Lars Schandorff

Playing the Caro-Kann

A Counter-Attacking Repertoire

A GRANDMASTER Guide

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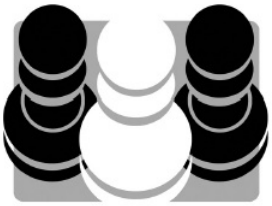
Playing the Caro-♔ann

By

Lars Schandorff



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Key to symbols used

⩲	White is slightly better
⩱	Black is slightly better
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
=	equality
⩳	with compensation
⇄	with counterplay
↑	with an initiative
∞	unclear
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
!?	a move worth considering
?!	a move of doubtful value
□	only move
#	mate

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Preface

The Caro-Kann Defence. Genuine bummer.
What is wrong with the Caro-Kann?
It is all pawns and no hope!

– Benny Watts (The Queen's Gambit)

Some openings really divide players into hardcore fans or lifelong adversaries – and the Caro-Kann is just like that. For a long time it was considered exceedingly solid, which probably provoked some White players who felt it was a form of anti-chess. Well, things change.

Ten years have passed since I wrote *Grandmaster Repertoire 7 – The Caro-Kann*, so it is about time to revisit this remarkable opening. The easiest approach would have been to update the old work, but instead I have chosen to write a completely new book that reflects the current state of affairs where Black plays the Caro-Kann to get a complicated, dynamic game instead of merely a solid one. Within the last few months the world's two best players, Carlsen and Caruana, have used the Caro-Kann as a winning try with Black, as have many other top players.

The single biggest change from *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* occurs in the Classical Variation after 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4, when I recommend the fashionable 4...♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 instead of the typical Caro-Kann move 4...♗f5, which I covered in the original book. Nothing is wrong with my former recommendation – as a matter of fact, Black has solved every problem to have arisen in the past decade – but my new recommendation leads to more strategically demanding play and in my opinion gives Black excellent winning chances.

Some of my recommendations are the same as before. That's because they are simply the best! A great example is in the Short System of the Advance Variation, which remains a favourite try for White at the highest level. After 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 I still fancy the immediate strike 5...c5. However, in the critical main line 6.♗e3, I have not only updated my previous recommendation, namely the solid 6...cxd4, which eventually equalizes but gives meagre winning chances, but have also presented a new and intriguing option in 6...♕b6!?, which is just as theoretically sound but also really tests White's theoretical knowledge and offers Black more winning chances. The same approach is used all over the book when I felt it appropriate to give you extra options. The Caro-Kann is a reliable opening with a sound positional foundation, but it is also a modern, dynamic weapon which enables Black to take the fight to the opponent. I hope it will serve you well.

I would very much like to thank my friend Nikos Ntirlis for his helpful research and analysis.

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Classical Variation

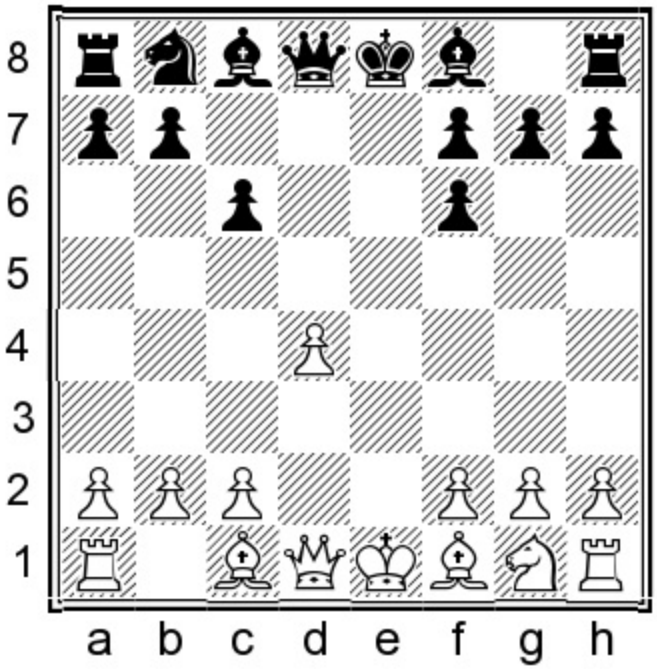
1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4

There is nothing wrong with my previous recommendation from *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, so you may ask: why change the recommended variation? The past decade has seen the rise of an almost forgotten way of playing with Black, which is extremely direct and dynamic. My new love is:

4...♘f6

The 'real' Caro-Kann move is of course 4...♗f5. After all, the whole opening is designed to get this bishop out. I examined this variation in great depth in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, ten years ago. Since then a lot of games have been played and several improvements have been discovered – fortunately mainly for Black! I would say that in general Black is in good shape in all lines.

5.♘xf6† exf6



After just five moves, a strategically complex position has arisen. Black voluntarily accepts doubled pawns and gives White a superior pawn structure, with the potential for a winning endgame if only he could exchange all the pieces.

Fortunately, there is a lot more to the position than Black's pawn structure. To really understand the position, it is necessary to go much deeper. A simple point is that Black can easily develop his

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kingside with ...♗d6 and ...0-0, which is nice.

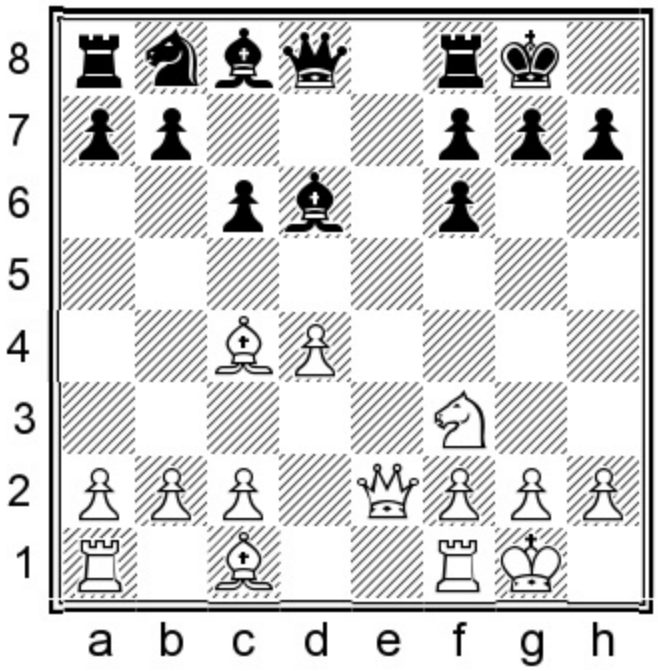
Furthermore, if the game takes a purely positional course, it will not be easy for White to exploit his extra pawn on the queenside. Let's suppose that White plays c2-c4 and d4-d5 to create a passed pawn. Instead of allowing exchanges, Black can simply close the position with ...c5 and play actively on the kingside. Black's own pawn majority should not be underestimated. The doubled pawns control a number of important squares, and Black can often expand on the kingside by pushing his front f-pawn and/or the h-pawn, creating dynamic play. The arising middlegames are demanding for both players, and if you are well prepared you will have good chances to outplay your opponents. Theory has moved fast in the last few years, without settling on a clear verdict. Practice has shown that Black has interesting resources in all variations. What I really like is that Black's position is rather easy to play. You don't have to remember a lot of long forcing lines like in the 4...♗f5 system – just some key moves here and there. Developing an understanding and feel for the position will take you a long way, although of course there are some critical lines – as is always the case in modern chess! White has attempted to refute Black's bold opening experiment in a number of ways.

One such try is:

6.♗c4 ♗d6 7.♕e2†

The point is that Black cannot develop his bishop to e6, so he must either withdraw the excellently-placed bishop or simplify with 7...♕e7, which would appear to take White a step closer to the winning endgame he desires. But as we will see, both moves are completely satisfactory for Black! For instance:

7...♗e7 8.♘f3 0-0 9.0-0 ♗d6



The lost tempo does not matter too much, as White's queen is not so great on the e-file, and may be attacked by a rook at some point. Black has no real problems and his kingside pawn majority

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offers considerable attacking potential, as Game 1 (Karjakin – Navara) perfectly demonstrates.

Another popular way for White to handle the intricacies of the position is to just ignore them and develop naturally:

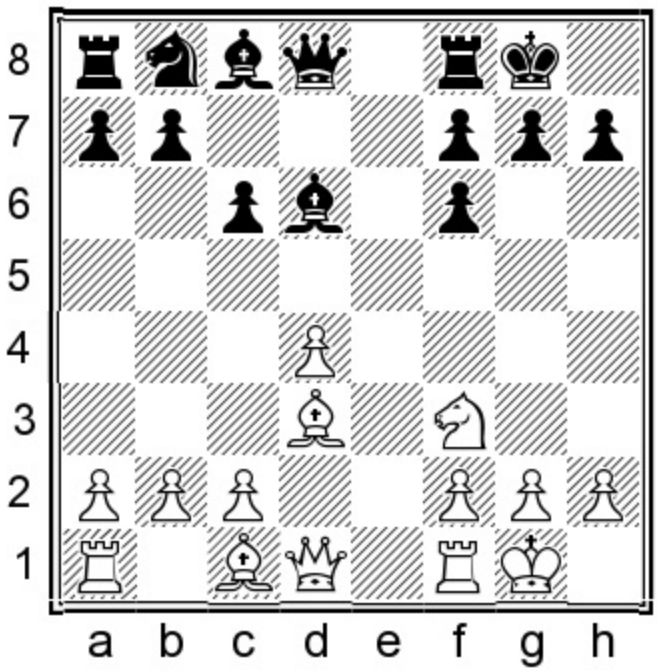
6.♘f3 ♗d6

Black does the same.

7.♗d3

7.♗e2 avoids the upcoming pin, but places the bishop on a passive square.

7...0-0 8.0-0



8...♗g4!

Black develops his bishop to an active square and establishes an annoying pin.

Black can also leave the bishop on c8 for a while and start with 8...♖e8!? intending ...♘d7-f8. We will also see this plan in lines where White prevents the pin with an earlier ♗e2 or h2-h3. To see how Black's set-up can work at the highest level, check out Game 2 (Nepomniachtchi – Carlsen).

The Main Line

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6

The most dangerous set-up for White has always been:

6.c3

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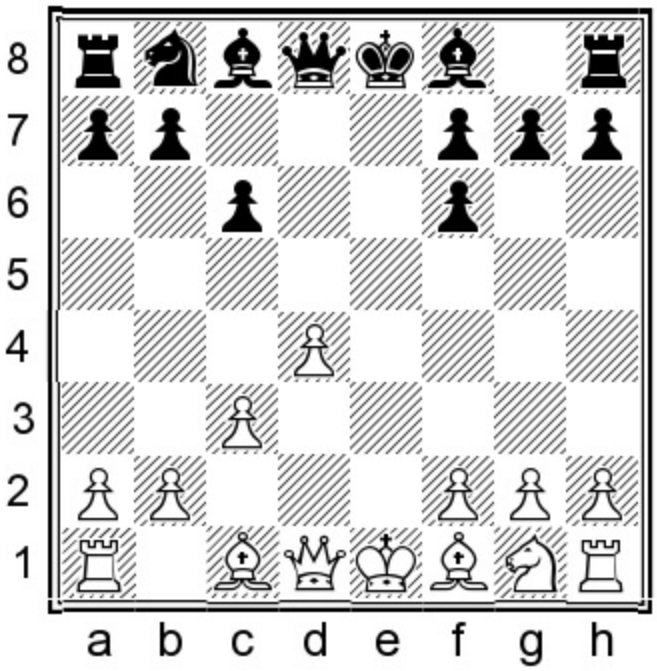

Planning ♗d3 and ♕c2. The point is that with Black's king heading for the kingside, the generally desirable ...g6 move would invite White to move the bishop from c1, castle queenside and then attack, attack, attack! However, a stunning new idea on move 9 has changed everything.

6...♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♕c2

This is the sharpest continuation, continuing with the aforementioned plan.

White can also opt for the quieter 8.♘e2, intending to castle short and play positionally. This set-up is no big threat to Black, as we will see in Game 3 (Stankovic – Sedlak).

8...♖e8† 9.♘e2

9.♗e3 is the alternative, which we will meet in the same way.

9...h5!

This remarkable move is the reason for the renewed interest in the entire 4...♘f6/5...exf6 variation. It avoids White's unpleasant plans on the kingside and leads to fighting positions where Black's chances do not seem worse at all. The present position is the real starting point of the current theoretical debate.

9...g6 is the move Black would like to play, but White gets an excellent game by launching the h-pawn up the board and castling queenside.

9...h6 keeps things tighter on the kingside, but Black gives up some control over the light squares, and White gets a nice edge with 10.0-0 followed by ♗f4 or ♘g3.

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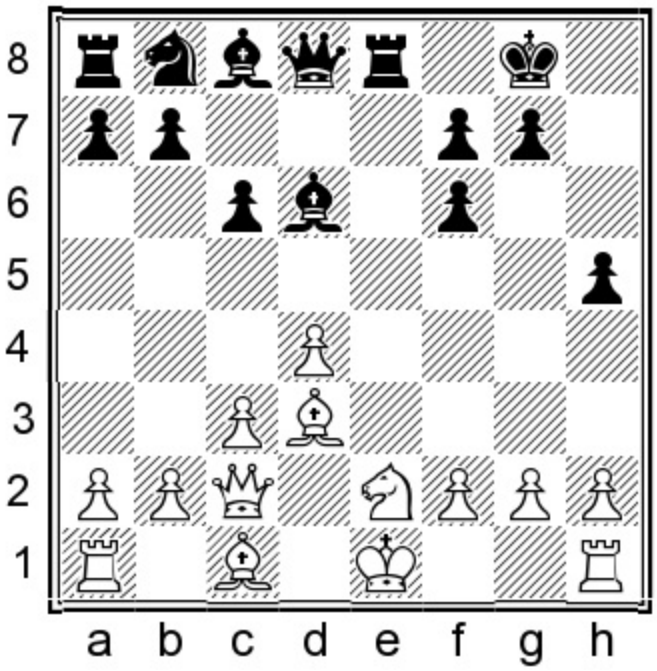

10.0-0

Attention has switched to this calm continuation, where the play is more positionally founded.

At first, White sought to refute Black's extravagant flank move by playing 10.♗e3 or 10.♗d2 followed by 0-0-0, hoping that the h5-pawn would make it easy to blow up the kingside and open lines with h2-h3 and g2-g4. But as we will see, this type of strategy is at least as dangerous for White as it is for Black.

10...h4

Black has a sound position with lots of dynamic potential. Even the pure endgame is absolutely fine, as can be seen in Game 5 (Hacker – Halkias).

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Chapter 1

4...♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6

Variation Index

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6

A) 6.♗f4 12

B) 6.♗c4 ♗d6 17

B1) 7.♘e2 17

B2) 7.♕e2† 18

B21) 7...♕e7 18

B22) 7...♗e7 21

***Game 1* – Karjakin – Navara 24**

C) 6.♘f3 ♗d6! 26

C1) 7.♗e2 28

***Game 2* – Nepomniachtchi – Carlsen 30**

C2) 7.♗c4 33

C3) 7.♗d3 33

"And I dreamed your dream for you and now your dream is real
How can you look at me as if I was just another one of your deals?"

Dire Straits – Romeo and Juliet

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1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6†

If White wishes to fight for an advantage, then exchanging on f6 is his only serious choice. Occasionally he tries something else, although there is nothing attractive about any of his alternatives.

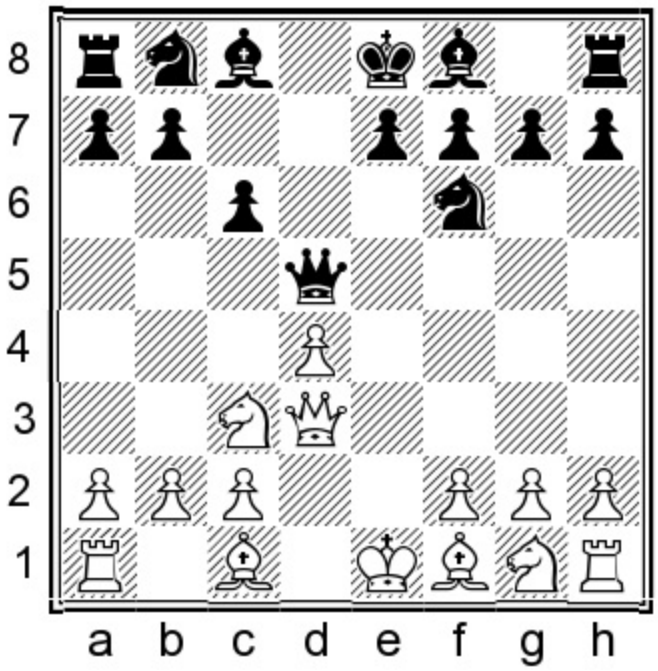
5.♘c3 ♗f5 gives Black a great version of a normal Caro-Kann – or a ...♕d8 Scandinavian with two extra tempos, depending on how you wish to define it. Black is at least equal and no special analysis is required, but I will mention an ambitious way to handle Black's position: 6.♘f3 e6 7.h3 ♗d6 8.♗d3 ♗g6 9.0-0 ♘bd7 10.♖e1 ♕c7 11.♕e2 ♗h5!? 12.♕e3 0-0-0⇄ Velickovic – Hodgson, London 1987.

5.♕d3

This is a strange choice. Black gets a good game after any sensible move, so I will just mention an interesting and unexplored option:

5...♕d5!? 6.♘c3

6.♘xf6† exf6 gives Black a good version of our main line.



6...♕a5!

Converting to a Scandinavian where White has spent a tempo moving his queen to the strange d3-square.

7.♗d2 ♗f5 8.♕g3

8.♘e4 ♕d5 9.♘xf6† gxf6∓

8...e6N

Black has a good version of a Scandinavian, and the attempt to play aggressively with 9.0-0-0? backfires after 9...b5∓ when White is in trouble on the queenside.

5.♘g5

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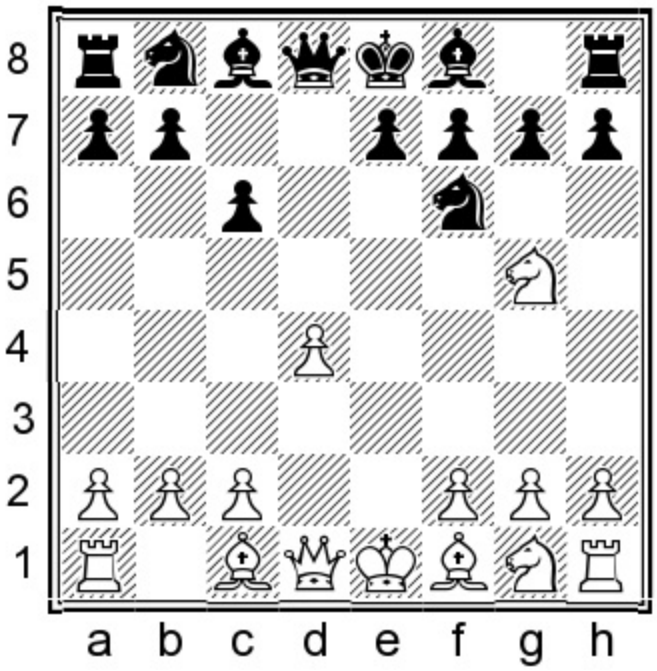

This is a well-known idea in the 4...♘d7 Caro-Kann, where the placement of the knight on d7 leaves Black open to various ideas involving ♘e6 or ♘xf7. Here there are no such tricks and Black has more than one route to a good game, for instance:

5...c5!

5...h6 is a good alternative, forcing 6.♘5f3 when 6...♗f5 or 6...♘bd7 gives Black at least equal chances.

6.♗c4 e6 7.♘e2 ♘c6 8.♘f3 a6 9.a4 ♘a5 10.♗a2 b5⇄

Saranya – Mohota, Bhubaneswar 2018.

5.♗d3

This sacrifices the d-pawn, which doesn't sound healthy, does it?

5...♕xd4 6.♘f3 ♕d8

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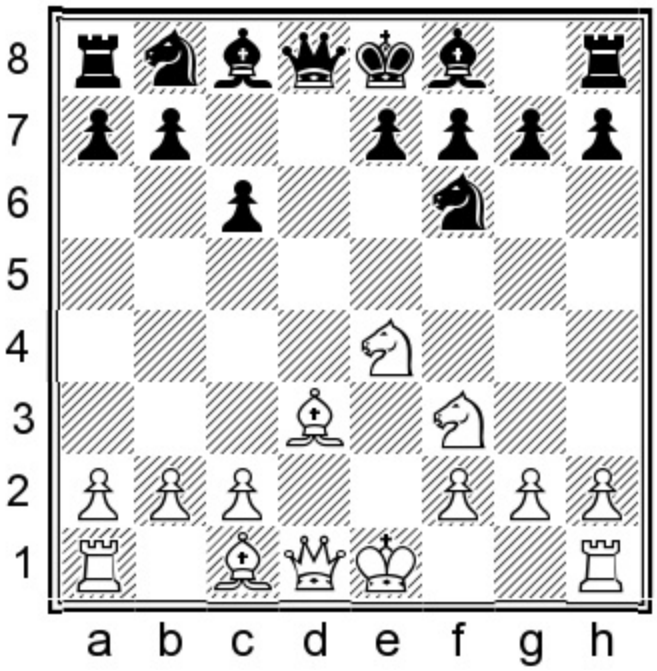


7.♘eg5

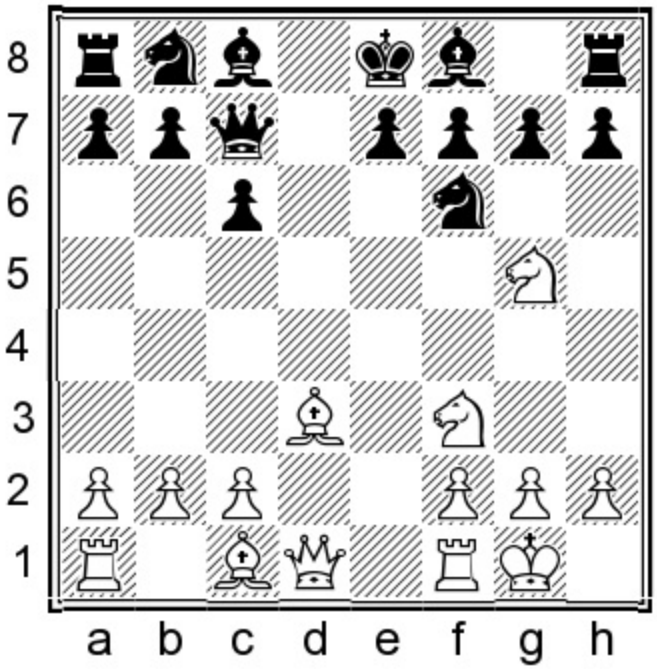
7.♘xf6† exf6 8.0-0 ♗e7 9.♖e1 0-0∓ leads to normal positions for our repertoire, but without a white pawn on d4!

7...♕c7!

Preventing ♘f3-e5.

7...♘bd7? 8.0-0 e6 9.♖e1 left Black unable to deal with the ♘xf7 threat in Pilavov – Grigoryan, Elista 2011.

8.0-0



In Mertin – Steinhoefel, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern 2001, Black could have secured some advantage with:

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8...h6!N

8...e6N 9.♕e2 ♗d6 is a safe route to an edge.

9.♘xf7!?

The consistent move, but not good enough.

9.♘e4 can be met by 9...♘xe4 10.♗xe4 e5∓ followed by ...♗e6.

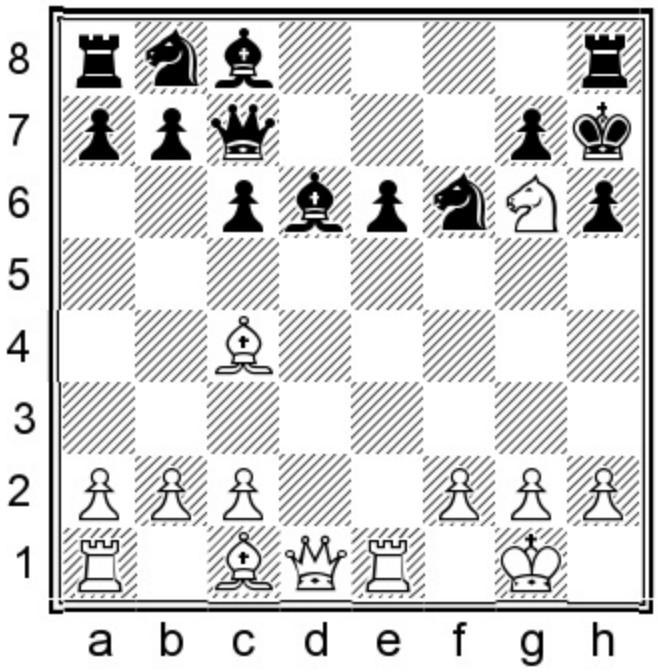
9...♔xf7 10.♘h4

I also considered 10.♖e1 ♔g8 11.♘e5 ♗e6! 12.♗f4 ♕c8–+ followed by ...♘d7, when White's attack is near its end.

10...♔g8 11.♗c4†

11.♘g6 e5–+

11...e6 12.♘g6 ♗d6 13.♖e1 ♔h7



14.♕d3 ♖e8–+

White has a discovered check, and so what?

5.♘g3

This is the most popular and natural-looking of the alternative moves under consideration.

5...h5!?

A quick raid with the h-pawn is seen in all kinds of openings in this modern age. Here it immediately challenges the knight on g3.

6.h4

Allowing the pawn to go any further would be unpleasant.

For instance, 6.♗c4?! h4 7.♘3e2 ♗f5 8.c3 e6 9.h3 ♗e4 10.f3 was seen in Das – Nisipeanu, Dubai 2012, when 10...♗d5 11.♗d3 c5∓ would have been excellent for Black.

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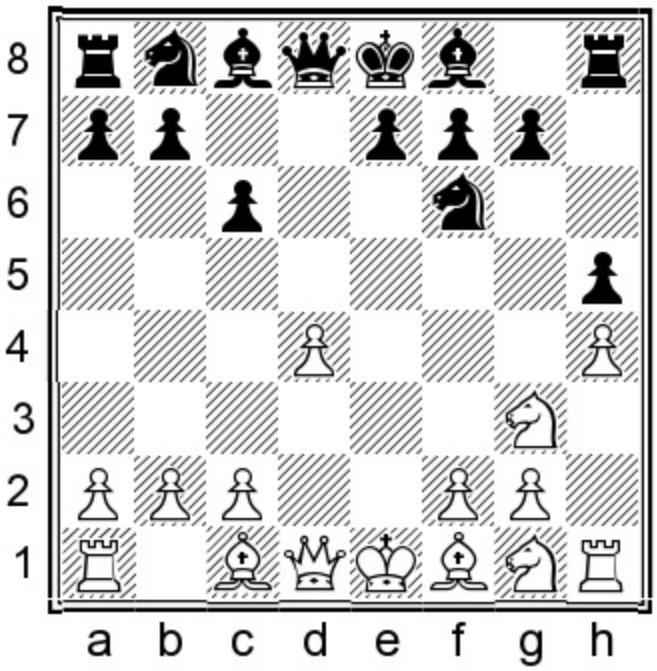

6...c5! 7.♘f3 ♘c6

Rambaldi recommends 7...♗g4 which also looks fine.

8.♗e3 cxd4N

This seems safest and best.

8...♗g4 could be considered, although you then have to reckon with 9.dxc5.

8...♘g4 was seen in Lutskan – Savon, Moscow 1959, when 9.d5!?N would have led to double-edged play.

9.♘xd4 ♗g4 10.♕d2

10.♗e2 is playable, but Black is fine after any sensible move.

10...♕c7 11.♘b5

Otherwise ...0-0-0 comes, with great play for Black.

11...♕b8 12.♗e2 ♗xe2 13.♕xe2 a6 14.♘d4 ♕c7⇄

Black has a good position and can finish his development with ...g6 and ...♗g7.

5...exf6

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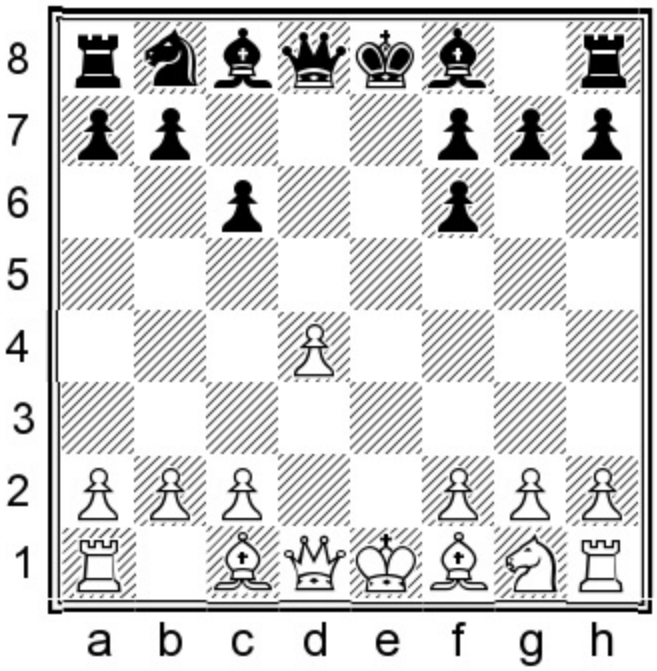


6.c3 is the big main line, which will be covered in Chapter 2. In this chapter we will analyse **A)** 6.♗f4, **B)** 6.♗c4 and **C)** 6.♘f3.

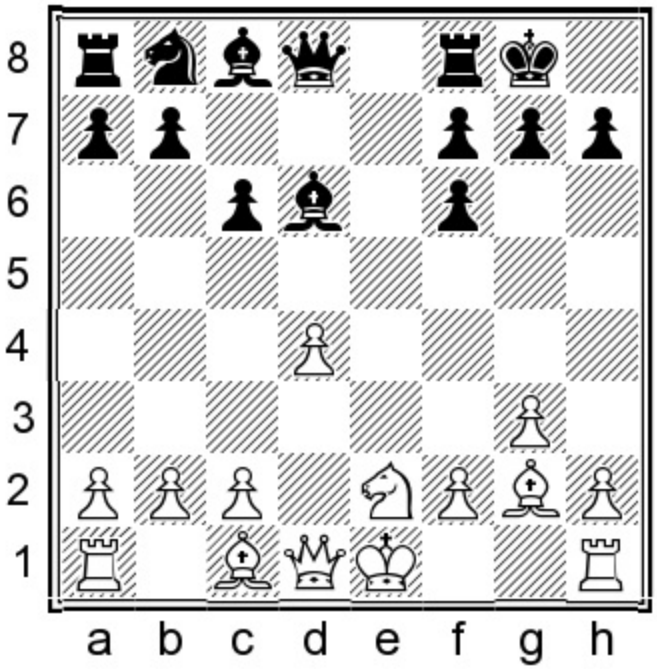
Of course, there are a bunch of other legal tries, so here is a short survey of them.

6.♘e2?! ♗d6 7.♘g3 0-0 8.♗e2 has been played by Timman, but that doesn't change the fact that White's set-up looks clumsy, and after 8...f5!↑ Black is for choice.

6.g3 ♗d6 7.♗g2

This is solid but hardly threatening.

7...0-0 8.♘e2



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8...♗g4!?

Creating an annoying pin.

8...♖e8 9.0-0 ♘d7⇄ was a sensible alternative seen in Maier – Cheparinov, Skopje 2018. The knight can go to either f8 or b6, depending on what White does next.

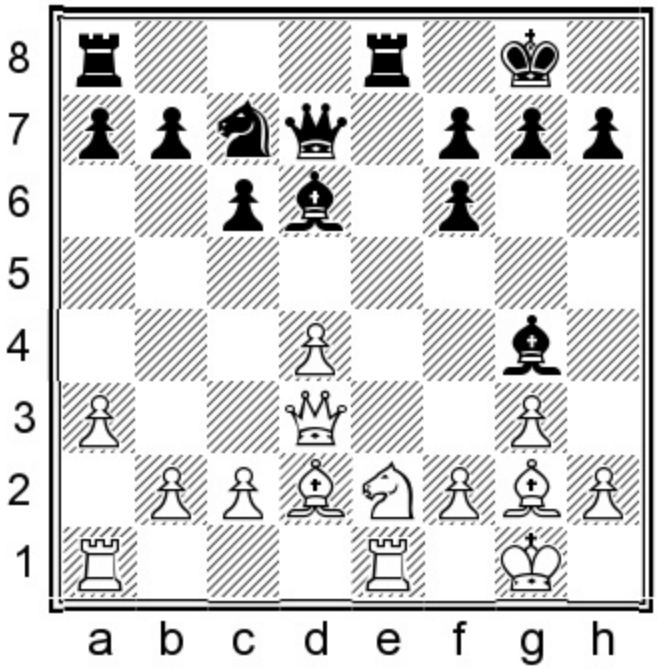
9.0-0 ♖e8 10.♖e1 ♘a6!?

10...♘d7 is also fine.

11.a3

11.h3 can be met by either 11...♗e6 or 11...♗h5, with fine play for Black in either case.

11...♘c7 12.♕d3 ♕d7 13.♗d2



In Montoliu Cervero – Salgado Lopez, Linares 2016, Black should have played:

13...♖ad8!N∓

With excellent piece coordination and pressure along the central files.

6.♗e3

This is a slightly odd move order which gives Black a choice.

6...♕b6!?

This is an interesting attempt to punish White's decision.

My personal choice would be 6...♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0, with a good game and something much closer to the typical positions we will study later. Rambaldi argues that White can play ♘e2 and 0-0, at which point ♗e3 could prove more useful than c2-c3, but I do not believe Black has anything to fear from such a set-up. Without having provoked ...h5, White has nothing special, and the bishop is not that great on e3 anyway.

7.♕e2!

This rare move is the most critical.

Rambaldi only mentions the most popular 7.♕c1, when 7...c5!? is fine for Black.

7.♖b1 is also no problem in view of 7...♗e6N 8.a3 ♗a2! 9.♖a1 ♕xb2∓.

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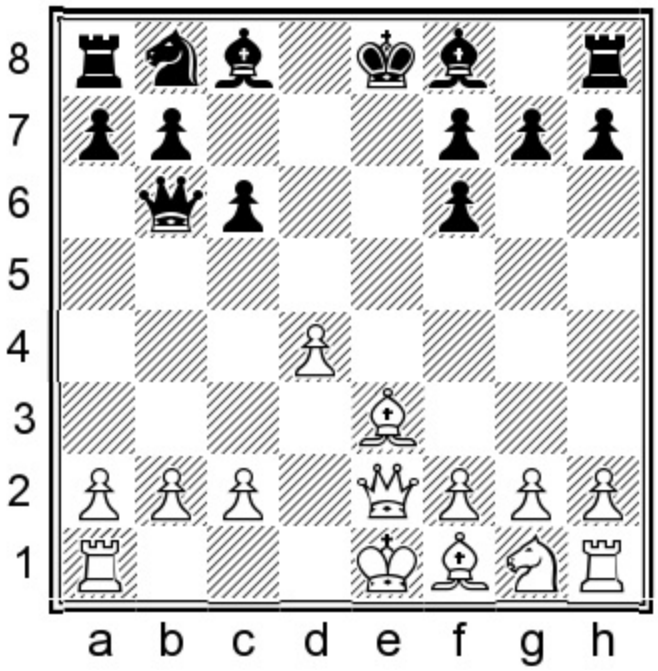

7...♗d6!?N

It turns out that Black can simply allow the discovered check.

7...♕xb2?? 8.♗c1† must be avoided.

7...♗e7N is sensible though.

8.0-0-0

8.♗f4†? ♔d8!∓ is a nice trick.

8.d5 ♕c7!∞ is messy.

8...0-0∞

6.♗d3

Gambiting the d-pawn tends not to work against our system, as the ...exf6 structure gives Black fast development and a well-protected king.

6...♕xd4!

It is hard to resist such a gift.

6...♗d6 7.♘e2 0-0 is a solid alternative, and it is hard to believe that White can benefit from avoiding c2-c3, but I would prefer to take the free pawn when it is offered.

7.♘f3 ♕d5! 8.0-0 ♗e6

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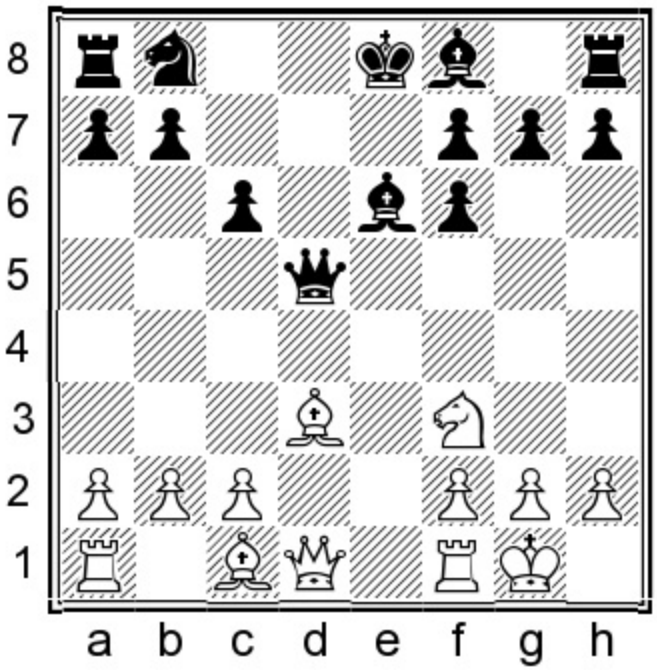

White has a slight lead in development but no threats, and Black should be able to consolidate and enjoy his extra pawn. For instance:

9.c4

9.♗e3 is well met by 9...♗c5, as we welcome an exchange of pieces if it doesn't compromise our position.

9.♗f4 ♘d7 10.♕e2 is slightly trickier but a good reply is: 10...♘c5! (10...♗d6? 11.♗e4! ♕c5 12.b4, is more fun for White) 11.♖fd1 ♘xd3 12.♖xd3 ♕h5∓ The dark-squared bishop will go to c5 and we will get castled.

9...♕d7 10.♗e3 ♘a6!

An excellent post for the knight, where it controls the important c5-square. Black is not only a pawn up, but is also threatening to castle on the queenside and seize the initiative.

11.♘d4

Wegener – Lechtynsky, Germany 2016.

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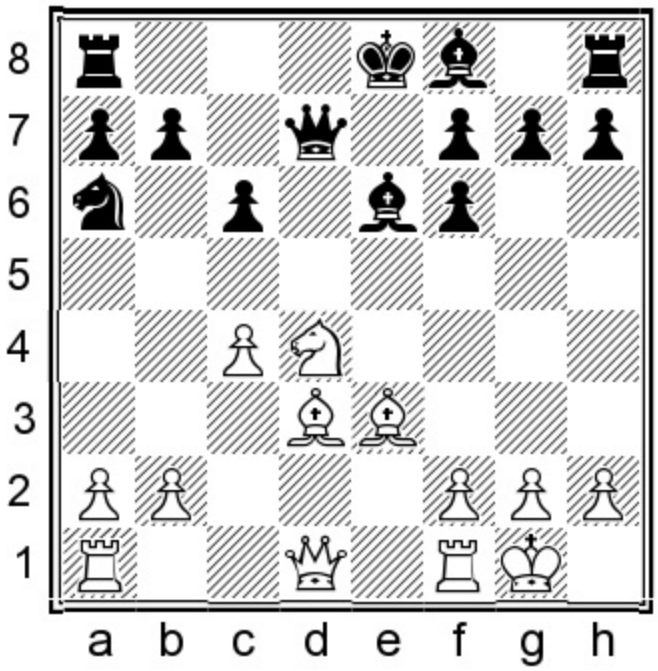
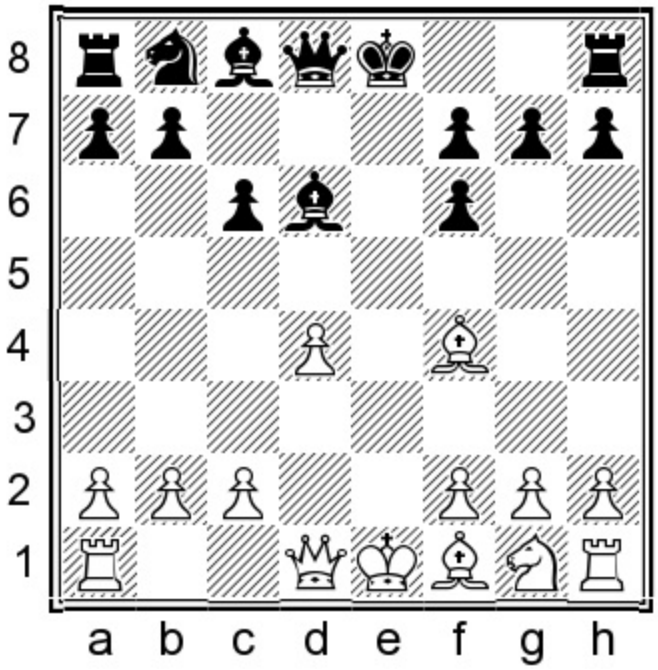


11...0-0-0!N 12.♕c1 ♗c5
With a great position for Black.

A) 6.♗f4 ♗d6!



Despite the pawn structure, we should not be afraid to simplify for the sake of fast and efficient development. Even after the exchange of our 'good' bishop, Black is positionally healthy.

7.♗xd6 ♕xd6 8.c3 0-0 9.♗d3

Having traded a pair of bishops, White tries to have his cake and eat it by developing all his pieces on ideal squares. However, he does not yet have control over the position and Black has

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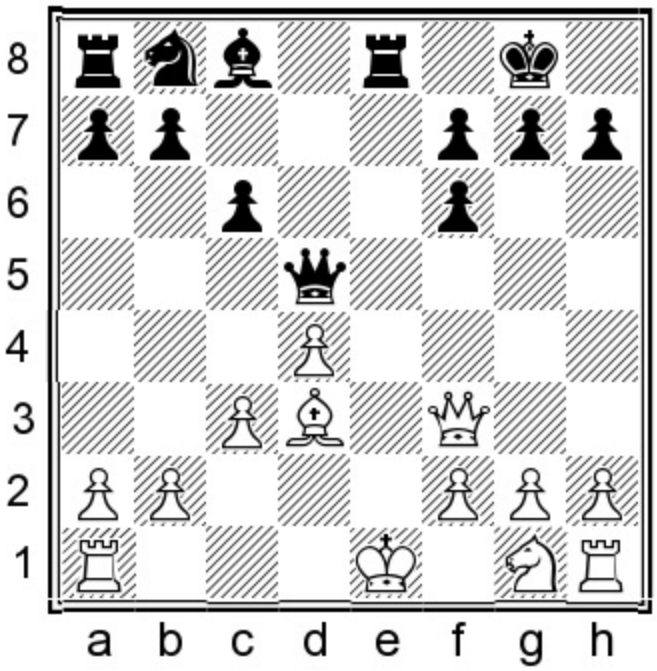
several good ways to counter.

9...♕d5!?

9...♖e8† 10.♘e2 ♗g4!? 11.f3 ♗e6 12.♕c2 g6 13.0-0 ♘d7 14.♖fe1 occurred in Drazic – Bluebaum, Skopje 2019, when 14...♖ad8N followed by ...f5 would have given Black a good game.

9...c5 10.dxc5 ♕xc5 also looks fine.

10.♕f3 ♖e8†



11.♔f1?!

Too risky.

White should have settled for 11.♘e2 ♕xf3 12.gxf3 ♗e6= when Black can obviously be happy with the outcome of the opening, but White is not yet worse.

11...♕g5! 12.♘h3 ♕d2∓

Polischuk – Saltaev, Germany 2001.

B) 6.♗c4

This active bishop move is a popular choice.

6...♗d6

It is important to understand that 6...♗e6?! 7.♗xe6 fxe6 is not desirable for Black. True, he gets rid of the doubled pawns, but at the same time he also sacrifices his dynamic potential and heads for a

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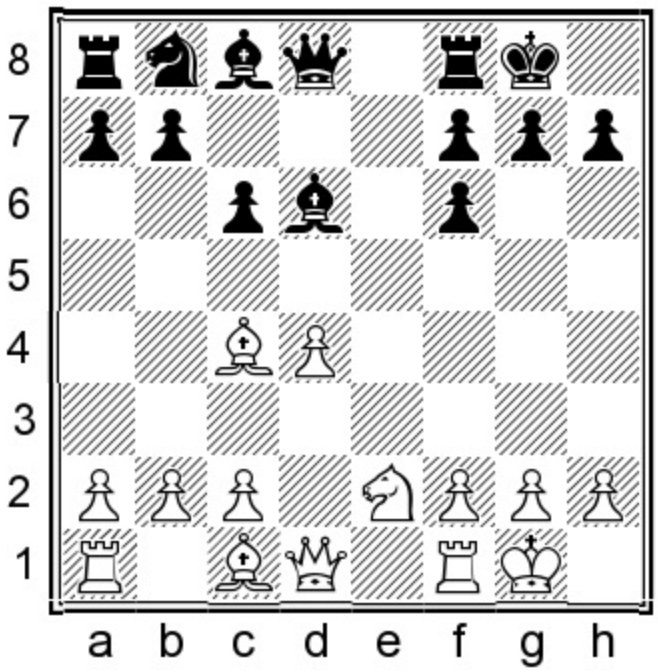
passive position. 8.♘f3 ♗d6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♖e1 ♖e8 11.c4± was pleasant for White in Fischer – Panov, Skopje 1967.

We will consider **B1)** 7.♘e2 followed by the main line of **B2)** 7.♕e2†.

7.♘f3 will be covered under the 6.♘f3 move order in variation C2.

7.♕h5 0-0 8.♘e2 seems strange with the queen in front of the rest of the army, and 8...g6 9.♕f3 ♖e8⇄ gave Black a healthy position in Keres – Mikenas, Buenos Aires (ol) 1939.

B1) 7.♘e2 0-0 8.0-0



8...♘d7!?

Once again, 8...♗e6?! 9.♗xe6 fxe6 10.c4 gives White the upper hand.

8...♗g4?! is risky in view of 9.h3 ♗h5 10.g4! ♗g6 (10...b5 11.♗b3 leads to the same thing) 11.f4 b5 12.♗b3 ♗e4 as seen in Sai – Rodrigue Lemieux, Montreal 2018, and now 13.♘c3N would have given White some initiative.

8...♕c7 to prevent ♗f4 makes a lot of sense – but it turns out that we have no reason to fear the bishop exchange.

9.♘g3

9.♗f4 ♘b6 10.♗b3 ♗g4 11.f3 ♗xf4 12.♘xf4 ♗f5 13.c3 (13.g4!?N is interesting, but 13...♕d6 14.♕d2 ♗d7∞ is fine for Black) was seen in Liberzon – Korchnoi, Lone Pine 1979. Here I suggest:

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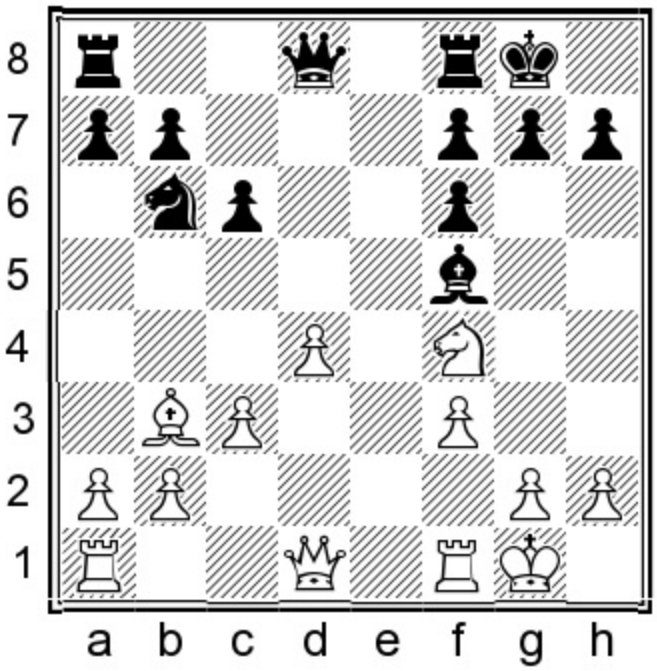

13...a5!?N 14.a4 ♕d6⇄ Black has a fine position, and the natural 15.♕d2 is strongly met by 15...c5!. This is a perfect example to illustrate that it is no disaster for Black to exchange the dark-squared bishops.

9...♘b6 10.♗d3

10.♗b3 was seen in Zapata – Boersma, Amsterdam 1986. Black can obtain a good game with: 10...a5!?N 11.a4 (11.c3?! a4 12.♗c2 ♖e8 is comfortable for Black, who can put the bishop on e6.) 11...♖e8 Followed by ...♖e6 and recapturing with the rook, rather than the pawn, which would give Black a rigid structure as explained before.

10...♘d5!?

Planning to jump to f4.

A good alternative is 10...g6N followed by ...f5 to restrict White's pieces, as given by Delchev.

11.♘e4 ♘f4 12.♘xd6 ♕xd6 13.♗e4

In Siwiec – Knap, Rewal 2008, Black missed a simple and thematic tactic:

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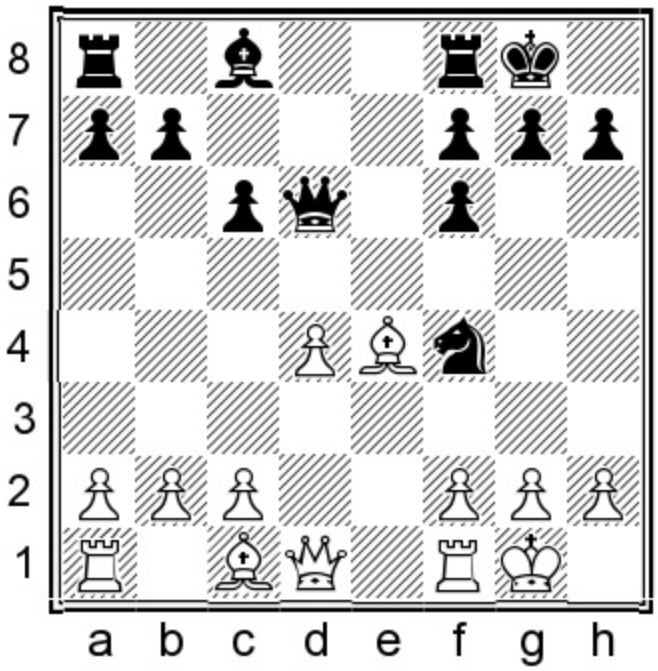
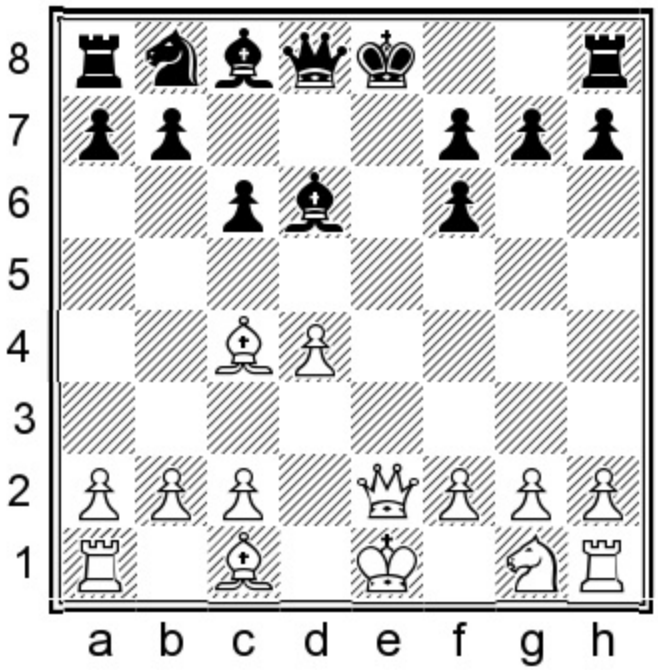


13...♕xd4!N

Winning a pawn.

B2) 7.♕e2†



By inserting this check, White forces us to choose between entering an ending with an inferior pawn structure or withdrawing the bishop from the active d6-square. Either option might seem like a concession, but Black is actually fine in both cases. I have no clear preference between the two options, so I decided to cover them both: **B21)** 7...♕e7 and **B22)** 7...♗e7.

B21) 7...♕e7

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Even if you intend to block with the bishop, it is worth studying this section just to get a general idea of what to do in the event of a queen exchange. Rambaldi believes the endgame to be unpleasant for Black, but I disagree.

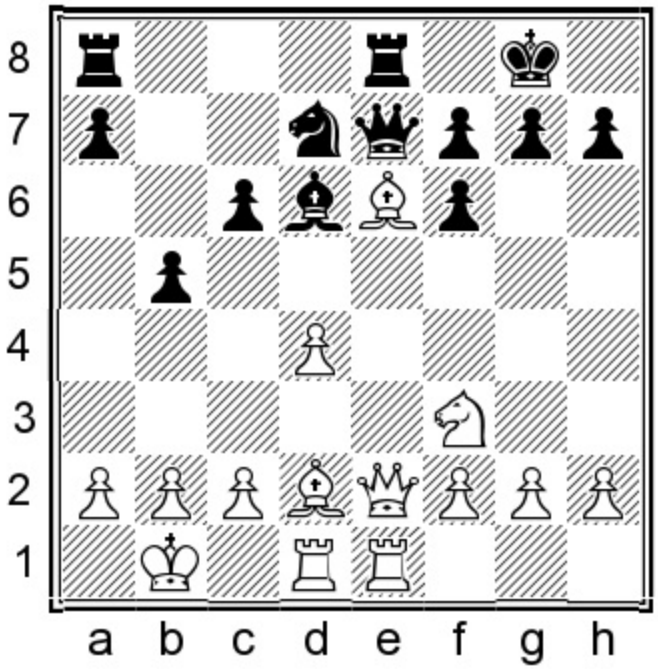
8.♕xe7†

Sometimes White refrains from exchanging – a sure sign that the ending isn't so great for White after all.

8.♗d2 ♗e6 9.0-0-0

9.♗xe6 ♕xe6! 10.0-0-0 0-0 11.♕xe6 fxe6 was fine for Black in Blatny – Knezevic, Rimavska Sobota 1974. This pawn structure is much more acceptable for Black with the queens exchanged, as the king comes to f7 and the e6-pawn is easy to defend.

9...0-0 10.♘f3 ♘d7 11.♖he1 ♖fe8 12.♔b1 b5 13.♗xe6



This occurred in Vasiukov – Goldberg, Kiev 1957, and here the correct recapture is:

13...♕xe6!N

As after:

14.♕xe6 fxe6!

Black is absolutely fine: his king will be happy on f7 and the knight can go via b6 to d5.

8.♘f3

This is similar to the 6.♘f3 lines.

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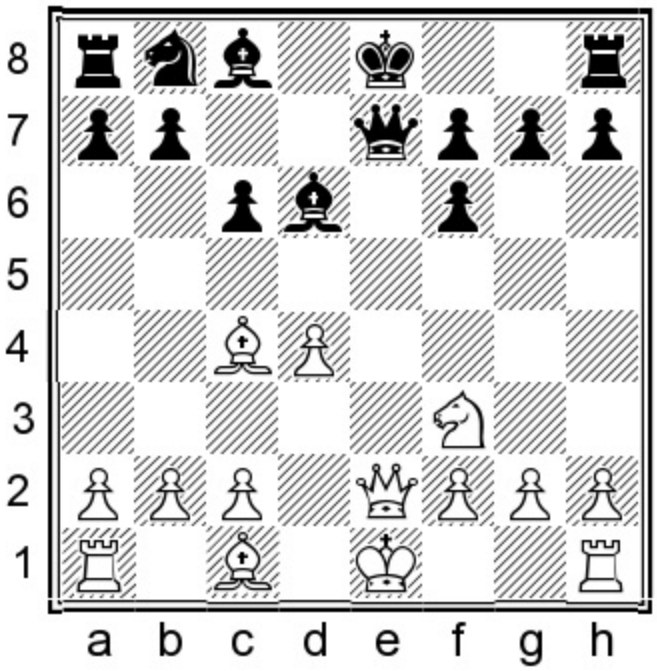


8...♕xe2†

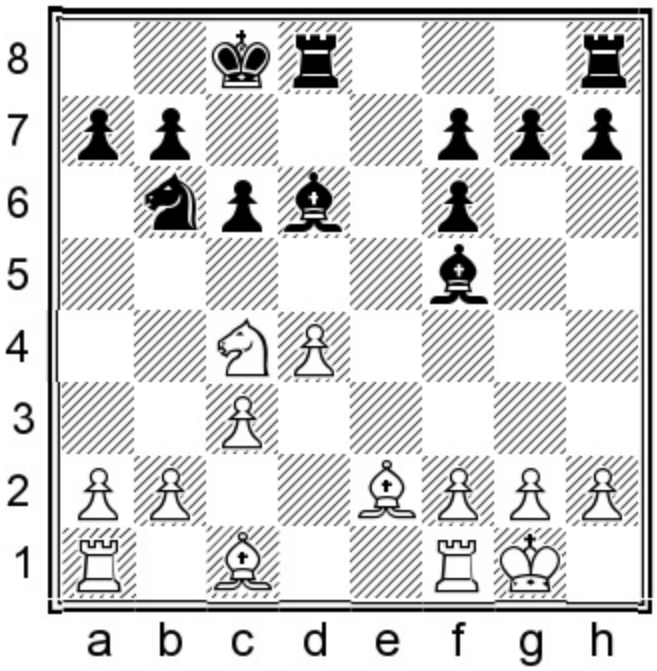
This seems simplest.

8...♗e6!? was an interesting strategic decision in a high-profile game, which continued: 9.0-0 (9.♗xe6 ♕xe6! is fine for Black, as usual) 9...♗xc4 10.♕xc4 0-0 11.♖e1 ♕d7= In Vachier-Lagrave – Nepomniachtchi, Zagreb 2019, Black could follow up with ...♘a6-c7 and ...♖ad8, with a solid position.

9.♗xe2 ♗f5 10.c3

10.c4 0-0 11.0-0 ♖e8 12.♗e3 ♘d7 13.♖fe1 (13.h3 ♖ad8=) occurred in D. Mastrovasilis – David, Rio Achaea 2018, when 13...♖ad8N would have led to an equal game.

10...♘d7 11.0-0 ♘b6 12.♘d2 0-0-0 13.♘c4



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This position was reached in Ristic – Atalik, Kragujevac 2018, and now I suggest:

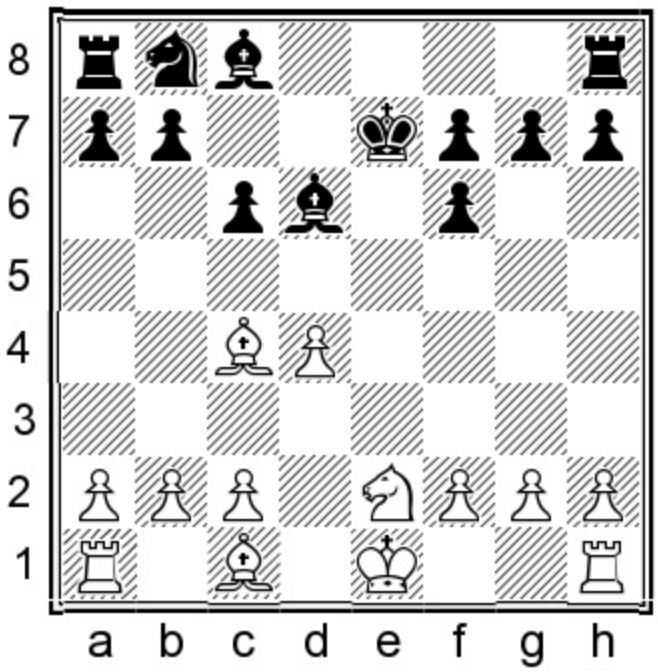
13...♘xc4!N 14.♗xc4 ♗e6!

Once again, Black does not mind the exchange, which would lead to a simple and equal endgame. White may instead opt for:

15.♗d3

We can choose between 15...c5= and the more complex 15...h5 with the idea of launching a massive kingside pawn offensive, as proposed by Leela Chess Zero (in future I will write Lc0).

8...♔xe7 9.♘e2



9...♗e6

As we have already seen, offering the bishop trade is a standard tool following the queen exchange.

9...♗f5!?

This is a good alternative if you prefer to avoid simplifying too much.

10.c3 ♖e8 11.♗f4 ♗xf4 12.♘xf4 ♔f8†

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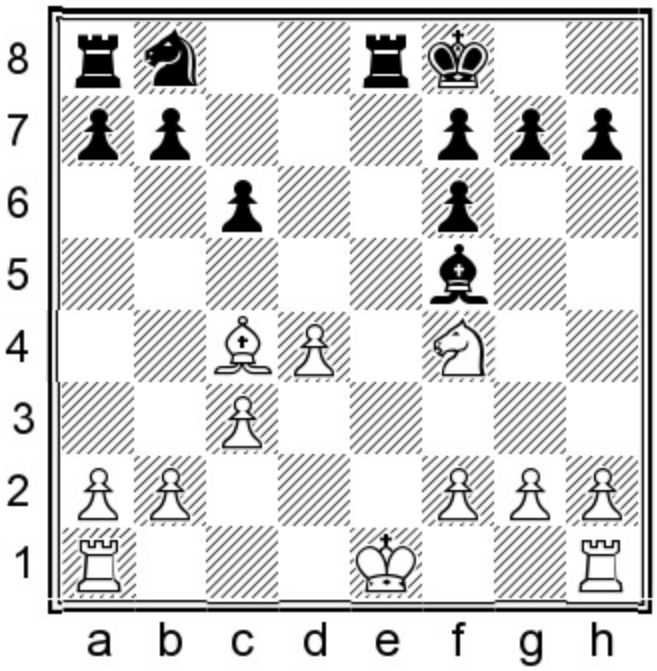


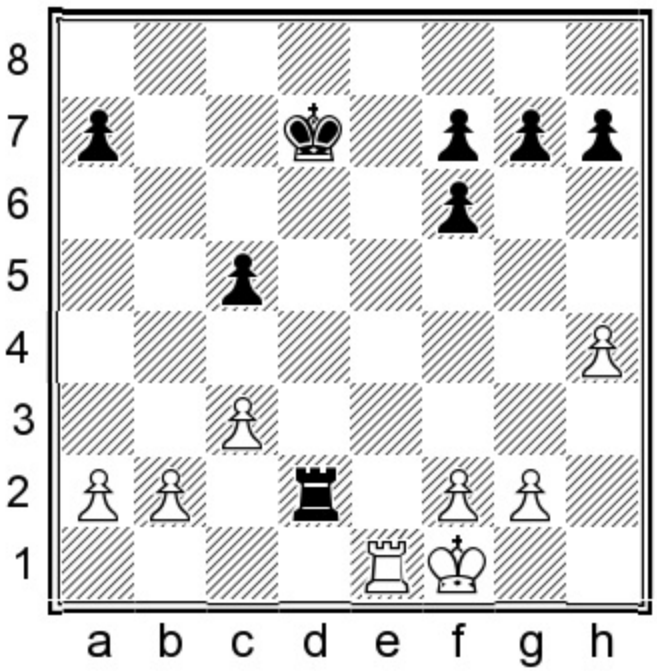
13.♔f1N

13.♔d2?! c5! gave Black good play against the king in the centre after 14.dxc5 ♘c6 in Tashkhodzhaev – Ni Shiqun, Abu Dhabi 2019.

13...♘d7 14.♗d3 ♗xd3† 15.♘xd3 ♖ad8

I decided to extend this instructive variation a little further to show why Black generally has no need to fear exchanges.

16.h4 b6! 17.♖h3 c5 18.dxc5 ♘xc5 19.♘xc5 bxc5 20.♖e1 ♖d2 21.♖xe8† ♔xe8 22.♖e3† ♔d7 23.♖e2 ♖d1† 24.♖e1 ♖d2=



White should settle for a repetition, as the attempt to play for more with 25.♖e4?! ♖xb2 26.♖a4 backfires after 26...♖b7 27.♖a6 ♔c7∓ followed by ...♔b8, when Black unravels and White must fight

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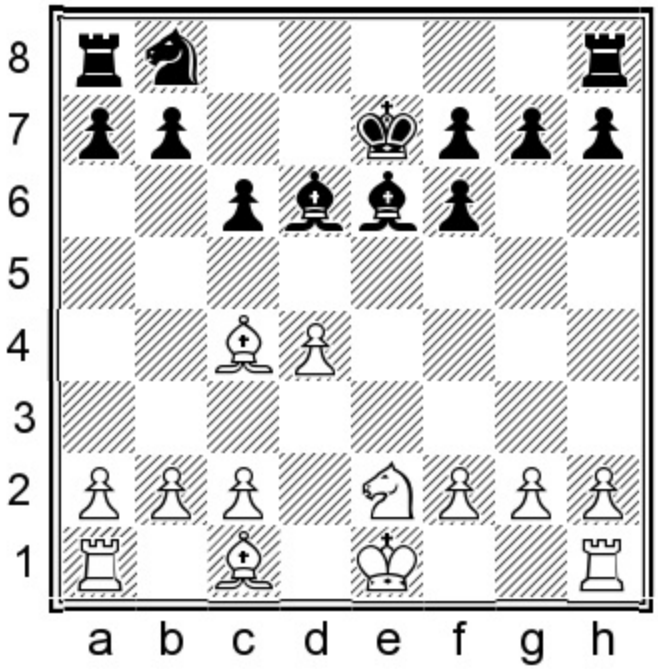
for a draw.



10.♗d3!

Rambaldi stops here and describes the endgame as unpleasant for Black. I can see why it may look that way, but it is not so easy for White to force mass exchanges or otherwise make use of his pawn majority. I will present my analysis to show the resources available to us. Of course, if you decide this stuff is not to your taste, you can always stick to 7...♗e7, which we analyse next.

10.♗xe6 fxe6 is obviously not something we should lose sleep about; the database reveals that Black has achieved 100% from here – draws, that is!

10.♗b3 is conveniently met by 10...a5= and Black is fine.

10...♘d7 11.0-0

11.♗e3 ♘b6⇄ prepares ...♘d5, with nice play for Black.

11.♗f4!?

This is a reasonable alternative, when my improvement is:

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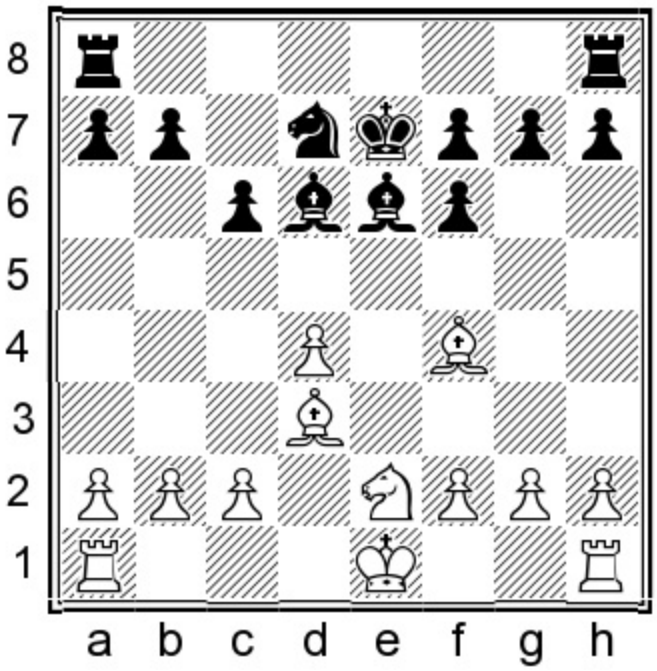

11...♖ad8!N

11...♘b6 looks natural but 12.♗xd6† ♔xd6 13.b3± left Black's knight slightly out of play in Matulovic – Smyslov, Siegen 1970.

12.♗xd6†

Other moves can be met by any of ...♘b6, ...b5 or ...h5!?.

12...♔xd6 13.0-0-0 ♖he8

Another way to obtain counterplay is 13...b5!? followed by ...♘b6.

14.♘f4 f5 15.b3 ♘f6=

Black is fine. He will play ...g5 and install a knight on d5, and any attempt by White to oust it will result in weaknesses.

11...♖hd8 12.♘f4!?N

This is the top engine choice; moreover, from a human perspective it is easy to understand the appeal of the bishop pair.

12.♗f4 ♘b6⇄ is no problem for us. 12.♖e1 was played in Corssen – Trzaska, Germany 2009, and now 12...♘b6N looks logical. Play may continue 13.c3 ♘d5 14.♘g3 ♗f4 15.♘f5† ♔f8 16.♘e3 a5⇄ with ...a4 to follow.

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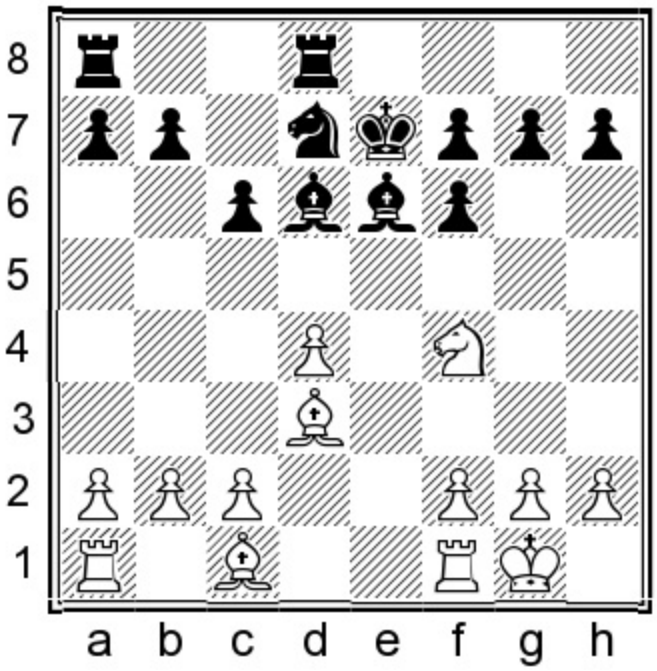

12...c5!⇄

It is worth remembering this concrete approach, as otherwise White might get some edge.

A sample line showing what to avoid is:

12...♘b6 13.c3

13.♘xe6 fxe6= is fine for Black, as 14.♗xh7?! runs into 14...♖h8∓ and h2 drops.

13...♗xf4?!

A better try is the patient 13...♖ac8 to support a timely ...c5.

14.♗xf4 c5 15.♗e4 ♘d5 16.♗d2! f5 17.♗f3 cxd4 18.c4! ♘b6 19.b3±

And the white bishops dominate.

13.♘xe6

13.d5 ♗xf4!= is no problem whatsoever.

13.♘e2 is legal, but getting in ...c5 for free obviously helps Black. 13...f5!? is one good continuation, gaining space and threatening ...c4. 13...cxd4 14.♘xd4 ♘c5 should be fine too.

13...fxe6 14.dxc5 ♘xc5 15.♗e2 e5=

Black has a strong centre and plenty of activity to compensate for White's bishop pair.

B22) 7...♗e7

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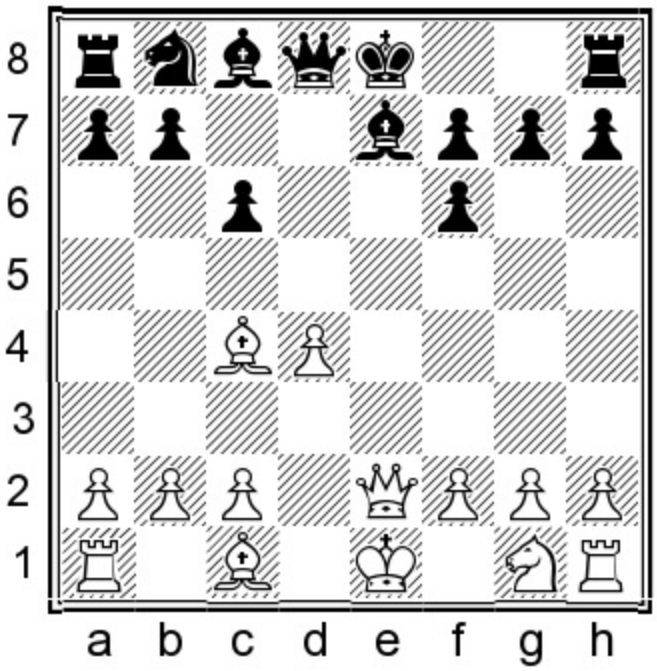

This retreat is not as sad as it looks. The d4-pawn is hanging and Black gets to castle next, while getting the queen to e2 is not such a major achievement for White.

8.♘f3

8.c3 0-0 9.♗e3 ♘d7 10.♘f3 ♖e8⇄ was fine for Black in Kholmov – Zaitseva, Moscow 1997. Compared to the main line, White gains nothing from committing the bishop to e3 so early.

8.♗e3 0-0 9.0-0-0?! (9.c3 ♖e8 10.♘f3 ♘d7 transposes to Kholmov – Zaitseva above) has been tried in quite a lot of games, but White is deceived by his own fighting spirit. After 9...b5 10.♗b3 a5↑ Black has the faster attack, as first shown in Asztalos – Tartakower, Vienna 1917.

8...0-0 9.0-0

Classical development is best.

9.♗d2 ♗d6 10.0-0-0?! is well met by 10...♖e8↑ with ...b5 to follow. (10.0-0 is better, but in that case we simply have a version of the main line where White has played the slightly suboptimal ♗d2.)

9.♗e3

This is playable but rather pointless: we have already seen that long castling is too risky for White, but if his king is going to the kingside anyway, it would be better to do it immediately and keep the bishop flexible. A brief illustrative line is:

9...♘d7

The knight comes to its usual square, eyeing the b6-d5 route, which conveniently hits both of the enemy bishops.

10.0-0 ♘b6 11.♗b3!?N

11.♗d3 occurred in Ten Kate – Polak, Rotterdam 1938, when 11...♘d5!N 12.♗d2 ♘b4 13.♗e4

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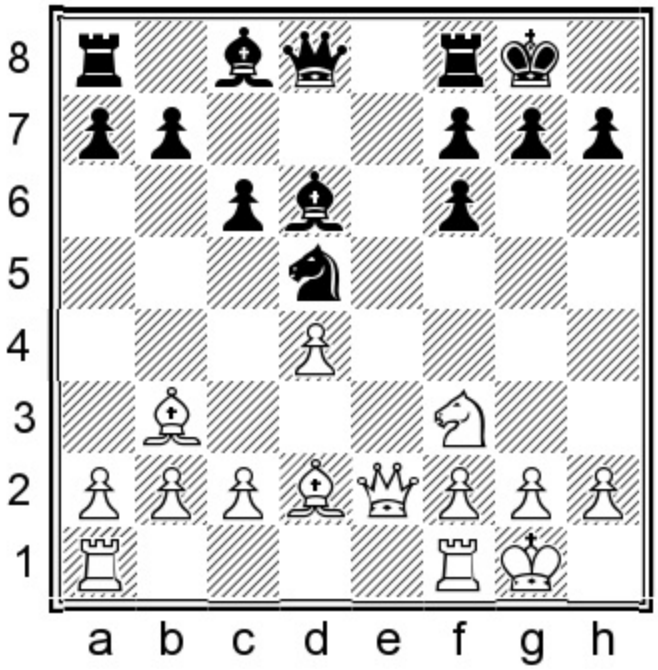
f5= would have forced the exchange of one of White's bishops for the knight.

11...♘d5 12.♗d2 ♗d6



Controlling the important f4-square.

13.♖fe1 b5!⇄

Preparing ...♗e6 next, while also having in mind:

14.♗xd5?! cxd5 15.♕xb5 ♖b8∓

With great compensation for the pawn.

9...♗d6!

Back to the normal square.

9...♘d7 is recommended by Rambaldi, but I prefer to improve the bishop first. As we will see, the knight has other options available, and I see no reason to commit it so soon.

9...♖e8

This has scored well for Black, but I consider it slightly inaccurate in view of:

10.♖e1

White has also tried 10.♕d3!? when perhaps the queen can go to b3 to attack f7.

10...♘d7

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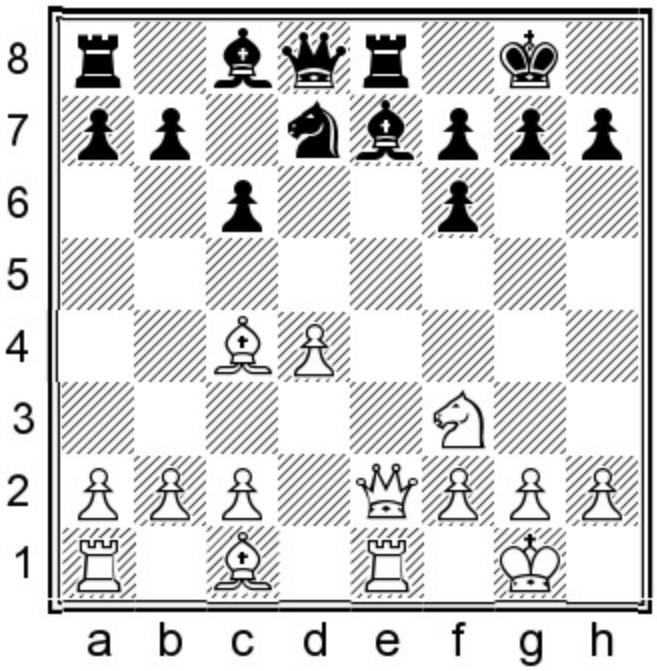

Black hopes to play ...♘f8 and ...♗e6 but a good answer is:

11.d5!N 11...♘b6 12.dxc6 ♘xc4 13.♕xc4 ♗e6 14.♕b5 bxc6 15.♕xc6

Black has more or less enough play for a pawn, but he still has to work to prove it. For example:

15...♖c8 16.♕e4 f5 17.♕e2 ♗c4 18.♕d2 ♕b6 19.b3 ♗f6 20.♖b1 ♖xe1† 21.♘xe1 ♖e8 22.♘d3 ♗xd3 23.cxd3 ♕a6 24.a4

Black has yet to equalize.

10.♖e1

Taking over the e-file has been the usual continuation. Other plausible moves are:

10.c3 ♘a6!? will be considered in Game 1 (Karjakin – Navara). Despite only being a blitz encounter, this is a truly model game and an excellent demonstration of the type of counterplay Black can obtain in this line.

10.♕e4?! ♖e8 11.♕h4

This is an odd choice, as White is not well placed for a kingside attack and the queen could be vulnerable to a well-timed ...♖e4.

11.♕d3 was the lesser evil, but obviously Black can be happy with the outcome of the opening in that case.

11...♗f5 12.c3

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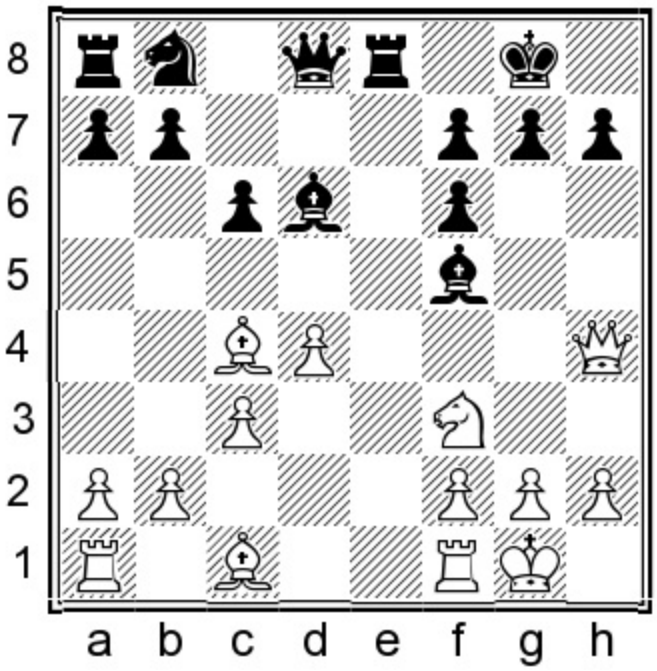


Medarde Santiago – Kourousis, Katowice 2017.

12...b5!N 13.♗b3 a5∓

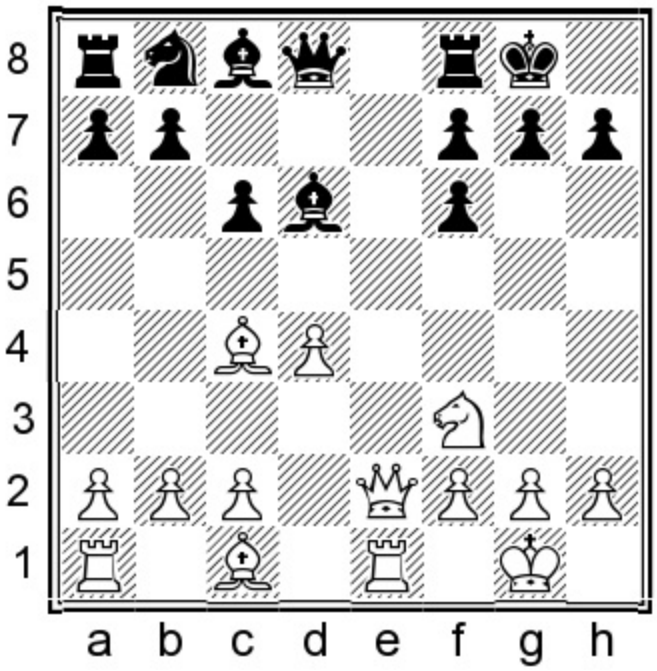
This would have been excellent for Black, for instance:

14.a4 bxa4! 15.♖xa4

15.♗xa4? loses to 15...♖e4 16.♕h5 ♗g4–+ as the bishop no longer attacks f7.

15...♘d7

Intending ...♘b6 while keeping the ...♖e4 idea in reserve.



10...a5!?

This move has seldom been played but I like it, and Lc0 approves too.

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10...♘d7 is playable but, considering the way White's pieces are arranged, I prefer to send the knight to c7 to support either ...♖e8 or ...♗e6.

The immediate 10...♘a6 has been tried by some strong players but a good response is 11.♗xa6! bxa6 as in Mrva – Martiska, Michalovce 1989, followed by 12.♗d2N with an edge for White, due to his better pawn structure.

11.♕e4

This was played in the only game from this position, but it is hardly possible for White to create meaningful threats on the kingside. So, this would be a good time for White to look for an improvement, but it seems to me that Black is quite comfortable whatever White does. Here are a few illustrative lines:

11.♗d3 ♘a6 12.c4 ♗g4⇄ gives Black plenty of activity.

11.a4 ♘a6 12.♘d2 ♘c7 13.♕f3 ♗e6⇄ carries out our main plan. In the event of 14.♗xe6 we follow the usual rule when the queens are on the board and play 14...♘xe6!, rather than 'improving' the pawn structure at the expense of activity.
11.h3 ♘a6 12.a4 ♘c7 leads to similar play, with ...♗e6 coming next.

11.♘d2 ♘a6 12.♘e4 seems logical but 12...b5! is a good reply. White's only ambitious continuation is 13.♘xd6 ♕xd6 14.♗d3 ♘b4 15.♗e4 f5 16.♗f3 when he keeps the bishop pair, but after 16...♗d7 17.♕d1 a4 18.♗d2 ♘d5 19.♖c1 ♗e6⇄ Black has an impressive grip on the light squares.

11...♘a6 12.♕h4 ♗f5 13.♗xa6?!

A clear overreaction to Black's manoeuvre.

13.c3N is better although 13...♕d7 gives Black easy play, with moves like ...♘c7, ...b5 and ...♖fe8 coming.

13...♖xa6 14.c4 ♗e6!?

A simple alternative is 14...♕d7N 15.♗d2 ♖aa8∓ intending ...♖fe8, with excellent play for Black.

15.b3 a4 16.♗d2

Now a clear improvement is:

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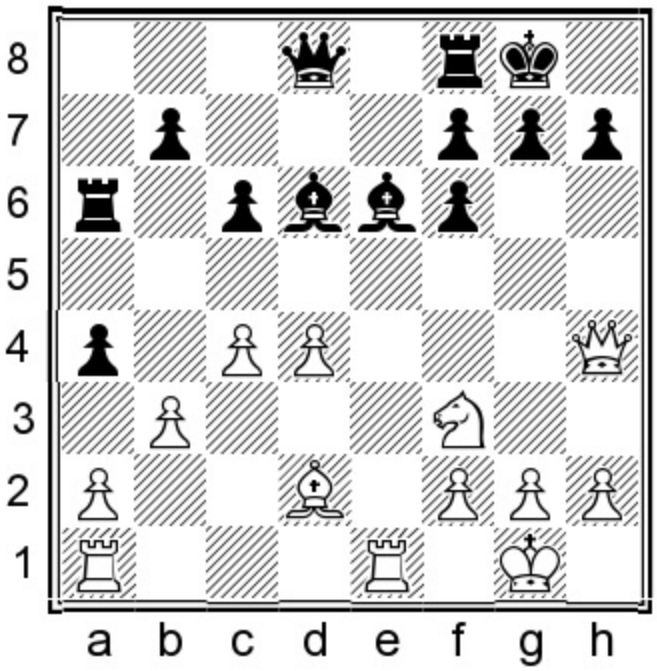

16...axb3!N

16...♕a8 17.♗c3 was not so bad for White in Mestrovic – Cvorovic, Rabac 2004.

17.axb3 ♖xa1 18.♖xa1 ♖e8∓

White's queen remains out of play and the b3-pawn is a potential target for the light-squared bishop.

GAME 1

Sergey Karjakin – David Navara

Saint Louis (blitz) 2017

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6

Notice the slightly unconventional move order. As we will see in Chapter 9, this is a perfectly acceptable response to the Two Knights Variation, which ties in nicely with our repertoire.

6.♗c4 ♗d6 7.♕e2† ♗e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.d4

Now we are back to familiar territory.

9...♗d6 10.c3

10.♖e1 is the main line, which was covered in the analysis section.

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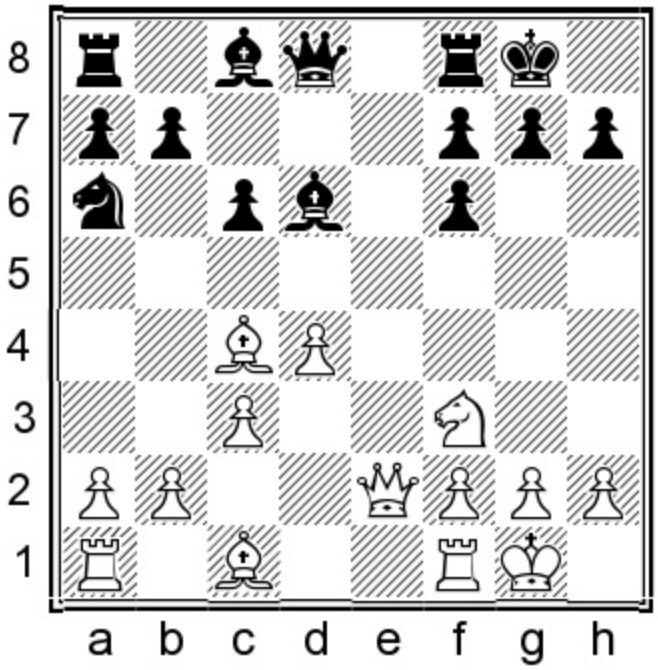
10...♘a6!?



A remarkable move. Black realizes that the knight will be excellently placed on c7, where it controls important squares like d5 and e6. The real revelation is that he is not afraid of ♗xa6. In the old days nobody would allow the pawn structure to be ruined like this, and it's true that I slightly shied away from it in the analysis section after 10.♖e1. Without going into too much detail, even in the 10.♖e1 version, White does not have an easy time proving an advantage. In the present case, c2-c3 is a less useful move and I would have no hesitation in allowing ♗xa6 here.

11.♕c2

11.♗xa6 bxa6 would be strategically at least as risky for White as for Black. The bishop pair has a lot of potential and ...a5 will come next. White's pawns look nice but it is not easy to advance them without creating weaknesses and opening lines for Black's bishops.

11...♖e8 12.♘d2

Manoeuvring with the knight accomplishes little.

12.h3N looks preferable, when play may continue: 12...♘c7 13.♗d3 g6 14.c4 b5!? Black seeks counterplay. (He could also play more patiently with 14...♘e6 or 14...♗f8.) 15.b3 a5⇄

12...♘c7 13.♗d3 g6 14.♘e4 ♗f8 15.♗d2 f5

The right plan, but perhaps it would have been more accurate to prepare it with 15...h6N.

16.♘g3?!

Too passive.

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White should have utilized the g5-square in one way or the other:

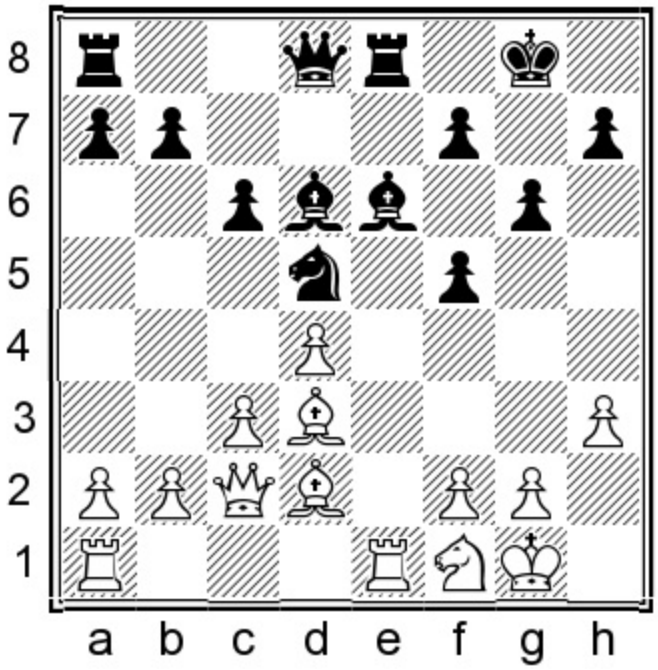
16.♗g5 fxe4!? (16...♗e7= leads to a normal game) 17.♗xd8 exd3 18.♕xd3 ♖xd8∞ With an interesting battle involving three minor pieces versus a queen and pawn.

16.♘g5!? would have enabled the knight to return to the more sensible f3-square, although Black is clearly doing fine.

16...♘d5 17.♖fe1 ♗e6 18.♘f1?!

White seems to be playing without a plan.

18...♗d6 19.h3



19...♘f4! 20.♗xf4 ♗xf4∓

Black has a comfortable game with the advantage of the two bishops. It is a blitz game we are following, so it is hardly surprising that the next phase of the game is a bit blurred. There is no need for us to go into too much detail. The bigger picture is clear and we will see how Black steadily builds his attack.

21.♘d2 ♗d5 22.♖xe8† ♕xe8 23.c4 ♗e6 24.♘f3 ♕d7 25.♖d1 ♖d8 26.♕a4 a6 27.♕b4 ♗b8

Navara wants to create a mating vehicle with ...♕c7.

28.♗e2 ♕c7 29.b3 g5!

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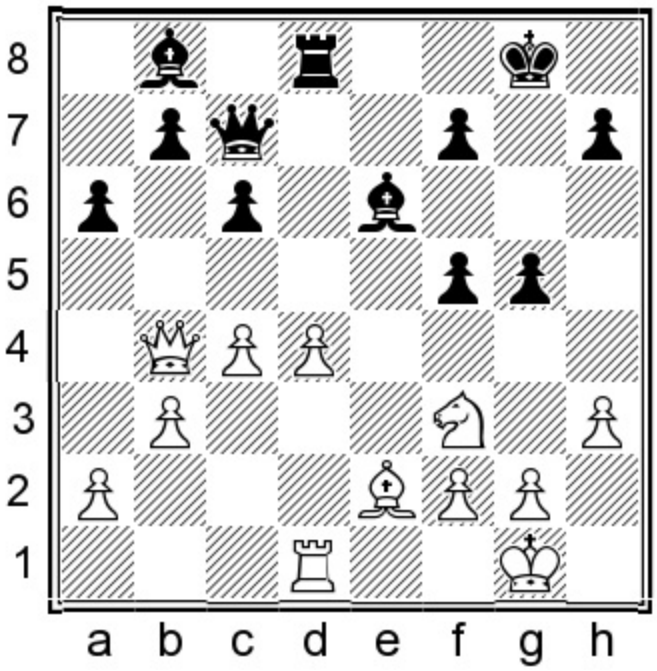

The pawns are coming!

30.♕d2 f6 31.g3 f4! 32.g4 h5! 33.♕d3 hxg4 34.♘xg5!?

A tricky and natural try, but it has one flaw.

34...♗c8!

This strong counter-blow decides the game.

35.♘e4

After 35.♕g6† ♕g7 36.♕xg7† ♔xg7 37.♘e4 f3 38.♗f1 gxh3 White can continue wriggling, but there is no doubt that Black should win.

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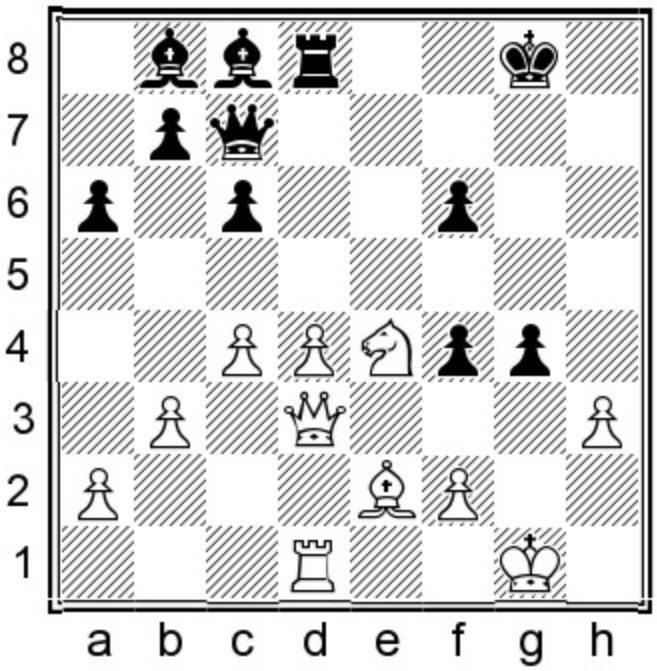


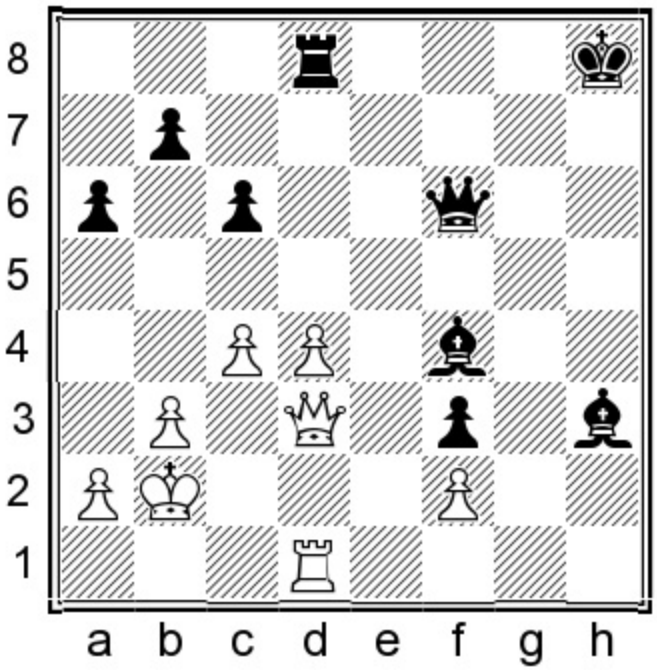
35...f3!

Navara's accuracy is impressive, especially at such a time limit.

36.♗xf3

36.♘xf6† ♔f8 leaves White without a good follow-up.

36...gxf3 37.♘xf6† ♔h8 38.♔f1 ♗xh3† 39.♔e1 ♕e7† 40.♔d2 ♕xf6 41.♔c1 ♗f4† 42.♔b2



42...♖xd4!

Black is winning any way he pleases, but this final flourish ends things quickly.

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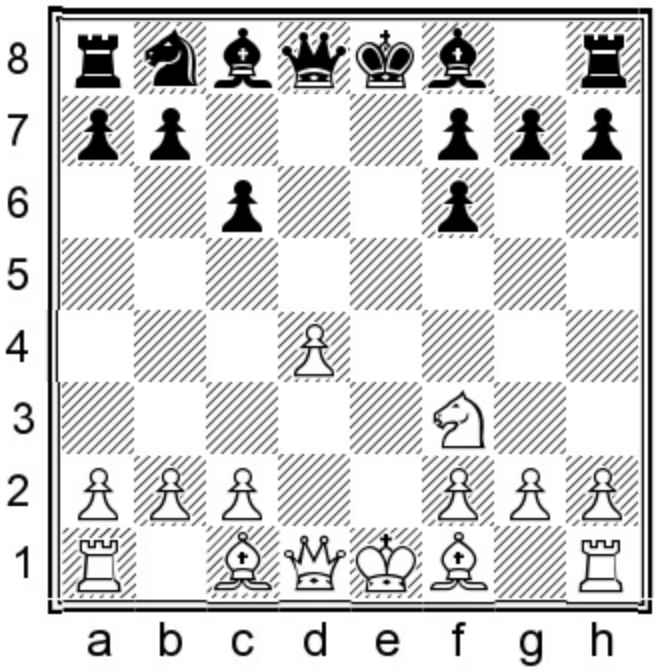
43.♕c3 ♖d2†

0–1

C) 6.♘f3



White develops normally.

6...♗d6!

And so does Black. The most natural way for White to proceed is to get the light-squared bishop out with **C1)** 7.♗e2, **C2)** 7.♗c4 or the most popular **C3)** 7.♗d3.

There are some alternatives that are worth mentioning, even though you are unlikely to meet them.

7.g3

This may seem tempting as the bishop could be good on g2, but the drawback is clear after:

7...0-0 8.♗g2 ♖e8†

Delivering an annoying check before White can castle.

9.♗e3 ♕b6!

Attacking b2, again causing problems before White can get properly coordinated.

10.0-0

10.♕c1 ♕a6! is awkward for White.

10...♕xb2 11.c4

11.d5N 11...♖d8∓ and White must prove his compensation.

11...♘a6 12.a3 ♕c3 13.♕a4

This position was reached in Tsolakidou – Delchev, Vrachati 2014, and now:

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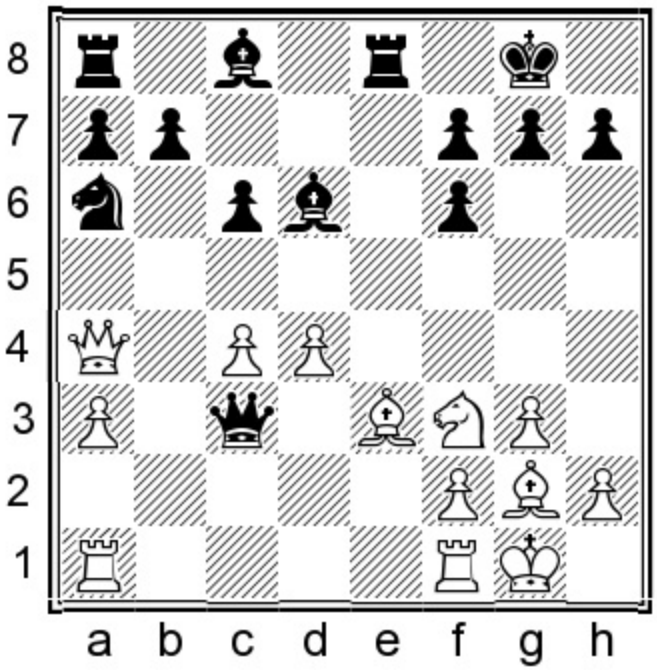

13...♘c7!N

Intending ...b5 would have given Black excellent play. (The exchange sacrifice 13...♖xe3!?N 14.fxe3 ♕xe3† 15.♔h1 ♕e8∓ is also tempting.)

7.♗e3

Whenever this move is played, it should act as a magnet for the knight to come to d5.

7...0-0 8.♕d2

White could also have developed with 8.♗d3 or 8.♗e2 which could soon transpose to one of the main lines covered right after this.

8...♖e8!

8...♗e6 has been played in several games, but there is no need to stop long castling.

8...♕c7 is another sensible move.

9.0-0-0?!

This looks consistent and has been the most popular choice, but it is too risky.

In the event of 9.♗d3 I propose a new idea: 9...♘a6!N 10.a3 (10.♗xa6 bxa6 gives Black promising play with the two bishops) 10...♘c7 11.0-0 ♘d5 Hitting the bishop on e3, with a comfortable game for Black.

9...♗e6 10.♔b1

Out of several decent moves, I prefer:

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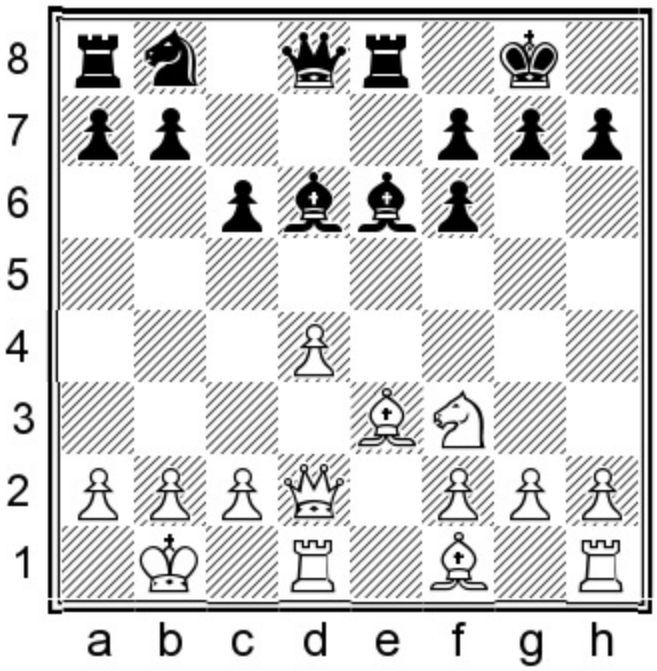


10...♘a6!?N

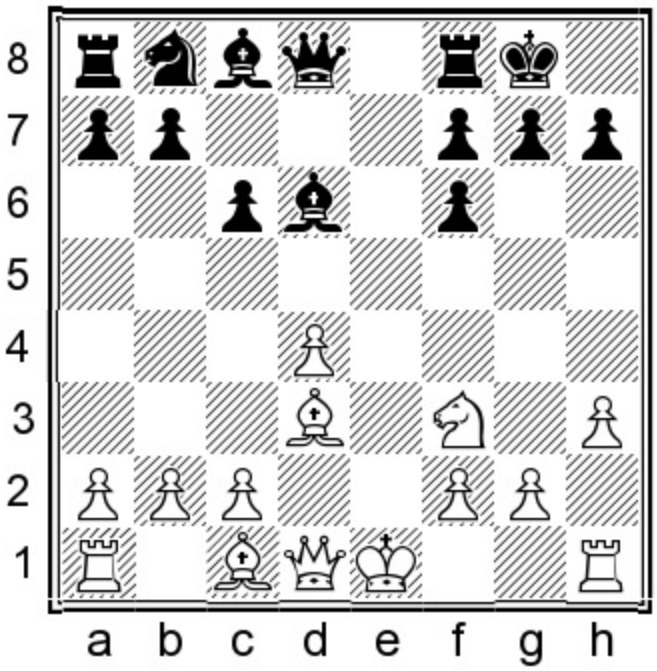
Intending ...♘c7-d5 and ...b5. Black is the first to develop an initiative against the enemy king, and the d5-outpost is sure to come in handy.

7.h3

There is some sense in preventing ...♗g4, but this seems a little early for it.

7...0-0 8.♗d3

8.♗e2 ♖e8 9.0-0 is covered under the 7.♗e2 move order.



8...♘a6!?N

Again, we see this method of activating the knight.

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9.c3

9.♗xa6?! gives Black a great game after 9...♕a5† followed by ...♕xa6.

In the event of 9.0-0 we could send the knight via c7 as usual, but even better is 9...♘b4! to harass the bishop, with the knight coming later to d5 and perhaps f4.

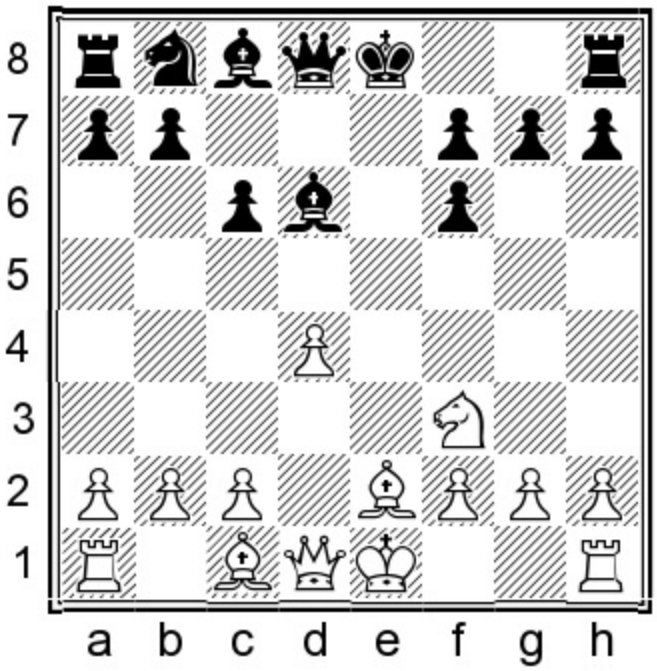
9...♖e8† 10.♗e3 ♗f4

10...♘c7 11.0-0 ♘d5 is also fine.

11.♕d2 ♕e7↑

The opening has clearly not gone well for White.

C1) 7.♗e2



It hardly needs to be stated that this set-up is not the most threatening for Black. It is solid though, and an understandable choice if White firmly believes that his better pawn structure will tell in a quiet positional game. As we have already seen again and again, such a judgement is superficial and basically wrong. Just because Black would be losing in a hypothetical king-and-pawn endgame, it does not mean his position is fundamentally inferior. He has active piece play and dynamic counter-chances based on the timely advance of his kingside pawns, which easily maintains the balance.

7...0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8

This is a good starting move before developing the queenside pieces. The knight may go to d7 or a6; there is no need to decide just yet. Also standing high on our to-do list is the development of the light-squared bishop, but again there is no need to hurry, as it may go to any of e6, f5 or g4.

Often in similar positions 8...♗g4 is played, but here 9.h3 ♗h5 10.♘h4! simplifies in a way that favours White. With the rook on e8, the same idea would not work. Of course, that does not mean we will necessarily develop the bishop to g4 next. One could argue that the best place for the bishop is f5, as White has neglected to take control of that diagonal with ♗d3.

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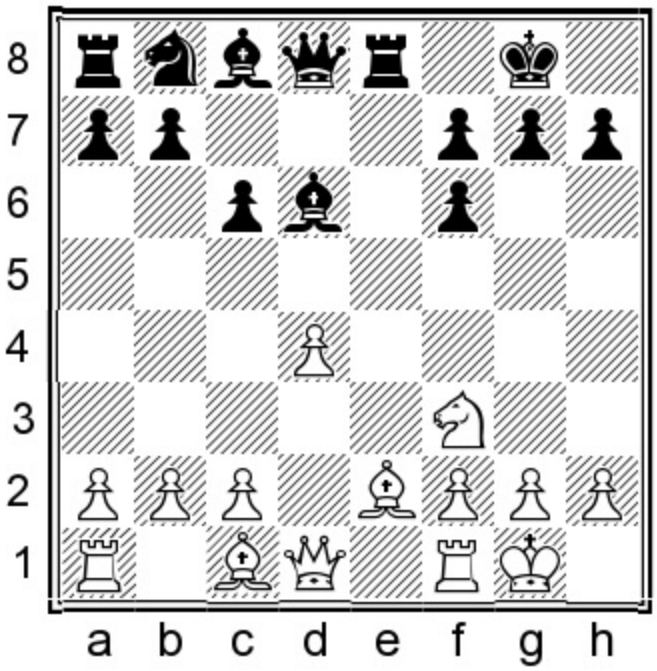

9.♖e1

Also a good move, for similar reasons: White develops the rook without prematurely committing any other pieces. Here are a few other possibilities:

9.c4 is covered in the next illustrative game (Nepomniachtchi – Carlsen), where we see how the World Champion handles the Caro-Kann.

9.h3 ♘d7 10.c4 ♘f8 11.♗e3 ♗e6 12.♕d2 ♕d7∓ and ...♗xh3 ideas were already in the air in Svensson – T. Hansen, Lund 2018.

9.♗e3 has been played in a lot of games, and in most cases Black develops the knight to d7. Although this is fine, I prefer the rare 9...♘a6!? as played in Swiercz – Zvjaginsev, Tromso 2013. Exchanging on a6 looks unappealing for White, so the knight will go to c7 next, where it threatens to hop to d5 and annoy the bishop. White will most probably prevent this with c2-c4, in which case the knight will still be decently placed on c7 (unlike if it had gone via d7 to b6), and at a suitable moment it may go to e6 and perhaps f4.

9...♘d7

Another flexible choice: Black makes the thematic knight manoeuvre to f8 and perhaps g6, and only then chooses a square for the light-squared bishop.

The immediate 9...♗f5 also makes sense.

10.c4

This is the only challenging approach.

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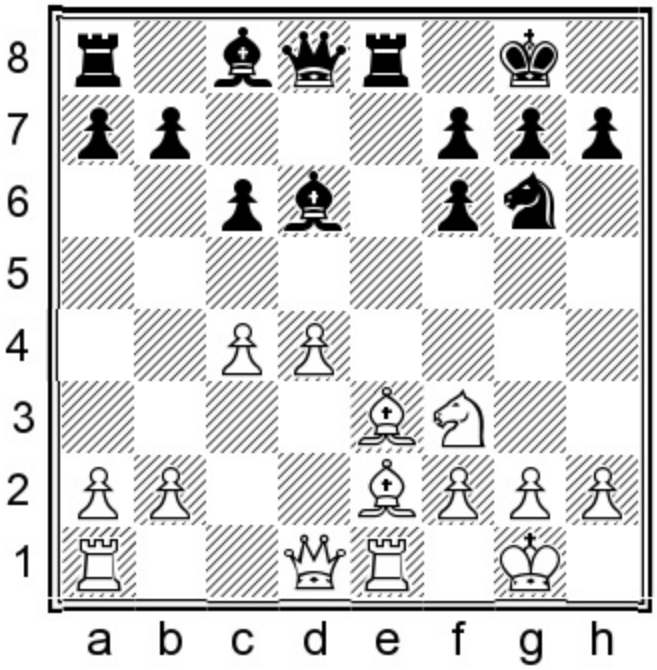
If White keeps playing slowly with something like 10.♗f1, then 10...♖xe1 11.♕xe1 ♘f8 leaves him equal at best.

10...♘f8 11.♗e3 ♘g6



The knight is excellent here, and the bishop can still go to f5 or g4, depending on what happens in the next few moves.

12.♕c2

Preventing ...♗f5 was Tiviakov's choice.

Black has done well against other moves, for instance:

12.♕b3 has been played a few times. 12...a5!?N is the favourite move of Lc0 which has been mentioned in a few places, and I like it here too.

12.d5!?N can be met by 12...cxd5 (12...c5!? leads to interesting play too) 13.♕xd5 (13.cxd5 ♗f5⇄ gives Black nice activity while the passer is securely blockaded) 13...♕c7⇄ with plenty of activity for Black. 13...♕e7!? is also playable.

12.♗f1 ♗f5 13.♕b3!?N (13.a3 occurred in Steingrimsson – Kreisl, Plovdiv 2012, and now the natural 13...♕d7N looks objectively equal but practically more pleasant for Black) 13...♕d7 14.h3 (14.♖ad1 ♗g4! is annoying for White) 14...a5!?⇄ Again we see this flank activity, preparing to kick the queen away with ...a4.

12...♘f4

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The knight is a nuisance, and exchanging it would cost White the bishop pair.

13.♗f1 ♗g4 14.♘d2

14.♗xf4 ♗xf4 15.♖xe8† ♕xe8 16.♖e1 ♕b8!? (16...♕d7 is also good) 17.h3 ♗xf3 18.gxf3 g6∓ was good for Black in Klauke – Broehl, Germany 2018.

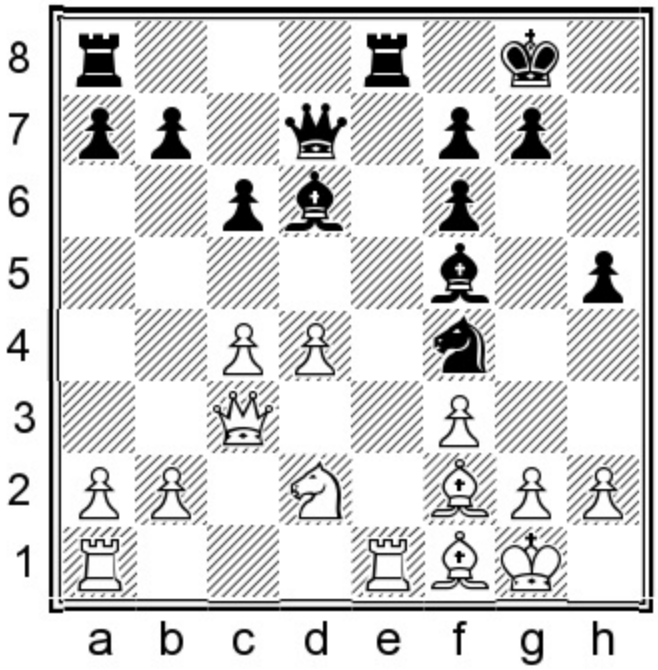
14...♕d7 15.f3 ♗f5 16.♕c3 h5!?

Going with the h-pawn is so fashionable in the age of AlphaZero.

Black could have taken similar inspiration on the opposite flank: 16...a5!?N 17.a3 a4∓ Here too, Black is more than okay.

17.♗f2

In Tiviakov – Maris, Groningen 2019, Black could have made use of a surprising resource:



17...c5!N

Simply centralizing with 17...♖ad8N also makes a lot of sense.

18.d5

18.dxc5 ♗e5 leaves the queen in an awkward spot, and after for instance 19.♕c1 ♗d3! Black has a strong initiative.

18...b6↑

The dark-squared bishop has access to the powerful e5-square and Black's kingside pawn majority may be mobilized with ...g5 at any moment.

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GAME 2

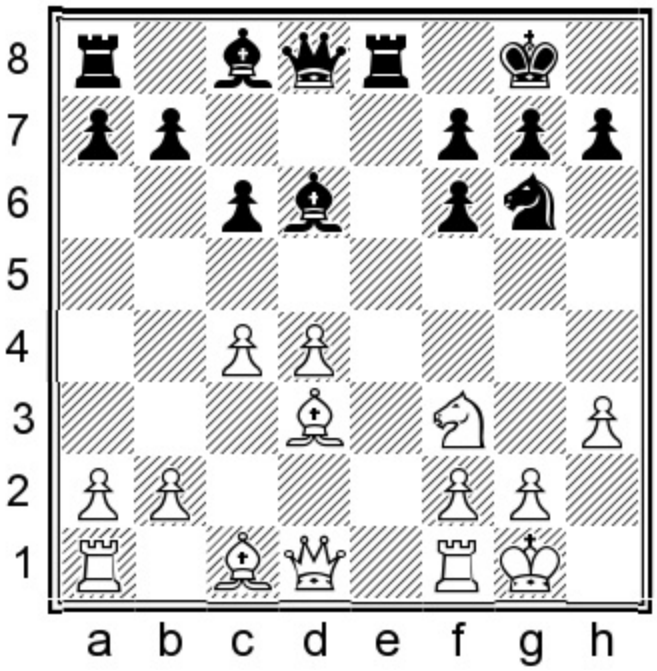
Ian Nepomniachtchi – Magnus Carlsen

Doha (rapid) 2016

1.e4 c6 2.♘c3 d5 3.♘f3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6

Again, notice the move-order. I will come back to this when we discuss the Two Knights Variation more fully in Chapter 9.

6.d4 ♗d6 7.♗e2 0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8 9.c4 ♘d7 10.♗d3 ♘f8 11.h3 ♘g6



One square is all it takes. I am talking about the f4-square. The fact that White has weakened his kingside by moving his h-pawn may also tell.

12.♕c2

Pinning the knight for now, while preparing ♗f5 to simplify.

12...♕a5

12...♗c7 13.♗f5 ♕d6 is also fine for Black. A good example continued: 14.g3 ♗xf5 15.♕xf5 ♕e6 16.♕xe6 fxe6= As we already know, this change in the pawn structure is fine for Black once the queens have been exchanged. 17.♗e3 ♖ad8 18.♖fd1 e5 19.dxe5 ♘xe5 20.♘xe5 ♗xe5 21.♖ab1 The players agreed a draw in Svidler – F. Berkes, Germany 2011.

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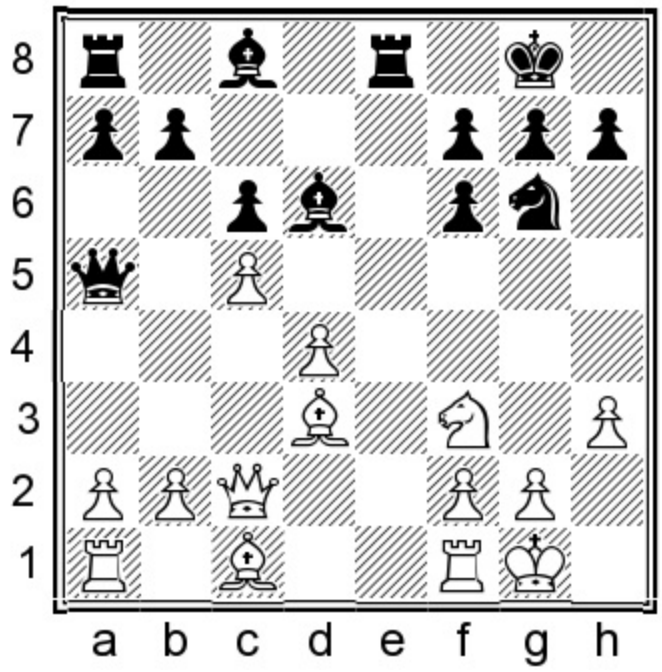
13.c5!?

White fights for the initiative in the most principled way possible. The move is positionally double-edged to put it mildly, because it gives Black a perfect square on d5.

The question is if White can develop serious pressure before Black can take control over the key outpost.



13...♗b8!

Black stays on the active diagonal.

13...♗c7?? 14.♗d2 traps the queen.

14.♗d2 ♕d8 15.♖fe1 ♗e6 16.♗c4

The fight for the d5-square continues.

16...♘f8 17.♖ad1 ♗c7 18.♕b3 ♗xc4 19.♕xc4 ♕d7 20.b4 ♘g6!?

Carlsen takes the most ambitious approach.

Black could have stayed ultra-solid with 20...♖xe1† 21.♖xe1 ♘e6 22.a4 a6 but Carlsen sees a way to seize the d5-square.

21.a4 ♘e7 22.b5 ♘d5

Both sides have achieved their objectives to some extent: Black has won the battle to secure the d5-square, while White has gained a lot of space on the queenside.

23.bxc6?!

It was better to keep the tension with 23.♖b1N when the position remains complex and dynamically balanced.

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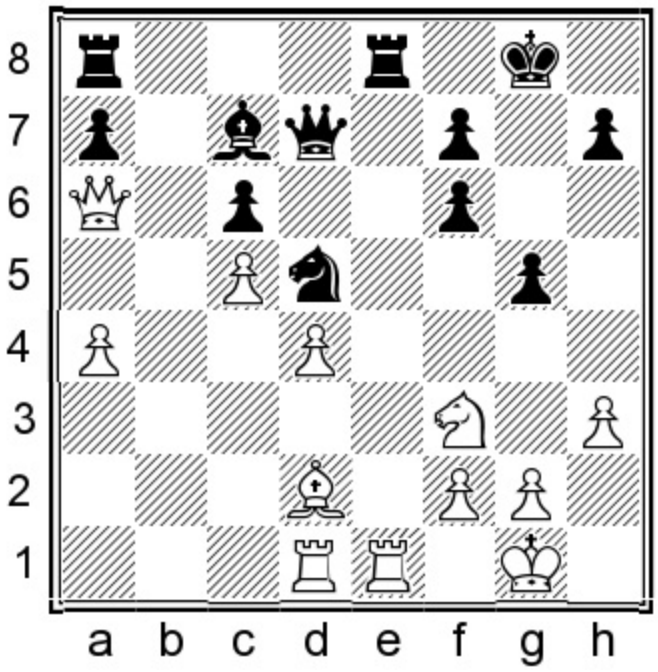
23...bxc6 24.♕a6 g5!



An extremely instructive moment. Before White can develop any real threats on the queenside, Carlsen launches an offensive on the other flank. Once again, we are reminded that Black's seemingly crippled pawn majority actually has a lot of latent potential.

25.♘h2

White goes into defensive mode to prevent a serious attack on his king, but runs into a different type of problem.

25...♗xh2†! 26.♔xh2 ♔g7∓

Black's knight is the undisputed champion of the d5-square, and is far superior to the enemy bishop.

27.♔g1 ♖xe1†! 28.♖xe1 ♖b8!

White can do nothing with the e-file, while the black rook is free to penetrate along the b-file. With only one rook left, it is harder for White to cover the weak squares in his position.

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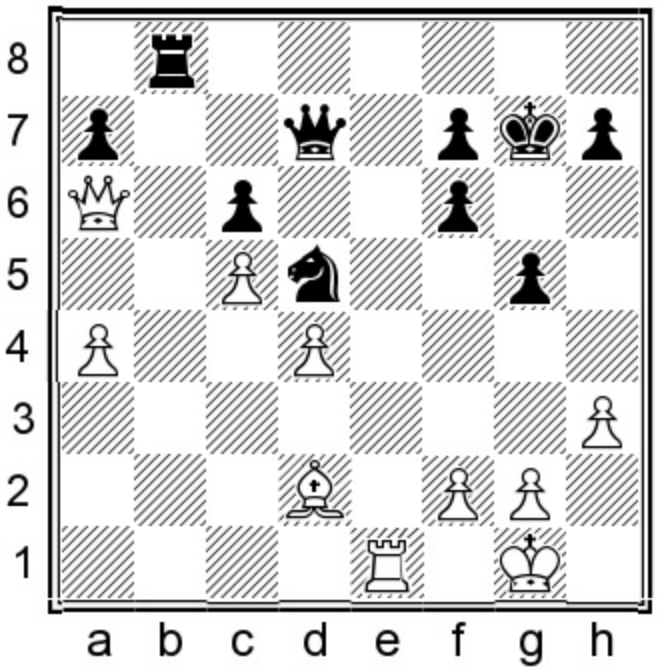

29.♕d3 ♖b2 30.a5 h6

There is no need to hurry.

31.♗c1

31.♖b1 ♕b7 32.♖xb2 ♕xb2 is also depressing, but White at least could try to maintain a fortress.

31...♖a2 32.♗d2 ♕b7

The queen joins the rook deep behind enemy lines, and the defence quickly breaks.

33.♖e8 ♕b2 34.♗e1 ♘f4

The triumph of the dark knight.

35.♕a6 ♕xd4

35...♖a1! 36.♕c8 ♘g6–+ was even more precise.

36.♕c8 ♘g6!

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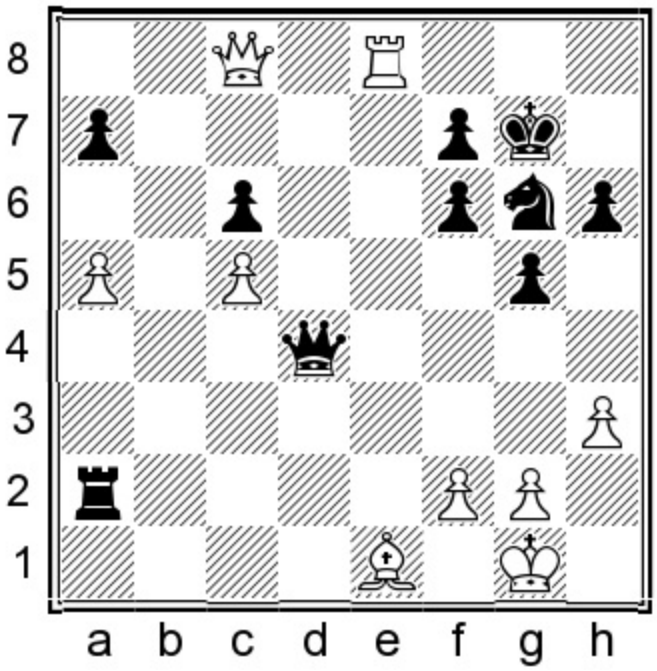

Protecting the king against almost everything.

37.♕xc6

White had to try 37.♖g8† ♔h7 38.♖xg6! although it is not quite good enough after 38...♔xg6 39.♕g8† ♔f5 40.♕c8† ♔e4 41.♕xc6† ♔d3 and the king escapes.

37...♖a1! 38.♕e4

In the event of 38.♖e3 ♕b4 39.♔f1 ♕xa5 Black picks off a pawn and creates a passer, while maintaining his other advantages.

38...♕xc5

With an extra pawn and a dominant position, victory is near for Black.

39.♔h2 h5 40.♕e3 ♕c6 41.♗c3 ♖a4

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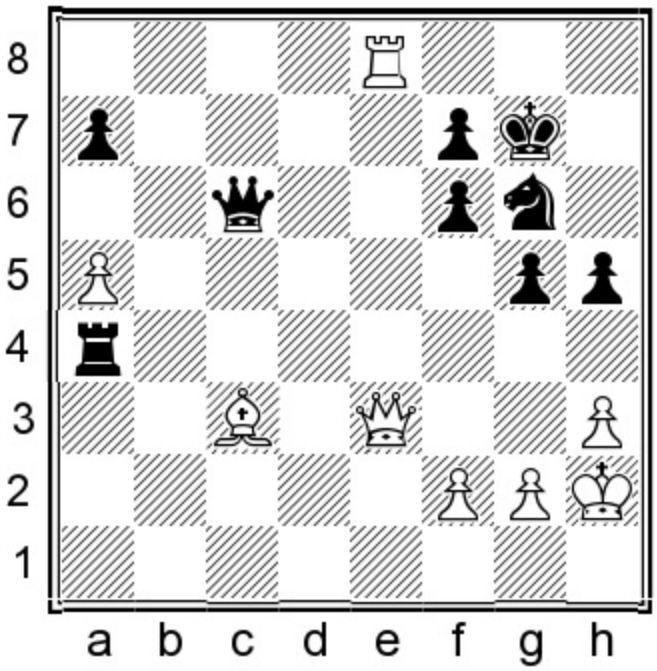


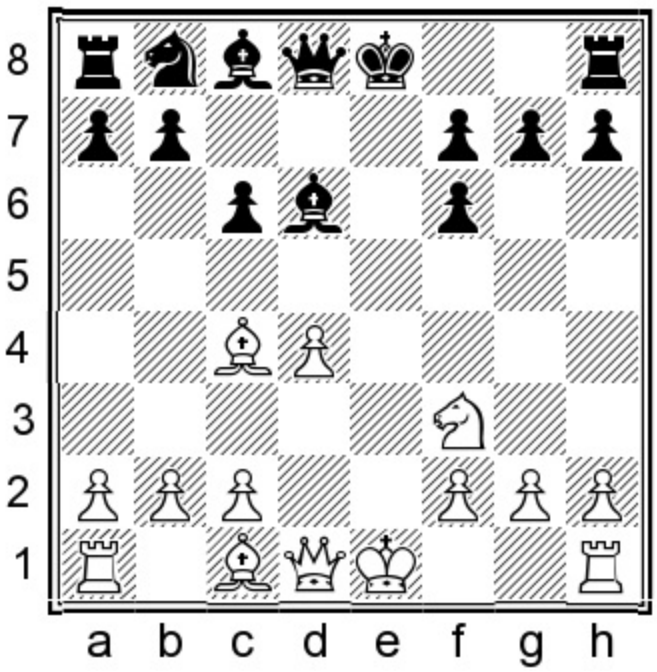
42.f3

42.♕xg5? loses to 42...♕xc3 of course.

42...♖a2 43.♔h1 ♖c2 44.♗e1 ♕b5 45.♗g3 h4 46.♗h2 ♕b1† 47.♗g1 ♕f1

0–1

C2) 7.♗c4



This is a rather shy and completely unthreatening cousin of the 6.♗c4 line. Because there is no queen check on e2, Black will not be disturbed.

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7...0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8

Like in the 7.♗e2 line, Black waits with the development of his light-squared bishop.

9.h3

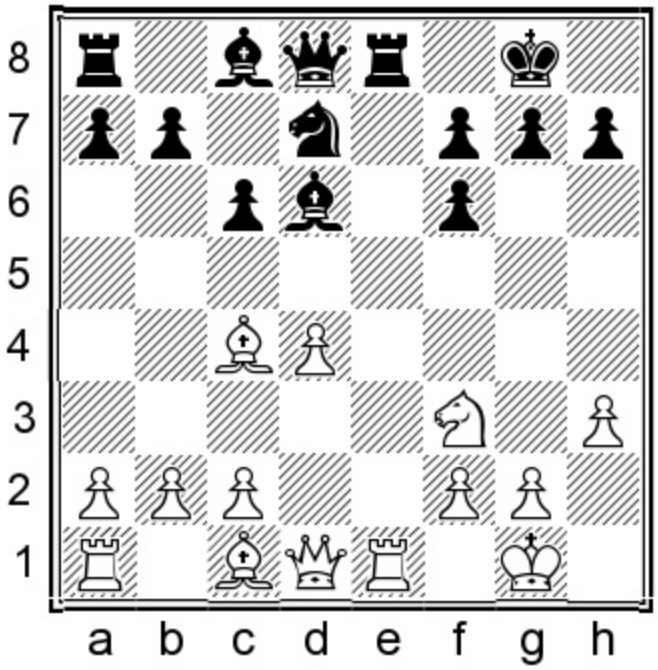
If 9.♗b3 then 9...♗g4 is well timed.

9...♘d7 10.♖e1

10.♗b3 ♘f8 11.c4 was seen in Recuero Guerra – Narciso Dublan, Gijon 2011, and now the typical 11...♗e6N followed by ...♕d7 would have led to equal play.

10.c3 ♘f8 is also fine for Black.

This occurred in Palit – Mithil, Jalgaon 2010. A logical continuation would be:



10...♖xe1†N 11.♕xe1 ♘f8=

Intending ...♗e6 and ...♕d7.

C3) 7.♗d3

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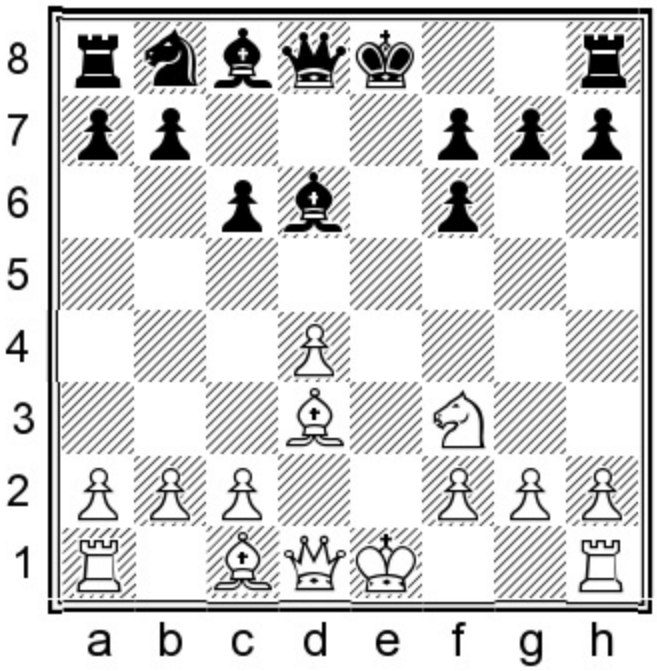

If White has any ambition, this is the move he should play.

7...0-0 8.0-0

8.h3 has been covered under 7.h3.

8...♗g4

This straightforward pinning move seems simplest.

In some previous examples we have seen that Black often waits with:

8...♖e8!?

This rook move, before committing his minor pieces, is valid here too. For instance:

9.h3

9.c3 ♘d7 followed by ...♘f8 continues Black's thematic plan.

9...♘d7 10.c4 ♘f8

White has deployed his pieces on more or less optimal squares. If the position looks familiar, it is because you saw it in the Nepomniachtchi – Carlsen game, but there it was Black to move! It happened because White wasted a tempo by playing ♗e2 first and only then ♗d3. But even a tempo ahead, how should White proceed? A typical plan for Black is ...♘g6, ...♗e6 and ...♕d7, after which there are always sacrifices on h3 in the air. With the help of the Lc0 beast, I unearthed a highly instructional variation:

11.♕b3!?N

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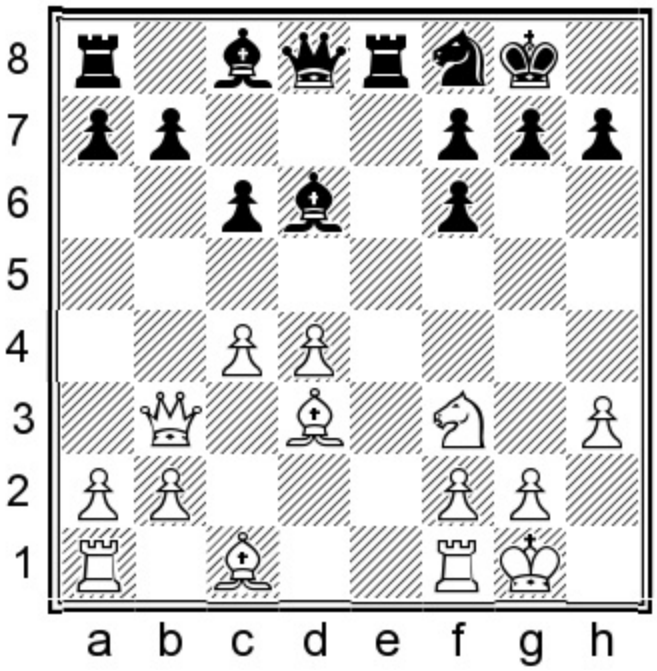

11...a5!?

Neural networks seem to love this kind of flank attack when the enemy queen is in range.

12.♗d2 a4 13.♕c2 ♗e6 14.♖fe1 ♕d7 15.♗f1 h5!?

Leela's tendency to advance the rook's pawns gives us plenty of food for thought.

15...♗f5 16.♖xe8! is slightly annoying, even though 16...♖xe8 17.♕xa4 ♗e4 gives Black reasonable play.

16.♖ac1

16.♖ad1 would definitely be met by 16...♗f5, since 17.♖xe8?? ♗xc2 is no longer playable for White.

16...♘g6∞

The knight comes to f4, with good play for Black.

The somewhat more daring 16...g5!?∞ could also be considered.

9.h3

9.♖e1 ♘d7 10.h3 ♗h5 is a simple transposition.

9.c3 ♖e8 10.♗c2 ♘d7 11.♕d3

This is an alternative way to get out of the pin, although Black easily defends h7 with:

11...♘f8

A move he was going to play anyway, so the white set-up looks somewhat artificial. A good example continued:

12.♗d2

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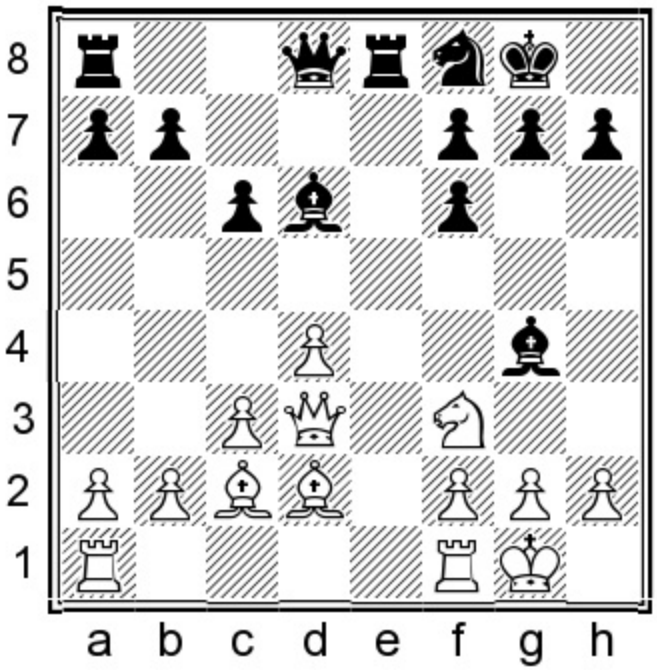


12...♗h5! 13.c4 ♗c7!

Black's regrouping is exemplary.

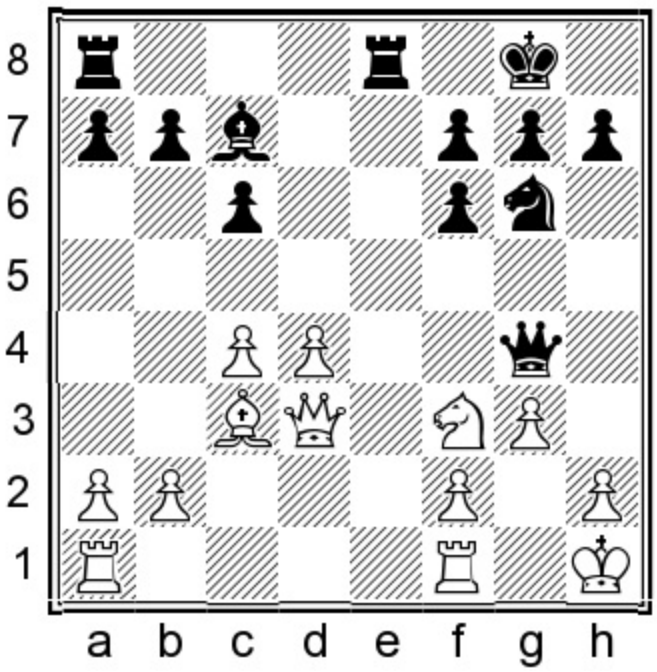
14.♗c3 ♕d6

There seems to be a mutual agreement about this primitive attacking formation, but the difference is that Black defended effortlessly whereas White actually has to weaken his kingside.

15.g3 ♗g6

The position remains objectively equal, but I would definitely prefer Black. He has more active ideas available, which the game continuation demonstrates.

16.♕d2 ♕e6 17.♗xg6 ♘xg6 18.♕d3 ♕g4! 19.♔h1



19...f5↑

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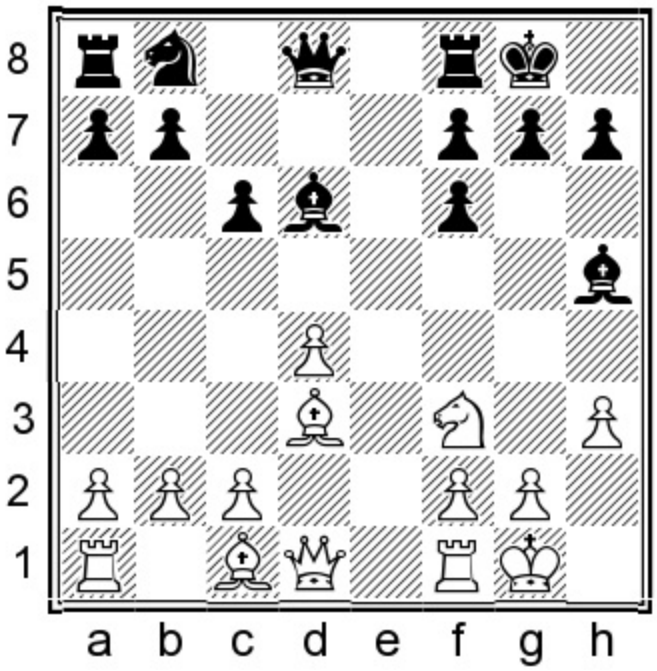
In Mahitosh – Delchev, Paracin 2019, Black was in the driving seat, even though the position remains equal if you are a computer.

19...h5N was a natural alternative; and even 19...b5!? was worth considering, with a surprise attack on the other side.

9...♗h5



10.♖e1

Taking the open file is by far the most common continuation, but White has some other ideas as well.

10.c3 is another typical move, when 10...♘a6!? is a good choice. (10...♘d7 is also fine of course.) A logical continuation is 11.♖e1 ♘c7 12.♗d2 ♖e8= with no problems for Black.

10.♗f5!? is a rare move which resembles the next line below. Black is fine after 10...♘a6!? (10...♘d7 is also playable of course) 11.c3 ♘c7 12.♕d3 ♗g6 13.♗d2 as played in T. Hansen – P. Olsen, Copenhagen 2004.

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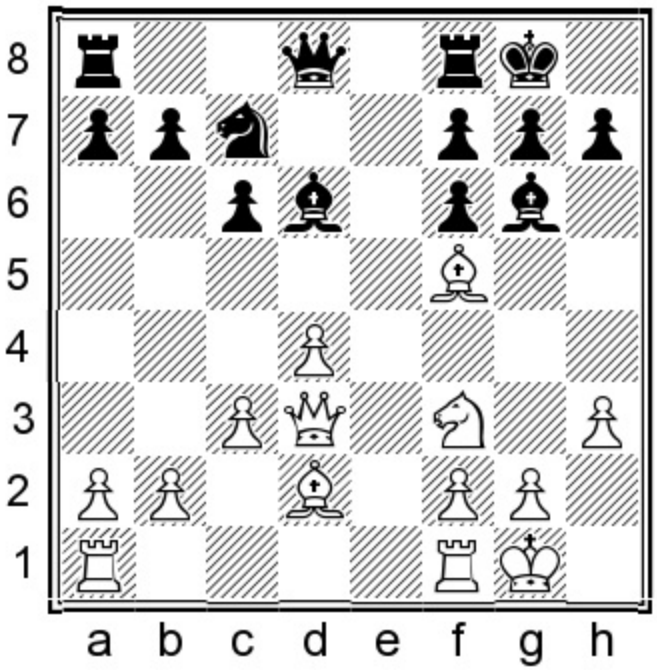

Now Black can choose between the fancy 13...♕d7!?N and the more obvious 13...♗xf5N 14.♕xf5 g6 followed by ...♖e8, with equal play in either case.

10.♗e4!?

Preparing ♕d3 is quite original, but also somewhat artificial.

10...♘a6!

This prepares to meet ♕d3 with ...♘b4, so White must spend a tempo to prevent it.

11.c3

Another good example continued: 11.a3 ♕d7 12.♕d3 g6!? (12...♗g6= is fine too) 13.♘d2 (13.g4?? ♗xg4 is no good for White) 13...f5 14.♗f3 ♗xf3 15.♘xf3 ♘c7= Black was fine in Ghaem Maghami – Ehlvest, Guilan 2016. A good plan is ...♘d5-f6-e4.

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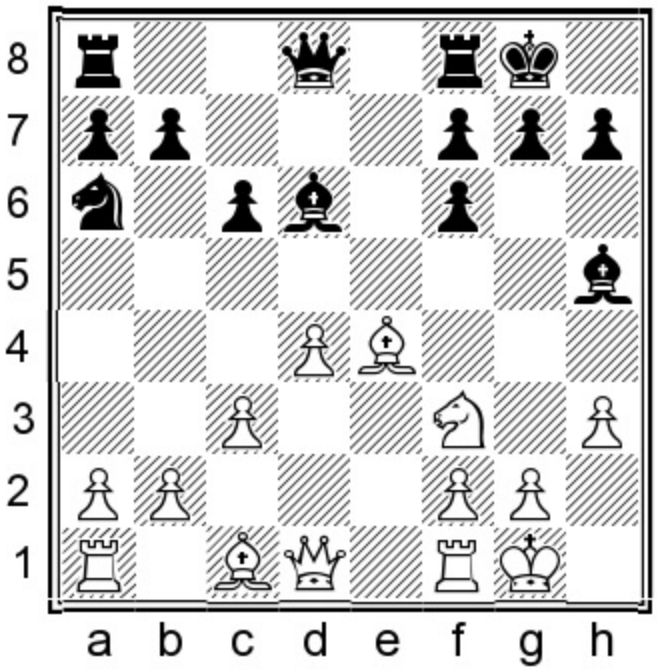
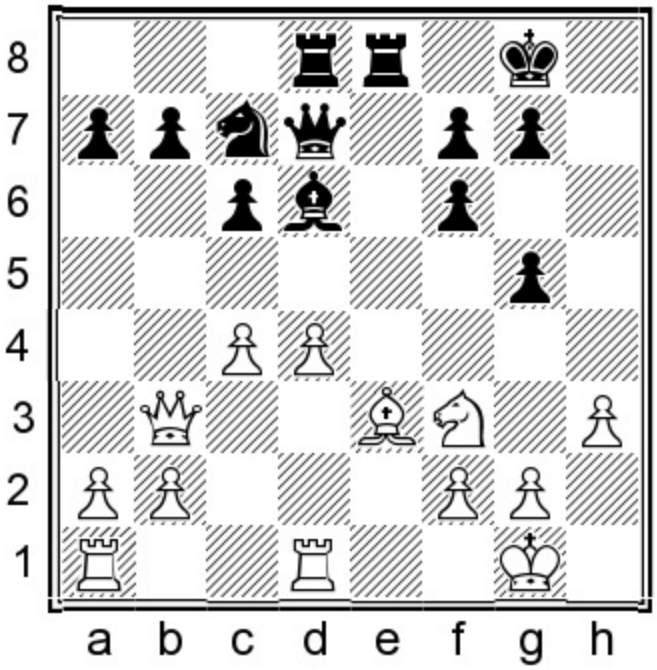


Black has two good options, and which to prefer is a matter of taste.

a) 11...♖e8 12.♕d3 ♗g6 13.♗xg6 hxg6

We reach a special pawn formation.

14.♖d1 ♕d7 15.♗e3 ♘c7 16.c4 ♖ad8 17.♕b3 g5!



Again we see this strike on the kingside.

18.a3 b6 19.♖ac1 ♘e6

19...g4⇄ is playable too.

20.c5 ♗c7 21.cxb6 axb6∞

The position remained complicated and dynamically balanced in Andreica-Navruc – Enescu, corr. 2016.

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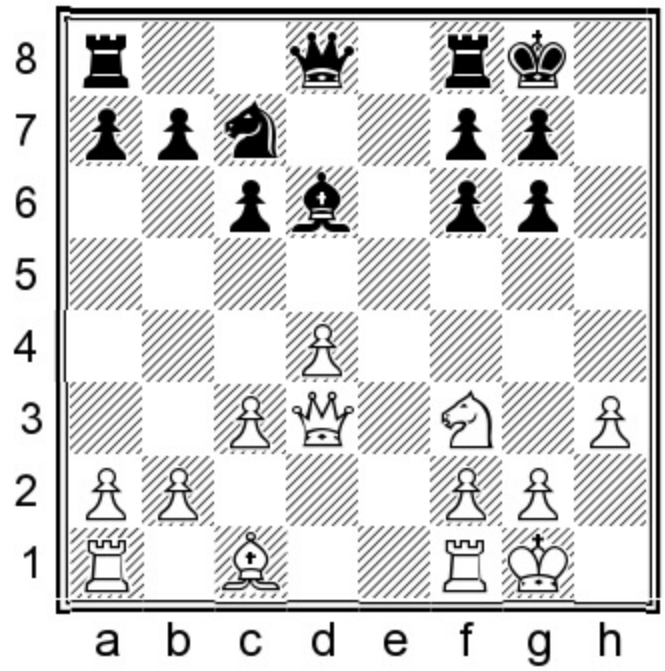
b) 11...♘c7

This is equally playable.

12.♕d3 ♗g6 13.♗xg6 hxg6



There arises a unique pawn structure, making the position difficult to evaluate. There is no doubt that Black's 'pawn square' has considerable dynamic potential, as the following example demonstrates:

14.c4 ♕d7 15.♗e3 g5!? 16.♘d2 g4!?

16...♖fe8=

17.hxg4 ♕xg4 18.♘e4 ♗e7 19.♘g3 g6

Preparing ...f5.

20.♕e4 ♕d7

It is natural to keep some attacking chances alive, but Black could also have exchanged queens with a fine position.

21.♖ad1 ♔g7 22.d5 cxd5 23.cxd5

We have been following Yuan – M. Muzychuk, Sochi 2015. Black should have immobilized the d-pawn with:

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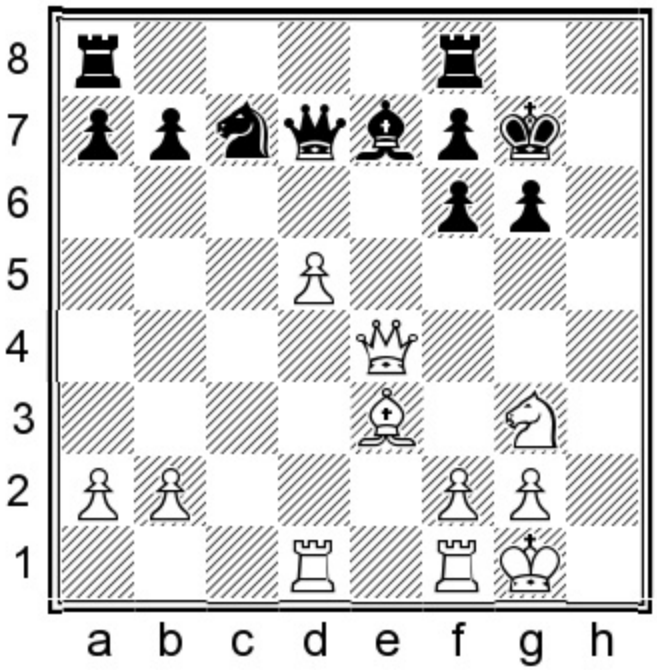

23...♗d6!N

The position is tense, but Black shouldn't complain. A possible continuation is:

24.♕f3 f5 25.♘h5†!?

This is not forced, but White has no advantage anyway, and it makes sense to act before Black has time for ...♖h8.

25...gxh5 26.♕xh5 f6

26...f4!? should also lead to a draw.

27.♗h6† ♔g8 28.♕g6† ♔h8 29.♗xf8 ♖xf8 30.♖d3 ♕h7 31.♖h3 ♕xh3 32.gxh3 ♖g8 33.♕g2 ♖xg2† 34.♔xg2 ♔h7=

Some play remains, but the ending should be a draw.

10...♘d7

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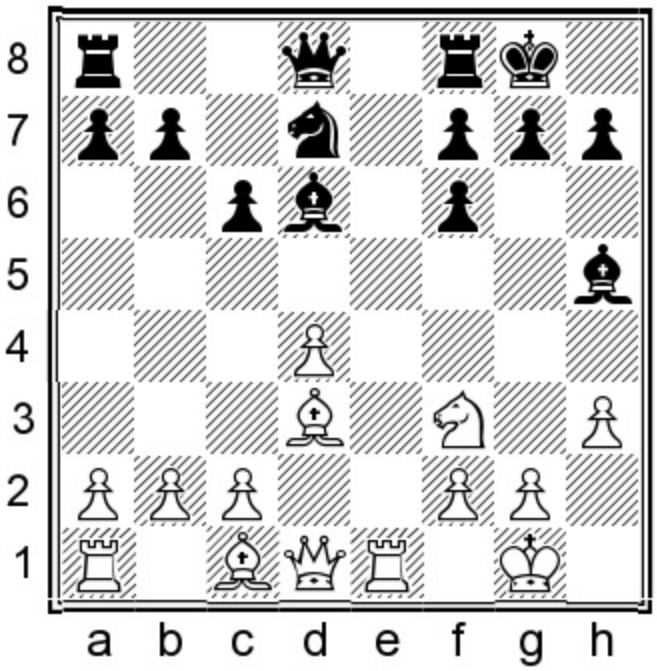

11.c4

This is the most challenging approach. White claims that his superior pawn structure can be used to secure both space and important squares in the centre. That may be true; but as we have witnessed several times already, White lacks a natural follow-up while Black's position is both solid and dynamic.

White could also play more reservedly and bolster his central pawn with:

11.c3

But it lacks bite and Black has more than one good continuation. The most ambitious is:

11...♘b6!?

Intending to complicate the game.

11...♖e8 12.♖xe8† ♕xe8 is simply equal after 13.♗d2 ♘f8 or 13.♗e3 ♘f8.

12.♗e4 ♖e8 13.♕d3

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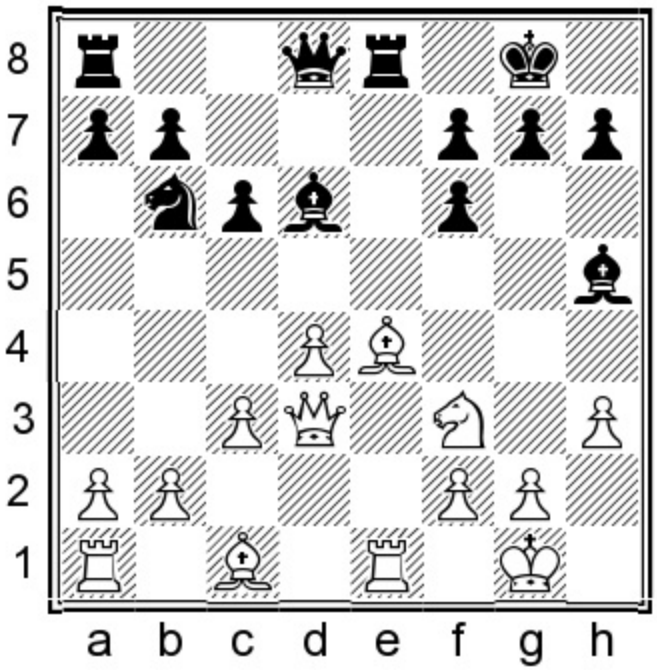


This occurred in Kulhanek – Navara, Prague 2019. Black's best continuation is:

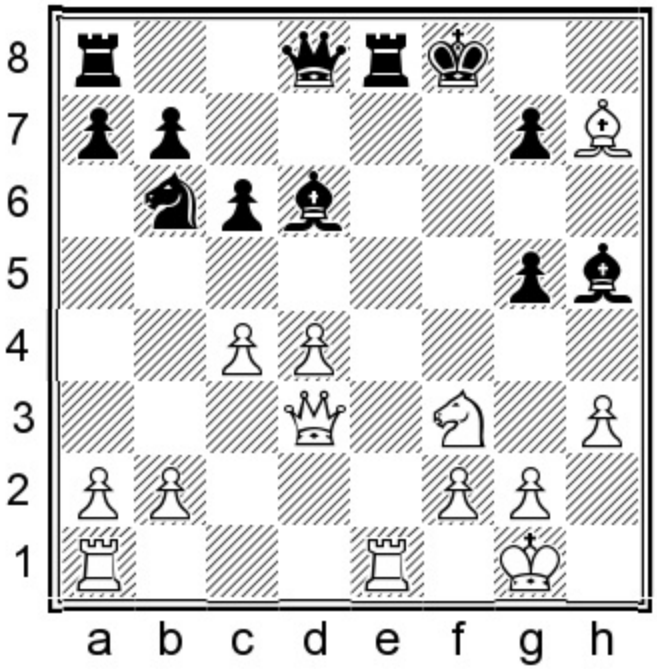
13...f5!N 14.♗g5!

14.♗xf5? ♗xf3 15.♖xe8† ♕xe8 16.gxf3 g6 and the bishop has no squares.

14...f6

14...♗xf3!? 15.♗xd8 ♗xe4 16.♕e2 ♖exd8 is a tempting alternative. Black has the makings of a clear advantage with three pieces versus a queen, but White can and should transform the material balance again with: 17.c4! ♗b4 18.f3 ♗xe1 19.♖xe1 ♖xd4 20.fxe4 fxe4∞ The machine evaluates this as 0.00, but in a practical game both sides would have some potential to outplay the opponent.

15.♗xf5 fxg5 16.♗xh7† ♔f8 17.c4



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White has compensation for the piece, and this position may well be the reason why Navara rejected this continuation. However, Black is not worse and he can play for a win with:

17...♕f6!?

17...♗xf3 18.♕xf3† ♕f6 19.♕xf6† gxf6 20.c5 ♗c7 21.cxb6 ♖xe1† 22.♖xe1 axb6= is a simple route to a drawn endgame if Black wants it.

18.c5 ♗xf3 19.gxf3 ♗xc5 20.dxc5 ♘d5⩲

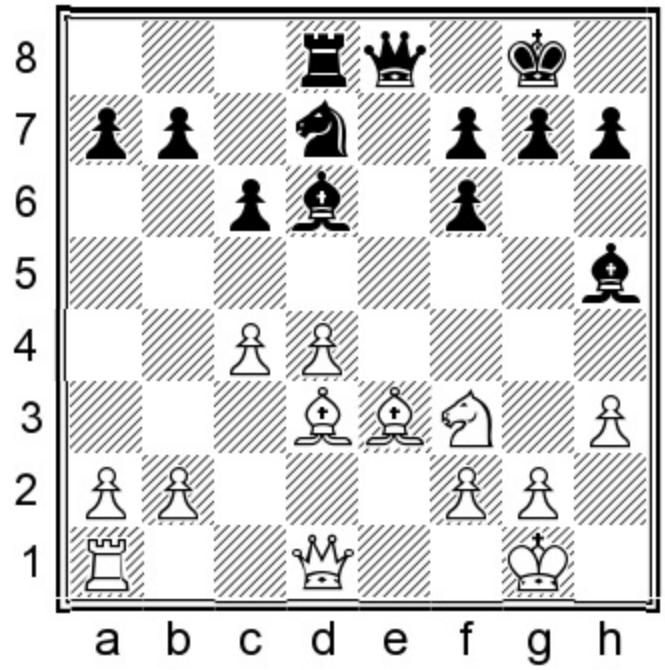
The tables have turned: Black is now a pawn down, but both sides have ugly pawn structures on the kingside and Black's knight is fantastic.

11...♖e8

Safe and sound development.

11...c5 was played by Tartakower back in 1929, but I don't completely trust it.

12.♖xe8† ♕xe8 13.♗e3 ♖d8



We have reached another typical middlegame, with a tense but balanced struggle.

14.♗e2

14.g4 ♗g6 15.♗xg6 hxg6 is fine for Black.

14...f5 15.♕b3 ♘f6 16.♖e1

After 16.♕xb7? f4 White loses a piece.

16...♕e7

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½–½

For some reason, the players agreed a draw in Serazeev – Zugrav, corr. 2019. Of course, there is no special reason to do so: the game has just started and anything can happen.

16...♖d7= is another good option, intending to put the rook on e7.

Conclusion

The Classical line 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 is defined by the pawn structure. Purely positional tries like 6.♗c4 or 6.♘f3 do not seem at all threatening. The biggest revelation is perhaps that exchanges and simplifications do not really favour White. As long as you don't enter a pawn ending, you should be safe! Provided at least a few pieces remain on the board, White's pawn majority on the queenside is rather rigid, whereas Black is at liberty to advance his kingside pawn majority, seizing territory and creating active counterplay.

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Chapter 2

6.c3

Variation Index

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 6.c3 ♗d6 7.♗d3 0–0

A) 8.♘e2 ♖e8 9.0-0 ♘d7 42

A1) 10.♘g3 44

A2) 10.♗f4 46

***Game 3* – Stankovic – Sedlak 48**

B) 8.♕c2 ♖e8† 50

B1) 9.♗e3 50

B2) 9.♘e2 h5! 52

B21) 10.♗d2 54

B22) 10.♗e3 ♘d7 57

B221) 11.♘g3 57

B222) 11.0-0-0 ♘f8 59

B2221) 12.♘g3 61

B2222) 12.h3 62

B2223) 12.♔b1 65

***Game 4* – Nayak – Narayanan 70**

B23) 10.0-0 h4 11.h3 ♘d7 72

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B231) 12.♗d2 73

B232) 12.♗e3 75

B233) 12.♗f4 76

***Game 5* – Hacker – Halkias 77**

"The curtains are shut
The furniture has gone
I am transforming
I am vibrating
I am glowing
I am flying
Look at me now"

Nick Cave – Jubilee Street

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 6.c3

This must be considered the main line. White bolsters the central pawn and prepares the active ♗d3. This was recommended by authors such as Khalifman and Negi, which says a lot.

6...♗d6 7.♗d3

This move should be expected almost every time, but occasionally White tries to mix things up in some way.

7.♘f3 converts to the 6.♘f3 realm, except that White has needlessly committed to c2-c3 at an early stage.

7.g3 0-0 8.♗g2 ♖e8† 9.♘e2

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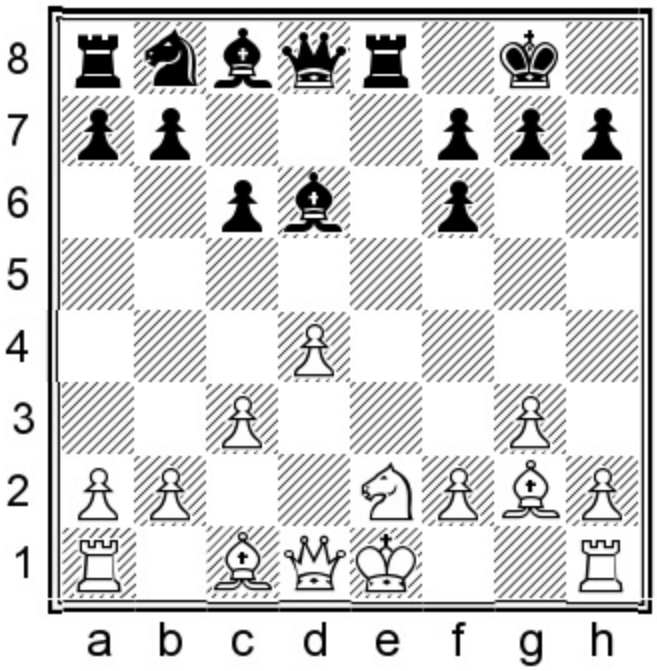


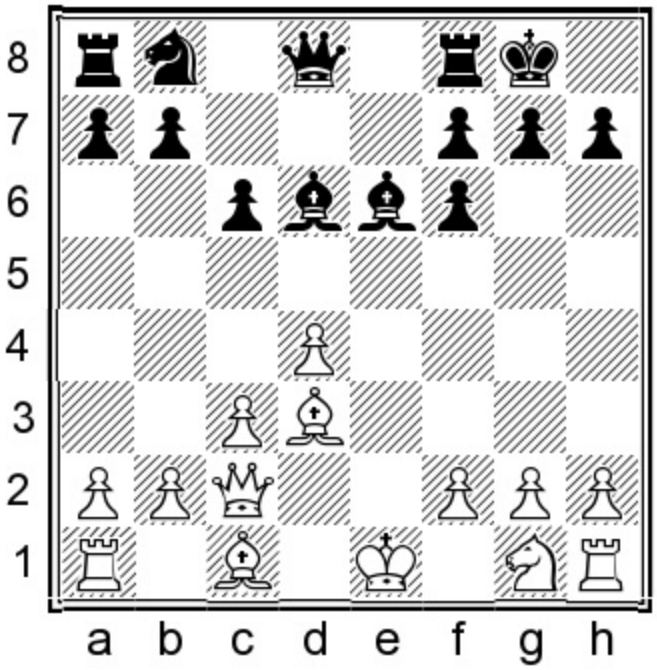
9...♗g4! disturbs the harmony in White's set-up, and after 10.♗e3 f5!? 11.♕d2 ♗xe2 12.♕xe2 f4 13.gxf4 ♗xf4 Black was at least equal in Nozdrachev – Oparin, St Petersburg 2018.

7.♗c4 0-0 8.♘e2 is not critical at all. For example, 8...♖e8 9.0-0 ♕c7 10.♘g3 ♗e6= and it turns out that the bishop on c4 actually helps Black to complete development.

The only other idea worth mentioning is:
7.♕e2† ♗e6 8.♕c2!?

8.g3?! is met by 8...0-0 followed by ...♖e8 when the queen looks stupid.

8...0-0 9.♗d3



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GM Savchenko has played this artificial-looking idea once. I see no reason not to react in our

usual fashion with:

9...h5!N 10.♘e2 ♖e8 11.0-0

I can only assume that the idea behind losing a tempo to lure the bishop to e6 was to bring the knight to f4 with tempo, but Black can avoid that easily enough with:

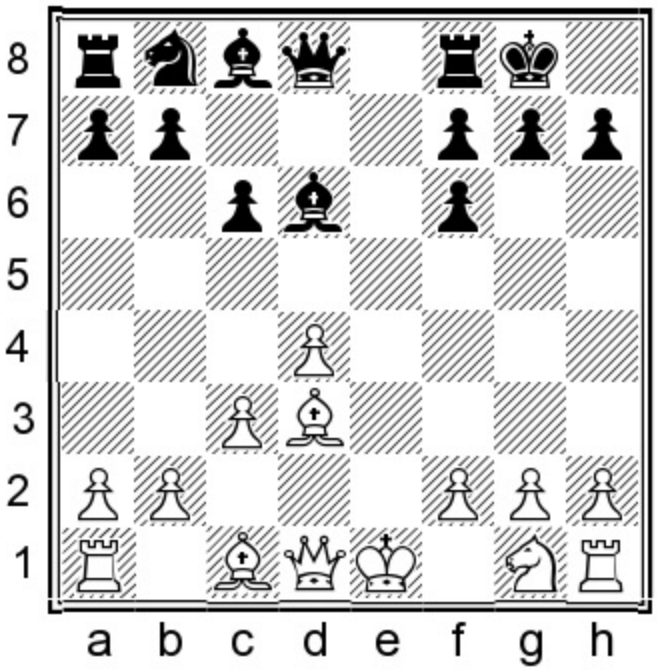
11...♕c7!

11...h4 12.♘f4 justifies White's previous play, not that Black is in bad shape after: 12...♗xf4 13.♗xf4 h3∞

12.h3 h4⇄

Reaching a pleasant version of the main line which we will examine later.

7...0-0



White has two main ideas: **A)** 8.♘e2, planning short castling, and **B)** 8.♕c2, prodding h7 and keeping all options open regarding where to put the king.

Before analysing those options, here are some rare tries:

8.♕h5?! g6 9.♕h4

This is an attempt to make use of the queen on the kingside, but it is optimistic to say the least.

9...♖e8† 10.♘e2 ♘d7 11.0-0 ♘f8 12.f4?!

Against other moves, Black could have continued with ...h5 and ...♘e6, planning to generate some play on the kingside. The text move prevents this but seriously weakens the e3- and e4-squares.

12...f5 13.♕xd8 ♖xd8 14.♗e3 ♗e6 15.c4

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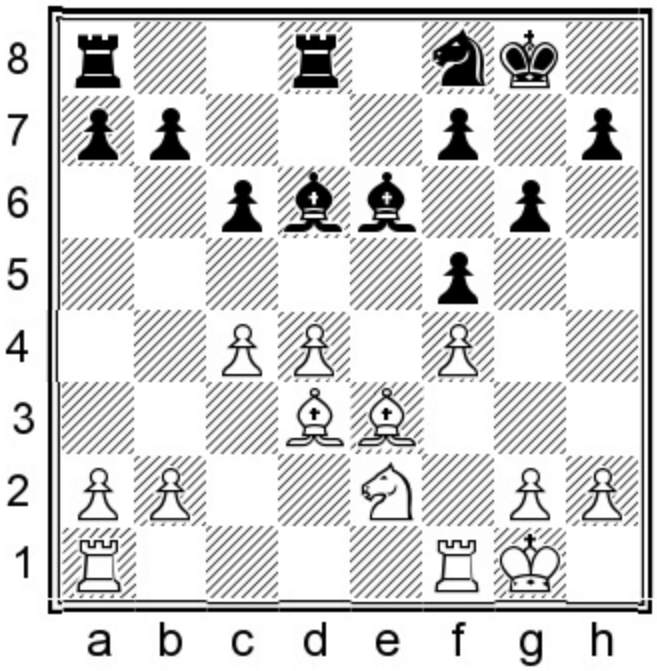

At first glance, White's position might seem to be okay, or even advantageous, due to his theoretically superior pawn structure. However, this proves to be an illusion after the strong regrouping:

15...♘d7! 16.♗f2 ♘f6∓

In Rigo – Saltaev, Dortmund 2001, White's weaknesses were becoming more apparent.

8.♕f3 ♖e8†

I have presented this as the main line so that we will have the opportunity to discuss a model game with a lot of instructive value.

Objectively, the clearest route to equality is 8...c5! 9.dxc5 ♗xc5 10.♘e2 ♘d7⇄ as seen in E. Berg – Tikkanen, Sweden 2019, when the knight comes to e5, with excellent play for Black.

9.♘e2 ♕c7 10.h3 ♘d7 11.0-0 ♘f8 12.♗f4 ♘g6 13.♗xd6 ♕xd6

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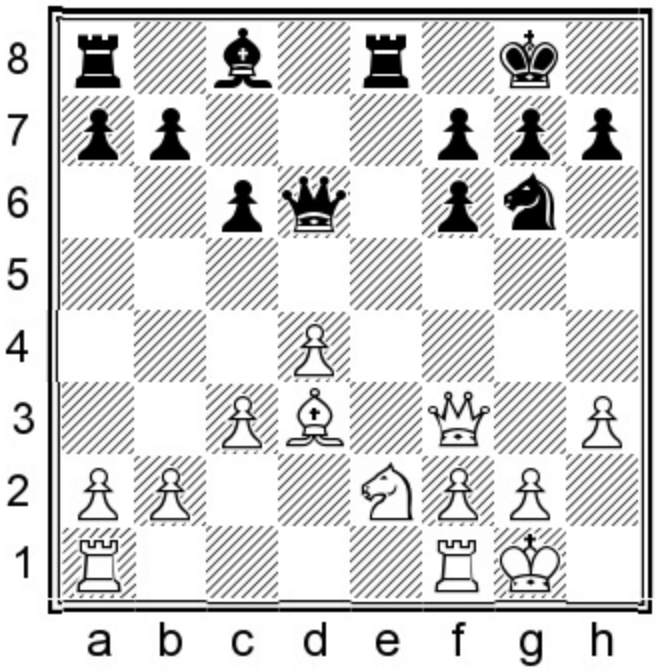

So far, so good. Black has carried out a typical knight manoeuvre and White has exchanged a pair of bishops, with the queens soon to follow. His plan, of course, is to win the eventual pawn endgame, but Black has more than enough resources to ensure that this will never happen.

14.♖fe1

Another good example continued: 14.♘g3 ♗e6 15.♘f5 ♕c7 16.♖fe1 ♖ad8 Black simply puts his pieces in the centre. The careless 17.♖ad1?! was seen in Mamyrbay – Maghsoodloo, Ulaan Batar 2015, when Black missed a good opportunity. (17.♗c2 is better although 17...♘f4 followed by ...g6 gives Black excellent play.) 17...♗xa2!N 18.c4 a5∓ The bishop is safe and White will have a hard time trying to prove compensation for the pawn.

14...♗e6 15.♕g3 ♕xg3 16.♘xg3

White should be happy here, right? He apparently has a good endgame, but the game continuation indicates that in some sense Black has the easier position to play.

16...♘f4 17.♗f1 f5

Restricting the knight on g3. Black's ability to gain space on the kingside is one of the deep dynamic advantages of the ...exf6 structure. It's all thanks to the 'spare' pawn on f7, which is there to cover the squares which would otherwise have been irreparably weakened by ...f5.

18.c4?!

White should have played more modestly. Now the 'extra' d4-pawn is more of a weakness than an asset.

18...♖ed8! 19.♖ad1 ♖d6 20.♖d2 ♖ad8 21.♖ed1 g5!

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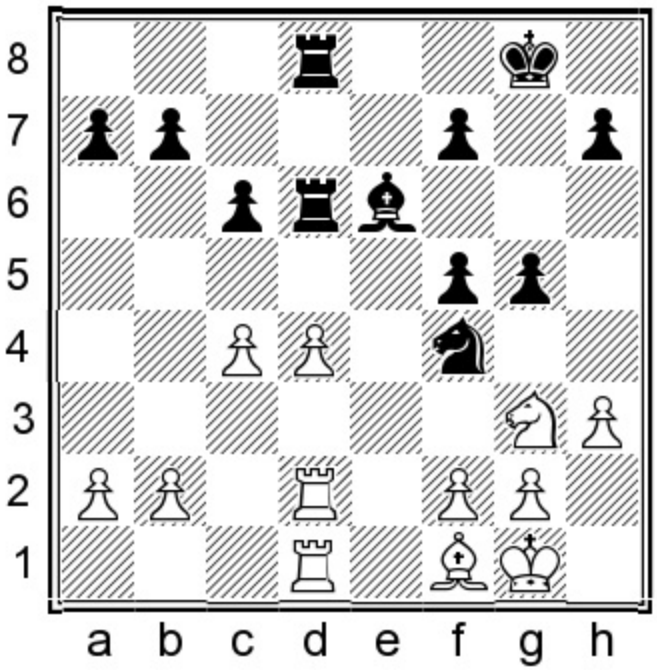
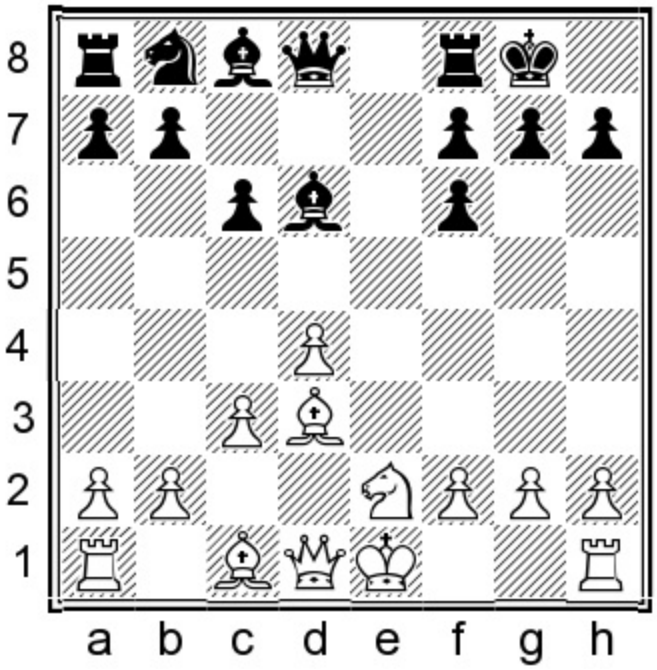


Again, we see that Black's pawn majority on the kingside should not be underestimated.
22.b3 ♔g7 23.♘e2 ♘xe2† 24.♗xe2 f4∓

Black has the more comfortable endgame and White's next move makes matters worse.
25.b4?! f3!

Black conveniently swapped off his doubled pawn and was clearly better in Aitbayev – Zvjaginsev, St Petersburg 2012.

A) 8.♘e2



White develops flexibly and prepares to castle.

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8...♖e8 9.0-0

9.♕c2 converts to the big main line – see 8.♕c2 ♖e8† 9.♘e2.

Occasionally White switches plans and goes for:

9.♗e3

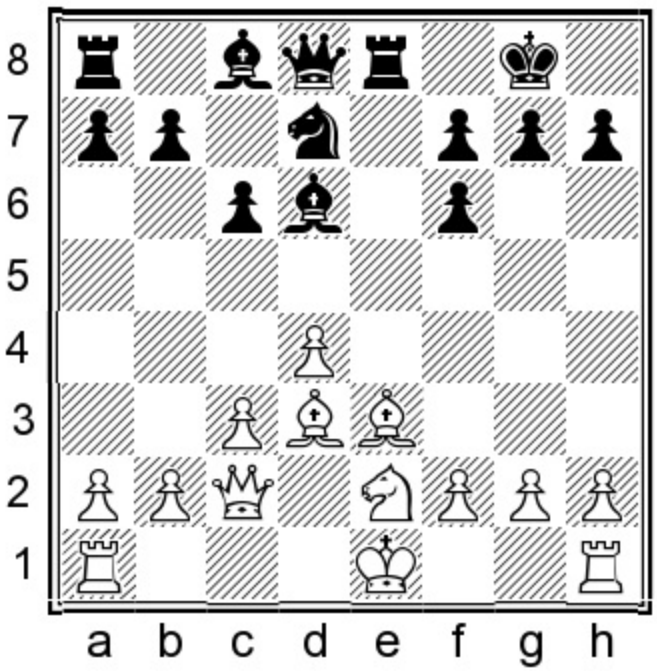
Intending long castling, but it fails to impress.

9...♘d7 10.♕c2?!

It is worth pointing out that the time for this move has passed. If White was going to play it, he should have done so at move 8 or 9, when it would have forced Black to move something on the kingside.

Perhaps 10.0-0 is best, but in that case White simply has a version of the 9.0-0 line where his bishop has committed to an unusual square.

10.♕d2 is well met by: 10...♕c7! Preventing ♗f4 and eyeing the h2-pawn, stopping short castling for now. 11.0-0-0 was seen in Naiditsch – Prusikin, Heringsdorf 2000, and now 11...b5!N would have given Black a great game.



Now Black simply answers:

10...♘f8!

And covers h7 with a move he usually plays anyway. This kind of small detail is what decides many opening duels. In this instance, one little slip by White means that he has no chance of an opening advantage and he will have to take care not to become worse. A good example continued:

11.♘g3 g6! 12.0-0-0 f5

Black can create threats on both sides of the board.

13.♘e2 ♕a5 14.♔b1

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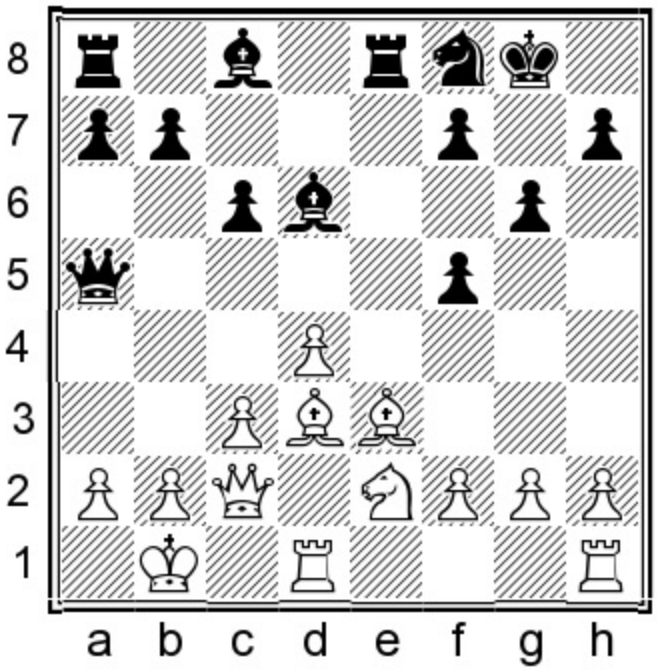
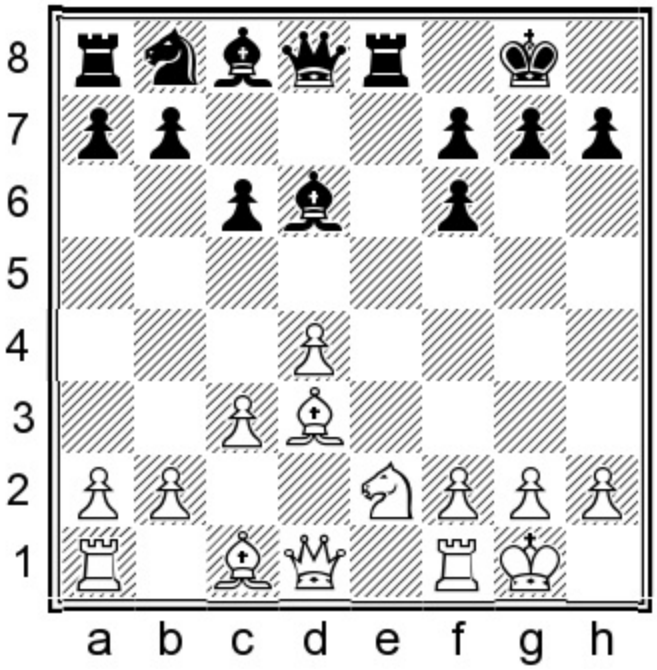


This occurred in Spassky – Seirawan, USA 1990, and now the straightforward:

14...b5!N

Would have given Black a promising initiative.



9...♘d7

I recommend this standard move, intending ...♘f8, without fearing ♗f4.

9...♕c7

This has been the most common choice, but White can ask some questions with:

10.♘g3! ♘d7

10...g6 11.♘e4 gives White some initiative; 10...a5!?N could be an interesting try, but I suggest

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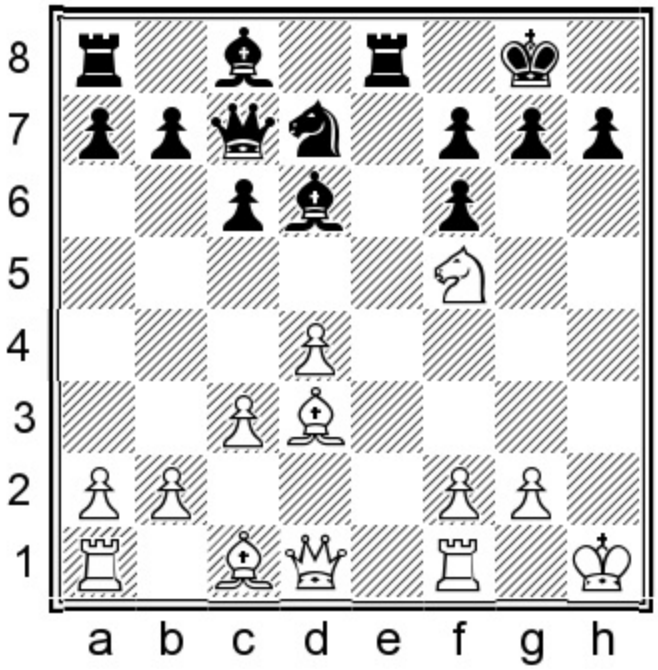
sticking to 9...♘d7 instead.

11.♘f5 ♗xh2†

11...♘f8 12.♘xd6 ♕xd6± keeps things solid, but White's bishop pair must count for something.

12.♔h1 ♗d6



13.♗h6!

The most dangerous try, as pointed out by L'Ami.

13.♕g4 is harmless: 13...g6 14.♘h6† ♔g7 15.♘f5† ♔h8!? Playing for the win! Still, White can force a draw with a few accurate moves: 16.♕h4 gxf5 17.♗xf5 ♘f8 18.♕xf6† ♔g8 19.♗h6 ♘e6 20.♗xe6 fxe6 21.♕g5† ♔h8 22.♕f6† ♔g8=

13...g6 14.♘g7! ♖e7 15.♕f3→

This looks more problematic for Black.

15...♕d8

The last move seems forced, but even if the defences hold up, Black is playing with fire and there is absolutely no point in subjecting ourselves to this kind of pressure.

We will examine two main options: **A1)** 10.♘g3 and **A2)** 10.♗f4.

10.a4

This was once played by GM Sutovsky. It is not particularly connected with any strong ideas on the queenside though.

10...♕c7!

We can threaten h2 and prevent ♗f4 with a natural move, so why not? Compared with the 9...♕c7 lines noted above, White's kingside attacking ideas will not work so well now that he has spent a tempo on a2-a4.

10...♘f8 11.♘g3 ♗e6?! 12.f4! was good for White in Sutovsky – Asrian, Istanbul 2003.

11.♘g3 g6!

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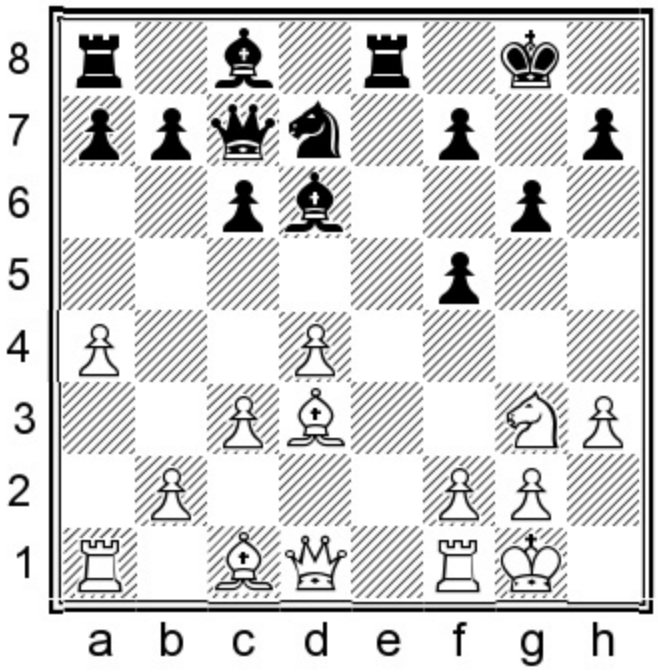
Taking the f5-square under control.

12.h3

With our knight already on d7, 12.♘e4? ♗xh2† 13.♔h1 f5∓ simply loses a pawn for White.

12...f5



Establishing a strong positional set-up. The f5-pawn seriously reduces the scope of the knight on g3 and bishop on d3, while also creating a convenient square on f6 for our own knight. Again we witness the excellent potential of Black's kingside pawns.

13.♖e1 ♖xe1† 14.♕xe1 c5=

Almarza Mato – Morozov, corr. 2017.

A1) 10.♘g3

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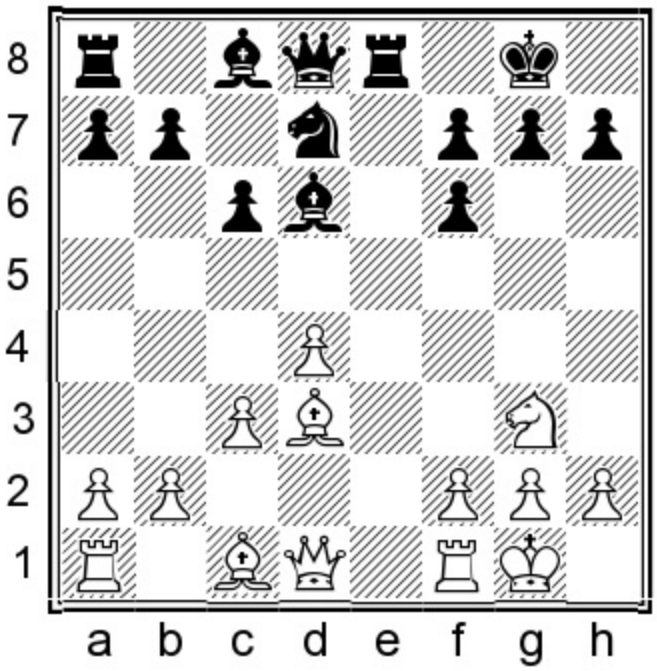

We saw this idea already. Aside from the obvious ♘f5 idea, White might aim for f4-f5 and/or place his queen somewhere active on the kingside. Still, his attacking chances are hampered by the presence of an extra black pawn on the kingside. Compared with the 9...♕c7 line mentioned in a previous note, ...♘d7 is a more useful move for defending the kingside. Despite all that, White's scheme should be treated with respect.

10...g6!

A typical reaction, immediately taking the f5-square under control.

10...♘f8 is the most common, but then 11.f4!? looks quite challenging.

11.♘e4!

White needs to react fast. Against practically any other move, Black can play ...f5 to restrict White's pieces, especially the knight on g3.

11.f4?! invites 11...f5∓ followed by ...♘f6, when the e3- and e4-squares have been permanently weakened.

11.♗h6N is not the worst idea although 11...f5 12.♕d2 ♘f8⇄ gives Black good prospects with the g3-knight being shut out of play.

11.♕f3?!

This is an inaccurate but still interesting move which is worth considering.

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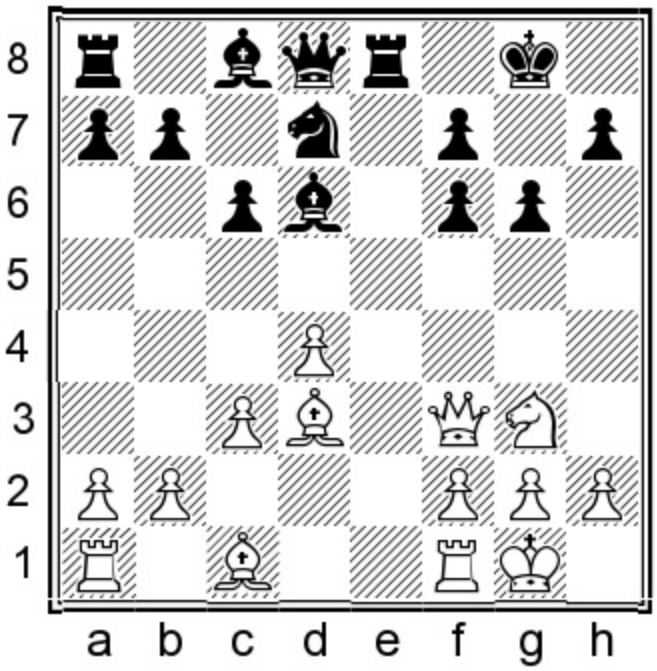

11...f5!N

11...♘f8 was the choice of a strong GM in Vardan – Sedlak, Backi Petrovac 2018, when 12.♘e4N 12...♗e7 would have been equal.

12.♗xf5

This speculative piece sacrifice is the only critical move, and is doubtless the reason why Sedlak played the way he did. Against anything else, Black plays ...♘f8 with a positional edge due to White's misplaced forces on the kingside.

12...gxf5 13.♘xf5

Now Black has two ways to secure an advantage.

13...♖e6!

This seems strongest.

13...♗f8!? is a reasonable alternative which has the practical advantage of soon leading to a queen exchange: 14.♕g4† ♔h8 15.♗g5 This is White's only real attempt to make something happen. 15...f6 16.♗h6 ♗xh6 17.♘xh6 ♖f8 18.♕h5 ♕e8 19.♕xe8 ♖xe8 Two pawns are only partial compensation for the missing piece, but Black still has to work to complete development. A sample line goes 20.♖fe1 ♖xe1† 21.♖xe1 ♔g7 22.♘f5† ♔g6 23.♘e7† ♔f7 24.♘f5 ♘b6 25.♘d6† ♔g6∓ and Black should finally be able to liberate the bishop.

14.h4

14.♘h6†?! ♖xh6 15.♗xh6 ♕h4 forces a queen exchange: 16.♕h3 ♕xh3 17.gxh3 ♘f8 Despite having given back some material, Black has everything under control and his winning chances are high.

14...♗f8 15.♗g5 ♘f6∓

Black still has to stay alert of course, but there is no doubt that White's compensation is objectively inadequate.

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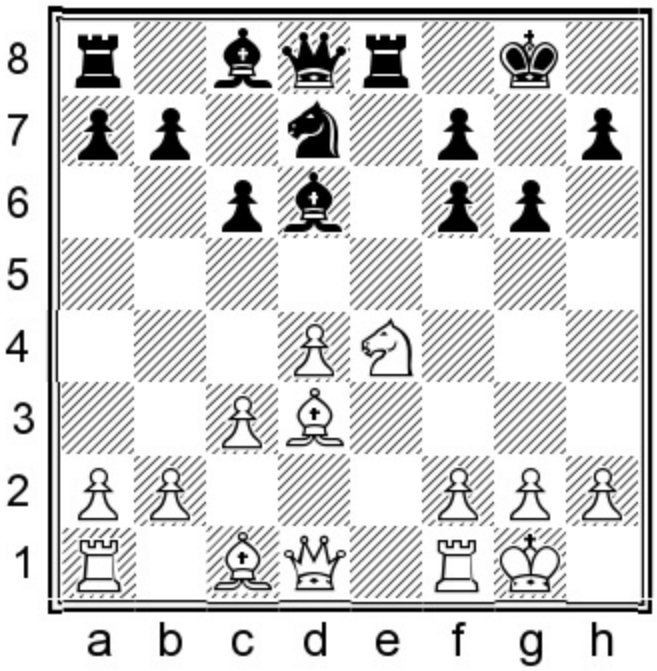

11...♗f8!N

I recommend this modest improvement on the existing games. It is useful to avoid blocking the rook on the open file. On f8, the bishop takes away a square which is practically tailor-made for the knight in these positions, but this piece has other routes available.

11...♗e7

This has been played a few times and is not at all bad, but White may be able to fight for an edge with:

12.♖e1!N

The top engine choice.

12.f4?! f5 13.♘g5 h6 14.♘f3 ♘f6 gave Black a characteristically good game for the f4/f5 pawn structure in Djokic – Djoric, Veliko Gradiste 2016.

12.♗f4 ♘f8! 13.♕c2 ♘e6 14.♗d2 f5 15.♘g3 c5 and Black solved all her opening problems in T. Smirnov – Shabunova, Moscow 2016.

12...f5 13.♘g5 ♘f6

White has, at most, a tiny edge, but Black's position is fully playable.

12.♗f4!?

At first this may appear problematic for Black, but everything turns out fine.

12.♖e1 f5 is fine for Black, as 13.♗g5 ♕c7= gives White nothing.

12...♘b6 13.♖e1 ♘d5

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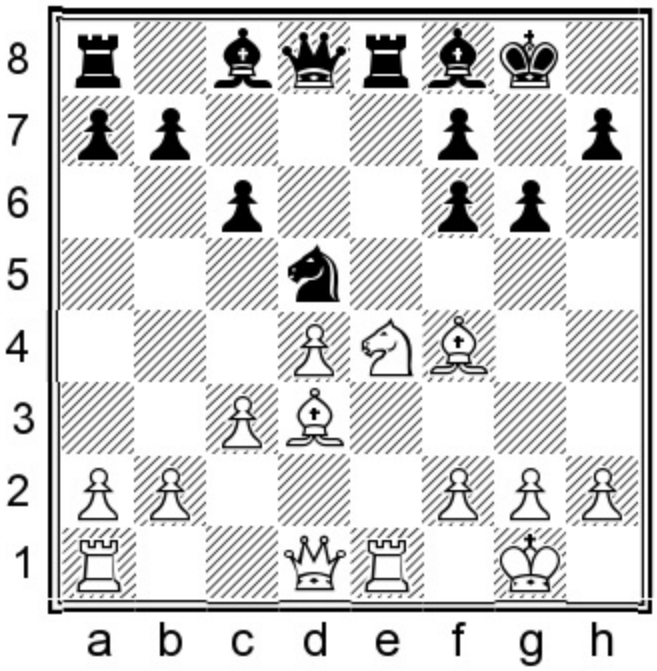


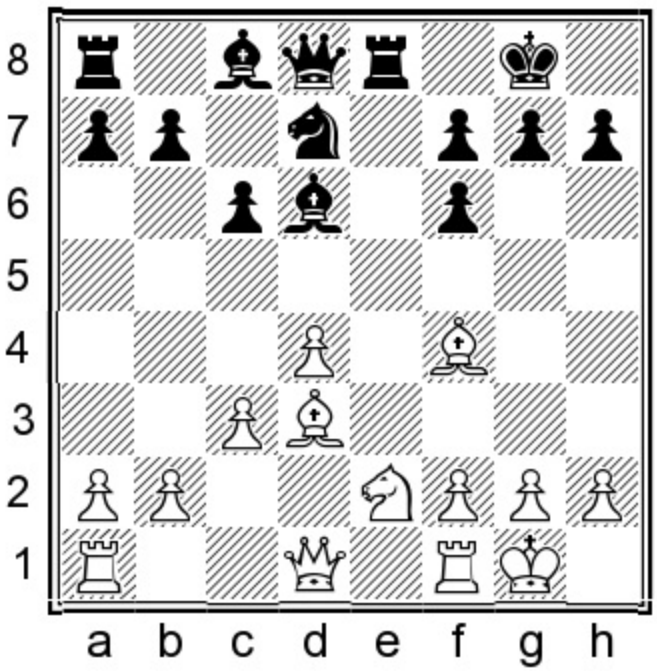
Here comes the knight!

14.♗d2 f5 15.♘g5 ♖xe1† 16.♕xe1 ♕c7⇄

With a typical middlegame where Black's chances are no worse.

16...♗g7⇄ also looks fine.

A2) 10.♗f4



This natural move has been the most popular choice. White swaps off his passive bishop for Black's active one, while taking a step towards the dream endgame. On the other hand, the bishop exchange makes it easier for Black to manoeuvre within his slightly limited amount of available

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space.

10...♘f8

10...♖xe2? must be avoided on account of 11.♕xe2 (even 11.♗xd6 would be good for White) 11...♗xf4 12.♕e4 when Black must give up material with: 12...♗xh2† 13.♔xh2 ♘f8±

11.♗xd6

A sensible alternative is:

11.♕d2 ♘g6 12.♗xd6 ♕xd6 13.♖fe1

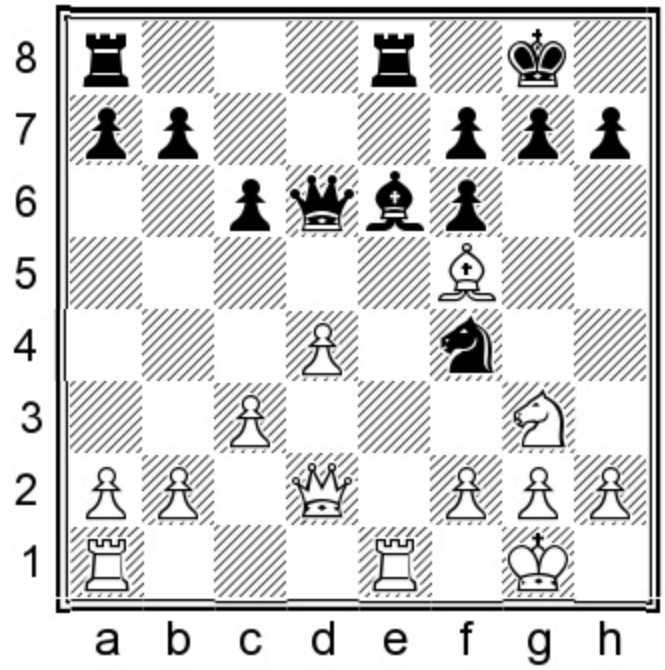
13.♘g3 ♕f4 14.♕c2 ♗e6= was solid for Black in Troia – Runarsson, corr. 2017.

13...♗e6 14.♘g3 ♘f4

Getting the knight to this square is a typical means of gaining counterplay in this variation.

15.♘e4

15.♗f5? from Turzo – Dreev, Internet 2020, could have been punished with:



15...♘xg2!N 16.♗xh7† (16.♔xg2 ♗xf5∓ leaves Black a pawn up thanks to the potential fork on d5. 16.♖e4 ♗xf5 17.♘xf5 ♕d5 18.♘h6†!? ♔h8! 19.♖g4 ♘h4 also favours Black.) 16...♔xh7 17.♔xg2∓ Material is equal but White's structure has been damaged, and Black has a pleasant choice between playing on the h-file or in the centre with ...c5, perhaps with ...♖ad8 first.

15...♕c7 16.♘c5 ♘xd3

16...♗d5!? is an option, should you wish to keep a bit more complexity in the position.

17.♘xe6 fxe6 18.♕xd3 e5=

Movsesian – Riazantsev, Wolfhagen 2019.

11...♕xd6

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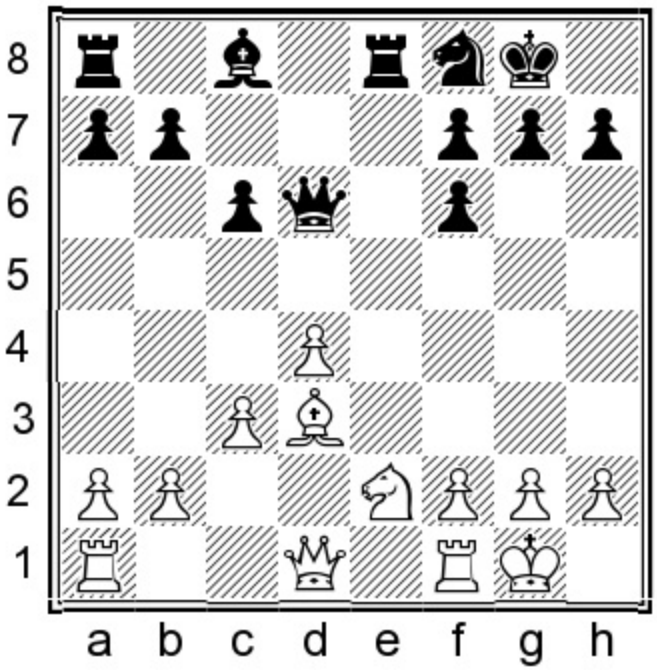


12.♘g3

12.♕d2 ♘g6 transposes to the 11.♕d2 line above.

Another example continued:

12.♖e1 g6!?

12...♘g6N is the more typical approach, when 13.♕c2 ♗e6 14.♘g3 ♖ad8 looks equal.

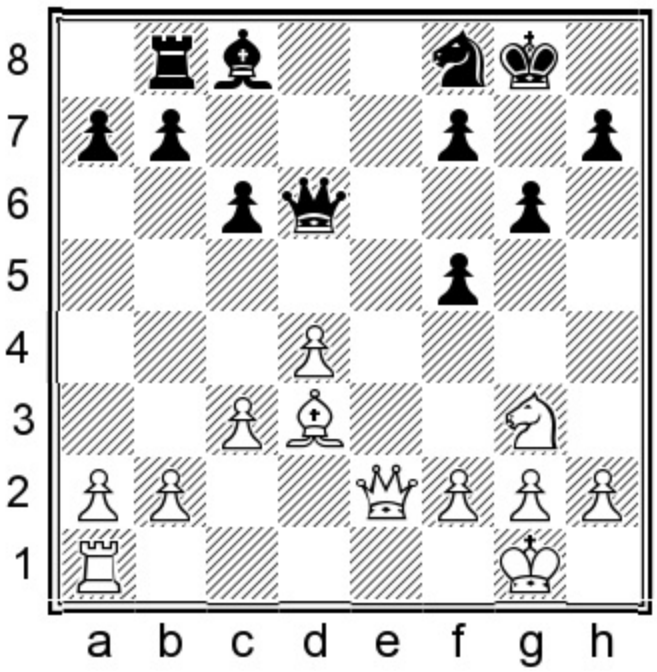
13.♘g3 ♖xe1† 14.♕xe1 f5!?

Thematic stuff, restricting the knight.

15.♕e8 ♖b8!

Forcing White to go back with his queen, otherwise ...♗e6 traps it.

16.♕e2



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This position was reached in Carlsen – Svane, Internet 2020. Fortunately for the World Champion, the lost tempo is of little consequence, as Black's rook has no special purpose on b8. Black has a good position though, and a good and active choice is:

16...♘e6!?N

With ideas of ...♘f4 – perhaps after additional preparation with ...♗d7, and maybe ...♖e8 as well.

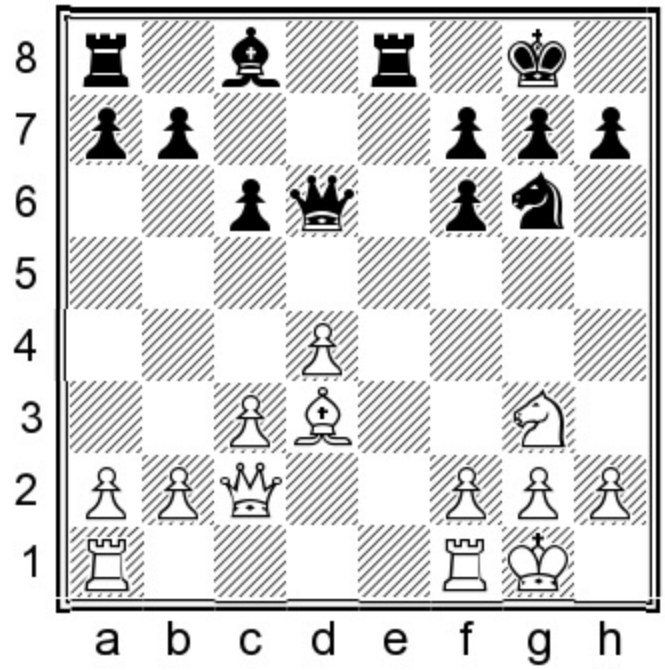
12...♘g6

I like this active plan, intending to utilize the f4-square.

12...g6!? 13.♕d2!? ♔g7 was a solid alternative in Felgaer – Bosco, Buenos Aires 1997. (13...f5!?N could be considered as well.)

13.♕c2!?

This seems like the most challenging continuation, although Black should be fine. 13.♘f5 is featured in Game 3 (Stankovic – Sedlak).



13...♕f4! 14.♖ae1 ♗d7!?N

Keeping some tension in the position.

The solid 14...♖xe1 15.♖xe1 ♗e6 is also fully playable, as shown after: 16.♗f5 ♘f8 17.♖e3 ♖d8⇄ Schwarz – Nepustil, corr. 2005.

15.♘f5

15.♕b3 b6 16.♗c4 looks more menacing but after 16...♖f8! Black's position is solid as a rock: 17.♖e4 ♕d6 (17...♕h6!? is an interesting alternative, intending to push the f-pawn.) 18.♖fe1 f5 19.♖4e2 b5 White is forced back. 20.♗d3 ♘f4⇄

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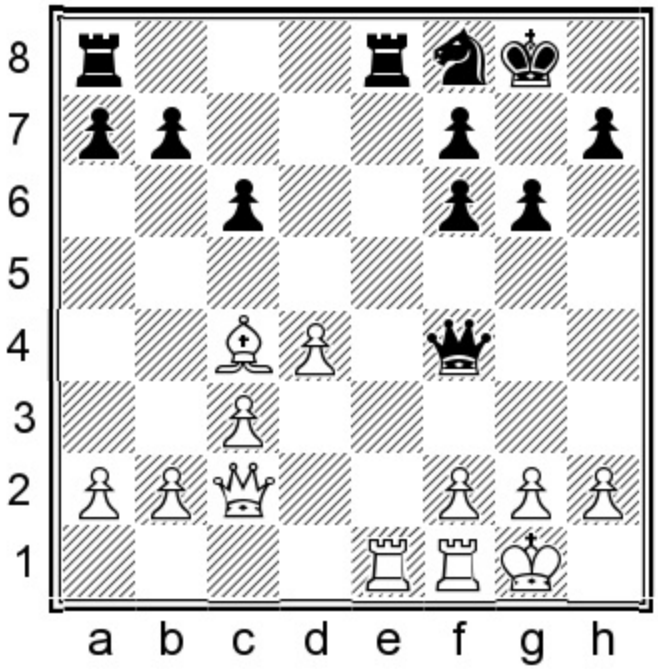
15...♗xf5!? 16.♗xf5 ♘f8

The knight drops back to facilitate ...g6. Black has a normal set-up and will soon untangle.

17.♗d3

17.g3 ♕c7 18.♗h3 is an interesting way to reroute the bishop, but 18...g6 19.♖e2 f5 20.♖fe1 ♖xe2 21.♕xe2 ♘e6⇄ maintains a healthy position for Black.

17...g6 18.♗c4



The bishop is well placed here, but Black easily neutralizes the slight pressure after:

18...♕c7 19.♖e3 ♖e7 20.♖fe1 ♖ae8 21.♖xe7 ♖xe7 22.♖xe7 ♕xe7 23.g3 ♔g7 24.♔g2 f5

Intending ...♘d7-f6. A possible idea is:

25.♕e2 ♕e4†!? 26.f3 ♕xe2† 27.♗xe2 ♔f6=

GAME 3

Milos Stankovic – Nikola Sedlak

Niksic 2018

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 6.c3 ♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♘e2 ♖e8 9.0-0 ♘d7

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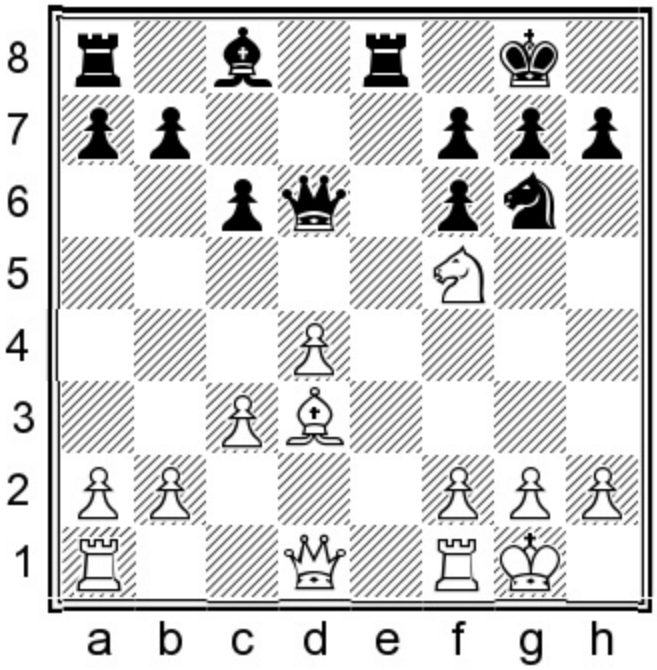
10.♗f4 ♘f8 11.♗xd6 ♕xd6 12.♘g3 ♘g6 13.♘f5

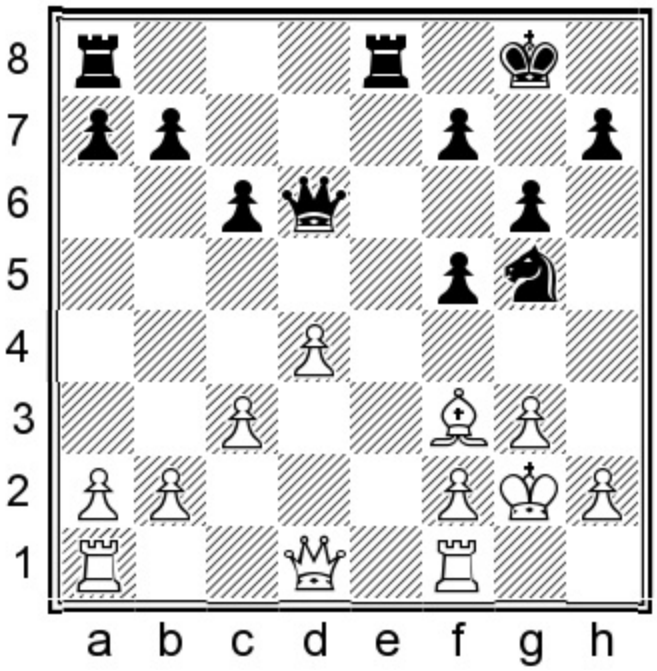


White provokes an exchange, which is generally a good strategy if you have the better pawn structure. On the other hand, it enables Black to increase the activity of his remaining pieces.

13...♗xf5 14.♗xf5 ♘f4

The active knight promises Black excellent counterplay. The g2-square is a soft spot in White's camp, so he should regroup the bishop, which is unstable on f5 anyway.

15.♗g4 g6 16.g3 f5! 17.♗f3 ♘h3† 18.♔g2 ♘g5



Black has solved all his opening problems. He can take on f3 if he feels like it, then double rooks

on the e-file. Alternatively, he can keep the minor pieces on the board and try to create some chances on the kingside, as Sedlak does in the game.

19.♕b3!?

A risky response.

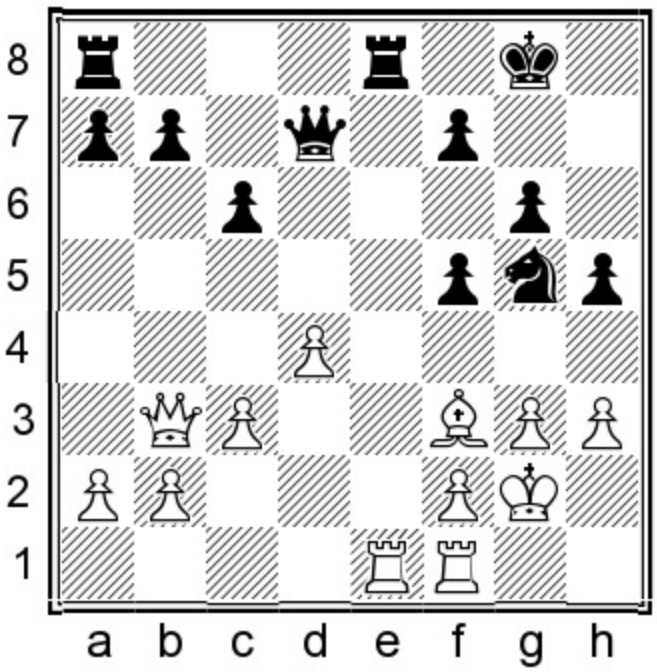
19.♕d3 was safer.

19...♕d7

Avoiding exchanges.

The simple 19...♘xf3 20.♔xf3 ♖e4 was also good because the greedy 21.♕xb7?! ♖b8 22.♕xa7? is refuted by the elegant 22...♕d5!–+ intending 23.♕xb8† (or 23.c4 ♖e3† 24.♔xe3 ♕e4† 25.♔d2 ♖xb2† and mates) 23...♖e8†.

20.♖ae1 h5 21.h3



21...♖e7

Contesting the open file is a good idea in itself – but Black has overlooked something even better!

21...f4!N 22.g4 ♘xf3 23.♔xf3 ♔g7 and the white king begins to feel uneasy. For instance: 24.♔xf4!? ♕c7† 25.♔f3 ♖xe1! 26.♖xe1 ♕h2∓

22.♖xe7 ♕xe7 23.c4 ♖e8 24.d5!

Now White has enough counterplay, so Sedlak decides to simplify. Compared to the previous

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lines, White's defence is much easier.

24...♘xf3 25.♕xf3 cxd5 26.♕xd5

26.cxd5!= was safer. It is more important for White to create a passer than to count pawn islands.

26...♕e4†! 27.♔g1!?

27.♕xe4 ♖xe4 28.b3 ♖e2 reaches a rook ending where only Black can have winning chances, but White should be able to hold by liquidating all the queenside pawns.

27...♖e5 28.♕d6 ♖e8 29.♕d5 h4 30.♕xe4 ♖xe4

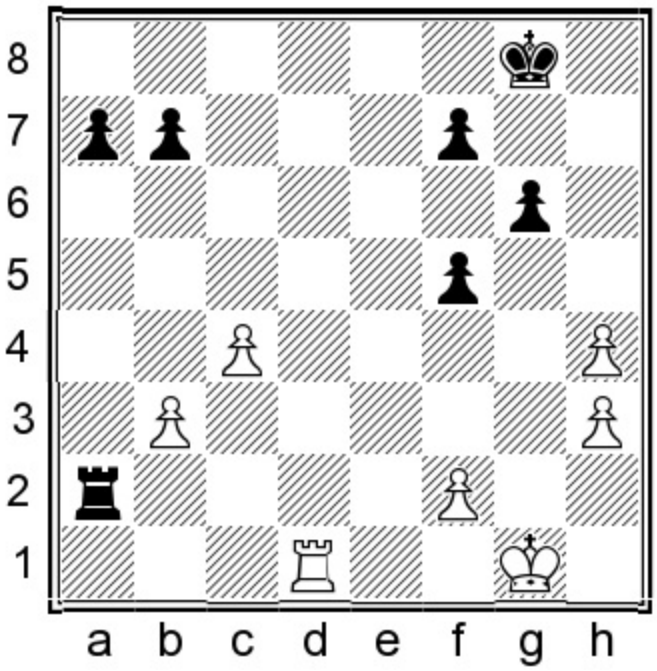
30...fxe4 31.♖d1 hxg3 32.fxg3= leaves White out of danger, as his rook gets active and Black does not have time to create connected passers and/or get his king to a threatening position.

31.b3 ♖e2

Black continues to press, but White makes good use of the famously wide drawing margin in rook endgames.

32.gxh4! ♖xa2 33.♖d1

White activates his rook.



33...b6

33...♖a3! 34.♖d3 ♔g7 was the last real chance to press. White should hold, but his rook is tied down and he will have to decide what to do about ...♔h6-h5, as well as ...a5-a4.

34.♖d7 ♖a3 35.♔g2 a5

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Having the better pawn structure is a pleasant role reversal for Black in this system, but it doesn't matter too much.

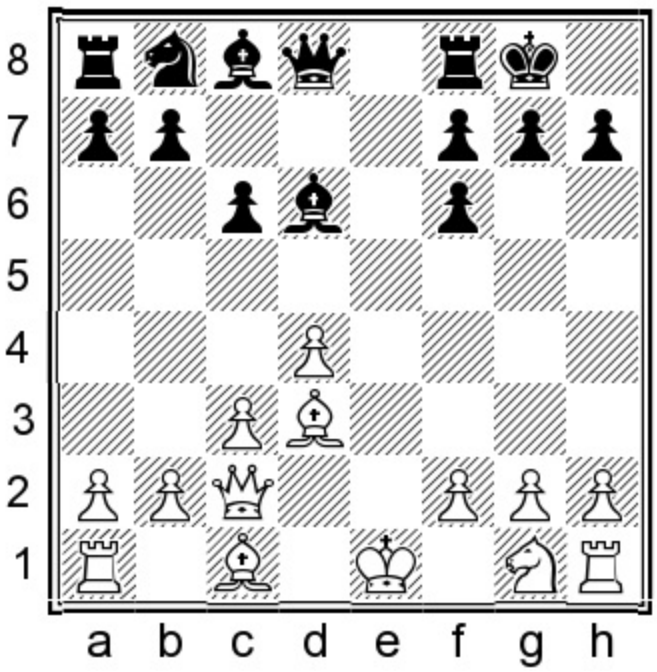
36.♖b7 ♖xb3 37.c5! a4

37...b5 38.c6 will lead to the same thing.

38.cxb6 a3 39.♖a7 ♖xb6

½–½

B) 8.♕c2



Finally we arrive at the most critical variation. White attacks h7 and forces Black to make a concession of some kind.

8...♖e8†

We will analyse **B1)** 9.♗e3 followed by the main line of **B2)** 9.♘e2.

B1) 9.♗e3

With this move, White argues that he may be able to find a better spot than e2 for his knight.

9...h5!

This is the modern solution. By the time we end our analysis of it, you will have seen this move so many times that you'll be able to make it in your sleep. In the old days when I started to play chess, such moves in front of your own king were unheard of. As recently as 2014, Parimarjan Negi failed to consider this move in his first *Grandmaster Repertoire – 1.e4 – Volume 1*; with good reason,

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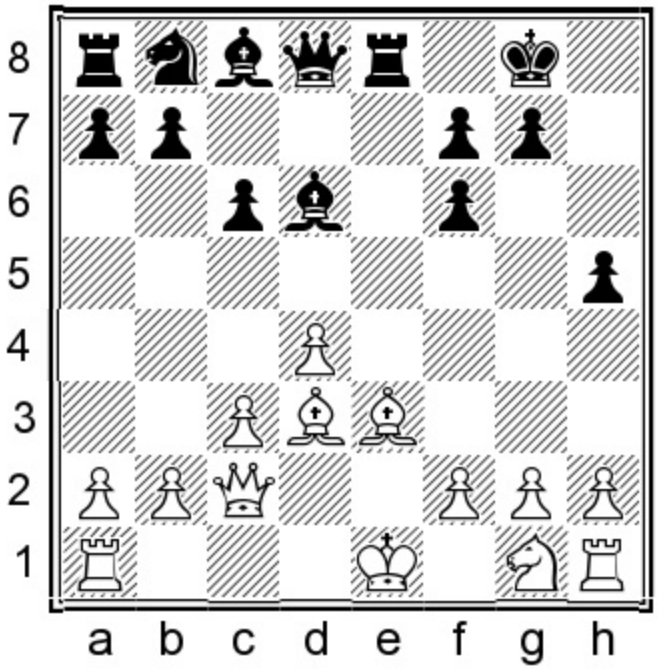
as nobody had played it! Today, such moves are practically part of the daily routine. Chess has surely developed.



10.0-0-0

This is a logical and principled continuation, hoping to open lines on the kingside. Changing course and going for short castling is legal, but it should not bother Black too much.

10.♘e2 will be covered later under 9.♘e2 h5! 10.♗e3, when 10...♘d7 is the best move.

10.♘f3

This is well met by:

10...♗e6!

The point being that when the knight has committed to f3, it cannot go via e2 to f4 to harass the bishop.

11.0-0 ♘d7 12.c4 ♘f8

Black organizes his pieces in the now-familiar way. Obviously things are a little different from the lines where White plays ♘f3 and 0-0 early, as in that case Black would have no special reason to play ...h5 so soon. Nevertheless, White cannot take advantage of it. A good example continued:

13.♗f5 ♕d7 14.♗xe6 fxe6!?

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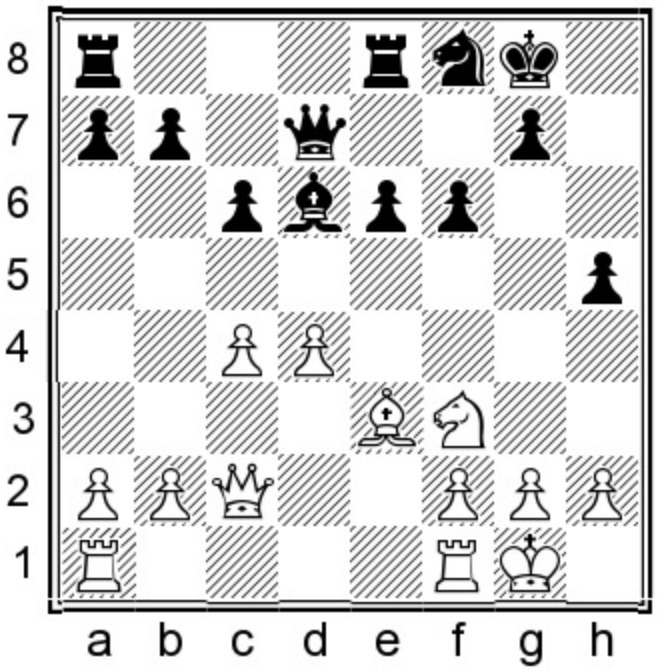

Taking back with a piece was also decent, but the game continuation provides a nice exception to the usual rule about not recapturing with ...fxe6 when the queens are on the board. Here it works fine, as Black's pieces are harmonious enough and White is in no position to generate pressure against e6.

15.♖ad1 ♖ad8

In this pretty balanced position, White made an interesting decision to change the structure:

16.d5!? cxd5 17.cxd5 e5⇄

In Kulaots – Shtembuliak, Moscow 2020, Black had a decent blockade of the passed d-pawn along with counter-chances on the kingside.

10...♗e6!

10...♕a5 was played in Stevic – Cheparinov, Zagreb 2018, but I prefer to prod the a-pawn in a different way, keeping the option of ...a7-a5.

10...♘a6!?N also deserves attention, but I like the text move the best.

11.c4

We will see more of this double-edged move in some of the later lines. White shields the a2-pawn and gains space, but enables Black to strike with ...b5 at an appropriate moment.

White could also ignore the queenside with 11.♘e2!?N but after 11...a5!↑ Black has the easier play anyway.

11...♘a6

It is good to get this piece into play, but 11...a5!?N and 11...b5!?N also deserve consideration.

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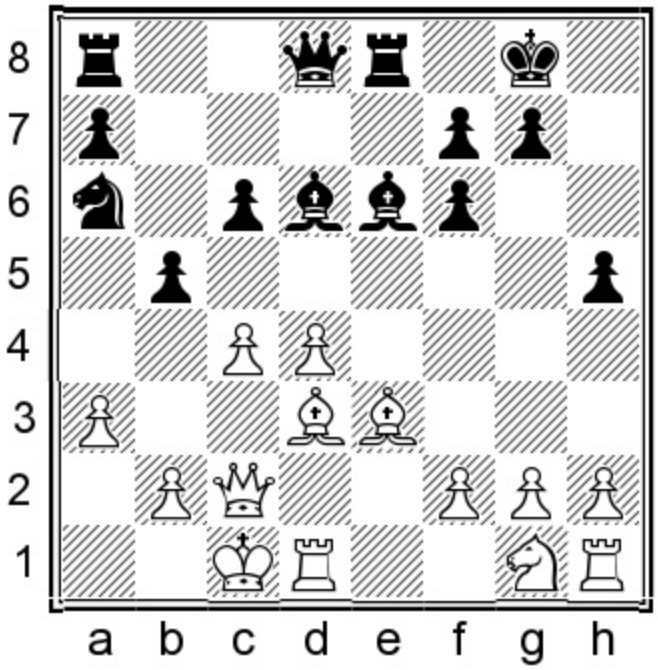
12.a3 b5!



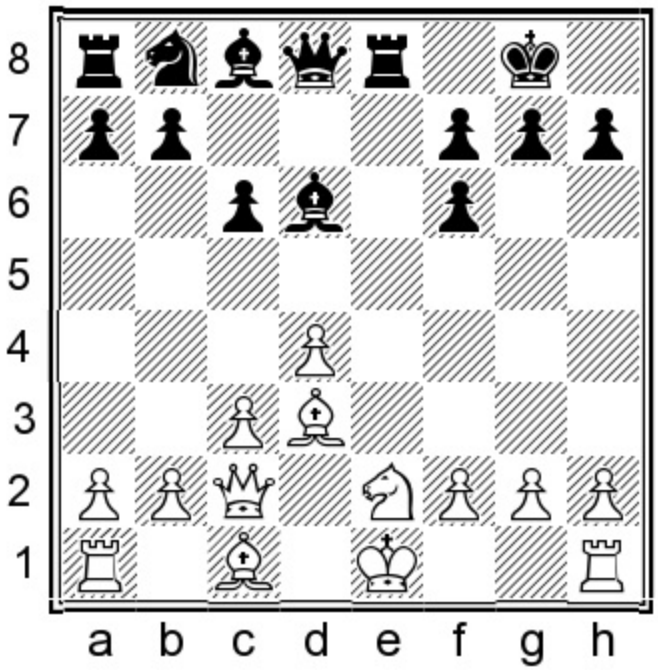
13.c5

Opening the position with 13.cxb5? cxb5 is terrible for White, and ...♖c8 is already a huge threat.

13...♗f8 14.♘e2 ♘c7↑

The d5-square gave Black excellent prospects in Sukovic – Kalezic, Podgorica 2019.

B2) 9.♘e2



This is the standard move, developing in the most flexible way while waiting to see how Black deals with the attack on h7.

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9...h5!

Before we analyse our main recommendation, it is worth considering an interesting sideline:

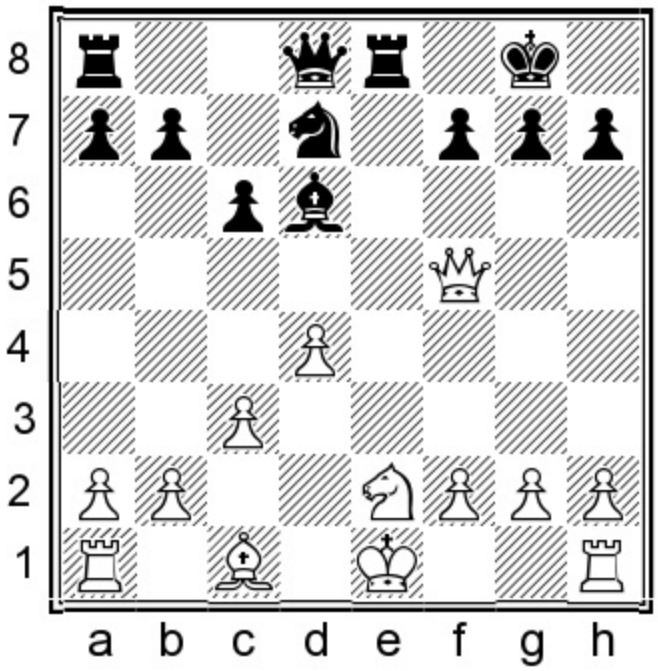
9...f5!?

There is an example on the database of this move being played in 2003, but Black's follow-up play was unconvincing and no one else paid attention to the idea for a long time. It was not until a few years ago that people started realizing it might actually be a cool idea.

10.♗xf5

10.♗d2 can be met by 10...♘d7!?⇄, still not caring about the pawn. Next up is ...♘f6.

10...♗xf5 11.♕xf5 ♘d7



The pressure on the e-file is somewhat annoying for White. He can and will unravel, but Black can obtain decent, long-term positional compensation.

12.♗e3

12.♕f3 is another possible direction, when 12...♕e7 (and 12...♕h4!?N can also be considered) 13.♗e3 ♘b6 has been played in a few games.

12...♘b6 13.0-0 ♘c4 14.b3!

Other moves are no problem, for instance:

a) 14.♖ae1 ♕c7 15.♘g3 ♘xb2= safely regained the pawn in Soltanici – Hamitevici, Kishinev 2018.

b) 14.♘g3 ♗xg3! 15.hxg3 ♘xb2N (15...♕d5!? 16.♕xd5 cxd5⩲ is also reasonable, Amonatov – Gukesh, New Delhi 2019.) 16.♕b1 ♕b6 17.d5 This enables Black to force a draw if he wants it: 17...♖xe3! (17...♕b5!? is the way to prolong the fight.) 18.fxe3 ♕xe3† 19.♔h1 ♕h6† 20.♔g1 ♕e3†=

14...g6 15.♕d3

15.♕f3 ♘xe3 16.fxe3 f5 leads to a similar situation; see for instance Saric – Esipenko, Riyadh

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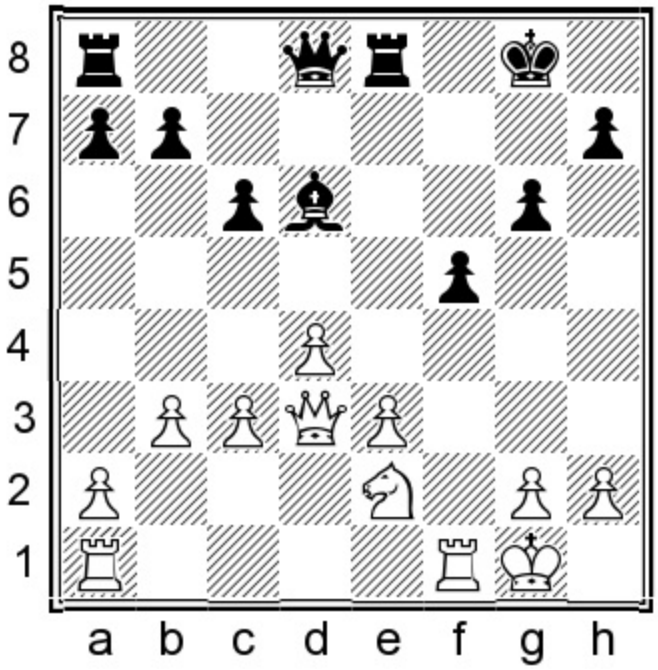
(blitz) 2017.

15...♘xe3 16.fxe3 f5⩱



White remains a pawn up, but Black's pressure against the backward e3-pawn makes progress difficult. For example:

17.♖f3 ♕c7 18.g3 ♖e4 19.c4 ♖ae8 20.c5 ♗f8 21.♘c3 ♖4e7 22.b4 ♕d7±/=

Shcherbatyuk – Morozov, corr. 2016. As a surprise weapon 9...f5!? can be tried, especially at faster time limits. Realistically, however, only White can play for a win in a position such as the one reached at the end of this line.

Let's return to 9...h5!, which is the modern, dynamic solution.

White now faces a major choice between castling long or short. It is tempting for White to castle long and try to prove that Black has gravely weakened his castled position with ...h5. If that is the agenda then **B21)** 10.♗d2 or **B22)** 10.♗e3 followed by 0-0-0 is the way to proceed. Funnily enough, it is **B23)** 10.0-0 which has turned out to be the most critical continuation at the time of writing, since it became clear that lines with long castling are at least as dangerous for White as for Black.

Of course White can still castle short even if he starts with 10.♗d2 or 10.♗e3; but if his plan is to put the king on the kingside, he gains nothing by committing the bishop so soon, as Black is happy to play ...♘d7 in all those scenarios.

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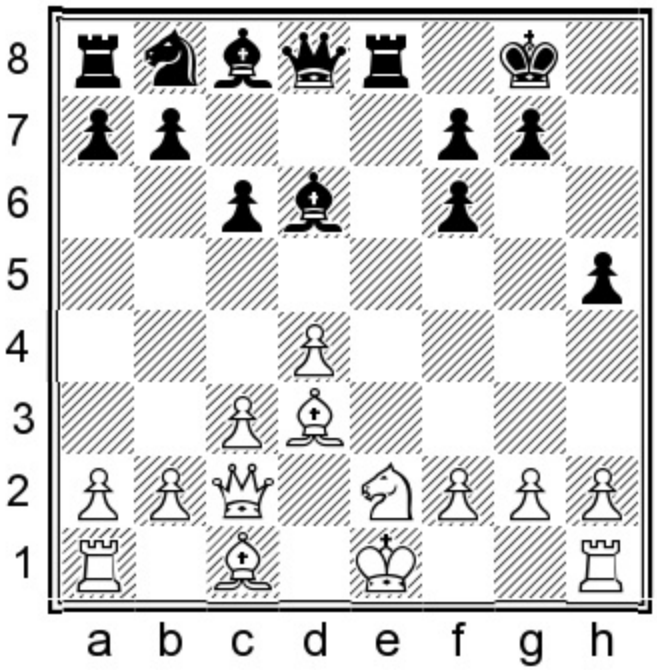

Some minor options are:

10.h4 fixes the h5-pawn in place but 10...c5! (the typical 10...♘d7 followed by ...♘f8 is also fine of course) 11.0-0 ♘c6⇄ gives Black excellent play.

10.h3!?

This move is not too dangerous, but there is a certain logic to it.

10...♘d7 11.g4

This is the consistent follow-up to h2-h3.

11.♗e3 ♘f8 12.0-0-0 will be covered under 10.♗e3 ♘d7 11.0-0-0 ♘f8 12.h3.

11.0-0 gives Black a pleasant choice: 11...h4 leads straight to the 10.0-0 h4 11.h3 line which is examined later, but it seems more logical to start with 11...♘f8 as played in Abdumalik – Sumets, Llucmajor 2018. The knight invariably goes to f8 anyway, so we may as well speed up the mobilization of the pieces and keep White guessing as to whether or not we will convert to the main line with ...h4.

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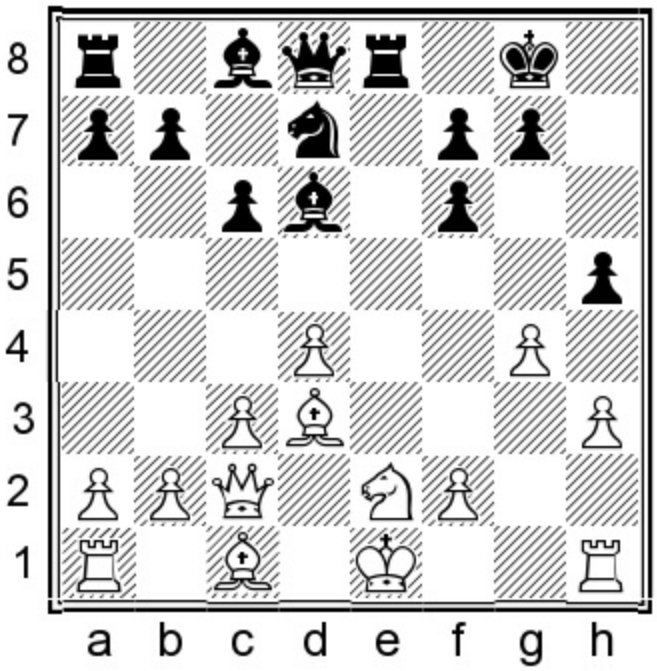


11...h4!

We will see this move again and again in the 0-0-0 lines, as it is vital to keep the kingside closed. Allowing an open g- or h-file would be an open invitation to blow our kingside to pieces.

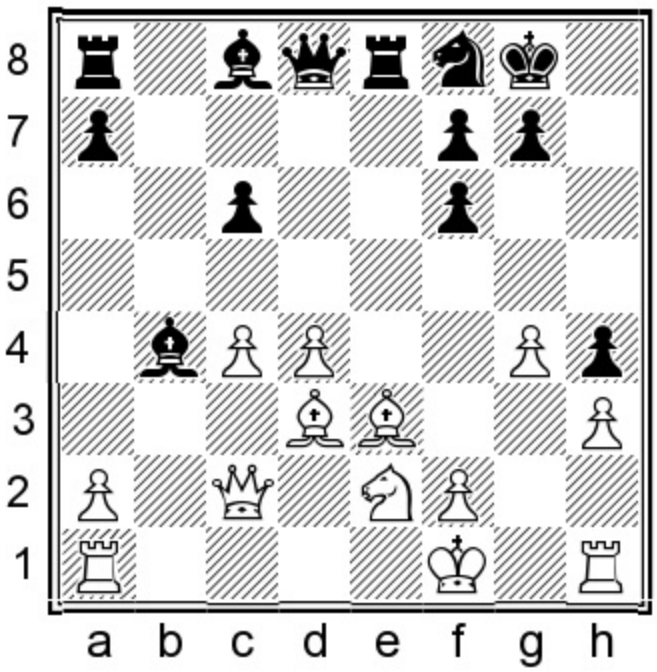
12.♗e3 ♘f8

This typical move works fine, but it is not the only decent option.

12...b5!?N is well worth considering. If the white king goes to the queenside, the pawn advance could obviously prove useful. If White castles short or castles artificially with ♔f1-g2, the bishop could be great on b7.

13.c4 ♗b4† 14.♔f1 b5 15.b3 bxc4 16.bxc4

A useful improvement is:



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16...a5!N

Intending ...♗a6 and maybe ...♖a7-e7, with active play. (This is much stronger than 16...♗d6 as played in Saric – Shimanov, Internet (rapid) 2019.)

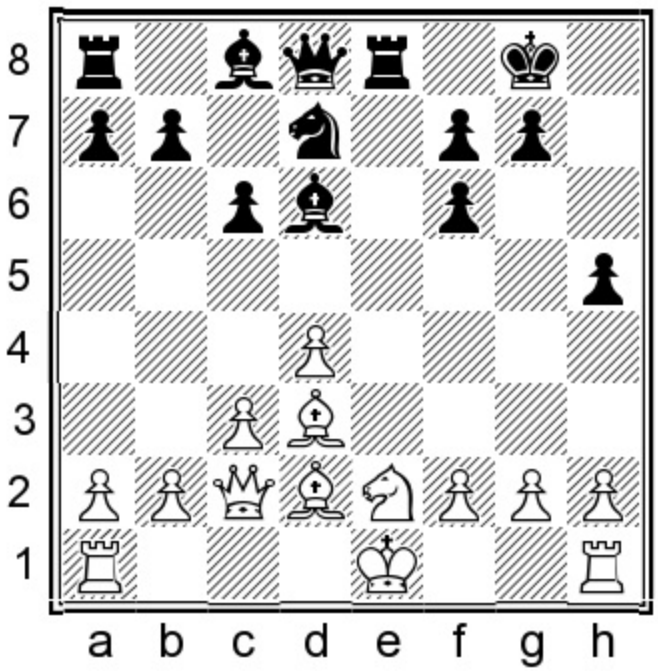
B21) 10.♗d2

This has been a rare choice, although a few GMs have tried it. At first glance, it looks strange to put the bishop where it has less influence over the centre and blocks the rook along the d-file (after 0-0-0). However, White's idea is that the bishop is less exposed on d2, which gives him certain additional options such as advancing the f-pawn.

10...♘d7

This is our standard move, preparing to go to f8.

If you wish to try something completely fresh then 10...c5!?N is one way of highlighting the drawback of having the bishop on d2 instead of e3. White should probably revert to 11.0-0 (11.d5 is the other main candidate, when 11...♘d7⇄ leads to double-edged play) 11...♘c6 with an interesting game, although in general I am a little sceptical about creating tension in the centre, and I prefer the trusty knight transfer to f8.



11.0-0-0

This plan is more critical with the bishop developed to e3. Still, we should of course check this version and consider White's attempts to profit from having the bishop on d2.

11...♘f8

Black intends to continue with ...♗e6 and possibly ...b5, securing his influence over the light squares in the centre and on the queenside.

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12.♔b1

This precautionary move is usually a good idea. If White tries to do without it, he may receive a harsh lesson in how strong Black's counterplay can be!

12.c4N 12...♗e6 13.♖he1 invites 13...b5! with good play, for example: 14.c5 ♗c7 15.♘f4 ♕xd4!? (other possibilities include 15...♕d7 and 15...♗xf4 16.♗xf4 ♕d5 17.♗e4 ♕xa2) 16.♘xe6 ♘xe6 17.♗e3 ♕b4⇄

12.♘g3 g6 13.♘e4 ♗e7 14.h4 ♗e6 15.♔b1 b5∓ was excellent for Black in Hu Yu – Batsiashvili, Shaoxing 2019.

12.♘f4 ♕c7!N

12...♗xf4 13.♗xf4 ♗e6 is a perfectly decent option, when 14.♔b1?! converts to 12.♔b1 ♗e6 13.♘f4?! below, so White should try something else, but Black is fine anyway. Still, I like the text move even more.

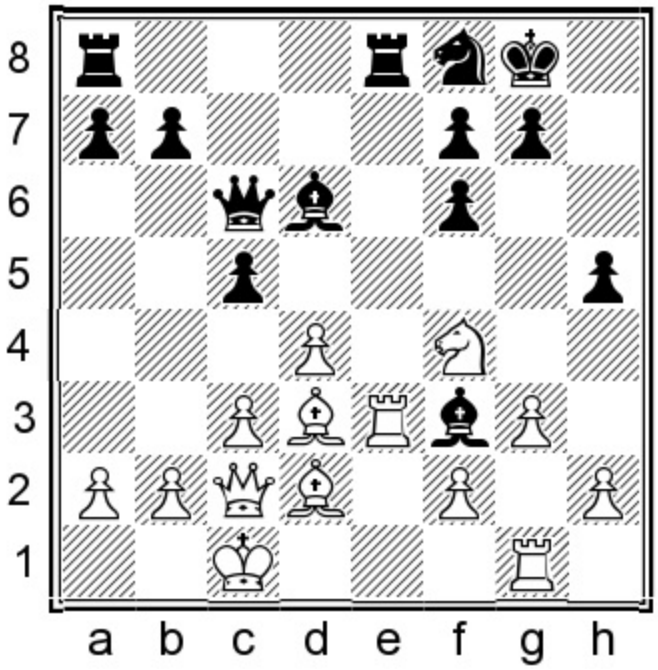
13.g3

13.♘xh5 ♗g4 14.♘g3 ♗xd1 15.♖xd1 c5 gives White insufficient compensation for the exchange.

13...♗g4 14.♖de1 ♗f3

14...c5!? is also decent.

15.♖hg1 c5 16.♖e3 ♕c6⇄



White should probably sacrifice a pawn with:

17.d5 ♗xd5 18.♘xd5 ♕xd5 19.c4

And claim some compensation, but Black's position is still somewhat preferable.

12.h3 ♗e6!N

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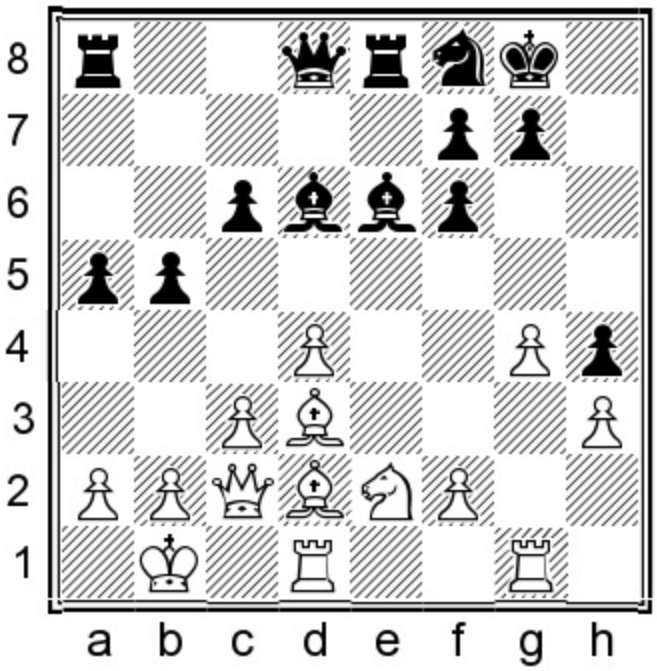
Black was successful with 12...♘g6 in Andriasian – Vidit, Internet (rapid) 2018, but I prefer the text move.

13.♔b1 b5 14.g4 h4! 15.♖hg1 a5

White has a hard time opening a file on the kingside, for instance:



16.f4

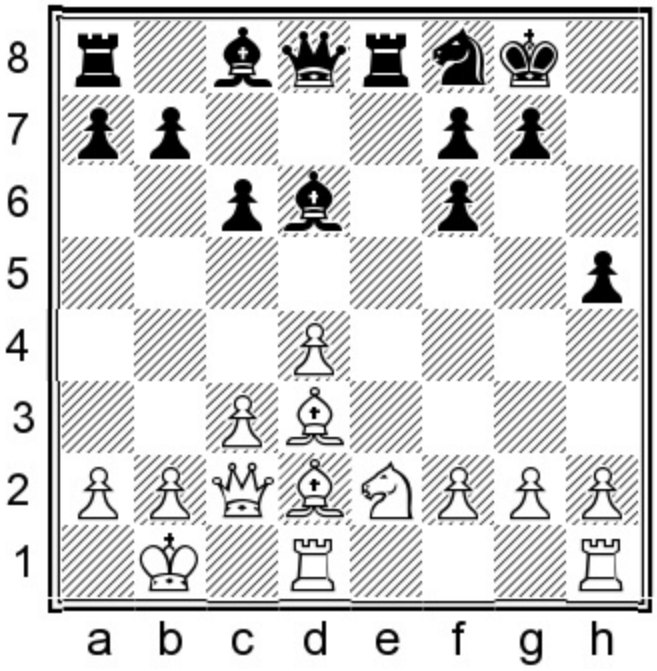
16.g5 f5!∓ exploits the loose knight on e2.

16...♗d5 17.f5

17.g5 is met by 17...f5 again of course.

17...♘h7!∓

White's attack is going nowhere.



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12...♗e6 13.f4!?

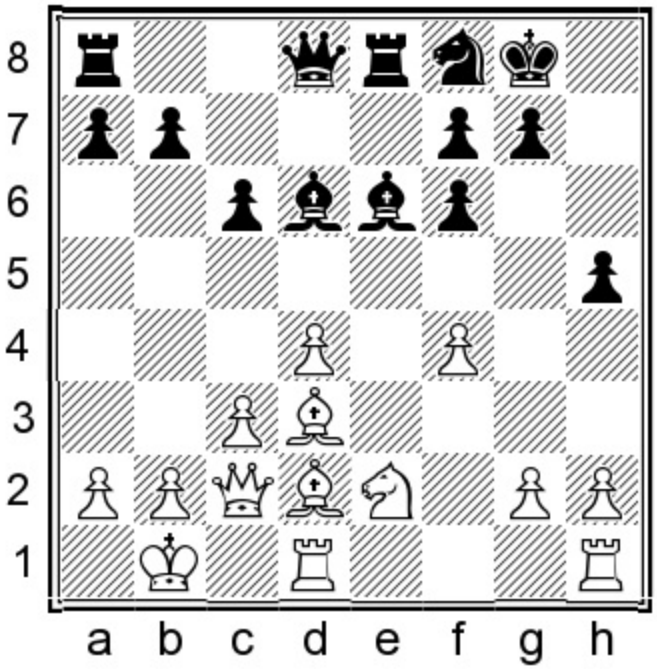
This may not be the prettiest move from a positional point of view, but at least it makes some kind of sense with the bishop on the safe spot d2. Black is doing well after other moves as well:

13.h3 b5 converts to the note on 12.h3 above.

13.♘g3 g6 14.♘e4 (14.c4 f5∞) 14...♗e7 was fine for Black in Kongsee – Kulpruethanon, Bangkok 2018. 14...b5!? is also fine, and has been played twice by Torbjorn Ringdal Hansen.

13.♘f4 is strongly met by the slightly surprising 13...♗xf4! 14.♗xf4 b5∓ when Black has strong play on the light squares, Utiatskaja – Mozharov, Moscow 2019.

13.c4 ♖c8 (the thematic pawn sac 13...b5!?N is also worth considering) 14.♘f4 This position occurred in Guliyev – Ris, Belgium 2018, and now the typical 14...♗xf4!N 15.♗xf4 b5 gives Black fine play.



13...f5!N

This strong positional idea secures Black an excellent game.

13...b5?! 14.♘g3, gave White a strong initiative in Guerra Mendez – Asis Gargatagli, Spain 2018.

14.♖de1

14.♗xf5?? is obviously out of the question: 14...♗xf5 15.♕xf5 ♖xe2–+

14.♘g3 g6 is nothing for White.

14...g6

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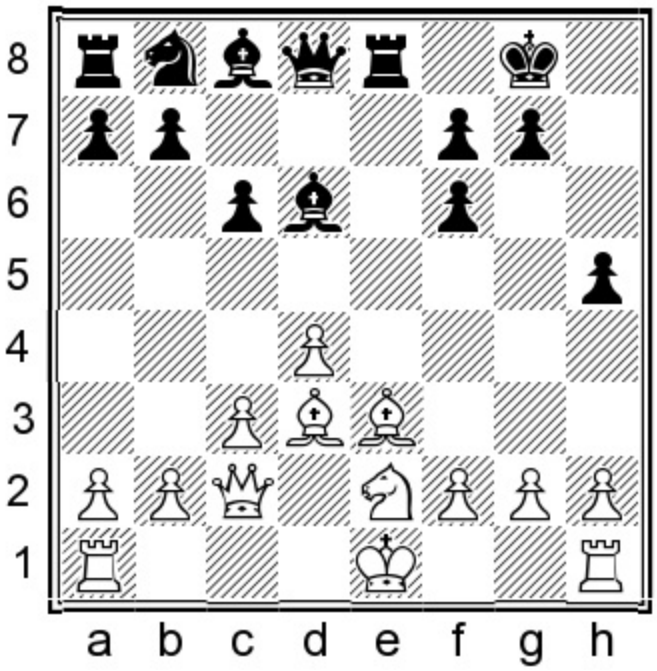
Securing the pawn wall. Black has a fine position, a brief illustrative line being:

15.h3 ♗d5⇄ 16.♖h2?! h4!∓

White has no attack and many weaknesses.

B22) 10.♗e3



If there was to be any refutation of the 9...h5 plan, it would have to come from castling long and utilizing the h5-pawn to attack in some way. Any attempt to attack with just pieces is more or less doomed from the outset. After all, Black has an extra pawn on the kingside and the ...♘d7-f8 manoeuvre will make his castled position even safer.

Thus, White has to go for h2-h3 and g2-g4 if he wants to prove anything. As soon as the pawn lands on g4, Black should be sure to respond with ...h4! to blockade the kingside. If White proceeds with g4-g5, we will play ...f5, continuing to keep things closed. Meanwhile, Black's counterplay is connected with ...♗e6 and various attacking ideas, typically involving ...♕a5 and/or ...b5/...a5 advances. Quite a common pattern in practical games is that White's attack gets stuck and then Black takes over.

10...♘d7

10...♗e6?! is inaccurate. White should be flexible and play: 11.0-0! (11.0-0-0?! has been played a few times, but it enables Black to justify his previous move with: 11...a5!N 12.♔b1 a4 13.c4 a3 14.b3 ♘a6→) Intending: 11...♘d7 12.♘f4± When the bishop proves to be misplaced.

We will analyse **B221)** 11.♘g3 and **B222)** 11.0-0-0.

B221) 11.♘g3

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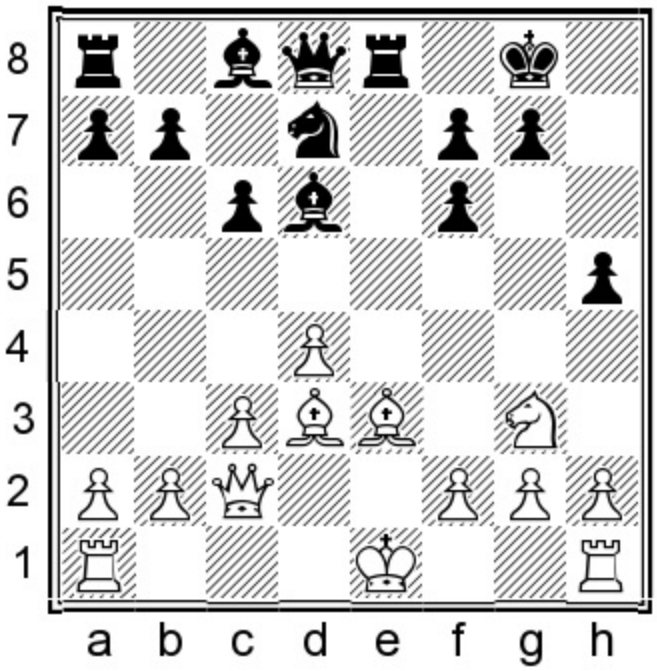

As stated earlier, attacking on the kingside without the use of pawns is not dangerous, but it has been tried by some strong players, so of course we will check it.

11...♘b6!

An excellent response, simply leaving the h-pawn en prise.

11...h4?! 12.♘f5 or 11...♗f4?! 12.0-0! both give White good prospects.

12.0-0-0

This is consistent with White's attacking plan, but it seems riskier for White than for Black.

The pawn can hardly be taken:
12.♘xh5?! ♘d5

White is in danger, but can equalize with:

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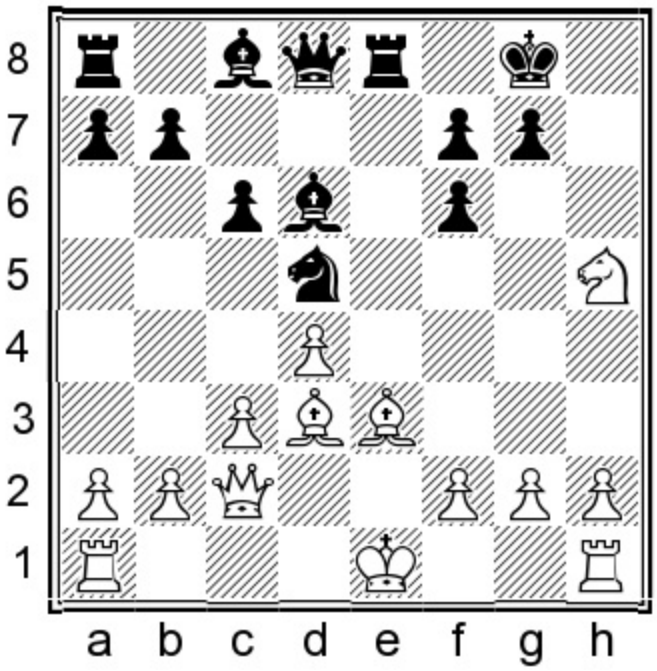

13.0-0

Somewhat depressing, but the alternatives are clearly worse.

13.♕d2? ♗g4 14.♘g3 leads to disaster for White after: 14...f5! 15.♘xf5 ♗xf5 16.♗xf5 ♗f4–+

13.0-0-0?! transposes to Guseinov – Vaibhav in the note to move 13 in the main line below, where we will see that 13...♗g4!N leads to a clear advantage for Black.

13...♗g4 14.♘g3 ♘xe3 15.fxe3 ♗xg3

15...♖xe3 is playable but the position is still just equal.

16.hxg3 ♖xe3=

Despite White's dodgy kingside structure, he was able to hold a draw without any real problems in Bjerre – Thybo, Aarhus 2018.

12.0-0

This is safer although Black is doing fine after:

12...♘d5

12...h4N 13.♘e4 ♗c7 is a sensible alternative.

13.♗d2 h4 14.♘e4

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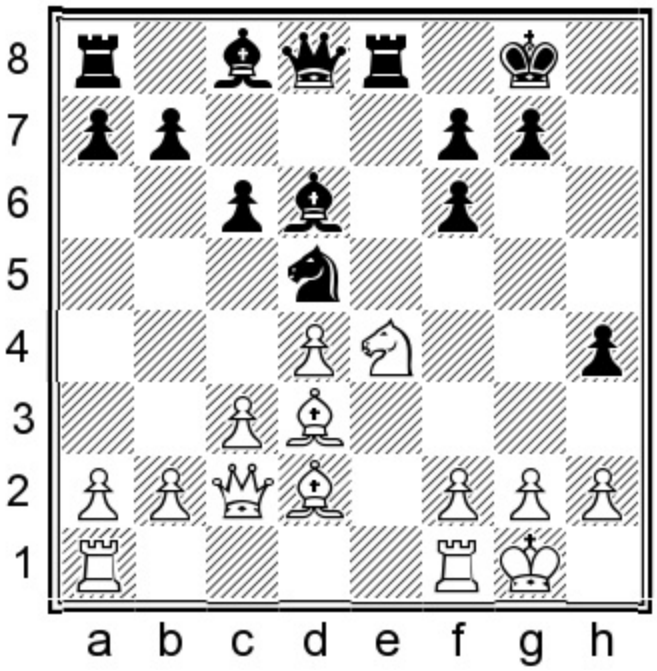

Here I recommend:

14...♘f4!?N

14...h3 is not bad although 15.g3 left Black without an obvious follow-up on the kingside in Bruzon Batista – Liang, Greensboro 2019, so I would prefer to keep this pawn push in reserve for the time being.

14...♗f4!?N is a reasonable alternative suggested by Max Illingworth.

15.♘xd6 ♕xd6 16.♖ae1 ♗d7⇄

White has the bishop pair but the knight is excellent on f4, so Black has no problems.

12...♘d5!

12...h4 is also promising for Black, who went on to win a good game in E. Paehtz – Grandelius, Gibraltar 2018, but I like the text move even more, as there is no need to spend time moving the h-pawn and driving White's knight to a better square.

13.♗d2

White was successful with 13.♘xh5? in Guseinov – Vaibhav, Dubai (blitz) 2019, but Black has a few strong continuations, the most accurate being:

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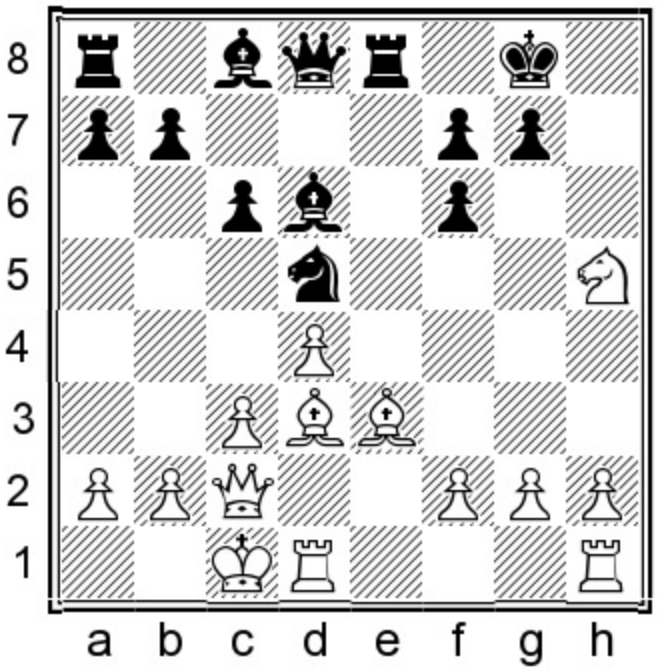
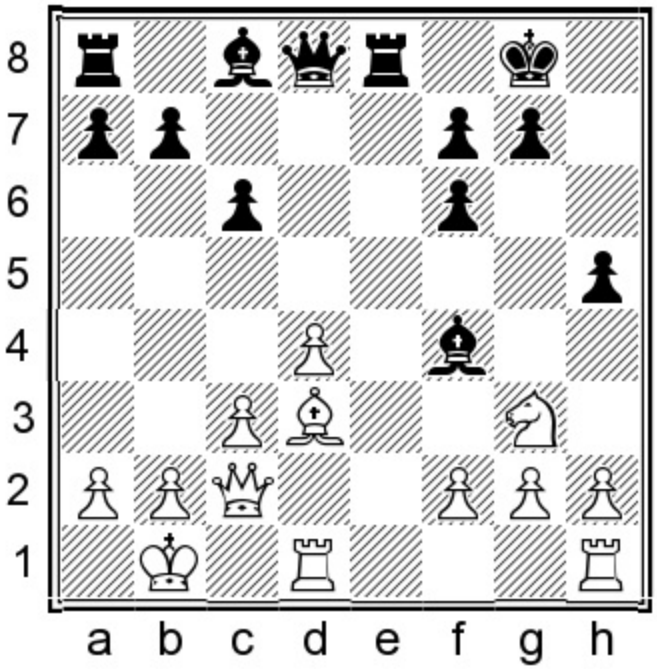


13...♗g4!N 14.♗e2 ♗xe2 15.♕xe2 g6 16.♘g3 f5 17.c4 ♘xe3 18.fxe3 f4 19.♘f1 fxe3∓

13.♖de1 ♗e6↑ was also promising for Black in Bernotas – Berkes, Batumi 2018.

13...♘f4 14.♗xf4 ♗xf4† 15.♔b1



15...♕a5⇄

Black was at least equal in Abdumalik – Lenderman, Saint Louis 2017.

15...♕d5!?N is given as best by Rambaldi and indeed the engine approves. However, after 16.c4 ♕xg2 (16...♕a5 17.d5∞) 17.♘xh5 ♕f3 18.♘g3∞ White does at least have some straightforward plans involving the open g-file and the d4-d5 advance, so from a practical perspective I'm not convinced

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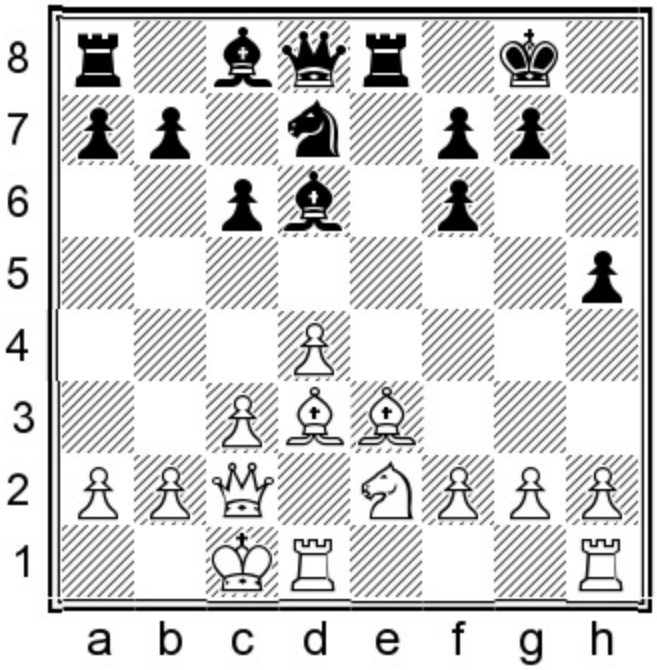
that this is really an improvement for Black, even if the engine rates it higher by a few hundredths of a pawn.

B222) 11.0-0-0



11...♘f8

This standard move is my main recommendation.

11...b5!?

This aggressive move has been tried a few times, including by the World Champion recently.

12.d5!

This is White's best move, leading to great complications.

12.♘g3 was seen in Kyshtymov – Lazarev, Ekaterinburg 2019, when 12...♘b6!?N seems most logical.

12...c5 13.♗xb5 ♖b8 14.c4 a6 15.♗a4

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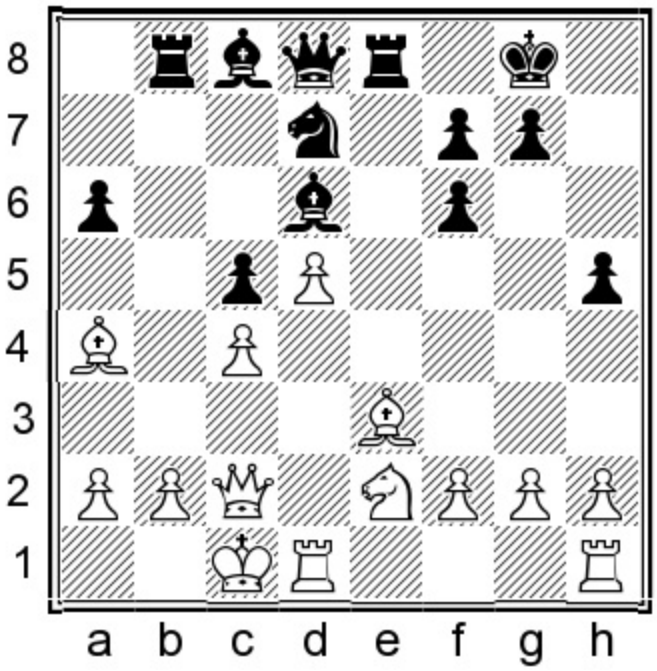

This position deserves further attention and will no doubt be tested further due to Carlsen's influence (regardless of the fact that he eventually lost the game due to later errors). An interesting new direction is:

15...g6!?N

15...♖e5!? 16.♘c3 ♘b6 17.♗b3 ♗f5 18.♕d2 (18.♕e2!?N) 18...a5 was okay for Black in Ivic – T. Hansen, Porto Carras 2018.

15...♖e7 was the continuation of Duda – Carlsen, Stavanger 2020.

16.♖he1 ♖xe3! 17.fxe3 ♘e5∓

Black has given up the exchange and a pawn, but his pieces are excellently placed and he dominates the dark squares. These short lines may serve as the basis for readers to investigate this path in more detail if they wish. With that being said, it is time to return to our main line.

The main moves are **B2221)** 12.♘g3, **B2222)** 12.h3 and **B2223)** 12.♔b1, which we will analyse after first discussing some less popular alternatives:

It is worth briefly noting that the attempt to blast open lines with 12.g4? does not work:

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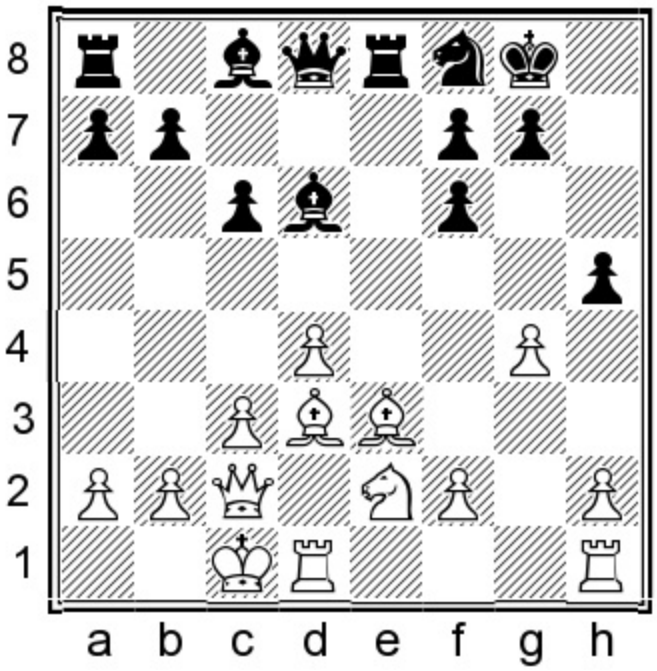
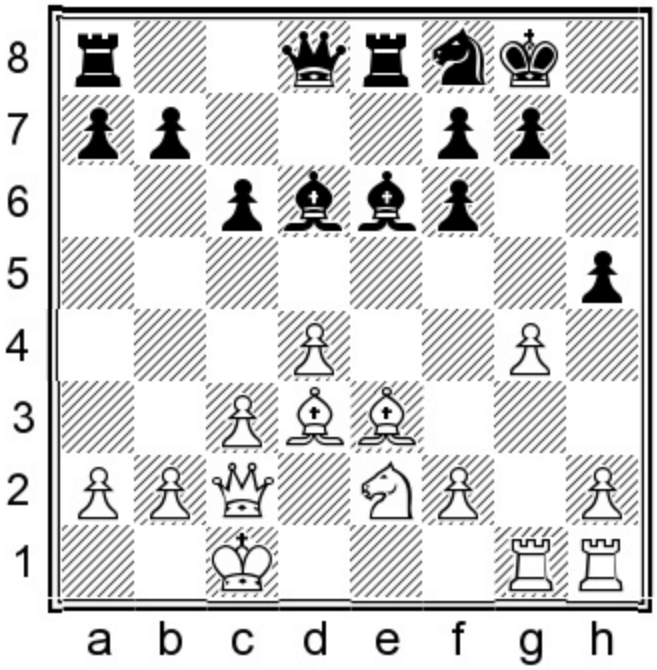


12...♗xg4! (12...hxg4 13.h3 gxh3 14.♖dg1 sort of justifies White's idea by giving him the kind of attacking position he wants, even if objectively he doesn't have enough for two pawns.) And since 13.♖dg1? loses material to 13...♗f3, White does not really have a good follow-up.

12.♖dg1 ♗e6 13.g4?!



This is a slightly more plausible version of the same theme, but Black has more than one good reply: 13...♗d5 (13...♗xg4!?N is arguably even stronger; despite the lost tempo with the bishop, ...♗f3 is an annoying threat.) 14.gxh5 ♗xh1 15.♖xh1 ♕a5 White did not have enough for the exchange in Hoolt – Moussard, Internet 2019.

12.♘f4 is a natural-looking move but the simple 12...♗xf4! 13.♗xf4 ♗e6 14.♔b1 b5 gave Black easy

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play on the light squares in Schulz – Babiy, Germany 2018.

12.c4!?

This has been played three times by Savchenko, though always at faster time limits.

12...♗e6 13.♘c3

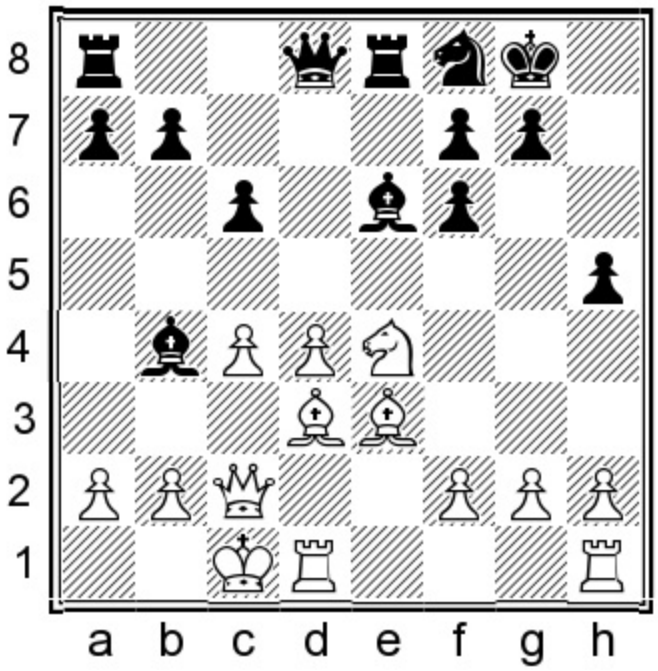
13.♔b1 is covered under 12.♔b1 ♗e6 13.c4.

13.h3 is mentioned later under 12.h3 ♗e6 13.c4.

13...♗b4

As we saw in the note above after 12.♘f4, Black should have no qualms about trading his dark-squared bishop for the knight and then attacking on the light squares.

14.♘e4



This position was first reached in Savchenko – Artemiev, Sochi (rapid) 2018; and Savchenko repeated it against Oparin in the same event the very next day. I recommend:

14...b5!N

We will see a lot more of this motif in the 12.♔b1 section, where White often follows up with c3-c4 at some point.

15.cxb5 cxb5 16.a3 ♖c8 17.♘c5 ♗xc5 18.dxc5 ♕a5=

Black has enough activity and the machine predictably assesses it as 0.00.

B2221) 12.♘g3

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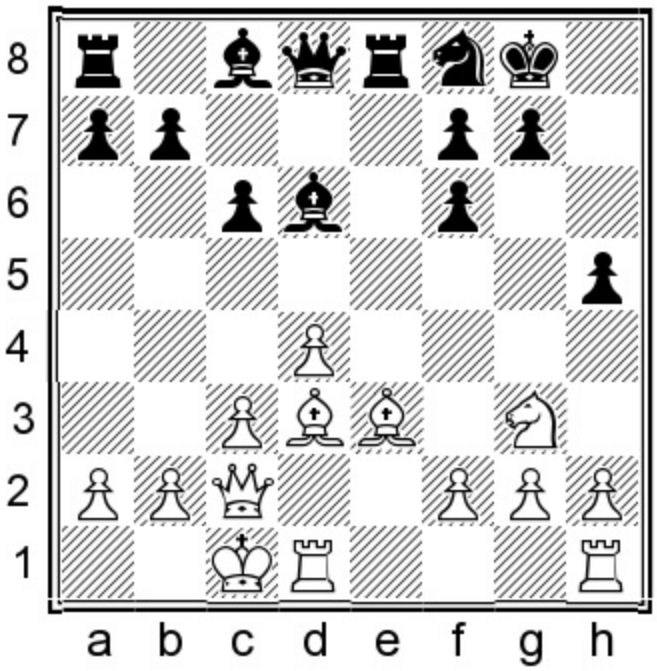

12...g6 13.♘e4 ♗e7!?

13...♗e6 is a good alternative; we have already seen that Black should not fear the exchange of his dark-squared bishop for the enemy knight. Still, I slightly prefer the idea of retreating the bishop and kicking the knight away.

14.♔b1 f5 15.♘d2 ♗e6∓

Despite a practical score of 3/3 for White so far, I am confident that Black stands better.

16.h3

Another game continued: 16.♘f3 b5 17.c4 bxc4 18.♗xc4 ♗d5 19.♘e5 ♗f6 20.f4 ♕d6 21.♖he1 ♘e6 22.g3 ♖ab8 23.♗xd5 cxd5 24.♖d3 ♖b6 25.♖b3 ♖xb3 26.♕xb3 ♖b8 27.♕c3

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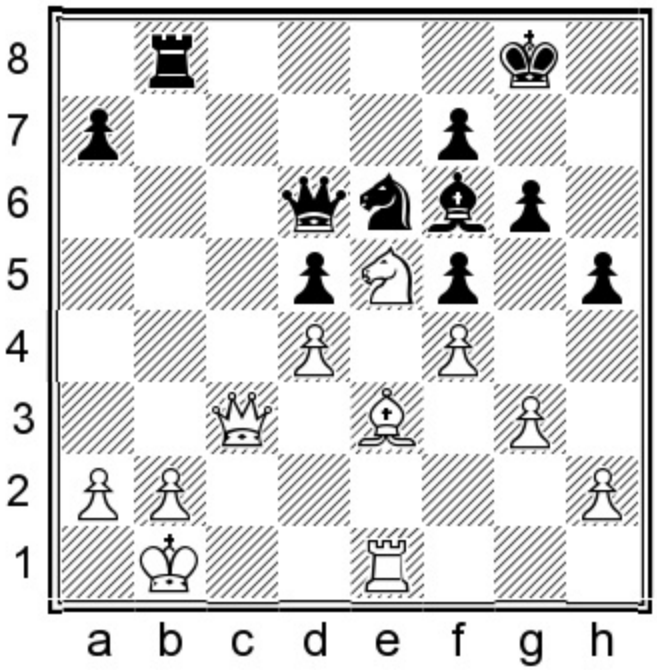
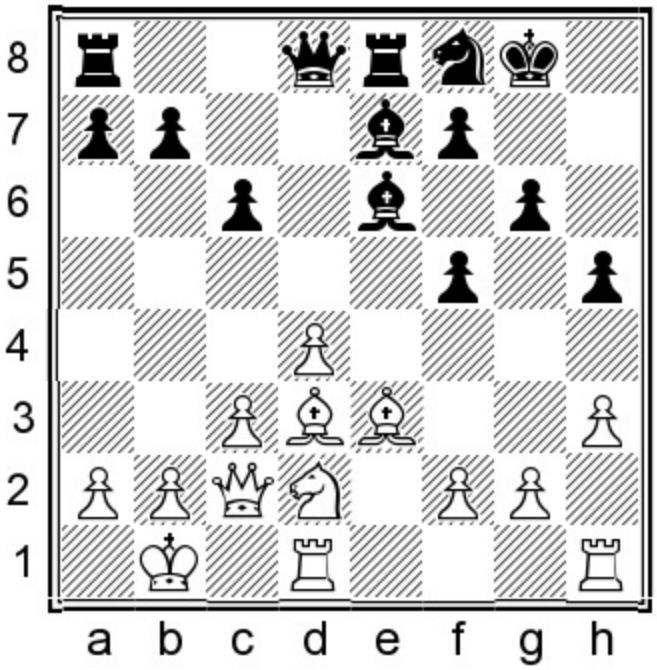


We have been following A. Muzychuk – Batsiashvili, St Petersburg 2018. Having played excellently so far, Black missed a good opportunity in 27...♗xe5!N 28.dxe5 ♕d7 29.♖d1 d4!∓ with an ideal position.

After the text move, I found a vital improvement.



16...♗f6!N

A deep move. Suddenly the rook on e8 eyes the bishop on e3 which is the key motif in the line below.

The naive 16...b5?! was severely punished by: 17.g4! I will give the remaining moves of this

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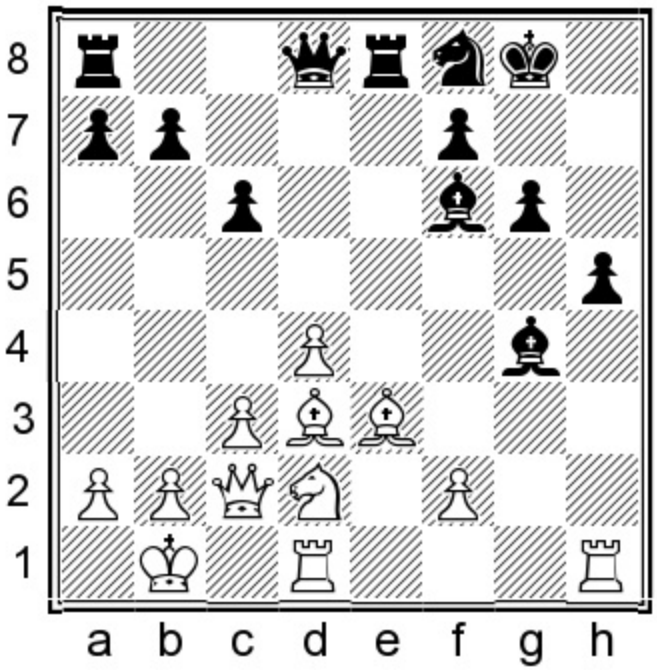
spectacular game to serve as a warning as to what can happen if you allow White to open the kingside in these positions. 17...fxg4 18.hxg4 hxg4 (18...♗xg4 can be met by 19.f3, followed by ♖gd1) 19.♗f4 ♗g5 20.♗e5 f6 21.f4 gxf3 22.♘xf3 fxe5 23.♗xg6 ♕f6 24.♗e4 ♗g4 25.♘xg5 ♕xg5 26.♖dg1 ♔f7 27.♗f3 ♗f5 28.♖xg5 ♗xc2† 29.♔xc2 exd4 30.♗xc6 ♖e2† 31.♔d1 ♖xb2 32.♗xa8 dxc3 33.♖f1† ♔e7 34.♖g7† 1–0 Mamedov – Tikkanen, Astana 2019.

17.g4?!

If White tries the preparatory 17.♖dg1 then 17...♗d5!? is one way to obstruct his plans. Then 18.c4 ♗e6 leaves d4 under fire, and after 19.♘f3 b5! White must attend to the queenside before his kingside attack gets off the ground.

17...fxg4 18.hxg4 ♗xg4



19.f3?!

This was a good option in the analogous variation from the Mamedov – Tikkanen game, but here it runs into:

19...♗xf3 20.♘xf3 ♖xe3∓

B2222) 12.h3

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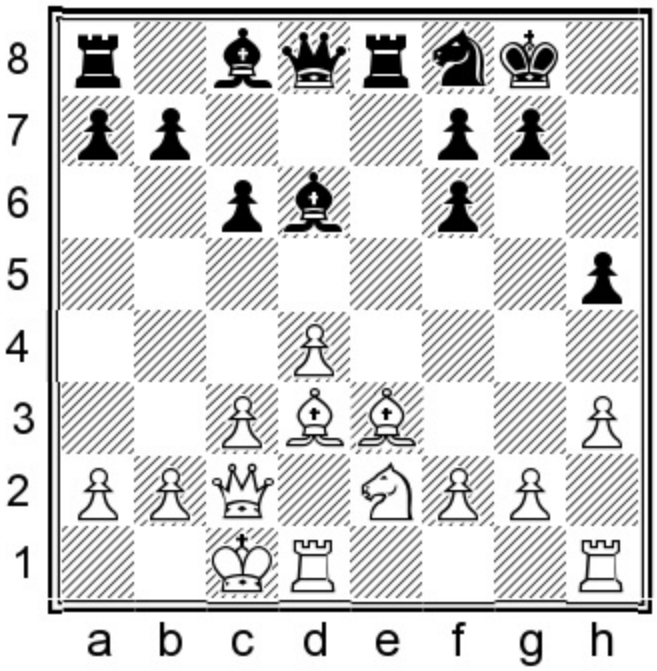

Preparing to strike with g2-g4 seems like the most critical approach.

12...♗e6 13.♔b1

This always makes sense.

13.g4

This immediate strike gives Black more than one good option. I like:

13...♗d5!?N

A small finesse to activate the bishop.

13...h4 has been played a few times and is fine, with 14.c4 b5 leading to thematic play resembling the 12.♔b1 lines.

13...♕a5!? 14.a3 occurred in Ghomi – Mahdian, Rasht 2019, and now 14...♗d5N 15.♖hg1 ♗f3!? 16.gxh5 ♕xh5∞ reaches a quirky position.

14.♖hg1 h4!

Stopping White's fun. For instance:

15.g5?

15.c4 should be preferred, when 15...♗f3 is my idea, aiming to make a nuisance of the bishop.

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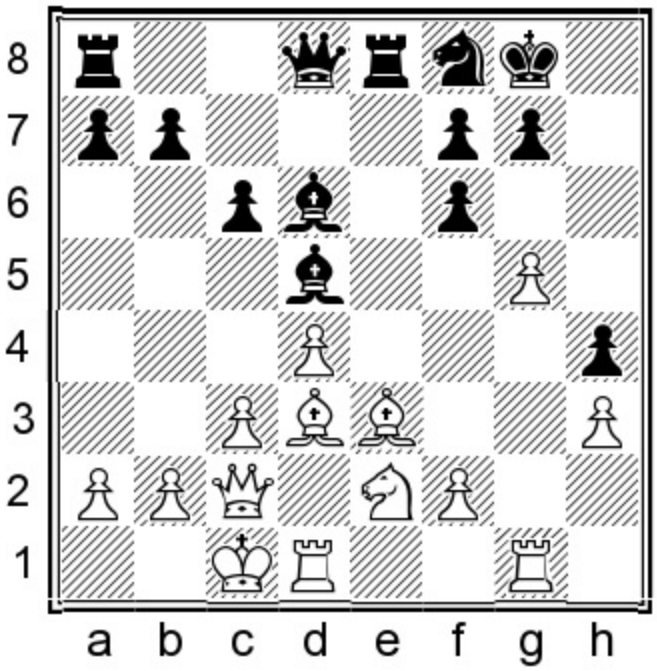
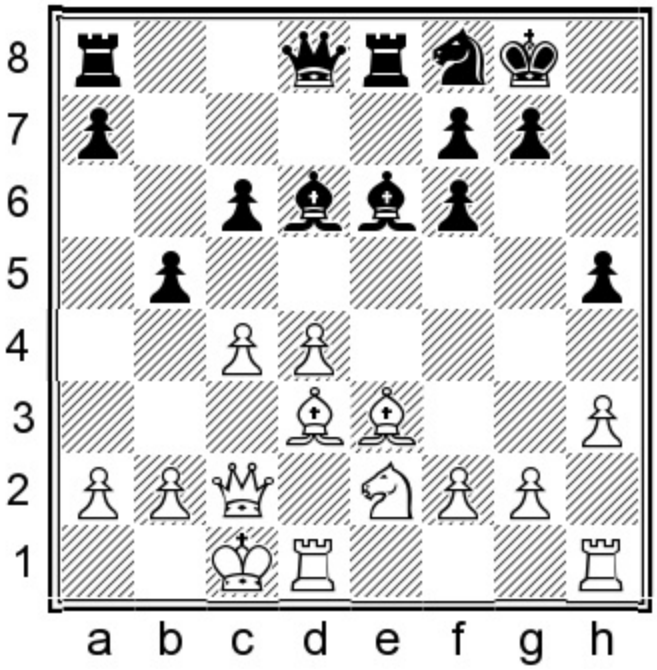


15...♗h2! 16.gxf6 ♕xf6∓

13.c4 b5! is a standard way of challenging White's d4-c4 pawn set-up. Unlike the 12.♔b1 line (which we analyse next) here we do not need to prepare it with ...♖c8, as White cannot afford to try anything fancy on the queenside with his king on its current square.



I checked four options:

a) 14.d5?! cxd5 15.c5 runs into 15...♕a5!∓ intending 16.cxd6?! ♖ac8 17.♘c3 b4 18.♗d4 bxc3 19.♗xc3 ♕xa2 and Black wins.

b) 14.cxb5?! is well met by 14...♗xa2!? 15.♘c3 ♗d5 and Black is better.

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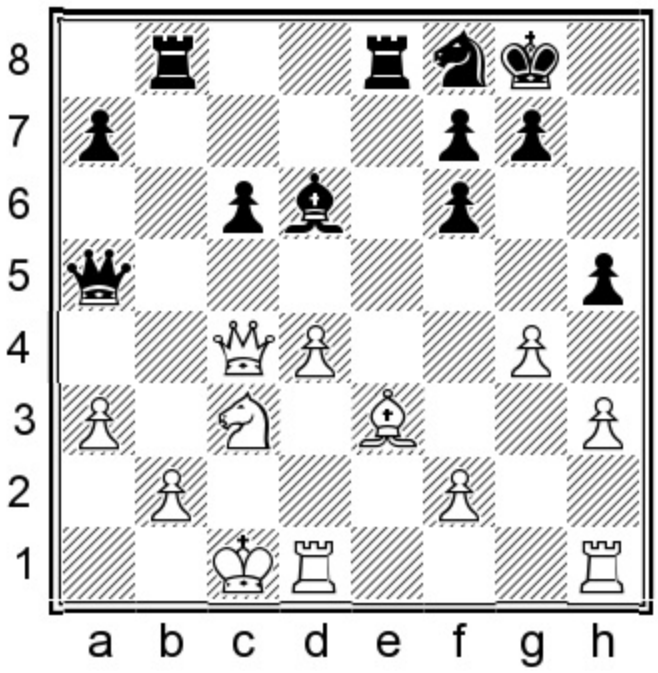
c) 14.g4?!

This is much too optimistic:

14...bxc4 15.♗xc4 ♗xc4 16.♕xc4 ♖b8

16...h4 gives Black a good position of course, but we don't even need to close the kingside because Black's attack is faster.

17.♘c3 ♕a5 18.a3



18...f5!?

Bringing the knight into the battle with 18...♘d7!N is objectively even stronger but the game continuation turned out nicely enough.

19.gxf5 ♕xf5 20.♕d3 ♕a5∓

Y. Gruenfeld – Kuzubov, Israel 2020.

d) 14.c5

This is natural, but it gives away the d5-square.

14...♗c7 15.♔b1

15.♘c3?! b4 16.d5 is the kind of idea that we must watch out for, but it simply doesn't work here after: 16...cxd5 17.♘e2 ♗e5 18.f4 ♗d6!∓

15.♗e4 is met by 15...♗d5∓ with a positional advantage for Black.

15...a5

15...b4!?N is well worth considering, for instance: 16.g4 (or 16.♗c4 ♗d5) 16...♗d5 17.♖hg1 h4 Black is doing well.

16.g4

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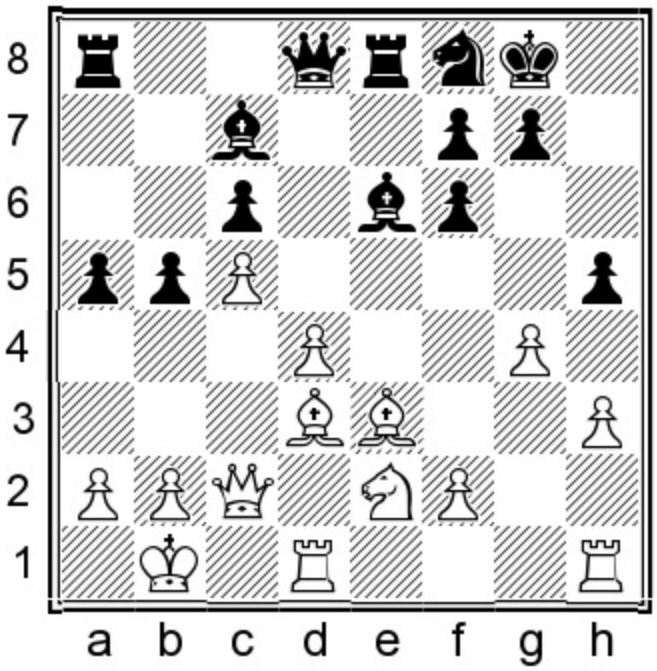
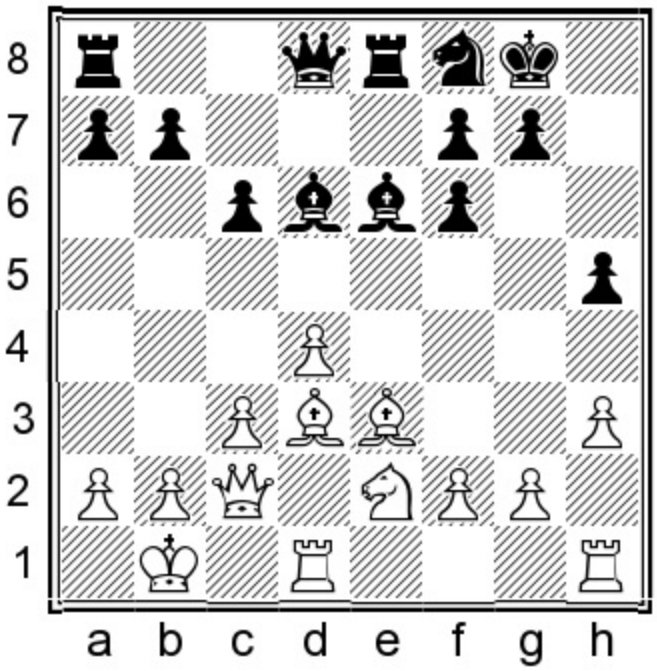


In Goryachkina – Khotenashvili, St Petersburg 2018, Black should have played:
16...♗d5!N 17.♖hg1 h4 18.♘c3 ♗f3 19.♗e2 ♗xe2 20.♘xe2 b4⇄
With mutual chances.



13...♗d5!?

There is no better square for the bishop to combine attacking and defensive functions.

The alternative 13...b5 14.g4 h4! is also fine.

14.♖hg1

14.c4? ♗xg2 15.♖hg1 ♗f3∓ gives White nothing.

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14.♖dg1 b5∓ left White without an obvious follow-up in Khanin – Oparin, Sochi 2018.

14...b5!

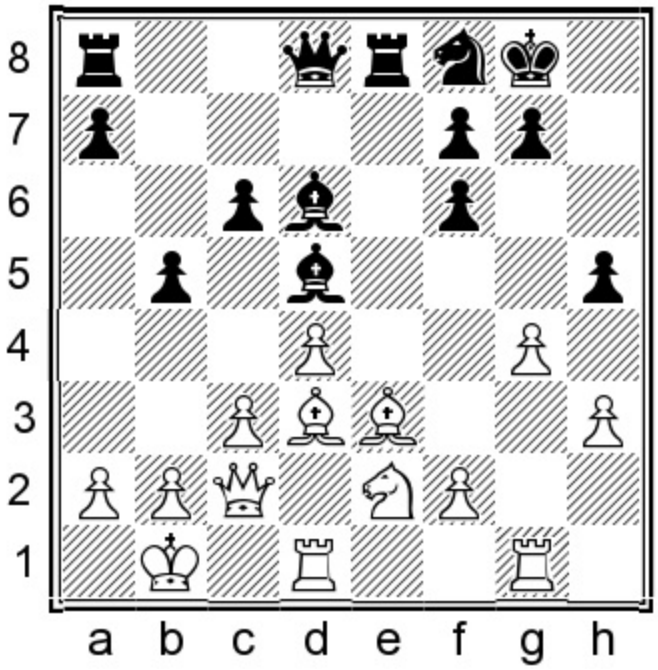
The bishop's ideal outpost must be secured.

14...♗h2?! is strongly met by: 15.c4! ♗xg1 16.cxd5±

15.g4

This has been the plan all along, but it runs into a remarkable refutation.

15.♘f4N seems preferable although 15...♗xf4! is fine for Black as usual: 16.♗xf4 a5 (16...♘g6!? also deserves attention) 17.g4 ♗f3! 18.gxh5 ♗xh5! 19.♖de1 ♖xe1† 20.♖xe1 ♗g6=



15...h4! 16.g5 ♗h2!

Again we see this method of countering White's attacking attempts.

16...g6 17.gxf6 ♕xf6∞ is playable but less convincing.

17.♖g4

17.♖h1 ♗xh1 18.♖xh1 ♗c7 leaves White with insufficient compensation.

17.gxf6 ♕xf6! 18.♖g4 ♗f3∓ also wins the exchange.

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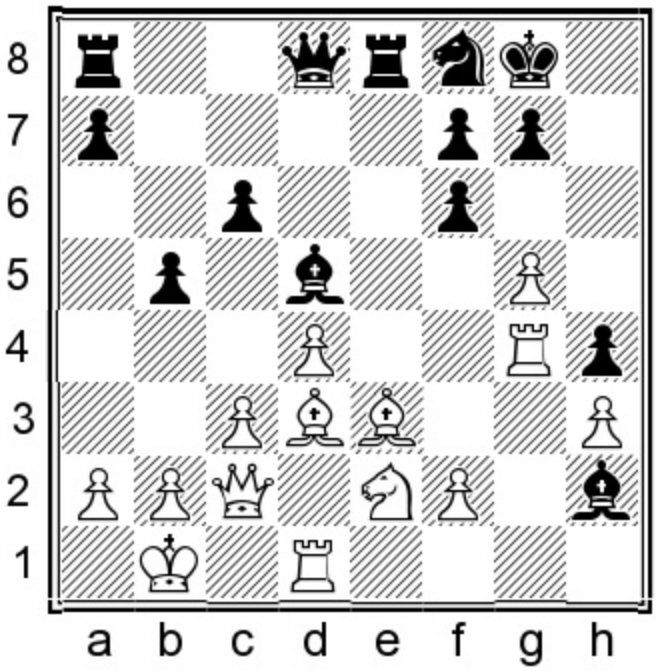

17...♗f3! 18.♖xh4 fxg5

The rook is trapped.

19.♗h7†

19.♖g4 ♗xg4 20.hxg4 ♕d5!∓ prevents any funny business along the h-file.

19...♔h8 20.♗e4†

The only way to keep the game going.

20...gxh4 21.♗xf3 ♕f6∓

All this happened in Gutenev – Cheparinov, Saint Petersburg (blitz) 2018. Model opening play by Black, which is especially impressive considering the time limit.

B2223) 12.♔b1

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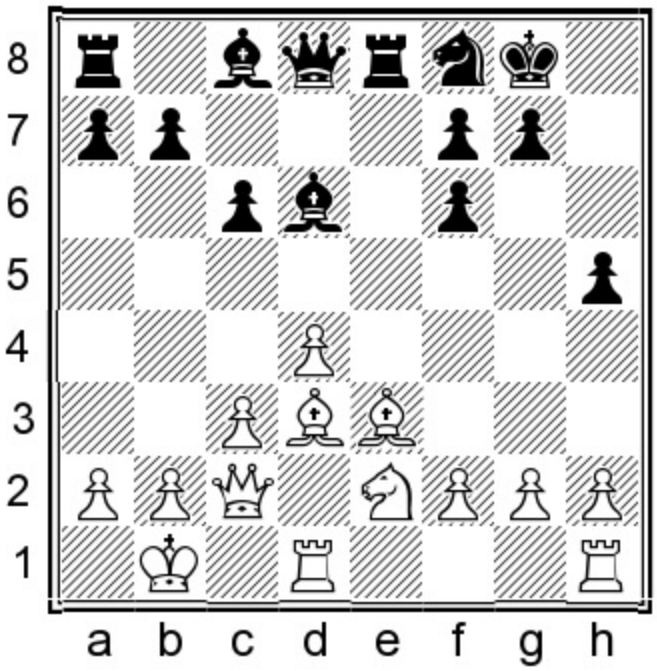

This has been the most popular choice so far.

12...♗e6

Another key position.

13.c4

Active prophylactic play! White expands and at the same time makes it harder for Black to seize control over the light squares.

13.h3 converts to variation B2222 above.

13.♘g3 g6 14.♘e4 has been played a few times but after 14...b5! it is not clear what White should do next, as Black would welcome the exchange on d6.

13.♘f4?!

This has been nearly as popular as the main line, but those who have played it have, in my view, seriously underestimated the risk of abandoning a whole colour complex.

13...♗xf4! 14.♗xf4 b5∓

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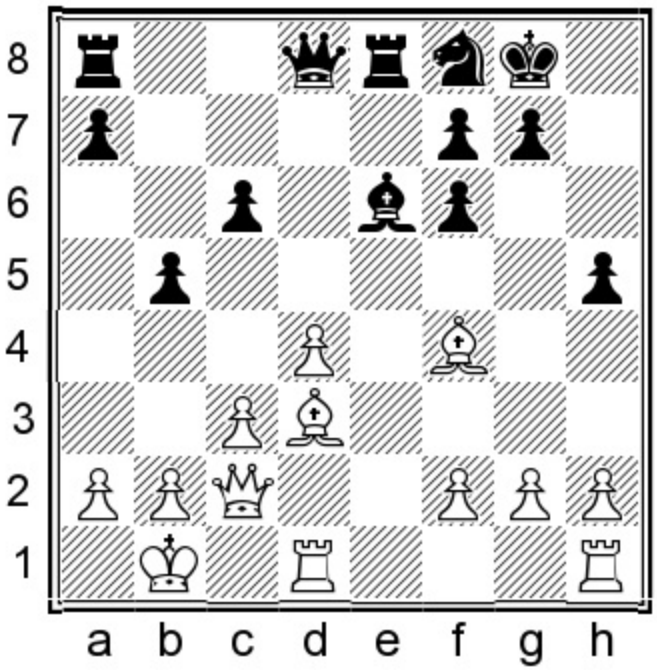
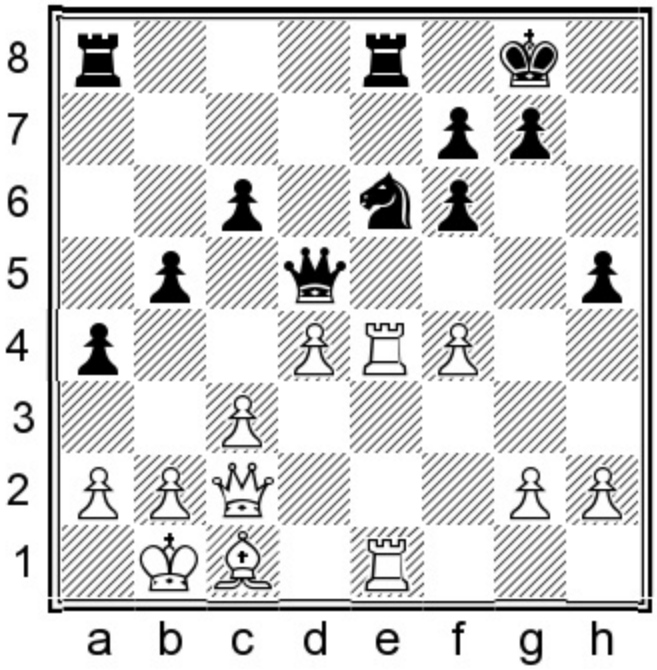


We have seen this idea before but it is always instructive. The two bishops are of no concern, but White should be worried about the light squares! A good example continued:

15.♗e4

15.♖he1 is featured in Game 4 (Nayak – Narayanan).

15...♗d5 16.♖he1 ♗xe4 17.♖xe4 ♘e6 18.♖de1 a5 19.♗c1 a4 20.f4 ♕d5!∓



The exchange of the light-squared bishops clearly favoured Black in Abrahamyan – Krush, Saint Louis 2017.

13...♖c8!

Preparing to strike with ...b5. White has tried various ideas in this complicated position.

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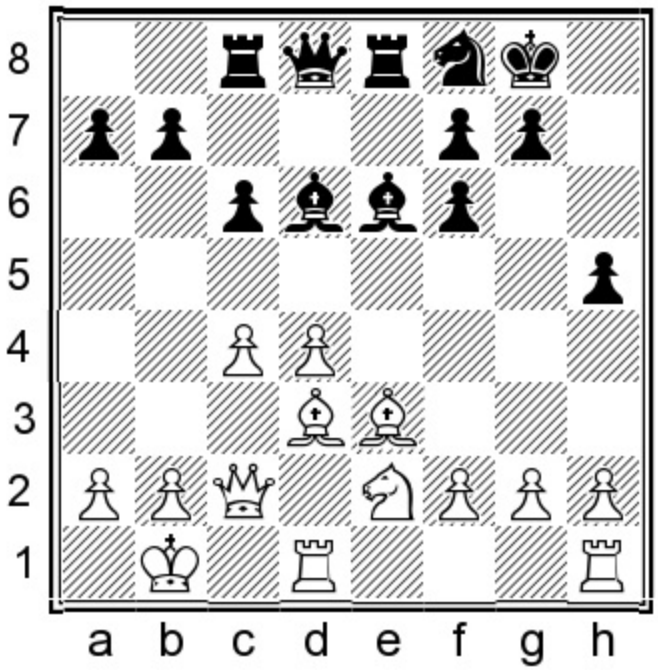
The immediate 13...b5?! would be premature due to 14.d5! cxd5 15.c5 with advantage to White.

A rare but interesting idea is:



14.a3!?

Sophisticated stuff, preparing ♘c3 without allowing ...♗b4 in response. Several other moves are possible:

14.♘g3 g6 15.♘e4 b5 is promising for Black.

14.♘c3 ♗b4!

As we have seen, it is often useful to trade this bishop for the enemy knight.

15.♘e4

15.♕b3?! ♗xc3 16.♕xc3 b5!∓ is similar to 15.a3?! below.

15.a3?! ♗xc3 16.♕xc3 b5! plays into Black's hands. 17.d5!? cxd5 18.c5 ♕d7 19.♔a1 a6 20.♗d4 was a good adjustment by White to avoid being murdered on the light squares.

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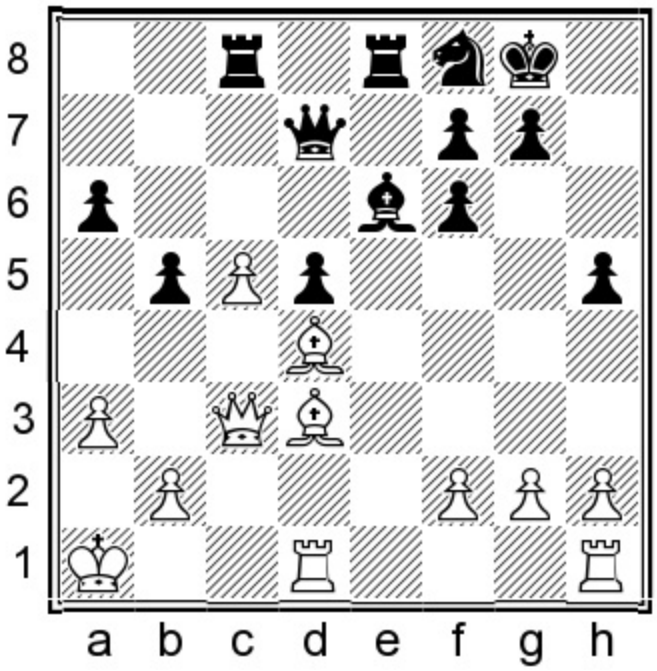

White had some compensation for the pawn in Tabatabaei – Svane, Internet 2020, but after 20...♕c7!N Black must be better; the last move takes control of the a5-square, so Black may follow up with ...♗d7 (to defend b5) and ...a5 to annoy White on the queenside, perhaps with ...♘e6 to hit d4 and c5 at some point.

15.h3!? is slightly more interesting as White prepares kingside counterplay; still, after 15...b5 16.d5 cxd5 17.cxd5 ♗d7 18.♗d4 ♗xc3 19.bxc3 ♕a5⇄ Black is at least equal.

15...♗e7 16.♘c5!?

16.♖he1 b5! gave Black the usual strong play on the light squares in Cumming – T. Hansen, London 2017.

Similarly, after 16.h4 b5! Black seized the initiative in Fakhrutdinov – Svane, Internet 2020.

16...♗xc5 17.dxc5

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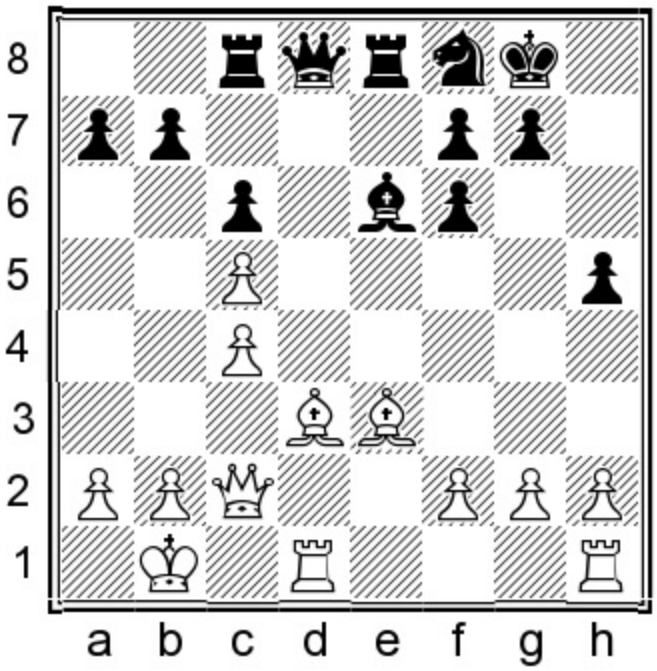

This was an interesting way to close the c-file in Gukesh – Solozhenkina, Gibraltar 2019, although Black should be fine after 17...♕e7N or 17...♕c7N.

14.h3

Preparing g2-g4 is an obvious try.

14...b5

The straightforward approach works well.

14...h4!? is an interesting alternative, when the critical continuation is: 15.♘c3!N 15...♗b4 (or 15...♘g6) with a complicated game. 15.♖dg1 is too slow, and 15...b5 16.c5 ♗b8 17.♘c3 b4! 18.♘e4 f5∓ worked out great for Black in Saric – Howell, Riyadh (blitz) 2017.

15.c5

15.cxb5? cxb5 16.♕d2 ♗d5∓ is great for Black.

15...♗b8

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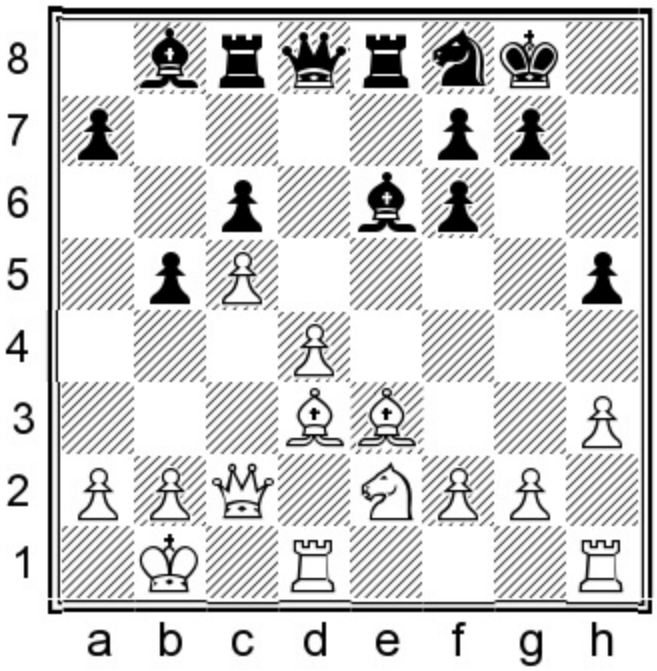

16.g4

16.d5!? is an interesting attempt to make the d-file a factor but 16...♕xd5!N is a good reply. (16...♗xd5 was also playable in Golubev – Baidetsky, Odessa 2019) 17.b3! White must maintain the tension. (Rambaldi mentions: 17.♗h7†? ♘xh7 18.♖xd5 ♗xd5∓) 17...a5!? 18.g4 h4∞ We have reached a strange kind of stand-off where Black's queen seems to be in an uncomfortable spot but White has no direct way to exploit it, as the ♗h7† trade is just as bad as before, and 19.♗e4 ♕e5 20.♗f4? ♗xb3! wins for Black.

16...h4!

As usual, keeping the kingside closed is of the utmost importance.

The materialistic 16...♗d5 17.♖hg1 ♗h2 receives a cold shower after: 18.gxh5! ♗xg1 19.♖xg1→

17.♖he1N

This seems like White's best try, although Black is not worse and can choose between several playable moves.

17.♖hg1 was played in Terletsky – Paszewski, Lvov 2019. I suggest: 17...♗d5!?N (17...b4!?N also maintains the balance, with ...♕d5 coming up) 18.♘c3 (18.g5 ♗h2! 19.gxf6 ♕xf6 leaves White unable to do much on the kingside because Black's bishops control so many important squares.) 18...♗f3 19.♗e2 ♗xe2 20.♘xe2 ♘e6⇄

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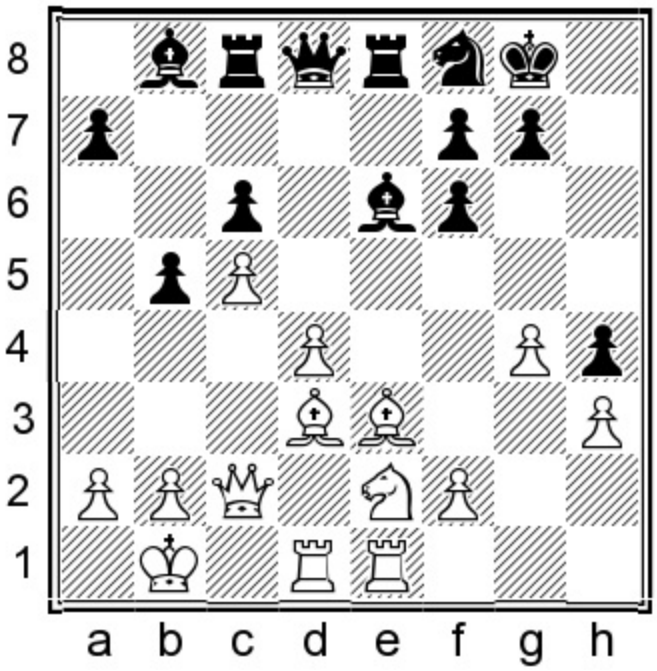
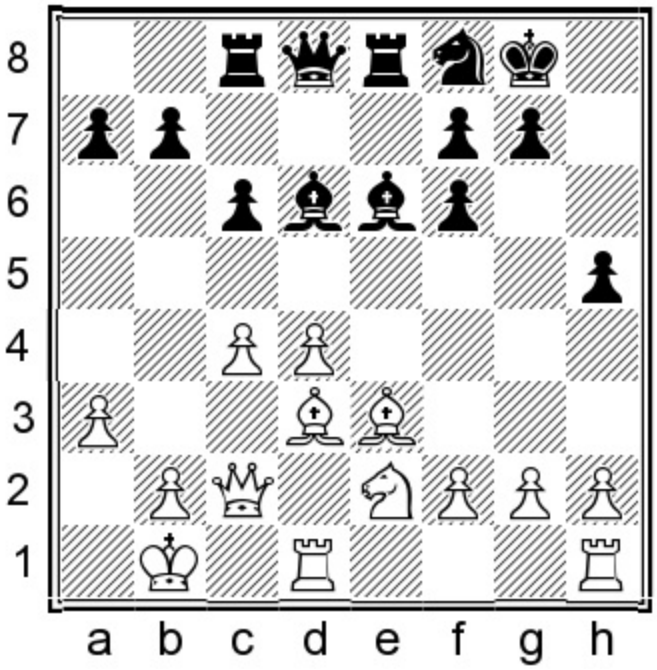


17...♗d5∞

Black could also choose any of 17...♘g6∞, 17...a5∞ or 17...b4∞, all of which result in dynamically balanced positions. If anything, Black has the easier position to play in a practical game, as he can advance his queenside pawns to create threats there, whereas White's attacking ambitions seem to have come to an end for the foreseeable future.



14...♘g6!N

I agree with Rambaldi that this is the way to improve Black's play.

14...b5?

This plays into White's hands here due to:

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15.c5!

15.d5? cxd5 16.c5 was the wrong idea in Tifferet – Tarun, Skopje 2019, the stem game with 14.a3!?.

15...♗b8

15...♗c7 16.♘c3± doesn't change anything.

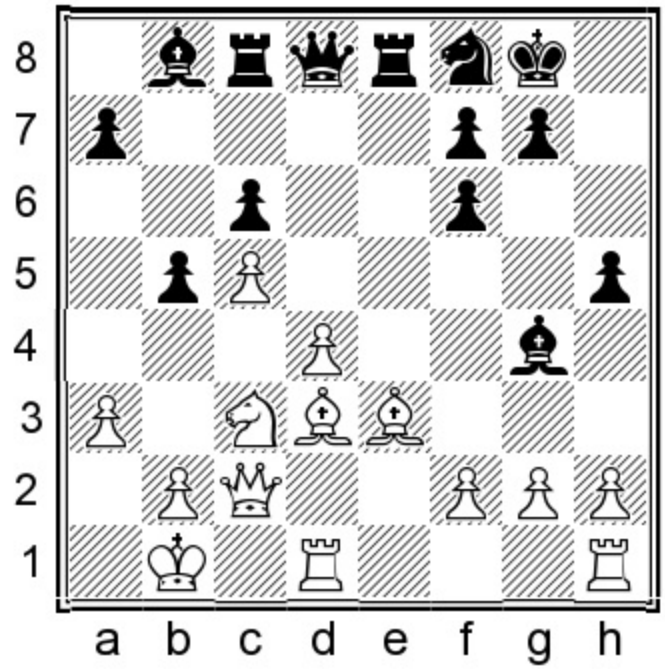
16.♘c3

White prepares d4-d5 with powerful effect, and the a3-pawn ensures that the knight cannot be driven away.

16...♗g4

16...a5 doesn't help: 17.d5 cxd5 18.♗xb5 ♖e7 occurred in Talukdar – Vigorito, Montreal 2020, when 19.♕d3!N would have been the most convincing way to secure a big advantage.

The text move was played in Suarez Uriel – Stefanova, Linares 2020. Among other good options, White could have forced the play with:



17.f3!?N 17...♗xf3

17...♖xe3 18.fxg4 h4 19.♗f5± and d4-d5 comes next.

17...♗d7 18.♖he1± with d4-d5 to follow.

18.gxf3 ♖xe3 19.♗f5±

Once again, d4-d5 will come with a lot of force.

15.♘c3

This seems consistent, although other moves are of course playable. For instance:

15.♖he1 b5! 16.c5 ♗b8 17.♗f5 (or 17.♘c3 ♘e7! and the d5-square remains under Black's control) 17...♘e7⇄ with mutual chances.

15.h3

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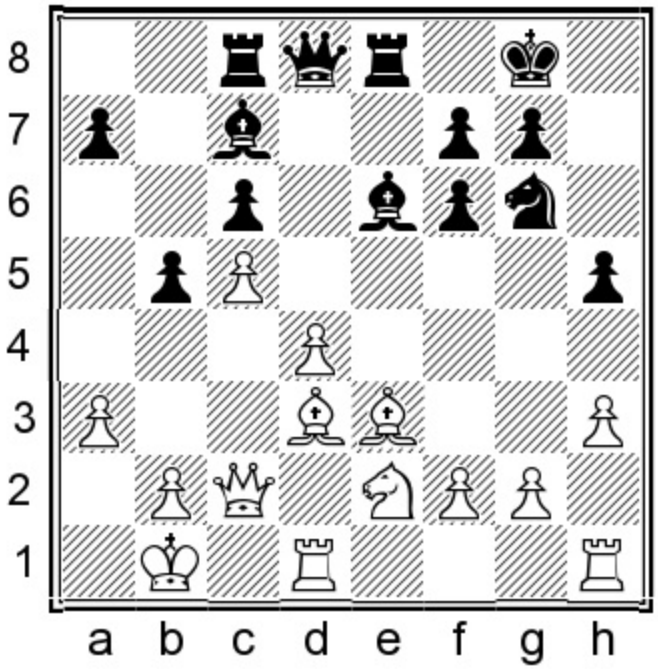
This is also met by:

15...b5! 16.c5 ♗c7



Black is ready to meet ♘c3 with ...♘e7 to control d5, as Rambaldi points out. By the way, there are many instances in these lines where ...b5 is met by c4-c5, leaving Black to decide whether the bishop should drop back to c7 or b8. Overall, I find c7 slightly more attractive than b8, as it leaves Black the option to put the rook to b8 and counterattack, but ...♗b8 has some potential advantages as the rook defends the c6-pawn and it may come to the centre via c7-d7 at some point. My analysis continues:

17.♗f5

17.♘c3 ♘e7 covers d5, as mentioned above; this is really the main point behind Black's improvement on move 14.

17...♗xf5

17...♗d5?! is a cool idea, as taking on c8 would leave Black with great play on the light squares, but it doesn't quite work after: 18.♘c3 ♖b8 19.♘xd5 ♕xd5 20.♗xg6 fxg6 21.♕xg6± Black has only partial compensation for the pawn, mainly because White has the option of ♗h6 next, which essentially forces ...♕f7 and a queen exchange, so Black will not have time to get an attack going on the queenside.

18.♕xf5 b4 19.a4 h4∓

Intending ...♘e7.

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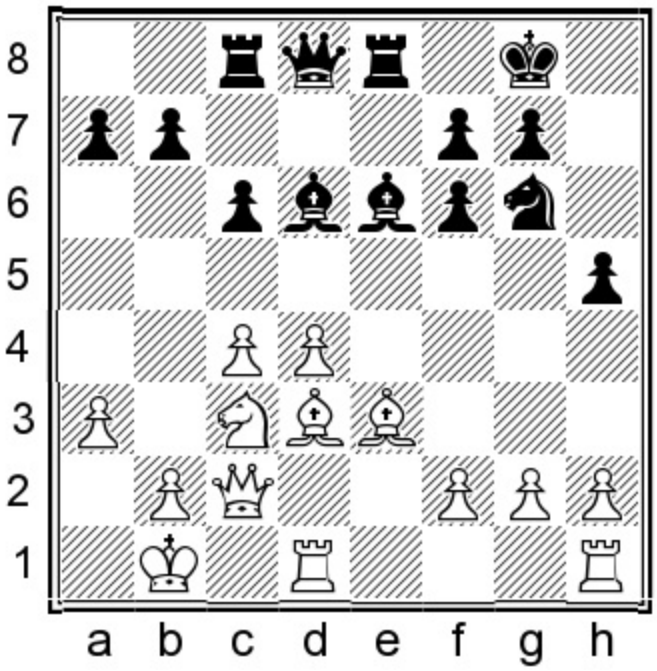

15...♘e7

15...b5!? is not as bad as it was on the previous move, because after 16.c5 ♗f8 Black's bishop finds a better square than b8 or c7. Play continues 17.d5 cxd5 18.♗xb5 (18.♘xb5? ♘e5∓) 18...♗xc5 19.♗xe8 ♕xe8 when Black has some compensation for the exchange. Still, after 20.♕a4± White should be the slight favourite.

16.h3

Threatening to launch an attack with g2-g4.

Another logical line is: 16.♖he1 a6! (16...b5 17.d5! cxd5 18.♘xb5 is annoying) 17.♗c1 ♕d7! (17...b5? 18.♖xe6! fxe6 19.♕e2 is best avoided) 18.♘e4 b5⇄ Finally!

16...h4!

Rambaldi ends his analysis with this move. I agree with his choice, although it is worth discussing two other ideas:

16...b5!?

This must always be considered. The critical line continues:

17.d5!

17.c5 ♗b8 is good for Black since d5 is under control.

17...cxd5 18.♘xb5 ♗e5 19.♖he1!

19.f4 ♗xb2! 20.♔xb2 ♕a5⩱ reaches a crazy-looking position which the machine evaluates as dead equal.

19...a6 20.♘d4∞

It would take a lot of analysis to determine if White is slightly better or if Black is objectively

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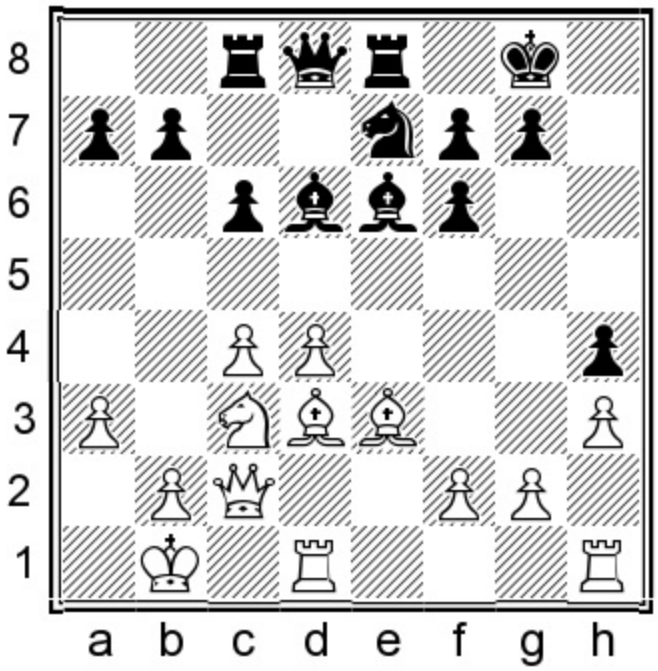
fully okay.

16...a6 prepares ...b5 but 17.♕e2 h4 18.c5! spoils all the fun. (18.♕h5 g6 19.♕xh4 ♘f5 20.♗xf5 ♗xf5† 21.♔a1 b5! 22.c5 b4 23.axb4 a5 was fun to analyse – ultimately equal, but in a practical situation it would be dangerous for White.) 18...♗c7 19.♕h5 f5 20.♕xh4 And now both 20...♗a5 and 20...♘d5 leave Black with only partial compensation. Still, in a practical game any of these lines could present problems for the opponent.



17.♕e2

17.g3 hxg3 18.fxg3 b5! and Black's attack looks faster.

17.♖he1 gives Black the time he needs to play 17...a6!⇄ with ...b5 to follow.

17...♘f5 18.♕f3 ♘xe3 19.fxe3 b5 20.c5

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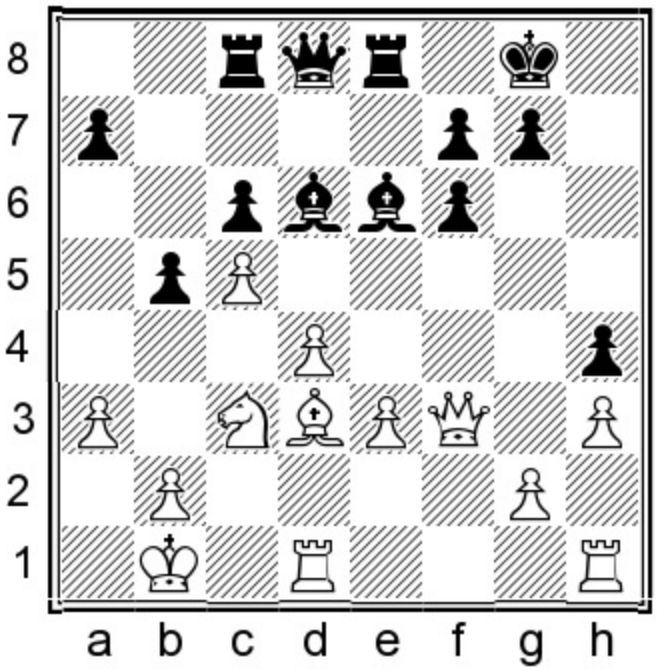

20...♗g3!?

Followed by any of ...a5, ...♕a5 or ...♖b8, with promising counterplay.

GAME 4

Rajesh Nayak – Narayanan Sunilduth Lyna

New Delhi 2019

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 6.c3 ♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♕c2 ♖e8† 9.♘e2 h5 10.♗e3 ♘d7 11.0-0-0 ♘f8 12.♔b1 ♗e6 13.♘f4?! ♗xf4! 14.♗xf4 b5

As noted in the theoretical section, I believe Black already stands better.

15.♖he1

15.♗e4 ♗d5 and the trade of light-squared bishops favours Black, as noted earlier.

15...♕d5! 16.b3 a5!

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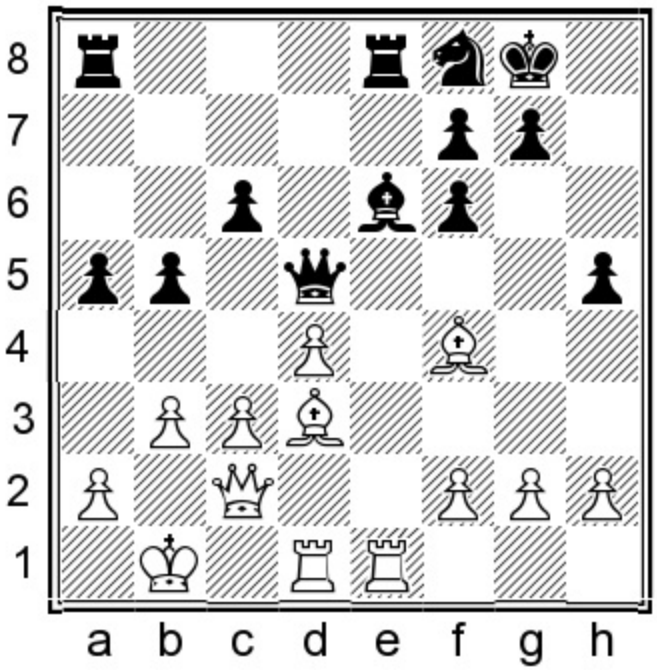

Simple and strong chess from Black. First he played ...♕d5 to force the weakening b2-b3, and now he prepares to attack the soft spot with ...a4. White can hardly allow the opening of a queenside file, so he will have to answer ...a4 with b3-b4, but that leaves him with a horrible pawn structure and eternal weaknesses on the light squares.

17.♗e4

17.c4 solves one problem but creates another. After 17...bxc4 18.bxc4 the bishop on f4 prevents Black from utilizing the open b-file immediately, but sooner or later the open queenside will tell. 18...♕xg2 is a safe pawn grab. The more modest 18...♕d7∓ gives Black some advantage as well.

17...♕d7 18.♕d3

Not the best, but the trouble is that there are no promising options.

18...a4! 19.b4

This is the pawn formation I was talking about. Notice how immobile White's pawn majority on the queenside is. More importantly, his light squares are permanently weakened while his dark-squared bishop shoots into thin air. All in all, Black has a strategically winning position.

19...♘g6 20.♗c1

20.♗xg6 fxg6 will end in a catastrophe on the light squares.

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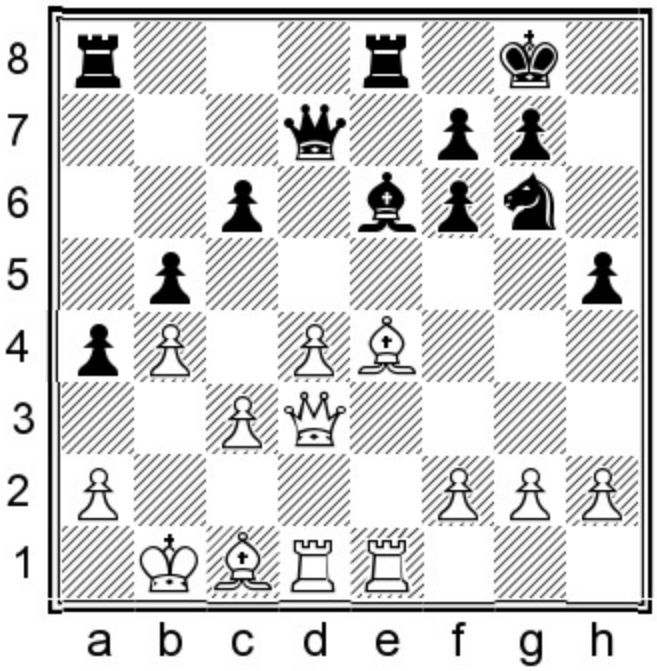

20...♖e7!

Black improves his position and gets ready to double rooks on the open e-file.

21.♕f3?

A mistake in a terrible position.

21.♖e2? ♗c4 wins immediately.
21.h3 looks like the best try although 21...f5 22.♗f3 ♖ae8∓ leaves White in a miserable position.

21...♗g4!

Winning material.

22.♕d3

22.♗xc6 ♗xf3 23.♗xd7 ♗xd1 is a whole rook.

22...♗xd1 23.♖xd1 ♖ae8 24.♗f3 ♘h4

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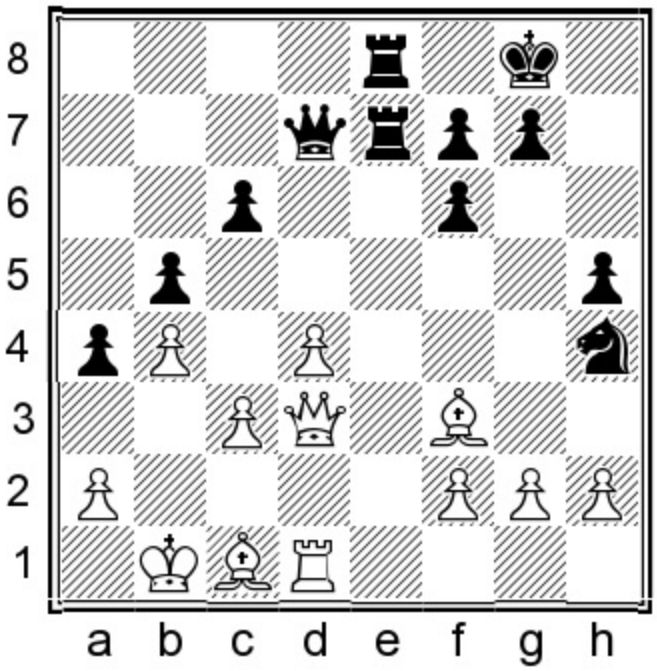


White is hopelessly uncoordinated and the game is soon over.

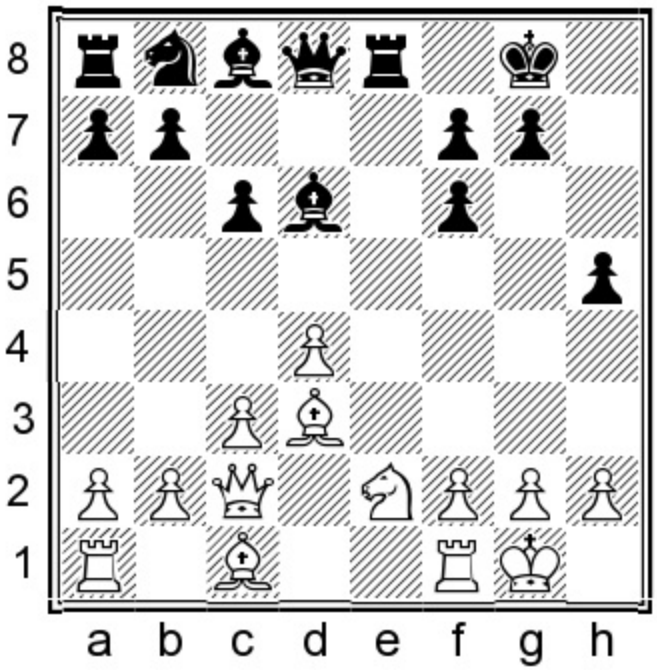
25.♗xh5 ♕d5 26.♗f3 ♘xf3 27.♕xf3 ♖e2 28.♕xd5 cxd5 29.♗e3 a3!

Black could have easily won by slower means, but it's nice to take full advantage of the rook on the 2nd rank.

30.♖d3 f5 31.g3 ♖b2† 32.♔a1 g5

0–1

B23) 10.0-0



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In the older variation with 9...h6, this move would be a safe route to a slight edge for White, who would follow up with ♘g3. We will see what a difference it makes having the pawn on h5 instead.

10...h4 11.h3

Blocking the pawn has been White's most popular choice. In this AlphaZero period, players are more cautious than ever about allowing flank pawns to advance too far, especially near the king. However, our plan is not to advance with ...h3 immediately if White allows it. Rather, we should keep it in reserve until a really inviting opportunity arises. In the meantime, the pawn on h4 plays an important role in preventing ♘g3. By the way, the fact that ...h3 is not an immediate threat does not mean that White is wrong to prevent it. It is reasonable to assume that White will want to play h2-h3 at some point, so it makes sense to get it done now and maintain as much flexibility as possible.

11.♗d2 has been played a few times but after 11...♘d7 White found nothing better than 12.h3, reaching a position covered under 12.♗d2 below.

11.♗f4

This is a positionally desirable move, as White swaps his worse bishop for Black's better one. A good reply is:

11...♘a6!

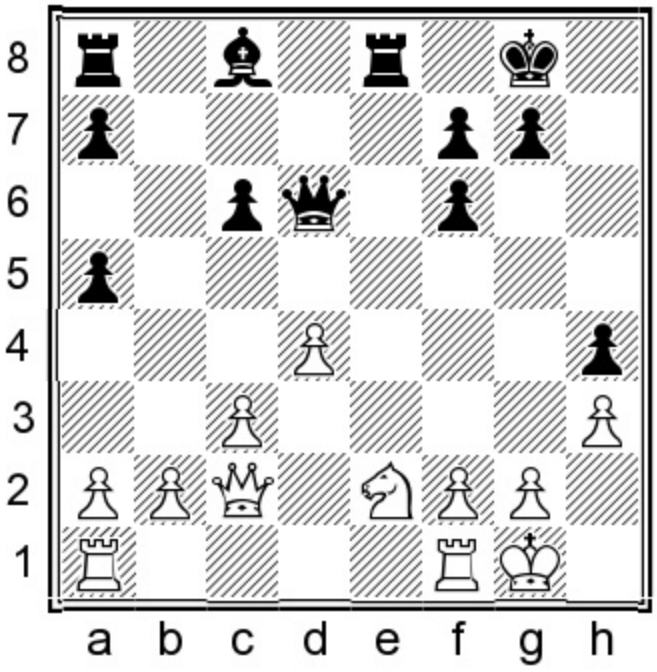
Planning ...♘c7 when the knight can go to e6 later, which is similar to Game 5 (Hacker – Halkias).

Just like in an earlier variation, 11...♖xe2? 12.♕xe2 ♗xf4 backfires due to 13.♕e4+–.

12.♗xa6N

This is the move which might seem scary. However, after:

12...bxa6 13.♗xd6 ♕xd6 14.h3 a5⇄



Black is absolutely fine, despite his crippled pawns. The a-rook can go to b8 and the bishop can

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be activated on a6 or e6. The trouble for White is that any pawn move on the queenside will create a weakness of some kind.

11...♘d7

The three main options of **B231)** 12.♗d2, **B232)** 12.♗e3 and **B233)** 12.♗f4 will be examined separately.

12.c4

This looks attractive, but loosening the d4-pawn is not something to take lightly.

12...♘f8 13.♗e3 ♗e6

The position is balanced although White needs to be careful, as evidenced by the following game:

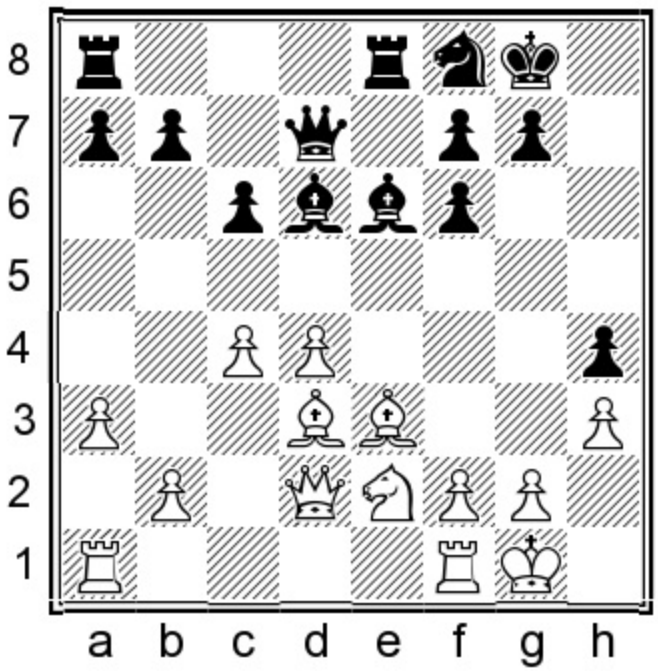
14.a3?! ♕d7

We have already seen that the h3-pawn can make an inviting target.

15.♕d2?

White fails to sense the danger.

The lesser evil was to shed a pawn with: 15.♘f4 ♗xf4 16.♗xf4 ♕xd4 17.♗e3 ♕d6 18.♖ad1 ♕c7 19.♖fe1 ♖ad8∓ When Black is doing well, but White's king is in no immediate danger and the two bishops offer him a certain amount of compensation.



15...♗xh3! 16.gxh3 ♕xh3

Black has a decisive attack.

17.♘f4

17.♗f4 ♕g4† 18.♔h1 ♕f3† 19.♔g1 h3–+ and White will be mated on g2.

17...♕g4† 18.♔h2 ♘e6

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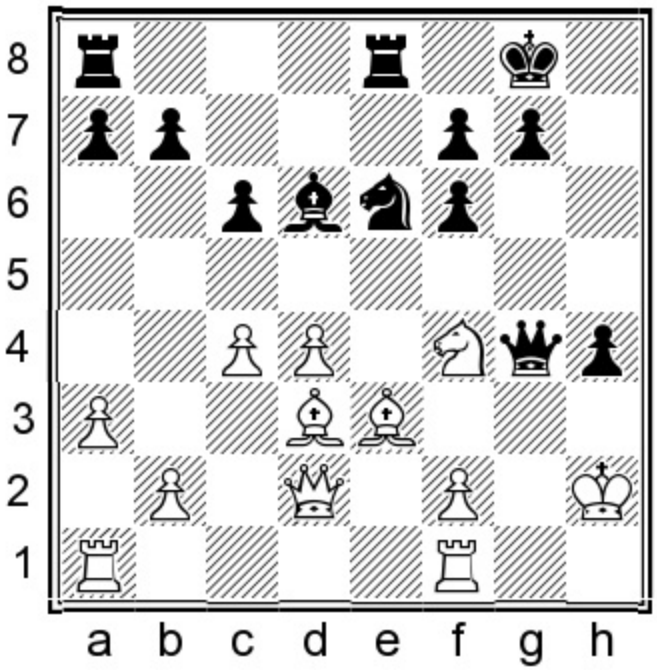
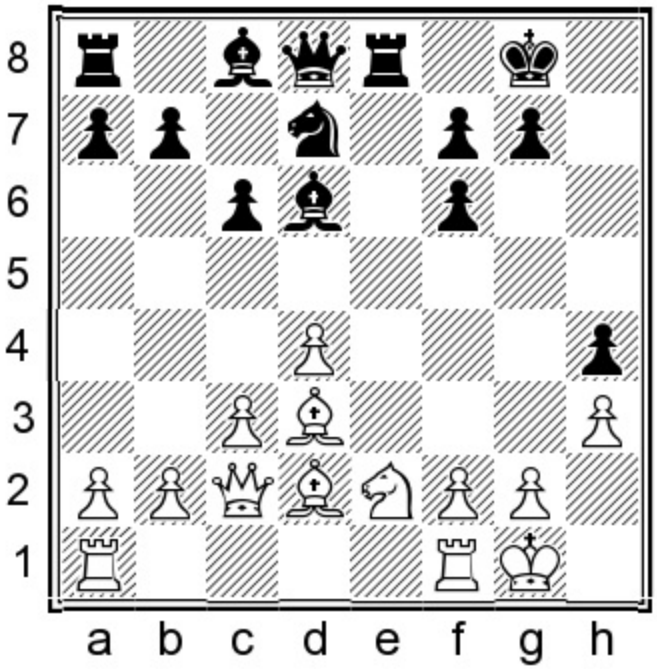


0–1 G. Lund – Sidali, Fornebu 2017. A wonderful miniature!

B231) 12.♗d2



This move is a top engine choice, but it doesn't boost White's confidence, does it? The bishop looks extremely tame on d2. To be fair, there is some logic behind it, as the bishop is less exposed on d2 than e3, and White may wish to contest the open e-file. The text move also sees White connect his rooks – a discipline in which Black is lagging far behind. However, this doesn't matter too much because it is not really a position for rooks anyway.

12...♘f8 13.♖ae1!?

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Planning to launch the f-pawn.

White could also play in the centre with:

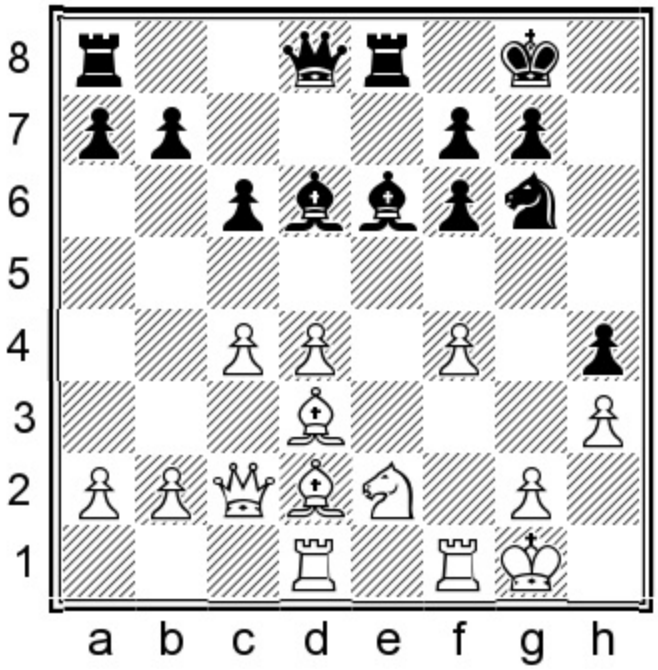
13.♖ad1 ♗e6

13...♗c7 14.c4 ♕d6?! 15.♗f4 ♖xe2 looked smart, but backfired: 16.♗xd6 ♖xc2 17.♗a3 ♗f5 (17...♗e6!N is better, but I would rather not have to resort to such measures to get a playable position) 18.♗xf5 ♖e2 In T. Nguyen – Michalik, Pardubice 2020, Black's rook escaped, but the resulting endgame looks terrible.

14.c4 ♘g6

Black has good prospects for counterplay. A correspondence game continued:

15.f4



15...f5! 16.♔h1 ♗f8 17.b3 ♕d7 18.♗c3 ♖ad8 19.♘g1 ♕c8 20.a4 ♗d6

With balanced play. Black has managed to prevent ♘g1-f3 by attacking the f4-pawn. White found nothing better than going back with the knight:

21.♘e2

Admitting that he had no advantage whatsoever in Shablinsky – Weyerstrass, corr. 2017.

13...♗c7

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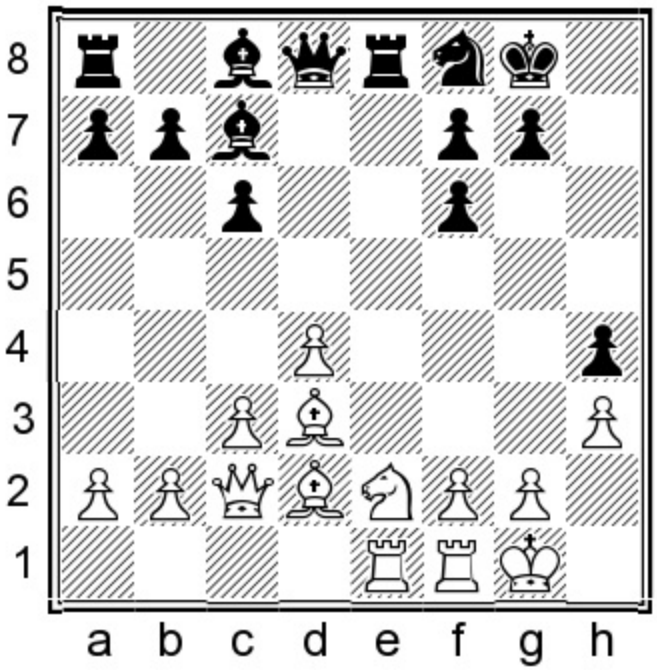

Black prepares a primitive mating threat with ...♕d6. We will not win the game that easily of course, but it's always useful to be able to create this threat at a moment's notice. White is not really threatening anything, so we can afford to spend a tempo in this way before developing the remaining pieces.

14.f4!?N

14.♔h1 was seen in Hracek – Adhiban, Batumi (ol) 2018. The idea to improve the knight with ♘g1-f3 is sensible, but Black should not experience any problems after something like: 14...g6!?N 15.♘g1 (15.f4 f5⇄) 15...♗e6 16.♘f3 ♕d7 Once again, h3 is a target!

14.b3 ♘e6 15.f4 ♕d6 16.♗h7† ♔f8

16...♔h8!? 17.♗e4 g6⇄ is another idea, intending ...♘g7.

17.♗e4 ♗d7

17...g6 is also decent.

18.♕d3 g6! 19.f5!?

Clearly this is risky, but without it Black plays ...f5 himself, with a fine position.

19...♕h2† 20.♔f2 ♘g5 21.♗xg5 fxg5 22.fxg6

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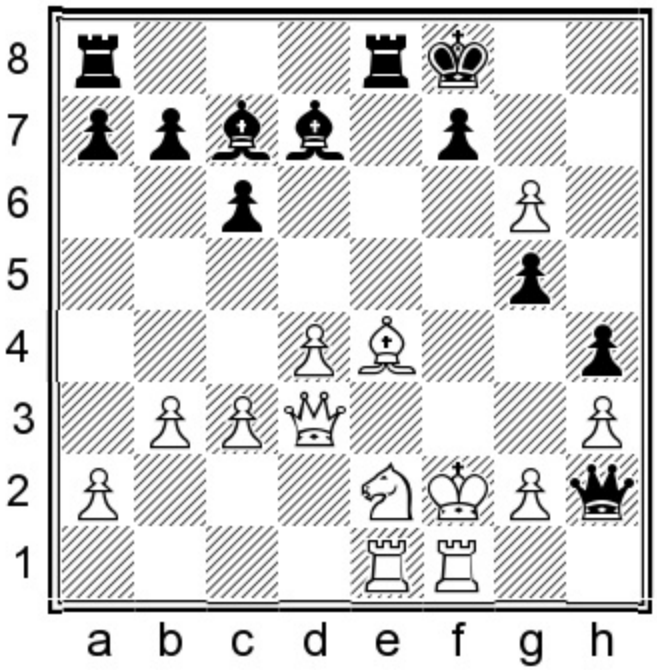

All this happened in Tekeyev – Esipenko, Yaroslavl 2018. Black has good chances after any sensible move, although the machine points out that the strongest continuation is:

22...f6!!N

Interested readers may delve into the details themselves to figure out what's going on here.

14...g6 15.f5

15.♔h1 f5 is fine for Black, whose knight has many nice squares to aim for on the kingside.

15...g5 16.g3!?

This ultra-aggressive try is suggested by Leela. The idea is:

16...hxg3 17.h4 ♘h7 18.♕d1

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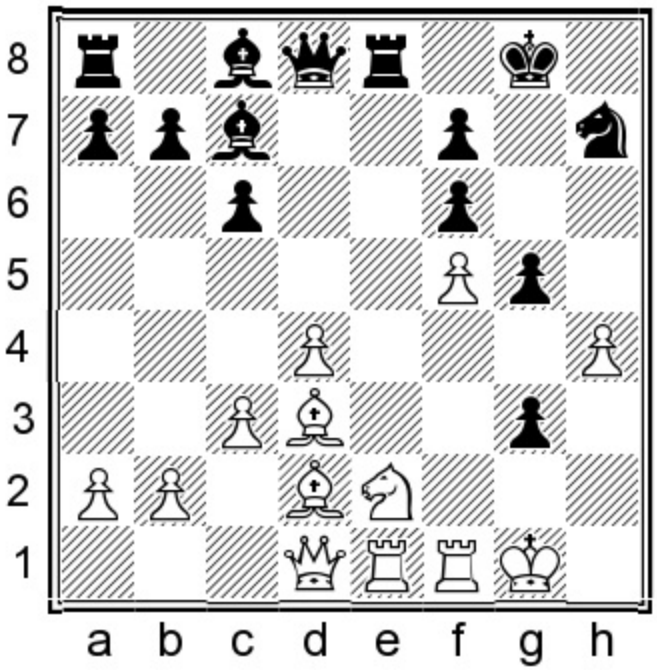


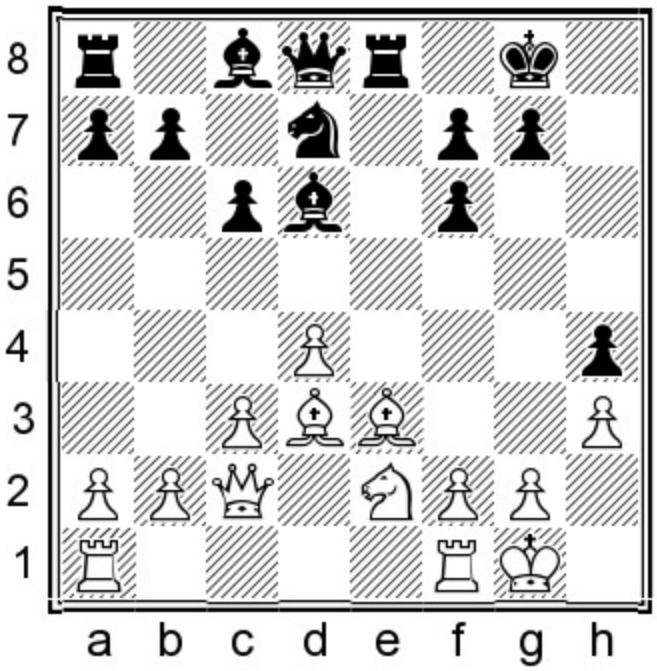
The queen is eyeing h5. L'Ami gives the impressive line:

18...♗d7 19.hxg5 fxg5 20.♘xg3 ♗xg3 21.♖xe8† ♕xe8 22.f6 g4 23.♕c2 ♘f8 24.♗c1

The game is heading for a draw after:

24...♕b8 25.♕d2 ♗h4 26.♕h6 ♕g3† 27.♔h1 ♕h3† 28.♔g1 ♕g3†=

B232) 12.♗e3



This move is recommended in *Kaufman's New Repertoire for Black and White*.

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12...♘f8

12...♘b6? to go to d5 is spoiled by: 13.c4!±

13.♖ad1

13.c4 transposes to 12.c4 above.

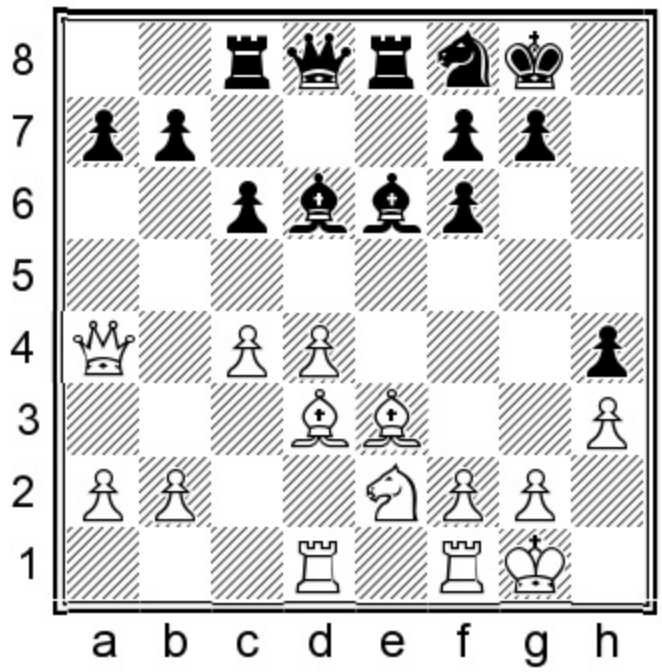
13...♗e6!

13...♗c7 has been the usual continuation and is the only move examined by Kaufman. White continues with 14.c4 and although I believe Black is okay, I find the text move easier.

13...♗d7!? was the choice of a young American prodigy. 14.♖fe1 ♕c8!? We saw in the note above how deadly a sacrifice on h3 can be, but here White is more alert to it. 15.♘f4 ♘e6 (15...♕c7!N 16.♘h5 ♕a5∞ is an improvement.) 16.♘h5 ♘g5 17.f4! ♘xh3† 18.gxh3 ♗xh3 In Huschenbeth – Xiong, Douglas 2019, White could have won with: 19.♕h2!N+–

14.c4 ♖c8 15.♕a4?!

Perhaps White should prefer 15.♘c3 or 15.♖fe1, although in both cases Black can be happy with his chances after 15...♗b8.



15...♘g6!N

15...g5?! worked well in Burke – Liang, Saint Louis 2019, but after 16.♕c2!N Black might regret the weakening of the light squares.

The text move leads to interesting play, where Black is definitely not worse. An important detail is that White cannot afford to get too greedy with:

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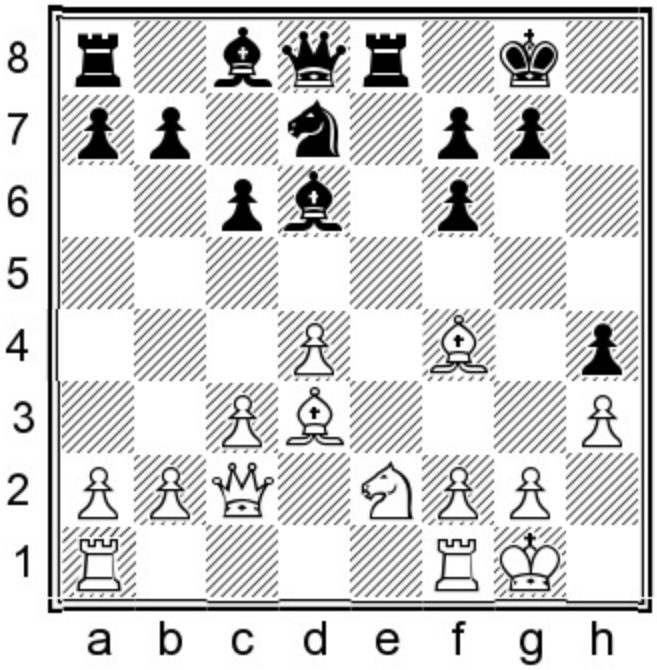
16.♕xa7? ♕d7!,

Black threatens to take on h3, and White's queen is much too far away.

B233) 12.♗f4



One concern Black may have when playing this system is that White will simply trade all the pieces off and win the pawn endgame with his extra pawn on the queenside. However, we see time and time again in these lines that Black does not have to fear exchanges, as long as there is at least one set of pieces left on the board. This revelation gives the entire 5...exf6 system a positional soundness which is far from obvious. Chess is deep!

12...♘f8

Black improves the knight and prepares to recapture on d6. The text move also makes a real threat of ...♖xe2.

As usual, the hasty 12...♖xe2? 13.♕xe2 ♗xf4 14.♕e4 wins for White, for example: 14...♗h6 15.♕h7† ♔f8 16.♖fe1+–

13.♕d2

I also checked:

13.♗xd6 ♕xd6 14.♖ae1

The simplifying 14.♕d2 ♗d7 15.♕f4 is discussed in Game 5 (Hacker – Halkias).

14.♖fe1 ♗d7 15.♖ad1 ♖e7 16.c4?! (16.♘c1=) 16...♖ae8 17.♖f1 f5∓ gave Black the initiative in Koutoukidis – Stoumbos, Agios Ioannis 2019.

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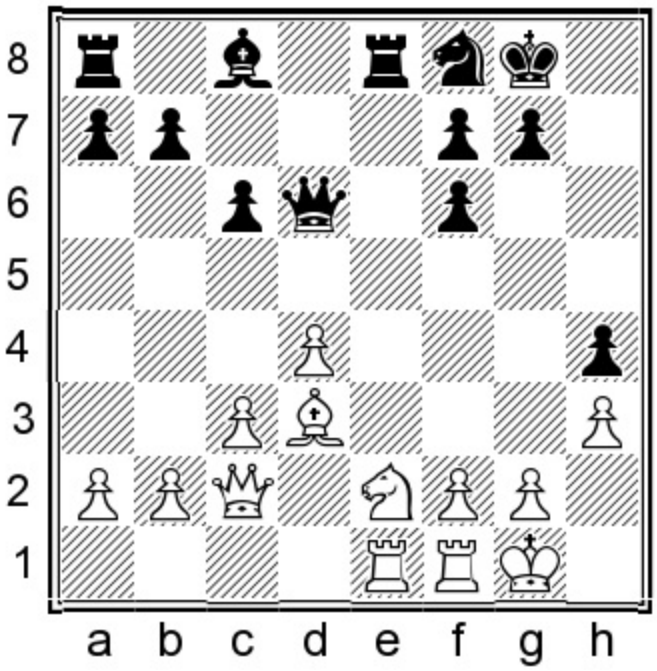


14...♗d7 15.♕d2 ♘e6!?

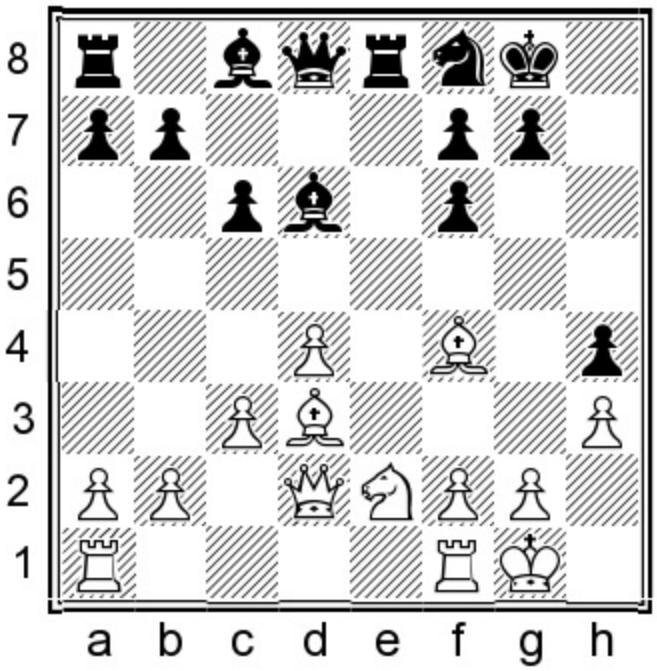
15...♘g6= is a good alternative.

16.♕e3

16.f4!? was worth considering.

16...♘c5 17.♕f4 ♕xf4 18.♘xf4 ♘xd3 19.♘xd3 ♗e6

Black was slightly better in the endgame due to having the stronger minor piece in Setyaki – Wen Yang, Ho Chi Minh City 2019.



The text move sees White protect the bishop and maintain the tension, but he is soon more or less forced to exchange on d6 anyway, as shown after:

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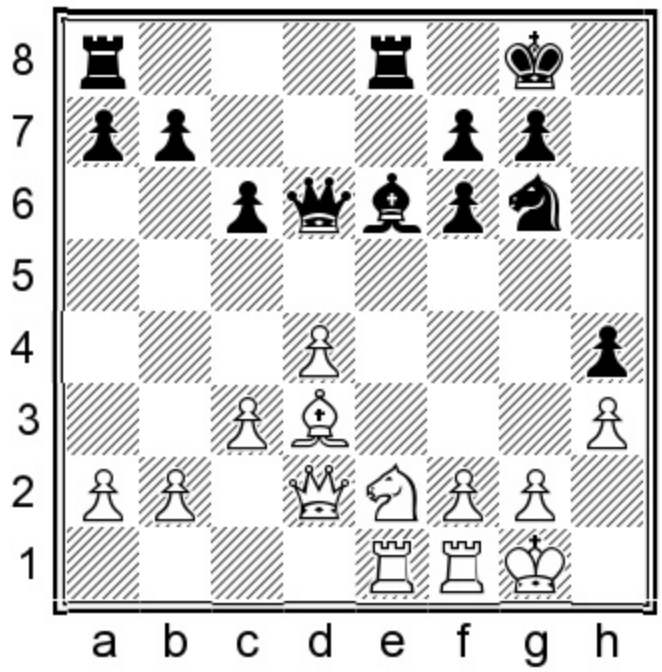
13...♘g6!

13...♘e6? is clumsy; 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6 was seen in Mihok – Bogner, Radenci 2019, and now 15.f4!N puts Black under pressure.

13...♕c7 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6 15.♖fe1 ♗d7 is solid though, and after the further 16.♕f4 ♕xf4 17.♘xf4 g6 18.♔f1 ♔g7 19.♖xe8 ♖xe8 20.♖e1 ♘e6 21.♘xe6† ♗xe6 22.a3 a5 23.b4 axb4 24.axb4 ♖a8∓ White still had to be careful to hold the endgame in Fitzsimons – Fernandez, Dublin 2019.

14.♗xd6 ♕xd6 15.♖ae1 ♗e6=



Black is fine, and he was only helped by the dubious exchange:

16.♗xg6?! fxg6 17.♘c1 g5∓

I. Popov – Artemiev, Moscow 2019.

GAME 5

Jonas Hacker – Stelios Halkias

Tegernsee 2018

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6† exf6 6.c3 ♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♕c2 ♖e8† 9.♘e2 h5 10.0-0 h4 11.h3 ♘d7 12.♗f4 ♘f8 13.♗xd6 ♕xd6 14.♕d2 ♗d7 15.♕f4 ♕xf4 16.♘xf4

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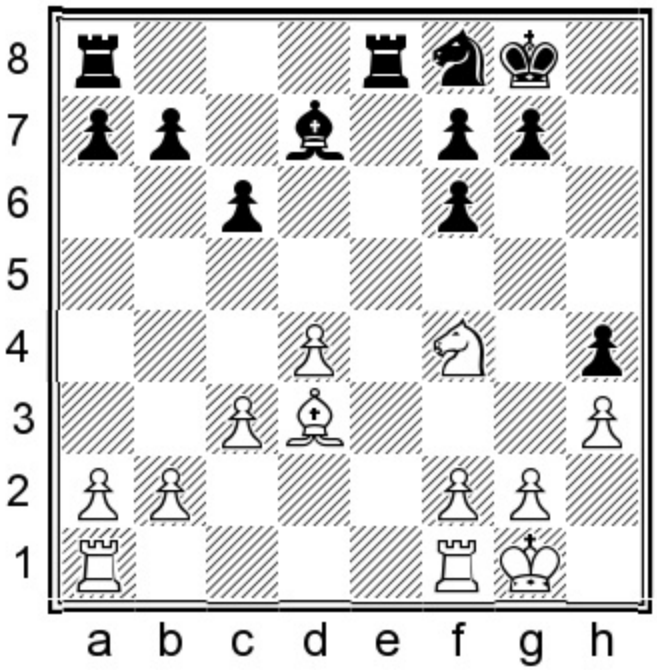

Who is better?

This is a natural question to ask, because it might reveal the truth about the whole ...♘f6 and ...exf6 line. Your initial judgement and understanding of general chess principles would probably lead you to answer White. But that is wrong! In fact Black is very comfortable and maybe even slightly better.

I can feel some of you have a hard time trying to believe me, so let me go a little deeper. The pawn structure favours White, you would claim. Yes, in a pawn ending White would have all the chances, but with pieces on the board it is different. The white pawns on the queenside look nice. However they are rather passive and potential targets. The point is that if they start moving then they will be weak. For instance, if White plays c3-c4 then both c4 and especially d4 are weak. If the pawns don't move then in the long run Black can most likely attack them anyway.

Black has good pieces. So does White, you might say. That may be partially true, but let's take the white knight as an example. It looks okay, but it isn't really doing much and the f4-square is hardly a stable outpost. If it gets pushed back to e2 then it would become really passive. If you are sitting at a real chess board – and why shouldn't you be? – then for fun, take the knight in your hand and drop it on c5. Then it would be a totally different story.

What about the bishops? Again, impressions can be deceptive. The white bishop looks excellent, but what does it actually do? Its main purpose seems to be guarding the e2-square, so that the black rook can't penetrate. The black bishop may appear passive on d7 but it actually has great prospects. At some point it will land on e6 and force White to weaken his queenside structure in some way. It also has a lot of potential on the kingside, where the important h4-pawn fixes one or more enemy pawns on light squares. Speaking of the kingside, Black will be able to advance his pawn majority without risk, as the 'spare' f-pawn will help to control important squares which would otherwise have been weakened. All in all, Black's position is objectively fine and I would argue that his position is the easier to play in a practical game.

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16...g6

Black prepares to step forwards with his king.

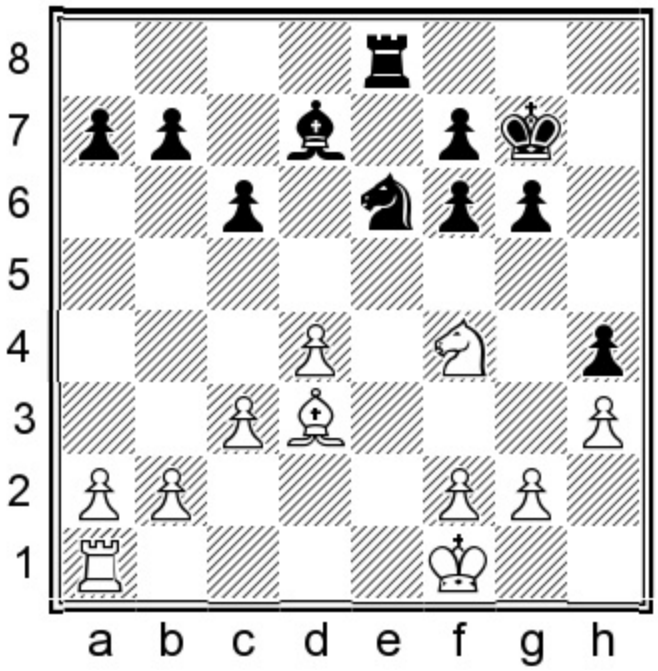
16...♘e6 17.♘xe6 ♗xe6= is fine, but if you are playing for a win then there is no need to simplify so soon.

16...a5!? is a tempting alternative though.

17.♖fe1 ♔g7 18.♖xe8

Being outrated by 200 points, White was evidently looking to simplify towards a draw. He could have played almost any other sensible move without affecting the general evaluation of the position, which remains as explained above.

18...♖xe8 19.♔f1 ♘e6!



20.♘e2

A strange decision.

It was more logical to keep exchanging pieces with 20.♘xe6† ♗xe6 when the game should of course be drawn, but one could keep playing for a long time. (20...fxe6!?= is also possible.)

20...a5

Black is slightly better.

21.♖d1 ♖d8 22.♗c2 ♗c8 23.♗b3 b6 24.♗c4

Interestingly, White refrains from the central break and rook trade.

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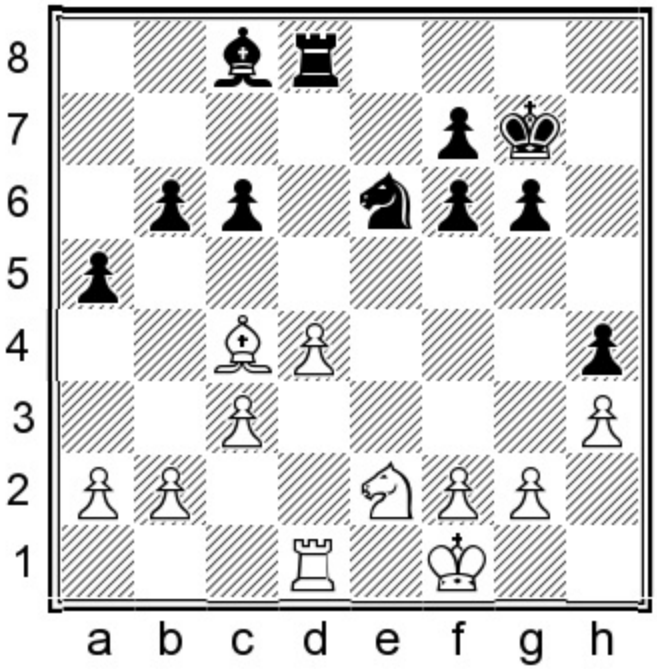
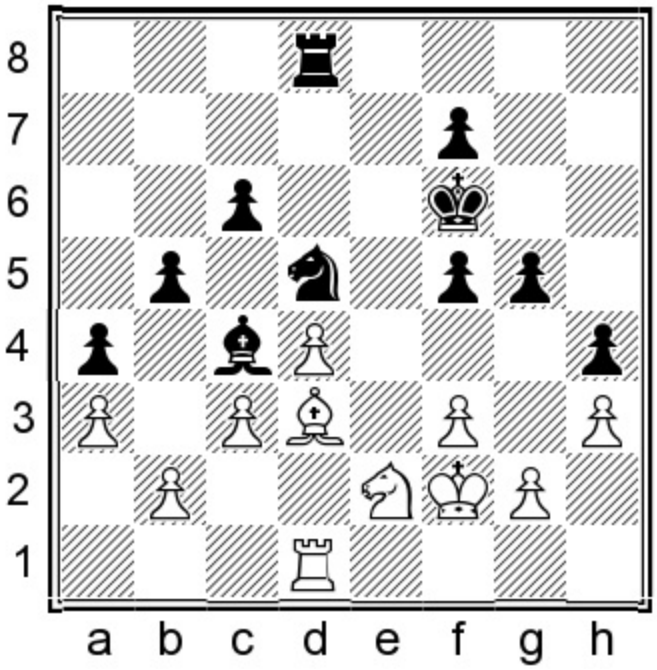
24.d5 cxd5 25.♖xd5 ♖xd5 26.♗xd5 and Black is still slightly better, but the position is more clarified.



24...b5 25.♗d3 a4 26.a3 f5

White has no counterplay, while Black is steadily improving his position and will be able to test the defence in various ways. For the time being he continues improving his pieces.

27.♗c2 ♔f6 28.f3 ♘c7 29.♔f2 ♗e6 30.♘f4 ♗c4 31.♗d3 g5 32.♘e2 ♘d5



Compare this position with the one at move 16, when the queens were exchanged, and it is clear which way the trend is going! Black is in complete control and it only remains to see where and how he will try to break through.

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33.♘c1

33.♗xc4 bxc4 34.♖d2 is not even close to a fortress, but it nonetheless looks like the most stubborn defence.

33...♖e8 34.♖d2 ♘f4 35.♗c2

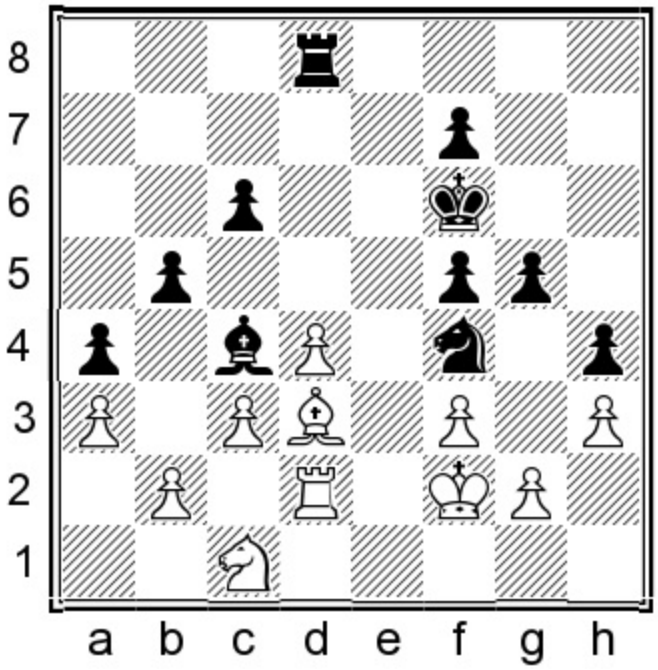
35.♗xc4 bxc4 leaves White with hardly any moves, while Black can prepare the ...g4 break.

35...♖d8!

The e-file was nice, but there were no points of entry. Now Black is flirting with the ...c5 break.

36.♗d3

It was probably better to wait instead of forcing the play.



36...c5! 37.♗xc4 bxc4 38.♔e1 cxd4 39.cxd4

39.♖xd4? ♖xd4 40.cxd4 ♘xg2† followed by ...♘f4, wins easily.

39...♖b8 40.♔f2 ♔e6 41.♔e3 ♔d5

White is almost completely paralysed.

42.♔f2 ♖b6 43.♔f1

43.♘e2 ♘d3† and b2 falls. 43.♔e3 ♖c6 44.♔f2 c3 breaks through.

43...c3! 44.bxc3 ♖b1 45.♖d1 ♔c4

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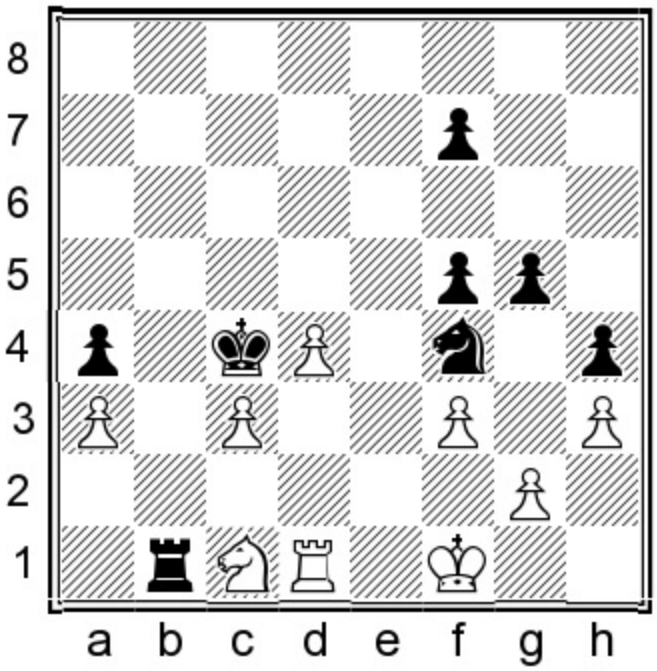

Total domination.

46.d5 ♘xd5 47.♔f2 ♖b2†

0–1

Conclusion

The critical test of the whole 5...exf6 idea is clearly 6.c3 ♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♕c2 ♖e8† 9.♘e2, but the relatively recent innovation of 9...h5! has turned everything upside down. After the natural 10.♗e3 and long castling, you would expect that the h5-pawn represents a severe weakening of the black king's position and that the pawn is vulnerable itself. On the contrary! The pawn hinders White from building a quick attack on the kingside and in the meantime Black slowly but surely advances on the other flank with a promising game. This is really a revolutionary discovery.

These days the theoretical debate has shifted towards 10.0-0. However, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, whenever White opts for short castling and a positional game, Black's position is hard to overrun. A complex strategic battle, with chances for both sides, is to be expected.

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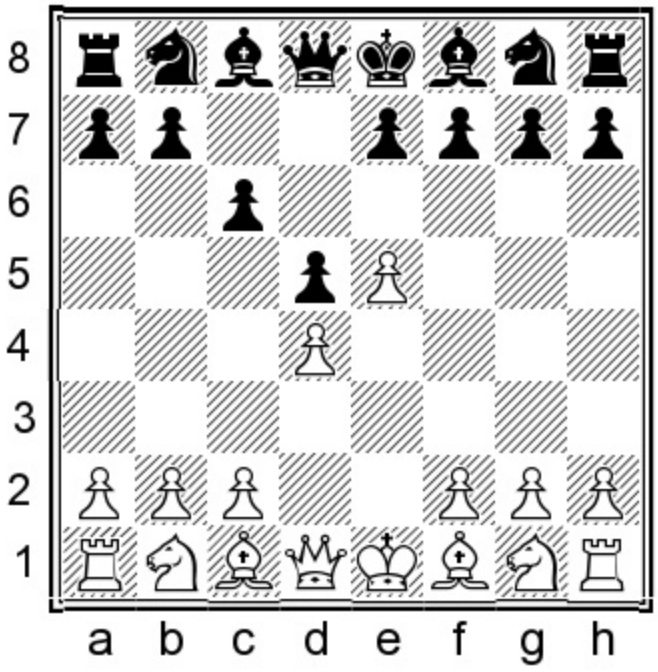
Advance Variation

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5



The Advance Variation is the most popular way to combat the Caro-Kann at the top level. White closes the centre and grabs space. He will then have almost unlimited possibilities to place his pawns and pieces in the desired fashion because Black's counterplay is just so slow. There is only one small annoyance in the otherwise beautiful picture. Black responds:

3...♗f5!

Solving all positional problems concerning that particular piece, which in many other openings is a constant worry for Black. On f5 it is wonderfully placed and, even though it is true that Black lacks space, he will be able to develop his other pieces to decent squares and eventually the counterplay against the white centre will come.

Some players are worried about the apparent passivity of Black's position and they instead go for the dynamic 3...c5!? which immediately seeks confrontation. It is a playable alternative, but in my opinion 3...♗f5 is both positionally sounder and more in the spirit of the opening. Compared to the French Defence for example, the Caro-Kann seems to be designed to make sure this bishop gets out, so let's get it on!

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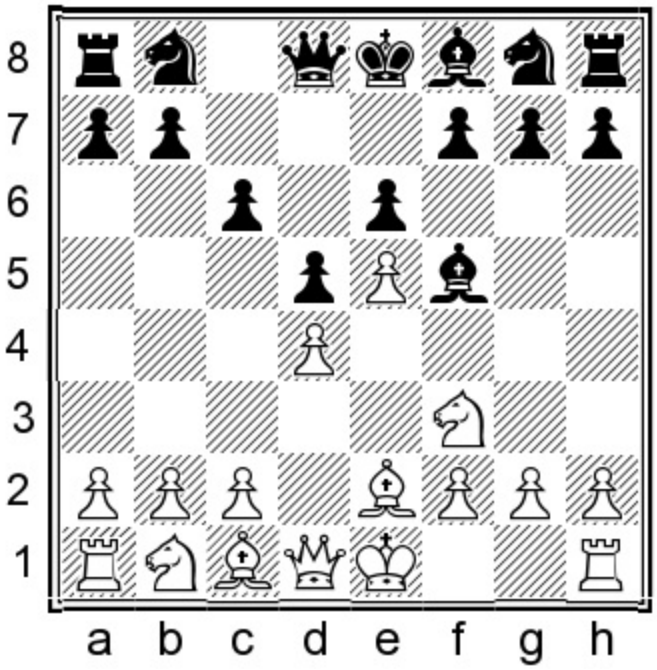
After 3.e5 ♗f5 there is a lot of material. By far the most critical set-up is the so-called Short System with:

4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2



Named after the British grandmaster and former World Championship challenger Nigel Short, who popularized the idea in a lot of his games, this system is still the choice of many of the world's top players. White stays flexible and intends to castle next. If Black tries to break with ...c5, White will often counter with c2-c4 and seize the initiative. Black has tried many different strategies and no clearly "best"set-up has been established. In this book I will recommend:

5...c5

Black attacks the base of the enemy pawn centre: a fundamental concept ever since Nimzowitsch's *My System* appeared almost a century ago. On the downside, playing ...c6 and then ...c5 within the first five moves costs an important tempo. This carries a certain risk, but the solidity of the black position is such that we can afford to neglect the development of the kingside, at least for now.

Black has many other interesting lines available. Karpov fancied postponing the central break for one move, and he often played 5...♘e7 6.0-0 c5. This is a respectable choice, but personally I prefer to strike at the centre immediately. It is the most principled choice, and if it works it must be good.

The flexible 5...♘e7 6.0-0 ♘d7 has been another popular choice. Black simply develops and sets out to prove that he can handle everything without a quick ...c5. The modern way to handle this position is to play ...h6, ...♕c7, ...g5!? and ...♗g7, when the king is relatively safe in the centre and Black can castle on either side when he feels like it, depending on what White has done in the meantime. Later Black can attack the enemy centre with ...c5 or more likely with ...f6. All very good, but I don't trust it completely. I believe that White's extra space matters and the pawn on g5 is a clear

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target.

6.♗e3

White can bolster his centre with 6.c3, as is common in the Advance French; or he can simply play 6.0-0. The critical move, however, is the active 6.♗e3, which flirts with taking on c5 as well as overprotecting the important d4-point. In *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* I recommended:

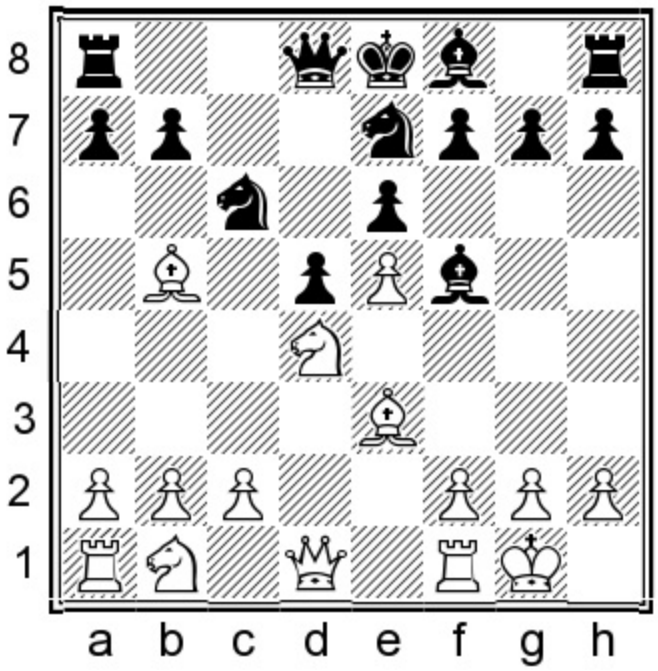
6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘e7

This is the old main line. However, in the past decade Black has been under a lot of pressure, especially after:

8.0-0

8.♘d2 and 8.c4 are not exactly a walk in the park either.

8...♘bc6 9.♗b5!



I believe that Black can hold his own in all these lines, but from a practical standpoint it is clear that they are difficult to play over the board and there are few winning chances against a well-prepared opponent.

Nevertheless, Black's position is objectively fully playable. For fans of my 2010 work, I can assure you that I have made a complete update of all the critical variations, primarily based on new correspondence games. If Black holds there, he will hold everywhere. However, I also recommend looking at a much more dynamic approach...

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 c5 6.♗e3 ♕b6!?

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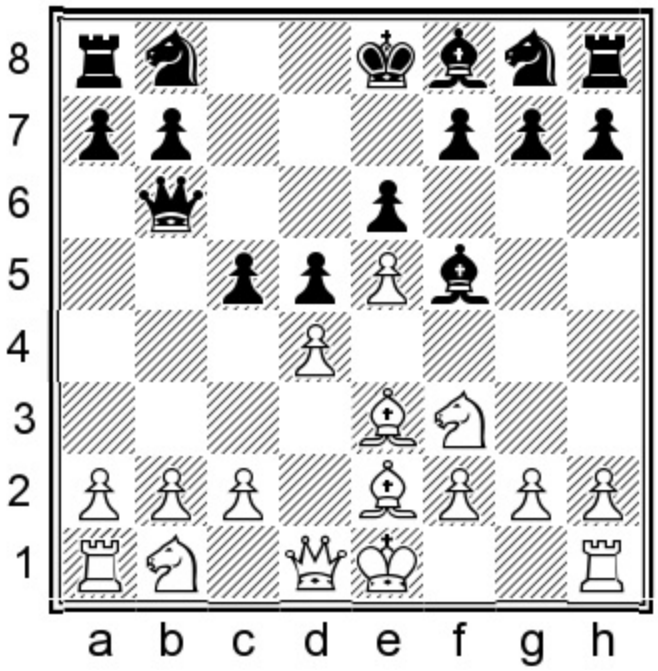

This is hardcore!

In the above-mentioned lines after 6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘e7 White has a risk-free pull, based on his better development and safer king. Black is solid and can expect to neutralize White's positional pressure after a little suffering, but it is hard to play for more than that against an opponent who knows what they are doing.

Instead of simplifying, the text move ramps up the tension by attacking b2. This is also a psychologically important moment, as White is threatened and all three results are possible. The play is likely to become sharp, which means you will have to memorize some complicated lines – but if you make the effort, your reward will be a great counterattacking weapon which practically guarantees a complicated fight.

The next part of our 3.e5 ♗f5 coverage will deal with various positional set-ups, such as:

4.h4 h5 5.♗d3

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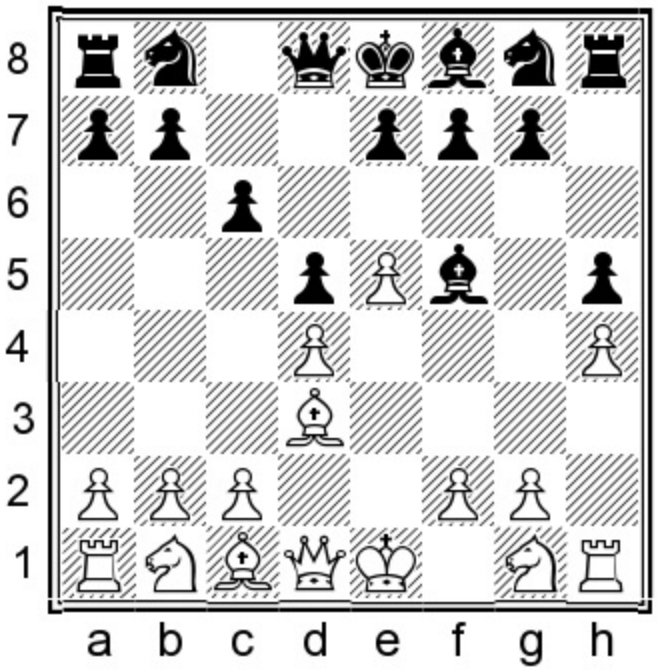
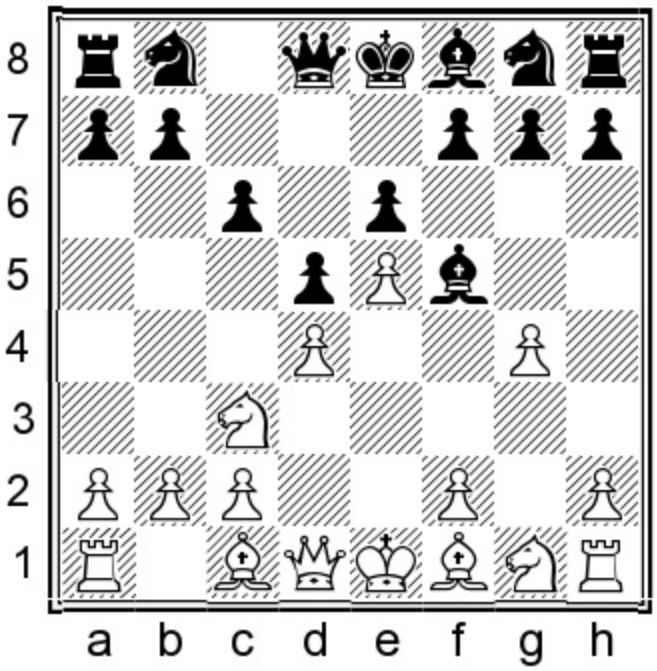


White develops and hopes his space advantage will tell in the long run. 4.♘d2 and 4.c3 are other tries covered in this chapter.

The final part deals with White's sharpest attempts to provoke a direct confrontation. Options such as 4.c4 and 4.h4 h5 5.c4 will be given due consideration. The most dangerous option in this chapter is:

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘c3 e6 5.g4



This uncompromising attempt to smash through the barriers is named after the brilliant attacking player Alexei Shirov. However, Black has an extremely sound position which cannot be broken so easily. The complications can be hair-raising, but White is burning his bridges on the way, so if Black

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survives the first wave of the attack then he will have good chances to strike back and take the full point.

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Chapter 3

Short System

Variation Index

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 c5

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B) 6.c3 ♘c6 7.0-0 87

B1) 7...cxd4 88

***Game 6* – Nayhebaver – Schandorff 90**

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C21) 9.♘c3 100

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C4) 8.0-0! ♘bc6 9.♗b5! a6 10.♗xc6† bxc6 11.c4 ♕d7 107

C41) 12.cxd5 108

C42) 12.♘c3 dxc4 109

C421) 13.♘xf5 109

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"This is Ground Control to Major Tom
You've really made the grade
And the papers want to know whose shirts you wear
Now it's time to leave the capsule if you dare"

David Bowie – Space Oddity

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 c5

We will analyse **A)** 6.0-0 and **B)** 6.c3, before concentrating on the big main line of **C)** 6.♗e3.

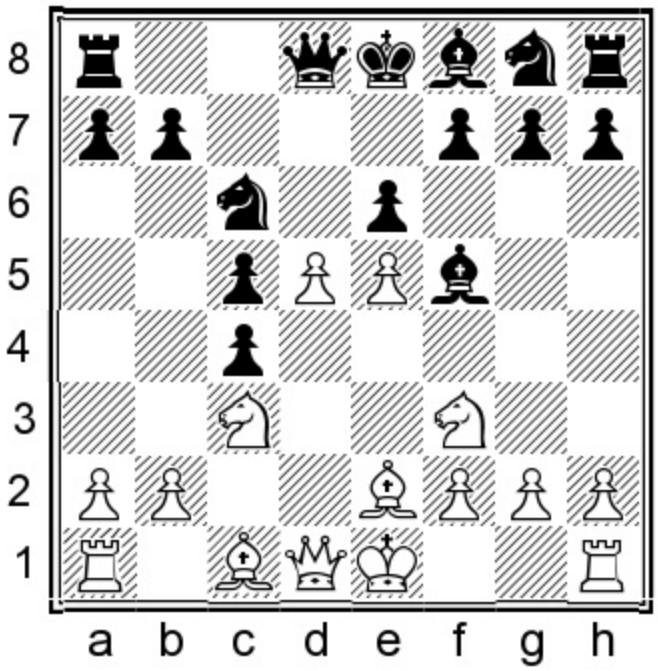
6.c4

This is a thematic break. Here it is a little premature though, and doesn't pose Black any difficulties.

6...dxc4 7.♘c3

7.♗xc4 ♘c6 8.♗e3 cxd4 9.♘xd4 can be met by 9...♗b4† 10.♘c3 ♘ge7 and Black is fine.

7...♘c6 8.d5



This is thematic, but White is not ready for such active, forcing operations.

8...exd5 9.♘xd5 ♘ge7! 10.♗xc4 ♗e4!

An instructive move. The light-squared bishop plays a vital role in many of these variations.

Black is much better already, for example:

11.♘xe7 ♕xd1† 12.♔xd1 ♗xe7∓ 13.♖e1?! 0-0-0† 14.♔e2

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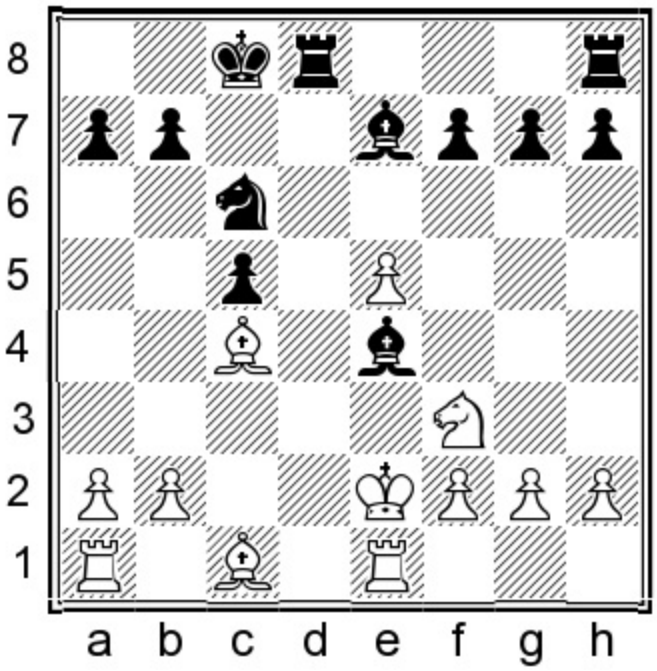


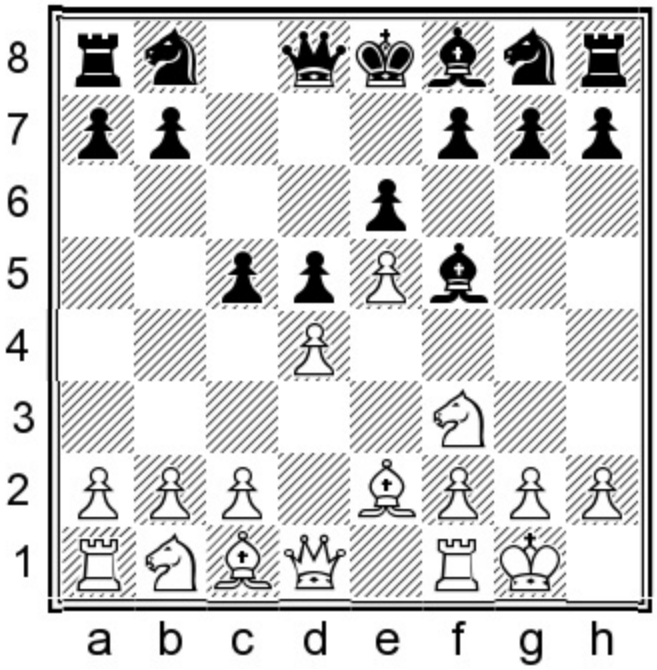
14...♗xf3†

14...b5!N 15.♗xf7 ♗d3† 16.♔e3 ♖hf8 is suggested by the computer. Play may continue 17.♗e6† ♔c7 18.a3 c4–+ with the deadly threat of ...♗c5†.

15.♔xf3 ♘d4† 16.♔g3 ♘c2∓

Black won material in Matinian – Khairullin, Khanty-Mansiysk 2013.

A) 6.0-0



It is natural to get the king to safety.

6...♘c6

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White has to decide how to meet the pressure against his centre. The only independent option is:

7.c4

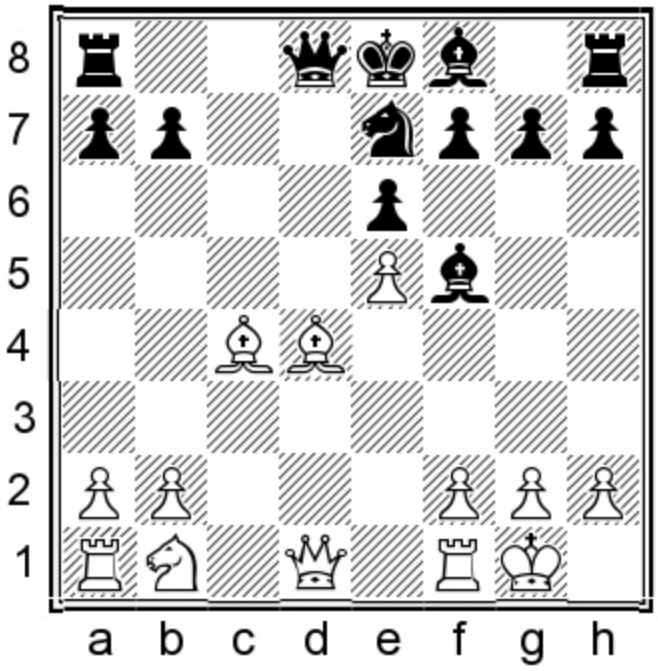
But once again Black is prepared to face it.
The more popular 7.♗e3 and 7.c3 transpose to other variations.

7...dxc4 8.♗e3

After 8.♗xc4 cxd4 9.♗b5 ♗c5 Black was at least equal in Hauge – A. Zhigalko, Warsaw 2013.

8...cxd4 9.♘xd4 ♘xd4 10.♗xd4 ♘e7 11.♗xc4

11.♕a4† ♘c6 12.♖d1 is nothing for White after 12...♗d3!= as seen in Zubarev – Sumets, Metz 2012. Still, this may have been his best bet, as the text move gives Black a pleasant choice.



11...a6!∓

Black has achieved excellent results with this simple move, which prevents ♗b5 and intends ...♘c6 next.

11...♘c6!? 12.♗b5 ♗e7 13.♗xc6† bxc6 14.♕a4 0-0 is also fine, and Black can look for ways to complicate the play. For instance, 15.♖d1 c5!?⇄ was a nice idea seen in Radjabov – Seirawan, Berlin (rapid) 2015, and if 16.♗xc5 ♗xc5 17.♖xd8 ♖axd8 Black has more than sufficient compensation for the queen, due to his two powerful bishops and the possibility to penetrate with the rook on the d-file.

B) 6.c3

This is a sound move which secures the centre.

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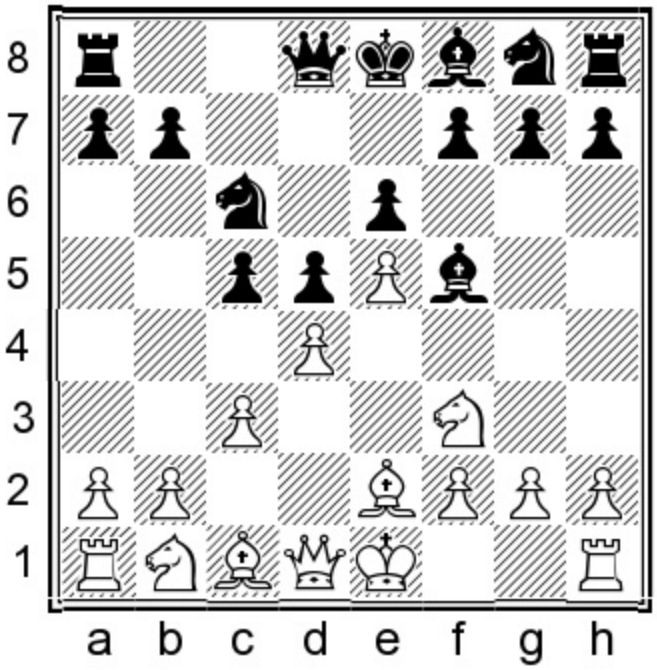
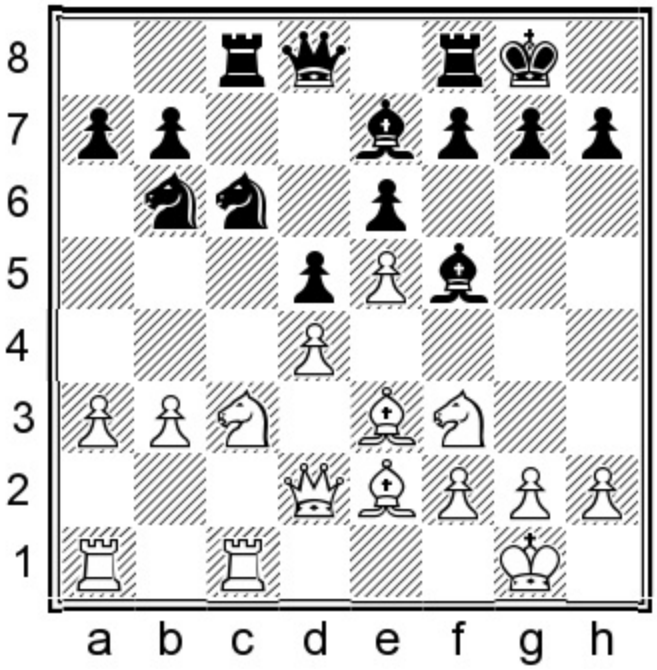
6...♘c6



7.0-0

7.a3 is a typical move in the Advance French, and here too it makes sense to take control over the b4-square. Black can do a lot of things, but simple and instructive is: 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 ♘ge7 9.0-0 ♘c8! Black uses the c8-square in exemplary fashion and shows that there is enough room to get the pieces out in a harmonious way. A top women's game went: 10.♘c3 ♗e7 11.♗e3 ♘b6 12.b3 0-0 13.♕d2 ♖c8 14.♖fc1



Gaponenko – Goryachkina, St Petersburg 2018. Here I would like to propose: 14...♘a5!?N 15.♕b2 a6= Black can improve her position with ...h6 and then think about ...♖c7 to double on the c-file.

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After the text move we will analyse **B1)** 7...cxd4, which is a perfectly respectable move. Then I will show you why I believe **B2)** 7...♗g6! to be slightly more precise.

Black can also consider 7...♗g4!? in order to exert extra pressure against d4. To be honest, I get the feeling that White should be slightly better somehow, but it is not easy to prove anything for him. The analytical details are not particularly relevant, as I am analysing two options already. However, the fact that Black can play a slightly suboptimal move without having to suffer for it shows that White's c2-c3 set-ups are generally not too threatening – unlike the 6.♗e3 main line, where White develops more quickly and keeps the option of c2-c4.

B1) 7...cxd4 8.♘xd4!

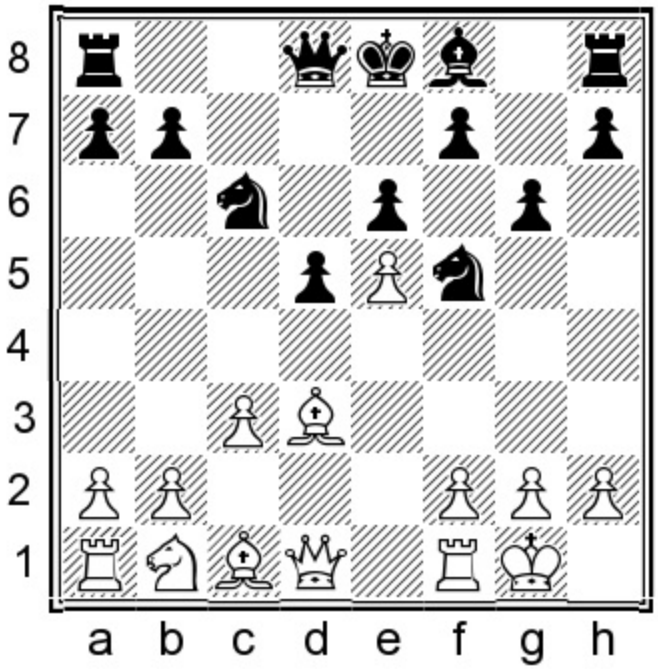
8.cxd4 ♘ge7 9.a3 ♘c8! is nothing special for White, as has already been established in the note on 6.a3.

8...♘ge7

8...♘xd4 9.cxd4 ♘e7 is solid, although White's extra space counts for something; I tried 8...♗g6!? in a recent game, preserving the bishop at the cost of a tempo. See Game 6.

9.♘xf5 ♘xf5 10.♗d3 g6

White has the bishop pair and the one on d3 is especially good. However, it is currently blocked by the knight on f5 which is secured by the g6-pawn, meaning that ♗xf5 is rarely an attractive option. Furthermore, White has to keep an eye out for the e5-pawn.



11.♕e2

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11.♖e1 ♗g7 12.f4 allows 12...d4!? with good counterplay. After 13.♕f3 0-0 14.♘d2 as in S. Zhigalko – Rozum, Kocaeli 2017, Black can already fight for the initiative with: 14...f6!N 15.exf6 ♗xf6⇄

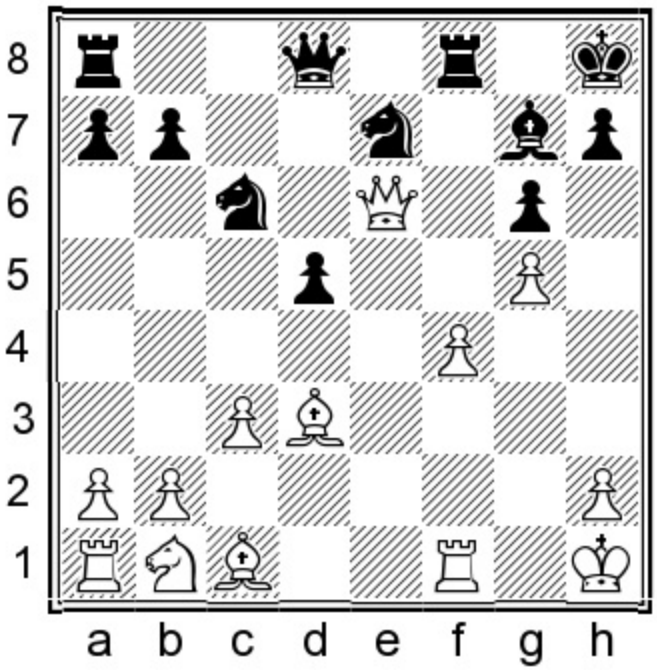
11.♗xf5!? gxf5 12.♗e3 of course is possible. Black can probably take the bait with 12...♘xe5!? (although developing moves such as 12...♕h4 and 12...♖g8 are also fine) 13.♗d4 f6 and get away with it.

11...♗g7 12.f4 0-0 13.♘d2

Planning ♘f3 with a harmonious position.

The time is still not quite right for active operations:
13.♔h1 f6!?

A key move in this line, but we must anticipate a forcing sequence:
14.g4 ♘fe7 15.exf6 ♖xf6 16.g5 ♖f8 17.♕xe6† ♔h8∓



White has won a pawn but the price was high, positionally speaking. Black's position has proven fine in correspondence praxis, for instance:
18.♕h3

18.♘d2 d4! 19.♕h3 ♘f5 20.♘e4 dxc3 21.bxc3 ♘b4! 22.♘f6! ♗xf6 23.♗xf5 ♕d5† 24.♕f3 ♕xf5 25.gxf6 ♘d5⇄ was agreed drawn a few moves later in Schroeder – Holroyd, corr. 2015.
18...d4! 19.c4 ♘f5 20.♗d2 ♕c8! 21.♖f3 a5 22.♘a3 ♘b4 23.♗xb4 axb4 24.♘c2

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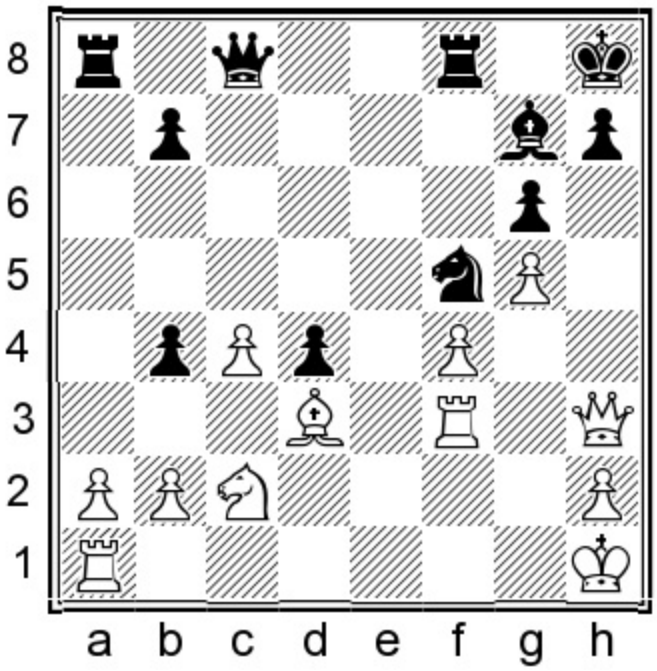


24...♕c5

Black has good compensation for the pawn.

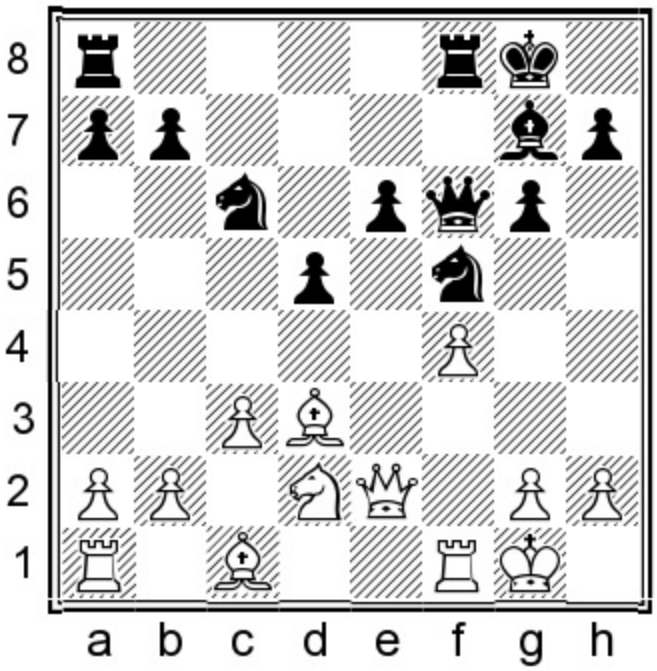
Black can also sacrifice another pawn with 24...b5!?N 25.cxb5 b3! 26.♘a3 bxa2 27.♖xa2 ♕c1† 28.♖f1 ♕e3 with good compensation. For instance, 29.♕xe3 dxe3 30.b6 ♘d6 31.♖fa1 ♖ab8 and Black gradually equalizes.

Another correspondence game quickly ended in a draw after a repetition of moves:

25.b3 ♖fe8 26.♕f1 ♘e3 27.♕h3 ♘f5 28.♕f1

½–½ Kogler – Holroyd, corr. 2017.

13...f6 14.exf6 ♕xf6



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15.♘f3

The most natural.

15.♘b3 ♖ae8 16.♗d2 e5 (Black could also consider 16...♕d8!? first) 17.♗xf5 ♕xf5 18.fxe5 was seen in Malakhov – F. Berkes, Khanty-Mansiysk (ol) 2010, when 18...♖xe5N 19.♕b5 ♕d7⇄ would have been most logical.

15...♖ae8

Black prepares the ...e5 break.

16.♗b5

So White tries to make it hard for him to achieve!

16.♗d2 ♕d8!? and Black is ready for ...e5 next.

16.♔h1 a6 17.♗d2 e5 18.fxe5 ♘xe5 19.♘xe5 ♖xe5⇄ led to balanced play in Lukasiewicz – Malinowski, corr. 2017.

Another example continued: 16.♗c2 ♕d8 17.♕d3 e5 18.♗b3 ♘fd4! This little tactical shot saves the day. 19.♘xd4 (19.cxd4 e4) 19...exd4 20.g3 ♘a5!? 21.♗d1 ♕b6 was another level game which was subsequently drawn in Zeghachov – Rahde, corr. 2019.

16...♕d8!

Black retreats and regroups, but that doesn't mean that he has given up on his main plan of getting ...e5 in.

17.♔h1

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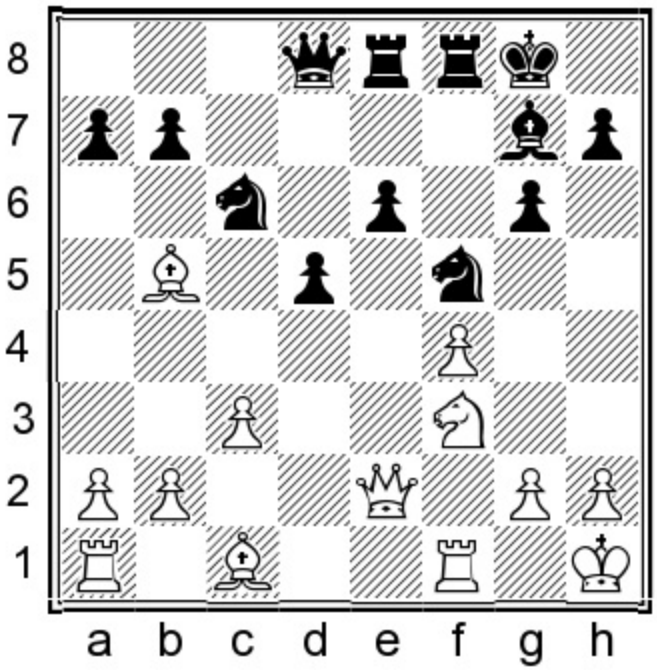


17...♕c7!?N

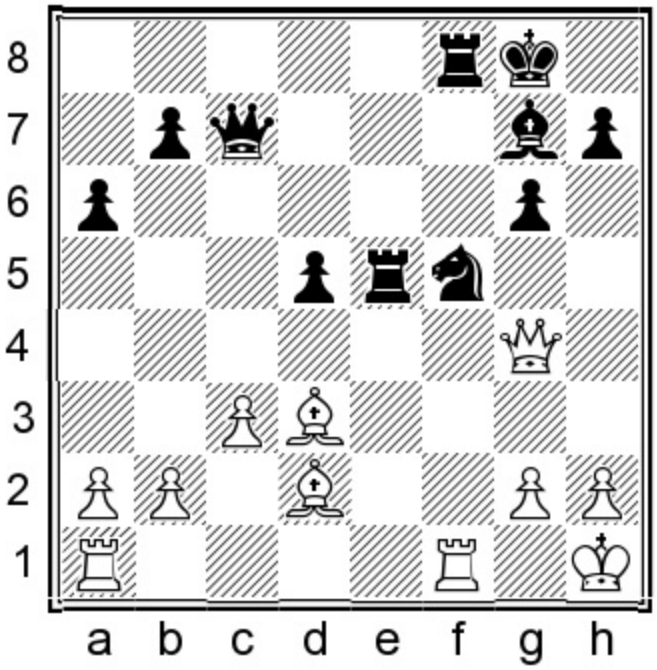
17...♕b6 18.♗a4 ♖e7 soon led to a draw in S. Zhigalko – Solak, Kigali 2017, but White missed a good opportunity to fight for the advantage: 19.g4!N 19...♘d6 20.♗e3 ♕c7 21.♖ae1±

The text move avoids having the queen driven back with tempo. A sample line could be:

18.♗d2 a6 19.♗d3

19.♗a4 b5 also gives Black adequate play.

19...e5! 20.♘xe5 ♘xe5 21.fxe5 ♖xe5 22.♕g4



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22...♘e3

22...♕b6!? also looks fine.

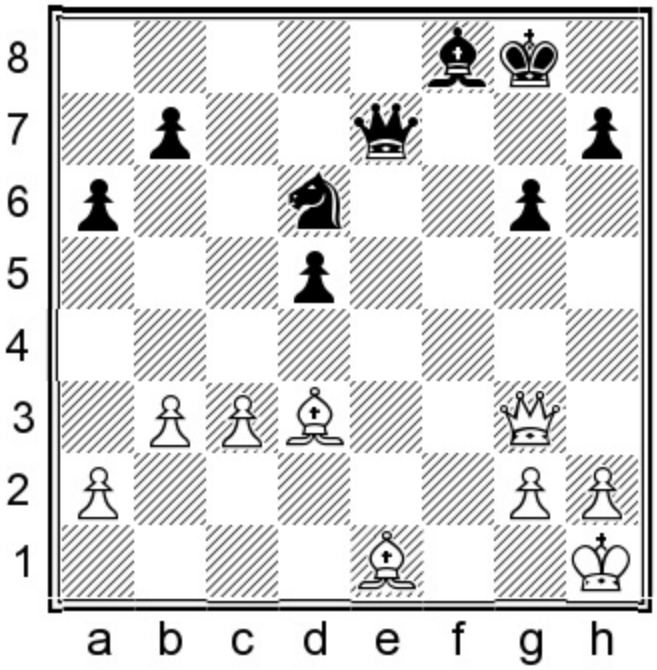
23.♖xf8† ♗xf8 24.♕g3

24.♗xe3 ♖xe3=

24...♕e7 25.♖e1 ♘c4

Black easily escapes the pin.

26.b3 ♖xe1† 27.♗xe1 ♘d6⇄



White still has the bishop pair, but the e4-outpost should be enough to keep the balance.

GAME 6

Martin Nayhebaver – Lars Schandorff

Batumi 2019

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 c5 6.0-0 ♘c6 7.c3 cxd4

7...♗g6! is a slightly more accurate version of the idea seen in the game; this will be analysed next.

8.♘xd4 ♗g6!?

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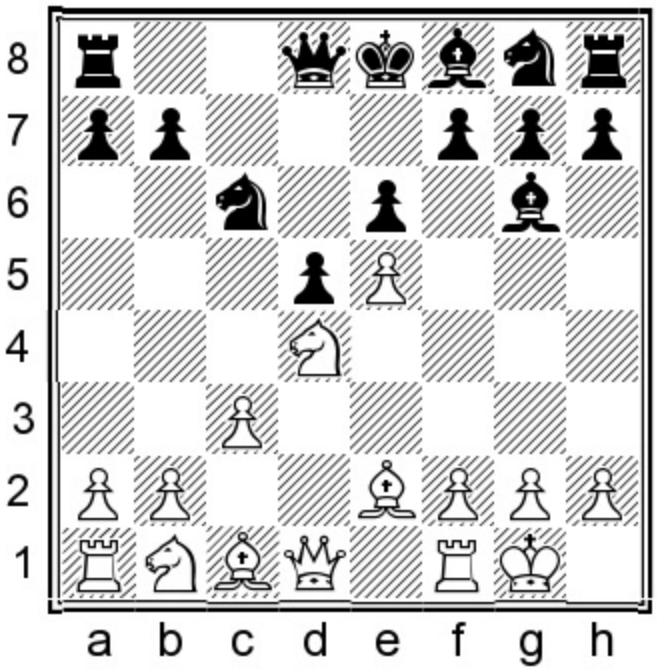
The most ambitious choice, investing a tempo to safeguard the strong Caro-Kann bishop.

8...♘ge7 is the main move.



9.c4!?

A thematic move in the Short Variation. Here White has lost a tempo by playing c2-c3 first, but it is not so significant because Black has spent his 'free' tempo moving his bishop for a second time.

9.♘xc6 bxc6 10.♘d2 was a natural way to proceed, when Black has a choice: 10...♕c7 (or 10...♗c5 11.b4 ♗b6 12.a4 ♘e7 13.♘f3 a5 with a balanced game) 11.♘f3 ♘e7 12.♕a4 ♗h5 White has no real choice but to commit to 13.g4!? if he wants to prove anything, and the position after 13...♗g6 14.♘d4 h5⇄ is hard to judge.

9...dxc4

9...♗c5 was a good alternative, but I decided to simplify.

10.♘xc6 ♕xd1 11.♖xd1 bxc6 12.♗xc4 ♗c5!

A precise move.

The natural 12...♘e7 to get to d5 proves to be too slow: 13.♘c3 ♘d5 14.♘xd5! exd5 (14...cxd5?! proves worse after: 15.♗b5† ♔d8 [or 15...♔e7 16.♗f4±] 16.♗g5† ♗e7 17.♗d2! ♗c5 18.♖ac1±) 15.♗b3 Threatening ♗a4. Black has to try something like 15...0-0-0 but it looks highly suspicious.

13.♘c3 ♘e7

Black slowly but surely gets his pieces out.

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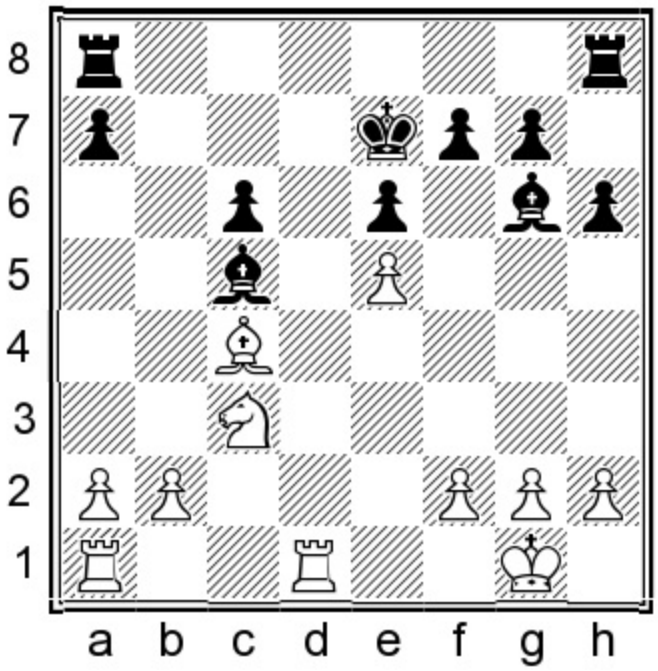
14.♗g5

An important detail is that 14.♘a4? is met by 14...♗c2! when White must give up the exchange for questionable compensation.

14.b3 followed by ♗b2 makes a lot of sense; in that case, the game would be balanced.

14...h6 15.♗xe7 ♔xe7



Black has solved all his problems and already has the more pleasant game. His king is well centralized and the e5-pawn is a potential weakness. I could mention the bishop pair as well, but since White makes sure to eliminate it, it is not that relevant!

16.♘a4 ♗b4 17.♗d3

White must simplify.

17.a3 ♗a5 18.b4 ♗c7∓

17...♗xd3 18.♖xd3 ♖hd8 19.♖b3

After 19.♖ad1 ♖d5! the rook finds an ideal protected spot.

19...♖d4 20.a3

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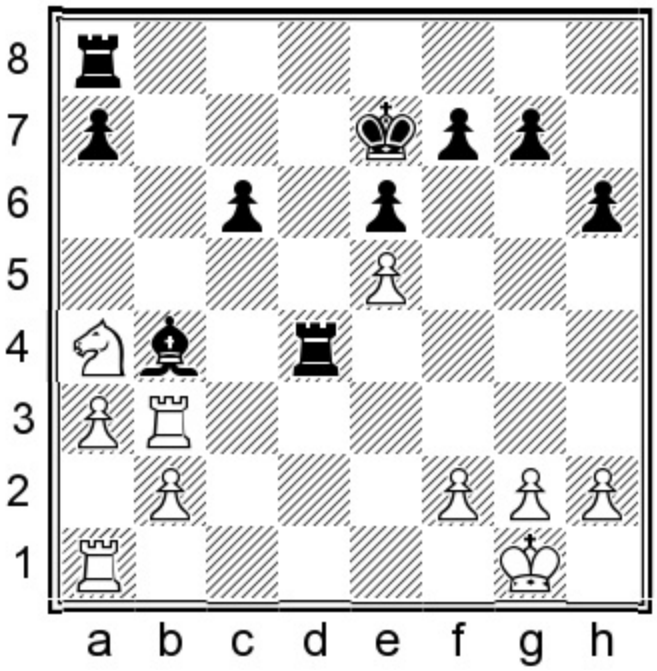

20...♖ad8!

By threatening a back-rank mate, Black wins a crucial tempo. We now liquidate to an interesting rook ending, more or less by force.

21.g3 ♗a5 22.♖b7† ♖8d7 23.♖xd7† ♔xd7 24.♘c5† ♔c7 25.♘b3 ♖d5 26.♘xa5 ♖xa5 27.♖e1 ♖d5

Black has good winning chances. His rook is perfectly placed and his active king can head for b3.

28.♖e4 c5 29.♖a4 ♔b6 30.♖f4 ♖d7 31.h4

White is on the look-out for counterplay with h4-h5 and ♖g4.

He could also have tried to simplify further with 31.b4 when the white position should be defensible, although Black can keep trying.

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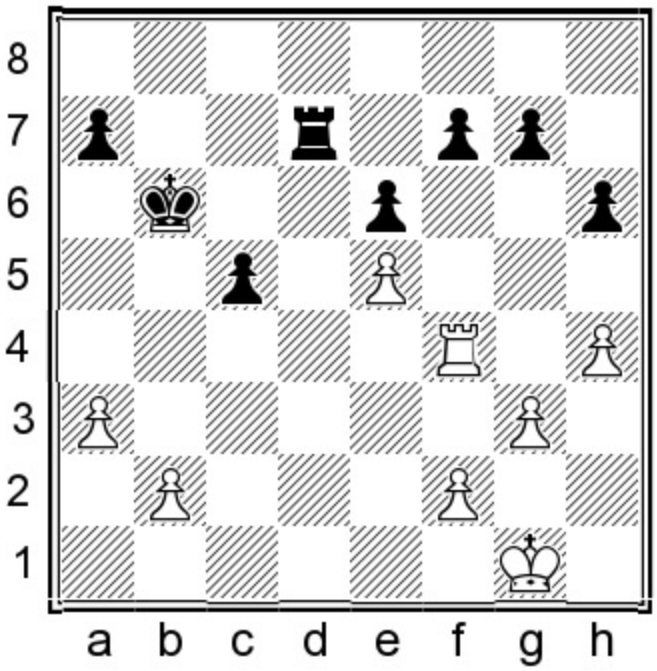


31...g6

Playing safe.

31...h5 32.g4 hxg4 33.h5! is a trick which I saw.

31...♔c6 32.h5 ♔d5 33.♖g4 c4! 34.♖xg7 ♖b7 35.g4 ♖xb2 36.♖xf7 gives Black winning chances as well, but this was hard to judge with little time left on the clock.

32.h5

Again 32.b4 was possible.

32...gxh5 33.♔g2?

Too slow.

Also 33.♖f6? c4 34.♖xh6 ♔c5 35.♖xh5 ♖b7 was hopeless.

33.b4! was absolutely necessary; after for instance 33...♖c7 34.bxc5† ♔xc5 White has good drawing chances.

33...a5! 34.♔h3 ♔c6 35.♔h4 ♖b7 36.♔xh5 ♔d5

A little too cautious.

36...♖xb2! 37.♖xf7 c4 is more convincing.

37.♔xh6 ♔xe5 38.♖a4?

38.♖c4 was the last chance to put up some resistance, although 38...♔d5 39.♖c2 ♖b3 40.♔g7 ♖f3

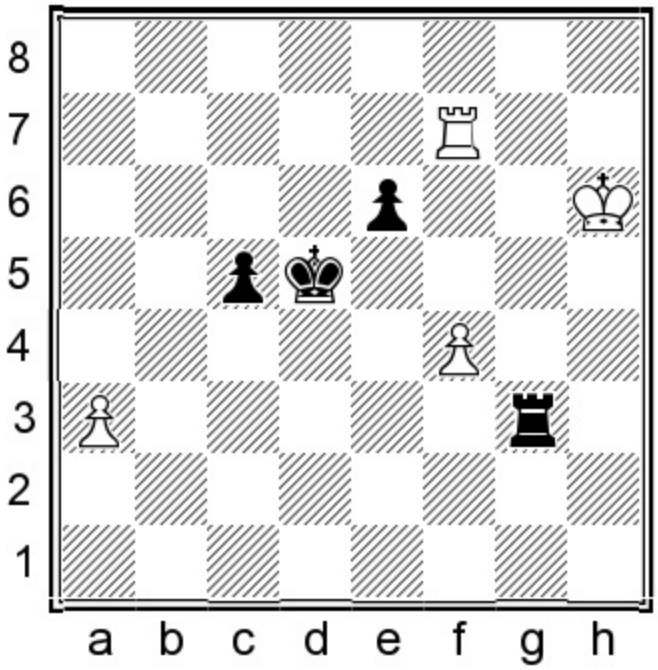
is still unpleasant for White.

38...♖xb2

Now the c-pawn is just too strong.

39.f4† ♔d5 40.♖xa5 ♖g2 41.♖a7 ♖xg3 42.♖xf7

42.a4 f5 changes nothing.



42...♖xa3 43.♔g5 ♖e3

Protecting e6 and preparing to run with the c-pawn.

44.♖f8 c4 45.♖d8† ♔c5 46.♖e8 ♔d4 47.♖d8† ♔c3

0–1

B2) 7...♗g6!

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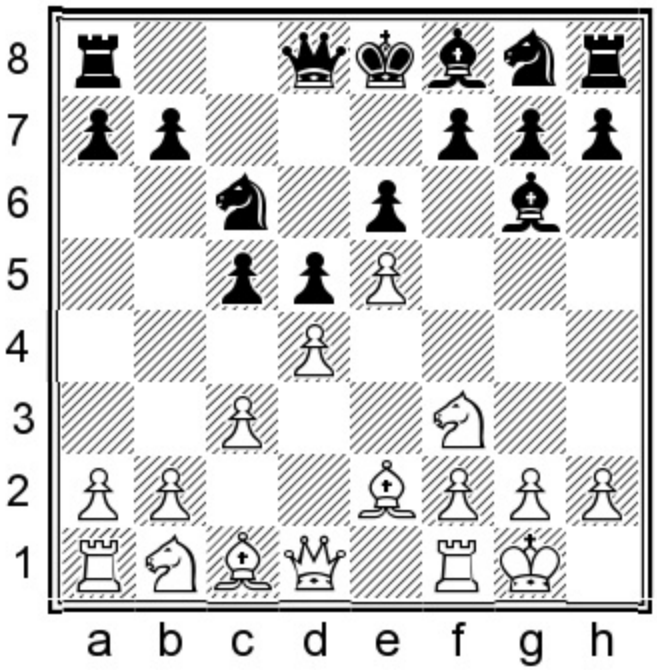

This flexible little move has become increasingly fashionable. Black drops the bishop out of harm's way so that it will not be attacked after the ♘xd4 recapture, while vacating the f5-square for the knight.

8.♗e3

8.a3 is a typical move which should be met in the usual fashion with 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 ♘ge7, with a split:

a) 10.♘h4? ♕b6 is a little embarrassing for White.

b) 10.♘c3 ♘c8

We are already familiar with this regrouping.

11.♗e3 ♘b6 12.b3

12.♖c1 ♗e7 13.b4 0-0 14.♘e1 a5 15.b5 ♘b8 16.♕b3 a4 17.♕a2 ♘8d7∓ was good for Black in Shevchenko – Shimanov, Minsk 2017.

12...♗e7 13.♘e1 ♖c8 14.♕d2 0-0 15.♘d3 ♘d7 16.♖fd1 ♘a5 17.♕b2 ♕b6 18.♖db1

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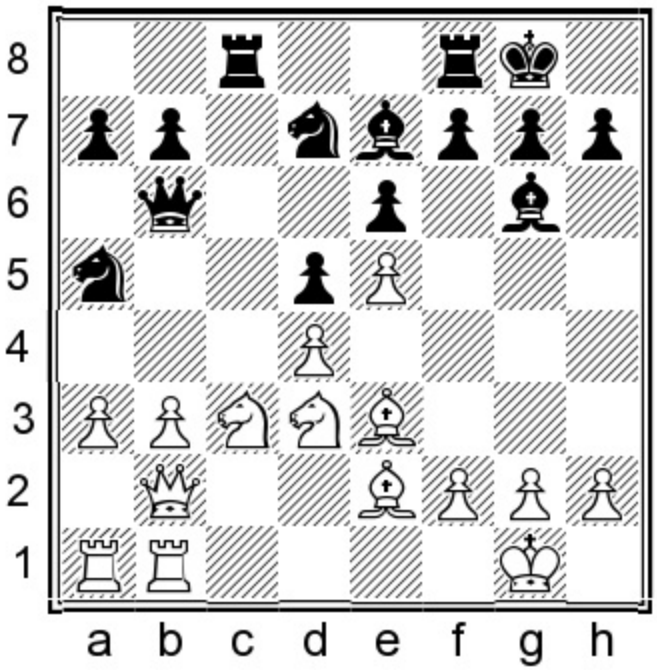


This position was reached in Kryvoruchko – Prohaszka, Gjakova 2016. I suggest:

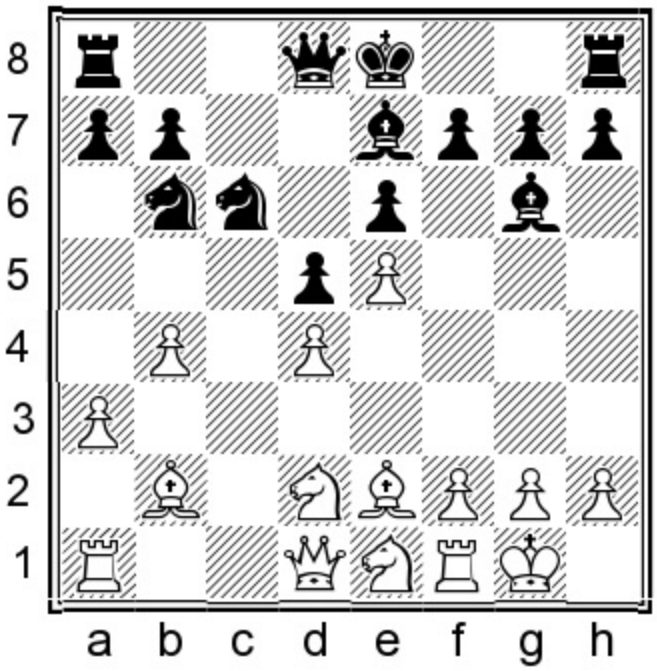
18...f6!?N⇄

This looks logical, especially as White's heavy pieces are all on the queenside.

c) 10.b4 ♘c8!

This thematic manoeuvre works especially well when White has weakened the c4-square.

11.♘bd2 ♘b6 12.♗b2 ♗e7 13.♘e1



We have been following Bologan – Eljanov, Sochi 2012. White intends ♘d3-c5 and can also consider a kingside pawn storm with f2-f4 and g2-g4, so Black needs to be careful. With precise play, he can obtain a fine position:

13...♖c8!N 14.♘d3 0-0 15.♘c5

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15.f4?! ♘c4 gives Black too much play.

15...♘d7! 16.♘db3

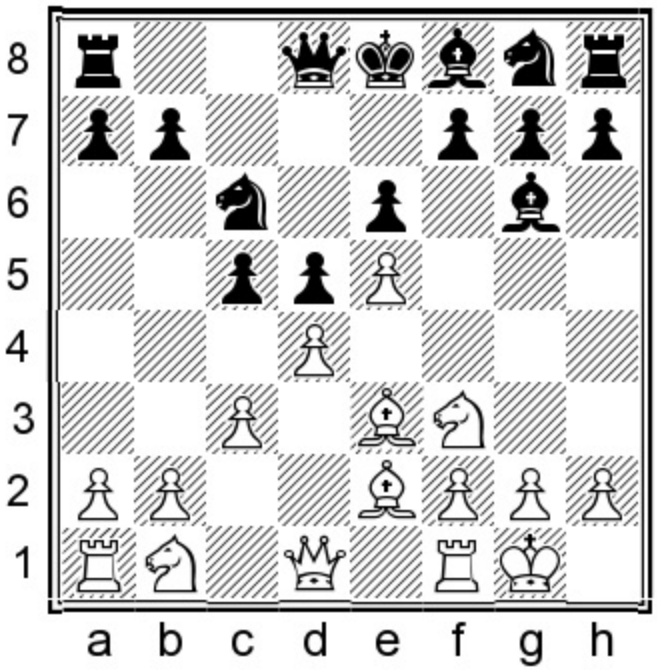
16.♘xb7?! ♕b6 17.♘c5 ♘xc5 18.dxc5 ♗xc5∓

16...♘xc5 17.♘xc5 ♗xc5 18.dxc5

18.bxc5 b6⇄

18...d4

The strong passed d-pawn gives excellent counterplay.



8...cxd4

This is the usual move, although Black has a sound alternative:

8...♕b6!? 9.b3

After 9.♕b3 c4! 10.♕xb6 axb6 11.♘h4 b5 12.♘xg6 hxg6 Black cannot be stopped from playing ...b4 with a good game, for example: 13.a3 b4 14.cxb4 ♗xb4 15.♘c3 ♗xc3!? 16.bxc3 ♘a5⇄

9...♘h6!

This attractive motif is also well known in the French Defence.

10.dxc5 ♗xc5 11.♗xh6 gxh6 12.b4 ♗f8

Black is fine.

13.b5 ♘e7 14.♘bd2 ♗g7 15.c4 0-0 16.♕b3

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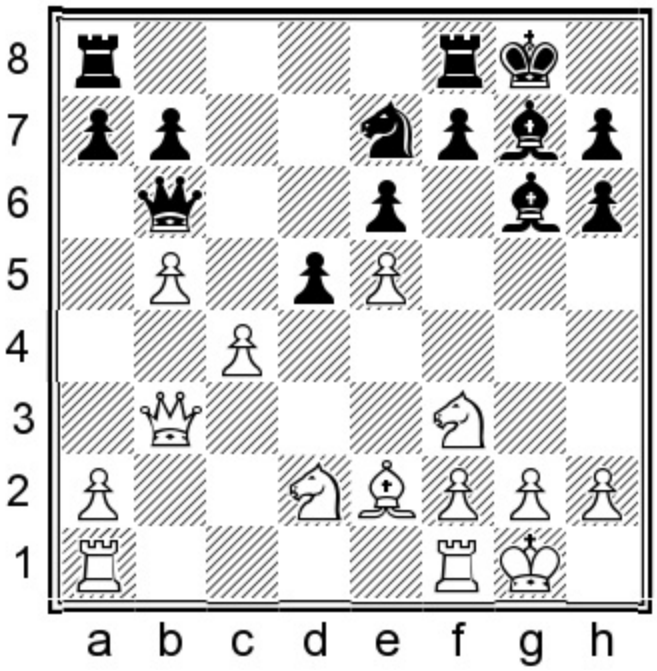

This occurred in Arakhamia-Grant – Eljanov, Khanty-Mansiysk (ol) 2010. A good continuation is:

16...a6N 17.a4 ♖fc8 18.♖fc1 axb5∓

White will be left on the defensive no matter which way she recaptures.

9.cxd4

9.♘xd4 doesn't attack the bishop on f5, so Black can consider grabbing the central pawn: 9...♘xe5!? (9...♘ge7 is a simple alternative if you don't wish to enter the complications) 10.♕a4† ♘d7 11.c4 ♘gf6 12.♘c3 e5⇄ White is more or less forced to sacrifice a piece with 13.♘xd5 ♘xd5 14.cxd5 exd4 15.♗xd4∞, when 15...♗e7! is best. The computer calls it equal but in practice any result would be possible.

9...♘ge7

On the road to f5.

10.♘h4

10.♘c3 ♘f5 11.♖c1 ♗e7 12.♘a4 0-0 13.♘c5 was seen in Anand – Karpov, Roquebrune (rapid) 1992.

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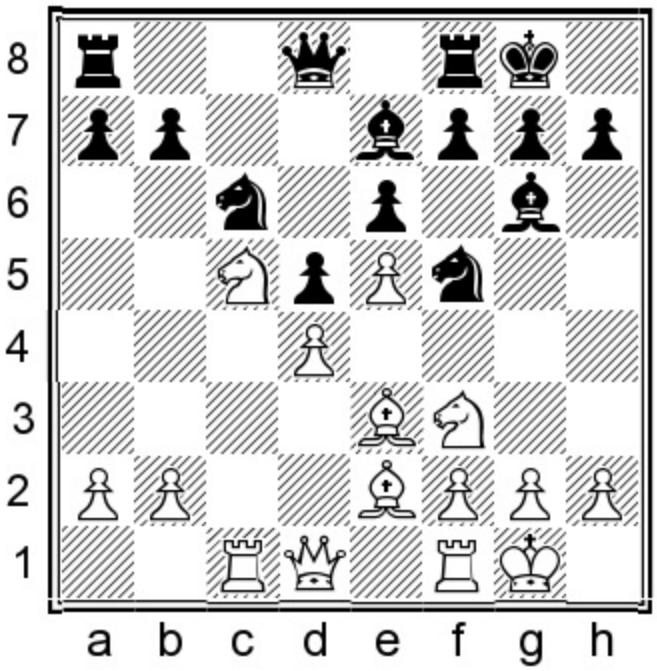
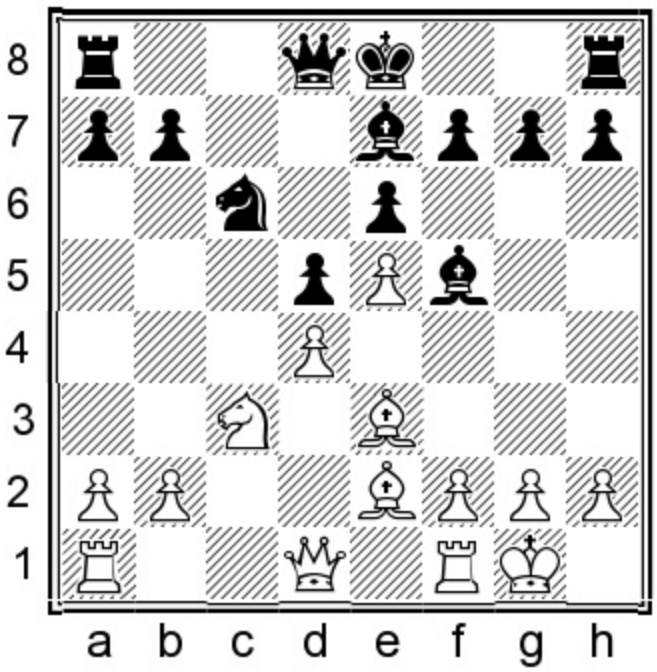


Instead of exchanging on c5, 13...♗h5!N 14.♘xb7 ♕b6⇄ would have traded the b7-pawn for serious pressure against White's centre, 15.♘c5 ♗xf3 16.♗xf3 ♘xe5!∓ being a neat tactical point.

10...♘f5 11.♘xf5

11.♘xg6?! hxg6∓ only helps Black.

11...♗xf5 12.♘c3 ♗e7



The game is positionally balanced. The big question is if White can obtain meaningful attacking chances by advancing his kingside pawns.

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13.f4

13.♗g4 ♗g6 14.f4 ♕d7 keeps an eye on f5, and 15.♕f3 f5!?⇄ ensures some breathing room on the kingside.

13.♖c1 0-0 14.a3 (14.♘a4 ♖c8 15.♘c5 ♘a5!= intending 16.b4 ♘c4 17.♗xc4 dxc4 18.♘xb7 ♕b6 is a line given by Igor Stohl) 14...♖c8 15.b4 Now in Fedoseev – Dreev, Moscow 2016, 15...f6!N⇄ would have given Black nice play.

13...♗g6!

Black needs to be alert, as 13...0-0?! runs into 14.g4↑.

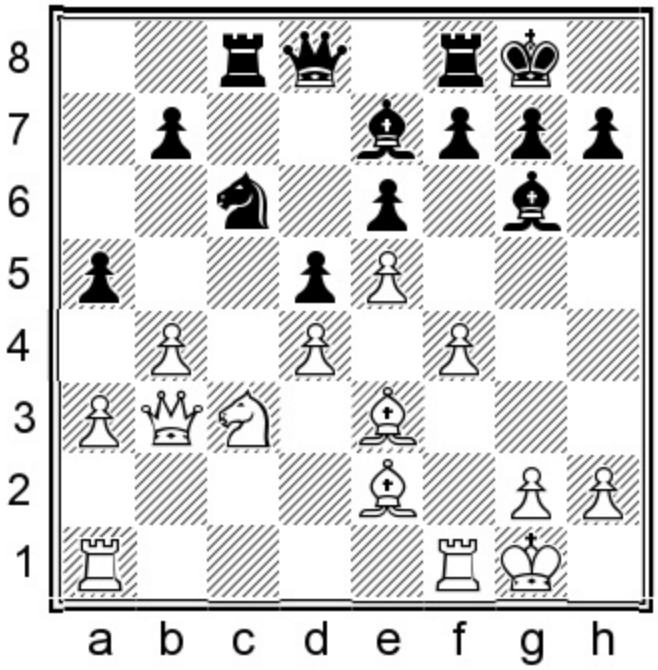
14.a3

Now 14.g4 can be met by 14...f5!⇄.

14...0-0 15.b4

15.g4 should be met by 15...f6!⇄ and if 16.f5?! ♗f7 White's centre is too unstable.

15...♖c8 16.♕b3 a5!⇄



Utilizing White's advanced pawn chain to obtain active counterplay. In the game we are following, White's position quickly went downhill.

17.g4?!

17.b5 is better although 17...a4! is a good response: 18.♕xa4 (18.♘xa4? ♘a5) 18...♘xe5⇄

17...axb4 18.axb4 ♕b6 19.f5 ♘xd4 20.♕d1 ♘xe2† 21.♕xe2 ♕xb4∓

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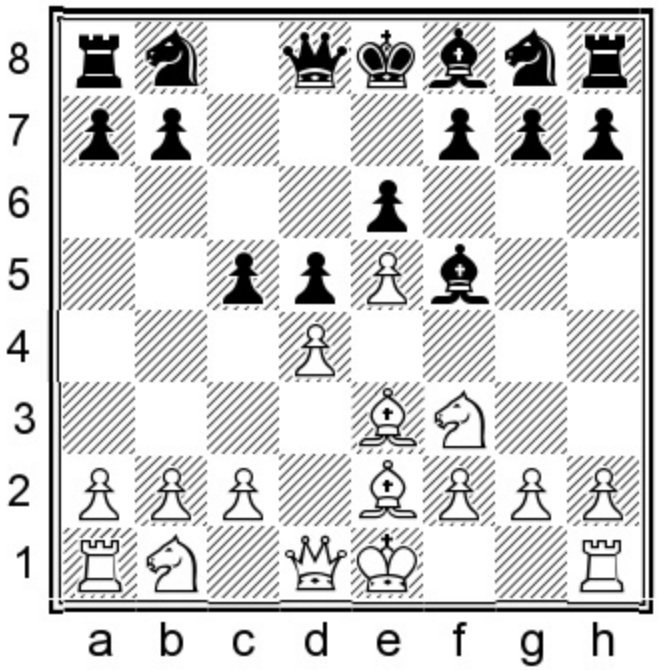
Kuybokarov – Akopian, Sharjah 2017.

C) 6.♗e3



This is the big main line, and we will analyse two responses against it. 6...♕b6!? is the most critical and challenging continuation, which we will analyse separately in the next chapter. Before then, I will provide a comprehensive update of my previous recommendation from *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*.

6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘e7

Black develops the knight, showing no fear of the ♘xf5 exchange. Next he will play ...♘bc6 to confront White's centralized knight and the e5-pawn.

White's main moves are **C1)** 8.♗g5, **C2)** 8.c4, **C3)** 8.♘d2 and **C4)** 8.0-0!. Before analysing them, let's cover some minor alternatives.

8.c3 ♘bc6 9.f4

This has been tried by Caruana and Naiditsch in the past.

9...♘xd4

9...g5 10.fxg5 ♗g7 11.♘d2 and despite White's eventual defeat, he was slightly better at this stage in Caruana – Motylev, Moscow 2008.

10.cxd4

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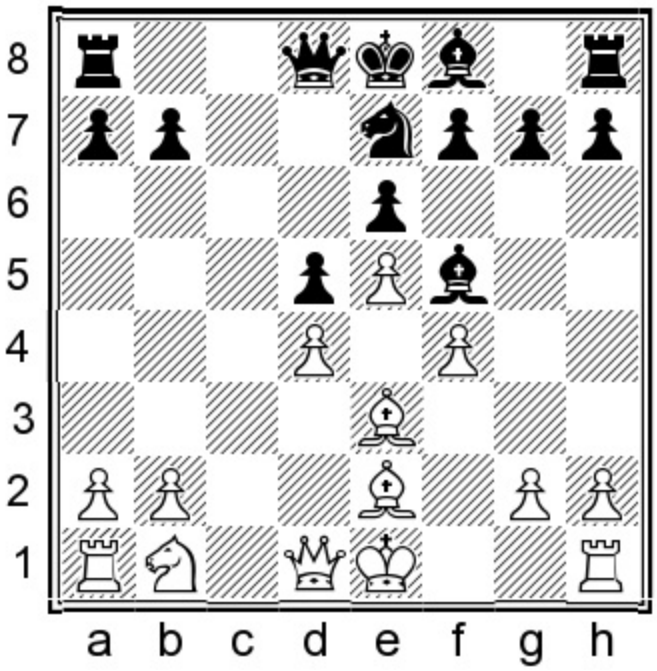

A useful improvement is:

10...♕b6!N

10...♘c6 11.0-0 h5!? 12.♘c3 g6 13.♖c1 ♗e7 14.♘a4 gave White a small but annoying advantage in Naiditsch – Seger, Germany 2016.

11.♕d2 ♘c6 12.♘c3 ♗b4 13.♖c1 0-0⇄

Black develops harmoniously with ...♖ac8 next, and has nothing to fear.

8.f4 ♘bc6 9.♘b5

9.c3 would transpose above.

9...♘c8!?

9...♘g6 is a decent alternative.

10.0-0 a6 11.♘d4 ♘xd4 12.♗xd4

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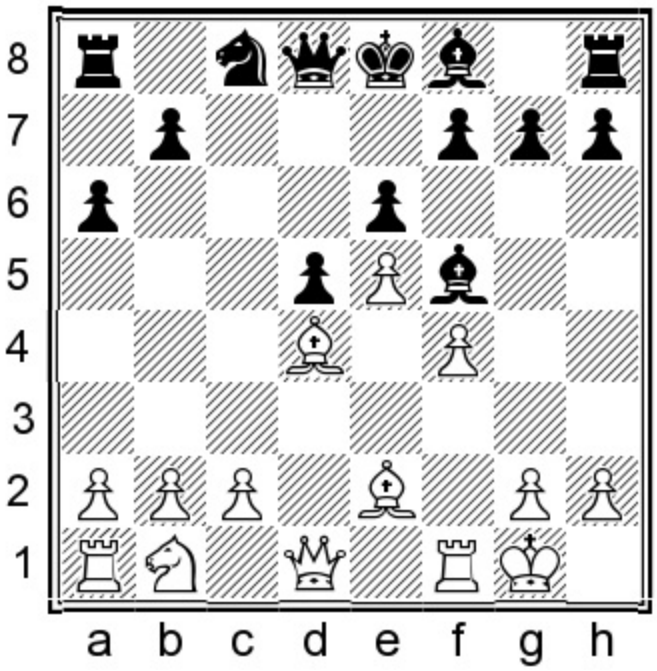


In Durarbayli – Colas, Chicago 2018, Black should have re-routed the knight with:

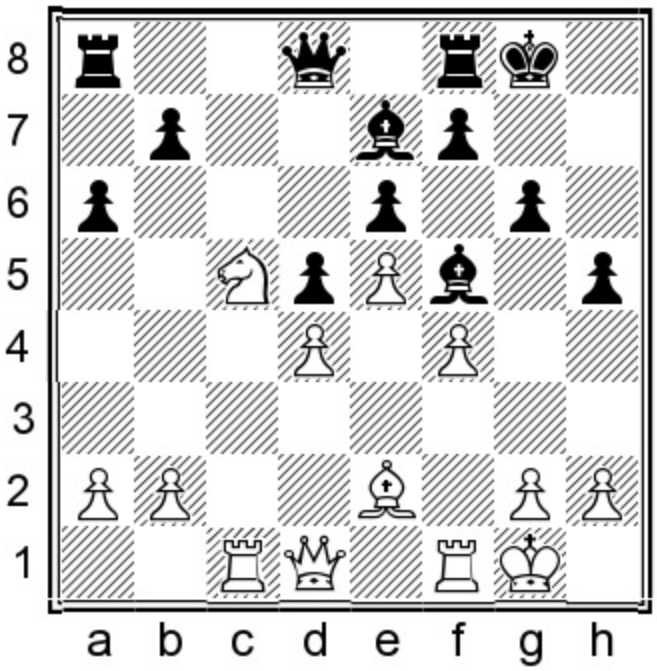
12...♘e7!N 13.♘d2 ♘c6 14.c3

Black should be fine with quiet play, but he can also force events:

14...♘xd4 15.cxd4 h5 16.♖c1 g6 17.♘b3

So far, we are following the most natural path which happens to be (surprise!) the first choice of the engines.

17...♗e7 18.♘c5 0-0!⇄



19.♕b3

19.♘xb7?! ♕b6 only helps Black.

19...a5!

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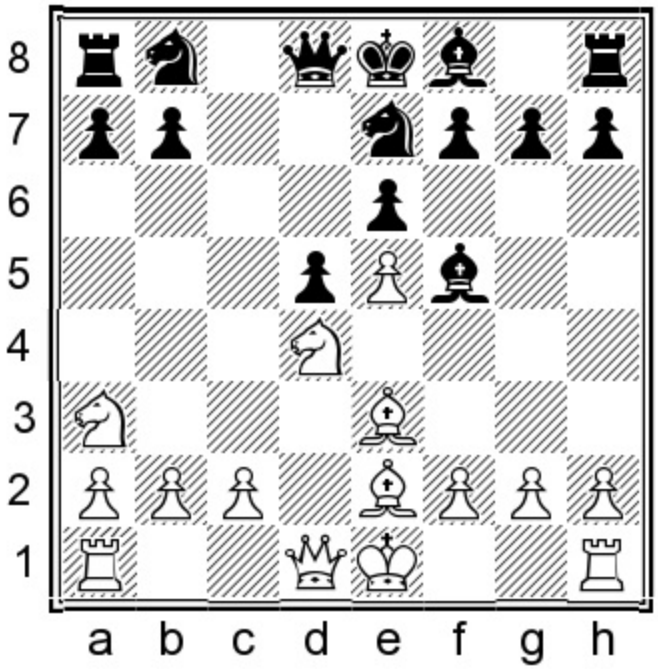
White's pressure on the queenside is less meaningful than it may appear. For instance:

20.♘xb7 ♕b8♒

The bishops!

8.♘a3!?



This is an interesting try. I suggest a cool reply:

8...♗e4!?N

Freeing up the e7-knight.

The natural 8...a6 is playable, although 9.c4 ♘bc6 10.♕a4 gives White a lot of activity. Still, Black can neutralize the pressure by exchanging queens: 10...♕a5† 11.♕xa5 ♘xa5 12.0-0 dxc4 13.♘xc4 ♘xc4 14.♗xc4 ♗e4! 15.♖ac1 ♗d5 16.♗e2

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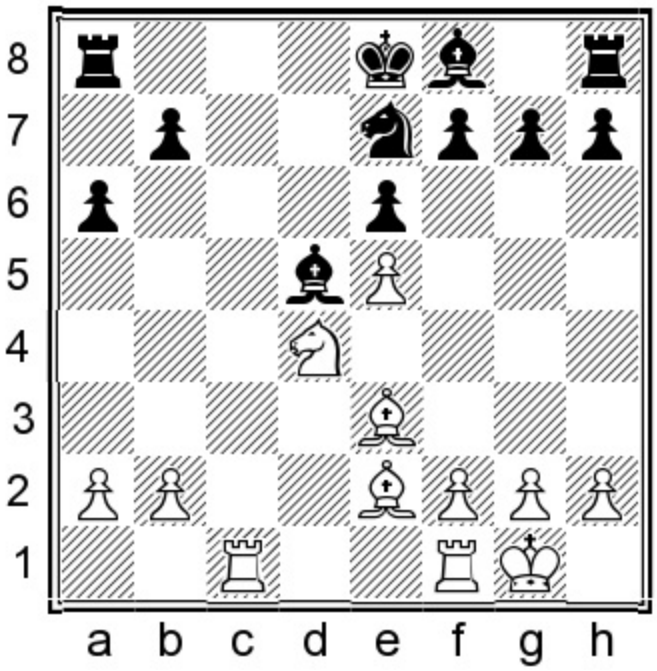

16...g5!? (16...♖c8 17.♖xc8† ♘xc8 gave Black a defensible position in Adams – Ragger, Germany 2011.) 17.♖c7 (17.♗xg5? ♖g8 is no good for White) 17...♖c8 18.♖xc8† ♘xc8 19.♘c2 ♗g7⇄ Black is okay, as has been shown in correspondence praxis.

9.c4

9.f3 ♘f5! is a nice detail.

9...♘ec6

In this original position, Black is fine after something like:

10.f3 ♘xd4 11.♗xd4 ♗xa3 12.bxa3 ♗g6⇄

8.♘c3 a6!?

It's always nice to control the b5-square.

9.g4 ♗g6

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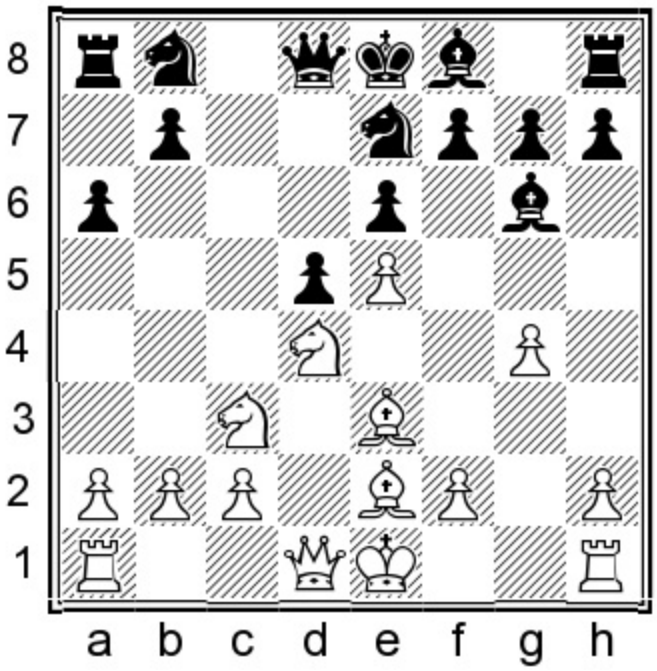


10.f4

10.h4 should be met by 10...h5!N 11.gxh5 ♗h7⩱ with excellent positional compensation.

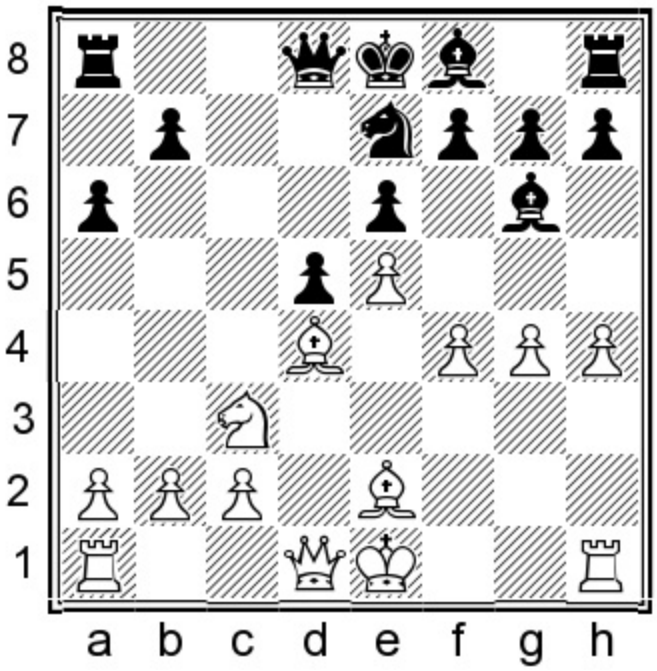
10...♘bc6 11.h4

After 11.0-0?! ♘xd4 12.♗xd4 ♕d7! Black controls the important f5-square. 13.♗f3 was seen in Van Wissen – Erenburg, Hoogeveen 2004, when 13...h5!N 14.gxh5 ♗f5⩲ would have been promising for Black, who can open the kingside with ...g6.

11...♘xd4

We must avoid the tempting 11...h5? because of 12.f5! exf5 13.gxh5 ♗h7 14.♕d2± as seen in Haugen – Atakisi, corr. 2002. Please take note of this dynamic f4-f5 idea.

12.♗xd4



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12...h5!

Having exchanged knights, this move turns out okay.

12...h6 is playable, but after 13.h5 ♗h7 14.♗d3 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♘c6 16.0-0-0 White's extra space was worth something in Reis – Evans, corr. 2012.

13.f5 ♗h7!

Not 13...exf5 14.gxh5.

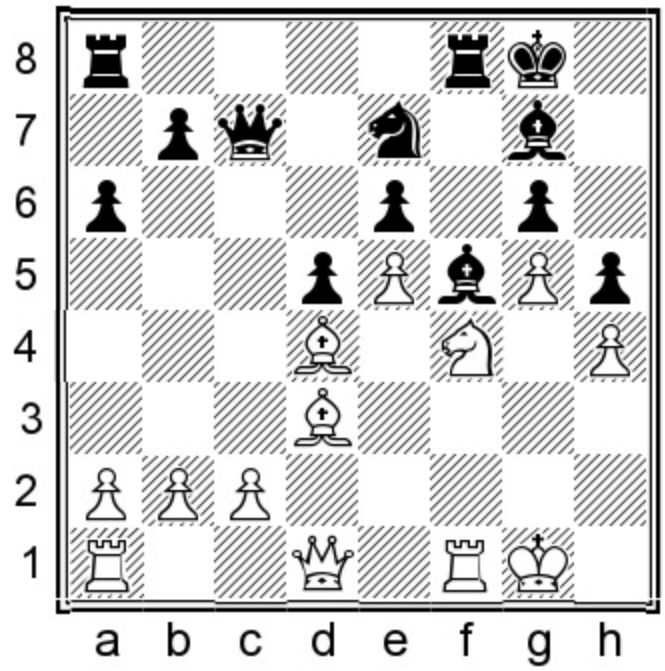
14.fxe6 fxe6 15.g5 ♗f5

Black is fine, as the game continuation demonstrates:

16.♗d3

16.♗xh5† g6 17.♗g4 ♕c7⩲

16...♕c7 17.0-0 g6 18.♘e2 ♗g7 19.♘f4 0-0



20.♗xf5 ♖xf5 21.♘xe6 ♕d7 22.♖xf5 ♘xf5 23.♘xg7 ♘xg7 24.♕e2

A draw was agreed here in Colin – Diez Gonzalez, corr. 2012, but Black could and perhaps should have played on with:

24...♕h3∓

C1) 8.♗g5 ♕d7

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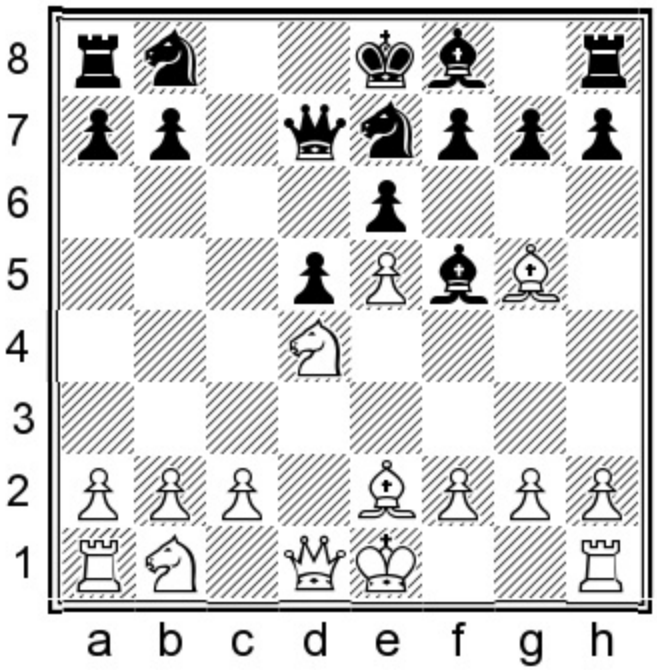

Stepping out of the pin.

9.♗xe7

9.♘c3?! ♗g6! 10.0-0 ♘ec6⇄ gave Black the more comfortable play in Parligras – David, Kavala 2008.

9.c4!?

This is a rare but interesting try.

9...♘bc6 10.♘xf5!?N

10.♗xe7 was played in Shabalov – Kacheishvili, Philadelphia 2008, when Black could have thrown in the intermediate 10...♘xd4!N 11.♕xd4 ♗xe7 with a good position, for instance: 12.cxd5 ♕xd5 13.♕xd5 exd5 Black intends long castling, and if 14.♗b5† ♔f8 15.♔e2 h5∓ the rook can get out via h6.

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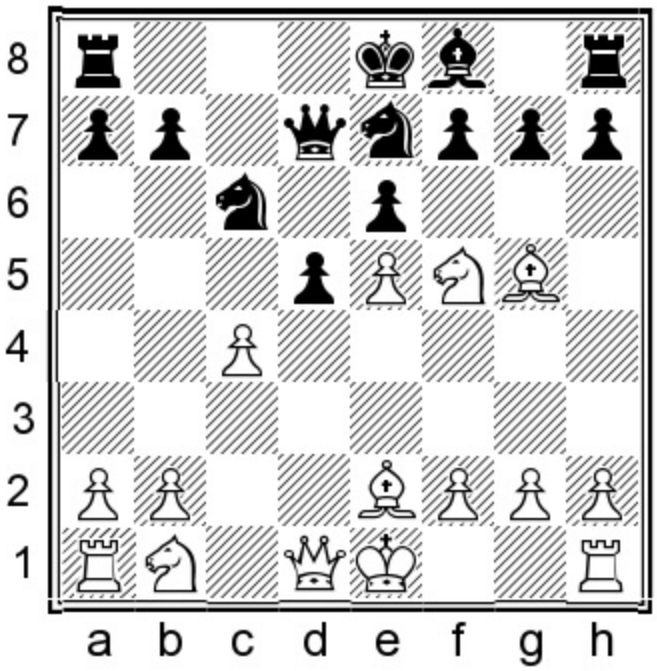


10...exf5!?⇄

10...♘xf5 is absolutely fine.

11.0-0 d4! 12.♖e1 ♘xe5!? 13.♗h5 ♘5c6

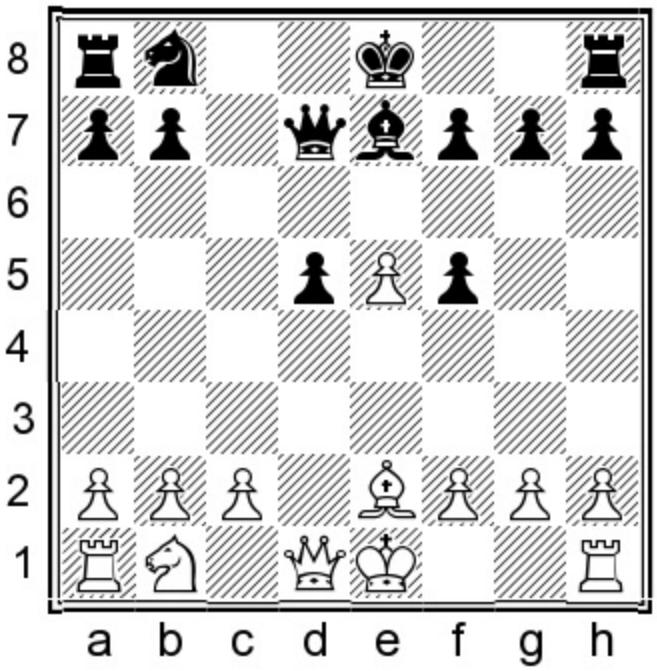
White's initiative surely looks threatening, but Black will push the bishops back and gain some breathing space.

14.♕b3 h6 15.♗f4 g6 16.♗f3 0-0-0

The position is rather unclear.

9...♗xe7 10.♘xf5 exf5

This typical sequence damages Black's pawn structure somewhat, but White cannot exploit it.



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11.♗f3

I checked two other tries:

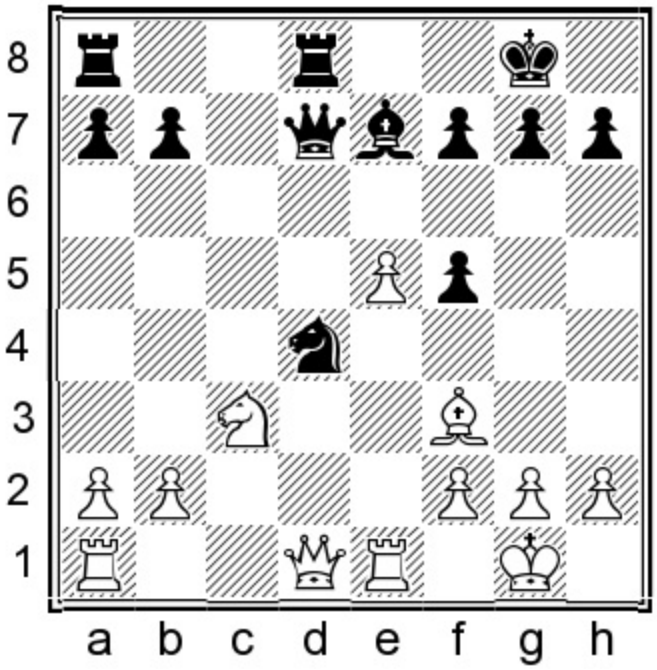
11.♘d2 0-0 12.0-0 ♘c6 13.♘f3 ♖ad8 14.♖e1 a6!?N Black can follow up with ...♕c7 and ...♖fe8.

11.0-0 ♘c6 12.♗b5 a6 13.♗xc6 bxc6 14.♕d3 0-0 15.♖e1 was seen in Bachmann – Margvelashvili, Brownsville 2010, when either 15...♕e6N or 15...a5!?N would have been fine for Black.

11...d4

11...♕b5!? 12.♕xd5 ♕xb2 13.0-0 ♘c6∞ has proved to be fine for Black in a few games.

12.0-0 0-0 13.♖e1 ♖d8 14.c3 ♘c6 15.cxd4 ♘xd4 16.♘c3



16...♗b4

16...♕e6!N would have been unpleasant for White.

17.a3 ♗xc3 18.bxc3 ♘xf3†

A draw was agreed in Pilgaard – Schandorff, Denmark 2010. (18...♘e6!? was more ambitious, but I remember I really didn't want to play that day...)

C2) 8.c4

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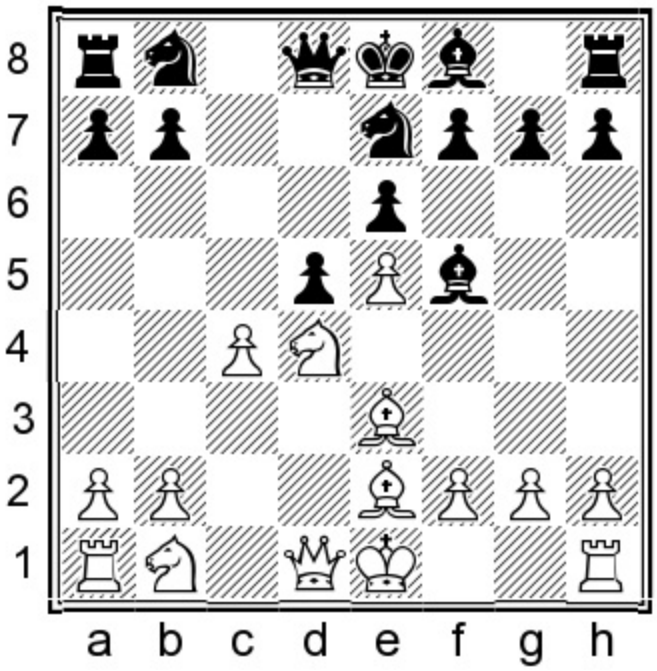

This direct move was a big main line when I wrote my previous Caro-Kann book, but not anymore. Interest has since shifted to deeper, more subtle ideas. Still, the text move could be dangerous if Black is not on guard. White intends quick development with moves like ♘c3 and ♕a4(†). However, good countermeasures have been found, which is why this line is no longer the centre of attention.

8...♘bc6

We will analyse **C21)** 9.♘c3 followed by the more precise **C22)** 9.♕a4.

C21) 9.♘c3

This is a natural try, but it allows Black to simplify.

9...♘xd4 10.♗xd4 dxc4 11.♕a4†

11.♗xc4 ♘c6 worked out well for Black after 12.♗b5 ♗e7 13.0-0 0-0 14.♗xc6 bxc6 15.♘e2 c5 16.♗c3 ♕b6!?∓ in Shirov – Anand, Linares 1998.

11...♘c6 12.0-0-0!?

The most aggressive try.

12.♗f3?! ♕d7 13.♗xc6 ♕xc6 14.♕xc6† bxc6∓ left White with no real compensation for the pawn in Psakhis – Sergejev, Internet 2001; Black even has the two bishops.

12.♖d1

This has been played more often, but Black cleverly neutralizes it with:

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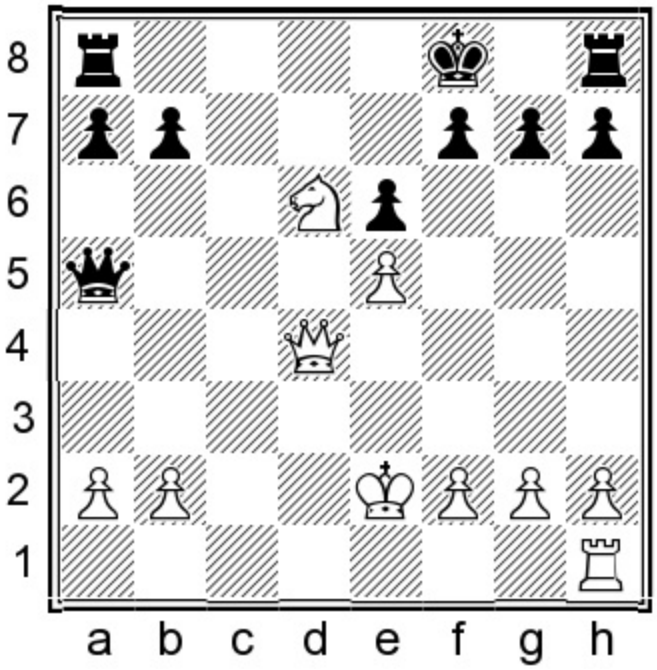
12...♗d3!

Best, although 12...♕a5!? 13.♕xa5 ♘xa5 14.0-0 ♘c6 15.♘b5 ♖c8= is an adequate alternative.

13.♗xd3 cxd3 14.♖xd3 ♗c5!

Black is simply better.

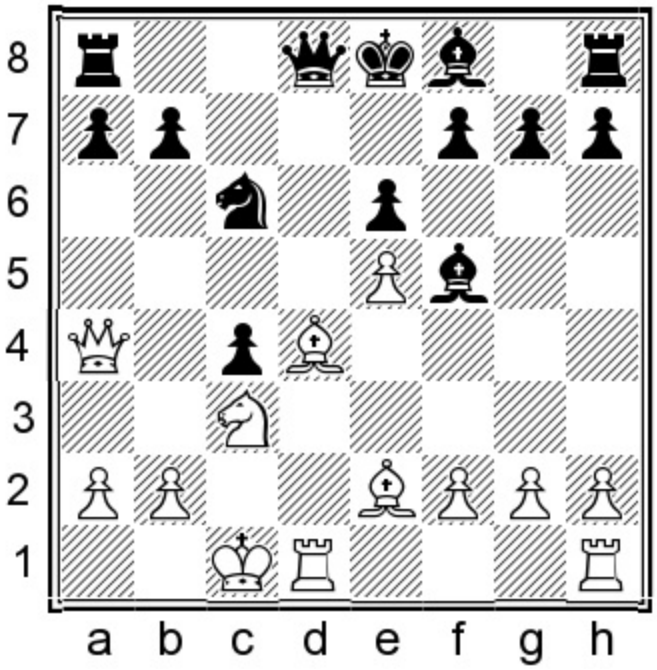
15.♘e4!? ♗xd4 16.♘d6† ♔f8 17.♖xd4 ♘xd4 18.♕xd4 ♕a5† 19.♔e2



This was an interesting attempt to confuse matters in Topalov – Anand, Nice 2009, but White does not have enough for the exchange. A strong continuation is:

19...♔g8N 20.♖c1 ♖f8!∓

Planning ...h5 and ...♖h6.



12...♗e7!N

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A strong improvement, preparing castling.

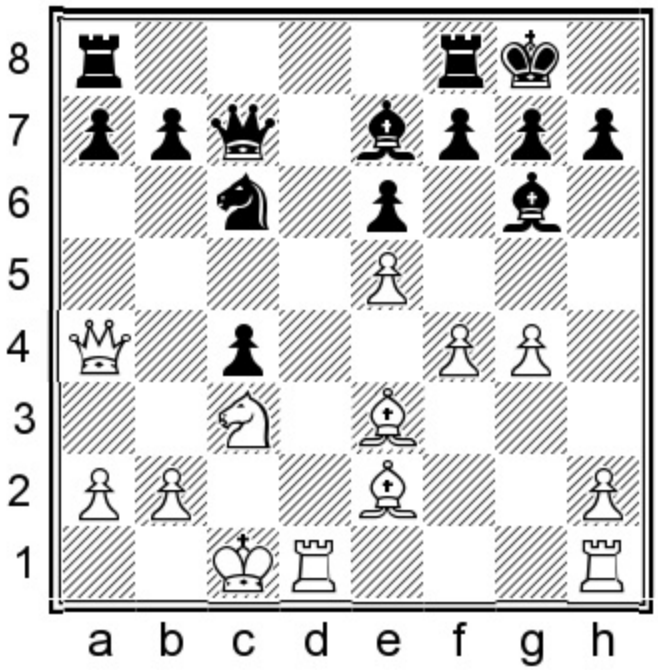
12...♕c8?! is too slow, and 13.g4 ♗g6 14.h4 h6 15.f4 ♗e7 16.f5! gave White a strong initiative in Amonatov – Shimanov, Moscow 2010.

12...♗d3 13.♗xd3 ♕xd4 (maybe Black can get away with 13...cxd3!? 14.♖xd3 ♕g5† 15.♗e3 ♕xg2) 14.♗e4 ♕b6 15.♗xc6† bxc6 16.♕xc4 ♗e7 17.♘e4 ♖b8 The players agreed a draw in Adhiban – Ipatov, Moscow 2012, and indeed after 18.♕d4 the position is equal.

13.♗e3

13.g4? ♗g5†! 14.♗e3 ♗xe3† 15.fxe3 ♗d3 16.♗xd3 cxd3∓ turns out great for Black.

13...♕c7 14.g4 ♗g6 15.f4 0-0



Black is clearly better as his counterplay comes in time after:

16.h4?!

16.♕xc4 ♖ac8–+ and 16.♗xc4 ♘b4!–+ turn out badly for White as well.

16...a6! 17.h5? b5–+

Embarrassing the white queen.

C22) 9.♕a4

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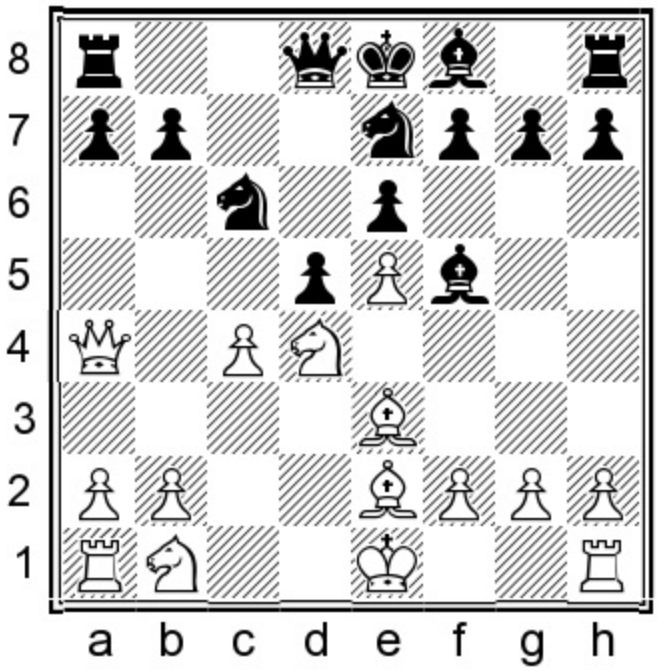

9...dxc4

9...a6 is another main line, but the text move is simpler.

10.♘a3

10.♘d2 ♕a5 11.♕xa5 ♘xa5 12.♘xc4 transposes to the 12.♘xc4 variation in the notes to the main line below.

10.♘c3!?

This leads to interesting play.

10...a6

10...♗d3!? is also possible.

11.0-0-0 ♕a5 12.♕xa5 ♘xa5 13.♘xf5 ♘xf5 14.♗b6 ♘c6 15.f4 ♖c8

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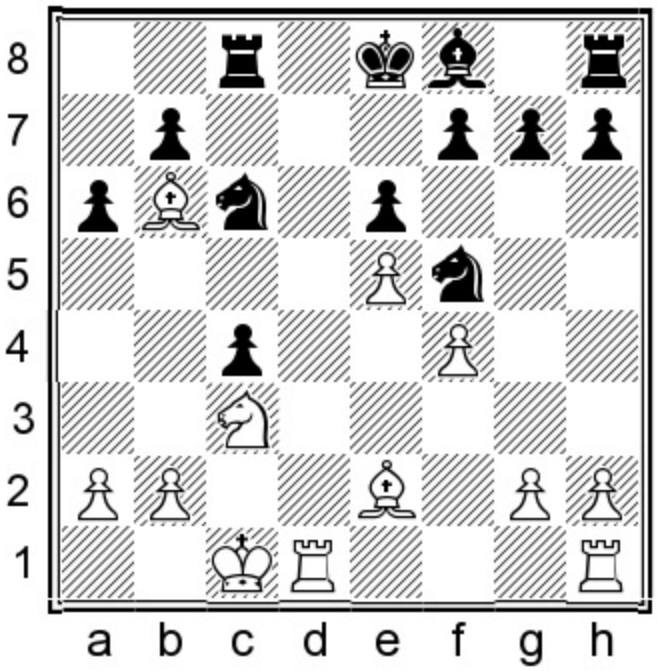
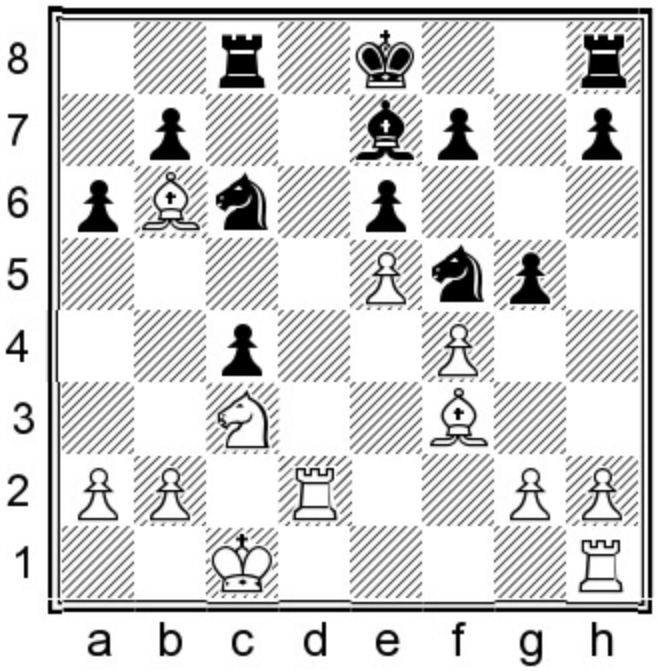


We have reached an important position. White's bishops are strong and he seems to have a good grip on the position, but Black will obtain counterplay with ...g5.

16.♗xc4

16.g4 ♘h4 17.♗xc4 g5 transposes to 16.♗xc4.

White can also refrain from recapturing the pawn and instead play for positional domination with: 16.♗f3!? ♗e7 17.♖d2 (17.♔b1 g5! 18.g3 gxf4 19.gxf4 ♖g8 20.♘a4 ♘h4⇄ gave Black good play in Kwiecinski – Mercadal Benejam, corr. 2010) 17...g5!



The key move to loosen White's structure. 18.g3 gxf4 19.gxf4 ♘h4 20.♗e4 ♖g8 21.♔b1 ♖g4⇄ Leko – Anand, Miskolc 2009.

16...g5! 17.g4

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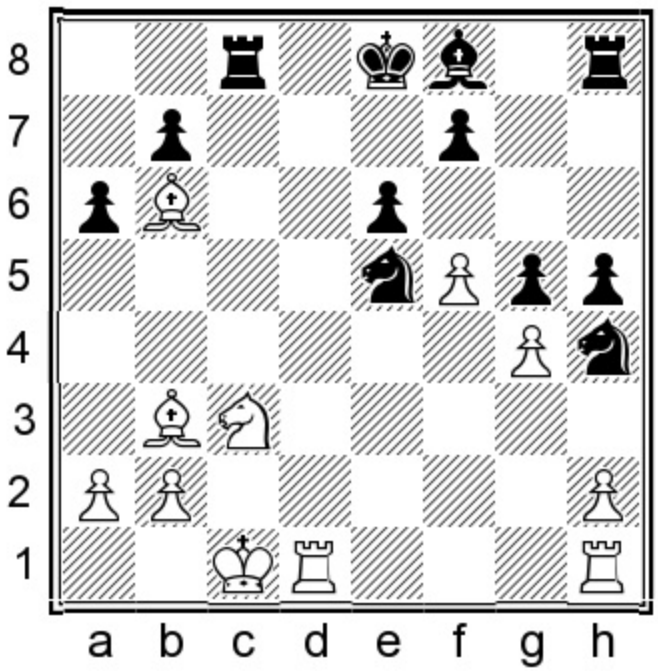
17.fxg5 ♘xe5 demolishes White's centre.

17...♘h4 18.f5!

White has to sacrifice his e-pawn to keep the initiative, but Black's position remains solid enough.

18.fxg5 ♘xe5 19.♗e2 ♗c5 20.♗xc5 ♖xc5= gives us nothing to worry about.

18...♘xe5 19.♗b3 h5!



Of course it is possible to try other moves, but White should always have good play for the pawn. The text move solves all Black's problems by returning the extra pawn and forcing simplifications.

20.fxe6 fxe6 21.♗d4

21.♗xe6? ♖c6 forks the bishops.

21...♘hf3 22.♗xe5 ♘xe5 23.♗xe6 ♖d8 24.♗d5 ♖d7

The position is clearly equal, and after the further:

25.gxh5 ♖xh5 26.♘e4 ♗e7 27.♘g3 ♖h6 28.♖he1 ♘c6 29.♘f5 ♖f6

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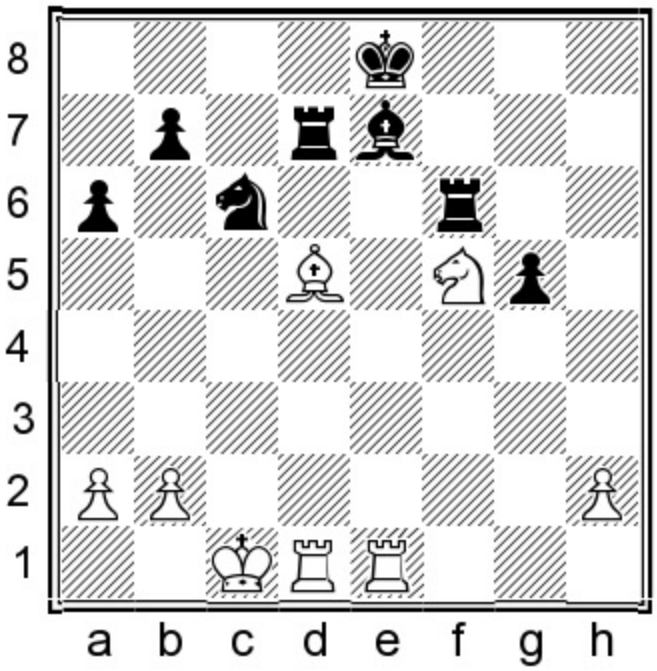
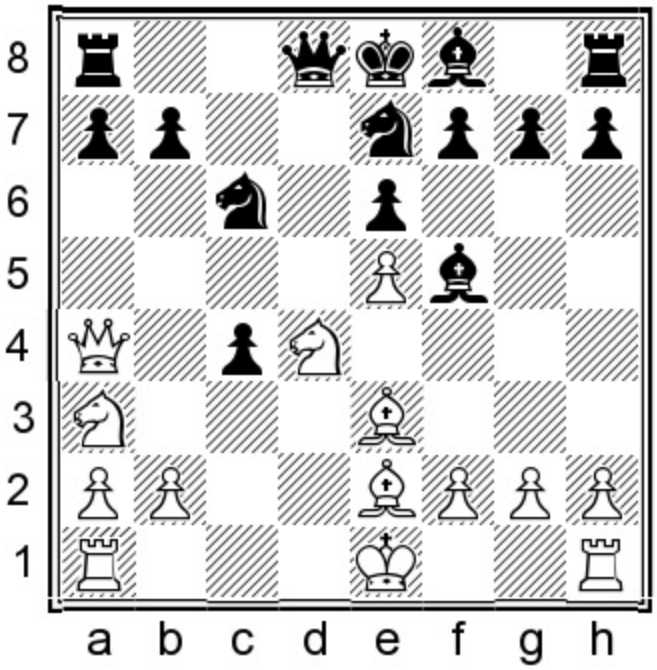


30.♘g7† ♔d8 31.♗e6 ♖d6

A draw was agreed in Anokhin – Chaika, corr. 2019.



10...♕a5† 11.♕xa5 ♘xa5 12.♘ab5

This is the critical continuation.

12.♘xc4

This is a relatively harmless try, which can also arise via the 10.♘d2 move order as noted above.

12...♘xc4 13.♗xc4 a6 14.f3

14.♖c1 ♗e4!= is a nice regrouping, and 15.♗b3 b5 16.0-0 ♗d5 ½–½ was the brief continuation of Gubas – Skerlik, corr. 2019.

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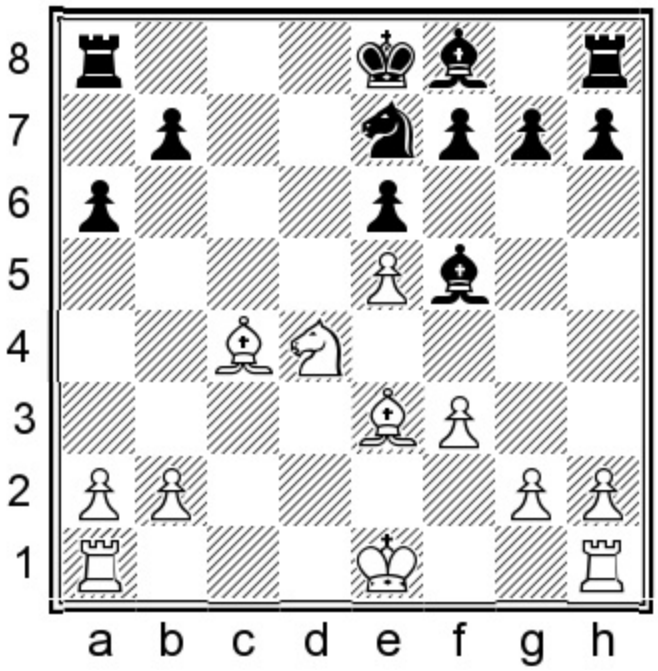
14.0-0 ♗e4! Here it is again. 15.♖ac1 ♖c8 16.♘b3 g6 17.f4 ♖xc4 The simplest. 18.♖xc4 ♗d3 19.♖cc1 (avoiding 19.♖c7? ♗xf1 20.♔xf1 ♘d5 with a fork) 19...♗xf1 20.♔xf1 ♘d5= Black had no problems in Kitson – Rau, corr. 2018.



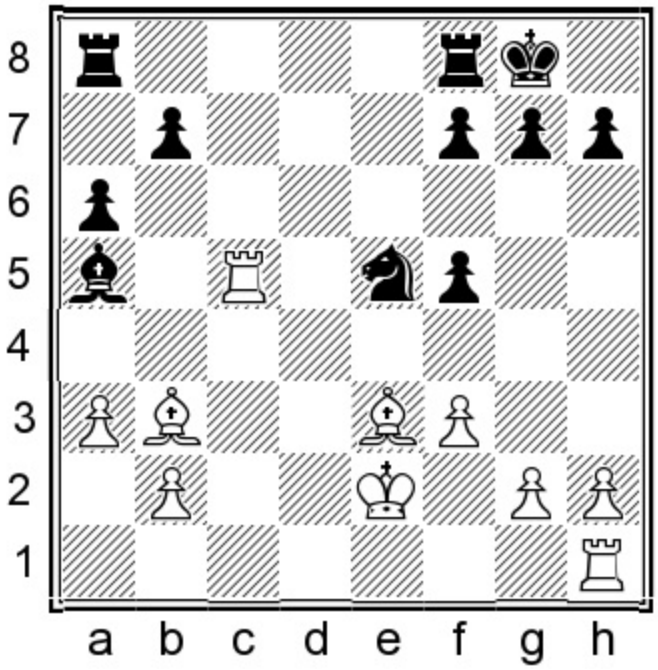
14...♘g6 15.♘xf5 ♘xe5! 16.♗b3 ♗b4†!

This important disturbing check revitalizes the line for Black, together with the little tactics that soon follow.

17.♔e2

17.♔f2 exf5 18.♖hd1 ♖d8=

17...exf5 18.♖ac1 0-0 19.a3 ♗a5 20.♖c5



In Lintchevski – Tate, Plovdiv 2012, Black should have continued:

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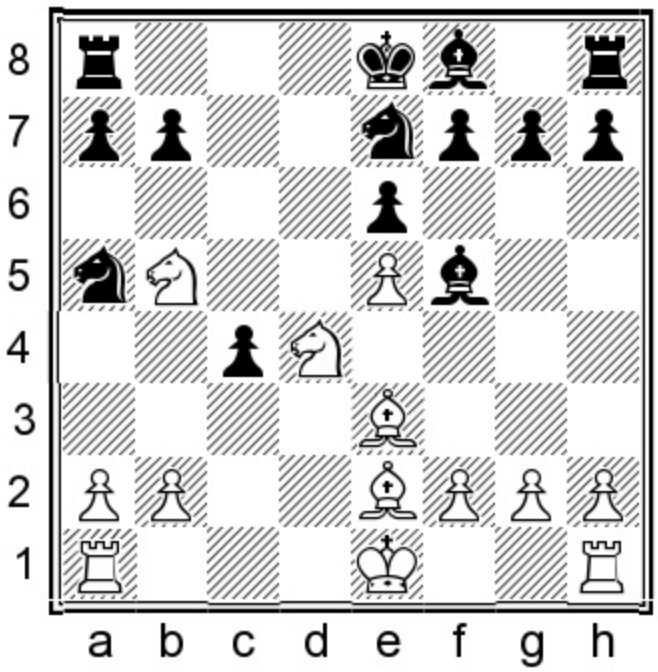
20...♘c6!N 21.♖xf5 ♖ae8 22.♔f2 ♖xe3! 23.♔xe3 ♗b6†

Followed by the ...♘d4 fork, winning back the exchange with easy equality.



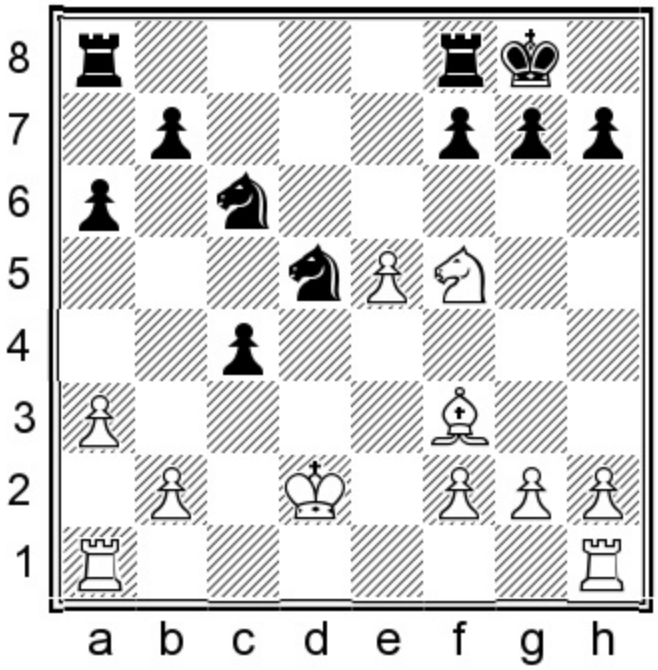
12...♘d5

The following sequence is more or less forced.

13.♘xf5 exf5 14.♗d2 a6 15.♘d4 ♗b4 16.♘xf5 ♗xd2† 17.♔xd2 0-0 18.♗f3 ♘c6 19.a3

Dreev argues that White has a small edge here, but I don't think it matters.

In the event of 19.♗xd5 ♖ad8 20.♘e3 ♘e7 21.♔e2 ♘xd5 22.♘xc4 ♖fe8 Black will soon regain the pawn with equality.



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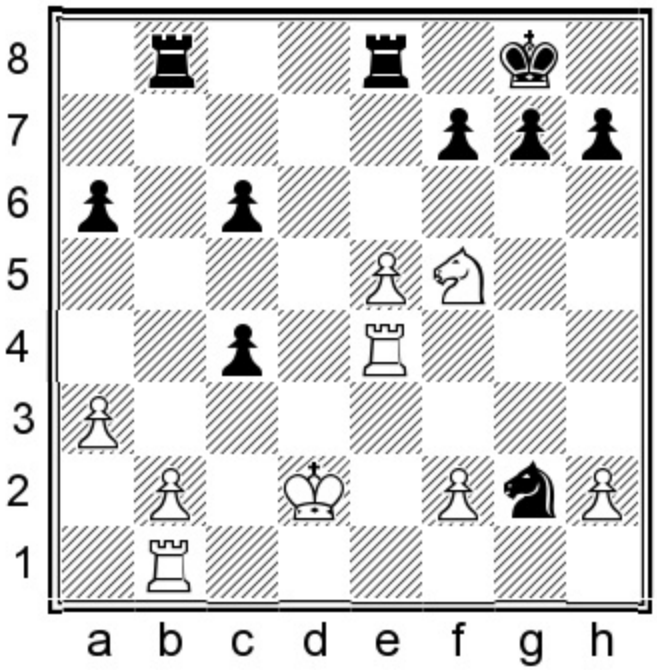
19...♘f4!?N

The only game so far continued: 19...♖ad8 20.♔c2 ♖fe8 21.♖he1 ♘f4 22.♗xc6 bxc6 23.♖e4 ♘d3 24.f4 f6± Black eventually held a draw in Iaselli – Rau, corr. 2017, but White was somewhat better all along.

20.♗xc6 bxc6

This seems fully playable for Black, for example:

21.♖he1 ♖ab8 22.♖ab1 ♖fe8 23.♖e4 ♘xg2⇄



Black's knight may appear to be in great danger, but the engine confirms that White has no way to exploit it and the position is completely equal. For instance:

24.♖g4 ♖xe5 25.♘xg7

After 25.♘d4 c3†! 26.♔xc3 ♖c5† 27.♔d3 ♖d8 28.♖xg2 ♖cd5 29.♖g4 c5 White has to be careful not to become worse.

25...♘f4 26.♖xf4 ♔xg7 27.♖xc4 ♖f5=

With a clearly drawn endgame.

C3) 8.♘d2

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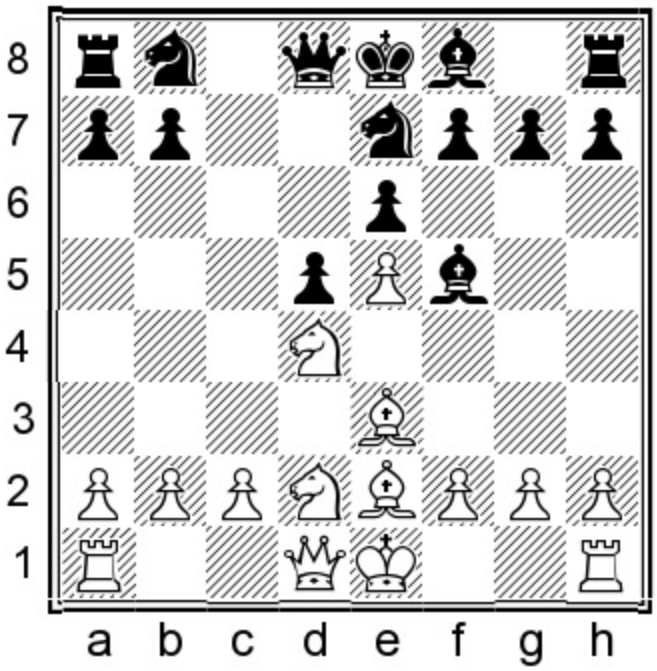

The idea of this natural move is revealed after:

8...♘bc6 9.♘2f3

Defending e5 while keeping a knight on d4. Now Black must figure out how to develop his kingside. The best approach is:

9...♗g4

The bishop is a strong piece but it was also a target on f5, so we intend to simply exchange it for the knight on f3. Then White will have the bishop pair, but his e5-pawn is vulnerable and Black easily gets his remaining pieces out.

9...♗e4 10.0-0 ♗xf3 is the same thing. (10...a6 is ultimately fine for Black as well, but it allows White some initiative.)

10.0-0 ♗xf3 11.♘xf3 ♕c7!

11...♘g6 is less precise in view of 12.c4! dxc4 13.♗xc4 ♕c7 14.♖c1 ♗e7 15.♘d4 with some initiative for White.

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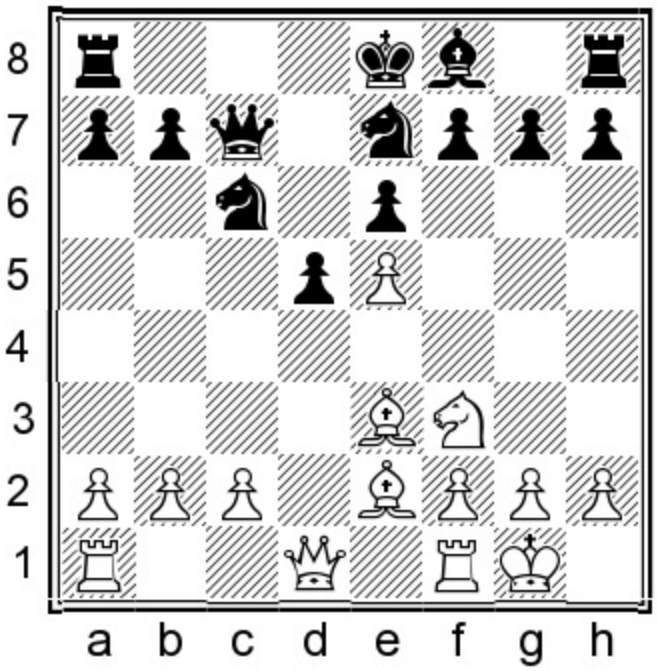

12.♖c1

White prepares the c2-c4 break, but after Black's simple response he will never make it.

On 12.♗f4 I propose 12...0-0-0!N with good play. (Navara has played 12...♘g6 13.♗g3 0-0-0 but I would rather hit the f4-bishop with ...h6 and ...g5.)

In the event of 12.♖e1 ♘g6⇄ White has not accomplished much with the rook on e1.

12.c4

This immediate pawn push could be considered, but White lacks a convincing follow-up and the position soon becomes simplified:

12...dxc4 13.♗xc4 ♘f5

Winning an important tempo compared to 11...♘g6 above.

14.♗f4 ♗e7 15.♗d3 0-0 16.♗e4 ♖fd8 17.♕c2 g6⇄

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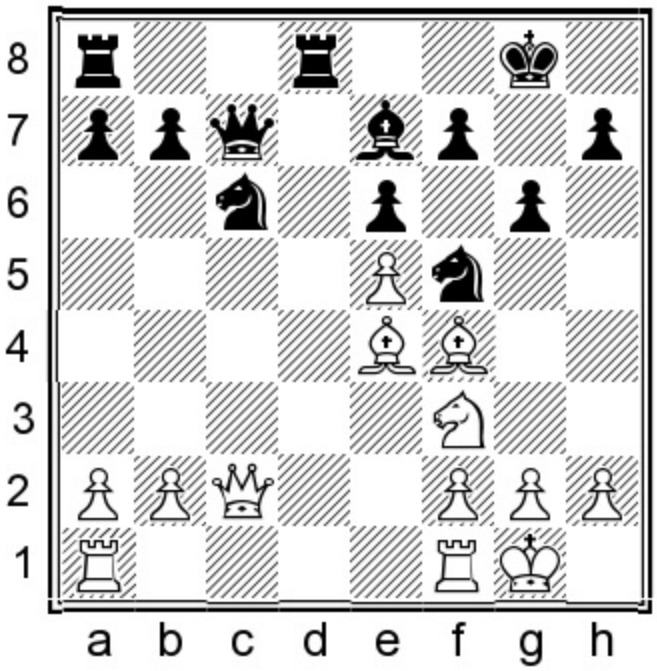

White has no advantage.

18.♖fd1 ♕b6 19.♗xc6 bxc6 20.♖ac1 ♖xd1† 21.♖xd1 ♖d8=

The game was well on the way towards a draw in So – Shankland, Saint Louis 2019.

Black could also have played 21...c5!?N if he wanted to keep more pieces on, although the position remains balanced anyway.

12...♖d8 13.c3

White plays a manoeuvring game where he hopes that his extra space and bishops will count for something.

13...♘g6

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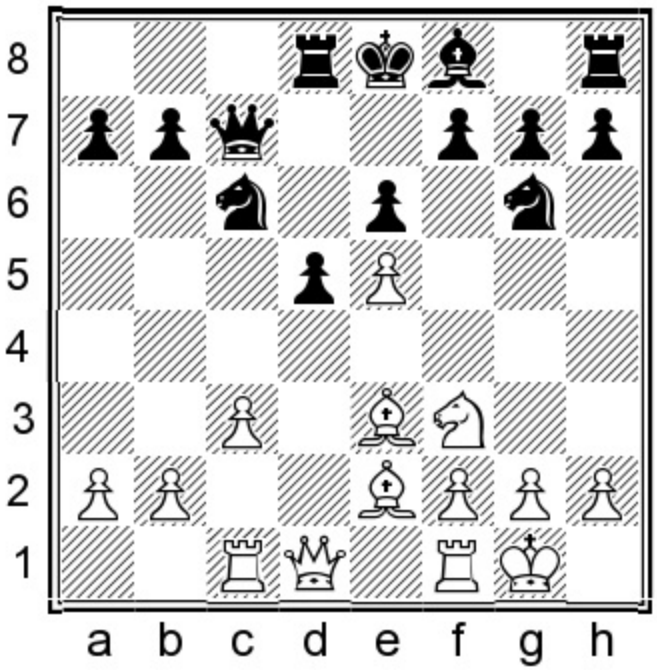

The weak e-pawn is a problem for White.

14.♗d4

This has been almost universally played, though it is not really a move White wants to make.

Giri tried to ignore the weak pawn and get on with his own play by means of 14.♕a4 ♗e7 15.c4 in Giri – Wojtaszek, Porto Carras 2011. However, Black could have questioned this ambitious strategy with: 15...dxc4N 16.♖xc4 ♘gxe5 17.♘xe5 ♕xe5 18.♗f3 0-0 Black is fine and White must be slightly careful not to become worse.

14...♗e7 15.♖e1 0-0

Simplifying with 15...♘h4 16.♘xh4 ♗xh4 is another decent option.

16.♗d3 ♖c8 17.g3 ♘xd4 18.cxd4 ♕xc1 19.♕xc1 ♖xc1 20.♖xc1

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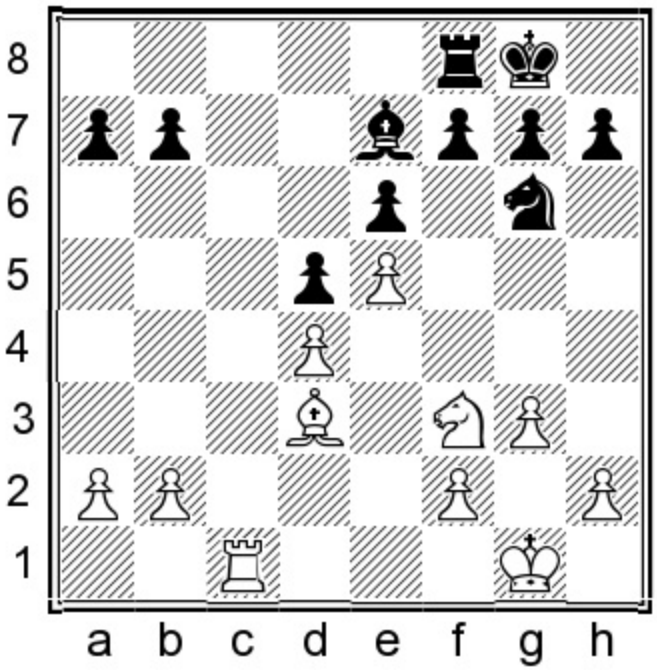

20...♗d8!

The bishop covers the c7-square and is on its way to an excellent post on b6.

21.♗xg6

Otherwise ...♘e7 comes.

21...hxg6

The ending is completely even, as has been confirmed by several correspondence games.

22.h4 ♗b6

Another example continued: 22...f6 23.♔f1 ♔f7 24.♖c8 ♗b6 25.♖c2 ♔e7 26.♔e2 ♔d7 27.♔e3 a6 ½–½ Tauscher – Sanchez Rodenas, corr. 2018.

23.♔f1 f6

23...♖b8!? 24.♔e2 ♔f8 is another possibility, leaving the f-pawn at home, with no problems for Black.

24.♔e2 ♔f7 25.g4 ♔e7

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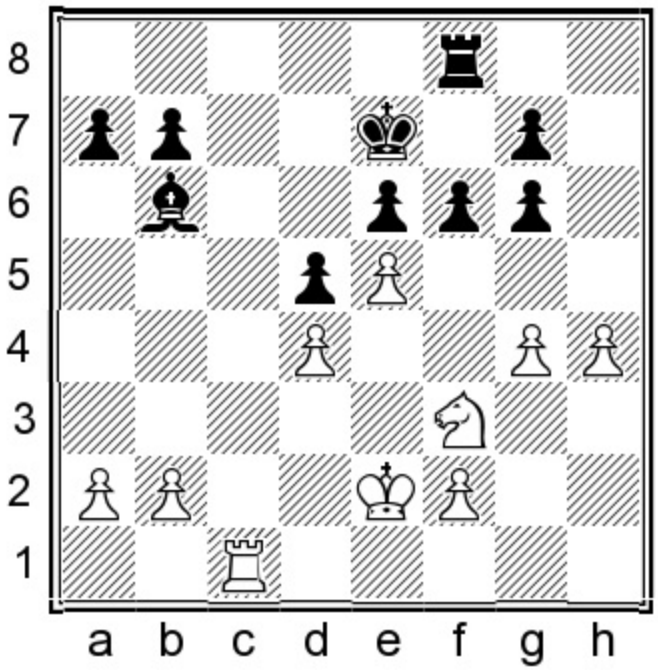
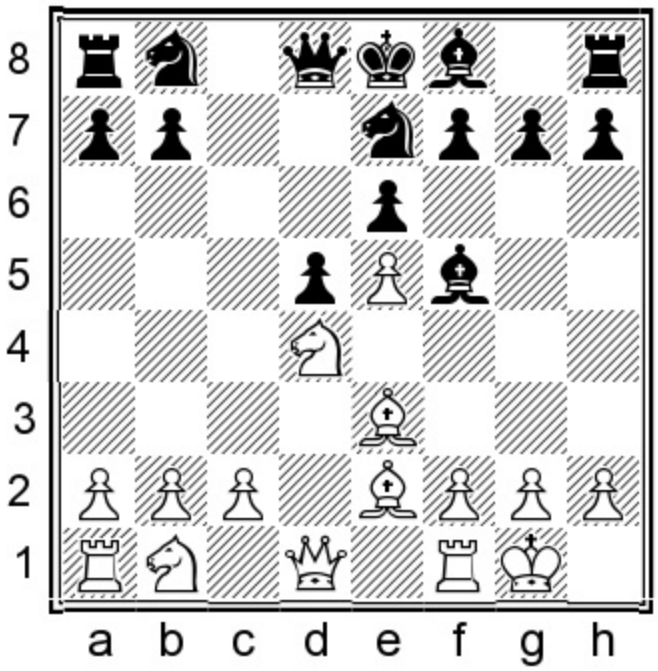


26.g5 fxg5 27.hxg5 ♖f4 28.♖c8 ♖f8 29.♖xf8 ♔xf8 30.♔e3 ♗d8 31.♔f4 ♗b6=

Zielasko – Ellis, corr. 2018.

C4) 8.0-0!



Nowadays this is considered the most dangerous move.

8...♘bc6 9.♗b5!

Now Black has no easy developing moves, and he needs to act fast before White intensifies the pressure with c2-c4. Other moves fail to pose any problems, as you can soon see for yourself:

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9.♘d2 ♘xd4 10.♗xd4 ♘c6 11.♘b3 ♗e7 with easy development for Black.
9.♘c3 ♘xd4 10.♗xd4 ♘c6 11.♗b5 ♗e7 is also fine for us; the purpose of the knight on c3 is not clear.

9.c4 ♘xd4 10.♗xd4 dxc4 11.♕a4† ♘c6 gives Black an easier version of the 8.c4 variation.

9.f4 is met by 9...♘xd4 10.♗xd4 ♘c6 11.c3 ♗e7 when Black is already toying with the idea of ...g5!?, and if 12.g4 ♗e4⇄ White risks becoming overextended.

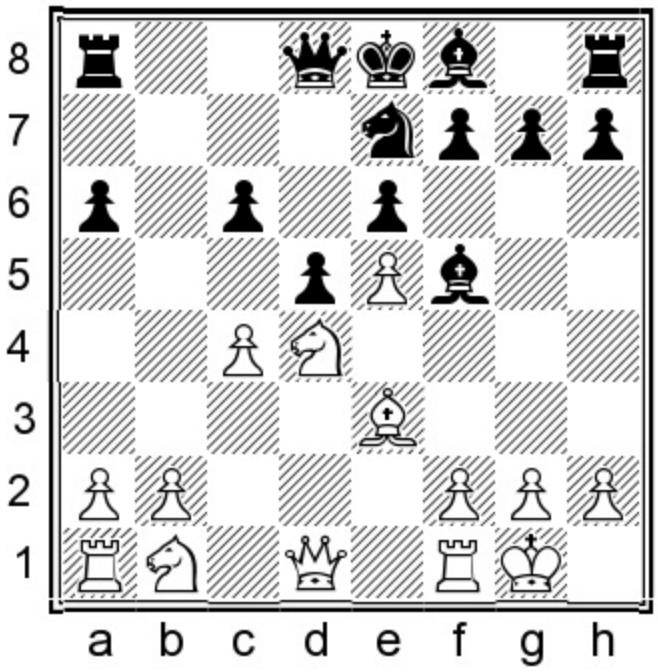
Finally, 9.♘f3 avoids ...♘xd4 followed by ...♘c6, but wastes too much time9...♘g6 (9...h6!? followed by ...g5!? is an interesting alternative.) 10.c4 dxc4 11.♕a4 ♕a5 12.♕xc4 ♘gxe5 13.♘xe5 ♘xe5 14.♕b3 ♕b4∓ This worked well for Black in Movsesian – Navara, Prague 2016.

9...a6

Black should clarify the situation without delay.

9...♗g6 10.c4 can hardly be recommended.

10.♗xc6† bxc6 11.c4



11...♕d7

This is the best continuation, although the trouble is not over yet.

11...c5

Somehow Lc0 proposes this as almost its top choice, but Black will be tortured after:

12.♘xf5 ♘xf5 13.cxd5 ♕xd5 14.♕a4† ♕d7 15.♕e4!?

15.♕xd7† ♔xd7± also favours White, although at least the king can go to c6 here.

15...♖c8 16.♘a3 ♗e7

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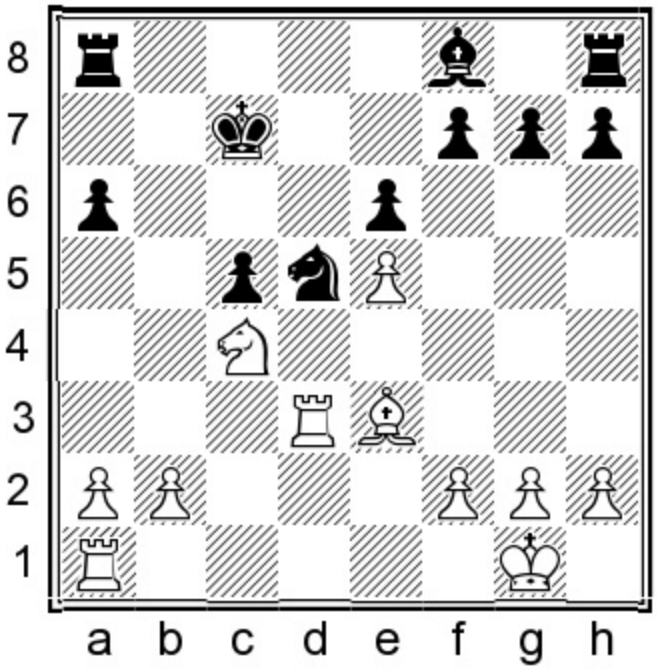
16...♖d8! is better, but Black still falls short of equality.
17.♖fd1 ♕c6 18.♕xc6† ♖xc6 19.♘c4±

White had a dream ending in Giri – Ipatov, Reykjavik 2013.

In *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* I also mentioned: 11...dxc4 12.♕a4 ♗d3 13.♖d1 ♕d7 14.♘a3 c5 15.♘db5 ♘d5 16.♘c7†! ♘xc7 17.♕xd7† ♔xd7 18.♘xc4 ♘d5 19.♖xd3 ♔c7



Looking at the position afresh, I don't really like it! The strong knight on d5 binds Black's position together, so it is not game over. Still, White is at least slightly better, and in a practical game it will be a long and tough defence without any counterplay.

We will analyse **C41)** 12.cxd5 and **C42)** 12.♘c3, the latter being the main line.

C41) 12.cxd5 ♘xd5 13.♘xf5 exf5 14.♗d4 ♖b8⇄

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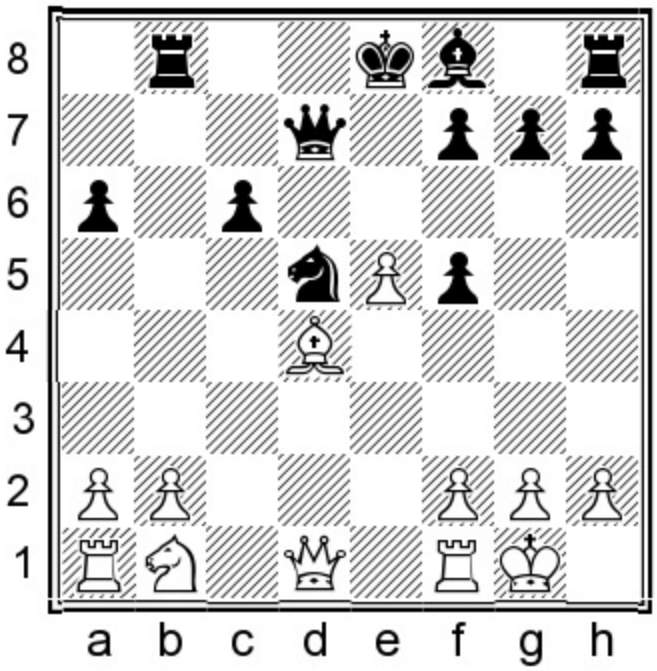

We have reached a position with an unusual pawn structure, where Black seems to be doing alright. Black has to be slightly careful because of his pawn weaknesses, but with careful play he should not be in too much danger.

15.♕f3

15.♘c3 ♘c7 is okay for Black. For instance, 16.b3 ♘e6 17.♗e3 occurred in Perunovic – Aravindh, Biel 2017, and now Black could try the disruptive 17...f4!?N with an interesting game.

15.g3 ♘c7 16.♗c3 ♗b4 17.♗xb4 ♖xb4 18.♕xd7† ♔xd7 19.b3 ♖d4 20.♘a3 ♘e6 21.♘c4 ♔e7 left Black only marginally worse, and he held comfortably in Traut – Amann, corr. 2017.

15.♘d2 ♗e7 16.e6!? ♕xe6 17.♖e1 should be met by:

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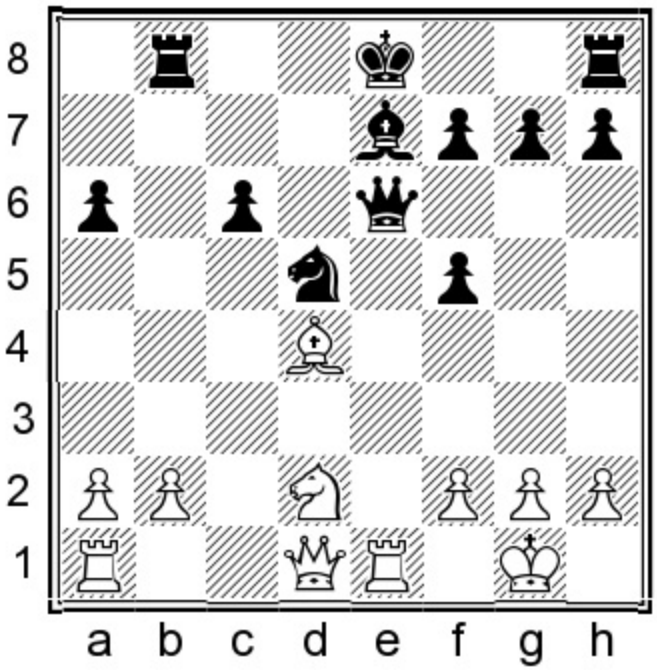
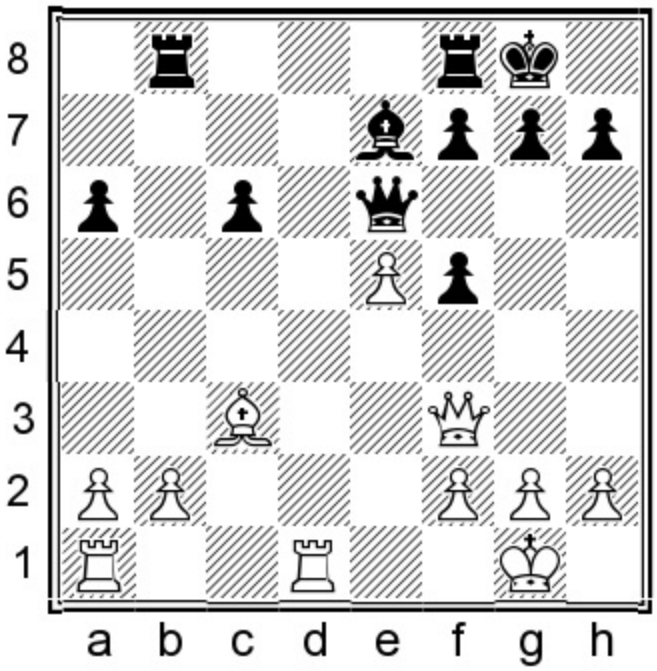


17...♕h6!N (17...♕g6 18.♗c5 ♖b7 19.♗xe7 ♘xe7 20.♕a4 gave White the better game in Vachier-Lagrave – Vidit, Doha 2016) 18.♗c5 ♖b7 19.♗xe7 ♖xe7 20.♖xe7† ♘xe7 Black is fine, an important point being that the white queen is tied to the defence of the knight on d2.

15...♗e7 16.♘c3 ♕e6 17.♖fd1 ♘xc3 18.♗xc3 0-0



19.♖d4 c5 20.♖f4 g6 21.b3 ♖fd8

Once again, White has a tiny edge due to his better pawn structure, but Black held easily in Panitevsky – Rogetzer, corr. 2018.

C42) 12.♘c3

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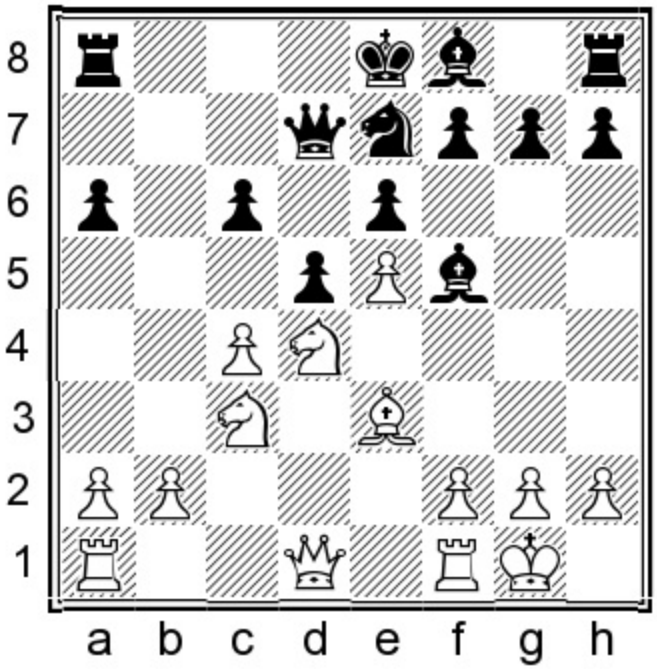
This is the main line, keeping the pace with fast and active development.



12...dxc4

This is not so much about grabbing a pawn as gaining the d5-square for the knight. In more general terms, removing pawns is also part of Black's simplifying strategy. White has two contrasting directions he can take. He can aim for a small positional plus with **C421)** 13.♘xf5, or he may keep the initiative going with **C422)** 13.♘a4.

C421) 13.♘xf5

This allows Black to exchange queens.

13...♕xd1 14.♖axd1

The most natural recapture.

14.♘xd1

This sophisticated move has its points too.

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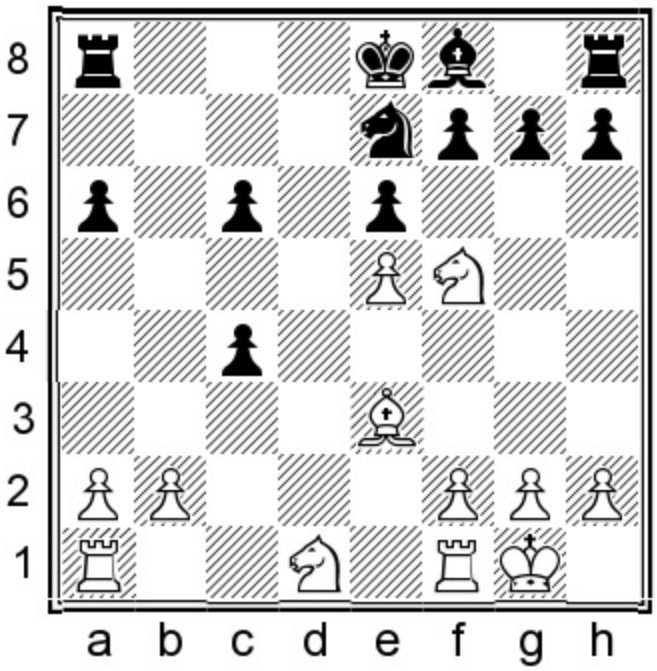

14...♘xf5 15.♖c1 0-0-0 16.♖xc4 ♔b7 17.♘c3 ♗e7

Another typical scenario for this variation has arisen, which we have come across again and again: White has the better pawn structure and slightly easier play, but Black's position is clearly within the drawing zone. This kind of play may not appeal to everyone, which is why I have switched to the 6...♕b6 variation as our main weapon. That said, it is useful to be able to hold positions like this when they arise, so I suggest that you study the continuations of the correspondence games given below, even if you don't intend to play this way. This knowledge that you accumulate by analysing subtle positional games is likely to improve your general chess understanding.

18.♘e4

Another game continued: 18.h3 ♖hf8!? Some kind of active prophylaxis: Black wants to take on e3, so first he protects f7 and in a deeper sense also prepares counterplay on the f-file. 19.♘a4 ♘xe3 20.fxe3 ♖d5!⇄ 21.♖cf4 f5 22.exf6 ♖xf6 23.♖g4 ♖xf1† 24.♔xf1 ♗f6 Black was okay in Tseng – Thompson, corr. 2017.

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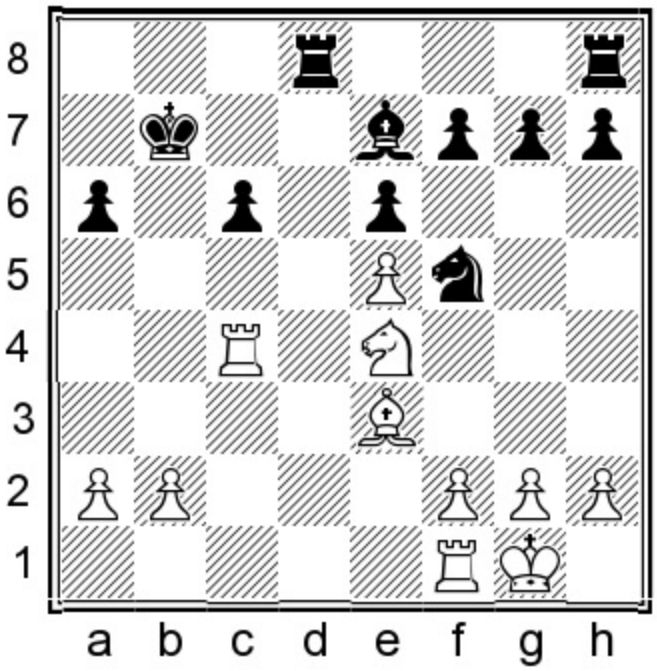

18...♖d5!

An excellent square for the rook.

19.♗g5 ♗xg5 20.♘xg5 h6! 21.♘xf7 ♖f8

The knight is trapped, so White has to go for a double rook ending.

22.♘d6† ♘xd6 23.exd6 ♖xd6 24.♖c2 ♖fd8 25.g3 ♔c7 26.♔g2 ♖d2 27.♖fc1 ♖8d6

½–½ Priepke – Rogetzer, corr. 2017.

14...♘xf5 15.♗b6 ♘e7!

Heading for d5.

16.♖d4 ♖b8

Also playable is 16...♘d5 17.♗a5 ♗b4 18.♗xb4 ♘xb4 19.♖xc4 ♘d3 20.f4 ♘xb2 21.♖b4 ♘d3 22.♖d4 ♘c5 23.♖c4 ♘d7 24.♖xc6 ♔e7 and Black went on to hold, although White was of course slightly better in Hernandez – Halldorsson, corr. 2019.

17.♗c7

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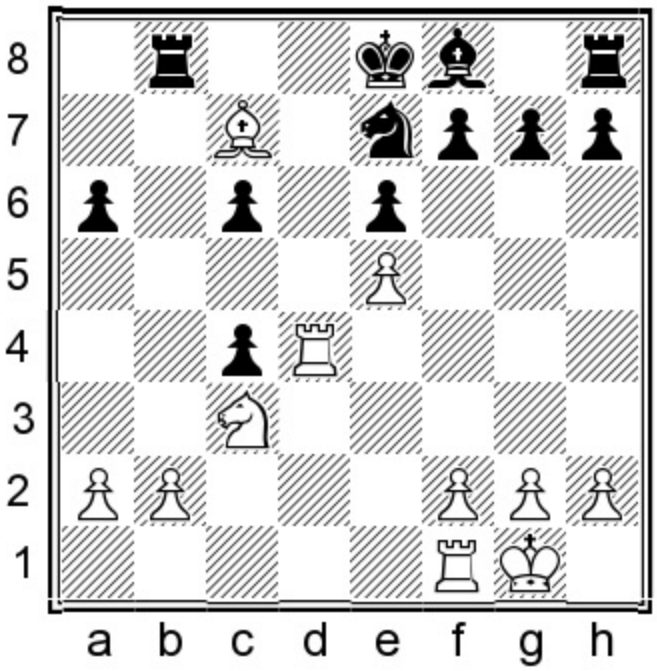


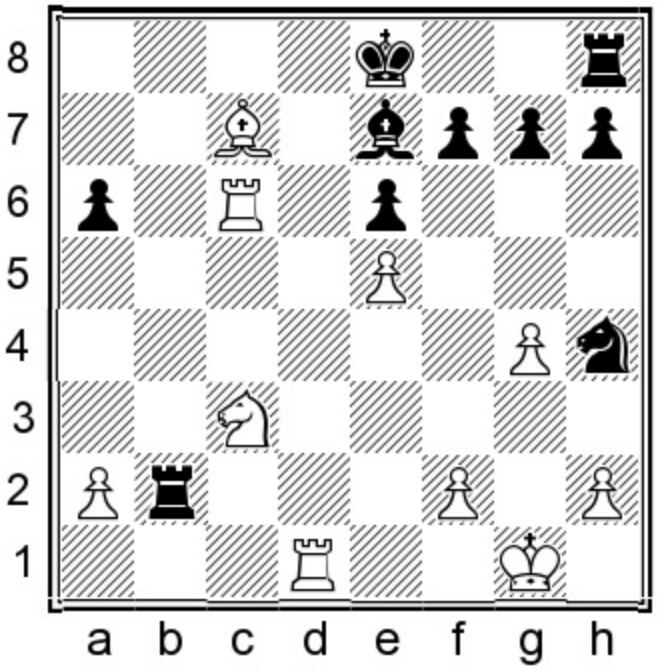
17...♘f5! 18.♖xc4

18.♖d2 ♖c8 19.♗a5 ♖b8 20.♖fd1 ♗e7 21.♖d7 h5! is also okay for Black. Another correspondence game was drawn after: 22.h3 h4 23.♖a7 0-0 24.♘a4 ♖b5 25.♖xa6 ♖xe5 26.♘c3 ♖c8 27.a4 g5 28.♗b6 ♗b4 29.♖a7 ♔g7 30.♔f1 ♔g6 ½–½ Begliy – Chaika, corr. 2017.

18...♖xb2 19.♖d1 ♗e7 20.g4

20.♖xc6 0-0= is no problem for us.

20...♘h4 21.♖xc6



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21...♘f3†!

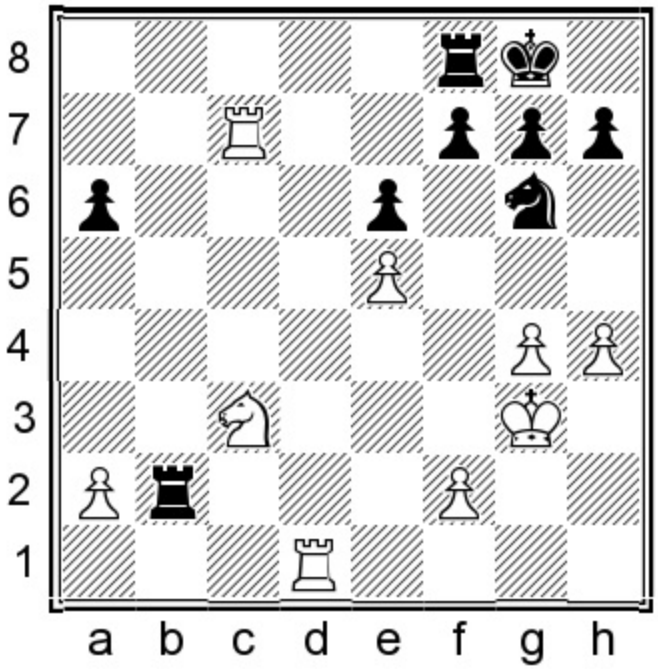
This deep move saves the day.

To understand the virtue of the check, compare with the natural 21...0-0 22.♗d6 ♘g6 when 23.h4! gives White a strong initiative.

22.♔g2 ♘h4† 23.♔g3 ♘g6 24.♗d6 0-0

The difference is that now the white king is on g3, so a pawn arriving on h4 can be captured with check. I will give the remaining moves of an impressive game.

25.♗xe7 ♘xe7 26.♖c7 ♘g6 27.h4!?



Despite the reduced material, White continues playing as aggressively as possible, but Black neutralizes the initiative.

27...♘xe5 28.f4 ♘g6 29.h5 ♘h8 30.g5 h6 31.gxh6 ♔h7 32.hxg7 ♔xg7 33.f5 exf5 34.♖d5 ♖e8 35.♔f3 ♖h2 36.♖xf5

½–½ De Filippis – Marbourg, corr. 2018.

C422) 13.♘a4

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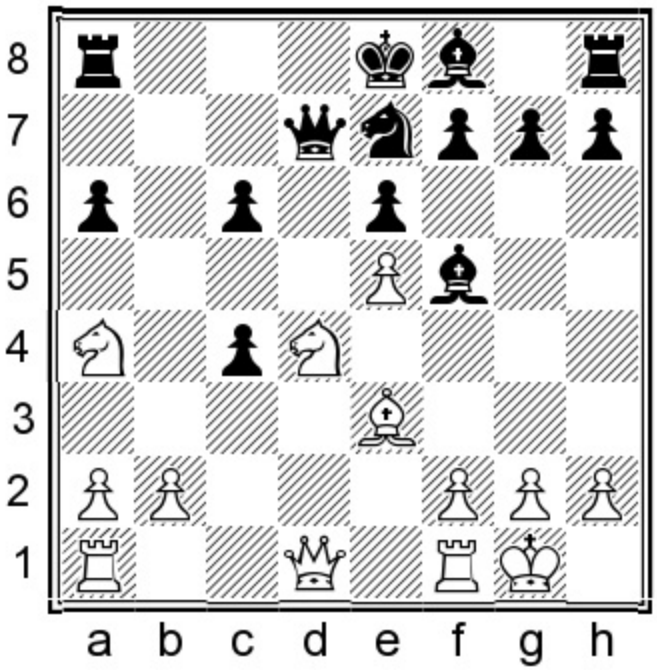

Instead of simplifying, White strives to keep some initiative in the middlegame. The immediate threat is ♘b6.

13...♘d5

This is more or less forced – but it is a move that we would like to play anyway.

14.♘xf5

White should take the opportunity to weaken Black's structure. Without this move, there would not be much point in White's previous play.

14...exf5

A critical position has arisen. We can already recognize the by-now familiar structural deficiencies in Black's camp. White will win his pawn back, but what next? The real question is if White can find some meaningful targets and increase his pressure. What primarily speaks for Black's survival is his possession of the d5-square, which is currently occupied by a wonderful knight, and may in the future serve the queen and/or a rook as well.

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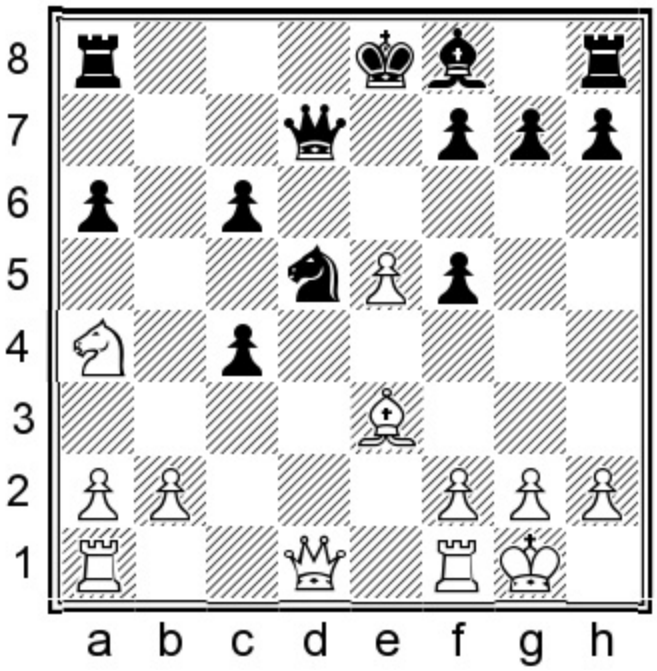
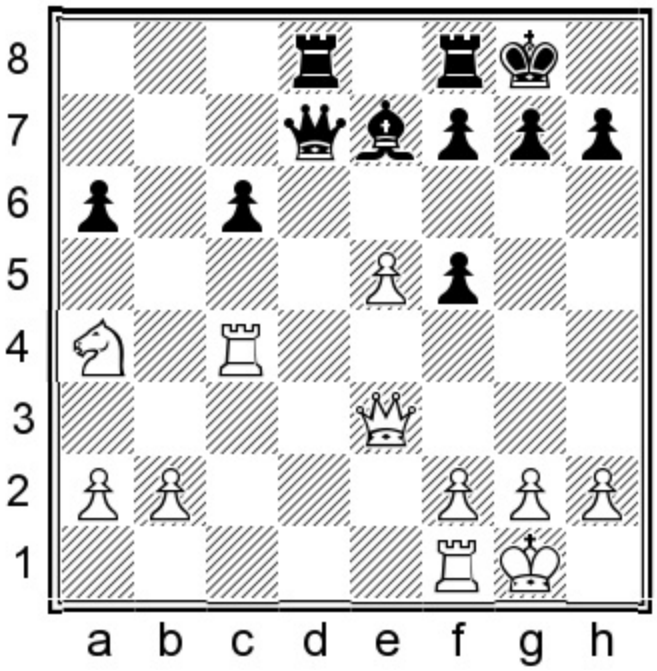


15.♖c1

This is the main line, although White has tried a lot of other moves as well. Here is an overview:

15.♕e2 ♗e7 16.♖ac1 0-0 17.♖xc4 ♘xe3!? A drastic decision, typical for correspondence play. (Black could also keep the tension with 17...♖ab8 or 17...♖fe8) 18.♕xe3 ♖ad8!



19.♕c3 ♕d5 20.♘b6 ♕e6 21.♖xc6 ♕xa2 22.g3 ♖fe8 23.♘c4 ♗f8 24.♕f3 g6= Olofsson – Rogetzer, corr. 2016.

15.♕f3 ♕e6 16.♖ac1 ♗e7 17.♗c5 0-0 18.♖fe1 ♖fe8 19.♖xc4 f6 gives Black counterplay.

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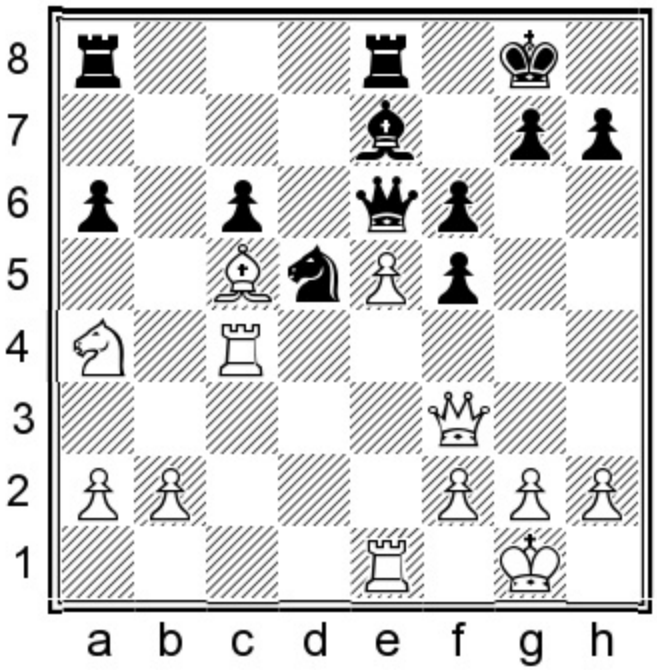

After the further 20.♗d4 ♖ad8 21.h3 ♘b4 22.♕c3 ♘xa2 23.exf6 ♕f7 24.♕b3 a draw was agreed in Sanchez Huerga – Mercadal Benejam, corr. 2017. 24...♗xf6= would be equal.

15.♗d2 ♗e7 16.♕c2 0-0 17.♕xc4 ♕e6

This places the queen on a nice square, showing that the ...exf5 structure is not without benefits.

18.♖fe1

18.f4 ♖ab8 19.g3 ♖fd8 20.b3 (20.♕xa6?! ♖a8 21.♕c4 ♘xf4! is good for Black) 20...h5!⇄ The raid of the h-pawn gives excellent play. 21.♖ac1 (21.♕xa6 h4↑) 21...♕d7 22.♖c2 h4 23.♕xa6 The players picked a strange moment to agree a draw in Onoprichuk – Chaika, corr. 2017. Black could play 23...h3⩲ with at least enough play for the pawn, due to White's exposed king.

18...♖fd8

18...♖ab8!? also looks okay.

19.g3 a5 20.♖e2 ♘b4!

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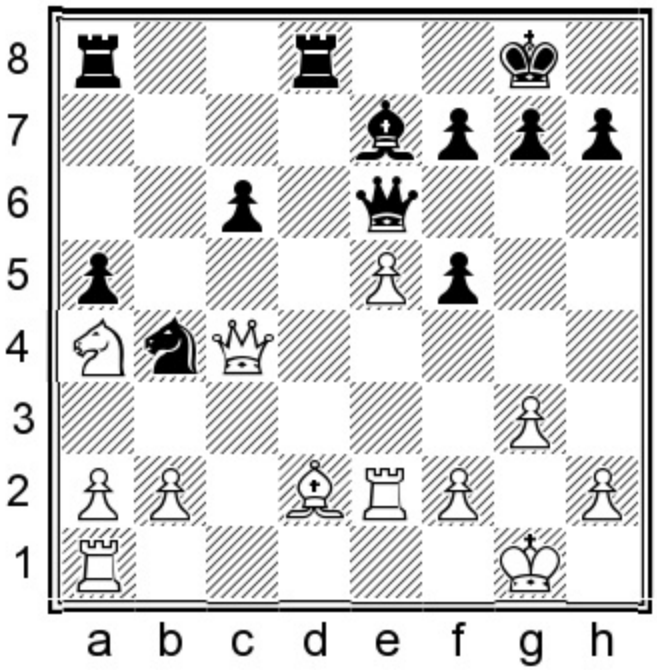

21.♕xe6 fxe6 22.♔f1 ♔f7=

Pastukhov – Chaika, corr. 2019.

15.♗d4

This was played by Gelfand against Karpov in the mid-1990s.

15...♖d8

In a recent correspondence encounter Black deviated with 15...c5!? and the game quickly became crazy: 16.♗c3 ♖b8 17.♕f3 ♘b4 18.e6! fxe6 19.♖fe1 ♔f7 20.g4 White has good compensation and I would guess most practical players would consider this risky for Black over the board, although the defences held up fine in Konstantinov – Burmeister, corr. 2018.

16.♕f3

16.♘c5 should be met by 16...♕c8.

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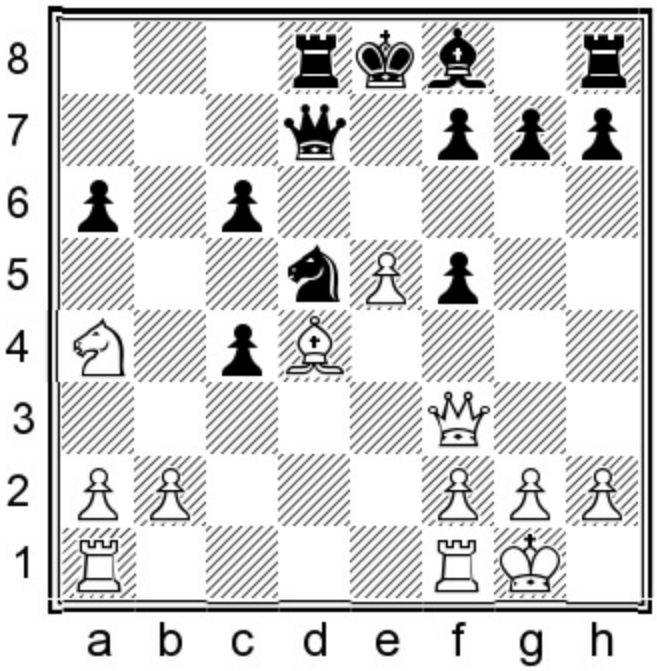
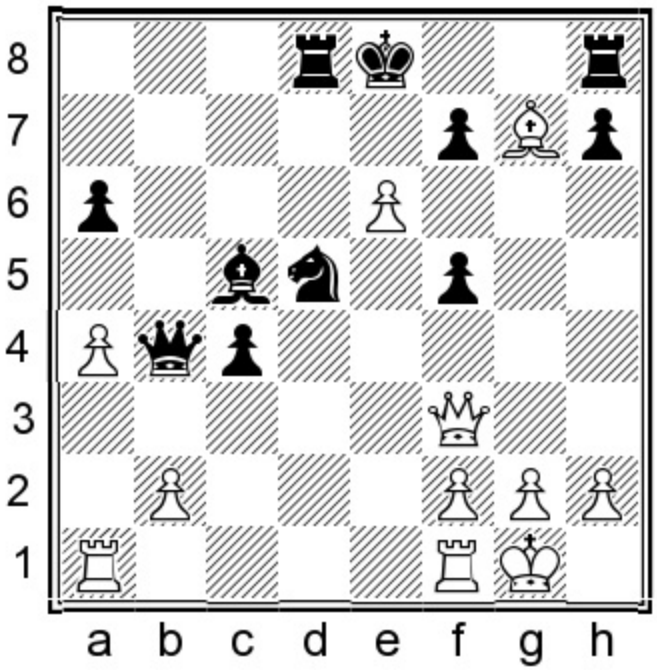


16...c5! 17.♘xc5 ♕b5

The white knight is in trouble.

18.a4 ♕b4 19.e6! ♗xc5 20.♗xg7

More critical is: 20.exf7† ♔f8! 21.♖ad1 ♗e7 22.♖fe1⩲ This looks tricky, but Black has two ways to force a draw: 22...♔xf7 (or 22...♘f6 23.♕xf5 ♖xd4 24.♕c8† ♖d8 25.♖xd8† ♗xd8 26.♕xd8† ♔xf7 27.♕c7† ♔g6 28.♕g3† ♔f7= with a repetition) 23.♕xf5† ♗f6 24.♕e6† ♔g6 25.♕g4† ♔f7= White has nothing better than perpetual check.



20...♖g8 21.exf7† ♔xf7 22.♗c3 ♘xc3

This leads to perpetual check.

Black could have played for more with 22...♕b6!N 23.♕xf5† ♔e8 24.♖fe1† ♗e7 25.♕xh7 ♕g6

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26.♕xg6† ♖xg6∓

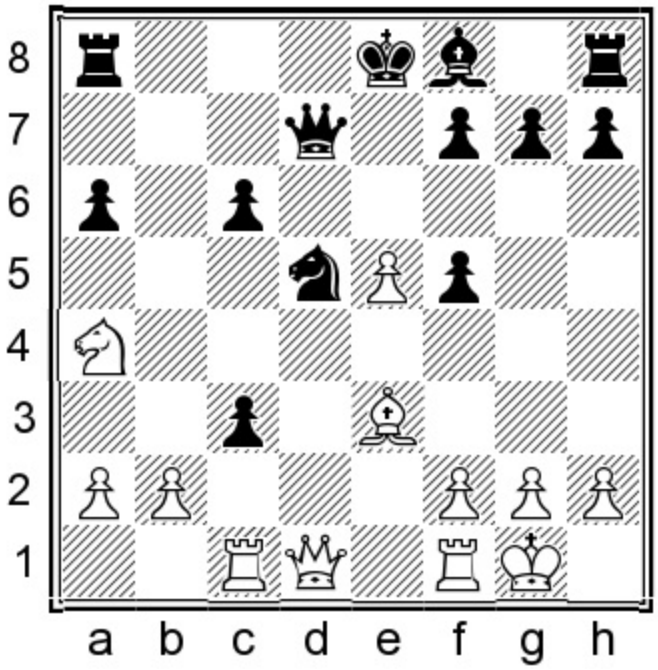
23.♕xf5† ♔g7 24.♕g5† ♔f7 25.♕f5† ♔g7 26.♕g5†

½–½ Gelfand – Karpov, Sanghi Nagar (1) 1995.

15...c3!

The most forcing.

15...♗e7 16.♖xc4 0-0 is also playable. 17.♗c5 ♖ad8 We reach a familiar structure, where White is slightly more comfortable, but Black is well within the drawing zone.



16.♘xc3

This is the obvious move, but it allows Black to carry out his plan of simplifying.

16.♕c2!?

This has been a popular way to keep playing for initiative rather than material. Black is still a couple of moves away from castling, so White will attempt to create strong threats before that happens.

16...cxb2

16...♖b8!? is another possibility, refusing to comply!

17.♕xb2 ♗e7 18.e6

a) 18.♖fd1 0-0 19.♘b6 backfires because of 19...♕b7! when White's queen is unprotected. After 20.♕b3 ♘xb6 21.♕xb6 ♕xb6 22.♗xb6 ♖fc8∓ White was lucky to have enough activity to hold a draw in T. Nguyen – Bogner, Radenci 2019.

b) 18.♘c5 should be met by: 18...♕c7 (but not 18...♗xc5? 19.♗xc5 and the king is trapped in the centre) 19.e6 0-0! The king escapes in time. 20.♘d7 ♖fe8 21.♖xc6 ♕xc6 22.exf7†

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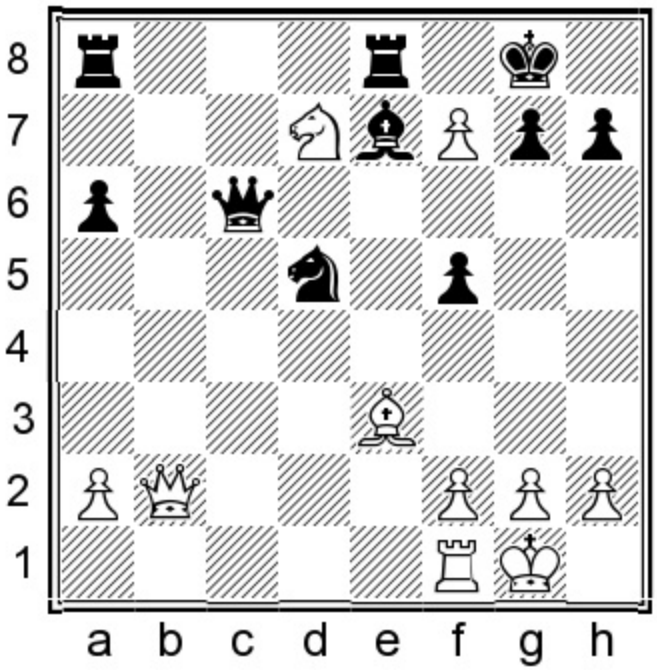
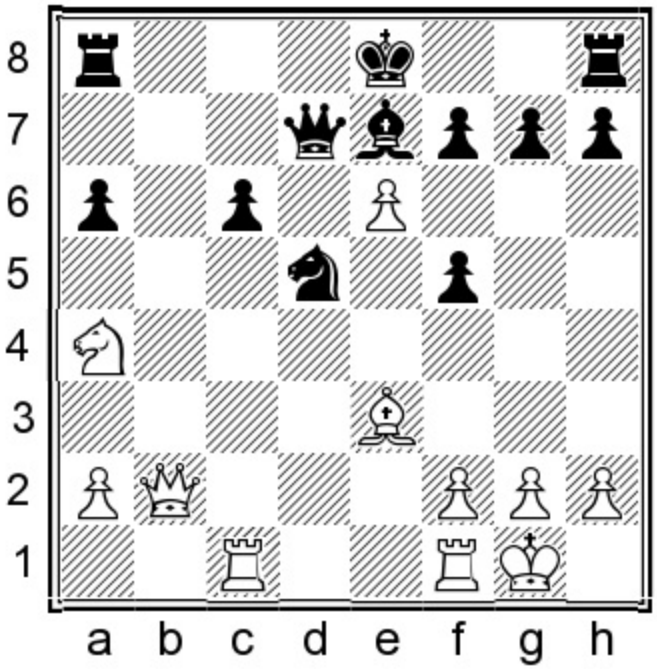


22...♔h8! Black simply gives back the material and defends. 23.♗d4 ♘f6 24.♘e5 ♕d5 25.fxe8=♕† ♖xe8 26.♘f3 h6 27.h3 ♗d8 28.♖d1 ♔h7 29.♕b1 ½–½ Kayis – Marbourg, corr. 2018. 29...♕e4= would be the likely continuation.

Returning to 18.e6, this looks tempting, but Black has enough defensive resources.



18...fxe6 19.♕xg7 ♗f6

This highlights the problem with sharp lines in the computer era: they speed up the game and often end in an early peace agreement because all possibilities have been exhausted.

20.♕g3

Another game continued 20.♕h6 ♗g7 (20...♕g7 is also fine) 21.♕h5† ♕f7 22.♕f3 0-0= and Black was perfectly fine in Gumularz – Mitrabha, Mumbai 2019.

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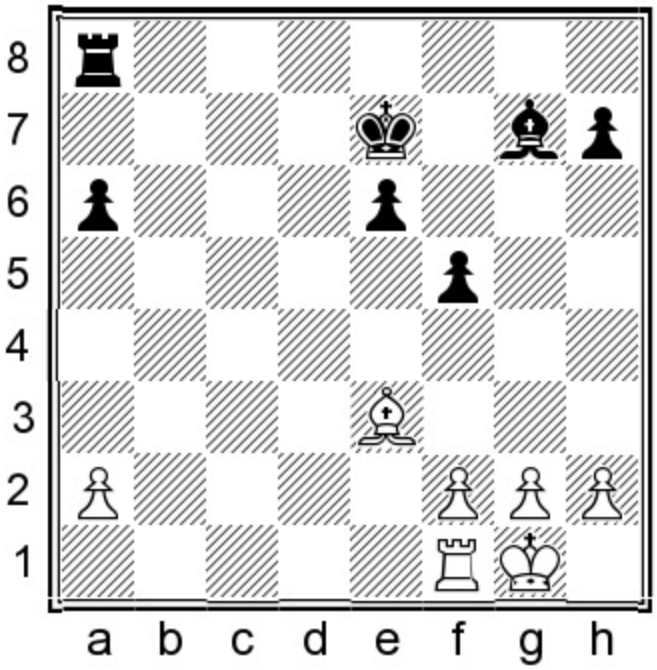
20...♕g7 21.♕xg7

A queen exchange always eases Black's game. There wasn't much point in keeping them though, as 21.♕d6 ♕e7 22.♕xc6† ♔f7= is fine for Black.

21...♗xg7 22.♖xc6 ♔d7 23.♖b6 ♘xb6 24.♘xb6† ♔e7 25.♘xa8 ♖xa8



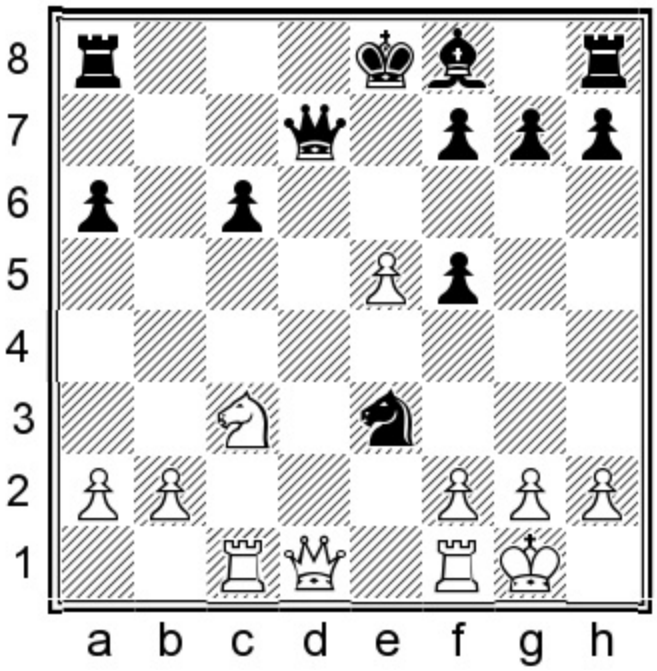
A draw was agreed in Lemutov – Chaika, corr. 2018. White could try:

26.♖b1

But Black is not in real danger, for example:

26...a5 27.a4 ♖c8 28.♖b7† ♔f8 29.♖b5 ♗c3=

16...♘xe3



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17.♕xd7†

White lures Black's king out into the open; but with so little material left, it is not that inconvenient.

17.fxe3 g6

This secures the f5-pawn. If White now takes on d7, we would transpose to the main line. That would seem White's most sensible course of action, because alternatives give nothing at all. Here is an example:

18.e4 ♕xd1 19.♖fxd1 ♗g7 20.exf5 ♗xe5 21.♘a4 0-0 22.fxg6 hxg6 23.♖c5

23.♖xc6 looks like the critical test, but Black gets good compensation for the pawn after 23...♖ac8⩲ or 23...♖ad8© Since White eschewed the extra pawn in a correspondence game, it's a safe bet that Black easily holds a draw (which is also what happened in the game).

23...♖fe8 24.g3 ♗g7⇄

Black had no problems in Mulligan – Rodi Maletich, corr. 2017.

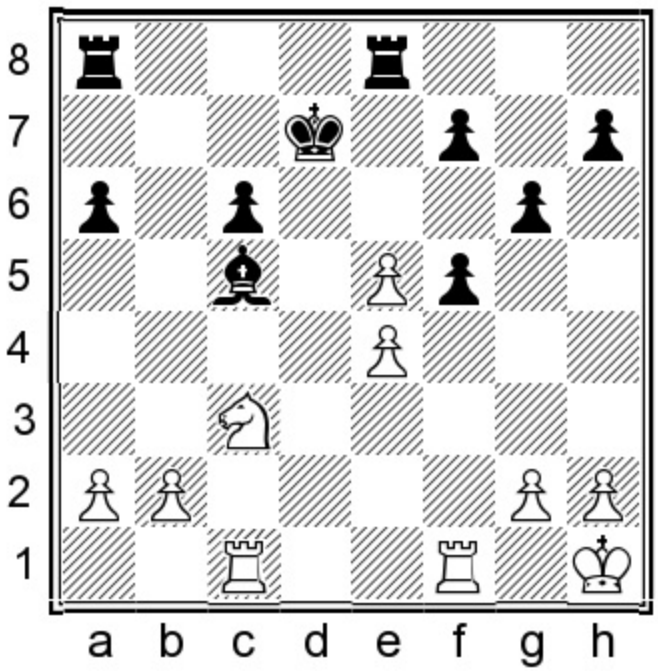
17...♔xd7 18.fxe3 g6

This position has been tested in a bunch of correspondence games. There is no doubt that it is balanced, and I will just quote a recent example.

19.e4

The best try.

19...♗c5† 20.♔h1 ♖he8!



Black's pieces join the battle.

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21.♖fd1† ♔e7 22.exf5 ♗e3! 23.♖c2 gxf5 24.♖f1 f4 25.♘e2 ♔f8 26.♘xf4 ♖xe5 27.g3 c5
½–½ Kulick – Halldorsson, corr. 2019.

We have covered a number of lines after 8.0-0 where White gets a tiny edge due to his better pawn structure, but nowhere have we been seriously troubled.

Conclusion

For a long time, nearly all the top players' favourite choice against the Caro-Kann was to play the Short System, 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2. Black has many possibilities but I favour the immediate 5...c5, when the best move is 6.♗e3. Here we have a choice. The current chapter has comprehensively updated my old recommendation, namely the solid 6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘ge7. The resulting positions are easier to play for White, but Black should be able to equalize gradually. It is useful to see how the solid Caro-Kann can withstand White's best efforts, and some players may wish to keep this line in their repertoires. However, more ambitious players are advised to investigate 6...♕b6!?, as covered in the next chapter.

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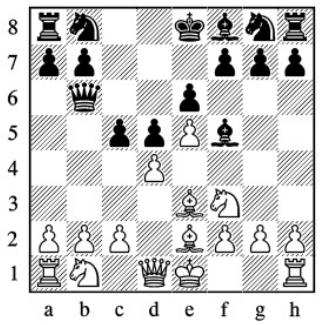
Chapter 4



6...♕b6!?

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"*I guess I'll call it sickness goneIt's hard to say the meaning of this songAn ambulance can only go so fastIt's easy to get buried in the pastWhen you try to make a good thing last"*

Neil Young – Ambulance Blues

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 c5 6.♗e3 ♕b6!?

This aggressive move has several functions. Apart from attacking the b2-pawn, Black defends c5 and puts additional pressure on the important d4-pawn.

We will analyse **A)** 7.c4!? before turning to the sharp but far-from-obvious **B)** 7.♘c3!, which is White's best answer.

Before we get to the main lines, there are some minor alternatives to consider. White can try to keep control by defending the b2-pawn, at the cost of some momentum, or he can sacrifice the pawn in various ways.

7.♘a3?! a6!? leaves the knight misplaced, and after 8.♖b1 ♘c6 9.0-0 ♗e4!?∓ Black is doing great.

7.♕c1?! is inadequate in view of 7...♘c6 8.c3 ♗g4!?⇄ with serious pressure against d4.

7.b3?! is slow and weakens the dark squares. 7...♘c6 8.0-0 cxd4!? 9.♘xd4 ♘xd4 10.♗xd4 ♗c5 11.♗b2 was seen in Nemeth – Kasimdzhanov, Germany 2017, and now 11...♘e7N followed by ...♘c6 would have given Black a fine position.

7.dxc5?! ♗xc5 8.♗xc5 ♕xc5 9.♕d4 is too tame. 9...♘d7!? 10.♘c3 a6 11.♕xc5 ♘xc5 12.♘d4 ♘e7 13.f4 h5 14.0-0-0

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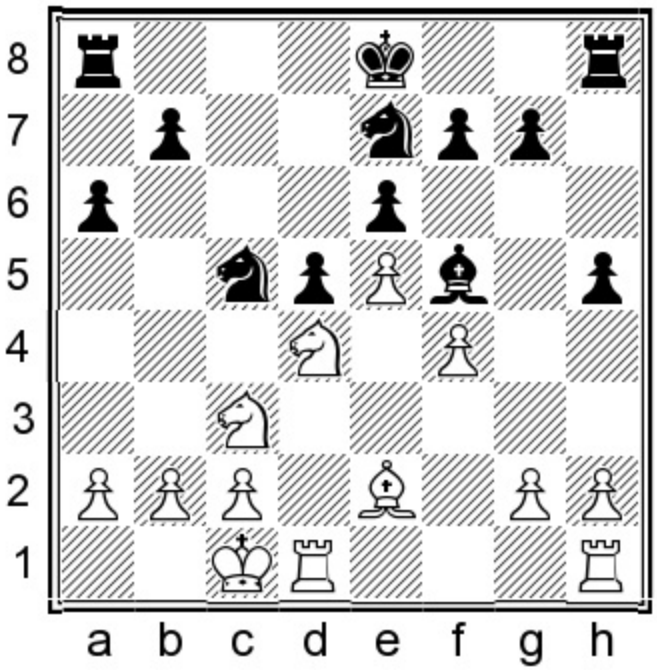
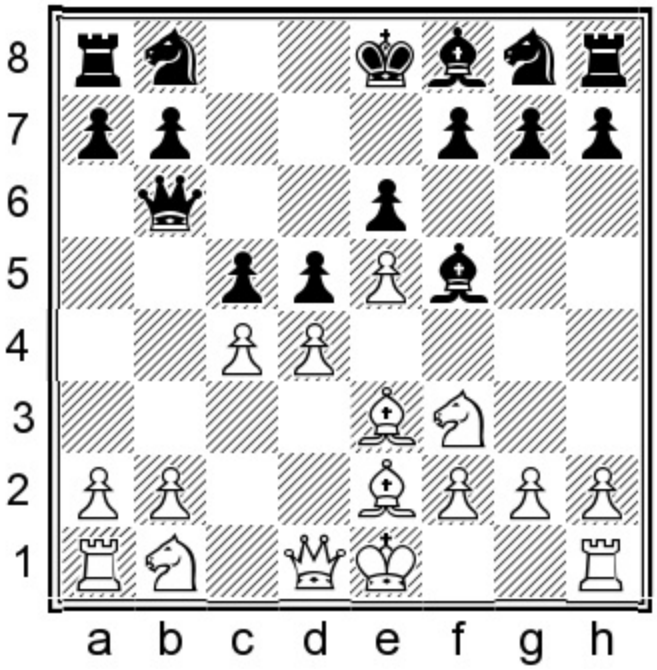


This was seen in Topalov – Illescas Cordoba, Leon 1996, and now 14...♗g4!?N 15.♖he1 ♖c8 16.♖d2 ♗xe2 17.♖exe2 g6∓ would have given Black a promising French-style endgame.

7.♘bd2 ♘c6⇄ with strong pressure against the centre and queenside.

7.0-0 ♕xb2 gives White nothing better than 8.c4 when 8...♘e7! (8...♕xa1?? 9.♕b3+– traps the queen and Black's queenside will fall apart) 9.♘bd2 transposes to variation A below.

A) 7.c4!?



This is the most threatening of White's alternatives. It was proposed by GM Shirov in his *Best*

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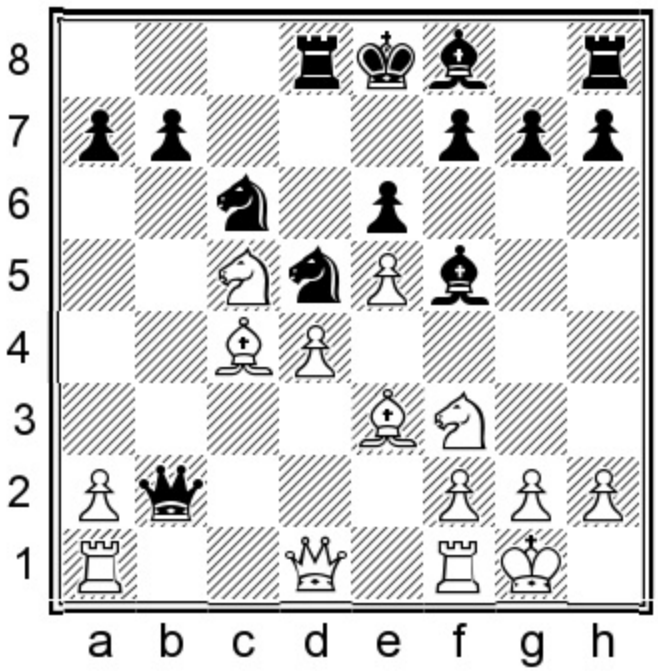
Games in the Caro-Kann ChessBase DVD some years ago and it is true to Shirov's style: dynamic and aggressive. Nowadays, however, it has been established that Black is fine.

7...♕xb2 8.♘bd2 ♘e7! 9.0-0 ♘bc6

The bishop on f5 does a fantastic job preventing ♖b1.

10.♘b3 dxc4! 11.♗xc4 ♖d8! 12.♘xc5 ♘d5



Black is already completely fine.

13.♗g5

White has nothing better.

After 13.♘d3 ♕a3 White's best is: 14.♗xd5!?N (14.♖c1?! ♗e7 15.♕d2 0-0 16.h3 ♗e4! is a typical way to use the Caro-Kann bishop: 17.♗b3 ♗xf3 18.gxf3 ♘b6∓ Kosteniuk – Kacheishvili, Las Vegas 2010) 14...♖xd5 15.♘f4 ♖d7 16.d5

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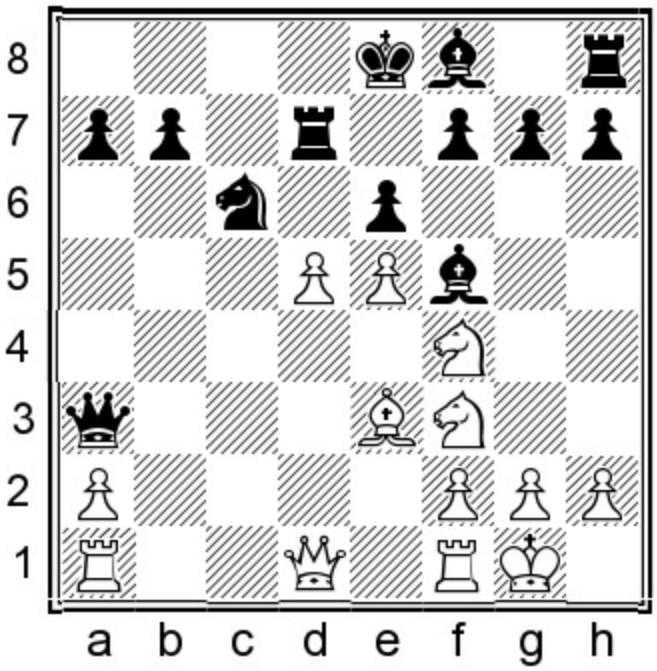
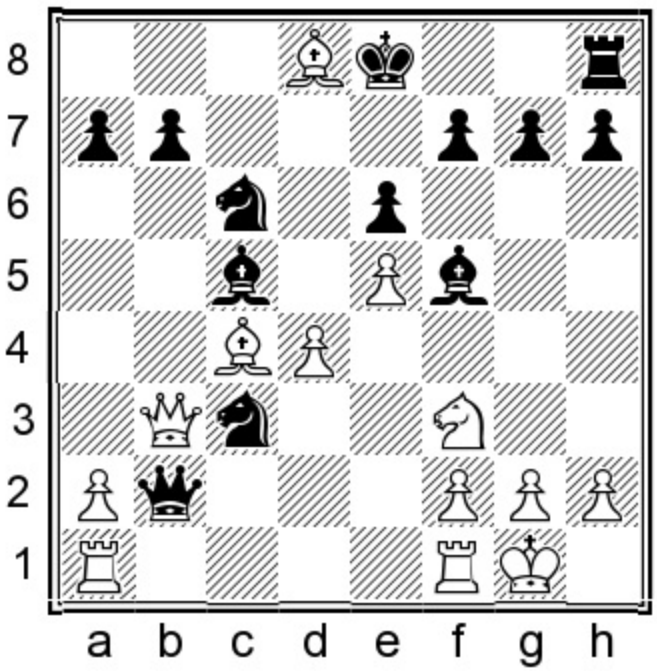


This is a forcing continuation but White is essentially fighting for equality, and after 16...♗e4!∓ I am not convinced that she is really there yet, as 17.d6? ♗xf3 will win both of the dangerous-looking pawns.

13...♗xc5! 14.♗xd8 ♘c3 15.♕b3

15.♕c1? ♕b4! 16.dxc5 ♕xc4 17.♕g5 ♘xd8 18.♕xg7 ♖f8∓ left White material down for insufficient compensation in Kryvoruchko – Punin, Lvov 2015.

We have been following Markgraf – Turov, Haarlem 2010.



15...♗a3!?N

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Turov exchanged queens on b3 which is also fine, but the text move is especially interesting. We are prepared to play a positional game an exchange down!

16.♗c7 ♕xb3 17.♗xb3

Worse is: 17.axb3?! ♗b2 18.♖ae1 The only square to save the extra exchange, but 18...b5! 19.♗e2 ♔d7 20.♗d6 a5⩲ leaves Black with more than enough compensation for the exchange.

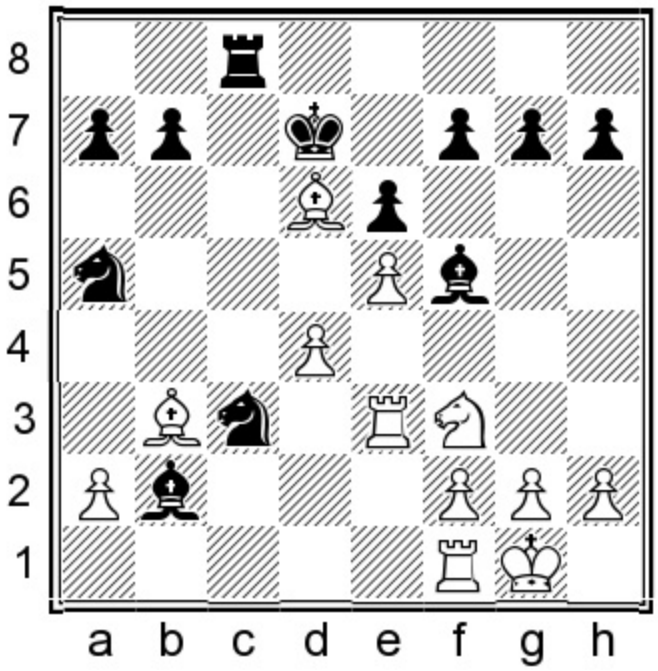
17...♗b2 18.♖ae1 ♔d7!

18...♗d3!? wins back the exchange, but we can play for more.

19.♗d6 ♘a5!? 20.♖e3

Preventing ...♗d3.

20...♖c8



Black has full compensation and chances to fight for the advantage. For example:

21.h3

After this or any similarly neutral move, we can continue:

21...♘xb3 22.axb3 a5∓

And the b-pawn is ready to follow.

B) 7.♘c3

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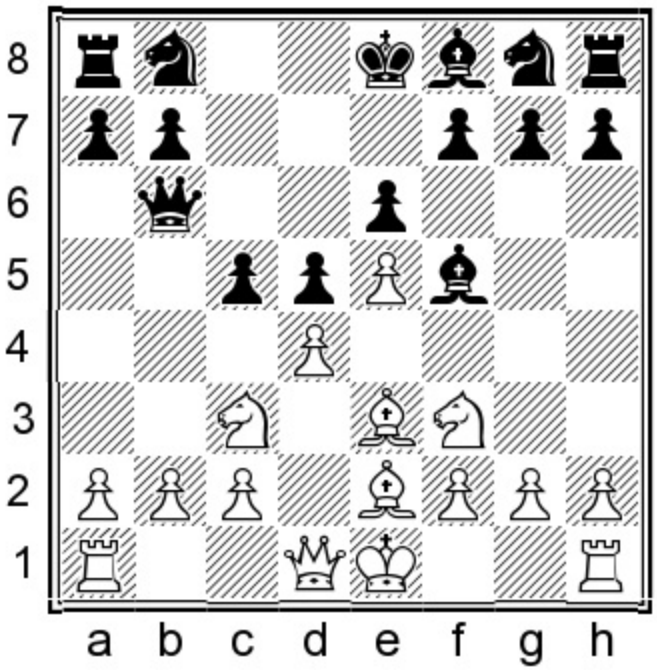

7...♘c6!

It took some time for the Caro-Kann community to establish that this is Black's best move. It is worth seeing why the alternatives are less precise.

Black could also keep the position closed with:

7...c4

For some time this was considered promising, but White has a strong reply.

8.♖b1! ♕d8

8...♗b4?! 9.0-0 gives White an easier advantage: 9...♗xc3

9.0-0 ♗b4 10.♘a4!? ♘c6

10...b5 11.a3! is another continuation where White claims that the move ...b5 might not be optimal.

11.a3 ♗f8 12.♘e1 h5

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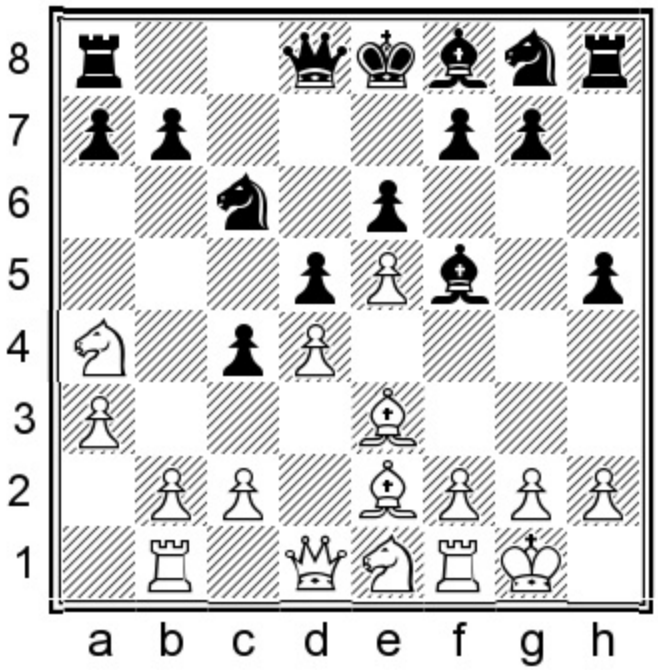

The last move is necessary to avoid being overrun by the white pawns on the kingside. Objectively this position is probably somewhere between okay for Black and White being somewhat better. I don't trust it completely, but if you enjoy playing closed positions you can give it a go.

7...♕xb2?!

Taking the pawn at once is tempting but excessively risky.

8.♕b1!

This is the problematic continuation.

8.♘b5 has been a more popular choice, but it is less convincing.

8...♕xb1†

8...♕xc3†? 9.♗d2 just loses.

8...♕b4 is met by 9.a3! and Black has to exchange queens after all. Then 9...♕xb1† 10.♖xb1 c4 11.♖xb7 ♘c6 12.♘b5 ♘d8 13.♖c7 ♗xc2 14.♘d6† ♗xd6 15.exd6 ♘f6 16.♖e7† ♔f8 17.♘e5 was excellent for White in Leonard – Volodarsky, corr. 2018.

9.♖xb1 c4

Trying to close the position.

9...b6 is met by 10.dxc5 bxc5 and now both 11.♖b7 and 11.♘b5 are promising.

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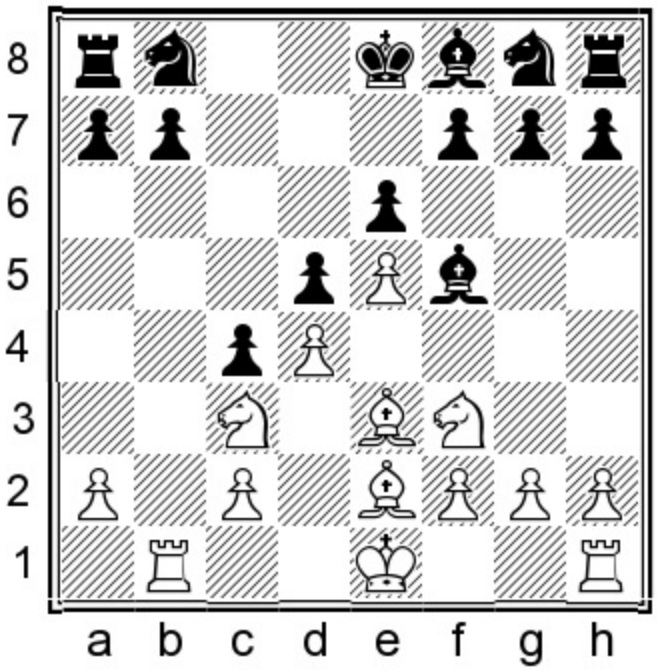

10.♖xb7 ♘c6 11.♘b5 ♘d8 12.♖c7! ♖b8 13.♘d6† ♗xd6 14.exd6 ♖b1† 15.♗d1 ♗xc2 16.♔d2 ♗xd1 17.♖xd1

White scores well here in correspondence games. Black is a long way from equalizing, so this cannot be recommended.

We will analyse **B1)** 8.♗b5, **B2)** 8.dxc5, **B3)** 8.♘a4 and finally the most threatening **B4)** 8.0-0.

Protecting the pawn with 8.♖b1?! can be strongly met by: 8...♗e4!N 9.♘xe4 dxe4 10.♘d2 cxd4 11.♗f4 f5∓

B1) 8.♗b5

Losing a tempo, but it solves the problem with the pressure on d4 and the attack on b2.

8...♖c8!?

We meet a rarity with a rarity, but we have a sound idea in mind. Next will come ...♗g4.

8...♗g4?! immediately doesn't work as well due to 9.dxc5 ♗xc5 10.♗xc5 ♕xc5 11.♕d4 ♕xd4 12.♗xc6†! bxc6 13.♘xd4! c5 14.♘b3± intending 14...c4 15.♘d4, or 14...♖c8 15.♘b5.

8...c4 has been tried, but after 9.0-0 a6 10.♗xc6† ♕xc6 11.♘h4 ♘e7 12.♗g5 ♗g6 13.f4 White developed some initiative in Naiditsch – Adla, Mulhouse 2011.

8...♘h6!? is offered by Dreev. It is a cool idea, but I like my recommendation more!

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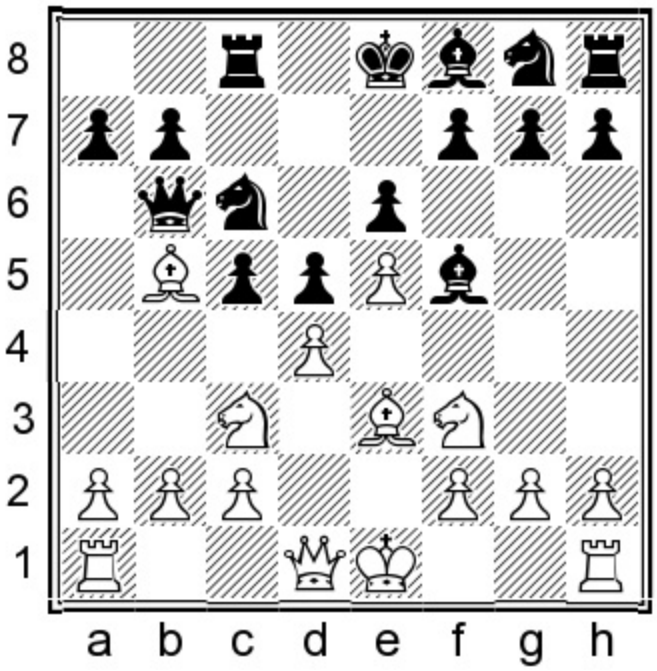

9.h3!N

Preventing ...♗g4.

9.b4? is the only move that has been tried in practice and it is just bad: 9...cxb4 10.♗xc6† ♕xc6 11.♘e2 ♕xc2 Black was simply two pawns up in Panian – Kathstede, Recklinghausen 1999.

White's other plausible continuation is harmless at best:

9.0-0?! ♗g4!

This gives Black at least equal play.

10.dxc5 ♗xc5 11.♗xc5 ♕xc5 12.♕d4 ♕xd4 13.♗xc6†

13.♘xd4 ♘ge7=

13...bxc6 14.♘xd4

Compare this with 8...♗g4?!.

14...♘e7!

Black is fine. White is unable to take control over the c5-square.

9...a6 10.♗xc6† ♕xc6 11.0-0

11.♘h4?! cxd4 12.♗xd4 ♘e7∓

11...h6

Securing our Caro-Kann bishop.

12.a4 b6!? 13.♘e2 ♘e7 14.c3 c4

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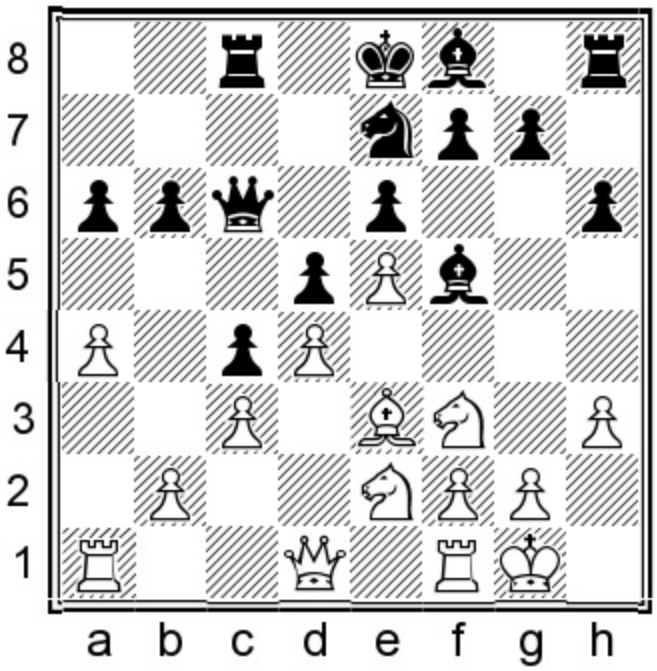

We have reached an interesting position with chances for both sides. Black can try to get his king to a safe spot on the queenside. I will just offer some sample lines to show how the game might unfold:

15.g4 ♗h7 16.♘g3 ♔d7 17.♘e1 ♔c7 18.f4 f5!?

A typical counter-measure.

19.exf6 gxf6 20.♘h5 f5!

20...♘g8 21.a5 b5 22.f5↑

21.♘f3 ♔b7∞

B2) 8.dxc5

For a brief period, this was considered the main way for White to fight for a small and practical advantage.

8...♗xc5 9.♗xc5 ♕xc5 10.♘b5

The point: White threatens a decisive check.

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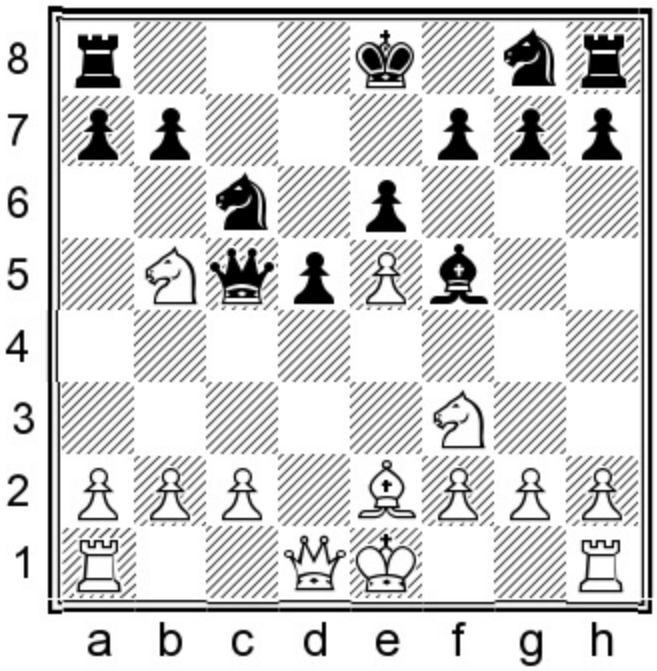

10...♔f8!

We are following an instructive clash between two heavyweights (in the chess sense).

11.♘bd4

Having provoked the enemy king into moving, White conquers the key d4-square, which is where the strategic battle will unfold.

11.♘d6?! ♗e4! leaves White with problems in the centre: it turns out that the e5-pawn is loose, which is really bad news for the knight on d6.

11.c3 is well met by 11...♗e4!⇄ when Black can take on f3 and/or develop his knight to e7.

11...♘ge7!

Notice how Black correctly resists the temptation of winning a pawn with ...♕b4† and ...♕xb2, as this would leave him dangerously behind in development.

12.0-0 ♗e4!

Again we see this key move.

13.♖e1 h6! 14.c3

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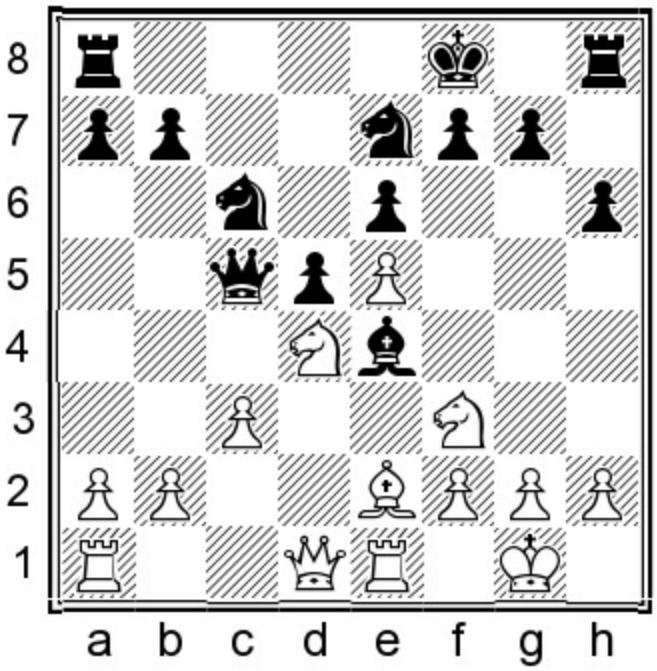


14...♘xd4!?N

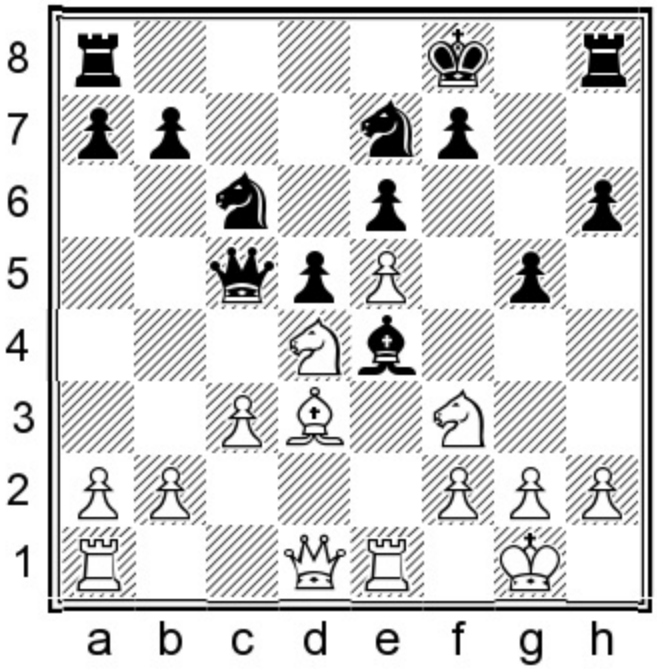
A more restrained approach is 14...♕b6 15.b3 ♖c8 followed by ...♗xf3 and ...g6, when Black is solid albeit a tad worse.

14...g5!?

This is adventurous but possibly not completely correct.

15.♗d3

We have been following S. Zhigalko – Esipenko, Minsk 2019. Best play continues:



15...♗xf3!N 16.♘xf3!

After 16.♕xf3 ♘xd4 a practically forced line continues: 17.♕f6 ♖g8 18.cxd4 ♕xd4 19.♖ad1 ♖g7

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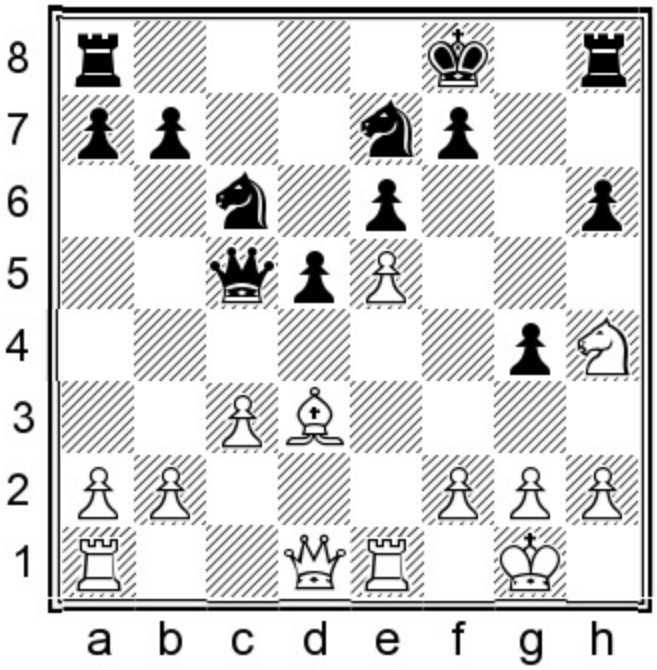
20.♕xh6 ♕h4 21.♕f6 ♕h5 Threatening ...♘g8. 22.♗e2 Now Black can choose between 22...♕h4 which is 0.00 according to the engines, and 22...♕g6!? which is a double-edged attempt to play for more.

16...g4!? 17.♘h4



17...d4! 18.♕xg4 dxc3 19.♖ac1 ♘xe5 20.♕e2 ♘xd3 21.♕xd3 ♕b4 22.♘f3 cxb2 23.♖c4 ♕b6 24.♖b1 ♖d8 25.♕c3 ♖g8 26.g3⩱

White is temporarily two pawns down, but he will pick up the b2-pawn and have excellent compensation for the other one. Objectively the position may be equal, but I consider it practically dangerous for Black due to the insecure position of the king.

15.♘xd4

If 15.cxd4?! ♕b4∓ Black can eliminate the f3-knight and put pressure on d4.

15...♘c6

According to the machine, best play continues:

16.♗d3 ♗xd3 17.♕xd3 ♖c8⇄

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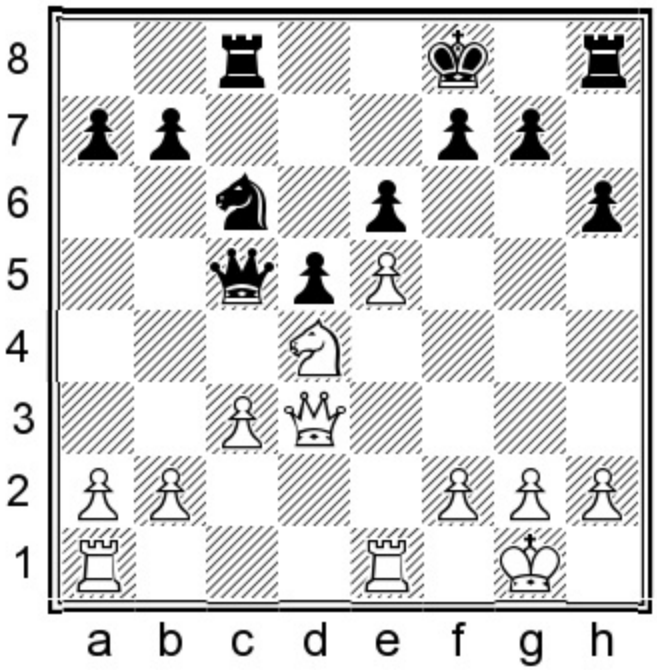
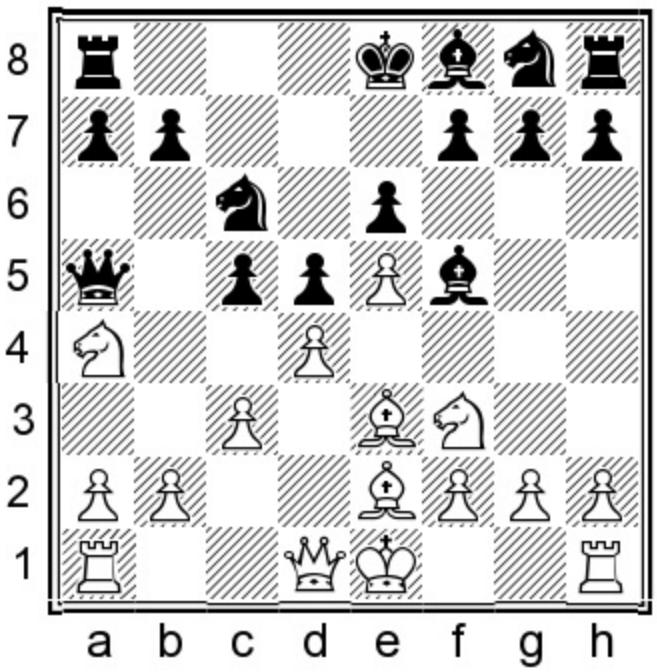


The only question remaining is what to do with our king and the h8-rook. Depending on how White proceeds, both ...h5-h4 and ...g6 followed by ...♔g7 can be considered.

B3) 8.♘a4 ♕a5† 9.c3



9...c4!

The most common continuation has been:

9...cxd4 10.♘xd4 ♘xd4 11.♗xd4 ♘e7 12.♕b3!

Not the only move, but dangerous enough to make me stay away from this line.

12...♕c7 13.♘c5 0-0-0 14.♕a4! ♘c6 15.0-0

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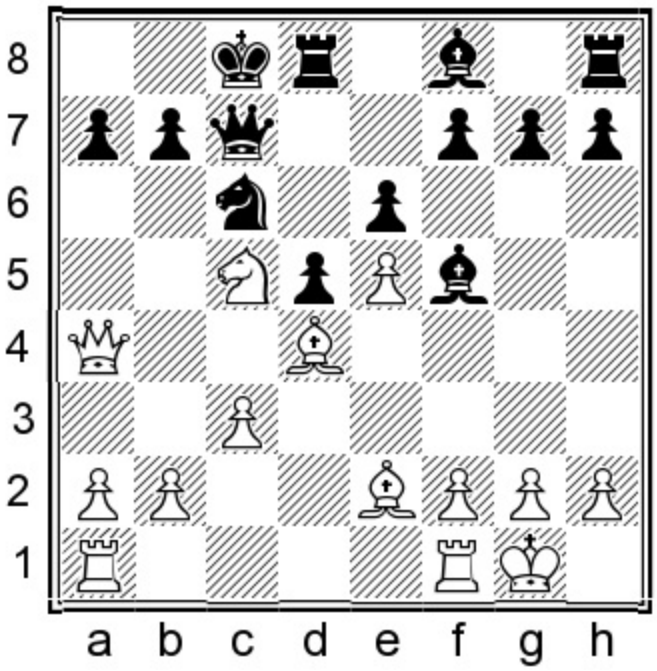

White has easy play and can put serious pressure on Black's position with ♗b5. Here are a couple of examples:

15...♔b8

15...♗xc5?! 16.♗xc5 ♕xe5 17.♗b5! ♕c7 18.♗xa7 e5 19.♗c5 ♖he8 20.♖ad1± was even worse in Le Quang Liem – Rozum, Hanoi 2018.

16.♖ac1! f6 17.♗b5 fxe5 18.♗xc6 ♕xc6 19.♗xe5† ♔c8 20.♕xc6† bxc6 21.b4 ♗xc5 22.bxc5 ♖d7 23.f3 ♖b7 24.♖cd1 ♖f8 25.♖d2

The ending is rather unpleasant, and Black was unable to hold it in the high-level game Chytilek – Zilberberg, corr. 2010.

10.b4

The alternative is:

10.0-0 b5 11.♘c5 ♗xc5 12.dxc5 ♘ge7!?

12...♖b8!?N was recommended by Dreev but I prefer the mainstream path.

13.♘d4

13.b4 ♕a3! 14.♕c1 ♕xc1 15.♖fxc1 ♔d7 The ending is fine for Black, despite White's apparent pressure along the a-file. 16.a4 a6 17.♖a2 ♖hb8 (17...♗g4!? 18.♖ca1 ♗xf3 19.♗xf3 ♖ab8 is also slightly better for Black; the plan of exchanging on f3 is good, but we can also keep it in reserve.) 18.♖ca1 bxa4! 19.♖xa4 (19.♗d1 ♗g4!∓ was excellent for Black in Lobanov – Can, Manavgat 2018.) 19...a5!∓ Intending ...♗g4. 20.♘e1 This is not forced, but it's the first choice of many engines. 20...♖b5!? Planning ...♘xe5 or ...♖ab8.

The text move was played in Jakovenko – Eljanov, Dagomys 2010.

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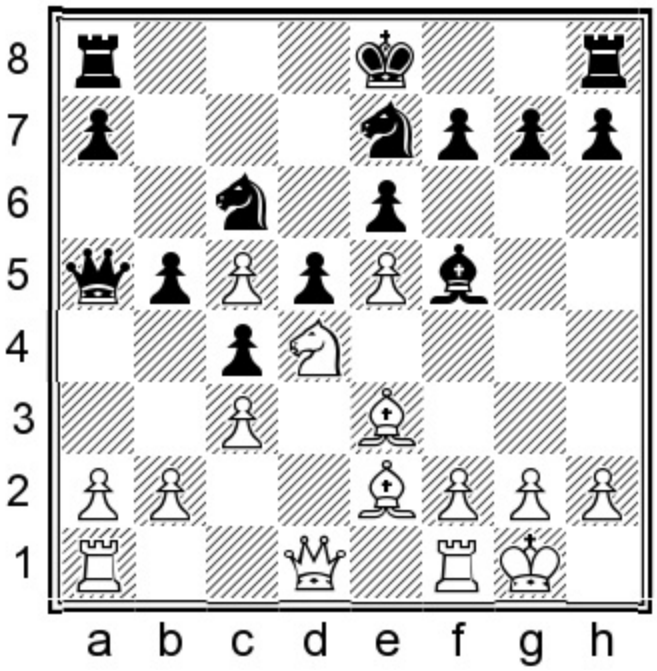


13...♖b8!N

Eljanov gives 13...b4 14.cxb4 ♕xb4 15.b3! in his annotations. The last move is the only way for White to keep the equilibrium. Black would like to play 15...c3? but 16.a3!± is annoying.

14.a3

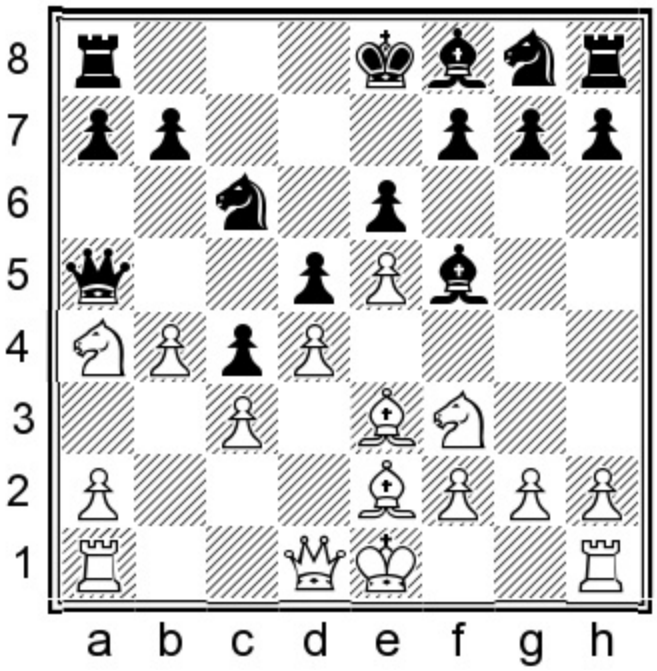
Otherwise Black may play ...b4 with an improved version of 13...b4.

14...♘xd4 15.♗xd4 ♕c7

15...♕a4!? also deserves attention.

16.b4 a5∓

Black can castle and then play ...♖a8 followed by ...♖a6 and ...♖fa8, trying to penetrate on the queenside.



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10...♗xb4!

This is the correct way to sacrifice a piece.

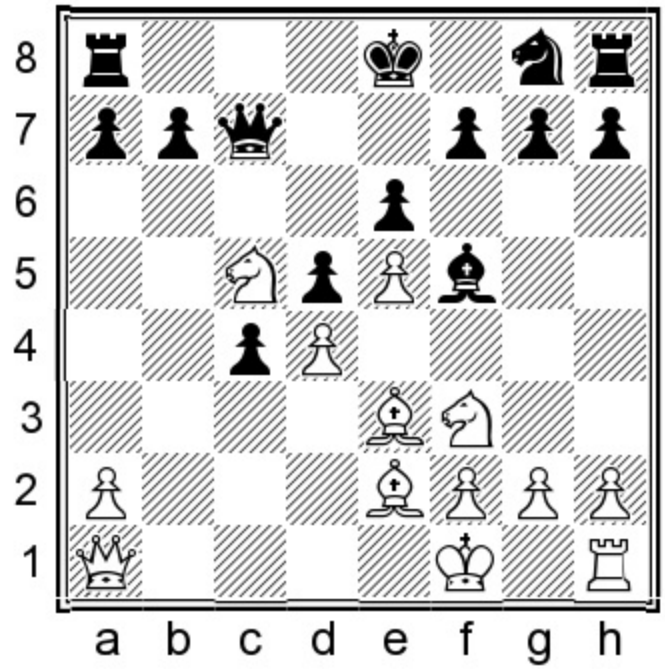
10...♘xb4? 11.cxb4 ♗xb4† 12.♔f1± was the right idea but poorly executed in Albornoz Cabrera – Paravyan, Internet 2020.

11.cxb4 ♘xb4 12.♘c5

The only move.

12.0-0? ♗c2 picks up the knight.

12...♘c2† 13.♔f1 ♘xa1 14.♕xa1 ♕c7!⇄



15.♘h4!N

White must strive for counterplay before Black makes his material advantage felt.

15.g4? ♗xg4 16.♖g1 h5∓ 17.♘h4 b6 18.♘a4 ♕e7 19.♘g2 ♘h6∓ worked out well for Black in Lagarde – Riazantsev, Brest 2018.

15.♗d1!?N improves on the above game although 15...♘e7 16.♗a4† ♔f8! still gives Black a promising position.

15...♘e7

The position is complicated but no worse for Black. I tried to go a little deeper to uncover how the game might go:

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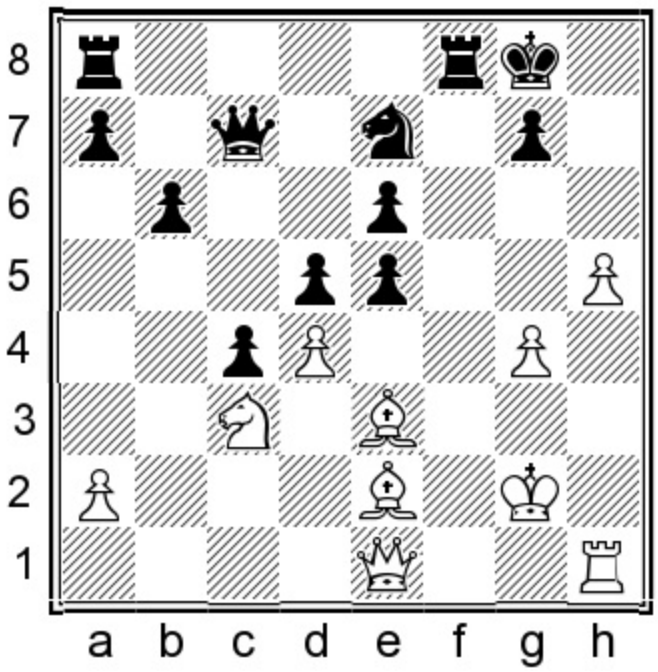
16.g4 ♗e4 17.f3 ♗g6 18.♘xg6 ♘xg6!? 19.h4 b6 20.♘a4 h5! 21.♕e1! hxg4 22.fxg4 f6! 23.♔g2 fxe5 24.h5 ♘e7 25.♘c3 0-0!?



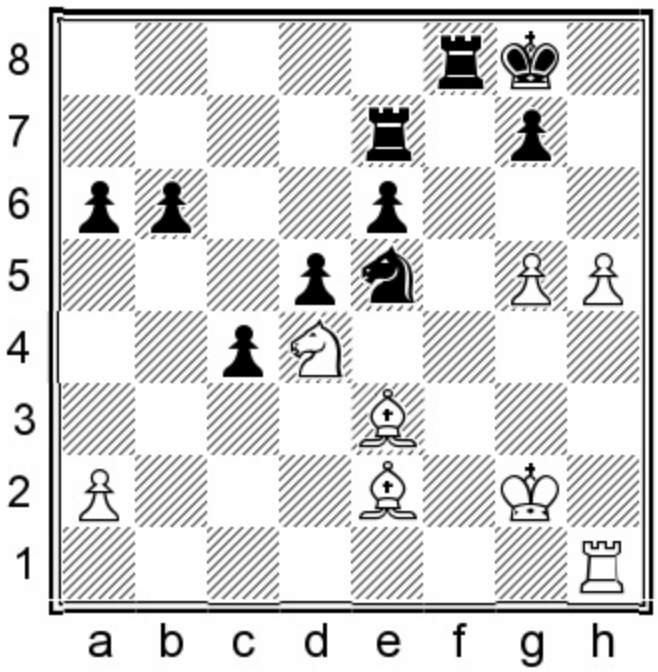
26.♕g3 ♖f7!?

26...♘c6 is simpler.

27.♕xe5 ♕xe5 28.dxe5 ♖af8 29.♘b5 ♘c6 30.♘d6 ♖c7 31.♘b5 ♖e7!?

31...♖cf7= repeats, but Black can try for more.

32.g5 a6 33.♘d4 ♘xe5⇄



I like Black's pawn phalanx, although anything can still happen. The endgame would be

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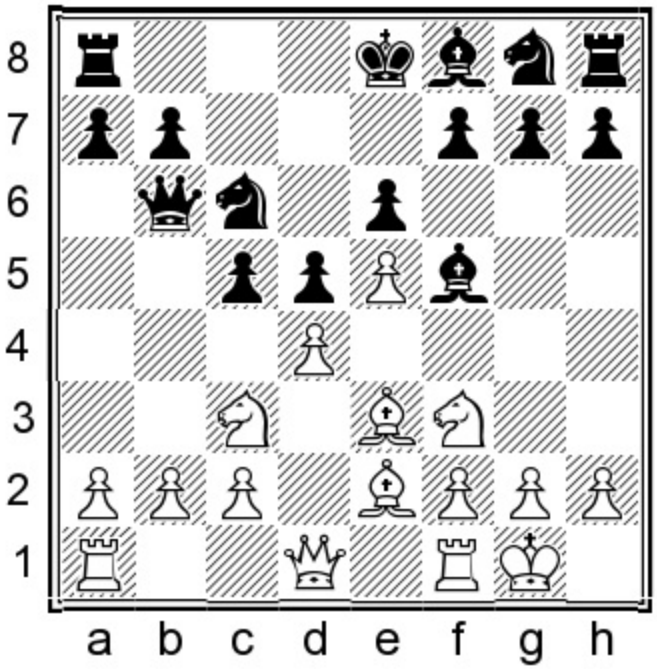
interesting to analyse further, but we are already well past the point of any normal opening preparation and we have to stop somewhere!

B4) 8.0-0



This is the main line.

8...♕xb2

Of course we take the pawn. Now **B41)** 9.♘b5 is an obvious move to check, but **B42)** 9.♕e1! is the critical move which we will examine in great detail.

First, let's consider some minor possibilities:

9.♕b1? is a big mistake because Black can castle long and protect his queenside while keeping the extra pawn: 9...♕xb1 10.♖axb1 0-0-0 11.♖b2 c4∓ Klekowski – Yuffa, Internet 2020.

9.g4?! ♗g6 10.♘b5 c4!

This is an important motif in the 6...♕b6 variation. Black is prepared to allow ♘c7† and ♘xa8, because the knight will never get out alive, and in the meantime Black picks up some pawns and creates an impressive pawn phalanx.

11.♖b1

11.♘c7† ♔d7 12.♘xa8 ♗xc2 13.♕d2 ♗b4 14.♖ab1 ♕xb1 15.♖xb1 ♗xd2 16.♖xb7† ♔c8 17.♖c7† ♔b8 18.♖xc6 ♗xe3 19.fxe3 ♘e7∓ is an instructive line which should be compared with 9.♘b5.

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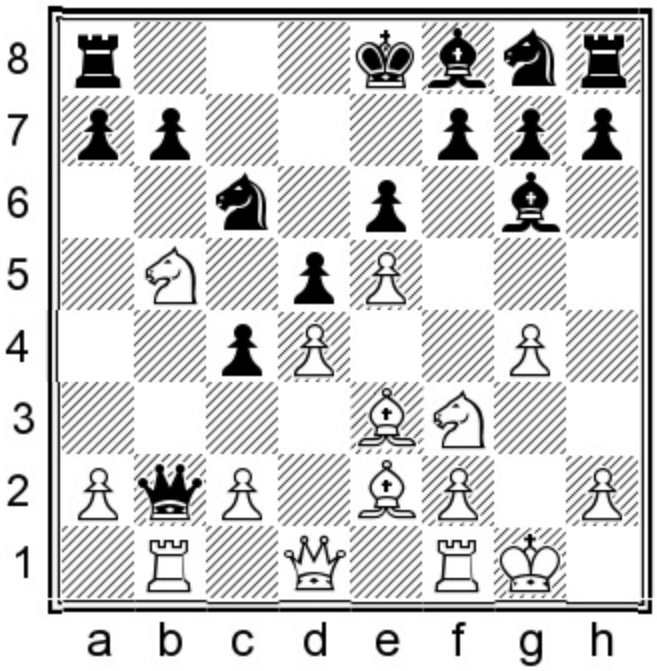
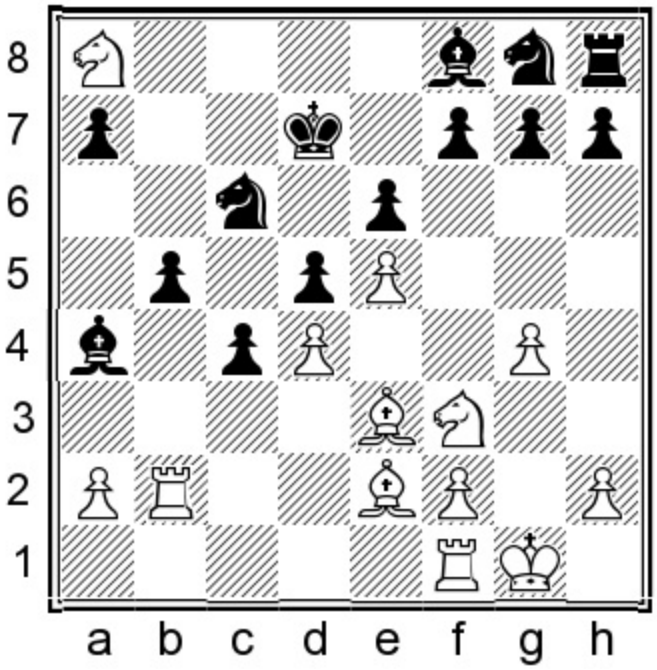


11...♕xc2!N

A big improvement on 11...♕xa2 12.♘c7† ♔d8 13.♖a1 ♕xc2 14.♕xc2 ♗xc2 15.♘xa8 ♗b4 16.♘g5 ♘h6 17.♘b6! and White was already winning in Vallejo Pons – Gines Esteo, Marbella 2019. Brilliant preparation or over-the-board inspiration?

12.♕xc2 ♗xc2 13.♖b2 ♗a4 14.♘c7† ♔d7 15.♘xa8 b5∓



I was unable to find a possible idea for White that should scare us.

B41) 9.♘b5

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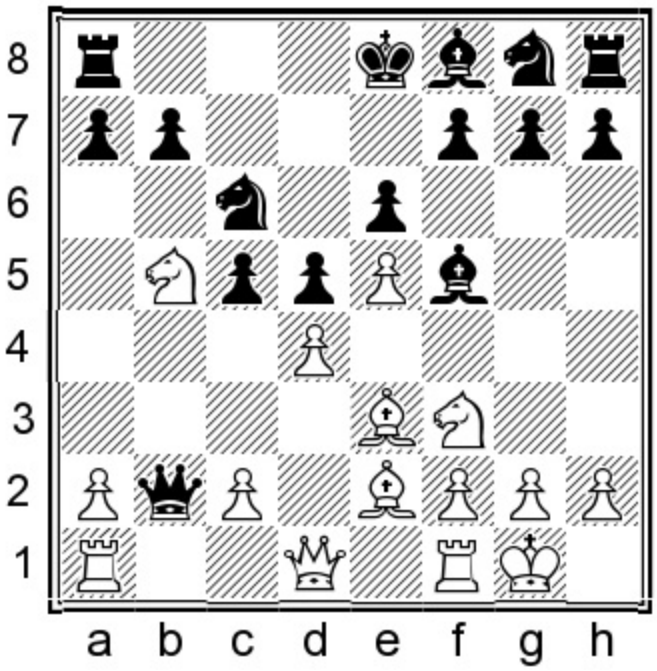

This is a more serious try which has been played many times.

9...c4!

The same motif.

10.♘c7†

This is the obvious move and the best choice.

10.♖b1?!

According to Dreev this move leads to equal play, but the correspondence “nerds”have dug deeper and found an advantage for Black.

10...♕xa2!

The refutation.

10...♕xc2 is playable, but after 11.♕xc2 ♗xc2 12.♖b2 ♗a4 13.♘c7† ♔d7 14.♘xa8 b5 15.♗d1!= the position is balanced, as has been proven in a dozen correspondence games.

11.♘c7†

11.♖a1?! ♕xc2 12.♕xc2 ♗xc2 leads to something similar except Black has a third extra pawn. After 13.♘c7† ♔d7 14.♘xa8 ♗b4∓ Black follows up with ...♘ge7 and the knight on a8 is doomed.

11...♔d8 12.♘xa8 ♗xc2 13.♖a1 ♗xd1 14.♖xa2 ♗xe2 15.♖xe2

Now the important move is:

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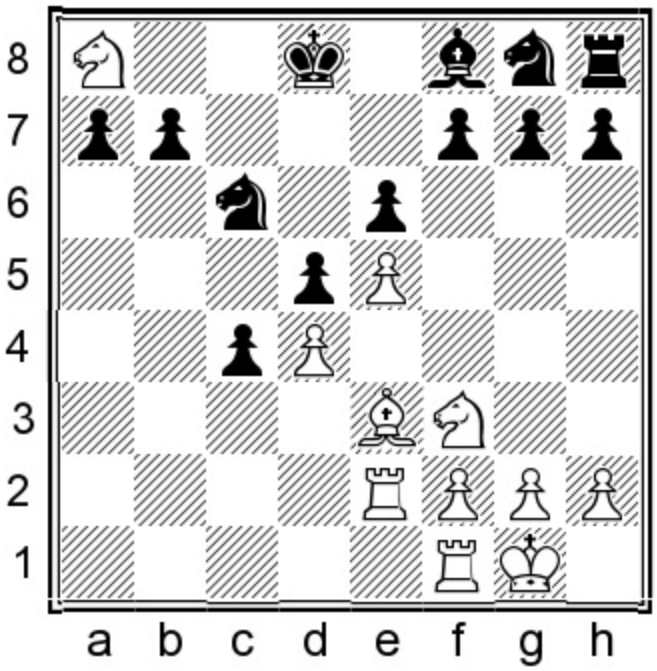


15...♗b4!

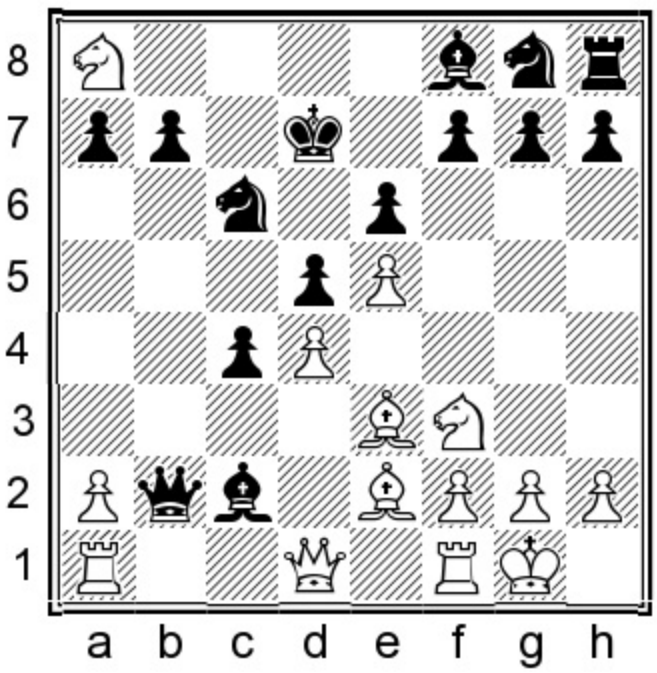
This is much stronger than 15...b5.

16.♖b1 b5 17.♖a2 a5∓

White was unable to save the game in Goreczny – Kund, corr. 2017.

10...♔d7 11.♘xa8 ♗xc2

It is important to pick up this pawn.



12.♕c1

White has two other queen moves available, both of which are weaker:

12.♕e1?! ♗b4

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This is good for Black, as has been known since the stem game from 2009.

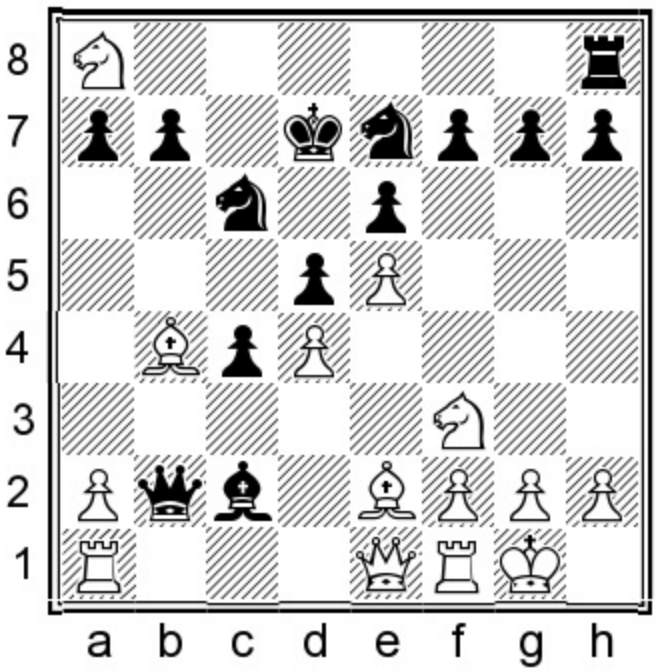
13.♗d2

The point behind putting the queen on e1. Luckily Black has two strong responses!

13...♘ge7

13...c3 is also good.

14.♗xb4



14...♕xb4!

Improving on 14...♘xb4 as played in Karjakin – Morozevich, Nice 2009.

15.♕c1 ♗g6∓

Despite Black's eventual defeat, at this point she was doing great in T. Kosintseva – Paikidze, Moscow 2010.

12.♕d2?! ♗b4 13.♖ab1

13.♖fb1 will just transpose.

13...♕xb1 14.♖xb1 ♗xd2 15.♖xb7†

The white rook is extremely active, but it can do little harm on its own.

15...♔c8

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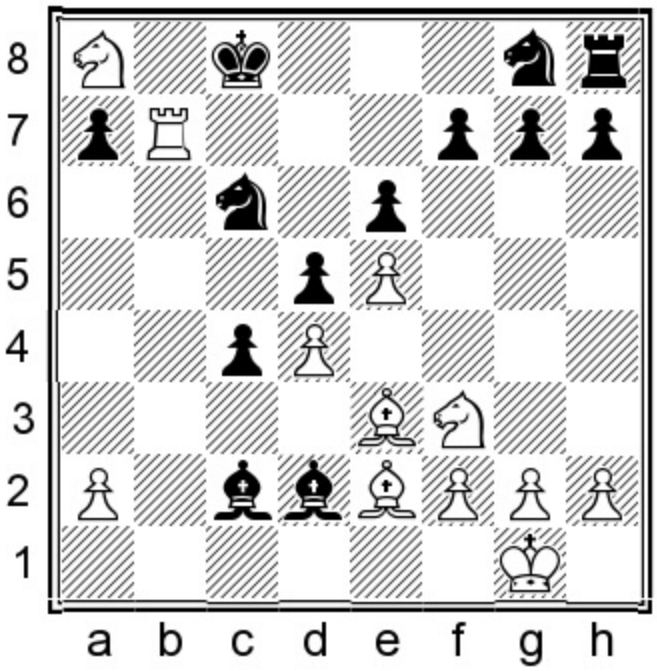


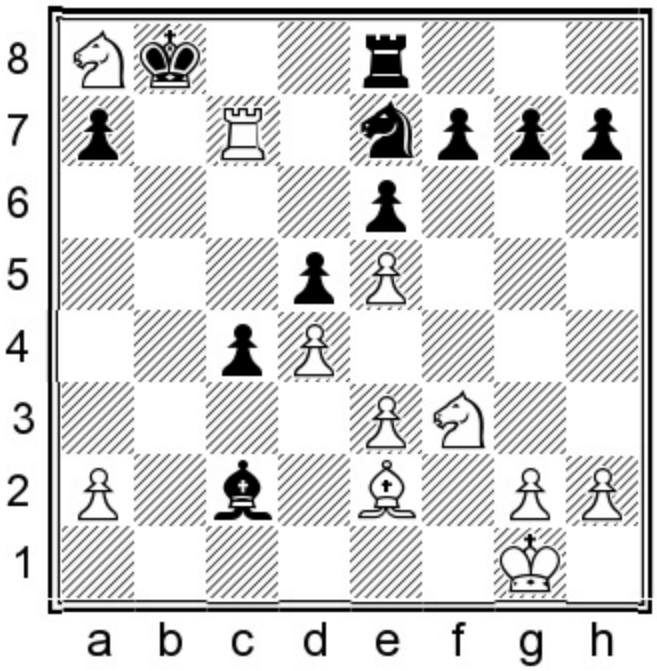
16.♖c7†

16.♖xf7? ♗a5! 17.♖f8† ♔b7 18.♘g5 ♗b4!–+ is a triumph for the black bishop.

16...♔b8 17.♖xc6

17.♘xd2 ♘ge7 18.♗g5 ♘f5 is also good for Black. For example: 19.♗xc4 ♖c8! 20.♖xc8† ♔xc8∓ The knight is still trapped and the d4-pawn drops.

17...♗xe3 18.fxe3 ♘e7 19.♖c7 ♖e8∓



Black is finally ready to pick up the stranded knight. See Game 7 for further details.

12...♗a3! 13.♘e1 ♗g6 14.♕d1

White should avoid the queen exchange.

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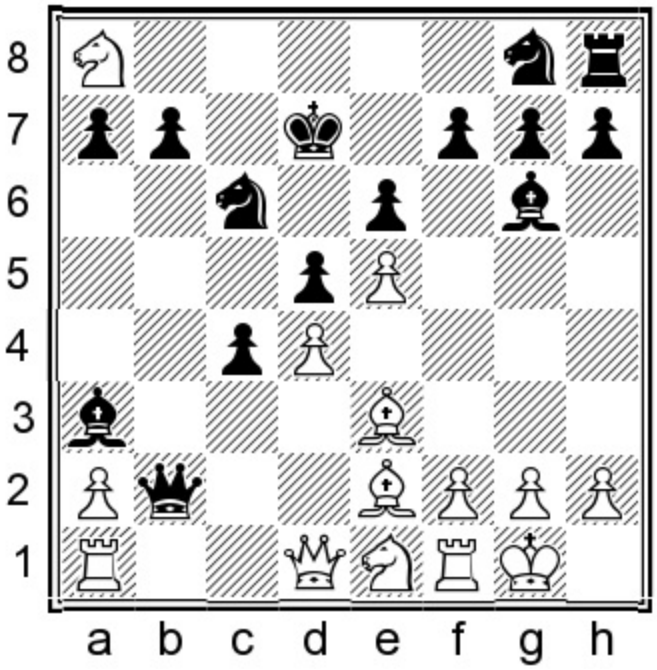
14.♕xb2? ♗xb2 15.♖d1 ♘ge7 is hopeless for him.



14...♘ge7!N

14...♔c8 was played in Sun Fanghui – Guo Qi, China 2013, when 15.h4!N 15...h5 16.♘d3!!⇄ is a spectacular way to keep the balance, since 16...cxd3? 17.♗xd3 is too dangerous for Black.

15.♗d3!

White uses imaginative tactics. He threatens ♖b1, so Black should take care.

15...♗xd3!

This is where my analysis goes in a different direction than Dreev's.

16.♘xd3 ♕c3 17.♘f4

I also considered 17.♘c5† ♗xc5 18.♖c1 ♕a5 19.dxc5 ♔c8!∓ and Black picks up the knight with his king (avoiding 19...♖xa8?! 20.♖xc4).

17...♖xa8 18.♘e2 ♕a5 19.♕b1

The only chance: White picks off a pawn and strives for counterplay with his active queen. However, with calm play Black will still be calling the shots with his impressive pawns.

19...b5 20.♕xh7

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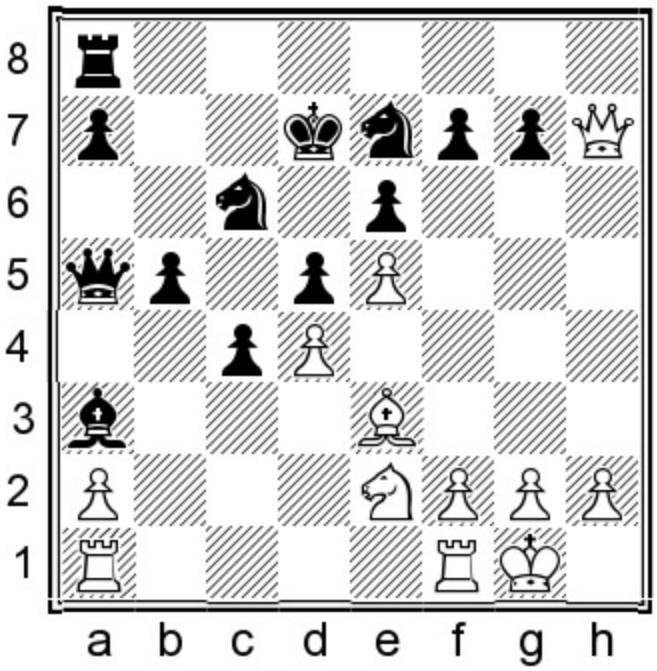

20...♕d8!?∓

Imaginative. 20...♖g8 is the safe option.

21.♕xg7 ♕g8 22.♕xg8 ♖xg8

Despite being the exchange down, Black's dangerous queenside pawns make him the favourite.

GAME 7

Hector Walsh – Nikolai Ninov

---

email 2010

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2 c5 6.♗e3 ♕b6 7.♘c3 ♘c6 8.0-0 ♕xb2 9.♘b5 c4 10.♘c7† ♔d7 11.♘xa8 ♗xc2 12.♕d2 ♗b4 13.♖fb1

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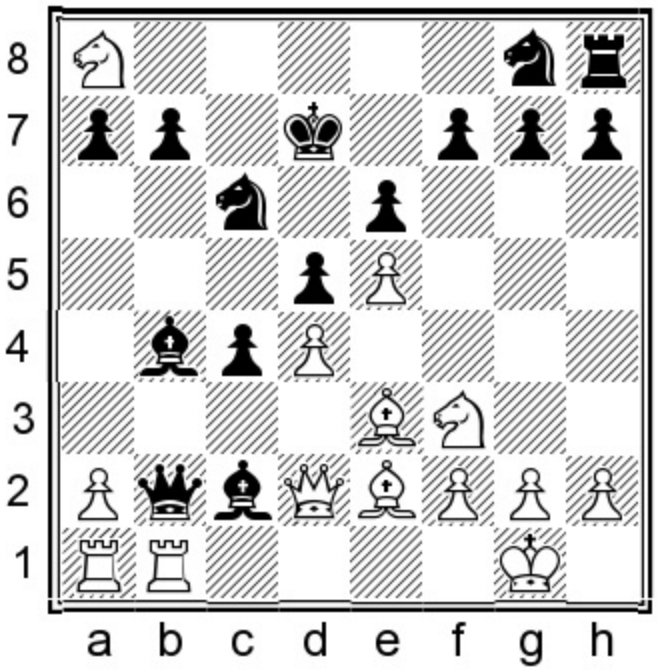

This line is tempting because White gets a rook to b7. On the way he gives up the exchange though, so he is “only”a piece up!

13...♕xb1† 14.♖xb1 ♗xd2 15.♖xb7† ♔c8 16.♖c7† ♔b8 17.♖xc6 ♗xe3 18.fxe3 ♘e7 19.♖c7 ♖e8

Black protects everything and is ready to take the piece back.

20.♘g5

White has to create quick counterplay. The a8-knight cannot be saved, so White should strive to pick up a pawn to avoid being material down.

20...♔xa8

20...♗g6 21.h4⇄ is hardly an improvement for Black over the game continuation.

21.♘xf7

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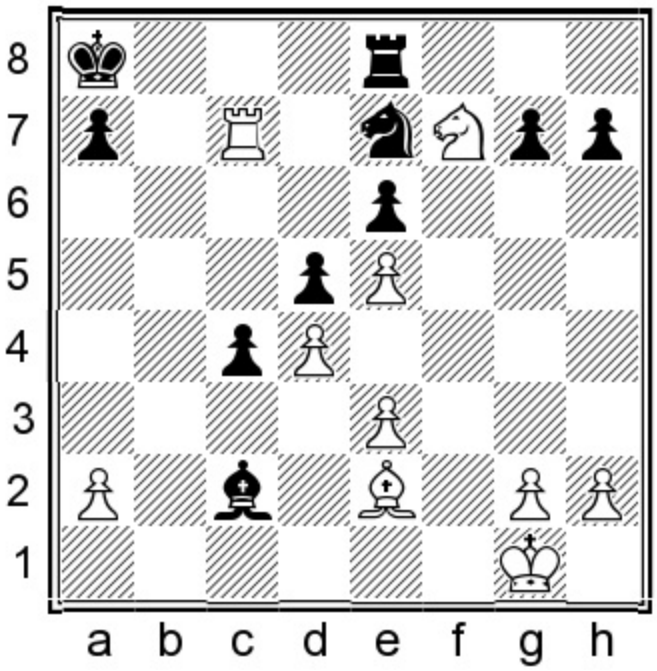

21...♔b8!

Black simplifies into a clear-cut ending.

Also tempting is 21...♘f5 22.♔f2 ♔b8 23.♖d7 ♗a4 24.♖d8† ♖xd8 25.♘xd8 c3 26.♗d3 c2 27.♗xc2 ♗xc2 when Black has won a piece, but after 28.♘xe6 White's active knight secures counterplay. Black still has good winning chances, but the game continuation is simpler.

22.♘d6 ♔xc7 23.♘xe8† ♔c6 24.♘xg7 ♗b1!

Threatening to promote the c-pawn, which means that White has no time to save his a-pawn. In the resulting position, Black has excellent chances with his strong passed pawns on the queenside.

25.♔f2 ♗xa2 26.♔e1 ♔b5 27.♔d2

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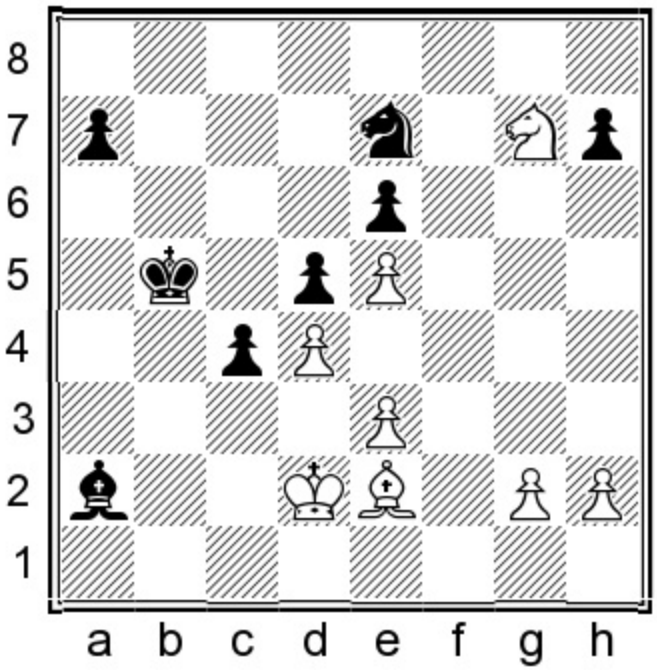

27...♔b4!

Just in time before the white king gets to c3.

28.♘xe6

28.♗d1 a5 29.♗c2 c3† 30.♔c1 a4 31.♘xe6 a3 occurred in a subsequent game, which Black also won convincingly: 32.♗xh7 ♗c4 33.♗b1 ♘f5! 34.♘f4 ♘xe3 35.e6 ♔b3 36.e7 ♗b5 37.♘e6 c2 38.♘c5† ♔c3 39.♗a2 ♘f5 40.♗xd5 ♘xe7 41.♗a2 ♗d3 42.♘a4† ♔xd4 43.♘b6 ♘c6 44.♘d5 ♔c5 45.♘f4 ♗e4 0–1 Daanen – Pepermans, corr. 2013.

28...a5

The black pawns rule, while the white ones are hardly mobile at all.

29.♗d1 ♗b3 30.♘c5 a4 31.♘a6† ♔a3 32.♘c5 ♘c6 33.♗c2 ♘b4 34.♗d1 c3†! 35.♔xc3 ♗xd1 36.e6 ♘c6 37.h3

White tries to keep the black king in captivity. If it escapes without losing the a-pawn, the contest will of course be all over.

37...♗e2 38.g4 ♘e7 39.g5 ♗f1 40.h4 ♗h3 41.h5 ♗f5 42.h6 ♗g6

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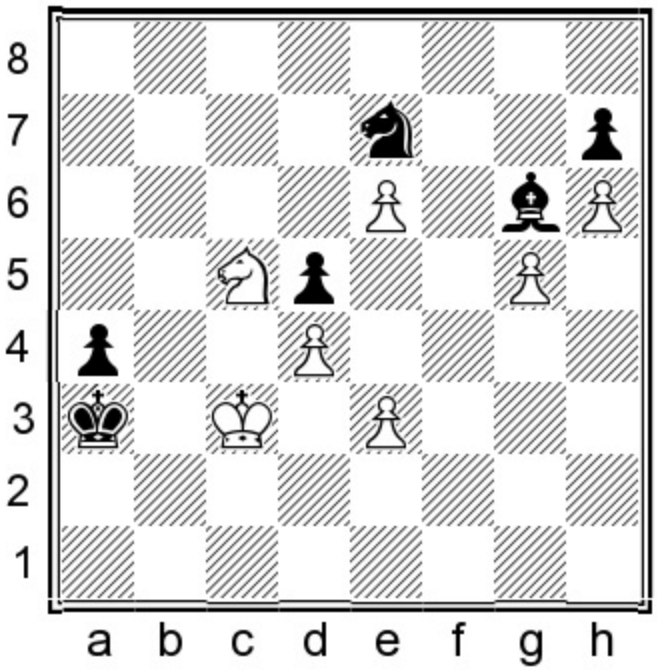

Zugzwang! Finally White runs out of sensible moves.

43.♘d7

43.♔d2 ♔b4–+ is no better.

43...♔a2 44.♘e5 ♗f5 45.♘d7

45.♔b4 a3–+

45...a3 46.♘c5 ♔b1 47.♘b3 ♗xe6

47...a2 48.♘d2† ♔c1 49.♘b3† ♔d1 50.♔b2 ♗xe6 51.♔xa2 ♔e2 also wins.

48.♘d2† ♔a2 49.♘f3 ♗f5 50.♘e1 ♗e4 51.♘c2 ♘c6

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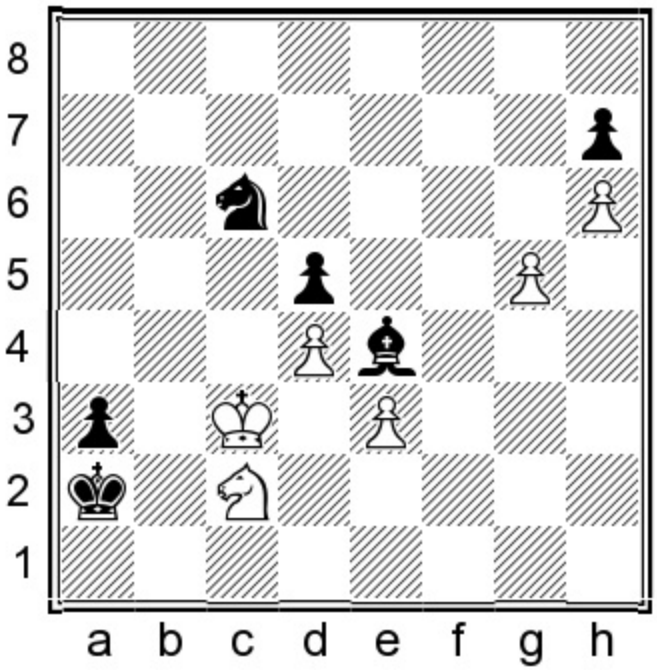


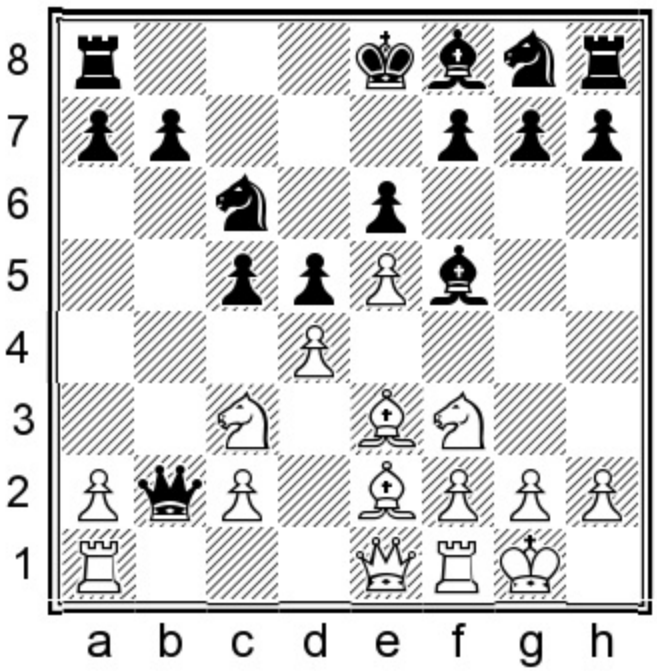
52.♘xa3

Desperation.

52.♔d2 ♔b2–+

52...♔xa3 53.♔d2 ♘d8 54.♔e2 ♘f7 55.g6 ♗xg6 56.♔f3 ♔b3 57.♔f4 ♔c2 58.♔g4 ♔d2 0–1

B42) 9.♕e1!



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As stated earlier, this is White's best continuation.

9...cxd4

This is the most reliable move.

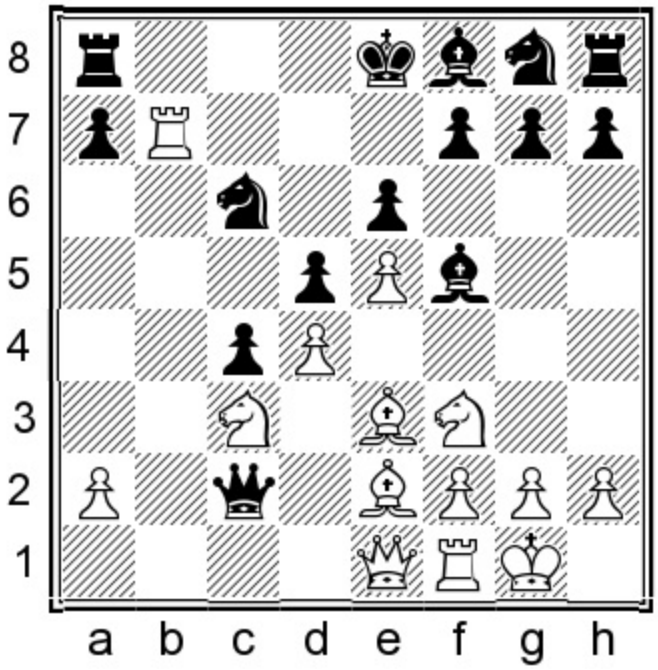
9...0-0-0? can hardly be recommended. Castling next to an open file with the queen drifting around practically begs for trouble. One example continued 10.♗b5! c4 11.♖b1!? (11.a3! ♕xc2 12.♖b1 a6 13.♗a4± traps the queen) 11...♕a3 12.♘a4 ♘ge7 13.♗c1 ♕xa2 14.♖b2 ♕a3 15.♘c5 and White had a strong initiative in Voveris – Jacob, corr. 2018.

9...c4!?

This was an excellent choice against 9.♘b5, but here it is extremely risky. Nevertheless, it may just be playable, so you may wish to investigate it as an alternative to the main line.

10.♖b1! ♕xc2 11.♖xb7!

The alternative is 11.♗d1 ♕xb1! 12.♘xb1 ♗xb1 13.♗a4 ♗d3 14.♕a5 ♔d7 15.♖d1 and here the calm 15...h6! prevents ♘g5 and has proven to be reliable so far. Play might continue 16.♗c1 b6 17.♕a6 ♔c7 18.♗xc6 ♔xc6 19.a4 ♘e7 20.a5 ♘c8 21.axb6 ♘xb6∞ although this illustrative line barely scratches the surface of this fascinating variation.



11...♖b8

11...♗b4? looks tempting but is refuted by: 12.♖xb4! ♘xb4 13.♗d1! (13.♕a1 ♘xa2 14.♘xa2 ♕a4 15.♘c3 ♕xa1 16.♖xa1 ♘e7 17.♗c1 followed by ♗a3 is another problematic continuation) 13...♕d3 14.♗a4† ♔f8 15.♕a1! ♗g4 16.♕b2 ♖b8 17.♖b1 ♗xf3

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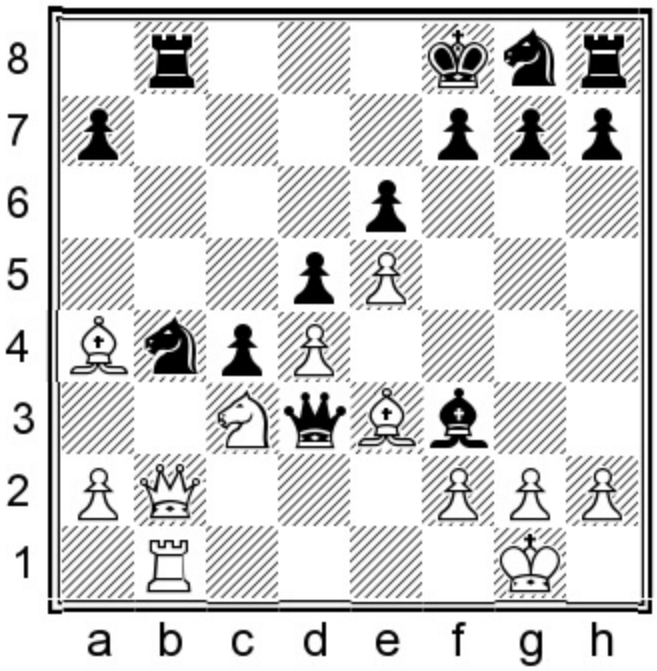
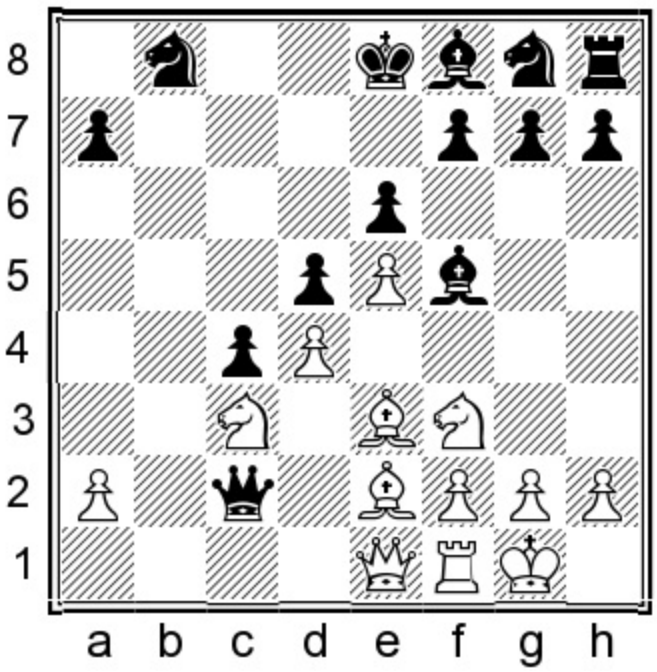


18.♗c2! ♗e2 (18...♕xc2 19.♕xc2 ♘xc2 20.♖xb8† ♔e7 21.gxf3+– is just terrible with the rook on h8 and knight on g8) 19.♗xd3 ♗xd3 20.a3 ♗xb1 21.axb4 ♗g6 22.♕a3 ♖b7 White's impressive preparation yielded a winning position in Karjakin – Laznicka, Poikovsky 2011, and now 23.♕a6 ♖e7 24.♘b5+– followed by ♘d6 would have been the cleanest route to victory.

12.♖xb8† ♘xb8



13.♕a1!

13.♗d1 has also been tested but after 13...♕b2 14.♗a4† ♔d8∞ White has failed to prove anything thus far.

13...♗b4 14.♖b1! ♗xc3 15.♖xb8† ♔d7 16.♕c1

16.♕d1!? is another serious option.

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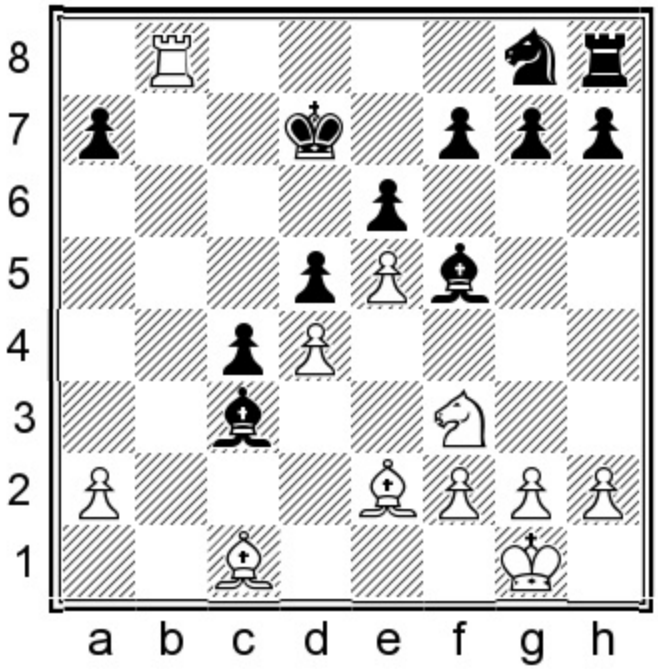
16...♕xc1†! 17.♗xc1



17...a5!

White went on to win in Ilonen – Gulbis, corr. 2017. I suspect that Black's position can be held, but the whole line is rather scary and I see no reason to play in such a risky fashion.

10.♗xd4

10.♘xd4 ♗b4 is good for Black.

10...♘xd4

10...♗b4?! 11.♖b1 ♕a3 is risky, as 12.♘b5 and 12.♖b3 are both promising for White.

11.♘xd4 ♗b4

One can arguably call this the real starting position of the entire 6...♕b6 variation! White chooses between **B421)** 12.♘db5 and **B422)** 12.♖b1.

White should not insert 12.♗b5†?! ♔f8 before playing 13.♖b1, as after 13...♗xc3 14.♖xb2 ♗xe1 15.♖xe1 the bishop blocks the b-file, meaning b7 is not en prise, which gives Black time to develop with 15...♘e7∓ as in Lobanov – Rozum, Sochi 2018.

B421) 12.♘db5

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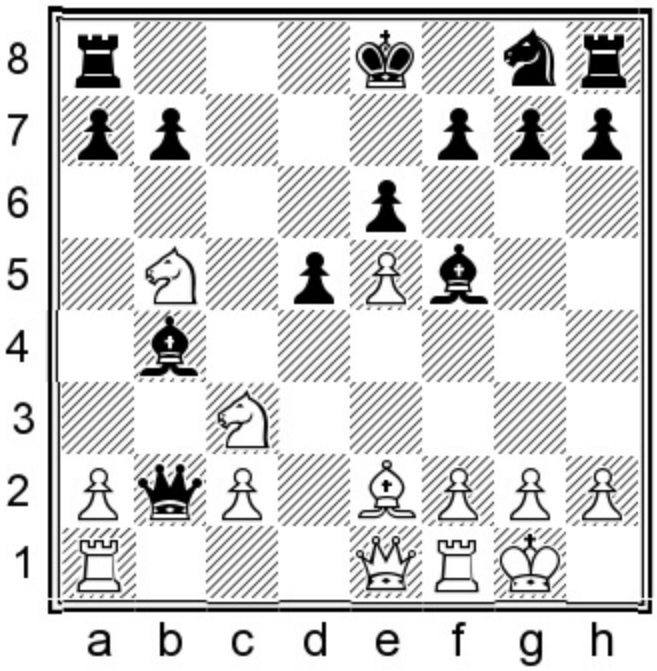

This is the trendy move in GM praxis, but in my opinion not the most critical.

12...♗a5!

A cool way to protect against the fork on c7. Black need not worry about the check on d6 because of the pressure on the c3-knight.

13.♖b1

13.g4 ♗g6 14.♖b1 ♕xc2 15.♖c1 ♕b2 transposes to variation B4212 on page 136.

13...♕xc2

White has two serious options: **B4211)** 14.♖b3 and **B4212)** 14.♖c1.

B4211) 14.♖b3

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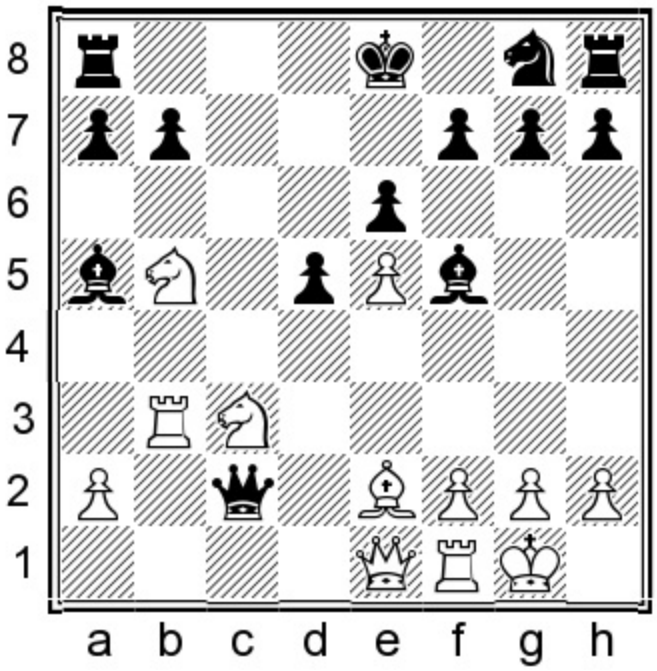

This was proposed by Dreev.

14...♘e7! 15.♘d6†

15.♘d4?! doesn't really trap the queen, and 15...♗xc3 16.♖xc3 ♕e4∓ was more than okay for Black in Tukhaev – Mirzoeva, Samara 2012.

15...♔f8 16.♘xb7 ♗b6 17.♗d1

17.♘d6

This is well met by:

17...♗g6!

17...♗a5 is given by Dreev as a good alternative; it could be an invitation to a repetition of moves with: 18.♘b7 ♗b6=

18.♗d1 ♕c1 19.♘a4 ♔g8

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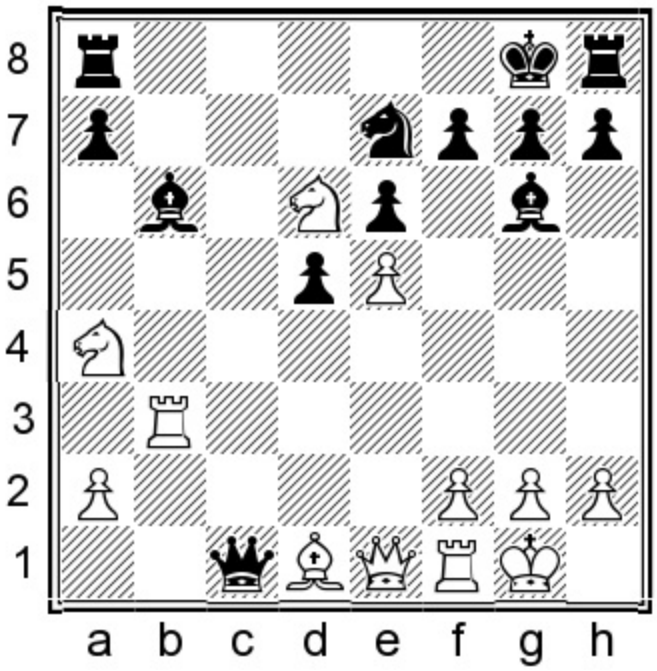
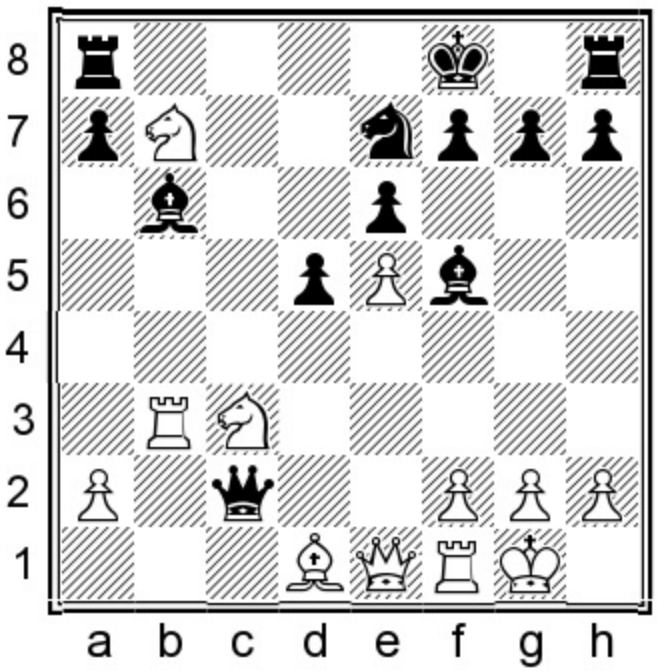


Black will slowly unravel. If allowed, he will play ...h6 and ...♔h7. White tries to disrupt things by initiating a dance with the black queen, but there is no way this can cause any real troubles.

20.♘xb6 axb6 21.♖c3 ♕f4 22.g3 ♕d4 23.♘b5 ♕e4 24.♖c7 ♘f5 25.♕c3 h5 26.♖e1 d4! 27.♖xe4 dxc3 28.♘xc3 ♔h7 29.a4 ♖hd8

Black was doing great in Milde – Doderer, corr. 2019.



17...♕c1!

17...♕d3!? is another good option, but I prefer the text move.

18.♘a4

18.♘d6N doesn't put any pressure on Black, and 18...♗g6 19.♘a4 ♔g8⇄ is a good answer.

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18...♗d4!

An excellent move. The bishop finds a safe square in the middle of the board.

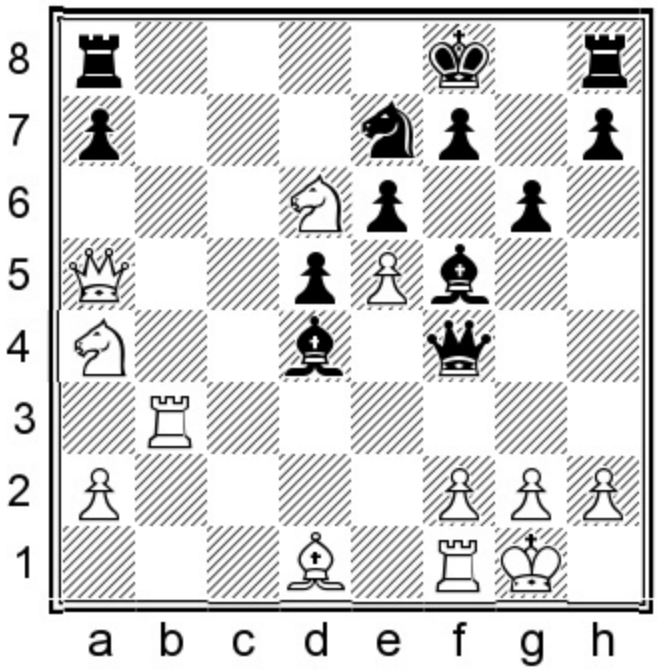
19.♘d6

19.♖b4N 19...♕f4 20.♘ac5 White is protecting e5 because of the check on d7, but 20...♘c6 21.♖a4 ♔g8! renews the threat, and 22.♘a5 ♘xa5 23.♕xa5 ♕xe5∓ leaves Black in control.

19...♕f4 20.♕a5 g6

Securing an escape route for the king.

Black does not have time for 20...♗xe5? because of 21.g3 ♕d4 22.♘b6! when his position is on the verge of collapsing.



21.♘b6

Dreev's suggestion.

21.♘c5

This is the kind of annoying move that modern chess theory is full of, as it apparently leads to a draw after precise play:

21...♔g7

21...♗xe5? 22.g3 ♕d4 23.♖b4±

22.♖b7 ♖hc8! 23.♖xe7 ♖xc5 24.♕a6

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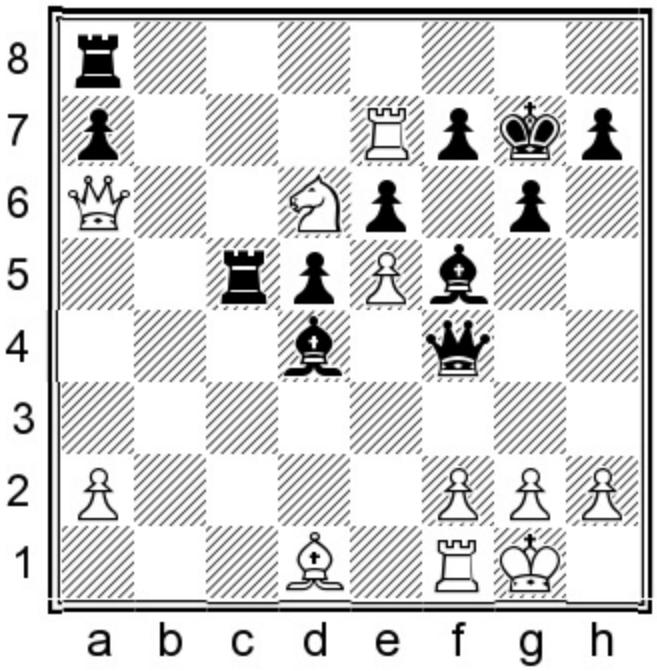

24...♖c1!

24...♖f8? 25.♕b7±

24...♗xe5? 25.g3 ♗xd6 26.gxf4 ♗xe7 27.♕b7±

24...♕xe5? 25.♘xf7 ♕f6 26.♕b7 ♖f8 27.♘g5† ♔g8 28.♘xh7 ♕h4 29.♘xf8 ♖c1 30.♔h1 ♕xf2 31.♕b5+–

25.♖xf7† ♔g8 26.♖g7†

½–½ In Ryzhkov – Efimov, corr. 2019, the players agreed a draw in view of the perpetual check after:

26...♔h8 27.♖xh7† ♔g8=

21...♗xb6 22.♖xb6 ♕xe5

Eliminating this important pawn is a big achievement for Black.

23.♖e1 ♕f6 24.♖b7 e5

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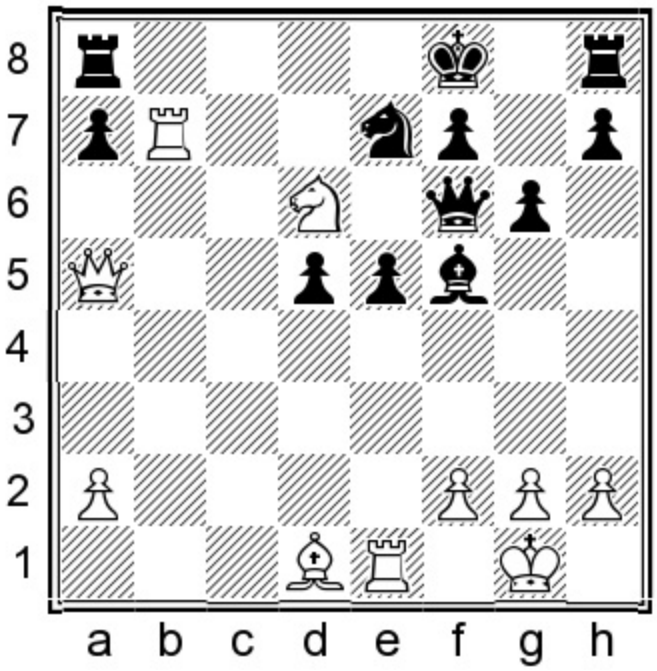

25.♘xf5N

25.♕a3 is given as interesting by Dreev, but after 25...♖d8 26.♘xf5 gxf5 27.♗e2 ♖g8 28.♖c1 ♖d6 Black was fine in Kovalenko – Eman, corr. 2017.

25...gxf5 26.♗b3

Dreev claims that White has the initiative. It is true that his pieces are more active, but Black has two extra pawns so he can give one of them back to simplify a little.

26...♔g7!? 27.♗xd5

Otherwise Black will defend the pawn with ...♖hd8.

27...♘xd5 28.♕xd5 ♖he8

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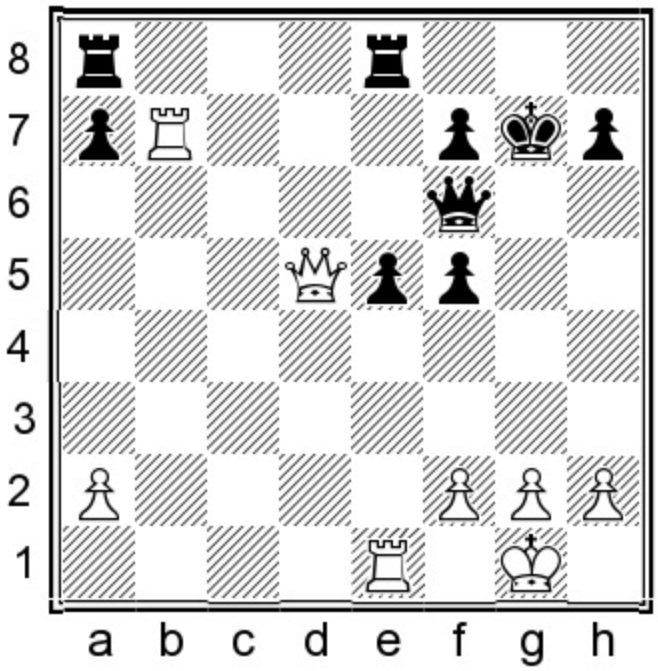
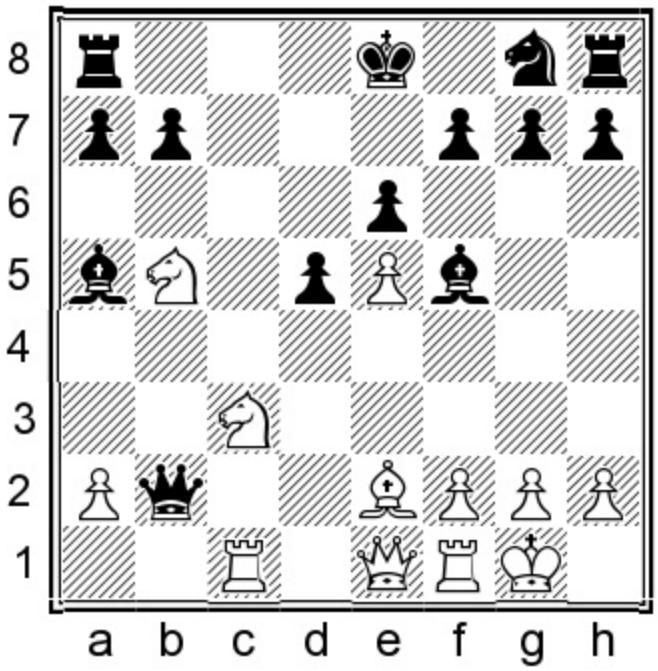


I cannot believe that Black can be worse here. His plan is to play ...a6 in order to activate his rook using the c- or d-file. Black may well play for a win with his extra pawn, although objectively White should have enough activity to maintain the balance.

B4212) 14.♖c1

This has become White's main hope nowadays.

14...♕b2



A sharp position has been reached. Black is two pawns up, but he is behind in development, so

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care is needed – but this is pretty much the DNA of the whole 6...♕b6 variation, so get used to it! Despite White's good practical results so far, Black is in good theoretical shape.

15.g4!?

I think this is White's most challenging continuation. We must also analyse a few other options:

15.♘d6† may look tempting, but 15...♔f8 16.♘xf5 exf5 17.♘a4 ♕b4! 18.♕xb4† ♗xb4 ends the fun. White has compensation for the pawns but no advantage, as demonstrated in De Lillo – Kazoks, corr. 2019.

15.♘a4

This forces an endgame where White keeps a slight initiative, but it can be neutralized without too much difficulty.

15...♗xe1 16.♘xb2 ♗a5 17.♘d6† ♔e7 18.♘xb7

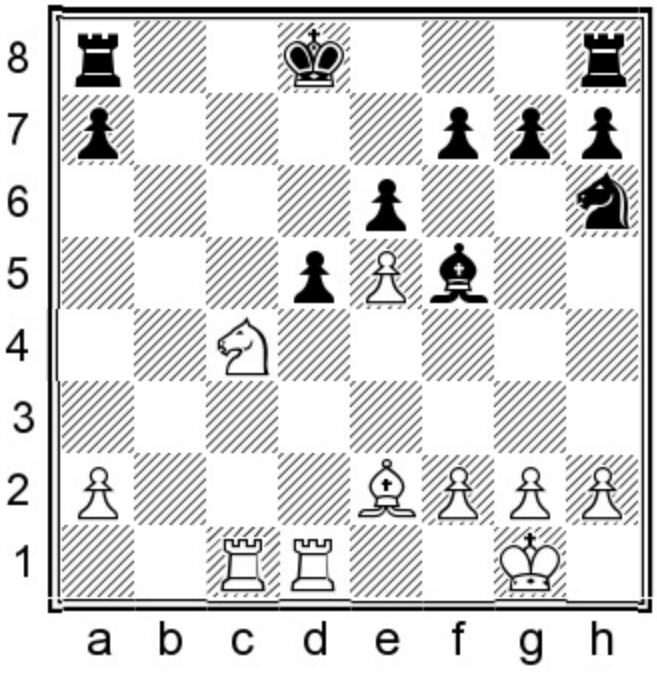
White wins back one of the sacrificed pawns and keeps some pressure, but Black will eventually get his pieces out and equalize.

18.♖c5N 18...♗b6 19.♘xf5† exf5 transposes to 18.♘xf5† below.

18.♘xf5† exf5 19.♖c5 ♗b6 20.♖xd5 ♖d8 (20...♘h6 21.♘c4 ♖hc8=) 21.♖b5 ♖d2 22.♖e1 ♘h6= and Black was fine in Golubenko – Efimov, corr. 2019.

18...♗d8! 19.♘xd8 ♔xd8 20.♖fd1 ♘h6 21.♘c4

White had some initiative for the pawn in Sarana – Rozum, Khanty-Mansiysk 2018. The best way to defuse it is:



21...♔e7!N 22.♘d6 ♖hd8 23.♖c7† ♖d7 24.♖dc1 g5!?

This multi-purpose move gives the king access to g7 if needed, as well as getting ready to place the bishop on g6 and maybe advance the d-pawn. A sample line goes:

25.a4

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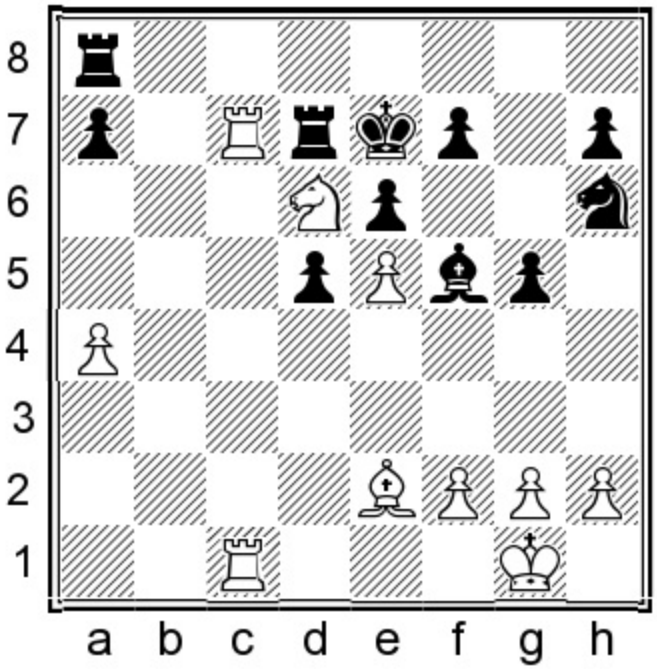
Lc0 loves to advance those rook's pawns! It makes a lot of sense to push this one to a6. 25.♗b5 ♖xc7 26.♖xc7† ♔f8⇄ looks like nothing to worry about.



25...d4!

25...♗g6? 26.a5 ♖xc7? (26...♘f5 27.♗b5!) 27.♖xc7† ♔f8 28.a6+– shows the dangers in the position: the a7-pawn is doomed.

26.a5

26.h3 should be met by 26...♗g6! (26...d3?! 27.♘xf5† ♘xf5 28.♗xd3 ♖b8 29.♖xd7† ♔xd7 30.♗b5† is a little nuance compared with our main line) 27.a5 d3! and Black is fine.

26...d3! 27.♘xf5† ♘xf5 28.♗xd3 ♖b8

The rook is ready for counterplay on the b-file.

29.a6 h6!?=

Taking the h-pawn out of the range of the bishop, while preparing ...♔d8 and ...♘e7.

15...♗g6

Another possible route to this position is 13.g4 ♗g6 14.♖b1 ♕xc2 15.♖c1 ♕b2, as mentioned earlier.

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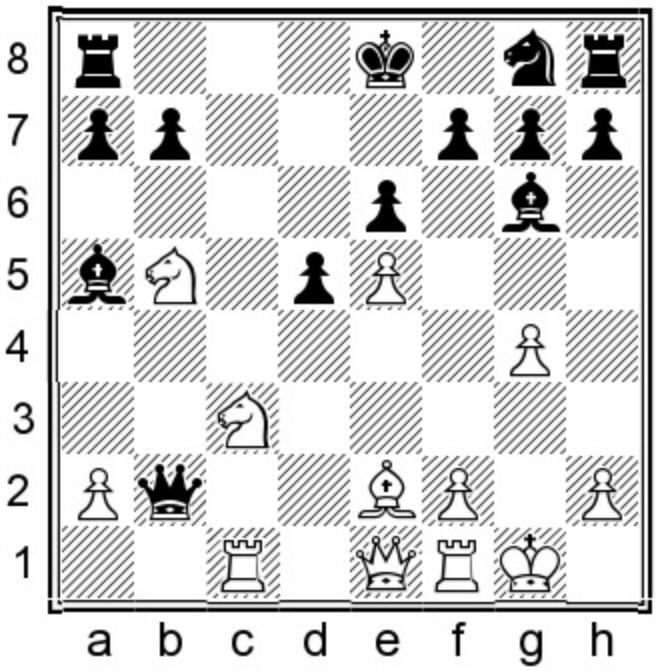

16.f4

White tries to force the play. Once again, the black position turns out to be impossible to overrun.

16...♗e4!

Once the enemy pawns have reached f4 and g4, this is a standard reaction before f4-f5 comes.

Nevertheless, the following alternative also seems adequate:

16...♘e7!? 17.♘d6†

17.f5 0-0!? 18.fxg6 fxg6⩲ gives Black a lot of pawns for the piece and White's position is full of holes. He can settle for a draw by 19.♖b1 ♕c2 20.♖c1, and he probably has to in order to avoid being worse.

17...♔f8 18.f5 exf5 19.gxf5 ♘xf5! 20.♘xf5 ♖c8

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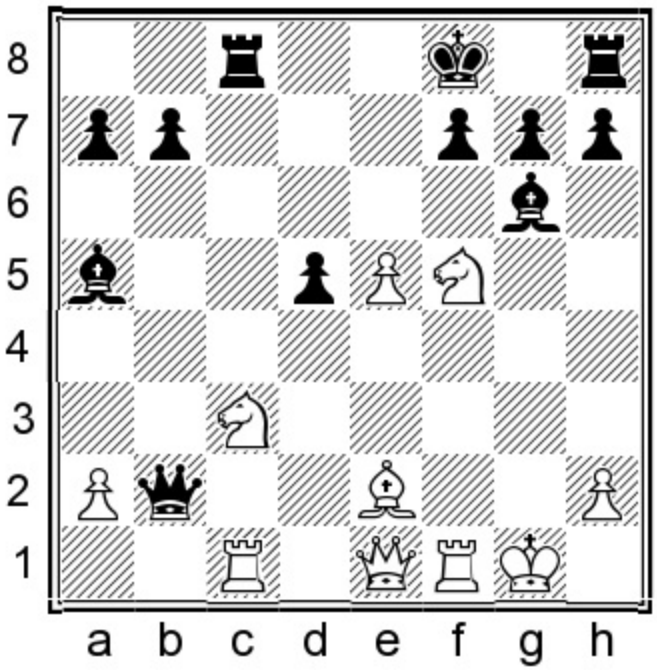

Again White has won a piece, but Black has serious counterplay. Here are a couple of examples:

21.♘xd5

21.♗b5 ♗xf5 22.e6 f6 23.♖xf5 ♗xc3 24.♖xc3 ♕xc3 25.e7† ♔f7 26.e8=♕† ♖hxe8 27.♗xe8† ♔f8 28.♕xc3 ♖xc3 29.♗a4 ♖c5 30.♗b3 ♔e7 31.♖xd5 ♖xd5 32.♗xd5 b5= led to a draw in Karjakin – Navara, Shamkir 2018.

21...♕xc1 22.♕xa5 ♕c5† 23.♕xc5† ♖xc5 24.♘fe3 ♗e4 25.e6 ♗xd5

25...f5!?∞

26.♖xf7† ♔e8 27.♘xd5 ♖xd5 28.♖xb7 ♖f8!?

28...♖g5† was immediately agreed drawn in an email game.

29.♗b5† ♖xb5 30.♖xb5 ♖f6 31.♖b7 ♖xe6=

With a clear draw.

17.♖f2! ♔f8! 18.♗d3 ♕b4 19.♖b1

19.a3 was played in Azarov – Shimanov, Saint Louis 2017, when 19...♕c5!?N 20.♗xe4 dxe4 21.♘d6 h5 22.♘xb7 ♕xa3 23.♘xa5 ♕xa5= would have been pleasant enough for Black.

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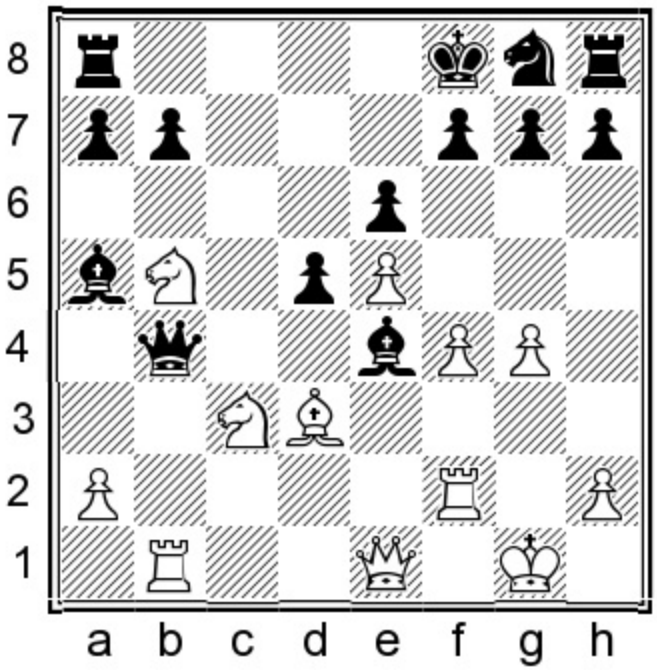
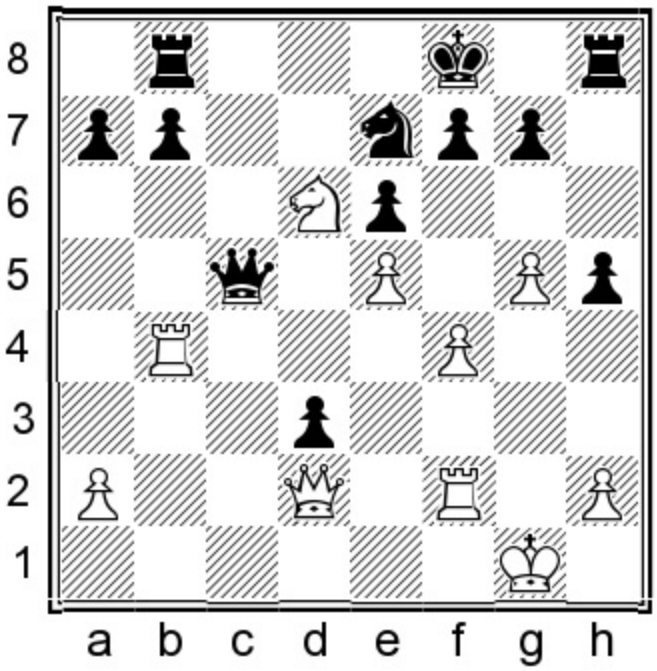


19...♕c5! 20.♘xe4 dxe4 21.♕xa5 exd3 22.♕d2 h5!⇄

This move is not mentioned by Dreev. Black secures the kingside and White has no way to penetrate the fortress. A good example continued:

23.g5 ♘e7 24.♘d6 ♖b8 25.♖b5 ♕d4 26.♖b4 ♕c5



27.♖b5 ♕d4 28.♖b3 g6 29.♖xd3 ♕b6 30.♖b3 ♕c5 31.♖c3 ♕b6=

After repeating a few more times, the players agreed a draw in Predke – Sjugirov, Khanty-Mansiysk 2018.

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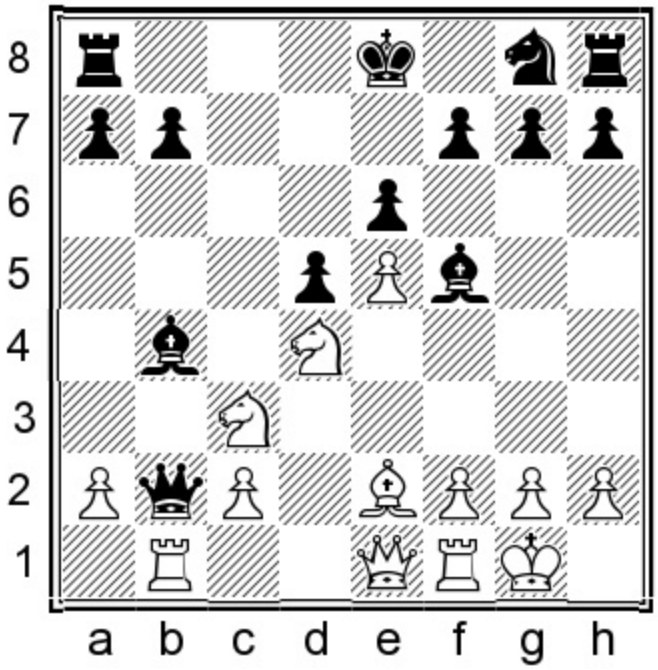
B422) 12.♖b1



I consider this the more critical move.

12...♗xc3 13.♖xb2 ♗xe1 14.♖xe1

Unlike the 12.♗b5†?! line noted earlier, Black must address the attack on the b7-pawn, so:

14...b6

We have reached a key position for the 6...♕b6 variation, which has received extensive testing in correspondence praxis, as well as over the board by some extremely strong players. The verdict? Black is totally fine! White has a lead in development and can try to restore material equality in various ways, but in the end Black always keeps the balance. That is the short story. The longer version is that it leads to some interesting positions, which are dynamically balanced but practically challenging for both sides.

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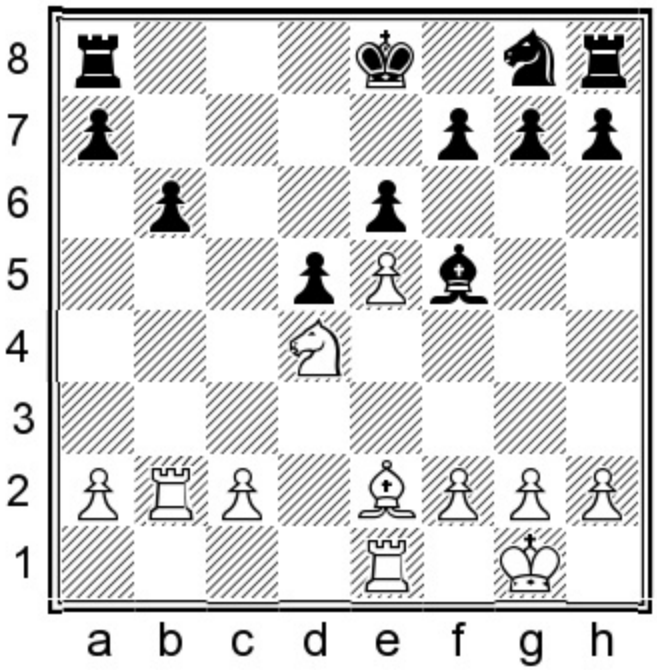
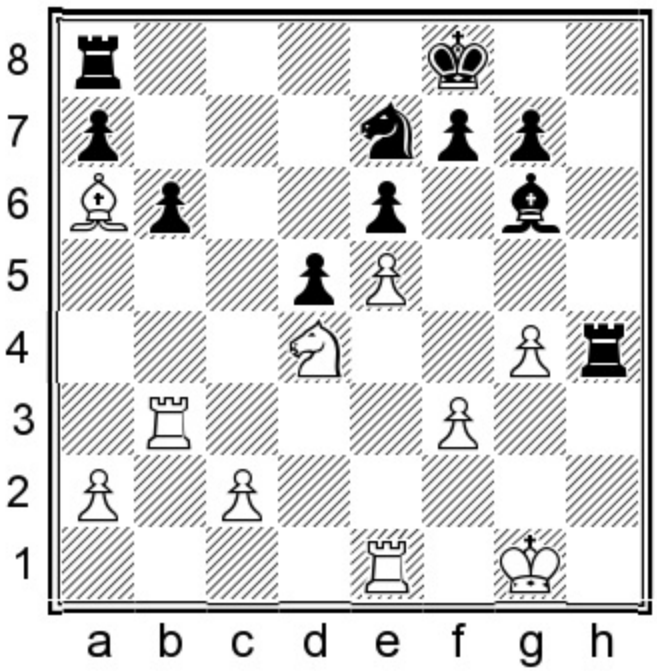


Despite the heavy simplifications, the ensuing sharp endgames cannot be navigated only by common sense, but require careful calculation as well. We will analyse two main options, beginning with **B4221)** 15.♘xf5; it is certainly natural to ruin Black's pawn structure. We will then move on to the more sophisticated and challenging **B4222)** 15.h4!.

15.♗b5† ♔f8 16.♘xf5 exf5 transposes to variation B4221 below.

15.g4 looks strange, but White tries to tie Black down in a cramped position on the kingside before attempting to make inroads on the other flank. 15...♗g6 16.♗b5† ♔f8 17.♗a6 h5 18.h3 ♘e7 19.♖b3 This was seen in Motylev – Laznicka, Poikovsky 2013. Here I suggest 19...hxg4N 20.hxg4 ♖h4 21.f3, at which point Black can create promising counterplay in a most unusual way:



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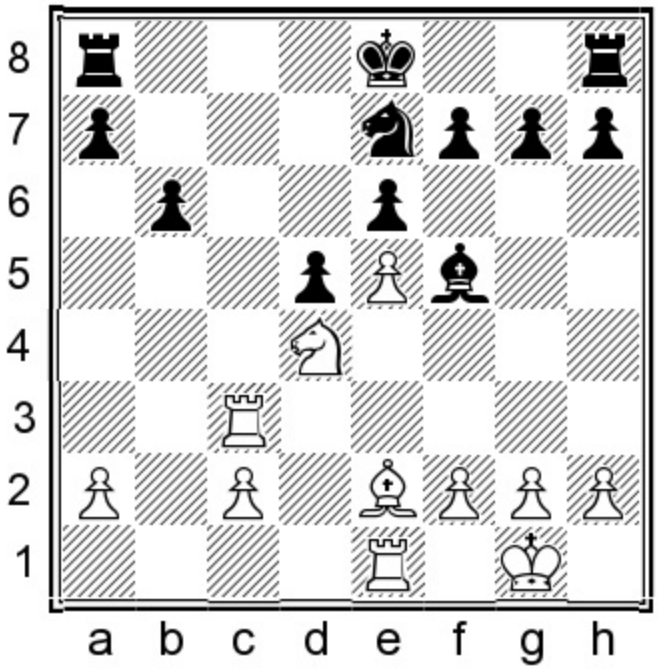
21...♗f5!? 22.♔g2 g5!⇄ Threatening ...♗xg4.

15.♖b3 ♘e7 16.♖c3

This is another logical try, hoping to get the rook to c7. However, Black can once again generate counterplay:



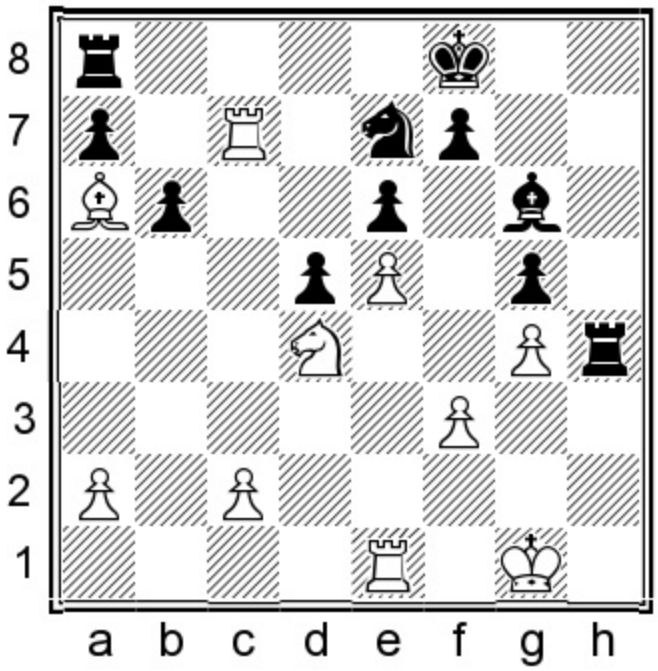
16...g5!

As we will see, with the moves h2-h4 and ...h5 inserted, Black can safely castle, but here 16...0-0? is bad due to 17.g4!±.

17.♖c7 ♗g6 18.g4

Taking control over f5.

18...h5 19.h3 ♔f8 20.♗a6 hxg4 21.hxg4 ♖h4 22.f3



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22...♗h7!

Making room for the knight to go to g6 instead.

23.♗b7 ♖e8 24.♗a6

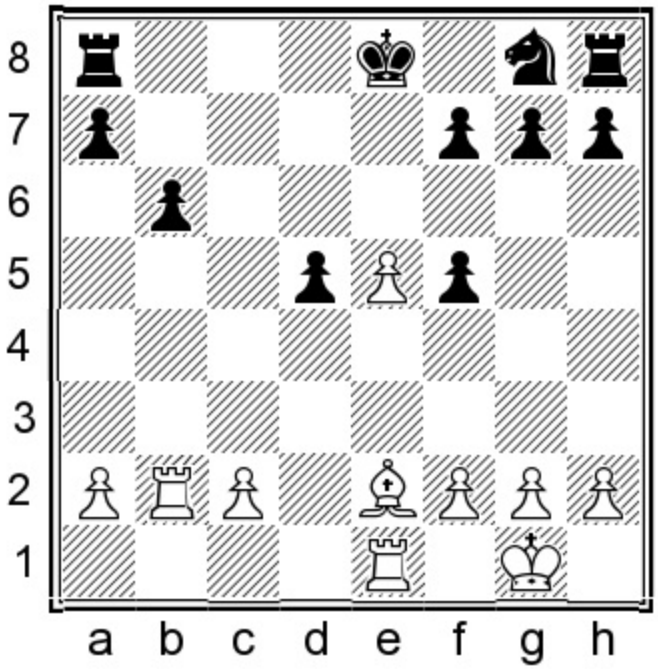
A draw was agreed in Sjugirov – Eljanov, St Petersburg 2013, after 24...♖a8.

Black could also have played on with:

24...♘g6!? 25.♖xa7 ♘f4⇄

Followed by ...♔g7.

B4221) 15.♘xf5 exf5



16.♗b5†

16.c4 makes life too easy for Black after: 16...♘e7 17.♖d2 0-0-0⇄

16...♔f8

White should try to open the position for his rooks and bishop while Black is still underdeveloped. However, the limited amount of material remaining makes it doubtful that he can achieve anything serious.

16...♔e7!?N could be considered.

17.♖d1

Attacking the d-pawn and expecting ...♘e7. White has tried a couple of other ideas:

17.♖b3 threatens to penetrate via c3 and c7, but 17...♖c8 is an obvious reply. A good example continued: 18.♖a3 a5 19.♗d3 ♘e7 20.♖b3 ♖c6 21.♖eb1

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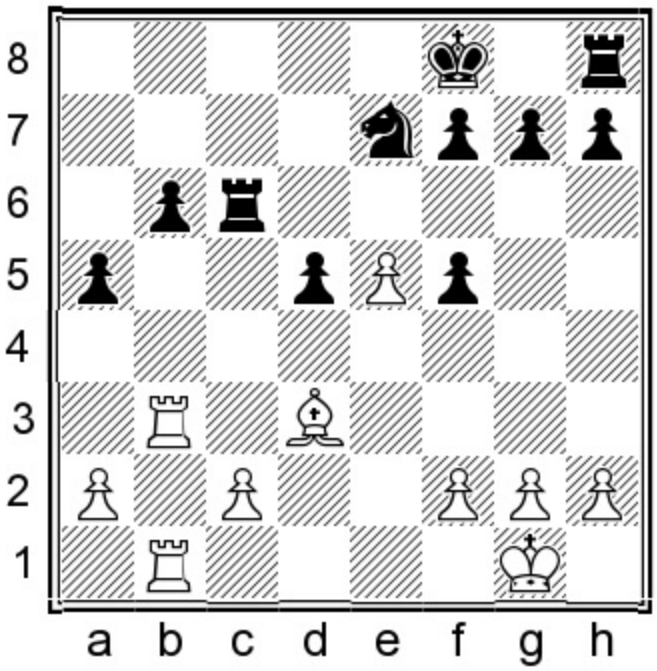

21...♘g6! Black cleverly returns the extra pawn in order to get the h8-rook into play. 22.♖xb6 ♖xb6 23.♖xb6 ♔e7 24.♗xf5 ♘xe5= Morozov – Korogodski, corr. 2017.

17.c4 dxc4 18.♗xc4

This makes the bishop really strong, but also eases Black's position. Once again, Black will be fine as long as he is willing to return the extra material at the right moment:

18...g5 19.♖be2

After 19.e6 ♖c8 20.♗b3 fxe6 21.♗xe6 ♖c5 22.h3 ♔g7 23.♗xg8 ♖xg8= a draw was agreed in Glaser – Tsitsulin, corr. 2019.

19...♖e8 20.e6

With this natural break, White hopes to soften Black's position, but after:

20...fxe6 21.♗xe6

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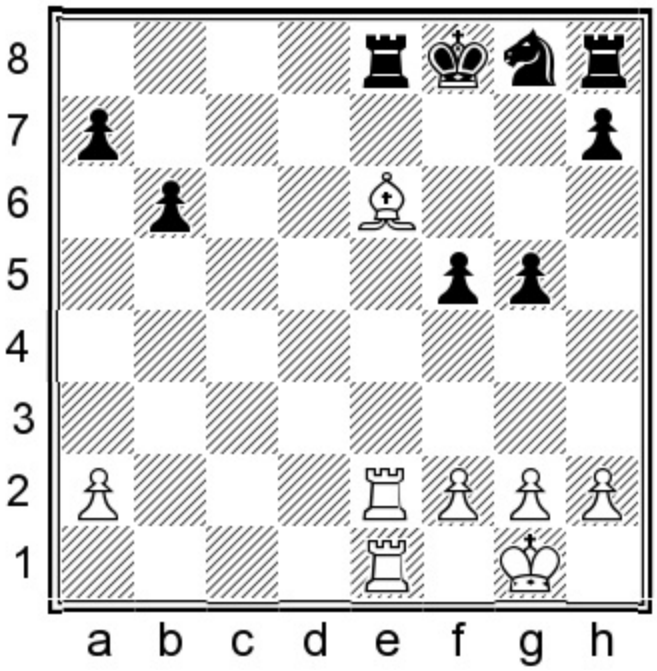
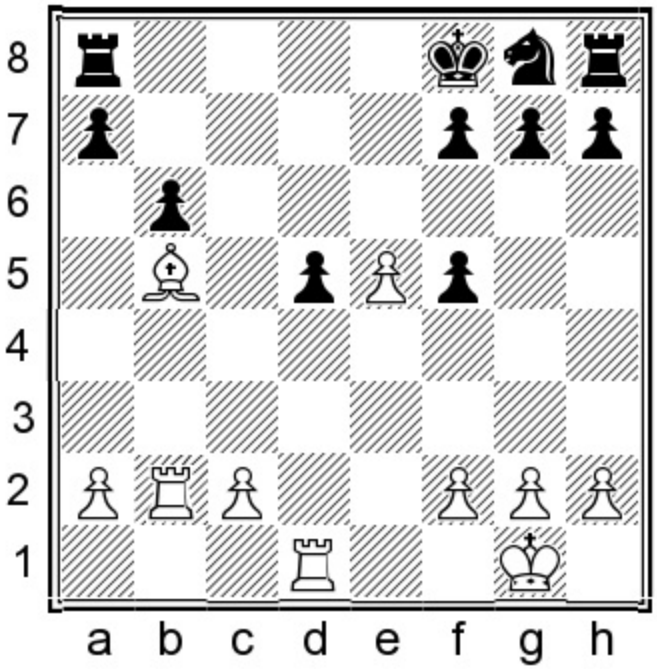


21...♘f6! 22.♗xf5 ♖xe2 23.♖xe2 ♔f7 24.f3=

It was another draw, Pereira – Leite, corr. 2017.



17...g5!?N

This is my idea to keep some play in the position.

White was of course anticipating 17...♘e7 when he planned to play for activity with: 18.c4 dxc4 19.♖bd2 Threatening mate. 19...♘g6 20.f4⩲ This has occurred in a couple of high-level correspondence games. Black should be able to hold, but my only issue with following the correspondence games is that Black found nothing better than shuffling around passively and challenging White to come up with something. I prefer to get my pieces out!

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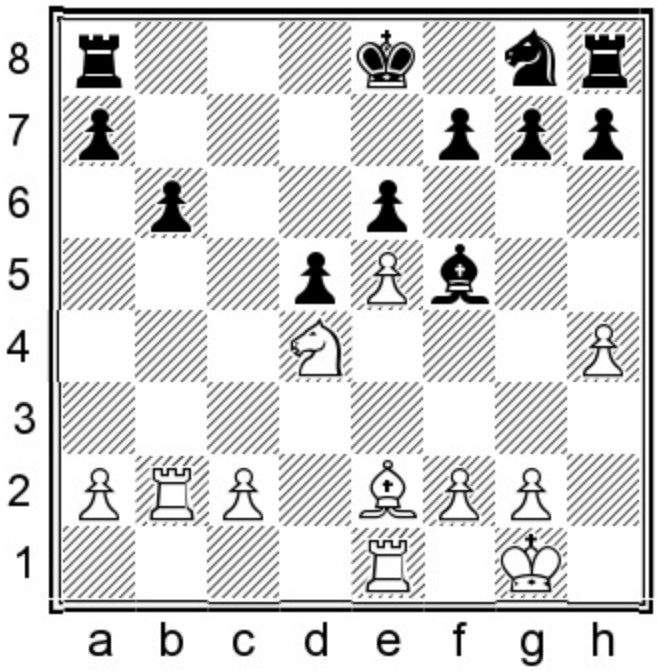
18.♖xd5 ♘e7 19.♖d6 ♔g7 20.♖d7 ♘g6 21.e6 ♖hf8

White's initiative is hampered by the poor placement of the rook on b2. Play can continue:

22.♖b3 ♔f6 23.exf7 ♖xf7 24.♖d6† ♔g7 25.♖g3 h6=

Also 25...g4 looks playable. Either way, the position is about equal, but there is a decent amount of play remaining and at least it doesn't look as pathetic as the position resulting from 17...♘e7.

B4222) 15.h4!



15...h5

If White inserts these moves (h2-h4 and ...h7-h5) then almost all of the similar lines we saw earlier are changed in Black's favour – except one! It is not a coincidence that this is White's main try in the world of correspondence chess, where concrete ideas are explored all the time. Still, Black has proven to be fine.

16.♘xf5

16.a4 ♘e7 17.a5 occurred in Motylev – Belov, Dagomys 2010. Black should have stopped caring too much about pawn-counting and instead activated his pieces with: 17...0-0!N 18.♗xh5 ♖fc8 19.axb6 axb6 20.♗e2 ♗h7⇄

16.c4 ♘e7 17.cxd5 exd5!? 18.f4 ♖h6 was fine for Black in Domancich – Eman, corr. 2017.

16.♖b3N is another plausible try, but 16...♘e7 17.♖c3 0-0 18.♖c7 ♘g6⇄ seems fine for Black.

16...exf5 17.c4!

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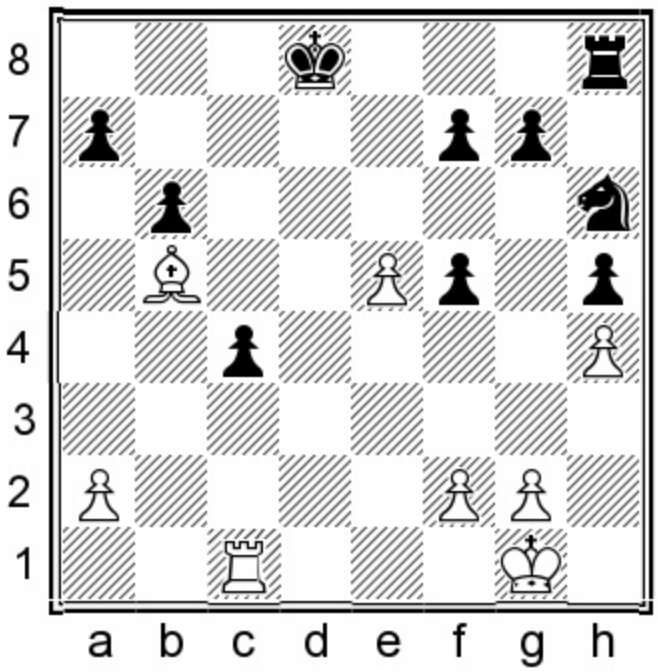
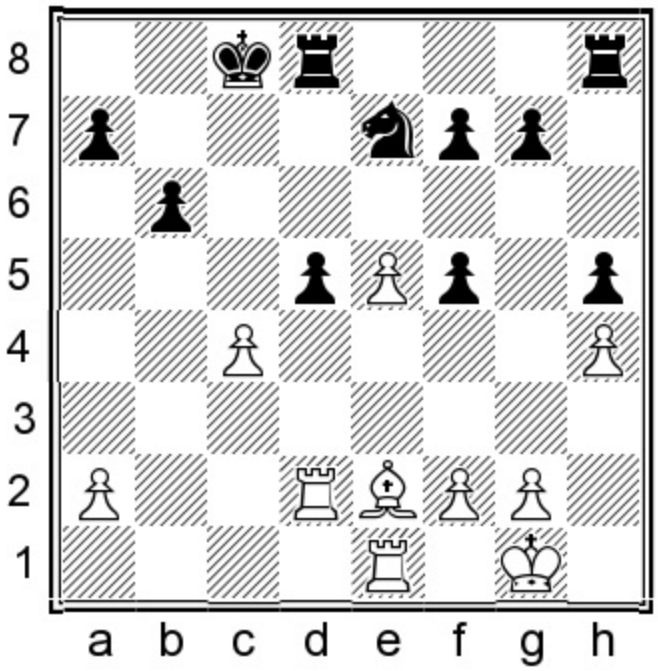
17.♗b5† can be met by 17...♔e7! 18.c4 dxc4 19.♖d2 ♖d8 20.♖xd8 ♔xd8 21.♖c1 ♘h6! when the inclusion of h2-h4 and ...h5 helps Black after:



22.♖xc4 ♘g4 23.f4 f6 24.e6 g5!?⇄

17...♘e7 18.♖d2 0-0-0



The inclusion of the pawn moves to h4 and h5 has rendered Black's pawn formation dangerously static. If he plays ...g6 to protect h5 then the white bishop might eventually mop up all the pawns; and there is also a king penetration via h2-g3-f4-g5 to worry about. Fortunately, with a little care, Black can avoid all such trouble.

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19.g3

19.♖ed1 looks tempting but 19...d4! relieves the pressure. After 20.f4 ♘g6! 21.g3 ♘f8! 22.♖xd4 ♖xd4 23.♖xd4 ♘e6 24.♖d5 g6⇄ the knight had a wonderful outpost on c5 in Tarrio Ocana – Brewer, corr. 2019.

19...f4!

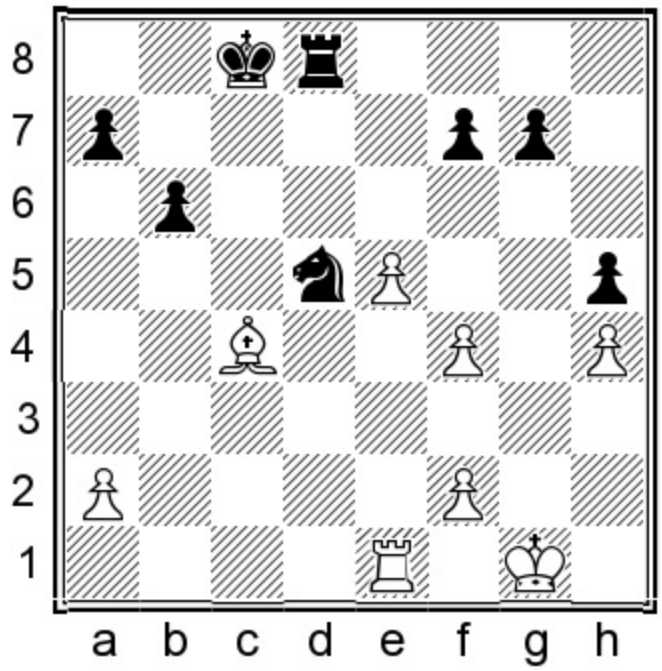
Disturbing White's plans before he can establish a grip on the position. One of the great things about being a pawn up is that you can always give it back!

20.cxd5 ♖xd5 21.♖xd5 ♘xd5 22.♗c4 ♖d8

White can win the pawn back but he cannot win the game, as the correspondence games have demonstrated.

23.gxf4

23.♖d1 was tried in a more recent game but the outcome was the same after: 23...♘c3 24.♖c1 ♖d1† 25.♖xd1 ♘xd1 26.♗b3 ♘c3 27.♗xf7 fxg3 28.fxg3 ♔d8 29.♔f2 ♔e7 30.♗g8 b5 31.♔e3 b4 32.♔d3 a5 33.♗c4 ♘d1 ½–½ Muljadi – Korogodski, corr. 2019.



23...b5!⇄

Already the players agreed a draw in Tkachenko – Ackermann, corr. 2018. A logical continuation would have been:

24.♗b3

24.♗xb5 ♘xf4⇄

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24...a5 25.♖c1† ♔b7 26.♖c5 ♘xf4 27.♖xb5† ♔a6 28.♗c4 ♖d4! 29.♗f1 ♔a7 30.♖xa5† ♔b6 31.♖a6† ♔c5 32.♖a7 ♘g6

Almost everything will be exchanged, making the draw a virtual certainty.

Conclusion

Black has many options against the Short System but for a while it seemed like he was struggling in all of them. I am happy to announce that his troubles are over! The ambitious 6...♕b6 leads to hair-raising complications, where apparently Black is doing fine in all lines. This really has put the ball in White's court in the Short Variation these days. It is like when you play 1.d4 and don't have anything against the Grünfeld. Makes you wonder if you should retire!

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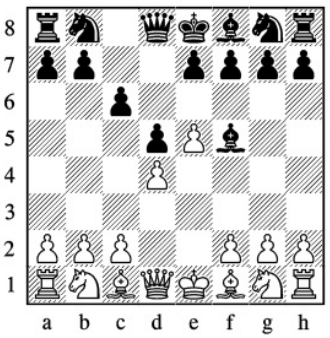
Chapter 5



Positional Lines

Variation Index

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5

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A2) 7.♗d2 151

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***Game 9* – Rublevsky – Artemiev 169**

"What's happened happened. Which is an expression of faith in the mechanics of the world. It's

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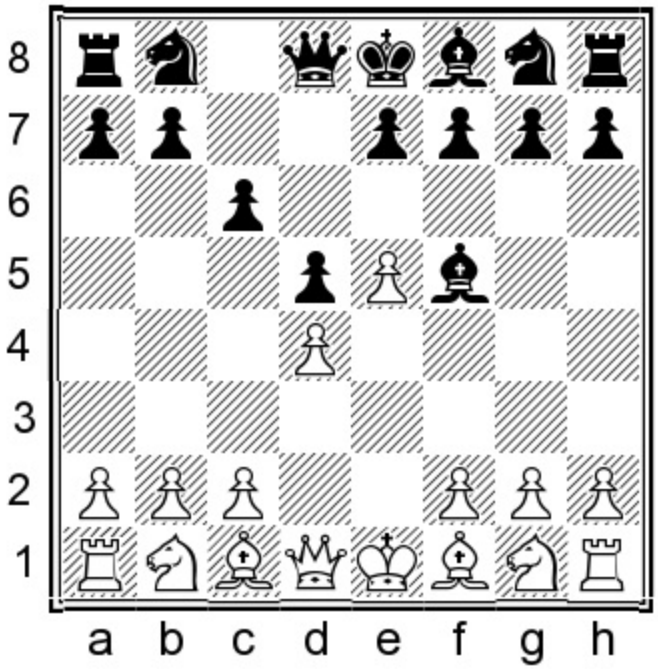
not an excuse to do nothing."

Neil (from the film Tenet)

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5



White can try to keep control and play positionally, hoping that his extra space will tell. This is a sound and popular way for White to approach the position, so this is an important chapter to study.

Overview of lines

Since this chapter is concerned with positional schemes, it makes sense to outline White's main plans before delving into variations.

The first try is the simplistic 4.♗d3 ♗xd3 5.♕xd3, exchanging Black's only developed piece, which seems like a reasonable thing to do. However, White risks ending up with a bad bishop, which is probably why the line has a rather dubious reputation. In fact it is not that bad, but Black is certainly okay, having a French Defence without the bad bishop. I cover this variation with the famous illustrative game Nimzowitsch – Capablanca, New York 1927, a positional masterpiece. There is a good chance that you know it, but chess classics are like great rock songs: you can enjoy them again and again. Please notice the instructive manoeuvre ...♕a5† followed by ...♕a6, which is mentioned in the commentary.

White can go for a much more potent version of the above idea with:

4.h4 h5 5.♗d3 ♗xd3 6.♕xd3

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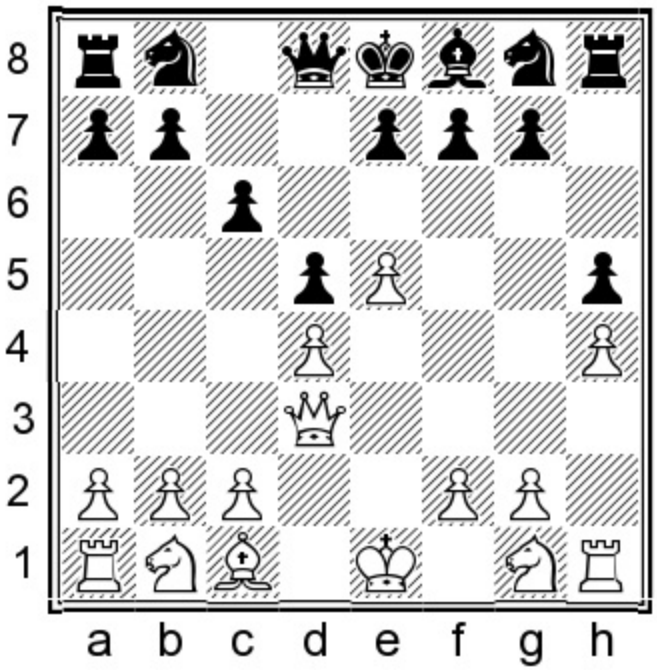

Both sides have made a committal move with their h-pawn, but White is well placed to make use of the g5-square. I recommend the clever:

6...♕a5†!

6...e6 7.♗g5! sees White put the g5-outpost to good use.

The text move leads to interesting middlegame positions, where White does not have time to develop in the ideal way with ♗g5 followed by ♘d2.

After 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5, White's first possible strategy was to exchange the light-squared bishops. The second option is to bolster the centre, especially the important d4-pawn, and perhaps try to inhibit the freeing move ...c5.
A subtle way for White to go about things is:

4.♘d2

4.c3 and 4.♗e3 are the other main ideas. Black often obtains counterplay on the other flank with a well-timed ...f6, as known from the French.

4...e6 5.♘b3

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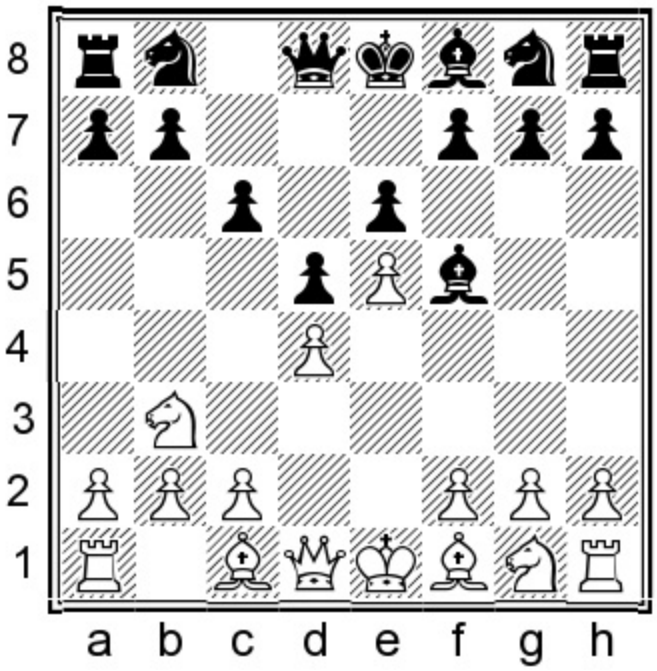

White's knight manoeuvre is directed against ...c5, but in a recent game I played it anyway: 5...c5!? 6.dxc5 ♗xc5 7.♘xc5 ♕a5† Followed by ...♕xc5. It only cost the bishop pair! Although this is an interesting way to play, it is not exactly a crystal-clear route to equality, but you can find it in the notes to the 4.♘d2 line, so you can see if you like it.

Instead Black can show that the lack of space is no great problem after:

5...♘e7

Followed by the fine move ...♘c8! intending ...♗e7 and ...0-0, with a perfectly sound position. This will be our main line.

GAME 8

Aron Nimzowitsch – Jose Raul Capablanca

New York 1927

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♗d3 ♗xd3 5.♕xd3 e6

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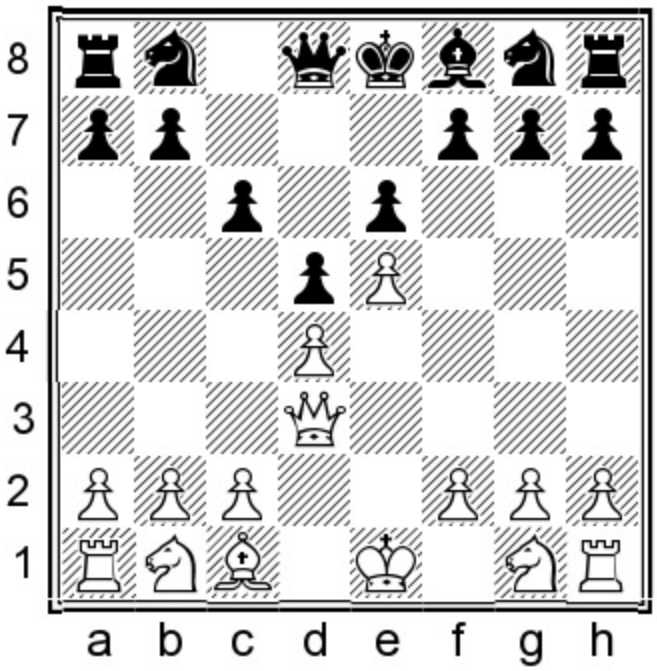

6.♘c3

It looks slightly odd to block the c-pawn. White has more often developed his other knight. Let's see some examples:

6.♘f3 ♕a5† 7.c3 (7.♗d2 is similar) 7...♕a6! is a key manoeuvre. If White doesn't exchange queens it will be difficult for him to castle, and 8.♕xa6 ♘xa6 gives Black a comfortable endgame.

6.♘e2 takes the sting out of the aforementioned queen manoeuvre, but the knight is rather passive on e2. 6...c5 7.c3 ♘c6 8.0-0 ♘ge7 Black is playing a French without the passive light-squared bishop, so he must be doing fine. 9.♘d2 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♘f5 11.♘f3 ♗e7 12.♗d2 0-0= White has more space, but Black has a sound position without any weaknesses.

Even the anti-positional 6.f4 has been played in quite a number of games. White takes some space and secures his centre, but the bishop on c1 doesn't feel happy. 6...c5 7.c3 ♘h6 8.♘f3 ♘c6 9.0-0 ♕b6 With good play against the white centre.

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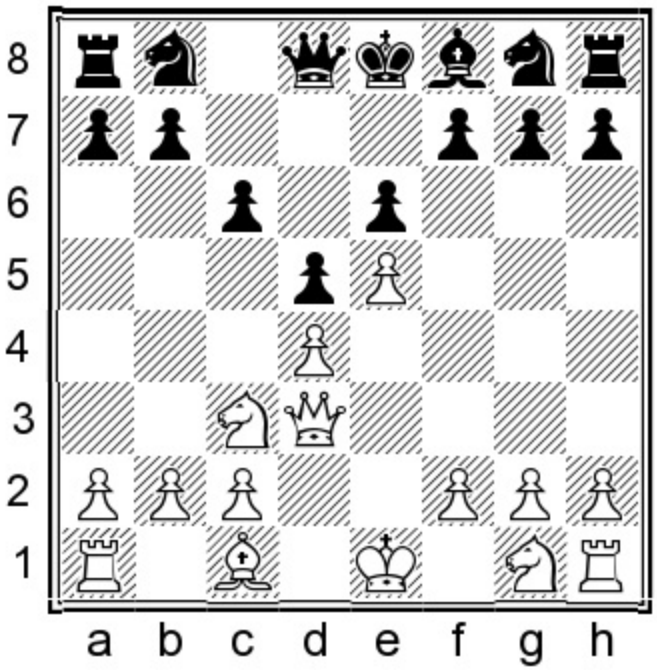

6...♕b6

The immediate 6...c5 is also good.

7.♘ge2

7.♘f3 ♕a6! and White's queen has no good options.

7...c5

The desired break.

Black could also develop more slowly with 7...♘e7 8.0-0 ♘d7, bringing the knights out before playing ...c5.

8.dxc5

Another possibility is 8.0-0 ♘d7!? (8...♘c6 is also fine) 9.♗e3 ♖c8 with an interesting position.

8...♗xc5 9.0-0 ♘e7 10.♘a4 ♕c6 11.♘xc5 ♕xc5 12.♗e3 ♕c7 13.f4 ♘f5

Objectively it may have been slightly better just to castle, with a balanced game. Instead Capablanca chooses a more cunning move: he hopes that White will drive the knight away with a lunge of the g-pawn.

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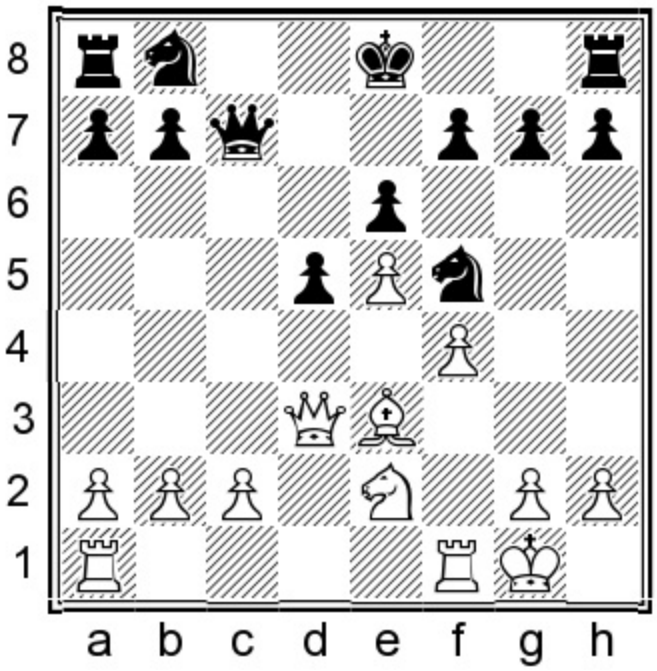

14.c3

Nimzowitsch plays somewhat planlessly.

Preserving the bishop with 14.♗f2 or activating the rook with 14.♖ac1 would have been more to the point.

14...♘c6 15.♖ad1 g6?!

Capablanca continues to delay castling, but this move weakens the dark squares. Still, it works out perfectly after White's ill-fated reply.

16.g4?

A big strategic mistake.

16.♗f2 was better, when 16...h5 leads to an interesting game.

16...♘xe3 17.♕xe3

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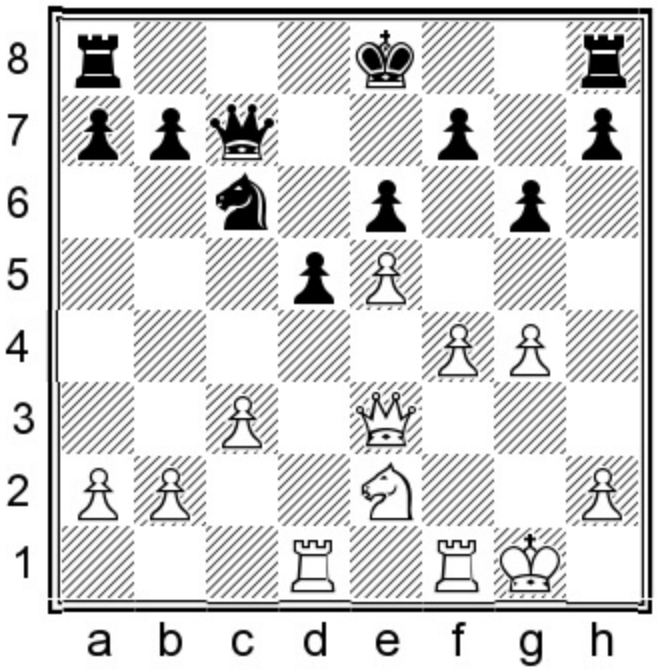

17...h5!

Highly instructive. Now White must make a difficult choice.

18.g5

Sad, but there was no perfect solution.

18.gxh5 ♖xh5! is depressing for White.

18.h3 keeps White's pawn structure intact, but after 18...hxg4 19.hxg4 0-0-0! Black tucks his king away and prepares to use the open h-file, perhaps in conjunction with ...g5 to undermine the e5-pawn.

18.f5! would be the likely choice of a strong modern-day player. Black should play 18...gxf5 (18...hxg4 19.fxe6 fxe6 20.♘d4 gives White decent counterplay) 19.gxf5 0-0-0 when Black is somewhat better, but the play is nothing like as one-sided as in the game. Nowadays we understand the value of active defence, precisely because of classic games such as the present one.

18...0-0

Having blocked the kingside structure, Black's king is perfectly safe here and he is free to build up on the queenside. A triumph for Capablanca's deep idea.

19.♘d4 ♕b6 20.♖f2 ♖fc8

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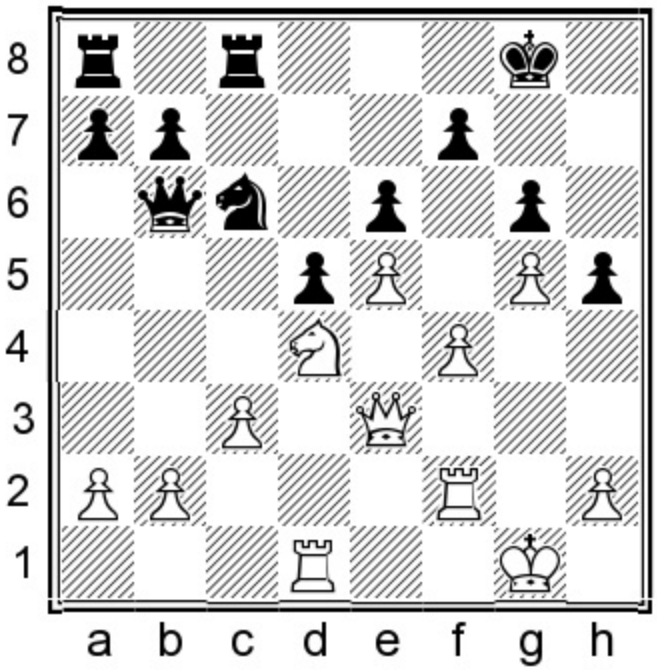

Black is better on the queenside and he starts to build up some pressure. White lacks counterplay. His only chance for active play is the f4-f5 break, but it will not work unless Black gets careless.

21.a3 ♖c7 22.♖d3 ♘a5 23.♖e2 ♖e8

This is not really necessary, but it's a good example of prophylactic thinking: on e8 the rook makes it even less likely that White will be able to carry out f4-f5.

24.♔g2 ♘c6 25.♖ed2 ♖ec8 26.♖e2

Perhaps 26.♘xc6 gave better chances to hold.

26...♘e7 27.♖ed2 ♖c4

White can only mark time and hope that his defensive troops can prevent Black from breaking through.

28.♕h3 ♔g7 29.♖f2 a5 30.♖e2 ♘f5!

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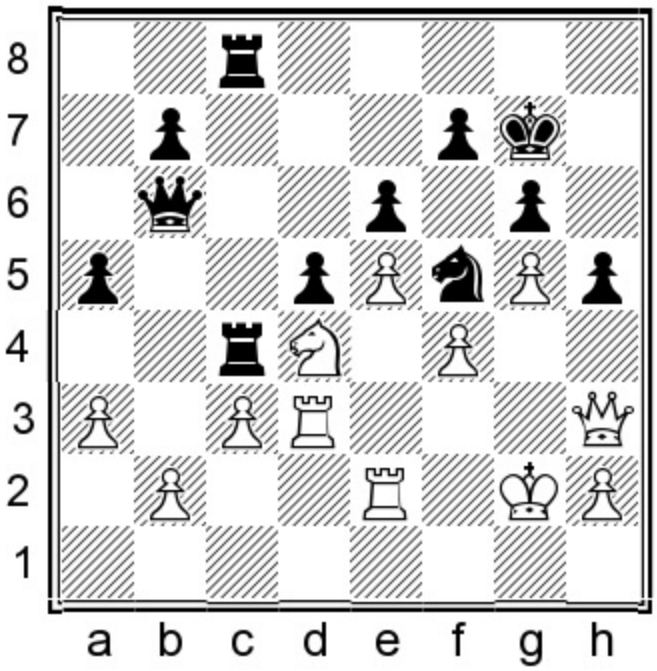

31.♘xf5†

A big decision.

The white pieces were suddenly slightly misplaced, so he could hardly have kept the tension with 31.♖ed2 because of 31...♘xd4 32.♖xd4 (the imaginative 32.♕e3!? is met by 32...♕b3 33.♖xd4 ♖xd4 34.♕xd4 ♖c4) 32...♖xd4 33.cxd4 ♕c6 and Black controls the only open file. White's kingside is full of holes, which makes it almost impossible to create a fortress – which is also the case after the game continuation.

31...gxf5 32.♕f3

32.♕xh5? is no good because 32...♖h8! 33.♕f3 ♖h4 picks up the f4-pawn.

32.♕h4 ♔g6 keeps control, rather like in the game.

32...♔g6

Black is in no hurry!

33.♖ed2 ♖e4!

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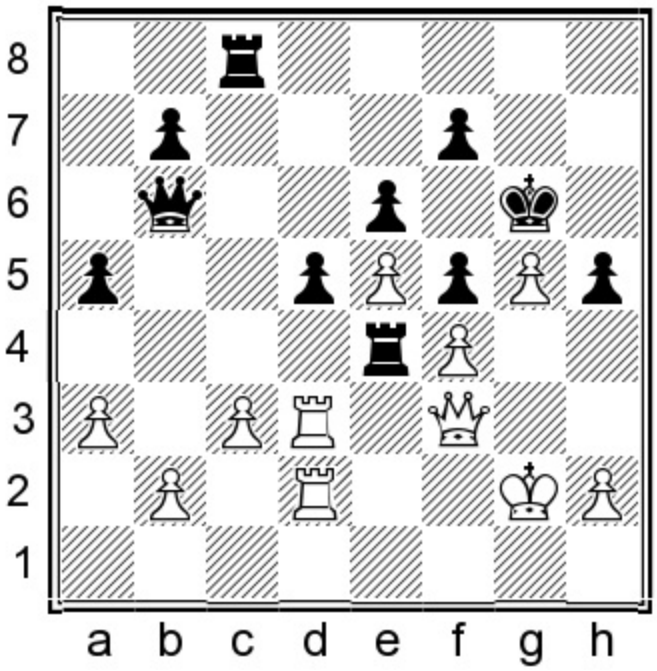


Capablanca penetrates along the fourth rank. He is planning ...♖cc4 to attack the weak f4-pawn. Later he will also try to infiltrate with his queen.

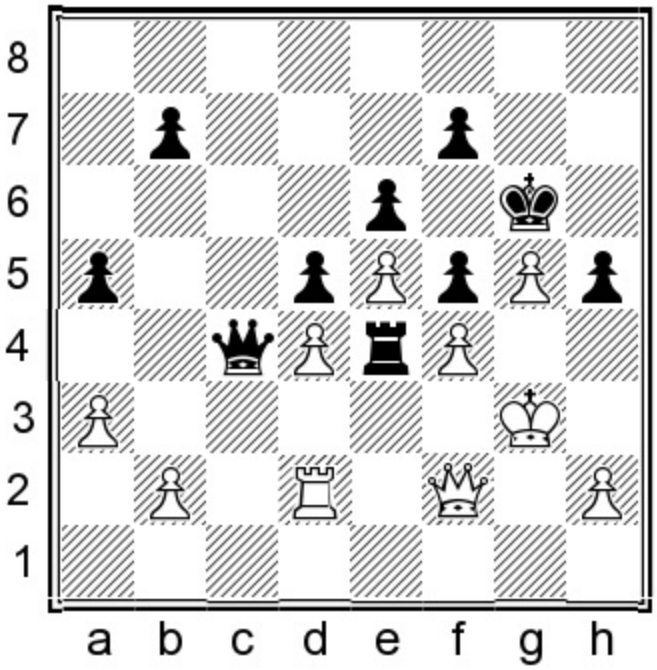
34.♖d4 ♖c4! 35.♕f2

35.♖xc4 ♖xc4 36.♕f2 ♕b5 was hardly better.

35...♕b5 36.♔g3 ♖cxd4! 37.cxd4

37.♖xd4? ♖e2 wins easily.

37...♕c4



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With complete domination.

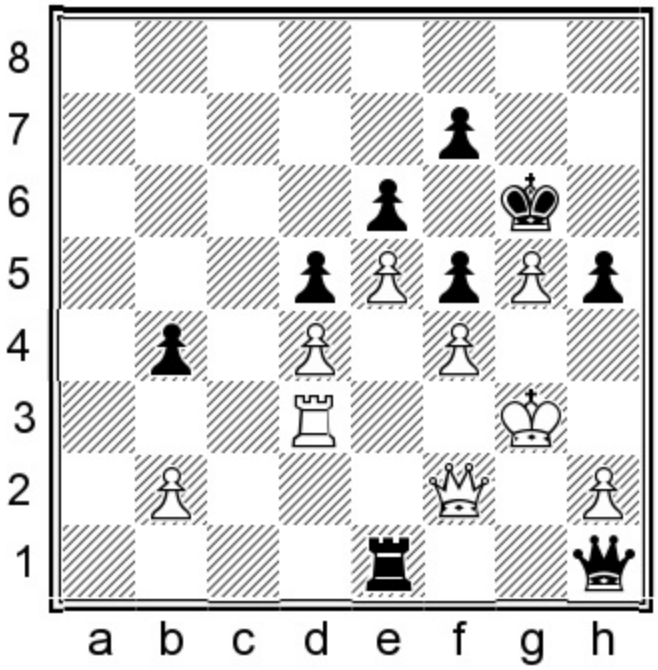
38.♔g2 b5

Black improves his position before the final assault.

39.♔g1 b4 40.axb4 axb4 41.♔g2 ♕c1! 42.♔g3 ♕h1 43.♖d3

43.♕g2 ♖e3† 44.♔h4 ♕xg2 45.♖xg2 ♖f3 is an illustrative variation. Everything is just hopeless.

43...♖e1!



44.♖f3

44.♔h3 ♕e4 45.♕f3 ♖g1 46.♕xe4 fxe4 47.♖b3 ♔f5 48.♖xb4 e3 is another nice variation.

44...♖d1 45.b3

White has run out of moves.

45.♖b3 ♖f1 should win quickly, for instance: 46.♕e2 (46.♕d2 ♕e4–+) 46...h4†! 47.♔xh4 ♕g1!? 48.♖g3 ♖xf4† 49.♔h3 ♕xd4–+

45...♖c1 46.♖e3

46.h3 ♖g1† 47.♔h4 ♖g4 is mate; 46.♔h3 ♖c2! 47.♕g3 h4! is another neat finish.

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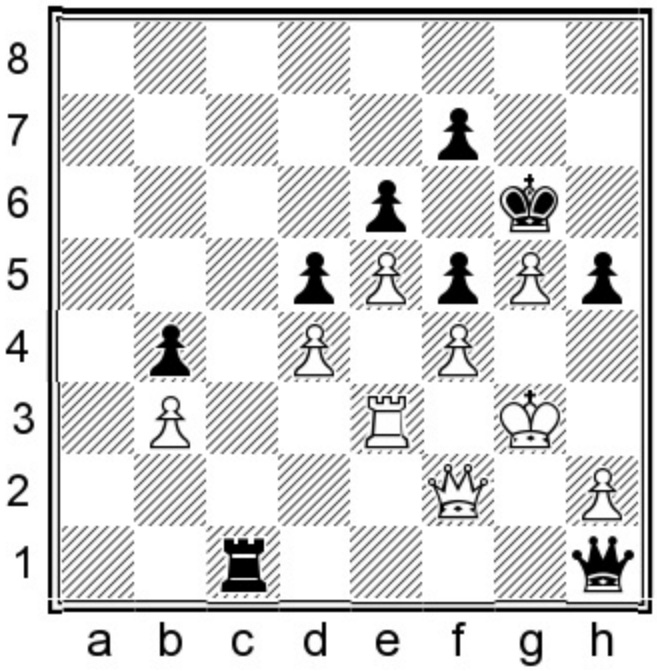

46...♖f1

Capablanca was rewarded with the prize for the best game of the super-tournament. It was a powerful display indeed, and crucial to our understanding of heavy-piece play.

0–1

Theory

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5

Having covered the rather simplistic 4.♗d3 in the game above, we will turn our attention to the main positional lines involving **A)** 4.h4, **B)** 4.c3 and **C)** 4.♘d2.

4.♗e3 is met by 4...e6 when 5.c3 transposes to variation B, while 5.♘d2 ♘d7 6.♘b3 converts to variation C, except that White has committed his bishop to e3 a little earlier than he would normally.

A) 4.h4 h5

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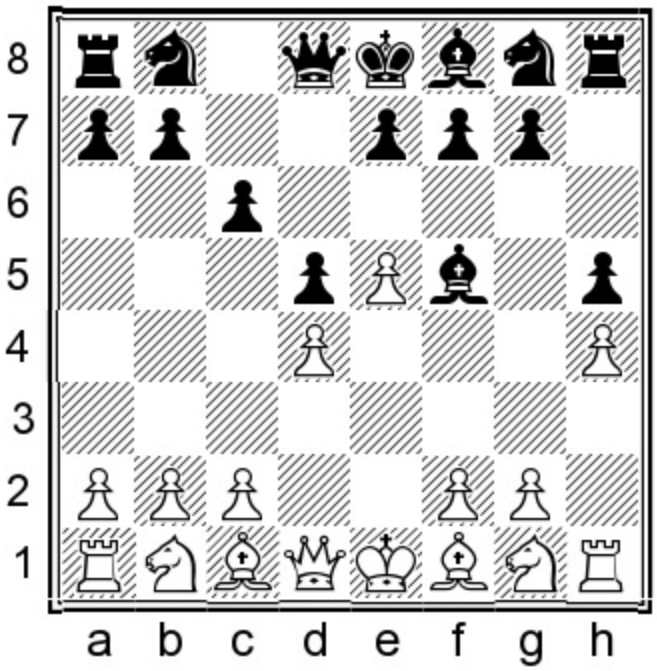

Other moves are possible but I like this symmetrical answer. It secures the kingside against any further advances of White's g- and h-pawns, and leads to interesting strategic play with chances for both sides.

5.♗d3

5.c4 and 5.♗g5!? are aggressive options which will be covered in the next chapter.

5...♗xd3 6.♕xd3 ♕a5†!

6...e6 has been the most popular choice but 7.♗g5 is a bit annoying for Black.

The text move is the most precise reaction. White's most important replies are **A1)** 7.♘c3, **A2)** 7.♗d2 and **A3)** 7.♘d2, the last being the most popular.

7.b4!?

This is an experimental try.

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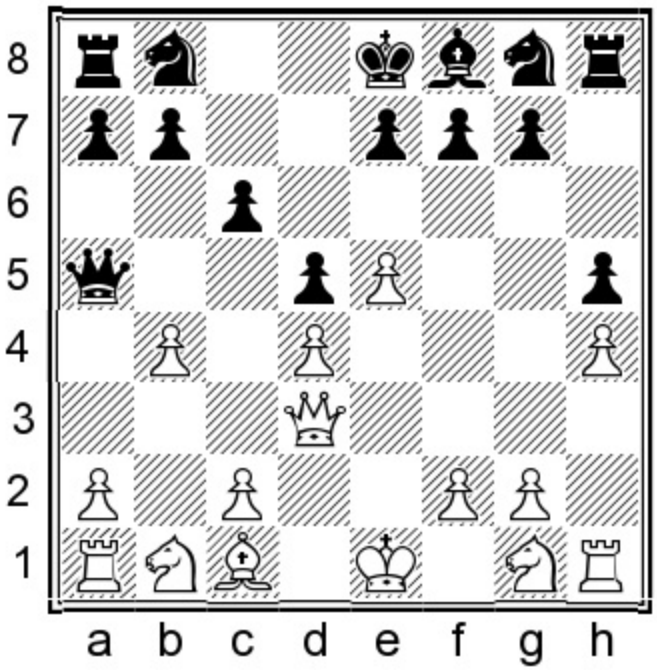

7...♕a6!

We should stick to this well-known manoeuvre!

7...♕xb4† is possible but riskier: 8.♘d2 e6 9.♖b1 ♕e7 White had reasonable compensation after 10.c4 in Desideri – Carneiro, Sao Paulo 2018, and the flexible 10.♘e2 can also be considered.

8.♕b3 e6 9.♘f3 ♘e7 10.♘c3 ♘f5 11.♘e2 ♘d7 12.a4 ♕c4!? 13.♕xc4 dxc4 14.b5 c5⇄

Black had no cause to complain in M. Muzychuk – E. Atalik, Khanty-Mansiysk 2018.

7.c3!? e6 8.♘e2

On 8.♘f3 ♕a6! is once again the answer: 9.♕xa6 ♘xa6 The ending is equal but full of play. 10.♗g5 was seen in Gara – A. Muzychuk, Astana 2019, and now 10...f6!?N was the most ambitious choice, intending 11.♗f4 ♘e7⇄ followed by ...♘g6.

8...♕a6 9.♕f3 c5

Black sets his counterplay in motion.

10.0-0 ♘c6 11.♖d1 ♘ge7 12.♘g3

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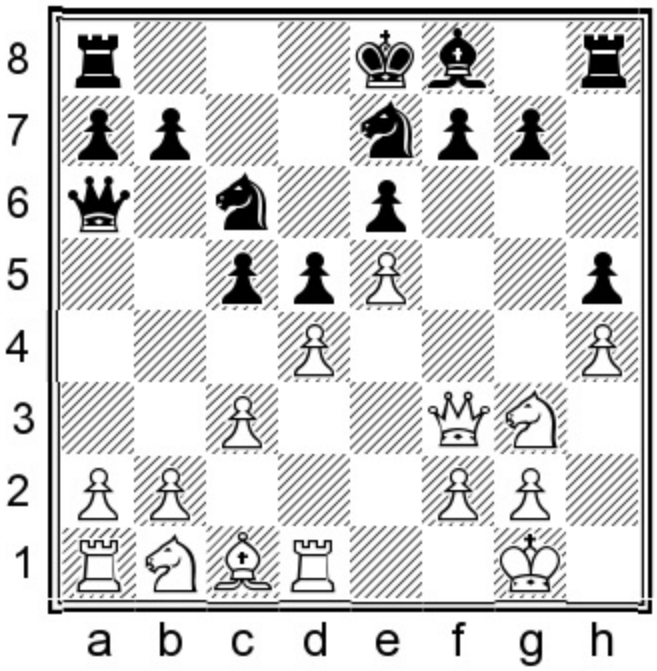


This happened in the all-Indian top-level encounter Anand – Vidit, Doha 2016. Black could have seized the initiative with:

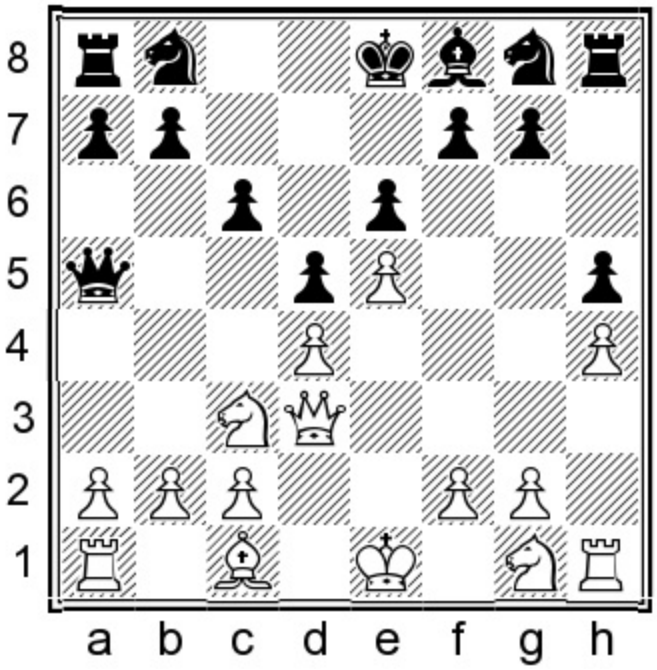
12...♘g6!N

Attacking h4, and after:

13.♗g5 ♕b6∓

White feels the heat on b2 and d4.

A1) 7.♘c3 e6



8.♗g5

Even without the queen on d8, this is still the most annoying move for Black to face.

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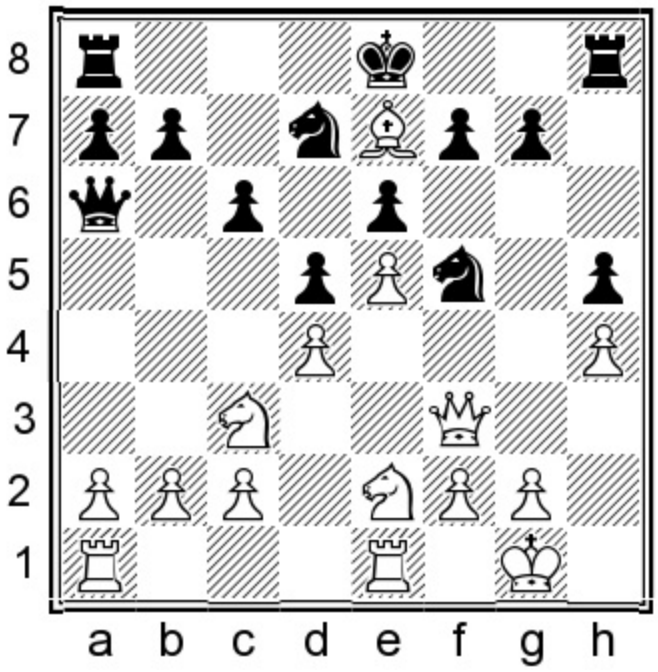
Another approach is:
8.♘ge2 ♕a6 9.♕f3 ♘e7

Black simply develops.

He could also strive for immediate counterplay with the typical 9...c5, when a logical continuation is: 10.a4!?N 10...♘c6 11.♘b5 ♖c8 12.c3 cxd4 13.cxd4 ♕b6 14.0-0 ♘h6⇄
10.♗g5 ♘d7 11.0-0 ♘f5 12.♖fe1 ♗e7 13.♗xe7



13...♘xe7N

This is the simple solution, with equal play.

Instead 13...♔xe7!? 14.♕f4 ♖ag8 was seen in Pilgaard – Rasmussen, Denmark 2018, when 15.♘d1!N would have been somewhat better for White.

8...♕a6 9.♕h3 ♘e7 10.♘ge2

This seems most natural.

10.0-0-0!? was an interesting but risky choice in Morozevich – Esipenko, Sochi 2018. Black can build up with 10...b5N 11.♔b1 ♘d7⇄ when ...b4 and ...c5 are in the air.

10...♘d7 11.0-0 ♘f5 12.a4

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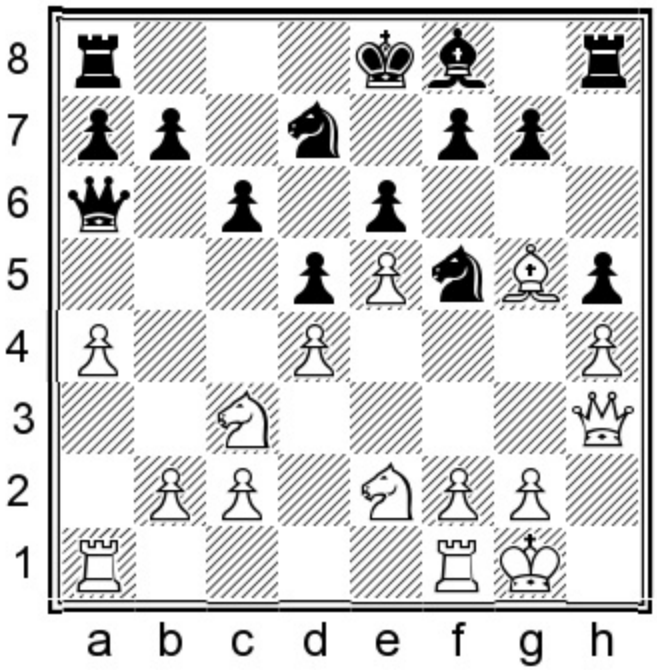

We have been following Hector – F. Berkes, Gilleleje 2020. I suggest:

12...♗b4N

With an interesting position where Black's chances are not worse.

A2) 7.♗d2 ♕a6 8.e6!?

This is a speculative pawn sacrifice. Without it, there is not much point in 7.♗d2 which chased the black queen to the great a6-square, where it probably would have gone anyway within the next few moves.

8...♕xd3 9.cxd3

White wants to sacrifice the pawn and leave Black stuck with an immobile kingside. 9.exf7† ♔xf7 10.cxd3 keeps material equality but Black has no problems getting his pieces out: 10...♘d7 11.♘f3 ♘h6 12.♘c3 g6 13.♘e2 ♗g7=

9...fxe6

9...f6!? is suggested by Fernandez, and could be worth considering if you desire a more complicated game. Black will play his knight to f5 while White will bring his knight to f4. It looks unclear and would be a risky decision for the practical player.

10.♘f3 ♘d7 11.0-0

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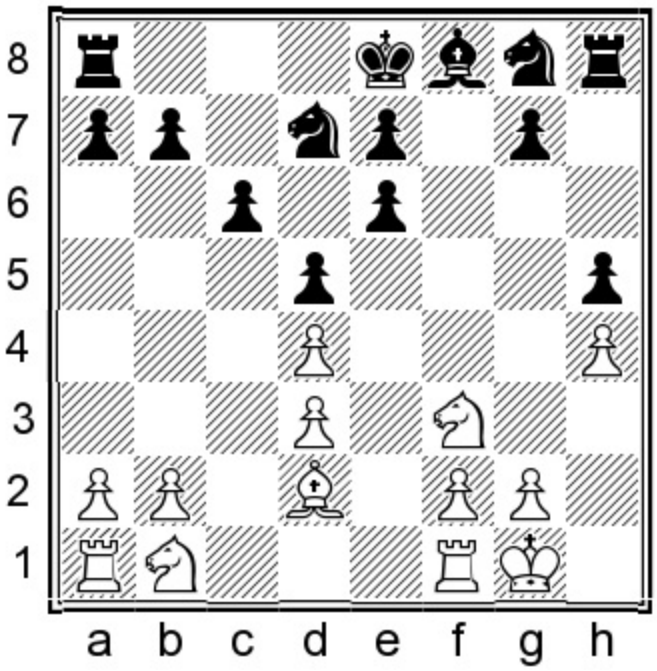
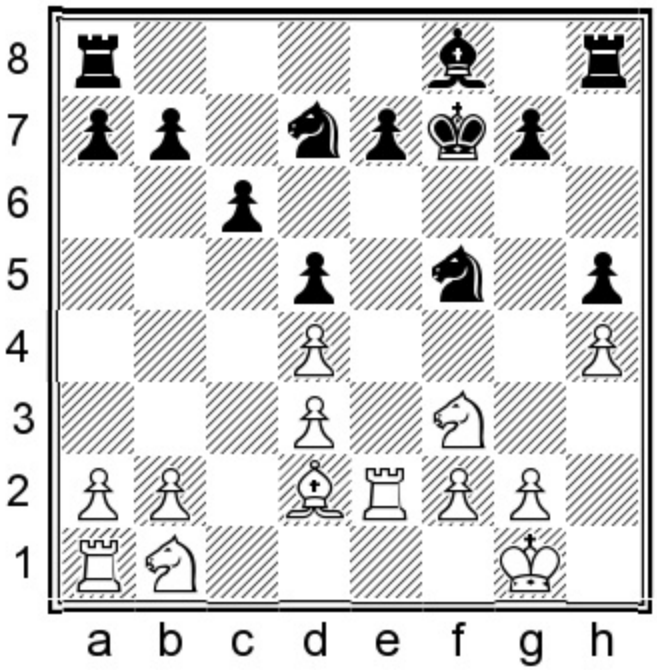


White has decent positional compensation for the pawn. Next he will play ♖e1 and put pressure on the e6-pawn. Black should not cling too stubbornly to his extra pawn, and should instead return it to reach a comfortable position. Even though the bishop on f8 looks grim, it is not too difficult to untangle, as will become clear in a few short moves.

11...♘h6 12.♖e1 ♘f5 13.♖xe6 ♔f7 14.♖e2

14.♘g5† ♔g8 leaves the d4- and h4-pawns under fire, so White has nothing better than 15.♘f3 when Black can either repeat with 15...♔f7= or try 15...g6!?.

A useful improvement is:



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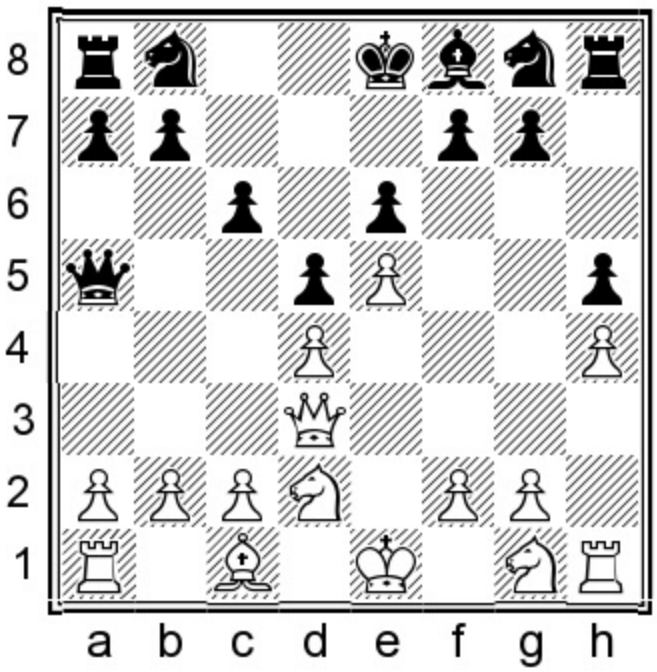
14...e6!N

14...g6 15.♗c3 ♗g7 16.♘bd2 (16.♘g5† was worth considering) 16...♗f6 led to a balanced game in Zhou – Wells, England 2018.

15.♘g5† ♔g8 16.♘xe6 ♘xh4 17.♘c3 ♘f5∓

Black has the better structure.

A3) 7.♘d2 e6



8.♘gf3

With this active choice, White prepares to answer ...♕a6 with c2-c4. This was John Shaw's recommendation in *Playing 1.e4 – Caro-Kann, 1...e5 & Minor Lines*, although he gave no further analysis, probably because almost everyone was playing 6...e6 at the time.

Of course White can also consider:

8.♘e2

Closing the a6-f1 diagonal to enable castling. It is a solid option, but Black should not have any problems.

8...♘e7 9.0-0 ♘f5 10.♘f3 ♕a6 11.♕d1 ♗e7

11...c5!? is also worth considering.

12.g3 c5 13.c3 ♘c6 14.♗e3

14.♔g2 b6=

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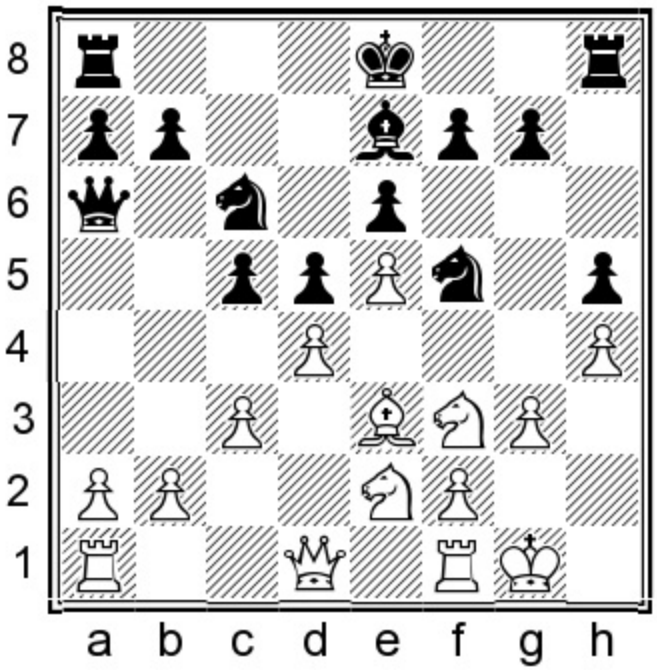
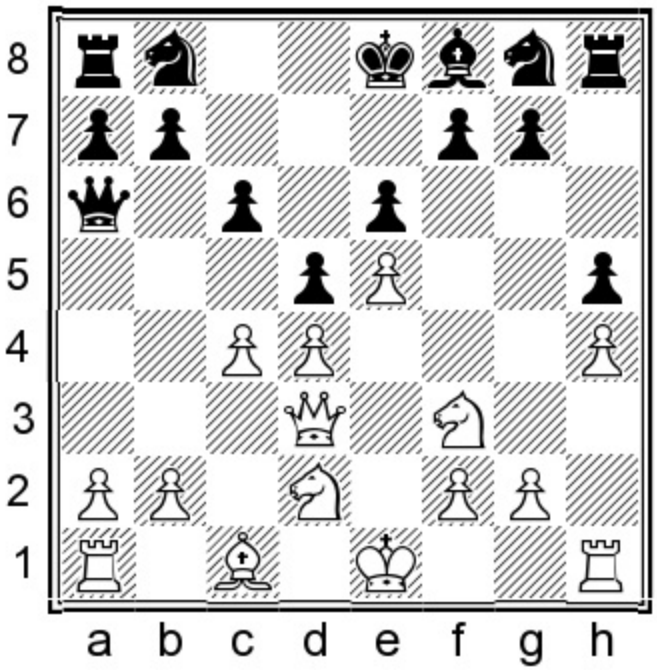


14...♖c8 15.♕d2 cxd4 16.♘exd4 ♘cxd4 17.♘xd4 ♘xe3 18.♕xe3

In Nakamura – Artemiev, Moscow 2018, Black could have played 18...♗c5N with a fine position. At some point he may take on d4 and try to use the c4-square for the rook, like in the Nimzowitsch – Capablanca game.

8...♕a6 9.c4



9...♘e7

Black could also reach our main line with 9...♘h6 followed by ...♘f5.

9...♘d7 10.0-0 ♗e7!? looks a little odd but 11.b3 ♘h6 12.a4 0-0 13.♗a3 ♗xa3 14.♖xa3 c5!⇄ gives

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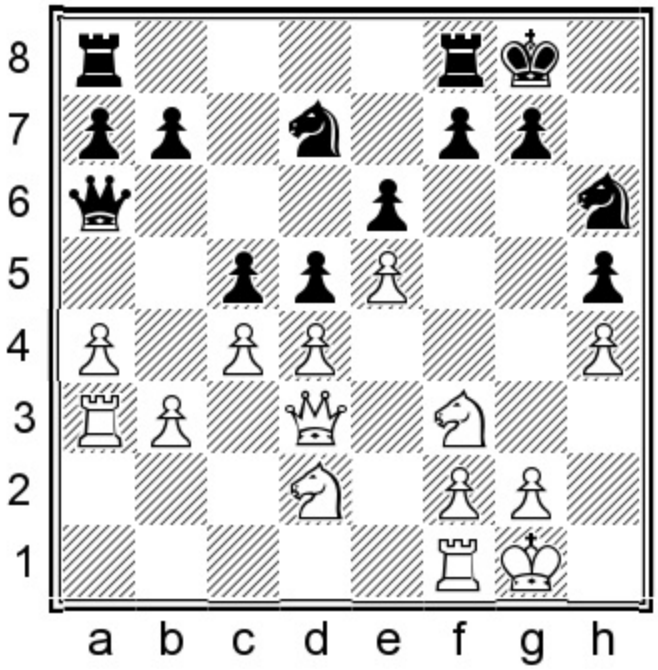
Black decent play.



After the further 15.dxc5 ♘xc5 16.♕d4 ♕b6 17.cxd5 exd5 18.♕xd5 ♕b4 19.♖a2 ♖ad8 20.♕c4 ♕xc4 21.♘xc4 ♘xb3= Black was fine and it was not long before a draw was agreed in Sutton – Coyne, corr. 2018. I will stick with the more tried-and-tested approach for my main recommendation, but the move order in this game certainly offers food for thought.

10.0-0

White can also delay castling with:

10.b3 ♘f5 11.a4!?

White takes some space and prepares ♗a3.

11.0-0 transposes to 10.0-0 ♘f5 11.b3 below.

11...♕a5!

An important moment.

The main line is 11...♘d7, when 12.0-0 reaches a popular position which has occurred via a few different move orders. 12...♗e7 is normal, when 13.♗a3! is critical. White has scored well from here and although Black's position is playable, I was unable to find clear equality.

11...c5!?N has not been tested but Lc0 thinks Black can get away with it. For instance: 12.♗a3 b6 13.a5 ♘c6 14.0-0 bxa5 15.♗xc5 ♗xc5 16.dxc5 0-0 17.♖fe1 ♖ad8=

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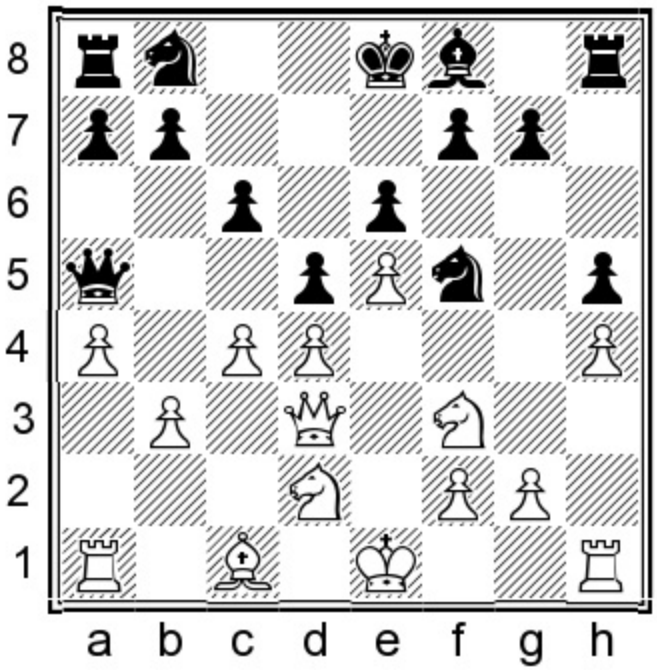


12.0-0 ♘a6⇄

Black brilliantly uses the few available squares to get the pieces into good positions. In the only game so far, White chose the wrong plan.

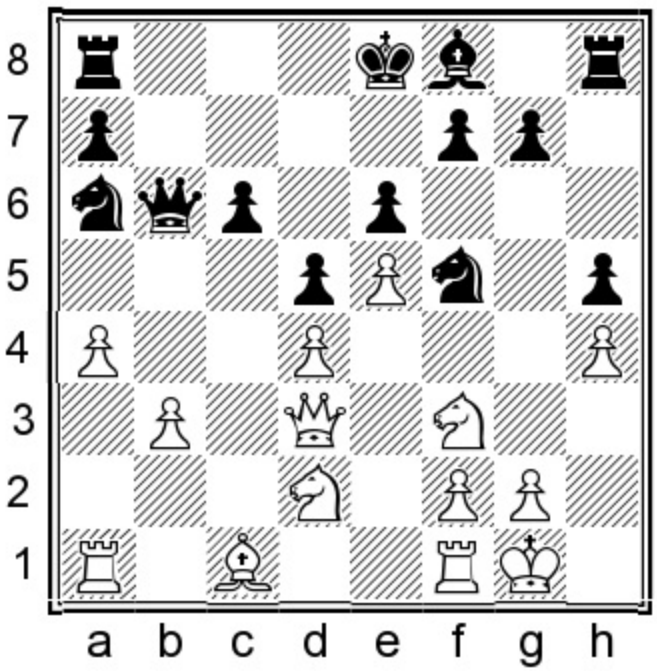
13.c5?!

Better was 13.♗b2N 13...♗e7= with a normal game.

13...b6! 14.cxb6 ♕xb6!N

14...axb6 was good enough in the game though, especially after the dubious sacrifice 15.b4?! ♘xb4 16.♕c3 ♗e7 17.♘b3 ♕a6 which was seen in Munguntuul – Vaishali, Douglas 2018. 18.a5 gives some play, but of course not enough for a pawn.

The text move would have given Black a clear advantage:



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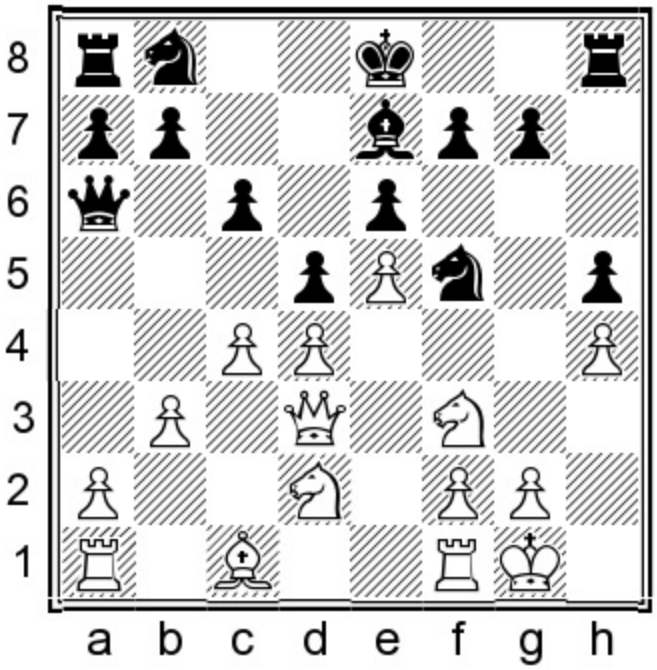
The plan of ...♕a5 and ...♘a6 is an important idea to be aware of, and we will see some further examples of it in the analysis of 10.0-0 below.

10...♘f5 11.b3 ♗e7



12.a4!

White can afford to leave the h4-pawn unprotected, as taking it would be too risky for Black.

12.g3 is playable but slow. 12...♘d7 (12...c5!? also deserves attention) 13.♕c2 0-0 14.♗b2 ♖ac8 15.♖fe1 was seen in Ladron de Guevara Pinto – Anton Guijarro, Linares 2016, and now 15...b6N would have been the simplest route to an equal game.

12...♕a5

Just as in the 10.b3 line above, Black improves his queen and prepares ...♘a6.

13.♖d1!

This is the most challenging continuation, preparing to reroute the knight via f1.

13.g3 is similar to the previous note, and 13...0-0 14.♗b2 ♘a6 15.♕e2 ♖ac8 16.♖fc1 ♖fd8 17.♘f1 c5⇄ was fine for Black in Chocenka – Mercadal Benejam, corr. 2018.

13.♗a3

This looks natural but it is not too dangerous.

13...♗xa3 14.♖xa3

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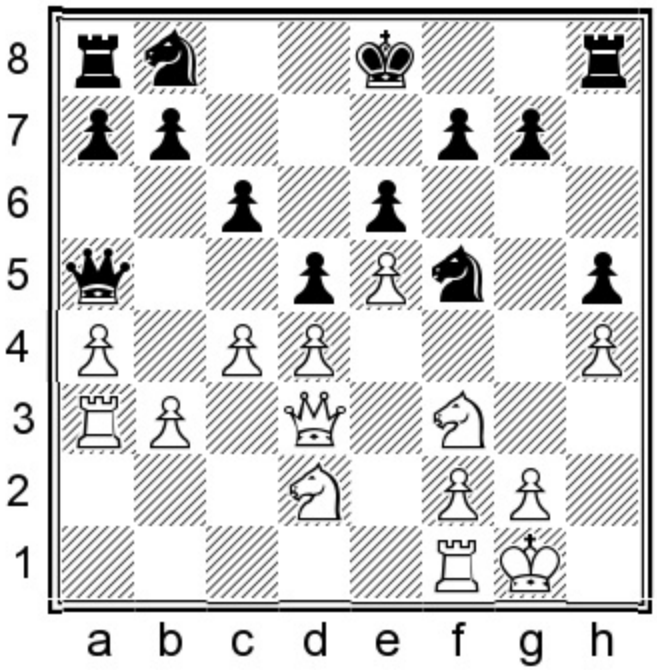

Black has more than one decent continuation:

14...0-0

This seems safest.

The alternative is: 14...♘a6!? Black seeks counterplay with ...♘b4 and ...c5. 15.b4! ♘xb4 16.♕c3 is tricky, but Black maintains the balance with 16...c5! when a relatively forcing sequence is: 17.cxd5 cxd4 18.♘xd4 ♘xd4 19.♕xd4 ♘c2 20.♘c4 ♘xd4 21.♘xa5 b6 22.♘b7 ♘f5 23.♖d1 exd5 24.♖xd5 ♖h6 25.♘d6† ♘xd6 26.exd6 ♖d8 27.♖e3† ♖e6 28.♖xe6† fxe6 29.♖xh5 ♖xd6= A draw was soon agreed in Cvak – Mercadal Benejam, corr. 2019.

15.♖c1

In a more recent game White got nowhere after: 15.♖b1 ♕b4 16.♖aa1 ♖d8 17.♘f1 ♕e7 18.cxd5 cxd5 19.g3 a5 20.♘e3 ♘h6= Grobler – Rau, corr. 2020.

15...♘a6 16.♘f1 ♕b4!

Intending to transfer the queen to a more central post.

17.♖aa1 ♕e7 18.♘g3 ♘xh4 19.♘xh5 ♘b4 20.♕e3 ♘xf3† 21.♕xf3 ♕h4

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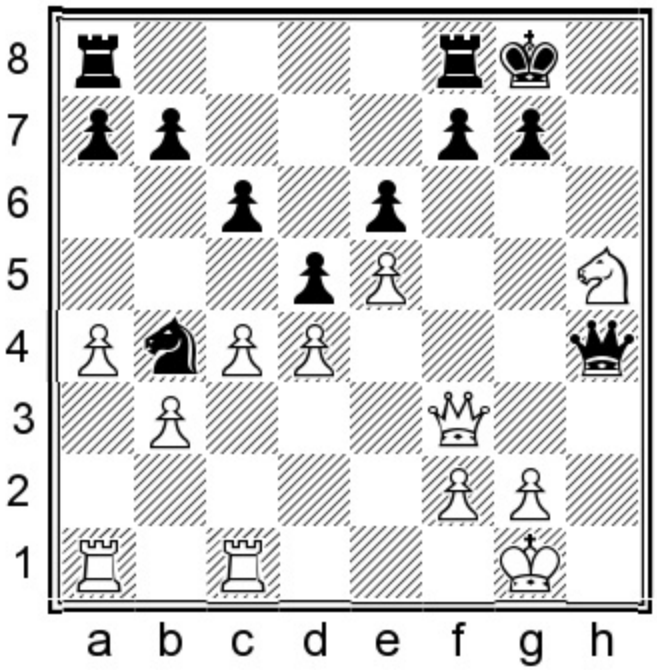
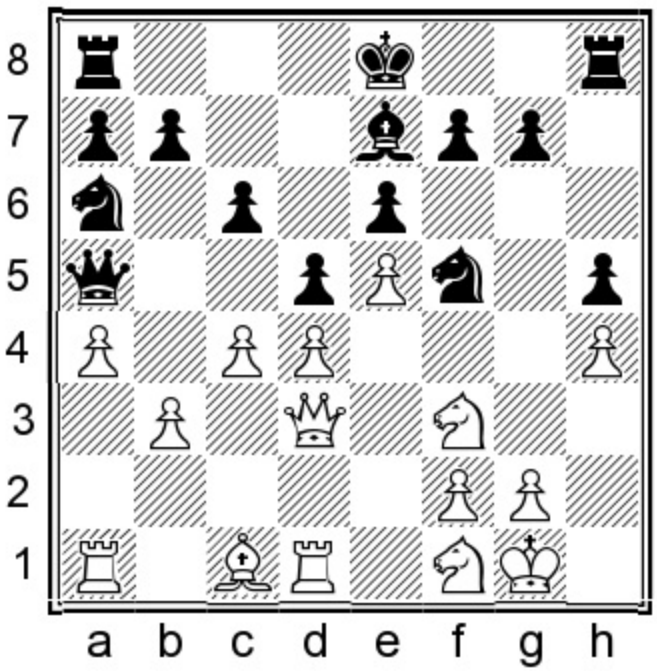


22.♖c3 g6 23.♘f4 ♔g7 24.g3 ♕e7 25.a5 dxc4 26.bxc4 c5⇄

A draw was agreed a few moves later in Laine – Brooks, corr. 2018.

13...♘a6 14.♘f1



14...♘xh4!

This time I recommend eating the pawn while we have the chance.

After something like 14...♘b4 15.♕c3 ♕c7 16.♘e3 ♘xe3 17.♗xe3± White has a pleasant edge.

15.♘xh4 ♗xh4 16.♗a3

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This line presents some challenges, as White clearly has some initiative for the pawn. Nevertheless, Black has no serious weaknesses and objectively his position should be fine.

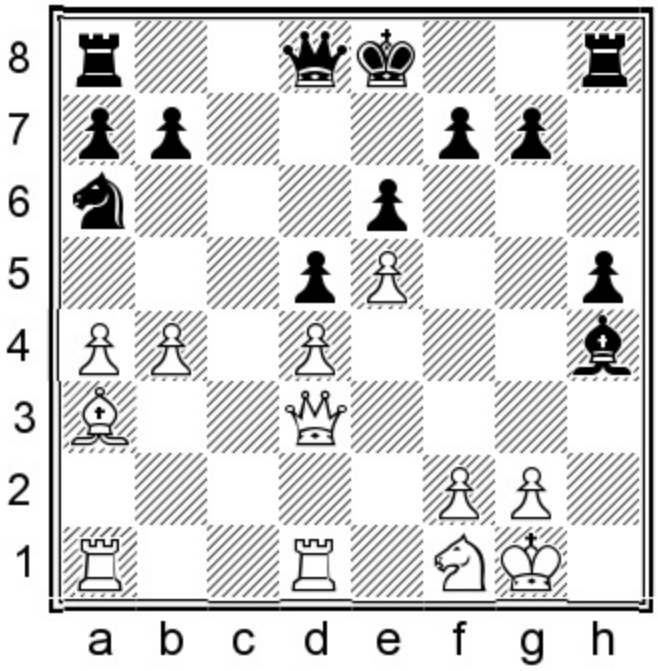
16...♕d8!

Preparing to retreat the bishop to e7 and then recapture with the queen.

17.cxd5!

17.♗d6 ♗e7 18.c5 looks tempting, as the bishop is monstrous on d6 and Black definitely does not want to take it. However, 18...♘b4! prepares ...a5 and ...b6, eroding White's outpost on d6 and giving Black a fine game.

17...cxd5 18.b4!



18...♘b8! 19.b5 ♘d7 20.♘d2

20.a5!? is an interesting direction but 20...♕xa5! seems adequate. Play continues 21.♗f8 ♕xa1 22.♖xa1 ♔xf8∞ when, despite the computer's initial excitement about White's position, I believe Black should be fine. An important point is that the bishop will go via d8 to b6, where it guards a7 and c7 and puts pressure on White's centre.

20...♗e7 21.♖dc1 0-0 22.a5

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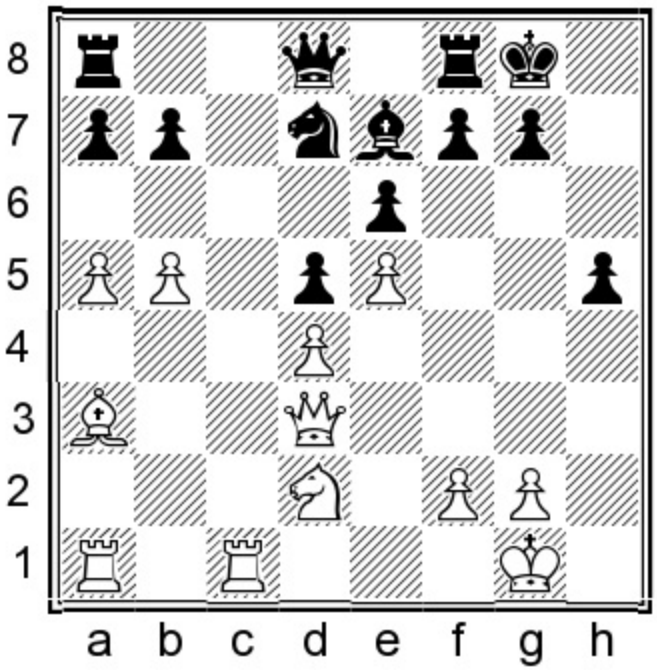

22...♖e8!

This solid choice has held up fine in correspondence games.

I spent some time analysing:

22...f6!?N

This could be an interesting choice for practical players wishing to unbalance the game.

23.♕h3 ♖f7 24.♗xe7 ♕xe7 25.♘f3 fxe5 26.dxe5 ♘f8 27.♕xh5 ♕b4!?

Simply threatening to take on b5.

27...♖f5 28.♕g4 ♕f7± is the alternative. White keeps some edge according to the engines, but in a practical game Black has his trumps.

28.♕h3

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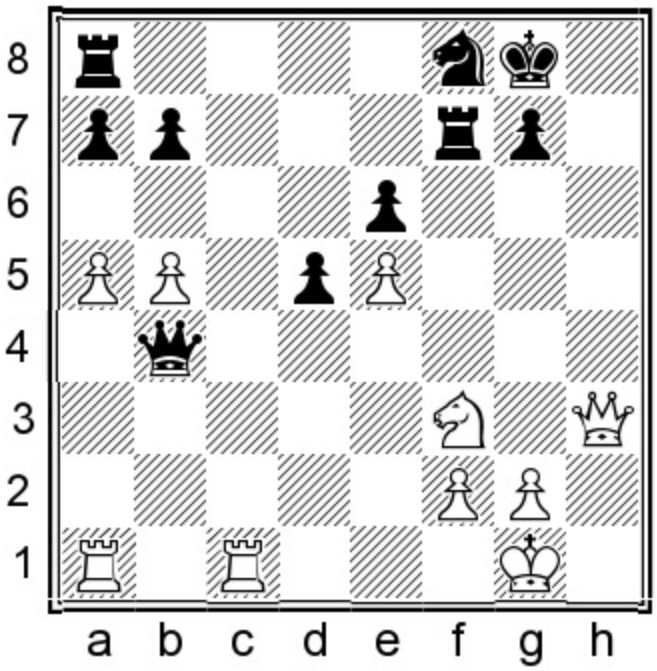

With the annoying threat of ♘g5.

28...♕f4!

Placing the queen on an active post while stopping White's idea.

29.♖c3 g5!?

This type of idea can be annoying in a human game.

30.♕g3 ♕xg3 31.fxg3 g4⇄

The engines indicate some edge for White, but in a practical game any result would be possible, as Black has a structural advantage and the e5-pawn could become weak.

23.♗xe7 ♖xe7 24.♕h3 ♖c8 25.♕h4!

The trickiest move, trying to stop Black regrouping.

25.♕xh5 ♘f8= is no problem.

25...f6!

25...♘f8?? loses to 26.♖xc8 of course.

26.♘f3 ♕e8 27.b6 ♖xc1† 28.♖xc1 axb6 29.axb6 fxe5 30.♖c7 e4 31.♘e5 ♘f6 32.♕f4

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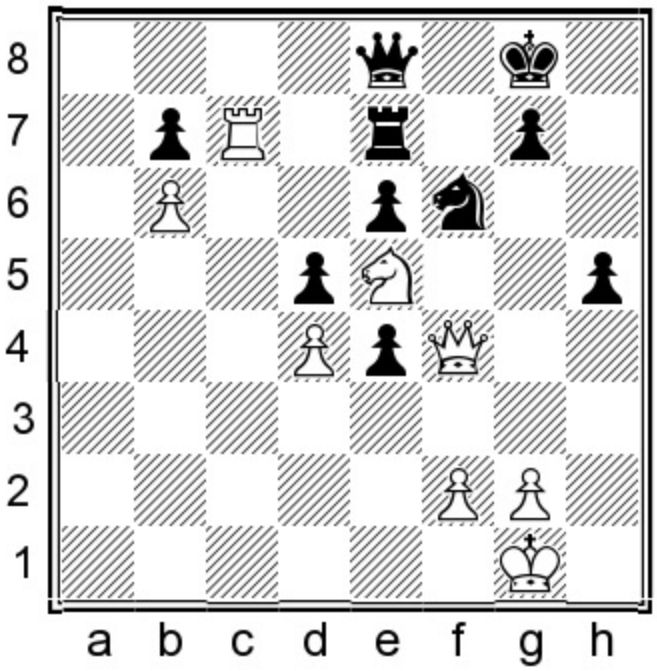
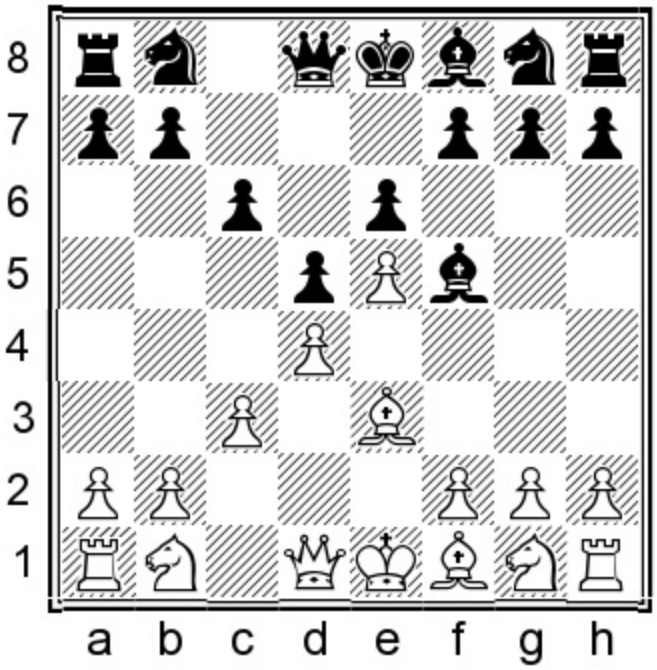


The games Konstantinov – Kumar, corr. 2019, and Cvak – Mercadal Benejam, corr. 2019, were both agreed drawn here. The continuation would be:

32...♕d8!=

To oust the annoying rook from c7. The position is a draw, although both sides still have to make some moves of course.

B) 4.c3 e6 5.♗e3



With this purely positional approach, White secures his centre and restrains the ...c5 break for the time being. White hopes to be able to keep his space advantage for a long time and supress all

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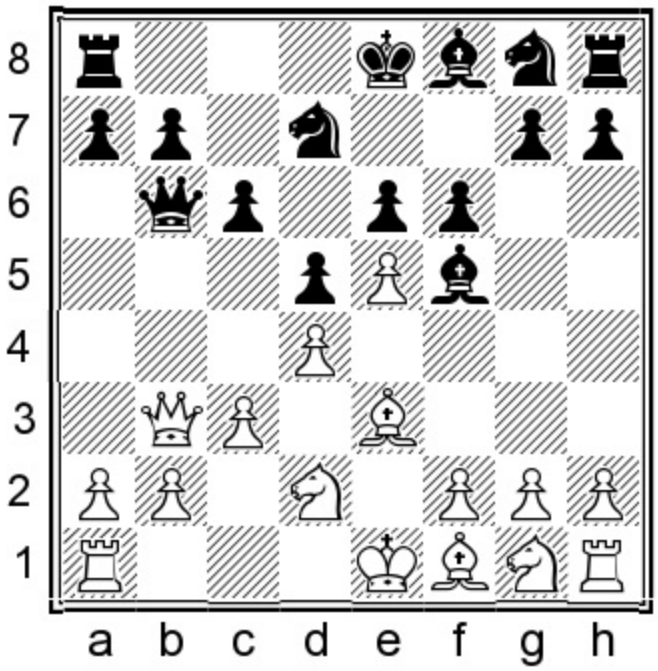
counterplay.

5...♕b6

This is my favourite move.

5...♘d7 6.♘d2 f6 is another possible move order, when play may continue: 7.f4 The most principled choice. (7.♘gf3 and 7.g4!? also exist) 7...♘h6!? (7...♕b6 8.♕b3 transposes to our main line) 8.♘gf3 ♗e7 9.h3 This looks fine for Black, who can choose between 9...fxe5, 9...0-0 and 9...♗g6.

6.♕b3 ♘d7 7.♘d2 f6!



We are not just going to sit and wait. Black's last move attacks the front of White's impressive pawn chain. Please notice that both sides are reluctant to exchange queens, because it will improve the other side's structure after they take back with the a-pawn, as well as activating the rook.

Now White has an important choice to make. How to protect e5? We will analyse **B1)** 8.♘gf3 and **B2)** 8.f4 in turn.

8.exf6 makes little sense: Black simply plays 8...♘gxf6 and enjoys easy development with excellent chances.

B1) 8.♘gf3

This natural move was not in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, but it should have been!

8...♘e7

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8...♕xb3 9.axb3 ♘e7 is playable, but I would rather not be the one who takes first.

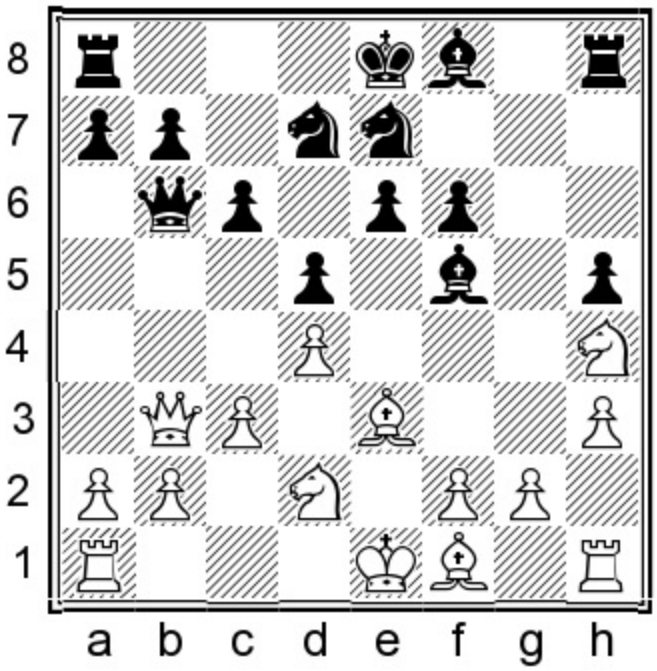
9.exf6

White does not really have a good way to maintain the tension.

9.h3 h5

White could also include these moves before exchanging:

10.exf6 gxf6 11.♘h4



And now we have a choice:

11...♕c7!?N

There is something to be said for keeping the queens on the board.

There is nothing wrong with 11...♗h6 12.♗e2 ♗xe3 13.fxe3 as played in Badev – Kuzmanov, Tsarevo 2001, and now for instance 13...0-0-0N seems fine for Black.

12.♗e2

12.♕a4 a6 oes not trouble Black.

12...0-0-0∞

The position is complex and double-edged, but I like Black's chances with the big pawn centre and open g-file.

9...gxf6 10.♘h4

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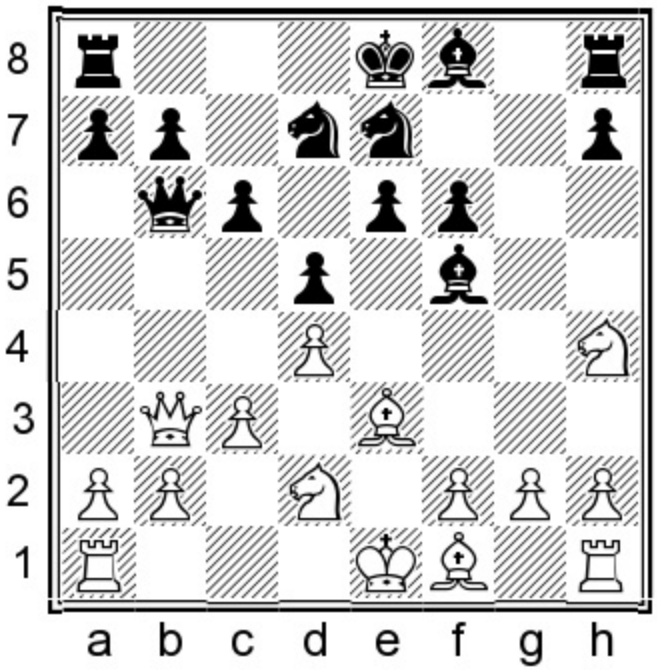

10...a5!?N

This was suggested by Lc0. Neural networks love to advance the rook's pawns! Black has other good options though:

10...♕c7 11.♗e2 0-0-0 12.0-0-0 ♔b8 is fine for Black.

10...♗g6 11.g4 (11.♗e2 ♘f5) 11...♗f7∞ is also sensible.

Even 10...♕xb3!? could be considered, despite my reservations about it. After 11.axb3 we can play 11...♗c2!? intending 12.♖c1 ♘g6!. It all feels a bit artificial though, so I would tend to prefer one of the other options.

11.♗e2 a4 12.♕xb6 ♘xb6 13.0-0-0 h5!

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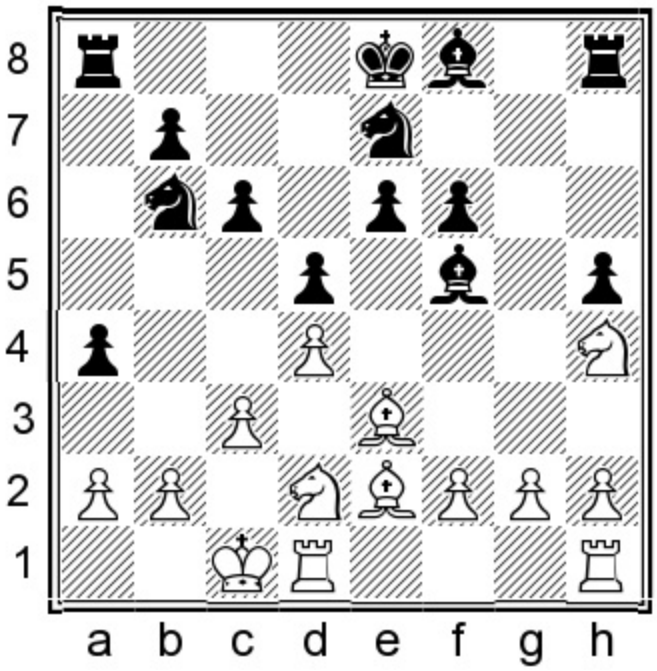

Again a rook's pawn plays a key role! Having utilized the a-pawn to gain space and force the queen exchange, we recruit the h-pawn. This gains some space on the other side of the board, but more concretely prevents g2-g4 and prepares to develop/exchange the dormant bishop with ...♗h6.

14.h3

Trying to advance the g-pawn anyway is White's most promising plan.

14...♔f7 15.g4 ♗e4!? 16.♘xe4

16.f3 ♗h7=

16...dxe4

Black is fine, for instance:

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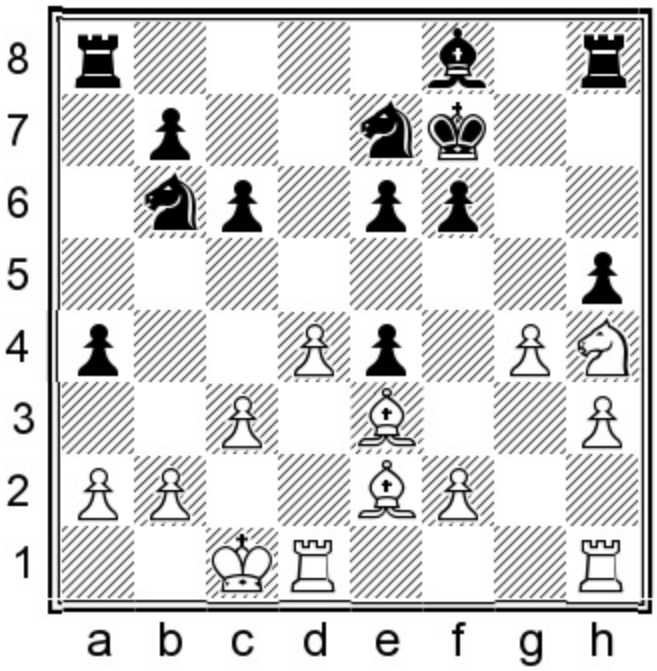
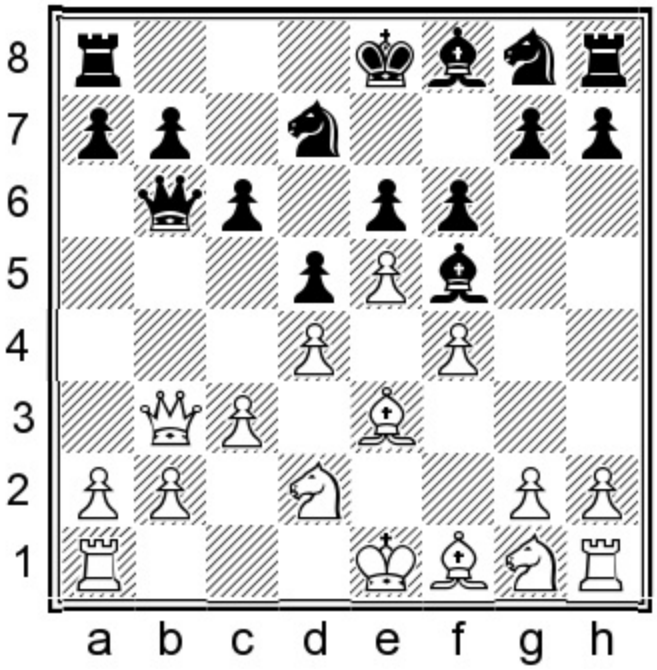


17.c4 ♗h6 18.♘g2 ♖ag8⇄

B2) 8.f4



This is by far the most frequently played move. White reinforces the e5-pawn; but if he thinks he has secured his centre, a big surprise is in store for him.

8...g5!

Suddenly the position is impossible to control. Black violently breaks free and fights for the initiative.

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9.♘gf3

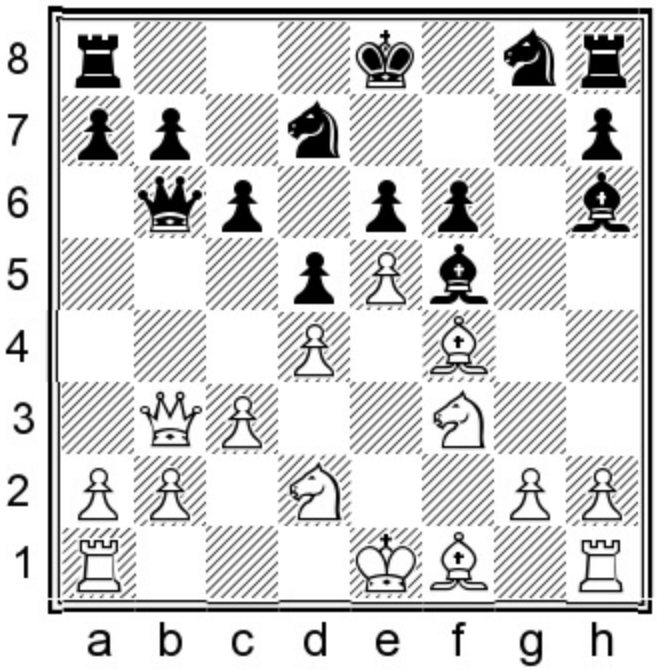
White ignores the turmoil in the centre and sensibly develops. Taking one of the offered pawns was hardly worth considering:

9.fxg5 fxe5 10.♗e2 has been tried in correspondence praxis, but Black can just play 10...exd4 and exchange queens if necessary, with a fine position.

9.exf6 g4! 10.f7† ♔xf7 is also great for Black, who can continue with ...♘gf6 next, whereas White can't play ♘gf3.

9...gxf4 10.♗xf4 ♗h6!

Exchanging White's strong bishop.



11.♗xh6

White has nothing better.

11.♕xb6 axb6 12.♗g3 is one try but, as I pointed out ten years ago, 12...fxe5 13.♘xe5 ♘gf6 is comfortable for Black, whose bishops are extremely active.

11.♗g3

This is the other way of preserving the bishop. Once again we continue:

11...fxe5 12.♘xe5 ♘gf6 13.♘df3

13.♘xd7 ♔xd7! is excellent for Black.

13...♘xe5 14.♘xe5

14.♗xe5 is met by 14...0-0.

14...0-0 15.♗d3 ♗xd3

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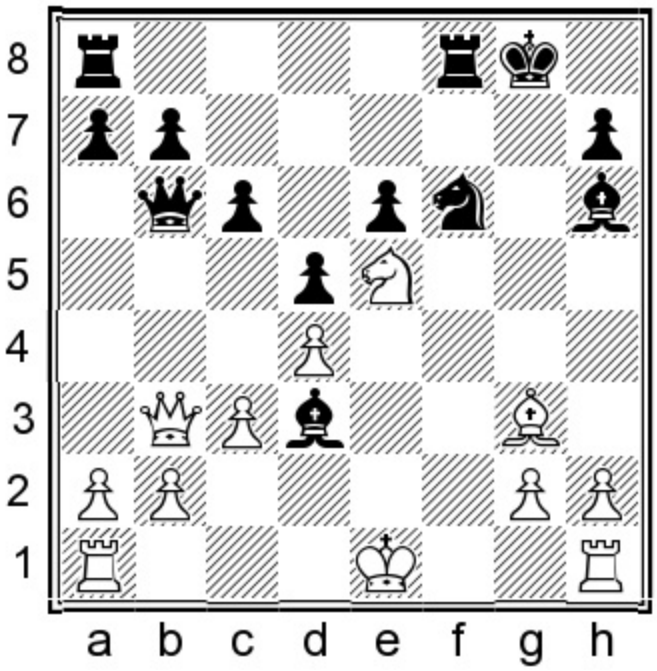

A draw was agreed here in Rytshagov – Stohl, Istanbul (ol) 2000, but Black could have played on:

16.♕xb6

16.♘xd3 ♘e4 should transpose, as it would be risky for White to leave the queens on with his king stuck in the centre.

16...axb6 17.♘xd3 ♘e4

Black has some initiative in the ending.

11...♘xh6 12.exf6

12.♕xb6 axb6 13.exf6 ♘xf6 transposes to 13.♕xb6 axb6 below.

12...♘xf6

Black is in good shape and even has a plus score in engine games from this position.

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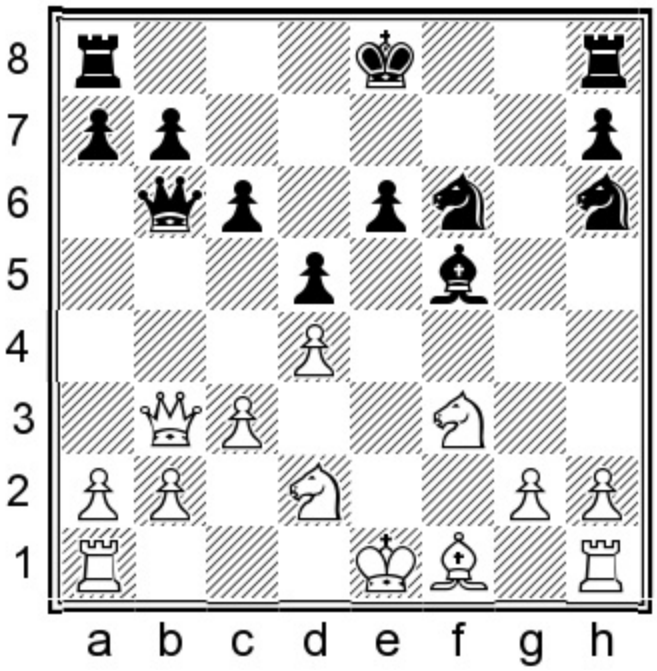

13.♗e2

This has been the most common continuation. Let's see a few other examples:

13.♘e5 ♕c7 (13...♘hg4 is also okay) 14.♗d3 0-0-0 15.0-0-0 ♘hg4 16.♖de1 ♖de8 17.♘xg4 ♘xg4 18.♗xf5 exf5 19.♕d1 ♖xe1 20.♕xe1 ♕f7= was fine for Black in Machycek – Haug, corr. 2013.

Exchanging queens doesn't pose any problems: 13.♕xb6 axb6 14.h3 ♘f7 15.♗e2 h5!? (15...♖g8 16.g4 was seen in Naroditsky – Shankland, Berkeley 2011, when 16...♗c2!?N was worth a try) 16.0-0 ♖g8⇄ Black was fine in an email game.

13.h3 ♘f7

The most natural.

13...♕c7!?N Keeping the queens on the board is interesting. 14.0-0-0 (14.g4 ♗e4) 14...0-0-0 15.g4 ♗e4 16.♗e2 ♘f7 17.♖hf1 ♖hf8 18.♕a3 a6∞

14.g4 ♗g6= 15.♗e2 0-0 16.♖g1 ♖fe8

Preparing counterplay with ...e5.

17.h4 e5 18.h5 ♕xb3 19.♘xb3 ♗e4 20.0-0-0

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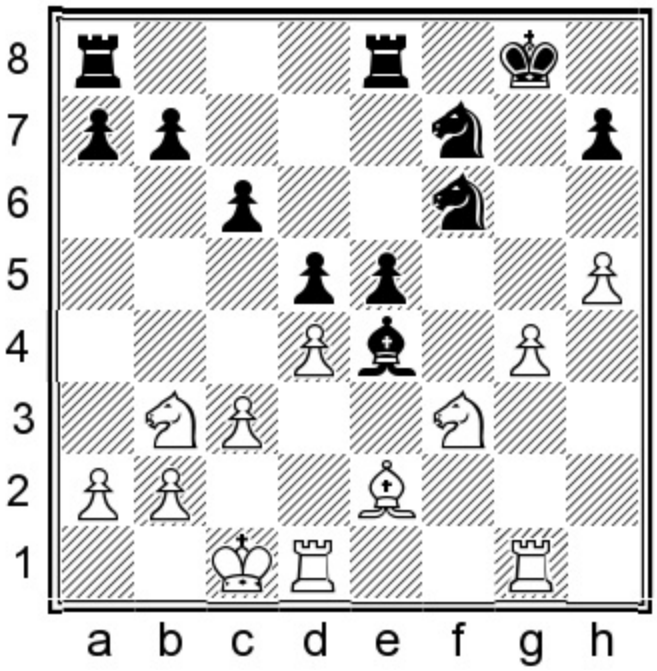

A draw was agreed here in Nyvlt – T. Carlsen, corr. 2007. The position is balanced, although Black could certainly consider playing on with:

20...♗xf3 21.♗xf3 h6

Immobilizing White's kingside pawns, with a clear strategic plan of playing for a favourable endgame.

13...♕c7!

Black was successful with 13...♘e4?! 14.♘xe4 ♗xe4 in Alekseev – Dreev, Moscow 2004, but 15.♘g5!N would have given White a strong initiative.

14.♘e5

This seems best, as castling on either side runs into unpleasantries:

14.0-0-0 ♘hg4!↑ or 14.0-0 0-0-0 when White has the more exposed king.

14...♖g8!

Black has some initiative.

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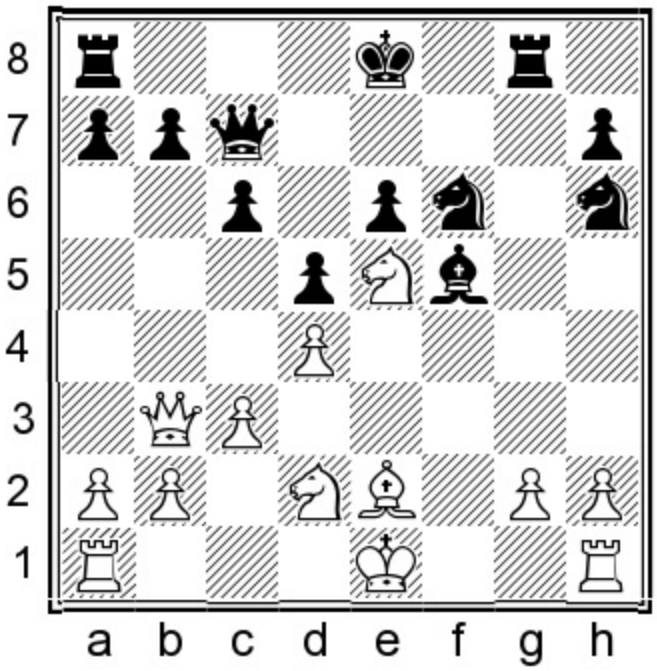

15.0-0?!

15.g3 is rather unambitious, but White should forget about playing ambitiously and instead look for safety. After 15...0-0-0 16.0-0-0 Black has many good options, the most forcing being 16...♘hg4!? 17.♗xg4 ♘xg4 18.♘xg4 ♗xg4 (18...♖xg4!? is also good) 19.♖df1 e5 (19...h5!?) 20.dxe5 ♕xe5 and Black is at least equal.

15...0-0-0

White must be very careful, as Black can easily develop a strong attack along the open g-file.

16.♖f2

16.♘df3 ♘fg4! put White in deep trouble in another game: 17.g3 ♗e4 18.♕a4 ♔b8 19.♖ae1 ♕g7 20.♕b3 ♘xh2! 21.g4 ♘2xg4 22.♘xc6† ♔a8 23.♕a4 ♘e5† 0–1 Beckett – Wilkinson, corr. 2015.

16...♘f7 17.♘xf7 ♕xf7 18.a4 ♖g6 19.♕d1 ♕g7 20.♕f1 ♖g8∓

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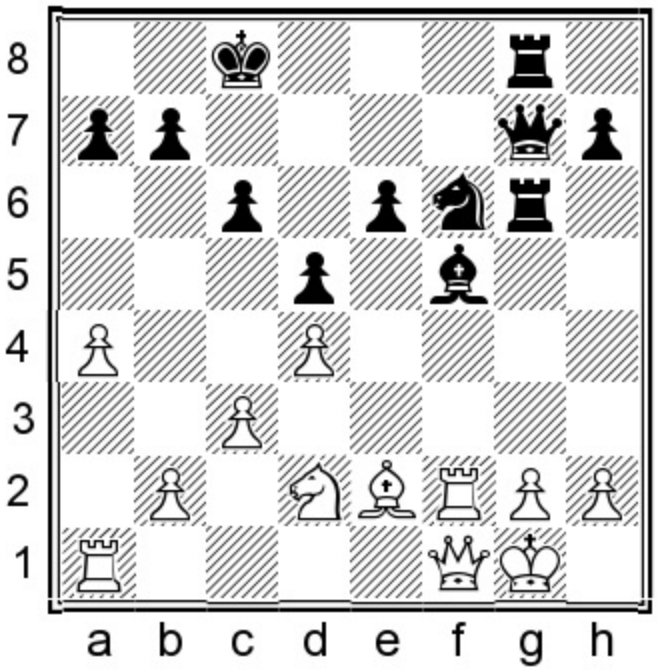
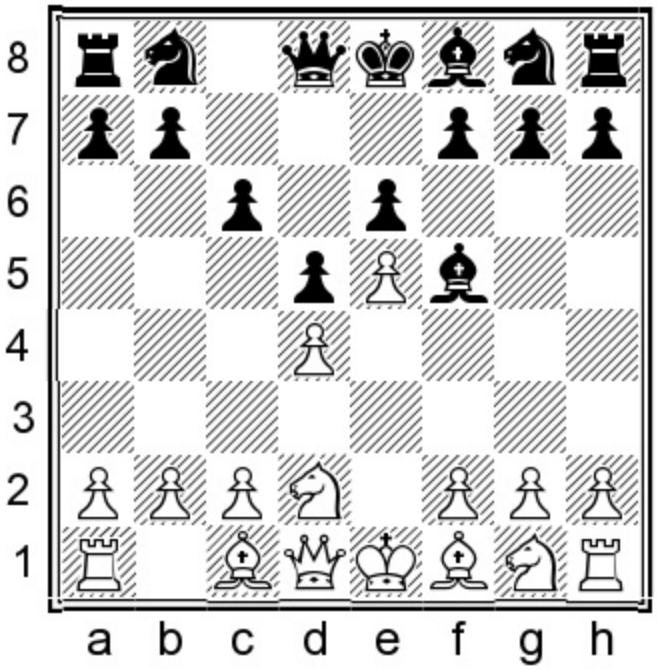


White was under huge pressure on the kingside in Dambrauskas – Muller, corr. 2004.

C) 4.♘d2 e6



5.♘b3

This popular set-up is related to the 4.c3 and 4.♗e3 variations. White reinforces his d4-pawn and, just as significantly, restrains the ...c5 break.

5...♘d7

The most natural.

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5...c5!?

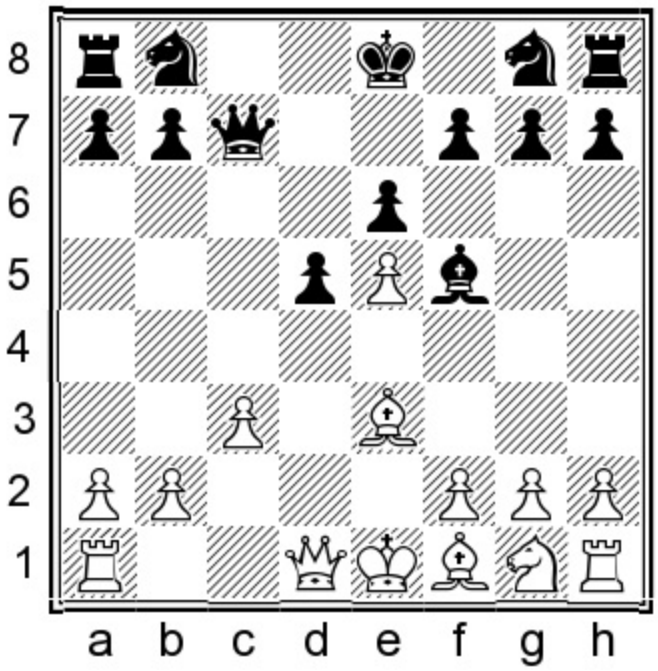
Despite White's efforts, Black can play this move anyway, at the cost of the bishop pair:

6.dxc5 ♗xc5! 7.♘xc5 ♕a5† 8.c3 ♕xc5 9.♗e3

9.♕a4† ♘d7 10.♘f3 ♕c7= is no problem for Black. A possible continuation is: 11.♗b5 a6 12.0-0 ♖c8 13.♗xd7† ♕xd7 14.♕f4N (14.♕a3 ♘e7) 14...♘e7 15.♘d4 0-0 16.h4 h6 17.h5 ♗h7⇄

Intending ...♖c4 and ...b5, with good prospects on the queenside.

9...♕c7



10.f4

At first glance it looks good for White, but Black has easy development and an active bishop on f5. With the help of a well-timed ...f6 break, he can get serious counterplay.

10...♘e7 11.♘f3 ♘bc6 12.♗e2 0-0 13.0-0

This position has been reached in numerous games. Black has tried many different moves but I think the most logical is:

13...f6!? 14.exf6 ♖xf6

Here is a fresh example from the author:

15.♕d2 h6 16.♖ae1 ♗e4 17.♕c1 ♘f5 18.♗f2

This was Tari – Schandorff, Denmark 2020, and now a useful suggestion by Lc0 is:

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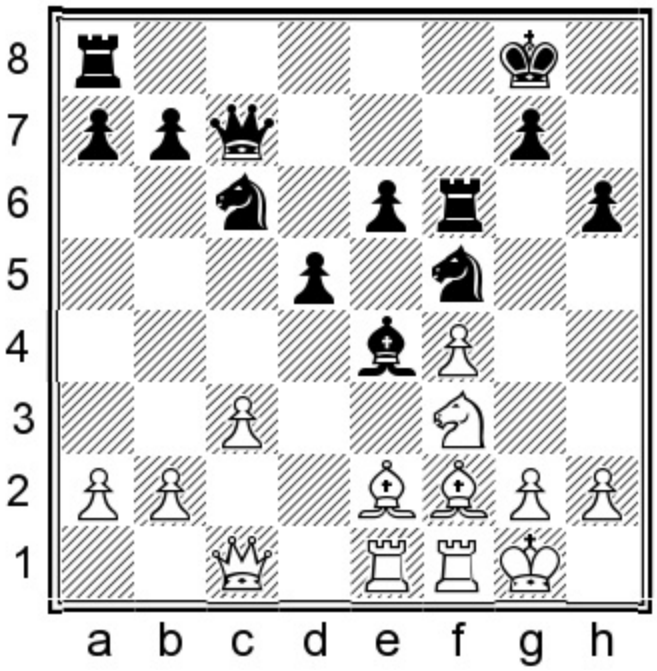
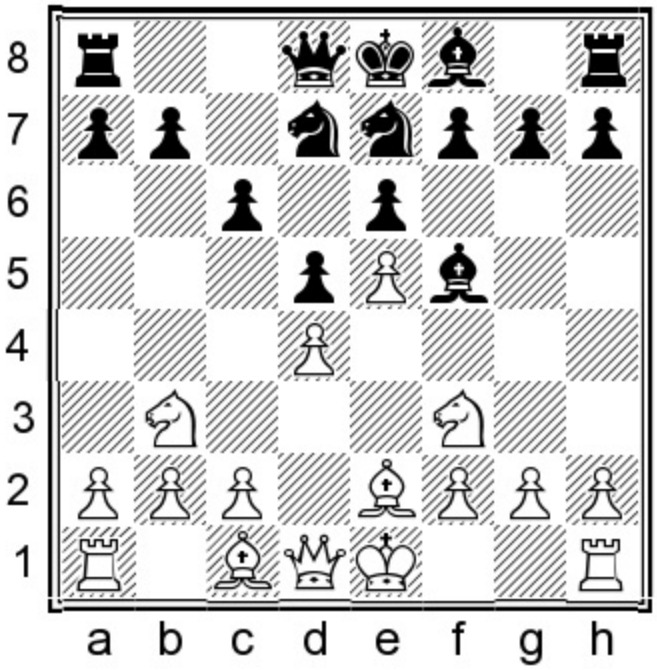


18...♖g6!N

Black wants to play ...e5 with some initiative.

6.♘f3 ♘e7 7.♗e2



7...♘c8!

My favourite manoeuvre.

7...h6 8.0-0 g5!? (or first 8...♕c7) is an interesting fighting option that actually transposes to a popular variation of the Short System. Since I recommend a different path for Black in Chapters 3 and 4, I will not go into details here, but it is worth pointing out that the possibility exists. If you like the look

of this then it may be of benefit to do your own homework. Personally I don't fancy weakening my kingside, so I will stick to what I know and prefer.

8.0-0 ♗e7

Black develops the last of his minor pieces and prepares to castle. Later he can start thinking about how to activate the knight on c8. For the moment, it's enough that the knight has got out of the way of the dark-squared bishop.

I will bring the interesting option of **C1)** 9.♘e1!? to your attention, before turning to **C2)** 9.a4, the big main line.
9.♗e3 0-0 has occurred in a number of games, but usually White just reverts to one of the two main plans with 10.a4 or 10.♘e1.

C1) 9.♘e1!?

This has scored well for White in practice. He intends ♗d3 and if Black exchanges bishops, the knight will recapture. Another point is that the queen's path to the kingside has been opened.

9...0-0 10.♗d3

The tempting pawn push 10.g4 ♗g6 11.f4 is well answered by 11...f5!, which can be compared with later variations.

10...♗xd3

There is no point in 10...♗g6 11.♗xg6 (the immediate 11.♕g4 is also good for White) 11...hxg6 12.♕g4± when Black's kingside has been weakened.

11.♘xd3

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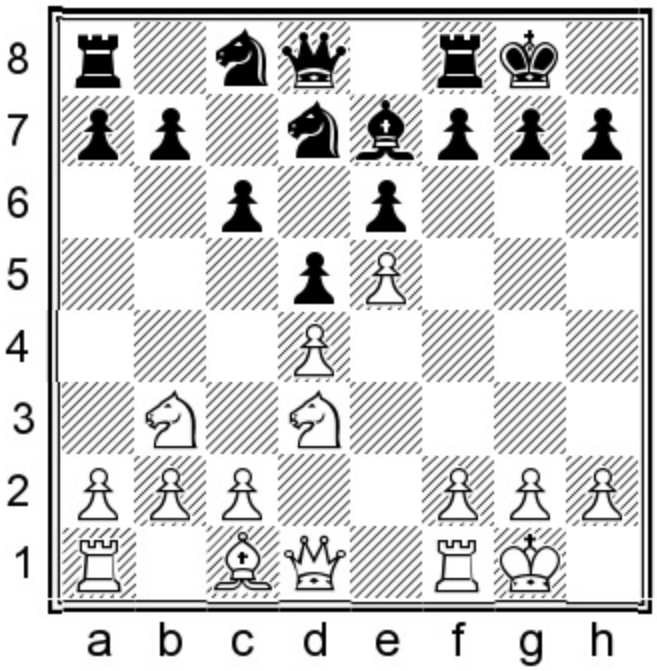

The knight is excellent on d3. Together with its fellow on b3, it controls the important c5-square, having also cleared the way for the f-pawn to advance and for White's queen to jump to g4 or h5. As for Black, he will aim to get ...c5 in, while at the same time paying attention to what White is up to on the other flank. A good way to start is:

11...a5!?N

Also possible is 11...b6 12.♕g4 as seen in N. Kosintseva – Danielian, Rostov on Don 2011, when 12...♖e8N is similar to our main line. However, the inclusion of the moves ...a5 and a2-a4 favours Black, because it is easier to open lines on the queenside.

12.a4 b6

Preparing ...c5.

13.♕g4 ♖e8

A good prophylactic move.

14.f4

This seems most natural, although there are many other moves that might be tried. For instance:

14.c3 c5 is fine for Black. For instance, 15.♗h6 (15.♘d2!? transposes to 14.♘d2 below) 15...♗f8 16.♘f4 ♘e7! and the knight comes to the defence of the kingside.

14.♗e3 fails to prevent the break: 14...c5! 15.dxc5 bxc5 16.♘bxc5 ♗xc5 17.♗xc5 ♘xc5 18.♘xc5 ♕c7 19.♕d4 ♘e7∓ Black will win back the pawn with the better game.

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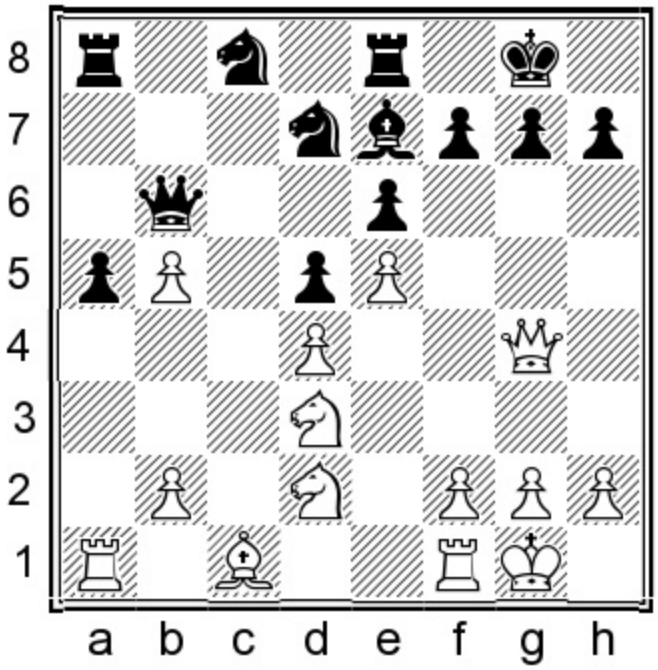
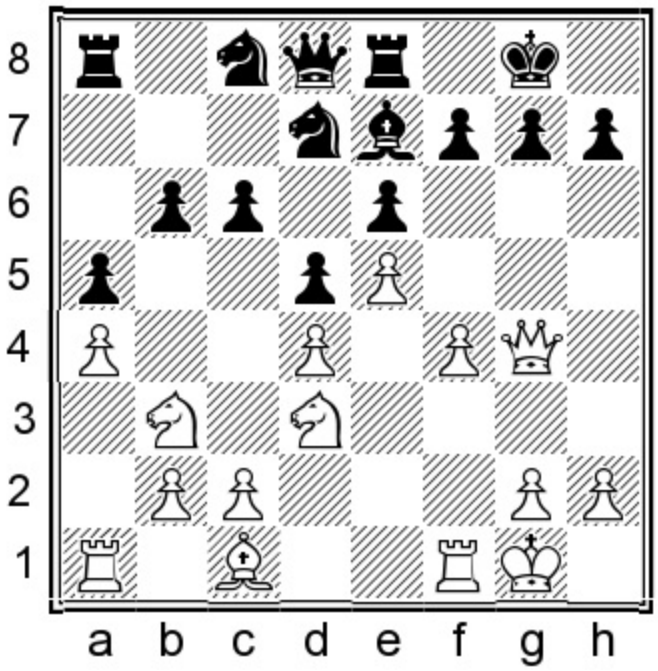
14.♘d2!? is proposed by Lc0. A logical continuation is 14...c5 15.c3 cxd4 16.cxd4 b5! 17.axb5 ♕b6 when it is obvious that the earlier inclusion of ...a5 and a2-a4 has helped Black.



A sample line continues 18.h4!? ♗f8 19.♘f3 ♘e7 20.♘f4 a4 21.h5 h6 and Black is fine.



14...f5!

A key move. It is easy to remember that f2-f4 is always answered by ...f5 in these positions – you simply cannot allow White to march ahead on the kingside unchecked.

15.exf6

The most forcing.

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White could play more calmly with 15.♕f3 but Black has a sound position; I like 15...♖b8!? followed by ...c5.

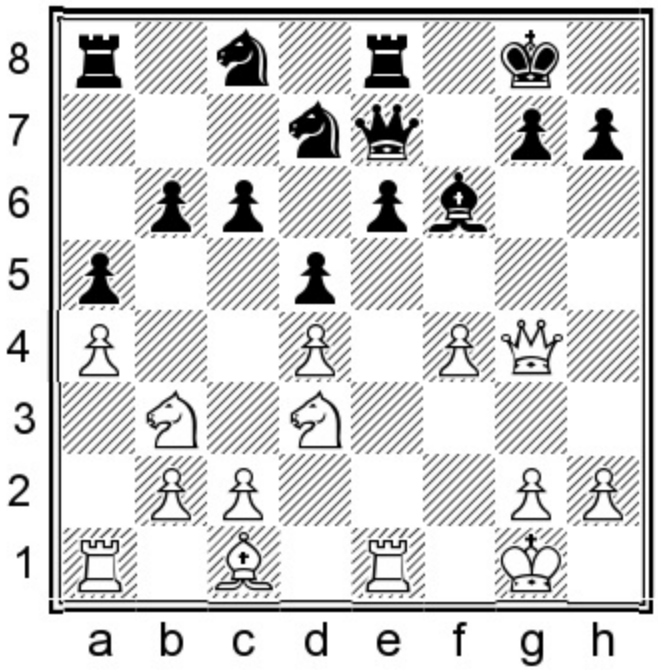
15...♗xf6 16.♖e1

Targeting the backward e-pawn.

16.♗e3 ♘d6=

16...♕e7

Black solves all problems with a combination of logical defence and small finesses.



17.f5

Certainly the most critical continuation.

White can also try playing for some sort of positional bind:

17.♘e5 c5 18.♗e3

Trying to win a pawn with 18.♘xd7 ♕xd7 19.dxc5 bxc5 20.♘xc5? backfires after: 20...♗d4† 21.♗e3 ♗xe3† 22.♖xe3 ♕a7! 23.♖c3 ♘d6 24.♔h1 d4 25.♖g3 ♘f5∓

18...♘d6

18...cxd4 is also playable.

19.♘xd7 ♕xd7 20.dxc5 ♘f5⇄

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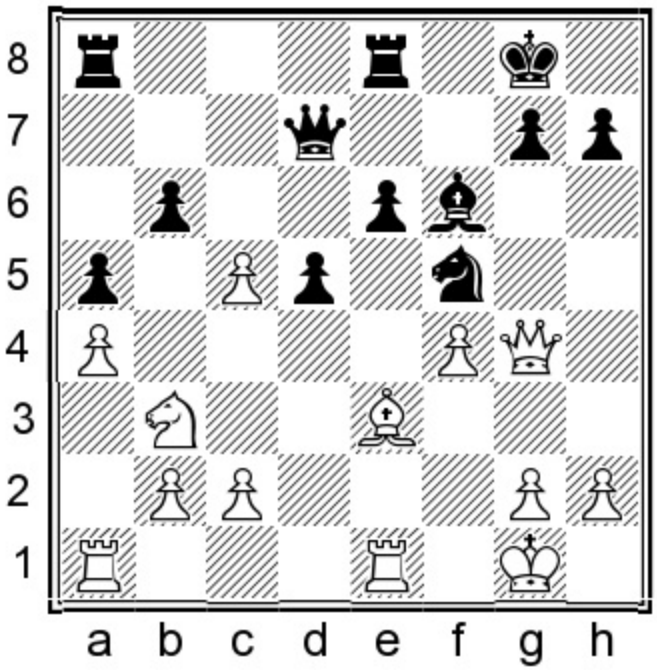

Black has plenty of activity, and after something like:

21.cxb6 ♗xb2 22.♖ab1 ♗c3 23.♗d2 ♗xd2 24.♘xd2 ♖ab8=

We are heading for a simplified and equal game.

17...♘f8 18.fxe6 ♘d6!

The knight heads for the e4-outpost, blocking the e-file and enabling Black to win the pawn back.

18...♘xe6? 19.♘f4+– must be avoided of course.

19.c3 ♘xe6

19...g6!? is also playable, but we do not need to be too sophisticated about things.

20.♗f4

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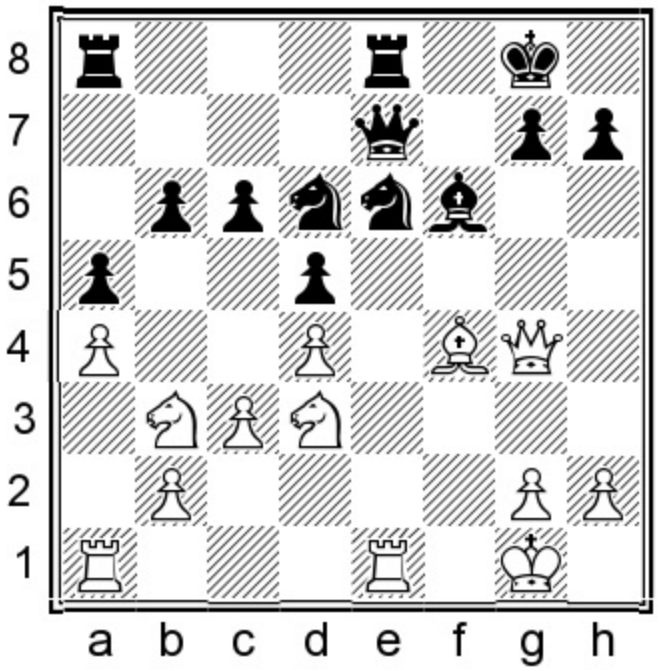


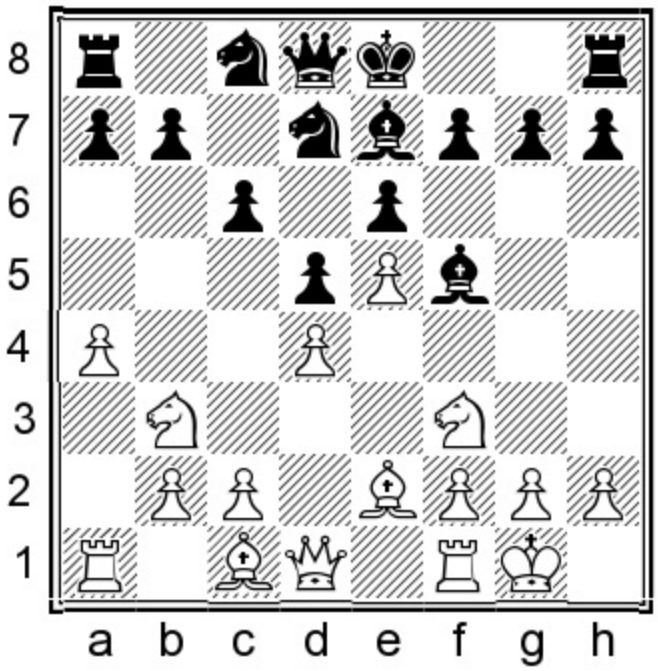
20...♕d7

20...♘e4 21.♘d2 ♘xd2 22.♗xd2 ♕d7 is also fine, should you wish to trade a pair of knights.

21.♘d2 ♖e7=

Black is fine.

C2) 9.a4



This is the most popular move. White intends to advance to a5 and paralyse the knight on c8.

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9...0-0 10.a5

Continuing the strategy.

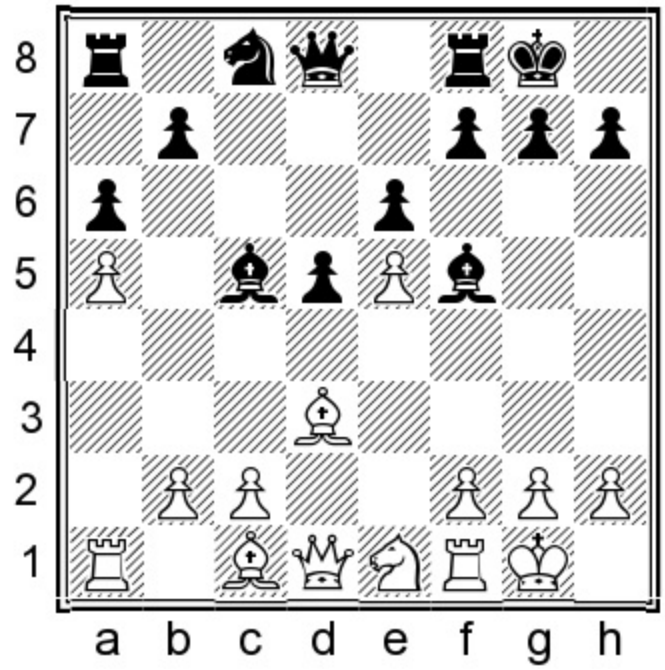
10.♗e3 has been played in a bunch of games, when play continues: 10...a6 11.♘fd2 (11.a5 would transpose to the main line) 11...f6! Black fights back. 12.f4 fxe5 13.fxe5 ♗g5⇄ Black had nice play in Oparin – Ovetchkin, Dagomys 2009. Once the bishops are exchanged, Black may re-develop the knight to e7.

10...a6

The main purpose of this move is to prepare ...♘a7. It also stops White from playing a5-a6 himself. It's not clear if this was his intention, but in these AlphaZero times I would not rule it out.

11.♗e3

11.♘e1 should be met by the freeing 11...c5! when the position simplifies. For instance: 12.♘xc5 ♘xc5 13.dxc5 ♗xc5 14.♗d3



This position arose in Karjakin – Shyam, Dubai (blitz) 2014, when 14...♘e7!N 15.♗g5 ♗xd3 16.♘xd3 ♖c8∓ would have given Black good prospects, as a number of White's pawns may become weak in the long run.

11.♗d3!? ♗xd3 (11...♗g4!? could be considered) 12.♕xd3 has scored well for White in engine games. A logical continuation is 12...♘a7 13.♗d2 h6, reaching a strategically demanding position where Black is okay. The point of the last move was to prepare ...c5, as White will no longer be able to exchange on c5 and play ♘g5. If White proceeds with the straightforward 14.c4 then 14...dxc4 15.♕xc4 ♘b5 sees the knight re-join the game. At some point, it may jump back to c7 and then on to the dream square d5.

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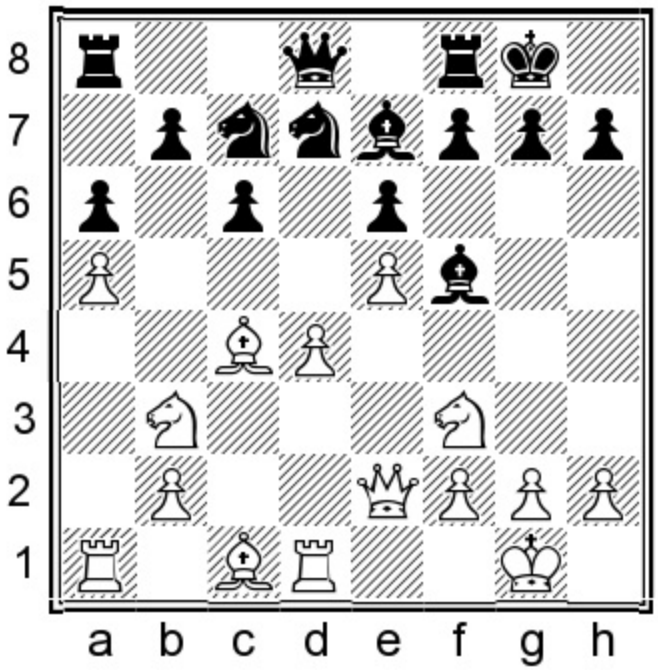
11.c4

This has been tested by many strong players. This pawn move is always relevant in these positions so we should consider it carefully.

11...dxc4 12.♗xc4 ♘a7 13.♕e2 ♘b5 14.♖d1 ♘c7



After a few natural moves on both sides, we reach an important position where I considered a few options:

a) 15.♘fd2 b5! 16.axb6 ♘xb6⇄ 17.♘a5 (17.♗xa6? was seen in Petkidis – Artemiev, Skopje 2018, when 17...♗c2!N [or 17...♘bd5!N] 18.♖e1 ♗xb3 19.♘xb3 ♕d5 would have given Black a strong initiative.) 17...♕d7 led to a complex, balanced game in Carlsson – Agrest, Sweden 2016.

b) 15.♘e1 ♘d5 16.♘d3 b5 17.axb6

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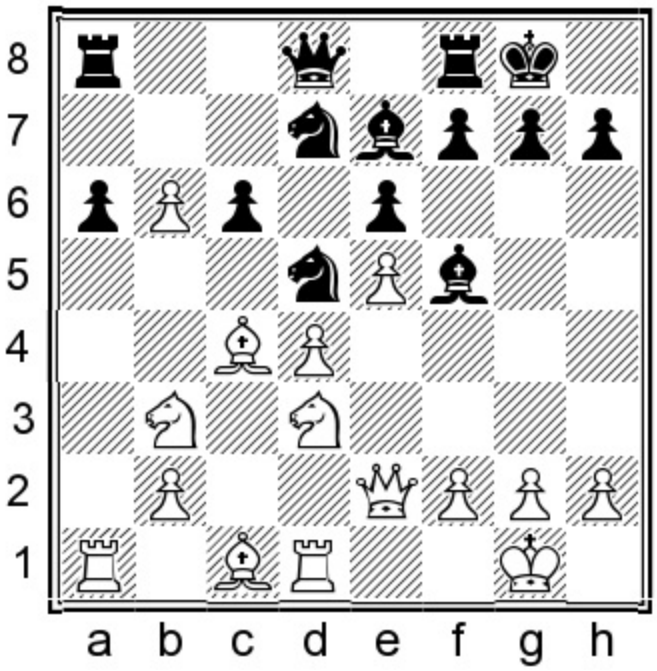
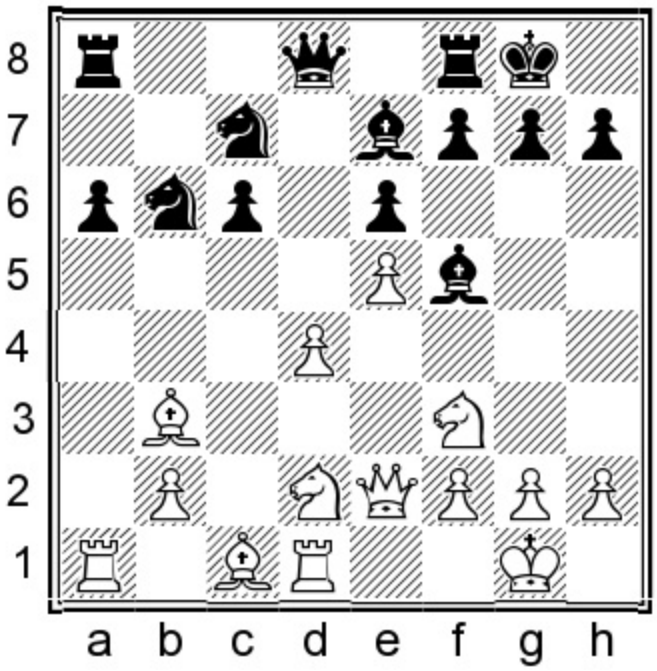


Now 17...♘7xb6!N would have given Black excellent play.

17...♕xb6 18.♗d2 occurred in Rublevsky – Diakonova, St Petersburg (rapid) 2015, when 18...♖fb8N would have been decent.

c) 15.♘bd2 b5! 16.axb6 ♘xb6 17.♗b3 (17.♗xa6? ♘bd5 is terrible for White because of the pin of the bishop) In Aagaard – Schandorff, Hillerod 2010, I returned with the knight to b5, which was not so good.



17...♘cd5!N would have been fine for Black.

17...a5!?N intending ...a4 also looks good.

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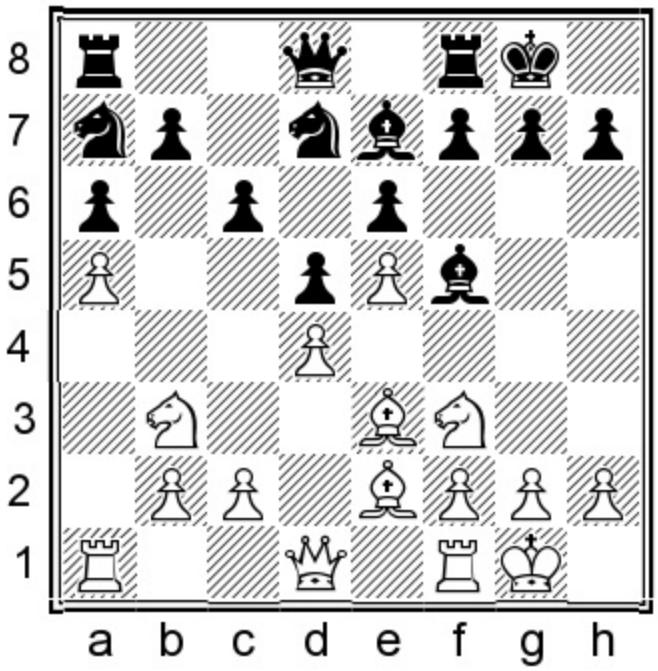
11...♘a7

11...h6 has been popular in engine games, but I don't see the need for it yet, and prefer to improve the knight.



12.c4

If White does not change the structure in this way, Black will get ...c5 in with good counterplay. Here is a short overview of some of the possible continuations:

12.c3 ♖c8 13.♘e1 c5 14.f4 ♘b5N (14...c4?! 15.g4! ♗g6 was seen in Solberg – Kharitonov, Paleochora 2012, when 16.f5!N would have been excellent for White) 15.dxc5 ♘xc5 16.♗xb5 axb5 17.♘d4 ♕d7 18.♘xf5 exf5 gives Black plenty of piece activity to compensate for his damaged structure, and Lc0 confirms that White has no advantage.

12.♘fd2 c5 (12...f6!? 13.exf6 ♗xf6⇄ is a valid alternative which has been tested in a few games) 13.g4 (13.c4 ♘c6⇄) 13...♗g6 14.f4 c4 15.♘c1 f6! 16.exf6 (16.f5 ♗f7 leaves White overextended) 16...♘xf6 17.c3 ♘c6 Black had a good position in Amin – Kayonde, Livingstone 2018.

12.♘e1 is a typical manoeuvre but 12...c5! is a well-timed break: 13.♘xc5 ♘xc5 14.dxc5 ♘c6 15.♘f3

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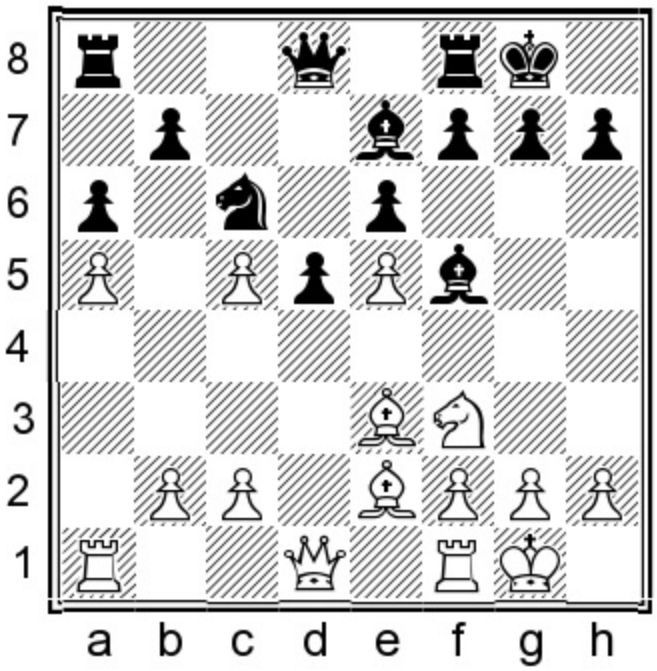
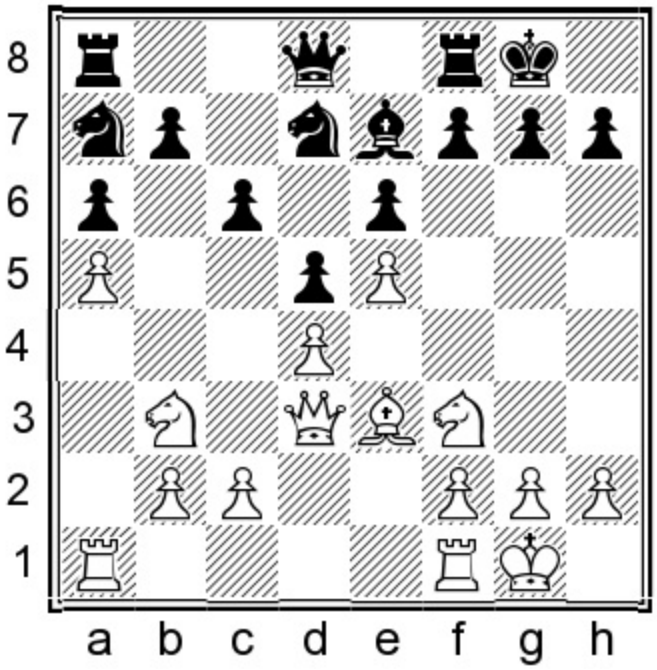


15...♕c7N (15...♗g4 16.♘d4 ♗xe2 17.♘xc6 ♗xd1 18.♘xd8 ♗e2 19.♖fe1 ♖fxd8 20.♖xe2 d4 21.♗d2 ♗xc5= was also fine in Galkin – Ivanchuk, Khanty-Mansiysk 2007) 16.♘d4 ♘xd4 17.♗xd4 (17.♕xd4 f6 18.f4 ♗xc2 is good for Black) 17...♗xc5 18.c3=

A tame alternative is:
12.♗d3 ♗xd3 13.♕xd3



13...h6!N

The need for alertness can be illustrated with a sample line: 13...♘b5 14.c3 ♖c8 was seen in Antal – Pacher, Szombathely 2011, and now after 15.♖fe1N 15...c5 (15...h6!?) 16.dxc5 ♘xc5?! (16...♕c7!? would still be okay) 17.♘xc5 ♗xc5 18.♘g5! g6 19.♖a4± Black is in trouble on the

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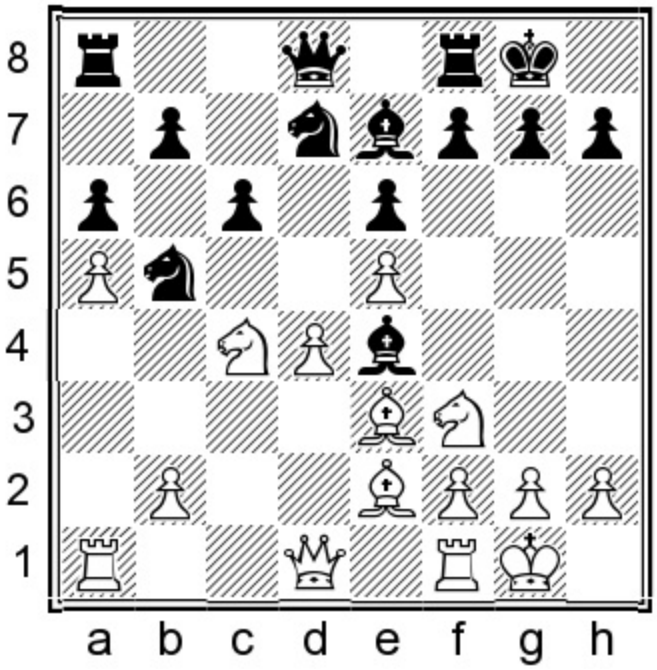
kingside.

The text move is a useful precaution before preparing ...c5. Play may continue: 14.c4 dxc4 15.♕xc4 ♘b5⇄

With similar play as in the 11.c4 line, but the exchange of light-squared bishops must make Black's life a little easier.

12...dxc4 13.♗xc4

White could also try to recapture with the knight: 13.♘bd2!? ♘b5 14.♘xc4 ♗e4!



The bishop shuffles around to the excellent d5-square. 15.♗d3 (15.♘fd2 and 15.♖c1 are both met by 15...♗d5= when Black is fine) 15...♗d5! 16.♕e2 ♕c7 With an interesting game ahead, Tishin – A. Zaitsev, Bogoroditsk 2011. A nice plan for Black is ...♖ae8 followed by ...f5.

13...♘b5

The knight gets back into play and is on its way to d5.

14.♕e2

Exchanging bishops is, as usual, rather harmless: 14.♗d3 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♘c7 16.♘bd2 ♘d5N Black is fine, for instance: 17.♘e4 h6=

14.♘e1 momentarily misplaces the knight, which makes it a perfect time for Black to break free: 14...c5! 15.♘xc5 ♗xc5 16.dxc5 ♘xe5 17.♗e2 ♕xd1 18.♖xd1 ♖fd8∓ Naiditsch – Nisipeanu, Dresden (ol) 2008.

On 14.♗e2 Black can choose between 14...♘c7 and 14...♗e4!?N, both of which look perfectly playable.

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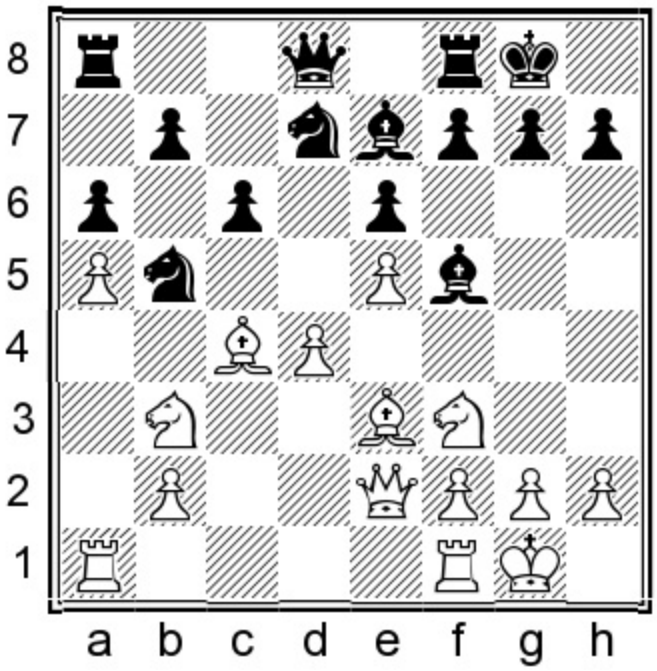

14...♘c7

This knight manoeuvre is the most natural choice.

It is noteworthy that the young Russian rising star Artemiev has ventured 14...♗g4!?, which is a good example of how Black can seek complications instead of mere equilibrium. See Game 9.

15.♘e1 ♘d5 16.♘d3 ♘xe3!?

16...♖c8 was played in a contest between two experts on the respective sides of this opening in Rublevsky – Doettling, Baden-Baden 2011, but I prefer a slightly different approach.

16...♕b8!?N 17.♖ac1 ♖c8 is an interesting way of preparing the ...b6 break.

17.fxe3

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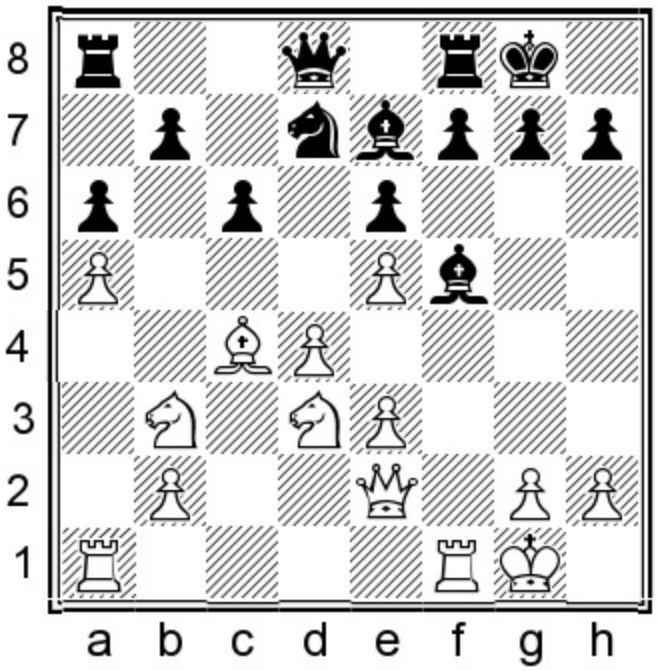

17...b5!N

17...♗xd3 18.♗xd3 g6 gave Black a playable position in Ivkina – Nechaeva, Sochi 2012, but I prefer the text move.

18.axb6 ♕xb6

18...♘xb6!? 19.♗xa6 ♘d7 gives decent compensation for the pawn, for instance: 20.♗c4 ♖xa1 21.♖xa1 ♕b8∞ (or 21...♕c7 22.♖c1 ♕a7∞)

19.♘a5 ♗xd3

19...c5?! 20.♖xf5! exf5 21.d5∞ is best avoided, but 19...♗e4!? is worth considering.

20.♗xd3 c5=

Black has enough pressure against the centre to deal with White's ideas on the kingside.

GAME 9

Sergei Rublevsky – Vladislav Artemiev

Moscow (rapid) 2017

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘d2 e6 5.♘b3 ♘d7 6.♘f3 ♘e7 7.♗e2 ♘c8 8.0-0 ♗e7 9.a4 0-0 10.a5 a6 11.c4 dxc4 12.♗xc4 ♘a7 13.♗e3 ♘b5 14.♕e2

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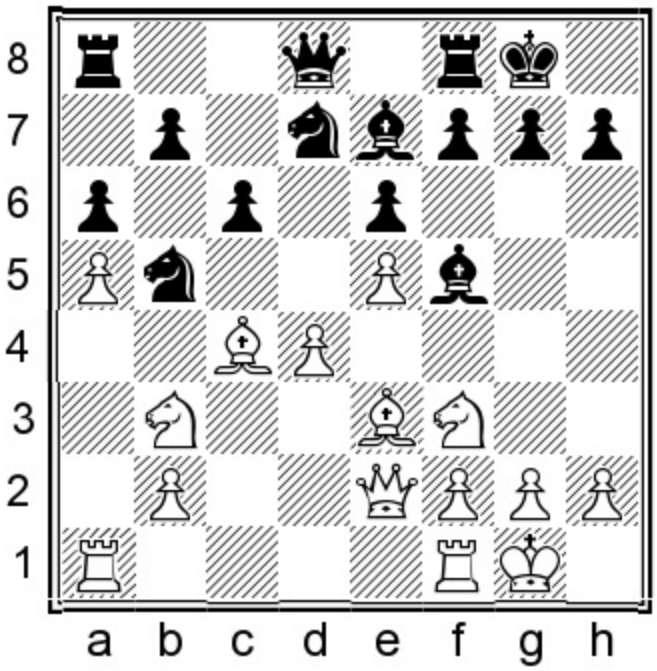

14...♗g4!?

Establishing an annoying pin. 14...♘c7 was covered in the theoretical section.

15.h3 ♗h5 16.♖fd1

16.g4 ♗g6∞ sees White break the pin, but the holes in his kingside may be felt later.

16...♘c7 17.♘c1

Rublevsky tries to get the knight to d3 and perhaps f4, but it is momentarily out of play so Artemiev initiates active counterplay.

17...f6!?

17...♘d5 18.♘d3 b5!? also makes a lot of sense. 19.axb6 leads to a balanced game after 19...♕xb6, and even the pawn sacrifice is playable.

18.♘d3

18.g4 ♗g6 19.♘d3 avoids the doubled pawns that occur in the game and seems safer.

18...fxe5 19.dxe5 ♗xf3 20.gxf3 ♕e8 21.f4 ♖f5 22.♕g4 ♕f7 23.♘e1

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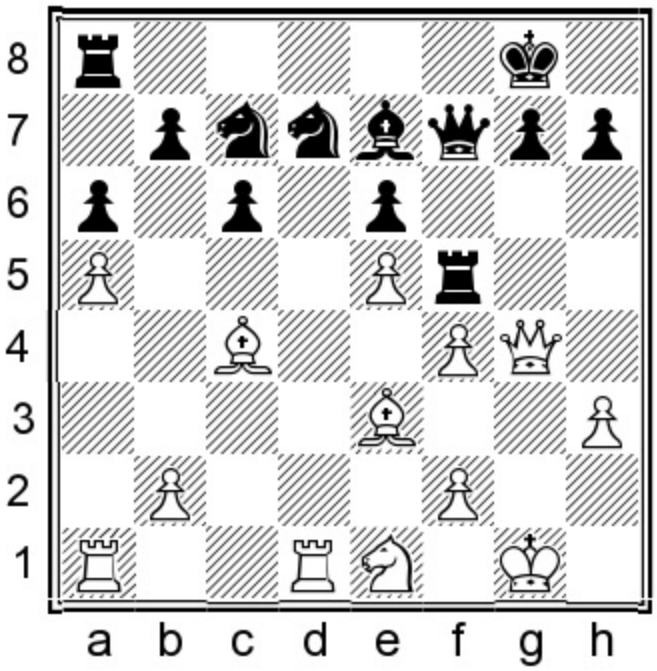

23...♘f8

23...♘d5! is slightly more accurate.

24.♘f3

24.♗d3 ♖h5 25.♘f3 and the machine likes White, although in a practical game the position would still be pretty double-edged.

24...♘d5 25.♘d4 ♖h5 26.♗xd5 exd5 27.e6?!

Keeping the pawns together with 27.f5 was stronger. Black can get good counterplay with 27...♖h4!? (27...g6 28.f6 ♗c5 could be tried, but it looks risky after 29.f4!) 28.♕g3 ♖xd4!? 29.♗xd4 ♕xf5 30.♕g4 g6⩲ (or 30...♕g6⩲).

27...♕e8 28.f5 g6!

Now the pawn chain will be broken.

29.b4 ♗f6! 30.♖e1?!

30.♖d3 ♕e7 31.♔h1 ♗xd4 32.♗xd4 ♖xf5 33.♖e1⩲ would have kept White in the game.

30...♕e7 31.fxg6 hxg6

Black is much better and White, presumably in time trouble, soon collapses.

32.♔h2? ♖h4!

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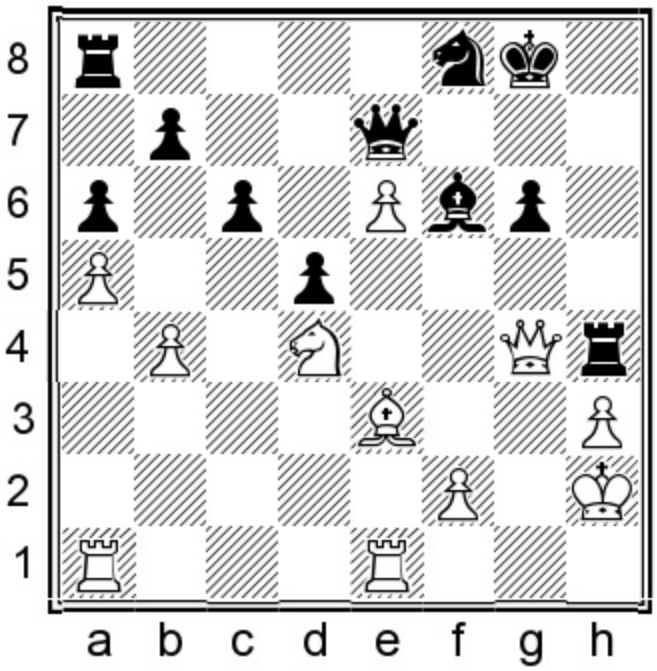

33.♘f5

33.♕d1 ♘xe6–+

33...♕c7† 34.♕g3 ♗e5 35.f4 ♖xf4! 36.♔h1?

36.♘e7† ♔h7 37.♔h1 was the last chance although 37...♖f5 should still be winning for Black.

36...♖xf5

0–1

Conclusion

3.e5 secures a space advantage in the centre for White; and when you have more room to manoeuvre, a quiet positional approach is often appropriate.

The practical player will most likely face 4.h4 h5 5.♗d3 a lot. I certainly do in blitz. It leads to a complicated middlegame, where I think Black is basically fine. After 5...♗xd3 6.♕xd3 the important thing is to remember to include 6...♕a5†! to interfere with White's intended set-up with ♗g5 and ♘d2.

Another good example of a positional strategy arises after 3...♗f5 4.♘d2 followed by ♘b3. Although it seems almost impossible for Black to get his pieces out without weakening his position, this is exactly what takes place after the deep manoeuvre ...♘g8-e7-c8 followed by ...♗e7 and ...0-0.

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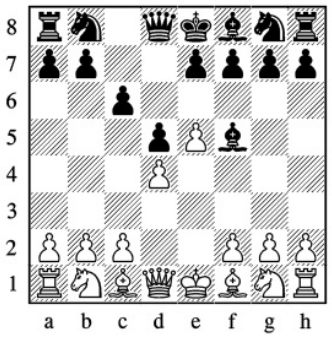
Chapter 6



Sharp Lines

Variation Index

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***Game11* – Aabling-Thomsen – Schandorff 200**

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F221) 12.♗g5 204

F222) 12.c3 205

"You'll take my life, but I'll take yours too
You'll fire your musket, but I'll run you through
So when you're waiting for the next attack
You'd better stand, there's no turning back"

Iron Maiden – The Trooper

Overview

Like in the previous chapter, we will start by identifying the main lines to be examined.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5

Until now we have seen positional approaches from White, where he mostly tries to keep control. There are numerous aggressive attempts as well: lines well suited for players who like a direct confrontation. A common feature for these sharp lines is that they involve at least one early pawn thrust.

Pawn moves

4.h4

We will briefly consider the premature 4.g4 and 4.f4, which weaken White's position more than they threaten Black's.

We will also examine 4.c4, which is closely related to 4.h4 h5 5.c4, but the version with the h-pawns advanced is more aggressive.

4...h5 5.c4

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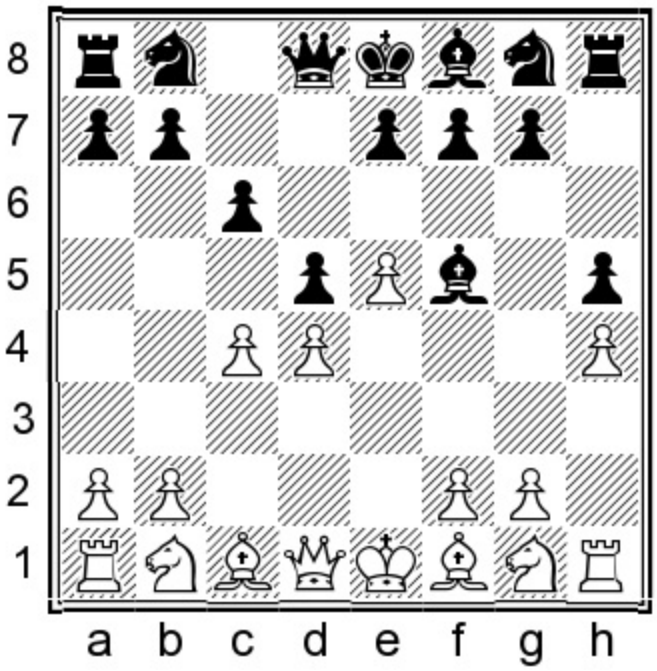

White takes a logical approach of challenging the enemy centre and preparing active development with ♘c3. In general, these c2-c4 lines lead to demanding middlegames where the initiative and dynamic factors are constantly mixed with more positional considerations. Often Black will play ...dxc4 to gain the d5-outpost for his pieces, while White gets the use of the e4-square. As always, the Caro-Kann structure is robust enough to withstand a lot of pressure, so there is no need to panic. The bishop on f5 is often the centre of attention: it might be a target for ♘ge2-g3 (or g2-g4, in the 4.c4 version), but it is also a tower of power.

Knight moves

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘c3

We should also mention 4.♘e2, with the idea of harassing the bishop after 4...e6 5.♘g3 ♗g6 6.h4. Bologan even calls it devious, but Black should be comfortable if he knows what he is doing.

4...e6 5.g4

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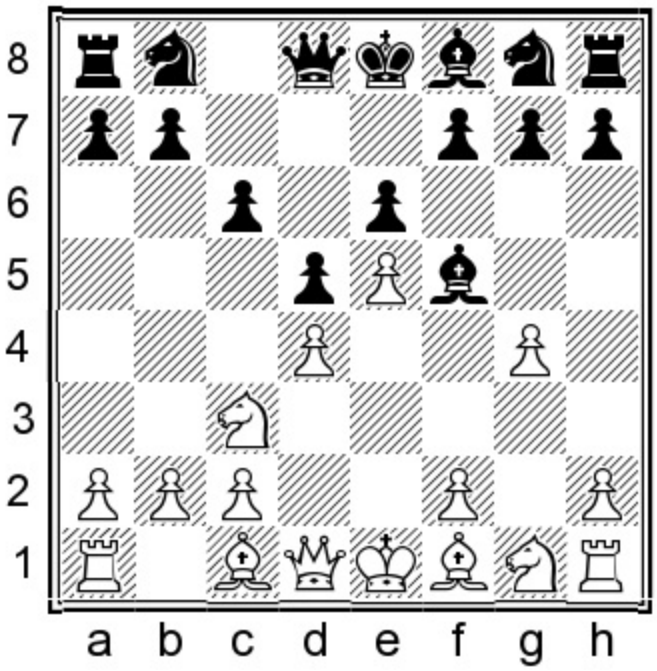

This is without doubt the most intriguing, mythical and violent line of the Caro-Kann. I refer to it as the Shirov Variation, after the brilliant attacking player Alexei Shirov, who has been a leading flag-bearer for White's cause. The line was heavily analysed as early as the 1980s by the Greek GM and theoretician Kotronias, and many other prominent players have had it regularly in their repertoires. To name a few, Sutovsky, Fedorov, Motylev, Khalifman, Timman, Topalov, Grischuk, Anand and even Kasparov have all played it at least from time to time. I have even faced it against Magnus Carlsen in a blindfold game! To be fair, the World Champion doesn't usually play this way and the same can be said of a lot of the other names above. Nowadays the popularity of this line has waned due to some important resources which have been discovered for Black. Still, the line is dangerous (for both sides) and must be taken seriously.

5...♗g6 6.♘ge2

6.h4 is premature due to 6...h5! when White has to weaken his structure.

6...c5

The position is already rather tense. Black's resources are plenty and there are good reasons to believe that White's super-aggressive approach may backfire. He risks destroying his own pawn structure, and if Black gets the initiative then it can quickly become a one-way struggle. See for example my win over the Danish IM Jakob Aabling-Thomsen, given here as an illustrative game.

White can continue his grand flank strategy with 7.h4, which is the big main line; or he can develop with more of a focus on the centre with 7.♗e3.

Theory

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1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5

We will cover the sidelines **A)** 4.g4, **B)** 4.f4 and **C)** 4.♘e2, followed by the more serious options of **D)** 4.c4, **E)** 4.h4 and finally **F)** 4.♘c3.

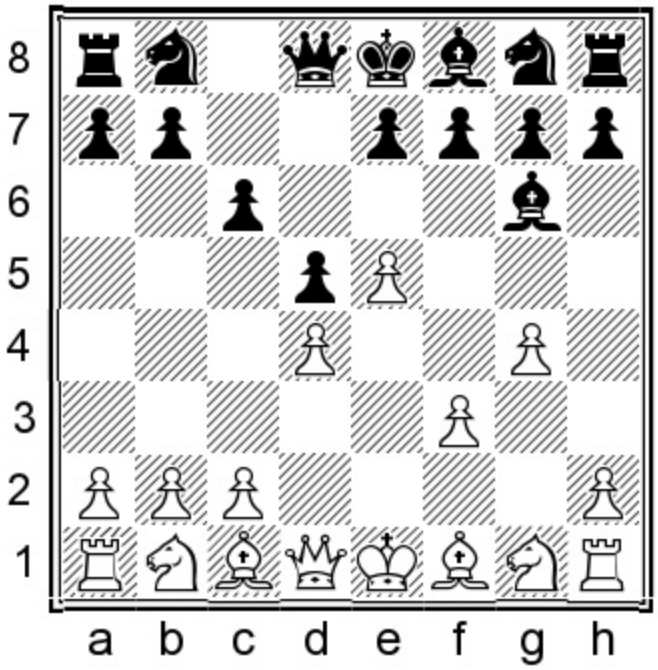
A) 4.g4

White attacks the bishop but significantly weakens his own kingside.

4...♗e4

Provoking another pawn move to compromise White's structure even more.

5.f3 ♗g6



6.h4

Consistent.

White has started with 6.♘e2 in some games, but 6...e6 7.h4 h5 8.♘f4 ♘e7 is good for Black.

6.e6 is interesting. Black should respond with: 6...♕d6! 7.exf7† ♗xf7 8.♘h3 ♘d7 9.♕e2 h6! (9...h5!? N can also be considered but the text move works well) 10.♗f4 ♕f6 11.♕e3 g5 12.♗g3 ♗g7 13.c3 c5 (13...e5!?N also looks good) 14.dxc5

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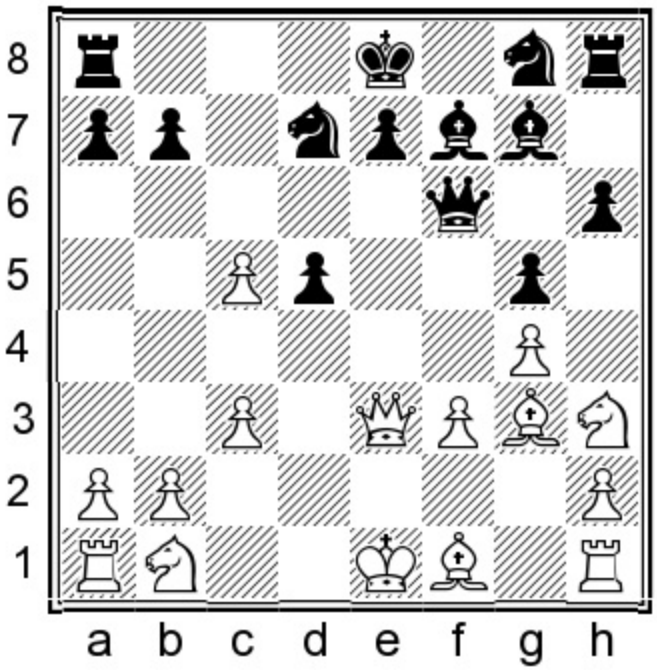
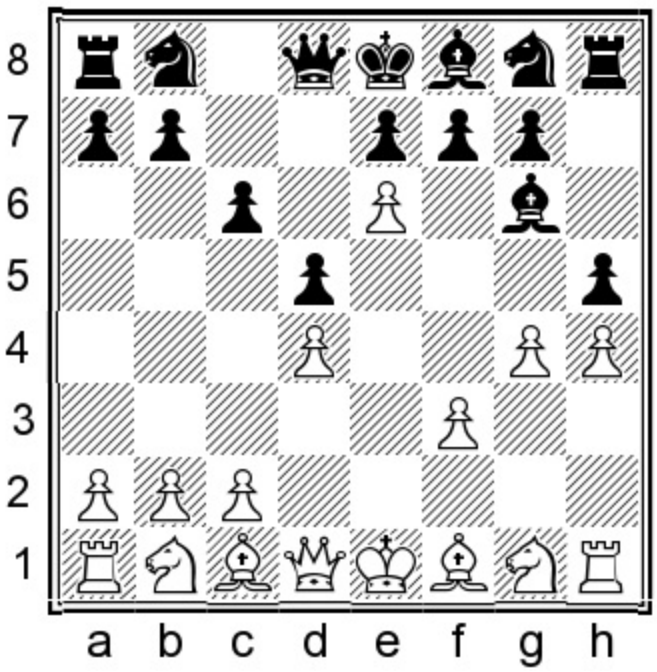


This occurred in Triantos – Olsen, Porto Carras 2018, and now 14...d4!N 15.cxd4 ♕xd4 16.♕xd4 ♗xd4 17.♘c3 ♖c8 is fine for Black.

6...h5 7.e6

Again we see this positional pawn sacrifice.

Both 7.♗d3 ♗xd3 8.♕xd3 e6 and 7.g5 e6 8.♗d3 ♗xd3 9.♕xd3 ♘e7 have been played in many games, with the latter line bearing a strong resemblance to the Nimzowitsch – Capablanca game. Exchanging the light-squared bishops is anti-positional from White's perspective, and Black is doing well.



7...♕d6!

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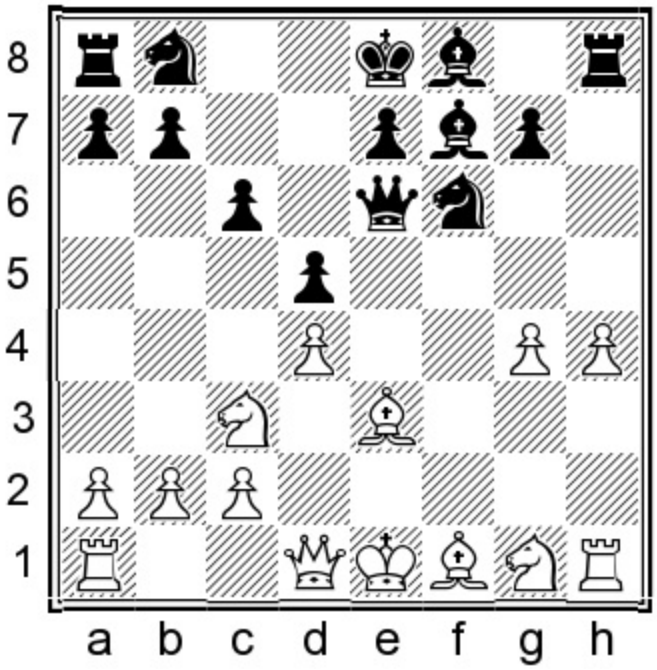
And again we see this response.

8.exf7† ♗xf7 9.♘e2

Black was threatening a check on g3.

The only top-level game continued: 9.♗e3 hxg4 10.fxg4 ♘f6 11.♘c3 ♕e6



12.♔d2?! The game was played in the World Cup and White takes too many risks, seeking a winning start in the two-game mini-match. (12.♕e2 ♘xg4 13.♗g5 was preferable although Black is still doing well) 12...♘xg4 13.♗g5 ♘f2 Black simply picked up material and won in Vallejo Pons – So, Tbilisi (3.1) 2017.

9...hxg4 10.fxg4

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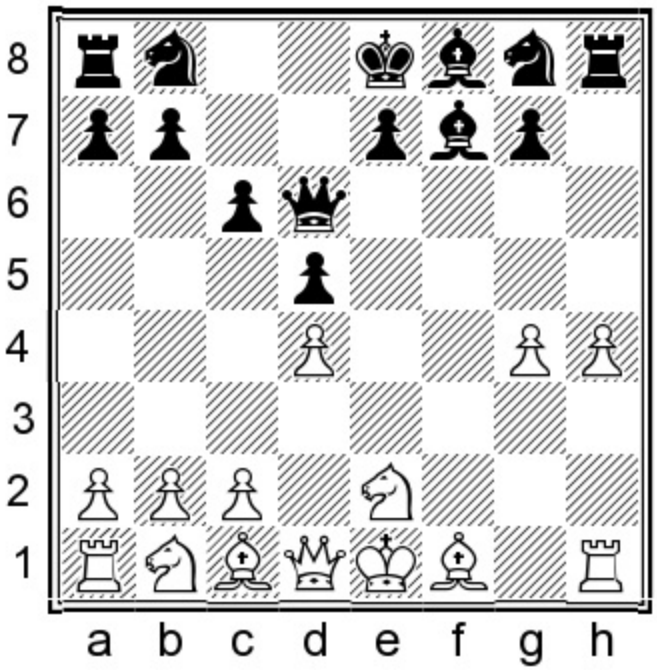


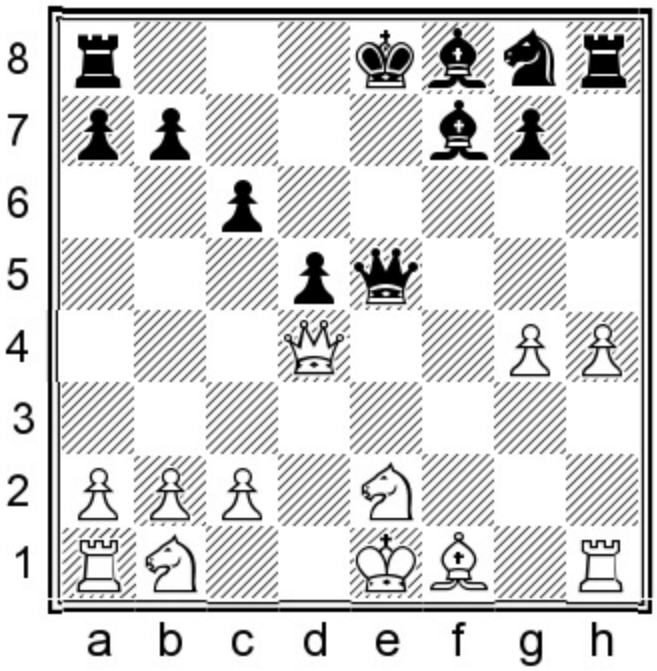
10...♘d7!

Preparing ...e5 next, with great play for Black.

11.♗f4

11.c3 e5 12.dxe5 ♘xe5 13.♗f4 ♘f6∓ is hardly an improvement for White.

11...e5 12.dxe5 ♘xe5 13.♗xe5 ♕xe5 14.♕d4



Trying to limit the damage. This position has arisen in a few games, and the most accurate continuation is:

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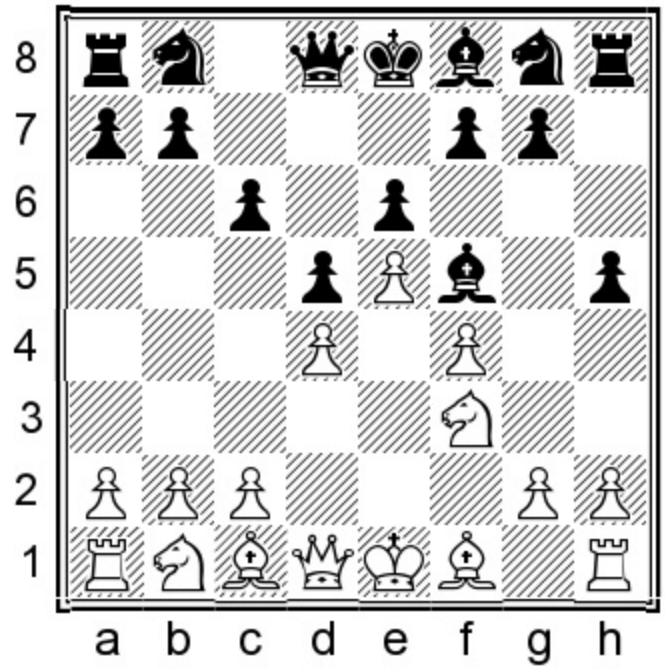
14...♕xd4!N 15.♘xd4 0-0-0∓

B) 4.f4

The positions after this move may not be particularly sharp, but it is an aggressive-looking pawn advance. White seizes space and overprotects the e5-point, but the bishop on c1 does not approve. Black should develop naturally and play on the light squares.

4...e6 5.♘f3 h5!

5...c5 looks logical but 6.♗b5† (or immediately 6.♗e3!?) 6...♘c6 7.♗e3 sharpens the game unnecessarily. I prefer to keep the position closed for the time being and delay ...c5 until our pieces are better developed.



6.c3

This was tried by the American superstar Caruana in a recent game.

6.♗d3 has been the most popular choice, but after 6...♘h6 the exchange of light-squared bishops suits Black.

6.♗e2 avoids the exchange but threatens nothing. 6...♘h6 is again the answer, with good play for Black.

6.♗e3 ♕b6 7.♕c1 ♘h6 (7...c5!?) 8.c4 ♘d7 9.♘bd2 was played in Morozevich – Svidler, Monte Carlo (rapid) 2005. Black should simply have continued 9...♗e7N and castled short, with a fine position.

6...♘d7 7.♗e3 ♘h6 8.♗d3

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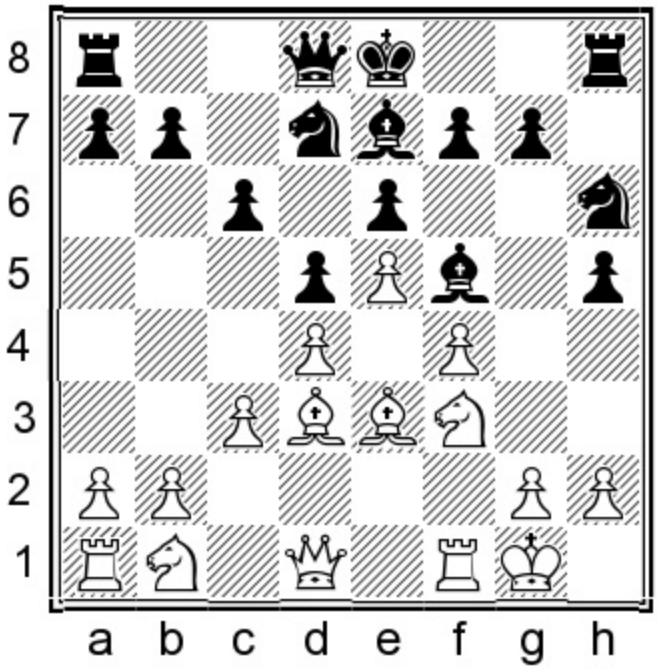
8.♘bd2 ♗e7 is no problem for Black.

8...♗e7 9.0-0



This was Caruana – Shimanov, Internet 2019. I suggest:

9...♕b6N

9...h4!?N is another idea.

10.b3 ♖c8

Black continues to delay castling and has a comfortable game. The last move will help to strengthen the ...c5 break when it comes.

C) 4.♘e2!?

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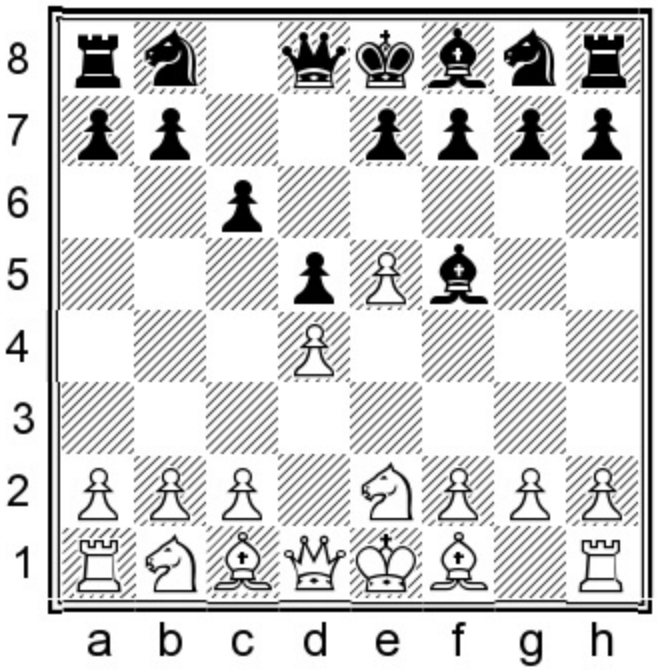

An offbeat but interesting try.

4...e6 5.♘g3

The knight can also take another direction:

5.♘f4

White intends to target the bishop with g2-g4, as in the Shirov Variation (which we will see later). Of course, advancing the g-pawn is a risky strategy, and the present case is no exception.

5...c5! 6.g4 ♗e4 7.f3

White should try to simplify with: 7.♗b5† ♘c6 8.♗xc6†! (but not 8.f3? because of 8...♕a5†! 9.♘c3 cxd4 10.♕xd4 ♗xf3–+) 8...bxc6 Black is in excellent shape. A good example continued 9.f3 ♗g6 10.h4 h5! 11.♘xg6 fxg6 12.♕d3 when Black should have played:

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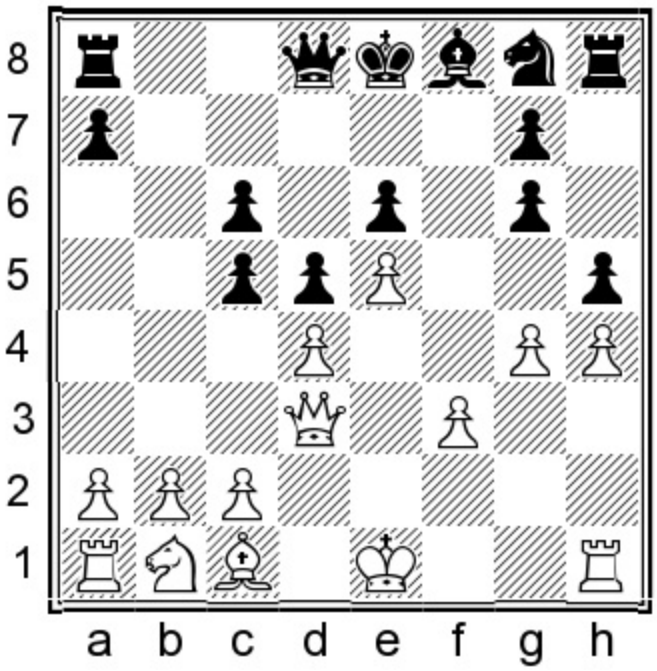
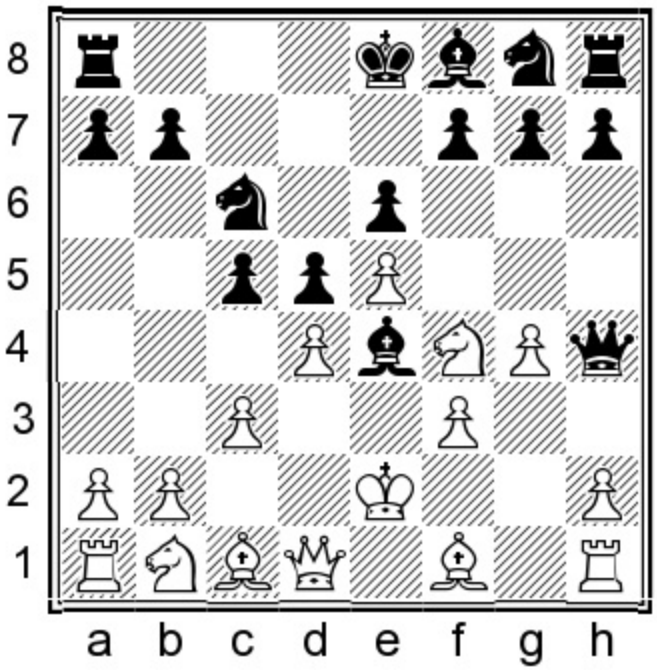


12...cxd4!N (12...♔f7 only led to a balanced position in Bojkovic – Ilieva, Innsbruck 1987) 13.♕xg6† ♔d7∓ Black's king is safe enough, while White's centre has been destroyed and his position is riddled with weaknesses.

7...♕h4† 8.♔e2 ♘c6! 9.c3

9.fxe4? ♕xg4† 10.♔e1 ♕h4† 11.♔e2 ♘xd4† wins for Black, with 12.♔d3 dxe4† 13.♔xe4!? 0-0-0–+ an amusing example of king 'activity' in the opening.



9...cxd4 10.cxd4 ♗c2!

The Caro-Kann bishop stays alive.

11.♕d2 h5!

White is crushed.

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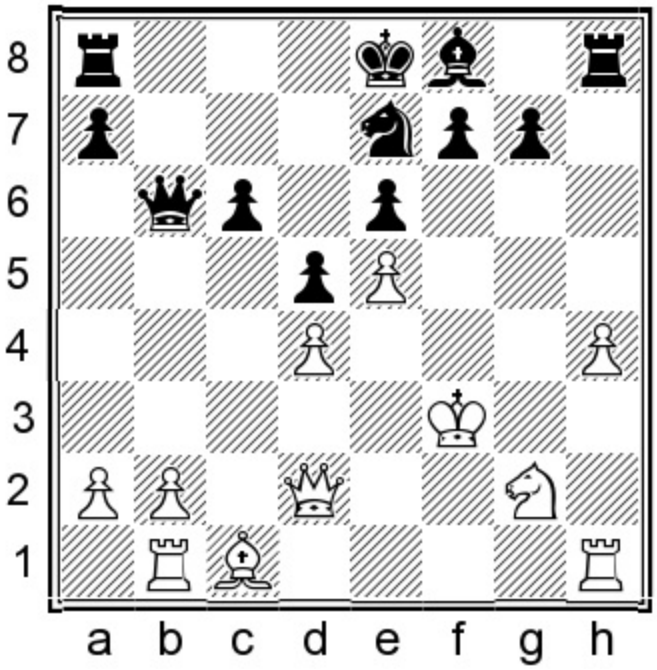
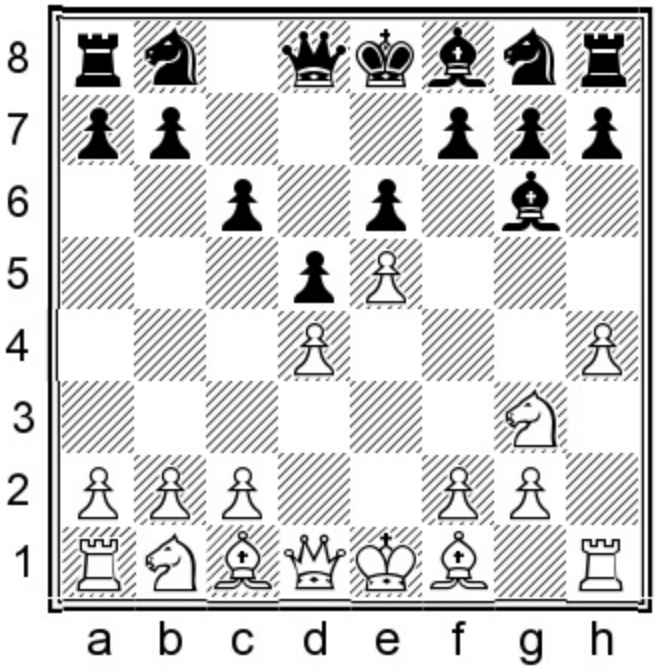
12.♘g2 ♕d8 13.♔f2 ♗xb1 14.♖xb1 hxg4 15.♗b5 gxf3 16.♔xf3 ♕b6 17.♗xc6† bxc6 18.h4 ♘e7



0–1 Litz – Nagel, email 2006.

5...♗g6 6.h4



6...h5!

6...f6!? is an interesting alternative, when 7.h5 ♗f7 reaches a position rich in possibilities for both sides. Although this would be entertaining to analyse further, it seems best to stick with the main line, which offers a good position with minimal fuss, rather than go to the trouble of analysing an interesting new direction against a variation that you are unlikely to encounter often, if at all.

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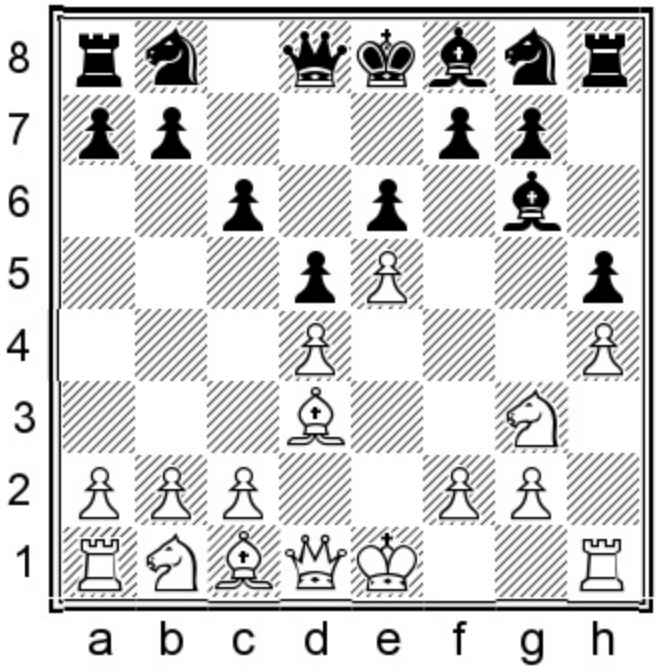
7.♗e2

Attacking the h-pawn is the natural follow-up, but White will never find a convenient time to capture it.

7.♗d3

This seems anti-positional.



7...♗xd3 8.cxd3!?

8.♕xd3 gives Black a pleasant choice between 8...♗e7, 8...c5 and 8...♕a5† followed by ...♕a6, with pleasant play in all cases.

8...♕b6 9.♘e2

9.♗e3?! ♕xb2 10.♘d2 ♕a3 11.♕e2 g6 12.0-0 b6∓ left White with insufficient compensation in Pecka – Noble, corr. 2015.

9...♘e7

Another good option is 9...♘d7 10.0-0 ♕a6⇄ intending ...♘e7 and ...c5.

10.♘d2 ♘f5

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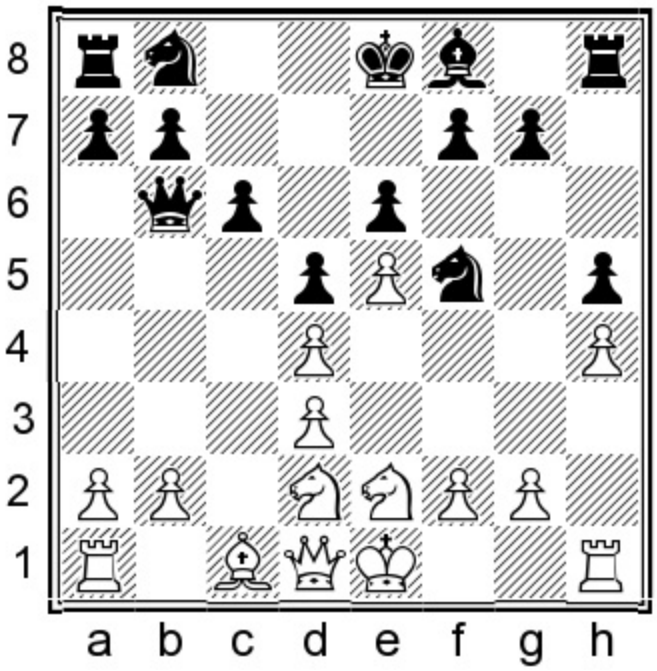
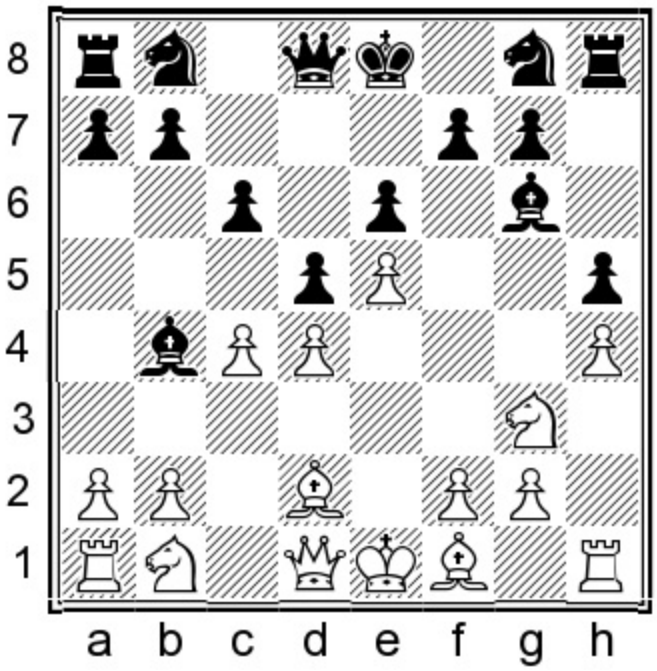


Black is comfortable, for example:
11.♘f3 c5 12.dxc5 ♗xc5 13.d4 ♗e7
Black had a pleasant game in Spassky – Adams, Cannes 1989.
13...♗b4†!?N 14.♗d2 ♗e7 15.♗c3 ♘c6∓ could also be considered.

7.c4!? This delayed version of the c2-c4 plan has scored decently for White, but it's nothing to fear. 7...♗b4† (Black can of course play 7...♘e7 or even 7...c5!? now that the white knight has moved away from the centre.) 8.♗d2 (8.♘c3 can be met by 8...c5 or 8...♘e7.)



8...c5!? 9.♗xb4 cxb4 10.♘d2 ♘e7 11.c5 ♘bc6 12.♘f3 ♕a5 13.b3 ♗f5 14.♘g5 ♗g4 15.f3 ♗f5 16.♕d2 b6⇄ The unusual pawn structure led to an interesting battle with mutual chances in Kyhos – Packroff,

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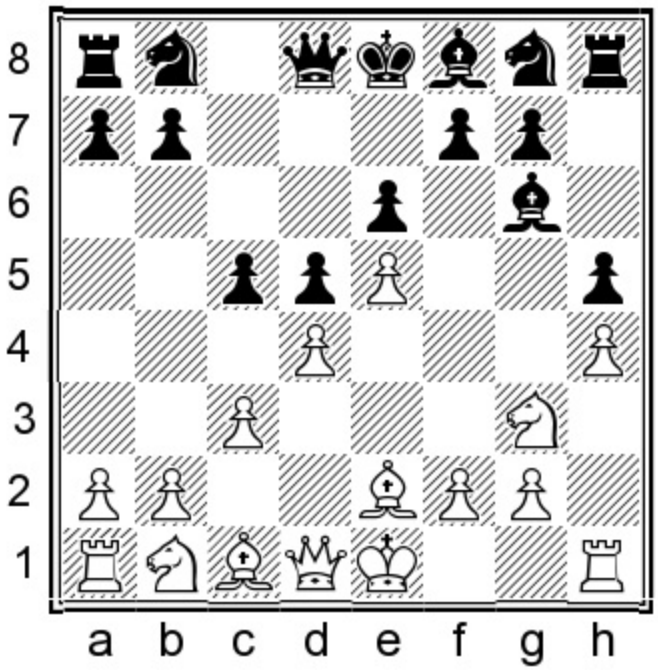
corr. 2014.

7...c5!

The counterattack on d4 diverts White's attention from the h-pawn.

8.c3

8.dxc5 ♗xc5 9.♘d2 (9.♘c3 ♘c6 10.♗g5 ♗e7∓) 9...♘c6 10.♘b3 ♗b6 11.♗xh5 ♗xh5 12.♘xh5 White collects the h-pawn, but he will soon lose the e5-pawn: not the cleverest swap. 12...♕c7 13.♗f4 g6 14.♘g3 ♘xe5 15.♕d2 This occurred in Naiditsch – Bologan, Kishinev 2012, and now the simple 15...♘f6 gives Black an excellent position.



8...♘c6 9.♗e3

It still wasn't good to take on h5:

9.♘xh5 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♕b6 11.♘f4 should be met by 11...♗f5!N to safeguard the strong bishop, followed by picking up the d4-pawn.

9.♗xh5 ♗xh5 10.♘xh5 g6 11.♘g3 (11.♗g5 ♗e7 does not help White) and now a nice finesse is:

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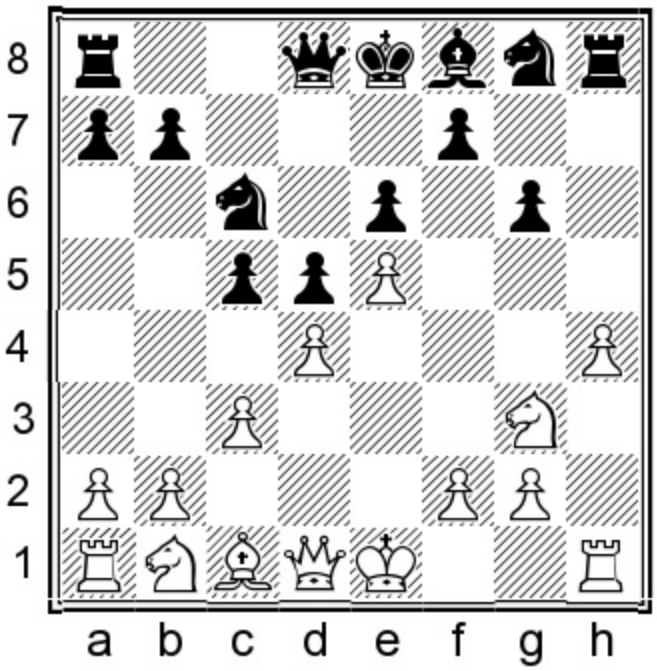
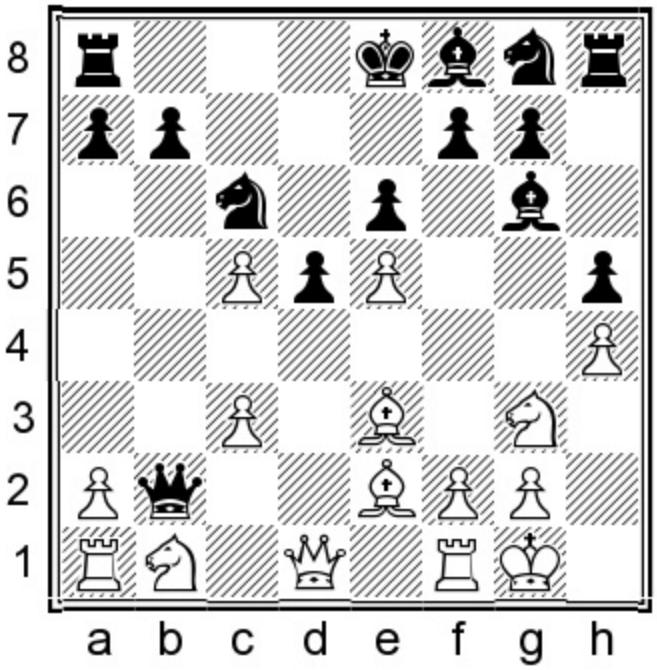


11...cxd4!N (the immediate 11...♖xh4 12.♖xh4 ♕xh4 enables White to equalize with 13.♘d2!) 12.cxd4 ♖xh4 13.♖xh4 ♕xh4 Now the d4-pawn hangs, as 14.♗e3 ♗h6!∓ does not help White.

9...♕b6 10.♕b3

It is surprising how quickly White might lose: after 10.♕d2? cxd4 11.cxd4 ♗xb1! White had to resign in Stojanovic – Pikula, Banja Dvorovi 2017, due to 12.♖xb1 ♗b4 and the queen is gone.

10.dxc5?! also looks questionable: 10...♕xb2 (the simple 10...♗xc5 is also good) 11.0-0



11...♘h6!N (11...0-0-0 was somewhat better for Black in Spassky – Dzindzichashvili, Tilburg 1978, but the text move is even more convincing.) 12.♕b3 ♕xb3 13.axb3 ♘g4∓

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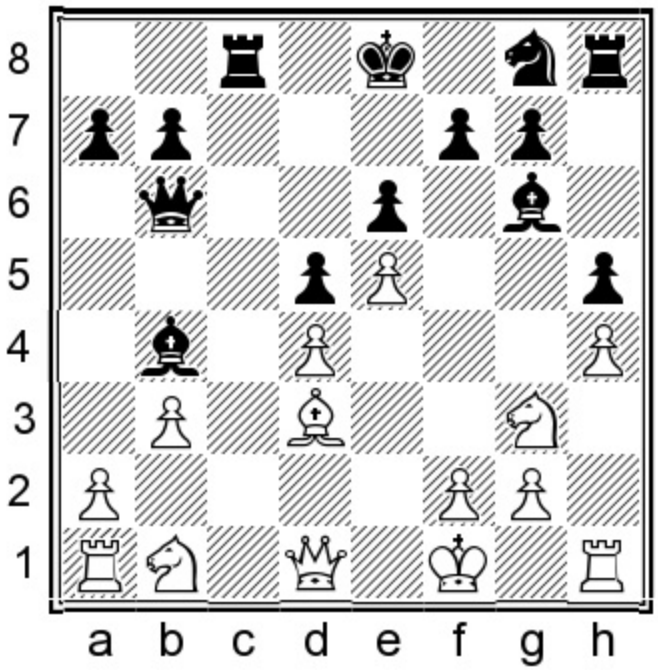
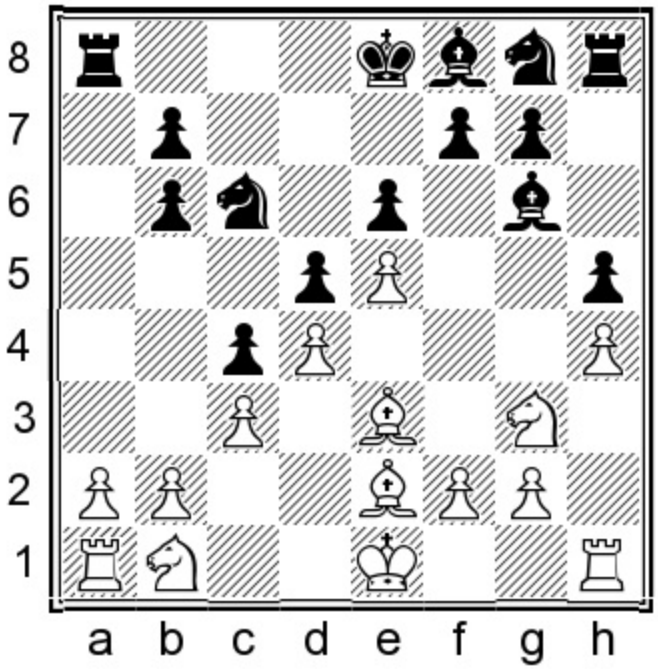
10.b3 weakens White's position a lot: 10...cxd4 11.♗xd4 (after 11.cxd4 ♘b4! 12.0-0 [12.♘a3? ♕a5–+] 12...♘c2 13.♘c3 ♘xa1 14.♕xa1 Black is simply the exchange up) 11...♘xd4 (even 11...♗c5 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5∓ turns out great for Black) 12.cxd4 ♗b4† 13.♔f1 ♖c8 14.♗d3



And now I like 14...♘h6!N 15.♗xg6 fxg6 16.♘e2 0-0 when White won't survive for long.

10...c4! 11.♕xb6 axb6

Black is clearly better thanks to the simple plan of ...b5-b4. White does not have time to prevent it with a2-a3 because his a-pawn will be pinned. A good example continued:



12.♘d2 b5 13.0-0 b4 14.♖fc1?! bxc3 15.bxc3 ♗a3–+

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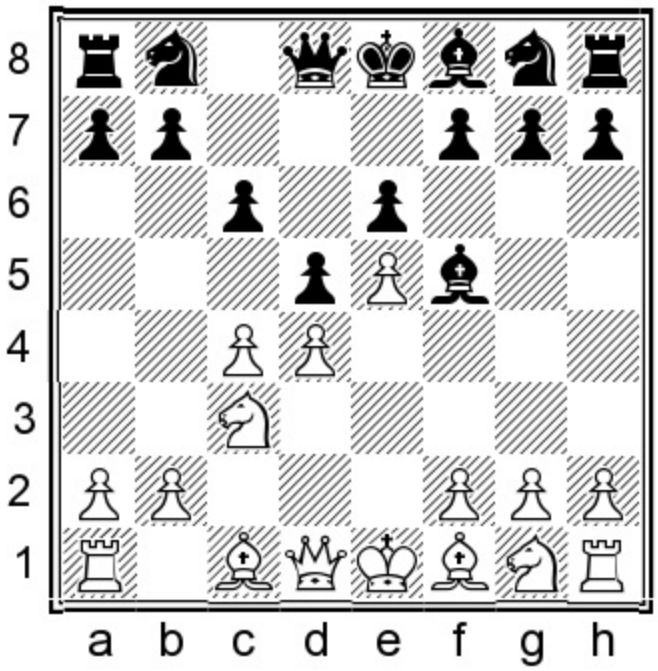
Black was winning material in Lopez Gomez – Yuffa, London 2018.

D) 4.c4 e6 5.♘c3



5...♘e7

Bologan has proposed 5...♗b4!? which the Russian Caro-Kann expert Riazantsev has played several times. It leads to interesting positional play where Black definitely has his chances. See Game 10.

The text move is the standard continuation. We will consider three main lines: the simple **D1)** 6.♘f3, the prophylactic **D2)** 6.a3 and the tricky **D3)** 6.♘ge2.

Other moves exist as well, but they are easy to deal with:

The immediate 6.c5 allows White's pawns to be undermined with 6...b6 7.b4 a5. This is not quite the end of the story, as 8.♗g5!? is tricky, but a good reply is: 8...♘d7! (8...axb4 9.♘b5!↑ is White's idea) and if 9.a3 f6! White's pawn chain comes under fire from all sides.

6.♗e3 dxc4 7.♗xc4 ♘d7

This leads to standard play, for example:

8.♘f3

8.♘ge2 ♘b6 9.♗b3 ♘ed5 10.0-0 ♗e7= was also fine for Black in Najer – Kholmov, Moscow 1999.

8...♘b6 9.♗d3

Now Black has more than one good option:

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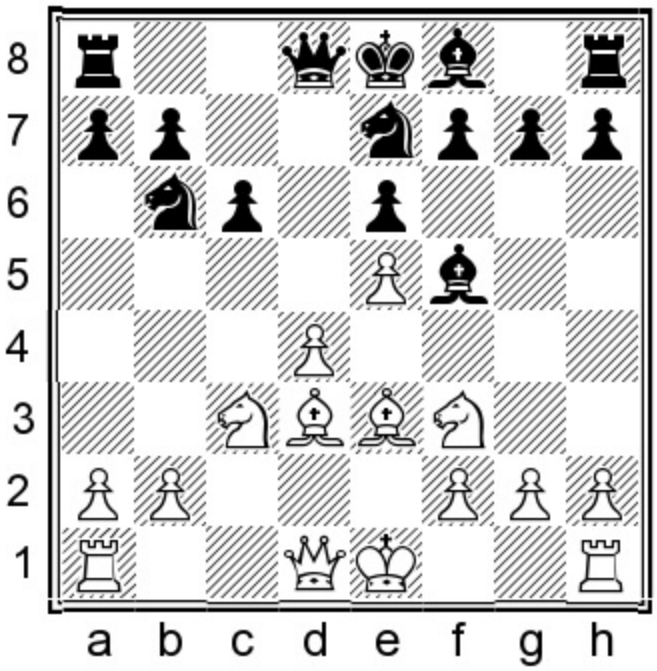


9...h6

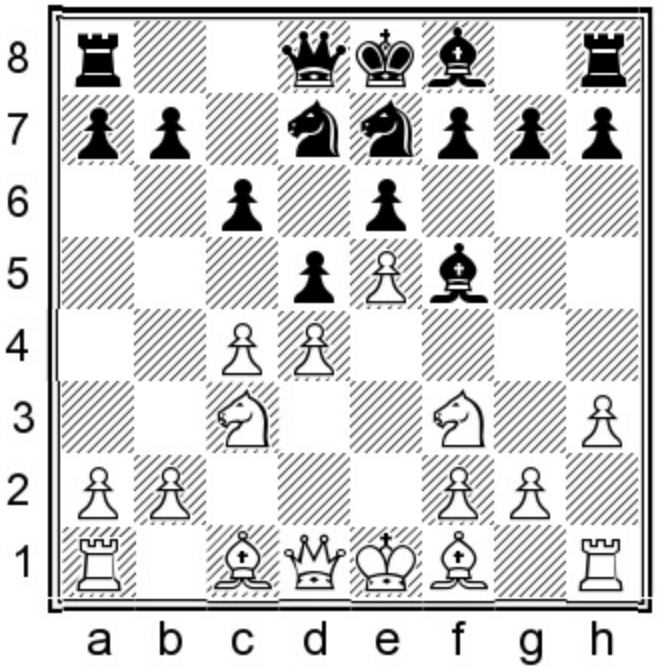
There is also 9...♘ed5!?N 10.0-0 ♕d7 with interesting play, when we don't have to fear the change in the pawn structure resulting from the bishop exchange.

10.0-0 ♗xd3 11.♕xd3 ♘f5=

Alekseev – Matlakov, St Petersburg 2014.

11...♘ed5N must also be fine.

D1) 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.h3



7...h6!?

This could be a clever waiting move.

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The more straightforward 7...dxc4 8.♗xc4 ♘d5 9.0-0 ♗e7 is also fine.

8.b3!?

This has been played in several games by Marian Petrov.

Another logical continuation is: 8.a3 dxc4 (8...♕c7!?) 9.♗xc4 ♘d5 10.♘xd5 cxd5 11.♗d3 ♗xd3 12.♕xd3 ♗e7 13.0-0 ♘b8!? (13...0-0 14.♗d2 ♖c8=) 14.♗d2 ♘c6 15.♗c3 ♕d7 16.♘d2 0-0 17.f4 f5 (17...b5!? 18.♘f3 a5⇄) 18.exf6 ♖xf6 19.g3 ♗d6∞ Short – Esipenko, Moscow 2018.

8...♘g6 9.a3 ♗e7

Black gets his pieces out.

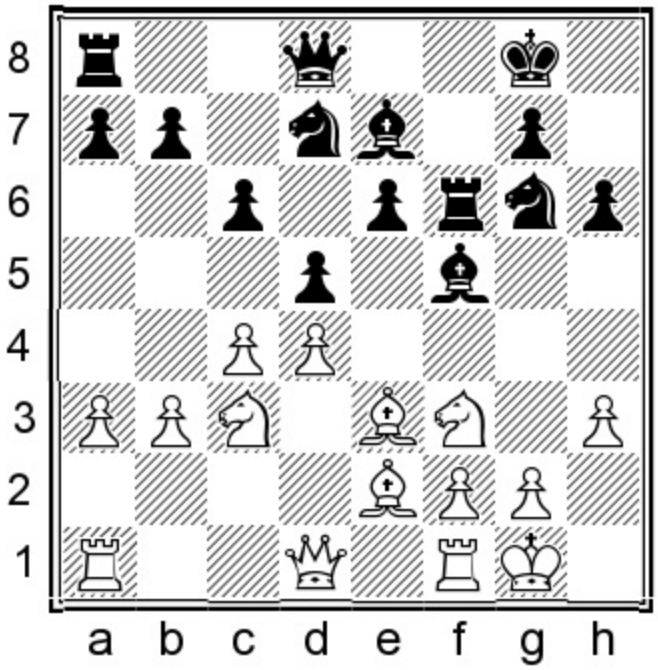
10.♗e2 0-0 11.0-0 f6!

Having completed development, we can go for direct counterplay.

12.exf6 ♖xf6

12...♘xf6 is also fine: the knight can go to e4.

13.♗e3



This was M. Petrov – Richardson, Cardiff 2019. I suggest:

13...♕c7!N 14.♕d2

14.g4?! ♗e4 15.♘xe4 dxe4 16.♘d2 ♘f4 is dangerous for White: 17.♘xe4 ♘xh3† 18.♔g2 ♘f4†→

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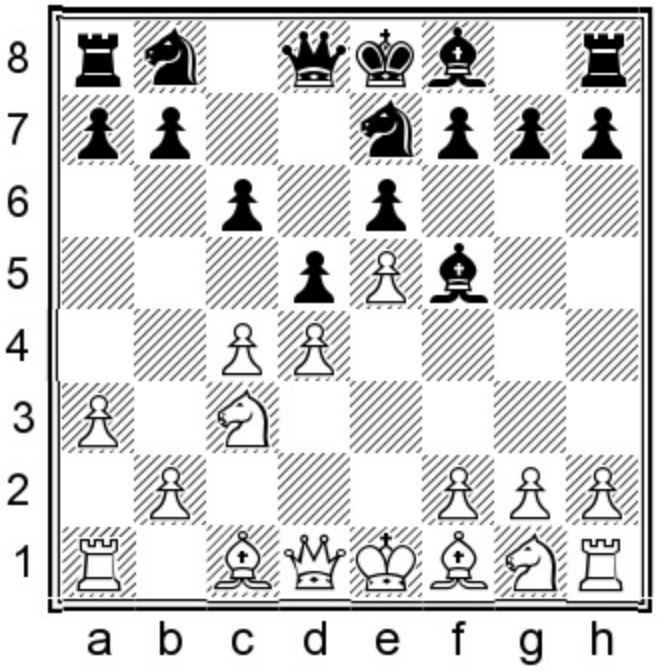
14...♖af8⇄

With plenty of activity for Black.

D2) 6.a3



This has been the most popular choice. White anticipates ...dxc4.

6...♘d7

So Black waits!

Having said that, it also makes perfect sense to play 6...dxc4 7.♗xc4 ♘d7 8.♘ge2 ♘b6 9.♗b3 ♕d7⇄ but that's another story.

7.c5!?

This leads to an unusual pawn structure, where White has a huge amount of space but has spent six out of seven tempos on pawn moves. It wasn't easy to keep making normal developing moves without giving something away. For instance:

7.♘f3 ♗g4!? 8.♗e3 ♘f5 9.cxd5 cxd5 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♗d3 ♗g6 12.♗f4 a6 13.h4 ♘e7 14.h5 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 h6 with a balanced game in A. Zhigalko – Rodshtein, Jerusalem 2015.

7.♗e3 ♕b6 8.♕d2 ♕b3! 9.♘ge2 was seen in Hoiberg – Jelling, Esbjerg 1988.

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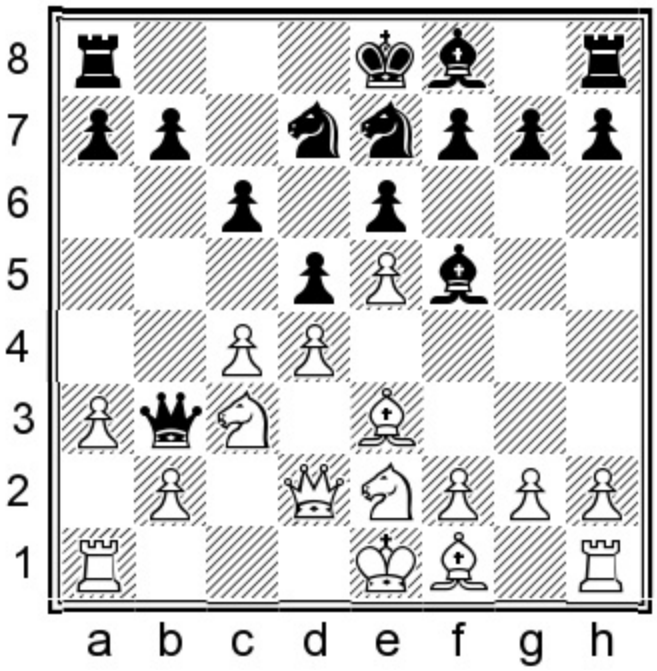

Black could have played: 9...♘b6!N (9...dxc4!?N is also good) 10.♘c1 ♕c2 with at least equal chances.

7...f6!

7...b6 is the wrong move order, and 8.b4 has scored well for White. If 8...f6 then 9.exf6 gives White a better version of the next note.

7...♗g6 is a fine alternative, but I prefer the more combative attack on the centre.

8.f4

This is more or less forced.

8.exf6 gxf6⇄ is promising for Black, who will get ...e5 in. For instance, 9.♘f3 e5! 10.♗e2 ♘g6 11.0-0 ♗g7 12.♘e1 ♕e7 13.b4 0-0∓ Botta – Prusikin, Switzerland 2018.

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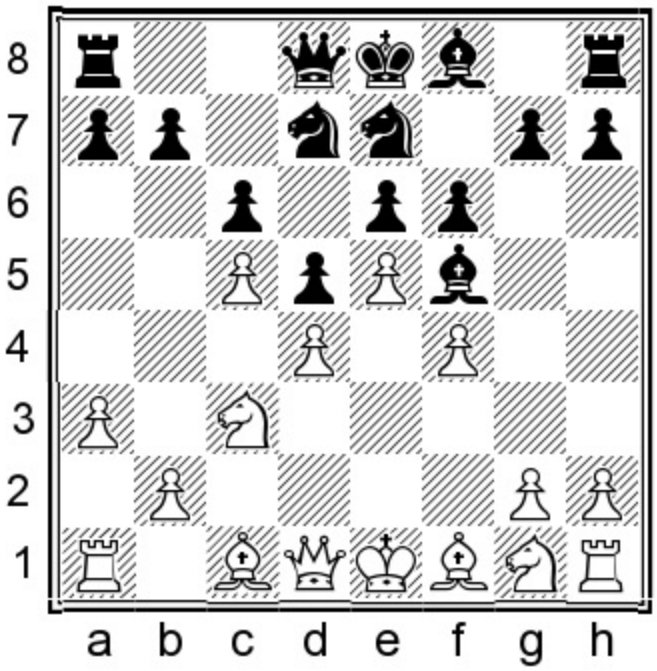

8...b6!

This clever move order forces White to stretch his pawn chain to the maximum to keep his centre intact.

9.b4 a5

Black has the initiative.

10.♗d2 fxe5!

10...g6 gives White the respite he needs for 11.♗e2!N 11...♗g7 12.♘f3= when White is okay.

Instead, 11.♘a4?! axb4 12.axb4 bxc5 13.bxc5 ♗g7 led to White being swiftly wiped from the board after: 14.♘e2 ♗g4 15.♗e3 ♘f5 16.♕d3 fxe5 17.dxe5 ♘xe5!? 18.♕c3 ♕e7 19.♗f2 0-0 20.♖a3 ♘c4 0–1 Khaetsky – Turov, Hofheim 2019.

11.fxe5 ♘g6 12.g3?

12.♘f3 is the lesser evil, although 12...♗g4∓ is excellent for Black, who threatens to take on f3 and play ...♕h4†.

Black went on to win quickly after ...bxc5 and a piece sac in Piskunov – Belmeskin, Krasnoyarsk 2009, but it would have been even more lethal to lure White's queen into the corner first:

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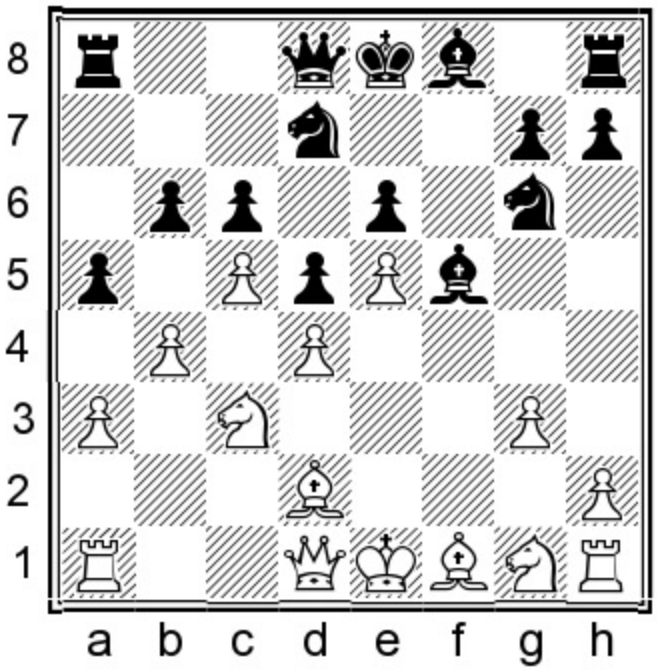

12...axb4!N 13.axb4 ♖xa1 14.♕xa1 bxc5 15.bxc5 ♗xc5! 16.dxc5 0-0–+

With a murderous attack.

D3) 6.♘ge2

This is the most critical line.

6...dxc4

Taking the pawn while it is momentarily unprotected makes sense.

6...♘d7 7.♘g3 ♗g6 is also playable; and even 6...♘a6!? could be considered.

7.♘g3

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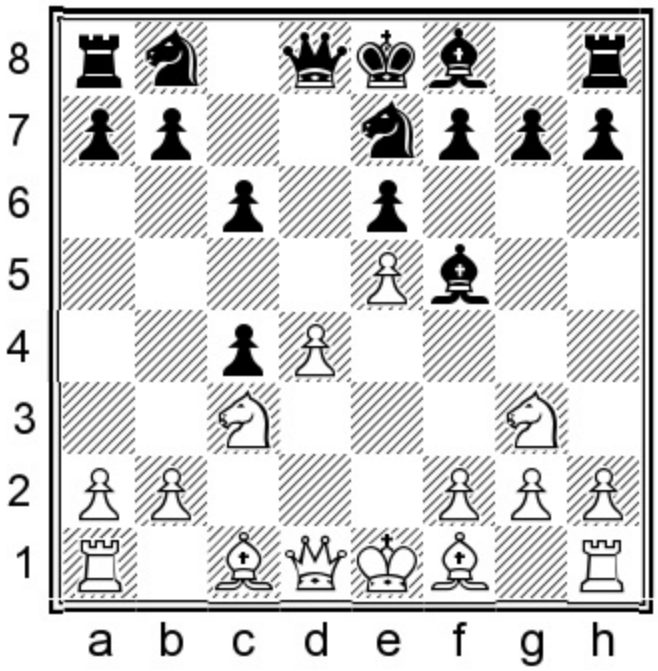

7...b5!

We protect the pawn like in similar positions in the Slav Defence. Of course White has some compensation, but no clear-cut plan to follow.

The big main line is 7...♘d7 8.♗xc4 ♘b6 9.♗b3 ♕d7 10.0-0 ♗g6 11.♗e3 when Black can put a knight on d5, but White has the freer game. The natural 11...0-0-0 is met by 12.a4!, when 12...♔b8 13.a5N 13...♘bd5 14.a6 b6 reaches a complicated position. This could certainly be investigated in more detail, but personally I am afraid of the pawn on a6!

8.a4

This is the standard break in such positions.

White can also play more slowly, but in that case he risks ending up with nothing to show for the pawn after Black consolidates. For example: 8.♗e2N 8...♗g6 9.0-0 (9.a4 can be met by 9...♘d5 10.0-0 ♗b4∞) 9...♘d7 10.a4 a6 11.♗g5

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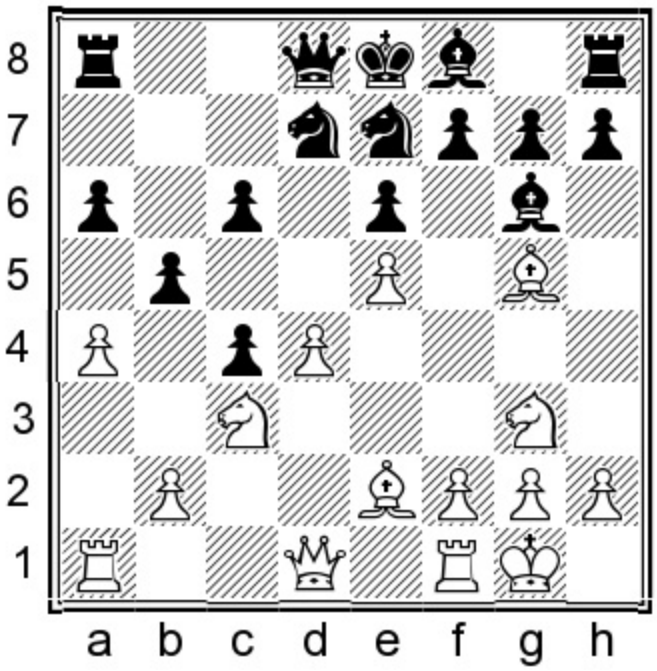
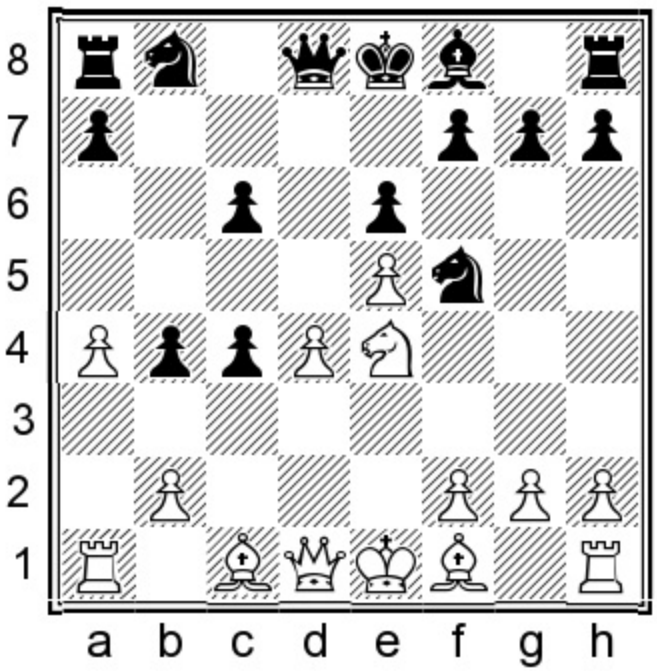


Threatening to do real damage with a knight to e4, but with a few precise moves Black solves all problems while keeping his extra pawn: 11...♕c8! 12.f4 h6 13.♗h4 ♘b6 14.♕d2 ♘bd5∓

8...b4 9.♘ce4 ♗xe4 10.♘xe4 ♘f5!



Without this move, Black would be in dire straits. As things stand, the counterattack in the centre at least maintains the balance, and may enable Black to strive for the advantage.

11.♗e3

This is the only move to have been played so far. There are two alternatives though, one at each end of the spectrum: a quiet continuation and a crazy one.

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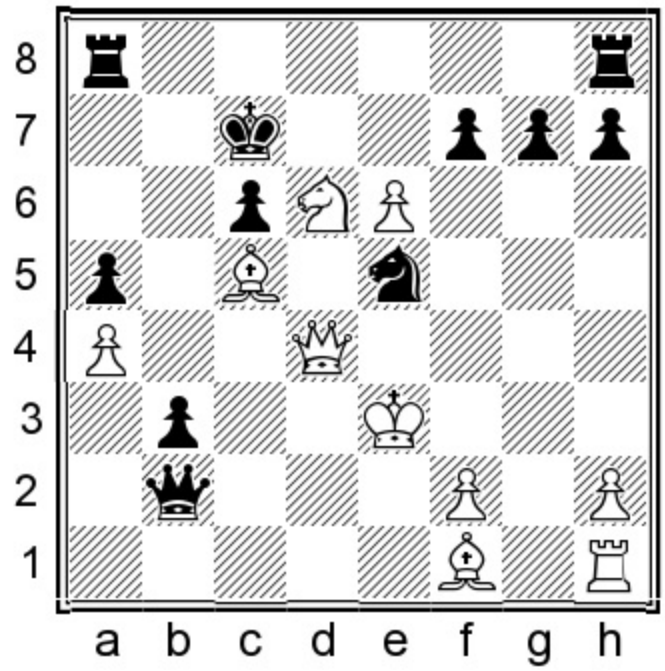
11.♗xc4 ♕xd4 12.♕xd4 ♘xd4 13.0-0 ♘d7⩲ offers White just enough positional compensation for the missing pawn, but nothing more than that.

11.g4!?

This leads to wild complications. Best play continues:

11...♕xd4 12.♕e2 b3! 13.gxf5 ♗b4† 14.♗d2 ♕xb2 15.♗xb4 ♕xa1† 16.♔d2 a5! 17.♗c5 ♘d7 18.♕xc4 ♕b2† 19.♔e3 ♘xe5 20.♘d6† ♔d7 21.fxe6† ♔c7 22.♕d4



And now Black has a choice:

22...♘g4†!?

Playing for the win.

22...♕c1† forces a repetition: 23.♔e2 (23.♔e4? b2 24.♗b6† ♔b8 25.♗d3 f6!–+) 23...♕c2† 24.♔e3=

23.♕xg4 ♕c3† 24.♔e2 ♕xc5 25.♘c4 ♖ad8 26.♕g3† ♔c8 27.♕xb3 ♖d4 28.♘e3 ♖b4∞

A mess, but Black has the initiative.

11...♕d5! 12.♘g3 ♘h4

12...♘xe3N 13.fxe3 ♘d7 also looks decent for Black. For instance: 14.♕c1 c3! 15.bxc3 bxc3 16.♕xc3 ♖b8⇄

13.f3

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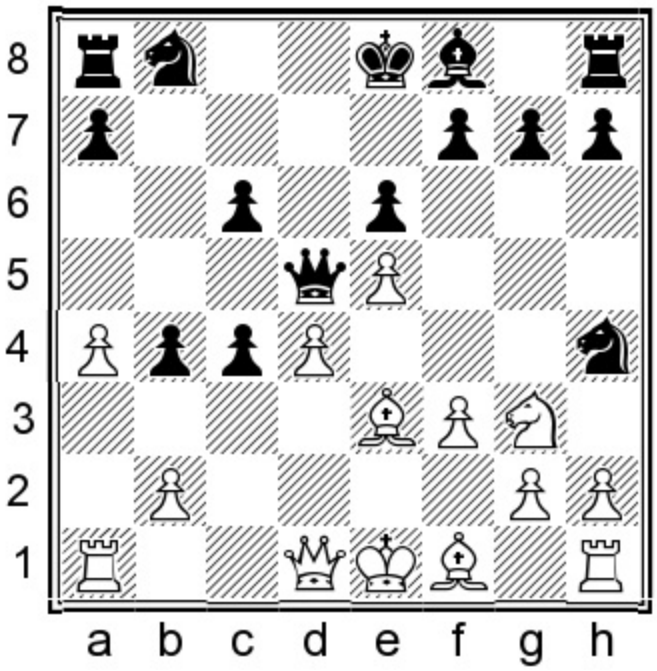


We have been following D. Mastrovasilis – Svetushkin, Subotica 2008. Black should continue:

13...c5!N

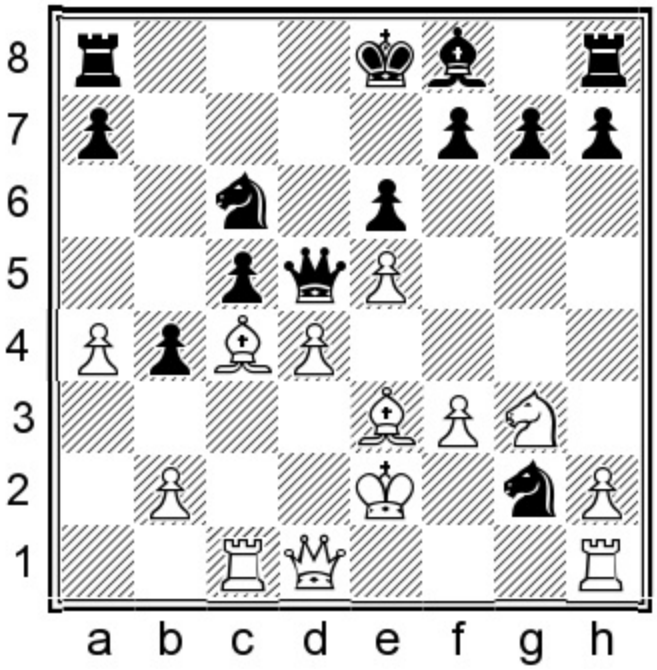
I gave this in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* and it still awaits a practical test.

14.♖c1

14.dxc5 ♕xe5∓

14...♘c6 15.♗xc4 ♘xg2† 16.♔e2

16.♔f2? loses to 16...♘xe3!–+ because White's queen can be taken with check!



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16...♕d7

Now 16...♘xe3? is no good because of 17.♗xd5 ♘xd1 18.♗xc6†.

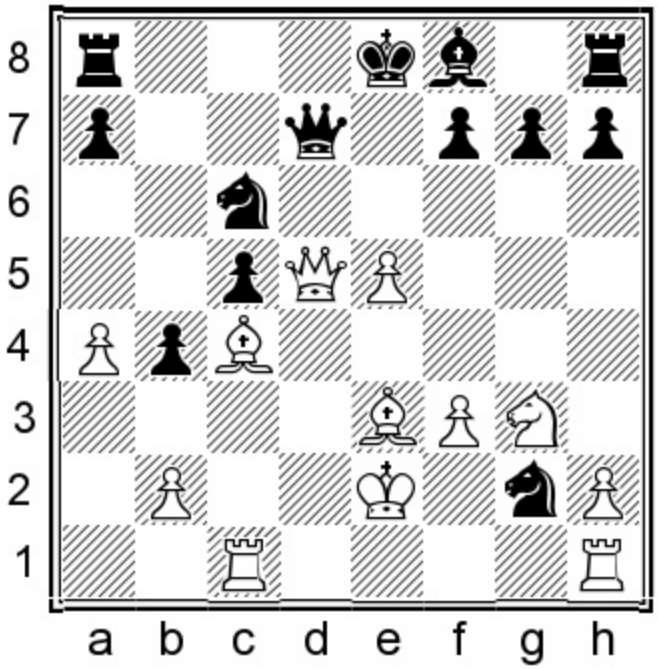
16...♘xd4† 17.♗xd4 ♕xd4 18.♕xd4 cxd4 19.♗b5† ♔d8 20.♖hd1 ♘f4† 21.♔f1 ♘d5 22.♖xd4 ♖c8 23.♗c6⩲ should be defensible, although it feels like Black still has to be slightly careful.

17.d5

What else is there?

17...exd5 18.♕xd5

Black has a number of acceptable continuations.



18...♘xe3

18...0-0-0 19.♕xd7† ♖xd7 20.♗b5 ♘xe3 21.♗xc6 ♖c7 22.♗e4 ♘g2 is also roughly equal.

18...♕xd5 19.♗xd5 ♖c8 20.♗xc6† ♖xc6 21.♗d2 ♘h4 22.♗xb4 f6 is fine too.

19.♔xe3 ♕xd5 20.♗xd5 ♖c8 21.♔e4 g6 22.f4 ♗e7⩲

White has enough compensation for the pawn, but Black is in no great danger.

GAME 10

Stefan Brandner – Alexander Riazantsev

Rogaska Slatina 2011

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1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.c4 e6 5.♘c3 ♗b4!?

An interesting positional solution.

6.♕b3

6.♘f3 ♘e7 7.♕b3 a5 transposes to the game.

6.a3 is slow, and 6...♗xc3† 7.bxc3 ♘e7 8.♘f3 c5!N gives Black promising play.

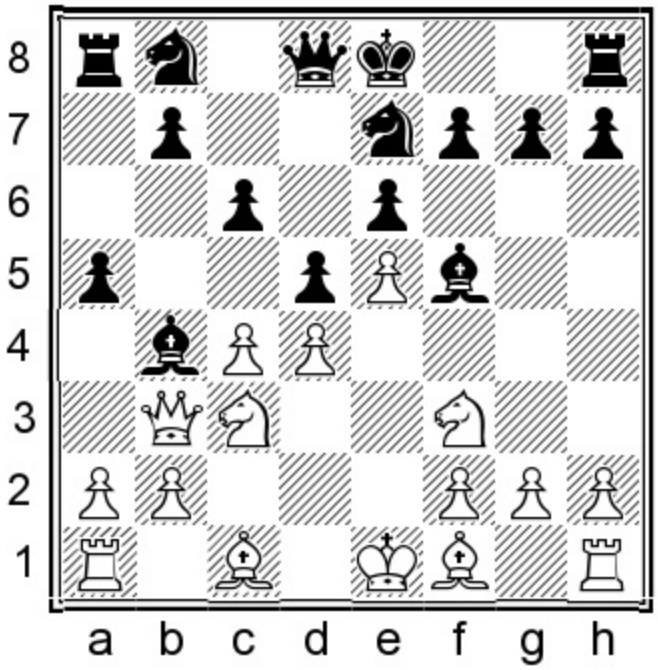
6...a5

6...♕a5!? is also possible.

7.♘f3

On 7.a3 Black plays 7...dxc4 8.♗xc4 ♗xc3† like in the game.

7...♘e7



8.a3

A few years later Riazantsev faced a different approach:

8.♗g5 dxc4

8...h6!?

9.♗xc4 h6 10.♗h4?!

Fedoseev – Riazantsev, Kaliningrad 2015.

10.♗d2 should be preferred, although 10...0-0 is fine for Black.

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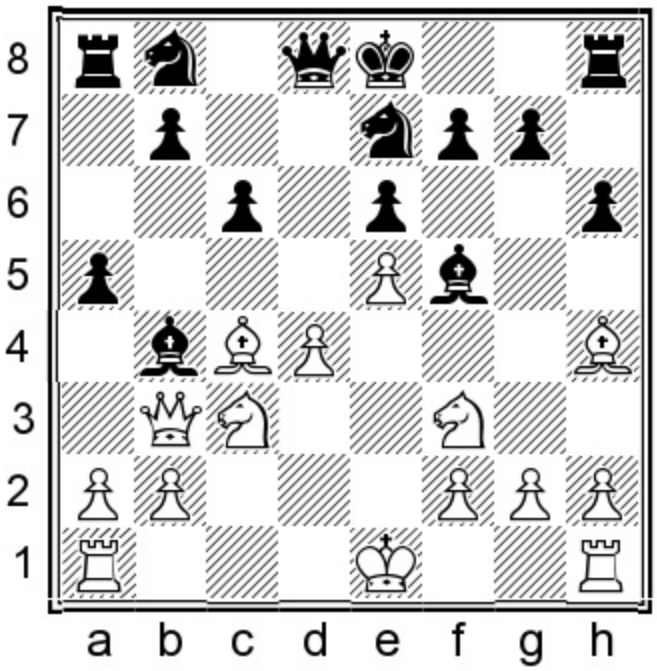
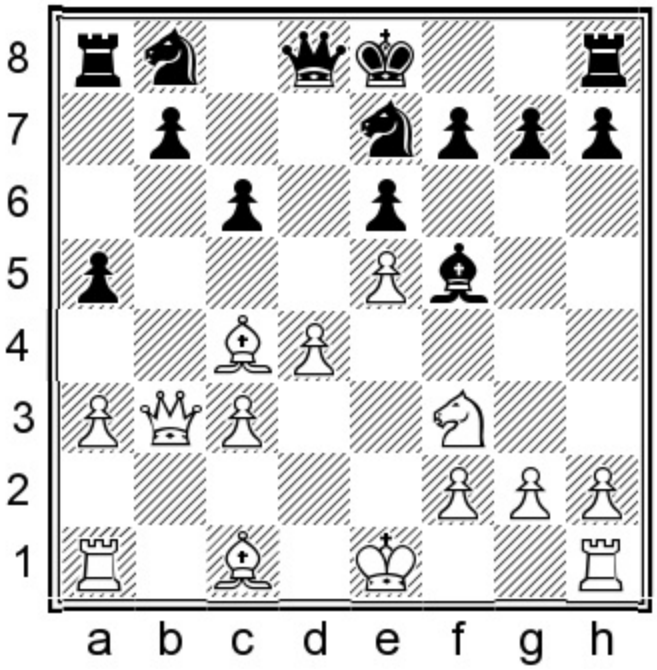


After the text move, Bologan shows that Black is much better:
10...b5!N 11.♗e2 g5 12.♗g3 ♘d5
Black is tremendously active and White is in trouble.

8...dxc4 9.♗xc4 ♗xc3† 10.bxc3

10.♕xc3 ♘d7 is also comfortable for Black, who has good play on the light squares.

White hopes to regroup and dominate the centre with an eventual c3-c4, but Black immediately shatters that dream.



10...b5! 11.♗e2 a4! 12.♕b2 ♘d7

Black continues his deep light-square strategy. The knight is heading for b6, where it controls

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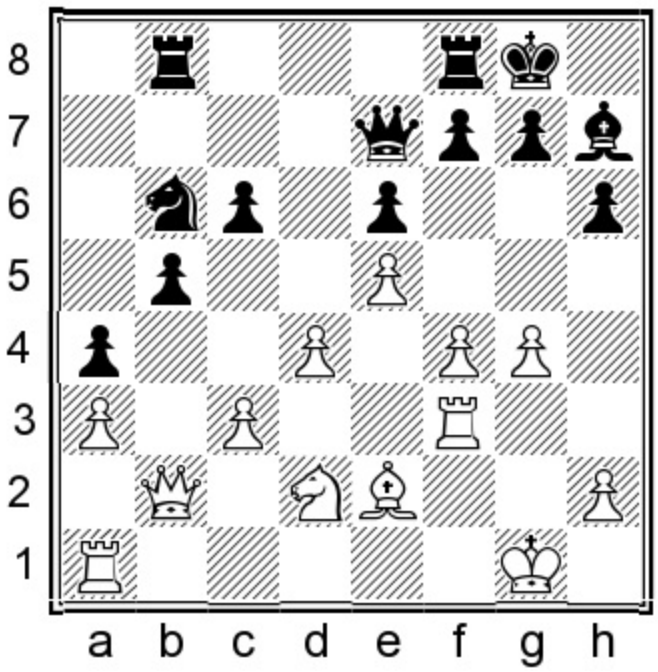
both c4 and d5.

13.♗g5 ♘b6 14.0-0 h6 15.♗xe7 ♕xe7 16.♘d2 0-0

Black is slightly better positionally speaking, so White tries to change the course of the game by launching an offensive on the kingside. Unfortunately for him, it only makes matters worse.

17.f4?! ♖ab8 18.g4?! ♗h7 19.♖f3

19.f5? is premature in view of: 19...exf5 20.gxf5 ♕g5† 21.♔h1 ♗xf5



19...f5!

A typical counter.

20.exf6 ♕xf6 21.♖af1 ♘d5

White has no attack, and his pawn advances have left a serious weakness on f4, along with holes everywhere in his position. For instance, the black queen will be happy on h4.

22.f5?!

Desperation.

22...exf5 23.gxf5 ♗xf5!

Simply winning.

24.♘e4

24.♖xf5 ♕g6† does the trick.

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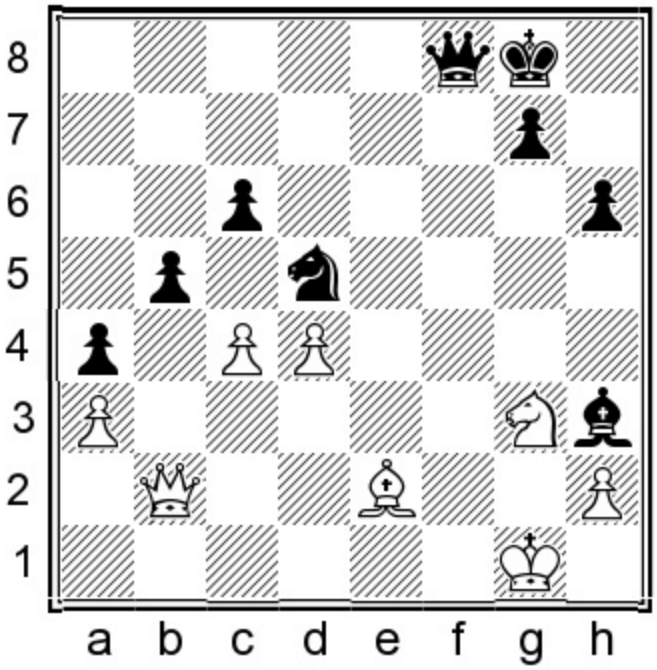
24...♕e7 25.♘g3

25.♖xf5 ♖xf5 26.♖xf5 ♕xe4 is hopeless for White.

25...♗h3 26.♖xf8† ♖xf8 27.♖xf8† ♕xf8 28.c4



28...♕f4! 29.♗f1

29.cxd5 ♕e3† 30.♔h1 ♕f2 threatens mate, and 31.♗f1 ♕xb2 picks up the queen.

29...♗xf1 30.cxd5

30.♘xf1 bxc4–+

30...♗h3

White resigned. If 31.dxc6 then 31...b4! exploits the overloaded queen, with an easy win.

0–1

E) 4.h4 h5

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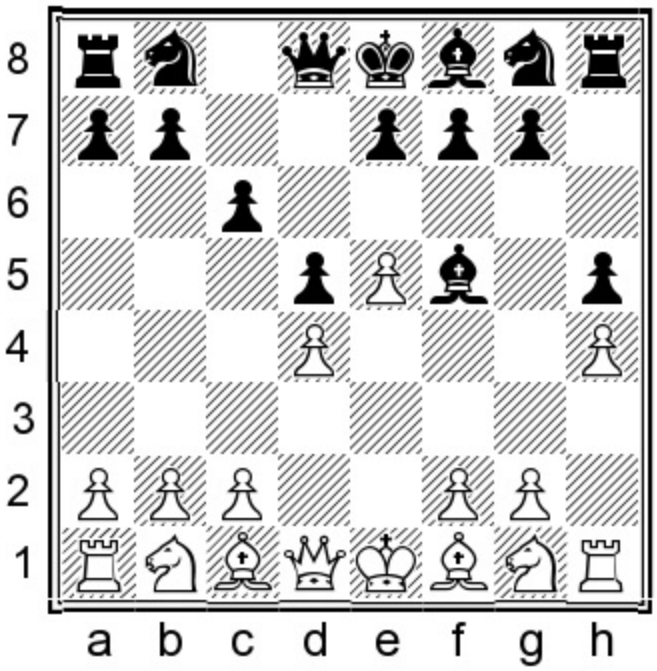
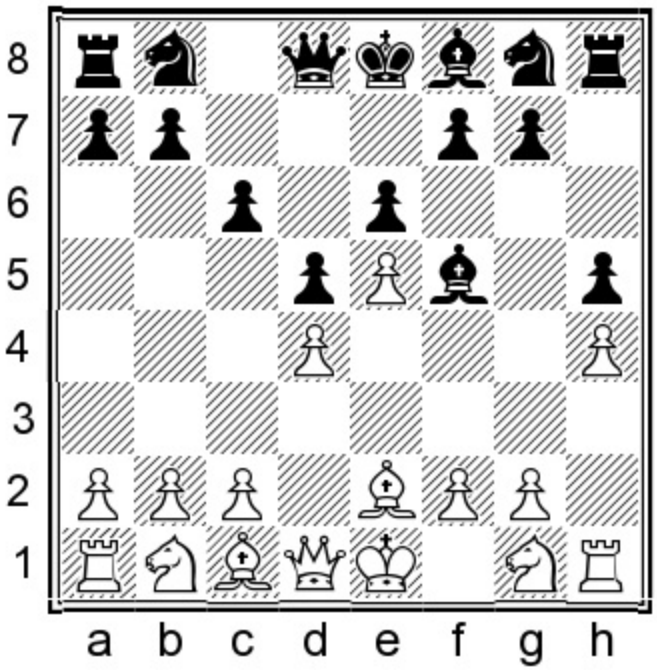


5.♗d3 has been analysed in the previous chapter, leaving **E1)** 5.♗g5!? and **E2)** 5.c4 the two main options to discuss.
Apart from those moves, there are a few other possibilities worth checking.

5.♘e2 e6 6.♘g3 ♗g6 has been covered in variation C under the move order 4.♘e2 e6 5.♘g3 ♗g6 6.h4 h5 – see page 177 for the continuation.

5.♗e2 is nothing to worry about: 5...e6



6.♘f3 (6.♗xh5? c5 gives Black too much activity) 6...♗g4!? 7.♘bd2 (7.♘g5 occurred in Costa – Oei, Lisbon 2001, when 7...♘h6N followed by ...c5 would have given Black promising play) 7...♘h6 8.c3 ♘f5 9.g3 ♗e7

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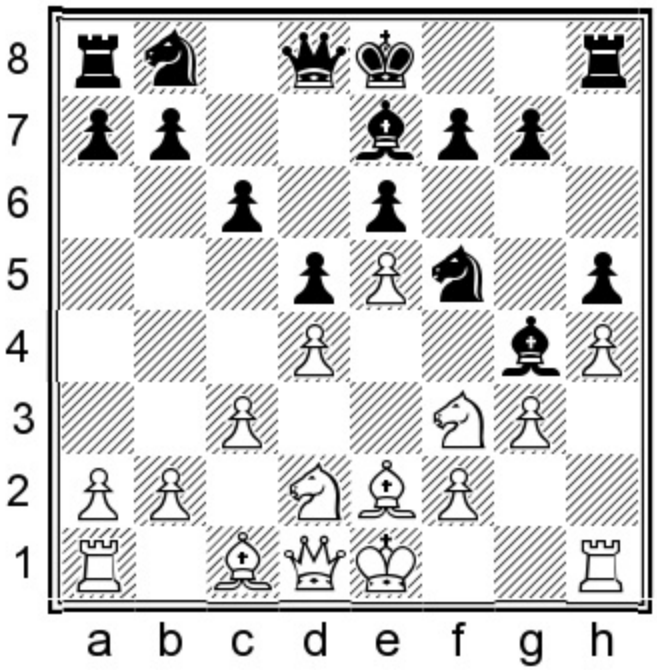
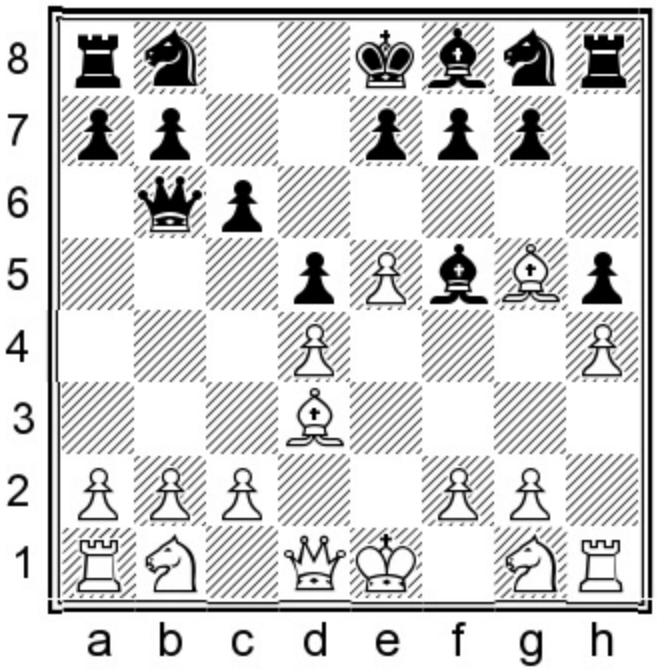


Black was doing fine in Weetik – Tkachenko, Novoshachtinsk 2007. White's best idea looks to be 10.♘b3!?N to restrain the ...c5 break, hoping to develop a bind with a4-a5, but 10...b6 11.a4 c5⇄ followed by ...♘c6 looks good enough.

E1) 5.♗g5!? ♕b6 6.♗d3

6.b3 is playable but feeble, and 6...e6 7.c3 c5⇄ gives Black easy play.

This variation became fashionable some years ago due to a particularly venomous trap, but nowadays the antidote is well known.



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6...♕xd4!

6...♗xd3 7.♕xd3 ♕xb2? (7...e6 is safer, but 8.♘d2 reaches a line of the 5.♗d3 variation which falls outside our repertoire) 8.e6!! is the evil trick which must be avoided.

7.♘f3

Since 7.♗xf5? ♕xe5† wins back the piece while collecting a second extra pawn, White has no choice but to play a speculative gambit.

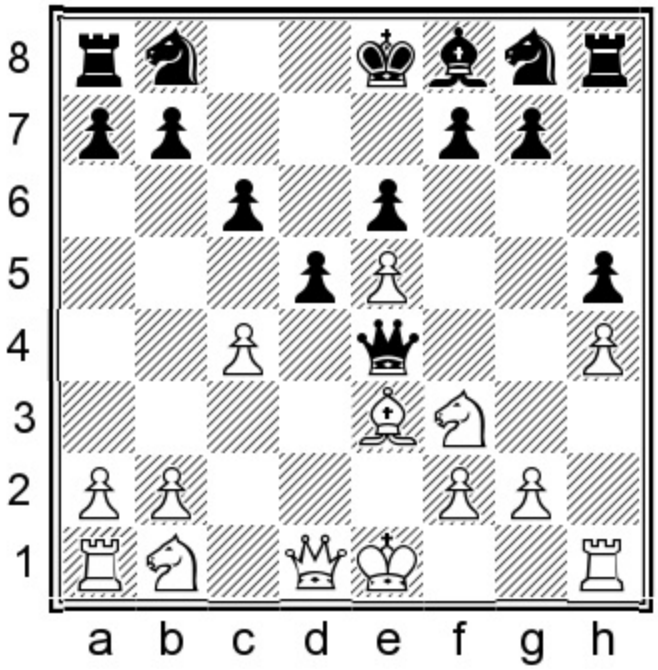
7...♕g4

Don't even think about getting greedy with 7...♕xb2? 8.♗xf5 ♕xa1 9.e6 when White's attack is too dangerous.

8.♗xf5 ♕xf5 9.c4

9.0-0 f6! is annoying for White, so the text move seems like his best try.

9...♕e4† 10.♗e3 e6



11.♘bd2

11.cxd5?! ♕xd5! (11...♗b4† 12.♘c3 cxd5∓ is also pretty good) 12.♕c2 ♘a6 13.a3 ♘c5 14.♘c3 ♕d3∓ leaves White a pawn down for virtually nothing.

11...♕d3!? 12.cxd5N

This seems as good a try as any.

12.♖c1 was played in Francisco – Vigorito, Charlotte 2017.

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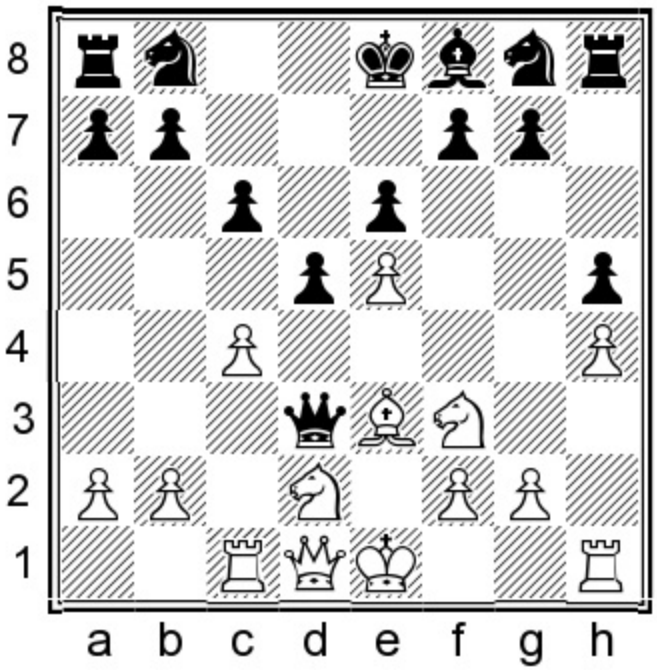
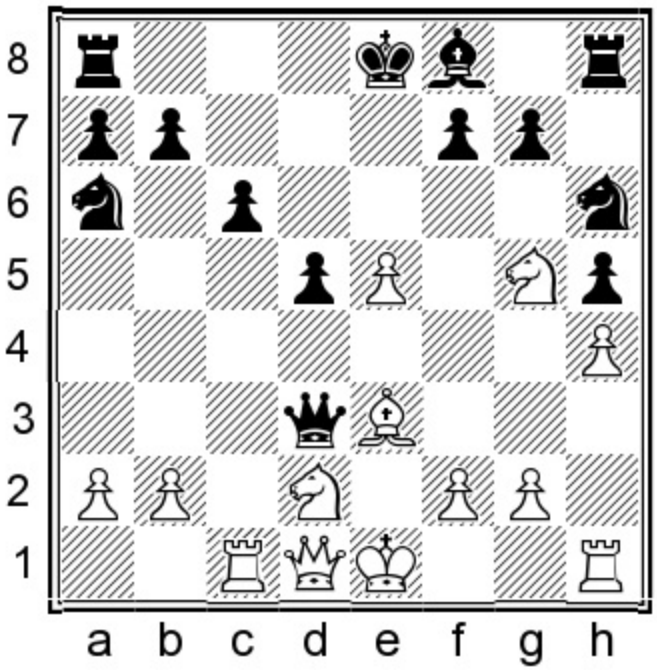


I suggest 12...♗b4!N and after something like 13.cxd5 exd5 14.a3 ♗xd2† 15.♗xd2 ♘e7 16.♖c3 ♕e4† 17.♖e3 ♕g4∓ White will be hard pressed to prove his compensation.

12...exd5 13.♘g5 ♘a6 14.♖c1 ♘h6

14...f6!? could be considered, but the text move is natural and good.



15.♕xh5 ♕f5 16.0-0 ♕g4 17.♕xg4 ♘xg4

Black is at least equal and White has some issues with his vulnerable bishop and e5- and h4-pawns.

E2) 5.c4 e6

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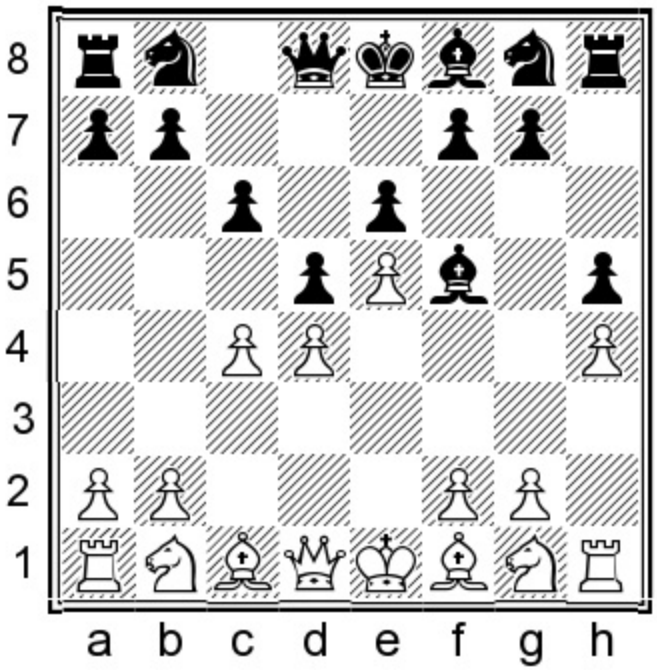
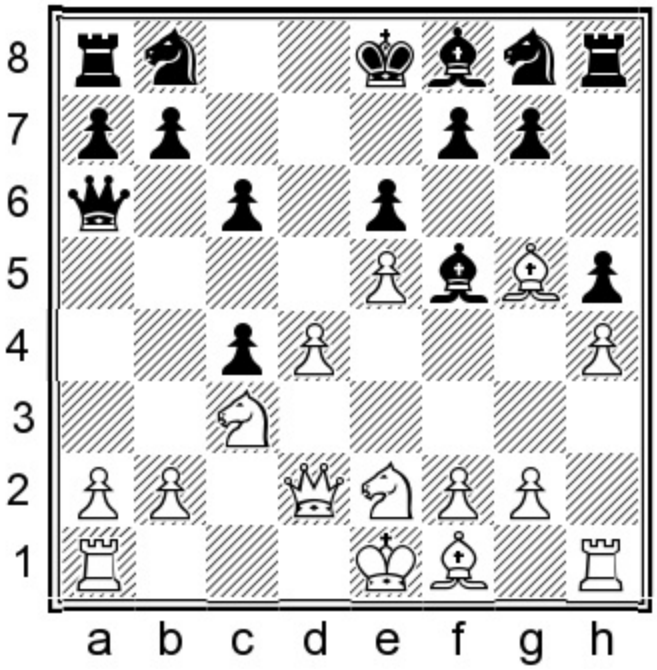
This can obviously be compared with 4.c4. The presence of the pawns on h4 and h5 brings pros and cons for both sides. The bishop on f5 is safer now, but White has the g5-square for his pieces.



6.♘c3

The immediate 6.♗g5 seems premature due to: 6...♕b6! 7.♕d2 dxc4 8.♘c3 (8.♗xc4? ♗xb1!–+ is a useful trick to know, threatening to win the queen with ...♗b4.) 8...♕a6! This method of protecting the pawn is quite annoying for White. 9.♘ge2 (9.b3 b5 10.bxc4 bxc4 is no problem for Black.)



This position has arisen in a few games, but no one found 9...f6!N 10.exf6 gxf6 11.♗f4 ♘d7 when Black is better.

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6...♘e7

Riazantsev has played 6...♗b4!? just like in the analogous position after 4.c4. If you like the look of Black's position from Game 10, you can certainly consider it here as well.

After this natural developing move, White generally chooses between **E21)** 7.♗g5 and **E22)** 7.♘ge2.

E21) 7.♗g5 ♕b6!

Stepping out of the pin.

The natural 7...dxc4 8.♗xc4 ♘d7 has been played a lot and is of course a decent alternative.

8.♕d2 ♘d7 9.♘f3

9.♘ge2 dxc4 10.♘g3 ♗g6 transposes to 10.♕d2 dxc4! under the 7.♘ge2 variation.

9.c5 is premature in view of 9...♕c7 10.b4 f6! 11.exf6 gxf6 12.♗e3 e5∓ as seen in Jayakumaar – Devansh, Jammu 2015.

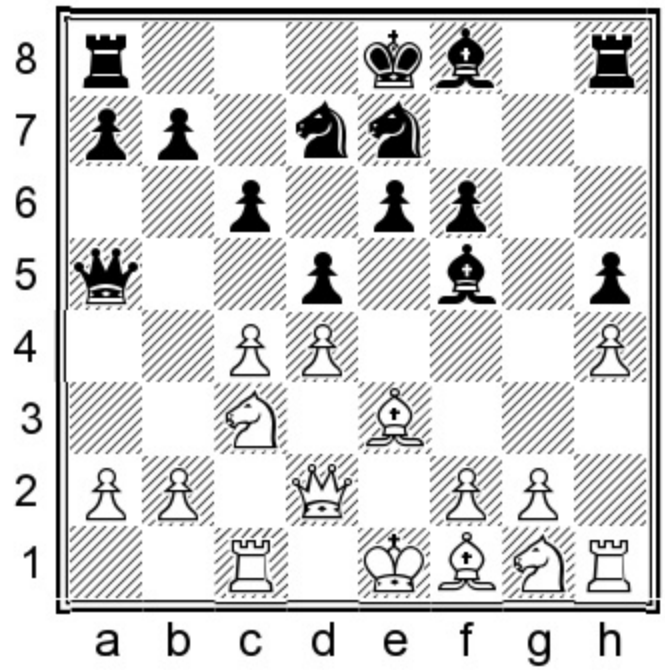
9.♖c1

This is well met by:

9...f6! 10.exf6 gxf6 11.♗e3 ♕a5

11...0-0-0!?N and 11...dxc4!?N deserve attention as well.

The text move gives Black promising play. A good example continued:



12.♘h3

12.cxd5 ♘xd5 13.♘xd5 ♕xd5∓

12...♘b6

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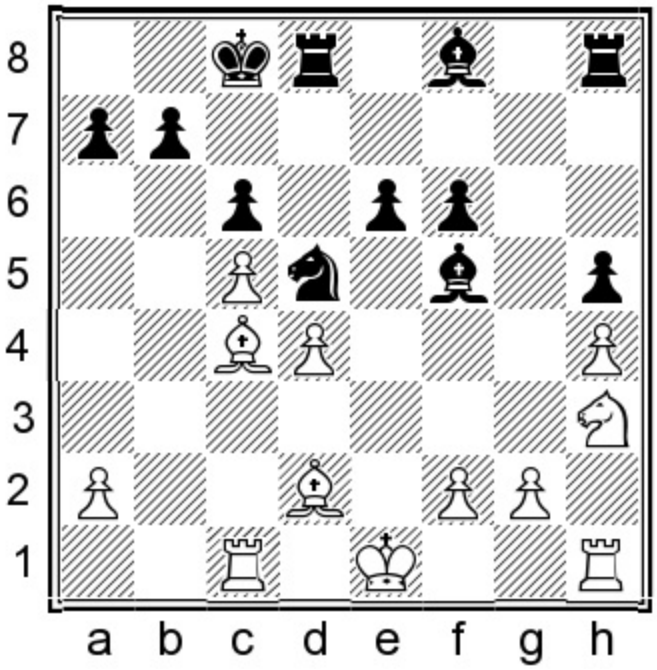
12...dxc4 13.♗xc4 ♘g6∓ is also good.

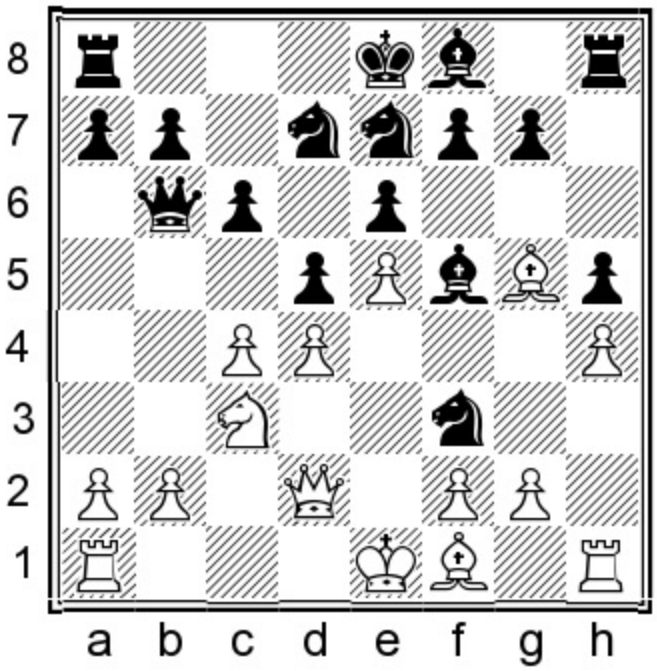
13.b3

13.c5 ♘d7∓

13...dxc4 14.bxc4 0-0-0 15.c5 ♘bd5 16.♘xd5 ♕xd2† 17.♗xd2 ♘xd5 18.♗c4



This happened in Rachels – Seirawan, Durango 1992, and now 18...b5!N would have given Black a clear advantage.



9...f6!

A key move, fighting for the centre.

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10.♗f4

This has yet to be tested in human play but it is the engine favourite.

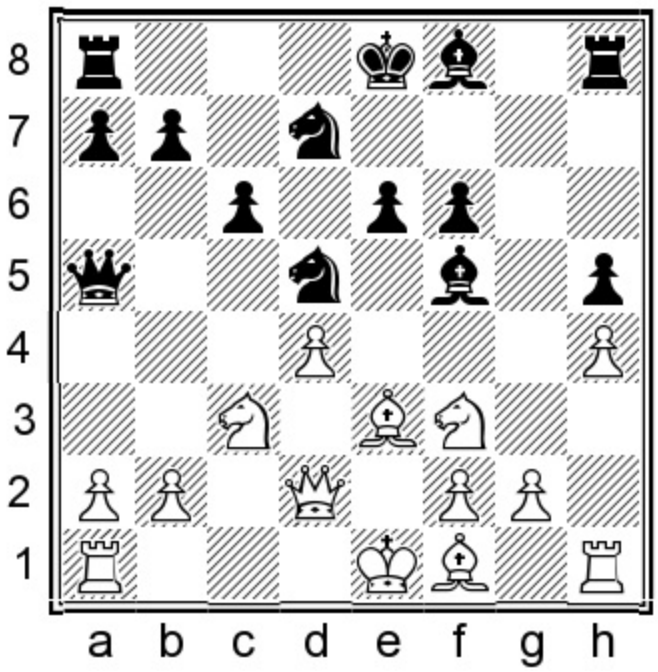
10.exf6 gxf6

This gives Black easy play, for instance:

11.♗e3

11.♗f4 should be met by 11...♕a5 to vacate the b6-square, and after 12.c5 (12.a3 dxc4 13.♗xc4 ♘b6∓) 12...♘g6 (12...♗g7 is also strong) 13.♗e3 e5 Black has an excellent game.

11...♕a5 12.cxd5 ♘xd5∓



Black has clearly won the opening battle, and after:

13.♘xd5 ♕xd5 14.♗d3 ♖g8! 15.♗xf5 ♕xf5 16.0-0-0 ♖xg2

He was already winning in Saurabh – Sargissian, Sharjah 2019.

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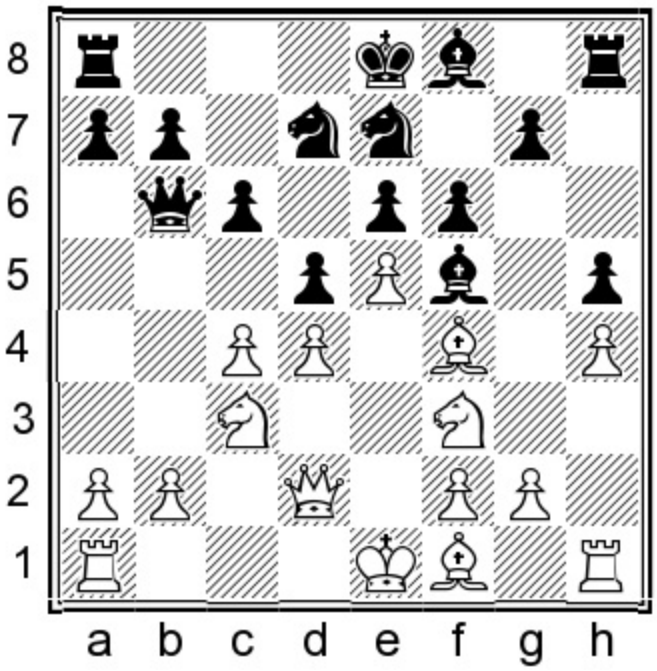

10...♘g6 11.♗e3

11.♗g3 is a speculative sacrifice, and after 11...fxe5 12.cxd5 cxd5 13.♗b5!? (13.dxe5 ♗b4∓) 13...e4 14.♘g5 ♖d8 White does not have enough for the pawn.

11...fxe5

11...dxc4!? 12.♗xc4 0-0-0∞ can also be considered.

12.cxd5

12.dxe5? ♗c5∓

12...exd5 13.dxe5 ♗c5 14.♘d4!

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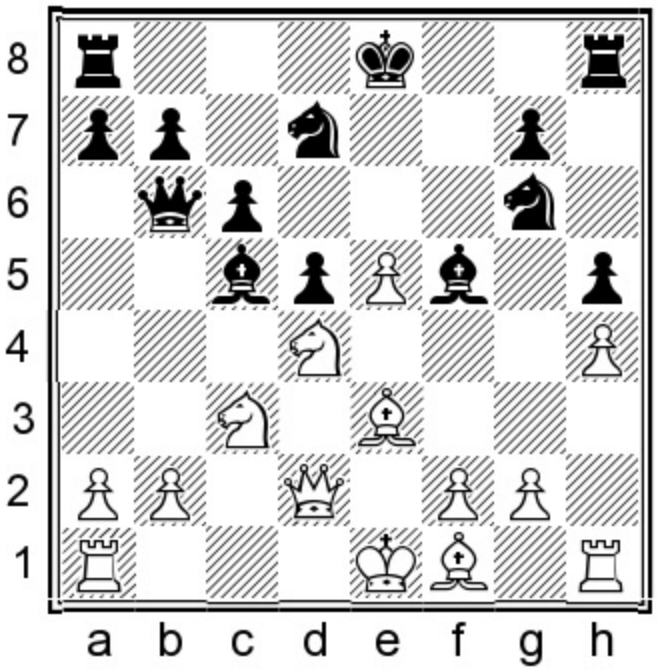

Without this move, White would simply be worse.

14...♗xd4! 15.♗xd4 ♕b4

Black has a good structure and an active bishop.

16.f4

16.a3 ♕e7 17.f4 ♘xh4 18.0-0-0 ♘g6 might give White just enough play for the pawn, but certainly no advantage.

16...0-0

Black is fine, although the position has been heavily debated in engine games, so it is interesting to see a little more.

17.g3

White does not have time to attack h5 with 17.♗e2? because of 17...c5! when his position falls apart.

17.a3?! ♕b3 only helps Black.

17...♗g4 18.♘e2 ♕e7 19.♗g2

19.0-0-0 c5⇄

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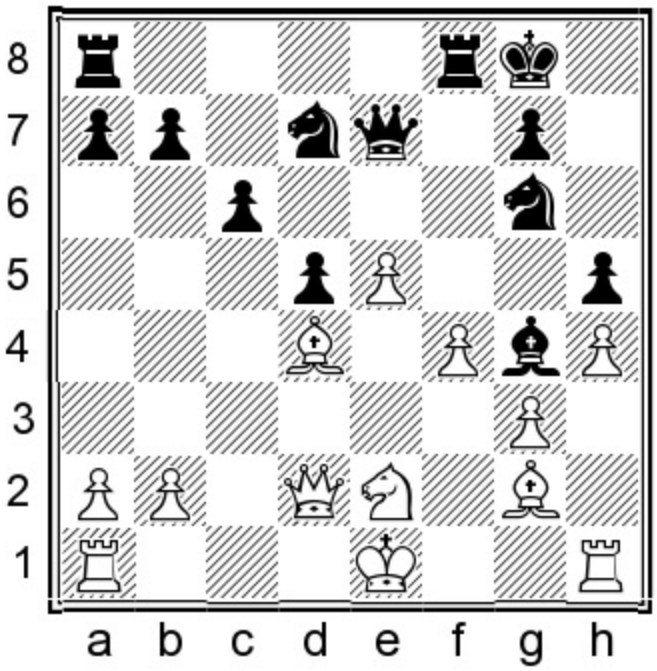

19...♘dxe5! 20.fxe5 ♘xe5∓

Black has fantastic play for the piece, and White has to follow a narrow path to save the game.

21.♕e3 ♖ae8 22.0-0-0

White has no other move.

22.♗xe5? ♕xe5 23.♕xe5 ♖xe5 24.♗f1 ♖xf1†! 25.♔xf1 ♖xe2–+ gives Black a winning endgame.

22.♘f4? is refuted by: 22...♕b4†! 23.♗c3 (23.♕c3 ♕xd4! 24.♕xd4 ♘f3† 25.♔f2 ♘xd4–+) 23...♘f3† 24.♔f2 ♕c4! 25.♕d3 ♖xf4 26.♕xc4 ♖xc4–+

22...♕c7

It is hard for White to escape the threats along the e-file, but he can maintain some kind of equilibrium by returning the extra piece.

23.♖df1 ♘f7 24.♕c3 ♗xe2 25.♖f4 ♘d6 26.♗xd5† ♔h8 27.♖xf8† ♖xf8

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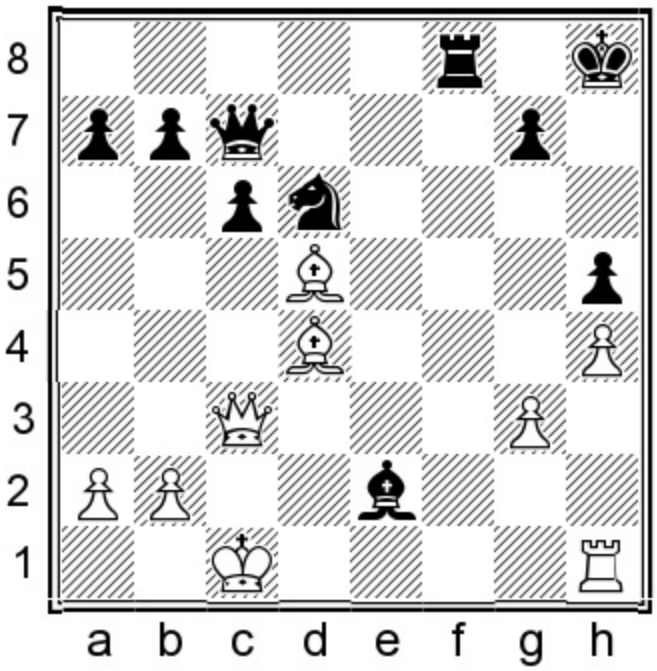
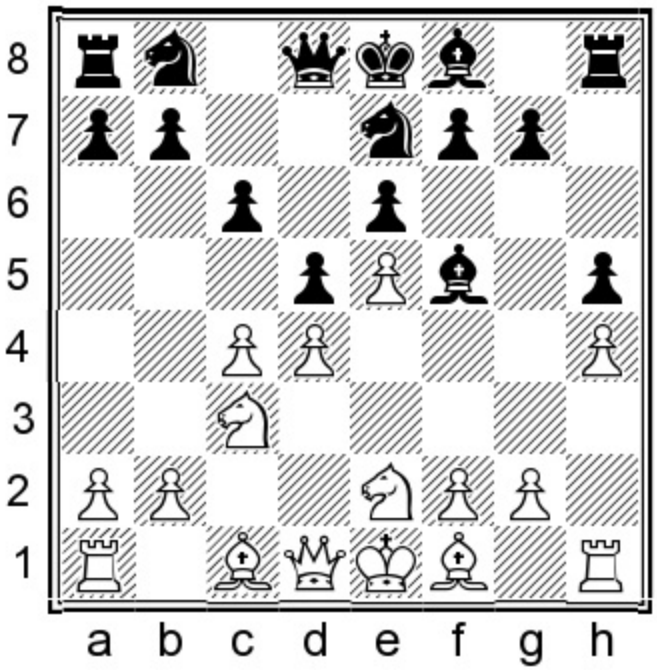


28.♗b3⩲

White has compensation for the pawn due to his strong dark-squared bishop, but Black is solid enough and can hope to exploit his material advantage in an endgame.

E22) 7.♘ge2



This is the modern main line.

7...♘d7

Black can also open the position with 7...dxc4 8.♘g3 ♘d7 9.♗xc4 ♕b6 10.0-0 0-0-0⇄ but it looks somewhat riskier.

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8.♘g3 ♗g6 9.♗g5

This is the most active choice.

9.♗e3

This is playable but not too dangerous.

9...♕b6

This is fine, despite the alignment of queen and bishop.

9...dxc4 is also playable, but in general I am not so keen on taking on c4 this early. Often it increases in strength a move or two later, and sometimes we won't exchange at all. There is no reason to reveal your plans to your opponent so soon.

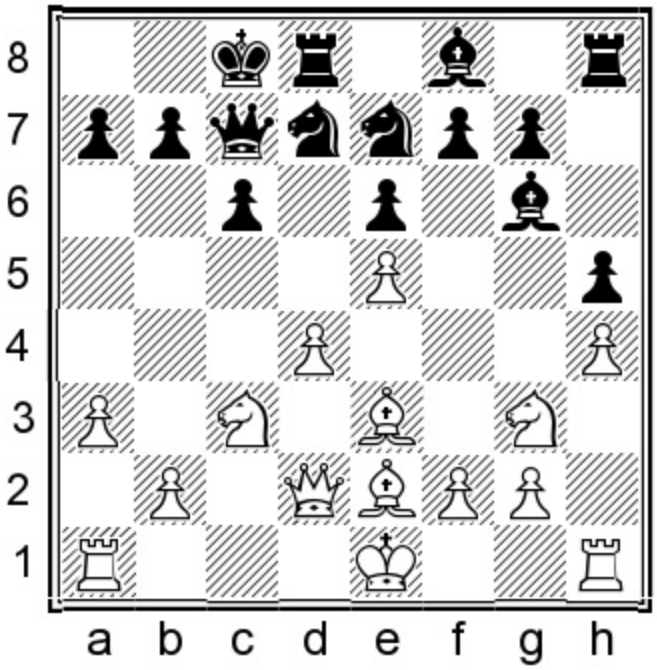
10.♕d2 dxc4 11.♗xc4 0-0-0

11...♘d5 is possible although it gives White the option of changing the structure with 12.♗xd5!? cxd5 when the position looks pretty equal, but extra space is always nice.

12.a3

In the event of 12.♕e2 I recommend: 12...♘d5!N (12...♕c7 13.0-0 ♘b6 14.♗b3 ♔b8 has been played in an email game, leading to a typical unclear position with chances for both sides.) 13.♗xd5 cxd5 14.♖c1 ♔b8 When Black is fine, having a slightly improved version of the 11...♘d5 line noted above.

12...♕c7 13.♗e2



This occurred in another correspondence game, and now most logical looks:

13...f6!?N 14.exf6 gxf6⇄

In quite a lot of games, White has opted to clarify the central structure with:

9.cxd5

But Black should be fine after:

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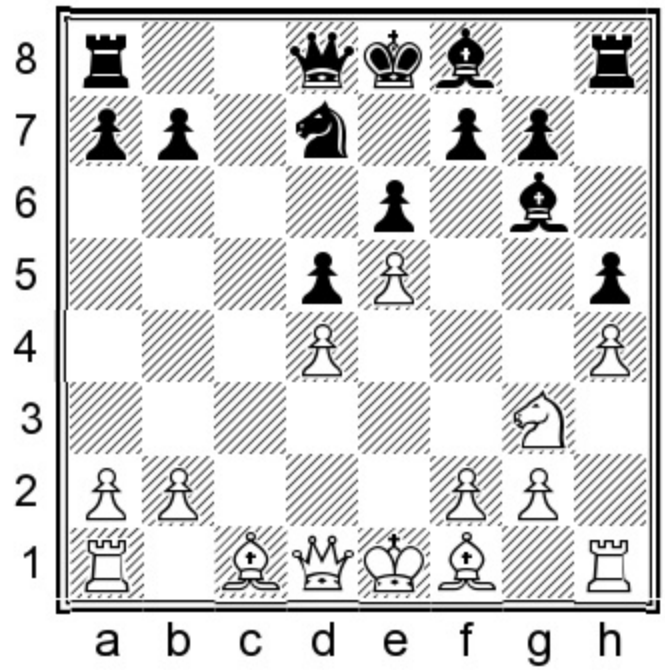
9...♘xd5!

Having less space, it makes sense to exchange a pair of knights, rather than playing 9...cxd5 10.♗g5 ♕b6 11.♗b5 ♘c6 12.0-0± when White had the freer game in Vachier-Lagrave – L'Ami, Reykjavik 2013.

10.♘xd5

10.♗e2 has been played several times but 10...♕a5 11.♗d2 0-0-0! was good for Black in Vachier-Lagrave – Vitiugov, Paris/St Petersburg 2013.

10...cxd5



White has scored surprisingly well from here, but Black should have little to fear.

11.♗d2!?

Going for the pawn on h5 gives White nothing: 11.♗e2 ♖c8 12.♗xh5 ♗c2!? (12...♗xh5 13.♘xh5 g6 14.♘f4 ♖xh4=) 13.♕d2N (White was successful with 13.♕e2 in Bodnaruk – Girya, Kazan 2014, but 13...♕b6! 14.♗e3 ♕xb2 15.0-0 ♗a3↑ would have given Black the better game.) 13...g6 (13...a6!?∞ planning ...♘b8-c6 with pressure on d4 is also interesting.) 14.♗e2 ♖xh4= Black has no problems.

11...♖c8!

11...♗e7 12.♗e2 gave White a slight initiative in Zherebukh – Eljanov, Khanty-Mansiysk 2011.

12.♖c1

12.♗e2 is met by 12...♗c2 and Black is at least equal.

12...♖xc1 13.♕xc1 a6 14.♗e2

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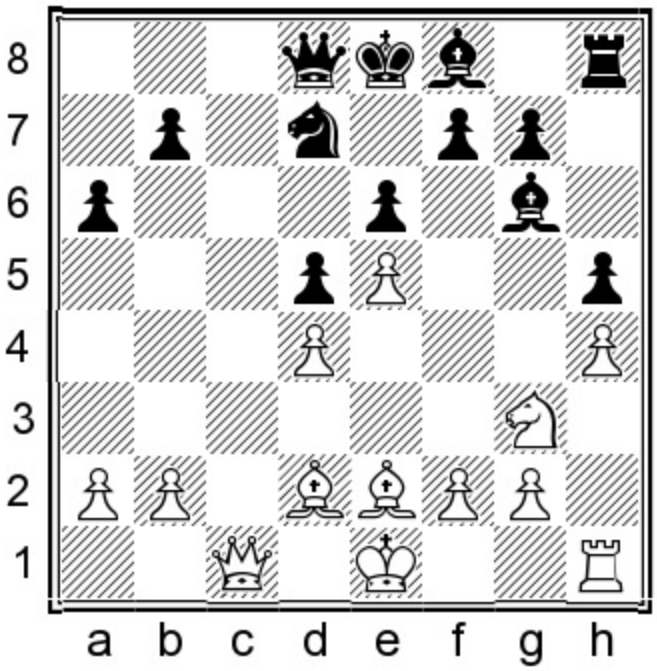

14...♗e7

The regrouping 14...♘b8!?N 15.♕d1 ♘c6 is also fine. 16.♗c3 The position is balanced, but there are lots of possibilities:

a) 16...♗b4!?N 17.♗xh5 ♗xh5 18.♘xh5 ♕a5 19.♖h3 ♕xa2 seems unnecessarily complicated, although it's equal according to the computer.

b) 16...♗e7 17.♘xh5 ♗xh5 18.♗xh5 g6 19.♗e2 ♖xh4 20.♖xh4 ♗xh4= White has the bishop pair but that's all; Black is solid and has no real problems.

c) I rather like 16...♔d7!?N 17.♘xh5 ♗xh5 18.♗xh5 g6 19.♗f3 ♖xh4 when White's bishop pair is not worth much and Black's pieces are nice and active.

15.♕d1 ♘b8 16.♗xh5 ♗xh5 17.♘xh5 g6

This was agreed drawn in a correspondence game. A possible continuation could be:

18.♘f6† ♗xf6 19.exf6 ♕xf6 20.♕g4 ♘c6 21.♗g5 ♕f5 22.♕xf5 exf5

22...gxf5!? 23.♖h3 0-0 is also possible.

23.♔d2 ♔d7=

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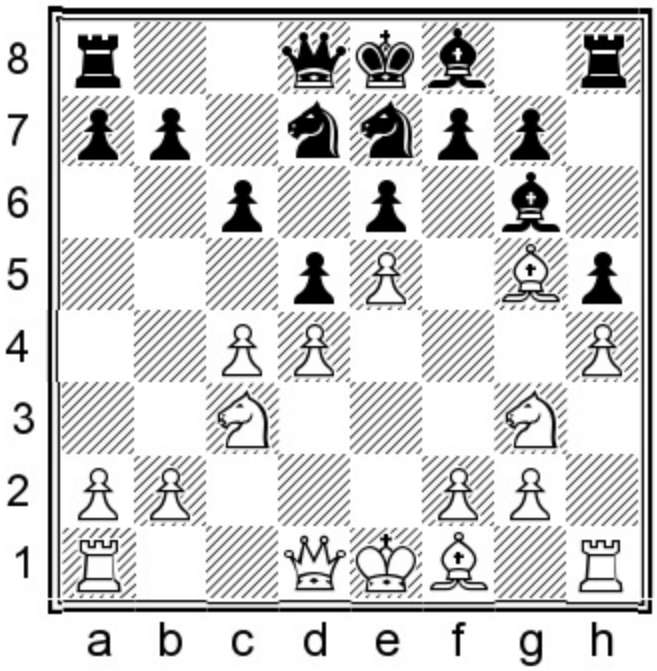

9...♕b6 10.♖c1!?

This pawn sacrifice is a fresh and interesting try.

10.♕d2

This has been the most popular choice but the problem is:

10...dxc4!

Opening the position while White is still underdeveloped.

11.♗xc4

11.♘ge4 ♘d5 was also pleasant for Black in Ashwin – Paragua, Ho Chi Minh City 2013.

11...0-0-0!

Threatening to take on e5.

12.♘a4

12.♗e3 ♕b4 13.♕e2 ♘b6 14.♗b3 ♘ed5 15.♖c1 ♗e7∓ was great for Black in Ruiz Castillo – Roiz, Rockville 2015.

12.♕e3 has been the most popular choice, but after the blunt 12...♕xb2! 13.0-0 ♘b6 14.♗b3 ♘ed5 15.♘xd5 ♘xd5 16.♕f3 ♖d7∓ White had no real compensation for the pawn in Gausel – K. Berg, Oslo 1987.

12...♕c7 13.♖c1

This gives us a few tempting ideas:

13...♘xe5

13...a6!? is a clever waiting move, highlighting the fact that it is not easy to prevent ...♘xe5 anyway. My line continues: 14.0-0 ♘xe5 15.b3 ♘g4 16.♘c5 ♘d5N 17.♗xd8 ♕xd8⩱

14.♗f4 ♘xc4 15.♗xc7 ♘xd2 16.♗xd8

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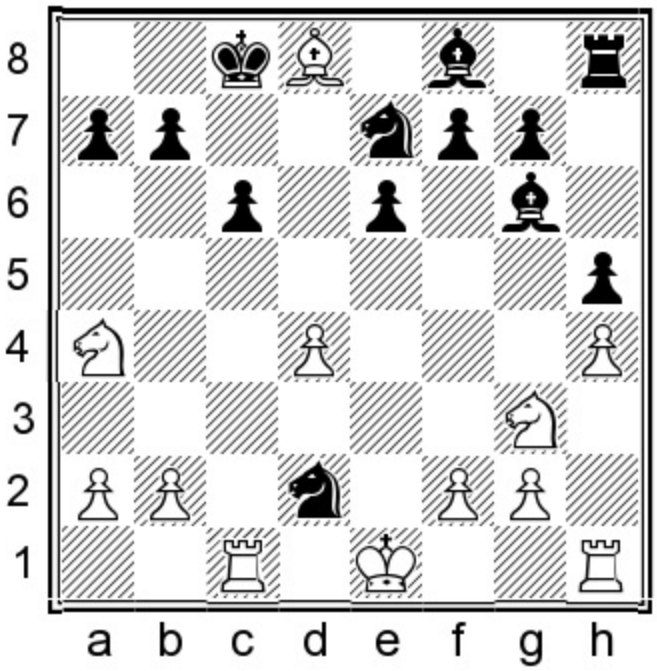

16...♘b3

16...♘f3†N 17.gxf3 ♔xd8♖ is a valid alternative.

17.axb3 ♔xd8♖

Black had a pawn for the exchange, plus the bishop pair and a superior structure in Emanuel – Rodshtein, Israel 2020.

10...dxc4!

Black has done okay with 10...f6 and 10...♕xb2, but the text move is best.

11.♗xc4

I can present an important improvement.

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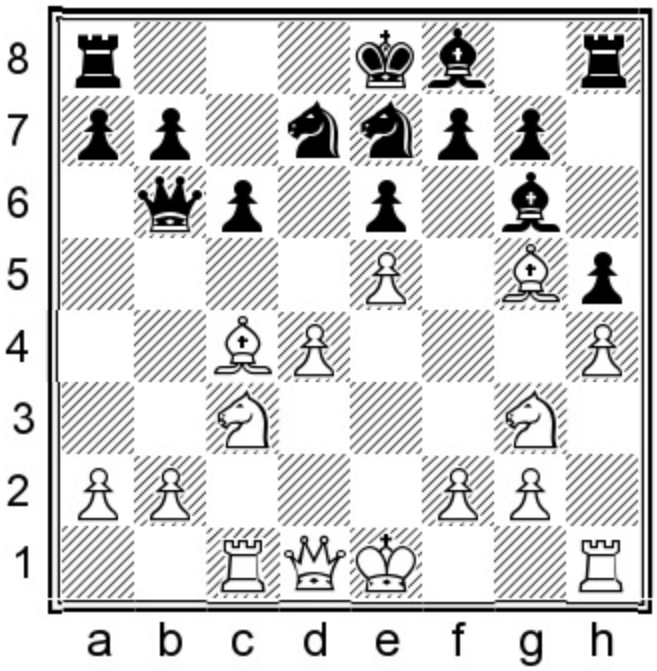

11...♖d8!N

Black centralizes the rook and starts shooting at the enemy centre.

Recent games have mainly focused on 11...♘d5 and 11...♘f5, but the text move is much stronger.

12.♘a4

In the event of 12.♘ge2 I suggest: 12...♗f5!⇄ (12...♘xe5 is met by 13.♘a4! ♕c7 14.♗f4 b5 15.0-0 bxc4 16.♗xe5⩲ with a development advantage for the sacrificed pawn, although Black keeps a playable position after 16...♕c8 or 16...♕b7.) The point of Black's last move is revealed after 13.0-0? ♘xe5 14.♘a4 ♕c7 15.♗f4 ♘7g6! when the vacant g6-square makes all the difference, and 16.♗g3 ♕c8–+ leaves White's position in ruins.

12...♕a5† 13.♗d2 ♕c7

Black has a promising position. My analysis continues:

14.0-0 ♘b6 15.♗a5 ♘f5 16.♘xf5 ♗xf5 17.♖e1 ♗e7 18.g3

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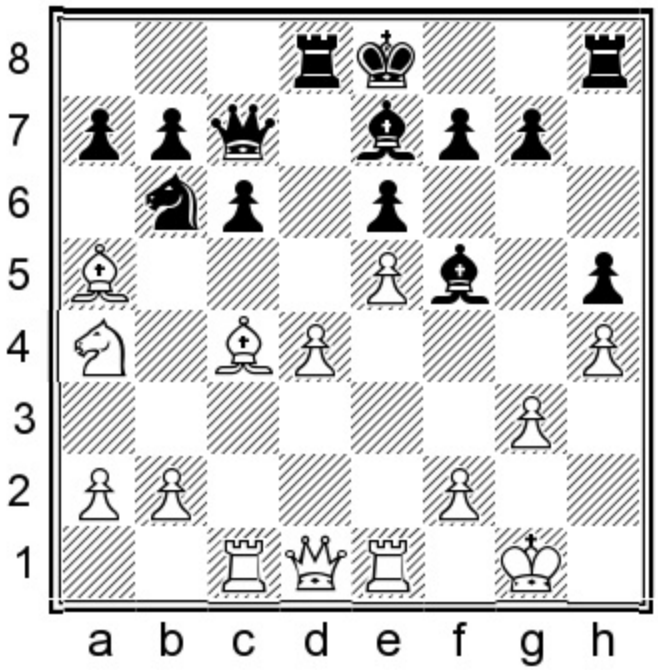

18...0-0⇄

Black intends to double rooks on the d-file, and he can always protect the h-pawn with ...g6.

18...g5!? is not completely correct in my view, but I present it as an option in case you are in the mood for wild complications. A sample line goes: 19.hxg5 ♗xg5 20.♖c3 ♗g4 21.♗e2 ♗xe2 22.♖xe2 h4 23.♖e4 ♖d5 24.♘c5 ♗e7 25.g4 (25.b4!?) 25...♗xc5 26.♖xc5 ♕d7 27.♗xb6 axb6 28.♖c3 c5 29.♖d3 ♔d8 30.♕f3 ♔c7 31.♖c3 ♔b8 32.dxc5 bxc5 33.b4 ♕c7 34.♖xc5 ♖xc5 35.bxc5 ♕xc5 36.♖e3±

19.♕b3?!

Attacking b6 looks strong, but it meets with a tactical refutation.

19...♖xd4! 20.♘xb6 ♗c5!

Even 20...♕b8 would be acceptable, because after 21.♗c3 ♖dd8 22.♘a4 Black wins the piece back with 22...b5.

21.♕c3

21.♗c3? ♖g4 22.♘a4 ♖xg3† wins for Black after: 23.♔f1 (or 23.♔h2 ♗xf2–+) 23...♗h3† 24.♔e2 ♗g4† 25.♔f1 ♖h3! Intending 26.♘xc5 ♗f3 followed by mate on h1.

21...axb6 22.♗xe6! ♗xe6 23.♕xc5 ♕d7

The ending after 23...bxc5 24.♗xc7 is also good for Black, but why not keep the queens on the board when White is lacking any defence on the light squares?

24.♗xb6 ♖d3∓

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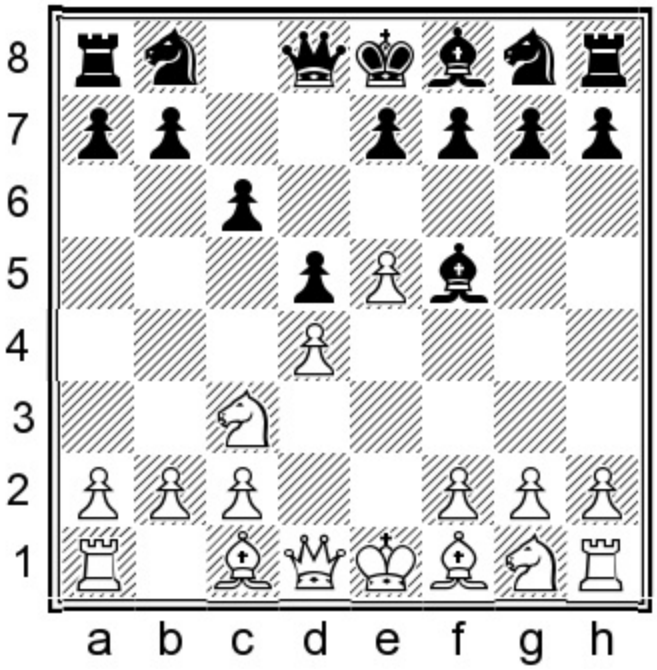
F) 4.♘c3



This move initiates an extremely sharp and entertaining way of combating the Caro-Kann. It leads to double-edged play to put it mildly, and so far White has not been able to destroy the solid black foundation, meaning that the whole approach may be too wild and over-optimistic.

4...e6 5.g4

White's idea is to attack with his g-pawn, and usually the other kingside pawns as well! However, this aggressive approach creates a bunch of holes in his position, which we will look to exploit later.

5...♗g6 6.♘ge2

The immediate 6.h4 h5 gives White nothing. To make his scheme work, he needs to have a knight ready to jump to f4.

6...c5!

Black has tried other moves like 6...♘e7 and 6...f6, but I prefer to strike in the centre at once. The only drawback of the early ...c5 is that it gives the white pieces the use of the b5-square. This should not be a big problem, but I just mention it so that you will remain alert!

After the text move the position is already rather tense. White can try to stabilize his centre with **F1)** 7.♗e3, but the most important option is the aggressive **F2**) 7.h4.

First I will have a brief look at a rare move:

7.♘f4

This was not mentioned in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* and it isn't too important, but you can consider it a little appetizer.

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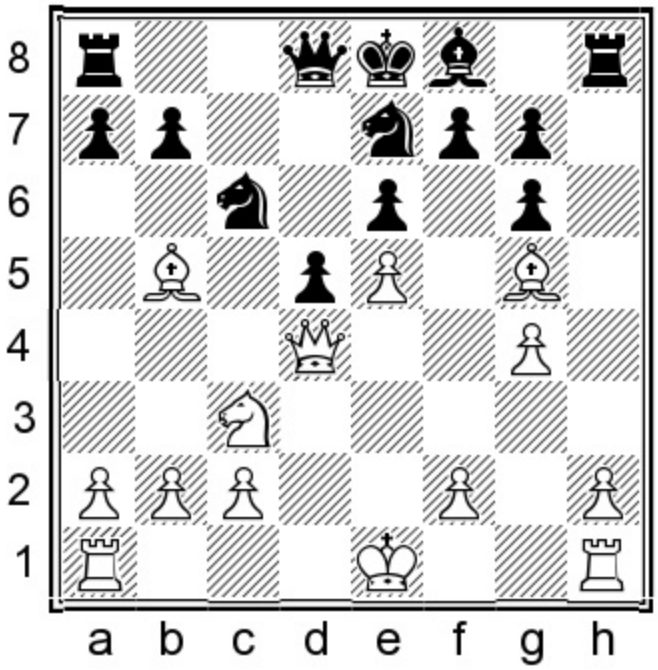
7...♘c6 8.♗b5

8.♘xg6 hxg6 only makes life easier for Black.

8...cxd4

8...♘ge7 is also fine.

9.♘xg6 hxg6 10.♕xd4 ♘ge7 11.♗g5



11...a6!

Both of the black knights are pinned, but this simple move solves the issue by exploiting the hanging white queen.

12.♗xc6†

Or 12.♗xe7 axb5! 13.♗xd8 ♘xd4 14.0-0-0 b4 and Black was winning in Tomcik – Koren, Slovakia 2014.

12...♘xc6 13.♕d2 ♕a5

White can't protect everything.

14.0-0-0 ♗b4 15.a3 ♗xc3 16.♕xc3 ♕xc3 17.bxc3 ♘xe5–+

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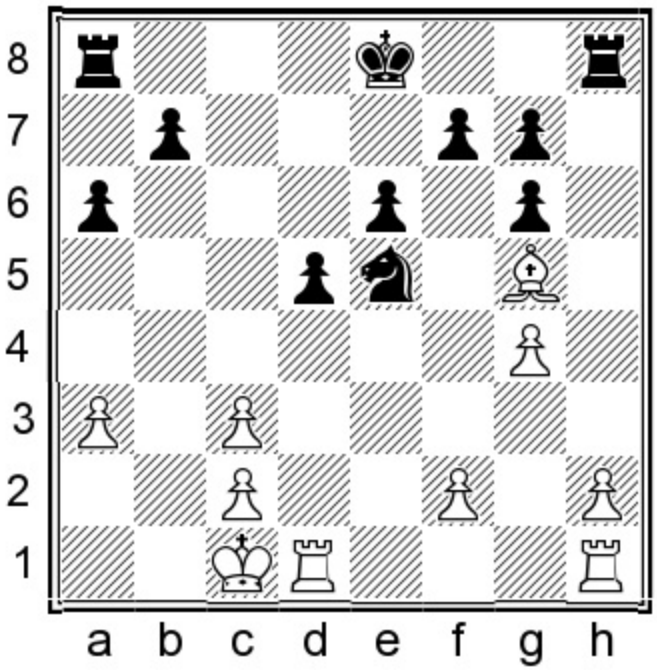
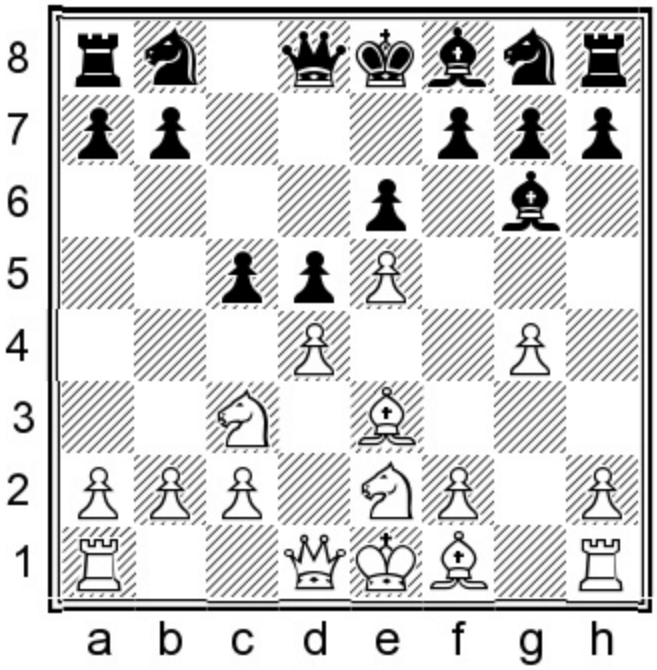


White's position was an utter disaster in Gozdziewicz – Dziuba, Katowice 2017.

F1) 7.♗e3



7...h5!?

This almost looks as if Black made a 'pre-move' expecting 7.h4, but I propose it here as a direct attempt to ruin White's pawn structure. Black has other good options:

7...♘c6 8.dxc5 h5!? was my recommendation in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* and it's still good, but today I am recommending the same idea a move earlier.

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7...♘e7!? is a rare but interesting move which could be investigated in more detail.

8.♘f4

After 8.dxc5 hxg4 it is mission accomplished!

8...♗h7!

This move is the deep point behind the ...h5 adventure. Black is willing to sacrifice the rook's pawn to gain time. If White takes the bait, his knight will be misplaced and unable to help with the defence of the centre.

9.dxc5

9.♘xh5 ♘c6 10.♗b5 has been played a few times, and now 10...♘ge7!N followed by ...a6 is promising for Black.

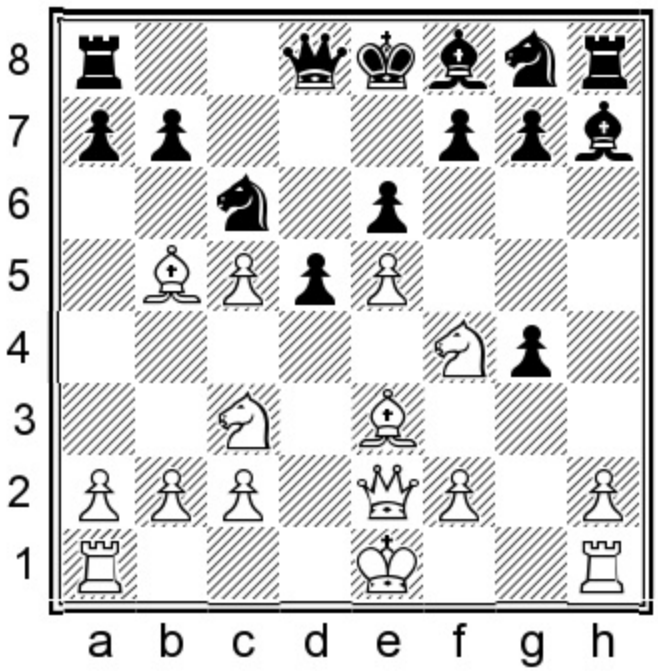
9...hxg4

9...♘c6!? transposes to my analysis from *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*. Taking on g4 immediately is more consistent with our chosen move order.

10.♗b5†

The untested 10.♕xg4!?N is more critical, but after 10...♘h6 11.♕h5 ♗f5! 12.♖g1 g6 13.♕f3 ♘c6 we can clearly see the effects of the damage to White's kingside structure: Black is solid on the light squares, and after 14.0-0-0 ♕a5⇄ Black has good prospects.

10...♘c6 11.♕e2



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A clear improvement is:

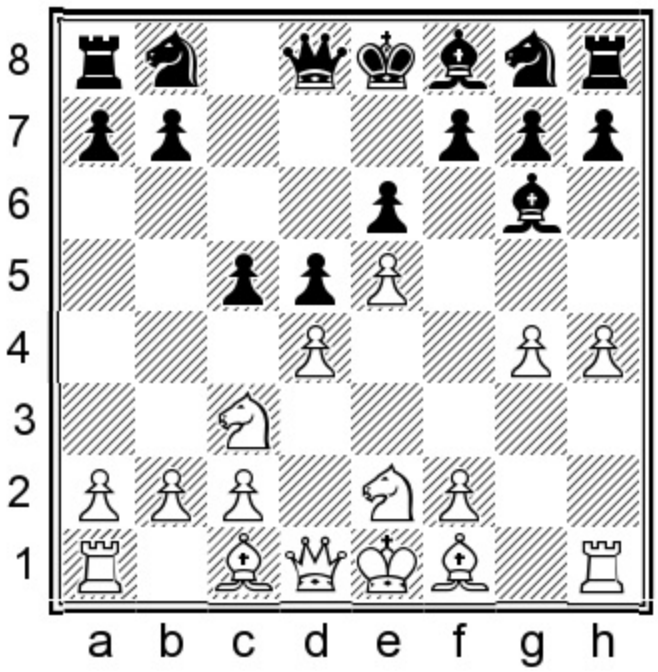
11...♕a5!N

11...♕c7 gives White the option of 12.0-0-0!N with sharp play. (Instead, 12.♘fxd5 exd5 13.♘xd5 ♕c8 was a rather speculative piece sacrifice in Shabalov – Admiraal, Escaldes 2018.)

12.0-0-0 ♗f5∓

Black has the clearly better pawn structure and his pieces have good squares available. Moreover, the white king is far from safe on the queenside.

F2) 7.h4



This is the big main line.

7...h5!

Stopping the enemy pawn in its tracks.

8.♘f4 ♗h7!

As we have already seen, Black should be willing to sacrifice his h-pawn to stop the enemy initiative and buy time to strike at the centre.

The somewhat surprising 8...cxd4!? 9.♘xg6 fxg6 has scored well for Black in engine games and could be worth investigating if you ever need an alternative.

9.♘xh5

I also considered:

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9.g5!?

Interesting play arises from this seemingly anti-positional move, although Black has nothing to fear.

9...cxd4 10.♘b5

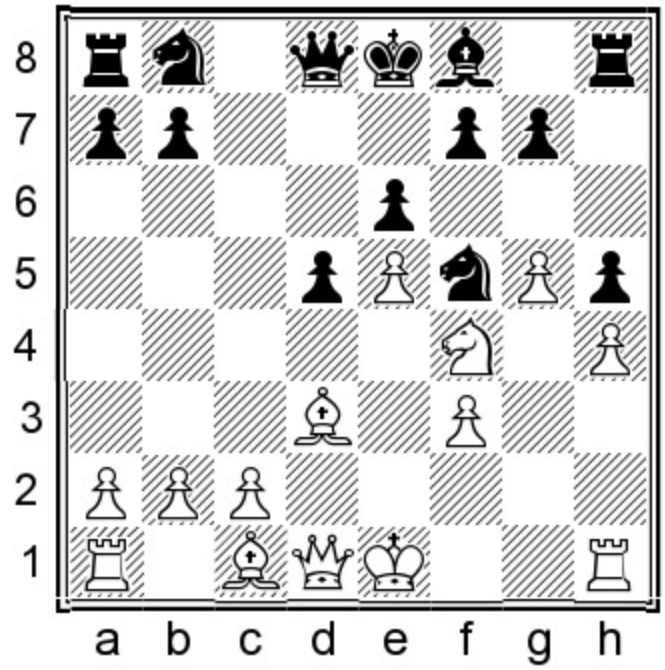
10.g6?! ♗xg6 11.♘xg6 fxg6 12.♘e2 ♘c6 13.♘xd4 ♕d7∓ does not work for White.

10...♗e4 11.f3 ♗f5 12.♘xd4

I once faced 12.♗d3 when the simplest response is 12...♘c6! 13.♗xf5 ♕a5† followed by ...♕xb5 with a good game.

12...♘e7 13.♘xf5 ♘xf5 14.♗d3

This has been played in a number of recent games.



14...g6

Also good is 14...♕c7!? 15.♘e2 g6N 16.♗xf5 gxf5 17.♗e3 ♘d7 18.f4 and now 18...♗c5 equalizes, but Black can also try 18...♕c4!? or 18...♘c5!? heading for e4, with interesting play.

15.♗xf5 gxf5 16.♕e2

16.♘d3 ♘c6=

16...♘c6 17.♗d2 ♕c7

17...♖c8 18.c3 ♕c7 19.0-0-0 ♘e7⇄

18.0-0-0 0-0-0 19.g6! ♗h6! 20.gxf7 ♕xf7 21.♘d3 ♗xd2† 22.♕xd2 ♔b8=

Maghsoodloo – Mamedyarov, Internet 2020.

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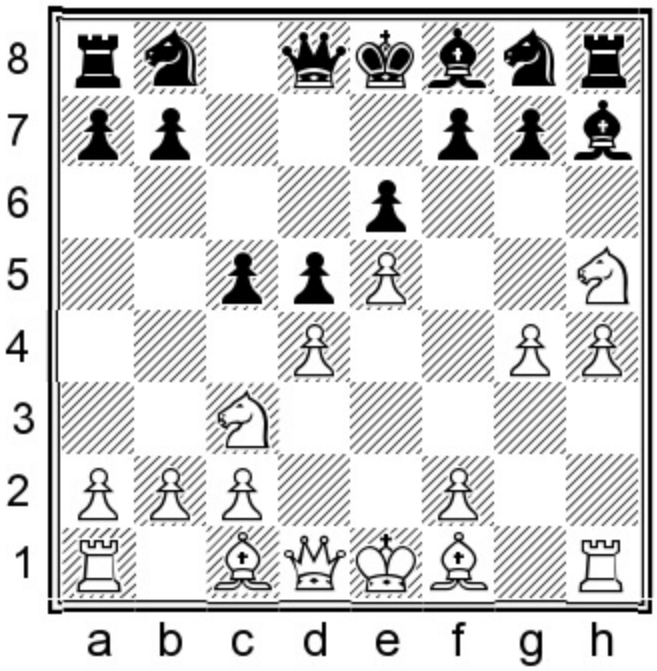

9...cxd4!

9...♘c6 was my suggestion from *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, which remains playable. However, after 10.dxc5! ♗xc5, 11.♗g5! is a recent development which poses some challenges. A relevant example continued 11...♕b6 12.♕d2 ♕xb2 13.♖b1 ♕xc2 14.♕xc2 ♗xc2 15.♖c1 d4 16.♘d5 ♗e4 17.♘c7† ♔d7 18.♖xc5 ♔xc7 19.♖h3∞ with an eventual draw in LCZero – Stockfish, engine game 2020.

Today I prefer this move order, which White can answer with **F21)** 10.♕xd4 or the more dynamic **F22)** 10.♘b5!.

F21) 10.♕xd4 ♘c6

This has been pretty firmly established as good for Black.

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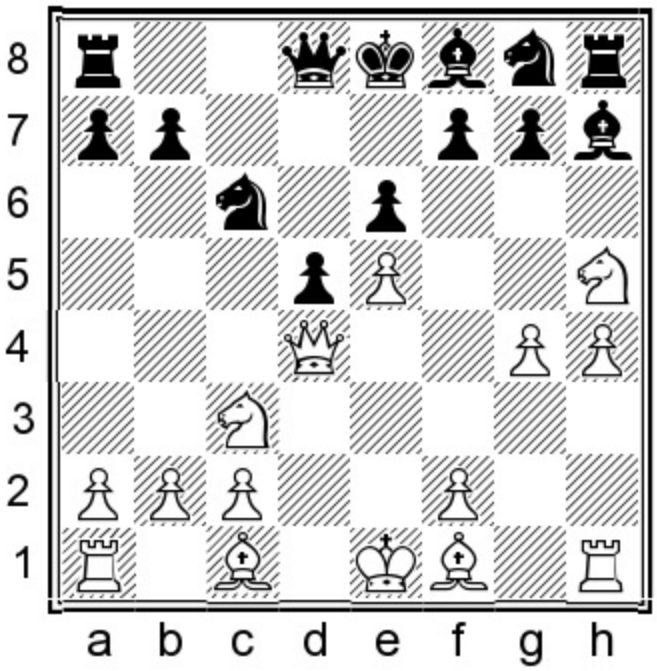


11.♗b5

Pinning the knight is the obvious developing move.

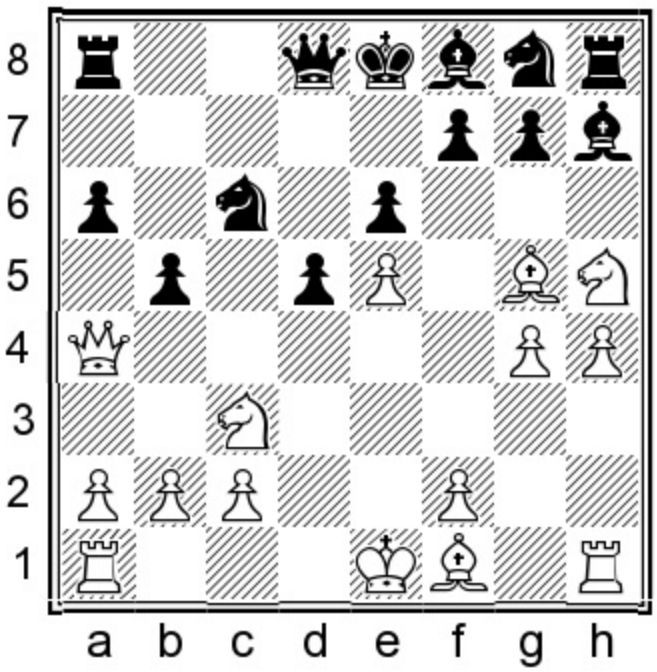
White could also just move the queen away:

11.♕a4

This has seldom been played, so there could be room for improvements, although I like Black's chances anyway.

11...a6 12.♗g5 b5

12...f6!? 13.exf6 gxf6 14.♗d2 b5 15.♕f4 ♔f7∞ was messy in Kuzko – Schultheiss, corr. 2011.



13.♕f4

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13.♗xd8? bxa4 14.♗b6 a3!∓ is nasty for White.

13...♕a5

13...♕c7 14.0-0-0∞

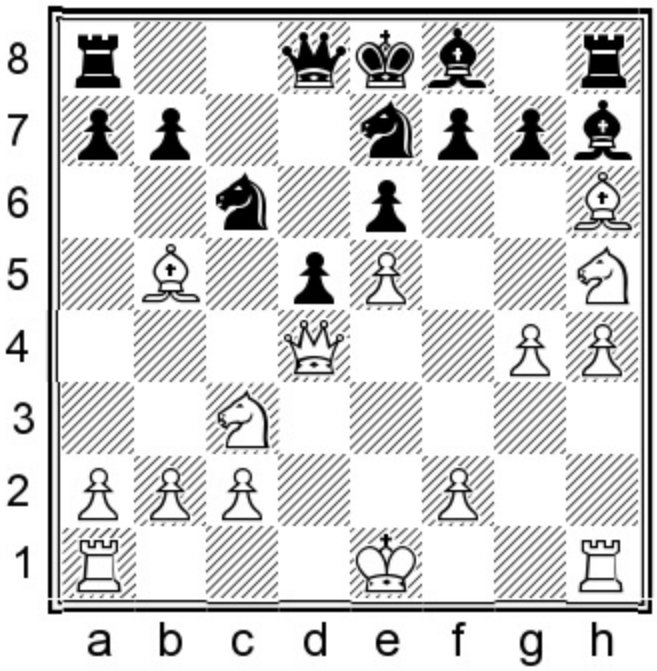
14.♗g2 ♖c8 15.0-0 ♕b4! 16.♖ad1 ♕xf4 17.♘xf4 ♘ge7

Black was doing well in Dubinin – Shishkov, corr. 2009. He will soon regain the pawn and White will be left with many holes in his position.

11...♘ge7 12.♗h6

Spectacular stuff, but it is easy enough for Black to deal with.

12.♗g5 a6 13.♗xc6† ♘xc6 is also good for Black, as Game 11 demonstrates.



12...♖g8!

Cool defence. Of course the bishop could not be taken because of mate in one, but now White's threats will be parried and the initiative passes to Black.

13.0-0-0

13.♕f4 a6 is similar and may easily transpose.

13...a6 14.♗xc6† ♘xc6 15.♕f4 ♕a5

Black has the better of this sharp position. His king is safe enough, and the long-ranging Caro-Kann bishop on h7 is doing an impressive job. This, combined with easy attacking moves like ...♖c8 and ...♘b4, makes White's position rather awful.

16.♖h3

Also after 16.♔b1 ♘b4 17.♖d2 ♖c8→ Black's threats are too strong.

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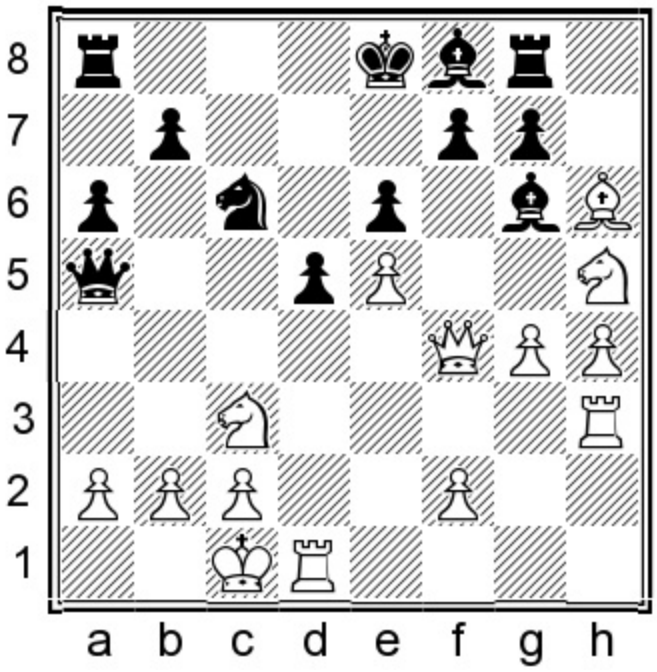
16...♗g6



17.♗xg7

This does not work, but it is hard to suggest other moves.

17...♗xg7 18.♘xg7† ♖xg7 19.h5 ♗h7 20.♕h6 ♔f8–+

White does not have enough for the piece and he soon had to give up in Mocnik – Hasanagic, corr. 2006.

GAME 11

Jakob Aabling-Thomsen – Lars Schandorff

Denmark 2010

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘c3 e6 5.g4 ♗g6 6.♘ge2 c5 7.h4 h5 8.♘f4 ♗h7 9.♘xh5 ♘c6

Notice my slightly inaccurate move order.

Today I would prefer 9...cxd4! when 10.♕xd4 ♘c6 11.♗b5 converts to the game continuation.

10.♗b5

10.dxc5! is White's best try, as noted earlier.

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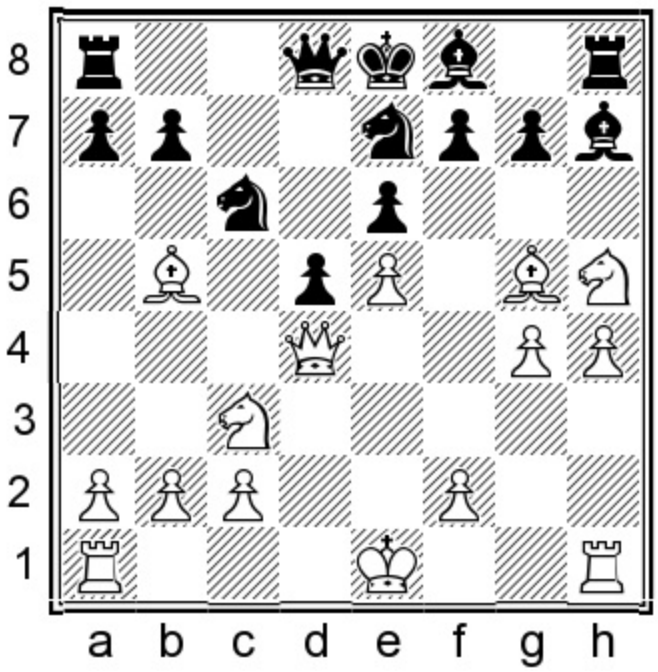
10...cxd4 11.♕xd4 ♘ge7 12.♗g5

12.♗h6 was covered in the analysis section above.



12...a6 13.♗xc6†

13.♗xe7?? axb5! is terrible for White.

13...♘xc6 14.♕f4 ♕a5 15.0-0-0?

This aggressive move leaves White's king too exposed.

15.0-0

This was the correct way to get the king out of the centre, although Black still has a choice of promising continuations:

15...♕b4!?N

Angling for a favourable endgame seems simplest.

Bluntly taking back a pawn with 15...♗xc2 is also good: 16.♖fe1 ♗g6 17.♘g3 (17.a3!?N 17...♗xh5 18.gxh5 ♕c7! [avoiding 18...♖xh5 19.b4 ♕c7 20.b5 axb5 21.♘xb5 ♕d7 22.♖ab1⩱] 19.♖ac1 ♖xh5 and White does not have enough for a pawn.)

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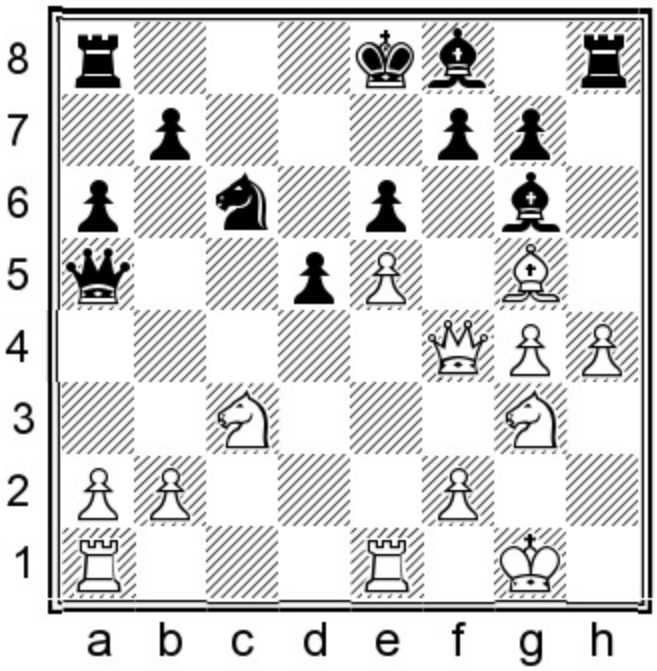
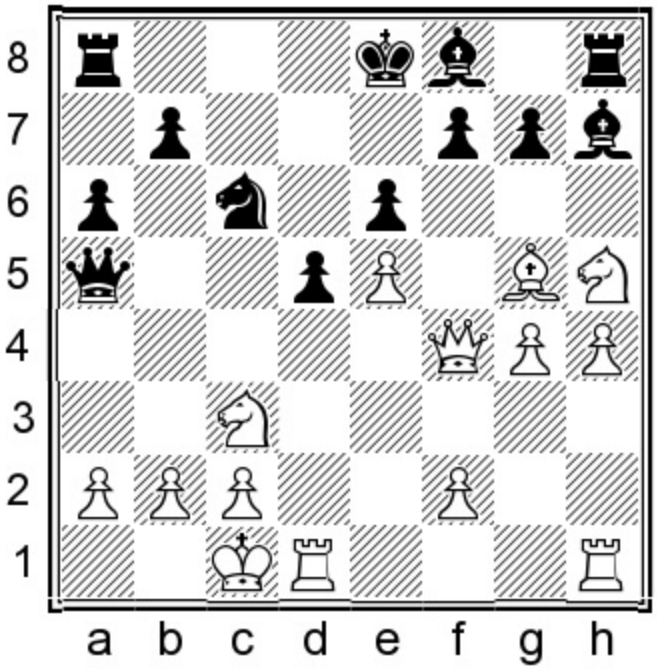


This occurred in Kuehn – Heuser, Karlsruhe 2003, and now 17...♕b4!N 18.h5 ♗h7 gives Black the upper hand after the queens come off.

16.♕xb4 ♘xb4 17.♖ac1 ♖c8∓

Black can win the pawn back whenever he likes, while keeping the more comfortable position.



15...♘b4!

White is already in deep trouble.

16.♖d4

The time was ripe for desperate measures such as 16.a3 ♘xc2 17.♖xd5!? exd5 18.e6 when at least White has some tricks.

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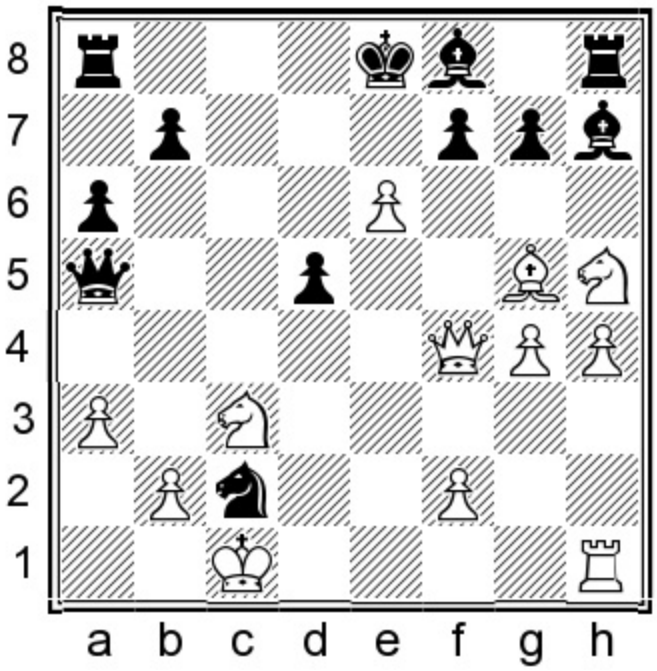
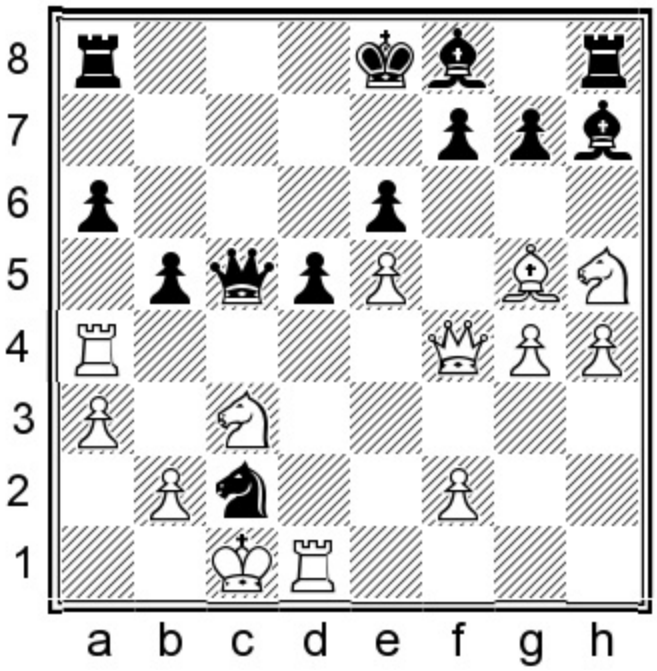


Best play continues: 18...fxe6 19.♘xg7†! ♔d7! (but not 19...♗xg7?? 20.♕d6+–) 20.♕f7† ♔c6 21.♕xe6†N (21.♘e8 ♘d4!–+ gave White nothing in Zezulkin – S. Pedersen, Gistrup 1992.) 21...♗d6∓ Black should be able to defend and convert his material advantage, but this was a better try than the game, where White has hardly any chances at all.

16...♘xc2 17.♖a4 ♕c5 18.♖d1 b5

Winning material.

19.a3



19...♕c6!

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Some caution is still needed.

19...bxa4?? 20.♕xa4† would be a terrible turn of events. After the text move the rook is definitively trapped.

20.♖ad4 ♘xd4 21.♖xd4 ♗g6 22.♕f3 ♖c8 23.♔d2 a5

Preparing to open the c-file. The position more or less plays itself.

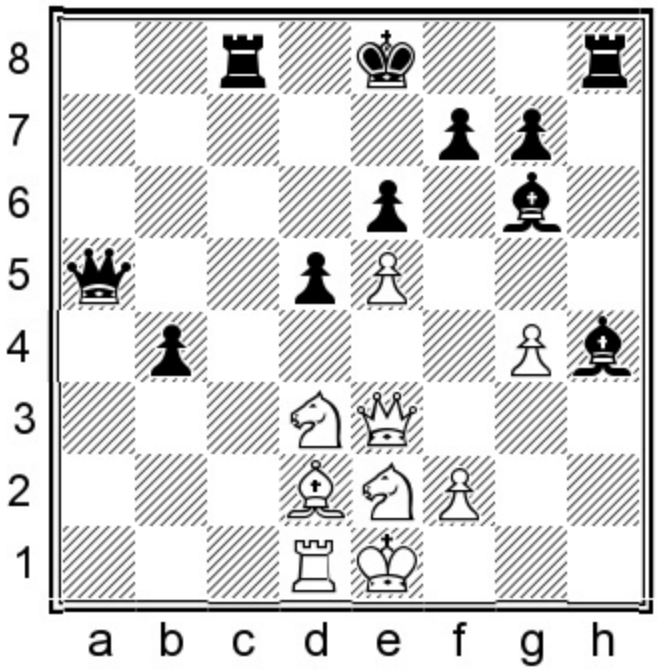
24.♔e1 b4 25.axb4 axb4 26.♘e2 ♕c2 27.♘hf4 ♗c5 28.♕g3

28.♖d2 ♕b1† 29.♖d1 ♕xb2 changes nothing.

28...♕xb2 29.♖d1 ♕a3 30.♘d3 ♗e7 31.♗c1

31.♗xe7 ♔xe7–+ is hopeless.

31...♗xh4 32.♕e3 ♕a5 33.♗d2



33...♗g5!

In such a position it is easy to come up with brilliant moves.

34.f4

34.♕xg5 ♖h1† was the idea.

34...♖h1† 35.♘g1 ♗h4† 36.♔f1 ♕b5

White is pinned all over.

0–1

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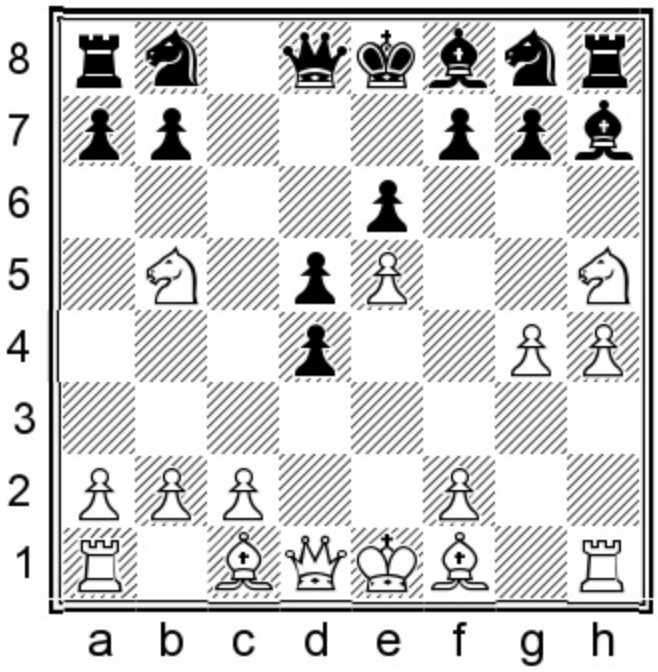
F22) 10.♘b5!



10...♘c6

This is the most natural and reliable choice.

10...♗e4!?

This seems fully playable as well, and Black has achieved good results with it so far. This move is still in the experimental stage, and I will just present a few brief lines as a basis for further investigation:

11.♖h3

11.f3 ♗g6 12.♗g5 (or 12.♘f4 ♖xh4 13.♖xh4 ♕xh4† 14.♔e2 ♔d7! 15.♘xd4 ♗c5⇄) 12...♕a5†! 13.♕d2 ♕xd2† 14.♔xd2 ♔d7 15.♘xd4 ♗xh5 16.gxh5 ♘c6 17.♘xc6 bxc6 Followed by ...♖xh5 with a balanced endgame.

11...♘c6 12.♘xd4 ♘ge7 13.♗g5 ♕a5† 14.c3

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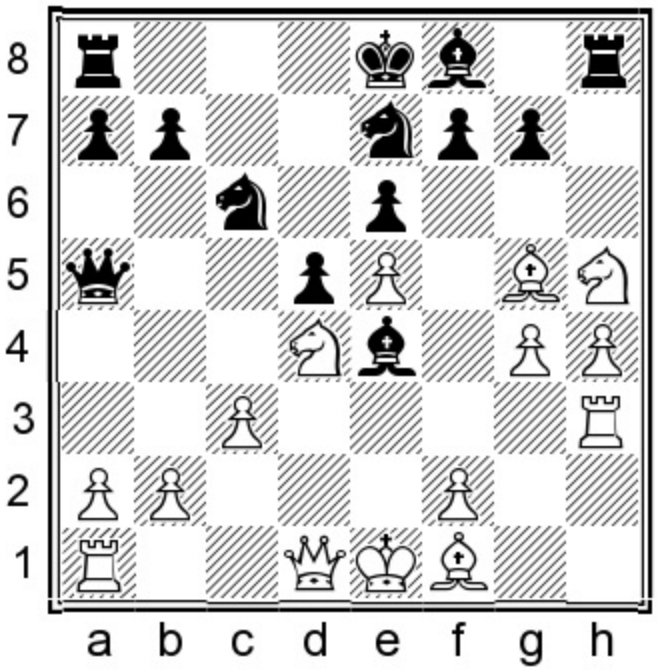

14...♘xd4 15.♕xd4 ♘c6 16.♕d1

16.♕e3 ♖c8 17.a3 ♘xe5 18.f3 ♘c4 19.♗xc4 ♖xc4 20.♖d1 ♖xh5 21.gxh5 ♗f5⇄

16...a6 17.f4 ♖c8 18.♘g3 ♗h7 19.h5 ♕b6 20.♕b3 ♕a7∞

Baldassare – Rautenberg, corr. 2015.

11.♘xd4

11.♖h3!? has been tried in some engine games. A plausible line is: 11...d3 12.♗xd3 ♘xe5 13.♗xh7 ♕a5†! 14.♔f1 ♕xb5† 15.♗d3 ♘xd3 16.cxd3 when a number of moves seem fine: 16...♘e7 and 16...♖c8, to mention two.

11...♘ge7

11...♘xe5!? looks risky in view of 12.♗b5† ♘d7 13.♗g5 ♘e7 14.♕e2N 14...a6 15.♗xd7† ♕xd7 16.0-0-0 0-0-0 17.♖h3↑ when the rook swings to the queenside. Still, after 17...♔b8 it is not easy to break Black's defences.

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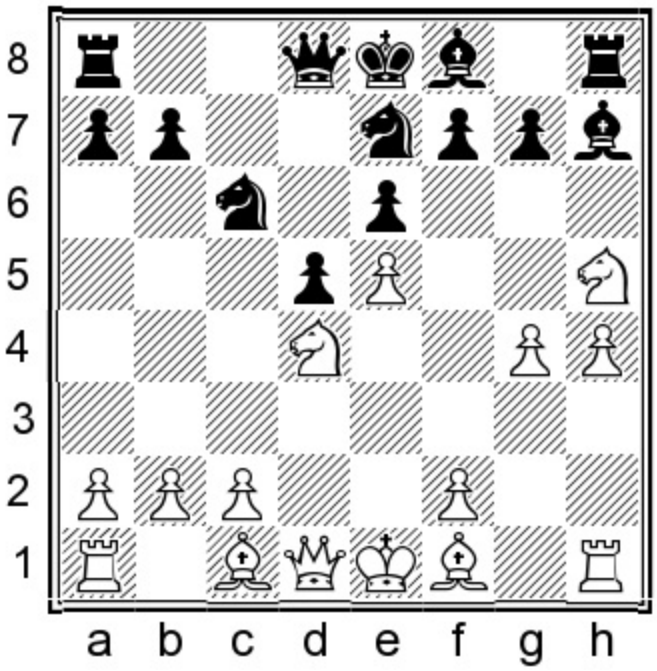

We will analyse **F221)** 12.♗g5 and **F222)** 12.c3.

Alternatives are nothing to be afraid of; but of course, in such a sharp position some accuracy is needed.

12.♗b5 ♕c7 13.f4

13.0-0 0-0-0 is sharp but fine for Black.

13...a6! 14.♘xc6

14.♗xc6† ♘xc6 15.c3 ♘xd4 16.cxd4 ♕c4⩲

14...♘xc6

14...axb5!? could be considered.

15.♗d3 ♗xd3

I also like 15...0-0-0!?∓.

16.cxd3

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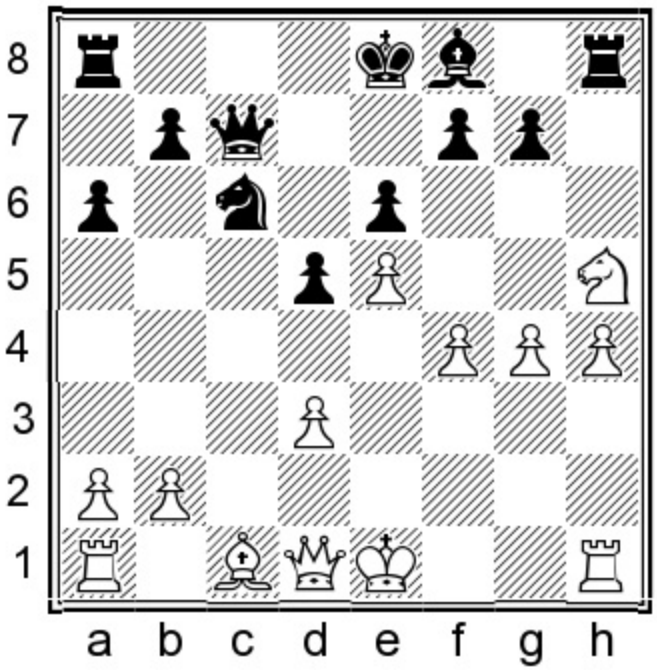


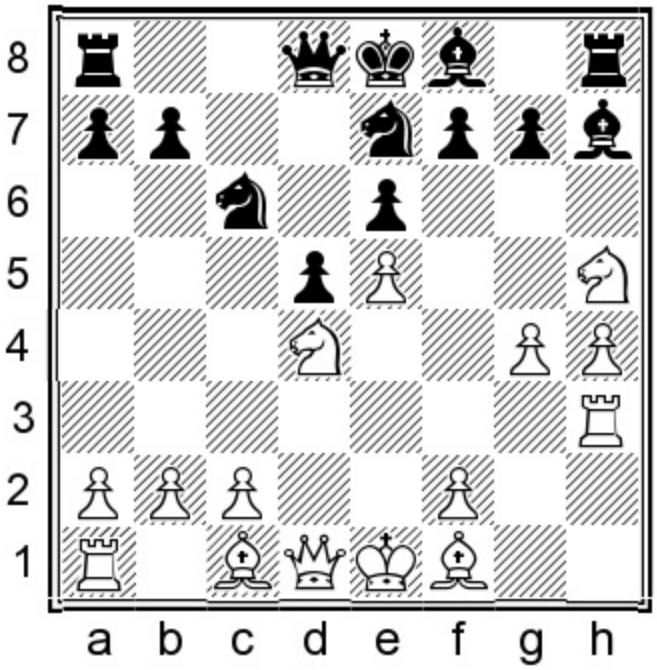
In Goluch – Klim, Szklarska Poreba 2012, Black should have continued:

16...♕b6!N 17.♔f1 0-0-0

With good play for the pawn.

12.♖h3

Here I found an interesting new idea.



12...♘xd4!?N

12...a6 13.c3!N leads to complicated play. (The last move improves on 13.♗g5 ♕b6 14.♘xc6 ♘xc6 which was fine for Black in Grischuk – Bareev, Wijk aan Zee 2003.)

13.♕xd4 ♘c6 14.♕a4

14.♕f4 ♕c7∓

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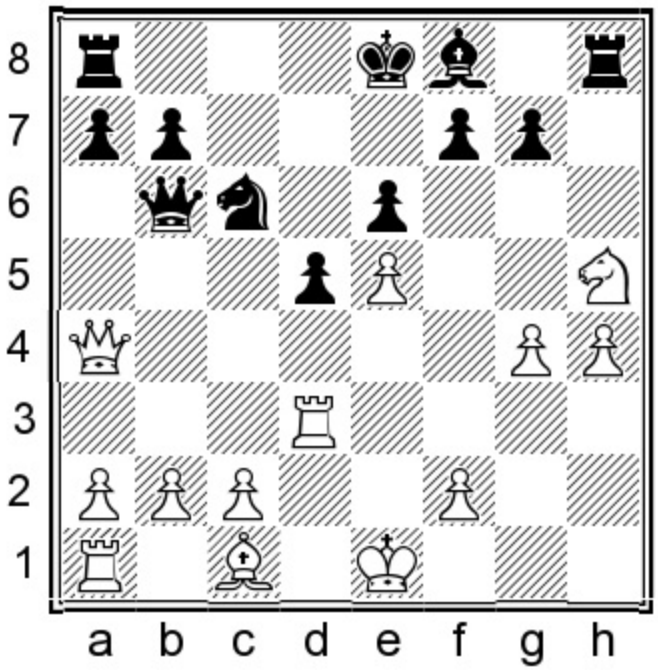
14...♕b6 15.♗d3

This is White's best attempt to neutralize the pressure, but Black still does well after:

15...♗xd3 16.♖xd3



16...♕b4†! 17.♕xb4 ♗xb4† 18.♔e2 ♘xe5 19.♖b3 ♗f8!

A cool withdrawal.

20.f3

20.♖xb7? ♘xg4∓

20...b6∓

Black has the better chances in the endgame thanks to his well-centralized forces.

F221) 12.♗g5 ♕b6

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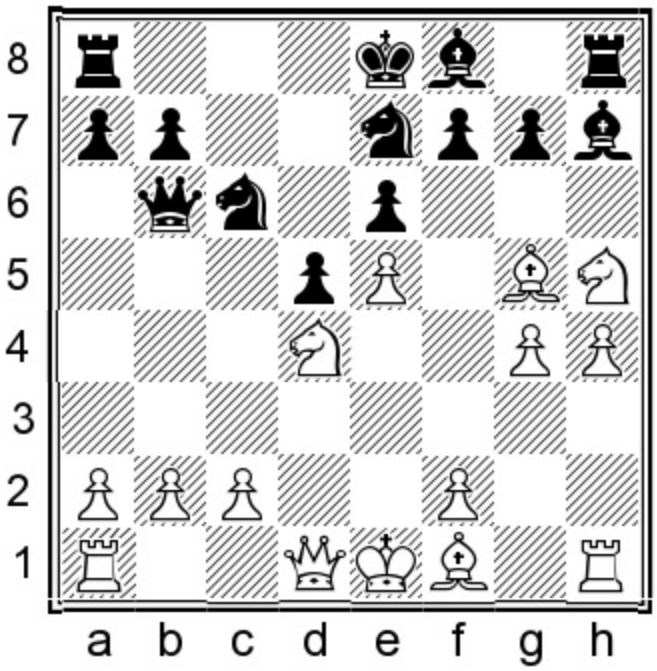

13.♗b5

Typical active bishop moves by White.

13.♘b5? ♘xe5 leads nowhere for him.

13...a6

Now White has to release the pressure.

14.♗xc6†

14.♗a4? ♕xb2 was a free pawn for Black in Shomoev – Grigoriants, Moscow 2007.

14.♗xe7?! ♗xe7 (14...axb5!?) 15.♗xc6† bxc6 16.♘xg7† ♔d7∓ gives Black fantastic play all over the board. Here is a sample line tested by computers: 17.♘h5 ♖ab8 18.♘b3 ♕b4† 19.c3 ♕e4† 20.♔d2 ♕xe5 White's position begins to crumble.

14...♘xc6 15.♘xc6 bxc6 16.0-0

16.b3?! runs into 16...♕b4†! 17.♔f1 ♕e4 and e5 drops.

16...♕xb2 17.c4 ♗e4! 18.cxd5 ♗xd5 19.♘f4 ♗c5

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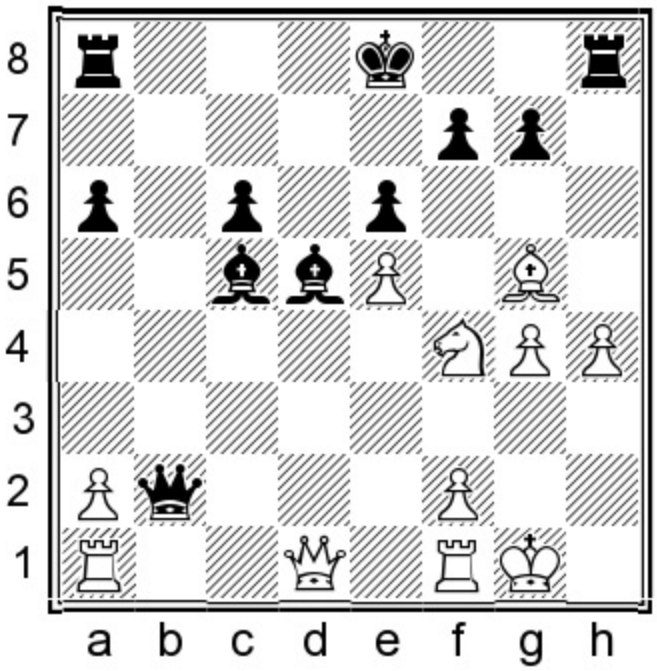


Black is fine, for example:

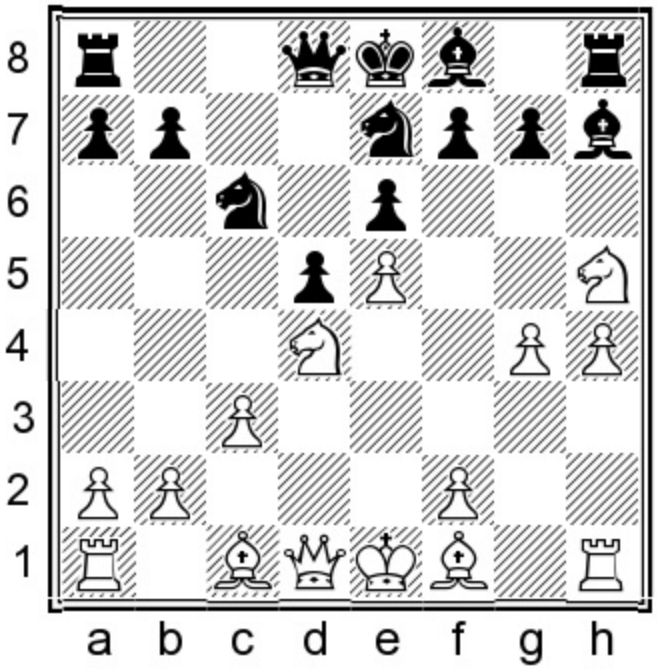
20.♖c1

I also checked 20.♘d3 ♕d4 21.♘xc5 ♕xc5 and Black is at least equal.

20...♕a3 21.♘xd5 cxd5 22.♔g2 0-0=

As tested in a couple of email games.

F222) 12.c3



This is what I wanted to avoid in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* when I recommended 9...♘c6.

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However, Black gets good play by grabbing the central pawn.

12...♘xe5!

Bologan recommends this in his book, and there are many correspondence and engine games confirming the soundness of Black's position.

13.♗g5

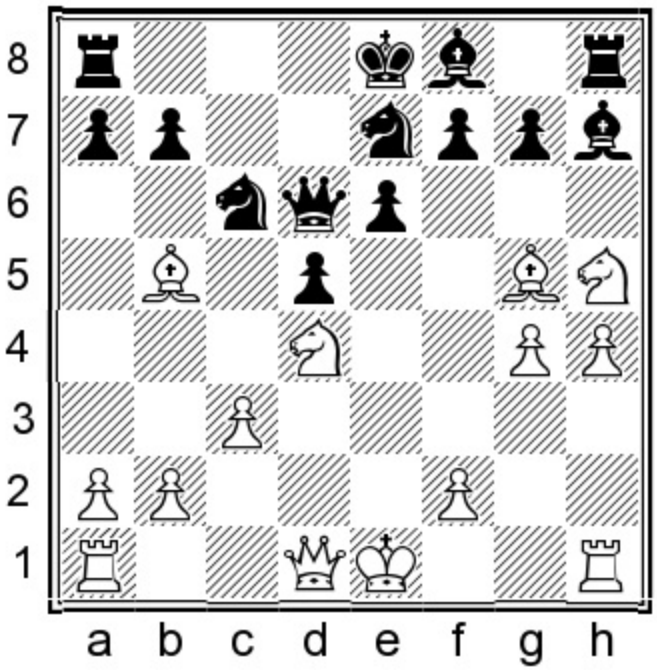
White has to play aggressively and fight for the initiative.

In the event of 13.♖h3N 13...a6 14.♗g5 ♕c7 15.♖e3 0-0-0 Black is likely to come out on top, for instance: 16.♗f4 ♘7g6 17.♗g3 ♗d6 18.♘xg7 ♘c4 19.♗xc4 dxc4∓

I also checked 13.♗f4N 13...♘5c6 14.♕a4 a6 15.♗g2 ♕b6 (15...♗g6!?) 16.0-0-0 0-0-0 with fine play for Black.

White's most popular choice has been to include the check on b5, but it fails to impress:
13.♗b5† ♘5c6 14.♗g5 ♕d6!

Black is extremely strong in the centre, and soon obtained an excellent position in the game we are following.



15.♕e2

After 15.♕a4 f6 16.♗e3 I found a nice improvement: 16...0-0-0!N (16...♔f7!? also looks good.) 17.♘xc6 ♘xc6 18.♗xc6 (18.0-0-0 a6 19.♗e2 ♔b8∓) 18...♕xc6 19.♕xc6† (19.♕xa7? gets crushed by 19...d4 20.0-0-0 ♗c5–+) 19...bxc6 20.♗xa7 Otherwise White will simply be positionally worse. 20...♗e4 21.♖g1 e5 Black has tremendous compensation for the pawn.

15...a6 16.♗a4?!

16.♗xc6† ♘xc6 is pleasant for Black.

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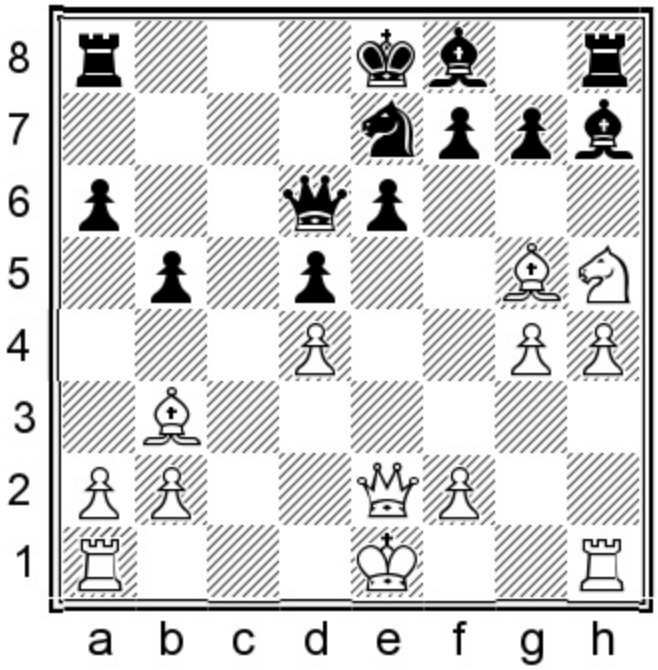
Perhaps White should try the intermediate move 16.♗xe7!? when 16...♔xe7! is the most accurate choice. (16...♗xe7 17.♗xc6† bxc6 18.♘xg7† ♔f8 19.♘h5∞) 17.♗xc6 bxc6 18.0-0-0 ♔d8

19.♖he1 ♔c7 Black's king is safe, and his bishop pair and strong centre might tell in the long run.

16...b5 17.♗b3 ♘xd4 18.cxd4

My improvement is:



18...♕b4†!N

18...♘c6 19.♖d1 was played in Lorenzo de la Riva – Peralta, Montcada 2012.

19.♕d2

Forced.

19.♔f1 ♕xd4 leaves White without much to show for the missing pawn.

19...♘c6 20.♗e3 ♗e4 21.♖g1 ♔d7∓

Black is well placed for the upcoming ending.

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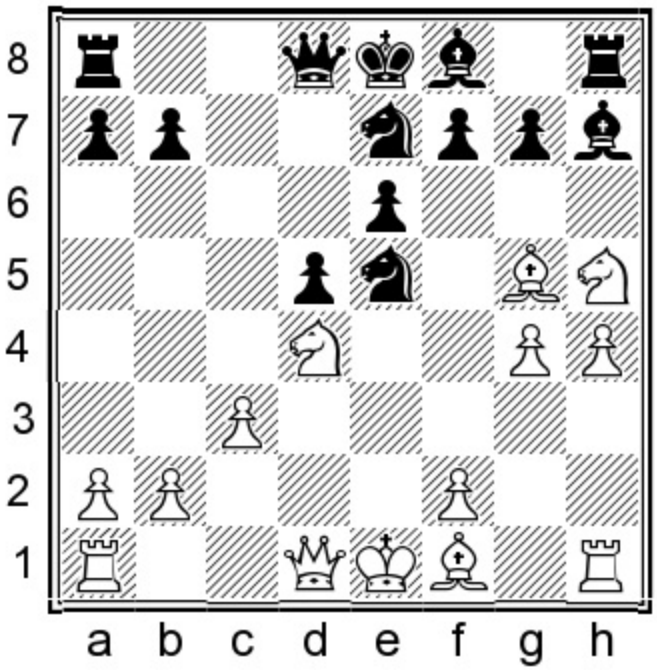

13...♕c7

Stepping out of the pin. Without the e5-pawn, White has no grip on the position. Instead, he has tricky piece play which more or less makes up for the inferior structure. In the good old days we would call a position like this unclear, but nowadays the machines demonstrate that it is perfectly balanced.

14.♕a4†

14.♘b5 is met by 14...♕b8! as in the main line.

White could also give the other check:

14.♗b5† ♘7c6

Also possible is 14...♘d7.

15.0-0 a6 16.♗xc6† ♘xc6 17.♖e1 ♗e4!

It is always pleasing when the great Caro-Kann bishop takes centre stage.

18.♖c1 ♖c8⇄

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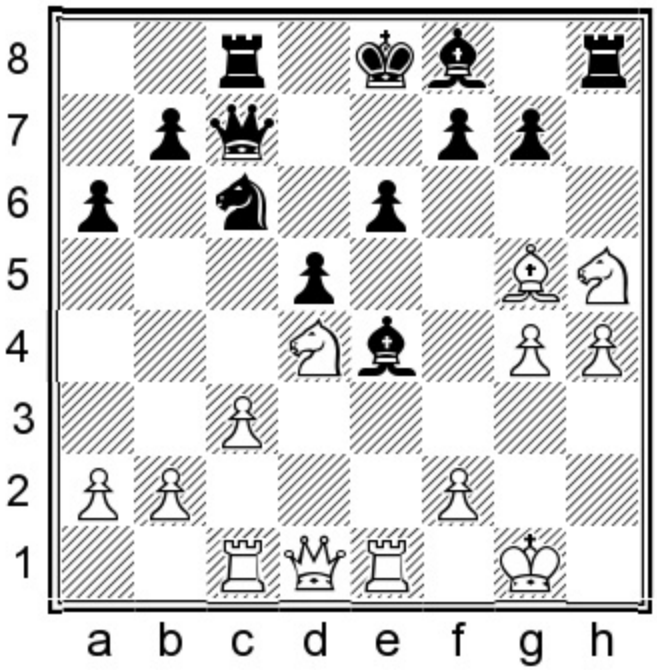
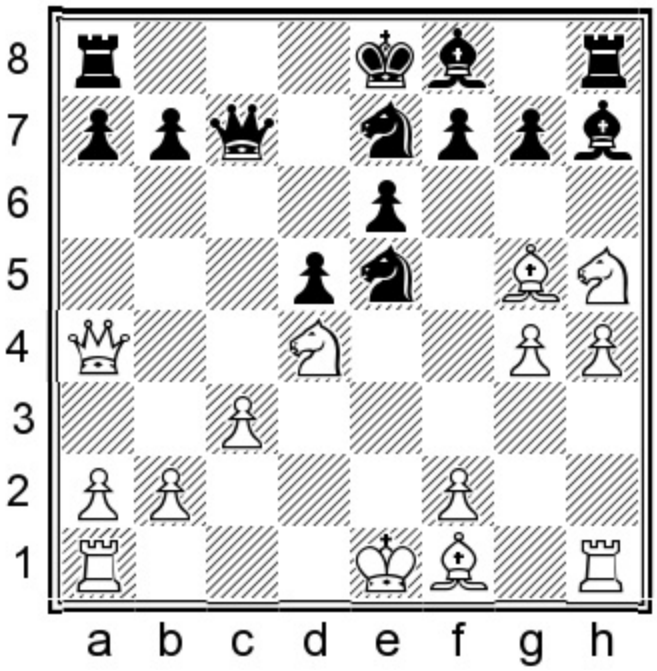


Black is fine. A recent correspondence game showed an interesting tactical sequence:
19.a4 ♗e7 20.♖xe4! ♖xh5! 21.gxh5 dxe4 22.♘xc6 ♕xc6=

Bobel – Korovnik corr. 2019.



14...♘d7! 15.♘b5!?

A threatening move, but Black can defend.

We should also consider the alternative:
15.0-0-0

This should be met by:
15...a6!

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15...♘c6 16.♗b5 ♖c8 is also playable, but Black should be careful. For instance, 17.♖he1 a6? 18.♘xe6! fxe6 19.♖xe6† ♔f7 20.♖xd5 axb5 21.♕b3! and White is winning in style.

16.♗e2

16.♘f4!? is tricky but 16...0-0-0 17.♘fxe6 fxe6 18.♘xe6 ♘c5! turns out fine for Black.

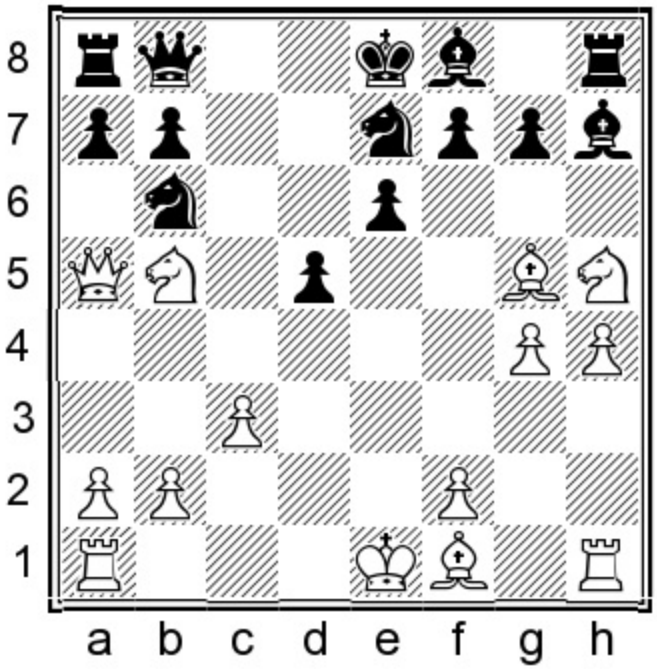
16...0-0-0 17.♘b3 e5 18.♕a5 ♕c6 19.♖h3 f6 20.♗d2 ♗g8∓

Black was ideally coordinated in Evans – Marez, corr. 2006.

15...♕b8!

I prefer this to 15...♕c6 16.♕a5 when Black is forced to weaken his structure with ...b6.

16.♕a5 ♘b6



Black is fine, for example:

17.♘d4 ♘c6 18.♗b5 ♕c8=

Conclusion

Some opportunistic players feel the urge to throw everything against the rock-solid Caro-Kann. In general, we should welcome that, because White can't make aggressive pawn assaults without weakening his own structure. This is especially true in the famous Shirov Variation 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘c3 e6 5.g4. This may offer White a short-term initiative, but well-timed counter-strikes with ...c5 and ...h5 make White's grand pawn centre impossible to maintain. I firmly believe in the soundness of Black's position and it makes me happy when my opponents attack with their heads first.

This concludes our coverage of the Advance Variation. The rest of the book deals with the many

and various moves which make up Other Lines.

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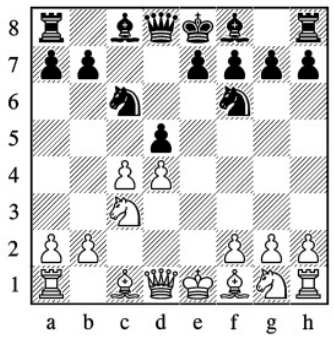
Chapter 7



Panov Variation

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"War is over! If you want it"

John Lennon & Yoko Ono

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4

The Panov Variation is one of White's most active and direct approaches against the Caro-Kann. It leads to an open battle where White hopes that his active piece play will secure a long-lasting initiative. It has attracted many enterprising, aggressive White players throughout the years, but has recently faded in popularity. This is of course related to the fact that several good ways of meeting it have been worked out in great detail.

4...♘f6 5.♘c3

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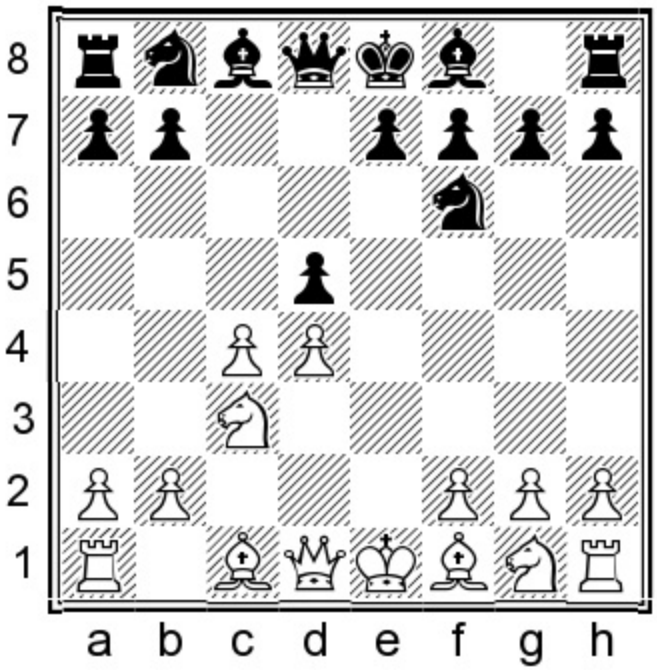

Black now has a choice between completely different lines, or rather between different playing styles. I think the best move is:

5...♘c6!

Black can treat the opening purely positionally and go for 5...e6, like the legendary former World Champion Anatoly Karpov always did. Then after 6.♘f3 Black can play 6...♗e7 or the Nimzo-Indian style 6...♗b4. In both cases an interesting strategic battle arises, often with White having an isolated queen's pawn but active piece play and attacking chances.
A totally different approach is 5...g6 which resembles a Grünfeld. The main line is 6.♕b3 intending cxd5 when the struggle revolves around Black's efforts to regain the pawn without giving White too much of an initiative. In general, this line leads to an interesting fight where both sides will have their chances.

Our choice can be characterized as an intelligent waiting move. In the aforementioned lines, Black did not address the real Caro-Kann issue: the light-squared bishop. After the text move, its path to freedom is still wide open, as is emphasized by our main line:

6.♘f3 ♗g4!

White usually starts forcing the play with:

7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♕b3 ♗xf3 9.gxf3

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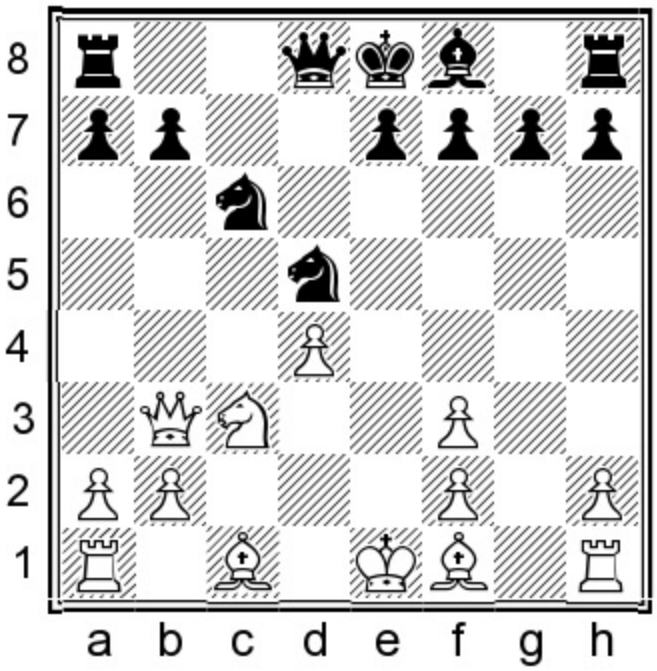


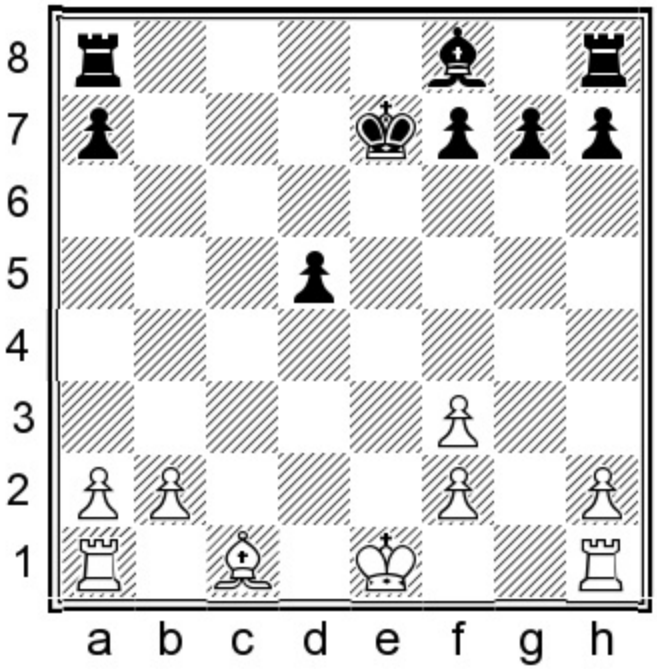
9...e6

9...♘b6!? is an underestimated way of avoiding the coming ending. It has a dubious reputation but this is probably undeserved. It leads to a complicated middlegame where both sides have chances, so I will cover it as a secondary option that might be handy for must-win situations.

10.♕xb7 ♘xd4 11.♗b5† ♘xb5 12.♕c6† ♔e7 13.♕xb5 ♕d7

13...♘xc3 is another option which will be discussed briefly.

14.♘xd5† ♕xd5 15.♕xd5 exd5



The endgame is equal. It can sometimes be dull but a lot of play remains. I managed to win it

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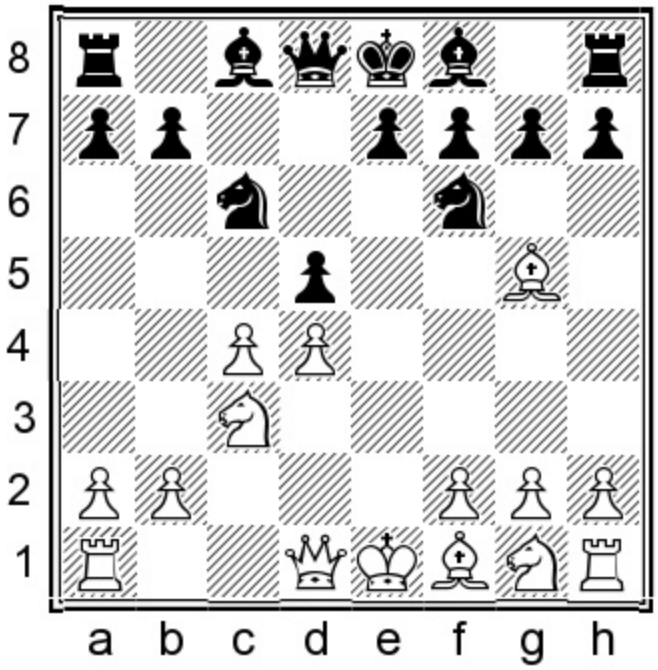
with Black, as shown in Game 12 (Lanzani – Schandorff), so don't worry!

Because of White's failure to prove an advantage in the Endgame Variation, many players have abandoned the natural 6.♘f3 in favour of the tricky alternative:

6.♗g5



This is a much more confrontational move. Black's centre is under pressure and he does not have time to finish his development in peace. So what should we do? Counterattack!

6...dxc4!

Creating an apparently typical IQP scenario, but with one small difference: the d-pawn actually hangs! White does best to ignore it and keep developing quickly.

7.♗xc4

The main alternative is 7.d5 ♘e5 8.♕d4, when 8...h6! is well known to solve all Black's problems.

7...h6 8.♗h4

We have reached another crossroads.

8...♕xd4

Eating the d4-pawn is my old recommendation and it still holds up fine.

A completely different direction is 8...e6!? when the game takes a more positional course, with White having to justify the isolated pawn. I cover this line as well.

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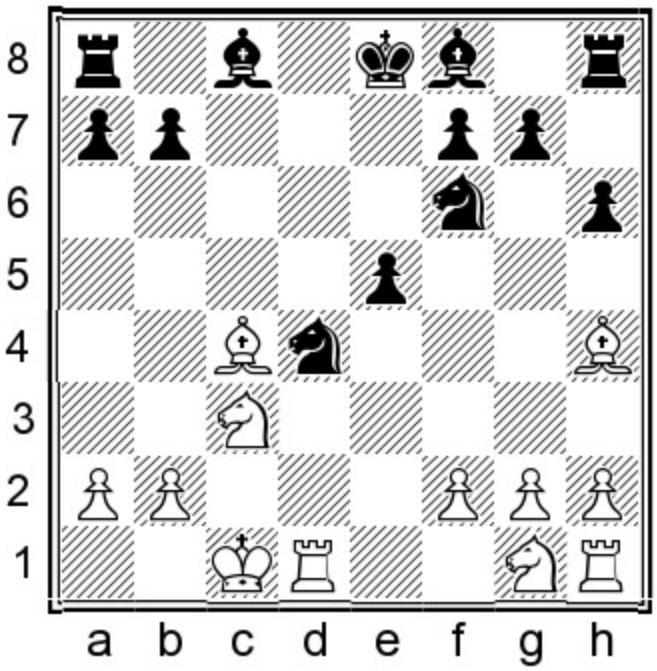
9.♕xd4 ♘xd4 10.0-0-0 e5

Black has an interesting chance to deviate with the relatively unexplored 10...g5!?, which also leads to balanced play, but on fresh ground.



11.f4

White has good compensation for the pawn, but no more than that. This has been tested and analysed to considerable depths.

Theory

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6

The two main highways are **A)** 6.♘f3 and **B)** 6.♗g5. There exist a few less trodden paths, but a short survey will show why they probably deserve to remain in obscurity.

6.cxd5

This releases the tension prematurely.

6...♘xd5 7.♗c4

7.♘f3 is a reasonable move, when White's move order gives Black a few extra options, but I recommend the simple 7...♗g4, sticking to our repertoire.

7.♗b5?! is inaccurate in view of 7...♘xc3 8.bxc3 ♕d5! with a double attack on b5 and g2. White must either exchange on c6 and be positionally worse or give up a pawn with 9.♗e2 ♕xg2 10.♗f3 ♕g6, when he has no real compensation.

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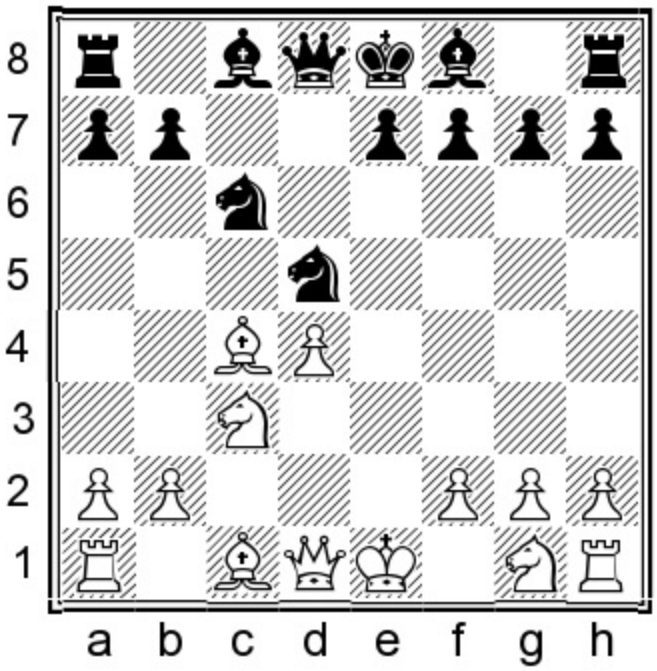

7...♗e6!

A resolute response, bolstering the d5-point while threatening the enemy bishop.

8.♗b3 g6 9.♘f3 ♗g7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♖e1 ♖c8

Black has a fine position, with good prospects against the isolated pawn.

6.c5?!

This is a typical Panov motif which gains space, but here White has no control over the centre and the move is boldly punished by:

6...e5! 7.dxe5

7.♗b5 exd4 8.♕xd4 ♗e7 9.♗xc6† (9.♘f3 0-0 10.♗xc6 bxc6 is the same thing) 9...bxc6 10.♘f3 0-0 is just bad for White, for example: 11.♘e5 (11.0-0 ♘d7∓) 11...♕c7N 12.0-0 ♗xc5 13.♕xc5 ♕xe5 14.♕xc6 ♘g4! 15.g3 ♕h5 16.h4 And now both 16...♗e6 and 16...♘e5 give Black a decisive attack.

7...♘g4 8.♕xd5

8.h3?! ♘gxe5 9.♕xd5 ♗e6 is a better version for Black, and after 10.♕xd8† ♖xd8 11.♗e3 ♘b4 12.♗b5† ♔e7!∓ the tricky knights cause White a lot of problems.

8...♗e6! 9.♕xd8† ♖xd8

Black has excellent compensation for the pawns and his initiative practically guarantees that he will regain the invested material. White should concentrate on equalizing, if that is possible at all.

10.♗g5 ♖d7

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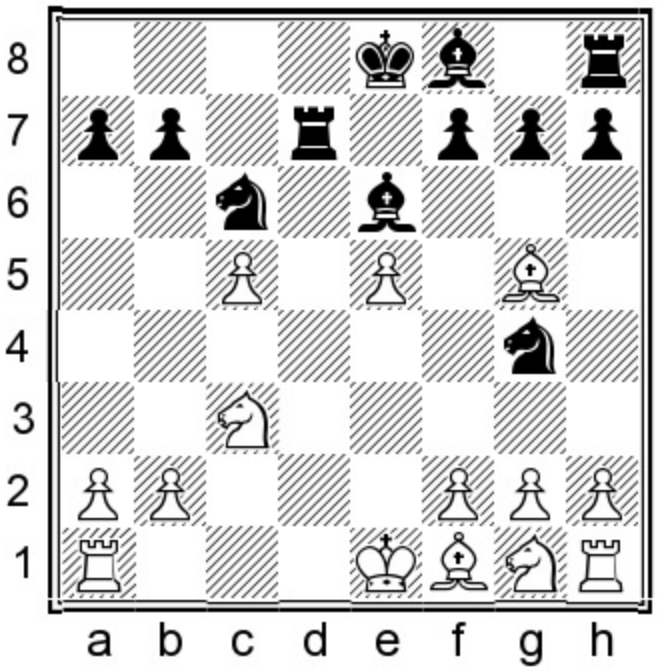

11.♘f3N

11.♗b5 was seen in Bobrov – Becker, Bavaria 2016, when 11...♗xc5N would have given Black a strong initiative.

11...♗xc5 12.♗h4!

12.♘e4 ♗b4† 13.♗d2 ♗xd2† 14.♘exd2 a6 15.♘c4 0-0 (15...♗xc4 16.♗xc4 ♘gxe5 17.♘xe5 ♘xe5= is fine for Black, but it would seem a pity to help White catch up in development.) 16.h3 ♗xc4 17.hxg4 ♗e6∓ Threatening not only ...♗xg4, but also a nasty invasion with ...♘b4.

12...♘gxe5 13.♘xe5 ♘xe5 14.♗b5 ♘c6 15.0-0 0-0

The position is essentially equal but I slightly prefer Black, whose pieces are better centralized.

6.♗f4 g6!

The most combative.

6...e6 allows 7.c5.

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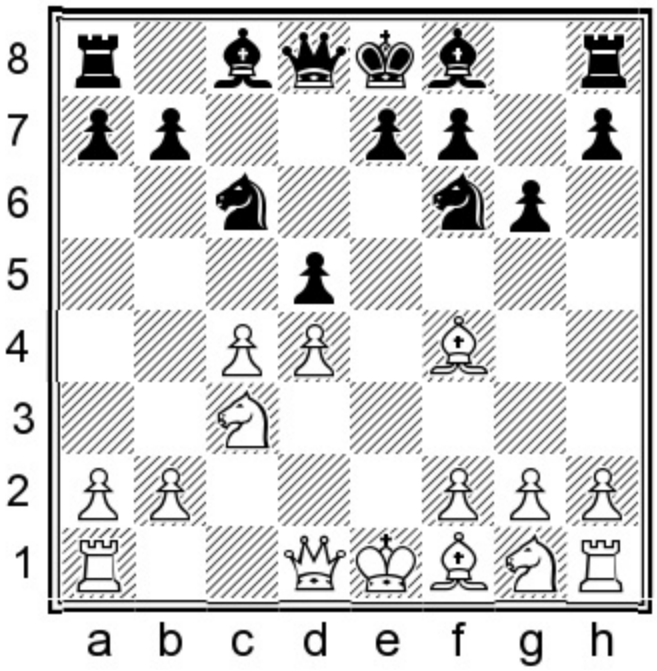

7.c5

The crude 7.♘b5? is refuted by: 7...e5! 8.dxe5 ♗b4† 9.♗d2 ♗xd2† 10.♕xd2 ♘xe5 11.♕b4 This has been played in a few games in which Black overlooked the strongest continuation: 11...♗e6!N 12.♘d6† ♔f8 Simply allowing the discovered check, when 13.♘xb7† ♕e7 14.♕xe7† ♔xe7 leaves White a pawn up, but nonetheless in trouble due to Black's considerable lead in development.

7.♘f3 is not a bad move, but 7...♗g7 8.♗e2 0-0 9.0-0 ♗g4 gives Black a pleasant game: White is playing a Tarrasch Defence with an extra tempo, which is nothing special at the best of times, and the early ♗f4 is not the best way to spend that tempo.

7...♗g7 8.♗b5

8.♘f3 0-0 (8...♘e4!? is also good) 9.♗e2 ♗g4 is fine for Black.

8...0-0 9.♘ge2

This is White's most testing set-up.

9...♘e4 10.0-0 ♘xc3 11.bxc3 ♗d7!

A strong positional move. Black wants to liberate his queenside with ...b6.

11...e5 12.dxe5 ♘xe5 is also playable.

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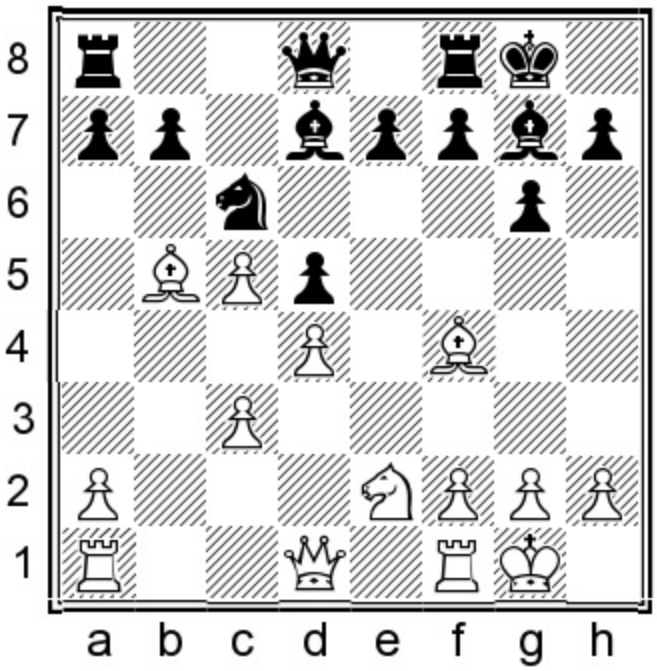


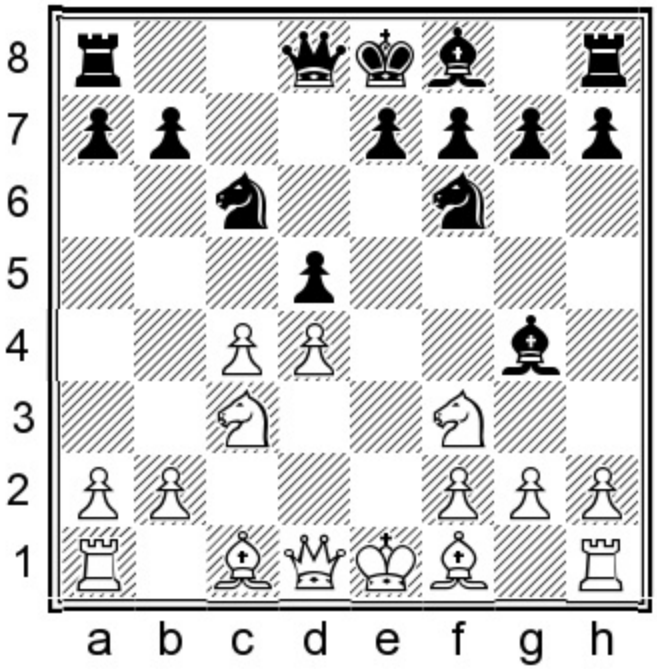
12.♖e1 ♘a5 13.♗d3

After 13.♗xd7 ♕xd7∓ Black has the c4-square.

13...b6! 14.cxb6 axb6∓

Black had the better structure on the queenside in Ghaem Maghami – Eljanov, Dubai (rapid) 2014.

A) 6.♘f3 ♗g4!



Getting this bishop out to such an active post is already a small success! We will analyse **A1)** 7.♗g5!? before turning to the main line of **A2)** 7.cxd5.

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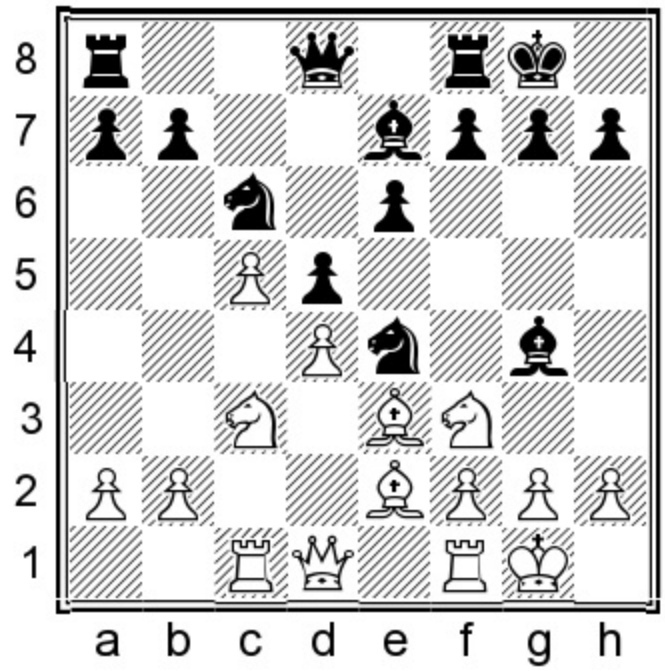
White does best to force the play with concrete threats. If he develops more slowly then Black will be fine with the bishop on g4, especially in IQP positions.

7.c5?! is once again premature, and 7...♗xf3 8.gxf3 g6 9.♗e3 ♗g7 gives Black easy play due to White's compromised structure.

7.♗e3 e6 8.c5 This has to be played. (8.♗e2 dxc4! 9.♗xc4 ♗b4 is already somewhat uncomfortable for White. 8.h3 ♗xf3 9.♕xf3 ♗b4 is also pleasant for Black.) 8...♗e7 9.♗e2 0-0 10.0-0 ♘e4 Black obtains good counterplay. 11.♖c1



Black has several reasonable moves. I like 11...♕c7!?N intending 12.a3 f5! with the initiative.

7.♗e2 e6 8.0-0

8.c5 ♗e7 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗e3 converts to the 7.♗e3 line above.

8...♗e7 9.♗e3

9.c5 0-0 is the same transposition.

9.h3 allows 9...♗xf3 (Black could also maintain the tension with 9...♗h5 of course) 10.♗xf3 dxc4 when 11.d5 seems to equalize for White!

9...dxc4 10.♗xc4 0-0

A typical IQP structure has been reached, where the active bishop on g4 gives Black easy play.

11.♗e2

The pin was annoying.

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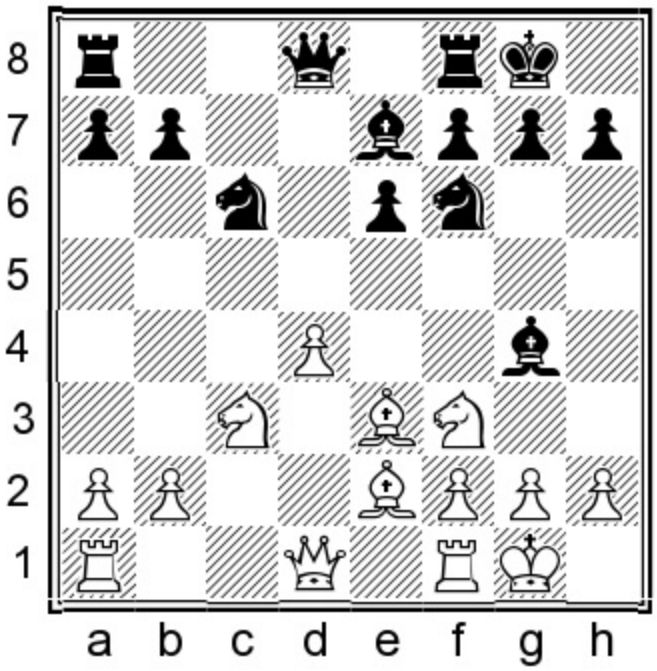


11...h6!?N

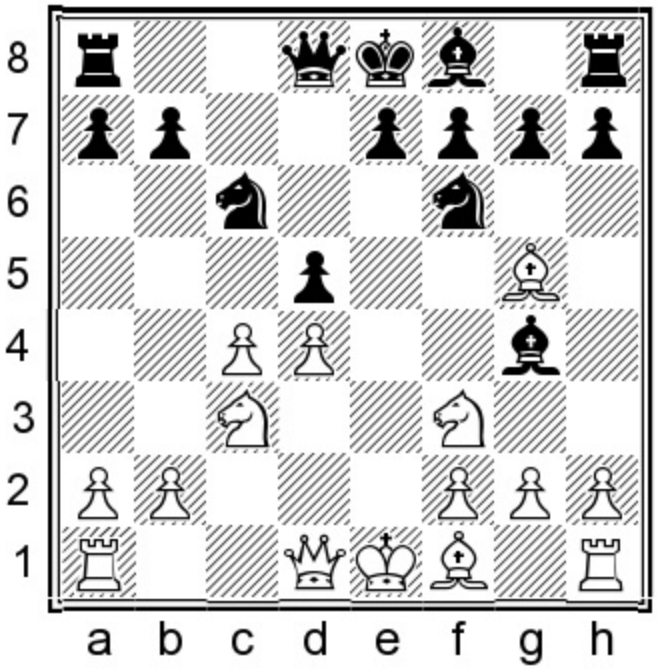
Creating an escape route for the bishop.

11...♖c8 is also fine.

12.♖c1 ♖c8 13.h3 ♗f5

Black has no problems.

A1) 7.♗g5!?



This somewhat unusual move is White's most interesting alternative to the main line. Axel Smith recommends this continuation in *e3 Poison*. (The Panov can arise via many move orders, including 1.♘f3 c5 2.c4 followed by e2-e3, d2-d4 and so on, in case you were wondering why it features in a

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book about e2-e3 systems.)

7...♕a5!?

7...♘e4 is also possible.

7...e6!?, on the other hand, is a little risky, but playable8.cxd5 exd5 9.♕e2†! ♗e6 (9...♕e7!?N also seems okay) 10.♗xf6 gxf6 With a double-edged position, Aronian – Grischuk, Saint Louis 2015.

8.♗xf6

8.♗d2 is fine for Black after: 8...♗xf3! 9.♕xf3 (9.gxf3 dxc4 and Black can be happy to have damaged the enemy structure.) 9...♘xd4 10.♕d1 This occurred in R. Li – Liang, Saint Louis 2018, and now 10...dxc4N (10...e5!?N also deserves attention) 11.♗xc4 ♕c7 seems promising for Black.

8...exf6

We know this kingside structure from the Classical Variation, but the big difference here is the tension in the centre. Can White exploit the pressure on d5?

9.h3

The answer is no!

9.cxd5 ♗b4! 10.♕b3 ♗xf3 11.dxc6 ♗xc6 is great for Black. For instance, 12.a3 ♗xc3† 13.♕xc3 ♕d5 14.f3 was seen in Van den Doel – Van der Sterren, Rotterdam 2000, and now the simple 14...0-0N leaves White in bad shape.

9.♕e2† has been tried in computer chess. A good response is 9...♔d8! 10.♕d2 ♗xf3 11.gxf3 ♗b4 12.0-0-0 ♘e7∞ with a roughly equal game.

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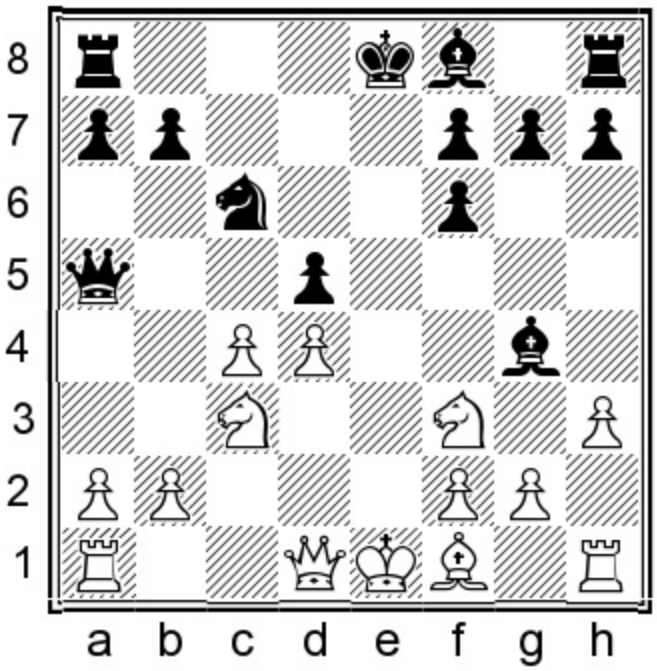


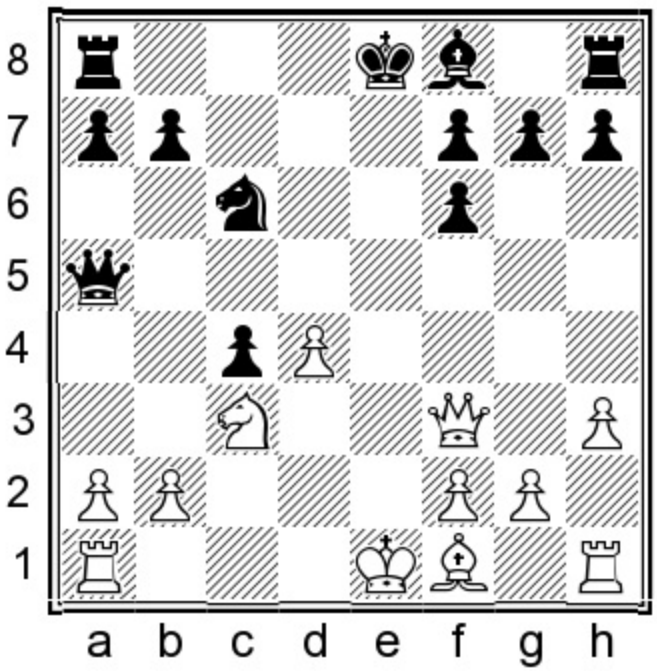
9...♗xf3

This is the simplest route to equality.

Of course 9...♗h5 comes to mind. Smith points out that 10.♗e2 is White's idea, intending to meet 10...dxc4?! with 11.♘d2!↑ when the bishop cannot retreat to e6. The computer line 10...♗a3!? 11.♕d2 ♗b4! seems okay for Black though.

Even 9...♗e6 can be considered, though I am not too fond of Black's position after 10.a3!.

10.♕xf3 dxc4



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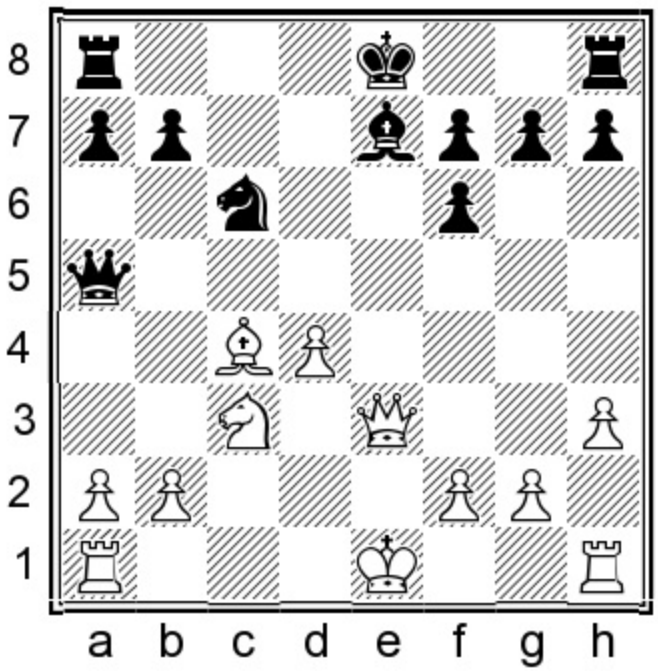
11.♕e3†

White has nothing better, for instance:
11.♕e4† ♗e7 12.d5 ♘e5 13.f4 ♕b4 14.0-0-0 ♘d3† 15.♗xd3 cxd3 16.♕xd3 ♕xf4† 17.♔b1 0-0-0⇄ Rattinger – Kupsys, corr. 2009.

11.♗xc4 0-0-0 12.d5 ♘e5 13.♕e2 ♘xc4 (Rambaldi suggests 13...♔b8 14.0-0 ♗d6= which also looks good.) 14.♕xc4† ♕c7 15.♕d3 ♖e8† 16.♔f1 h5 Black was fine in Buczinski – Roynet, corr. 2016.

11...♗e7 12.♗xc4



Smith analyses this far and points out that White would be winning if he could simplify to a pawn ending, though he acknowledges that there is no way to make that happen, and that in the meantime Black's control of the dark squares will prevent the passed pawn from getting beyond d5.

12...0-0 13.0-0 ♕b4

13...♖ad8 14.♖ad1 ♗b4= is given by Rambaldi.

13...♖fe8 is the engines' favourite, which also looks fine.

14.d5 ♘e5 15.♗b3 ♖fe8 16.♖ad1 ♗d6=

Sodomski – Toman, corr. 2017.

A2) 7.cxd5 ♘xd5

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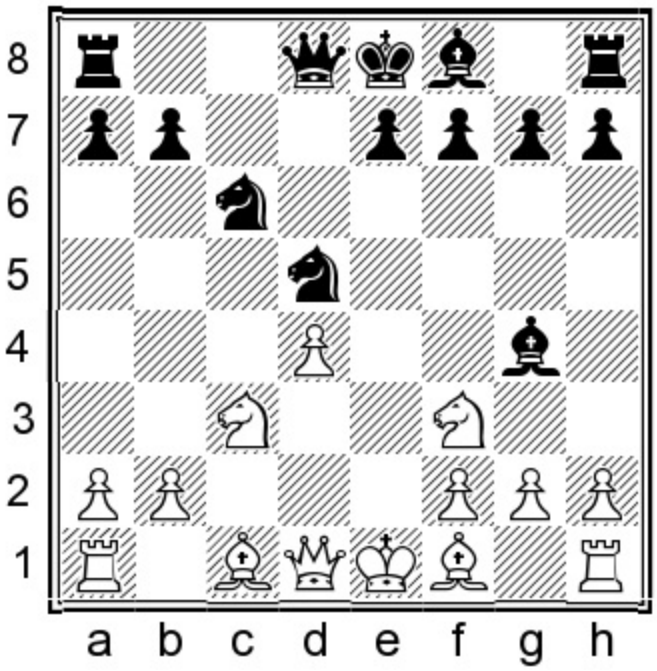

8.♕b3

If White is to justify capturing on d5 on the previous turn, then the text move is his only serious option. If White just develops normally, Black automatically gets good play. Here are a few such sidelines:

8.♗e2

This is harmless.

8...e6 9.0-0 ♗b4!

I like these active bishops on b4 and g4!

9...♗e7 is also sensible and fine.

10.h3!?

Other continuations such as 10.♘xd5 ♕xd5, 10.♘e4 0-0 and 10.♗d2 0-0 all give Black comfortable play.

10...♗h5

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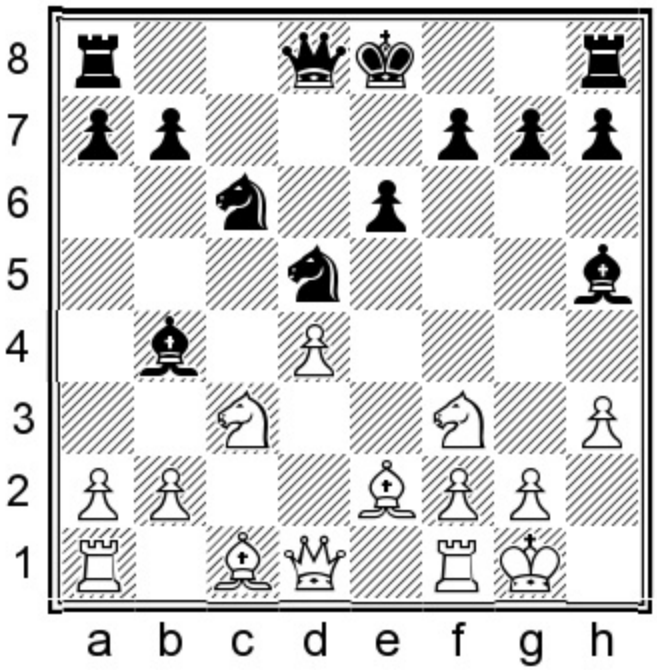

11.♗g5

11.♗d2 0-0 12.♖c1 ♗e7 gives Black a pleasant position playing against the IQP.

11...♕a5 12.♘xd5 ♕xd5 13.a3 ♗a5

Having forced a favourable exchange of knights, Black was slightly better in Kratochvil – Ballard, corr. 2011.

8.♗b5 ♖c8

8...e6!? 9.h3 ♗h5 is also playable, and if 10.♕a4 Black sacrifices a pawn with 10...f6!.

9.h3

9.0-0 e6 will most likely transpose.

9...♗h5

9...♗xf3 10.♕xf3 e6 is solid.

10.g4

10.0-0 e6 11.♖e1 (11.g4 ♗g6 is covered under 10.g4) 11...♗e7 12.♖e5 ♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♗g6 The position was balanced in Khasin – Bagirov, Baku 1961.

10...♗g6 11.0-0 e6 12.♘e5

I also considered 12.♕a4N 12...♗e7 13.♘e5 0-0! 14.♗xc6 bxc6 15.♘xc6 (White can try 15.♕xa7 but Black has excellent compensation) 15...♕e8 16.♘xe7† ♕xe7∓ when White may regret weakening his kingside.

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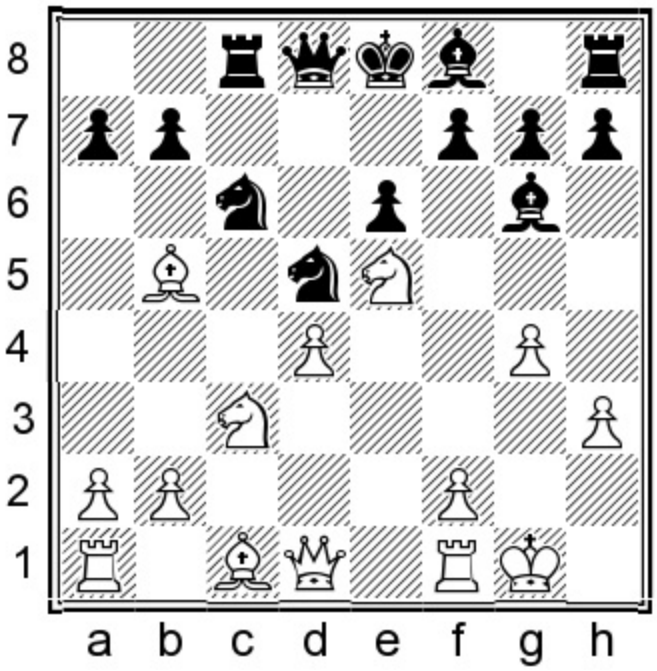

12...♗d6! 13.♘xd5 ♗xe5 14.dxe5

In Rzepecka – Srnec, Brno 2004, Black allowed a queen exchange for some reason. Since White's king has been exposed by the g2-g4 advance, I suggest 14...exd5N when Black is fine.

A final sideline is:

8.♗c4 e6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.h3

10.♘xd5 exd5 11.♗e2 0-0 is fine for Black.

10.♗e3 is also nothing. Black can either play 10...0-0 with a normal game or proceed more ambitiously with 10...♘xe3!? 11.fxe3 0-0 when he may already be marginally better with the bishops.

10...♗h5

Another possibility is 10...♗xf3 11.♕xf3 ♘xd4 12.♕e4 ♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♘c6 14.♖b1 ♕d7!?N when White has compensation, but I see no reason why Black shouldn't be okay.

11.♗xd5

11.♖e1 0-0 and Black is at least equal.

11...exd5 12.g4 ♗g6 13.♕b3

This is what White was aiming for. Unfortunately for him, Black easily avoids any danger and has chances to expose White's weak kingside.

13...♘b4

13...0-0!?, as suggested by Rambaldi, is worth a try. For instance, 14.♘xd5 ♗e4 15.♘xe7† ♘xe7⩲ with decent play for Black.

14.♕a4† ♔f8! 15.♘e5

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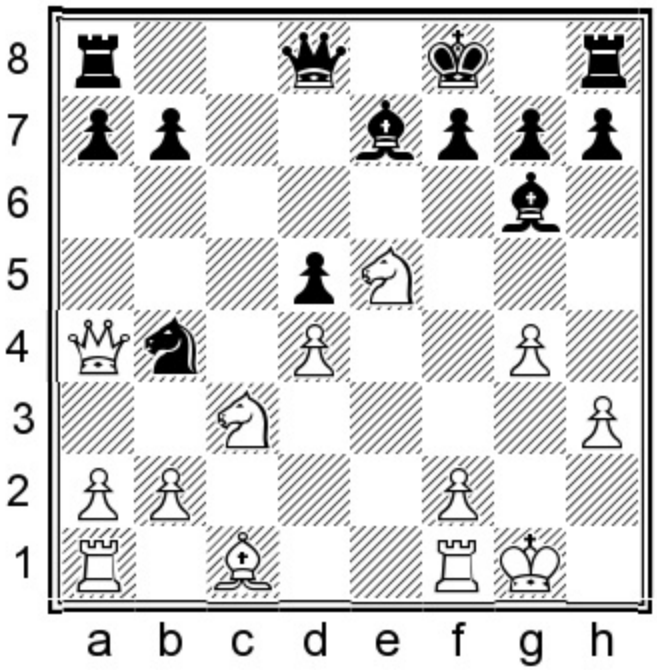


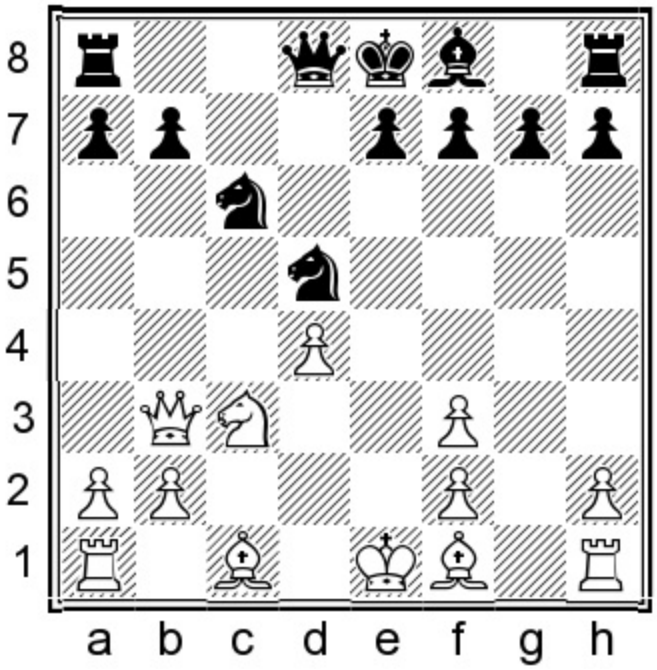
15...f6!N

Improving on 15...♗c2 16.♕b5 f6 as played in Meinhardt – Herzenstein, Willingen 2001, when 17.a3!N would have given Black some problems.

16.♘xg6† hxg6 17.♔g2 ♕d6

The position is balanced.

8...♗xf3 9.gxf3



The tried-and-tested **A21)** 9...e6 is my main recommendation, while **A22)** 9...♘b6!? is a riskier and more ambitious alternative which I analyse separately.

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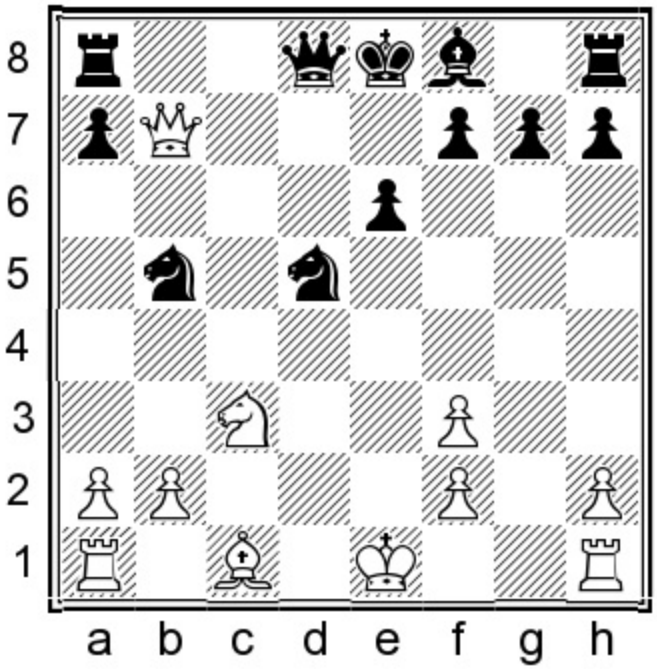
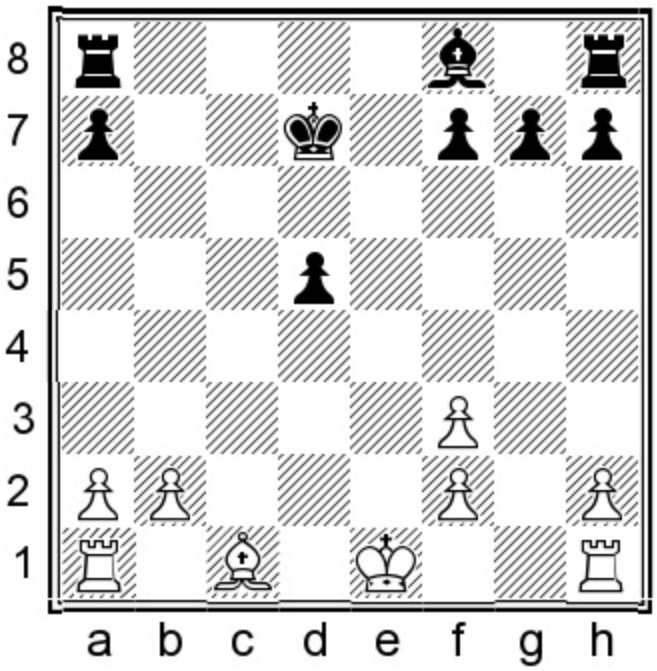
A21) 9...e6 10.♕xb7 ♘xd4 11.♗b5† ♘xb5



12.♕c6†

A clever zwischenzug. This is the main line, which usually leads to a famous endgame.

12.♕xb5† ♕d7 13.♕xd7† ♔xd7 14.♘xd5 exd5 gives Black an easier version of the endgame, with his king on d7 instead of e7.



A good example continued: 15.♗e3 ♗b4† 16.♔e2 ♖hc8 17.♖ac1 ♗d6 18.♔d3 a6= With no problems for Black, V. Popov – Smeets, Wijk aan Zee 2004.

12...♔e7

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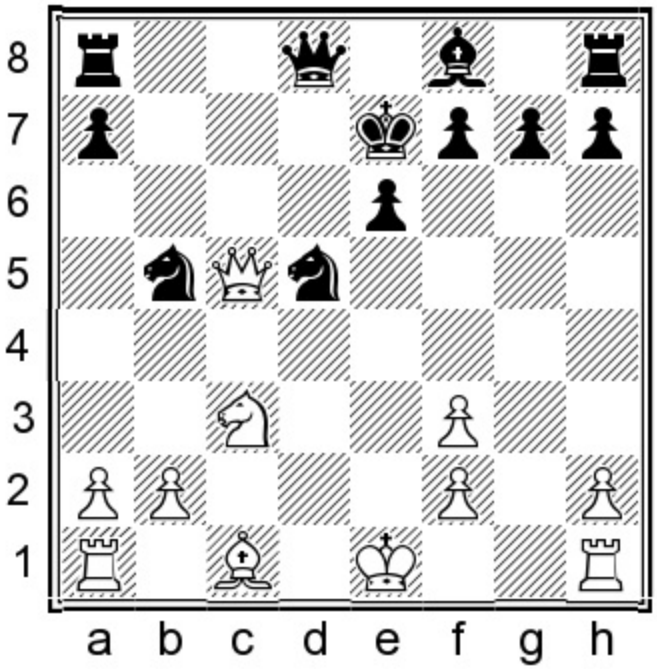
We will analyse the interesting new development **A211)** 13.♕c5†!?, followed by the traditional **A212)** 13.♕xb5.

A211) 13.♕c5†!?



This stunning idea was unknown until Grischuk used it to beat Vidit at the 2016 World Rapid Championship.

13...♘d6 14.♘xd5†

Surprisingly, Black has a choice here: the obvious **A2111)** 14...exd5 should be safe enough, but **A2112)** 14...♔d7!? is an interesting alternative which could offer more winning chances, as we will see next.

A2111) 14...exd5

I first became aware of this line when I encountered it in a blitz game. To be honest, I thought that my opponent had blundered a piece! That wasn't the case, and in our next game he repeated the same sacrifice. Since then I have analysed it and checked the various games, and I must admit it is a decent piece sacrifice which gives just about enough compensation. The computer claims it is just 0.00! Black's position is certainly tricky to handle in blitz, although with more time on the clock I guess it isn't so frightening. Still, it could come as a cold shower to unsuspecting players who think they're heading for a quiet endgame!

15.0-0

15.♕xd5 ♕b8 16.0-0 ♕b7 transposes.

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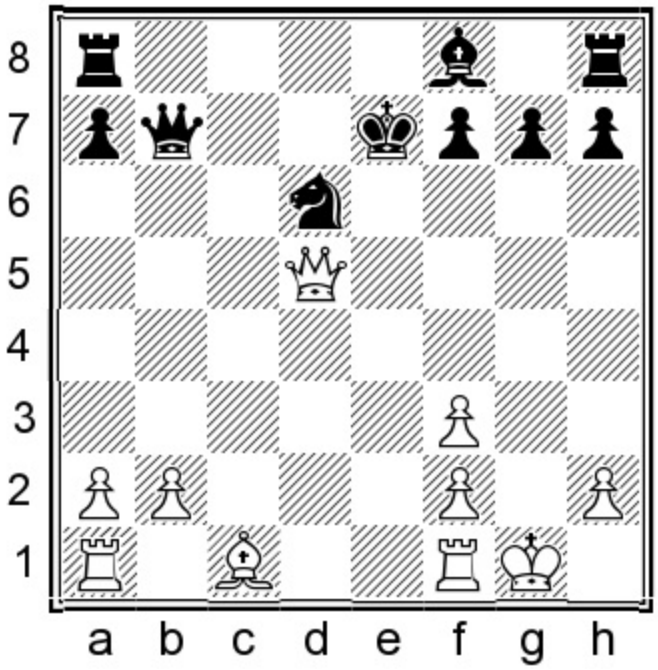
15...♕c8 16.♕xd5 ♕b7

This is the right square for the queen.



17.♕e5†

White can try other moves. He always has compensation, but I don't think Black is in any real danger and he may gradually take over.
17.♕h5 ♔e8 18.♖e1† ♗e7 19.♗g5 ♘c8 20.♖ac1 ♔f8 21.♖xc8† ♕xc8 22.♗xe7† ♔g8∓ and the king escapes.

17.♖e1† ♔d7 18.♕d1 (18.♕d3 ♕b5∓) 18...♖c8 19.♗f4 ♖c6 20.♕a4 ♕a6³ repels the attack.

17.♗g5† ♔d7 18.♕d4 ♕b6 19.♕g4† f5 20.♕a4† ♕b5 This leads to a draw. (Black might be able to get away with 20...♔e6!? 21.♖ac1 ♔f7 22.♕d7† ♔g6) 21.♕d4 ♕b6=

17...♔d7

A fascinating position has been reached. There is no way to get the king away from the centre, but the knight provides good cover. Objectively, the position is balanced.

18.♖d1

18.♗f4 was seen in Navumenka – Von Mettenheim, Bratislava 2019, and now 18...♖e8!N is more or less equal, but in a more pleasant way for Black than in our main line.

Pinning the knight is best. The rest of the line seems pretty forced.

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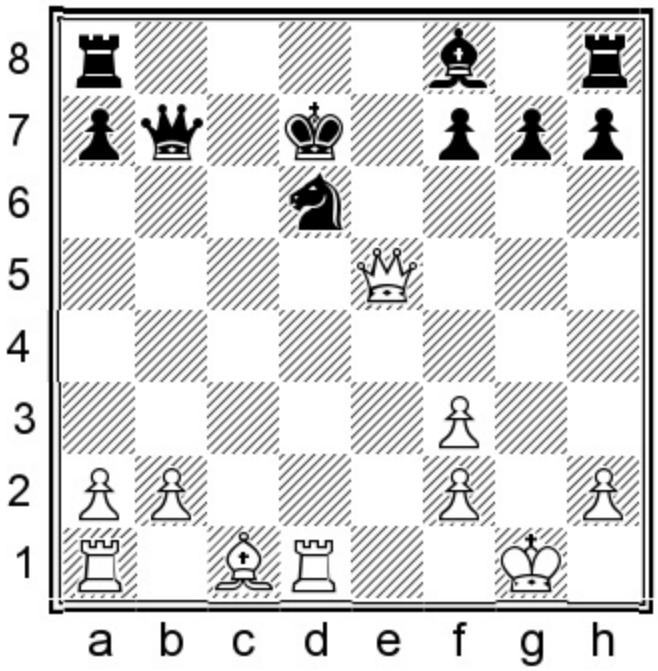


18...♖e8 19.♕f5†

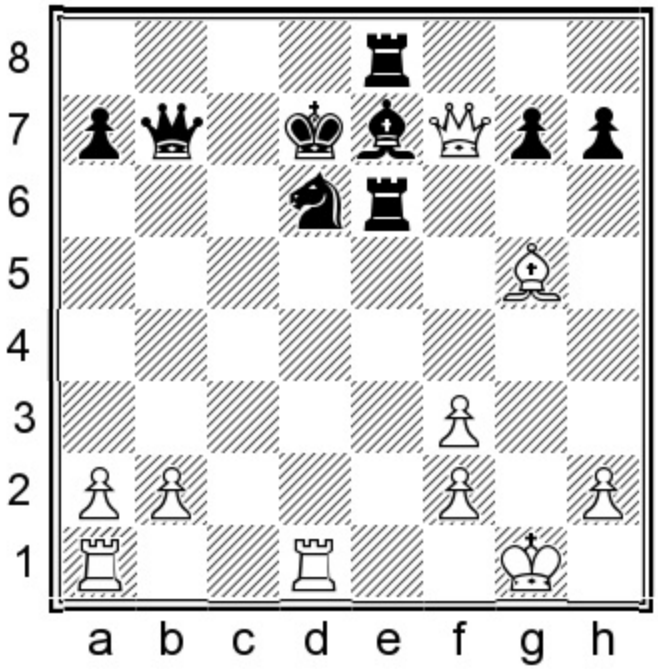
This move is possible because of the pin.

19...♖e6 20.♕xf7†

And this!

20...♗e7 21.♗g5 ♖e8

Black protects everything and White is lucky to be able to force a draw.



22.♖xd6†!

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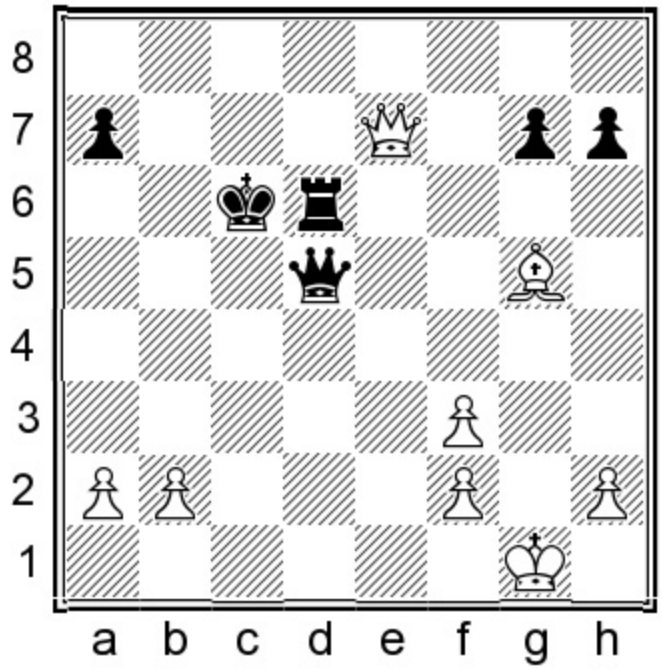
22.♖d2? proved too slow after 22...h6 23.♗e3 ♖f8 24.♕xg7 ♖ff6! 25.♔h1 ♖xf3 and White resigned in Plat – Kjartansson, Schwaebisch Gmuend 2018, due to: 26.♕g2 ♖g6–+

22...♖xd6 23.♖e1

Black's bishop cannot be protected.

23...♕d5 24.♖xe7† ♖xe7 25.♕xe7† ♔c6



The position is equal. With our king out in the open, it is unrealistic to play for a win, and it seems likely that the game will end in perpetual check somehow. The only game to reach this position ended in exactly that way after:

26.♗f4 ♖g6† 27.♗g3 ♕xa2 28.♕c7† ♔b5 29.♕b7† ♔c5 30.♕e7† ♔b5 31.♕b7† ♔c5 32.♕e7† ♔b5

½–½ Simacek – Velicka, Ostrava 2018.

A2112) 14...♔d7!?

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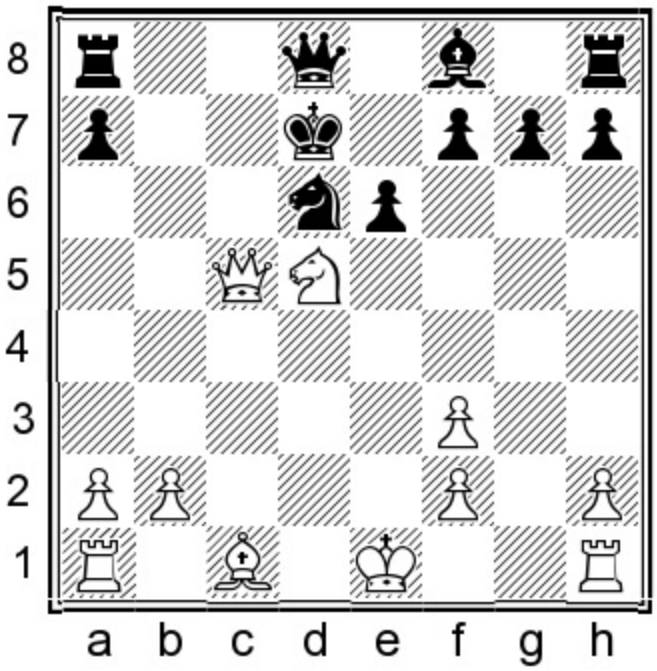

This is an interesting way to throw an unexpected move back at White. Rather than hurry to accept the sacrificed piece, Black keeps the material level and hopes to fight for an advantage based on White's damaged kingside structure.

15.♘c3

15.0-0 has not been played. White is still hoping Black will capture the knight, which would transpose to the previous variation, but 15...♕c8 16.♕a5 ♘c4! (16...exd5 17.♖d1⩲ resembles the 14...exd5 line and should ultimately be equal) 17.♕a4† ♕c6 18.♕xc6† ♔xc6 19.♘e3 ♘b6 reaches an endgame where only Black can be better.

15...♕b6 16.♕h5

Only by keeping the queens on can White hope to cause problems.

16.♕xb6 axb6 17.♗f4 ♘f5 18.0-0-0† ♔c6= was only equal in Bogdanov – Vaishali, Agios Ioannis 2019, but Black has achieved his goal of reaching an endgame with the better structure.

16.♕e5 ♗e7 (16...♕a6N 17.♖g1 f6= is a decent alternative) 17.♕e2 was played in Heberla – Janik, Warsaw 2019. (17.0-0 f6 18.♕e2 ♘f5⇄) 17...♖hd8N This looks logical, followed by ...♔e8 when Black starts getting coordinated nicely.

16...♔e8 17.0-0

17.♕g4?! is well met by 17...f5!∓ followed by ...♔f7.

17...♘f5

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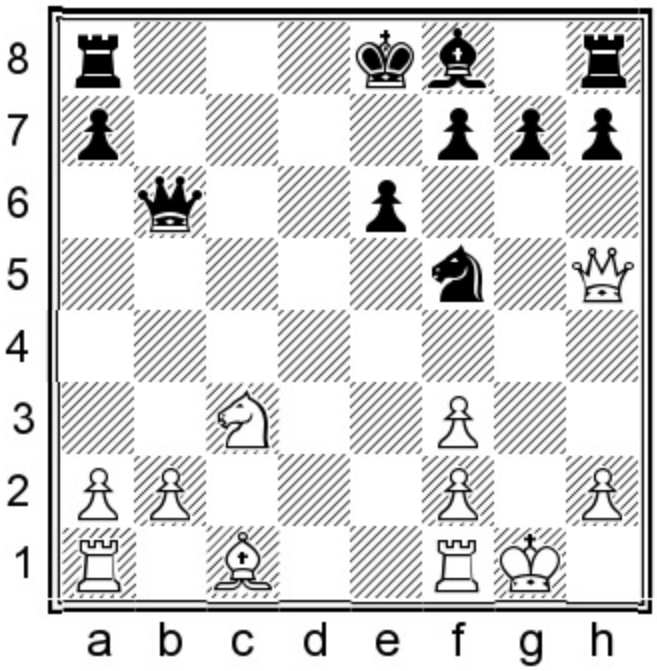


The knight is wonderful here: it guards many important squares around Black's king, and it will be able to jump to d4 or h4 for attacking purposes at a moment's notice.

18.♖d1

Another example continued:

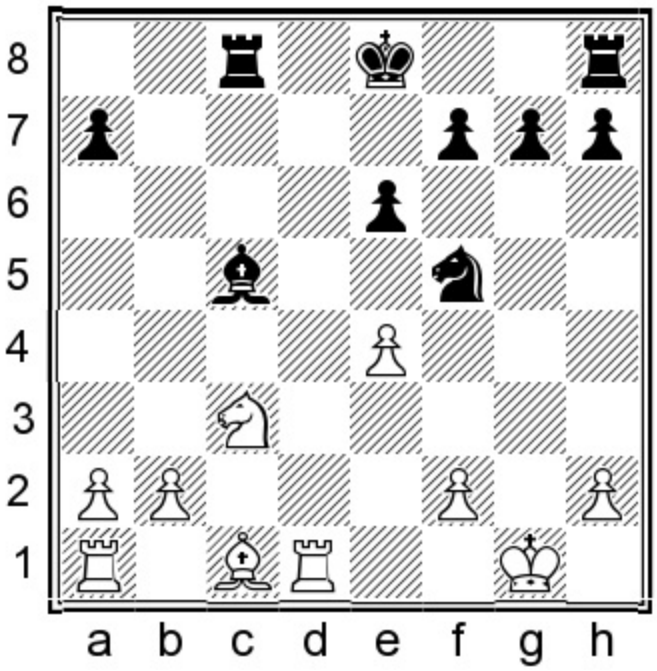
18.♕g4 ♖c8 19.♖d1 ♗c5

19...♗e7!?N also leads to interesting play after 20.♕e4 ♗h4⇄ or 20...Qc6⇄.

20.♕a4† ♕c6 21.♕e4 ♕xe4

A good alternative is 21...f6N intending ...♔f7.

22.fxe4



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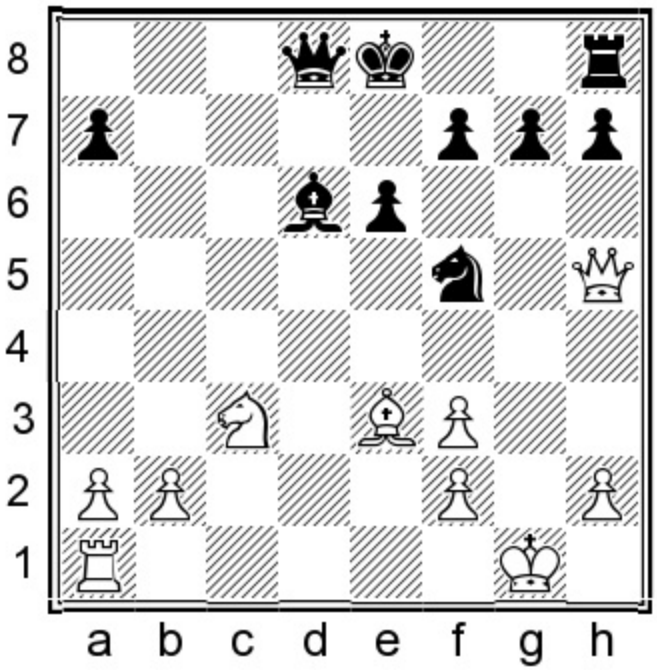
In Pechac – Kreisl, Skara Lubovna 2017, Black moved the knight to d4, where it looks active but is actually a bit unstable. A better option is:

22...♘d6!N 23.♗f4 ♔e7

Black is at least equal in the endgame. White's previously doubled f-pawns may have been straightened out, but Black nevertheless keeps the better structure.

18...♖d8 19.♖xd8† ♕xd8 20.♗e3 ♗d6



21.♖d1

21.♗xa7 grabs a pawn but after 21...♕a5 22.♗e3 g6 23.♕g5 ♗e5! 24.♗d2 f6 25.♕g4 ♔f7 Black enjoys excellent coordination. Play may continue 26.♕e4 ♖d8 27.♗f4 ♗xf4 28.♕xf4 ♖d4 29.♕b8 ♘h4⇄ when the position is getting dangerous for White.

21...♕b8 22.♕g4 ♗xh2†!?

White is not really threatening anything, so Black can afford to pick up a pawn and retreat with his bishop.

23.♔h1 ♗d6

Notice how well the knight on f5 continues to hold everything together.

24.♕a4† ♔e7 25.♘b5

25.♘e4 ♖d8 26.♗d2 ♕b7⇄ also leads to complex but roughly equal play.

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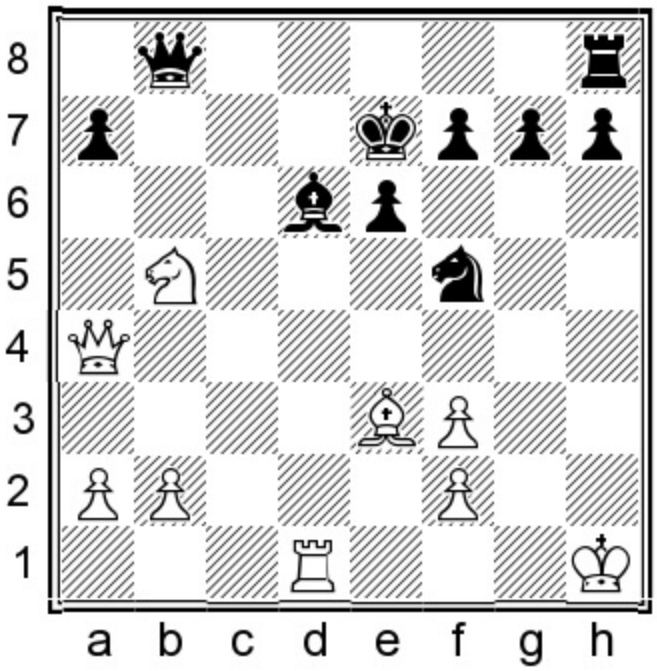

25...♖d8

An interesting alternative is: 25...♘xe3!? 26.♘xa7 ♘xd1 27.♘c6† ♔f6 28.♘xb8 ♘xf2† 29.♔g2 ♖xb8 30.♕h4† g5 31.♕xf2 (31.♕h6† ♔e7 32.♕xg5† ♔d7 33.♕d2 ♘d3! 34.♕xd3 ♖xb2† 35.♔f1 ♖xa2 36.♕xh7 ♔e7 should be a draw, although if anyone is in danger it is White.) 31...♗e5 32.b3 h5⇄ The endgame should be a draw, but in a practical game anything could happen.

26.♘xd6

26.♗xa7 ♕b7 27.♘xd6 ♕xf3† 28.♔g1 ♘xd6 should also be a draw with best play.

26...♘xe3 27.fxe3 ♖xd6

A draw was agreed here in Schuster – Ciucurel, corr. 2014. The continuation could be:

28.♖xd6 ♕xd6 29.♕xa7† ♔f6 30.♕d4† ♕xd4 31.exd4=

A212) 13.♕xb5

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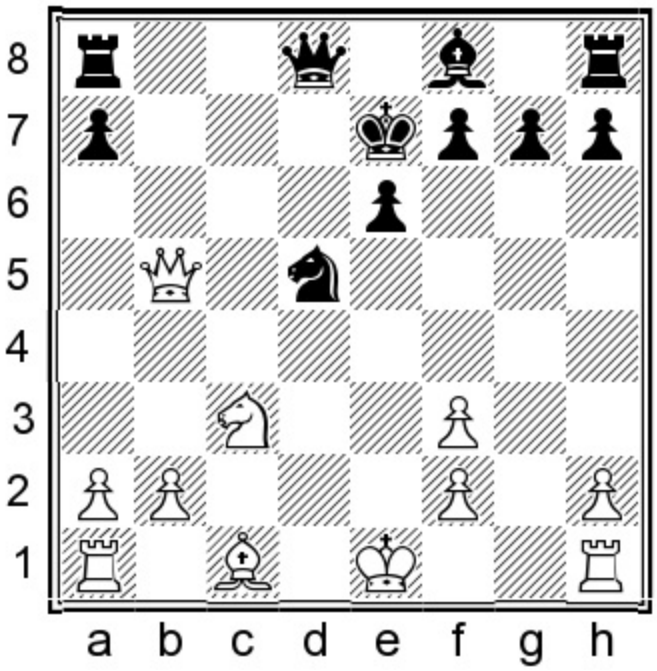

This is the traditional move, heading towards the endgame.

13...♕d7

In *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* I analysed 13...♘xc3!? 14.bxc3 ♖b8 as an interesting alternative to the ending. Many new games have taken place, and the best route for White is: 15.♕c5† ♔e8 16.♕xa7 ♗d6 17.0-0! ♖b5 18.♕d4! The last move is an important detail which I did not consider in my previous work. White has a clear plus score from here and I don't fully trust this line for Black. If you wish to avoid the endgame, then 9...♘b6!? is the alternative which I will present later.

14.♘xd5†

If White tries to keep the queens on the board then he risks becoming worse. Black has the better structure and the only minus – the king on e7 – can soon be fixed.

14.♗g5† is playable but pointless, as 14...f6 15.♘xd5† exd5 16.♕xd7† ♔xd7 gives Black an easier version of the standard endgame because his king is on d7 instead of e7.

14.♕e2?! ♘xc3 15.bxc3 f6 16.0-0 ♔f7 17.♖d1 ♕c6 18.♕e4

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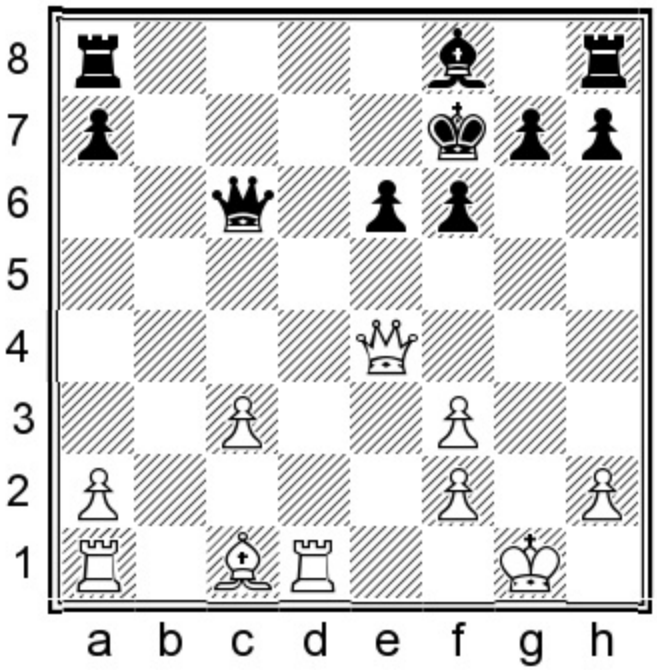
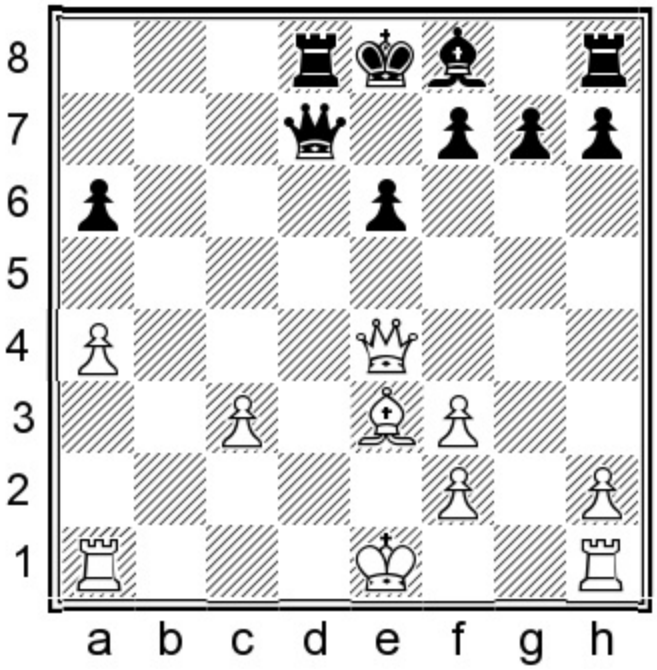


18...♕xe4! Black can afford to improve White's kingside structure a little, as he still has the more compact structure with two pawn islands versus four. 19.fxe4 ♗c5 20.♖d7† ♔g6∓ Sardarov – Bagirov, Kishinev 1964.

14.♕a5 ♘xc3 15.♕xc3 (15.bxc3?! weakens White's structure, and after 15...f6 the king hides on f7 anyway.) 15...f6 16.0-0 ♔f7 17.♗e3 ♗e7= This was level in Tseitlin – Kasparov, Daugavpils 1978, although I guess most players would slightly favour Black due to his better structure.

14.a4!? is an interesting try but a good reply is: 14...♘xc3N 15.bxc3 a6! 16.♕b4† ♔e8 17.♕e4 ♖d8 18.♗e3 (18.0-0 ♕d5 is fine for Black)



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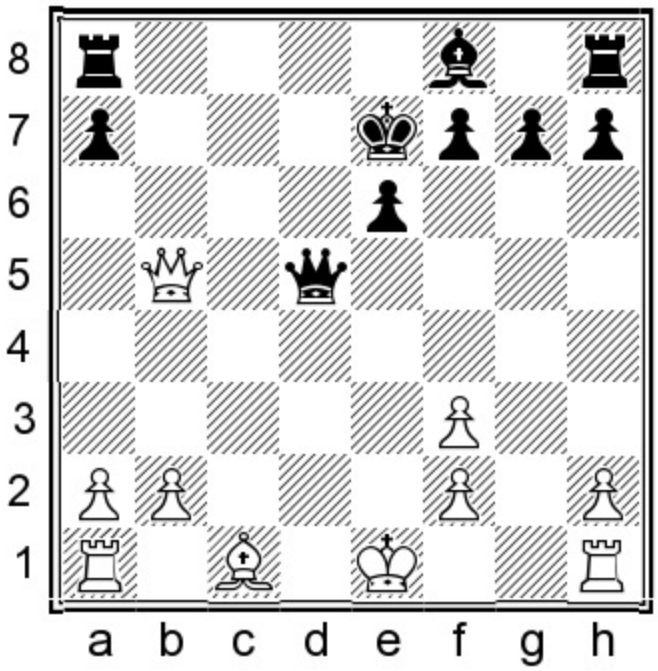
18...f5! 19.♕c4 ♕c8 20.♕xc8 ♖xc8 21.♖b1 ♗d6 22.♔e2 ♔d7= As given by Rambaldi. The position is

only equal, but White should be a little careful because of his inferior pawn structure.

14...♕xd5

14...exd5?! cannot be recommended. White benefits the most from the queens staying on the board. Black has long-term issues with his king and even though he might be able to defend, why bother since the ending offers easy equality?



The text move practically forces White to exchange queens, which is in the spirit of this whole variation. The ending exists in two versions. White can exchange at once with **A2121)** 15.♕xd5, which is the main line, or he can insert **A2122)** 15.♗g5† to force 15...f6 before exchanging queens. The difference is minor but it could prove important in certain lines, so I will deeply investigate both options.

Before we get to that, let's see what could happen if White tries to avoid the exchange:

15.♕b4† ♔f6 16.♕h4† g5 17.♕h5 I think this looks riskier for White than for Black, although of course the computer simply claims it is balanced! Here are some brief sample lines:

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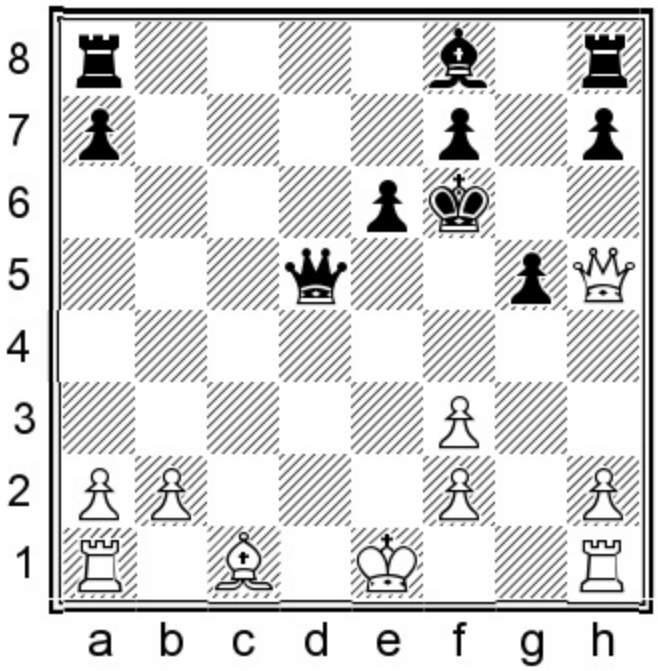
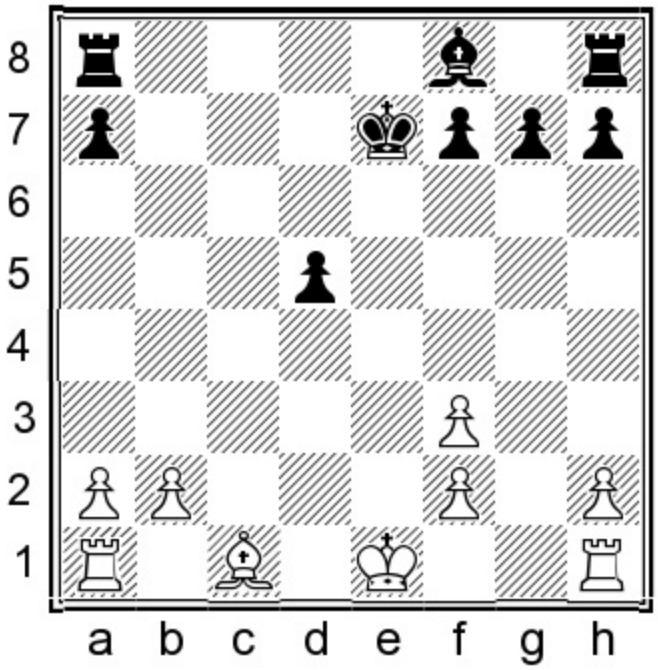


17...h6 (17...♗b4† 18.♔f1 h6 19.♔g2 ♖ac8 20.♗e3 ♗c5= is also fine.) 18.0-0 ♗d6 19.♗e3 ♕f5 20.♖ad1 ♗e5 21.♖d7 ♔g7= Black is safe and his better structure may eventually count for something.

A2121) 15.♕xd5 exd5



This is the starting position of the famous ending which, despite its apparent simplicity and plethora of games and analysis, is far from exhausted. Nevertheless, deep investigation has revealed the grand scheme of play and the overall verdict is clear: Black has no serious problems if he knows what he is doing. He has to come up with a few precise moves to address his two most obvious issues: the weak, isolated d-pawn and the vulnerable king in the centre. Both deficiencies can quickly turn into strengths: the d-pawn is passed, and the centralized king may prove more active than its

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counterpart. The next phase will determine who, if anyone, will gain the upper hand. Don't be fooled by any engine claims about everything being 0.00. While that might be objectively true, the position is not as easy to play as you might think – for either side! There are a lot of subtleties and prospects to outplay the opponent with either colour.

White faces a choice: should he castle short or long? There is a lot to be said for **A21211)** 16.0-0!?, but the traditional main line has been **A21212)** 16.♗e3 intending 0-0-0.

Alternatives to our two main moves are easily dealt with:

16.♗g5† f6 transposes to the 15.♗g5† line. (16...♔e6!? is playable but it's not really an improvement, so I suggest sticking with the main line to keep things simple.)

16.♗d2 seems rather passive. 16...♔e6 17.0-0-0 White's idea is to give a check on e1. The simple 17...f6!N 18.♖he1† ♔f7= solves this problem in a satisfactory way.

16.♗f4

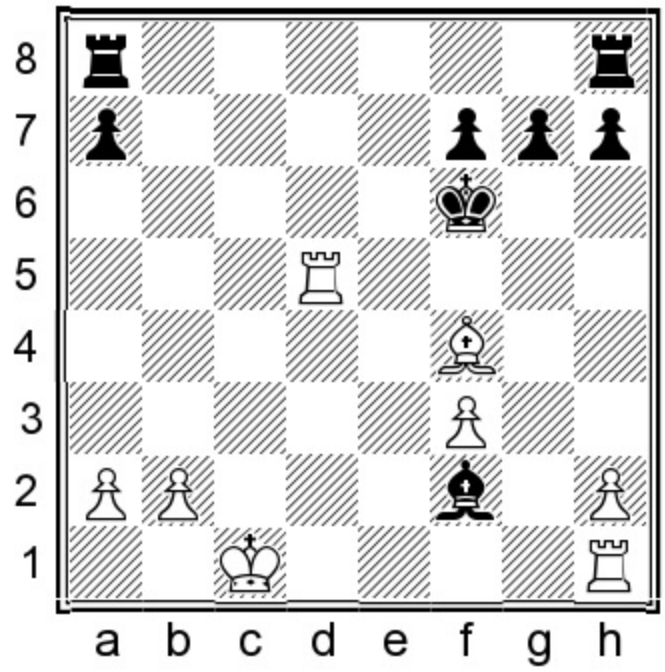
This is the most enterprising of White's alternatives.

16...♔f6

16...♔d7 17.0-0-0 ♔c6 is possible, but the king is a little awkward on the open c-file.

16...♔e6 17.0-0-0 ♖d8 18.♖he1† ♔f5 has also been tested and should be okay.

17.0-0-0 ♗c5 18.♖xd5 ♗xf2=



Black has no problems, for example:

19.♗e5† ♔g6 20.♗d4 ♗xd4 21.♖xd4 ♖ac8† 22.♔b1 ♖hd8 23.♖g1† ♔f6 24.♖f4† ♔e7 25.b3 g6 26.♖e1† ♔f8 27.♖c1 ♖xc1†

½–½ Potkin – Sjugirov, Rogaska Slatina 2011.

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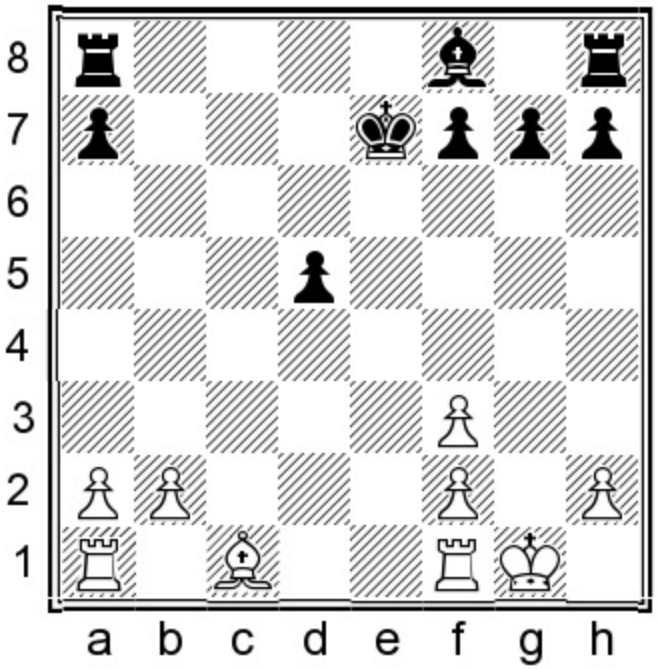
A21211) 16.0-0!?



16...♔e6

This is the safest choice.

There is an interesting alternative:

16...♖d8!?

Planning active counterplay with the passed d-pawn. Suddenly it looks strong!

17.♖d1

The most critical. Against other moves Black easily consolidates:

a) 17.♗d2 ♔f6 18.♖fe1 ♗c5 is covered under 17.♖e1† below.

b) 17.♖e1† ♔f6 And now 18.♗d2N looks logical, but 18...♗c5 19.b4 ♗d4 20.♖ad1 ♖he8= leaves Black with no problems.

c) 17.b3 ♔e6 18.♗b2 was seen in Gaponenko – Purtseladze, Rijeka 2010. I suggest: 18...f6N 19.♗d4 ♖d7 20.♖fe1† ♔f7 21.♖ac1 ♗d6=

d) 17.♗f4 ♔e6 18.♖ad1!?N (18.♖ac1 ♔f5 19.♗e3 ♗d6 20.♖fd1 occurred in Rasmussen – T. Nielsen, Denmark 1998, when 20...♗e5N looks equal.) 18...f6 19.♖fe1† ♔f5 20.♗e3 ♗b4 21.♖e2 ♖d7=

17...d4

A passed pawn should advance!

17...g6!?N planning ...♗g7, and 17...♔e6 also make sense.

18.♗f4 ♔e6 19.♖ac1

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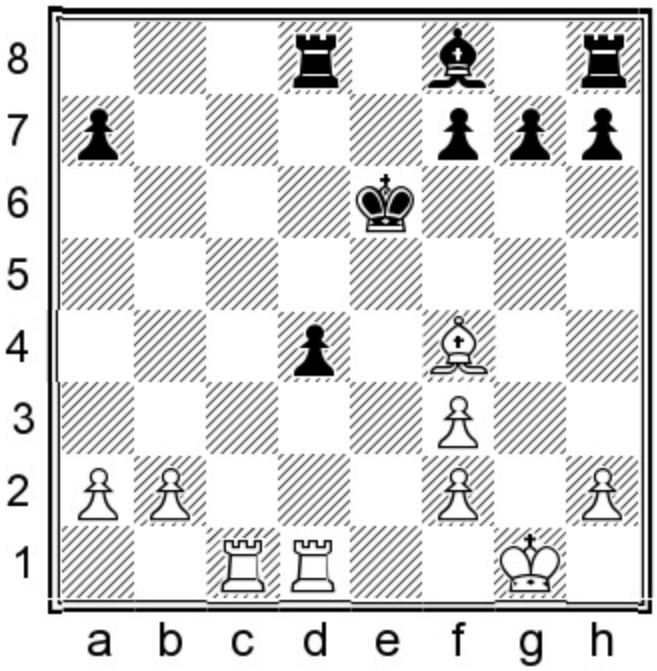

Reaching a critical position.

19...g5!?

This is the most active choice, which involves a pawn sacrifice for the initiative. Of course the pawn cannot be taken immediately because of trouble along the g-file, but Black will leave it en prise.

The alternative is 19...♖d5 20.♖c8 g5 21.♗d2 ♗g7 22.♖c6† when Fernandez likes White. It is true that White has some initiative, but in several engine games Black has kept the balance after any of 22...♖d6, 22...♔d7 and 22...♔f5, so I would not dismiss this line categorically.

20.♗e3 ♗g7! 21.♗xg5

White may as well take the pawn with gain of tempo.

21.♖c6† ♔d5 22.♖c7 looks active, but after 22...♗e5 23.♖xa7 ♔e6⩱ Black had good compensation in Predojevic – Anastasian, Kemer 2007. Black is well coordinated and will be able to combine play against the white queenside with threats to advance the passed pawn.

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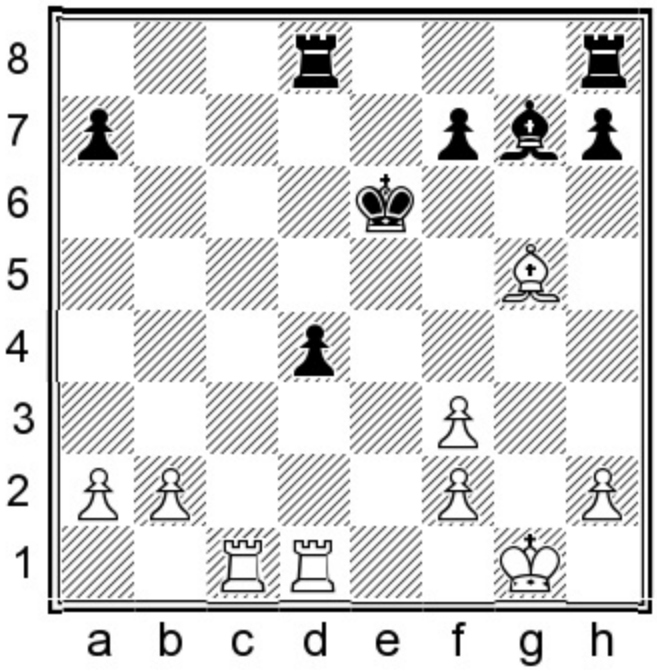


This position was reached in Ivanchuk – Larino Nieto, Gibraltar 2014. I suggest:

21...♖c8!N

Black has decent compensation. He can activate his king and disturb the white bishop, for instance:

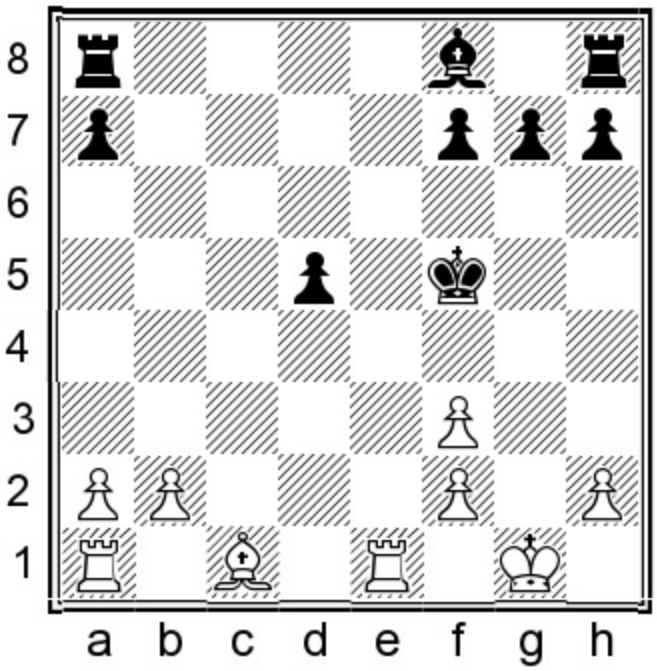
22.♔f1 ♔f5! 23.♗d2

Or 23.♗h4 when Black various options, including 23...h5.

23...♗e5 24.h3 d3∓

17.♖e1† ♔f5

The king is both safe and effective here.



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18.♖d1

White has also tried:

18.♗e3 ♗e7

The bishop will be well placed on f6.

19.♖ac1

19.♖ad1 ♖hd8 20.♖d4 f6!? This move keeps the game going. I don't think Black is better, but he is not worse either. The position is far from dull, so this could be worth trying.

20...♗f6 is fine as long as you don't mind a quick day at the office: 21.♖f4† ♔g6 22.♖g4† ♔f5 23.♖f4† ♔g6= With a repetition.

I also checked 20...g5 21.♖ed1 ♔e6 22.♖e1 and Black has to repeat: 22...♔f5=

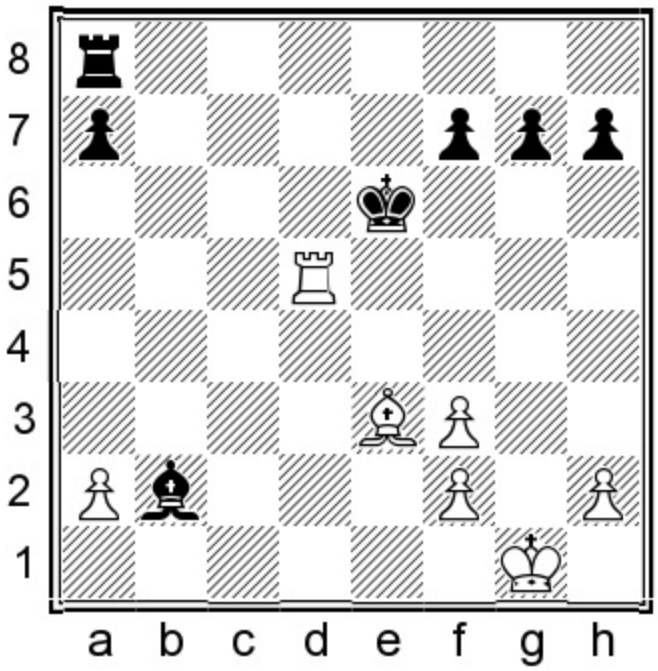
19...♗f6 20.♖c5

20.b4!?N could be tried, though 20...♖hc8 offers Black good counterplay.

20...♖hd8 21.♖d1

21.b4 can be met by either 21...♔g6!? planning ...d4, or the simple 21...♗e7N 22.♖c7 ♗xb4.

21...♗xb2 22.♖cxd5† ♖xd5 23.♖xd5† ♔e6



At the time of writing I found ten engine games from this position, and Black holds the balance without any big problems.

24.♖b5

24.♖h5 h6 25.♖b5 is hardly an improvement. 24.♖a5 a6 is also fine for Black.

24...♗e5 25.f4 ♗c7 26.f5† ♔d7=

18...♖d8 19.♗e3 ♖d7

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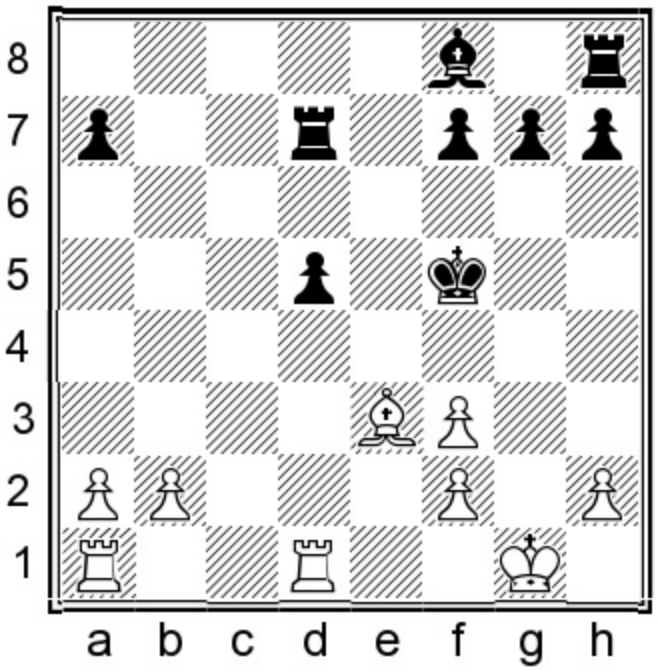

The black rook defends the two weak points on a7 and d5. As soon as he gets his kingside pieces developed, he will have a fine position. The question is if White can achieve something quickly before that happens. The answer is no!

20.♖d4

20.♖ac1 ♗e7 21.♖d4 g5! prevents ♖f4†, and after 22.♖a4 ♗f6 23.b4 d4 24.♖a5† ♔g6 25.♗d2 ♖e8 26.♔f1 d3⇄ Black had good play in Adams – Dreev, Wijk aan Zee 2002.

20...♗c5 21.♖g4

21.♖f4† ♔e5 22.♖c1 ♗b6! was getting a little risky for White in P.H. Nielsen – Filippov, Gistrup 1996. Although the position is theoretically still in balance, Black's passed pawn is an asset that gives him some initiative.

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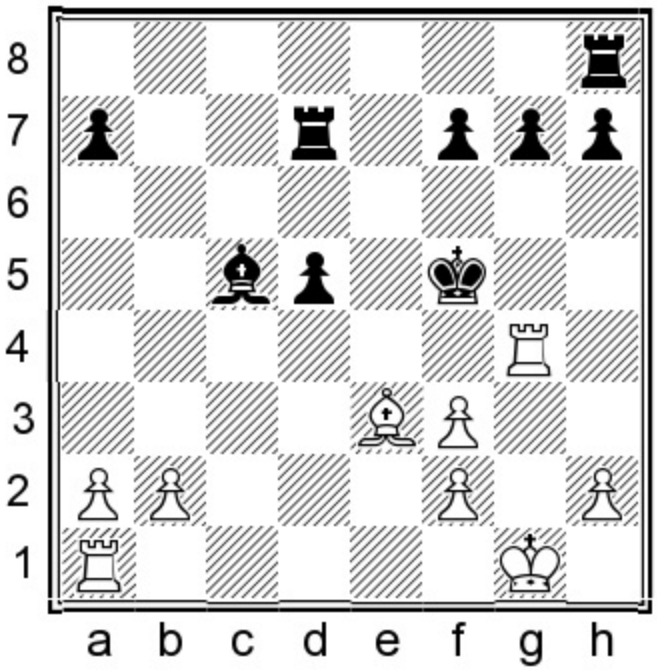

21...♗b6!

A winning attempt.

21...♗e7 allows a repetition with 22.♖f4† ♔g6 23.♖g4† ♔f5. Of course White is not obliged to take it and he might continue with 24.♖xg7, but after 24...♗f6 25.♖g4 ♗xb2 he really should take the draw: 26.♖f4† ♔g6 27.♖g4† ♔f5=

22.♖xg7 d4

The mobile passed pawn gives Black excellent compensation in all lines.

23.♖d1

White can maintain his extra pawn in different ways, but Black always has plenty of counterplay with his mobile passer and active pieces. Here are a few other examples:

23.♗h6 ♖c8 24.♖g5† ♔e6 25.♖e1† ♔d6⩲ And the black rook is ready to come to c2.

23.♗d2 ♔f6 (23...♖c8!? 24.♖xh7 ♖c2⇄) 24.♖g4 ♖c8 And again White had better take the repetition: 25.♖f4† ♔g6 26.♖g4† ♔f6= As has occurred in some engine games.

23...♖e8

23...♖c8 is also possible, for example: 24.♔g2 ♔e6 25.♗d2 ♖c2 26.b4 ♖xa2 27.♖xh7 ♖c7 28.h4 ♖cc2 29.♗e1 ♖c8⩲

24.♖g5† ♔f6 25.♗d2 ♖e2 26.f4 h6 27.♖e5

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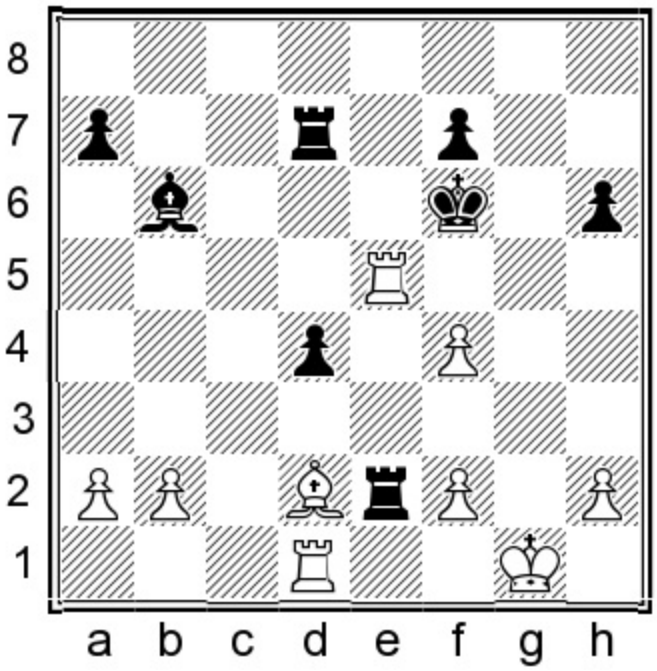
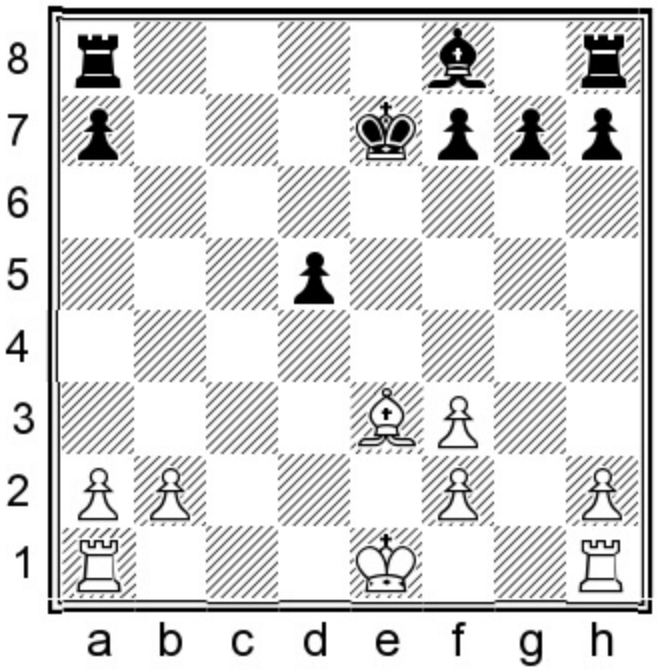


27...♖xe5 28.fxe5† ♔xe5 29.♗xh6 ♖d6 30.♗d2 ♔e4↑

If anything, the position is more dangerous for White than for Black.

A21212) 16.♗e3



This has been the most popular choice by some margin.

16...♔e6 17.0-0-0 ♗b4!

A key move. The bishop temporarily prevents ♖e1 and prepares to exchange itself for White's much stronger bishop after ...♖hc8(†) and ...♗c5.

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18.♔b1

Vacating the open file before the check comes.

18.♖d3 ♖hc8† 19.♔b1 transposes to the main line.

18.a3 ♖hc8† 19.♔b1 ♗c5 is fine for Black, as we will see in Game 12 (Lanzani – Schandorff): my only over-the-board experience with this ending so far!

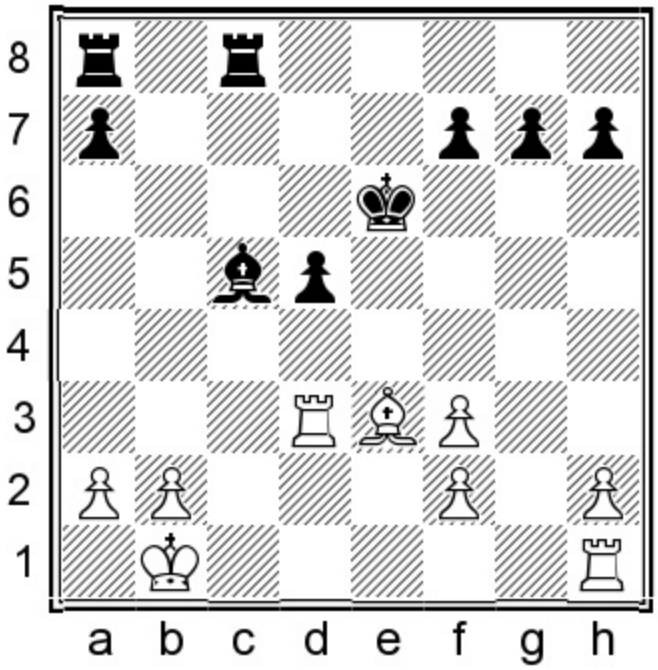
18...♖hc8 19.♖d3

19.a3 converts to Game 12.

White can stop ...♗c5 with 19.♖c1 but after 19...a5 Black is doing well: there is no pressure on his d-pawn and the king is great.

19...♗c5!

The bishop exchange essentially solves all Black's problems at once.



20.♖e1

Utilizing the placement of the black king to activate the rooks. Other moves are less challenging, for instance:

White doesn't achieve anything with 20.♖g1 g6.

20.♖hd1 ♗xe3 21.fxe3 ♖c5= is fine for Black.

20.♖c1 ♗xe3 This seems easiest. (20...♗b6!? is also fine.) 21.fxe3 g5 22.♖a3 White must try to activate his rooks. 22...♖xc1† 23.♔xc1 a5= I will give the remaining moves as a good illustration of how the endgame can turn out. 24.♔d1 ♖b8 25.b3 ♖b5 26.♖a4 h5 27.♔e1 f5 28.h3 ♔d6 29.♔e2 ♖c5 30.♔d2 ♖b5 31.♔e2 ♖c5 32.♔d2 ♖b5 ½–½ Ivanchuk – Najer, Kocaeli 2017.

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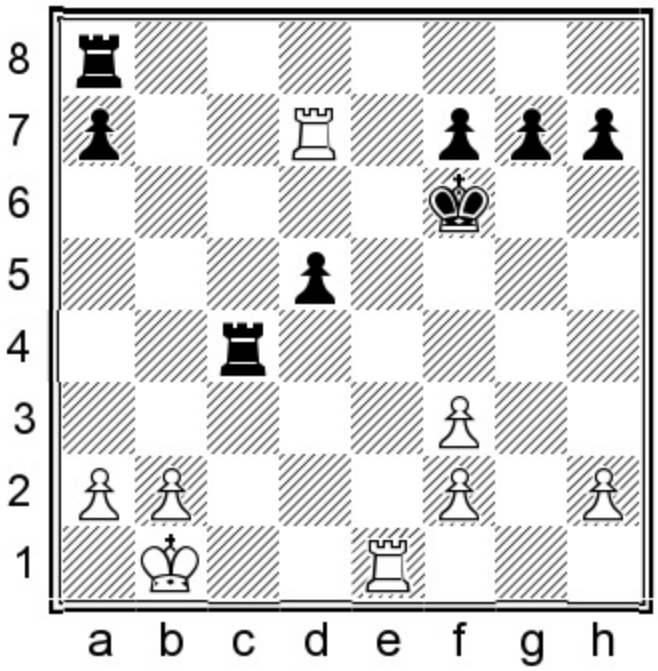
20...♗xe3 21.♖dxe3† ♔f6 22.♖e7

White conquers the seventh rank.

22...♖c4!

Securing counterplay. Never forget the ruined state of White's pawn structure on the kingside.

23.♖d7



23...g6!N

23...♖f4 24.♖d6† ♔f5 25.♖xd5† ♔g6 gave Black enough compensation for the pawn in Stripunsky – Dreev, Internet 2001.

After the text move, White can win a pawn but he has no advantage. On the contrary, I think he should be careful.

24.♖ee7

It is tempting to double on the seventh rank, although Black's cool response takes the sting out of the attack.

I also checked 24.♖xd5 ♖h4 25.♖h1 ♖e8∞ when Black has good play for the pawn with his active rooks.

24...♖f8 25.♖xa7 ♖h4⇄

Black will win the h2-pawn and get an outside passed pawn, which will keep White busy.

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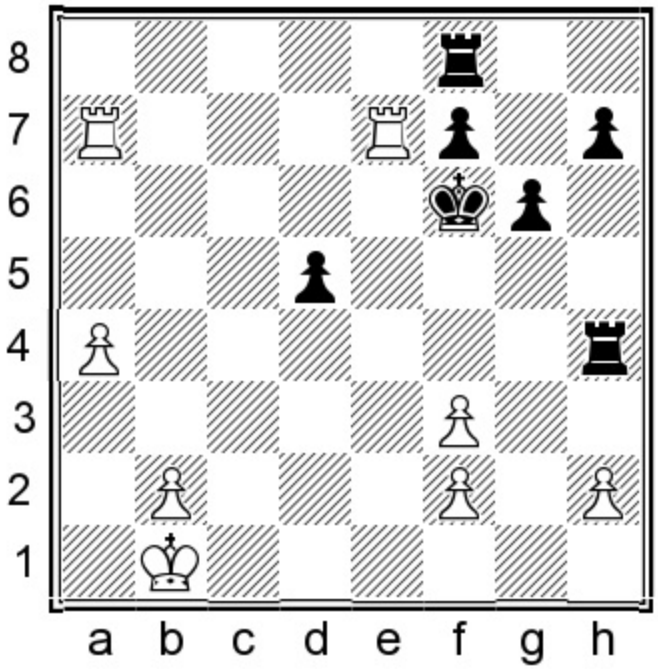
26.a4



This seems best, even though it gives Black a new option:

26...♖xa4!? 27.♖xf7† ♖xf7 28.♖xa4=

GAME 12

Mario Lanzani – Lars Schandorff

Porto Mannu 2014

1.c4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6

Please note the move order. There are several ways to reach the Panov. Quite often it occurs via the Symmetrical English with an early e2-e3 by White.

3.e3 ♘f6 4.d4 cxd4 5.exd4 d5 6.♘c3

Here we are.

6...♗g4 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♕b3 ♗xf3 9.gxf3 e6 10.♕xb7 ♘xd4 11.♗b5† ♘xb5 12.♕c6† ♔e7 13.♕xb5 ♕d7 14.♘xd5† ♕xd5 15.♕xd5 exd5 16.♗e3 ♔e6 17.0-0-0 ♗b4! 18.a3 ♖hc8† 19.♔b1 ♗c5

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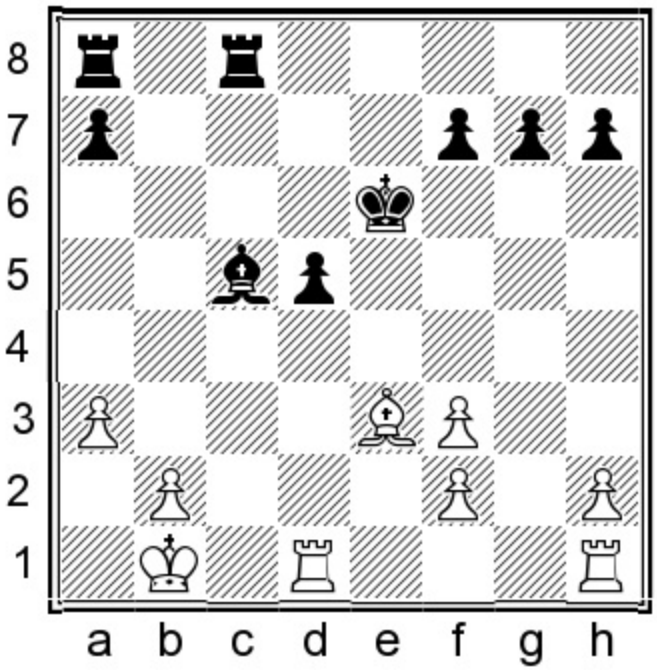

The sequence shown in the last three moves is a key detail to remember. White's strong bishop is confronted and exchanged, which leads to a double rook ending where Black is absolutely fine.

20.♖he1 ♗xe3 21.♖xe3†

White should keep his rooks as active as possible.

He could also have improved his pawn structure with 21.fxe3 but after 21...♖c4! Black has good play and has actually achieved a plus score from this position.

21...♔d6 22.♖ed3

After 22.f4 ♖ab8 23.♖d4 the players agreed a draw in Vaganian – Dreev, Odessa 1989, but Black could have played on with: 23...♖b5N 24.f5 ♖c4!⇄ Black is for preference in my opinion, because of his better structure.

22...♖c5

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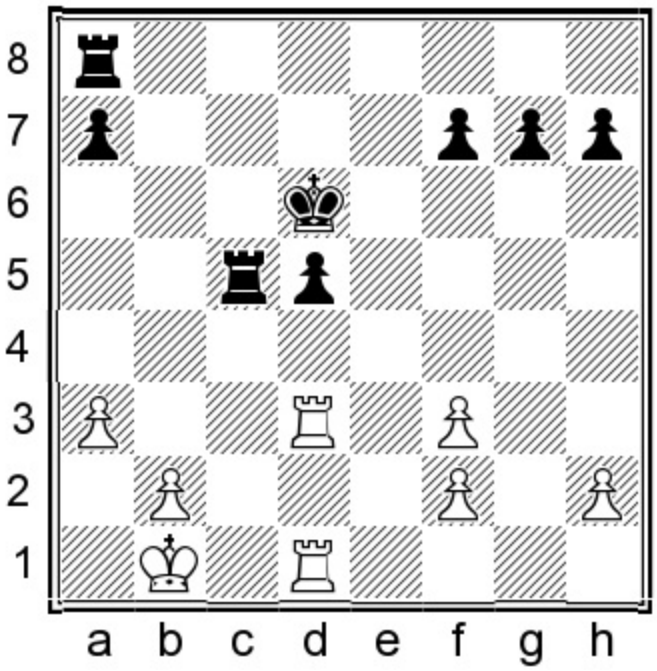


23.♖d4

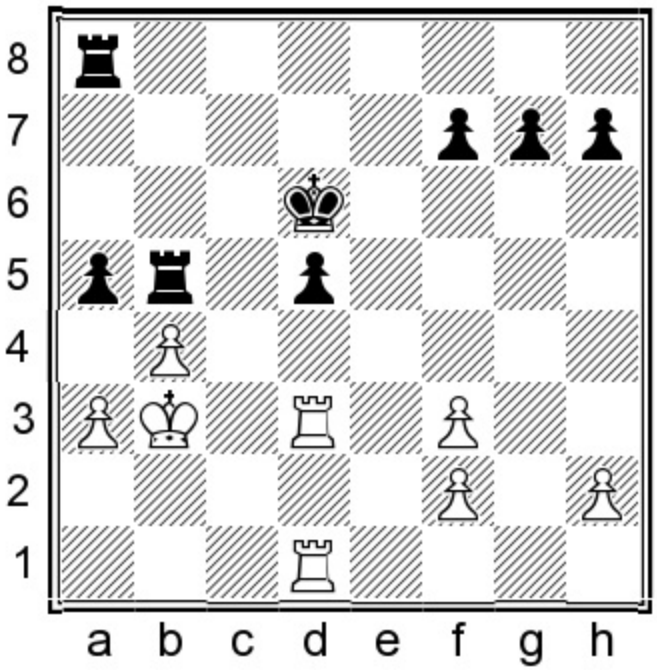
23.b4

This is also plausible.

23...♖b5 24.♔b2

24.♖d4 a5 25.♔b2 axb4 26.axb4 transposes to the 24.b4 line in the notes to the game.

24...a5 25.♔b3



An interesting novelty is:

25...a4†!?

Playing for the win!

25...axb4 26.axb4 g6= was level in Konig – Dvorakova, Klatovy 1999. 26...g5!?N is also fine.

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26.♔c3

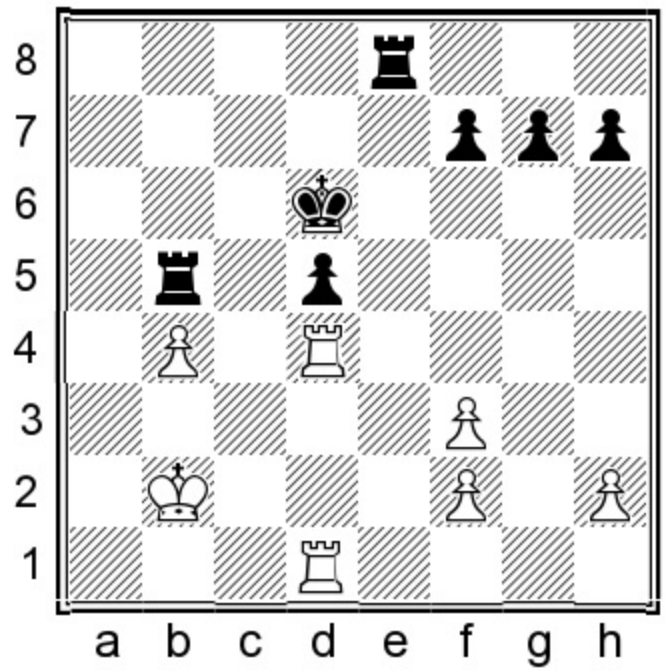
26.♔b2 ♖e8 27.♖e3 ♖e6⇄

26...♖c8† 27.♔d2 ♖b7⇄

23...a5 24.♖g4?!

White tries to force Black to weaken his kingside pawns, but in reality White is drifting and Black soon takes over.

24.b4! was necessary, and after 24...axb4 25.axb4 ♖b5 26.♔b2 ♖e8⇄ the position remains balanced.



The rest of the following game was instructive, so I will give it in full: 27.♔b3 ♖e2 28.♔a4 ♔c6 29.♖c1† ♔b6 30.♖f4 f6 31.♖c8 ♖a2† 32.♔b3 ♖a1 33.♖g8 ♖b1† 34.♔a4 ♖a1† 35.♔b3 ♖b1† 36.♔a4 ♖a1† 37.♔b3 ½–½ Sengupta – Das, Metz 2010.

24...g6 25.♖h4 h5 26.b4?

This loses, but Black was already much better. For instance:

26.♖f4 ♖a7∓ achieves nothing for White; 26.♖hd4 ♖b8∓ maintains the pressure.

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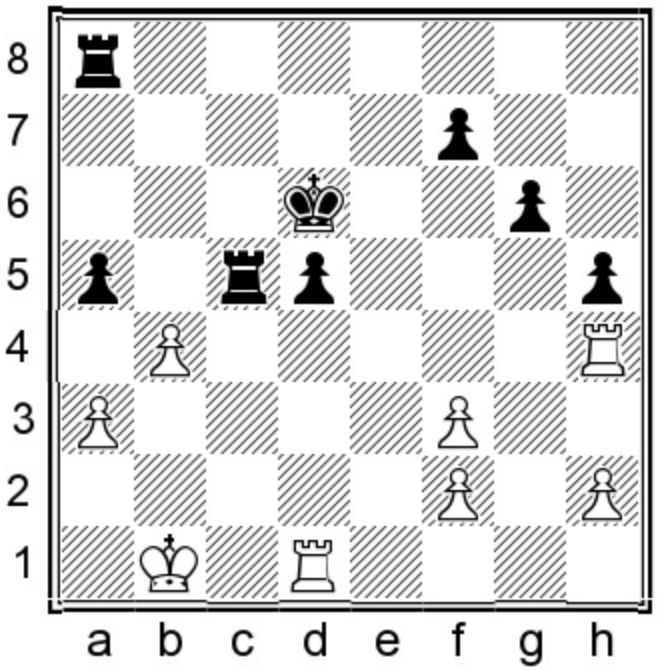

26...♖c3!

Winning material.

27.♖hd4 ♖xa3 28.♖xd5† ♔e6 29.♖d6†

29.b5 ♖b8 and the b-pawn will soon fall.

29.bxa5 ♖8xa5 30.♖xa5 ♖xa5 leaves White unable to protect his kingside.

29...♔e7

Avoiding the "active"29...♔e5?? 30.♖1d5† ♔f4 31.♖f6#.

30.♖d7†

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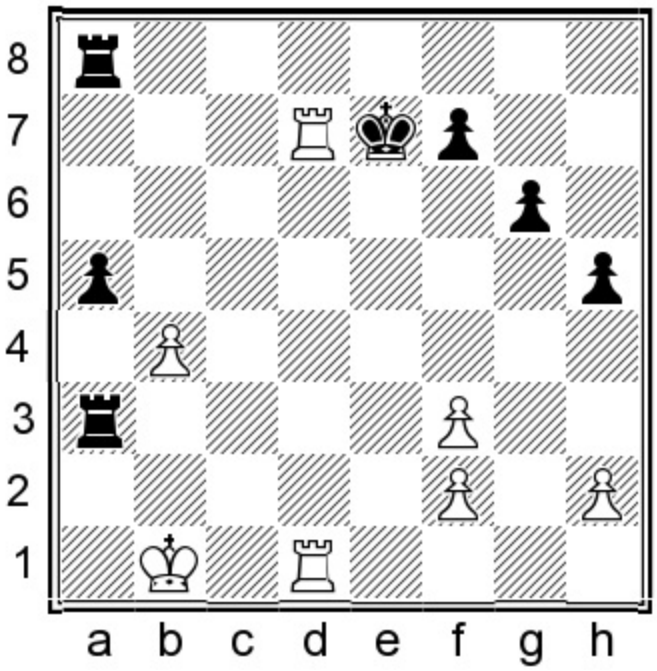

30...♔e8!?

30...♔f6 also wins, but I preferred to keep attacking the d7-rook so as to tie the other white rook to the d-file. White's only chance would have been if he could get both rooks to the seventh rank.

31.bxa5 ♖xf3 32.♖7d2 ♖xa5

Black has won a pawn and White's kingside is in terrible shape. If only the white king had been on g2...

33.♖e1† ♔f8 34.♖e3 ♖af5 35.♖xf3 ♖xf3 36.♔c1 ♖h3 37.f4 ♖f3

Winning a second pawn.

38.♖d4 ♖f1†

0–1

A2122) 15.♗g5†

As mentioned earlier, White can play an alternate version of the ending.

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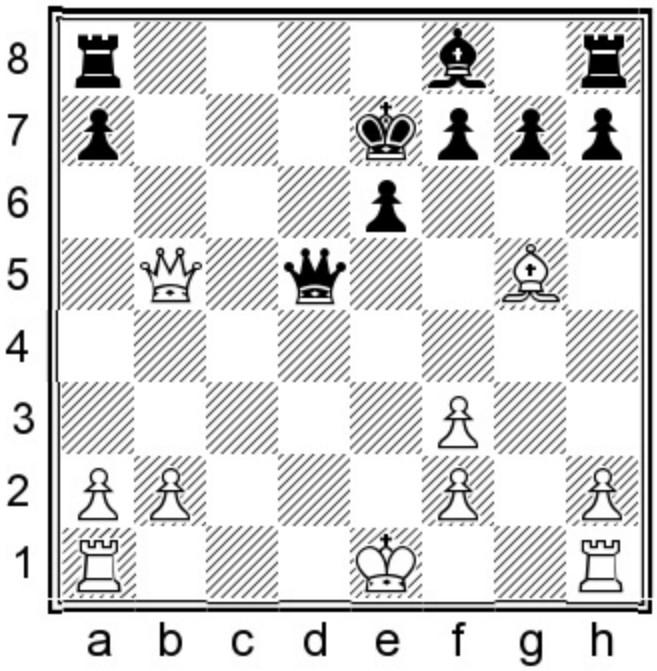

Including this check has been somewhat less popular, but many strong players have favoured it. It forces Black to play ...f6, which weakens the e6-square and takes f6 away from the king. On the other hand, Black may also benefit from this free move because the king gets a nice shelter on f7. Enough talk about small subtleties. Let's see some variations!

15...f6 16.♕xd5 exd5 17.♗e3

This is the best square for the bishop and nothing else is ever played.

17...♔e6

Thanks to the inclusion of ...f6, there is even 17...♔f7!? 18.0-0-0 ♖d8 and Black equalizes: 19.♖d3 ♖d7 20.♖hd1 ♔e6= Dolmatov – Lechtynsky, Hradec Kralove 1981.

18.0-0-0

This is almost exclusively played.

The alternative is 18.♖c1 ♗d6 and now:

a) 19.♖c6 was played in Khamrakulov – Nanu, Ortigueira 2005. I suggest: 19...♖hd8N 20.♔e2 ♔f5⇄
b) Another game continued: 19.♔e2 ♖hb8 20.b3 a5∓ 21.♖c6 ♔d7

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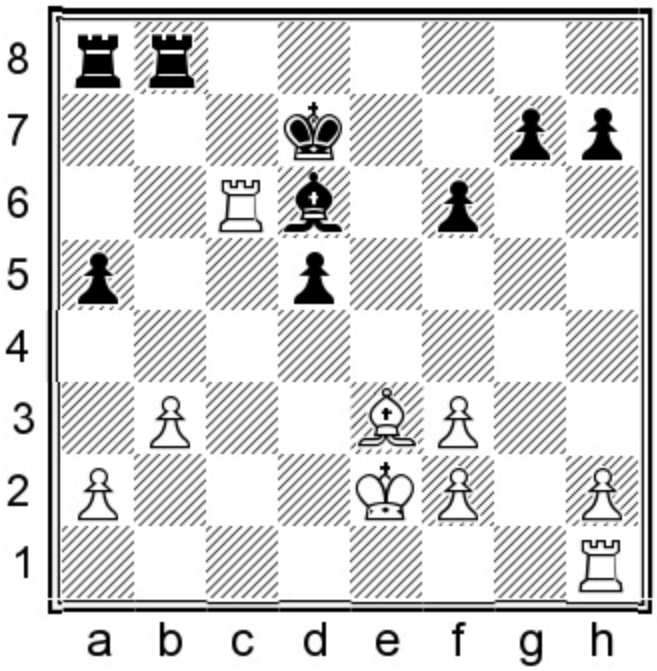
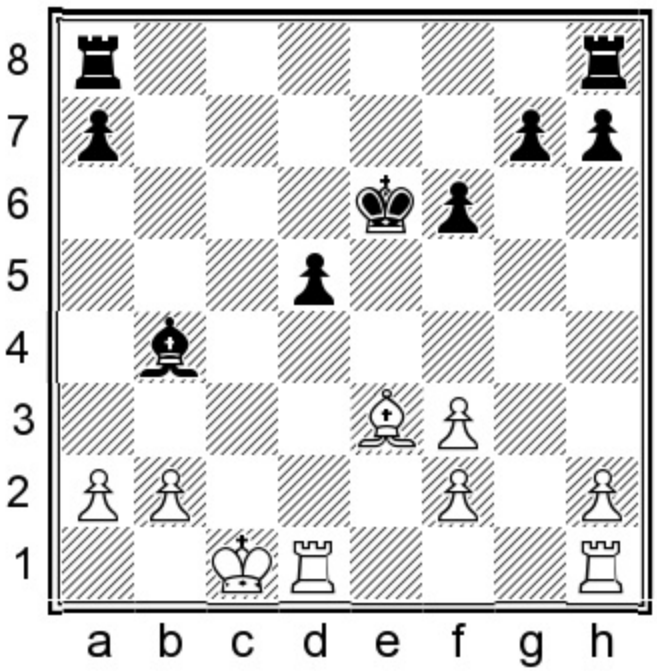


22.♖xd6†? Misjudging the rook ending. 22...♔xd6 23.♗f4† ♔e6 24.♗xb8 ♖xb8∓ This was Kuzevanova – Stjazhkina, St Petersburg 2007. Such endgames can be deceptive. Despite the reduced material, Black is much better because of her active rook, better pawn structure and mobile passed pawn.

18...♗b4

Preparing the well-known manoeuvre to trade bishops.

18...♖d8 19.♖he1 ♔f7 is also roughly equal, Simacek – Cifka, Czech Republic 2008.



19.a3

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In the event of:

19.♔b1

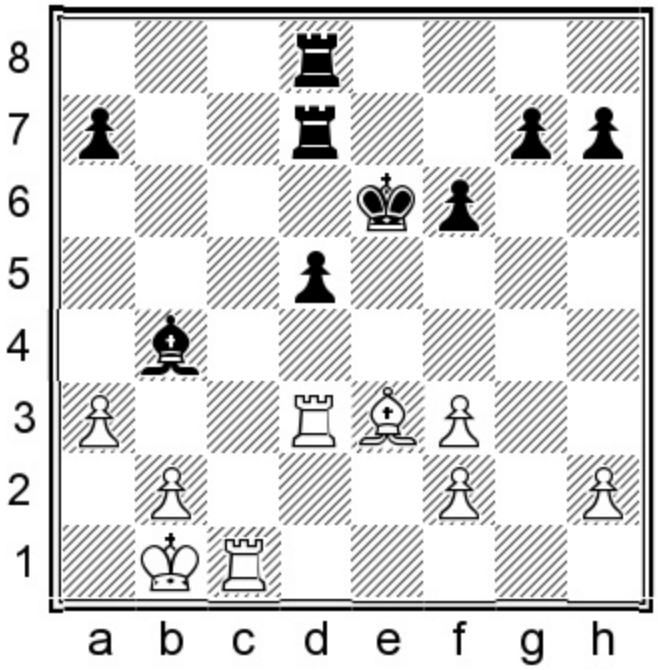
Black might even change strategy with:

19...♖hd8!?

19...♖hc8 is also fine.

20.♖d3 ♖d7 21.♖c1 ♖ad8 22.a3

22.♖c6† ♖d6= is fine for Black; note that White cannot win a pawn by taking on d6 and a7, as the bishop will recapture on d6 and attack h2.



Black can now complicate matters with:

22...d4!?

There is also 22...♗e7 23.♖c6† ♔f5 24.♖d4 as in Kulhanek – H. Pedersen, Liberec 2011, and now after 24...♖b8!N Black has active counterplay and should not be worse. For instance: 25.♖f4† ♔g6 26.♖g4† ♔f7=

23.axb4 dxe3 24.♖xe3†

24.♖xd7 ♖xd7 25.fxe3 g5⩱ is mentioned by Rambaldi.

24...♔f5 25.♖a3 ♖b7 26.♖c5†

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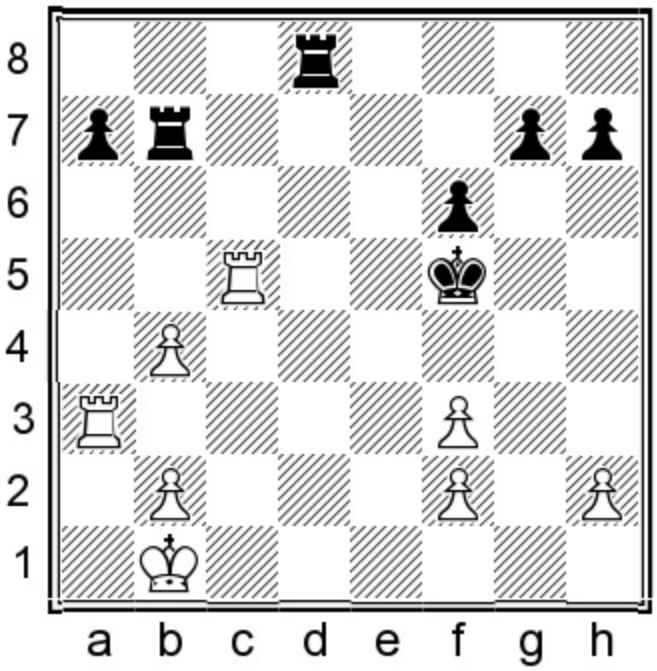

A draw was agreed here in Reinderman – Fridman, Germany 2003, but Rambaldi rightly points out that Black can play for victory with:

26...♔g6!

Because of White's many weak pawns.

19...♖hc8† 20.♔b1 ♗c5

The familiar solution. White is unable to benefit from the inclusion of the ...f6 move.

21.♖he1 ♗xe3 22.♖xe3†

22.fxe3 ♖c4 is fine for Black.

22...♔d6 23.♖de1

This is White's only serious try. The weakening of the e6-square comes into play, but it is too little to really make a difference.

23.♖ed3 ♖c5= is nothing for White.

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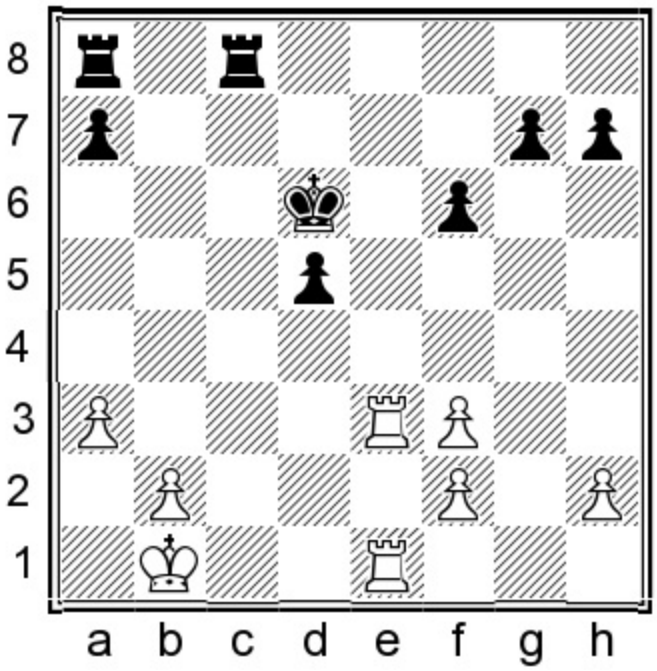

23...♖c4!

Active counterplay is the best approach, as has been verified in a bunch of games.

24.♖e7

24.b3 may lead to a forced draw: 24...♖f4 25.♖e6† ♔c7 26.♖e7† ♔c6 27.♖7e6† ♔c7 28.♖e7† ♔c6 29.♖7e6† ♔c7 30.♖e7† ♔c6 ½–½ Korneev – Goryachkina, Sochi 2019.

Chasing the king at once doesn't achieve much: 24.♖e6† ♔c5 25.♖g1 (25.♖a6 ♖f4 26.♖c1† ♔d4! 27.♖c3 ♔e5 And Black was comfortably equal in Egin – Guliev, Moscow 1997.) 25...g6 26.♖xf6 ♖h4 27.♖c1† ♔d4 28.♖d6 ♔e5 29.♖d7 ♖xh2= This has all been played in an email game. It is virtually impossible to come up with new stuff in some lines...

24...♖f4

24...♖h4 is also equal – it's a matter of taste.

25.♖1e6† ♔c5 26.♖xg7 ♖xf3

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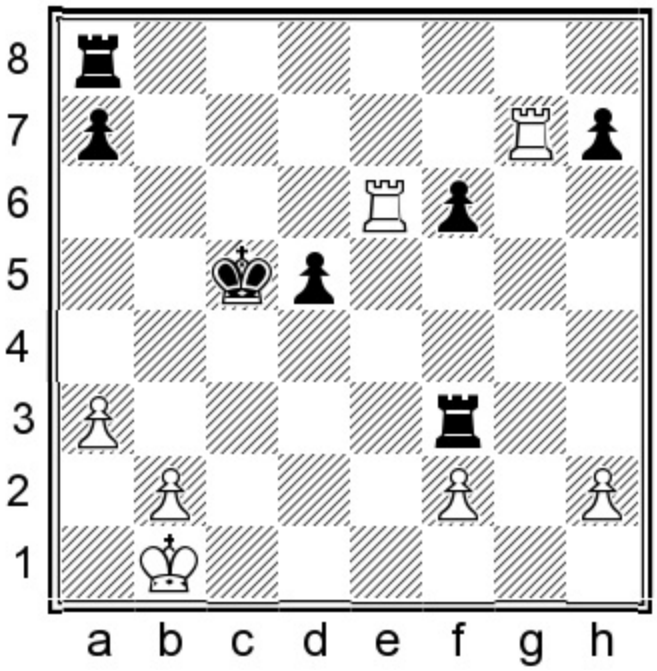


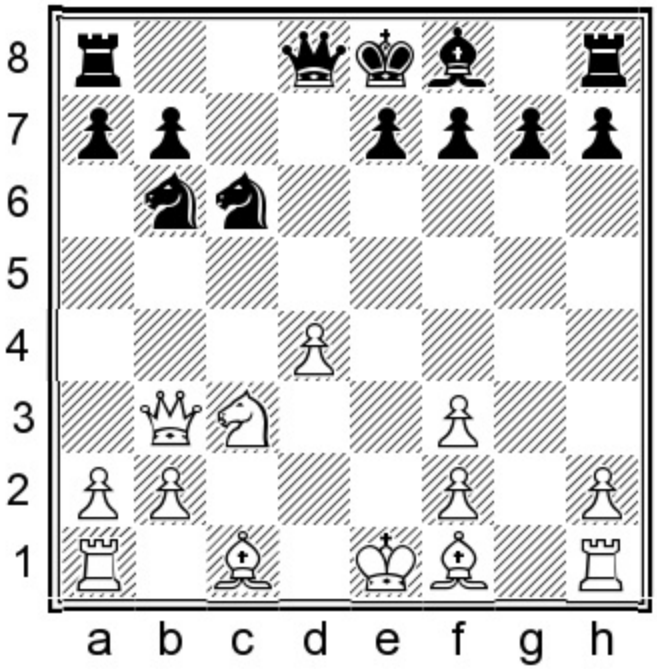
27.♖xh7

In the event of 27.♖c7† ♔d4 28.♖e2 I like 28...♔d3!?N when the active king holds the balance (although 28...♖h3= was also adequate in Hochgraefe – Krause, Germany 2015).

27...♖xf2=

The position is becoming heavily simplified, and a draw was soon agreed in Diu – N. Nguyen, Hanoi 2018.

A22) 9...♘b6!?



This is our secondary option, should you wish to avoid the endgame. Black tries to stabilize the

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position, which is logical, considering that White's pawn structure is in ruins. If Black manages to make the game a purely positional one, he will have succeeded and his position will be at least equal. White has to play dynamically, creating threats and striving to make the most of his bishop pair.

Let's get to more concrete matters. The d4-pawn hangs, so White can protect it with **A221)** 10.♗e3 or advance it with **A222)** 10.d5. The latter option is definitely the more critical of the two.

A221) 10.♗e3 e6

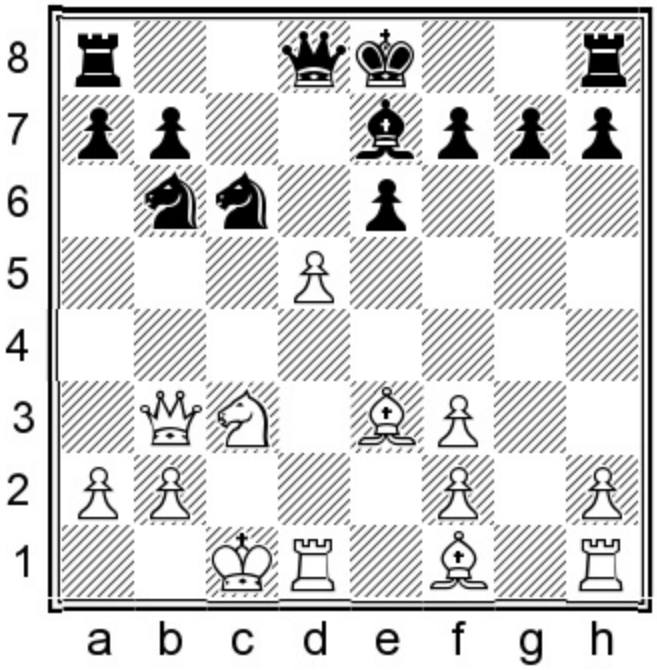
10...♘xd4?? is not an option in view of: 11.♗xd4 ♕xd4 12.♗b5† ♘d7 13.0-0+–

11.0-0-0

There is no time to waste. Long castling is a dual-purpose move which removes the king from the centre and prepares to open things up with d4-d5.

11.♖d1?! is inaccurate due to 11...♗b4∓ and after 12.♗b5 (or 12.a3 ♗a5!?) 12...0-0 Black is comfortable.
11.♖g1 is a decent move, but after 11...♕c7 12.0-0-0 g6!?⇄ Black has a sound and solid game.

11...♗e7 12.d5



White forces the play.

12...exd5 13.♘xd5

The other way to capture is no problem for Black:
13.♗xb6 ♕xb6 14.♕xb6 axb6 15.♘xd5

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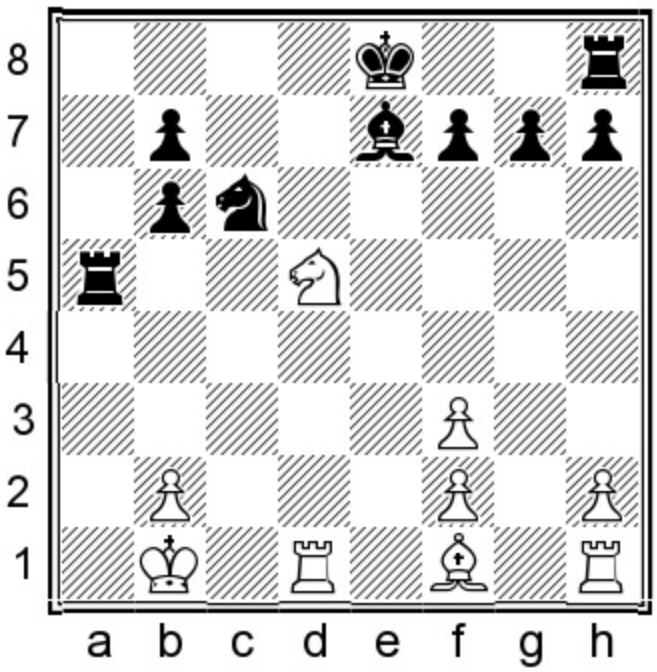
15.♖xd5 0-0∓

15...♖xa2! 16.♔b1 ♖a5⇄

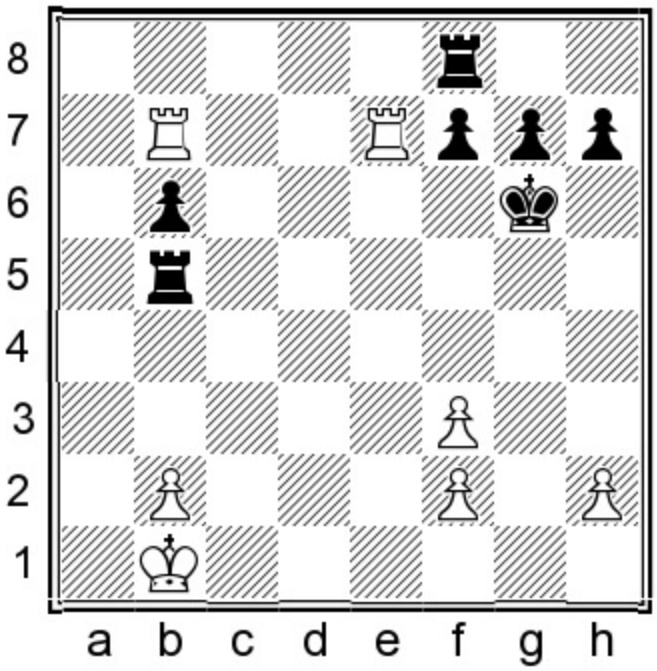


The stem game from this position continued:

17.♗b5! ♔f8! 18.♘xe7 ♔xe7

½–½ Ribli – Miles, Surakarta 1982. A quick draw between grandmasters was by no means a rare occurrence in those days. A couple of years later, two brave players continued the fight:

19.♖he1† ♔f6 20.♖d6† ♔f5 21.♗xc6 bxc6 22.♖e7 ♖f8 23.♖xc6 ♖b5 24.♖cc7 ♔g6 25.♖b7



½–½ Kindermann – Hermann, Germany 1984. I think Black could have played on, but I guess we will just have to wait for two even braver players to turn up...

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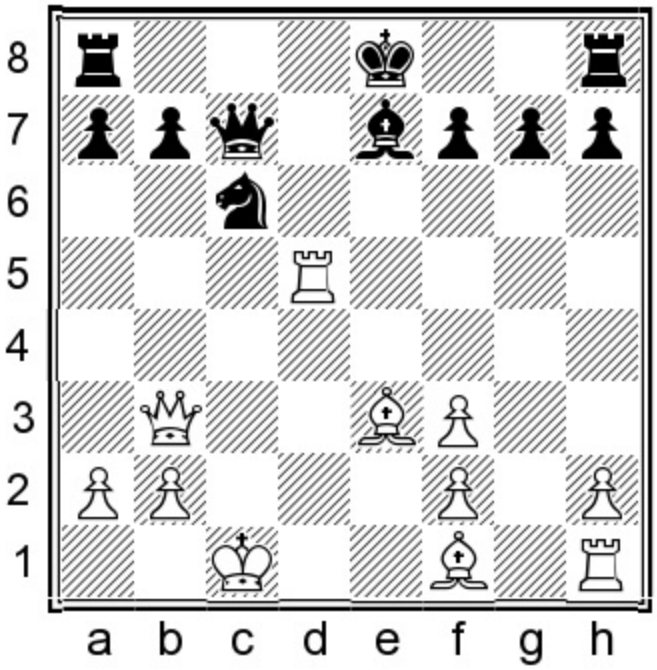
13...♘xd5 14.♖xd5 ♕c7

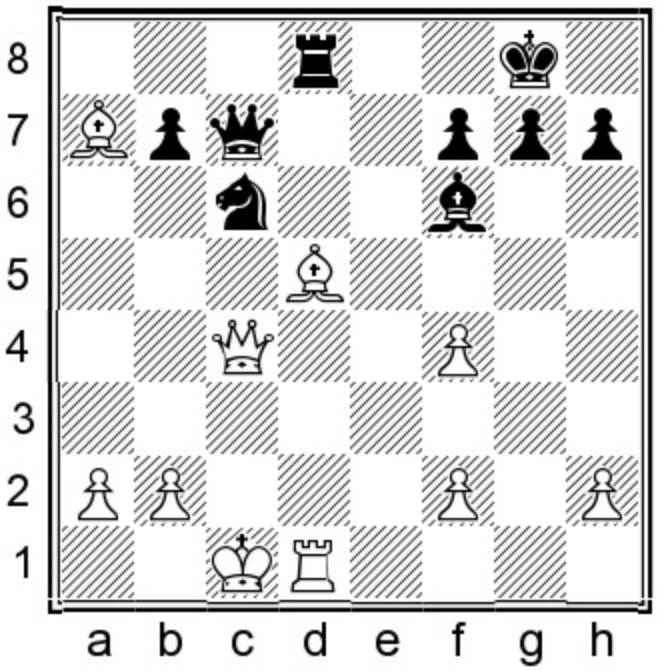


Black is totally fine. He will castle short and place the bishop on the excellent f6-post. White's damaged structure is a long-term liability. White still has a lot of activity though, so he should not be in real danger.

15.♔b1

Always the natural move in such positions.

I noticed a correspondence game where White did without it and instead used his queen to block the c-file, not that he got anything: 15.♕c4!? 0-0 (15...♖d8!?=) 16.f4 ♖ad8 17.♗g2 ♖xd5 18.♗xd5 ♗f6 19.♖d1 ♖d8 20.♗xa7



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Taking the bait. Black has a strong response up his sleeve: 20...b5! 21.♕xc6 ♕xa7 22.♗b3 ♖f8 23.♕f3 g6 (23...b4!?⩱ also comes to mind, with good compensation.) 24.♔b1 ♔g7 25.a3 ♖e8 26.f5 ♕c5⩱ Black had enough for the pawn in Molin – Besozzi, corr. 2017.

15...0-0 16.f4 ♖ad8

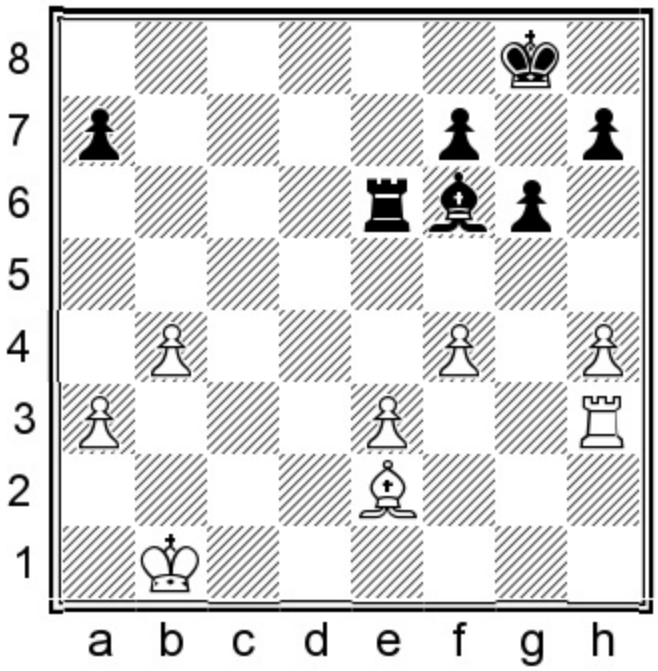
An old chess saying claims that you always choose the wrong rook. I usually respond, "Then it doesn't matter which rook you choose."

Apparently that is true for this position, as 16...♖fd8 17.♗g2 ♗f6 18.♖hd1 ♖xd5 19.♖xd5 g6 20.♗e4 ♔g7⇄ was also absolutely fine for Black in Marcos Nozar – Goreczny, corr. 2017.

17.♗g2 ♖xd5 18.♗xd5 ♗f6 19.a3 g6

Black has no problems. The game quickly takes a forcing character, so let's see it to the end:

20.h4 ♘d4!? 21.♕xb7 ♕xb7 22.♗xb7 ♖b8 23.♗a6 ♘f5 24.b4 ♘xe3 25.fxe3 ♖b6 26.♗e2 ♖e6 27.♖h3



27...h5!

A nice move that saddles White with a permanent weakness on h4, which condemns his rook to passivity. After a few more moves, the players agreed a draw in Runarsson – Besozzi, corr. 2017.

A222) 10.d5

This is the more dangerous continuation.

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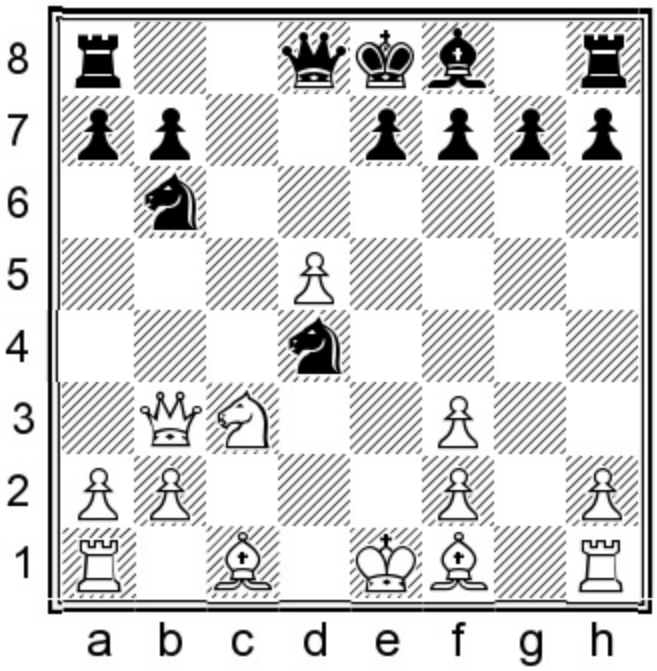
10...♘d4



11.♗b5†!

11.♕d1

This has been played in a lot of games.

11...e5

But this is fine for Black, who is strong on the dark squares.

12.dxe6

12.♗e3 ♗c5 is promising for Black.

12...fxe6 13.♗e3 ♗c5⇄

If Black can keep the knight on d4 then he is better, so White has to generate tactical complications.

14.b4!? 0-0

14...♕f6 15.bxc5 ♘xf3† 16.♔e2 0-0 is also fine, and after 17.cxb6 ♕xc3 we may transpose to lines given below.

15.bxc5 ♘xf3† 16.♔e2 ♕f6

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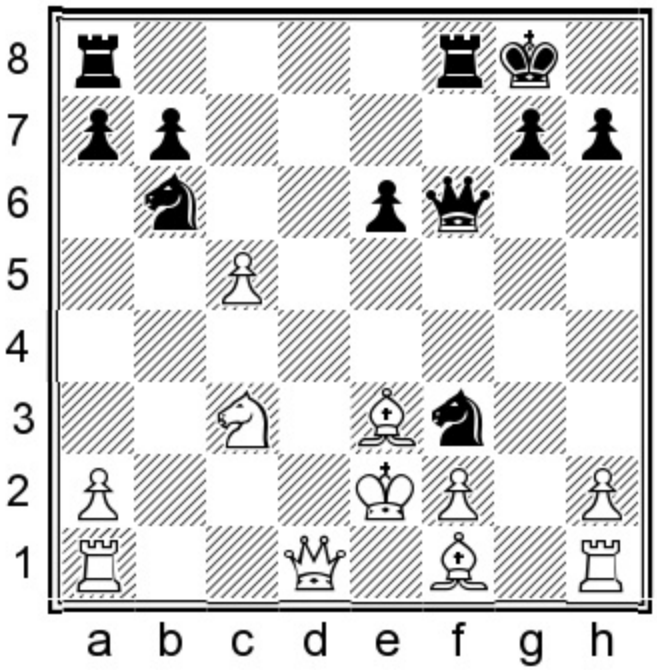

I analysed three continuations from here:

a) 17.♗g2 ♖ad8↑ cannot be recommended for White.

b) Taking the second piece is also dangerous for White:

17.cxb6 ♕xc3

A recent example continued:

18.♖c1?

Absolutely necessary was 18.♗g2! ♖ad8 19.♖c1 and although Black can win White's queen, the outcome remains unclear: 19...♕b2† 20.♕c2 ♖d2†! 21.♗xd2 ♘d4† 22.♔d1 ♘xc2 23.♖xc2 ♕xb6∞ I think the active queen gives Black the better chances.

18...♕b2† 19.♕c2

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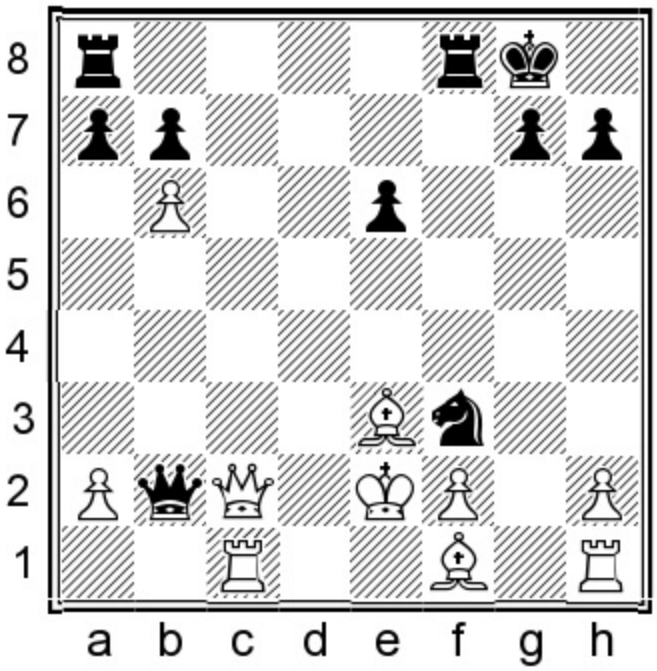


19...♕b5† 20.♕c4 ♕h5–+

Black has an irresistible attack, and the game ended abruptly after:

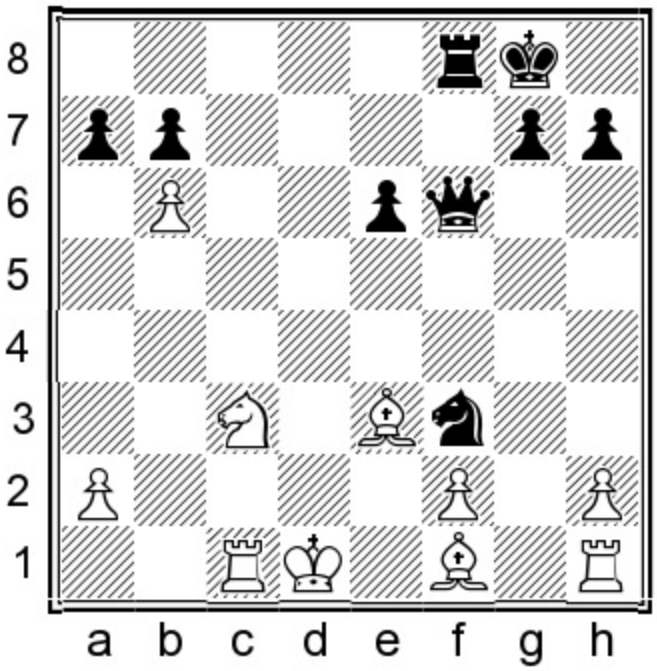
21.♕c5 ♘e5† 22.♔e1 axb6 23.♕b5 ♖xa2 24.♗e2 ♘f3†

0–1 Adhiban – Sargsyan, Internet 2019.

c) 17.♖c1 ♖ad8 18.cxb6

White's best chance is to give up the queen and reduce Black's attacking potential.

18...♖xd1 19.♔xd1



A possible improvement is:

19...♕g6!?N

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19...♕f5 20.♖c2 axb6 21.♗e2 ♕f6 22.♔c1 ♘d4 23.♗xd4 ♕xd4∞ was dynamically balanced and subsequently drawn in Renard – Compagnone, corr. 2017.

The point of the text move is that if White plays like in the game with:

20.♖c2 axb6 21.♗e2

Then Black has:

21...♕g2! 22.♖f1 ♘xh2 23.♖e1 ♘f3∓

Or 23...♘g4∓.

11...♘d7

This is more or less forced.

11...♘xb5?! 12.♘xb5 a6 13.♘c3 and the loose knight on b6 is a problem.

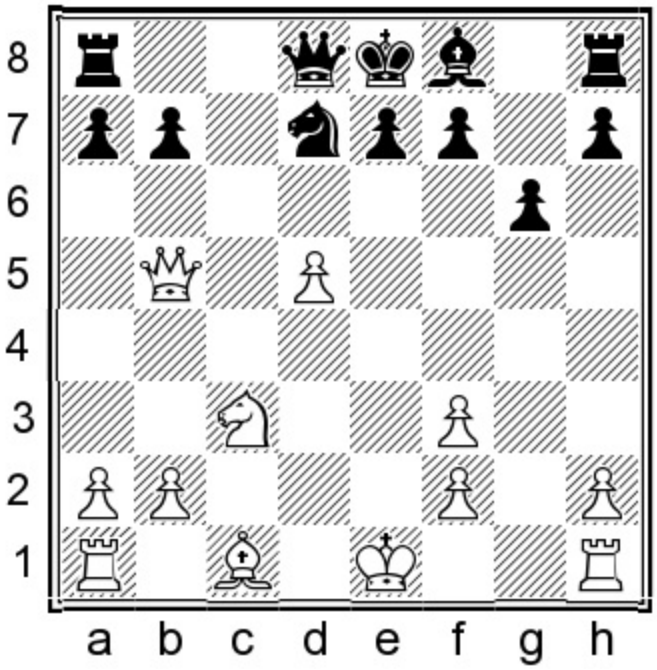
12.♕a4 ♘xb5

The greedy 12...♘xf3†? 13.♔f1 a6 14.♗e2 ♘fe5 15.♗f4 ♘g6 16.♗e3 leaves Black a long way from completing development and without much hope of surviving.

13.♕xb5

13.♘xb5 a6 14.♘c3 gives Black a choice of continuations: 14...b5!? 15.♕d4 ♕b6 or 14...g6!? 15.d6 ♗g7, with equality in both cases.

13...g6



This is the real starting position of the 9...♘b6 variation, at least if White is trying to prove an advantage. White has a few tempting continuations, including some direct attempts to refute Black's whole opening strategy. In the most recent correspondence games, Black has been able to withstand

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the pressure and obtain playable positions.

14.0-0

There are three other options to consider:

14.♗g5

I recommend meeting this with:

14...♗g7!

14...h6 15.♗h4 ♕b6!? may also be okay.

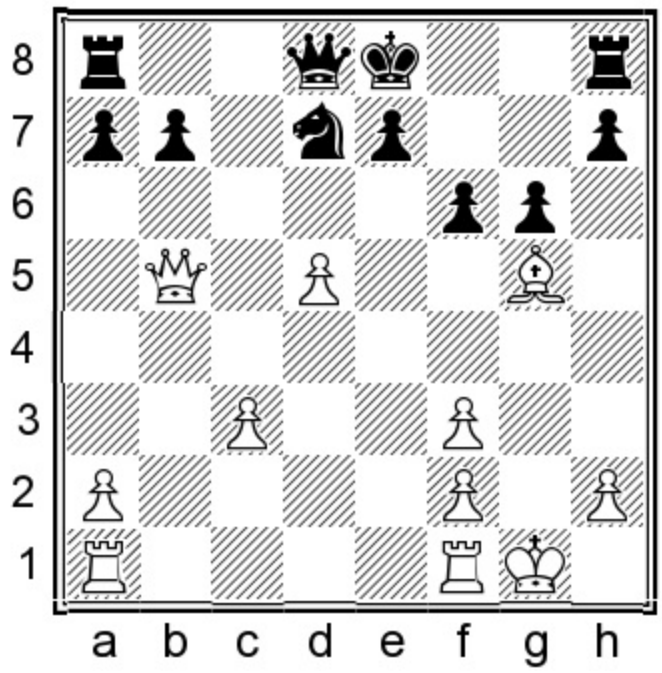
15.0-0

15.d6?! transposes to 14.d6!? ♗g7! 15.♗g5?! as analysed below.

15...♗xc3!?

This is an important theme which we will encounter again.

16.bxc3 f6



17.♗f4

17.♗h6 ♕b6 18.♕a4 ♕a6 19.♕e4 ♘e5 has been played in an engine game, in which Black's position proved to be fine.

17...0-0

The position is balanced. A typical sample line goes:

18.♖fe1 ♖f7 19.♖ad1 b6 20.♕e2 ♖c8 21.c4 ♘c5 22.♗c1 ♘b7 23.♗a3 ♘d6

White has nothing better than exchanging on d6, with equal play.

14.♕xb7 ♗g7 15.0-0 0-0

We have reached another critical position. White has grabbed a pawn, but Black has obvious compensation due to his better structure and safer king.

16.♖d1

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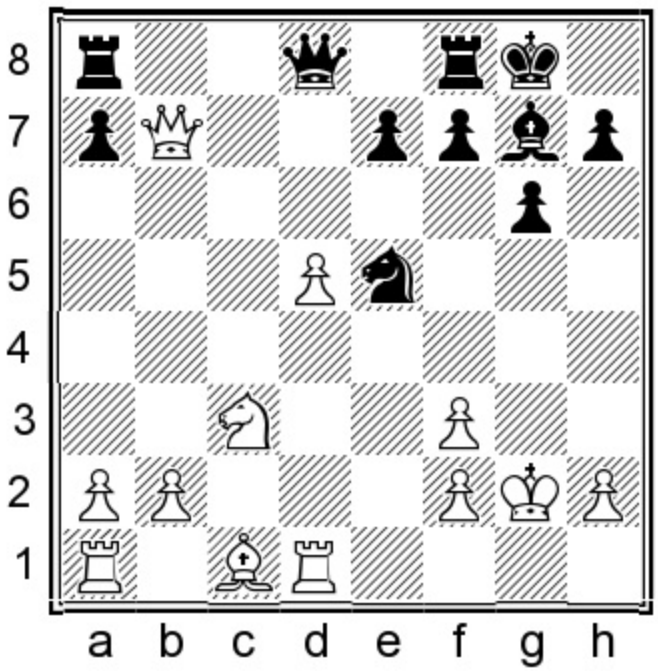
16.♗f4 allows 16...♗xc3!N 17.bxc3 ♘c5 when Black picks up the d5-pawn with a good position.
16...♘e5 17.♔g2



17...h6!?N

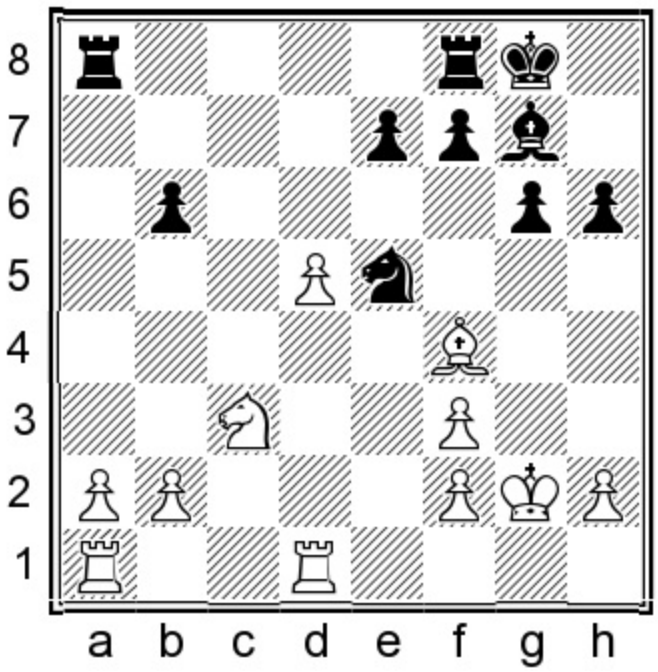
17...♘c4 18.♗f4 (18.♘e4! looks more challenging) 18...♘d6 19.♕a6 ♘f5 20.♕e2 ♕d7⩱ occurred in Kovacevic – Solak, Novi Sad 2009.

17...♖e8!?N also deserves attention.

18.♗f4 ♕b6! 19.♕xb6

19.♕xe7?! ♖fe8 20.♕a3 ♘c4 21.♕b3 ♘xb2∓ turns out badly for White.

19...axb6



Black has excellent compensation for the pawn. Although the pawn structure is quite different,

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the position still reminds me of a Benko Gambit where the open files on the queenside, combined with the c4-square for the knight and the long diagonal for the bishop, guarantee Black a good game. My analysis continues:

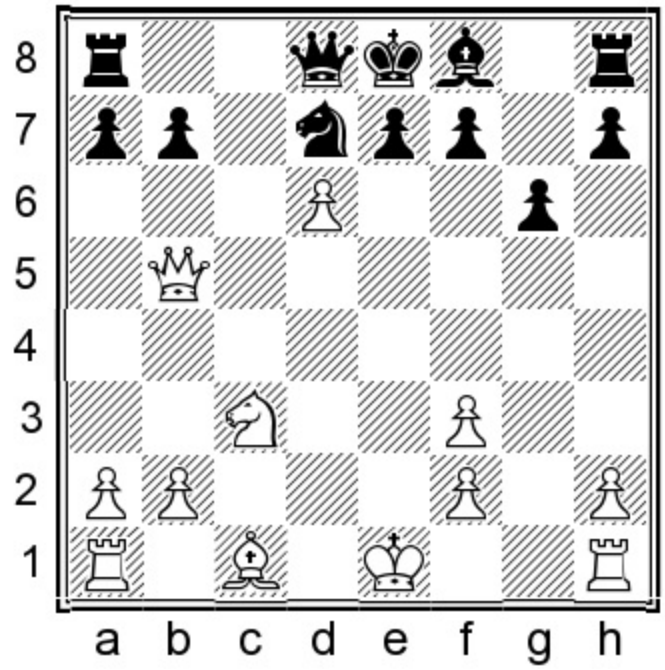
20.♖ab1 g5!?

A winning try!

The natural 20...♘c4 leads to simplifications and a likely draw after: 21.b3 ♗xc3 22.bxc4 ♖fc8= 21.♗xe5 ♗xe5 22.♖e1 f6∓

The bishop is much better than the knight.

14.d6!?



This rare move is perhaps the only option that should worry us. Still, Black seems to be okay.

14...♗g7!

14...exd6? 15.0-0 followed by ♖e1† is terrible.

14...e6 is not disastrous, but 15.0-0 ♗g7 16.♕xb7± gives White an improved version of the 14.♕xb7 line above (but not 16.♗g5? a6! when Black was better in Guerra – Orr, Dubai [ol] 1986).

15.♘d5

Two other moves should also be mentioned:

a) 15.♗g5?! was played in Holloway – Heinemann, Verden 2009. Black should have followed our standard strategy with: 15...♗xc3†!N 16.bxc3 ♕b6 17.♕xb6 axb6 18.♗xe7 (18.dxe7 f6∓) 18...f6 19.0-0 ♔f7∓ Black has more than enough compensation for the pawn. White's bishop is paralysed and ...♖hc8 is coming, with strong pressure against White's queenside.

b) 15.0-0 ♗xc3! is the same important motif. Black trades his super bishop for the knight and builds a sound structure. 16.bxc3 ♕b6 17.♖b1 e6!=

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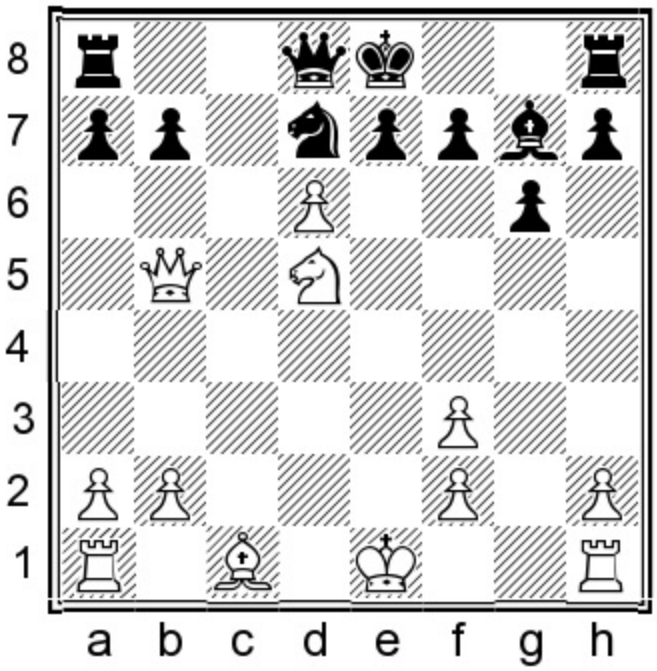


15...exd6 16.♗g5!

16.♕e2† ♔f8 17.0-0 was seen in Bierenbroodspot – Heinemann, Germany 2015, and now after 17...h5!N I slightly prefer Black.

16...f6 17.♗e3 0-0 18.h4

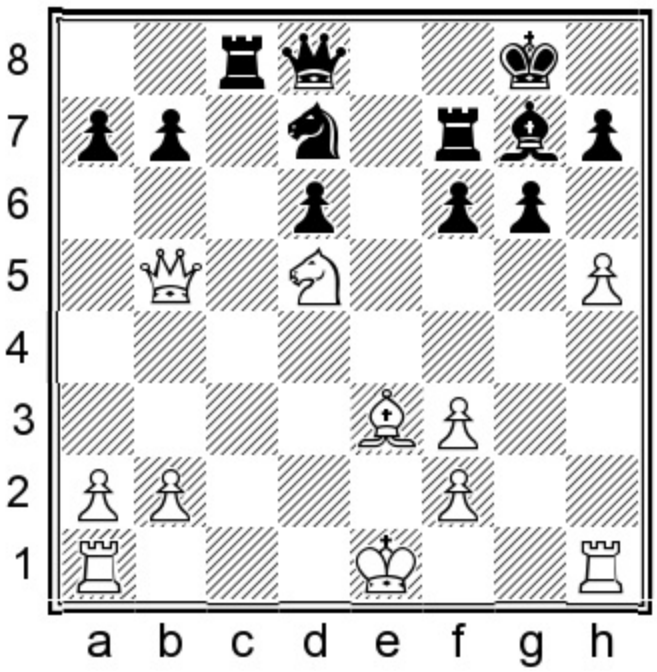
The most direct.

18.0-0-0⩲ is also playable and roughly equal.

18...♖f7

18...h5!? looks a little strange but it seems okay. For example: 19.0-0-0 ♕c8† 20.♔b1 ♔h7∞

19.h5 ♖c8



I do not believe Black stands worse. A sample line goes:

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20.hxg6 hxg6 21.♔f1 ♘e5 22.f4 ♘c4⇄ 23.f5

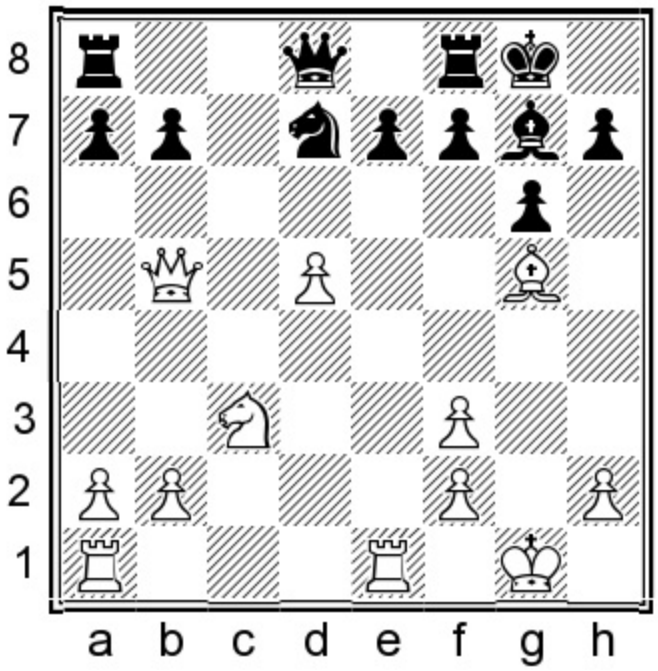
23.♗xa7 b6∞

23...a6 24.♕b3 g5∞

14...♗g7 15.♖e1

15.♗g5 transposes to the 14.♗g5 line above.

15...0-0 16.♗g5



This is another critical line and you might call it the obvious try. White's moves are pretty standard stuff: a rook to e1 and the bishop to g5 attacking the important e7-pawn. Black's response might come as a surprise though, and it leads to interesting positions which seem absolutely playable:

16...♗xc3! 17.bxc3

The intermezzo try 17.♗xe7? fails to 17...♕a5! 18.♕xa5 ♗xa5 19.b4 ♗b6 20.♗xf8 ♔xf8∓ with a grim ending for White.

17...f6

Black's position may not look pretty, but it turns out that White has as many weaknesses – or rather holes – in his structure. The absence of the normally-so-important bishop on g7 is also hard to exploit. A couple of correspondence games suggest that Black's chances are no worse.

18.♗f4

18.♗h6 ♖f7 19.♖e6 ♘e5 20.♔g2 ♕c8 21.♖e1 b6⇄ was the earlier example, Relyea – Besozzi, corr. 2017.

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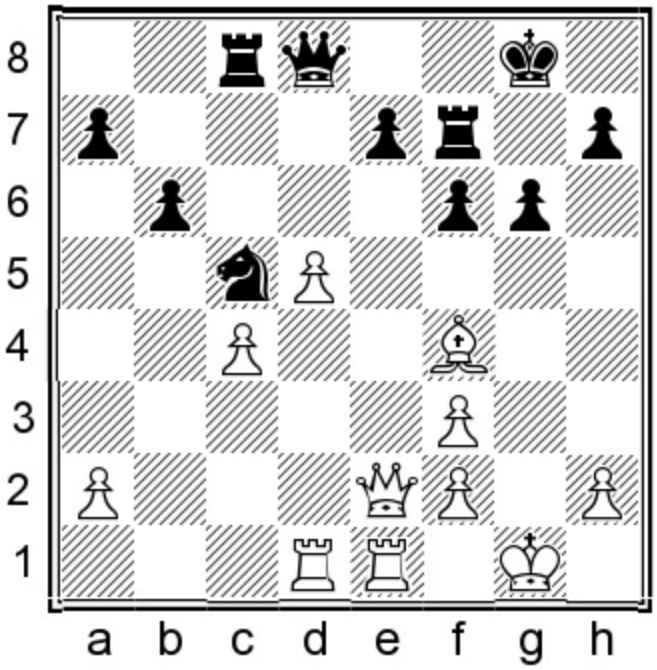
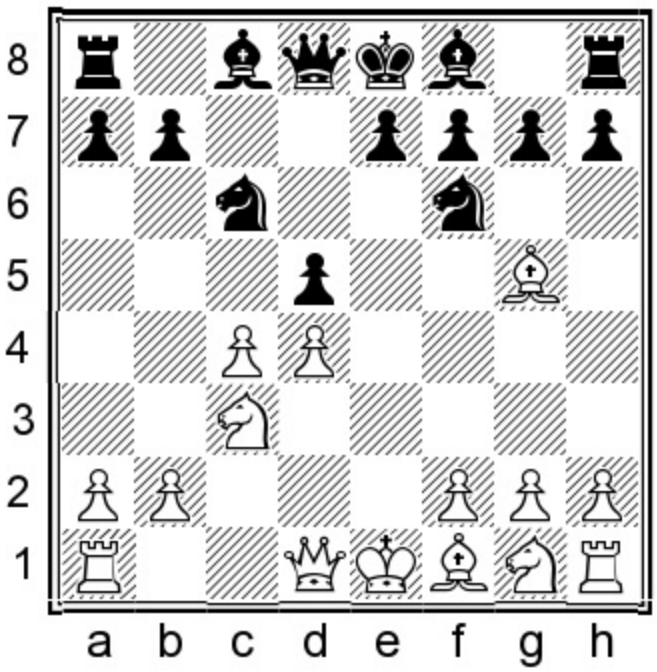
18...♖f7 19.♖ad1 b6 20.♕e2 ♖c8 21.c4 ♘c5⇄



Gagliardi – Compagnone, corr. 2019. In both examples we see that the rook on f7 defends both the e7-pawn and the king, and the knight has a choice of excellent outposts. All in all, the Endgame Variation provides a simpler route to equality, which is why I have presented it as my main recommendation. However, 9...♘b6!? seems better than its past reputation would indicate. The resulting positions are rather unclear but ultimately balanced, which is all we can ask for, so it's a nice alternative to the solid ending for players who desire a more complex battle.

B) 6.♗g5



The sharpest move and a favourite of Panov aficionados.

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6...dxc4!

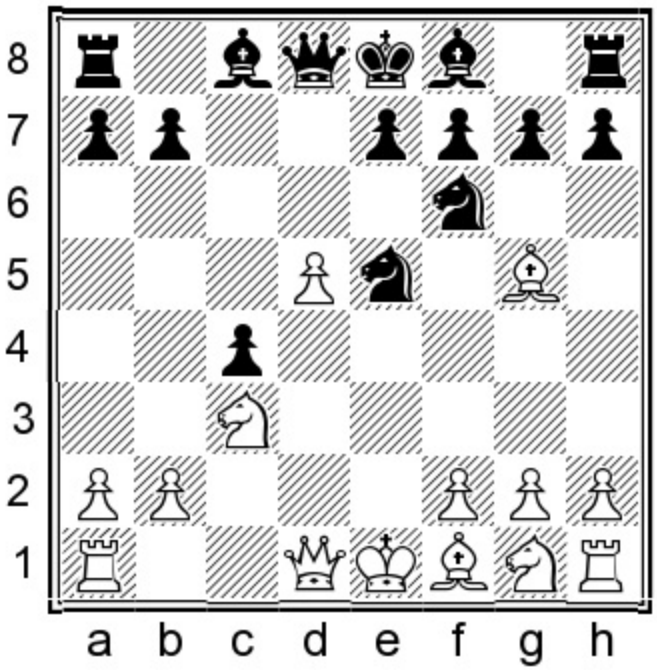
Black is up for the challenge! This was my previous recommendation and nothing has happened in the last ten years to change my opinion of it, although of course there have been some new developments and relevant games which we will consider.

We will analyse two main continuations. **B1)** 7.d5 is a tempting option which posed Black some serious problems for a while until the right cure was found. These days, **B2)** 7.♗xc4!? is the main line, sacrificing the d-pawn and aiming for fast development.

Just protecting the d4-pawn with 7.♘f3 is not really in the spirit of the Panov Variation and hardly anyone plays it. A good response is 7...h6! 8.♗xf6 exf6 9.♗xc4 ♗d6 with a fine position. We know this kingside structure well from the Classical Variation and can easily realize that there is even less reason to be concerned here. A top game continued: 10.0-0 0-0 11.h3 ♗f5 12.♗d3 ♕d7 13.♗xf5 ♕xf5 And Black was slightly more comfortable in Ivanchuk – Aronian, Nice (rapid) 2009.

B1) 7.d5 ♘e5

7...♘a5 is also playable, but there is no need for a double repertoire against this sideline.



8.♕d4

Centralizing the queen is the best try.

8.♗xc4 ♘xc4 9.♕a4† ♗d7 10.♕xc4 has been played in a fair number of games, but White can hardly hope for an advantage after trading a bishop for a knight so cheaply. 10...h6!? looks like a tempting move to include, although the more common 10...e6 is also at least equal for Black.

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8.♘f3 ♗g4

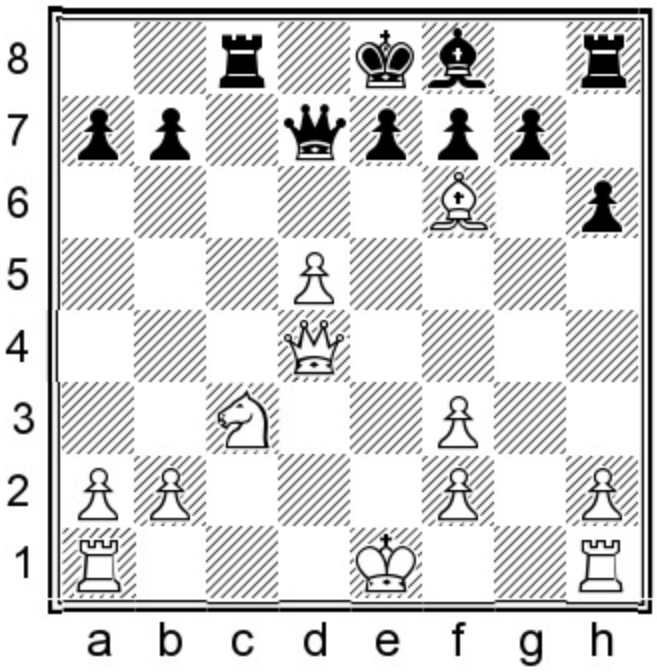
The pin is strong. Play usually continues:

9.♗xc4 ♘xc4 10.♕a4† ♕d7 11.♕xc4 ♗xf3 12.gxf3

White has scored well from this position, but Black should be in good shape after the precise:

12...♖c8 13.♕d4 h6! 14.♗xf6

14.♗f4 is met by 14...g6 followed by ...♗g7 and castling.



14...exf6!

This is good for Black; ...♗c5 is planned, and grabbing the a-pawn is risky for White.

15.♕xa7N

15.0-0-0 ♗c5 16.♖he1† occurred in Kislinsky – Bures, Czech Republic 2019, when 16...♔f8N would have been the right way to get the king to safety, with better chances for Black.

15...♗d6 16.♕a4

16.♕e3† ♔f8 17.0-0-0 g6 18.♔b1 ♔g7∓

16...♕xa4 17.♘xa4 ♔d8!?∓

This gives Black more than enough compensation in the ending.

8...h6!

That's the cure! The bishop does not really have a good square and if White exchanges it for a knight, then we will have great play on the dark squares.

8...♘d3† 9.♗xd3 cxd3 10.♕xd3 gives White a strong initiative.

9.♗f4

9.♗xf6?! exf6 is simply good for Black.

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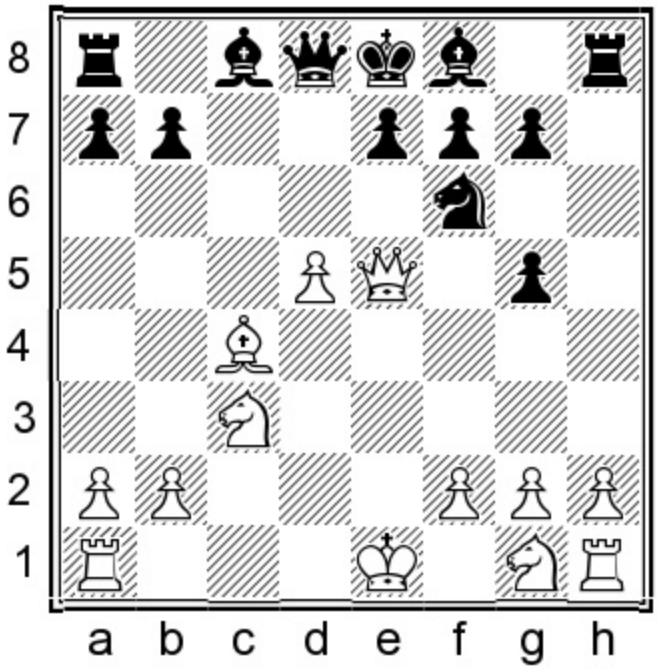
9.♗h4 ♘g6 10.♗g3 transposes to 10.♗g3 in the notes to the main line below.

9.♗e3 ♘d3† 10.♗xd3 cxd3 11.♕xd3 e5 12.♘ge2 ♗d6 is at least equal for Black.

9.♕xe5 hxg5 10.♗xc4



10...♕b6!

This is promising for Black.

10...a6 and 10...g4 are fine, but I like the text move even more.

11.♕g3

11.♗b3 allows 11...♕xf2†!; and 11.♘f3 g4 is not good either.

11...♕xb2

I also like the calmer 11...g6!?.

12.♖b1 ♕a3 13.♗b5† ♔d8

The complications seem to favour Black, for instance:

14.♘ge2 ♕d6 15.♕xg5 g6∓

Guizar – Rau, corr. 2019.

9...♘g6 10.♗xc4

10.♗g3

This is well met by:

10...e5!

A cool pawn sacrifice.

Also fine is the more restrained 10...e6, but why not try to seize the initiative?

11.♗xe5 ♘xe5 12.♕xe5† ♗e7

Black is ready to castle and play ...♖e8 with great play for the pawn.

13.0-0-0 ♘g4!

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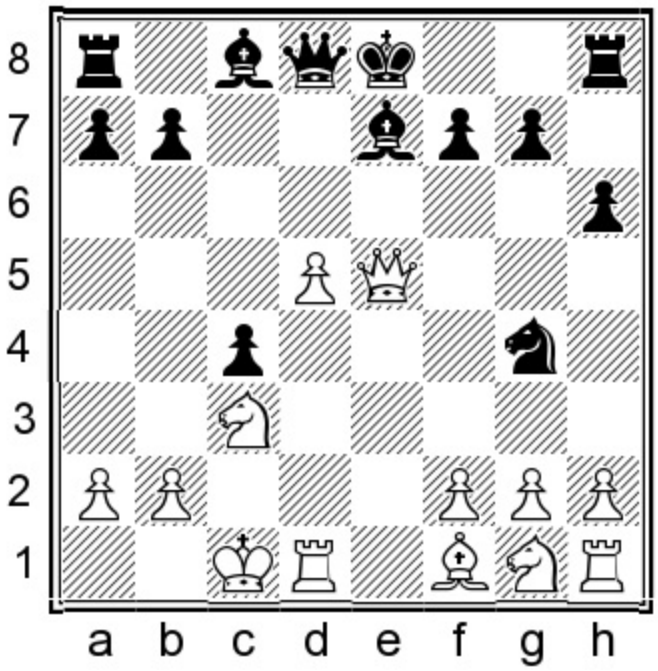


This tactical solution works wonderfully.

14.♕xg7 ♗g5† 15.♔b1 ♗f5† 16.♔a1

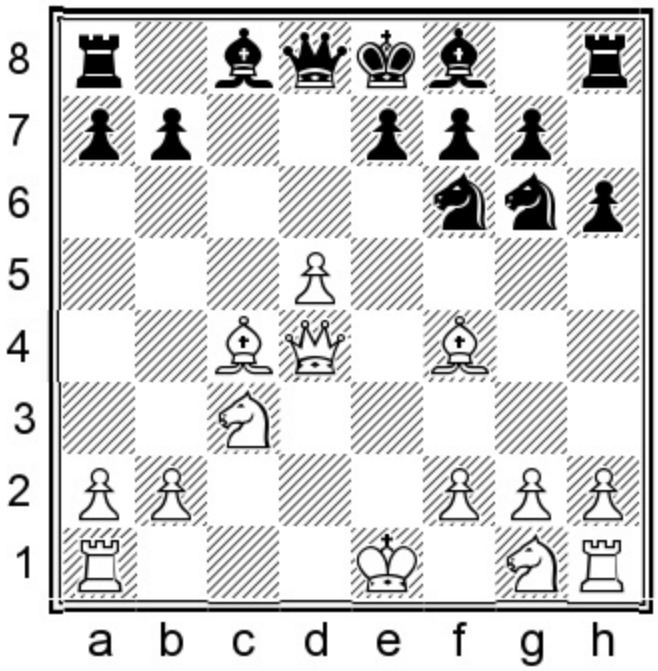
16.♗d3 ♗xd3† 17.♖xd3 ♗f6 18.♕xg4 cxd3∓

16...♗f6 17.♖e1† ♕e7!

Both sides will lose their queen for an enemy rook, but Black comes out on top after:

18.♕xh8† ♗xh8 19.♖xe7† ♔xe7 20.♘h3 ♖c8∓

Ulybin – D. Berczes, Winterthur 2009.



10...♘xf4 11.♕xf4 g5!

Black gains a tempo to prepare ...♗g7, and will generate good play on the dark squares.

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12.♕e3

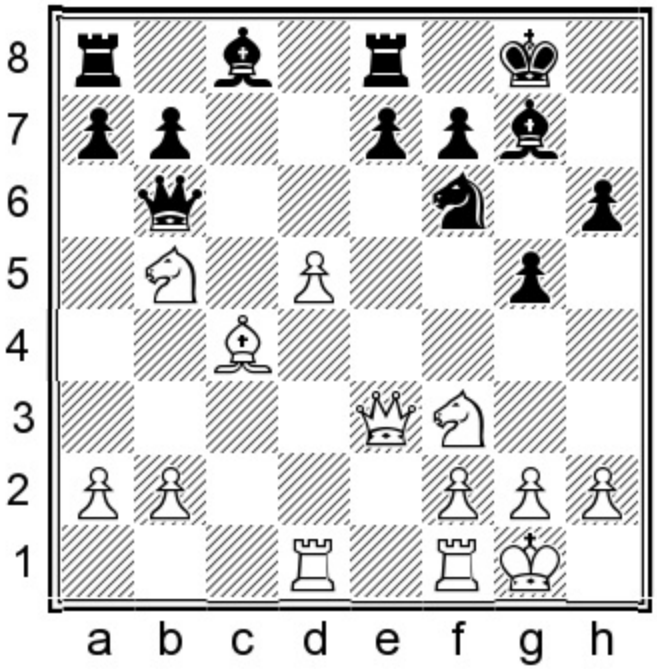
The alternative 12.♕d2 ♗g7 13.♘ge2 ♗d7 14.0-0 0-0 15.♖ad1 leads to a similar position, and after 15...♕b6N Black is fine.

12...♗g7 13.♘f3 0-0 14.0-0 ♖e8 15.♖ad1 ♕b6!

This move solves all problems. Here are two examples from correspondence praxis:

16.♘b5

16.♕xb6 axb6 17.♖fe1 ♔f8 18.♖d2 ♗f5 19.h4 g4 20.♘d4 ♗d7 21.♖ed1 occurred in Houpt – Sharpe, corr. 2017, and now 21...♖ec8N seems most logical to me, with equal play.



16...♕xe3 17.fxe3 ♖f8 18.d6 exd6 19.♘xd6 ♗e6=

Gaujens – Rau, corr. 2019.

B2) 7.♗xc4

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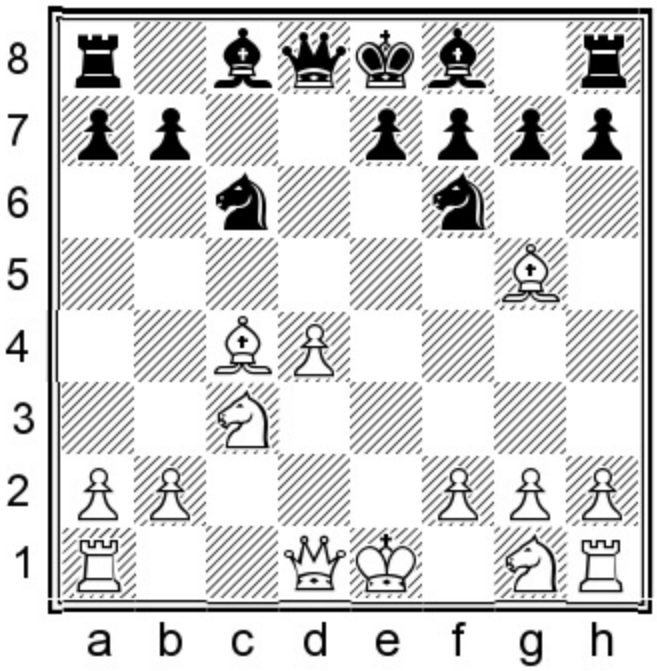


This sharp move is the main line these days. White is prepared to sacrifice the d-pawn in return for rapid development and a dangerous initiative.

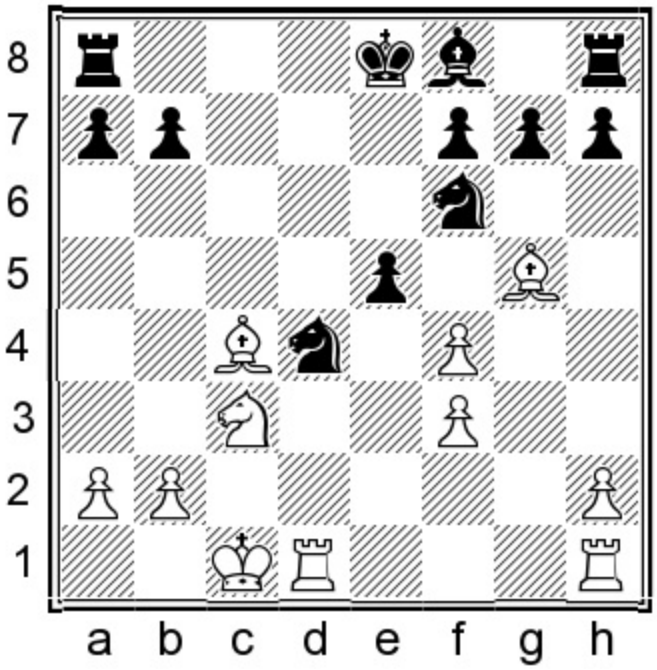
7...h6!

A clever intermediate move.

7...♕xd4

This gives White excellent play for the pawn and I prefer to avoid it. A recent correspondence game shows the direction the play usually takes:

8.♕xd4 ♘xd4 9.0-0-0 e5 10.f4 ♗g4 11.♘f3 ♗xf3 12.gxf3



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12...0-0-0

12...♖c8?! 13.fxe5 ♖xc4 14.exf6 ♘e6 15.♖he1↑ is unpleasant for Black; this should be compared with the better version after 7...h6! 8.♗h4 ♕xd4, as analysed below.

13.fxe5 ♘xf3 14.♖xd8† ♔xd8 15.♗xf6† gxf6 16.exf6 ♘e5 17.♗d5 ♔c7 18.♖g1 ♗h6† 19.♔c2 ♔b8=

The opposite-coloured bishops helped Black to maintain the balance in Colombo Berra – Golubenko, corr. 2019. Games such as this one indicate that grabbing the d-pawn is theoretically okay for Black, but giving White fast development and the initiative hardly seems like the best practical choice.

8.♗h4

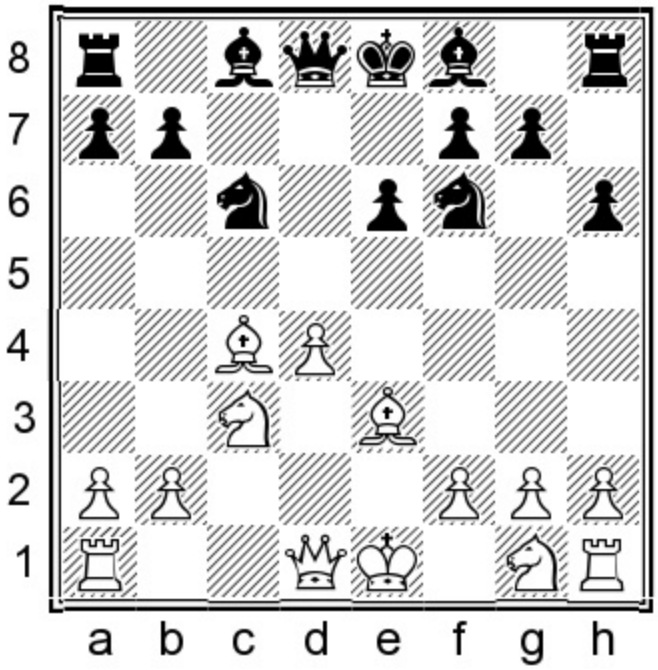
White keeps the tension. Other bishop moves all have drawbacks.

8.♗xf6 exf6 9.♘f3 ♗d6 transposes to lines we have already seen and is completely harmless.

8.♗e3

This is not bad, although Black can enter a classical IQP position in good conscience:

8...e6



Black is fine although the inclusion of ...h6 changes certain details. If Black were to develop in a traditional fashion with ...♗e7, 0-0, ...b6, ...♗b7 and so on, the ...h6 move might offer White some additional attacking possibilities. Instead, Black should develop with ...♗d6 (exploiting the fact that there is no ♗g5 pin!) and follow up with ...0-0 and ...♘e7-f5 so that the kingside is well defended and White's dark-squared bishop becomes a potential target.

9.♘f3 ♗d6

9...♗e7 has been tried by some strong players, but I find it less suitable for the reasons explained above.

10.0-0 0-0 11.♕d2 ♘e7

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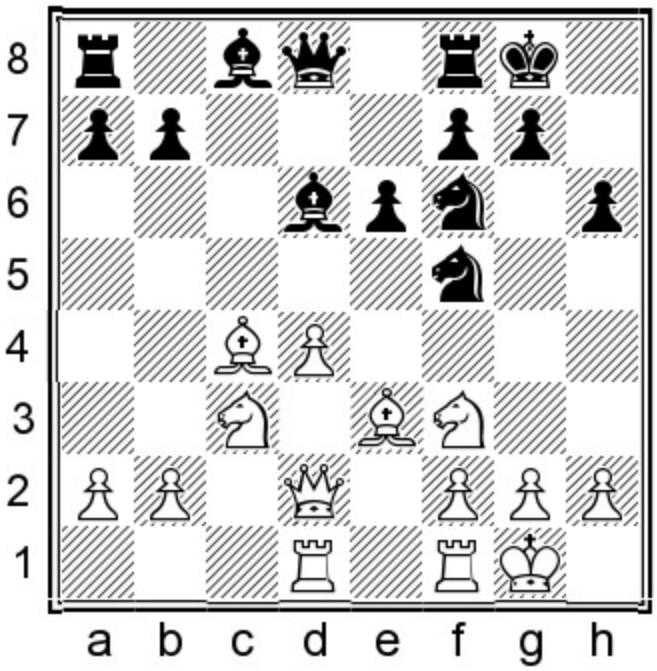
All according to plan.

The freeing break 11...e5!? is also possible, although 12.♗xh6!? gxh6 13.♕xh6 practically forces a draw if White wants it.

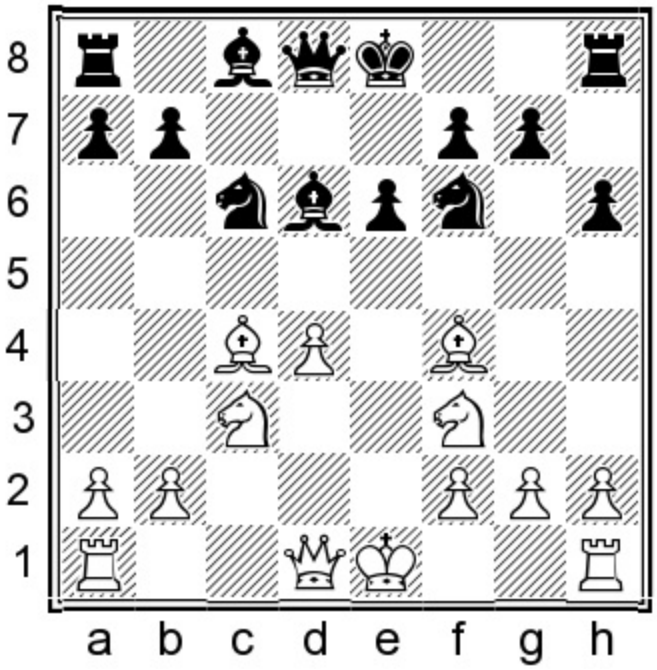
12.♖ad1 ♘f5⇄



Having achieved the desired set-up, Black can look to expand on the queenside with moves like ...a6 and ...b5.

8.♗f4 e6 9.♘f3 ♗d6!

Again we see this characteristic move. Here it makes even more sense, as minor-piece exchanges tend to favour the side playing against the IQP.



10.♘e5

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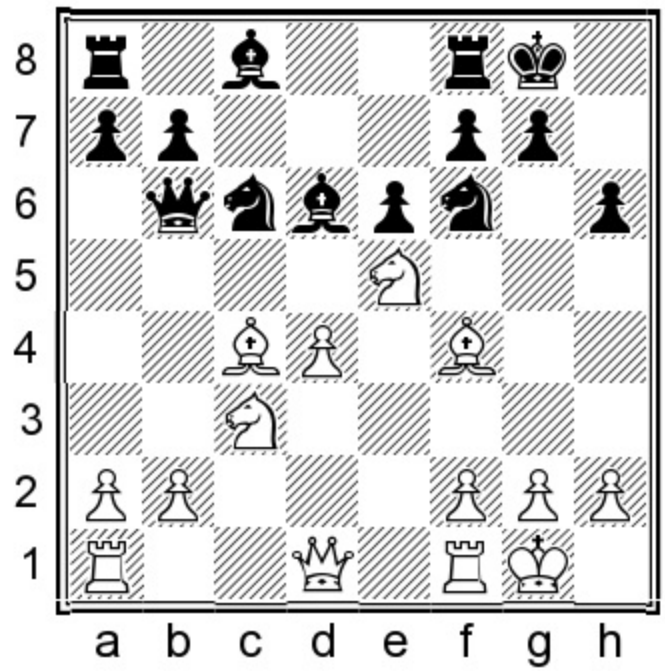
The most natural.

10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.0-0 0-0 is pleasant for Black, who will play ...b6 and ...♗b7 with a fine game.

10.♗e5!? has been the most popular choice, although it looks rather artificial. 10...♗xe5 (10...0-0 has been more popular, but the text move seems to me like a good response.) 11.dxe5 ♘d7 12.♗b5 (12.♕e2 ♕c7 13.♘b5?! ♕a5† 14.♔f1 0-0 was clearly better for Black in Zeller – Roesemann, Leipzig 2014.) 12...0-0 13.♗xc6 bxc6 14.0-0 c5∓ Black's bishop will be strong on b7.

10...0-0 11.0-0 ♕b6!

Black has various playable options, but the text move could prove annoying for White. The only example so far continued:



12.♘d7 ♗xd7 13.♗xd6 ♖fd8 14.♗c5 ♕a5 15.♖b1 ♗e8 16.♖e1 ♕c7

And Black was better in the email game we have been following: the d-pawn is weak and the bishop looks strange on c5.

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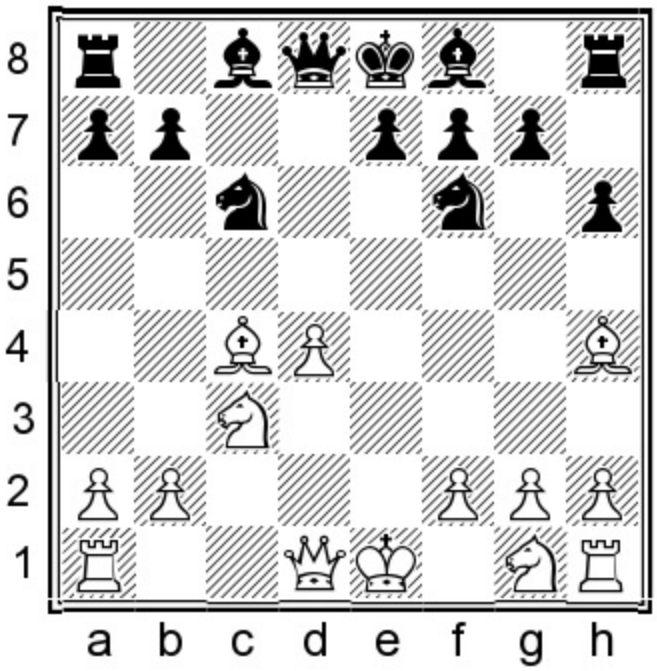

We will analyse two continuations which are equally playable but lead to totally different types of play. **B21)** 8...♕xd4 is an improved version of the pawn grab discussed on the previous move, and it provides a no-nonsense route to equality for players who don't mind memorizing some concrete lines. The less forcing alternative is **B22)** 8...e6, leading to a relatively normal IQP position. Compared to the notes above, White's bishop is more active on h4 than, for instance, on e3, but Black nonetheless seems fine.

B21) 8...♕xd4 9.♕xd4 ♘xd4 10.0-0-0 e5

This is the big main line that has been heavily tested and almost exclusively played.

10...g5!? is an interesting alternative which we will see in Game 13 (Gaponenko – Kosteniuk).

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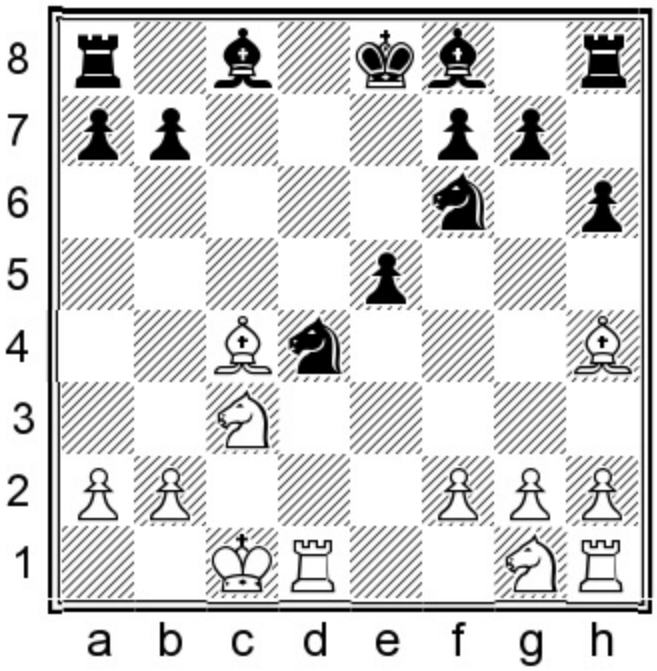

11.f4

White has to attack the centre somehow, and this is the most obvious and popular way. Two other options have been tried:

11.♗g3 is easily neutralized as Black simply returns the pawn: 11...♗e6 (11...♗e7 12.♗xe5 ♘c6= was maybe even simpler in Sanal – Jojua, Denizli 2013.) 12.♗xe6 ♘xe6 13.♗xe5 ♗e7 14.♘ge2 0-0= Khairullin – Ni Hua, Khanty-Mansiysk 2011.

11.♘f3!? ♘xf3 12.♗xf6

12.gxf3?! ♗e6 13.♗b5† ♘d7 makes life easy for Black, and after 14.f4 g5! 15.fxg5 ♗e7 16.♘d5 ♖c8† 17.♔b1 ♗f5† 18.♔a1 hxg5 19.♘xe7 ♔xe7 20.♗xg5† f6 21.♗e3 a6 22.♗e2 ♖c2 23.♖de1 ♗e4 24.♖hg1 ♖xh2∓ White was on the defensive in Bartel – D. Mastrovasilis, Aix-les-Bains 2011.

12...gxf6 13.♗b5†

13.gxf3?! ♗e7 gives White nothing.

13...♔e7

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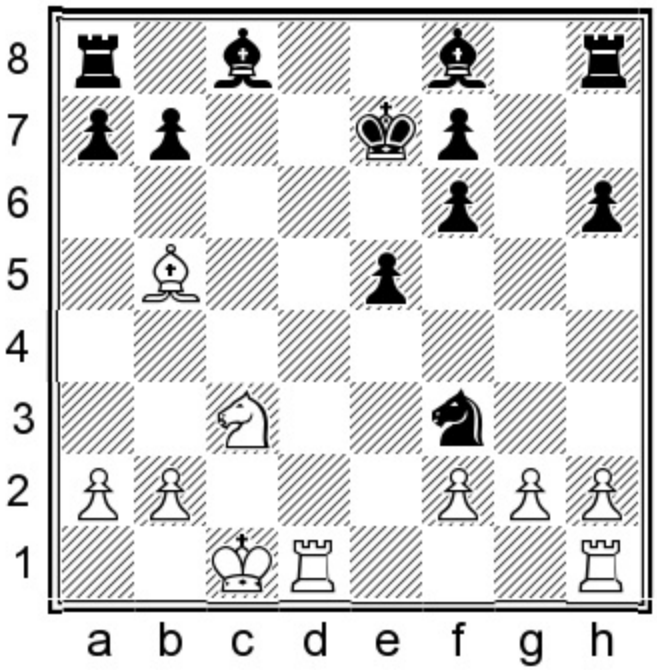

Black has entered a minefield where he has to follow a narrow, but not-too-difficult, path to avoid being harmed.

14.♘d5† ♔d8 15.gxf3

After 15.♘b6†? ♘d4µ the white knight will be trapped in the corner.

15...♗d6

This looks dangerous for Black, but White cannot profit from the pressure on the d-file. If he moves the knight away from d5, the black king gets access to the e7-square.

16.♖d2

16.♘xf6 ♔e7 17.♘d5† ♔f8 18.♘e3 ♔e7 19.♘d5† was soon agreed drawn in Hess – Shankland, Saint Louis 2011.

16...♗e6 17.♖hd1 ♗c5! 18.♘b6† ♔e7 19.♘xa8 ♖xa8∓

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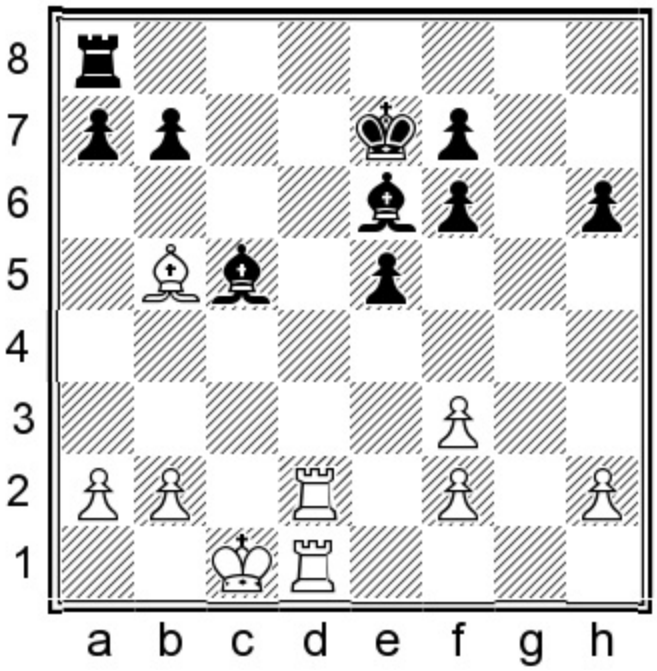
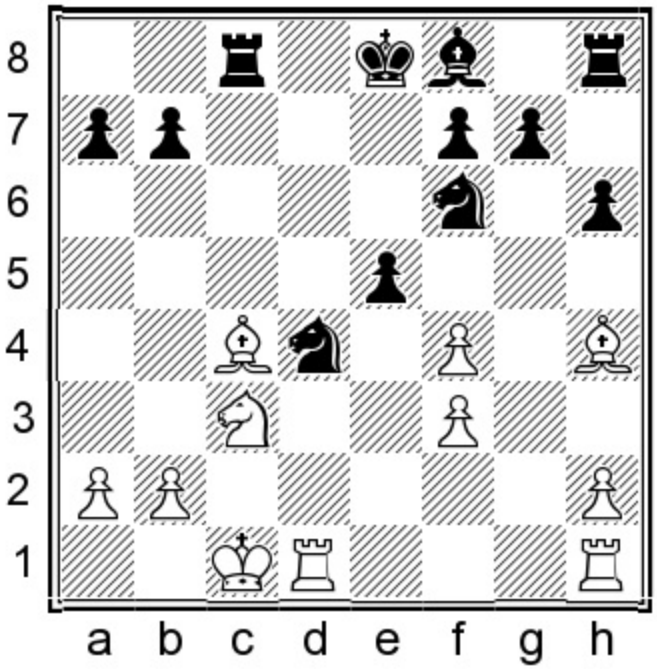


Black has excellent compensation for the exchange. The stem game continued:
20.♗d7?!

Later White has tried other moves, but he has been unable to prove any advantage.
20...♗xa2 21.♗g4 ♗d4 22.f4∓

A draw was agreed in Aronian – Stellwagen, Wijk aan Zee 2009, but Black should really have played on.

11...♗g4 12.♘f3 ♗xf3 13.gxf3 ♖c8!



Black cannot maintain his centre anymore, but this counterattack saves the day.

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14.fxe5

This forcing continuation ultimately leads to an equal ending.

The alternative is:

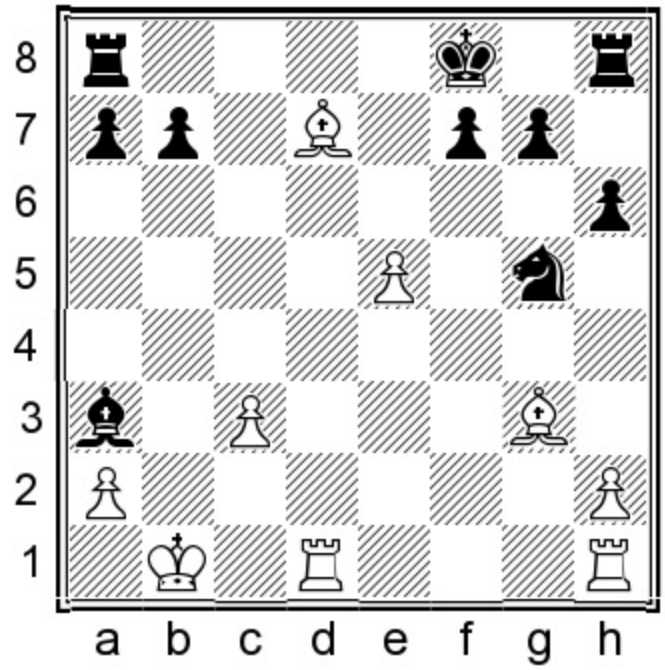
14.♗f1!?

This way White aims for a longer-lasting initiative, but Black's position is hard to break:

14...♘d5! 15.fxe5 ♘xc3 16.bxc3 ♗a3† 17.♔b1 ♘xf3 18.♗h3

18.♗b5† ♔f8 19.♗g3 a6 20.♗e2 ♘g5 21.♗g4 ♖e8= is nothing to worry about.

18...♖a8 19.♗d7† ♔f8 20.♗g3 ♘g5



White's active bishops give him compensation of course, but several correspondence games demonstrate that White has no way to get an advantage. For instance:

21.e6!

The most enterprising.

21.♖d5 ♔e7 22.♗h4 b6=

21.♗f5 g6 22.h4 gxf5 23.hxg5 h5 24.e6 ♖e8=

21...♘e4!

21...♘xe6 22.♗xe6 fxe6 23.♖d7⩲ would be trickier.

22.♗e5 f6 23.♖he1

23.♗d4?! ♔e7∓

23...fxe5 24.♖xe4 ♔e7 25.h4

25.♖xe5?! ♗d6 26.♖e2 g5∓

25...g5 26.hxg5 hxg5 27.♖xe5 g4 28.♗a4 ♗d6 29.♖ed5

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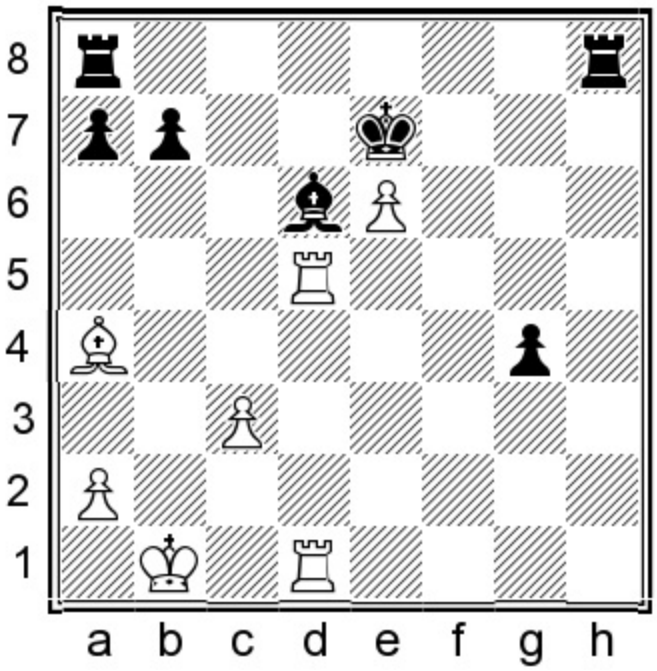


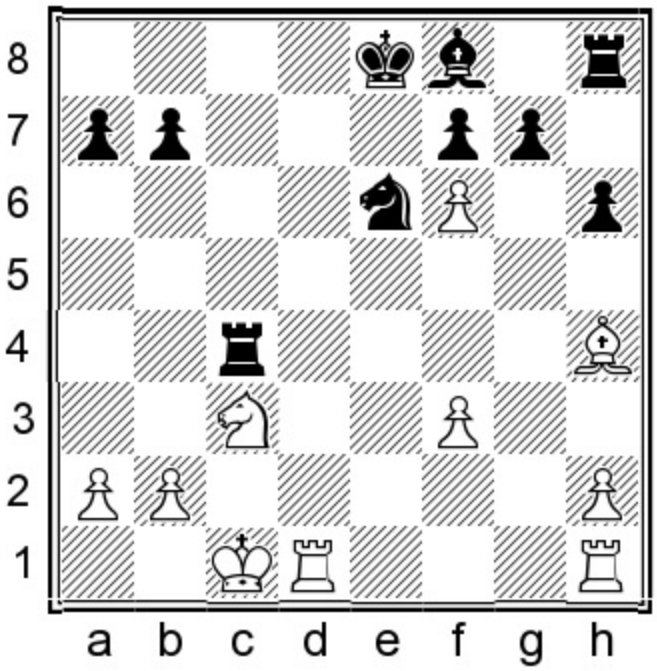
The endgame is equal and the players called it a draw in Pellen – Forsloef, corr. 2018. If I ever reached this position in a practical game, I would be tempted to play a few more moves starting with:

29...♖ad8

Asking White how he intends to deal with the passed g-pawn.

14...♖xc4 15.exf6 ♘e6

The rook attacks the bishop from the side, which gives Black enough time to stabilize the position. Compare the 12...♖c8?! line, as mentioned in the earlier note on 7...♕xd4, when the bishop was still on g5 and White could play ♖he1, keeping the full momentum of his initiative.



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16.♗g3

Harmless is: 16.♗f2 gxf6 17.♗xa7 (17.♔b1 ♗c5=) 17...♗b4 18.♔c2 ♗xc3 19.bxc3 White went on to win from here in Moe – T.B. Nielsen, Copenhagen 2018, but after 19...♖a4N followed by picking up the a-pawn, White would have had to take care not to get into trouble.

16...gxf6 17.♔b1 ♖g8

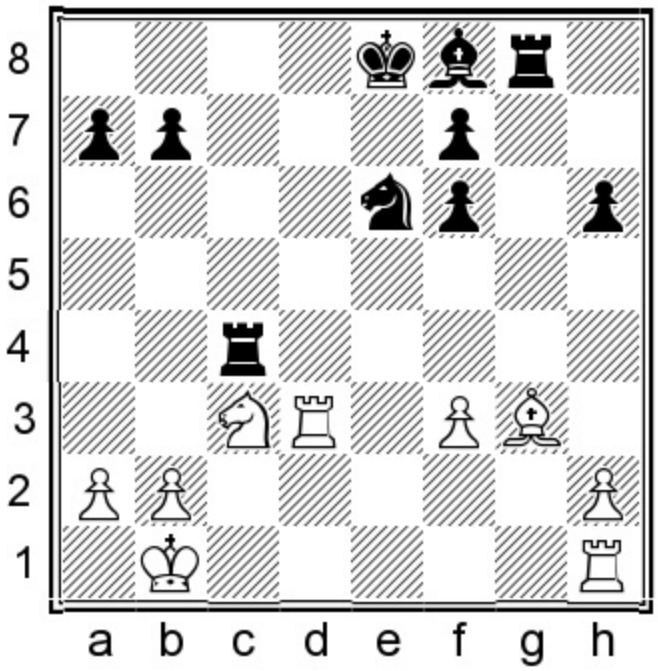
Activating the rook and preparing to protect the f6-pawn with ...♖g6.

17...♖d4!? also seems fine, and I am sure there are other decent moves as well.

18.♖d3!?

This is the most recent try, not that it really changes anything.

18.♘d5 ♖g6 19.b3 ♖c6 is level, as Black can hardly hope to convert his extra pawn, while White has no way to break through. A recent example continued: 20.♖he1 ♗e7 21.f4 f5 22.♘xe7 ♔xe7 23.♖d5 ♔f6 24.♖ee5 ♖g4 25.♖xf5† ♔g6 26.♖fe5 b6= And Black secured the c5-square for the knight in Szerlak – Grabner, corr. 2019.



18...♖d4 19.♖xd4 ♘xd4 20.♘d5 ♖g5 21.♖e1† ♘e6 22.♘xf6† ♔e7 23.♘g4 ♖h5 24.♗e5 b6=

Again, White managed to regain the sacrificed pawn, but he was left with no advantage in Burgarth – Baranowski, corr. 2019.

GAME 13

Inna Gaponenko – Alexandra Kosteniuk

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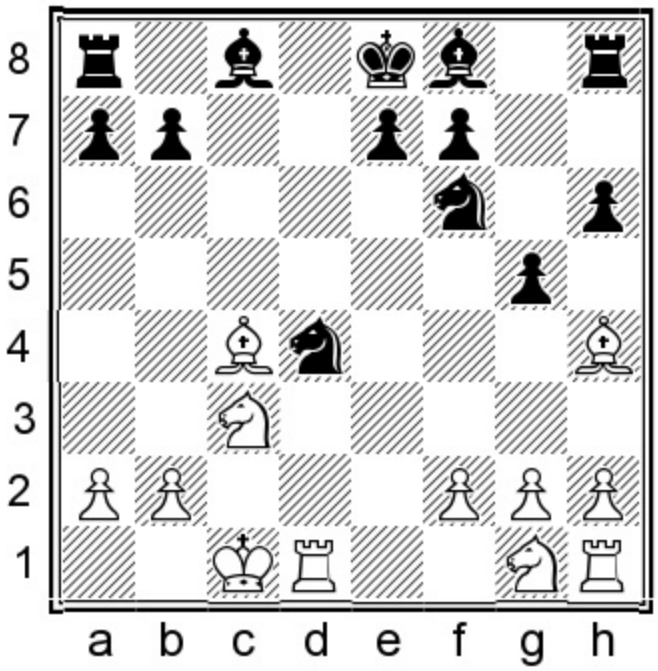
1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♗g5 dxc4 7.♗xc4 h6 8.♗h4 ♕xd4 9.♕xd4 ♘xd4 10.0-0-0 g5!?



This was an interesting novelty at the time. It has never attracted more than a few followers, which is a shame, as the resulting positions are quite entertaining and much less heavily explored than the 10...e5 lines.

11.♖xd4

Keeping the bishop also allows Black to keep her extra pawn: 11.♗g3 ♘e6 12.♘f3 (12.♘b5 a6 13.♗xe6 axb5∓) 12...♗g7 13.♖he1 0-0 White has a degree of compensation but Black is at least equal, and after 14.h4 g4 15.♘e5 a6 16.♗b3?! ♘c5 Black was much better in Badelka – Girya, Riyadh (blitz) 2017.

11...gxh4 12.♘b5!

12.♖xh4 regains the pawn but 12...a6 leaves Black with the bishop pair and a nice position.

12...e5!

The only move!

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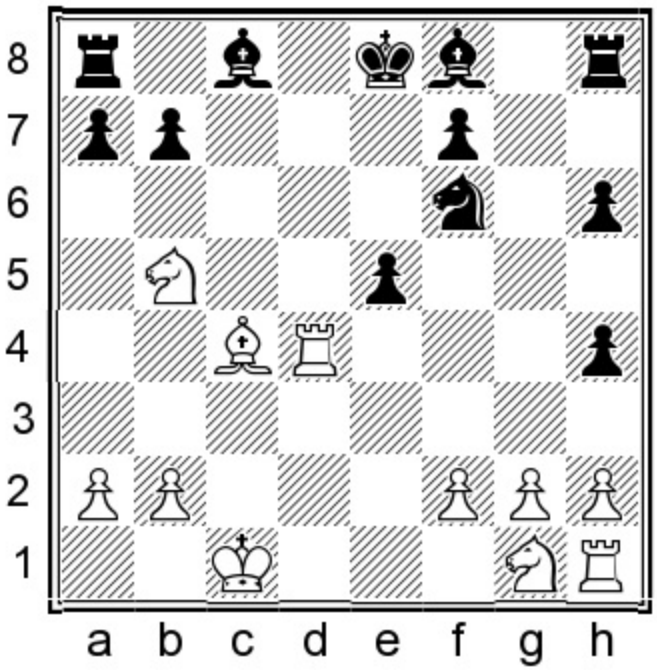

13.♘c7†

13.♖xh4

Erwin L'Ami gives a spectacular idea here:

13...♗c5!?

13...♔e7 14.♘f3 e4 15.♖e1 h5⇄ is also quite playable.

The point is revealed after:

14.♘c7†?

White has to go for the unclear 14.♘f3! and after something like 14...♗xf2 15.g3 0-0 16.♘xe5 ♗e3† 17.♔b1 ♗f5† 18.♔a1 ♖ad8 19.♖f1 ♗g5 20.♖d4 ♖xd4 21.♘xd4 ♗h3⇄ the position remains balanced.

14...♔e7 15.♘xa8 ♗xf2 16.g3 ♗e3† 17.♔c2 ♗g5

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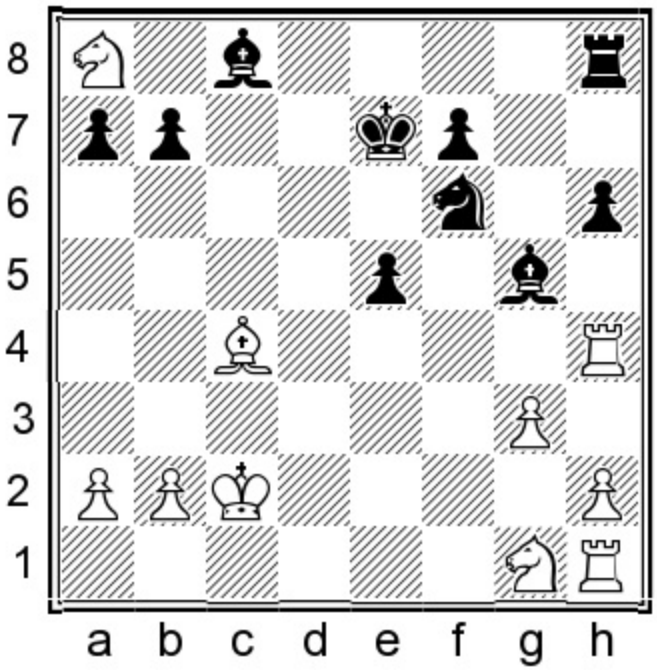


White's rook is trapped and although he will still be temporarily a piece up, he will lose that too because his coordination is so poor. Play may continue:

18.♘c7 ♗xh4 19.gxh4 ♗f5†

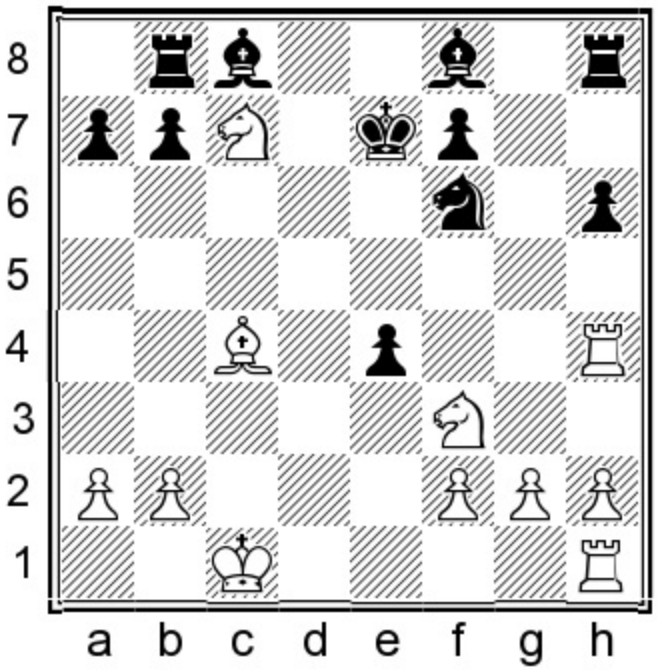
And by now it's clear that White is in big trouble due to 20.♔b3 ♗e4 or 20.♗d3 e4 21.♗c4 ♖c8.

13...♔e7 14.♖d1

14.♘xa8? exd4 is poor for White, as the knight is in trouble in the corner.

A later game continued:

14.♖xh4 ♖b8 15.♘f3 e4



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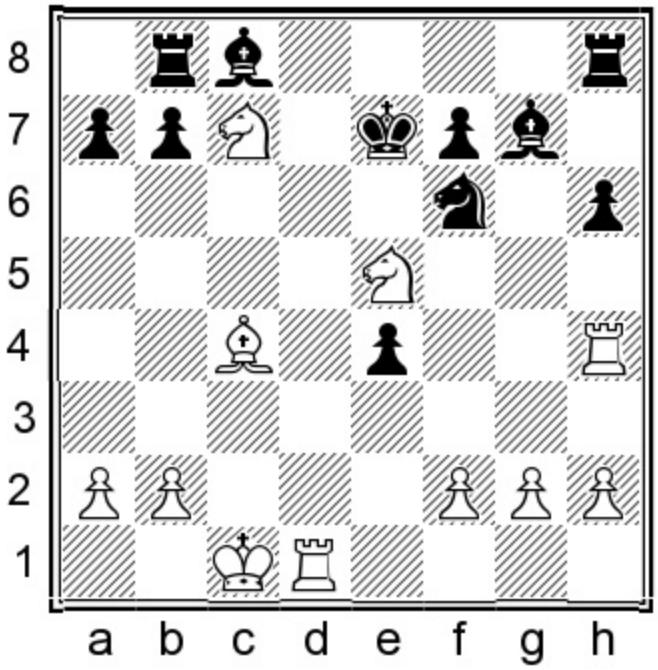
16.♘e5

16.♘d5† ♘xd5 17.♖xe4† wins a pawn but Black gets good compensation after 17...♔f6 18.♗xd5 ♗f5⩲ or 17...♔d6 18.♖d1 ♗e6 19.♗xd5 ♗xd5 20.♖ed4 ♖c8† 21.♔b1 ♖c5 22.b4 ♖b5 23.a4 ♗g7 24.axb5 ♗xd4 25.♖xd4 ♖e8⩲.

16...♗g7

16...♗f5!?N 17.♖f4 (17.♘xf7? ♖c8!) 17...♗h7 works out well, for instance: 18.♖xf6 ♔xf6 19.♘d7† ♔g7 20.♘xb8 ♗d6 21.♘ba6 ♖c8 22.b3 bxa6 23.♘d5 a5=

17.♖d1



In Yan – Girya, China 2019, better would have been:

17...h5!N

The position is sharp but equal, with ...♗h6† a useful resource.

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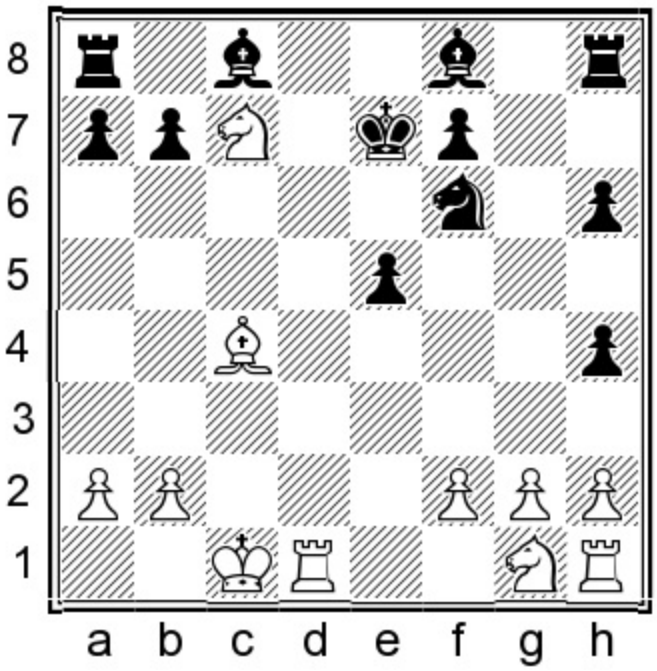

14...♗g4! 15.♘xa8

White cannot play 15.f3? because of 15...♖c8! with trouble down the c-file.

15...♗xd1 16.♔xd1 ♗g7

Winning back the piece.

17.♘f3

17.♘c7? ♖c8 18.♘d5† ♘xd5 19.♗xd5 ♖d8∓ is no good for White.

17...♖xa8

L'Ami suggests 17...h3!? and calls it a kamikaze-move. I like that! It is true that the piece on a8 is running nowhere and after 18.gxh3 ♖xa8 19.♘xe5 White's pawn structure is severely damaged. After something like 19...♖d8† 20.♘d3 ♖d4 21.b3 ♘e4= her extra pawn does not matter.

18.♘xe5

18.♘xh4 ♘e4= was safer for White.

18...♖d8† 19.♔e2 ♖d4!

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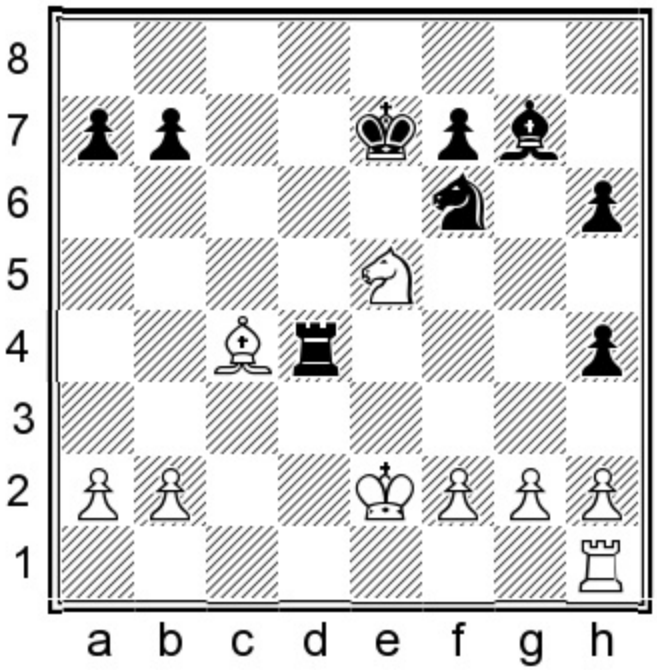


Black has some initiative.

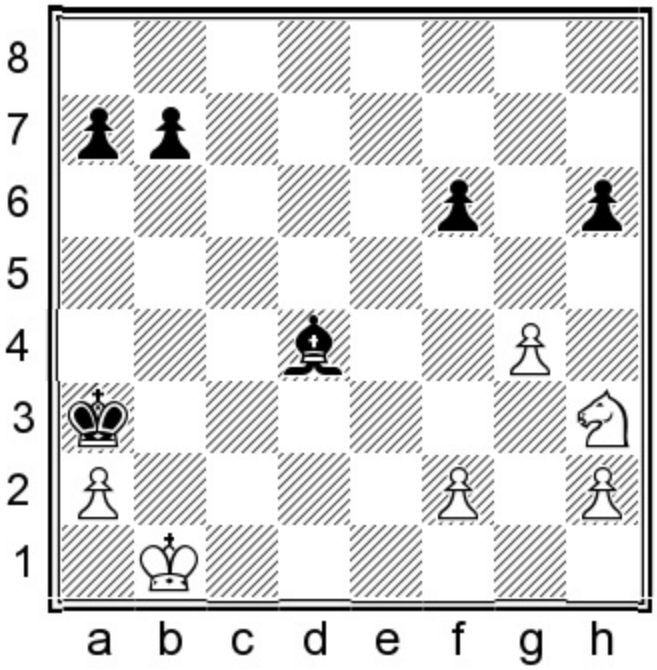
20.♖e1 ♘e4! 21.♘f3 ♖xc4 22.♔d3 ♖b4 23.♖xe4† ♖xe4 24.♔xe4 h3 25.g3 ♗xb2 26.♘g1?

Centralizing the king with 26.♔d5! was necessary to keep the balance.

26...♔d6! 27.♘xh3 ♔c5

Now Black is winning with her active king and strong bishop.

28.♔d3 ♔b4 29.♔c2 ♔a3 30.♔b1 ♗d4 31.g4 f6



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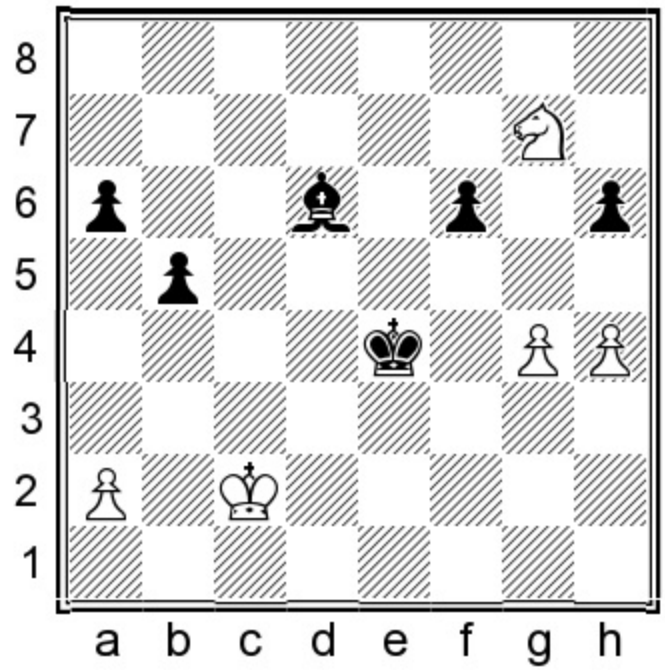
32.♘f4

32.f4 ♗e3 leaves White paralysed.

32...♗xf2 33.♘d5 ♗h4 34.♘e7 ♗g5 35.♘c8 a6 36.♘d6 b5 37.♘b7 ♔b4 38.h3 ♗f4 39.♘d8 ♔c3 40.♘e6 ♗d6 41.h4 ♔c4 42.♔c2 ♔d5 43.♘g7 ♔e4



The king does an excellent job.

44.♘f5 ♗f4 45.♘e7 ♔f3 46.♘d5 ♗e5 47.♘b4 a5 48.♘c6 ♔xg4 49.♘xa5 ♔xh4 50.♔d3 ♔g3 51.♔e2 ♔g2 52.♘c6 h5 53.♘e7 h4 54.♘f5 h3 55.♘h4† ♔g3 56.♘f5† ♔f4

0–1

B22) 8...e6!?

This is a good positional alternative to 8...♕xd4.

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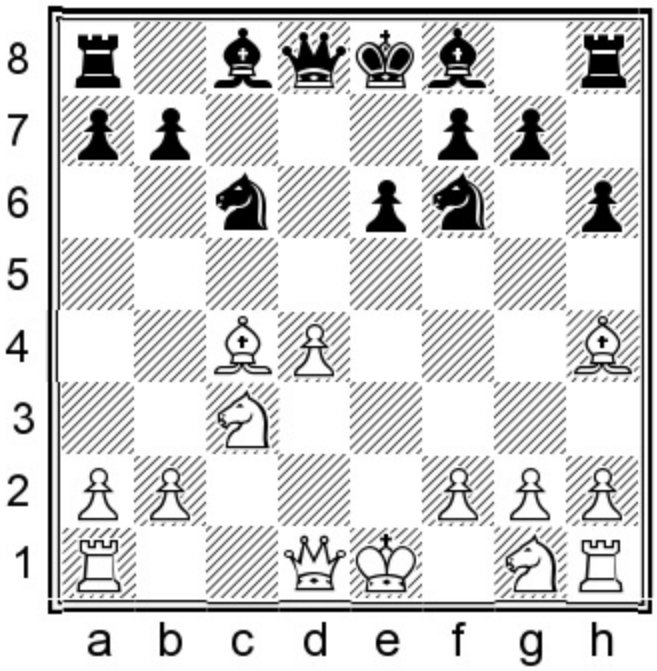
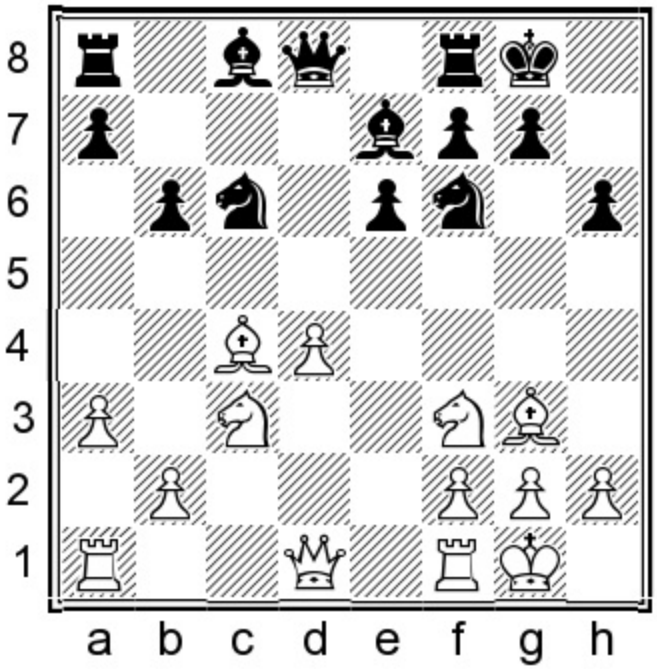


9.♘f3 ♗e7 10.0-0 0-0

Black wants to play ...♘h5 next and ease his position. If White then exchanges bishops on e7, Black takes back with the knight and tries to get control over the important d5-square in front of the isolated pawn. This is vintage Nimzowitsch strategy: first make the pawn immobile; later attack it!

We will analyse **B221)** 11.♖c1 and **B222)** 11.♖e1, the latter being the critical test.

11.♗g3 preserves the bishop but loses time. 11...b6 12.a3



In L.B. Hansen – Dean, Orlando 2011, Black developed the bishop to b7 and went on to draw with his much higher-rated opponent. Although that was perfectly fine, Black could also have played more actively with: 12...♘a5!?N 13.♗a2 ♗a6= Planning ...♗c4.

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11.a3

This is always a useful move in these IQP positions, but it doesn't put any pressure on Black and he obtains easy equality with the thematic move:

11...♘h5! 12.♗xe7 ♘xe7 13.♖e1

13.d5 just leads to liquidation after 13...♘xd5 14.♘xd5 exd5 15.♗xd5 ♘f4 16.♗e4 ♕f6= but perhaps White should settle for this scenario while he still has the chance.

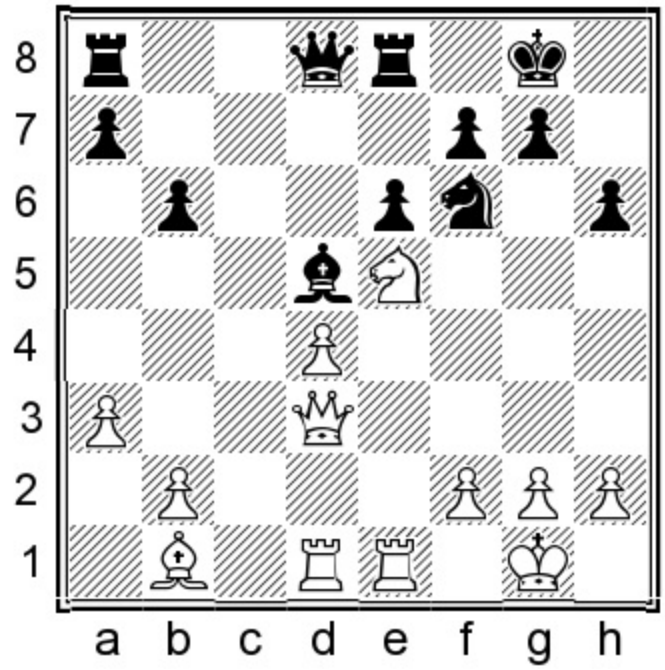
13...♘f6 14.♕d3 b6

14...♗d7!? followed by ...♗c6 is also fine.

15.♖ad1

15.♘e5!?N 15...♗b7 16.♘xf7!? ♖xf7 17.♗xe6 seems like the only real attempt to cause problems, but after 17...♘ed5 18.♕g6 ♕f8 19.♘xd5 ♗xd5 20.♕xf7† ♕xf7 21.♗xf7† ♔xf7 22.♖ac1 ♘e8= Black defends all the entry squares.

15...♗b7 16.♗a2 ♖e8 17.♘e5 ♘ed5 18.♘xd5 ♗xd5 19.♗b1



And now in Kron – A. Tregubov, Tomsk 2003, Black missed a powerful idea:

19...♖e7!N

Planning ...♖c7 and ...♖ac8 with a pleasant position.

Please note that White is in trouble after:

20.♘g4 ♖c7! 21.♘xf6† ♕xf6 22.♕h7† ♔f8∓

The check on h8 is simply answered by ...♔e7, when the rook on a8 is protected by the bishop.

B221) 11.♖c1

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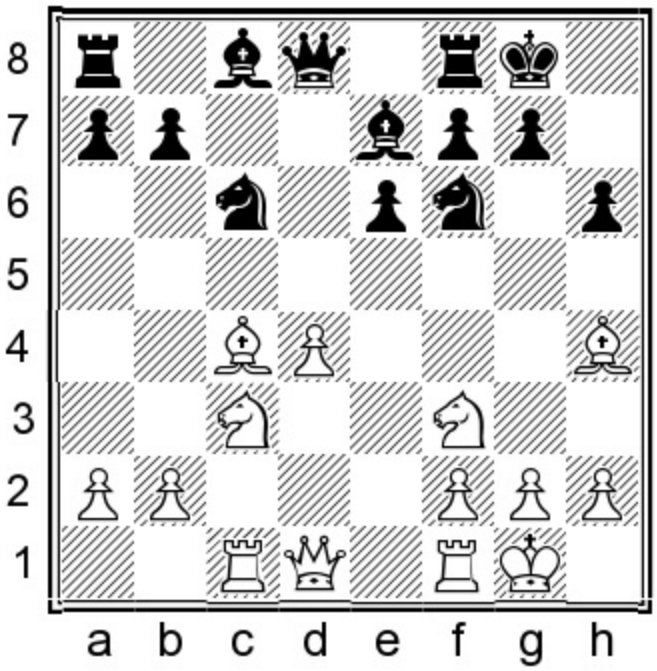

Placing the rook on the open file is a natural choice. Interestingly, this position has often occurred via the Queen's Gambit Declined: 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 ♗e7 5.♗g5 h6 6.♗h4 0-0 7.♖c1!? dxc4 8.e3 c5 9.♗xc4 cxd4 10.exd4 ♘c6 11.0-0. This was the move order of both of the Karpov games referenced below.

11...♘h5!

All according to plan.

12.♗xe7 ♘xe7

Black is at least equal. If White fails to generate any initiative – which is hard for him to achieve after the exchange of the dark-squared bishops – he will gradually become worse, as demonstrated by the twelfth World Champion in a couple of games.

13.♗b3

13.♖e1 ♘f6 14.♘e5 ♗d7 15.♕b3 ♖b8 16.♖cd1 b5! is an important resource that we will see again. 17.♘xd7 ♘xd7 18.♗d3 ♘f6 19.♗b1 a6∓ Christiansen – Karpov, London 1982.

13...♘f6 14.♘e5 ♗d7

Black is slowly but surely getting his pieces into play. He intends ...♖c8 and ...♗c6, increasing his grip over d5. In a famous game from the Merano 1981 World Championship match, Korchnoi soon went astray.

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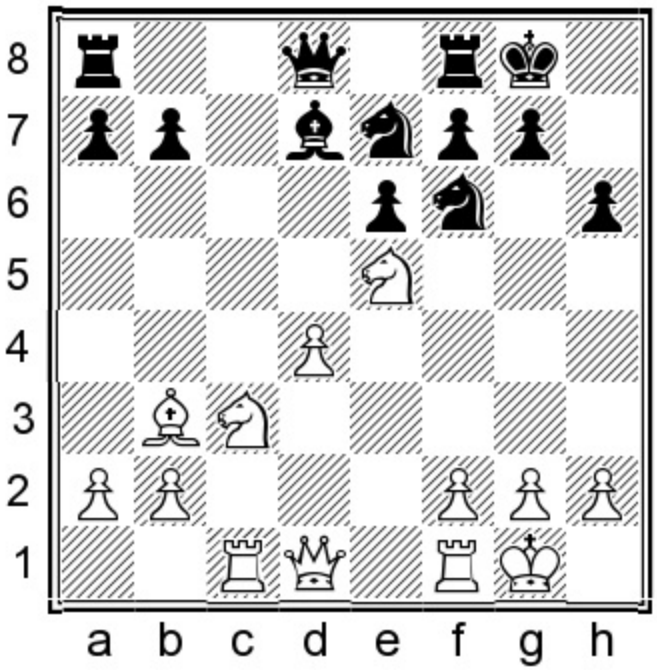
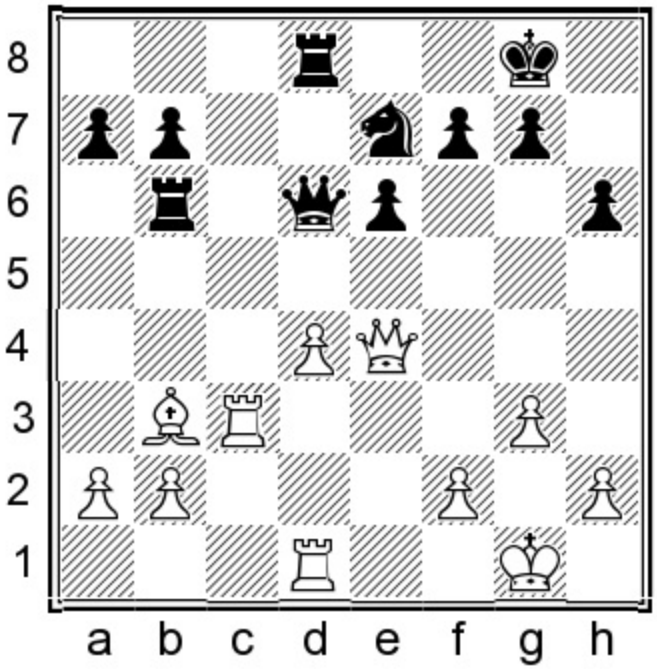


15.♕e2 ♖c8 16.♘e4?!

This fails to cause any problems and even helps Black, who is keen to exchange minor pieces.

16.♖fe1 was better, when 16...♗e8 followed by ...♕d6 and ...♗c6 would be a logical way to continue Black's plan. 16...a6 is also fine but 16...♗c6? would carelessly allow 17.♘xf7!.

16...♘xe4 17.♕xe4 ♗c6 18.♘xc6 ♖xc6 19.♖c3 ♕d6 20.g3 ♖d8 21.♖d1 ♖b6∓



In Korchnoi – Karpov, Merano (9) 1981, White got into long-term trouble, having to passively defend the isolated pawns.

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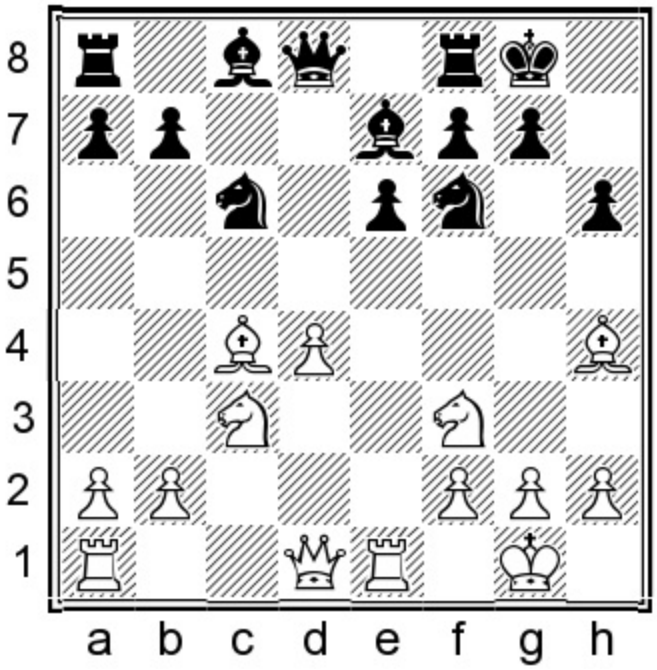
B222) 11.♖e1



This is the critical move. We will deal with it in the same way as the others.

11...♘h5! 12.♗xe7 ♘xe7 13.♕b3!?

The sharpest continuation. White fights for the key d5-square and generally tries to develop in as active and threatening a way as possible.

13.♘e5 ♘f6 14.♕d3 gives White nothing much after the typical 14...♗d7,, intending ...♗c6, as seen in Salai – Berezjuk, Slovakia 1996.

13.d5 just simplifies as usual. 13...exd5 14.♘xd5 ♘xd5 15.♗xd5 occurred in Sambuev – Lenderman, Montreal 2010, when 15...♘f4N looks most logical, with equal play.

13...♘f6 14.♖ad1 ♖b8

Black needs to solve some issues with the development of his queenside.

15.♘e5

So far we have followed Korobov – Anand, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018. Here Black has a major improvement:

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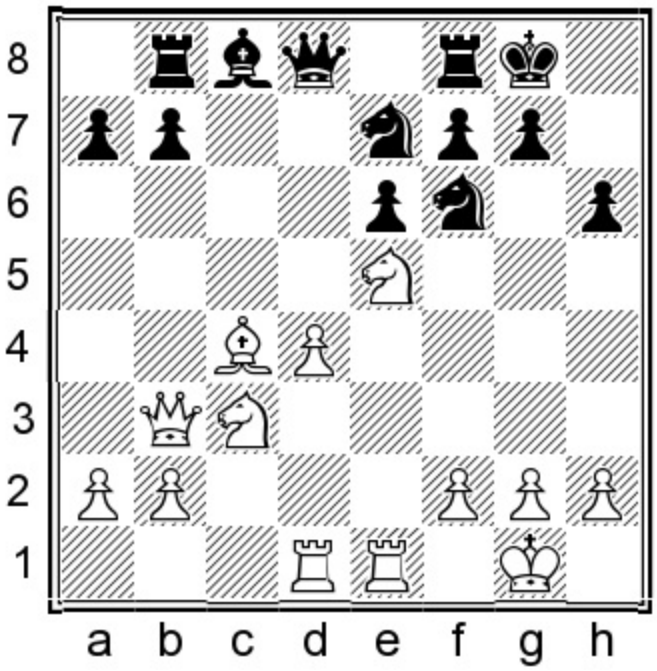

15...b5!N

The pawn cannot be taken immediately because of the pin on the b-file, and if White starts to withdraw then he will lose all momentum. However, Black is also pinned along the b-file, so White should continue:

16.a4! a6 17.axb5 axb5

We have reached a critical position for the whole line. White must decide whether or not to capture the offered pawn.

18.d5

The thematic d4-d5 break certainly looks tempting. Usually such a move leads to a lot of exchanges, and this is no exception. However, White pins his hopes on his active pieces and the possibility of reaching a technical position where Black's loose queenside may be exploited.

18.♗xb5?! is easy to counter: 18...♗a6 19.♕a4 ♗xb5 20.♘xb5 ♕e8 21.♘c3 ♖xb2∓

18.♘xb5!?

This is more complicated.

18...♖b6

This is the most straightforward move, though not the only playable one.

18...♗a6!? looks riskier on account of 19.♗xe6!? but it is not clear how strong this actually is. My analysis continues: 19...♘ed5! 20.♘c6 ♖xb5 21.♗xf7† ♖xf7 22.♕xb5 ♕c8!⩱ (22...♗xb5 23.♘xd8±) 23.♕a4 (23.♕b8 ♕xb8 24.♘xb8 ♗b5 25.♖c1 ♖b7 26.♘c6 ♗xc6 27.♖xc6 ♖xb2=) When both 23...♖c7∞ and 23...♘f4∞ lead to complicated play.

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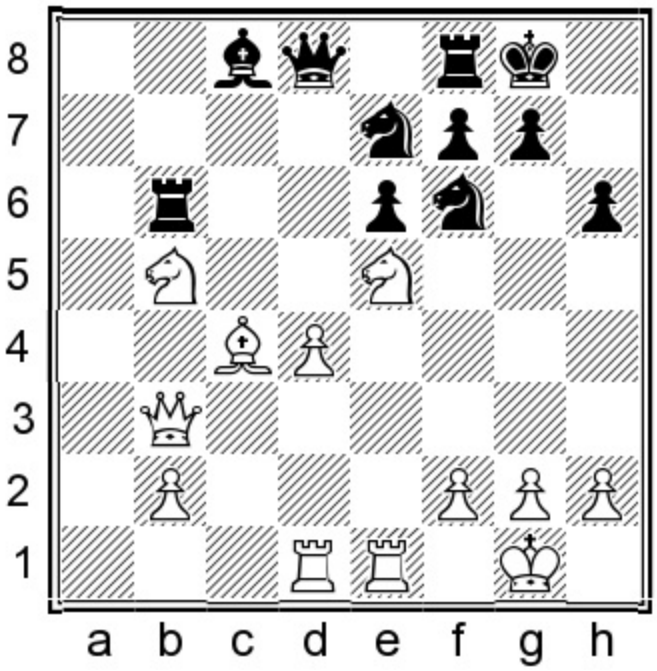


19.♕d3 ♗a6

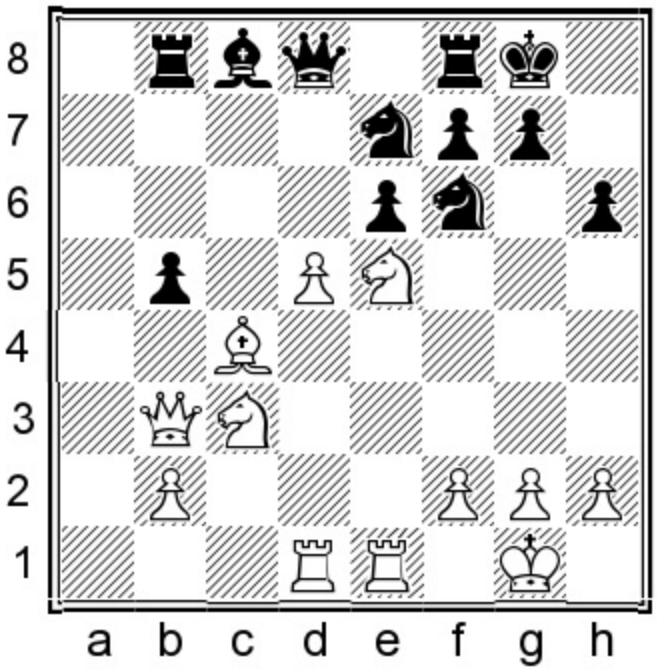
Black has good compensation and it will be hard for White to exploit his extra pawn with both of his queenside pawns so vulnerable. For instance:

20.b3

20.♘a3 ♗xc4 21.♘axc4 ♖b4⩲

20...♗xb5 21.♗xb5 ♕b8 22.♗c4 ♖d8

Black has strong pressure against the d4-pawn. The computer thinks White should just give it back and settle for equality.



18...exd5 19.♗xd5 ♘fxd5 20.♘xd5 ♘xd5 21.♘c6!

White's hopes for an advantage are pinned on this intermediate move.

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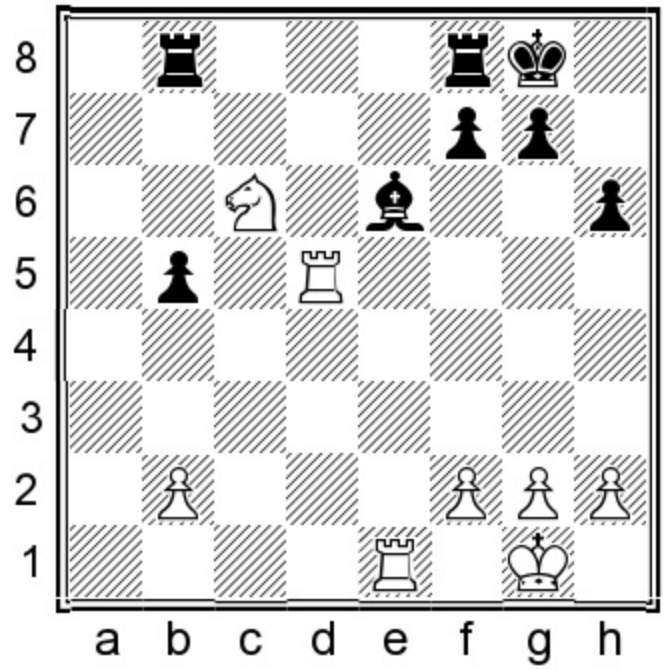
21...♕d6 22.♕xd5

The best choice.

22.♘xb8?! ♗e6! leaves the knight in trouble, and after 23.♘a6 Black has a choice. 23...♖a8! This is a winning attempt. (23...♕xa6 24.♖xd5= and a draw is likely.) 24.♖xd5! ♗xd5 25.♕d3 ♖d8 26.♕xb5 ♗c6 27.♕c4 ♕g6 28.g3 ♖d2⩱ Black's pieces are active and White has major weaknesses on the light squares, so Black has more than enough play for the pawn.

22...♕xd5 23.♖xd5 ♗e6

The ending is just equal. For instance:



24.♖de5 ♖b6 25.♘d4 ♗c4 26.b3 f6 27.♖c5 ♗f7=

Conclusion

With the sharp Panov Variation, 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3, White fights for activity and the initiative. An effective way to meet it is 5...♘c6!, when the aggressive 6.♗g5 is well answered by 6...dxc4 and if 7.♗xc4 then the subtle zwischenzug 7...h6!, before considering taking on d4, gives Black a good game.

6.♘f3 is the main line, when the normal sequence of 6...♗g4 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♕b3 ♗xf3 9.gxf3 e6 10.♕xb7 ♘xd4 11.♗b5† ♘xb5 12.♕c6† ♔e7 13.♕xb5 ♕d7 14.♘xd5† ♕xd5 leads to an equal ending. Don't forget to take a look at the 13.♕c5†!? sacrifice, which could be dangerous if you are unprepared.

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If Black wants a more complicated middlegame, 9...♘b6!? is interesting and playable, though riskier than the main line. Personally, I would go for the ending!

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Chapter 8

Exchange Variation

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1.e4 c6

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***Game 14* – Vitiugov – Lenderman 273**

B32) 4...♘f6 275

B321) 5.h3!? 276

B322) 5.c3 276

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"A lack of luck is the worst professional mistake."

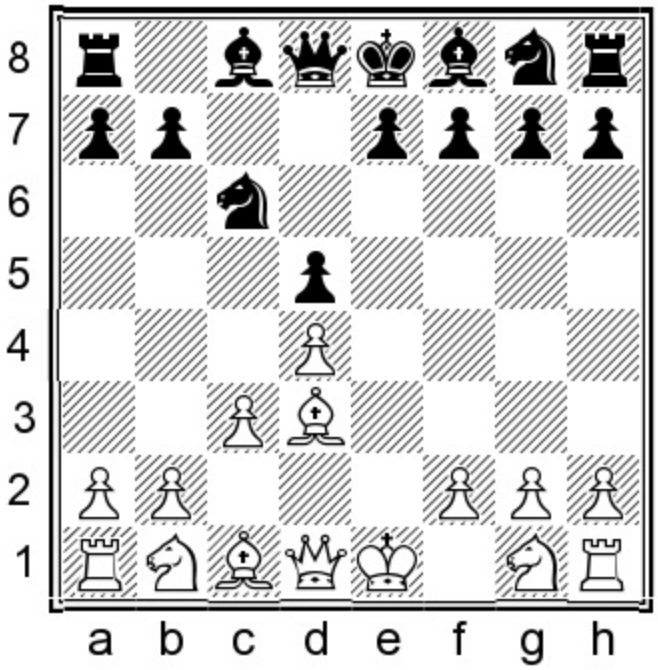
Garry Kasparov

The Exchange Variation has been popular for years and it is easy to understand why. One can learn the opening sequence pretty fast, and White has seemingly rather comfortable play in a position with a well-defined pawn structure. In recent years, the discovery of several subtleties has attracted new followers to White's cause.

1.e4

To fully understand the details of our topic, it makes sense to compare the well-known Carlsbad structure arising from the Queen's Gambit Declined. Here the Exchange Variation typically arises after the opening moves: 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.cxd5 exd5 and now the important move 5.♗g5!, when White has a slight positional initiative. Even then Black is basically okay, and if White slows down and plays something like 5...♗e7 6.♘f3 c6 7.e3 Black goes 7...♗f5! and has no problems whatsoever. After 8.♗d3 ♗xd3 9.♕xd3 ♘bd7 Black is arguably even slightly better.

1...c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘c6 5.c3



It certainly seems tempting for White to play a luxury version of the QGD variant with reversed colours. Fortunately, Black is not without interesting possibilities himself.

5...♕c7

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Preventing ♗f4. Again it is fully comparable with the QGD Exchange Variation, where White often plays an early ♕c2 to prevent ...♗f5.

In the old days after 5...♘f6 White automatically played the natural 6.♗f4, for instance in the famous game between Bobby Fischer and Tigran Petrosian in the legendary USSR vs. Rest of the World match in 1970. Petrosian responded with 6...♗g4 which I believe to be acceptable for Black. The problem is the little move 6.h3! which prevents Black from getting his bishop out.

6.h3!

Once again this little move is annoying. For Black it is essential to get the light-squared bishop out. With a little flair for move orders, it is possible. Black starts with:

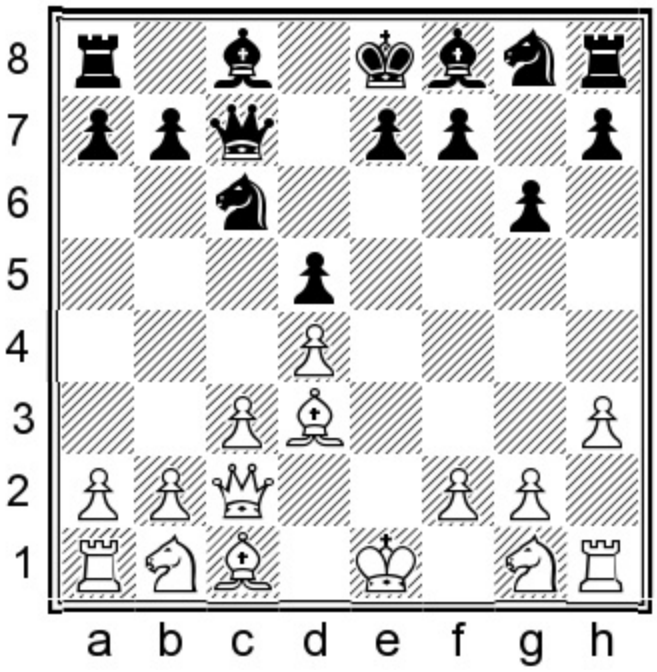
6...g6!

In *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* I gave 6...♘f6 7.♘f3 g6 which was the accepted solution at the time, intending 8.0-0 ♗f5! with fine play. However, in the meantime White has come up with 8.♕c2!, once again preventing ...♗f5, when I can't really see what to do with the bishop.

7.♕c2

White should calm down and play 7.♘f3 or 7.♘e2 when Black gets a normal game with 7...♗f5.

If White tries to prevent ...♗f5 like in the previous note, Black goes:



7...f6!

A fantastic concept, preparing ...e5. See Game 14 (Vitiugov – Lenderman) for all the finesses.

Speaking of move orders, as a bonus after 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3, I will cover the

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interesting alternative:

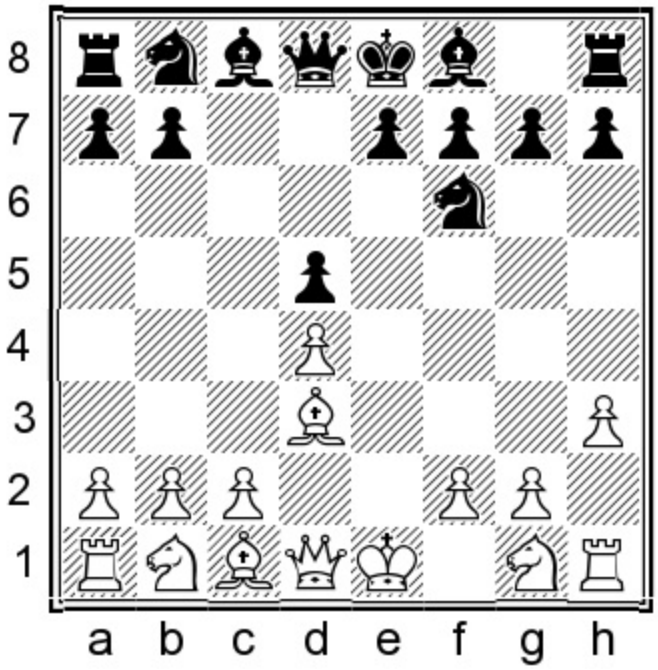
4...♘f6!?

Again the idea is to play ...♗g4.

4...♘c6 is our main move, of course.

5.h3

Now Black goes:



5...g6!

Intending ...♗f5. Because the moves ...♘c6 and c2-c3 have not been inserted, White cannot play ♕c2. Of course this is not the end of the story – it fact it is only the beginning – but it's an interesting option.

Theory

1.e4 c6

We will start by consider the unusual variant **A)** 2.♘f3!?, where White delays d2-d4, followed by the Exchange Variation proper after **B)** 2.d4.

A) 2.♘f3!? d5 3.exd5 cxd5

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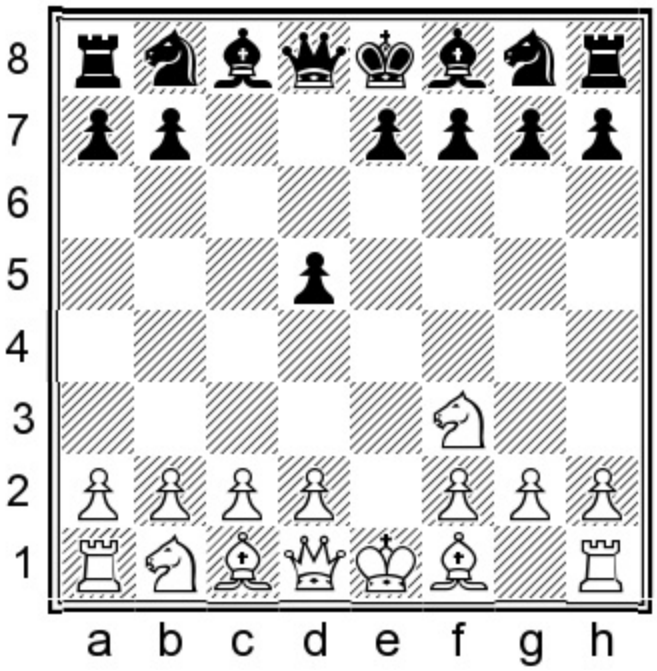

4.♘e5

This is the point of White's strange move order. The ...♗g4 pin is prevented and White toys with ♗b5† in various positions, giving this move order a unique character.

4.c4?! ♘f6 is likely to transpose to a Panov where White has committed to ♘f3 earlier than usual. (4...d4!? with a reversed Benoni is also a good option.) After 5.d4 it is well worth considering 5...g6!? since the critical line with a quick ♘c3, ♕b3 and cxd5 is no longer available to White.

4.♗b5† ♗d7 5.♗xd7† ♕xd7= followed by ...♘c6 clearly gives Black no problems.

4.♘c3 seems weird, and after 4...♘f6 5.d4 ♗g4 6.h3 ♗xf3 7.♕xf3 ♘c6 Black is more than fine. A good example continued: 8.♗b5 e6 9.0-0 ♗d6 10.♗g5 h6 11.♗xf6 ♕xf6 12.♕xf6 gxf6 13.♖ad1 ♔d7!? 14.♖fe1 ♖ag8⇄ Majstorovic – Ostojic, Nisz 2015.

4...♘f6 5.d4

5.♗b5† ♗d7 6.♘xd7 ♘bxd7 gives Black an easy life. 7.0-0 (7.d4 seems slightly inaccurate due to: 7...♕a5†! 8.♘c3 a6 9.♗d3 ♕b4⇄) 7...a6 (7...♕b6!?N is worth considering) 8.♗e2 e6 9.d4 ♗d6= Pina Vega – Motta Leon, Bogota 2012. Black castles short, puts the queen on c7 and plays ...b5, with a good game.

5...♘c6

Challenging the knight is logical.

5...g6!? is a popular alternative.

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6.♗b5 ♗d7 7.♘xd7

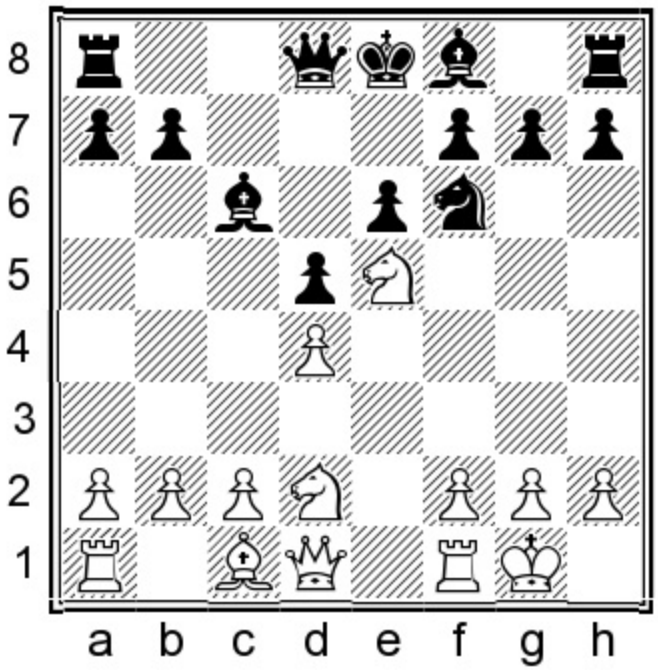
It seems natural to execute this exchange and try to make something of the bishop pair.

7.♗xc6

This has been tried by a few top players, though only in blitz games.

7...♗xc6 8.0-0 e6 9.♘d2

9.♗g5?! was seen in Karjakin – Inarkiev, Nazran (blitz) 2019, when 9...♕b6!?N looks good, and if 10.♘xc6 bxc6 11.♗xf6 gxf6∓ Black boasts a strong centre and the better minor piece.



This position was reached in Anand – Melkumyan, Doha (blitz) 2016. I suggest:

9...♗d6!N

When the only ambitious continuation looks to be:

10.c4 0-0 11.♘xc6 bxc6 12.c5 ♗c7 13.♖e1

Stopping ...♘e4.

13...a5⇄

Restraining White's queenside pawns, with a nice position for Black.

7...♕xd7 8.c3

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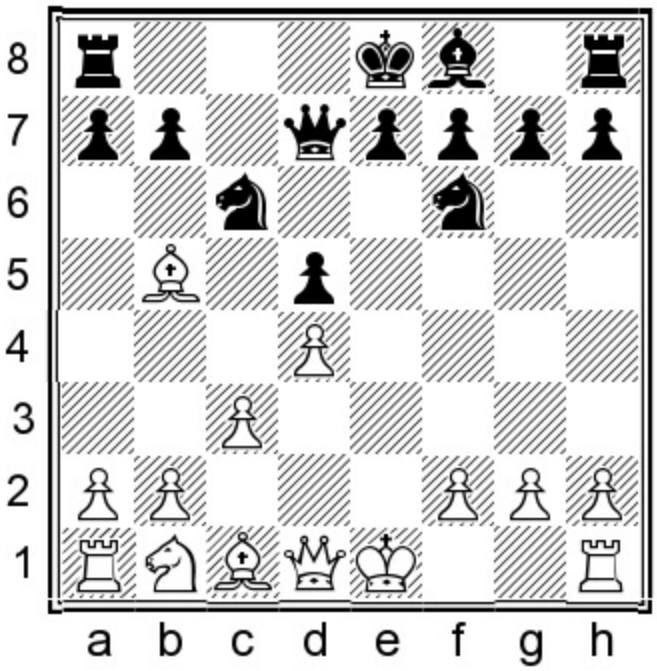

8...a6!

It is best to confront the bishop at once.

In the following noteworthy example Black went astray over the next few moves: 8...e6 9.0-0 ♗d6 10.♘d2 ♕c7 (10...0-0 looks playable) 11.g3 h5?! 12.♘f3! ♘e4 This was Shankland – Ding Liren, Internet 2019, and now 13.♗d3!N would have been strong, for instance: 13...0-0-0 14.♗xe4 dxe4 15.♘g5±

9.♗d3 e5!

That's the idea, gaining active counterplay.

9...♕g4!? forces a queen exchange, but it looks pleasant for White with the two bishops. Still, if you love endgames...

10.dxe5 ♘xe5 11.0-0 ♗d6 12.♗c2

12.♗g5 ♘e4! 13.♗xe4 dxe4 14.♘d2 f5 holds on to the vital e4-pawn, and after: 15.f3 (15.♕b3 is nothing; Black can go 15...♘d3 anyway.) 15...♗c5† 16.♔h1 h6 17.♗f4 ♘d3∓ Black's bold play prevailed in Yudin – Girya, Chelyabinsk 2018.

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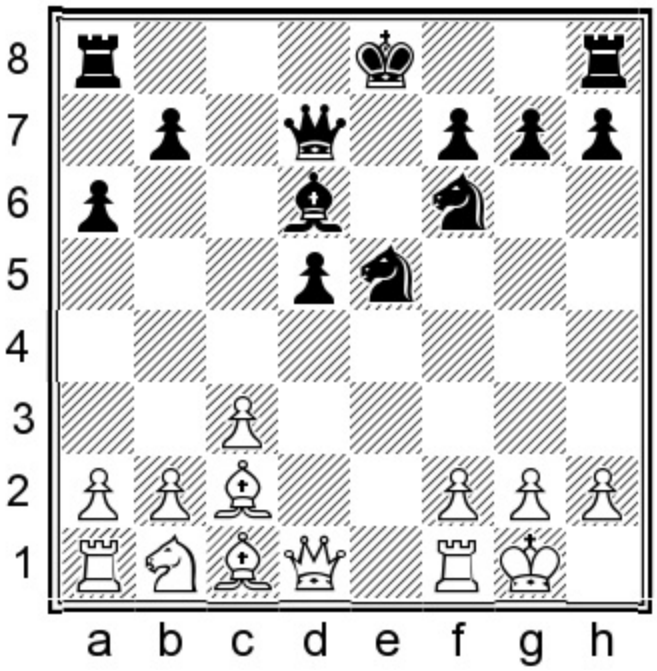

12...0-0N

Simple and good.

12...0-0-0!?∞ was seen in Tustanowski – Chojnacki, Szczyrk 2014. I don't fully trust it, but the option is there should you wish to investigate it.

13.♘d2

13.♗g5 is met by 13...♘e4⇄ of course.

13...h6 14.♘f3 ♖fe8 15.♘xe5 ♗xe5=

The bishop pair is nothing special here, and Black may trade off his isolated pawn with a timely ...d4.

B) 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5

The previous chapter dealt with 4.c4, the Panov. If White wishes to play an Exchange Variation, his main options are **B1)** 4.♘f3, **B2)** 4.♗f4 and **B3)** 4.♗d3, the last move being the main line by far.

B1) 4.♘f3

This is too tame to give Black any problems.

4...♘f6 5.♗d3

5.♘e5 leads back to the 2.♘f3 line.

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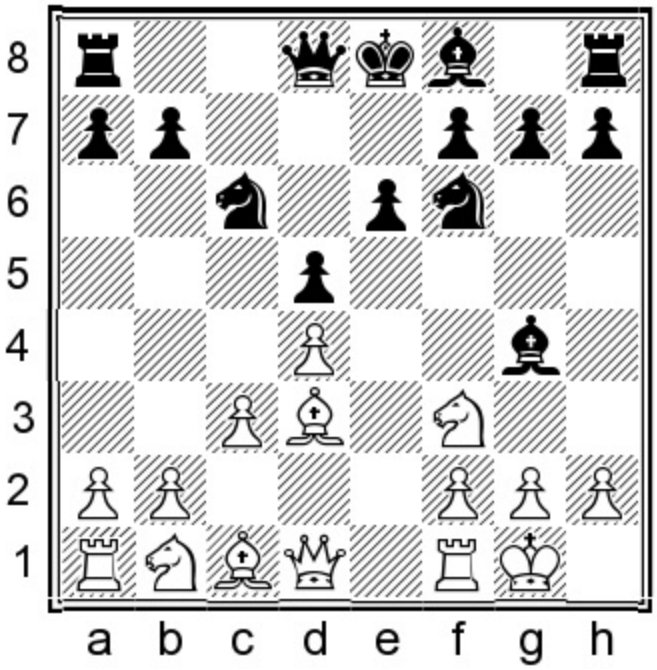
5...♗g4!

Always get the bishop out if you can.

6.0-0 ♘c6 7.c3 e6



This is a real QGD Exchange Variation with colours reversed, except that the bishop has gone to d3 instead of e2, which seems more active but has a drawback of failing to deal with the pin. In any case, Black has a playable position with no real problems.

8.♘bd2

Here are two possible lines where White develops the bishop first:

8.♗g5 ♗d6 9.♘bd2 h6 10.♗h4 ♕c7 11.♗g3 ♗xg3 12.hxg3 h5!?⇄ and Black castles long.

8.♗f4 ♗d6 9.♗xd6 (9.♗g3?! ♗xg3 10.hxg3 ♗xf3 11.♕xf3 ♕b6 12.♕e2 h5→) 9...♗xf3!? By making this exchange early, Black avoids ♘bd2xf3. 10.♕xf3 ♕xd6 11.♘d2 0-0⇄ Black can follow the typical plans for the Carlsbad structure: the main plan is to prepare a minority attack with ...b5-b4, and a secondary idea is to break in the centre with ...e5 in certain situations.

8...♗d6 9.♖e1 0-0 10.♘f1

This is also a well-known regrouping in the QGD.

10...♕c7

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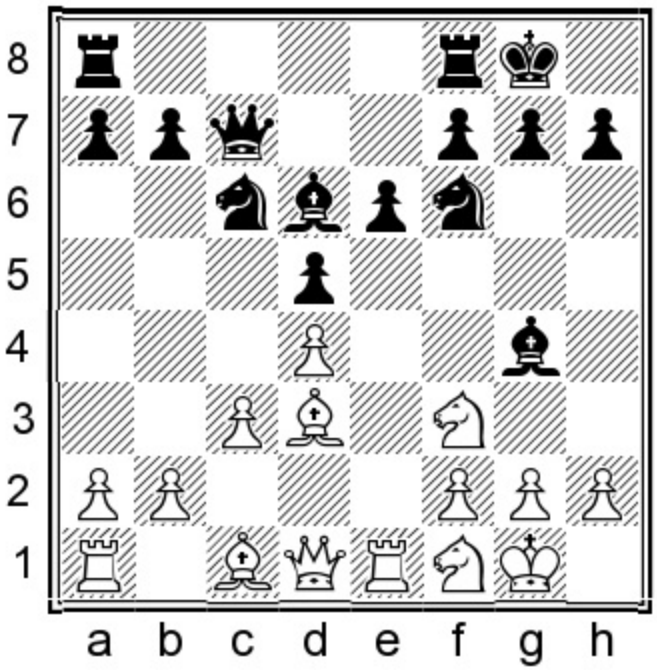

11.♗g5

11.♘g3 can be met by 11...♖ae8⇄ when ...e5 is in the air.

11...♘d7 12.♗h4 ♗f4

12...♗h5 13.♗g3 ♗g6= is even simpler.

13.♗g3 ♘f6 14.♗xf4 ♕xf4 15.♕d2

The players agreed a draw here in Yusupov – Gustafsson, Germany 2005. The ensuing ending is equal, although plenty of play remains.

B2) 4.♗f4

Perhaps not the most obvious move. The position is quite relevant though, because it often arises from the popular London System: 1.d4 d5 2.♗f4 c5 3.e3 cxd4 4.exd4.

4...♘f6 5.c3 ♗f5!?

Black takes the opportunity to get the bishop out and punish White for omitting ♗d3.

6.♘f3 ♘c6

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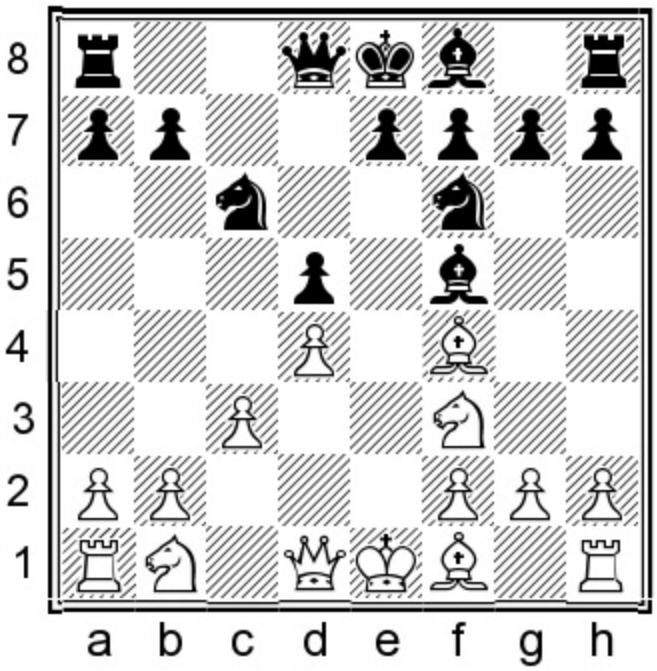

7.♕b3

The slight looseness of the b7-pawn is the drawback of developing our light-squared bishop so early. Well, you cannot have everything, and in most cases Black can easily defend the soft spot, or even sometimes sacrifice the pawn for quick development.

7.♘e5 e6 8.♗b5 ♕b6 9.♕b3 (9.♕a4 ♖c8⇄) 9...♗d6⇄ was fine for Black in Bocanegra Moreno – Nasybullin, corr. 2007.

7.♘bd2 e6

7...h6 is possible, and if 8.♕b3 ♕c8 we transpose to 8...h6 in the notes to the main line below.

8.♘h4

8.♕b3 ♗d6! is a promising pawn sac, as shown after 9.♕xb7 ♗xf4 10.♕xc6† ♔f8 11.♘e5 ♔g8!N 12.♘df3 ♖b8 13.♗d3 ♘e4⇄ when moves like ...f6, ...g5 and/or ...h5 are in the air.

8...♗g4! 9.♕b3 ♗d6 10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.h3 ♗h5

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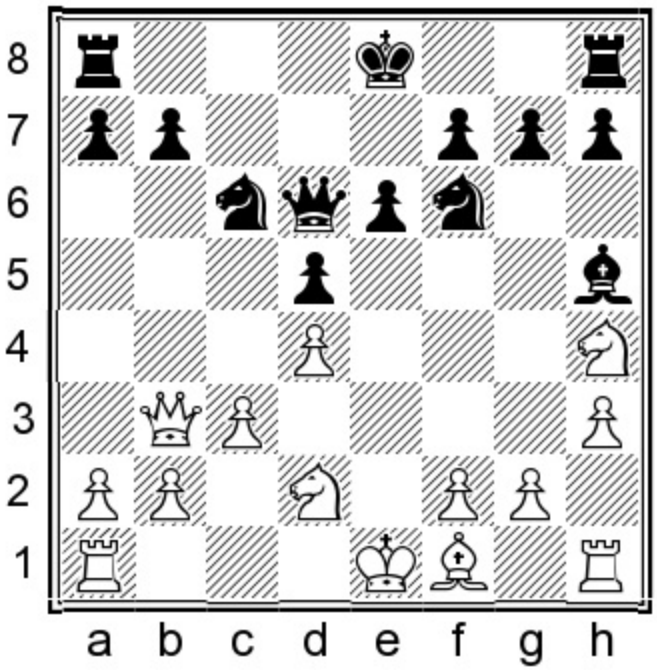

12.♗d3

12.g4 ♗g6 13.♘xg6 hxg6 14.♗g2 occurred in Tang – Cheng, Internet 2019, when 14...0-0-0!N would have given Black nice prospects.

12...0-0-0 13.♗b5

13.g4 ♗g6 14.♘xg6 hxg6 15.0-0-0 ♕f4⇄ was decent for Black in Grabinsky – Chandra, Saint Louis 2017.

13...♔b8

13...g5!? could also be considered.

14.♘hf3 ♗xf3 15.♘xf3 ♘e4 16.0-0 g5⇄

Black had fine prospects on the kingside in Wang Hao – Gelfand, St Petersburg 2018.

7...♕c8

7...♕d7?! simply invites 8.♘e5.

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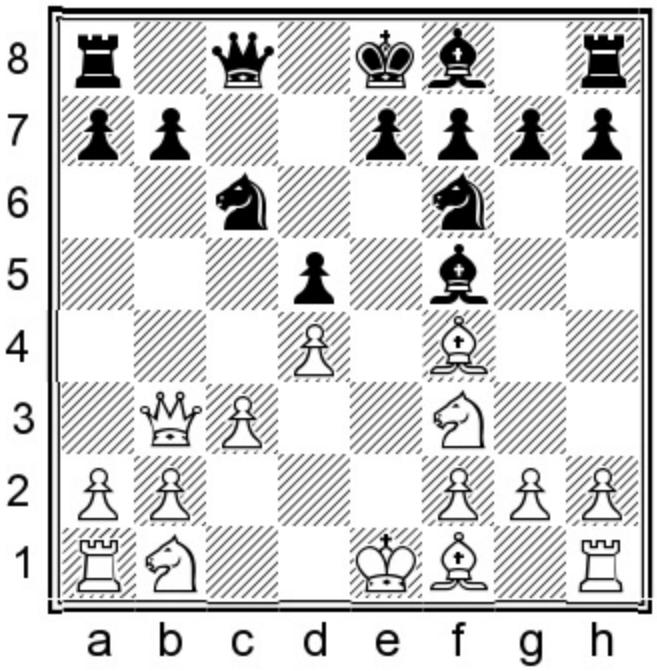


8.♘bd2

8.♘a3 a6 keeps the knight under control, and 9.♘h4 b5! 10.♗e2 ♗g4⇄ leads to interesting play.

8.♗e2 h6

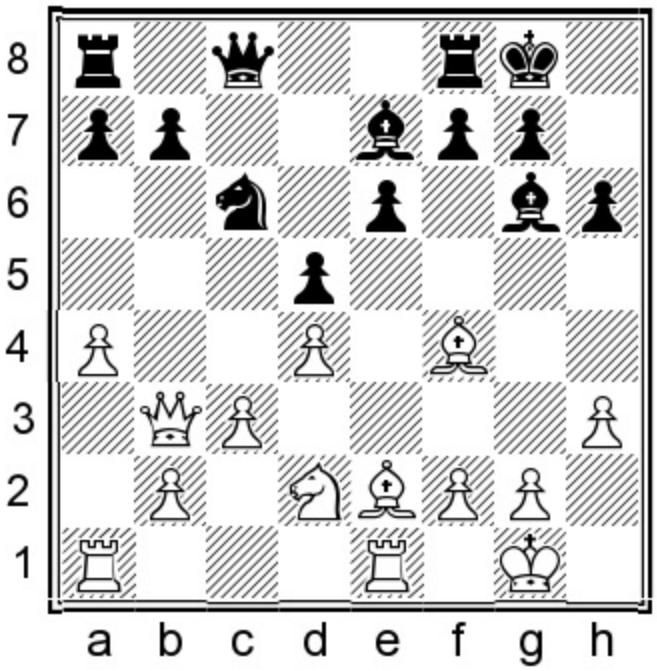
Securing a retreat square for the bishop is simplest.

Black could also consider 8...e6, with similar ideas as in the main line below.

9.0-0 e6 10.♘bd2 ♗e7 11.♖fe1 0-0

You certainly don't need to know any more than this to get through the opening, but I will include a couple of relevant examples to show how the play may develop:

12.h3 ♘e4 13.♘xe4 ♗xe4 14.♘d2 ♗g6 15.a4



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15...a5!?

Shirov improves on his own play.

15...♖d8 16.a5 ♗d6 17.♗xd6 ♖xd6 18.♕a3 ♕c7 19.♘b3 ♖ad8 20.♗b5 f6 21.♘c5 ♗f7 22.a6 bxa6 23.♗xa6 ♖b8 24.♗f1 saw Black come under unpleasant pressure in Kamsky – Shirov, St Petersburg (rapid) 2018.

15...♗d8!? intending ...♗c7 looks solid.

16.♘b1 ♖d8 17.♘a3 ♗d6 18.♗xd6 ♖xd6 19.♘b5 ♖d8 20.♕d1 ♕d7 21.♗d3 ♗xd3 22.♕xd3 ♘a7= Grachev – Shirov, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018.

8...e6!?

Allowing White to execute his plan.

8...h6

This gives the bishop an escape square on h7 at the cost of a tempo.

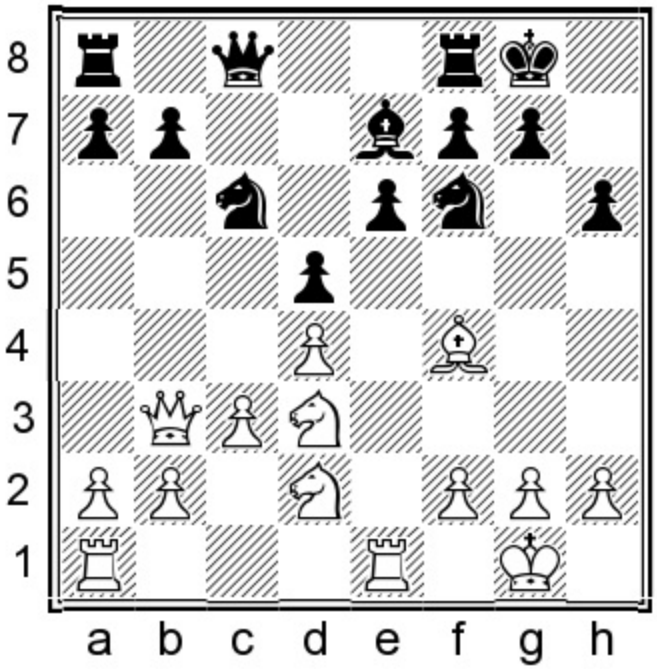
9.♘e5 e6 10.♗d3

10.♗b5 a6 11.♗xc6† bxc6 12.♕a4 ♗d6 13.♗g3 occurred in Sakaev – Shirov, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018, when 13...♗xe5N 14.♗xe5 0-0 15.♗xf6 gxf6∞ would have led to interesting, double-edged play.

10...♗xd3 11.♘xd3 ♗e7 12.0-0 0-0

The position looks innocent enough, but there is no doubt that White has a pleasant version of a reversed QGD, so it is worth seeing a few more moves.

13.♖fe1



13...♗d8!

An important manoeuvre to remember.

14.♘f3 ♗c7

White can keep some tension with:

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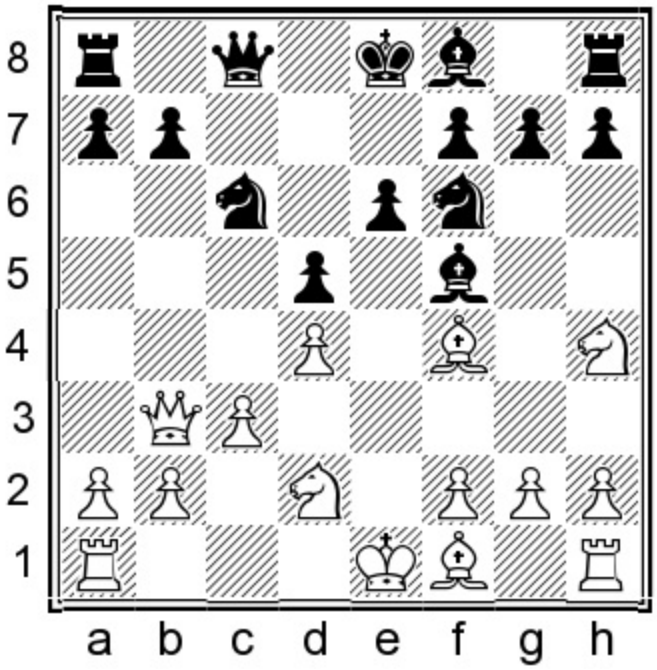
15.♘fe5!?

Although Black's position is essentially fine and he should gradually equalize.

9.♘h4



9...♗e4!

Black must play with a certain amount of precision to stop White from getting a pleasant edge with the bishop pair.

9...♗g4 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♗d3 ♗e7 12.0-0 a6 13.♖ae1 ♘d7 14.♘df3 b5 15.g4 ♗g6 16.♘xg6 hxg6 17.♔g2 ♘f6 18.♗g3 left White in control in Nisipeanu – Laznicka, Germany 2018.

10.♘xe4

10.♗e2 h6! 11.♘xe4 ♘xe4 12.♘f3 ♗d6 13.♗xd6 ♘xd6 resembles the main line, except that White's bishop is on e2 instead of d3, which hardly helps him.

10...♘xe4 11.♘f3

11.♗d3 h6! 12.♘f3 ♗d6 13.♗xd6 ♘xd6 transposes to the main line below.

11...♗d6! 12.♗xd6

12.♗g3 ♘xg3 13.hxg3 ♕c7 14.♗d3 h6 15.g4 0-0-0⇄ leads to a lively game. A good example continued 16.♔f1 ♔b8 17.a4 ♖he8 18.a5 ♘xa5 19.♕a4 ♘c6 20.b4 ♕b6 21.g3 e5 22.b5 ♘xd4 23.cxd4 e4 24.♗e2 exf3 25.♗xf3 ♗e7 when Black had the easier side of equality in Kamsky – Wojtaszek, Sochi 2015.

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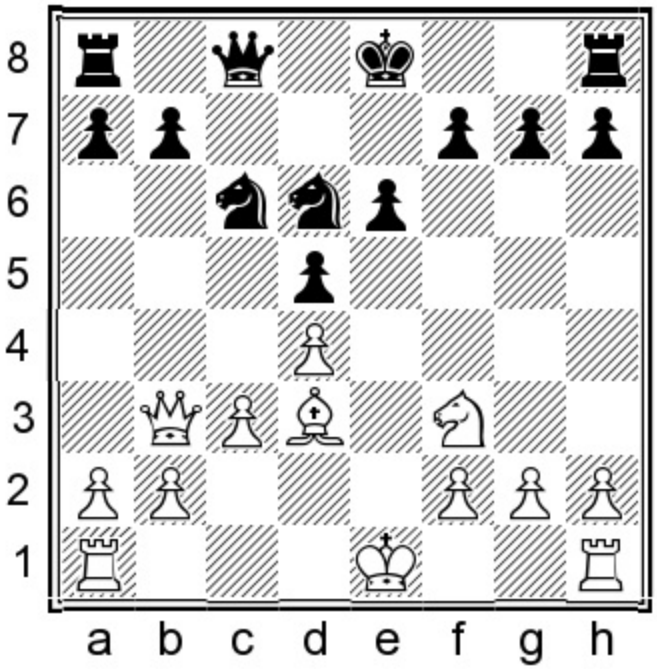
12...♘xd6 13.♗d3



13...h6!

13...♕c7 14.♕c2 0-0-0 seems a bit risky. After 15.0-0 h6 16.a4 ♔b8 17.♖fe1 ♖c8 18.♕d1 the World Champion went on to win an excellent game in Carlsen – Wojtaszek, Reykjavik 2015, although at this point the logical 18...g5N would have given Black adequate counterplay.

14.0-0 ♕c7!

Keeping as flexible as possible.

14...0-0 looks riskier in view of 15.♖ae1! ♕c7 16.♗b1 ♖fc8 17.♕c2 ♘e4 18.♕d3 as played in Melkumyan – Svane, London 2016.

15.♖ae1

15.♖fe1 0-0 gives Black a more comfortable version of the previous note; and even 15...0-0-0!? could be considered.

15...0-0-0!?⇄

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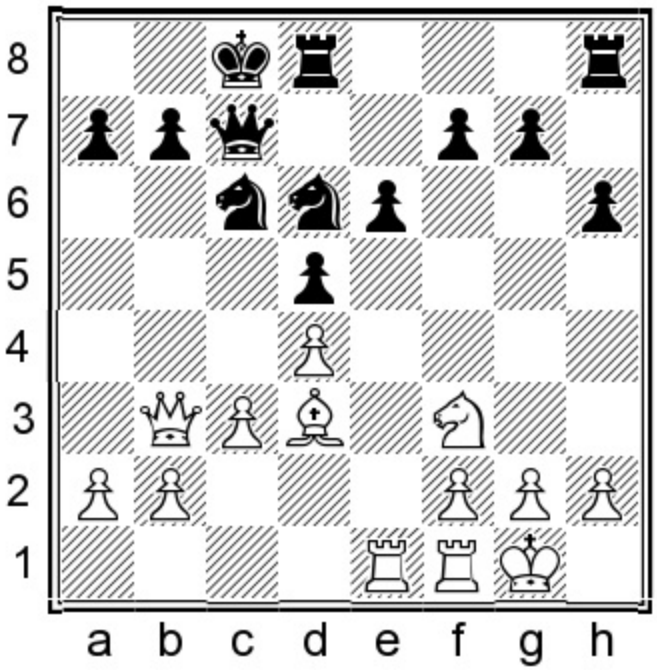

Now it makes more sense to castle long. The game is complex but Black has no reason to be unsatisfied with the opening. To give you some idea of what can happen, here is a correspondence game:

16.♕c2 ♔b8 17.a4 ♖he8 18.♖e3 g5 19.♕e2 ♖h8 20.♘e5 ♘xe5 21.♖xe5 a6 22.♖a1 ♖de8 23.a5 ♔a7 24.♕g4 ♕d7 25.♖ee1 f5 26.♕e2 g4 27.b4 h5 28.♖ab1 ♖e7 29.b5 axb5 30.♗xb5 ♕c7 31.♖b3 h4

A draw was agreed here in Szymanski – Hrubcik, corr. 2018, but in a practical game anything could happen.

B3) 4.♗d3

We will analyse the standard B31) 4...♘c6 as our main line, followed by the secondary option of B32) 4...♘f6.

B31) 4...♘c6 5.c3 ♕c7

White has tried a lot of different moves here. Out of the unusual options, the interesting **B311)** 6.♘a3!? is the one to watch, but the two main lines are clearly **B312)** 6.♘e2 and B313) 6.h3.

6.♘f3 ♗g4 is similar to the 4.♘f3 line and may well transpose.
6.f4 sets up a Stonewall formation but weakens the light squares. 6...♘h6 (6...g6 followed by ...♗f5 also looks good.) 7.♘f3 ♗f5 8.0-0 (8.♗e2 e6 also looks promising for Black.) 8...e6 9.♘e5 ♗d6 10.♕e2 0-0 11.g4 (11.♗e3 ♖ae8 12.♘d2 f6 13.♘xc6 bxc6∓) 11...♗xd3 12.♘xd3 ♖ae8∞ I would take Black's position any day. He can play ...f6 and ...♘f7, or perhaps even ...♔h8 and ...♘g8-f6-e4.

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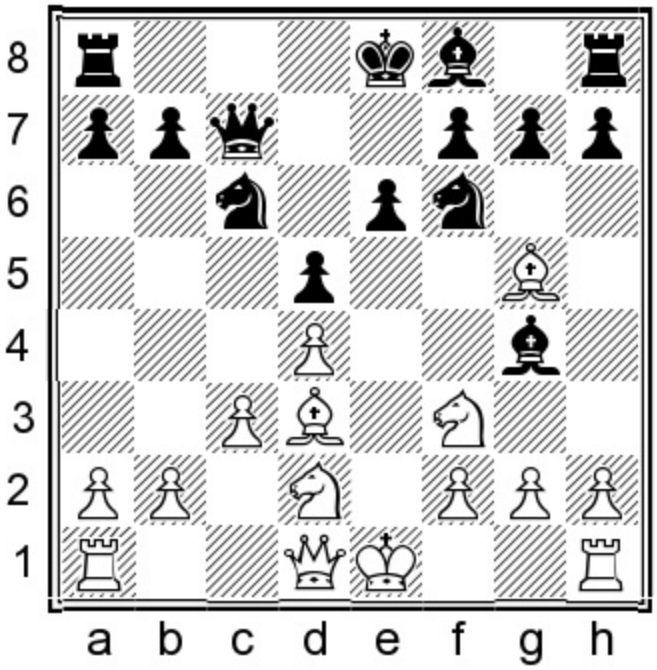
6.♗g5 ♘f6!

There is no need to fear the doubling of the kingside pawns.

7.♘d2

7.♗xf6 gxf6 followed by ...e5 is good for Black.

7...♗g4 8.♘gf3 e6



9.♗h4

9.0-0 ♗d6 10.♕c2 h6 11.♗h4 ♘h5!∓ was good for Black in Genocchio – Svetushkin, Cutro 2009.

9.♗xf6 gxf6 This exchange seldom works well for White. 10.♗e2 ♖g8 11.♘h4 ♗xe2 (11...f5!? also deserves attention) 12.♕xe2 0-0-0 13.0-0 ♕f4 14.♘df3 This was Kamsky – Fontaine, Internet 2006, and now 14...e5!N would have favoured Black.

9...♗d6

Another logical option is 9...♘h5!? 10.♗g3 as in Sapozhnikov – Harikrishna, Toronto 2010, when I would suggest 10...♘xg3 11.hxg3 ♗d6,, followed by ...0-0-0.

10.♗g3 ♗h5=

Black can play ...♗g6 whenever he feels like it.

6.♘d2 ♘f6 7.h3

7.♘gf3 ♗g4 8.0-0 e6 9.♖e1 ♗d6 10.♘f1 0-0 converts to the 4.♘f3 variation.

7...e5!

7...g6 8.♕c2! makes it hard to find a role for the c8-bishop.

8.dxe5 ♘xe5

This gives Black an active game, for instance:

9.♗c2 ♗d6

9...♗c5!? 10.♘b3 ♗b6 11.♘e2 0-0 is also pretty logical.

10.♘gf3

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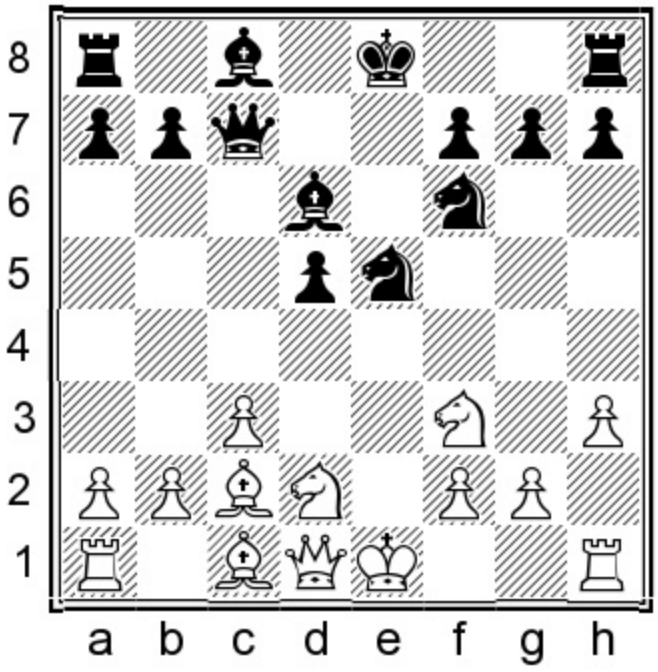
10.♘df3 ♘c4!?⇄



10...♘c6!? 11.0-0 0-0 12.♘b3 h6 13.♗e3 ♖e8 14.♖e1 ♗d7∞

A typically double-edged IQP situation had been reached in Pavlov – Zemlyanov, corr. 2016. The position resembles a line of the French Tarrasch, except that here Black's knight stands on f6 instead of e7, which benefits him slightly.

B311) 6.♘a3!?

This is a well-known idea for the Carlsbad structure.

6...a6

It is definitely worth a tempo to prevent ♘b5.

7.♘c2

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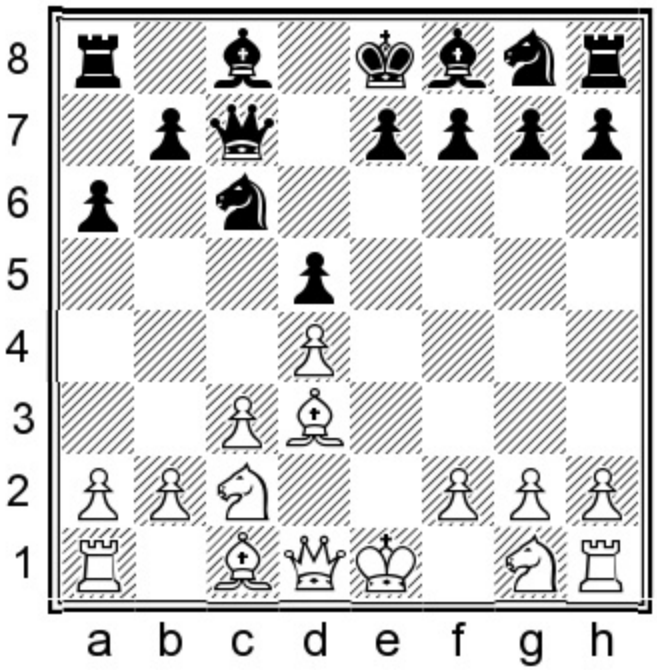

7...e6!?

Please note the change of strategy: in reaction to White's chosen set-up, we refrain from trying to get the bishop out. Instead the plan is to play ...♗d6 and ...♘ge7, with a flexible position.

7...♘f6

This is well met by:

8.h3!

8.♘e2 ♗g4 9.f3 ♗d7 10.♗f4 e5 11.dxe5 ♘xe5 12.0-0 ♗d6 13.♔h1 0-0 was okay for Black in Zinchenko – Hawkins, London 2016.

8...g6

8...e6 9.♘f3 ♗d6 10.0-0 b5 11.♖e1 ♗b7 12.a4 bxa4 13.♖xa4 0-0 14.♕e2 a5 15.♘a3± was pleasant for White in Artemiev – Dreev, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018.

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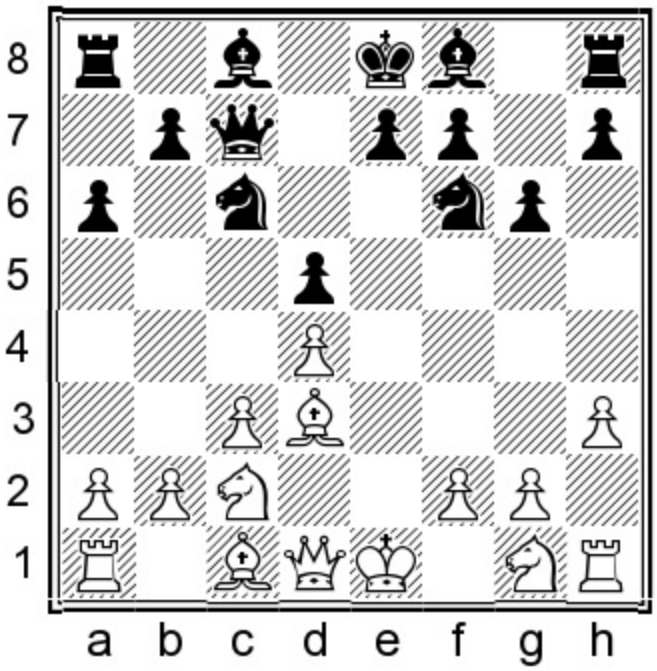

Planning ...♗f5 looks clever, because White doesn't have ♕c2 for obvious reasons, but a good response is:

9.♘e2!

The young Greek Champion Tsolakidou has championed this move, definitely with the help of her coach, GM Papaioannou, who is a Caro-Kann expert himself.

The standard 9.♘f3 ♗f5 on the other hand is fine for Black. For example: 10.♗e2 (Or 10.♗xf5 gxf5 11.0-0 e6 12.a4 ♖g8 13.♖e1 ♗d6∓ as in Maurizzi – Howell, Balagna 2019.) 10...e6 11.0-0 h5 12.♘ce1 ♗d6 13.♘d3 ♘e4 14.♗e3 0-0-0 (14...g5!?) 15.♖c1 g5⇄ Caruana – Ding, Saint Louis 2019.

9...♗g7

9...♗f5 10.♗xf5 gxf5 11.♗g5! is annoying, and 11...♘e4 12.♗f4 ♕d7 13.f3± was excellent for White in Tsolakidou – Kubicka, Manavgat 2018.

10.♗f4±

White had a good game in Tsolakidou – Kojima, Djenovici 2018, although Black's position is hardly a catastrophe after something like 10...♕b6 11.♖b1 0-0.

8.♘f3!

The most advanced square is the knight's best option, as it is too late to try to prepare ♗f4:

8.♘e2 ♗d6 9.h3 ♘ge7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♖e1 ♗d7⇄ gives Black easy play. For instance, 12.♗g5?! f6 13.♗h4 e5 14.dxe5 fxe5 15.♘e3 ♗e6 16.♗c2 ♖ad8∓ with excellent central control in Skripchenko – Charochkina, Riyadh (blitz) 2017.

8...♗d6 9.0-0 ♘ge7 10.♖e1 ♗d7 11.♗d2 f6 12.♘e3

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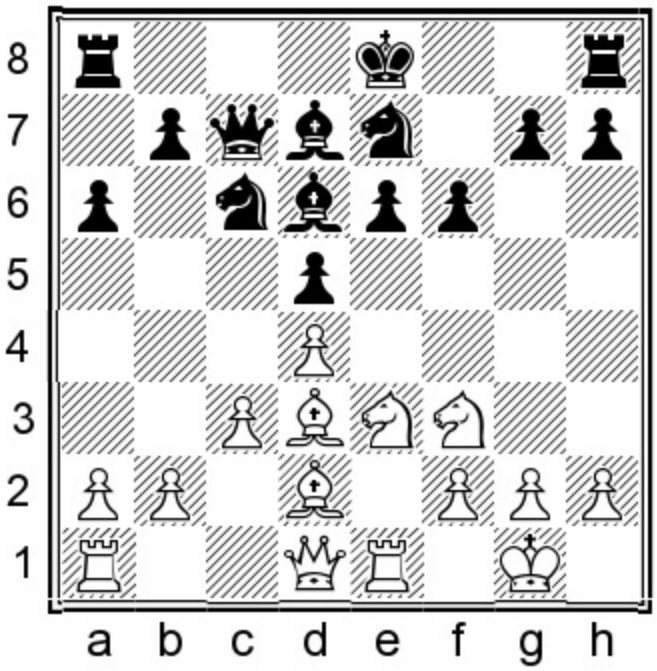

I propose a natural improvement:

12...b5!N

It seems best to prevent 12...0-0 13.c4± as occurred in Bulmaga – Miciano, Ho Chi Minh City 2019.

13.a4 ♖b8⇄

Black has fair chances in this double-edged position. A natural continuation could be:

14.b4 0-0 15.axb5 axb5 16.♕e2 ♔h8 17.♘g4

The loose pawn turns out to be poisoned after 17.♗xb5?! ♖xb5 18.♕xb5 ♘xd4 19.♕a5 ♘xf3† 20.gxf3 ♕b8 21.♕a7 ♕e8→ when White's weak king is more relevant than the sacrificed exchange.

17.♖a6 ♗c8 18.♖a3 e5⇄ also looks decent for Black.

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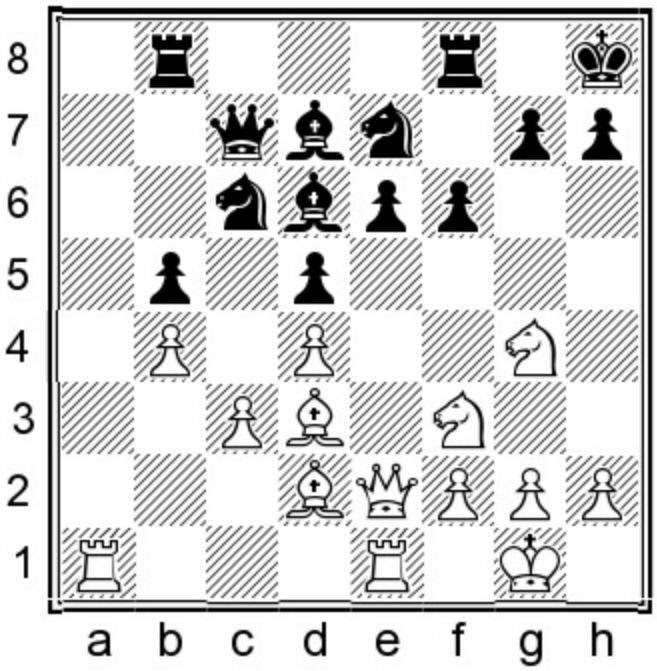
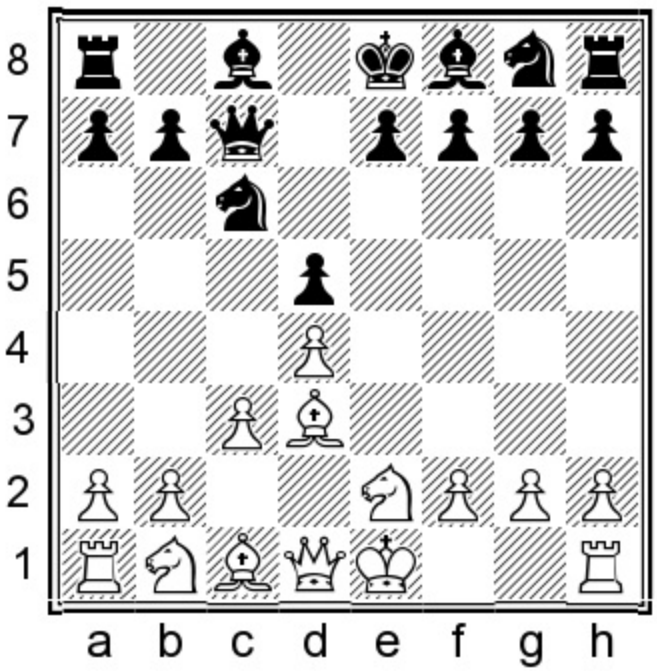


17...♕b6!?⇄

Black is preparing to strike with ...e5.

Please note that the immediate 17...e5? would backfire after: 18.dxe5 ♗xg4 19.exd6 ♕xd6 20.h3 ♗xf3 21.♕xf3±

B312) 6.♘e2



Black has only just prevented ♗f4, and now White threatens it again. Fortunately, we can get our own bishop out.

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6...♗g4

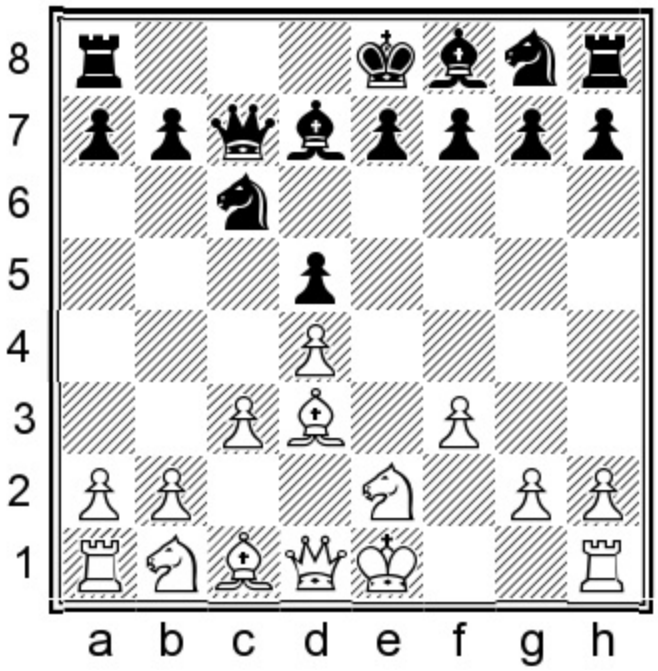
We come to another split. **B3121)** 7.f3 was the main line for a long time, but **B3122)** 7.0-0! is the latest move-order finesse.

7.♗f4 ♕xf4! 8.♘xf4 ♗xd1 9.♔xd1 e6= gives Black a fine ending.

7.♕b3 ♗xe2 8.♗xe2 ♘xd4! is another neat tactic which solves all problems, for instance: 9.♕xd5 ♖d8 10.♗b5† ♘xb5 11.♕xb5† ♖d7=

7.h3 ♗h5 8.g4 ♗g6 9.♗xg6 (9.♗f4 ♕d7 10.♗xg6 hxg6 transposes) 9...hxg6 10.♗f4 ♕d7 11.♕d3 ♘f6 12.f3 e6 13.♘d2 0-0-0 14.0-0-0 ♗e7 15.♔b1∞ reached a double-edged middlegame in Mostowik – Eelvelt, corr. 2018. In the game Black played ...♖h7 and doubled on the h-file, which looked fine, but the position is rich in other possibilities: ...♘e8 or ...♗d6 also come to mind.

B3121) 7.f3 ♗d7



I like this retreat. Having provoked a weakening of the enemy kingside, Black will strike with ...e5.

8.♗f4

8.♘a3 a6 9.0-0 e5!? (9...e6 followed by ...♗d6 is more solid) 10.♖e1 ♗d6 11.c4!? is extremely sharp, but Black's position held up fine in a correspondence game: 11...♘f6 12.cxd5 (12.♗g5!? is another possible direction) 12...♘xd5 13.♘c4 0-0 14.♗e4 ♗e6 15.♘xd6 ♕xd6 16.dxe5 ♕c5† 17.♔h1 ♖fd8 18.♗g5 ♘f6 19.♕a4 ♘xe4 20.♕xe4 ♖d5 21.♗f4 ♕b4 22.♕xb4 ♘xb4 23.♘c3 ♖d7 24.♖ed1 ♘d3 25.♗g3 ♘xb2 The action died down and Black had the upper hand in the endgame in Wiersma – Homont, corr. 2017.

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8...e5 9.dxe5 ♘xe5

We have reached a double-edged position, where White might regret having weakened himself with f2-f3.

10.♗c2

Another natural continuation is:

10.0-0 ♗d6

10...♘f6!? could also be considered.

11.♘a3

11.♔h1 ♘e7 (11...♘f6!?) 12.♘a3 a6 13.♘c2 0-0 14.♘ed4 ♖ac8= gives Black no problems, and after 15.♘e3? ♘xd3 16.♗xd6 ♘xb2! White lost a pawn in Semeniuk – Dreev, St Petersburg 1999.

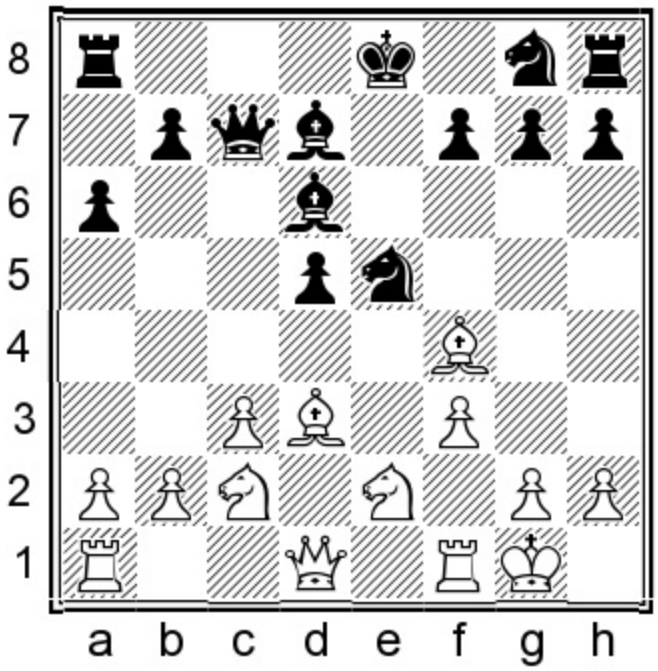
11.♘d4 ♘e7 12.♘a3 a6 13.♘ac2 0-0 14.♕d2 ♖fe8 15.♗g3 ♘7c6 16.♖fe1 ♕b6 17.b3∞ is another possible direction, with mutual chances.

11...a6

11...♗xa3!? 12.bxa3 ♕c5† 13.♘d4 ♘xd3 14.♕xd3 ♘e7 deserves attention.

12.♘c2

12.c4?! dxc4 13.♗xe5 ♗xe5 14.♘xc4 can be safely met by 14...♗xh2†!N 15.♔h1 b5∓ when White doesn't have enough for the pawn.



12...♘f6!N 13.♘e3 0-0 14.♗c2 ♖fe8∞

Compared to a normal IQP position, White has made the committal f2-f3 move and his knights are unusually placed. With that being said, his set-up is not so bad and the position can be evaluated as complex and roughly equal.

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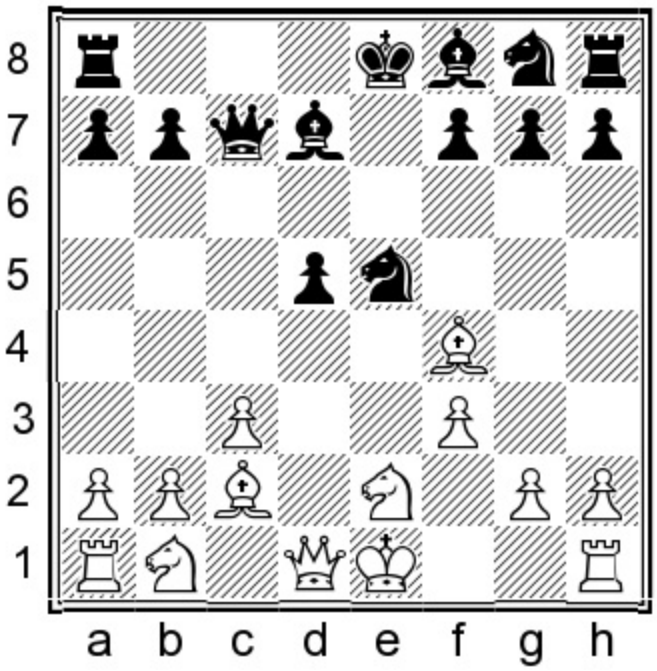


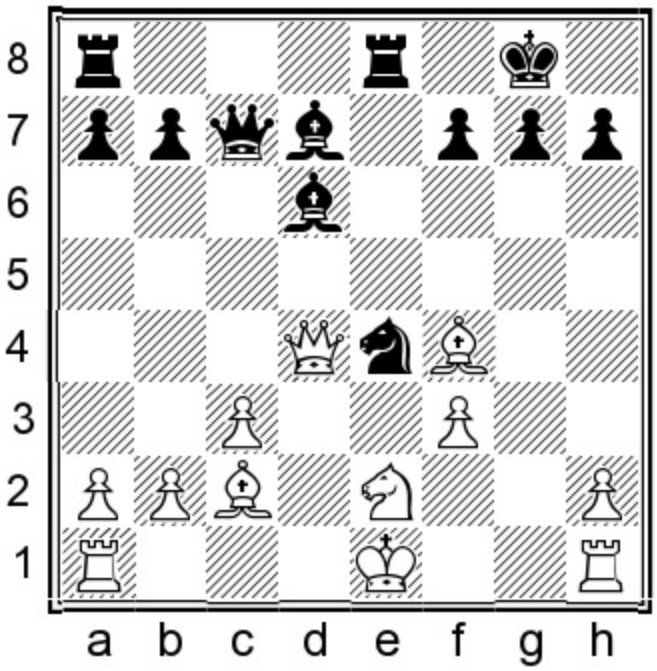
10...♗d6

10...♘f6 is of course legal, but Black can afford to offer the d-pawn.

11.0-0

11.♗a4 ♗c6 12.0-0 ♘e7 13.♘d4 0-0 14.♗c2 ♘7g6 15.♗xg6 hxg6 gave Black comfortable play in Yudasin – Kacheishvili, New York 2004.

11.♕xd5 ♘f6 12.♕d4 0-0 offers great compensation. For instance: 13.♘d2 ♖fe8 14.♘e4 ♘xf3†!N 15.gxf3 ♘xe4



16.♖g1!? (16.♗xe4 ♗xf4∓; 16.♗xd6 ♘xd6 17.0-0-0 ♖xe2 18.♕xd6 ♕xd6 19.♖xd6 ♗c6∓) The text

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move is tricky but Black comes out on top after: 16...g6 17.♗h6 ♗e5 18.♕xe4 ♗xc3† 19.bxc3 ♖xe4 20.fxe4 ♕xh2 21.♗e3 a6∓

11...♘f6 12.♘d2

12.♔h1 h6 13.♘d2 0-0 is also fine for Black. 14.♗g3 ♖fe8 15.♗h4 ♗e7 16.♗f2 a6 17.♖e1 occurred in Broadway – Balutescu, corr. 2018, and now either 17...♗c5N or 17...♗d6N would have given Black a comfortable IQP position.

12...0-0 13.♘b3

13.♔h1?! ♖fe8 (13...♘h5!? also looks good) 14.♘b3 ♘c4! 15.♗xd6 ♕xd6∓ left White in big trouble in Nakamura – Dobrov, Internet (blitz) 2019.

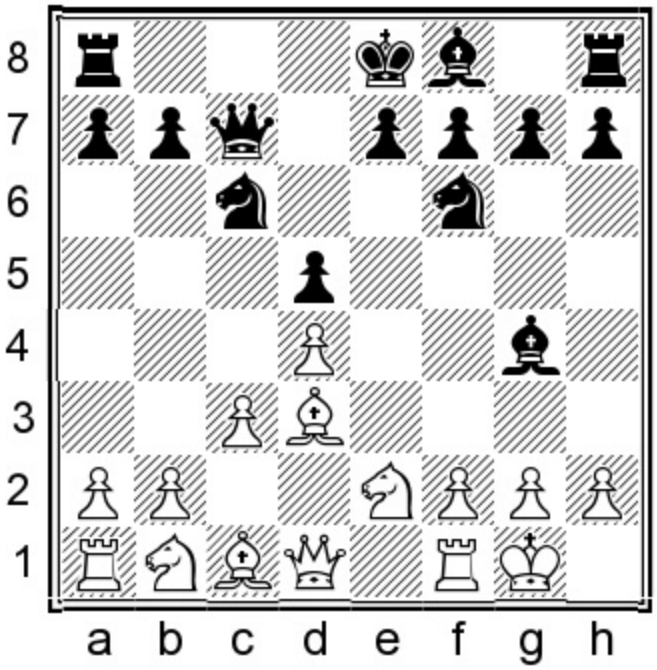
13...♘h5

13...♘c4!? deserves attention.

14.♗xe5 ♗xe5 15.g3 ♖ad8 16.♖e1 g6 17.♕d2 ♖fe8∓

Black had an excellent game in Broadway – Squires, corr. 2018.

B3122) 7.0-0! ♘f6



8.♕e1!

This is White's new concept. He unpins the knight and prepares various ideas on the kingside, which we will see in the lines below. If Black takes on e2, White will take back with the queen and claim that he is slightly better due to the bishop pair.

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8...e6 9.f3

9.♗f4 ♗d6 10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.♘g3 0-0 12.h3 ♗h5= is no problem at all.

9.♘g3 looks natural but 9...♗d6 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♘xh5 ♘xh5 was okay for Black in Triapishko – Artemiev, Sochi 2018.

9.♗g5

This can be met by:

9...♗xe2

9...♗h5 10.f4 0-0-0 11.♘g3 ♗g6 12.f5 exf5 has been played, but 13.♘xf5N gives White some pull.

9...h6!? 10.♗xf6 ♗xe2! 11.♕xe2 gxf6∞ could be considered, although it feels more natural to start with ...♗d6.

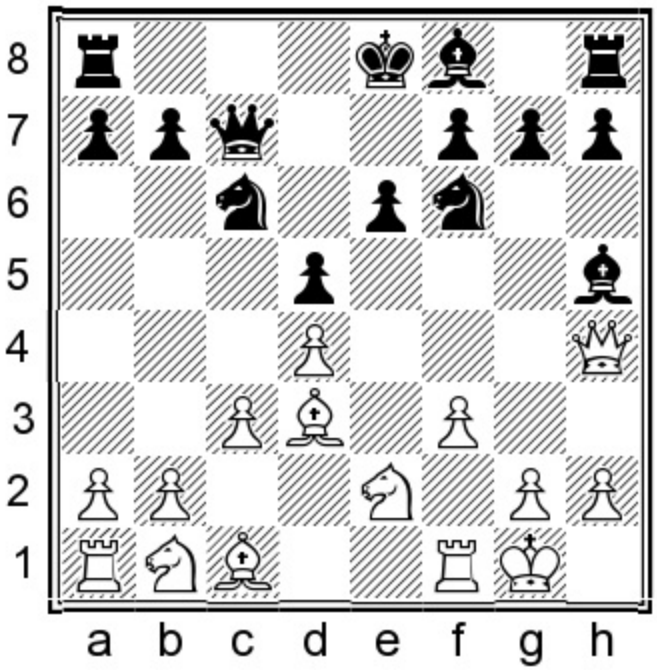
10.♕xe2 ♗d6 11.h3 h6 12.♗xf6 gxf6

Black is essentially fine in this structure. One example continued:

13.a4 ♖g8 14.♔h1 ♖g5 15.♘a3 a6 16.♘c2 0-0-0 17.b4

And unfortunately a draw was agreed in K. Jones – Dias, corr. 2019, just as the battle was getting started.

9...♗h5 10.♕h4



10...♖g8!

The most reliable choice, and a move which is well worth remembering, as such moves can be hard to find over the board. Black prepares ...♗g6 and makes sure he can take back with the h-pawn.

10...h6 is fully playable as well. True, it allows 11.♘g3 ♗g6 12.♗xg6 fxg6, but the ensuing structure

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might not be so terrible. Instead, the sophisticated 11.♕h3! looks like White's best chance to fight for an advantage.

11.♘f4

There are three other tries to consider:

11.♗f4 ♕b6!N (11...♗d6?! 12.♘a3 a6 13.♗xd6 ♕xd6 14.♗xh7 ♘xh7 15.♕xh5 ♘f6 16.♕g5± and Black didn't have enough for the pawn in Prusikin – Fontaine, Switzerland 2019.) 12.♘d2 ♗g6= Black is fine.

11.♗xh7

This is risky in view of:

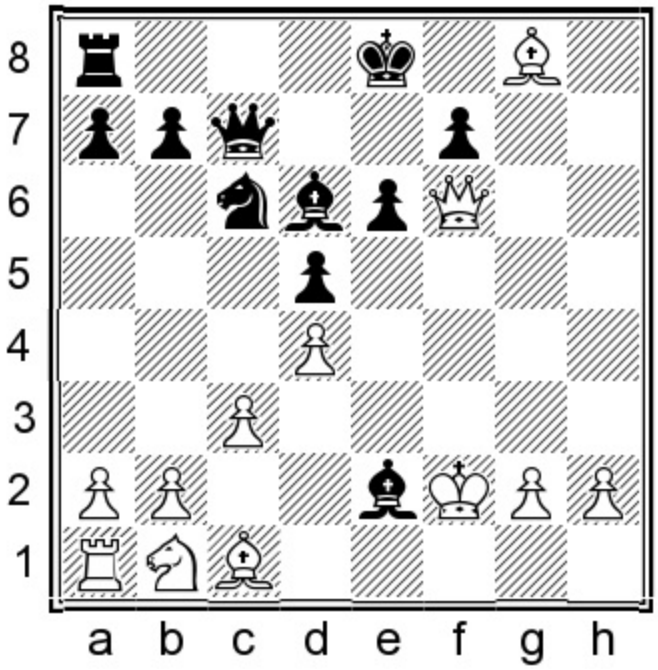
11...♗xf3! 12.♗xg8

12.♖xf3 ♖h8 13.♖xf6 gxf6∞

12...♗xe2 13.♖xf6

13.♖f2 ♗d3∓

13...gxf6 14.♕xf6 ♗d6 15.♔f2?



The last move was a serious mistake, although Black was at least equal anyway. Now in Tsolakidou – Mrudul, New Delhi 2019, Black could have prevailed with:

15...♗d3!N 16.♗h7 ♗xh7 17.♕h8† ♔d7 18.♕xh7

Or 18.♕xa8 ♗xh2 with a winning attack.

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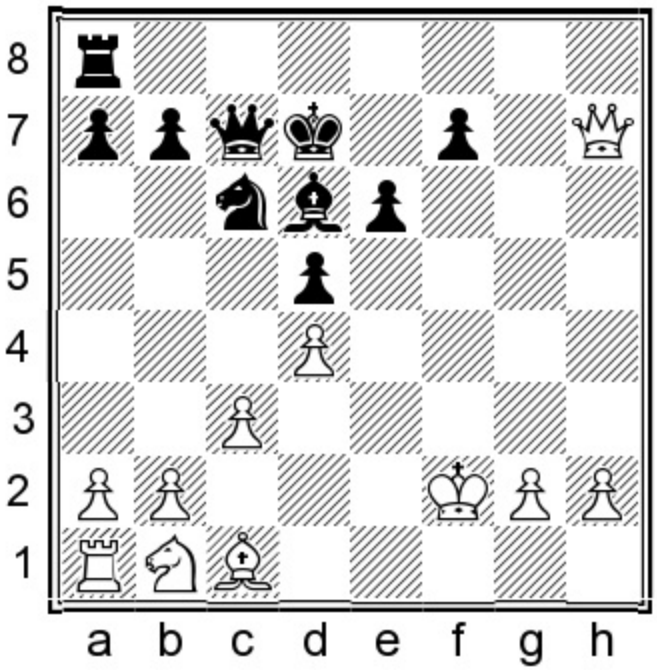


18...♘xd4!

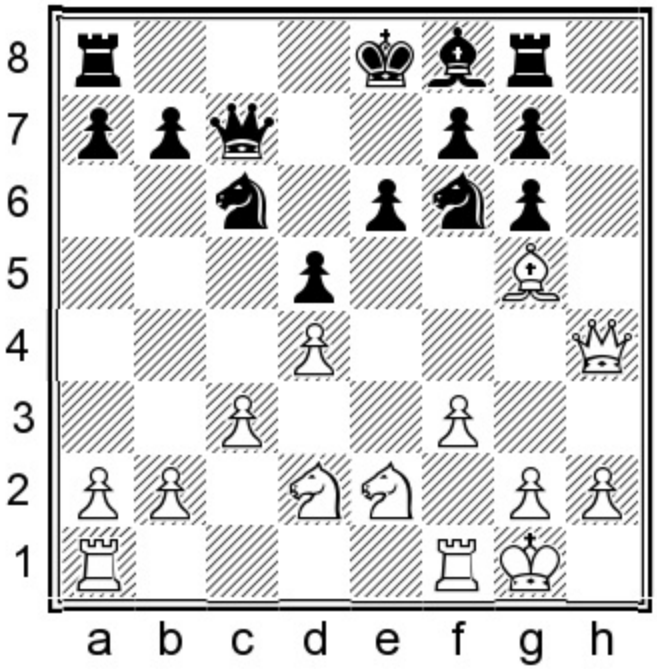
White will hardly survive.

11.♗g5 ♗g6! 12.♗xg6

12.♘f4 ♗e7 13.♘xg6 hxg6 14.♘a3 a6 15.♗f4 ♗d6 16.♗xd6 ♕xd6 17.♕g3 (17.♘c2 can be met by 17...♔d7!? followed by ...♖h8) 17...♔e7 (17...♕d7!?) 18.♘c2 ♖h8 19.♖ae1 ♕xg3 20.hxg3 ♔d6 was equal in Tarjan – Dreev, Internet 2017.

12...hxg6 13.♘d2

13.♗xf6?! gxf6 14.♕xf6? g5! and there is no defence to ...♗g7.



13...♗d6 14.♗f4 ♘e7 15.♗xd6 ♕xd6 16.♕f4 ♕xf4

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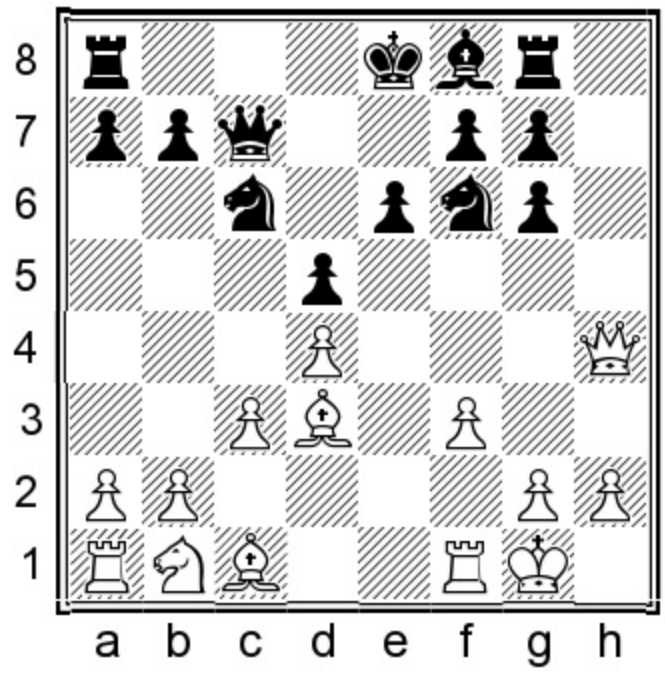
16...♕a6!?
17.♘xf4 ♘c6=
Vasquez Schroder – Nyzhnyk, Internet 2019.

11...♗g6 12.♘xg6 hxg6



Black has no problems, as the following examples demonstrate.

13.♗f4

13.♘a3 a6 14.♕e1 ♗d6 15.g3 ♖h8 16.♔g2 occurred in Alekseev – Arutinian, Batumi 2018, when 16...♕d7!N intending ...e5 gives Black a great game, for instance: 17.♘c2 e5 Threatening a deadly check on h3. 18.h4 0-0-0∓

13...♕b6!?

13...♗d6 is a simple equalizer: 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6 15.♕g3=

14.♕f2 ♖h8 15.g3 ♖c8

With a double-edged position, Gerasimov – Gerbich, corr. 2017.

B313) 6.h3

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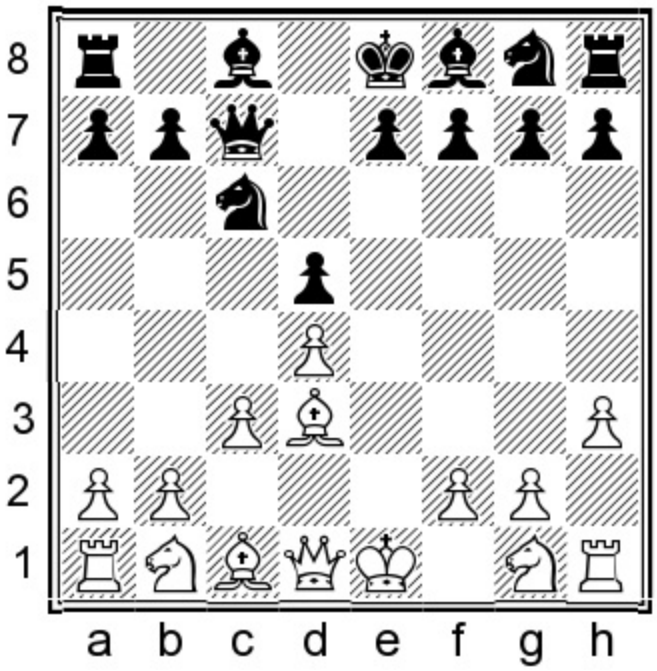

This is the newest trend and also Kaufman's proposal. White prevents ...♗g4 once and for all. I believe we should strive to get the bishop out, so that leaves ...♗f5. The right way to prepare it is:

6...g6!

6...e5 7.dxe5 ♘xe5 does not fully equalize after 8.♗c2 or 8.♘f3.

6...e6 7.♘f3 ♗d6 8.0-0 ♘ge7 gives a playable position, but White has more options compared to the position with the knight already transferred via a3 to c2.

6...♘f6 7.♘f3 g6 is the wrong way to prepare ...♗f5 because of 8.♕c2!.

7.♘e2!

Now 7.♕c2?! runs into the surprising 7...f6! with the idea to play ...e5. See Game 14 (Vitiugov – Lenderman) for more details.

The alternative is: 7.♘f3 ♗f5 8.♗e2 (8.♗xf5 gxf5 is pleasant for Black, who will follow up with ...e6 and ...♗d6.) 8...e6! 9.♘bd2 h5⇄ This plan is not mentioned by Kaufman. After the further 10.♘f1 ♗d6 11.♘e3 ♗e4 (11...♘f6!?) 12.♘g5 ♘f6= Black was fine in Yudin – Shimanov, Sochi 2019.

7...♗f5 8.♗xf5 gxf5 9.♗f4

This is the reason for putting the knight on e2.

9...♕d7 10.♘d2 e6 11.g4!?

11.♘f3 ♗d6 12.0-0 ♘f6 gives White little if any advantage, for instance: 13.♘e5 ♕c7! 14.♘d3 ♗xf4 15.♘exf4 0-0-0 16.♖e1 ♖hg8⇄ Degraeve – Medvegy, Germany 2008.

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11...fxg4

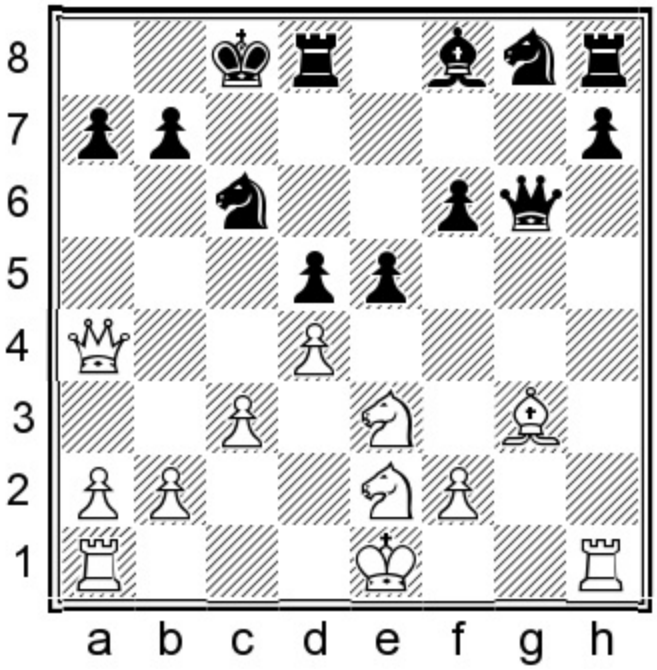
11...♘ge7 is answered by 12.♘g3.

11...f6!? is interesting though, and if 12.gxf5 e5 Black is doing great.

12.hxg4 f6!?

The coming ...e5 break gives Black adequate counterplay, as demonstrated in a correspondence game:

13.♗g3 e5 14.♘f1 ♕xg4 15.♘e3 ♕g6 16.♕a4 0-0-0



17.b4 a6 18.b5 axb5 19.♕xb5 ♘ge7∞

The position remained sharp and dynamically balanced in Rogos st. – Klengel, corr. 2017.

GAME 14

Nikita Vitiugov – Aleksandr Lenderman

Douglas 2019

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘c6 5.c3 ♕c7 6.h3 g6 7.♕c2?! f6!

With the simple but strong idea of ...e5. It is surprisingly difficult to find a satisfactory response for White.

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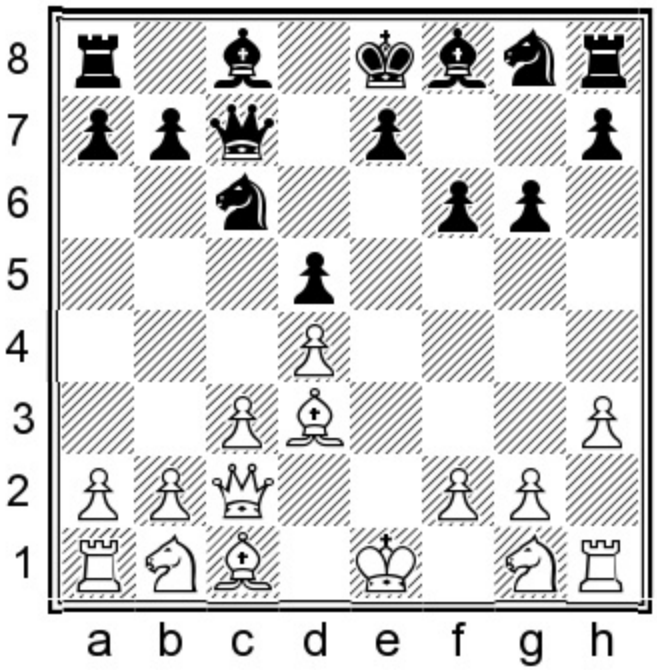

8.f4

White discourages the central advance but his chosen move is not a pretty choice, positionally speaking.

In another top game White played 8.♘e2 and allowed Black to carry out his plan: 8...e5 9.0-0 ♘ge7 10.dxe5 fxe5 11.c4? A highly speculative piece sacrifice. (11.♕a4 is better although 11...♗f5! is clearly pleasant for Black, who will castle long.) 11...e4 12.♗xe4 dxe4 13.♘bc3 ♗g7 14.♘d5 ♕d6∓ White had nothing like enough compensation in Aronian – Howell, Gibraltar 2019.

8...♘h6!

Black eyes the f5-square.

9.♘f3

9.g4 is well met by 9...♘f7 followed by ...e5.

9...♗f5

Black managed to bring his bishop to a good square after all.

10.0-0 0-0-0 11.♖e1

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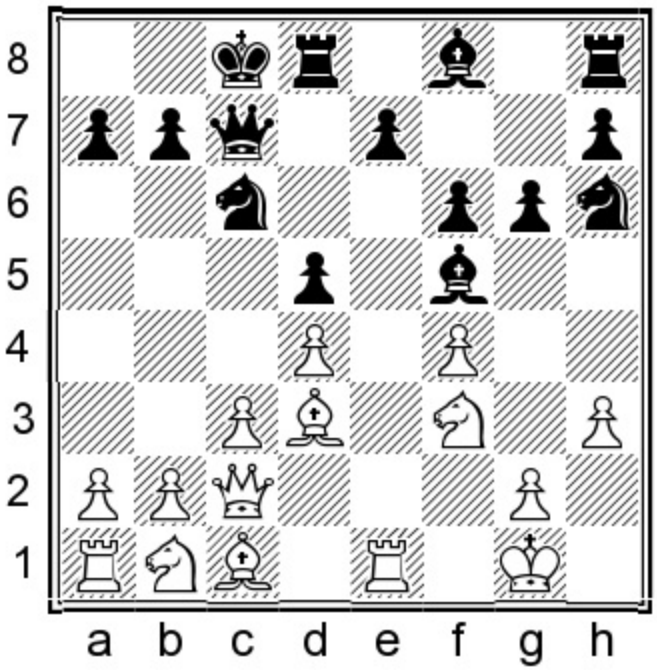

11...e6

We have reached a real fighting position, where Black already has the upper hand because of the weaknesses created by the f2-f4 move.

12.♘a3?!

This leads to a really ugly pawn structure. Alternatives were plenty, but not satisfactory:

12.♗xf5 ♘xf5∓ 13.♖xe6? ♘cxd4!–+ is a nice tactical point.

12.a4 ♘b4 13.cxb4 ♕xc2 14.♗xc2 ♗xc2∓ leaves Black with two bishops and the better structure.

12.♕e2 ♗xd3 13.♕xd3 ♖e8 14.♗d2 ♘f5 15.a4 ♗h6∓ also looks like no fun for White.

12...♗xa3

Of course.

13.bxa3 ♖he8 14.♖b1 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♘f5∓

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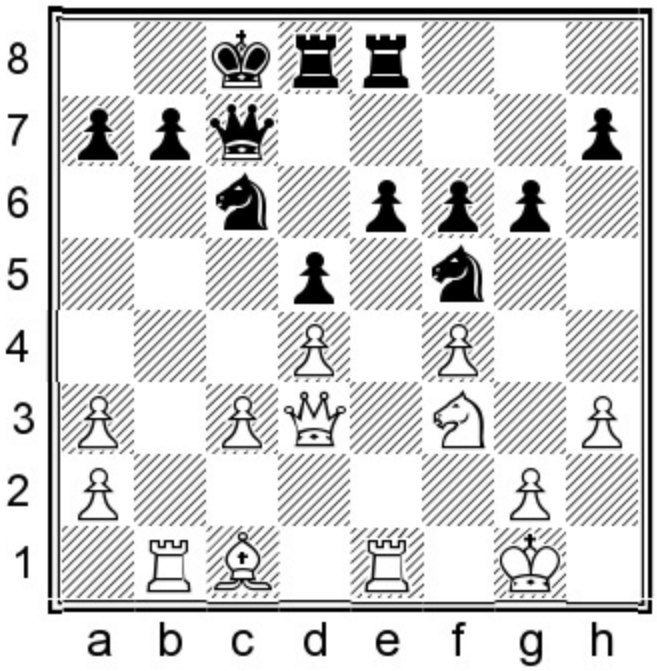


White has been positionally outplayed and must seek dynamic counter-chances.

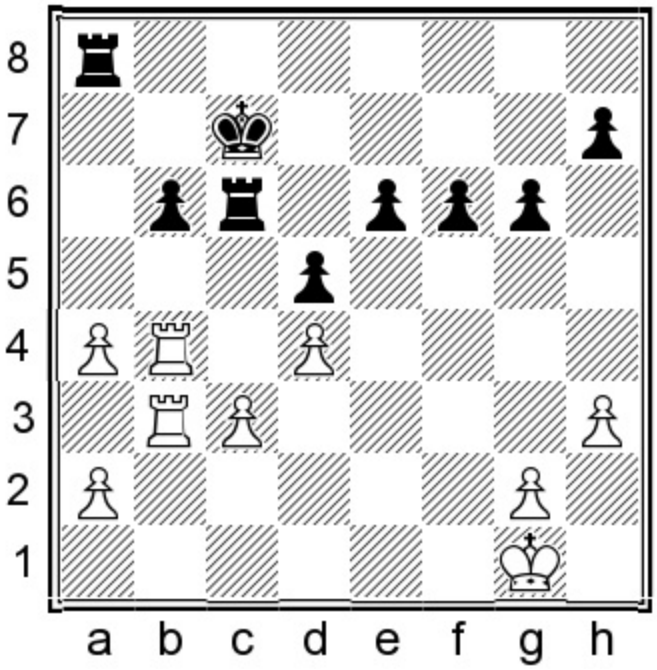
16.a4 ♘d6 17.♘d2 ♘a5 18.♗a3 ♘dc4 19.♗b4 ♕xf4

Stronger was 19...♘xd2! 20.♗xa5 ♕xa5 21.♕xd2 ♕xa4∓ with a clear extra pawn.

20.♗xa5 ♕xd2 21.♕xd2 ♘xd2 22.♖bd1 b6 23.♗xb6 axb6 24.♖xd2 ♔c7∓

Black has a pleasant rook endgame. We can no longer talk about a winning advantage though, and Vitiugov succeeds in defending it.

25.♖b1 ♖d6 26.♖b4 ♖c6 27.♖db2 ♖a8 28.♖2b3



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28...♔b7

Expanding on the kingside with 28...g5 29.♔f2 h5 made a lot of sense.

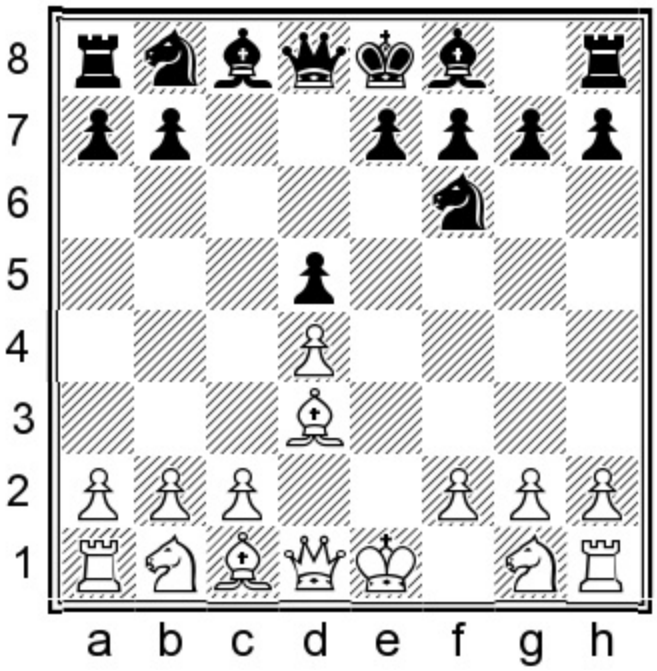
29.♔f2 ♔a6 30.♔e2 ♖ac8 31.♔d2 ♖8c7 32.♖b5 ♖g7 33.a5! bxa5 34.♖b8

Black cannot liberate himself.

34...♖a7 35.a4 ♖ac7 36.♖a8† ♖a7 37.♖f8 f5 38.♔e3 g5 39.♖e8 ♖b7 40.♖a8† ♖a7 41.♖e8 ♖b7 42.♖a8† ♖a7 43.♖e8

½–½

B32) 4...♘f6!?



It is somewhat experimental to refrain from ...♘c6, but the logic behind the text move is clear: we want to play ...♗g4 if allowed; and if White prevents it, we will play ...g6 and ...♗f5, since White has no time for ♕c2.

By the way, Daniel Fernandez gives 4...g6!? 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.0-0 and makes the interesting point that 6...♗f5? is met by 7.♗xf5 gxf5 8.c4!±. So you might think of the present variation as an attempt to get a better version of this.

White has two relevant replies: **B321)** 5.h3 and **B322)** 5.c3.

B321) 5.h3 g6!

Another idea is 5...♕c7!? 6.♘f3 e6 7.0-0 ♗d6 8.♖e1 0-0 9.c3 (9.♗g5 ♘bd7) 9...b6 to get the bishop out via a6. I don't really trust it though, and after 10.♕e2 a5 11.♗g5! ♗a6?! 12.♗xa6 ♘xa6 13.♗xf6

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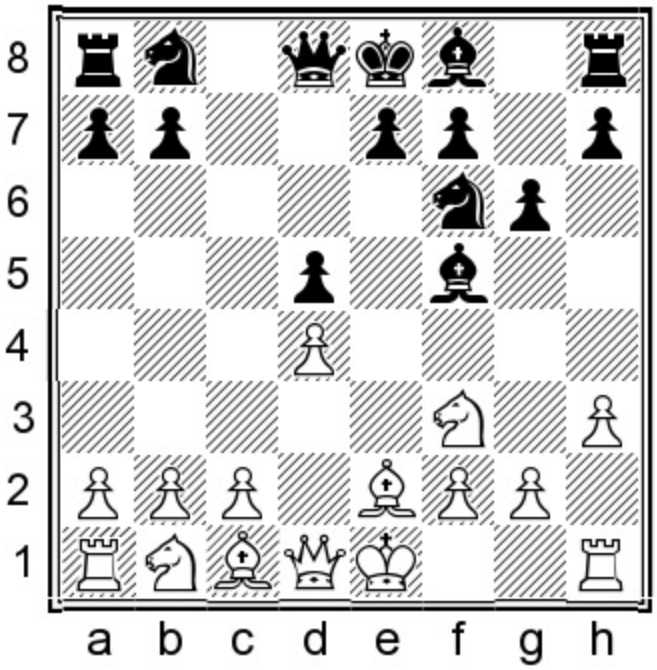
gxf6 I would rather be White.

6.♘f3 ♗f5 7.♗e2

7.♗xf5 gxf5 8.c4?! is a poor relation of the Fernandez line above, due to 8...dxc4 9.♘c3 ♗g7⇄ with fine play for Black.



7...♕c7 8.c3 ♘c6 9.0-0

This is the most popular move, but I believe it to be slightly inaccurate, as it invites Black to prepare ...g5.

9.♗e3!?

This is a safer and more flexible choice. Now White does not need to fear a quick ...g5-g4, and he will continue developing before deciding what to do with his king. Play may continue:

9...e6!?N 10.♘bd2

10.g4 can be met by either 10...♗e4 or 10...♗xb1.

10...h5 11.♖c1

11.0-0 gives Black nice play after: 11...♗d6 (or 11...♘g4!? immediately) 12.♖c1 ♘g4!⇄

11...♗d6 12.♗b5 ♔f8!?

Black will place his king on g7, and if White castles then ...♘g4 is always in the air.

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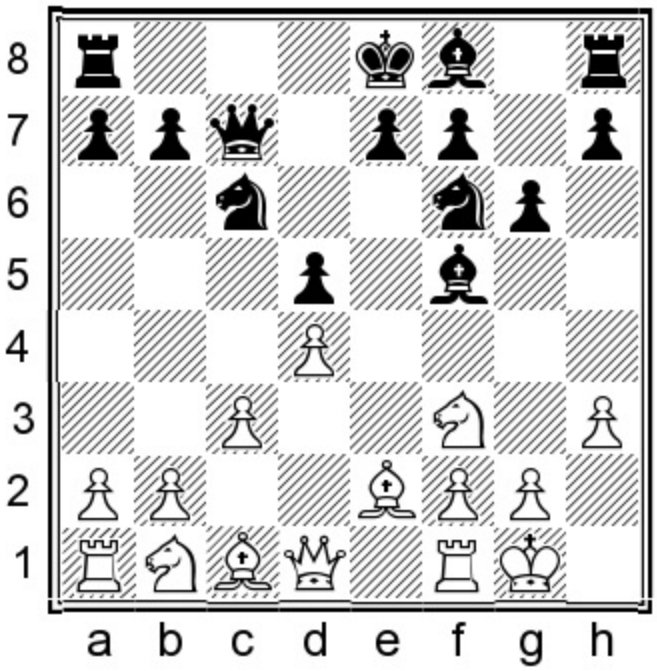


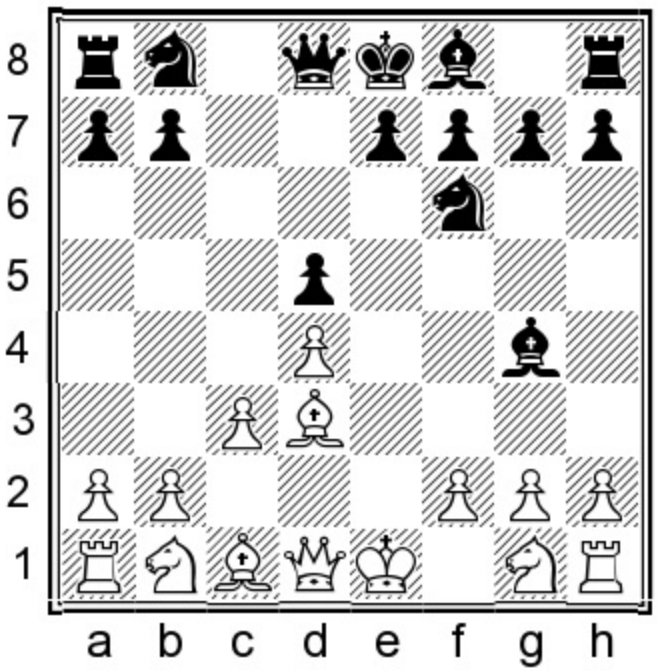
9...h6!?N

9...e6!?N is another idea to investigate. Black can put the bishop on d6 and play ...h5 as in the previous note.

10.♗e3 e6 11.♘bd2 g5!?⇄

The position is rather double-edged but Black certainly has an ambitious vision: he will put the bishop on d6, probably go ...♔f8 and, at an appropriate moment, ...g4 with an attack!

B322) 5.c3 ♗g4



Continuing with our plan of getting the bishop out as quickly as possible.

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6.♕b3

The only challenging move.

6...♕c7! 7.h3

7.♘e2

This allows Black to solve most of his problems right away with:

7...♗xe2! 8.♗xe2 e6 9.♗e3

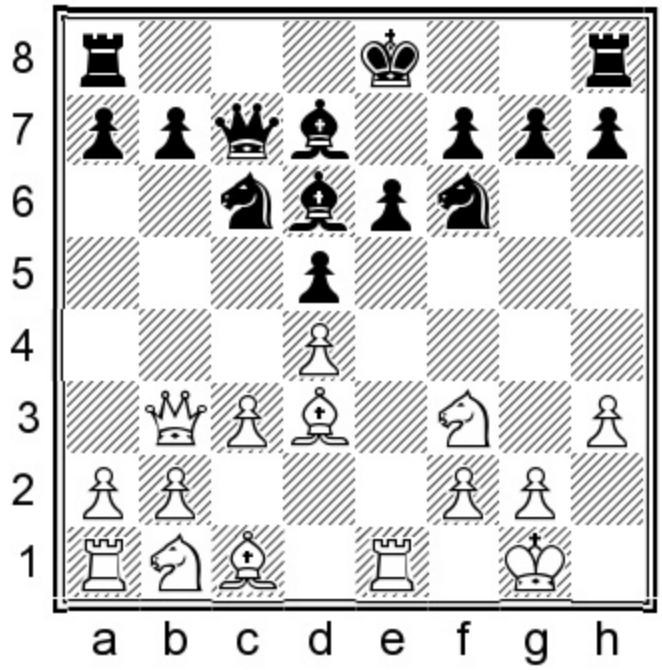
9.♘a3 ♘c6 10.♘b5 (or 10.♗f4 ♕d7 11.0-0 ♘e4!?⇄ followed by ...♗d6) 10...♕d7 11.♗f4 ♖c8 proved to be no problem after 12.a4 ♘a5 13.♕d1 a6 14.♘a3 ♗d6= in Zapata – Hernandez Carmenates, Greensboro 2015.

9...♗d6 10.♘d2 0-0 11.g3 ♘c6 12.0-0 h6 13.♕d1 a6 14.♗d3 b5 15.♖c1 e5⇄

Mikaelyan – Khalifman, St Petersburg 2019.

7...♗h5

7...♗d7!? 8.♘f3 ♘c6 9.0-0 e6 10.♖e1 ♗d6 is also possible. Black's bishop may be passive on d7, but White's oddly-placed queen and inability to plonk a knight on e5 hamper his chances. A recent game continued:



11.♗g5 0-0! Not fearing an exchange on f6. 12.♘bd2 ♘h5! 13.♕d1 f6 14.♗e3 ♘f4 15.♗f1 g5!? 16.c4 ♔h8 17.♖c1 ♖g8↑ Black had the makings of a dangerous attack in Tari – Firouzja, Stavanger 2020.

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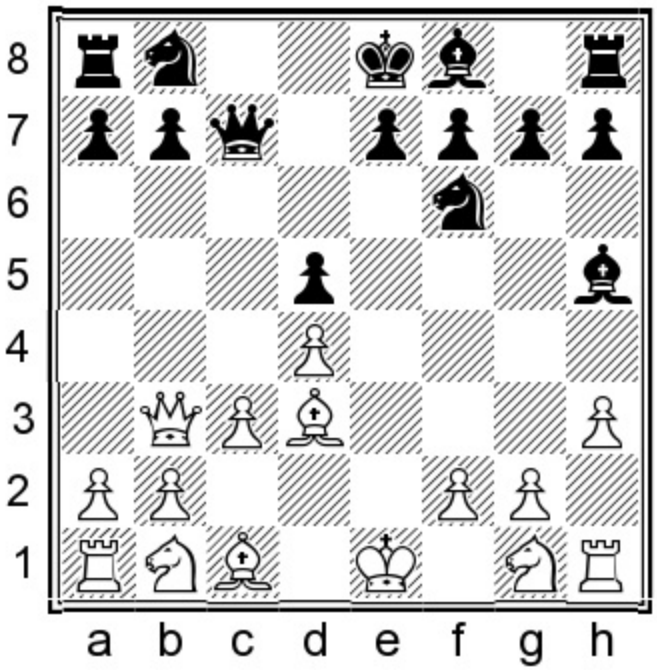

8.g4

This is the critical continuation, trying to refute Black's play. White wins a pawn by force, but whether or not it's a good decision is another matter. In the resulting position Black's pieces come to life and he gets excellent compensation. Other moves are safer, but they don't promise White any advantage, for instance:

8.♘e2 ♗xe2 9.♗xe2 e6 is the same as the 7.♘e2 line above, except that h2-h3 has been inserted, which doesn't change the evaluation.

8.♗g5 e6 9.♘d2 ♗d6 10.♘gf3 ♘c6⇄ was fine for Black in Pop – Gaudron, St Lorenzo 1995. The exchange on f6 is no problem, and if White refrains from it then Black can consider playing ...♘d7 and ...h6.

8.♗e3 e6 9.♘d2 ♘c6 10.♘gf3 ♗d6 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖fe1 a6 13.♖ac1 ♗g6 is equal. After the further 14.♗xg6 hxg6 15.♕d1 b5 16.♕e2 ♘a5 17.♘b3 ♘c4⇄ a draw was agreed in Blomqvist – Khalifman, Puhajarve 2019, but by now I prefer Black's position.

8...♗g6 9.♗xg6 hxg6 10.g5 ♘fd7 11.♕xd5 ♘c6

11...e5!?⩲ also deserves attention.

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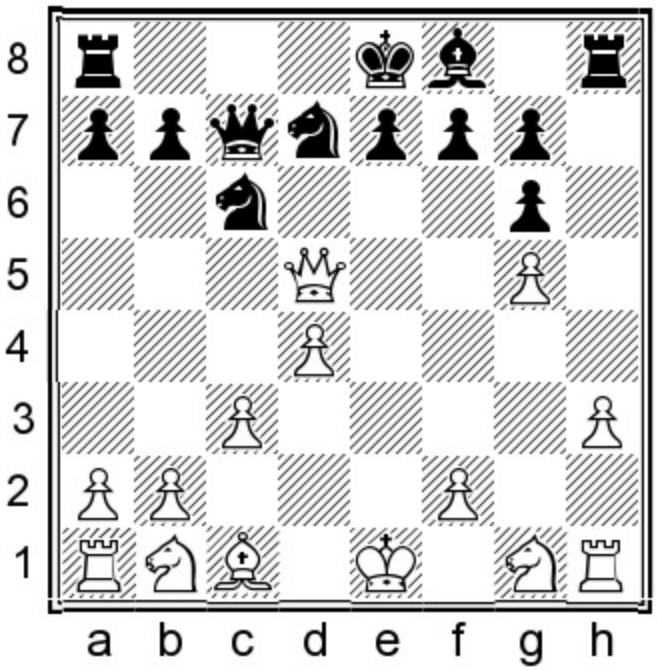

12.♘e2

12.♗e3 e5 13.dxe5?! ♘cxe5 14.♘d2 0-0-0 15.0-0-0 ♘c5∓ Nazarova – Rapport, Batumi 2019.

12...e5⩱

Black has excellent play for the pawn, as we will see in the illustrative game below.

GAME 15

Adam Tukhaev – Mikheil Mchedlishvili

Ankara 2018

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘f6 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♕b3 ♕c7 7.h3 ♗h5 8.g4 ♗g6 9.♗xg6 hxg6 10.g5 ♘fd7 11.♕xd5 e5 12.♘e2 ♘c6 13.♗e3

White must try to consolidate.

13...♘b6 14.♕e4

14.♕b3 was seen in Ovejero – Almagro Llamas, Madrid 2018, when 14...0-0-0N would have been logical, with promising play for Black.

14...0-0-0 15.♘d2

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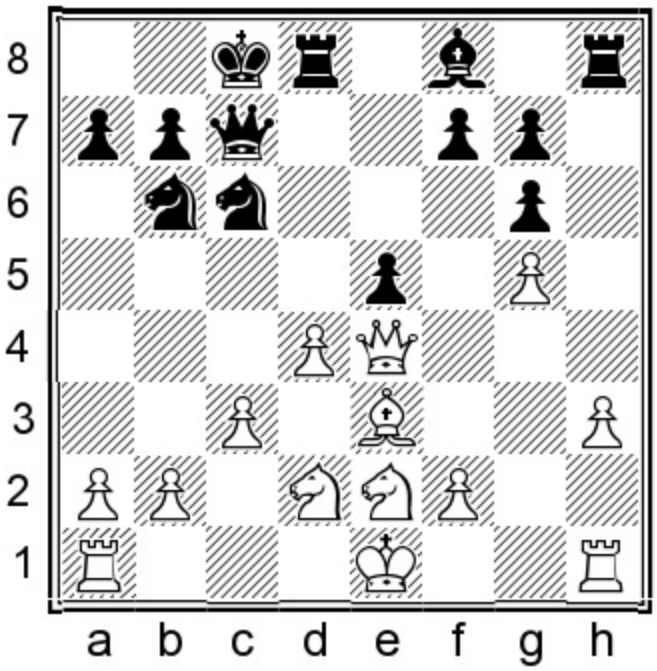

15...f5!

Black sacrifices a second pawn.

The text move is stronger than 15...exd4 16.♘xd4 ♘xd4 17.♗xd4 ♗c5 18.♕g4† ♔b8 19.♗xc5 ♕xc5 20.♕f4† ♔a8 21.0-0-0± and White consolidated in Predojevic – Postny, Internet 2020.

16.gxf6 gxf6 17.♕xg6

If White doesn't take on g6 then ...f5 comes.

17...exd4 18.cxd4 ♘d5 19.♖c1 ♔b8

Black has at least sufficient compensation for two pawns, thanks to his strong knight on d5 and the white king being stuck in the centre.

20.♕g3 ♗d6 21.♕f3 ♕f7

21...♖he8!? was also good, 22.♕xd5?! ♖xe3! being the tactical justification.

22.♘e4 ♗c7 23.a3 ♖he8 24.♘4c3

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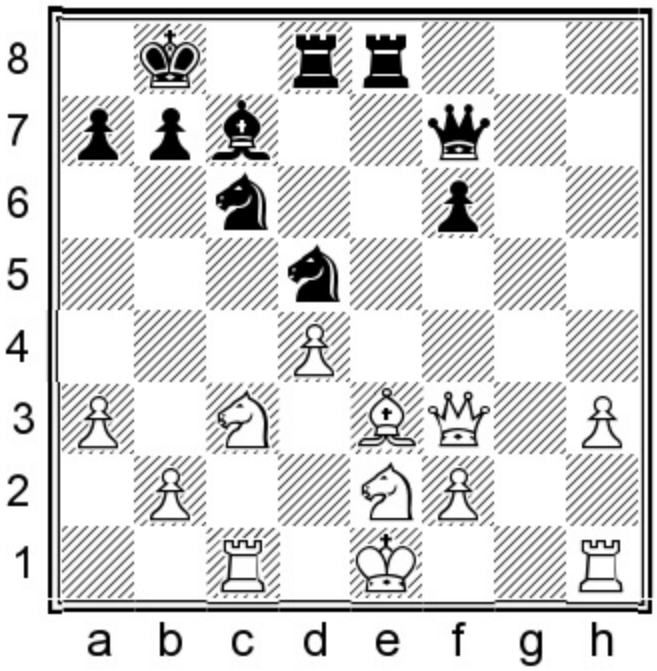

24...♘xe3!

Black changes the structure to create some targets.

25.fxe3 ♕b3 26.♔f2 f5!

Keeping maximum pressure.

27.♖hd1 ♖d7 28.♖d2?

White has not had any easy moves for a long time, and he finally cracks. The position was unpleasant under all circumstances.

28...♘e5! 29.♕h5

Neither 29.♕xf5 ♖f7 nor 29.dxe5 ♖xd2 is playable for White.

29...♖ed8 30.♘f4 ♘c4 31.♖e2

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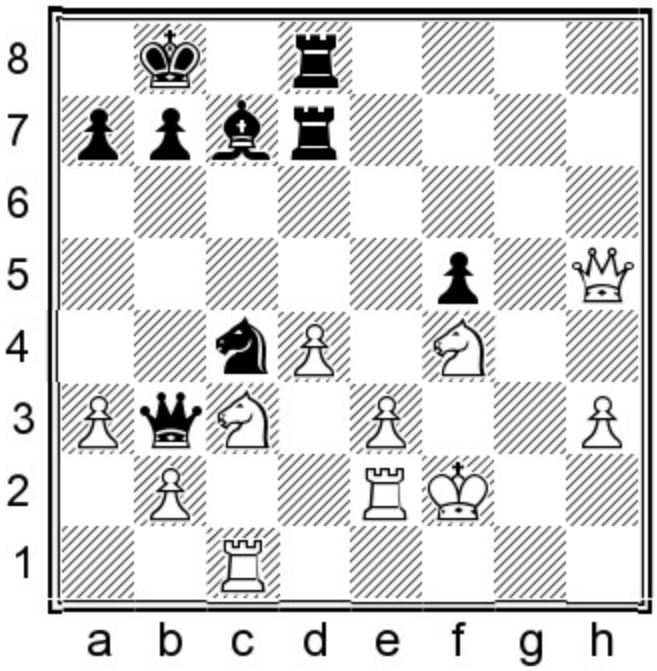

31...♘xe3!

Everything falls apart.

32.♘g2

32.♖xe3 ♗xf4 and 32.♔xe3 ♖xd4 33.♖f1 ♖e4† are crushing.

32...♘c4 33.♕f3 ♖xd4

Black has won the two pawns back without losing his initiative. The contest is soon over.

34.♔g1 ♕b6 35.♕f2 ♕d6 36.♘e1 ♖g8† 37.♔h1 ♖f4 38.♘f3 ♕h6 39.♖g1 ♕xh3† 40.♘h2 ♖h8 41.♕e1

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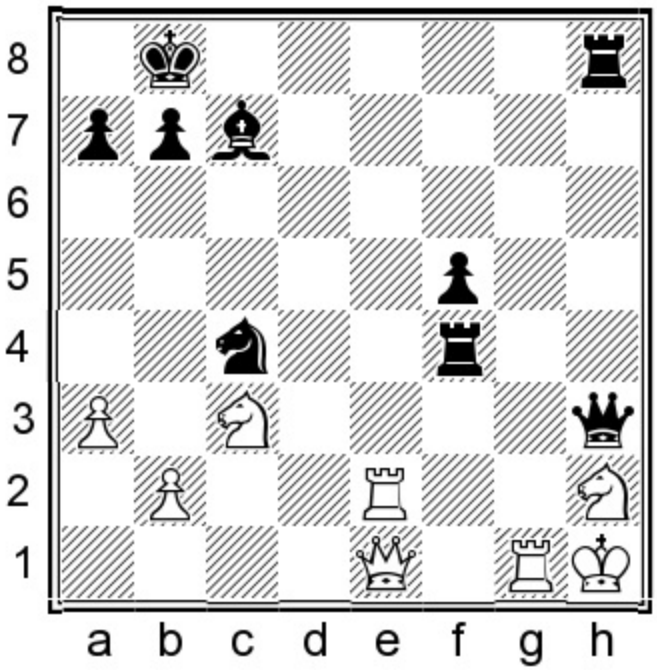

41...♕xh2†!

Black finishes in style with a beautiful queen sacrifice.

42.♖xh2 ♖xh2† 43.♔xh2 ♖f2† 44.♔h3 ♖h2#

0–1

Conclusion

The Exchange Variation is one of White's best ways of combatting the Caro-Kann. He easily gets an active position, and the debate unfolds about whether or not Black can get his light-squared bishop out. Black has been under some pressure in recent years, but fortunately some finesses have been discovered.

Particularly important is 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘c6 5.c3 ♕c7 6.h3 and now the subtle move 6...g6! followed by ...♗f5 with a decent game.

A good alternative for Black is the little-explored 4...♘f6!? preparing ...♗g4. Again, White can try to prevent it with 5.h3, and again we answer 5...g6! followed by ...♗f5 with interesting play.

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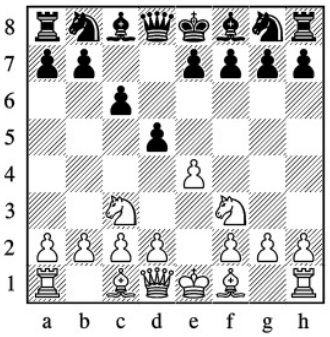
Chapter 9



Two Knights Variation

Variation Index

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5

A) 3.e5 284

B) 3.d3!? 285

C) 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♕e2 ♘xe4 6.♕xe4 287

C1) 6...♕a5!? 287

C2) 6...♘d7 289

***Game 16* – Ragger – Donchenko 290**

"Patience my tinsel angel, patience my perfumed child
One day they really love you, you'll charm them with that smile
But for now it's just another Chelsea Monday"

Marillion – Chelsea Monday

In recent years a popular choice for the practical player has been the Two Knights Variation, which arises after the opening moves:

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3

A natural-looking move with various transpositional possibilities.

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2.♘c3 d5 3.♘f3 is another route to the same thing.

2...d5 3.♘c3

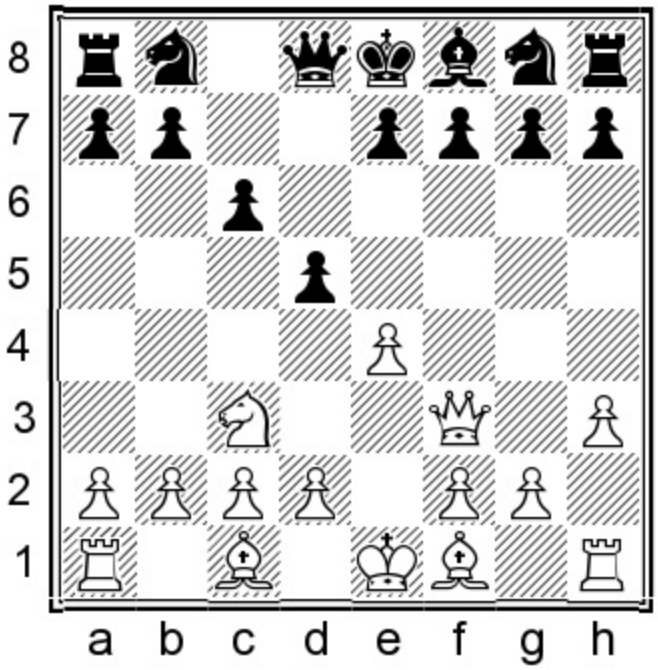
This set-up was a favourite of the young Bobby Fischer, but in general it was considered completely harmless, to such an extent that Fischer's Soviet adversaries started to play the Caro-Kann against him in the Candidates in 1959. Especially Keres' 2–0 score with Black against the American prodigy cemented the line's status. These days this verdict has been challenged, not so much theoretically but in over-the-board play.

3...♗g4

This liberating move was my recommendation in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, so I will say a few words about it.

3...dxe4 is our choice this time, as explained shortly.

4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3



Both sides have reasons to be happy: White has the bishop pair and a flexible structure, while Black is solid and has solved the problem of the passive light-squared bishop. The middlegame is rich with possibilities for both sides, but it is somewhat easier to play with White. Still, I would not be too scared to defend Black's cause. However, since we are going for the ...♘f6/...exf6 structure in the Classical Variation anyway, it makes sense to take the same approach here.

My recommendation

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6!?

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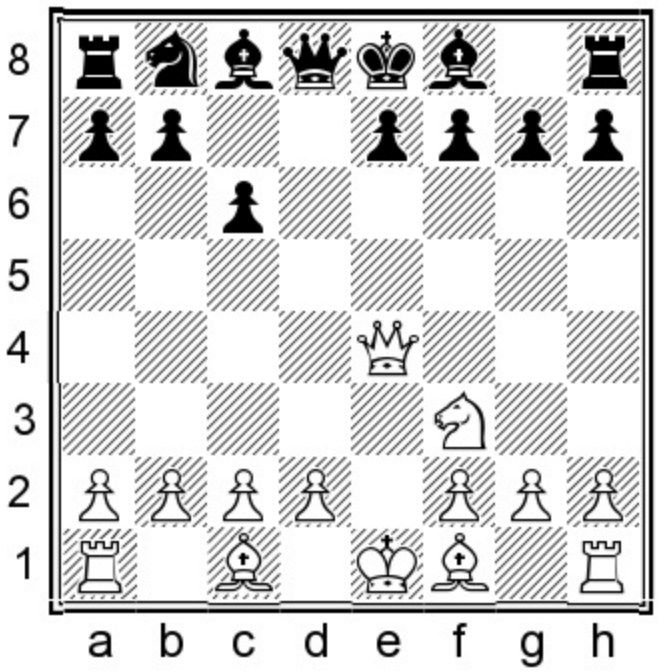
This is consistent with our choice in the Classical Variation, although even if we were not playing 4...♘f6 there, it would still be worth considering the text move here, because White has already committed himself to ♘f3, thus depriving himself of the more challenging set-up with c2-c3, ♗d3 and ♘e2, as covered in Chapter 2. Of course White players are fully aware of this and they have come up with:

5.♕e2

This is the only chance to fight for an advantage. After only five moves a relatively unexplored position is on the board. What more can you ask for? Theory is only just developing, so each game can expand the horizon. Black's position must be okay, so why not be a pioneer?

5...♘xe4 6.♕xe4



After this the path divides. Black can choose to remain on new soil with:

6...♕a5!?

Or he can try the more traditional 6...♘d7 followed by ...♘f6 and maybe ...♗f5. Please note the exceptionally entertaining game Ragger – Donchenko, Brest 2019, for the current state of affairs.

Odds and ends

We have taken a slight liberty in naming the chapter the way we have, while also dealing with a few sidelines after 1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 where White avoids the familiar paths of 3.exd5 or 3.♘c3. Such ideas (3.e5, for instance) are mostly harmless, but an interesting exception is:

3.d3!?

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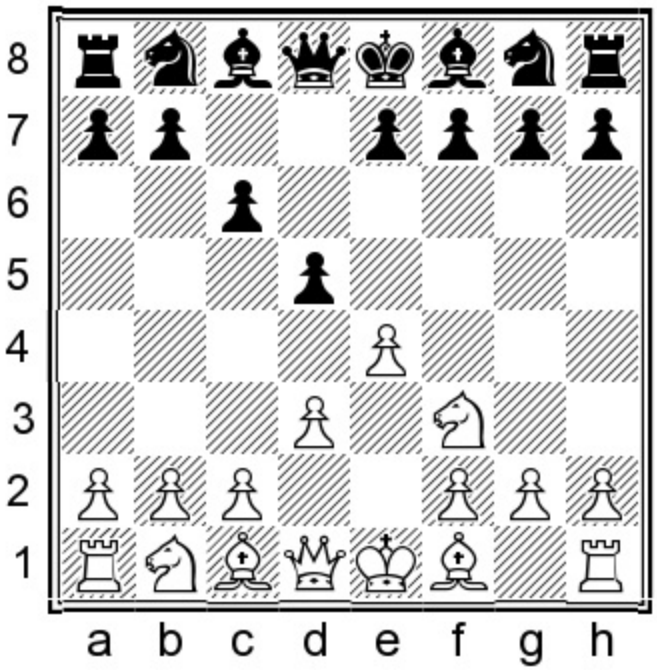

Yes, this is actually for real! When I first heard about this idea I couldn't believe what I had just been told. Black can of course take on e4 and exchange queens, so how can this be a winning try for White? On closer inspection I realized that matters are not so simple. Black truly risks being slightly worse in the ending, and it is much harder to play than you might think at first sight. However, I came up with a good antidote whereby Black quickly generates counterplay on the kingside.

Theory

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3

2.♘c3 d5 3.♘f3 is another possible route to our main subject; and 3.♕f3 is a sideline which you can find in Chapter 11.

2...d5

We will deal with the sidelines **A)** 3.e5 and **B)** 3.d3!?, before turning to our main topic of the Two Knights after **C)** 3.♘c3.

3.exd5 cxd5 was covered in variation A of the previous chapter.

A) 3.e5

This seems far too ambitious. In Chapter 11 we shall see a related variation where White reaches this position except with the knight on e2 rather than f3 (via a 2.♘e2 move order), which is a bit more purposeful.

3...♗g4

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Black gets an improved version of the Advance Variation, with his bishop better placed on g4 than f5.

4.d4 e6 5.c3 c5!?

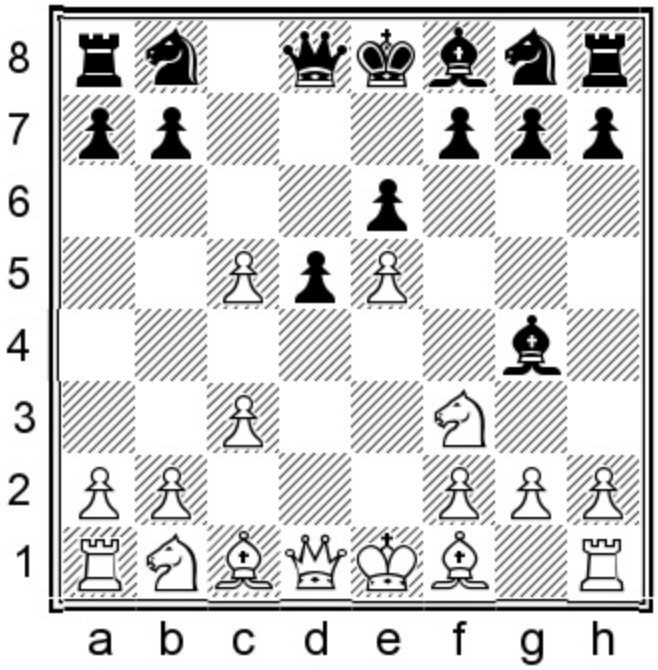
The most ambitious.

5...♘d7 is playable, but it's nice to develop the knight on the more active c6-square.

6.dxc5!

The only challenging continuation.

6.♘bd2?! cxd4 7.cxd4 ♘c6 is excellent for Black.



6...♗xf3

Please don't fall for 6...♗xc5?? 7.♕a4† which has claimed a number of victims.

6...♘c6 is not really suitable for us, as it transposes to a quite heavily tested and analysed line of the 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 variation, which lies outside of our repertoire.

7.♕xf3 ♗xc5

The resulting position resembles a French. Generally speaking it should be good for Black, but we have exchanged on f3 a little earlier than we would have ideally wished to, so White should try to make use of his active queen.

8.♕g4

White must threaten something.

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8.♕g3 is basically the same.

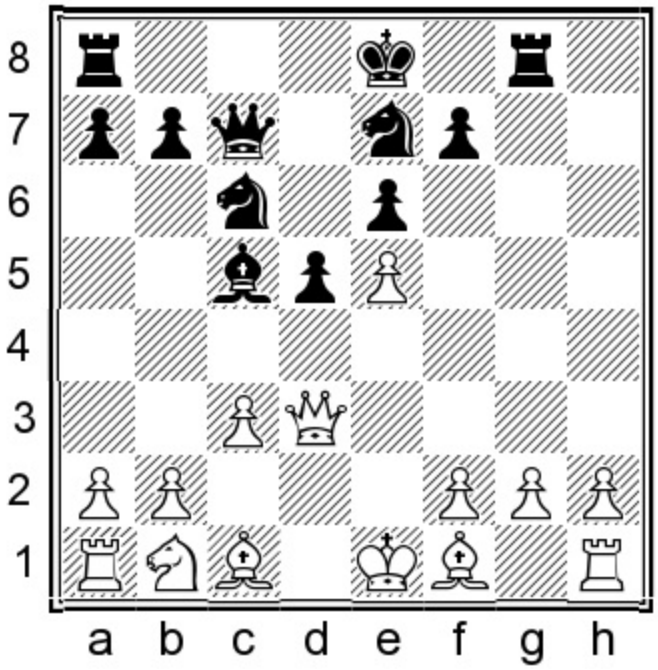
8.♘d2 is well met by: 8...♘e7! 9.♗d3 ♘d7∓ The knights belong on c6 and d7 in this structure, and the e5-pawn is about to come under heavy fire.

8...♘e7!?

We can go all-in, playing in the spirit of the Winawer Poisoned Pawn!

8...g6 and 8...♔f8!?∞ can also be considered.

9.♕xg7 ♖g8 10.♕xh7 ♘bc6 11.♕d3 ♕c7⩲



Black will castle long with interesting play. Compared to the Winawer, White's queenside remains intact and Black has swapped off the different-coloured bishop. Still, Black has a serious lead in development and after something like:

12.f4 d4⇄

He has a potent initiative for the sacrificed material.

B) 3.d3!?

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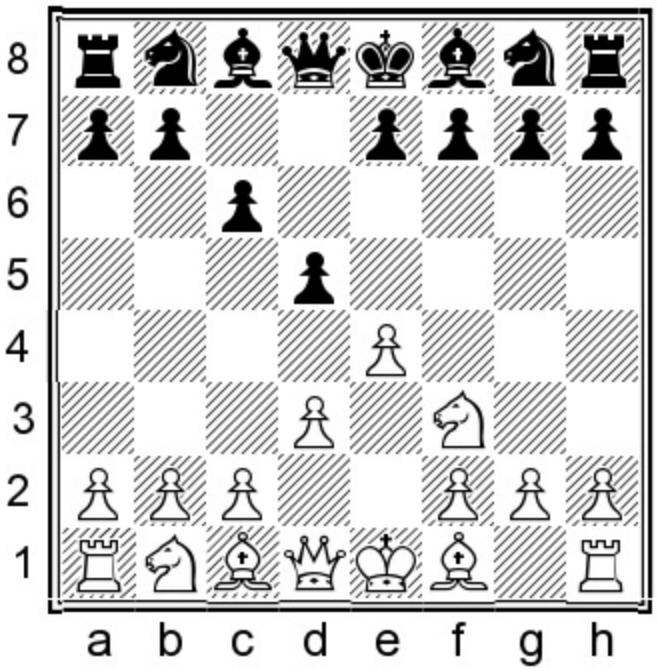

After the escapism of an early e4-e5, we are returning to planet Earth with this modest move, inviting a seemingly innocent ending. This approach has been tried by a lot of strong players, suggesting that things are not as simple as you would expect. I will be honest: it has not been easy to come up with a completely satisfactory antidote, partly because there is no established theory to follow, and partly due to the fact that White is marginally ahead in development, so his position should be a tad easier to play.

Of course the variation cannot threaten the entire Caro-Kann foundation, but it can be a practical annoyance, just like similar – and similarly popular these days – ideas in other openings, one example being the invitation to trade queens in the English after the opening moves 1.c4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♘c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♘xd5 5.e3 ♘xc3 6.dxc3!?.

3...dxe4

As Caro-Kann players, we are not afraid of ghosts... I mean endings.
Of course there are alternatives such as 3...g6 that can be investigated.

4.dxe4 ♕xd1† 5.♔xd1

In this queenless middlegame, a key idea for White is to regroup with ♘e1-d3 and protect his central pawn with f2-f3.

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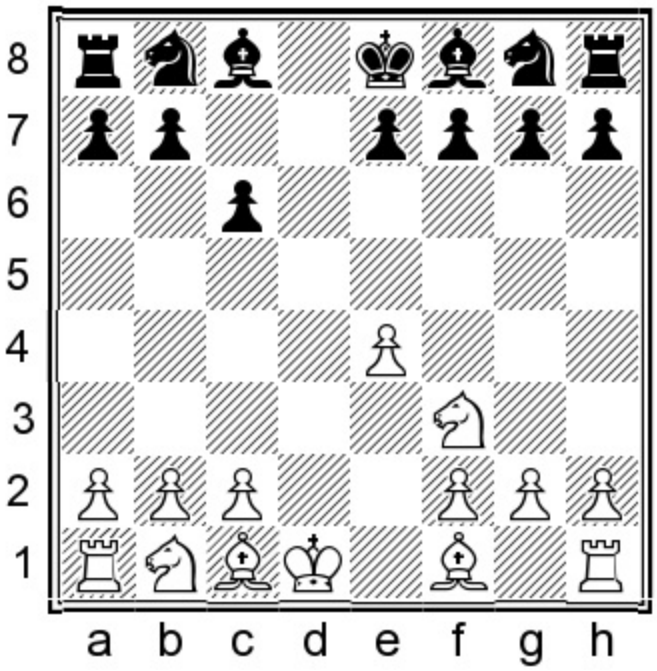

5...♘f6!

This is why it is essential to play this move and force a decision.

5...♘d7 is met by 6.♘e1!?± and the knight will be excellently placed on d3. (6.a4!?± is a good alternative.)

5...♗g4 6.♘bd2 ♘d7 7.♗e2± also seems fractionally better for White. A sample continuation is 7...g6 8.♘e1 ♗xe2† 9.♔xe2 ♗h6 10.♘d3 ♘gf6 11.f3 0-0-0 12.a4 ♘e8 13.a5 ♘d6 14.h4 f6 15.g4 and White is pressing.

5...f6 6.♘e1!? e5 7.♗c4 ♘d7 8.a4 a5 9.f3 h5 10.♘d3 is a perfect illustration of White's regrouping plans, and after 10...♘h6 11.♗e3 ♘f7 12.♘d2± White is much more comfortable.

5...g6!? 6.♘fd2!? is another typical regrouping, but this time the knight heads for c4. (6.♘e1!? is a natural alternative which I also like.) 6...♗g7 7.a4 ♘d7 8.♘c4 ♘gf6 9.f3 0-0 10.♗e3 ♘e8 11.♘bd2 ♘d6 12.c3± Todorov – Debray, Noisy le Grand 2008.

6.♘fd2

White will protect the e4-pawn with f2-f3 and place the knight on c4. Other options fail to trouble Black:

6.♗d3 obstructs the ♘e1-d3 manoeuvre while also inviting 6...♘bd7⇄ when the knight may go to c5 to target the bishop.

6.♘bd2 ♘bd7 (6...g6!? is another idea, perhaps with ...♗g4 and/or ...♗h6 to follow.) 7.♘e1!?

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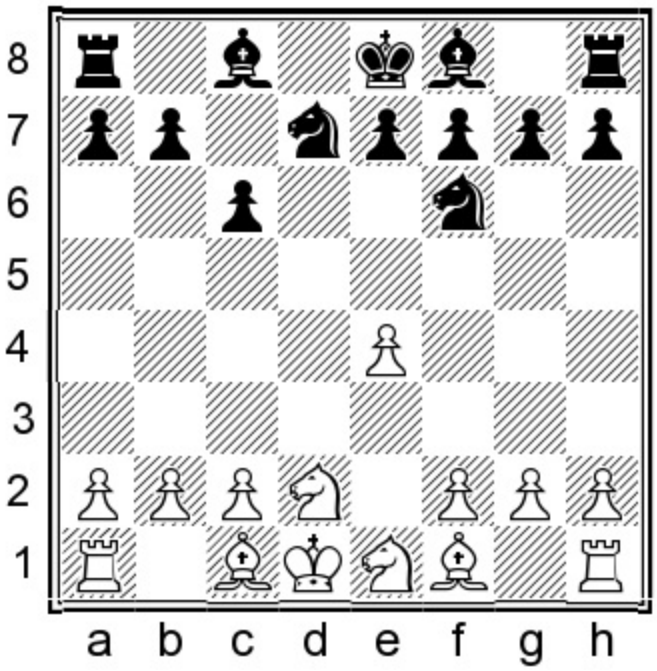
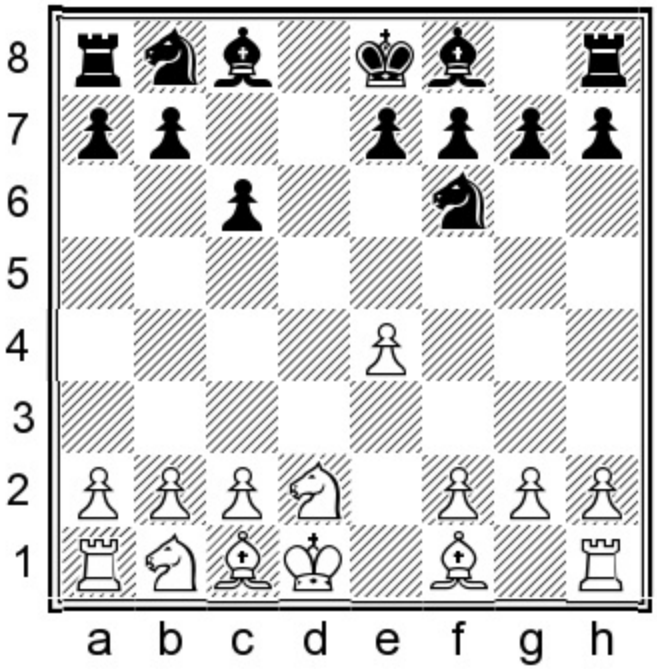


White tries to get the optimal set-up with the knight on d3, but a good answer is: 7...♘g4! 8.♘d3 (8.♔e2 is met by 8...b6 when ...♗a6† is in the air.) 8...♘de5!⇄



6...g5!

Black should create his own agenda. It is logical to expand on the kingside to control some key squares and pave the way for active counterplay.

6...h5!?⇄ is a good alternative, with broadly the same kind of ideas.

7.f3 ♖g8 8.♘c4

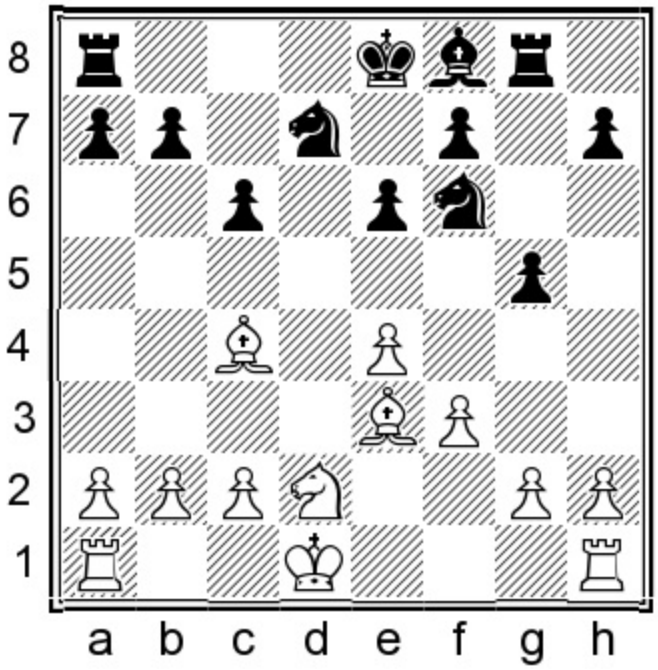
Surprisingly, a draw was agreed in Karjakin – Wei Yi, Jerusalem 2019. Obviously the main battle

lies ahead, but the fact that Karjakin gave up all ambition says something about the effectiveness of Black's set-up. Here is an instructive sample continuation:

8...♗e6 9.♗e3

White is ready to follow up with ♘bd2, which is why I recommend the immediate exchange:

9...♗xc4! 10.♗xc4 e6 11.♘d2 ♘bd7



Black's pieces have good prospects on the dark squares, while his pawns on light squares seriously inhibit the bishop on c4.

12.a4 ♗c5 13.♔e2 h5=

C) 3.♘c3

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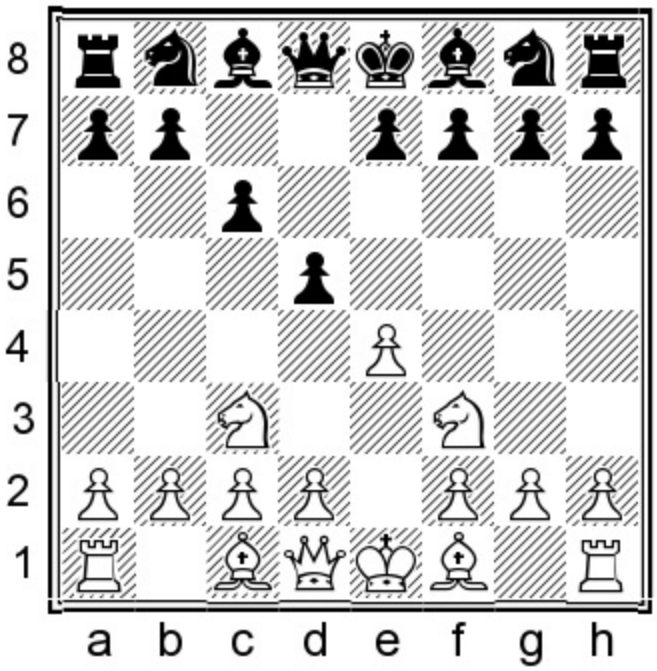

Finally we reach the Two Knights proper.

3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♕e2

A cool response.

5.♘xf6† exf6 will transpose to the Classical Variation as soon as White plays d2-d4 – and it is hard to see any good reason for him to avoid this move.

5...♘xe4 6.♕xe4

We have reached an important split. Black can stay off the beaten track with **C1)** 6...♕a5!? or go for the more orthodox **C2)** 6...♘d7.

C1) 6...♕a5!?

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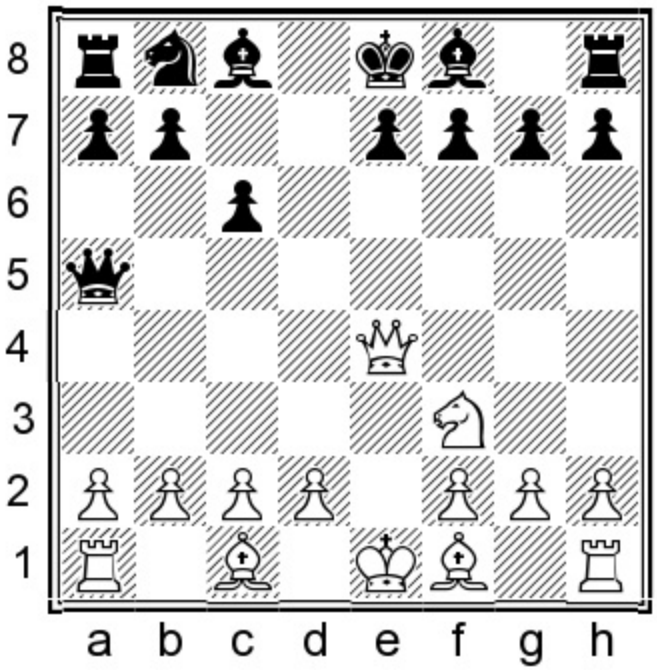

Pinning the d-pawn and preparing ...♗f5.

7.♕f4

This is arguably White's best chance for an advantage, even though it allows the exchange of queens. Other moves give Black easy play:

7.♗c4 and 7.♕h4 are both met by 7...♗f5⇄ with nice play for Black.

7.♘e5 ♘d7 is nothing for White, for instance: 8.♘c4 ♕d5= Zvjaginsev – I. Popov, Yaroslavl 2018.

7.c3 ♗f5 8.♕f4 e6 In general, if Black gets in ...♗f5 and ...e6, reaching a normal-looking Caro-Kann position, then he should be fine. 9.♘h4 ♗g6 (9...♗c2?! 10.d3 is needlessly risky.)

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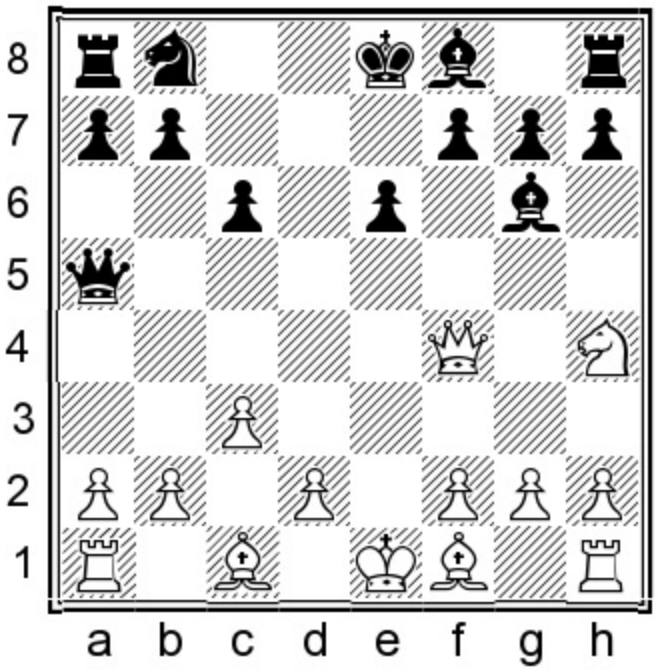

10.d4 ♘d7 11.♘xg6 hxg6 12.♗d3 e5 (Also fine is 12...♘f6N followed by long castling.) 13.dxe5 ♘xe5 14.♗e2 0-0-0 15.0-0 ♗d6⇄ Black's activity was at least as important as White's bishop pair in Vachier-Lagrave – Karjakin, Saint Louis (rapid) 2019.

7.♗d3!?

This prevents ...♗f5 but Black has another clever response:

7...♘a6! 8.♕e5

8.♗xa6 ♕xa6 9.b3 was tried by the young Iranian star. 9...c5!? Preparing ...♕e6. (I also like 9...♕a5N followed by ...♗f5.) 10.d4 This was Firouzja – Gholami, Bushehr 2019, and now 10...g6!N would have brought Black good play. For instance, 11.♕e5 f6 12.♕xc5 ♗f5 13.c4 e5 14.♕b5† ♕xb5 15.cxb5 e4 and Black has the initiative.

8...♕xe5† 9.♘xe5

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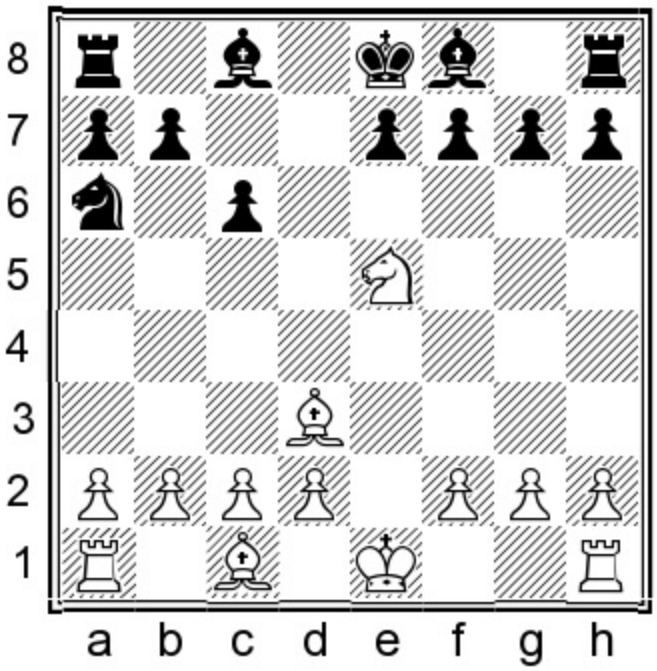

This was Adams – Howell, London 2018. Instead of lunging with ...♘b4, I suggest:

9...♘c7N 10.♗e4 f6

If the knight retreats, then ...e5 will give Black a pleasant game, so White is more or less forced to seek complications:

11.♘xc6! bxc6 12.♗xc6† ♔f7 13.♗xa8 ♘xa8 14.d4 ♘b6 15.b3 e6 16.c4 ♗b7∞

Objectively the ending is balanced, but in practice anything could happen.

7...♕f5

We chase the white queen. If the queens are exchanged, Black will have no problems.

8.d3

8.♕e3 ♕e6 We insist! 9.b3 (9.d4 ♕xe3† 10.♗xe3 ♗f5⇄) 9...♕xe3† 10.fxe3 a5 Black has active ideas of his own. 11.a4 ♗f5 12.d3 f6 13.♗b2 (13.e4 ♗g4 14.h3 ♗h5 15.♗e3 e5=) 13...e5 14.0-0-0 ♘a6∞ Mamedov – Artemiev, Riyadh (rapid) 2017.

8...♕xf4 9.♗xf4

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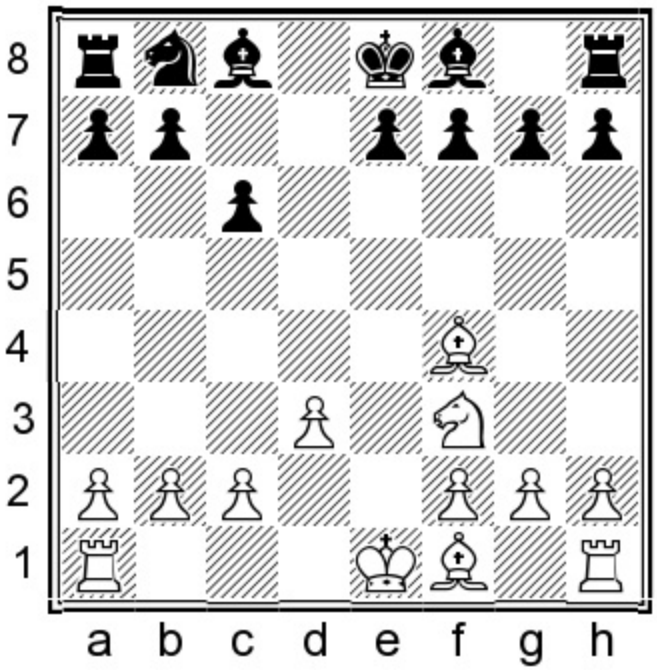

9...f6

I like this move, simply preparing ...e5 with a good game.

9...h5!?, 9...g6!? and 9...♗g4 can all be considered as well.

10.0-0-0

10.d4 prevents ...e5, but Black gets fine play anyway after: 10...♗f5 11.0-0-0 g5 12.♗e3 ♘d7= Followed by ...e6 and ...h5.

10...e5 11.♗e3 c5! 12.♘d2 ♘c6

Black has a fine position with plenty of space.

13.g3 ♗d7 14.♗g2 0-0-0 15.f4 exf4 16.♗xf4 ♘d4 17.♖de1

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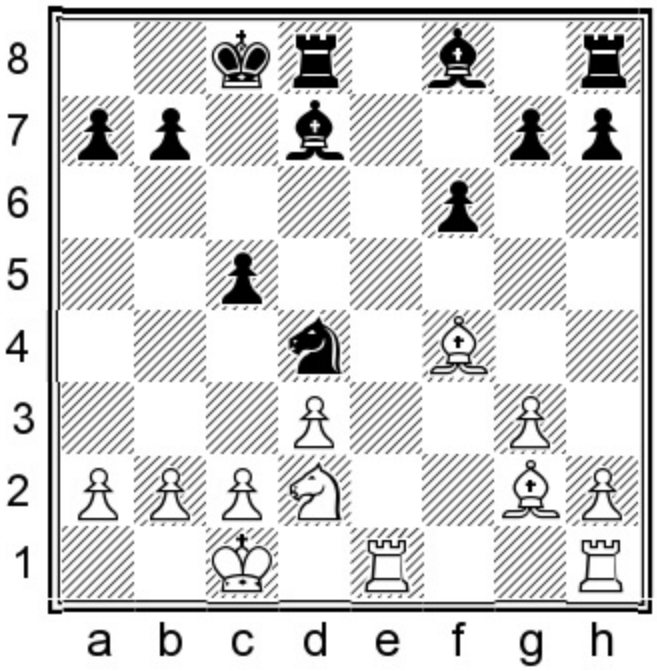
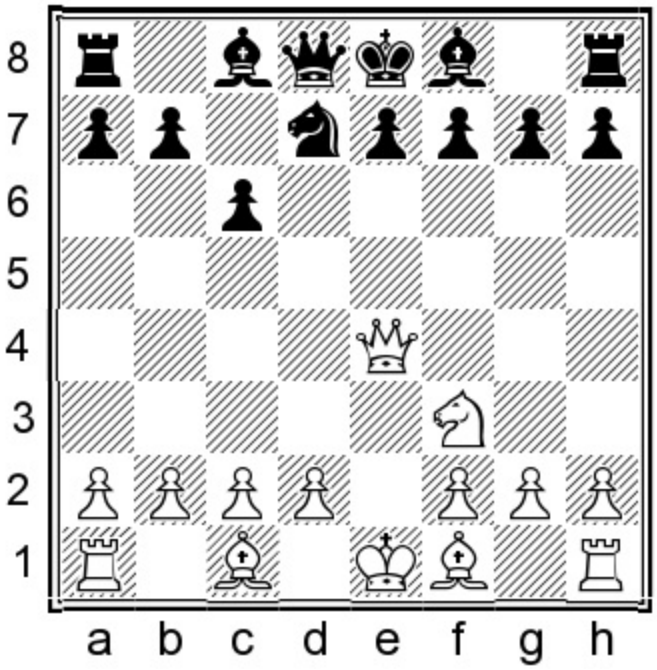


Now in I. Popov – Dhopade, New Delhi 2019, Black could have obtained interesting play with:

17...h5!?N

With ideas such as ...h4 and ...♗c6.

C2) 6...♘d7



Straightforward development. Black intends ...♘f6 to gain a tempo, followed by developing his remaining pieces.

7.♗c4

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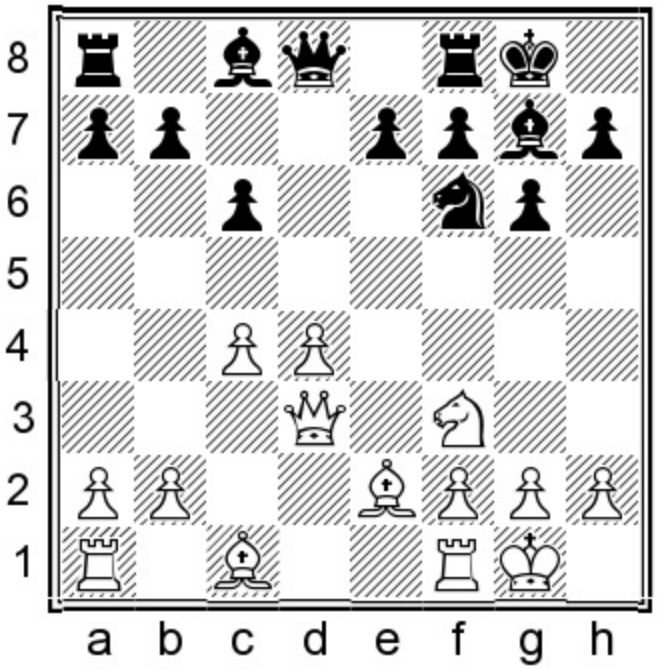
This is the usual continuation.

The natural alternative is:
7.d4 ♘f6 8.♕d3

8.♕h4 ♗f5 9.c3 e6⇄ gave White nothing special in Felgaer – Donchenko, Internet (blitz) 2019.

8.♕f4 ♘d5 9.♕e4N (9.♕d2 ♗f5 10.c4 ♘f6 11.♗e2 e6 gave Black a pleasant game in Eggleston – Donchenko, Newcastle 2019.) 9...g6 10.♗c4 ♗g7 11.0-0 0-0 12.h3 ♗f5 13.♕e2 b5 14.♗b3 a5⇄ With good play for Black.

8...g6 9.♗e2 ♗g7 10.0-0 0-0 11.c4



In Grandelius – Admiraal, Budva 2019, the logical continuation would have been:
11...♗f5N

Developing the final minor piece with tempo, with no particular problems for Black.

7...♘f6 8.♘e5

This small trick is White's only chance to prove something.

8...e6

In their respective White repertoire works, Kaufman, Hammer and Sielecki all claim an edge for White in this variation, probably due to a combination of the initially-positive engine assessment and the general notion that blocking in the c8-bishop is something of an achievement for White. But as we will see, matters are not so simple.

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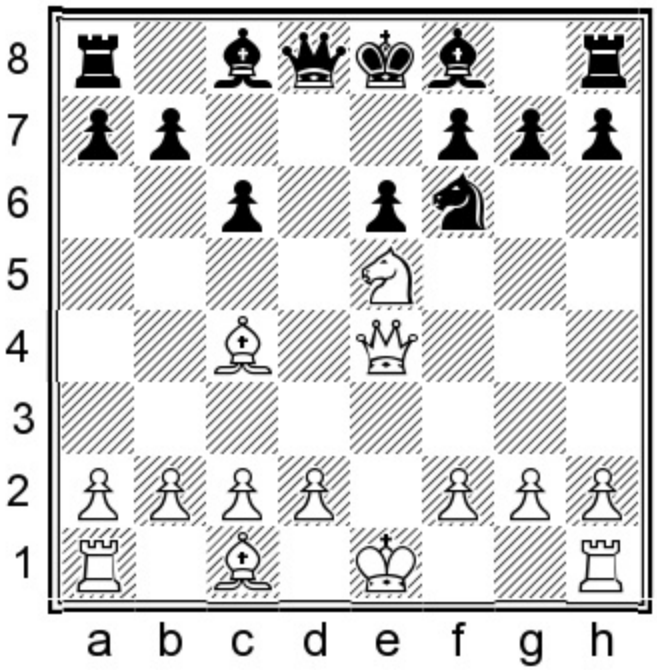

9.♕e2 b5!

Black seeks quick counterplay. Immediately we can see that White's bishop is a target and Black's may have a bright future on b7.

10.♗d3

Nobody has tried 10.♘xc6?! yet, with good reason, as 10...♕c7! 11.♗d3 (11.♗xb5? a6!–+) 11...a6 12.♘d4 ♗b7⩲ gives Black tremendous activity.

10.♗b3 is harmless, as Black will prevent any ♘xf7 tricks and then target the bishop: 10...♕c7 11.d4 ♗d6 12.0-0 0-0 13.c3 (13.♗f4 a5!⇄ gave Black nice play in Rydstrom – Svane, Helsingor 2019.) 13...♗b7 14.♖e1 a6= Black was ready for ...c5 in Ducarmon – Donchenko, Internet (rapid) 2019.

10...♕c7

10...♗b7 11.a4 a6 is a decent alternative.

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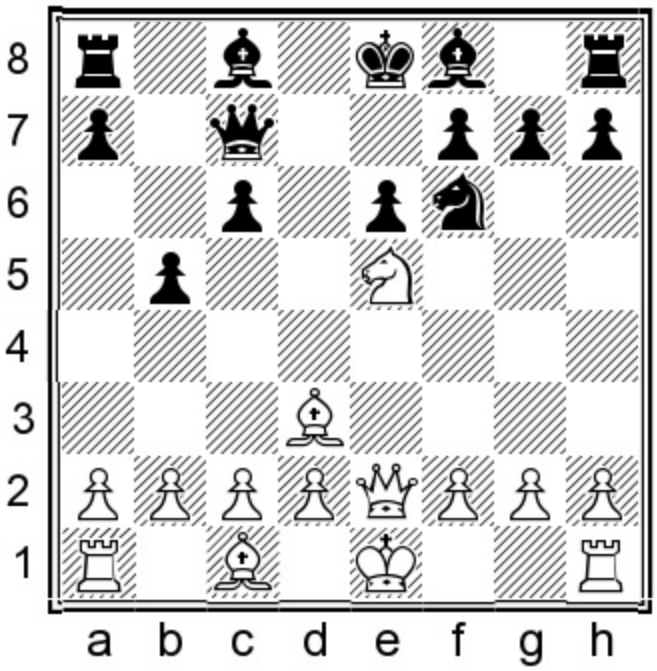

11.a4

White should force the play, as otherwise the poor placement of the d3-bishop will tell.

11.b3 occurred in T.R. Hansen – Kumar, Reykjavik 2017, when 11...♘d5!N 12.♗b2 ♘f4 13.♕e4 ♘xd3† 14.♘xd3 ♗b7 15.♕e2 c5∓ would have given Black slightly better chances thanks to the strong bishops.

11...♗d6! 12.♘xc6! b4 13.♘d4 a6⩱

Black has good compensation for the pawn, as we will see in the next illustrative game.

GAME 16

Markus Ragger – Alexander Donchenko

Brest 2019

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♕e2 ♘xe4 6.♕xe4 ♘d7 7.♗c4 ♘f6 8.♘e5 e6 9.♕e2 b5! 10.♗d3 ♕c7 11.a4 ♗d6! 12.♘xc6! b4 13.♘d4 a6

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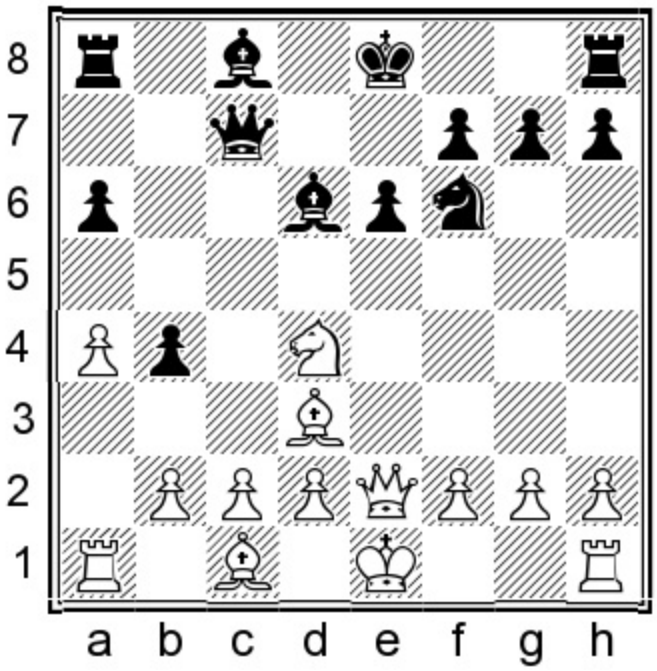

14.♘f5!

This is the critical continuation and leads to a hair-raising tactical battle.

14.h3 0-0 15.0-0 ♗b7∓ gives Black a promising initiative for the pawn.

14...♗e5 15.♘xg7†

Taking a pawn with check is, unsurprisingly, a critical test.

15.f4 ♗xf4 16.♘xg7† ♔f8 17.g3

Another try, when play continues:

17...♗xg3† 18.hxg3 ♕xg3† 19.♔d1

19.♕f2 ♕xf2† 20.♔xf2 ♔xg7 is level.

19...♔xg7 20.♕f1

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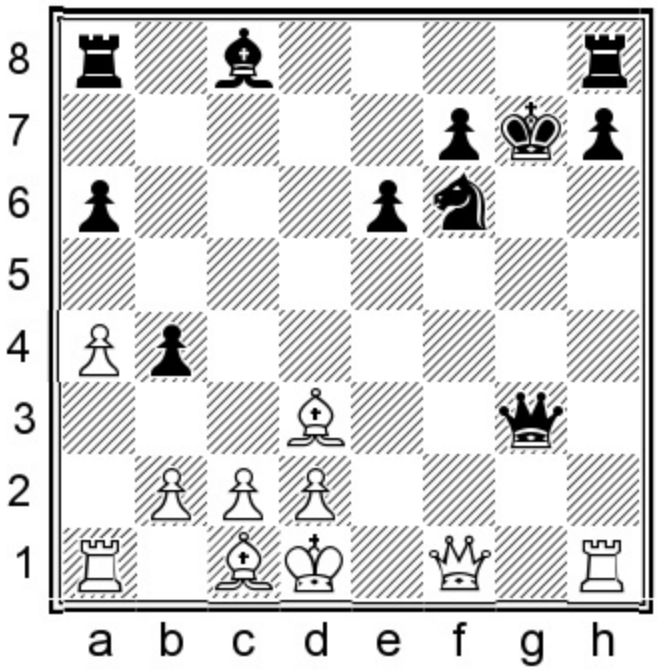

Threatening ♖g1, but Black easily escapes.

20...e5! 21.♖g1 ♗g4† 22.♗e2 ♕h4

White must start looking for equality. For example:

23.♗xg4 ♘xg4 24.♕f5 h5 25.♕xe5† ♔g6⇄

15...♔f8 16.♘h5 ♘xh5 17.♕xh5 ♗b7

Black has great piece play, in return for the temporary two-pawn deficit.

18.♗e2

18.♕h4 ♖g8⩲ looks pleasant for Black.

18...♗xg2 19.♖g1 ♖g8

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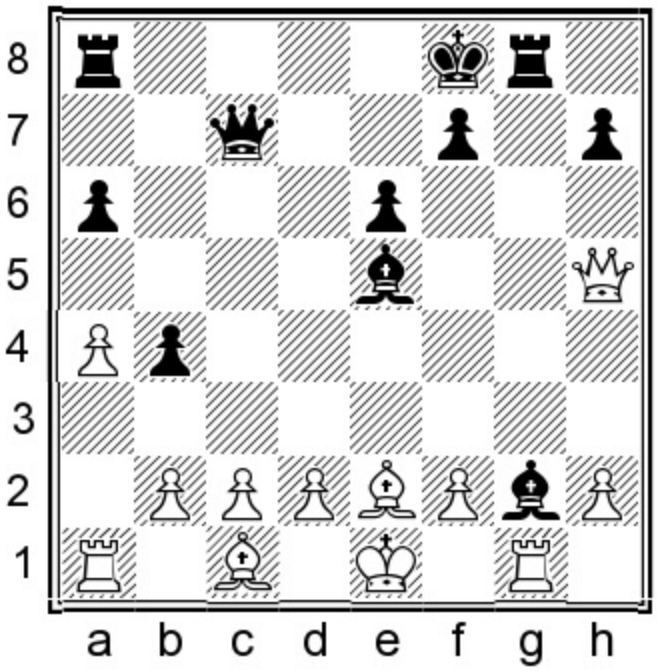

20.d4!

White must speed up his development. The initiative is more important than pawn-counting.

20...♗xh2 21.♕h6† ♔e8

Not 21...♔e7?? 22.♗g5† and the bishop on g2 hangs.

22.♕xh7 ♔e7

Now e7 is a safe spot.

23.♗h5!

White poses a big threat to safeguard his rook from being captured.

23...♖af8 24.♗xf7 ♖h8!

Neutralizing the pressure.

25.♗g5†

The start of a forcing sequence that ultimately leads to a drawn ending.

25.♕g7 ♗d5∞ looks messy but should also lead to approximate equality, with Black always having enough activity to compensate for being down by a pawn or two.

25...♔d6 26.♕xh2† ♖xh2 27.♗f4† ♔c6 28.♗xc7 ♔xc7

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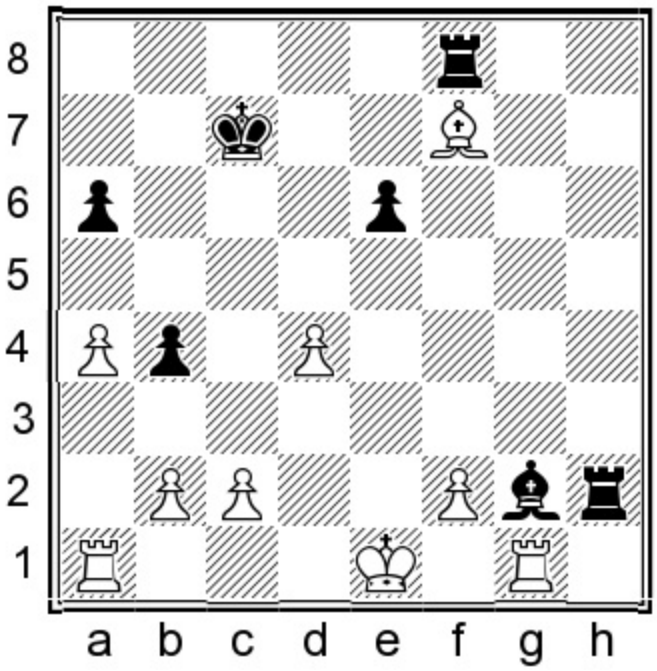

29.♗g6

29.♗xe6?! ♖e8 can only be dangerous for White.

29...♗d5 30.b3

30.♖f1 ♗g2 31.♖g1 repeats.

30...♖fxf2 31.0-0-0 a5

White is a pawn up, but Black has everything under control.

32.♖df1 ♖xf1† 33.♖xf1

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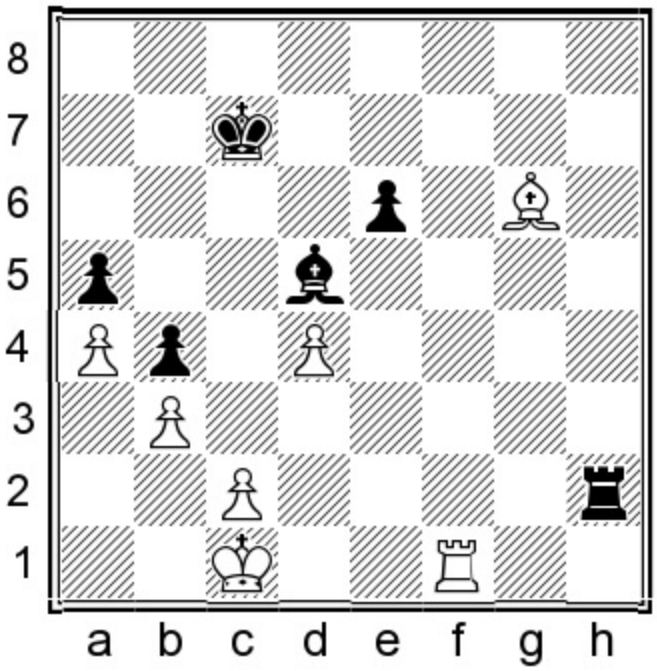


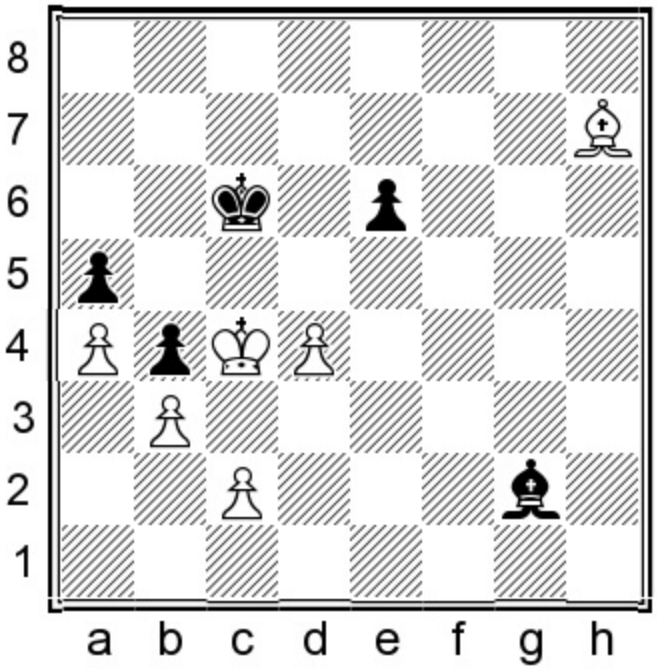
33...♖h1!?

33...♖h4 is a good alternative to target d4, but Donchenko has correctly evaluated the bishop endgame as an easy draw.

34.♖xh1 ♗xh1 35.♔d2 ♔d6 36.♔d3 ♗b7 37.♗f7 ♗g2 38.♗g6

Or 38.c3 bxc3 39.♔xc3 ♗c6 followed by ...e5 is a dead draw.

38...♗b7 39.♗h7 ♗g2 40.♔c4 ♔c6



41.♔d3

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41.♗g8?? ♗f1# would have been fun for Black.

41...♔d6 42.♗g8 ♗b7 43.♗f7 ♗g2

White has no way to make progress, so a draw was agreed. Amazingly, computer analysis indicates that the position remained balanced since the opening. It would be interesting to know how much of the game was preparation by one or both sides – but whatever the case may be, the level of accuracy by both players was extremely impressive.

½–½

Conclusion

Before the Two Knights Variation we saw two sidelines after 2.♘f3 d5.

3.e5 is harmless as it allows 3...♗g4.

3.d3 is not as insipid as it looks, but exchanging on e4 and d1 followed by 5...♘f6! is a good way to prevent White's ideal set-up.

The Two Knights Variation is a popular sideline. White doesn't look to pose direct threats, but instead goes for an easy game with decent chances for a small plus. Because we play the ...♘f6 line in the Classical, we can respond to 1.e4 c6 2.♘c3 d5 3.♘f3 with 3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6!, inviting our favourite ...exf6 structure.

The only critical response is 5.♕e2 ♘xe4 6.♕xe4, when Black can choose between 6...♕a5 and 6...♘d7. Personally, I like 6...♕a5 with an unusual type of position. The ending arising after 7.♕f4 ♕f5 8.♕e3 ♕e6 9.b3 is full of play, so don't relax too much just because the queens are coming off. That said, Black should have plenty of chances for counterplay.

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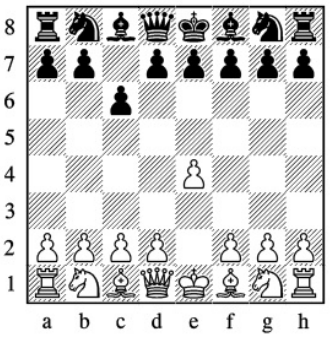
Chapter 10



Popular Sidelines

Variation Index

1.e4 c6

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A1) 5.d4!? 296

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C21) 6...b5!? 319

C22) 6...♗f5 320

"Boy, I feel so outgunned today
But I'll get up and fight back, anyway
You and I are not huge mainstream stars
But unlike them, we're really what we are"

Iggy Pop – Main Street Eyes

1.e4 c6

White has a number of ways to deviate from mainstream theory early in the game. Some of these systems are quite popular among certain players – typically those who prefer not to spend a lot of time on topical theoretical positions, but still want to have a sound repertoire containing a drop of poison.

2.d3 d5 3.♘d2

3.♘f3!? converts to the 2.♘f3 d5 3.d3!? line from the previous chapter.

This is hardly the most dangerous choice, but the King's Indian Attack still has its supporters. The downside is that Black gets a good position with mostly easy and natural moves.

***

2.c4

This is a reasonable line: White plays a kind of Panov without really playing a Panov!

2...d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.cxd5 ♘f6

Probably the most challenging continuation is the simple:

5.♘c3

White can also try to keep the pawn by giving a check. Both 5.♕a4† and 5.♗b5† lead to interesting positions where some accuracy is required – but if Black knows what he is doing, he will be in great shape.

5...♘xd5 6.♘f3

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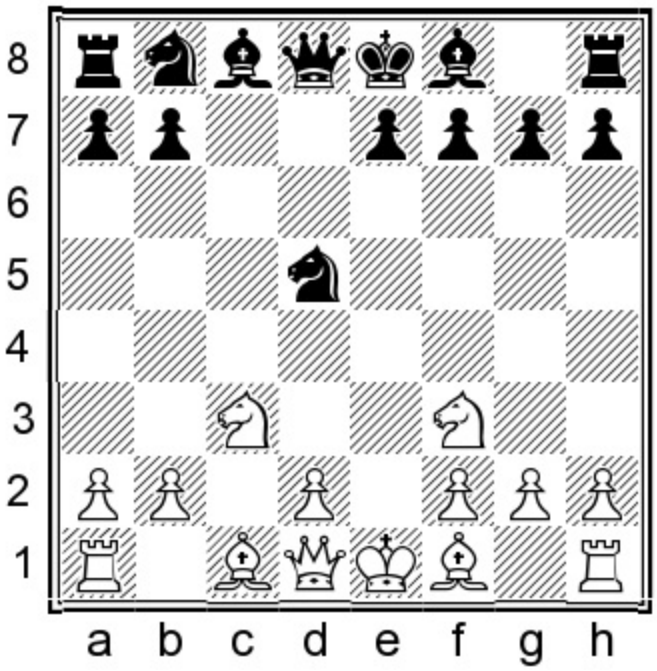

Black is okay, but he needs to keep in mind that White can switch to a normal Panov with d2-d4 at any moment.

***

Finally comes what is perhaps the most mythical Anti-Caro-Kann system:

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.f3!?

The Fantasy Variation. Despite its appealing name, I think that White is mainly playing for tricks, so I would like to suggest renaming it “The Lack of Imagination Variation”. It can be pretty sharp though, so it is necessary to take it seriously.

Speaking of early advances of the f-pawn, there is also 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.f3, which is the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit (BDG). As we will see, Black’s biggest problem is choosing between the different promising options available.

3...dxe4 4.fxe4

4.♘c3 is the BDG above.

4...e5!

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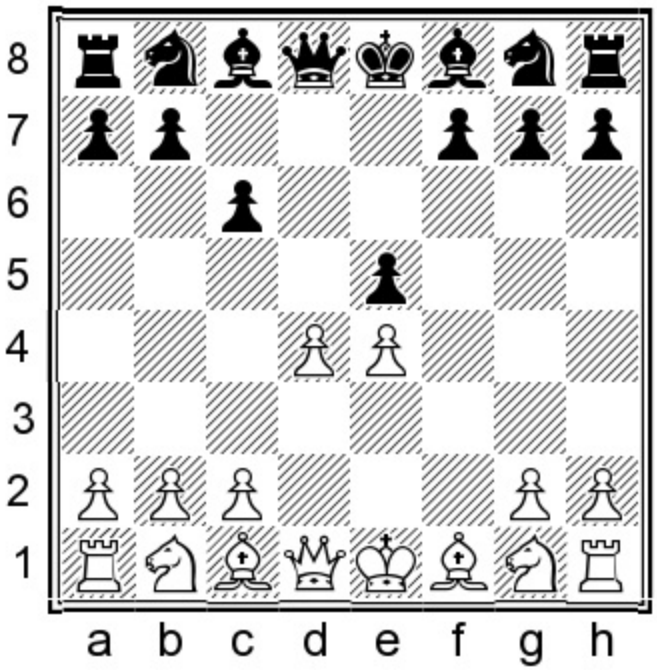

I believe that if Black is well-armed, he can fight for the initiative.

Theory

1.e4 c6

This chapter will deal with **A)** 2.d3 and **B)** 2.c4, followed by **C)** 2.d4 sidelines.

A) 2.d3

Fianchettoing the light-squared bishop is a common occurrence in many openings, but here White needs a little preparation, as 2.g3 d5 3.♗g2 dxe4 4.♗xe4 ♘f6 is clearly good for Black.

2...d5 3.♘d2 e5 4.♘gf3 ♗d6

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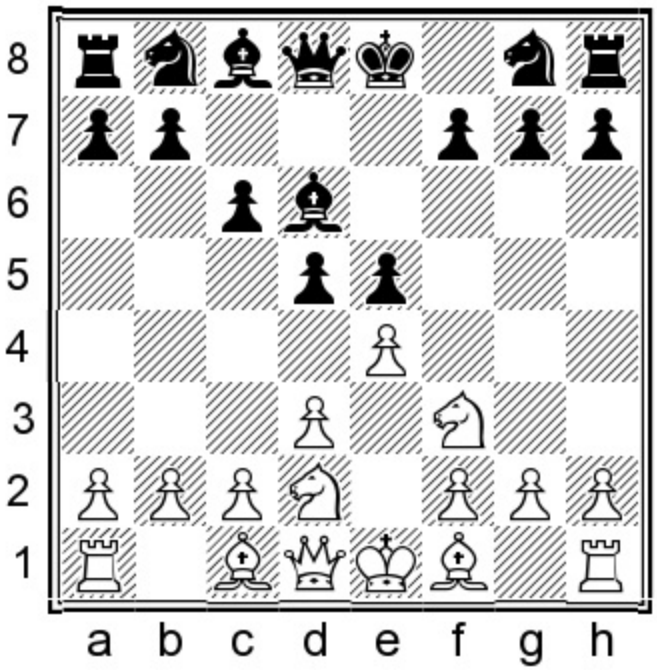

Black's pieces come out so naturally that it is hard to believe White is fighting for an advantage. Perhaps he is just trying to get a playable position. With that being said, White can try to take the game in a livelier direction with **A1)** 5.d4!?, although the most popular and traditional KIA approach is **A2)** 5.g3. Before we get to these two important lines, we will consider some alternatives.

5.♗e2 has been tried by some strong players, but a reversed Philidor is hardly something to lose sleep over. 5...♘e7!? (5...♘f6 allows 6.d4!? dxe4 7.dxe5 [7.♘xe5!?] 7...exf3 8.♘xf3 ♗c7 9.♕xd8† ♗xd8 10.exf6 ♗xf6= which is fine if a draw is okay.) 6.0-0 0-0 7.♖e1 ♘d7⇄

5.♕e2 ♘f6!

There is no need to play 5...♕e7?! when 6.d4! actually may be troublesome to face.

6.d4

Taking the pawn with 6.exd5 cxd5 7.♘xe5 cannot be recommended. 7...0-0 8.d4 ♖e8 9.♘df3 ♘e4!N (9...♘c6 10.♗e3 ♘xe5 11.dxe5 ♗xe5 has been played a few times, when Black has regained the material and has an active game.) 10.♗e3 ♗b4† White is forced to play 11.♔d1! when Black must have fantastic compensation for the pawn.

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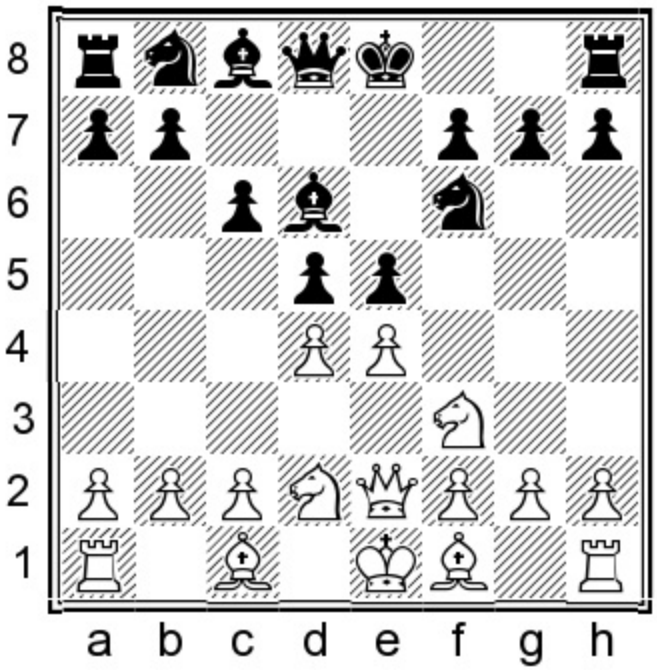

6...exd4

6...dxe4 7.♘xe5 ♗f5 is also playable.

7.exd5†

7.e5 is bad because of 7...0-0 and ...♖e8.

7...♗e7

The white queen is awkwardly placed and will soon have to move again before a rook comes to e8.

8.dxc6

8.♘xd4 0-0 9.♘2f3 ♖e8 10.♗e3 occurred in Berke – Franciskovic, Sveti Martin 2009, when 10...♘xd5N would have left Black with no problems, to say the least.

8...♘xc6 9.♕d1

Black has a good version of the 5.d4 line which we will cover shortly. I suggest:

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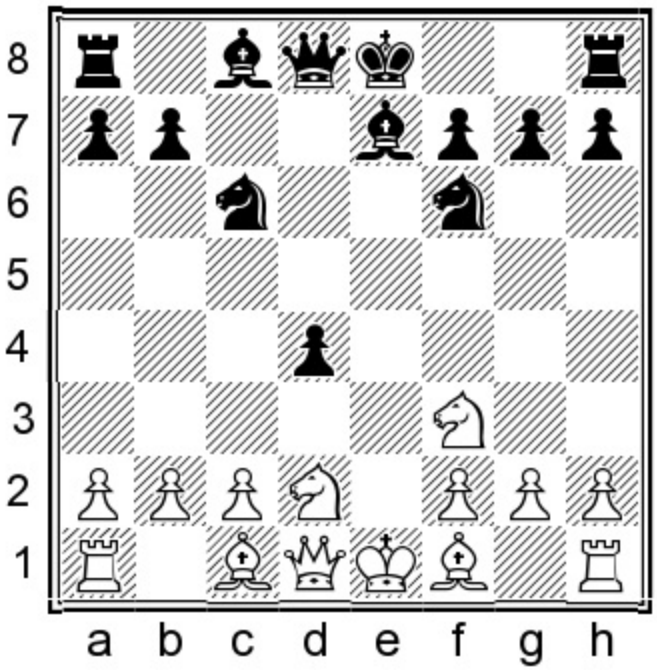

9...0-0!N

After 9...♗f5 10.♗d3 ♗xd3 a draw was agreed in Roeder – Claesen, Paks 1997. After something like 11.cxd3 0-0 12.0-0 ♖e8 13.♖e1 ♕d7= the position is balanced.

10.♗d3 ♖e8 11.0-0 ♕d5∓

With an active game for Black.

A1) 5.d4!?

GAME 17

Jakub Pulpan – David Navara

Prague (rapid) 2016

1.e4 c6 2.d3 d5 3.♘d2 e5 4.♘gf3 ♗d6 5.d4!? exd4 6.exd5

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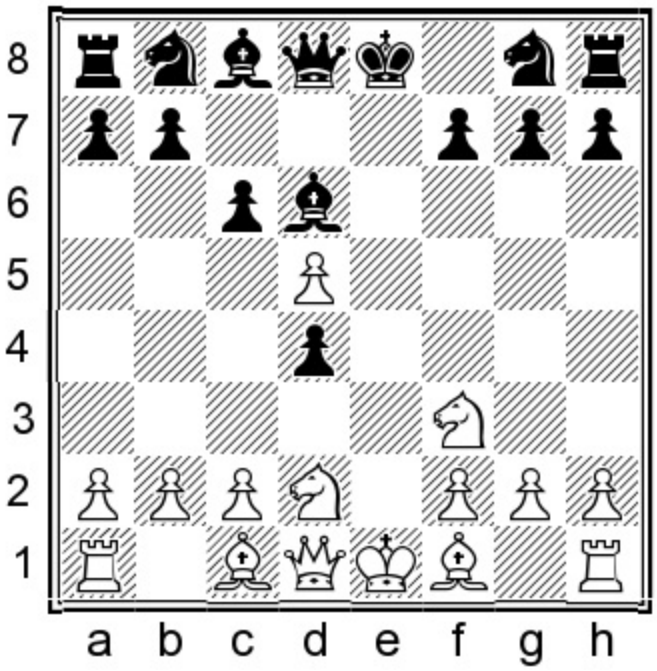

6...♘f6!

Black fights for the initiative.

6...cxd5 7.♘xd4 ♘c6 is also absolutely fine. It looks like something from a French Tarrasch, but this is a good version for Black.

7.dxc6

7.♕e2†?! ♗e7 makes the bishop on f1 look silly.

7.♘xd4 ♘xd5= is nothing for White.

7.♘c4 has been played in a blitz game by the World Champion, but it looks suspicious. 7...♗b4† 8.♗d2 ♗xd2† 9.♕xd2 cxd5 10.♘ce5 0-0 11.0-0-0 ♘c6 12.♘xc6 bxc6 13.♕xd4

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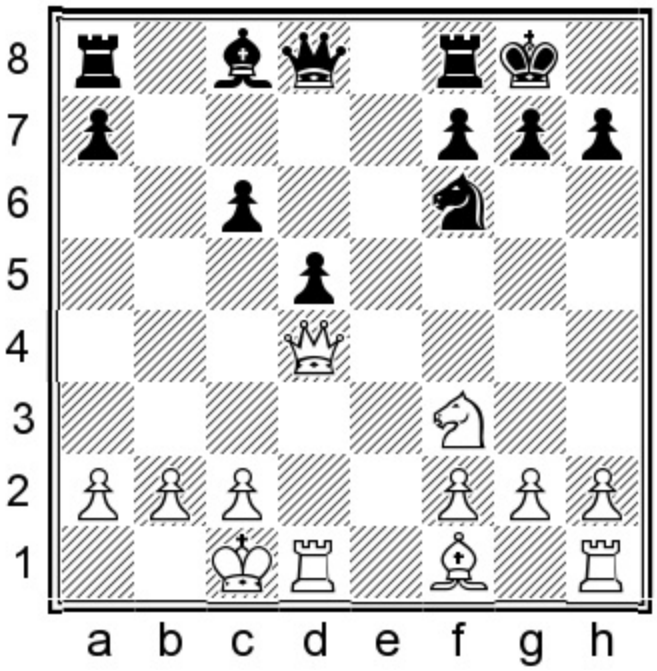
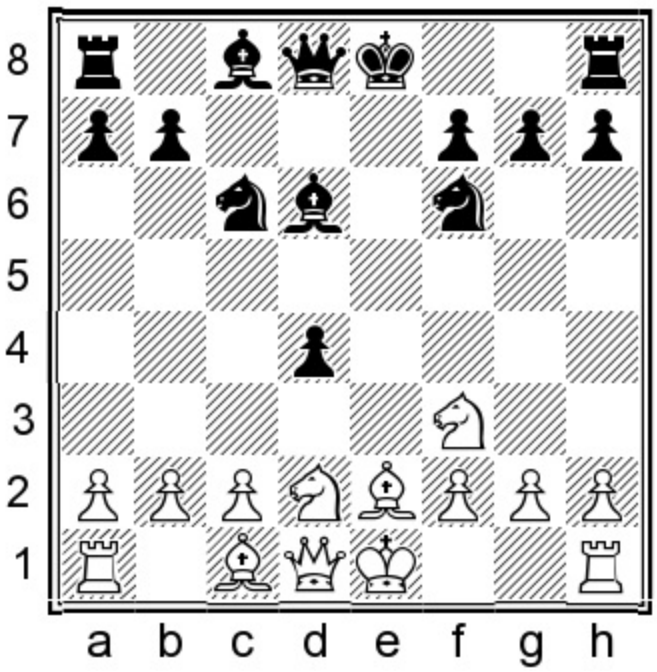


In Carlsen – So, Internet (blitz) 2017, Black could have continued with the simple 13...♕a5!N 14.♔b1 ♖b8 with a big attack.

7...♘xc6 8.♗e2

White concentrates on developing his kingside.

To go pawn-grabbing with 8.♘b3 0-0 9.♘bxd4 is risky with the king in the centre. Black gets good play with simple moves. (9.♗e2 transposes to the next note to the main line below.) 9...♖e8† 10.♗e2 ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 (11.♘xd4 ♘g4!) 11...♕c7 (11...♗f5 is suggested by L'Ami.) 12.♗e3 ♘g4⩲



8...0-0 9.0-0

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Usually White castles before jumping around with the knight.

The alternative is:

9.♘b3 ♖e8 10.0-0

10.♘bxd4 sends us back to the previous note on 8.♘b3.

10...♗g4

The safest continuation, protecting the d-pawn tactically.

10...♕c7 11.h3 ♗d7N is an attempt to sacrifice a pawn for the initiative: 12.♘bxd4 ♘xd4 13.♘xd4 ♕c5 14.c3 ♖ad8 However, this is rather speculative and probably not entirely correct.

A better way of doing it is 10...♗c7!? 11.♘bxd4 ♘xd4 12.♘xd4 ♕d6 13.♘f3 ♕c5⩱ as proposed by L'Ami. His analysis continues: 14.h3 ♕h5 15.♘d4 ♕e5 16.f4 ♕d6 17.c3 ♗d7 18.♗f3 ♘d5 19.♘c2 ♗e6⩱

11.h3

White should avoid: 11.♘fxd4?! ♗xe2 12.♘xe2 ♗xh2†! This little finesse wins the pawn back. 13.♔xh2 ♕xd1 14.♖xd1 ♖xe2 Black is better in the ending.

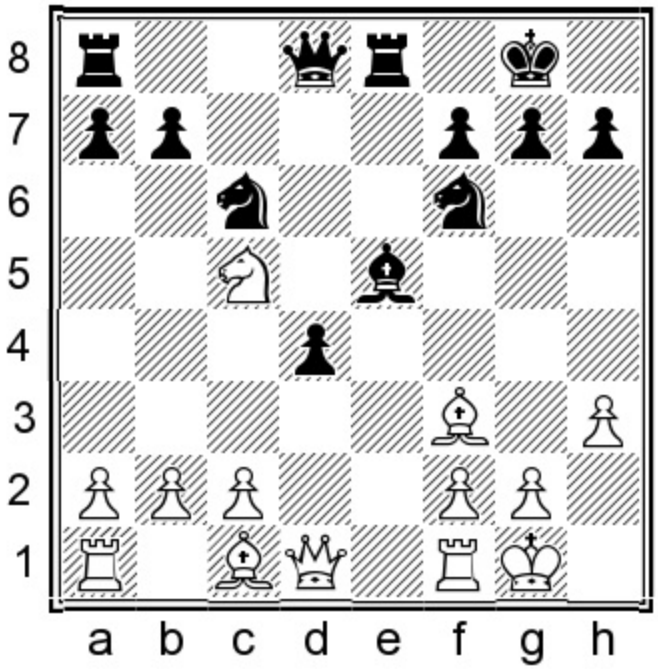
11...♗xf3

11...♗h5? is a mistake due to 12.♘fxd4 when Black cannot win back the pawn by taking on h2. A few strong players have succumbed to this trick, so please be mindful of it.

12.♗xf3 ♗e5

Safeguarding d4.

13.♘c5



This position was first reached in Hou Yifan – Kosteniuk, Monte Carlo 2012. I suggest:

13...♕c7!?N

Also reasonable is 13...♕b6N 14.♘d3 ♗d6.

14.♘d3 ♗h2† 15.♔h1 ♗d6⇄

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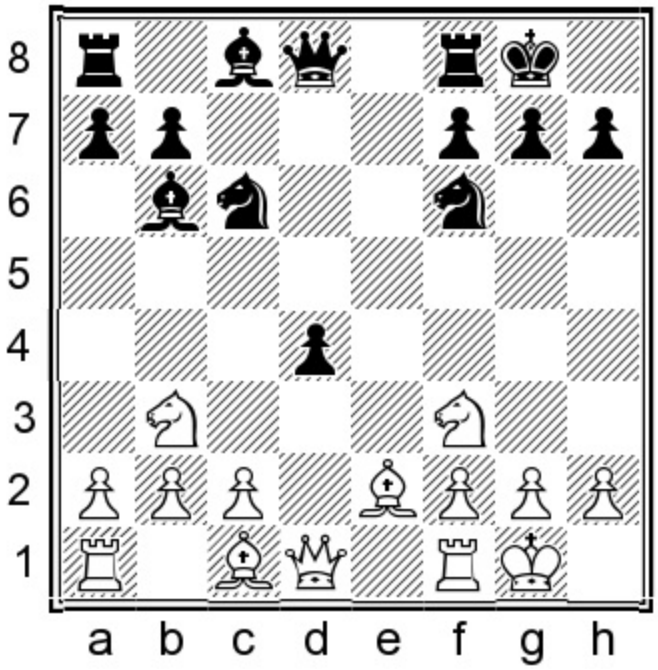
9...♗c7! 10.♘b3 ♗b6

Black has an active game and the pawn on d4 prevents White from developing fluidly.



11.♗g5 h6 12.♗h4 ♖e8

The immediate 12...g5!? 13.♗g3 ♘e4 has been played by Dreev and also looks fine.

13.♖e1 g5 14.♗g3 ♗g4

14...♗f5= is a good alternative.

15.h3 ♗h5

The position is pretty balanced but Black is more active, which means White should take care. In the present encounter he ran into a serious blow that opened the way for the bishop on b6:

16.♘fd2?

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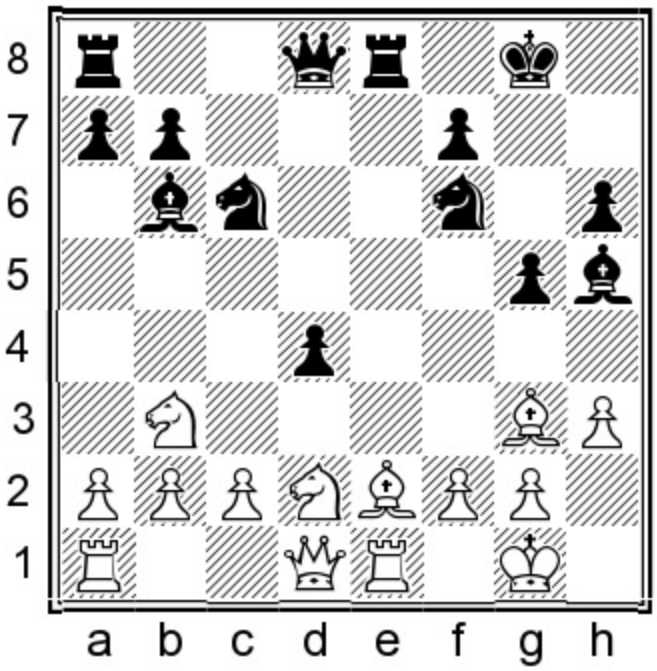
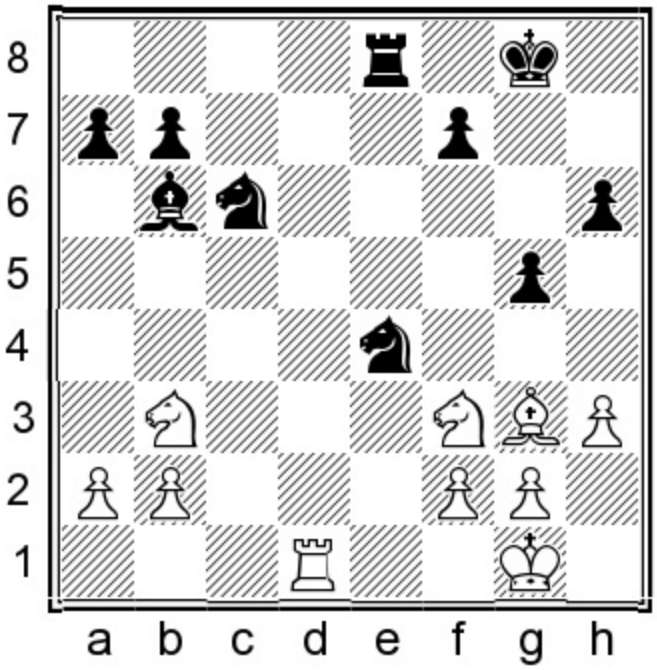


16...d3! 17.cxd3 ♗xe2 18.♖xe2 ♕xd3 19.♖xe8† ♖xe8 20.♘f3 ♕xd1† 21.♖xd1 ♘e4∓

Even if he defends perfectly, White is in big trouble. In the game, he quickly succumbed to one of the many tactical pitfalls:



22.♖e1 ♖e6 23.♔f1 ♘b4! 24.♘c1?! ♘c2 25.♖e2 ♘e3†!

0–1

A2) 5.g3

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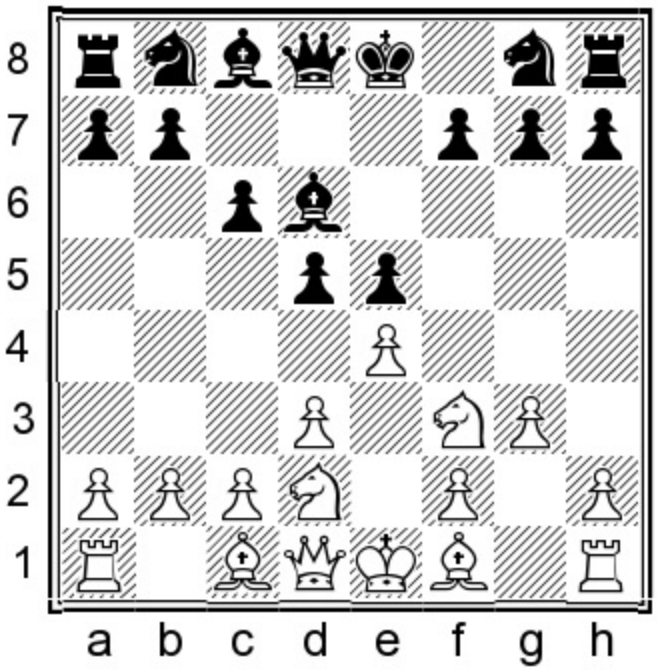

This is the standard move, although Black has easy play and gets a harmonious position almost without thinking.

5...♘f6 6.♗g2 0-0 7.0-0 ♖e8

It is hard to tell why some White players are attracted to this line. In my opinion Black is already slightly better. As they joke in the commentary room on Chess24: “I don’t know why it’s called the King’s Indian Attack. There is no attack!”

White can choose between various set-ups, but so can Black.

8.♖e1

Or 8.b3 a5! threatens ...a4. 9.a3 (9.a4 weakens the b4-square, which Black immediately exploits with 9...♘a6.) 9...♘a6 Black has many other fine options but I opted for the text move in a recent game, which continued:

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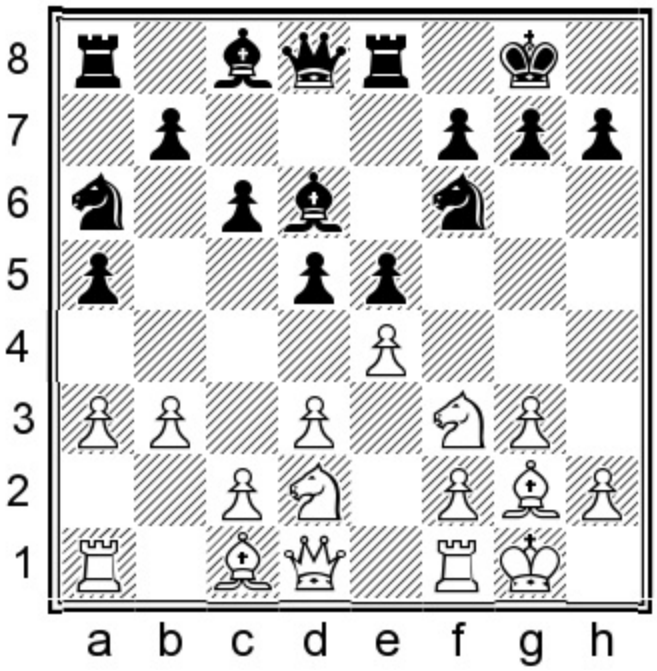
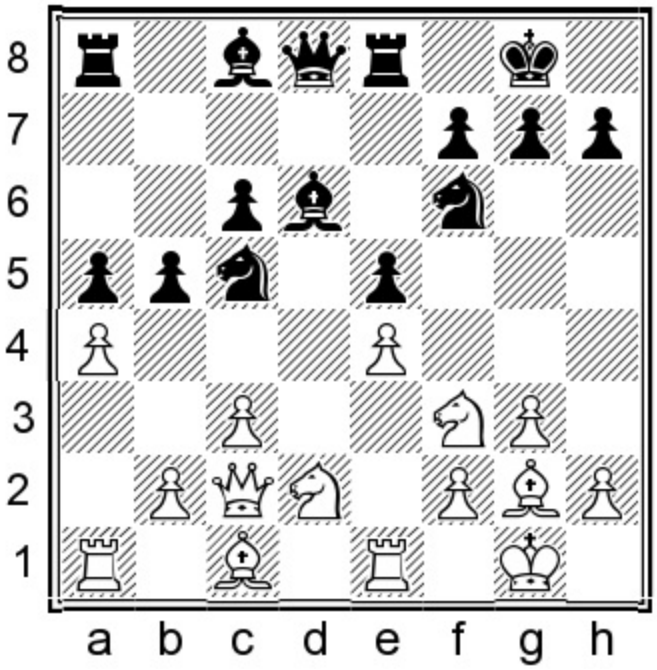


10.♗b2 dxe4 11.dxe4 b5 12.♖e1 ♘c5 13.h3 ♕c7 Black had a comfortable position in Ask – Schandorff, Gothenburg 2019.

8.c3 a5 9.a4 ♘bd7 10.♕c2 ♘c5 11.♖e1 dxe4 12.dxe4 is quite similar. Again Black should be comfortable in a slow manoeuvring game, but he can also try the active 12...b5!? when play can continue:



13.axb5 cxb5 14.b4 ♘a4 15.♘c4 axb4 16.♘xd6 ♕xd6 17.cxb4 ♕xb4 Black is a pawn up although White has decent compensation, Conterno – Schneider, email 2017.

8...♘bd7

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Even here, 8...a5 followed by ...♘a6 is a good option, but so is natural development.

9.c3

9.h3 ♕c7 also gives Black a harmonious position.

9...a5!?

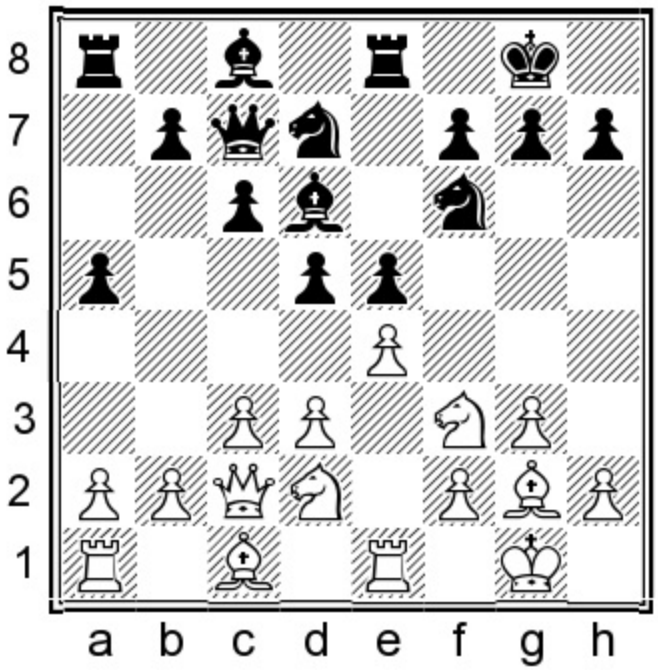
Taking space.

10.♕c2

The whole line is about flexibility. If White tries to open the position, it will typically lead to simplifications.

10.d4 exd4 11.♘xd4 dxe4 12.♘xe4 ♘xe4 13.♖xe4 ♖xe4 14.♗xe4 ♘f6 15.♗g2 ♗g4 is just equal.

10...♕c7



Both sides have got what they want. Let's see a few examples of what can happen next:

11.♘f1

11.a4 b6 Keeping the tension. (11...dxe4= is playable although in general it would seem best not to give up Black's extra central space without a good reason.) 12.h3 ♗a6⇄ Langner – Polak, Czech Republic 2001.

11...dxe4

The purpose of this move is to play ...♘c5 without having to worry about any d3-d4 ideas. The timing is good, as White's knight has just moved away from c4.

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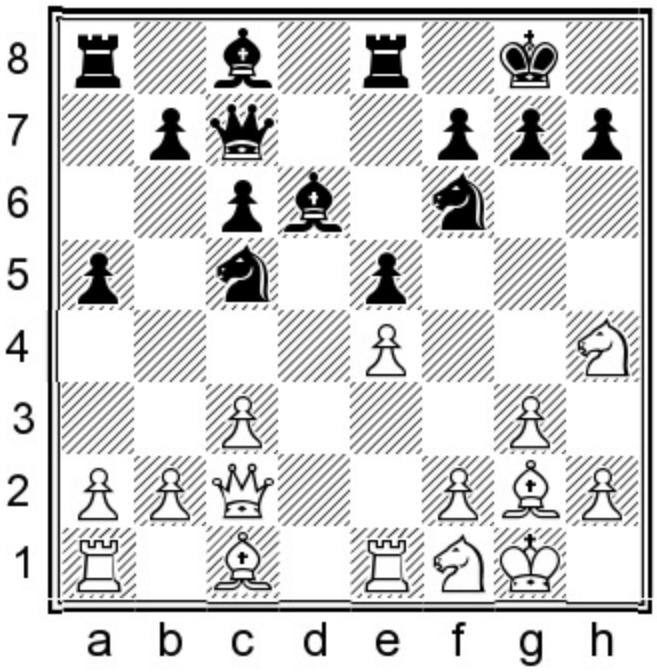
12.dxe4 ♘c5 13.♘h4



13...g6∓

I recommended this in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, and I still do. Black had the more pleasant game in A. Markos – Juhasz, Miskolc 2011.

B) 2.c4

This is a popular choice among those who want to avoid deep theoretical discussions and still get an active position. Fans of the IQP are especially attracted to this line, which is closely related to the Panov, and often transposes. In this section I will investigate the more original scenarios where White, at least for the time being, leaves his d2-pawn where it stands.

2...d5

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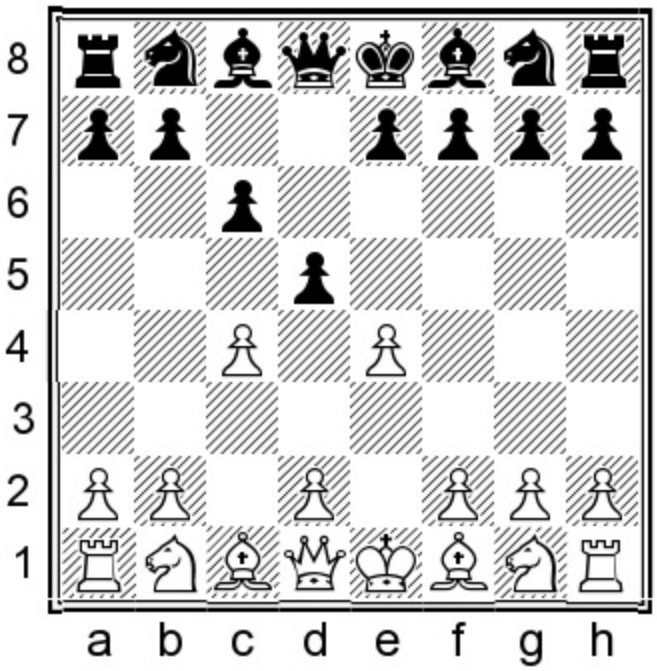

3.exd5

Other moves hardly make sense:

3.e5?! d4 4.f4 occurred in Ponkratov – Robson, Internet 2020. After 4...♘h6!?N I already prefer Black slightly: we have the f5-square and can attack the white centre with ...f6 when we feel like it.

3.♘c3?! d4 4.♘ce2 e5 5.d3 ♗b4† 6.♗d2 a5 is also pleasant for Black, who has a good version of a reversed Benoni. For instance, 7.a3 ♗xd2† 8.♕xd2 occurred in Gitter – Markus, Muehlhausen 2005, and now 8...♘d7N would have favoured Black, who intends ...♘c5.

Finally, after:

3.cxd5 cxd5

White can and should play 4.exd5 and transpose to the main line below. If he tries something else, he risks becoming worse right from the start, for instance:

4.♗b5†

4.♘c3?! d4 5.♘ce2 ♘c6 6.♘g3 h5!∓

4.d4?! dxe4 5.♘c3 ♘f6 6.♗c4 e6 7.♘ge2 ♘c6 8.0-0 ♗d6∓

4.e5?! ♕a5! 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.♘c3 ♗g4 7.d4 e6 8.♗e2 This occurred in Schope – Roynet, corr. 2017, when 8...♗xf3!N 9.♗xf3 ♕b4∓ would have won a pawn for insufficient compensation.

4...♗d7 5.♗xd7† ♕xd7 6.e5 e6

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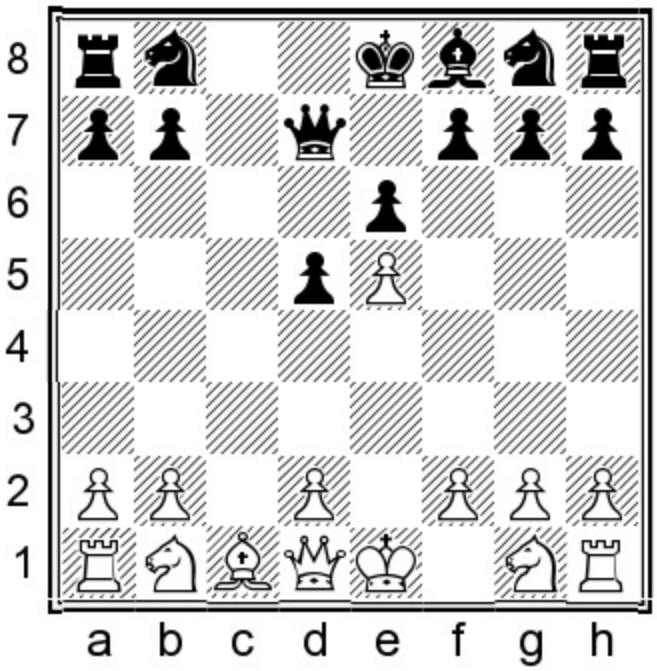

7.d4 ♘c6

Black has a luxury version of an Advance French with the light-squared bishops exchanged, so he is at least equal.

3...cxd5 4.cxd5

4.d4 is a Panov proper.

4.♘c3?! d4 5.♘ce2 e5∓ is great for Black.

4.♘f3

This gives Black a choice.

4...d4!?

The most ambitious.

The simple move is 4...♘f6 when White hardly has anything better than 5.d4 with a Panov or 5.cxd5 ♘xd5 6.♘c3 which converts to one of the main lines below.

5.b4!?

5.g3 ♘c6 leads to a reversed Modern Benoni.

5...♘f6 6.♗b2

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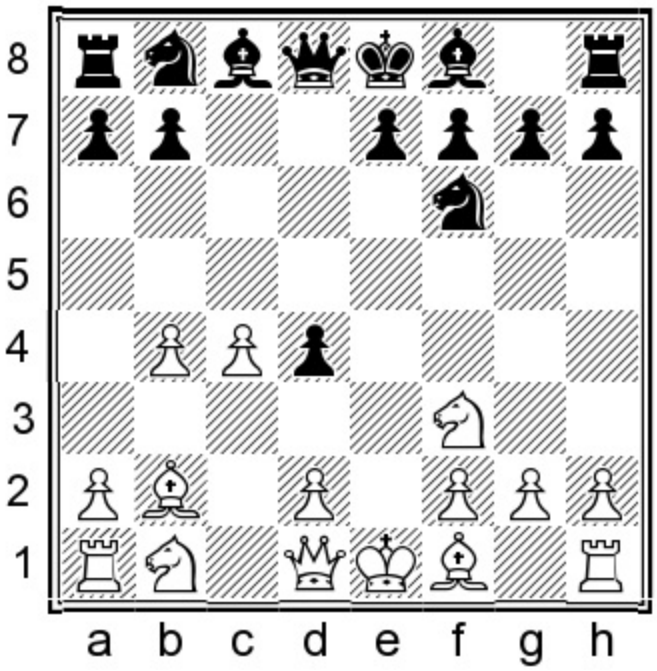


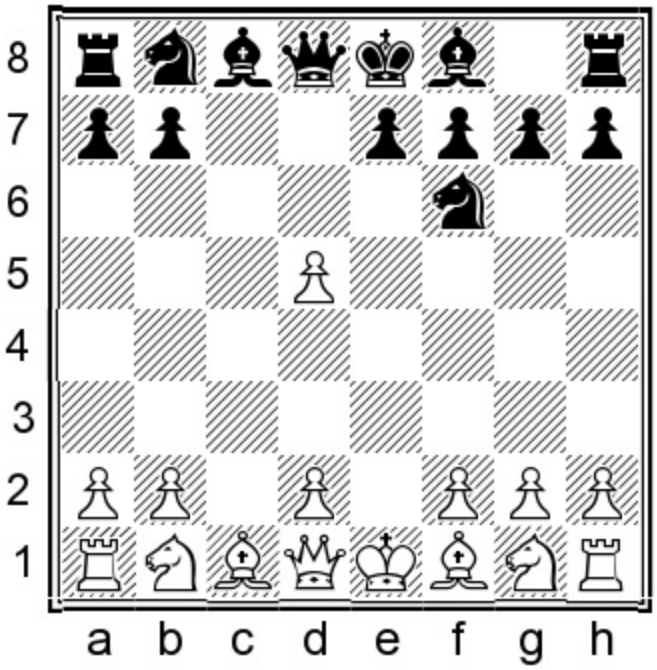
6...e5!

A recent computer game went:

7.♘xe5 ♗xb4 8.♕a4† ♘fd7 9.♗xd4 0-0 10.♕xb4 ♘xe5 11.♕c3 ♘bc6 12.♗e3 ♕h4 13.d4 ♘g4 14.g3 ♕f6 15.♗e2 ♘xe3 16.fxe3 ♗h3⩱

BookFish – LCZero, engine game 2020.

4...♘f6



This is the real tabiya of the 2.c4 variation. White can try to keep the d5-pawn by giving a check, either with **B1)** 5.♗b5† or with **B2)** 5.♕a4†, or he can just develop with **B3)** 5.♘c3 and let Black recapture on d5.

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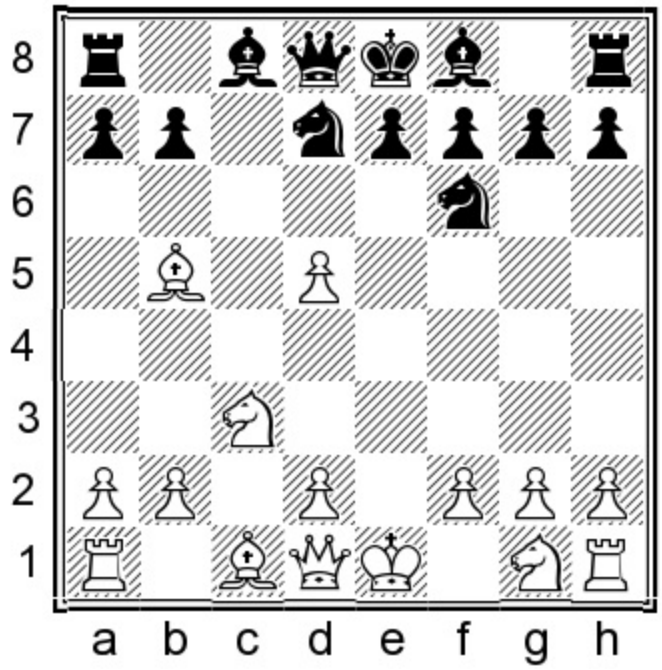
B1) 5.♗b5† ♘bd7

5...♗d7 would be a great move if White had to exchange bishops, but of course his idea is to protect the extra d-pawn with 6.♗c4, when the bishop on d7 is rather in the way.

6.♘c3



6...a6!

Immediately confronting the bishop.

In a perfect world Black would just go 6...g6 7.d4 ♗g7 followed by ...0-0, ...♘b6 and ...♘bxd5 with a superior position. The problem is that White can throw in 8.d6 to compromise Black's structure as well. The main line goes 8...exd6 9.♕e2† ♕e7 10.♗f4 and although I think Black is okay after the exchange of queens, he is only really playing for equality, whereas the text move offers more winning chances.

7.♕a4

The only critical move.

7.♗a4?! only helps Black: 7...b5 8.♗b3 ♗b7∓

7.♗e2 b5 8.d4 b4 9.♘a4 ♗b7= is also no problem for us.

7.♗xd7† ♕xd7 8.♕b3 (8.♘f3 ♘xd5)

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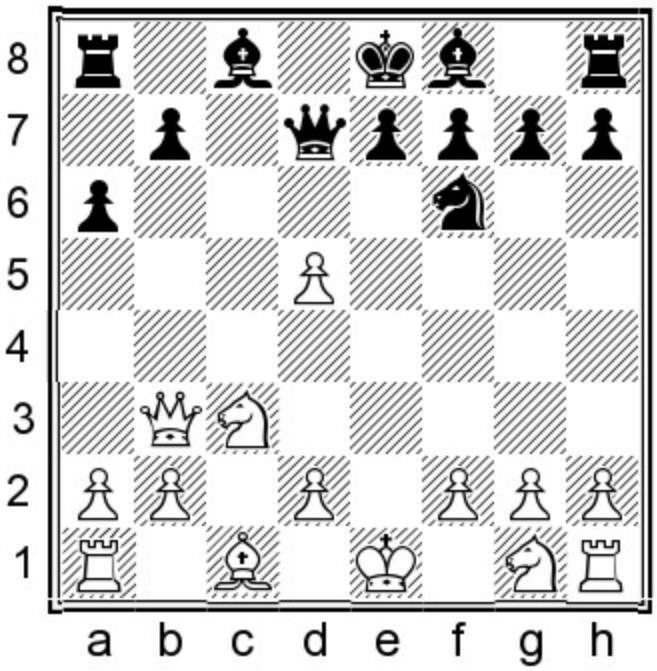

8...♕g4! is annoying for White. A game of mine continued: 9.g3 b5 10.♘ge2 ♕f3 11.♖f1 ♗b7 12.♘d4 ♕d3 13.♘c6 e6! 14.♘b4 ♗xb4 15.♕xb4 ♘xd5 16.♘xd5 ♗xd5 17.♕c3 ♕g6 And Black was strategically winning in L. Nielsen – Schandorff, Denmark (rapid) 2009.

7...♖b8

Forcing White to release the tension.

A decent alternative is: 7...g6 8.♘f3 ♗g7 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗xd7 ♗xd7 (10...♘xd7!? could also be considered) 11.♕b3 b5 12.d4 ♗c8 13.♗g5 ♗b7 14.♗xf6 ♗xf6 When Black has enough compensation for the pawn.

8.♗xd7† ♗xd7

I consider this the best winning attempt.

8...♕xd7 9.♕xd7† ♗xd7 leads to a balanced position after 10.d4 ♗f5!? 11.♗g5 ♘e4 12.♗f4 ♖d8 13.♘ge2 ♘f6⇄ when Black will win the pawn back, but he is behind in development and White gets the c-file.

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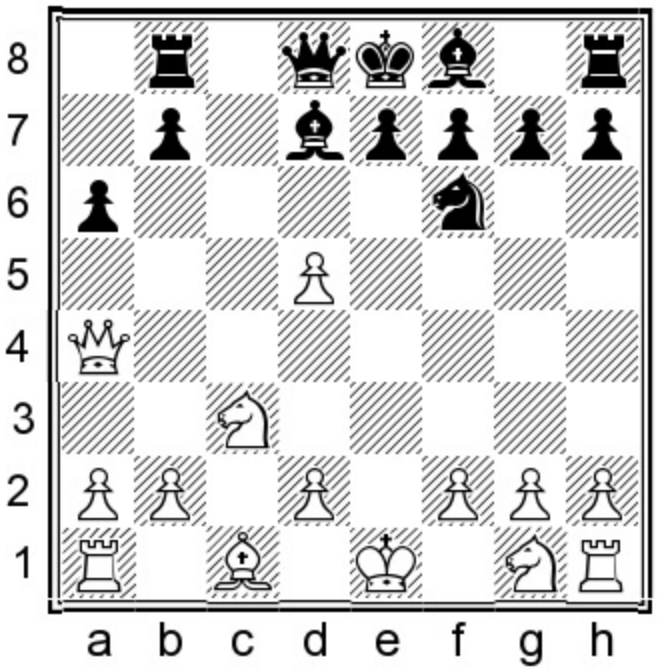

9.♕f4

9.♕b3 e6!? is a fresh idea which the engines endorse. (The more popular 9...b5 is also okay.) 10.♘f3 (10.dxe6 ♗xe6⩲ gives Black fantastic play for the pawn.) 10...♗d6 11.0-0 0-0 12.d4 ♘xd5 13.♘xd5 exd5 Black has a comfortable position because the pawn is poisoned: 14.♕xd5? ♗b5! White must give up the exchange, as moving the rook would blunder the queen to ...♗xh2†.

9...g6 10.♘f3 ♗g7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖e1 ♗f5 13.d4

Black is in good shape and can choose between two continuations of roughly equal value. The rooks are likely to be best placed on c8 and e8, but in which order? I don't think it matters a great deal.

13...♖e8

13...♖c8N seems fine, when a sample line from the engine continues: 14.h3 h6 15.♗d2 ♖e8 16.♖e5 b5 17.a3 ♗c2 18.♖c1 ♗b3 Black regains the pawn with a good position.

14.♕h4

14.♘h4?! ♘xd5 15.♘xd5 ♕xd5 16.♘xf5 ♕xf5 17.♕xf5 gxf5 gives Black a big advantage in the ending.

This position was reached in Van der Burght – Hoogendoorn, Soest 1996. I suggest:

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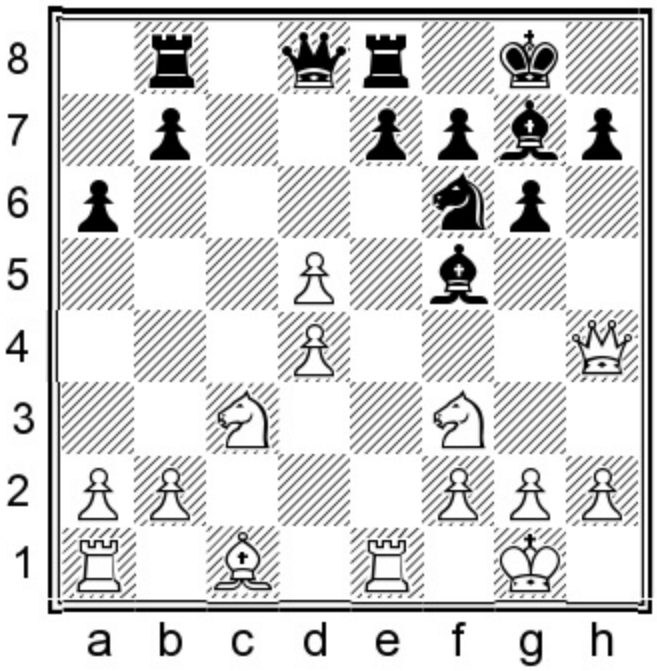


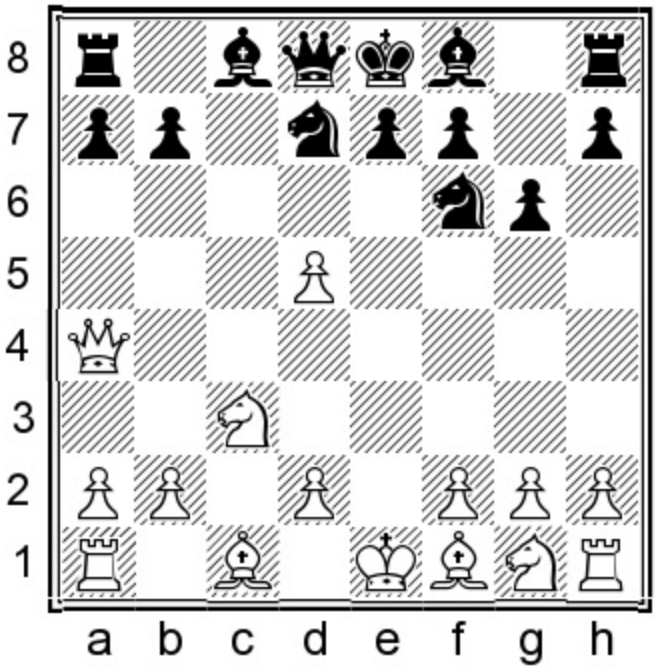
14...♖c8N 15.♗h6 ♘xd5 16.♗xg7 ♔xg7∓

Material is equal and White doesn't have any real initiative to compensate for the isolated pawn. It doesn't require too much imagination to envisage a future scenario with a mighty bishop on d5 against a humble knight on f3.

B2) 5.♕a4†

Another check to disturb Black.

5...♘bd7 6.♘c3 g6



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7.♘f3

7.♕b3 ♗g7 8.♘f3 and 7.♗c4 ♗g7 8.♘f3 transpose to lines considered below; the knight hardly has a better square than f3 in these positions. There exist a few independent alternatives though:

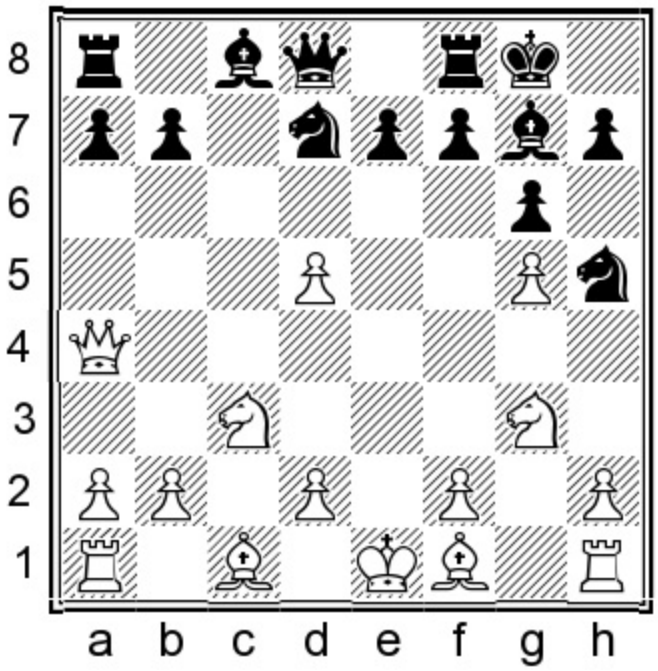
7.g4!?

We live in a time when such wild pawn moves have become normalized. Having said that, this one has been tested in some older games. It looks tempting to gain space and drive the knight away from f6, but this does not justify the weakening of White's position.

7...♗g7

7...h6 is a more controlled way of proceeding, and after 8.♗g2 ♗g7 9.h4 ♔f8 10.g5 hxg5 11.hxg5 ♖xh1 12.♗xh1 ♘h5 Black had the preferable position in Steiner – Canal, Budapest 1933.

8.g5 ♘h5 9.♘ge2 0-0 10.♘g3



10...e6! 11.♘xh5 gxh5

White's position is overextended and Black seizes the initiative, Korchnoi – Salov, Amsterdam 1991.

7.g3 ♗g7 8.♗g2

This is more solid than the line above, and quite a logical way to protect the d5-pawn.

8...0-0 9.♘ge2

Here I can present a remarkable novelty:

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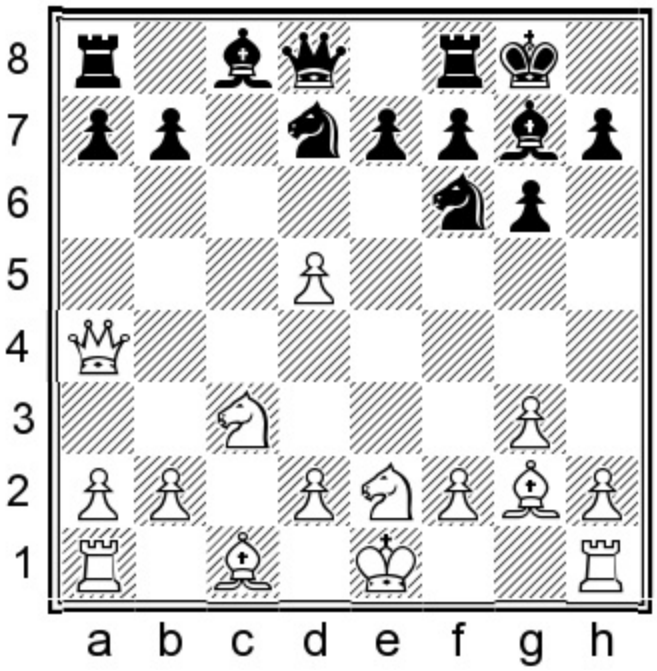

9...b5!N

An excellent pawn sacrifice for active development.

9...♘b6 and even 9...e6!? have also worked fine for Black.

10.♘xb5

10.♕xb5 is risky in view of 10...♖b8 11.♕a4 ♘c5 12.♕d4 ♕a5↑ with ...♖b4 coming.

10.♕b3 can be met in a few different ways. 10...a5 This seems simplest. (10...♘c5!? 11.♕xb5 ♘fd7⩱ can certainly be considered though.) 11.0-0 b4 12.♘a4 ♗b7 13.d4 ♘b6 14.♘xb6 ♕xb6

Black will most likely win the pawn back, with a good game.

10...♘b6 11.♕a5 ♗b7 12.0-0

Black has good positional compensation after:

12...♗xd5⩱

Or even 12...♕d7!?⩱ as the pawn is running nowhere.

7...♗g7 8.♗c4

This is the standard set-up.

White can try to refine it by first improving his queen.

8.♕b3 0-0 9.♗c4

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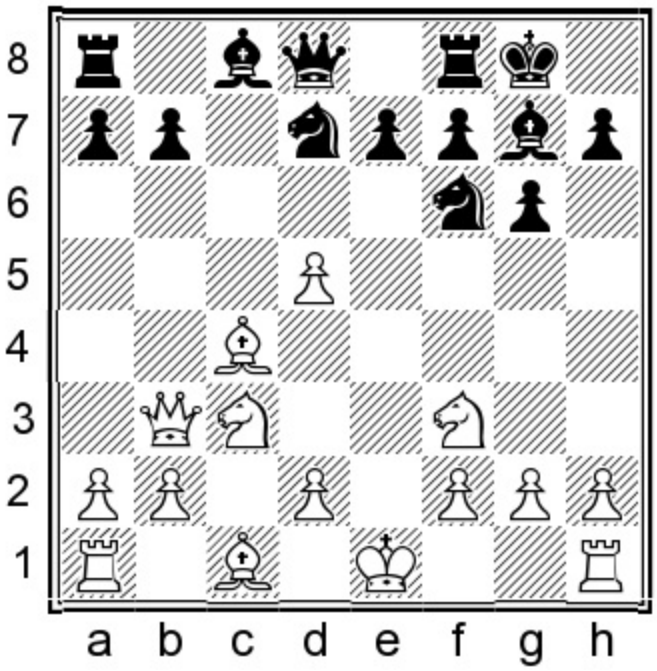

9...b5!

A modern solution proposed by the engines. Black gives up a pawn to free himself and get good piece play, rather like in the 7.g3 line above.

9...a6 10.a4 transposes to my recommendation from *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, which leads to interesting play. A subsequent game continued: 10...♕a5 11.♖a3 ♘b6 12.0-0 ♘xc4 13.♕xc4 ♗f5 14.d4 (14.♘d4 ♖ac8 15.♕e2 ♗d7!?N is pleasant for Black, as 16.♕xe7?! ♕b6 looks too risky for White.) 14...♖fd8 15.♖b3 ♖ac8 16.♕b4 ♕xb4 17.♖xb4 b5 18.axb5 axb5 19.♗g5 This was Jeanne – Roeder, Aix-les-Bains 2011, and now 19...h6!N 20.♗xf6 exf6! would have given Black good play in a complicated ending.

10.♘xb5N

10.♗e2 a6 11.0-0 ♘b6 12.a4 bxa4 13.♘xa4 ♘xa4 14.♖xa4 ♘xd5∓ and Black had won the opening battle in Sirotti – Kurylo, corr. 2017.

10.♗xb5 ♖b8⩱ gave Black plenty of play for the material in Boidman – Bertrem, Belgium 2006.

10...♖b8 11.♕d1 ♕a5

11...♘xd5!? is also possible.

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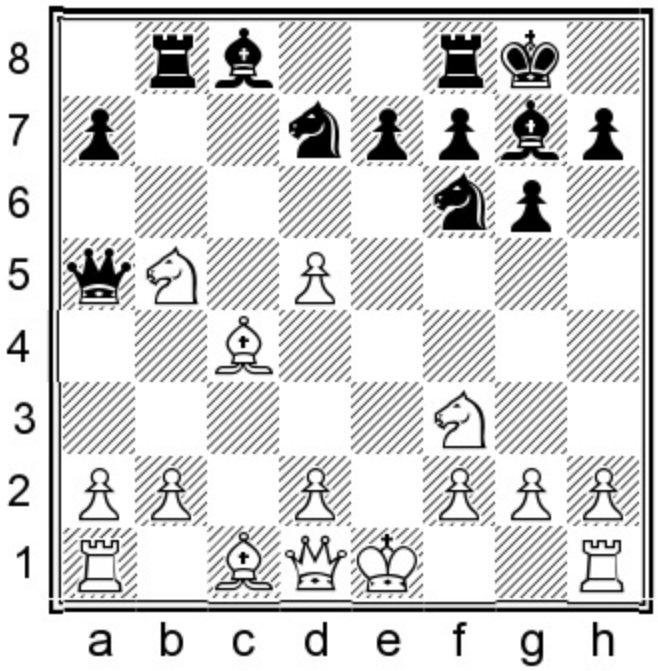


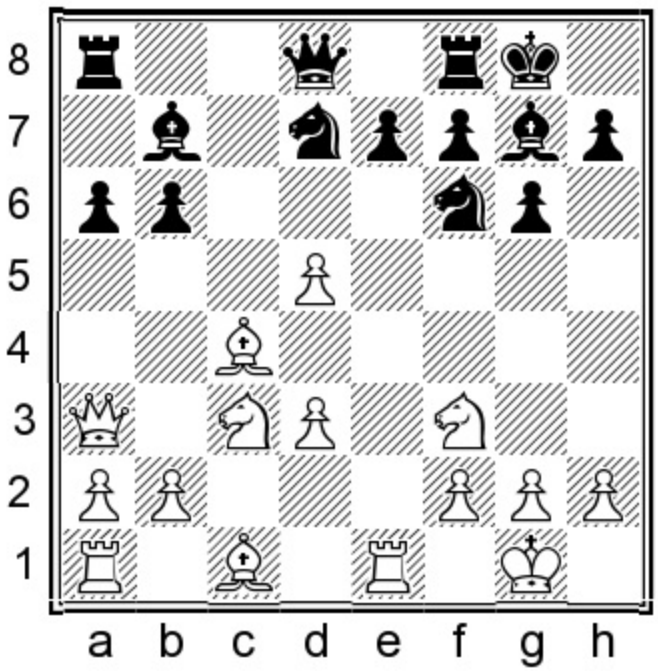
12.♘bd4 ♕c5 13.d3 ♘xd5 14.♘b3 ♕b4† 15.♗d2 ♕d6

Black has excellent compensation for the pawn.

8...0-0 9.d3 a6 10.♕a3

White has to spend a tempo with the queen as ...b5 was threatened, and if ♗xb5 then ...♘b6 wins.

10...b6 11.0-0 ♗b7 12.♖e1



12...♖e8

A key position has been reached. Black is ready to play ...b5 followed by ...♘b6 and capturing on d5, with an excellent position. White has to come up with something concrete if he is to avoid being

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worse.

13.♗e3

13.♘g5

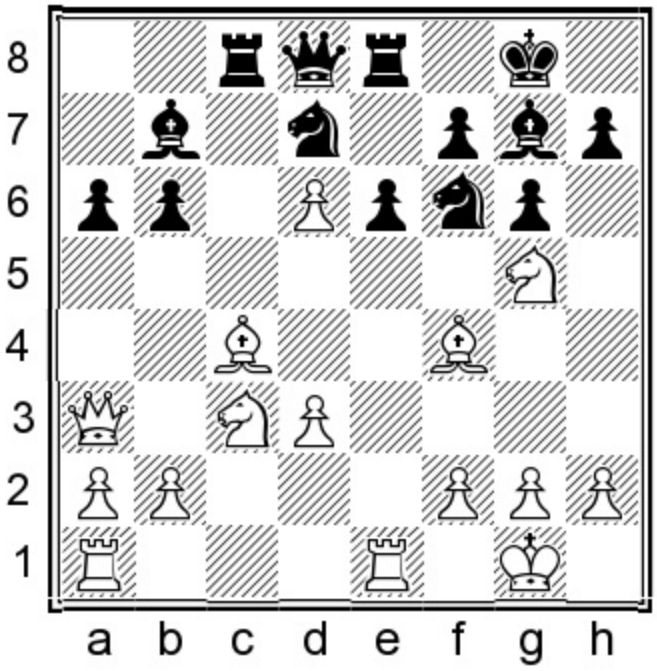
This aggressive try can be answered coolly with:

13...♖c8! 14.d6

14.♗e3 ♘e5∓

14...e6 15.♗f4

15.♘ge4 ♘xe4 16.♘xe4 ♗xe4 17.♖xe4 b5 18.♗b3 ♘c5∓ left Black in control in Kulkarni – Postny, Internet 2020.



15...h6!

Forcing White to sacrifice the knight, and it simply isn't good enough.

16.♘xe6

White can't back down: 16.♘ge4 ♘xe4 17.♘xe4 ♗xe4 18.♖xe4 b5 19.♗b3 ♘c5 and Black is winning, since 20.♖e3? a5! embarrasses the queen, as L'Ami points out.

16...fxe6 17.♖xe6 ♔h8 18.♖ae1 ♘c5 19.♖e7 ♖xe7 20.dxe7 ♕d7∓

Black has excellent chances of converting his extra piece.

13...b5 14.♗b3 ♘b6 15.♗xb6

Such an exchange is hardly optimal, but White had to do something.

15.d6 allows Black to inflict serious damage on White's kingside structure: 15...♗xf3 16.gxf3 (16.dxe7 ♖xe7 17.gxf3 ♘bd7 gave Black excellent play for the pawn in McLaughlin – Girling, corr. 2014.) 16...exd6 17.♗f4 d5 (17...♗f8!? also deserves attention) 18.♖xe8† ♕xe8 19.♕c5 ♕e6 This was good for Black in Panarin – Riazantsev, Sochi 2012.

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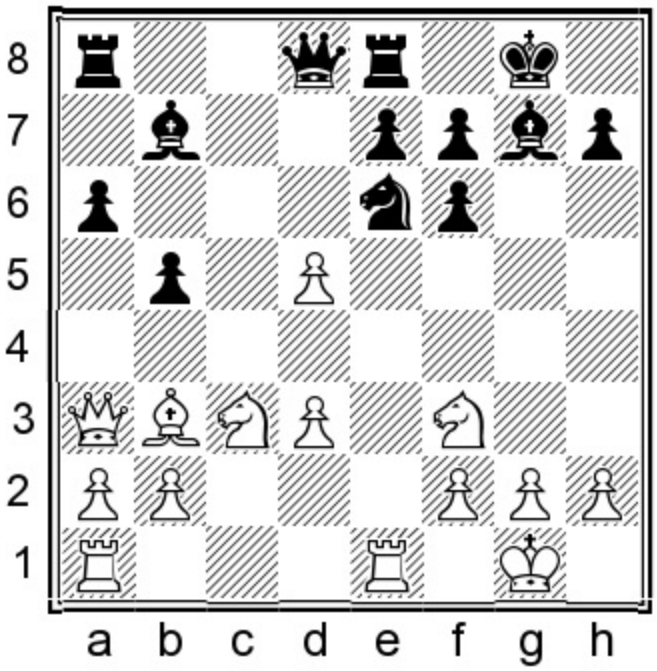

15...♕xb6 16.♕b4 ♕d8

Black has the luxury of being able to choose between a few promising options.

16...♗f8 is a recent try. 17.a4 (17.♕f4!?N should also be investigated.) 17...e6! 18.♕h4 exd5 19.axb5 axb5 20.♖xa8 ♖xe1† 21.♘xe1 ♗xa8∓ It turned out well for Black in Blomqvist – Tari, Internet 2020.

Even 16...♕d6!?N could be considered, as after 17.♕xd6 exd6 18.a3 ♔f8⩱ White's extra pawn isn't worth much and Black has excellent positional compensation, despite the queen exchange and the lack of frontal pressure on the d5-pawn.

17.a4

On 17.♖e5 Black can regroup with 17...♘d7 18.♖e2 ♘b6, with good play.

17...♘xd5 18.♗xd5

Taking the other way with 18.♘xd5 ♗xd5 19.axb5 axb5 does not change the fact that Black stands better.

The clever 18.♕e4! would have just about clung on to equality.

18...♗xd5 19.axb5 axb5 20.♕xb5 ♗xf3 21.gxf3 ♖b8∓

We have been following Bortnyk – Grischuk, Internet (blitz) 2016. White's material advantage will evaporate and he will be left with a ruined kingside.

B3) 5.♘c3

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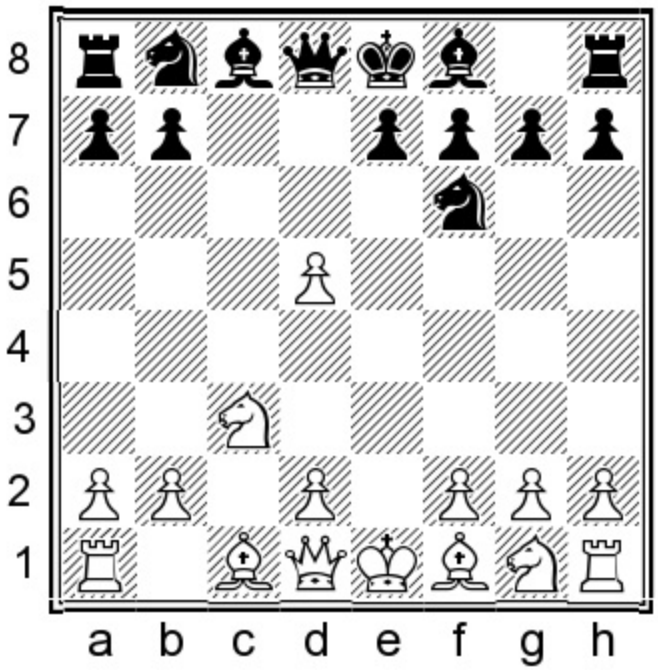

I consider this the most challenging of the three main moves, chiefly due to move-order issues. White can play d2-d4 at any moment, so if we are not careful, we could find ourselves in a line of the Panov that falls outside our repertoire.

5...♘xd5 6.♘f3

Only this flexible move requires serious attention.

6.♕b3 ♘b6 7.♘f3 ♗e6 8.♗b5† ♘c6 9.♕c2 occurred in Garcia Jimenez – Narciso Dublan, Barcelona 2016, when 9...♖c8N would have been simplest, followed by ...g6 with a harmonious position.

6.♗b5† ♗d7 7.♕b3 ♘b6 8.♘f3 ♗xb5 9.♕xb5† ♕d7 10.a4 happened in Cernousek – A. Ledger, Sunningdale 2007, when 10...e6N would have been fine for Black.

6.♗c4 ♘b6 7.♗b3 ♘c6 8.♘f3 ♘a5!? (The more popular 8...♗f5 is also fine.) 9.♗c2 g6 10.0-0 ♗g7⇄ Black has a pleasant game.

6...♘c6!

This move fits best with the rest of our repertoire.

6...♘xc3 is given in some older books, but I believe the very rarely played 7.dxc3! ♕xd1† 8.♔xd1 to be slightly favourable to White.

Please also note that the otherwise fine move 6...e6 can be met by 7.d4 when we are outside our Panov repertoire.

7.♗b5

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Pinning the knight is the only tricky move.

7.♗c4 ♘b6 8.♗b3 converts to the 6.♗c4 line above.

7.♕b3 ♘b6 8.♗b5 ♗e6 is the 6.♕b3 line above.

7.d4

This seems slightly inaccurate due to:

7...♗e6!

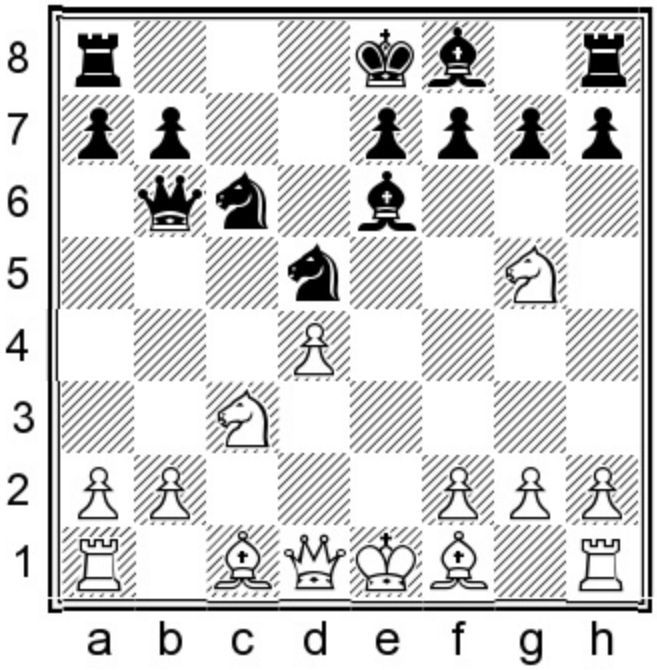
Trying to take advantage of White's move order.

Of course 7...♗g4 would be the Panov main line.

8.♘g5

Otherwise Black will simply play ...♖c8 and ...g6 with a good game.

8...♕b6!?



9.♘xe6 fxe6

Black is ahead in development and the d-pawn will soon fall.

10.♗e2

10.♗c4 ♕xd4 11.♕b3 0-0-0⇄ was also pretty good for Black in Sedina – Girya, Mamaia 2016.

10...g6 11.0-0 ♗g7 12.♗e3 ♘xd4 13.♗xd4 ♕xd4

This occurred in Stets – Prohaszka, Aghios Kirykos 2019. White has some compensation, but if anyone is better it is Black.

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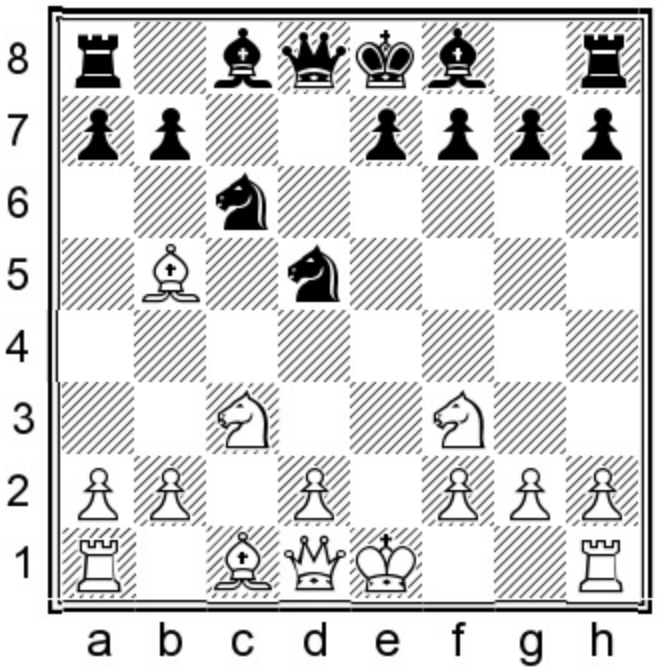

7...g6!

The more popular 7...e6 was my previous recommendation, but the text move is more ambitious. Black strives for a kind of Grünfeld.

8.♕a4

8.♘e5 is no problem after 8...♕d6 9.d4 ♗g7 10.0-0 0-0 and Black is fine.

8.0-0 ♗g7 9.♕a4 0-0! is a nice little detail, based on the fact that 10.♗xc6 bxc6 11.♕xc6 ♗e6⩲ gives Black at least enough play for the pawn.

8.♕b3 ♗e6 9.♕a4!?N

This is an engine suggestion, sacrificing a tempo in the hope of exploiting the exposed bishop on e6, but it is hard to believe it can really be good.

9.♘g5 ♕d7 10.♘xe6 ♕xe6† 11.♔f1 0-0-0 was promising for Black in Lagarde – Van Foreest, Chartres 2017.

9...♕c8! 10.♘e5 a6 11.♗xc6† bxc6 12.0-0

12.♕xc6†? ♕xc6 13.♘xc6 backfires after 13...♘xc3 14.dxc3 ♗d5 and ...♗xg2.

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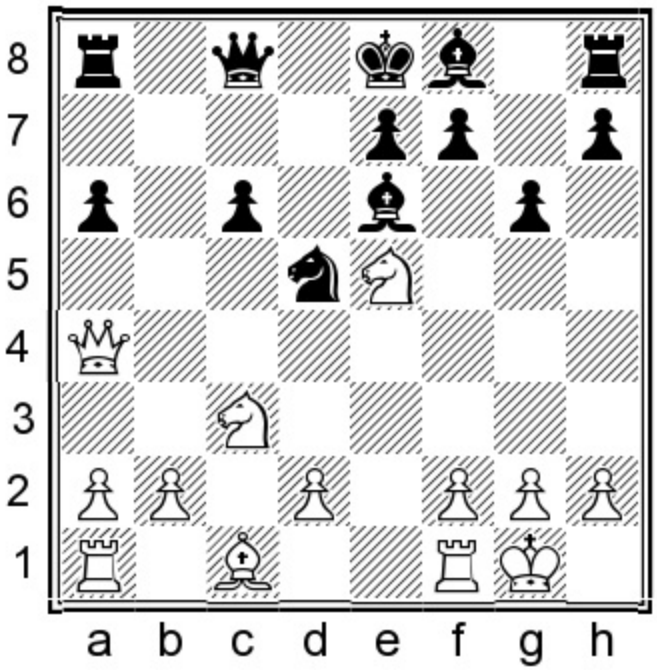

12...♗g7

It is still risky to take on c6:

13.♕xc6†

13.♖e1 0-0∓

13...♕xc6 14.♘xc6 ♖c8 15.♘xd5

15.♘a5 ♘b4↑

15...♗xd5 16.♘b4 ♗b7

Black has fantastic play for the pawn.

8...♘b6!?

Sacrificing a pawn for the initiative.

The safe 8...♕d6 is also possible.

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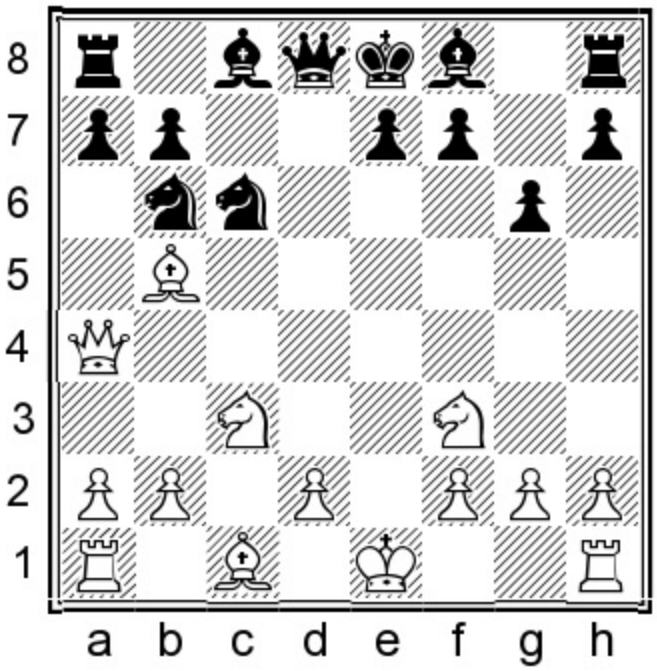


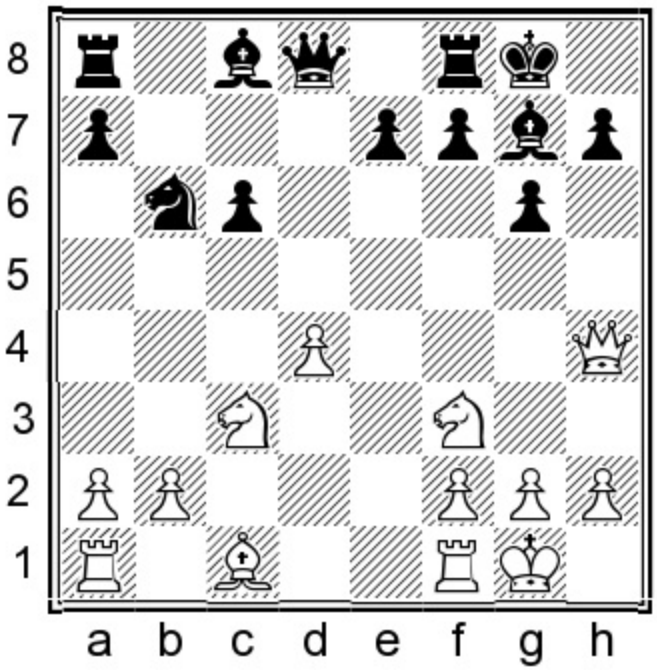
9.♗xc6†

White could also play more positionally with:

9.♕h4 ♗g7 10.d4 0-0 11.♗xc6

11.♗h6?! occurred in Eybl – Gatterer, Austria 2016, when Black could have tried: 11...♘xd4!N 12.♘xd4 (12.♗xg7 ♘xf3† 13.gxf3 ♔xg7∓) 12...♗xh6! 13.♖d1 ♗g7 (13...e5 14.♕xh6 exd4 15.0-0 ♗f5=) 14.♘e6 ♗xc3† (14...♗xe6 15.♖xd8 ♖fxd8 is also playable, but it's tempting to keep White's king in the centre.) 15.bxc3 ♕xd1† 16.♔xd1 ♗xe6 Black has approximate material parity for the queen, plus some positional advantages.

11...bxc6 12.0-0



This position has been tested by a number of strong players, including multiple times in online

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blitz matches involving Kosteniuk on White's side versus Gunina and Girya. Despite the fast time limit, the players were obviously well prepared.

12...f6!

Taking control over some important squares and at the same time toying with the idea of ...g5.

13.♕e4 ♘d5

Another game continued: 13...♕d7 14.♖e1 ♖e8 15.b3?! There was no real need for this move. (White should prefer something like 15.h3 or perhaps 15.♕c2 followed by ♘e4.) The text move was played in Kosteniuk – Gunina, Monaco 2019. Black could have obtained excellent play with: 15...♘d5!N 16.♗b2 ♕f5!⇄

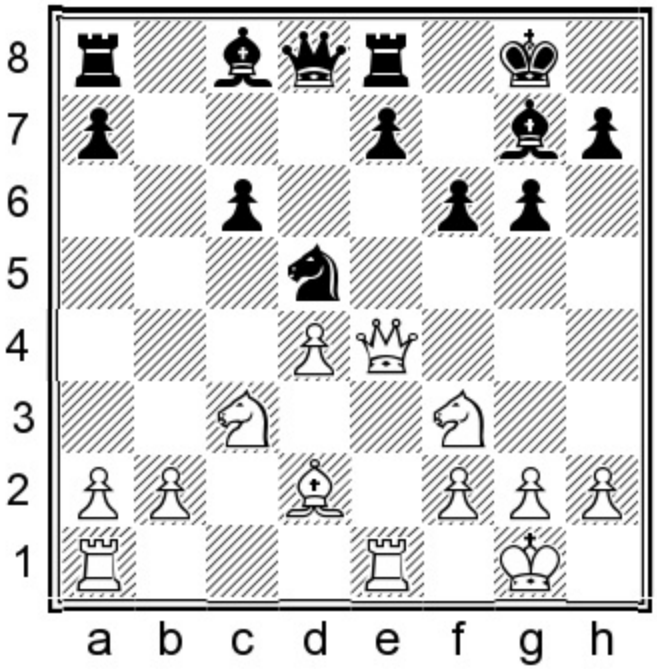
14.♖e1

14.h3 ♗f5 15.♕e2 g5!?⇄ was decent for Black in Kosteniuk – Girya, Internet (blitz) 2020.

14...♖e8

14...♗f5 is also possible.

15.♗d2



Here the most accurate is:

15...♖b8!N

The thematic 15...♗f5 16.♕e2 g5!?⇄ was also perfectly acceptable in Kosteniuk – Girya, Internet (blitz) 2020.

16.b3 ♘b4↑

Followed by ...♗f5.

9...bxc6 10.♕xc6† ♗d7 11.♕e4 ♗g7

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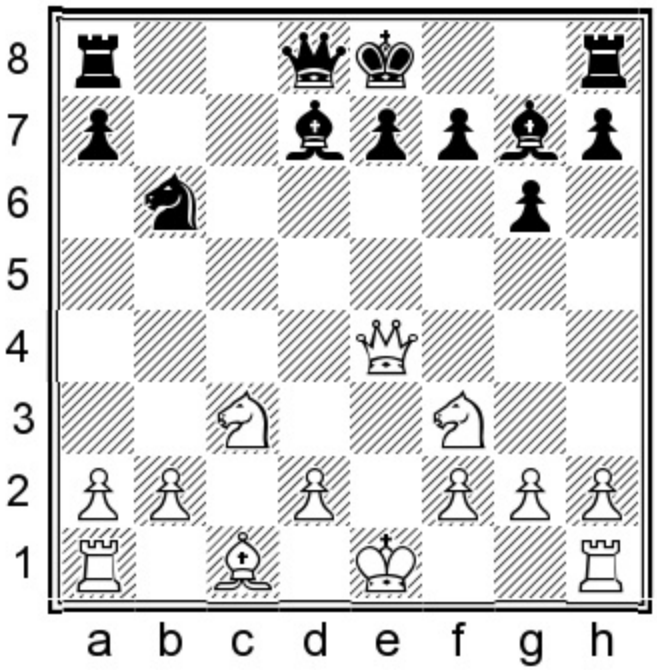

12.d4

12.0-0 ♖c8 13.♖e1 (13.d4 is safer, transposing to the main line below.) 13...♗c6 14.♕e2 0-0⩲ 15.♘e5 ♗a8 16.d3 ♘d5 17.♗d2 ♘b4! This plan exploited the weaknesses in White's position in Li Chao – Laznicka, Riyadh (rapid) 2017.

12...♖c8

Preparing ...♗c6.

13.0-0 ♗c6 14.♕e2

White is more or less forced to return his extra pawn and simplify. Trying to cling on to his material advantage could lead to problems, for instance:

14.♕f4 ♗xf3 (14...0-0!?⩱) 15.gxf3?! (15.♕xf3 transposes to the main line below.) 15...0-0⩲ Black has more than enough compensation for the pawn.

14.♕g4 h5 15.♕g3 ♗xf3 (15...0-0!?⩱) 16.♕xf3 ♕xd4 is similar to the main line, and it is hard to imagine that the extra ...h5 move will harm Black. A game continued:

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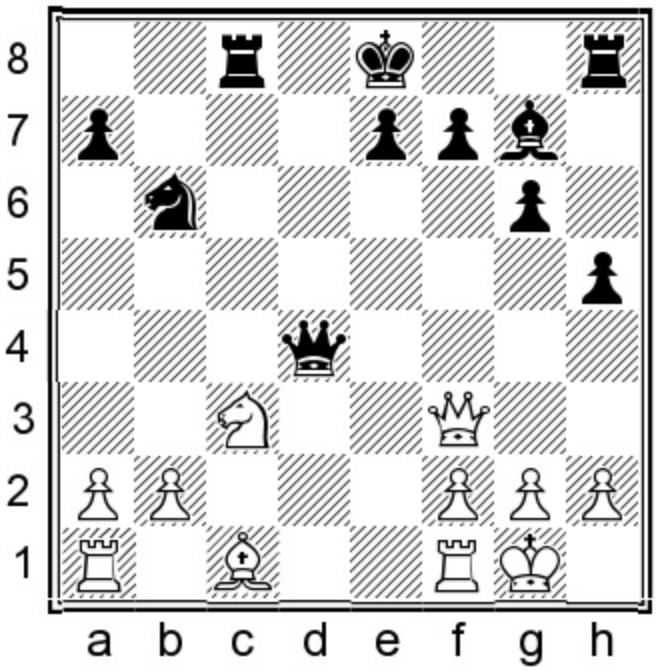
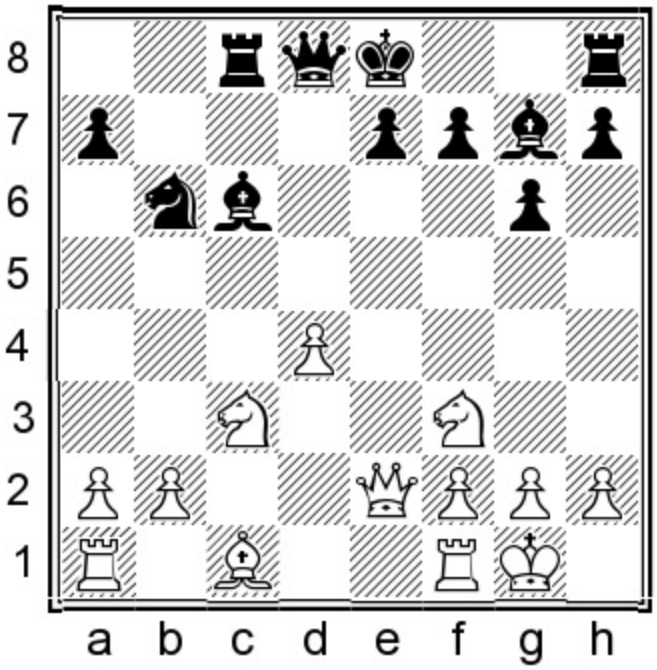


17.♗e3 ♕g4 Utilizing the free pawn move. (17...♕f6!? and 17...♕b4 are also fine, just like in the main line below.) 18.♕b7 The players agreed a draw in Ceres – Koziak, Lvov 2019. The game might continue with: 18...♕d7 (or 18...♗xc3!? 19.bxc3 ♕d7⇄) 19.♕xd7† ♔xd7 20.♖fd1† ♔c6! 21.♖ac1 ♖hd8=



14...♗xf3

14...0-0!? 15.♖d1 ♘d5 16.♘xd5 ♗xd5⩱ was an interesting way to maintain positional compensation in Artemiev – Maletin, Tyumen 2012.

15.♕xf3 ♕xd4

Black restores material equality and is not worse at all.

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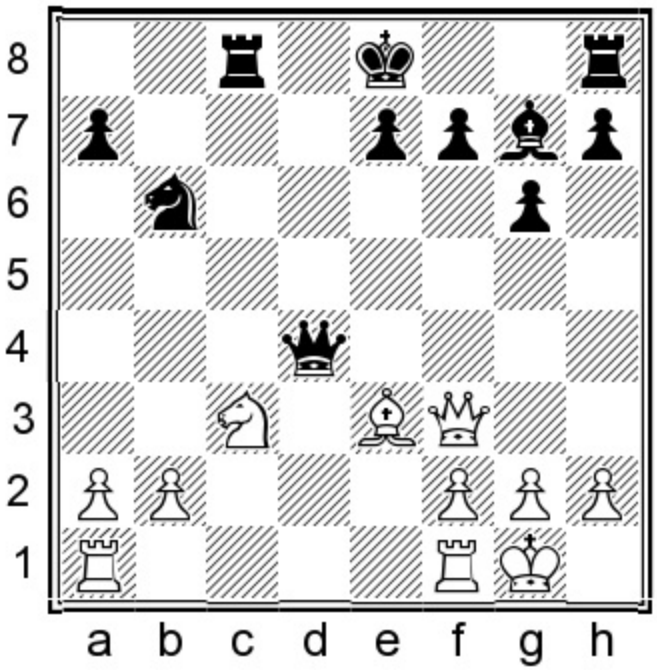
16.♗e3

16.♗g5 ♕c5!? (16...h6 17.♗e3 ♕b4 also proved fine after 18.♗xb6 ♗xc3 19.♗xa7 ♕xb2 20.♗e3 ♕xa1 21.♖xa1 ♗xa1 22.g3 h5 23.♕b7 0-0 24.♕xe7 ♖a8= in Greenfeld – Blomqvist, Fagernes 2017.) 17.♘e4 ♕f5 18.♕a3 0-0 Black had an excellent position in B. Lalic – Sulava, Pula 1996.



16...♕f6!?N

This looks like an interesting new direction, not that Black particularly needs an improvement.

16...♕b4 17.♕b7 (17.♗xb6 ♗xc3=) 17...0-0 18.♕xa7 ♕xb2 19.♕xb6 ♗xc3 20.♕xb2 ♗xb2 21.♖ad1 ♗a3 led to a drawn endgame in Andreikin – Eljanov, Moscow 2012, although any token advantage lies with Black, who can double rooks on the a-file and tie White to the defence of a2.

17.♕b7

17.♕xf6 ♗xf6⇄

17...♕c6 18.♕xa7 ♘c4⩲

With plenty of activity for the pawn.

C) 2.d4 d5

The remainder of this chapter will cover **C1)** 3.f3, the Fantasy Variation, followed by **C2)** 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.f3, the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit.

C1) 3.f3

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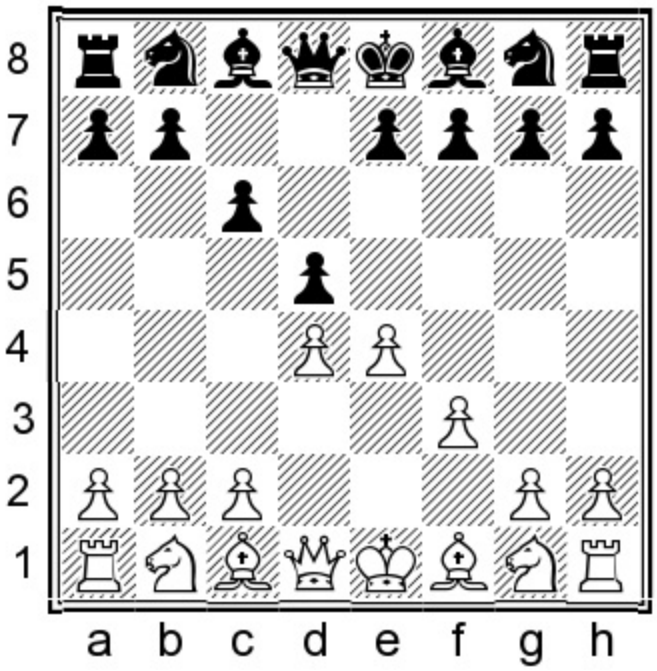

White protects his e-pawn. It is not without risk to move your f-pawn in the early phase of the opening, and we will aim to exploit this with a dynamic response.

3...dxe4!

The solid 3...e6 is a good alternative, leading to some kind of French where the most significant feature is the white pawn on f3.

4.fxe4

4.♘c3 converts to the gambit covered in variation C2, which we should be happy to accept.

4...e5!

Without this move it would have made no sense to exchange on e4. From here, a complicated strategic battle will ensue. White strives for the initiative and Black tries to counter that with dynamic play all over the board.

5.♘f3 ♗g4

5...exd4 6.♗c4 may be objectively playable, but it seems unnecessarily risky for Black.

We will consider **C11)** 6.c3!? and **C12)** 6.♗c4.

C11) 6.c3!?

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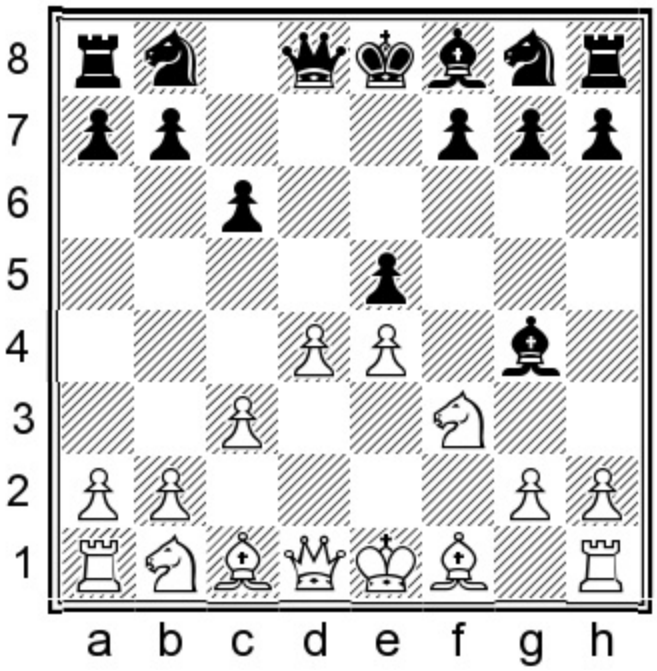


This interesting sideline has attracted the attention of some strong players in recent years.

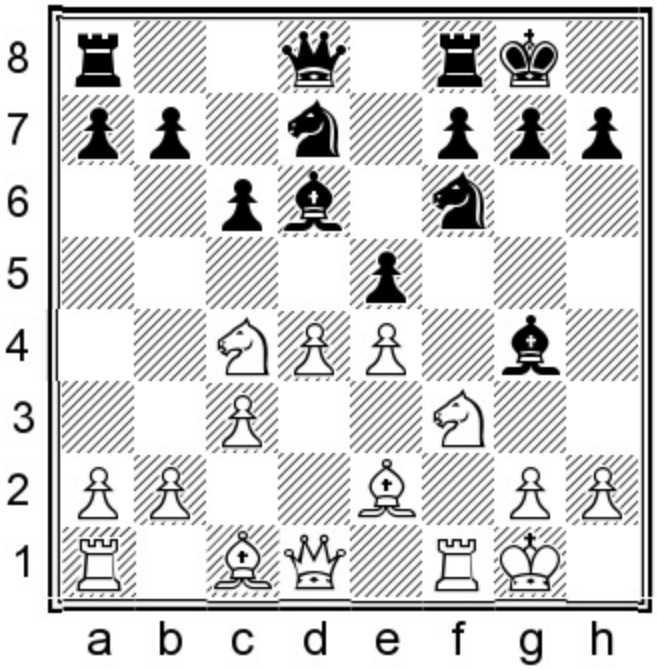
6...♘d7 7.♗d3

7.♗e2!?

This rare move actually holds some venom.

7...♗d6 8.♘bd2 ♘gf6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♘c4

The pressure on the e5-point provoked Black into exchanging on f3 in Sochacki – Stephan, Nantes 2013, but there is no need to panic.



Instead I suggest:

10...♗c7!N

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With the idea:

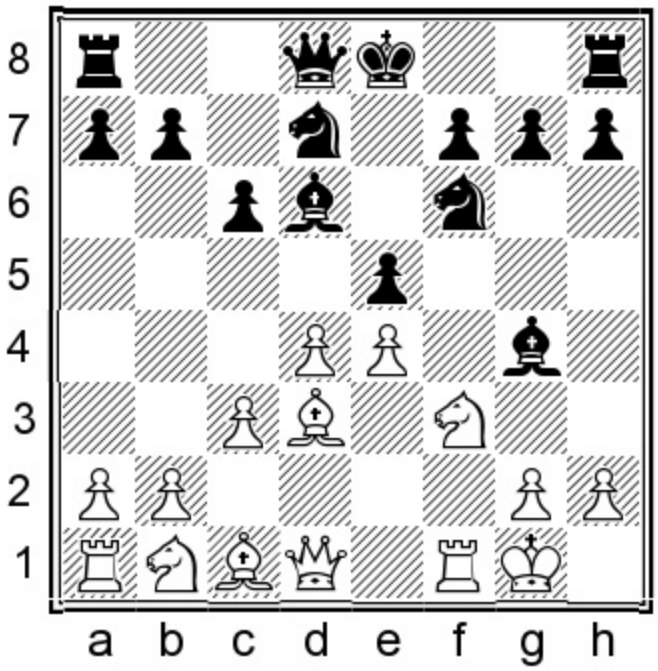
11.♘cxe5 ♘xe5 12.♘xe5 ♗xe2 13.♕xe2 ♗xe5 14.dxe5 ♘d7

Intending to win back the pawn. A natural continuation is:

15.e6 fxe6 16.♗f4 ♕e7=

When the game remains balanced.

7...♗d6 8.0-0 ♘gf6



9.h3

9.♗g5 h6 is fine for Black after: 10.♗h4 ♕c7 (or even 10...g5!?)

9.♘bd2 b5 is similar to the main line and may easily transpose.

9.♘a3!? is a fresh idea which demands an improvement by Black: 9...♗xa3!N (9...b5 10.♘c2 occurred in Caruana – Firouzja, Stavanger 2020, when the knight travelled onwards to e3 and f5, putting Black's position under heavy pressure.) 10.bxa3 0-0 11.♖b1 b5 Black is ready to play ...♖e8 and start attacking White's centre. 12.♕e1 seems to be White's most dangerous idea, but after 12...♗xf3 13.♖xf3 ♖e8⇄ Black's prospects look fine to me.

9...♗h5

Taking on f3 looks playable, but keeping the tension is the more principled way of playing.

10.♘bd2 b5

Preventing ♘c4.

The prophylactic 10...♗c7 is also worth considering.

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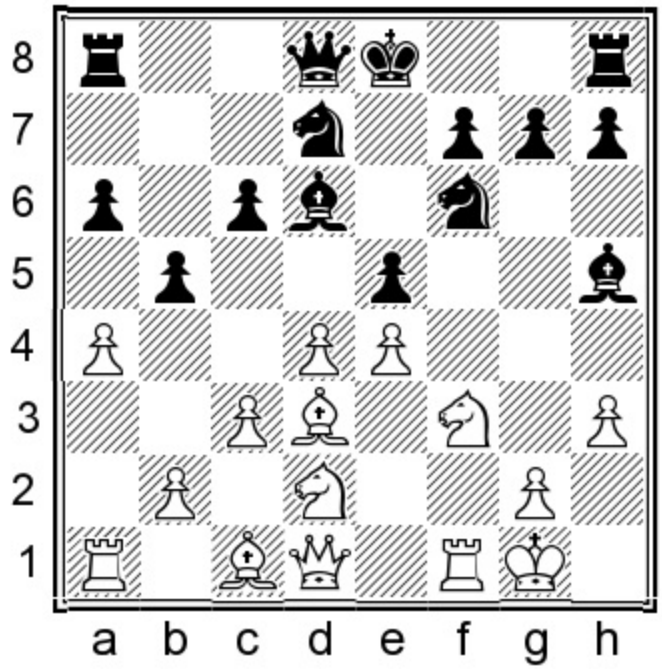
11.a4 a6



This position has been reached in a couple of games. The only critical move is:

12.g4!N

12.♕c2 0-0 13.b3?! ♕b6 14.♔h1 ♗g6 was already more comfortable for Black in Hill – Richardson, England 2014.

12.♕e1 0-0 13.♘h4 occurred in T. Willemze – J. Grant, Hoogeveen 2011, and now 13...♗g6N looks good and solid.

12...♗g6 13.♘h4 0-0

I think Black is fine, although the position is complicated of course. Let's see a few sample lines:

14.♘f5

14.♔g2 c5⇄ is fine for Black.

14.♘xg6 hxg6 15.♘f3 ♕c7 and Black will get counterplay with ...c5 at an appropriate moment.

14.axb5 axb5 15.♖xa8 ♕xa8 16.♘xg6 hxg6 17.♘f3 ♕b8= also looks fine.

14...♗xf5 15.exf5

15.♖xf5 ♕b6⇄ with good play on the dark squares.

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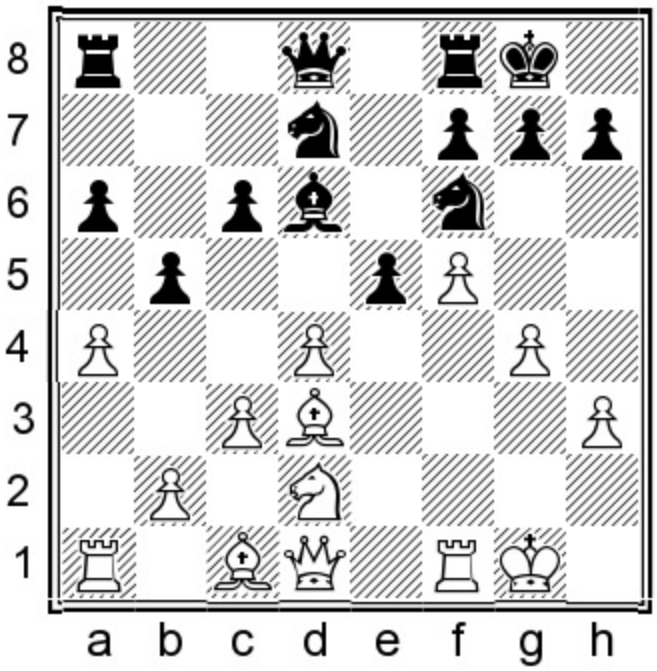
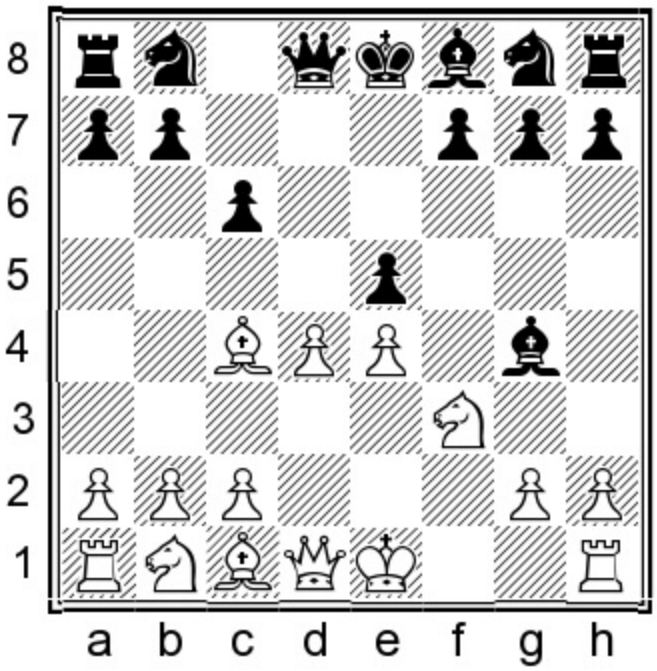


15...exd4 16.cxd4 ♕b6 17.♘f3 h6

Black has good prospects in this double-edged position.

C12) 6.♗c4



This active move is the main line.

6...♘d7

White has two important options: **C121)** 7.c3 and **C122)** 7.0-0.

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C121) 7.c3

White not only secures his centre, but also discourages Black's normal development due to the threat of ♕b3. Or does he?

7...♗d6!

This used to be considered a mistake, but the German player Frank Fritsche played it in a number of email games back in 2013. These games have more or less been overlooked by theory, but the engines approve of Black's concept and L'Ami also recommends it.

Traditionally Black has responded with 7...b5 or 7...♗h5, the latter being my recommendation in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*.

8.♕b3

8.0-0 ♘gf6 converts to variation C122 below.

8...♕e7

The amazing discovery is that we can allow White to take on b7 and then c6, as Black obtains a big lead in development with attacking chances against the white king.

9.♕xb7

This is the critical move, but not all of Fritsche's opponents had the guts to take the pawn.

9.0-0 ♗xf3 10.gxf3

10.♖xf3 ♘gf6⇄

10...♘b6

10...♘gf6!? followed by ...0-0 is also fine, as it would be dangerous for White to go pawn-grabbing.

11.♗d3

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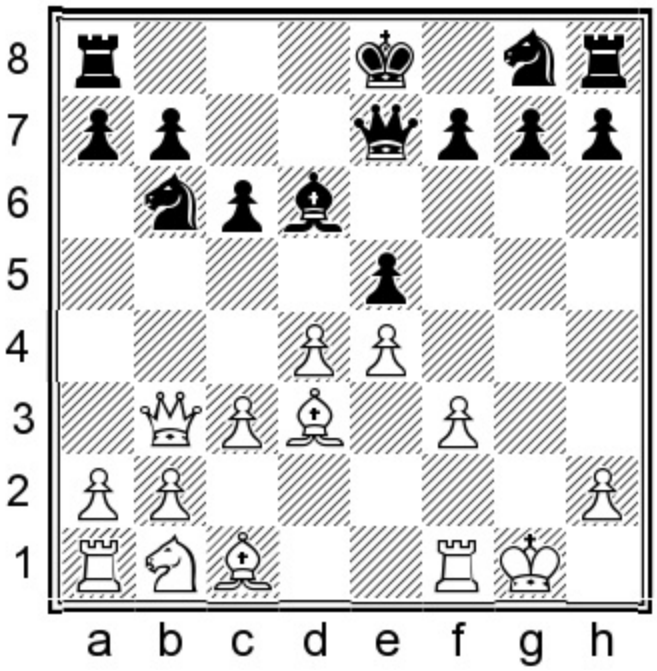


11...exd4! 12.cxd4 ♗c7

Black is strong on the dark squares.

13.♗e3 ♘d5! 14.♗f2 ♕g5† 15.♔h1 ♘f4 16.♖g1 ♕h5 17.♗f1 0-0-0

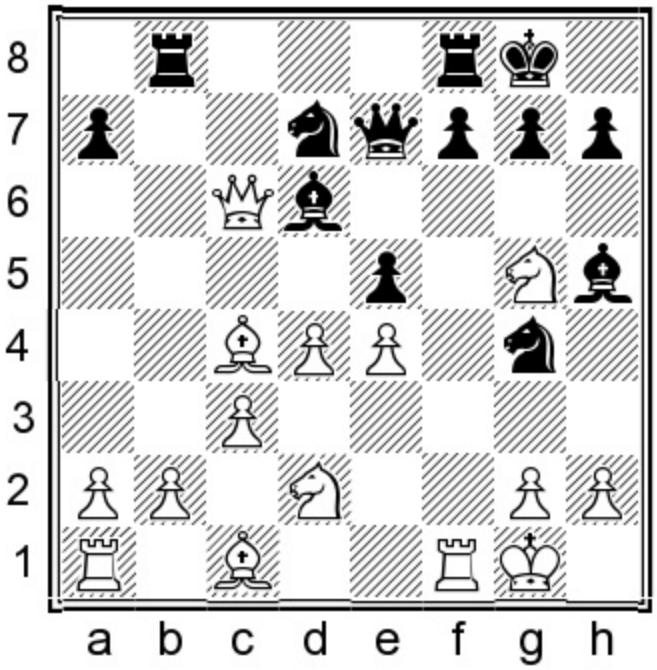
Black had the initiative in K. Schneider – Fritsche, email 2013.

9.♘g5 ♗h5 10.0-0 ♘gf6 11.♕xb7 0-0

This gives Black good compensation for the pawn...

12.♘d2 ♖ab8 13.♕xc6 ♘g4!

...for the two pawns, I mean!



14.♘df3 h6 15.♘h3 ♗g6 16.♘f2

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16.♗d3 gives Black a number of good options; for instance, 16...♘df6 looks fine.

16...♘xf2 17.♖xf2 exd4

17...♖b6 18.♕a4 exd4 19.cxd4 ♖b4 20.♕c2 ♗xe4⩱

18.e5! ♘xe5 19.♘xe5 ♗xe5 20.♕xg6 dxc3

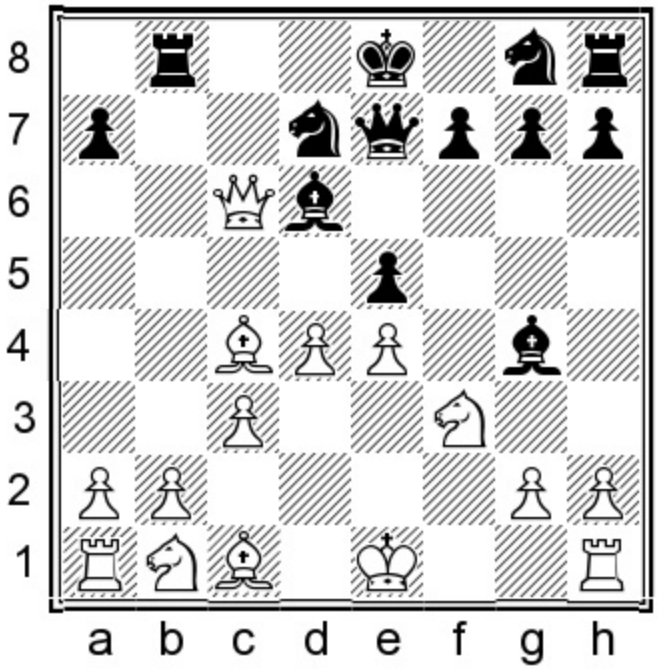
The position looks sharp but is actually just equal, as the game continuation demonstrates.

21.♗e3 cxb2 22.♖af1 ♕c7 23.♗d5 ♔h8 24.♖xf7 ♖xf7 25.♗xf7 b1=♕ 26.♖xb1

½–½ Wilmes – Fritsche, email 2013.

9...♖b8 10.♕xc6

10.♕a6 can hardly be an improvement. It allows 10...exd4 because e4 hangs, but I also like 10...♗xf3 11.gxf3 ♕h4† 12.♔d1 ♘e7↑ with good compensation.



10...♗xf3!

It is important to weaken White's king and dark squares.

11.gxf3 ♘gf6

Black has great prospects in return for the pawns.

12.♗b3?

This was played by one of Fritsche's opponents.

12.0-0?! is also a mistake. 12...0-0∓ 13.♘d2?! White is already in trouble, but this move loses directly. 13...♖b6 14.♕a4 exd4 15.cxd4 ♗xh2†! This leads to a decisive attack, as L'Ami points out.

According to the computer, the best that White can do is:

12.dxe5 ♗xe5 13.♗e3

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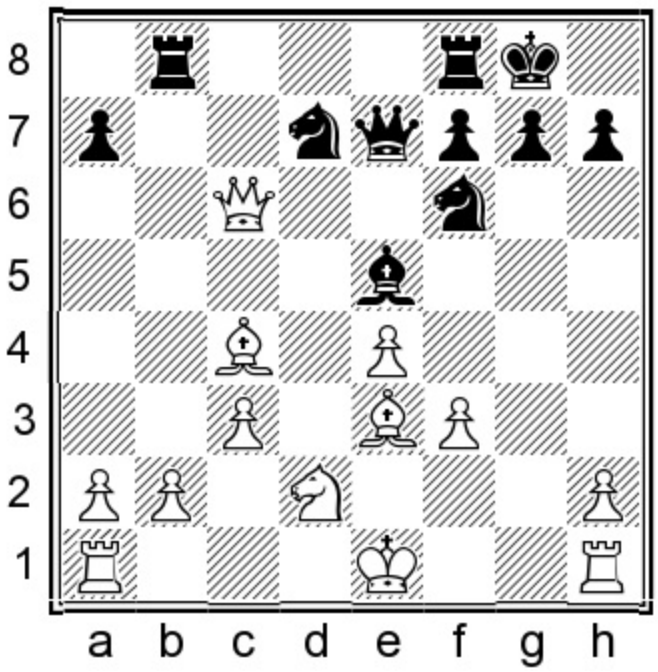
The sharp 13.f4? is easily dismissed after: 13...0-0!–+

13...0-0 14.♘d2



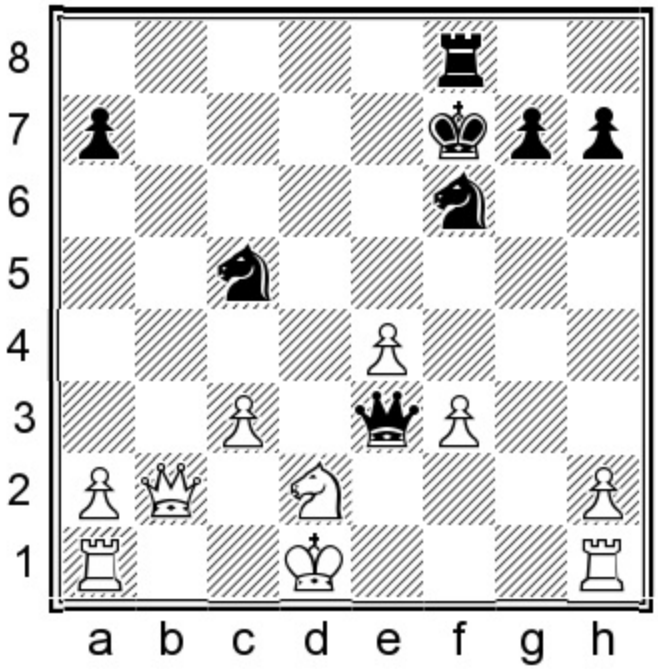
14...♖xb2

14...♖fc8 15.♕a6 ♘c5 16.♗xc5 ♕xc5 17.0-0-0 g6!?⩱ is another possibility, aiming to play on the dark squares and against White's king of course. Black has excellent positional compensation for the pawns.

15.♗b3 ♗d6 16.♕b7!

A hard move to find. Without it, White would be in deep trouble.

16...♗c5 17.♗xc5 ♕xc5 18.♗xf7† ♔xf7 19.♕xb2 ♕e3† 20.♔d1 ♘c5⩱



The game is balanced. White will have problems with his king forever, although Black has no

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more than a draw. Analysing with a machine leads to many repetitions of moves and unavoidable draws. For example:

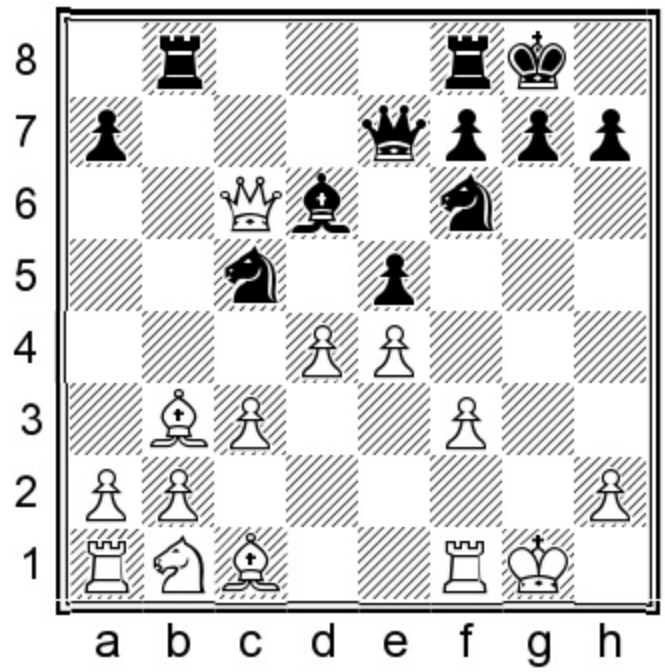
21.♕b5 ♖d8 22.♕e2 ♖xd2†! 23.♕xd2 ♕xf3† 24.♔c2 ♕xe4† 25.♔b2 ♕b7† 26.♔a3 ♕a6† 27.♔b2

27.♔b4? ♕a4† 28.♔xc5 ♘e4†–+

27...♕b7† 28.♔c2 ♕e4†=

The scoresheet can be signed.

12...0-0 13.0-0 ♘c5!



A spectacular continuation of the attack. Black threatens to trap the queen with ...♖b6 or ...♖fc8, so White has no choice but to capture the knight.

14.dxc5 ♗xc5† 15.♔h1 ♖b6 16.♗xf7†

16.♕a4 ♘h5 gives Black an unstoppable attack.

16...♔h8! 17.♕a4 ♕xf7

White resigned here in Hoexter – Fritsche, email 2013. It may seem a little early to give up, but with computer assistance it soon becomes clear that White's position is utterly hopeless. I will offer an illustrative line:

18.♕c2

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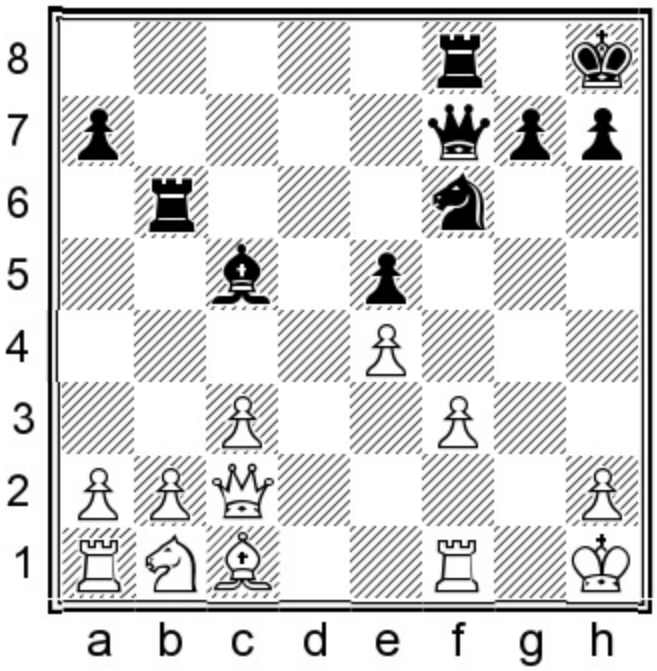
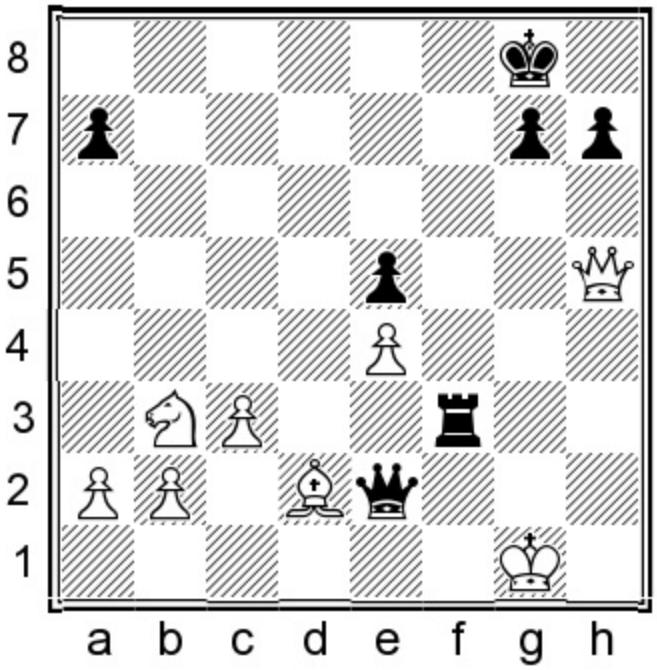


18...♘g4! 19.♕e2 ♘xh2! 20.♕xh2 ♕c4 21.♕h3 ♖g6 22.♘d2 ♕e2 23.♘b3 ♗f2 24.♗d2 ♖g3 25.♕h5 ♔g8!

Simply threatening ...♖fxf3 when there will be no back-rank mate.

26.♖g1 ♗xg1 27.♖xg1 ♖xg1† 28.♔xg1 ♖xf3



29.♕e8† ♖f8 30.♕e6† ♔h8 31.♕h3 ♕d1† 32.♔h2 ♖f2†

By now, it is definitely time to resign!

C122) 7.0-0

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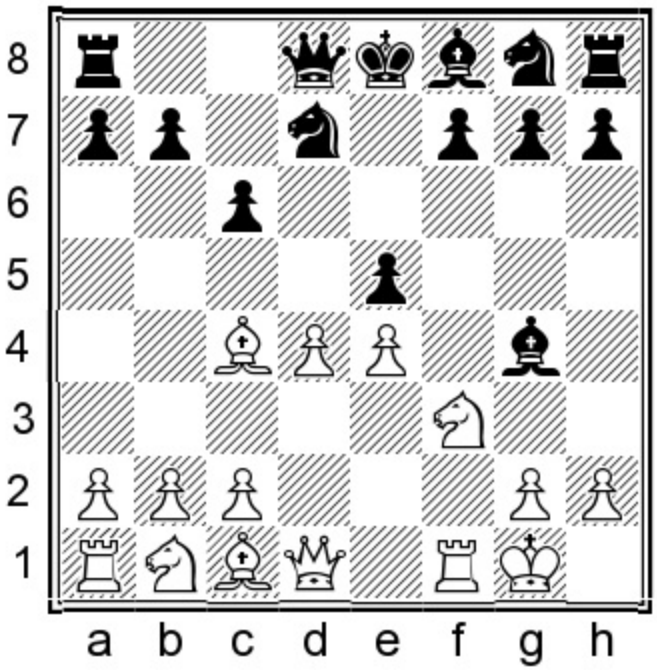

In terms of popularity, this is the main line.

7...♘gf6 8.c3

White needs to protect his centre, so he cannot really do without this move.

8...♗d6 9.♗g5

Active development is in the spirit of the Fantasy Variation.

9.♕b3?!

This enables us to get an improved version of the sacrifice from the previous variation:

9...0-0 10.♕xb7 ♗xf3!

10...exd4 11.cxd4 ♘b6 has scored well for Black but after 12.♗b3 ♘xe4 13.♘c3 ♘xc3 14.bxc3 ♕c8, which was, by the way, my recommendation in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*, Black is no more than equal.

11.gxf3

11.♖xf3 exd4 12.cxd4 occurred in Kizza – Ssonko, Kampala 2018, and now L'Ami points out the deadly improvement: 12...♘g4!N 13.h3 ♘c5!–+

In Eibl – Ch. Mueller, Bavaria 2008, Black should have played:

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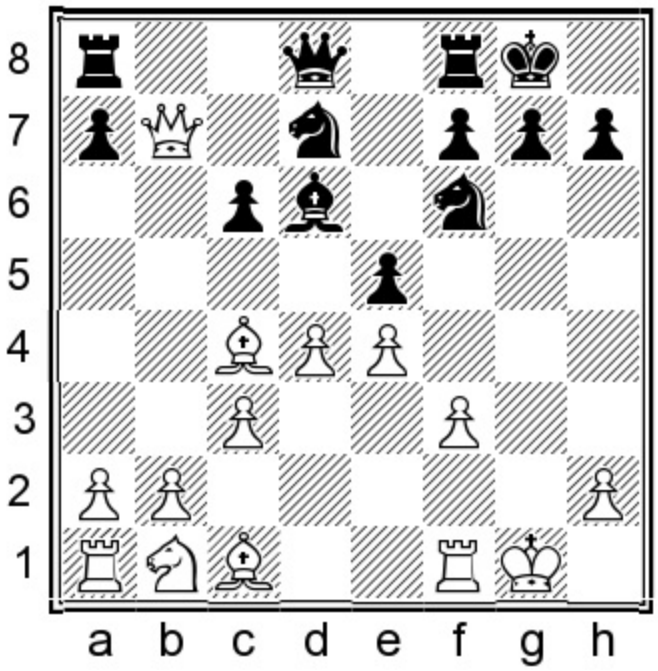


11...♖b8!N 12.♕xa7

Or 12.♕xc6 ♖b6 followed by ...exd4 and attack, attack, attack!

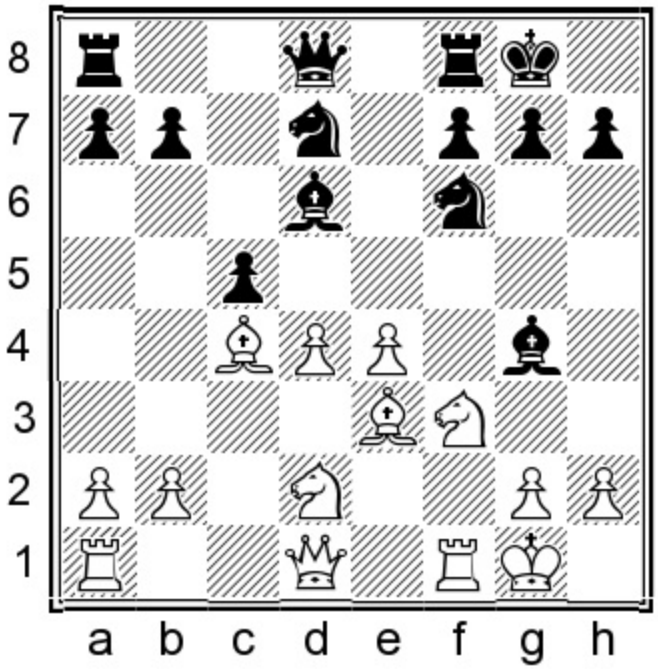
12...♘h5→

Black has great play for the pawns.

9.♗e3 0-0 10.♘bd2 exd4!

Previously I recommended 10...b5 11.♗d3 ♕c7 which has also done well since 2010, but the text move changes the structure in a favourable way, so I like it even more.

11.cxd4 c5!



That's the idea!

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12.♕b3

12.d5?! has been played a few times, but after 12...♖e8N Black controls the dark squares, most notably e5, and is clearly better.

I also considered 12.♔h1N 12...cxd4 13.♗xd4 ♖c8 when Black is fine.

12...cxd4 13.♗xd4 ♗c5! 14.♕e3 ♗xd4 15.♘xd4 ♘e5

Black had the more comfortable game in Ziska – Kasimdzhanov, Khanty-Mansiysk (ol) 2010.

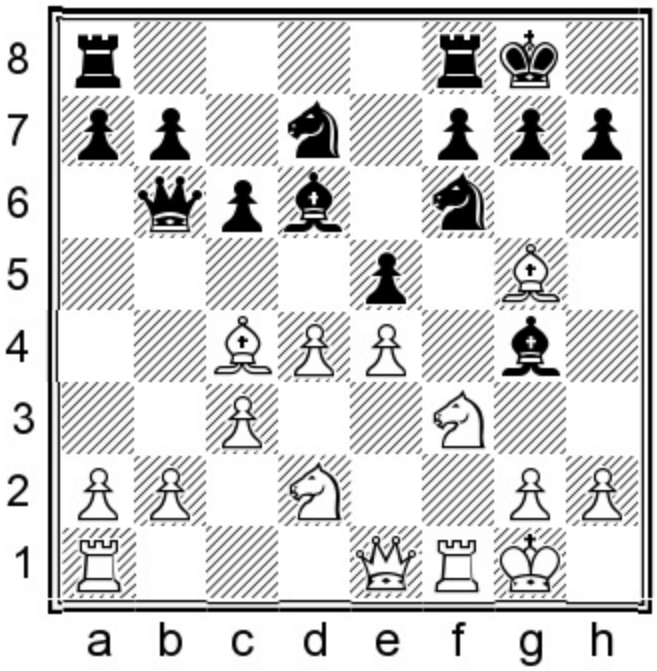
9.♕e1

Stepping out of the pin is a natural idea.

9...0-0

Black could even consider 9...♕e7!? with ideas of long castling!

10.♗g5 ♕b6 11.♘bd2



Now in Calzetta Ruiz – A. Hagesaether, Gibraltar 2009, Black missed a nice opportunity:

11...exd4!N 12.cxd4

This is obviously the move White would like to play, but it loses a pawn.

12.♘xd4 ♖ae8∓ gives Black the superior structure and pressure on the e-file.

12...♗xf3! 13.♘xf3

Or 13.gxf3 ♕xd4† 14.♗e3 ♕xe3†! 15.♕xe3 ♗c5∓.

13...♖ae8 14.♗d3

14.e5 runs into 14...♘xe5! of course.

14...♘xe4! 15.♗xe4 f5∓

9...h6!

A useful refinement.

Previously I recommended the standard continuation of 9...0-0 10.♘bd2 h6 11.♗h4 (or 11.♗e3 ♗h5)

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11...♕c7 which is decent enough.

10.♗h4 ♗xf3

This exchange to weaken the dark squares is a thematic idea which we have seen again and again.

10...g5!? 11.♗g3 ♕e7 12.♘bd2 0-0-0⇄ is proposed by L'Ami.

11.gxf3

Of course White would prefer not to weaken his structure like this, but recapturing with a piece would have led to even worse issues:

11.♕xf3?! ♕b6! and d4 hangs.

11.♖xf3?! exd4 12.cxd4 ♘e5! is a nice motif.

11...♗e7

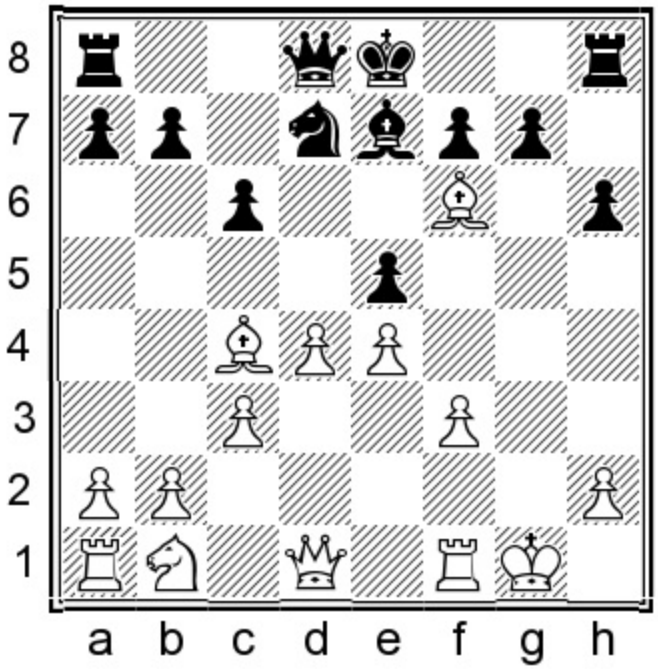
This works well, although Black has the luxury of a few tempting alternatives:

11...♕e7!? followed by ...0-0-0 looks promising.

Black can also consider 11...g5!? followed by ...♕e7 and so on.

12.♗xf6

Perhaps White should try something else, but Black is clearly in good shape anyway, with ...♘h5 an obvious idea.



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12...♘xf6! 13.dxe5 ♗c5† 14.♔h1 ♘h5∓

Black had more than enough play for a pawn in Kolek – Carradori, corr. 2014. An illustrative line is:

15.♕xd8† ♖xd8 16.f4 g5! 17.f5 ♘f4∓

C2) 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.f3

I was fairly dismissive of this gambit in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* and my overall opinion of it has not changed. However, a chunky tome entitled *The Blackmar-Diemer Gambit* was published in 2011, in which the author, IM Christoph Scheerer, analysed the gambit in some detail. Thus, I have afforded the BDG a bit more space than before, to make sure my readers will be well equipped to deal with whatever White may try.

4...exf3

Taking the pawn is obvious, but you could also decline it with 4...♘f6!?, the point being that 5.fxe4 e5! is good for Black. So White usually continues: 5.♗c4 (Instead 5.♘xe4 might be the best chance to equalize, but in that case White has reached a simply ludicrous version of the Classical Caro-Kann with f2-f3 included.) 5...♘bd7!? (5...exf3 6.♘xf3 is a possible route to the main line below, which avoids the 6.♗d3 set-up, not that it's particularly scary.) 6.fxe4 (6.♘xe4 e5 is also good for Black.) 6...b5 Followed by ...b4 and ...♘xe4, which seems great for Black. (6...e5!? is also decent.)

5.♘xf3 ♘f6 6.♗c4

6.♗d3 is an alternative which usually implies a second pawn sac. (You can avoid this option with the 4...♘f6!? 5.♗c4 exf3 move order noted above if you wish, so I will just cover it briefly.) The critical line continues: 6...♗g4 7.h3 ♗xf3 8.♕xf3 ♕xd4 9.♗e3 ♕h4† 10.g3 ♕b4 11.0-0-0 ♘bd7 12.g4

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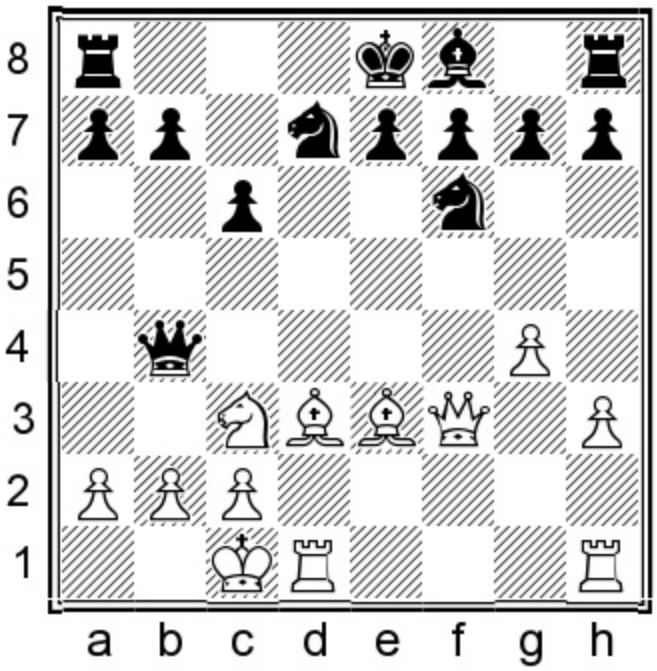
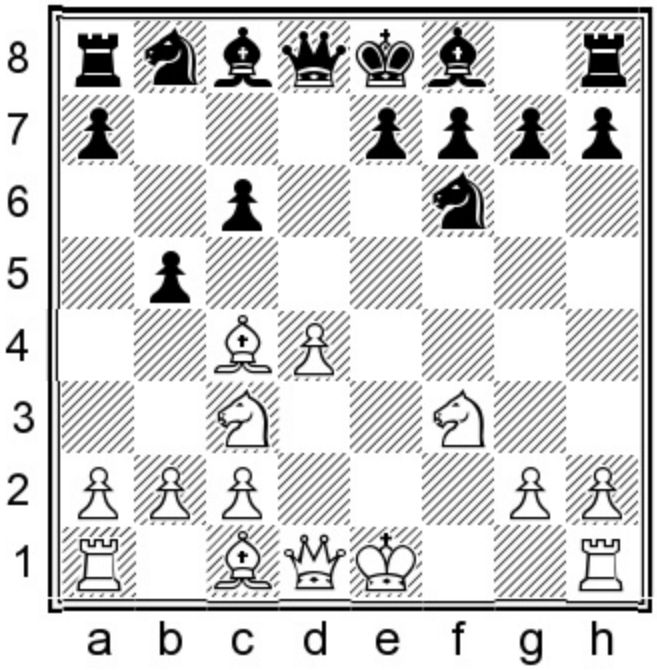


12...h6! White has no obvious follow-up. He can still play for tricks of course, but with careful play Black should be able to convert his material advantage. (Scheerer only mentions 12...e6 13.g5 which is trickier, although Black should be better here too with precise play.)

The text move is the main line. Now **C21)** 6...b5!? is a rare but promising option, but the more traditional and 'Caro-Kann-like' **C22)** 6...♗f5 will be considered as well.

C21) 6...b5!?



It is a mystery why this move has not become more popular. White is struggling to prove full compensation.

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7.♗b3

7.♗xf7†? ♔xf7 gives White nothing after 8.♘g5† ♔g8–+ or 8.♘e5† ♔g8–+.

7.♗d3 is Scheerer's best try but 7...g6!N is a simple improvement which blunts the bishop on d3, and after 8.0-0 ♗g7 White's compensation is questionable.

7...a5

7...b4 is mentioned by Scheerer, but I prefer the text move.

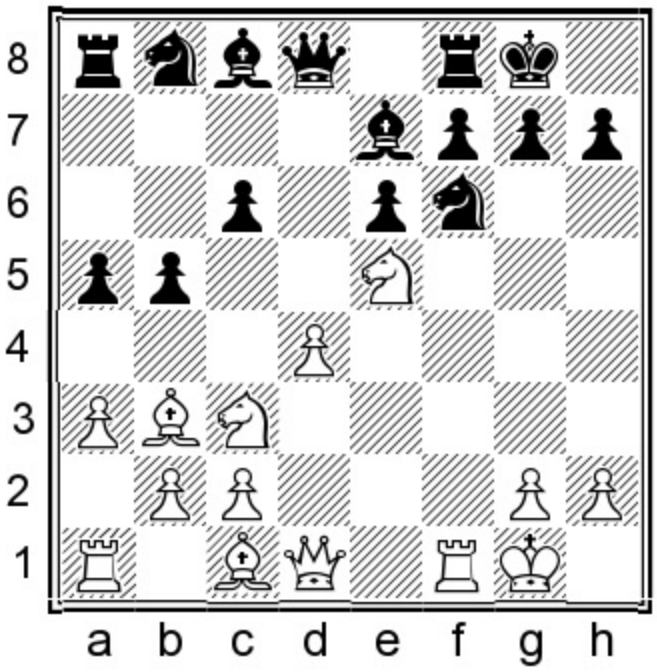
8.a3

White has nothing better, for instance:

8.a4 b4 9.♘g5 (9.♘e2 e6∓ and the black bishops will be great on d6 and a6.) 9...e6 10.♘ce4 ♘xe4 (10...♗e7!? is also good) 11.♘xe4 ♕h4† 12.♘f2 ♗a6∓ White is a pawn down and unable to castle.

8.♘e5 e6 9.a3 (9.a4 b4 10.♘e2 [10.♘b1 c5∓] 10...♘bd7!∓ is a nice little finesse, as 11.♘xc6 ♕c7 12.♘e5 ♘xe5 13.♗f4 ♗d6 turns out badly for White.) 9...♘bd7! 10.♘xc6 ♕b6 11.♘e5 a4 12.♗a2 ♘xe5 13.dxe5 ♘d7 14.♘d5 ♕c6∓ White's knight will soon have to retreat; meanwhile Black intends ...♗b7 and ...0-0-0 with a huge initiative.

8...e6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.♘e5 0-0



11.♔h1

11.♗e3 ♗a6 (11...♗b7!? also looks good) 12.♖f3 was seen in Pitz – Krawelitzki, Greifswald 2003, when 12...c5N 13.♖g3 cxd4 14.♗h6 g6∓ would have seen Black dominate.

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11...♗b7

Black is ready to complete development with ...♘bd7 and it is hard to find a good idea for White. For instance:

12.♕e1

12.♘xf7? ♔xf7!∓ and the king will simply walk back via g8-h8.

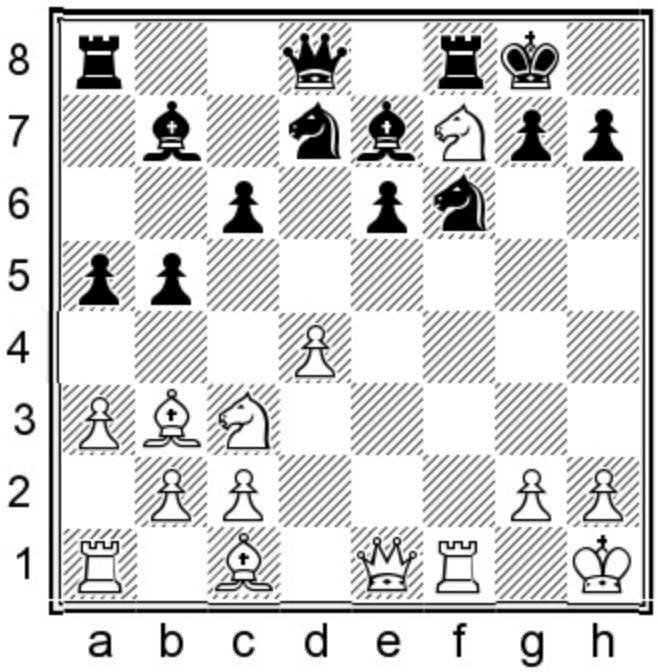
12.♗f4 ♘bd7 with an extra pawn and a pleasant game for Black.

12...♘bd7 13.♘xf7?!

The only critical try, but it doesn't work.

13.♗g5 c5!∓ is great for Black.

13.♗e3 is objectively best, but in that case White is basically just admitting that he has no compensation. Black has many good moves but I like 13...♕c8!?∓ intending ...b4 and ...c5.



13...♖xf7 14.♗xe6

14.♕xe6 ♕e8∓ gives White nothing.

14...♘f8 15.♗xf7† ♔xf7 16.♗g5 ♔g8∓

Black's two minor pieces are clearly stronger than the rook and pawn.

C22) 6...♗f5

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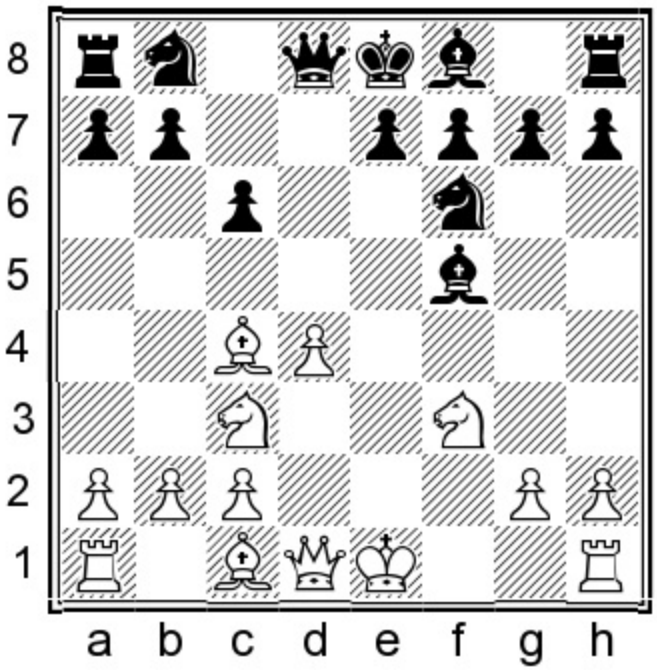


This is the most popular move and it remains a good choice.

7.0-0

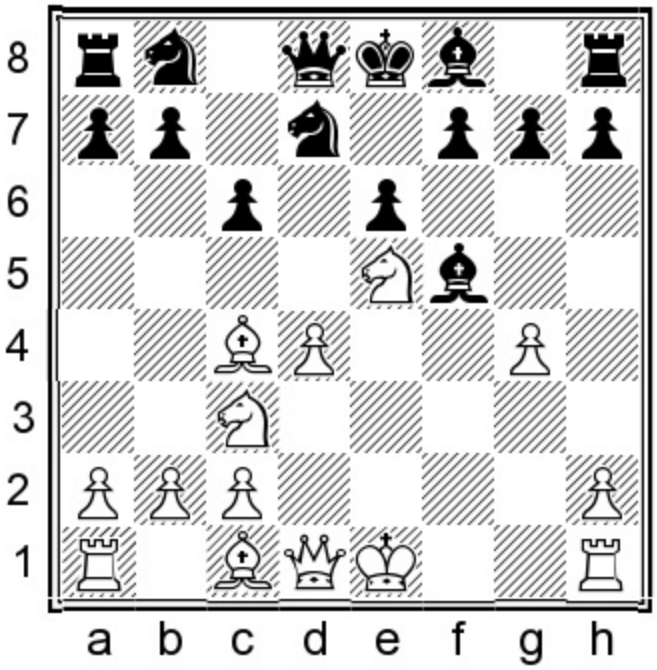
There are two other options to consider:

7.♘e5 e6 8.g4?!

8.0-0 converts to 7.0-0 e6 8.♘e5 below.

8...♘fd7!

This attractive move is all you really need to know against the 7.♘e5 line. The tactics work for Black, and White's scheme is essentially refuted.



9.gxf5

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a) 9.♘xd7? ♕h4† 10.♔f1 ♗xg4 11.♕d3 ♗h3† 12.♔e2 ♘xd7–+ leaves Black with two extra pawns, plus an attack!

b) 9.♗f4? ♘xe5 10.♗xe5 ♕h4† 11.♗g3 ♕xg4 and Black was winning in Gareyev – Vazquez, Internet (rapid) 2017.

c) 9.0-0? ♘xe5 10.gxf5 ♘xc4 11.fxe6 f6–+ with an extra piece, Stampovsky – Gil, Orlova 2006.

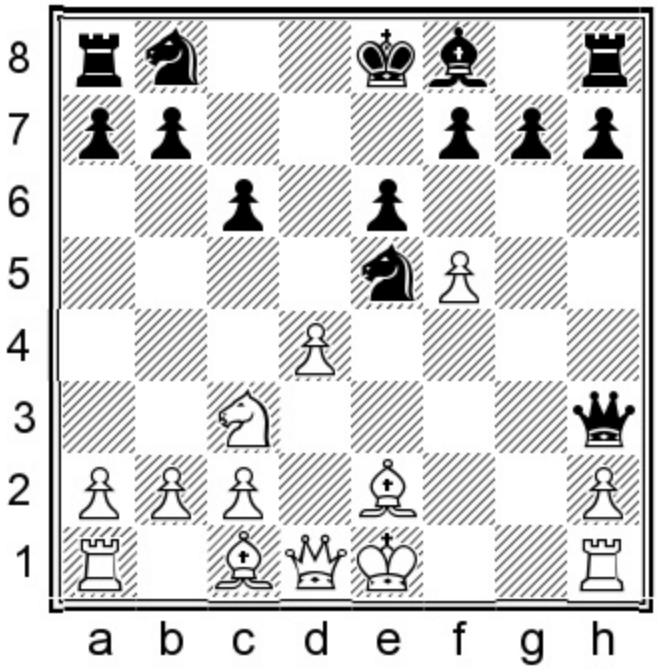
d) 9.♘d3!? occurred in Villing – Nachtkamp, Bad Woerishofen 2014. White avoids an immediate disaster but can hardly hope to prove serious compensation with such a move. I suggest: 9...♗g6N 10.h4 ♘b6 (10...b5 is also strong.) 11.h5 (11.♗b3 ♕xd4–+) 11...♗xd3 12.♕xd3 ♘xc4 13.♕xc4 ♘d7∓ A pawn is a pawn!

9...♘xe5 10.♗e2

10.dxe5 ♕h4† and ...♕xc4 is the smart point.

10...♕h4† 11.♔f1 ♕h3† 12.♔e1

12.♔g1 is met by 12...exf5! with the point that 13.dxe5? loses to 13...♗c5†.



12...♗e7! 13.dxe5?

White had to play 13.♗f4 ♘ed7 14.fxe6 ♕xe6∓.

13...♕g2!

Now Black is winning.

14.♔d2

14.♖f1 ♗h4† 15.♔d2 ♘a6 is no better. A fun line is: 16.♔e3 ♗g5† 17.♖f4 ♗xf4† 18.♔xf4 ♕f2†! 19.♗f3 ♖d8 20.♕e2 ♕h4† 21.♔e3 ♕d4# or 21.♗g4 ♖d4†.

14...♘a6

With a rook poised to land on d8, White resigned in Pegoraro – Kierzek, Arco 2010.

7.♗g5!?

This is rare, but probably White's best chance to prove compensation, if followed up correctly.

7...♘bd7 8.♕e2 e6 9.d5!

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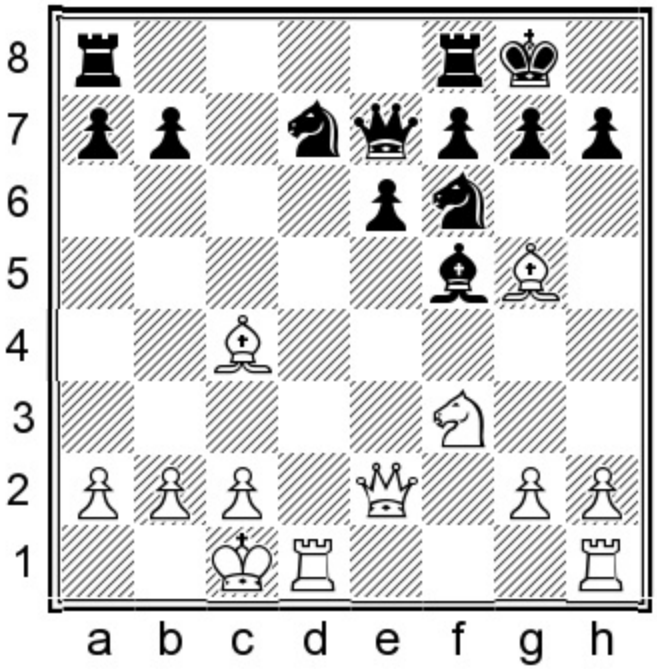
As played in a high-level engine contest, which we will follow.

9.0-0-0 is well met by 9...♗e7! followed by some combination of ...0-0 and ...♘d5, perhaps with ...b5 and ...a5 thrown in somewhere. (Scheerer only mentions 9...♗b4 when 10.d5! is dangerous.)

9...cxd5 10.♘xd5 ♗e7 11.♘xe7 ♕xe7 12.0-0-0 0-0



13.♘h4

White has no real attack, but can claim positional compensation due to the bishop pair.

13...♕c5 14.♘xf5 ♕xf5 15.♗e3 ♘e5 16.♖hf1 ♕g4 17.♖d4 ♕xe2 18.♗xe2 ♘d5 19.♗f2 ♖ac8

The two monsters eventually drew in Leela – Stockfish, engine game 2020. From a human perspective, Black should be happy to play an endgame with an extra pawn. As far as I know, not many people play the BDG with the intention of swapping queens and playing for positional compensation.

7...e6 8.♘e5

I also checked:

8.♘g5 ♗g6 9.♘e2

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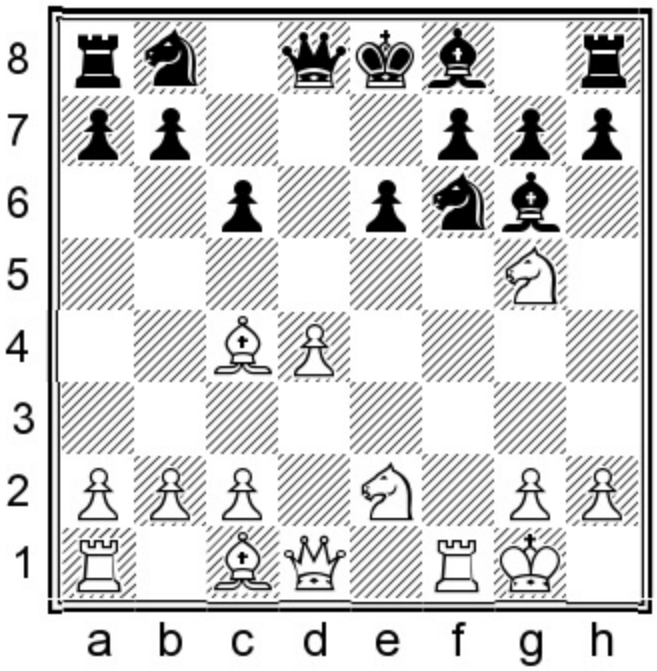


This is one of Scheerer's favourite tries, hoping to land a missile on e6, but Black easily prevents it with:

9...♗d6 10.♘f4 ♗xf4 11.♗xf4

11.♖xf4 occurred in Go – Bellia, Groningen 2013, when 11...h6N would have driven the knight away, with a big advantage for Black.

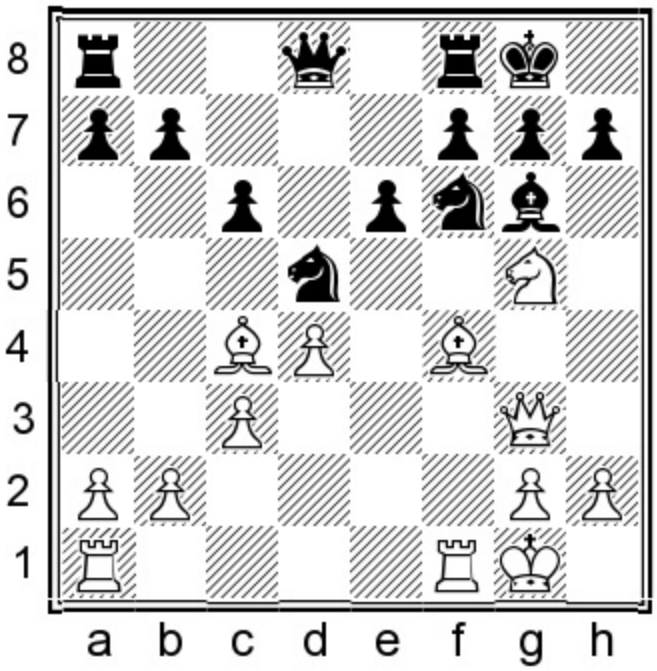
11...0-0 12.c3

12.♗xe6? h6 wins for Black.

12...♘d5 13.♕g4

Scheerer gives this as White's best try but after:

13...♘d7 14.♕g3 ♘7f6!∓



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White is a pawn down and his kingside pieces are unstable; the computer's top choices include such depressing options as:

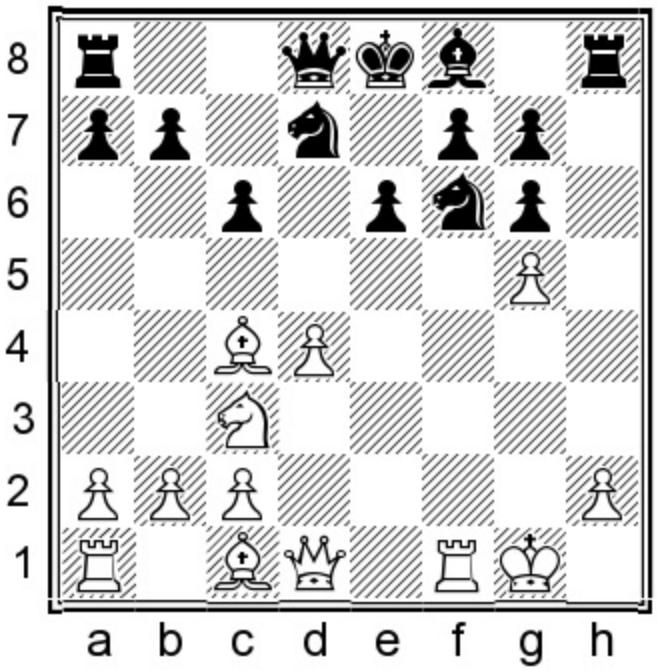
15.♗xd5

Or even 15.♗c1, which tells you how bad White's position is.

8...♗g6 9.g4

9.♗g5 ♗e7 and Black is rock-solid with an extra pawn.

9...♘bd7 10.♘xg6 hxg6 11.g5



11...♘b6!

Scheerer attaches a question mark to this move, but he is in for a cold shower.

11...♕c7!? is the fancier move which also gives Black some advantage, but the text move is objectively stronger, and an especially attractive choice if your opponent believes it to be a mistake.

12.♗xe6 fxe6 13.gxf6

13.♕d3 ♗e7 14.♕xg6† ♔d7 15.gxf6 gxf6∓ is similar.

13...gxf6 14.♕g4

Scheerer stops here, implying that White is doing well, but Black is much better after:

14...♔d7 15.♕xg6

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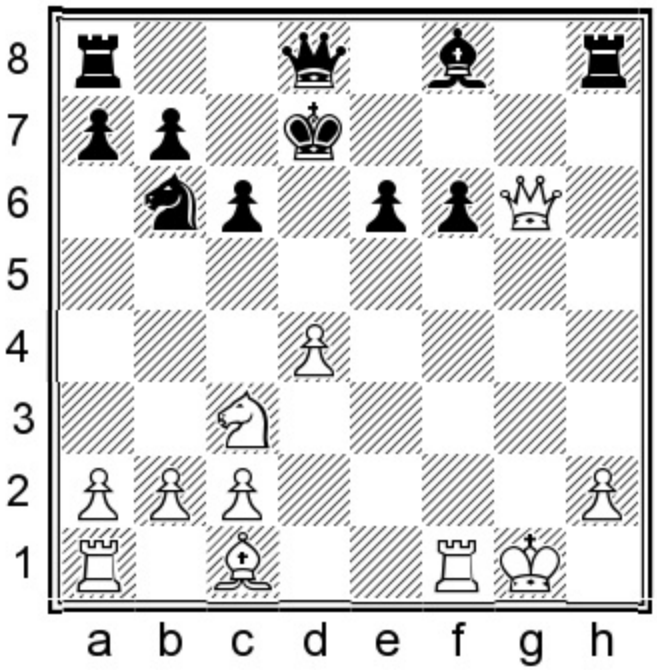

15...f5!∓

Intending ...♗d6 followed by raining fire along the g- and h-files.

Conclusion

Many White players – primarily the lazy ones – have a pet sideline versus the Caro-Kann, like 2.d3 or 2.c4, and they keep playing it, knowing full well that it gives no advantage, but hoping just to get a playable position. We welcome such an attitude from our opponents, because it means we have an easy game.

The only sideline that needs deep analysis is the Fantasy Variation with 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.f3!?. I like to fight for the initiative with the sharp 3...dxe4 4.fxe4 e5. After 5.♘f3 ♗g4 6.♗c4 ♘d7 Black should know about the promising sacrifice 7.c3 ♗d6! 8.♕b3 ♕e7, when 9.♕xb7 ♖b8 10.♕xc6 ♗xf3 11.gxf3 ♘gf6 already looks scary for White. 7.0-0 is safer, when 7...♘gf6 8.c3 ♗d6 leads to a complicated strategic game, where Black should be fine.

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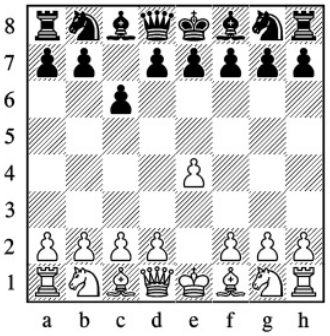
Chapter 11



Minor Lines

Variation Index

1.e4 c6

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B) 2.♘c3 d5 3.♕f3 328

C) 2.b3 331

D) 2.f4 332

E) 2.♘e2 333

"I rolled on as the sky grew dark
I put the pedal down to make some time
There's something good waitin' down this road
I'm pickin' up whatever's mine"

Tom Petty – Runnin' Down a Dream

1.e4 c6

As in all chess openings, in the Caro-Kann there exist some rather bizarre lines that you should be aware of to avoid unpleasant surprises. The somewhat dubious variations are particularly popular in online games with a limited amount of time available to grasp what is going on.

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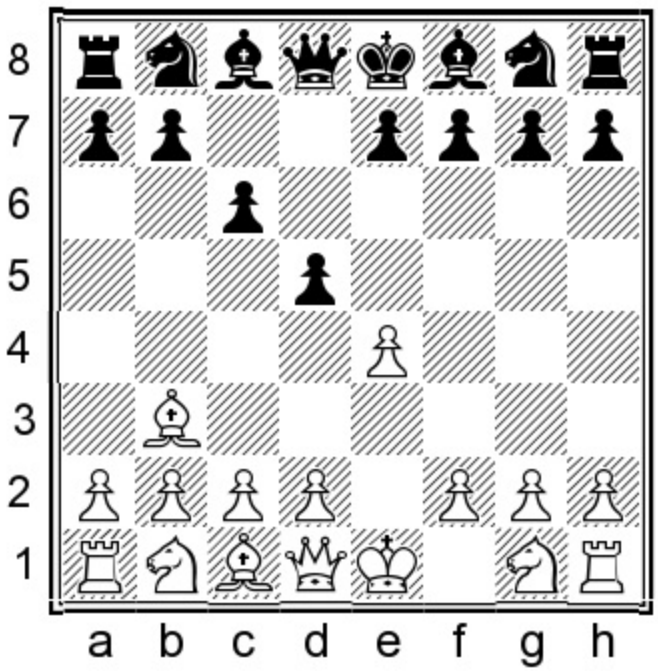
Let’s say your opponent plays:

2.♗c4 d5 3.♗b3

It looks like a free pawn, so you take it.

3.exd5 cxd5 would of course give White a poor version of the Exchange Variation.



3...dxe4

Then comes:

4.♕h5

Already, you are confused if you have never seen it before. This chapter solves all such anxieties, so from now on you will be happy whenever White tries one of his cheap tricks!
Another tricky line is:

1.e4 c6 2.♘c3

White can also try moves like 2.b3 or 2.f4, but they shouldn’t bother us at all.

2...d5

And now not the expected 3.d4 or 3.♘f3, but rather:

3.♕f3!?

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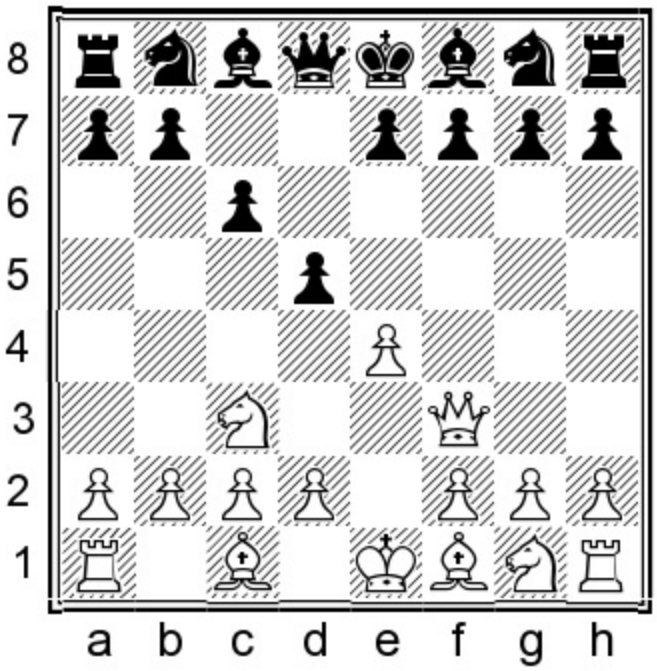

What is this? Okay, it attacks the d5-pawn, but we can react with a fresh and exciting idea:

3...e5!?

The space-gaining 3...d4 is met by 4.♗c4! with interesting complications ahead.

3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 looks like a tempting way to aim for our favourite ...exf6 structure, but White generally avoids it (at least for the time being) with 5.♗c4, after which 5...♘bd7 6.d4 ♘b6 7.♗d3 gambits the d4-pawn. Previously I recommended taking it, which remains a valid course of action, but why grab a pawn and defend when we can turn the tables on White?

4.exd5 ♘f6⩱

Instead of pursuing his own attack, White immediately finds himself under pressure. Black has easy development and excellent chances to seize the initiative.

***

A last attempt worth highlighting is:

1.e4 c6 2.♘e2 d5 3.e5

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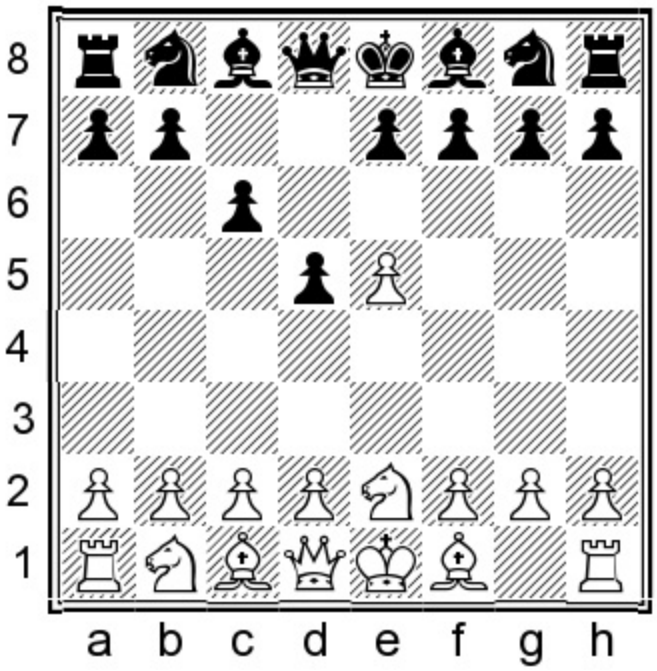

White plays a strange version of the Advance Variation without d2-d4. He hopes to be able to hit the black bishop fast after 3...♗f5 4.♘g3 ♗g6 5.h4. This is actually not as dangerous as it might look at first glance. Even so, I have opted to avoid it and instead go for the more original:

3...d4!

All in all, Black is well placed to meet these minor lines.

Theory

1.e4 c6

We will examine **A)** 2.♗c4?!, **B)** 2.♘c3 d5 3.♕f3, **C)** 2.b3, **D)** 2.f4 and **E)** 2.♘e2.

A) 2.♗c4?! d5 3.♗b3

As stated earlier, 3.exd5 cxd5 gives White a poor version of the Exchange Variation, so the text move is the only one that makes any sense.

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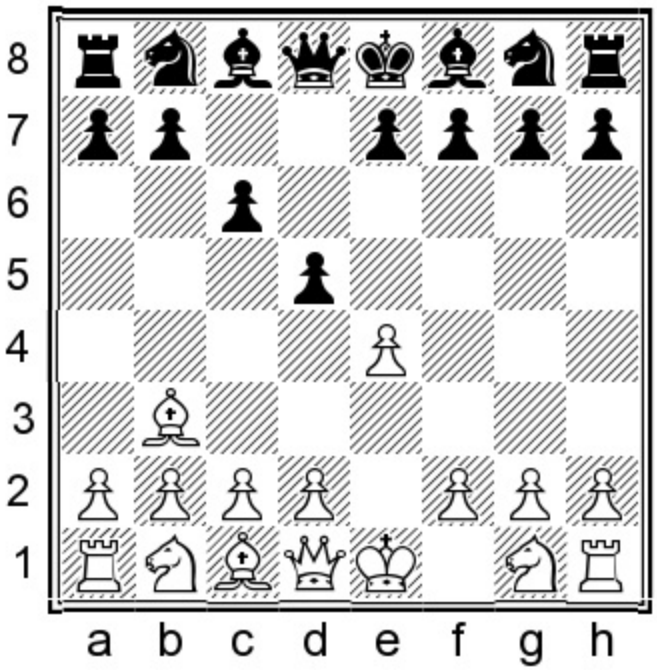


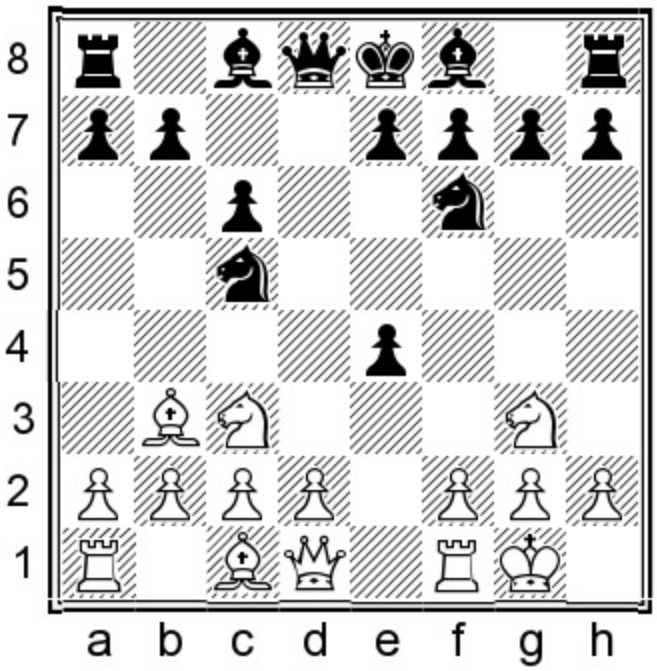
3...dxe4 4.♕h5

An alternative approach is:

4.♘c3 ♘f6 5.♘ge2

5.f3 exf3 6.♘xf3 ♗f5∓ leaves White with a poor version of the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit.

5...♘a6 6.0-0 ♘c5 7.♘g3



And now Black can obtain a clear advantage with:

7...a5!N

Targeting the bishop.

Instead, 7...♗g4 8.♕e1 e6 9.♘gxe4 ♘fxe4 10.♘xe4 occurred in Firouzja – Cheparinov, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018, when 10...♘xe4N 11.♕xe4 ♗f5 would have been comfortably equal, but this

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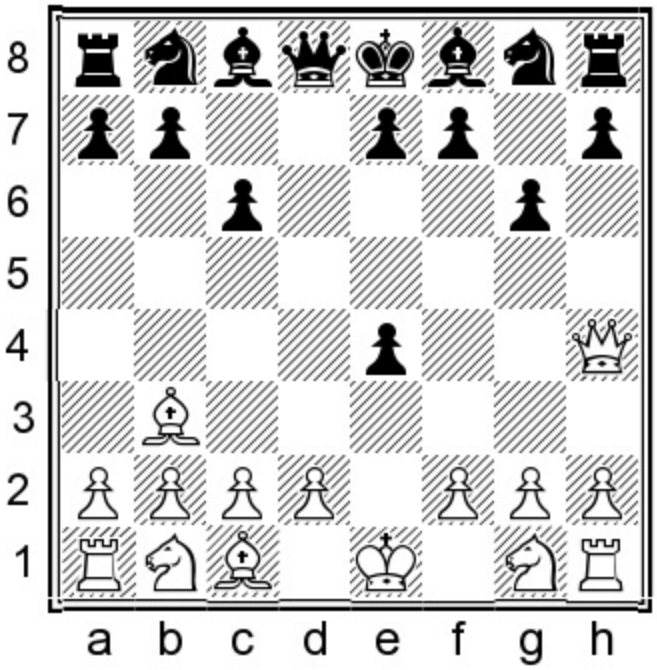
is not the punishment that White's dubious opening play deserves.

4...g6

This is best, for a few reasons.

4...e6 5.♘c3 ♘f6 6.♕h4 enables White to regain his pawn.

5.♕h4



5...♗f5!N

Everybody plays 5...♘f6 when 6.♘c3 (or even 6.f3) is how it usually goes. Black is doing fine there of course, but the text move practically refutes White's entire scheme. I will not take credit for the novelty, because it is proposed by both Rambaldi and L'Ami.

6.♘c3 e6!

This is the point. The threat to the queen ensures that White will not have time to capture on e4.

7.♕xd8† ♔xd8∓

Black is a pawn up!

B) 2.♘c3 d5 3.♕f3 e5!?

This gambit seems theoretically fine, as well as a good practical choice to take White by surprise and put him under pressure. Here is a brief summary of the two main alternatives:

3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6! 5.♗c4

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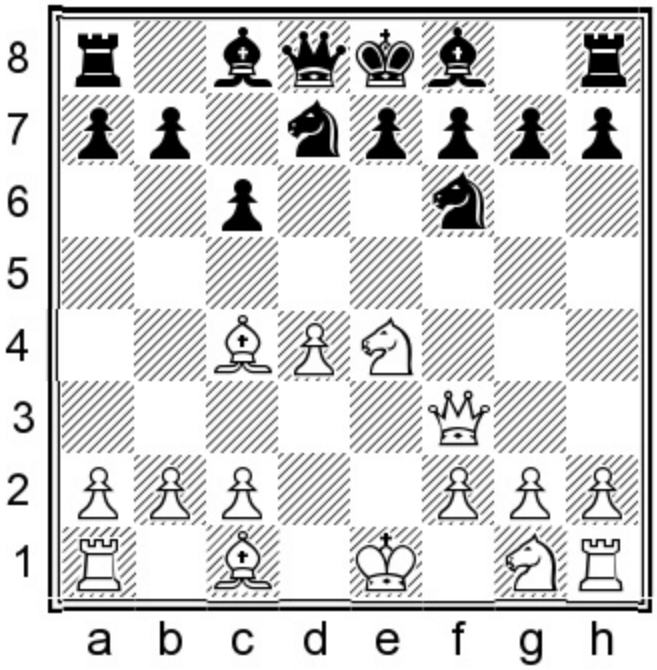
5.♘xf6† exf6 simply gives us a pleasant version of our new pet system after 6.♗c4 ♗d6 (or 6...♘d7).

5...♘bd7 6.d4

If White reverts to 6.♘xf6† then 6...exf6!? is still possible and a good choice.



6...♘b6

More or less forcing White to sacrifice his d-pawn for speculative compensation.

7.♗d3

This is the best try.

7...♕xd4 8.♘e2

From here, 8...♕d7 was my previous recommendation and 8...♕e5!? also deserves attention, but in both cases White has some initiative for the pawn.

3...d4 4.♗c4

4.♘ce2?! e5 is already slightly better for Black.

4...♘f6

Taking on c3 may not lead to an instant forced mate, but it is suicidal all the same.

5.e5!

If White withdraws the knight then Black is simply better. If you wish to play safely without having to learn any serious theory, then a decent option is:

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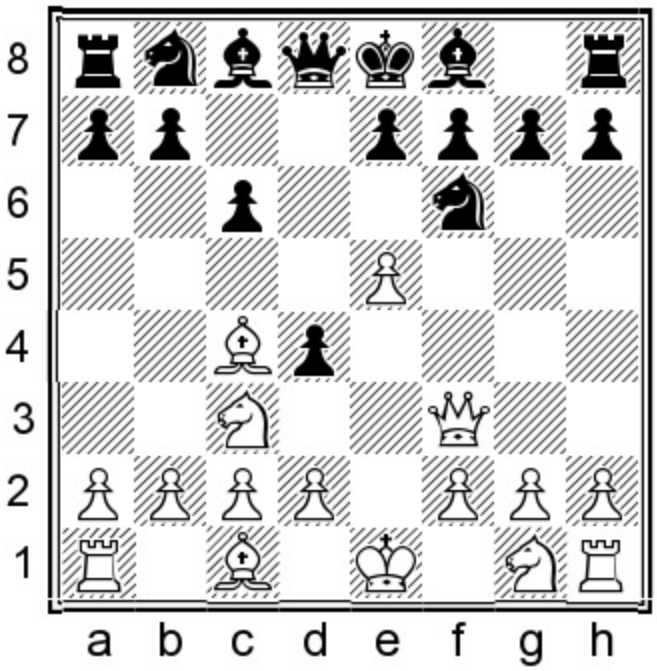

5...dxc3

The more complex option is: 5...♘bd7!? Trying to punish White for the extravagant queen sortie. 6.exf6 ♘e5⇄ Black will regain the piece with an interesting game, although the analysis can get quite complicated. Since I am already giving 3...e5 for players seeking the initiative, there is really no need to go into further details; I will just let you know that the idea exists.

6.exf6 exf6 7.dxc3 ♘d7

7...♗d6 is also okay.

8.♕e2†

Black can safely answer the check with:

8...♗e7 9.♘f3 0-0

With an equal game.

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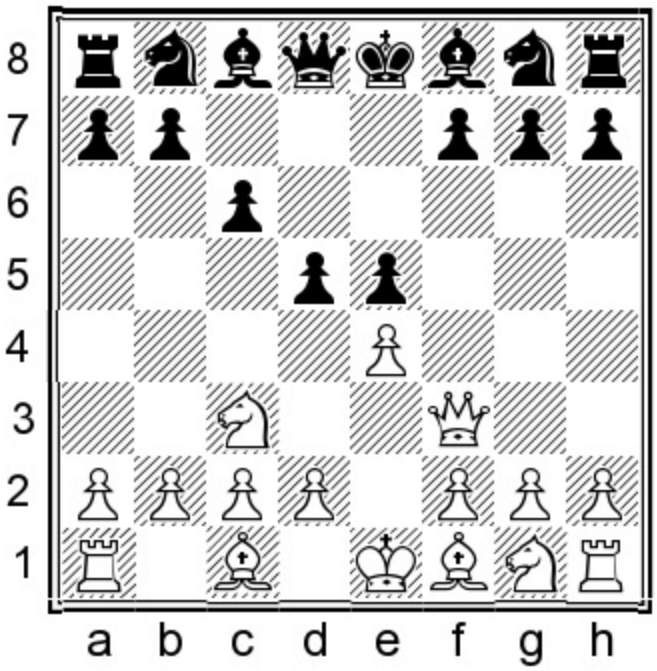

4.exd5

4.♕g3 f6! 5.d3 d4 6.♘ce2 c5 7.f4 ♘c6 is pleasant for Black, especially if, like me, you are a 1.d4 player!

4...♘f6 5.dxc6

This is the most common continuation, and was MVL's choice.

5.♗c4 e4 6.♕e2 (6.♘xe4? ♕e7∓) 6...cxd5 7.♗xd5 was seen in Brynell – St. Hansen, Brondby 1985, when 7...♘xd5N 8.♕b5† ♘c6 9.♕xd5 ♕xd5 10.♘xd5 ♗d6⩱ would have given Black full compensation despite the queen exchange, thanks to his bishop pair and speedy development.

5...♘xc6

Black has great development for the pawn. To begin with, he is threatening ...♘d4.

6.♗b5 ♗d7 7.♘ge2

Another good thing about this line is that many of the moves are practically forced.

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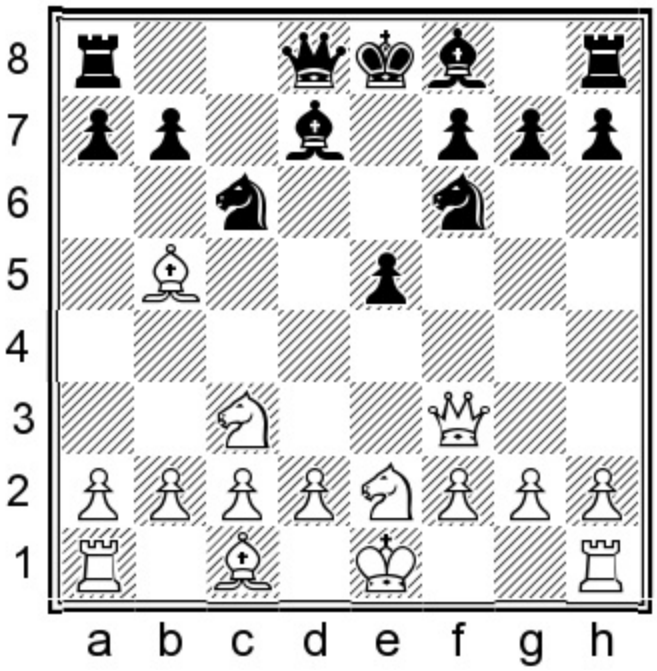

7...♗e7!

The most precise.

7...♘b4 occurred in Amonatov – Belozerov, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018, when 8.♕f5!N would have been annoying.

7...♗c5 8.0-0 0-0 9.d3 ♘b4 (9...a6!?) 10.♗g5! favoured White in Vachier-Lagrave – Admiraal, Internet (rapid) 2018.

8.0-0 0-0 9.♗c4

9.d3 was played in Lauer – Simmons, corr. 2010. Unlike the examples in the note to Black's 7th move above, 9...♘b4!N would have been fine here, when Black picks up the c2-pawn with a good game.

9.♘e4 ♘xe4 10.♕xe4 ♔h8! gives Black the makings of a huge initiative and White has to be extremely careful. Still, he seems to maintain the balance after: 11.d4! f5 12.♕d5 a6 13.♗xc6 ♗xc6 14.♕xd8 ♖axd8 15.c3 ♗b5=

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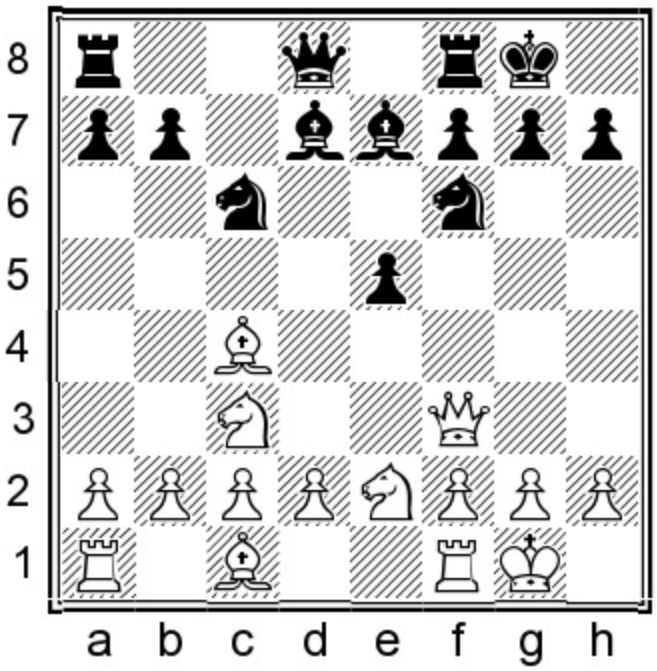

9...e4!

In our best Mikhail Tal style, Black invests a second pawn to accelerate the initiative.

9...♘a5!? is the less forcing approach, just playing for compensation.

10.♘xe4

White might as well accept the gift. Of course he can move the queen instead, but in that case Black will have promising play anyway. For instance:

10.♕g3 ♘b4 11.♗b3 a5↑ annoys White on the queenside, and if 12.a3 a4! 13.axb4 axb3 14.♖xa8 ♕xa8 White's structure will be a mess.

10.♕f4 ♘b4 11.♗b3

11.♘xe4 ♘xe4 12.♕xe4 ♗c6 13.♕g4 ♘xc2 14.♖b1 ♗f6⩲ gives Black nice activity.

11...a5!? 12.a3 a4

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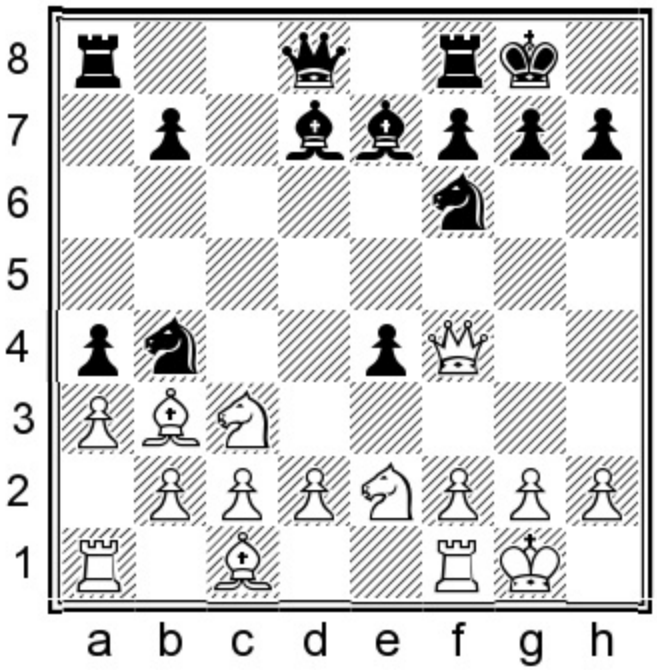

13.axb4

Not 13.♘xa4? ♖xa4 14.♗xa4 ♘bd5 and Black wins.

Also 13.♗xf7† ♖xf7 14.axb4 ♘d5 15.♕xe4 ♘xb4 can only be good for Black.

13...axb3 14.♖xa8 ♕xa8 15.cxb3 ♕a6

Black is ready to take over, for example:

16.♘g3 ♗d6 17.♕e3 ♖e8↑

10...♘e5

The next few moves are more or less forced.

11.♕c3 ♘xc4 12.♕xc4 ♖c8 13.♘xf6† ♗xf6 14.♕b3 ♖e8

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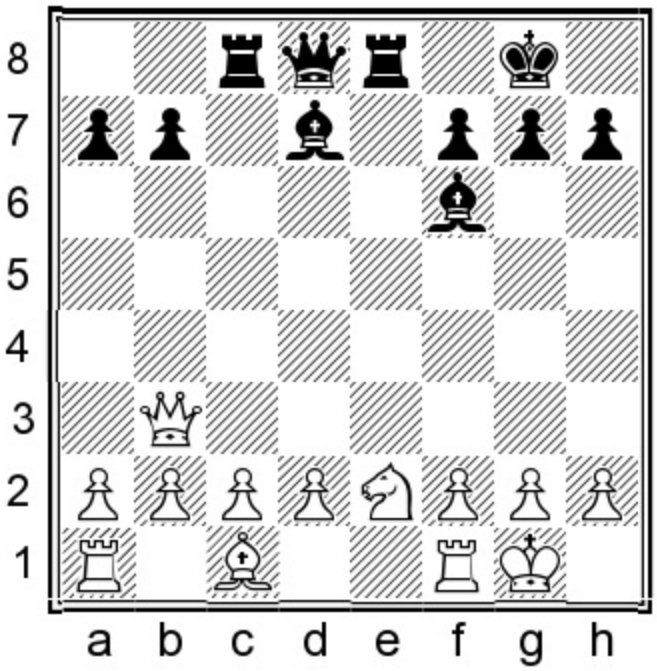

This looks like a game from the Romantic era played by Paul Morphy or Adolf Anderssen. Despite having two extra pawns, it is difficult to find a good way to proceed for White. What should he do about the hanging knight on e2 and the terrible development in general? The engines come up with:

15.♘f4

15.♘g3 looks natural but after 15...♗e6! 16.♕xb7 ♗d5 White is in trouble. For instance: 17.♕xa7 ♖a8 18.♕c5 ♖a5 19.♕b4 ♕a8! 20.f3 ♖a4 21.♕b5 ♗d4† 22.♔h1 ♗c4–+ And it's all over.

15...♗e5 16.d4!

White returns a pawn to get his pieces out just in time.

16...♗xd4 17.c3

17.♗e3 ♗xe3 18.fxe3 ♗c6⩱ is more or less the same thing.

17...♗b6

White has nothing better than:

18.♗e3 ♗xe3 19.fxe3 ♗c6⩱

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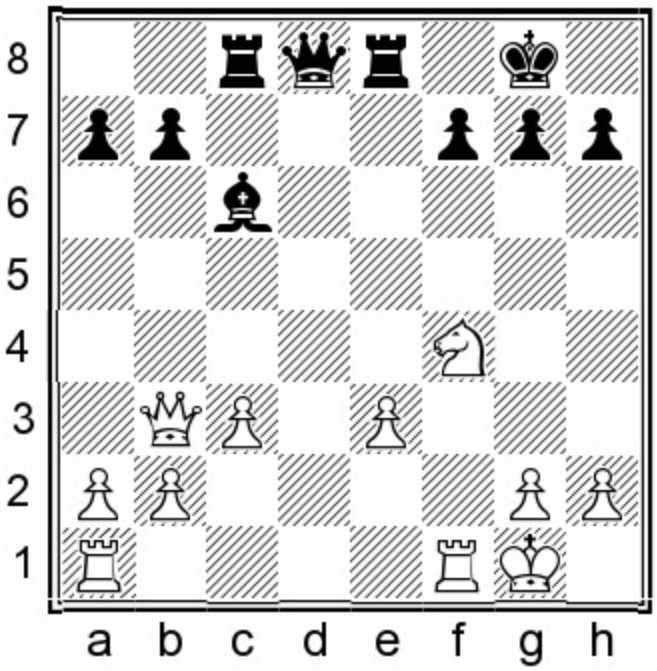

Black has full positional compensation. The queen will most likely go to g5, especially if a white rook lands on d1. In a practical game, I think White should be happy if he can maintain the balance.

C) 2.b3 d5 3.♗b2

Once again we see that White is leaving his e4-pawn en prise. This time we take it!

3.exd5, 3.e5 and 3.♘c3 all avoid the loss of a pawn, but make no sense whatsoever in connection with 2.b3.

3...dxe4 4.♘c3

White must concentrate on winning the pawn back if possible.

4.♘e2 ♘f6 5.♘g3 is met in a similar fashion: 5...g6!? 6.♘xe4 ♗g7 7.♘xf6† exf6 With a good game for Black.

4...♘f6 5.♘ge2

5.♕e2 ♗f5 keeps the extra pawn.

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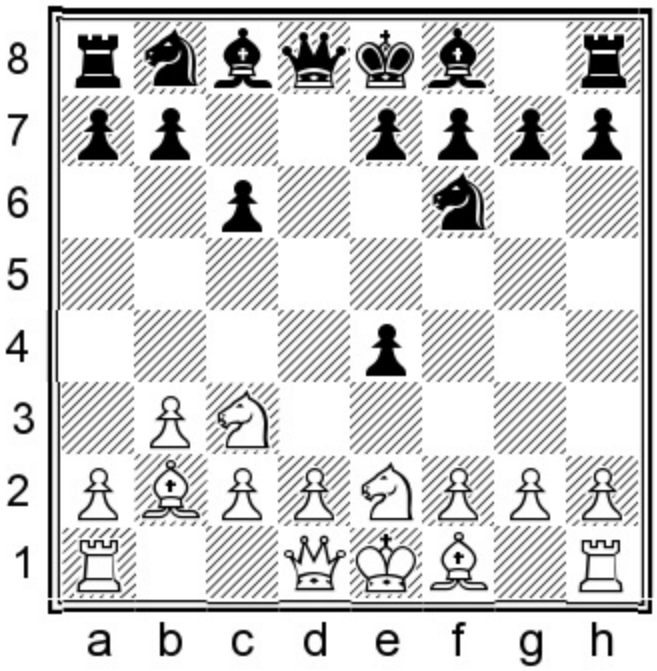

5...g6!?

This is a fresh idea which I first saw mentioned by Rambaldi.

5...♗f5 6.♘g3 e6 is the traditional approach, which I gave in *Grandmaster Repertoire 7*. After 7.♕e2 ♗b4 8.0-0-0 a simple solution for Black is 8...♕e7 9.♘cxe4 ♗xe4 10.♘xe4 ♗a3! 11.♘xf6† ♕xf6 12.d4 ♗xb2† 13.♔xb2 0-0= with a pleasant game.

6.♘g3

6.♘xe4? is met by 6...♘xe4! 7.♗xh8 f6 and the bishop on h8 will soon be picked up.

6...♗g7 7.♘cxe4 0-0 8.♘xf6† exf6!

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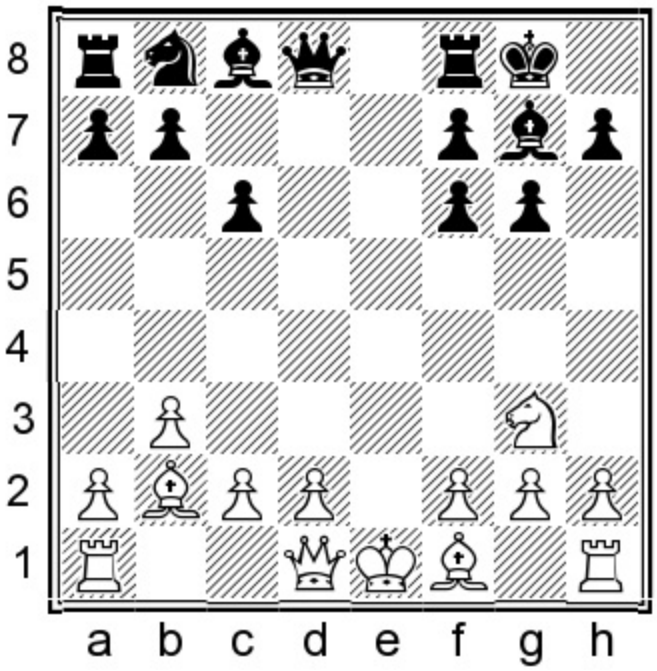

9.♕f3

Or 9.♗e2 h5! with some initiative for Black.

9...♖e8† 10.♗e2 f5 11.♗xg7 ♔xg7∓

All this happened in an engine game, and it's obvious that Black has a pleasant version of the thematic pawn structure from the first part of the book.

D) 2.f4

As a lifelong Anti-Dutch spokesman, let me use this opportunity to explain why it is bad to move the f-pawn so early: it permanently weakens the position! Just look at the important f2-square.

And for what benefits? Okay, White controls the e5-square, but that could have been accomplished by the far more natural 2.d4!. Maybe it is taking it too far to call 2.f4 an outright mistake, since the position is still more or less balanced – but Black certainly has an easier time than in the main lines.

2...d5

Of course we play the usual Caro-Kann move.

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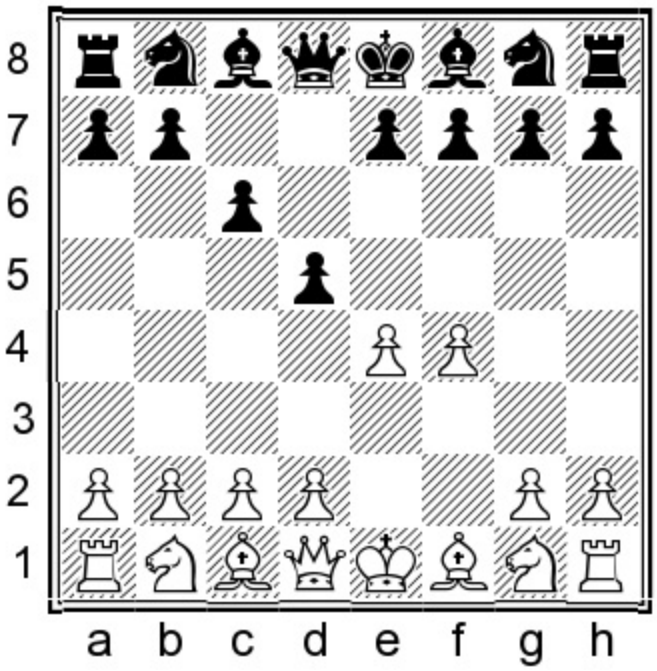

3.e5

Grabbing space and keeping the position closed.

3.d3?! allows Black not only to exchange queens, but also to seize the initiative: 3...dxe4 4.dxe4 ♕xd1† 5.♔xd1 ♘f6 (5...e5!? is also fine.) 6.e5 (6.♘c3 e5!↑) 6...♘d5 7.♘f3 ♗f5⇄

The gambit 3.♘f3 dxe4?! 4.♘g5 is best met by 4...♘f6 5.♗c4 e6 when White can win the pawn back, but Black gets a pleasant position after: 6.♘c3 b5 7.♗b3 ♘bd7 8.♘gxe4 a5 9.a3 ♘c5∓ Chouinard – Dube, Ste-Foy 2015.

3.♘c3 allows: 3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6! 5.♘f2 (5.♘xf6† exf6 gives us a dream version of the ...exf6 Classical structure, as the pawn really looks stupid on f4.) 5...g6 6.♘f3 ♗g7= We have a board full of pieces and the main battle lies ahead, but any problems on Black's side will not be due to the outcome of the opening.

3...♗f5 4.♘f3

If White goes for 4.d4 either here or in the next few moves, we will convert to the 3.e5 ♗f5 4.f4 sideline of the Advance Variation.

4...e6 5.♗e2

5.c3 c5 6.d3?! is unimpressive – if White is going to play the modest d2-d3, there is no need for c2-c3. After 6...♘c6∓ Black already has the more comfortable game.

5...c5 6.0-0 ♘c6 7.d3

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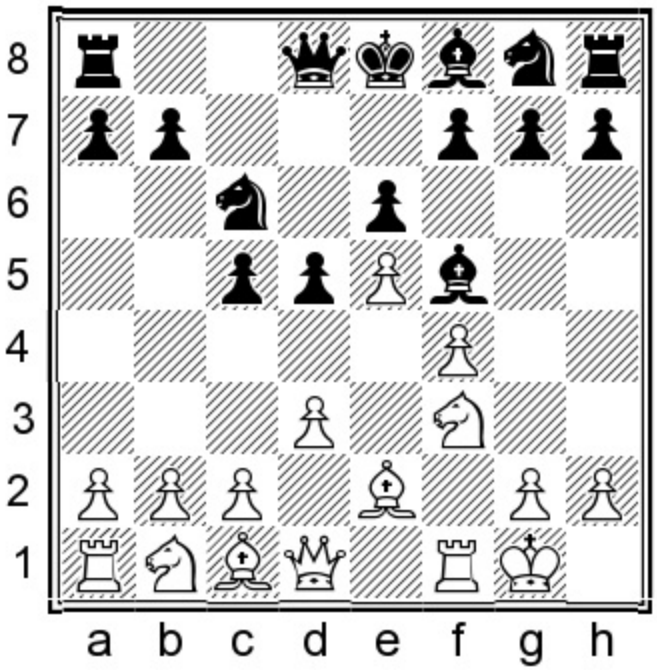

7...♘h6!?

A nice way to get the pieces out.

Black could also consider the preparatory 7...h5.

8.h3 ♗g6

Clearing f5 for the knight. A logical continuation is:

9.♗e3 ♘f5 10.♗f2 h5⇄

Lodwig – Packroff, email 2013.

E) 2.♘e2 d5 3.e5

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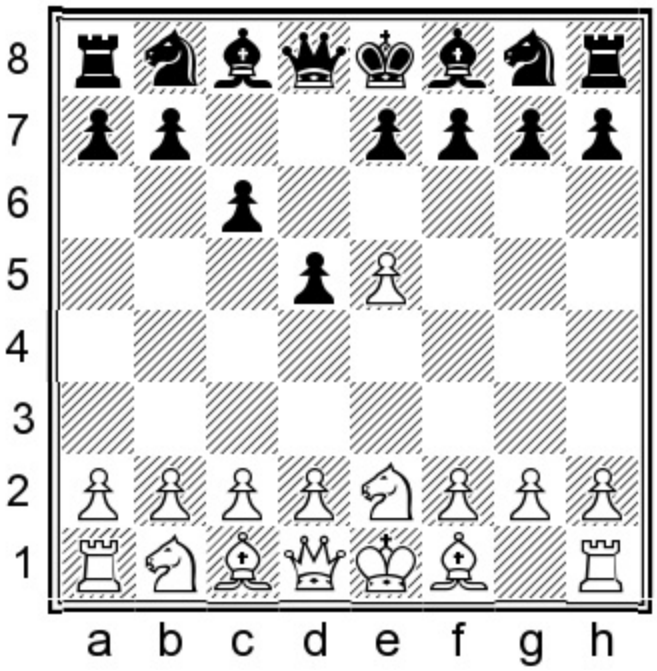

An interesting idea, designed to scare Black away from getting his bishop out with ...♗f5.

3...d4!

Exploiting White's omission of d2-d4 is logical.

3...c5 has been the most popular choice, but then 4.d4, 4.c3 and even 4.b4!? all demand attention.

3...♗f5 4.♘g3 ♗g6 is perfectly playable; I spent some time analysing the 'big idea' of White's move order, namely 5.h4 h6 6.h5 ♗h7 7.e6, and found that after 7...fxe6! 8.d4 ♕d6! White does not have enough control over the centre to justify his pawn sacrifice.

4.c3

This is the most popular move, attacking the annoying d4-pawn at once. Black was ready to protect it and strengthen his influence in the centre with ...c5 and ...♘c6. Here are a few other possibilities:

4.d3 is too tame to pose any problems. Black can just go 4...c5 or 4...g6 with a fine position.

4.♘g3 ♕d5! 5.f4 The e5-pawn is a target.

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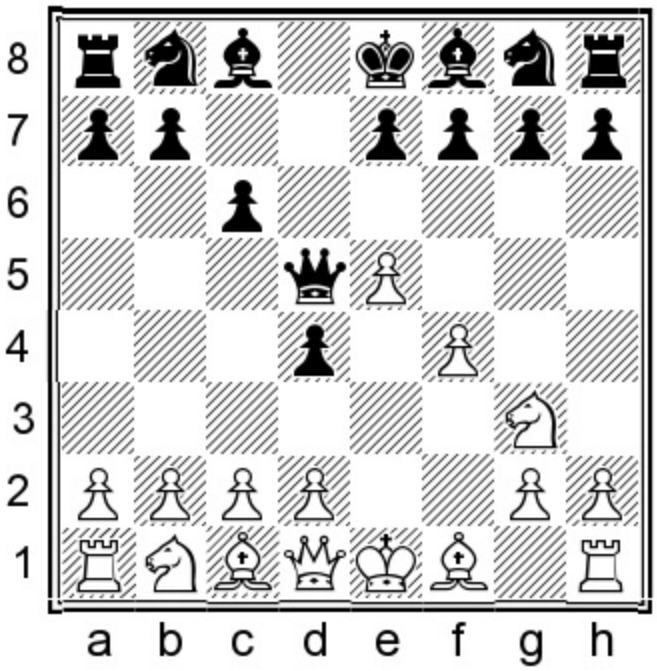


In *Grandmaster Repertoire 7* I proposed 5...g5!?, which has since been tested and my verdict stands. After 6.d3 gxf4 7.♗xf4 ♗h6 Black was absolutely fine in Farran Martos – Narciso Dublan, El Sauzal 2010.

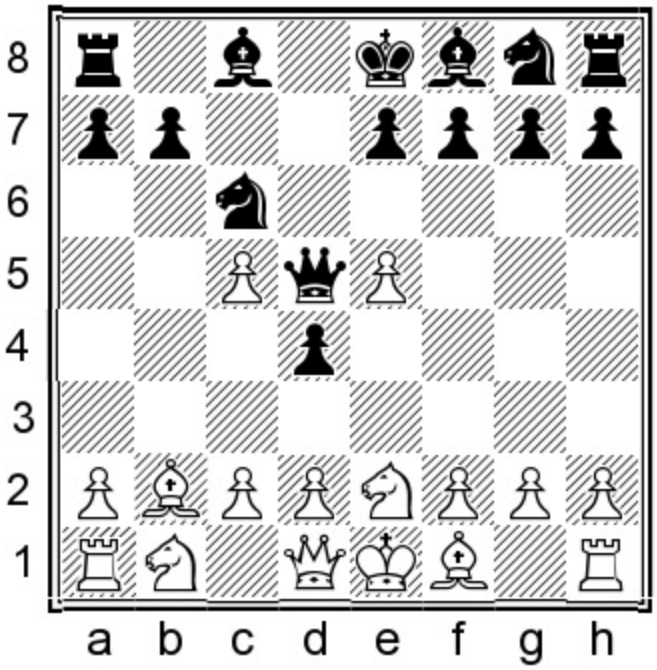
4.b4?!

This looks too loose, and Black has several good responses. For simplicity, let's centralize the queen again!

4...♕d5 5.♗b2

5.f4 occurred in Juracsik – Bensaid, Budapest 2015, when 5...♗g4N would have favoured Black.

5...c5 6.bxc5 ♘c6



7.f4!?N

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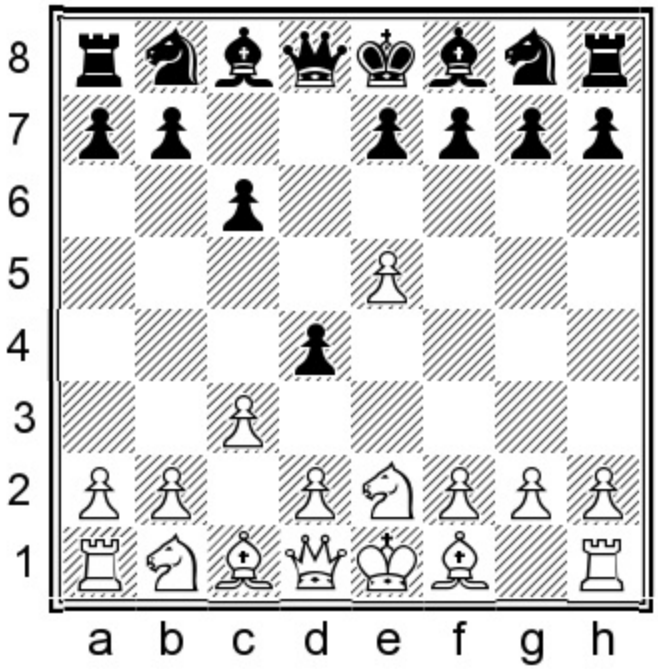
Possibly White's best chance.

7.d3 ♕xc5 (7...♕xe5 is similar and may transpose.) 8.c3 ♕xe5 9.cxd4 ♕a5†∓ This left Black with the clearly better pawn structure in Le Roux – Vogel, Germany 2018.

7...g5!?⇄

A somewhat crazy position, but it looks good for Black.



4...c5 5.b4!?

The emphasis is on originality!

Black is also doing great after 5.♘f4 e6∓ or 5.f4 ♘c6 (5...g5!?) 6.♘g3 e6 (6...♘h6!?) 7.♗b5 ♗d7⇄.

5...♕d5 6.bxc5

A noteworthy game continued: 6.f4? d3! 7.♘g3 c4 8.♕f3

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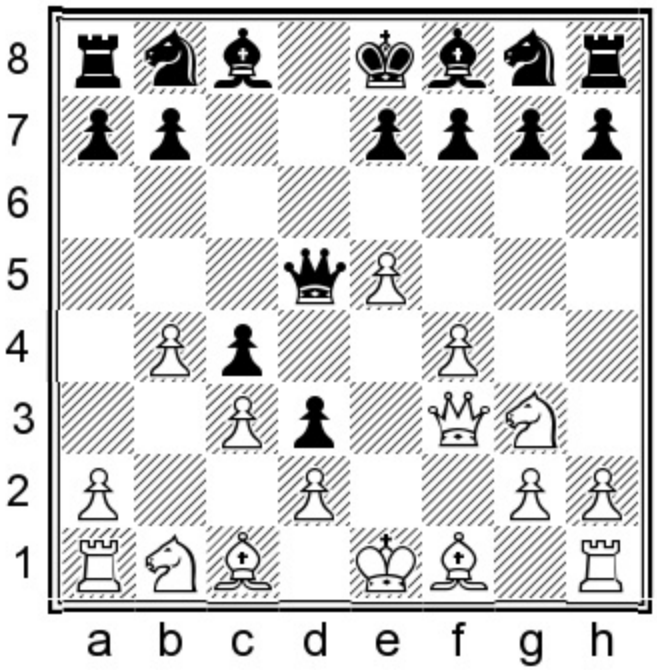
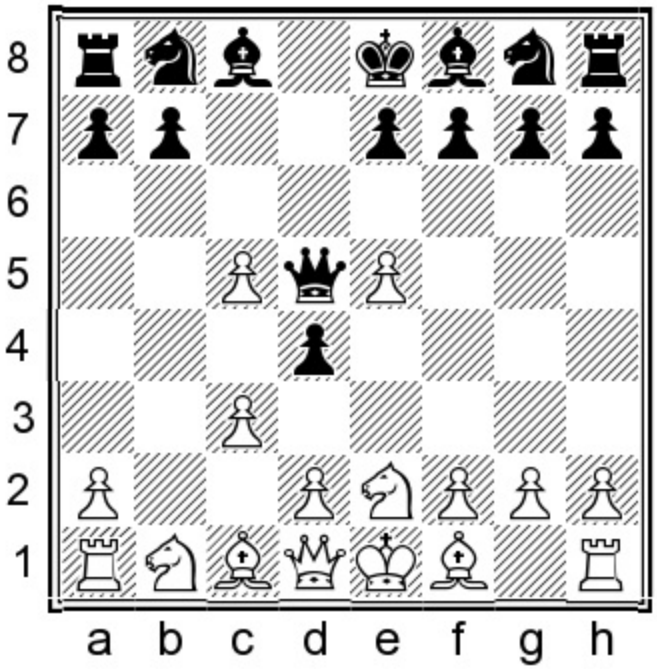


White eventually prevailed in Mamedov – Navara, Huaian (blitz) 2016, but I am sure that with more thinking time Mamedov would have chosen a better opening line and Navara would have correctly assessed 8...♕xf3N 9.gxf3 g6∓ as being strategically winning for Black.
6.d3!?N may be White's best, intending 6...cxb4 7.cxd4 when White's central control offers just about enough compensation for his bad structure. Play might continue 7...♘c6 8.♗b2 e6 9.♘d2 ♘ge7 10.♘c4 ♘f5 11.♘e3 ♕a5 when the position is unclear, but Black looks to be in good shape.



6...d3!

Black wins the e5-pawn with check and has a good game.

7.♕a4† ♘c6 8.♘g3 ♕xe5† 9.♕e4 ♕xe4† 10.♘xe4 f5!

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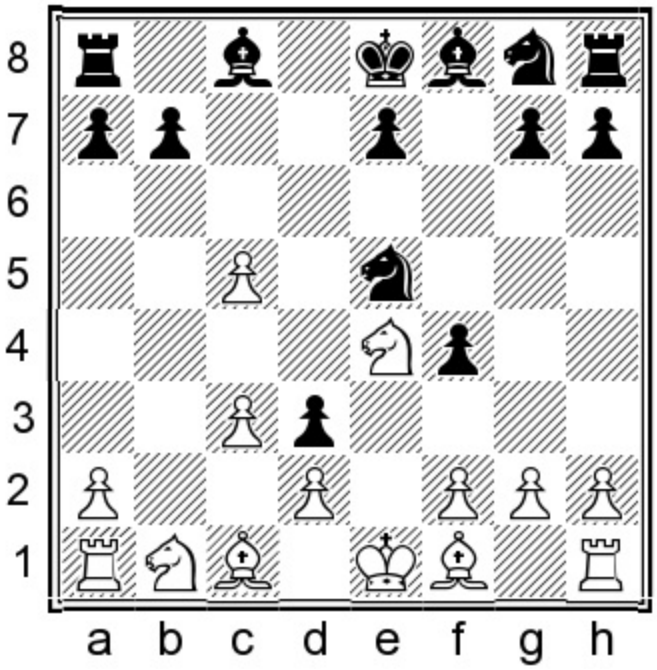
Black takes the initiative.

11.♘g3 f4 12.♘e4 ♘e5!∓

Hauge – Agrest, Sweden 2018.



Conclusion

Against all openings there are some offbeat tries, and the Caro-Kann is no different. Theoretically the only question is if Black is better already – and in most cases I believe he is! Since you are unlikely to meet these lines in a serious game there is no real need to memorize the details. If you are confronted with one of these lines, just use your common sense along with a minimal amount of theoretical knowledge and you should be in great shape.

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