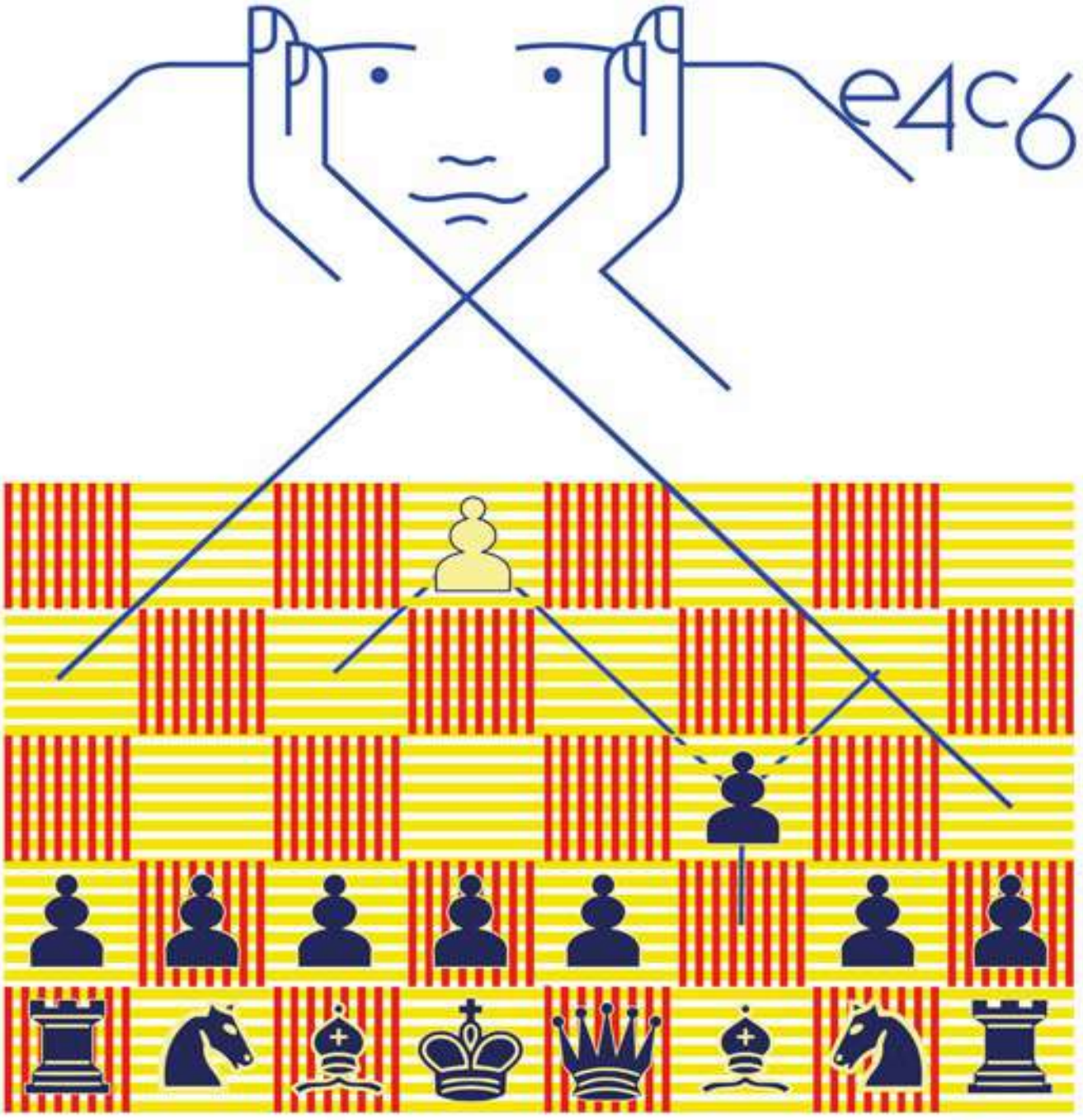
The Caro-Kann Revisited

A Complete Repertoire for Black

Francesco Rambaldi



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by

Francesco Rambaldi

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Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
⟳	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
⩱	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+–	White has a decisive advantage
–+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
⇄	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⩲	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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To Gérard Talvard, connoisseur of chess, my first chess coach

Preface

The modern chess player faces a challenging task before every game: the choice of opening. For most players, the ideal opening for Black has the following characteristics:

a. It requires a limited amount of memorization.
b. It contains an element of surprise for the opponent.
c. It leads to an equal position.
d. It allows for a relatively complex game, with winning chances for Black.

Obviously, the ideal opening does not exist. Before every game, the modern chess player needs to consider numerous variables – the most obvious being his specific opponent and the tournament situation – and then compromise. As the number of games played in each variation increases and opening theory becomes more and more developed, finding a suitable opening becomes harder and harder, and players tend to follow the most popular variations.

Openings rise and fall in popularity over time, as players continue to learn and find new ideas for both sides. The two main replies to 1.e4 have always been 1...e5 and 1...c5, and with good 'homework' it is exceedingly likely you will equalize with either. However, in tandem with their popularity, the amount of theory that is needed to play those openings has increased as well.

In this book, I recommend the Caro-Kann Defense as a viable and flexible opening for Black. Let's examine, point by point, how it compares to both 1...e5 and 1...c5.

• Judging the amount of theory required to play an opening is not an exact science, but it is quite clear that the Caro-Kann will be an easier opening to pick up from scratch than any Sicilian. The amount of theory is probably more comparable to a 1...e5 repertoire, depending on which variations one chooses to play.

• As I mentioned earlier, the Caro-Kann is not played as frequently as 1...e5 and 1...c5. Further, the Caro-Kann comes in various flavors and can be adopted either as a mainstay or a surprise weapon, due to the diverse options that Black has available.

• Chess players always need to make some concessions in the opening, but this point is the hardest to tackle for any chess player (for good reason). I believe that the Caro-Kann is very playable, and that it is White who needs to find fresh ideas to trouble Black. Opening theory will evolve well beyond this book, but the Caro-Kann will remain a viable opening.

• Last but not least, the Caro-Kann is a pretty good choice if you are looking to avoid simple draws or major simplifications since it rarely leads to forcing variations.

The Caro-Kann Defense has always been one of my favorite openings to play and was the very first opening I learned when I started playing chess. Former world champion Anatoly Karpov espoused this opening throughout his career and, with his solid and positional style, inspired me to play the Caro-

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Kann as well. Many games have been played, and theory has evolved since the days of Karpov's Caro-Kann. As you will see in this book, this opening offers Black many opportunities for dynamic play, despite its solid framework.

My hope is that readers of all levels will find something of value to them in this book. The material contains many new ideas and the analysis often stretch quite far from the opening stages. Nevertheless, I have done my best to help the reader make sense of the complicated variations and of the positional nuances inextricably woven between them. The idea is not only to show you the moves, but also to help you develop both your understanding of the underlying plans and your familiarity with broader strategic concepts, to guide your decision-making even beyond the opening.

Francesco Rambaldi
St. Louis, March 2020

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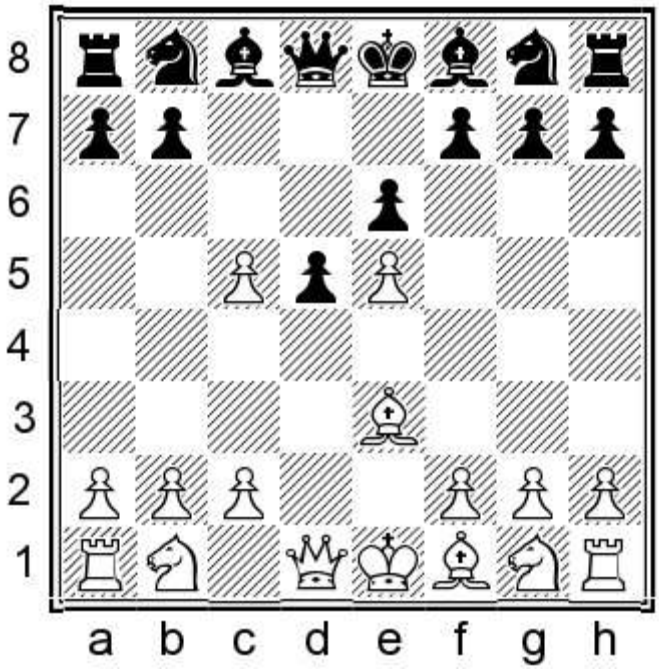
Part I
Advance Caro-Kann

Chapter 1
4.dxc5 e6 5.♗e3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♗e3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 1 – 4.dxc5 e6 5.♗e3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♗e3 ♘d7

a) 6.♗b5

b) 6.♘f3

a) 6.♗b5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♗e3

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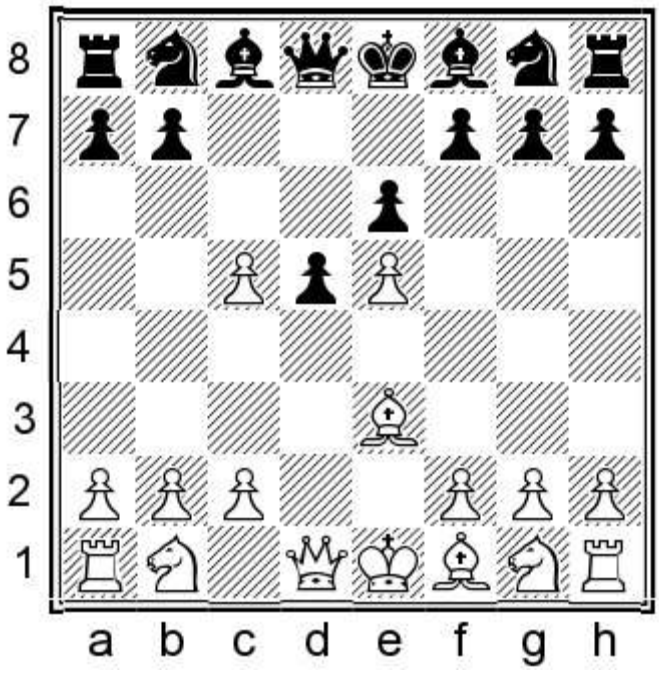

Position after: 5.♗e3

This move brings about a positional struggle in which White tries to use his central control whereas Black tries to open lines to gain counterplay. Black will recapture the pawn on c5, but the text move forces him to trade the dark-squared bishops.

5...♘d7!

Other moves are too slow:

A) 5...♘e7?! 6.♘f3 ♘f5 7.♗g5! ♕c7 8.♗d3 ♗xc5 9.♘c3 h6 10.♗c1! ♘c6 11.0-0± Black is behind in development and has to cope with the threat of ♗xf5.

B) 5...♘h6?! 6.♗d3! White prevents ...♘f5 and forces Black to play ...♘d7. 6...♘d7 7.♘f3 ♘g4 Black will recapture on c5 with the bishop, but he misplaces the knight on g4. [7...♗xc5 8.♗xh6! gxh6 9.♘c3± Black's pawn structure is ruined and White enjoys a positional edge.] 8.♗f4!N 8...♗xc5 9.0-0 f6 10.exf6 ♕xf6 11.♗g3 0-0 12.♕e1!± Without ...♘ge5, Black's initiative cannot proceed and he is left to deal with his overextended position.

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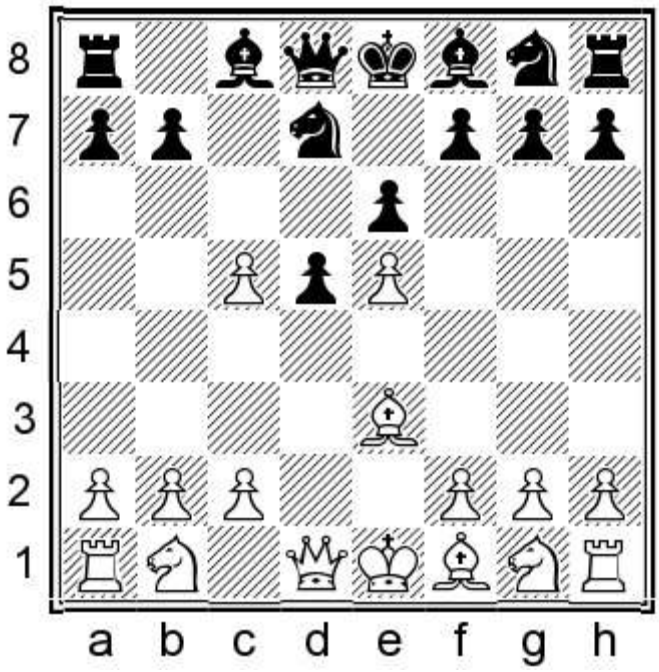

Position after: 5...♘d7!

6.♗b5!?

An attempt to defend the c5-pawn. However, White now lacks coordination and Black generates enough play to compensate for the missing pawn.

A) 6.c4 does not achieve much, since after 6...♗xc5 7.♗xc5 ♘xc5 8.cxd5 exd5= Black's piece play compensates for the isolated pawn.

B) 6.♘f3 is covered in the next subchapter.

6...♘e7

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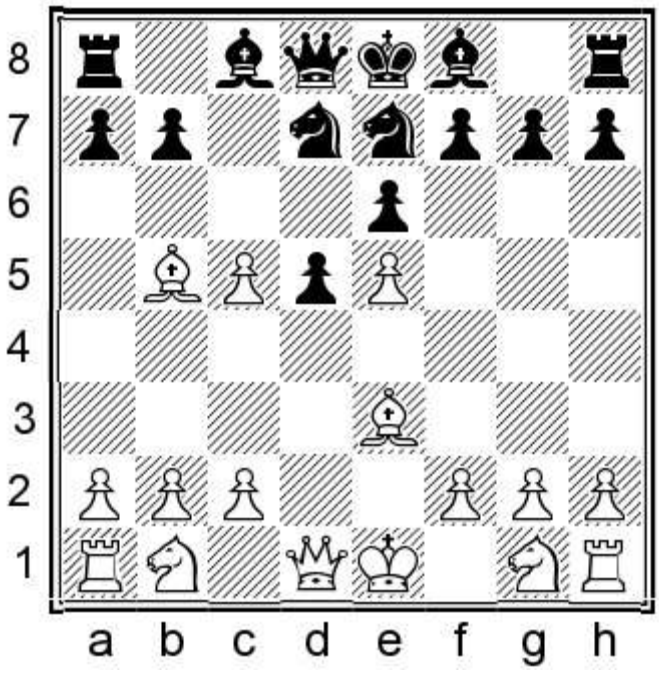
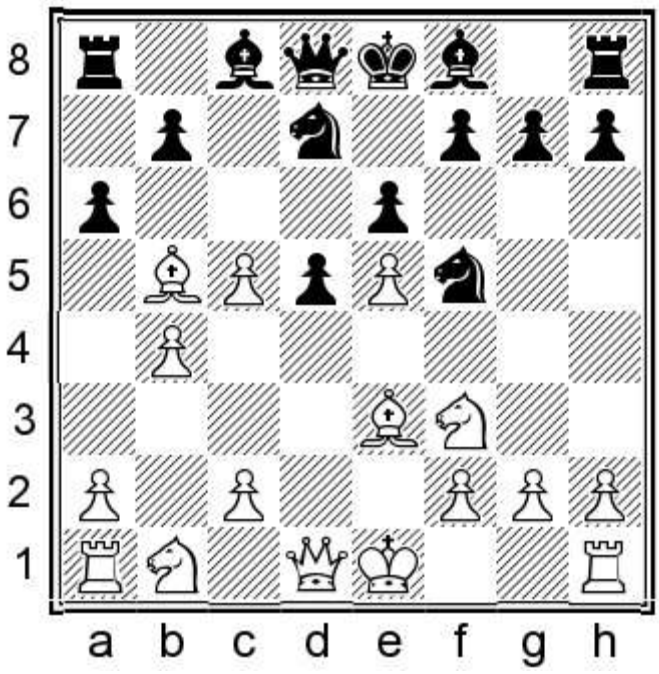


Position after: 6...♘e7

7.♘f3

7.c3 allows Black to recapture the c5-pawn. 7...♘c6 8.♘f3 ♗xc5 9.♗xc5 ♘xc5 10.0-0 0-0 11.♘bd2 ♗d7! [The natural 11...♕b6 is less precise: 12.a4 a6 13.♗xc6 bxc6 14.b4 ♘d7 15.♘b3 c5 16.a5!N 16...♕c7 17.♖e1± and the c8-bishop will be a source of headaches for Black.] 12.♗xc6N 12...bxc6 13.b4 ♘b7=

7...♘f5 8.b4 a6



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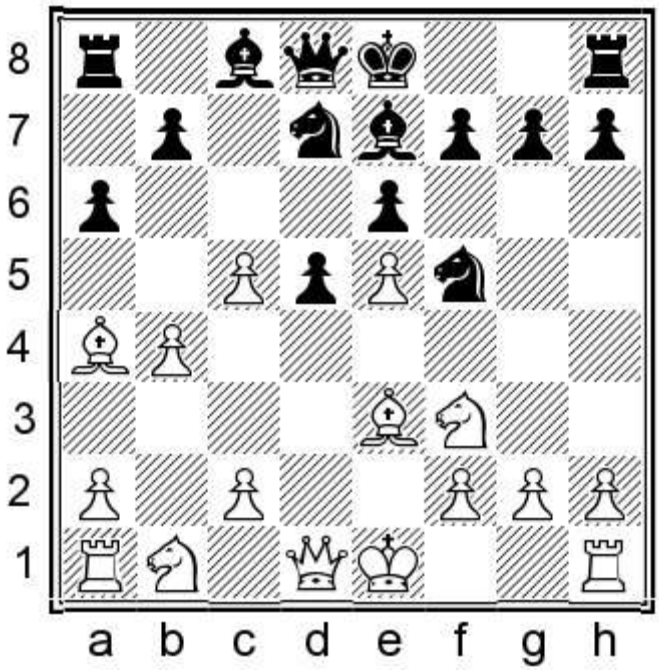
Position after: 8...a6

Forcing White to misplace his bishop on a4, where it will lose contact with some central squares.

9.♗a4 a5

This move leads to a forcing line where Black finds compensation for the pawn and can then simplify down to equality.

9...♗e7!?N This is an interesting novelty which leads to less forcing play.



Position after: 9...♗e7!?N

Black keeps his options open and can play either on the queenside with ...a5, or on the kingside with ...f6. This move leads to an extremely rich middlegame with chances for both sides.

A) 10.0-0 0-0

A1) 11.♗f4 White keeps the bishop, but the f4-square is not a long-term solution: 11...g5! 12.♗d2 a5 13.c3 f6!∞. We have reached a very double-edged position which is hard to assess, but it seems to me that Black has excellent compensation for the pawn.

A2) 11.c4 dxc4 12.♘c3 b5! An important move: Black fights for his own space on the queenside. 13.♗c2 ♗b7 14.♗xf5 [14.a4 invites Black to shake up the queenside with 14...♘xe3 15.fxe3 a5!∞] 14...exf5 15.a4 bxa4 16.♘xa4 ♕c7=

B) 10.♗f4 As in the previous line, this move invites 10...g5! and after 11.g4 ♘h4 12.♗g3 ♘xf3+ 13.♕xf3 a5 14.c6 bxc6 15.♗xc6 ♖b8 16.b5 ♗b7∓ Black has adequate compensation for the pawn.

C) 10.♗d2 0-0 11.c3 a5

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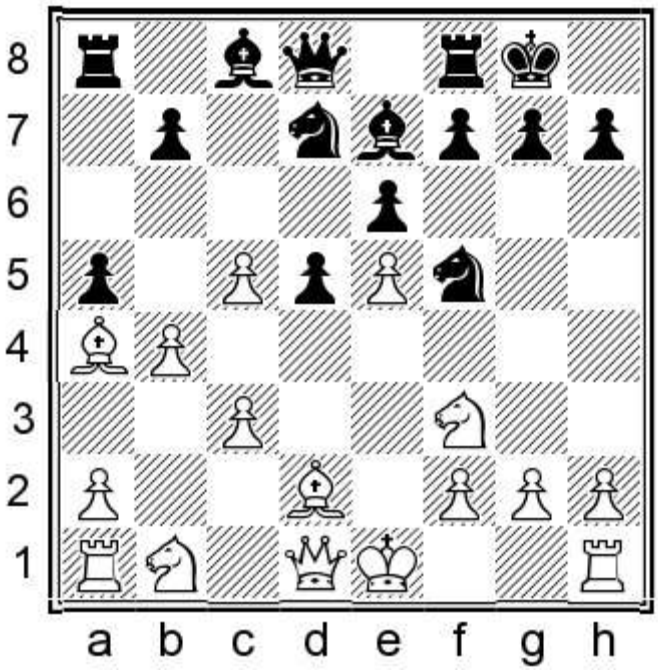
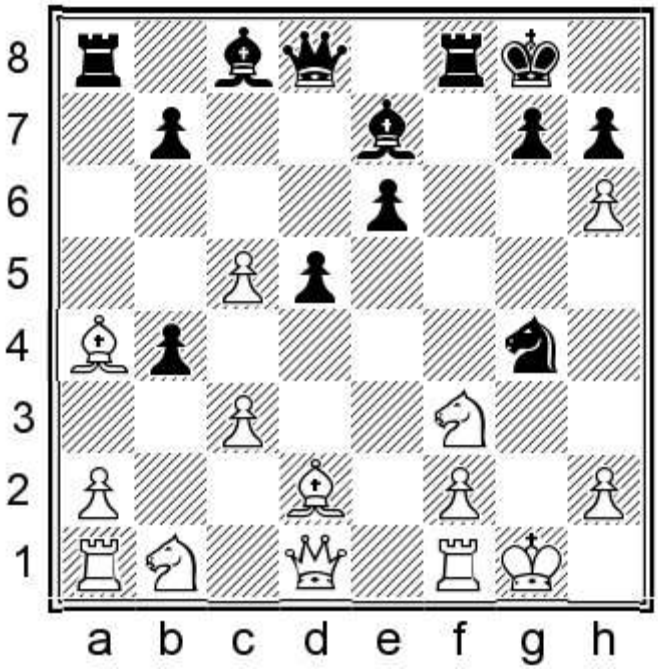


Position after: 11...a5

[Instead, 11...b6?! is dangerous for Black since his kingside is left exposed after 12.c6 ♘b8 13.h4!±]

C1) 12.0-0 f6! 13.g4! ♘h6 14.exf6 ♘xf6 15.g5 ♘fg4! 16.gxh6 axb4!∞



Position after: 16...axb4!∞

The position is incredibly complex, and any mistake can cost either player the game.

C2) 12.♗c2 also leads to very sharp play. 12...f6 13.g4 axb4 14.gxf5 b3! Forcing the bishop out of the b1-h7 diagonal. 15.♗xb3 fxe5 16.♗e3 ♖xf5⩱

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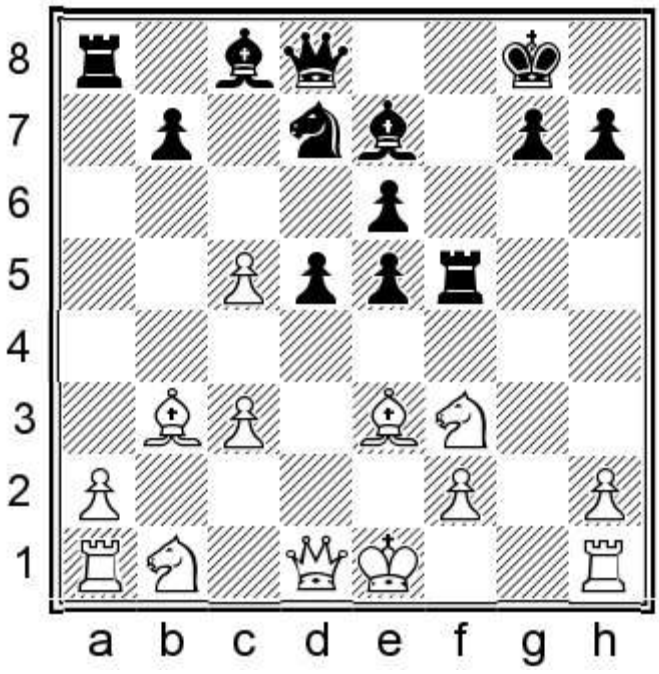
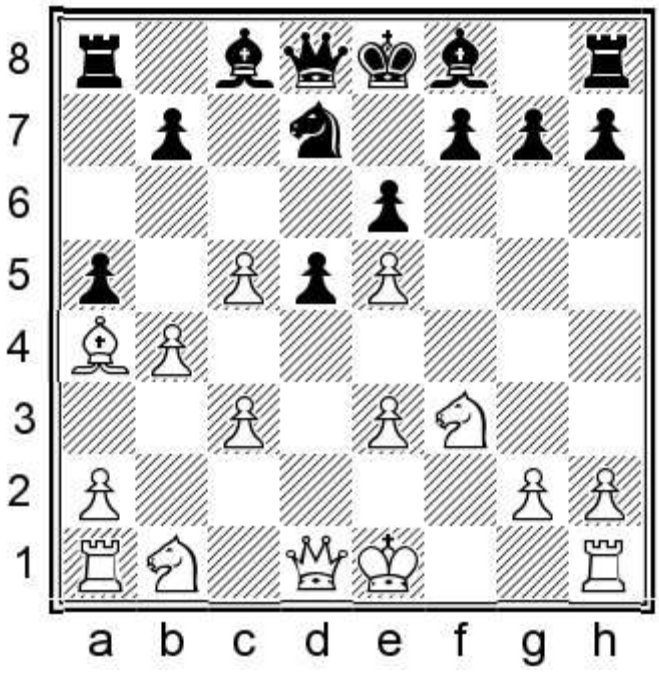


Position after: 16...♖xf5⩱

This position is difficult to assess, but I think Black's attacking chances give him good compensation for the material. To illustrate I will show two possible continuations. 17.♘bd2 [17.♗c2 ♖f8 18.0-0 e4 19.♘d4 ♖a6!⩱] 17...♗xc5 18.0-0 ♕e7 19.♔h1 b6 20.♗c2 ♖h5 21.♖g1 ♗b7⩱.

In summary, I would advocate 9...♗e7!?N for ambitious players who seek complicated positions, but we will now return to the main line.

10.c3 ♘xe3 11.fxe3



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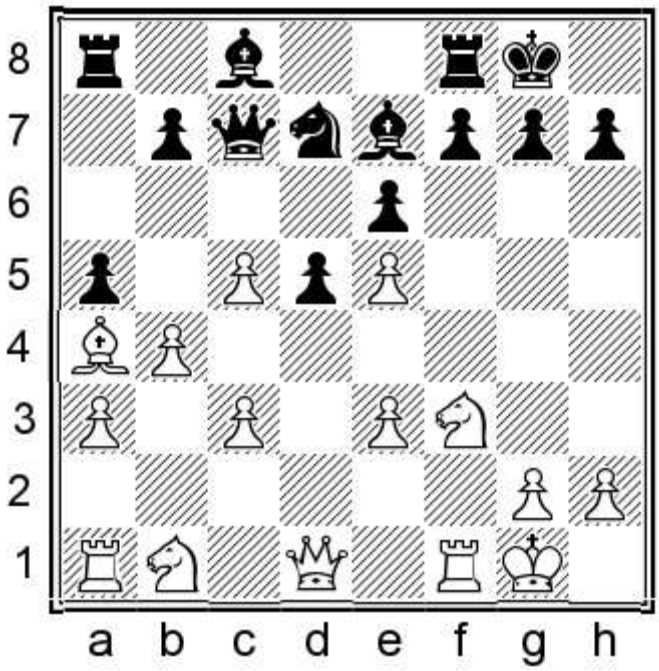
Position after: 11.fxe3

11...♗e7

11...g6?! is too slow, and White can hold on to his extra pawn and claim an advantage with: 12.0-0 ♗g7 13.c6 bxc6 14.♗xc6 ♖b8 15.b5 0-0 16.♗xd7 ♗xd7 17.a4 f6 18.exf6 ♕xf6 19.♖a2±.

12.0-0 0-0 13.a3 ♕c7!



Position after: 13...♕c7!

Forcing White to give up his light-squared bishop:

14.♗xd7 ♗xd7 15.♕d4 ♖fb8 16.♘bd2 b6!

Black finally breaks on the queenside.

17.cxb6 ♖xb6

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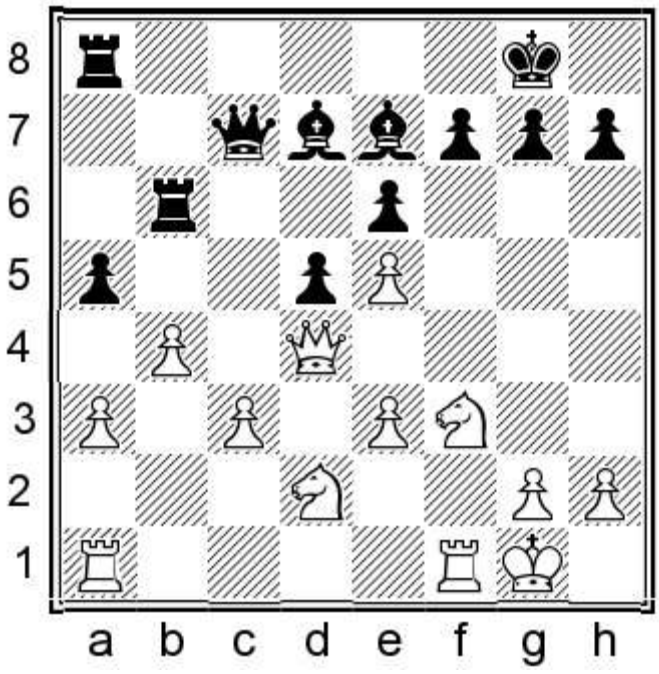

Position after: 17...♖xb6

18.♖fc1

18.♘b3 gives Black access to the c4-square: 18...♖c6 19.♖fc1 ♖c4 20.♕d2 axb4 21.cxb4 ♖c8♒ Black's active pieces give compensate for the pawn.

18...♗a4!

An important move, preventing ♘b3.

19.c4 dxc4 20.♖xc4 ♖c6 21.♖ac1 ♖aa6!

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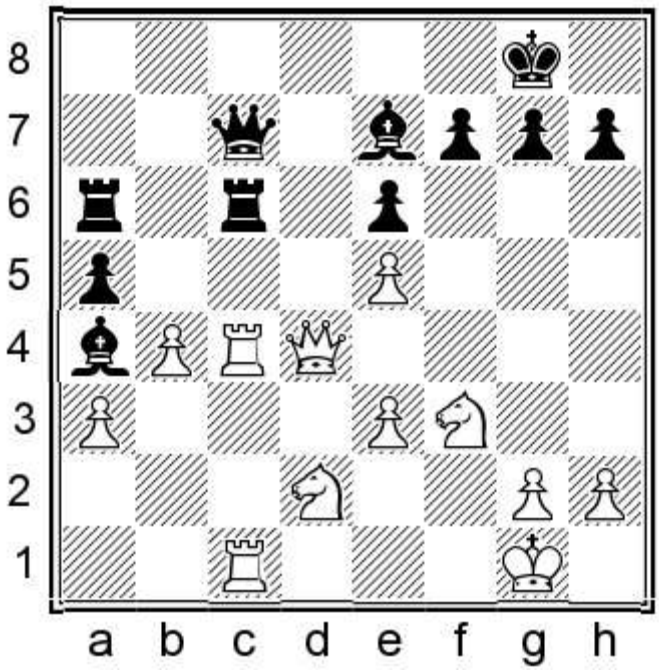
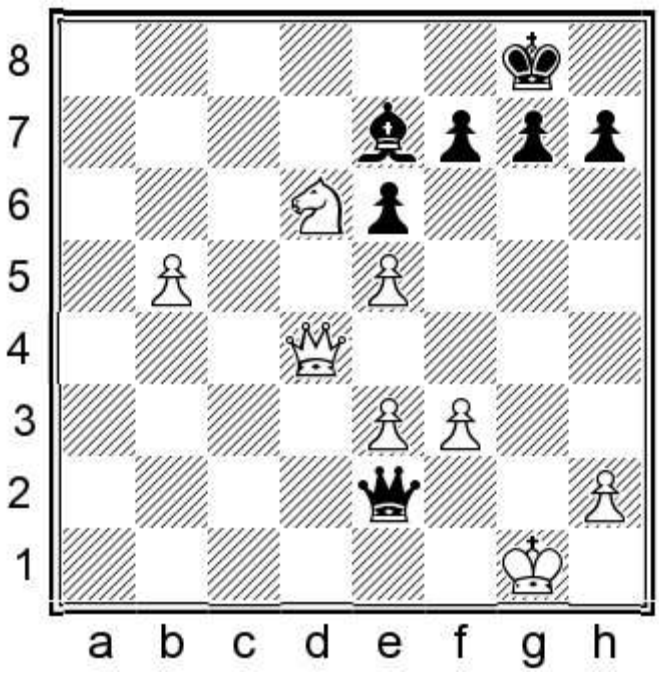


Position after: 21...♖aa6!

Black is prepared to trade all the rooks.

22.♘e4 axb4 23.axb4 ♗b5 24.♖xc6 ♖xc6 25.♖xc6 ♗xc6 26.♘d6 ♗xf3 27.gxf3 ♕c2 28.b5 ♕e2!=

White cannot escape the perpetual. White has some alternatives along the way, but Black always finds enough counterplay to equalize.



Position after: 28...♕e2!=

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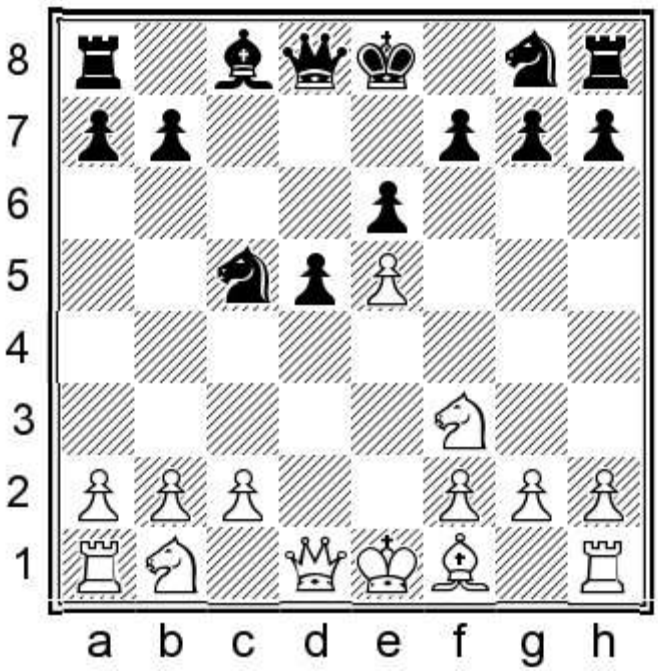
b) 6.♘f3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♗e3 ♘d7! 6.♘f3 ♗xc5 7.♗xc5 ♘xc5



Position after: 7...♘xc5

Normally, this kind of position would be considered dangerous for Black since the dark-squared bishops have been traded and he is left with the inferior bishop. In this position, however, Black is able to quickly complete his development and generate counterplay both in the center and on the queenside. The absence of dark-squared bishops also leaves the b2-pawn unprotected, so Black can create problems for White with ...♕b6.

8.♕d4

8.♘bd2 ♘e7 9.♘b3 ♗d7!

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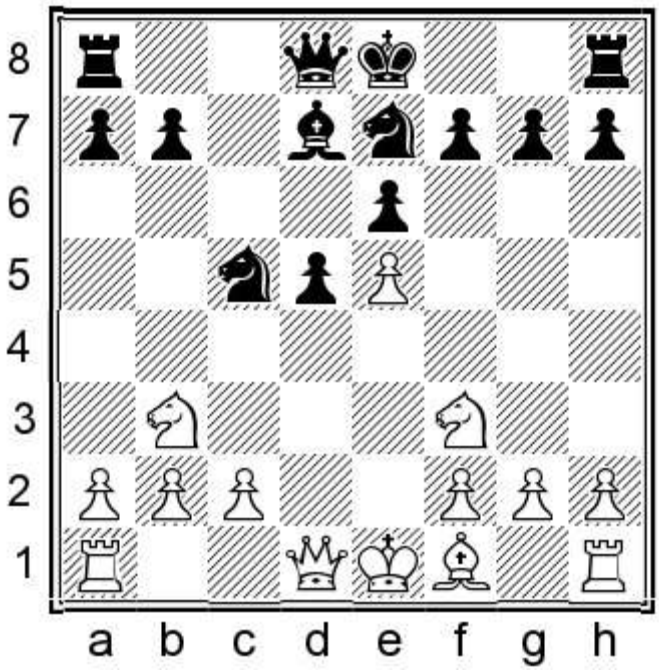
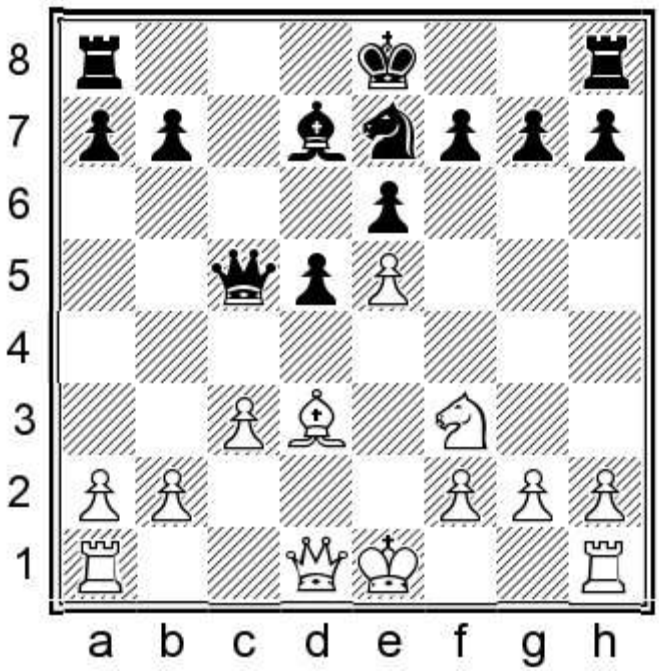


Position after: 9...♗d7!

Black should not waste any time in developing his pieces and trying to create counterplay on the queenside.

A) 10.♗d3 transposes to note b) after 10...♕b6 11.♘xc5 ♕xc5 12.c3. [If White plays 12.0-0 Black can trade off the bishop and equalize with 12...♗b5!=; likewise after 12.♕e2 there is 12...a6!= followed by ...♗b5.]

B) 10.♘xc5 ♕a5+ 11.c3 ♕xc5 12.♗d3N



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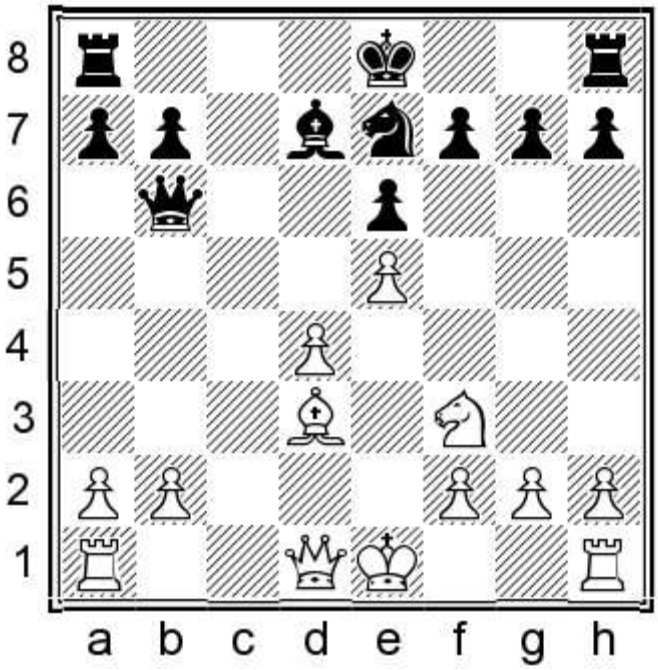
Position after: 12.♗d3N

This is an important position. If White finds the time to castle and complete his development, his long-term positional advantage will make the game very unpleasant for Black. [After 12.♕d4 ♕xd4 13.cxd4 Black can play 13...a6! 14.♔d2 ♗b5=; whereas after 12.a4 Black can open the queenside with 12...a5! 13.♗d3 b5!=.]

B1) A slow approach does not work out well for Black: 12...♗b5?! 13.♗c2! White avoids trading the bishops and keeps the d4-square under control. 13...♘c6 14.♕d2 Black can still try 14...d4 but White retains an edge after 15.♘xd4 0-0-0 16.0-0-0 ♕xe5 17.♕e3 ♕xe3+ 18.fxe3 ♗a6 19.♘xc6 bxc6±.

B2) For this reason, Black should prefer 12...d4!, opening the center and generating play. 13.cxd4 ♕b6



Position after: 13...♕b6

Black will now pressure the d4-pawn and White will need to make substantial concessions if he wishes to keep it. 14.♕b3 [After 14.0-0 ♗c6! White is unable to keep the extra pawn: 15.♖e1 ♖d8 16.b3 ♗xf3 17.♕xf3 ♘c6 18.♗e4 ♘xd4 19.♕e3 ♕a5 20.f4 0-0 21.♖ed1 ♘f5=; 14.♗e4 attempts to prevent ...♗c6, but after 14...♗b5! 15.a4 ♗c6 16.♗xc6+ ♘xc6⩲ White has too many weaknesses to claim any advantage.] 14...♕xb3 15.axb3 ♗c6 16.0-0 [16.♔e2 simply relinquishes the extra pawn: 16...a6 17.♖hd1 ♖d8 18.g3 ♗xf3+ 19.♔xf3 ♘c6 20.♔e3 ♖xd4 21.♗e4 ♖xd1 22.♖xd1 ♘xe5 23.♗xb7 ♔e7 24.♗xa6 ♖b8=.] 16...a6 Black is now ready to play ...♖d8 and pressure the d4-pawn. 17.♘e1 f5!?

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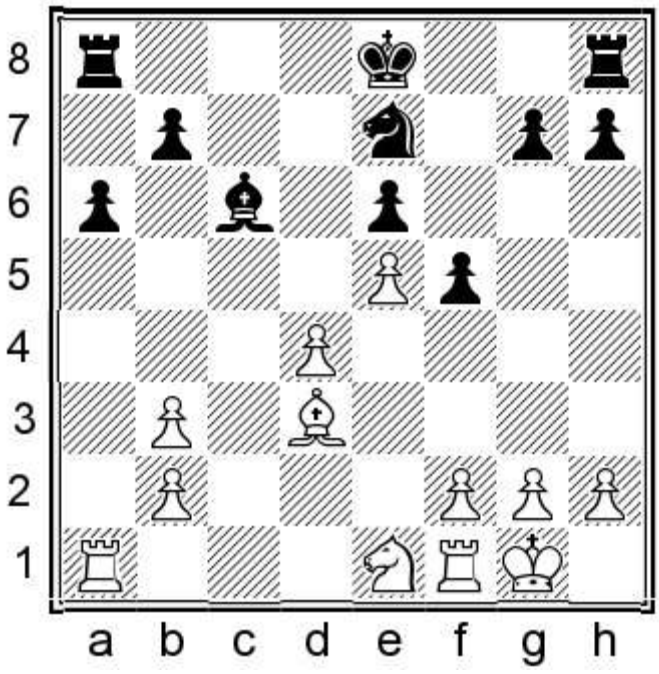
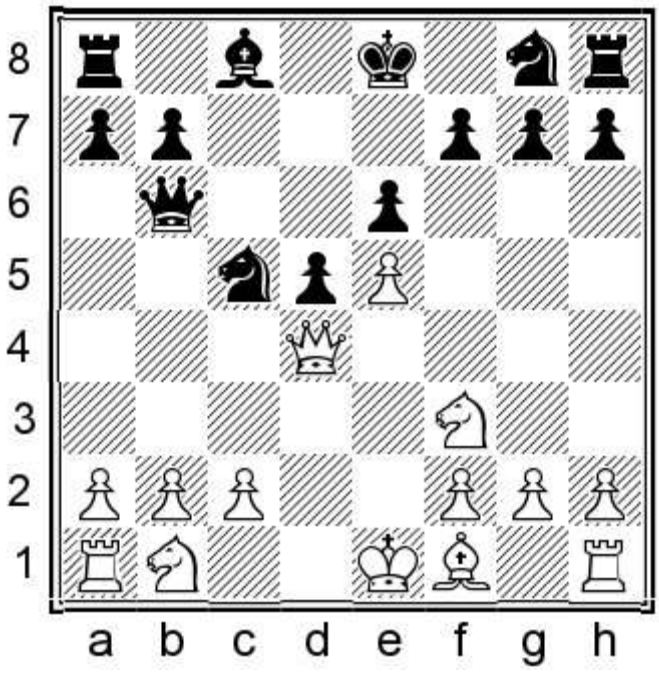


Position after: 17...f5!?

Black gains space on the kingside and frees the f7-square for the king. 18.exf6 [18.♘c2 ♔f7 19.♖fd1 ♖hd8 20.h4 ♖d7 21.f4 h6 22.♔f2 ♖ad8= White is unable to make any progress.] 18...gxf6 19.♘c2 ♖d8 20.♖fd1 ♔f7 21.♘b4 ♖d6⩲ Black has enough compensation for the pawn, thanks to his activity and White's weak pawns.

8...♕b6



Position after: 8...♕b6

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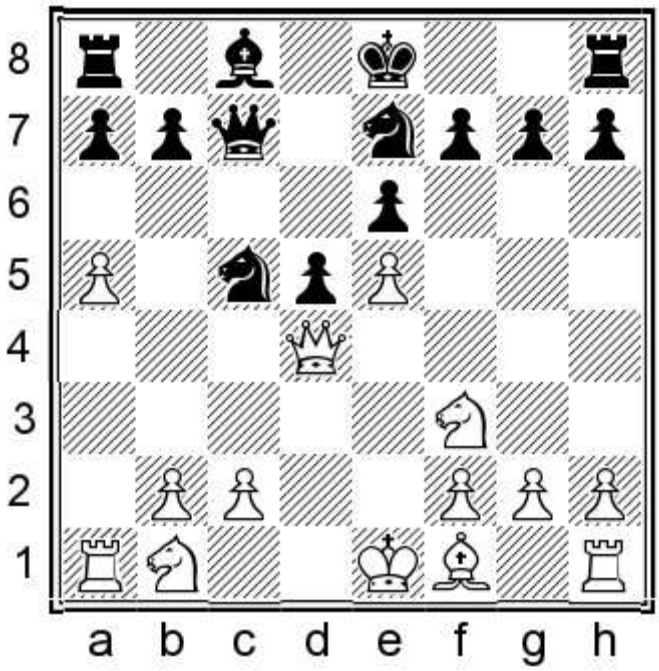
9.a4

A) 9.♘c3 leads to a typical French-like position. Black's pieces can quickly come into play, so Black's position is perfectly fine. 9...♘e7 10.0-0-0 0-0 11.h4 ♘c6 12.♕f4 f6 13.exf6 ♖xf6 14.♕e3 ♗d7 15.h5 h6=

B) 9.♘bd2 is also fine for Black, as White is unable to restrict Black's active play: 9...♘e7 10.♘b3 ♘xb3 [10...♘e4 is also interesting: 11.♗d3 ♘c6 12.♕xb6 axb6 13.0-0 ♘c5=] 11.axb3 ♕xd4 12.♘xd4 ♘g6 13.♘f3 f6! By eliminating the e5-pawn, Black equalizes completely. 14.exf6 gxf6=

9...♘e7 10.a5 ♕c7



Position after: 10...♕c7

11.♘a3

A) 11.♘c3 a6 12.♗d3 was played in Scuderi, D (2307) – Blattner, K (2180) ICCF email 2013, and Black could have continued with 12...♘xd3+N 13.cxd3 ♗d7 14.0-0 0-0=.

B) 11.♕c3 ♗d7 12.b4 ♘a6 13.♕b2 [13.♗xa6?! ♕xc3+ 14.♘xc3 bxa6 15.♔d2 as in Amann, K (2030) – Do Amaral, R (1929) LSS email 2008 would have led to a slight edge for Black after 15...f6!N] 13...0-0 14.♗d3 ♘g6 15.0-0 ♘f4 16.♖a3 ♖fc8= The position was equal in Ter Sahakyan, S (2590) – Ponomariov, R (2667) Skopje 2019.

11...♗d7 12.b4 ♘e4

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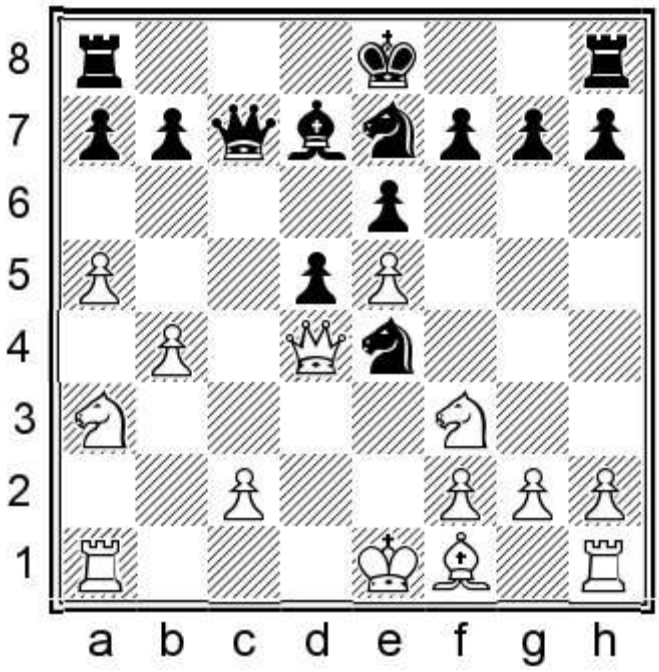

Position after: 12...♘e4

13.c4

We have been following the game Mueller, M (2258) – Packroff, H (2231) ICCF email 2016. 13.♗d3N is harmless: 13...0-0 14.0-0 a6 15.♖fe1 ♘f5 16.♕b2 ♕c3 17.♕xc3 ♘xc3 18.♗xf5 exf5 19.♘d4=.

13...0-0N 14.♗d3 ♘c6 15.♕b2 h6

15...a6 16.0-0 b6= is also possible.

16.0-0 ♘g5 17.♘xg5 ♕xe5 18.♗h7+ ♔h8 19.♕xe5 ♘xe5 20.♗e4 hxg5 21.cxd5 exd5 22.♗xd5 ♗c6=

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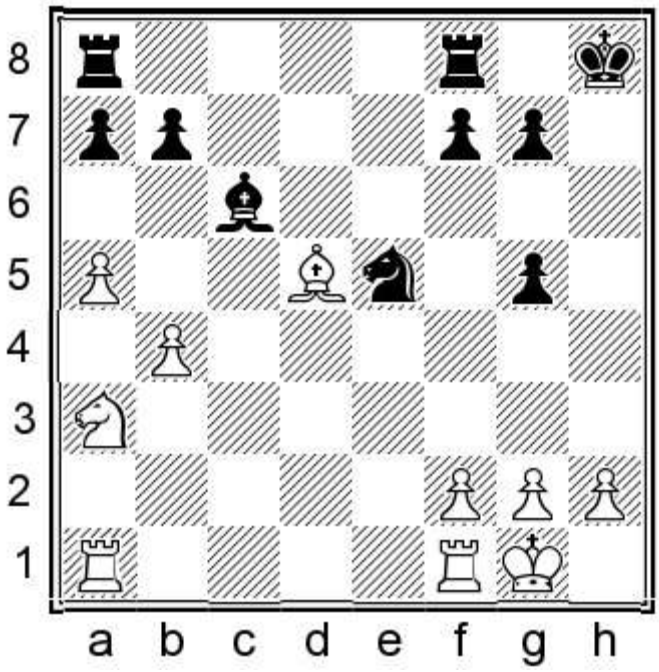

Position after: 22...♗c6=

This endgame is equal.

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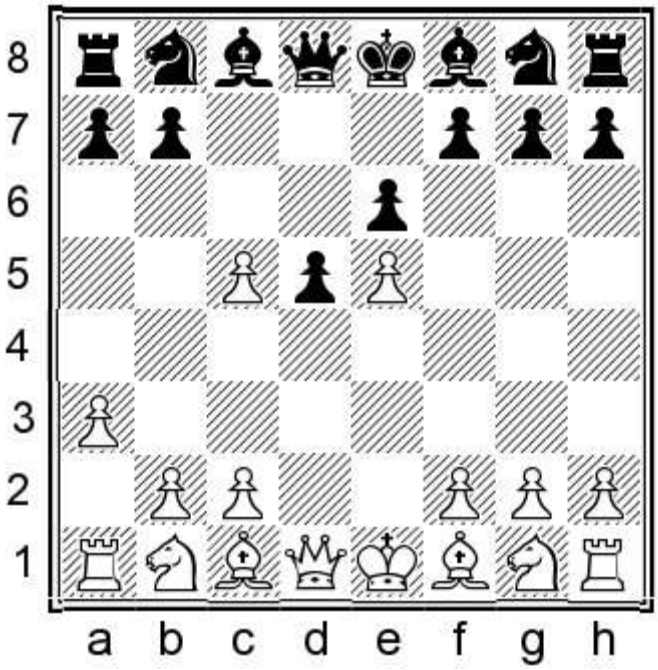
Chapter 2
4.dxc5 e6 5.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 2 – 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5

a) 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.--

b) 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.♘bd2

c) 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.c4 ♘e7 8.--

d) 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.c4 ♘e7 8.b4

a) 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3

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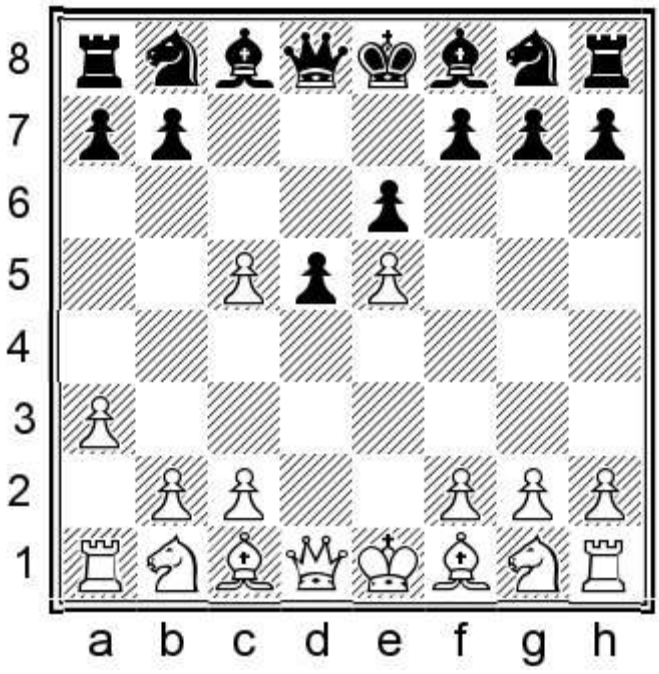

Position after: 5.a3

With this move, White introduces the option of playing b4 to drive Black's bishop away from c5. If Black continues his development with ...♘e7, this will force him to retreat his bishop to b6. While a lot of players have continued in that fashion – either by playing 6...♘c6 7.b4 ♗b6 or by playing 6...♘e7 7.b4 ♗b6 – I do not recommend it since White retains an edge in those positions. Instead, Black can adopt a different plan: he will play ...♘d7 and ...f6, with the intention of breaking open the center.

In this line, Black should pay particular attention to move orders as transpositions are rather common and small changes in the position can make a significant difference.

5...♗xc5

Black recaptures the pawn and leaves White with two options. 6.b4 ♗e7 allows Black to play for ...f6, whereas 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.c4 opens the center and prevents Black from playing ...f6. We will focus on the first option for now.

6.b4 ♗e7!?

As I mentioned earlier, Black is willing to occupy the e7-square and renounce developing his g8-knight to e7. Instead, he will continue with ...♘d7 and ...f6 and he will play ...a5 to force White to relinquish control of the c5-square.

7.♘f3

A) 7.♕g4 is not dangerous in this move order since the b4 pawn will be a target for Black's counterplay.

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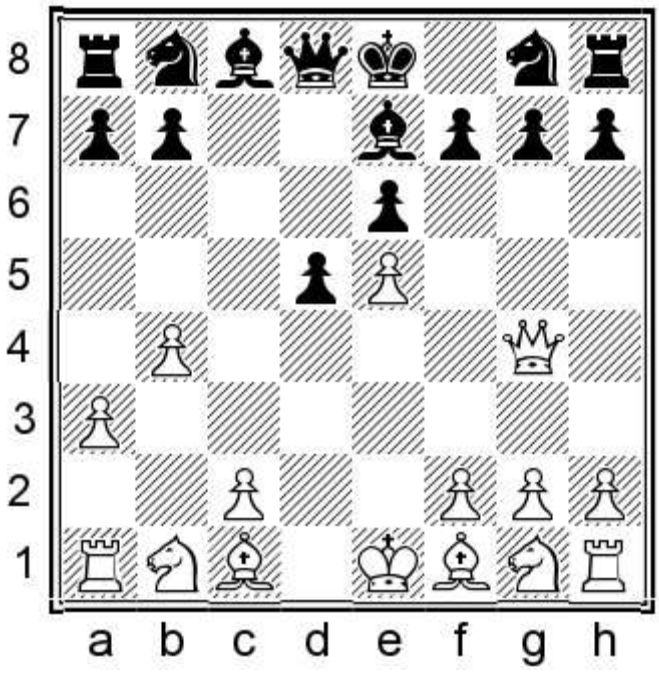

Position after: 7.♕g4

A1) 7...g5?! is too weakening, and White can play 8.h4!N 8...h5 9.♕g3 g4 10.♗d3 a5 11.b5 ♘d7 12.♘e2 with a comfortable edge. Play may continue with 12...♘c5 [12...♘xe5? 13.♕xe5 ♗f6 14.♕e3 ♗xa1 15.c3± and the bishop is trapped] 13.♘bc3 a4 14.♘d4 ♘xd3+ 15.cxd3 ♘h6 16.♗g5!± giving up a pawn to dominate the dark squares.

A2) 7...g6 8.♘f3 a5 9.b5 ♘d7 10.♗d3 h5 11.♕f4 ♘h6= Black has no trouble finishing his development as the c5-square is readily available.

B) 7.c4 is mentioned by Dreev as White's way to get an advantage in *Attacking The Caro-Kann*, but Black can play 7...♘d7!N

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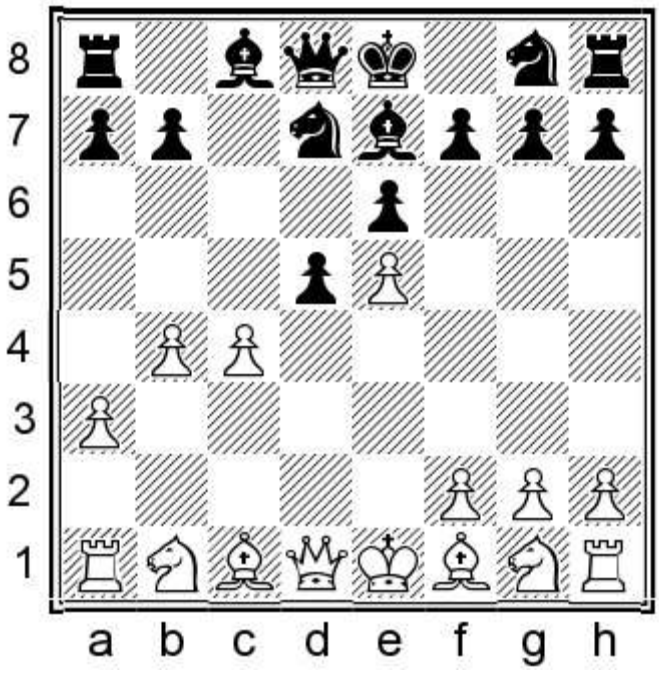
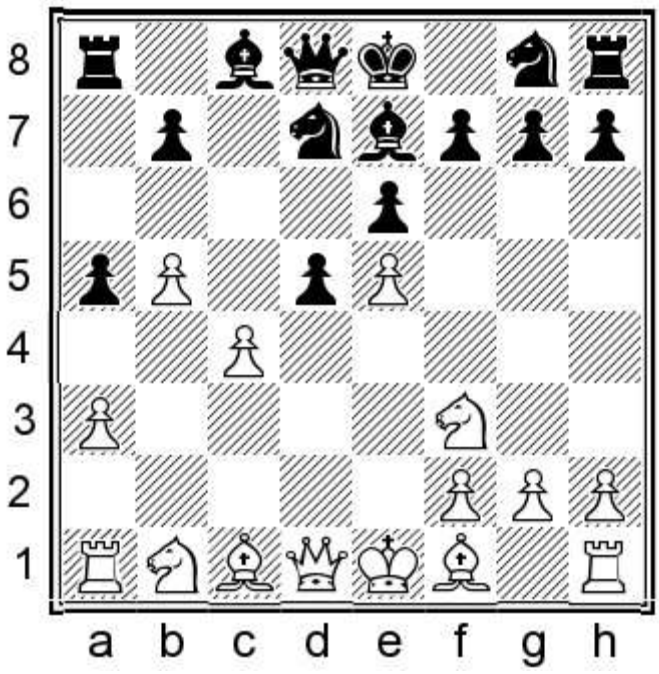


Position after: 7...♘d7!N

8.♗b2 [8.♘f3 transposes to 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.c4] 8...dxc4 9.♕g4 [9.♗xc4 ♘h6=] 9...g6 10.♗xc4 ♘b6 11.♗b3 a5⇄ and White is left with uncoordinated pieces.

7...♘d7

Black continues with his plan and prepares ...f6. 7...a5?! is imprecise since White can open the center with 8.b5 ♘d7 9.c4!



Position after: 9.c4!

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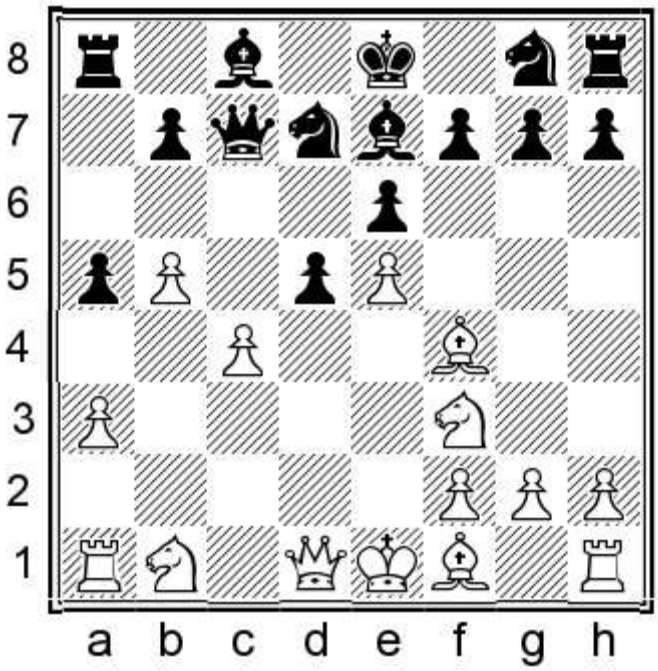
Black now finds himself in an uncomfortable position as he scrambles to complete his development.

A) 9...dxc4N 10.♘bd2! White wants to recapture with the knight on c4 so that the knight will control important squares in the center. 10...♘xe5 [10...♘c5 11.♘xc4 ♕xd1+ 12.♔xd1± Black is cramped and White has a sizeable edge in this endgame.] 11.♘xe5 ♕d4 This is a nice tactical try, but it fails to 12.♘dxc4! ♕xa1 13.♗d3 ♕c3+ 14.♔e2! ♕d4 15.♗b2 when Black's position collapses. 15...♕d8 [15...♕c5 16.♕a1→] 16.♕c2 ♘f6 17.♖d1 ♗d7 18.♗xh7!→

B) 9...♕c7 10.♗f4



Position after: 10.♗f4

B1) 10...dxc4 11.♗e2 b6 12.♘bd2 c3 13.♘c4 ♗b7 was tried in Malin, D (2183) – Ovcharenko, L (2241) ICCF email 2016. In the game, White continued with 14.♕d3. Instead, 14.♖c1!N leads to an extremely dangerous position for Black after 14...♗xf3 15.gxf3 ♗c5 16.♖xc3 ♘e7 17.♘d6+ ♔f8 18.♖c2→.

B2) 10...♘b6N is a new move, but Black fails to equalize. 11.♘bd2 a4 [11...♗d7 12.♗e3 ♘xc4 13.♗xc4 dxc4 14.♕a4 ♖c8 15.0-0± Black is still far from completing his development, and White is tearing apart his position on the queenside.] 12.♗e2 [12.♖a2!? is also interesting; but White is already much better with 12.♗e2.] 12...dxc4 13.♗e3!±

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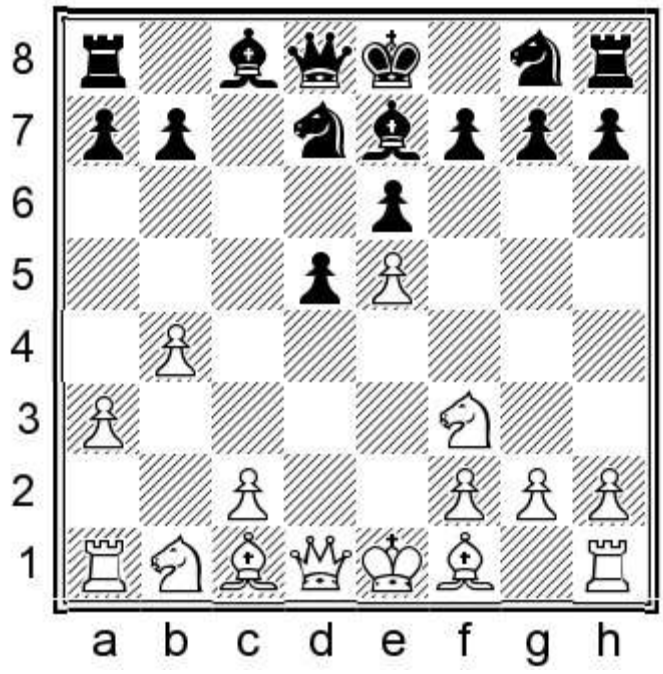

Position after: 7...♘d7

8.♗d3

The most natural response, but Black can now showcase the idea behind his setup.

A) 8.c4N is not dangerous in this move order as Black can simply play 8...dxc4:

A1) 9.♗xc4?! runs into a double-attack: 9...♕c7! and only Black can be better after 10.♗b5 a6 11.♗xd7+ ♗xd7=.

A2) 9.♘bd2?? was a good move with the moves ...a5 and b5 included, but it fails here as Black can simply hold on to the c4-pawn with 9...b5–+.

A3) 9.♘c3 a5 10.♗xc4 [White still needs to recapture the c4-pawn after 10.♖b1 axb4 11.axb4 ♘b6 12.♕xd8+ ♔xd8=] 10...axb4 11.♘b5!? This is a nice try, but Black can continue with 11...♘b6! 12.♗d3 ♘h6 13.0-0 0-0 14.♗xh6 gxh6 15.♘fd4 ♘d5 16.axb4 ♖xa1 17.♕xa1 ♗xb4= and White has no more than compensation for the pawn.

B) 8.♗b2 was played in Pekin, T (2083) – Albers, S (1975) Hoogeveen 2019, but this move poses no problems to Black: 8...a5!N 9.b5 ♘h6 10.♗e2 0-0 11.0-0 b6 12.♘bd2 a4=.

8...a5! 9.b5

An unassuming but interesting novelty is 9.bxa5!?N, which aims to open the queenside to profit from White's lead in development. Black should proceed carefully.

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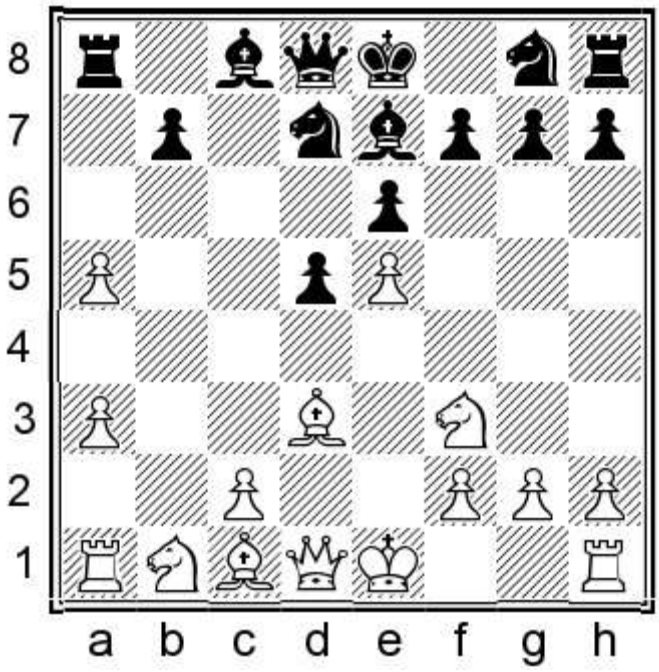
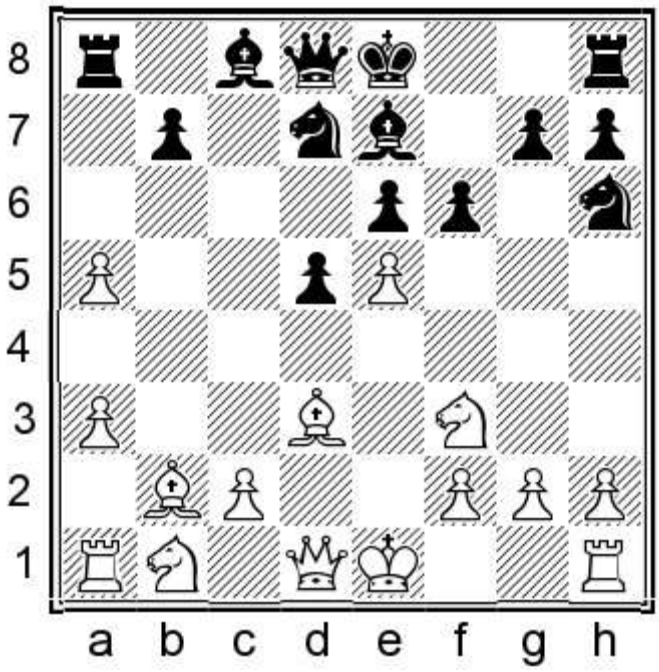


Position after: 9.bxa5!?N

A) The natural 9...♕xa5+?! is dangerous for Black: 10.♗d2 ♕c7 11.0-0!. White can give up the e5-pawn since Black is so poorly developed. After 11...♘xe5 12.♘xe5 ♕xe5 13.♗c3 ♕g5 14.f4 ♗c5+ 15.♔h1 ♕h6 16.♗b5+ ♔e7 17.♗d4⩲ White has more than enough compensation for the pawn and an attack against Black's king.

B) 9...f6! Black has freed the c5-square for his knight and should stick to his plan. 10.♗b2 ♘h6



Position after: 10...♘h6

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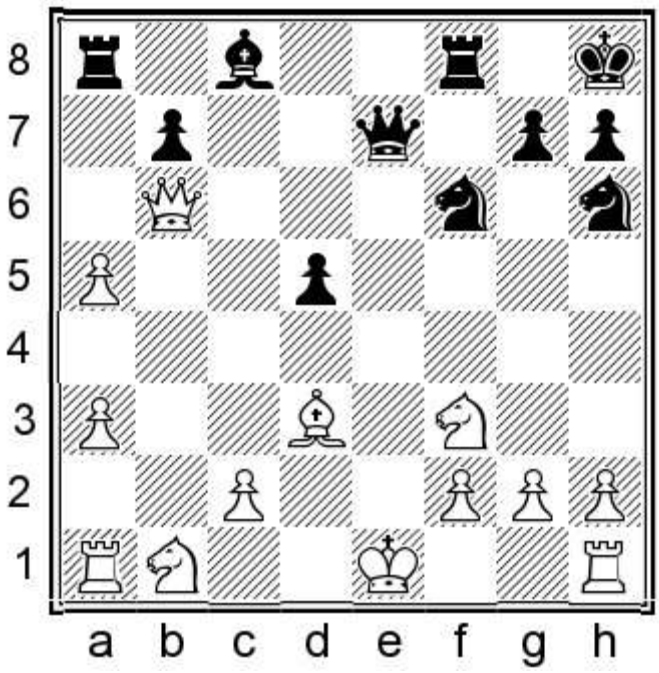
B1) Equivalent is 11.♘bd2 0-0 12.0-0 ♘f7 13.exf6 ♗xf6 14.♗xf6 ♕xf6, tranposing to the main line.

B2) 11.♕e2 is an attempt to force matters in the center, but Black can ignore White's threat and play 11...0-0! 12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.♕xe6+ ♔h8 14.♗xf6 ♘xf6. Black is the one with dynamic compensation for the pawns, and White needs to play accurately to avoid trouble. 15.♕b6 ♕e7+



Position after: 15...♕e7+

16.♕e3 [16.♔f1 ♘e4 17.h3 ♗f5 18.♔g1 ♖ae8 19.♕d4 ♗g6! Black opens up the f-file. 20.♘bd2 ♘xd2 21.♘xd2 ♗xd3 22.♕xd3 ♖xf2! 23.♔xf2 ♕c5+ 24.♔f3 ♕f8+ 25.♔g3 ♕d6+=] 16...♘e4 17.0-0 ♘g4 18.♕e2 ♕d6! With the obvious threat of ...♖xf3. 19.h3 ♖xf3 20.hxg4 ♗xg4 21.gxf3 ♗f5= Black will force the draw by checking the White king.

B3) 11.0-0 ♘f7 12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.♗xf6 ♕xf6 14.♘bd2 Although it is enticing to castle, Black must not give White time to consolidate. It's better to attack in the center straight away with 14...e5! [Black has only limited compensation after 14...0-0?! 15.♘b3 e5 16.♗e2±.]

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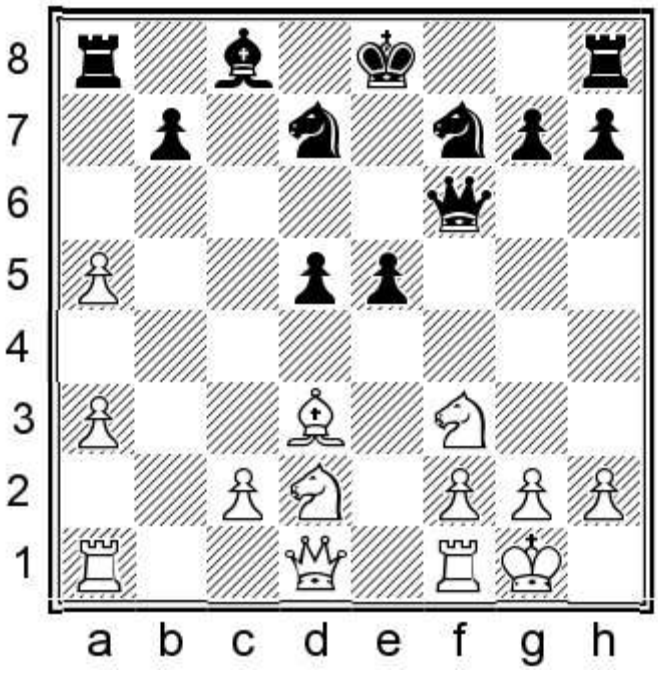
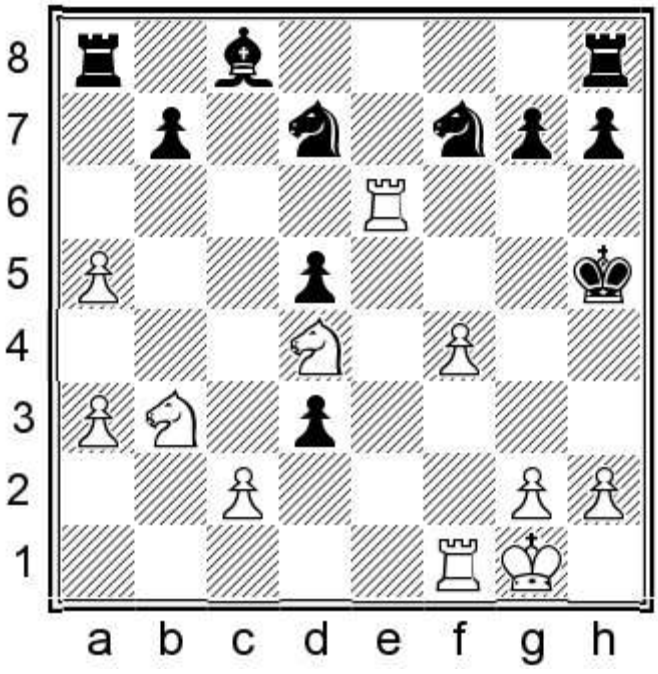


Position after: 14...e5!

White can now avoid the fork with various moves: 15.♗b5 [15.♘b3 e4 16.♘fd4!? leads to a crazy variation as the next moves are forced: 16...exd3 17.♕e1+ ♕e7 18.♕xe7+ ♔xe7 19.♖ae1+ ♔f6 20.♖e6+ ♔g5 21.f4+ ♔h5= Amazingly, the Black king is perfectly fine on h5, and Black's pieces will quickly enter the game.;



Position after: 21...♔h5=

15.♗e2 e4 16.♘e1 ♕c3!∞ Black blocks the c2-pawn and prevents White from activating his pieces.]

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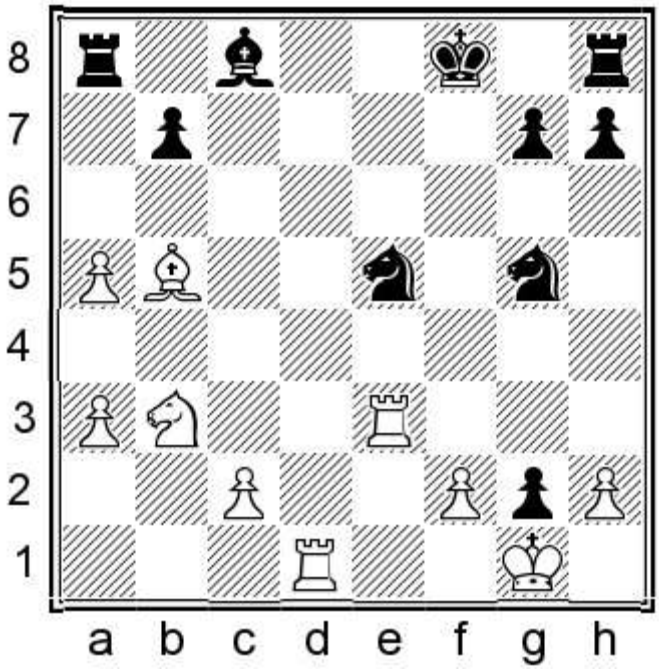
15...e4 16.♘b3!? [16.♘e1 preserves the piece, but White is certainly not fighting for an advantage after 16...0-0 17.♘b3 ♘de5 18.f3 ♘c4 19.♗xc4 dxc4 20.fxe4 ♕g5 21.♘d4 ♕e3+ 22.♔h1 ♖xa5=.] 16...exf3 17.♖e1+ ♔f8 18.♕xd5 ♕g5! An important move, without which White's attack would be too strong. 19.♕xg5 ♘xg5 20.♖ad1 fxg2 21.♖e3 ♘e5!!



Position after: 21...♘e5!!

An amazing resource, and White is still a piece down after 22.♖d8+ ♔f7 23.♖xh8 ♘ef3+ 24.♔xg2 ♗h3+ 25.♔g3 ♖xh8 although he can find equality in a few different ways. 26.♗e2 [Or 26.a6 bxa6 27.♗c6 ♘g1 28.♖e1 ♖c8 29.♘d4 ♘e6 30.♗d5 ♖c3+ 31.♖e3 ♔f6 32.♗xe6 ♖xe3+ 33.fxe3 ♗xe6 34.♔g2 ♗d5+ 35.♔xg1 g5= when Black makes an easy draw despite the pawn deficit; 26.♗c4+?! leaves White fighting for a draw after 26...♔g6 27.♗d5 h5 28.♖xf3 h4+ 29.♔f4 ♘xf3 30.♗xf3 ♗c8∞.] 26...♘g1 27.♗c4+ [27.♗d3 ♘1f3=] 27...♗e6 28.♗xe6+ ♘xe6 29.h4 ♖c8 30.♔h2 ♖xc2 31.♔xg1 ♖a2= With an equal endgame.

9...f6! 10.♗b2 ♘h6

Black develops the knight and prepares to put more pressure on the e5-pawn.

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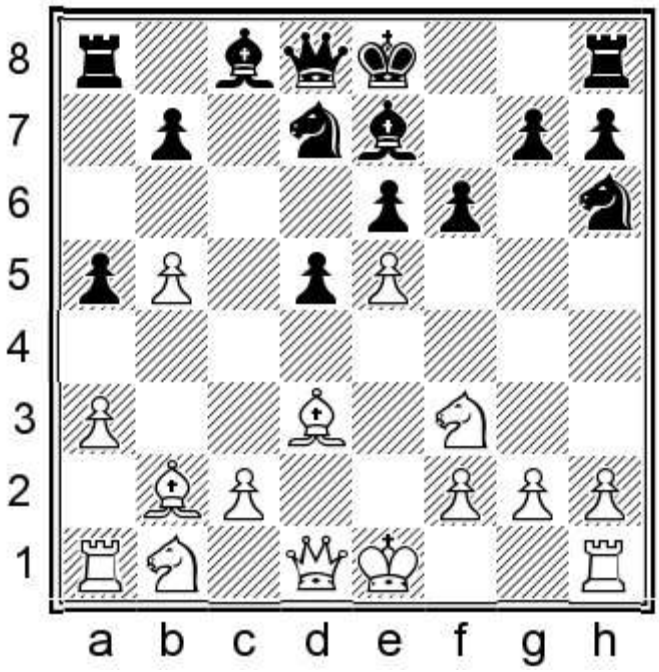
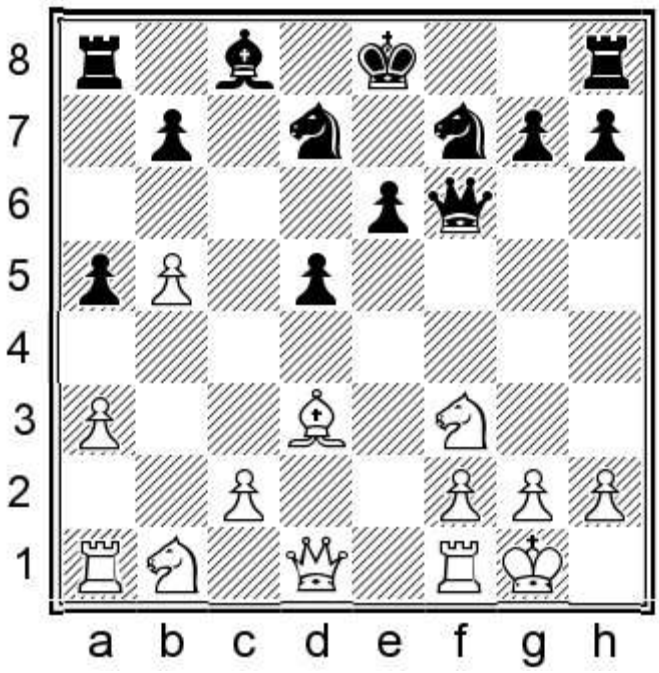


Position after: 10...♘h6

11.♘bd2N

This is the most interesting continuation, preparing to take on f6 without allowing Black to take over the initiative.

A) A few strong players have played 11.0-0?! but after 11...♘f7 12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.♗xf6 ♕xf6



Position after: 13...♕xf6

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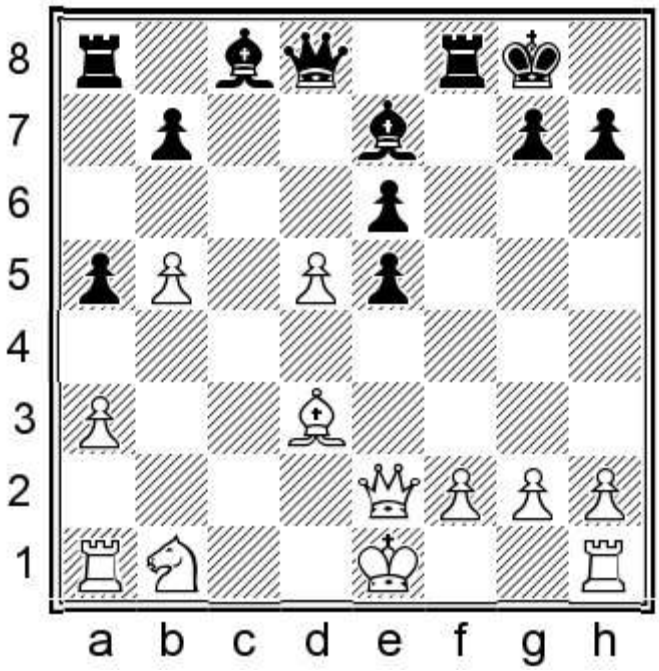
Black is better. Torbjorn Hansen found himself in this position twice, and he showed the correct move the second time around: 14.♘bd2 e5!∓ This was Degraeve, J (2570) – Hansen, T (2410) chess.com 2018. [14...0-0? 15.c4!± gave White an edge in Fressinet, L (2651) – Hansen, T (2429) Corsica 2017.]

B) 11.♕e2 only delays ...♘f7 for a single move: 11...0-0 12.c4N [12.0-0 ♘f7 13.exf6 ♗xf6 14.c4 ♘c5= gave Black an equal position in Warakomska, A (2293) – Giacomini, H (2178) Hoogeveen 2018] 12...♘f7 13.cxd5 ♘fxe5 14.♘xe5 ♘xe5 15.♗xe5 fxe5



Position after: 15...fxe5

16.d6!? [after 16.♕h5 Black can simply allow the queen to penetrate, as his king is very safe: 16...h6 17.♕g6 ♗f6∓] 16...♗xd6 17.0-0 ♕e7= and White has compensation for the pawn, but nothing more.

C) 11.c4 was tried in Meghna, C (1903) – Chitlange, S (2168) Surakarta 2019.

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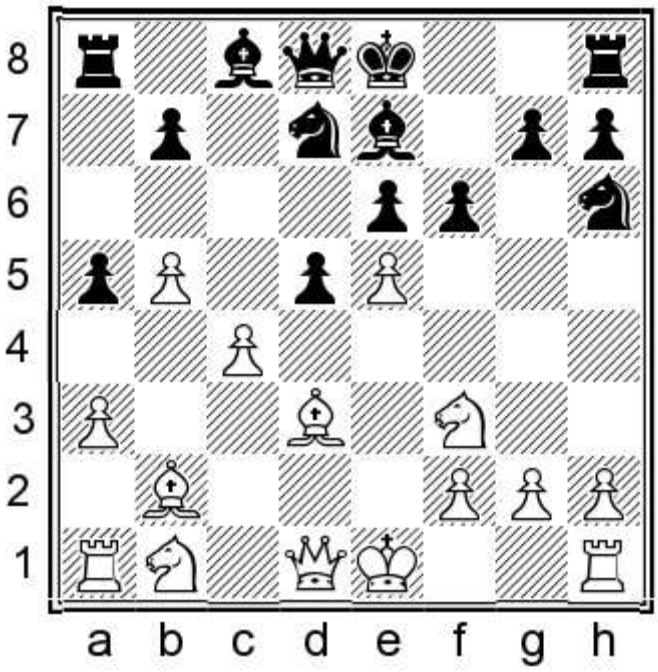
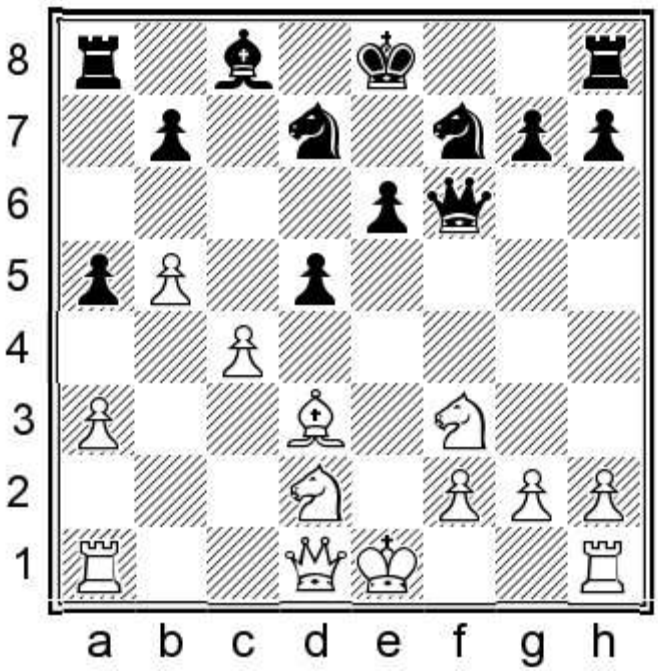


Position after: 11.c4

Black could have played 11...fxe5N 12.♘xe5 ♘xe5 13.♗xe5 dxc4 14.♗xc4 ♕xd1+ 15.♔xd1 ♘f7= with equality.

11...♘f7 12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.♗xf6 ♕xf6 14.c4!



Position after: 14.c4!

An important move, otherwise Black will have full control of the center.

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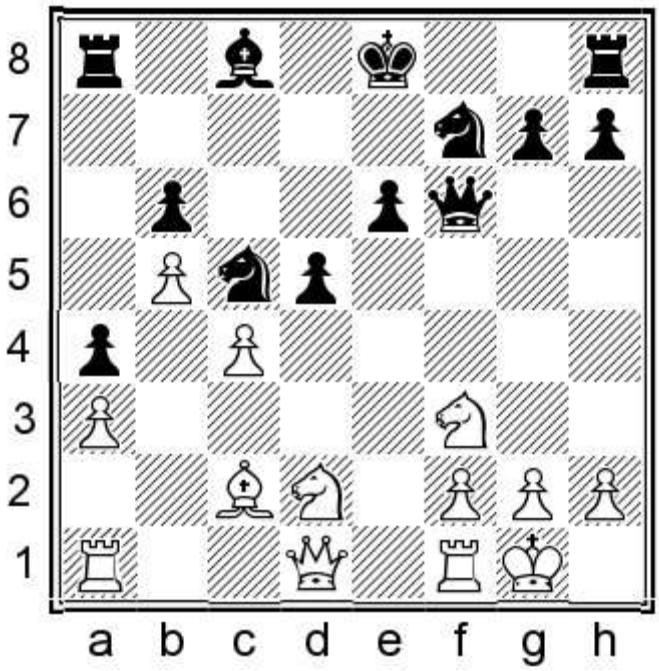
14...♘c5 15.♗c2 b6 16.0-0 a4!



Position after: 16...a4!

Black prevents ♘b3.

16...0-0 is also possible, but 17.cxd5 exd5 18.♘b3∞ gives White a small pull.

17.♕b1

White gets nothing more than one check in 17.cxd5 exd5 18.♖e1+ and Black has a great position after 18...♗e6 19.♘f1 0-0=.

17...♗b7!?

17...h6 is a less forcing alternative, and also gives Black a good position after 18.♕b4 0-0 19.♖ae1 ♗d7=.

18.cxd5 ♗xd5 19.♘e4 ♕f4! 20.♘xc5 bxc5 21.♖e1!?

Black has nothing to worry about after 21.♕c1 ♕xc1 22.♖fxc1 ♔e7=.

21...♗xf3 22.♖xe6+ ♔f8 23.gxf3 ♘g5 24.♗e4 ♖d8 25.♖a6 ♖d2!

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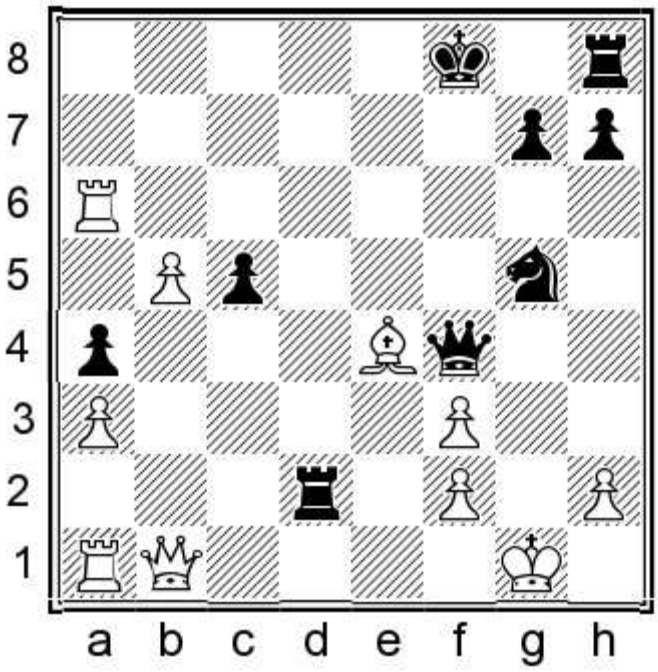

Position after: 25...♖d2!

Every line now leads to a perpetual check.

26.♕f1

A) 26.♖a8+ ♔f7 27.♖a7+=

B) 26.♔g2 ♕h4 27.♕e1 ♘xe4=

26...♘xe4 27.fxe4 ♕g4+=

b) 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.♘bd2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.b4 ♗e7!? 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.♘bd2!?

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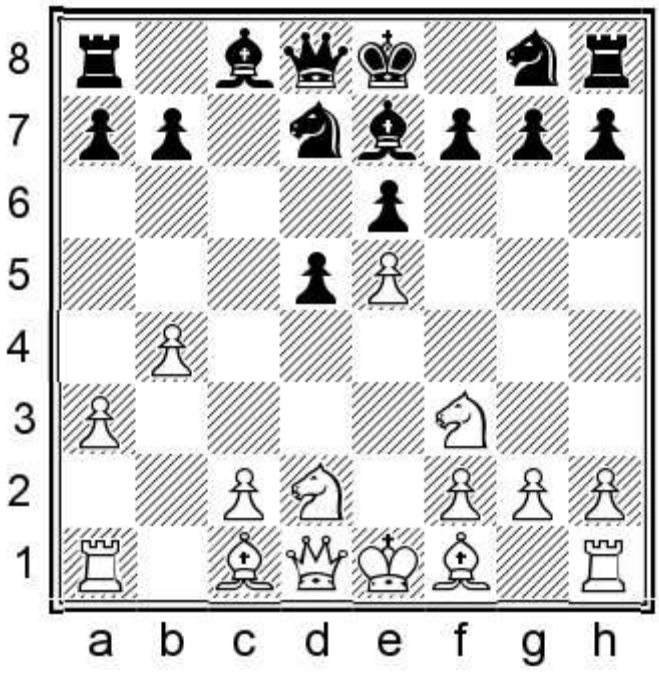

Position after: 8.♘bd2!?

White's idea is to play ♖b1 on the next move and keep his b-pawn on b4. This move is quite challenging since Black needs to make do without the c5-square. Nevertheless, the plan remains the same: ...f6.

8...a5

Black sticks to the plan. Other moves are not as good:

A) 8...f6?! 9.♗b2 ♘h6 10.exf6 ♗xf6 11.♗xf6 ♕xf6 12.c4± gives White a pull due to Black's poor pawn structure.

B) 8...♘h6?! also fails to equalize: 9.♘b3 ♕c7 [9...0-0 10.♗b5! ♘f5 11.0-0 ♘b6 12.♗d3±] 10.♗b5!

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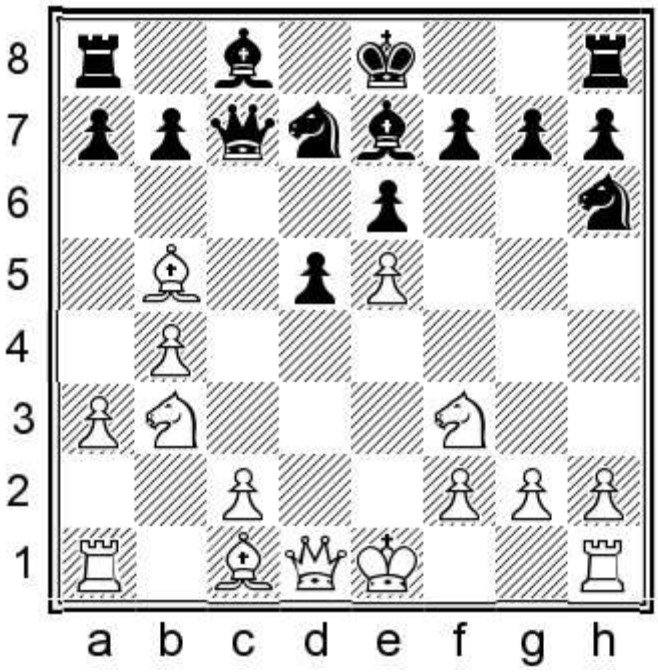
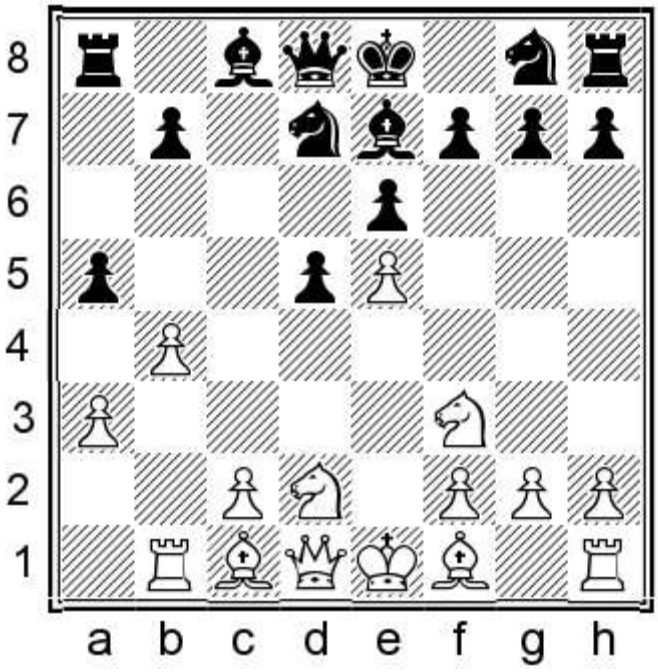


Position after: 10.♗b5!

Black is now deprived of the option of ...f6. 10...a6 [After 10...0-0 White can ruin Black's pawn structure with 11.♗xd7 ♗xd7 12.♗xh6 gxh6 13.0-0±; whereas after 10...♘f5 11.0-0 a6 12.♗d3 ♘xe5 13.♗xf5 ♘xf3+ 14.♕xf3 exf5 15.♗f4± Black is far from equality as White's pieces are crashing through in the center.] 11.♗xd7+ ♗xd7 12.♗xh6 gxh6 13.0-0 0-0-0 14.♘bd4± Black's kingside attack is not nearly strong enough to compensate for the bad pawn structure.

9.♖b1N



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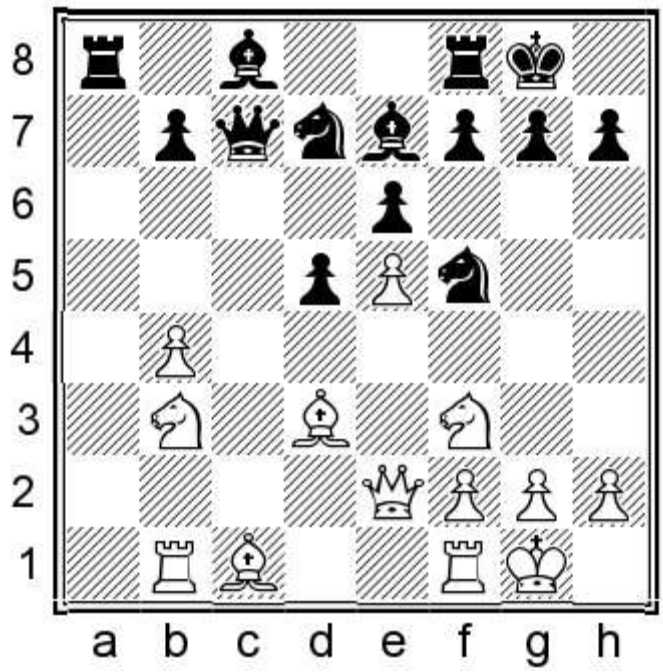
Position after: 9.♖b1N

9...f6

9...♕c7?! leaves White with the upper hand: 10.♗b5 ♘h6 11.0-0 0-0 12.♕e2!? White gives up a pawn to continue his attack. [12.♖e1!? is also interesting.] 12...axb4 13.axb4 ♕xc2 [13...♘b6 also leaves Black in an inferior position after 14.c4 ♗d7 15.♗xd7 ♕xd7 16.c5 ♘a4 17.♕d3±.] 14.♗d3 ♕c7 15.♘b3 ♘f5



Position after: 15...♘f5

And now White delivers a strong blow, ruining Black's position: 16.g4! ♘h4 17.♘xh4 ♗xh4 18.g5!±.

10.♗b5

10.♗b2 leads to the same position as 10.♗b5 after a few moves. For 10...axb4 11.axb4 fxe5 [11...♘h6!? is playable, but there is no need to avoid transposing to the main line] 12.♘xe5 ♘gf6 13.♗b5 0-0 14.0-0, see 10.♗b5 fxe5 11.♘xe5 ♘gf6 12.0-0 0-0 13.♗b2.

10...fxe5

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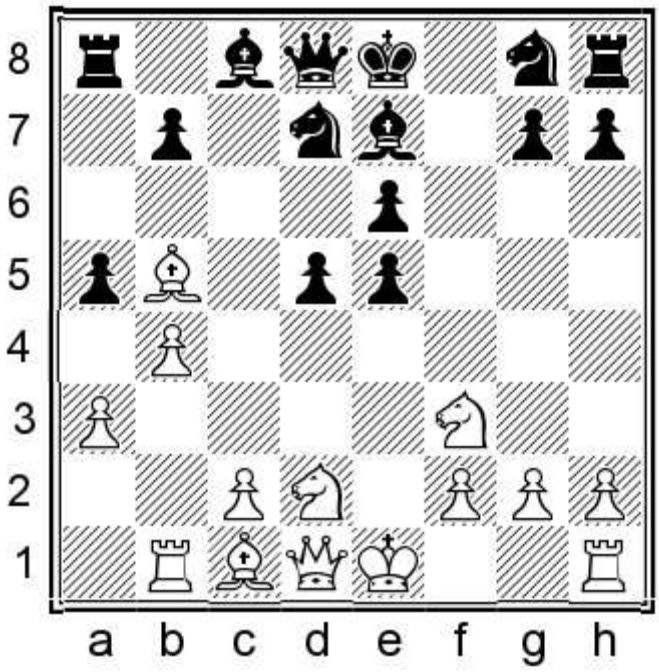


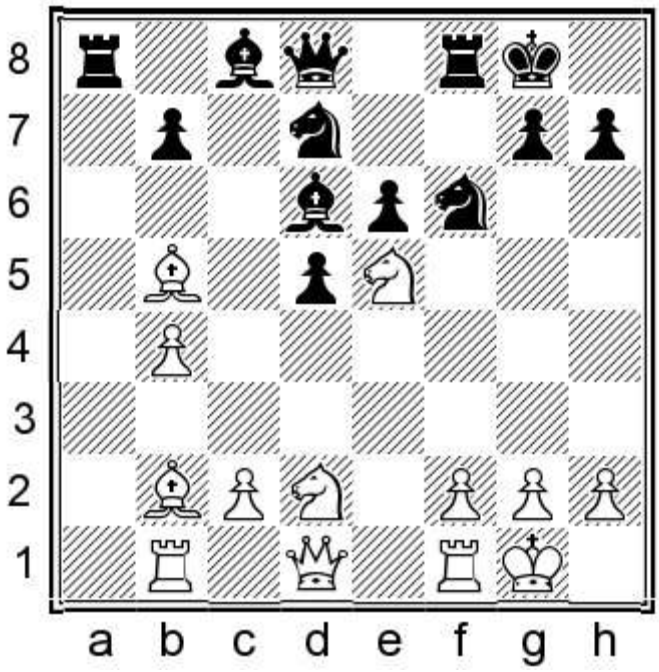
Position after: 10...fxe5

11.♘xe5

A) 11.0-0 ♘gf6 12.♘xe5 returns to the main line.

B) 11.c4 is a bit rushed, and Black is completely fine: 11...axb4 12.axb4 ♘h6! The knight will be better placed than on f6. 13.♘xe5 0-0 14.♘ef3 e5! White has not castled yet, so Black can play ambitiously in the center. 15.0-0 e4 16.♘d4 ♘e5 17.cxd5 ♕xd5=

11...♘gf6 12.0-0 0-0 13.♗b2 axb4 14.axb4 ♗d6!



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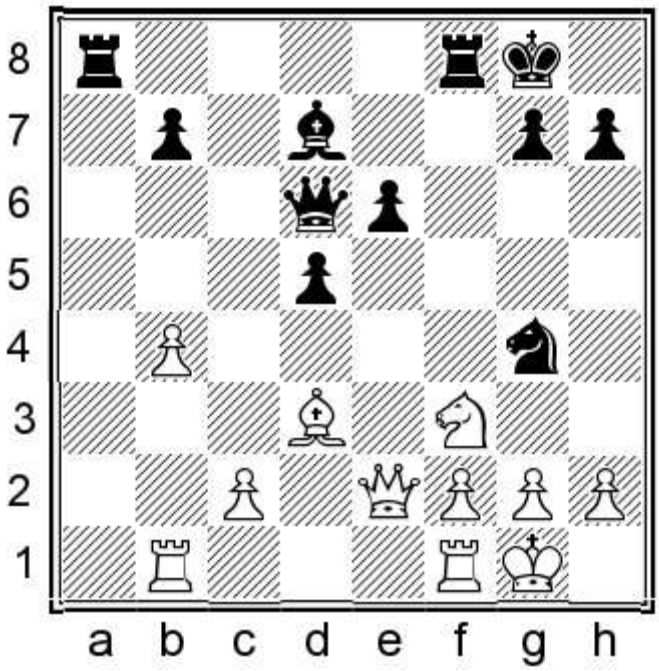
Position after: 14...♗d6!

Black cannot play passively and must continue to pressure the e5-square.

15.♘df3

15.♕e2 is also possible. Black can continue with 15...♘xe5 16.♗xe5 ♕e7! hitting the b4-pawn and forcing matters in the center. 17.♗xd6 ♕xd6 18.♘f3 [After 18.♖fe1 Black can give up a pawn with 18...♗d7 as after 19.♗xd7 ♕xd7 20.♕xe6+ ♕xe6 21.♖xe6 ♖fc8= Black has enough compensation for the pawn.] 18...♗d7 19.♗d3 Black cannot let White regain control of the e5-square and must play actively: 19...♘g4!



Position after: 19...♘g4!

20.♗xh7+ [20.h3 is just equal after 20...♖xf3 21.hxg4 ♖f4 22.c4 e5 23.f3 dxc4 24.♗xc4+ ♔f8=] 20...♔xh7 White wins a pawn, but after 21.♘g5+ ♔g6 22.♕xg4 ♕f4! 23.♕xf4 ♖xf4 24.♘f3 ♔f6 25.♖fe1 ♖a3⩲ Black's activity gives him excellent chances.

15...♘xe5 16.♗xe5 ♘g4!

Again, Black fights for the e5-square.

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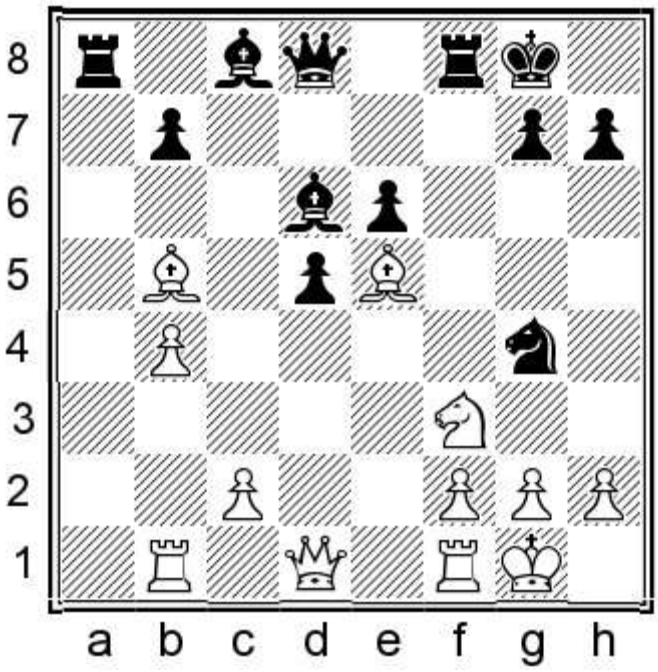
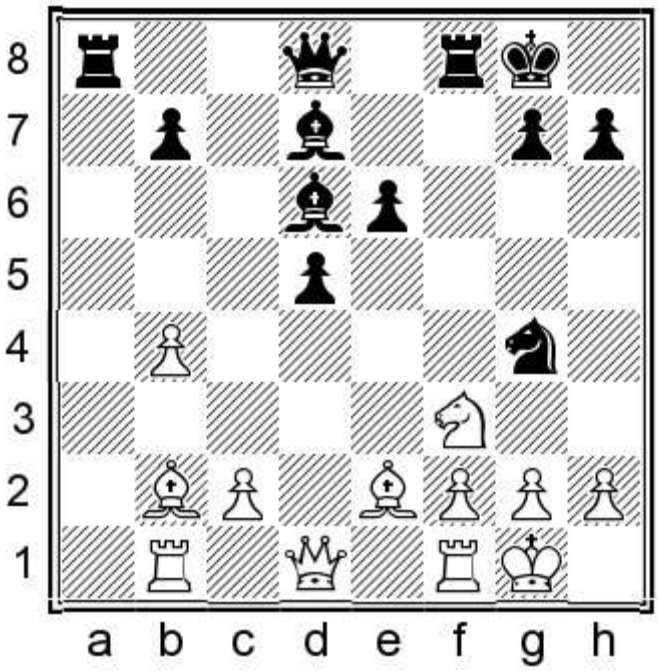


Position after: 16...♘g4!

17.♗b2 ♗d7 18.♗e2

A) 18.♕d4 looks dangerous, but Black has a strong reply: 18...♘e5! 19.♘xe5 ♗xb5 20.♘c4 ♖f7 21.♘xd6 ♕xd6=.

B) 18.♗d3 allows Black to advance in the center: 18...e5 19.♗e2 d4 20.h3 ♘h6= with easy play.



Position after: 18.♗e2

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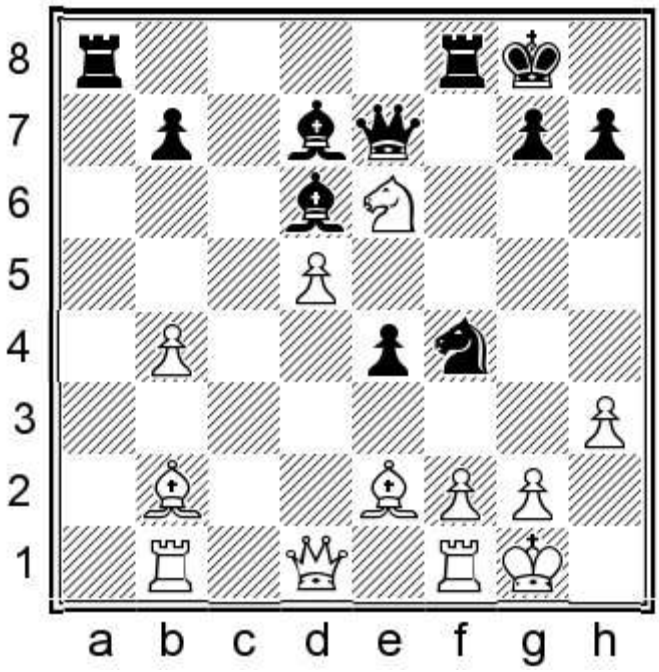
18...♕e7!?

18...♖xf3!? is also playable and leads to sharp play.

19.h3 ♘f6 20.c4 e5!

Black gives up the d5-pawn for an active position.

21.cxd5 e4 22.♘g5 ♘h5 23.♘e6 ♘f4≅



Position after: 23...♘f4≅

c) 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.c4 ♘e7 8.--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5

In the last 2 subchapters, we examined White's most logical follow-up: 6.b4. However, White can also delay playing b4 and first continue his development.

6.♘f3 ♘d7

Now, in order to maintain consistency, we need to avoid playing ...♘e7 here as well. Again, continuations like 6...♘e7 7.b4 ♗b6 have been played before but they fail to equalize. Just like in the 6.b4 variation, we instead develop with ...♘d7 and prepare a timely ...f6.

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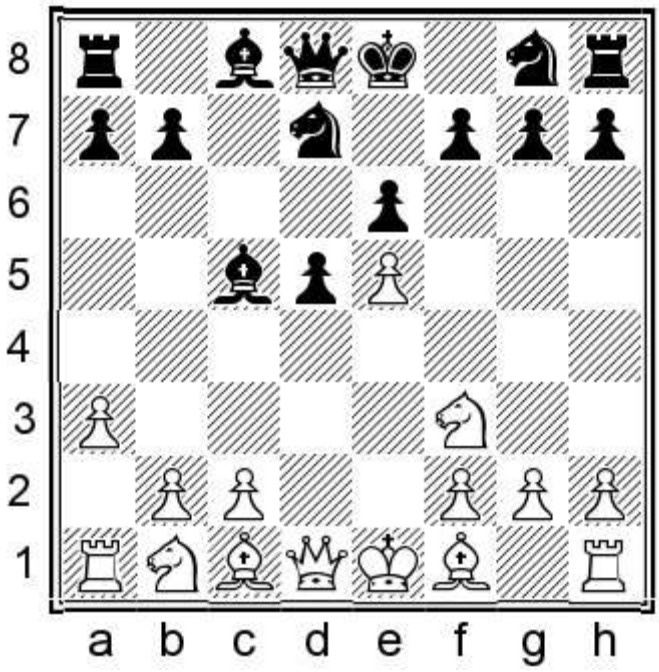

Position after: 6...♘d7

7.c4!?

Neither 7.♗d3 f6 8.b4 ♗e7 (covered via 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7 8.♗d3 f6) nor 7.b4 ♗e7 (covered via 6.b4 ♗e7 7.♘f3 ♘d7) has any independent significance since both lines transpose to variations that I cover under 6.b4. With our flexible setup, White is unable to trick us by delaying b4 since we can swiftly transpose to either variation. Hence, White only has one idea to avoid a transposition. Even though it has only been played once, a thorough analysis is needed because it is a logical continuation.

7...♘e7

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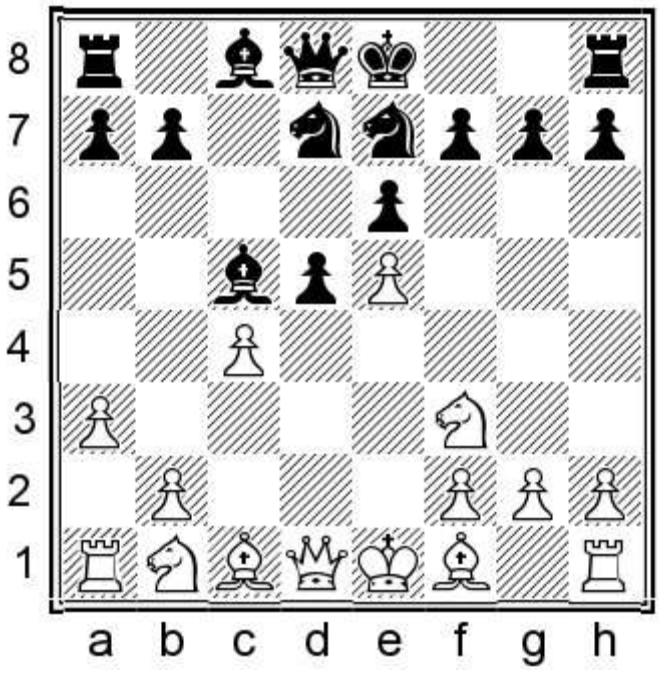

Position after: 7...♘e7

Now that we have occupied the e7-square, White can (but does not have to) play b4 and force the bishop to b6, leading to very different positions.

8.♘c3N

This is an interesting alternative to 8.b4.

Generally, White wants to play either ♘c3 or b4, but not both since the e5-pawn would then be vulnerable. Here, White wants to develop with ♗d3 and 0-0, and then launch a kingside attack.

A) 8.cxd5 This is the only move that has been played, but it isn't dangerous, as now Black can untangle himself. 8...♘xd5 9.♗c4N This improves slightly over Olszewski, M (2498) – Urban, K (2473) Legnica 2008, but Black has an excellent position after 9...♘7b6 10.♗d3 ♗d7 11.0-0 ♖c8=.

B) 8.♗f4N allows Black to gain space on the queenside with 8...dxc4 9.♗xc4 b5! 10.♗d3 ♘d5 11.♗g3 ♗e7 12.0-0 a6= Black has been able to develop and the position is simply equal.

C) 8.b4!?N – see the next subchapter.

8...0-0

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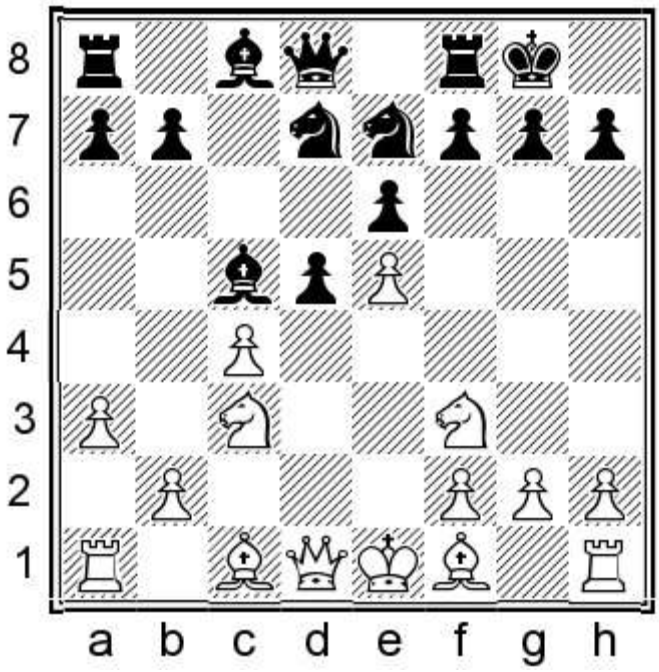
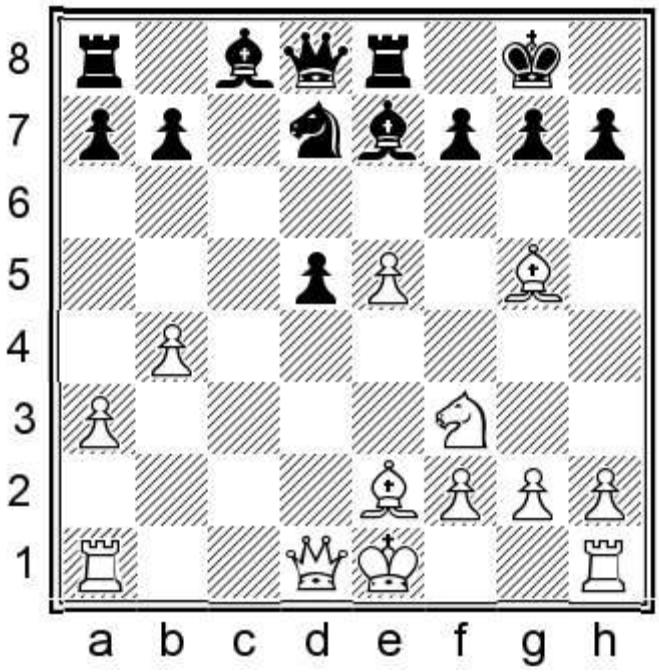


Position after: 8...0-0

9.♗d3

This is White's most dangerous option. Black equalizes with relative ease against other moves:

A) 9.cxd5 gives Black an isolated pawn, but Black is ahead in development and obtains counterplay with simple means. 9...♘xd5 10.♘xd5 exd5 11.♗e2 ♖e8 12.b4 ♗f8 13.♗g5 [13.♗b2 allows Black to destabilize the queenside with 13...a5=.] 13...♗e7



Position after: 13...♗e7

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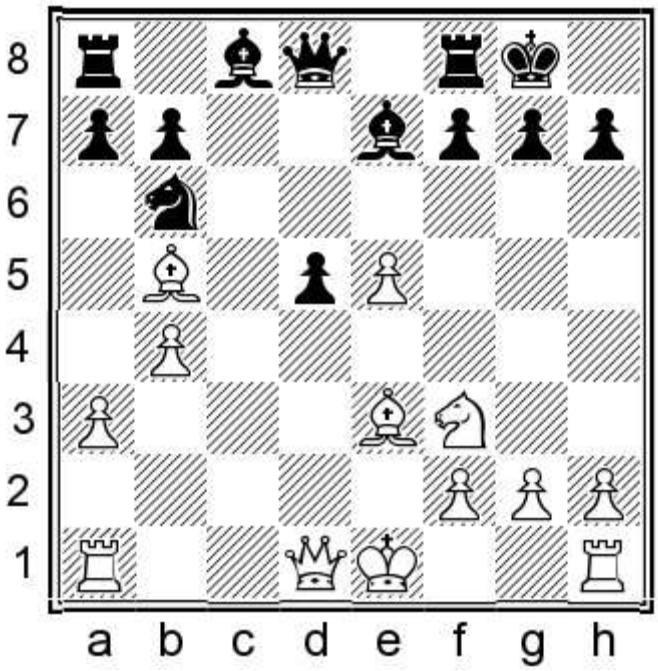
A1) 14.♗d2 White wants to bring the bishop to c3 and blockade the isolated pawn. To avoid White's positional pressure, Black should react in the center with 14...f6! [White may be able to claim a small edge after 14...♘b6 15.0-0 ♘c4 16.♗c3∞.] 15.exf6 ♘xf6 16.0-0 ♘e4 17.♖c1 ♗f6 18.♗d3 ♗g4= Black has an active position; it's hard to imagine the d5-pawn ever becoming a liability.

A2) 14.♗e3 ♘b6 15.♗b5 ♖f8



Position after: 15...♖f8

White is finally about to castle and complete his development, but his position is quite loose, and Black will create problems with ...♘c4. 16.♕e2 White attempts to dissuade Black from playing ...♘c4 but Black is willing to sacrifice a pawn to open up the position. [16.0-0 ♘c4 17.♕e2 ♘xe3 18.♕xe3 a5 19.bxa5 ♖xa5 20.a4 ♗d7=] 16...♘c4 17.♗xc4 dxc4 18.♕xc4 ♗e6⩲ Since the position is open, Black has excellent compensation for the pawn and his bishop pair will dominate the board.

B) 9.b4 is less dangerous now since White's c3 knight is not ideally placed. 9...♗b6

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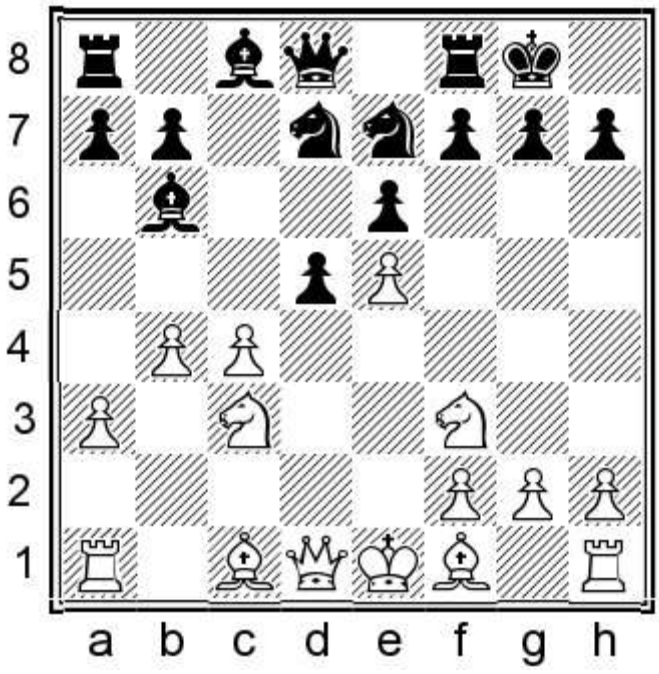
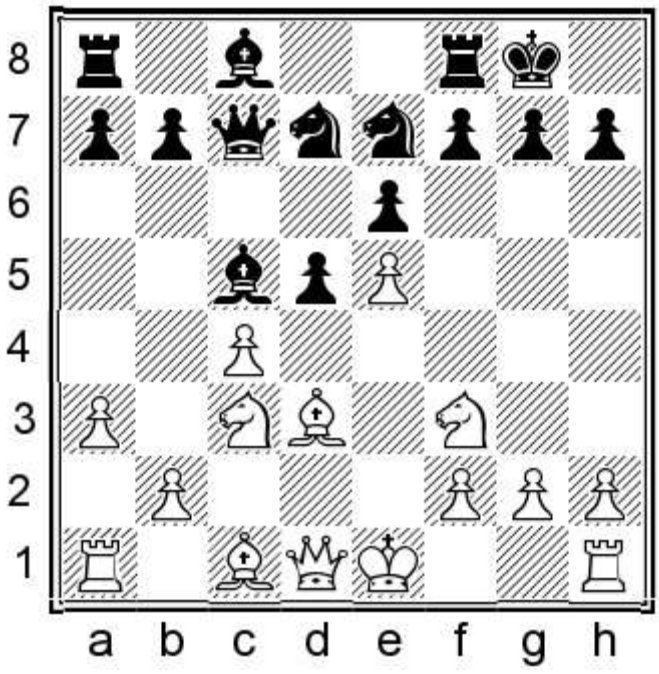


Position after: 9...♗b6

B1) White can initiate a kingside attack with 10.♗d3 but the tactics work out well for Black: 10...dxc4 11.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 12.♘g5+ ♔g6 13.h4 ♘xe5 14.h5+ ♔h6 15.♘xe6+ ♔h7 16.♘xd8 ♘d3+ 17.♔f1 ♘xf2 18.♕f3 ♘xh1∞ The position is utterly chaotic, but Black has excellent chances.

B2) 10.cxd5 exd5 11.♗b2 ♗c7! Black gives White a concrete problem to solve. 12.♘b5 ♗b8 13.♗e2 a6 14.♘d6 ♘xe5 15.♘xc8 ♘xf3+ 16.♗xf3 ♕xc8 17.0-0 ♗a7=

9...♕c7!



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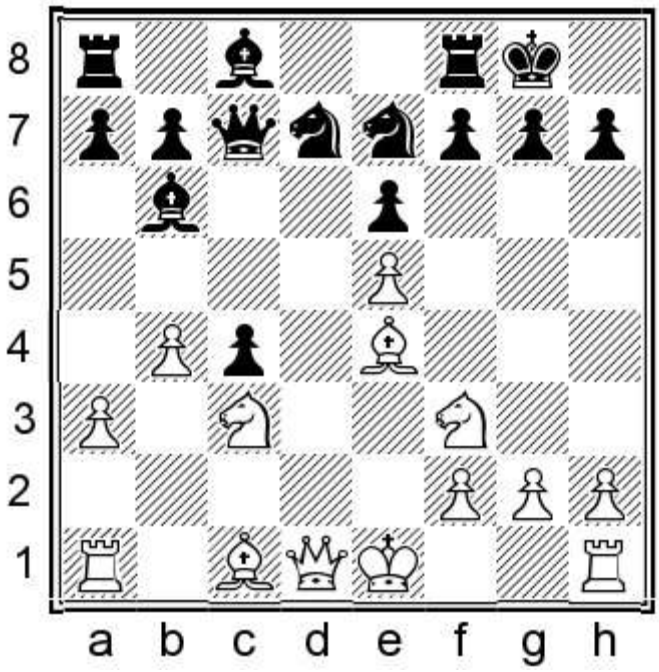
Position after: 9...♕c7!

Black attacks the e5-pawn and introduces the threat of ...dxc4.

10.0-0

10.b4 can be met by 10...dxc4! 11.♗e4 ♗b6



Position after: 11...♗b6

Black has a great position. White has compensation due to his space advantage, but Black is not without resources, as the following lines show.

A) 12.♘b5 leads to a long and forcing line from which Black emerges unscathed. 12...♕b8 13.♗b2 f5! 14.exf6 ♘xf6 15.♗e5 ♘xe4 16.♗xb8 ♘xf2 17.♕c2 ♖xb8 18.0-0 ♗d7 19.♕xc4 ♖bc8 20.♕b3 ♘f5 21.♖xf2 ♗xb5 22.♕xe6+ ♔h8∞ Black's position is more comfortable as the pin causes White problems.

B) 12.♗f4 ♘g6 13.♗xg6 fxg6!

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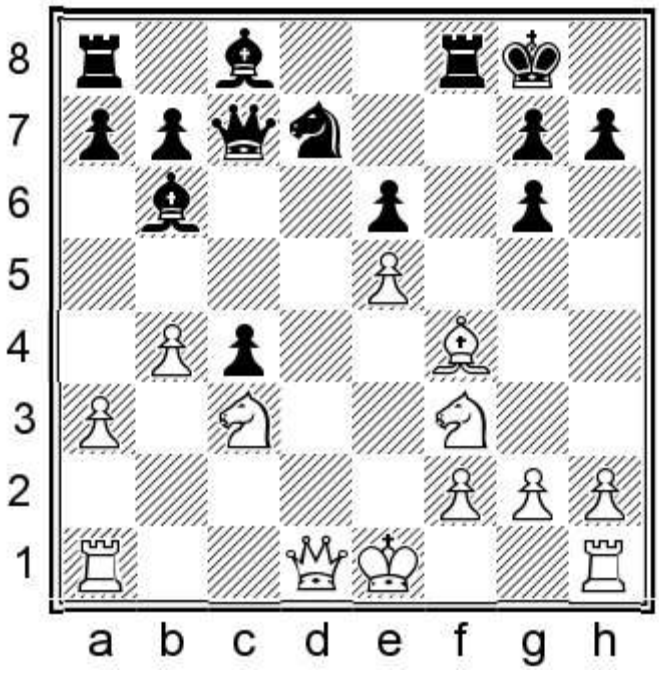
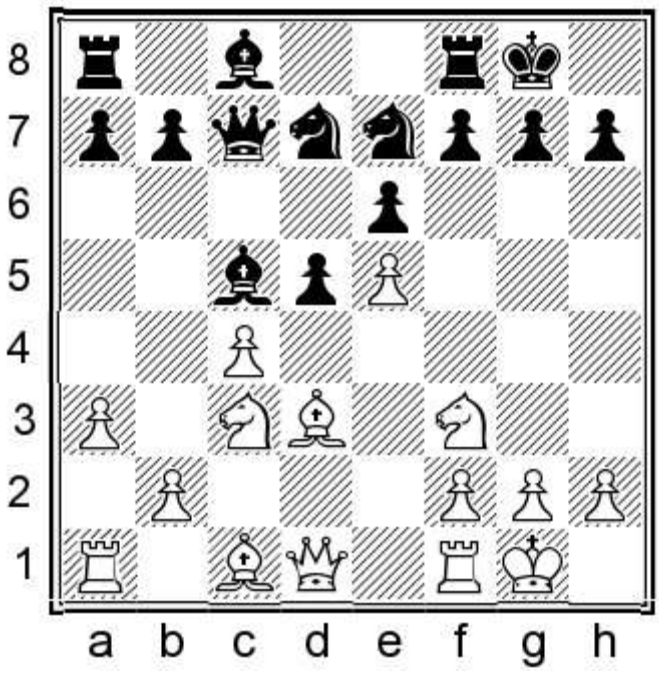


Position after: 13...fxg6!

Although this move weakens Black's pawn structure, opening up the f-file generates enough resources to outweigh that. 14.♗g3 a6 15.h4 [After 15.0-0 ♗a7 16.a4 ♖d8 White has nothing better than to enter an equal endgame with 17.♕d6 ♕xd6 18.exd6 ♘f6=.] 15...h6 16.♕c2 ♖xf3!? Black has other options, but this one is in the spirit of the line. 17.gxf3 ♗d4 18.♖d1 ♗xc3+ 19.♕xc3 b5∞ Black definitely has full compensation for the exchange.



Position after: 10.0-0

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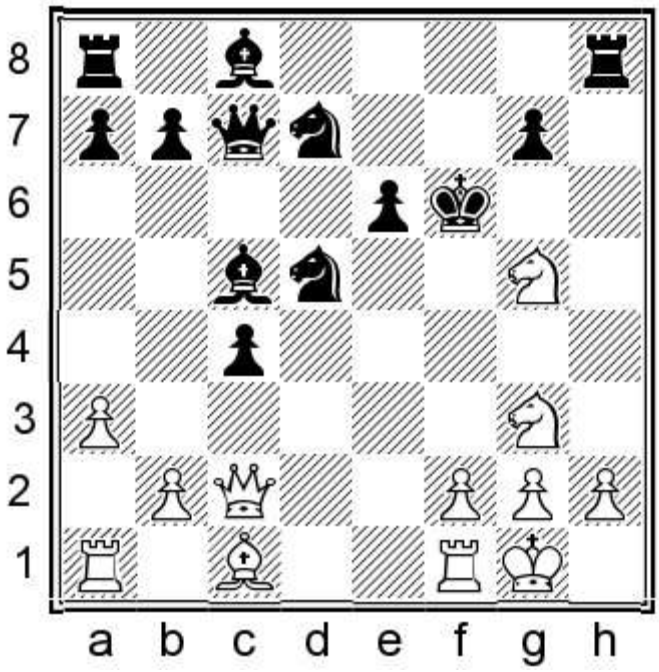
10...dxc4!

Inviting White to begin his attack. Black has no choice since he lacks space to develop his pieces. 10...♘xe5?! is very dangerous for Black due to 11.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 12.♘g5+ ♔g6 13.♘e2→.

11.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 12.♘g5+ ♔g6 13.♘e2 ♘d5 14.♘g3 ♖h8 15.♕c2+ f5 16.exf6+ ♔xf6



Position after: 16...♔xf6

Black's king is in the center of the board but, because Black's pieces are close by to defend it, there is no guarantee that White's attack will be successful. The position is extremely complicated and the game can continue in many different ways.

17.♖e1

17.♕xc4 ♔e7 leads to a perpetual check: 18.♘f5+ ♔e8 19.♘xg7+ ♔e7 20.♘f5+ exf5 21.♖e1+ ♔f6 22.♖e6+ ♔g7 23.♕xd5 ♘f6 24.♕xf5 ♕xh2+ 25.♔f1 ♗xe6 26.♘xe6+ ♔f7 27.♘g5+ ♔g7=.

17...♘7b6

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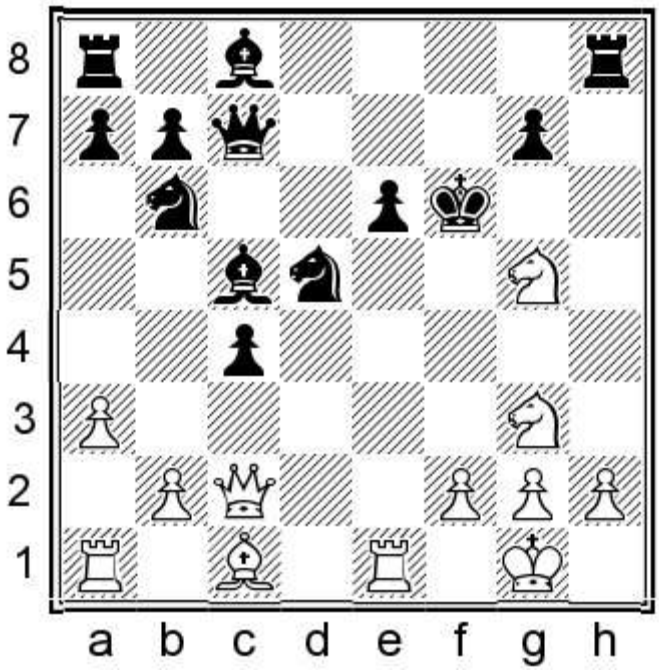


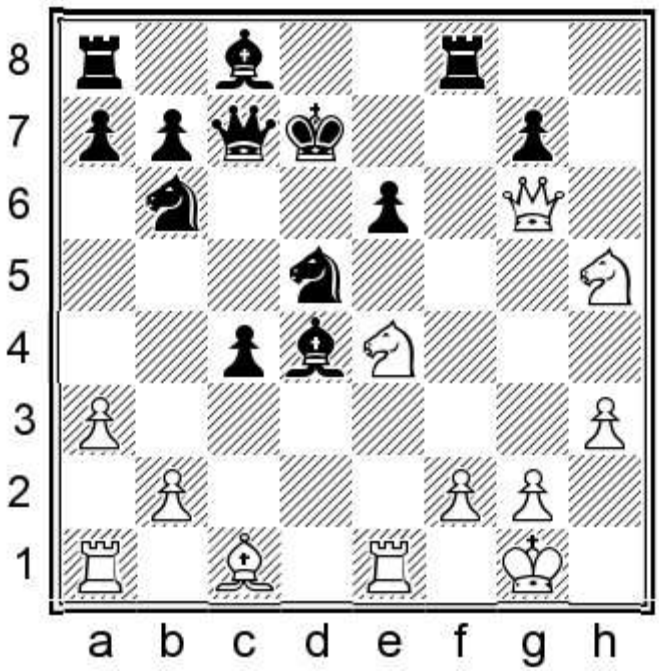
Position after: 17...♘7b6

18.b3!?

This is the most challenging option: White wants to bring the dark-squared bishop into the game.

A) 18.♗d2 ♗d6!∞

B) 18.h3 may lead to an incredible line, as Black brings his king to the queenside to avoid being checkmated. White's idea is to free the g3-knight to bring it into the attack. 18...♔e7 19.♕g6 ♖f8 20.♘5e4 [20.♘f5+ ♔d8 21.♘xg7 ♗xf2+ 22.♔h1 ♕g3∞] 20...♗d4 21.♘h5 ♔d7!



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Position after: 21...♔d7!

The Black king begins his escape to the queenside. 22.♘xg7 ♔c6! 23.♘xe6 ♗xe6 24.♕xe6+ ♔b5 25.a4+ ♔a5 26.♗d2+ ♘b4∞ Amazingly, Black's king is quite safe on a5!

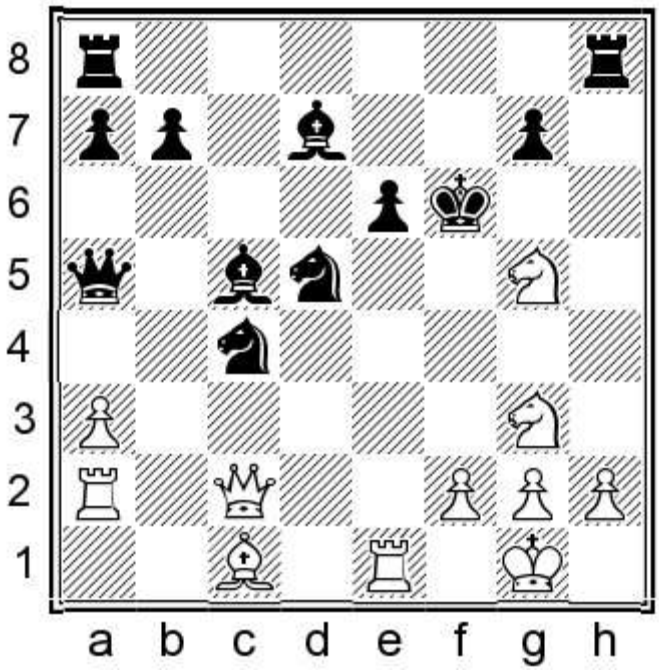
18...♗d7!

It is hardly obvious that you should play this, but it makes sense in principle: Black ignores White's ideas and simply connects his rooks.

19.bxc4 ♘xc4 20.♖a2!?

20.♕e2 ♕c6! 21.♘3e4+ ♔e7 22.♘xc5 ♕xc5 23.♘xe6 ♗xe6 24.♕xe6+ ♔f8 25.♕f5+ ♔g8 26.♕e6+ ♔f8=

20...♕a5∞



Position after: 20...♕a5∞

The position is extremely unclear and could be analyzed further, but we are already very far out of opening theory. The engines suggest that the position is 0.00, so I will take their word for it. In a practical game, any result is possible.

d) 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.c4 ♘e7 8.b4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.♘f3 ♘d7 7.c4!? ♘e7 8.b4N

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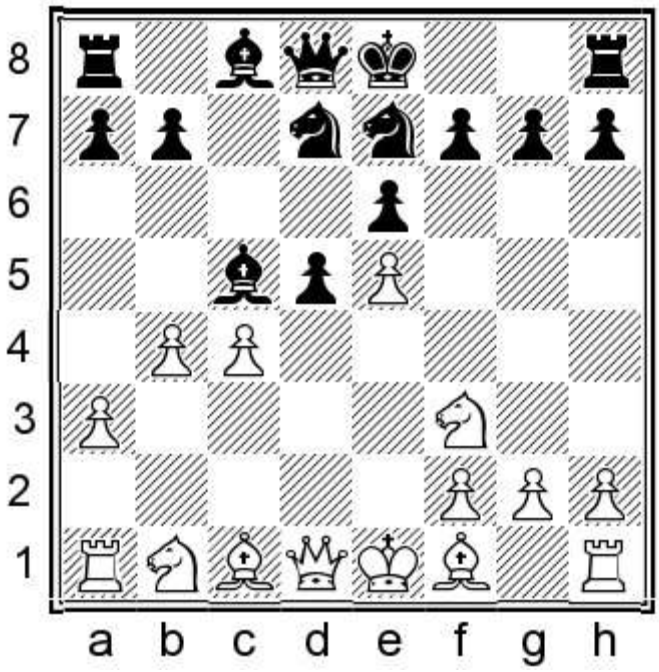
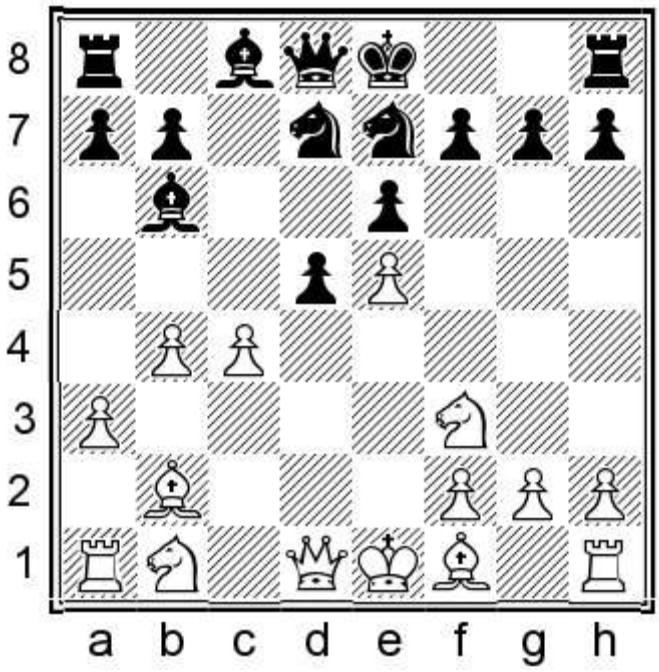


Position after: 8.b4N

This is the most challenging move for Black, who needs to respond accurately to maintain the balance.

8...♗b6 9.♗b2

9.♘c3 0-0= is not as good, as White will not be able to adequately defend the e5-pawn.



Position after: 9.♗b2

9...♗c7!

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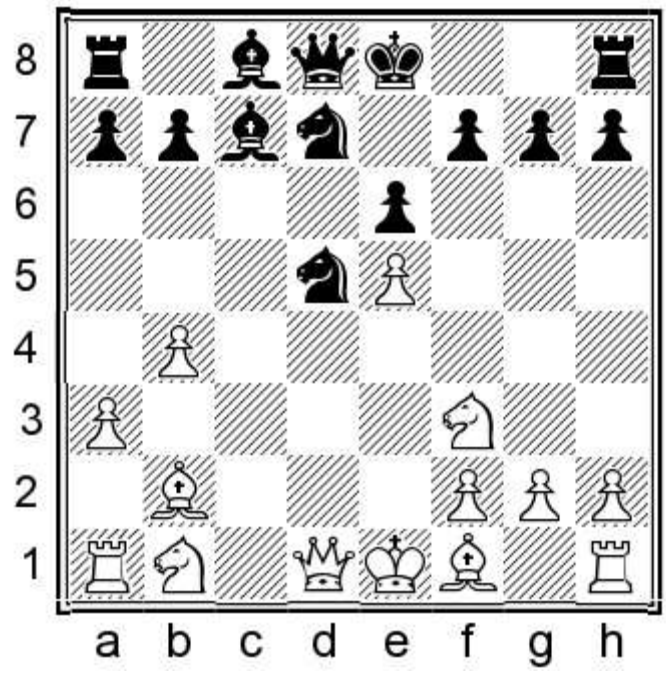
Forcing White to play 10.cxd5, since otherwise ...♘c6 or ...♘g6 comes next, and the e5-pawn will be under pressure. Other moves fail to equalize:

A) 9...a5?! allows White to expand on the queenside: 10.c5! ♗c7 11.♗b5! White is ready to take the knight when it arrives on c6, and his space advantage will guarantee him a comfortable edge. 11...axb4 12.axb4 ♖xa1 13.♗xa1 ♘c6 14.♗xc6 bxc6 15.0-0 ♗a6 16.♖e1 0-0 17.♘a3!± The knight will come to d4, and Black's position is quite unpleasant.

B) 9...♘g6?! runs into 10.h4! ♗c7 11.♕e2± and the g6-knight is misplaced.

10.cxd5 ♘xd5



Position after: 10...♘xd5

10...exd5?! would be interesting if White didn't have 11.e6! fxe6 12.♗xg7 ♖g8 13.♗b2± where Black's position seems very dangerous.

11.♘bd2

Alternatives are not as strong, as Black can quickly develop and pose problems for White:

A) 11.♗e2 0-0 12.0-0 ♘7b6 13.♘bd2 ♗d7 14.♘e4 ♘f4=

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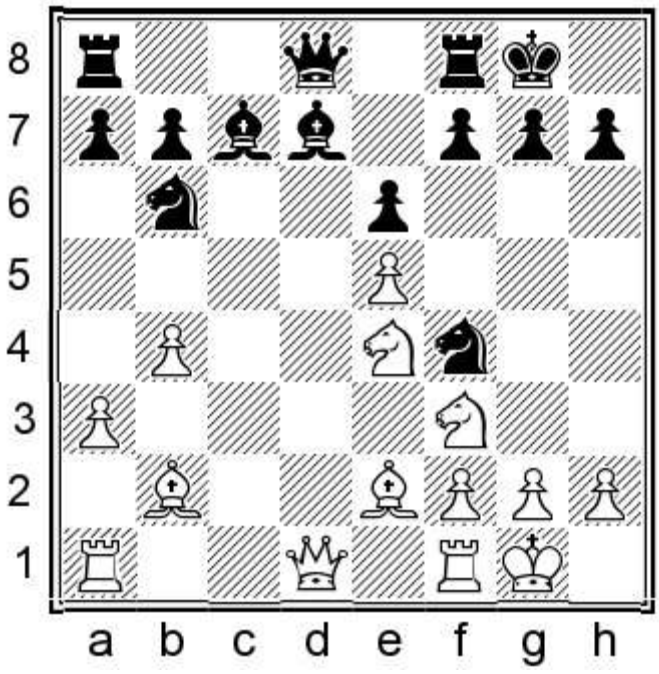

Position after: 14...♘f4=

Black will dominate the light squares and is in no trouble at all.

B) 11.♘c3 is also not an issue: 11...0-0 12.♕d4 ♘7b6=

11...0-0 12.g3

After 12.♕c2 Black can secure the c5-square for his knight: 12...a5! 13.b5 b6 14.♗d3 h6 15.0-0 ♘c5= with a great position.

12...b6!

Black hinders White's plan and prepares to bring the light-squared bishop into the game.

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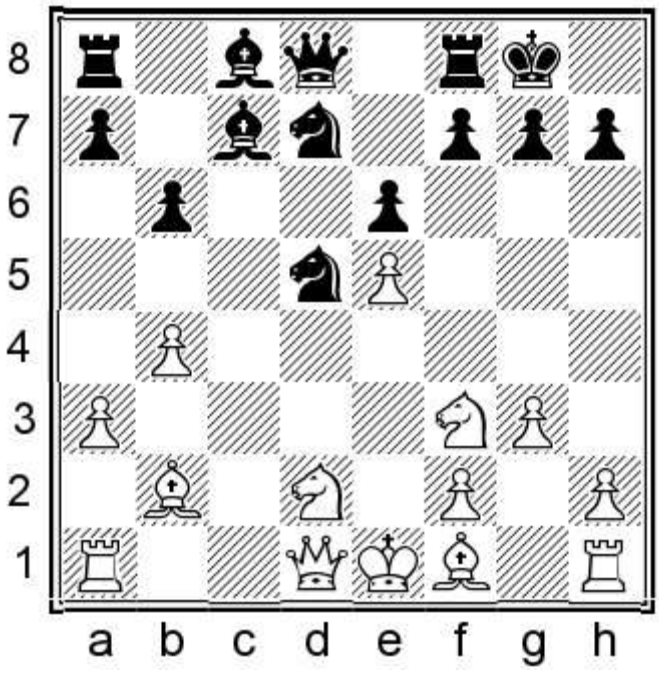

Position after: 12...b6!

A) 12...♘7b6?! intending ...♗d7, ...♘a4 is met simply by 13.♖c1!±.

B) 12...a5?! is also imprecise, as the future c5-knight can't achieve much. 13.b5 b6 14.♗g2 ♘c5 15.0-0±

13.♕e2!?

This is White's most interesting option. He wants to continue with ♗g2, and (if Black plays passively) work with his space advantage. Therefore Black should now switch gears and play to open up the queenside.

A) 13.♗e2 leaves the e5-pawn unprotected, and Black can quickly take advantage of this with 13...♗b7 14.0-0 ♕b8!=

B) 13.♗g2 leaves the a6-f1 diagonal unguarded, and after 13...♗a6!= White is unable to castle.

C) 13.♗d3 is an interesting try for White and has the same idea of trying to capitalize on his extra space in the center. Black should seek activity first with 13...a5!, gaining control of the c5-square, and after 14.b5 ♘c5 15.♗c2, with 15...f5! 16.exf6 ♘xf6 17.♕e2 e5!

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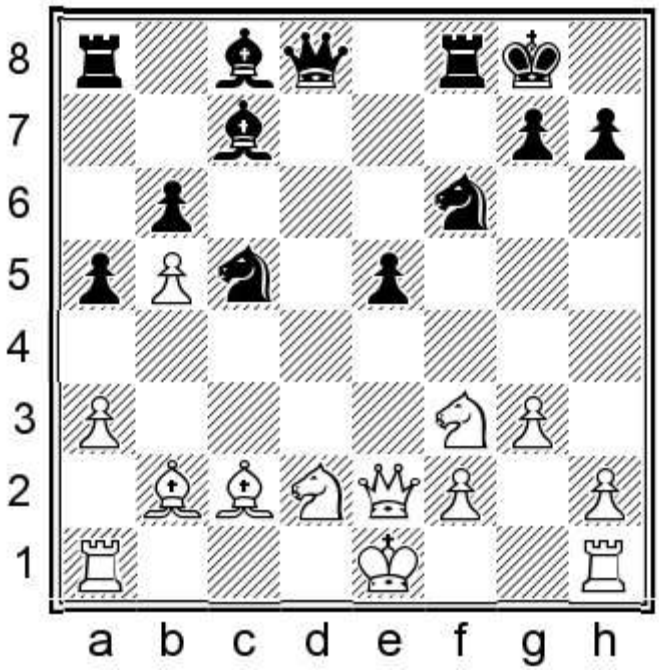

Position after: 17...e5!

Black has opened up the position with a series of punchy moves and has rendered the game rather complex. It's quite easy to see that Black's pieces are ideally placed for dynamic play. Nevertheless, the game is extremely sharp and all three results are possible. I will present a few continuations without too many comments for you to use as inspiration.

C1) 18.♘g5 leads to nothing more than a repetition after 18...h6 19.♘ge4 ♗g4 20.♕c4+ ♗e6 21.♕e2 ♗g4=

C2) 18.0-0-0 looks dangerous, but Black can stay out of trouble with precise play: 18...♕e8! 19.♖he1 ♗g4 20.h3 ♗h5 21.♕c4+ [21.g4 ♗g6 22.♘b3 (note that 22.♗xe5 is met by 22...♖c8⩲) 22...♘fe4 23.♘xc5 ♘xc5 24.♘xe5 ♗xc2 25.♔xc2 ♗xe5 26.♗xe5 ♕g6+ 27.♔b2 ♖ac8⩲] 21...♗f7 22.♕f1 ♘fd7!

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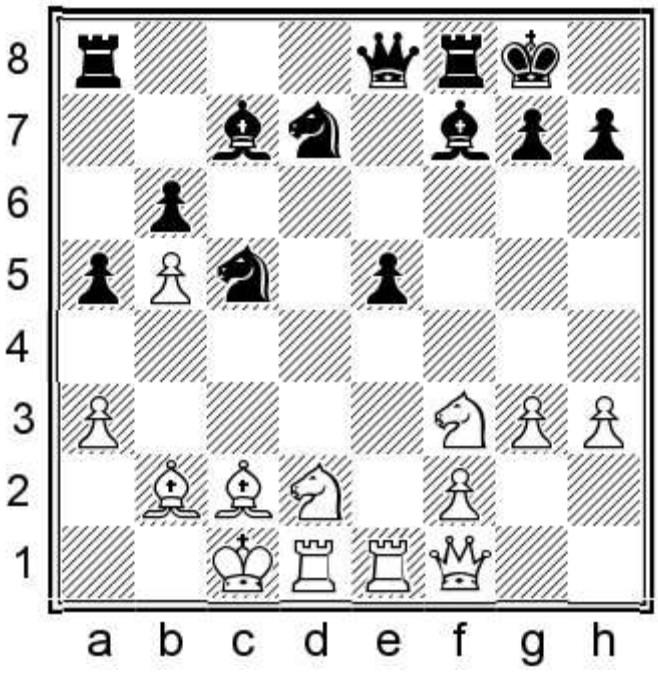
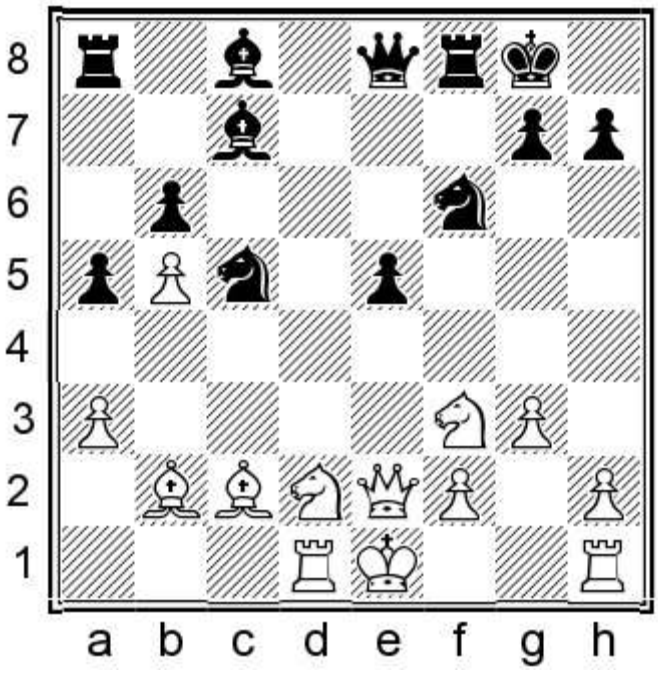


Position after: 22...♘fd7!

Protecting the e5-pawn. 23.♘e4 ♗g6 The most straightforward continuation. [23...♘xe4!? 24.♗xe4 ♖c8 25.♗c6 ♗b8∞ is also possible.] 24.♕c4+ ♔h8 25.♘xc5 ♘xc5 26.♗xe5 [26.♘xe5 ♗xc2 27.♕xc2 ♕xb5=] 26...♗xe5 27.♖xe5 ♕c8 28.♖e3 ♘d3+ 29.♗xd3 ♗xd3 30.♕xc8 ♖axc8+ 31.♔b2 ♗xb5=

C3) White can take the pawn with 18.♗xe5 but Black's active pieces provide excellent compensation for the pawn after 18...♗g4 19.0-0 ♗xe5 20.♕xe5 ♖a7⩲.

C4) 18.♖d1 ♕e8



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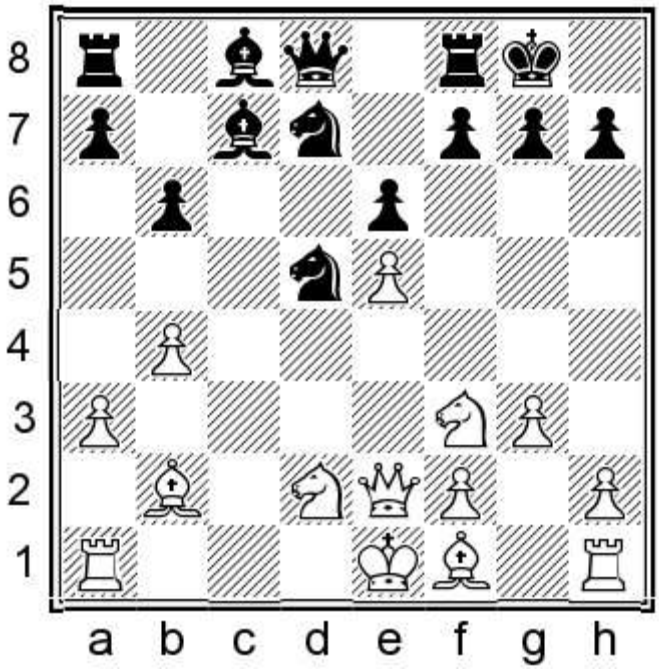
Position after: 18...♕e8

19.♘g5 leads to spectacular lines: [19.0-0 leads to an equal endgame after 19...♗d7 20.♕c4+ ♔h8 21.a4 ♕h5 22.♕h4 ♕xh4 23.♘xh4 ♗g4=.] 19...h6 20.♘ge4 ♗h3 21.♘xf6+ ♖xf6 22.♘e4 ♘xe4 23.♗xe4 [23.♕xe4 ♔f8!∞] 23...♗d6! 24.f4 ♖a7! 25.g4 ♗c5 26.f5 ♖d7 27.♕f3 ♖xd1+ 28.♔xd1 ♕xb5 29.♗xe5 ♖f7 30.♗d5 ♗xa3∞



Position after: 13.♕e2!?

13...b5!

A) 13...♗b7?! 14.♗g2± leaves Black without a plan, and scrambling to untangle his position.

B) Similarly 13...a5?! 14.b5± is very unpleasant for Black.

14.♗g2 a5

14...a6 15.0-0 ♗b7∞ is also possible, but I prefer the more forcing line.

15.0-0 ♗b7

We are quite far from anything that has ever been played, but this position is quite critical for the ...♘d7 setup to be playable.

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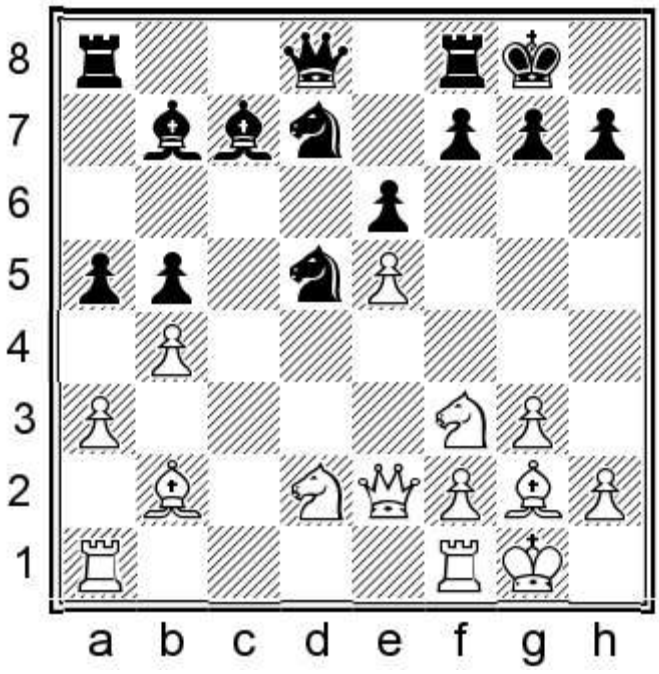


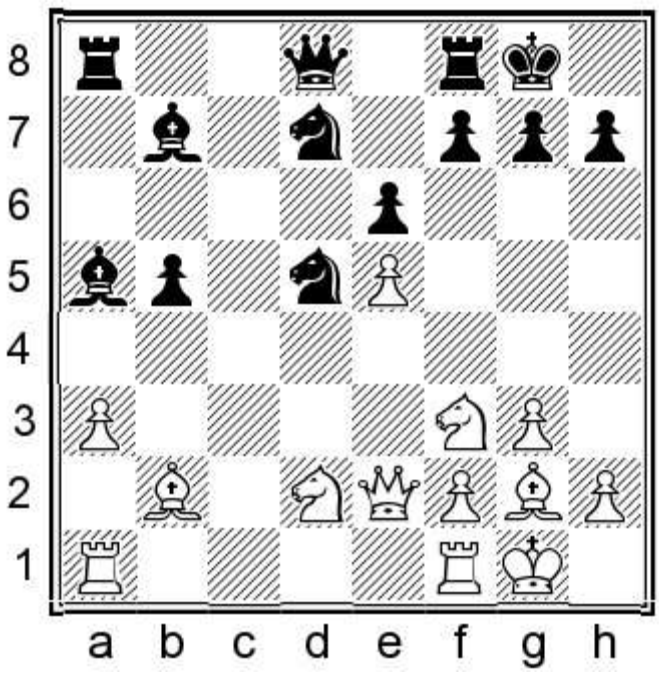
Position after: 15...♗b7

White has a few different options, but Black finds equality in every line with precise play.

16.♖fc1

This is the most logical continuation, as Black still needs to find ways to ease the pressure on his position. Luckily there is a continuation that fits the bill.

A) 16.bxa5 is the easiest continuation to deal with, as Black can continue to open the position on the queenside with ...b4. 16...♗xa5



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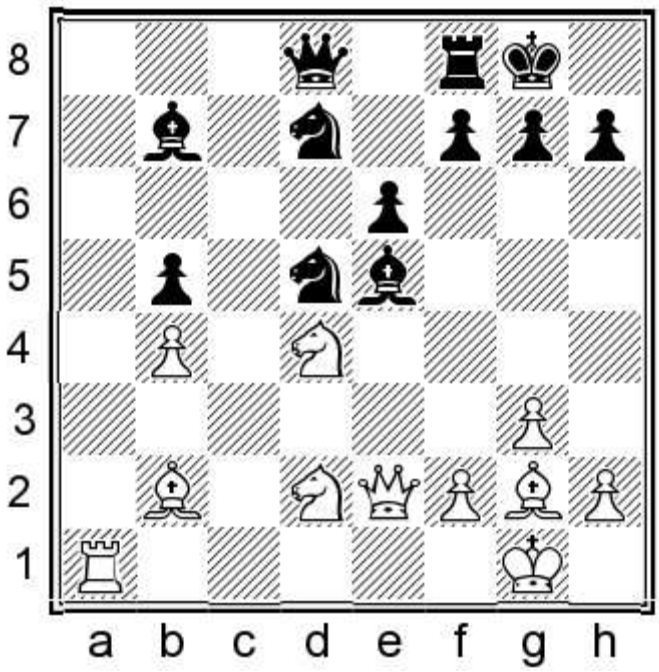
Position after: 16...♗xa5

17.♘e4 [17.♖fc1 b4 18.♘c4 bxa3 19.♗xa3 ♗b4 20.♗xb4 ♘xb4=] 17...b4 18.♖fc1 bxa3 19.♖xa3 ♗b4 20.♖b3 ♖a2 21.♕d3 h6 22.♘d4 ♕a5=

B) 16.♘d4 White is effectively trading the e5-pawn for the b5-pawn in an attempt to put pressure on Black on the queenside. 16...axb4 17.axb4 ♖xa1 18.♖xa1 [18.♗xa1 is less logical, and Black can continue with 18...♕e7 19.♕xb5 ♖b8 20.♘c6 ♗xc6 21.♕xc6 ♘xe5 22.♗xe5 ♗xe5 23.♗xd5 exd5 24.b5 ♗f6 25.♘f3 ♕b7 26.♖c1 ♕xc6 27.♖xc6 ♔f8= Now Black should find it relatively simple to hold this endgame.] 18...♗xe5



Position after: 18...♗xe5

B1) White can also delay capturing the pawn on b5 with 19.♘2b3!? ♗f6 20.♕xb5 ♗a8! 21.♕e2 [21.♖xa8 is not dangerous as Black can simplify matters with 21...♕xa8 22.♕xd7 ♕a2! 23.♗c1 ♗xd4 24.♘xd4 ♕c4 25.♗b2 ♕xb4 26.♕b5 ♖b8 27.♕xb4 ♖xb4 28.♗xd5 ♖xb2= with equality.] 21...♕b6 22.♖a6 ♕c7 23.b5 ♗b7 24.♖a1 ♕b6= The b5-pawn is blockaded and Black's position is solid, so it should be easy enough to play from here.

B2) 19.♘xe6 does not achieve much as after 19...fxe6 20.♗xe5 ♘xe5 21.♕xe5 ♕b6= White can hardly profit from Black's inferior pawn structure.

B3) 19.♕xb5 ♕b6

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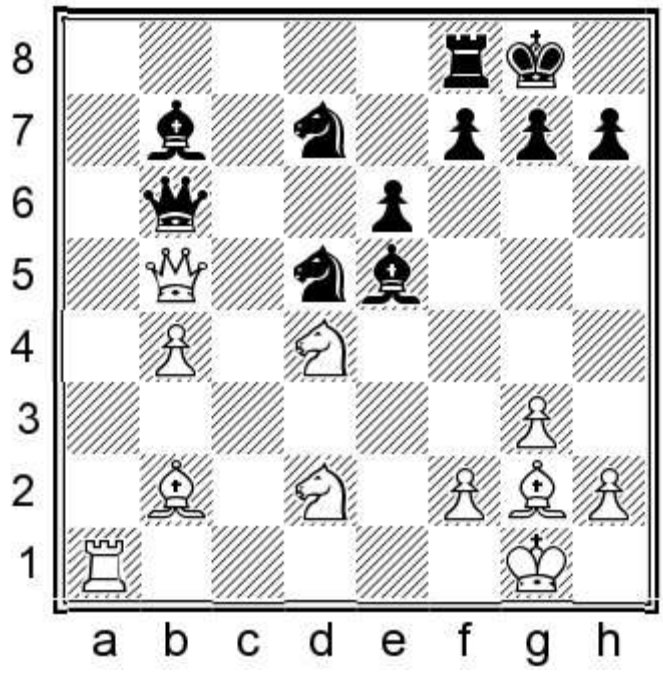

Position after: 19...♕b6

20.♕xb6 [20.♘c4 ♕xb5 21.♘xb5 ♗xb2 22.♘xb2 ♖a8 23.♖a5 ♔f8= Although White retains some pressure because of the passed b4-pawn, Black should be able to hold this endgame without major hussles.] 20...♘7xb6 21.♖a7 ♖b8 22.b5 ♘c8 23.♖a5 h6 24.♘c4 ♗f6 25.♗f1 g5= This is by no means a drawn endgame since there is a lot of play left in the position, but Black is not in trouble.

16...axb4 17.axb4 ♖a4!

Opening up the queenside and forcing matters.

18.♖xa4 bxa4

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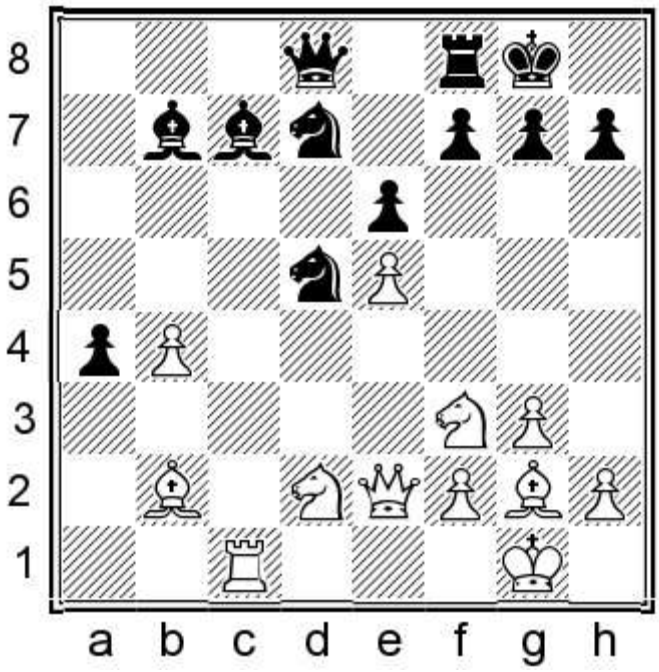
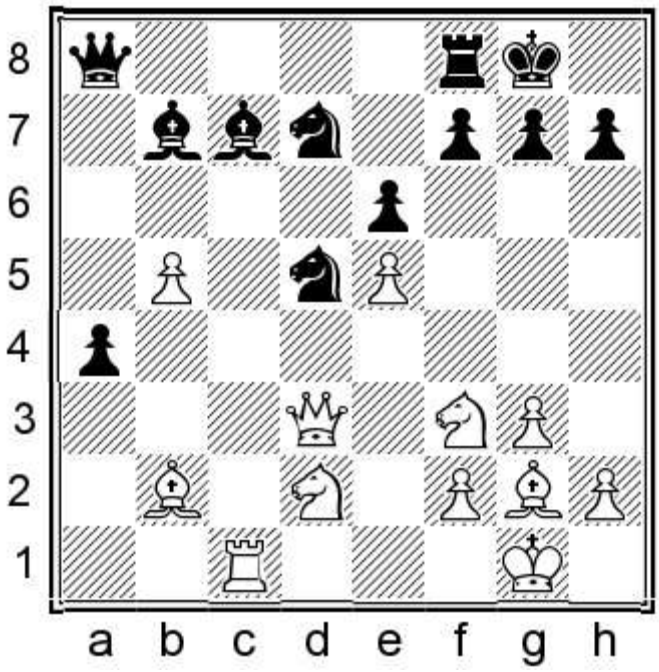


Position after: 18...bxa4

19.b5

19.♘c4 is tricky, but Black ultimately reaches an equal endgame with 19...♗a6: 20.♘d4 ♘xb4 21.♕d2 ♗xc4 22.♕xb4 ♘xe5 23.♘c6 ♘xc6 24.♕xc4 ♗e5! 25.♗a3 ♘e7 26.♕xa4 ♗d6 27.♖d1 ♘d5 28.♗xd5 ♗xa3! 29.♗xe6 ♕e8=.

19...♕a8 20.♕d3!



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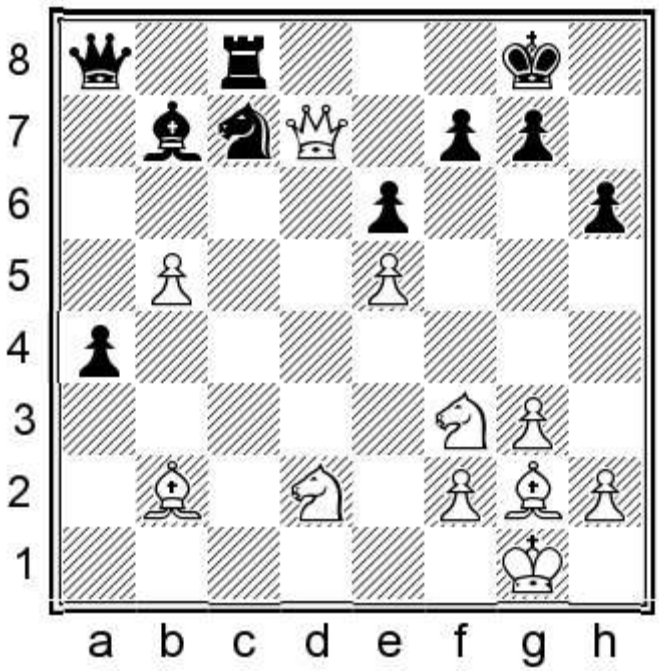
Position after: 20.♕d3!

White has two ideas: ♘g5 and ♖xc7.

20...h6! 21.♖xc7 ♘xc7 22.♕xd7 ♖c8!

Luckily, the latter threat was not too serious. Black's passed a4-pawn and superior piece coordination now pose enough problems to compensate for the material deficit. The position is quite complex, and both players need to calculate accurately to play it.



Position after: 22...♖c8!

23.h4

White needs to give his king a square to avoid back-rank problems.

A) After 23.h3 Black can activate his pieces with 23...♘d5 24.♕d6 ♖c2 25.♗a3 ♖a2 26.♕c5 ♘b6!∞ with an unclear position.

B) 23.♗a3 stops the a4-pawn, but allows Black to activate his knight with 23...♘d5 24.♕d6 ♘c3!=

23...♘d5

23...a3!? is also interesting, as after 24.♗xa3 ♘d5! 25.♗e7 ♖e8! the bishop has no good squares, and White has to give back material with 26.♗g5 hxg5 27.♘xg5 ♖e7 28.♕d6 ♖e8∞.

24.♕d6 ♘c3!

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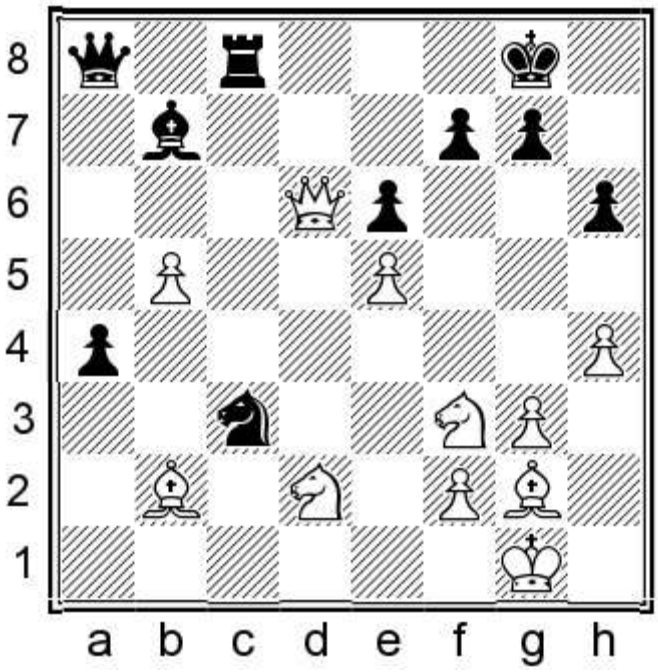
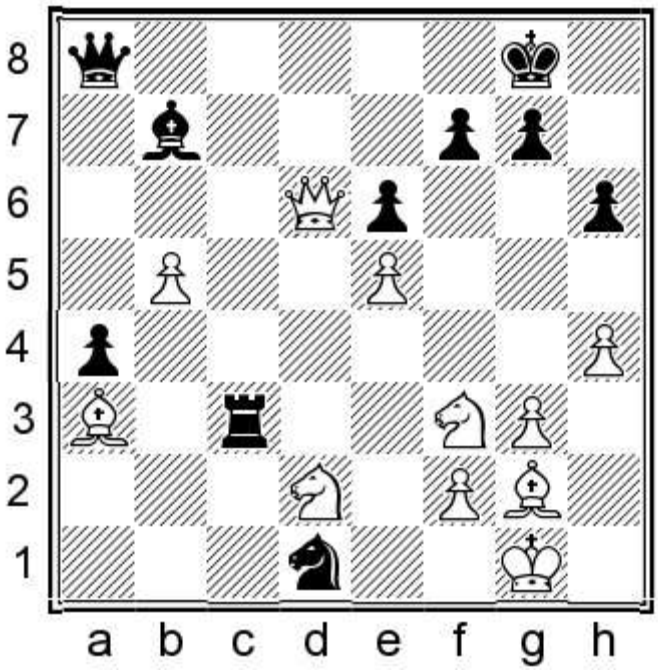


Position after: 24...♘c3!

25.♕d3

25.♕b4 leads to an equal position after 25...♘e2+ 26.♔f1 ♘c1 27.♕a3 ♘b3 28.♘xb3 ♗xf3 29.♗xf3 ♕xf3 30.♘d4 ♕e4=.

25...♘d1! 26.♗a3 ♖c3 27.♕d6



Position after: 27.♕d6

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Here, Black has an amazing resource:

27...♖xa3! 28.♕xa3 ♕a7 29.♘f1 ♕xf2+ 30.♔h2 ♕e2 31.b6 ♘f2=

White cannot escape the perpetual check. This also explains why this line is not playable for Black after 23.h3, as the g4-square would be covered.

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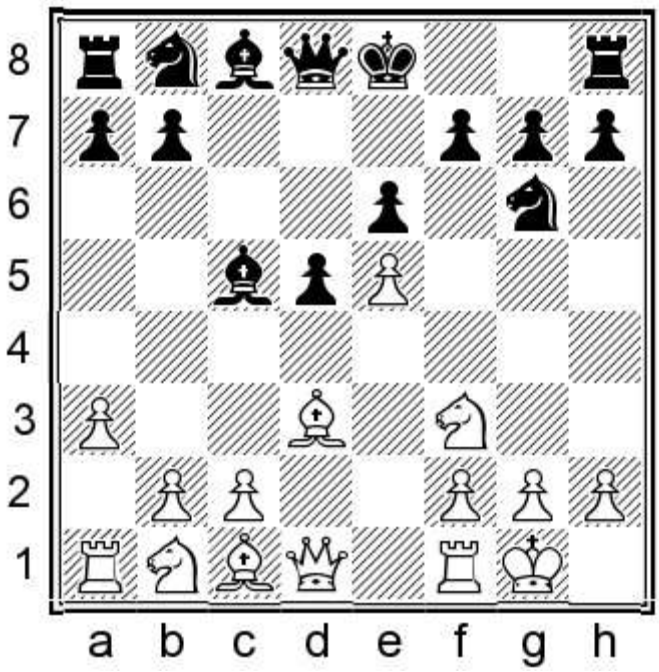
Chapter 3
4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 with 8.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 3 – 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 with 8.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3

a) 8...♘c6

b) 8...0-0 9.♘g5

c) 8...0-0 9.♖e1

d) 8...a6

e) 8...♗e7

a) 8...♘c6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3

6.a3 is covered via 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.♘f3.

6...♘e7

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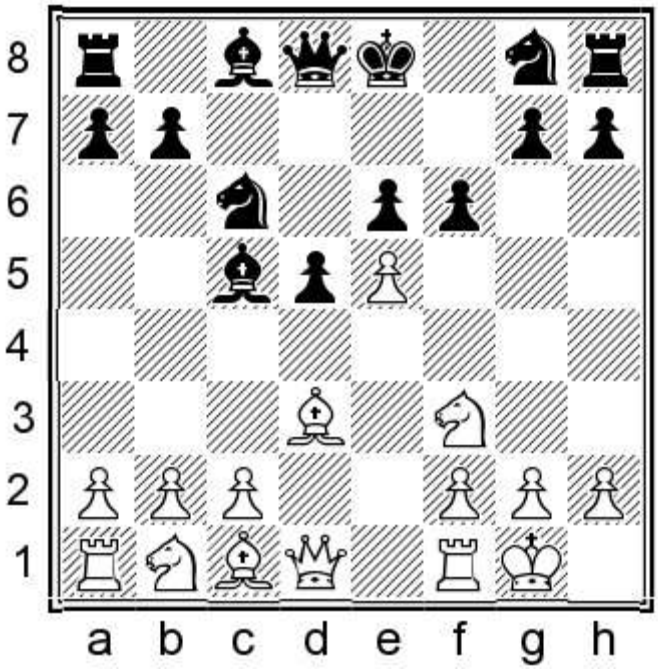
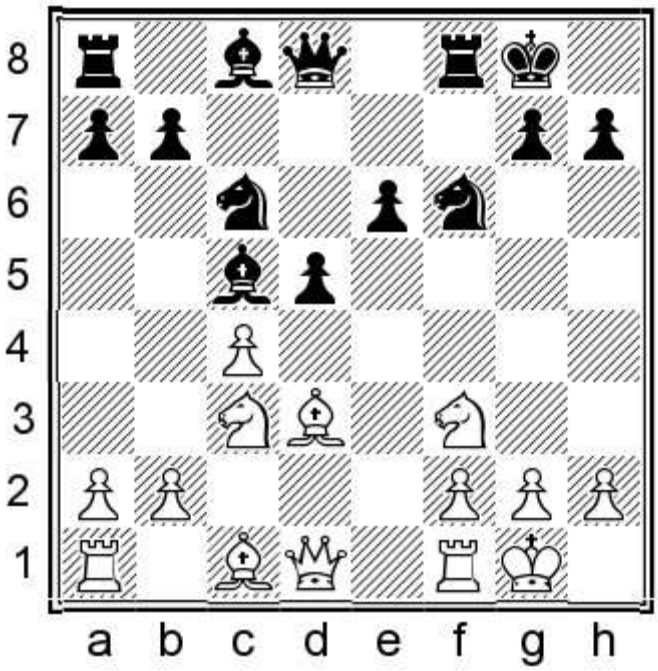
It is worth considering the currently popular variation 6...f6 7.0-0 ♘c6:



Position after: 7...♘c6

White obtains the upper hand here with precise play. 8.exf6 ♘xf6 9.c4 0-0 10.♘c3 and Black can choose a few different ideas, but none of them give him enough counterplay. In the long run, Black's central pawns are weak and Black will either lose one or give up important squares by pushing them.



Position after: 10.♘c3

A) 10...♔h8 11.♗g5 ♕d6 12.♗h4!± gave White an edge in Van Kampen, R (2572) – Kroeze, F (2408)

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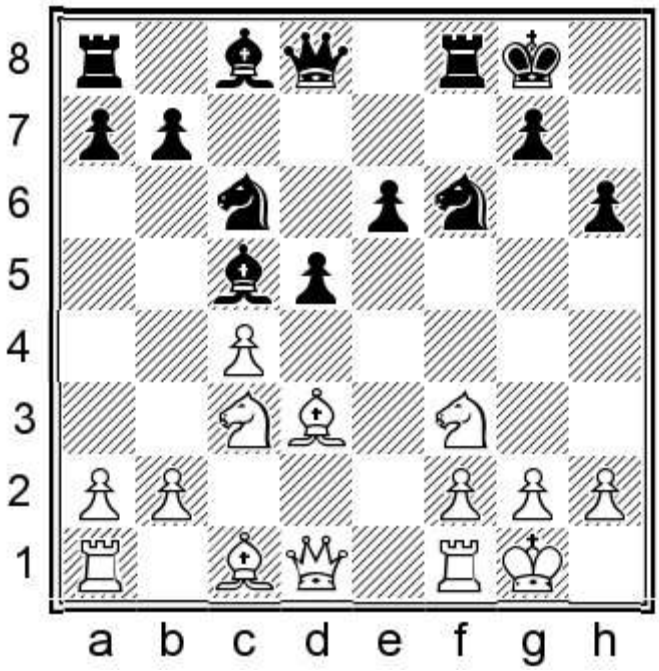
Germany 2012.

B) 10...h6



Position after: 10...h6

11.♗f4!N White wants to bring the bishop to g3 so that it will defend the f2-pawn and control the e5-square. 11...d4 [11...♘h5 12.♗d2 ♗d7 13.♖c1± Black's position is too loose.; 11...♗d7 12.♗g3 ♗e8 13.♖e1±] 12.♘b1!? The idea is to bring the knight to d2 and control the e4-square. White has a slight edge due to Black's inferior pawn structure. 12...♘h5 13.♗g3 e5 14.♘bd2±

C) 10...♕d6 11.h3! ♗d7 [11...♘e5 is forcing and worth considering, but after 12.cxd5 ♘fg4 13.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 14.♘g5+ ♔g8 15.hxg4 exd5 16.♕xd5+ ♕xd5 17.♘xd5 ♗xg4 18.♗e3± the tactics have worked out in White's favour.] 12.♘a4!

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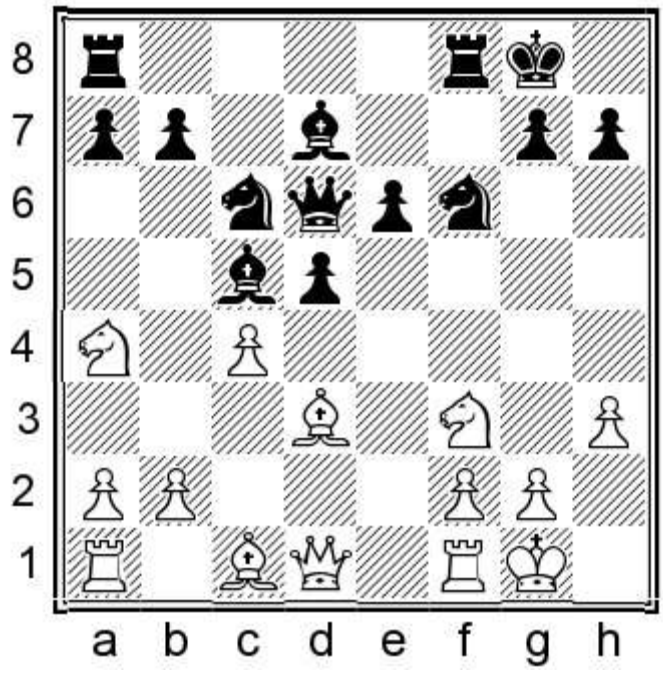

Position after: 12.♘a4!

White harasses the c5-bishop, which is Black's best piece. 12...♗b4 [12...b6 13.cxd5 exd5 14.♘xc5 bxc5 15.♗e3±] 13.a3 ♗a5 14.♘c3 Black's dark-squared bishop has been driven away and a3 is a useful move. 14...a6 [14...♘e5 15.♗f4 ♘xf3+ 16.♕xf3 e5 17.♗g3±] 15.cxd5 exd5 16.♘e4! ♘xe4 [16...dxe4?? loses to 17.♗c4++–] 17.♗xe4 d4 [17...♘e7 18.♗g5 ♔h8 19.♗xe7 ♕xe7 20.♕xd5± leaves White a pawn up for little compensation.] 18.♘g5! g6 19.♗d2 ♖ae8 20.♗xa5 ♘xa5 21.♖e1± White's position is more comfortable, as the d4-pawn is very weak.

7.0-0

7.a3 has no independent value since Black frees the e7-square for the bishop with 7...♘g6.

7...♘g6 8.a3

White's intention is quite clear: he wants to play b4 and follow up with ♗b2, ♘bd2, ♖e1 and possibly c4.

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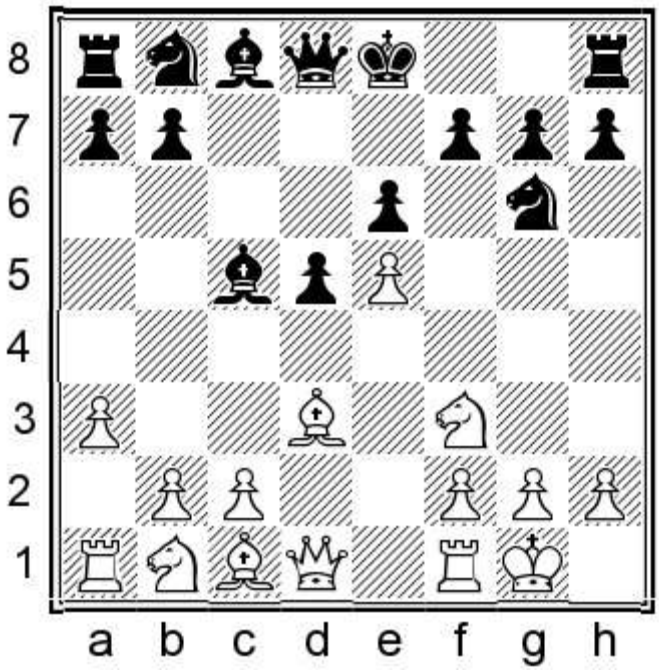

Position after: 8.a3

A lot of players have reached this position, and there is considerably more theory than in the lines we discussed in the previous chapter, where a3 was played on an earlier move. Nevertheless, there are many new ideas to be explored. Since we are discussing one of the main lines for White, I will show a few different continuations for Black. 8...♘c6 is the most popular move and should be followed up with 9.b4 ♗e7. White can likely claim a slight pull in that line, but he needs to be very precise. 8...0-0 is another popular move, which can lead to very sharp and forcing play after 9.♘g5 or to a positional struggle after 9.♖e1. Overall, Black needs to put in a considerable amount of work to equalize in both lines, so I will just showcase the main variations. Although it is only move 8, Black has two interesting novelties in this position. The first one is 8...a6!?N, freeing the a7-square for the bishop. The critical lines arise after 9.♘bd2, as White mirrors the main line with 8.♘bd2 with the moves a3 and ...a6 included. My main recommendation is 8...♗e7!?N, an intriguing move that can be best understood by examining the shortfalls of the other variations. It almost always makes sense to delay ...♘c6, because in case White plays b4 Black wants to reply with ...♗e7 and ...a5 (displacing the b4-pawn) and then develop the queen's knight to c5 instead. We will begin by discussing Black's alternatives to 8...♗e7, and we will revert to my main recommendation in the last subchapter.

8...♘c6

The most straightforward approach. Black simply continues development and invites White to show his plan.

9.b4

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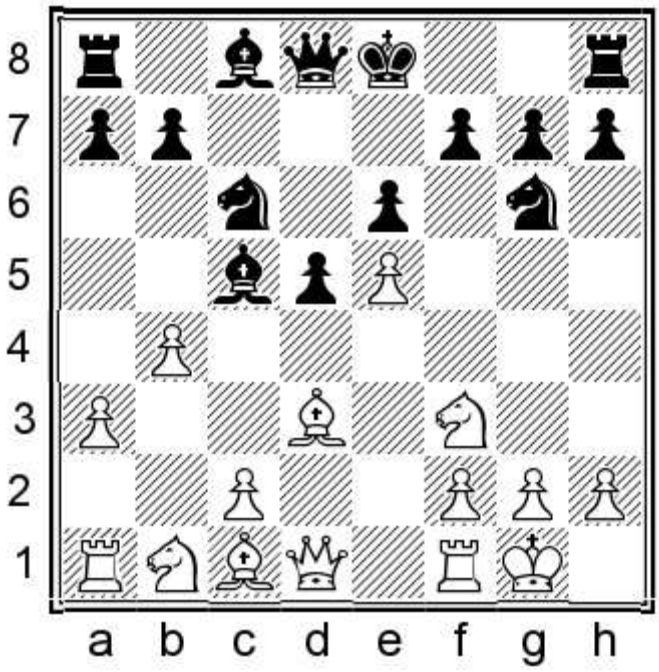

Position after: 9.b4

9...♗e7

9...♗b6?! is more popular, but Black fails to equalize as White opens up the center with c4. 10.♗b2 0-0 [10...♘f4 can also be played, but White retains the upper hand with 11.c4 0-0 12.c5! ♘xd3 13.♕xd3 ♗c7 14.b5 ♘e7 15.♘bd2± as was played in Kadric, D (2554) – Pogorelov, R (2354) Sitges 2018.] 11.♖e1 f6!? This is Black's only try, as Black's position will be very hard to play if he does not look for counterplay. 12.exf6 gxf6 13.c4 dxc4 [13...♘f4 14.cxd5 ♕xd5 15.♗e4 ♕xd1 16.♖xd1 e5 17.♘c3± gave White a more comfortable endgame in Wolfrum, R (2212) – Gierth, K (2187) GER email 2011.] 14.♗xc4 ♕xd1 15.♖xd1 ♔g7 16.♘c3 e5 17.♘d5±

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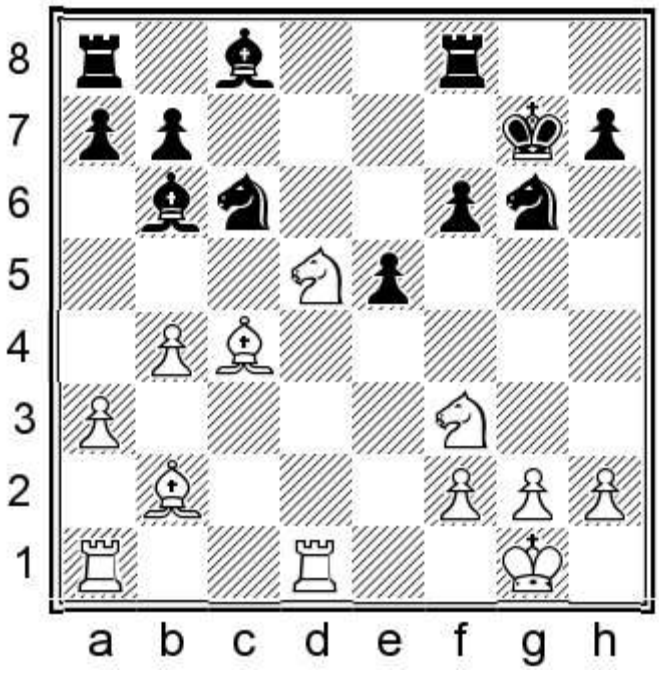

Position after: 17.♘d5±

White also had a more comfortable endgame in Karjakin, S (2753) – Adhiban, B (2683) Astana 2019.

10.♗b2

10.♖e1 transposes to 8...♗e7 9.♖e1 ♘c6 10.b4.

10...0-0

A) 10...♘f4 eliminates the light-squared bishop, but Black's kingside is left exposed and White can start an attack with 11.♖e1!N 11...♘xd3 12.♕xd3 0-0 13.♘bd2 b6 14.♖e3!±.

B) 10...f6 is a worse version of the lines with 8...♗e7 9.♖e1 ♘c6 10.b4 f6, as White can take on g6 without spending time on ♖e1. 11.♗xg6+ hxg6 12.♕d3 f5N 13.♘bd2 g5 14.h3± White is about to play c4 and Black is under pressure.

11.♖e1

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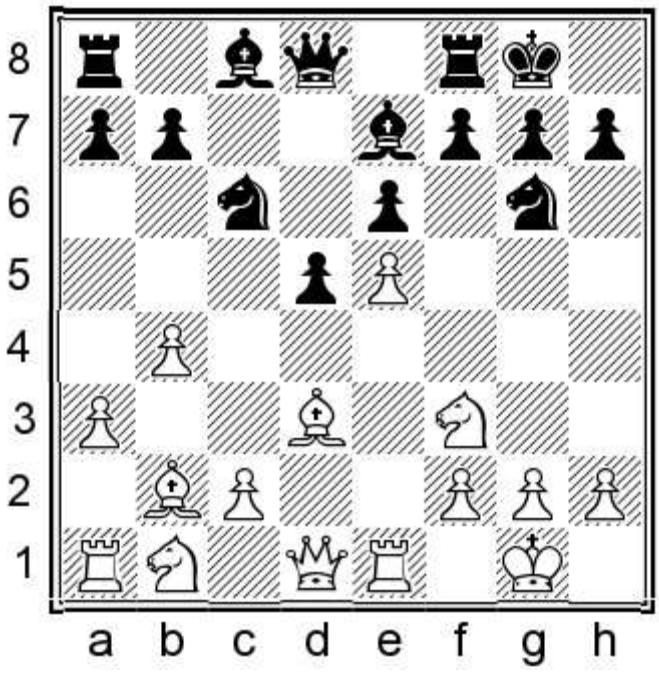

Position after: 11.♖e1

White needs to free the f1-square for his light-squared bishop.

11.♘bd2 ♘f4= was equal in Bernadskiy, V (2570) – Tabatabaei, M (2566) Teheran 2017

11...♗d7

A) 11...f6 is not as strong now since Black has already castled and cannot generate a kingside initiative. 12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♘bd2±

B) 11...♘f4 is pointless, as White can retreat the bishop to f1. 12.♗f1 f6 13.♘bd2±

12.♘bd2

12.c4 dxc4 13.♗xc4 was seen in Zilberstein, D – Bartholomew, J ICC 2007, and now Black can equalize completely with: 13...b5!N 14.♗xb5 a5=.

12...b5!

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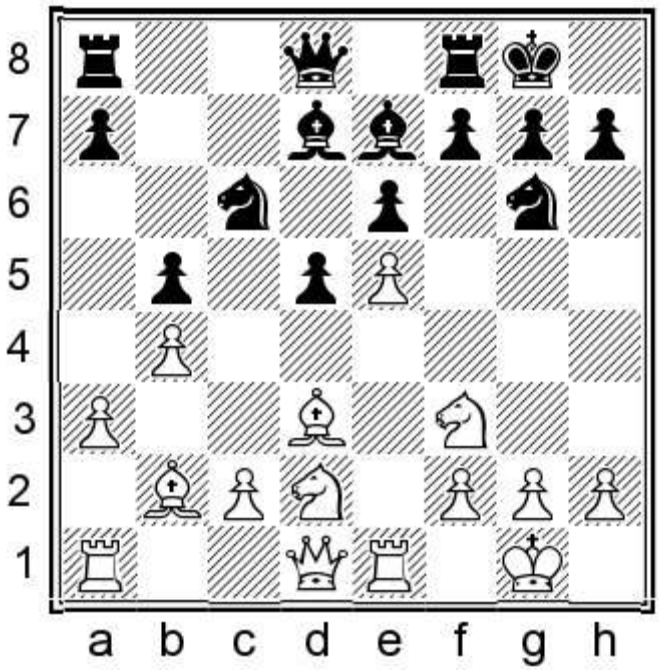

Position after: 12...b5!

Without this move, Black's position is cramped and passive.

13.♗xb5

White can also choose to leave the pawn on b5 with 13.g3N 13...a5 14.c3 ♖b8 15.♖b1 [Putting the rook on c1 does not change much, as the rook will be headed to d1 once Black closes the queenside. Thus 15.♖c1 a4 16.♕e2 ♕b6 17.♖cd1 would transpose.] 15...a4 16.♕e2 ♕b6 17.♖bd1 ♕b7 18.h4!? [18.♘f1 f6 19.exf6 ♗xf6 20.♗xg6 hxg6=] 18...f6 19.exf6 ♗xf6 20.♗b1∞ The position is complex, but slightly easier to play for White as his pieces are more centralized.

13...♘cxe5 14.♗xd7

14.♗f1 is too slow: 14...♘xf3+ 15.♘xf3 ♗a4!=.

14...♘xd7 15.c4 dxc4 16.♘xc4 ♘b6 17.♘a5!?

A) 17.♖c1 ♕xd1 18.♖exd1 ♘f4 19.♔f1 ♖fc8=

B) 17.♕e2 ♕d5 18.♘xb6 axb6 19.g3 ♖fd8=

17...♕xd1 18.♖exd1 ♖fc8 19.g3∞

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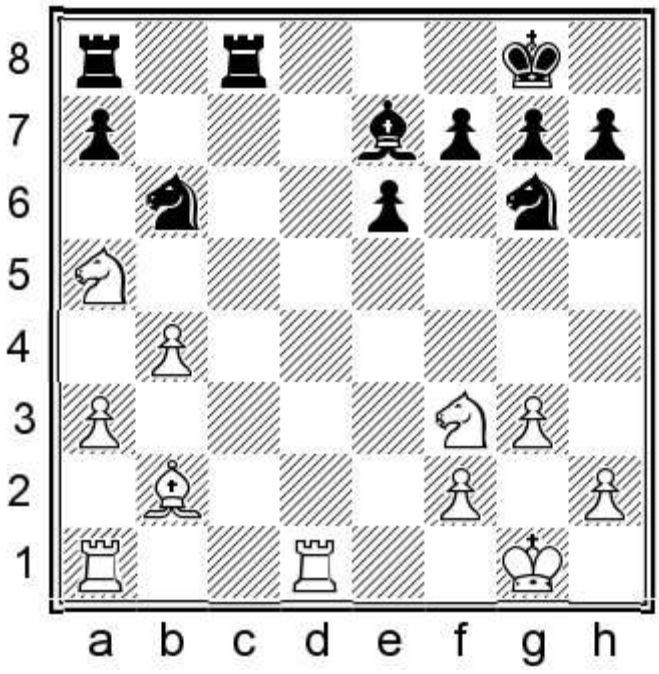

Position after: 19.g3∞

Although this endgame is not far from equality, Black is the one who will have to work for a draw.

b) 8...0-0 9.♘g5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3 0-0!?

A very logical move, but it restricts Black's options, as f6 will not be as good without the rook on h8. White now has two main options: the calmer 9.♖e1!? and the more aggressive 9.♘g5!?.

9.♘g5!?

Taking the bait. Now, Black needs to defend against White's threat of an imminent attack on the kingside.

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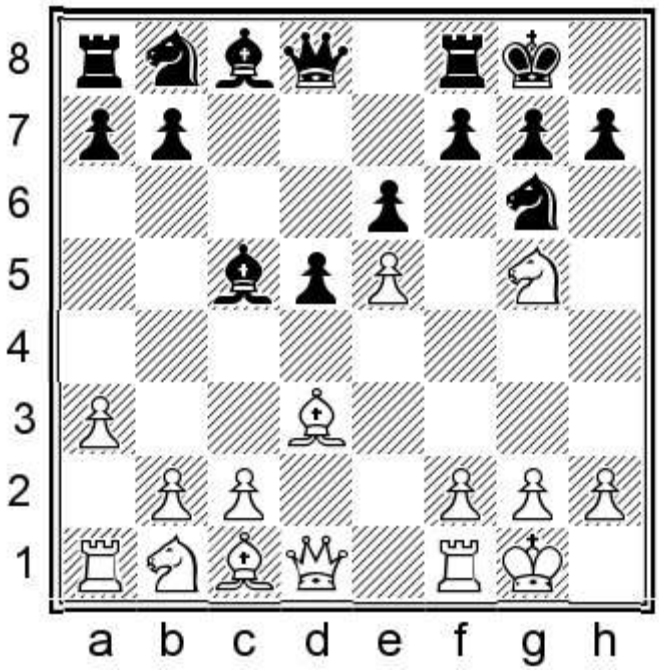

Position after: 9.♘g5!?

A) 9.b4?! is not a good idea now since 9...♗e7= (followed by ...a5) gives Black a good position.

B) 9.♘bd2 seems logical, with the idea of waiting for ...♘c6 to play b4, but the f4-square is now free for Black to use. 9...♘c6 10.b4 ♗b6 11.♗b2 [Black was fine after 11.♗xg6 fxg6= in Anand, V (2773) – Mamedyarov, S (2817) Wijk aan Zee 2019.] 11...♘f4= Once the light-squared bishop comes off the board, Black will not be in any danger. Black was fine in Vitiugov, N (2735) – Anand, V (2776) Karlsruhe/ Baden-Baden 2018.

C) 9.♖e1!? – see the next subchapter.

9...♕c7

9...♗e7?! was played in Xiong, J (2656) – Karavade, E (2374) Douglas 2018, and Black soon succumbed to the attack: 10.♕h5 ♗xg5 11.♗xg5→ 11...♕c7 12.♘c3 ♘c6 13.f4 ♘d4 14.♖ae1 h6 15.♗f6! gxf6 16.exf6 ♘f5 17.♗xf5 exf5 18.♘xd5 ♕c5+ 19.♖e3 ♖d8 20.♕xh6 ♕f8 21.♘e7+ and resigns.

10.♕h5 h6 11.♘f3

11.♘xf7 wins a pawn but gives up the initiative, and Black finds ample compensation. 11...♕xf7

A) 12.♗xg6? seems crushing, but it is White fighting for a draw after 12...♕xf2+!! 13.♖xf2 ♖xf2 14.♘d2 [14.b4 ♗b6 15.c4 was played in Gaponenko, I (2396) – Socko, M (2407) Moscow 2019, and Black could have played 15...♗d4!N with a winning position] 14...♖f5+ 15.♔h1 ♖xh5 16.♗xh5 ♘c6∓ Polgar, T (2241) – Chylewski, P (2376) Pardubice 2019.

B) 12.♗e3 ♘f4! 13.♕xf7+ ♖xf7 14.♗xc5 ♘xd3 15.cxd3 ♘c6 16.♗d6 ♘d4 17.♘c3 b6 18.f3 ♗a6 19.♖ad1 ♖c8 20.♖f2 g5⩲

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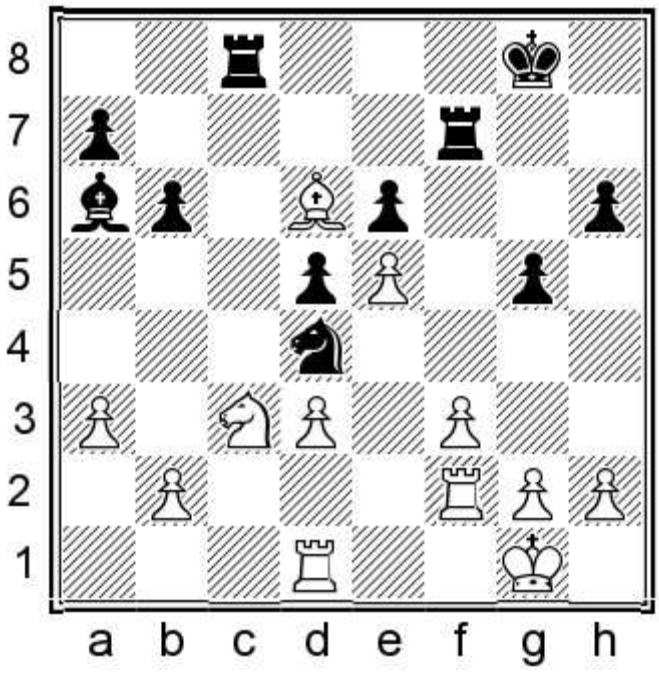
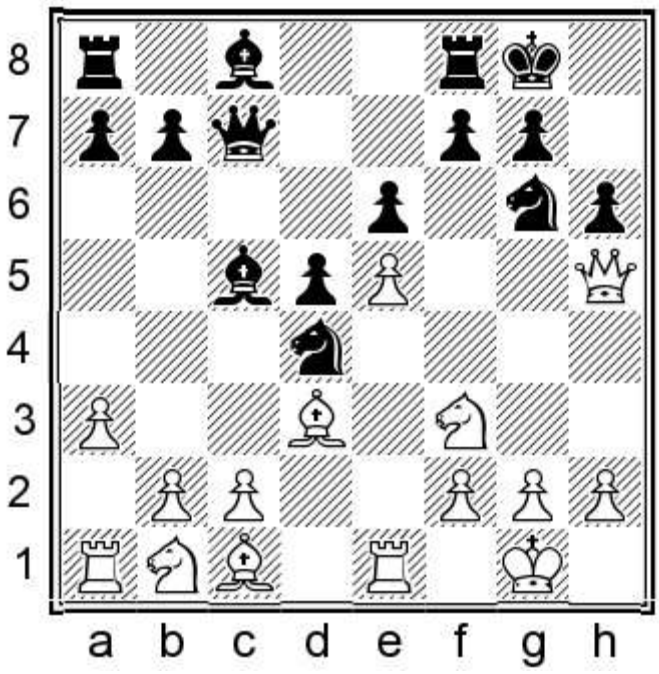


Position after: 20...g5∞

White has an extra pawn, but Black should be quite comfortable holding this endgame.

11...♘c6 12.♖e1 ♘d4!



Position after: 12...♘d4!

The only way for Black to create counterplay.

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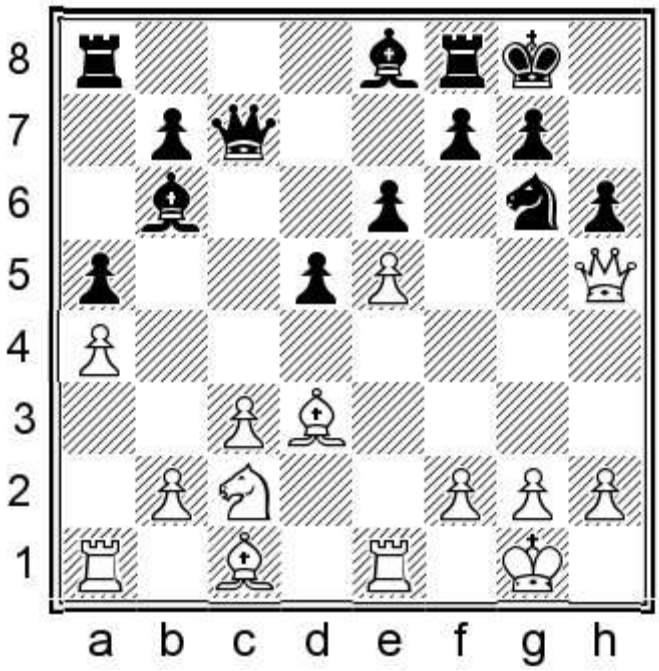
13.♘xd4 ♗xd4 14.c3 ♗b6!?

Retreating to c5 is imprecise: 14...♗c5 15.a4 a5 [15...a6 is too passive, and Black will struggle after 16.♘a3 ♗d7 17.♘c2±.] 16.♘a3 ♗d7 17.♘b5 ♗xb5 [17...♕b6 18.♕e2±] 18.axb5 a4 19.♗d2 a3 20.b4! ♗b6 21.♖a2!± The pawn is blockaded, and Black is left without any play.

15.a4 a5 16.♘a3 ♗d7 17.♘c2

17.♘b5 While this move was strong after 14...♗c5, Black is fine here since after 17...♗xb5 18.axb5 a4 19.♗d2 a3 b4 does not come with tempo. 20.bxa3 [20.b4 a2!∓ is now simply better for Black.] 20...♕c5! 21.♖f1 ♖xa3 22.♖xa3 ♕xa3=

17...♗e8!



Position after: 17...♗e8!

Defending the knight on g6 and preparing to push the f-pawn for counterplay.

18.♘d4

We have been following Arjun, K (2483) – Sankalp, G (2369) New Delhi 2019.

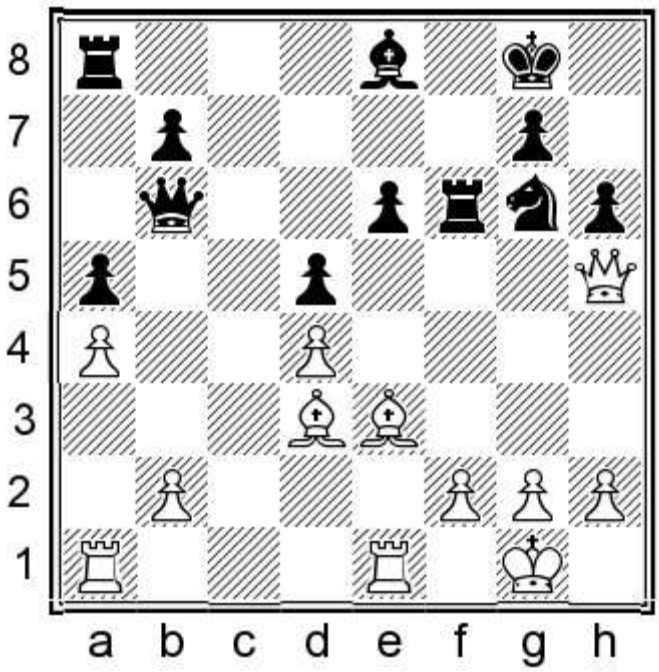
White could also have tried 18.♗d2N: by delaying ♘d4, he maintains his options of pushing the b-pawn. 18...♗c5!

A) Black's point is to answer 19.♘d4 with 19...♕b6!; 19.b3 ♖c8 [19...♕b6?! 20.♕e2!±] 20.♘d4 ♗xd4 21.cxd4 ♕b6 22.♕g4 f5 23.exf6 ♖xf6 24.h3 ♘e7∞ with an unclear position.

B) 19.b4 axb4 20.cxb4 ♗a7 21.b5 [21.a5 ♗b5! 22.♗xb5 ♕xc2=] 21...f6! A cool resource! 22.♗xg6

♕xc2! 23.♗xc2 ♗xh5=

18...♗xd4N 19.cxd4 ♕b6 20.♗e3 f5 21.exf6 ♖xf6∞



Position after: 21...♖xf6∞

The position is quite complicated, and we could analyze it further, but the general assessment is that Black will need to be quite precise to avoid trouble.

c) 8...0-0 9.♖e1

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3 0-0!? 9.♖e1!?

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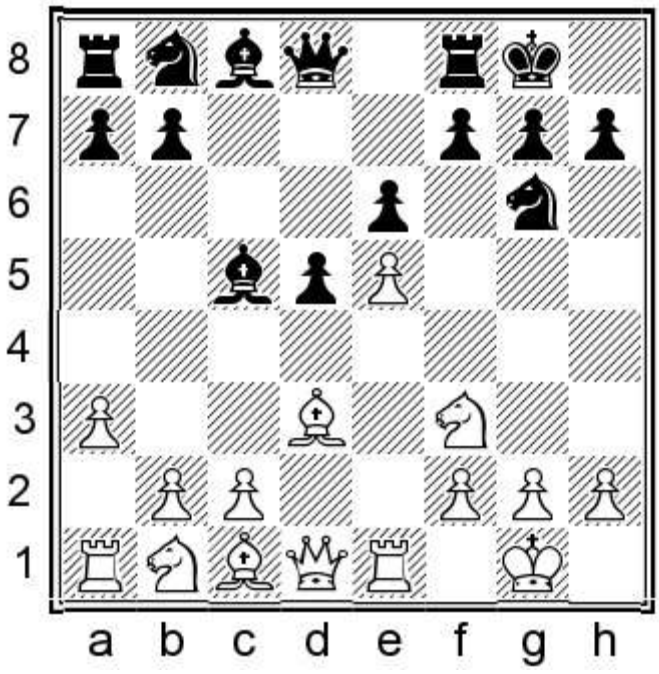

Position after: 9.♖e1!?

This move is surprisingly difficult to deal with since Black normally prefers delaying ...0-0. The inclusion of the last two moves favors White as ...f6 breaks are harder to accomplish now. The text move is perhaps stronger than 9.♘g5 since Black is now left to find a plan. By contrast, in the 9.♘g5 variations, Black's moves are forced and somewhat easier to find.

9...a5!?

An interesting move: Black restricts White's play on the queenside and gains space. Still, Black does not have a clear plan to find counterplay, so White's position is a bit more comfortable.

A) 9...♕b6 creates some discomfort for White, but he can quickly re-adjust his position:

A1) 10.♕d2!? White will develop his dark-squared bishop on b2, and now Black's own queen is misplaced on b6.

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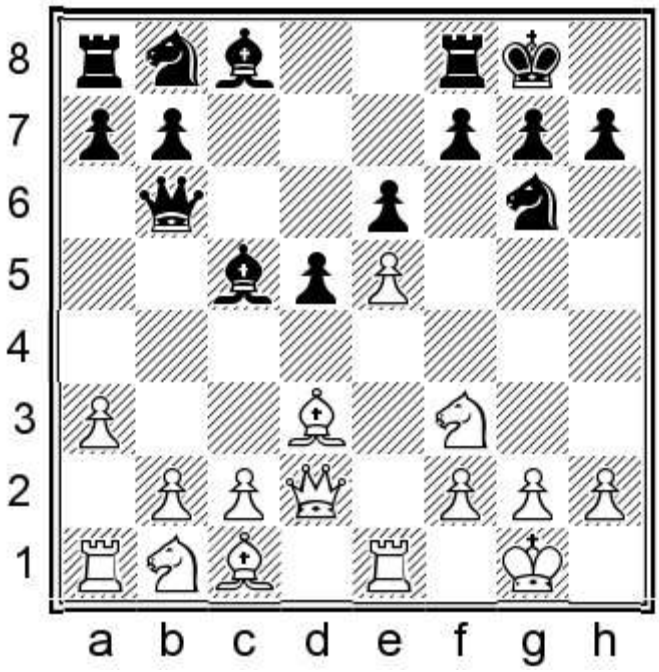

Position after: 10.♕d2!?

10...♘c6 [10...♗d7 allows 11.h4! ♕d8 12.b4 ♗b6 13.h5 ♘h4 14.♘g5 h6 15.♘h7 ♖e8 16.a4!→ with a crushing attack.] 11.b4 ♗e7 12.♗b2 a6 13.♕c1!± Black now has no easy way to deal with c4.

A2) 10.♗e3 is also possible as Black cannot take on b2: 10...♗xe3 11.♖xe3 ♘f4 [11...♕xb2? 12.♘c3!+–] 12.♘bd2∞.

B) 9...♕c7 is rather odd, but has an idea: Black is waiting for White to play b4 to develop his b8-knight so that he can then play ...a5 followed by b5 ...♘d7. However, White can seize the initiative with 10.b4 ♗e7 [The bishop is misplaced on b6, as Black can no longer pressure the b4-pawn: 10...♗b6 11.♘bd2 a5 12.♗b2±] 11.h4! Taking advantage of Black's slow development.

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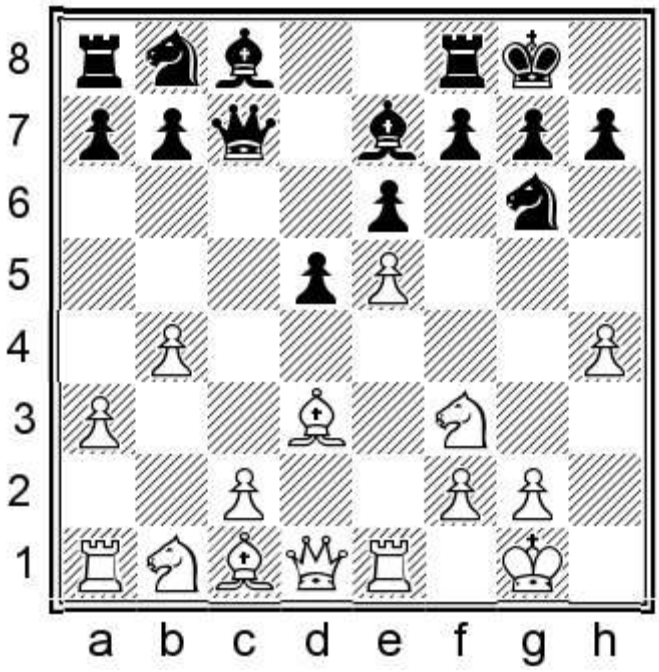
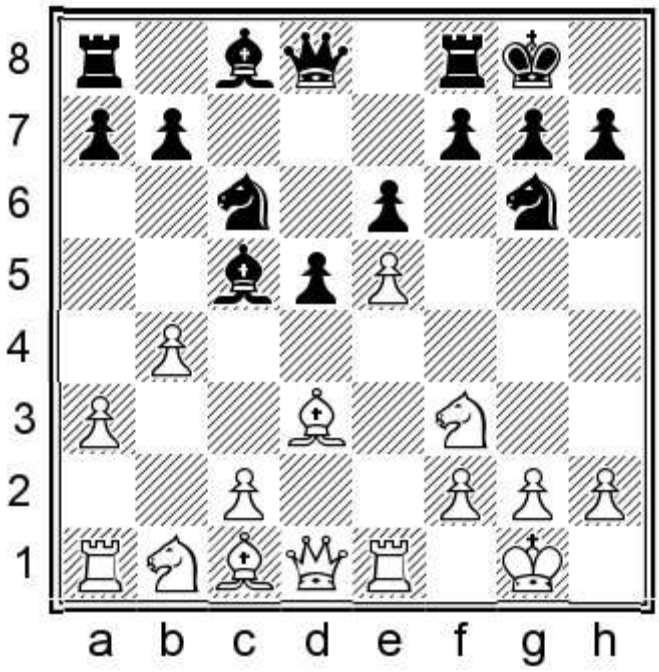


Position after: 11.h4!

11...♘d7 [11...♘c6 12.♗b2 f6 13.♗xg6 hxg6 14.♘bd2 b5 15.♕e2 a5 16.♕d3! f5 17.c3± gives White the upper hand as Black has no counterplay.] 12.♕e2! f6 13.♗xg6 hxg6 14.♗b2 White has an edge: 14...fxe5 [14...a5 15.exf6 ♘xf6 16.♗e5!±] 15.♘xe5 ♗xh4 16.♘f3 ♗f6 17.♕xe6+ ♔h8 [17...♖f7?? loses to 18.♕xd5! ♗xb2 19.♖e7+–] 18.♗d4±

C) 9...♘c6 transposes to lines which are good for White: 10.b4



Position after: 10.b4

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10...♗b6 [10...♗e7 11.♘bd2 f6 is not so good since Black has already castled. 12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♗b2±] 11.♗b2 See 8...♘c6 9.b4 ♗b6 10.♗b2 0-0 11.♖e1.

10.♗e3

This is the most logical move: White develops his bishop with tempo. Black can either trade bishops or retreat to e7. In both cases, White's position is slightly more comfortable.

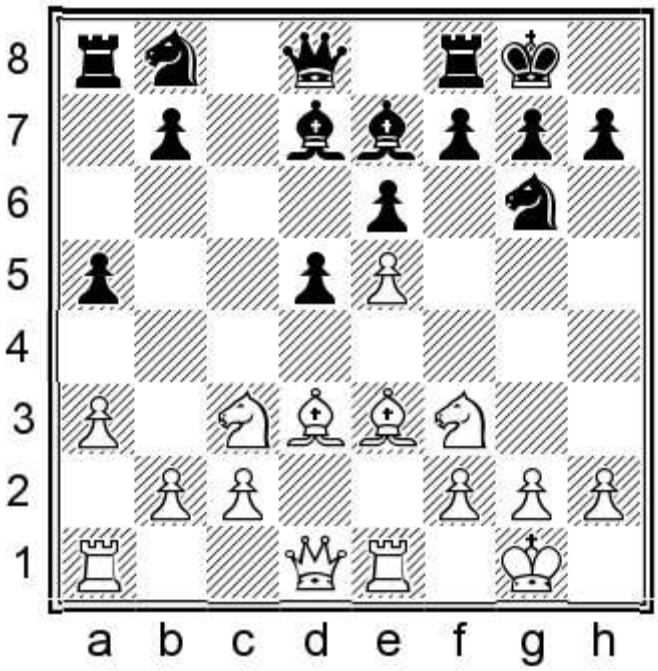
A) 10.♘c3 (with the idea of placing the knight on b5) is also interesting. 10...♘c6 11.♘b5 a4∞

B) 10.h4?! was played in Chen, Q (2362) – Wang, S (2187) Chengdu 2017, but Black has nothing to worry about after 10...♘c6N.

10...♗e7!?

10...♗xe3 11.♖xe3 ♘c6 12.♗xg6 fxg6∞

11.♘c3 ♗d7∞



Position after: 11...♗d7∞

d) 8...a6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3 a6!?N

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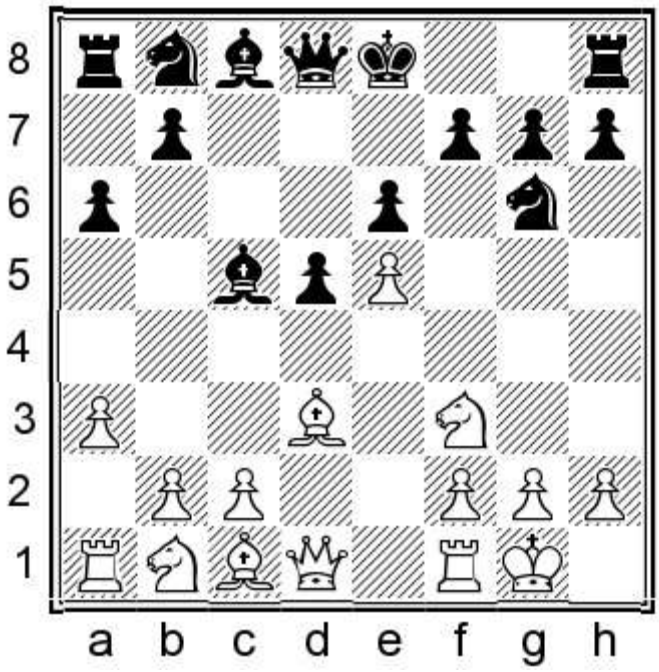

Position after: 8...a6!?N

This is an interesting option. Black wants to mitigate the effect of b4 by securing the a7-square for his bishop and by ensuring that b5 will not displace the c6-knight. In order for White to have any hope of an advantage, he now needs to switch plans and play 9.♘bd2, essentially mirroring the main line but with the moves a3 and ...a6 included. The inclusion of these moves changes Black's plan, partly because the dark-squared bishop will retreat to b8, not c7.

9.♘bd2!?

With this move, White is aiming for a line in the ♘bd2-♘b3 variation where the inclusion of a3 and ...a6 is favorable to him.

It takes a good understanding of the position to recognize that this is the best continuation without prior knowledge.

A) 9.b4 ♗a7

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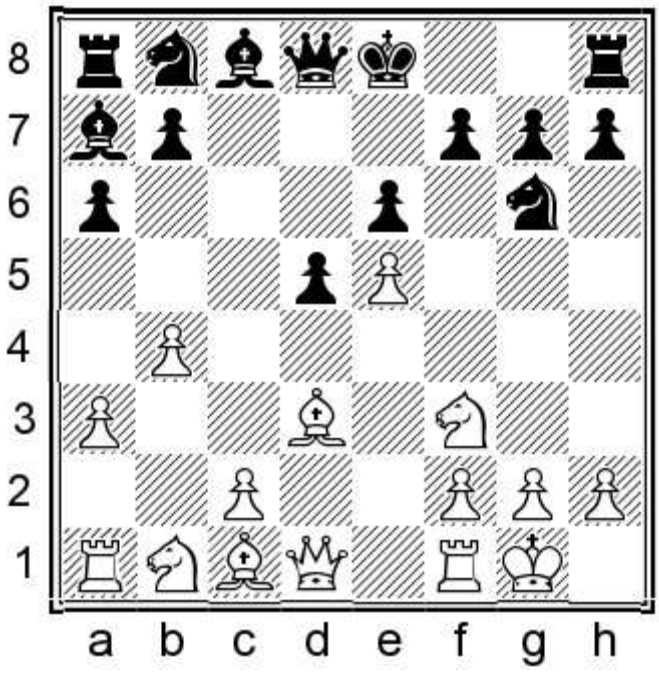
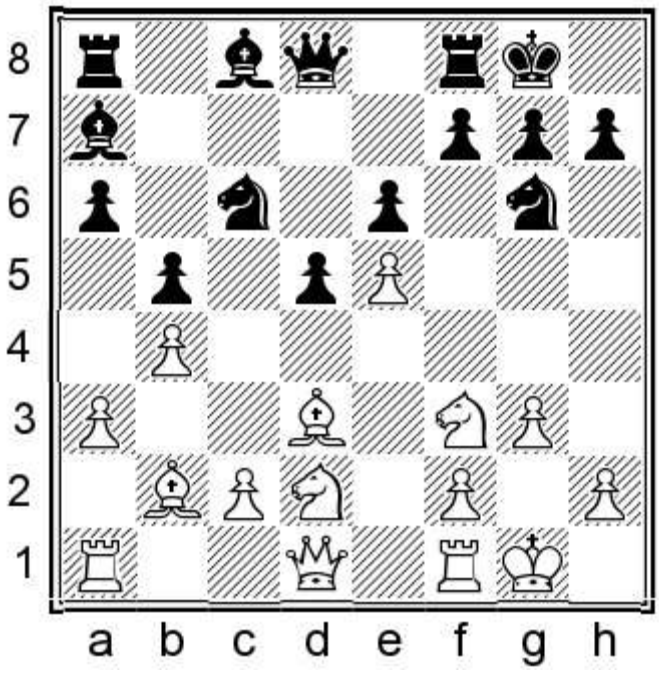


Position after: 9...♗a7

A1) 10.♗b2 Foregoing ♖e1 is not a good idea as Black can eliminate White's light-squared bishop. 10...♘c6 11.♘bd2 ♘f4! 12.♘b3 0-0 13.♕d2 ♘xd3 14.cxd3 d4!=

A2) 10.g3 is an alternative to ♖e1 as it prevents ...♘f4 and prepares h4, expanding on the kingside. 10...♘c6 11.♗b2 0-0 12.♘bd2 b5



Position after: 12...b5

Black prevents c4, so that he can focus on creating counterplay with ...f6. 13.♘b3 [13.♕e2 ♕e8!

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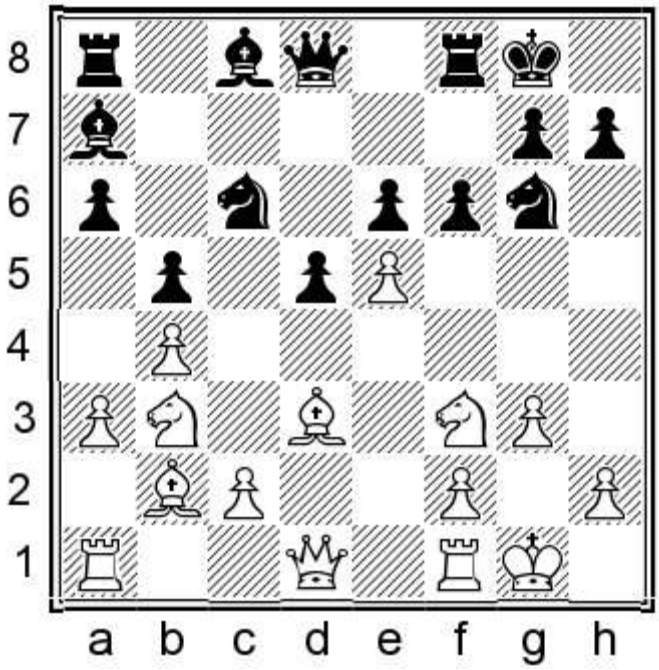
14.♖ae1 f6=] 13...f6 [13...f5!? allows White to shift his focus to the queenside with 14.a4!∞]



Position after: 13...f6

14.♗xg6 [14.exf6 gxf6 15.a4 bxa4 16.♖xa4 e5∞ The position is very unclear, with play for both sides.] 14...hxg6 15.♕d3 ♕e8 16.♖ae1 g5 17.♘bd4 ♗xd4 18.♗xd4 ♕h5= White controls the dark squares whereas Black controls the light squares. The position is balanced.

A3) 10.♖e1 ♘c6 11.♗g5 [White cannot simply develop with ♗b2 and ♘bd2 since Black has an extra option available, i.e. 11.♗b2 0-0 12.♘bd2 ♕b6!= hitting f2 and creating problems for White.] 11...f6! Quite surprisingly, Black is ready to open the position with this move despite White's e1-rook eyeing at Black's uncastled king. In fact, White should be careful not to run into trouble.

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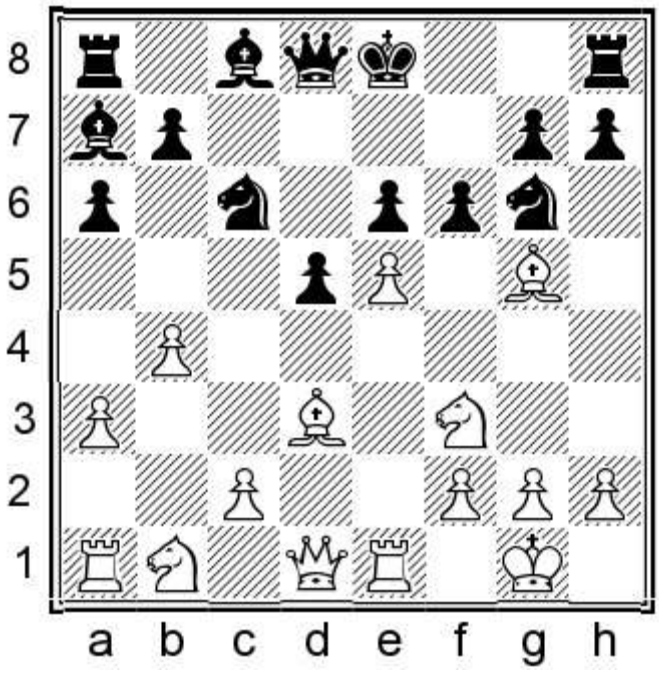

Position after: 11...f6!

12.exf6 gxf6 13.♗h6 ♘ce5! 14.♘xe5 fxe5 Black's strong center allows him to get away with his incomplete development. 15.♗g7 [15.c4 e4!? 16.♗f1 ♕h4 17.♗e3 ♘e5 18.♗xa7 ♖xa7∞] 15...e4! 16.♗xh8 [16.♕h5? seems dangerous but Black has 16...♔f7! 17.♗xh8 ♕xh8 18.♗xe4 dxe4 19.♘d2 e3!∓ and Black has the upper hand.] 16...♘xh8 17.♗xe4 dxe4 18.♕h5+ ♘g6 19.♕xh7 ♕f6 20.♘d2 ♗xf2+ 21.♔h1 ♗xe1 22.♖xe1 ♕f7 23.♕h6 ♗d7 24.♘xe4 ♔d8!= Black escapes and White has nothing more than a perpetual.

B) For 9.♗g5 ♕c7 10.♖e1 0-0 11.♘bd2 ♘c6 12.♘b3 ♗a7 see note a) to White's 12th.

9...♘c6 10.♘b3 ♗a7 11.♖e1

11.♕e2 is not very dangerous: 11...♗b8 12.♗xg6 fxg6=.

11...0-0

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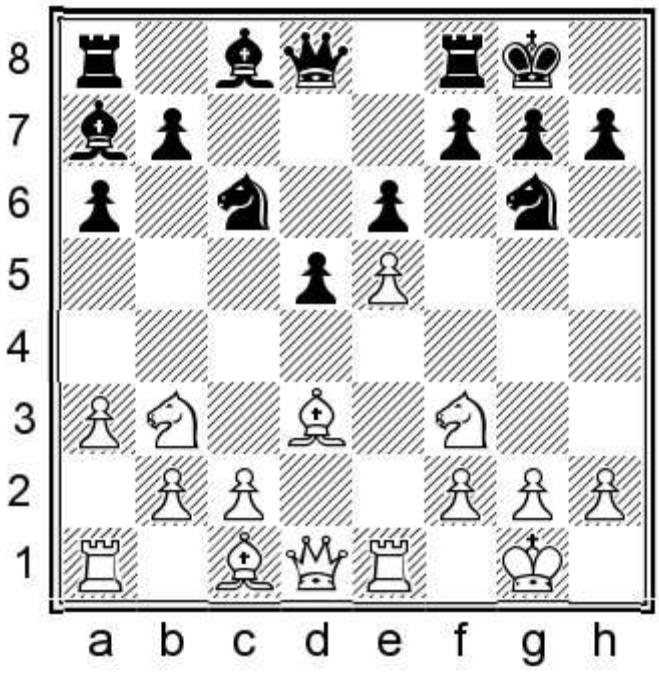

Position after: 11...0-0

I will now consider the same continuations that I consider in the chapter on 9.♘bd2. Although I will not go into great depth for each move, I will attempt to show the major differences that are caused by the extra move that both sides have played.

12.♗xg6!?

While this move is not critical in the main line, it is quite strong here since Black will have to retreat his dark-squared bishop to b8 to avoid exchanging it, and this will impede the a8-rook. 12.♗xg6!? probably makes the best use of the inclusion of a3 and ...a6, and Black's position becomes uncomfortable.

A) 12.♗g5 ♕c7 13.♗xg6 fxg6 14.♗e3 probably gives White a better version of the same idea in the main line since a3 is more useful than ...a6 (Black often plays ...a5). However, Black has an extra option. [14.♖c1 allows Black to activate his rook with 14...♖f5! 15.♗h4 ♖f4! 16.♗g3 ♖e4!=] 14...b6!∞ White's position looks more comfortable, but Black has the bishop pair and a very solid position.

B) After 12.♗e3 Black can now play both ...♘cxe5 and ...♗b8. 12...♘cxe5!? This move is not possible in the main line because White would win a piece by playing ♘xe5 ♘xe5 ♗xb6, attacking both Black's queen on d8 and White's knight on e5. [Sacrificing an exchange with 12...♗b8 is still possible, and there is no major difference compared to the main line. 13.♗c5 ♘cxe5 14.♗xf8 ♕xf8=] 13.♘xe5 ♘xe5 14.♗xh7+ ♔xh7

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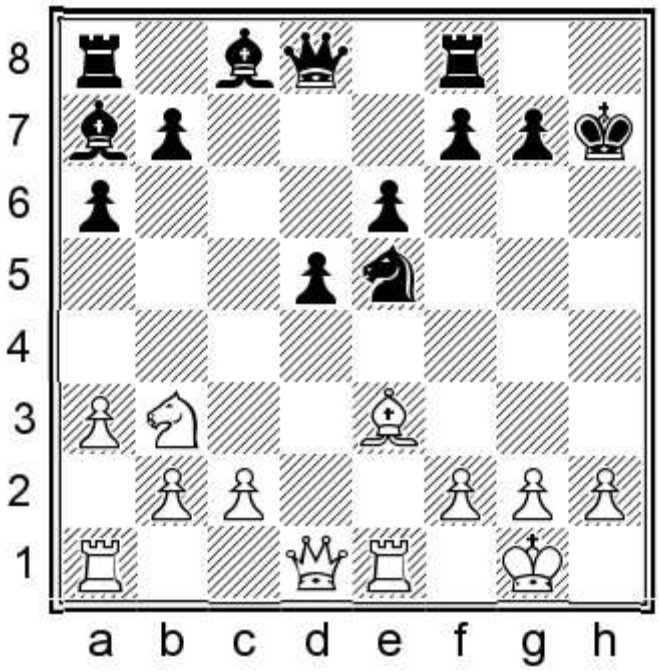
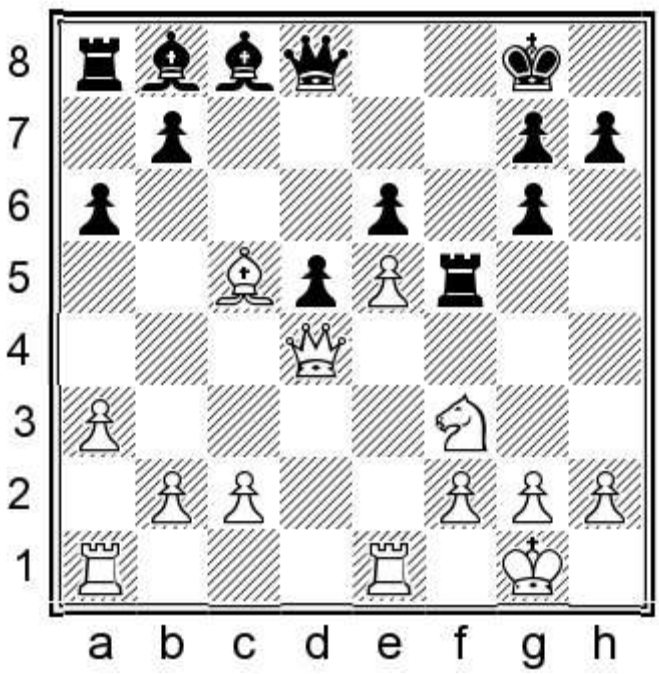


Position after: 14...♔xh7

15.♕h5+ [15.♗xa7 allows Black to play a fancy idea: 15...♘g6 16.♗d4 ♖h8! 17.♕f3 ♔g8=] 15...♔g8 16.♗xa7 ♘g6 17.♗d4 ♕h4 18.♕xh4 ♘xh4= With an equal endgame.

C) There is no big difference after 12.c3 as Black continues with 12...♗b8 forcing 13.♗xg6 fxg6=.

12...fxg6 13.♗e3 ♗b8 14.♗c5 ♖f5 15.♘bd4 ♘xd4 16.♕xd4



Position after: 16.♕xd4

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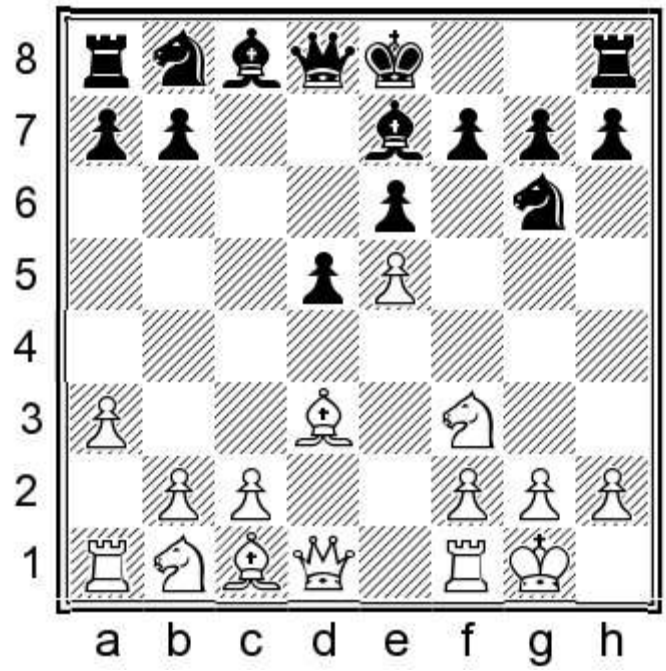
Sadly, Black now needs to lose a tempo and that gives White an initiative.

16...♗c7 17.c4! b6 18.♗d6! ♗xd6 19.exd6 ♕xd6 20.♖ac1±

Although Black might be able to hold this position, it's quite clear that it is not that pleasant.

e) 8...♗e7

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3 ♗e7!?N



Position after: 8...♗e7!?N

It's always a pleasure to play such an odd-looking move! Black's idea is actually quite simple: he is now ready to respond to b4 with ...a5, forcing White to give up the b5-square, and then the b8-knight will come to c5 via d7. If White plays 9.♖e1, Black will play 9...♘c6 and then 10.b4 f6!, since ♖e1 is far less useful than ♗b2 in that position.

9.♖e1

This is White's best continuation, delaying b4.

A) 9.b4 is naive, as it allows Black to demonstrate his idea: 9...a5! 10.b5 ♘d7 11.♗b2 a4! Black has completely secured his space on the queenside and White's expansion does not seem threatening anymore. 12.♖e1 0-0 13.♘bd2 ♘c5 14.♗f1 b6 15.g3 [15.♕e2 ♗b7 16.♖ad1 ♕c7=] 15...♗b7 16.♗g2 f5! Very principled: Black should open the center once all his pieces occupy strong positions.

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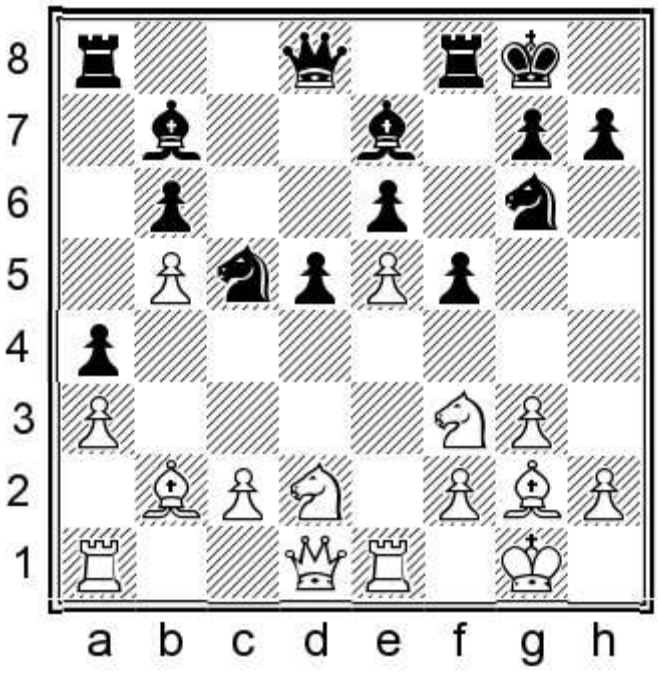
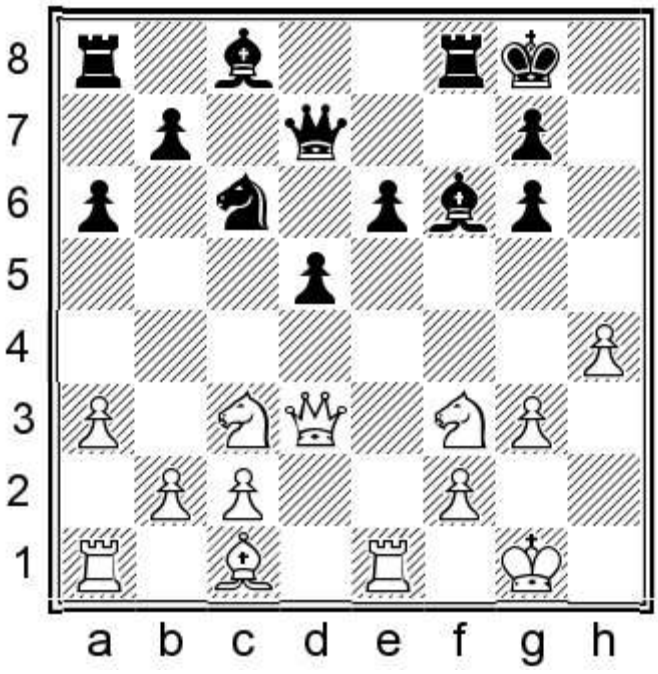


Position after: 16...f5!

17.exf6 ♗xf6 18.♘e5 ♘xe5 19.♗xe5 ♖c8 20.♕e2 ♗xe5 21.♕xe5 ♕f6=

B) 9.♘bd2 allows 9...♘f4! and Black has nothing to worry about once the light-squared bishop is eliminated: 10.♘b3 [10.♖e1 ♘xd3 11.cxd3 0-0 12.♘f1 ♘c6 13.♘g3 f6=] 10...♘xd3 11.♕xd3 0-0 12.♖e1 ♘c6 13.♗f4 [13.♘fd4 f6!=] 13...♗d7 14.♖ad1 ♖c8=.

C) 9.♘c3 takes the game in a different direction, but White lacks a clear plan. Black should continue with his standard plan: 9...♘c6 10.♖e1 a6 11.g3 0-0 12.h4 f6! 13.exf6 ♗xf6 14.♗xg6 hxg6 15.♕d3 ♕d7!=



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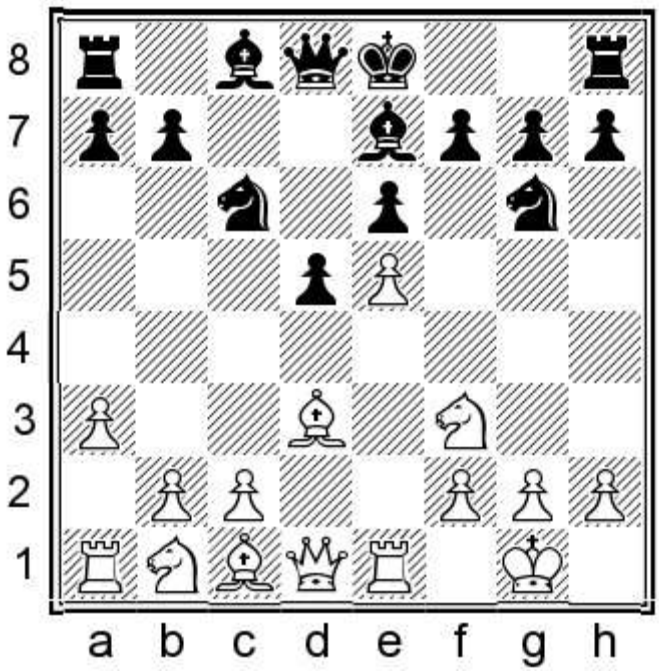
Position after: 15...♕d7!=

Black's queen comes to f7, where it probes White's kingside weaknesses.

9...♘c6



Position after: 9...♘c6

9...0-0 allows White to continue developing with 10.♘bd2!± and the ...f6 push will not be as effective.

10.b4

A) 10.♘bd2 ♕c7! forcing White to take on g6. 11.♗xg6 fxg6 [11...hxg6 12.♘b3 ♗d7 13.♗f4∞ is also playable, but less active.] 12.c4!? This is White's best attempt, but he is unable to contain Black's activity. [Black is in great shape after 12.b4 0-0 13.♕e2 ♗d7 14.♘b3 ♖ac8=.] 12...dxc4 13.♘xc4 0-0

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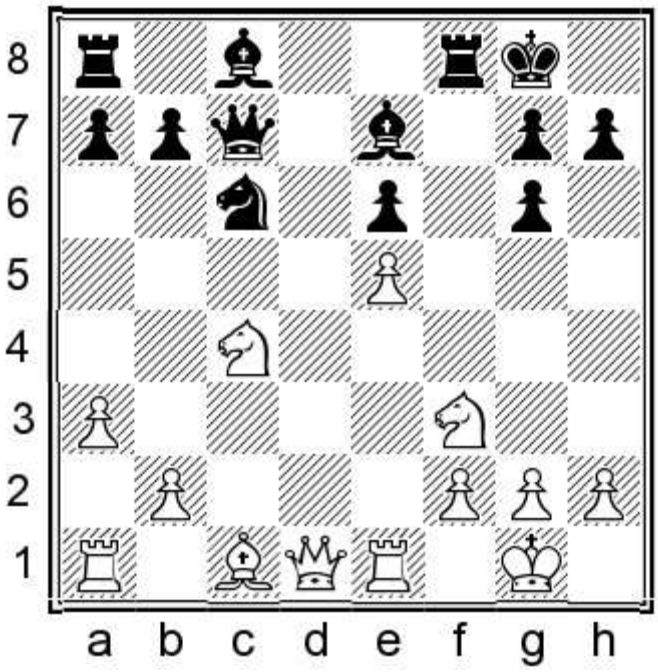
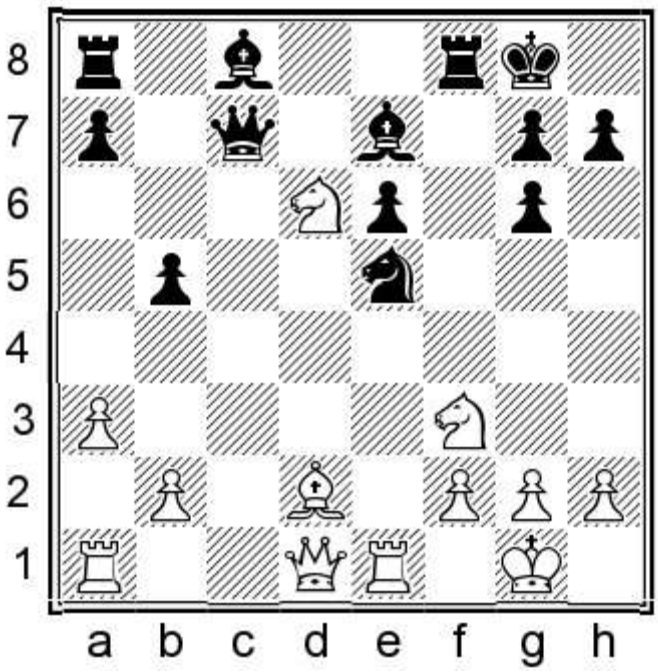


Position after: 13...0-0

A1) 14.♗e3 b5! 15.♘cd2 [15.♘d6 ♘xe5 16.♘xb5 ♕b7 17.♘xe5 ♕xb5=] 15...♘xe5 16.♖c1 ♘xf3+ 17.♘xf3 ♕b7= White cannot claim an advantage here.

A2) 14.♗d2 b5! 15.♘d6 ♘xe5



Position after: 15...♘xe5

16.♘xe5 [16.♘xb5 plays only for a draw: 16...♘xf3+ 17.♕xf3 ♕d7! 18.♕xa8 ♗b7 19.♕xa7 ♕c6 20.♕xb7 ♕xb7 21.a4 ♕d5∞.] 16...♕xd6 17.♗b4 ♕xd1 18.♖axd1 ♗xb4 19.axb4 ♗b7= Again, White

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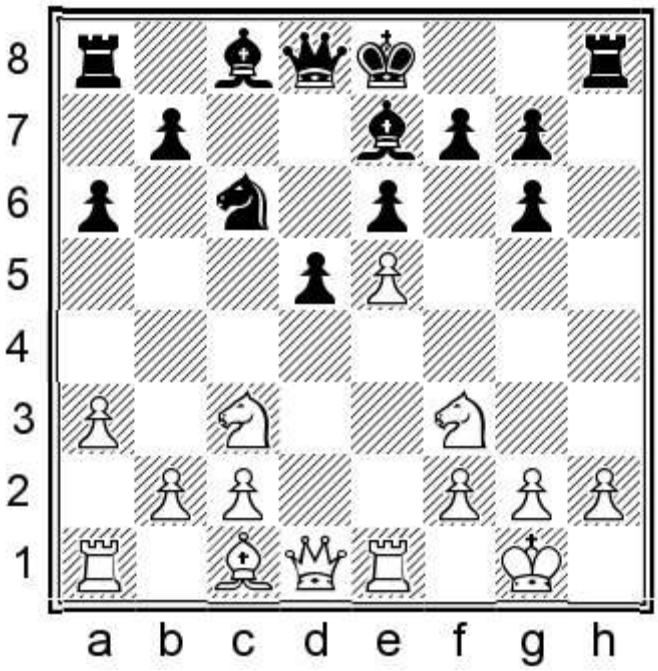
has full compensation but nothing more.

B) 10.♘c3 White's idea is to play ♘b5, therefore Black prevents it with 10...a6. After 11.♗xg6 [11.♗d2 ♗d7 12.♘a2 ♕b6=] Black can again take back with either pawn. 11...hxg6 [11...fxg6 is also possible, but less logical before castling, for instance 12.♗e3 ♕c7 13.♘a4 b5 14.♘b6 ♖b8 15.♘xc8 ♕xc8 16.c3 0-0 17.b4 a5∞.] and now:



Position after: 11...hxg6

B1) 12.♗e3 White wants to play ♘a4, but Black reacts in the center: 12...f6! 13.exf6 [13.♗d4 g5 14.h3 f5∞] 13...gxf6 14.♘a4 b5 15.♘b6 ♖b8 16.♘xc8 ♕xc8=

B2) 12.♘e2 g5! 13.♘ed4 f5 14.exf6 gxf6 15.♘xe6 ♗xe6 16.♖xe6 ♕d7⩱ and Black may be better already.

10...f6!

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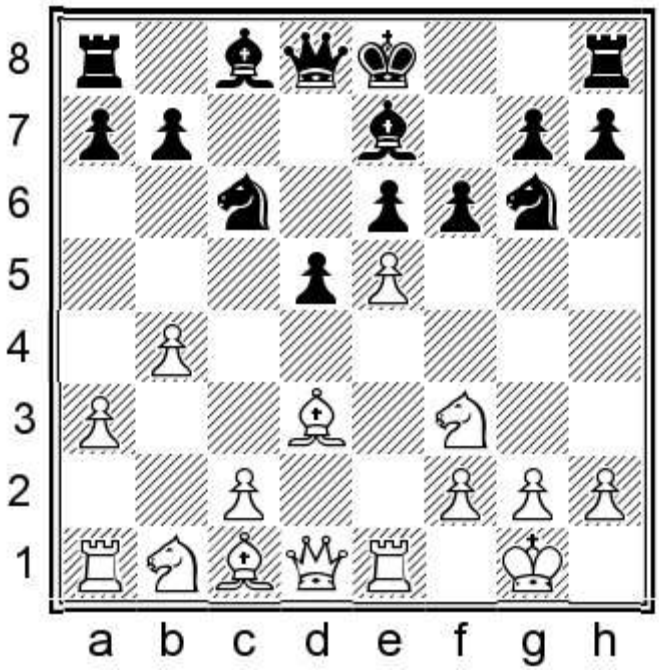
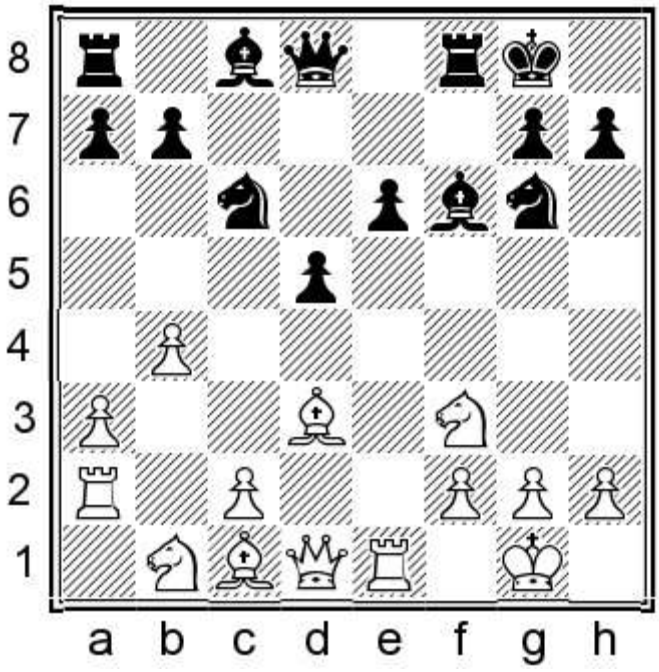


Position after: 10...f6!

Opening up the center without wasting any time! It's very important that White's c1-bishop is still undeveloped. White can now choose between the sharp 11.♗xg6 and the calmer 11.exf6.

11.♗xg6+

11.exf6 ♗xf6 12.♖a2 [12.c3 0-0 13.♖a2 reaches line b) below.] 12...0-0



Position after: 12...0-0

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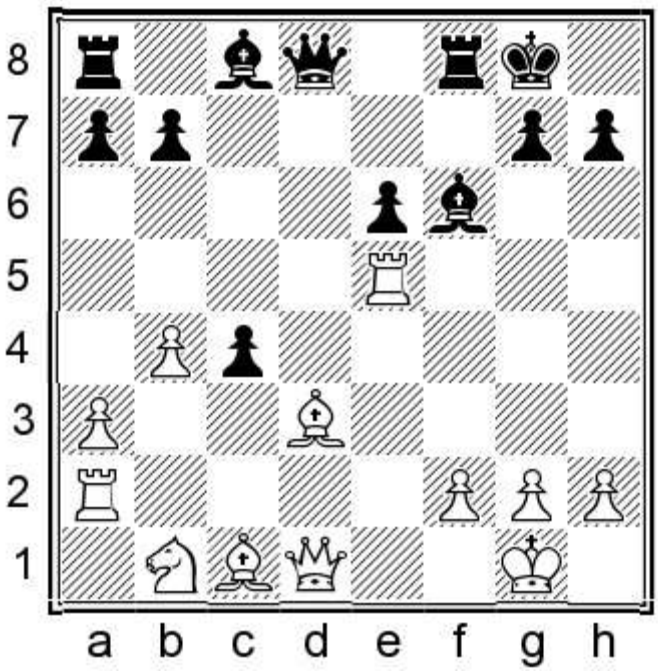
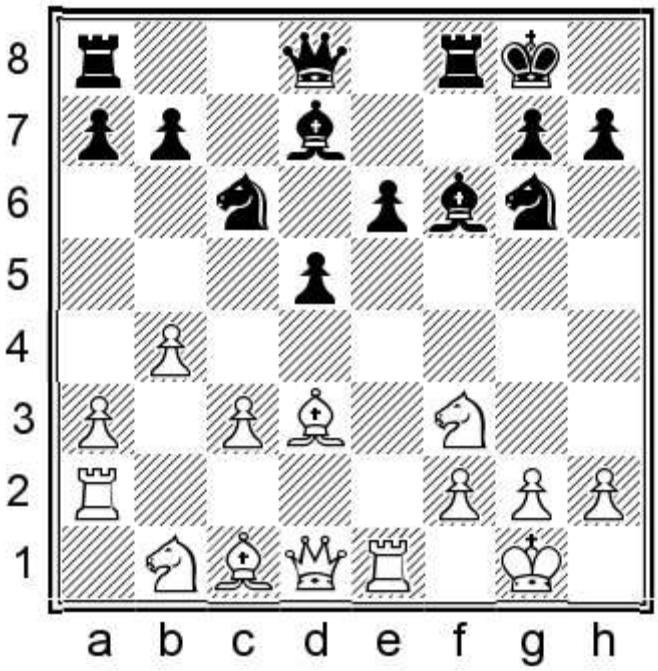
A) 13.c4 is an interesting attempt; Black needs to react quickly in the center to avoid suffering due to his worse pawn structure. 13...♘ce5! 14.♘xe5 ♘xe5 15.♖xe5! dxc4!



Position after: 15...dxc4!

16.♖e3 [16.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 17.♖d2 ♕e8 18.♕c2+ ♔g8 19.♖e3 e5 20.♕xc4+ ♗e6 21.♕e2 ♖c8 22.♖d1 ♗h4 23.♖f3 ♗f5⩲ Black's activity gives him good compensation for the pawn.] 16...cxd3 17.♖xd3 ♕e8 18.♘c3 ♕g6 19.♖g3 ♕f5 20.♖e2 ♖d8 21.♕b3 b6= Although Black has an isolated pawn on e6, the bishop pair and the open nature of the position fully compensate for it.

B) 13.c3 ♗d7!



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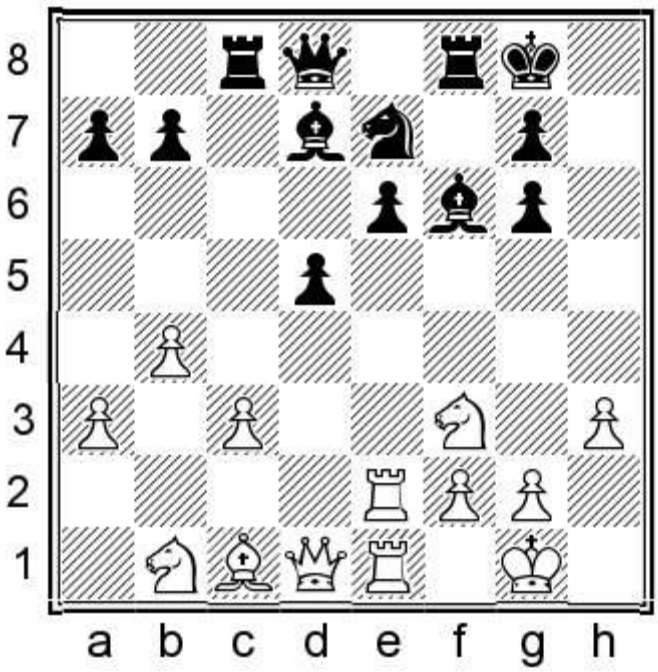
Position after: 13...♗d7!

Black needs to quickly bring his rook to c8 to create counterplay.

B1) 14.♗e3 ♘ge5 15.♘xe5 ♘xe5 16.♗d4 ♘xd3 17.♕xd3 ♗xd4 18.cxd4 ♕h4= Black's kingside initiative compensates for the weak pawn on e6.

B2) 14.♗xg6 creates weaknesses for Black but gives up a valuable bishop. 14...hxg6 15.c4 dxc4 16.♖d2 ♖f7 17.♗b2 (or 17.♕c2 e5=) 17...♗xb2 18.♖xb2 ♗e8 19.♖d2 ♖d7=

B3) 14.♖ae2 ♖c8 15.♗xg6 hxg6 16.h3 [16.♕d3 a6! Preventing b5 is more important than keeping the g6-pawn! 17.♕xg6 ♗e8 18.♕g3 e5 19.♗e3 ♗h5∓ Black has excellent compensation for the pawn.] 16...♘e7!



Position after: 16...♘e7!

Sending the knight to f5 while unveiling the d7-bishop! 17.♗e3 [17.a4 ♘f5 18.♗f4 d4!⇄] 17...♗b5 18.♖d2 ♘f5 19.♗xa7 b6 20.a4 ♗d7 21.a5 bxa5 22.♗c5 ♖e8 23.♘e5 ♗xe5 24.♖xe5 ♕f6=

11...hxg6

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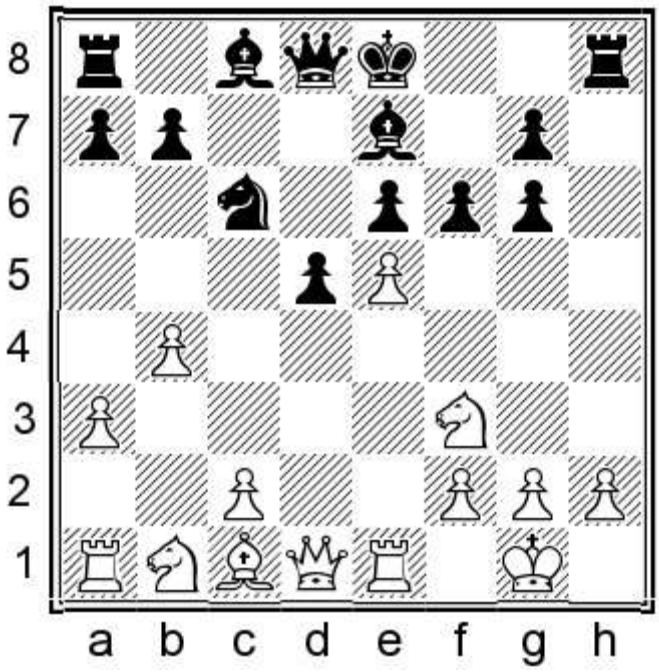
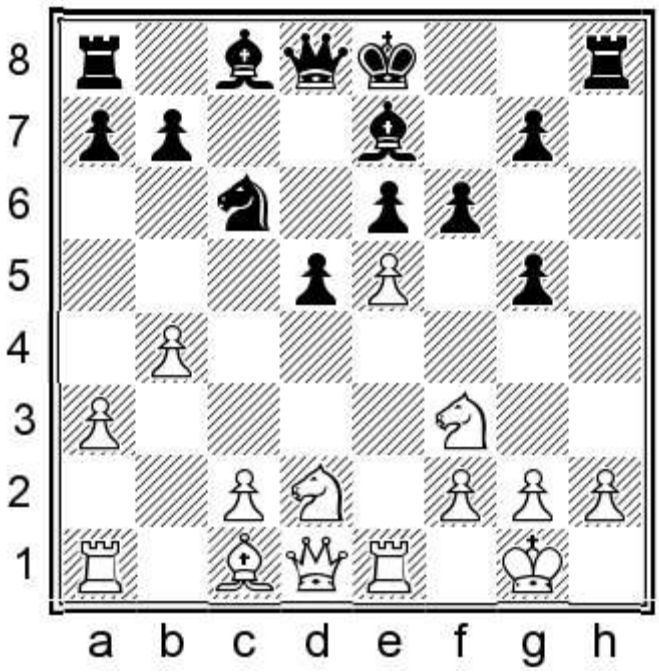


Position after: 11...hxg6

Although Black's position has been weakened, he is able to develop a surprisingly strong initiative on the kingside. It is critical for Black to not dither and to immediately put pressure on the kingside before White is able to open the center with c4.

12.♕d3

12.♘bd2N White wants to hasten the c4 break further, even at the cost of hindering his queen, but Black can get his kingside counter in first: 12...g5!



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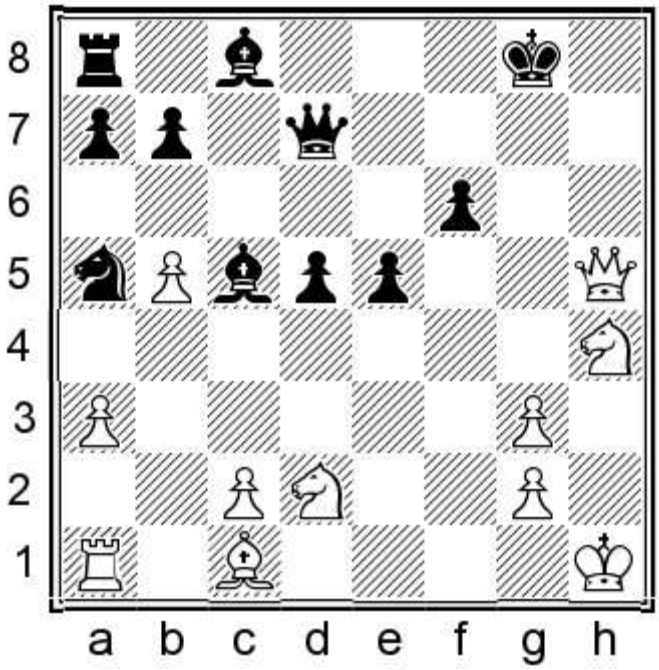
Position after: 12...g5!

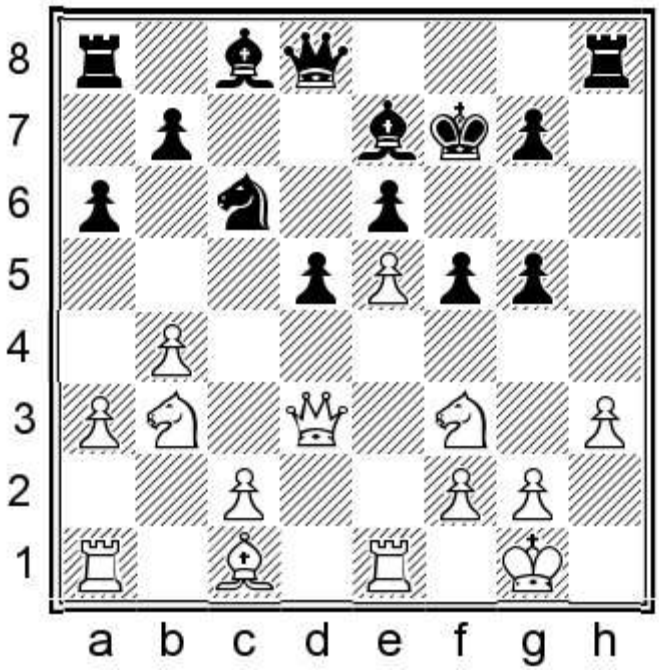
A) Now if White attempts to stop Black's attack with 13.b5, he loses his grip over the center and so Black can even castle short, e.g. 13...♘a5 14.exf6 gxf6 15.h3 0-0! 16.h4!? [16.c4 ♘xc4 17.♕c2 ♖f7 18.♘xc4 dxc4 19.♕xc4 ♕d5=; 16.♗b2 ♖f7 17.♕e2 e5∞] 16...gxh4 17.♘xh4 ♖f7 18.♖e3 [18.♘f1 f5 19.♘g6 ♖h7∞] 18...♖g7 19.♕h5 e5 20.♖g3 ♖xg3 21.fxg3 ♗c5+ 22.♔h1 ♕d7=



Position after: 22...♕d7=

White has nothing better than a perpetual check.

B) 13.h3 f5 14.♘b3 a6 15.♕d3 ♔f7! Black frees the back rank for a 'queen lift' to the kingside!



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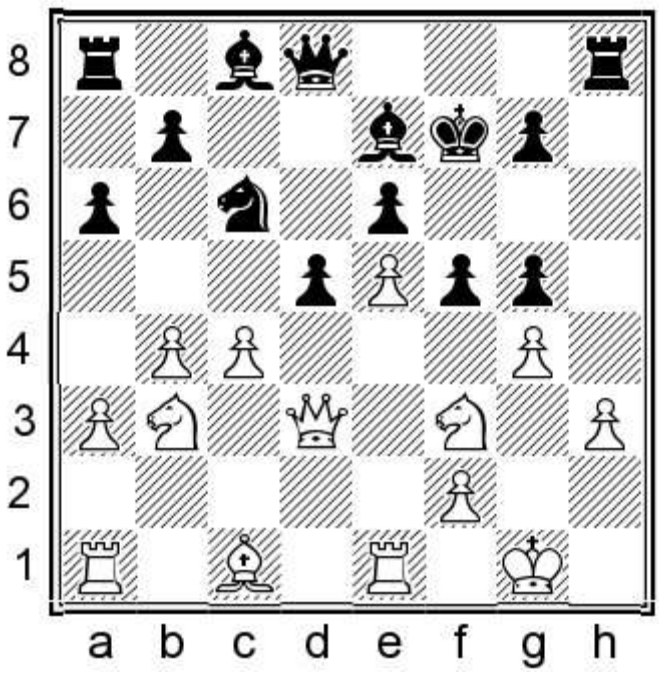
Position after: 15...♔f7!

The lines that follow are quite complex, but Black always manages to create enough counterplay.

B1) 16.c4 ♖h5! The idea is ...g4 and then ...♕h8. 17.g4 ♖h8



Position after: 17...♖h8

18.♗b2 [18.c5 d4! 19.gxf5 ♕d5!∞; 18.♔g2 dxc4 19.♕xc4 ♕d5 20.♕xd5 exd5 21.♘fd4 ♘xd4 22.♘xd4 fxg4 23.e6+ ♔g6 24.hxg4 ♗f6=] 18...dxc4 19.♕xc4 ♖xh3 20.♔g2 fxg4 21.♕xg4 ♖h6=

B2) 16.♗d2 ♗d7 17.♘c5 [17.c4?! allows Black to take over on the kingside. 17...g4 18.hxg4 fxg4 19.♘h2 ♖xh2! 20.♔xh2 ♕h8+ 21.♔g1 ♕h5 22.♕g3 ♖h8 23.f3 gxf3→] 17...g4!

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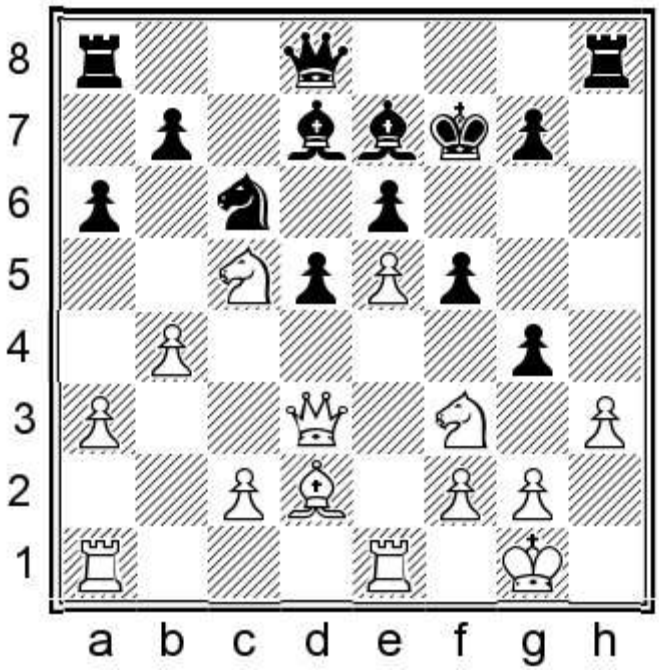
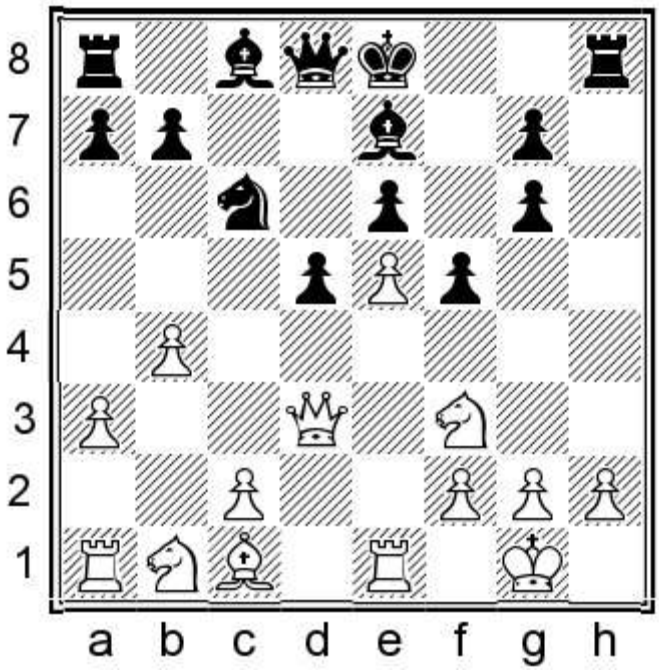


Position after: 17...g4!

Black relentlessly plays for a kingside attack as White does not have an easy time defending. 18.♘xb7 ♕b6 19.♘g5+ ♗xg5 20.♘d6+ ♔g6 21.♗xg5 ♔xg5 22.♘f7+ ♔g6 23.♘xh8+ ♖xh8 24.hxg4 ♘e7 25.gxf5+ exf5 26.c4 ♗e6∞

12...f5N



Position after: 12...f5N

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12...g5!?N is also worthy of consideration.

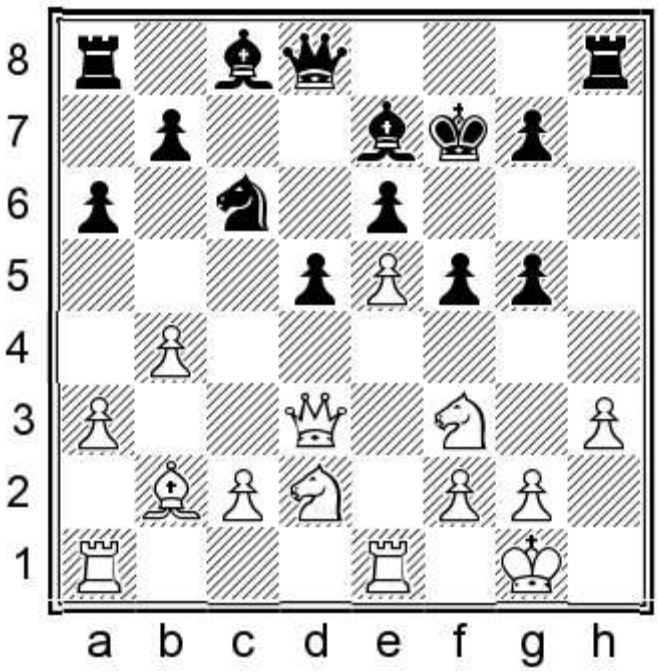
13.♗b2

White can break in the center now, but his position is still a bit loose: 13.c4 g5! 14.cxd5 g4 15.♘g5 a5! (A brilliant resource!) 16.b5 ♗xg5 17.♗xg5 ♕xg5 18.dxc6 bxc6 19.bxc6 ♕h5 20.♕g3 ♕h6 21.h3 gxh3 22.♘c3 ♖a6=.

13...g5 14.h3 ♔f7

14...0-0 15.♘bd2 a6 16.♖ad1 b5∞ is also possible, but I prefer to keep the rook on h8.

15.♘bd2 a6



Position after: 15...a6

16.c4!

White cannot delay this move any longer, as Black is ready to bring the queen to the kingside.

A) 16.♖ad1 ♖h6!⇄ Black's counterplay is serious now; he wants to play ...g4 next.

B) 16.♘b3 ♕g8!= Bringing the queen to the kingside, and Black takes over the initiative.

16...dxc4

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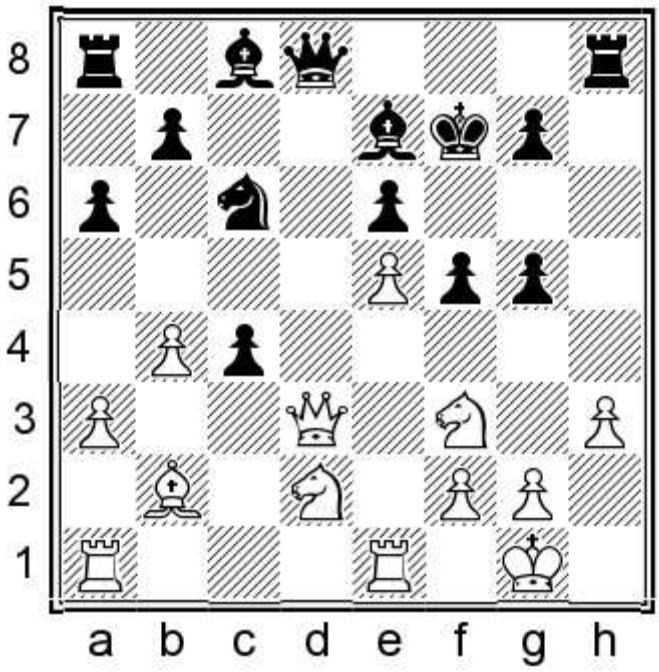
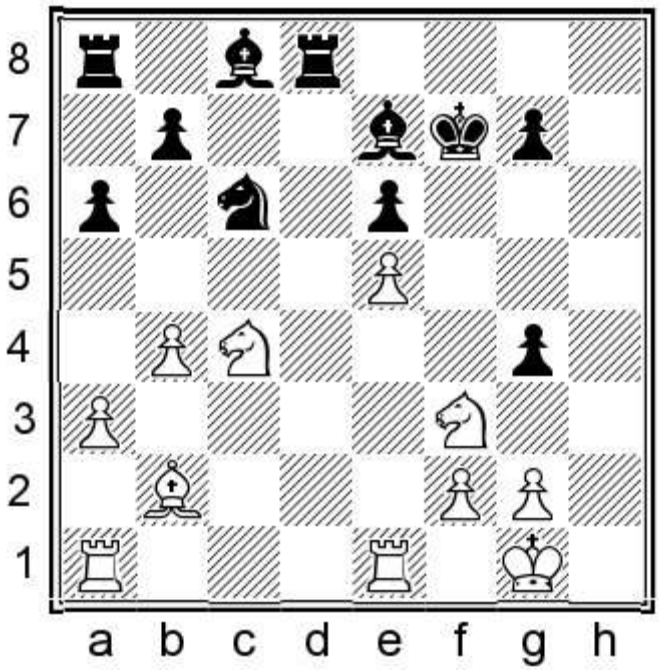


Position after: 16...dxc4

17.♕xc4

Trading queens with 17.♕xd8 gives White a slightly more comfortable endgame, but Black should be able to hold the draw. 17...♖xd8 18.♘xc4 g4 19.hxg4 fxg4



Position after: 19...fxg4

20.♘h2 [20.♘fd2 b5 21.♘d6+ ♗xd6 22.exd6 ♖xd6 23.♘e4 ♖d5 24.♖ac1 ♗d7 25.♘c5 ♗c8 26.♘xe6 ♗xe6 27.♖xc6 ♗d7 28.♖b6 a5= is an easy hold.; 20.♘b6 ♖b8 21.♘h2 g3 22.fxg3 a5!=] 20...b5 21.♘d6+

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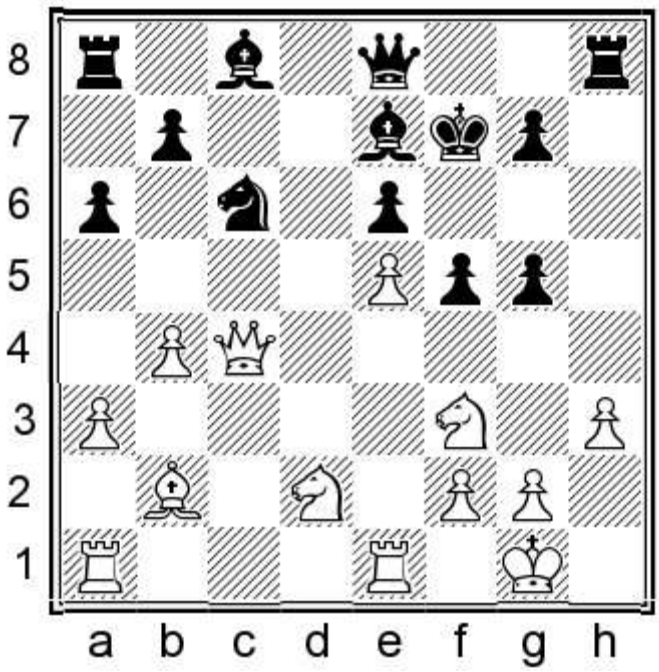
♗xd6 22.exd6 g3 23.fxg3 ♖xd6∞

17...♕e8



Position after: 17...♕e8

The position is quite unclear, with chances for both sides. Some sample lines follow.

18.♘f1

A) 18.♖ac1 ♔g8 19.♘f1 ♗d7 20.♖ed1 ♖d8 21.♘e3 ♕g6 22.a4 b5 23.axb5 axb5 24.♕xb5 ♘d4 25.♕b7 ♘e2+ 26.♔h2 ♘xc1 27.♖xd7 ♘e2 28.♖xe7 g4 29.♘g1 g3+ 30.fxg3 ♕xg3+ 31.♔h1 ♖xh3+ 32.♘xh3 ♖d1+ 33.♘xd1 ♕e1+ 34.♔h2 ♕g3+=

B) 18.♖ad1 b5 19.♕d3 ♔g8=

18...b5 19.♕b3 ♖h6 20.♖ad1 ♗b7∞

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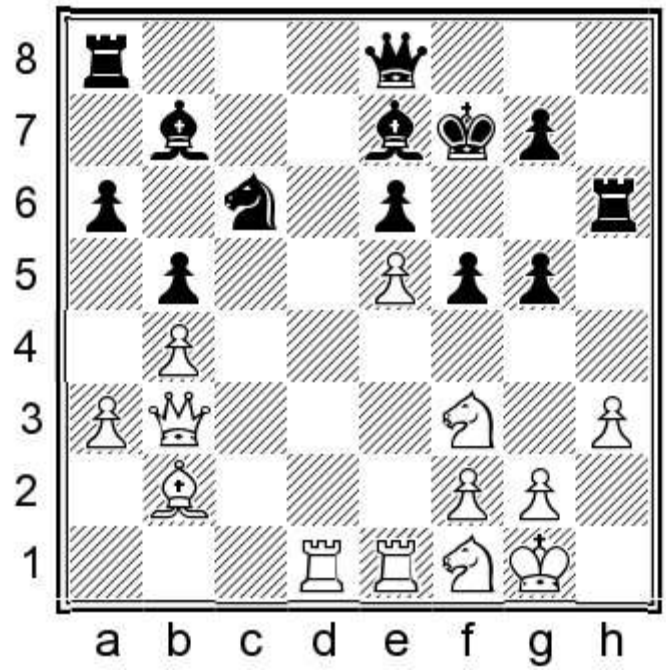

Position after: 20...♗b7∞

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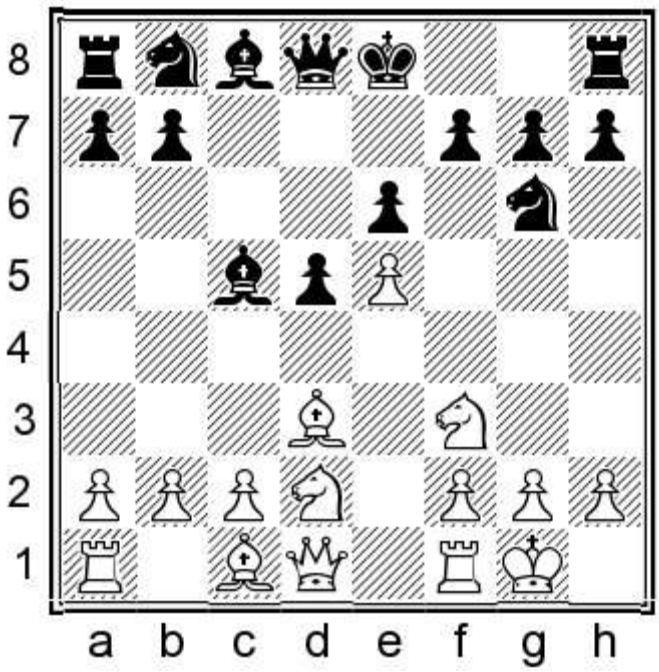
Chapter 4
4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 with 8.♘bd2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.♘bd2



Chapter Guide

Chapter 4 – 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 with 8.♘bd2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.♘bd2 ♘c6 9.♘b3 ♗b6

a) 10.♕e2

b) 10.♖e1 0-0 11.--

c) 10.♖e1 0-0 11.♗e3

a) 10.♕e2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7

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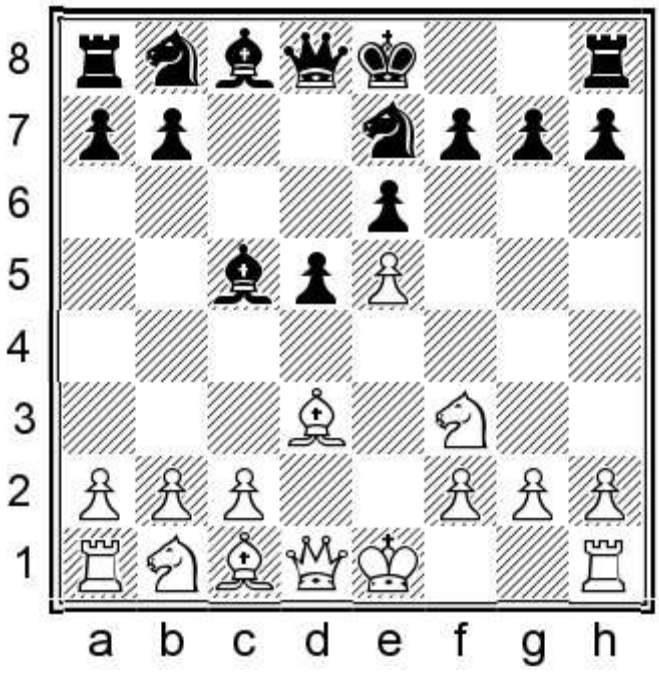

Position after: 6...♘e7

The previous chapters focused on one plan for White: a3 followed by b4. We saw all the different ways in which Black should react, depending on the move-order White used. The overarching objective was to secure a good square for his dark-squared bishop and generate counterplay on the queenside (with ...a5) and in the center (with ...f6).

Another plan for White is to play ♘bd2-b3. This idea is quite flexible in that it gives White various options to continue his development. The core idea is to develop the knight so that it controls important central squares (d4 and c5) and give White a platform to activate his pieces. From Black's perspective, the positional objective remains the same: he wants to generate counterplay by creating space for his pieces. To do so, Black will target the vulnerable e5-pawn, which White cannot easily defend. Moreover, Black will leverage ideas like ...f6 to break open the center at an appropriate moment.

7.0-0

White can also play 7.♘bd2 before castling, but it ultimately leads to the same position. 7...♘g6 8.♘b3 ♗b6 White has nothing better than 9.0-0, which transposes to our main line.

7...♘g6 8.♘bd2 ♘c6 9.♘b3 ♗b6

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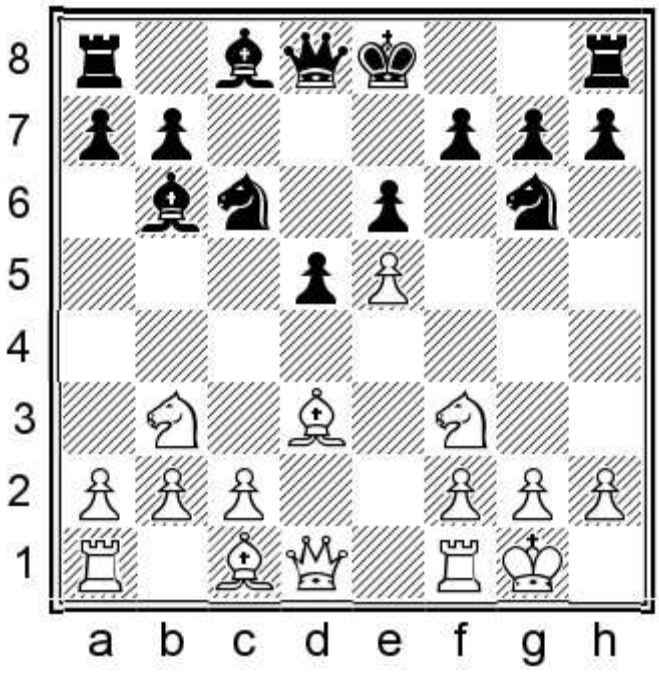

Position after: 9...♗b6

White can protect the e5-pawn in two ways: 10.♖e1 and 10.♕e2, the former being the more popular option since it offers more flexibility.

10.♕e2!?

10.♖e1 – see the next subchapter.

10...0-0

Now, Black is ready to play ...f6 and eliminate White's main asset in the position: the e5-pawn.

10...f6?! would be premature; Black is not ready to play with an open center. 11.exf6 ♕xf6 12.♗xg6+ ♕xg6 13.♗e3± White was better in Makeev, V (2367) – Louro, E (2127) email 2010.

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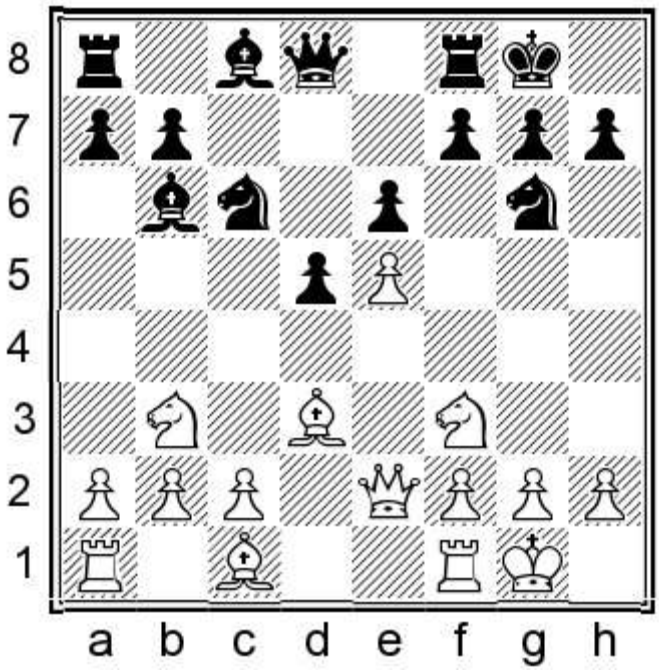

Position after: 10...0-0

11.♗e3!?N

This is White's only sensible follow-up since the e5-pawn causes him too many issues in the alternative continuations. The trade of the dark-squared bishops is positionally very desirable for White: he would eliminate one of Black's most active pieces and greatly reduce the pressure on the e5-pawn.

A) 11.c3N allows Black to carry out his plan: 11...f6! 12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♗e3 ♗c7=. White has given up his bishop pair to maintain his grip on the center, but Black will continue to exert pressure on the e5-pawn.

B) 11.♗g5 is unimpressive as White is unable to properly deal with the threat of ...♘xe5. 11...♕c7 12.♖ae1

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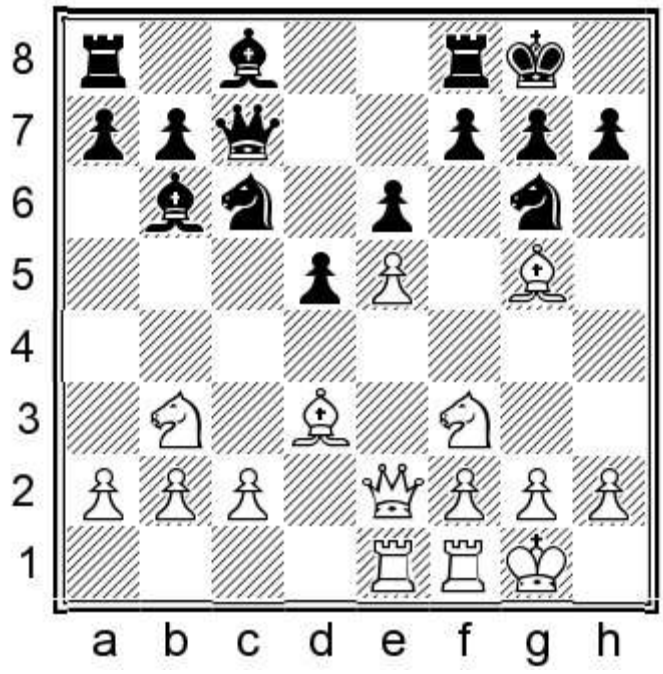

Position after: 12.♖ae1

12...♘cxe5!N Black utilizes the positioning of White's g5-bishop to break open the center and win the bishop pair. 13.♘xe5 ♕xe5 14.♕xe5 ♘xe5 15.♖xe5 f6 16.♗xf6 ♖xf6=

11...♗c7!

Black should not trade the bishops and should instead increase the pressure on the e5-pawn.

12.♗c5

This is White's idea. He forgoes the defense of the e5-pawn to instead displace Black's f8-rook. However, Black can employ a typical exchange sacrifice which embodies the ethos of this variation:

12...♘cxe5!

Black will give up the exchange for the e5-pawn.

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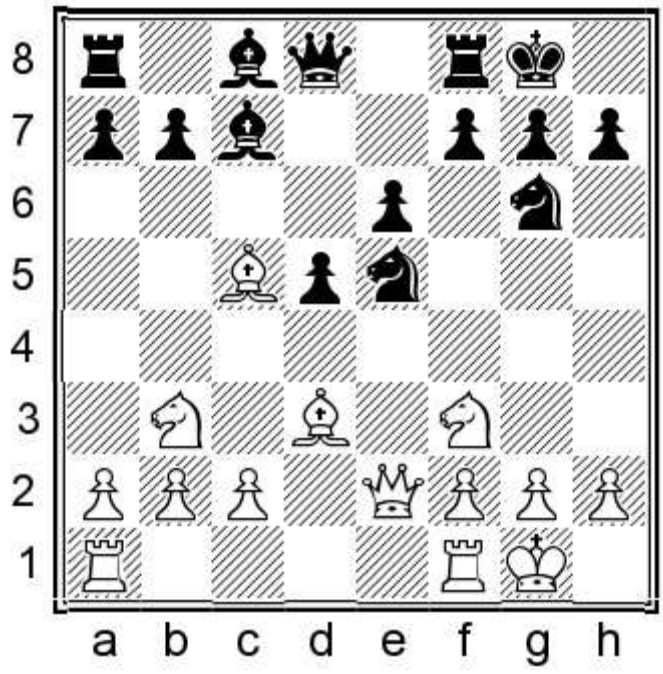

Position after: 12...♘cxe5!

In order to assess this sacrifice, we need to consider the positional aspects of the resulting position. By taking the exchange, White will lose his dark-squared bishop, giving Black total control over the dark-squares. In conjunction with Black's strong pawn center, which exercises control over important squares and restricts White's possibilities for active play, Black's dark-squared bishop will prevent White from developing any attack. Given these factors, White needs to break with his c- or f-pawn to open files for his rooks. However, this is easier said than done, since those pawn breaks will weaken his position and give Black active options.

13.♘xe5

13.♗xf8 will transpose to the main line since White should not avoid playing ♘xe5. 13...♕xf8 14.♘xe5 [14.♗xg6 is an independent attempt, but Black has an excellent position after 14...♘xf3+ 15.♕xf3 hxg6=.] 14...♘xe5 See 13.♘xe5.

13...♘xe5 14.♗xf8 ♕xf8

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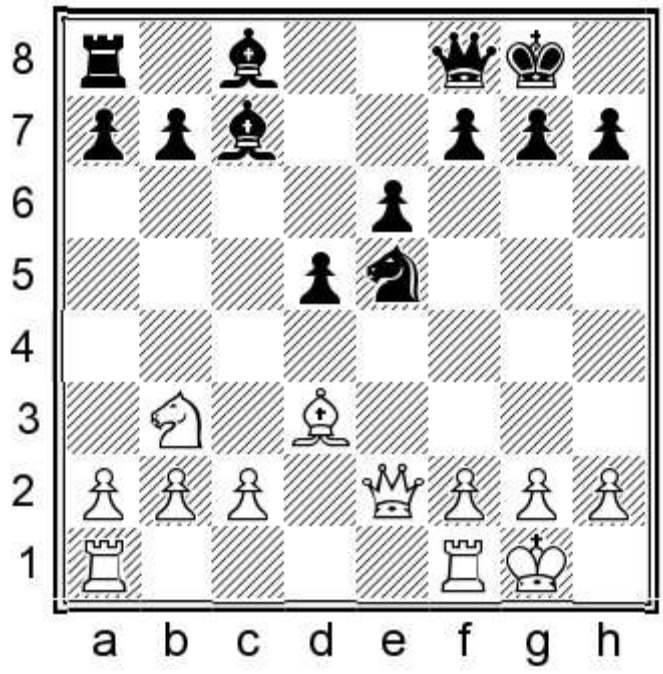

Position after: 14...♕xf8

As I mentioned before, White should try to open the position or his rooks will remain passive and Black will retain control of the game.

15.c4

White wants to open the c-file to to activate his rooks. However, Black's position is solid and he can create threats of his own to counter White's plans.

15.f4 is not as good, because it noticeably weakens White's position. Black can easily react to the threat of f5. 15...♘d7! The knight is headed to f6, whence it controls important squares on the kingide and in the center. 16.♔h1 ♘f6 17.♖ae1 a6 18.♘d4 ♗d7 19.c3 ♖e8= White is unable to make progress since f5 would be met by ...e5, and so the position is equal.

15...♕d6 16.g3 ♗d7 17.♖fd1 ♖d8

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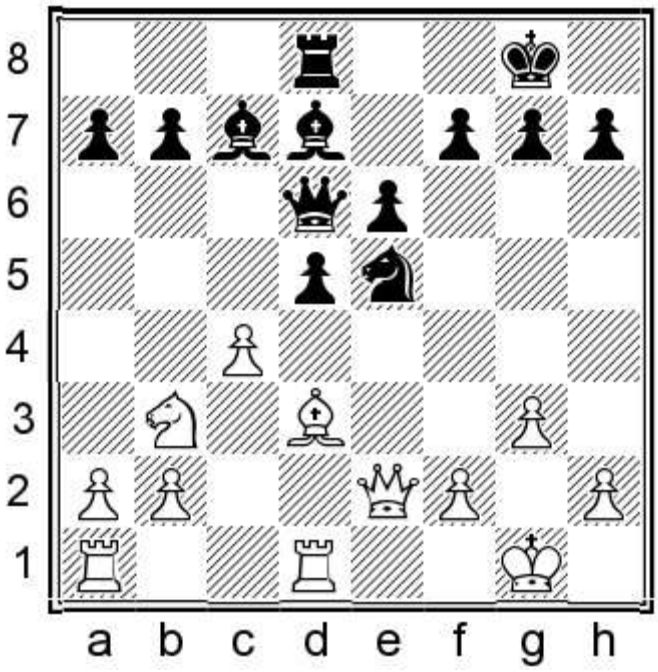
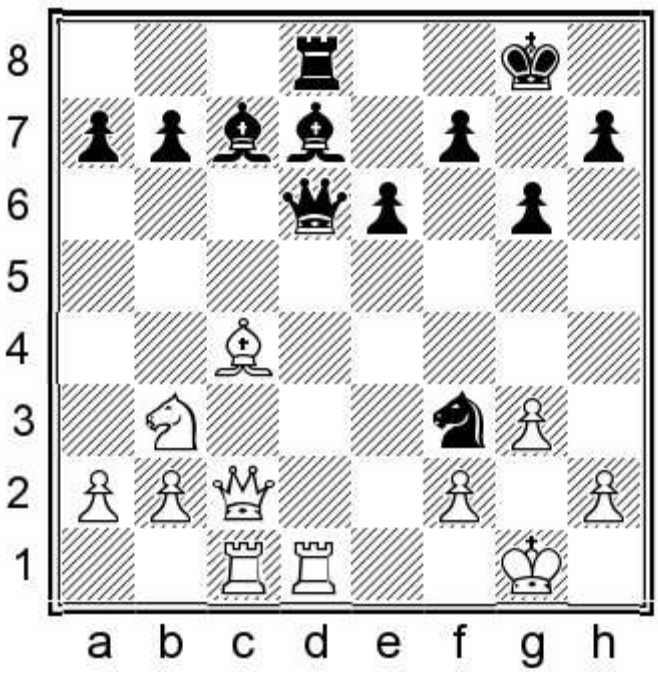


Position after: 17...♖d8

It's quite easy to see that Black has excellent compensation for the exchange. Black has finished his development and he will now generate counterplay by utilizing the weaknesses around the white king.

The following lines serve as examples.

18.♖ac1 g6 19.♕c2 dxc4 20.♗xc4 ♘f3+!



Position after: 20...♘f3+!

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Without wasting time, Black activates his position. The queen will come to h5 via e5 to pressure White's kingside.

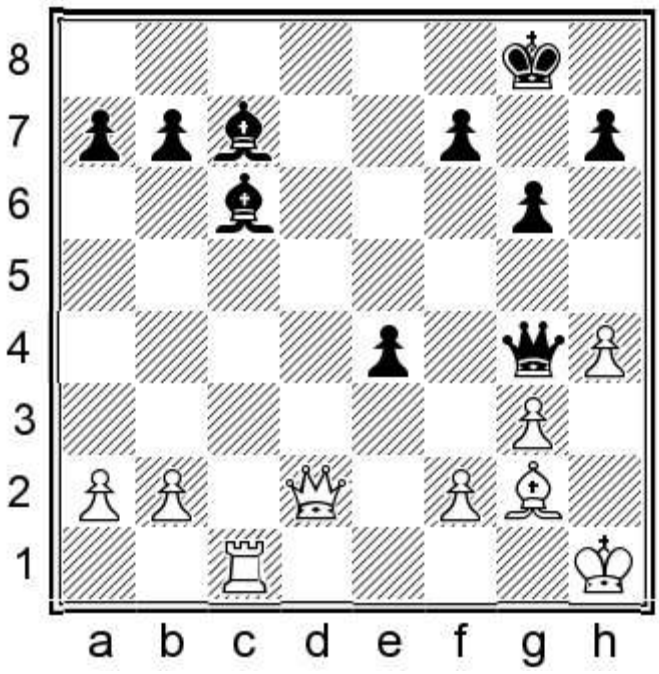
21.♔h1

21.♔f1 ♕e5 22.♗e2 ♕h5 23.h4 ♕g4 24.♗xf3 ♕xf3 25.♘d4 ♕h1+ 26.♔e2 ♕d5= White's king is too weak for White to make any progress.

21...♕e5 22.♗f1 ♕h5 23.h4 ♗c6 24.♗g2 e5!

Using the extra pawn to support Black's initiative.

25.♕e2 ♖xd1+ 26.♕xd1 e4 27.♘d2 ♘xd2 28.♕xd2 ♕g4=



Position after: 28...♕g4=

Black's initiative continues and compensates for the exchange.

b) 10.♖e1 0-0 11.--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.♘bd2 ♘c6 9.♘b3 ♗b6 10.♖e1

This is White's most popular option. He develops the rook and does not commit to a square for his queen.

10...0-0

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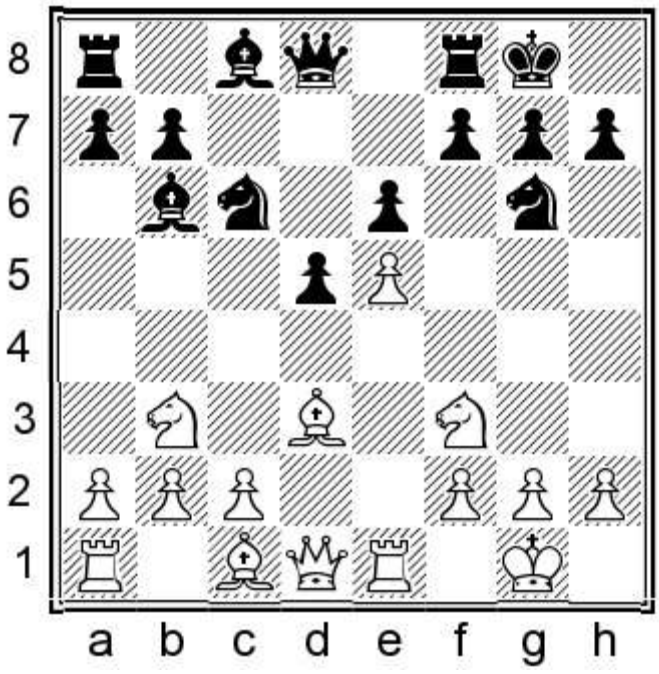

Position after: 10...0-0

White can continue in various ways, but the most important idea, which comes up in almost every line, is ♗e3. As in the 10.♕e2 variation, Black will use the e5-pawn to generate counterplay. Before examining the main move 11.♗e3 (next subchapter), let's have a look at some alternatives.

11.♗g5

This move has a clever idea: White wants to force Black's queen to a worse square and then return to this original plan of ♗e3.

A) 11.a4N is too slow and allows Black to execute his idea. 11...♗c7! 12.♗xg6 White has no choice but to give up his light-squared bishop to hold on to the e5-pawn. While this position is not critical by any means, it allows me to highlight the importance of Black's next move. 12...fxg6!=

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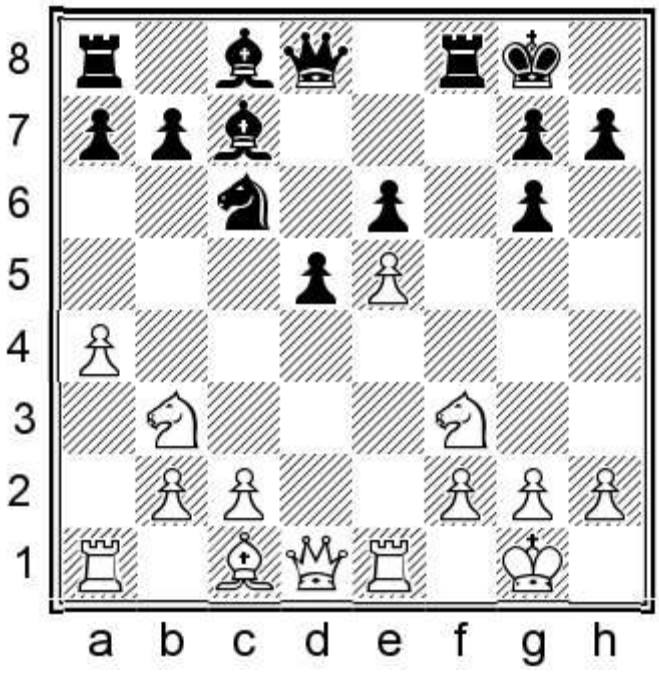
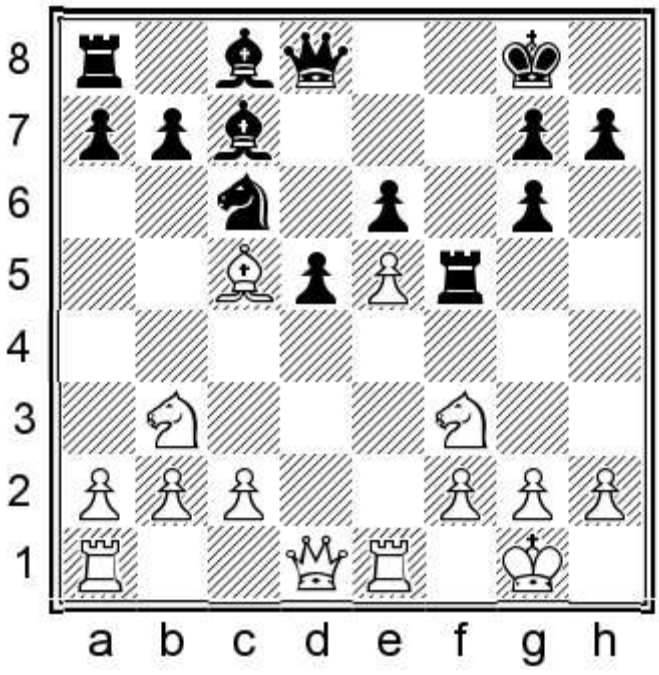


Position after: 12...fxg6!=

This idea will come up over and over again in the subsequent lines. Black should not recapture with the h-pawn since that would leave him in a passive position, without an active plan. Instead, Black should open the f-file for his f8-rook. Moreover, ...fxg6 improves the mobility of Black's pawns since he can continue with ...h6 and ...g5, whereas the pawns would be unable to advance after ...hxg6.

B) Similarly, 11.♗xg6N 11...fxg6 12.♗e3 ♗c7! is completely fine for Black. Another idea of ...fxg6 is apparent in the following moves: 13.♗c5 ♖f5!



Position after: 13...♖f5!

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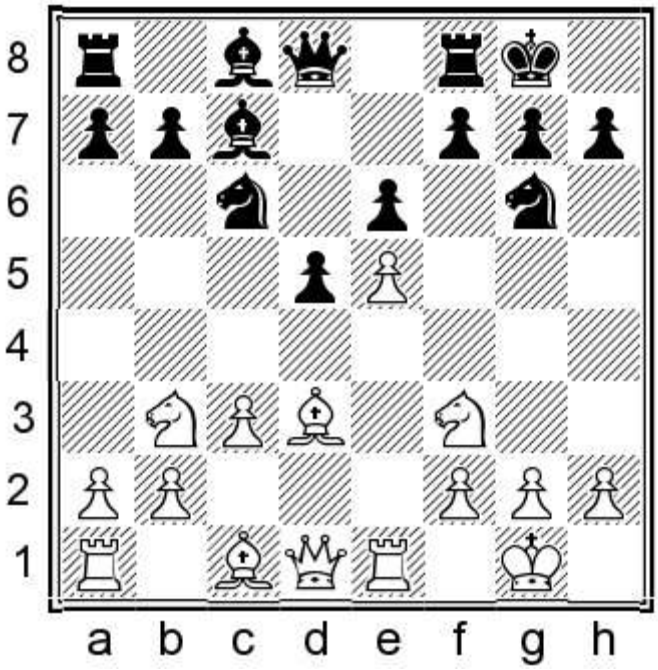
The rook comes into the game and attacks the e5-pawn. 14.♘bd4 ♘xd4 15.♕xd4 g5=

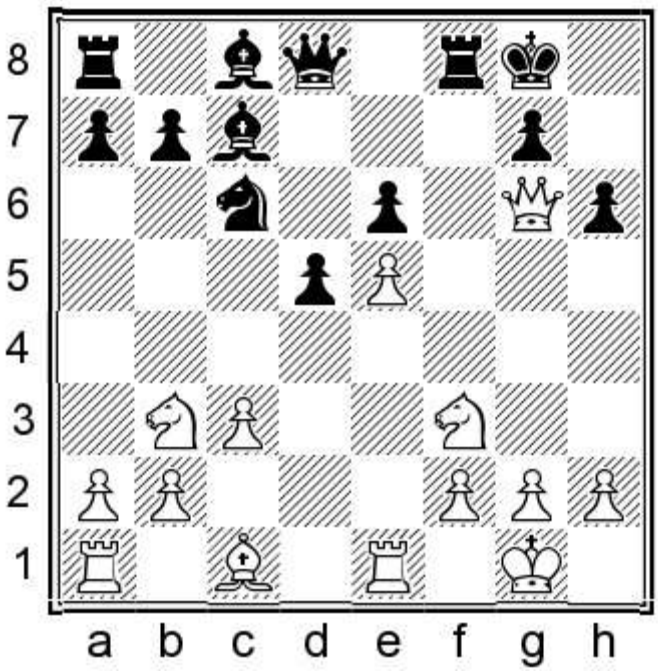
C) 11.c3 This continuation is not critical, but it has been played by some strong players so I will cover it in some depth. 11...♗c7!



Position after: 11...♗c7!

Black continues with his main idea: to attack the e5-pawn.

C1) 12.♕c2 This pin is an interesting way to defend the e5-pawn, but Black can break it: 12...h6! White can win a pawn by taking on g6, but he will give up his light-squared bishop and catalyse Black's counterplay. 13.♗xg6 fxg6 14.♕xg6 [14.♘bd4 g5=]



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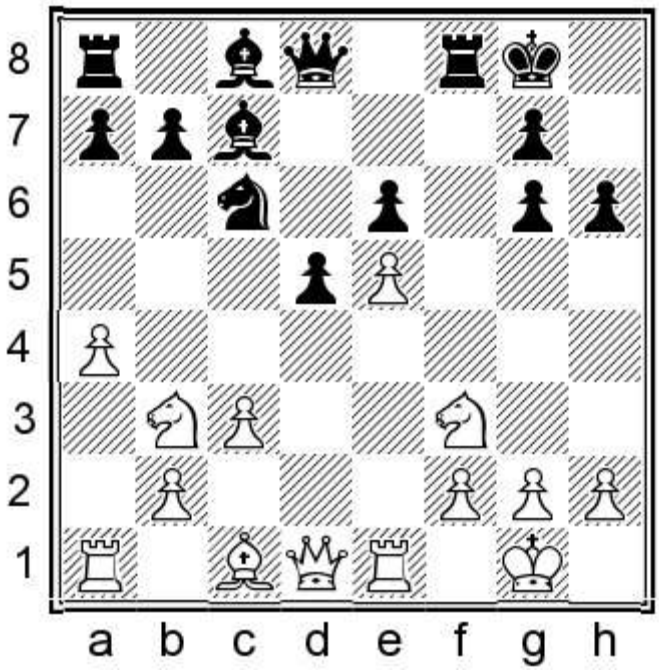
Position after: 14.♕xg6

14...♖xf3! Black is ready to exploit White's overextended position. 15.gxf3 ♘xe5 16.♖xe5 ♗xe5 17.♗xh6 ♕h4 18.f4 ♗f6 19.♕e8+ ♔h7 20.♗g5 ♗xg5 21.fxg5 ♕g4+=

C2) 12.♗g5 does not improve White's position since Black can simply play 12...♕d7= and the e5-pawn remains underprotected.

C3) 12.♗xg6 fxg6 13.a4 [13.♘bd4 is also possible, but White is unable to put any pressure on the e6-pawn and Black is happy to trade knights on d4. 13...♘xd4 14.♘xd4 ♗d7 15.f4 (if 15.♕g4 ♕e8 16.h4 ♖c8=) 15...♗b6= was soon drawn: Lanheld, W (2195) – Packroff, H (2251) corr. 2016.] 13...h6!N



Position after: 13...h6!N

Black should immediately pursue active play on the kingside with ... g5. [13...♖f5 14.♘bd4 ♘xd4 15.♕xd4 ♗d7∞ was played in Yu, Y (2739) – Cheparinov, I (2667) Hengshui 2019. Black is still fine, but I like the text move better.] 14.♘bd4 Trading knights is good for Black since he is the one with less space, but White does not have other good options to contain Black's kingside initiative starting with ...g5. [White can prevent ...g5 with 14.h4 but he has weakened his kingside. Now, Black can continue as in the Yu – Cheparinov game. 14...♖f5! 15.♘bd4 ♘xd4 16.♕xd4 ♗d7=] 14...♘xd4 15.♕xd4 ♗d7 ...g5 would no longer carry the threat of ...g4, so Black continues his development instead. 16.♕g4 ♔h7 17.♗e3 a5!= Fixing the a4-pawn. The position is balanced, as both players have solid positions.

Back to 11.♗g5.

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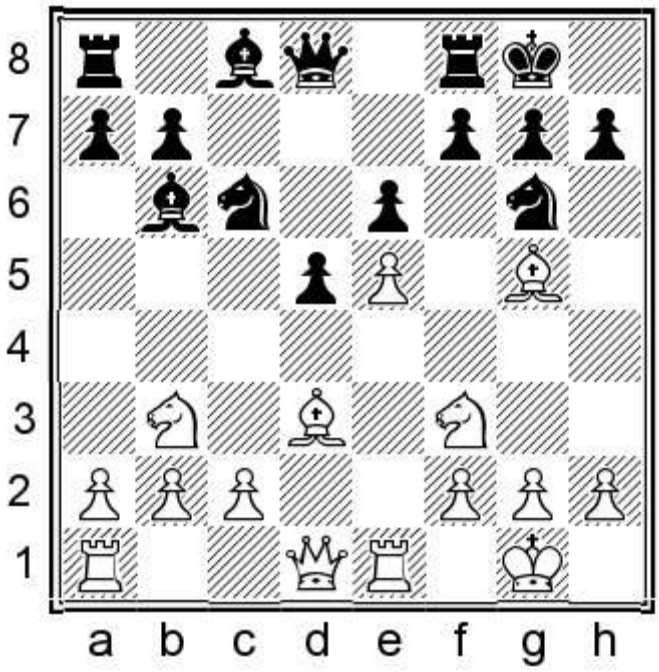

Position after: 11.♗g5

11...♕c7

11...f6 is playable, but it is weakening and Black has to play very accurately to make up for his dubious positional play. It is more intuitive to pressure the e5-pawn than exchange it, anyway.

12.♗xg6

12.a4 is met by 12...a5 and White has nothing better than a transposition to an inferior version of the main line since the inclusion of a4 and ...a5 favors Black.

12...fxg6 13.♗e3!

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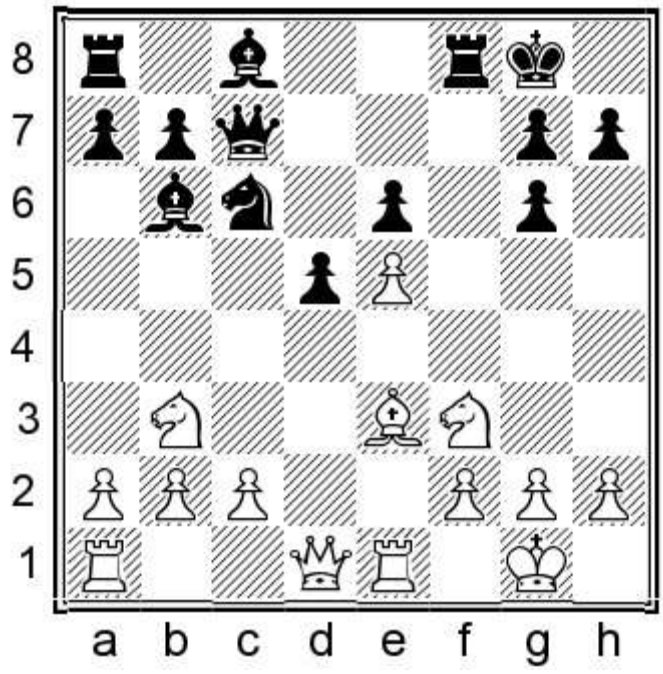

Position after: 13.♗e3!

White returns to his original idea. Now that Black's queen is on c7, Black cannot prevent the trade by retreating his bishop to c7. However, Black can use the extra move to jumpstart his kingside initiative.

13...h6!N

Black must initiate active play on the kingside before White can take control of the position. It is important to consider that, once the dark-squared bishops come off the board, White's position is superior from a positional perspective. Therefore, Black must use concrete and dynamic play on the kingside to offset his strategic issues.

13...a5?! has been played before, but I prefer focusing on the kingside since White is well-equipped to defend his queenside. 14.♕d3!N With the help of some simple tactics, White can fend off the ideas of ...♘b4, and the queen is ideally placed on d3 otherwise. 14...a4 15.♗xb6 ♕xb6 16.♘bd4

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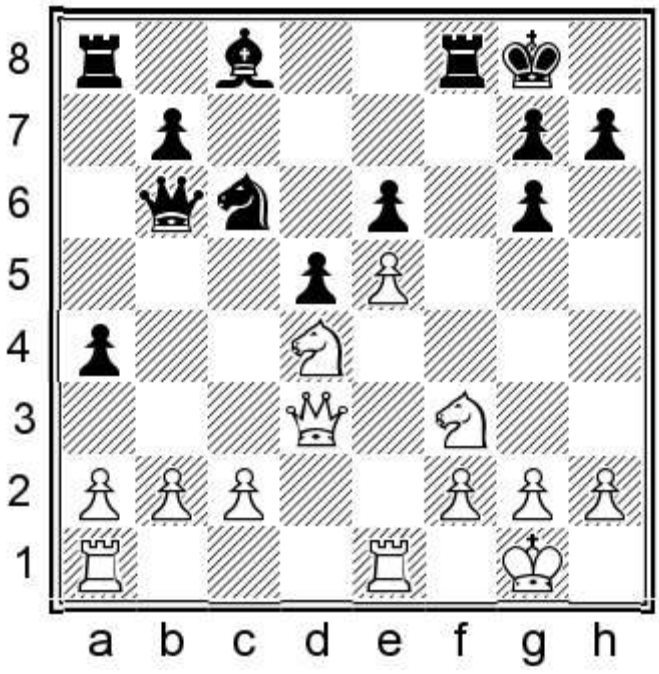
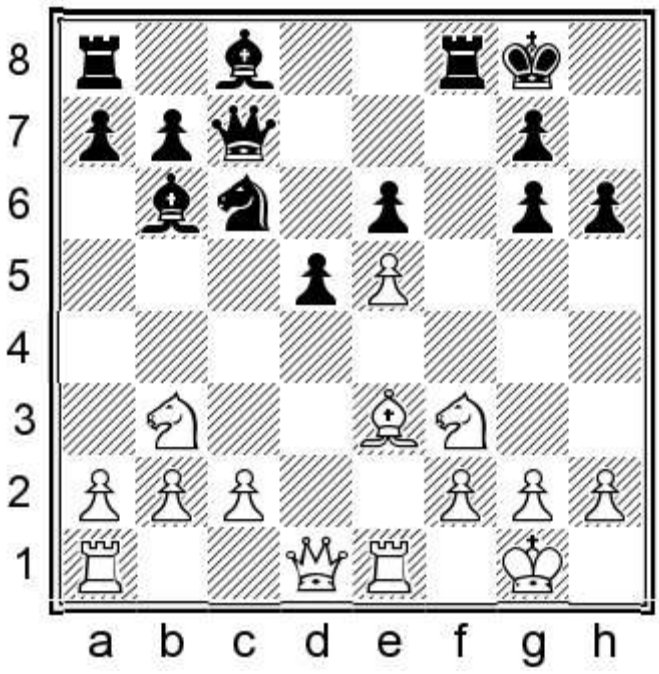


Position after: 16.♘bd4

Black's only idea is to take on b2, but White's positional advantages come to the fore first. 16...h6 [16...♖f4 is met by 17.♘xc6 bxc6 18.♕d2! ♖f7 19.b4!± and Black is left without counterplay.] 17.♕e3! g5 18.♘xc6 ♕xc6 [18...♕xe3 19.♘e7+ ♔f7 20.♖xe3 ♔xe7 21.♘d4± is a very unpleasant endgame for Black.] 19.c3± White has successfully dealt with Black's queenside advance and he is now in full control of the position.



Position after: 13...h6!N

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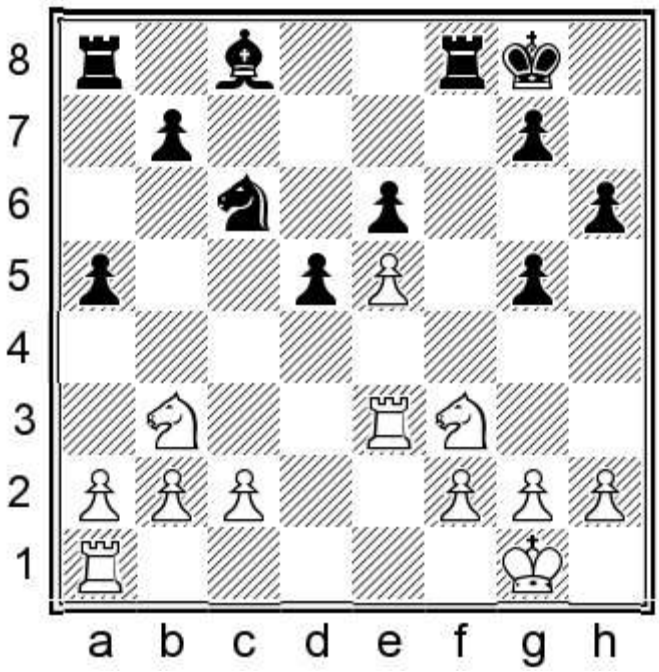
14.♗xb6

A) 14.a4 is now met by 14...♗xe3 15.♖xe3 g5 16.h3 ♗d7= and Black is ready to play ...♖f4.

B) 14.♖c1 is a logical attempt, but Black is well-prepared to counter White's c4-plan. 14...g5 15.c4 ♕f7! Threatening ...g4. 16.♗xb6 [16.h3 ♖d8=] 16...axb6 17.cxd5 exd5 18.♕d2 ♖xa2 19.♘bd4 ♗g4 20.e6 ♕f4 21.♘xc6 bxc6 22.♕xf4 gxf4 23.♖xc6 ♗xf3 24.gxf3 ♖xb2=

C) 14.♕d3 is met by 14...g5 and after 15.♗xb6 ♕xb6 16.♕e3 ♕xe3 17.♖xe3 a5!



Position after: 17...a5!

Black pressures White on both sides of the board to generate counterplay. 18.h3 [18.♘fd4 a4! 19.♘xc6 axb3 20.♘b4 bxc2 21.♘xc2 ♗d7=; 18.a4 ♖f4! Black prevents ♘bd4 and targets the a4-pawn. 19.c3 ♖e4 20.h3 ♖xe3 21.fxe3 b6=] 18...a4 19.♘bd4 ♗d7 20.♖c3 ♖ac8 21.♘xc6 ♖xc6 22.♖xc6 bxc6= By taking on c6, White has consolidated Black's pawn structure. With ...c5 now possible, Black is not worse at all.

D) White can temporarily bring Black's counterplay to a halt with 14.h4 but he weakens his kingside. 14...♗d7 15.♕d3 [15.♗xb6 ♕xb6 transposes to our main line.] 15...♗xe3 16.♕xe3 ♖f7! Black prepares to double rooks on the f-file, and White is not in time to find any meaningful plan. 17.♘fd4 ♖af8 18.f3 ♖f4!

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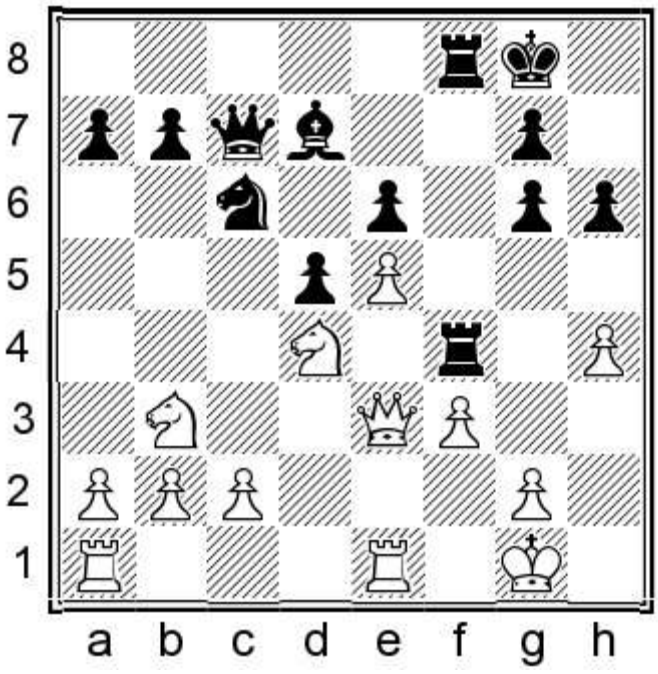
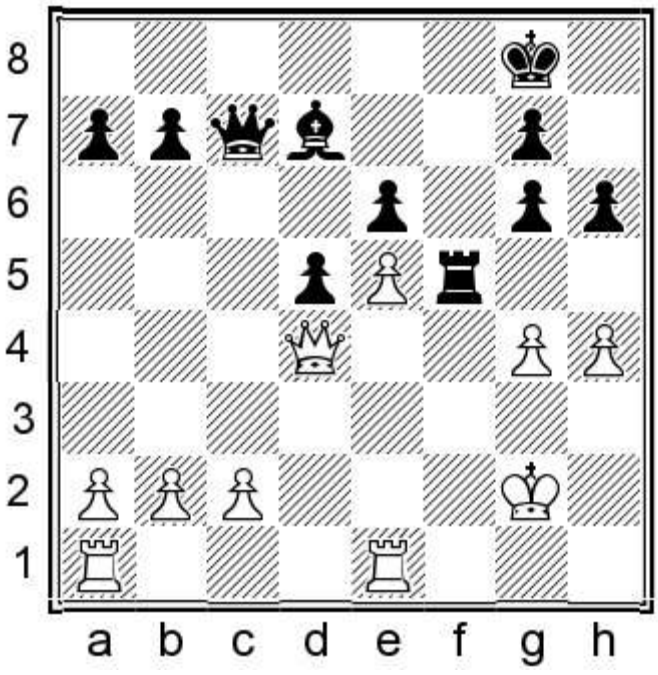


Position after: 18...♖f4!

It is critical that Black continues forcing the pace, so that White is not in time to consolidate his position. 19.g3 ♘xd4 20.♘xd4 ♖xd4! Just when White seemed to have contained Black's kingside initiative, Black sacrifices the exchange to keep it going! After 21.♕xd4 ♖xf3 White's king is left exposed and the light squared bishop will burst into the game to sustain Black's initiative. If White is able to trade a pair of rooks with ♖f1, he will regain control over the position (although it is not clear if he can win the resulting position). However, Black can prevent this with ...♗b5. 22.♔g2 [22.♖f1 trades the rooks but gives away one more pawn. 22...♖xf1+ 23.♖xf1 ♕xc2=] 22...♖f5 23.g4



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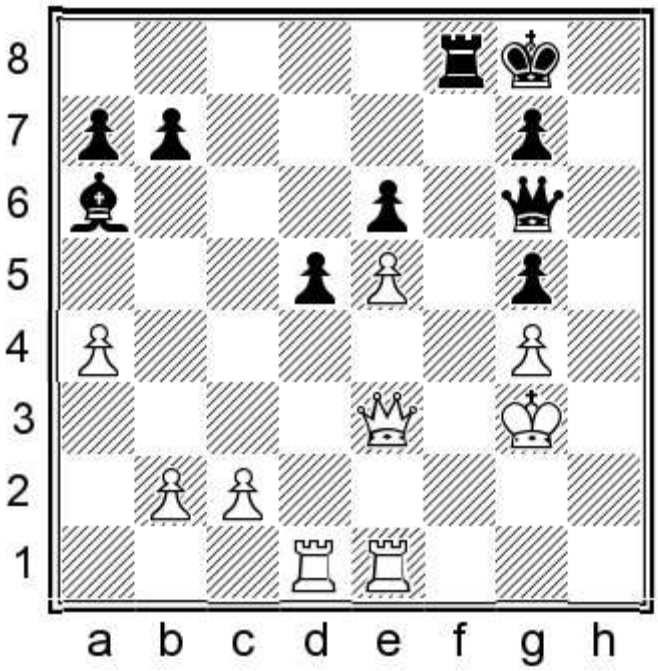
Position after: 23.g4

This is the only way for White to make progress. 23...♖f8 [23...♕xc2+? runs into trouble since after 24.♔g3 ♖f8 25.♖ac1 Black cannot avoid trading queens. White has a winning endgame after 25...♕a4 26.♕xa4 ♗xa4 27.♖f1+–.] 24.♔g3 [24.c3 ♗b5! 25.♖ad1 ♕d8 26.♔g3 g5! 27.hxg5 ♕xg5 28.♕e3 ♕g6 29.♖d4 ♖f5⩲ Black's initiative persists since White's king will remain exposed.] 24...♗b5! Again, this move is crucial to prevent White from playing ♖f1. 25.a4 ♗a6 26.♖ad1 g5! 27.hxg5 hxg5 28.♕c3 ♕f7 29.♕e3 ♕g6=



Position after: 29...♕g6=

There is no way for White to make progress because his king is too unsafe.

14...♕xb6

White has traded the bishops, but it has cost him some time. Black is ready to generate counterplay on the kingside.

15.h4

If White does not prevent ...g5, he has few hopes of an advantage. 15.c3 g5 16.♕d2 ♗d7 17.♕e3 ♖f4!? 18.♕xb6 axb6 19.h3 g4 20.hxg4 ♖xg4=

15...♗d7

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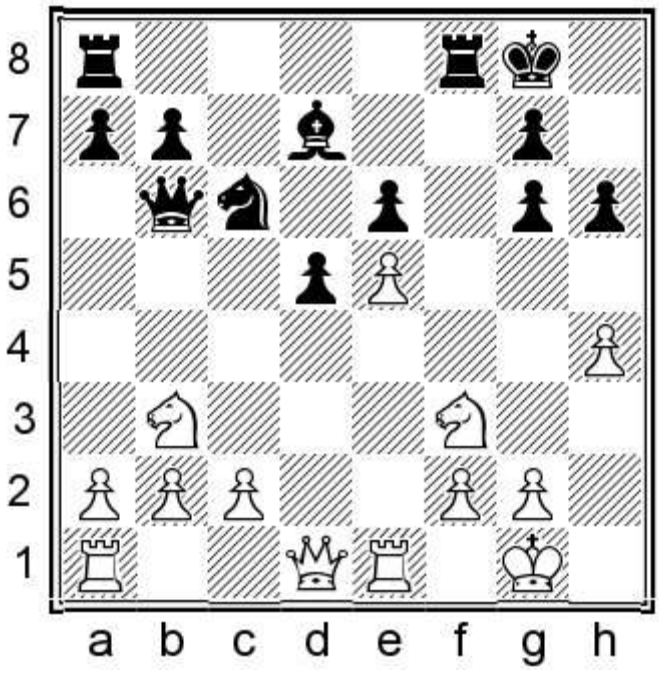
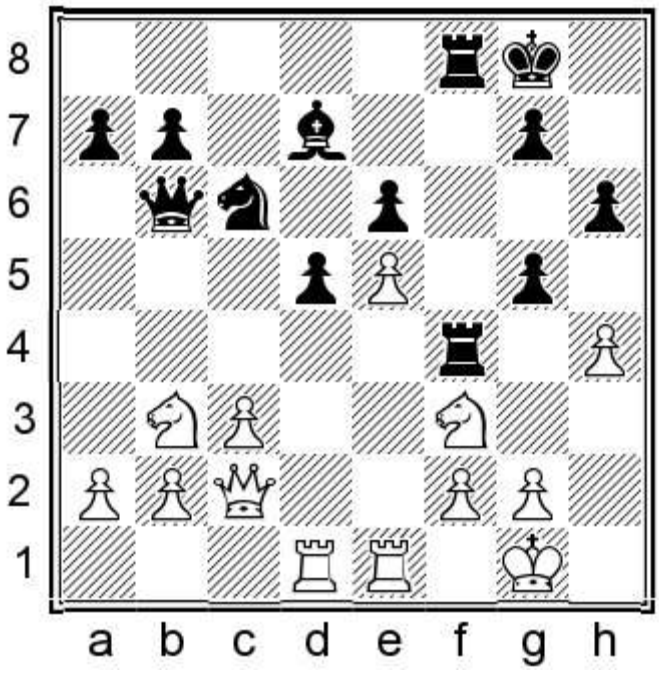


Position after: 15...♗d7

16.♕d3

A) 16.c4 is met by 16...dxc4 17.♕xd7 ♖fe8!= and White's queen must retreat to anticipate ...♖fd8.

B) 16.c3 ♖f4 17.♕c2 ♖af8 18.♖ad1 g5! Black's pieces are active and coordinated. This move flows from his position and begins a flurry of tactics.



Position after: 18...g5!

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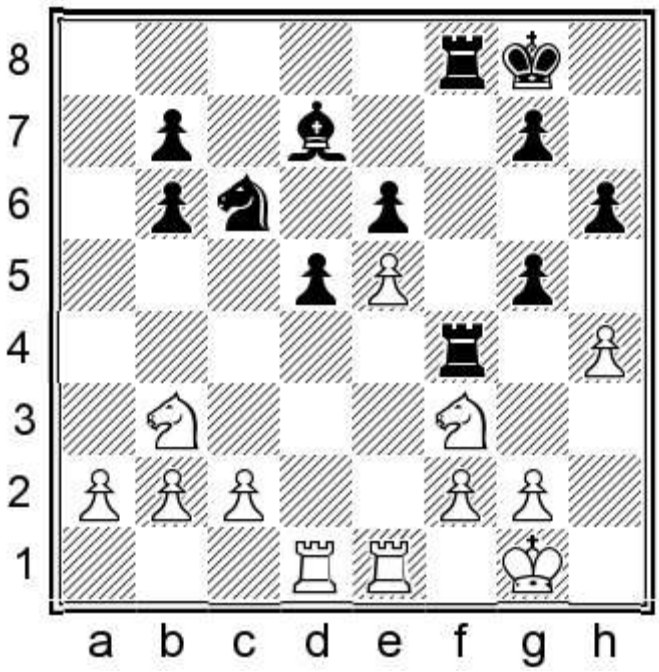
19.hxg5 ♖xf3! 20.gxf3 ♕d8! White's kingside is weakened and he needs to show some accuracy to avoid being worse. From a practical perspective, I think few players would be comfortable playing such positions with White. 21.f4! ♖xf4 22.♖d3! ♖f5 23.♖g3 [23.gxh6 ♘xe5 24.♖g3 ♘f3+ 25.♖xf3 ♖xf3 26.♕g6 ♕f6=] 23...♖xg5 24.♖ee3 ♘xe5 25.f4 ♘c4 26.fxg5 ♘xe3 27.♕g6 ♘f5 28.gxh6 ♕h4!= The position is messy, but the computer assures us that it is equal.

16...♖f4 17.♕e3

17.♕xg6 is quite greedy as Black's initiative grows with 17...♖af8!∓.

17...♖af8 18.♕xb6 axb6 19.♖ad1 g5!



Position after: 19...g5!

Black's initiative continues into the endgame. This activity ensures that Black is not worse despite his long-term strategic weaknesses. Play may continue with, for instance:

20.hxg5 hxg5 21.♖d2 g4 22.♘fd4 g5!? 23.♘b5 ♖4f5 24.♖de2 ♖5f7! 25.♘3d4 ♖h7!

White's king is not entirely safe yet!

26.♖e3 ♔g7 27.f3

27.♖g3 ♖fh8 28.f4 ♖h4! 29.f5 exf5 30.e6 ♖h1+ 31.♔f2 ♖xe1 32.♔xe1 ♗c8 33.♘xf5+ ♔f6 34.♘fd4 ♗xe6=

27...gxf3 28.♘xf3 g4 29.♘fd4 ♔g6 30.c3 ♔g5=

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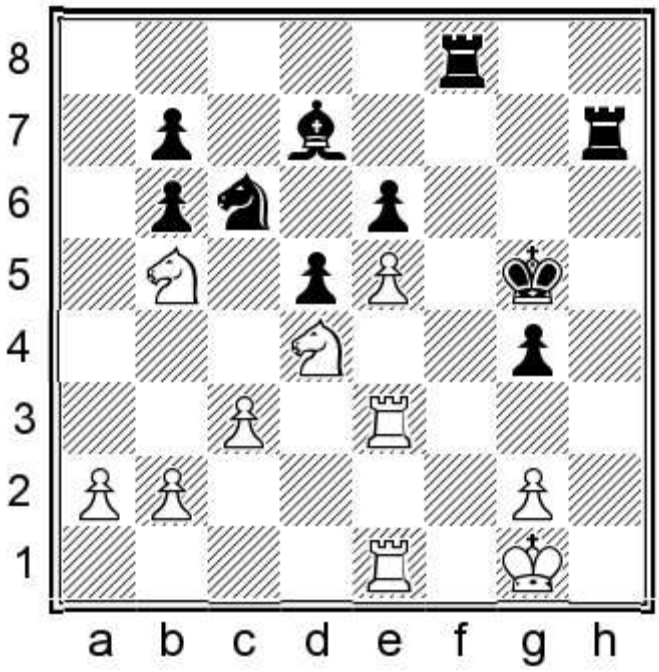
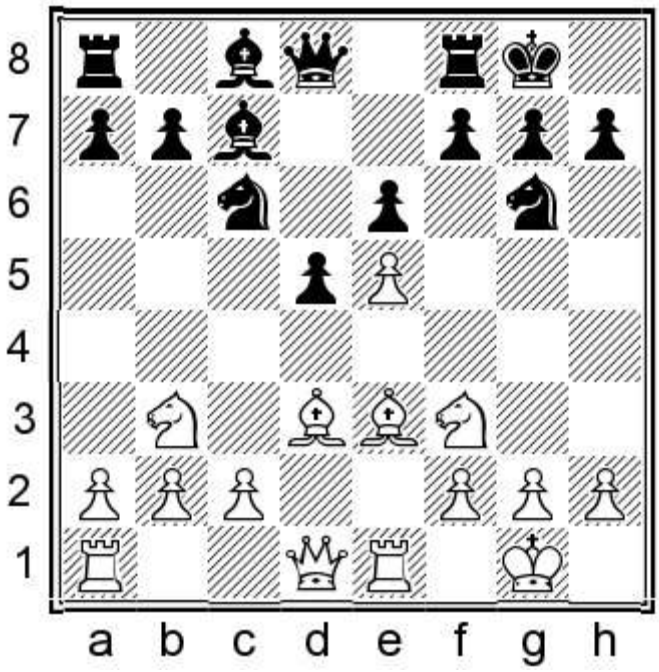


Position after: 30...♔g5=

c) 10.♖e1 0-0 11.♗e3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.♘bd2 ♘c6 9.♘b3 ♗b6 10.♖e1 0-0 11.♗e3 ♗c7



Position after: 11...♗c7

12.♗c5

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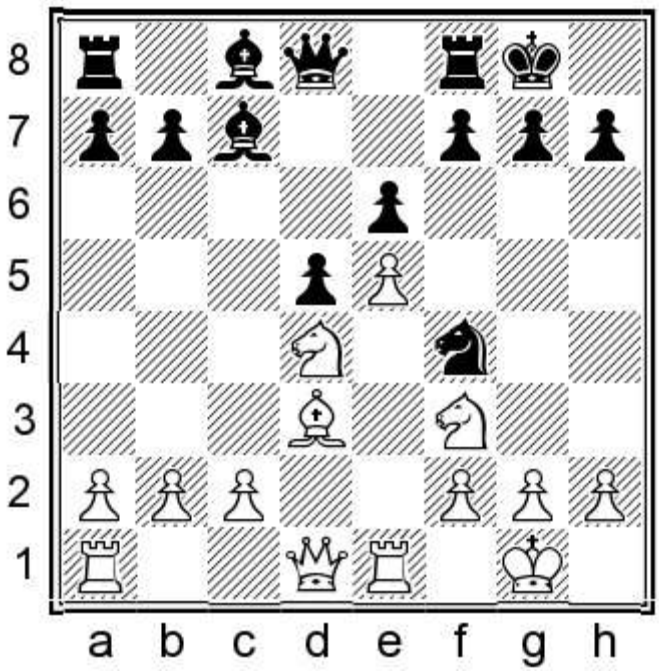
A) 12.♗xg6 is not critical as Black can continue with his plan. 12...fxg6 13.♗c5 ♖f5 14.♘bd4 ♘xd4 15.♕xd4 g5 16.h3 ♗d7=

B) 12.♗d4 is, surprisingly, a more interesting option. White gives up his dark-squared bishop to release the pressure on the e5-pawn. Although the bishop pair is a plus for Black, he can can hardly make any use of it without opening the position. The issue is that providing open lines for his bishops is not a simple task, and Black needs to exploit some tactical motifs and some concrete ideas to succeed in doing so. 12...♘xd4 13.♘bxd4 ♘f4! This move paves the way for Black to play ...f6.



Position after: 13...♘f4!

B1) 14.g3N gives away White's best piece for no real compensation. After 14...♘xd3 15.♕xd3 ♗d7 16.c3 ♕e7 17.♖e3 ♖ae8 18.♖ae1 Black can play 18...f5!?= to gain some space in the center.

B2) 14.c3N is a more interesting option. White intends to retreat his bishop to c2, where it will remain active on the b1-h7 diagonal. 14...f6! Since Black wants to open the kingside and attack there, there is no point in trading the f4-knight. Once the e5-pawn is traded, Black's bishops will burst into life and the attack will begin for real. 15.♗c2 fxe5 16.♘xe5 ♕f6 17.♘df3 b6!

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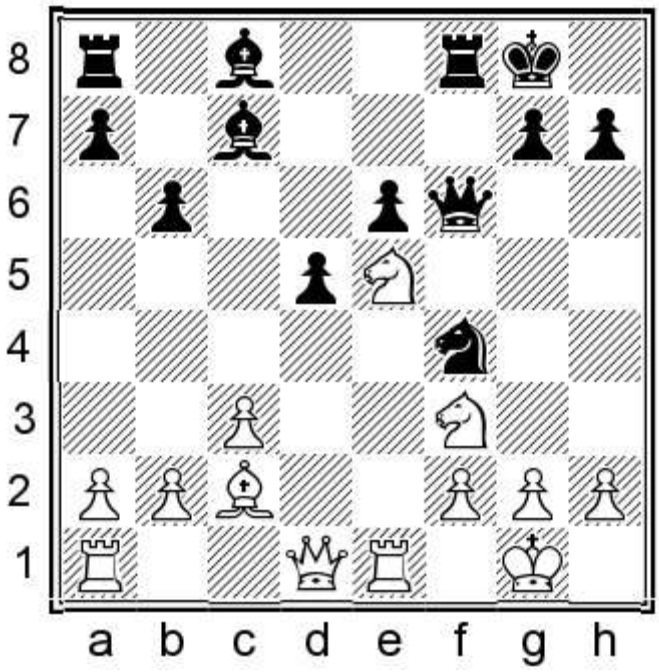

Position after: 17...b6!

The position has opened and Black has a strong initiative. He should not shy away from sacrificing some material to further his active play. 18.♔h1 [Similarly, 18.♖e3 is met by 18...♗b7! and Black has excellent compensation for the exchange after 19.♘d7 ♕h6 20.♘xf8 ♖xf8♾; 18.♕d4 ♗xe5! 19.♖xe5 ♘h3+! 20.gxh3 ♕xf3 21.♗d1 ♕f4= White's structure has been weakened and, although Black may lose the e6-pawn, the endgame will offer White very few chances.] 18...♗b7! [18...g5!? is worth thinking about.] Now White can slow down Black's initiative with 19.♘g4 but he is misplacing his own pieces. [19.♘d7 ♕h6 20.♘xf8 ♖xf8 21.♕d4 ♗d6♾] 19...♕e7 20.g3 ♘h3 21.♕d3 g6 22.♗b3 ♕f7 23.♖e3 h5! 24.♘h6+ ♔g7 25.♘xf7 ♘xf2+ 26.♔g1 ♘xd3 27.♘7g5 ♘c5 28.♘d4 ♗d6 29.♘gxe6+ ♘xe6 30.♖xe6 ♗c5=

B3) 14.♗f1 This is White's most logical move, keeping the bishop on the board. 14...f6! This is the only way forward for Black, since he cannot allow White to expand on the kingside with g3 and h4. 15.g3 ♘g6 16.♗h3 ♖e8! The moves that follow are relatively forced as neither player has attractive alternatives. 17.exf6 e5! 18.♗xc8 ♖xc8 19.♘f5 ♕xf6 20.♕xd5+ ♔h8 21.♘3h4 [21.♘e3 e4 22.♘d2 ♖cd8♾] 21...♘xh4 22.♘xh4 ♗b6 23.♖e2 e4!

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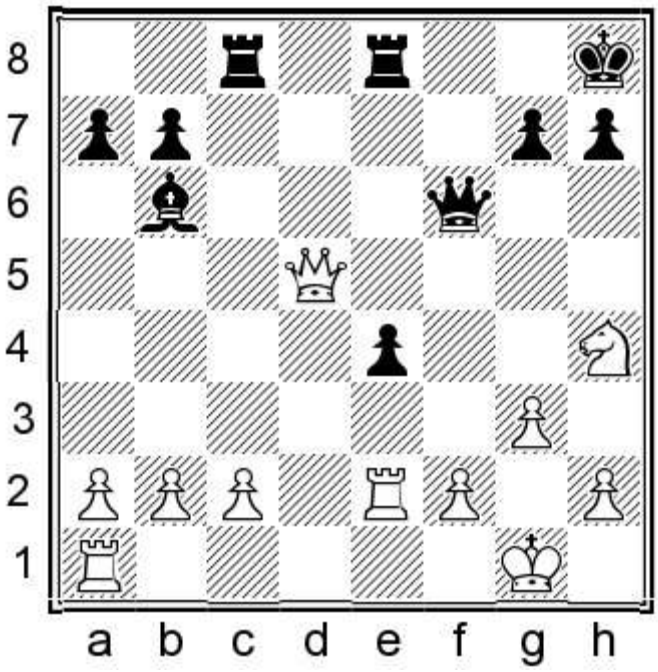
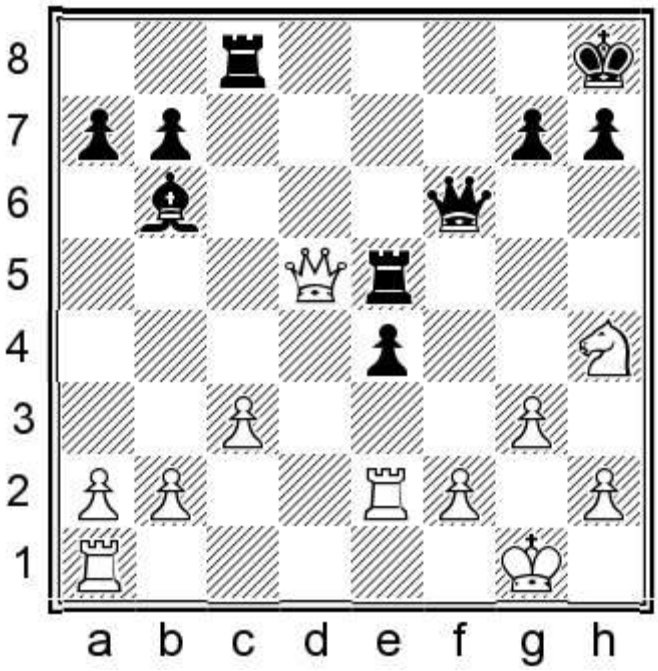


Position after: 23...e4!

Black has sacrificed a pawn to open up the position and found good squares for all his pieces. Although White is quite solid, Black's initiative gives him enough compensation for the pawn. Moreover, this position is very unpleasant to play over the board as Black's moves flow naturally whereas White needs to proceed with great caution. 24.c3 [24.♕b3 defends the b2-pawn while removing the queen from the d-file, but the queen is awkwardly placed on b3. 24...♖f8 25.♖f1 e3 26.f4 g5 27.♘g2 ♖cd8∞] 24...♖e5!



Position after: 24...♖e5!

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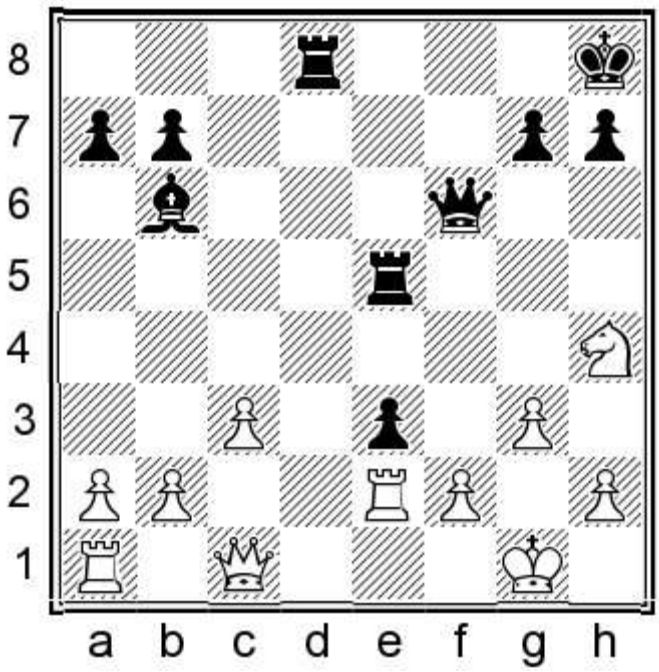
B3.1) 25.♕xb7? is too greedy: 25...♖d8! 26.♖f1 ♖e7 27.♕a6 g5!–+ and White is unable to cope with Black's threats (...♗xf2 is now possible since ♖xf2 ♕xa6 no longer runs into ♖f8).

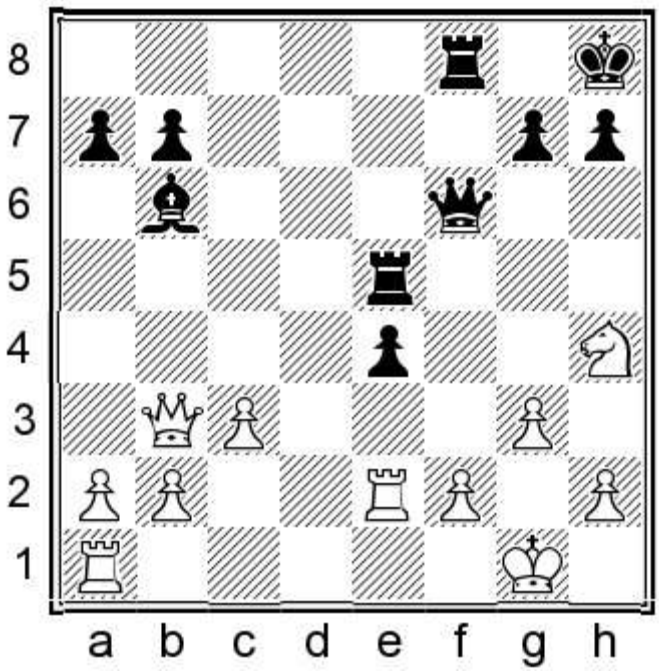
B3.2) 25.♕d2 ♖d8 26.♕c1 e3!



Position after: 26...e3!

Black is willing to give away a second pawn to weaken White's position even further. 27.fxe3 ♖f8 28.♘g2 ♖f5⩲ The position explains it all. White must defend passively as Black will continue to poke at his kingside weaknesses.

B3.3) 25.♕b3 ♖f8



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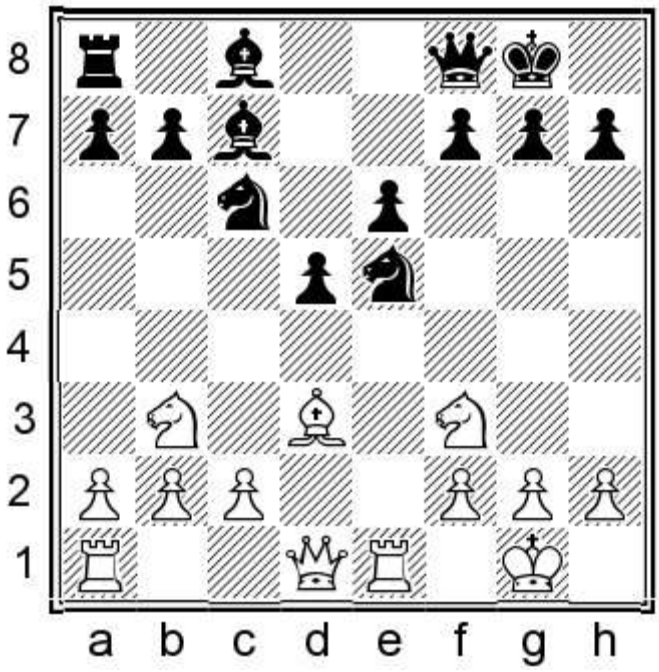
Position after: 25...♖f8

26.♖f1 [26.♕c2 is met by 26...♕e6! 27.♖ae1 ♕xa2 28.c4 ♕a5!= Black has equalized material.] 26...g5 27.♘g2 ♕f3!∓ We could analyze this position further, but this line is not critical. Black's attack continues and White must defend accurately.

12...♘gxe5 13.♗xf8 ♕xf8



Position after: 13...♕xf8

As we saw in the 10.♕e2 variation, Black should not be afraid to sacrifice the exchange. The bishop pair and the solid center give Black plenty of compensation for the material.

14.♘bd4!?N

A) 14.♘xe5 ♘xe5

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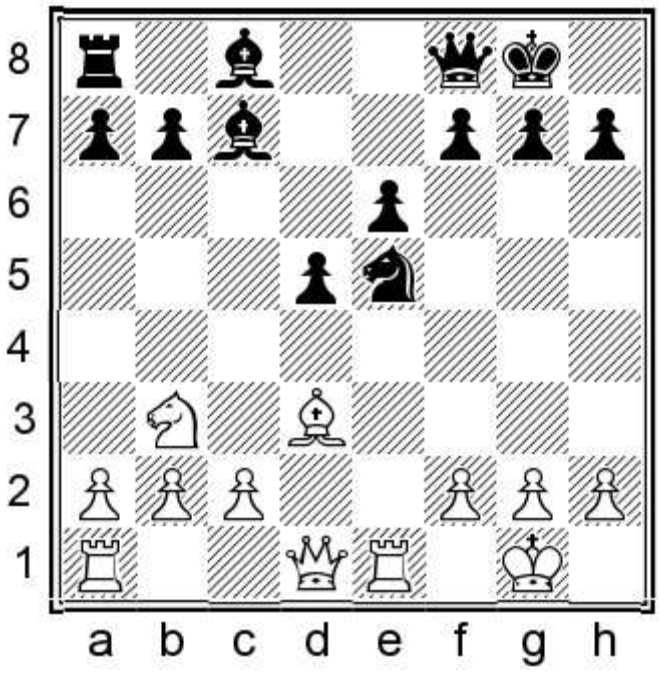
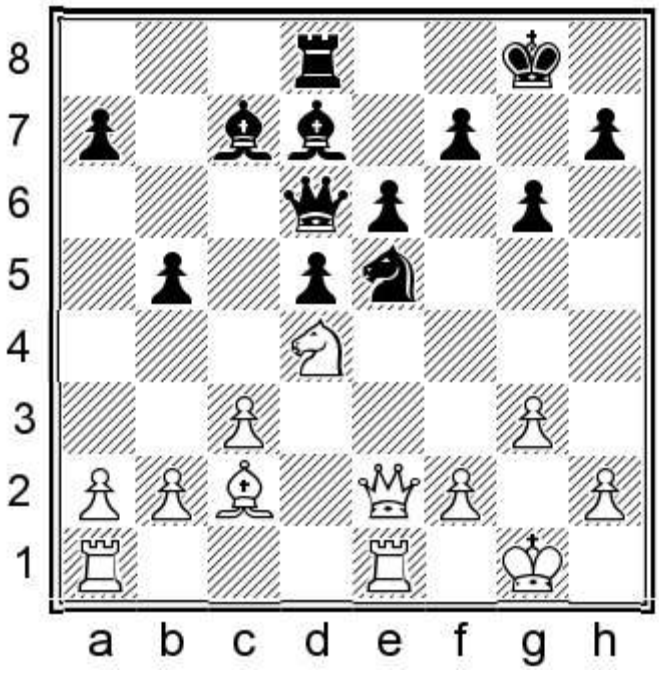


Position after: 14...♘xe5

A1) White can give back the exchange to eliminate Black's dark-squared bishop, but the resulting position is simply equal. 15.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 16.♖xe5 ♗xe5 17.♕h5+ ♔g8 18.♕xe5 ♗d7= Dominguez Perez, L (2750) – Cheparinov, I (2667) Hengshui 2019. Dominguez's decision to give back the material speaks volumes about how uncomfortable it is to play these positions with White, despite the material advantage.

A2) 15.c3 ♗d7 16.♘d4 ♖d8 17.♗c2 g6 18.♕e2 ♕d6 19.g3 b5=



Position after: 19...b5=

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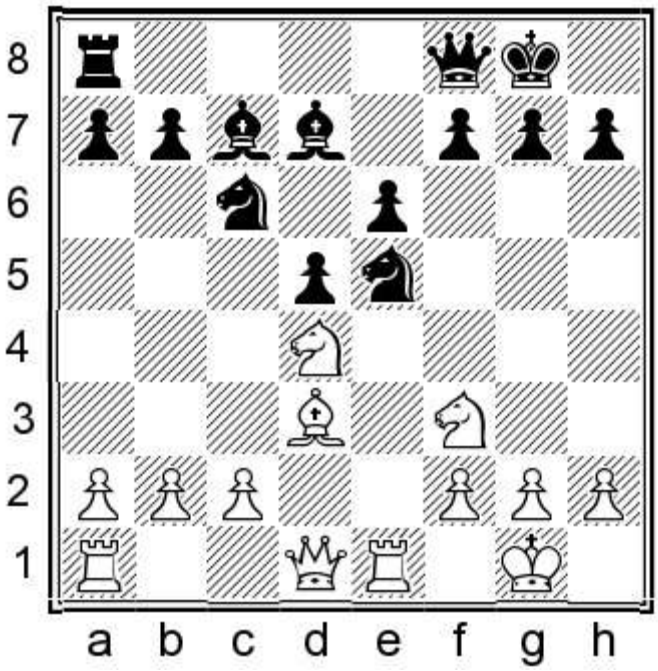
This position was reached in Suarez, M – De Homont, R (2323) ICCF email 2016. White is unable to make progress due to Black's active pieces, and the closed nature of the position does not allow him to activate his rooks. The position is about equal.

B) 14.♖c1N is a logical attempt to open up the position by playing c4, but White is unable to execute his plan: 14...♘xd3 15.♕xd3 [15.cxd3 allows Black to gain space in the center with 15...e5 and White has nothing better than to give back the exchange: 16.♖xc6 bxc6 17.♘xe5 c5=.] 15...♘b4! 16.♕c3 ♗b6 17.♖a1 f6! 18.a3 ♘c6= The position remains closed and Black's b6-bishop is superlative.

14...♗d7



Position after: 14...♗d7

14...♘xf3+?! 15.♘xf3 e5 is a logical follow-up, but it fails due to 16.♗b5! e4 17.♕xd5! exf3 18.♗xc6 ♗e6 19.♖xe6 fxe6 20.♕xe6++–.

15.♘xe5

A) 15.♘xc6 ♘xf3+ 16.♕xf3 bxc6 17.c4 ♕d6=

B) 15.♗b5 ♘xf3+ 16.♘xf3 ♖d8 17.c4 d4! 18.a3 f6= Black's pawns will advance in the center and cause headaches for White.

15...♘xe5 16.♗b5!

16.♘f3 ♘xf3+ 17.♕xf3 ♕d6 18.g3 b5=

16...♗c8!

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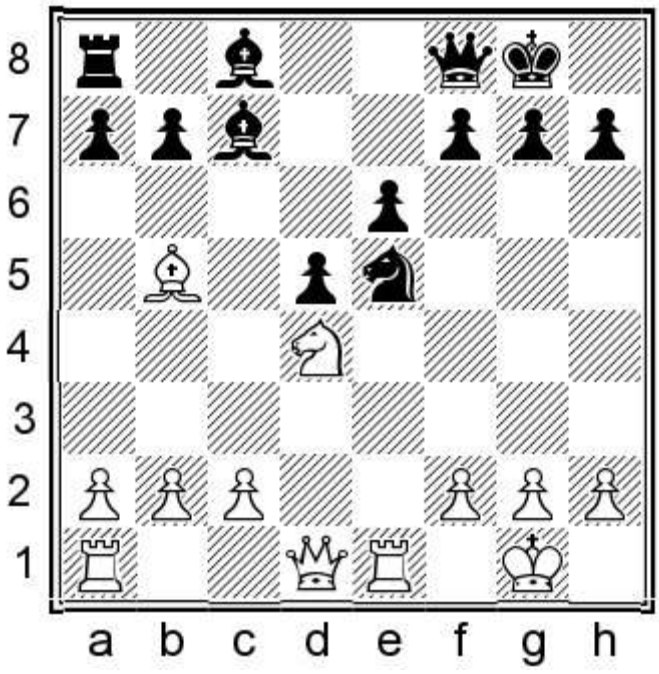

Position after: 16...♗c8!

There are no forcing variations and the game can continue in many ways. Nevertheless, I present a few variations to showcase Black's ideas. Note that Black should not trade the light-squared bishops since Black's initiative would be greatly diminished without the bishop pair. Accordingly, 16...♕b4 is a bad idea since the exchange gives White a set of squares where he can safely place his pieces. 17.♗xd7 ♘xd7 18.♖e2±

17.c3

A) 17.♘f3 ♘xf3+ 18.♕xf3 ♕c5

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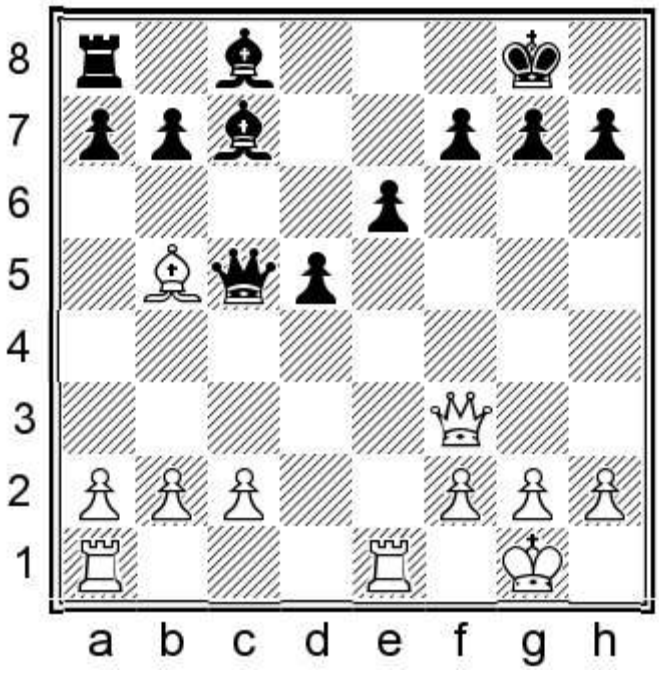
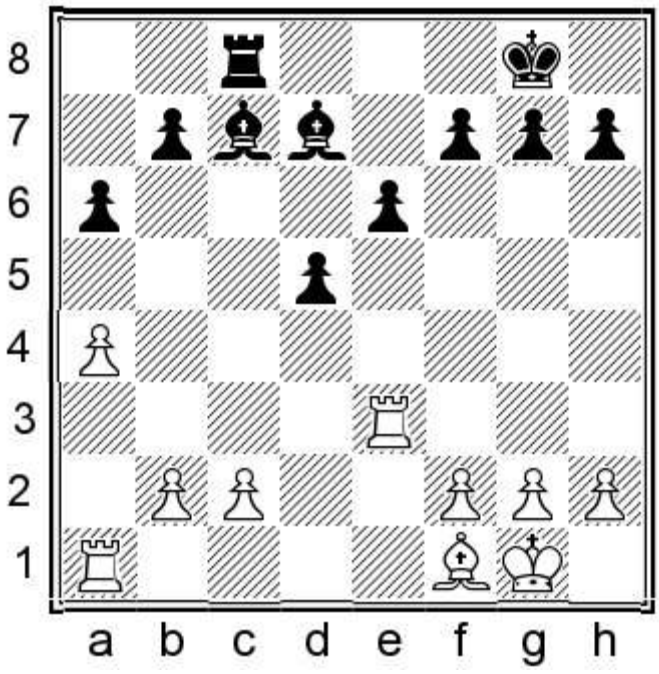


Position after: 18...♕c5

A1) 19.♗d3 ♗d7 20.♖ac1 e5! Just when White was ready to play c4, Black changes the pace. 21.♗f5 e4 22.♕h3 ♗xf5 23.♕xf5 g6= In this case Black's compensation continues even without the light-squared bishops as his central pawns have advanced a lot and exert pressure.

A2) 19.a4 a6 20.♗f1 ♗d7 21.♕e3 ♕xe3 22.♖xe3 ♖c8



Position after: 22...♖c8

Black's compensation also endures a queen trade, as White is still unable to find good pieces for his

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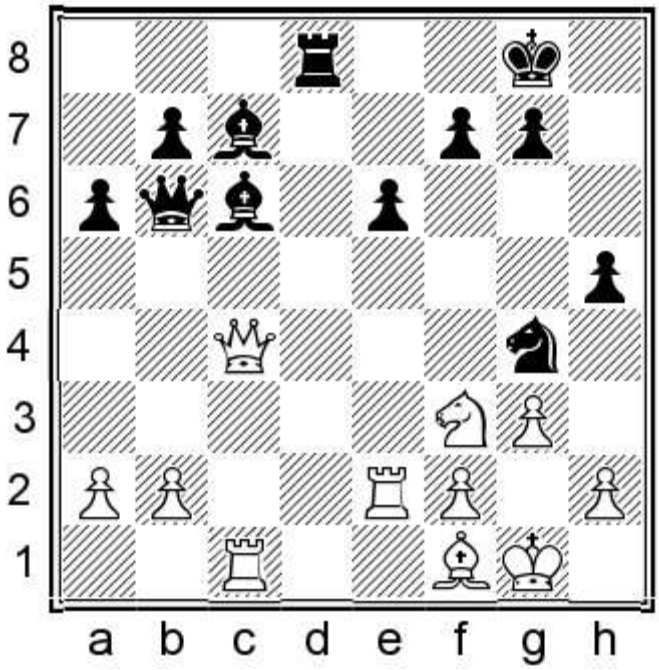
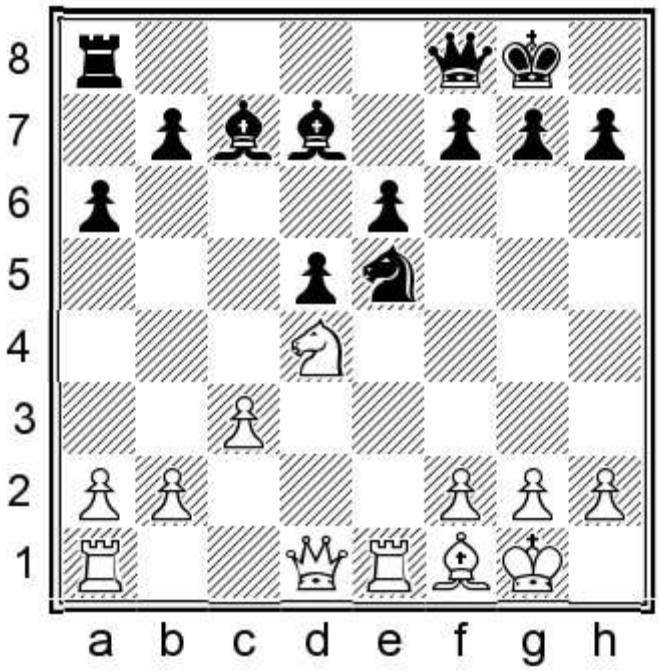
pieces. 23.g3 ♗a5 24.c4 dxc4 25.♖e4 c3 26.bxc3 ♔f8!=

B) 17.♖c1 ♕d6 18.g3 ♕b6 19.♖e3 a6 20.♗f1 ♗d7 21.♘f3 ♘g4 22.♖e2 ♖d8 23.c4 dxc4 24.♕c2 ♗c6 25.♕xc4 h5⩲ Black's initiative remains even though White has opened the c-file.



Position after: 25...h5⩲

17...a6 18.♗f1 ♗d7



Position after: 18...♗d7

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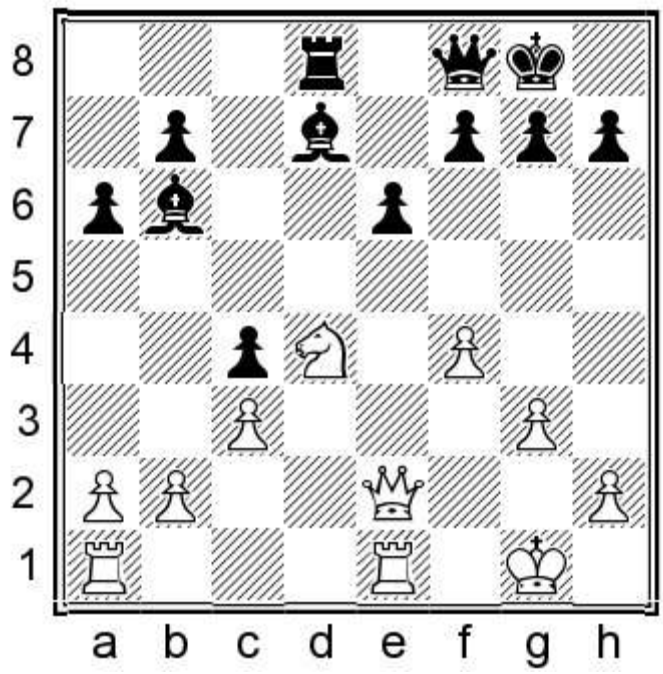
19.g3

A) 19.a4 ♕d8! The queen comes to f6. 20.g3 ♕f6=

B) 19.♘f3 ♘xf3+ 20.♕xf3 ♗c6 21.g3 e5⩱

19...♖d8 20.f4 ♘c4 21.♗xc4 dxc4 22.♕e2 ♗b6⩱



Position after: 22...♗b6⩱

White has weakened his kingside and Black's bishop pair will continue to trouble him throughout the game. Even though Black's center has been broken up, there is still good compensation for the exchange.

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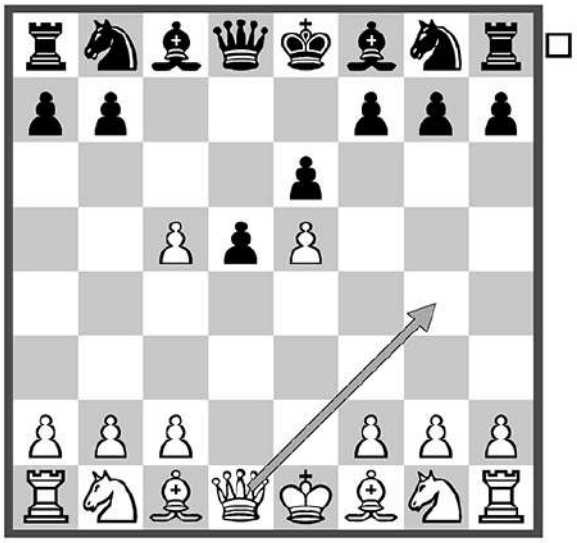
Chapter 5
Lines with ♕g4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 5 – Lines with ♕g4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.♕g4 ♘e7 7.♘f3

a) 5.♕g4 alternative

b) 7...--

c) 7...0-0 8.b4

d) 7...0-0 8.♗d3

a) 5.♕g4 alternative

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6

In this chapter, we will focus on the lines where White plays ♕g4 to pressure Black's kingside. Because of the active nature of White's idea, the ensuing lines can lead to sharp and dynamic play.

5.♕g4

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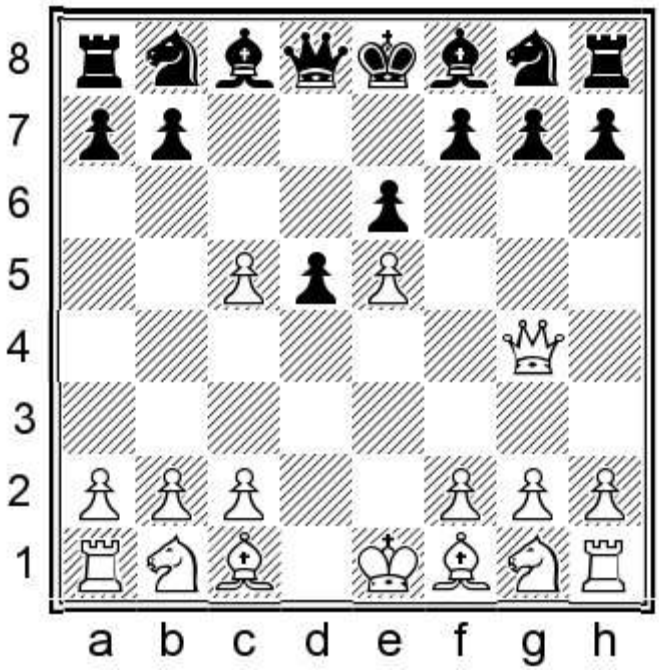

Position after: 5.♕g4

A logical move: White tries to prevent ...♗xc5 by targeting the g7-pawn. Although it is not too challenging from a theoretical perspective, Black needs to play actively to complete his development. In many lines, Black will either give up castling rights or sacrifice some material for the initiative. The resulting positions are quite complicated, so it is important that you are familiar with the main ideas.

5...h5!

Black needs to chase the queen from g4 in order to continue with his normal development. This move was already recommended for Black in Kotronias' *Beating the Caro-Kann*, although the author did not analyze any further.

Taking the c5-pawn with the knight leaves White with a more comfortable position after 5...♘d7 6.♘f3 ♘e7 7.♘c3 ♘xc5 8.♗e2 h5 9.♕f4 ♘g6 10.♕e3±.

6.♕f4 ♗xc5

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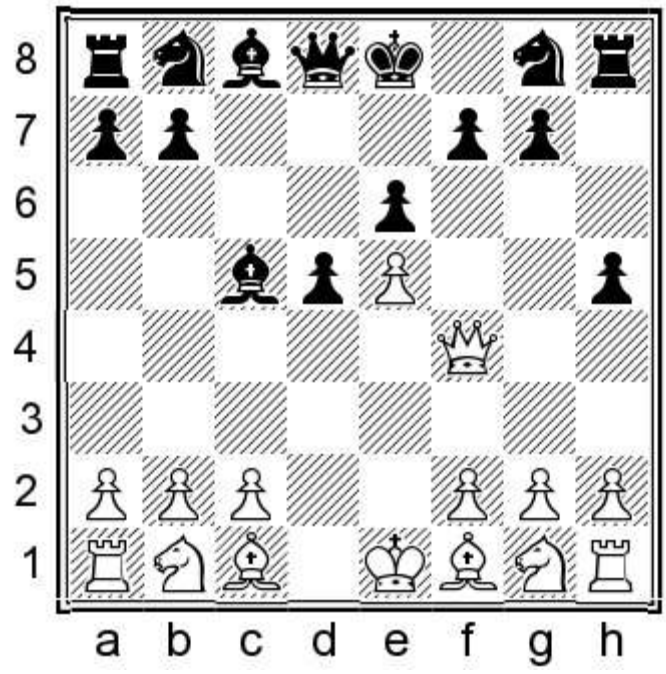

Position after: 6...♗xc5

With 5...h5, Black has weakened his kingside, so continuing with normal development will lead him into trouble as White's pieces will easily find targets to attack. For this reason, Black needs to react quickly in the center with ...f6 and target the white queen.

7.♘c3!?N

Although this move seems quite artificial at first, it is actually a decent attempt to control Black's counterplay. White maintains some flexibility and prepares to play ♘f3 since ...♕b6 can now be met by ♘a4.

A) 7.♘f3?! is imprecise, as Black can play 7...♕b6!N hitting the unprotected f2-pawn and forcing White to lose an important tempo defending it. 8.♕d2 ♘h6 9.h3 ♘c6 10.♘c3 ♗e7! Defending against ♘a4 and preparing to gain space on the kingside with ...g5. 11.♗d3 g5 12.♘b5 g4 13.hxg4 ♘xg4=

B) 7.♗d3 has been tried in a few games, but Black can ignore the threat of ♗g6+ and play ...f6 anyway: 7...♘c6 8.♘f3 f6! 9.♕g3 ♔f8

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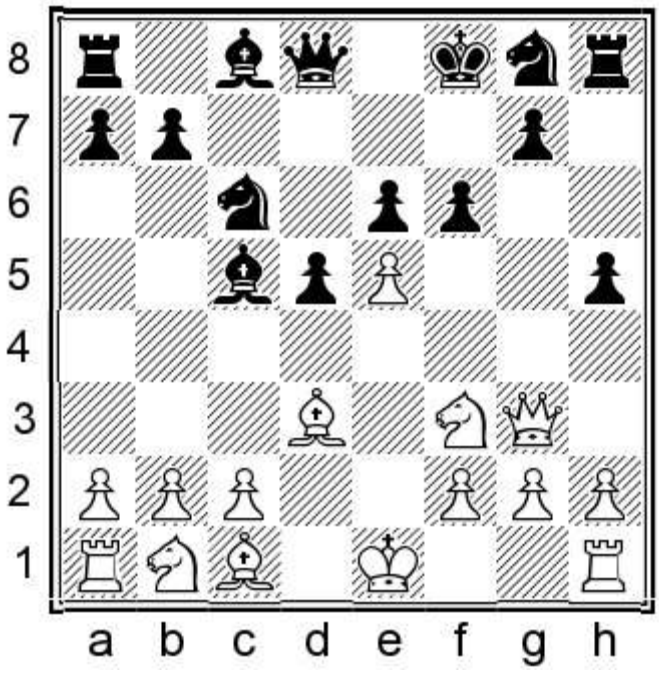
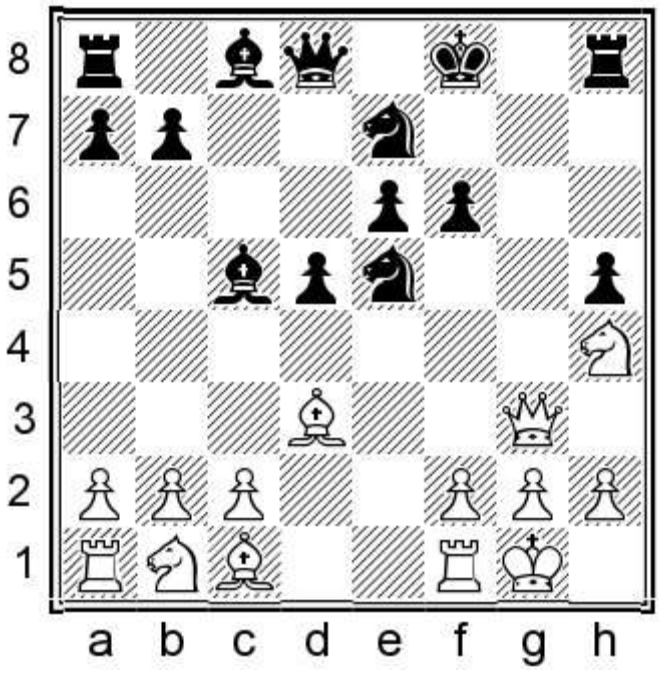


Position after: 9...♔f8

[9...♕c7?!N is not as good: 10.0-0 ♘xe5 11.♘xe5 fxe5 12.♘c3 h4 13.♕g5 e4 14.♗e3!→]

B1) 10.h4 was played in Perez Ponsa, F (2562) – Henriquez Villagra, C (2543) Montevideo 2019, and Black soon gained an edge. 10...♘h6! 11.♗xh6 By over-reacting to the threat of ...♘g4, White ceded control of the position: 11...♖xh6 12.exf6 gxf6∓.

B2) 10.exf6!?N Opening the center. This is the only way for White to exploit the position of Black's king, although he is unable to achieve much. 10...gxf6 11.♘h4 [11.0-0 is met by 11...♗d6 12.♕h4 e5!∓ and Black's rolling pawns allow Black to take over the initiative.] 11...♘ge7 12.0-0 ♘e5



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Position after: 12...♘e5

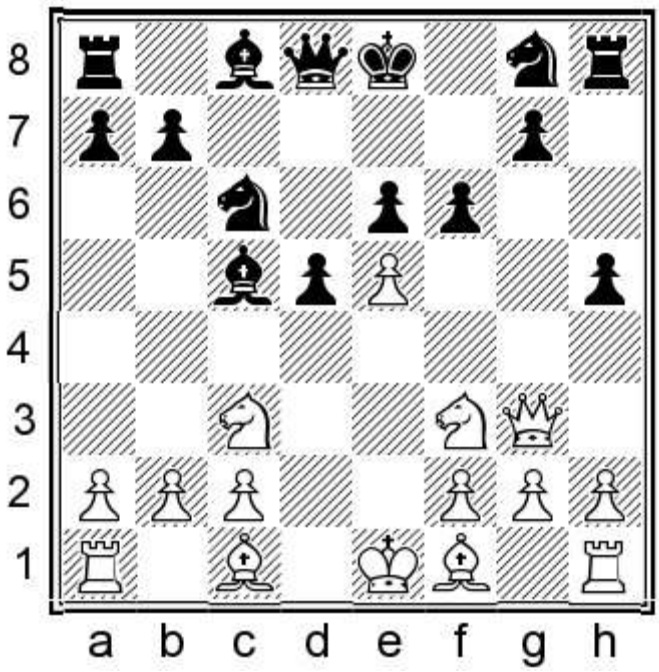
13.♗e3 [13.♘c3 ♔f7! Black's solid center keeps his king safe, and he is now ready to take over the initiative with moves like ...♕g8. 14.♗f4 ♘xd3 15.♕xd3 ♗d7=] 13...d4! Black should retain his powerful c5-bishop and increase the pressure on White's position by gaining more space in the center. 14.♗c1 ♕d5 15.♘d2 ♘xd3 16.♕xd3 b6!↑ Black is ready to bring his last minor piece into the game. The b7-bishop will be a superlative asset.

7...♘h6!

This is an important move.

Black keeps his ...f6 ideas alive but he also threatens to play ...♘g4.

7...♘c6 8.♘f3 f6 does not work as well as it did against 7.♗d3 because ♘c3 is more useful for White. 9.♕g3!



Position after: 9.♕g3!

A) 9...♔f8 10.♘h4 ♘xe5 [10...♘ge7 11.♗e3→ White is ready to castle on the queenside and Black is unable to control the center.] 11.f4! ♘g4 12.♘g6+ ♔e8 13.♕d3 ♖h6 14.♕b5+ ♔f7 15.♕xc5 ♖xg6 16.f5 exf5 17.♗e2±

B) 9...♔f7 This is possibly a better attempt than 9...♔f8 but it is not too convincing. 10.♗d3 ♘ge7 11.♕f4! Black's king is misplaced on f7.

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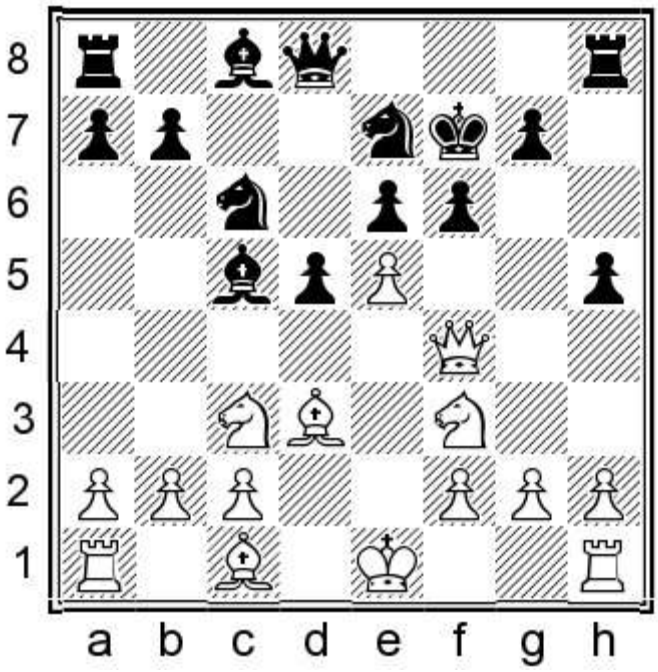
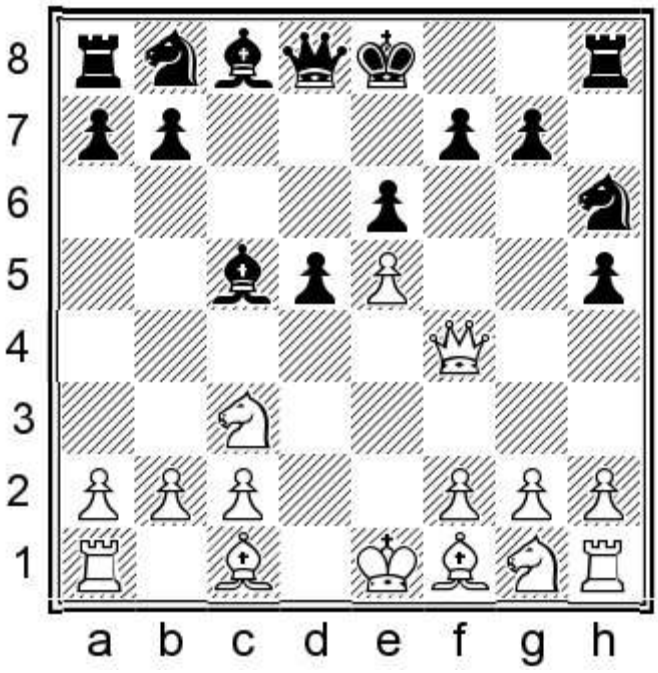


Position after: 11.♕f4!

It can survive White's attack after some accurate moves but White will still be better after 11...♕c7 12.♘b5 ♕b8 13.♗e3! ♗xe3 14.fxe3 ♘xe5 15.♘xe5+ ♕xe5 16.♘d6+ ♔g8 17.♕xe5 fxe5 18.e4 ♖h6 19.0-0 ♖f6 20.c4±.



Position after: 7...♘h6!

8.♘f3

This is the most critical reply. It invites Black to continue his plan and leads to a complicated game.

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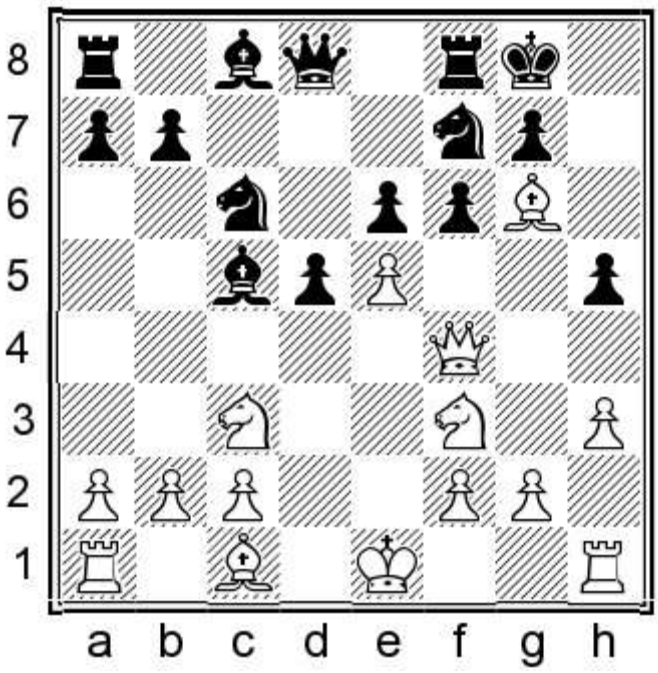
8.h3 prevents ideas like ...♘g4 but now Black can strike in the center: 8...f6!

A) 9.♘f3 ♘c6 10.♗d3 ♘f7 transposes to line c) below.

B) 9.♗e3 ♗xe3 10.fxe3 0-0 11.0-0-0 ♘d7 12.exf6 ♘xf6 13.♕g5 ♘f7 14.♕g3 ♗d7= Black's king is safe and he is ready to generate counterplay on the queenside with ...b5.

C) 9.♗d3 ♘f7 10.♘f3 ♘c6 11.♗g6 This is White's only way to protect his e5-pawn. 11...0-0!



Position after: 11...0-0!

Black ignores the h5-pawn and focuses on pressuring the center. 12.exf6 ♕xf6 13.♗xh5 [13.♕xf6 gxf6 14.♗e3 d4 15.♘e4 b6!=] 13...♘b4! 14.0-0 ♘xc2 15.♖b1 ♗d7 16.♕g3 ♘d4 17.♘xd4 ♗xd4= Black has successfully dissolved White's bind on the center and his pieces are now active and ready to make use of the central squares.

8...♘g4

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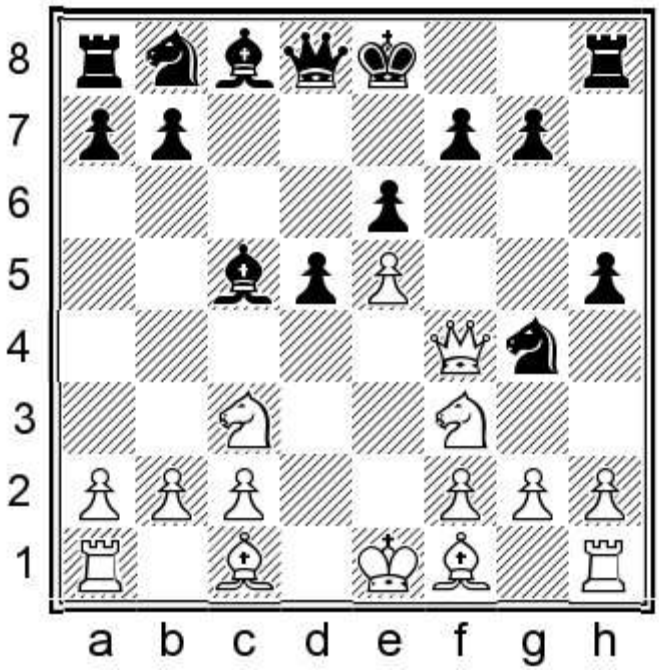

Position after: 8...♘g4

9.h3

A) 9.♘d1 defends the f2-pawn, but too passively. Black now takes over the initiative. 9...f6 10.exf6 gxf6∓

B) 9.♗b5+ ♗d7 10.♗xd7+ [10.h3 ♘xf2 transposes to our main line.] 10...♘xd7 11.h3 g5! Black uses some fancy tactics to simplify the position. 12.♕xg5 ♕xg5 13.♗xg5 ♖g8 14.hxg4 hxg4 15.♗f4 gxf3 16.gxf3 ♗b4=

9...♘xf2 10.♗b5+ ♗d7 11.♗xd7+

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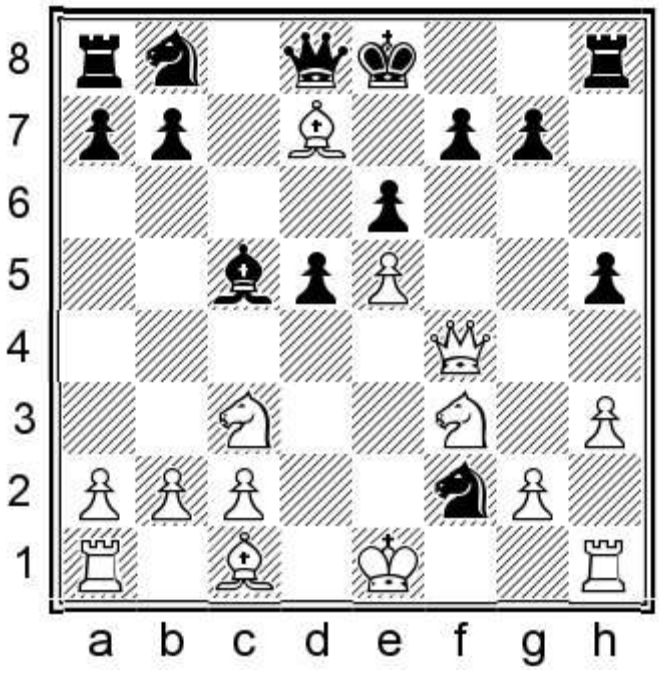

Position after: 11.♗xd7+

11...♘xd7

11...♕xd7 is also playable but White has a slightly more pleasant position after 12.♖f1 ♘e4 13.♘xe4 dxe4 14.♕xe4 ♕c6 15.♕e2 ♕a6 16.♕xa6 ♘xa6 17.c3∞.

12.♖f1 ♘e4! 13.♘xe4 dxe4 14.♘g5!

14.♕xe4 ♕b6= is just equal.

14...♖f8!

White has too few pieces in the attack to cause any real harm, but Black must play some accurate moves.

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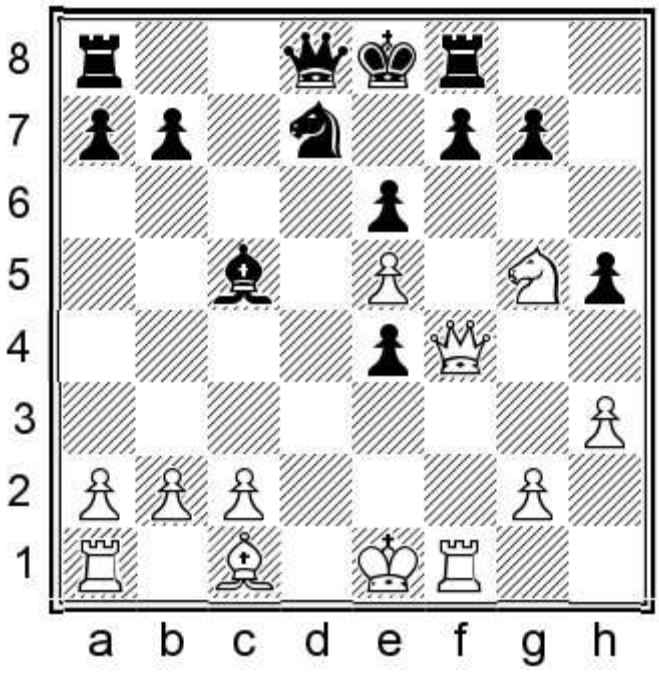

Position after: 14...♖f8!

15.♘h7

A) White has nothing better than a repetition after 15.♕xe4 ♕b6 since Black is about to castle his king into safety. 16.♘h7 ♖h8 17.♘g5 ♖f8=

B) 15.♗d2 ♕b6 16.♘h7 g5! Accurate play leads to an equal endgame: 17.♕xe4 ♕xb2 18.♔e2 ♖g8 19.♖ab1 ♕d4 20.♕xd4 ♗xd4 21.♖xb7 ♗xe5 22.♘xg5 f6 23.♘xe6 ♖xg2+ 24.♖f2 ♖xf2+ 25.♔xf2 ♖c8=

15...♘xe5!

This is an important move.

16.♘xf8 ♕d4!

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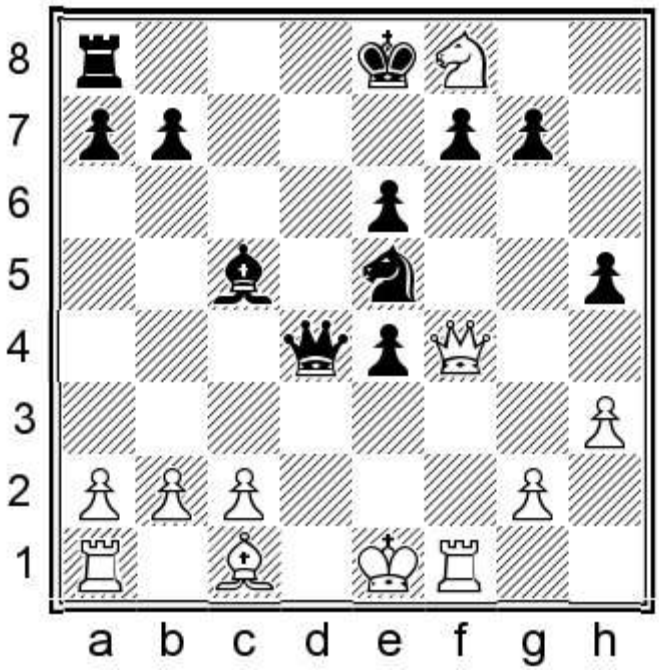


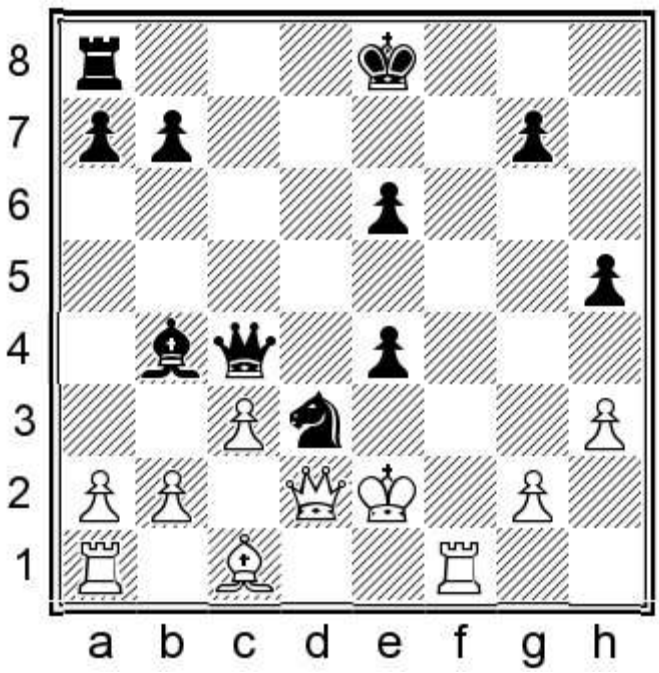
Position after: 16...♕d4!

White is now under pressure as ...♗b4 is a serious threat. As it often happens, the line ends with a perpetual check.

17.♘xe6 fxe6 18.♕d2

18.♕g5 ♖d8 19.♗f4 ♕b4+ 20.♔e2 ♕c4+ 21.♔e1 ♕b4+=

18...♗b4 19.c3 ♘d3+ 20.♔e2 ♕c4



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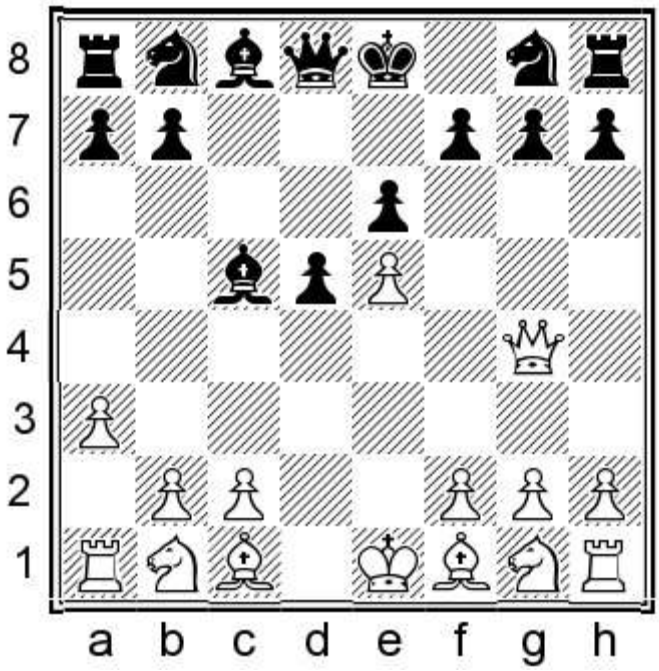
Position after: 20...♕c4

21.cxb4 0-0-0 22.♕c3 ♘xc1+ 23.♔e1 ♘d3+ 24.♔e2 ♘c1+=

b) 7...--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.♕g4!?



Position after: 6.♕g4!?

White intends to gain an initiative on the kingside by weakening Black's position. Similarly to the 5.♕g4 lines, Black must quickly activate his pieces and attack the center before White is able to develop a strong initiative.

6...♘e7 7.♘f3

Black can now choose from several plans. My recommendation is 7... 0-0, as it gives Black a comfortable position from which he can play for two results. We will cover this move in the next subchapter.

For now, let's examine the alternatives:

A) Taking the pawn immediately with 7.♕xg7 is rather harmless as the white queen finds itself trapped on g7. 7...♘g6 [7...♖g8N is also possible, avoiding the possibility of a quick draw: 8.♕xh7 ♘bc6∞.] 8.♗d3N [8.♘f3N 8...♗f8 9.♕f6 ♗e7 10.♕g7 ♘d7 11.♗b5 a6 12.♗xd7+ ♗xd7 13.0-0 ♕c7⩱] 8...♗f8 9.♕f6 ♗e7=

B) 7.b4 h5! An important move, forcing White to choose a square for the queen before moving the bishop from c5. 8.♕d1N [8.♕xg7 ♖g8 9.♕h6 ♗d4 10.♖a2 ♗xe5∓ was played in Fabig, H (2266) –

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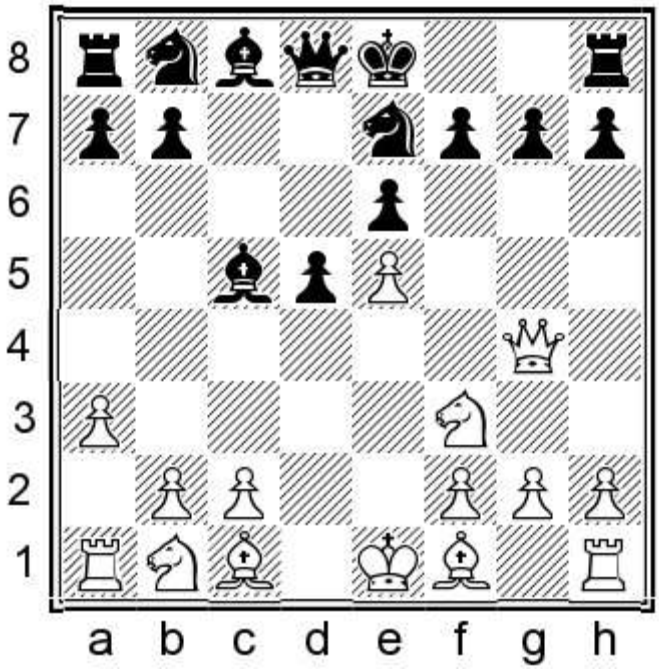
Baumgartner, U (2381) ICCF email 2016] 8...♗b6=



Position after: 7.♘f3

7...♕b6!?

Black forces White to give up the f2-pawn (and castling rights). In return, White gets a strong initiative and quick development. After this fighting move, White should obtain a slight edge with perfect play. Nevertheless, the more adventurous readers can give it a try since it leads to truly fascinating complications!

Before we proceed, let me explain why I am discarding other options.

A) 7...♘g6?! gives White too much time: 8.♗d3 0-0 9.0-0 ♘c6 10.♕h5!± Black's position is very unpleasant as ...f6 is no longer an option. White went on to win in Ilyasov, A (2395) – Dard, M (2251) ICCF email 2018.

B) 7...♘bc6 is probably the most natural continuation for Black. However, White's kingside initiative is annoying after 8.b4! ♗b6 9.♗d3 [White should refrain from taking the pawn since it only helps Black find counterplay: 9.♕xg7 ♖g8 10.♕xh7 ♕c7 11.♗b2 ♘d4! 12.♗d3 ♘xf3+ 13.gxf3 ♗d7 14.♘d2 0-0-0∞] 9...♘g6 10.♗b2 h5 11.♕g3 Without ...f6, Black's position is simply too passive. 11...♘ce7N [11...h4 12.♕g4 ♘ce7 was tried in Perske, T (2456) – Sebenik, M (2522) Radenci 2019, and White could have secured an edge with 13.♘c3N] 12.♕g5!±

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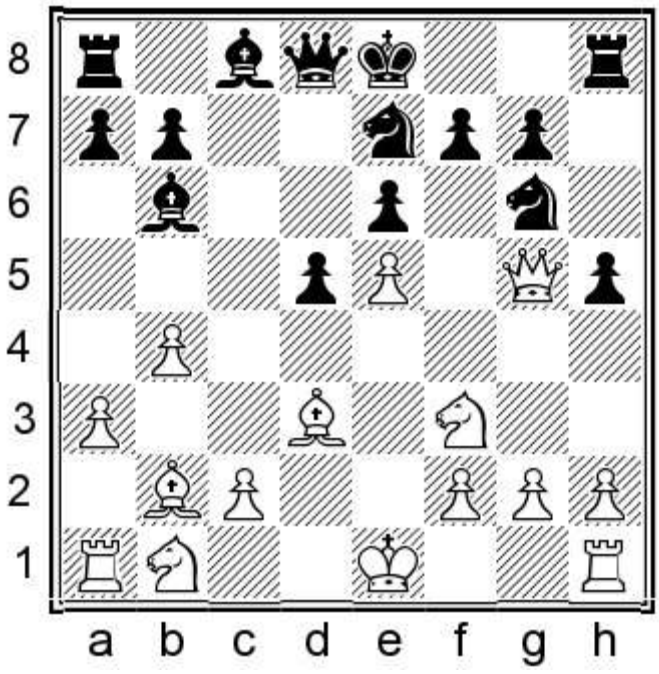


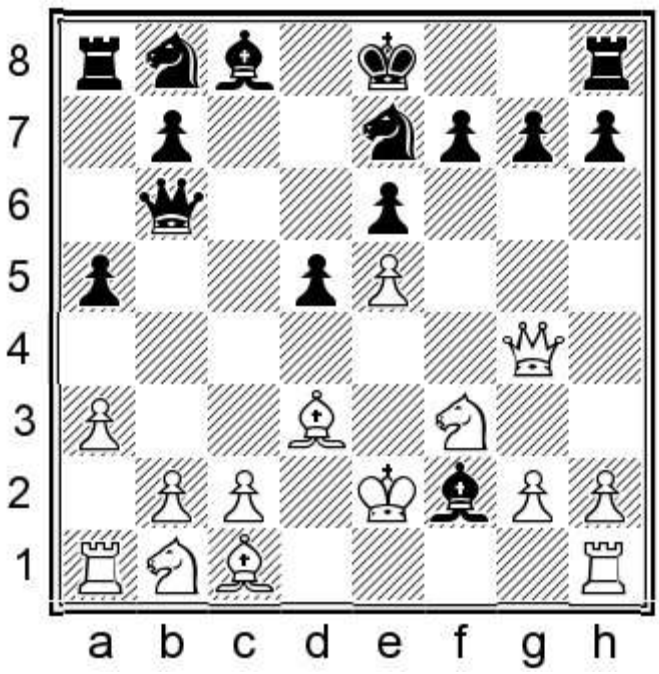
Position after: 12.♕g5!±

White anticipates ...♘f5 and Black is left without a plan.

8.♗d3

This is the point. The white king goes to e2 and White develops quickly.

8...♗xf2+ 9.♔e2 a5!



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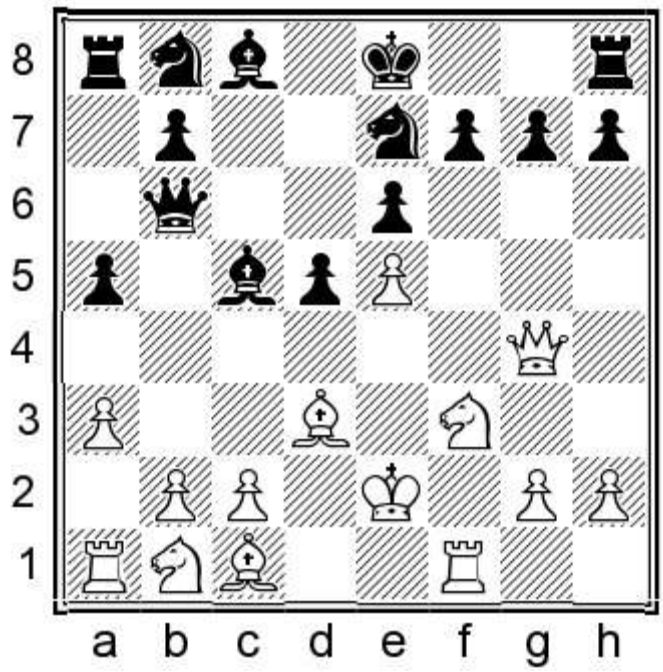
Position after: 9...a5!

White was threatening ♖f1 and b4 (winning the bishop) so Black's hand was forced. The alternative 9...♘bc6? simply does not work: 10.♖f1 ♗d4 [10...♘d4+ 11.♘xd4 ♗xd4 12.♕xg7 ♖g8 13.♕xf7+ ♔d8 14.♗h6+–] 11.c3 ♘xe5 12.♕xd4 ♘xd3 13.♕xd3±.

10.♘c3!

The romantic approach is best! White is not bothered by the f2-bishop and simply continues his development. Now, when ♖f1 does come, it will be even stronger.

On that note, 10.♖f1 is not as accurate. White can insert the pair of moves ♖f1, ...♗c5 at any time and should keep the bishop on f2 to restrict Black's options. 10...♗c5



Position after: 10...♗c5

A) 11.♕xg7 ♖g8 12.♕xh7 ♗d7 13.♘g5 Black must give up the f7-pawn, but White loses time taking it, and Black can start an attack against the White king. [13.♘c3 ♘a6 transposes to line b) below.] 13...♘bc6 14.♘xf7 [14.♕xf7+ ♔d8 15.♕f6 ♘d4+ 16.♔d1 ♗b5! 17.♗xb5 ♕xb5 18.♘c3 ♕a6∞ Black's king is quite safe so it is White who must be on higher alert.] 14...♘d4+ 15.♔d1 ♗b5 16.♘d6+ ♔d7∞ This position is extremely unclear, but it too seems a lot more frightening from White's perspective.

B) 11.♘c3 ♗d7

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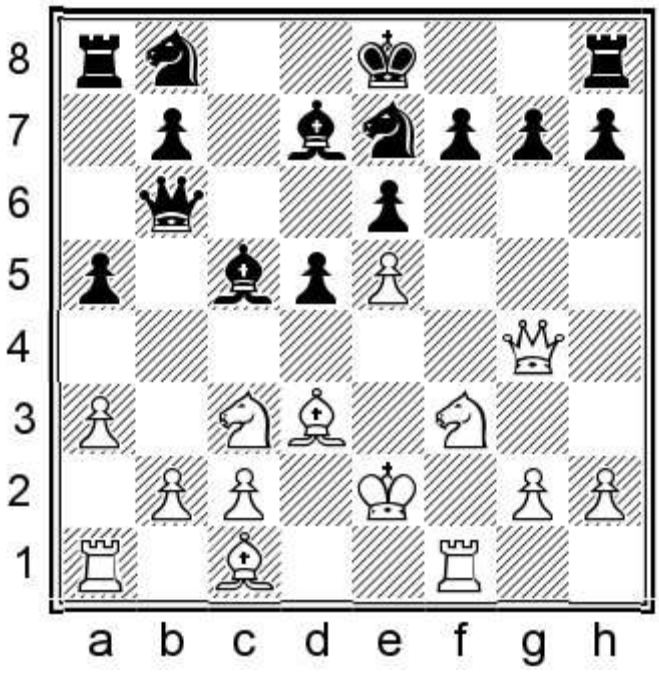
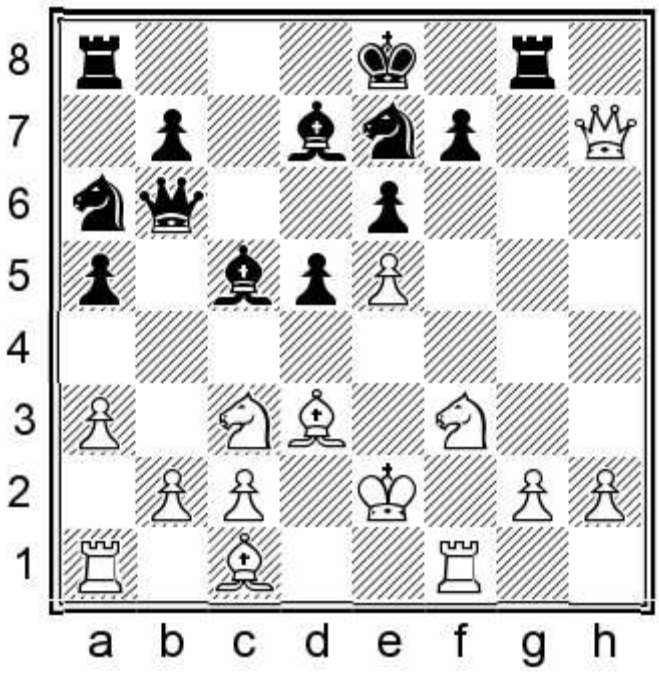


Position after: 11...♗d7

B1) White can delay taking on g7 once more with 12.♗d2 but Black can play the extremely cool 12...a4!, preventing b4. 13.♕xg7 [13.♘g5 ♘f5 14.♘xd5 exd5 15.♗xf5 ♗b5+ 16.♗d3 ♗xd3+ 17.cxd3 0-0=] 13...♖g8 14.♕xh7 ♖xg2+ 15.♔d1 ♗e3 16.♗e1 ♘bc6 17.♘h4 ♖g4 18.♕xf7+ ♔d8 19.♘f3 ♕xb2 20.♖b1 ♕xa3∞ We have reached a very chaotic position. There is no need to analyze it further, however, and I will rely on the computer's "0.00" evaluation.

B2) 12.♕xg7 ♖g8 13.♕xh7 ♘a6



Position after: 13...♘a6

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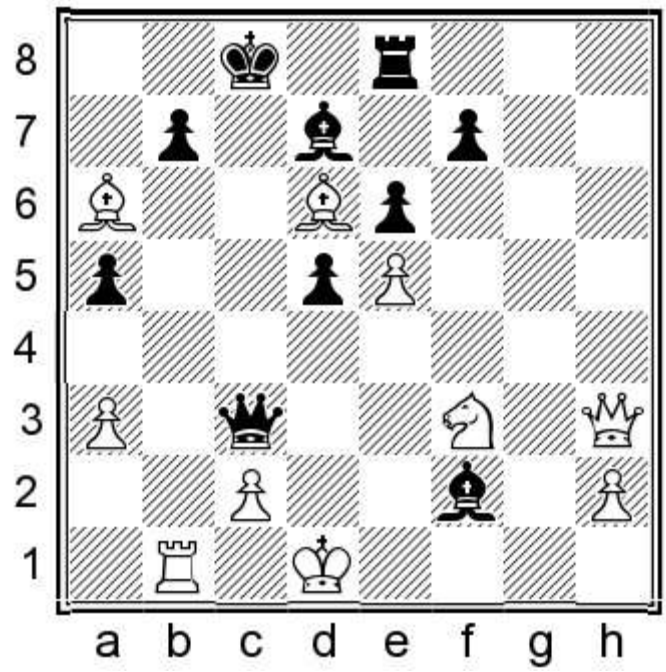
This position is also messy, but the general assessment is quite simple: Black has excellent compensation for the pawn. The position resembles certain variations of the Winawer French where Black gives up the g7 and h7 pawns to generate a dangerous initiative through the center. Even though the engines suggest that the position is balanced, I prefer Black in a practical game since White will have to withstand an enduring initiative. 14.g4!? This leads to some impressive tactical fireworks. [14.♘g5 0-0-0 15.♖xf7 ♖h8 16.♕g7 ♖dg8 17.♕f6 ♖xh2 18.♖f8+ ♖xf8 19.♕xf8+ ♔c7∞; 14.♗g5 0-0-0 15.♖ab1 ♖h8 16.♕g7 ♖dg8 17.♕f6 d4 18.♘e4 ♘d5 19.♕xf7 ♖f8=; 14.♕h3 0-0-0 15.♗g5 ♔b8 16.♖ab1 ♖c8! 17.g4 ♗c6!∞ Black is ready to play ...d4 and his initiative continues.] 14...♖xg4 15.♗g5 ♖g2+! 16.♔d1 0-0-0 17.♕h3 ♖f2 18.♖xf2 ♗xf2 19.♗xe7 ♖e8 20.♗d6 ♕xb2 21.♖b1 ♕xc3 22.♗xa6



Position after: 22.♗xa6

22...♗a4!! This is one of several flashy lines which highlight the double-edged character of the position. 23.♔e2 ♕e3+ 24.♔f1 ♗xc2 25.♕h5 ♖g8 26.♖xb7 ♗d3+ 27.♗xd3 ♕xd3+ 28.♔xf2 ♕c2+=

10...♗d7

This move is necessary to prevent ♘a4. 10...♘bc6? 11.♖f1 ♗d4 12.♘a4 ♕a7 13.c3 ♗b6 [13...♘xe5 14.♗b5+ ♗d7 15.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 16.cxd4+–] 14.b4 ♘g6 15.b5 ♘ce7 16.♕h5!→

11.♕xg7 ♖g8 12.♕f6!

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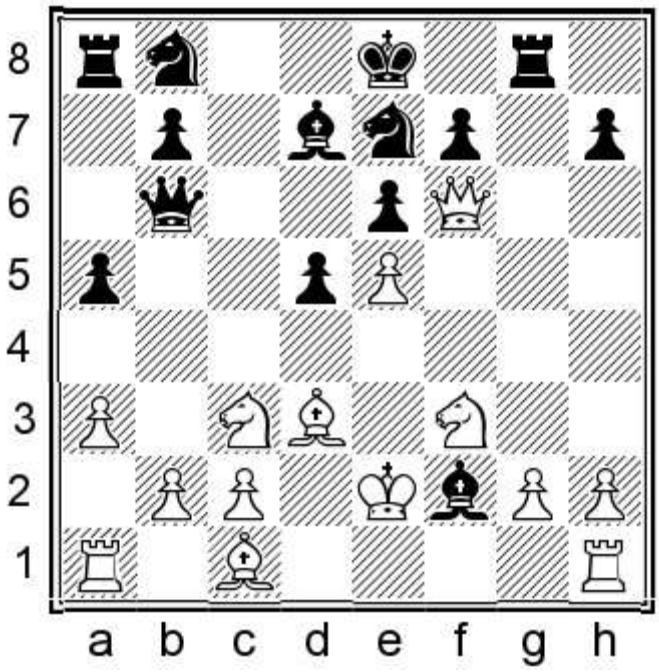

Position after: 12.♕f6!

Since Black's dark-squared bishop is still on f2, White can retreat the queen to f6. This way, he keeps the queen in the attack.

12...♘bc6

12...♗c5 is met by 13.♗g5! and White's attack is too strong. 13...♖g6!? is a wonderful resource, but it fails to [13...h6 14.♕xh6 ♘bc6 15.♖ae1±; 13...♘g6 loses to 14.b4! ♗e7 15.♘xd5!+–] 14.♗xg6 ♘xg6 15.♖hf1! ♘c6 16.♘h4! ♘gxe5 17.♖ad1!→ with a crushing attack.

13.♘a4 ♕a7 14.g3 0-0-0 15.♖f1

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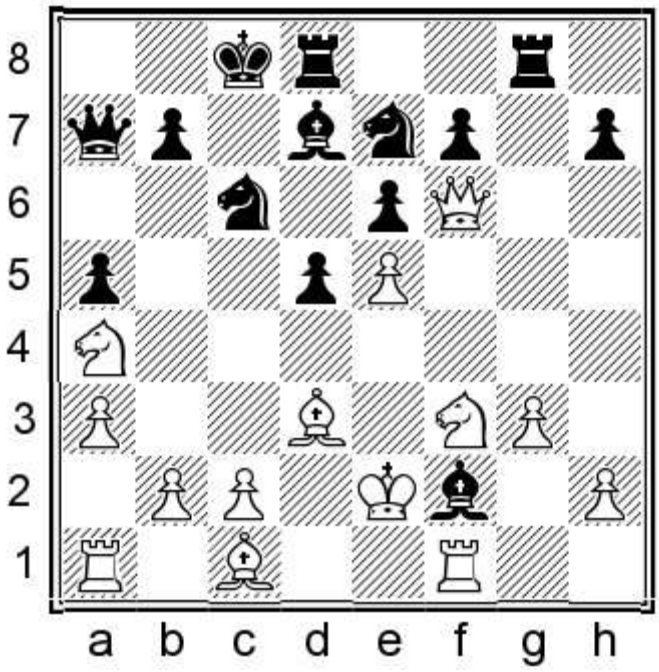

Position after: 15.♖fl

White finally forces Black's bishop out of the way, and Black's queen will be locked out of the game after it retreats.

15...♗b6

15...♘d4+ 16.♔xf2 ♘df5+ 17.♔g2 ♗xa4 18.♘h4 d4 19.♘xf5 ♘xf5 20.♖xf5 exf5 21.♗f4 ♕c5 22.♕xf5+ ♗d7 23.♕xf7 ♖df8 24.♕c4 ♕xc4 25.♗xc4 ♖g6 26.♔f3±

16.♘c3!

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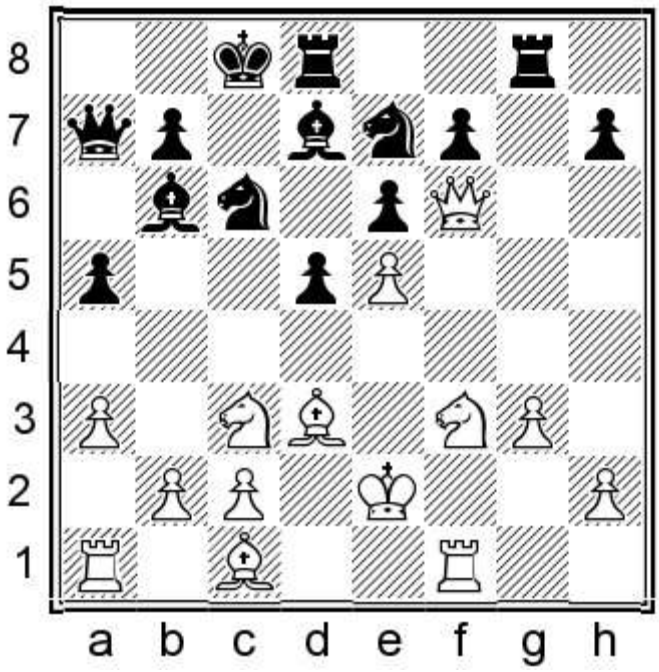

Position after: 16.♘c3!

The knight will come to b5, gaining another tempo off the enemy queen. Both sides have equal material, but White has successfully ousted Black's pieces from his position and Black is unable to properly organize his forces.

16...♘f5

16...♗c7 17.♘b5 ♕b6 18.♗f4±

17.♘b5 ♘cd4+ 18.♘fxd4 ♘xd4+ 19.♘xd4 ♗xd4 20.♖b1! h5 21.b4! axb4 22.♖xb4 ♗c5 23.♖h4±

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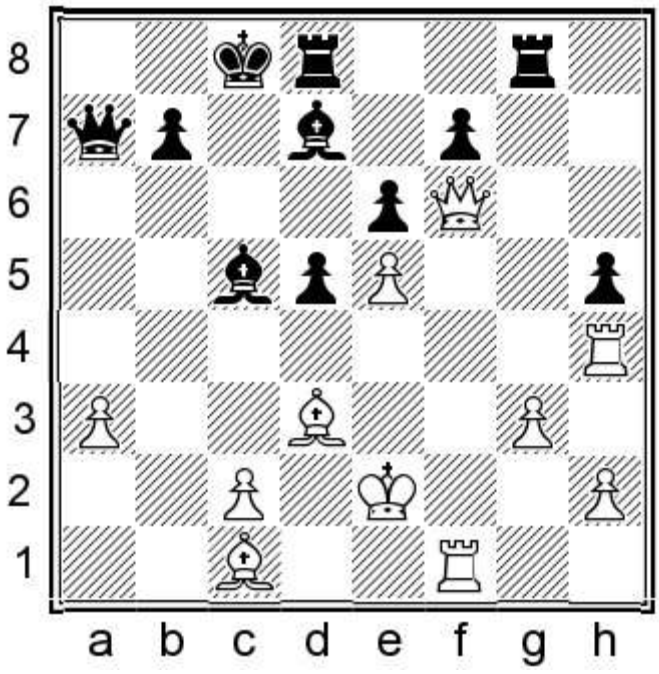
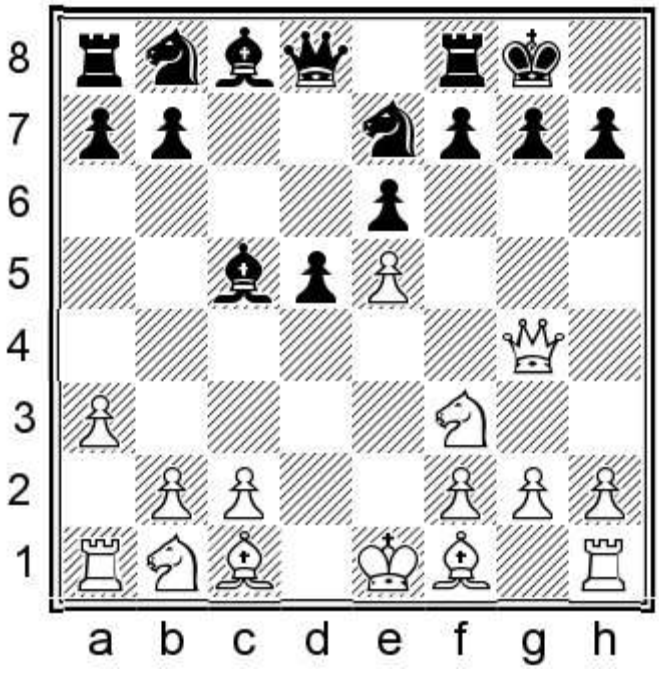


Position after: 23.♖h4±

c) 7...0-0 8.b4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.♕g4!? ♘e7 7.♘f3 0-0!



Position after: 7...0-0!

Black castles into White's initiative! This move is playable because Black intends to react in the center by playing ...f6.

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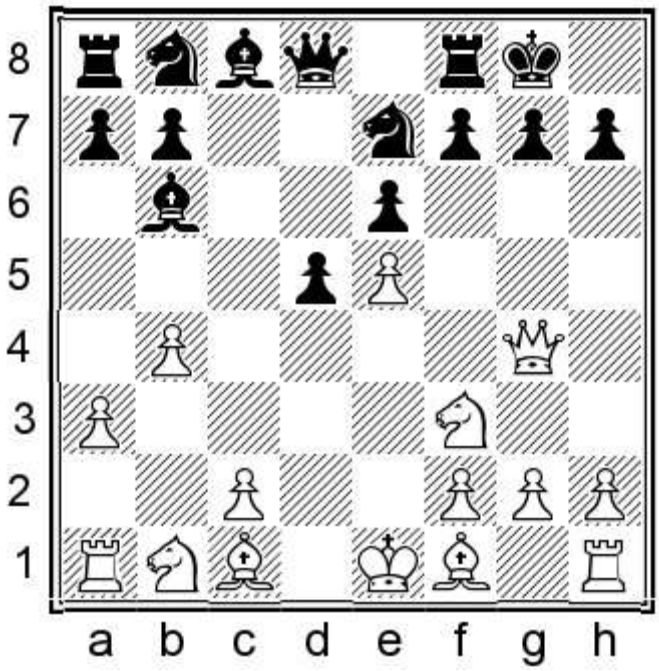
Although 7...♕b6 is worth a shot (since White needs to be very well-prepared to see out Black's initiative), the text move is my main recommendation because it offers Black a sound and solid game.

8.b4

The main move is 8.♗d3 (see the next subchapter), but White can also develop his dark-squared bishop first, to pressure the f6-square and deter ...f5.

8...♗b6



Position after: 8...♗b6

9.♗b2

White continues with his plan to prevent ...f6, but it is not effective: Black will eventually break through the center anyway and overpower White to seize the initiative.

9.♗d3 is rather inconsistent and should be met by 9...♘g6.

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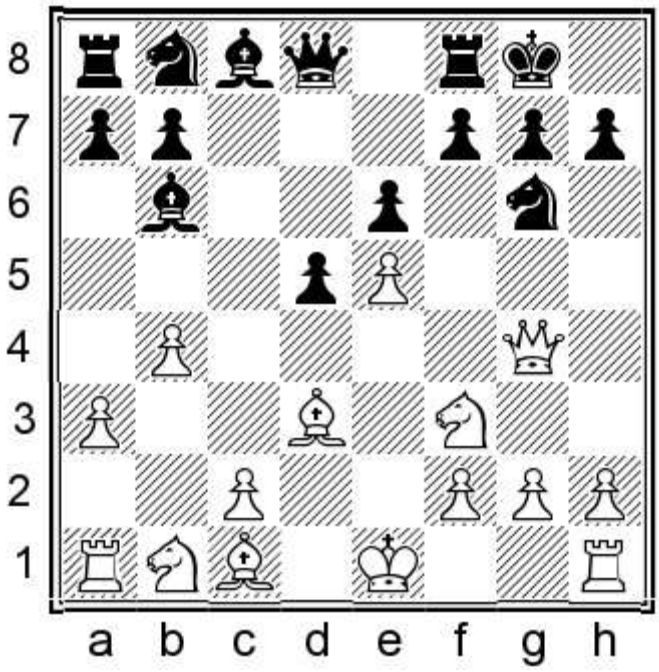
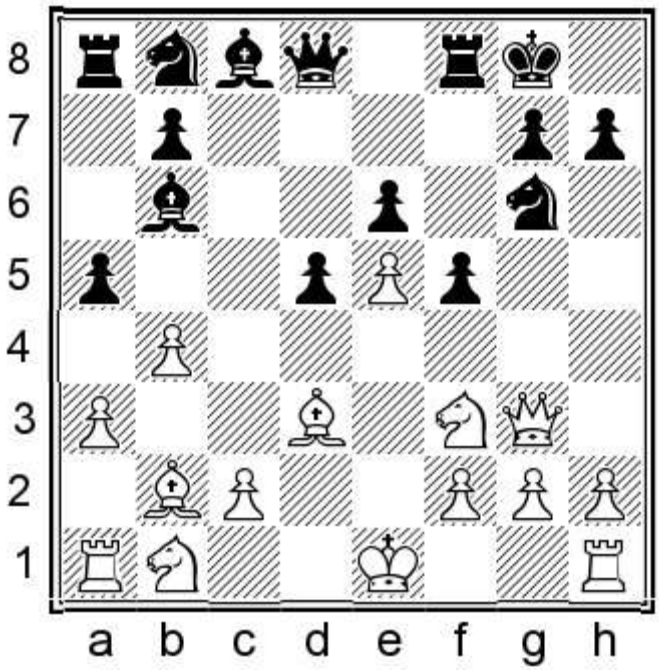


Position after: 9...♘g6

[Since 9...f5?!N 10.exf6 ♖xf6 11.♕h5 h6 12.0-0± gives White a comfortable edge as Black has no counterplay.]

A) 10.♗b2 is harmless since it does not prevent ...f5: 10...f5!

A1) 11.♕g3 a5



Position after: 11...a5

12.0-0 [12.h4N attempts to drive Black's knight away from g6 but the knight will reappear in the

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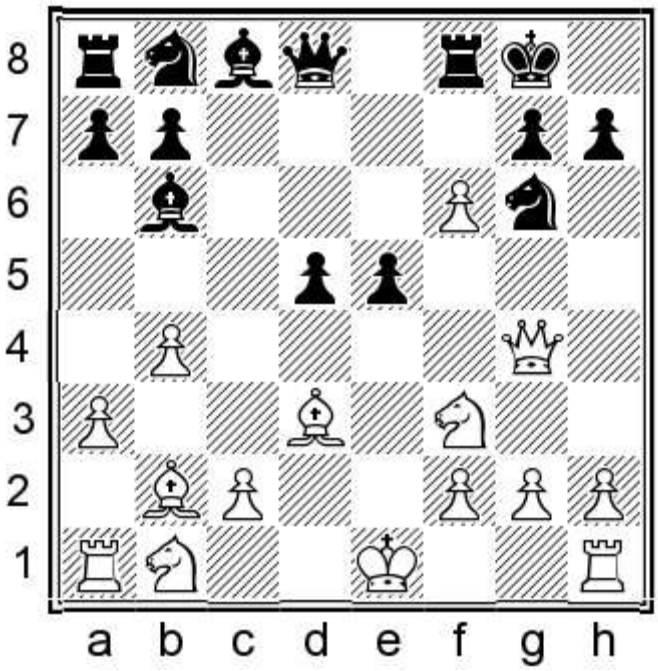
center via h8: 12...axb4 13.axb4 ♖xa1 14.♗xa1 ♕e7 15.♗c3 ♘c6 16.h5 ♘h8=] 12...axb4 13.axb4 ♖xa1 14.♗xa1 ♘a6 15.c3 ♗d7= gave Black an excellent position in Neuschmied, S (2282) – Hoefelsauer, T (2380) Bayern 2018.

A2) 11.exf6 This is the critical move since White cannot justify letting Black play ...f5 for free. 11...e5!



Position after: 11...e5!

The point. Black strikes in the center and uses the precarious position of White's pieces to generate a dangerous initiative in the center. 12.♕h5 e4! 13.♘g5 [13.♗xe4N is also possible, but it is an admission that White is the one playing for the draw. Indeed, he succeeds in forcing a draw with 13...dxe4 14.♘g5 ♗xf2+ 15.♔xf2 ♖xf6+ 16.♗xf6 ♕xf6+ 17.♔e1 h6 18.♘xe4 ♕xa1 19.♕xg6 ♕xb1+ 20.♔d2 ♕b2 21.♕e8+ ♔h7 22.♘g5+ hxg5 23.♕h5+=.] 13...♗xf2+!

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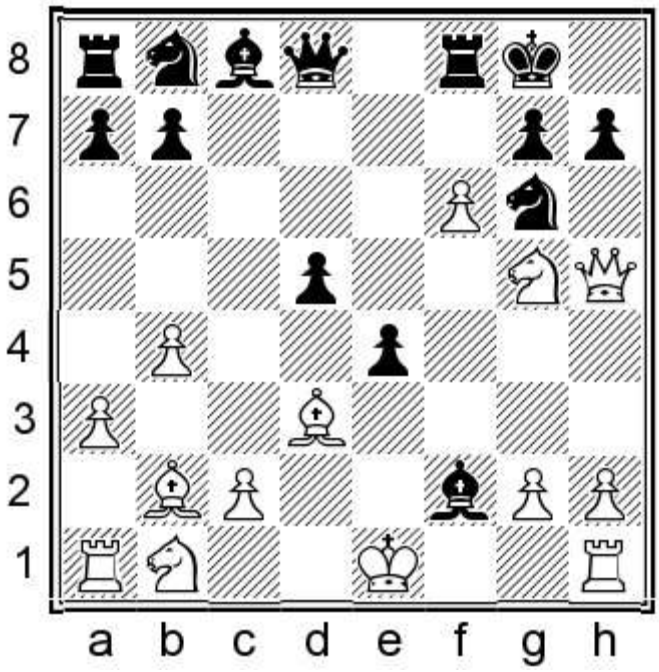
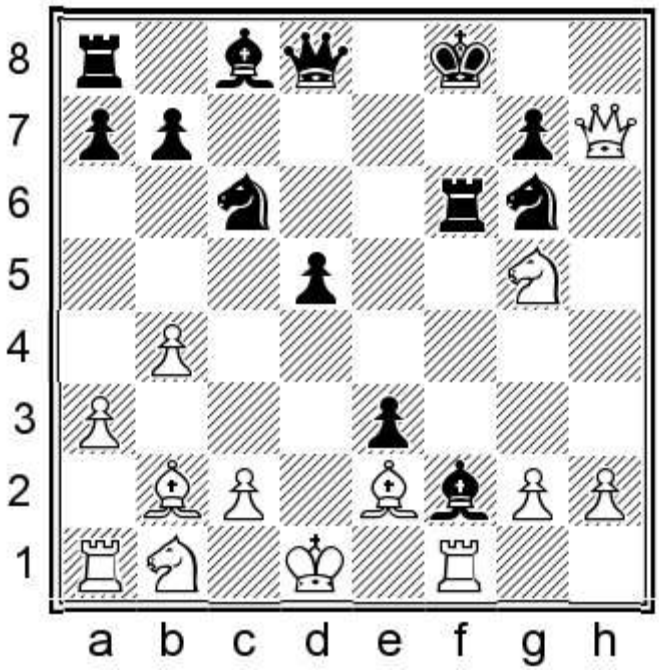


Position after: 13...♗xf2+!

Black cannot let White shelter his king. [13...♖xf6N is playable but it does not solve Black's problems as White is in time to castle and turbo-charge his attack: 14.♕xh7+ ♔f8 15.0-0! exd3 16.♗xf6 ♕xf6 17.♕h5!± with strong pressure.] 14.♔d1 [14.♔xf2N 14...♖xf6+ 15.♗xf6 ♕xf6+ 16.♔e1 exd3 17.♕xh7+ ♔f8 18.♖f1 ♗f5 19.♕h5 ♔g8∞ White can decline the repetition if he likes, but it is not clear whether this would be healthy since his own king is rather unsafe here.] 14...♖xf6 15.♕xh7+ ♔f8 16.♗e2 ♘c6 17.♖f1 e3∞



Position after: 17...e3∞

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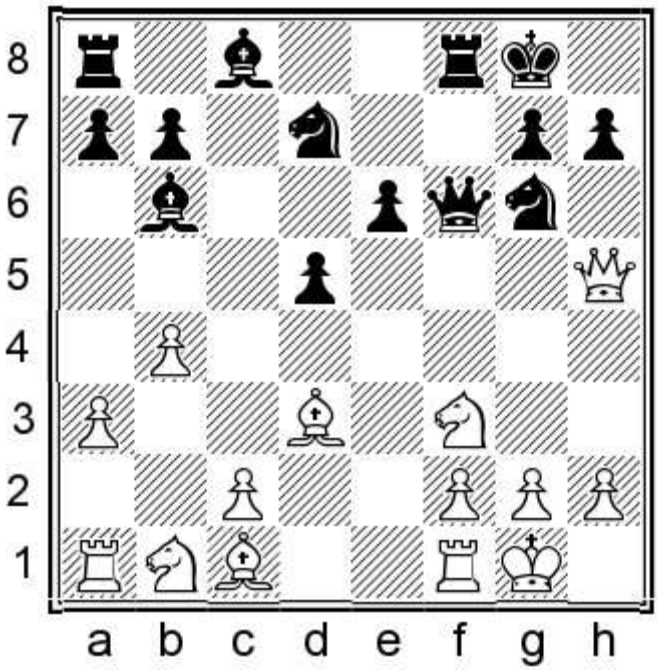
The position is extremely unclear and unorthodox. However, Black's moves seem rather natural to me whereas White needs to find some very clever ideas to maintain the balance. In the game Nemeth, M (2488) – Doric, D (2467) Mali Losinj 2019, White resigned after only nine more moves: 18.h4 d4! 19.h5 ♕d5 20.hxg6 ♕xg5 21.♕h8+ ♔e7 22.♕xg7+ ♔d6 23.♘c3 dxc3 24.♗xc3 ♖xg6 25.♕f8+ ♔c7 26.b5 ♕d8+.

B) 10.0-0 f5! Black must open the center, or he will drift into a passive position. 11.exf6 [11.♕g3 a5!= gave Black an excellent game in Azarov, S (2589) – Melkumyan, H (2661) Greensboro 2019.] 11...♕xf6 12.♕h5 ♘d7! The knight heads to the kingside to help in the defense. [It's worth noting that 12...♕xa1? simply loses to 13.♘g5!+–.]



Position after: 12...♘d7!

B1) 13.♘g5 leads to a picturesque draw: 13...h6 14.♗xg6 ♕xa1 15.♗f7+ ♔h8 16.♘xe6 ♘f6 17.♘xf8 ♘xh5 18.♘g6+ ♔h7 19.♘f8+=.

B2) 13.c3N is another way to defend the a1-rook, but it does not make a difference: 13...♕f7 14.♘g5 [14.♘bd2 ♗c7 15.♗xg6 ♕xg6 16.♕xg6 hxg6=] 14...♘f6! 15.♘xf7 ♘xh5 16.♗xg6 hxg6 17.♘e5 a5! ⇄ Black uses his superior piece activity to generate dynamic play and overshadow his structural weaknesses.

B3) 13.♖a2 ♕f7 14.c4 [14.♘g5N is met by 14...♘f6 and the resulting endgame is equal. 15.♘xf7 ♘xh5 16.♗xg6 hxg6 17.♘e5 ♘f4=] 14...dxc4 15.♗xg6 ♕xg6 16.♕xg6 hxg6 17.♘bd2 c3 18.♘e4 ♘f6 19.♘xc3 ♗d7 20.♖d2 a5= This position was reached in both Savic, M (2503) – Sedlak, N (2583) Tuzla 2019 and Pugh, J (2473) – Martin Molinero, R (2419) ICCF email 2016.

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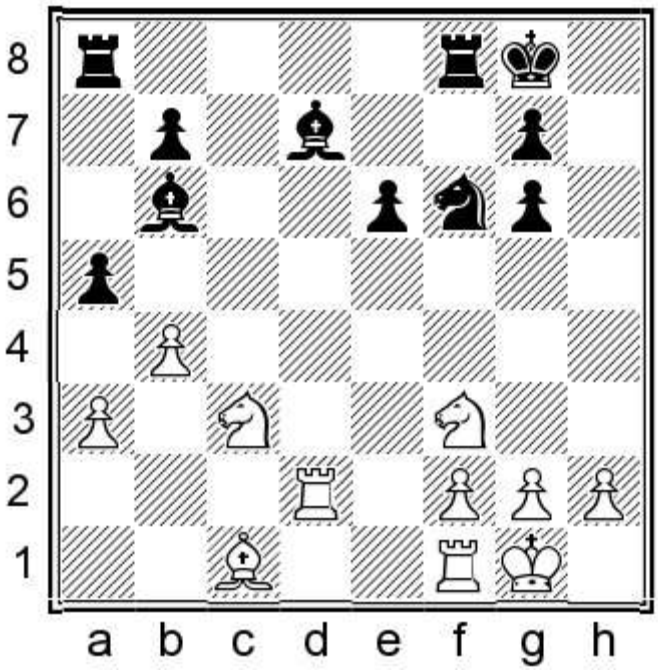
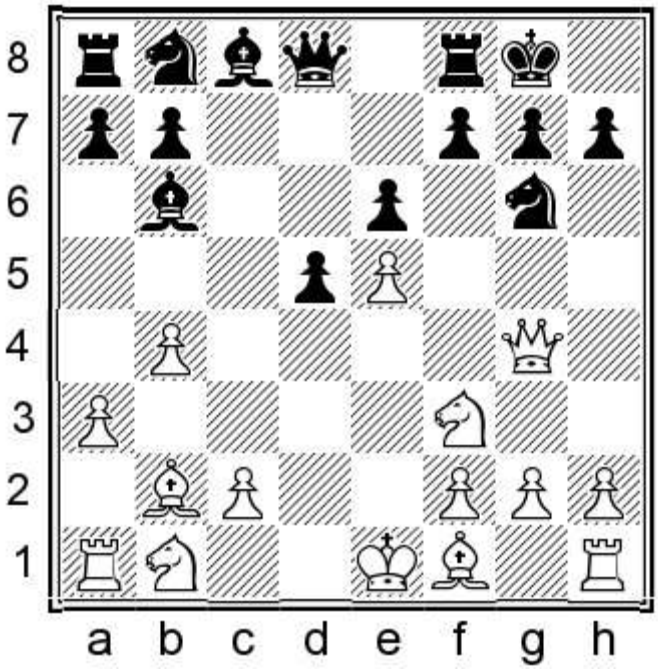


Position after: 20...a5=

The position is equal despite the slight imbalance, and both games indeed ended in a draw.

9...♘g6



Position after: 9...♘g6

10.h4!?N

This is White's most principled continuation. He seeks to prevent ...f6 and displace Black's g6-knight.

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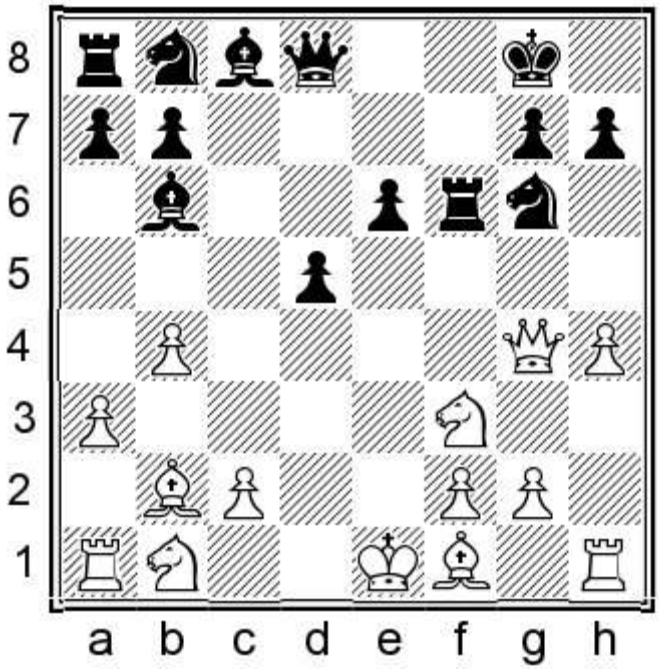
However, Black is still in time to strike!

10.♗d3 would transpose to the line we covered under 9.♗d3 ♘g6 10.♗b2.

10...f6!

10...f5?! would actually be imprecise since White can keep his position intact with 11.♕g3!±.

11.exf6 ♖xf6!



Position after: 11...♖xf6!

This is Black's idea. White can take an exchange but Black will have complete control over the dark squares and will be able to attack White's king through the center and with his better developed pieces.

11...e5 is also interesting, but Black fails to equalize: 12.♕g3 ♕xf6 13.♘c3 ♗e6 14.0-0-0 ♘f4 15.♘a4! d4 16.♘xb6 axb6 17.♕g5±.

12.♗xf6

A) 12.h5 ♖f4! Black defends by attacking White's queen. 13.♕g3 ♗c7! 14.♕g5 ♕xg5 15.♘xg5 ♘e5 16.h6 [Black's initiative continues into the endgame, as the following line demonstrates: 16.g3 ♖g4 17.♘h3 ♘c4 18.♗e2 e5!∓] 16...♖f5!

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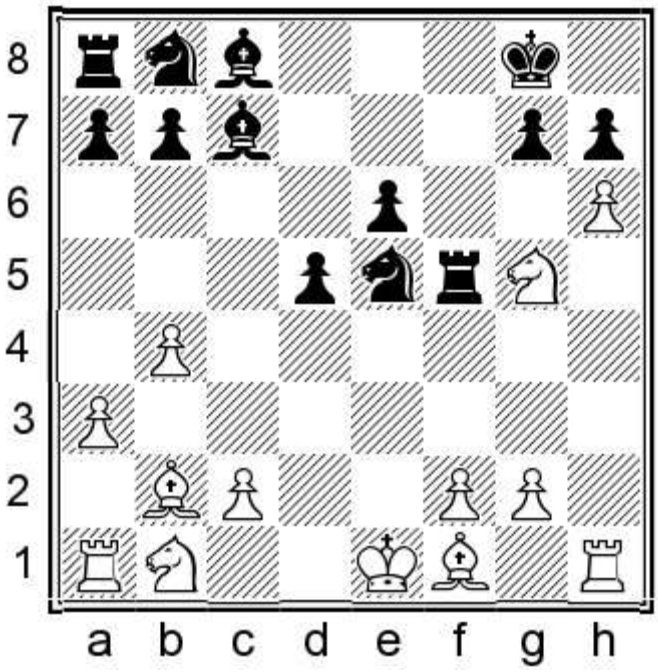
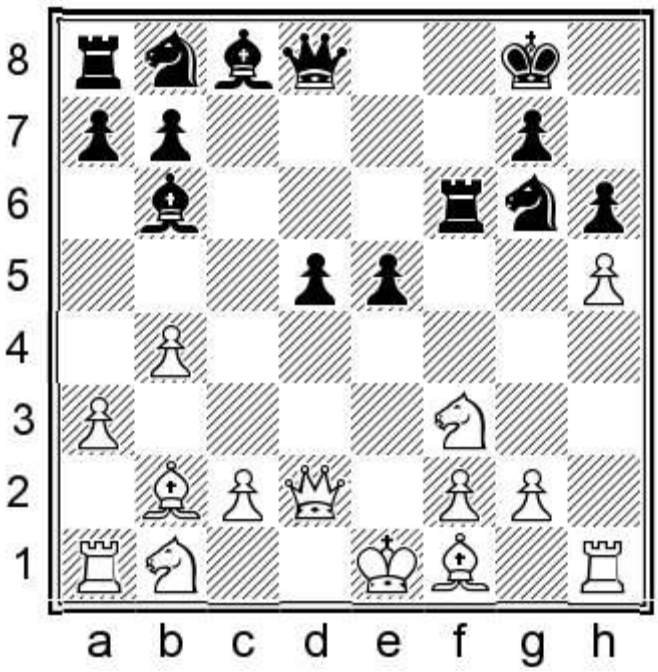


Position after: 16...♖f5!

17.♘xh7 [17.f4 ♖xf4 18.hxg7 ♘bc6∞] 17...♔xh7 18.hxg7+ ♔xg7 19.♗d3 ♖f7 20.f4 ♘bd7 21.fxe5 ♗xe5 22.♘c3 a5! 23.0-0-0 axb4 24.axb4 ♖f4!= Black's e5-bishop will come to f6 and the b4-pawn will fall. Just like in many of the lines we have seen, we must stop analyzing even though the position is still quite unclear.

B) 12.♕g5 e5!

B1) 13.h5 h6 14.♕d2



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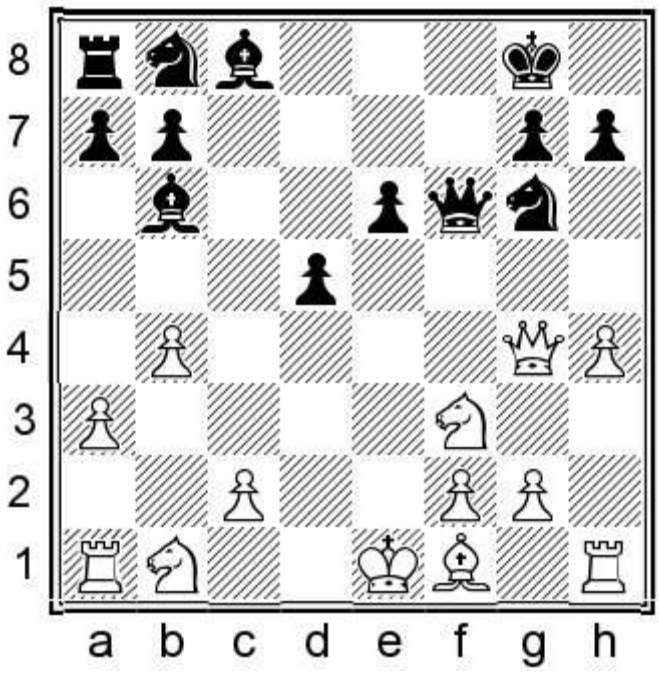
Position after: 14.♕d2

14...♘h4!! This variation never stops presenting beautiful tactical ideas. While it's a joy to analyze, it requires painstaking calculation to play it over the board. 15.♖xh4 [15.♘xh4? ♗xf2+ 16.♔e2 ♘c6–+] 15...♖xf3 16.gxf3 ♕xh4∞

B2) 13.♘c3 ♘c6 14.0-0-0 h6 15.♕d2 ♘d4! 16.h5 ♘e7∞

C) 12.♘c3 ♘c6 13.0-0-0 a5! Black must attack White's king no matter what, or White will have time to develop a dangerous attack on the kingside. 14.b5 ♘ce5 15.♘xe5 ♘xe5 16.♕g3 ♘d7! 17.f3 ♗c7 18.♕f2 ♘b6∞

12...♕xf6



Position after: 12...♕xf6

13.♖a2

13.c3 a5! Black should be relentless in his initiative to prevent White from consolidating. 14.h5 [14.bxa5 ♗xa5 15.♕d4 ♘d7 16.h5 ♘e7 17.♕xf6 ♘xf6⩲ Black has excellent compensation in this endgame due to White's lack of coordination.] 14...♘e7 15.h6 e5! 16.♕xg7+ ♕xg7 17.hxg7 axb4 18.cxb4 e4 19.♘g5 ♘bc6 20.♖a2 ♗f5 21.g4 ♗g6 22.♘c3 ♘d4⩲ Once again, it's time to stop analyzing. When evaluating this position, it is quite clear that's White extra exchange will not be particularly relevant, at least in the short-term, since Black's well-coordinated minor pieces rule the board.

13...a5 14.b5 ♘d7 15.♕g5 ♕f7!

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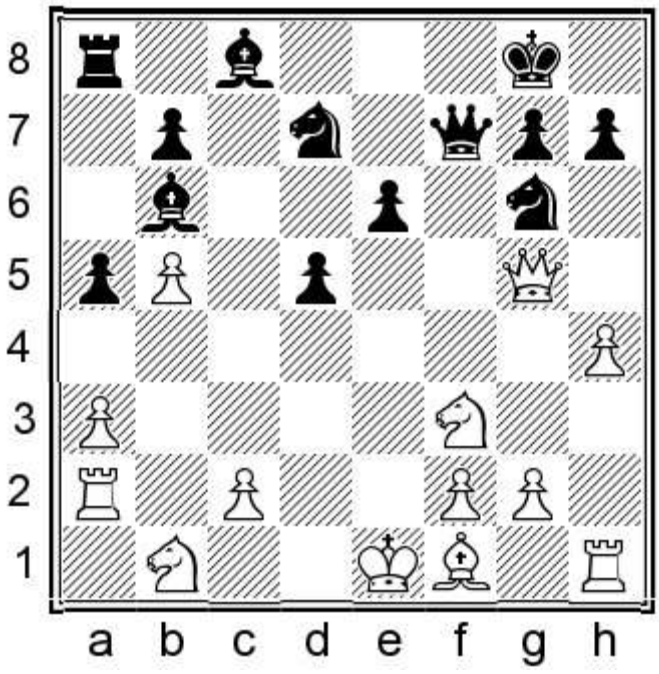


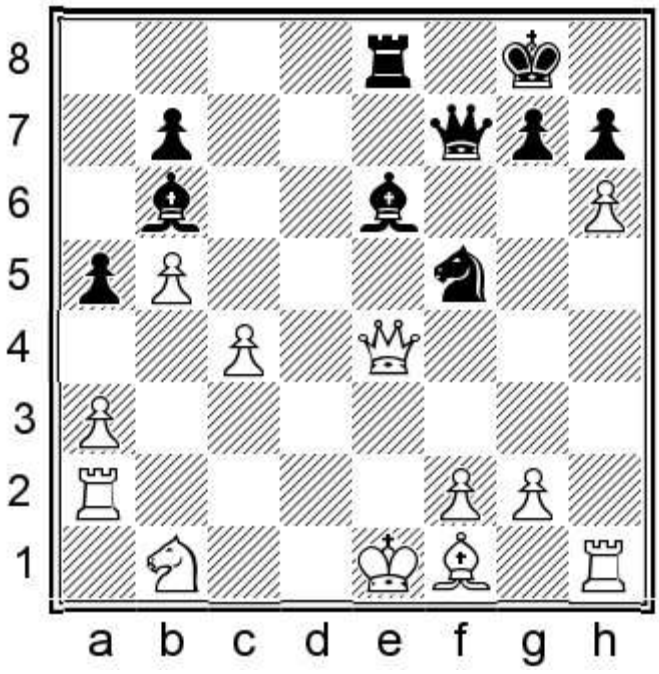
Position after: 15...♕f7!

Black keeps the queens on the board to maintain his initiative.

16.h5 ♘e7 17.h6

17.c4 h6 18.♕g3 e5 19.cxd5 e4 20.♘fd2 ♘f6∞

17...e5 18.c4 e4 19.♘e5 ♘xe5 20.♕xe5 ♘f5 21.♕xd5 ♗e6 22.♕xe4 ♖e8⩲



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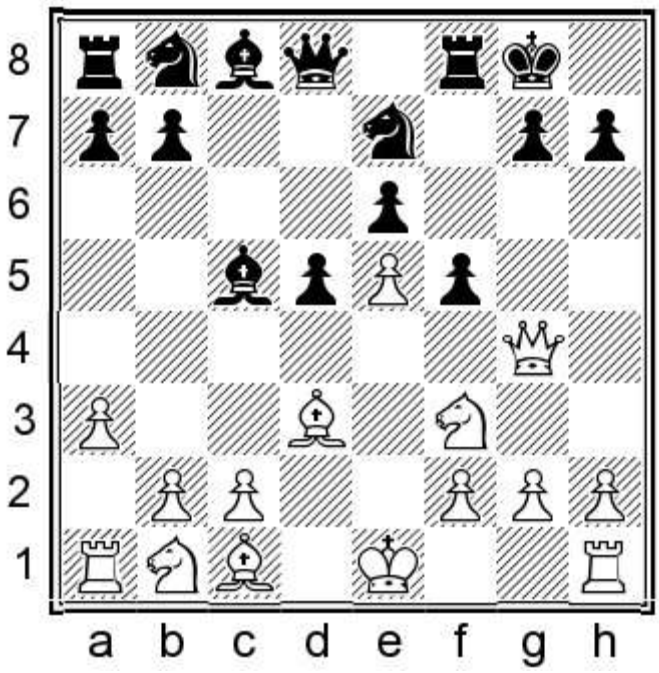
Position after: 22...♖e8♾

Although the computer gives an ice-cold «0.00», the position is certainly more appealing to Black.

d) 7...0-0 8.♗d3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♗xc5 6.♕g4!? ♘e7 7.♘f3 0-0! 8.♗d3 f5!



Position after: 8...f5!

9.exf6

9.♕g3 was played in Tari, A (2615) – Sadzikowski, D (2523) Reykjavik 2019. Black should continue with 9...♘g6!N [9...♘bc6 was played in that game, but the text move is more precise as the b8-knight will stand better on d7.] 10.0-0 [10.b4 ♗e7 11.♗b2 a5 12.b5 ♘d7=] 10...♘d7

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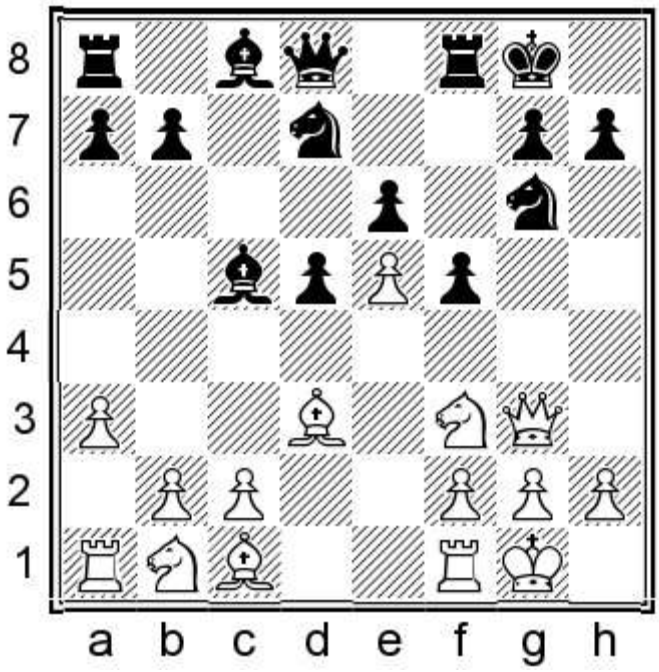
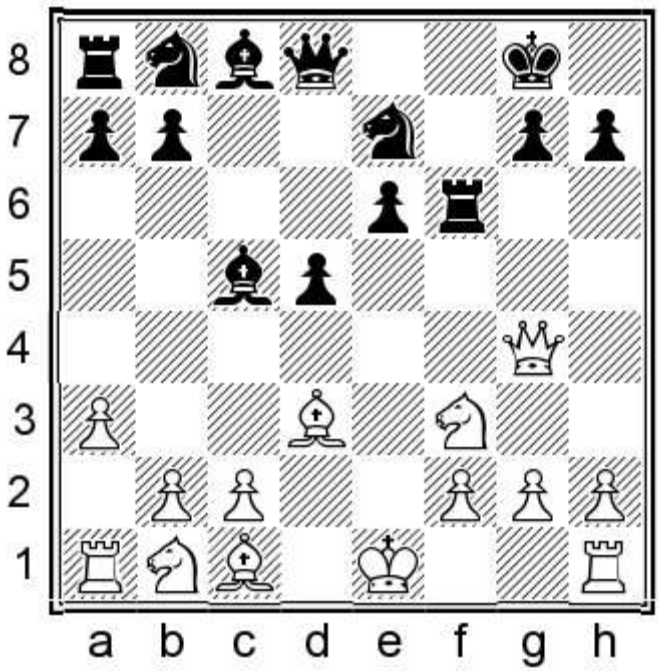


Position after: 10...♘d7

11.♘bd2 [11.♘c3 ♗b6! The bishop is re-routed to c7 to pressure White's e5-pawn. 12.b4 ♗c7 13.♖e1 ♘f6!∓ The knight will come to e4 with devastating effect.; 11.b4 ♗e7 12.♘c3 d4! 13.♘e2 ♘dxe5 14.♘xe5 ♗h4! 15.♕h3 ♘xe5 16.♗b2 ♘xd3 17.♕xd3 e5∓] 11...a5 12.♘b3 ♗b6 13.a4 ♗c7 14.♖e1 ♘f6 15.h4 ♘e4 16.♕h2 ♘e7 17.♗e3 ♘c6= Both of Black's knights are now on their ideal squares and Black has an outstanding position.

9...♖xf6



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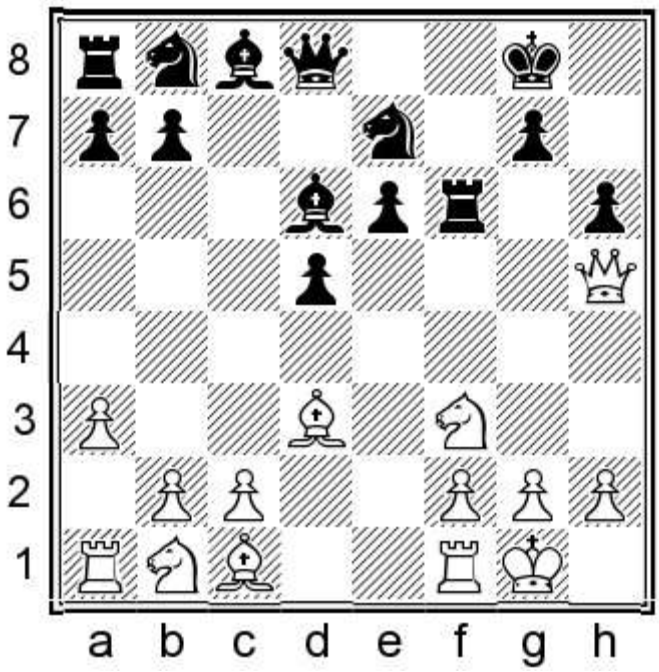
Position after: 9...♖xf6

10.♕h5!?N

A) 10.♕h4 h6∓ was played in Karjakin, S (2754) – Wei, Y (2725) Jerusalem 2019 but the queen is better placed on h5.

B) 10.♗g5N is met by 10...e5! 11.♕h4 e4 12.♗xf6 gxf6∞ and Black will have two pieces for the rook and an excellent position.

10...h6 11.0-0 ♗d6!



Position after: 11...♗d6!

11...♘bc6? is imprecise since the knight should go to d7 when White plays b4. 12.b4 e5 13.♗b2!±

12.c4

A) 12.♗d2 ♘d7! 13.♗c3 ♖f4 14.♘bd2 ♘c5= Ilyasov, A (2385) – Zajsek, F (2381) email 2018

B) 12.b4N 12...♘d7! As I just mentioned, the knight is better placed on d7 than on c6. The same idea also arises in the 5.♘f3 ♗xc5 6.♗d3 ♘e7 7.0-0 ♘g6 8.a3 variation, as I discuss in great detail in chapter 3. 13.c4 a5! 14.♗b2 axb4 15.axb4 ♖xa1 16.♗xa1 ♖f4 17.c5 ♗b8 18.♘bd2 ♕f8! 19.♘d4 ♘xc5! This is the beauty of the variation: Black is always in a position to play some fancy tactics. 20.bxc5 e5!⩲

12...♘bc6 13.♘c3

13.b4 is now misguided as Black is in time to expand in the center: 13...e5!∞

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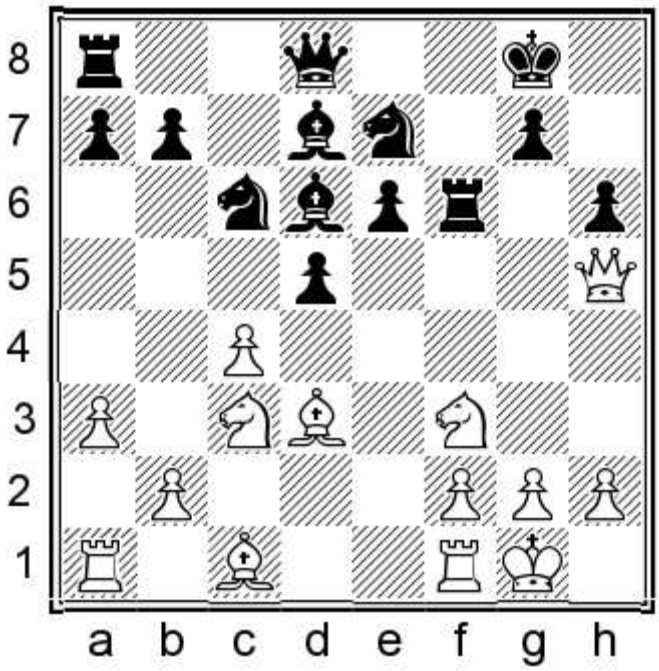
13...♗d7



Position after: 13...♗d7

Black is threatening to play ...♗e8 and chase the white queen around the board with ...♗d7 after the queen retreats to h3 or g4.

White has a few options to prevent a repetition, but Black's active position gives him excellent chances.

14.♗e3

A) 14.♖e1 ♗e8 15.♕g4 ♗d7=

B) 14.♗d2 ♗e8 15.♕g4 ♗d7=

C) 14.cxd5 ♗e8! 15.♕g4 exd5 16.♗d2 ♗d7 17.♕h5 Black can either repeat moves or deviate with 17...♗e6!?=.

14...♗e8

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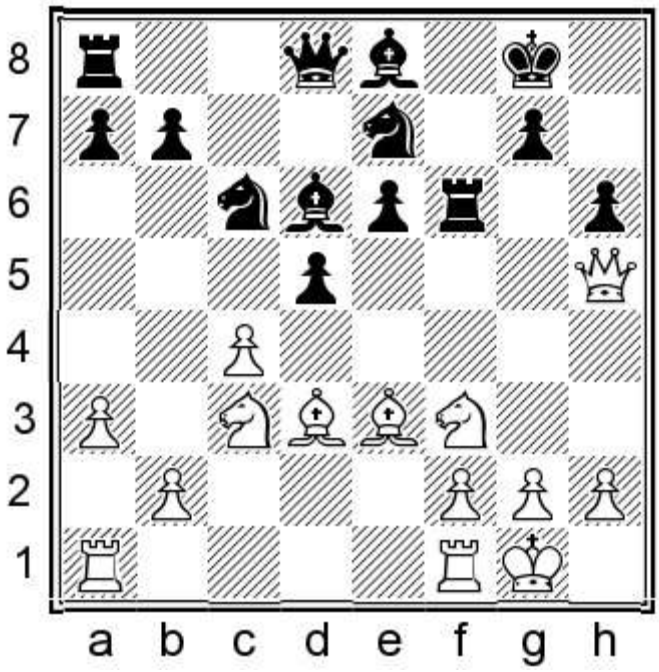

Position after: 14...♗e8

15.♕g4

15.♕h3 ♗d7 16.♖ad1 [16.♖fe1 allows Black to roll his pawns forward: 16...e5 17.♕h4 d4 18.♘e4 dxe3 19.♘xf6+ gxf6 20.fxe3 ♕f8∞.] 16...♕e8! 17.♖fe1 [17.g4!? This idea is impossible with the queen on g4. Here, it leads to some fascinating complications. 17...♖c8 18.g5 ♖xf3! 19.♕xf3 ♘e5 20.♕g2 ♘xd3 21.gxh6 ♘f5 22.♖xd3 ♖xc4∞] 17...♖d8! White has nothing better than 18.♕h4, transposing to our main line. [Instead, 18.♗b1 ♕f7!= is similar to note b) to White's 18th.]

15...♗d7 16.♖ad1 ♕e8! 17.♖fe1 ♖d8

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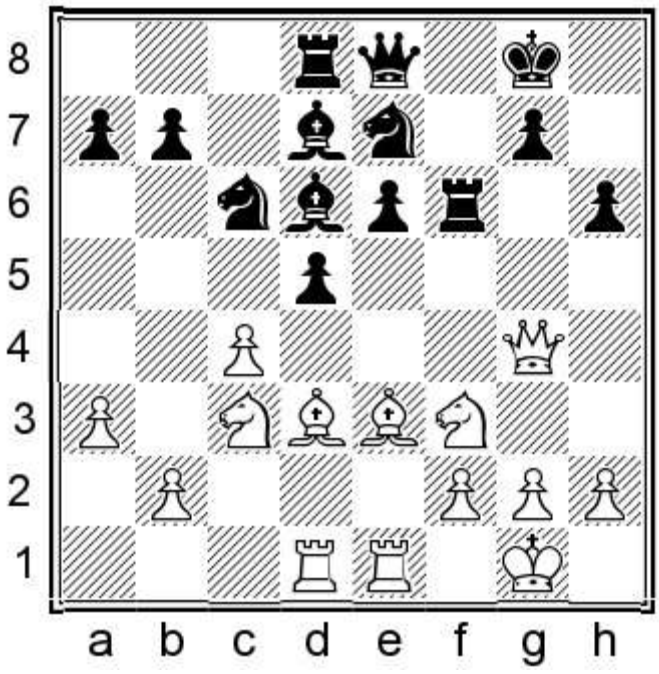

Position after: 17...♖d8

18.♕h4!?

White intends to answer 18...♕f7 with 19.♗h7+!?, but Black can proceed with the customary exchange sacrifice on f3.

A) 18.b4 e5! 19.♕h4 ♖xf3! 20.gxf3 e4! 21.fxe4 d4∓

B) 18.♗b1 ♕f7 19.b4 ♖xf3 There is little White can do to stop this sacrifice, and Black always has excellent compensation since ...♘e5 comes with very concrete threats. 20.♕xf3 ♕xf3 21.gxf3 ♘e5= White will most likely give back the material by allowing ...♘f3+.

18...♖xf3

18...♕f7 19.♗h7+!

19.gxf3 ♘e5 20.♗e2 ♘f5 21.♕h3 ♘xc4 22.♗xc4 dxc4 23.♗xa7 ♕f7∞

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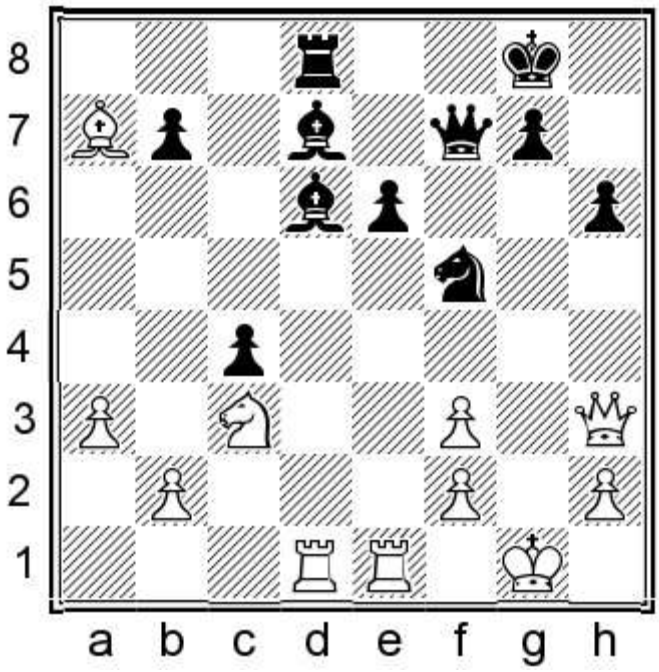

Position after: 23...♕f7∞

White's kingside is a shambles and the position is unclear.

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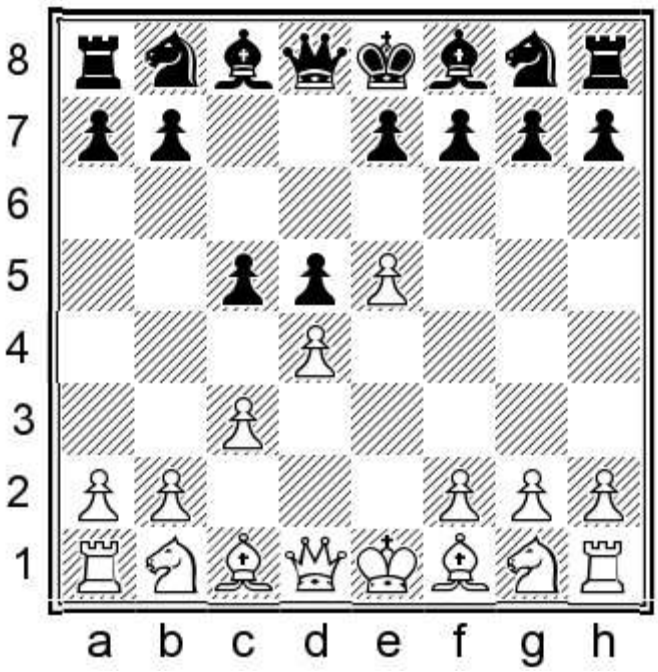
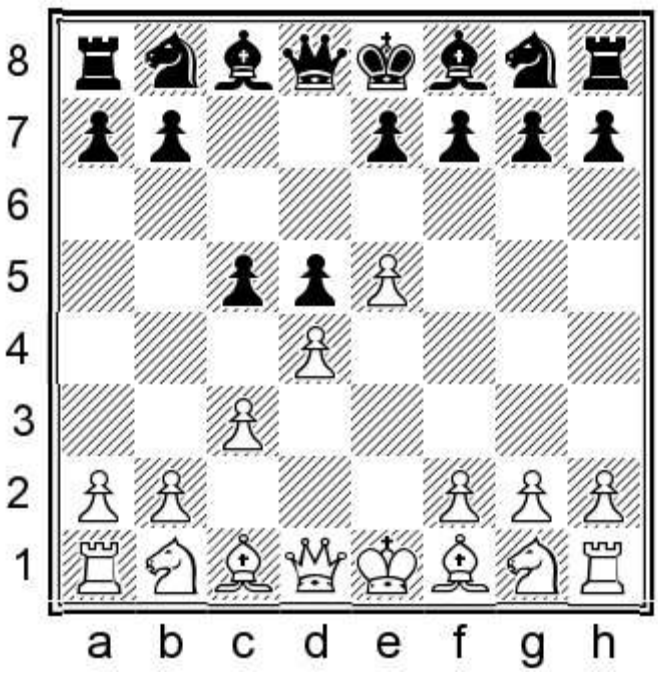
Chapter 6
4.c3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3



1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3



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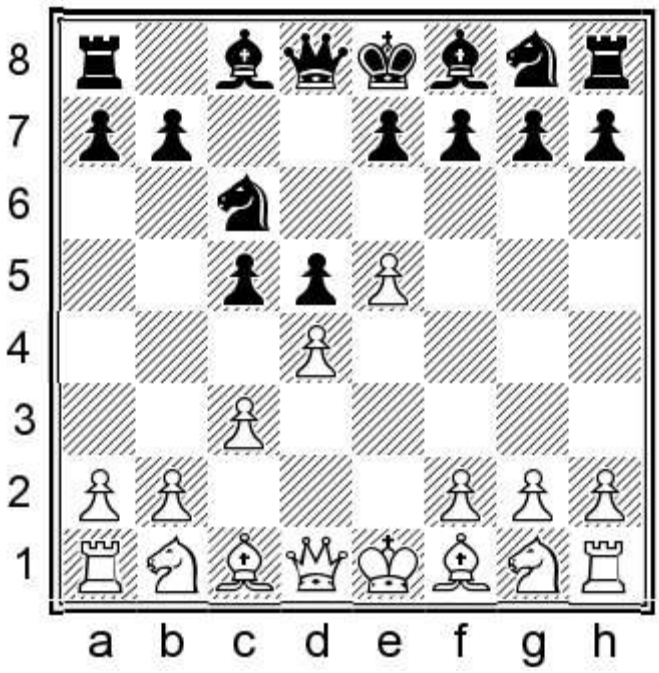
Position after: 4.c3

This move is quite natural – White reinforces the center – but every Caro-Kann player should be delighted to play against it. If Black's e7 pawn were on e6, we would be looking at the advance French. However, since that move is 'missing' (Black having played ...c5 in two moves rather than one), Black is able to develop his light-squared bishop outside of the pawn chain before playing ...e6. Although many details are reminiscent of the French defense, this important difference gives Black has a rather comfortable version. The only drawback with delaying ...e6 is that White can sometimes take on c5 and then defend the extra pawn with b4. Black should be wary of such ideas.

4...♘c6

White can play a few moves here. The naive 5.♘f3 allows ...♗g4 and Black gets an excellent game. White can delay developing his g1-knight to avoid the pin, but this forces him to make some kind of concession.



Position after: 4...♘c6

5.♗e2!?

This is White's most interesting move. White waits for Black to develop his light-squared bishop (to f5) before playing ♘f3 and plays a useful developing move in the meantime.

A) 5.♘f3 is the most straightforward approach, but it allows ...♗g4. 5...cxd4 6.cxd4 ♗g4

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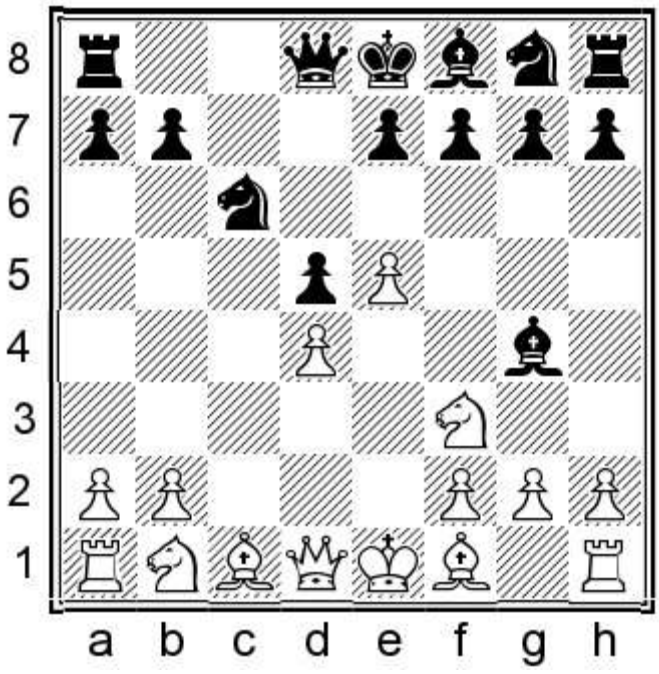
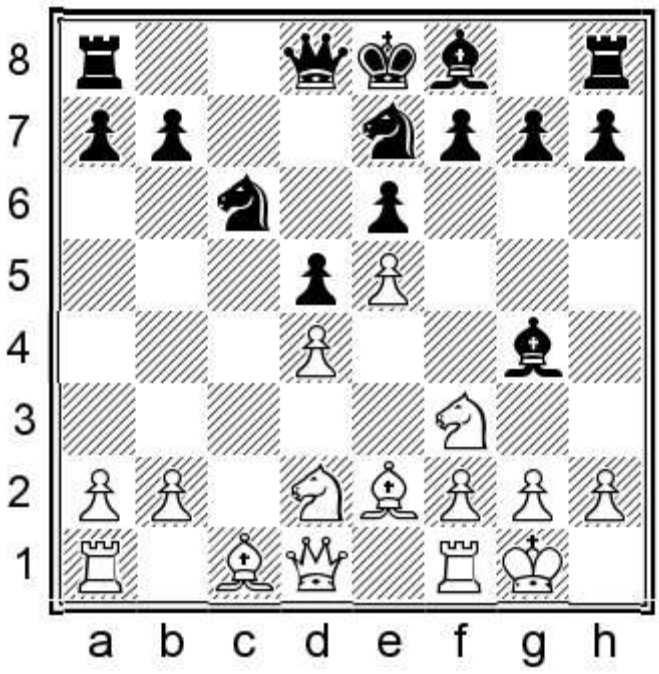


Position after: 6...♗g4

A1) After 7.♘bd2 e6 8.♗e2 Black can play actively with 8...♗b4! and he is able to quickly develop his pieces. 9.0-0 ♗xd2 10.♕xd2 ♘ge7 11.b3 ♕a5N 12.♕xa5 ♘xa5 13.h3 ♗xf3 14.♗xf3 ♘ac6 15.♗b2 ♘f5 16.♖fd1 h5= The endgame is equal; White's bishop-pair is not that important in a position this closed.

A2) 7.♗e2 e6 8.0-0 ♘ge7 9.♘bd2 [Developing the knight to c3 allows Black to play ...♘f5, threatening to take on f3 and d4, thus forcing a concession. 9.♘c3 ♘f5 10.♗e3 ♗e7=]



Position after: 9.♘bd2

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9...♘c8!?N In general, Black wants to play ...♘c8 in two scenarios: either when White has already played b4 (weakening the c4-square), or when White has developed his queen's knight to d2, with the idea of playing ♘b3 in the future. In the latter case, White will be less keen on playing b3 (to control the c4-square) since his d2-knight would then be misplaced. 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♘b3 ♘b6=

B) 5.h3 White's intention is clear: he wants to play ♘f3 without allowing ♗g4. This move is quite slow, however, and it is difficult to imagine that White will get an edge. 5...cxd4 [5...♗f5 is also possible, but the game gets complicated after 6.dxc5∞.] 6.cxd4 ♗f5 7.♘c3 [7.♗d3 is harmless since Black can simply trade the bishops and continue his development. 7...♗xd3 8.♕xd3 e6 9.♘f3 ♘ge7 10.♘c3 ♘f5 11.♗g5 ♗e7 12.♗xe7 ♕xe7=] 7...e6 8.♘f3 ♗b4!? [8...♘ge7!? is also possible, but I prefer the more active 8...♗b4.] 9.♗d3 ♘ge7 10.0-0 ♗xc3 11.bxc3 ♕a5 12.♖b1 ♗xd3 13.♕xd3 b6= This structure is of course reminiscent of the French. The light-squared bishops have been traded and Black's king is rather safe, so Black has an excellent position.

C) 5.♗e3 The bishop is not well placed on e3, as ♘f5 will come. 5...♘h6! 6.♗d3N 6...g6 7.♘e2 ♗g7 8.0-0 0-0=

D) 5.f4 is dubious since it weakens White's position without posing any real threat to Black. White is not in time to launch an attack on the kingside since he is behind in development. 5...cxd4 6.cxd4 ♗f5 [6...♘h6!? is also interesting but one good line is enough.] 7.♘c3 e6 8.♘f3 h5 9.♗e2 ♘h6 10.0-0 ♗e7= Black has successfully blockaded the kingside and has an excellent position.

E) 5.a3 ♗f5 6.b4 cxd4 [6...c4!?] 7.cxd4 e6 8.♘f3 ♘ge7 9.♗e2 ♘c8!=

F) 5.♗b5 With this move, White renews the option of taking on c5. Black cannot develop his light-squared bishop to f5 since he would then be unable to oppose the pin on his c6-knight. Therefore, Black should immediately go after White's bishop with 5...♕a5! [5...e6 is also possible, but White can transpose to a heavily theoretical line of the advance French with 6.♘f3 ♗d7 7.♗e2!?. While this line is certainly playable, it does not make sense to study so much theory for such an offbeat continuation.] 6.♗xc6+ [White is unable to maintain the pin with 6.♗a4 since Black can play 6...b5! 7.♗b3 e6=.] 6...bxc6

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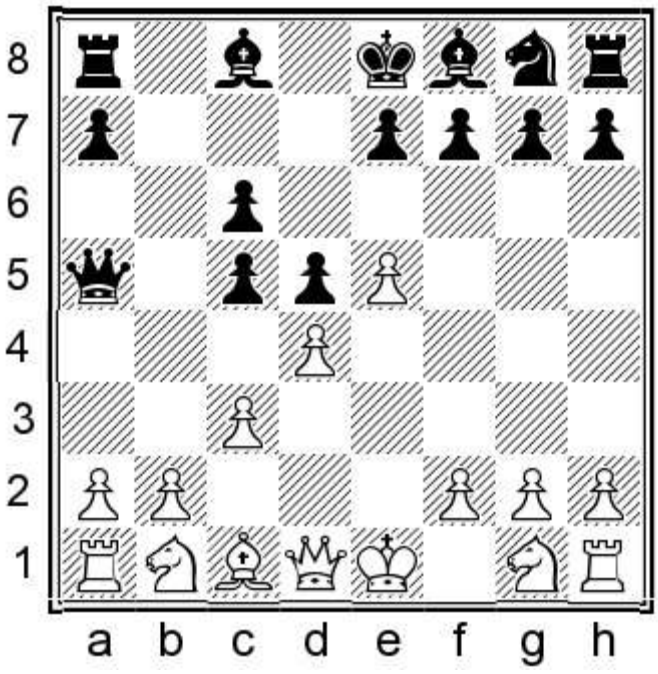
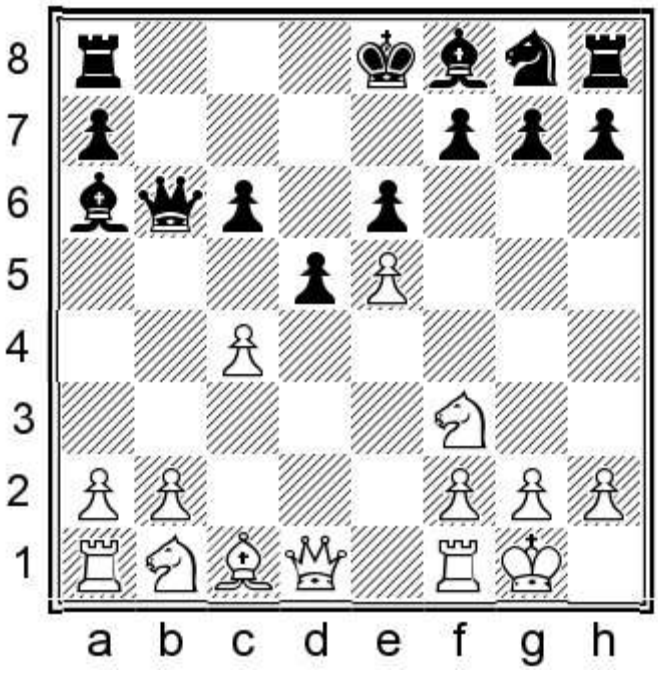


Position after: 6...bxc6

7.dxc5!N This is White's only attractive option: since he is threatening to hold on to the pawn with b4, Black must lose more time and take on c5 with the queen, further delaying his development. White will use this time to further his development. [The alternative 7.♘d2 is much less critical: 7...cxd4N 8.cxd4 e6 9.♘e2 ♘e7 10.0-0 ♘f5 11.♘b3 ♕b6 12.♘g3 a5 13.♘xf5 exf5 14.♗e3 a4 15.♘c5 ♗xc5 16.dxc5 ♕b4=.] 7...♕xc5 8.♘f3 e6 9.0-0 ♕b6 10.c4! Black must continue accurately to avoid trouble. 10...♗a6!



Position after: 10...♗a6!

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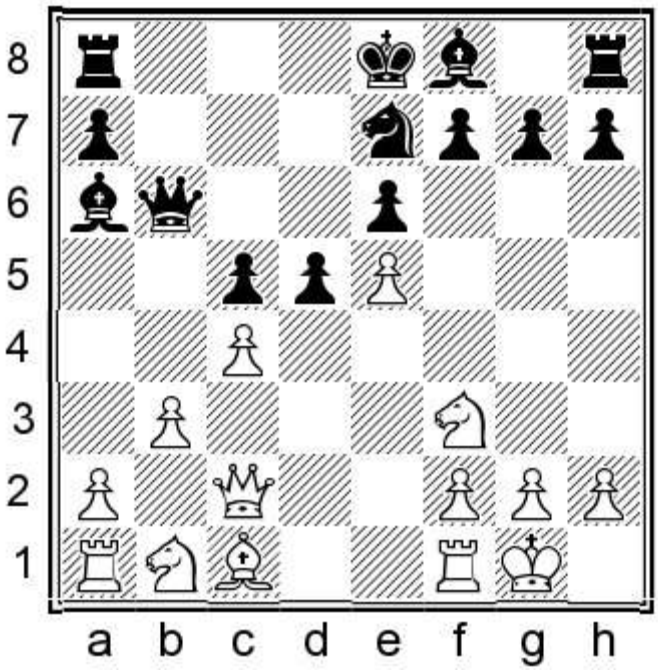
F1) 11.♗e3 ♗c5 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5 13.♘bd2 ♘e7 14.♕a4 [14.♖c1 ♕b6 15.♕a4 dxc4 16.♘xc4 ♗xc4 17.♕xc4 0-0=] 14...♗xc4 15.♖fc1 ♕b5 16.♕a3 h6! 17.♘xc4 dxc4 18.♖c3 ♖d8 19.♖ac1 ♖d7 20.h4 0-0 21.♖xc4 ♖fd8= Black has an inferior pawn structure but there is no way to capitalise on it because his pieces are very active.

F2) 11.b3 ♘e7 12.♕c2 c5!



Position after: 12...c5!

Black needs to play this move to fight for control of the queenside. 13.♘c3 ♗b7 14.♖e1 [14.♘a4 ♕c7 15.♗a3 ♘g6 16.cxd5 ♗xd5 17.♕e2 ♗e7 18.♖ac1 White picks up the c5-pawn but Black's d5-bishop gives him excellent compensation. 18...0-0 19.♗xc5 ♗xc5 20.♖xc5 ♕b7⩲] 14...♖c8! 15.♖b1 [15.♗g5 d4 16.♘e4 ♘f5 17.♘h4 ♘xh4 18.♗xh4 ♕c7 19.♖ad1 ♗xe4 20.♕xe4 ♗e7=] 15...♕a6! [15...d4?! 16.♘e4 ♘f5 17.g4! ♘e7 18.b4!±] 16.♕d3 Now that Black has dealt with the threat of cxd5, he is ready to finish his development: 16...♘f5=.

5...♗f5 6.♘f3 e6 7.0-0

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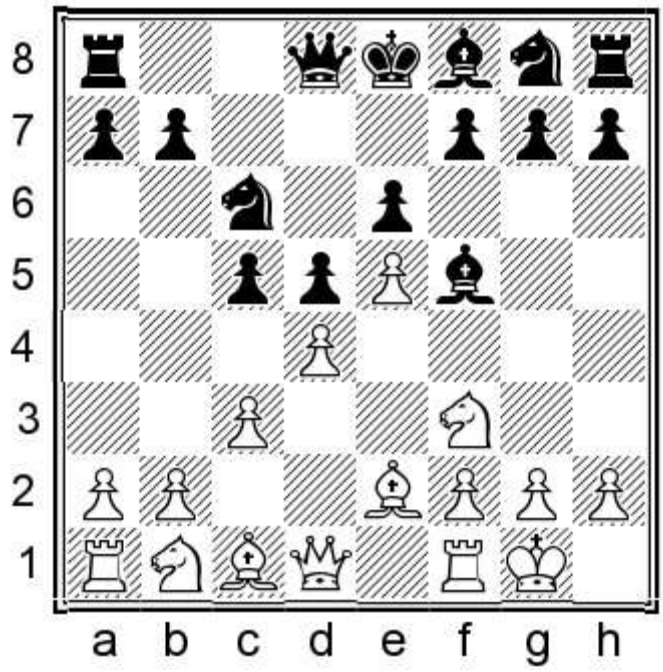

Position after: 7.0-0

Black now faces a problem that is very typical of the advance Caro-Kann: how should he develop his kingside pieces?

Since the f6-square is not available to the knight, Black must play ...♘ge7 and then move the knight again in order to play ...♗e7. However, 7...♘ge7 right away allows White to develop a dangerous initiative on the kingside with 8.♘h4!. Black can play 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 ♘ge7 to address this problem (9.♘h4? would then run into 9...♕b6!), but this gives White the c3-square for his b1-knight (not to mention that 8.♘xd4 is also interesting). This is why Black should instead play 7...♗g6!, freeing the f5-square for his knight and not committing to ...cxd4.

7...♗g6!

White is left without a good developing move for his b1-knight since the c3-square is not available. He has two main options is this position: 8.a3 and 8.♗e3. Black's idea is the same in both cases: he will play ...cxd4, ...♘ge7 and then move the knight from e7 to develop the dark-squared bishop.

8.♗e3

8.a3 is possible but b4 is not a dangerous threat since Black is comfortable opening the position on the queenside. 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 ♘ge7

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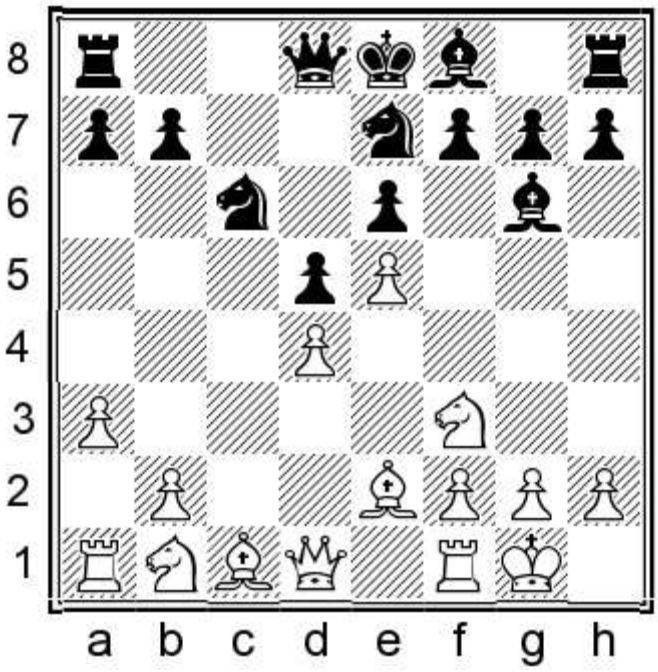
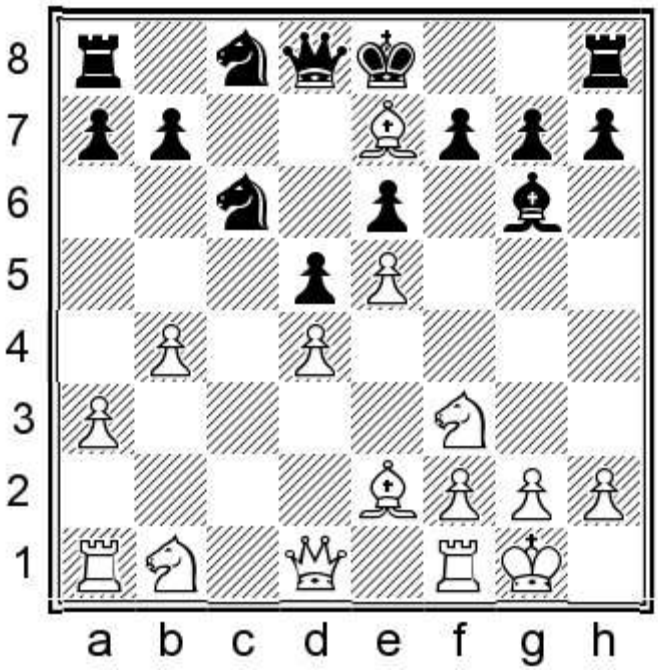


Position after: 9...♘ge7

A) 10.♘c3 ♗h5!?N Black goes after the d4-pawn by pressuring the f3-knight. Moreover, ...♘f5 can no longer be countered with g4. [10...♘f5 11.g4!∞; 10...♘c8!?] 11.♘h4 ♗xe2 12.♘xe2 ♕b6 13.f4 g6=

B) 10.b4 ♘c8! White has weakened the c4-square, so the knight heads to b6. 11.♗g5 [11.♘bd2 ♘b6 12.♗b2 ♗e7 13.♖c1 0-0 14.♗c3 a6= was equal in Fedoseev, V (2667) – Dreev, A (2652) Moscow 2016 and Black went on to win.] 11...♗e7 12.♗xe7



Position after: 12.♗xe7

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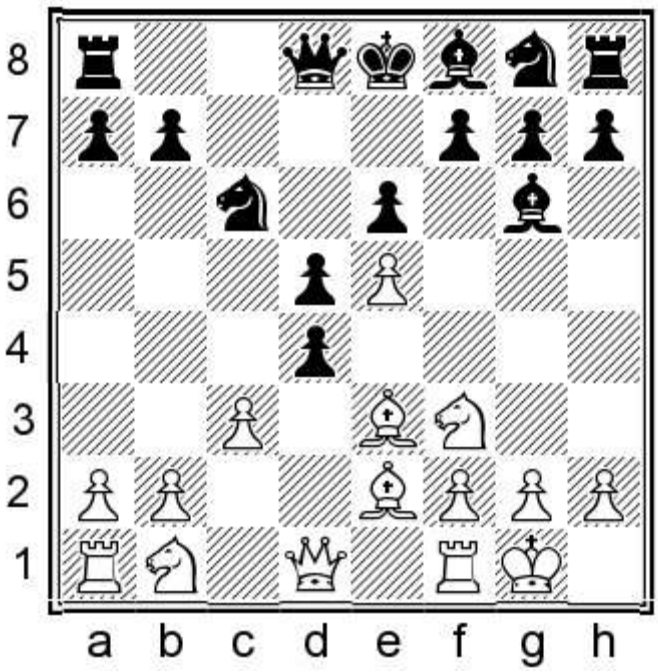
12...♘8xe7!?N [12...♕xe7 13.♘bd2 ♘b6 Dominguez Perez, L (2739) – Mamedyarov, S (2768) Doha 2016 14.♗b5!N] 13.♘bd2 ♕b6=

8...cxd4



Position after: 8...cxd4

8...♕b6?! is dangerous in view of 9.♘bd2! White ignores Black's threat and plays to open the position on the queenside. 9...♕xb2 [9...♘h6 10.♕a4! ♘f5 11.dxc5 ♗xc5 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5 13.b4 ♕e7 14.b5 ♘b8 15.c4↑] 10.dxc5 ♕xc3 11.♗b5!∞ This is not the kind of position we are looking for. White has excellent compensation and Black is under a lot of pressure.

9.cxd4

White can also try 9.♘xd4!?. He sacrifices the e5-pawn to open the center.

A) Two games reached this position, and Black declined the sacrifice with 9...♘ge7 in both. The games were Karjakin, S (2723) – Bareev, E (2634) Moscow 2009, and Martinez Duany, L (2547) – Solozhenkina, E (2287) Rochefort 2019. In the latter game, White achieved a superior position with 10.f4.

B) 9...♘xe5!N 10.♕a4+ ♘d7 11.c4 White has excellent compensation for the pawn, and Black should respond accurately: 11...e5! 12.♘c3!

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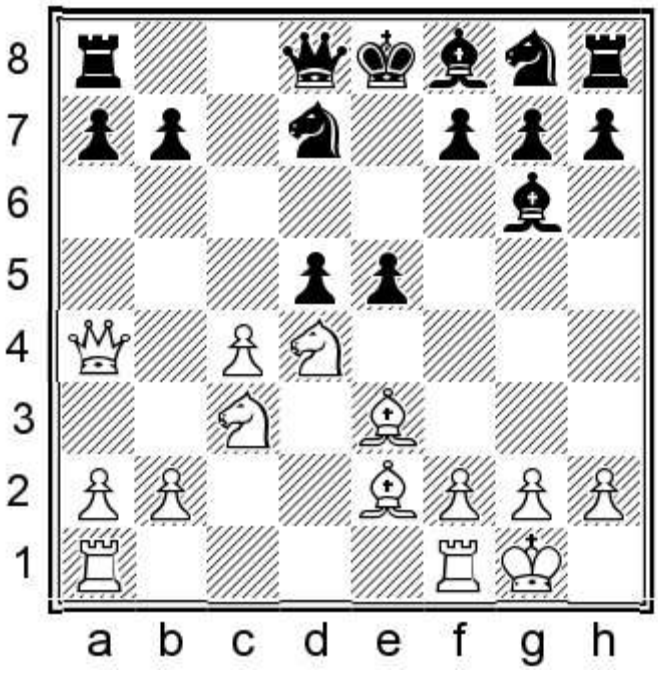
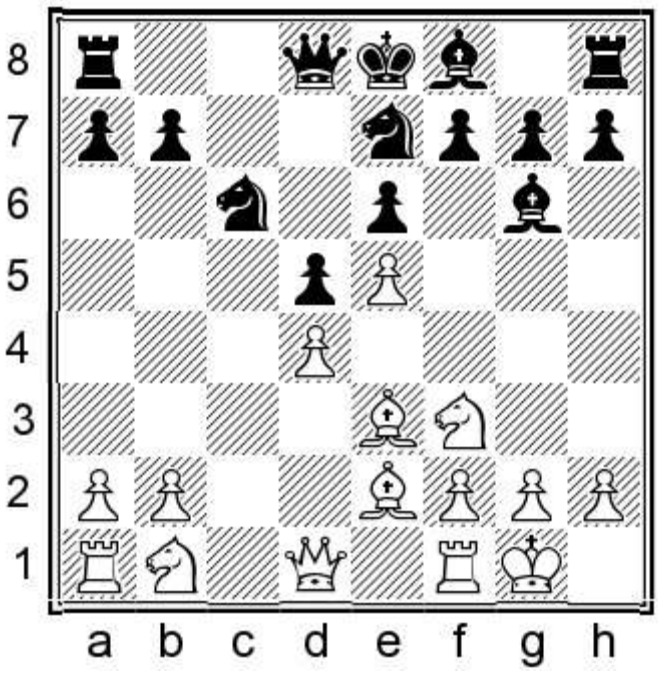


Position after: 12.♘c3!

White's brilliant follow-up. Sharp play ensues: 12...♗c5! [12...♘gf6 leaves Black with an extremely dangerous position after 13.♘xd5 ♘xd5 14.cxd5 exd4 15.♗xd4⩲.] 13.♘b3 [13.♘e6 can also be tried, but Black finds safety with 13...fxe6 14.cxd5 ♗xe3 15.fxe3 ♗f5! 16.♘b5 ♘gf6 17.♕a3 ♔f7! 18.g4 ♖f8=.] 13...♗xe3 14.fxe3 ♘gf6 Black gives the material back to complete his development. 15.♖ad1 0-0 16.♘xd5 ♘xd5 17.♖xd5 ♘b6 18.♖xd8 ♘xa4=

9...♘ge7



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Position after: 9...♘ge7

10.♘h4!?

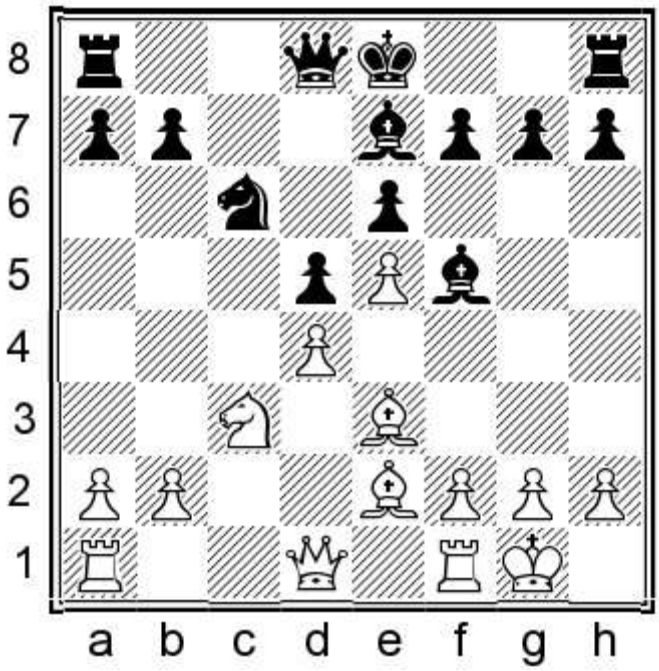
White cannot let Black execute his plan and instead looks to push his kingside pawns to pressure Black.

10.♘c3 allows 10...♘f5= and Black has an excellent position.

10...♘f5 11.♘xf5 ♗xf5 12.♘c3

12.g4N 12...♗g6 13.f4 f5! Black must block the kingside advance. 14.♗d3!? fxg4 15.f5 ♗xf5 16.♗xf5 exf5 17.♖xf5 g6 18.♖f2 ♕d7=

12...♗e7



Position after: 12...♗e7

13.f4

A) Starting with g4 does not change anything: 13.g4 ♗g6 14.f4 ♕d7 transposes to the main line.

B) 13.♗g4 White fights for the f5-square to enable the march of the f-pawn. However, this approach is too slow to pose any real problems to Black. 13...♗g6 14.f4 ♕d7 15.f5 ♗xf5 16.♗xf5 exf5 17.♕f3 0-0-0N

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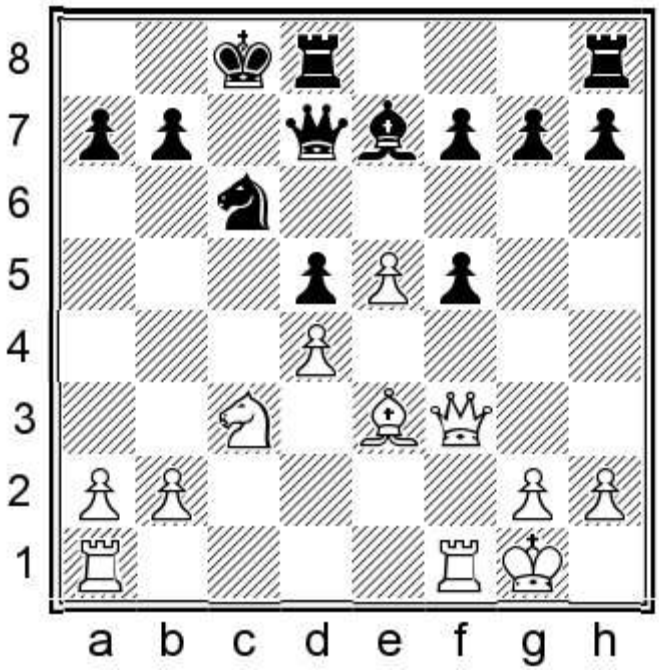
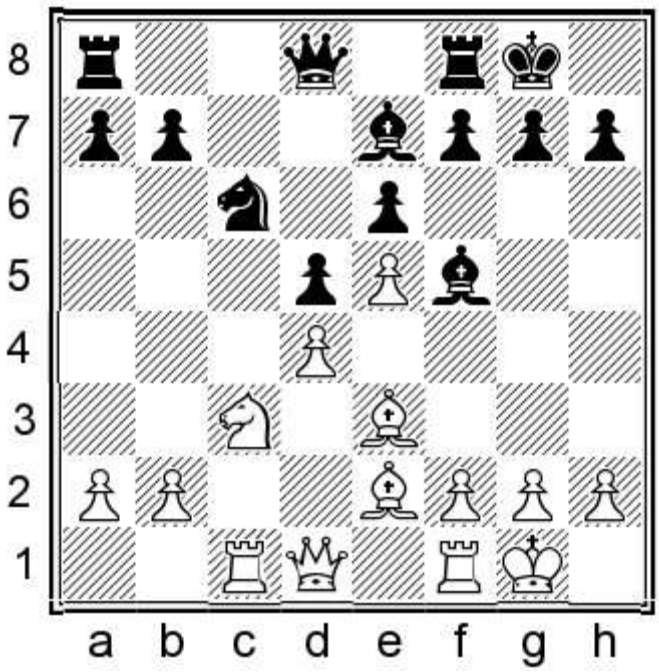


Position after: 17...0-0-0N

Black gives the pawn back and brings his king to safety. 18.♕xf5 ♕xf5 19.♖xf5 f6! 20.exf6 ♗xf6 21.♖d1 ♘e7=

C) White can also play on the queenside with 13.♖c1 but Black has nothing to worry about: 13...0-0



Position after: 13...0-0

14.♘a4 [White no longer has time for 14.g4 ♗g6 15.f4 as Black can counterattack on the kingside with 15...f6!= as in Iovcov, V (2224) – Yuffa, D (2449) Batumi 2014.] 14...♖c8 15.♘c5 b6 16.♘d3

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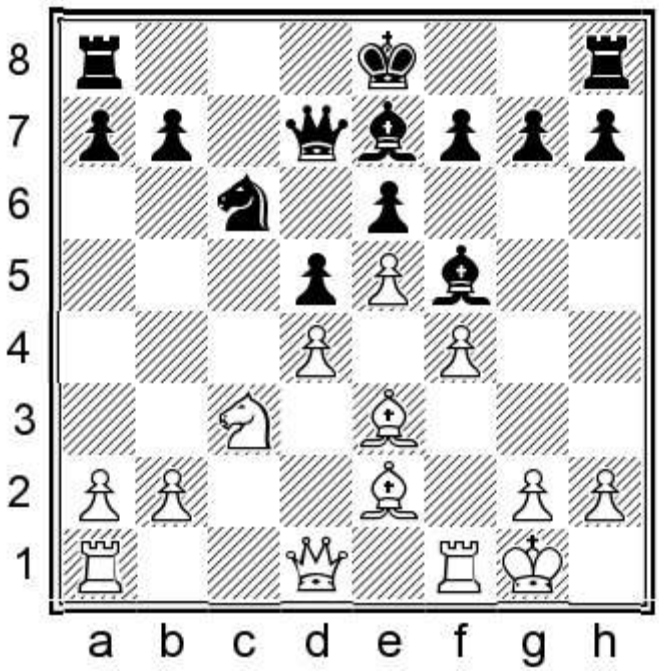
♘a5= Black now had an excellent position in Baklan, V (2610) – Berkes, F (2685) Mamaia 2012.

13...♕d7!



Position after: 13...♕d7!

Black needs to control the f5-square.

14.g4

The slower 14.♖c1N 14...0-0 15.a3 ♖ac8 16.b4 h6= does not trouble Black.

14...♗g6 15.♗f3 0-0

15...f5N is dangerous here due to 16.exf6 ♗xf6 17.f5! exf5 18.♘xd5∞

16.♘xd5!?N

16.♗g2 was played in Pushkarev, D (2369) – Korablin, J Kemerovo 2007, but Black is now ready for 16...f5!N

16...exd5 17.f5 f6!

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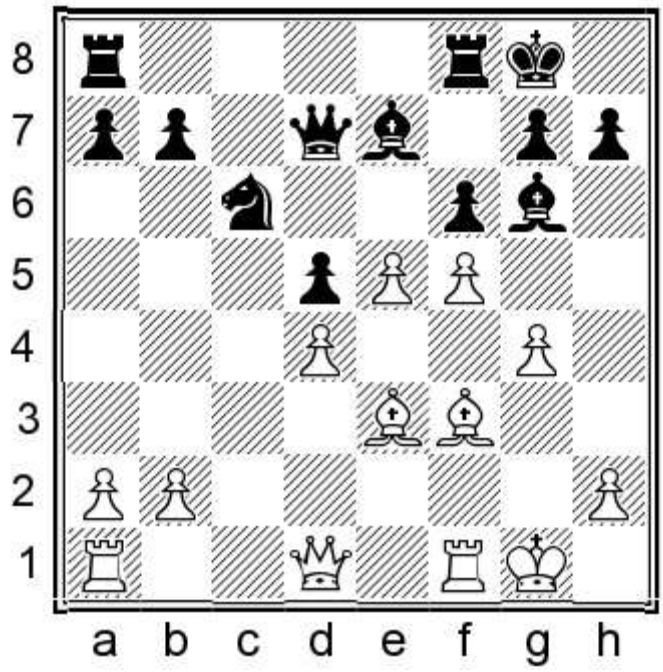

Position after: 17...f6!

White regains the piece, but no more.

18.exf6

18.fxg6 fxe5 19.dxe5 ♖ad8=

18...♖xf6 19.fxg6 ♖xg6

19...♖af8!? is also interesting and leads to a complex position after 20.gxh7+ ♔h8≅.

20.♔h1 ♗g5!

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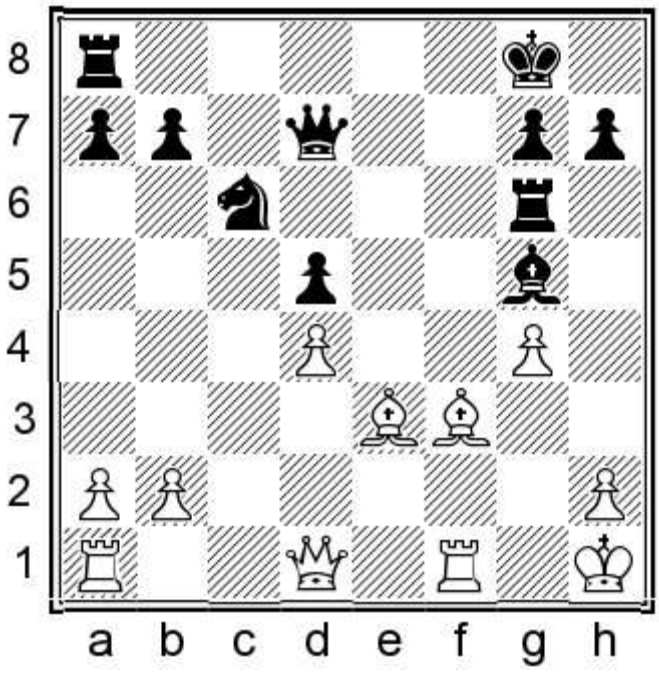

Position after: 20...♗g5!

Black eliminates White's bishop pair.

21.♗xg5 ♖xg5 22.♕d2 h6 23.♖ae1 ♖f8=

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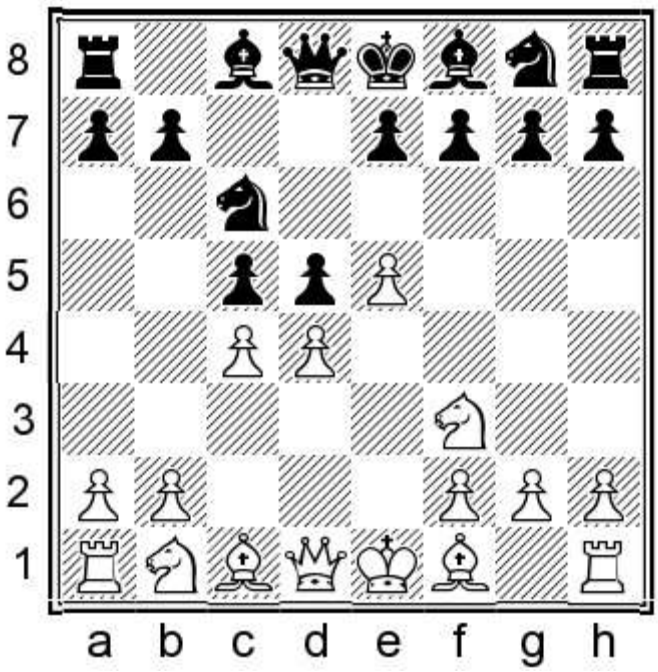
Chapter 7
4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c4



Chapter Guide

Chapter 7 – 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 e6 7.♘c3 ♗c5 8.♘xc6 bxc6

a) 4...-- alternatives

b) 9.cxd5

c) 9.♕g4

a) 4...-- alternatives

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3

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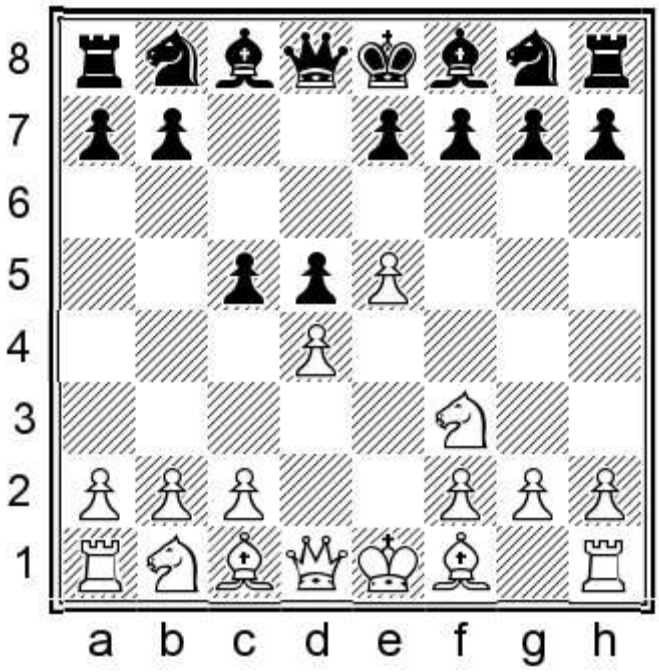

Position after: 4.♘f3

This is White's main alternative to 4.dxc5. He is aiming for quick development and is leaving Black to decide how to proceed in the center. My recommendation is 4...♘c6 (next subchapter), continuing development. Other moves have been played but they fail to equalize, as I demonstrate below.

4.c4 is not worthy of independent consideration since after 4...♘c6 White's only sensible continuation is 5.♘f3, which we examine under the 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c4 move order.

Only one alternative is worth mentioning: 5.dxc5 e6 6.cxd5 exd5 7.♘c3 ♗xc5 8.♕xd5 ♕b6 9.♕d2 ♗f5⩲ White is a pawn up but he will certainly have to give it back to slow down Black's attack.

4...♗g4

4...cxd4 is probably a better try than 4...♗g4, but White gets an advantage by playing simple and logical moves. 5.♘xd4 [5.♕xd4!? has also been tried in a few high-level games, but I don't see any reason to avoid 5.♘xd4.] 5...♘c6!? [5...e6 is too passive, and White has an excellent position after either 6.♘d2 or 6.♗e3.] 6.♘xc6! bxc6 7.♗d3 e6 [7...♕c7 forces White to defend the e5-pawn, but it does not change the assessment of the position. 8.♕e2 e6 9.0-0 ♘e7 10.♘d2 c5 11.c4±] 8.0-0 ♘e7 9.♘d2 ♘g6

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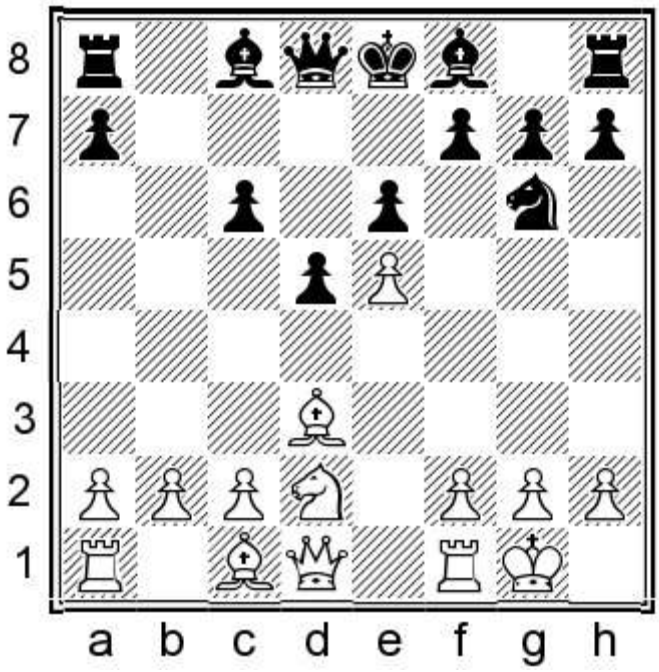

Position after: 9...♘g6

A) 10.f4 was played by my teammate and classmate at Saint Louis University in Kevlishvili, R (2473) – Prraneeth,V (2264) Balatonlelle 2019, but this move only helps Black find counterplay. White should instead keep the c1-h6 diagonal open for his dark-squared bishop.

B) 10.♖e1 ♗c5N [10...♗e7 11.♕g4! ♕b6 12.c3 ♗a6 13.♗c2± gave White a clear edge in Padmini, R (2369) – Ravi, T (2464) Caleta 2020.] 11.♘b3 ♗b6 12.♗e3± Black is unable to find counterplay and White has a strategically superior position.

5.c4!

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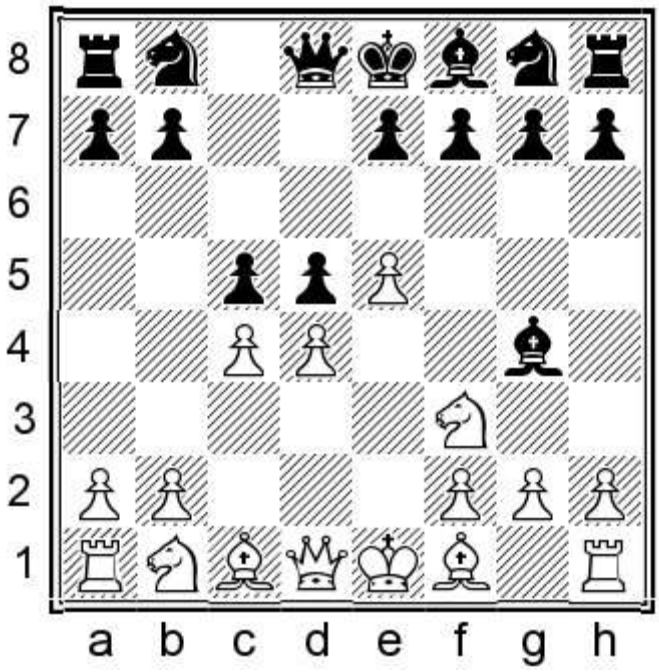
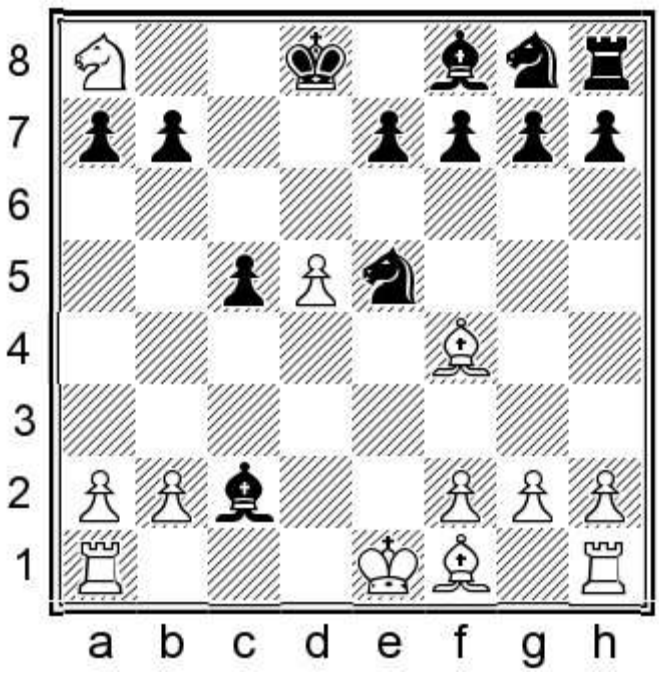


Position after: 5.c4!

Black lags in development and is not prepared for an open game.

5...cxd4

A) 5...♘c6 leads to sharp play, but White always comes out on top: 6.cxd5 ♗xf3 [6...♕xd5 7.♘c3 ♗xf3 8.♘xd5 ♗xd1 9.♘c7+ ♔d8 10.♘xa8 ♗c2 11.d5 ♘xe5 12.♗f4±



Position after: 12.♗f4±

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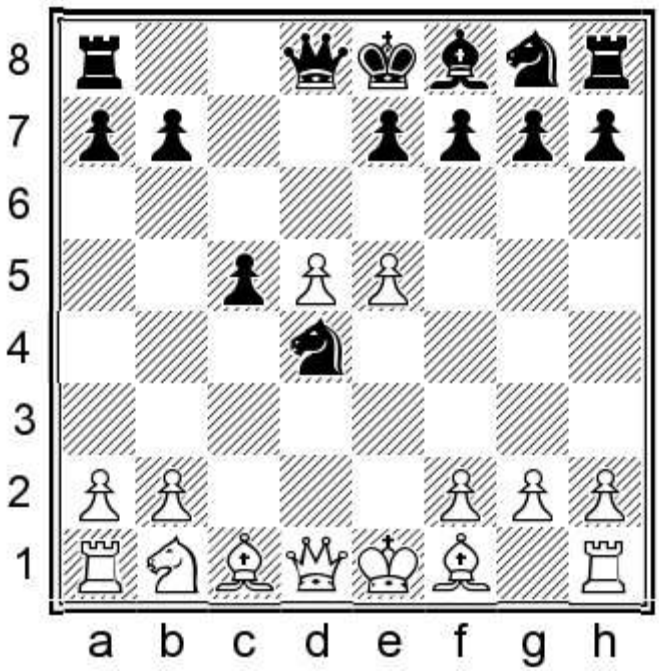
The White knight will eventually return to safety and Black has no compensation for the material deficit.] 7.♕xf3 ♘xd4 8.♕d1!



Position after: 8.♕d1!

8...e6 [8...♕xd5 9.♗b5+ ♔d8 10.0-0±] 9.d6! f6 10.♗e3 fxe5 11.♗xd4 exd4 12.♗b5+ ♔f7 13.♕f3+ ♘f6 14.♕xb7+ ♔g8 15.♗c4 h5 16.0-0±

B) 5...e6 is an attempt to limit the damage, but White has the upper hand: 6.cxd5 ♕xd5 [6...exd5 7.♗b5+ ♘c6 8.0-0±] 7.♘c3 ♗xf3 8.gxf3 ♕xd4 9.♕xd4 cxd4 10.♘b5 ♔d7 11.♘xd4 ♘c6 12.♗b5±

6.cxd5 ♕xd5 7.♘c3

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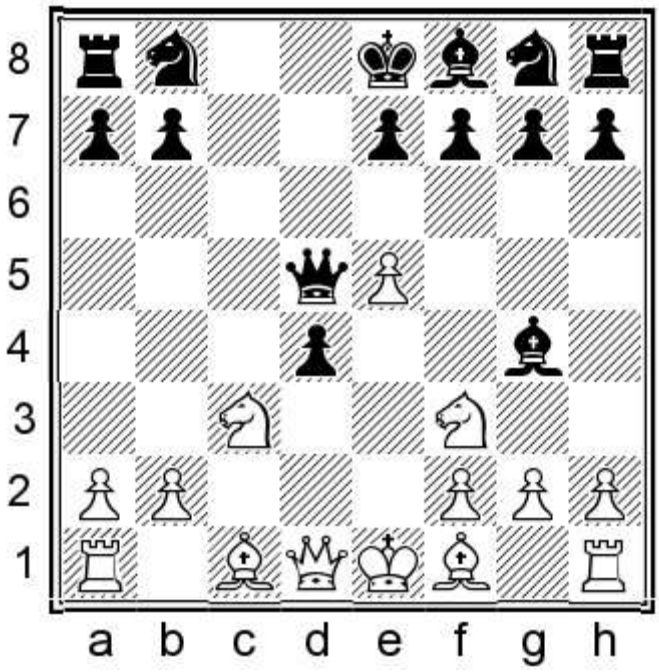
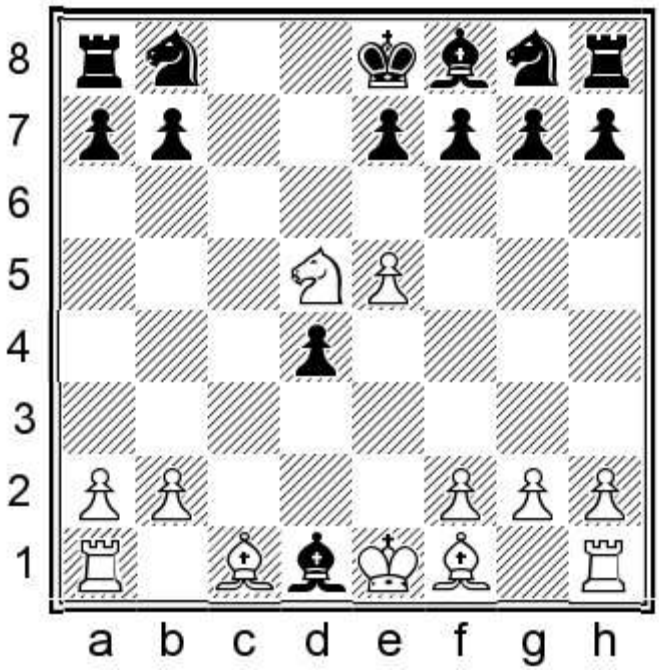


Position after: 7.♘c3

7...♗xf3

7...♕a5 doesn't help: 8.♗b5+ ♘c6 9.♗xc6+ bxc6 10.♕xd4 ♗xf3 11.gxf3 e6 12.♗e3 ♘e7 13.0-0-0± and White eventually won in Wang, J (2380) – Qiu, M (2207) China 2016.

8.♘xd5 ♗xd1



Position after: 8...♗xd1

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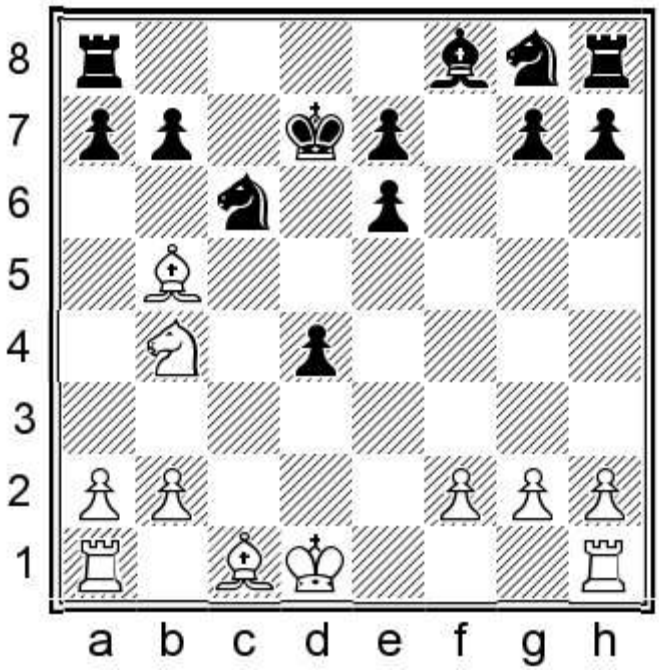
9.♔xd1!N

9.♘c7+!? has been played in many games, but White has a simpler option in 9.♔xd1.

9...♔d7

9...♔d8 10.e6!±

10.♗b5+ ♘c6 11.e6+! fxe6 12.♘b4!±



Position after: 12.♘b4!±

The knight will come to d3 and White will continue attacking Black's weaknesses.

b) 9.cxd5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6

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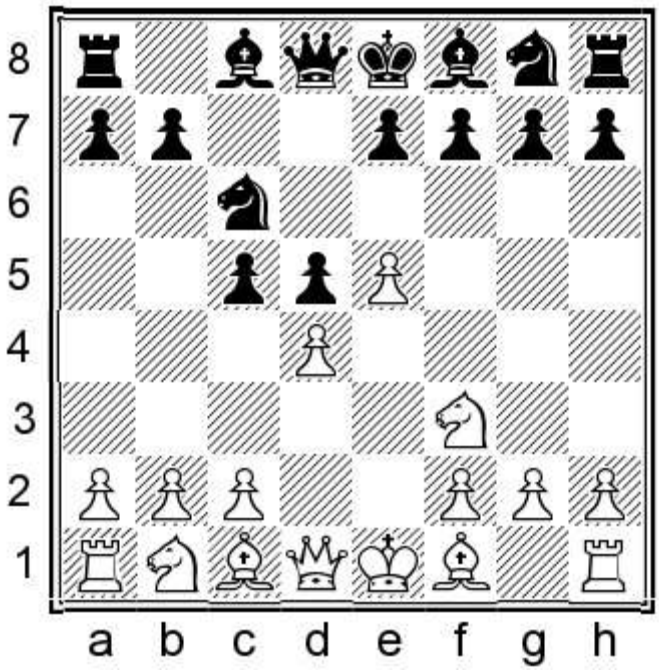
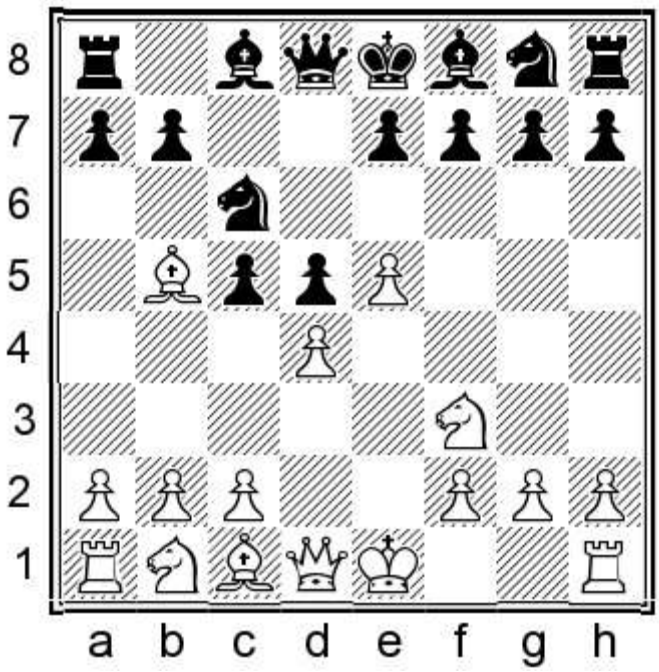


Position after: 4...♘c6

5.c4

This is the main move that we will consider, and we will consider 5.dxc5 in the next chapter since the two moves lead to very different positions.

White's only other reasonable alternative is 5.♗b5.



Position after: 5.♗b5

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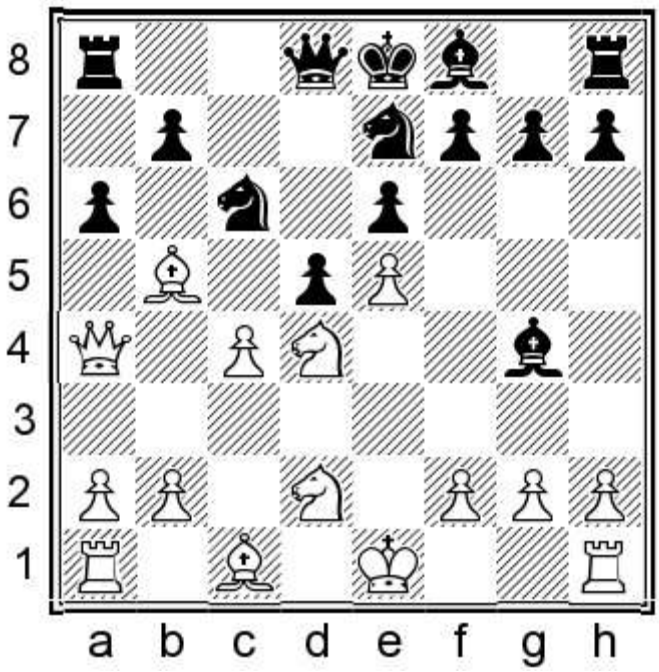
It is fully in the spirit of the variation: White develops and puts pressure on Black's queenside by introducing ideas like c4 or dxc5 and b4. Now:

A) 5...cxd4 only helps White since his goal is to open the position to benefit from his lead in development. 6.♘xd4 ♗d7 7.♘xc6 ♗xc6 8.♗d3 d4!? Other moves are just too passive, but White has an insidious reply: 9.♕e2! ♗xg2N 10.f3! ♗h3 11.♘d2∞ Although Black seems to be holding, the position is very unappealing.

B) 5...e6 is possible but White can transpose to the advance French with 6.c3 ♗d7 7.♗e2, just as in the 4.c3 ♘c6 5.♗b5 e6 6.♘f3 ♗d7 7.♗e2 move order (chapter 6).

C) 5...♗g4 Black continues in standard fashion, developing his light-squared bishop outside of the pawn chain. 6.c4! This is White's best attempt to exploit Black's aggressive setup by highlighting his queenside weaknesses. [6.dxc5 transposes to 6.dxc5 ♗g4 7.♗b5, which we cover in the next chapter.] 6...e6 7.♘bd2 cxd4 8.♕a4 ♘ge7 9.♘xd4 a6!



Position after: 9...a6!

Black uses some tactics to resolve his problems. 10.♗xc6+ ♘xc6 11.♘xc6 [11.h3 ♗f5 12.♘xf5 exf5 13.0-0 dxc4 14.♕xc4 ♗e7 15.♘f3 ♕d7 16.♗g5 ♗xg5 17.♘xg5 ♕e7 18.♕f4 0-0=; 11.cxd5 exd5 12.♘xc6 ♕d7 transposes to 11.♘xc6 ♕d7 12.cxd5 exd5.] 11...♕d7 12.cxd5 [12.h3 ♗f5 13.cxd5 exd5 14.♘b3 ♕xc6 15.♕xc6+ bxc6 16.♗e3 ♖b8! Black is ready to give up his c6-pawn in exchange for active play on the queenside. 17.♖c1 ♗d3 18.♖xc6 ♔d7⩱ Black has compensation since ...♗c4 will come and White will not hold on to the extra pawn.] 12...exd5 13.♘b3 ♖c8! 14.h3 ♗e6 15.♘bd4 bxc6 16.♘xe6 ♕xe6 17.0-0 ♗e7 18.♕xa6 0-0⩲ White's lack of coordination prevents him from making use of the extra pawn, whereas Black can start rolling the central pawns forward to create counterplay.

5...cxd4 6.♘xd4 e6 7.♘c3

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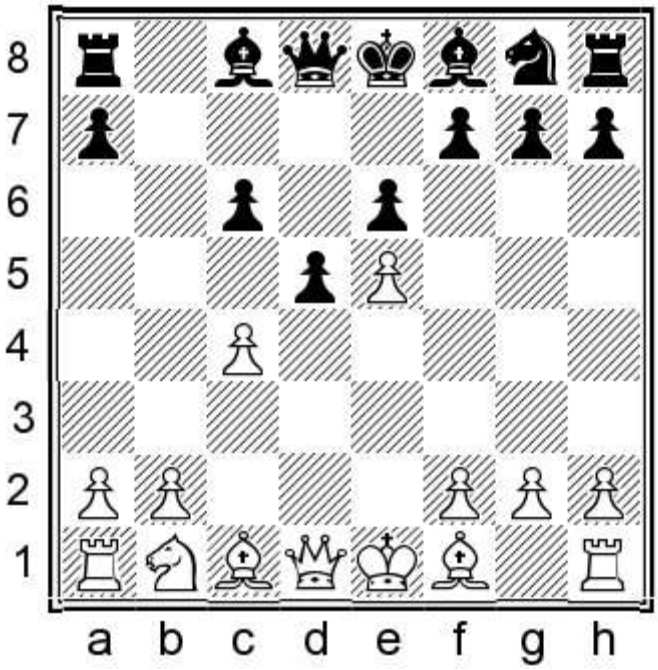
Simplifying the position with 7.♘xc6 is quite innocuous: 7...bxc6



Position after: 7...bxc6

A) 8.♗d3?! runs into 8...dxc4! 9.♗xc4 ♕a5+ 10.♘c3 ♕xe5+ 11.♗e2 ♗c5∓ when White does not have adequate compensation for the pawn.

B) 8.♘c3 allows Black to complicate the game with 8...d4! 9.♘e4 ♕a5+ 10.♗d2 ♕xe5 11.♗d3. White has compensation for the pawn, but Black manages to quickly develop and bring his king to safety. 11...♘f6 12.0-0 ♘xe4 13.f4 ♕c7 14.♗xe4 f5 15.♗a5! ♕d7 16.♗f3 ♗b7 17.♖e1 ♔f7=

C) 8.♗e2 ♘e7 9.0-0 ♘g6 10.f4 ♗c5+ 11.♔h1 0-0 12.♘d2N [12.♕c2 was played in Kotrotsos, V (2276) – Kotronias, V (2587) Salonica 2006. Black could have activated his pieces with 12...♗a6N 13.♘d2 ♕b6=.] 12...a5! Black vacates the a7-square for the dark-squared bishop in preparation for ♘b3. 13.♘b3 ♗a7=

7...♗c5

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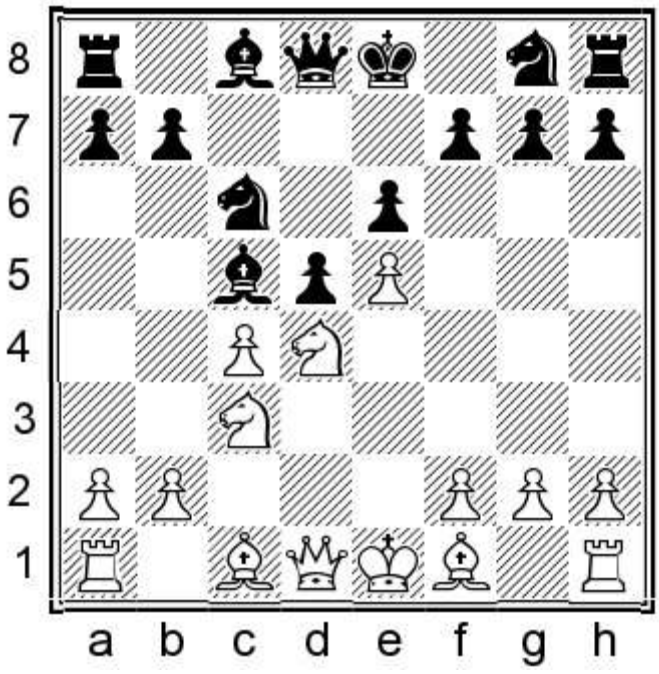

Position after: 7...♗c5

7...♗b4 is also possible and was recommended by Houska in *Play the Caro-Kann*, but it gives White a handful of interesting options.

8.♘xc6

A) 8.♗e3 White is trying to create threats on the dark squares, but Black is too solid. 8...♕b6 9.♘db5?! This demands to be examined, but White will be the one who is struggling for a draw. [9.♘a4N is a better move, but Black is in no trouble at all: 9...♕a5+ 10.♗d2 ♗b4 11.♘xc6 bxc6 12.b3 ♘e7 13.a3 ♗xd2+ 14.♕xd2 ♕c7 15.f4 0-0 16.♗d3 dxc4 17.bxc4 c5=] 9...♗xe3 10.fxe3 ♕xe3+N [10...♘xe5? 11.♕d4+– was winning for White in Bensch, P (2197) – Geberl, H (2213) Bayern 2014.] 11.♗e2 d4! 12.♘c7+ ♔f8 13.♘xa8 dxc3 14.♕d6+ ♘ge7 15.♖d1 g5! 16.♕d3 ♘f5 17.♕xc3 ♕xc3+ 18.bxc3 ♘e3 19.♖d2 ♘xg2+ 20.♔f2 ♘f4∓

B) 8.♘b3 ♗b4 9.cxd5 exd5

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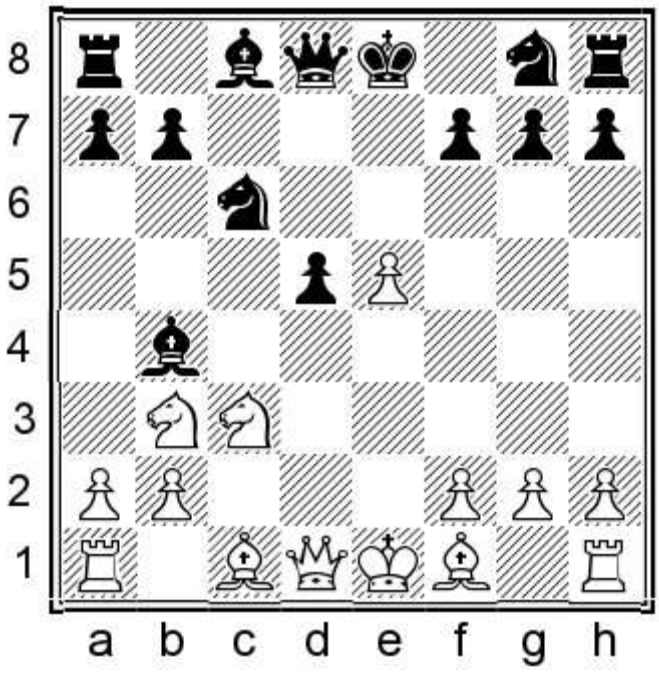
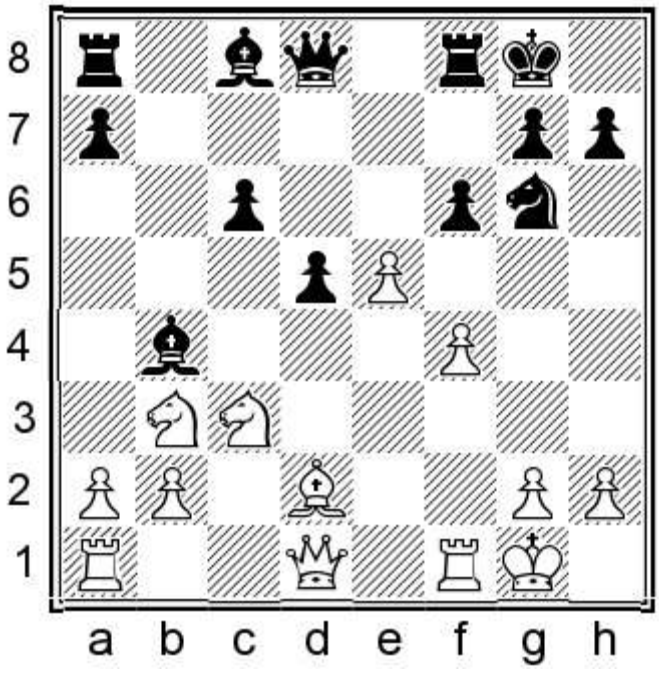


Position after: 9...exd5

10.♗b5!?N This is an interesting novelty. White wants to develop quickly and worsen Black's pawn structure by taking on c6. [10.♗d2 ♘ge7N 11.a3 ♗xc3 12.♗xc3 0-0= Black has given up the bishop pair, but his better development gives him excellent chances.] 10...♘ge7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♗xc6! bxc6 13.♗d2 ♘g6 14.f4 f6!



Position after: 14...f6!

Black needs to react in the center before White gets the time to play ♘a4, tightening the screws.

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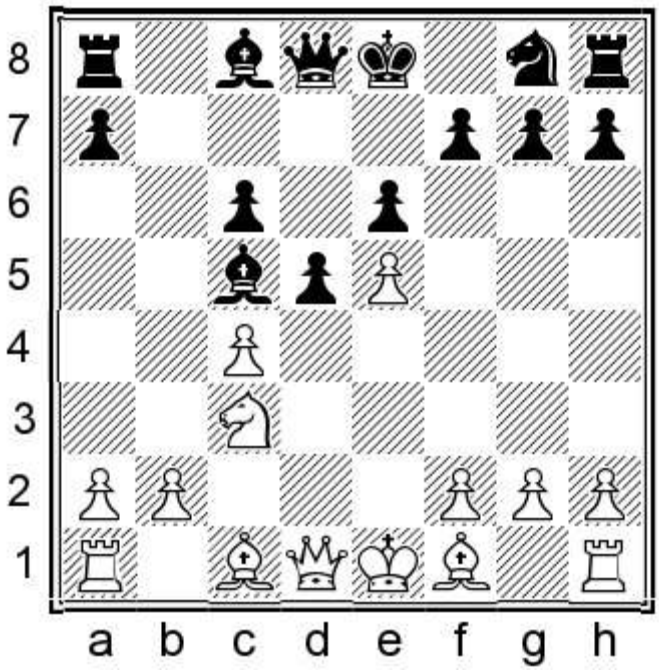
15.exf6 [15.e6 d4! 16.♘a4 ♗xd2 17.♘xd2 f5! 18.♘c5 ♖e8 19.♘db3 ♗xe6 20.♘xe6 ♖xe6 21.♕xd4 ♕b6= White has a slightly better pawn structure but Black should have no trouble holding a draw.] 15...♖xf6 16.♘xd5 ♕xd5 17.♗xb4 ♘xf4 18.♕xd5+ cxd5 19.♘d4 ♗a6 20.♖f2 ♖e8= This ending is very drawish due to the opposite-coloured bishops.

8...bxc6



Position after: 8...bxc6

9.cxd5

For the main move 9.♕g4, see the next subchapter. 9.♗d3 dxc4! 10.♗xc4 ♕xd1+ [Black won a pawn with 10...♗xf2+? 11.♔xf2 ♕h4+ 12.g3 ♕xc4 but found himself losing after 13.♕d6!+– in Iordachescu, V (2606) – Arkell, K (2513) Port Erin 2003.] 11.♘xd1 ♗d4! 12.f4 ♗b7 13.♗e3 0-0-0= Black has a weakness on c6 but White is slightly overextended and Black will create counterplay on the d-file. The endgame is equal.

9...exd5!?

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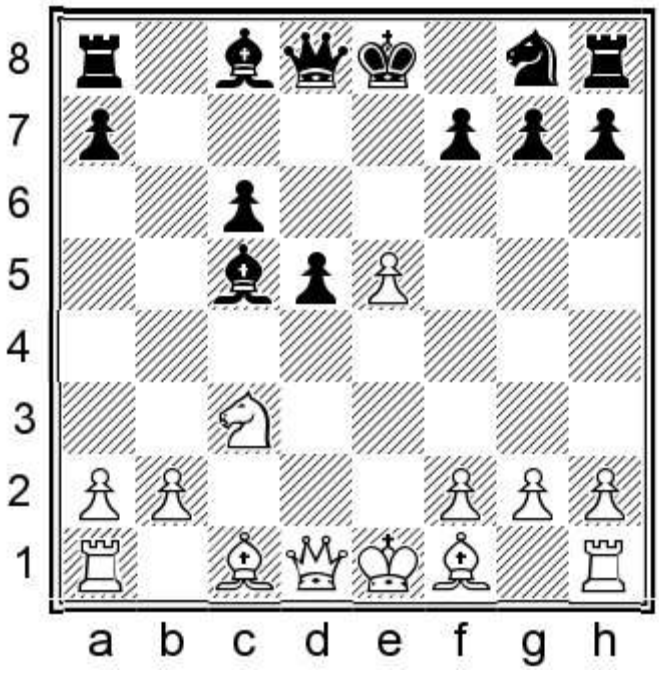
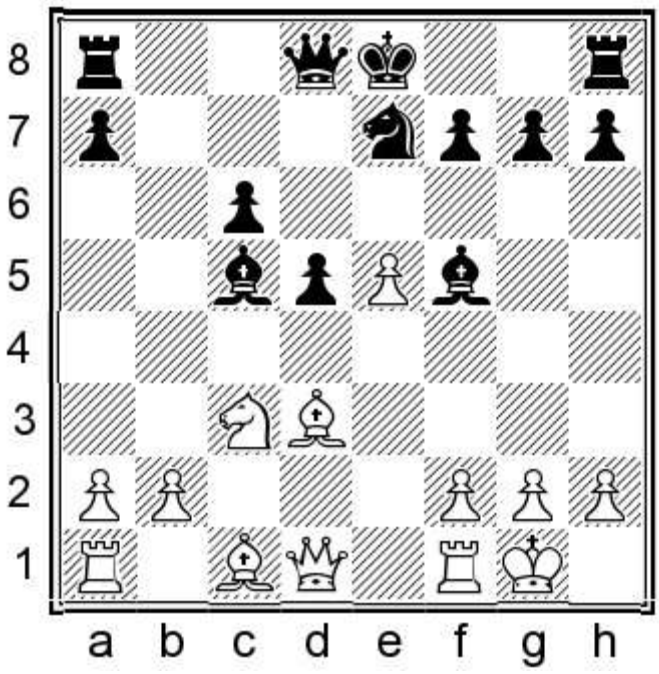


Position after: 9...exd5!?

This move has been preferred in correspondence games, and Black has had good results. Black accepts an inferior pawn structure and instead focuses on finding active play with his pieces and by pressuring the e5-pawn. The open nature of the position will naturally lead to simplifications, but Black finds equality in every variation.

9...cxd5 10.b4!∞

10.♗d3 ♘e7 11.0-0 ♗f5!



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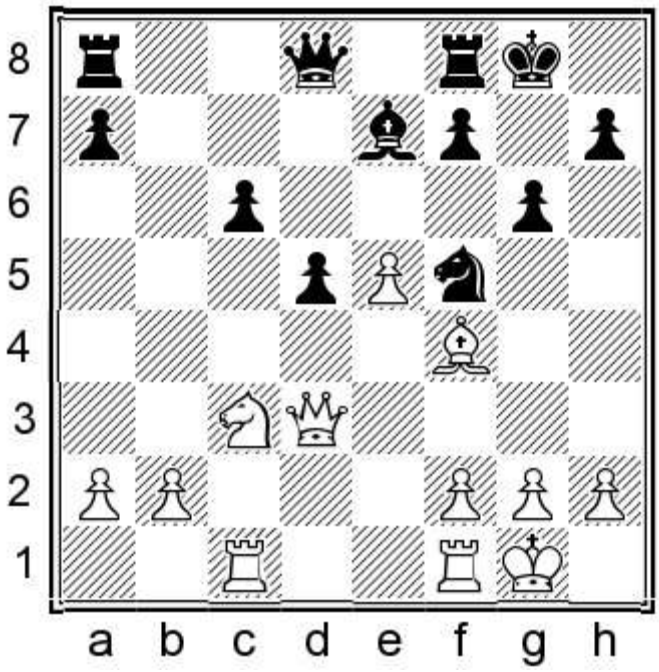
Position after: 11...♗f5!

Black wastes no time activating his pieces. White's d3-bishop is his best piece, so trading it favors Black.

12.♗g5

A) 12.♗xf5N fails to trouble Black in any way: 12...♘xf5 13.♘a4 ♗d4 14.♕c2 ♕c8=.

B) Similarly, 12.♗f4N does not pose any problems: 12...0-0 13.♗xf5 ♘xf5 14.♖c1 ♗e7 15.♕d3 g6=.



Position after: 15...g6=

C) 12.♘a4 ♗b6 Here White could transpose back into the main line (with 13.♗g5), but 13.b3 0-0 is independent:

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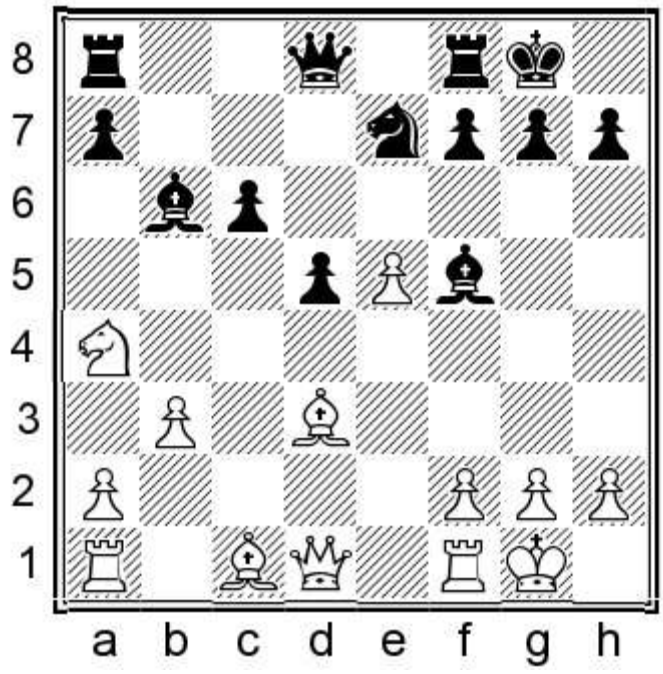

Position after: 13...0-0

C1) 14.♗a3 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♖e8 Black has resolved the pin and the e7-knight will come to g6 on the next move. Since the bishop is on a3, White has to defend the e5-pawn with f4, which is not ideal. 16.♔h1 ♘g6 17.f4 f6! Black must break up White's structure. 18.exf6 ♕xf6 19.♗b2 ♕f7=

C2) 14.♗b2 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♘g6 16.♖ac1 ♖e8! Black does not waste time defending the c6-pawn and instead counterattacks by hitting the e5-pawn. 17.♖xc6 [17.♘xb6 axb6 18.♖xc6 ♖xa2 19.♖d6 ♕c8=] 17...♘xe5 18.♗xe5 ♖xe5= Although White has a symbolic initiative, it will soon fade and the position will simply be equal.

12...♕d7!N

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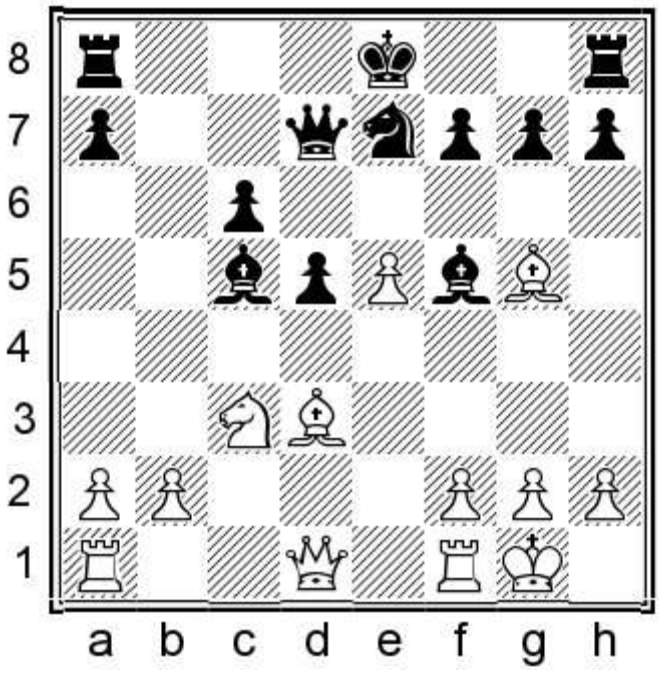

Position after: 12...♕d7!N

Black does not give in to the pressure and instead maintains his bishop on f5.

12...♗xd3?! helps White develop: 13.♕xd3 h6 [13...0-0 14.♘a4 ♗b6 15.♘xb6 axb6 16.f4!±] 14.♘a4! ♗b6 15.♗e3± White had the upper hand in Schmidt, T (2369) – Costa Trillo, V (2279) ICCF email 2015.

13.♘a4

13.♖c1 ♗b6 14.♘a4 [14.♗xe7 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♕xe7 16.♘a4 0-0 17.♖xc6 ♕xe5= is equal, as we have already seen. A lot of move orders lead to this position, so we will see it again later.] 14...♘g6! Black should continue forcing the matters to keep White from organizing his pieces and furthering his positional pressure on the queenside.

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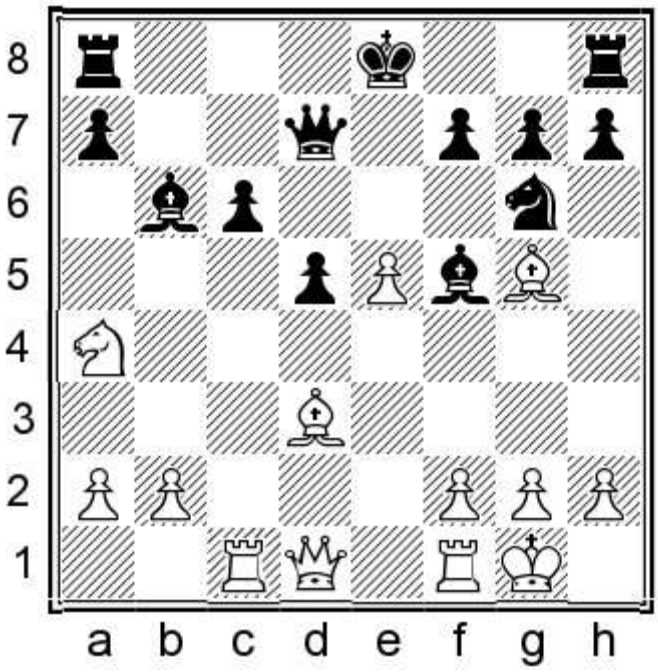
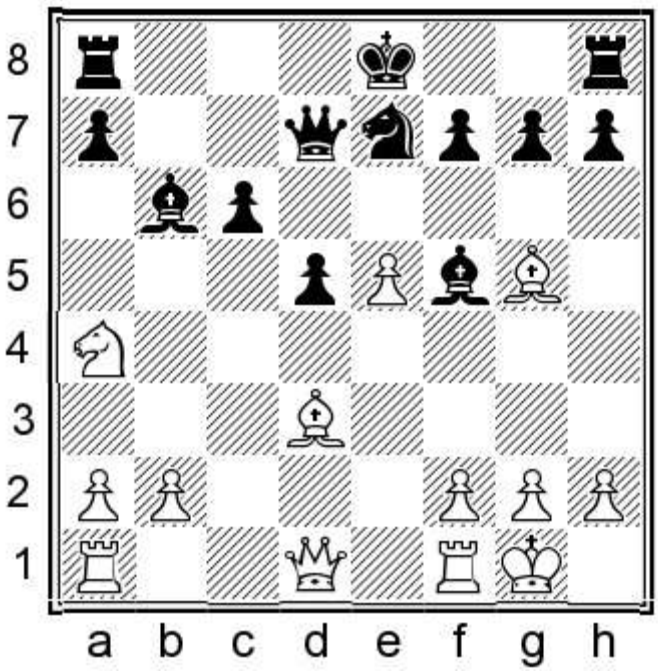


Position after: 14...♘g6!

The variation that follows is quite forcing, but Black emerges unscathed. [14...♗xd3 15.♕xd3 0-0 16.♗e3±] 15.♗xf5 ♕xf5 16.♗d2 ♘xe5 17.♘xb6 axb6 18.f4 ♘c4 19.♗b4 c5 20.♖e1+ ♔f8 21.♗c3 h5! 22.b3 ♘a5 23.♖e5 ♕xf4 24.♕xd5 ♕xc1+ 25.♖e1 ♕xe1+ 26.♗xe1 ♖e8 27.♗xa5 bxa5 28.♕xc5+ ♔g8 29.♕xa5 ♖h6= Black's rooks will soon create massive headaches for White, impeding him from promoting his queenside pawns.

13...♗b6



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Position after: 13...♗b6

14.♗xe7

14.♖e1 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♕f5= Black is completely fine once the queens come off the board.

14...♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♕xe7 16.♖fc1

16.♖ac1 0-0 17.♖xc6 ♕xe5=

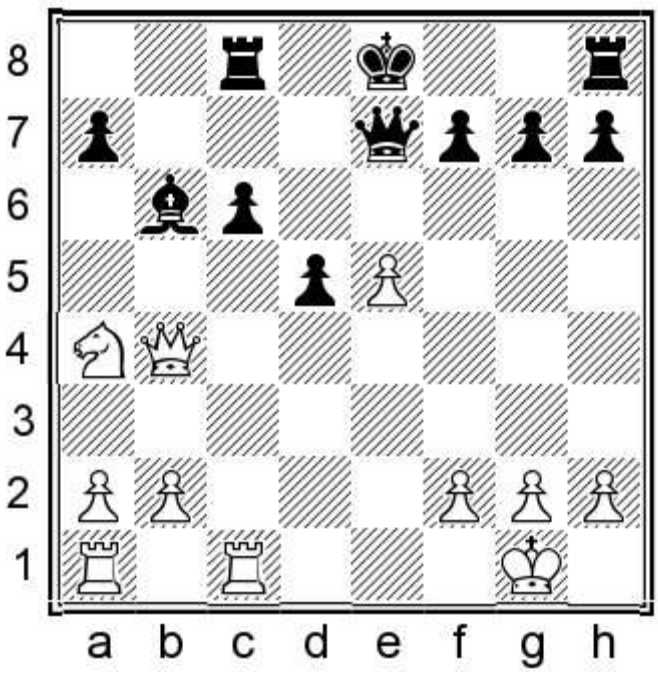
16...♕e6!

Whereas 16...0-0 was possible after 16.♖ac1, it does not work here since after 17.♘xb6 axb6 18.♖xc6 ♕xe5 19.♖xb6± White is still defending the a2-pawn.

17.♕a3

17.♕b3 0-0 18.♘xb6 ♖ab8 19.♕a4 ♖xb6=

17...♖c8 18.♕b4 ♕e7=



Position after: 18...♕e7=

Black will castle on the next move and White's initiative has vanished.

c) 9.♕g4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.c4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 e6 7.♘c3 ♗c5 8.♘xc6 bxc6 9.♕g4!?

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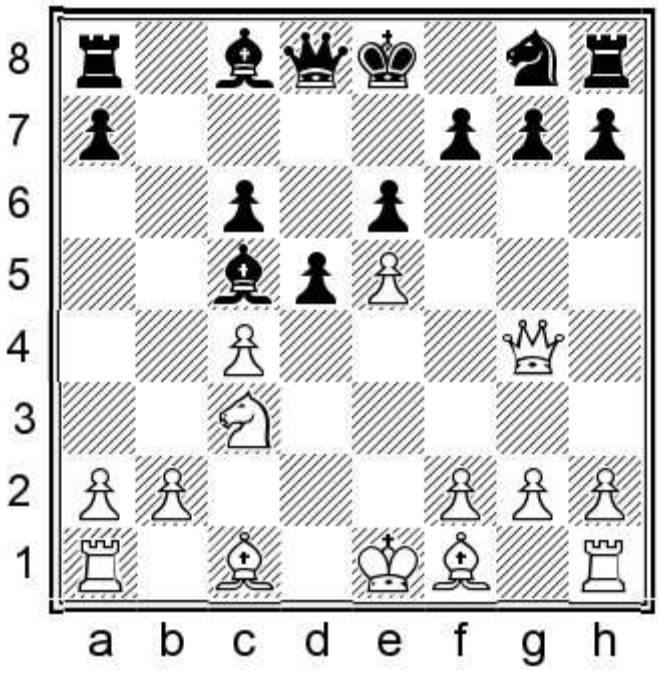

Position after: 9.♕g4!?

This is White's most ambitious continuation. Black has no choice but to sacrifice his kingside pawns, and the game becomes very complex.

9...♘e7 10.♕xg7 ♖g8

10...♘g6 is imprecise: 11.♗e2 ♗d4. [Or 11...♗f8 12.♕f6 ♗e7 13.♕f3 d4 14.♘e4∞ when Black's position looks quite precarious.] The game Butov, Y (2311) – Andeer, S (2474) ICCF email 2014 was drawn in this position, but play could have continued 12.0-0N 12...♗xe5 13.♕h6 ♕h4 14.♕xh4 ♘xh4 15.♖e1±.

11.♕xh7 ♖b8!

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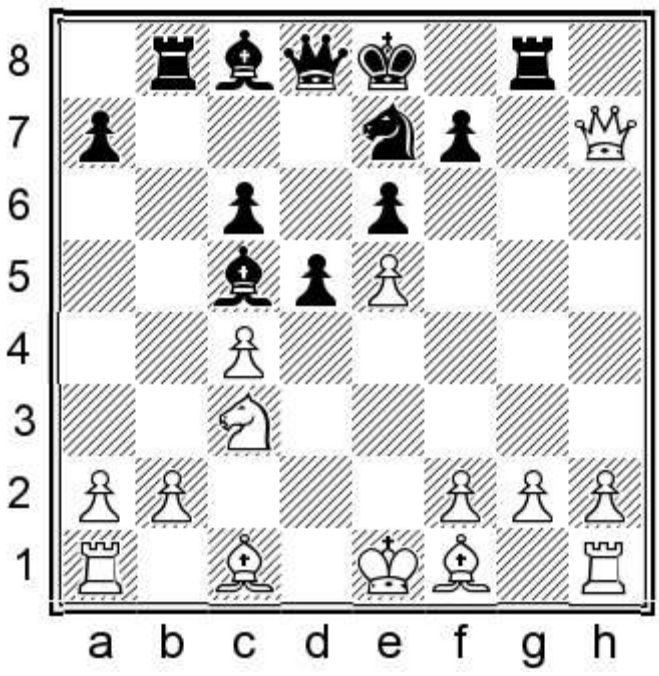

Position after: 11...♖b8!

This position closely resembles some variations from the Winawer French. Black has sacrificed two pawns for the initiative and will now pressure White on both sides of the board. White's king is stranded in the center, ensuring that Black's initiative will persist well into the middlegame. The position is double-edged, and Black has excellent chances, especially in a practical game.

12.♕c2

A) 12.g3N White wants to develop his f1-bishop and castle, but he is not in time. 12...♕a5! 13.♗e2 d4! 14.♗h5 ♖g6!? Black gives up the exchange to keep his king safe. He will regain the material shortly on c3. [14...dxc3 15.♗xf7+ ♔d8 16.b4!∞] 15.♗xg6 ♘xg6 16.♗d2 dxc3 17.♗xc3 ♗b4 18.0-0 ♗xc3 19.bxc3 ♕xe5∞

B) 12.♖b1N White defends his b2-pawn so that he can develop his c1-bishop. Moreover, pushing b4 with tempo is an idea that may become useful later on. 12...♕c7! 13.f4 ♕b6!

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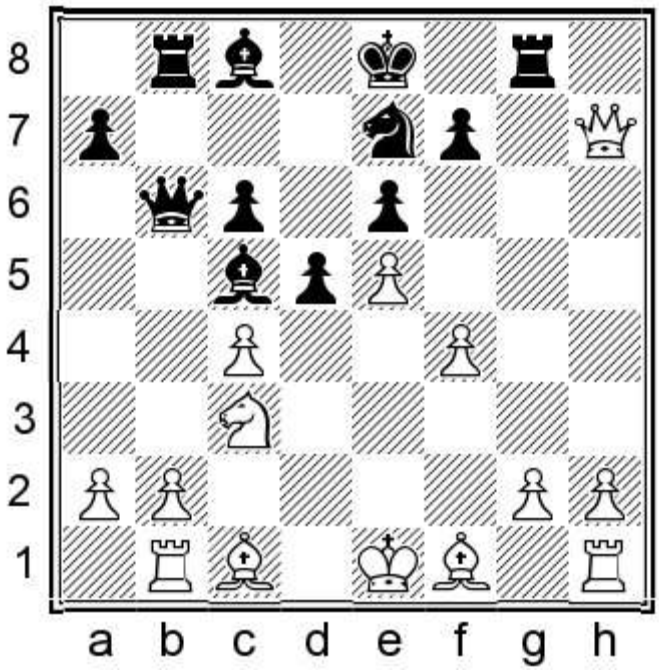

Position after: 13...♕b6!

Black made a point of provoking f4, and it is now time to exploit the weaknesses created by that pawn move.

B1) 14.♕c2 is logical, but Black's initiative is menacing after 14...♘f5→.

B2) 14.g3 ♗a6!? [14...♖g6!? is also interesting – the idea is to lock the White queen out of the game. However, one good line is enough.] 15.cxd5 [15.♕c2 dxc4! Black takes a pawn and – more importantly – opens up the position to attack White's king. 16.a3 ♖d8 17.♘e4 ♘f5 18.♗xc4 – if 18.b4 ♗g1! Black will play ...♘e3 soon and White's position is on the brink of collapse. – 18...♗xc4 19.♕xc4 ♗xa3!= Black is only one pawn down and White's problems remain: his king is exposed in the center of the board and his pieces are uncoordinated.; 15.♗d2 transposes to our main line (14.♗d2 ♗a6 15.g3).] 15...cxd5 16.♕c2 [16.♗d2 would tranpose to 14.♗d2 ♗a6 15.cxd5 cxd5 16.g3.] 16...♔f8!∞ Black shelters his king to prevent ♕a4+, and he is ready to continue his attack.

B3) 14.♗d2 ♗a6

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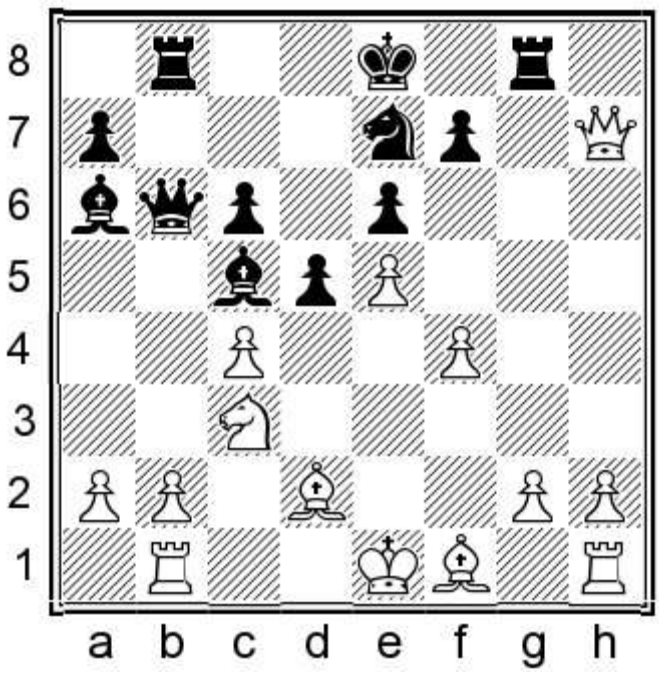

Position after: 14...♗a6

15.g3 [15.cxd5 cxd5 16.g3 ♔f8! This is an important idea. Black protects the g8-rook so that he can bring his knight into the game. Bringing the knight into the game with ...♘f5 will significantly strengthen Black's attack. 17.♕h6+ ♖g7 18.♕h5! White wants to bring his queen back. For example, 18...♘f5 is met by 19.♗xa6 ♕xa6 20.♕e2!. However, Black has no intentions of giving White this luxury: 18...♗f2+! 19.♔d1 d4! 20.♘e4 ♗e3 White has nothing better than a perpetual check to escape Black's assault. 21.♘f6 ♕c6 22.♗xa6 ♕xh1+ 23.♗e1 ♗f2 24.♘d7+ ♔g8 25.♘f6+=] 15...♔f8! Again, Black defends the g8-rook to free the e7-knight. [15...♗e3!? is also worthy of consideration.] 16.♗d3 [16.♘a4 ♗f2+ 17.♔d1 ♕d4 18.♕d3 dxc4 19.♕xd4 ♗xd4⩱ Black's initiative persists into the endgame.] 16...dxc4 17.♗e4 ♖d8 18.♕h6+ ♖g7 19.f5!? White can try to develop an initiative of his own but Black is simply too active: 19...exf5 20.♗g5 fxe4 21.♗f6 ♘f5 22.♗xg7+ ♘xg7 23.♕h8+ ♔e7 24.♕xg7 ♖d3∞.

12...♘f5

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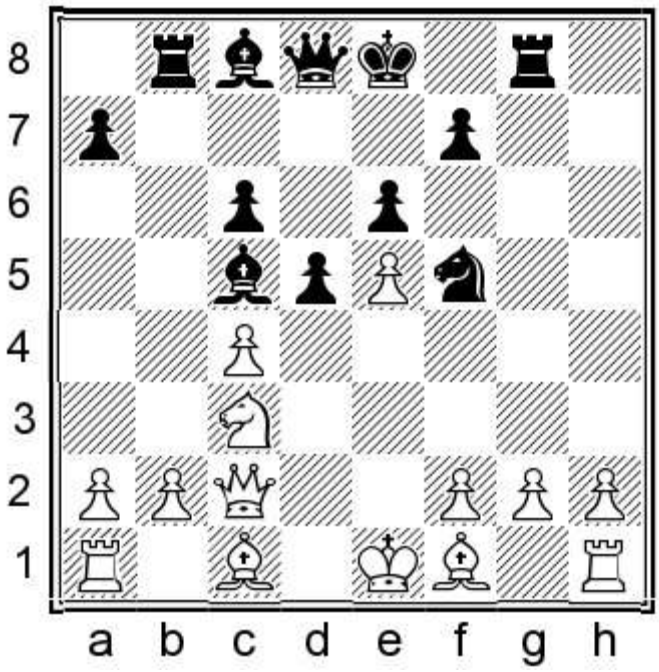

Position after: 12...♘f5

13.g3

A) 13.♗d2 White wants to castle long, but Black can prevent this with 13...♗xf2+! and White cannot escape a perpetual check: 14.♔xf2 ♕h4+ 15.g3 ♘xg3 16.hxg3 ♕xg3+ 17.♔e2 ♕g4+=.

B) 13.h4 is a typical idea in the Winawer French: White wants to advance the pawn to distract Black from his own initiative. However, it is simply too slow in this position. 13...♕c7 14.♗f4 ♖g4! 15.g3 ♘d4! 16.♕c1 f6!∞

C) 13.♖b1 ♕c7 14.♗f4 f6!

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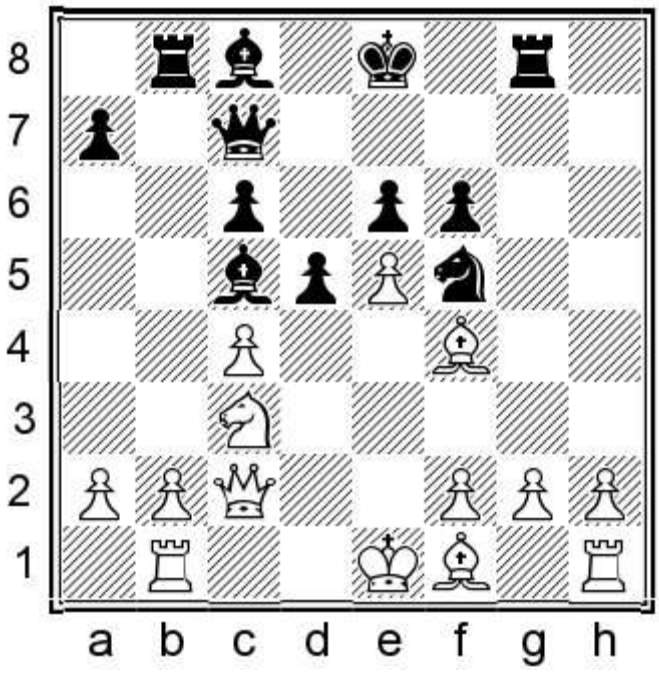
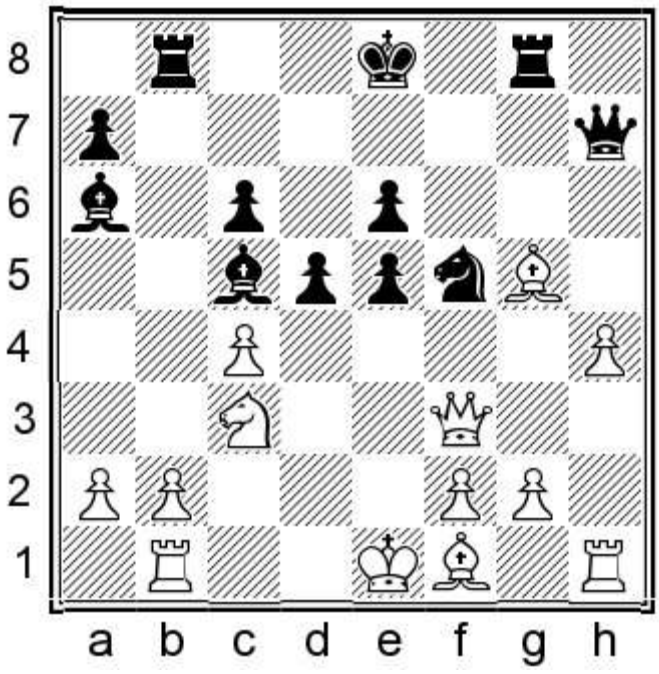


Position after: 14...f6!

Black has no reason to back down from confrontation: his pieces are all ideally placed to attack. 15.♕e2 [15.cxd5 exd5 16.♗d3 ♘d4 17.♕d1 ♗g4 18.♕a4 fxe5 19.♗g3 ♔f7!∞] 15...♔f8! Anticipating ♕h5. 16.h4 ♗a6 17.♕f3 [17.b3 ♗b4 18.♗d2 ♘d4! 19.♕h5 ♘f5!= White has nothing better than repeating with ♕e2, since ...♕xe5 is a serious threat.] 17...fxe5 18.♗h6+ ♔e8 19.♗g5 [19.♕h5+ ♕f7 20.♕xf7+ ♔xf7 21.♗d2 ♔g6!= Black is still a pawn down, but his huge pawn center gives him an dangerous initiative.] 19...♕h7!



Position after: 19...♕h7!

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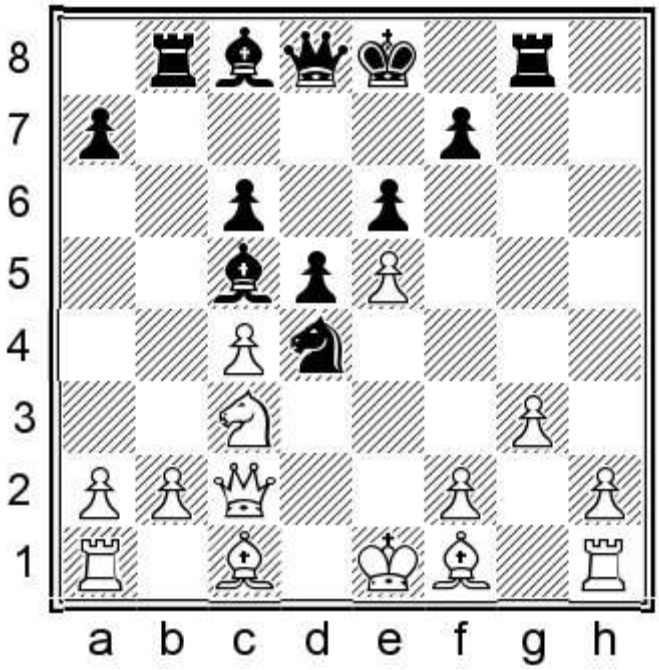
The position is extremely messy, and the following lines are a display of the tactical brilliance that can ensue. 20.cxd5 ♗xf1 21.dxe6 [21.♔xf1 ♖xg5 22.dxe6 ♘e3+ 23.♔e2 ♕c2+ 24.♔e1 ♘xg2+ 25.♔f1 ♘e3+=] 21...♗b5 22.a4 ♗xa4 23.0-0 ♘d4 24.♕f7+ ♕xf7 25.exf7+ ♔xf7 26.♘xa4 ♖xg5! 27.♖fd1 ♘e2+ 28.♔f1 ♘g3+! 29.fxg3 ♖f5+ 30.♔e2 ♖f2+ 31.♔d3 e4+ 32.♔c4 ♖c2+ 33.♘c3 ♗f8= Even with so few pieces left on the board, Black's initiative makes up for the material deficit.

13...♘d4!



Position after: 13...♘d4!

The knight is ready to exploit White's weaknesses.

14.♕d1

A) 14.♕d3 ♗a6 15.♕h7 ♖f8 16.cxd5 ♘f3+ 17.♔d1 ♗xf1 18.♖xf1 cxd5⩱

B) 14.♕h7 ♘f3+ 15.♔e2 [15.♔d1 ♖f8 16.cxd5 ♘xe5 17.♕g7 ♕d6∞] 15...♘d4+ 16.♔d1 [16.♔e1 ♖f8∞ White has lost his castling rights, so his king is stuck in the center.] 16...♖f8

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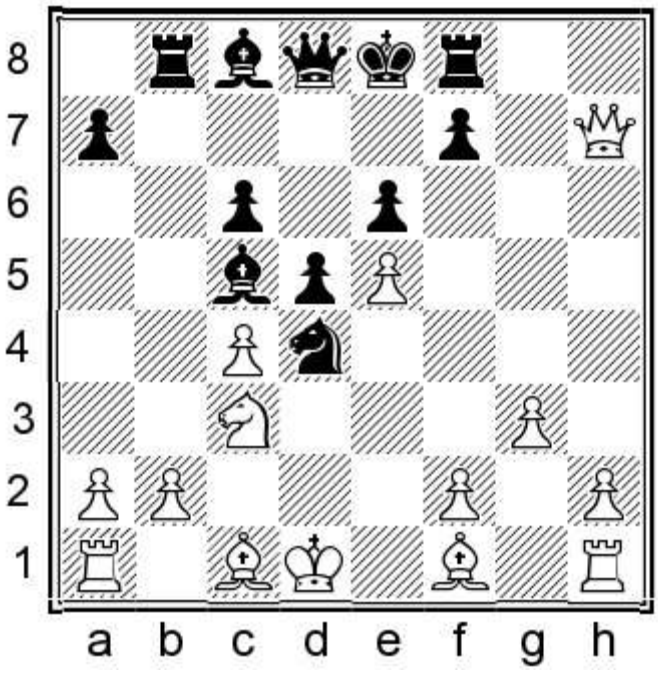
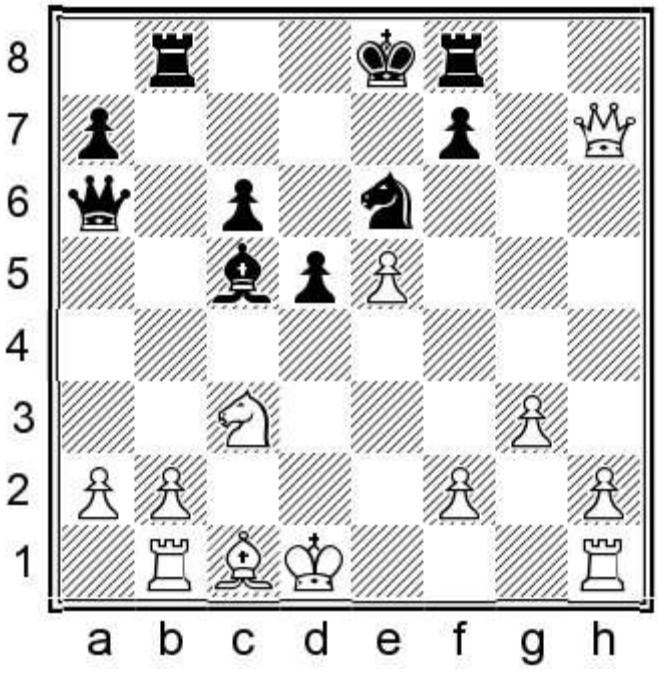


Position after: 16...♖f8

B1) 17.♗h6 ♘f5! 18.♖b1 [Taking the exchange only helps Black since White is unable to control Black's initiative on the dark squares. 18.♗xf8 ♗xf8∓] 18...dxc4+ 19.♔c2 ♕d4∞

B2) 17.♗e3 ♕a5 18.♕d3 ♗a6 19.♗xd4 dxc4 20.♕e4 ♖d8 21.♔c2 ♗xd4 22.♕xc6+ ♔e7∞

B3) 17.cxd5 exd5 18.♗h3 ♗xh3 19.♕xh3 ♕a5 20.♕h7 ♕a6 21.♖b1 ♘e6⩱



Position after: 21...♘e6⩱

Although White has managed to trade the light-squared bishops and somewhat simplify the position,

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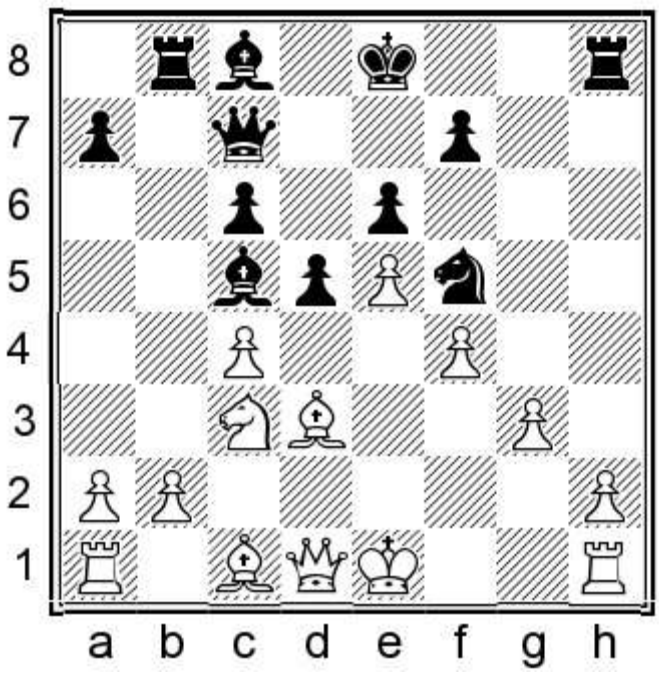
Black's attack continues and White's king remains unsafe.

14...♕c7 15.f4 ♘f5!

The knight comes back to its logical post, whence it controls the e3-square. Moreover, ...d4 is now an option.

16.♗d3 ♖h8!



Position after: 16...♖h8!

Threatening ...♘xg3.

17.♕f3

17.♗xf5 nullifies the immediate threats but gives up a great piece. 17...exf5 18.♗d2 [18.♘a4 dxc4! 19.♘xc5 ♕a5+ 20.♕d2 ♕xc5 21.h4 ♗e6=] 18...♕b6! 19.♘a4 ♗f2+ 20.♔f1 ♕d4 21.♗c3 ♕xd1+ 22.♖xd1 ♗xg3∞

17...♗a6

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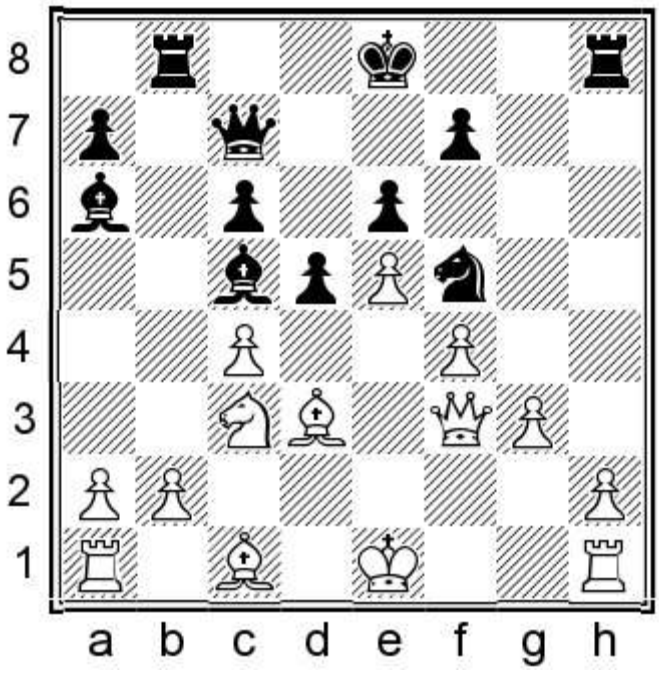


Position after: 17...♗a6

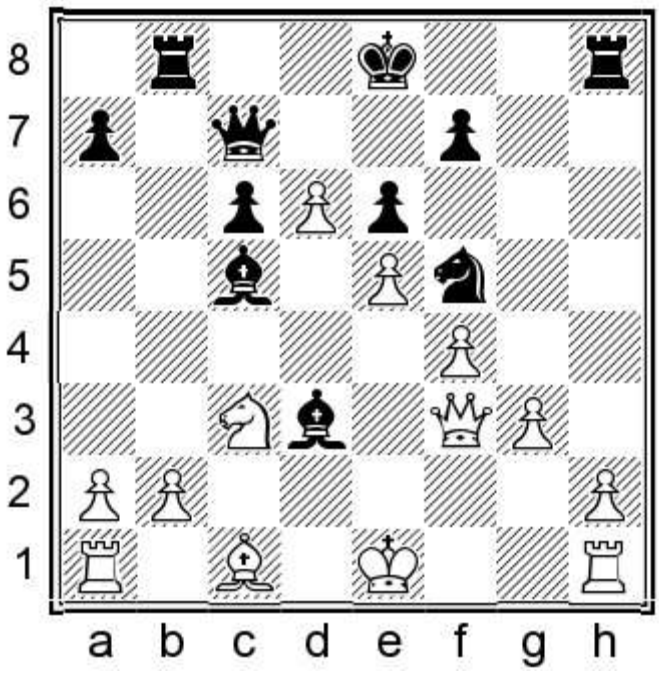
Black's initiative continues and White has no way of sheltering his king.

18.cxd5

A) 18.h4 ♗xc4 19.♗xc4 dxc4∞

B) 18.♔f1 ♘d4! 19.♕d1 ♘f5!=

18...♗xd3 19.d6!



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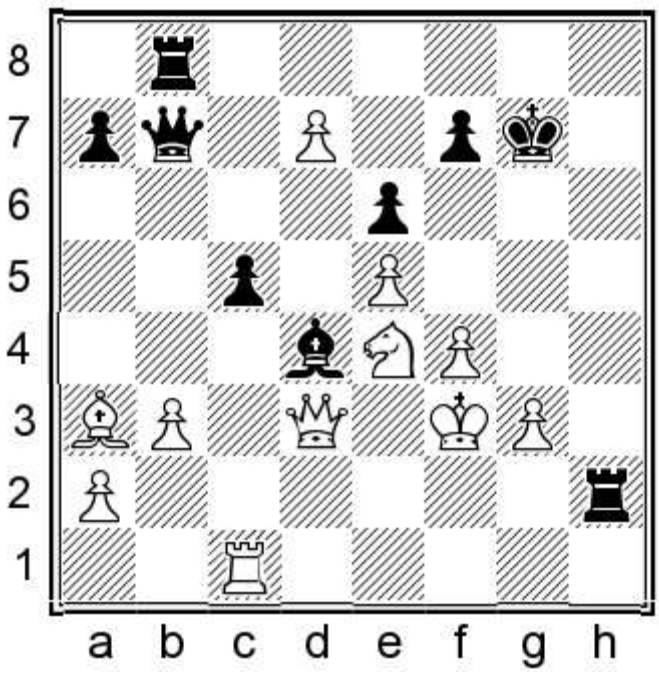
Position after: 19.d6!

A nice intermediate move, but it does not suffice to end Black's initiative.

19.♕xd3 cxd5⩱

19...♕b6! 20.♕xd3 ♗f2+ 21.♔e2 ♘xg3+ 22.hxg3 ♖xh1 23.d7+ ♔f8 24.b3 ♖h2 25.♔f3 ♔g7 26.♗a3 c5 27.♘e4 ♗d4 28.♖c1 ♕b7∞



Position after: 28...♕b7∞

The position remains very unclear, but the computer unsurprisingly assures us that it is balanced.

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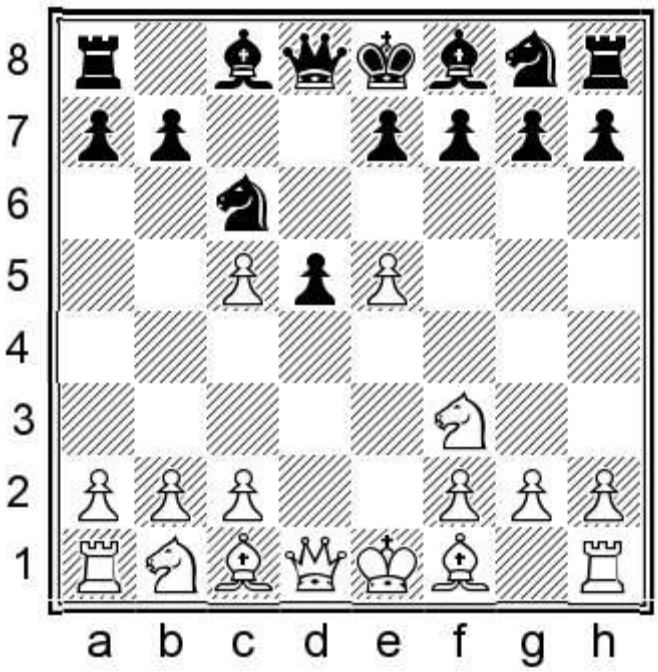
Chapter 8
4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5



Chapter Guide

Chapter 8 – 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5 ♗g4

a) 6.a3

b) 6.♗b5

c) 6.c3 e6 7.b4 g6 8.♗b5

d) 6.c3 e6 7.b4 g6 8.♘bd2

e) 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3 a6 8.♕b3

f) 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3 a6 8.♘bd2

a) 6.a3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5

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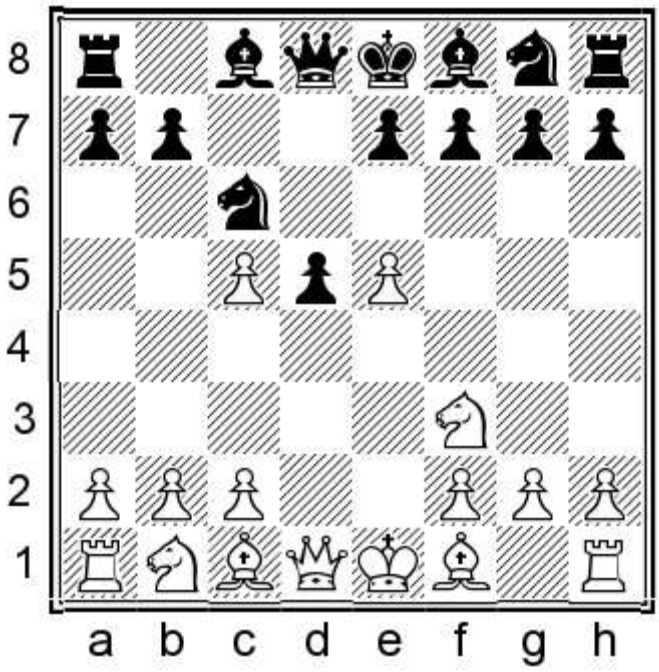

Position after: 5.dxc5

The positions that arise after 5.c4 (discussed in the previous chapter) are strikingly different from most of the positions that we encounter in the Advance Caro-Kann with 3...c5. With 5.c4, White opens the center and seeks to create problems for Black with quick and active piece play. With the text move, instead, White steers the game into a more familiar direction, akin to what we have already seen after 4.dxc5. As you might expect, the inclusion of ♘f3 and ...♘c6 makes a big difference. In this variation, Black cannot recapture the c5-pawn immediately and instead has to focus and counterattacking in the center. Quite often, Black will in fact forego recapturing on c5 and instead regain the pawn by taking on e5. This leads to unbalanced positions where both sides' respective pawn majorities dictate the game.

5...♗g4

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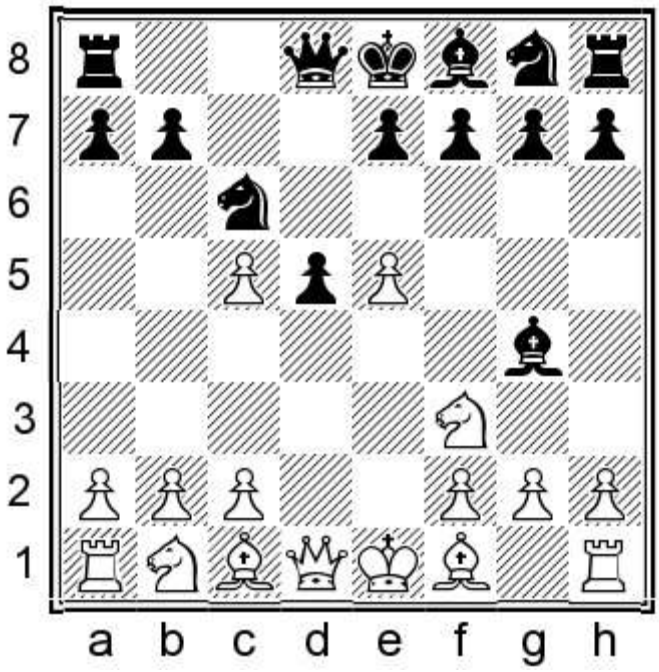

Position after: 5...♗g4

White has several continuations, but they all have the same common idea: to protect the b4-pawn. We begin by examining 6.a3 in this subchapter.

Continuing with 5...e6 simply leads to a bad version of the 4.dxc5 e6 lines: 6.a3! ♗xc5 7.b4 ♗b6 8.♗b2 ♘ge7 9.♘bd2 0-0 10.♗d3 ♘g6 11.b5± Black was left with little counterplay and White had a much more comfortable position in Volokitin, A (2627) – Pelletier, Y (2555) Batumi 2019.

6.a3

White supports b4 with the idea of protecting the c5-pawn. The idea is to be able to defend the e5-pawn with ♗b2, but Black can complicate matters.

6.♗e3 does not require much independent consideration, since the game will sooner or later transpose to one of the lines we discuss later. 6...e6

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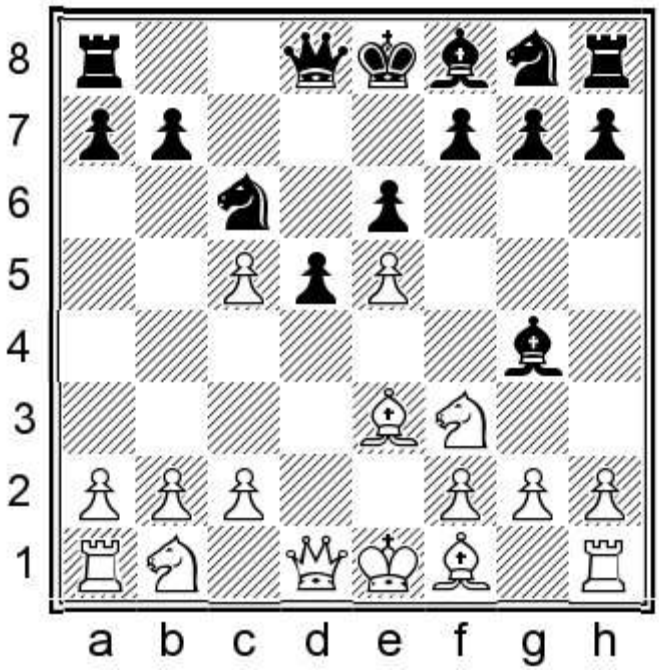

Position after: 6...e6

[6...d4!? is also playable, but there is no need to study a separate response to 6.♗e3.] 7.♘bd2 This is the only idea that would not be possible with any other move order. However, Black equalizes easily. [7.♗b5 ♕a5+ 8.♘c3 is covered under 6.♗b5 ♕a5+ 7.♘c3 e6 8.♗e3; and 7.c3 under 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3.] 7...d4! 8.♗f4 ♗xc5= Black has recaptured the c5-pawn and has a great position.

6...e6 7.b4 a5!

Black forces c3, so that ♗b2 will no longer defend the e5-pawn. The text move is weakening, however, and should not be played in every variation.

8.c3N

White has secured his c5-pawn, so Black must now shift his focus to the e5-pawn.

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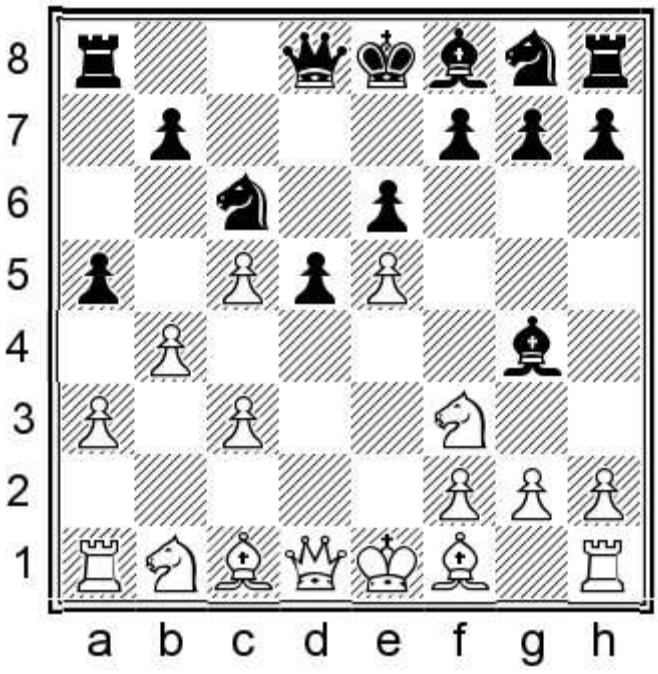


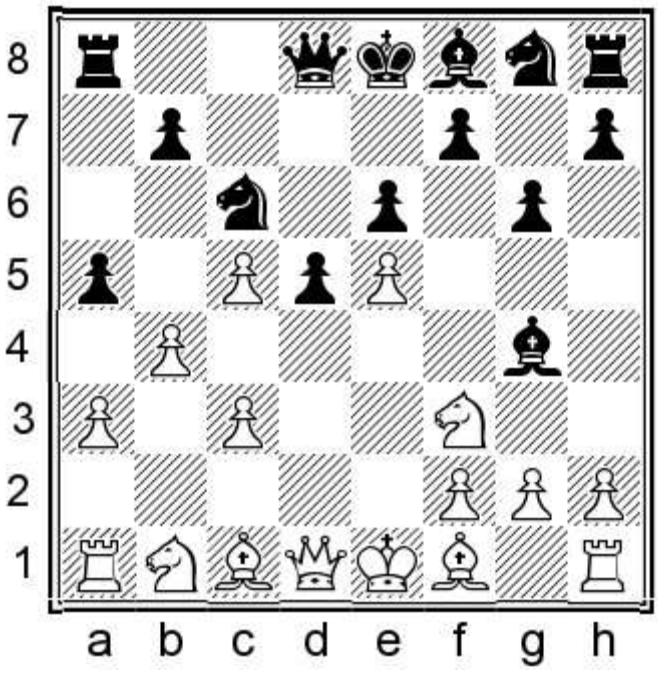
Position after: 8.c3N

Although this position has (surprisingly) never been reached before, finding equality for Black is not trivial.

8...♗xf3!?

Black needs to take on f3 before White plays ♘bd2 so that White is forced to expose his queen. Black will then go after the e5-pawn and seek counterplay through the center.

Another possibility is 8...g6:



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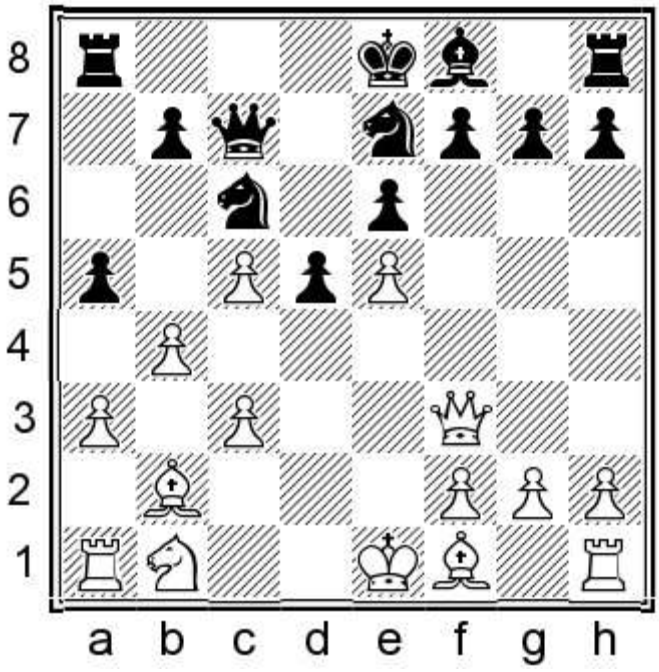
Position after: 8...g6

This move echoes the 6.c3 e6 7.b4 g6 variation, but the inclusion of ...a5 and a3 favors White because it weakens Black's queenside.

A) 9.♗b5 does not help White defend the e5-pawn: 9...♗g7 10.0-0 [10.♗f4? is a desperate attempt to hold on the e5-pawn: 10...axb4 11.cxb4 f6!∓ Black renounces his claim on the e5-pawn and instead opens the position, with deadly effect.] 10...♘ge7 11.♘bd2 ♗xe5 12.♗b2 ♗g7 13.h3 ♗xf3 14.♘xf3 0-0= We have reached a very typical position for this line. White has a strong pawn mass on the queenside, but Black is very solid and has the upper hand in the center.

B) 9.♘bd2 ♗g7 10.h3!? White gives up the e5-pawn, but in return he will have the bishop pair and more space. 10...♗xf3 11.♘xf3 ♘xe5 12.♘xe5 ♗xe5 13.♗b5+ ♔f8 14.♗d2∞ Although the position is certainly playable for Black, I would feel more comfortable with the White pieces.

9.♕xf3 ♕c7 10.♗b2 ♘ge7!



Position after: 10...♘ge7!

Black continues his development and threatens to play ...♘xe5 since ♗b5+ can now be met by ...♘7c6. That being said, Black is not in a rush to regain the pawn since White is unable to properly defend it. Black should only snatch the pawn off the board if he can do it without wasting time or giving White additional options.

Case in point, Black can recapture the e5-pawn with 10...♕xe5+ but there is no hurry to do so yet, especially since the queen is misplaced on e5. 11.♕e2 ♕f5 12.♕d3±

11.♗b5

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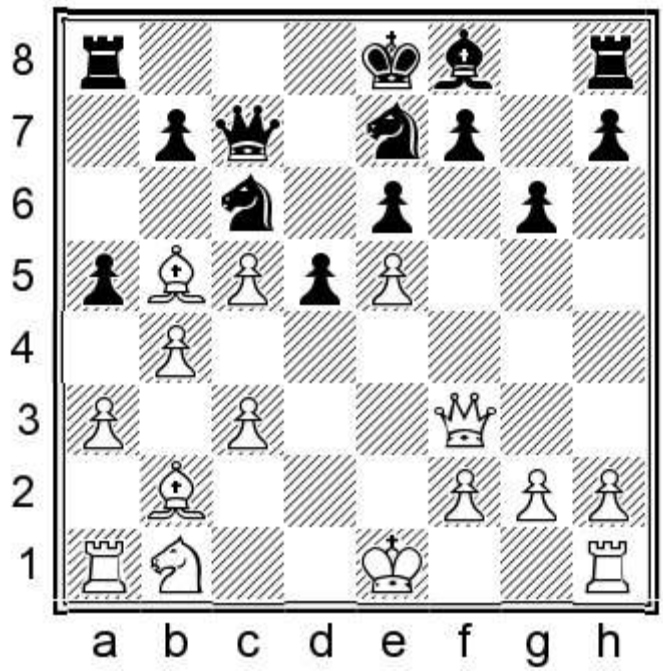
A) 11.♗d3 allows Black to go after the e5-pawn with 11...♘g6! and White fails to find any advantage: 12.♕e3 ♕xe5 13.♕xe5 ♘gxe5 14.♗b5 g5=.

B) 11.♘d2 g6! This illustrates my point. Black wants to play ...♗g7 and ...♗xe5. 12.b5 [12.♕f6 takes away Black's castling rights but White is losing time by moving his queen. 12...♖g8 13.♕f3 ♗g7 14.♕d1 ♗xe5 15.♘f3 ♗f6 16.♗e2 ♔f8! 17.0-0 ♔g7= The king walks to g7 and Black is able to finish his development.] 12...♘xe5 13.♕f6 ♖g8 Although Black has lost his right to castle on the kingside, White has weakened his position whereas Black remains solid in the center of the board. 14.b6 ♕b8 15.♗b5+ ♘7c6 16.0-0 ♗e7 17.♕f4 ♗xc5 18.♕a4 ♕d6∞ White has compensation for the pawn, but not enough for an advantage.

11...g6



Position after: 11...g6

12.♕e2

White retreats his queen so that he can protect his e5-pawn with f4. This is by far the most critical continuation and it requires Black to play creatively to generate counterplay.

12.♕f6 is possible here too, but White does not benefit from forcing ...♖g8. 12...♖g8 13.♕g5 [13.0-0 ♗g7 14.♕f3 ♗xe5=] 13...♘f5 14.0-0 ♗g7= The position is closed and Black's king is safe on e8. Ideally, Black wants to play ...♗xe5 and transfer his king to g7, although he might also castle long in certain variations.

12...♗g7 13.f4 g5!

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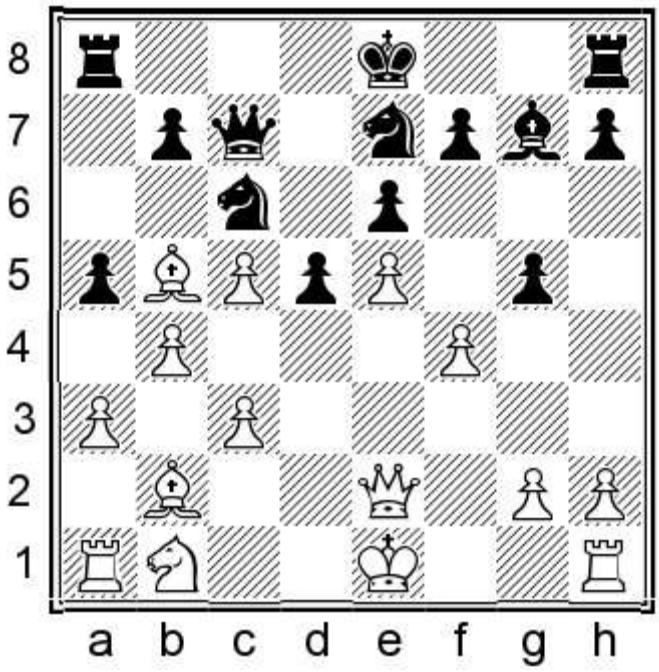

Position after: 13...g5!

This is Black's key idea. Black cannot stay passive and let White establish a bind in the center.

14.g3

A) 14.♕g4 h5! 15.♕xg5 ♘f5∞ White's queen is trapped and Black has a repetition at his disposal at any time with ...♗h6 and ...♗g7.

B) 14.fxg5 h6! Black should be relentless in his quest to open the position since White lacks coordination. 15.gxh6 ♗xe5=

14...gxf4 15.gxf4 ♖g8

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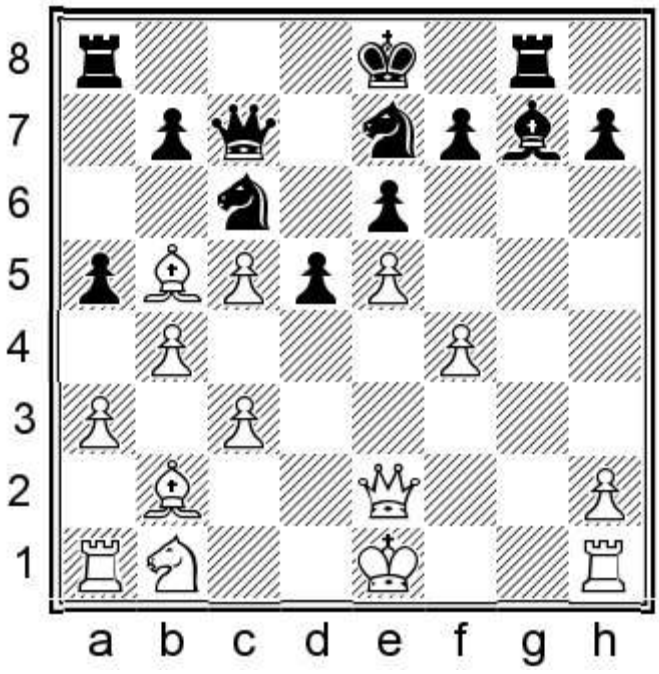
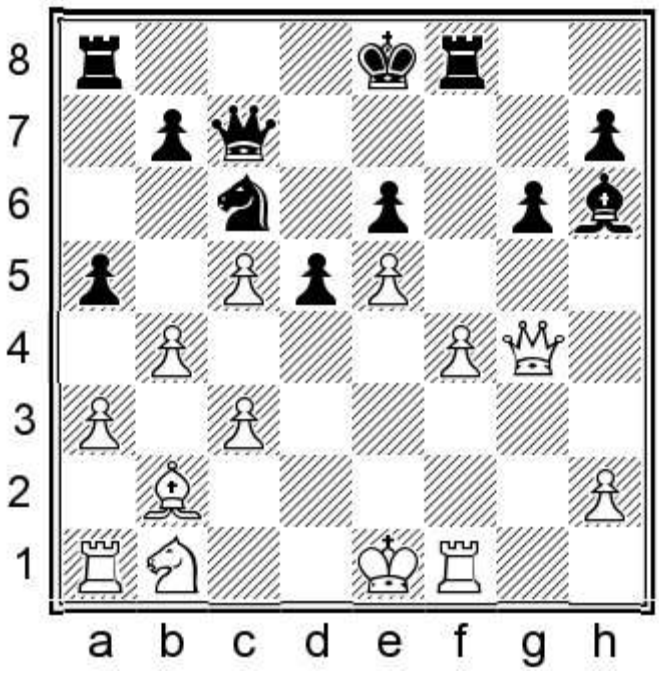


Position after: 15...♖g8

Black will now go after White's f4-pawn and try to open the position with ...d4. White is unable to contain Black's initiative because he lags in development. The best he can do is get his king to safety on the queenside and react to Black's initiative.

16.♘d2

16.♖f1 ♗h6 17.♗d3 ♘g6 18.♗xg6 fxg6 19.♕g4 ♖f8!?



Position after: 19...♖f8!?

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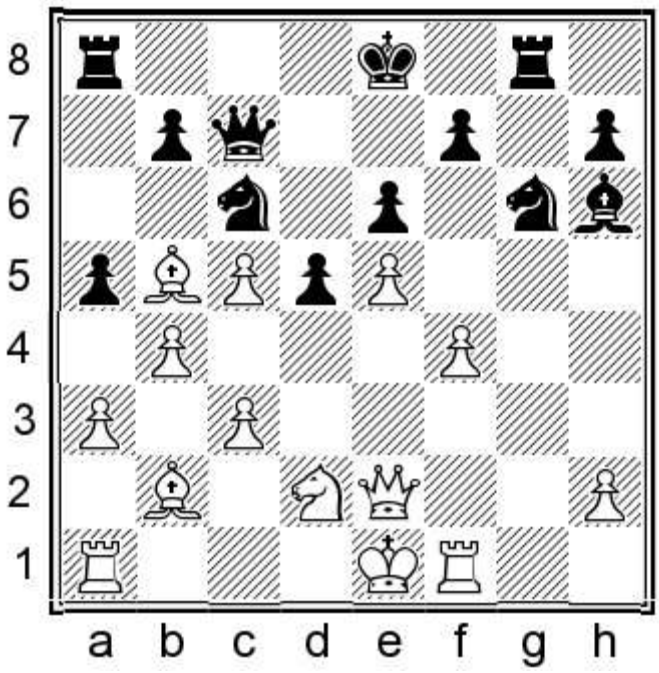
It’s impossible to stem the flow of Black’s active sacrificial ideas. 20.♕xe6+ ♘e7 21.♗c1 ♖f5♾

16...♘g6 17.♖f1

17.♕e3 ♗h6 18.♖f1 transposes.

17...♗h6



Position after: 17...♗h6

Continuing the assault on White’s central pawns.

18.♕e3

18.0-0-0 0-0-0 19.♗xc6 ♕xc6 20.♔b1 [20.♕e3 would transpose to our main line.; 20.f5 ♘h4 21.fxe6 fxe6 22.♔b1 ♖g2 23.♕d3 ♗xd2 24.♖xd2 ♖xd2 25.♕xd2 ♘f5=] 20...♘xf4 21.♕e3 ♕a4 22.c6!? ♖g2! 23.cxb7+ ♔xb7∞

18...0-0-0 19.♗xc6 ♕xc6 20.0-0-0 ♕a4!

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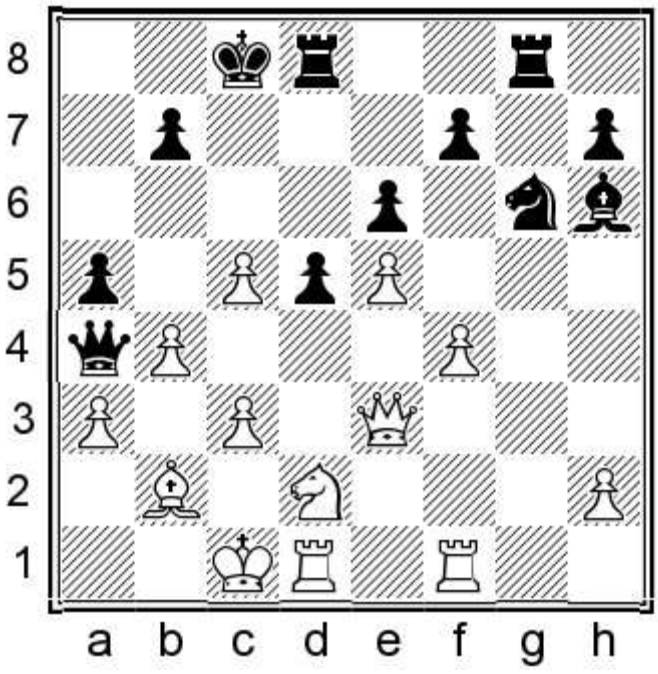
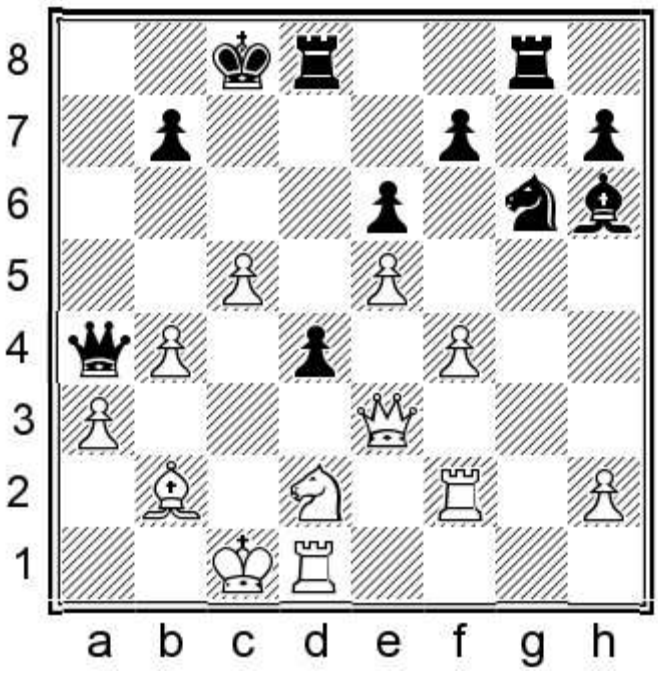


Position after: 20...♕a4!

Black combines threats on the kingside with threats on the queenside to prevent White from regrouping. White has quite a few options, but the two lines that follow serve as examples of how the game can proceed.

21.♖de1

21.♖f2 axb4 22.cxb4 d4!



Position after: 22...d4!

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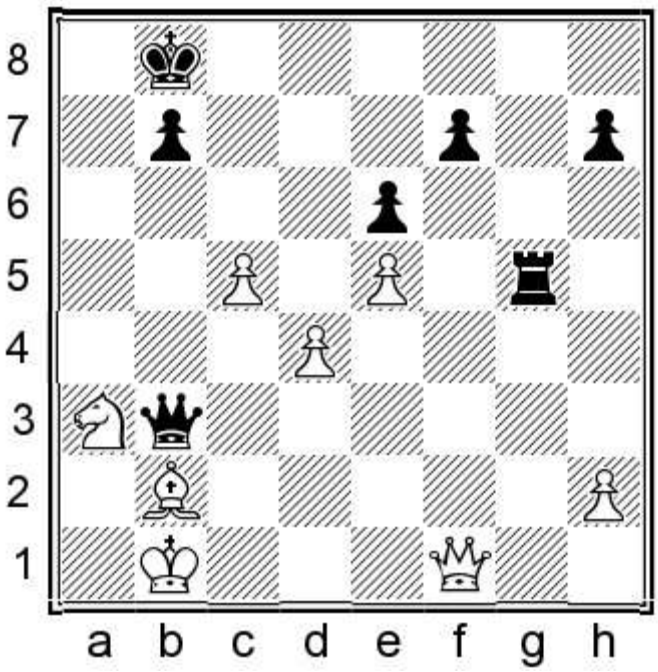
23.♗xd4 ♘xf4 24.♖xf4 ♖g4 25.♖df1 ♗xf4 26.♖xf4 ♖xf4 27.♕xf4 ♕xa3+ 28.♗b2 ♕d3=

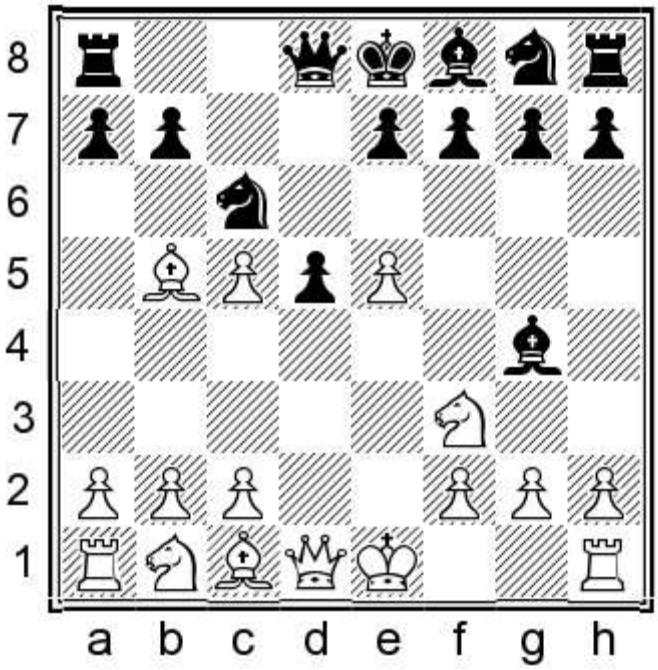
21...♔b8 22.♔b1 ♘xf4! 23.♖xf4 d4! 24.cxd4 axb4 25.♘c4 bxa3 26.♘xa3 ♖g4 27.♖ef1 ♖xf4 28.♖xf4 ♖g8 29.♕e4 ♗xf4 30.♕xf4 ♕b3 31.♕f1 ♖g5!∞



Position after: 31...♖g5!∞

b) 6.♗b5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5 ♗g4 6.♗b5



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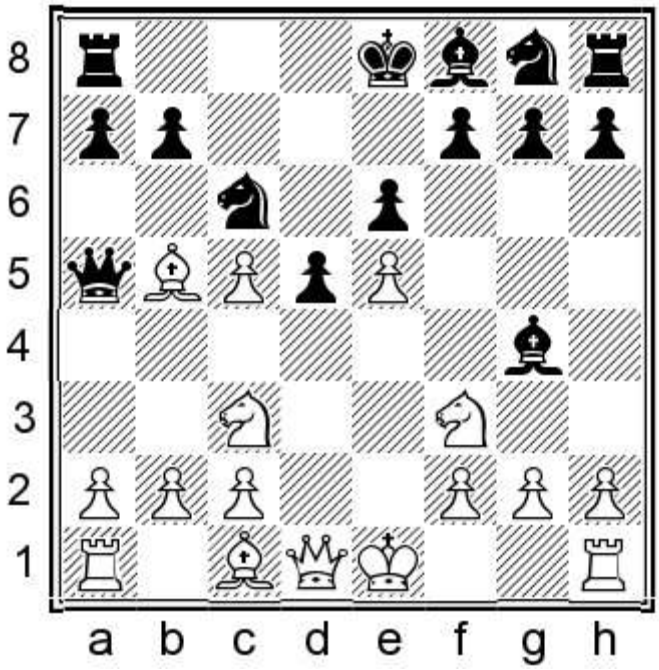
Position after: 6.♗b5

This is a logical reply to Black's previous move. White indirectly protects his e5-pawn and prepares to meet 6...e6 with 7.b4!±, holding on to the c5-pawn.

6...♕a5+!

An important move. Black forces White to play 7.♘c3, which makes it harder for him to defend the c5-pawn with c3 and b4. Moreover, the c3-knight is vulnerable to ideas like ...d4.

7.♘c3 e6



Position after: 7...e6

White has two options: he can defend the c5-pawn either directly with 8.♗e3, or indirectly, by targeting Black's queen, with 8. ♗d2.

8.♗d2

This is the more critical of the two options. White intends to use tactics to play b4 and defend the c5-pawn. However, Black can switch gears and go after the e5-pawn.

8.♗e3 ♘ge7!

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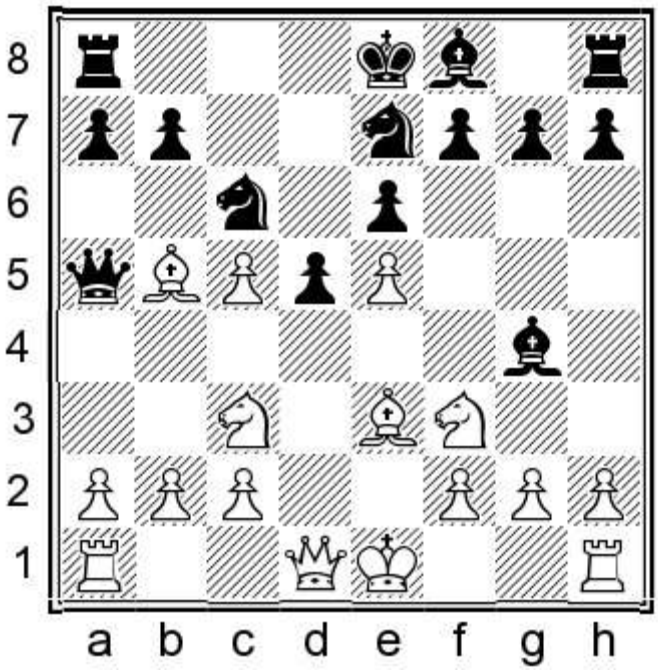
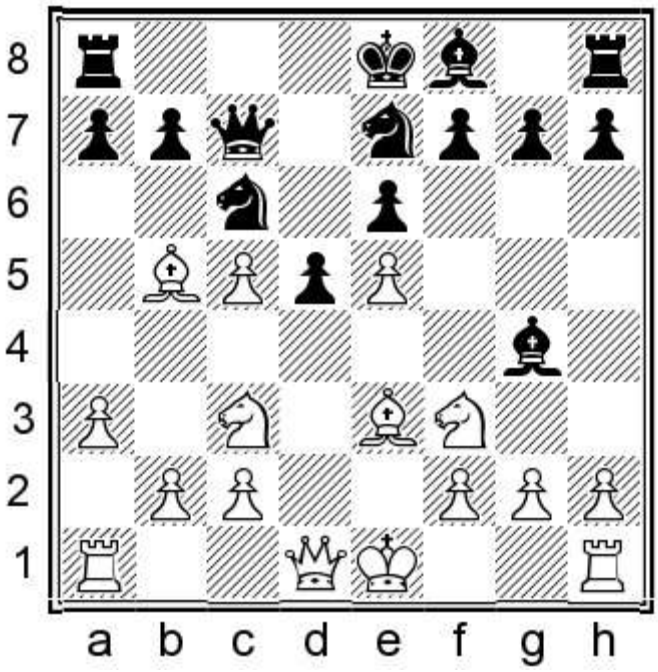


Position after: 8...♘ge7!

The knight heads to f5, with the idea of removing the e3-bishop to recapture the c5-pawn. 9.a3 [9.h3?! does not solve White's problems, and Black is already in the driver's seat after 9...♗xf3 10.♕xf3 a6 11.♗xc6+ ♘xc6∓.] 9...♕c7!



Position after: 9...♕c7!

This move has not been played as frequently as 9...0-0-0, but it is a simpler way to proceed. The idea is to prevent b4, since it can now be met by ...♗xf3 ♕xf3 ...♕xe5. Without b4, White is unable to properly

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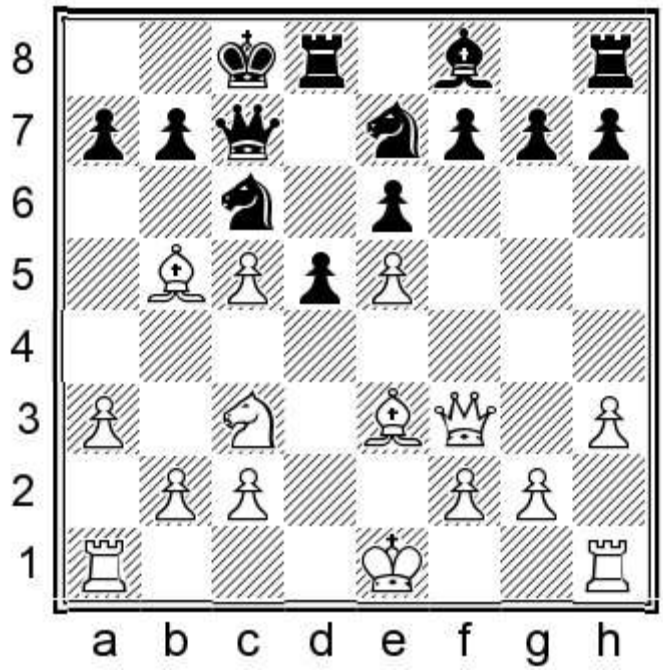
deal with Black's threats of taking on e5 and playing ...d4. [9...0-0-0 10.b4 ♗xf3 11.gxf3 ♕c7 12.♗xc6 ♘xc6 13.♗f4 a6∞ is a more popular continuation and is definitely playable, but I like the text move better.]

A) 10.0-0 ♘f5 White's best try is to sacrifice a piece to hold on to the c5-pawn, but Black is in no danger: 11.b4N 11...♗xf3 12.♕xf3 d4! 13.♘e4 dxe3 14.fxe3 0-0-0 15.♘d6+ ♔b8 16.♗xc6 ♗xd6 17.exd6 ♕xc6 18.g4 ♕xf3 19.♖xf3 ♘h6 20.g5 ♘g4 21.♖xf7 ♘xe3∓ Although the position is quite messy, Black is the one playing for the win since White's pawns can easily be contained.

B) 10.h3 ♗xf3 11.♕xf3 0-0-0!



Position after: 11...0-0-0!

This is the key idea behind 9...♕c7. Black ignores the f7-pawn and focuses on his initiative in the center. 12.♕xf7 White's only critical continuation. [12.♗xc6 ♘xc6 13.0-0 d4 14.♘b5 ♕xe5 15.♕xf7 ♖d7 16.♕e8+ led to a quick draw in Liamtsau, V (2224) – Nichols, S (2271) LSS email 2012 since neither player can avoid a repetition.] 12...d4

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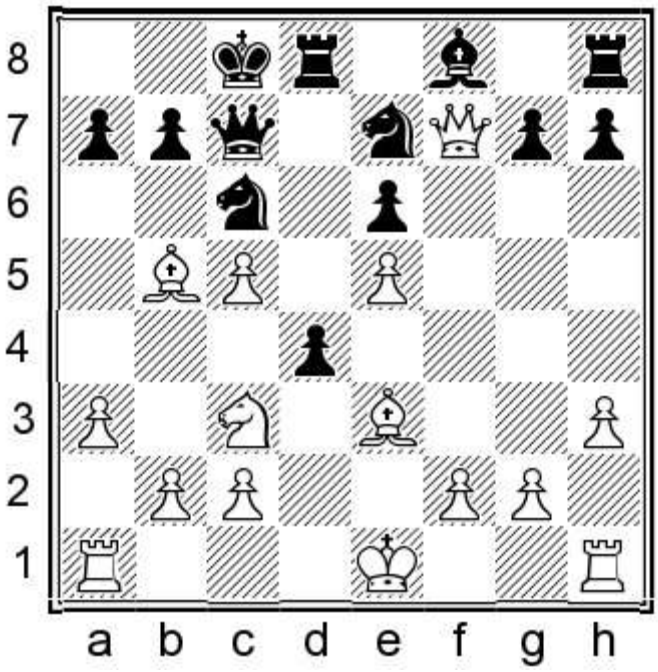
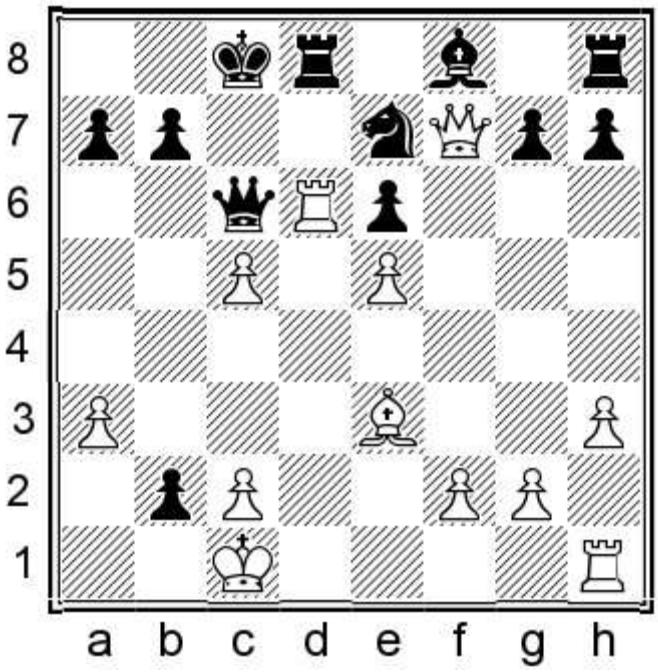


Position after: 12...d4

B1) White can play 13.♕xe6+N 13...♔b8 14.0-0-0 dxe3 15.fxe3 a6 16.b4! but, although his space advantage compensates for the piece, he does not have any long-term prospects against the Black king. Black can complete his development with 16...g6 17.♖d6 ♗h6∞ with an unclear position.

B2) 13.♗xc6 ♕xc6 14.0-0-0 dxc3 15.♖d6 cxb2+



Position after: 15...cxb2+

16.♔b1 [16.♔xb2N only makes Black's job easier since the king is now exposed. 16...♕b5+ 17.♔a1

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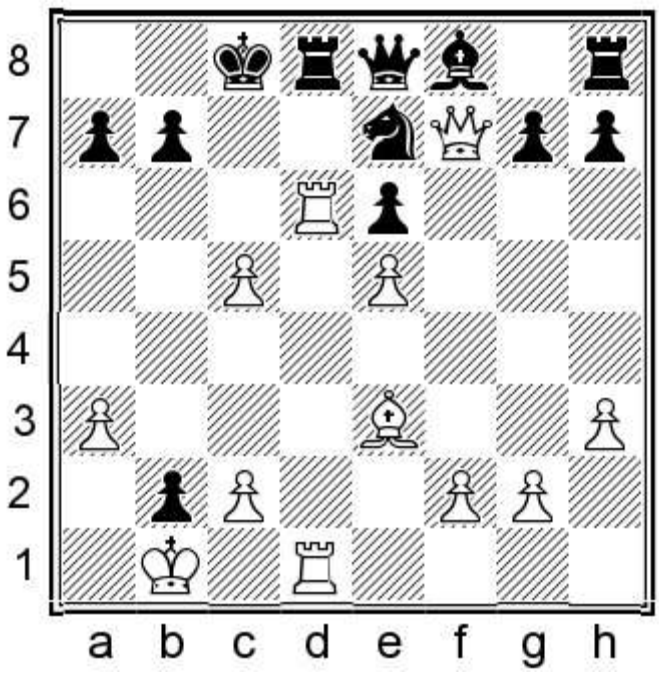
♘c6 18.♕xe6+ ♔c7 19.♖b1 ♕a6 20.♖b3!? Rather than simplify the position and lose his initiative, White can keep some tension by sacrificing an exchange. However, Black can deal with White's threats rather easily and it is hard to believe that White has serious winning chances here. 20...♗xd6 21.cxd6+ ♔b8 22.♕d5 ♔a8∞] 16...♕e8 17.♖hd1



Position after: 17.♖hd1

A draw was agreed in Betker, J (2219) – Richter, M (2075) GER email 2013 in view of the following variation: [17.♕xe6+ is an attempt to keep the game going, but Black is very solid: 17...♔b8 18.♖hd1 ♘c8 19.♕xe8 ♖xe8 20.♖d7 b6! 21.cxb6 ♘xb6 22.♖f7 ♗xa3 23.♖d3 ♗b4∞ White has compensation for the piece, but nothing more.] 17...♕xf7 18.♖xd8+ ♔c7 19.♖1d7+ ♔c6 20.♖d6+ ♔c7= [Black cannot escape the repetition either: 20...♔b5?? 21.♖8d7!+–.]

8...♕c7

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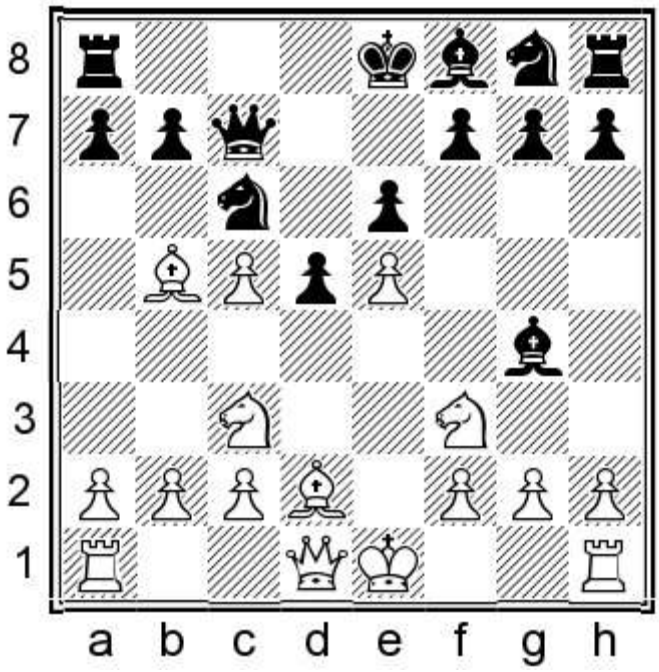
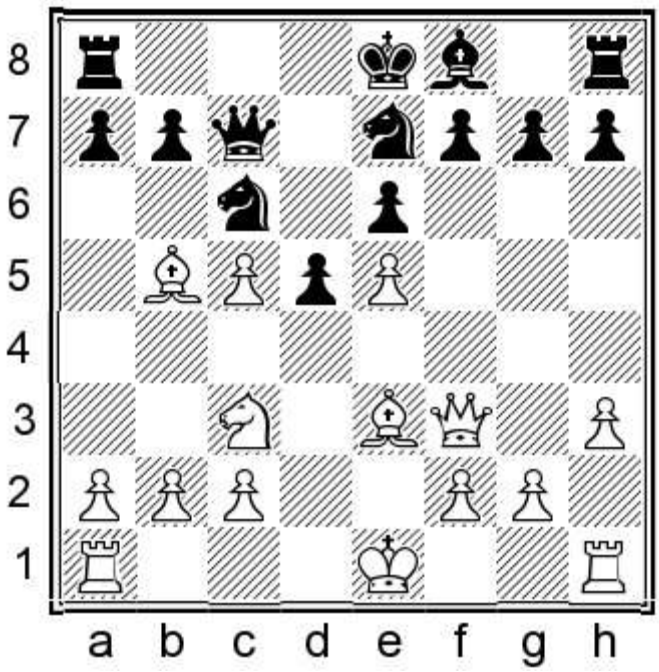


Position after: 8...♕c7

9.b4

9.♗e3 It's difficult to see how forcing ...♕c7 benefits White, so this looks like a better version of the 8.♗e3 variation. Black continues his development and maintains pressure on the center. 9...♘ge7 10.h3 ♗xf3 11.♕xf3



Position after: 11.♕xf3

A) Play can develop just as in note b2) to White's 8th: 11...0-0-0 12.♕xf7 d4 13.♗xc6 ♕xc6!N and

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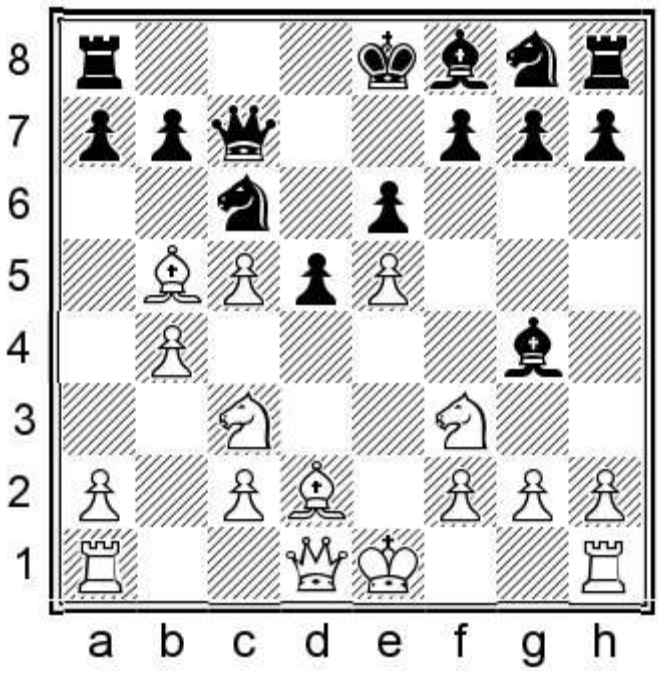
here too White has no better than taking a perpetual: [13...♘xc6?! was played before but White stands better after 14.♕xc7+ ♔xc7 15.♘b5+ ♔b8 16.♗f4±.] 14.0-0-0 dxc3 15.♖d6 cxb2+ 16.♔b1 ♕e8 17.♖hd1 ♕xf7 18.♖xd8+ ♔c7 19.♖1d7+ ♔c6 20.♖d6+=

B) 11...a6 Whereas this move would be dubious if White already had his pawn on a3, it is quite playable here since White cannot defend his c5-pawn. Hence, this is a good alternative to line a) above. 12.0-0!? [12.♗xc6+ ♘xc6 13.0-0-0 ♖d8 14.♘a4 ♗e7⩲ Drobka, M (2194) – Gierth, K (2049) email 2012] 12...♘g6!? [12...♕xe5!?N is also possible, but the text move is more straightforward.] 13.♗a4 [13.♗xc6+N 13...♕xc6 14.b4 b6! 15.a4 bxc5 16.b5 ♕d7=] 13...♗e7 14.♗d4 ♘gxe5 15.♗xc6+ bxc6N [15...♘xc6 is also possible: 16.♗xg7 ♖g8 17.♗f6 0-0-0⩱ Pina Fernandez, J (2260) – Tyulenko, Y (2452) ICCF email 2013] 16.♕g3 ♗f6= As we often see in this variation, White has been able to hold on to his c5-pawn but has had to give up the e5-pawn. The position is double-edged because of the asymmetric pawn structure, and a complex positional battle ensues.



Position after: 9.b4

9...♗xf3

9...a5? seems like a natural reply, but Black's queenside initiative is going nowhere after 10.a3 and the inclusion of the two moves favors White. Now, the b5-square is weak and bxa5 is in White's plans since opening the b-file will allow him to pressure the b7-pawn. 10...♗xf3 11.gxf3 ♕xe5+ 12.♕e2 ♕f6 13.♖b1!±

10.♕xf3

10.gxf3 makes little sense. 10...♕xe5+ 11.♕e2 ♕f6N There is no need to trade queens since ♘xd5 is not possible.

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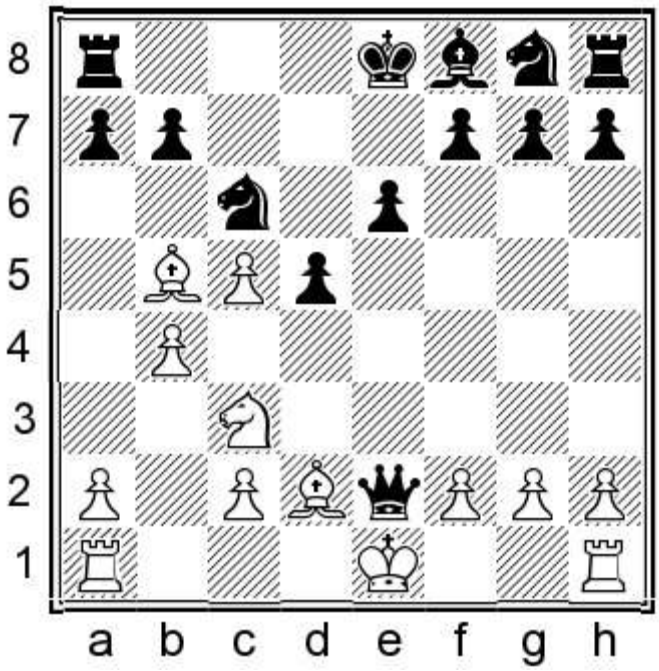
10...♕xe5+ 11.♕e2

11.♔f1 is met by 11...♕d4! and White is now forced to trade queens on unfavorable terms: 12.♕d3 [12.♕e2 ♗e7=] 12...♕xd3+ 13.cxd3 g6 14.♗a4 a6 15.♘e2 ♗g7 16.♖b1 ♘ge7 17.g3 0-0 18.♔g2 ♘f5=.

11...♕xe2+



Position after: 11...♕xe2+

Although this position has only been reached in three games, I will dedicate a considerable amount of time to the analysis of this endgame since it is quite critical for an objective assessment of the variation. White can recapture in two ways on e2 (12.♗xe2 does not make any sense) and each recapture comes with a specific set of ideas, but there are some common features which need to be highlighted. As we have seen in quite a few variations already, White has given up his e5-pawn and held on to his c5-pawn instead. This creates an imbalance and determines the direction of the game. White's most important asset is his queenside majority: if he can advance it, Black will be in great danger. On the flip side, Black will try to advance his central pawns, since White will be unable to oppose them. As you will see, it is imperative for Black to push his pawns whenever he has a chance since this is Black's main source of counterplay. Finally, from a more practical perspective, Black needs to resolve the pin on his c6-knight since this will allow him to activate his position.

12.♘xe2

12.♔xe2!?N This move deserves consideration alongside 12.♘xe2, which was chosen in all three games. White accelerates his development by connecting his rooks (♖hb1 is already possible) and prepares to bring his king to the queenside with ♔d3. Black needs to react swiftly to push back against White's queenside initiative. 12...f5!

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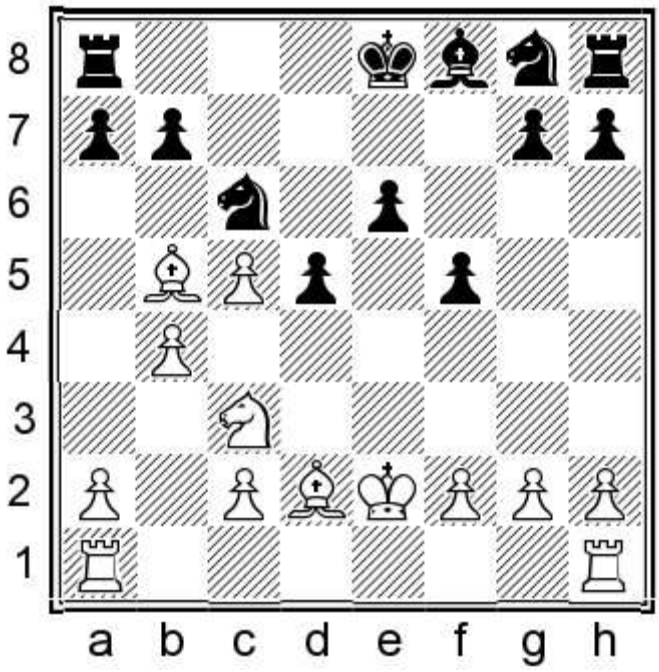

Position after: 12...f5!

This is a critical move. Black gains space in the center and gives his king the f7-square so that he can unpin the c6-knight. Now, Black can also play ideas like ...♘f6-e4 and create quick counterplay. [12...g6!? is also possible, but the text move is stronger.]

A) 13.♖he1 This is a significant concession, since White is delaying his queenside expansion. The following line shows just how Black can use his counterplay in the center to prevent White from making progress on the queenside. 13...♔f7 14.♔f1 ♘f6 15.♖ab1 ♗e7 16.f3 ♘d7 17.♘e2 ♗h4! 18.♖ed1 a6 19.♗xc6 bxc6 20.c4 ♗f6= Black's knight will come to e5, anchoring his position.

B) 13.♔d3 This is a more challenging move. White's idea is to play ♘e2-d4 and pressure the c6-knight. However, Black is in time to react: 13...♘f6 14.♘e2 ♘g4!

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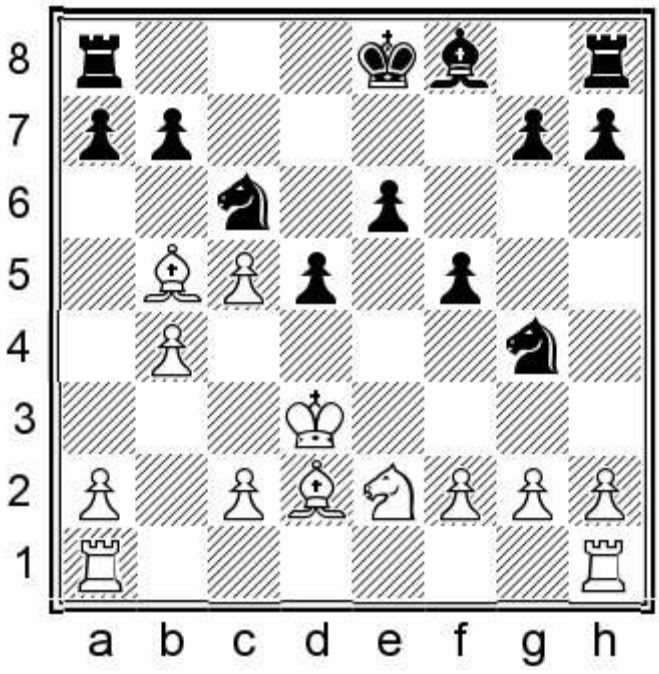

Position after: 14...♘g4!

Exploiting the position of White's king. 15.♘d4 ♔f7 16.♗xc6 ♘e5+! 17.♔e2 ♘xc6 18.c3 a5! Black has successfully dealt with the pin and he is now ready to open up the position. 19.a4 [19.a3 ♘e5=] 19...axb4 20.♘xc6 bxc6 21.cxb4 e5=

C) 13.a4 White could play a5 and a6, undermining the c6-knight, if Black does not react accordingly. But this move also introduces other ideas: after ♗xc6 it will be possible to just roll the queenside pawns. 13...♗e7! [13...♘f6 is imprecise because Black wants to play ...♗f6 in certain positions. 14.a5 a6 15.♗xc6+ bxc6 16.♘a4 ♔f7 17.♘b6 ♖a7 18.f3± Black's knight is restricted on f6 and White has a slight edge.] 14.♗xc6+ [The improvement over 13...♘f6 is obvious in the following variation: 14.a5 a6 15.♗xc6+ bxc6 16.♘a4 ♗f6!= The bishop is active on f6 and Black is ready to push his central pawns.] 14...bxc6 15.♘b5!

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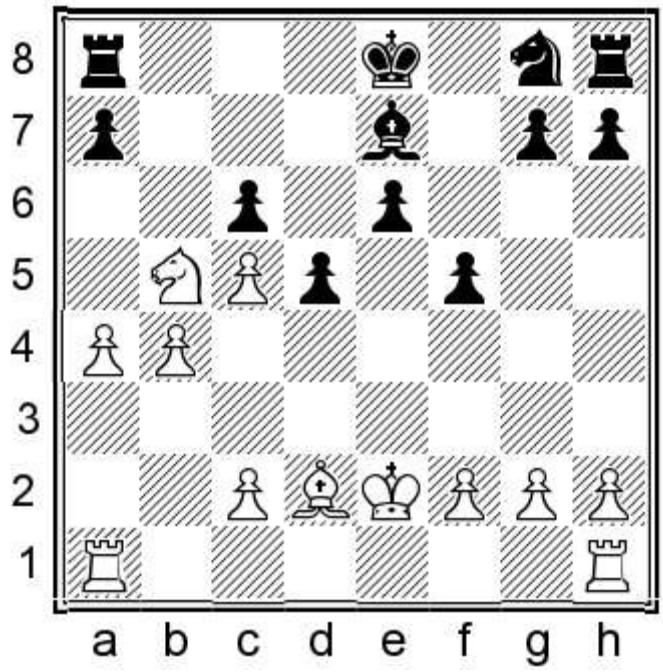

Position after: 15.♘b5!

This is a fascinating concept. White gives up his knight to advance his pawns further. The justification is that Black is undeveloped and will struggle to get his pieces to the queenside fast enough. However, Black can deal with White's threats with precise play. 15...cxb5 16.axb5 ♘f6 17.b6 ♔d7 18.b7 ♖ab8 19.♖xa7 e5! Preventing ♗f4. The position is quite complicated, and both players need to proceed with great accuracy. The lines that follow serve as examples of how play might continue. 20.f4 [20.♖ha1 ♔c7 21.f4 ♖he8! 22.fxe5 ♖xb7! The tactics work in Black's favor. 23.♔d3 ♘g4 24.♔d4 ♘xe5 25.♗f4 ♗f6∞] 20...e4 21.♗c3 ♘e8 22.♖a6 [22.♖ha1 ♘c7 23.♖1a5 ♔c6∞] 22...♘c7 23.c6+ ♔e6 24.b5 ♘xb5 25.c7+ ♔f7 26.cxb8=♕ ♘xc3+ 27.♔d2 ♖xb8 28.♔xc3 ♖xb7= White is an exchange up, but Black is very solid and his e4-pawn gives him excellent compensation.

12...a6

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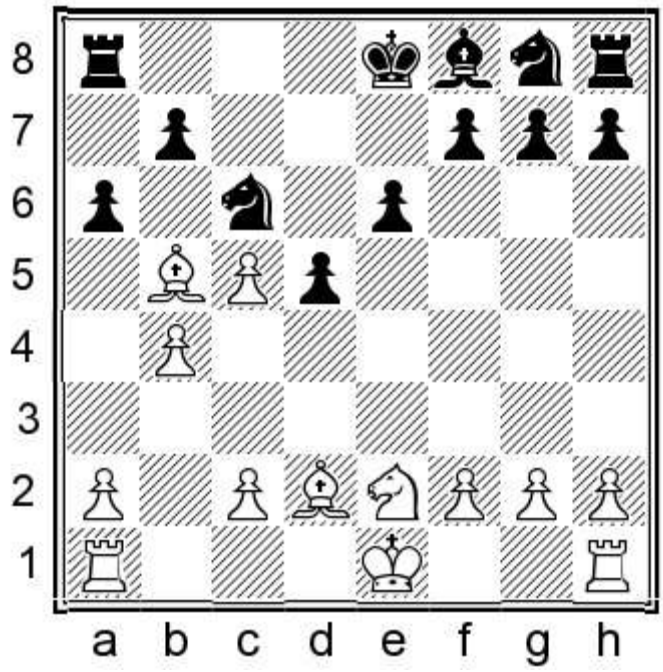

Position after: 12...a6

White was threatening to play ♘d4.

13.♗a4

This is White's most logical continuation: the pressure on the queenside keeps the ball in Black's court. Black now needs to generate counterplay on the kingside and in the center. I decided to continue the analysis for quite a few moves, but you certainly should not try to memorize them all. Rather, you should understand White's main ideas and how Black should respond to them to gain a greater understanding of the position.

A) 13.♗d3 renounces White's initiative and can be met by 13...a5 14.c3 g6 15.a3 ♗g7 16.0-0 ♘ge7 17.♖fd1 0-0=.

B) 13.♗xc6+ also simplifies Black's task. 13...bxc6 14.0-0 [14.♘d4 ♔d7 15.a4 ♗e7 16.♘f3 f6! 17.♔e2 e5⇄] 14...♗e7 15.a4 a5!? 16.c3 ♘f6 17.♖fb1 ♔d7= White cannot make progress until he can push the b-pawn.

13...♘ge7!

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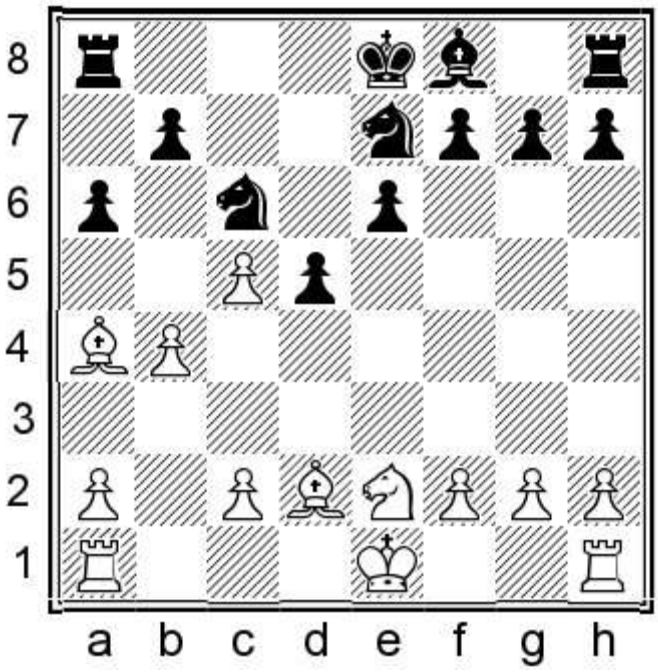


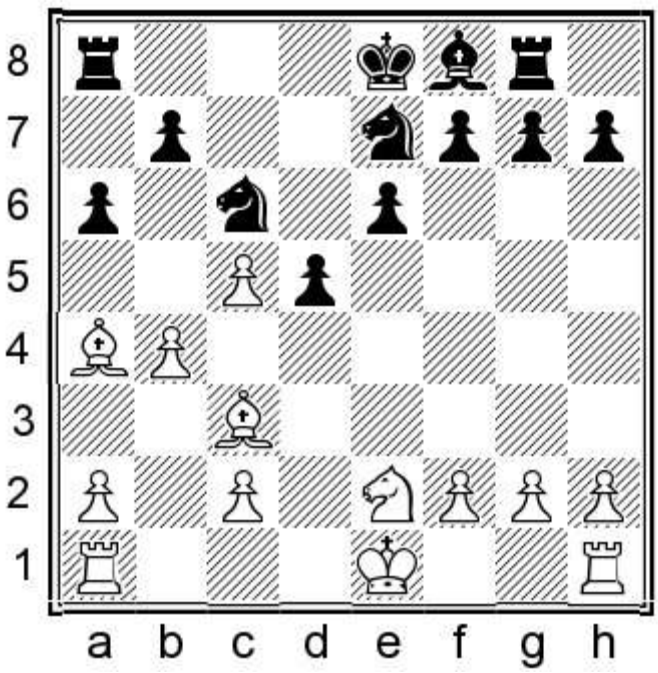
Position after: 13...♘ge7!

Black reinforces the c6-knight and prepares to develop his dark-squared bishop with ...g6. Black could not play ...f5 (like in the line 12.♔xe2 line) since ♘d4 was an immediate threat.

14.0-0-0

This is White's most critical move: the idea is to bring the king to the queenside to support the advance of the queenside pawns.

A) White can try to prevent ...g6 with 14.♗c3 but it does not work in view of 14...♖g8!.



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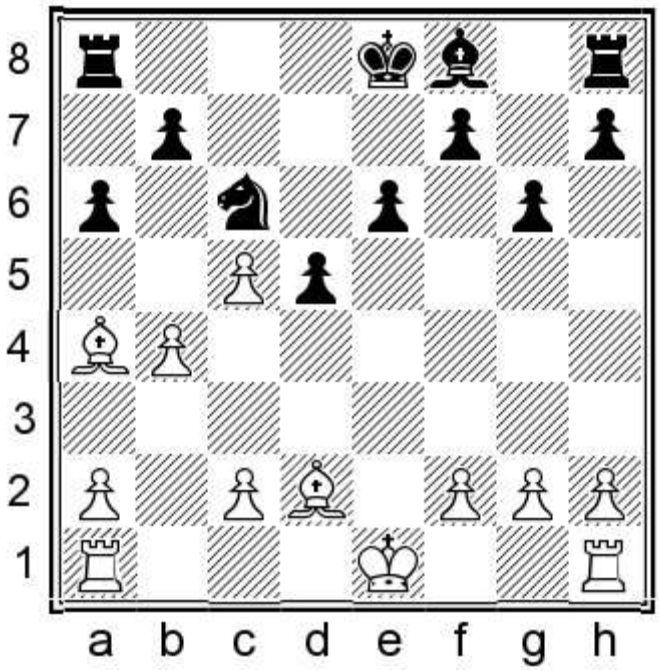
Position after: 14...♖g8!

15.h4 [15.0-0-0 g5 16.♖he1 0-0-0= is equal, since Black will play ...♗g7 soon and White has no way of increasing the pressure on Black's position.] 15...g6 16.h5 g5 Black should keep the kingside closed. 17.g4 [17.0-0-0 g4!⇄] 17...♗g7 18.♗xg7 ♖xg7 19.♖h3 ♖g8 20.0-0-0 ♔f8!= Once the dark-squared bishops come off the board, Black can safely put his pieces on the dark-squares and organize his position accordingly. The c6-knight is no longer pinned and Black will slowly advance his pawns in the center.

B) 14.0-0 is a rather lackluster continuation since the king is far away from the action on g1. Black can simply finish his development and gain space on the kingside: 14...g6 15.♗c3 ♖g8 16.♖ab1 ♗g7 17.♗d2 ♗f6 18.♗b3 h5=

C) 14.♘d4 can now be dealt with 14...g6 and White does not accomplish much by trading knights: 15.♘xc6 ♘xc6



Position after: 15...♘xc6

16.♗c3 [16.♔e2 ♗g7 17.♖ab1 ♔e7 18.c3 ♖hd8=] 16...♖g8 17.0-0-0 0-0-0 18.a3 g5!= Since White has no threat, Black can gain space on the kingside before he plays ...♗g7.

14...g6 15.c3 ♗g7 16.♔c2 0-0

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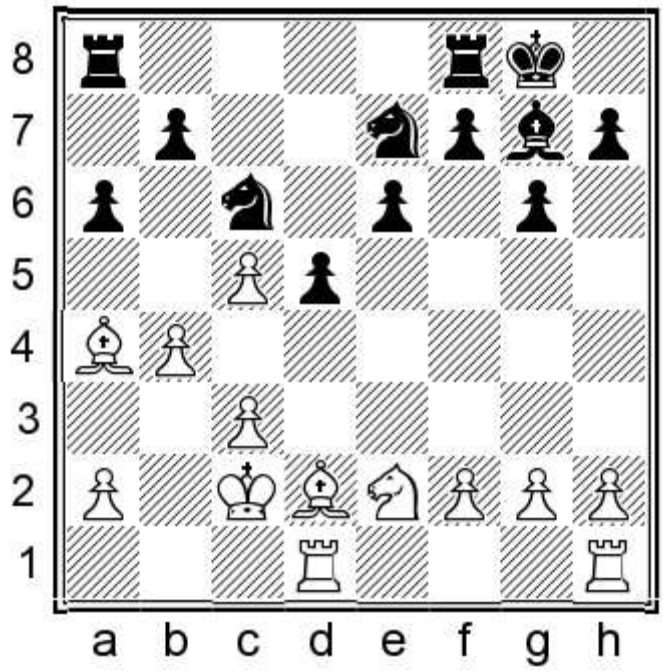

Position after: 16...0-0

17.♗xc6!?

White gives up his bishop to help his queenside advance.

17.f4 prevents Black from playing ...e5 (Black's simplest way to generate counterplay), but Black can use this tempo to instead stir up trouble on the queenside: 17...a5! 18.♔b3 ♖fb8! 19.b5 b6! 20.bxc6 b5 21.♖b1 ♘xc6 22.♗e3 ♘a7 23.♗d4 ♗f8 24.♔a3 bxa4 25.♖xb8 ♖xb8 26.♔xa4 ♖b2 27.♘c1 ♗g7∞ White's king is cut off from the game and White is unable to coordinate his position.

17...bxc6!

Black uses the c6-pawn to prevent b5 and he will now focus on generating counterplay in the center. 17...♘xc6 leaves Black vulnerable to White's queenside expansion: 18.f4 a5 19.♔b3±

18.a4 e5! 19.f4

19.♖he1 ♖fc8 20.g4 a5⇄

19...e4 20.g4 f5! 21.g5 d4!

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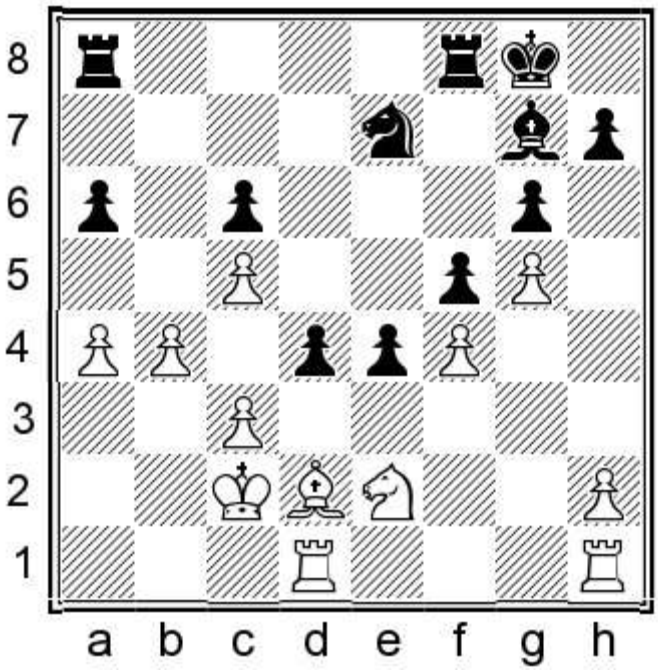
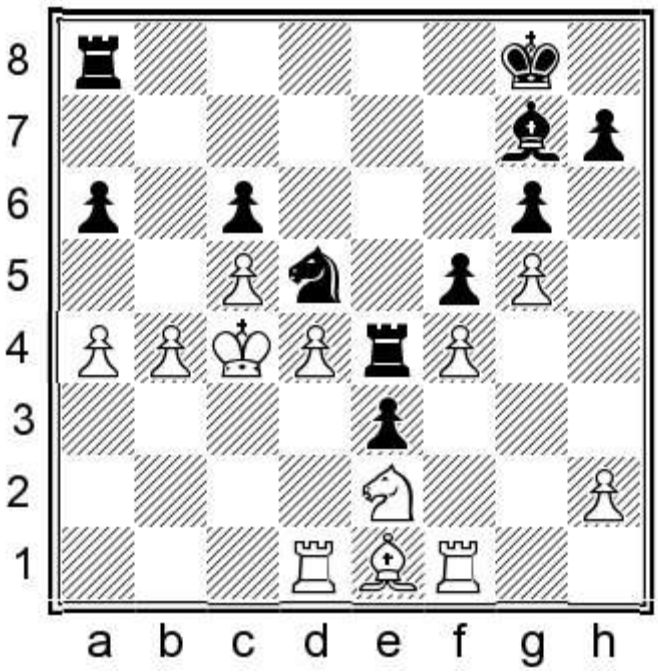


Position after: 21...d4!

This is a brilliant idea: Black gives up the pawn to gain important squares for his pieces. Although White will keep the pawn indefinitely, he has no way to make progress.

22.cxd4 ♖fd8 23.♔c3 e3 24.♗e1 ♘d5+ 25.♔c4 ♖e8 26.♖f1 ♖e4=



Position after: 26...♖e4=

Black's pieces are active whereas White's position is cramped. As long as Black does not allow a

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successful b5 break, he will easily hold White in check.

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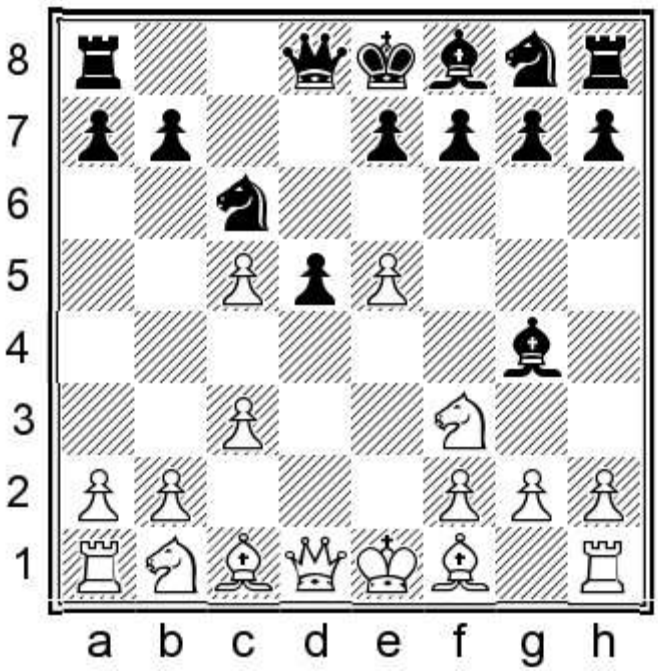
c) 6.c3 e6 7.b4 g6 8.♗b5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5 ♗g4 6.c3



Position after: 6.c3

This is White's main continuation. The idea is to prepare b4 and control the important d4-square.

6...e6 7.b4!?

This move leads to a very sharp game, but the logic behind it is quite simple: White defends the c5-pawn. By doing so, however, White is further delaying his development and is giving Black a hook for his queenside counterplay, beginning with ...a5. In the short-term, Black's primary focus is on restoring material equality by taking the e5-pawn.

7...g6!

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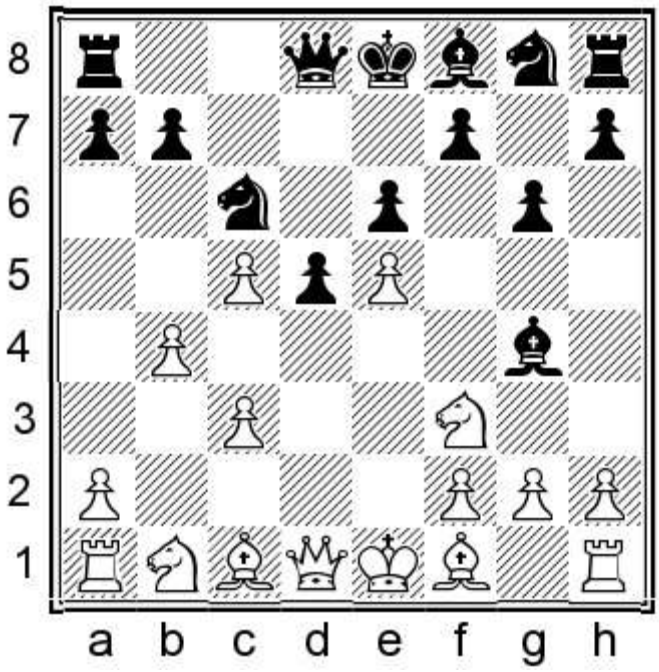

Position after: 7...g6!

The f8-bishop is no longer useful on the a3-f8 diagonal since Black will never be able to take on c5. Therefore, Black relocates it to g7. White can either give up the e5-pawn to speed up his development or try to hold onto the pawn. The latter approach will force him to develop his pieces to suboptimal squares, and Black will use this to create counterplay.

8.♗b5

8.♘bd2 – see the next subchapter.

8...♗g7 9.♗f4

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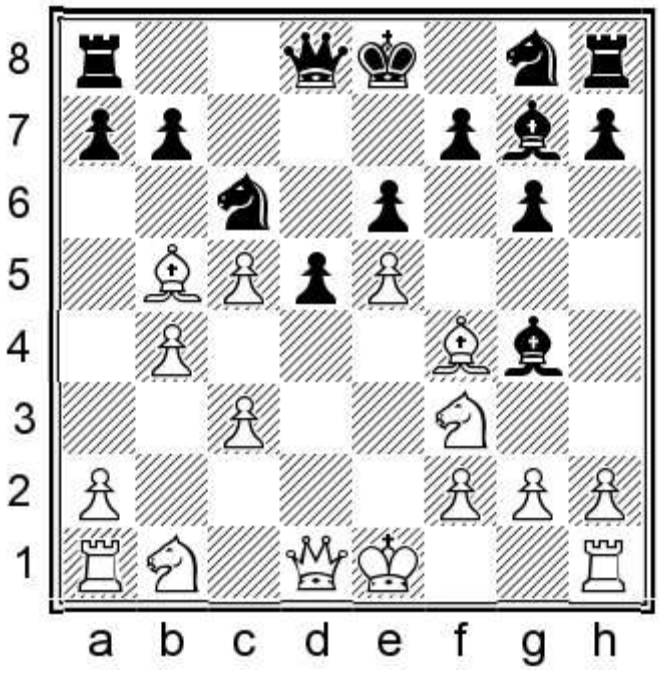

Position after: 9.♗f4

White is unable to hold on to the pawn in 9.0-0 ♘ge7 10.♗g5 ♕c7 11.♘bd2 ♗xe5 12.h3 ♗xf3 13.♕xf3 0-0=.

9...♗xf3!

Black draws the enemy queen out. If White is given the time to play ♘bd2, Black will be unable to capture the e5-pawn.

9...f6 10.exf6 ♘xf6 11.♗e5! 0-0 12.♗xc6 bxc6 13.♘bd2± Avotins, M (2414) – Tazelaar, H (2373) email 2017.

10.♗xc6+!

This intermediate move prevents Black from keeping a knight on c6. This way, the pressure on e5 is diminished and Black's counterplay with ...a5 is blunted.

The natural 10.♕xf3 allows Black to defend the c6-knight, which enables him to attack the b4-pawn: 10...♘ge7 11.♕e2 [11.0-0 a5!∞] 11...a5!N

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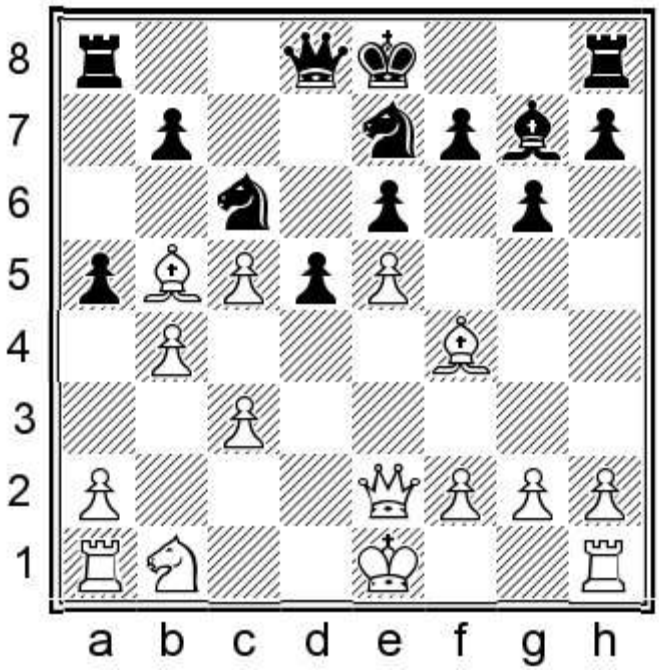

Position after: 11...a5!N

Black must generate counterplay on the queenside before White is able to consolidate. 12.♗xc6+ ♘xc6 13.b5 ♘e7 14.♗e3! [14.0-0 ♕c7=] 14...♗xe5 15.♗d4 ♗xd4 16.cxd4 ♘f5 17.♘c3 ♕g5! Black continues his forcing approach. White may be able to claim an edge if he is given the time to castle and defend the d4-pawn, but this move does not give him that chance. 18.♕e5 ♕xg2! 19.♕xh8+ ♔e7 20.♕xa8 ♕xh1+ 21.♔d2 ♕xa1 22.♕xb7+ ♔f6 23.♕b8 ♕b2+ 24.♔d3 ♕xf2 25.♕e5+ ♔g5 26.♘e2 ♕f3+ 27.♔d2 ♕a3= Both kings are rather exposed and thus the likely outcome is a draw by perpetual check. With correct play, Black will be able to prevent White from advancing his queenside pawns.

10...bxc6 11.♕xf3 g5!

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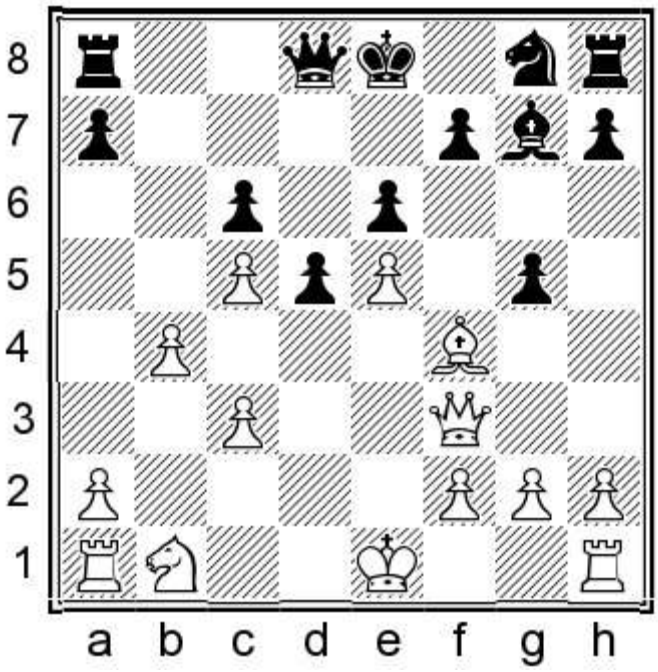
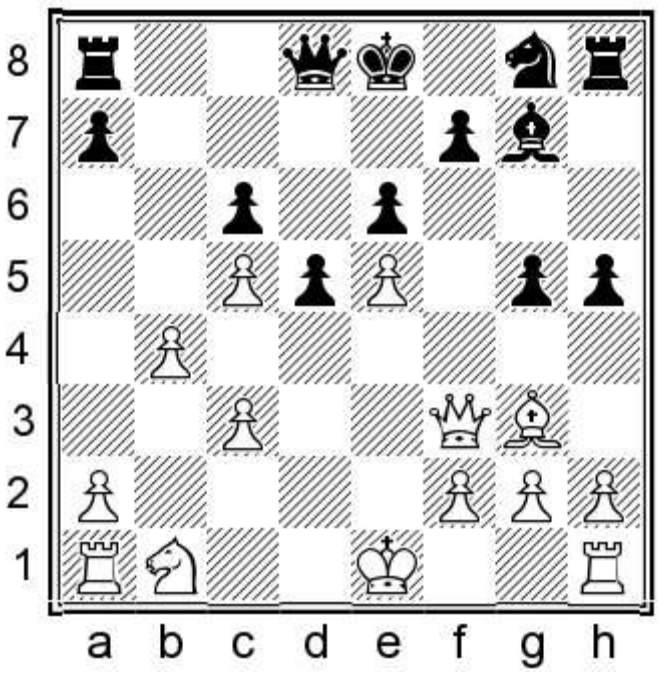


Position after: 11...g5!

Black must look for new ways to attack! Since ...a5 does not pose any concrete threats, Black shifts his attention to the kingside and to the only piece that is defending e5.

12.♕g4

A) Retreating the bishop with 12.♗g3 allows Black to continue his initiative on the kingside: 12...h5!



Position after: 12...h5!

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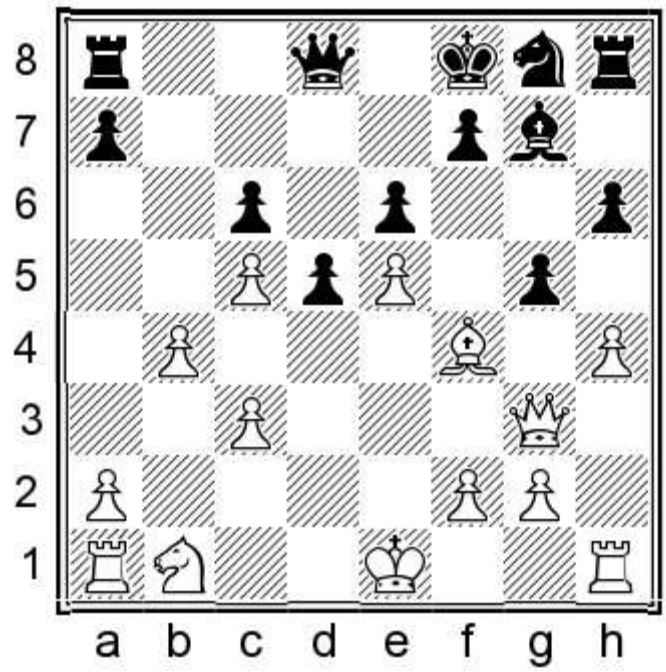
A1) 13.h4 a5 14.b5 ♕e7!= [14...cxb5? 15.♘a3!±]

A2) 13.h3 ♘h6 14.♘d2 a5 15.a3 g4∓

B) 12.♕g3 This in an attempt to keep the pressure on Black and prevent his kingside counterplay from flourishing. The text move is similar to our main line (12.♕g4) but a subtle nuance (shown in the note to Black's 13th) forces Black to respond differently. 12...h6 13.h4 [13.0-0?! ♘e7∓] 13...♔f8!



Position after: 13...♔f8!

Black forces a decision by protecting the g7-bishop.

B1) 14.♗d2 ♕b8!? [14...♕c7!? is also possible, but I like the idea of pressuring the b4-pawn as well.] 15.f4 a5! Black uses a well timed combination of kingside and queenside counterplay to open the position and assail White's position. This theme is present throughout the 9.♗f4 variation. 16.hxg5 [16.0-0 axb4 17.cxb4 ♘e7∞] 16...hxg5 17.♖xh8 ♗xh8 18.♕xg5 f6! 19.♕h5 ♗g7∞ The position is quite complex, but Black has managed to open both fronts and White's position clearly lacks coordination.

B2) 14.hxg5 hxg5 15.♖xh8 gxf4 16.♖xg8+ ♔xg8 17.♕xf4 ♕c7

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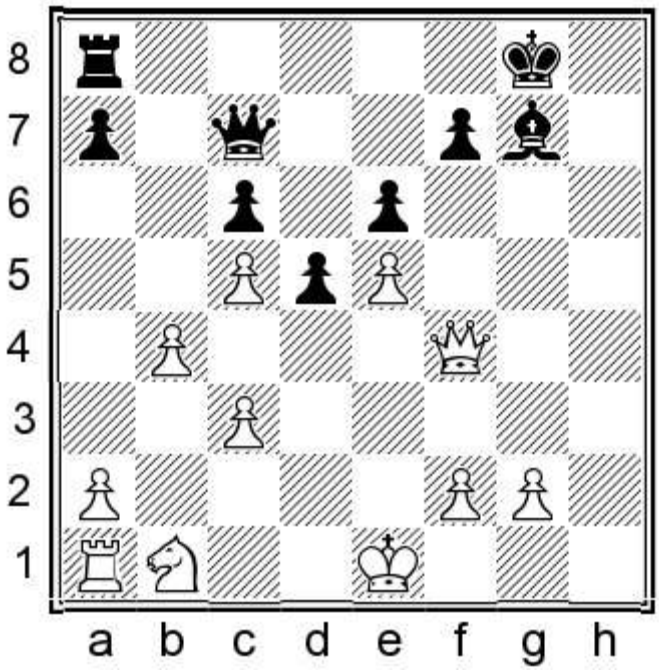
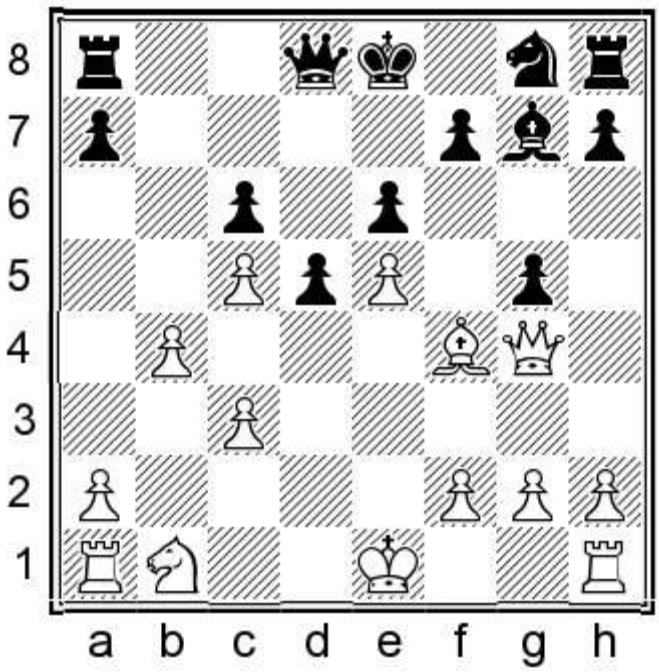


Position after: 17...♕c7

Now that the kingside has been cut open, Black can resume his plan of taking the e5-pawn. 18.a4 [18.♕g5 forces Black to trade queens, but the resulting endgame offers White few chances: 18...♕xe5+ 19.♕xe5 ♗xe5 20.a4 ♖b8 21.♔e2 a5! 22.bxa5 ♗f6∞.] 18...a5! Black should never allow White to establish a bind on the queenside. 19.♖a3 ♗xe5 20.♕g5+ ♗g7 21.♘d2 ♔f8! 22.♔e2 ♕b7 23.♖b3 axb4 24.cxb4 ♕a6+ 25.b5 ♕xa4 26.b6 ♕a1!⇄ The b6-pawn should be dealt with carefully, but White's exposed king and Black's active pieces make it difficult for White to make progress.

Back to 12.♕g4.



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Position after: 12.♕g4

12...h6

12...h5 seems interesting, but I am not convinced that Black has compensation for the pawn after 13.♕xg5 ♕xg5 14.♗xg5 ♗xe5 15.a4! ♘e7 16.♗d2±.

13.h4

13.♘d2 a5!⇄

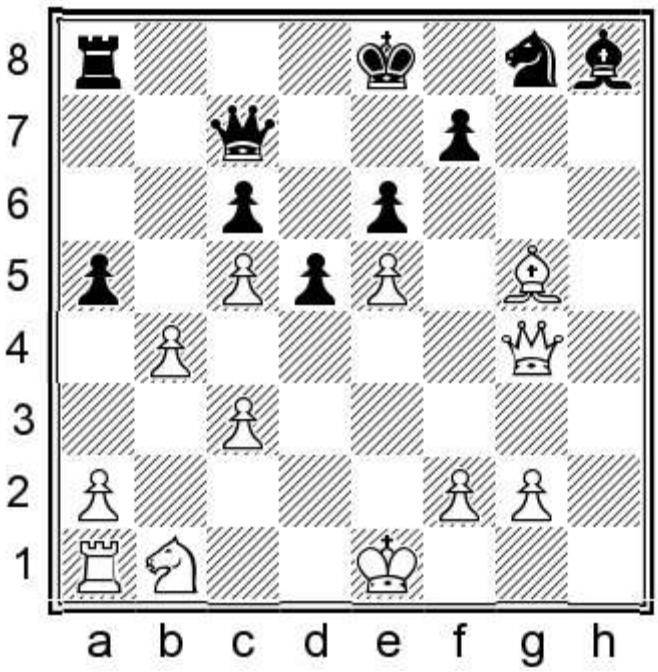
13...a5!

Note that 13...♔f8 does not work here because after 14.hxg5 hxg5 15.♖xh8 Black cannot play ...gxf4 and attack the White queen just like in the 12.♕g3 variation. However, just as in the 12.♕g3 line, Black should try to open a new front on the queenside.

14.hxg5

14.b5!? cxb5 15.hxg5 hxg5 16.♖xh8 ♗xh8 17.♗xg5 ♘e7∞

14...hxg5 15.♖xh8 ♗xh8 16.♗xg5 ♕c7



Position after: 16...♕c7

White has quite a few options and there are many fascinating lines to explore but doing so would unnecessarily distract us from the opening stages of the game. From a practical perspective, Black should be familiar with the ideas that he has at his disposal and the general direction of play, but it is

extremely difficult to find the best moves over the board for both players.

17.b5!

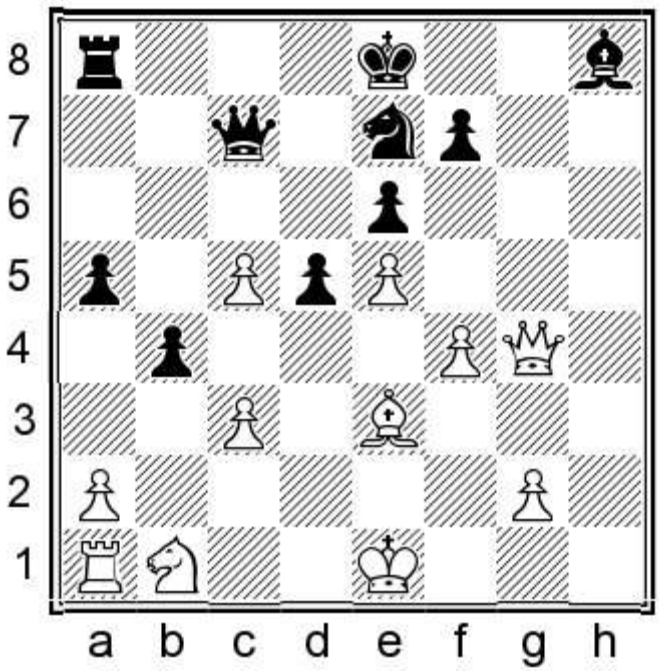
A) 17.f4 axb4 18.♕h3 [18.cxb4? ♗xe5!–+] 18...♗g7 19.♘d2 ♖a3!∞

B) 17.♗e3 ♘e7 18.f4 axb4 19.cxb4 ♖b8 20.♕h5 ♗g7 21.♗d2 ♘f5⩲

17...cxb5

17...♕xe5+ 18.♔f1 cxb5 19.♗f4 ♕g7 20.♕e2!±

18.♗e3 ♘e7 19.f4 b4!



Position after: 19...b4!

Black should continue his attack no matter what. If White has time to bring his a1-rook into the game, Black will soon be in trouble.

20.a3

A) 20.♘d2 bxc3 21.♘f3 0-0-0! 22.♘d4 ♕xc5 23.♕h3 ♕c4! 24.♖c1 ♗g7 25.♗f2 ♔d7! 26.♖xc3 ♕xa2∞

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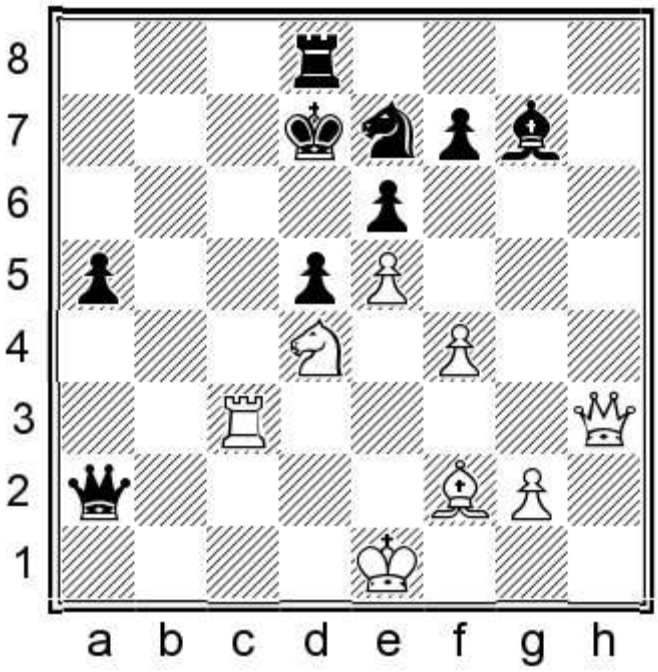
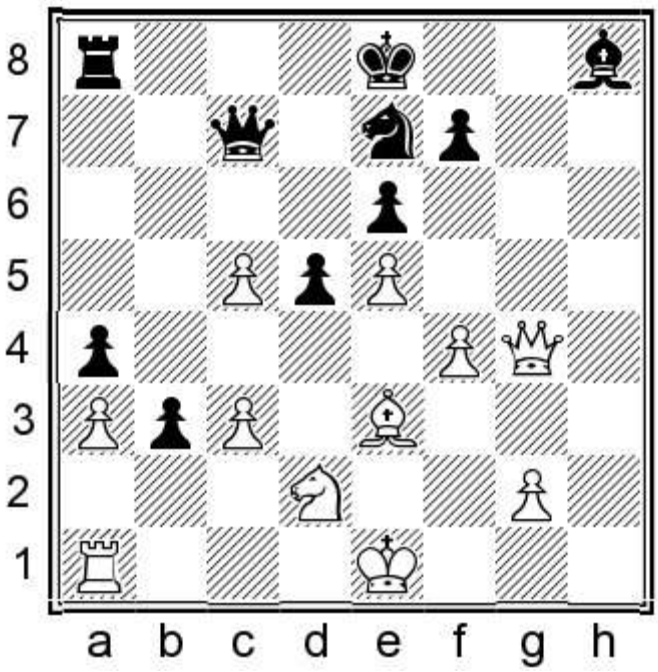


Position after: 26...♕xa2∞

Black's king is surprisingly safe on d7 and his rook quickly gets into the game.

B) 20.♗d4 ♕b7! 21.a3 [21.♘d2 bxc3 22.♗xc3 ♕b5=] 21...b3 22.♘d2 a4 23.0-0-0 ♕b5 24.♕f3 0-0-0 25.♖h1 ♗g7 26.♖h7 ♖g8∞

20...b3 21.♘d2 a4



Position after: 21...a4

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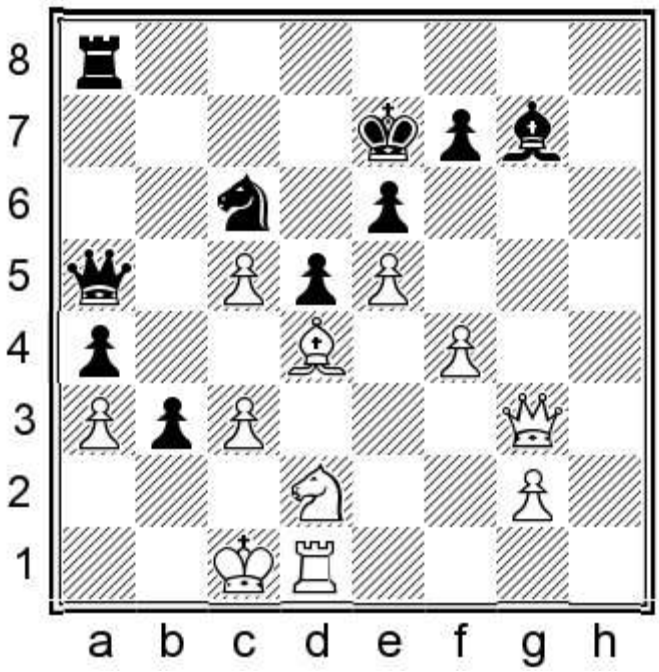
The b3-pawn is a constant headache for White.

22.0-0-0 ♕a5! 23.♗d4

23.♔b2 ♕a6 24.♘f1 ♘c6 25.♗d4 0-0-0 26.♘e3 ♗g7!∞

23...♘c6 24.♕g8+ ♔e7 25.♕g3 ♗g7!∞

The tactics continue, but there is no need to go any further. The position is double-edged and any result is possible in a tournament game.



Position after: 25...♗g7!∞

d) 6.c3 e6 7.b4 g6 8.♘bd2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5 ♗g4 6.c3 e6 7.b4!? g6! 8.♘bd2

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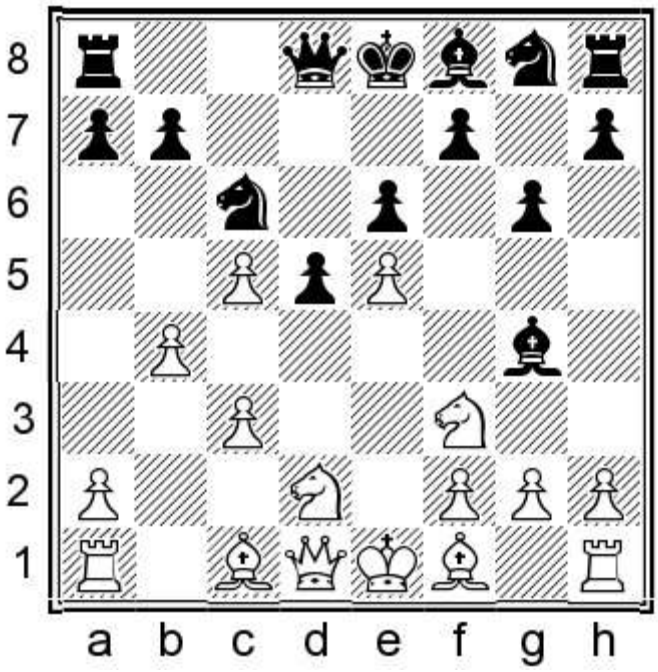
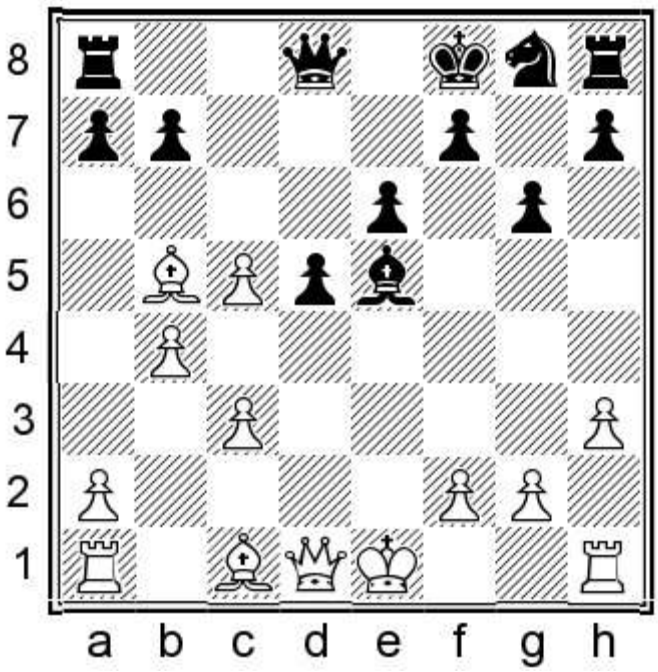


Position after: 8.♘bd2

With 8.♗b5, White was trying to hold on to the e5-pawn. With the text move, he instead prepares to abandon it to pursue quick development.

8...♗g7 9.h3!? ♗xf3 10.♘xf3 ♘xe5 11.♘xe5 ♗xe5 12.♗b5+! ♔f8



Position after: 12...♔f8

Black has been deprived of castling rights whereas White will quickly complete his development.

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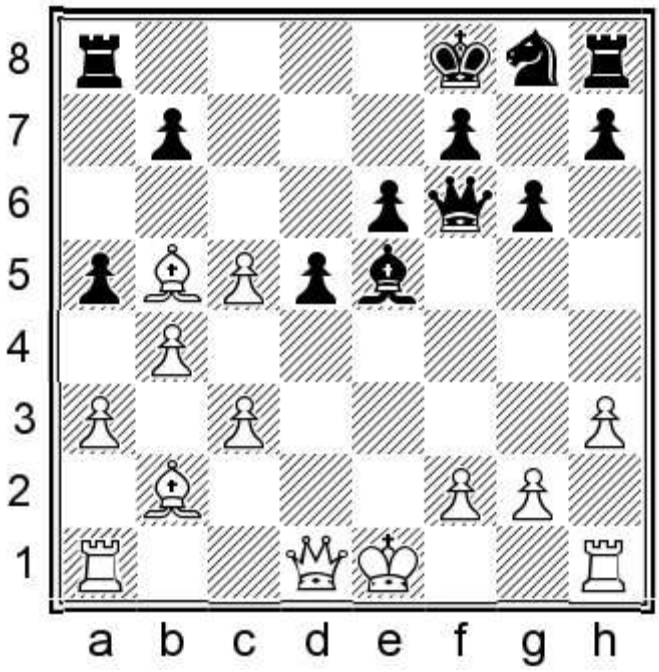
Nevertheless, Black's solidity in the center buys him time to reorganize his position.

13.♗d2

A) 13.♕c2 ♕f6! 14.♗d2 ♗f4!= gave Black an excellent position in Salvador Marques, C (2376) – Woodard, D (2407) ICCF email 2016, since trading the dark-squared bishops is beneficial to Black.

B) 13.♗b2N 13...a5! 14.a3 ♕f6!



Position after: 14...♕f6!

Black intends to play on the dark squares and develop an initiative on the kingside to counter White's queenside plans. [14...♘f6!? is also possible, but I like the text move better.] 15.0-0 ♘e7 16.♕d2 g5! 17.♖fe1 ♖g8 18.g3 ♘g6!

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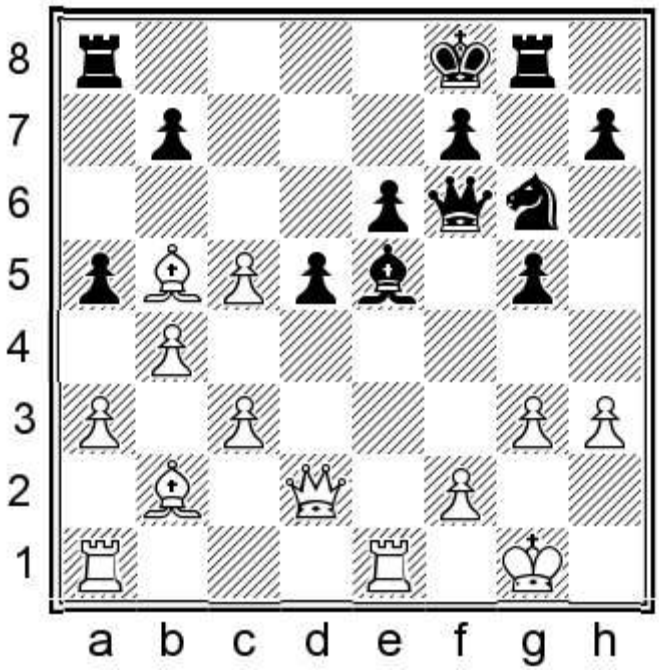

Position after: 18...♘g6!

Without the kingside attack, White would have a comfortable edge. However, Black is able to generate just enough play to force White to redirect his forces to the kingside.

B1) 19.♗e2 ♘f4! 20.♗f1 [White can take the knight, but he opens up his king: 20.gxf4 gxf4+ 21.♔f1 f3 22.♗xf3 ♕xf3 23.♖xe5 ♕xh3+ 24.♔e2 ♕g4+ 25.f3 ♕h3! 26.♔d3 ♖g2 27.♕f4 ♖xb2 28.♖g1 ♖g2! ∞] 20...♘g6 21.♗g2 [21.♗e2 would invite a repetition of moves.] 21...h5!∞ Black intends to play ...h4 and continue his attack on the dark squares.

B2) 19.♗d3 ♘f4 20.♔f1 ♘xd3! [20...♘xh3? 21.♖xe5 ♕xe5 22.c4 d4 23.♖e1 ♕f6 24.♗e4±] 21.♕xd3 h5! 22.♕e3 ♗c7 23.♖e2 ♖d8 24.♖d1 e5∞ Black has successfully converted his control of the dark squares into an initiative on the kingside, whereas White has been unable to make any progress on the queenside.

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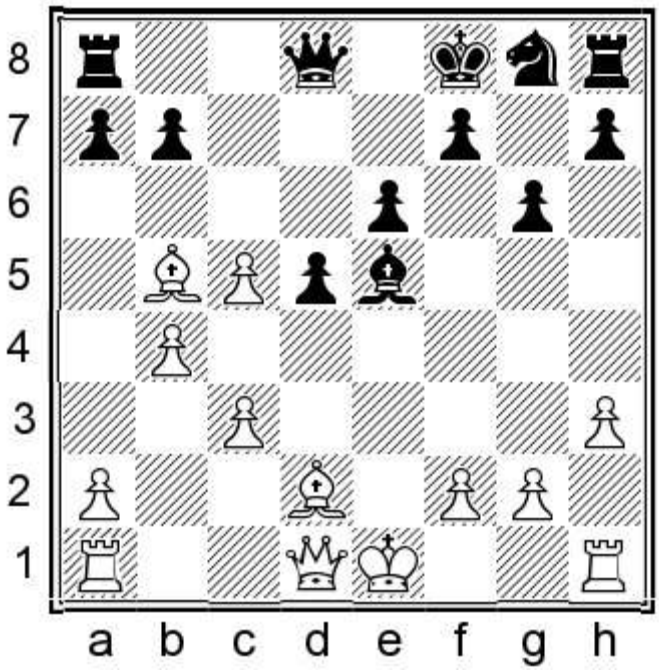
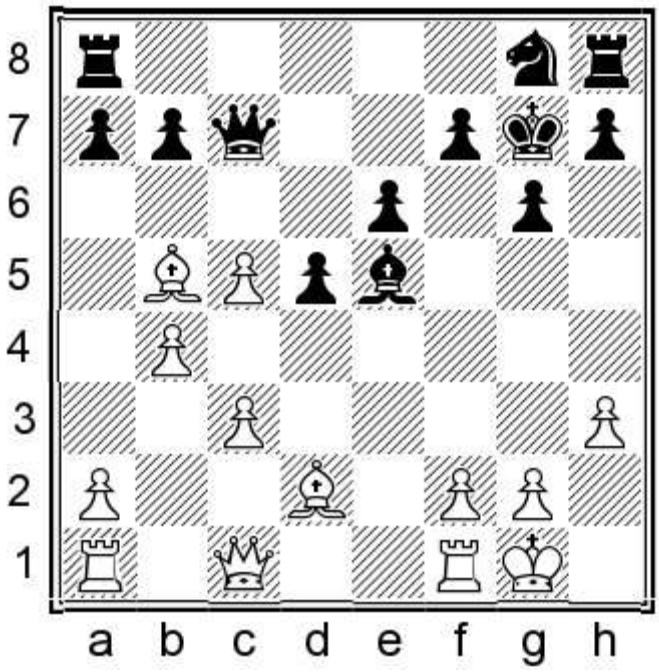


Position after: 13.♗d2

13...b6!N

I like this move because it eliminates White's strongest asset: the c5-pawn. Black opens up the c-file to pressure the c3-pawn and gains the d6-square for his pieces.

13...♔g7 was played in Schwetlick, T (2503) – Rawlings, A (2352) ICCF email 2019, but after 14.0-0 ♕c7 15.♕c1!



Position after: 15.♕c1!

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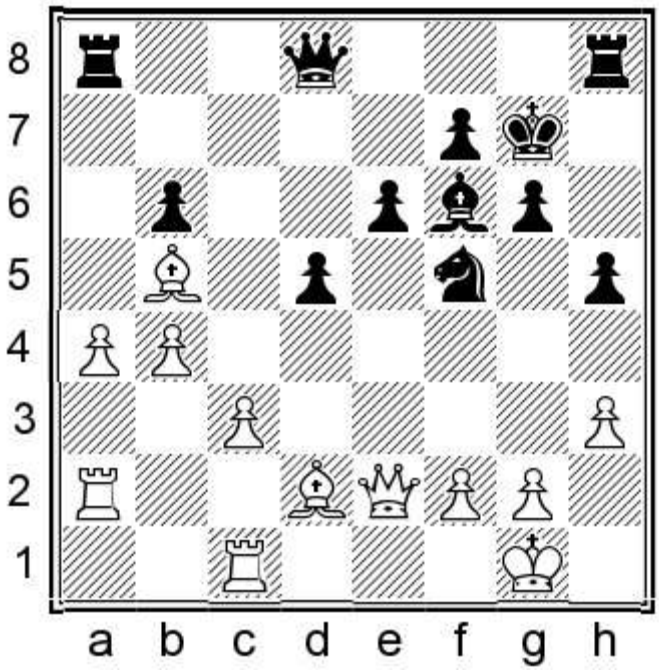
Black is unable to trade the dark-squared bishops with ...♗f4, leaving him without a clear plan. The game continued 15...b6 16.cxb6 axb6 17.♖e1 h5 18.♖xe5!? ♕xe5 19.♗f4 ♕f6 20.♕e3 ♕d8 21.a4∞ and although Black eventually held, this position looks quite uncomfortable to play in a tournament game. We should be wary of correspondence games: although they often provide invaluable insight due to their analytical rigor, they sometimes involve positions that are easy to hold for engines but unplayable for a human in a practical game.

14.cxb6 axb6 15.0-0 ♔g7 16.a4 ♘e7 17.♕e2

17.♕f3 h5 18.♗g5 ♕d6 19.♖ad1 ♘f5=

17...♗f6 18.♖fc1 h5 19.♖a2 ♘f5=



Position after: 19...♘f5=

White has the bishop pair, but Black has a solid position and an excellent dark-squared bishop.

e) 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3 a6 8.♕b3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5 ♗g4 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3

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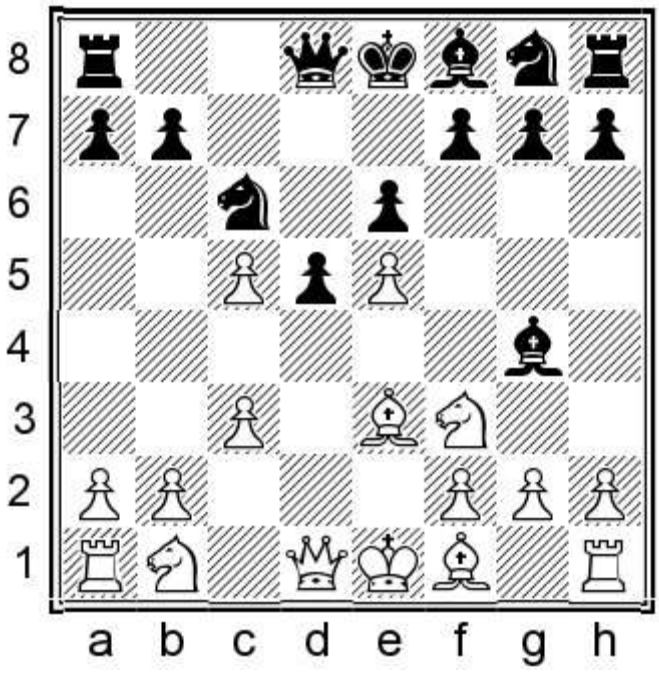

Position after: 7.♗e3

This is White's most straightforward continuation: he develops a piece and defends the c5-pawn. Just like in the 7.b4 variation, Black has no choice but to go after the e5-pawn.

7...a6!?

By preventing ♗b5, Black makes ...♘xe5 an immediate threat.

The alternatives are not as good:

A) 7...♕c7? 8.♘bd2 ♘ge7 9.♕a4!±

B) 7...♗xf3?! 8.♕xf3 ♕c7 9.♗b5 ♕xe5 10.0-0 ♘f6 11.♘d2 ♕c7 12.a4 ♗e7 13.b4±

C) 7...♘ge7?! 8.♘bd2 ♘f5 9.♗d4 ♗e7 10.♗b5 0-0 11.♗xc6 bxc6 12.h3±

8.♕b3!?

This is a very forcing idea: White resolves the pin on the f3-knight and attacks the b7-pawn at the same time. The game becomes incredibly messy and the flow of tactical ideas makes it somewhat difficult to follow. That being said, Black's idea is quite straightforward: he needs to generate counterplay against the White king and exploit White's lag in development.

8.♕a4 is an attempt to hold on to the e5-pawn, but Black has excellent compensation: 8...♗xf3 9.gxf3 ♘ge7 10.♘d2 ♘f5!N 11.♘b3 ♘xe3 12.fxe3 ♕g5 13.f4 ♕h4+ 14.♔d2 ♗e7⩱.

8...♗xf3 9.♕xb7

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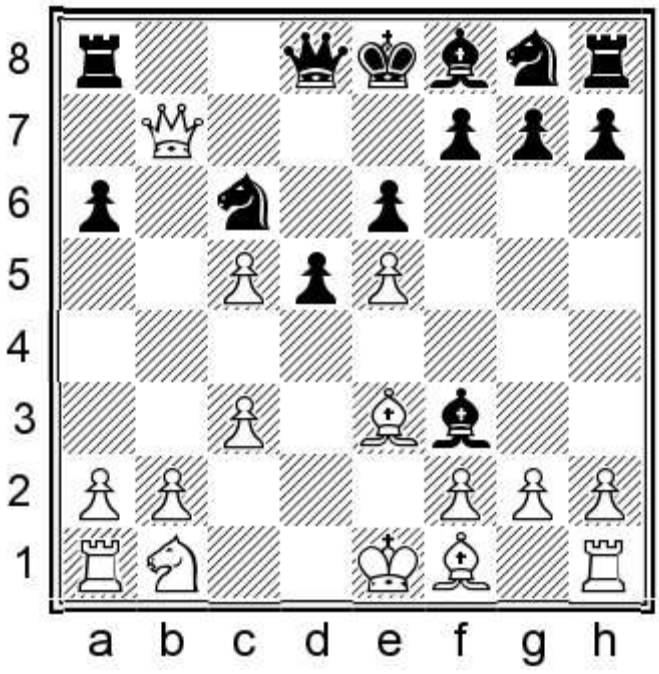
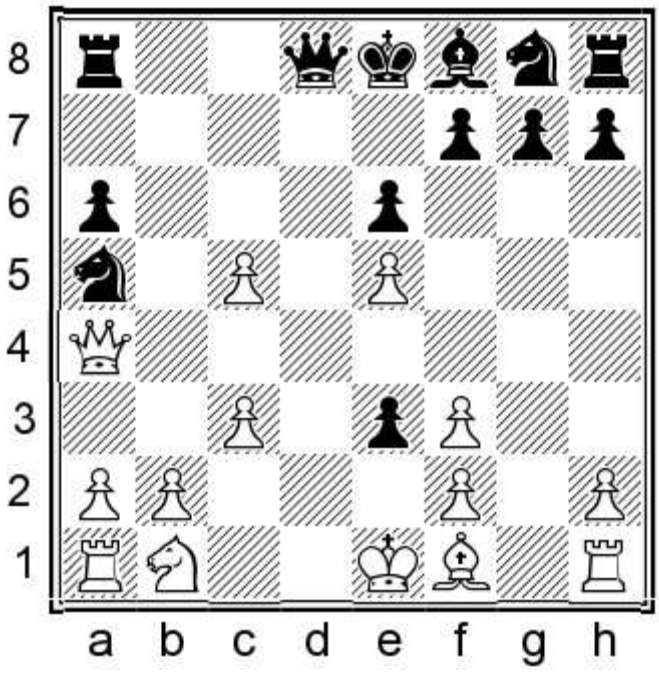


Position after: 9.♕xb7

9...♘ge7!N

I was extremely pleased to find this novelty since it upholds the viability of the entire variation. Black accepts a two-pawn deficit, but he will use his solid position to generate a strong initiative on all parts of the board.

9...d4 has been played before, but Black fails to equalize. 10.gxf3 ♘a5 11.♕e4 dxe3 12.♕a4+



Position after: 12.♕a4+

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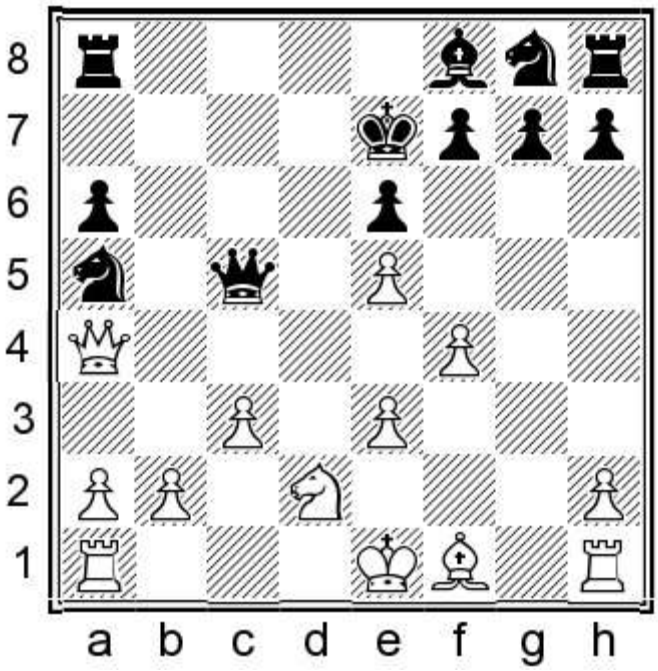
A) 12...♕d7 13.♕xa5 ♕c6 14.fxe3 ♗xc5 15.♘d2 ♗xe3 16.0-0-0 ♘e7 17.♗d3 ♕xf3 18.♖hf1 ♕g4∞ was played in Goncharenko, G (2495) – Ozmen, H (2425) ICCF email 2016 and Black was able to hold this position. However, it seems quite obvious to the human eye that White is the one pressing and that Black faces an uncomfortable defense.

B) 12...♔e7 13.fxe3 ♕c7 14.f4 ♕xc5 15.♘d2



Position after: 15.♘d2

15...f5 The game Bubir, S (2586) – Brodda, W (2608) ICCF email 2012 ended in a draw in this position, but White could have gained the upper hand. [Instead 15...♕xe3+ 16.♗e2 ♖d8 17.♘f3 ♕b6 18.♘d4± was unpleasant in Zaas, P (2348) – Gredescul, A (2085) ICCF email 2017.] 16.♘f3!N 16...♕c6 17.♕xc6 ♘xc6 18.♖d1± Although White only has two pawns for the piece, Black lacks coordination and his e6-pawn is an easy target.

10.gxf3 ♖a7

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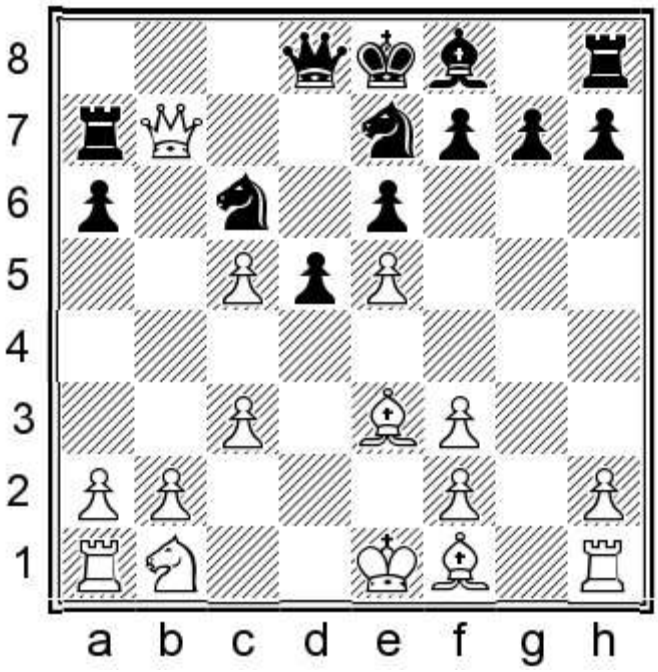
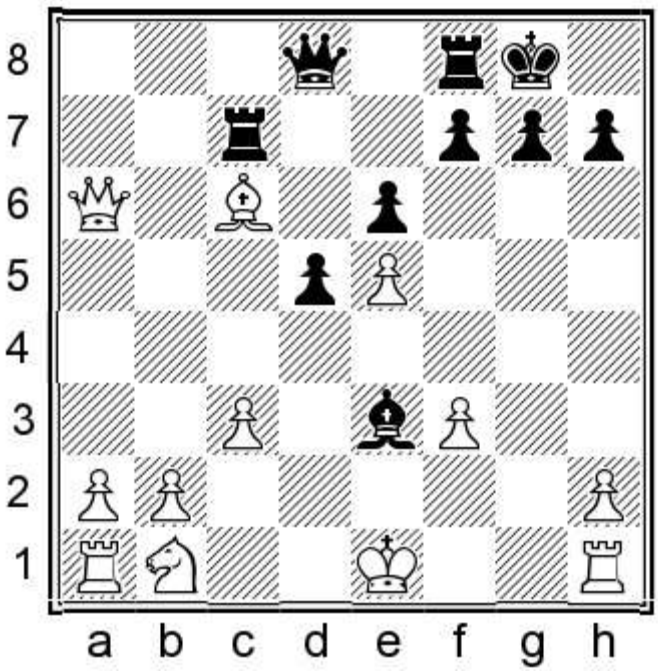


Position after: 10...♖a7

11.♕b6

11.♕b3 ♘f5 12.♕a4 ♖c7! The a6-pawn is irrelevant, so it's better to focus on the c5-pawn and the initiative. 13.♕xa6 [13.♗xa6 ♘xe3 14.fxe3 ♗xc5 15.♗b5 ♕c8 16.♔e2 0-0 17.♗xc6 ♖xc6] 13...♘xe3 14.fxe3 ♗xc5 15.♗b5 0-0! 16.♗xc6 ♗xe3



Position after: 16...♗xe3

Black's strong attack compensates for the material deficit because White's king is so exposed and

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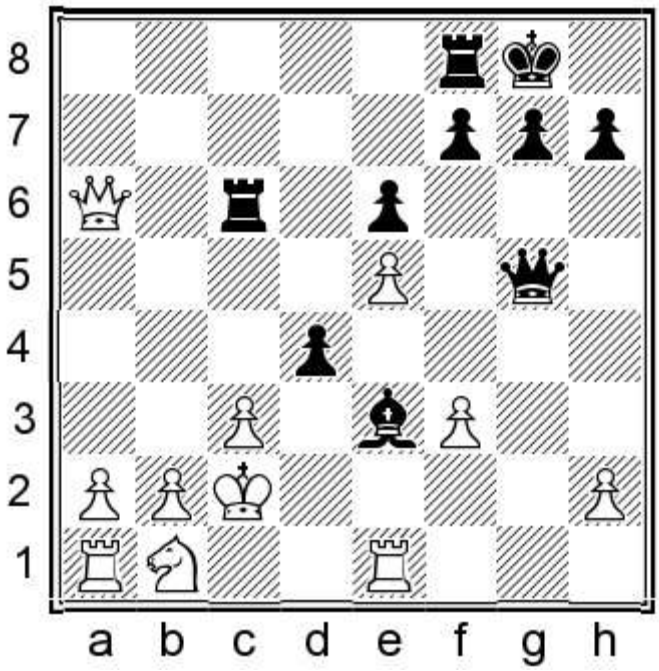
White is so undeveloped. I present a few lines, without too comments, to showcase how the game may continue:

A) 17.h4 ♕b8! 18.b4 ♗c1! 19.a3 ♖fc8 20.♗a4 ♖c4 21.♗b5 ♕xe5+ 22.♔d1 ♖4c7∓

B) 17.♕e2 ♗f4 18.♗b5 d4! Black needs to open the position to attack the enemy king. 19.♗d3 ♖c5 20.♗xh7+ [20.♔d1 ♖xe5 21.♕f1 ♖e3 22.♔c2 ♕a8∞] 20...♔h8 21.♗e4 ♖xe5∞

C) 17.♔d1 d4 18.♔c2 ♕g5 19.♖e1 ♖xc6!



Position after: 19...♖xc6!

Just when it seemed that White was consolidating, Black initiates a king hunt. 20.♕xc6 ♕g2+ 21.♔b3 [21.♔d3 ♕xb2 22.cxd4 ♗xd4∞] 21...♖b8+ 22.♔a4 ♕xb2 23.♘a3 dxc3 24.♘b5 ♕c2+ 25.♔b4 ♕b2+ 26.♔a5 ♖xb5+ 27.♕xb5 ♕a3+ 28.♕a4 ♕c5+ 29.♕b5 ♕a3+=

11...♕a8! 12.f4 ♘f5

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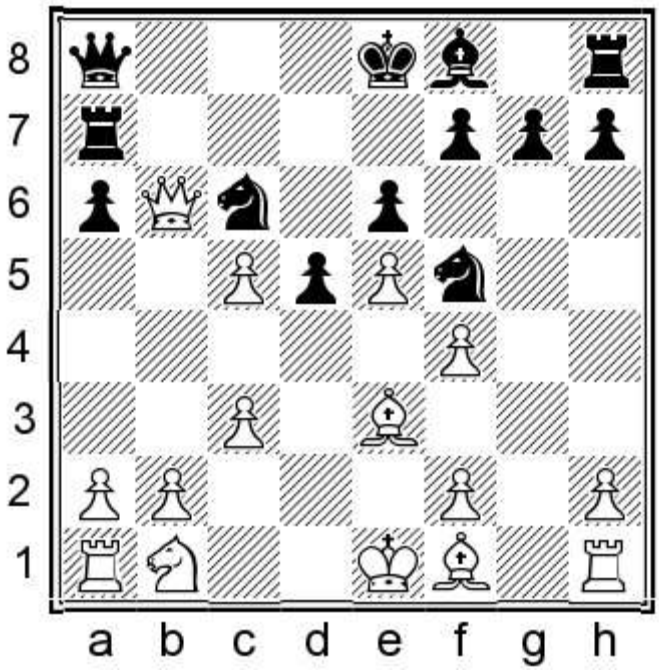

Position after: 12...♘f5

By eliminating the e3-bishop, Black takes control of the dark squares and weakens White's position.

13.c4

This is White's most critical continuation, and it leads to some truly spectacular lines.

A) 13.♘d2 ♗e7 14.♖g1 0-0 15.♕b3 ♘xe3 16.fxe3 ♗xc5 17.♖g3 ♖b7 18.♕c2 ♕a7→

B) 13.♗d3 is a logical alternative, but Black's initiative does not allow White to consolidate: 13...♘xe3 14.fxe3 ♗e7 15.♘d2 [15.♖f1 0-0 16.♕b3 ♗xc5=] 15...0-0 16.♕b3 ♗xc5 17.♔e2 ♖b7 18.♕a4 ♖xb2 19.♖ab1 ♖fb8 20.♖xb2 ♖xb2 21.♖b1 ♖xb1 22.♘xb1 a5 23.♘d2 ♕b7=.

13...♗e7 14.cxd5 ♘xe3! 15.fxe3 ♗h4+! 16.♔e2 exd5

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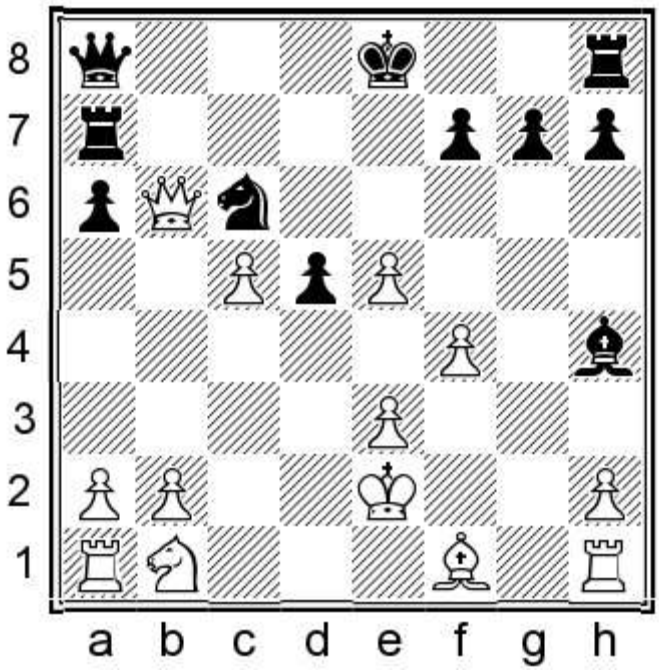

Position after: 16...exd5

When you first glance at this position, White's two extra pawns seem almost irrelevant because what draws your attention is White's king safety and the other dynamic aspects of the position. Of course, a more concrete approach is required, but this gut feeling is not too far wide of the mark: Black's attack is dangerous and White needs to defend accurately to stay out of trouble. Since this position has little to do with opening theory, I will present some lines as "proof" of Black's compensation, but without too many comments because the tactics speak for themselves.

17.♗g2

17.♘d2 0-0 18.♕b3 ♖b7 19.♕d3 [19.♕a3 a5 This is a move that will show up over and over again. Black frees the a6 square to bring his queen into the game. 20.♘f3 ♗e7∞; 19.♕c2 d4 20.♘c4 dxe3 21.♖d1 ♖b5 22.♕e4 ♖xc5∞] 19...a5 20.a3 d4! 21.♗g2 dxe3 22.♗xc6 exd2∞ White will eventually take the exchange on b7 but his king will remain exposed.

17...0-0 18.♕b3 ♖b7 19.♕d3 ♘b4!

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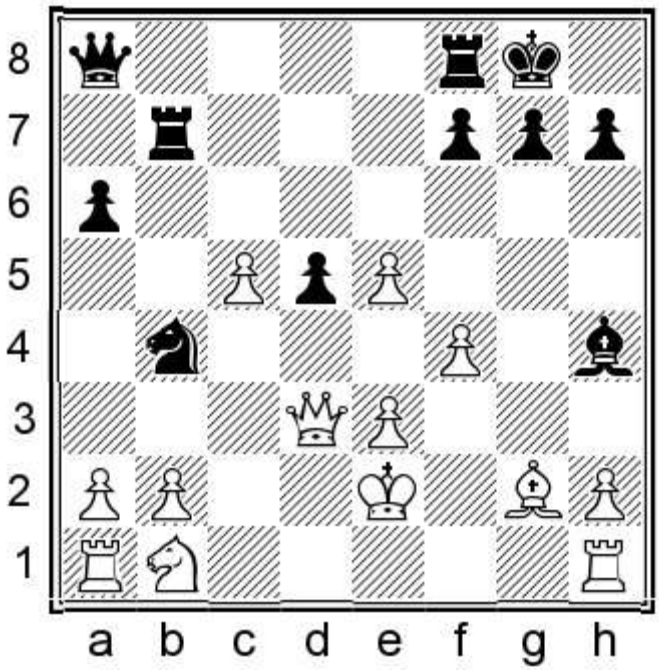
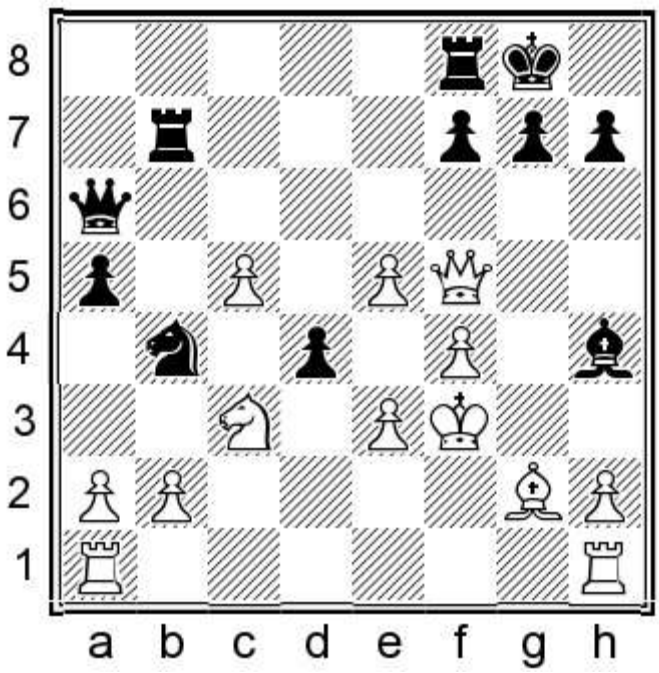


Position after: 19...♘b4!

20.♕f5

20.♕d2 is met by 20...a5! and White's king has nowhere to hide. 21.a3 [21.♔f1 ♖fb8 22.♘c3 ♘c2!∞] 21...♕a6+ 22.♔d1 ♘d3 23.♗f1 ♘xb2+ 24.♕xb2 ♕xf1+ 25.♖xf1 ♖xb2 26.♘c3 ♖c8 27.♖a2 ♖xa2 28.♘xa2 ♗e7=

20...a5! 21.♘c3 ♕a6+ 22.♔f3 d4!



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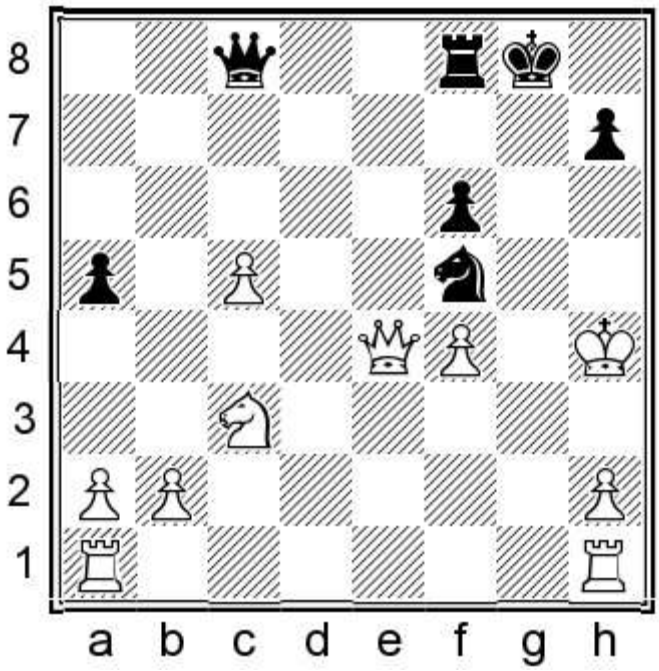
Position after: 22...d4!

Black should disregard even the very last of his materialistic thoughts here.

23.exd4 ♘c6 24.♔g4 ♘xd4 25.♗xb7 ♕xb7 26.♕e4 f5+! 27.exf6 ♕c8+ 28.♔xh4

28.f5 ♘xf5 29.♖ae1 ♗xe1 30.♖xe1 ♘e3+ 31.♔f4 ♖e8=

28...♘f5+ 29.♔g5 gxf6+ 30.♔h5 ♘g7+ 31.♔h4 ♘f5+=



Position after: 31...♘f5+=

As it so often happens, the main line simply leads to a repetition.

f) 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3 a6 8.♘bd2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.dxc5 ♗g4 6.c3 e6 7.♗e3 a6!? 8.♘bd2

This is the most principled move: White gives up on his e5-pawn but instead seeks to complete his development and claim a positional edge.

8...♘xe5

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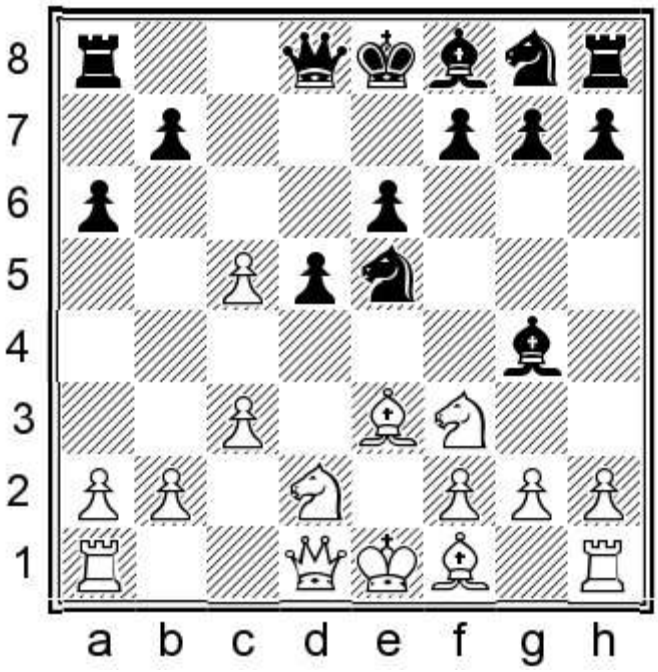
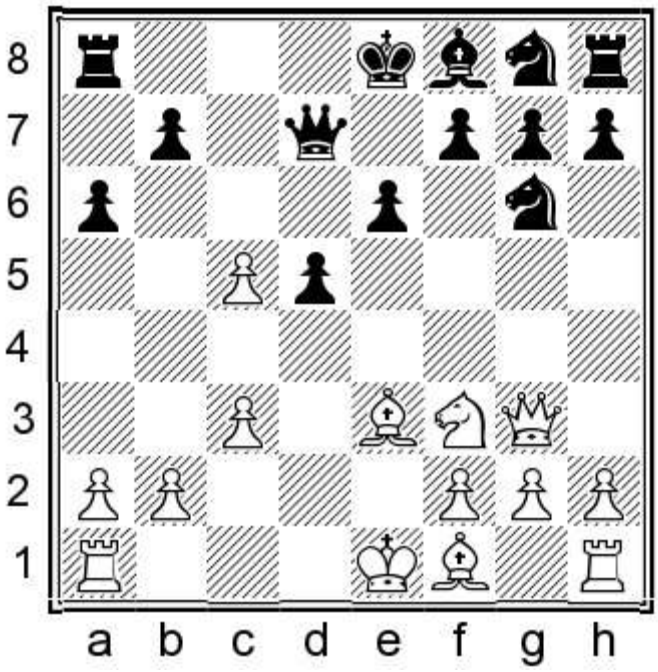


Position after: 8...♘xe5

9.h3

A) 9.♕a4+ ♕d7 10.♕f4 This move forces matters in the center, but White's queen is awkwardly placed on f4. 10...♗xf3 11.♘xf3 [11.♕xe5 ♗g4=] 11...♘g6 12.♕g3



Position after: 12.♕g3

12...f5!?N Whereas White obtains a comfortable edge against the alternatives, the text move forces him to enter a very double-edged position. [12...♘f6 13.♗d3 ♘e4 14.♗xe4 dxe4 15.♖d1 ♕b5 16.♘d4

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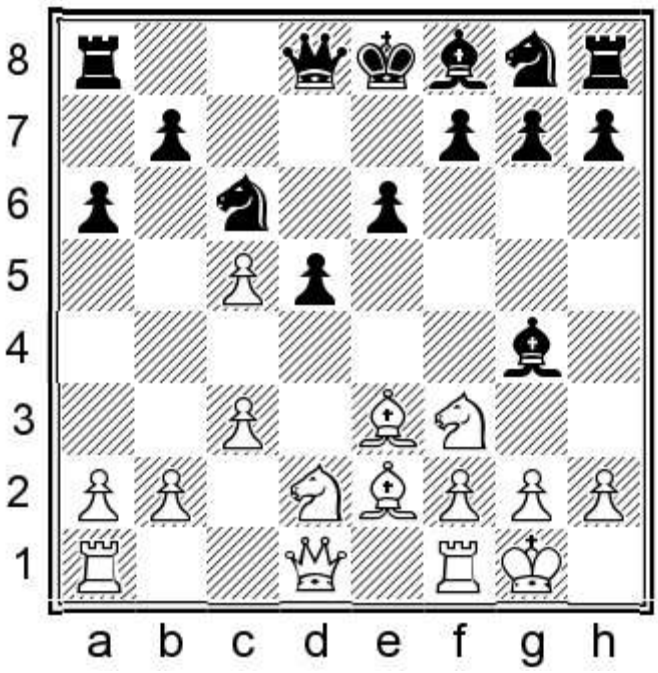
♕xb2 Ronquillo Tamarit, W (2199) – Anand, A (2138) ICCF email 2016 17.0-0!N 17...♗e7 18.c6!±] 13.♗d3 [13.♘e5 ♘xe5 14.♕xe5 ♘f6 15.♗d4 ♔f7 16.♗e2 b6!∞; 13.♘g5!? is met by 13...e5! 14.♘xh7 ♕e6 15.♘xf8 ♘xf8⩱] 13...♘f6 14.0-0-0 [14.0-0 ♗e7 15.♖ad1 0-0 16.♕h3 ♖ac8 17.b4 b6! 18.cxb6 ♖xc3 19.♗xa6 ♖a3 20.b5 ♗d6⩲ Black is ready to advance his central pawns while White is left wondering how to proceed.] 14...b6! Black must eliminate the c5-pawn so that he can complete his development, even at the cost of a pawn. 15.cxb6 ♗d6 16.♕h3 0-0 17.♔b1 ♖ab8∞ The position is very sharp, but I have faith in Black's queenside attack.

B) 9.♗e2 ♘c6 10.0-0



Position after: 10.0-0

10...♘ge7!?N Although 10...♘f6 is also possible, I like sticking to our setup, which involves ...♘ge7 and ...g6.

B1) 11.♘d4 ♗xe2 12.♕xe2 g6 13.♖ad1 ♕c7! [13...♗g7 is imprecise due to 14.♘c4!±] 14.b4 ♗g7=

B2) 11.♕b3 ♕d7 12.c4 ♘f5 13.cxd5 exd5 14.♖ad1 ♗e7 15.h3 ♘xe3 16.♕xe3 ♗e6=

B3) 11.b4 g6 12.a4 ♘f5 13.♗g5 ♗e7 14.♗xe7 ♕xe7 15.♖e1 0-0= Without the dark-squared bishops, White's options are limited. Black will try to utilize his control of the dark-squares to blockade White's queenside pawns with ...b6 or ...a5.

9...♘xf3+ 10.♘xf3 ♗xf3 11.♕xf3 ♘f6

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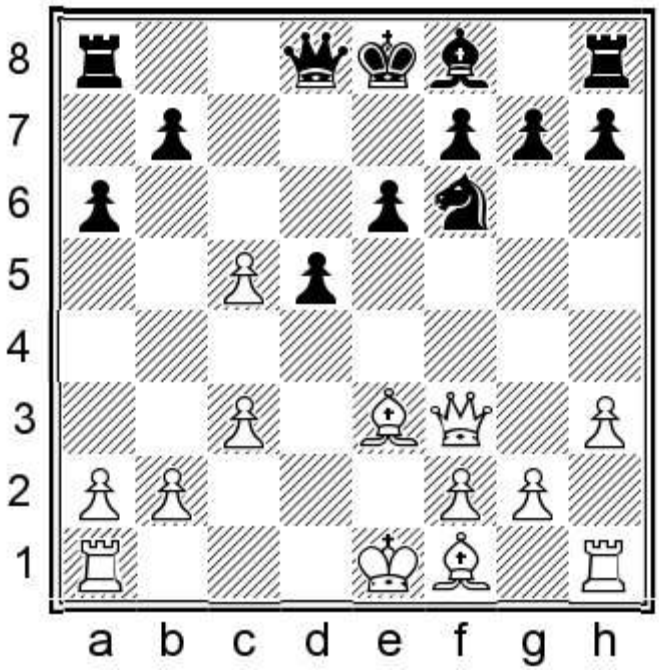

Position after: 11...♘f6

Black wants to play ...g6, ...♗g7 and ...0-0, and then use his solid center to undermine White's queenside pawns with either ...b6 or ...a5.

12.♗d3

12.♗d4 prevents ...g6 but now Black can play 12...♕c7! with the intention of playing ...e5 on the next move. 13.b4 e5! 14.♕g3 0-0-0 15.♗xe5 ♖e8 16.f4 ♘d7 17.0-0-0 ♘xe5 18.fxe5 ♖xe5 19.♕f3 ♗e7 20.♖xd5 ♖xd5 21.♕xd5 ♖d8 22.♕f3 a5! 23.a3 ♕d7!∞

12...g6

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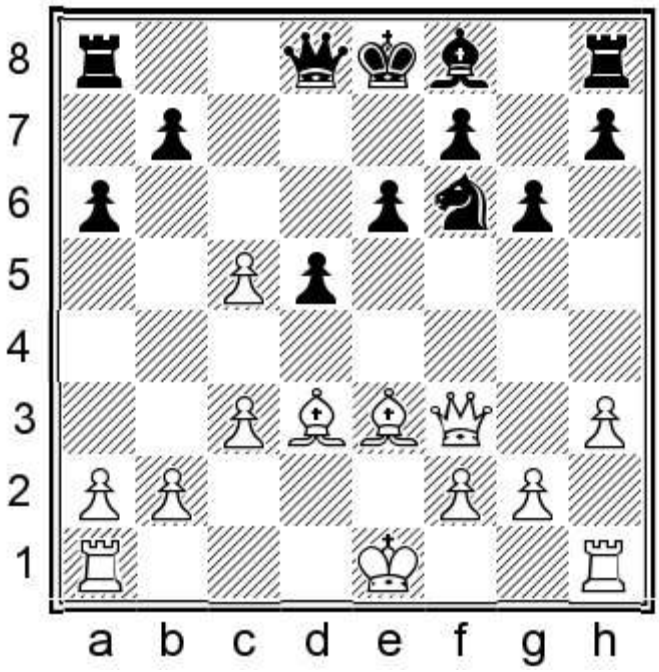
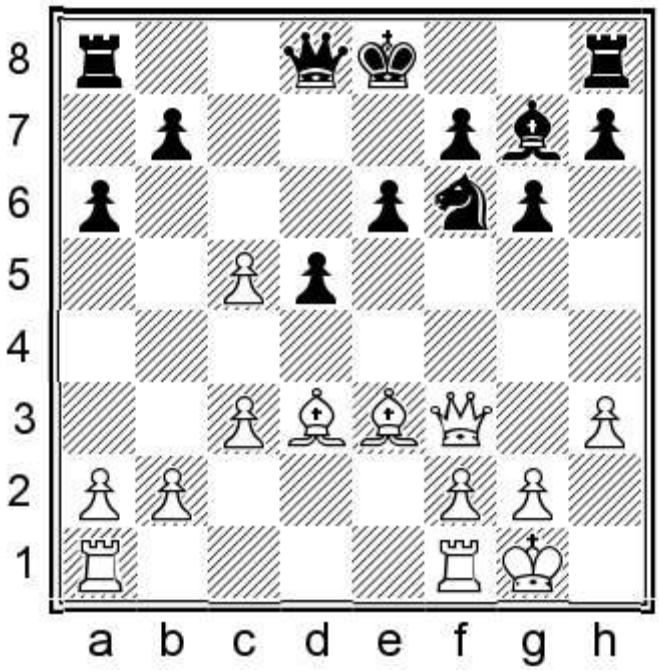


Position after: 12...g6

13.0-0

13.0-0-0 is too ambitious since Black is ready to attack on the queenside. 13...♖c8! 14.♗d4 ♗g7 15.g4 [15.h4 is met by 15...h5!= and White's attack is at an end.] 15...0-0 16.h4 ♘d7!= The dark-squared bishops come off the board, taking the sting out of White's attack.

13...♗g7



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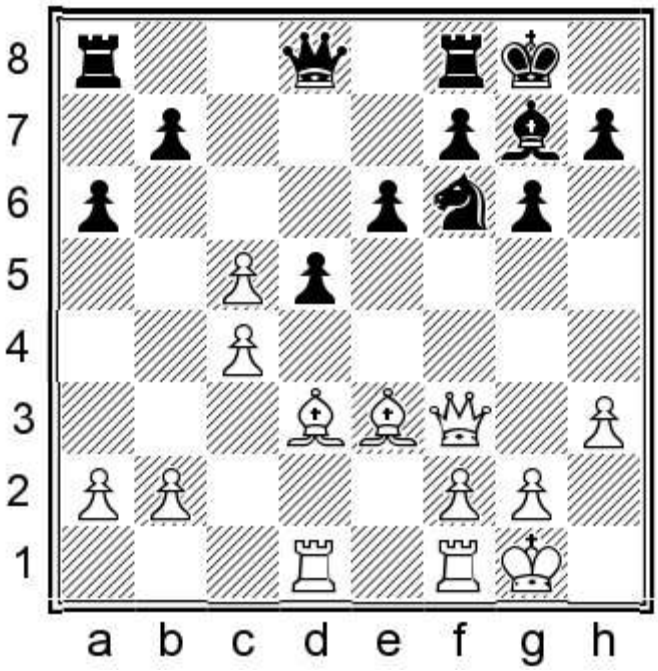
Position after: 13...♗g7

There are many moves worth exploring, but the variation tree quickly gets ridiculous. As usual I will mention a few of my lines to highlight some key ideas.

14.c4

14.♗g5 This move prevents ...♘d7. 14...0-0 15.b4 a5! 16.a3 h6 17.♗h4 e5! Since ...♘d7 is not an option, Black must generate counterplay in the center. 18.♗c2 [18.♗b5 e4 19.♕d1 ♕e7 20.♕b3 ♕e6 21.♖ad1 ♘h5! 22.♕xd5 ♕xd5 23.♖xd5 g5 24.♗g3 ♘xg3 25.fxg3 ♗xc3=] 18...e4 19.♕e2 [19.♕e3 ♘g4!=] 19...b6 20.c6 ♕d6 21.b5 ♖fe8∞ White has a strong pawn on c6 but Black has gained space in the center and has good control over key squares on the queenside.

14...0-0 15.♖ad1



Position after: 15.♖ad1

15...a5!

15...♕a5 is met by 16.♗g5! dxc4 17.♗e2! and Black fails to equalize. 17...♘d5 18.♗xc4 h6 19.♗xd5 exd5 20.♗f4 ♕xc5 21.♖xd5 ♕c6 22.b3 [22.♖fd1 ♕f6!=] 22...♖ac8 23.♖fd1± Although White's advantage is not a crushing one, the position is quite unpleasant for Black.

16.a3

16.♗f4 ♖e8 17.♗d6 ♖c8 18.♖fe1 ♗f8 19.cxd5 exd5 20.♖xe8 ♘xe8 21.♕xd5 ♘xd6 22.cxd6 ♕xd6 23.♕xd6 ♗xd6 24.♗xg6

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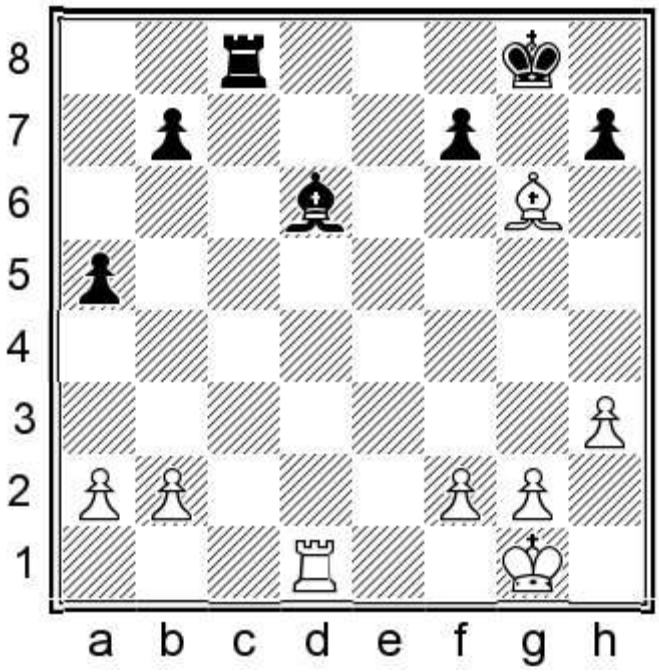
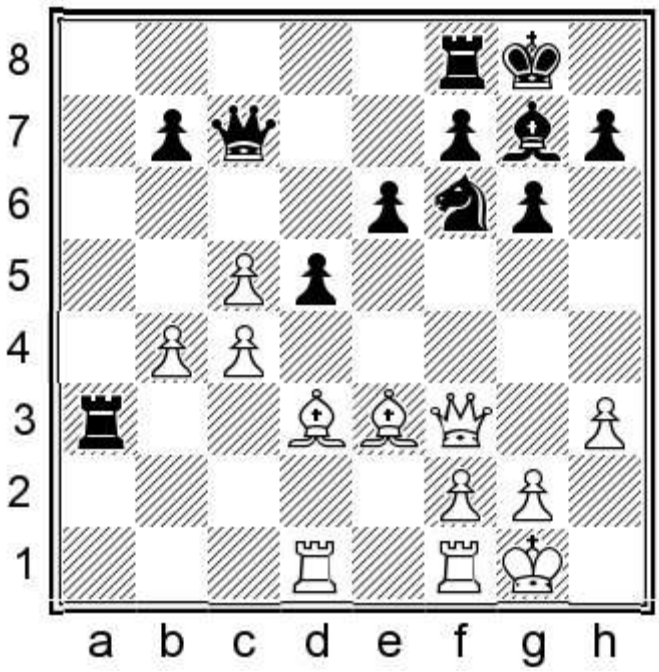


Position after: 24.♗xg6

24...♗f4! 25.♗e4 ♖c1 26.♖xc1 ♗xc1 27.b3 b6=

16...♕c7 17.b4 axb4 18.axb4 ♖a3∞



Position after: 18...♖a3∞

Black's activity makes it difficult for White to utilize his bishop pair. Black should continue to pressure White's queenside pawns and look for ways to simplify the position.

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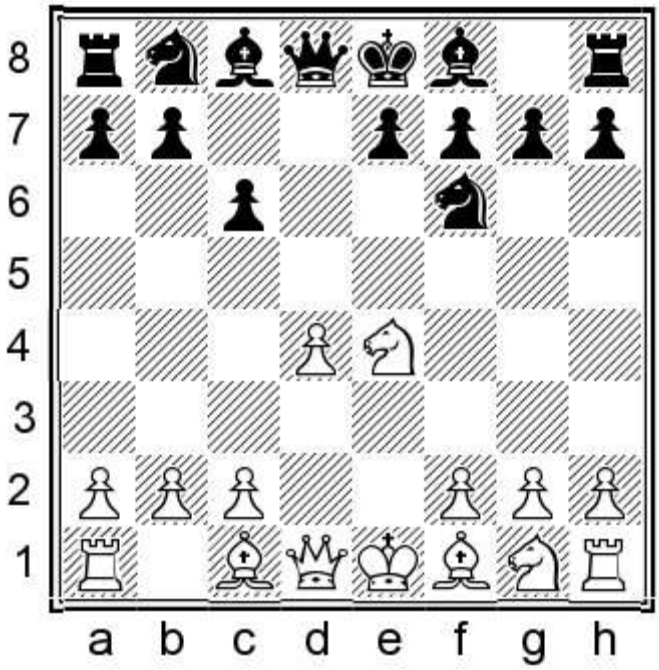
Part II
Open Caro-Kann

Chapter 9
Alternatives on moves 5 and 6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 9 – Alternatives on moves 5 and 6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6

a) 5.--, 5.♘xf6+ exf6 6.--

b) 6.♘f3

a) 5.--, 5.♘xf6+ exf6 6.--

With this chapter we begin our discussion of the open Caro-Kann. The open Caro-Kann has been tried and tested for decades and is emblematic of the Caro-Kann Defense. Advocates of the Caro-Kann have brought to life a variety of setups, and their opponents have relentlessly posed problems for Black in each line. While the theoretical advancements have detracted players from choosing certain lines (4...♘d7, for example, is rarely played nowadays), Black has continuously found new ideas and defended the viability of the opening. Since you ought to expect a substantial number of your Caro-Kann games to feature the open variation, I have dedicated a large portion of the book to it.

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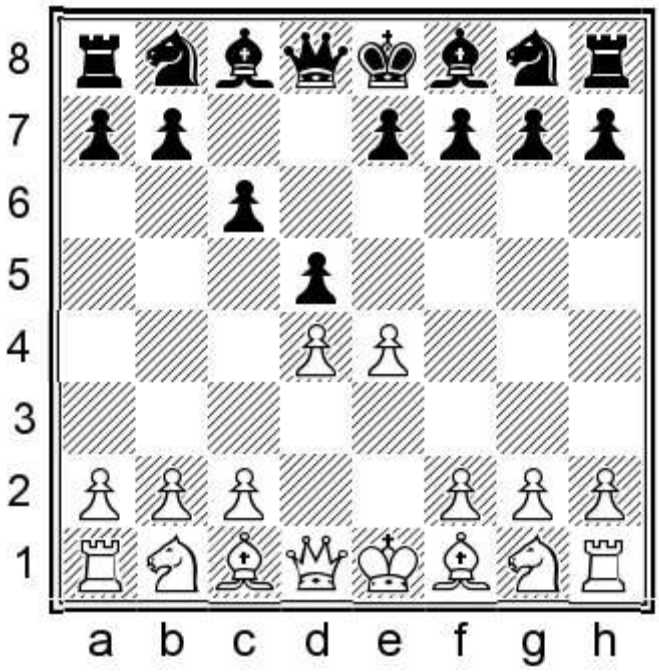
The line that I present is 4...♘f6 5.♘xf6+ exf6. It is a solid and modern approach which can be employed under various circumstances, whether you are looking to achieve a solid and positional struggle or a more complex and dynamic game. 4...♘f6 is not as popular as 4...♗f5 but it has seen a recent surge in popularity as Black has found new ideas and revitalized the variation.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5



Position after: 2...d5

3.♘c3

3.♘d2 simply leads to the same position, since White will recapture on e4 after 3...dxe4. Some players prefer to play 3.♘d2 because it gives them the option of playing c2-c3 in the case where Black does not play 3...dxe4 and instead plays 3...g6. However, there is no difference for us since we intend to play 3...dxe4 regardless.

3...dxe4 4.♘xe4

4.f3

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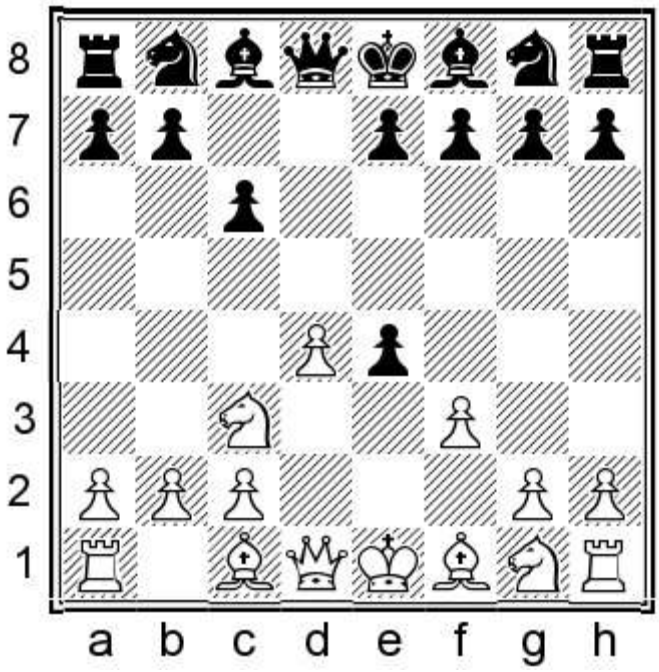
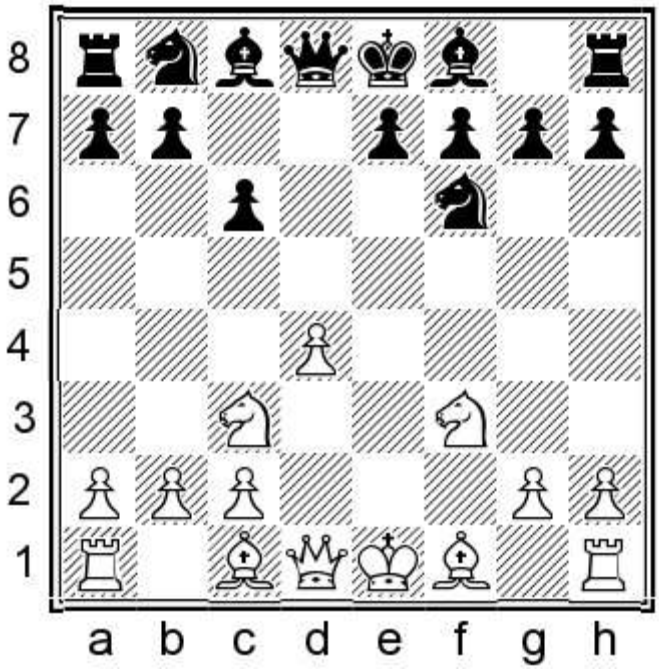


Position after: 4.f3

While this move is nothing more than a coffeehouse attempt to develop a quick initiative, I decided to include it for completeness. I remember encoutering this move on a regular basis when playing on the Internet Chess Club as a kid (the level of my games was not quite as good as it is today, as you can imagine.) The sacrifice is unsound, but Black's position can become dangerous if he proceeds carelessly. 4...exf3 5.♘xf3 ♘f6



Position after: 5...♘f6

This position can also be reached via the equally uncommon 1.d4 d5 2.e4?!? dxe4 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.f3 exf3

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5.♘xf3 c6. Black has other moves besides 5...c6, but I have always preferred this one because it fits into our present repertoire. It was also recommended by Andrew Martin in his "*Queen's Pawn Openings*", a DVD which I greatly enjoyed as a kid. White now has a choice: he can develop his light-squared bishop to d3 or c4. Black will develop his own light-squared bishop accordingly, either to g4 or f5.

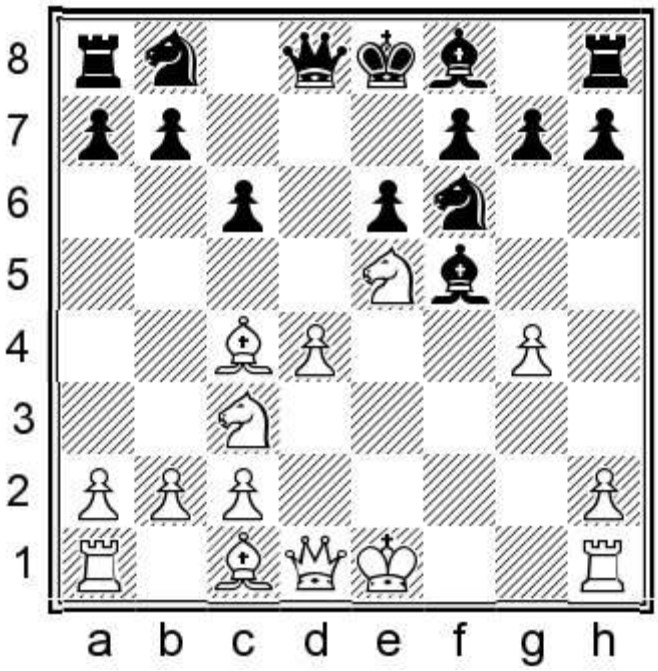
A) 6.♗d3 ♗g4! Black immediately pressures the d4-pawn.

A1) 7.0-0 simply allows Black to gobble a second pawn: 7...♗xf3 8.♕xf3 ♕xd4+ 9.♗e3 ♕g4 10.♕f2 e6∓ Although White has some compensation, it definitely is not enough for equality.

A2) 7.h3 With this move, White invites Black to take on d4 so that he can castle queenside. 7...♗xf3 8.♕xf3 ♕xd4 9.♗e3 ♕h4+ 10.g3 ♕b4 11.0-0-0 ♘bd7 12.g4 h6N 13.♔b1 e6∓ Here too, White has an active position to compensate for the two pawns, but Black should be able to get away unscathed.

A3) 7.♗e3 e6 8.0-0 ♘bd7 9.♕e1 ♗xf3 10.♖xf3 ♗d6∓ Black's position is very solid and his king is safe, so White does not have enough compensation for the pawn.

B) 6.♗c4 ♗f5 [Pinning the f3-knight with 6...♗g4?? would fail to both 7.♘e5 and 7.♗xf7+ ♔xf7 8.♘e5+.] 7.♘e5 e6 8.g4



Position after: 8.g4

[8.0-0 ♗g6! Black protects the f7-pawn and prevents White's tricks. 9.♗g5 ♗e7∓.] 8...♘fd7! An important move. White obtains decent compensation after the more natural 8...♗g6. With 8...♘fd7, Black uses the fact that White's own king is exposed on e1. 9.gxf5 ♕h4+ 10.♔f1 ♘xe5 11.♗e2 ♕h3+ 12.♔e1 ♘ed7! 13.fxe6 ♕xe6 14.♖g1 ♘a6∓ White's initiative has vanished, and Black is left with an extra pawn.

4...♘f6

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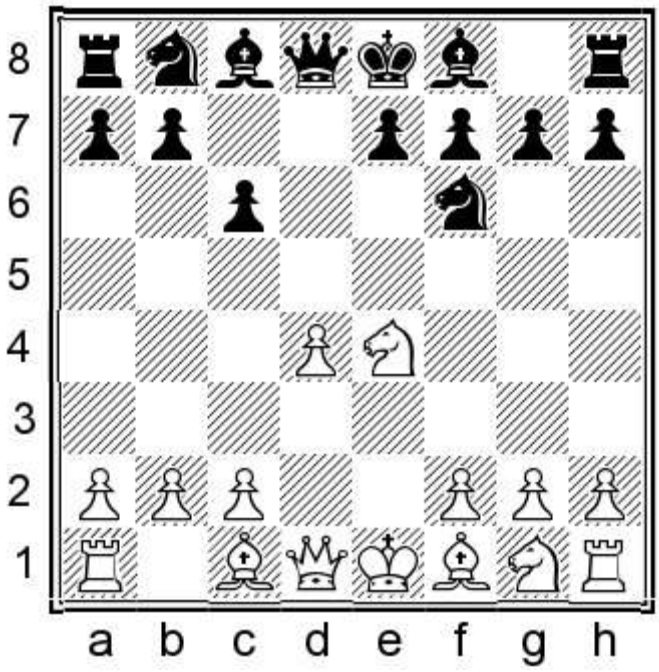

Position after: 4...♘f6

Although White's alternatives to 5.♘xf6+ are played infrequently – and for good reason – we shall examine them briefly. It's quite easy to realize that any move other than 5.♘xf6+ is not very challenging for Black by considering that Black's second most popular choice on move 4 is 4...♘d7, with the idea to play ...♘f6 without allowing White to double Black's pawns. If White does not take on f6, Black will have a much improved version of that line.

5.♘xf6+

A) White cannot protect the e4-knight with 5.♗d3?! since the d4-pawn is left unprotected: 5...♕xd4 6.♘f3 ♕d5= White may have compensation, but Black is in the driver's seat.

B) 5.♘c3 is a very unambitious retreat. Black can continue his development in typical Caro-Kann fashion: 5...♗f5 6.♘f3 e6 7.♗d3 ♗xd3 8.♕xd3 ♗e7 9.0-0 0-0=.

C) 5.♕d3

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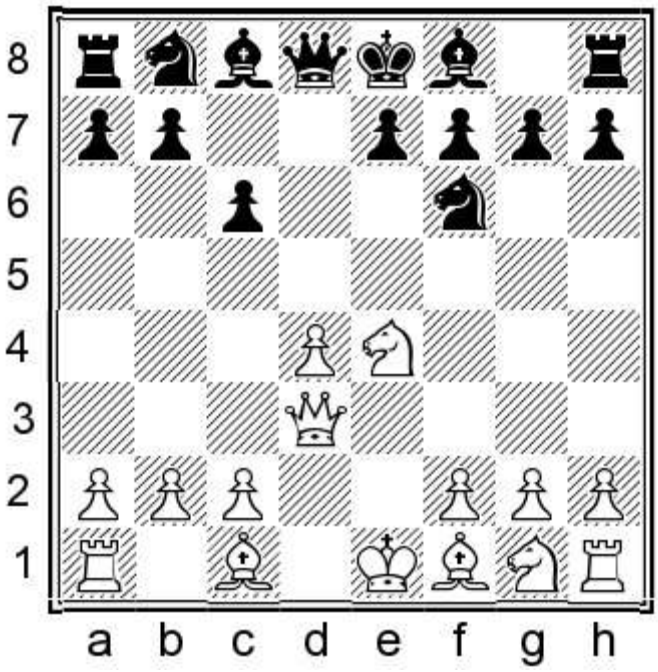
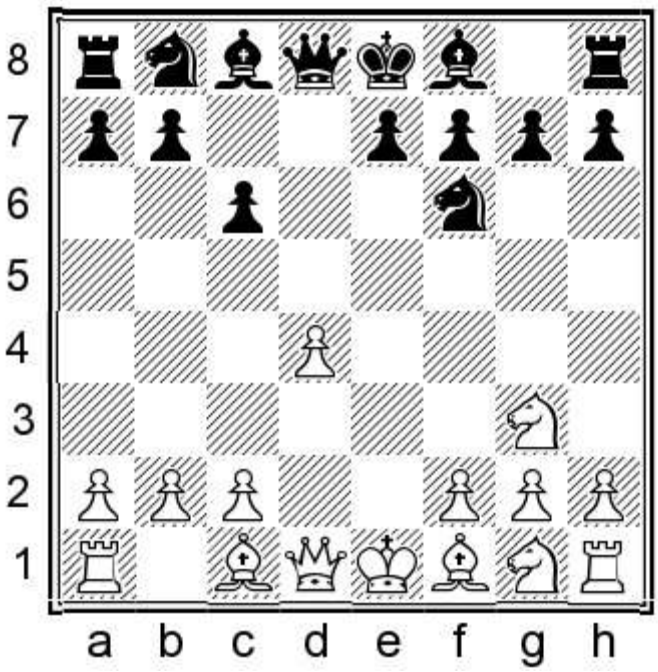


Position after: 5.♕d3

This move is perhaps White's best alternative to 5.♘xf6+, but it has consistently been shunned by White players. Black is unable to place his light-squared bishop on f5, so he delays its development. 5...♘bd7 6.♘f3 ♘xe4 7.♕xe4 ♘f6 8.♕f4 [8.♕d3 g6 9.♗e2 ♗g7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♖e1 ♕c7= Black is ready to pressure White's center with ...c5, and White still needs to complete his development.] 8...♘d5 9.♕d2 g6 10.♗d3 ♗g7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖e1 ♕d6= Again, Black is ready to open the position with ...c5. Once White's d4-pawn is traded, he will have lost his space advantage.

D) 5.♘g3



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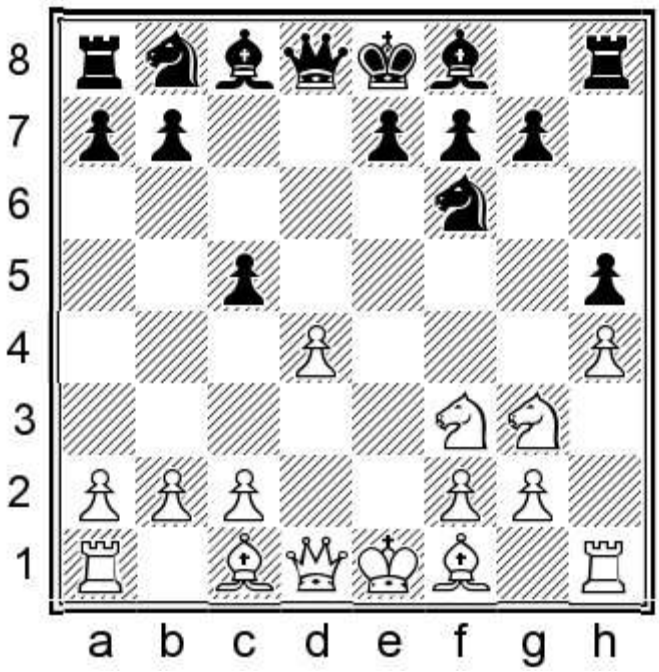
Position after: 5.♘g3

White prevents ...♗f5, but his knight is akwardly placed on g3. 5...h5! Black wastes no time going after the g3-knight. 6.h4 Although White has stopped Black's plan of playing ...h4, the inclusion of h4 and ...h5 favors Black since the g4-square is now more secure for Black's pieces. [6.♗c4 h4 7.♘3e2 ♗f5 8.♘f3 h3 9.g3 e6 10.0-0 c5=] 6...c5! Black is ready to open the center! There are other good options, but I like this straightforward approach. 7.♘f3



Position after: 7.♘f3

7...♗g4!N 8.♗g5 [8.dxc5 leads to an equal endgame: 8...♕xd1+ 9.♔xd1 e6 10.♗e3 ♘bd7 11.♗b5 0-0-0 12.♔e1 ♗xf3 13.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 14.gxf3 ♗xc5=.] 8...♕a5+! 9.c3 cxd4 10.♕xd4 ♘c6 11.♕c4 e6= Black has an excellent position, with all the benefits of the Caro-Kann: an active light-squared bishop, a solid position and excellent piece play.

5...exf6

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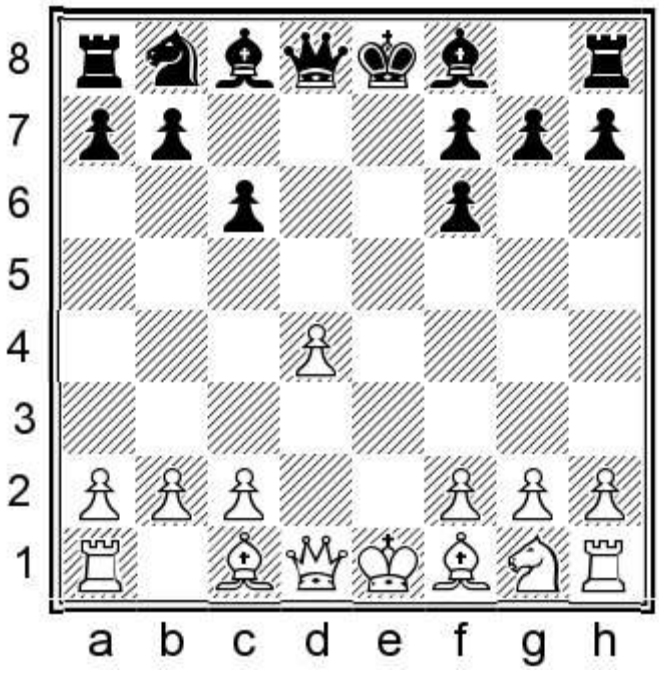

Position after: 5...exf6

Before we proceed to delve into the forest of variations that follows, it's worth taking a moment to think about the position we have reached and its general characteristics. With 4...♘f6, Black has allowed White to double his pawns on the f-file. Understanding how the doubled pawns influence the decisions of both players (and therefore drive the further development of the game) is critical to successfully playing this line. By playing 4...♘f6, Black is prioritizing quick piece development and is ready to develop his pieces and castle. There is little that White can do to prevent it, and this is quite a luxury since few openings give Black this benefit. However, this comes at a price: the doubled pawns. The first thing to understand is that if we were to trade all the pieces, White would probably win the pawn endgame because his queenside majority could just advance unchallenged whereas Black would not be able to make use of his own kingside majority. That being said, we are far away from a pawn endgame, and we need to consider the dynamic aspect of the position. It is of vital importance that Black uses his doubled pawns to create counterplay on the kingside. The pawns are not static, and Black can achieve a lot by simply pushing the f6-pawn. From White's perspective, the goal is to contain the kingside pawns and use his center as a stronghold to limit Black's counterplay.

The rest of this chapter is focused on White's alternatives to 6.c3. Although 6.c3 is by far the most popular move, 6.♘f3 and 6.♗c4 are very reasonable options, and will be our main subject in the following pages.

6.♗c4!?

By developing the bishop to c4, White need not spend a tempo defending the d-pawn with c3. However, it is not so well placed on c4 since it can be easily attacked (...♘d7-♘b6, or ...b5) and since the a2-g8 diagonal is not as appealing. White's idea is very concrete: he wants to reply to 6...♗d6 with 7.♕e2+.

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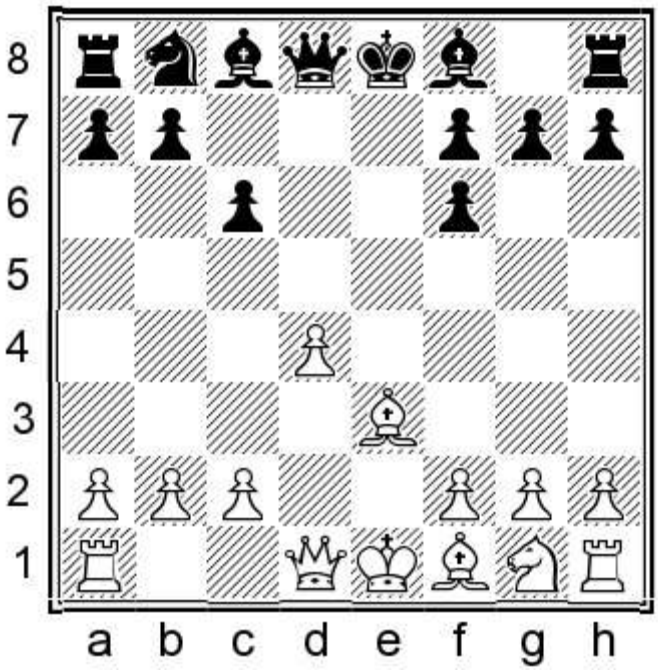
A) It is worth noting that 6.♗d3? is not possible since Black can safely take the d4-pawn: 6...♕xd4 7.♘f3 ♕d6 8.0-0 ♗e7 9.♖e1 ♘d7∓ Black is ready to castle and White does not have enough compensation for the pawn.

B) 6.♗f4 is rather unnatural, and Black can simply continue with 6...♗d6 7.♗xd6 ♕xd6=. This position is simply a much better version for Black of other positions which arise when White plays ♘e2 and ♗f4 to trade the dark-squared bishops later on.

C) 6.♗e3



Position after: 6.♗e3

With this move, White defends the d4-pawn with the bishop. If Black were to continue with normal development (...♗d6/...0-0/...♘d7), ♗e3 will prove more useful than c3 and White will have a better version of the main line. This is why Black should instead strike on the queenside with 6...♕b6! 7.♕c1 c5!? 8.d5 [8.♘f3 ♘c6 9.c3 cxd4 10.♘xd4 ♗c5 11.♘xc6 ♕xc6 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5 13.♗e2 0-0 14.0-0 ♗e6= Black's activity compensates for the inferior pawn structure, as White will have a difficult time proving the worth of his queenside majority.] 8...♗f5 9.♘e2 ♗d6 10.c4 0-0 11.♘c3 ♘d7 12.♗e2 ♖ae8 13.0-0 ♖e7↑

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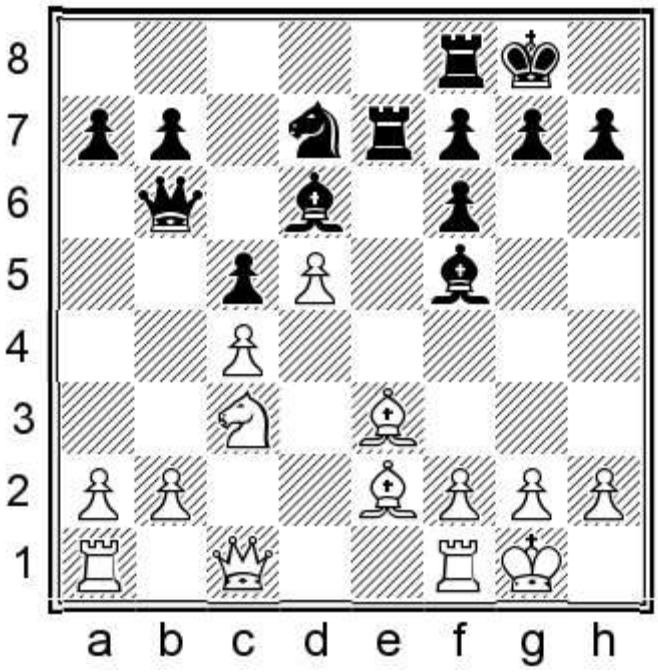
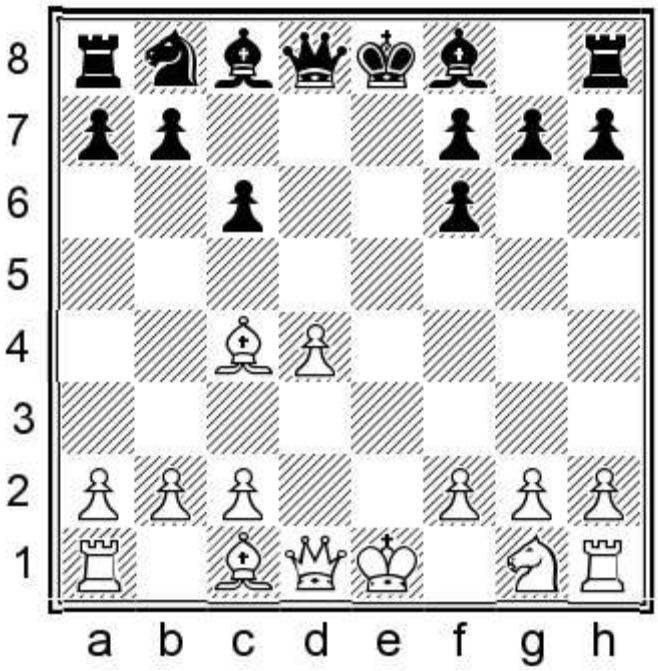


Position after: 13...♖e7↑

Black has used his faster development to create a strong iniative on the e-file. The d5-pawn is blockaded and Black is ready to pressure White's kingside.



Position after: 6.♗c4!?

6...♗d6

6...♘d7 is an interesting alternative. Black does not disclose his intentions on the kingside and takes advantage of the placement of White's light-squared bishop. White can obtain an edge, but only if he

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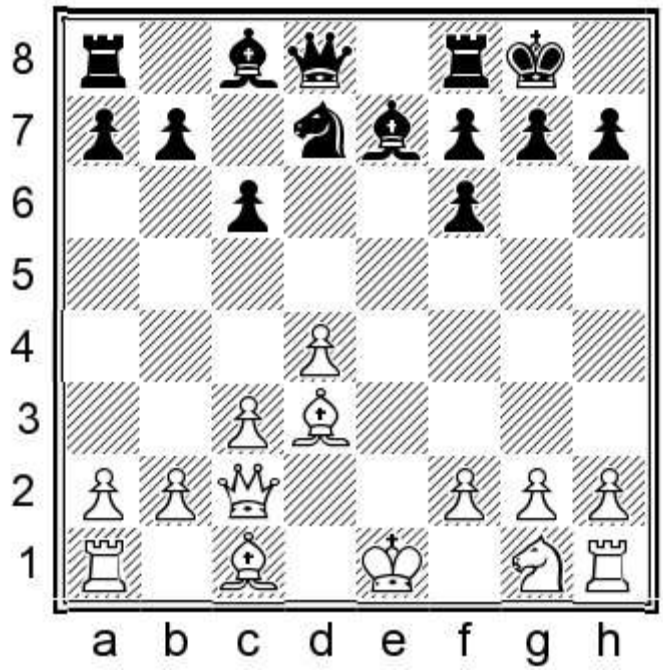
shows a truly incredible understanding of the position.

A) 7.♘e2 ♗d6 8.0-0 0-0= simply gives Black a great position, since the bishop is misplaced on c4.

B) 7.♘f3 ♗d6 8.♕e2+ ♕e7! While the same idea would give White a better position after 6...♗d6 7.♕e2+ ♕e7, there is a key difference here: White has developed his knight to f3. On f3, the knight is not as well placed and White does not have the option of playing ♗f4. 9.♕xe7+ ♗xe7 10.0-0 ♘b6 11.♗d3 ♗e6=.

C) 7.♗d3! White retreats his bishop, now that the d4-pawn is no longer attacked! The idea is to anticipate ...♘b6 while delaying ♘e2, so as to keep the option of playing ♕e2+. 7...♗d6 8.♕e2+ ♗e7 [8...♕e7 9.♕xe7+ ♗xe7 10.♘e2± is better for White since the knight is developed to e2.] 9.c3! 0-0 10.♕c2!



Position after: 10.♕c2!

Let's compare this position to our main line (6.c3 ♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♕c2). At first sight, the difference doesn't seem unfavorable: Black's dark-squared bishop is on e7 (not d6), but we have already developed our knight to d7. Upon further inspection, however, these details change the evaluation of the position. 10...h5 [10...g6 11.h4± is also excellent for White, since Black is unprepared to react to White's attack.] 11.♘e2 ♗d6 12.0-0±

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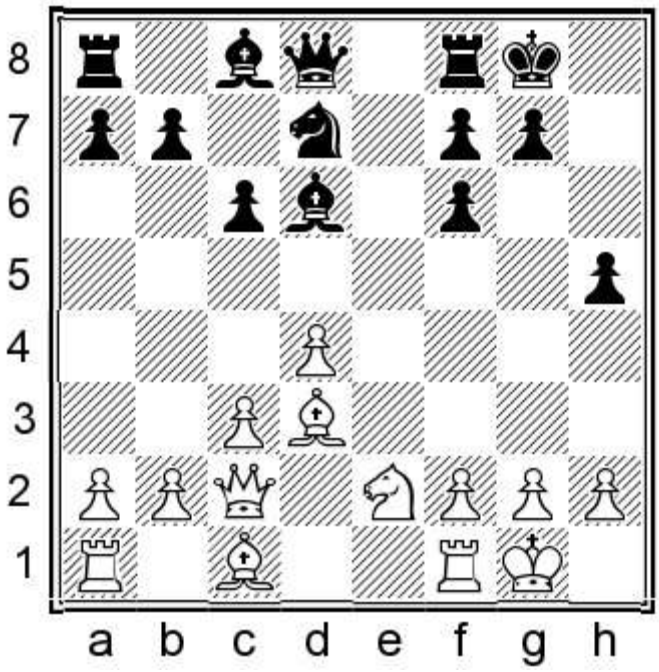
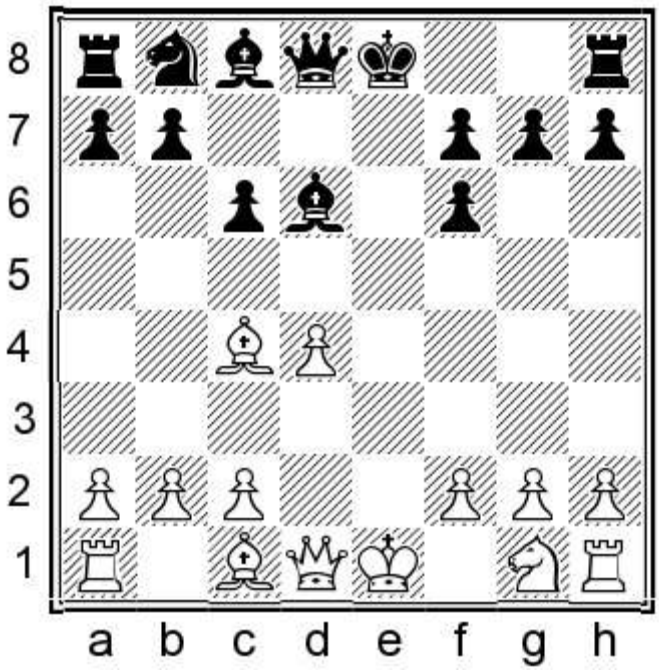


Position after: 12.0-0±

In the main line, Black would have his f8-rook on e8 and his knight on b8. This difference is critical, as Black continues with ...h4 in that position, not ...♘d7. Here, therefore, White has a better version of that line.



Position after: 6...♗d6

7.♕e2+!

A) 7.♘e2 allows Black to continue his development at ease. 7...0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8 9.♗f4 [9.♘g3 ♗e6=]

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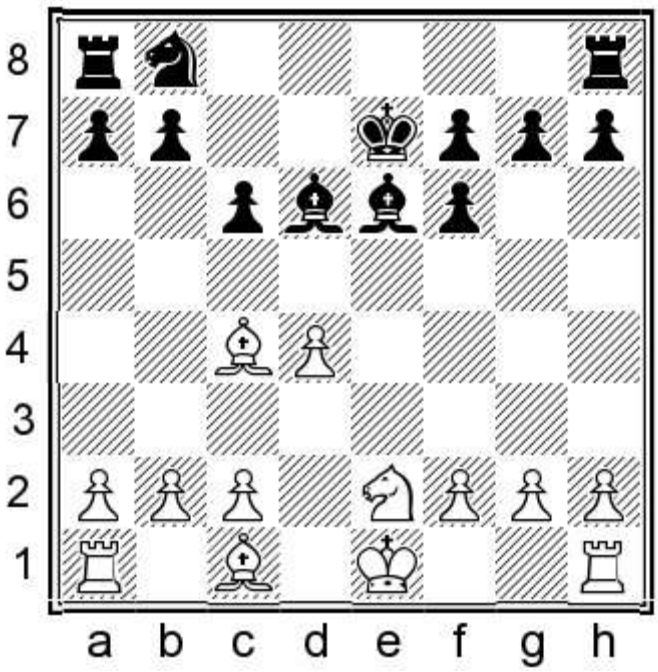
9...♗g4! 10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.h3 ♗xe2 12.♗xe2 ♘d7= The simplifications have left Black with an excellent position.

B) 7.♘f3 also fails to create any issues for Black: 7...0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8 9.♖e1 ♖xe1+ 10.♕xe1 ♘d7 11.♕e4 ♘f8=.

7...♗e7

I don't recommend playing 7...♕e7 since the resulting endgame is very unpleasant. 8.♕xe7+ ♔xe7 9.♘e2 ♗e6



Position after: 9...♗e6

10.♗d3!± White keeps the bishop and enjoys an edge. In Abdusattorov, N (2608) – Piorun, K (2643) Douglas 2019, we have a perfect example of why this endgame is so dangerous. White's play was not perfect, and Black probably could have held with more precise play, but the constant pressure that results from the static weakness in Black's position makes the position extremely hard to play. White eventually won a risk-free, comfortable game. Alexei Suetin also emphasizes this evaluation with a more detailed analysis of this endgame in *Caro-Kann Defence*.

8.♘f3 0-0 9.0-0

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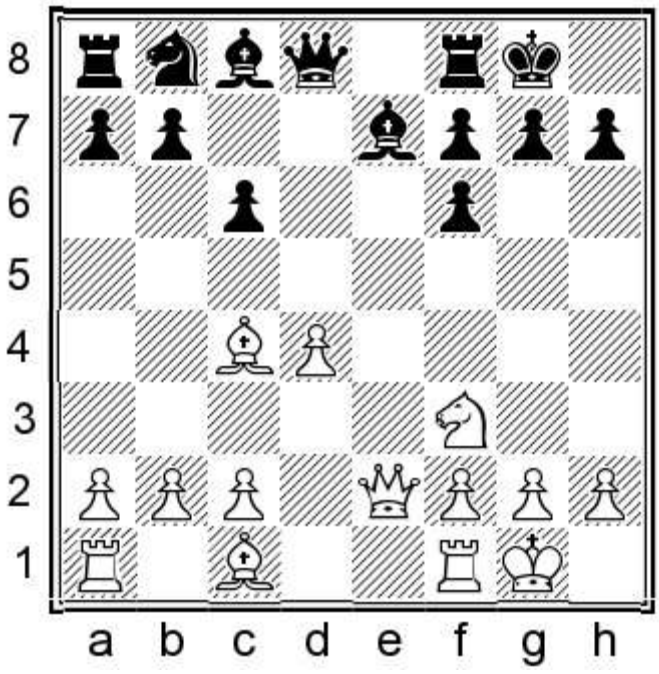

Position after: 9.0-0

9...♘d7!

Since Black's development has been delayed, he does not have enough time for ...♗g4 and instead should develop with a steadier, more restrained hand. 9...♗g4 is generally the right move, but White is able to quickly unpin his queen with 10.♖e1 ♗d6 11.♕e4!±.

10.d5!?

White's most interesting continuation. The idea is to chip away at Black's central grip and open the position.

A) 10.a4

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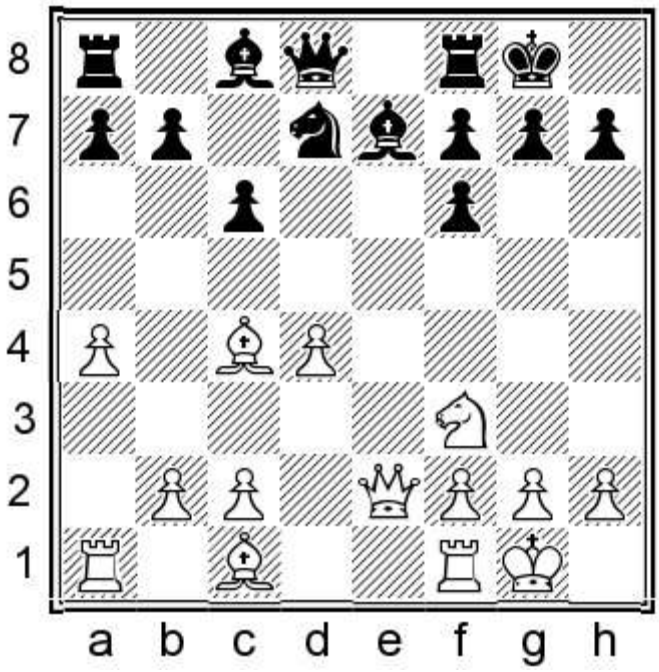
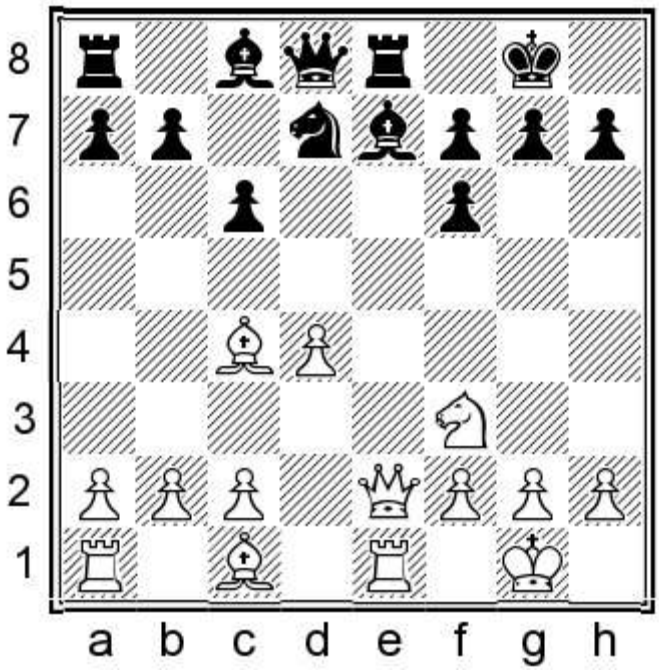


Position after: 10.a4

was played in Gunina, V (2515) – Goryachkina, A (2504) Moscow 2019, and now Black could have continued with 10...♘b6N 11.♗b3 ♖e8, since upon a5 Black can simply respond with ...♘d5. 12.c4 a5 Black needs to secure his b6-knight. 13.♗e3 ♗g4!=

B) White can also try to exploit Black's slow development by launching an attack on the kingside with 10.♖e1 ♖e8



Position after: 10...♖e8

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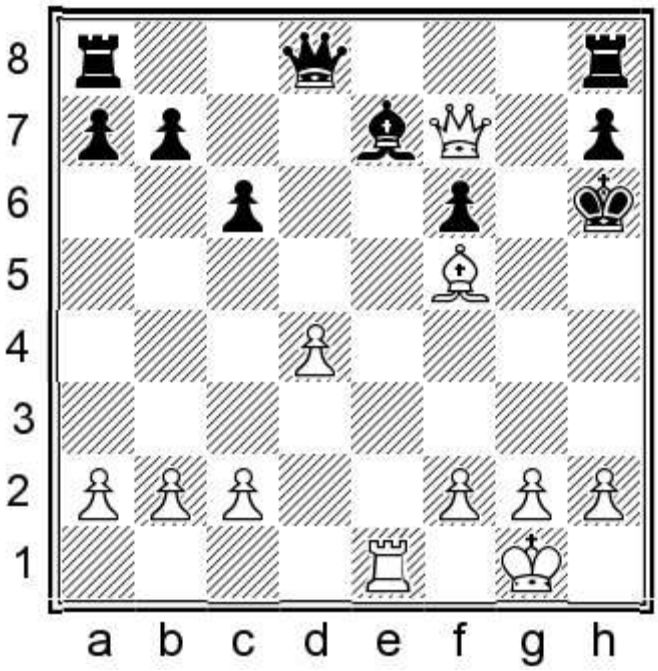
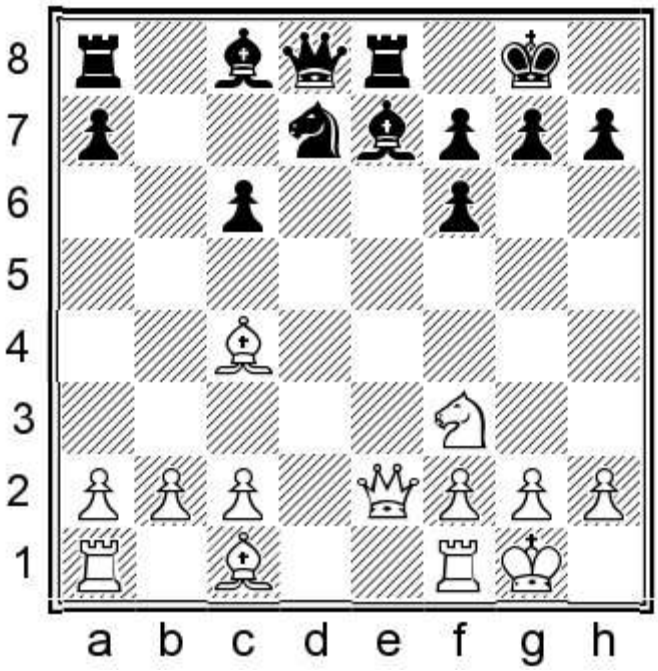
11.♘g5!? but Black has enough resources to survive the onslaught. [The slower 11.♕d3 does not pose any problems to Black: 11...a5! 12.a4 ♘b6 13.♗b3 ♘d5=] 11...fxg5 12.♗xg5 ♘f6 13.♗xf6 gxf6 14.♕h5 ♗e6 15.♖xe6 fxe6 16.♗xe6+ ♔g7 17.♕f7+ ♔h6 18.♗f5 ♖h8 19.♖e1



Position after: 19.♖e1

19...♕xd4! White has no better than perpetual check: 20.♗d3 ♖af8 21.♕e6 ♗c5 22.♕h3+ ♔g7 23.♕g3+=.

10...♖e8 11.dxc6 bxc6



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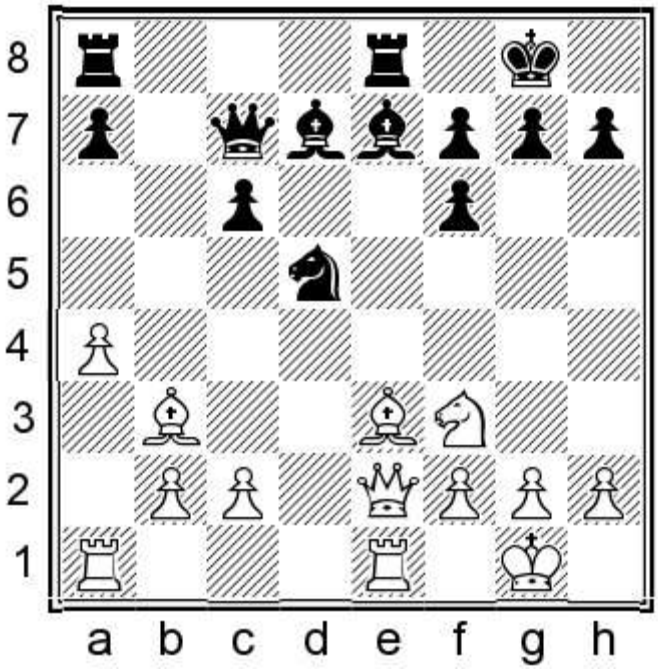
Position after: 11...bxc6

Although Black's pawn structure has been weakened even further, the opening of the center plays to Black's strengths since he is ready to activate his pieces and pressure White along the central open files.

12.♖e1

12.♗e3 ♕c7 13.♖fe1 ♘b6 14.♗d3 ♗d7= Black will continue with ...c5 and exert pressure on White's position.

12...♘b6 13.♗b3 ♗d7 14.♗e3 ♕c7 15.a4 ♘d5!=



Position after: 15...♘d5!=

Due to Black's active position, White does not have time to exploit the queenside weaknesses.

b) 6.♘f3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♘xf6+ exf6 6.♘f3

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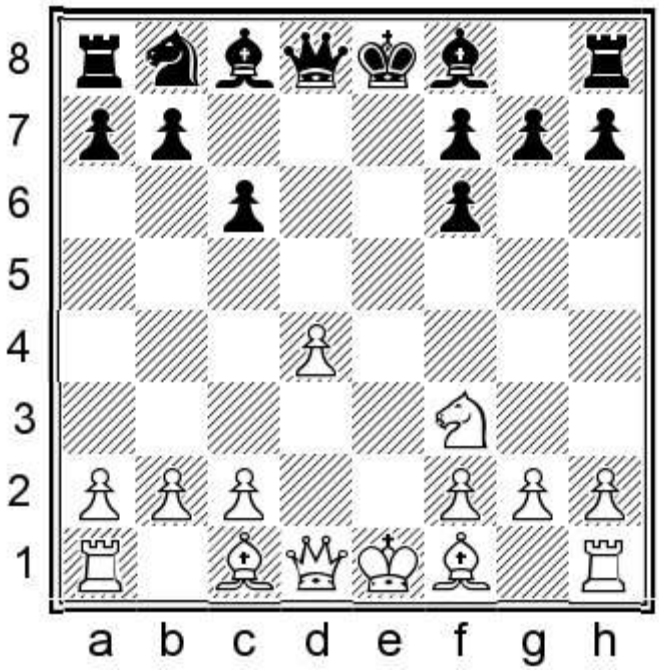

Position after: 6.♘f3

This is a natural move, but the development of the knight to f3 makes Black's task a lot easier: he can now play ...♗g4 and his dark-squared bishop will be unchallenged on d6. This variation allows me to introduce you to Black's typical ideas in the 4...♘f6 Caro-Kann. Black's desired sequence of moves is natural and intuitive: he wants to play ...♗d6, ...0-0, ...♗g4, ...♖e8, ...♘d7, and ...♘f8. If Black can achieve this, he will have an excellent position, deriving value from his solidity in the center and his active play on the kingside.

6...♗d6 7.♗d3

7.♗e2 abates Black's plan to play ...♗g4, but White's bishop is unimpressive on e2. 7...0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8 9.♖e1 ♘d7 10.♗e3 ♘f8 11.c4 ♘g6 12.♗f1 ♗f5= Black had an excellent position and comfortably held against his higher-rated opponent in Steingrimsson, H (2556) – Kreisl, R (2400) Plovdiv 2012.

7...0-0 8.0-0

8.h3 This is another option to prevent ...♗g4, but now White has to deal with the complications arising from Black's next moves. 8...♖e8+ 9.♗e3 ♘a6! The knight takes aim at the bishop on e3. 10.c3N 10...♘c7 11.0-0 ♘d5 12.♗d2 ♗e6=

8...♗g4 9.h3 ♗h5

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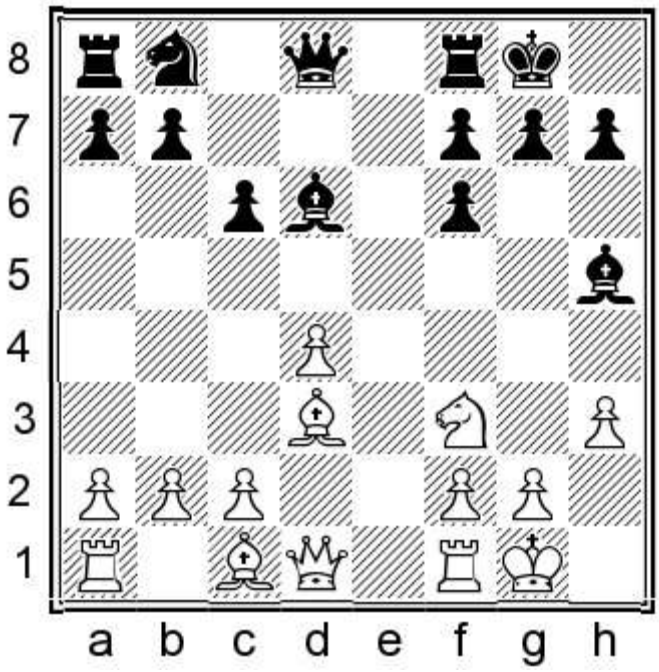

Position after: 9...♗h5

White can try quite a few moves in this position, but Black's plan remains essentially the same.

10.♗f5!?

This is perhaps White's best attempt. His hope is to establish a outpost on f5 and limit the mobility of Black's kingside pawns, but Black can fight back.

A) 10.c3 ♘d7 11.♖e1 ♕c7 12.g4!? ♗g6 13.♘h4 ♖fe8= White has weakened his kingside to combat Black's initiative. Black eventually won in Gyles, A – Kelling, F Auckland 1922.

B) 10.♖e1 ♘d7 11.c4

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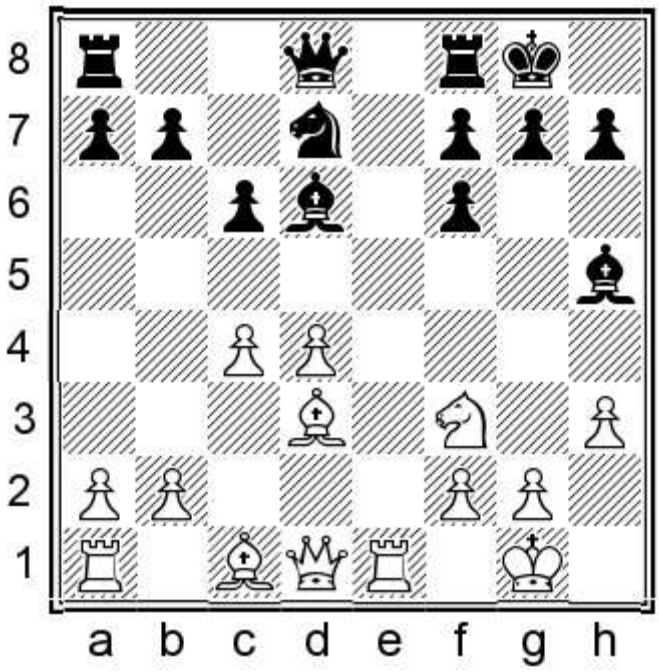
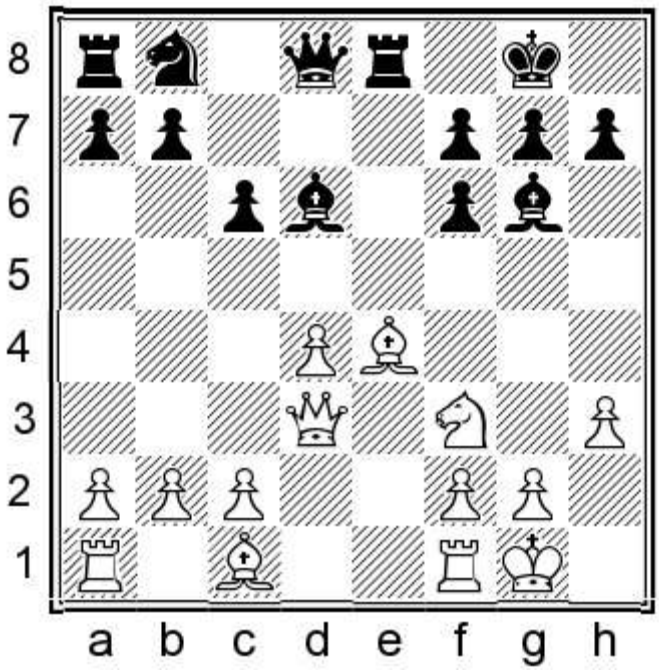


Position after: 11.c4

Unlike in the previous variation, ...♕c7 is not an option due to c5. Therefore, Black simply continues with 11...♖e8 12.♖xe8+ ♕xe8 13.♗e3 ♖d8 14.g4 ♗g6 15.♗xg6 hxg6 16.♕b3 b6 17.♖e1 ♘f8= Black's knight will come to e6 and Black will have an excellent position. Gross, M (2169) – Tkachenko, I (2282) ICCF email 2016.

C) 10.♗e4 ♖e8 11.♕d3 ♗g6! Black easily counters White's threats, and White is left without a plan.



Position after: 11...♗g6!

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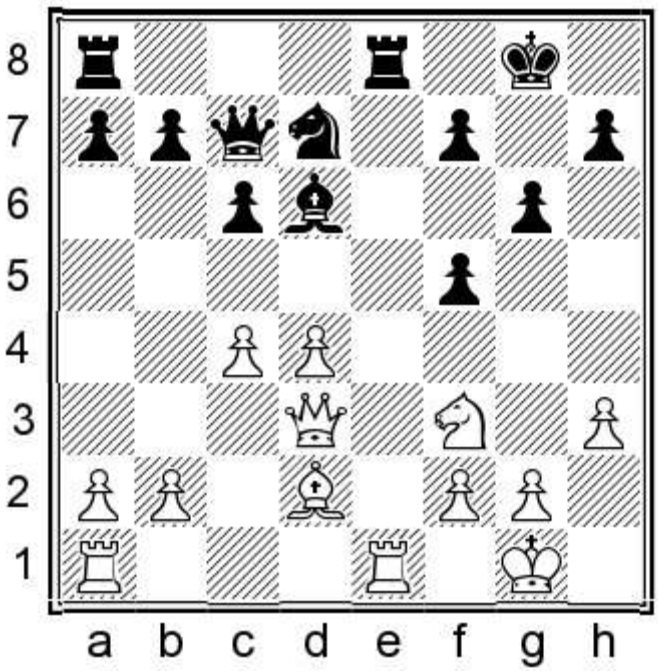
12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♗d2 ♘d7= Black easily held this position, and was on his way to become World Junior Champion in Karthikeyan, M (2617) – Shtembuliak, E (2577) New Delhi 2019.

10...♘d7 11.♕d3 ♗g6 12.♗d2 ♗xf5 13.♕xf5 g6! 14.♕d3 ♖e8 15.♖fe1 ♕c7 16.c4 f5=



Position after: 16...f5=

Black's f5-pawn plays a crucial role in this position, allowing for ideas like ...♘f6-e4. Black has a solid position, and he will look for counterplay in the center.

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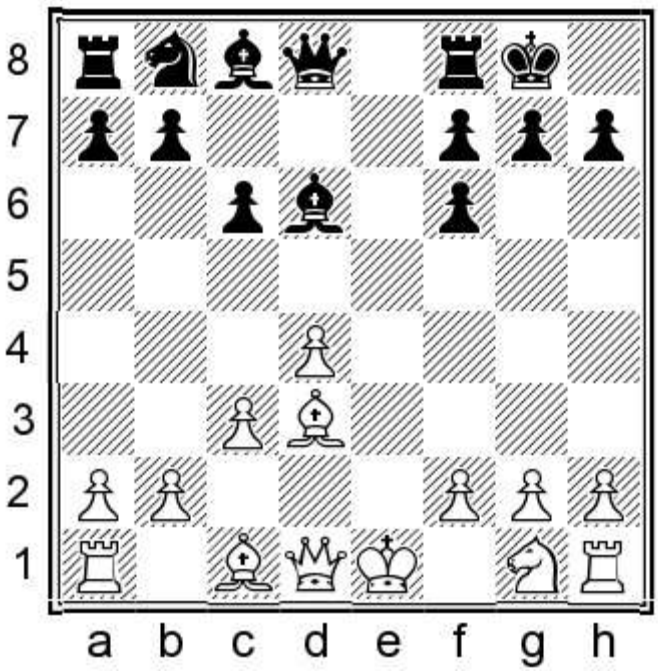
Chapter 10
The Main Line

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



Chapter Guide

Chapter 10 – The Main Line

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 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

a) Lines with 0-0-0

b) Alternatives up to move 11

c) 12.♗d2

d) 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.--

e) 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.♖ad1

f) 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.c4

a) Lines with 0-0-0

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

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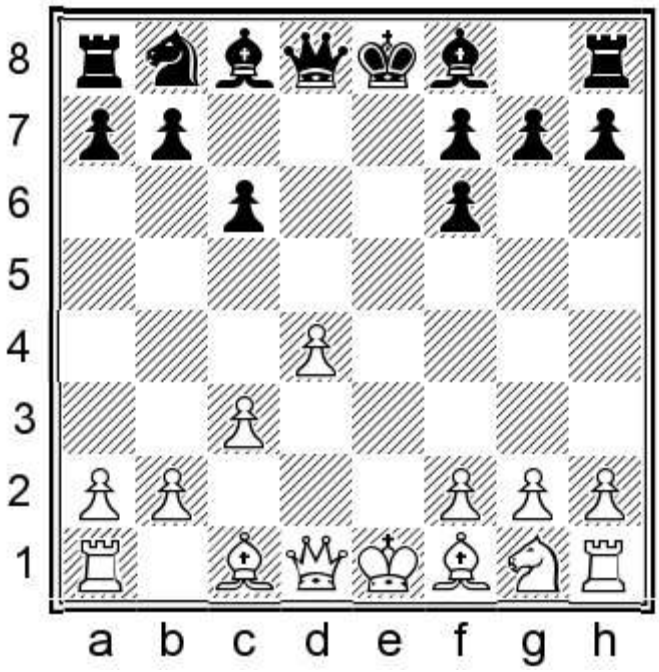

Position after: 6.c3

In the previous chapter, we examined White's alternatives to 6.c3. Although they require some consideration, they all commit to a suboptimal placement of one piece or another. For instance, 6.♘f3 develops the knight to a suboptimal square (White's setup is a lot more flexible with the knight on e2), and 6.♗c4 places the bishop on a square which is convenient but not ideal (the bishop is more active on d3). With the text move, White intends to continue his development efficiently and optimally with ♗d3, ♘e2, and ♕c2. Besides developing, White also forces Black to deal with the pressure against the h7-pawn. In the present subchapter, we will focus on the lines where White castles on the queenside, whereas the rest of the chapter will consider the lines where White castles on the kingside.

6...♗d6 7.♗d3 0-0

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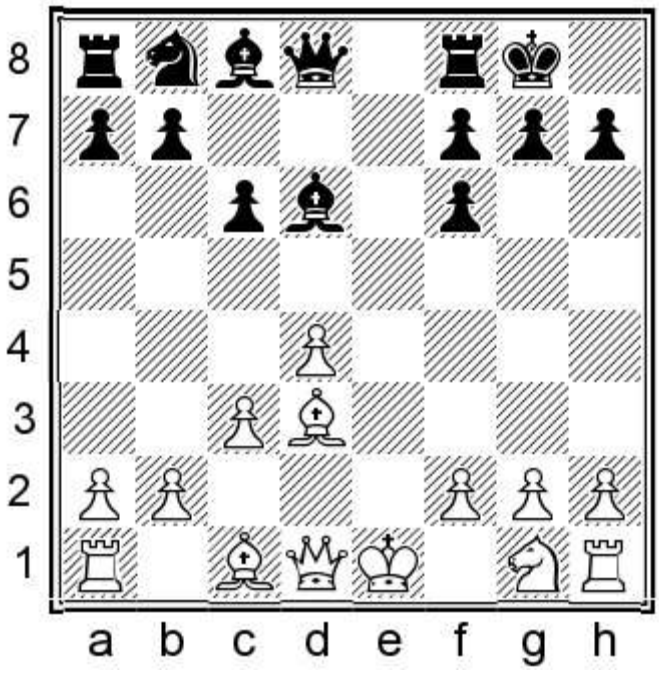
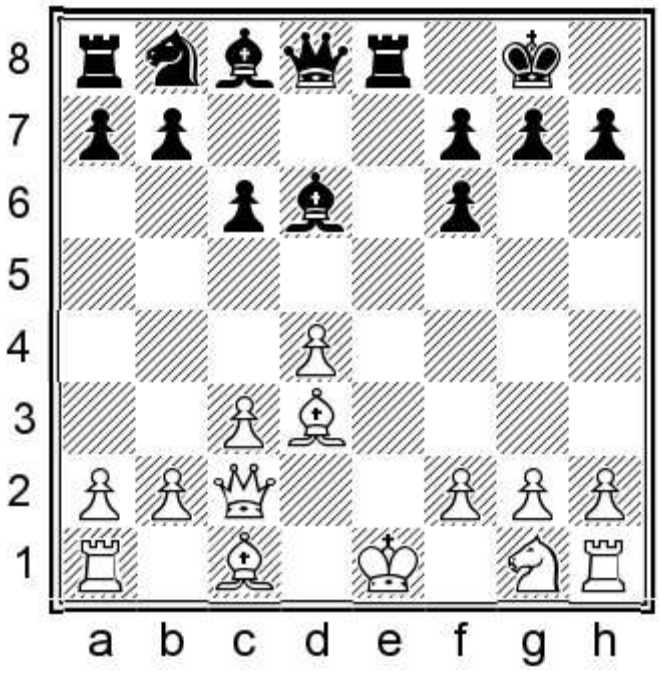


Position after: 7...0-0

8.♕c2

8.♘e2 is a viable alternative, but we will discuss it in the next subchapter since it is only independent of our main line if White castles kingside and omits ♕c2 altogether.

8...♖e8+



Position after: 8...♖e8+

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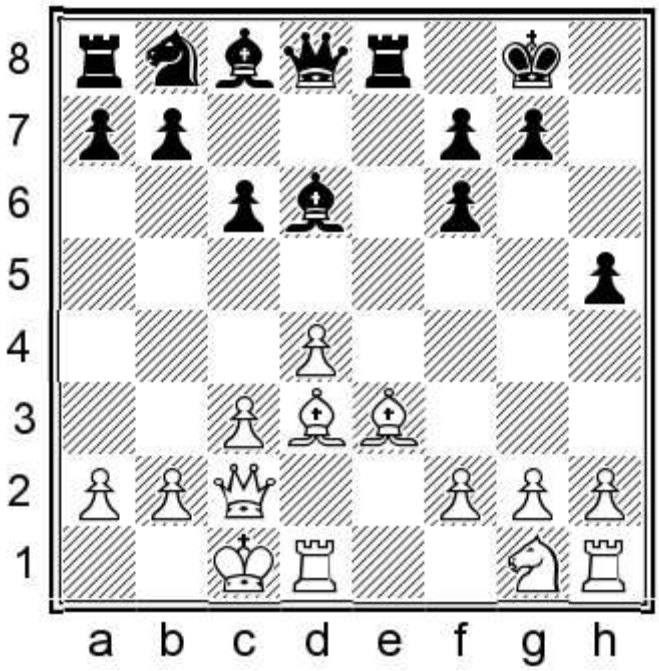
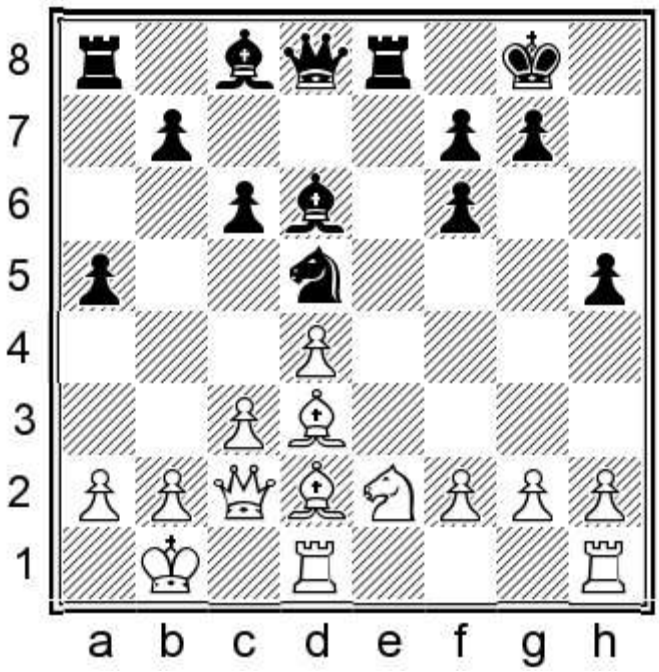
9.♘e2

9.♗e3 is also possible, but White will eventually end up playing ♘e2 so there is no point in committing to ♗e3 this early. 9...h5 10.0-0-0



Position after: 10.0-0-0

10...♘a6!? This move is an interesting attempt to take advantage of White's premature placement of his dark-squared bishop on e3. [Black could also play 10...♘d7 and the game will likely transpose to the 9.♘e2 h5 10.♗e3 ♘d7 11.0-0-0 line after White develops his knight to e2.] 11.♘e2 ♘c7 12.♔b1 ♘d5 13.♗d2 a5!=



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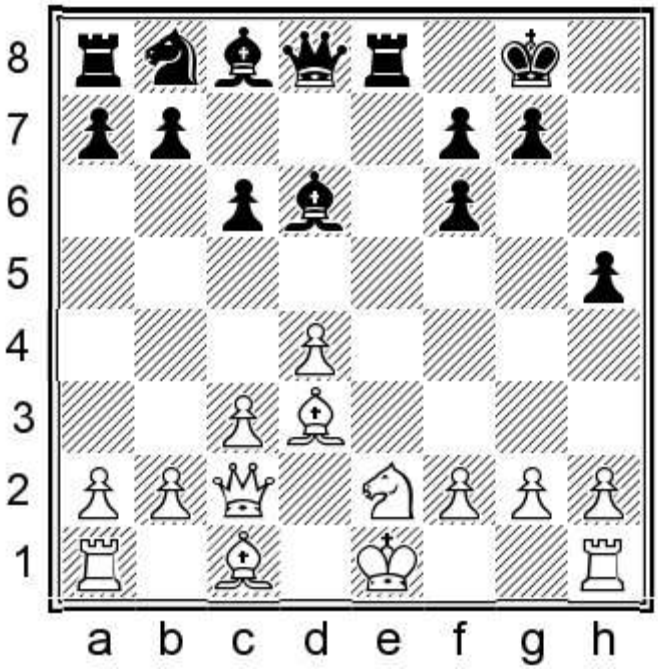
Position after: 13...a5!=

Black is ready to launch an attack on White's king, and White will have to take appropriate measures.

9...h5!



Position after: 9...h5!

We have reached the starting point for what constitutes our main line. 9...h5 is a very recent move, and it only became Black's primary continuation in recent years. In fact, both 9...h6 and 9...g6 have been played more frequently. Nevertheless, 9...h5 is Black's best move, and I expect it to overtake the alternatives in the popularity rankings very soon. The idea of 9...h5 is to deal with the threat of ♗xh7 while also playing an active and useful move. In fact, we will see that the h-pawn plays a key role in Black's plans, as the threat of ...h4 discourages White from playing ♘g3 and the advance of the h-pawn is a constant headache for White. In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss White's continuations which involve queenside castling. It's worth noting that the text move is so recent that many books fail to even consider it. Both Khalifman in *Opening for White According to Anand (vol. 3)*, and Negi in *1.e4 vs. The French, Caro-Kann & Philidor* (these are two excellent books which present a repertoire for White) do not mention this move.

A) 9...h6 is a more passive version of 9...h5, and it fails to equalize since Black is left without an active plan after 10.0-0 ♕c7 11.♘g3 ♘d7 12.c4±.

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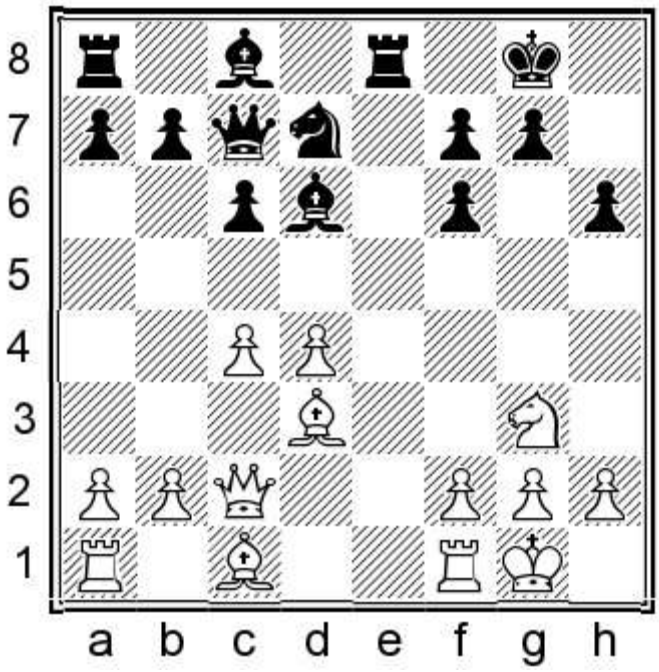

Position after: 12.c4±

B) 9...g6 exposes Black's king to a dangerous attack: 10.h4!→. You may refer to Negi's *1.e4 vs. The French, Caro-Kann & Philidor* to see how the game can continue from here from White's perspective. I have nothing to add to his conclusion that White has the upper hand due to his strong kingside attack.

10.♗e3

With this move, White clearly plans to castle queenside (the present topic). If White intends to castle kingside, he should do it now so that he still has the option of developing the bishop elsewhere.

The other bishop development 10.♗d2 doesn't work well with queenside castling. 10...♘d7 [10...c5!? is an interesting option, which is only possible in this move order. After 11.dxc5 ♗xc5 12.0-0 ♘c6= Black has an excellent position since White's minor pieces are awkwardly placed in the center.] 11.0-0-0 [11.0-0 h4 transposes to 10.0-0 h4 11.♗d2 ♘d7] 11...♘f8 12.♔b1 ♗e6=

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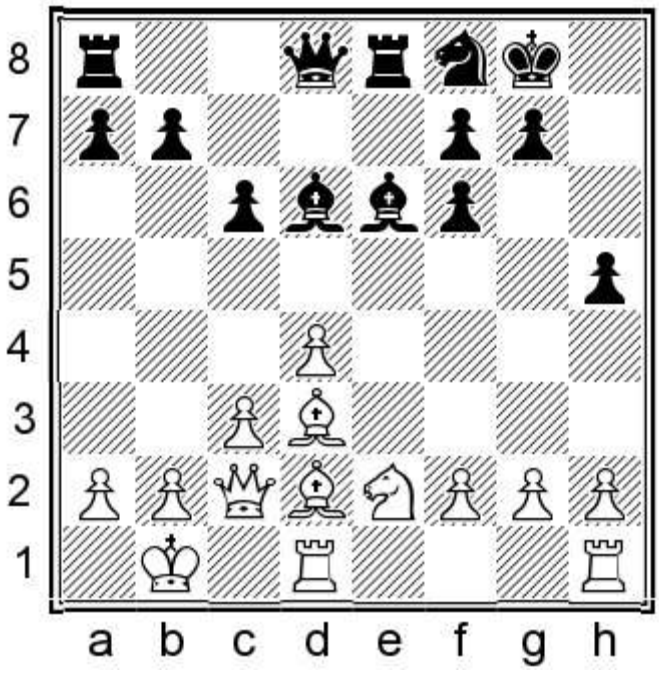
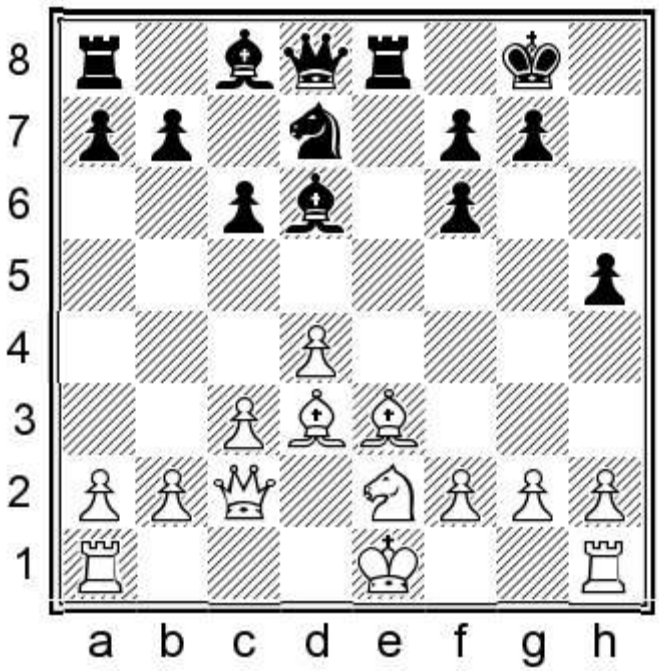


Position after: 12...♗e6=

White simply has an inferior version of the 10.♗e3 ♘d7 11.0-0-0 line, since there is no benefit to having his dark-squared bishop on d2 instead of e3.

10...♘d7



Position after: 10...♘d7

Black continues with this standard developing move. There is no point in pushing the h-pawn any

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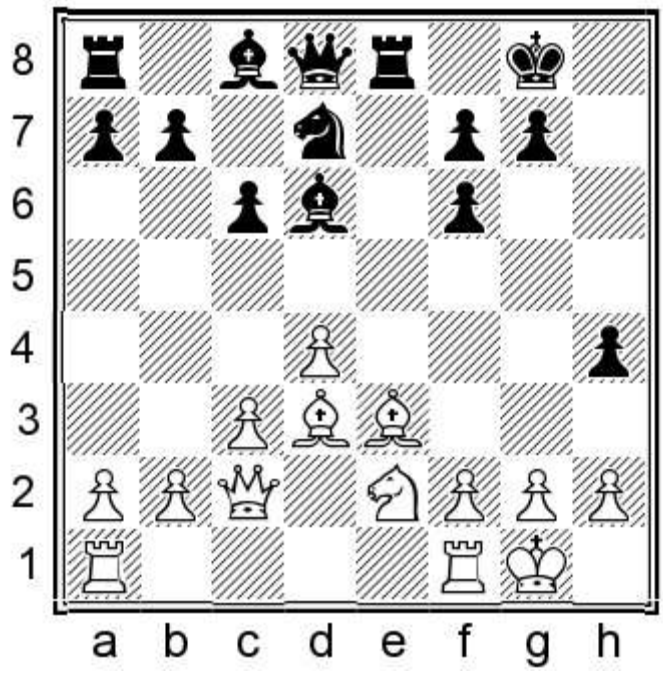
further yet, since it could backfire if White castles on the queenside. Now White has to make a decision regarding his king.

11.0-0-0

With this move, White invites Black to play a sharp game where both players need to play actively and aggressively on both sides of the board, a common feature of positions with opposite-side castling.

As you will see in the lines that follow, Black is able to limit the scope of White's kingside attack by forcing him to deal with threats on the queenside and in the center. An important feature of this position is the usefulness of the f6-pawn, which controls two important squares: e5 and g5. Black's pieces are ready to develop a dangerous initiative on the queenside, and a good starting point is the move ...b5, which gains space on the queenside and carves out the d5-square as an outpost. The major drawback in Black's position is the h5-pawn since it can become a target. That being said, it is not so easy for White to exploit it: h3 followed by g4 can simply be met with ...h4, and White's attack comes to a stall. As we will see, the game often develops into a complex positional struggle in the center, as neither player is able to break through on the flanks. From a practical perspective, Black needs to be prepared for a double-edged game and should be willing to sacrifice a pawn or two to open up the queenside and attack the White king.

A) 11.0-0 h4!



Position after: 11...h4!

Now that White has placed his king on g1, Black is ready to develop an initiative on the kingside. At some point, White will have to play h3 to prevent Black from doing so himself and the game will transpose to a line that we cover in one of the next subchapters under the more common move order 10.0-0 h4 11.h3. For example, 12.h3 transposes directly to 10.0-0 h4 11.h3 ♘d7 12.♗e3.

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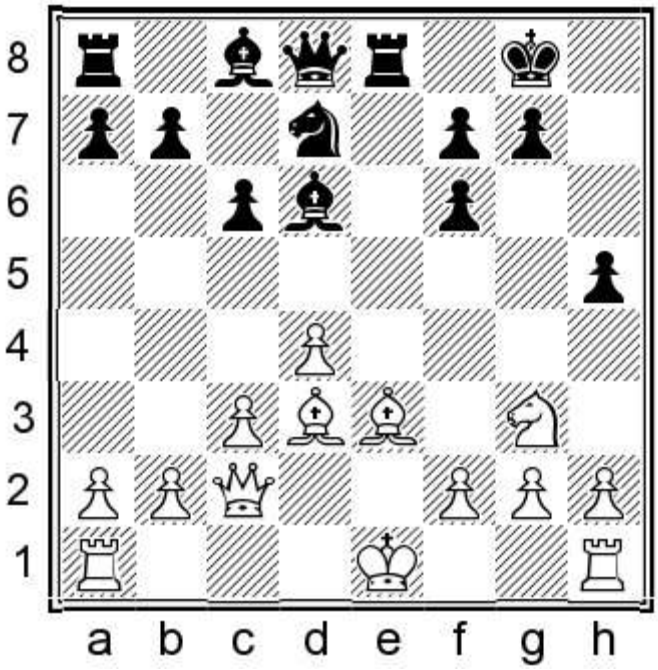
B) 11.♘g3



Position after: 11.♘g3

This move is an additional option that is available to White in this specific move order, although it poses no real problems to Black. This move is possible because Black has played ...♘d7 (thus his light-squared bishop does not control the f5-square) and because he has not yet played ...h4.

B1) Black can continue with the logical 11...h4N, although (quite surprisingly) no one has yet chosen to do so. The reason for this is probably that after 12.♘f5 ♘b6 13.♘xh4 ♘d5 14.0-0∞ White's position seems easier to play, and Black needs to proceed carefully on the kingside.

B2) 11...♘b6! Black foregoes his original plan and chooses a different route for his knight.

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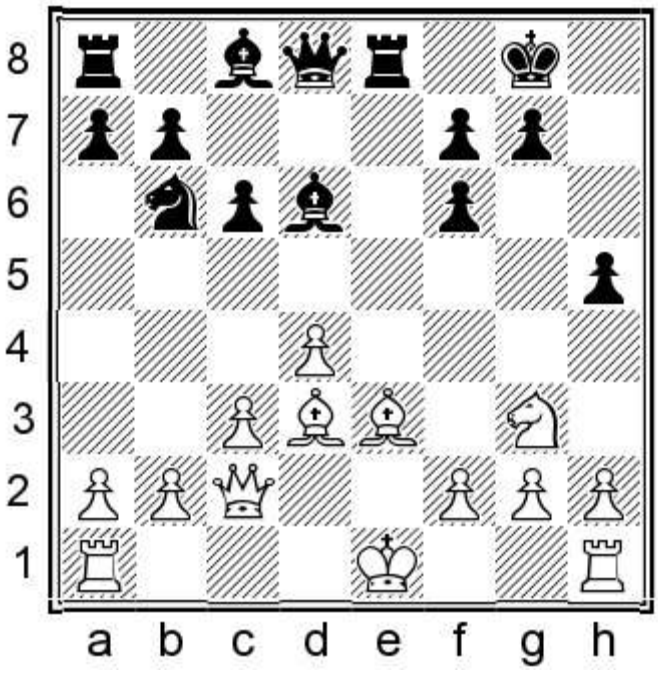
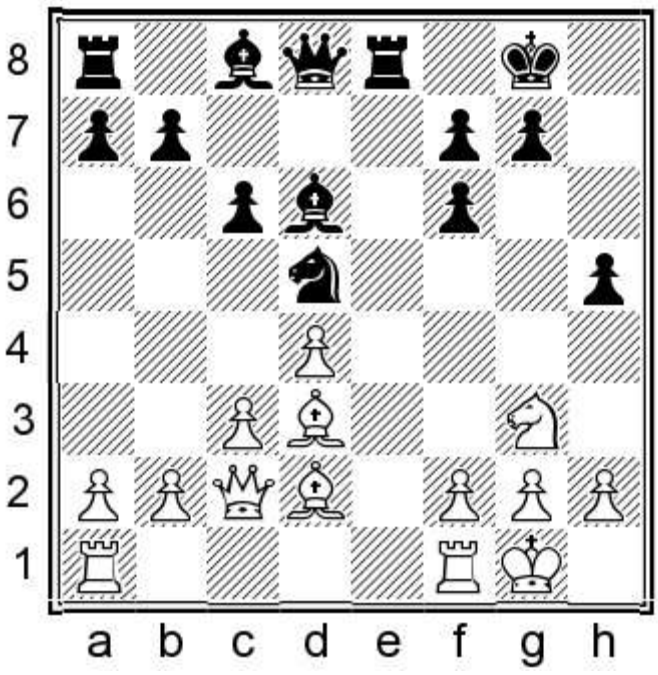


Position after: 11...♘b6!

The idea is to take advantage of the fact that White's king is still on the open e-file to target the e3-bishop.

B2.1) Now 12.0-0 simply gives us a better version of the main line, since Black's knight will land on d5 and contribute to Black's kingside initiative. 12...♘d5 13.♗d2



Position after: 13.♗d2

13...h4! It is quite clear that White has not achieved anything by placing his knight on g3, and he

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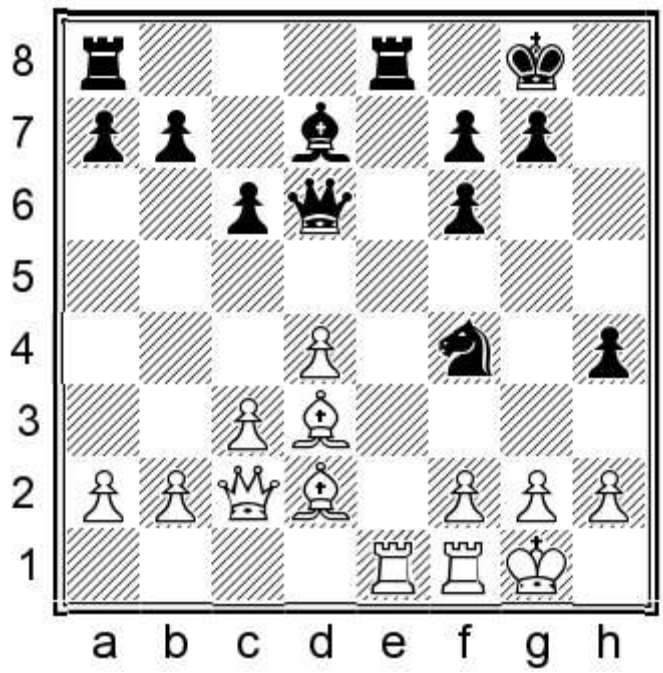
will now lose more time relocating it. 14.♘e4 [14.♘f5N forces Black to give up the bishop pair, but White is not in a position to make any use of it. After 14...♗xf5 15.♗xf5 ♕c7 16.h3 g6= Black's control of the dark squares on the kingside will be a constant headache for White.] 14...♘f4N 15.♘xd6 ♕xd6 16.♖ae1 ♗d7=



Position after: 16...♗d7=

Black's activity on the kingside prevents White from making any progress on the queenside, so the position is balanced.

B2.2) 12.0-0-0 is also possible, but (analogously to 12.0-0 above) leads to a worse version of the 11.0-0-0 line, since Black's knight is much better placed on d5 than on f8. 12...♘d5 13.♗d2 ♘f4! 14.♗xf4 ♗xf4+ 15.♔b1

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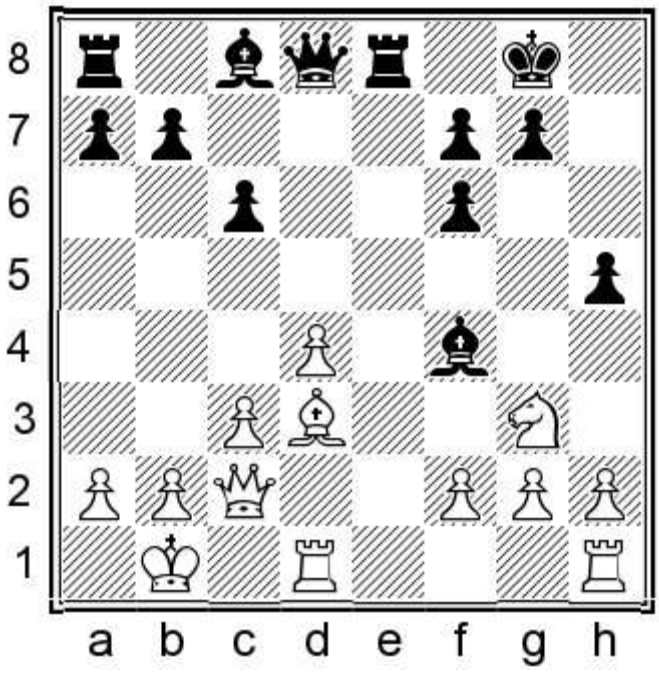
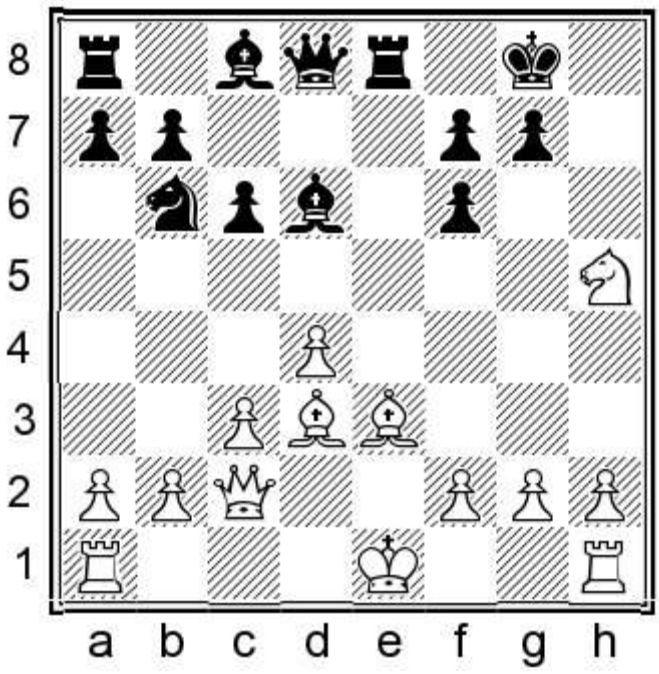


Position after: 15.♔b1

Many moves are good for Black, but 15...♕d5!N is particularly strong, as Black's queen enters the game and spells trouble for White both on the kingside and on the queenside.

B2.3) 12.♘xh5



Position after: 12.♘xh5

This is White's most logical follow-up, simply grabbing the offered pawn. Of course, Black immediately reacts in the center with 12...♘d5 13.0-0 ♗g4! 14.♘g3 ♗xg3 15.hxg3 ♘xe3 16.fxe3

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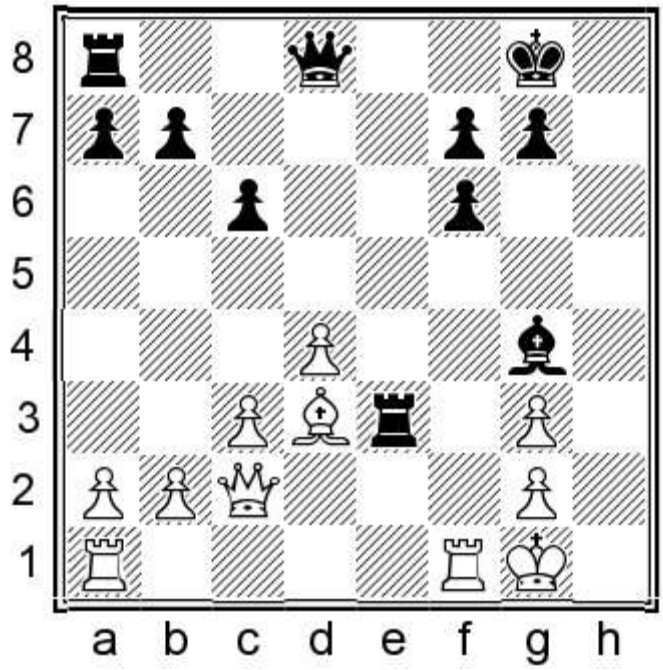
♖xe3



Position after: 16...♖xe3

Black has regained the pawn and the position has simplified. Neither side has much to play for: 17.♔f2N 17...♕e7 18.♖ae1 ♖e8 19.♕d2 ♖e6!?N This is perhaps Black's only chance to keep some play in the position although a draw is by far the likeliest result. [19...♖xe1 20.♖xe1 ♕xe1+ 21.♕xe1 ♖xe1 22.♔xe1 ♔f8 led to a simple draw in Bjerre, J (2368) – Thybo, J (2479) ½-½ (30) Aarhus 2018.]

11...♘f8

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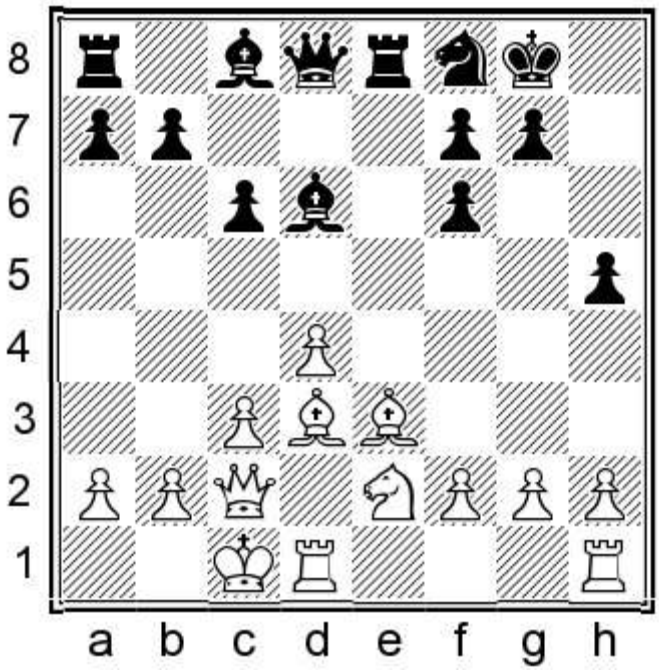
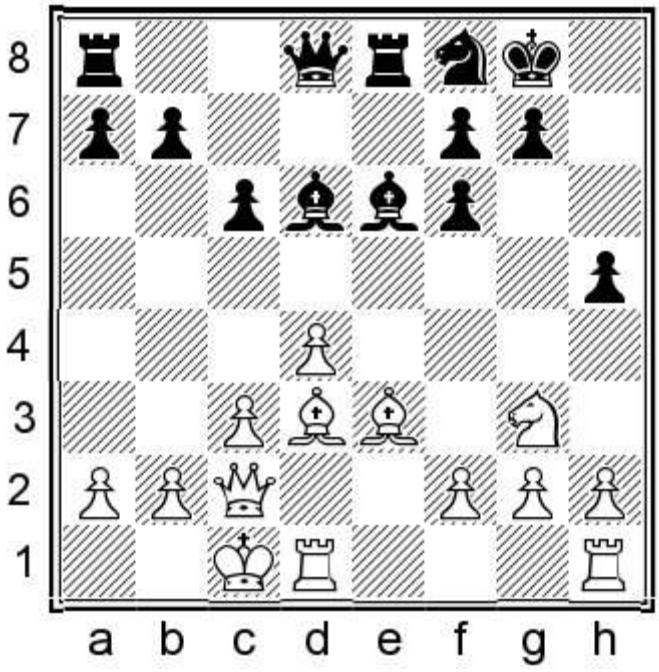


Position after: 11...♘f8

Black continues with his standard development, clearing the line of his c8-bishop and bringing his knight to the kingside.

12.♔b1

A) 12.♘g3 ♗e6!



Position after: 12...♗e6!

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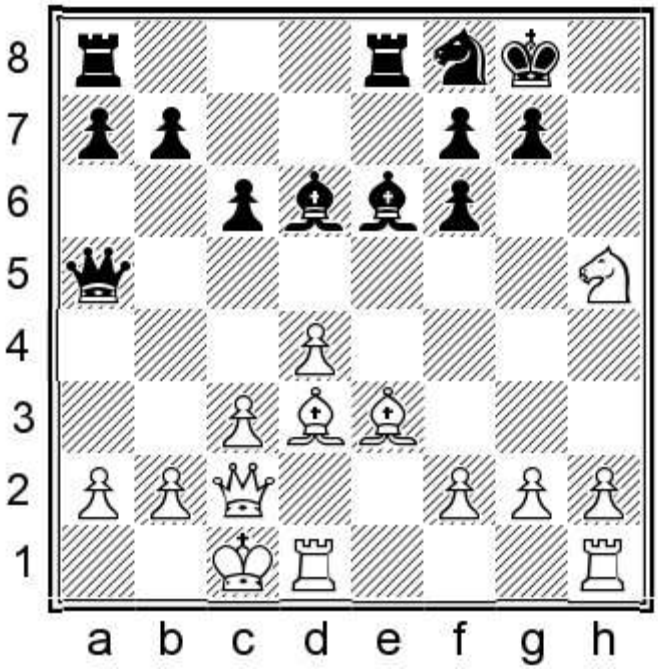
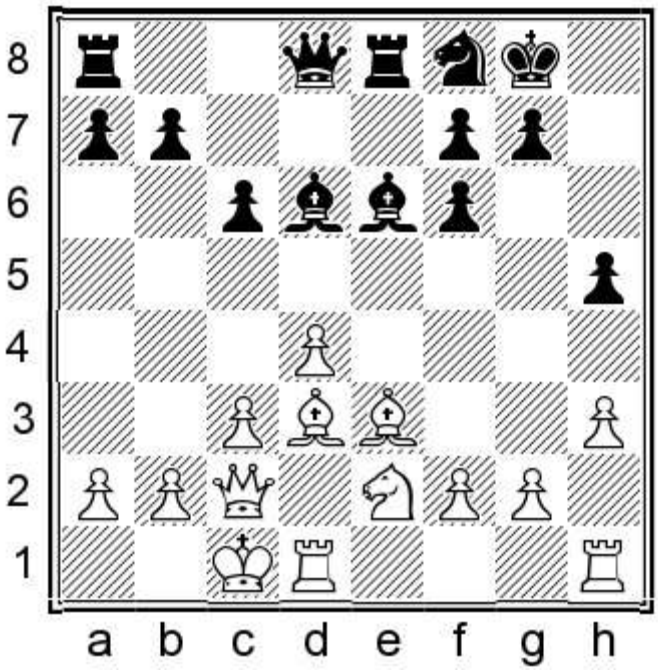
Black should not weaken his position any more than necessary. Since ♘xh5 is not a threat, there is no reason not to press ahead on the queenside. White's best reply is 13.♔b1, protecting the a2-pawn and transposing to a position that is briefly considered in the 12.♔b1 ♗e6 13.♘g3 move order. [13.♘xh5, meanwhile, helps Black pursue his initiative on the queenside: 13...♕a5!



Position after: 13...♕a5!

gives him a strong attack, and the lost pawn will be regained on a2 in short order.]

B) 12.h3 White prepares to play g4, with the objective of opening the kingside. However, g4 is by no means a deadly threat and Black does not need to take additional precautionary measures. 12...♗e6



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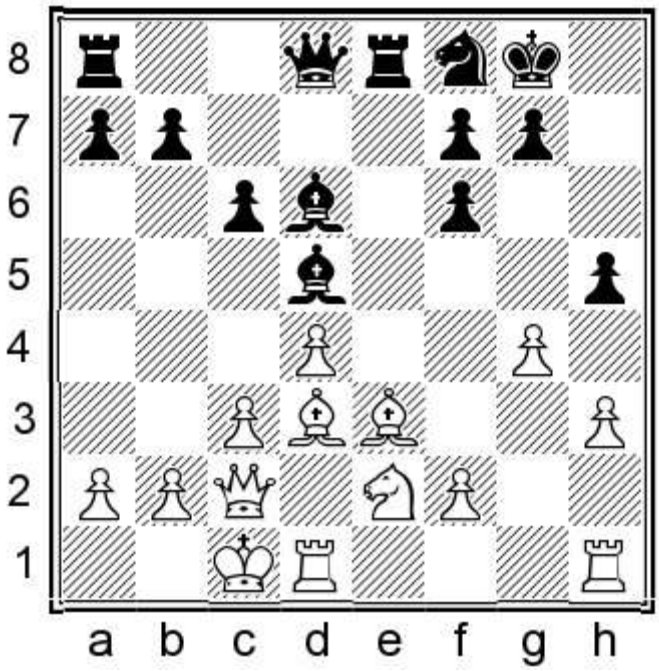
Position after: 12...♗e6

B1) The immediate 13.g4 does not lead to an attack on the kingside since Black can reply with 13...♗d5!N



Position after: 13...♗d5!N

hitting the h1-rook and inconveniencing White since the rook is surprinsingly short of available squares. 14.♖hg1 [14.♖he1 is met by 14...h4 15.c4 ♗f3!∓ White's attack has come to a stall and Black has a superior position; 14.gxh5 is a rather desperate attempt to open the kingside. I don't believe that White has sufficient compensation for the exchange after 14...♗xh1 15.♖xh1 ♕a5 16.h6 g6∓.] 14...h4! Black keeps the kingside closed. Now, 15.g5 can be countered with 15...♗h2!

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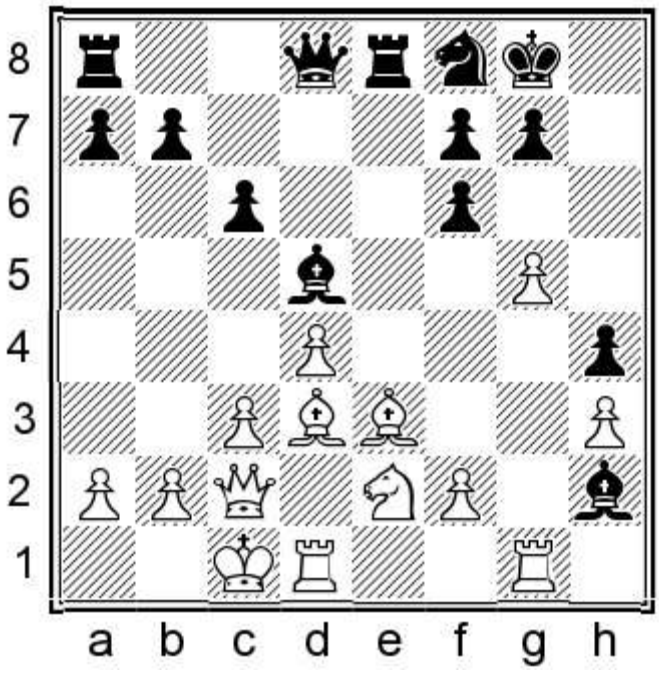
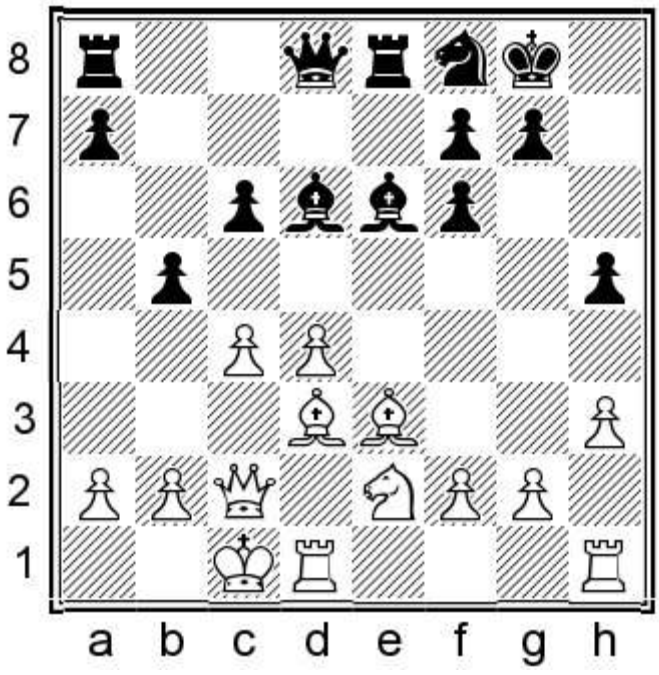


Position after: 15...♗h2!

16.gxf6 [16.♖g4 ♗f3!∓] 16...♕xf6 17.♖ge1 The rook has been forced to vacate the g-file on pain of losing the exchange, so Black does not face immediate threats to his king. It is thus time to counterattack on the queenside with 17...b5!∓.

B2) 13.c4 With this move, White tries to gain space in the center and slow down Black's kingside initiative before carrying on with his kingside attack. Black should not accept a passive position and should instead hit back with 13...b5!



Position after: 13...b5!

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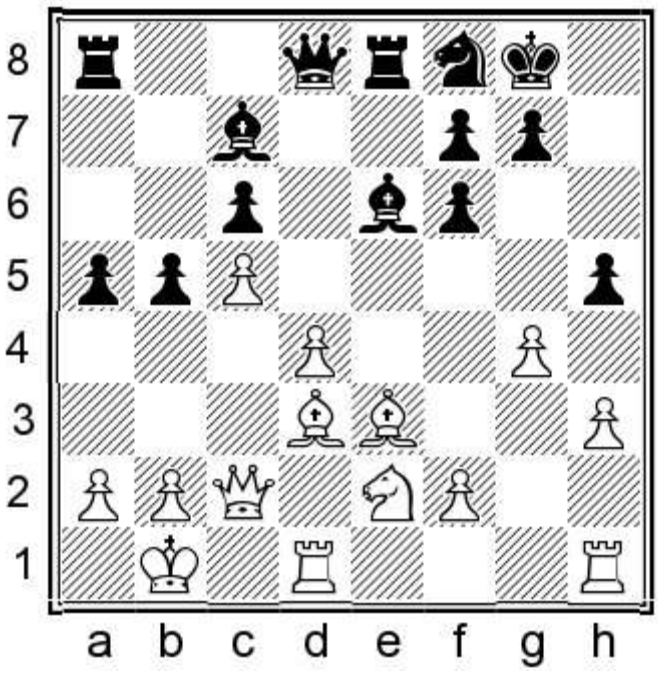
14.c5 [14.cxb5 plays into Black's idea: 14...♗xa2 15.♘c3 ♗d5 16.♔b1 ♖b8 17.♘xd5 cxd5= and White's attention will need to be diverted to defense.] 14...♗c7 15.♔b1 a5 16.g4



Position after: 16.g4

16...♗d5!N An important move, as White's h1-rook comes under fire again. [16...h4?! was played in Goryachkina, A (2518) – Khotenashvili, B (2479) St Petersburg 2018, but White could have secured a slight edge with 17.♗e4!N] 17.♖hg1 h4= The position is very double-edged, but I like Black's chances since carrying out a successful kingside attack is not an easy task for White.

C) 12.c4 is an attempt to contain Black's queenside initiative by gaining space in the center. Unfortunately for White, it isn't really possible to prevent the ...b5 break, especially after the following idea (a thematic one in all positions where White develops with c4 and ♘c3.) 12...♗e6 13.♘c3 ♗b4! This is an important move: Black wants to take on c3 to loosen White's grip on the center and then play ...b5. 14.♘e4

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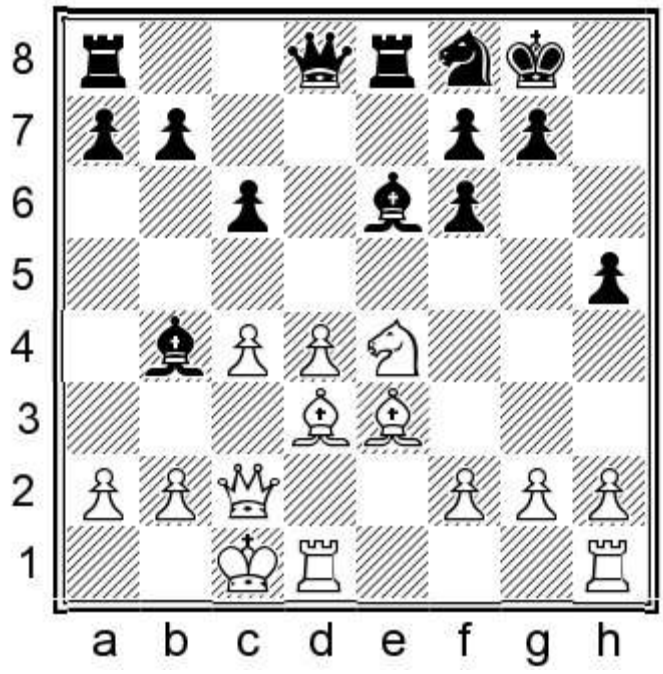
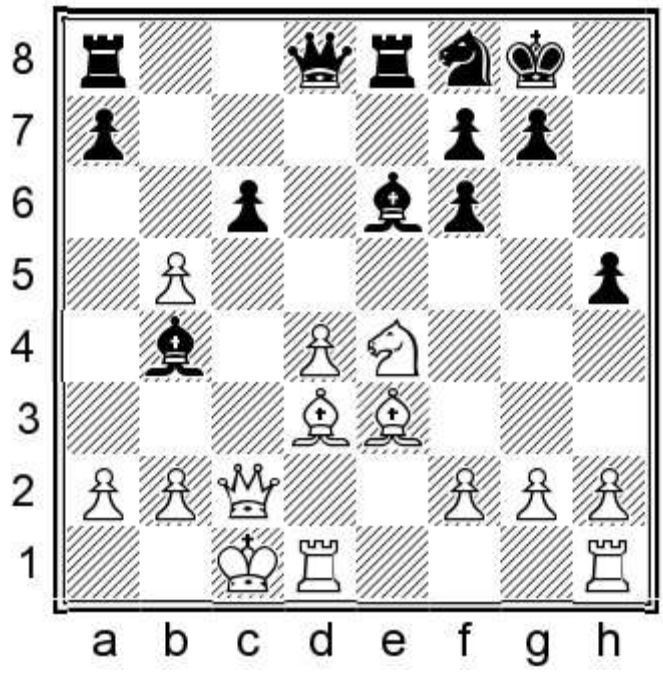


Position after: 14.♘e4

[14.♔b1N allows Black's idea: 14...♗xc3! 15.♕xc3 ♘g6= Since White has no attack on the kingside, ...b5 can wait for one more move.] 14...b5!N Black wastes no time furthering his initiative on the queenside. GM Boris Savchenko reached this position twice with the White pieces, but the text move is an improvement over his opponents' replies. [14...♖c8? 15.c5! ♗xa2 16.♘d6± gave White an edge in Savchenko, B (2562) – Oparin, G (2624) Sochi 2018, although Black eventually managed to make a draw.; 14...♕a5 15.a3 ♗e7 was played in Savchenko, B (2562) – Artemiev, V (2706) Sochi 2018, but White could have secured a more pleasant position with 16.♕c3!?N.] 15.cxb5



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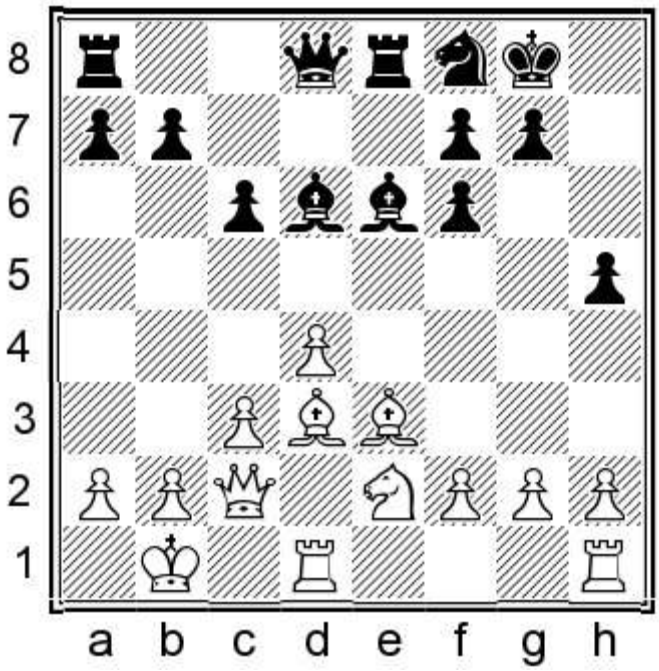
Position after: 15.cxb5

C1) The computer gives 15...♗xa2 as an option, but the position becomes unreasonably complicated after 16.♕a4 ♕a5 17.♕xa5 ♗xa5 18.♘d6 cxb5 19.♘xe8 ♖xe8∞. Although this position may be playable for Black, I prefer the text move, which is more 'human'.

C2) 15...cxb5 16.a3 ♖c8 17.♘c5 ♗xc5 18.dxc5 ♕a5! White's c5-pawn is menacing, but his king is unsafe and Black will continue to create problems for White on the queenside. 19.♕d2 [19.♕c3 ♕xc3+ 20.bxc3 ♗d7!=] 19...♕b6 20.♔b1 ♕b7∓

12...♗e6



Position after: 12...♗e6

Similarly to what we have already seen, Black prepares to attack on the queenside, starting with ...b5.

13.c4

A) 13.♘f4? gives Black the upper hand: 13...♗xf4! 14.♗xf4 b5!→

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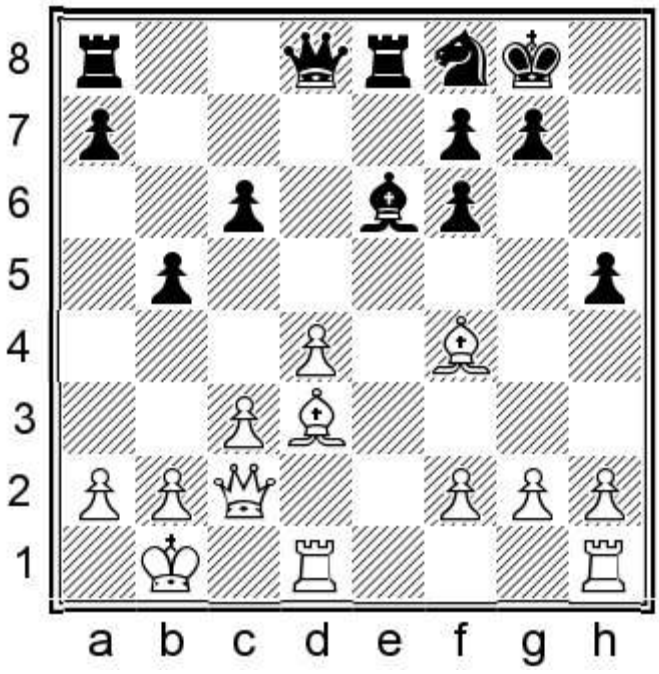
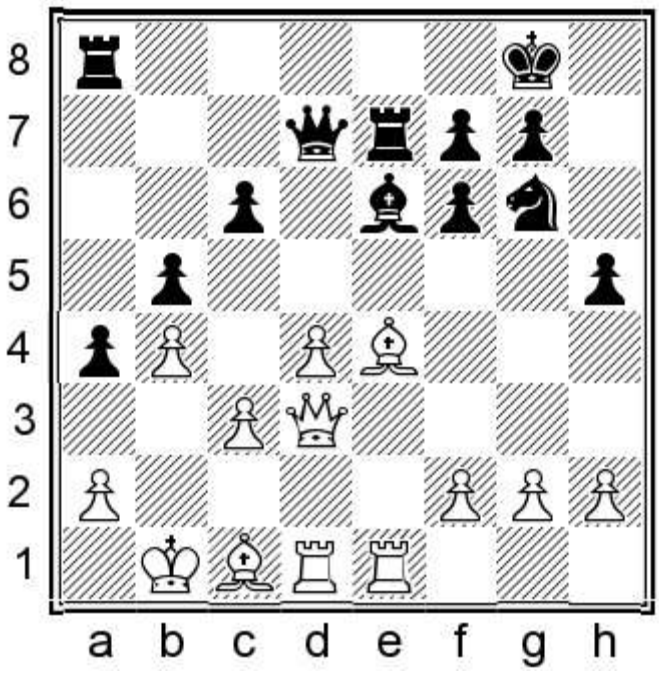


Position after: 14...b5!→

White's bishop pair is not a relevant factor since Black controls the light squares and has a safer king. From here, the game Nayak, R (2181) – Sunilduth Lyna, N (2575) New Delhi 2019 shows how Black can increase his advantage with a careful combination of dynamic play and positional awareness.
15.♖he1 ♕d5 16.b3 a5 17.♗e4 ♕d7 18.♕d3 a4 19.b4 ♘g6 20.♗c1 ♖e7∓



Position after: 20...♖e7∓

A few moves later, White's problems have only worsened: Black controls the light squares and has a safer king.

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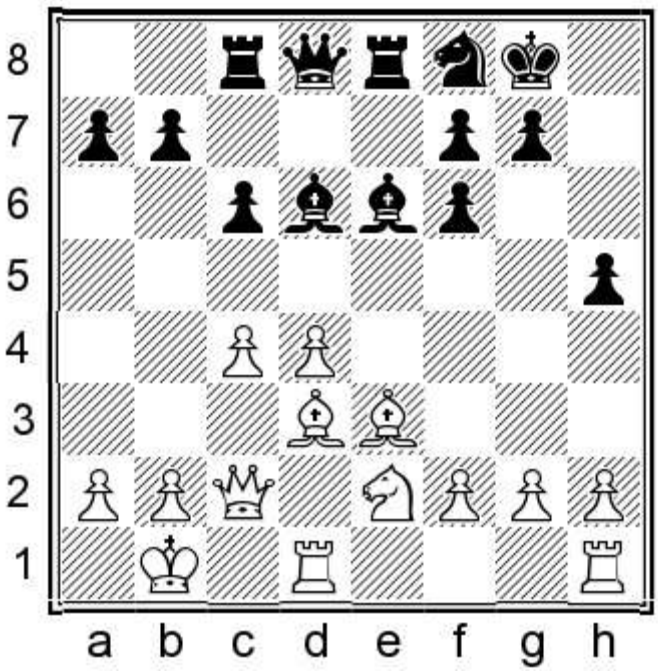
B) 13.♘g3 is easily met by 13...g6 and White is unable to attack on the kingside, whereas Black is ready to expand on the queenside: 14.♘e4 b5!=

13...♖c8!



Position after: 13...♖c8!

Black once again prepares ...b5.

14.♘c3

This is White's most natural follow-up, and White's preferred move in tournament play. However, from the discussion above I'm sure you already have a good idea how Black should respond!

A) 14.a3

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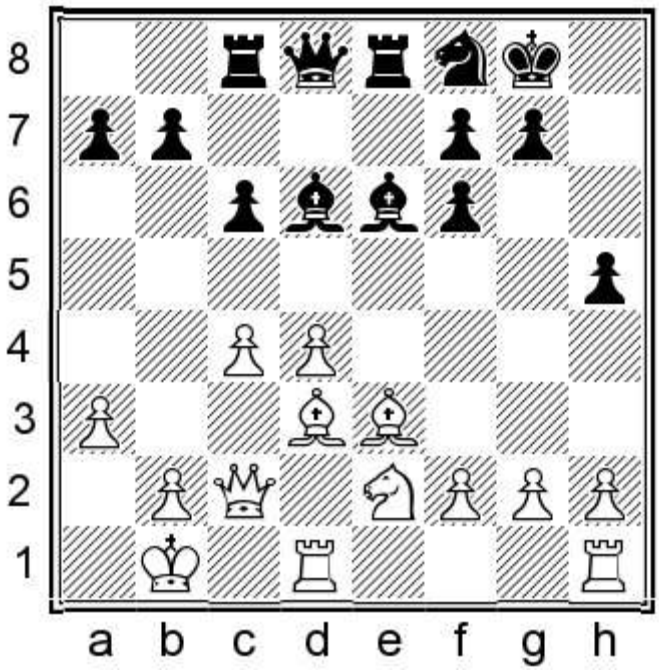

Position after: 14.a3

This is a computeresque idea that few Grandmasters would consider. White wants to pre-emptively prevent ...♗b4 as well as a future ...b4 pawn push. However, Black can continue with an ingenious manoeuvre:

A1) 14...b5? was tried in Tifferet, S (2219) – Tarun, K (2027) Skopje 2019, but White could have continued with 15.c5! ♗c7 16.♘c3 ♘g6 17.d5! cxd5 18.♘xb5±. This is an example of a ...b5-break gone wrong for Black: his queenside initiative has faded and White firmly controls the center.

A2) 14...♘g6!N Black improves his position by transferring his knight to e7, from which square it will be ready to jump into d5 or support a later ...♗f5 to trade off White's excellent light-squared bishop. 15.♘c3 [15.h3 b5! 16.c5 ♗c7= Black is ready to meet ♘c3 with ...♘e7, preventing d5.] 15...♘e7! 16.h3 h4! White was threatening to play g4, because Black could not respond with ...♗d5 as we saw in previous lines. 17.♖hg1 a6!⇄

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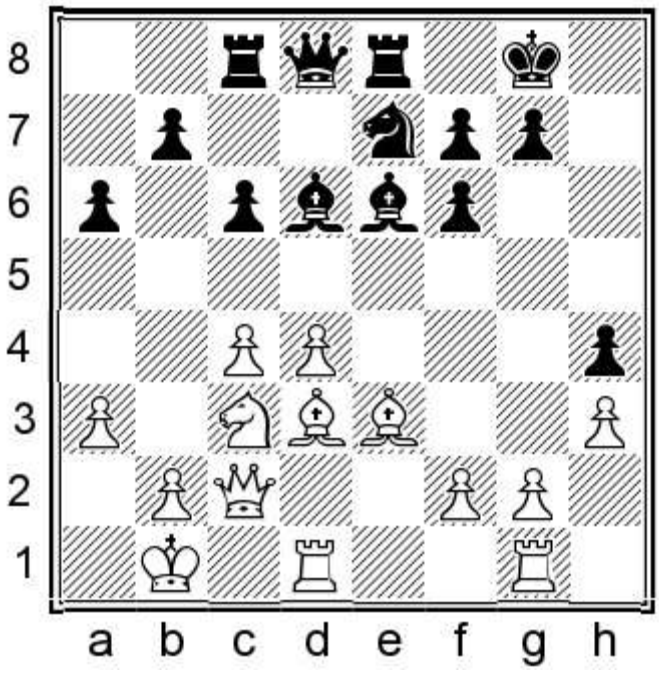
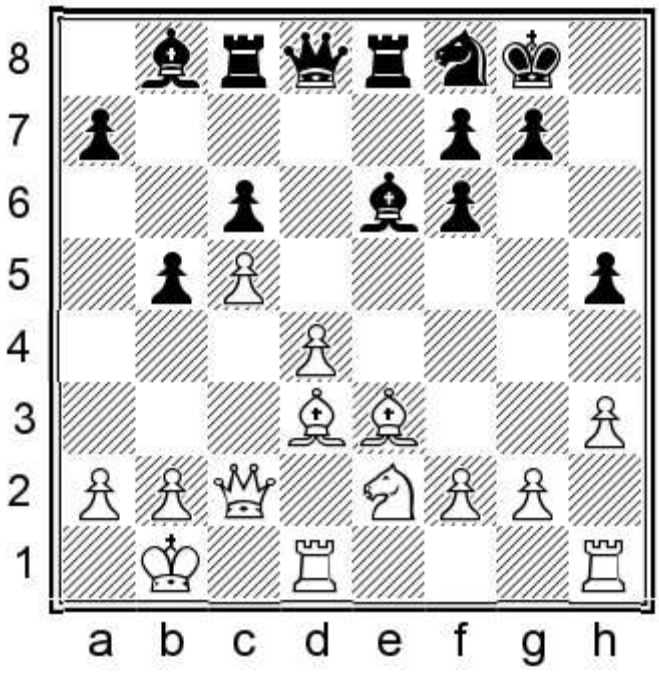


Position after: 17...a6!⇄

White will play g4 and Black will counter with ...b5. The position is very complicated since both sides are ready to attack. I am optimistic about Black's chances: he has a solid position and his moves flow easily.

B) A more natural continuation is 14.h3 but Black can now strike on the queenside with 14...b5! 15.c5 ♗b8!



Position after: 15...♗b8!

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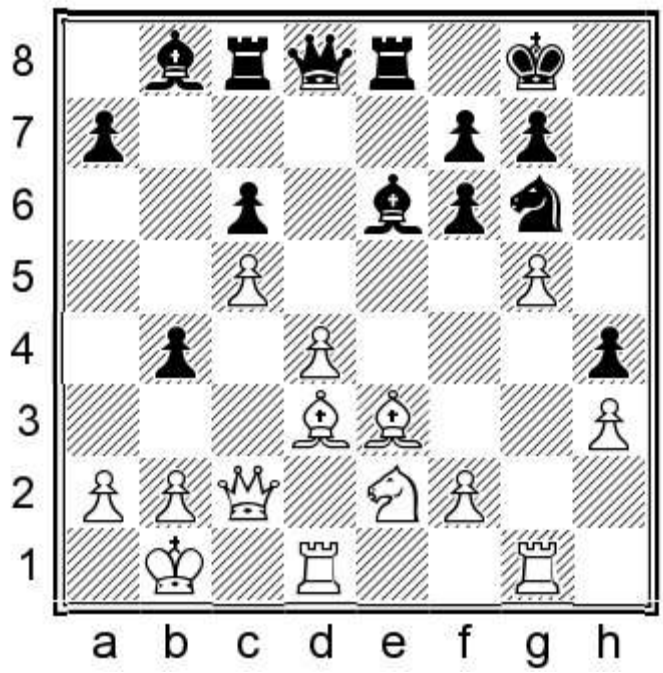
[15...♗c7?!N leaves the c6-pawn unprotected and White can exploit this with 16.♗e4! ♗d5 17.♗xd5 ♕xd5 18.g4! b4 19.♕f5!±] 16.g4 [16.d5? was played in Golubev, M (2483) – Baidetsky, V (2406) Odessa 2019, but I see no reason to shy away from 16...♕xd5!N since Black stands better after 17.♗h7+ ♘xh7 18.♖xd5 ♗xd5∓.] 16...h4 17.♖hg1 We have been following the game Terletsky, O (2186) – Paszewski, M (2347) Lvov 2019, but now I like the computer's suggestion to gain space on the queenside with 17...b4!N The position is extremely sharp and both players should not be afraid to play ambitiously. 18.g5 ♘g6! This is a brilliant move which shows how Black can combine attack and defence.



Position after: 18...♘g6!

B1) 19.gxf6 ♕xf6 20.♗xg6 fxg6 21.♖xg6 ♕f5⩲ gives Black excellent compensation for the pawn since White's attacking chances will have vanished once the queens will be traded and Black's pair of bishops will rule the board.

B2) 19.♗e4 ♗xh3! 20.d5 f5! Very resourceful! 21.dxc6 ♖xe4! 22.♖xd8+ ♖xd8∓ Black's h-pawn will create problems for White.

B3) 19.d5!? ♗xd5 20.♘d4 a5!⇄

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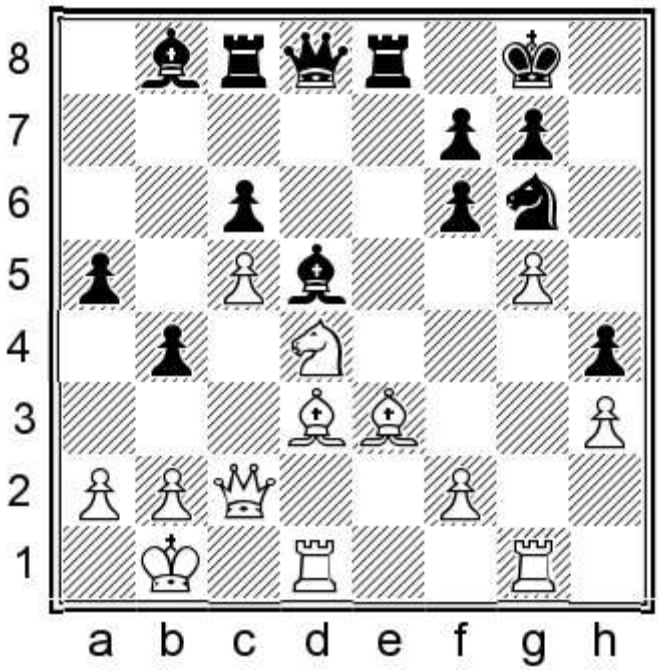
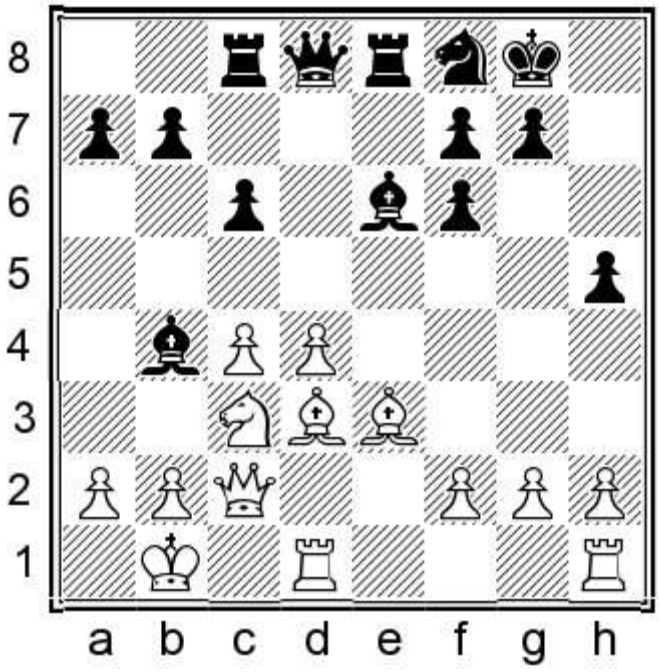


Position after: 20...a5

The position remains extremely complicated, but it seems to me that Black has excellent chances.

14...♗b4!



Position after: 14...♗b4!

As we saw before, Black goes after the c3-knight to renew the threat of ...b5.

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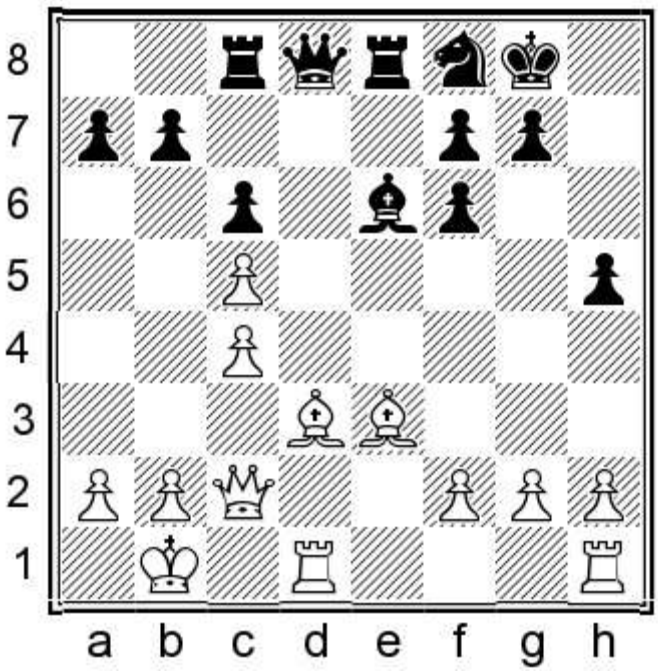
15.♘e4 ♗e7 16.h3

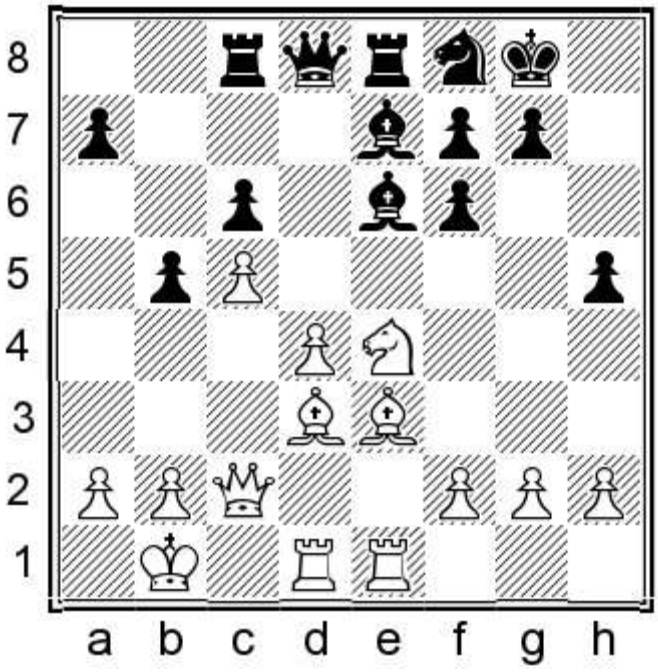
A) 16.♘c5 ♗xc5 17.dxc5



Position after: 17.dxc5

This position was reached in Gukesh, D (2497) – Solozhenkina, E (2279) Caleta 2019. Here, Black can continue with 17...♕e7!N , with the idea of going after the c5-pawn. Neither player has attacking chances since the center is too open, but Black's pieces are very well placed for an open game as well.

B) 16.♖he1 b5 17.c5 was essayed in Cumming, R (2162) – Hansen, T (2408) London 2017.



Position after: 17.c5

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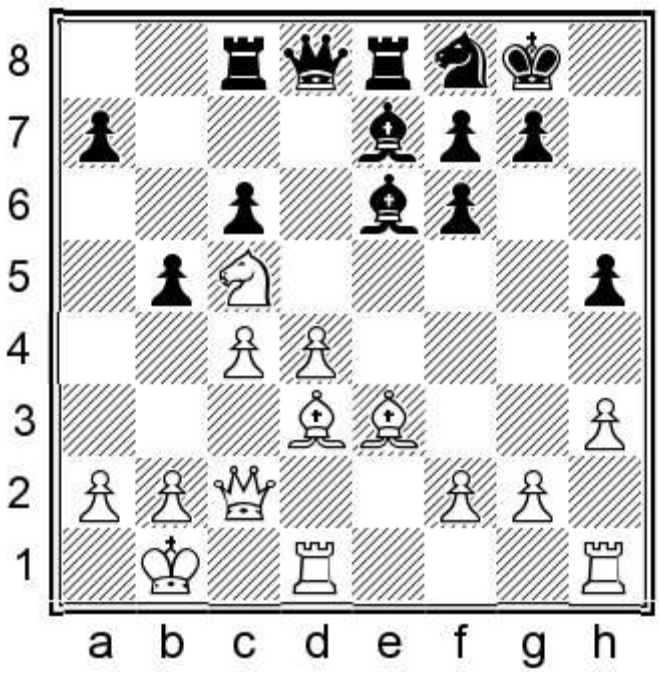
Here Black could have continued with 17...g6!N with the idea of playing ...f5 and driving the White knight from e4. 18.♘c3 ♕a5!⇄

16...b5!

As usual, Black strikes on the queenside.

17.♘c5



Position after: 17.♘c5

17.c5N 17...f5 18.♘c3 b4 19.♘e2 ♗g5!=

17...bxc4!N

I reached this position myself in Griffith, K (2315) – Rambaldi, F (2570) Golden State Open 2020, and I continued with the imprecise 17...♗xc5?! which could have allowed White to develop a dangerous initiative with 18.dxc5 ♕a5 19.b3 a6 20.g4!N.

18.♗xc4 ♗d5=

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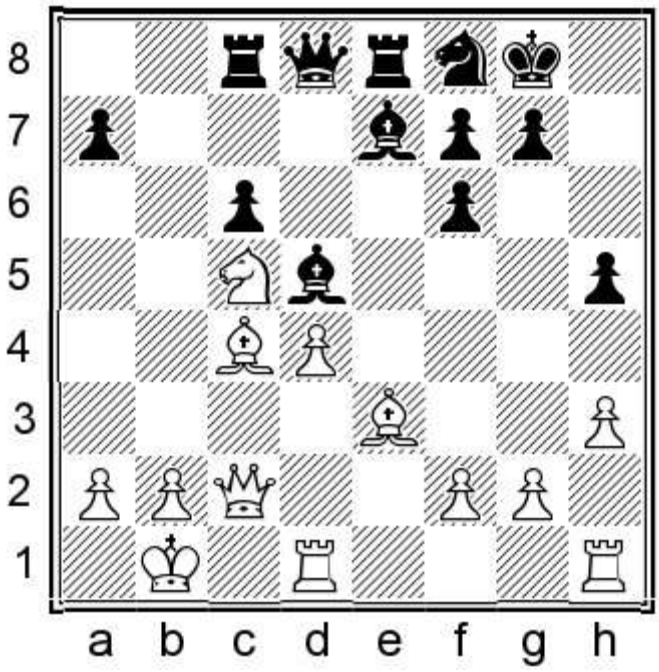

Position after: 18...♗d5=

Black has opened the b-file and prevented White from developing a kingside attack. Still, White is very solid and controls the key central squares, so chances are level.

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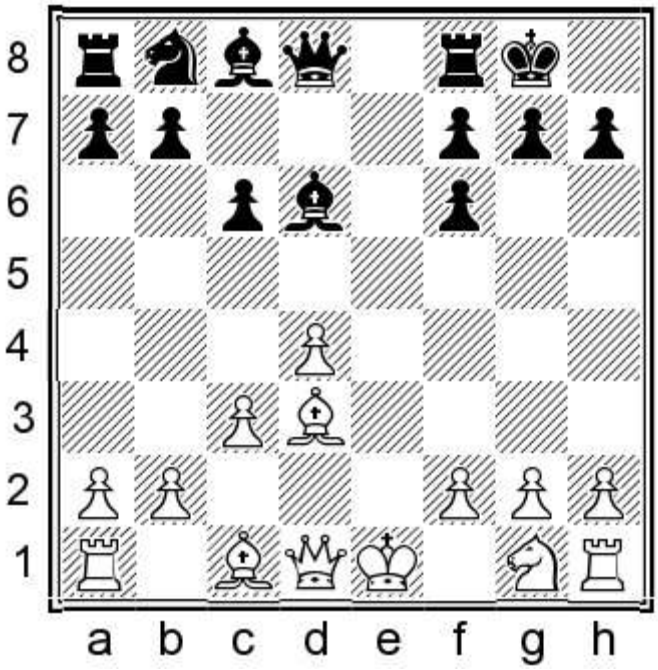
b) Alternatives up to move 11

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



Position after: 7...0-0

In the previous subchapter, we examined White's options associated with queenside castling. Let's now turn our attention to the more common approach which involves castling kingside. As we will see, when White castles kingside, we don't get positions as double-edged as the ones we saw in the last few pages. Nevertheless, numerous tactical motifs are inextricably linked to the positional subtleties. Since strategic features drive the tactics and not the other way around, I advise that you begin by understanding what ideas work in which situations, and how small changes in the position or in the move order can affect the play. Then, you will be able to remember the intricate details of specific variations.

8.♕c2

8.♘e2 Although this move is a logical follow-up, it can be considered an inferior version for White of the main line (8.♕c2 ♖e8+ 9.♘e2 h5) . In the main line, Black is forced to advance his h-pawn and weaken his kingside. The most important difference is Black's ability to play ... ♘d7-f8-g6. With the pawn on h5, this plan would not be possible. 8...♖e8 9.0-0 [9.♕c2 h5 would transpose to the main line.] 9...♘d7

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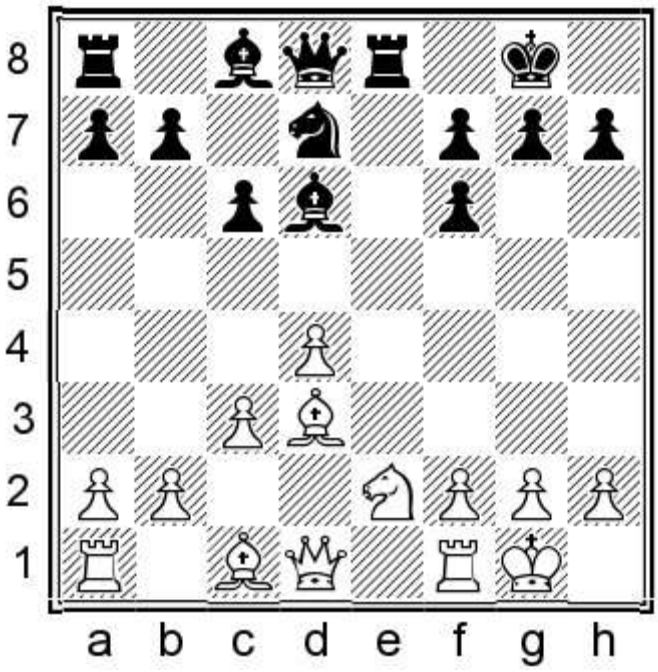
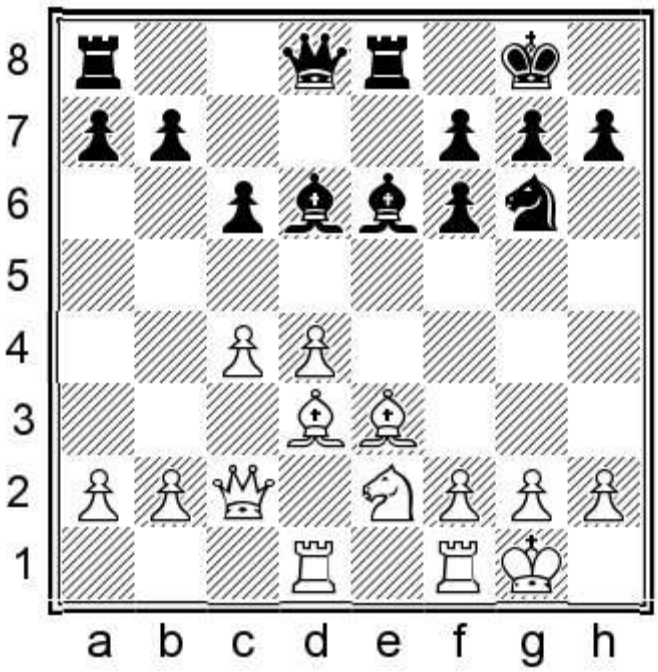


Position after: 9...♘d7

White has a few options, but Black's plan is simple: he will bring his knight to g6 and then exert pressure on White's kingside with moves like ...♕c7, ...♘h4 or ...♗e6 and ...♕d7.

A) 10.♗e3 ♘f8 11.♕c2 ♗e6N 12.c4 ♘g6 13.♖ad1



Position after: 13.♖ad1

White has played very logical moves, but Black is about to show why this variation packs a punch if White plays in uncritical fashion. 13...♕c7! 14.♘g3 [14.h3 ♕d7!→ gives Black a very dangerous

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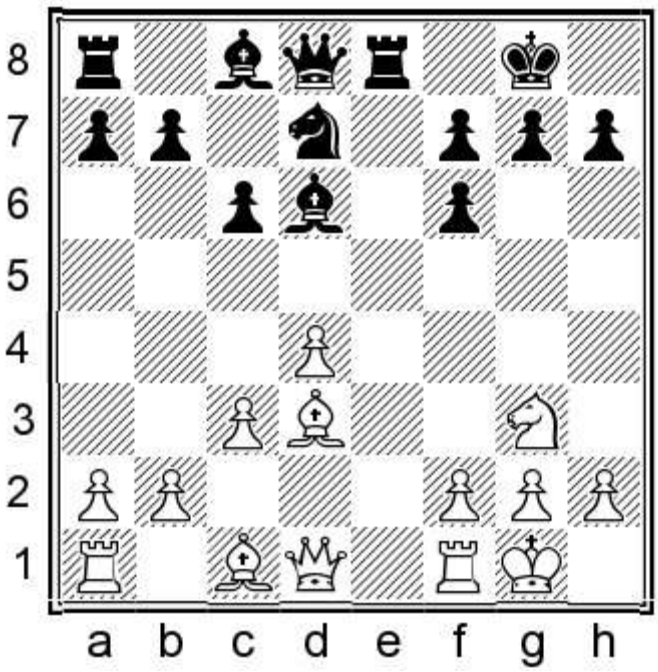
initiative, as ...♗xh3 is already a big threat.] 14...♖ad8 15.♖fe1 h5!= Black goes after the misplaced g3-knight and gains space on the kingside. His position is excellent and his kingside initiative keeps White's mind far away from thoughts of exploiting the queenside majority.

B) 10.♘g3



Position after: 10.♘g3

This is perhaps White's most logical follow-up. The idea is simply to bring the knight to f5 and establish a firm grip on Black's kingside activity. Of course, Black should not allow this: 10...g6! Black prevents ♘f5 and preserves the mobility of his kingside pawns. The drawback is that Black weakens the dark squares around his king, but White is not active enough to fully take advantage of that. 11.♘e4 [11.♖e1 ♖xe1+ 12.♕xe1 f5 13.♗h6 ♘f6 14.♕d2 ♗f8= Black trades the dark-squared bishops to regain control over the kingside weaknesses, and the position is equal.] 11...♗f8N 12.♗f4 ♘b6 13.♖e1 [13.♗c7? is a nice trick, but it is White who ends up in trouble after 13...♕xc7 14.♘xf6+ ♔h8 15.♘xe8 ♕e7∓ since the knight cannot escape.] 13...♘d5 14.♗d2 f5 15.♘g5 ♖xe1+ 16.♕xe1 ♗d7=

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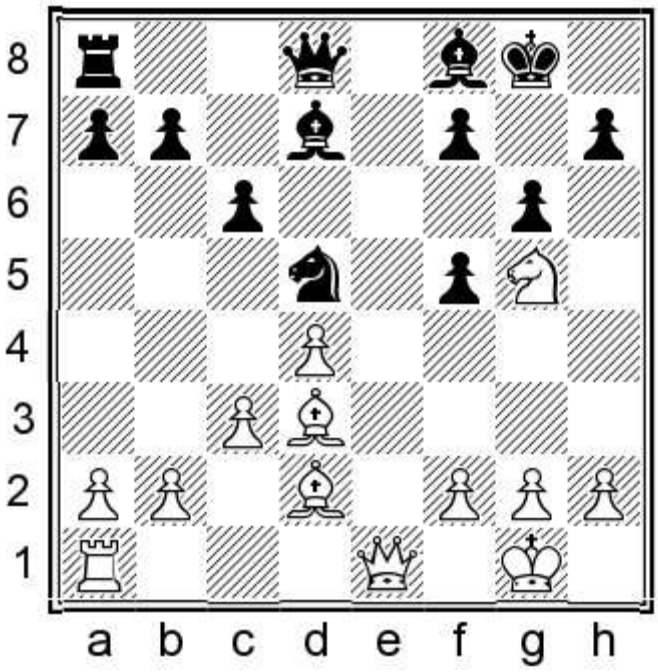
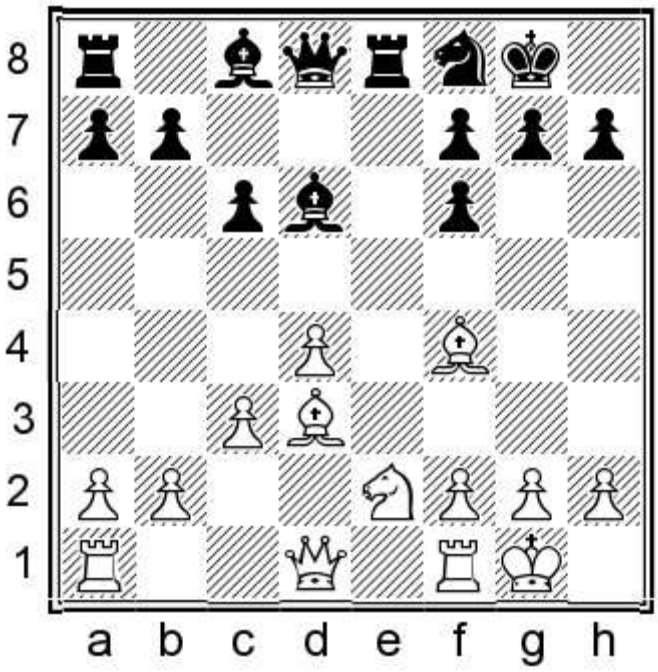


Position after: 16...♗d7=

Black is ready to gain space on the kingside and, once again, White's queenside majority will be hard-pressed to make any real impact.

C) 10.♗f4 White trades Black's excellent dark-squared bishop, but it is not enough to pose any real problems to his opponent. 10...♘f8



Position after: 10...♘f8

C1) 11.♗xd6 ♕xd6 12.♘g3 g6 13.♘e4 ♕d8 14.♖e1 ♔g7 15.♕f3 was played in Ochsner, B (2454) –

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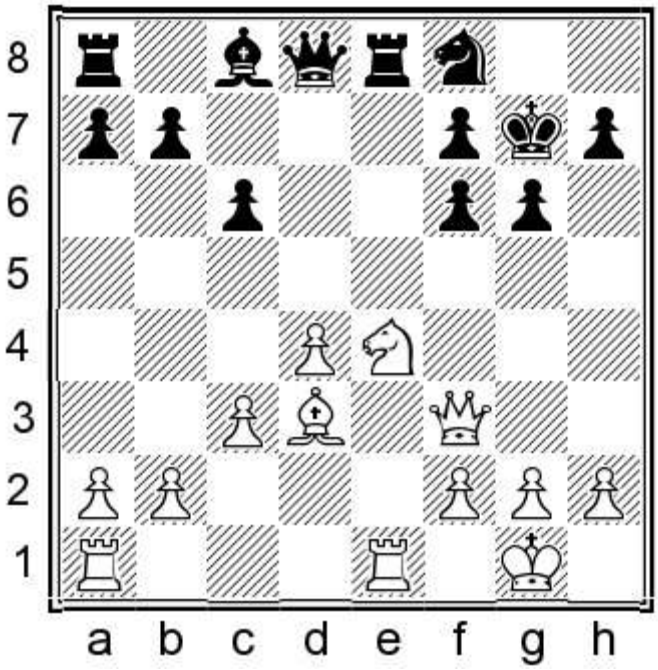
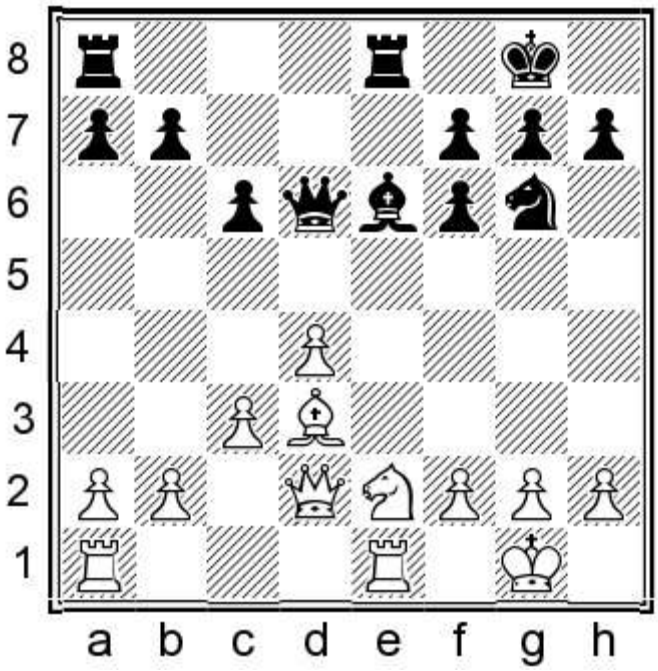
Thybo, J (2470) Svendborg 2018.



Position after: 15.♕f3

Here Black could have continued with 15...♗f5!N. Trading the bishop for the White knight is favorable for Black since the knight controls important squares (d6 and c5 especially) and is the key to White's initiative. 16.a4 ♗xe4 17.♖xe4 ♖xe4 18.♕xe4 ♕d7 19.♖e1 ♘e6= Black's knight is very well placed on e6 as it controls important squares both on the kingside and in the center. The position is balanced.

C2) 11.♕d2 ♘g6 12.♗xd6 ♕xd6 13.♖fe1 ♗e6



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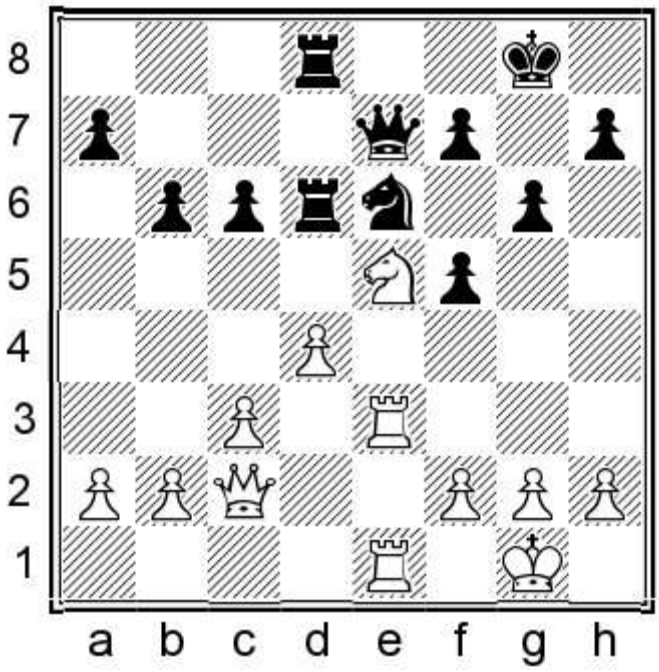
Position after: 13...♗e6

There is little point in analyzing much further from this position. White has many options, but Black is in no danger at all. From a practical standpoint, it is advisable to play out this position for practice (or a similar position from other lines we just covered) and see how the game can evolve from this point. In general, Black should not lose his grip on the initiative and let White take over. Moreover, the f6-pawn is an asset, and Black should not forget to use it.

In the following game, which I consider to be instructive in its entirety, the young Iranian Grandmaster Maghsoodloo illustrates some ideas Black can use to outplay his opponent from here. 14.♘g3 b6 15.♕c2 ♘f8 16.♗f5 g6 17.♗xe6 ♘xe6 18.♘e4 ♕e7 19.♖e3 f5 20.♘d2 ♖ed8 21.♘f3 ♖d6 22.♖ae1 ♖ad8 23.♘e5



Position after: 23.♘e5

23...f4! Black shows how the f5-pawn can combine with a ...c5 break to pincer White's center apart and secure an edge. 24.♖3e2 c5! 25.d5 f3! 26.♘xf3 ♖xd5 27.g3 c4!∓

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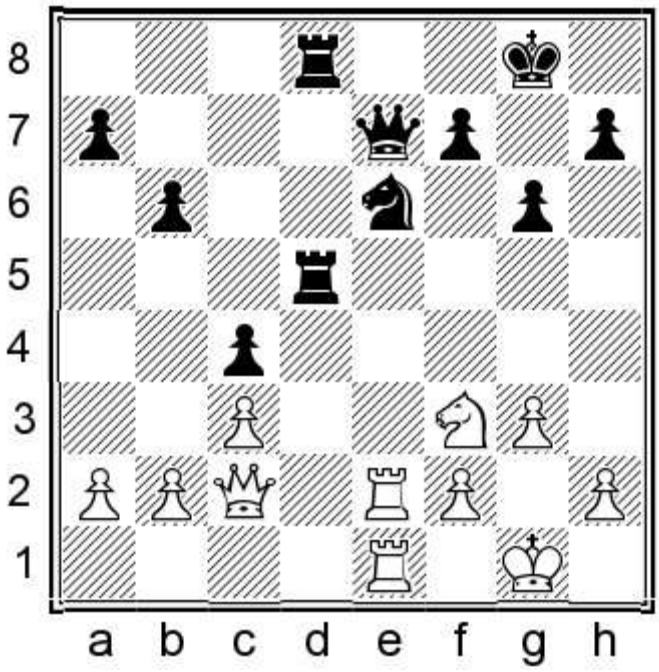

Position after: 27...c4!∓

Black is better due to his space advantage on the queenside and better placed knight. There follows an outstanding display of technique. 28.♕e4 ♕f6 29.♔g2 b5 30.♕h4 ♕xh4 31.♘xh4 ♘c5 32.♘f3 ♘d3 33.♖b1 ♖8d6 34.♘e1 ♘c5 35.♘f3 a5 36.b3 cxb3 37.axb3 a4 38.♘d4 ♖xd4 39.cxd4 ♘xb3 40.♖e5 ♘xd4 41.♖d1 ♔g7 42.♖xd4 ♖xd4 43.♖xb5 a3 44.♖a5 ♖d3 45.h4 h5 46.♖a6 ♖b3 47.♔h2 f6 48.♔g2 ♔f7 49.♔h2 ♔e7 50.♔g2 ♔f7 51.♔h2 ♔e7 52.♔g2 g5 53.♖a5 ♔d6 54.hxg5 fxg5 55.♖xg5 a2 56.♖a5 ♖b2 57.♔f3 ♔c6 58.♔e3 ♔b6 59.♖a8 ♔c5 60.f4 ♔b4 61.♔e4 ♖c2 62.♖b8+ ♔c3 63.♖a8 ♔b2 64.♔f5 ♖c3 65.♖xa2+ ♔xa2 66.♔g6 ♔b3 67.f5 ♖xg3+ 68.♔xh5 ♔c4 69.f6 ♔d5 White resigned in Arjun, K (2366) – Maghsoodloo, P (2590) Abu Dhabi 2017.

8...♖e8+ 9.♘e2 h5 10.0-0 h4!

This move is key to Black's strategy. He cuts out the idea of ♘g3 and introduces his own idea of playing ...h3, which would weaken White's kingside. Hence, White usually responds with 11.h3. However, there are a few interesting alternatives, which we will discuss in this subchapter, leaving 11.h3 for later.

It is important to note that 10...♘d7? is not possible in this position since White can play 11.♘g3!

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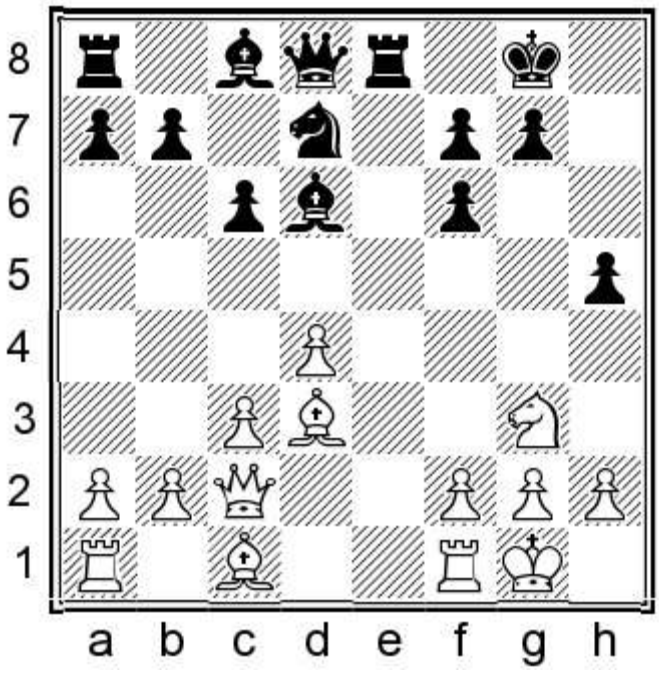
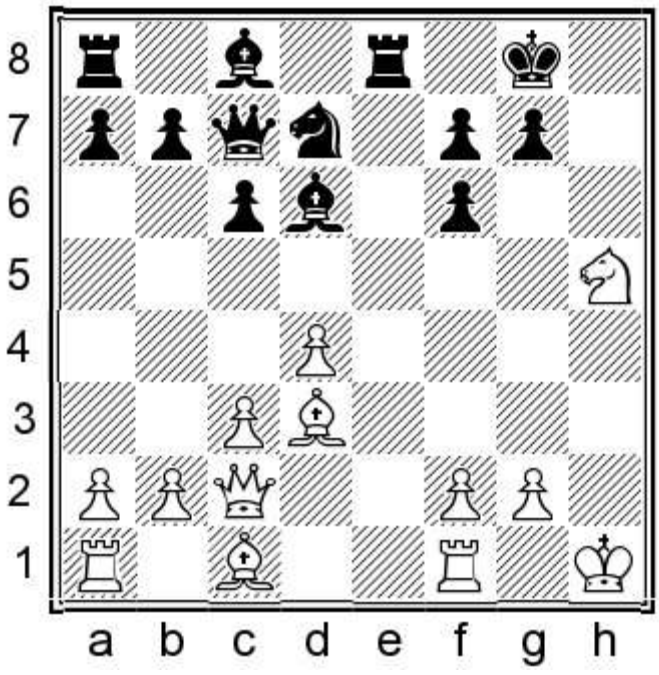


Position after: 11.♘g3!

and Black is unprepared to deal with the threat of ♘xh5. 11...♕c7 [11...h4N 12.♘f5± simply loses a pawn.] 12.♘xh5! White is better prepared for an opening of the h-file, since his king is safer and his pieces are ready to attack. 12...♗xh2+ 13.♔h1 ♗d6



Position after: 13...♗d6

This position was reached in Firat, B (2468) – Arutinian, D (2555) Skopje 2019. White failed to find the crushing 14.♗h6!N, which would have left Black in dire straits: 14...gxh6 15.♗c4! ♔h8 16.♗xf7

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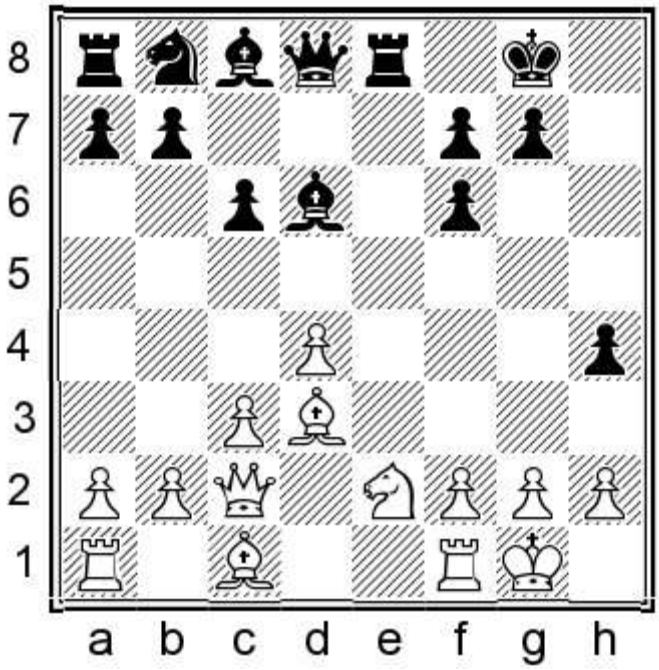
♖e7 17.♕g6 ♖xf7 18.♕xf7 ♘f8 19.♕xf6+ ♔h7 20.♖fe1+–.



Position after: 10...h4!

11.♗f4

With this move, White prevents Black's usual developing plan (...♘d7-f8). While this may not seem critical, it forces Black to rethink the development of his knight. As we have already seen, when the knight is unable to get to f8, the alternative route is a6-c7-d5 (or a6-c7-e6). The specific set of circumstances in this position make the idea not only playable but promising. Importantly, note that ...♘d5 will come with tempo.

A) 11.♗d2 is rarely played unless White intends to follow up with h3, since White's other plan is not convincing. See the following game: 11...♘d7 12.♖ae1 [12.h3 would transpose to 11.h3 ♘d7 12.♗d2.] 12...♘f8 13.♘f4 ♗xf4! 14.♗xf4 h3!=

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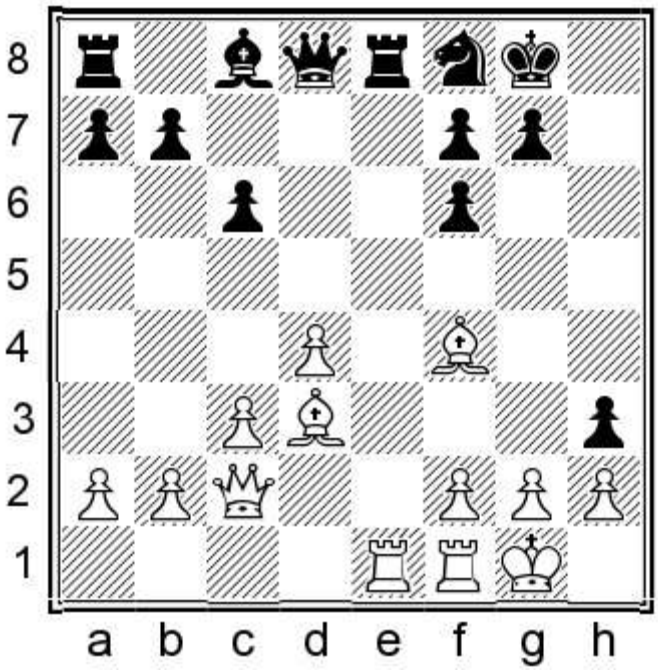
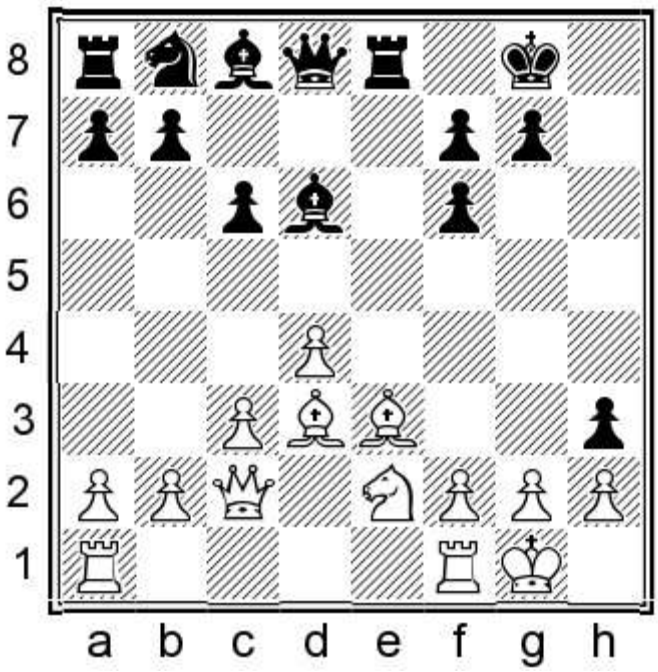


Position after: 14...h3!=

White's kingside is weakened and this gives Black enough counterplay to claim equality. A draw was agreed one move later in Nalbant, T (2401) – Krstulovic, A (2324) Corum 2019.

B) 11.♗e3 h3!N Black wastes no time going after White's kingside. While the kingside weaknesses may not seem decisive for now, they will be a constant headache for White throughout the game.



Position after: 11...h3!N

[11...♘d7 is also playable and would most likely transpose to 11.h3 ♘d7 12.♗e3 since it is unlikely

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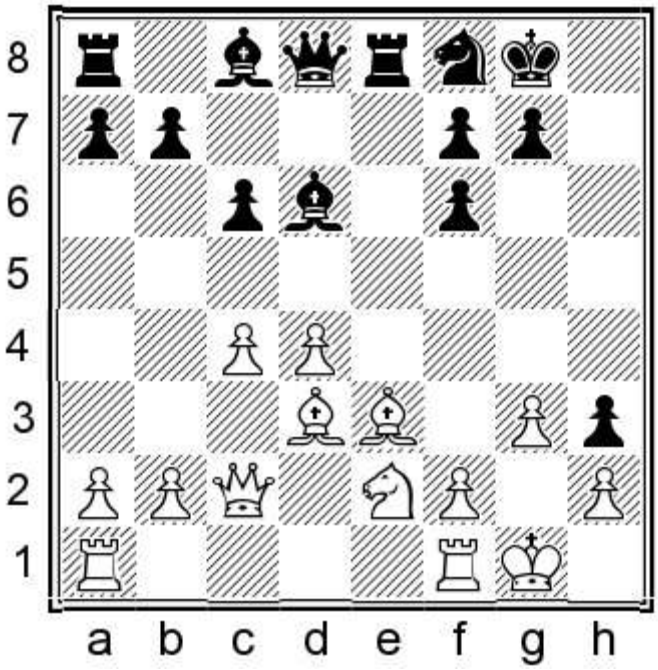
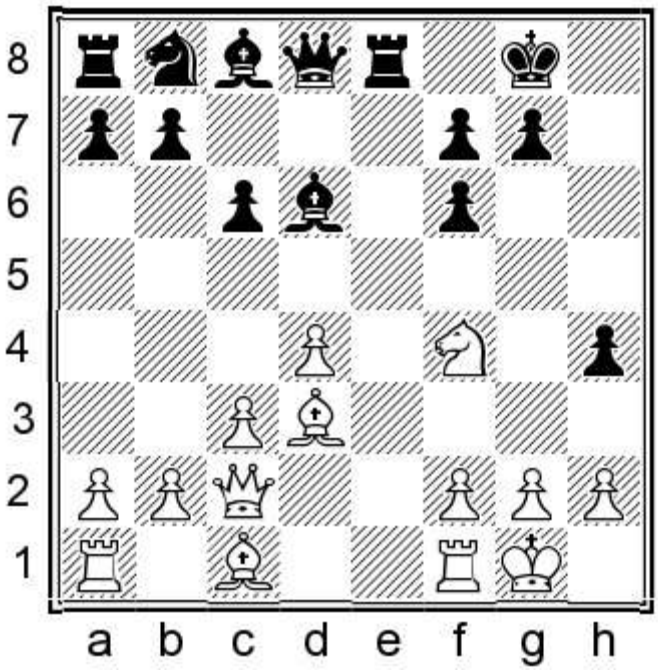
that White will completely avoid playing h3.] 12.g3 [12.♖ae1 is an interesting alternative, but Black can quickly activate his pieces with 12...hxg2 13.♔xg2 ♕d7! 14.♔g1 ♘a6! 15.♘g3 ♕h3 16.♗f5 ♕h4= White's kingside has been weakened and Black has excellent play on the kingside.] 12...♘d7 13.c4 ♘f8=



Position after: 13...♘f8=

There is little point in analyzing much further. Black has simply achieved a better version of the main line with 11.h3 ♘d7 12.♗e3, since the h3-pawn will continue to annoy White.

C) 11.♘f4!?



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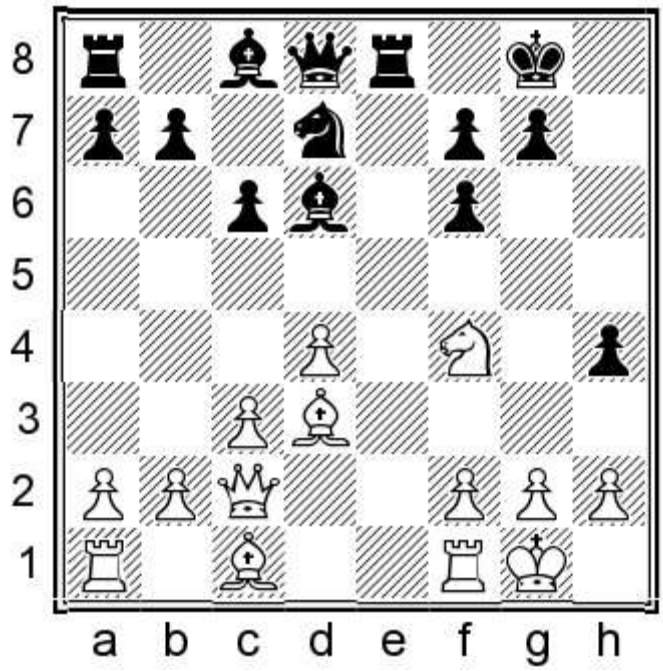
Position after: 11.♘f4!?

While 11.♗d2 and 11.♗e3 did not warrant serious consideration, the text move is an interesting attempt which is fully independent from the 11.h3 variations. White's idea is quite straightforward yet surprisingly dangerous: he wants to play ♕d1 and ♕h5. This idea essentially tries to resolve White's dominant issue in all the variations that arise after 5.♘xf6+ exf6: his lack of control over the kingside squares. 11...♘d7 For now, White has not yet made his kingside ambitions apparent and Black can continue with this normal developing move. The knight will be very useful on f8 since it will cover the h7-square.



Position after: 11...♘d7

C1) Continuing with normal development simply does not give White any hope for an advantage. For example: 12.♗d2N 12...♗xf4 13.♗xf4 h3! 14.f3 ♘f8 15.g4 ♗e6= The h-pawn thrust has weakened White's kingside and Black has an excellent position.

C2) 12.♕d1! ♘f8 13.♕h5

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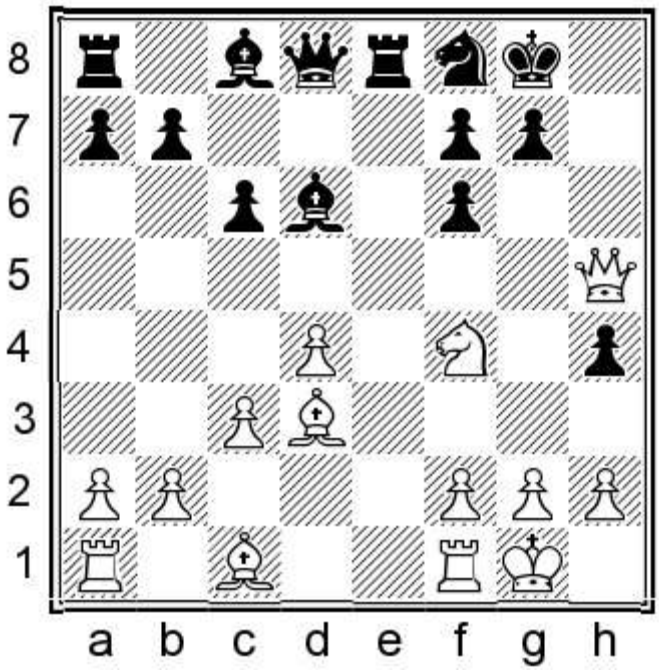
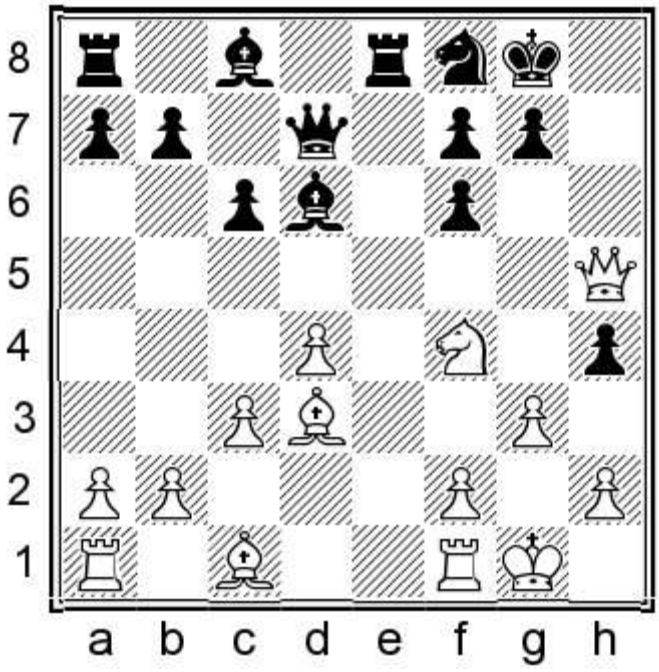


Position after: 13.♕h5

It is now Black's job to find a way to counteract White's increased presence on the kingside. The only way in which Black can effectively chase the White queen away from h5 is by bringing his own queen to the kingside. For this reason, Black should continue with 13...♕c7! forcing White to play 14.g3. [Note 14.♕xh4?? is not possible due to 14...g5–+] 14...♕d7!



Position after: 14...♕d7!

Black wants to play either simply ...♕g4, or ...g5 followed by ...♕h3. While this maneuver might

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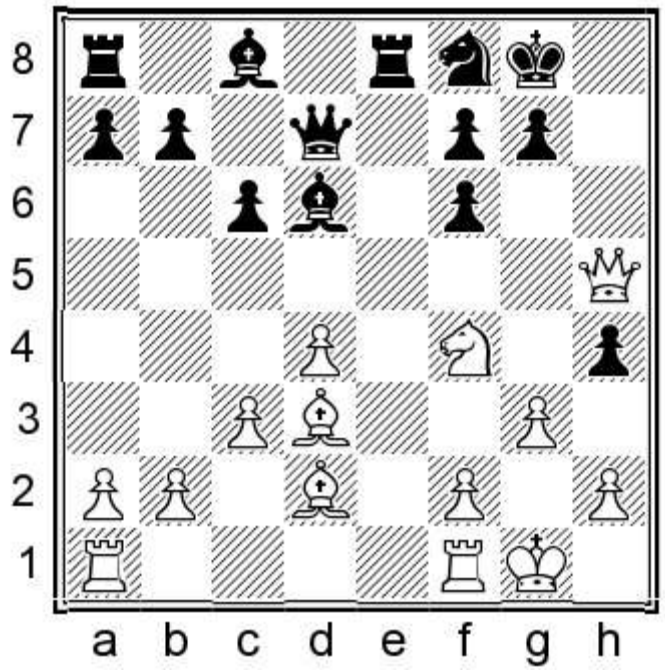
seem somewhat unnatural, it is the only way for Black to avoid falling into a passive position. The second idea can also be dangerous for White due to the mating motifs that can arise because of White's weaknesses on the kingside. 15.♗d2 This move was played in Luczak, F (2160) – Silva, P (1960) Bratislava 2019 and is White's most natural continuation.



Position after: 15.♗d2

The idea is simple: White completes his development and prepares to contrast Black on the open e-file. Black should press on with his plan and play [15.♘g2N is an attempt to force matters on the kingside, but the outcome is simply an equal endgame: 15...hxg3 16.hxg3 ♕h3 17.♕xh3 ♗xh3=] 15...♗xf4!N 16.♗xf4 g5! [The immediate 16...♕h3? does not work since White can reply with 17.♕xh4! and after 17...g5 he can play 18.♗xg5! since 18...fxg5 19.♕xg5+ ♔h8 20.♖ae1→ leaves White with a poweful attack and three pawns for the piece.] 17.♗d2 ♕h3!

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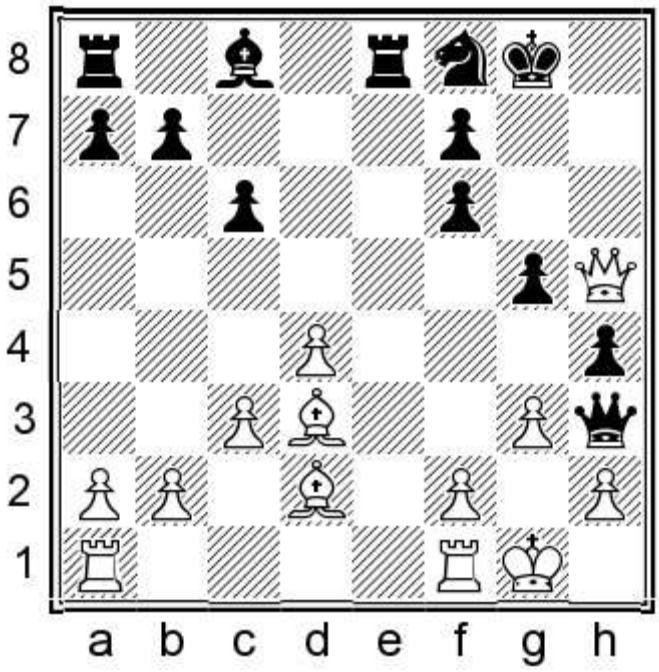
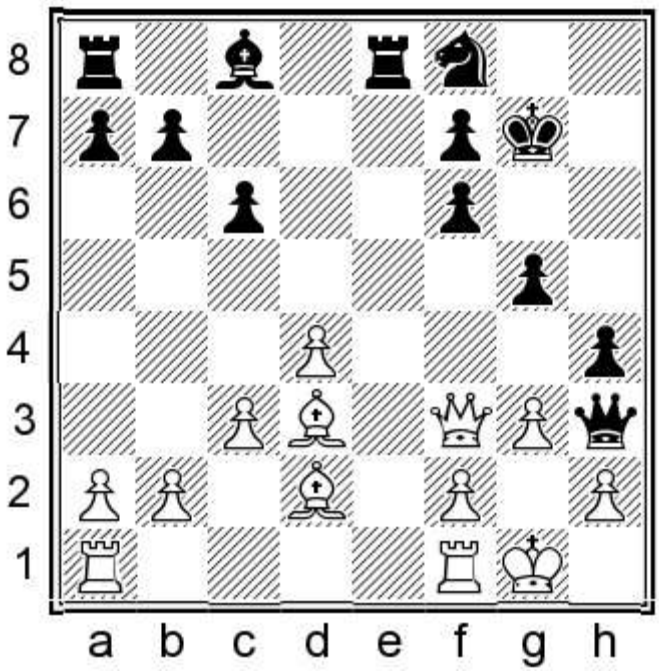


Position after: 17...♕h3!

Black has achieved the objective of ...♕c7-d7: he has eliminated White's menacing knight on f4 and regained control of important squares on the kingside. White now has to deal with the imminent threat of ...♗g4-f3 and mate! 18.♕f3 [The seemingly active 18.f4? fails to 18...♗g4! 19.♕h6 ♗e2!–+ where Black is the one with a crushing attack; also, the passive 18.♗e2 can be met with 18...♗e6! and after 19.c4 ♔g7! 20.gxh4 Black can play 20...♘g6! 21.hxg5 ♕xh5 22.♗xh5 ♗xc4=] 18...♔g7



Position after: 18...♔g7

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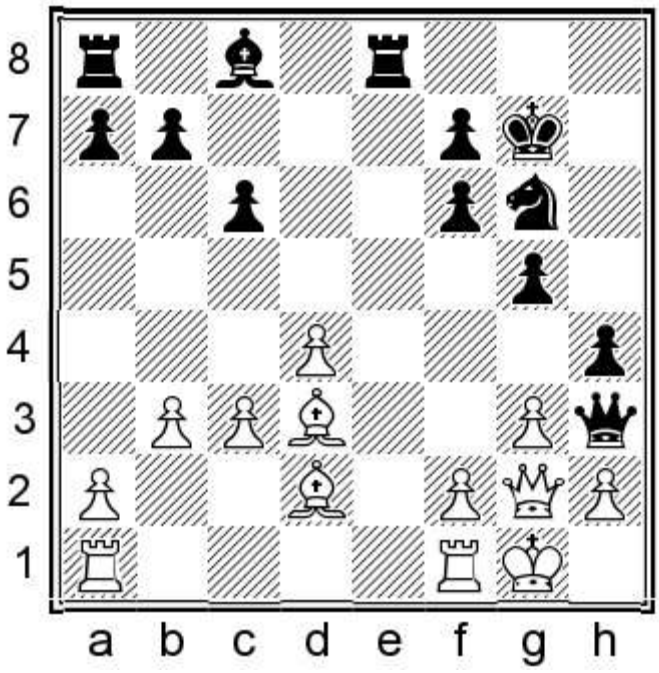
19.♕g2 [19.♖fe1 ♗g4! 20.♕g2 ♕xg2+ 21.♔xg2 h3+ 22.♔f1 ♗f3= The endgame is equal since Black's firm grip on the kingside compensates for White's bishop pair and queenside majority.] 19...♘g6 Black has completely regained control of the kingside. This is now obvious visually as well. 20.b3!?



Position after: 20.b3!?

This is very computeresque move, but I decided to include it to show how Black can further develop attacking chances. The idea is to mobilize the queenside majority and fight for the light squares on the queenside. 20...c5! Black stops White right in his tracks! With this move, which uses the detail that White's bishops lie on the same file, Black maintains the initiative and aims to put pressure on White's center. 21.♗e4 [21.♖fe1 ♕xg2+ 22.♔xg2 ♗e6= Black will continue to pressure the d4-pawn so that White will be unable to truly utilize his queenside pawns.] 21...cxd4 22.cxd4 ♕d7!?= The position is very sharp: White has a passed d-pawn, but the light squares are a thorn in his side. A simple move like 23.♗c3 allows Black to further expand on the kingside and obtain a comfortable edge with 23...h3! 24.♕h1 g4!∓

11...♘a6!

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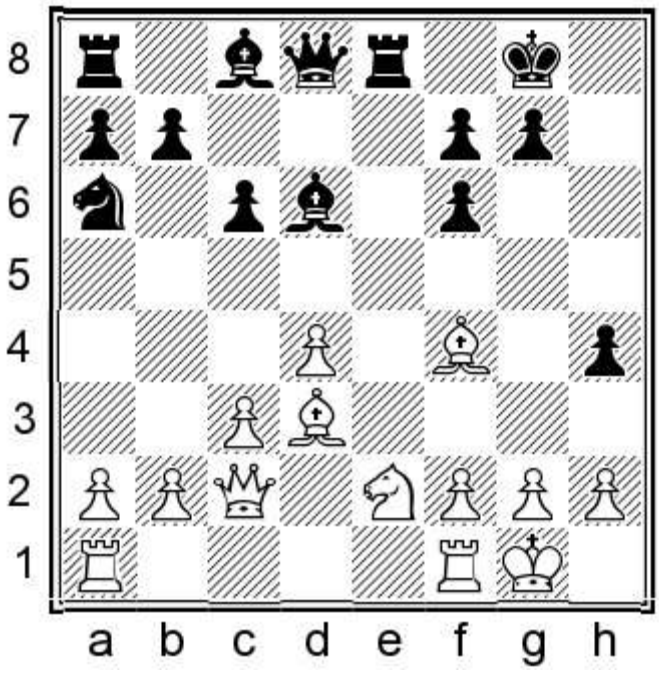
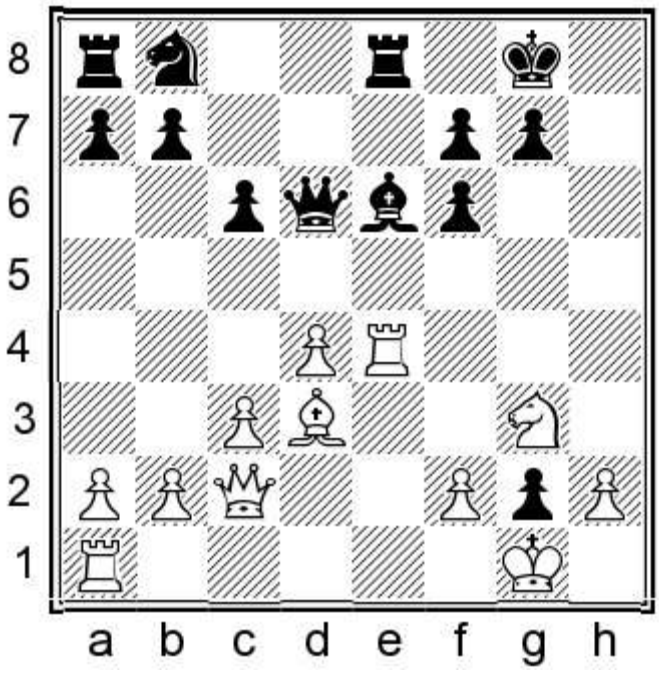


Position after: 11...♘a6!

White now has a few options, but Black's plan will remain the same, at least for the next few moves.

A) It is necessary to note that 11...♖xe2?? is not possible because of 12.♕xe2 ♗xf4 13.♕e4!+– where White's kingside attack just wins.

B) 11...h3?! is also not a viable alternative since White has a surprisingly dangerous resource: 12.♖fe1! White simply ignores the g2-pawn and prepares to launch a kingside attack. 12...hxg2 13.♗xd6 ♕xd6 14.♘g3 ♗e6 15.♖e4!→ Black's position is quite dangerous and I definitely don't recommend it.



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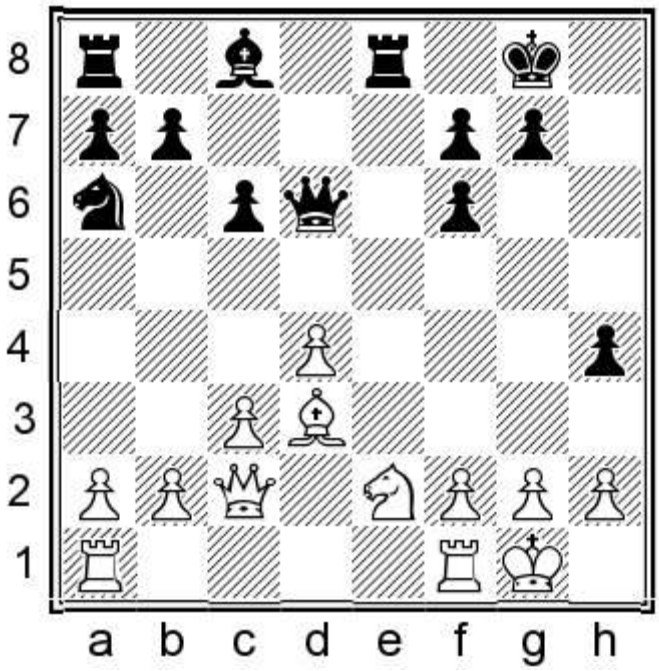
Position after: 15.♖e4!→

12.h3

A) 12.♗xd6?! White gives in and helps Black develop. It's difficult to imagine that White can achieve an advantage with this move. 12...♕xd6



Position after: 12...♕xd6

A1) 13.♗xa6N deserves a note. While Black's pawn structure is clearly not ideal, White has given up both of his bishops and is left with a clearly inferior minor piece. Black can start to assert his dominance on the light squares and use his active position to exert pressure. White's position simply isn't good enough for him to exploit Black's weaknesses, e.g. 13...bxa6 14.h3 a5! 15.♖fe1 g6 16.♕d2 ♗f5=

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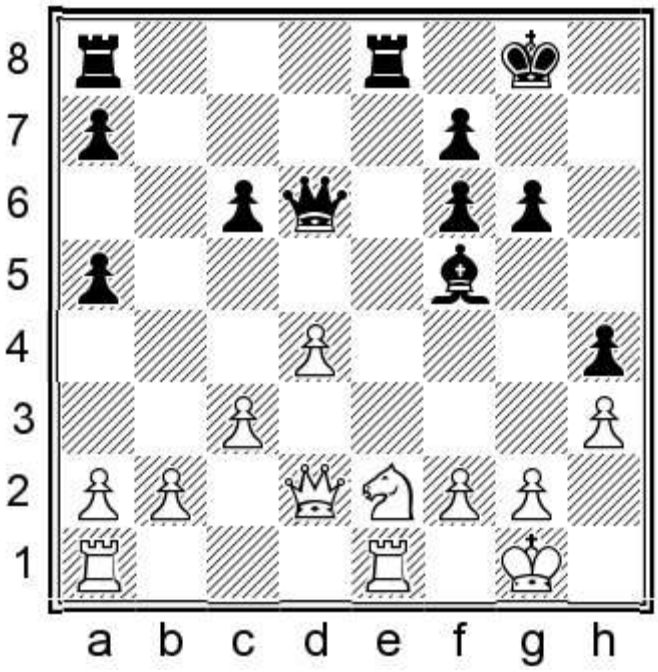
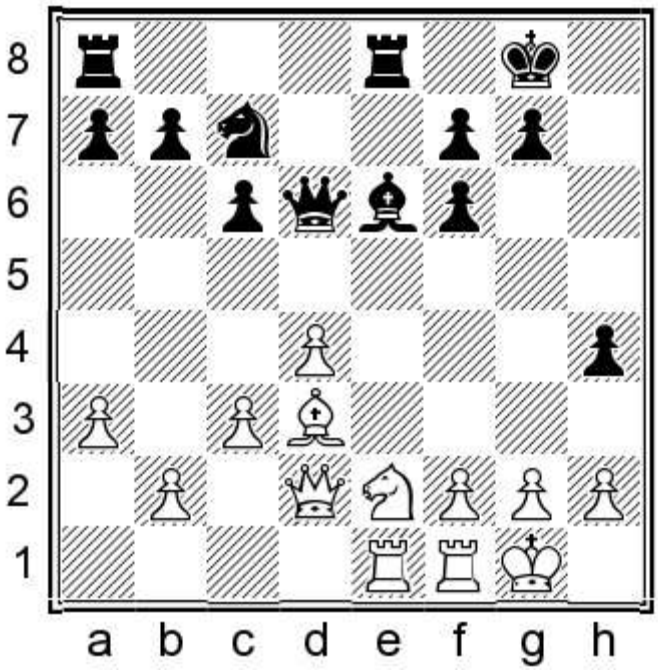


Position after: 16...♗f5=

The b2-pawn will be a constant headache for White, especially since it cannot be defended with ♖b1. Even in an endgame, Black's dynamic advantage will persist and compensate for the inferior pawn structure.

A2) 13.♖ae1 ♘c7 14.♕d2 ♗e6! 15.a3



Position after: 15.a3

Here in Krause, B (2434) – Buhmann, R (2573) Magdeburg 2019 Black could have seized an

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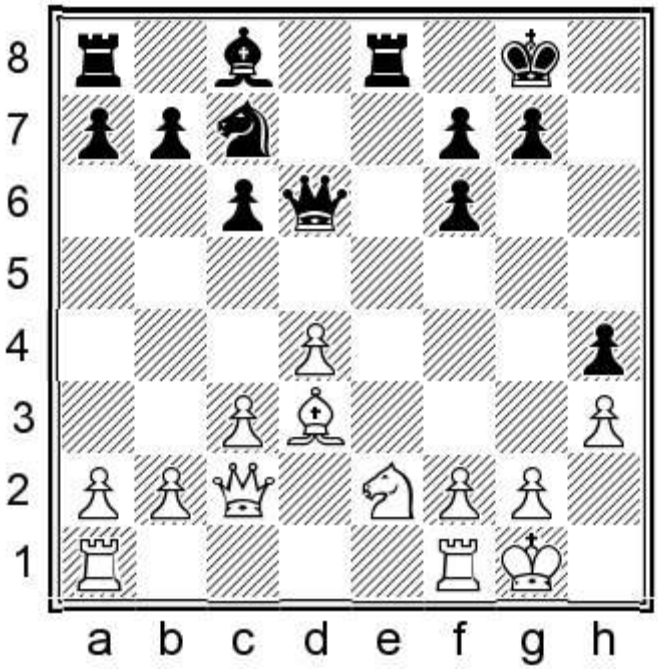
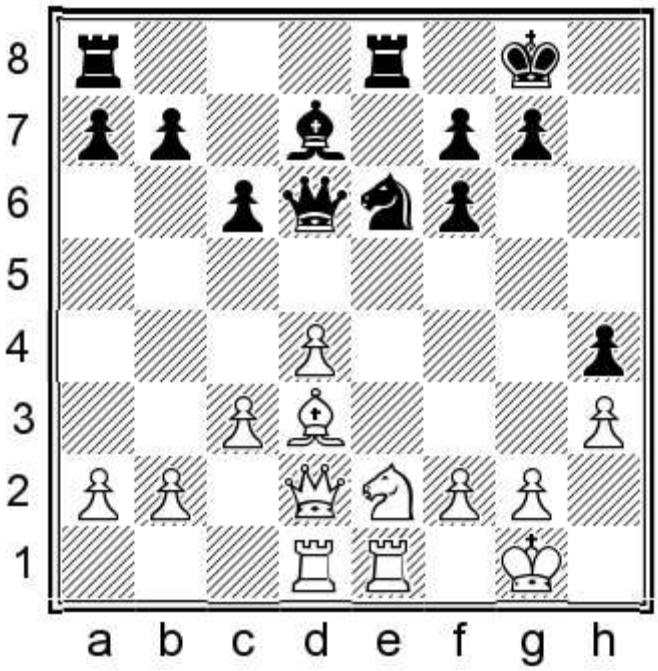
advantage with 15...h3!N 16.g3 c5! 17.dxc5 ♕xc5 18.♘d4 ♗c4∓ when, once again, White's kingside weaknesses will spell trouble for him for the rest of the game.

A3) 13.h3 ♘c7



Position after: 13...♘c7

A3.1) 14.♖fe1 ♘e6 15.♖ad1 ♗d7 16.♕d2



Position after: 16.♕d2

This position was reached in Handke, F (2536) – Grandelius, N (2655) Porto Carras 2018. While

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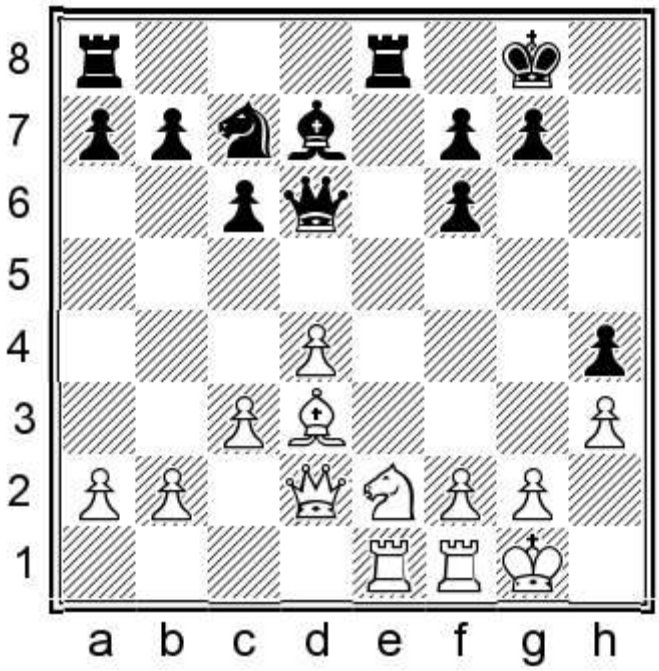
Black's continuation from the game was also good (16...♖ad8), I prefer 16...♖e7!N. This is a concept that we will encounter repeatedly in the lines with kingside castling. It is important to realize that in such positions, the only open file is the e-file, and Black has to play to emphasise his main positional trump, which is his kingside control. For these reasons, the ideal placement for the rooks is on e7 and e8. Black will have ideas of ...♘f4 or ...♘g5 in some positions and the rooks will create chances for Black on the d-file. While placing the rooks on e8 and d8 does not make Black stand worse, doubling rooks on the e-file is more precise.

A3.2) 14.♖ae1 ♗d7 15.♕d2 Now in Bacrot, E (2677) – Blohberger, F (2434) Germany 2018 Black should have prepared to double on the e-file, just as above.



Position after: 15.♕d2

15...♖e7!N 16.♘c1 ♖ae8 17.♖xe7 ♖xe7 18.♖e1 ♖xe1+ 19.♕xe1 ♘d5=

B) 12.♖fe1 is a natural alternative. White brings his rook to the open e-file and waits to see how the game will develop. 12...♘c7

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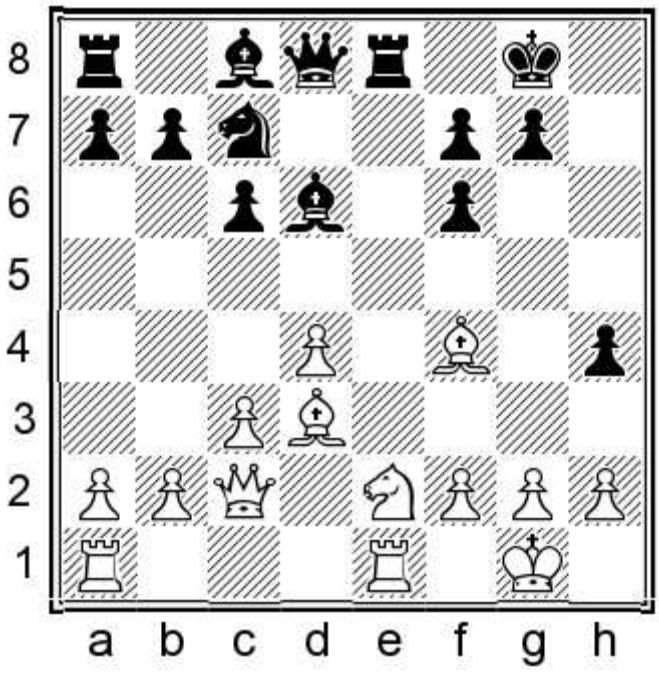
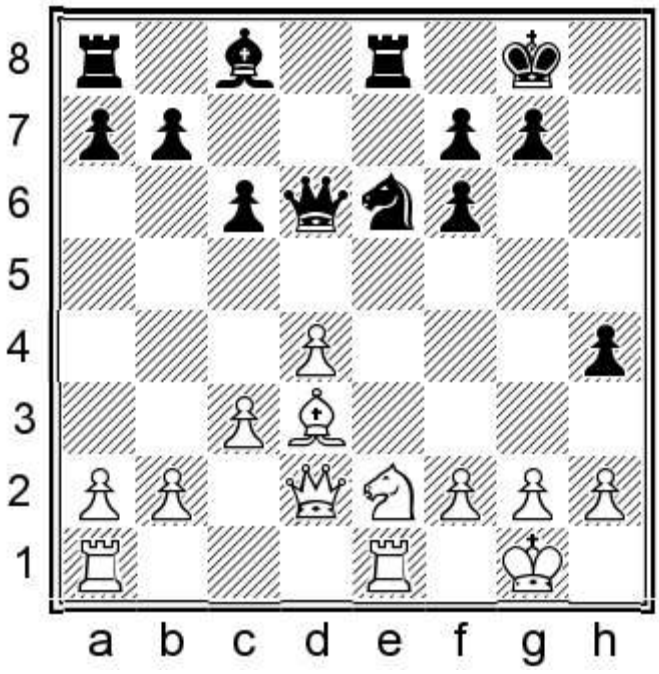


Position after: 12...♘c7

B1) 13.g3? is an example of how White can get into trouble if he underestimates Black's attacking chances on the kingside. Unfortunately, Black did not make the most of this opportunity in Zajic, M (2497) – Omorjan, D (2291) Subotica 2019, where the logical continuation was 13...♘e6!N with the idea of playing ...♘g5 next move.

B2) 13.♕d2!? ♘e6 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6



Position after: 14...♕xd6

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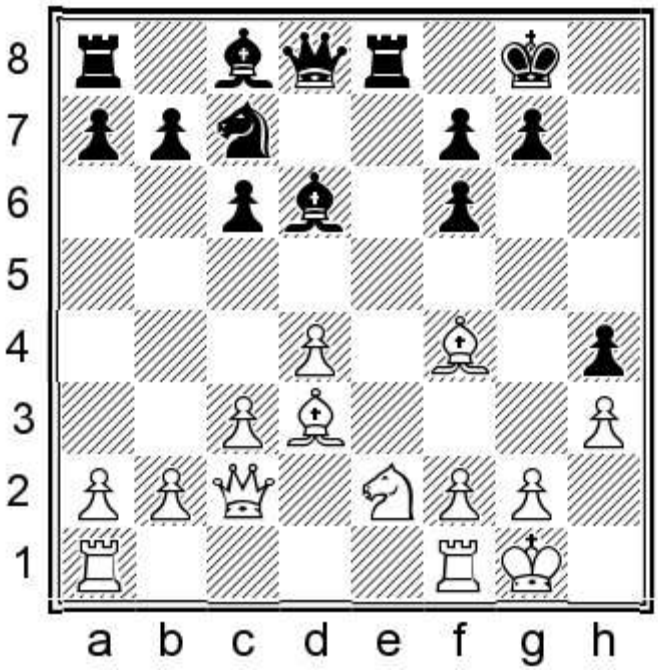
15.♕e3!?N White's idea is to play ♕h3 and gobble up the h4-pawn. [15.♘f4 ♗d7 16.♘xe6 ♖xe6 17.♗c4 was Heinemann, J (2317) – Li, X (2307) Sharjah 2020. Now Black can improve slightly with 17...♖ee8!?N 18.h3 g5=.; 15.♗c2 ♗d7= was equal in Bacrot, E (2678) – Villegas, P Brest 2019, and Black made an easy draw against his higher-rated opponent.] Of course, Black can easily prevent this with 15...♘c7 16.♕f4 ♕xf4 17.♘xf4 ♔f8 18.g3 hxg3 19.hxg3 ♖xe1+ 20.♖xe1 ♗e6=. This position is perhaps the most that White can achieve in this variation: he has contained Black's kingside pressure and traded some pieces. Nevertheless, I don't think that Black should have any trouble holding.

12...♘c7



Position after: 12...♘c7

White has various options, but Black's position is solid and sound. Rather than trying to memorize all the variations that follow, I recommend that you try to pick up on the positional nuances and acquaint yourself with Black's responses to the various ideas that White can try.

12...♖xe2?? still loses on the spot to 13.♕xe2 ♗xf4 14.♕e4!+–.

13.♕d2!?N

This novelty is (to an even greater extent than 13.♖ae1) aimed against ...♘e6, since White can then develop a strong initiative on the kingside with f4.

A) White can withdraw his offer to trade the dark-squared bishops with 13.♗d2N but Black can change plans accordingly and relocate his knight on the kingside: 13...g6! 14.♖fe1 ♘e6 15.c4 ♗c7 16.♖ad1 ♘g7=

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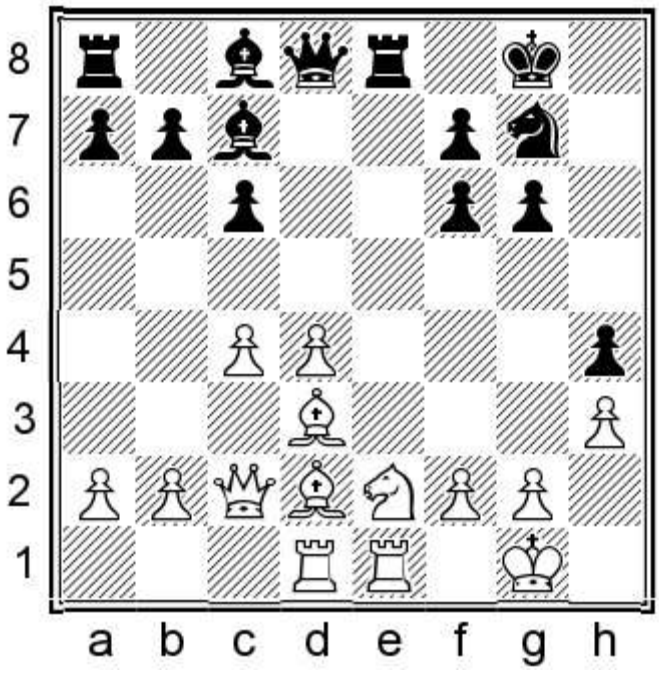

Position after: 16...♘g7=

Black's position is very flexible and he can proceed in various ways: ...♗f5, ...♗e6, ...♕d6, ...♘h5 are all possible. We will see this idea of bringing the knight to g7 frequently in the next subchapter. From g7 it can help Black create threats on the kingside (...♘h5 and ...♕d6) or it can support ...♗f5 to challenge White's d3-bishop.

B) 13.♖fe1N 13...♘e6! [Again, 13...♖xe2? 14.♕xe2 ♗xf4 15.♕e4 ♘e6 16.♕h7+ ♔f8 17.♖ad1± leads to a strong attack through the center for White, even though this time Black has gotten his knight to e6.] 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6. We've transposed to 12.♗xd6 ♕xd6 13.h3 ♘c7 14.♖fe1 ♘e6.

C) 13.♖ae1N

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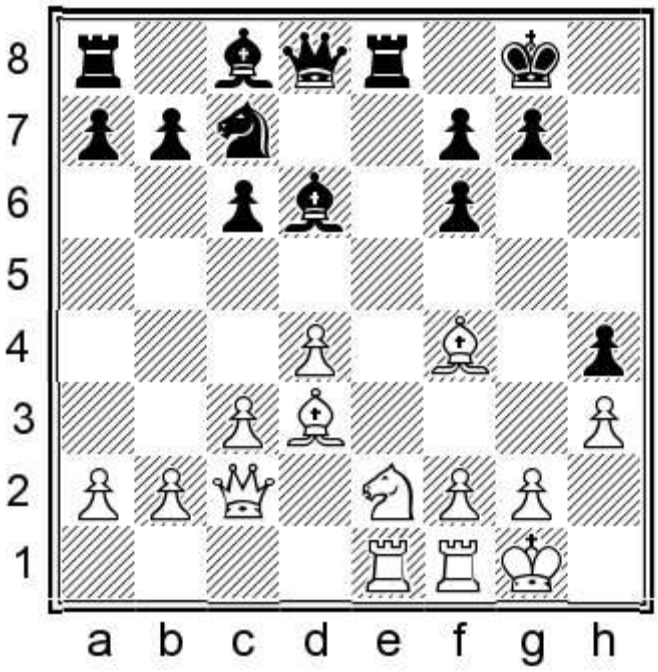
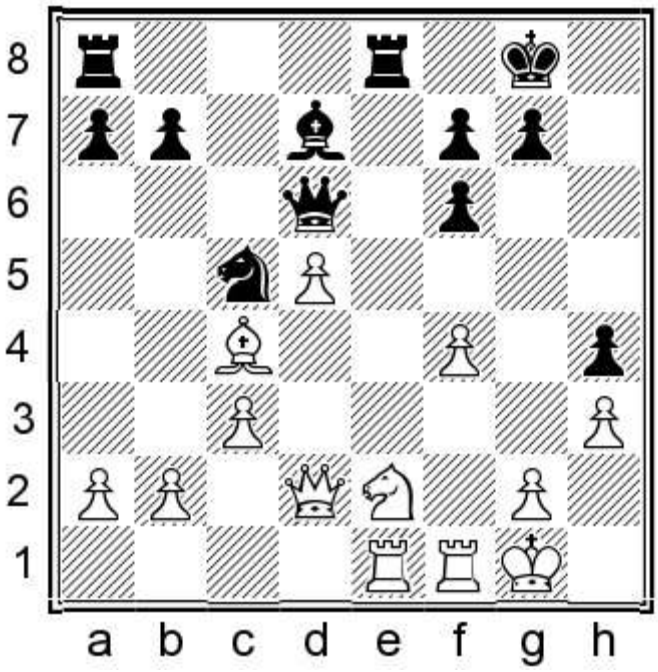


Position after: 13.♖ae1N

C1) In this case 13...♘e6 is possible: 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6 15.♕d2 ♗d7 16.f4!? c5! Black must react in the center. 17.d5 c4! 18.♗xc4 ♘c5⩲



Position after: 18...♘c5⩲

It seems to me that Black has good compensation for the pawn due to White's weaknesses on the kingside and the fact that the d5-pawn is not well protected.

C2) 13...♖xe2!? This is one of the rare positions where this move does not lose. Instead, it leads to a

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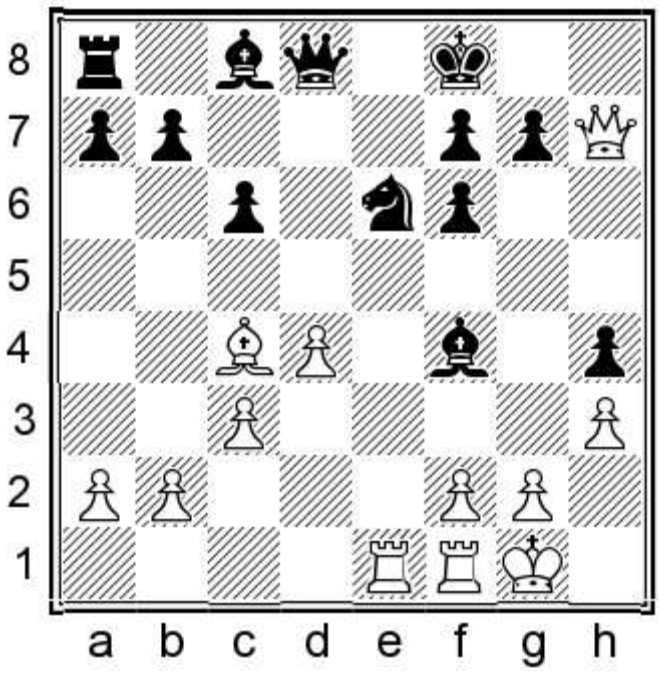
long and forcing line which eventually peters out to a draw. 14.♕xe2 ♗xf4 15.♕e4 ♘e6 16.♕h7+ ♔f8 17.♗c4!



Position after: 17.♗c4!

[17.♕h8+ is a logical follow-up, but Black is able to bring his king to safety and regroup: 17...♔e7 18.♕xg7 ♕f8 19.♕g4 ♕h6 20.♗f5 ♕g5∓ White's attack has vanished and Black has a better position.] 17...g5! 18.g3! White is able to open the f-file, but it is not enough to mate the black king: [18.♖e2 f5!= is an amazing resource for Black. The idea is to bring the queen to f6 to defend.] 18...hxg3 19.fxg3 ♗xg3 20.♕h8+ ♔e7 21.♕xf6+ ♔d6 22.♕xf7 ♗xe1 23.♖xe1 ♕f8 24.♗xe6 ♕xf7 25.♗xf7 ♗xh3=

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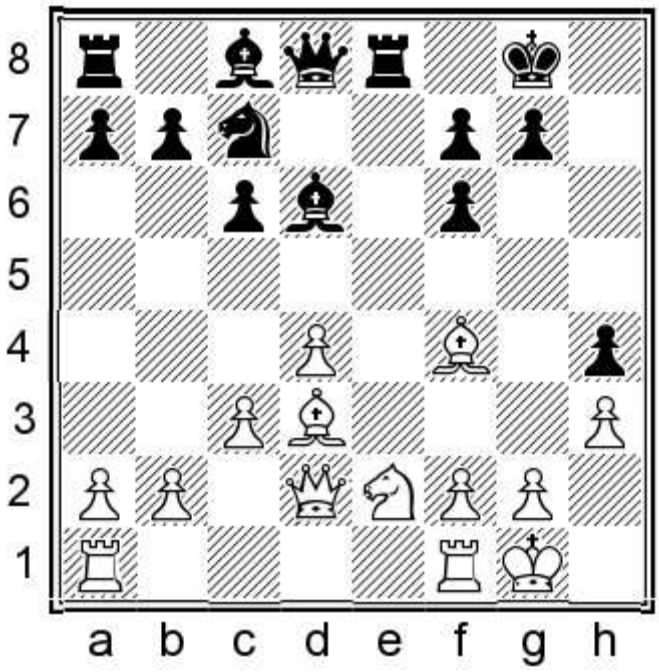


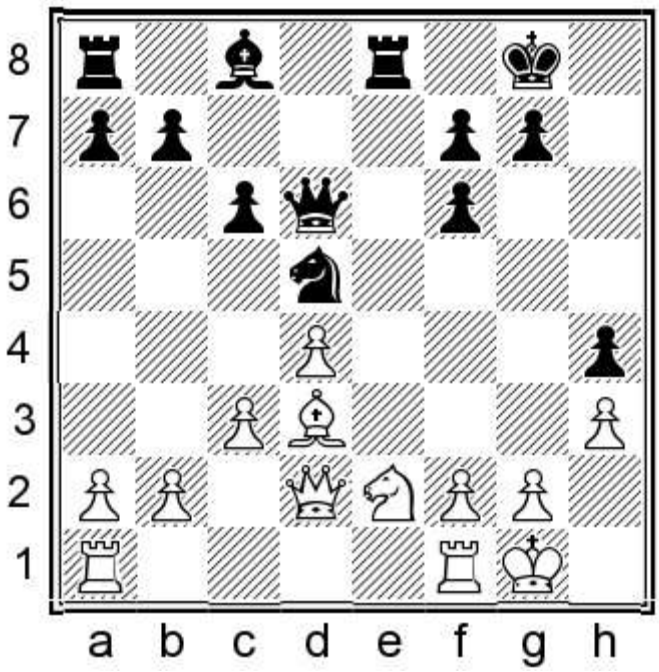
Position after: 13.♕d2!?N

13...♘d5!?

A) 13...♘e6?! 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6 15.f4! c5 16.♕e1!± White will pick up the h4-pawn and Black is worse.

B) 13...b6!? is an interesting alternative, with the idea of playing ...♗b7 and ...c5, but I prefer the forcing text move.

14.♗xd6 ♕xd6



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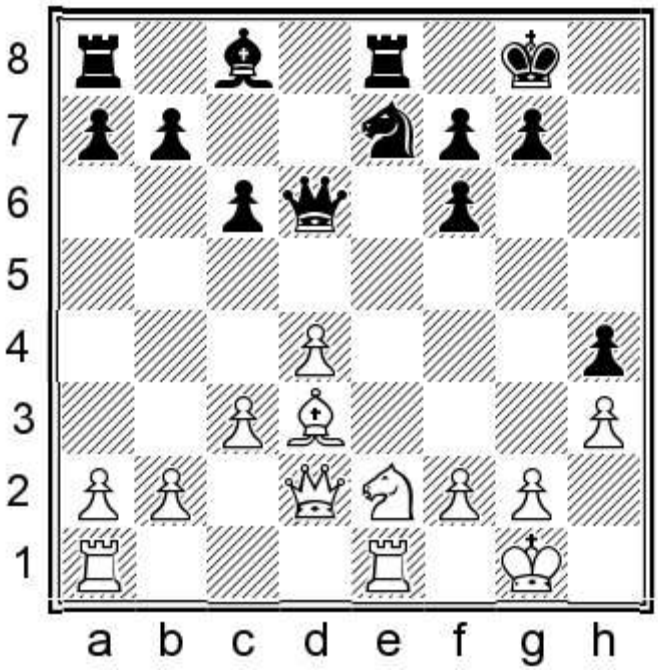
Position after: 14...♕xd6

The plan for Black is now to relocate the knight closer to the kingside and to play ...♗f5. The d3-bishop is White's strongest piece, so trading it will take the sting out of White's future plans.

15.♖fe1

15.c4 simply helps Black: 15...♘e7 16.♘c3 ♗f5=

15...♘e7!



Position after: 15...♘e7!

Black prepares ... ♗f5.

16.♖ad1

A) 16.♕f4 forces a queen trade, but Black is not worse at all in the resulting endgame: 16...♕xf4 17.♘xf4 ♔f8! 18.g3 hxg3 19.fxg3 ♖d8 20.♖e2 ♘d5=

B) 16.♘f4 is another attempt to prevent ...♗f5, but the knight is not well placed on f4 and could become a target. 16...♗d7 17.♖e2 ♘f5 18.♖ae1 ♖xe2 19.♖xe2 g6=

16...♗f5 17.♕f4!?

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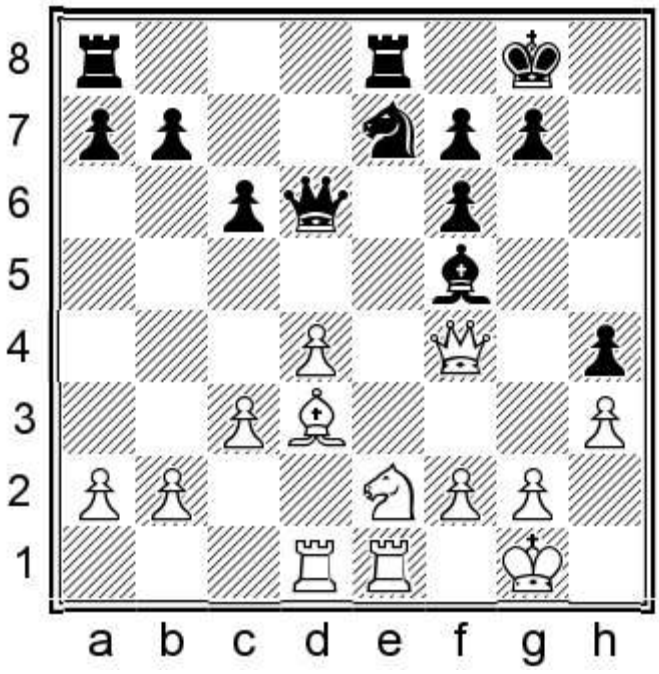

Position after: 17.♕f4!?

17...♕d5!

Black uses a small tactical detail to hold onto the dynamism of his position.

18.c4 ♕a5 19.b4 ♕a4!

White has not achieved anything by extending his position on the queenside.

20.♘c3

20.♗xf5 ♘xf5 21.♕xf5 ♖xe2!= is the reason Black is holding onto his piece.

20...♕xb4 21.♘e4 ♗xe4 22.♕xe4 g6 23.♕xh4 ♔g7=

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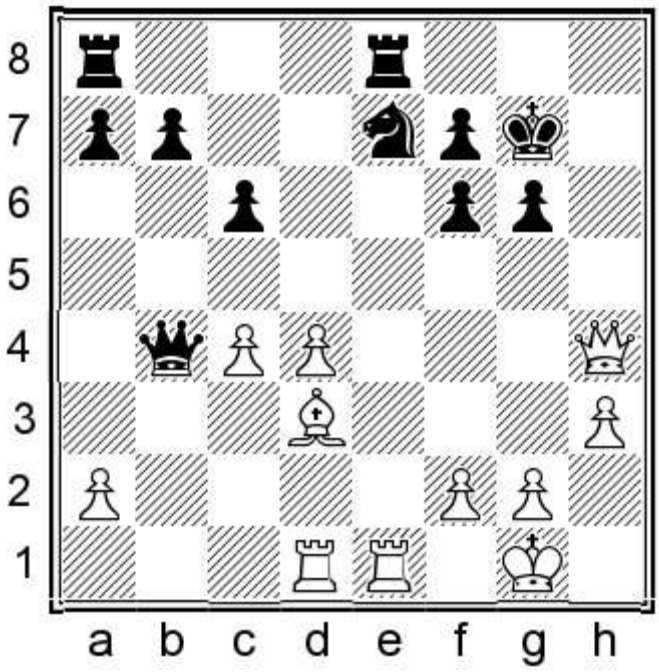
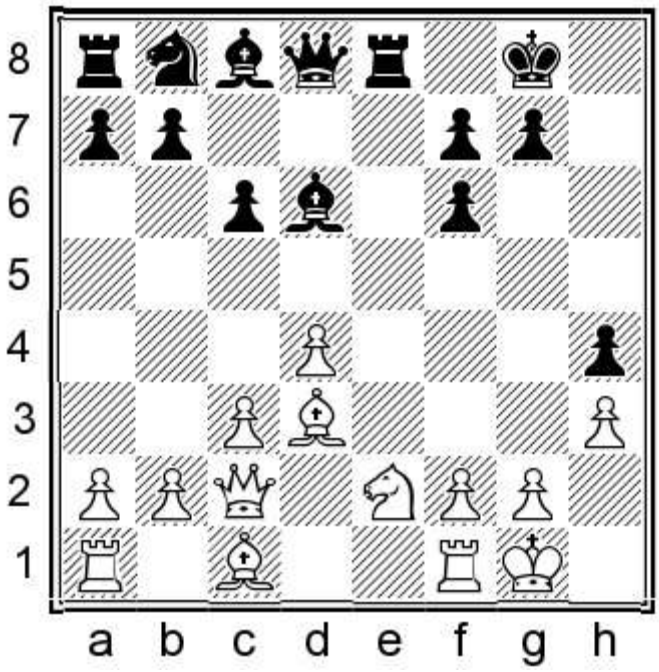


Position after: 23...♔g7=

Black has maintained a solid position and chances are equal.

c) 12.♗d2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 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



Position after: 11.h3

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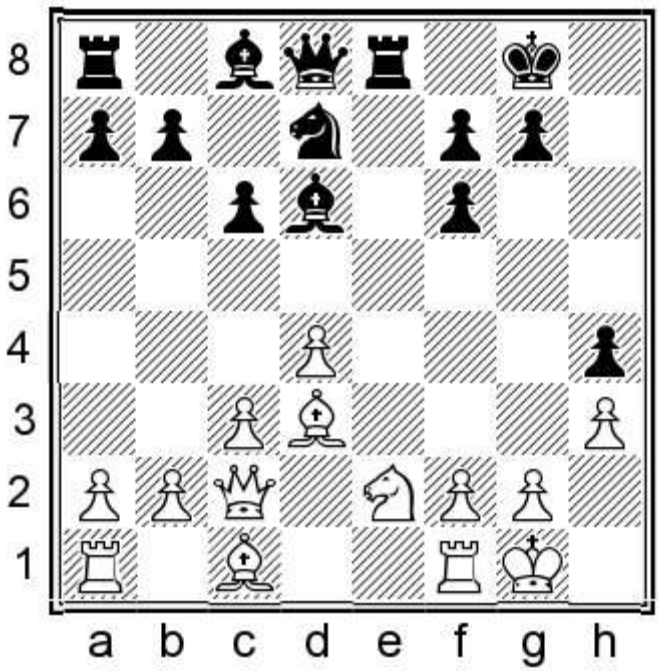
White ensures that Black will not play ...h3 himself and prepares to continue his development. Although the alternatives that we covered in the previous subchapter are not pointless, 11.h3 is the most logical move and I will dedicate two full subchapters to it. This one will deal primarily with 11...♘d7 12.♗d2, and the following one with 11...♘d7 12.♗e3. In both subchapters, I will cover some of the most complicated lines that you will find in this book. While I hope that you enjoy the in-depth analysis, I once again urge you to keep the general picture and strategic considerations in mind for two reasons. Firstly, because a deep understanding of the interconnected ideas that flow through Black's moves will help you find moves by yourself when your opponent surprises you or your recollection ends. Secondly, because the amount of detail here is just too much for you to remember the lines without a very strong idea of the common threads running through them.

11...♘d7



Position after: 11...♘d7

12.♗d2

With this move, White completes his development and connects his rooks. Although 12.♗d2 is not the most impressive-looking move you will see, if contains a lot of interesting ideas. The key difference between 12.♗d2 and 12.♗e3 is that the bishop does not occupy the e-file. Whereas with 12.♗e3, White solidifies the d4-pawn and advances ideas like c4, with 12.♗d2 White simply aims to develop his bishop and bring a rook to e1. White then has two main options: he can either try to clamp down on Black with a kingside expansion, starting with f4, or he can play in the center with a well-timed ♘f4. Either way, Black needs to remain flexible and develop his pieces with the aim of pressuring White on the kingside. The key motive that will be present throughout the rest of the chapter is White's weakness on the b8-h2 diagonal. Black can exploit this by playing ...♗c7 and, when appropriate, ...♕d6.

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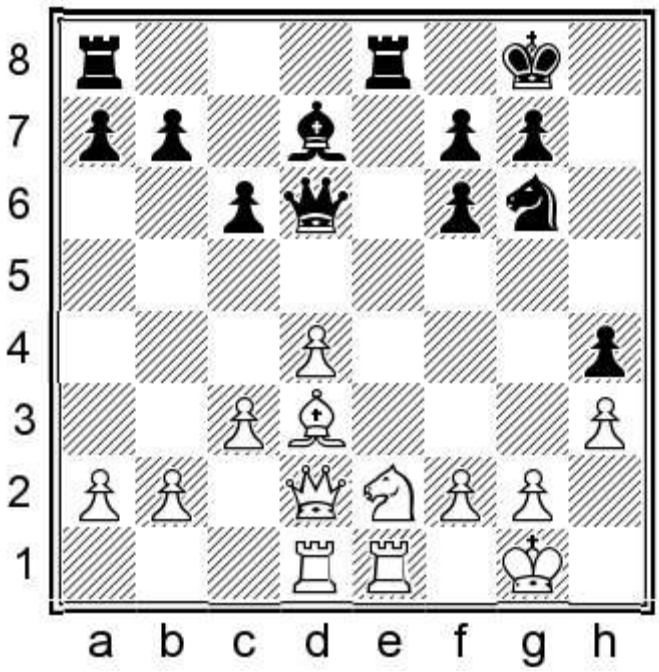
A) Before we proceed to the main line, let's briefly discuss White's alternatives. 12.c4 ♘f8 does not deserve independent consideration since the most likely continuation is 13.♗e3, transposing to 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.c4.

B) 12.♗f4 is still possible, but it offers White fewers interesting options than the 11.♗f4 line which we covered in the previous subchapter. 12...♘f8 13.♕d2 ♘g6 14.♗xd6 ♕xd6

B1) 15.♖fe1 ♗d7 16.♖ad1



Position after: 16.♖ad1

This was seen in Khodashenas, M (2452) – Annaberdiyev, B (2214) Mersin 2018 and gives me the opportunity to remind you of a critical idea, already seen in the coverage of 11.♗f4: doubling rooks with 16...♖e7!N.

B2) 15.♖ae1 ♗e6 16.c4 [16.♗xg6?! was a surprising move in Popov, I (2636) – Artemiev, V (2731) Moscow 2019, since Black already had some advantage after 16...fxg6 17.♘c1 g5∓.]

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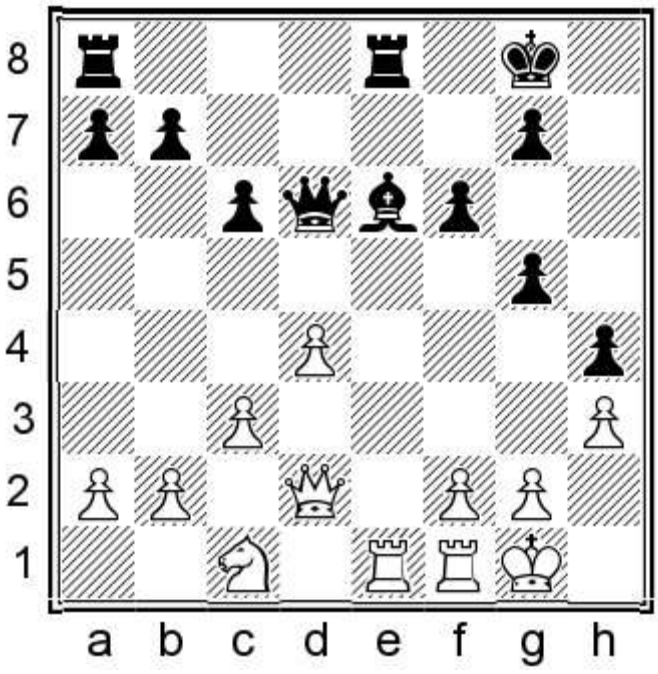
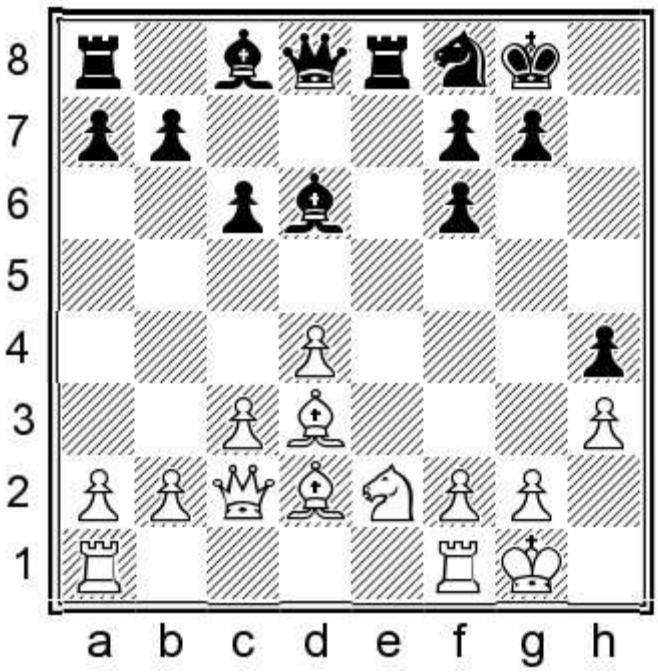


Position after: 17...g5∓

16...♖e7!= Again, doubling rooks on the e-file gives Black more options than any back rank arrangement.

12...♘f8



Position after: 12...♘f8

I will now analyze two moves for White: first the crafty (and less common) 13.♖fe1, and then the main

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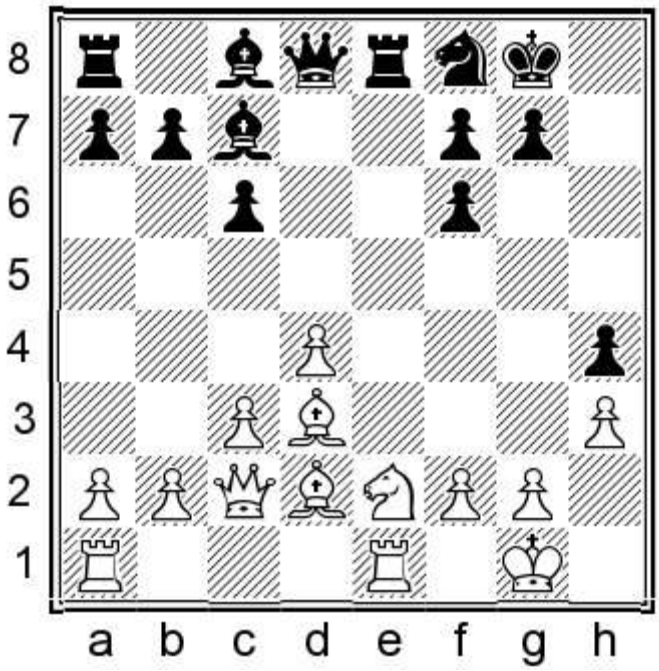
move 13.♖ae1.

13.♖ae1

13.♖fe1 With the text move, White intends to play in the center, and he prepares to play ♘f4.
13...♗c7!N



Position after: 13...♗c7!N

This is an important move. White has not made his intentions clear, so Black plays a useful move while waiting for White to do so. With 13...♗c7!N, Black introduces the idea of playing...♕d6. This means that ♘f4 can now be answered by ...♕d6, pinning the knight.

A) 14.♖ad1 White continues his development in the center, but he is giving Black time to organize his pieces. 14...♗e6

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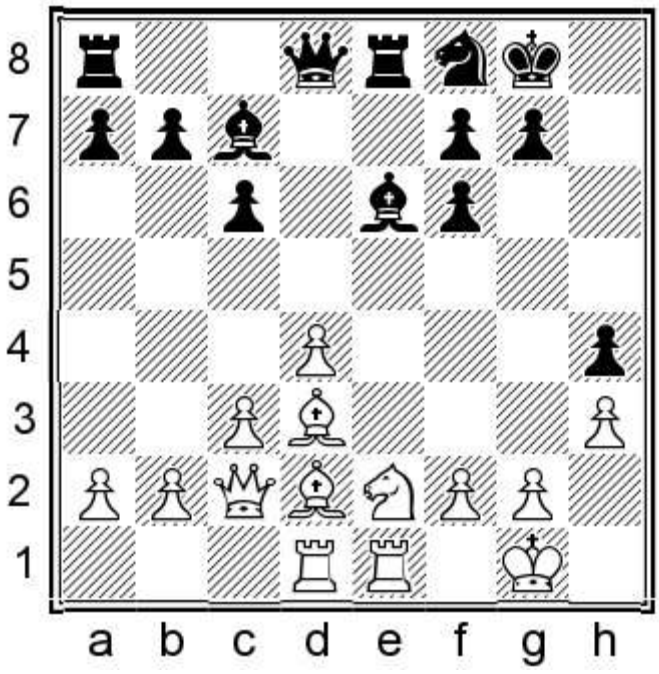
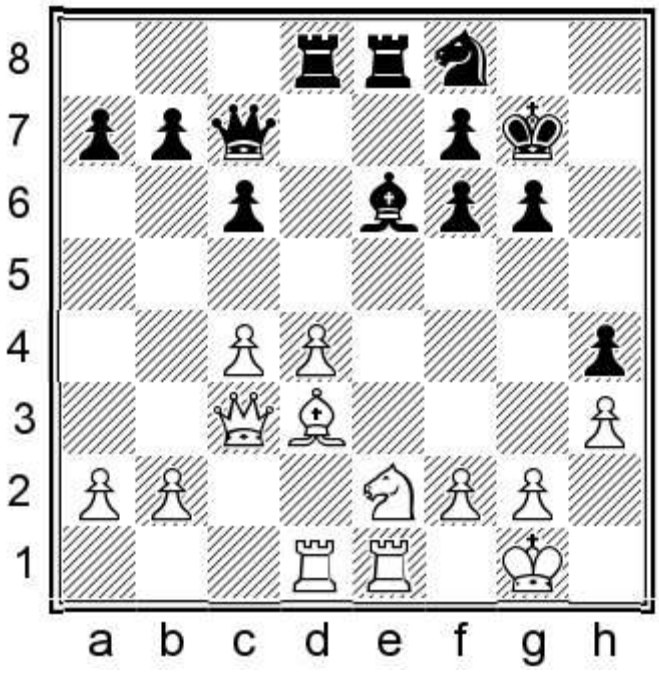


Position after: 14...♗e6

A1) As mentioned, 15.♘f4 can be answered with 15...♕d6!= and the knight is akwardly placed on f4.

A2) White can attempt to resolve the pressure on the b8-h2 diagonal by trading the dark-squared bishop with 15.♗f4, but trading pieces is not what White wants on principle since it gives Black more space to develop. 15...g6! 16.♗xc7 ♕xc7 17.c4 ♖ad8 18.♕c3 ♔g7=



Position after: 18...♔g7=

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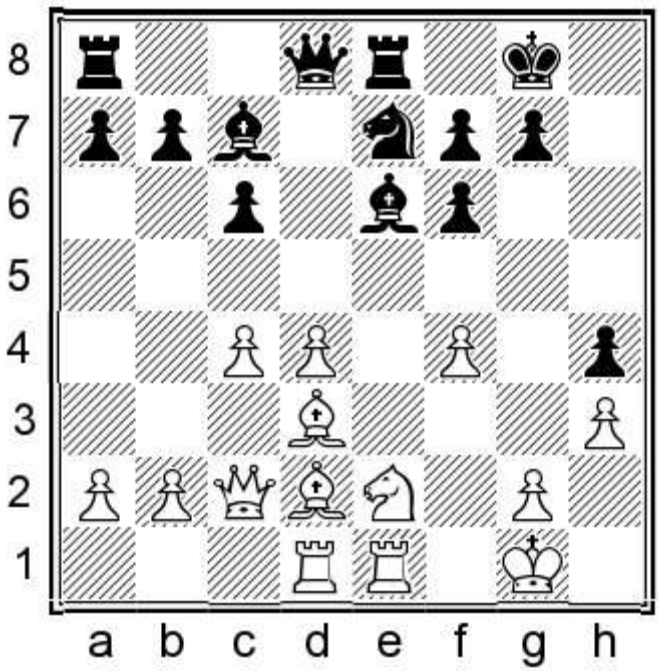
Black is very solid and White has no way to make progress without making substantial concessions (e.g. d5 would give up control of important squares in the center).

A3) 15.c4 This is White's most natural continuation. Now that his rooks are centralized, he attempts to gain space in the center. 15...♘g6! This move has been enabled by White's c4-push. Now, Black's threat of ...♕d6 can no longer be answered by ♗f4. Therefore, White needs to respond proactively with 16.f4! ♘e7! Black should play this (by now standard) regrouping move. The knight controls two critical squares from e7 (f5 and d5).



Position after: 16...♘e7!

Although White has more space, he risks being overextended: Black is extremely solid and White's kingside weaknesses may come back to hurt him. 17.f5 White advances further and forces Black to retreat his light-squared bishop. Even though White is moving forward, this does not mean that his position is improving. Black is ready to counter-attack and open the position as soon as the opportunity presents itself. [17.♗e3 allows Black to seize the initiative by detonating the center: 17...b5!

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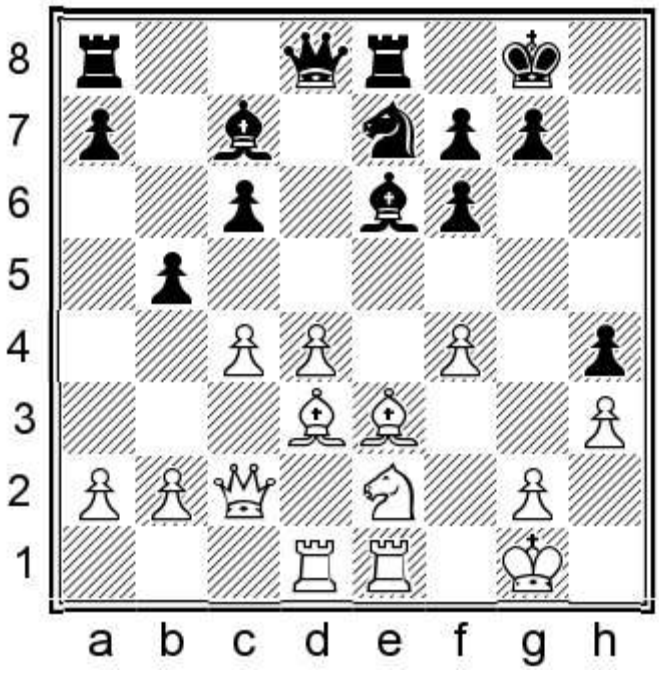
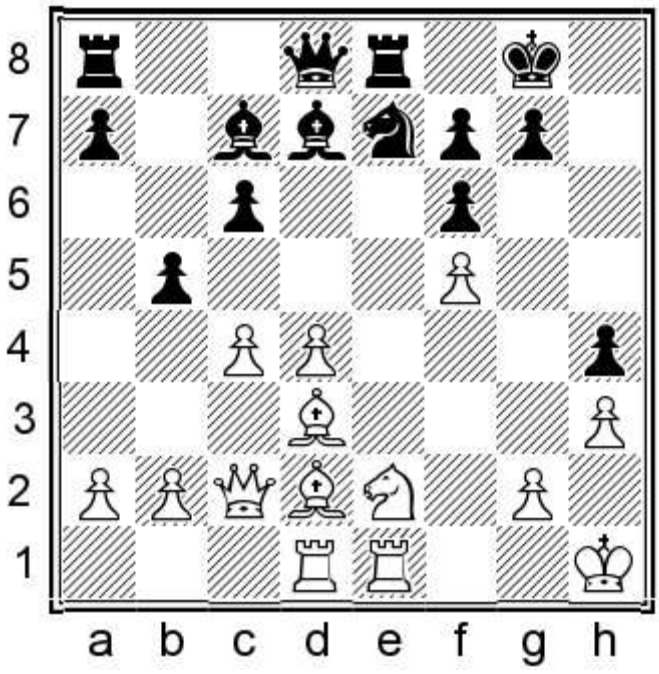


Position after: 17...b5!

The immediate target is the d5-square, but after 18.cxb5 ♘d5 19.♗f2 cxb5 20.♗xb5 ♗d7 21.♗c4 ♗c6∓ all of Black's pieces have been mobilized and he has excellent compensation. White's pieces, by contrast, are restrained by the weaknesses in his position. I think that this position would be more pleasant to play with Black in a practical game because White's defensive task seems challenging.] 17...♗d7 18.♔h1 [18.♘f4 is met by the incredible 18...♗c8!⇄, hitting the d4-pawn and forcing White to renounce his attack to protect it.] 18...b5!



Position after: 18...b5!

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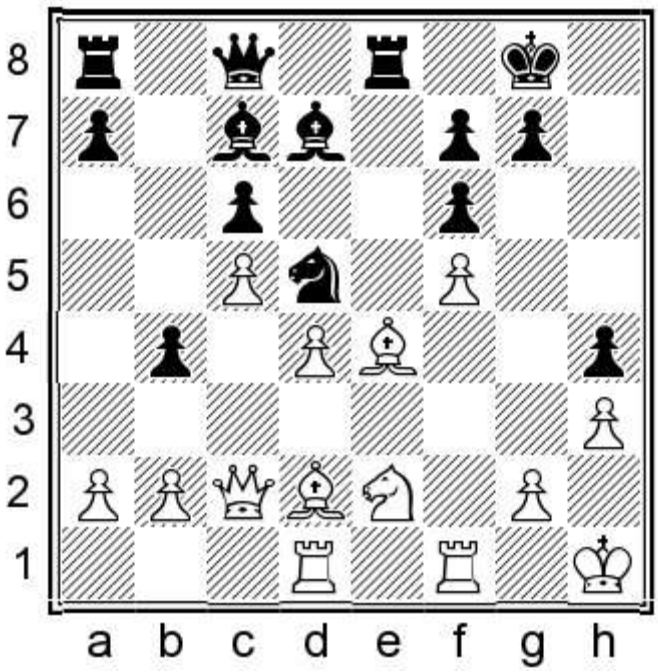
At last, Black fights back! The goal is to secure the d5-square for the knight and then progressively untangle Black's position. 19.c5 [19.b3 keeps the d5-square under control, but allows Black to open the b-file: 19...bxc4 20.bxc4 ♖b8 21.♘f4 ♗a5!∞] 19...♘d5 20.♗e4 ♕c8! [20...♖c8!? is also possible, but the text move seems more natural to me.] 21.♖f1 b4!⇄ Black is slowly gaining space on the kingside while White is not making much progress. We are already quite deep into this variation, but I will continue for a few moves to showcase a key idea for Black.



Position after: 21...b4!⇄

22.♘f4 ♗xf4 23.♗xf4 ♖xe4! Black sacrifices the exchange for positional compensation. The d5-knight rules the position and Black will have total control over the light squares. 24.♕xe4 ♗xf5 25.♕f3 ♗c2 26.♖de1 ♕f5≅

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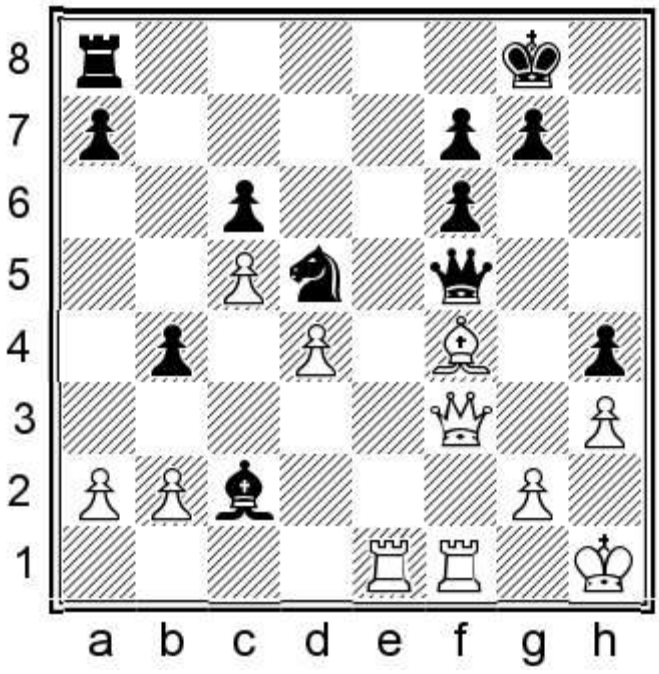
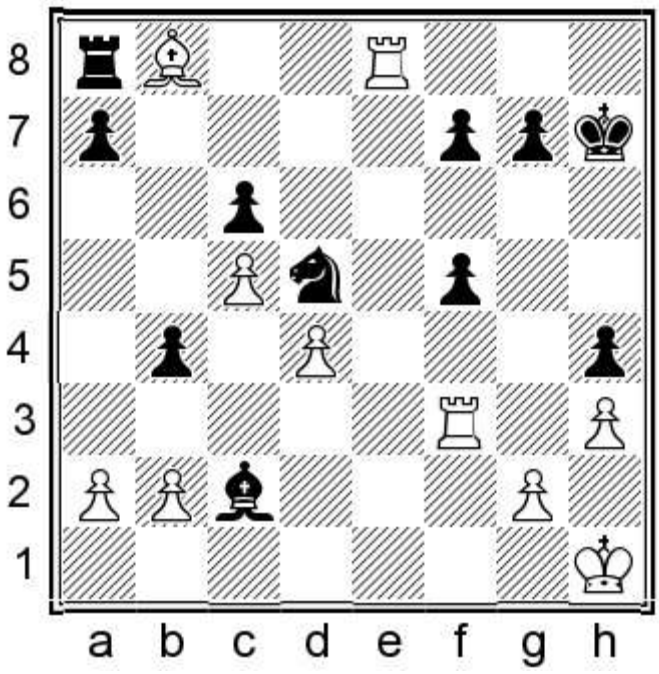


Position after: 26...♕f5⩱

Although the engines may initially suggest otherwise, I don't think that Black should be worried at all in this position. White has no real ideas to penetrate Black's position and Black has lots of improving moves that suggest themselves. This is the usual upshot of exchange sacrifices such as ...♖xe4. For instance: 27.♗b8!? [27.♖f2 a5 28.♕g4 ♕xg4 29.hxg4 ♗d3=] 27...♕xf3 28.♖e8+ ♔h7 29.♖xf3 f5!=



Position after: 29...f5!=

White has reached his maximum and now the momentum has shifted over to Black.

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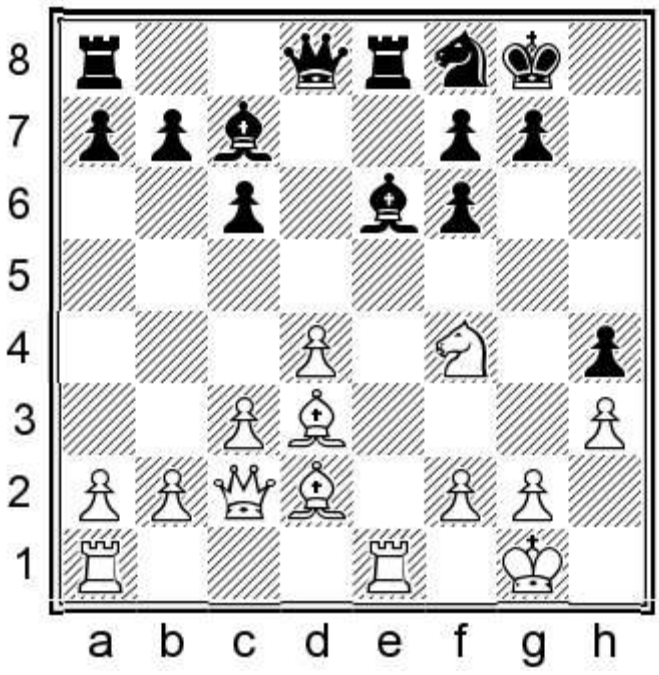
B) 14.♘f4 White frees the e-file and activates his knight. Although the move is natural and appears constructive, finding a follow-up is not simple. 14...♗e6



Position after: 14...♗e6

15.♗e3!? This slow move has the idea of ♕e2, bringing his queen to the kingside. Moreover, the bishop supports White's center and allows him to play c4 in some cases. [Black is not scared of 15.♘xe6? ♘xe6∓, since White now has to deal with ...♕d6; 15.♕d1 is an attempt to bring the queen to the kingside, but Black can prevent this with 15...g6!=] 15...♕d6 Black follows up on his idea and is now threatening ...g5. 16.c4 White prevents ...g5 by threatening to play c5. [16.♖ad1 allows Black to execute his idea, leaving White in hot water after 16...g5! 17.♘h5 ♗xh3!→] 16...♖e7!

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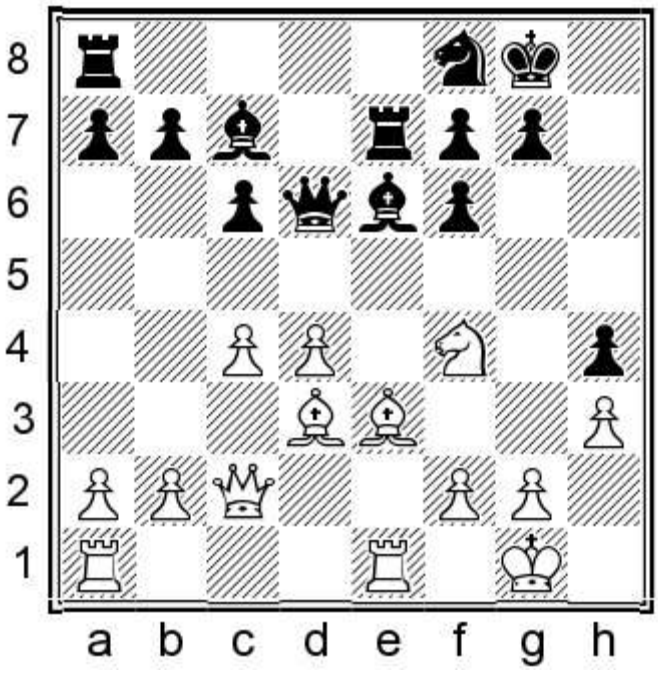
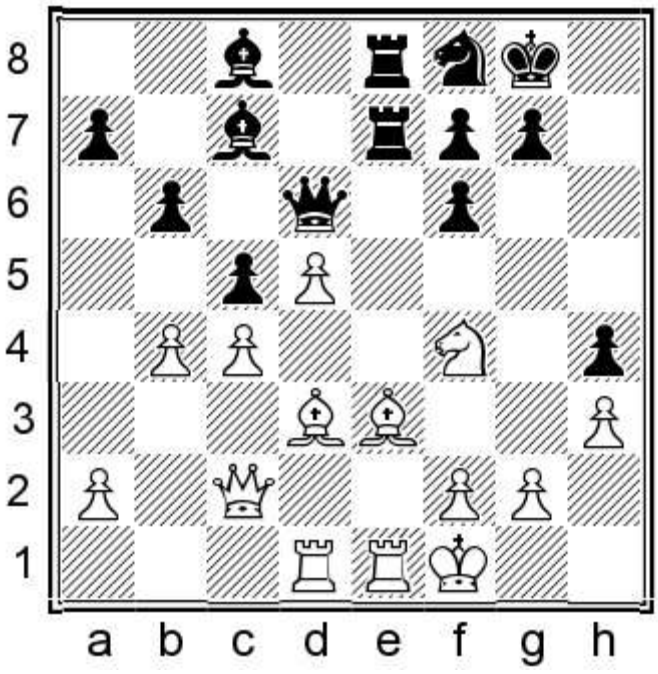


Position after: 16...♖e7!

As we have seen time and time again, Black's best plan is to double rooks on the e-file. This is no exception. White has a few options, but Black has the easier play. [16...♖ad8!? is also, as usual, possible but less precise.]

B1) 17.♖ad1 ♖ae8 18.♔f1 ♗c8 19.d5 c5 20.b4 b6∞



Position after: 20...b6∞

White's moves in many of these lines seem enigmatic but the computer is actually just telling us that

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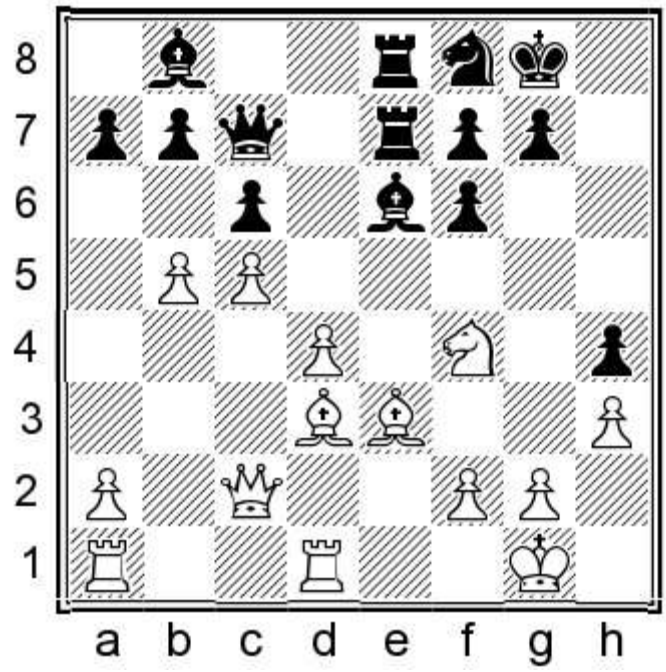
White has no concrete ways to generate play on the kingside and that he instead has to play very slowly. The position is roughly equal, with chances for both sides, but Black's position appeals more to me. His pieces are centralized and his king is safer. Of course, White has a strong pawn on d5, but before he can attempt to capitalise on it he will need to diffuse Black's initiative.

B2) Queenside pawn-pushes do not help White; Black just re-establishes the battery with ...♗b8 and ...♕c7, e.g. 17.c5 ♕d7 18.b4 ♖ae8 19.♖ed1 ♗b8! 20.b5 ♕c7∞.



Position after: 20...♕c7∞

B3) 17.♕e2 ♖ae8 18.c5 [18.♕f3 ♗b8! Freeing the c7 square for the queen, so as to maintain the pressure on White. 19.c5 ♕c7 20.♔f1 g6!= Black is ready to play ...f5 or ...♘h7, and his next moves will flow from the position whereas White faces a difficult task untangling himself.] 18...♕d8! 19.♘xe6 ♘xe6 20.♕h5 g6 21.♕xh4 ♘f4!⩱

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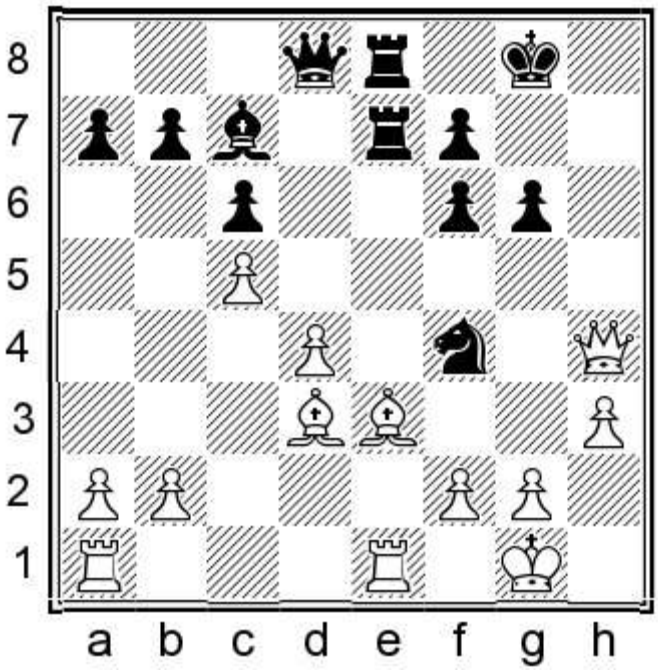
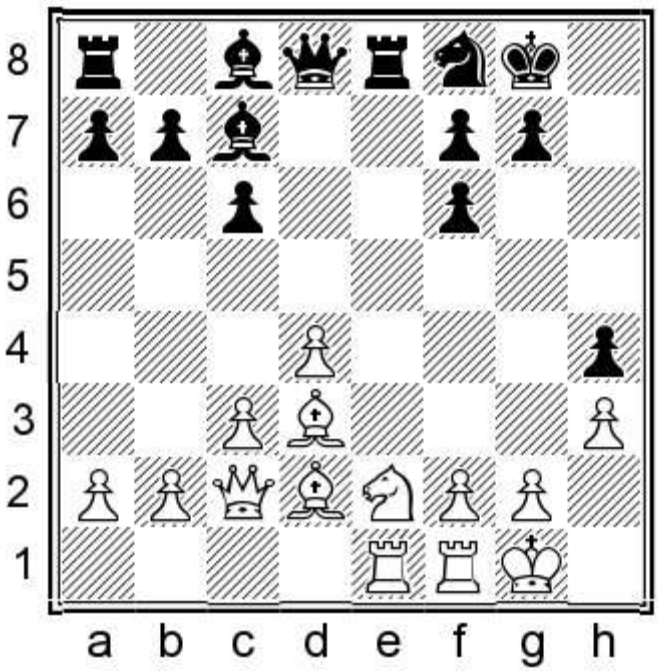


Position after: 21...♘f4!∞

Black has great compensation for the pawn: all his pieces are ideally placed and the d4-pawn is weak.

13...♗c7!



Position after: 13...♗c7!

14.f4!?N

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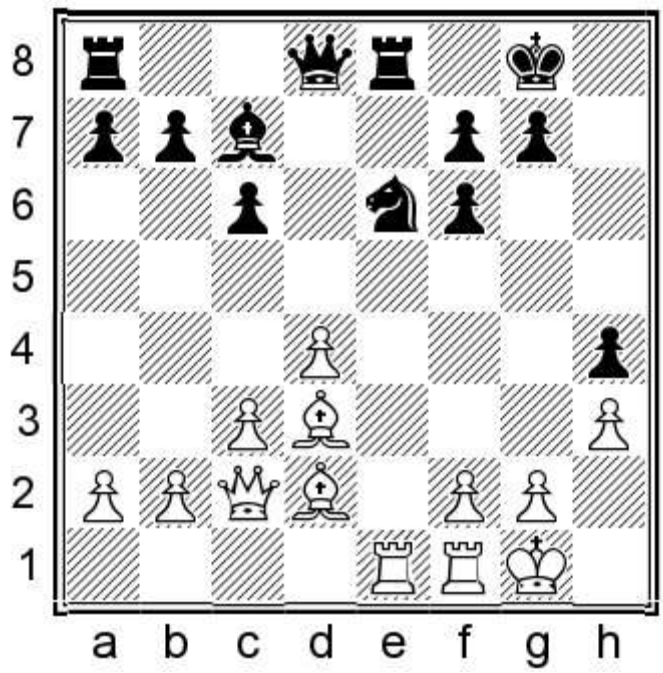
This novelty makes sense and should be considered. White is looking to expand on the kingside and shut down Black's active plans with f5 followed by ♗f4.

A) 14.c4N is rather inconsistent, as White's rooks are not ideally placed to play in the center. Black can improve his position by relocating his knight to g7: 14...♘e6! 15.c5 g6 16.b4 ♘g7!=

B) 14.♘f4 This is a logical continuation. Just like after 13.♖fe1 ♗c7 14.♘f4, Black can continue with 14...♗e6 15.♘xe6 [15.♗e3 ♕d6 16.c4 is less logical, since White is shifting from playing on the kingside to playing in the center. 16...♖ad8 17.c5 ♕d7 18.♖d1 ♗b8!= The queen will come to c7 and the pressure will continue.] 15...♘xe6



Position after: 15...♘xe6

B1) 16.♕d1 was tried in Mazur, S (2441) – Naderi, M (2178) Mashhad 2019, and White eventually won. However, Black's play can be improved: 16...g6!N preventing White's idea to play ♕h5 and gaining control over the light squares on the kingside. 17.♕g4 ♕d6 18.f4 ♔g7⇄

B2) 16.f4N is also possible, but it does not solve White's issues on the b8-h2 diagonal in the long run: 16...♕d6 17.♗e3 g6 18.♕f2

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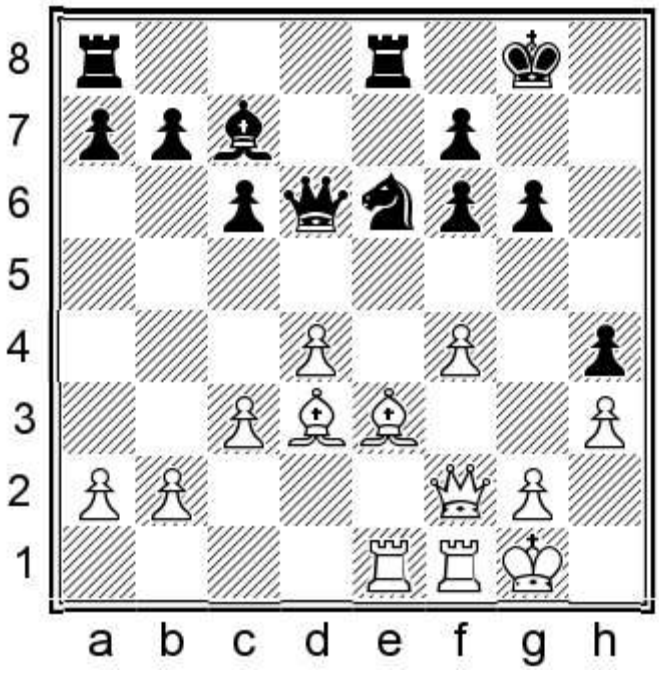
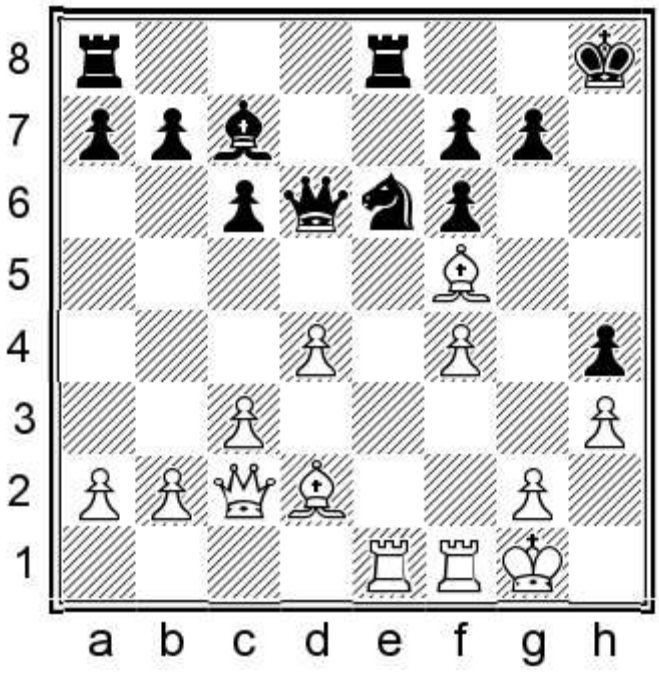


Position after: 18.♕f2

18...c5! Black is ready to open the center to generate play on the dark squares. [18...g5!? is also possible and leads to sharp play.] 19.d5 ♕xd5 20.♗b5 ♖ed8 21.♕xh4 f5 22.b3 ♖d6!= Black will follow up with ...♗d8-f6, and the position is equal.

B3) 16.♗h7+ ♔h8 17.♗f5 ♕d6 18.f4∞ This position was reached in Ostrovskiy, A (2414) – Antal, G (2534) Charlotte 2018.



Position after: 18.f4∞

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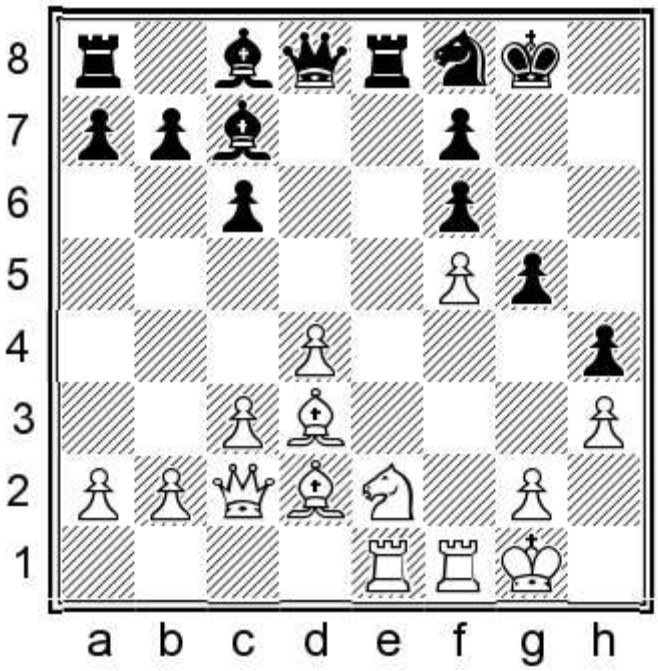
We can improve on Black's play with the powerful 18...c5!N. Black opens the center to exploit White's weakness on the dark squares. 19.♕d1 [The following line clearly demonstrates how strong Black's initiative can become: 19.dxc5 ♘xc5 20.♗e3 ♗b6 21.♕f2 g6 22.♗c2 ♖xe3! 23.♖xe3 ♔g7∓ Black's many threats on the dark squares give him more than enough compensation for the exchange.] 19...♔g8! Anticipating ♕h5. 20.d5 ♕xd5 21.♕h5 g6 22.♗xg6 ♕xh5 23.♗xh5 ♖ad8= As it usually happens when we analyze with computers, the game eventually boils down to an equal endgame. Nevertheless, many of the moves that we have played to reach this position are far from trivial in practice and I believe that Black has excellent chances.

14...g6!

This is a critical move. The idea will become obvious after White's next move:

15.f5 g5!



Position after: 15...g5!

Black secures his access to the b8-h2 diagonal by controlling the f4-square. Both sides are well mobilised all over the board at a very early stage, and this can lead to great complications.

16.g3!?

Sacrificing a pawn to open the kingside.

A) 16.♖f3 is too slow to cause any real harm, but Black must quickly seek counterplay in the center. 16...♕d6 17.g3 c5! 18.dxc5 ♕xc5+ 19.♘d4 ♖xe1+ 20.♗xe1 hxg3 21.♗xg3 ♗d7=

B) 16.♕d1 c5! Other moves are possible, but the text move is in sync with Black's core idea in this

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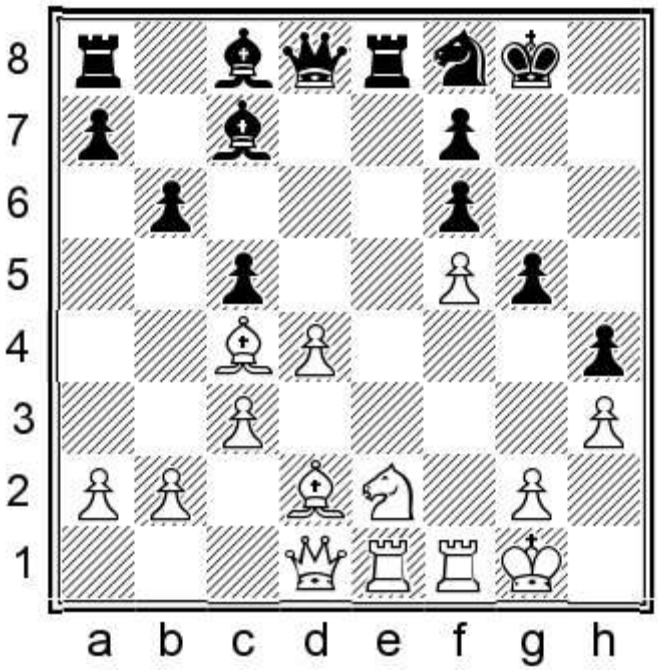
position: to open diagonals towards the white king and create counterplay in the center. 17.♗c4!? [17.♘f4 is possible, but Black can defend with 17...♖xe1 18.♖xe1 gxf4 19.♕g4+ ♘g6 20.♕h5 ♘e7∞ and accurate play should lead to a draw.] 17...b6!



Position after: 17...b6!

Black opens more diagonals towards the white king and prepares to bring the light-squared bishop into the game. 18.dxc5 [Again, 18.♘f4 is possible but it does not give White more than a draw: 18...♖xe1 19.♖xe1 ♗xf4 20.♕h5 ♕c7 21.♖e8 ♔g7 22.♗xf4 gxf4 23.♕g4+ ♘g6 24.♕h5 ♘f8=] 18...bxc5 19.♘f4!? There is not much space for human comments since every move in such lines is simply a computer creation. [The brilliant 19.♘d4!? is answered by the even-more-brilliant 19...♗a6!! and the position remains chaotic after 20.♗xa6 cxd4 21.♗c4 ♕d6∞.] 19...♖xe1 20.♖xe1 ♗xf4 21.♕h5 ♗e6!! 22.fxe6 ♕xd2 23.♕xf7+ ♔h8 24.♕xf6+ ♔h7 25.♖e4 ♕c1+ 26.♗f1 ♗e3+ 27.♔h1 ♗f4=

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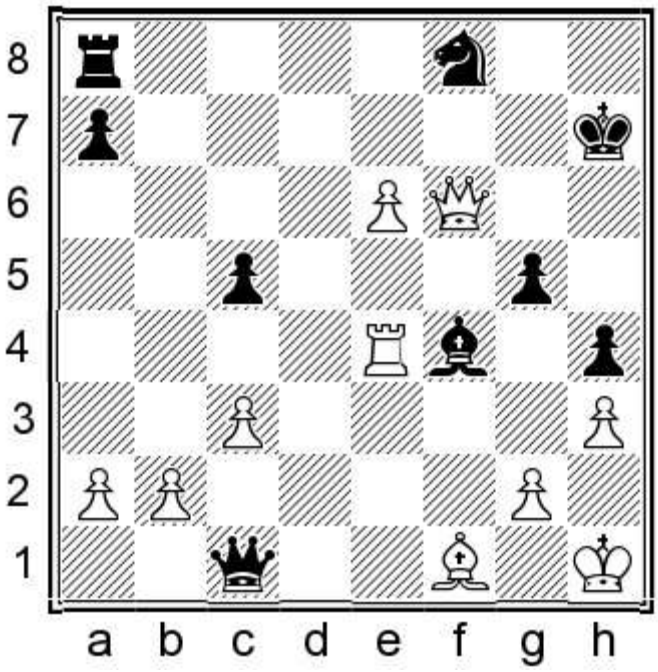
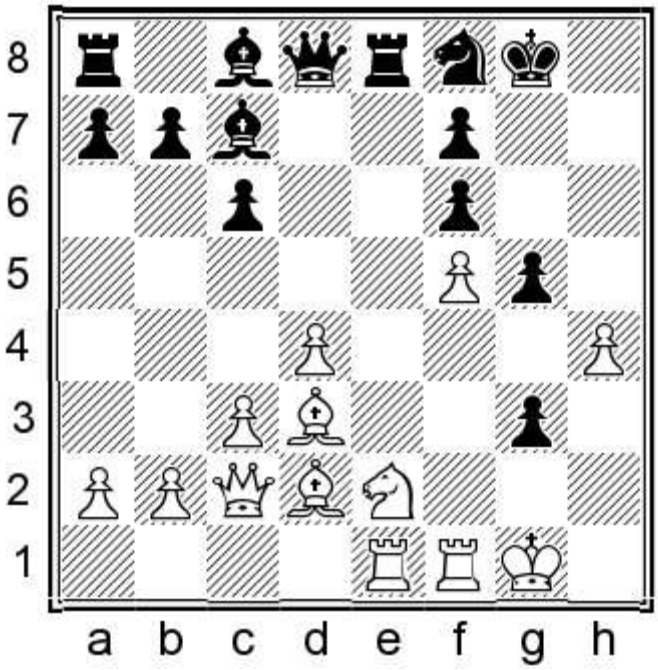


Position after: 27...♗f4=

Those who regularly work on openings with computers already knew that this line would end with a repetition!

16...hxg3 17.h4!



Position after: 17.h4!

17...c5!

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Once again, Black prioritizes his counterplay in the center over anything that is happening on the kingside. Needless to say, the position is extremely unclear and any result would be possible in a human game.

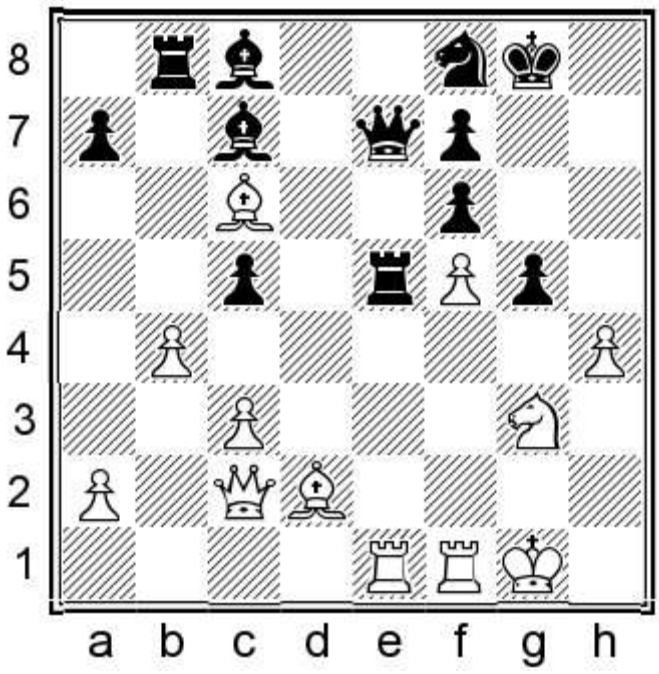
18.dxc5

18.♗b5 ♗d7 19.♗xd7 ♕xd7 20.hxg5 ♘h7∞

18...b6! 19.♗b5

19.♗e4? loses to the exotic 19...♖xe4! 20.♕xe4 ♕xd2 21.♕xa8 gxh4–+.

19...♖e5 20.♘xg3 ♕e7 21.b4 bxc5 22.♗c6 ♖b8∞



Position after: 22...♖b8∞

The position is extremely messy, and we are very far away from anything that has already been played.

Besides entertaining you with some flashy lines, the goal was to show you “proof” that Black is able to withstand even the craziest engine recommendations with accurate play.

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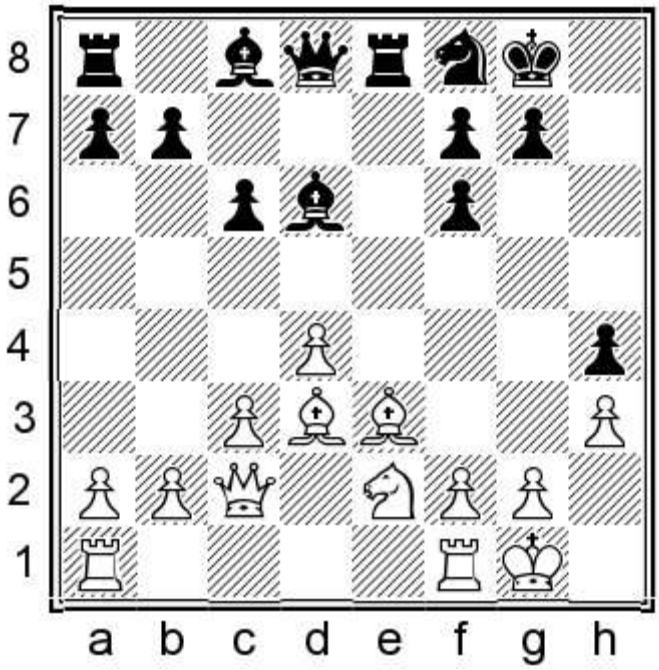
d) 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 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.♗e3 ♘f8



Position after: 12...♘f8

If you have been reading this book in order, you have made it to the very last variation of the open Caro–Kann. We began by examining rather simple variations, and we have worked our way to this position, which marks the beginning of a fascinating line. With 12.♗e3, White does not place his hopes on an initiative on the open e-file and instead chooses to slowly build up his position and reinforce the center. c4, followed by an expansion on the queenside and/or in the center, is White's central idea as he seeks to make use of his queenside majority and activate his own pieces. Black will respond with a set of ideas (albeit slightly tweaked) that should now be familiar to you.

13.♖fe1

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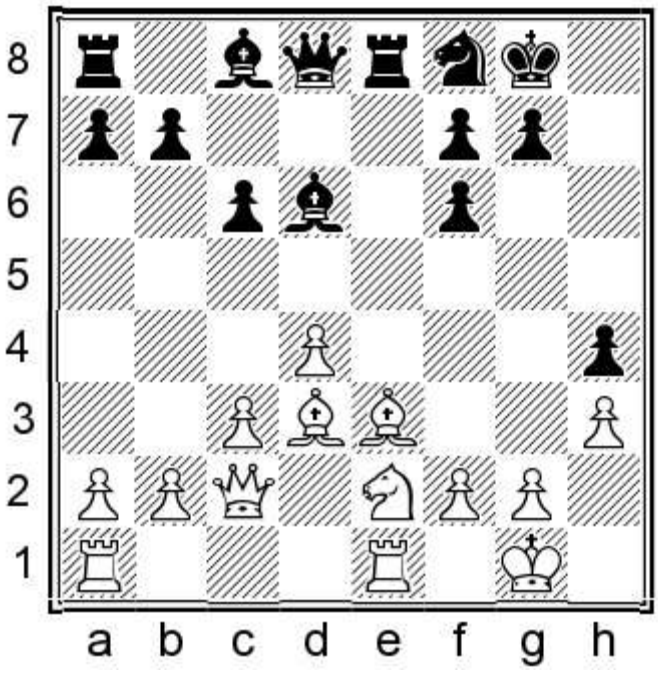
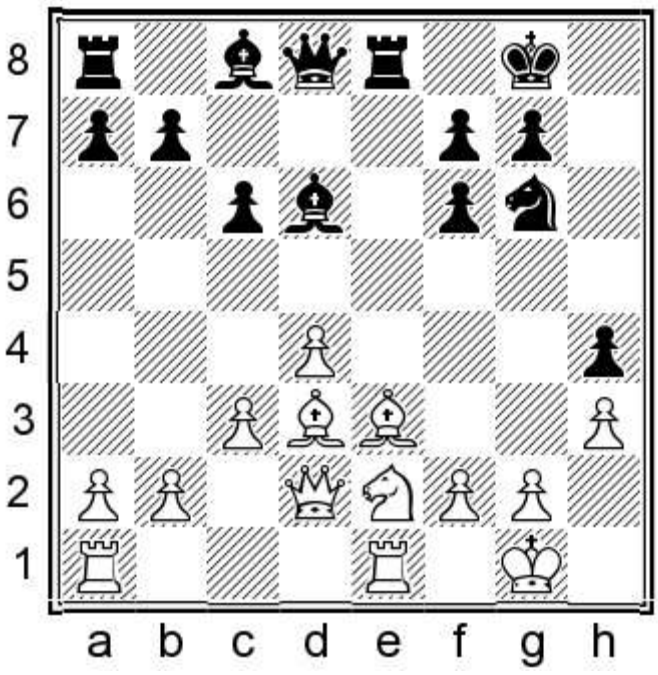


Position after: 13.♖fe1

Although 13.♖ad1 and 13.c4 are White's most common continuations, the text move also deserves a section by itself. It is crucial that you recognize the individual character of each move since even the slightest difference can be important.

A) 13.♘f4 ♗c7 does not deserve independent consideration since White has nothing better than 14.♖fe1 which transposes to 13.♖fe1 ♗c7 14.♘f4.

B) 13.♕d2 prepares ♗f4, but Black can simply play 13...♘g6 and after 14.♖fe1



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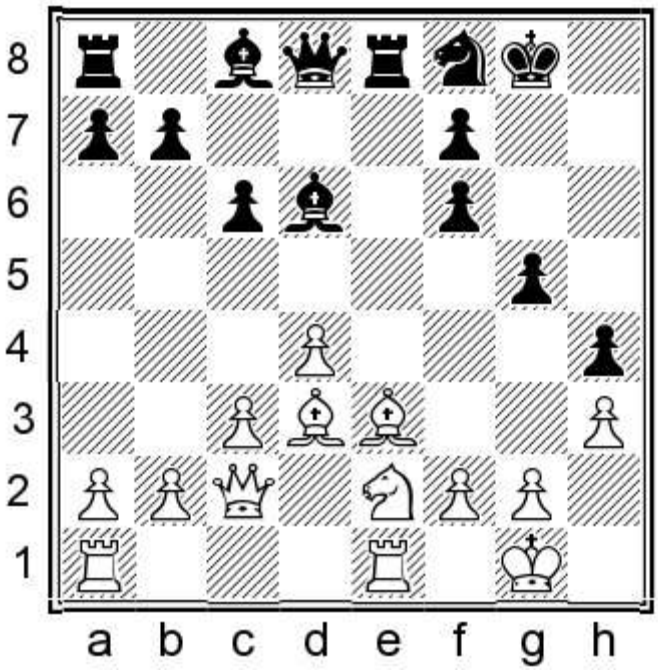
Position after: 14.♖fe1

I would improve on Popov, I (2608) – Gaifullin, A (2448) Yaroslavl 2018 by playing 14...♘e7!N intending ...♗f5.

C) 13.♖ae1N does not align well with White's previous move (♗e3) since f4 is not an option. Black can simply continue with 13...♗c7! 14.♘f4 ♕d6 15.c4 ♗b8!↑, vacating the c7-square for the queen and maintaining pressure on White's position.

13...♗c7!?N

This is the natural follow-up; Black prepares to meet ♘f4 with ...♕d6 and is ready to continue his development with ...♗e6. But there also exists an extra option, courtesy of White not really threatening anything in the center. That possibility is 13...g5!?



Position after: 13...g5!?

Even before playing ...♗c7, Black can initiate his usual plan in this way, ruling out both ♗f4 and ♘f4. Now, White needs to take immediate action to defend against Black's mating attack.

A) 14.♕d2?!N is not good enough. After 14...♗c7 15.f4 ♕d6!∓ White's position is cramped and he finds it difficult to activate his pieces.

B) 14.c4 is a better try but it does not eliminate Black's idea completely: 14...♗c7 15.c5

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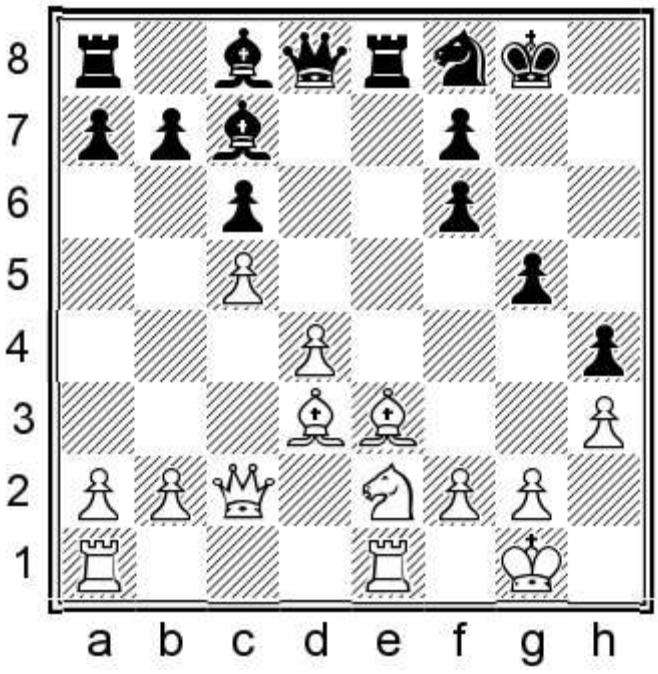
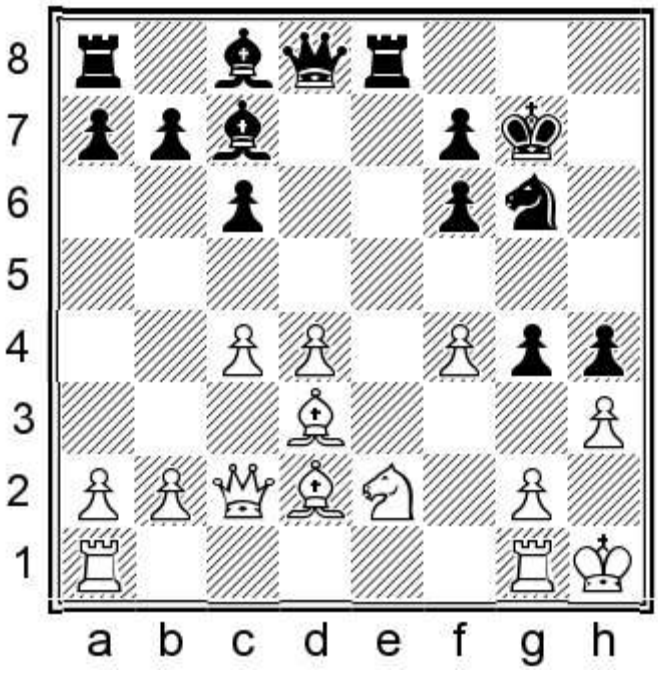


Position after: 15.c5

15...♗e6N [15...♗b8!? was played in Vignesh, N (2459) – Vaibhav, S (2599) Xingtai 2019, but the text move seems more natural, to establish control over the important d5-square as a matter of priority.] 16.♘c3 ♔g7 17.♖ad1 Now, Black is ready for 17...♗b8!= with a great game.

C) 14.♗d2!?N This is White's best move. The idea is to play f4 on the next move, and the bishop is now better placed on d2. 14...♗c7 15.c4 [15.f4 leads to a complex and forcing line, ending in perpetual check: 15...♘e6! 16.fxg5 fxg5 17.♖f1 ♕d6 18.♖f3 ♕h2+ 19.♔f2 g4! 20.hxg4 ♘xd4 21.♘xd4 ♗xg4 22.♖g1 ♗g3+ 23.♔f1 h3 24.♗f5 hxg2+ 25.♖xg2 ♕h1+=] 15...♔g7 16.f4 ♘g6 17.♔h1 g4! 18.♖g1!∞



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Position after: 18.♖g1!∞

We have reached an incredibly complex middlegame position. I am sure that a deeper analysis would produce fascinating results, but I will leave that up to the reader. For now, let's return to 13...♗c7.

14.♘f4

14.♖ad1 is too slow and Black can now play 14...g5!= as in Musyuk, L (2311) – Silva, P (1960) Bratislava 2019, with an excellent position.

14...♕d6

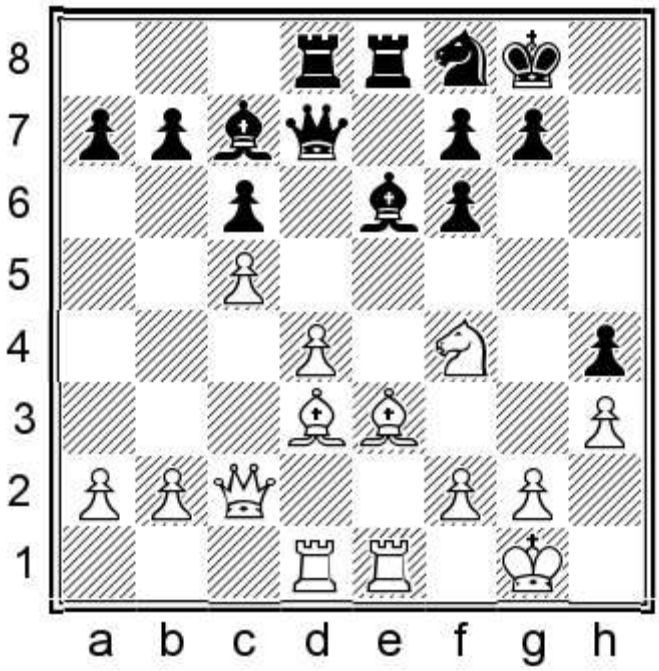
14...g6!? also warrants consideration, but I prefer the more direct text move.

15.c4 ♗e6 16.♖ad1 ♖ad8

Just this once, 16...♖e7?! is imprecise. White can get an advantage with 17.c5 ♕d7 18.♘xe6 ♘xe6 19.♗c4±.

17.c5 ♕d7

White has managed to force Black's queen out of the b8-h2 diagonal, but not for long.



Position after: 17...♕d7

Black will now play ...♗b8 and ...♕c7. If he is left to play those two moves unchallenged, he will have a great position and White's positional woes will resurface as ...g5 will be an immediate threat. Instead, White should play for d5, breaking open the center.

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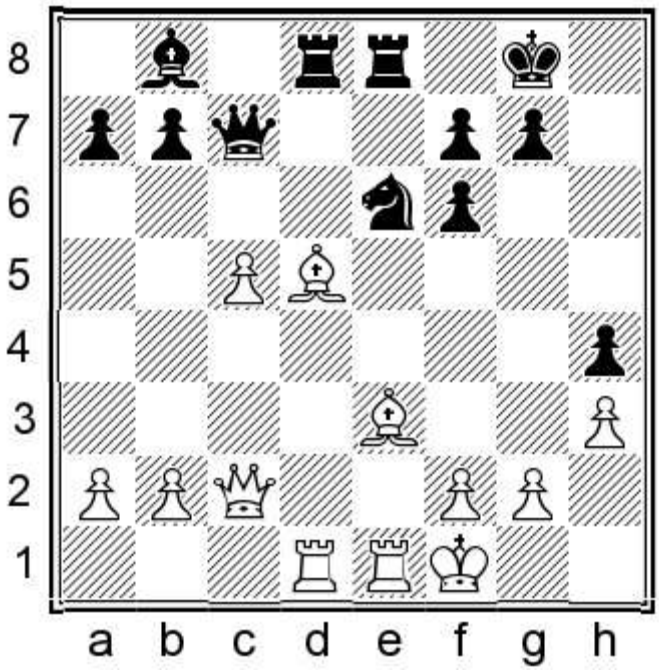
18.a4!?

This is White's best try, and it comes with a very clever idea, which is best illustrated after 18...♗b8. White wants to play d5 since ...cxd5 runs into ♗b5!

A) 18.b4 is simply too slow and does not pose problems to Black: 18...♗b8 19.b5 ♕c7=

B) 18.♘xe6 is a logical continuation: White weakens Black's grip on the d5-square and takes control of the light squares. Nevertheless, Black's threats on the dark squares have not disappeared. 18...♘xe6 19.♗c4 ♗b8! 20.d5 cxd5 21.♗xd5 ♕c7 22.♔f1



Position after: 22.♔f1

Black is now ready to initiate some tactics: 22...♖xd5! 23.♖xd5 ♕h2♒ White's exposed king gives Black enough compensation for the exchange. This line shows that, in spite of all the other positional considerations, Black can create serious problems for White by sticking to his plan of ...♗b8 and ...♕c7.

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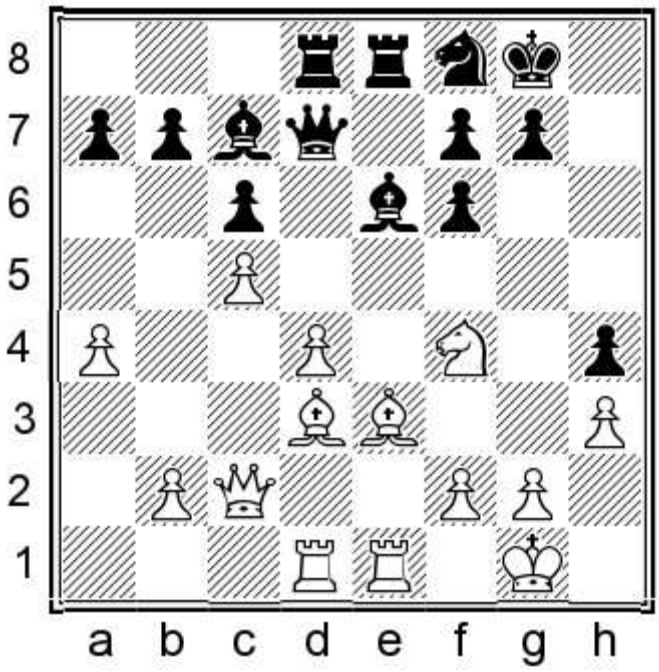

Position after: 18.a4!?

18...♗xf4!

Black changes plans and eliminates White's knight to prevent d5.

A) Black's most logical continuation, 18...♗b8, fails to 19.d5! ♗xd5 20.♘xd5 cxd5 21.♗b5± since White wins the exchange.

B) 18...a6 is a natural response, but now White's queenside advance is much stronger since b6 will be possible, completely eliminating the idea of ...♕c7. 19.b4 ♗b8 20.b5 axb5 21.axb5± Now ...♕c7 can be met by b6 and so White has an edge.

19.♗xf4 ♘g6 20.♗d6 ♘e7! 21.b4 g6 22.b5 ♔g7∞

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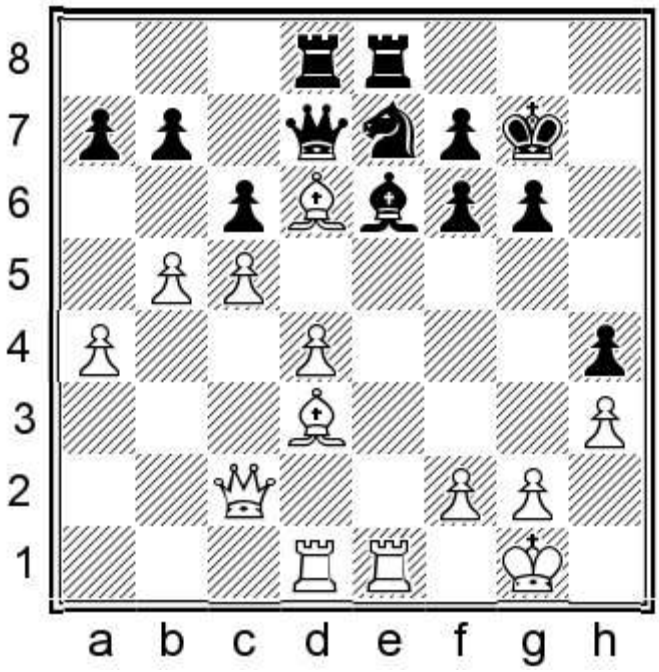
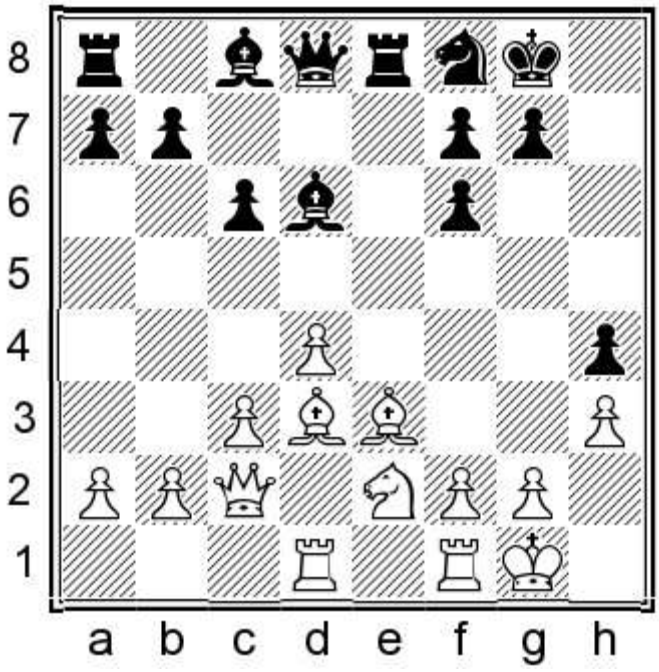


Position after: 22...♔g7∞

Black has given up the bishop pair but he has firm control over the d5-square and can now consider active options such as ...♘f5 and ...♗f5. It seems very hard for White to make progress and I like the solidity of Black's position.

e) 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.♖ad1

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 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.♗e3 ♘f8 13.♖ad1



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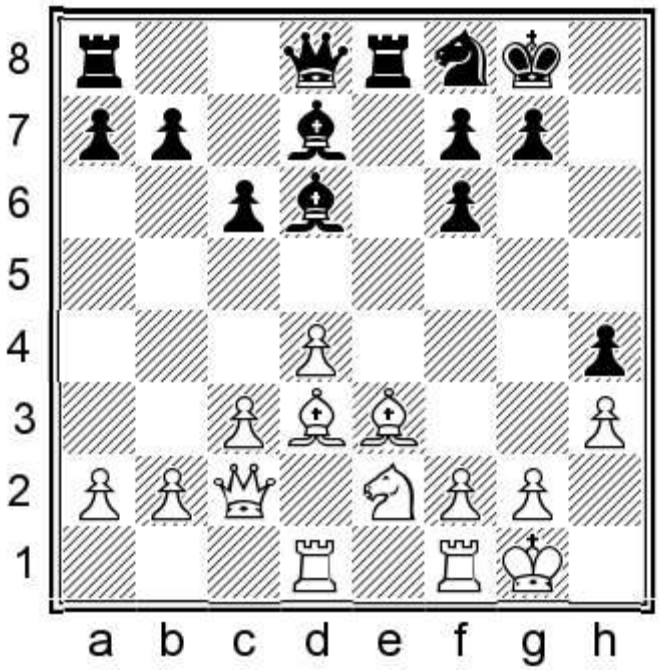
Position after: 13.♖ad1

We now turn our attention to this move, which is one of the more critical lines. White may still want to play c4 at some moment, but there are important differences between the text move and 13.c4. The main one is that White keeps the flexibility of playing ♘f4 or ♗f4 as early as the next move. I will present two options for Black: 13...♗c7, the standard approach, and 13...♗d7!?N, an interesting novelty which gives Black more dynamic potential.

13...♗d7!?N

Black's idea is to continue his development on the queenside so that he can respond to White's queenside advance with a timely ...b5.



Position after: 13...♗d7!?N

In addition, Black also introduces the idea of playing ...♕c8 and targeting White's kingside pawns with a direct attack.

The main line after the alternative 13...♗c7 will illustrate why I prefer 13...♗d7!?N, which leads to a double-edged game with chances for both sides. 14.c4 ♕d6!?

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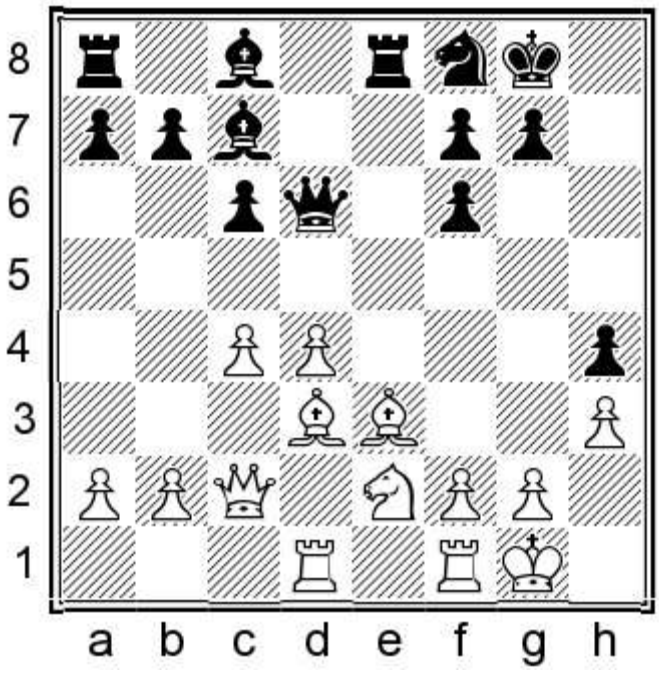
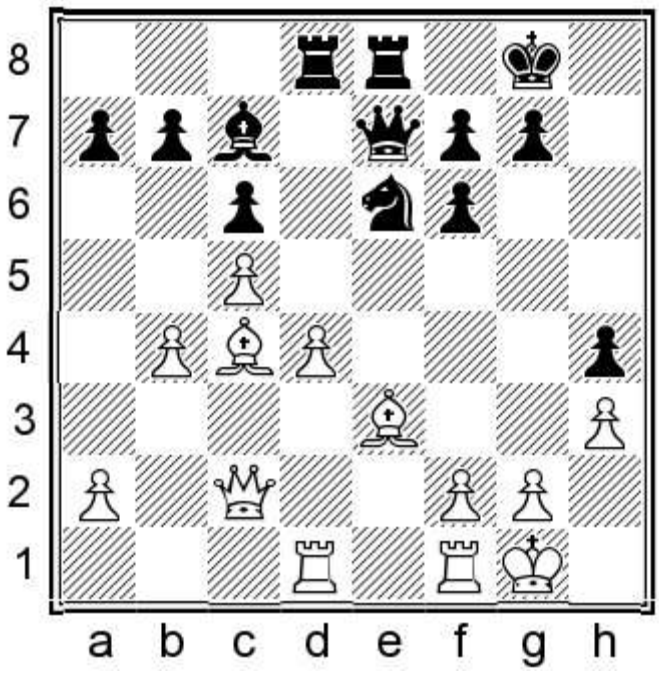


Position after: 14...♕d6!?

While Black generally prefers to wait for ♘f4 to play ...♕d6, this move is playable in this particular position. Black does not have an easy way to improve his position before playing ...♕d6 since 14...♗e6 leaves the bishop vulnerable to d5 ideas.

A) 15.♘f4 is also possible, but it justifies Black's play. 15...♗e6 16.c5!? [16.♖fe1 would transpose to 13.♖fe1 ♗c7 14.♘f4 ♕d6 15.c4 ♗e6 16.♖ad1.] 16...♕e7! [16...♕d7?! leaves Black unprepared to cope with the threat of d5 after 17.♘xe6 ♘xe6 18.♗c4±.] 17.b4 ♖ad8 18.♘xe6 [18.b5 is unthreatening: 18...♗b8 19.♖fe1 ♕c7 20.bxc6 bxc6 21.♔f1 ♗d7!⇄] 18...♘xe6 19.♗c4



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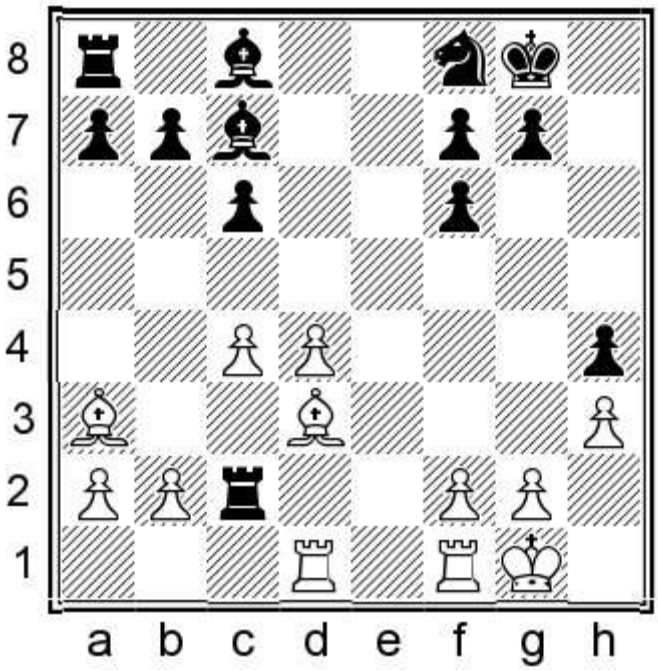
Position after: 19.♗c4

Just as in the 13.♖fe1 variation, Black sticks to his plan to annoy White along the b8-h2 diagonal. 19...♗b8! 20.d5 cxd5 21.♖xd5 [21.♗xd5 g6 22.♗c1 ♘g7!=] 21...♖xd5 22.♗xd5 ♕c7! 23.f4 ♕e7⇄ Black's counterplay on the dark squares compensates for White's queenside threats.

B) 15.♗f4! ♖xe2! The point. 16.♗xd6 ♖xc2 17.♗a3!



Position after: 17.♗a3!

[17.♗xc7? ♖xb2∓ would simply leave Black a pawn up.] 17...♗e6! Black's rook is trapped, but this move forces White to give up the c4-pawn. [17...♗f5? 18.♗xf5 ♖e2 19.♗g4 ♖ee8 20.d5± gave White a clear edge in Abdumalik, Z (2482) – Garcia Martin, M (2329) Batumi 2018.]

B1) 18.d5?!, as in Kanmazalp, O (2473) – Motylev, A (2669) Batumi 2018, can be met with 18...♗f5!N and Black's rook escapes: 19.♗xf5 ♖xc4 20.d6 ♗b6 21.d7 ♖f4!

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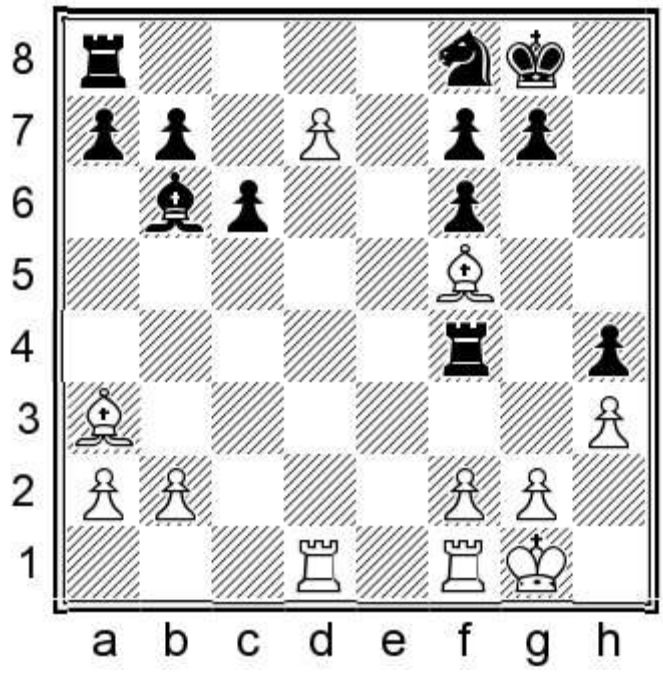
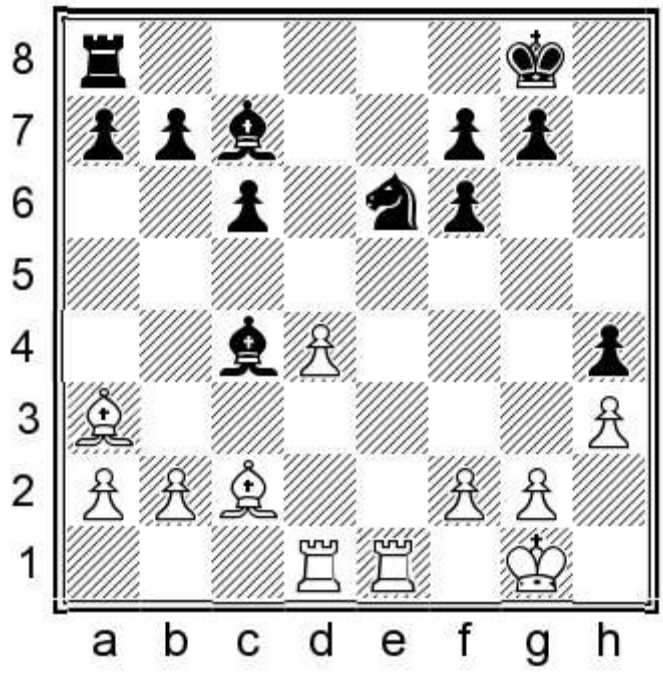


Position after: 21...♖f4!

Black needs to go after the d7-pawn, and the best way to do it is to chase White's bishop from f5. 22.♗g4 f5 23.♗d6 ♖xf2! 24.♖xf2 fxg4 25.♗xf8 g3! 26.♗c5 gxf2+ 27.♔f1 ♗c7 28.♔xf2 f5!∓ Pieces have come off the board and we are left with an endgame that only Black can win since White will have to give up his d7-pawn sooner or later.

B2) 18.♗xc2N 18...♗xc4 19.♖fe1 ♘e6∞



Position after: 19...♘e6∞

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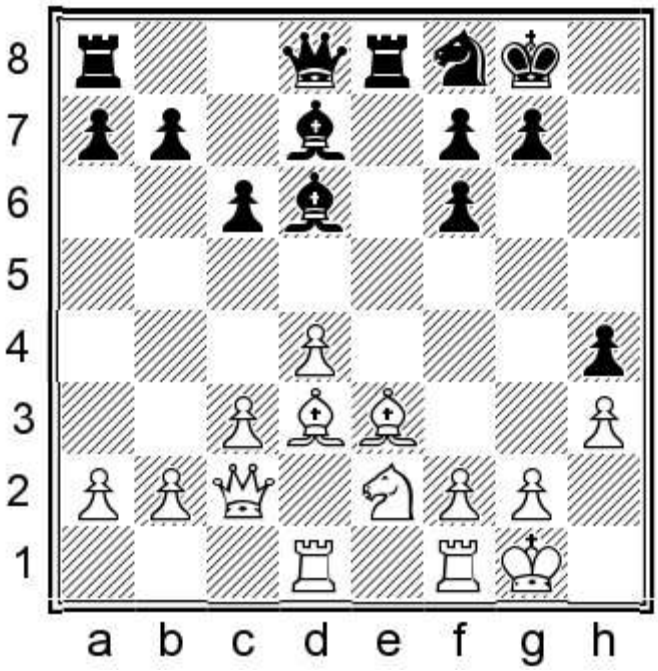
This endgame could be analyzed further, but the general evaluation is clear: Black has good positional compensation for the slight material deficit due to his control of the d5-square and superior pawn structure. However, it's difficult to envision Black winning from this position.



Position after: 13...♗d7!?N

14.c4

This is White's most straight-forward reply, continuing with his plan to expand in the center.

A) 14.♘f4 simply allows Black to continue his development: 14...♖c8 15.♖fe1 ♗b8!= Black is ready to play ...♕c7 and can counter c4 with ...b5.

B) 14.♕d2 should be met by 14...♘g6!, preventing ♗f4, and Black has an excellent position after 15.c4 ♕e7! 16.♖fe1 ♖ad8 17.♘c3 ♗b8!=.

C) 14.♖fe1 allows me to demonstrate a clever idea: 14...♕c8!. This move may seem overly simplistic, but Black's threat of ...♗xh3 is surprisingly difficult to deal with.

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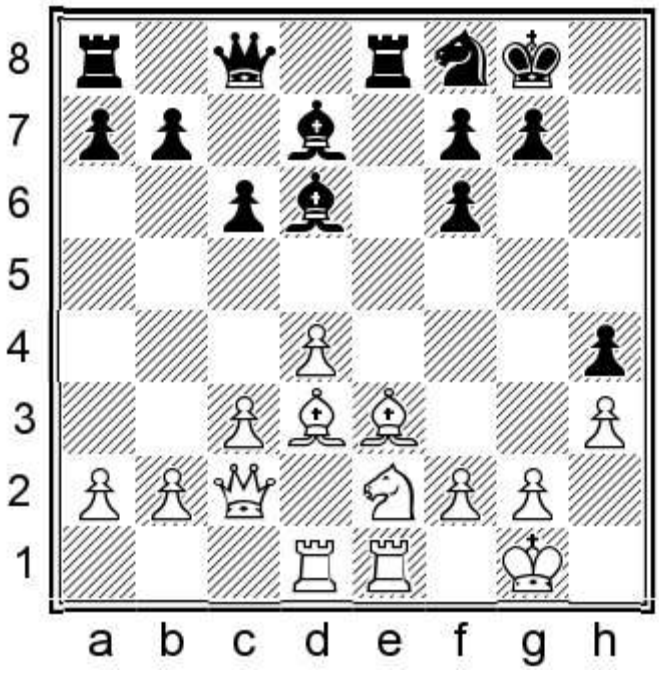
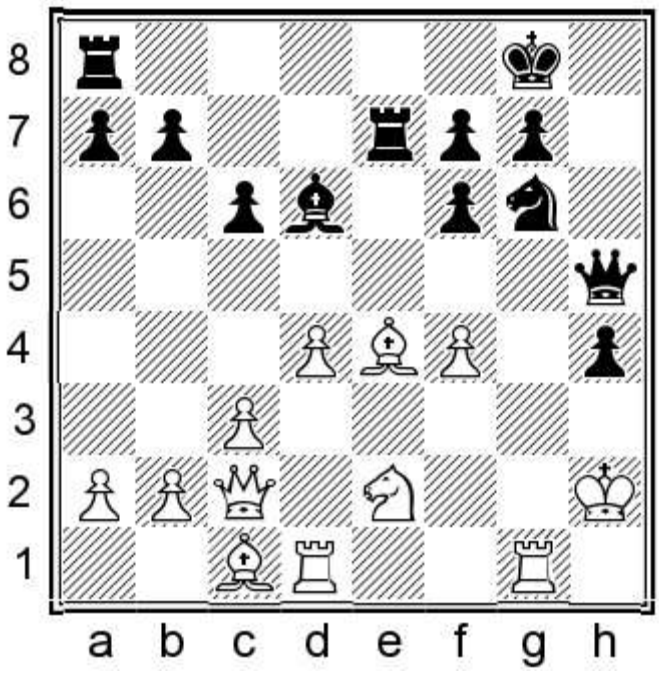


Position after: 14...♕c8!

15.♘f4 White protects the h3-pawn and prevents Black's ...♗xh3 ideas, but the knight is not well placed on f4. [15.♗e4?, for instance, allows Black to take over with 15...♗xh3!; after 15.♗c1 ♘g6! Black brings his pieces to the kingside to initiate an attack. 16.♗e4 – Black has excellent compensation for the pawn after 16.♗xg6 fxg6 17.♕xg6 ♗f5 18.♕h5 ♗c2 19.♖d2 ♕f5 – 16...♗xh3! 17.gxh3 ♕xh3 18.f4 ♕g4+ 19.♔h2 ♖e7! 20.♖g1 ♕h5∞



Position after: 20...♕h5∞

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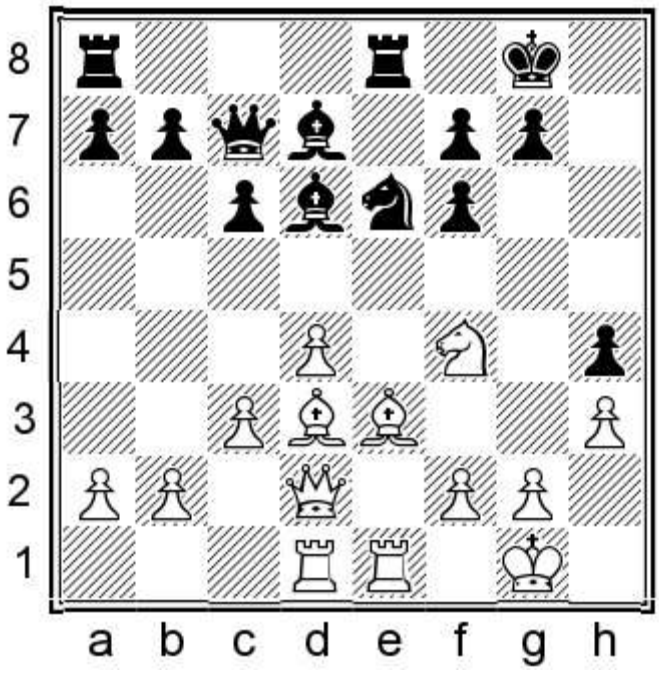
The resulting position is very unclear, but I believe that Black's attack fully justifies the material deficit.] Black can now switch plans with 15...♕c7! 16.♕d2 [16.♘h5 ♕a5! 17.♕e2 ♕xa2∞ Although the Black queen is temporarily out of play, White's kingside initiative will take time. The position is very unclear.] 16...♘e6!



Position after: 16...♘e6!

Black uses the f4-knight to develop with tempo. A knight trade would be a positive outcome for Black as it would give him more space.

Furthermore, bishops are the ideal pieces to deal with a central passed pawn in case White proceeds with c4 and d5.

C1) 17.♘xe6 simply leads to equality: 17...♗xe6 18.c4 ♖ad8 19.b3 g6=

C2) 17.♘h5 is met by 17...♕a5!. White can attempt 18.d5!? [after 18.♕e2 ♘f4! Black trades the h5-knight and ends White's initiative: 19.♘xf4 ♗xf4 20.♕f3 ♗xe3 21.fxe3 ♕g5 22.e4 ♗e6=] 18...cxd5 [18...♕xd5? fails to 19.♕e2!± when Black's pieces are left hanging on the d-file] 19.♕e2 ♘g5= but Black is adequately prepared to deal with White's kingside threats.

C3) 17.♘e2!? b5!

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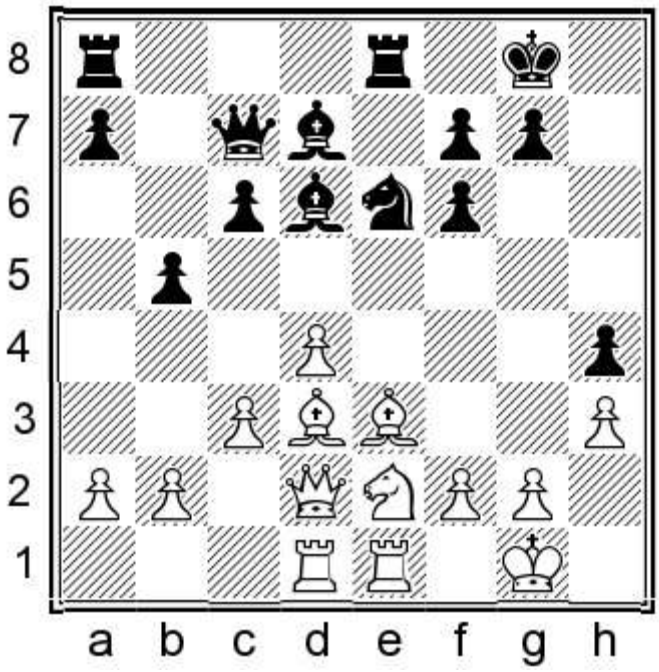
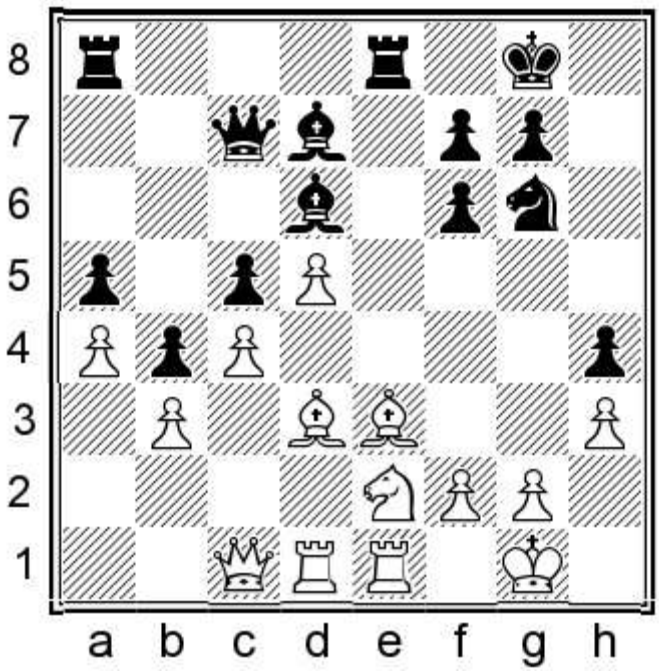


Position after: 17...b5!

Now that White has retreated his knight to e2, Black is ready to expand on the queenside. 18.b3 [18.c4 bxc4 19.♗xc4 ♖ad8= does not trouble Black.; 18.♖c1 can be countered with 18...c5! 19.d5 ♘f8 20.c4 b4∞ and the blocked center allows Black to take over the initiative on the kingside. White's d5-pawn is his main asset, but it is far from a deciding factor as Black has firm control of the center.] 18...a5 19.♕c1!? c5! 20.d5 ♘f8 21.c4 b4 22.a4 ♘g6∞



Position after: 22...♘g6∞

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We have reached a fascinating position. White has a strong d5-pawn, but Black has excellent piece activity and sustained pressure on the kingside.

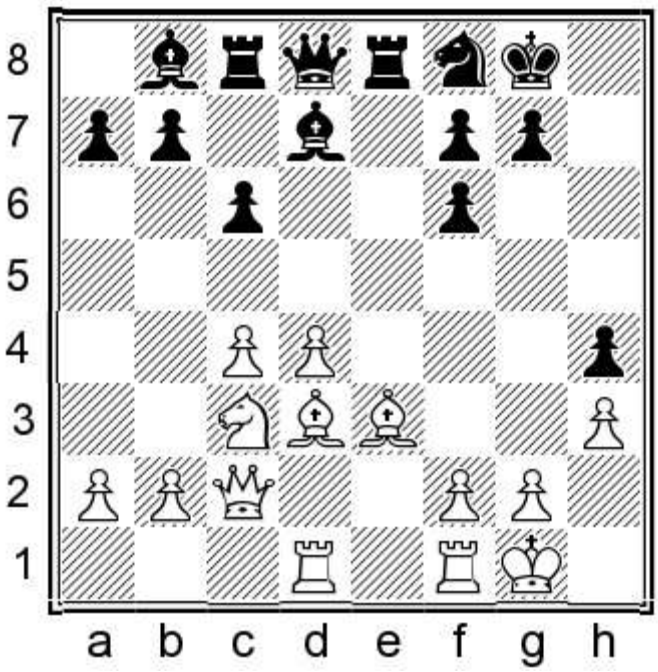
14...♖c8

Black brings the rook into the game and prepares to play ...b5. Another idea is ...♗b8 and ...♕c7. Black's position is full of resources and attacking potential which should not be underestimated.

15.♘c3

15.♖fe1 ♗b8! 16.♗c1 ♕c7 17.f4 b5!∞

15...♗b8



Position after: 15...♗b8

16.♖fe1

A) 16.d5 does not trouble Black since he is well prepared to play with an open center: 16...cxd5 17.♘xd5 ♗e6 18.♗f4 ♗xf4 19.♘xf4 ♕c7 20.♘xe6 ♘xe6=

B) 16.♕d2 By taking the queen away from the c-file, White takes the sting out of the ...b5 push, but Black can begin to play on the kingside and use the fact that ...♘g6 is possible. 16...f5! 17.d5 ♕f6 18.f4 ♘g6 19.♕f2 b6=

16...b5!

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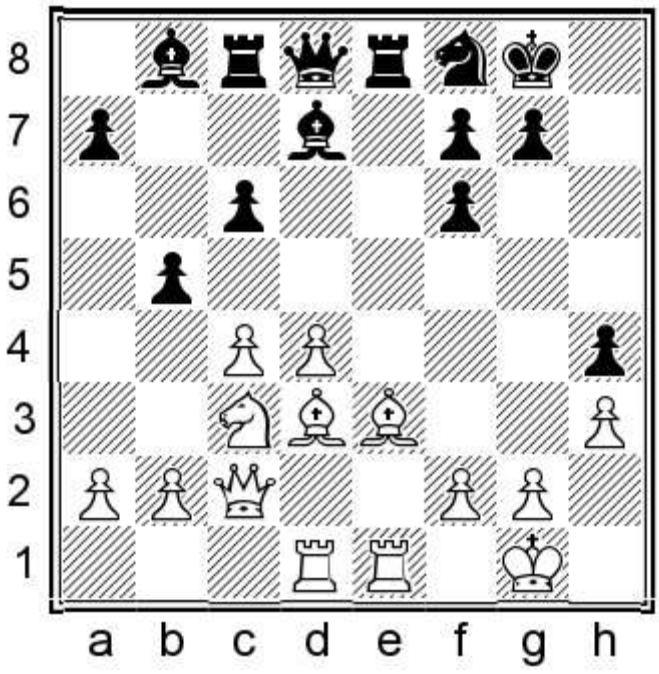
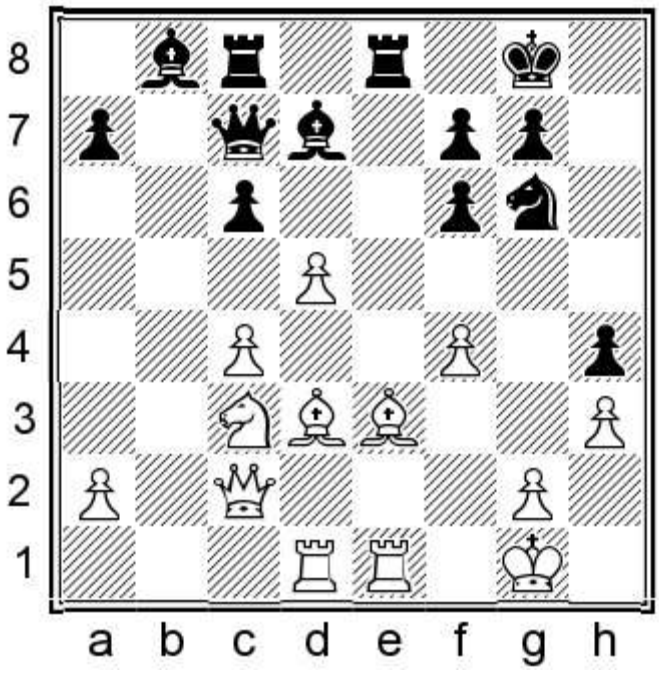


Position after: 16...b5!

17.c5

A) Further opening the center with 17.d5 plays right into Black's hands: 17...cxd5 18.♘xd5 ♗e6 19.♕e2 bxc4 20.♗xc4 ♘g6∓

B) 17.b3 is an attempt to maintain control over the b5-square. Black should proceed by combining his queenside play with threats on the kingside. 17...bxc4 18.bxc4 ♕c7 19.f4 ♘g6!? 20.d5



Position after: 20.d5

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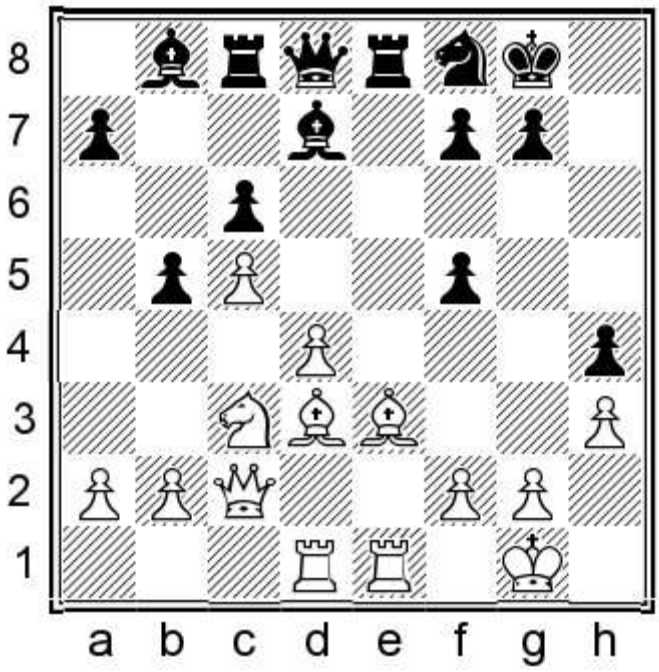
[20.♗xg6 fxg6 21.♕xg6 ♕a5!⩱] 20...f5! 21.♗xf5 ♖xe3! 22.♖xe3 ♕xf4 23.♗xd7 ♕xe3+ 24.♕f2 ♗h2+!! 25.♔f1 ♕xc3 26.♗xc8 ♕xc4+ 27.♕e2 ♕f4+= The variation ends with a predictable perpetual check. This line is an excellent example of how Black can use both sides of the board to harass White and activate his pieces.

17...f5!



Position after: 17...f5!

The lines that follow serve as proof that this idea is viable.

The general concept is that Black combines his threats on the b8-h2 diagonal with concrete ideas both in the center and on the kingside to create problems for White. Black's attack flows surprisingly well, and I think that White's position is rather unpleasant.

The slower 17...♕c7 leaves Black empty-handed after 18.f4 f5 19.b4!±.

18.♗xf5

Taking the bait.

A) 18.d5 f4! 19.♗c1 ♖xe1+ 20.♖xe1 ♕g5↑

B) 18.b4 ♕f6

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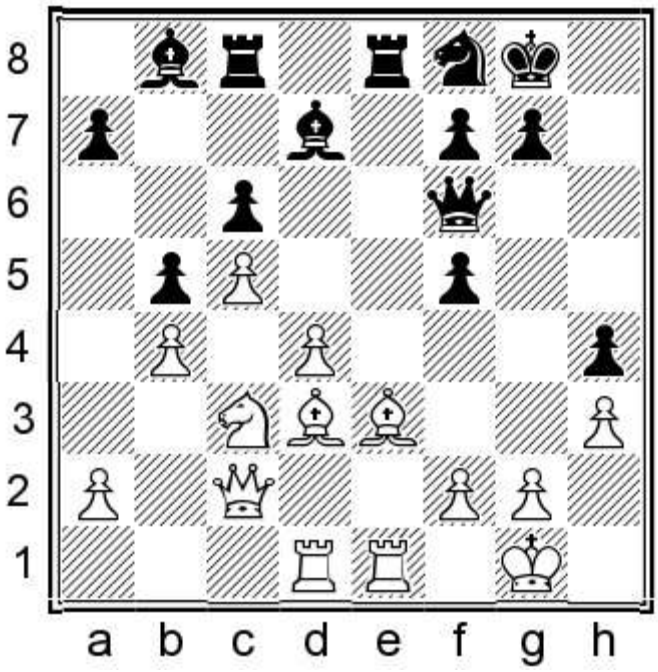
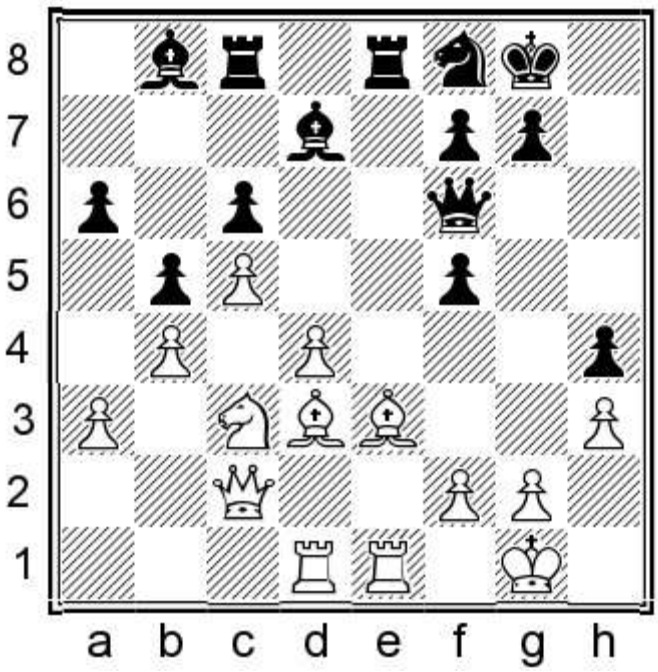


Position after: 18...♕f6

B1) 19.d5 cxd5 20.♗c1 [20.♗xb5? d4!–+] 20...♗c6 21.♗xf5 ♖xe1+ 22.♖xe1 ♖d8=

B2) 19.a3!? This is a very computeresque prophylactic move. Black can respond in kind with 19...a6!



Position after: 19...a6!

This defends the b5-pawn and prepares for White's d5-thrust. 20.d5 [20.♗e2 f4 21.♗c1 ♖cd8 22.♕d2 ♘h7!↑; 20.♗f1 f4 21.♗c1 ♖xe1 22.♖xe1 ♗e6∞] 20...cxd5 21.♗c1 ♗c6 22.♗xf5 ♖xe1+ 23.♖xe1 ♖d8=

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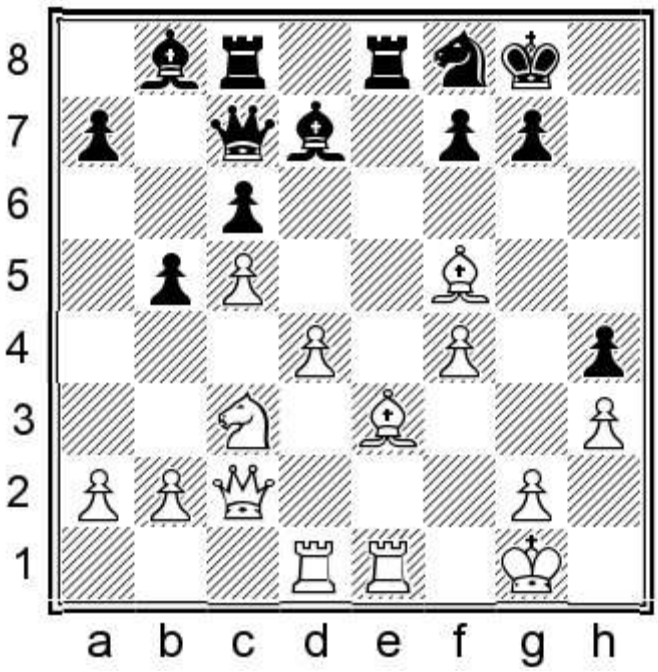
18...♕c7! 19.♗xd7

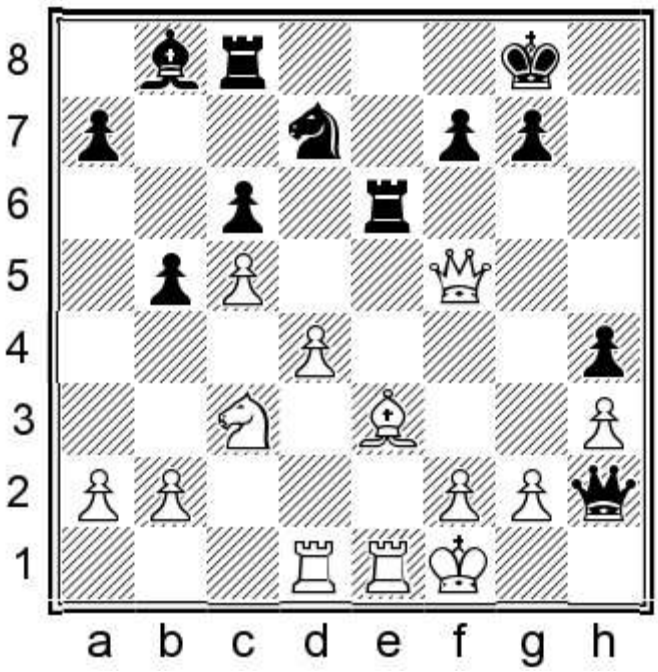
19.f4



Position after: 19.f4

is met by 19...b4! [19...♖xe3!? is also interesting] 20.♗xd7 ♕xd7 21.♘b1 [21.♘e4 ♕f5 22.♗c1 ♖cd8⩱] 21...♘g6 22.♕f2 ♖e7!⩲ and Black has excellent compensation for the pawn.

19...♕h2+ 20.♔f1 ♘xd7 21.♕f5 ♖e6



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Position after: 21...♖e6

The position is extremely complicated, but Black finds enough play to compensate for the pawn in every line.

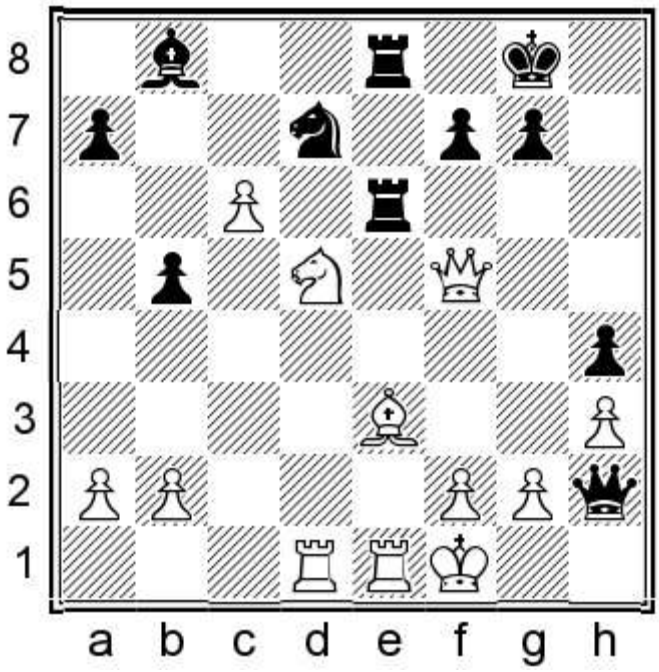
22.d5

A) 22.♔e2!? leads to an equal endgame after 22...♖ce8 23.♖h1 ♕xg2 24.♕xe6 fxe6 25.♖dg1 ♕xh1 26.♖xh1 ♘f6=.

B) 22.b4 leaves White looking for a simplification after 22...♖ce8 23.d5 cxd5 24.♘xd5 ♘f6∞.

22...cxd5 23.♘xd5 ♖ce8 24.c6

As you can tell, the position is very unclear. I will show one sample line which leads to a perpetual check, but alternatives like 24.♖d4 ♗g3!∞ exist and can lead to some crazy positions.



Position after: 24.c6

24...♘b6 25.c7 ♗xc7 26.♘xc7 ♕h1+ 27.♔e2 ♖xe3+ 28.fxe3 ♕xg2+ 29.♕f2 ♖xe3+ 30.♔xe3! ♘c4+ 31.♔e2 ♕e4+ 32.♔f1 ♕h1+=

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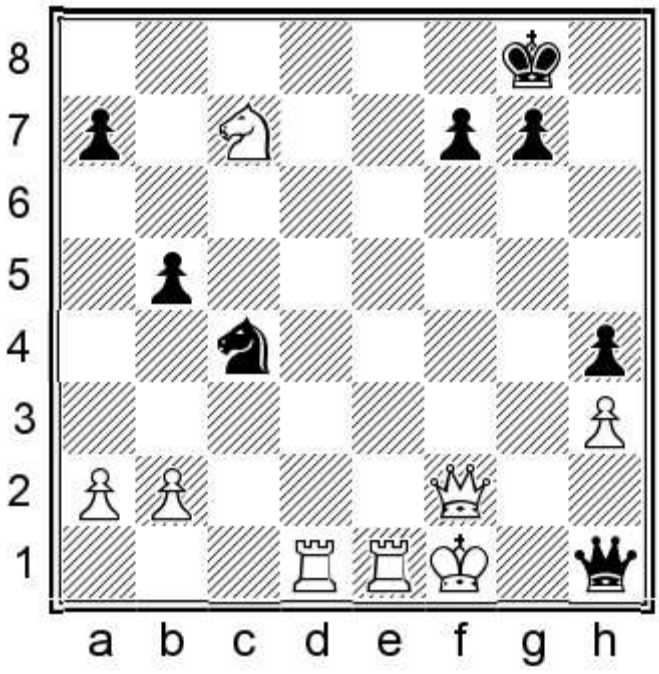
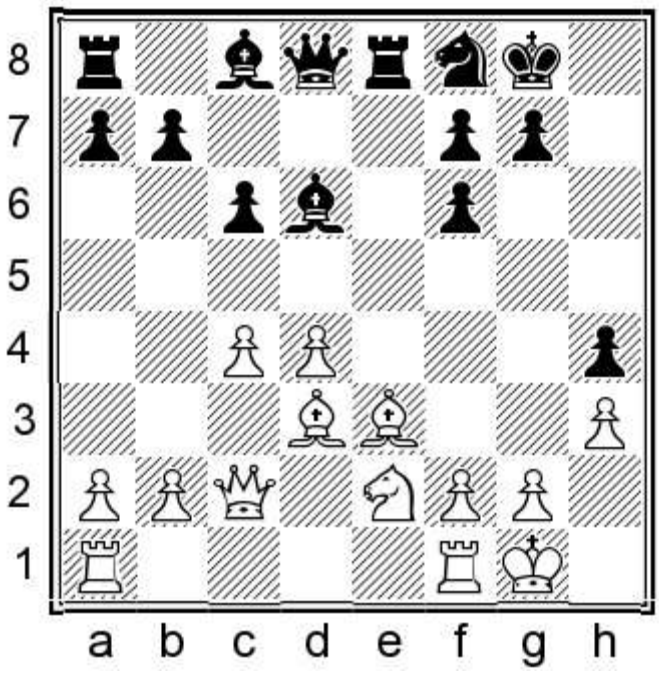


Position after: 32...♕h1+=

At last, the White king cannot escape the perpetual check. Of course, you don't need to memorize every line; the many variations serve as examples to fuel your calculations when you play these complicated positions over the board.

f) 12.♗e3 ♘f8 13.c4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 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.♗e3 ♘f8 13.c4



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Position after: 13.c4

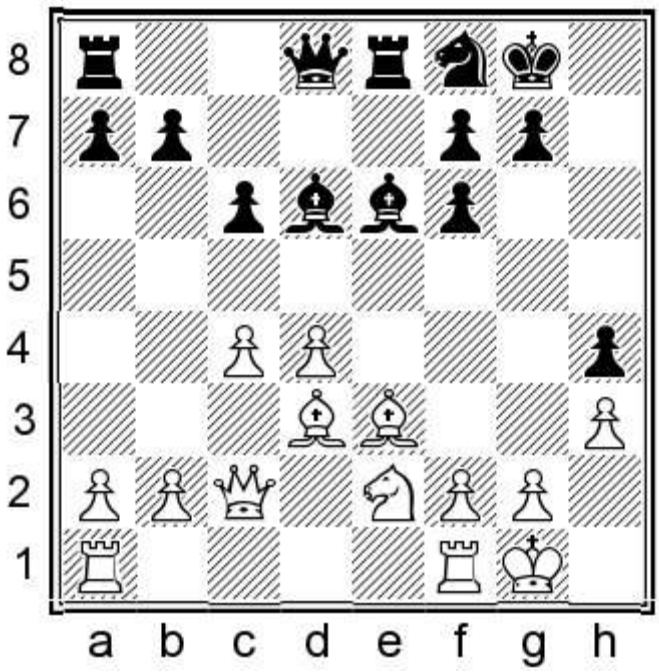
Now that we have examined White's alternatives, we return to his most principled approach. With the text move, White prepares to play ♘c3 and advance his central pawns.

13...♗e6

Black develops his bishop on an active square and prepares to prod at White's kingside with ...♕d7. Moreover, ...♖c8 will enable ...b5.

A) 13...♗c7 is a playable alternative that transposes to our discussion of 13.♖ad1 ♗c7 14.c4 after 14.♖ad1.

B) While 13...♗d7?!N was playable after 13.♖ad1, it is too slow in this position: 14.♘c3! ♖c8 15.♖ae1 b5 16.c5 ♗b8 17.f4!± Black struggles to find counterplay and has not equalized.



Position after: 13...♗e6

14.♖ad1

A) 14.♘c3 is not a precise follow-up and Black can simply continue with 14...♗c7! 15.♖ae1 f5! 16.f4 a6!? 17.a4 ♘g6↑ with a strong initiative.

B) 14.♖fe1 ♕d7! 15.♘c3 ♘g6!

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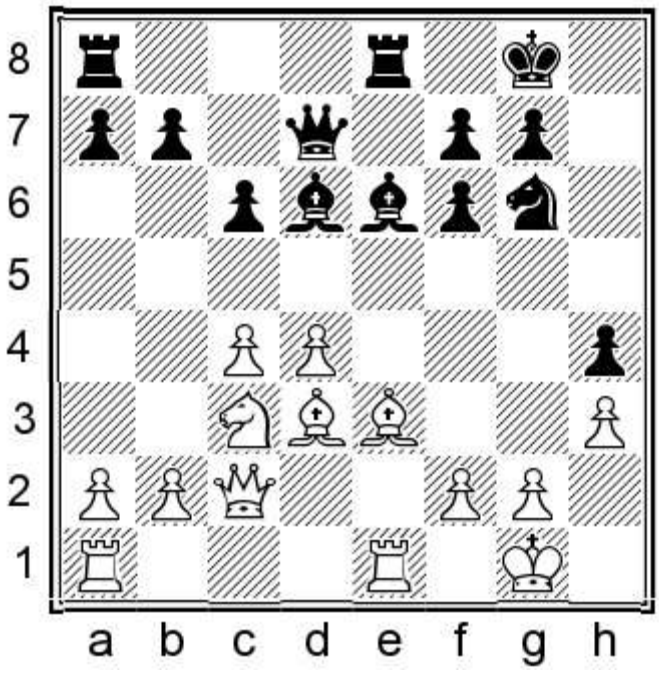
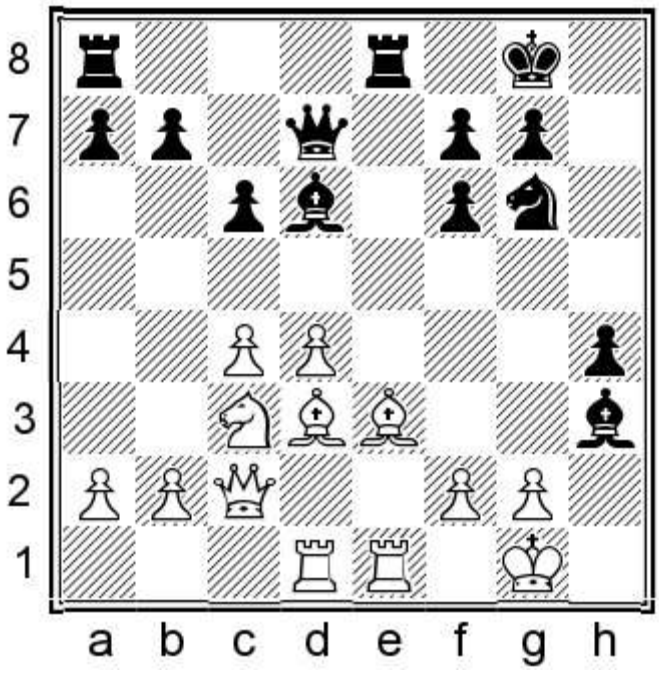


Position after: 15...♘g6!

B1) 16.♗xg6 is not productive, as Black's dominance on the light squares weighs down White's attacking chances. 16...fxg6 17.♕xg6 ♗xc4 [17...♗f7!? 18.♕d3 ♗c7∓ is interesting] 18.♘e4 ♖e6 19.♕g4 ♕f7=.

B2) 16.♖ad1 ♗xh3!

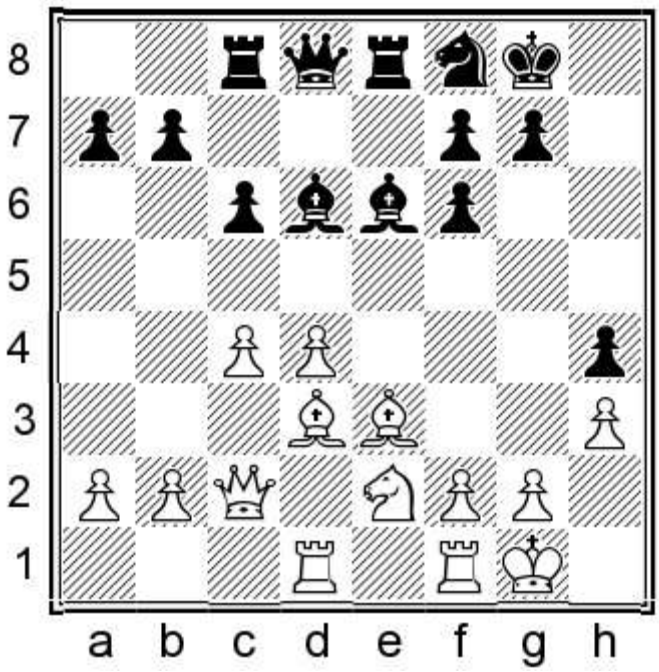


Position after: 16...♗xh3!

Black is ready to launch his attack! 17.gxh3 ♕xh3 18.f3 ♗f4! 19.♗xf4 ♖xe1+ 20.♖xe1 ♘xf4 21.♖e3

♕g3+ 22.♔h1 ♘xd3 23.♕xd3 [After 23.♖xd3 ♖e8! 24.♖d1 ♖e1+ 25.♖xe1 ♕xe1+ 26.♔g2 ♕g3+ 27.♔f1 ♕xf3+ 28.♕f2 ♕g4∓ Black's kingside pawns are a serious menace, and White's exposed king drags White into a passive position.] 23...♕h3+ 24.♔g1 ♕g3+ 25.♔f1 h3 26.♕e2 h2 27.♕g2 ♕h4 28.♕h1 ♖d8⩲ Black's compensation is apparent, as White's king is exposed and the h2-pawn restricts White's active options.

14...♖c8



Position after: 14...♖c8

15.♘c3N

A) 15.♕a4 was played in Burke, J (2562) – Liang, A (2592) Saint Louis 2019, but the queen is misplaced on a4 as the action is on the kingside. Black could have continued with 15...♘g6N.

B) 15.♖fe1N 15...♘g6!?

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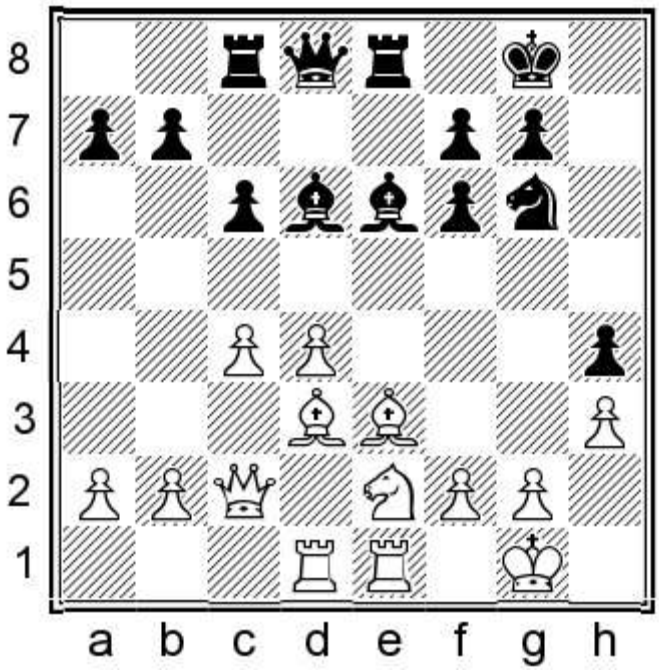
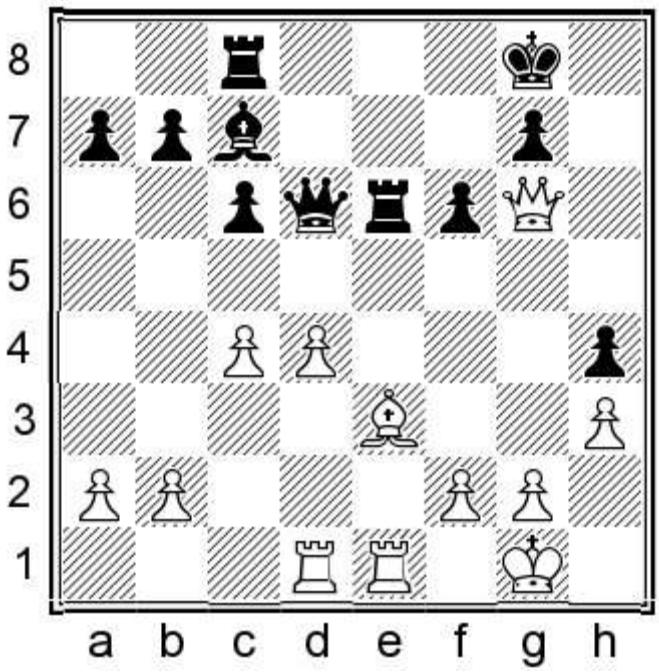


Position after: 15...♘g6!?

[15...♗b8 16.♗f4!? is slightly unpleasant for Black.]

B1) As usual, White does not achieve much by giving up his light-squared bishop. 16.♗xg6 fxg6 17.c5 [17.♕xg6 ♗xc4=] 17...♗b8 18.♕xg6 ♗xa2 19.♕g4 ♗b3 20.♖a1 g5=

B2) 16.♘c3 ♕d7 17.♘e4 ♗c7 18.♘c5 ♕d6 19.♘xe6 [19.f4 ♘xf4 20.♘xb7 ♕d7 21.♘c5 ♕d6=] 19...♖xe6 20.♗xg6 fxg6 21.♕xg6



Position after: 21.♕xg6

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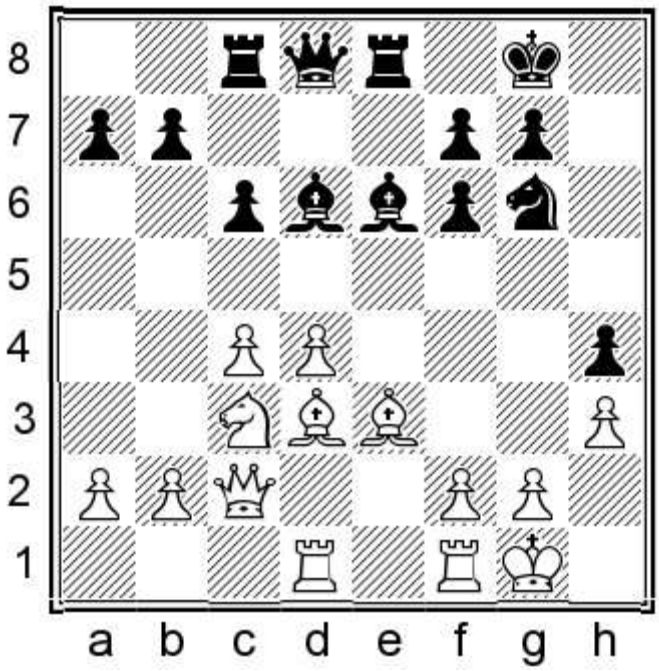
Black has excellent compensation once more, as White's king is unsafe. Now there's a choice: 21...f5!? [or 21...♕h2+ 22.♔f1 ♖ce8=] 22.♕xf5 ♖f8 23.♕g4 ♖g6 24.♕e4 ♖e6=.

15...♗b8!

15...♘g6?!



Position after: 15...♘g6?!

is now met by 16.d5! cxd5 17.cxd5 ♗d7 18.♗xg6 fxg6 19.♕xg6 ♕e7 20.♗d4± and White's position is more pleasant.

16.♖fe1 ♕d6 17.f4 ♘g6

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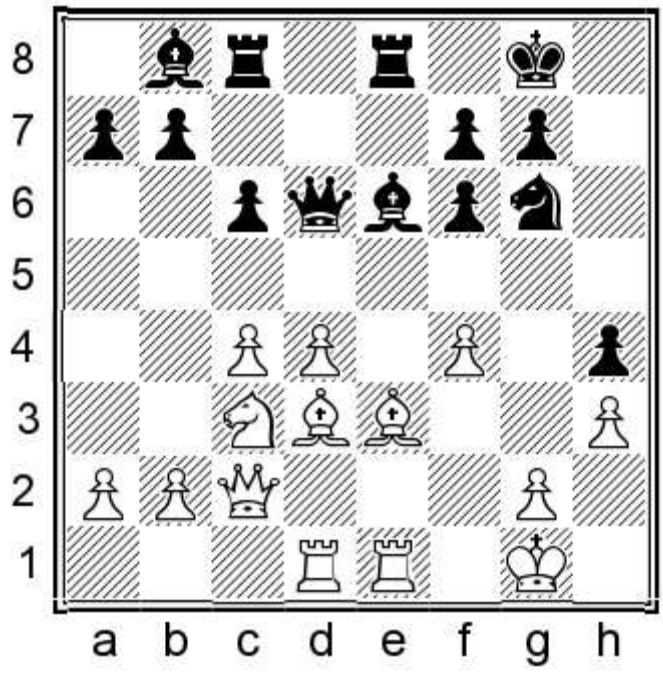
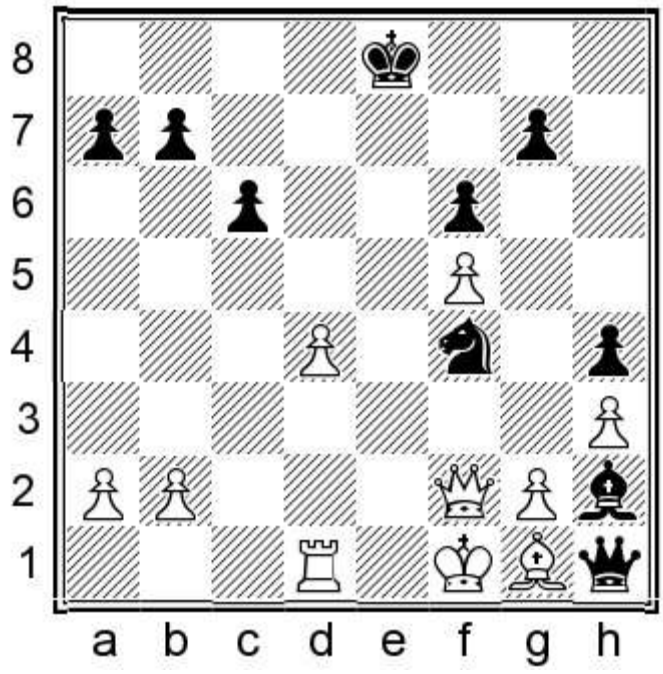


Position after: 17...♘g6

18.f5

18.c5 ♕c7 19.♗xg6 fxg6 20.♕xg6 ♕f7 21.♕c2 ♖cd8 22.♕f2 ♕h5⩲

18...♕h2+ 19.♔f1 ♕h1+ 20.♗g1 ♗h2 21.♕f2 ♗xc4 22.♗xc4 ♘f4 23.♖e4 ♖xe4 24.♘xe4 ♖e8 25.♗xf7+ ♔xf7 26.♘d6+ ♔f8 27.♘xe8 ♔xe8=



Position after: 27...♔xe8=

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White is unable to make any progress because of Black’s kingside threats, so correct play will lead to a draw.

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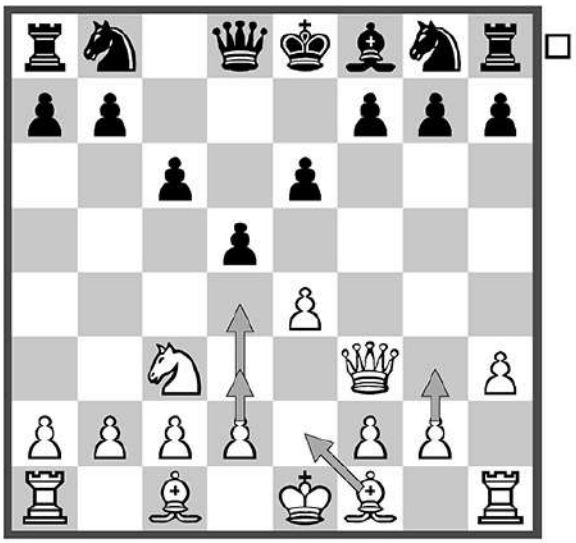
Part III
Two Knights Caro-Kann

Chapter 11
The classical 3...♗g4

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 11 – The classical 3...♗g4

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6

a) Alternatives up to move 4

b) 6.d4

c) 6.♗e2 d4

d) 6.♗e2 ♘f6

e) 6.♗e2 ♗c5

f) 6.d3

g) 6.g3

a) Alternatives up to move 4

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3

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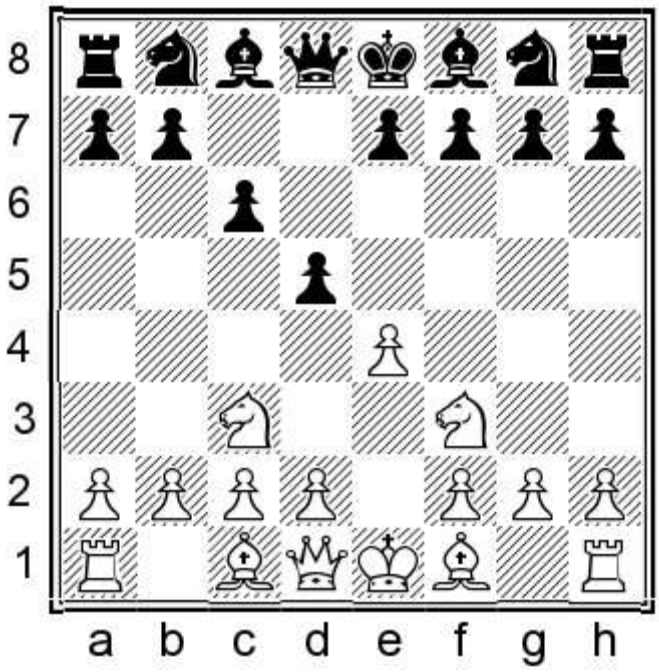

Position after: 3.♘c3

The Two Knights Caro-Kann is considered a rather aggressive setup for White. By delaying or omitting d4, White prioritizes quick piece development and maintains a flexible approach in the center. Both White and Black can steer the game in very different directions depending on the line that they choose to play.

The Two Knights variation has gained popularity in recent years because it has provided White with a fertile ground to find new ideas. Whereas other lines such as the open variation or the advance variation have been analyzed extensively, the Two Knights variation gives White ample opportunity to surprise his opponent. Moreover, strong players who like to play dynamic positions like Vachier – Lagrave employ it regularly. I have played the Two Knights variation quite often myself when I faced the Caro-Kann with the White pieces. 3...♗g4 is Black's most popular reply and is my recommendation for Black. Other options have emerged as interesting alternatives, but Black struggles to equalize in those lines.

Before we proceed to discuss my recommendation, I will give a quick overview of Black's alternatives to 3...♗g4.

3...♗g4

While you are probably already familiar with this move, let me take a moment to discuss the concepts that underlie it. The basic idea is that Black needs to play ...e6 to continue his kingside development. The drawback is clear: after 4.h3, Black will have to give up the bishop pair. However, although the bishop pair will play an important role in the game, the position is quite closed and thus White does not get a chance to activate his bishops and make use of his bishop pair. As such, it is important for Black to keep the position relatively closed.

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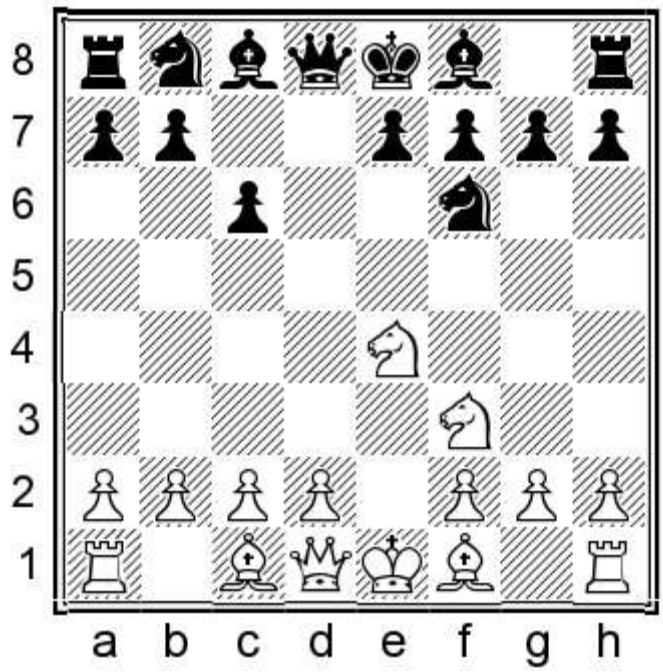
The remainder of this chapter will deal with White's alternatives to 4.h3, and we will being our discussion of the main line in the next chapter.

A) 3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6



Position after: 4...♘f6

Black is trying to exploit the fact that White has already developed his knight to f3 to obtain a superior version of the 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 line, since the f3-knight is not ideally placed due to Black's f6-pawn when White takes on f6. However, White can refrain from taking on f6 and instead continue with 5.♕e2!. This move follows the spirit of the variation: White prioritizes piece development and delays taking the center. Black finds it surprisingly difficult to quickly and actively develop his pieces. [5.♘xf6+ exf6= is indeed equal, and will most likely transpose to the Open Caro-Kann after White plays d4.] 5...♘xe4 [5...♗f5 is an alternative that can be explored, but I prefer White after 6.♘xf6+ gxf6∞.] 6.♕xe4

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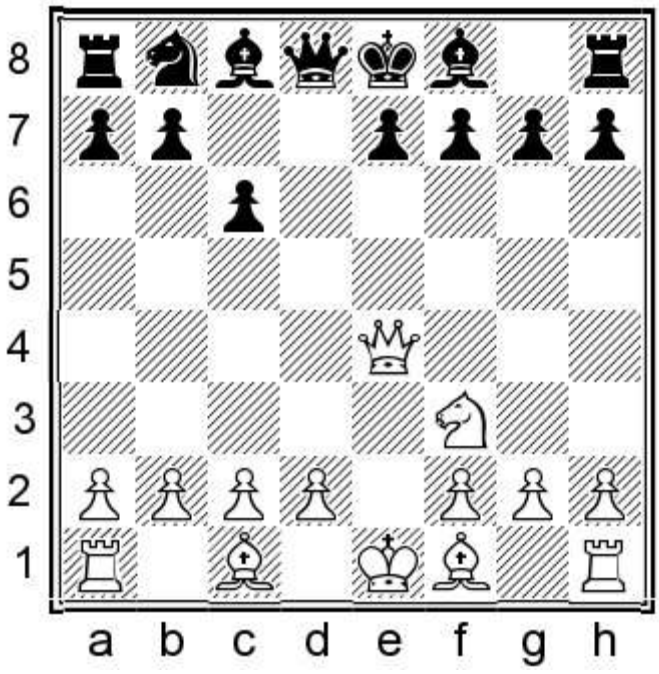

Position after: 6.♕xe4

Black has a few options, but I am not satisfied with either one of them.

A1) 6...♕a5 transposes to the main line: 7.♕f4 ♕f5.

A2) 6...♘d7 7.♗c4 ♘f6 8.♘e5! This move is important. White forces ...e6 and prevents Black from developing. 8...e6 9.♕e2 b5 10.♗d3!? I prefer this move because it makes White's next moves very simple and logical, but 10.♗b3!? is also interesting. With 10.♗d3!?, White intends to play b3, ♗b2, 0-0, f4. Black struggles to create counterplay.

A3) 6...♕d5 7.♕f4 ♕f5 8.♕e3 ♕e6 [8...♕xc2 9.♗d3⩲ is very dangerous for Black, and certainly not a position I would recommend.] 9.b3 ♕xe3+ 10.fxe3± White has a more pleasant endgame.

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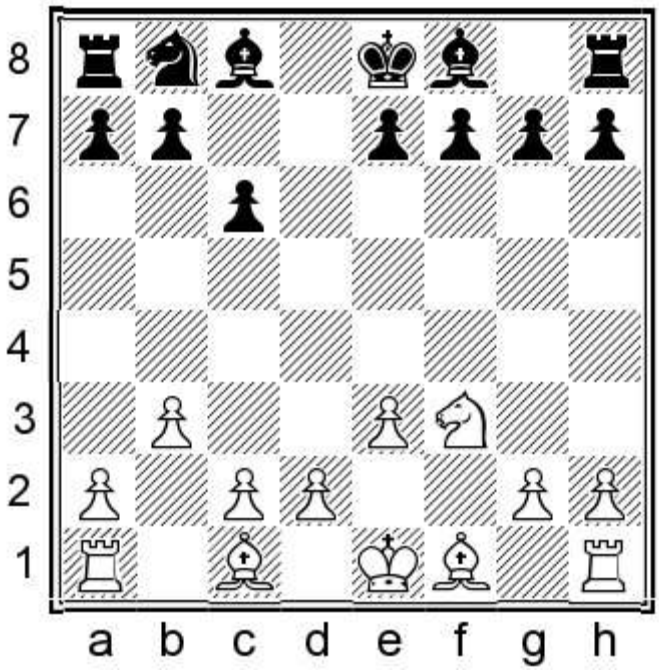
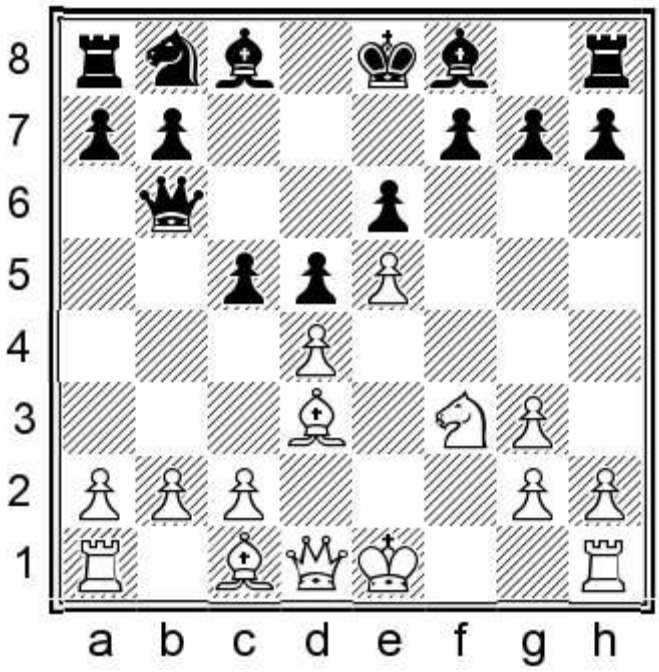


Position after: 10.fxe3±

B) 3...♘f6 is a modern approach that has become quite popular, but recent developments are rather discouraging for Black. 4.e5 ♘e4 5.♘e2 ♕b6 6.d4 e6 7.♘g3 c5 8.♗d3 ♘xg3 9.fxg3!



Position after: 9.fxg3!

I was myself one of the first players to employ this move in the last round of the Final Four of the US Intercollegiate Championship. I failed to convert a very favorable position in Rambaldi, F (2559) – Shimanov, A (2642) New York 2017. The move has since gained in popularity since Black faces serious challenges in this line.

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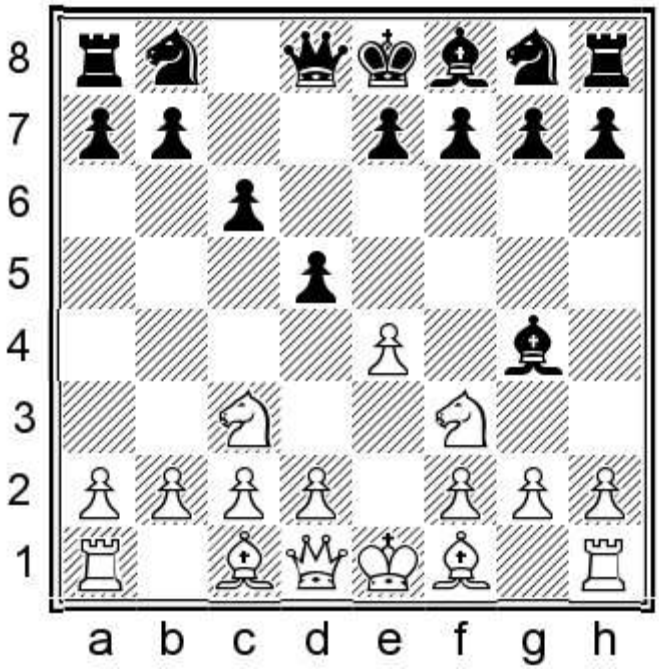
Back to 3...♗g4.



Position after: 3...♗g4

4.♗e2!?

This move is more challenging than 4.d4. At first glance, it does not seem threatening: White is simply developing his bishop on a rather passive square. It turns out, however, that Black needs to respond very accurately to stay out of danger.

4.d4 ♘f6! Black needs to immediately put pressure on White's central pawns to prevent him from developing with ease. 5.♗d3 [5.h3 transposes to a line that we will cover later in this chapter. After 5...♗xf3 6.♕xf3 e6 we reach a position that also arises in the following move order: 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6 6.d4 ♘f6.] 5...dxe4! Black should not let White dominate the center. Trading pieces is also favorable to Black, who has less space. 6.♘xe4 ♘xe4 7.♗xe4 ♘d7 8.h3 ♗h5 9.c3 e6 10.0-0 ♗d6 11.♖e1 ♘f6 12.♗c2 ♕c7=

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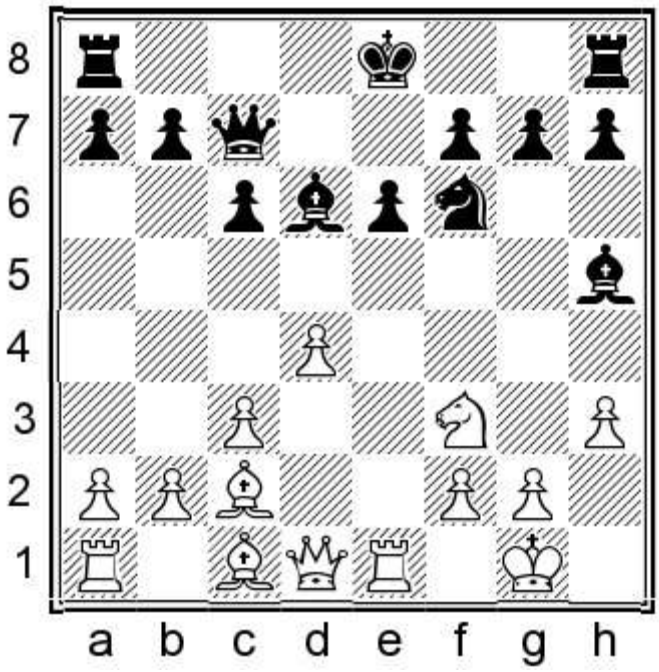
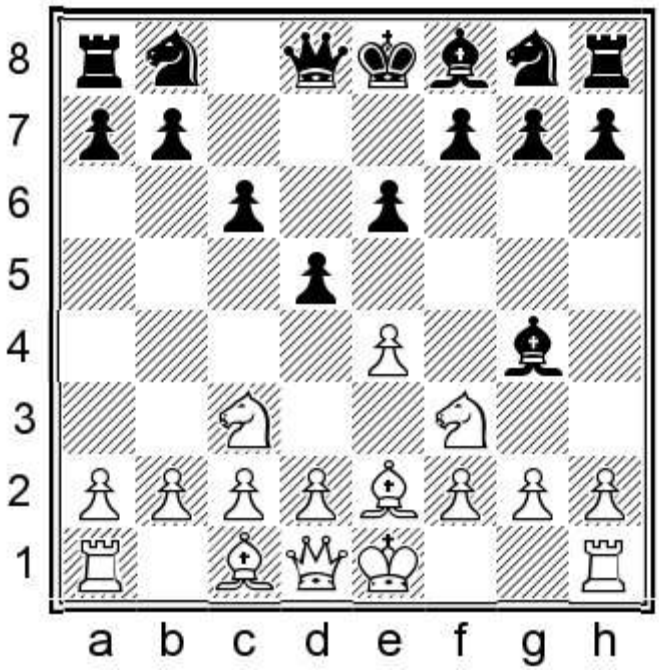


Position after: 12...♕c7=

We have reached a very typical Caro-Kann position. White has more space in the center, but Black is very solid. Black has held on to his bishop pair and will now seek to open the position with ...c5 or ...e5.

4...e6



Position after: 4...e6

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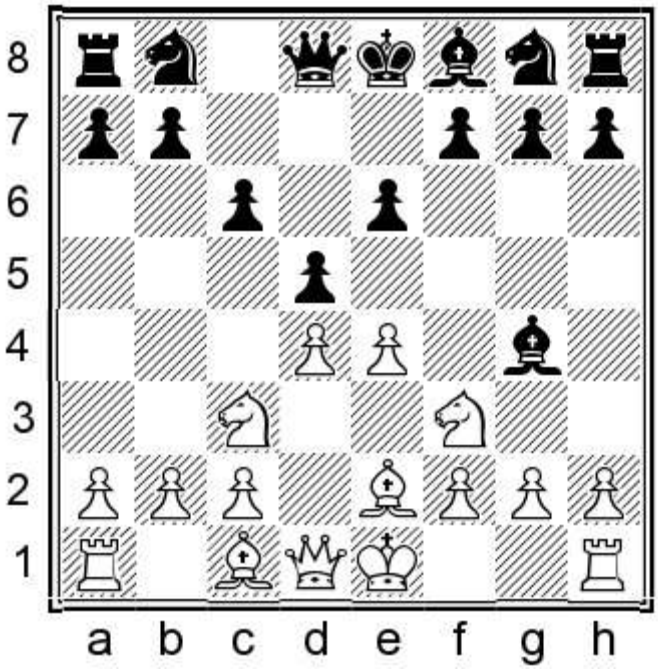
4...♘f6 is met by 5.h3 and White gets an excellent version of the 4.h3 lines since he gains the bishop pair without exposing his queen on f3.

5.d4!

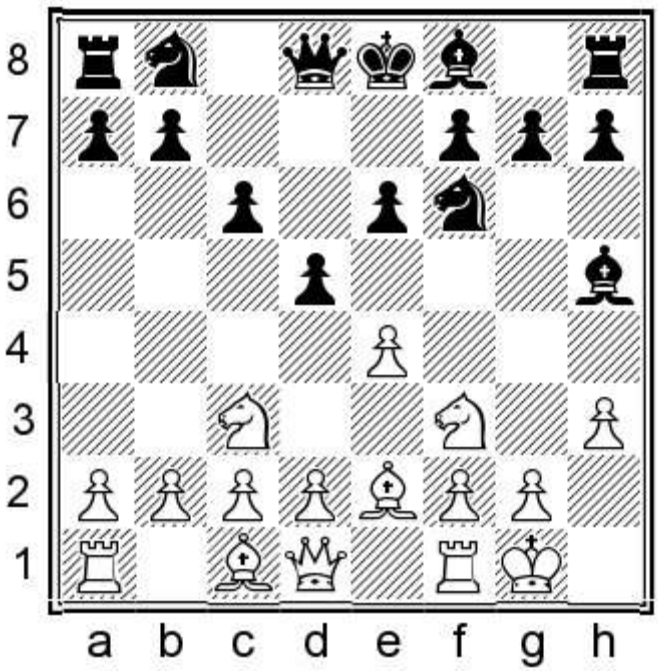


Position after: 5.d4!

It's important to play the text move before castling to restrict Black's play.

5.0-0 is not as precise since it gives Black an extra option. 5...♘f6

A) 6.h3 ♗h5 Forcing the retreat to h5 can only benefit Black since ...♗g6 is now an option.



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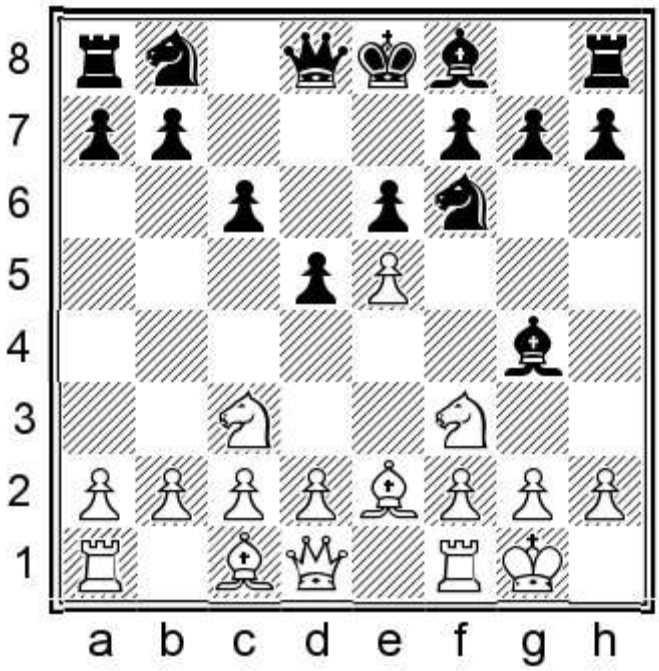
Position after: 6...♗h5

7.♘e5!? [My previous point is illustrated after 7.e5 ♘fd7 8.d4 ♗e7 9.♘e1 when Black is not forced to take on e2 and can instead continue with 9...♗g6 10.f4 c5⇄.] 7...♗xe2 8.♕xe2 ♗e7 9.d4 0-0= White has a bit more space in the center, but Black is extremely solid and will activate his pieces in the coming moves.

B) 6.e5



Position after: 6.e5

6...♘e4!N This move would not be possible if White already had his pawn on d4, since ♘xe4 dxe4 would leave Black with a weak pawn on e4 that could easily be attacked. This is a major difference since White is unable to develop any initiative after 6...♘e4!N. [6...♘fd7 7.d4 would instead transpose to 5.d4 ♘f6 6.e5 ♘fd7 7.0-0, which we will analyze later.] 7.d4 [7.♘b1 White wants to chase Black's knight away from e4, but he is wasting too much time. 7...♗e7 8.d3 ♘c5 9.d4 ♘cd7 10.♘bd2 0-0= Black will create counterplay on the queenside with ...c5 and he has an excellent position.] 7...♗e7 White's only reasonable attempt to create problems for Black is to take on e4, but Black is completely fine after 8.♘xe4 dxe4 9.♘d2 ♗xe2 10.♕xe2 ♕xd4 11.♕xe4 ♕xe4 12.♘xe4 ♘d7 13.f4 ♘c5=.

5...♘f6 6.e5

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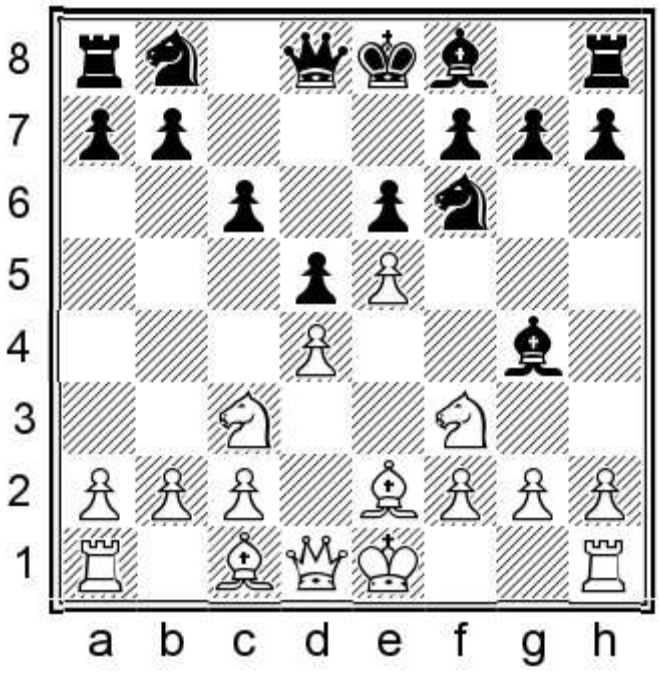

Position after: 6.e5

6...♘fd7

Now, 6...♘e4 runs into trouble: 7.♘xe4 dxe4 8.♗g5! White gains an important tempo. 8...♕b6 9.♘d2 ♗xe2 10.♕xe2 ♕xb2 11.♖b1 ♕xd4 12.0-0∞ White has a huge attack and it is obvious to the human eye that Black's position is untenable.

7.0-0

The Spanish Grandmaster Munoz Pantoja has reached this position a total of 18 times according to ChessBase's online database. Considering that this position has only been featured in 55 games, that makes him by far the most committed advocate of this line. As you will see, he does have a valid point.

7.♘g5 is an interesting alternative, but it leads to nothing more than a perpetual check. 7...♗xe2 8.♕xe2 h6 9.♘xe6 [9.♕h5 simply leaves Black with the upper hand after 9...g6 10.♕h3 ♗e7 11.♘f3 c5∓ since White's pieces are uncoordinated.] 9...fxe6 10.♕h5+ ♔e7 11.♕h4+ ♔e8=

7...c5

7...♗e7 is too slow, and White develops a dangerous initiative with 8.♘e1 ♗xe2 9.♘xe2 c5 10.c3±.

8.♗g5!

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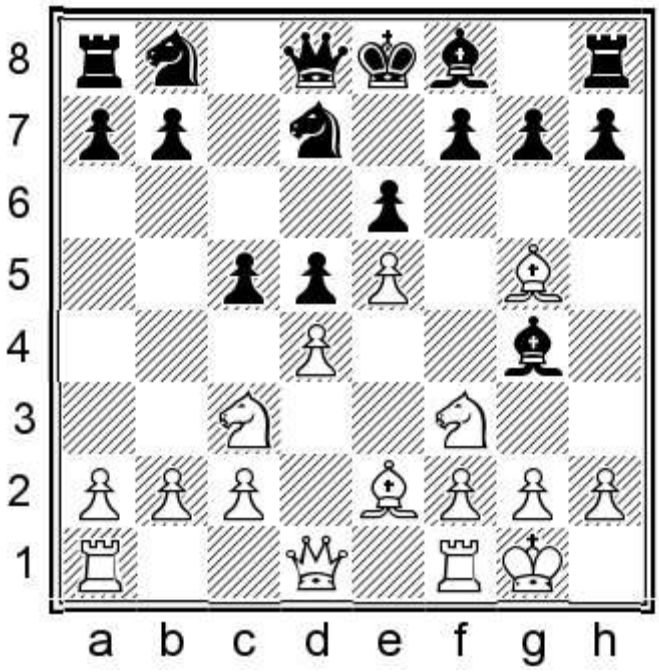


Position after: 8.♗g5!

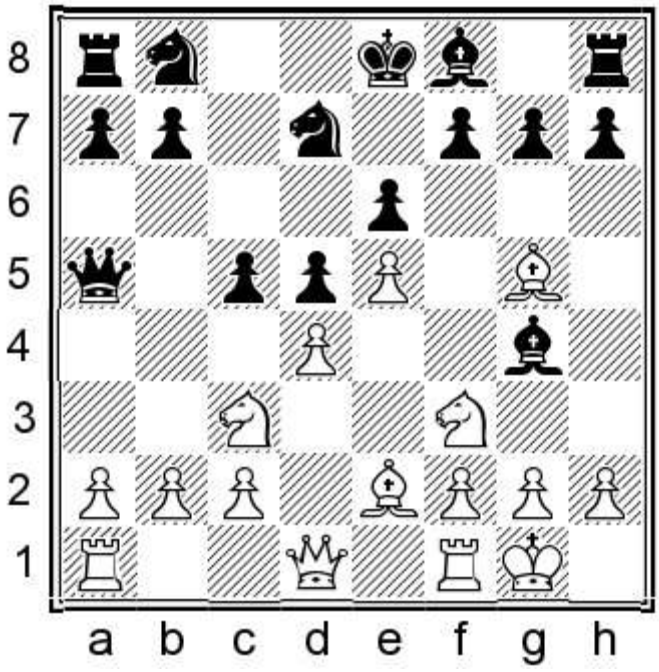
This is White's idea. Black needs to reply accurately to contain White's initiative.

8...♕a5!

This precise move allows Black to withstand White's attack.

A) 8...♗e7?! 9.♗xe7 ♕xe7 10.♘b5!± The knight penetrates Black's position with devastating effect.

B) 8...♕b6?! 9.♘a4! ♕c7 10.c4!± White crashes through the center and Black is unprepared.



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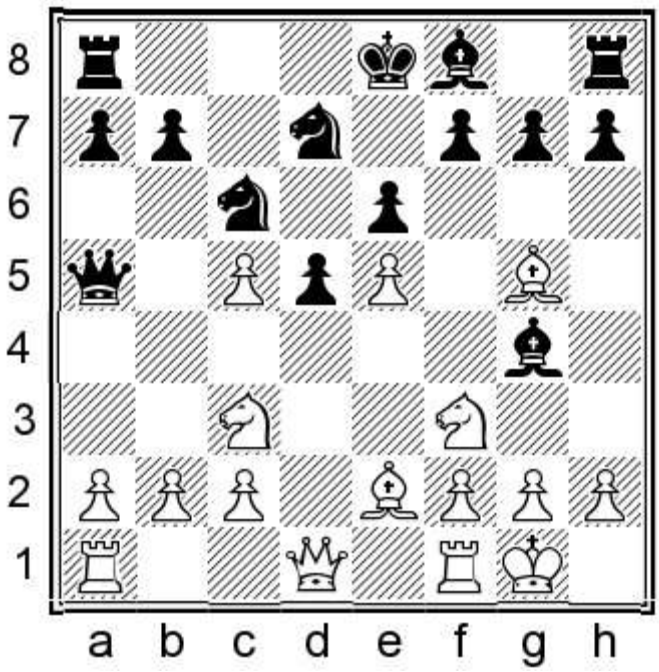
Position after: 8...♕a5!

9.a3

White brings a new idea into consideration: b4. He has alternatives:

A) 9.dxc5 is a logical continuation: White releases the pressure on the d4-pawn and opens the position. 9...♘c6



Position after: 9...♘c6

A1) 10.a3 ♕xc5 11.♘b5!? This move forces Black to give up castling rights after 11...♕b6 12.♗e3 ♗c5 13.♘d6+ but, in return, White will lose the weak e5-pawn. 13...♔e7 14.♗xc5 ♘xc5 15.b4 ♘a4 16.♕d2 ♗xf3 17.♕g5+ ♔d7 18.♗xf3 ♘xe5 19.♕xe5 ♕xd6∞

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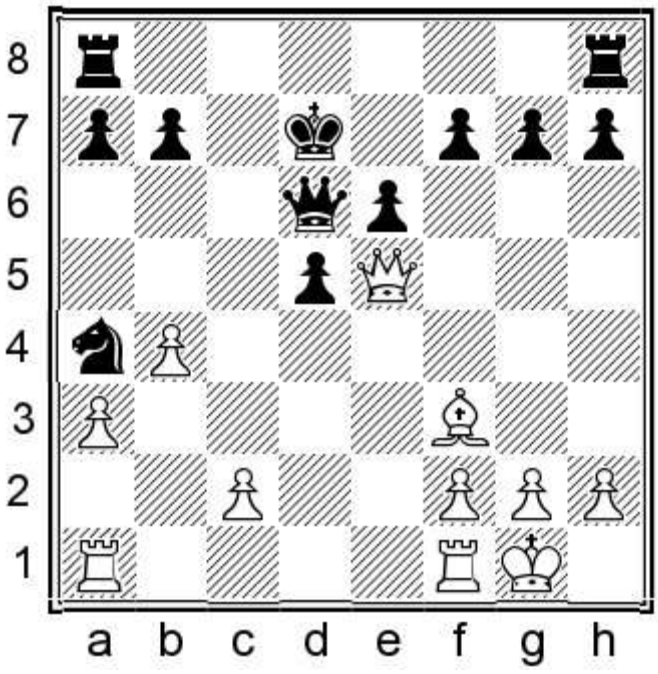
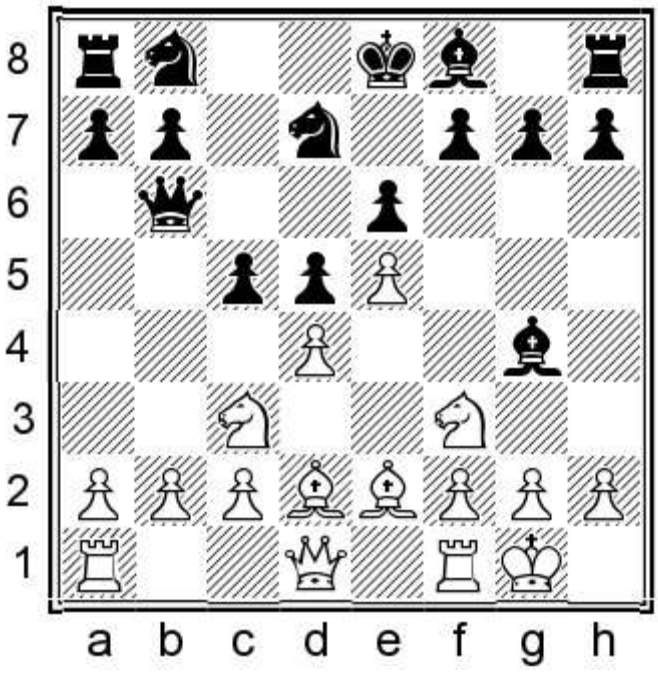


Position after: 19...♕xd6∞

White has compensation for the pawn because Black's king is in the center of the board, but Black remains solid and has time to regroup. The position is complicated, with chances for both sides.

A2) 10.♘b5 White continues to pose problems but Black survives with accurate play. 10...♗xf3! 11.gxf3 ♘dxe5 12.b4! ♘xb4 13.♗d2 ♘c4 14.♗xc4 dxc4 15.♘d6+ ♗xd6 16.cxd6 ♕c5 17.♗xb4 ♕xb4 The d6-pawn is strong, but White's position is too precarious for him to reap the benefits. 18.♖b1 ♕a5 19.♖xb7 0-0=.

B) 9.♗d2 White continues to go after Black's queen. 9...♕b6



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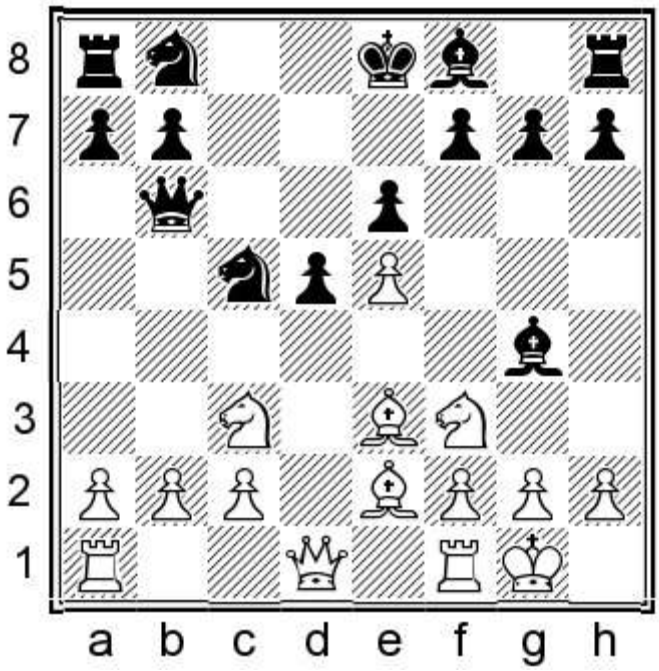
Position after: 9...♕b6

B1) 10.♘a4 continues to poke the Black queen, but White's initiative fades in the next few moves. 10...♕c7 11.dxc5 [11.♘xc5 ♘xc5 12.dxc5 ♗xc5 13.c4 dxc4 14.♕a4+ ♘d7=] 11...♘c6 12.b4 ♗e7= At some point, Black will capture the e5-pawn and have an excellent position, reminiscent of the advance Caro-Kann with 3...c5.

B2) 10.dxc5 ♘xc5 11.♗e3



Position after: 11.♗e3

White keeps targeting Black's queen, since it is Black's only weakness. 11...a6!N Preventing ♘b5 for good. [11...♗xf3 12.♗xf3 ♘c6 13.♖b1! ♕d8 was played in Munoz Pantoja, M (2460) – Nikolic, P (2638) 1-0 (60) Barcelona 2012, and White could have continued his dynamic play with 14.♘b5!N.] 12.♘a4 ♕a5 13.♗xc5!? [13.♘xc5 leads to an equal endgame: 13...♗xc5 14.c4 ♗xe3 15.fxe3 ♘c6 16.cxd5 ♕xd5 17.♕xd5 exd5=.] 13...♗xc5 14.c4 dxc4 15.♖c1 0-0 16.♖xc4 ♗xf3 17.♗xf3 ♗e7 18.♗xb7 ♖a7 19.♗f3 ♕xe5 20.♕c2 ♘d7= The awkward clustering of Black's forces is temporary.

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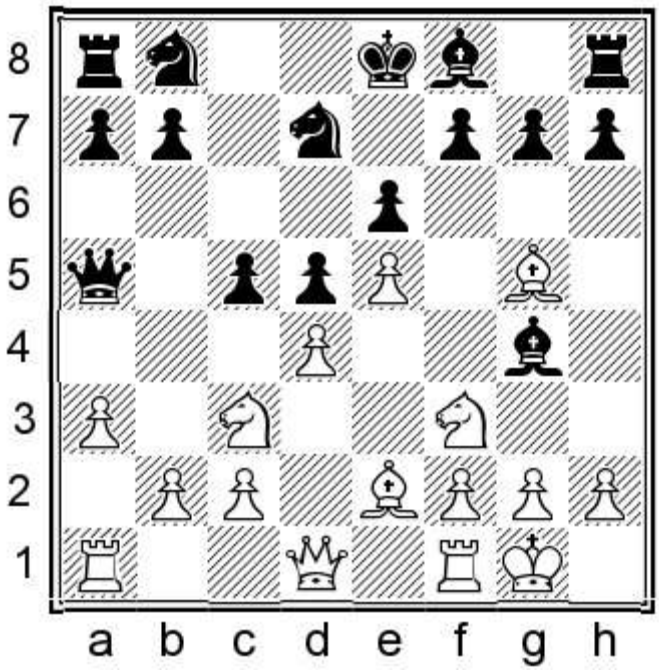

Position after: 9.a3

9...cxd4!

Black has no choice but to open the center with this move.

9...♗xf3? is too ambitious, and Black's position collapses quickly: 10.♗xf3 cxd4 [10...♘c6 11.♗xd5!±] 11.♘xd5! exd5 12.e6! fxe6 13.♕xd4+– White's attack is crushing.

10.♘xd4 ♗xe2 11.♕xe2 ♘c6 12.♖ad1

12.♘b3 ♕a6! Any endgame that arises from this position will be good for Black. Instead of trading queens, White can continue with 13.♘b5 but Black manages to complete his development: 13...♖c8 14.♖fe1 h6 15.♗e3 ♗e7=.

12...♘xd4 13.♖xd4 h6

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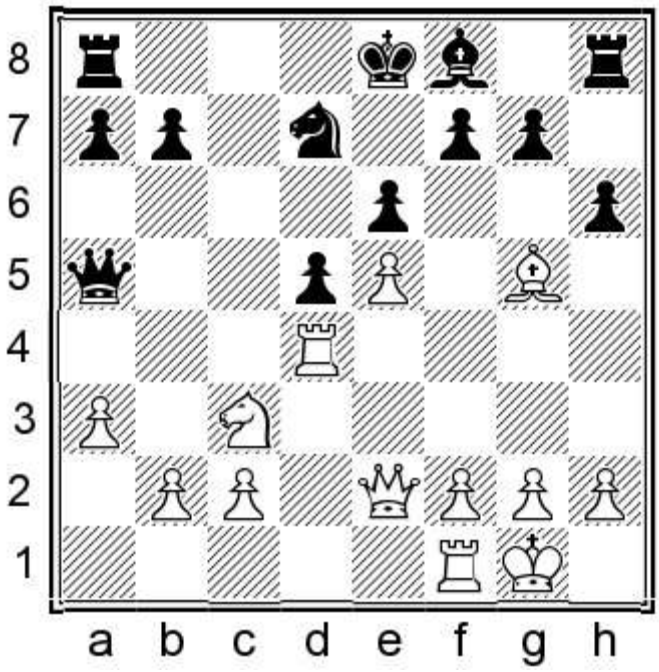
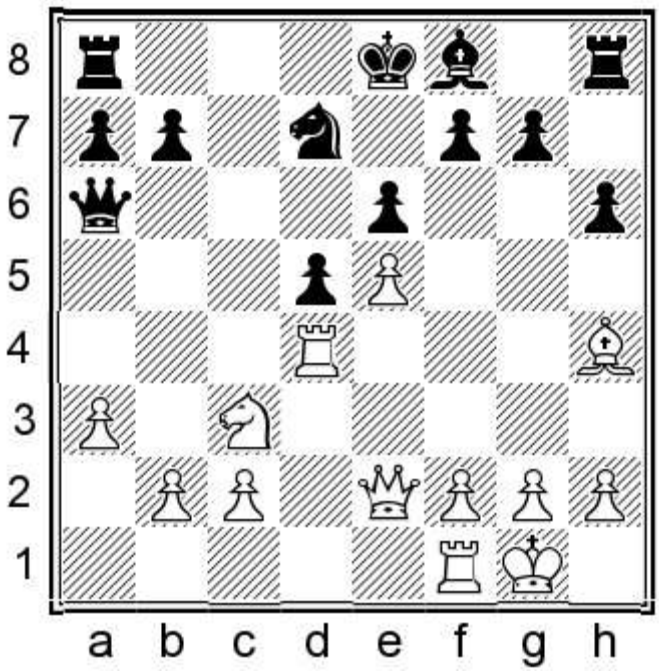


Position after: 13...h6

14.♗h4

14.♗e3 a6! Black defends against the threat of ♖a4 and ♘b5. Before Black can complete his development, White can strike in the center: 15.♘xd5!? exd5 16.♖fd1 ♕c7 17.♖xd5 ♘c5 18.♗xc5 ♗xc5 19.e6 0-0 20.♖d7 ♕b6 21.b4 ♗xf2+! Black gives back the material to end White's attack. 22.♕xf2 ♕xe6 23.♖xb7 ♕a2!= Black finds just enough counterplay on the queenside to equalize.

14...♕a6!



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Position after: 14...♕a6!

Black simultaneously defends against White's queenside threats and slows down White's attack by offering a queen trade.

15.♘b5!? ♕b6! 16.♖xd5!?

White continues to force the issue, but Black has enough resources to survive. 16.♖fd1 allows Black to regain some space with 16...♗c5 17.♖4d2 a6 18.♘c3 g5! 19.♗g3 ♖d8!= The position remains complicated, but White's attack is not so dangerous.

16...exd5 17.♘d6+ ♗xd6 18.exd6+ ♔f8 19.♕e7+ ♔g8 20.♕xd7 ♕c6 21.♕xc6 bxc6 22.♗e7 f6 23.d7 ♔f7 24.♖e1 ♖hd8! 25.♗xd8 ♖xd8

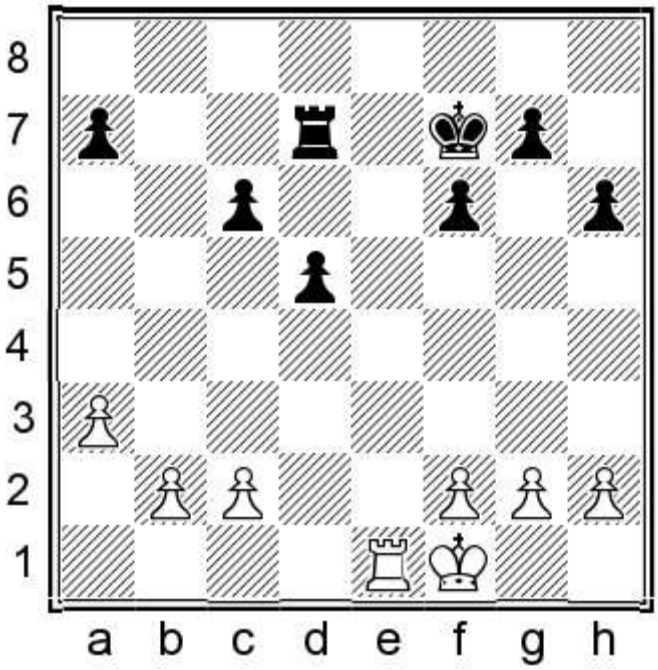
At last, White's attack is over and we have reached an equal endgame.

26.♔f1

26.♖e8 ♖xe8 27.dxe8=♕+ ♔xe8= Black has nothing to worry about in this pawn endgame since he can prevent White from making progress with ...c5.

26...♖xd7=

Although Black's pawn structure is slightly inferior, he should be able to hold this endgame easily.



Position after: 26...♖xd7=

b) 6.d4

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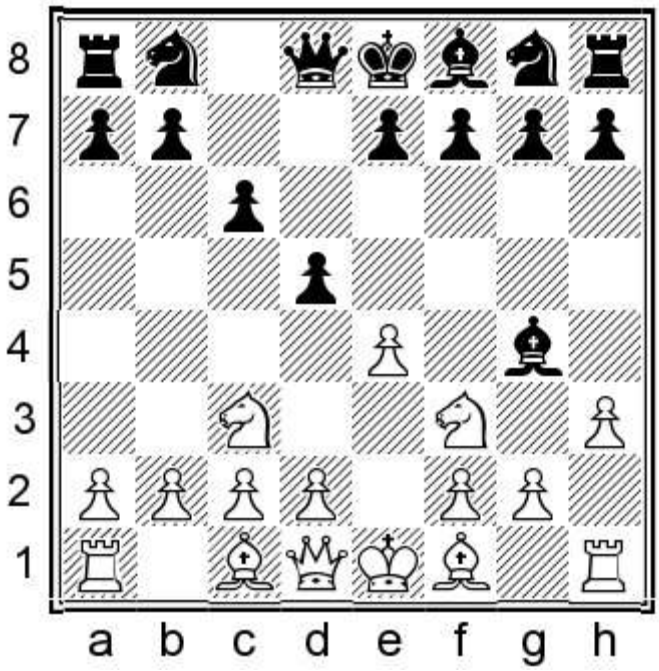
1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3



Position after: 4.h3

We now turn our attention to White's main line and, undoubtedly, his most logical move.

With 4.h3 White immediately goes after Black's light-squared bishop and effectively forces him to give up the bishop pair.

4...♗xf3 5.♕xf3

5.gxf3 is an attempt to open the position, but White's activity does not justify the spoiled pawn structure. Black should maintain his solid position and develop his pieces naturally. 5...e6 6.d4 ♘f6

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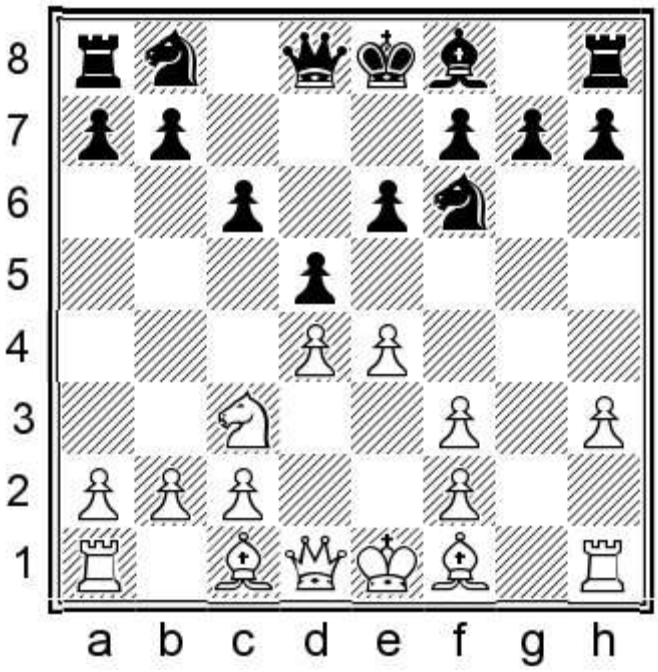
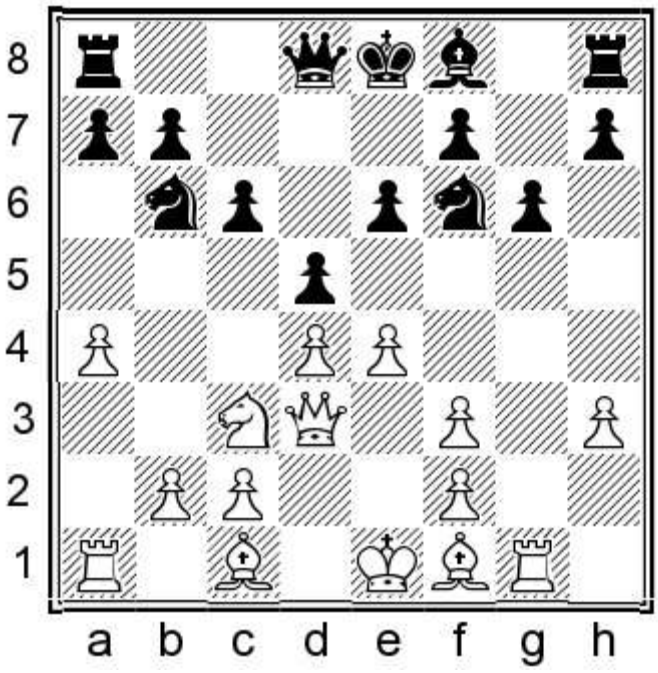


Position after: 6...♘f6

7.♕d3 [7.♖g1 ♘bd7 8.♗e3 g6 9.♕d2 ♗b4 10.♗d3 ♕a5= Black had an excellent position in Semenova, E (2260) – Girya, O (2454) Khanty-Mansiysk 2018; similarly 7.♗e3 ♕b6!? 8.a3N 8...♗e7 9.♗d3 ♘bd7=.] 7...♘bd7 8.♖g1 ♘b6 9.a4 g6=



Position after: 9...g6=

Black had equalised in Muniz Pardino, A (2311) – Tazelaar, H (2373) ICCF email 2017, wherein a draw was soon agreed.

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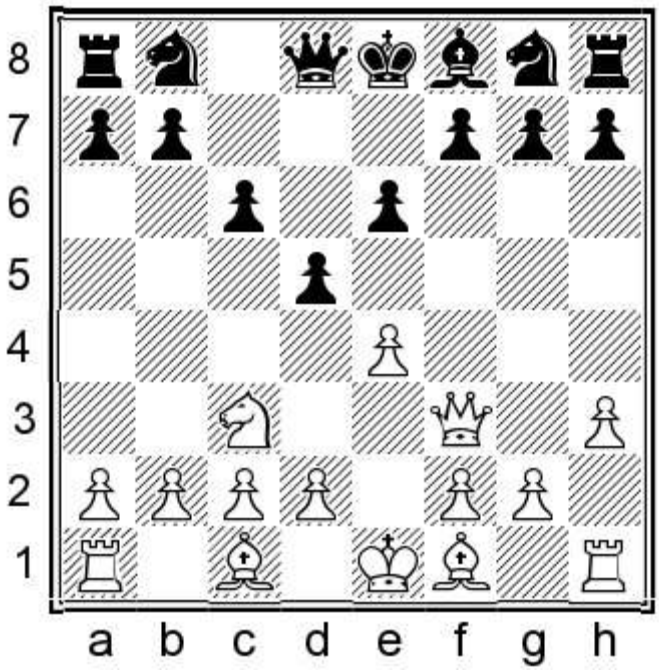
5...e6



Position after: 5...e6

We have now arrived at a crossroads. White has four major options: 6.d3, 6.g3, 6.d4, and 6.♗e2. The moves 6.d3 and 6.g3 have similar intentions and, generally, neither is played without the other. The idea is to keep the center closed and play g3, d3, ♗g2, 0-0, ♕e2, f4. 6.♗e2 and 6.d4, instead, attempt to steer the game in a different direction by keeping White's pieces centralized and ready for an open center. Although all these lines share some common ideas and themes, every move order has its own purpose and requires a different treatment from Black.

6.d4

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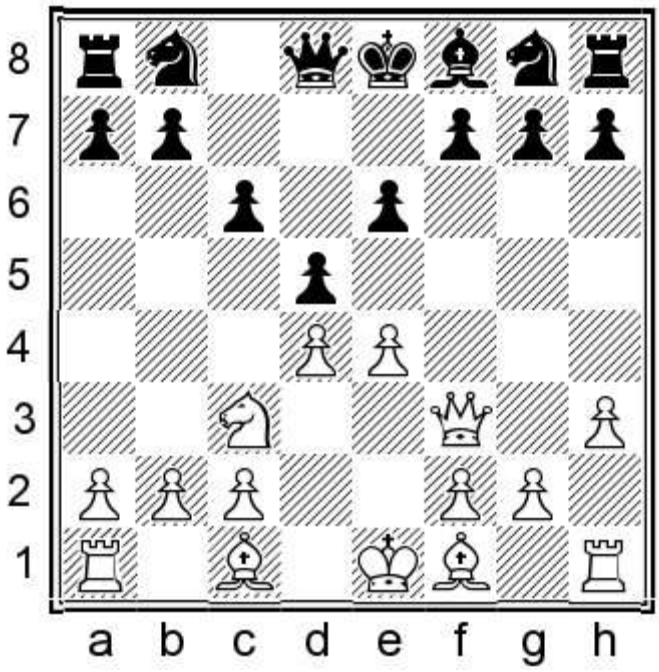

Position after: 6.d4

White is making his intentions very clear with this move: he wants to open the center and quickly develop his pieces. This plan is quite natural: an open game would favor White since he has the bishop pair and a bit more space. For this reason, White will have the upper hand if Black continues with simple and straightforward development. Instead, Black needs to pressure the unprotected d4-pawn and create problems for White in the center. Before we begin our discussion of 6.d4, however, let me mention two alternatives.

A) 6.a3 has little independent value since White has nothing better than a transposition to 6.d4 lines after 6...♘f6. Here, 7.d4 would transpose to 6.d4 ♘f6 7.a3.

B) 6.exd5, instead, only helps Black since he can now develop his b8-knight to c6. 6...cxd5 7.♗b5+ ♘c6 8.0-0 ♗d6=

6...♘f6

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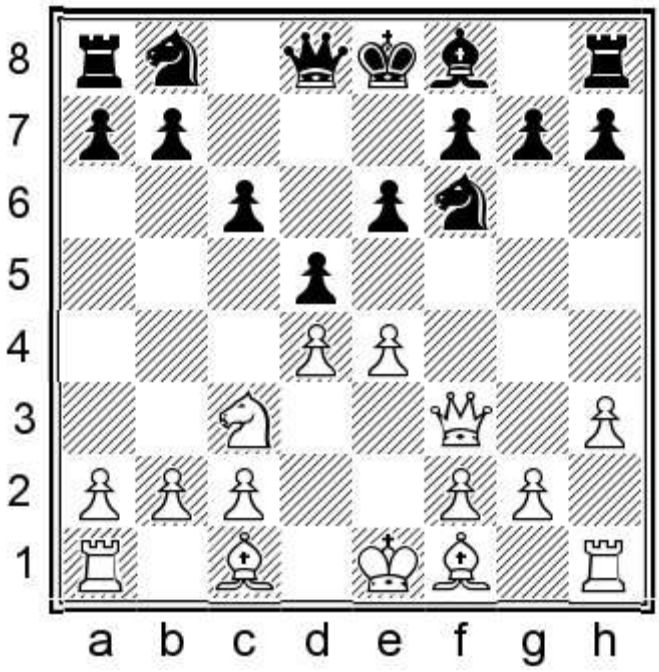

Position after: 6...♘f6

Black is threatening ...dxe4 followed by ...♕xd4. If White wants to keep his d4-pawn, he needs to either take a time out from development or close the position. Neither of the two options are desirable for White, which is why his most interesting move is 7.♗d3, giving up the d4-pawn for dynamic compensation.

6...dxe4 7.♕xe4± gives White a comfortable edge.

7.♗d3

A) Closing the position with 7.e5 plays into Black's strengths. White's center is weak and Black will continue with a quick ...c5 to break it up. 7...♘fd7 8.♗f4 [8.♕g3 ♕b6!⇄] 8...c5 9.dxc5 ♗xc5=

B) 7.♗g5 The pin is not very effective, since Black is not worried about ♗xf6. 7...h6 8.♗xf6 ♕xf6 9.♕xf6 gxf6= Black eventually won this equal endgame in Garcia Jimenez, F (2251) – Cruz Lledo, P (2414) Xativa 2016.

C) 7.a3!? With this move, White prepares for ...dxe4 and prevents ...♗b4 ideas. Although it seems like a slow approach, the nature of the position allows White this luxury. 7...dxe4 8.♕e3!

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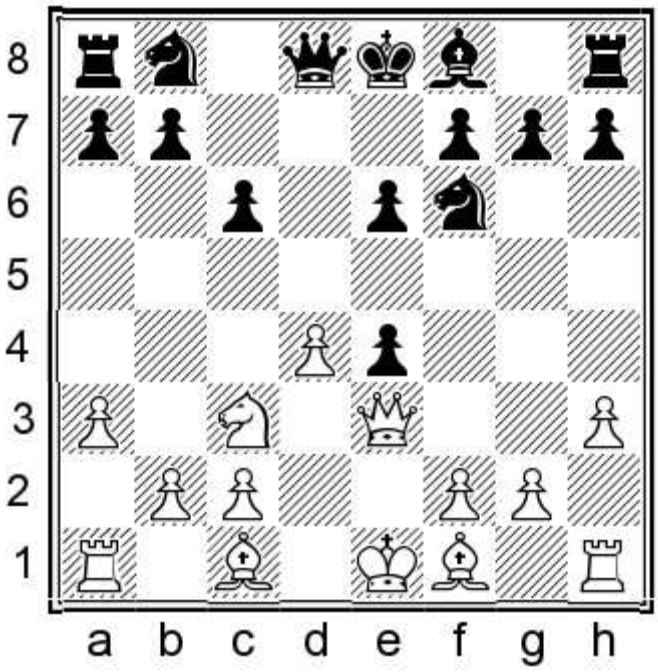
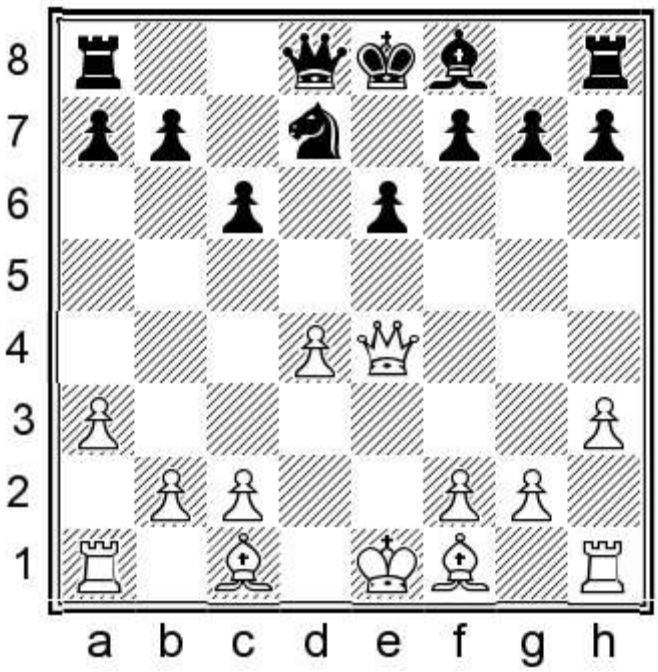


Position after: 8.♕e3!

White cannot give up the d4-pawn, so he protects it and prepares to play ♘xe4 on the next move.

C1) Continuing with normal development gives White an edge: 8...♘bd7 9.♘xe4 ♘xe4 10.♕xe4



Position after: 10.♕xe4

10...♗e7 [10...♘f6 11.♕d3 ♗d6N 12.♗e2 ♕c7 13.♕f3!± White prevents ...♗f4 and keeps both of his bishops. This position is very unpleasant for Black because he lacks an active plan. The ...e5 and ...c5 pawn breaks are favorable to White since they only open the position more.] 11.♗d3 [Editor's

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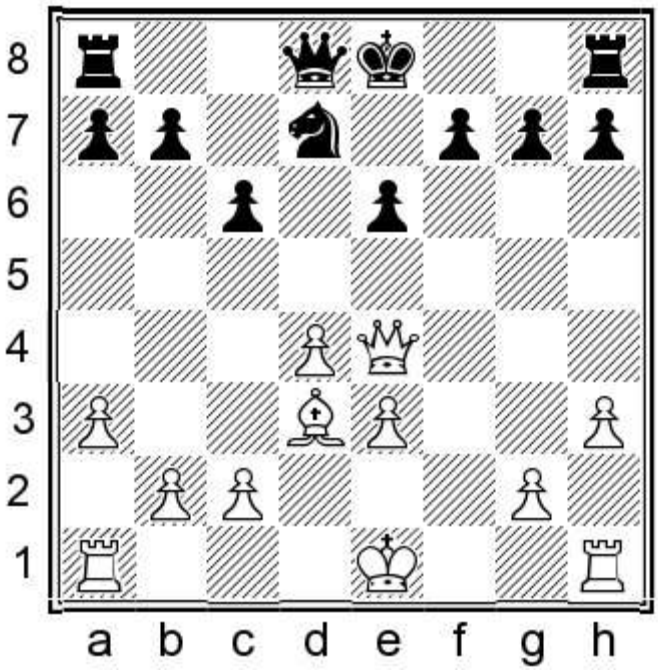
note: White can get away with substantial liberties in order to keep the bishop-pair. For instance, 11.♗e2 ♕a5+ 12.c3 ♗g5 13.f4!? as in Fernandez, D (2500) – Gormally, D (2474) Northampton 2018.] 11...♗g5 12.♗e3 ♗xe3 13.fxe3±



Position after: 13.fxe3±

Here, even though Black has traded off the dark-squared bishops, White has an edge. He later went on to win in Korley, K (2453) – Wang, T (2354) Charlotte 2018.

C2) 8...♕a5!N This move is very important. Black needs to trade the dark-squared bishops to eliminate White's pair of bishops. 9.♗d2 ♗b4! This was Black's idea. Now, White has no choice but to give up his bishop pair to recapture the e4-pawn. 10.♘xe4 ♗xd2+ 11.♘xd2 [11.♕xd2 simply leads to an equal endgame: 11...♕xd2+ 12.♘xd2 ♘bd7=] 11...♘bd7

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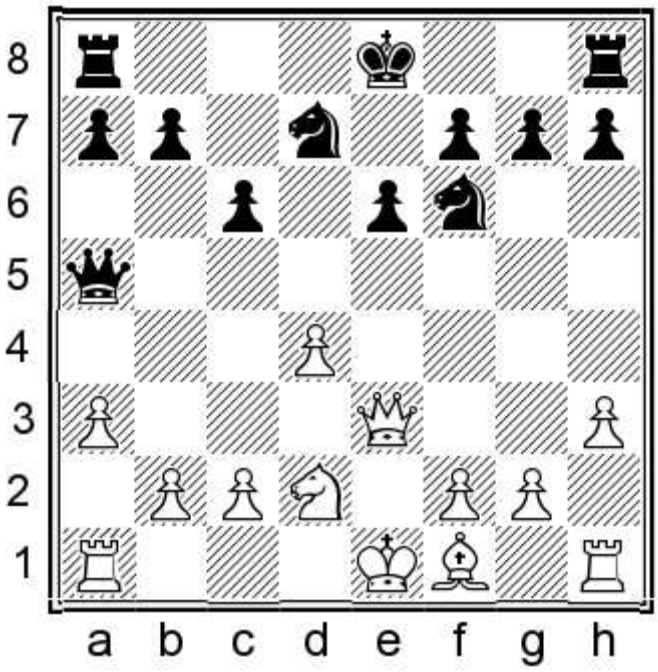

Position after: 11...♘bd7

White has a bit more space, but Black is extremely solid. The game can continue in many directions, but Black has little to worry about.

C2.1) 12.g3 ♕d5! Black throws a dart at White's plan by preventing ♗g2. 13.♖g1 [13.♘f3 0-0 14.♗g2 ♕c4! White can't make much progress. The queen trade 15.♕e2 ends his initiative: 15...♕xe2+ 16.♔xe2 a5=.] 13...0-0 14.0-0-0 b5! Now that White has committed to castling queenside, Black shouldn't hold back from starting his attack on that side. 15.♗g2 ♕d6⇄

C2.2) 12.♗d3 0-0 13.0-0 ♘d5 14.♕e4 ♘7f6 15.♘c4 ♕c7 16.♕e5 ♖ac8=

C2.3) 12.0-0-0 b5! Black is ready to attack on the queenside! We have reached an interesting and complicated position.

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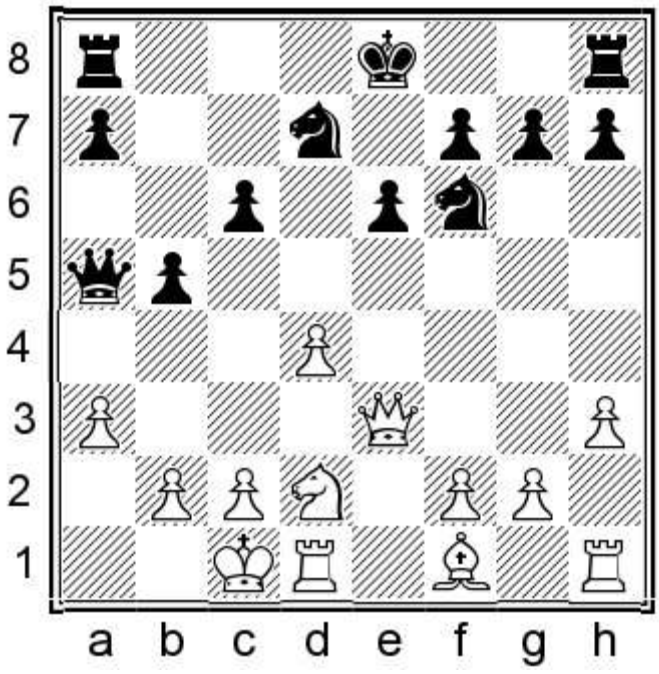


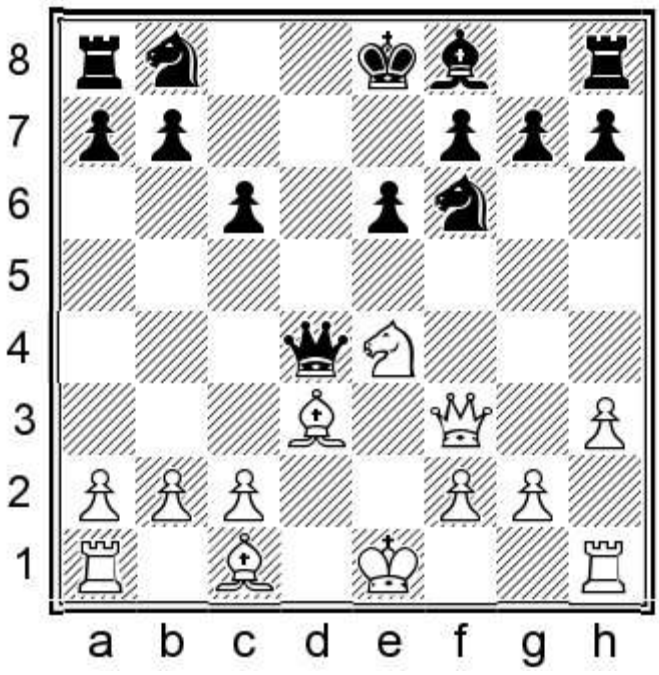
Position after: 12...b5!

13.♗d3 [13.g4 ♘d5 14.♕e4 ♖c8=] 13...♘d5 14.♕e4 ♕c7=.

7...dxe4

Black takes the sacrifice, because backing down now gives White a slight edge.

8.♘xe4 ♕xd4



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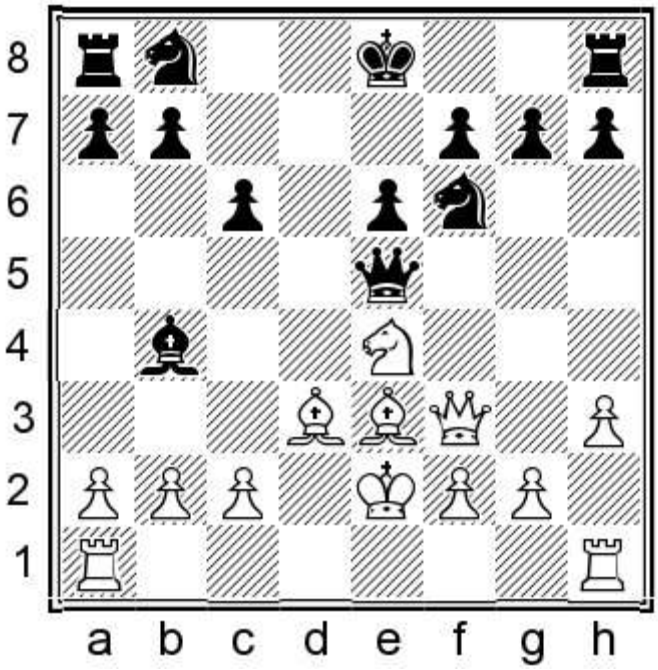
Position after: 8...♕xd4

Black has captured the pawn on d4 and the ball is in White's court. He needs to show compensation and can attempt to do so in three ways.

9.c3!?

White forces the queen to retreat to d8. This option seems most critical, but Black still has little trouble equalizing.

A) 9.♗e3 White just wants to gain a tempo and then castle queenside. Unfortunately, Black has an important check at his disposal: 9...♗b4+! Black forces the White king to stay put, since c3 doesn't work. 10.♔e2 ♕e5!



Position after: 10...♕e5!

Black can now combine attack and defense, using White's king position to create counterplay. 11.♗f4 [11.c3 allows Black to simplify the position: 11...♘xe4! 12.♗xe4 ♗e7 13.♖hd1 ♕c7= White should have enough compensation for the pawn, but Black is in no trouble at all.] 11...♕d5 12.♖hd1 [12.♘xf6+ gives White nothing more than a repetition: 12...gxf6 13.♗e4 ♕c4+ 14.♗d3 ♕d5=.] 12...♘bd7 White has nothing better than to retreat the king so that he can continue his attack. 13.♔f1 ♗e7! By retreating his bishop to e7, Black covers all the important squares and is now ready to move his king to safety. Again, White has nothing better than a repetition: 14.c4 ♕d4 15.♗e3 ♕e5 16.♗f4 ♕d4=.

B) 9.0-0 This is perhaps the most natural continuation: White brings his king to safety and prepares to challenge Black on the open d-file. Black needs to combine active and defensive play to stay out of trouble. So Black introduces the threat of ...♘e5 and solidifies his position. 9...♘bd7!

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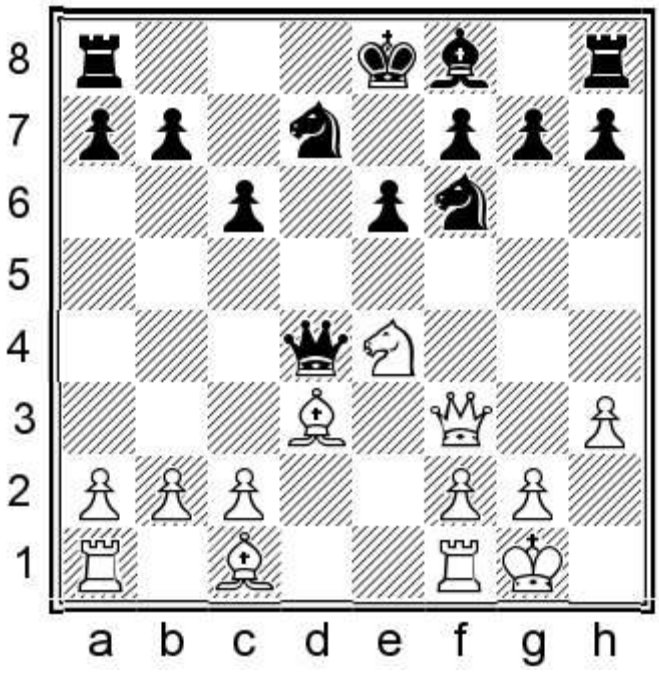
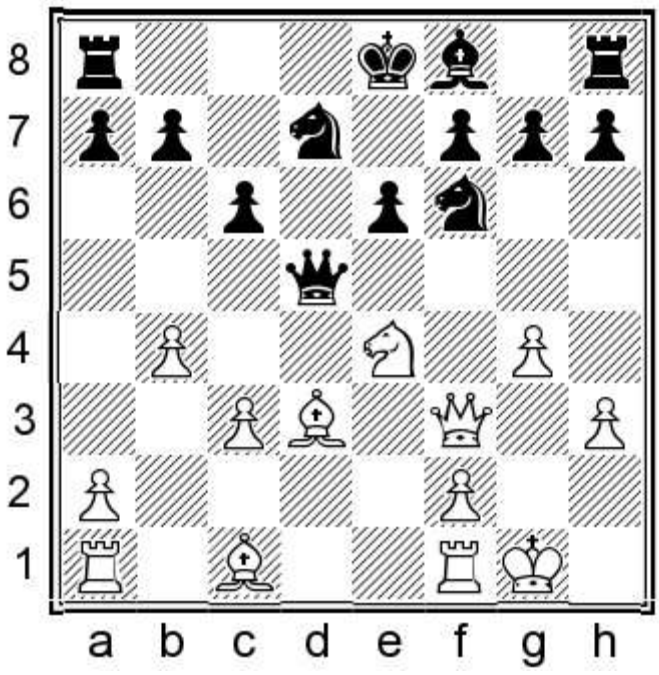


Position after: 9...♘bd7!

B1) 10.♖d1 allows Black to simplify: 10...♘xe4 11.♗xe4 ♕f6! 12.♗f4 ♗c5 13.b4!? ♗d4 14.♖ab1 ♘e5=.

B2) 10.c3!? is an interesting alternative to the more popular 10.♗e3. The main difference is that White can use the c2-square for his light-squared bishop, cuing up ideas of ♖d1 to hassle the enemy queen. Black should hence play 10...♕a4!?, moving the queen from the center of the board. [10...♕d5 11.♗c2!∞ would be more perilous.] 11.b3 ♕a5 12.b4!? [Black equalizes easily after 12.♗f4 ♘e5 13.♘xf6+ gxf6 14.♗xe5 fxe5=.] 12...♕h5! 13.g4 ♕d5



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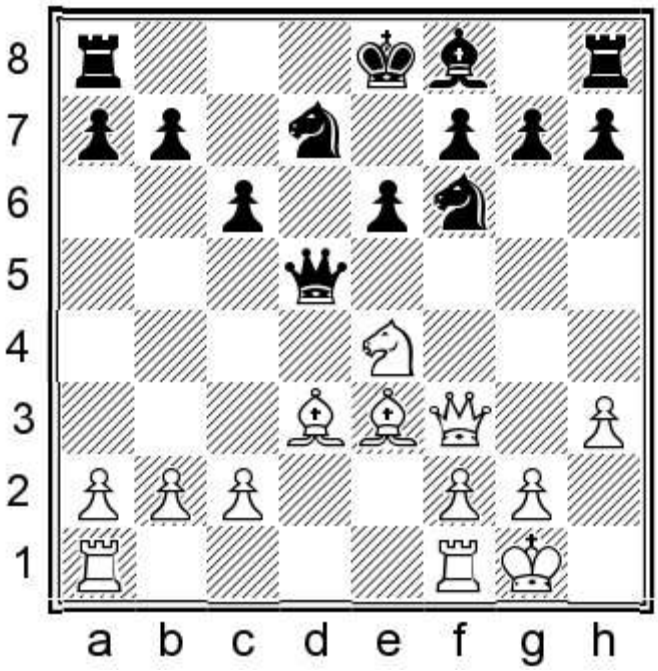
Position after: 13...♕d5

At last, Black's queen returns to d5, but now White's position has been weakened. 14.♖d1 h5! Black counterattacks on the kingside! 15.c4 hxg4 16.hxg4 ♘e5! 17.♕e2 ♕d7 18.♗f4 [18.g5 keeps White trying to equalize after 18...♘xd3 19.♖xd3 ♕c7 20.♘g3 ♘d7 21.g6 0-0-0 22.gxf7 ♕e5∓] 18...♕d4 19.♗e3 ♕d7 20.♗f4 [White has no follow-up after 20.♗c2 ♕c8∓] 20...♕d4=

B3) 10.♗e3 This move is a natural continuation but it fails to trouble Black. 10...♕d5



Position after: 10...♕d5

B3.1) 11.♖fd1 ♗e7 12.c4 [12.♘xf6+? ♘xf6 13.♕g3 ♗d6!∓ Black was clearly in the driver's seat and went on to win in Vakhlamov, I– Yuffa, D Sochi 2019.] 12...♕a5= Black had equalised in Thavandiran, S (2385) – Nyzhnyk, I (2594) Saint Louis 2017, and White later failed to show enough compensation.

B3.2) 11.♖ad1 ♗e7 12.c4 [12.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 13.♗e4

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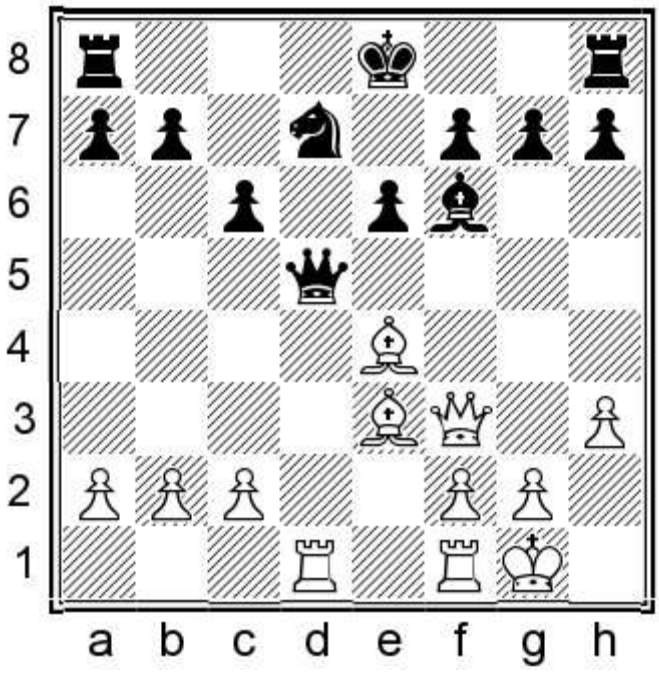

Position after: 13.♗e4

This approach looks dangerous but Black can simply give material back and bring his king to safety. 13...♕xa2!N 14.♗xc6 bxc6 15.♕xc6 0-0 16.♖xd7 ♗xb2=] 12...♕a5N 13.♗d2 [After 13.♕g3 Black should again simplify matters by forcing the queen trade: 13...♕e5! 14.♕xg7 ♘xe4 15.♕xe5 ♘xe5 16.♗xe4 ♘xc4 17.♗d4 0-0=] 13...♕b6 14.♗c3 ♘xe4 15.♗xe4 ♗f6= White seems to have barely enough compensation for the pawn.

9...♕d8 10.0-0

White needs to use his lead in development to pose immediate problems to Black. He will have a difficult time showing compensation if he fails to do so.

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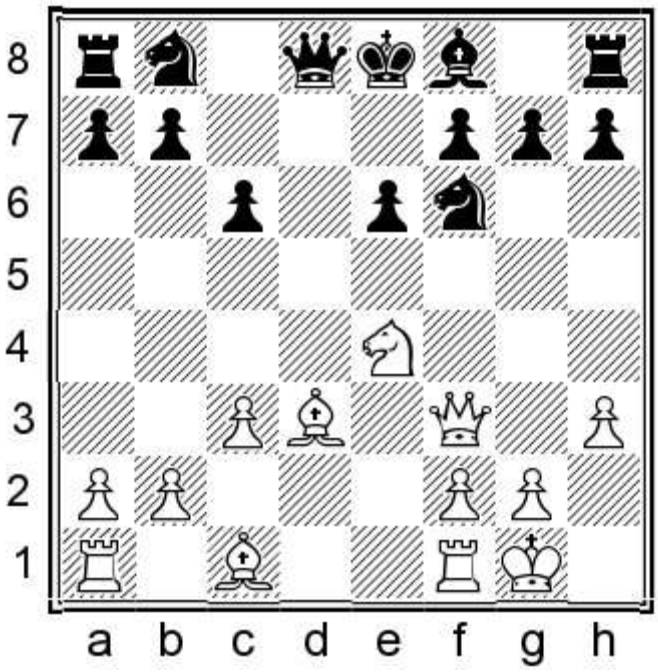


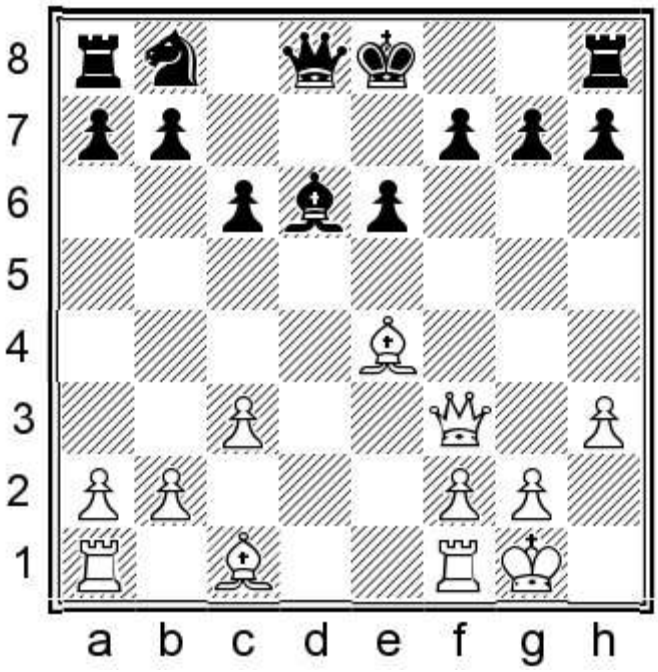
Position after: 10.0-0

10...♘xe4!

A) 10...♘bd7 is dangerous for Black: 11.♖d1 ♗e7 12.♗f4 ♘d5 13.♘d6+ ♗xd6 14.♗xd6 ♕f6 15.♕g3 e5 16.♗a3⩲ The position has opened and the two bishops reign supreme; White has excellent compensation for the pawn.

B) 10...♗e7 also leaves Black struggling to find a comfortable position after 11.♗f4 ♘xe4 12.♗xe4⩲.

11.♗xe4 ♗d6!



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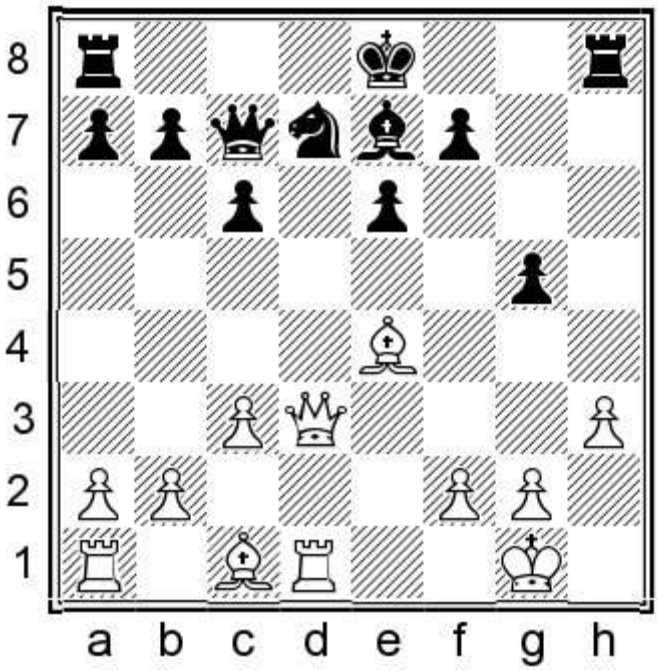
Position after: 11...♗d6!

Black intends to continue with ...♕c7 and ...♘d7, giving him the option of castling queenside. White must continue concretely.

12.♖d1 ♕c7 13.♕d3! ♗e7!

Other moves are playable, but I believe that this is the simplest way for Black to equalize.

14.♗xh7 ♘d7N 15.♗e4 g5!



Position after: 15...g5!

This is an important move. Black must generate counterplay on the kingside before White is able to finish his development.

15...0-0-0 is too slow and White can pose problems for Black with 16.♕f3 ♘f6 17.♗f4 ♕b6 18.b4∞.

16.♗f3 0-0-0 17.♕e2!?

White is trying to prevent ...f5 by hitting the e6-pawn.

17.♗e3 lets Black pursue his kingside initiative: 17...f5 18.♕c4 ♖h6 19.♖d2 ♘e5 20.♕e2 ♖h4!⇄.

17...♖h6!

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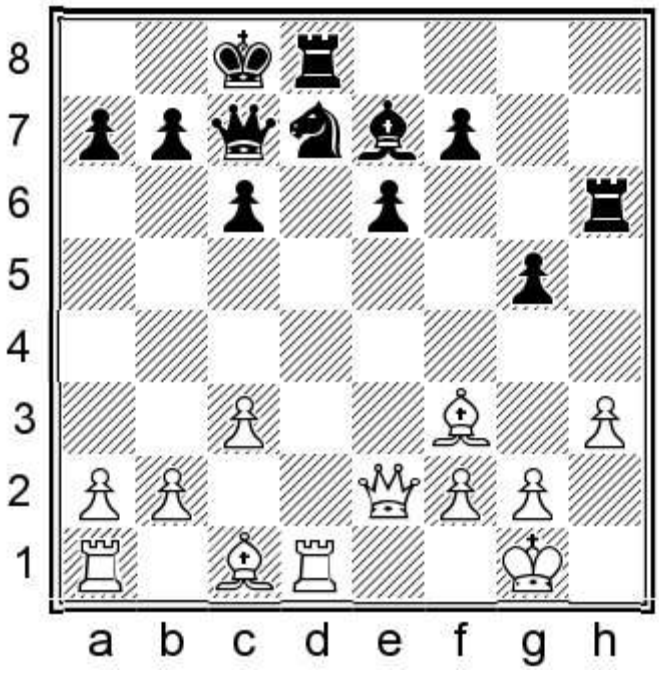


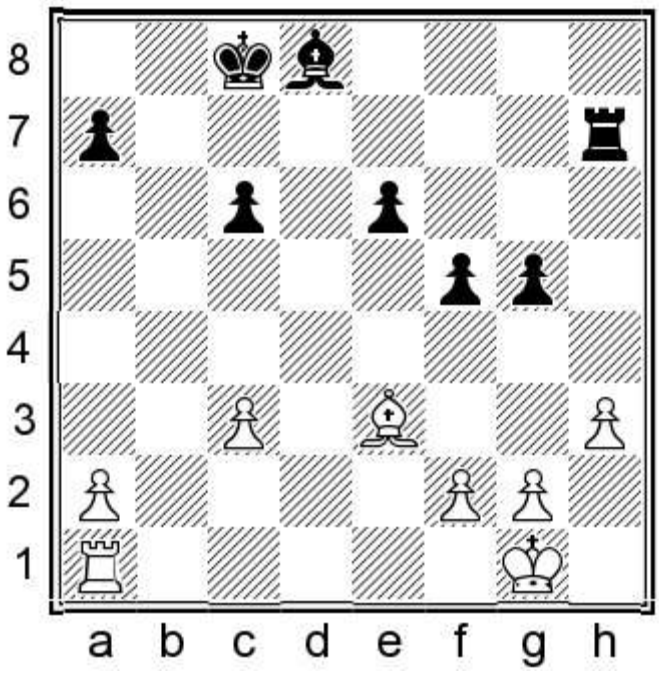
Position after: 17...♖h6!

Renewing the threat of ...f5!

18.b4

White reacts on the queenside, but his attack is not dangerous and the game quickly simplifies.
18.♗e3 f5 19.♖d2 e5∞

18...f5 19.b5 ♘e5! 20.♖xd8+ ♗xd8 21.bxc6 ♘xf3+ 22.♕xf3 ♕xc6 23.♕xc6+ bxc6 24.♗e3 ♖h7=



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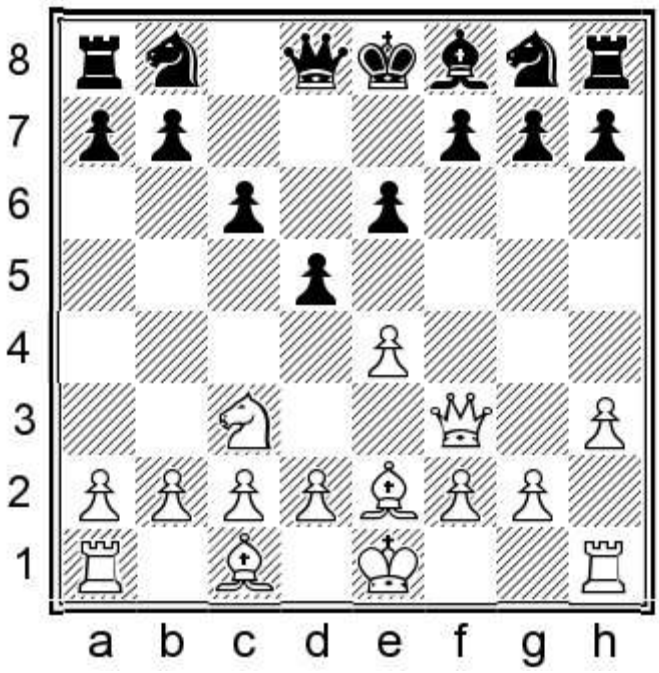
Position after: 24...♖h7

c) 6.♗e2 d4

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6 6.♗e2!?



Position after: 6.♗e2!?

In the previous chapter, we saw how Black could use White's unprotected d4-pawn to generate counterplay in the center. 6.♗e2 is White's logical answer to those issues: he maintains his intention of playing d4, but seeks to castle first. This makes Black's job more difficult since there is not easy way to generate counterplay. If White successfully brings his king to safety on the kingside and then takes the center with d4, he will have a positional advantage. Therefore, Black's primary concern is to prevent d4. I will present a few options for Black so that you can employ multiple variations and to give you a wide range of exposure to the positional nuances of this variation.

This chapter will be focused on 6...d4, which is a blunt approach to the position. In the next chapter, we will discuss 6...♘f6 and then my main recommendation – 6...♗c5.

6...d4!?

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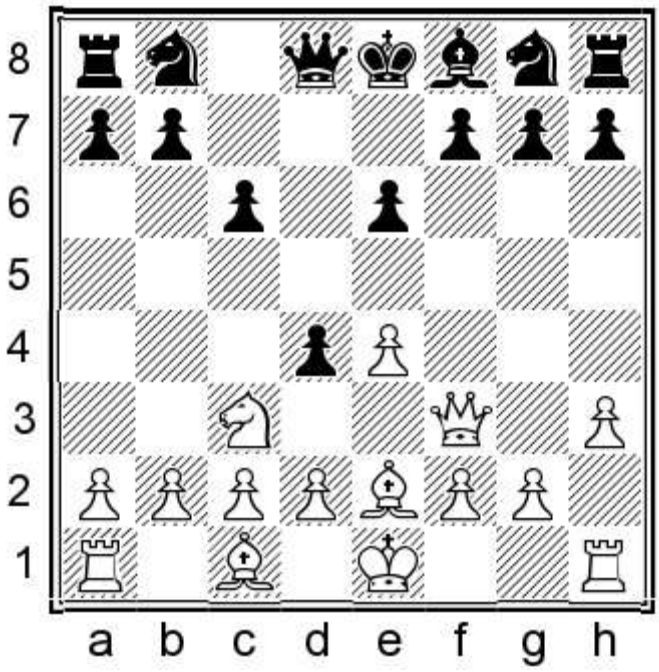

Position after: 6...d4!?

This move was successfully essayed by GM Alireza Firouzja and is an interesting attempt to complicate the game. Nevertheless, my analysis shows that White can obtain an advantage with precise play. With 6...d4, Black is closing the center and gaining space on the queenside. The issue, however, is that by doing so Black no longer exerts any pressure on White's center. Play becomes 'end-to-end': White will attack on the kingside whereas Black will look for counterplay on the queenside.

7.♘b1

7.♘d1 The knight stands worse on d1 since it has no good squares to go to. 7...♗d6 8.c3 [The misplacement of the knight is particularly apparent after 8.♕b3 ♕c7 9.0-0 ♘f6 10.d3 e5 11.c3 c5=.] 8...c5 9.b4!? This is the only way to get the d1-knight back into the game. After 9...♘c6 10.bxc5 ♗xc5 11.♘b2 ♘f6 12.♘d3 ♘d7= Black has excellent control of the center and White has clearly wasted too much time with his knight.

7...♗d6

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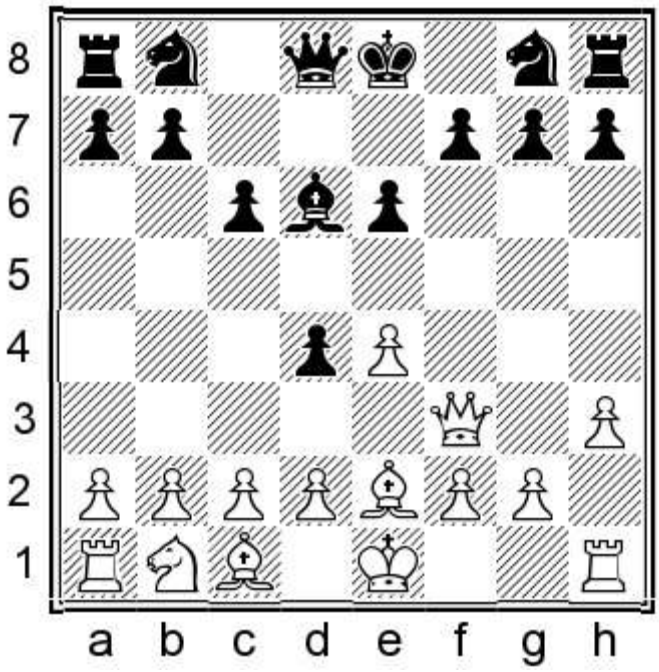

Position after: 7...♗d6

Black is ready to bring his knights into the game and expand on the queenside.

White's main problem is his queen, which is somewhat trapped on f3 and vulnerable to attacks. If White can find a good way to shield or move his queen without compromising his position, he will have an excellent position.

8.d3

This is White's most natural continuation: he proceeds with normal development and prepares to bring his pieces to the kingside.

A) 8.c3 c5 9.♘a3 ♘c6 10.0-0 was played in Idani, P (2611) – Firouzja, A (2618) Bushehr 2019, and Black could have continued with 10...♘ge7N with an excellent game.

B) 8.♕b3!?N

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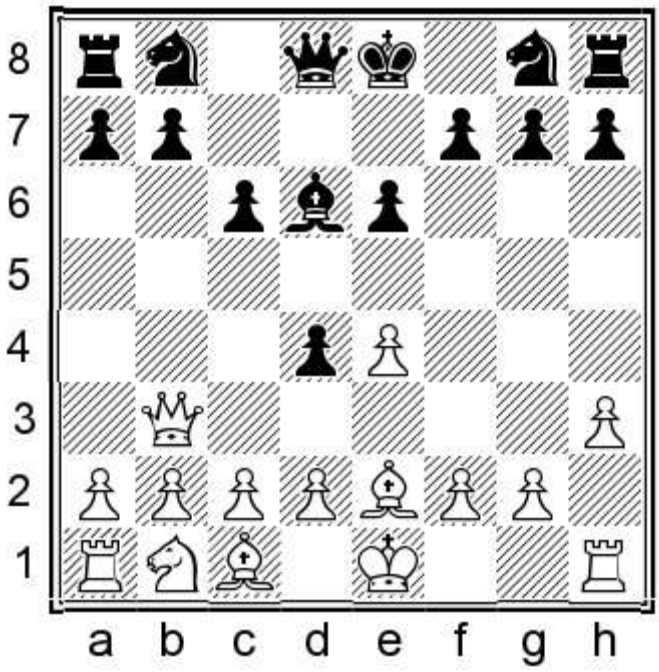

Position after: 8.♕b3!?N

This is another solution to White's queen issues. The move gains a tempo since the b7-pawn is unprotected.

B1) Black can defend the b7-pawn with 8...♕d7 but this gives White time to coordinate his pieces: 9.d3 c5 10.a4 ♘c6 11.♘a3 ♘ge7 12.♘c4 ♗c7 13.a5 ♖b8 14.0-0± White's bishop pair gives him a slight edge, although his queen is still awkwardly placed on b3.

B2) 8...♘d7!? This is definitely Black's most interesting continuation, especially from a practical perspective. White can take on b7, but he should proceed with extreme caution. 9.♕xb7 ['Having said A one must say B'. If White does otherwise his queen will remain exposed on the queenside: 9.d3 ♘c5 10.♕c4 e5 11.a4 ♘f6 12.0-0 0-0=.] 9...♘e7 10.♕a6 White must retreat the queen since ...♘c5 is an obvious threat. [10.♕b3 ♖b8 will transpose to some line of 10.♕a6 ♖b8; 10.0-0 simply leaves Black with the upper hand after 10...♘c5 11.♕b4 ♘xe4∓.] 10...♖b8

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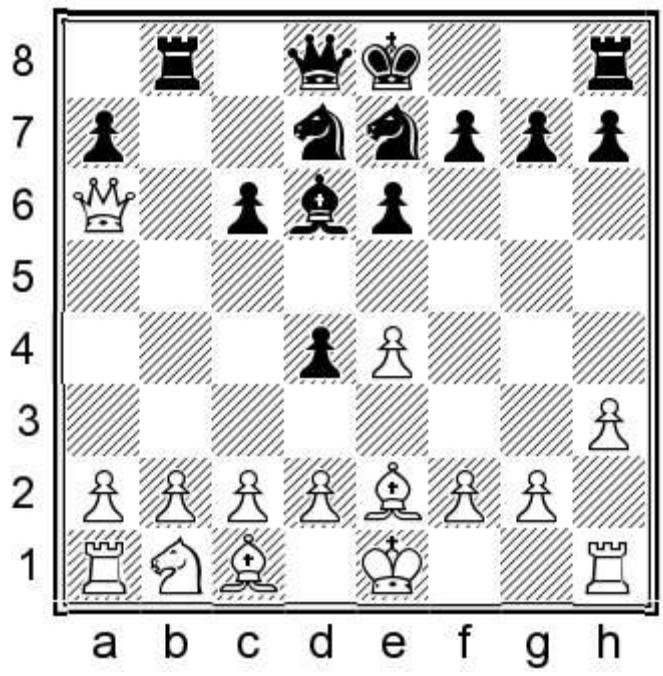

Position after: 10...♖b8

White is a pawn up, but this position is extremely difficult to play over the board. Black has many threats and White's queen will remain exposed for many moves.

B2.1) 11.♕d3 seems helpful, but after 11...c5 the queen still has nowhere to hide. 12.♘a3 ♘e5 13.♕a6 0-0 14.♘c4 ♘xc4 15.♗xc4 ♖b6 16.♕a3 ♘c6 17.d3 ♕f6⩲.

B2.2) 11.♕a4 ♖b4 12.♕a3 ♕b8 13.c3 ♖b6 14.♕a4 ♖xb2! 15.♘a3 dxc3 16.dxc3 0-0 17.♘c4 ♘b6 18.♘xb6 ♖xb6 19.0-0 ♘g6=.

B2.3) 11.c3 0-0! There is no need to defend the d4-pawn. Instead, Black finishes his development and prepares to attack the White king. 12.cxd4 [12.0-0 ♘g6⩲; 12.♘a3 f5 13.♕c4 ♔h8 14.0-0 ♘g6⩲; 12.d3 ♘c5 13.♕c4 dxc3 14.bxc3 ♘g6⩲.] 12...♖b4!

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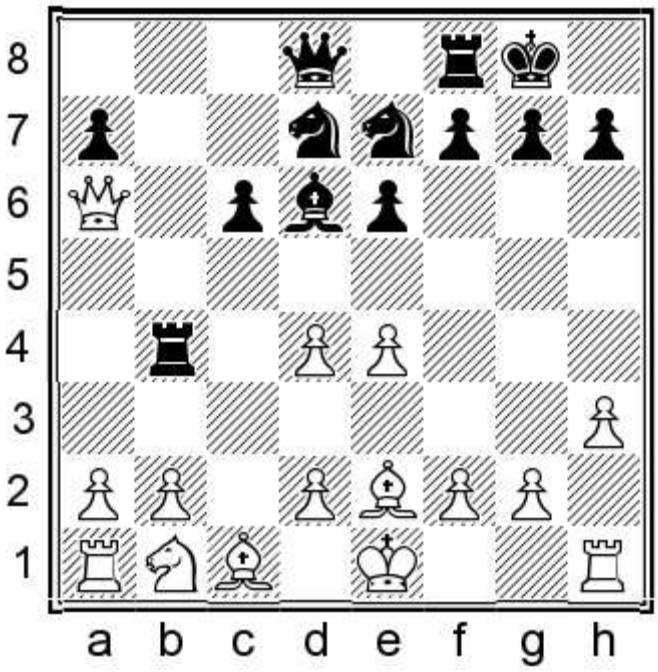
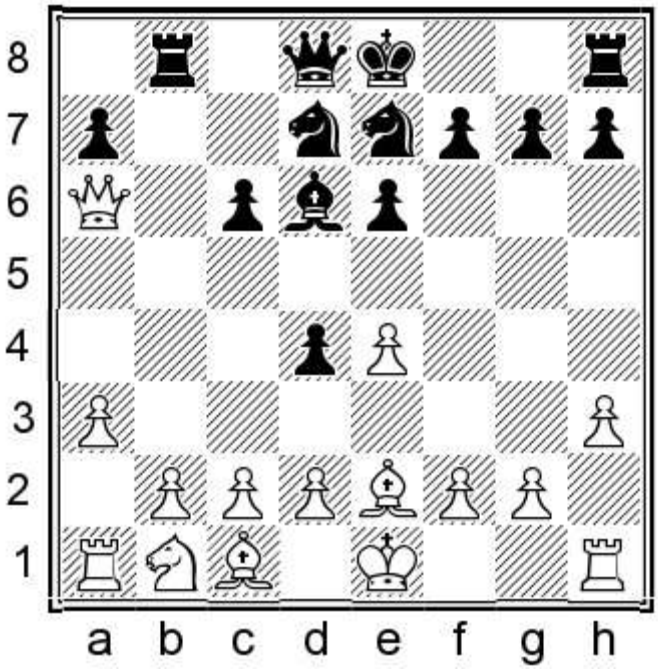


Position after: 12...♖b4!

The rook comes into the game and Black's initiative easily compensates for the material deficit. 13.♕xa7 [13.♕d3 ♘g6 14.0-0 ♘f4 15.♕e3 f5∓] 13...f5! 14.d3 ♘c8 15.♕a6 ♖xd4↑

B2.4) 11.a3!



Position after: 11.a3!

This is White's best move, and his only path to a small advantage. Clearly, finding such a move over the board is extremely difficult, and thus I believe that this line is completely playable as a

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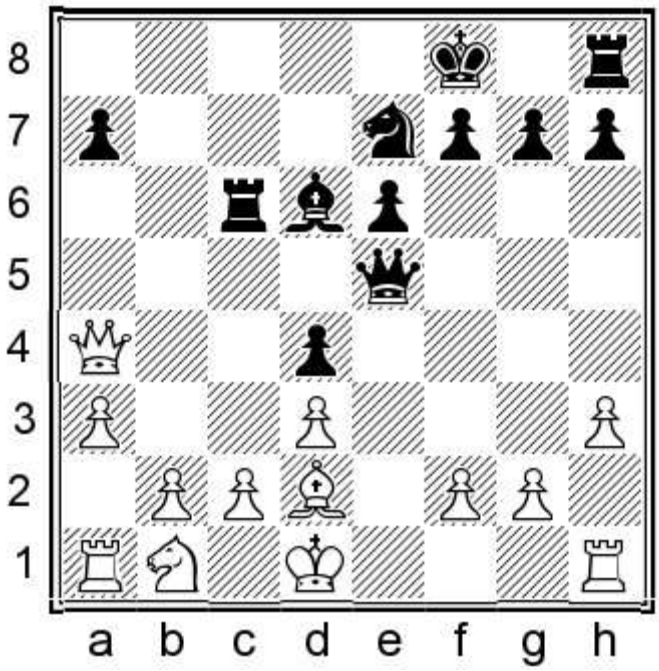
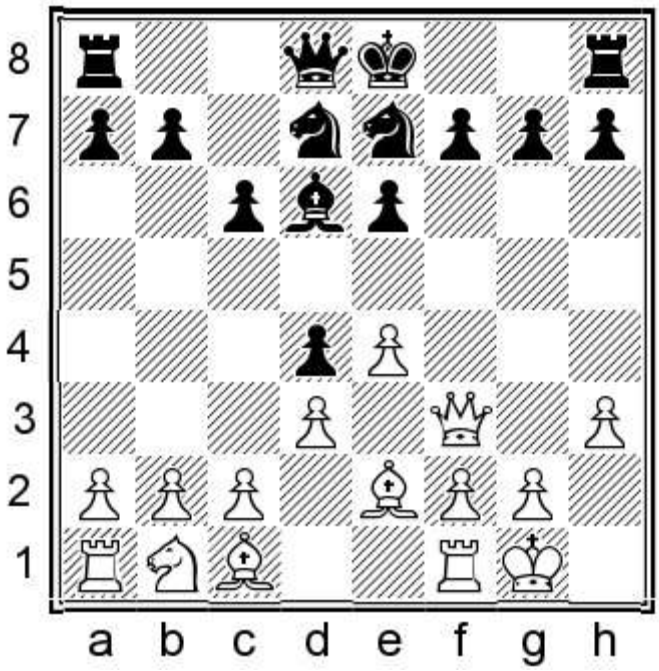
surprise weapon. The game can continue with 11...♘c5 12.♕c4 ♘xe4 13.♗f3! [13.♗d3 is not as precise: 13...♘c5 14.♕xd4 0-0 15.♗e2 e5 16.♕c4 ♘d5⩲] 13...♘g5 14.♗xc6+ ♔f8 15.d3! ♖c8 16.♗xg5 ♕a5+ 17.♗d2 ♕e5+ 18.♔d1 ♖xc6 19.♕a4±



Position after: 19.♕a4±

After all that, White is a pawn up and Black's compensation is probably not fully sufficient. But White needs to find a lot of accurate moves to reach this position.

8...♘e7 9.0-0 ♘d7



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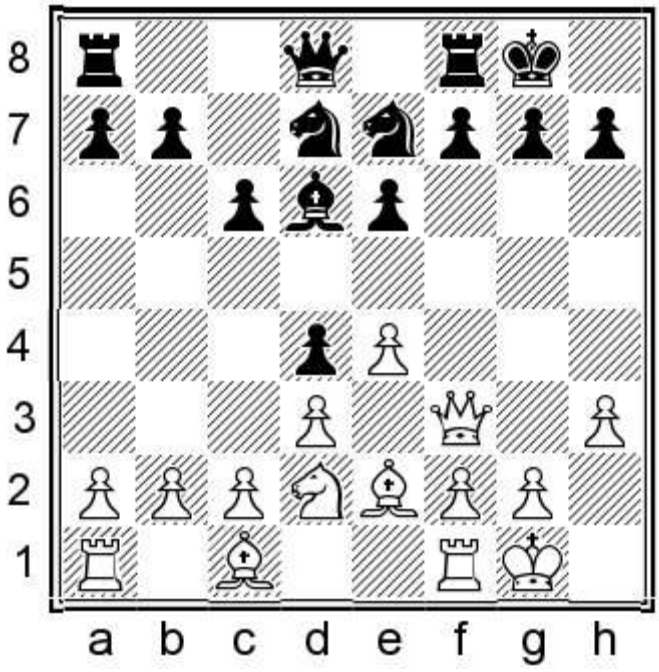
Position after: 9...♘d7

It is now apparent that White needs to resolve his issues with his queen placement since ...♘e5 is a looming threat.

10.♘d2

10.♗d1N creates a definite escape route for the queen, but it is quite passive. 10...0-0 11.♕e2 b5! Black immediately begins his queenside expansion. Since White has yet to do likewise on the kingside, Black will generate enough counterplay for equality. 12.f4 [12.♘d2 ♕c7 13.g3 c5 14.f4 ♘c6 15.♘f3 ♘b6⇄ Black is ready to play ...c4 and open the queenside.; 12.a4 ♘c5! 13.axb5 cxb5 14.f4 a5⇄ only helps Black.] 12...a5! 13.a4 ♘c5 14.b3 bxa4 15.bxa4 ♖b8 16.♘d2 ♘d7= With the b-file open, it is clear that White will not be able to focus solely on the kingside.

10...0-0



Position after: 10...0-0

11.h4!N

This is a key idea for White. The queen will go to h3 and support White's kingside attack. Furthermore, the h-pawn will participate in the attack with h5 and possibly h6. I do not see how Black can equalize from here, although the game remains double-edged with plenty of chances for both players.

A) 11.a4N slows down Black's plan to play ...b5 but Black can react in the center, exploiting White's exposed queen: 11...f5! 12.exf5 exf5 13.♘c4 ♗c7=

B) 11.g3

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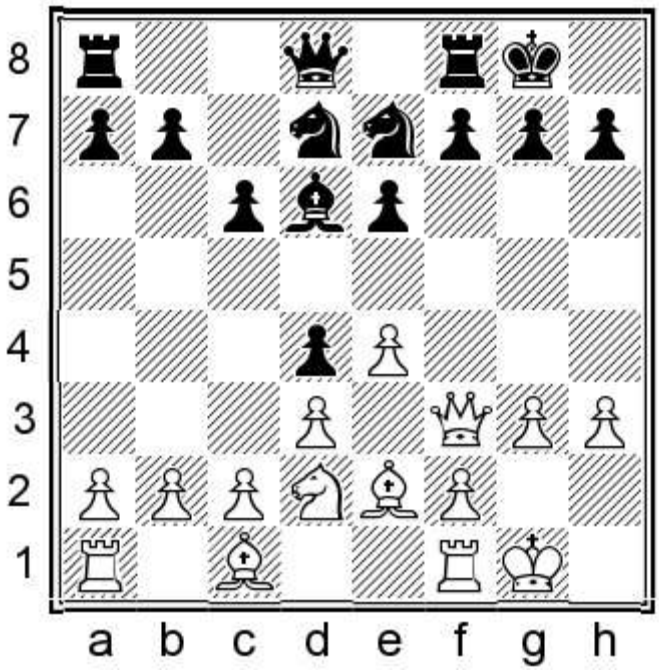

Position after: 11.g3

11...b5!N 12.♕g2 [12.a4 ♘c5! 13.b3 ♘d7!= Now ...♗b4 will come and the weak dark-squares will be a constant headache for White.] 12...a5 13.f4 a4 14.a3 ♗c7 15.♘f3 c5 16.h4 f5!= Black has successfully managed to create his own play on the queenside and slow down White's kingside activity.

11...b5

11...a5 can be countered with 12.a4!?

White's attack lands quite fast, and Black needs to proceed cautiously to avoid major trouble.

12.♕h3!

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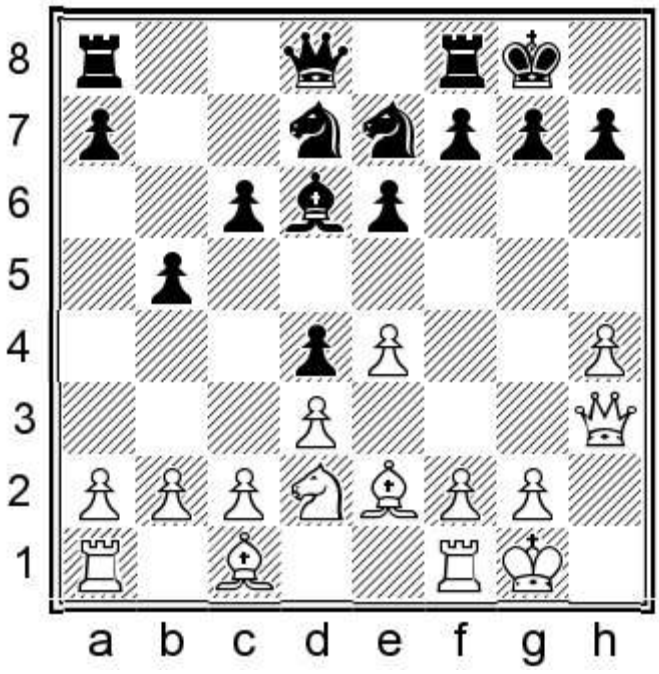

Position after: 12.♕h3!

12...♕c7

12...a5 13.f4 a4 14.a3 c5 15.♘f3→ looks extremely unpleasant for Black.

13.g3 e5!?

Perhaps, this is Black's best try. White is now unable to play f4 but he can try to exploit Black's weak light squares. 13...c5 is simply too slow: 14.f4 ♘c6 15.e5 ♗e7 16.a3 ♘b6 17.♗f3! c4 18.♗e4± From e4, the bishop participates in White's attack and in the defense.

14.♘f3 c5 15.h5±

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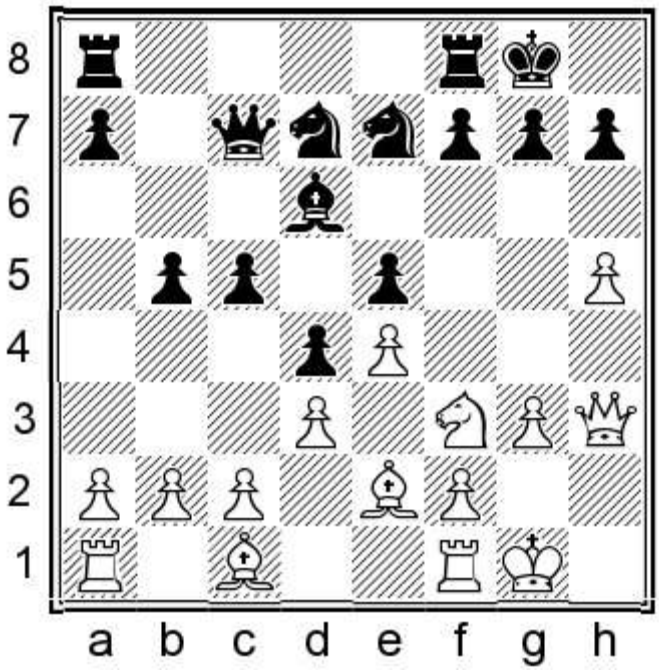

Position after: 15.h5±

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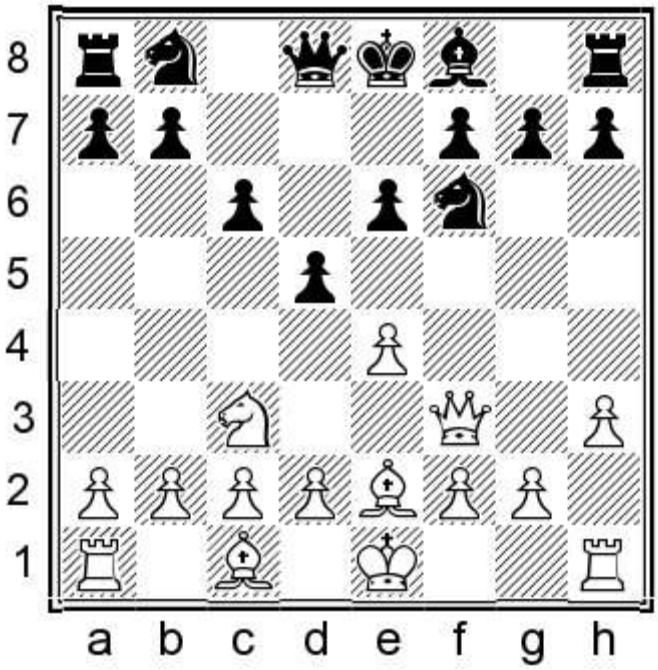
d) 6.♗e2 ♘f6

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6 6.♗e2!?

6...d4 does not suit the repertoire well because Caro-Kann players generally prefer a positional struggle in the center of the board to an all-or-nothing, double-edged game where both players attack on their respective sides. In this chapter, we now turn our attention to Black's more common continuations: 6...♘f6 and 6...♗c5, the latter being my primary recommendation.

6...♘f6



Position after: 6...♘f6

While 6...d4 is a very rare move, the text move is actually Black's most popular choice. Nevertheless, the contributions of well-prepared players such as Maxime Vachier-Lagrave have made this line extremely dangerous for Black. I will briefly discuss the state of theory in this line before we move on to my main recommendation.

A) Note that 6...♘d7?! allows White to take the center with 7.d4!± and Black is left without counterplay and a slightly worse position.

B) 6...♗c5!? – see the next subchapter.

7.0-0

The logical follow-up. Now, White is ready to play d4 and open the position.

There are some (inferior) alternatives:

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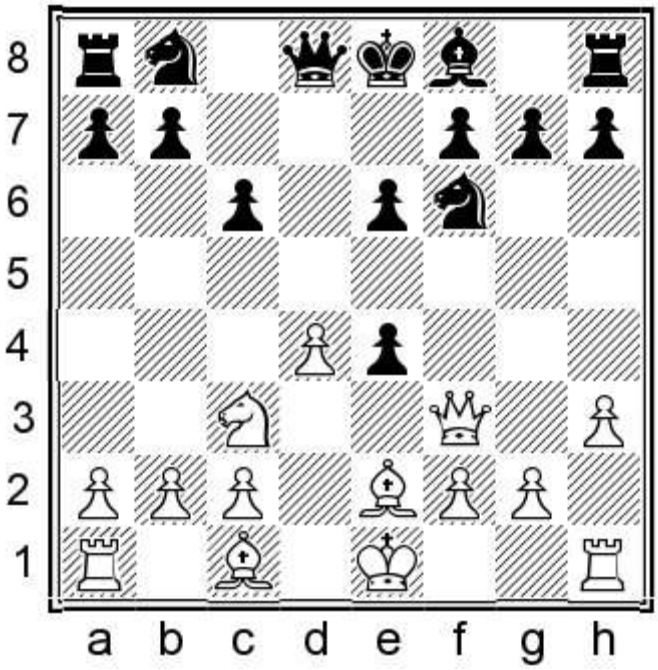
A) The immediate 7.d4 forces White to lose a tempo to protect the d4-pawn after 7...dxe4.



Position after: 7...dxe4

A1) 8.♘xe4 allows Black to take on d4: 8...♕xd4 9.♘xf6+ ♕xf6 10.♕b3 ♗c5 11.0-0 b6= White has compensation, but that is really it. Black eventually won against her higher-rated opponent in Diakonova, E (2292) – Sakorenko, A (2116) Sochi 2017.

A2) 8.♕e3 ♗b4! Black intends to hold on to the pawn. 9.0-0 ♗xc3 10.bxc3 0-0 11.♕g3 ♘bd7= We could analyze this position further, but there is little point in doing so as Black can't be worse. Sherwood, R (2179) – Kolomytchenko, I (1919) LSS email 2012.

B) 7.♕f4!? White just wants e5. Black has options, but the simplest one is 7...d4!?N 8.e5 dxc3 9.exf6 ♕xf6 10.dxc3 ♕xf4 11.♗xf4 ♘d7 12.0-0 0-0-0=.

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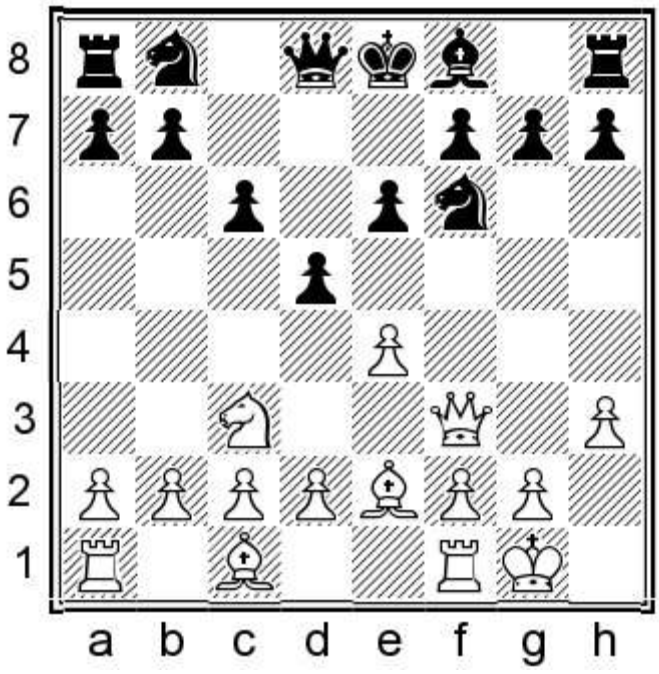


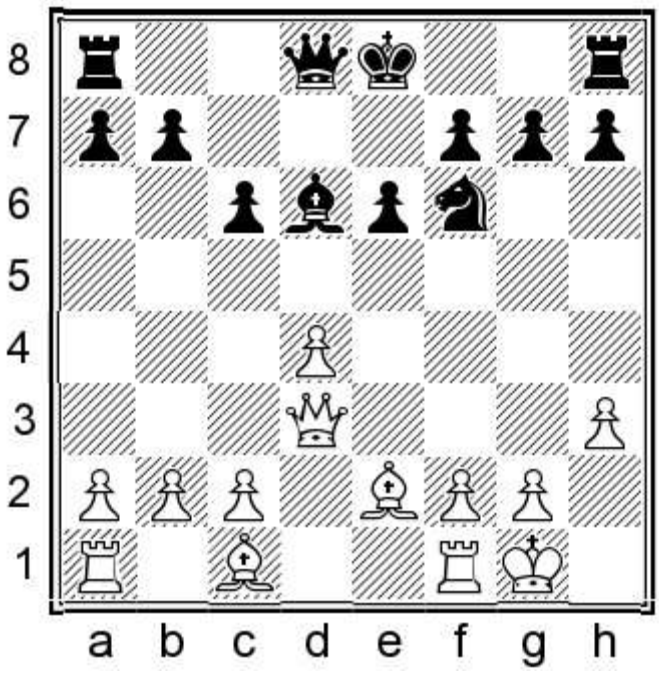
Position after: 7.0-0

7...♗c5

Black must prevent d4, though after White's next the problem recurs.

A) 7...♗e7 is quite passive and White gets the upper hand with 8.d4 dxe4 9.♕e3 ♘bd7 10.♘xe4 0-0 11.c3±.

B) 7...dxe4 8.♘xe4 ♘xe4 9.♕xe4 ♘d7 10.d4 ♘f6 11.♕d3 ♗d6 is Lars Schandorff's recommendation.



Position after: 11...♗d6

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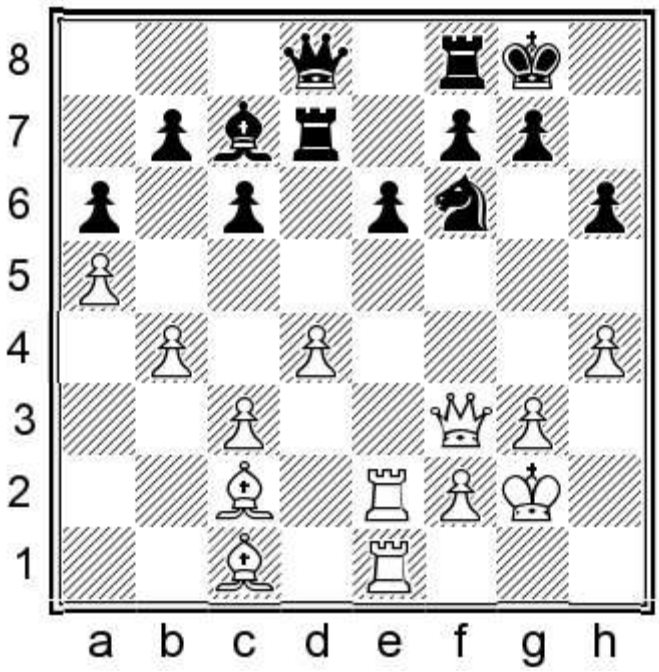
He argues that this position is playable for Black since White struggles to make use of his space advantage.

While it is true that White is a long way from any concrete results, he will be able to apply a longstanding pressure on Black's position. The game Vachier Lagrave, M (2803) – Agrest, E (2593) chess.com 2017 illustrates exactly how White can dismantle Black's solid position with small, incremental improvements. 12.a4 ♕e7 13.a5 a6 14.♖d1 ♖d8 15.♕f3 h6 16.g3 0-0 17.c3 ♖d7 18.♔g2 ♖fd8 19.♖e1 ♗c7 20.b4 ♖e8 21.♗d3 ♕d8 22.♗c2 ♗b8 23.♖e2 ♘d5 24.♗d2 ♘f6 25.♖ae1 ♖f8 26.♗c1 ♗c7 27.h4!



Position after: 27.h4!

White has complete control of the queenside and he now switches his focus to the kingside. 27...♗b8 28.♖h1 ♘d5 29.♕d3 ♘f6 30.g4! e5 31.g5 e4 32.♕h3 ♘d5 33.♖xe4 h5 34.♖he1+– White had a crushing advantage and went on to convert it to a win.

8.♖d1!

8.d3 has featured in more games, but it does not fit White's overall strategy. 8...♘bd7 [8...0-0 can be met with 9.♖d1! and Black is unable to prevent d4: 9...♗d4 10.♕f4!N 10...♗b6 11.d4±.] 9.♕g3 0-0 10.♗f4 ♔h8= It seems to me that Black has a very playable position. No particular plan comes to mind for White and both players should be prepared for a long positional struggle. Black should make sure the position stays closed (so that White's bishop pair does not come to life) while seeking active play on the queenside with ...a5, ...b5 et cetera.

8...♗d4

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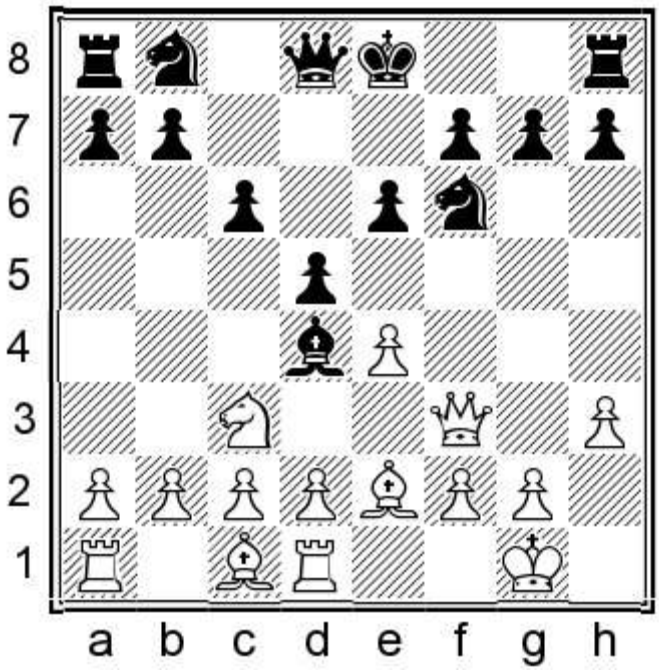

Position after: 8...♗d4

9.♕f4!

Black is forced to give up his dark-squared bishop to prevent d4. Of course, he wins a pawn in the process, but his position becomes extremely dangerous as White's bishop pair comes to life and Black struggles to organize his pieces. I do not recommend entering this line with Black since White has a much easier game: his moves are logical and he can effortlessly develop a dangerous initiative. Black, on the other hand, needs to be acutely aware of the tactics and needs to find some very unnatural moves to survive.

9.exd5 cxd5 10.♗b5+ [10.♘b5 leads to a forcing line, but Black holds his ground quite easily: 10...♘c6 11.♕a3 ♗e5 12.d4 ♗b8 13.c4 dxc4 14.d5 ♘xd5 15.♗xc4 ♕e7 16.♗xd5 exd5 17.♕xe7+ ♘xe7= Vaibhav, S (2560) – Macovei, A (2343) Tarvisio 2017.] 10...♘c6 11.♘e2 ♗b6 12.d4 0-0 13.c3 ♘e4 14.♗f4 a6 15.♗a4 ♖c8 16.♖ac1 ♘a5= White's bishops struggle to make an impact; in fact Black's knights are better suited to this position.

9...♗xc3 10.bxc3

After 10.dxc3 White doesn't get the same activity, since his bishop cannot get to a3. 10...♘xe4 11.c4 0-0= Soltanici, R (2408) – Istratescu, A (2555) Arad 2019.

10...♘xe4

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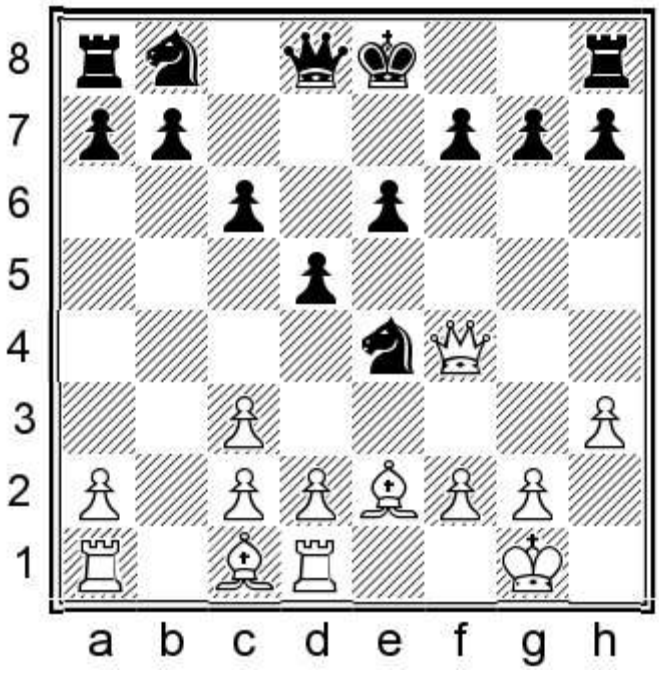
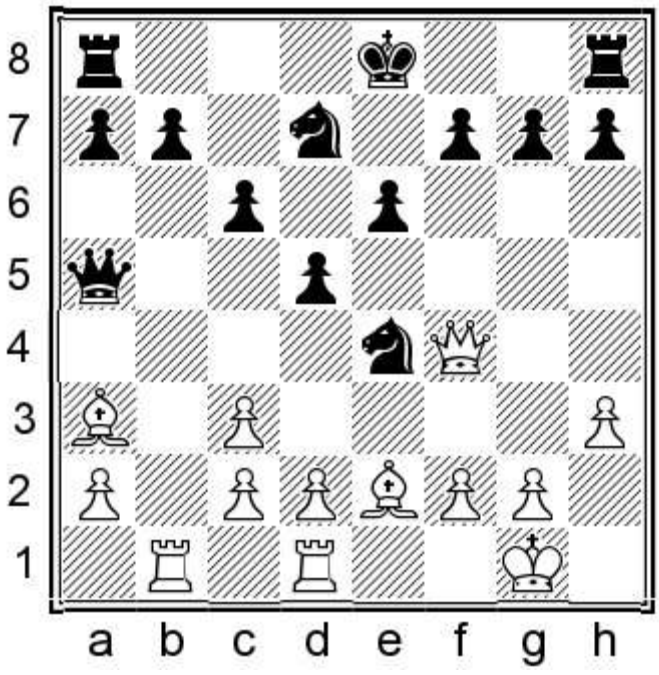


Position after: 10...♘xe4

11.♖b1!?

11.♗a3 is also dangerous for Black, although the text move seems even stronger as Black needs to deal with the imminent threat of ♖xb7. 11...♘d7 12.♖ab1 ♕a5



Position after: 12...♕a5

A) 13.♗b4 can be answered with 13...♕a4! Black holds here without too many difficulties. [13...♕d8?! 14.c4! c5 15.cxd5 exd5 16.♗c3 0-0 17.♖xb7± left White with a clear advantage in

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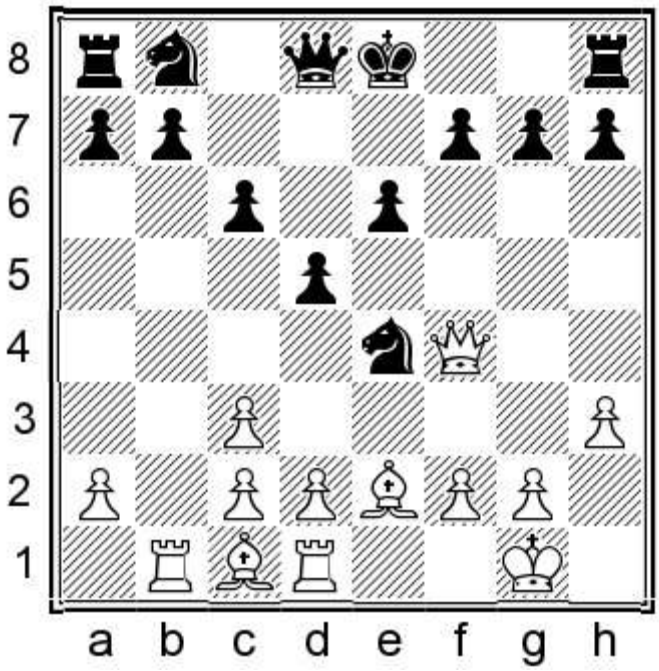
Vachier Lagrave, M (2780) – Mamedyarov, S (2772) Moscow 2019, which he duly converted.] 14.f3 [14.♖b3N 14...a5 15.♗a3 ♘dc5 16.♗xc5 ♘xc5 17.♕xa4 ♘xa4 18.♖xb7 0-0=; 14.♕c7N 14...c5 15.f3 cxb4 16.fxe4 ♕c6 17.♕xc6 bxc6 18.exd5 cxd5 19.♖xb4 ♔e7=] 14...a5 15.fxe4 axb4 16.exd5 cxd5 17.♕d6 ♕c6 18.♕xb4 ♕c5+ 19.♕xc5 ♘xc5 20.♖b5 ♘e4 21.♖xb7 0-0 22.♖b2 ♖fc8= White is a pawn up, but he will have a difficult time making use of it due to his bad pawn structure and Black's powerful knight

B) 13.♖b3!?N This novelty requires Black to find some difficult moves: 13...e5!? [13...♘ec5 14.♗b4 ♕d8 15.♖bb1±] 14.♕e3 f5! 15.♗d3 c5! [15...0-0-0 simply leaves White was an edge after 16.♖db1 f4 17.♕e2 ♘ec5 18.♗xc5 ♘xc5 19.♕xe5±] 16.♗xe4 dxe4 17.d4! 0-0-0 18.dxc5 ♘b8 19.♖d6± Black has played excellent moves but he still needs to defend an inferior middlegame position.



Position after: 11.♖b1!?

11...♕d6!?

This is Black's best defence. However, White's initiative persists and there is no clear path to equality for Black.

A) 11...b6 12.♗a3 c5 13.♗b5+ ♘d7 14.c4 ♕f6 15.♕e3 ♘d6 16.cxd5 ♘xb5 17.♖xb5 0-0 18.♗b2 ♕f5 19.dxe6 fxe6 20.c4±

B) 11...♕e7 12.♗f3 ♘g5 [12...♘f6N 13.♖b3 0-0 14.♗a3 c5 15.d4 ♖e8 16.♖db1 b6 17.dxc5 ♕d7 18.cxb6 axb6 19.♖xb6±] 13.♗h5 0-0 14.d3± White later went on to win in Paehtz, E (2484) – Gunina, V (2509) Monaco 2019.

C) 11...b5 12.c4! bxc4 13.♗a3 ♘d7 [13...c5 14.♗f3 ♕d6 15.♕e3 ♘d7 16.♗xe4 dxe4 17.♕xe4 0-0 18.♕xc4±] 14.♖b7!

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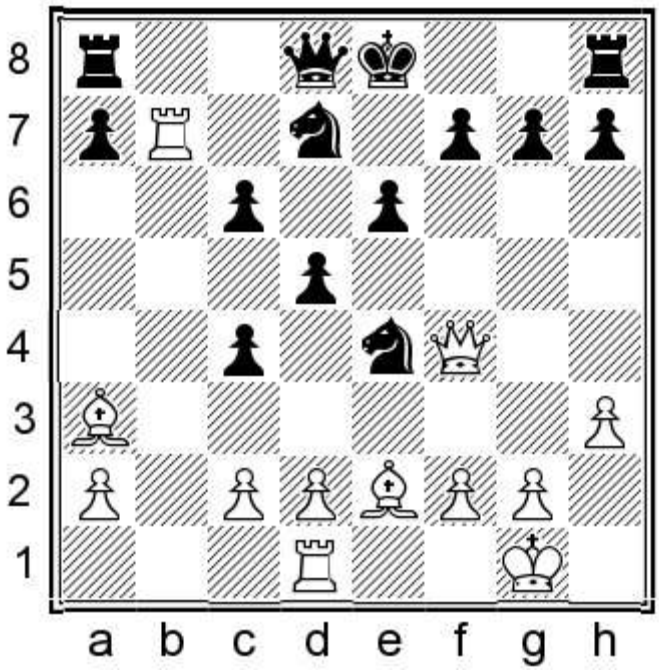

Position after: 14.♖b7!

Black's position is simply collapsing: 14...♕f6 [14...c5 15.f3 ♘ef6 16.♕d6±; 14...e5 15.♕e3 ♕c8 16.♖xd7 ♕xd7 17.d3 cxd3 18.cxd3 ♘f6 19.d4 e4 20.♕g3 ♕e6 21.♖b1± Black's king is stuck in the center and faces an uncertain future.] 15.♕c7! ♕xf2+ 16.♔h2 ♖d8 17.d3 ♕e3 18.♖db1!± The attack keeps coming without respite.

12.♕e3

12.♕g4 is another possibility: 12...0-0 13.♖xb7 ♘d7 14.d4 ♘df6 15.♕f3 c5 16.dxc5 ♕xc5 17.c4 dxc4 18.♗a3.

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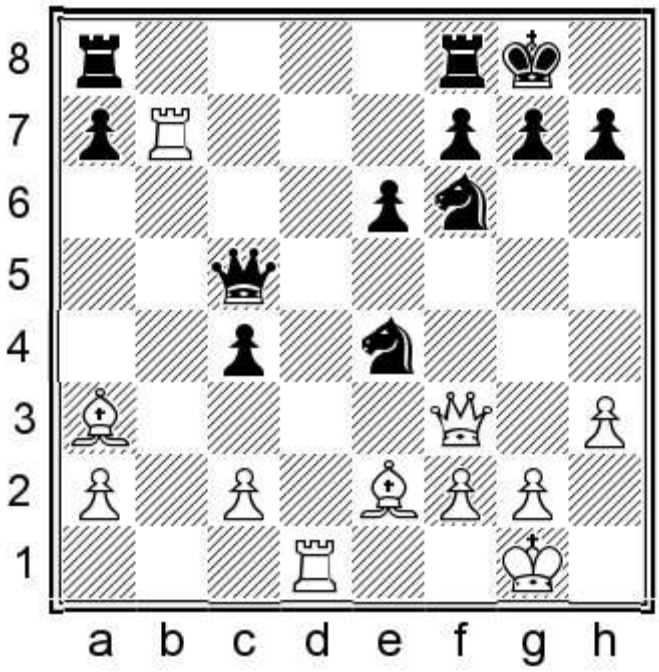
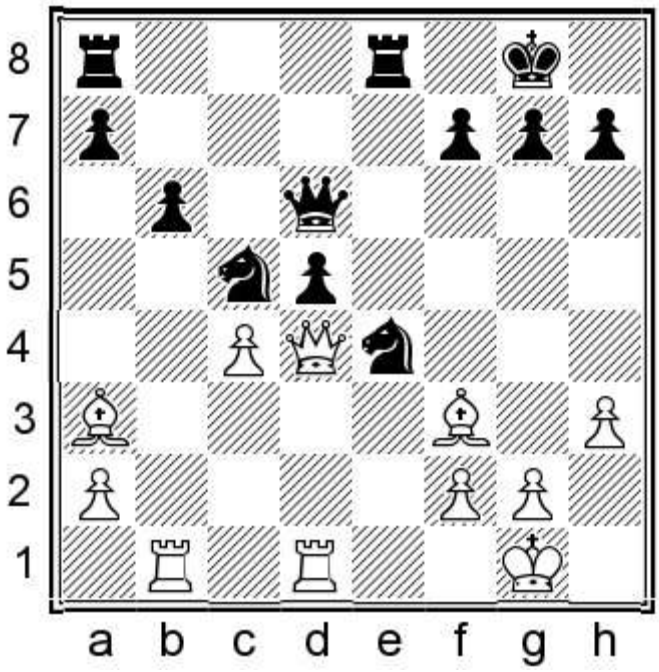


Position after: 18.♗a3

18...♕c8 19.♖b4 ♖d8 20.♖xd8+ ♕xd8 21.♗xc4 ♘d2 22.♕f4 ♘xc4 23.♖xc4∞ White's advantage is mininal, but Black's defensive task is not trivial either.

12...b6 13.c4 0-0 14.♗a3 c5 15.♗f3 ♘d7 16.d4 ♖fe8 17.dxc5 ♘exc5 18.cxd5 exd5 19.♕d2 ♘f6 20.c4 ♘fe4 21.♕d4∞



Position after: 21.♕d4∞

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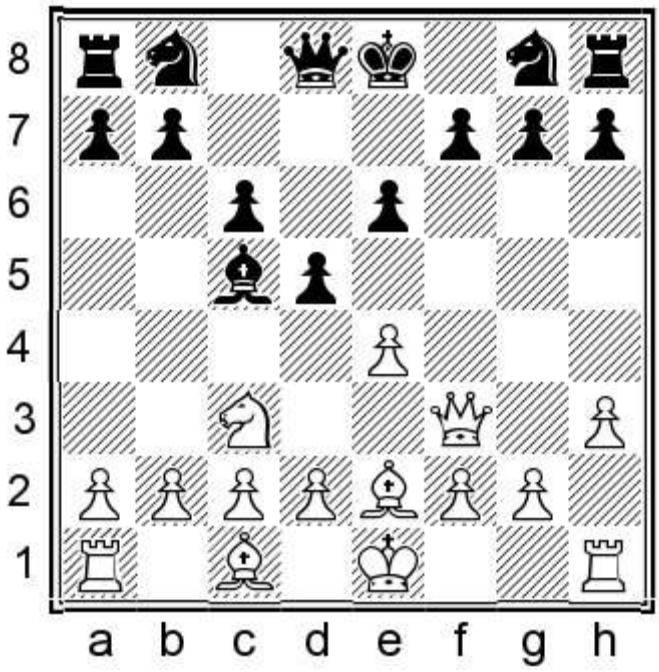
White’s bishop pair faces off against Black’s active knights. Still, White’s position is more comfortable and Black has had to play many excellent moves to reach this position.

e) 6.♗e2 ♗c5

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6 6.♗e2!? ♗c5!?



Position after: 6...♗c5!?

Now that we have analyzed Black’s alternatives, it should be clear why the text move is my main recommendation.

6...d4 is a very independent variation which changes the dynamic of the position, but not necessarily for the better because White gets a free pass to attack on the kingside. There will be some counterplay on the queenside, but the resulting positions feel a lot easier to play with White. Meanwhile 6...♘f6 is very much in the spirit of the position, but after 7.0-0 ♗c5 8.♖d1, Black is forced to enter very forcing lines to prevent d4. This is why it is vital to play 6...♗c5. Black immediately prevents d4 and maintains flexibility for his knights.

7.0-0

7.♕g3!? is an attempt to take advantage of Black’s early development of his dark-squared bishop. Black should avoid weakening his kingside and defend the g7-pawn with 7...♗d4!

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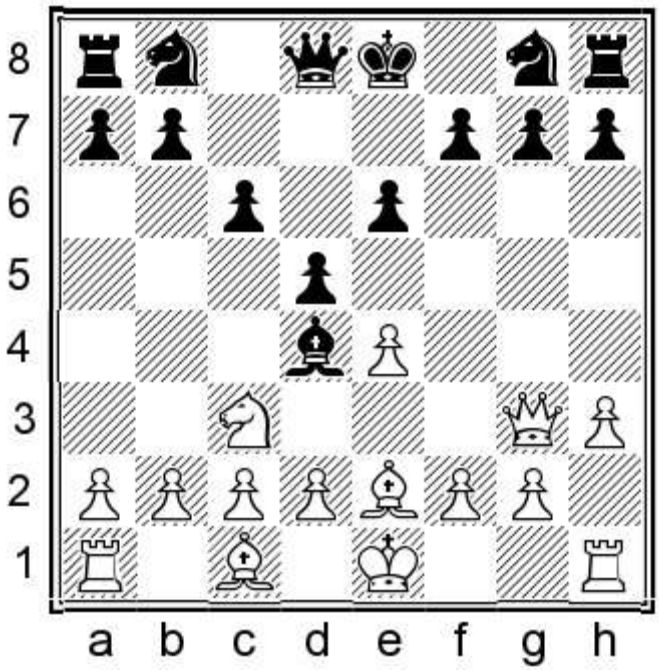
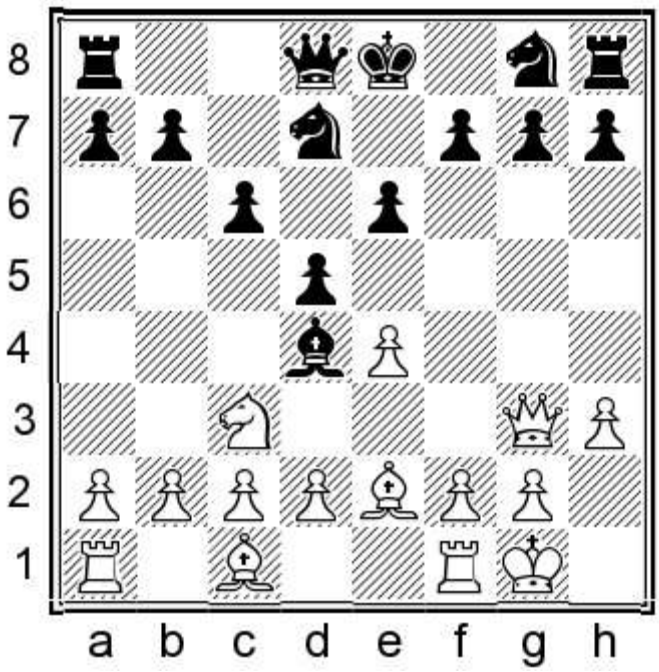


Position after: 7...♗d4!

[The line 7...♘e7? 8.♕xg7 ♖g8 9.♕xh7 ♖xg2 10.♗h5 ♘g6 11.♗xg6 ♖xg6 12.♕h8+ ♗f8 13.d3 ♘d7 14.♗d2± gives Black poor compensation.]

A) 8.0-0 ♘d7

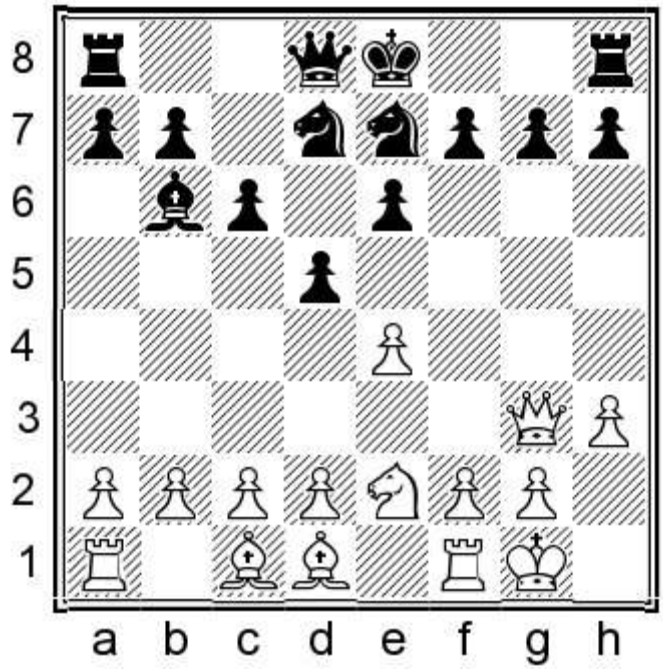


Position after: 8...♘d7

A1) 9.d3 ♘e7 10.♗e3 was played in Walek, M (2310) – Splichal, S Czechia 1995. Black could have continued with 10...dxe4!?N 11.dxe4 [11.♗xd4 ♘f5 12.♕g4 ♘xd4 13.♕xg7 ♕f6 14.♕xf6 ♘xf6

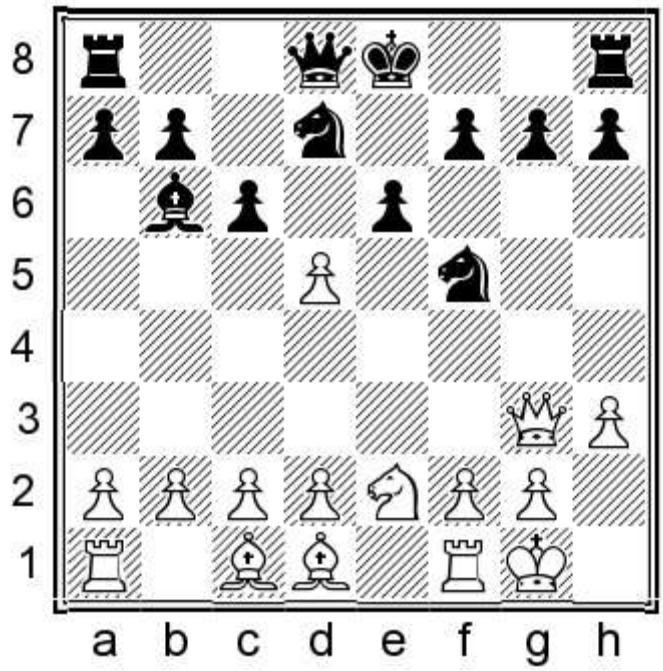
15.dxe4 ♘xe2+ 16.♘xe2 ♘xe4=] 11...♗xe3 12.♕xe3 ♕b6= and the position is equal.

A2) 9.♗d1!?N The idea is to harass the bishop on d4 since it is protecting the g7-pawn somewhat artificially. 9...♘e7 10.♘e2 ♗b6!



Position after: 10...♗b6!

Now that Black is more developed, the g7-pawn can be offered as bait. 11.exd5 [11.♕xg7?! is asking for trouble: 11...♖g8 12.♕xh7 ♘f6 13.♕h4 ♘g6 14.♕g5 ♗c7!→ White's queen is still under pressure and Black's attack will blossom; 11.d3 is too timid and can be met, for instance, as follows: 11...dxe4 12.dxe4 ♘g6 13.c3 h5!=] 11...♘f5!



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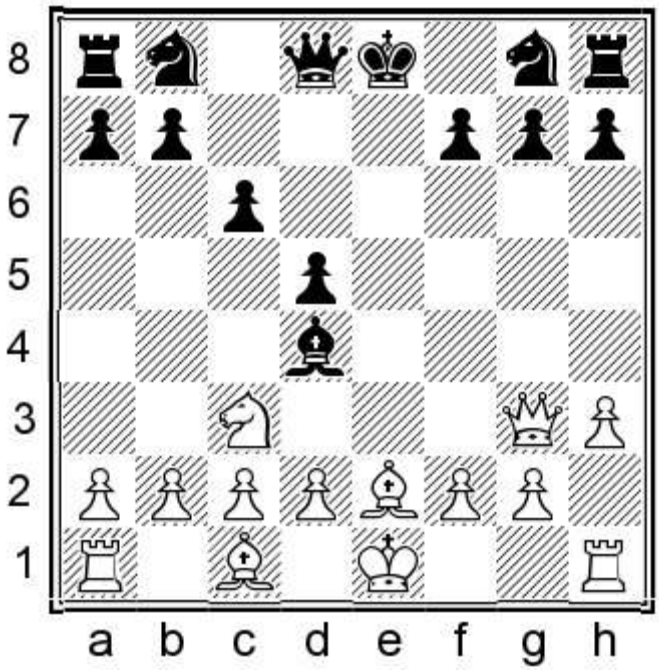
Position after: 11...♘f5!

An important intermediate move, defending the g7-pawn before recapturing on d5. [After 11...cxd5? 12.♕xg7 ♖g8 13.♕xh7 ♘f6 White's queen has a line of retreat: 14.♕d3± and Black does not have enough to justify his two-pawn deficit.] 12.♕a3 [12.♕f4 g5! 13.♕b4 cxd5 14.d4 ♕f6= and White needs to deal with Black's kingside threats of ...h5 and ...g4.] 12...cxd5 13.c3 ♗c7 14.d4 ♘d6 15.♗c2 a5!= White's queen is misplaced on a3 and Black will use this to pressure White on the queenside.

B) 8.exd5 exd5



Position after: 8...exd5

White has managed to open the e-file, but Black's strong center limits his options. Those of you who are familiar with the 5.♖e1 Berlin may recognize the plans that follow. In general, Black wants to restrict White's play on the light squares and generate counterplay with his knights. [Note that 8...cxd5? 9.♘b5+– wins; Black cannot deal with the dual threat of ♘c7 and ♘d6.]

B1) 9.♘d1N prepares c3, with the idea of chasing Black's bishop, but White is wasting too much time. 9...♘d7 10.c3 ♗e5 11.f4 ♗f6 12.0-0 ♘e7 13.d4 0-0 14.♕f3 c5⇄ Black has excellent counterplay as the d4-pawn is now a target.

B2) 9.♕g4 ♗e5 10.0-0 h5!

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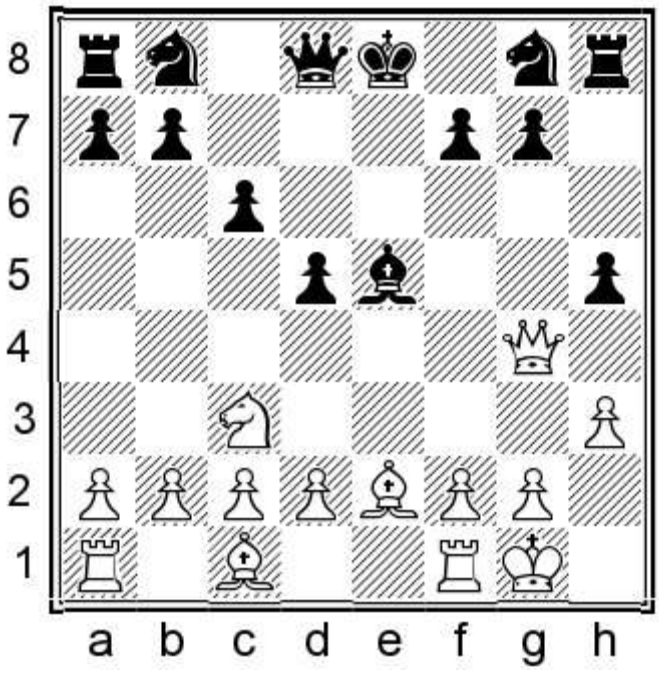
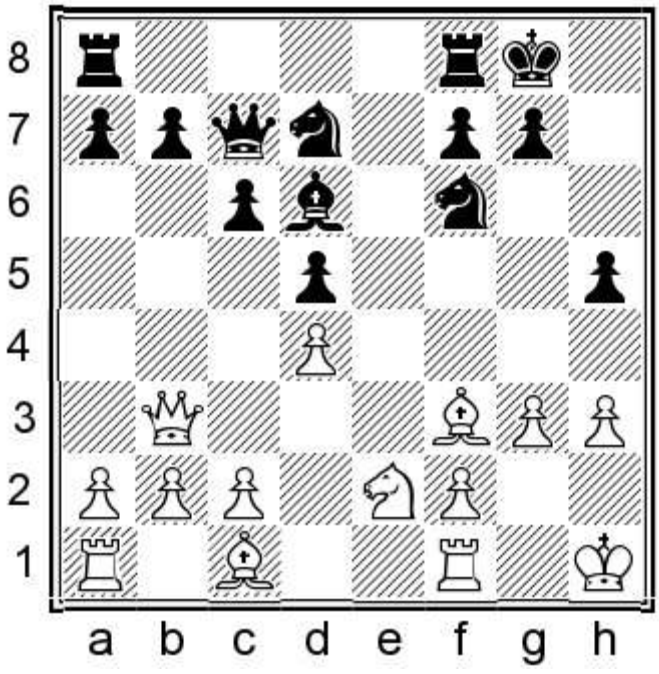


Position after: 10...h5!

Misplacing the white queen.

B2.1) 11.♕b4 ♕e7 12.♕b3 White prefers not to trade, but his queen is far from the action on b3. [After 12.♕xe7+ ♘xe7= Black has no issues since it's not clear how White will make anything of his bishop pair.] 12...♘f6 The following sample variation shows how Black can restrain White's development and, especially, his light-squared bishop. 13.♗f3 0-0 14.♘e2 ♕c7 15.d4 ♗h2+ 16.♔h1 ♗d6 17.g3 ♘bd7=.



Position after: 17...♘bd7=

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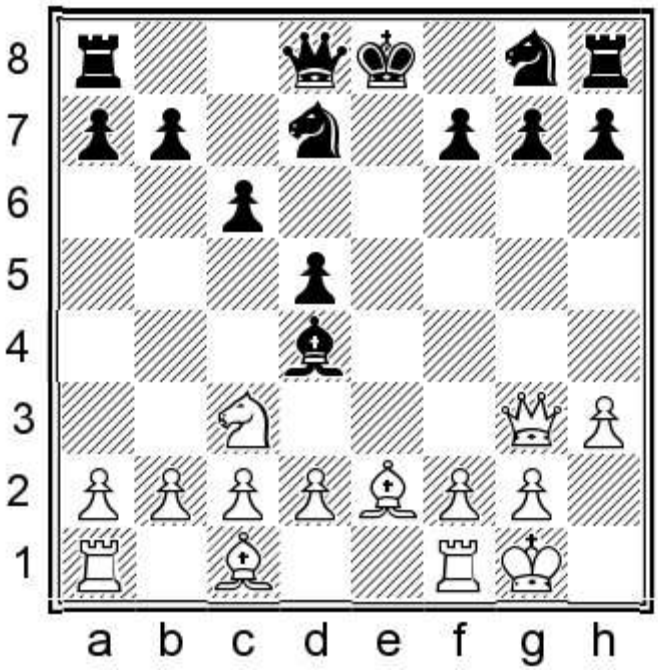
B2.2) 11.♕a4 ♘f6 12.d4 ♗d6 13.♕b3 [13.♗g5 ♘bd7 14.♖ae1 0-0 15.♗xh5 ♕b6⩱] 13...♕c7 14.♘d1 0-0 15.♘e3 ♘bd7 16.c4 dxc4 17.♘xc4 ♘b6 18.♘xd6 ♕xd6= White has managed to open the position but he now has an isolated pawn on d4 and Black's knights will use the d5-square to great effect.

B3) 9.0-0 ♘d7



Position after: 9...♘d7

10.♗d1!?N [10.♕g4 is met by 10...♕f6 11.d3 h5!= as in Harikrishna, P (2729) – Praggnanandhaa, R (2530) Kolkata 2018; 10.♗g4 ♘e7 11.♖e1 and now in Berg, E (2495) – Dreev, A (2689) playchess.com 2004, Black could have played the logical 11...0-0N with an excellent position.] 10...♘e7 [10...♕f6!? leads to an interesting and double-edged position after 11.♕c7 ♘e7 12.♕xb7 ♖b8∞ but the text move is simpler.] 11.♘e2 ♗f6 12.d4 ♘f5 13.♕g4 g6 14.c3 0-0∞

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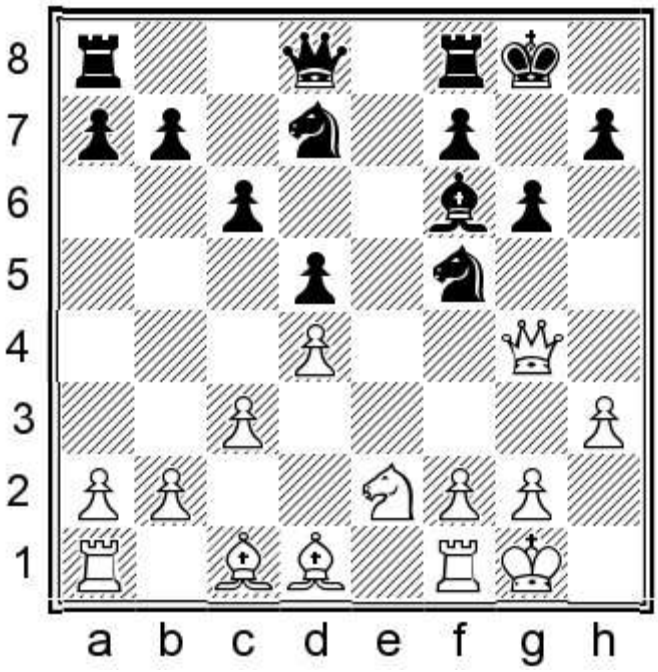
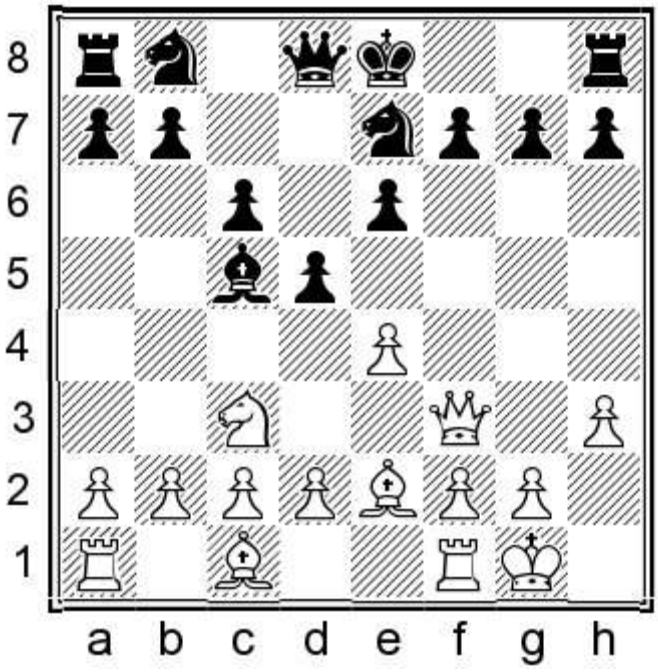


Position after: 14...0-0∞

White has successfully arranged his central pawns, but his position is far from menacing.

7...♘e7!?



Position after: 7...♘e7!?

This is Black's key improvement over the 6...♘f6 7.0-0 ♗c5 line. The knight stands better on e7 since it gives Black a more flexible setup.

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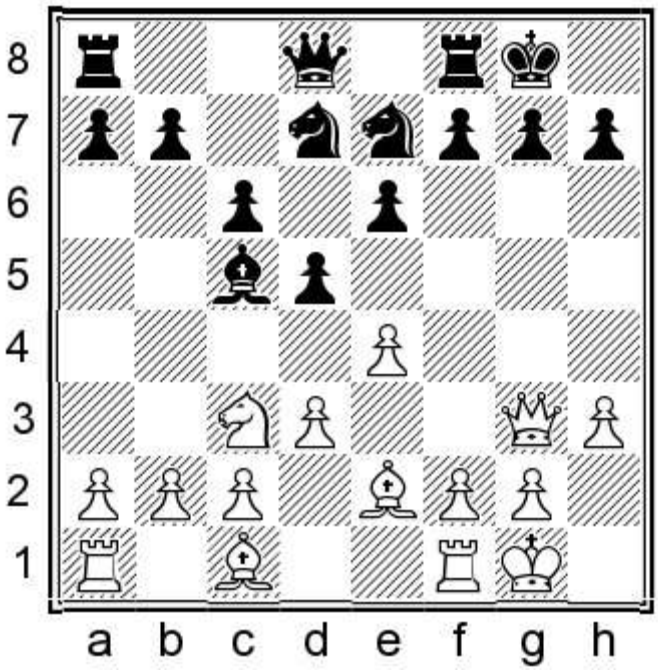
8.♘a4!

A) 8.♖d1 can now be met with 8...d4! as in Bacrot, E (2708) – Mamedyarov, S (2800) Paris 2017, but after 9.♘b1 Black can improve with 9...h5!N 10.d3 ♘g6=. It is now obvious that the move 7...♘e7 is important, since this idea would not be nearly as effective with the knight on f6.

B) 8.d3 is also possible, but White will not achieve much if he renounces his plan to play d4. 8...0-0 9.♕g3 ♘d7



Position after: 9...♘d7

Black will expand on the queenside with ...a5 and ...a4, while White lacks a clear plan. 10.♔h1 [10.♗d2 Morgunov, M (2182) – Yuffa, D (2587) Tallinn 2019 10...a5!?N] 10...a5N 11.f4 a4⇄

C) 8.♕g4 0-0 9.exd5 was tried in Oparin, G (2542) – Bukavshin, I (2608) Loo 2014, and now I prefer 9...exd5!?N, keeping a solid center and preparing to harass the White queen with ...f5. 10.d4 f5! 11.♕h4 ♗d6= Black's b8-knight has a well carved out route to e4 and it will be easy for Black to generate counterplay with his pieces.

8...♗d6 9.d4

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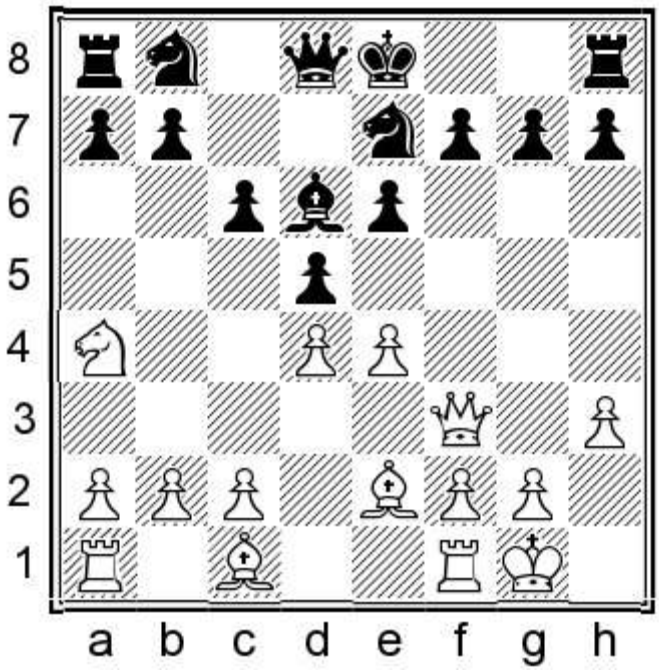

Position after: 9.d4

9...dxe4!

9...♘d7?! is too passive, and White can seize the initiative with 10.e5!N 10...♗c7 11.♗d3. Black can attempt to break up White's center with 11...c5 but the opening of the position favors White. 12.♘xc5 ♘xc5 13.dxc5 ♗xe5 14.♕h5 ♘c6 15.♖b1±

10.♕xe4 ♘d7

While this type of position is generally favorable for White, his pieces are awkwardly placed in this particular instance.

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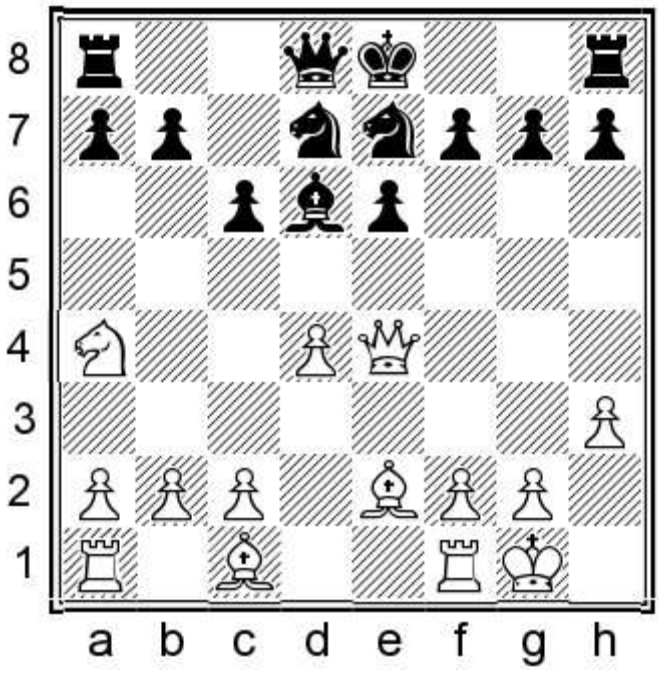

Position after: 10...♘d7

The knight on a4, especially, will need to be re-routed to a better square. Black can use these features to generate counterplay. Furthermore, Black's position is very flexible and he can switch between plans quite easily, castling on either side according to what suits him best.

11.♖d1

A) 11.♘c3N brings the knight back to the center, but Black can continue with 11...♘f6 12.♕d3 ♗c7 13.♖d1 h5!⇄ White has to deal with Black's kingside activity since the idea of ...♕d6 (in combination with a timely ...h4) will create headaches for him.

B) 11.c4 is a logical move: White gains space in the center and prepares to relocate his knight on c3. However, Black can use the under-protected d4-pawn to activate his position: 11...♘f6 12.♕d3 ♘f5 13.♖d1 0-0 14.♘c3 Kovalchuk, A (2388) – Yuffa, D (2577) Sochi 2019 and now 14...♕c7N.

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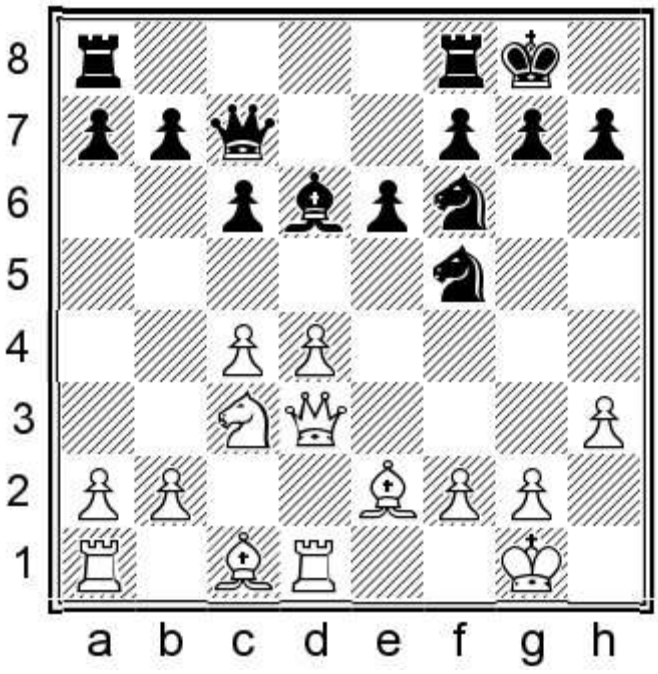


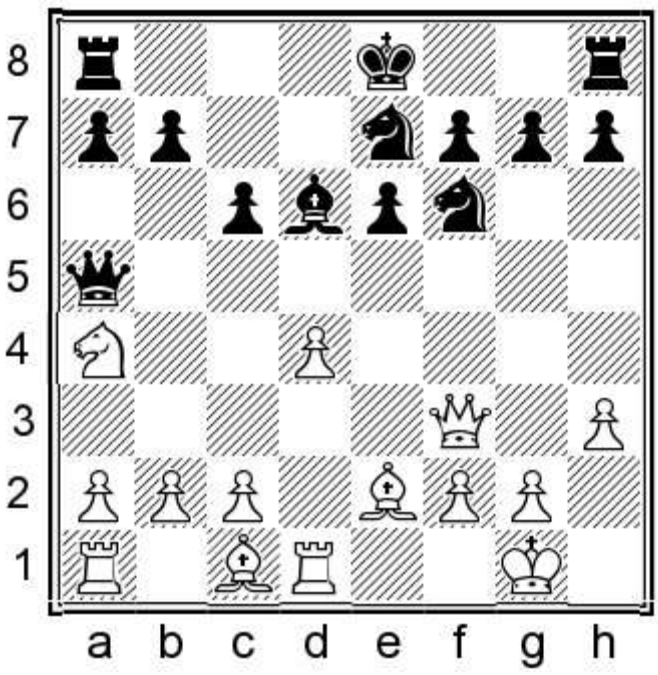
Position after: 14...♕c7N

The idea is ...♖ad8 and White will have to deal with Black's threats on the d-file.

11...♘f6 12.♕f3

12.♕d3 is also possible, but it gives Black the option of playing for ...♗f4. 12...♕c7! 13.♘c5 0-0 14.♘e4 ♘xe4 15.♕xe4 ♘g6=

12...♕a5



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Position after: 12...♕a5

13.♘c3

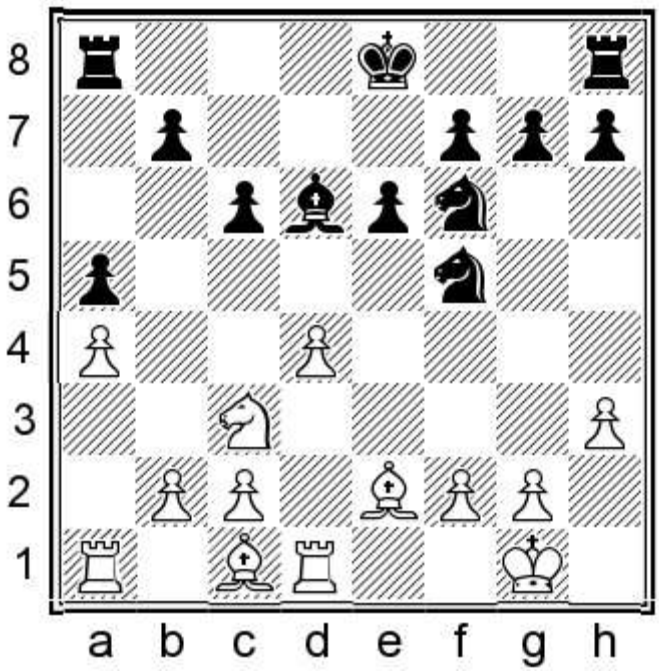
13.b3 This move has the idea of playing ♘b2. If White gets his knight to c4 or d3, Black will be left without active play. Therefore, Black should continue with 13...e5! 14.dxe5 ♗xe5 15.♗d2 ♕c7 16.♖ac1 0-0= and Black's control of the dark squares gives him a good position.

13...♕f5!

This is an important move since White will slowly take over the initiative if the queens remain on the board.

13...0-0 14.♗d3! Although Black's position is definitely playable, I prefer trading the queens to prevent White from developing any initiative on the kingside.

14.a4 a5 15.♕xf5 ♘xf5=



Position after: 15...♘xf5=

Now that the queens have come off the board, White will struggle to make good use of his bishop pair.

Black is extremely solid and has excellent chances in this endgame.

f) 6.d3

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6

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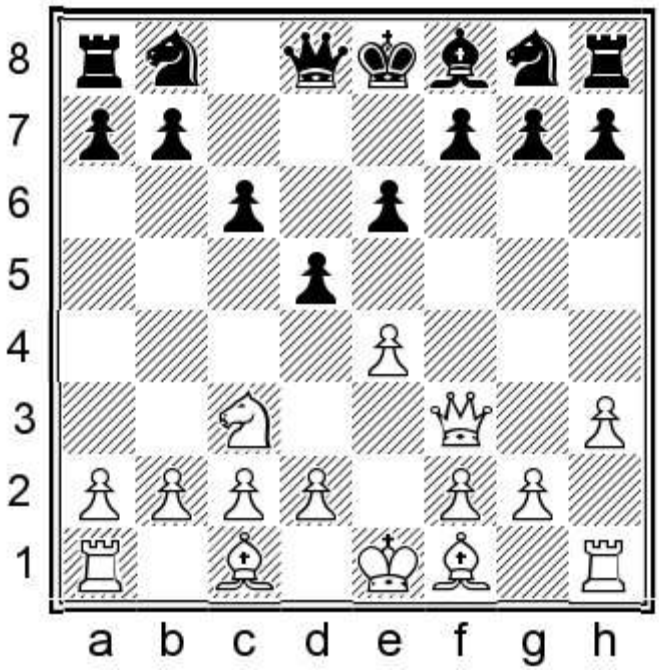

Position after: 5...e6

In the previous subchapters, we examined 6.d4 and 6.♗e2. In the 6.d4 lines, White had committed to d4 and thus Black's task was straightforward (although not without its challenges): to pressure the center and, especially, the d4-pawn. 6.d3 has a similar characteristic: by playing 6.d3, White has made his intentions clear, and Black can react accordingly.

On the other hand, 6.g3 (next subchapter) is more flexible since White keeps his options open. Although 6.d3 is the more popular move, 6.g3 is more challenging for Black.

6.d3

Although it is still considered the main line, this move has fallen out of favor, and for good reason. With 6.d3, White loses flexibility and gives Black new opportunities by weakening the a5-e1 diagonal. The traditional plan for White involves castling queenside and playing g4, h4, g5 on the kingside. However, with precise play, Black can limit the scope of White's attack and develop a dangerous initiative on the queenside.

6...♘d7

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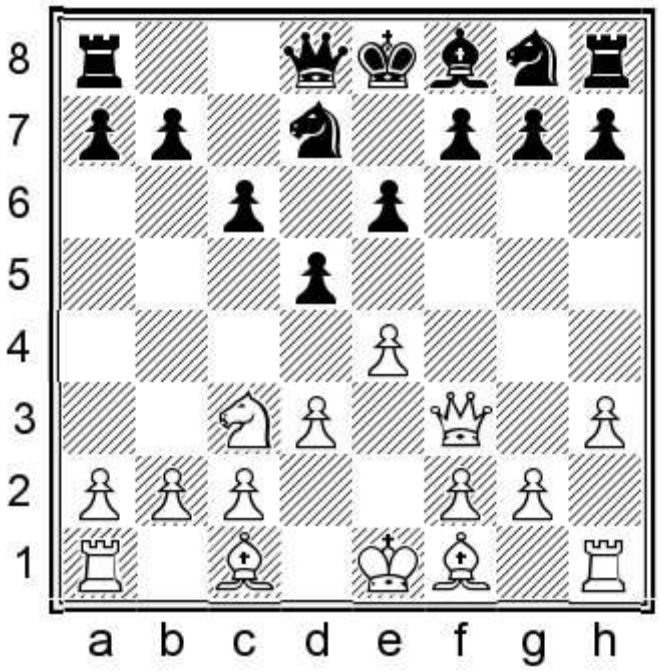
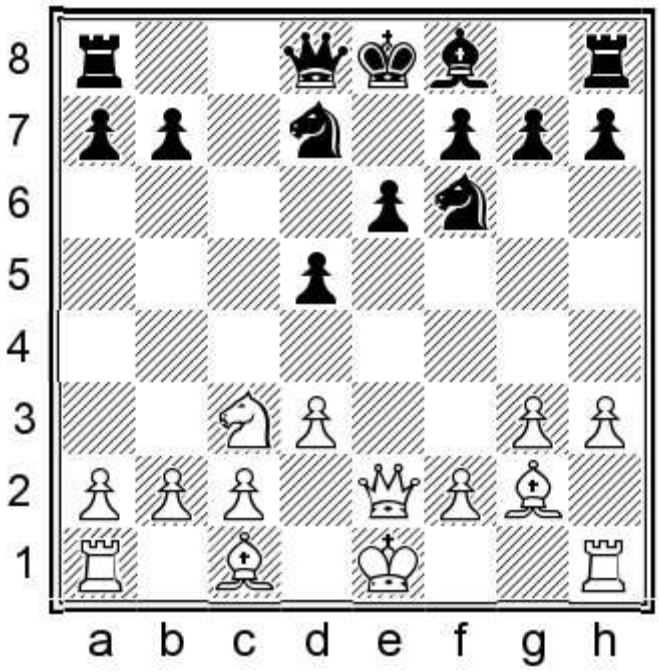


Position after: 6...♘d7

It makes more sense to delay ...♘f6, since White's primary idea is to play g4.

7.♗d2

A) 7.g3 ♗b4!? Black finds easy counterplay. [7...♕a5!? is also interesting.] 8.exd5 [8.♗d2 d4 9.♘b1 ♕b6= Without the dark-squared bishop, White has little to play for.] 8...cxd5 9.♕g4 ♗f8! 10.♗g2 ♘gf6 11.♕e2 This was played in Ashton, A (2385) – Hawkins, J (2563) England 2016 and Black went on to win the game.



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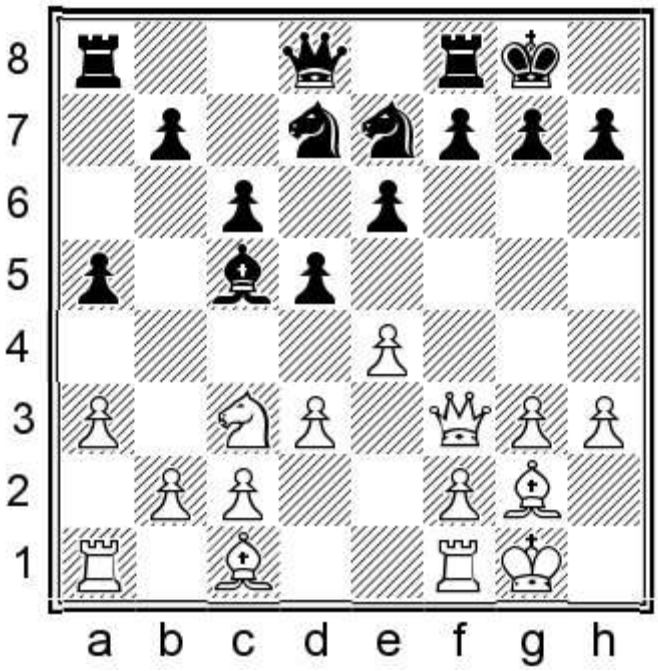
Position after: 11.♕e2

Nevertheless, 11...♘b8!N is a nice improvement. Black maneuvers the knight to c6, where it will control the d4-square and bring harmony to Black's position. 12.0-0 ♘c6=

B) 7.a3 Black could continue in a few ways, but I like Dreev's approach: 7...♗c5 8.g3 ♘e7 9.♗g2 0-0 10.0-0 a5!?=



Position after: 10...a5!?=

Black won relatively quickly in Melnikov, D (2207) – Dreev, A (2635) St Petersburg 2018. It is important to note that the position would not be as good if Black had developed his g8-knight to f6 since ...f5 would not be an option.

C) 7.♕g3 g6! Black has no problem developing his bishop to g7. 8.♗e2 ♗g7 9.0-0 ♘e7 10.♗f4 e5 11.♗g5 f6 12.♗d2 This position was reached in Ismailov, T (2027) – Tokhirjanova, H (2135) Dushanbe 2013, and the simple novelty 12...0-0N gives Black a great position.

D) 7.♗e2 ♗d6 8.0-0 ♗e5!

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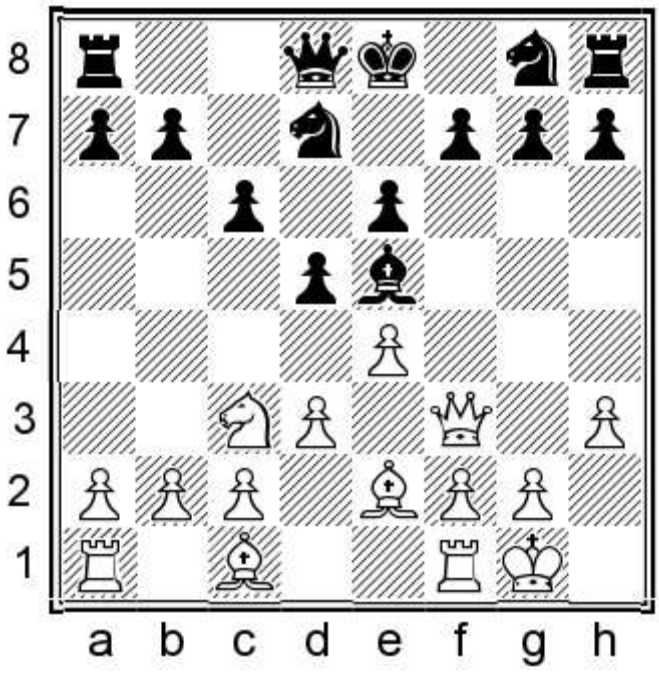
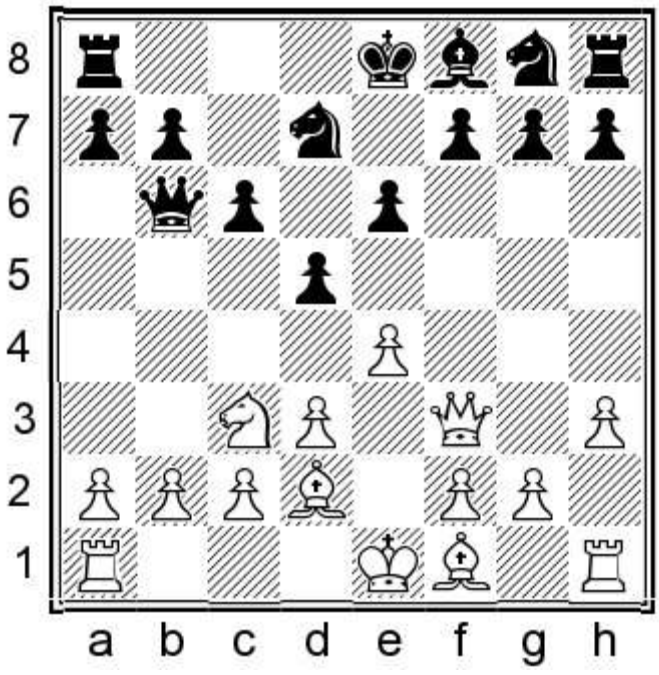


Position after: 8...♗e5!

Without d4, White has little to play for. 9.exd5 [9.♖d1 d4 10.♘b1 The center is blocked and Black is ready to attack on the kingside: 10...h5!? 11.c3 g5!→] 9...cxd5 10.♖d1 d4 11.♘e4 ♕c7 12.c4 a5= The position is interesting; Black will play on the kingside whereas White will try to open up the queenside.

7...♕b6!



Position after: 7...♕b6!

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Black hits the b2-pawn and increases his control over some key dark squares.

8.0-0-0

8.♗e2 ♗d6= was equal in Bortnik, E (2360) – Glogowski, Z (2300) email 2005. If White doesn't castle queenside, his ensuing plans will be rather tame.

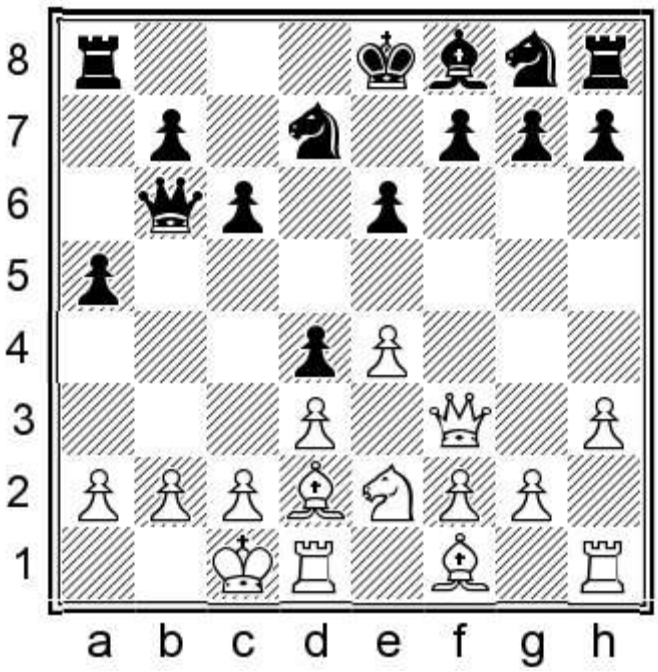
8...d4!

Black is ready to close the center to build up his queenside attack.

9.♘e2

9.♘b1 is definitely not an improvement: 9...♕a6 10.a3 b5→.

9...a5!?



Position after: 9...a5!?

I like this approach which was pioneered by Gustafsson. The idea is simple: Black wants to play ...♗b4, trade the dark-squared bishops, and continue his attack on the queenside by pushing the queenside pawns.

10.g4N

A) 10.e5 was played in Baltic, F (2238) – Gustafsson, J (2645) Germany 2019, where Black could have continued with 10...♖d8!N, gaining the upper hand.

B) 10.♕g3N is an attempt to create an initiative on the kingside with f4, but the plan is very slow.

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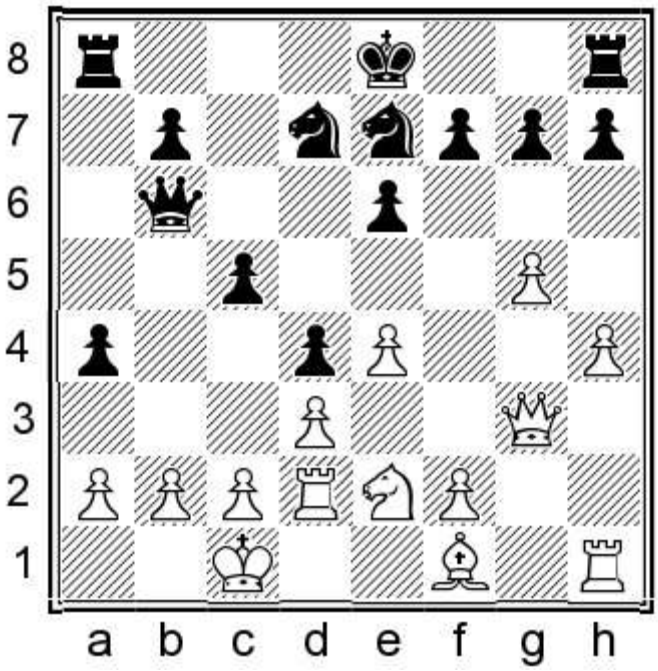
10...c5 11.f4 ♘e7 12.♘g1 ♘c6 13.♘f3 a4 14.♗e2 ♗e7→ I fancy Black's chances since White's king looks more vulnerable.

C) 10.h4N is also possible, but rather harmless. 10...h5 11.g4 hxg4 12.♕xg4 ♘gf6 13.♕g1 ♖h5! 14.♗g5 ♘c5∓.

10...♗b4 11.h4

11.c3 dxc3 12.♗xc3 ♗xc3 13.♘xc3 c5=

11...♗xd2+ 12.♖xd2 a4 13.g5 ♘e7 14.♕g3 c5∓



Position after: 14...c5∓

Black's attack looks more dangerous.

g) 6.g3

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘c3 ♗g4 4.h3 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 e6 6.g3

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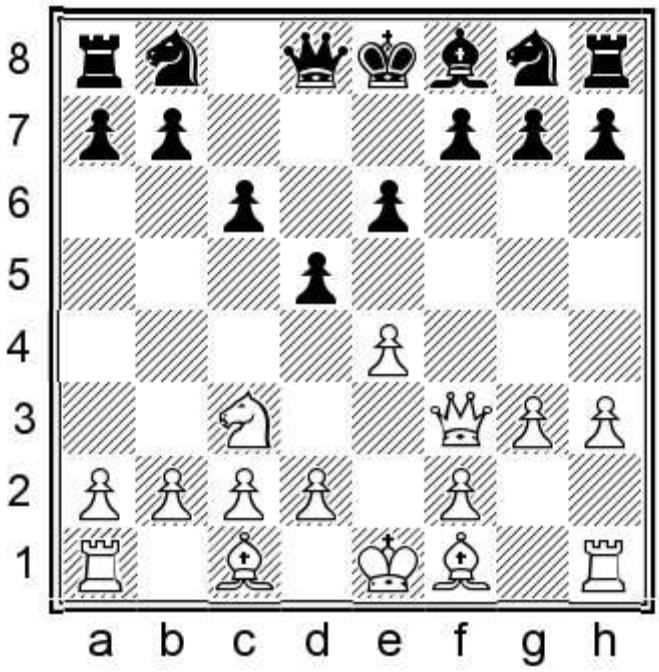


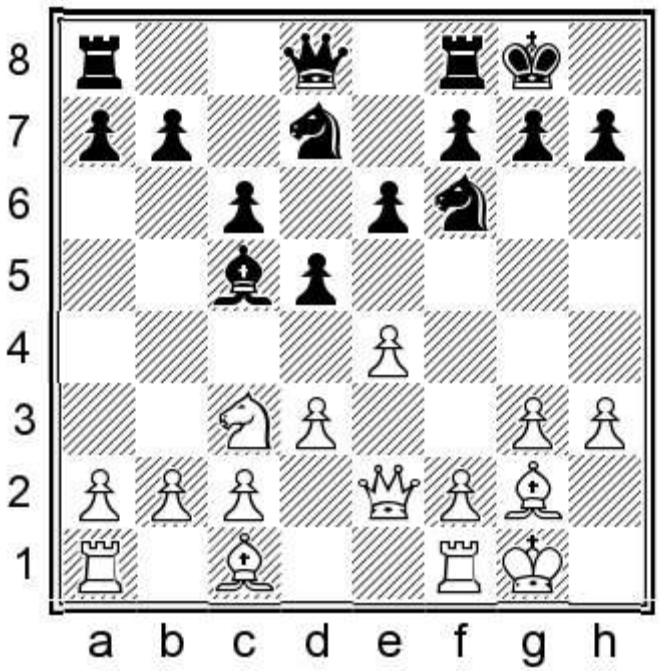
Position after: 6.g3

This move is more flexible than 6.d3 and more critical.

6...♘d7!?

6...♘f6 is not as flexible: 7.♗g2

A) 7...♗c5 is an interesting way to develop, but I prefer White after 8.0-0 0-0 9.d3 ♘bd7 10.♕e2±



Position after: 10.♕e2±

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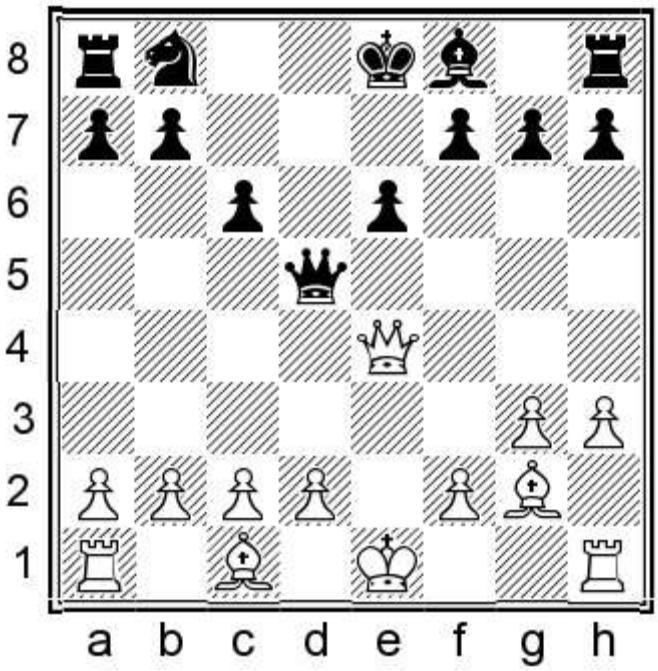
The main problem for Black is that he lacks a clear and active plan, mainly because he does not have any noteworthy pawn breaks. White is very solid and, more importantly, he is in control of the position since he can steer the game in the direction he chooses. For example, White can play on the kingside with ♔h2, f4 or he can play in the center with ♗d2, ♖ad1 and possibly ♘b1 to play c3.

B) 7...dxe4 8.♘xe4 ♘xe4 9.♕xe4 ♕d5∞



Position after: 9...♕d5∞

Black forces the queen trade, but any endgame will be slighly better for White. Black is very solid and has very good chances to hold, but I don't like the idea of entering such an endgame right after the opening.

7.♗g2

An interesting alternative is 7.d4!?

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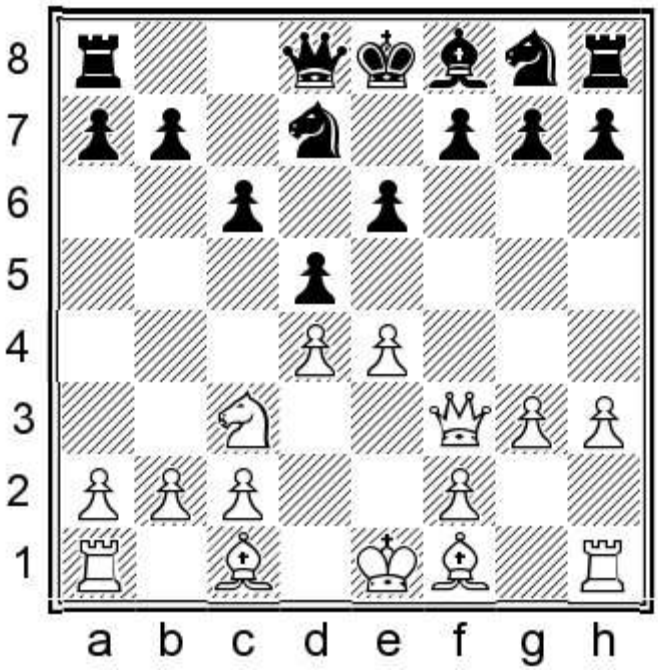
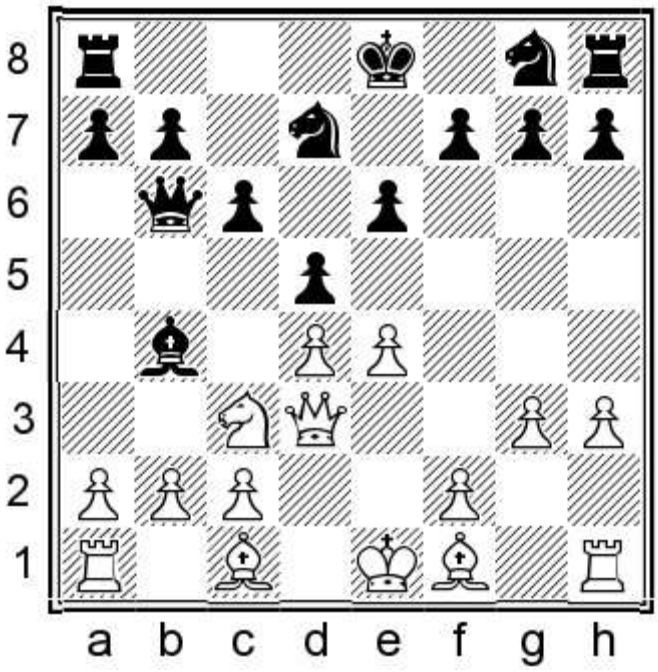


Position after: 7.d4!?

White wants to reap the advantages of a d4-based setup now that Black cannot pressure the d4-pawn. Just like in the 6.d4 variation, Black needs to react switfly. 7...♕b6! 8.♕d3 ♗b4!



Position after: 8...♗b4!

Black prevents White from continuing his development by playing against his exposed queen and central pawns. This position was reached only once, but it is critical for 6...♘d7!? to be playable.

A) 9.exd5 cxd5= was seen in Simacek, P (2518) – Paikidze, N (2317) Wroclaw 2010 and Black went

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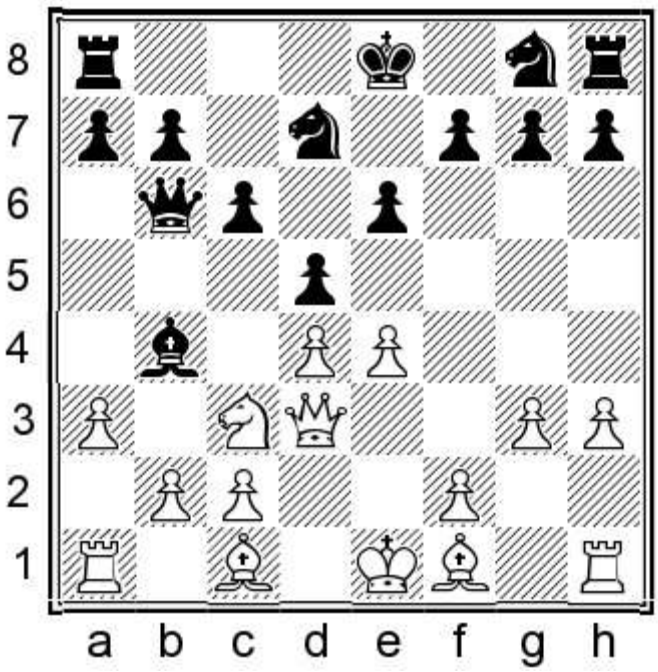
on to win against her stronger opponent. Releasing the central pressure helps Black since the position is now closed and White's bishop pair less effective.

B) Continuing development with 9.♗g2 allows Black to create threats in the center: 9...dxe4 10.♕xe4 ♘df6! 11.♕d3 ♖d8! 12.♗e3 ♘d5! 13.♗g5 ♗e7 White has nothing better than to close the center, e.g. with 14.♘xd5 cxd5 15.♗c1 ♘f6 16.0-0 0-0=.

C) 9.a3!?



Position after: 9.a3!?

C1) 9...♗xc3+?! 10.♕xc3! dxe4 [10...♘e7 11.f3!±] 11.d5!±

C2) 9...dxe4 10.♕xe4 ♗xc3+! [Again, a slower approach does not yield good results for Black: 10...♘gf6 11.♕d3 ♗e7 12.♗g2 0-0 13.0-0±] 11.bxc3 ♕a5!

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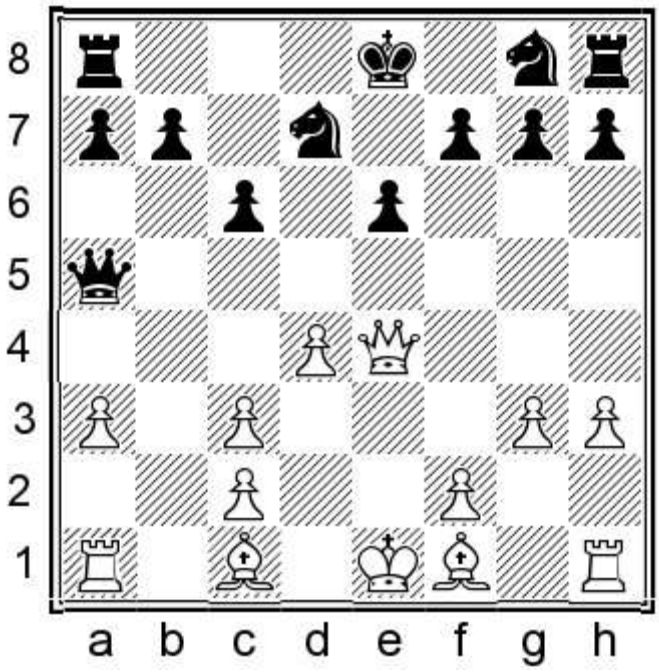

Position after: 11...♕a5!

Black keeps up the pressure on White's position.

C2.1) 12.♕f3 keeps the a8–h1 diagonal guarded, but the queen is not so well placed on f3. 12...♘gf6 13.♗e2 0-0 14.0-0 ♖ac8! By defending the c6-pawn, Black prepares ...b5!. 15.a4 This move prevents ...b5, but Black can still find active counterplay with [15.♖b1 b5!=] 15...e5!⇄ Although White's bishop pair is a strong asset, Black has good counterplay in the center.

C2.2) 12.♕d3 0-0-0!? [12...♖d8!? is also possible.] 13.♗d2 White prepares c4. 13...♕d5! An important move, which forces White to give up castling rights on the kingside. 14.♖g1 ♘e7 15.c4 [15.♗g2 ♕a5 16.a4 ♘f5∞] 15...♕f5! 16.g4 ♕xd3 17.♗xd3 c5!

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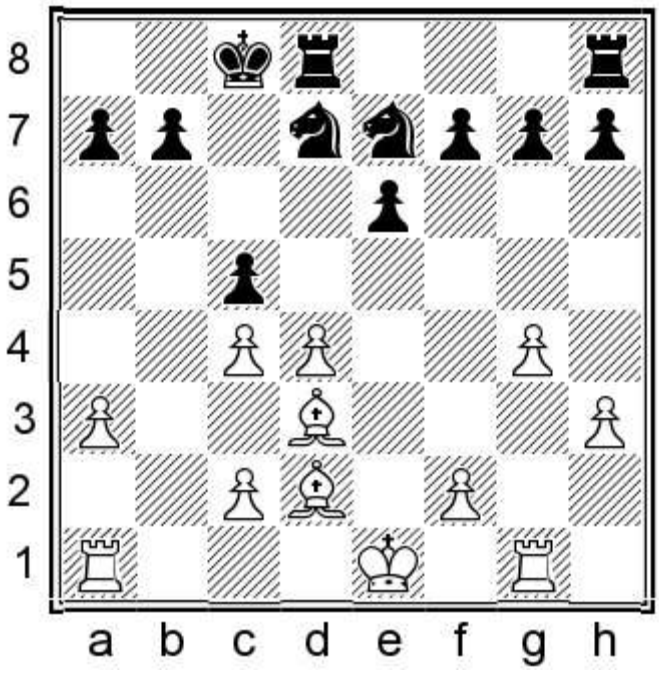

Position after: 17...c5!

We have come a long way from the opening stages, but it is natural to continue our analysis so long as the position mandates it.

In this endgame, White has the pair of bishops but his pawn structure has been ruined. There is a lot of play left, but the position is equal. Play may continue: 18.♗e3 cxd4 19.♗xd4 f6! 20.♗xa7 [20.0-0-0 ♘c6=] 20...b6 21.♖b1 ♔c7 22.c5 bxc5 23.♖b5 ♖a8 24.♗xc5 ♘d5 25.♗b4 ♘xb4 26.♖xb4 ♖xa3=.

7...d4!

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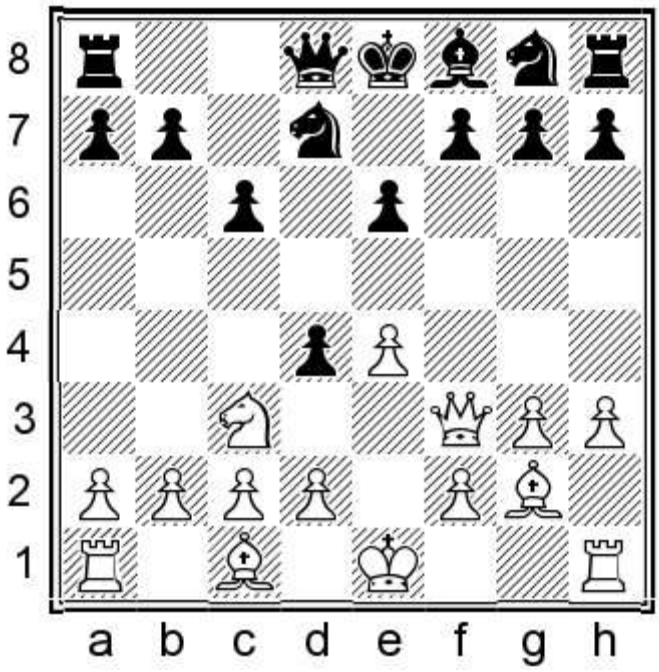

Position after: 7...d4!

Black cannot let White continue his development without defining the pawn structure. With 7...d4, Black wants to exploit White's slow development and the exposed queen on f3. The idea is the same as the one we saw in the 6.♗e2 line, but this version is different because White's light-squared bishop is on g2.

8.♘e2

A) 8.♘b1 is quite passive and Black can take over the initiative with 8...h5! 9.d3 h4 10.g4 ♘e7 11.0-0 ♘g6∓.

B) 8.♘d1 White's plan is to play ♕e2, f4 and then ♘f2. However, Black can play actively with 8...g5! 9.h4 [9.♕h5?! puts Black in the driver's seat: 9...♘gf6 10.♕xg5 h5!⩱] 9...gxh4 10.♖xh4 ♘e5 11.♕b3 ♕c7= White's position is not very organized and Black can continue with active play on the kingside.

8...♕b6

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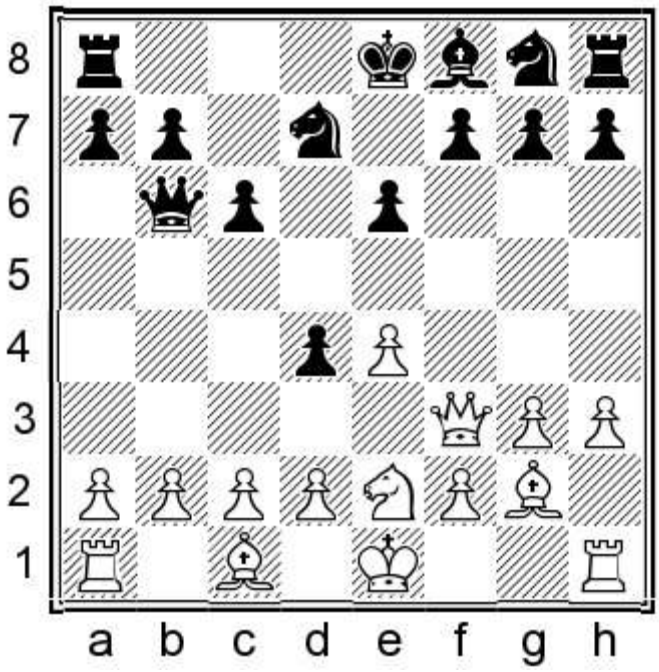

Position after: 8...♕b6

Just like in the 6.♗e2 line, and perhaps even more so, White needs to solve the problem of his queen on f3.

9.♕d3

This is White's most interesting continuation. Although it provides a temporary fix for the queen, White will need to lose more time to bring his dark-squared bishop into the game. While he tries to rearrange his position, Black wants to use the queen to create counterplay on the queenside with ...c4.

A) 9.♕b3 ♕xb3 10.axb3 d3!=

B) 9.♘f4 does not solve White's problem and allows Black to gain space on the kingside: 9...g5! 10.♘d3 h5=.

C) 9.0-0 ♘e5! 10.♕h5 [10.♕f4 leads to repetition: 10...♘g6 11.♕f3 ♘e5=] 10...♗d6 11.d3 h6!

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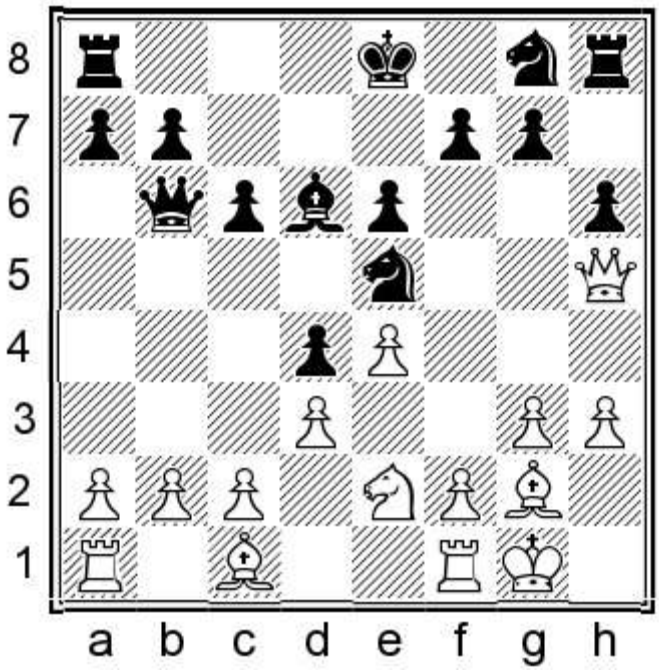
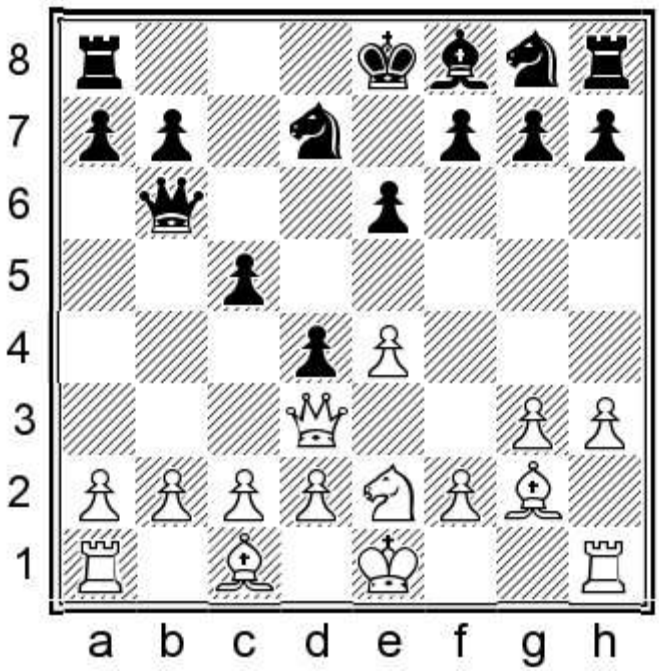


Position after: 11...h6!

Black restricts the movement of the White queen. Now, ...♘f6 is a serious threat. 12.♘f4 g5! 13.♘xe6 ♘f6 14.♘g7+ ♔f8 15.♕e2 ♔xg7 16.f4 ♕c7 17.fxe5 ♗xe5=

9...c5



Position after: 9...c5

10.f4

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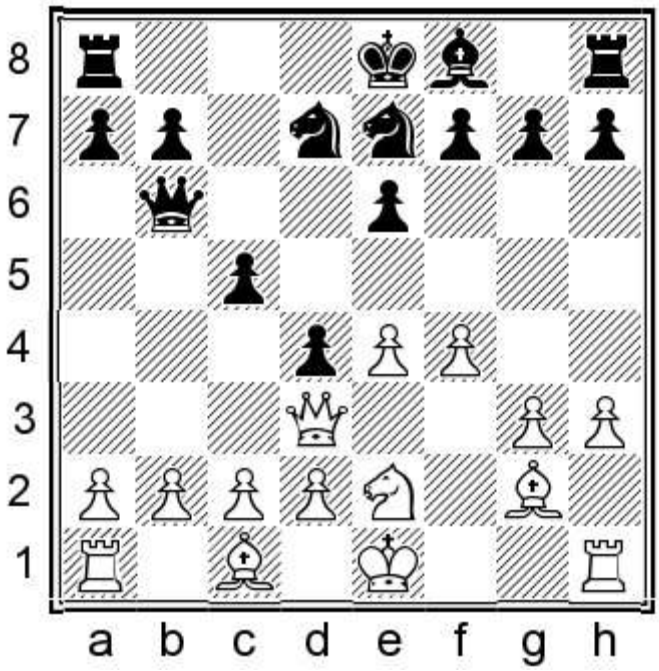
A) 10.0-0 ♘e7 11.f4 ♘c6 12.♕f3 c4!⇄

B) 10.♕b3 is another option, but there is no reason to believe that White has any edge regardless of whether queens are traded. 10...♘e7 11.d3 ♘c6 12.♗d2 ♗d6 13.f4 e5 14.0-0 0-0=

10...♘e7



Position after: 10...♘e7

11.♕f3

White has brought his queen to a natural position, but he has lost a lot of time.

A) 11.e5 opens the diagonal for the g2-bishop but Black is ready to react on the kingside with 11...g5! ⇄.

B) 11.♕b3 ♕xb3 12.axb3 d3! Again, it's necessary to ruin White's pawn structure.

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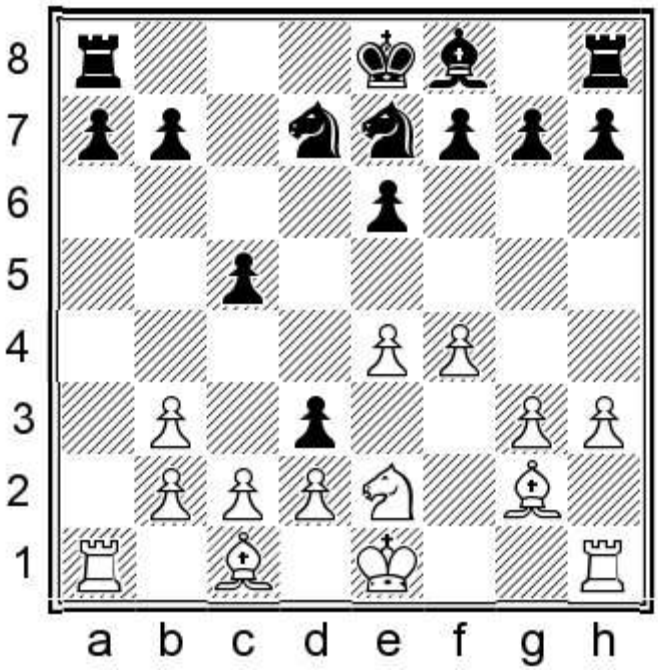


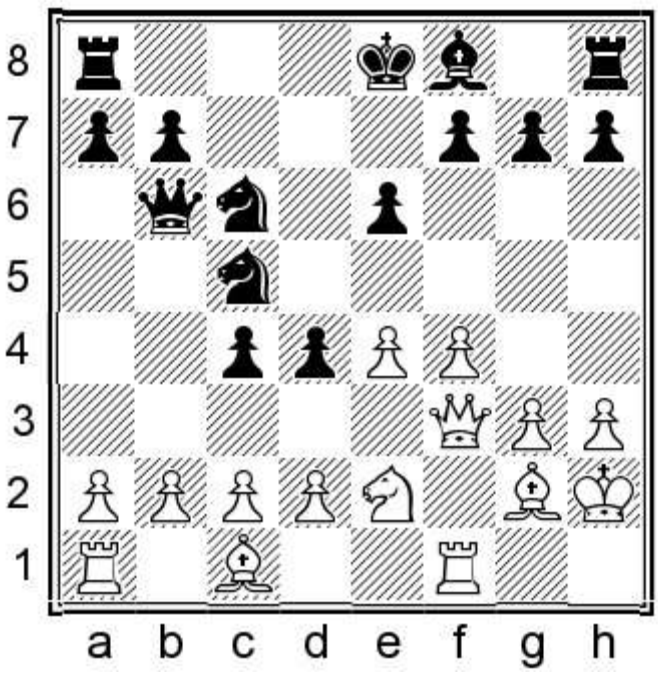
Position after: 12...d3!

13.cxd3 e5! 14.b4!? ♘c6! Black keeps his clamp on White's position. 15.b5 ♘b4 16.0-0 ♗d6 17.b3 ♘xd3 18.♗a3 a5=

11...♘c6 12.0-0

12.d3 is very slow and Black is ready to take over the initiative. 12...♘b4 13.♔d1 c4! 14.dxc4 ♘c5→

12...c4 13.♔h2 ♘c5=



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Position after: 13...♘c5=

Black has achieved what he wanted: counterplay on the queenside. White is unable to complete his development without creating new targets for Black's initiative.

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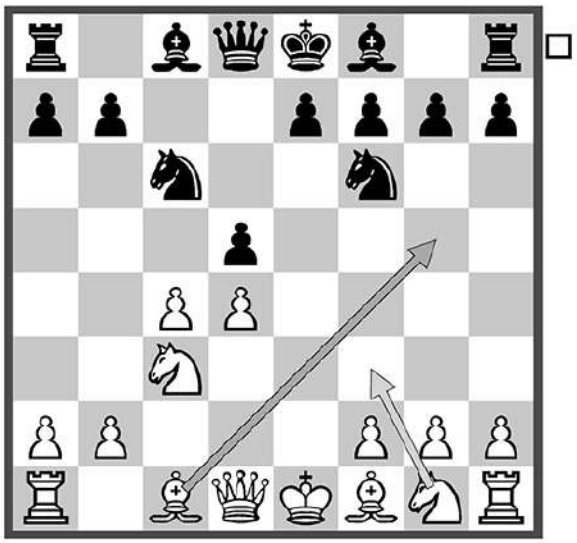
Part IV
Panov Variation

Chapter 12
5...♘c6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 12 – 5...♘c6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6

a) 6.♗g5 dxc4

b) 6.♗g5 ♗e6

c) 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.--

d) 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.cxd5 – The Fischer Endgame (with 15.♗g5+)

e) 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.cxd5 – The Fischer Endgame (with 15.♕xd5)

a) 6.♗g5 dxc4

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4

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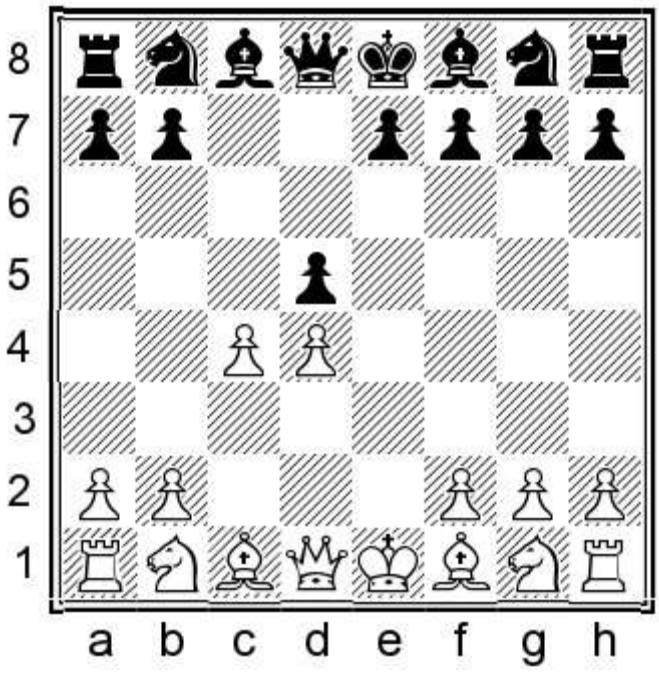

Position after: 4.c4

The Panov variation is one of the oldest lines in the Caro-Kann Defense. It is often employed by players who like open games and who seek dynamic positions with open diagonals for their bishops. White's idea is simply to open the position and activate his pieces quickly, with moves like ♘c3, ♘f3, ♗d3 and 0-0. Although White is indeed able to generate active play, the strategy also plays into Black's hands: he gets the c6-square for his b8-knight and the possibility of developing his light-squared bishop to an active square (either f5 or g4). Black can use these factors to quickly develop his own pieces and solidify his center. Another important feature of the Panov variation is the central structure. Very often, White will play cxd5 (or Black will play ...dxc4) giving us a position where White has an isolated queen's pawn (IQP). Nowadays, the Panov variation is seldom played by top players because Black has found specific ways to handle White's activity and equalize. The simplest one starts with 4...♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 and continues with 6.♘f3 ♗g4. Although this line is most definitely sufficient for equality, it does allow White to substantially simplify the position. For this reason, I also present an alternative for Black: 4...♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘f3 ♗b4. While I am not as confident about Black's ability to equalize in this line, it still gives players a sound alternative to play in situations where a draw is not a favorable result. We will begin by examining 4...♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 in two subchapters (first 6.♗g5 and then 6.♘f3), and we will then tackle 4...♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘f3 ♗b4 in the subsequent chapter.

4...♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6

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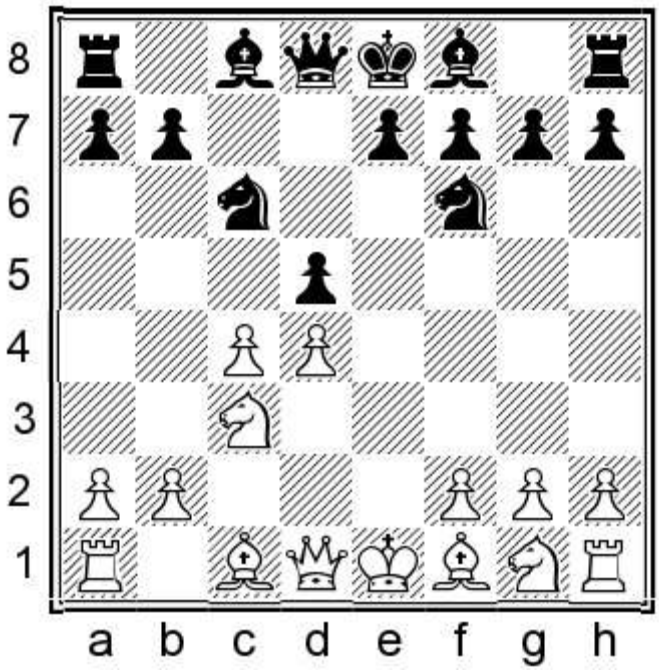
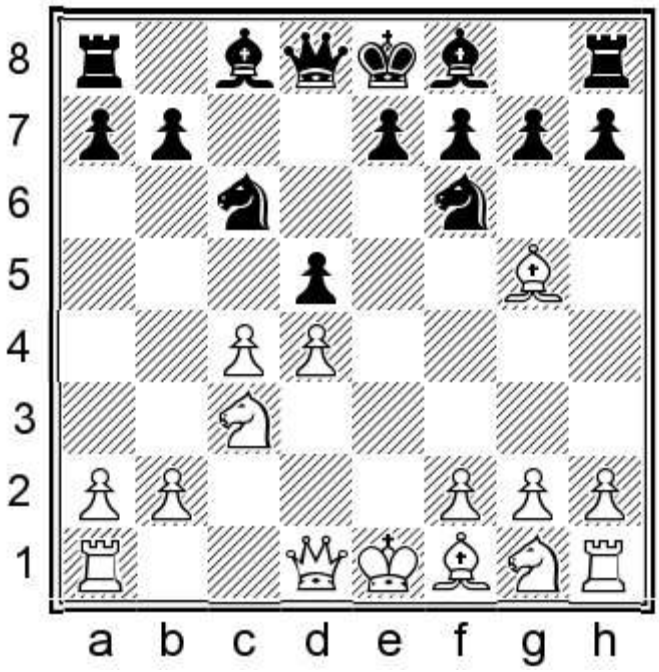


Position after: 5...♘c6

The key idea of Black's setup is waiting for White to play ♘f3 so as to develop the light-squared bishop to g4. With this move, Black starts pressuring the d4-pawn and introduces the idea of playing ...dxc4. While 6.♘f3 is White's main continuation, the following is a viable alternative.

6.♗g5



Position after: 6.♗g5

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White is putting immediate pressure on the d5-square by going after Black's f6-knight. Hence, Black needs to take appropriate action in the center.

I will present two continuations for Black: 6...dxc4 and 6...♗e6. The first one matches the spirit of the position, immediately pressuring the d4-pawn and releasing the pressure on d5. Instead, 6...♗e6 relies on concrete details of this position: Black defends the d5-pawn and intends to activate Black's remaining pieces without delay, gaining time against the g5-bishop with moves like ...h6 or ...♘e4. My personal preference is for 6...♗e6 because it gives Black more chances to obtain active positions.

6.cxd5 ♘xd5 is not that critical (since it releases the pressure on the center and simplifies Black's play) but we will discuss it a bit further via the move-order 1.e4 c6 2.c4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.cxd5 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘xd5 6.d4 ♘c6.

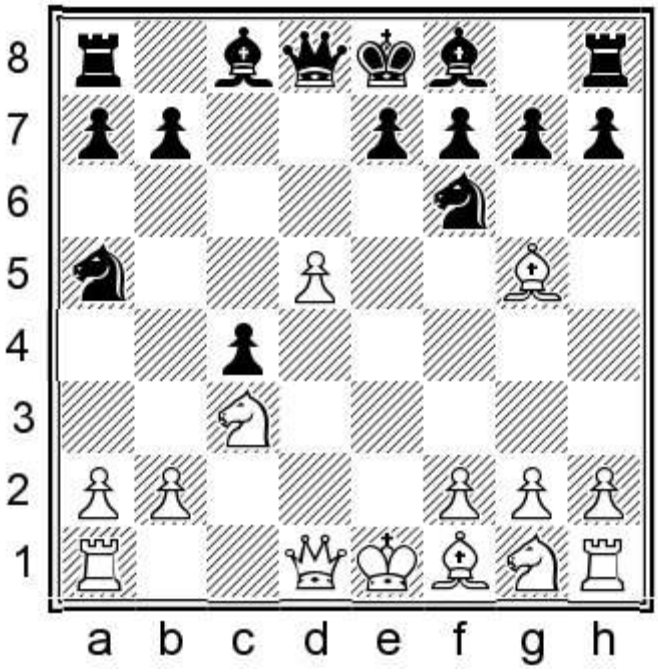
6...dxc4!?

Black is not just taking the c4-pawn but also simultaneously attacking its colleague on d4. This move leads to rather forcing play; the alternative 6...♗e6!? is covered in the next subchapter.

7.♗xc4

White hopes his faster development will make up for the jettisoned d-pawn.

7.d5 is also possible. White defends against Black's threat to take on d4 and gains space in the center. However, Black can reply with 7...♘a5!



Position after: 7...♘a5!

protecting the c4-pawn. Although Black is slightly behind in development, he will be able to untangle his kingside by using the g5-bishop to gain tempi. Meanwhile, White will have to give up the bishop

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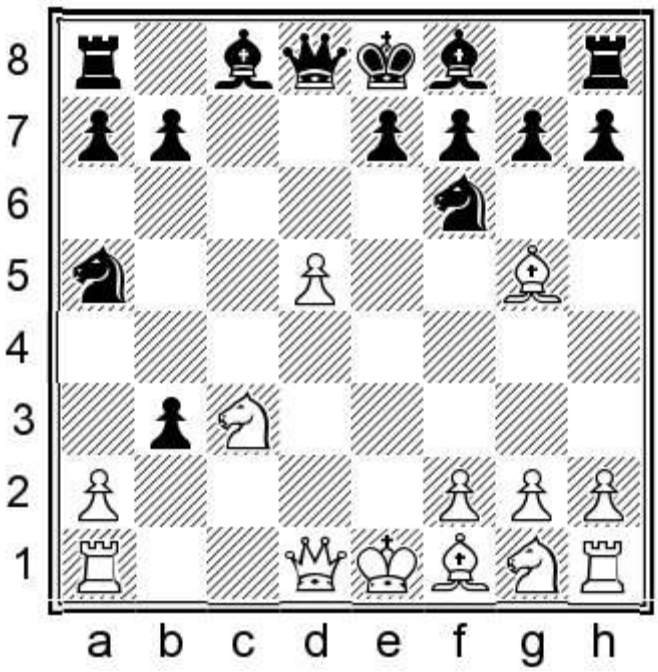
pair and exchange off Black's inconvenient a5-knight to recover his pawn.

A) 8.b4!? White gives up on recapturing the c4-pawn and instead sacrifices a pawn to open the queenside and exploit Black's misplaced a5-knight. However, Black is too solid for this to cause any real harm. 8...cxb3



Position after: 8...cxb3

A1) 9.axb3 Although this move has been played far more often than the other, it is less critical. Now comes 9...♗d7! 10.♗d3 [10.b4 ♖c8!∓ is an important point. The knight will come to c4.] 10...e5! This is a key move, solving Black's development issues. 11.♘ge2 ♗b4∓ Black had the upper hand in Gaujens, A (2119) – Jong, E (2093) ICCF email 2010.

A2) 9.♗b5+!? A nice intermediate move. By trading the light-squared bishops, White makes it harder for Black to push his e-pawn and, hence, to complete his development. 9...♗d7 10.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 11.axb3 b6 12.b4! [12.♘f3N gives Black the time to develop his dark-squared bishop: 12...h6! 13.♗d2 g5!∓ ...♗g7 is coming and I don't think White has enough compensation for the pawn.] 12...♘c4 13.♕e2 b5 14.♘f3 e6! 15.0-0 ♗xb4 16.dxe6 ♕xe6 17.♕xe6+ fxe6 18.♘xb5 0-0 19.♖xa7 ♖xa7 we have been following the game Sanna, P (2277) – Rosenhoefer, T (2295) ICCF email 2018. The players agreed to a draw in this position, since the endgame is totally equal.

B) White can delay taking on c4 with 8.♘f3!? but Black can proceed with 8...h6 as in Chandler, M (2540) – Croad, N (2313) Auckland 2008. Now, in lieu of 9.♗xf6 exf6, which gave Black an excellent position, White could have tried 9.♗d2!?N

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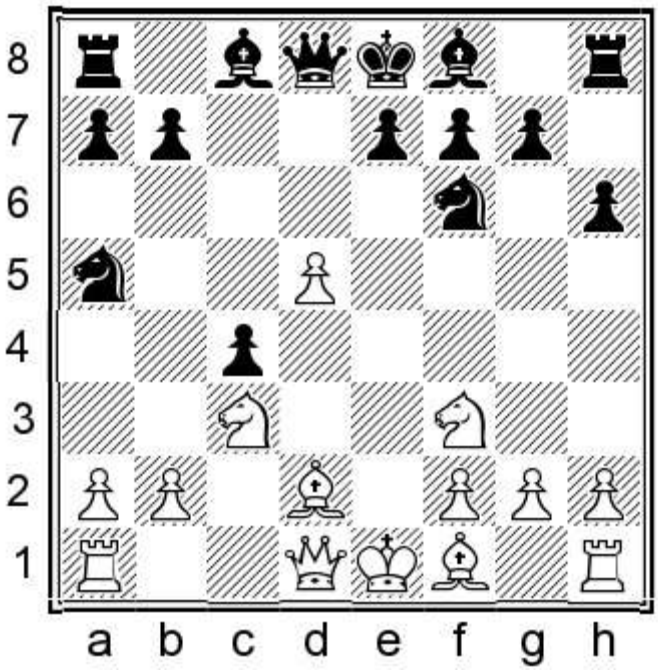
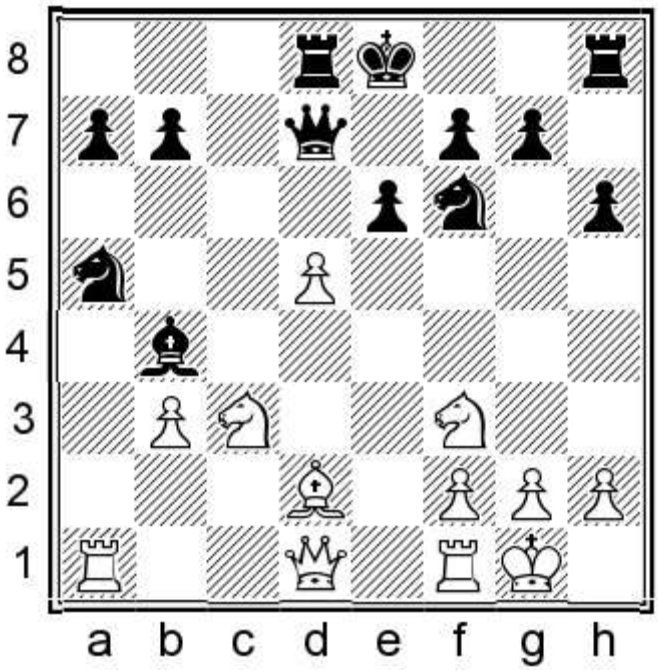


Position after: 9.♗d2!?N

[9.♗h4N: keeping the bishop on the kingside only helps Black. 9...g5 10.♗g3 ♗g7 11.♗xc4 ♘xc4 12.♕a4+ ♗d7 13.♕xc4 b5!⇄ Black has a strong initiative on both sides of the board.] 9...e6 [Black can eliminate the d5-pawn with 9...♘xd5 but White keeps the initiative: 10.♘xd5 ♕xd5 11.♕a4+ ♘c6 12.♗xc4 ♕e4+ 13.♗e3 e6 14.0-0 ♗e7 15.♖fe1. Now, Black has nothing better than giving the pawn back. 15...0-0 16.♗xh6 ♕f5 17.♗e3∞] 10.b4! This is White's key idea. Although Black is by no means in danger, he needs to proceed with caution since the a5-knight can quickly become a source of problems. 10...cxb3 11.♗b5+ ♗d7 12.axb3 ♗b4! 13.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 14.0-0 ♖d8!



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Position after: 14...♖d8!

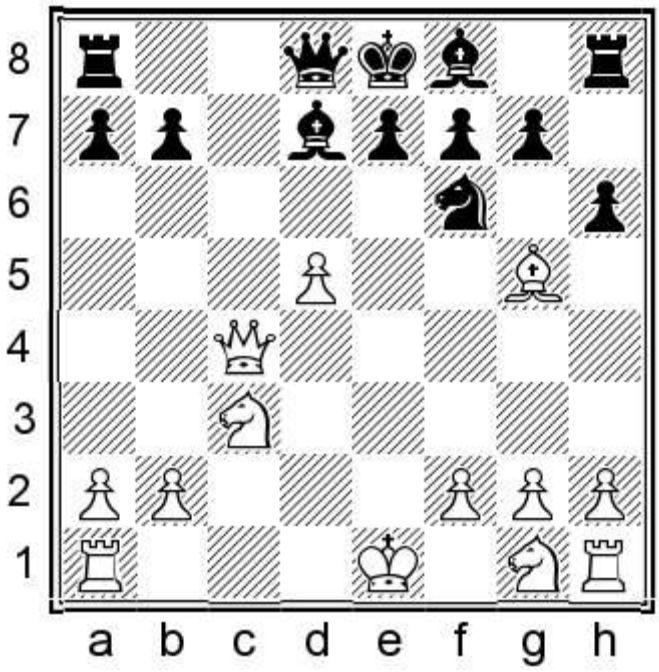
Reinforcing the center. Now, Black is ready to play ...♕e7 and protect his bishop. [14...0-0? fails to 15.♖a4! ♕e7 16.d6! ♕xd6 17.♘b5+–]

B1) 15.♖e1 ♕e7!∓ dxe6 is not a threat and Black is ready to castle.

B2) 15.♖a4 leads to a forcing line from which Black emerges unscathed: 15...♘xd5! 16.♘xd5 ♗xd2 17.♕xd2 ♘xb3 18.♘c7+! ♕xc7 19.♕b2 ♘c5 20.♕xg7 ♘xa4 21.♕xh8+ ♔e7 22.♕xh6 ♘c5∞ Black is a pawn up but his king is vulnerable. The most likely outcome is a perpetual check.

B3) 15.♘e5 ♕e7 16.♘d3 b6! Black simply defends the a5-knight and White's initiative fades. 17.♘xb4 ♕xb4 18.dxe6 fxe6 19.♘d5! ♕d4 20.♘xf6+ ♕xf6 21.♕c2 0-0 22.♗xa5 bxa5 23.♖xa5 ♖f7=

C) 8.♗xc4 Although this is the most popular move, it is quite harmless. White regains the pawn but gives up his bishop pair and resolves Black's issues with the a5-knight. 8...♘xc4 9.♕a4+ ♗d7 10.♕xc4 h6!



Position after: 10...h6!

Black displaces White's pieces as he continues his development. 11.♗e3 [11.♗xf6 exf6∓ simply hands Black the reins since Black's bishops will be unrivaled; 11.♗h4 ♕b6! 12.♘ge2N 12...g6∓] 11...e6! 12.dxe6 ♗xe6 13.♕b5+ Now in Dostal, S – De Homont, R ICCF email 2014, 13...♕d7N 14.♕xd7+ ♗xd7= would have given Black an equal position.

Back to 7.♗xc4.

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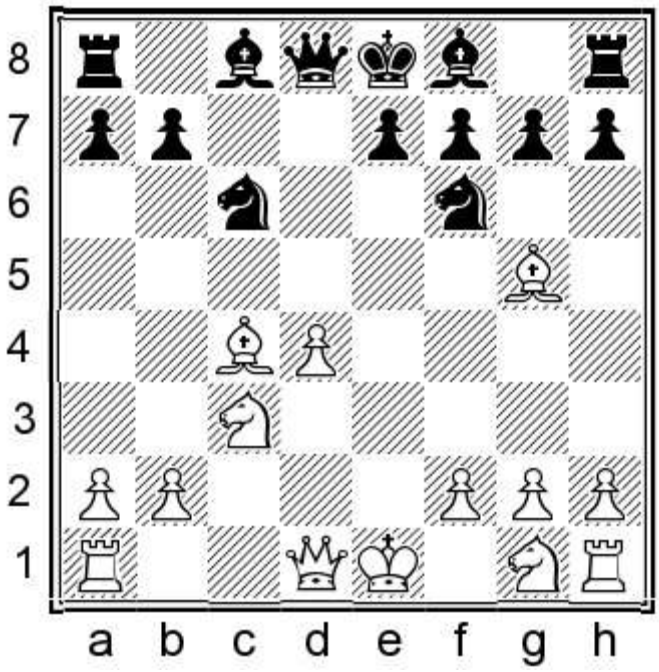

Position after: 7.♗xc4

7...h6

Taking on d4 immediately is also possible, although Black faces an uncomfortable defense after 7...♕xd4 8.♕xd4 ♘xd4 9.0-0-0 e5 10.f4 ♗g4 11.♘f3 ♗xf3 12.gxf3 0-0-0 13.fxe5 ♘xf3 14.♖xd8+ ♔xd8 15.♗xf6+ gxf6 16.exf6 ♗h6+ 17.♔c2 ♘e5 18.♗d5 ♔c8 19.♖g1∞. Black went on to draw in Neborak, Y (2315) – Poletaev, V (2243) ICCF email 2013, but correspondence games run by a different playbook, and over the board a human would probably find this unpleasant. The differences between this line and the main line seem minor but are actually quite important.

8.♗h4

Other moves aren't that critical:

A) 8.♗xf6 exf6 9.♕h5 g6 10.♕e2+ ♗e7 11.♘f3 0-0 12.0-0 ♗g4= Dos Santos, M (2275) – Putman, M (2283) LSS email 2010

B) 8.♗f4 e6 9.♘f3 ♗d6=

C) 8.♗e3 e6 9.♘f3 ♗d6 10.0-0 0-0 11.♕e2 b6 12.♖ad1 ♘e7 13.♘e5 ♗b7= Black controls the d5-square and can manoeuvre around it as he likes.

8...♕xd4

If Black does not take on d4, he has trouble completing his development since ...e6 is met by d5.

9.♕xd4 ♘xd4 10.0-0-0 e5

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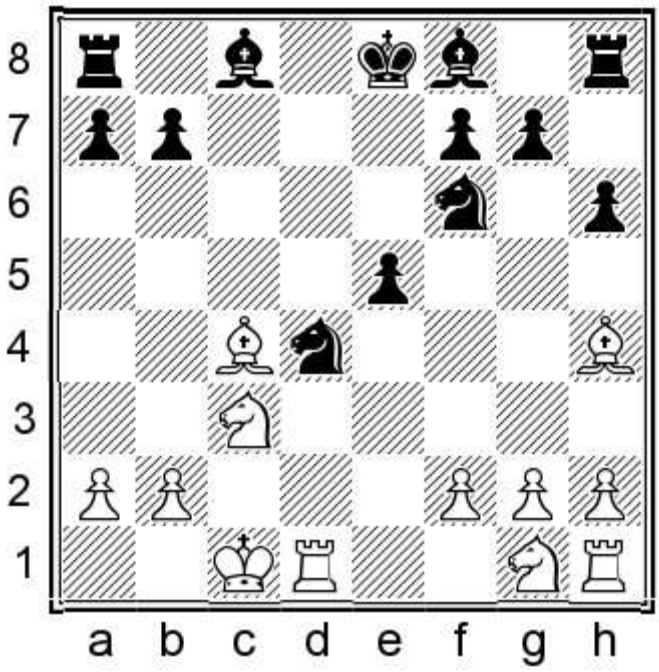

Position after: 10...e5

11.f4!?

11.♗g3 is also possible but Black can return the material and complete his development: 11...♗e7 12.♗xe5 ♘c6 13.♘f3 0-0 14.h3 ♗f5 15.♖he1 ♖ac8=

11...♗g4!

An important move which prepares queenside options like ...♖c8.

12.♘f3 ♗xf3 13.gxf3 ♖c8

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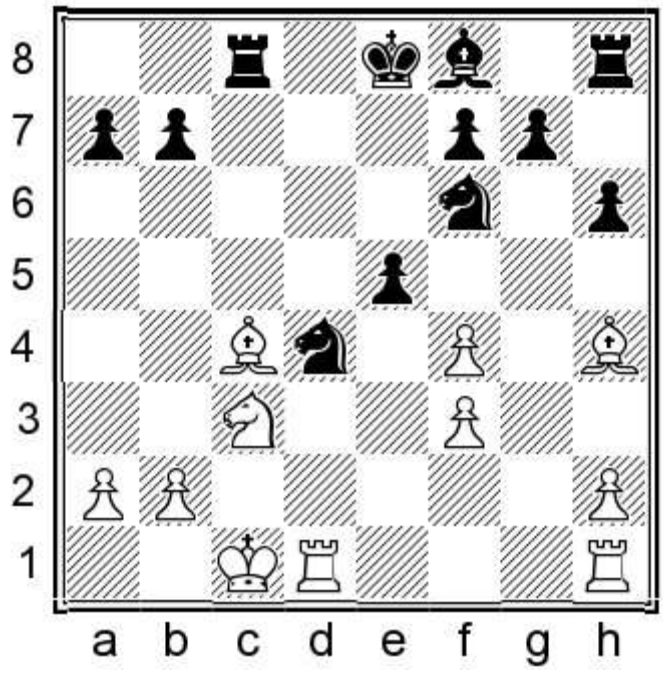

Position after: 13...♖c8

While 13...0-0-0 would have been possible if the moves ...h6 and ♗h4 were not included, here it loses to 14.fxe5 ♘xf3 15.♖xd8+ ♔xd8 16.♗g3+–.

14.fxe5

14.♗f1 ♘d5! 15.fxe5 ♘xc3 16.bxc3 ♗a3+ 17.♔b1 ♘xf3 18.♗h3 ♖a8 19.♗d7+ ♔f8 20.♗g3 ♘g5∞ The knight comes to e6 and solidifies the position. White has compensation for the pawn but nothing more.

14...♖xc4 15.exf6 ♘e6

The dust clears and Black is fine. Note that (ironically) had Black entered the analogous line without 7...h6 8.♗h4 included, ...♘e6 would not gain a tempo as White could handle the threat to his bishop while also developing, with ♖he1. This detail shows the finesse that is needed to avoid being worse here.

16.♗g3 gxf6 17.♔b1 ♖g8 18.♘d5 ♖g6=

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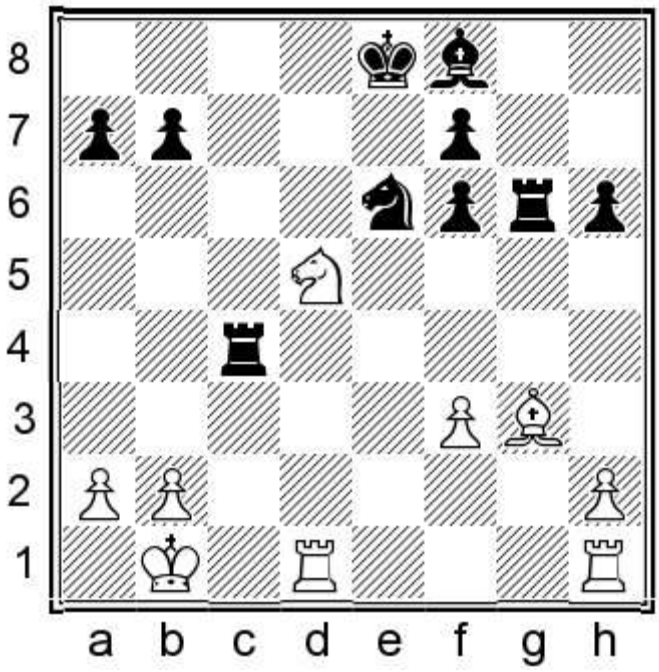
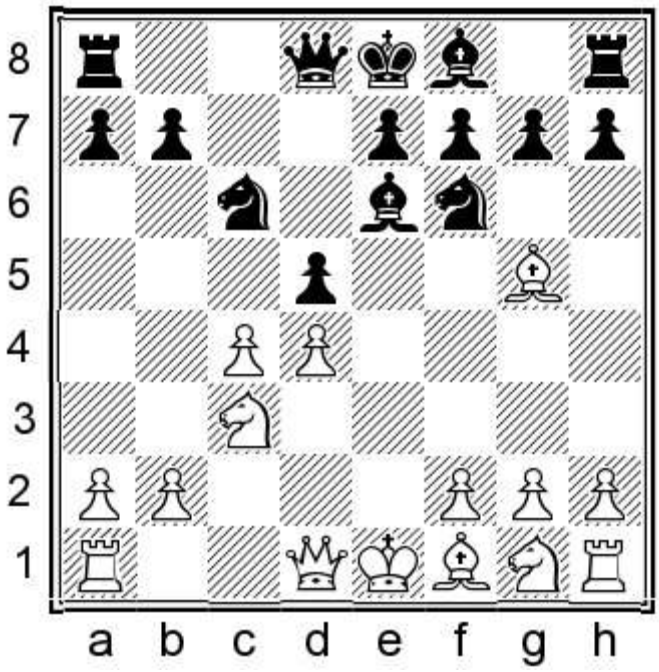


Position after: 18...♖g6=

b) 6.♗g5 ♗e6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♗g5 ♗e6!?



Position after: 6...♗e6!?

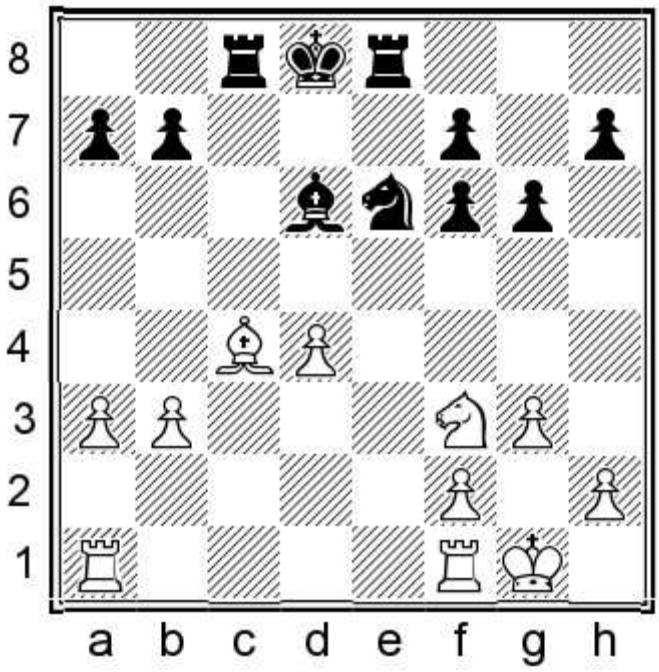
This is an unconventional and modern approach which seeks to utilize the fact that White has played ♗g5. The bishop on g5 prevents White from playing ♘g5 to harass the e6-bishop, and also gives Black

a target to gain tempi against (...h6 and ...g5, or ...♘e4.) Black's commonest follow-up, though, is ...g6. If he is given the time to develop with ...♗g7 and ... 0-0, then the c4-pawn will be become a target and Black will always be able to respond to c5 with ...♘e4.

7.♗e2!?

This is a tricky idea: White wants to play ♗f3 and combine all his resources to pressure the d5 square.

A) 7.a3 is not particularly challenging but it allows me to illustrate some important ideas. 7...g6 8.♗xf6 White cannot let Black continue his development. 8...exf6 9.cxd5 ♗xd5 10.♕e2+ ♘e7 11.♘xd5 ♕xd5 12.♕b5+ ♔d8 13.♕xd5+ ♘xd5 14.♗c4 ♘f4 15.g3 ♖c8 16.b3 ♘e6 17.♘f3 ♗d6 18.0-0 ♖e8= This position was reached in Amin, B (2699) – Sunilduth Lyna, N (2611) chess24.com 2020.



Position after: 18...♖e8=

If you have been reading this book in order, you should be very familiar with this kind of structure from our repertoire in the open Caro-Kann. What we have here is an ideal version of the endgame: Black's king is perfectly placed, the dark-squared bishop blockades the d-pawn and Black's knight is also ideally placed on e6.

B) 7.c5 gives in to the pressure too easily. Now, Black can counter in the center: 7...♘e4 8.♗f4 [8.♗e3 is not advisable due to 8...♘xc5! 9.dxc5 d4∓] 8...g5! 9.♗e3 ♗g7= Black will continue with ...0-0, ...f5 and have an excellent initiative on the kingside.

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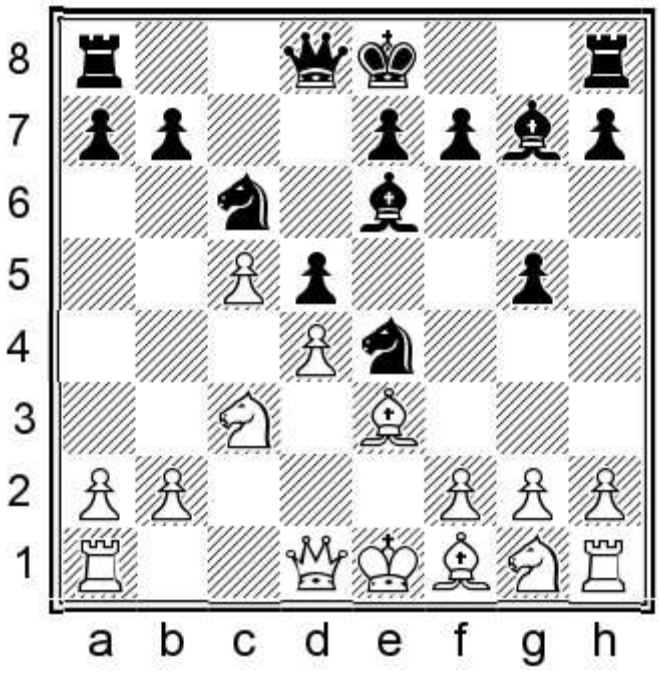
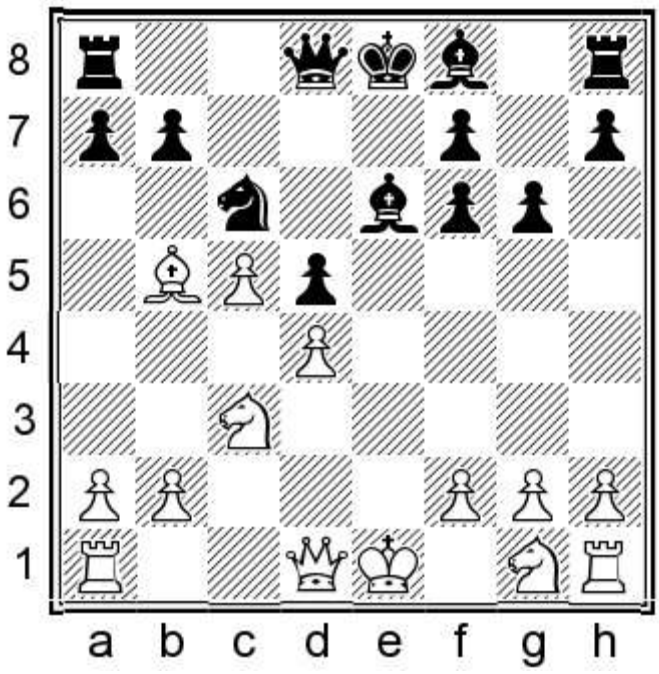


Position after: 9...♗g7=

Black went on to win in Hope, G (1858) – Ward, M (1787) England 2010.

C) 7.♗xf6 also seems a bit rushed, but it justifies White's previous move. 7...exf6 8.c5 g6 9.♗b5



Position after: 9.♗b5

9...h5!?N There is no need to wait: Black's plan is to attack on the kingside, and he should push his pawn majority to gain space. Furthermore, this move gives Black the option to activate his dark-squared bishop via h6. [9...♗g7 is also good and has been employed successfully, but I prefer the text

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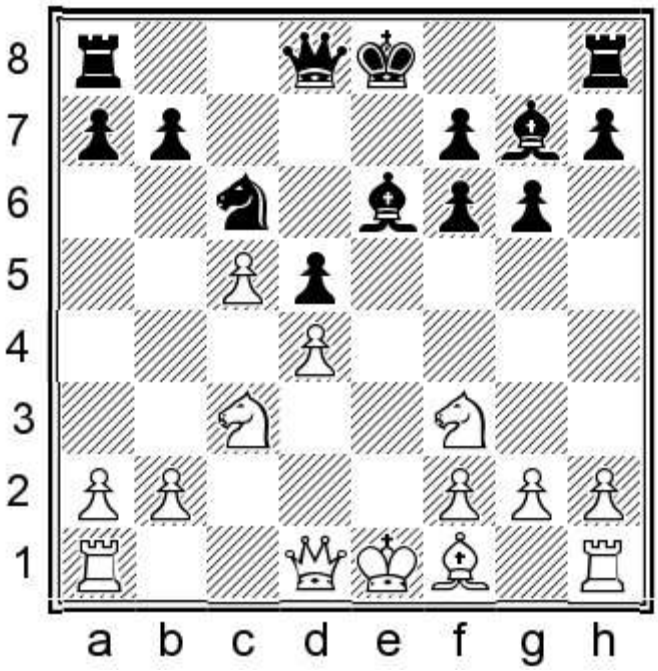
move.] 10.♘f3 ♗h6 11.0-0 ♔f8∞

D) 7.♘f3 This is the most logical continuation. 7...g6 8.♗xf6 exf6 9.c5 ♗g7



Position after: 9...♗g7

10.♗b5 [10.h3 prevents ...♗g4, but loses time. 10...0-0 11.♗b5 a6 12.♗a4 ♗f5 13.0-0 ♗e4= Black had an excellent position and eventually won in Rivas Romero, G (2377) – Dhanish, P (2530) ICCF email 2010.] 10...♗g4! An important move. Black would not be worse after 10...0-0, but now it is White who needs to worry about equality. 11.♕e2+ ♔f8↑ Black's initiative was too strong and he won nicely in Vayser, V (2580) – Zhak, B (2556) ICCF email 2009.

7...♕a5!

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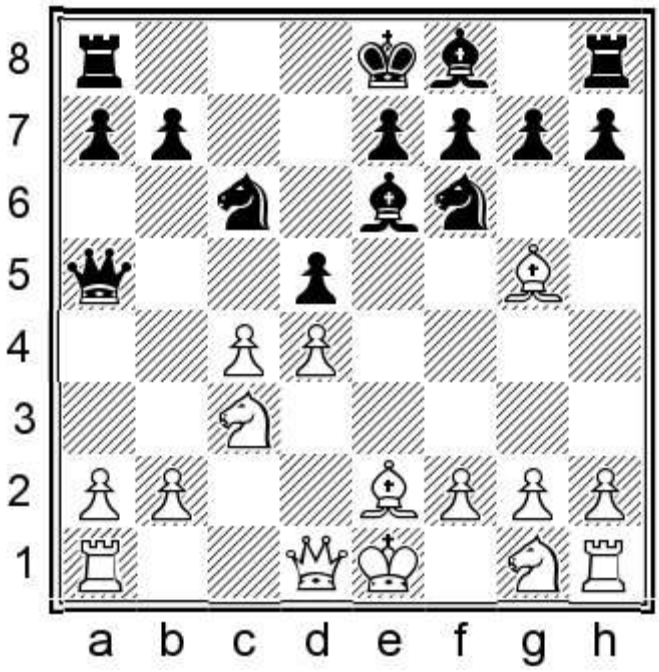

Position after: 7...♕a5!

A punchy move that prepares ...0-0-0!

8.♘f3

White gives up on his idea to play ♗f3, and instead focuses on quick development. However, he is giving up the c4-pawn and has no clear way to regain it.

A) 8.c5 simply gives up on pressuring the center, and Black can continue his kingside development. 8...♘e4 9.♗d2 ♘xd2 10.♕xd2 g6 11.♗b5 [11.♘f3 ♗g4!∓] 11...a6 12.♗xc6+ bxc6 13.♘f3 ♗g7 14.0-0N 14...0-0 15.h3 ♕c7 16.♖fe1 ♗f5= Black will play ...f6 and ...e5 to open the position and bring his pair of bishops to life.

B) 8.♗f3 is now met by 8...dxc4 9.d5 0-0-0! and White has nothing better than 10.♗d2 ♘xd5 11.♘xd5 ♖xd5 12.♗xa5 ♖xd1+ 13.♖xd1 ♘xa5 14.♘e2 ♗d7 15.0-0 e6= when Black's bishop pair and the two pawns give him excellent chances.

8...dxc4! 9.0-0 ♖d8

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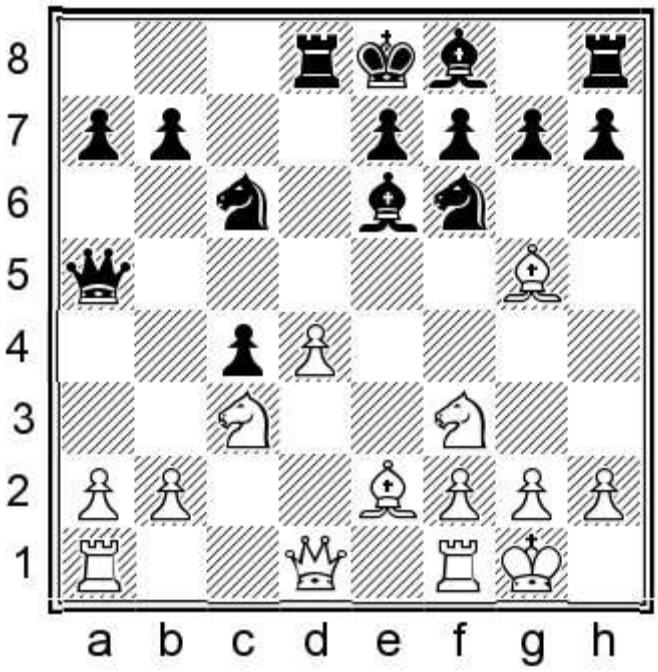
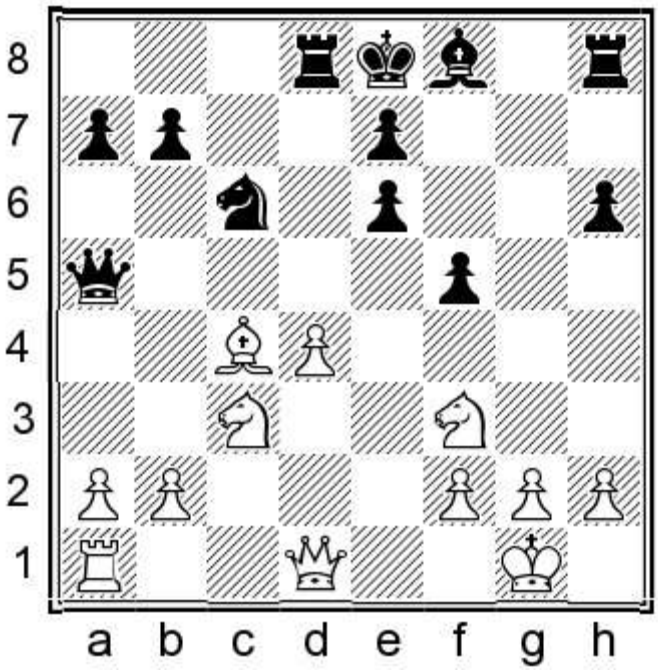


Position after: 9...♖d8

10.♕c1

10.♖e1 is too slow: 10...h6 11.♗xf6 gxf6 12.♗f1 f5! White can try 13.♖xe6 fxe6 14.♗xc4 but Black is very solid and emerges on top:



Position after: 14.♗xc4

14...♗g7 15.♕e2 ♘xd4 16.♘xd4 ♖xd4 17.♕xe6 ♔d8∓ Black later won in Mansour, W (2323) – Divanbaigyzand, M (2445) email 2005.

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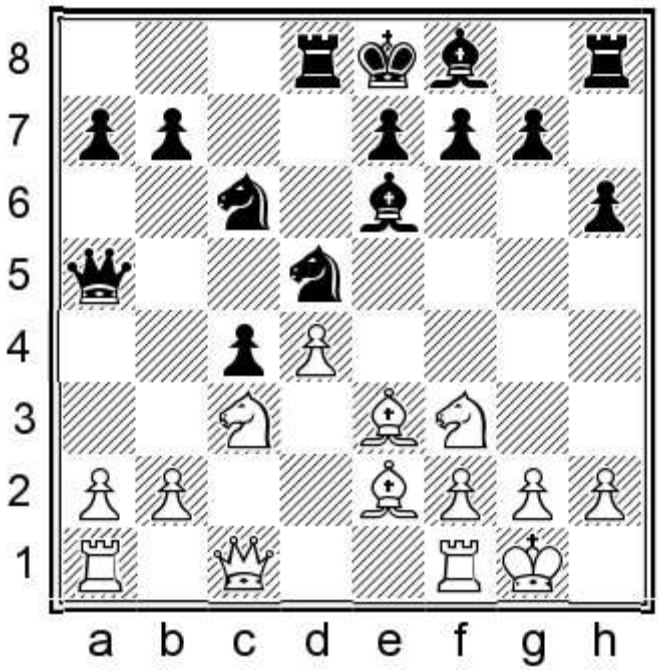
10...h6 11.♗e3N 11...♘d5=

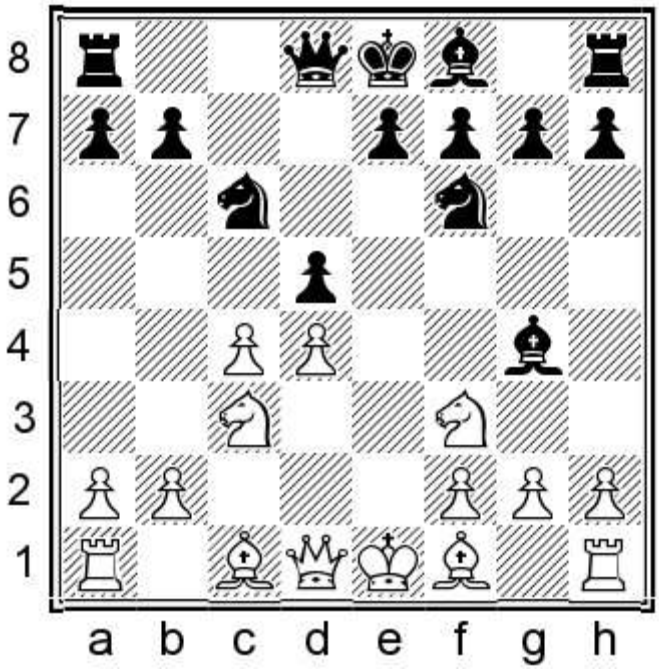


Position after: 11...♘d5=

Black is ready to finish his kingside development and White is unable to generate active play due to Black's firm grip on the center.

c) 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♘f3 ♗g4



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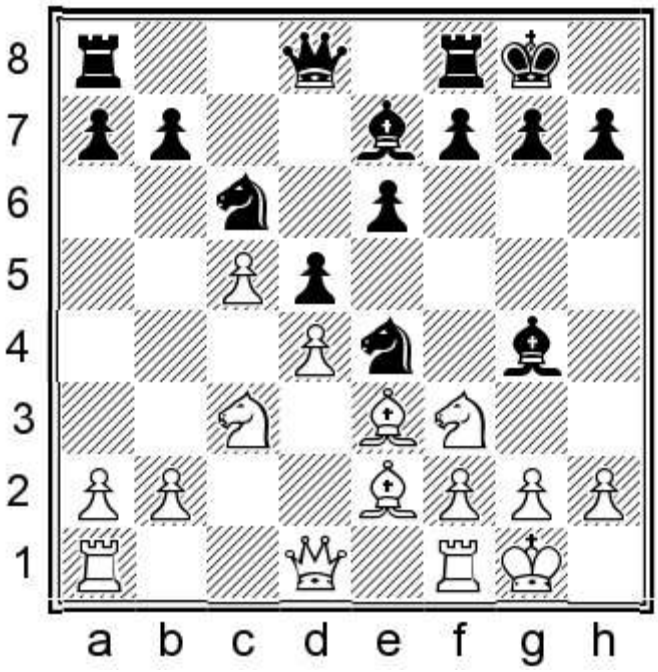
Position after: 6...♗g4

Whereas 6.♗g5 was a rather forcing option, with 6.♘f3 White continues his development and leaves Black to decide how to proceed. 6...♗g4 is the key idea behind Black's setup and our main move. 6...g6 is a playable alternative which has been covered by other authors but falls outside the scope of our repertoire. 6...e6, instead, is simply a worse version of 5...e6 since the c6-knight is misplaced in many variations.

Returning to the position after 6...♗g4, if White continues with normal development, Black will play ...e6, ...♗e7, ...0-0 and have a great position. The well-placed g4-bishop will be a continuous source of frustration for White as he attempts to generate active play in the center and on the kingside. Hence, 7.cxd5 (which we discuss in the next subchapter) is by far the most common reply; the idea is to impede Black from finishing development.

7.♗g5

A) 7.♗e2 illustrates what I just said: 7...e6 8.0-0 ♗e7 9.c5 0-0 10.♗e3 ♘e4= White has not achieved anything and Black is ready to continue with ideas like ...f5.



Position after: 10...♘e4=

B) 7.♗e3 is sometimes played in connection with c5: 7...e6 8.c5!

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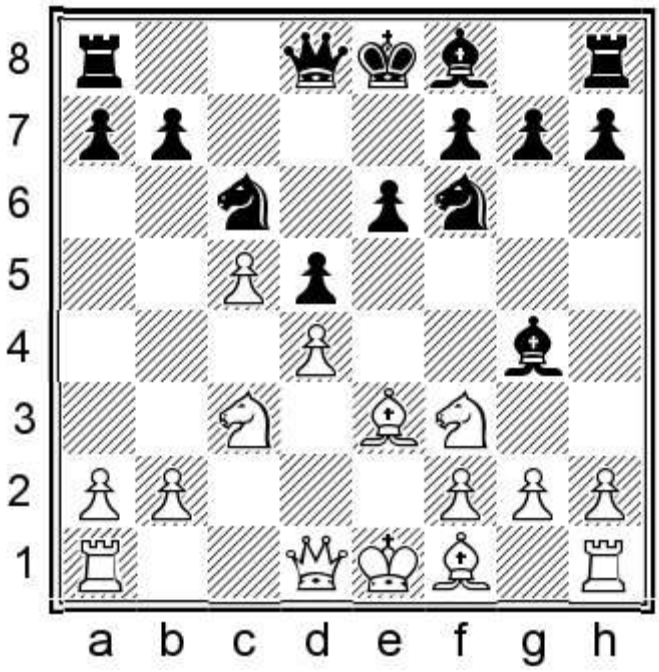
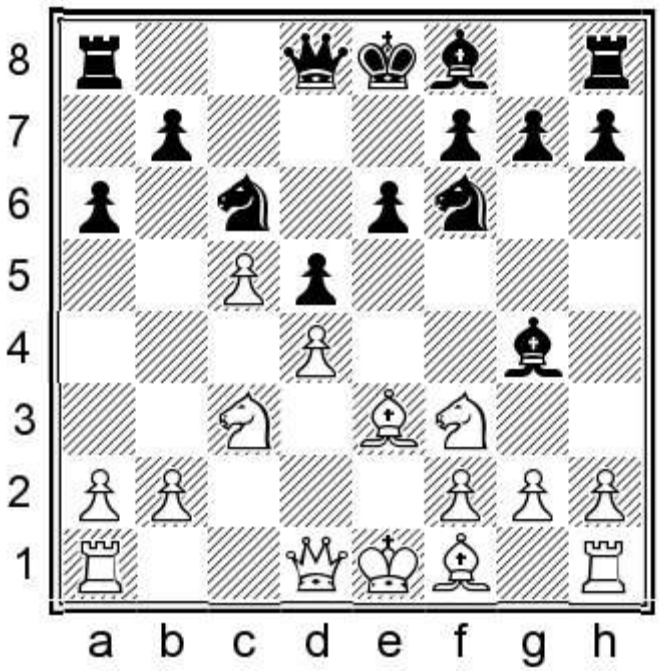


Position after: 8.c5!

White wants to play ♗b5, h3, g4 and ♘e5 and confine Black to a rather passive position by controlling the center. It turns out that this plan is not so dangerous, however, even if it can be executed in its entirety, and Black can find counterplay with moves like ...♘e4 and then either ...f6 or ...f5. Nevertheless, I see no reason to allow any of this and thus I recommend 8...a6!? to prevent White's main idea.



Position after: 8...a6!?

B1) 9.h3 is a bit rushed since White would rather recapture on f3 with the bishop than with the

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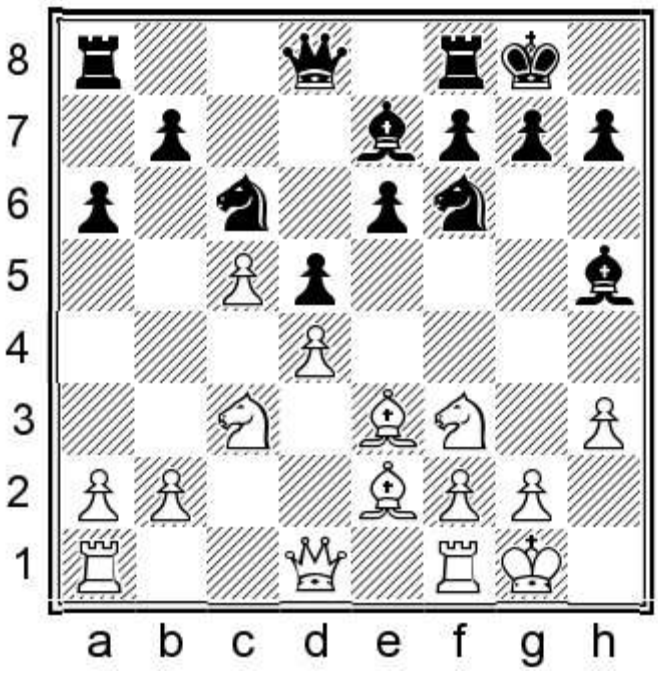
queen. The following line illustrates why: 9...♗xf3 10.♕xf3 g6 11.♗e2 ♗g7 12.0-0 ♘g8! Black relocates the knight to e7, making ...♘f5 a constant threat and forcing White to deal with the weakness of his d4-pawn. 13.♖fd1 ♘ge7=

B2) 9.♗e2 ♗e7 10.0-0 0-0 11.h3 ♗h5



Position after: 11...♗h5

White has a few options in this position, but Black's plan remains the same: ...♘e4 and then ...f5, unless White prevents it. 12.♖b1 White wants to play b4 and b5 to exploit his space advantage on the queenside. [12.♖c1 ♘e4 13.♘e5!? ♘xc3 14.♖xc3 ♗xe2 15.♘xc6 ♗xd1 16.♘xd8 ♗a4 17.♘xb7 ♖fb8 18.♘d6 ♖xb2= White has a strong pawn on c5, but Black has the bishop pair and control of the b-file.; 12.b4 ♘e4 13.♕b3 f5 14.♘e5 ♘xc3 15.♗xh5 ♘e4=] 12...♘e4 13.♘d2!? White cannot let Black expand further on the kingside, so he trades Black's most active pieces. 13...♗xe2 14.♘xe2 ♘xd2 15.♕xd2 a5!

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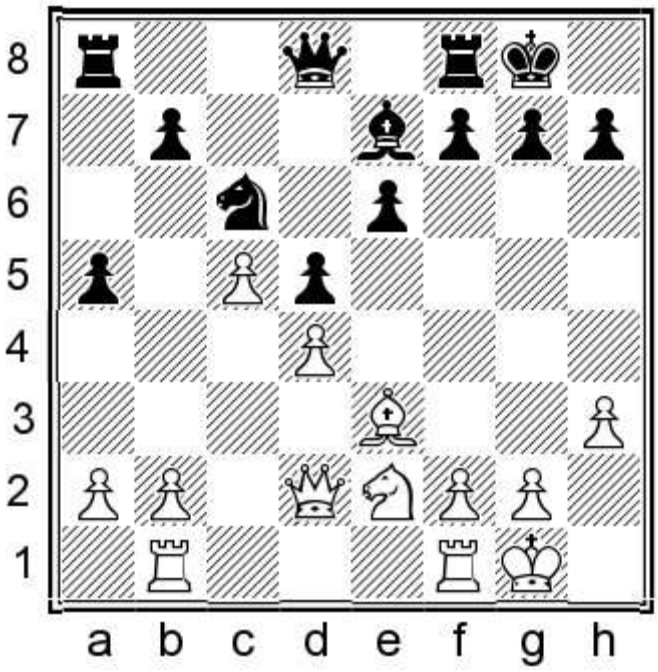
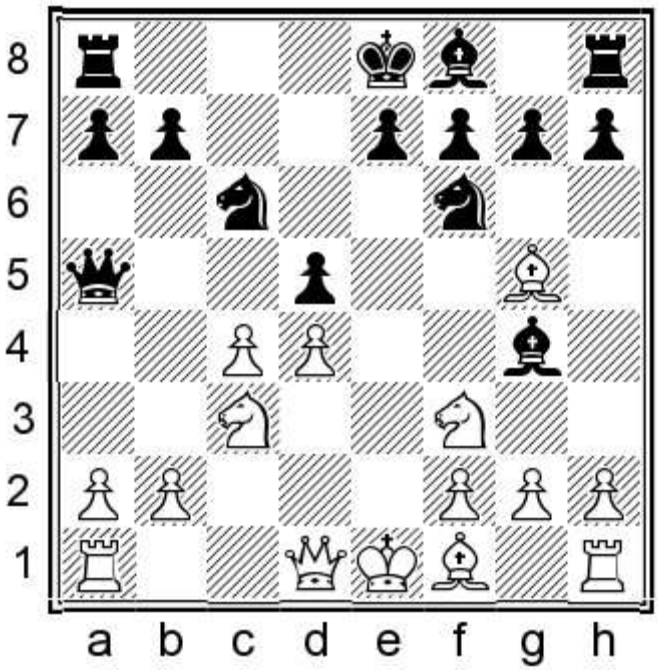


Position after: 15...a5!

stopping White's queenside expansion. This move gives up control of the b5-square, but Black has a clever idea in mind: 16.♕d3 b6! 17.♕b5 ♕d7! 18.cxb6 ♘e5! 19.♘c3 ♕xb5 20.♘xb5 ♘c4= Black will eventually regain the pawn with an excellent position.

7...♕a5!



Position after: 7...♕a5!

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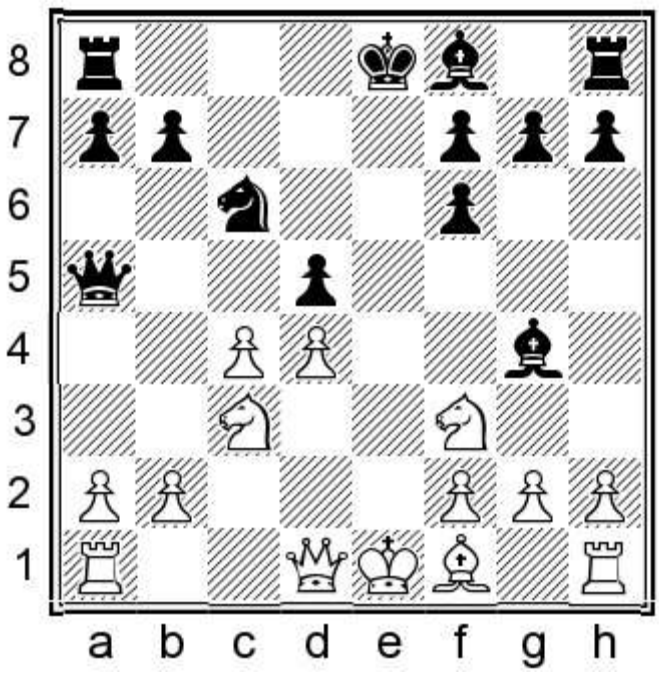
This is the way to deal with White's 7th move. ...♘e4 is now a serious threat.

8.♗xf6

8.♗d2 ♗xf3 9.gxf3 dxc4 10.♗xc4 was played in Sandor, L – Szoukup, H (1933) Budapest 2009, and Black could have continued with 10...♕b4!N 11.b3 ♘xd4 where White has nothing better than a repetition with 12.♘b5 ♕c5 13.♗e3 ♕b4+ 14.♗d2 ♕c5=.

8...exf6



Position after: 8...exf6

9.h3

A) 9.cxd5 is answered with 9...♗b4!= and White's temporary extra pawn does nothing to slow down Black's initiative.

B) 9.♕e2+N 9...♔d8! Black gives up castling rights because his king remains very safe and ...♗b4 followed by ...♖e8 is a concerning threat for White, e.g. 10.♕d2 ♗xf3 11.gxf3 ♗b4=.

9...♗xf3

9...♗h5!?N is also possible and leads to a sharp game. I prefer the simpler text move. 10.g4 ♗b4!? 11.gxh5 ♗xc3+ 12.bxc3 ♕xc3+ 13.♔e2 0-0 14.♗g2 ♕xc4+ 15.♕d3 ♖fe8+ 16.♔d2 ♕b4+ 17.♔d1 ♕b2 18.♖b1 ♕xa2∞

10.♕xf3 dxc4

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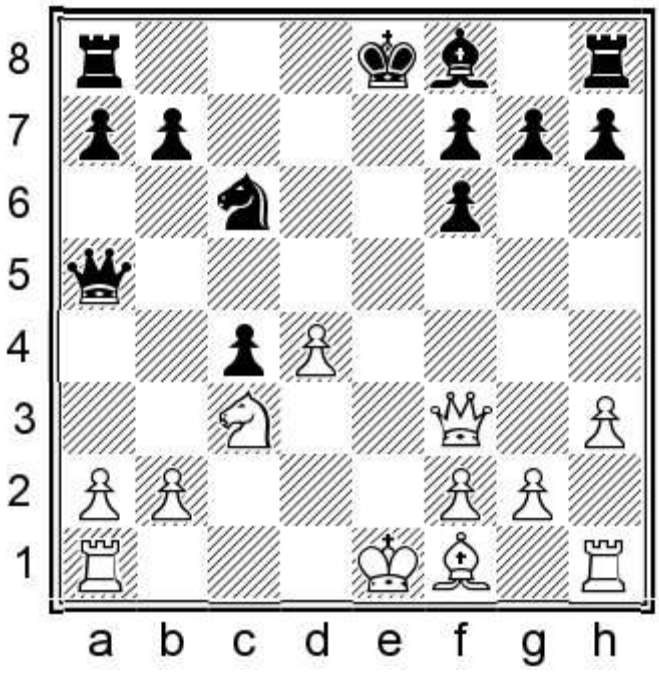
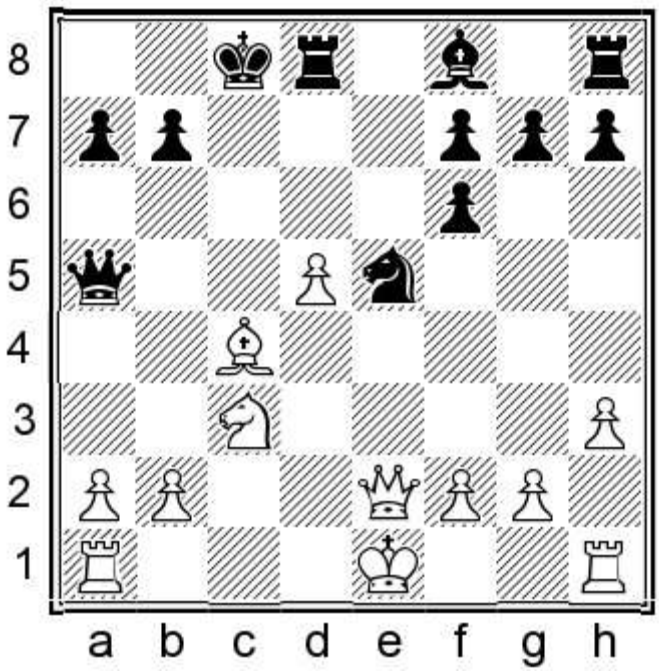


Position after: 10...dxc4

Black simply resolves the tension in the center and prepares to play this pawn structure. The dark squares are a key strength for Black.

11.♕e3+!?

11.♗xc4 0-0-0! 12.d5 ♘e5 13.♕e2 gave Black a great position in Buczinski, H (2136) – Roynet, S (1991) ICCF email 2016.



Position after: 13.♕e2

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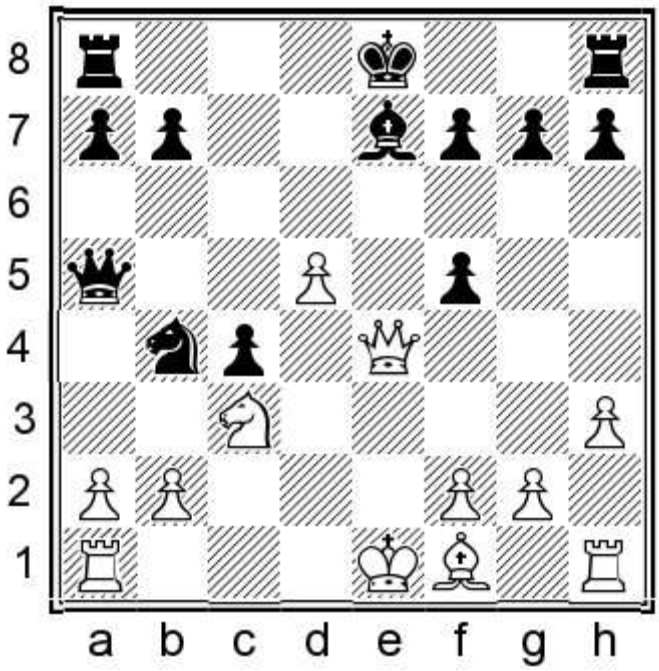
Black could have continued with 13...♔b8N 14.0-0 ♗d6= where he is the one in control. White's chances of developing a dangerous queenside attack are non-existent and Black can hassle White on the dark squares.

11...♗e7 12.♗xc4

12.d5N seems dangerous at first, but Black is well prepared to set up counterplay. 12...♘b4 13.♕e4 [13.0-0-0 ♘xa2+ 14.♘xa2 ♕xa2 15.d6 ♕a1+ 16.♔c2 ♕a4+= gives White no more than a perpetual check.] 13...f5!



Position after: 13...f5!

Black sacrifices the pawn to distract the White queen and completes his development. 14.♕xf5 0-0∞

12...0-0 13.0-0 ♖ad8 14.♖ad1 ♗b4=

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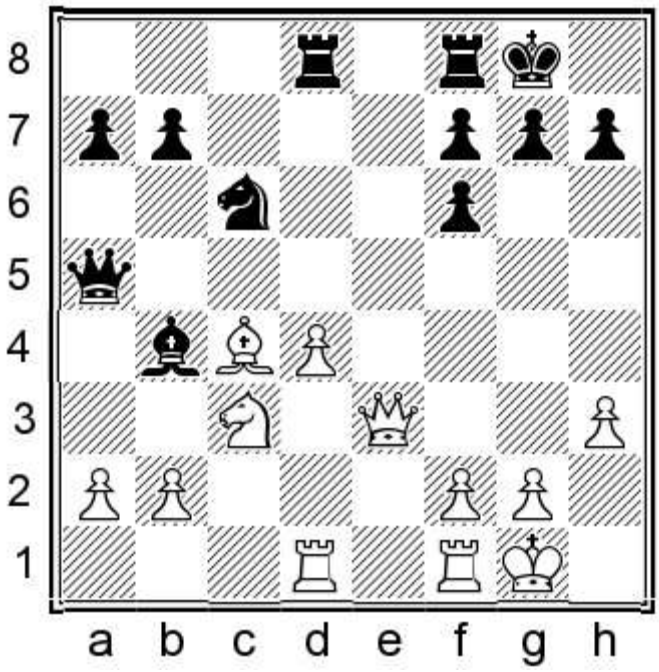
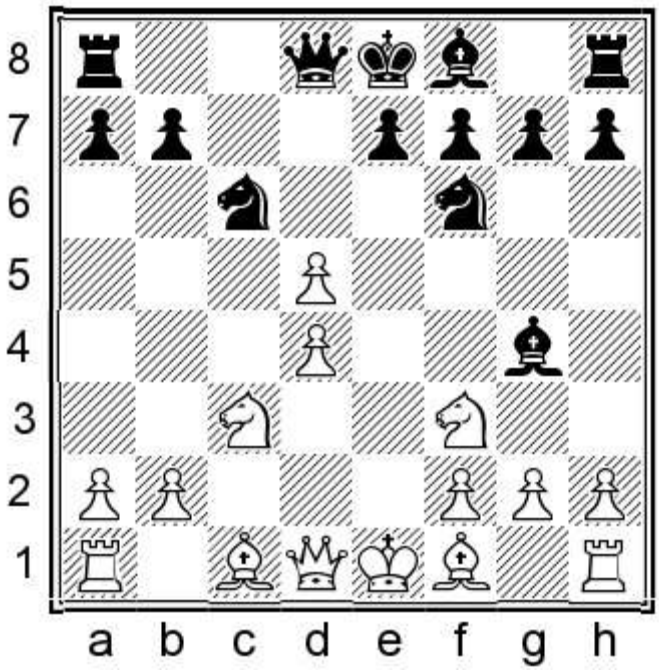


Position after: 14...♗b4=

Once more, White's d4-pawn is far from threatening and so the position is equal.

d) 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.cxd5 – The Fischer Endgame (with 15.♗g5+)

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.cxd5



Position after: 7.cxd5

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This is White's most critical reply. Black's last move has left his queenside somewhat unattended, so White exploits this by playing on the light squares. The lines that follow are quite forcing, as both players engage in concrete ideas.

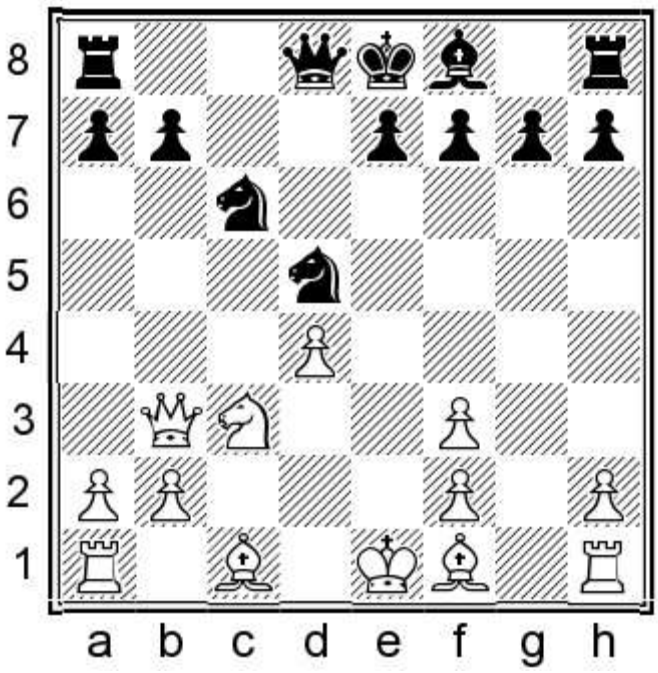
7...♘xd5 8.♕b3

Other moves do not pose any real problems to Black:

A) 8.♗b5 ♖c8 9.h3 ♗h5 10.g4 ♗g6 11.♘e5 e6 Black's position is solid and he is ready to push back with a timely ...f6. White has gained space on the kingside, but his expansion may backfire because of the weaknesses he has created. 12.0-0 ♗e7 13.f4N 13...f6!=

B) Similarly, 8.♗c4 does not cause any harm: 8...e6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♗xd5 exd5 12.g4 ♗g6 13.♕b3 ♘b4 [Black can try 13...0-0!? to avoid a repetition. 14.♘xd5 ♗e4 15.♘xe7+ ♘xe7⩲ White's kingside weaknesses will dictate the game whereas the d4-pawn does not offer White much.] 14.♕a4+ ♘c6=.

8...♗xf3 9.gxf3



Position after: 9.gxf3

9...e6

9...♘b6 is also playable, but I don't see the point in choosing it over 8...♗xf3. There are quite a few forcing lines and Black needs to put in more work to equalize, whereas 8...♗xf3 gives White no hopes of an advantage. The key lines are: 10.♗e3 [10.d5 ♘d4 11.♗b5+ ♘d7 12.♕a4 ♘xb5 13.♕xb5 g6∞] 10...e6 11.0-0-0 ♗e7∞.

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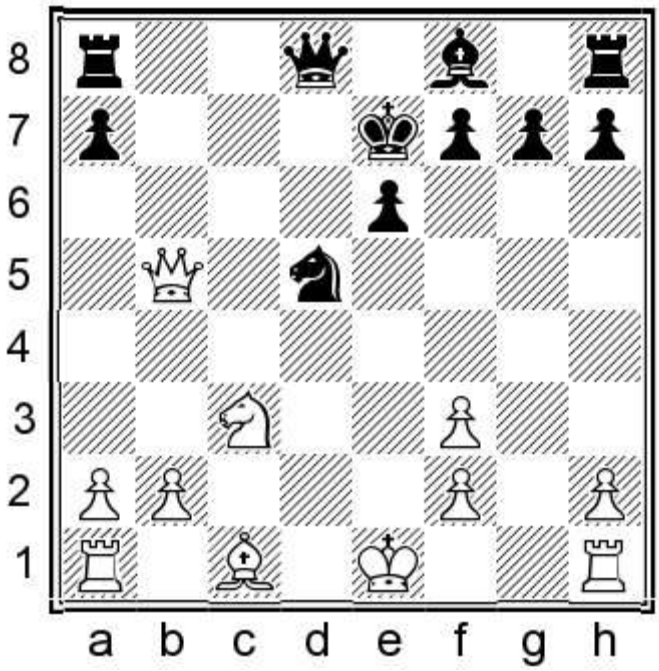
10.♕xb7 ♘xd4 11.♗b5+ ♘xb5 12.♕c6+ ♔e7 13.♕xb5



Position after: 13.♕xb5

We have reached our first critical position for this variation since the previous moves were essentially forced. Before we proceed, let's take a moment to understand the position. Black has given up castling rights, but he has the better pawn structure and a solid position. In fact, although the king stands on e7, it's fair to say that it is quite safe since a few pieces have already come off the board and Black could simply shelter it with ...f6 and ...♔f7. Nevertheless, Black's main goal is trade queens, so that his king is no longer in any danger, and to finish his development.

13...♕d7!

13...♘xc3?! 14.bxc3 ♕d7 15.♖b1± was famously played in the game Fischer, R – Euwe, M Leipzig 1960, and Fischer went on to win the endgame with textbook precision. However, there is no need for Black to open the b-file and facilitate White's play.

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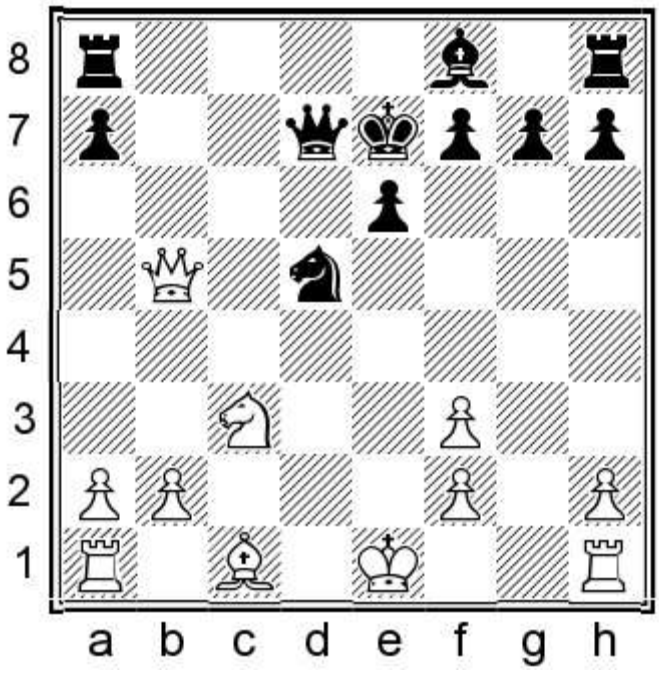

Position after: 13...♕d7!

14.♘xd5+

A) 14.♕e2 keeps the queens on the board but relieves the pressure on Black's position. 14...♘xc3 15.bxc3 f5 16.0-0 ♔f7 17.♖d1 ♕c6= Black's king is perfectly safe on f7 and only Black can be better since White's pawn structure is a major weakness.

B) 14.♗g5+ is simply a worse version of 14.♘xd5+ ♕xd5 15.♗g5+, since after 14...f6 15.♘xd5+ exd5 White needs to take on d7 and improve the position of Black's king. 16.♕xd7+ ♔xd7 17.♗e3 ♗b4+ 18.♔e2 ♖hc8 19.♖ac1 a5!?= The position was equal and Black easily held a draw in Holst, A (2340) – Borbjerggaard, L (2180) Denmark 1996.

C) 14.a4!? is White's most interesting alternative. Now, ...♕xb5 is not an option since White would reply with axb5. Black should instead continue with 14...♘xc3N 15.bxc3 a6!

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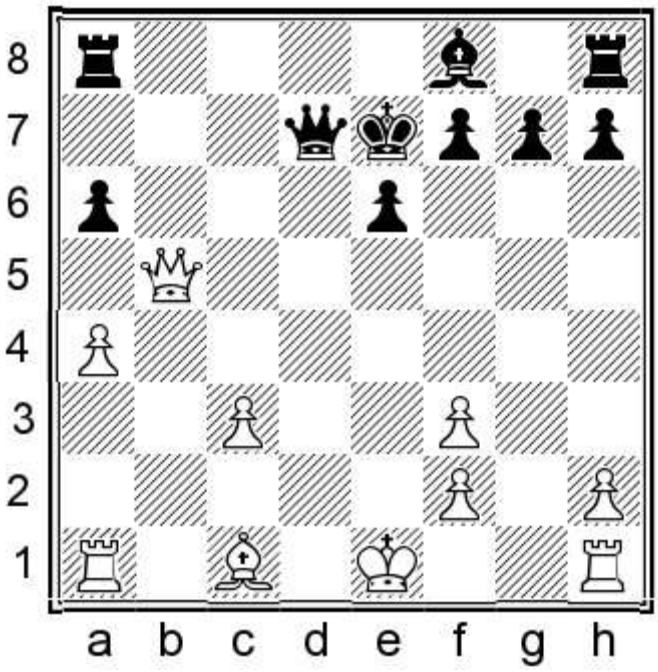
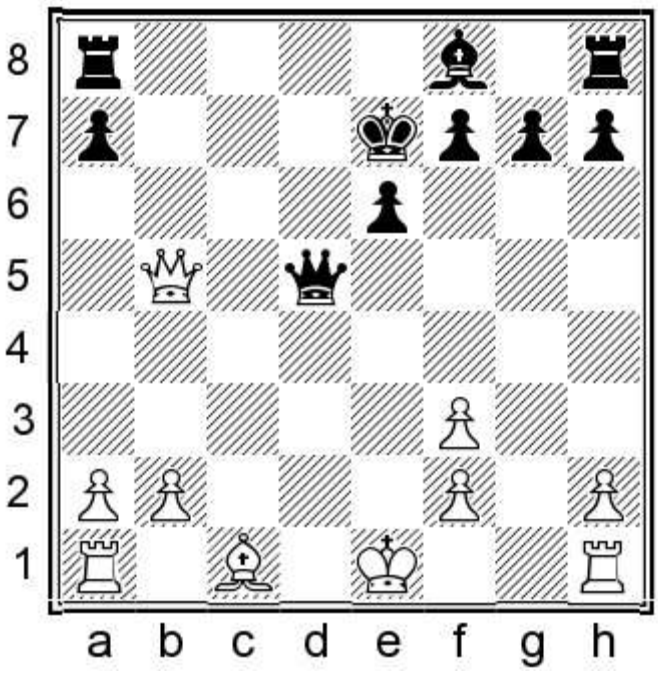


Position after: 15...a6!

driving the queen away from b5. 16.♕b4+N [16.♕e2 f6 17.0-0 ♔f7 18.♖d1 ♕c6= was equal in Le Bourhis, D (2100) – Jorissen, P Viborg 1996; whereas 16.♕c4N is met by 16...♕c8!= and White has nothing better than trading queens.] 16...♔e8 17.♕e4 ♖d8 Although Black's king is still in the center of the board, White has no way to exploit this. Black will eventually relocate his king so that he can finish his development and bring the h8-rook into the game. 18.♗e3 [18.0-0 ♕d5 19.♗e3 ♗c5 20.♗xc5 ♕xc5 21.♕b7 ♕c8=] 18...f5! 19.♕c4 ♕c8! 20.♕xc8 ♖xc8 21.♖b1 ♗d6 22.♔e2 ♔d7=

14...♕xd5



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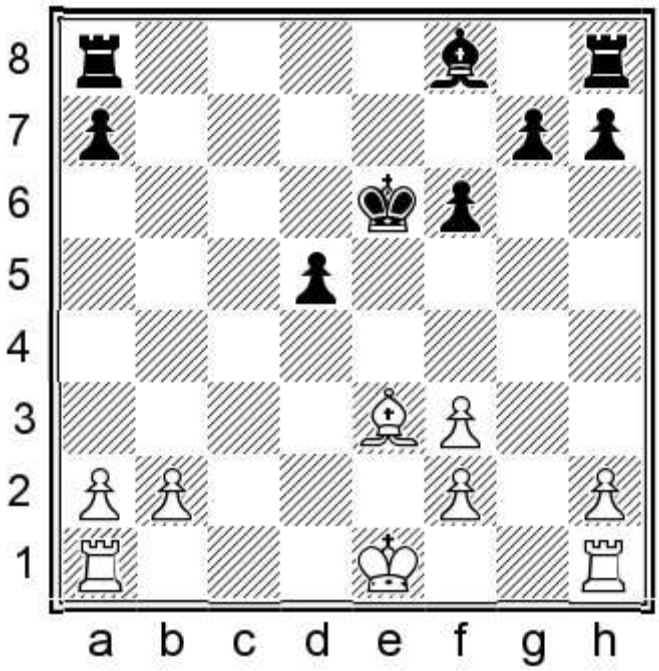
Position after: 14...♕xd5

This position has been played in many games and each one comes with its own nuances and plans, but my evaluation aligns with that of Karpov and Bologan, who have extensively analyzed this endgame: neither player has substantial winning chances. As to who has the most winning chances – I think there is a good argument to be made that it is Black. Although the endgame has traditionally been associated with the concept that White is the one pressing, I don't think that this sentiment is justified. In fact, as you will see in the lines that follow, White can easily run into trouble if he goes astray.

15.♗g5+

White provokes ...f6, but it is not at all clear if this is good or bad. For 15.♕xd5, see the next subchapter.

15...f6 16.♕xd5 exd5 17.♗e3 ♔e6



Position after: 17...♔e6

18.0-0-0

A) 18.0-0 ♗b4! You will see this idea over and over again in subsequent variations. Black prevents ♖e1, connects his rooks and prepares to play ...♗a5-b6 to eliminate White's queenside threats against the isolated pawn on a7. 19.a3 ♗a5 20.♖ac1 ♖hd8 21.♖fd1 ♗b6 22.♗xb6 axb6 23.♖c7 ♖ac8! Black should not be scared of playing actively in the endgame, especially since his king is better placed. 24.♖xg7 ♖c2=

B) 18.♖c1 ♗d6 19.♔e2 [19.♖g1!?N is an improvement over the text move, but I will use this variation to showcase my comments in the note to 14...♕xd5. 19...g5! 20.h4 h6 21.hxg5 hxg5 22.♔e2 ♗e5=]

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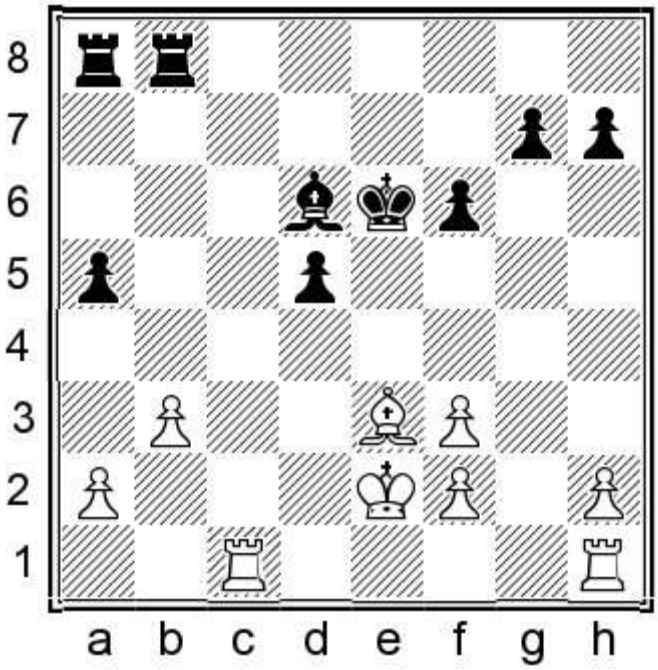
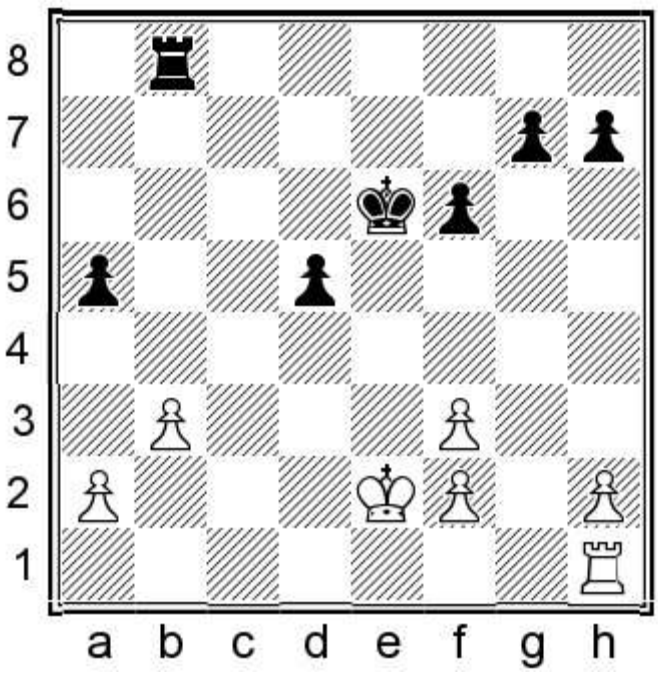
19...♖hb8 20.b3 a5!∓



Position after: 20...a5!∓

Already, Black has taken over the initiative and he has the more comfortable position. There is an immediate threat (...a4) and White is on the defensive. Now in the game Kuzevanova, E (2172) – Stjazhkina, O (2328) St Petersburg 2007, Black showed good technique in gradually increasing the pressure on White's position, eventually reaping her reward. 21.♖c6 ♔d7 22.♖xd6+ ♔xd6 23.♗f4+ ♔e6 24.♗xb8 ♖xb8∓



Position after: 24...♖xb8∓

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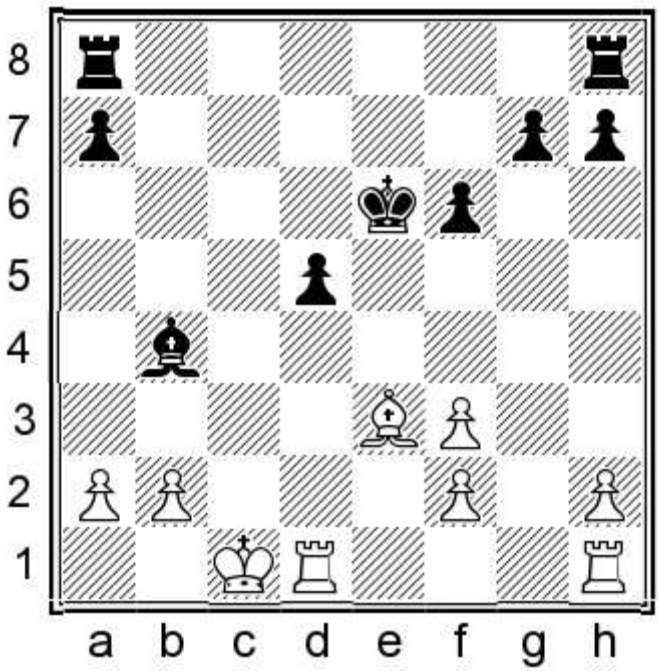
Although more pieces have come off the board, White's position has not gotten any better. Now she also has to deal with ideas like ...♖b4-h4. 25.♖g1 g5 26.♔d3 ♖b4 27.♖g4 h5! The pawn endgame that results after 28.♖xb4 axb4 is winning for Black because White is unable to do anything with her queenside majority. After 28.♖d4 ♔e5 29.f4+ ♔d6 30.fxg5 fxg5 31.♔c3 ♔c5 32.♖d3 ♖f4 33.a3 d4+ 34.♔d2 ♖xf2+ 35.♔e1 ♖xh2 36.b4+ axb4 37.axb4+ ♔c4 38.♖g3 g4 White resigned.

18...♗b4!



Position after: 18...♗b4!

19.a3

A) 19.♔b1 ♖hd8 20.♖d3 is analyzed under 19.♖d3 ♖hd8 20.♔b1.

B) 19.♖hg1 g5 20.h4 h6

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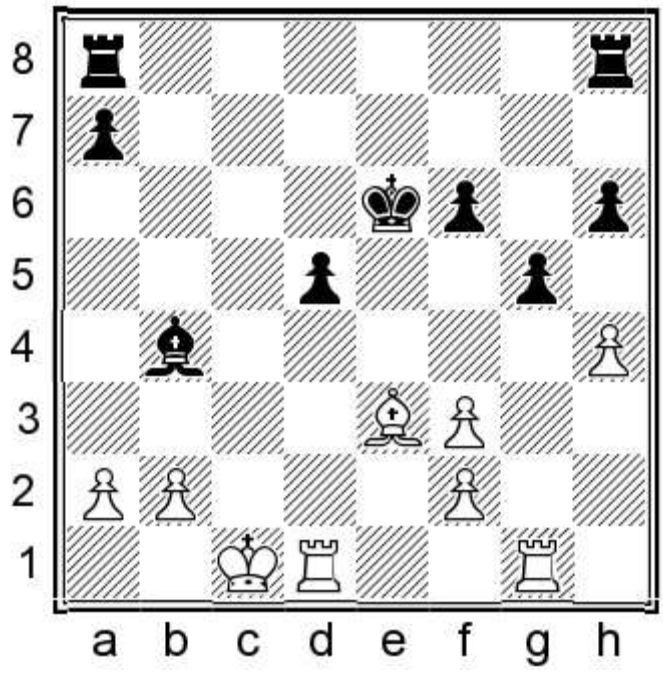

Position after: 20...h6

B1) 21.f4?! seems logical, since White gets rid of his doubled pawns, but his kingside pawns remain a target after 21...gxf4 22.♗xf4 ♖ac8+ 23.♔b1 ♖c4!∓ In addition, Black's king placement tips the balance in his favor. Black went on to win in Kolev, A – Wells, P (2320) Kiljava 1984.

B2) 21.hxg5N 21...hxg5 22.f4 gxf4 23.♗xf4 ♖h4 24.♗e3 a5=

C) 19.♖d3 ♖hd8 20.♔b1 [20.a3 gives Black the opportunity to trade bishops and activate his a8-rook: 20...♖ac8+ 21.♔b1 ♗c5 22.♖e1 ♔f7 23.♖c1 ♗xe3 24.fxe3 ♖xc1+ 25.♔xc1 ♖c8+ 26.♔d2 ♔e6 27.♖d4 ♖b8 28.b4 g5= Pelletier, Y (2602) – Brunner, N (2420) Nancy 2010.] 20...♖d7! Black defends the a7-pawn so that he can bring his a8-rook into the game.

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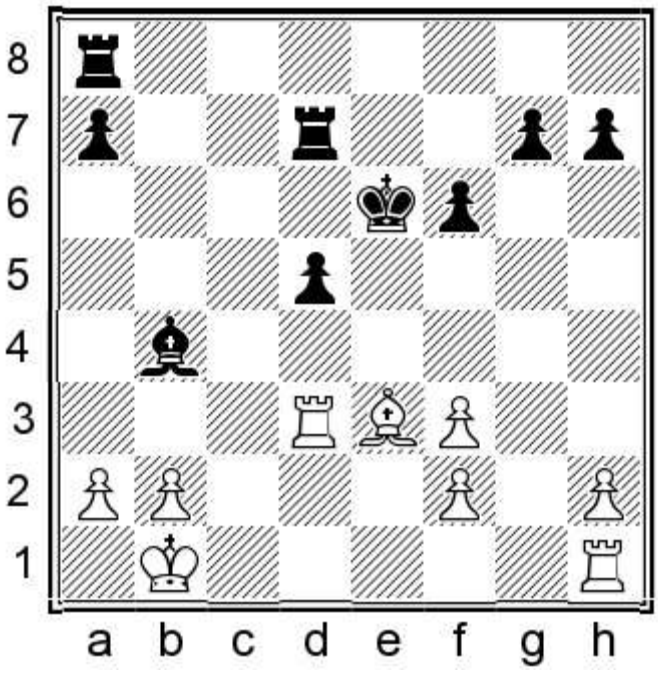
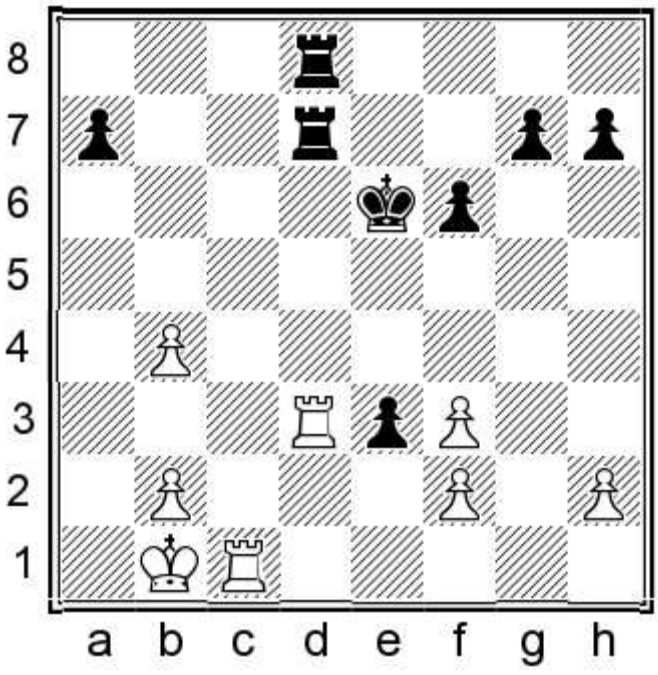


Position after: 20...♖d7!

21.♖c1 ♖ad8 22.a3 [22.♖c6+ ♖d6 23.♖xd6+ ♗xd6 24.h3 ♖d7 25.♔c2 g5= was equal in Lauridsen, J (2298) – Rewitz, P (2296) Denmark 2011.] 22...d4!? [22...♗a5!?N is an alternative which leads to less forcing play. The position remains equal after 23.♖c6+ ♔f5 24.b4 ♗c7 25.h3 ♗f4=.] 23.axb4 dxe3



Position after: 23...dxe3

C1) 24.♖xe3+?! This move is (surprisingly) not best, and Black can take over the initiative with 24...♔f5 25.♖a3 ♖b7 26.♖c5+ ♔g6!N {rather than agreeing to a draw, as in Reinderman, D (2506) –

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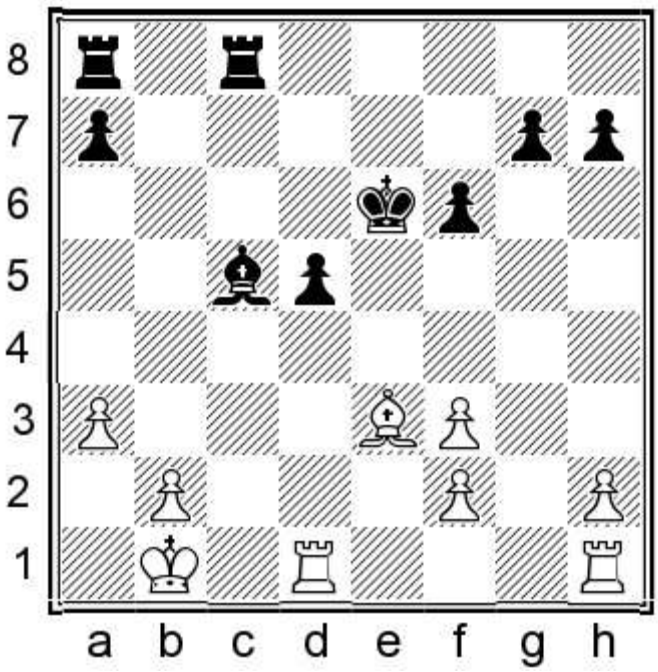
Fridman, D (2572) Germany 2003.} The factors in Black's favor are his king activity and White's weaknesses on the kingside (which make ...♖d4-h4 a serious idea.)

C2) 24.♖xd7 ♖xd7 25.fxe3 g5= Black has full compensation for the pawn as his king is better placed. And it is a rook endgame after all!

19...♖hc8+! 20.♔b1 ♗c5



Position after: 20...♗c5

Black has eliminated White's only trump in the position. Once these bishops are traded Black has absolutely nothing to worry about. I have included a few sample continuations, without commentary since the positions are very dry.

21.♖he1 ♗xe3 22.♖xe3+ ♔d6 23.♖de1 ♖c4 24.♖e7

24.♖e6+ ♔c5

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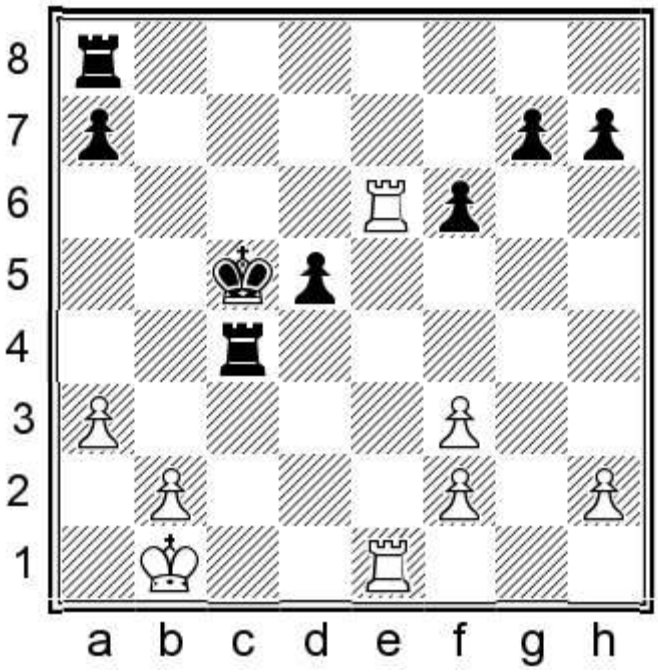
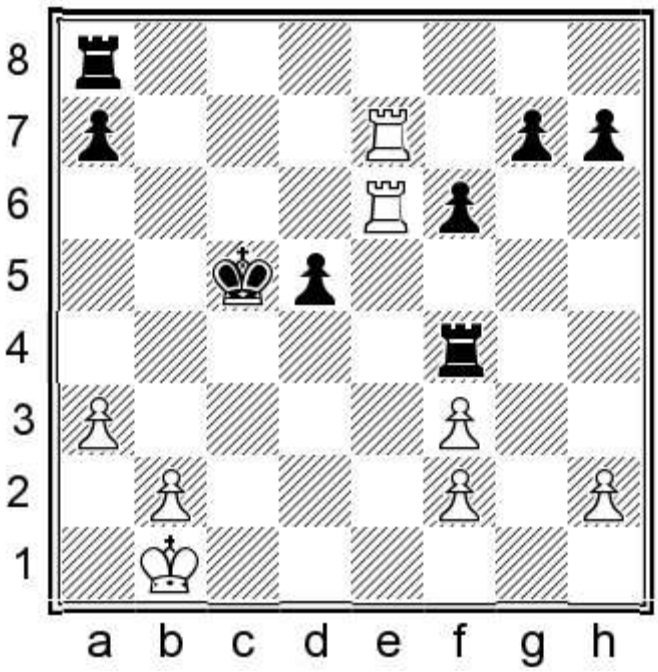


Position after: 24...♔c5

25.♖g1 [25.b4+ ♔b5 26.♖d6 ♔a4 27.♔b2 a5 28.♖xd5 axb4 29.axb4 ♖ac8= Bojkovic, N (2429) – Schuurman, P (2348) Novi Sad 2009.; 25.♖e7 g5N 26.♖xh7 ♖f4 27.♖e3 a5∞] 25...g6! As long as Black keeps his superior pawn structure he will be safe, even if this means giving up a pawn. 26.♖xf6 ♖h4 27.♖c1+ ♔d4 28.♖d6 ♔e5 29.♖d7 ♖xh2 30.♖e1+ ♔f6= Lanin, B (1929) – Markus, R (2232) LSS email 2013

24...♖f4 25.♖1e6+ ♔c5



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Position after: 25...♔c5

26.♖xg7

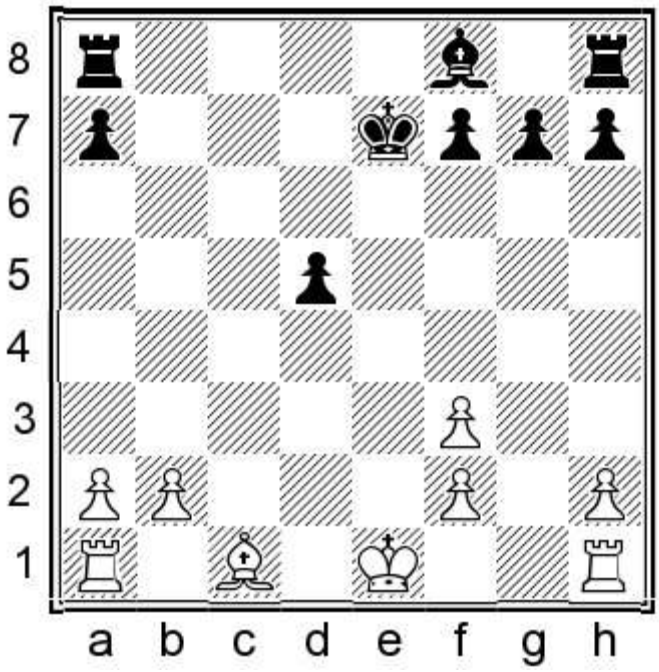
26.♖c7+ ♔d4 27.♖c3 a5= Nijboer, F (2555) – Hort, V (2520) Germany 1997.

26...♖xf3 27.♖xh7 ♖xf2 28.♖f7 ♖b8 29.b4+ ♔c4 30.♖exf6 ♖xf6 31.♖xf6 ♖h8

In the game Diu, V (2426) – Nguyen, N (2630) Hanoi 2018 the players agreed to a draw in this completely equal position.

e) 6.♘f3 ♗g4 7.cxd5 – The Fischer Endgame (with 15.♕xd5)

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♘f3 ♗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



Position after: 15...exd5

Although there are a couple of lines where Black needs to show some accuracy, the ideas and concepts are the same as those we have already discussed in the notes to 15.♗g5+. Without ...f6, White can harass the black king more easily, but Black is in no danger and always has more than one way to maintain equality.

16.♗e3

A) 16.♗g5+ f6 17.♗e3 simply transposes to the 15.♗g5+ line.

B) 16.♗f4 ♔e6 17.0-0-0

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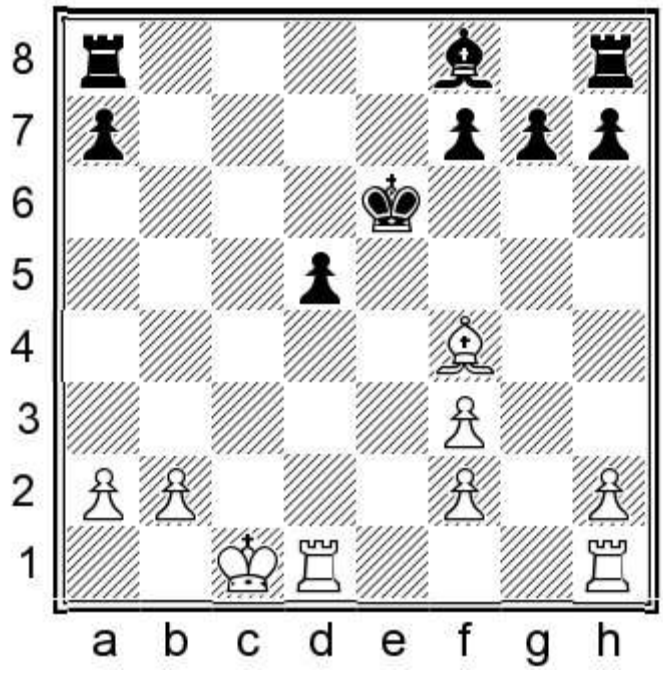
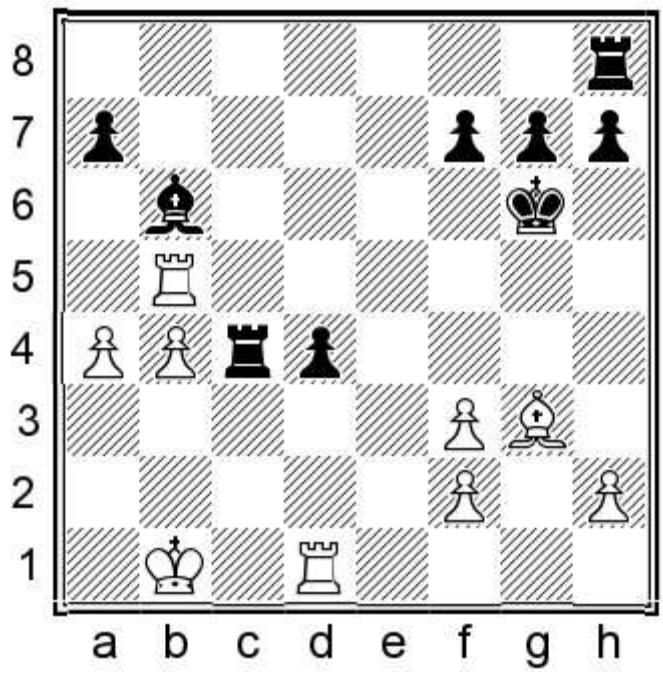


Position after: 17.0-0-0

This is an interesting idea. White wants to chase the black king around using checks from his rooks. 17...♖c8+! [17...♗b4 18.♖d4 ♖hc8+ 19.♔b1 ♖c4 20.♖xc4 dxc4 was played in Thesing, M (2413) – Schmidt, B (2332) Germany 2006, but White can perhaps pose some minor problems with 21.♖c1!? N] 18.♔b1 ♗b4 19.a3 ♗a5 20.b4 ♗b6 21.♖he1+ ♔f5 Black's king is very safe on f5 and Black can focus on creating counterplay with his d-pawn. 22.♗g3 [22.♗d6 d4 23.♖e5+ ♔g6 24.♖g1+ ♔f6 25.♖ge1 ♔g6 26.♖g1+= Daurelle, H – Marez, S LSS email 2007] 22...d4 23.a4 ♖c4 24.♖e5+ ♔g6 25.♖b5



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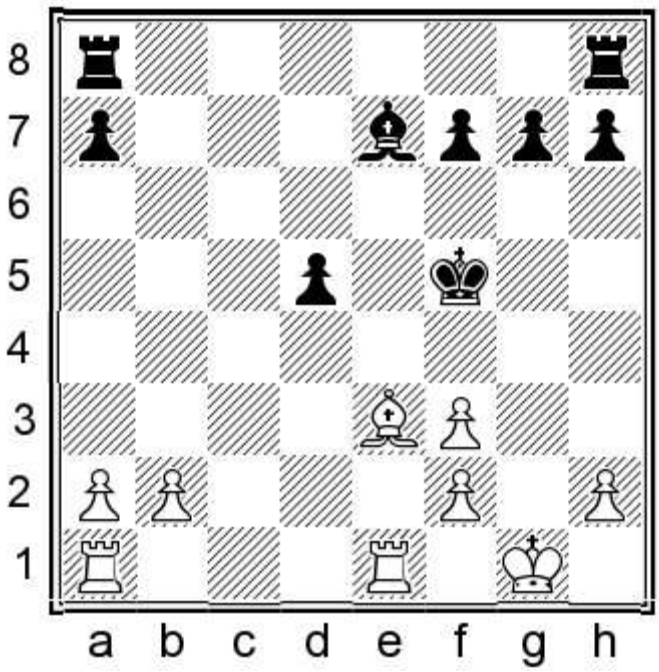
Position after: 25.♖b5

Now in Karpatchev, A (2477) – Braun, P (2254) Crailsheim 1999, White eventually won, but Black could have continued with 25...♖hc8!N giving his bishop a retreat square on d8. 26.a5 ♗d8 27.♗e5 a6 28.♖b7 ♗f6 29.♖b6 ♔f5=

C) Similarly to 16.♗f4, 16.0-0 has the immediate threat of ♖e1+, but Black can easily deal with this by bringing his king to f5. 16...♔e6 17.♖e1+ ♔f5

C1) 18.♗e3 ♗e7!



Position after: 18...♗e7!

There is no point in playing .. .♗b4 since it is too late to prevent ♖e1, so Black instead manoeuvres the bishop to f6, where it will support the d-pawn and control important squares around Black's king. 19.♖ac1 [19.♖ad1 ♖hd8 20.♖d4 ♗f6 21.♖f4+ ♔g6 22.♖g4+ ♔f5=] 19...♗f6 20.♖c5 ♖hd8 21.♖d1 ♗xb2N 22.♖cxd5+ ♖xd5 23.♖xd5+ ♔e6=

C2) 18.♖d1 ♖d8 19.♗e3 ♖d7 20.♖ac1 [20.♖d4 ♗c5 21.♖g4 ♗b6!?N 22.♖xg7 d4 23.♗d2 ♔f6 24.♖g5 ♖c8∞

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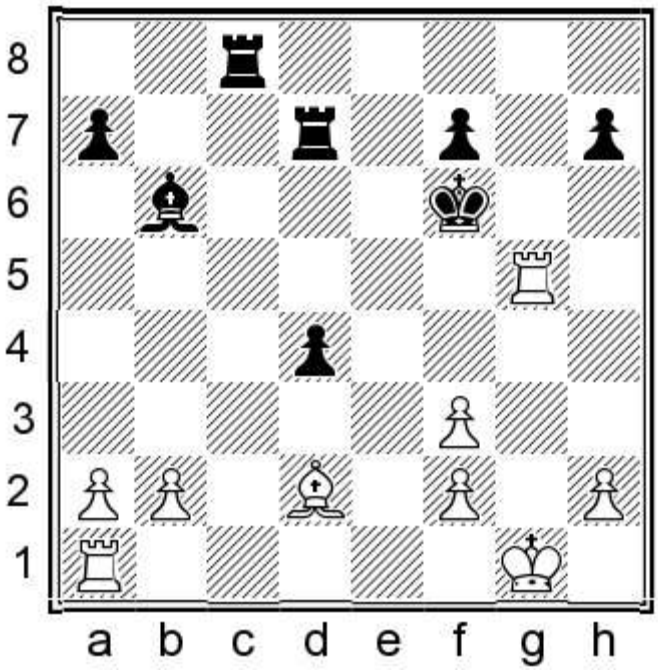
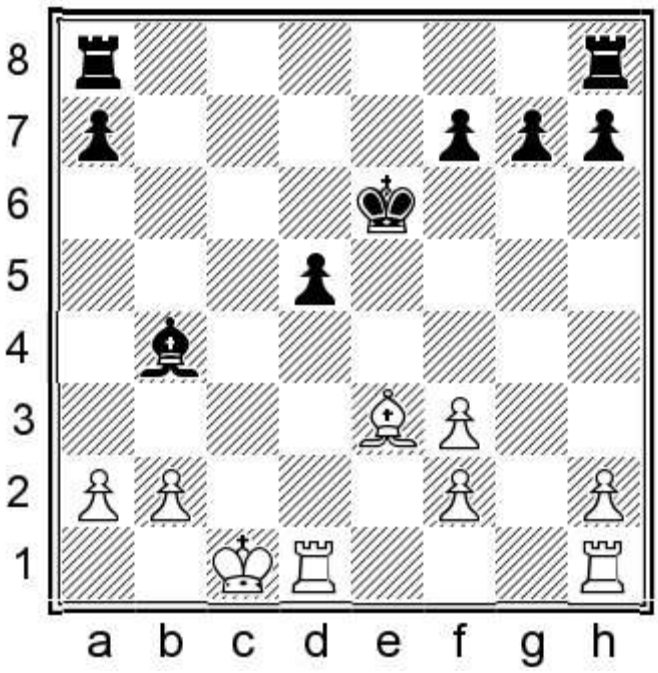


Position after: 24...♖c8♾

Black has excellent compensation for the pawn, since ...♖c2 is a threat and the d-pawn is marching forward.] 20...♗e7 21.♖d4 ♗f6 22.♖f4+ ♔g6=

16...♔e6 17.0-0-0 ♗b4



Position after: 17...♗b4

18.♔b1

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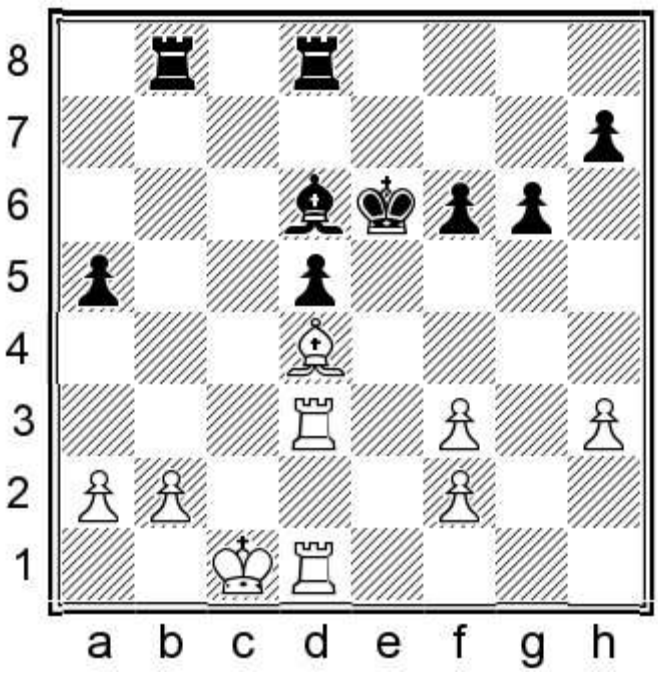
A) 18.♖hg1 was played in Bezemer, A (2324) – Landa, K (2615) Vlissingen 2008. This game is yet another example of how Black can outplay his opponent from this seemingly dry position. 18...g6 19.♖g4 a5! 20.♖gd4 ♖hd8 21.♖4d3 ♖ab8 22.♗d4 f6 23.h3 White has wasted time and now Black takes over the initiative by trading the bishops. 23...♗d6!



Position after: 23...♗d6!

24.b3 ♗e5!∓ 25.♖c3 ♖b4 26.♖e3 ♔d6 27.♖ed3 ♖c8+ 28.♔b1 ♖xd4 29.♖xd4 ♗xd4 30.♖xd4 ♖c3 31.♖f4 ♔e5 32.♖a4 ♖xf3 33.♖xa5 ♖xf2 34.b4 ♔d6 35.b5 d4 36.b6 d3 37.♖b5 ♖f1+ 38.♔b2 d2 39.b7 ♖b1+ 40.♔xb1 d1=♕+ and resigns.

B) 18.♗d4 f6 19.a3 ♖ac8+ 20.♔b1 ♗c5 21.♖he1+ ♔d6=

C) 18.a3 ♖hc8+ 19.♔b1 ♗c5 20.♖he1 ♗xe3 21.♖xe3+ ♔d6 22.♖ed3 ♖c5 23.b4 ♖b5 24.♔c2 a5 25.♔b3 axb4 26.axb4 g6= Konig, M – Dvorakova, M Klatovy 1999

18...♖hc8 19.♖d3 ♗c5 20.♖c1 ♗b6=

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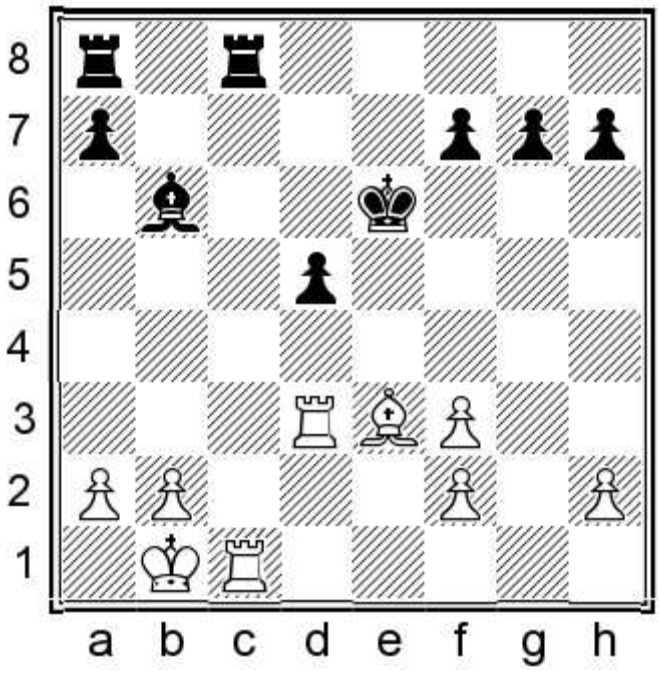

Position after: 20...♗b6=

The bishops will finally be traded off, leaving a very equal rook endgame.

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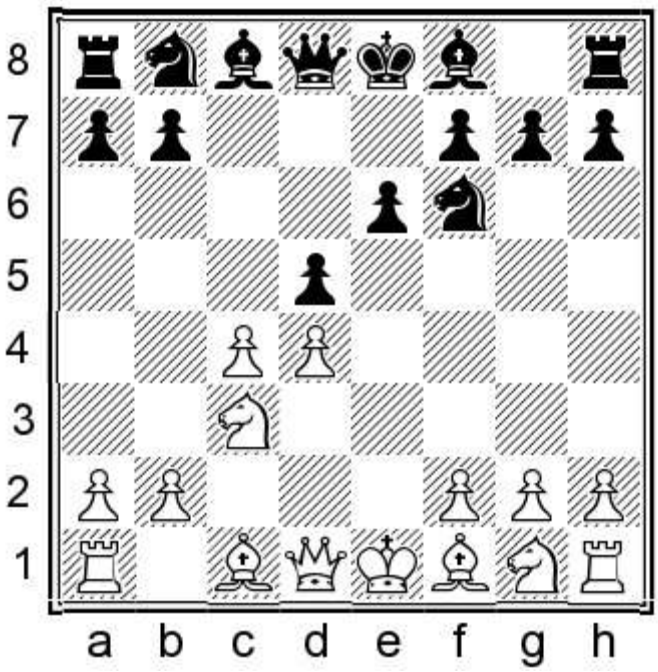
Chapter 13
5...e6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 13 – 5...e6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘f3 ♗b4

a) 7.--

b) 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♕c2

c) 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♗d2

a) 7.--

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6

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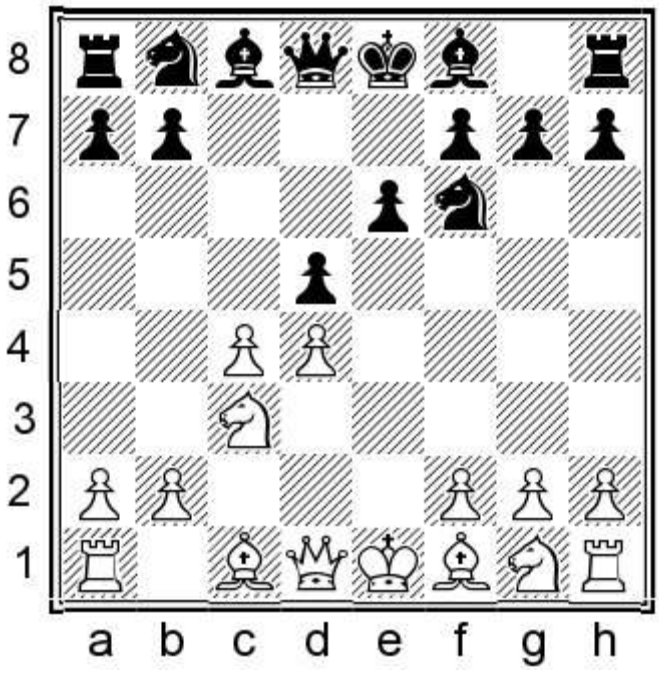

Position after: 5...e6

While 5...♘c6 is a perfectly viable move (as seen in the previous chapters), some players may be concerned by the ease with which White can simplify the position. This is why I am presenting an alternative in this chapter.

That being said, my goal is not to show you a "win-at-all-costs" variation, because any line that completely avoids drawish outcomes is objectively unsound. Rather, I will present 5...e6 as an alternative that you can use occasionally to surprise opponents or make your repertoire more unpredictable.

6.♘f3

This is the continuation which you can expect in the vast majority of your games. White has other options, but they are all suboptimal.

A) 6.♗g5 is premature; the best square for this bishop cannot be determined yet. 6...♗e7 7.♘f3 0-0 8.♗d3 [Black is better after 8.cxd5 ♘xd5 9.♗xe7 ♕xe7 10.♗d3 ♗d7!N 11.0-0 ♗c6= as White does not have enough activity to compensate for the isolated pawn.] 8...dxc4! This is always good after White has played ♗d3, because now White loses a tempo recapturing. 9.♗xc4 ♘c6 10.0-0 b6 11.a3 ♗b7 12.♕d3 h6 13.♗h4 ♘h5!

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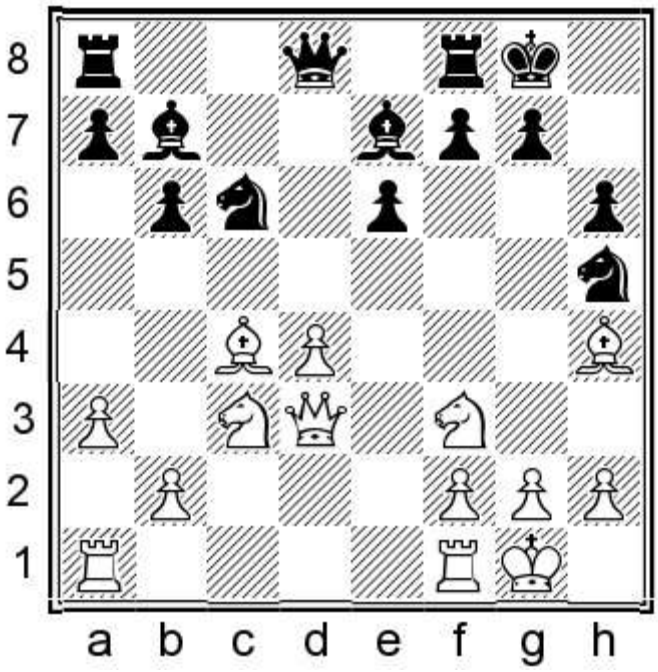
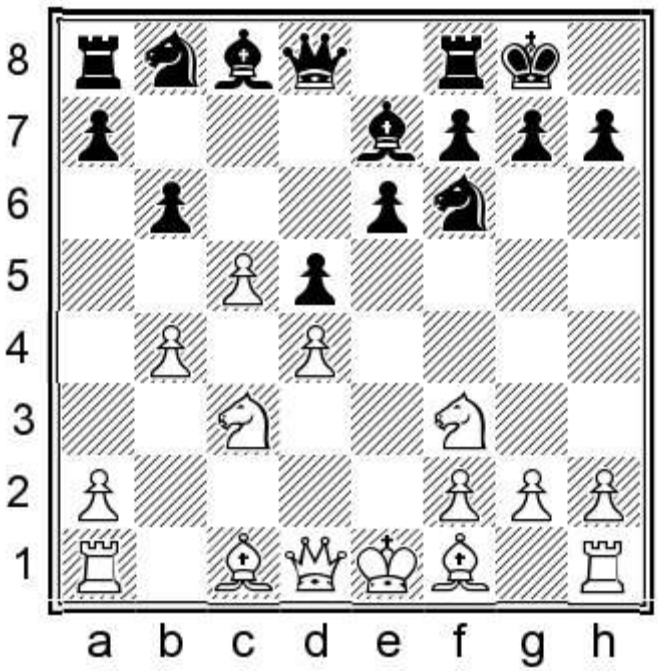


Position after: 13...♘h5!

Black goes after the g5-bishop. Now it is clear that 6.♗g5 was not a useful move for White since trading bishops is not favorable to him. 14.♗g3 [14.♗xe7 ♘xe7 opens up the long diagonal for Black's light-squared bishop and gives Black full control of the d5-square.] 14...♗f6N 15.♖ad1 ♘e7= Black can take the g3-bishop anytime and has contained White's initiative.

B) It would also be too early for 6.c5, which simply leaves White over-extended. 6...♗e7 7.♘f3 b6! Black immediately starts putting pressure on White's pawn chain. Black will now generate counterplay with ...a5 and a timely ...♘e4. 8.b4 0-0



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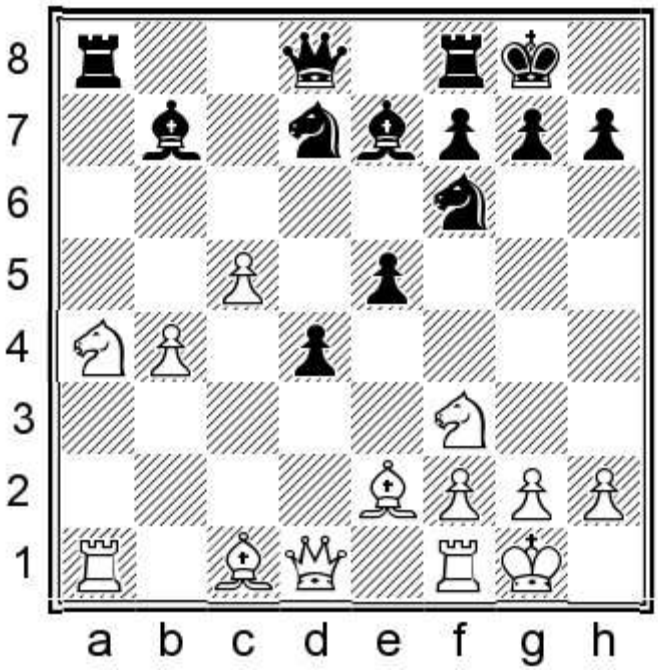
Position after: 8...0-0

B1) 9.♗f4 ♘e4! 10.♕c2 ♘c6! Here, White's unprotected queenside pawns are helping Black develop with tempo and slowing down his own development. 11.a3 bxc5! 12.♘xe4 dxe4 13.♕xe4 ♘xd4 14.♗d3 This position was reached in the game Kalinin, N (2205) – Stepanyan, E (1872) Sochi 2017, and now Black should have continued with 14...♘f5!N 15.0-0 ♗b7! 16.♕xb7 ♕xd3 17.♘e5 ♕d5 18.♕xd5 exd5= with an equal endgame, although White is the one with less material.

B2) 9.♖b1 is met by 9...a5! and after 10.a3 axb4 11.axb4 bxc5 12.bxc5 the queenside is open and Black can switch his focus to the center with 12...♘e4!⇄.

B3) 9.♗d3 a5 10.♘a4!? In vain White tries to hold together his pawn structure and contain Black's initiative. 10...♘bd7 11.a3 axb4 12.axb4 bxc5 13.dxc5 [13.bxc5 e5! also puts Black in the driver's seat: 14.♘xe5 ♘xe5 15.dxe5 ♘e4 16.0-0 ♘xc5 17.♗c2 d4!∓] 13...e5! 14.♗e2 ♗b7 15.0-0 d4∞



Position after: 15...d4∞

White has maintained his c5-pawn but he has completely given up the center. Although the position is about equal, I find Black's position easier to play.

6...♗b4

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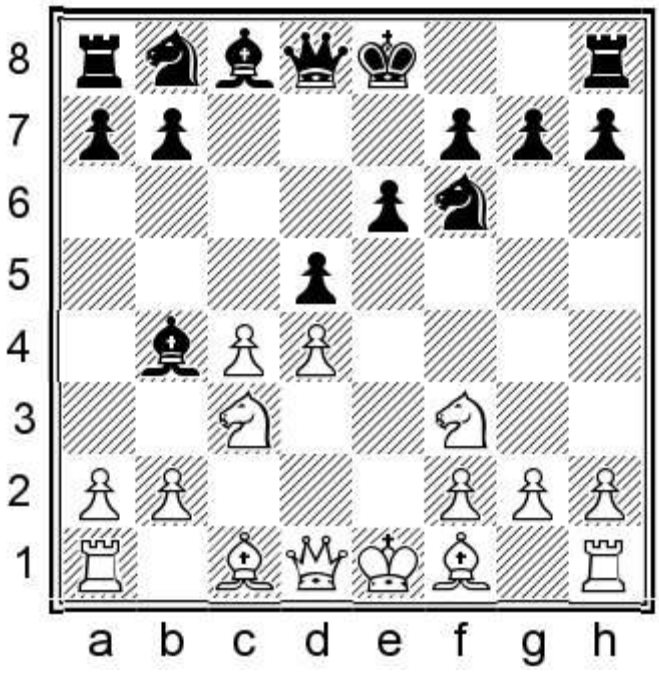

Position after: 6...♗b4

Rather than prioritize finding a good square for the c8-bishop (as in the 5...♘c6 variation), here Black prioritizes his kingside development and aims for an isolani position. Black's option to play ...dxc4 is the central idea and determines White's next moves. In general, Black would benefit from this pawn exchange but he is waiting for White to play ♗d3 first so that White would lose a tempo on the recapture. For this reason, White's main move is 7.cxd5 (next subchapter), avoiding the waste of time associated with ♗xc4.

It's also worth noting that 6...♗e7 is a playable alternative, although it has fallen out of favor in recent years. The text move will lead to the same position, but with ♗d2 included. This is an improvement for Black since it makes the d4-pawn an easier target. Play may continue with 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♗d3 ♘c6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♖e1 ♗f6 11.♗e4 ♘ce7 and Black retains a solid position. This variation was further analyzed in Khalifman's *Opening for Black According to Karpov*.

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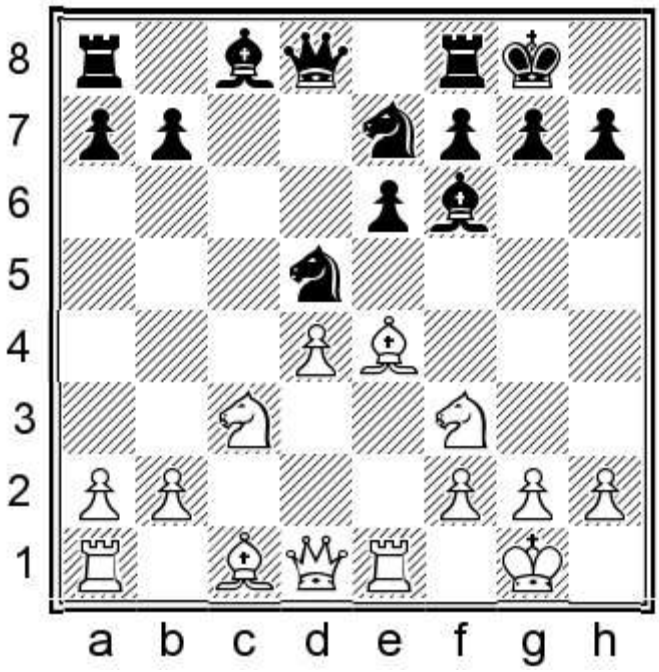

Position after: 11...♘ce7

7.♗d3

7.a3 forces Black to give up the bishop pair but White is far too undeveloped to exploit it. 7...♗xc3+ 8.bxc3 0-0 9.♕c2 [After the predictable 9.♗d3 dxc4! Black is better, e.g. 10.♗xc4 ♕c7 11.♕d3 b6! 12.0-0 ♗b7∓ when White's 'hanging pawns' are a constant issue.] 9...♘c6 10.cxd5 exd5 11.♗d3 ♖e8+ 12.♗e3 ♗g4= Black had an excellent position in Keymer, V (2036) – Zimmer, G (1975) Wiesbaden 2014.

7...dxc4 8.♗xc4

White has accepted the tempo loss, but he is now ready to castle and then develop his pieces on active squares with moves like ♗g5, ♖e1, ♘e5. Moreover, White has good control over the d5-square (including with his light-squared bishop) and Black must watch out for the possibility of a d5-break.

8...a6!

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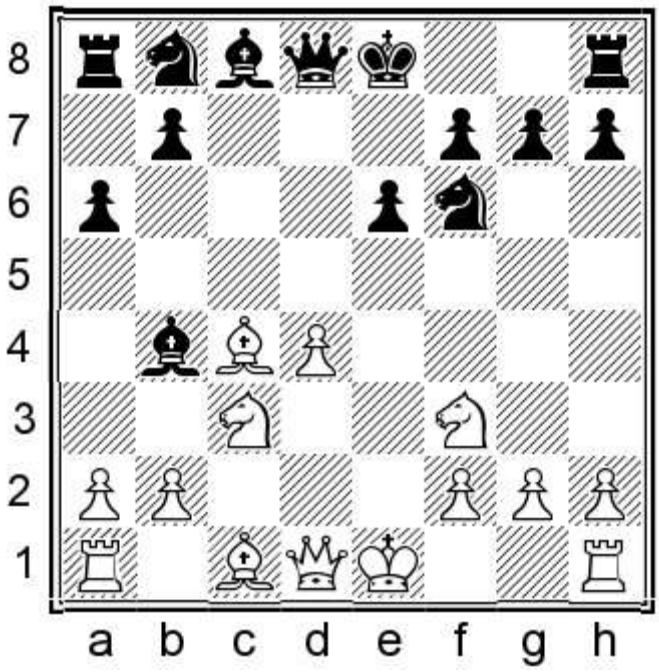

Position after: 8...a6!

Black intends to play ...b5 next move and develop his queenside before proceeding with ...0-0. The idea is to secure the d5-square with ...♗b7 and possibly even ...♘bd7-b6, just to make sure White can't play d5. Moreover, ...b5 will gain space on the queenside and allow Black's counterplay to flourish before White gets any serious initiative on the kingside.

8...0-0 9.0-0 transposes to a popular variation in the Nimzo-Indian Defense: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e3 0-0 5.♗d3 d5 6.♘f3 c5 7. 0-0 cxd4 8.exd4 dxc4 9.♗xc4. While Black is in excellent shape in that variation, I don't see the need to get embroiled in a potentially rather tedious theoretical discussion, especially given that White then has a few lines which lead to drawish positions. Instead, I'd like to exploit the move-order nuances and jumpstart Black's queenside play now.

9.0-0

A) 9.♘e5 b5! 10.♗e2 [10.♕f3?? ♕xd4!–+ just loses] 10...♗b7 11.0-0 0-0 12.a4 ♘c6!= Black had no issues at all and was eventually able to reel in the full point, Reinderman, D (2590) – Ernst, S (2568) Netherlands 2013.

B) 9.a4 This prevents ...b5, but the inclusion of ...a6 and a4 favors Black. He can now occupy the b4-square freely with any piece, like a knight on its way to d5, for instance: 9...0-0 10.0-0 ♘c6 11.♗g5 h6 12.♗h4 ♗e7 13.♖e1 ♗d7 14.♕e2 ♖e8 15.♖ad1 ♘d5!=.

C) 9.a3 White vacates the a2-square for his c4-bishop, but now his c3-pawn comes under fire. 9...♗xc3+ 10.bxc3 ♕c7!

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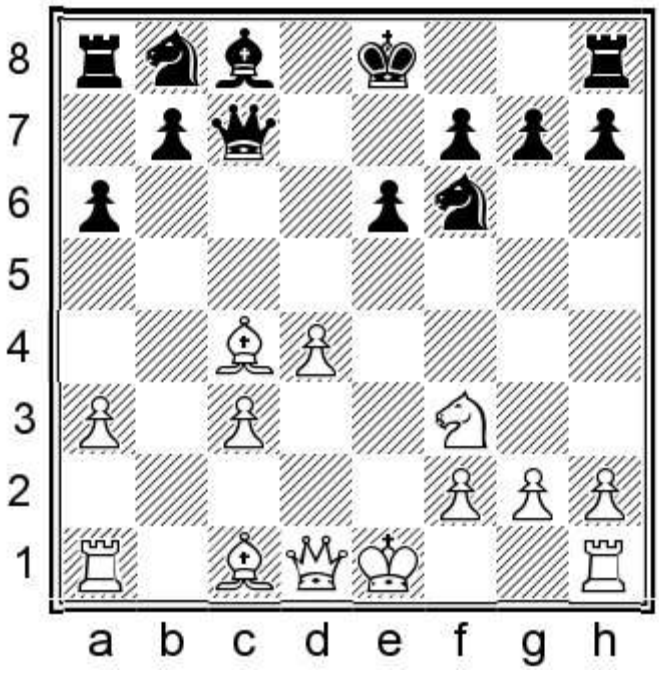

Position after: 10...♕c7!

C1) 11.♗b3. Although 11...♕xc3+ is definitely playable, I prefer the simpler 11...b5 12.0-0 ♗b7 13.♖e1 0-0=. White's c3-pawn remains a weakness and Black will continue to generate counterplay on the c-file and via the a8-h1 diagonal.

C2) 11.♕b3 0-0 12.0-0 b5 13.♗d3 ♗b7= Black had an excellent position and went on to win in Kononenko, D (2316) – Riazantsev, A (2635) Tallinn 2019. White's queen is misplaced, his central pawns locked down and his kingside initiative defunct; whereas Black has a great position and his light-squared bishop reigns supreme.

9...b5

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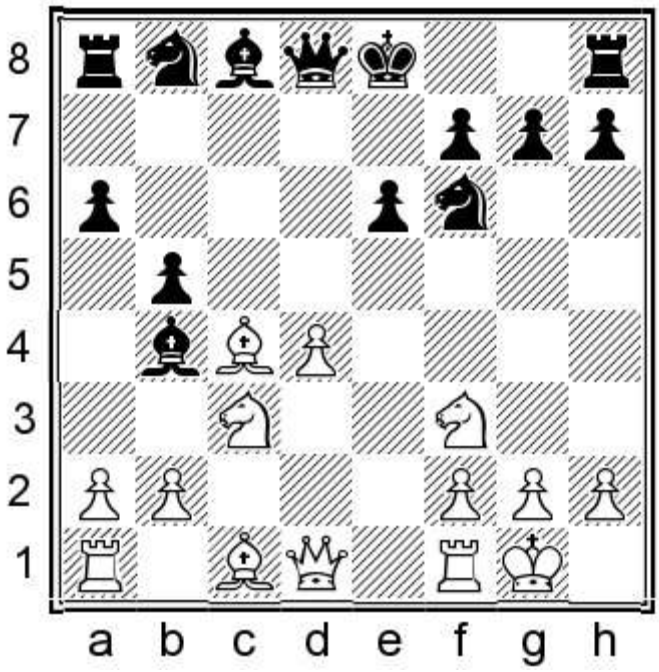

Position after: 9...b5

10.♗b3

10.♗d3 0-0 The strength of this move order is that White is simply unable to develop any substantial initiative on the kingside.

A) For example, 11.♗g5 is met by 11...♗b7 12.♖e1 h6 13.♗h4 ♘bd7 14.♘e5 ♗e7= and Black has an excellent position. It's important to relieve the pin on the f6-knight, so that ...♘d5 becomes a viable option.

B) 11.a4 bxa4 12.♖xa4 a5 13.♗g5 h6 14.♗h4 ♘bd7↑ Black was already in the driver's seat in Iskusnyh, S (2529) – Voitsekhovsky, S (2447) Tula 2001.

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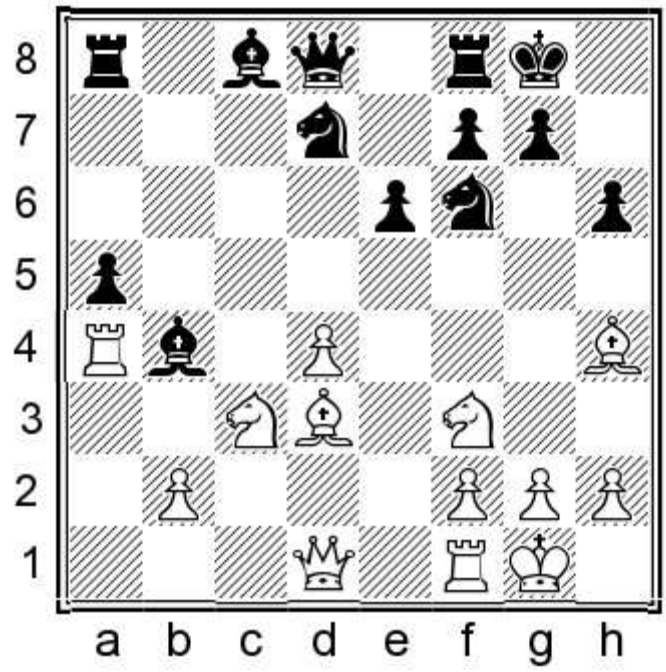

Position after: 14...♘bd7↑

10...0-0

10...♗b7? 11.d5!± illustrates the dangers Black faces if he is careless.

11.♗g5

11.♘e5 ♗b7 12.♗g5 ♗e7 13.♕d3 ♘c6!N 14.♖ad1 ♕c7=

11...♗b7 12.♕e2 ♘bd7 13.♘e5 ♖c8!?N 14.♖fe1 ♖c7!

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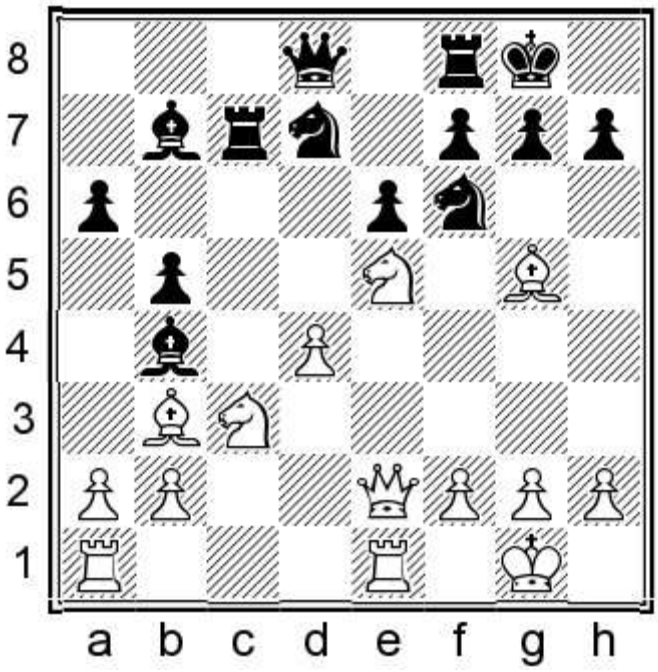
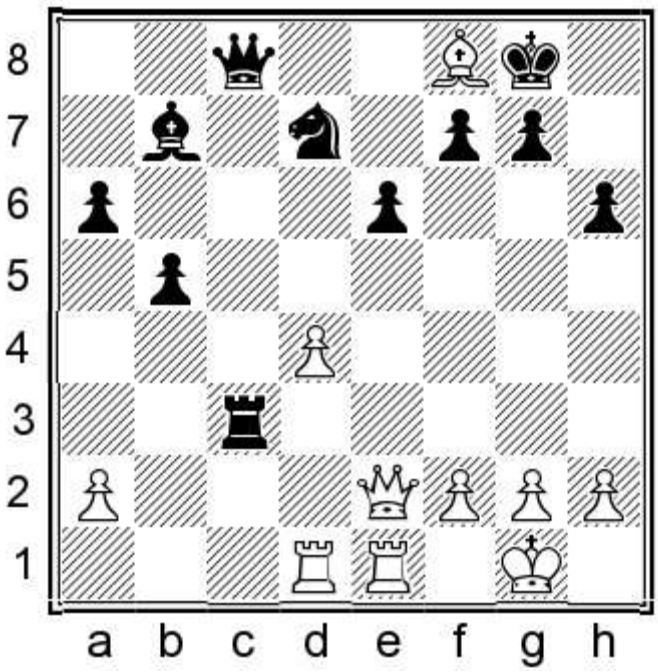


Position after: 14...♖c7!

Black has other good options, but I like this move for its simplicity. Black is ready to unpin the f6-knight and pressure White on the c-file with ...♕c8.

15.♖ad1 h6 16.♗h4 ♕c8 17.♘xd7 ♘xd7 18.♗g3 ♗xc3! 19.bxc3 ♖xc3 20.♗d6 ♖xb3! 21.♗xf8 ♖c3♾



Position after: 21...♖c3♾

Although he is the exchange down, Black has an excellent position due to his powerful light-squared

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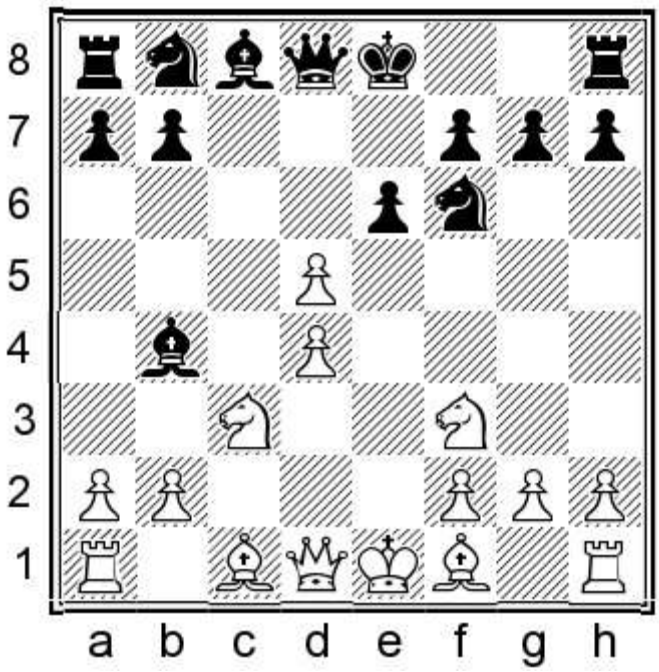
bishop and control of the c-file.

b) 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♕c2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.cxd5



Position after: 7.cxd5

This is White's most popular move. The f6-knight is brought to d5, where it will be slightly misplaced, and White ensures that his light-squared bishop will stay on the b1-h7 diagonal, which is its preferred position.

7...♘xd5

White can defend the c3-knight in two ways: 8.♕c2 and 8.♗d2 (next subchapter).

8.♕c2

The problem with this move is that the queen is misplaced on c2. It can be attacked in various ways: someday Black will bring a rook to c8 to use the open c-file, and then there is ...♘b4 to worry about (which also hits the ideal square for White's light-squared bishop.)

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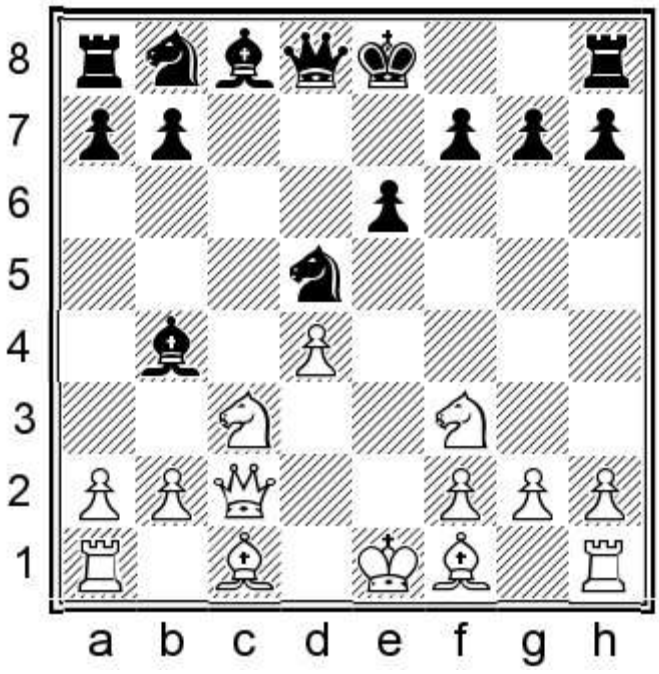
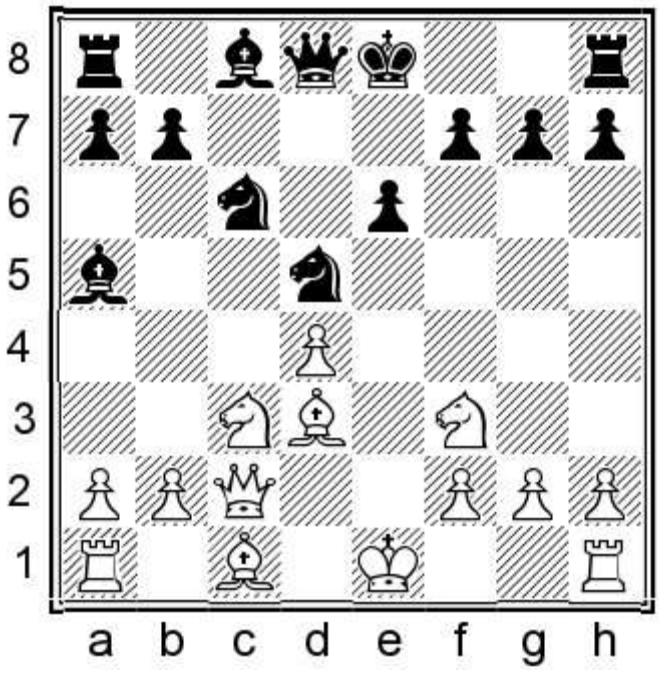


Position after: 8.♕c2

8...♘c6 9.a3

A) 9.♗e2 is too passive, and Black gets a great position with 9...0-0 10.0-0 ♘ce7 11.♗d3 h6 12.♘e5 b6=.

B) 9.♗d3 ♗a5!



Position after: 9...♗a5!

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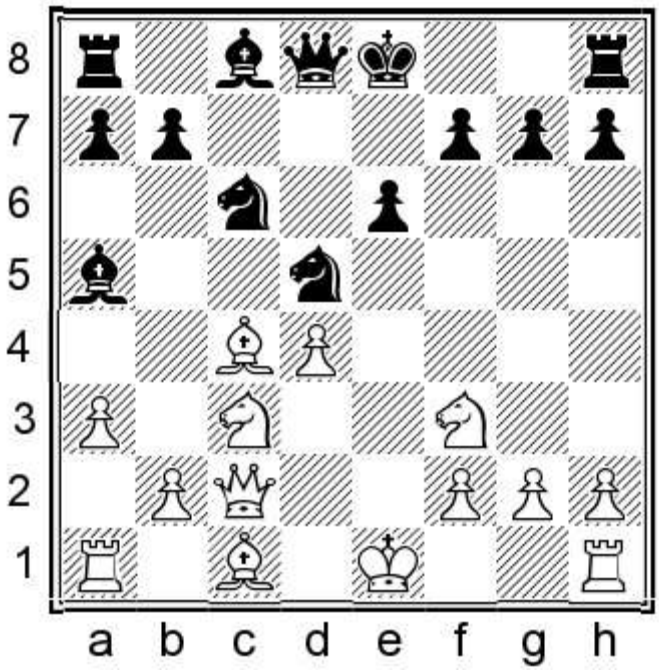
This is an important move. Black improves the bishop's position (it can later go to b6 to pressure the center) and forces White to take action to prevent ...♘b4. Now after 10.a3 we transpose to 9.a3 ♗a5 10.♗d3. [Meanwhile, 10.0-0 allows Black to eliminate the d3-bishop; White can only ever be worse after 10...♘db4 11.♕e2 ♘xd3 12.♕xd3 ♘e7!?N 13.♗f4 0-0=.]

9...♗a5 10.♗d3

There is an artificial-looking move which does not fit White's usual plans, but it should not be completely disregarded. 10.♗c4



Position after: 10.♗c4

10...♕c7!?N Black initiates fireworks in the center, exploiting the precarious position of White's pieces on the c-file. The immediate threat is ...♘xd4. [White wants something like 10...0-0 11.0-0 ♘ce7 12.♗g5!?∞ as in Pavlovic, M (2505) – Simeonidis, I (2260) Chalkida 1997, when Black is surprisingly facing some issues.] 11.0-0 [11.♗xd5 ♗xc3+ 12.♕xc3 exd5 13.0-0 0-0 14.♘e5 ♗f5= is simply equal.; 11.♕d3 ♗xc3+! 12.bxc3 ♘a5 13.♗b5+ ♗d7 14.♗xd7+ ♕xd7= Black controls the light squares and will pressure White's central pawns.] 11...♘xd4! 12.♘xd5! exd5 13.♗b5+ ♘xb5 14.♕e2+ ♗e6 15.♕xb5+ ♗d7 16.♕e2+ ♗e6 17.♕b5+ ♗d7 When the dust settles, the position is simply equal. White can avoid the repetition with 18.♕xd5 but only Black can be better after 18...0-0 19.♗f4 ♕xf4 20.♕xd7 ♖ab8= because of his active bishop.

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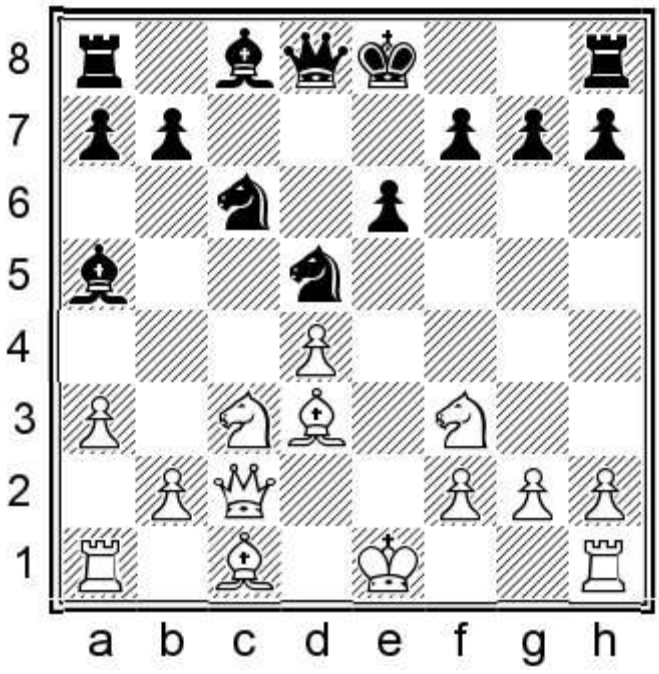
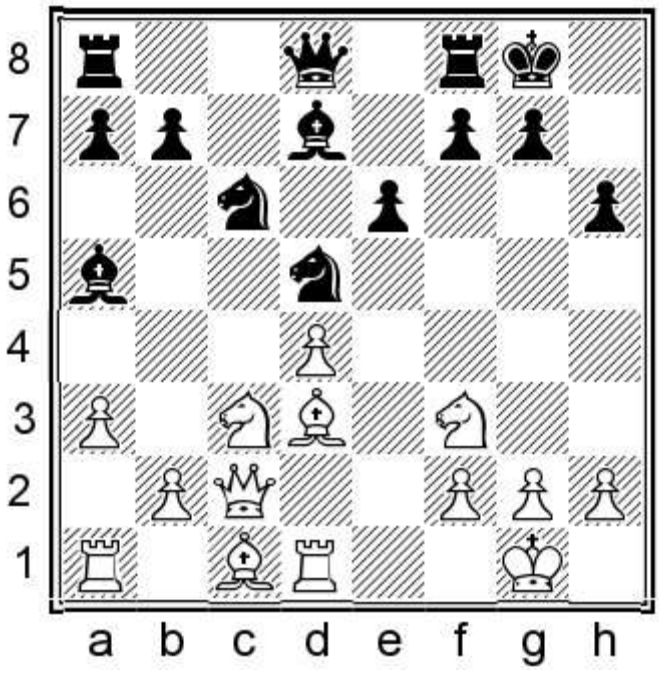


Position after: 10.♗d3

10...h6

10...♘xc3 is possible, but I don't like the resulting position: 11.bxc3 ♘xd4 12.♘xd4 ♕xd4 13.♗b5+∞ The position is quite complex and White has good compensation for the pawn. Black is most likely fine, but I don't see a reason to enter this sharp variation.

11.0-0 0-0 12.♖d1 ♗d7!?



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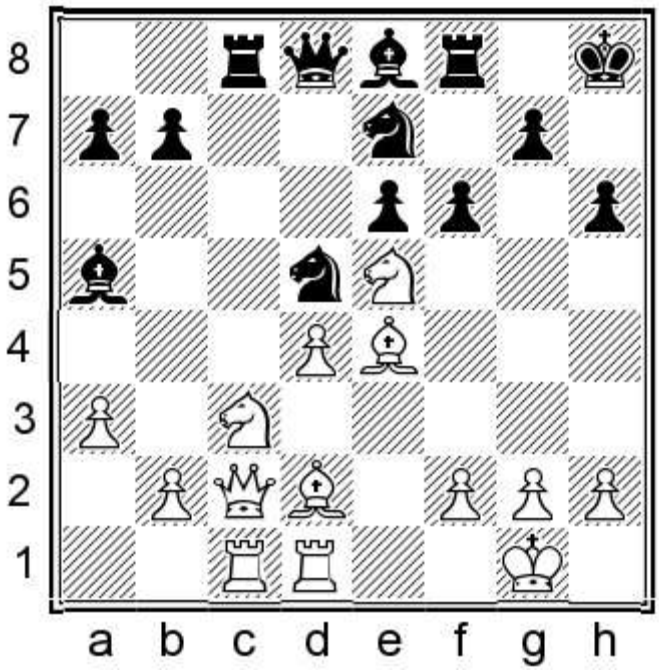
Position after: 12...♗d7!?

Black is ready to bring his rook to c8 and annoy the white queen.

13.♘e4

13.♗h7+ ♔h8 14.♗e4 ♘ce7 15.♗d2 ♖c8 16.♘e5 ♗e8 17.♖ac1 f6



Position after: 17...f6

18.♘d3 ♗b6 19.♘c5 ♗xc5 20.dxc5 ♖xc5= was played in Carlsen, M (2872) – Dominguez Perez, L (2758) Moscow 2019 and Dominguez successfully held against the World Champion. Although White has compensation for the pawn, Black has certainly equalized.

13...♗b6 14.♘c5 ♕c7!?

The idea is to bring the f8 rook to c8 and keep one rook on a8 to fuel ...a5 in response to b4.

15.b4 a5! 16.♘xd7 ♕xd7 17.b5 ♘ce7=

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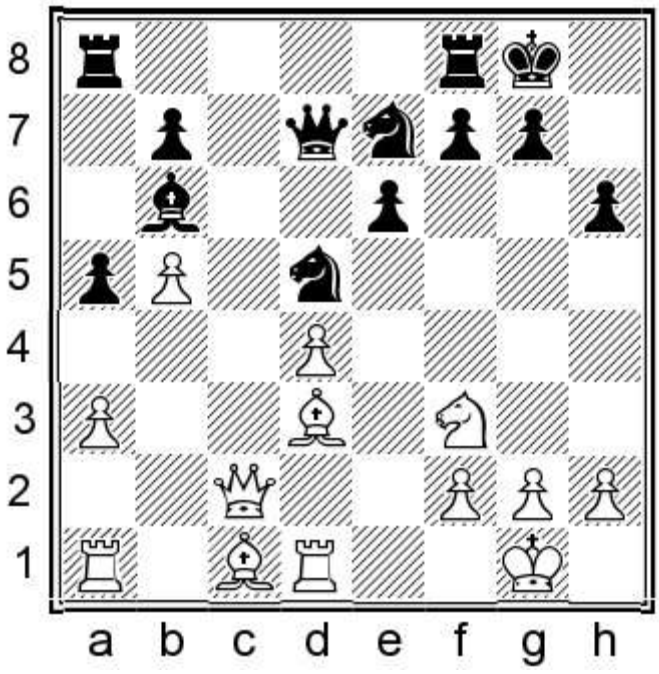
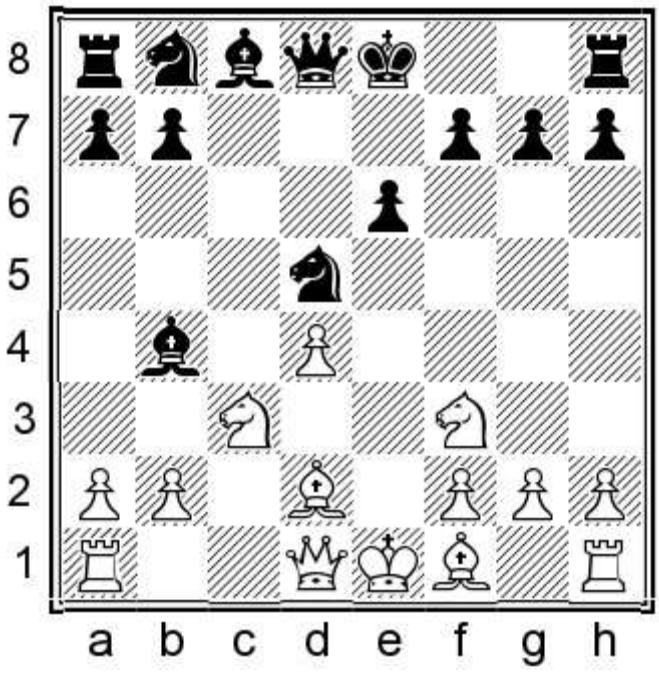


Position after: 17...♘ce7=

Black has an excellent position and went on to win in Lyell, M (2288) – Rausis, I (2512) Uxbridge 2009.

c) 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♗d2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e6 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♗d2



Position after: 8.♗d2

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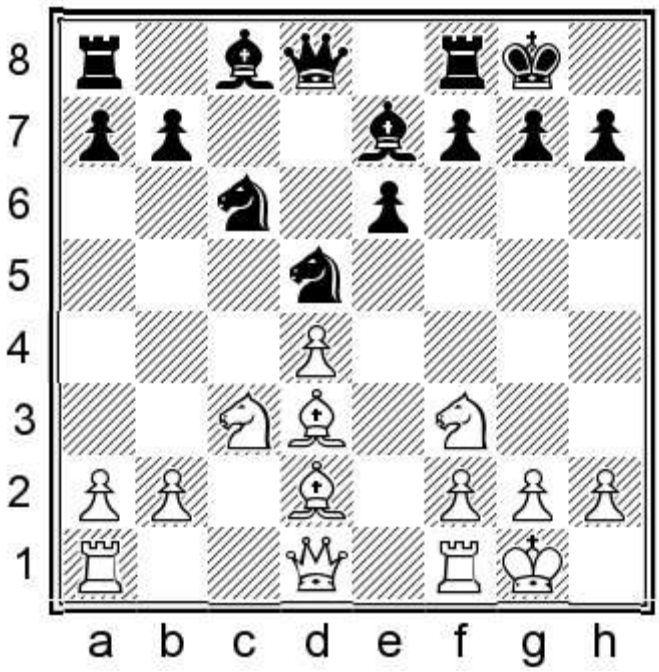
This is the critical move. White is ready to play 0-0, ♖e1 and ♘e5 and create threats on the kingside.

8...♘c6 9.♗d3 0-0 10.0-0 ♗e7!



Position after: 10...♗e7!

The bishop was no longer threatening anything on b4, so Black retreats it to e7. From Black's perspective, this opens up ideas like ...♘db4 and ...♗f6. More generally, Black's goal is to contain White's initiative on the kingside and in the center and slowly shift the emphasis of the fight to White's isolated pawn. Trading some pieces will alleviate the pressure and would hence be beneficial to Black.

11.a3

A) 11.♘xd5 is not particularly ambitious, as the position is very symmetrical after 11...exd5. [11...♕xd5 would be the positionally correct move to play, but the queen is exposed and White can play 12.♖e1!± with a slight edge.] 12.♕b3 ♗f6 13.♗c3 ♖b8 14.♖fe1 ♗e6 15.♕c2 g6 16.♕d2 ♗g7=

B) 11.♖e1 allows Black to execute his threat: 11...♘db4!

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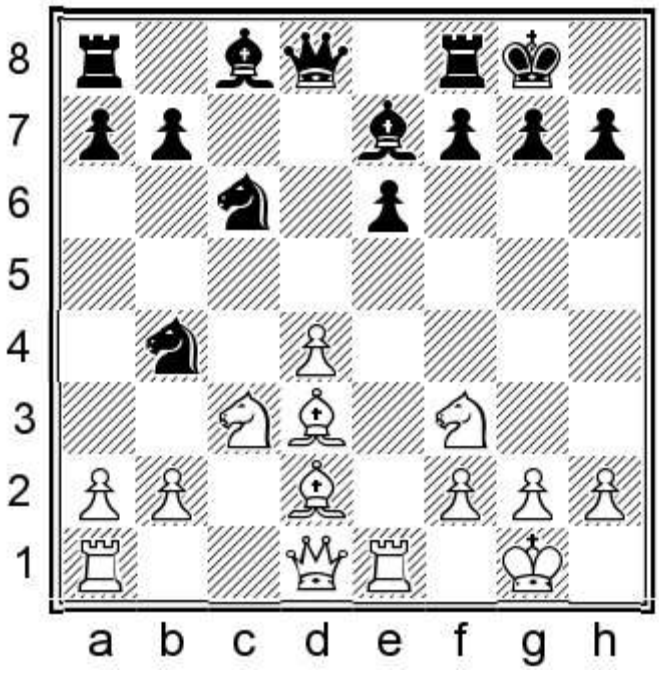
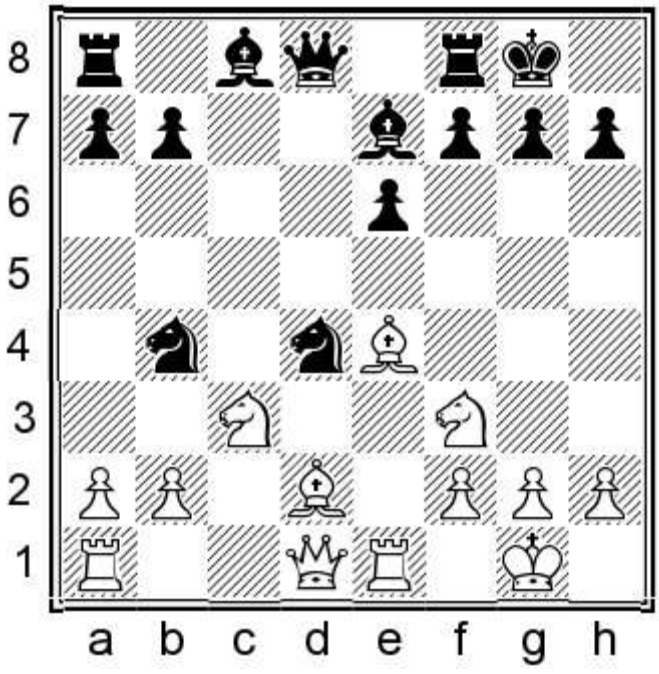


Position after: 11...♘db4!

B1) 12.♗f4 gives away the bishop pair, but White had enough activity to equalize: 12...♘xd3 13.♕xd3 ♘b4 14.♕e4 ♖e8 15.♖ac1 ♗d7 16.♘e5 ♗c6 17.♘xc6 ♘xc6 18.♖cd1 ♗b4 19.d5 exd5 20.♕xe8+ ♕xe8 21.♖xe8+ ♖xe8. This position was reached in Besozzi, F (2245) – Stigar, P (2573) ICCF email 2012 and the players agreed to a draw here.

B2) 12.♗e4 White sacrifices the d-pawn for compensation. Although Black lags in development, he can return the pawn at the right moment and untangle his position. 12...♘xd4



Position after: 12...♘xd4

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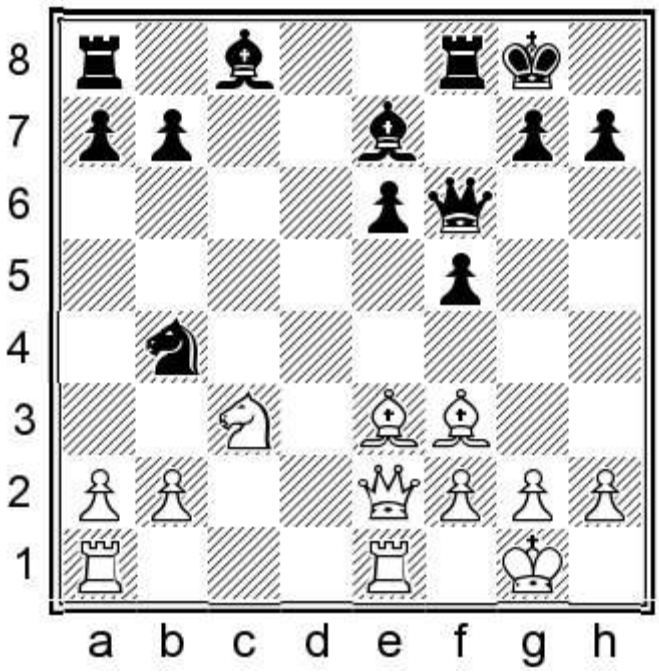
B2.1) 13.♘xd4 ♕xd4 14.♕e2 f5! Black needs to take some squares from White or he will suffocate. 15.♗e3 ♕f6 16.♗f3

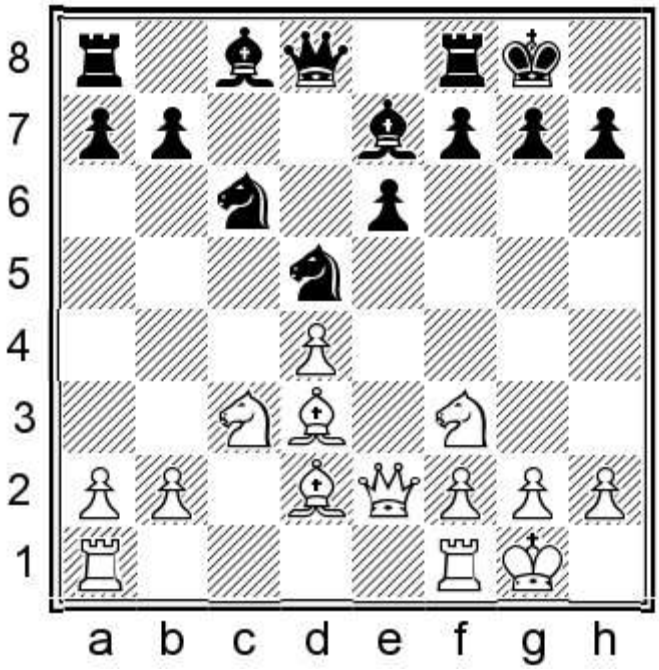


Position after: 16.♗f3

16...f4!N Black should press on here. 17.♘e4 ♕f5 18.♗d4 ♗d7 19.♗g4 f3! 20.gxf3 ♕g6= White has regained the pawn, but at the price of his control; Black has managed to complete development.

B2.2) 13.♗f4!? ♗f6 14.♘xd4 ♗xd4 15.♘b5 e5! 16.♘xd4 exf4 17.♕d2 ♘c6 18.♗xc6 bxc6 19.♕xf4 ♕b6 20.b3 c5= Though Black's structure is worse, he is very solid and has a powerful bishop.

C) 11.♕e2!?



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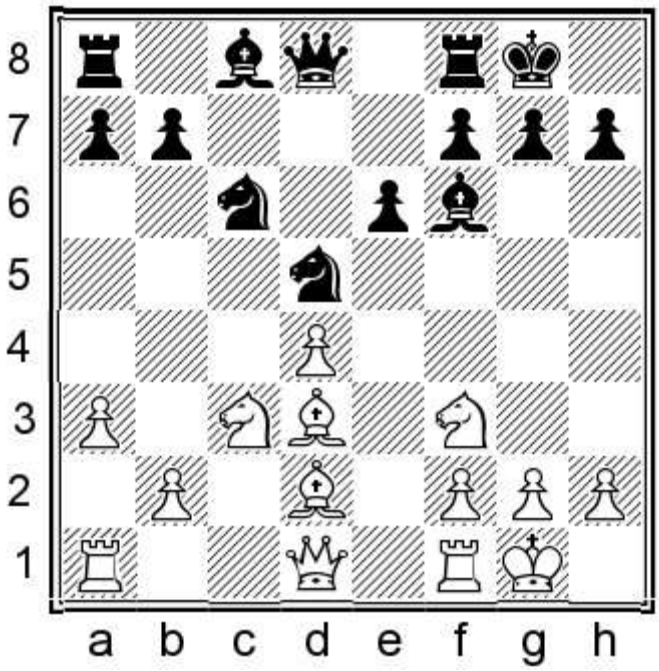
Position after: 11.♕e2!?

White is preparing ♖ad1 and certain kingside ideas like ♕e4. Black should simply restrict the attacking options with 11...♘f6! attacking the d4-pawn and completely ruling out ♕e4. 12.♘e4 ♕b6! 13.♖fd1 ♗d7 Black has stalled White's kingside initiative and successfully completed development. 14.♘e5N [14.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 15.♕e4 g6 16.♗h6 ♘xd4! 17.♗xf8 ♖xf8 18.♘e5 ♗c6 19.♘xc6 bxc6= Black has excellent compensation for the exchange, mainly due to his powerful knight on d4.] 14...♗e8 15.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 16.♗e3 ♘b4!? White must prevent Black from placing his knight on d5, or his position will be quite passive. 17.d5!? ♕d6 18.♘g4 ♗d8 19.♖ac1 ♘xd3 20.♕xd3 ♗b6= Here it seems likely that we will get an equal ending.

11...♗f6



Position after: 11...♗f6

12.♕c2

This move gains a tempo since Black needs to deal with the threat of ♗xh7, but the queen is not well placed on c2.

A) 12.♕e2 ♘xd4 13.♘xd4 ♗xd4 14.♗xh7+ ♔xh7 15.♕e4+ ♔g8 16.♕xd4 ♘e7=

B) 12.♗e3 This is a lousy way to defend the d4-pawn since it forfeits the bishop and, hence, effectively renounces any hope of a kingside initiative. 12...♘xe3 13.fxe3 g6 14.♕e2 ♗g7 15.♖ad1 ♘e7 with good play for Black.

12...h6

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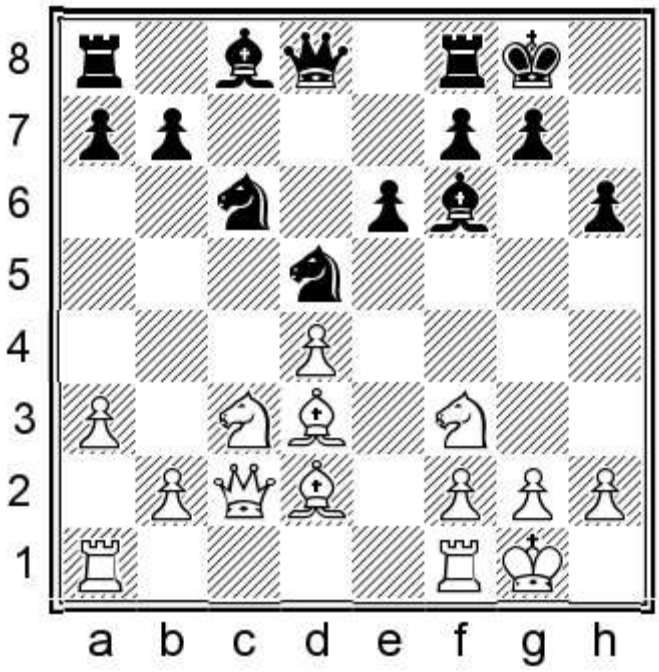

Position after: 12...h6

13.♖ad1

13.♗e3 ♘ce7! 14.♘e4 b6 15.♘xf6+ ♘xf6 16.♘e5 ♗b7=

13...♘xd4!

Other moves would hand White a more comfortable position but the text move equalizes forcefully.

14.♘xd4 ♗xd4 15.♗h7+ ♔h8 16.♘xd5 ♕xd5 17.♗c3 e5 18.♗e4 ♕c5 19.♗xd4 ♕xc2 20.♗xc2 exd4 21.♖xd4 ♗e6=

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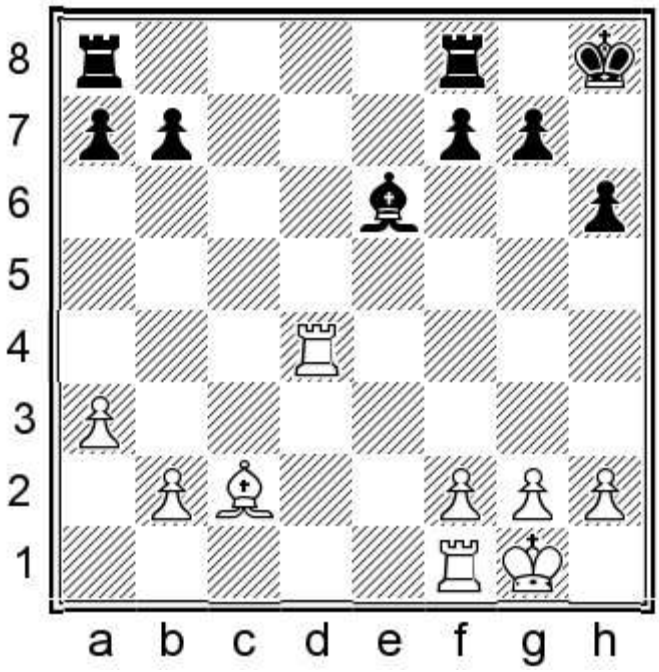

Position after: 21...♗e6=

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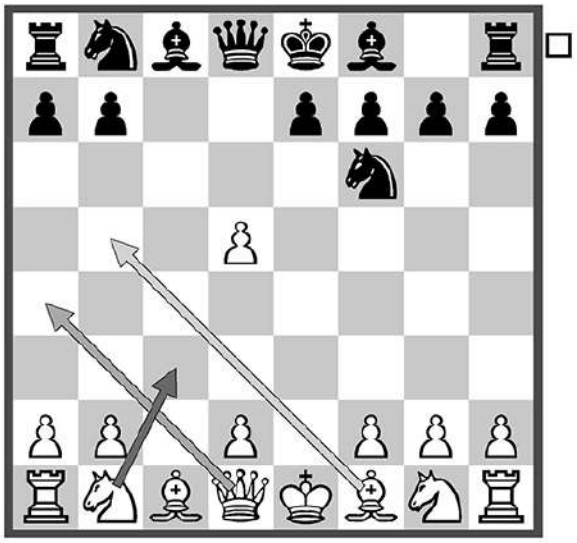
Chapter 14
The early 2.c4!?

1.e4 c6 2.c4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.cxd5 ♘f6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 14 – The early 2.c4!?

1.e4 c6 2.c4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.cxd5 ♘f6

a) 5.♕a4+

b) 5.♗b5+

c) 5.♘c3

a) 5.♕a4+

1.e4 c6 2.c4

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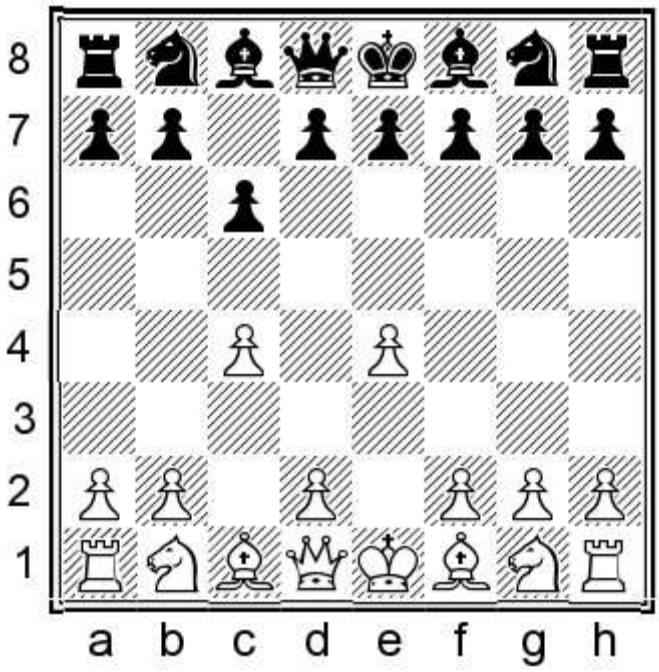

Position after: 2.c4

In the previous chapters, we looked at the traditional Panov attack, defined by the moves 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.c4. The present move order, while also involving a quick c4, actually leads to different kinds of positions. White's idea is to pressure the d5 square immediately and take twice on d5. Then, White will try to either hold on to the d5-pawn or use it to buy time for other tactics.

Although this variation is not critical from a theoretical perspective, Black should be familiar with the plans and ideas that characterize it.

2...d5 3.exd5

White achieves nothing if he does not take twice on d5. 3.cxd5 cxd5 4.e5

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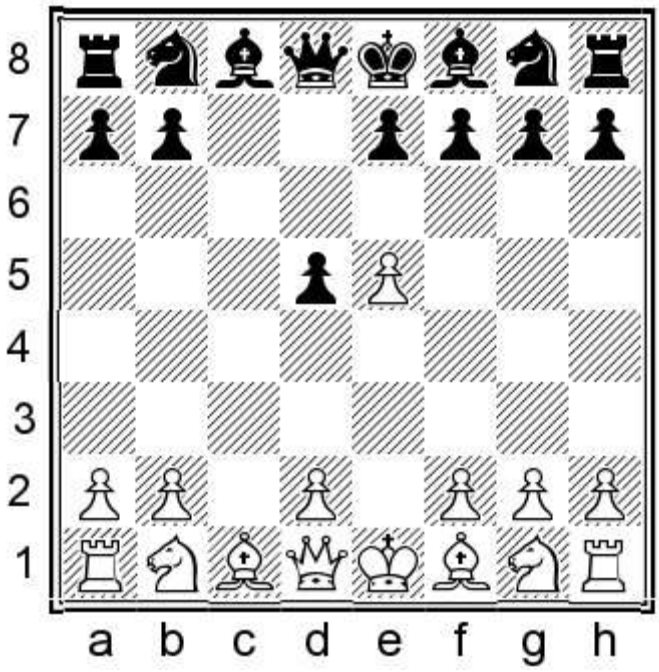


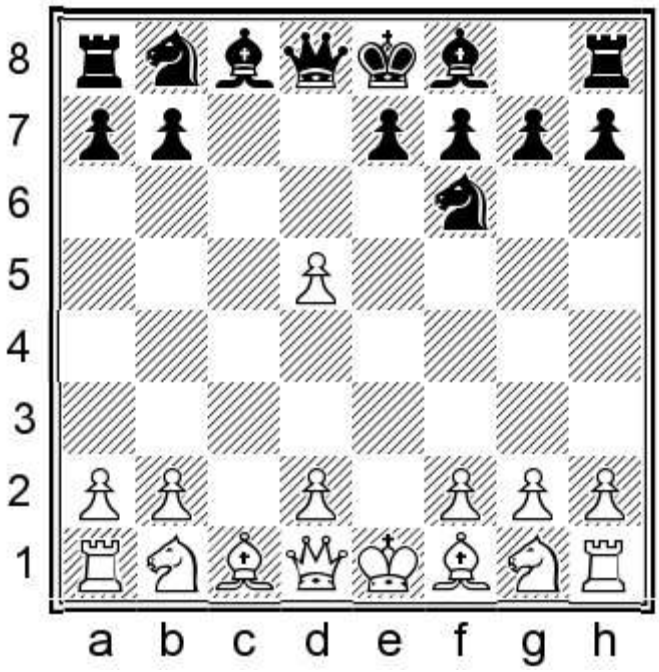
Position after: 4.e5

Black can play the strong move 4...♕a5! here (to prevent d4.) In Schoepe, H (2257) – Roynet, S (2089) email 2017 he quickly got an excellent position: 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.♘c3 ♗g4 7.d4 e6=.

3...cxd5 4.cxd5

4.d4 transposes to the Panov variation.

4...♘f6!



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Position after: 4...♘f6!

This is an important moment because it defines the variation and the play that follows. Black should not recapture the pawn with 4...♕xd5 because that allows White to gain critical time in developing his pieces whereas Black will have to retreat his queen and fall behind in development. After 4...♘f6, Black does want to recapture the d5-pawn but White can try to prevent him from doing so in various ways. Alternatively, White can also let Black recapture and instead focus on quick development and piece activity with 5.♘c3 (subchapter "c)").

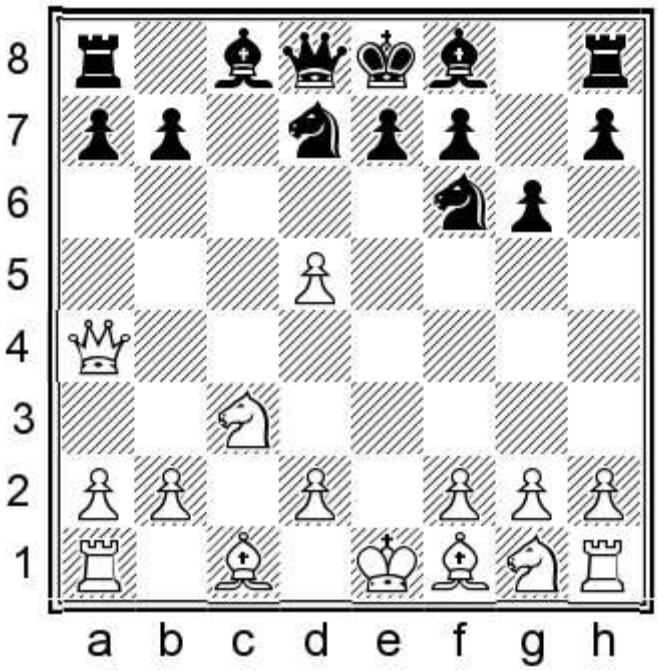
5.♕a4+

This is one of the ways in which White can attempt to make Black's life more difficult and delay the recapture of the d5-pawn. With this check, White forces Black to block on d7 and temporarily abandon the threat of ...♘xd5.

5...♘bd7!

Black will continue with ...g6, ...♗g7 and ...0-0, and then ...♘b6 (to regain the pawn) will be a threat.

6.♘c3 g6



Position after: 6...g6

Due to Black's plan to castle and play ...♘b6, White needs to protect his d5-pawn. He can do this in two ways: g3 & ♗g2, or ♗c4. In both cases, Black also has possibilities like ...b5, which (timed well) can cause havoc.

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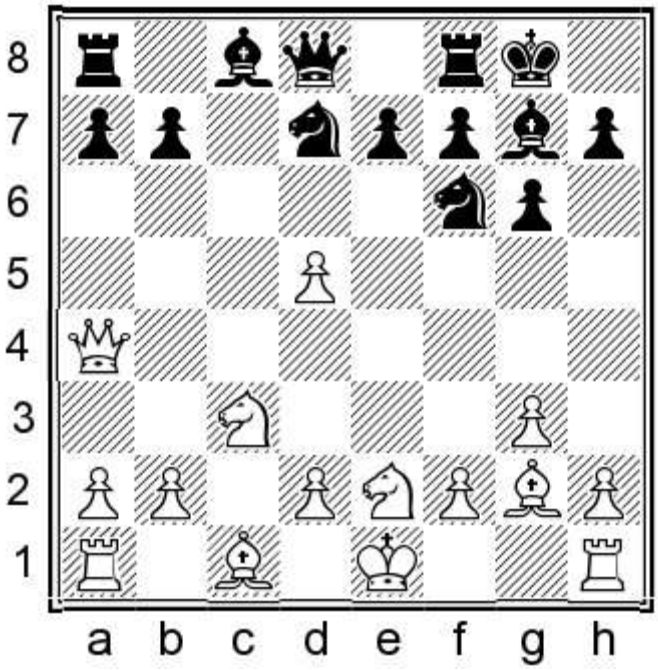
7.♘f3

A) 7.♗c4 can be played in this position but it will transpose to the 7.♘f3 lines after White plays ♘f3.

B) 7.g3 ♗g7 8.♗g2 0-0 9.♘ge2



Position after: 9.♘ge2

White has successfully defended his d5-pawn, but it has come at a price: he is behind in development. Black should make use of the dynamic potential in his position to create concrete problems for his opponent.

9...b5!N Other moves are playable, but I prefer this approach. Black targets the White queen and opens up the queenside for active play.

B1) 10.♘xb5 gives Black the upper hand after 10...♘b6 11.♕d1 ♗b7⩲. The d5-pawn will fall and White's light squares are a permanent weakness. Moreover, Black's piece activity on the queenside will be a constant annoyance for White.

B2) 10.♕b3

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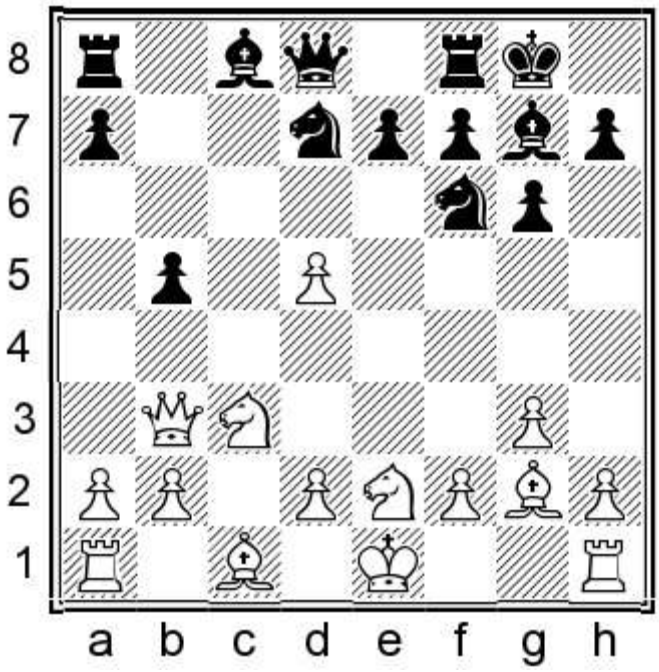

Position after: 10.♕b3

Black has two excellent options to proceed from here.

B2.1) 10...♘c5!? forces White's queen to wander around the board and takes control of the d3-square: 11.♕xb5 ♘fd7 12.0-0 ♖b8 13.♕c4 ♗a6 14.♕h4 ♗f6 15.♕h6 ♘d3 16.♕e3 ♖e8⩲ White is two pawns up but Black has excellent piece play whereas White struggles to untangle himself.

B2.2) 10...♖b8!? This is the most logical move. Given that White has left the b5-pawn on the board, Black prepares to push it and dislodge the c3-knight. 11.d4 b4 12.♘a4 ♗a6 13.♗e3 ♘b6 14.♘xb6 ♕xb6⩲ Black has excellent compensation due to his active pieces and White's inability to finish his development.

7...♗g7

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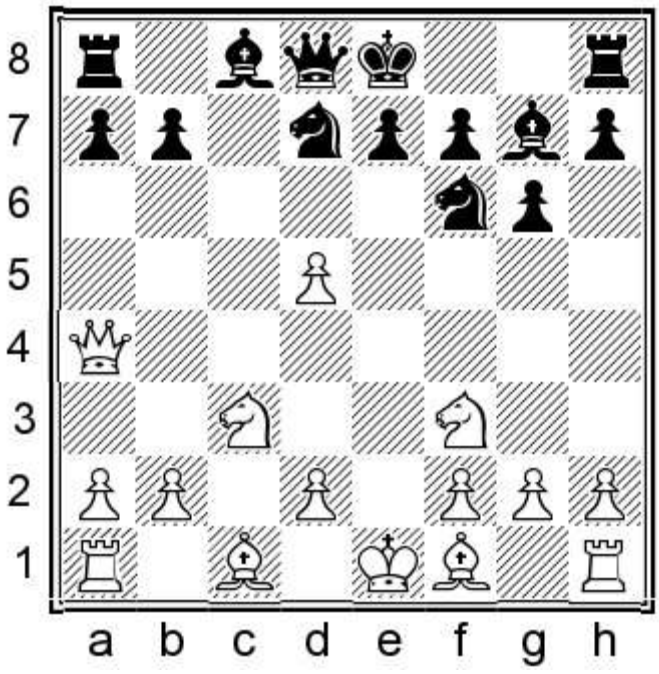
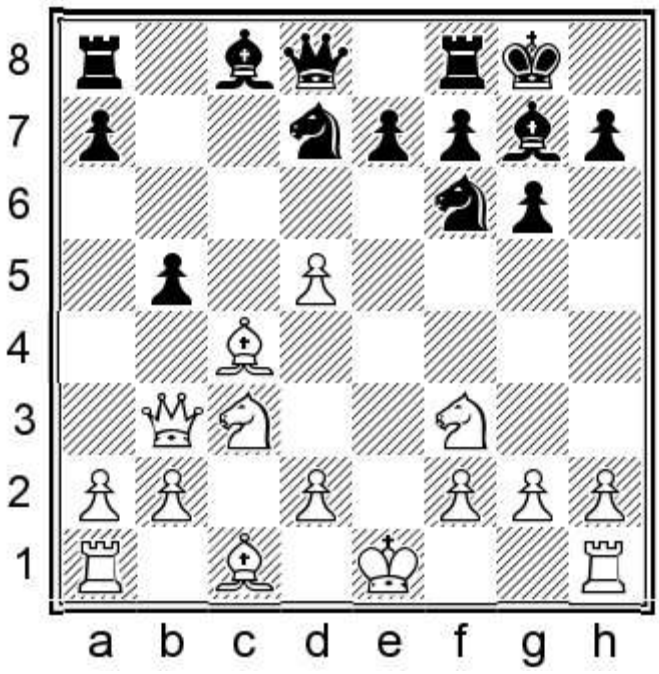


Position after: 7...♗g7

White's idea is to play ♗c4, ♕b3, a4 and protect the d5-pawn. However, Black's plans are not confined to recuperating the pawn; in fact, he can simply ignore it and pursue active play against White's disorganized queenside.

8.♗c4

8.♕b3 0-0 9.♗c4 b5!



Position after: 9...b5!

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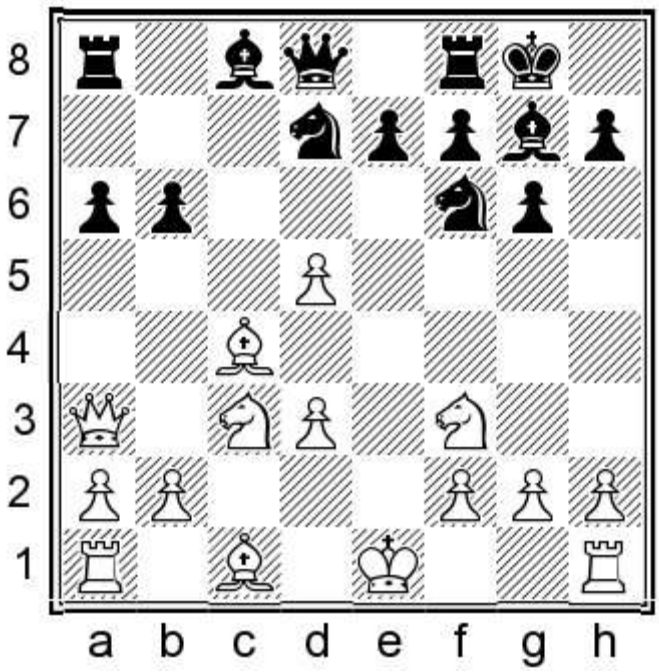
This is a case in point. Black gives up on the d5-pawn and sacrifices another one! White's position is simply too loose and Black's play flows naturally. 10.♗xb5 ♖b8 11.♕c4N 11...♘b6 12.♕e2 ♘fxd5 13.0-0 ♘f4 14.♕e4 ♘e6∓ Black dictates matters. He has active bishops (on g7 and soon on b7) and strong knights. That and White's weak structure mean you barely notice the missing pawn at all.

8...a6!

Although ...b5 is not a threat just yet, it will become one after Black castles.

9.d3 0-0 10.♕a3 b6!



Position after: 10...b6!

Black plans to play ...b5 in two steps. First, he plays ...b6 and ...♗b7 and then ...b5. The idea is that Black is in no hurry to regain the pawn. In fact, the d5-pawn restrains White's pieces (especially his light-squared bishop) and will be a constant weakness for as long as it lives. In the short term, Black's activity largely compensates for the pawn.

11.0-0 ♗b7 12.♖e1 ♖e8 13.♗e3

13.♘g5 ♖c8! 14.d6 e6∓

13...b5!

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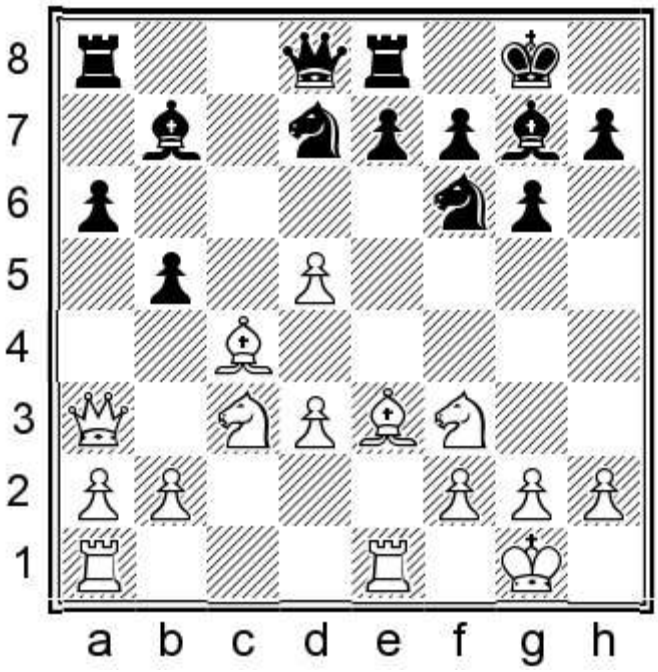
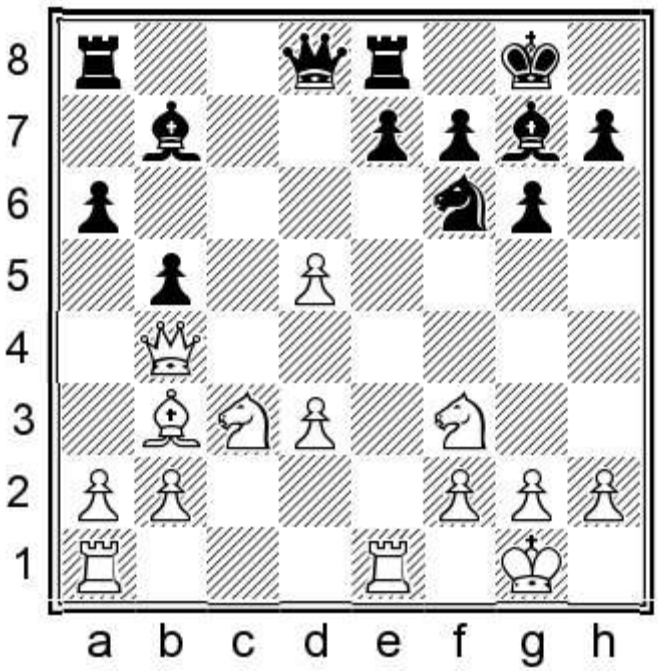


Position after: 13...b5!

Black eventually expands. Now, the b6-square is available and ...♘b6 becomes a logical follow-up.

14.♗b3 ♘b6 15.♗xb6 ♕xb6 16.♕b4 ♕d8!∓



Position after: 16...♕d8!∓

Black had complete control over the dark squares and full compensation for the pawn in Bortnyk, O (2579) – Grischuk, A (2747) Internet 2016.

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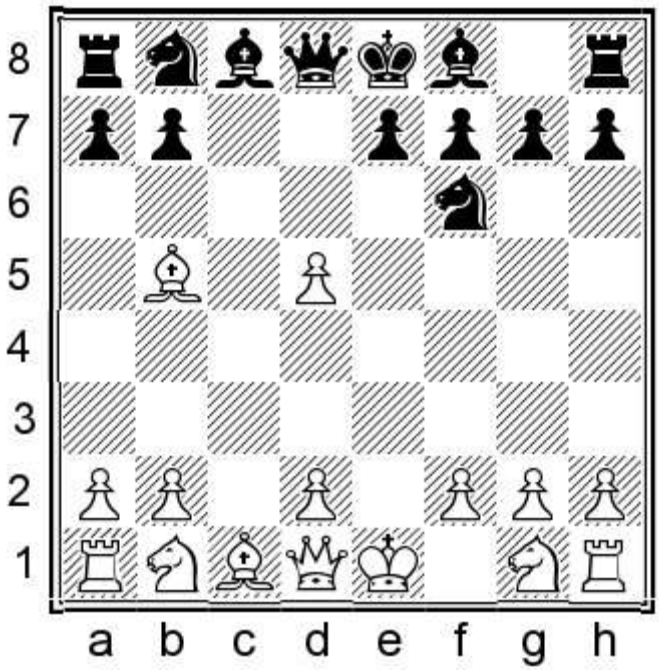
Curiously, Grischuk played 16...♕d6 17.♕xd6 exd6⩲ in another game from the same match. However, I prefer the text move since keeping the queens on the board benefits Black.

b) 5.♗b5+

1.e4 c6 2.c4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.cxd5 ♘f6! 5.♗b5+



Position after: 5.♗b5+

This is a second attempt to throw a dart at Black's plans. Just like after 5.♕a4+, Black should block with the knight.

5...♘bd7

Black will develop his dark-squared bishop on g7 and then create counterplay on the queenside. In order to keep the d5-pawn, White will often need to give up his light-squared bishop to prevent ideas like ... ♘b6. Of course, this is a major concession since Black will then dominate the light squares and the bishop pair is an important factor in an open position like this one.

6.♘c3

A) 6.d4 is inconsistent since White is unable to keep the d5-pawn:

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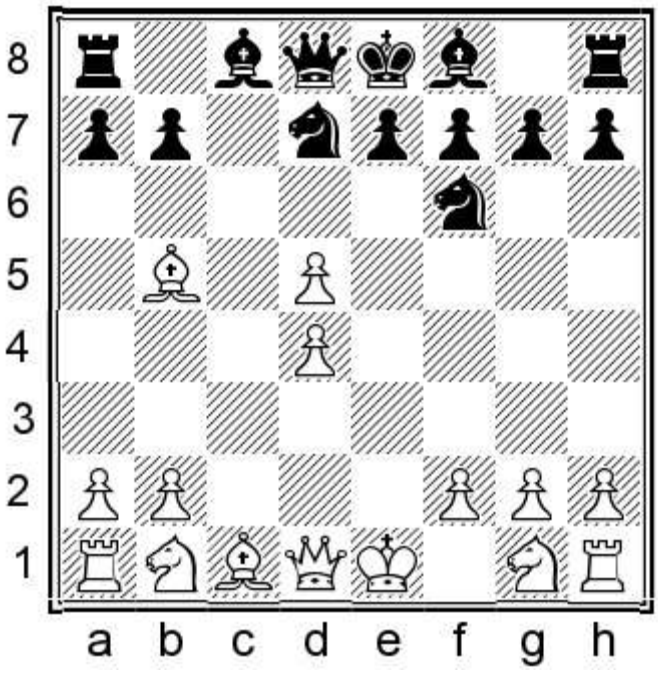
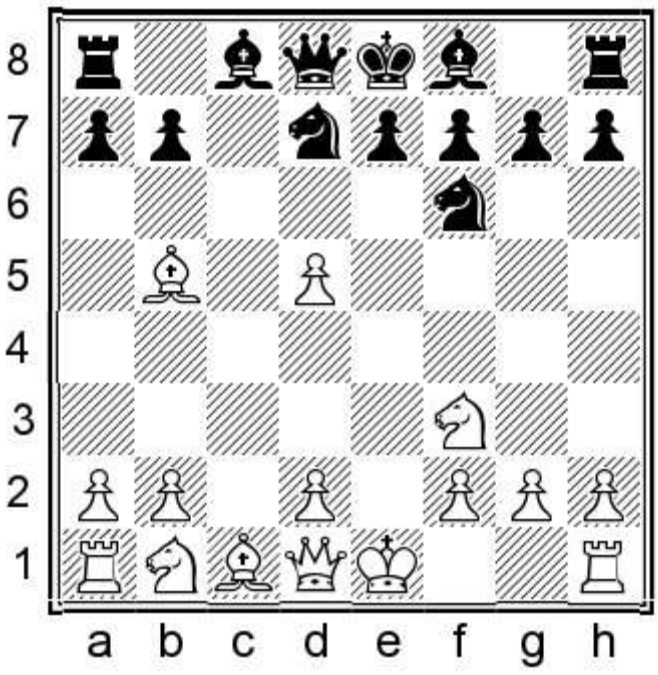


Position after: 6.d4

6...a6 7.♗d3 ♘b6 8.♘c3 ♘bxd5 9.♘f3 g6 10.0-0 ♗g7 11.♖e1 0-0= Black has an ideal version of the ...g6 Panov lines: an excellent bishop on g7, options for the c8-bishop (such as g4 or b7), and a solid grip on the d5-square.

B) 6.♘f3



Position after: 6.♘f3

This is also unimpressive since Black easily regains the d5-pawn and obtains an excellent position.

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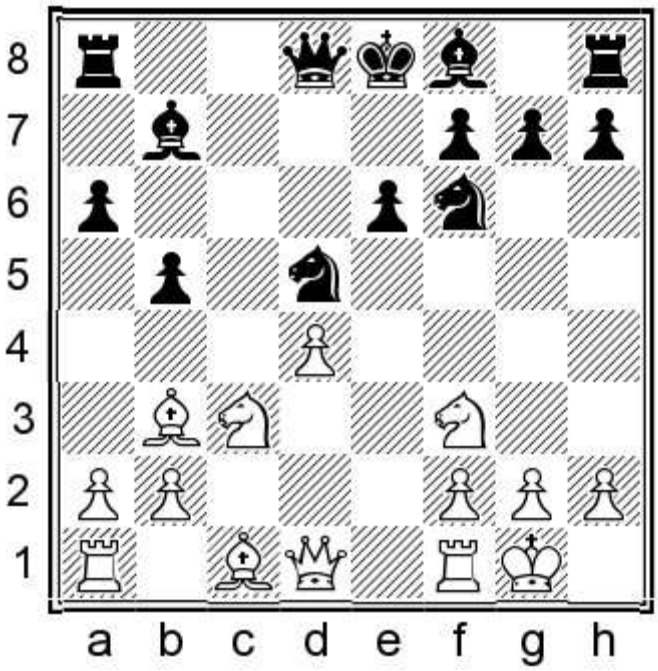
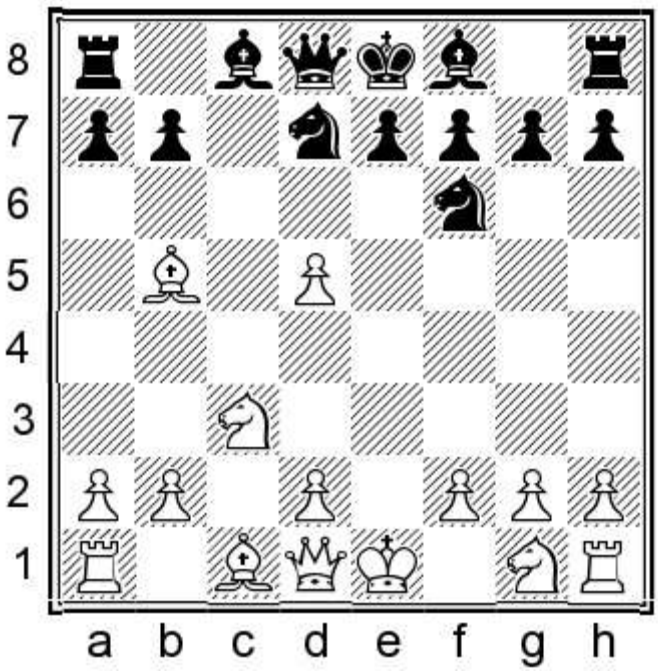
6...a6 7.♗a4 [7.♗xd7+ ♕xd7! 8.♘c3 ♘xd5 9.0-0 f6! 10.♖e1 e6= Black's positional advantages gave him the more comfortable position in Looshnikov, N (2435) – Lobanov, S (2515) Sochi 2018.] 7...b5 8.♗b3 ♗b7 9.0-0 ♘xd5 10.♘c3 ♘7f6 11.d4 e6=



Position after: 11...e6=

White has a terrible track record in this position and for good reason: Black has active pieces, space on the queenside and the better pawn structure.

Back to 6.♘c3.



Position after: 6.♘c3

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6...a6

6...g6 is also possible, but I prefer the text move. White can cause trouble for Black with 7.d4 ♗g7 8.d6!∞ as Andrew Martin points out in *First Steps: Caro-Kann Defence*.

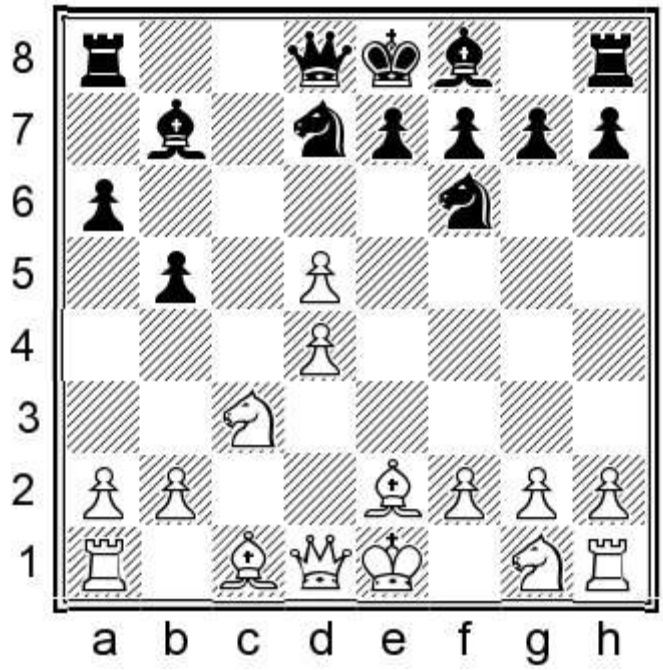
7.♕a4

This pin is White's only real attempt at keeping the d5-pawn. White temporarily stops ideas of ...b5 or ...♘b6.

A) 7.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 8.♕b3 defends the d5-pawn, but White's weakness are immediately highlighted by 8...♕g4! which forces White to give up castling rights. 9.♔f1 b5∓

B) 7.♗a4 b5 8.♗b3 ♗b7 9.♘f3 White will not hold on to the d5-pawn for much longer since 9...b4! displaces the c3-knight. Black already has a slight edge after 10.♘a4 ♘xd5 11.d4 e6∓.

C) 7.♗e2 This is a more reasonable attempt: the bishop leaves the queenside after it has accomplished its job (forcing ...♘bd7) and White does not lose further tempi with it. 7...b5 8.d4 ♗b7!?



Position after: 8...♗b7!?

[8...b4!? is also interesting, but one good line is enough.]

C1) 9.♕b3 is a last effort to protect the d5-pawn but Black can reply with 9...♕a5! and now White cannot hold on to the pawn any longer. 10.♘f3 ♗xd5 11.♕d1 e6 12.0-0 was played in Varga, Z (2535) – Dizdarevic, E (2500) Makarska Tucepi 1995 and here I like 12...♗b7N to keep the bishop on the board.

C2) 9.♘f3 b4 10.♘a4 ♗xd5

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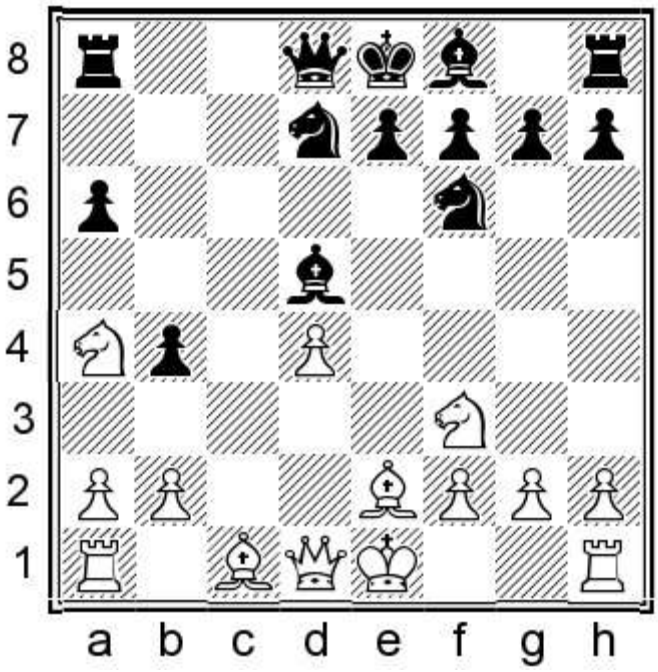
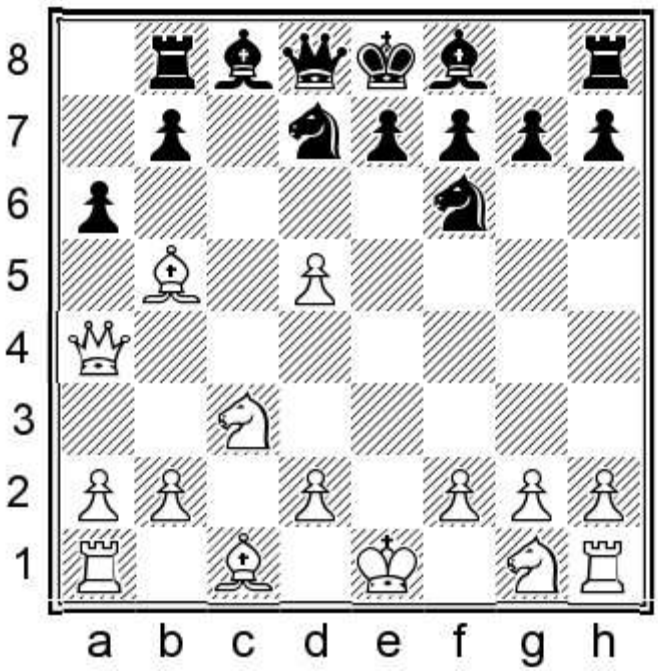


Position after: 10...♗xd5

Black has regained the pawn and has an excellent version of normal Panov isolani positions. 11.♗f4 e6 12.♖c1 ♗e7 13.0-0 0-0 14.b3 was played in Ponomariov, R (2733) – Gelfand, B (2741) Medias 2010. [The 14.♗c7 ♕c8 15.♗d6 of Varga, Z (2470) – Blohberger, F (2427) Dunajska Streda 2018, does not force a draw since Black may play on if he likes with 15...♕e8!N.] Now Black should continue 14...♖c8N with equality.

7...♖b8!?



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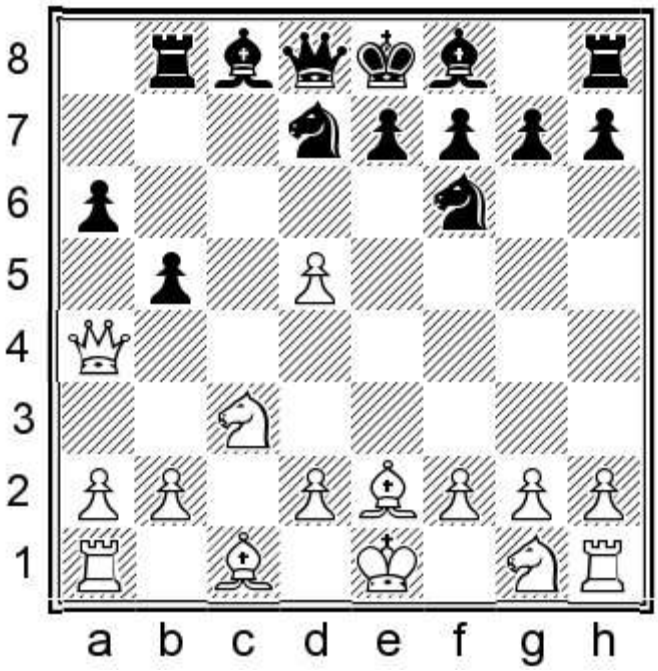
Position after: 7...♖b8!?

With this active move (which is more direct than the playable alternative 7...g6) Black forces White to make a decision regarding his b5-bishop.

8.♗xd7+

Giving up the bishop allows White to maintain his extra pawn but concedes yet another positional trump to Black.

8.♗e2 allows Black to take over the initiative in a somewhat surprising manner: 8...b5.



Position after: 8...b5

A) 9.♕b3 ♘c5 10.♕d1N 10...e5! shows how Black's best choice is not necessarily to recapture on d5. Instead, Black abandons the pawn to accelerate his development. 11.dxe6 ♘xe6 12.♘f3 ♗d6↑ Black has more than enough compensation for the pawn and White's position is really passive.

B) 9.♕h4 g5! Black exploits the position of White's queen and the fact that White is underdeveloped to attack on both sides of the board.

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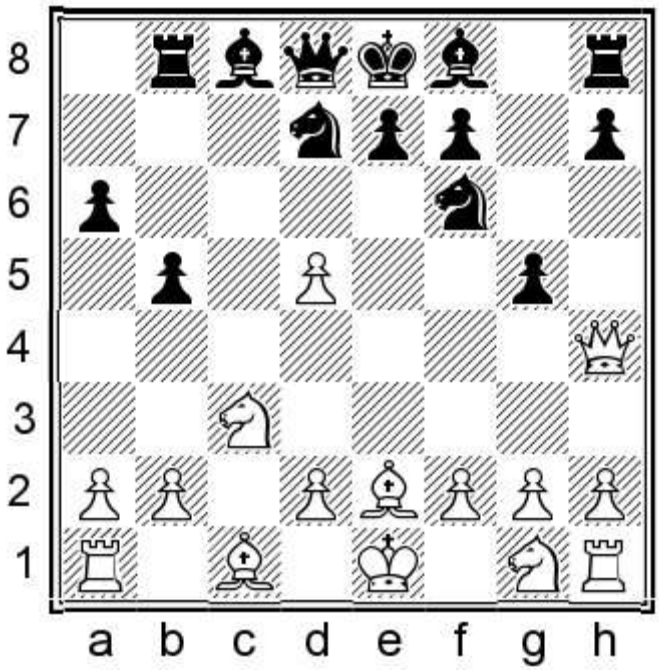
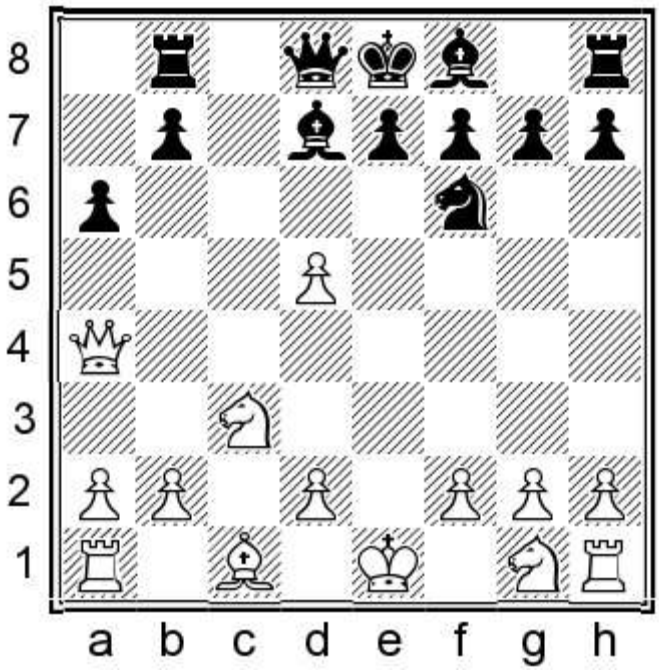


Position after: 9...g5!

10.♕g3 [Taking would allow Black to bring his h8-rook into the game and create additional weaknesses in White's position. 10.♕xg5 ♖g8 11.♕h4 ♖xg2 12.d4 ♖g6∓] 10...b4 11.♘d1 ♗b7 12.♘e3 ♖g8∓ Black is fully in command and has a raging initiative, while White struggles to even complete his development.

8...♗xd7



Position after: 8...♗xd7

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9.♕f4

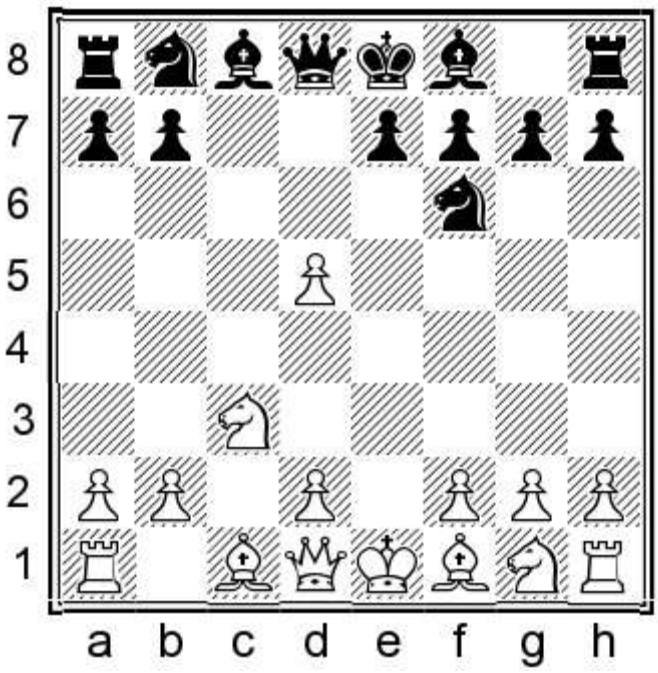
9.♕b3 b5 10.d3 e6! 11.♗f4 ♖c8 12.a3 exd5= was played in Mainka, R (2515) – Rasmussen, K (2440) Copenhagen 1993. Black has equalized the pawn count and the position is equal.

9...g6 10.♘f3 ♗g7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖e1 ♗f5 13.d4 ♖e8=

White is still holding on to his pawn (albeit probably not for long) but Black has an excellent position regardless.

c) 5.♘c3

1.e4 c6 2.c4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.cxd5 ♘f6! 5.♘c3



Position after: 5.♘c3

With this move, White allows Black to recapture the d5-pawn and instead focuses on quickly developing his pieces by delaying the d4-push. However, there is little that White can do to cause problems for Black.

5...♘xd5 6.♘f3

A) 6.♗b5+ ♘c6 7.♘f3 transposes to our main line (6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.♗b5).

B) 6.♕b3 forces the knight out of d5, but with no consequences. 6...♘b6 7.♘f3 ♘c6 8.♗b5 The queen is now misplaced on b3 and Black can exploit this with 8...♗e6! 9.♕d1N 9...g6=.

C) 6.♗c4 ♘b6 7.♗b3 ♘c6 8.♘f3 is also fine for Black since he can achieve a better version of normal Panov variations with 8...♗f5, developing the bishop outside the pawn chain. 9.d4 e6 10.0-0 ♗e7=

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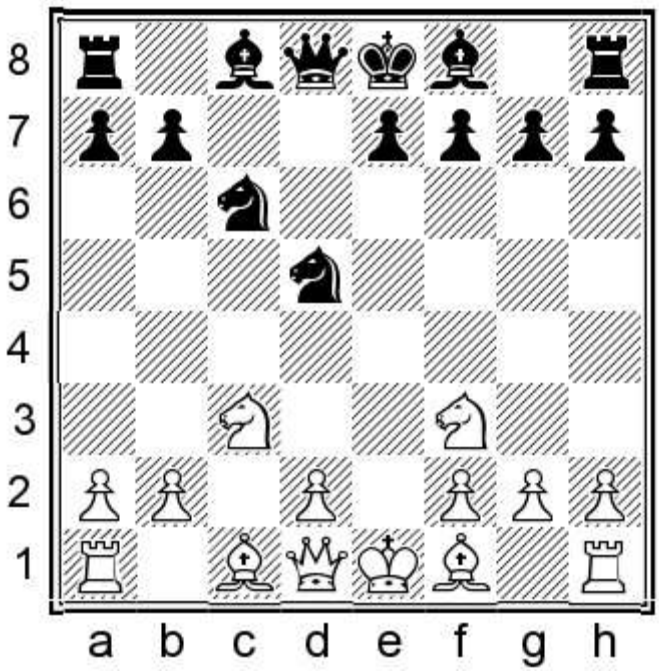
D) 6.d4 ♘c6 7.♗c4 can be met by 7...♗e6! solidifying the center and forcing White to deal with the threat of ...♘xc3. 8.♗b3 g6 9.♘f3 ♗g7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♖e1 ♖c8=

6...♘c6



Position after: 6...♘c6

7.♗b5

This is the only real alternative to the plans with d4. White can now continue with ♕a4 to make this approach coherent, but Black has no problems anyway.

Instead, 7.d4 allows Black to develop his light-squared bishop: 7...♗f5 [7...♗g4 is also possible, transposing to our main line in the 5...♘c6 Panov, but there is no need to have that theoretical discussion since 7...♗f5 simply yields a better version.] 8.♗b5 e6 9.♕a4 [9.♘e5 is met with 9...♘db4! 10.0-0 ♗d6 as in Erwich, F (2361) – Van Delft, M (2428) Leiden 2015, and 11.a3N can be countered with 11...♗xe5 12.dxe5 ♘c2 13.♕xd8+ ♖xd8 14.♗g5 ♘xa1 15.♗xc6+ bxc6 16.♗xd8 ♔xd8 17.♖xa1 ♔e7= with an equal endgame.] 9...♕d6!N Black solidifies the center and prepares an interesting pawn sacrifice: 10.♘e5 ♘b6! 11.♗xc6+ bxc6 12.♕xc6+ ♕xc6 13.♘xc6 f6⩲ White's misplaced c6-knight and Black's bishops easily compensate for the pawn.

7...g6

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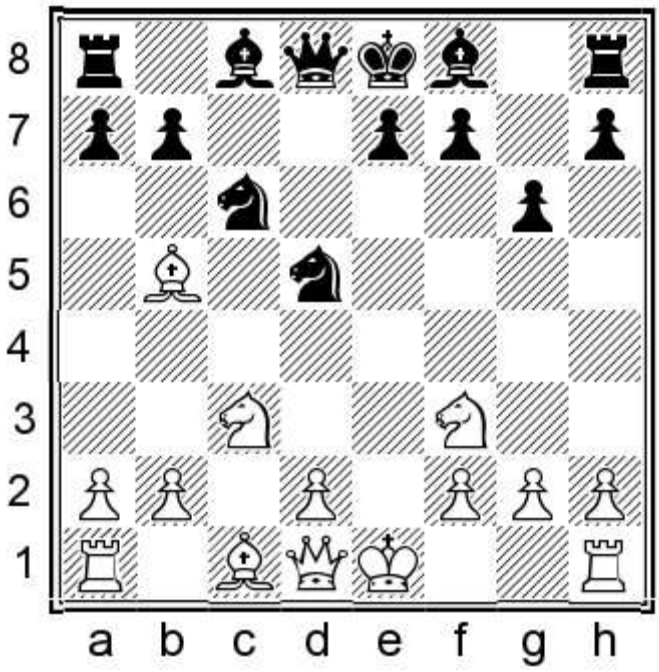

Position after: 7...g6

7...e6 is also possible, but I don't see a reason not to play actively with ...g6. 8.0-0 ♗d6 9.d4 0-0=

8.♕a4

A) 8.0-0 ♗g7 9.♕a4 is too slow and Black can simply sacrifice a pawn with 9...0-0! 10.♗xc6 bxc6 11.♕xc6 ♗e6∓ as in Ritter, U – Jansen, U email 2009.

B) 8.♕b3 ♗e6 9.♘d4 seems threatening, but 9...♕d7! 10.♘xe6 ♕xe6+ 11.♔f1 0-0-0∓ solves Black's problems and gives him the better position. In a game I got to watch from the next board, my teammate in the French league lost (with White) from here in Lagarde, M (2601) – Van Foreest, J (2595) Chartres 2017.

8...♕d6 9.♘e4

9.♕d4 ♘f6 10.♕xd6 exd6=

9...♕e6!

Black temporarily places the queen on the awkward e6-square to stop White's initiative.

10.0-0 ♗g7 11.♖e1 0-0 12.d4 ♖d8N 13.♘c5 ♕d6 14.♗xc6 ♕xc6 15.♕xc6 bxc6=

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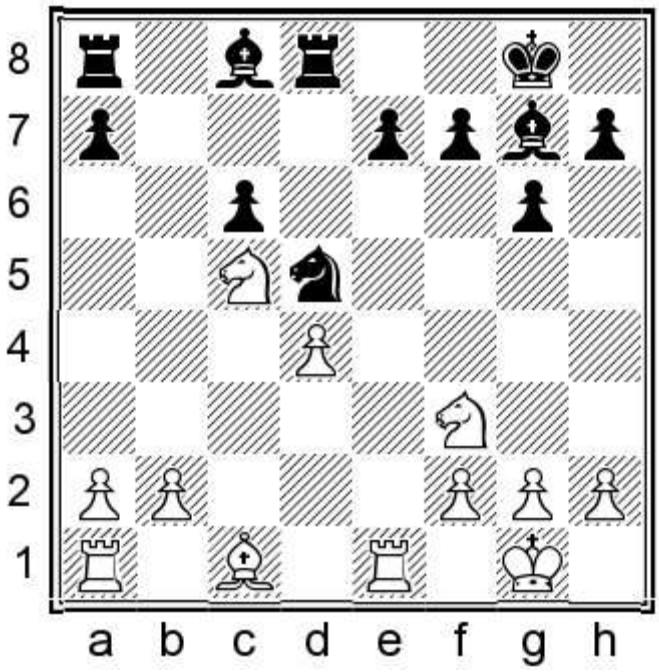

Position after: 15...bxc6=

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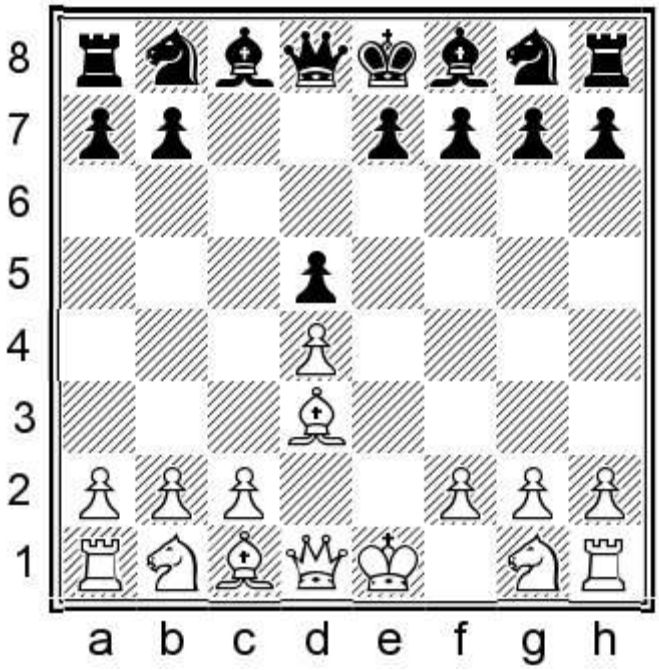
Part V
Exchange Caro-Kann

Chapter 15
4.♗d3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 15 – 4.♗d3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘f6

a) Early alternatives

b) 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♘e2

c) 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♕b3

d) 5.h3 ♘c6 6.c3 e5

e) 5.h3 ♘c6 6.c3 g6

a) Early alternatives

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5

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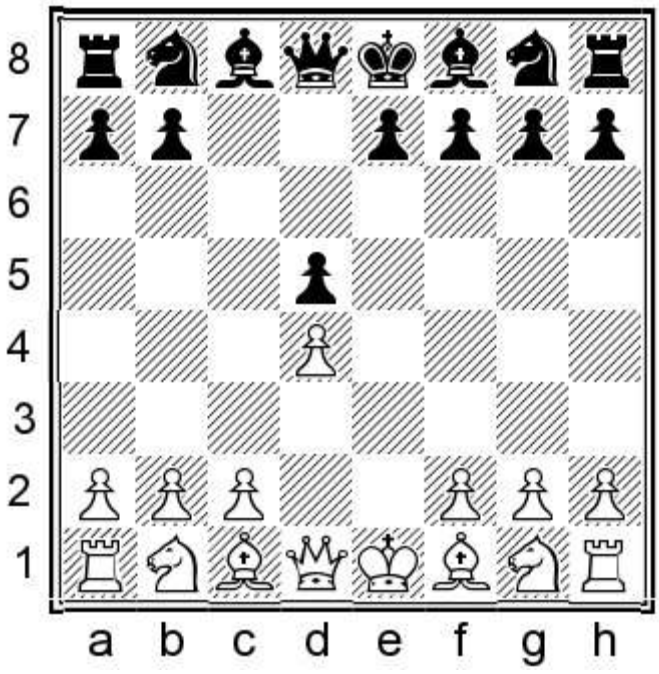

Position after: 3...cxd5

Modern theory teaches us one thing: the extensive work that is required to play the main lines serves as a deterrent for many players, who then seek refuge in more uncommon variations where it is easier to find positions that are playable without memorizing hundreds of moves. A typical example of this approach, which has been championed by Magnus Carlsen over the years, is the London Opening. However, the resurgence of the London is not only due to the surprise factor: it is also the result of a general willingness to play a structure that essentially mirrors the Carlsbad structure. This type of position is exactly what we get in the exchange variation of the Caro-Kann. White trades his e-pawn for Black's c-pawn so that he can use the central squares for his pieces. Moreover, White fixes the pawn structure in the center to create a foundation for a long, positional struggle. On the flip side, White facilitates Black's play to an extent. By trading the c6-pawn, White has allowed Black to develop his b8-knight to c6 and he has given Black an extra pawn in the center which he may use in certain situations with a timely ...f6 to play ...e5. The primary issue which will define the opening stage of the game is the development of Black's c8-bishop. It is crucial that Black develops it outside of his pawn chain since blocking it with ...e6 would render his position very passive. Black's play revolves around this concept: he will try to develop the bishop to either g4 or f5. Of course, White will try to prevent Black from doing so with moves like ♗d3 or h3.

4.♗d3

This is the most critical move and White's most popular follow-up. White develops his bishop on an ideal square, prevents ...♗f5, and prepares to develop his g1-knight either to f3 or e2. Nevertheless, let's briefly explore White's alternatives.

A) 4.♘f3 is a rather uninspiring continuation since it allows ...♗g4 and makes it harder for White to go after the bishop once it gets to g4. If the knight were on e2, White could play f3 and ♘f4, for

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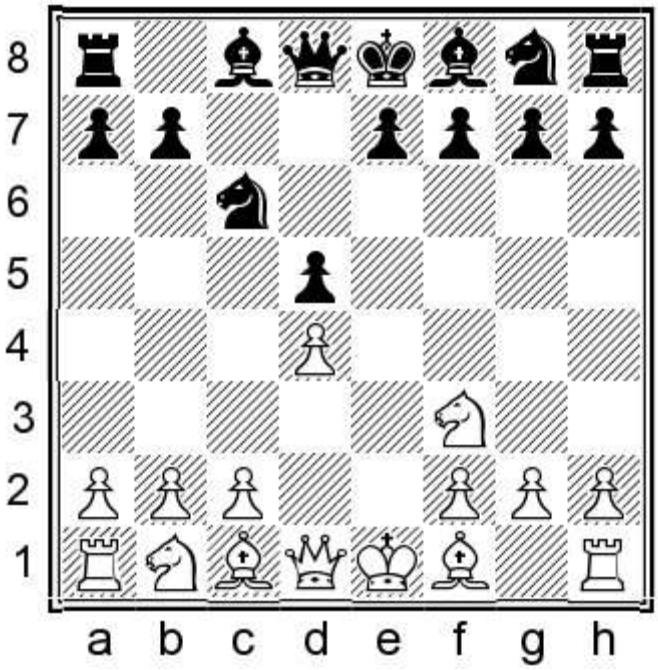
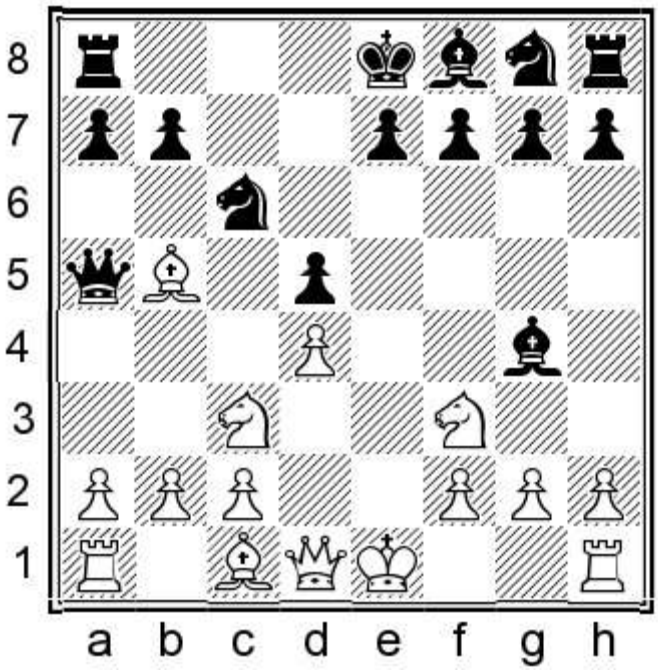
example. 4...♘c6



Position after: 4...♘c6

A1) 5.♗d3 is very passive, and Black gets an excellent position: 5...♗g4 6.c3 ♕c7! 7.0-0 e6 8.♖e1 ♗d6 9.h3 ♗h5 10.♘bd2 ♘ge7= White is unable to find good squares for his pieces since Black controls the e5-square. A timely ...f6, with the idea of playing ...e5, will give Black the upper hand if White proceeds carelessly.

A2) 5.♗b5 This is the only justification for White's previous move. White intends to play c4 and exploit his faster development. However, Black can prevent this by playing 5...♕a5+! 6.♘c3 ♗g4



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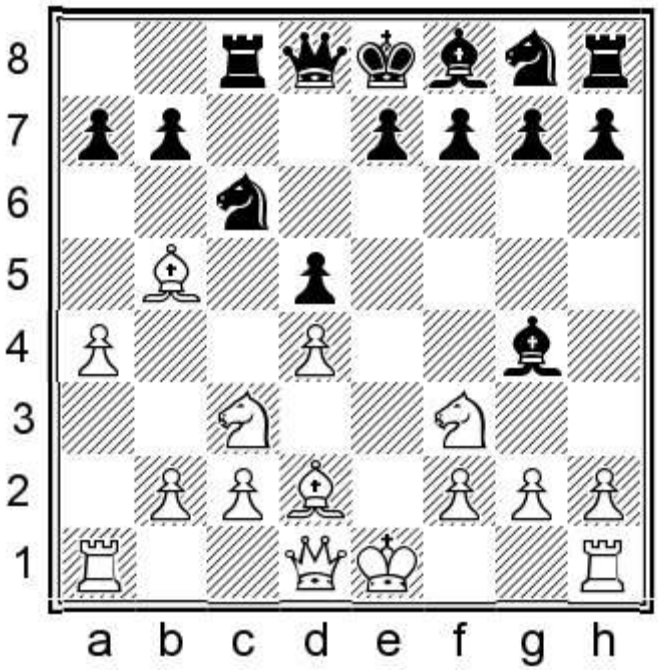
Position after: 6...♗g4

Now that White's threat of playing c4 has been dealt with, his pieces are misplaced. 7.♗d2 [7.0-0 e6 8.h3 ♗xf3 9.♕xf3 ♘f6 10.♕g3 ♖c8= was equal in Abrahamyan, T (2377) – Khotenashvili, B (2474) Astana 2019, and Black eventually won.] 7...♖c8 8.a4 ♕d8



Position after: 8...♕d8

The queen has completed its job and can now return to the center of the board. 9.h3 ♗xf3 10.♕xf3 e6 11.♘e2 a6 12.♗d3 ♘b4 13.0-0 ♘f6 14.♗xb4 ♗xb4 15.g3 ♗d6= was played in Hovhannisyan, R (2625) – Petrosyan, M (2551) Yerevan 2018, and Black went on to win the game.

B) 4.♘c3 Whereas 1.d4 d5 2.♘c3 is a playable line which gives White active chances, the absence of an e-pawn makes the move quite futile since e4 is not an option. Black can continue his development with 4...♘c6 5.♘f3 ♗g4=.

C) 4.c3 This move is coherent with White's structure, but it is unnecessary at this stage. Black can make use of this waste of time by playing 4...♗f5!. Now that the bishop is outside the pawn chain, Black can continue his normal development with ...♘c6, ...e6 and ...♗d6.

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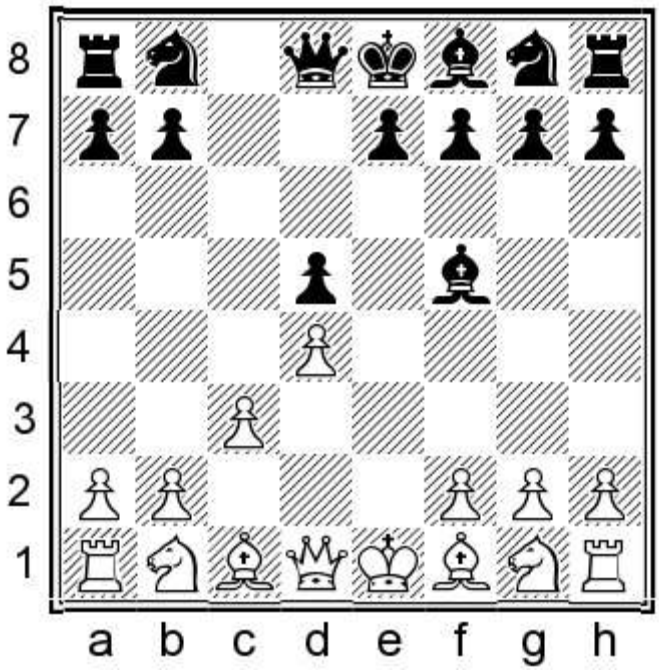
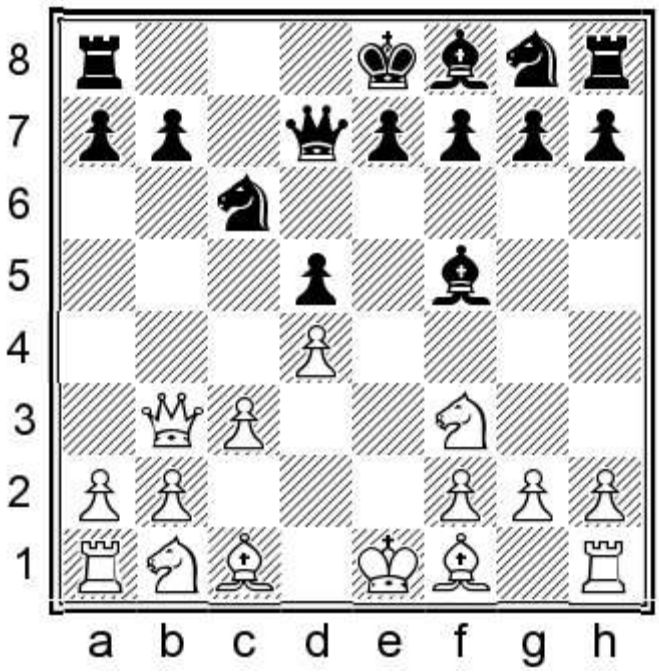


Position after: 4...♗f5!

White's only attempt to exploit the early outing of the bishop is to attack Black's b7-pawn with ♕b3. However, Black can easily deal with this idea. 5.♕b3 [5.♘f3 e6 6.♕b3 ♕c7!= The queen simultaneously prevents ♗f4 and protects the b7-pawn, and White is left without any active plan.] 5...♕d7 6.♘f3 ♘c6 Black has control over the e5-square and the b1-h7 diagonal, so White is the one who needs to play accurately to maintain an equal position.



Position after: 6...♘c6

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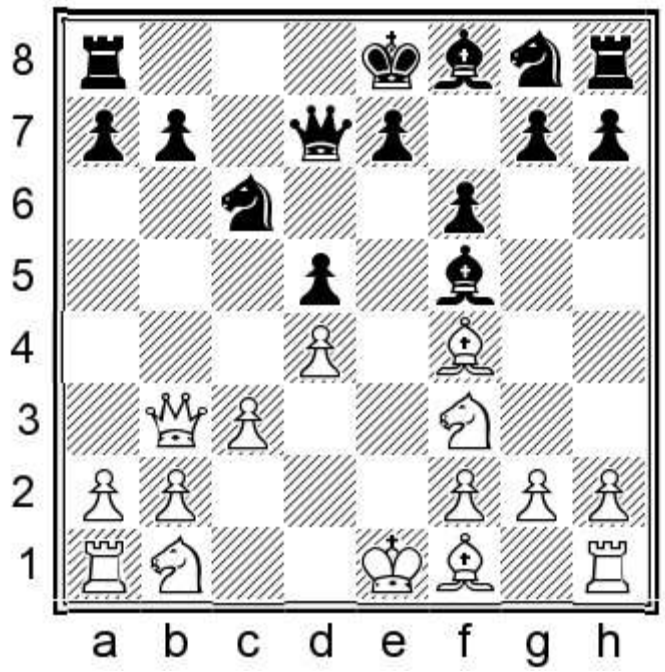
C1) 7.♘e5 does not achieve much: 7...♘xe5 8.dxe5 a6 9.♘a3 e6 10.♘b5!? The knight cannot be taken, but White does not have a threat. 10...♖c8=

C2) 7.♗b5 e6 8.♘e5 ♕c8= Although the queen has been pushed back to c8, White's e5-knight will now come under pressure as Black will play ...♗d6, ...♘ge7 and ...f6.

C3) 7.♗f4 f6!



Position after: 7...f6!

This is an extremely strong idea. Black gains control of the e5-square and threatens to expand on the kingside with ...g5. White's position can deteriorate very quickly, as the following variation shows: 8.♘bd2 [8.h4N 8...♘h6!?=] 8...g5! 9.♗g3 h5 10.h4 g4 11.♘h2 ♘h6∓ White has played logical moves until now, but Black dominates the board. This position was reached in Wang, Y (2684) – Bartholomew, J (2439) Internet 2019.

D) 4.♗f4 Although this move is coherent with White's direction of play, it is a bit premature and fails to oppose ...♗f5. 4...♘c6 5.c3 ♗f5 6.♘f3 e6

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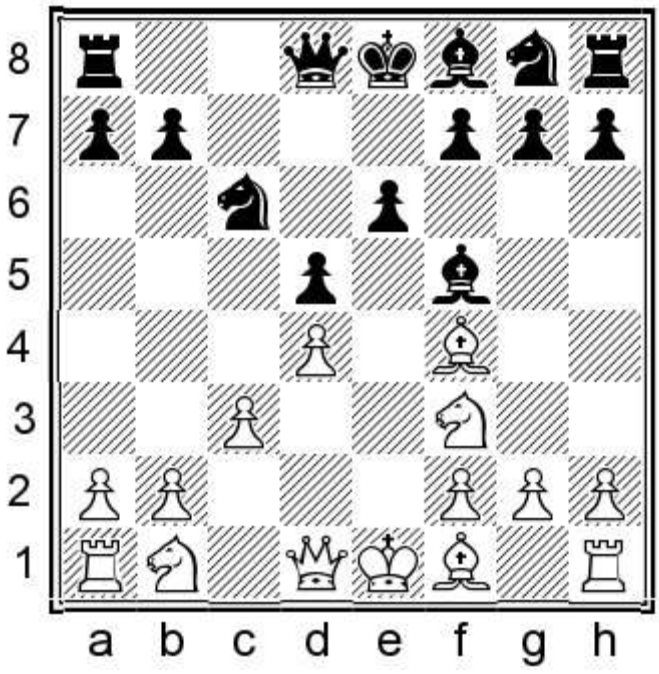
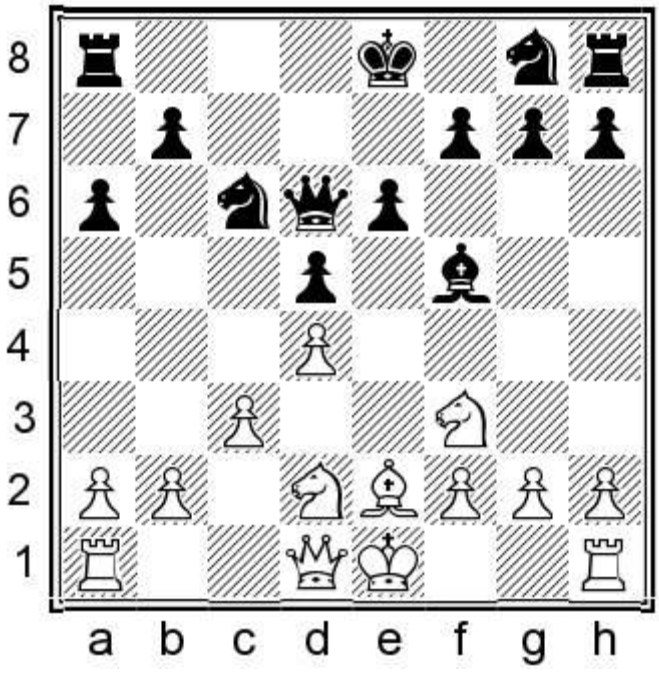


Position after: 6...e6

D1) 7.♕b3 ♕d7 8.♘bd2 f6! Just as we saw in the 4.c3 variation, Black can delay his development to gain space on the kingside because the center is closed and White's pieces do not have a real target. 9.♗e2 g5 10.♗g3 h5 11.h4 g4∓

D2) 7.♘bd2 a6!? There are many other options, but I like the text move. Black takes away White's only active idea (♗b5), and will continue with his development on the next move. [7...f6!? is also possible but it allows 8.♘h4 g5 9.♕h5+∞] 8.♗e2 ♗d6 9.♗xd6 ♕xd6=



Position after: 9...♕xd6=

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The position was equal in Kobo, O (2460) – Alekseenko, K (2563) Tarvisio 2017 and Black went on to win the game.

4...♘f6!?

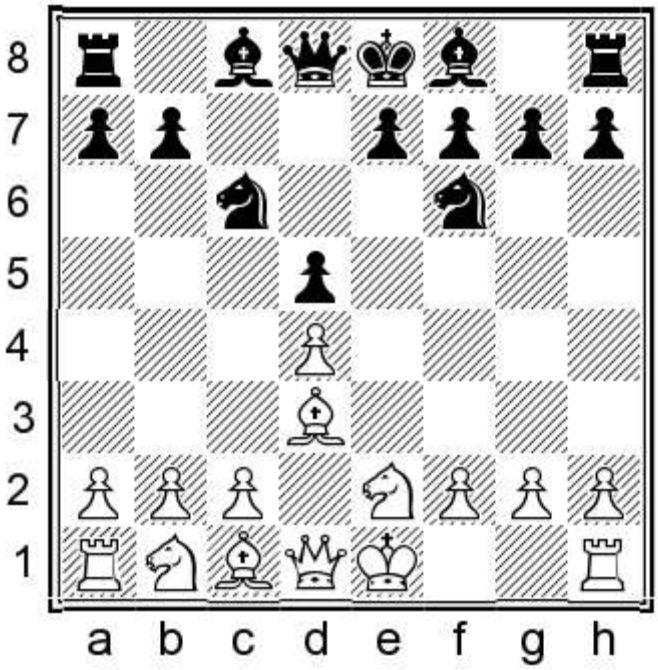
This move is not as popular as 4...♘c6, but it follows through with Black's primary idea: to develop the c8-bishop. As we will see, we will prefer to develop the b8-knight to d7 in certain variations, so 4...♘f6 keeps our position more flexible. White now faces a choice: he can either prevent ...♗g4 altogether with 5.h3 or he can continue his development and prepare to harass the bishop once it lands on g4. The rest of this chapter will be focused on the latter idea, and we will examine 5.h3 in the next chapter. Before we move on to 5.c3, let's see why other moves are not so interesting.

4...♘c6 is the main line, but recent games show that Black struggles to find equality in many variations. 5.c3 ♘f6 [5...♕c7 Black prevents ♗f4, but he does not solve the problem of his c8-bishop. Both 6.h3 and 6.♘a3 are interesting continuations, and White has the more pleasant game.] 6.♗f4 ♗g4 7.♕b3 Black has managed to develop his bishop to g4 but White controls the e5 square and Black needs to keep the b7-pawn under control. This line is playable but I prefer 4...♘f6 because it offers Black more options to play actively.

5.c3

A) 5.♘f3 ♗g4 6.c3 simply transposes to 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♘f3, so we will get back to this position later.

B) 5.♘e2 is rather passive since it does not prevent ...♗g4 and it renounces any claim to the e5-square. 5...♘c6



Position after: 5...♘c6

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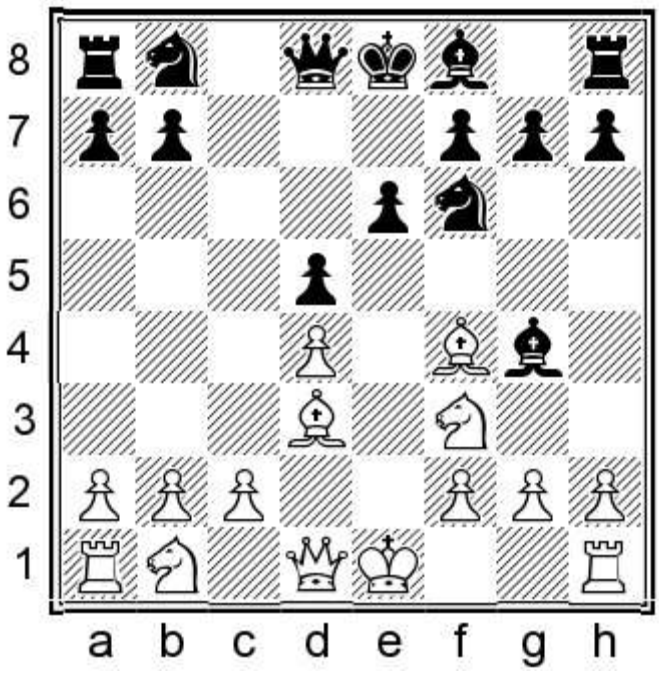
6.0-0 [6.c3 e5! 7.dxe5 ♘xe5 8.0-0 ♗d6=] 6...♗g4! Black can continue his development unopposed. 7.c3 e6 8.♕b3 ♕c7! 9.♗f4 ♗d6 10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.♘d2 0-0=

C) 5.♗f4 is playable, but we will eventually transpose to lines which we will cover later in the chapter, once White plays c3. 5...♗g4 6.♘f3 e6



Position after: 6...e6

7.♘bd2 [7.h3 neglects the queenside and Black can create problems for White with 7...♗xf3 8.♕xf3 ♕b6! 9.♘c3 ♘c6 10.♘e2 ♘b4=.] 7...♗d6 8.♗xd6 ♕xd6 9.c3 ♘c6 We have transposed to 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.♗f4 e6 8.♘bd2 ♗d6 9.♗xd6 ♕xd6.

5...♗g4

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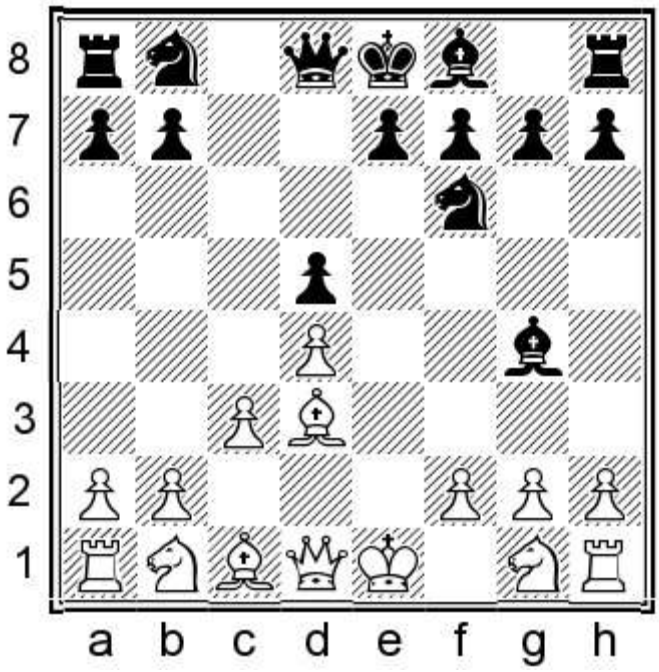

Position after: 5...♗g4

Black develops his bishop on the sought-after square and he is now ready to continue his development with ...e6, ...♘c6 and ...♗d6. White has a few options, but the most critical are 6.♕b3 and 6.♘e2 (see next subchapters).

6.♘f3

With this move, White accepts that Black has managed to develop his bishop on g4 and he continues his development without opposing it. Although White's position is solid and well-structured, there is no reason to believe that he will have any hope for an advantage since Black is able to develop his pieces on good squares, having already achieved the most important goal: developing the light-squared bishop to g4.

6.f3?! simply weakens White's position without achieving anything since the bishop can retreat to h5. 6...♗h5 7.♘e2 ♗g6=

6...♘c6

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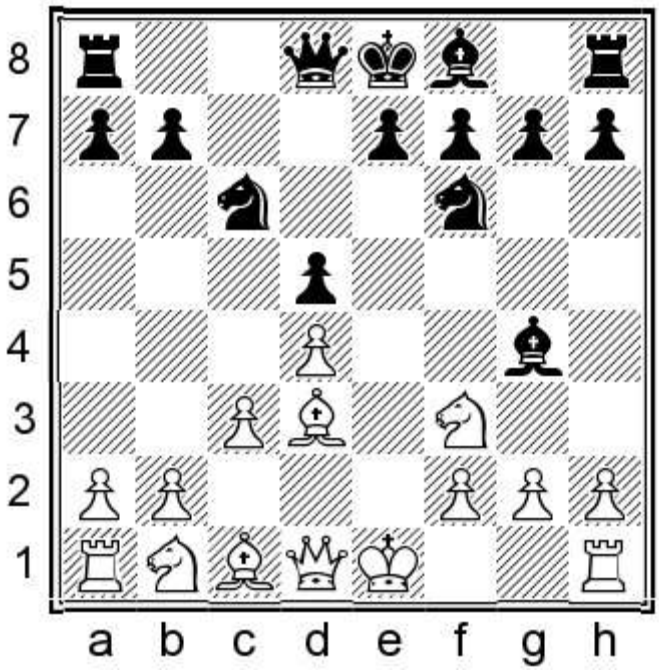
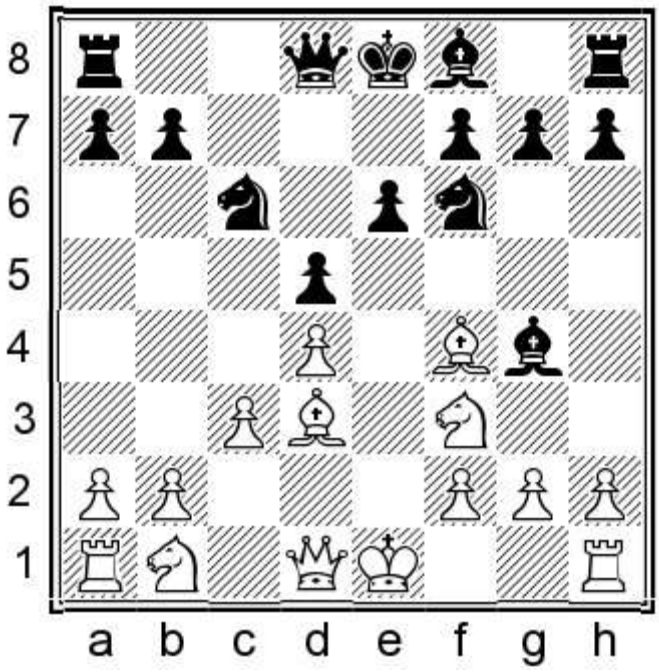


Position after: 6...♘c6

7.♗f4

7.0-0 is imprecise, as Black can now take control of the b8-h2 diagonal with 7...♕c7! 8.♖e1 e6 9.♗g5 ♗d6 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♘bd2 0-0= Without a bishop on f4, White does not have any play since the e5-square is also unavailable.

7...e6



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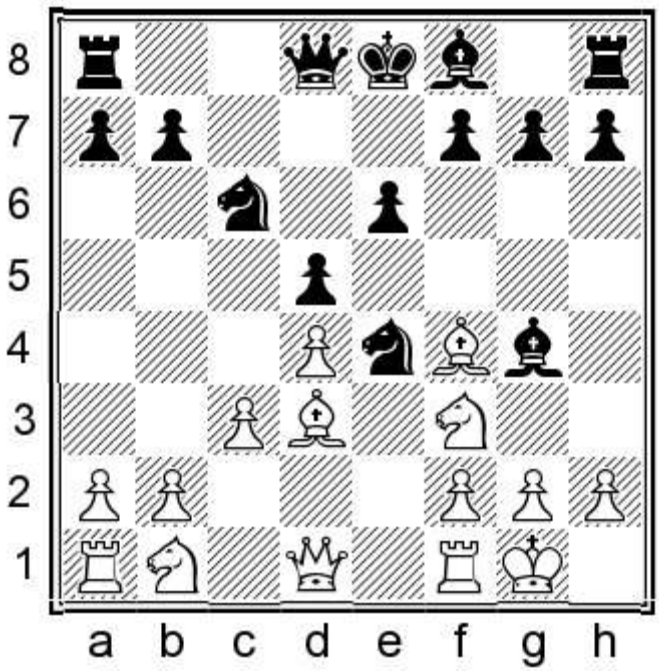
Position after: 7...e6

Black is ready to trade the dark-squared bishops with ...♗d6. The f4-bishop is White's best piece and it controls the important e5-square.

8.h3!?

Although it seems unimportant, the move order in which White plays h3 is actually significant. If White castles first and delays h3 by a few more moves, then Black will be able to retreat his bishop to f5. This will be an improvement for Black since White's d3-bishop stands better.

A) 8.0-0 Although the most natural follow-up is 8...♗d6 (and play will transpose to the main line after White plays ♘bd2), this move gives Black the additional option of playing 8...♘e4!?



Position after: 8...♘e4!?

The idea is to play ...♗d6 and recapture on d6 with the knight. This way, the knight reaches its ideal square and supports ...♗f5 to trade White's other most active piece – the d3-bishop. 9.♕b3 [9.♖e1 ♗d6 10.♗xd6 ♘xd6 11.♘bd2 0-0 12.♕c2 ♗f5= illustrates Black's idea. Without the bishops, White does not have any advantage and Black can now turn his attention to the queenside with moves like ...b5.] 9...♗d6! This is the key idea, and one that you will see again in other move-orders in the variations that follow. Black is not obligated to waste time and protect the b7-pawn. Instead, he can sacrifice the b7-pawn so long as he can trade the dark-squared bishops and then play ...♖ab8. 10.♕xb7 0-0! The unprotected f4-bishop makes this possible. Black's activity will now flourish and the b7-pawn is a negligible factor. 11.♗g3 [11.♗xd6 ♕xd6⩲ gives Black excellent compensation as ...♖ab8 and ...♕f4 are immediate threats.] 11...♘xg3 Black gains the bishop pair and will now use his control of the dark squares to find active play.

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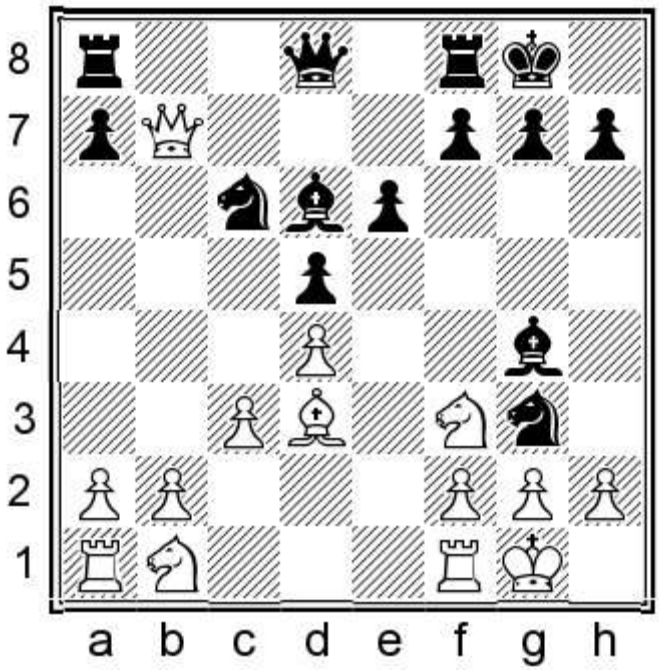
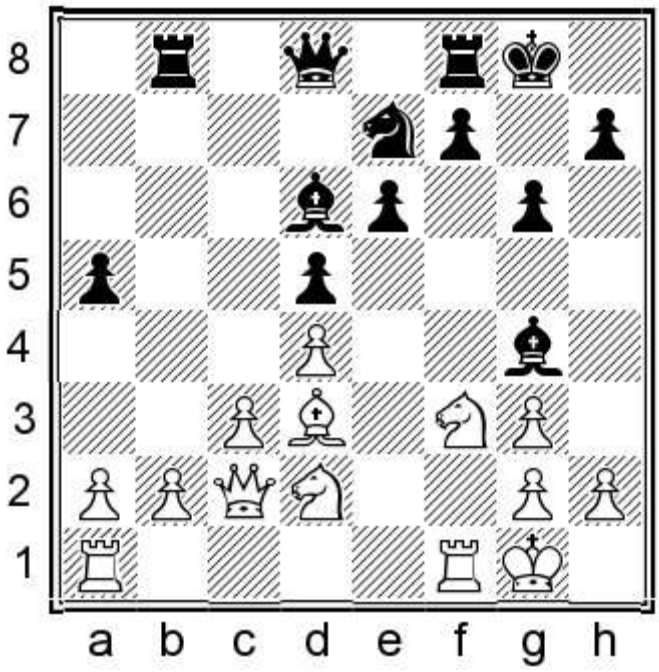


Position after: 11...♘xg3

A1) 12.hxg3 ♗xf3 13.gxf3 ♕g5! 14.♔g2 [14.♕xc6 ♗xg3 15.fxg3 ♕xg3+ 16.♔h1 Black does not have to repeat moves and can instead play 16...♖ab8!∓ with the idea of playing ...♖b6.] 14...♘e7⩱ It's quite obvious that White has misplayed his hand since he gave up a solid position for the current one, in which Black is going right after his king and White's only compensation is a pawn.

A2) 12.fxg3 ♘e7 13.♘bd2 a5! 14.♕b3 ♖b8 15.♕c2 g6⩱



Position after: 15...g6⩱

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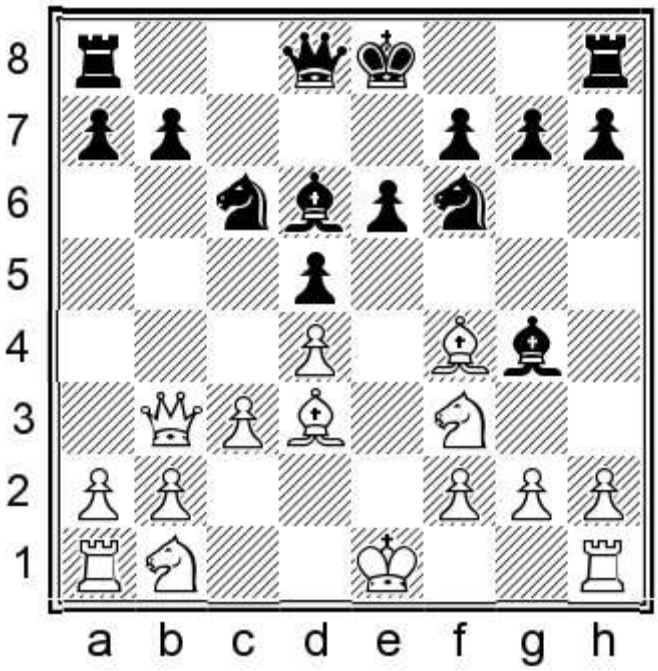
Black has no immediate threats, but the long-term positional advantages give him the upper hand.

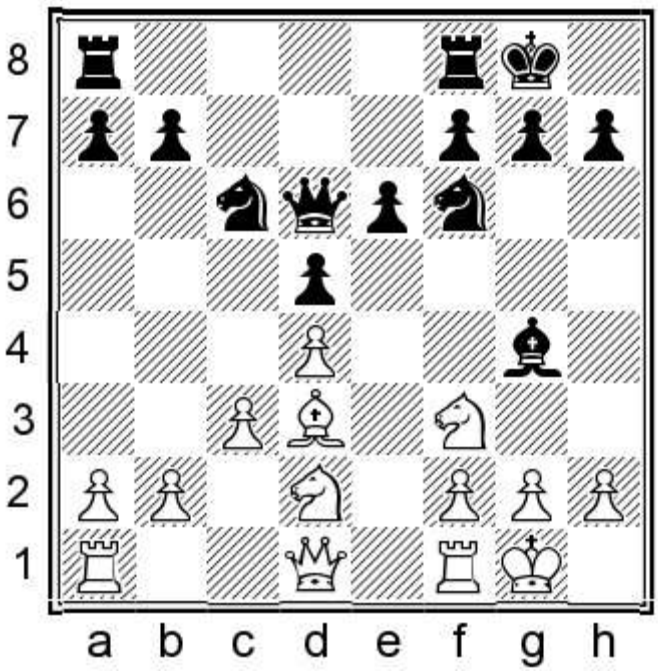
B) 8.♕b3 ♗d6!



Position after: 8...♗d6!

9.♗xd6 [9.♕xb7 0-0!⩱] 9...♕xd6 10.♘bd2 0-0 11.0-0 ♖ab8 12.♖fe1 ♘e7 13.♘e5 ♗f5 14.♗e2 h6 15.♘df3 ♖fc8= Black had an excellent position in Jibouleau, J (1166) – Blonde, X (1990) IECG email 2000.

C) 8.♘bd2 This move is not as precise as 8.h3 because Black will now be able to retreat his bishop to f5. 8...♗d6 9.♗xd6 ♕xd6 10.0-0 0-0



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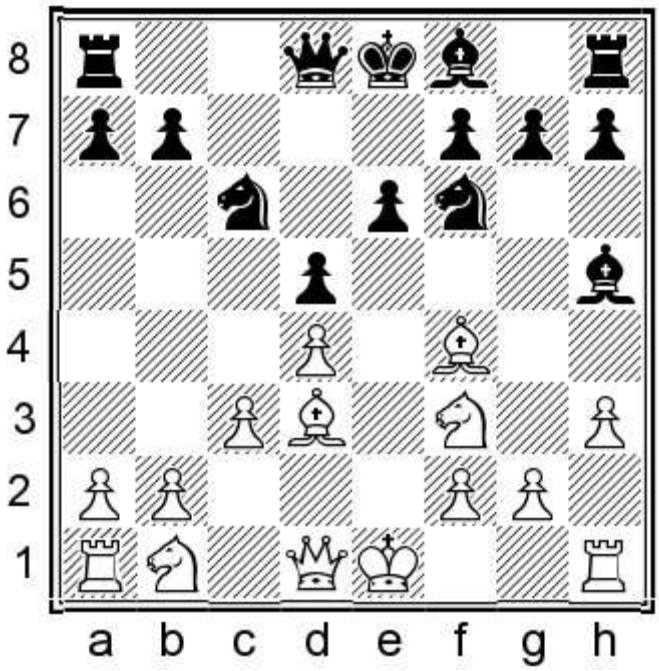
Position after: 10...0-0

11.♖e1 [11.h3 ♗f5! 12.♗xf5 exf5= Black controls the e4-square and will advance his kingside pawns to generate counterplay, whereas White lacks a clear plan.] 11...♘e7!= Black will play ...♗f5 on the next move and then turn his attention to the queenside.

8...♗h5



Position after: 8...♗h5

9.♘bd2

9.♕b3 is again met by 9...♗d6! and taking the pawn only creates trouble for White: 10.♕xb7 0-0! 11.♕xc6 ♗xf4∓.

9...♗d6 10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖e1

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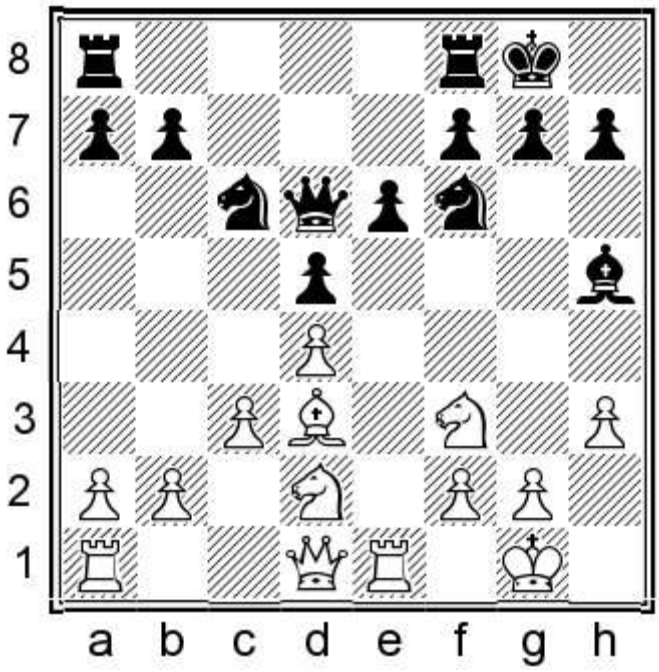

Position after: 12.♖e1

12...♖ab8!

If h3 and ...♗h5 were not included in this position, Black could play ...♘e7 and ...♗f5, as we will see in the main line. Here, however, we should be slightly more precise.

12...♘e7 is playable but it allows White to gain space on the queenside and slow down our counterplay with 13.a4!

13.a4

13.♖e3 White is not in time to generate a dangerous attack on the kingside: 13...♘d7 14.♕e2 ♘e7 15.♖e1 ♗g6=.

13...♘d7

Black prevents ♘e5 and reroutes the knight to the queenside, where he intends to generate counterplay.

14.♕c2 ♗g6!

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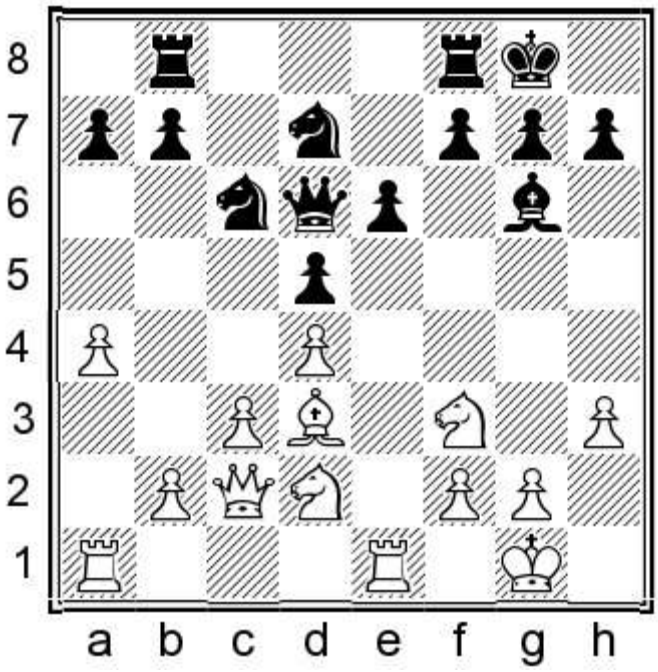
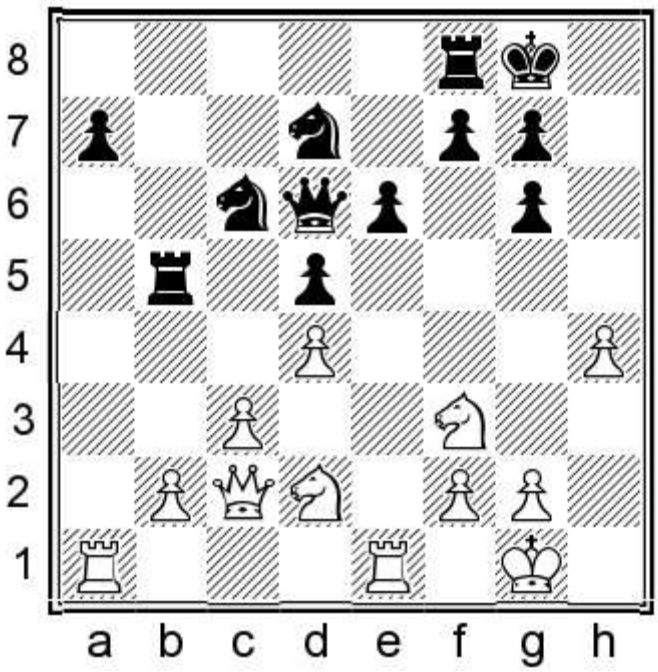


Position after: 14...♗g6!

Although Black will have doubled pawns on g6 and g7, he should not waste time. The key is to get ...b5 in as soon as possible to create counterplay.

15.♗xg6 hxg6 16.h4 b5 17.axb5 ♖xb5⇄



Position after: 17...♖xb5⇄

Black has opened up the queenside and White has no time to create serious threats on the kingside.

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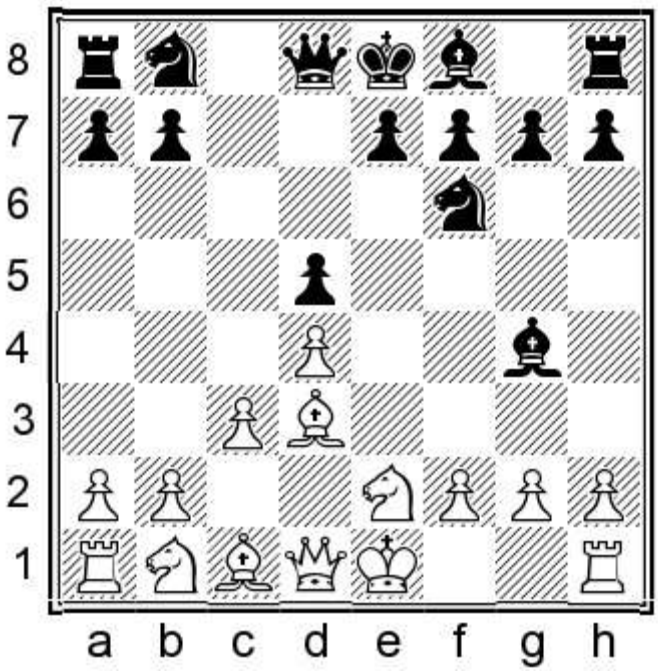
b) 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♘e2

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘f6!? 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♘e2



Position after: 6.♘e2

White continues his development but keeps a flexible approach to the kingside. With this move, White keeps his options open to go after Black's g4 bishop with h3 and then ♘f4. Moreover, the knight supports ♗f4 to oppose Black on the b8-h2 diagonal.

6...e6!

White can play many moves but the critical lines arise after some combination of ♕b3 and h3.

Other plans simply allow Black to develop without any issues. Moreover, the e2-knight is misplaced if White intends to play for the central squares.

6...♘c6?! is imprecise because it leaves Black vulnerable to attacks on the b7 and d5 pawns. White can continue with 7.h3 ♗h5 8.♕b3! ♕c7 9.g4! ♗g6 10.♗xg6 hxg6 11.g5! and Black has to give up the d5-pawn. The position that arises after 11...♘g8 12.♕xd5 e5!∞ might be playable, but I don't see a good reason to enter this line. Black has some compensation for the pawn, but I am not certain whether it is enough for equality.

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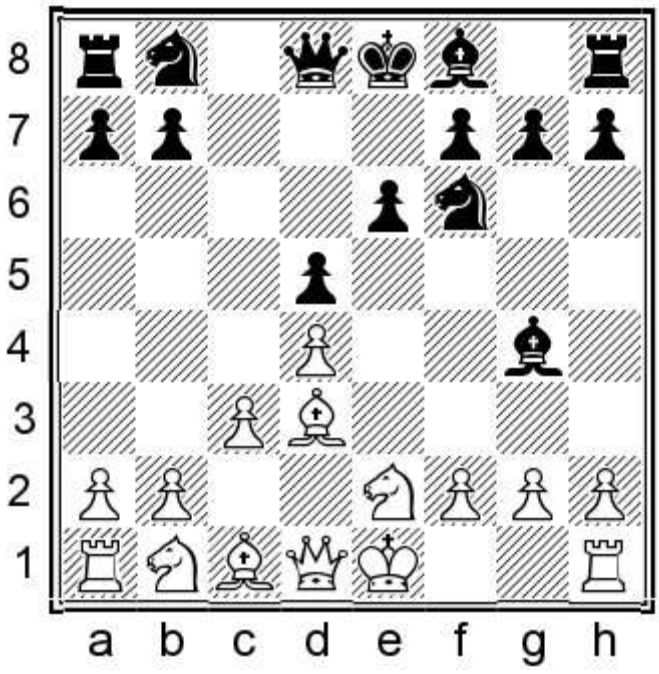
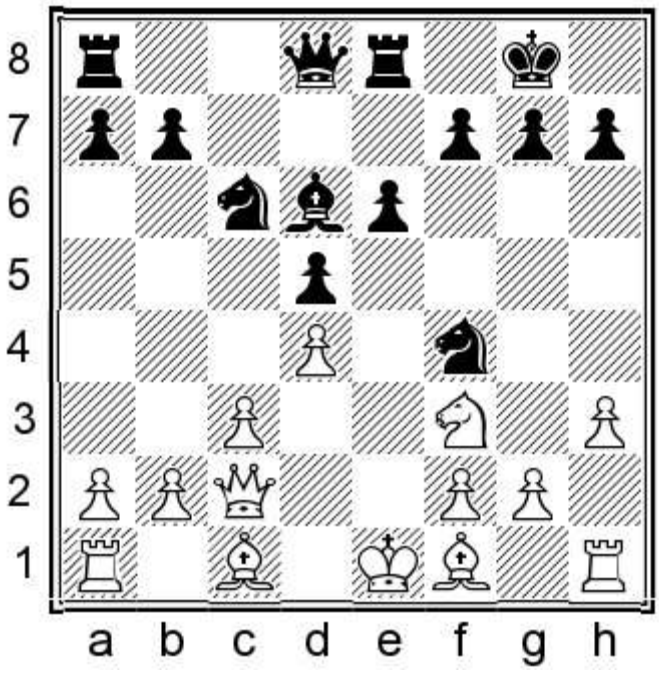


Position after: 6...e6!

7.h3

A) 7.0-0 ♘c6 leaves White without any ideas. 8.♕b3 [8.♗f4 ♗d6 9.♗xd6 ♕xd6 10.♘d2 0-0= This continuation is simply a much better version for Black of the 6.♘f3 line since White's knight is passive on e2; 8.♗g5 ♗d6 9.♘d2 ♕c7=] 8...♕c7! 9.♗f4 ♗d6! 10.♗xd6 ♕xd6 11.♘d2 0-0= Once again, the b7-pawn is not a tempting offer for White.

B) 7.♕c2 ♗d6 8.h3 ♗h5 9.♘f4 ♘c6 10.♘xh5 ♘xh5 11.♘d2 ♘f4 12.♗f1 0-0 13.♘f3 ♖e8=



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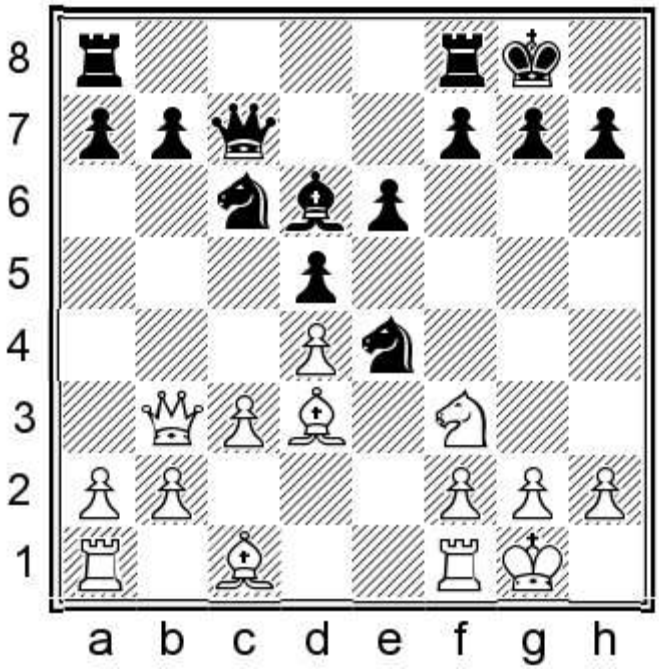
Position after: 13...♖e8=

C) 7.♕b3 This is a logical move, but White would be better off with h3 and ...♗h5 included, as we will see. 7...♗xe2! 8.♗xe2 ♕c7 9.♘d2 ♗d6 10.♘f3 ♘c6 11.0-0 0-0 12.♗d3 ♘e4!= Black can continue with ...f5 and generate a strong kingside initiative. The position was balanced in Martinez, R (2418) – Epishin, V (2592) Bergamo 2009.



Position after: 12...♘e4!=

It is important to note that if White's h2-pawn were on h3, this move would not be possible because White could play ♗xe4 and ♘g5 – winning the e4-pawn – since ♗xh2 would not be a threat.

7...♗h5 8.♕b3

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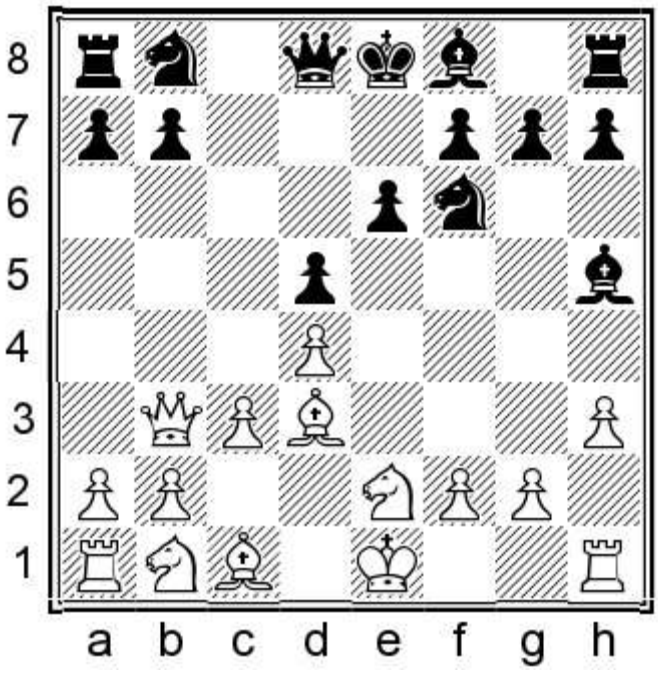


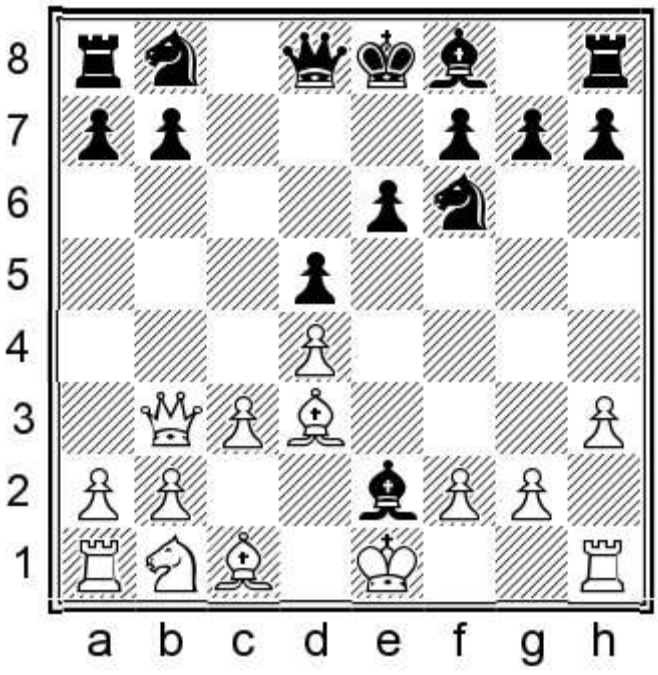
Position after: 8.♕b3

This is White's only attempt to trouble Black.

8...♕c7!

This is my main recommendation. Recall that this move would not have been possible if Black had played ...♘c6 instead of ...e6 because White could then play g4.

8...♗xe2!? was my recommendation after 7.♕b3, but the inclusion of h3 and ...♗h5 makes a difference, as I explained earlier.



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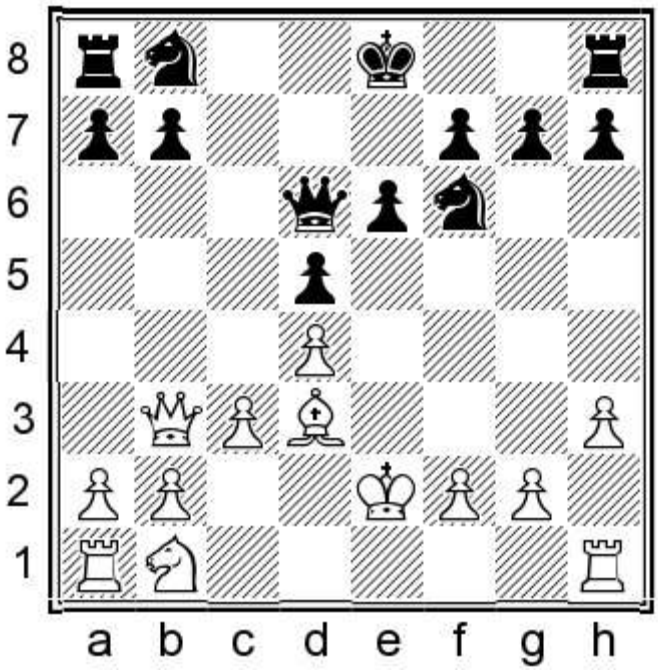
Position after: 8...♗xe2!?

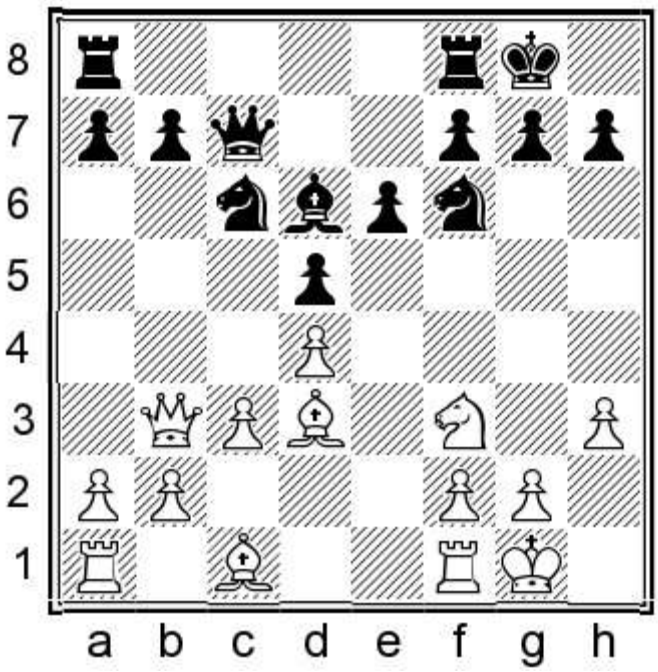
A) 9.♔xe2 is not very logical since the king will be exposed in the center of the board. 9...♕c7 10.♗f4 ♗d6 11.♗xd6 ♕xd6



Position after: 11...♕xd6

12.♘d2 [12.♕xb7 0-0⩲ 13.♕xa8? ♕b6! 14.♘d2 ♘bd7 15.♕xf8+ ♔xf8∓ Black will play ...e5 and open up the position in front of White's king.] 12...♘c6 13.♖he1 0-0 14.♘f3 ♖ab8 15.♔f1 b5=

B) 9.♗xe2 ♕c7 10.0-0 ♗d6 11.♘d2 0-0 12.♘f3 ♘c6 13.♗d3



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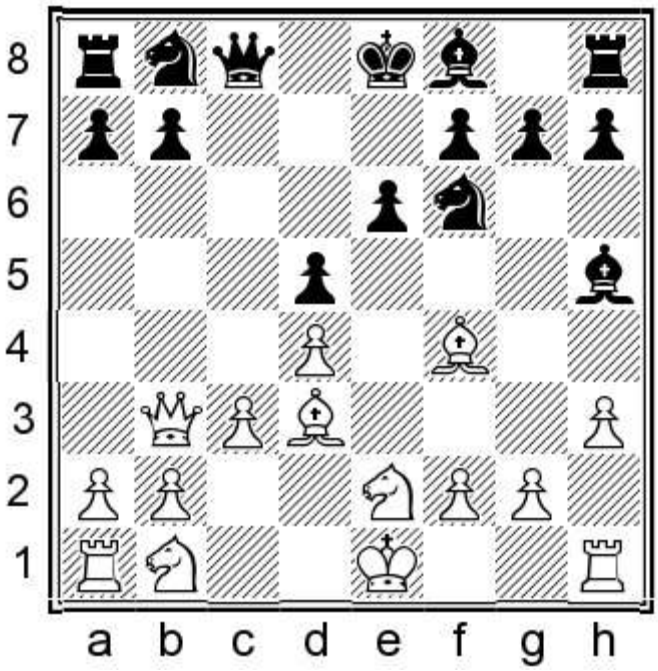
Position after: 13.♗d3

While ...♘e4 was possible in the 7.♕b3 variation, it is not possible here and this makes a difference because Black is now unable to find an active plan. 13...h6 14.♖e1 ♖ab8 15.♕d1∞ Although this position is playable, I don't feel comfortable knowing that White will keep the pair of bishops and, especially, that the d3-bishop will be unopposed.

9.♗f4

9.♘f4 gains the bishop pair but Black will have control over the dark squares after 9...♗d6 10.♘xh5 ♘xh5= and ♘f4 will create headaches for White.

9...♕c8



Position after: 9...♕c8

9...♗d6 was not possible in this move order but Black can simply retreat the queen since White is not ready to exploit his initiative. The key is that the e2-knight is misplaced and should be on f3 to further White's active play. Moreover, the f4-bishop actually prevents White from playing ♘f4 to eliminate the h5-bishop.

10.♘d2 ♘c6 11.0-0 ♗e7 12.♖fe1 0-0 13.♗g3 ♗g6!

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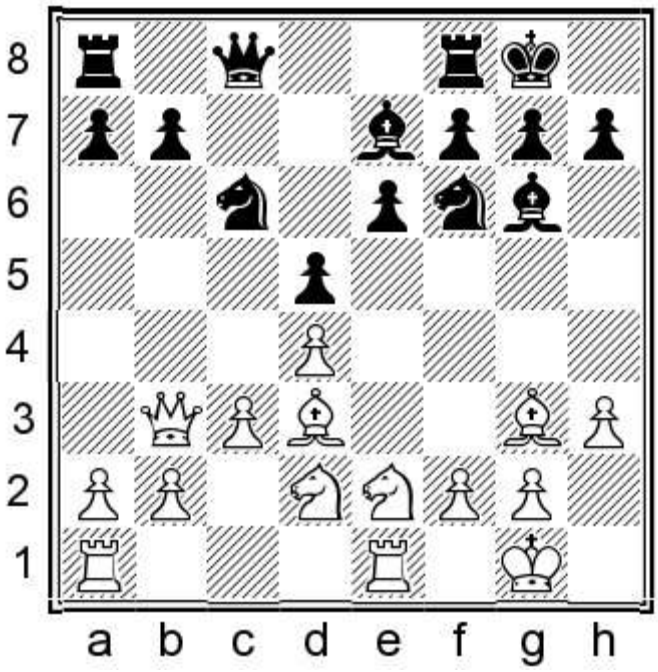


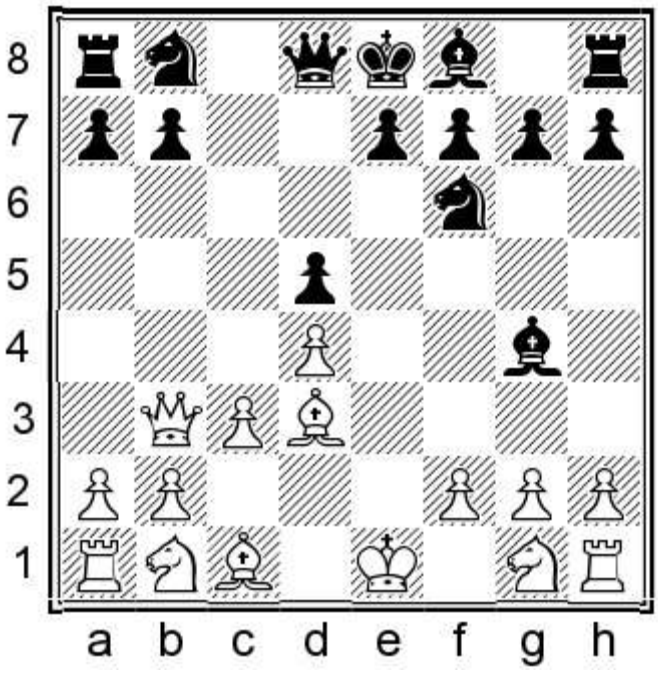
Position after: 13...♗g6!

Just when White was ready to play ♘f4, Black trades his bishop for White's powerful d3-bishop.

14.♘f4 ♗xd3 15.♘xd3 b6 16.♕d1 a5 17.a4 ♕b7=

c) 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♕b3

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘f6!? 5.c3 ♗g4 6.♕b3



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Position after: 6.♕b3

With this move, White forces Black to defend the b7-pawn and attempts to make use of Black's unconventional development by creating immediate threats to Black's position.

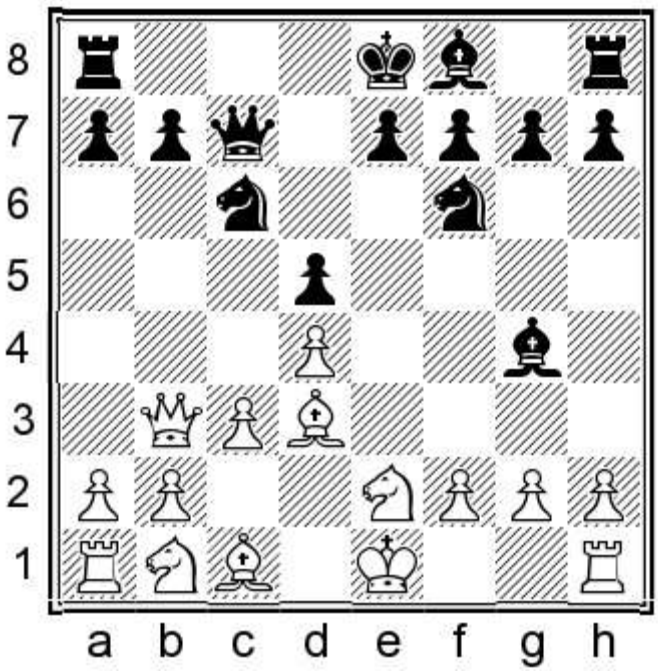
6...♕c7!

6...♕d7 makes it easier for White as he can now play 7.♗f4±.

7.h3

A) 7.♗g5 gives Black time to complete his development and does not pose any problems: 7...e6 8.♘d2 ♗d6 9.♘gf3 ♘c6=.

B) 7.♘e2 With this move, White intends to carry out his standard plan: ♗f4. 7...♘c6



Position after: 7...♘c6

8.♗f4 [8.h3? is now impossible due to 8...♗xe2 9.♔xe2 (9.♗xe2?? ♘xd4–+) 9...e5! and Black takes over the initiative. 10.dxe5 ♕xe5+ 11.♗e3 0-0-0∓] 8...♕d7

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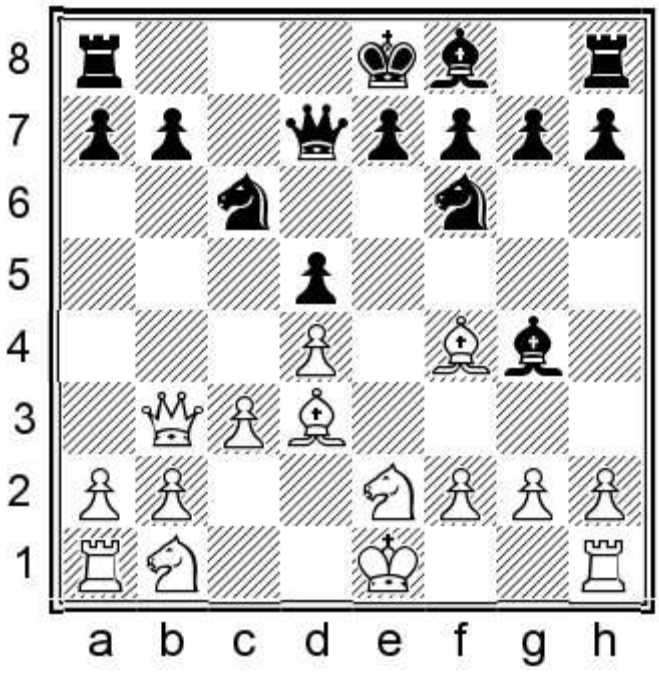
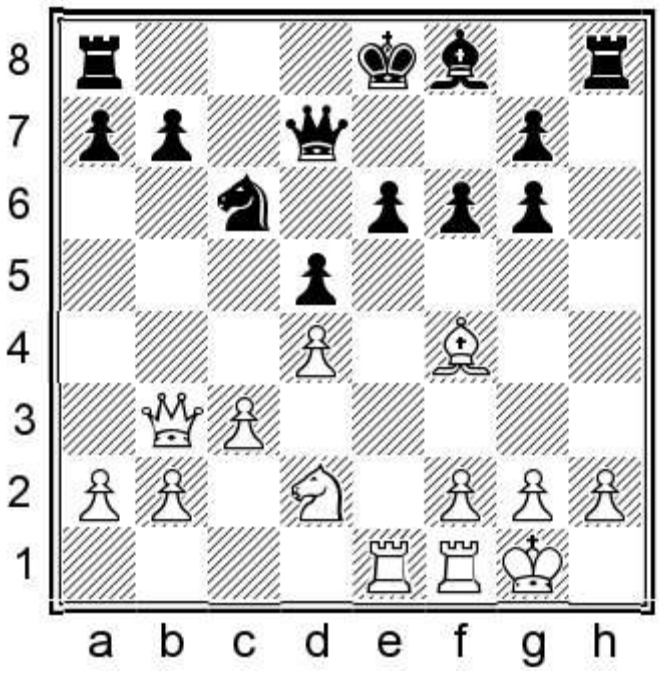


Position after: 8...♕d7

Although White has regained control of the b8-h2 diagonal, he is left with a misplaced knight on e2. The following lines present some important subtleties, but Black's overarching plan remains the same: he wants to play ...e6 and ...♗d6 to trade off White's f4-bishop and ...♗h5 and ...♗g6 to trade off White's d3-bishop. The order of execution entirely depends on White's next moves.

B1) 9.♘g3 White is threatening h3, but Black can play 9...♘h5! resolving the issue. 10.♘xh5 ♗xh5 11.0-0 Fernandes, C (1616) – Ferreira, M (1972) Vila Nova de Gaia 2013. 11...♗g6!N Black is even ready to take over the initiative now that ...f6 is an option. 12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♘d2 f6! 14.♖ae1 e6



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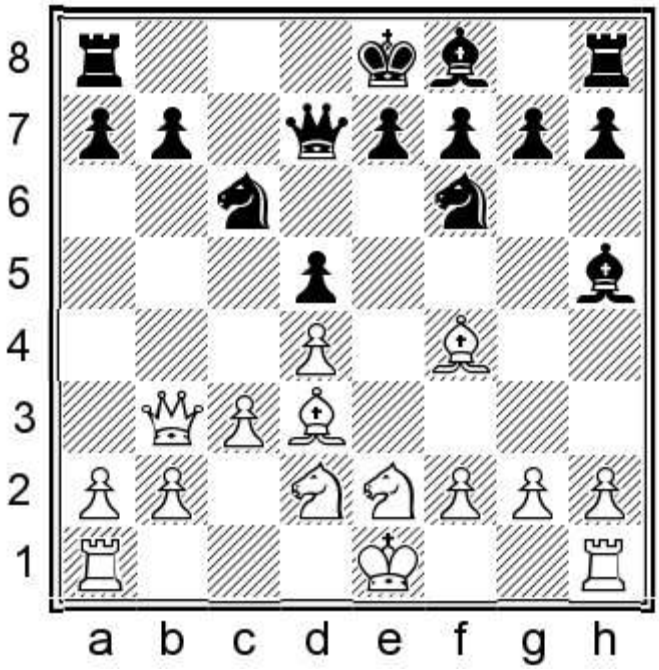
Position after: 14...e6

White is the one who needs to proceed with caution. 15.♖e3 [15.h3 g5 16.♗h2 g4! 17.hxg4 0-0-0 18.♘f3 ♗d6⩲ is an example of how Black can create a dangerous kingside attack.] 15...g5 16.♗g3 0-0-0 17.♖fe1 f5 18.f4 e5! 19.dxe5 ♗c5∞ The position is unclear, but one thing is certain: White was not aspiring for this kind of position when he decided to play the exchange variation. Black has a strong initiative and White has lost control of the center.

B2) 9.♘d2 ♗h5!?N This is an important move. Black should not leave his bishop on g4 as it may run out of squares. Instead, Black proceeds to first trade off the light-squared bishops, and only then will he continue his development with ...e6. [9...e6 10.♘g3! ♘h5 11.♘xh5 ♗xh5 12.0-0 ♗e7 13.♖fe1 ♗g6 14.♗xg6 hxg6 15.♘f3 0-0 16.h4± gives White the more pleasant position. Note that Black was not in time to generate play on the kingside like he did in the 9.♘g3 variation.]



Position after: 9...♗h5!?N

B2.1) 10.0-0 e6 [10...♗g6?! 11.♗b5!± is a tricky idea to watch out for.] 11.♖fe1 ♗g6 12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♘f3 ♗e7 14.♘c1 ♘e4!⇄

B2.2) 10.♗g3 ♗g6 11.♘f4 ♗xd3 12.♘xd3 e6 13.0-0 ♗e7 14.♖fe1 0-0=

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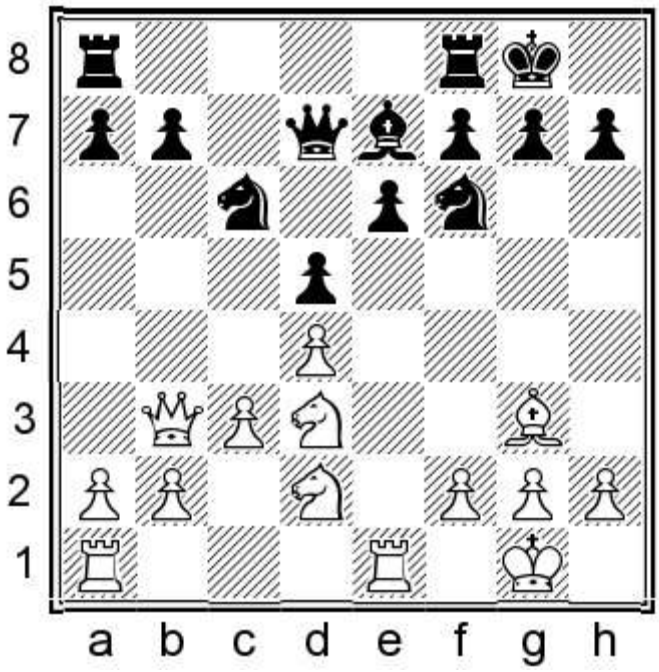
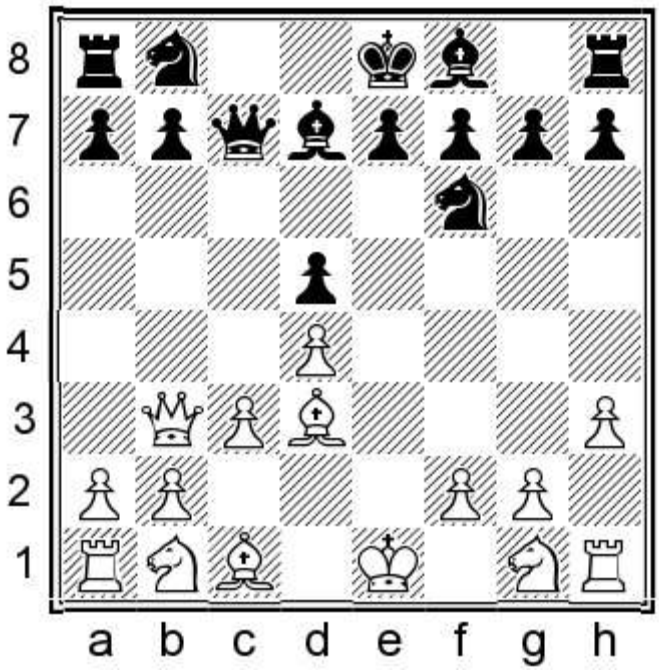


Position after: 14...0-0=

Although the g3-bishop is a source of annoyance, Black has achieved the most important objective: to resolve the position of his h5-bishop and trade off White's d3-bishop. Going forward, Black should try to make progress on the queenside while keeping an eye on White's kingside threats.

7...♗d7!



Position after: 7...♗d7!

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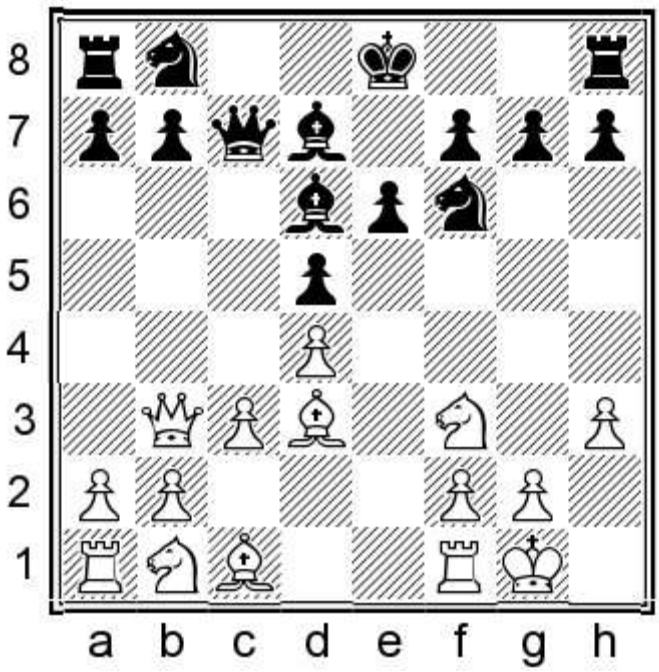
This is a relatively novel idea. Black intends to place the bishop on c6 and then proceed with ...♘bd7. The important factors to consider are that Black controls the b8-h2 diagonal and that White's queen is misplaced on b3 since b7 will be over-protected.

7...♗h5 has been featured in more games, but 8.g4 ♗g6 9.♗xg6 hxg6 10.g5 ♘fd7 11.♕xd5 e5 12.♘e2 ♘c6 13.♗e3∞ is rather unclear.

8.♘f3

8.♘e2 is unimpressive since the knight is much better placed on f3 and 8...♘c6 9.♗f4 can be countered with 9...e5! 10.dxe5 ♘xe5= as in Santos Ruiz, M (2585) – Rozum, I (2573) Moscow 2019.

8...e6 9.0-0 ♗d6



Position after: 9...♗d6

From White's perspective, the plan is to slow down Black's counterplay and control the central squares. If he is indeed able to successfully contain Black's activity, he will stand better. In particular, Black's light-squared bishop will be passive whereas White's d3-bishop will exert unchallenged pressure on Black's kingside.

10.♖e1

10.♘e5N 10...0-0

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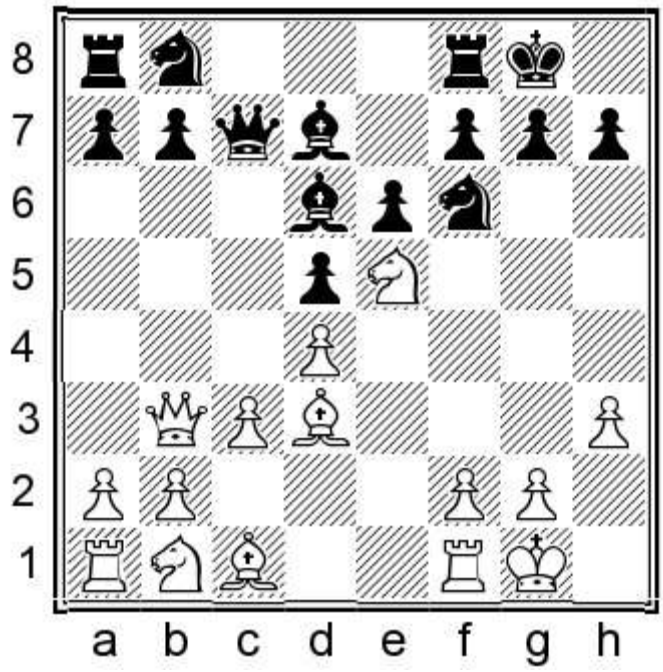

Position after: 10...0-0

Since White has committed to playing ♘e5, Black can switch plans and play with ...♘c6 to drive the e5-knight away.

A) 11.f4 ♘c6 12.♘d2 a6!= Black can continue with ...♘e7 and ...♗b5, with an excellent position. White's attack is not dangerous, and he has weakened the critical e4-square.

B) 11.♗f4 ♗e8! Black will exploit the pin to generate counterplay. 12.♖e1 ♘h5! 13.♗c1 ♘c6 14.♕d1 f5!⇄

C) 11.♘xd7 ♘bxd7 12.♘d2 gives White the bishop pair but Black can open up the position with 12...e5⇄ and White is behind in development.

D) 11.♖e1 ♘c6 12.♘xd7 [12.f4 is met with 12...b5!⇄ and Black's queenside counterplay will quickly become a major nuisance whereas White has few prospects on the kingside.] 12...♘xd7 13.♘d2 ♖ae8

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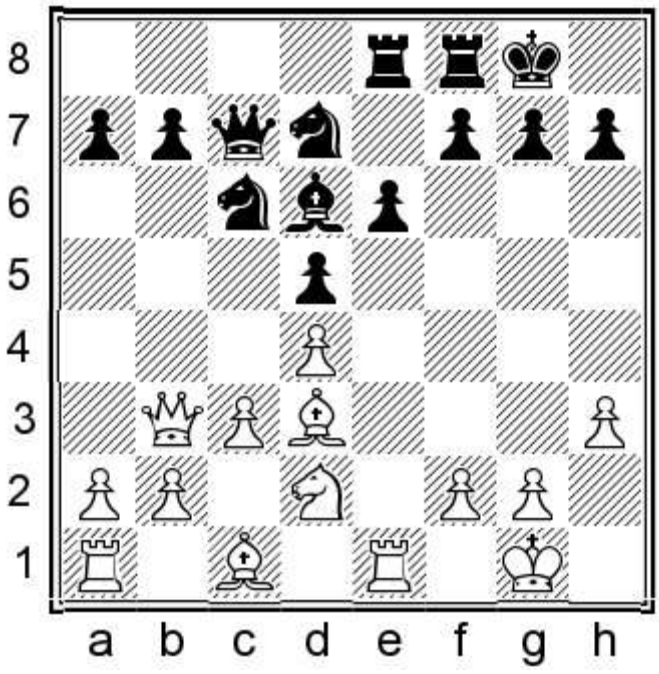
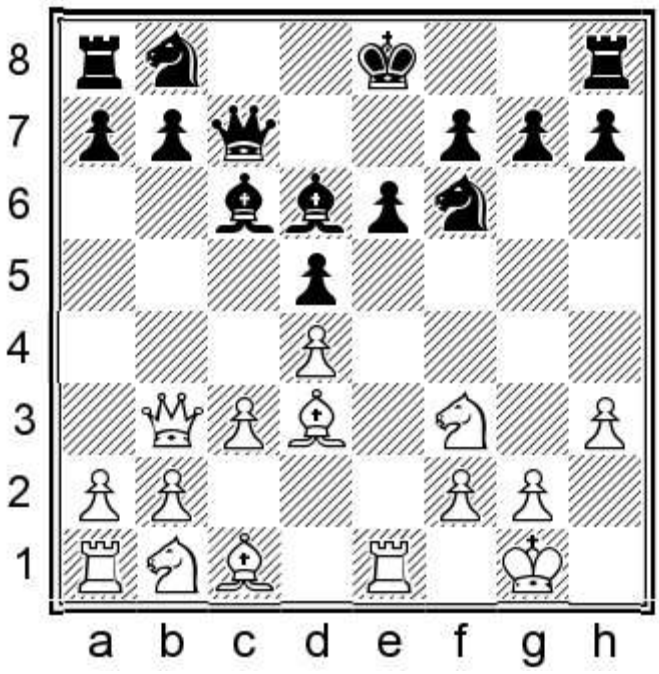


Position after: 13...♖ae8

Although White has the bishop pair, Black is better developed and ready to open the position and play on the kingside. 14.♕d1 [14.♘f3 e5!=; 14.♕c2 e5 15.♗xh7+ ♔h8 16.♗f5 e4∓ Black has excellent compensation for the pawn as his pawns will quickly create problems for White on the kingside.] 14...e5 15.dxe5 ♘cxe5 16.♗c2 ♘f6= Just like we have seen in the variations that led to this position, White is simply too passive to make use of his bishop pair. Black has control over the central squares and will use his initiative to prevent White from untangling his position.

10...♗c6!?



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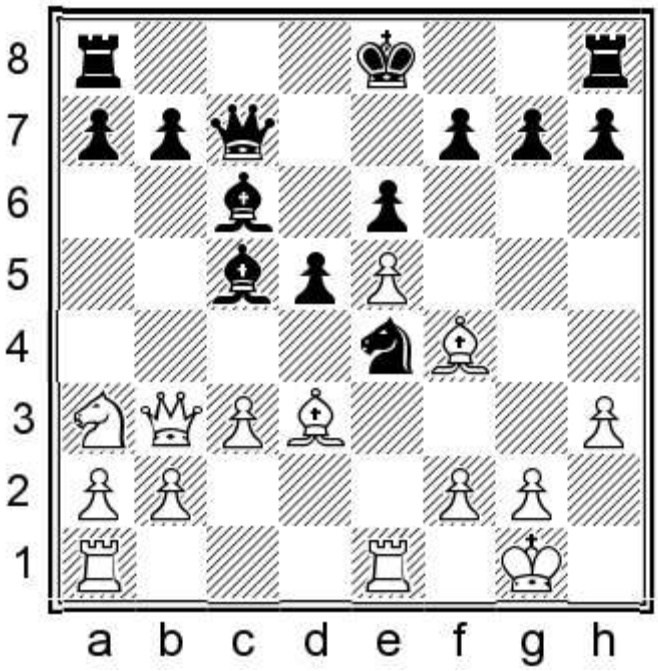
Position after: 10...♗c6!?

This is the key idea of the variation. Black wants to play ...♘bd7 and ...♘e4.

11.♕c2

White relocates the queen to the center so that it will exert pressure on the e5-square and on the kingside.

11.♘e5N is now met by 11...♘bd7 12.♗f4 [12.f4 ♘h5!⇄ highlights White's kingside weaknesses.] 12...♘e4! 13.♘a3 ♘xe5 14.dxe5 ♗c5



Position after: 14...♗c5

and it is quite obvious that White has lost his control over the position as Black has activated his pieces. 15.♗xe4 dxe4 16.♘c4 0-0 17.♘d6 seems dangerous, but Black can continue with 17...♗xd6 18.exd6 ♕d7 19.c4 f6 20.c5 ♕f7 21.♕c2 e5 22.♗g3 a5∞.

11...♘bd7 12.♕e2 0-0

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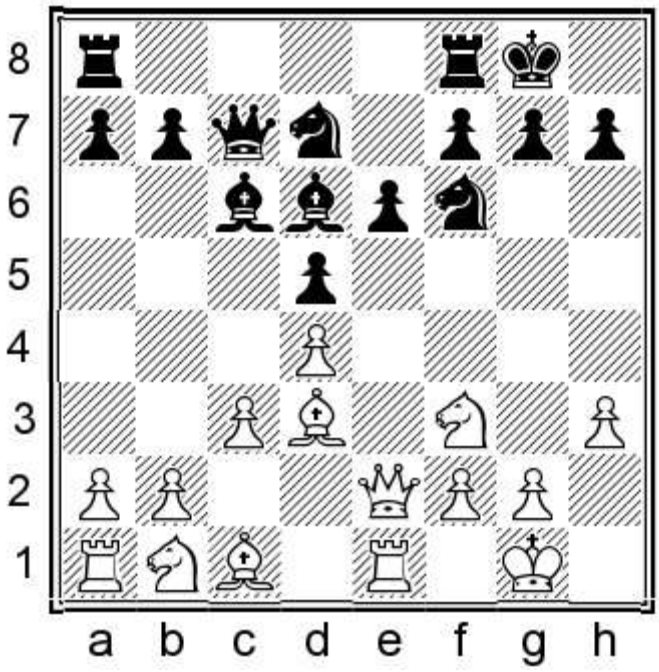
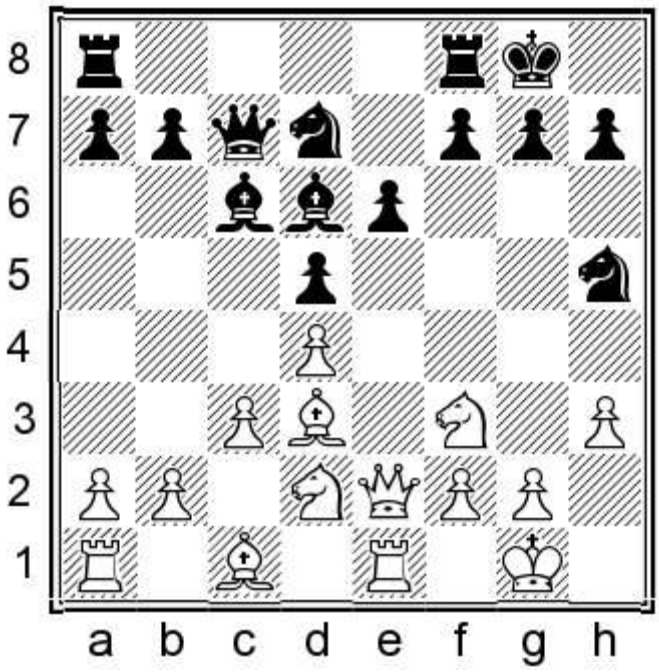


Position after: 12...0-0

13.♘e5

13.♘bd2 prevents Black's main idea (...♘e4), but Black can play 13...♘h5! with the threat of ...♘f4.



Position after: 13...♘h5!

A) White has nothing better than a computeresque repetition after 14.♘g5N 14...♘hf6 15.♘gf3 ♘h5.

B) 14.♘f1N allows Black to play 14...♘f4 and gain control of the dark squares. 15.♗xf4 ♗xf4 Black

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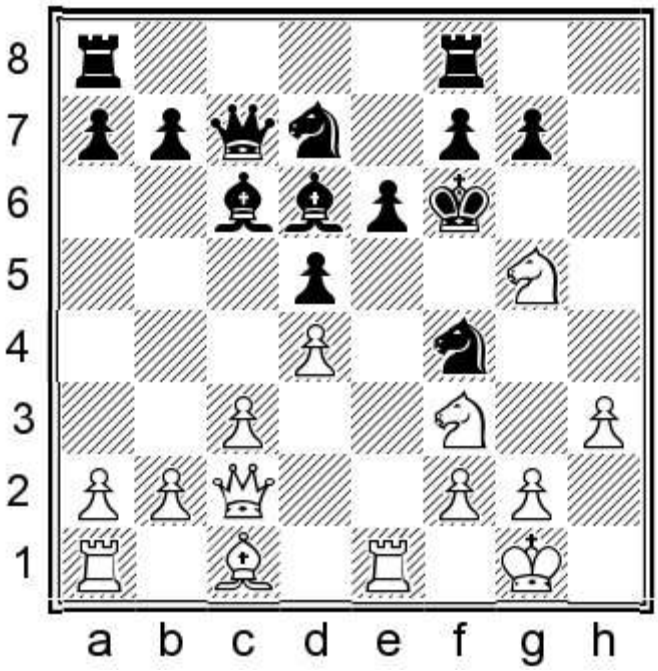
should not play passively and should use his dark-squared bishop to play ...e5. 16.g3 [16.♘1h2 ♖fe8 17.♘g4 e5! 18.dxe5 h5!=] 16...♗d6 17.♘1h2 ♖fe8 18.♘g4 [18.♕c2 h5!=] 18...f6! 19.♕c2 ♘f8= Black has easily coped with White's threats on the kingside and he is now ready to find counterplay in the center.

C) 14.♗xh7+!? This is the most critical test for this variation, but Black emerges from the complications unscathed. 14...♔xh7 15.♘g5+ ♔g6 16.♘df3 ♘f4! 17.♕c2+ ♔f6



Position after: 17...♔f6

The king will soon return to safety behind Black's pawn formation unless White plays 18.g3 ♘g6 19.♘xf7!? but Black nevertheless maintains the balance with 19...♔xf7 20.♘g5+ ♔g8 21.♕xg6 ♘f6 22.♘xe6 ♕d7 23.♗h6 ♘e4! 24.♖xe4 dxe4 25.♘g5 ♖f7!∞.

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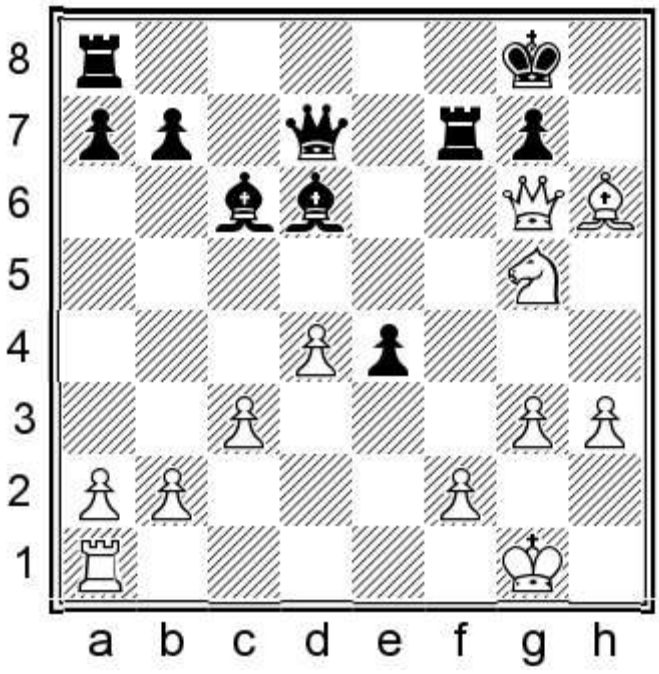
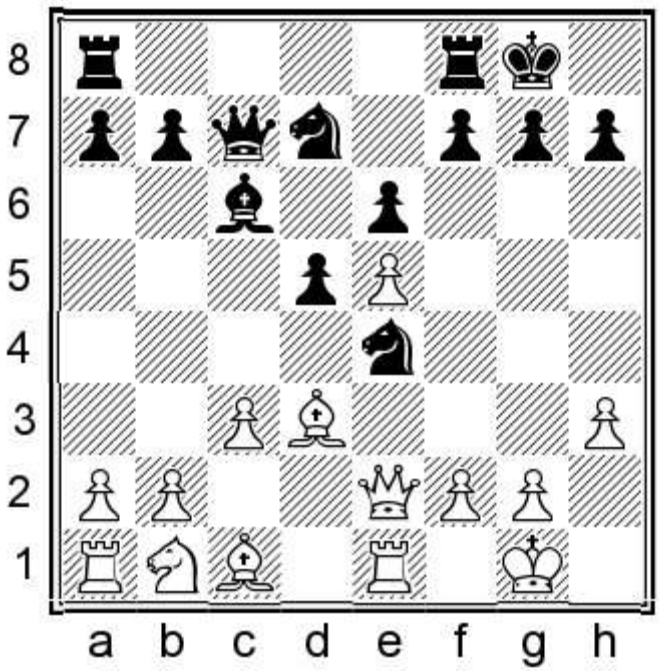


Position after: 25...♖f7!∞

We have been following the recent game Ganguly, S (2636) – Eljanov, P (2650) Wijk aan Zee 2020. Black eventually weathered White's attack and won a fine game.

13...♗xe5 14.dxe5 ♘e4!

Black has given up his dark-squared bishop but the e4-knight gives him a persistent initiative and prevents White from making progress.



Position after: 14...♘e4!

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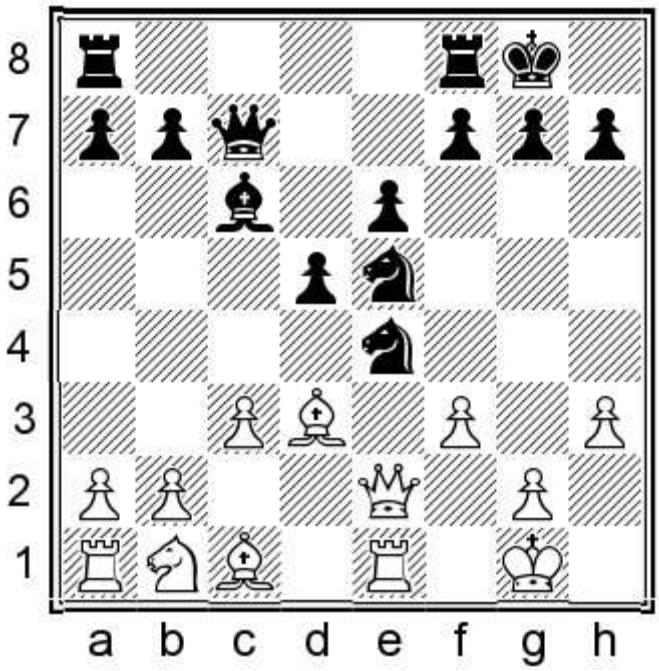
15.♗c2

15.f3N is a natural attempt to drive away the knight, but Black does not give in and instead plays 15...♘xe5!



Position after: 15...♘xe5!

16.fxe4 [Black has excellent compensation after 16.♗f4 ♘xf3+ 17.♕xf3 e5 18.♗e3 f5 19.♗f2 ♖f6⩲ as his pieces flock to the kingside.] 16...♘xd3 17.♕xd3 dxe4 18.♖xe4 ♕b6+! 19.♔h2 ♗xe4 20.♕xe4 ♕d6+ 21.♕f4 e5 22.♕f1 f5 23.c4 f4 24.♘c3 ♕d4∞ The position remains unclear, but Black's initiative guarantees him equality.

15...♘xe5

15...f5!? is also interesting, as Black played in Steinkellner, P (2304) – Tyulenko, Y (2452) ICCF email 2013.

16.♗f4 f6

White will regain the pawn, but his positional advantages will disappear in the process.

17.♘d2

17.♘a3 a6 18.♖ad1 ♖ad8=

17...♕b6! 18.♘xe4 dxe4

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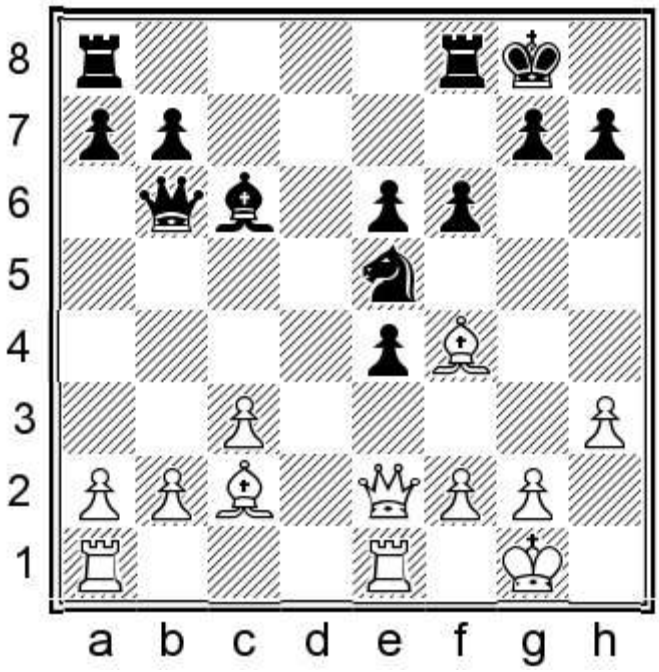
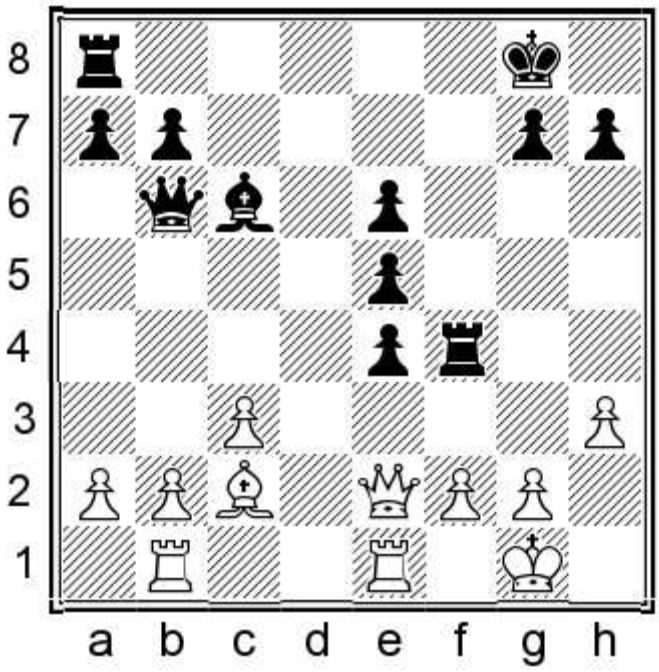


Position after: 18...dxe4

19.♗xe5

19.♗xe4 ♗xe4 20.♕xe4 ♕xb2 21.♖ab1 ♕xa2 22.♖xb7 ♕d5 23.♗xe5 fxe5 24.♕xd5 exd5 25.♖xe5 ♖f7= is simply an equal endgame.

19...fxe5 20.♖ab1 ♖f4!=



Position after: 20...♖f4!=

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We have reached quite an artistic position, with three black pawns on the e-file. Objectively speaking, the game will likely simplify to an equal endgame very soon.

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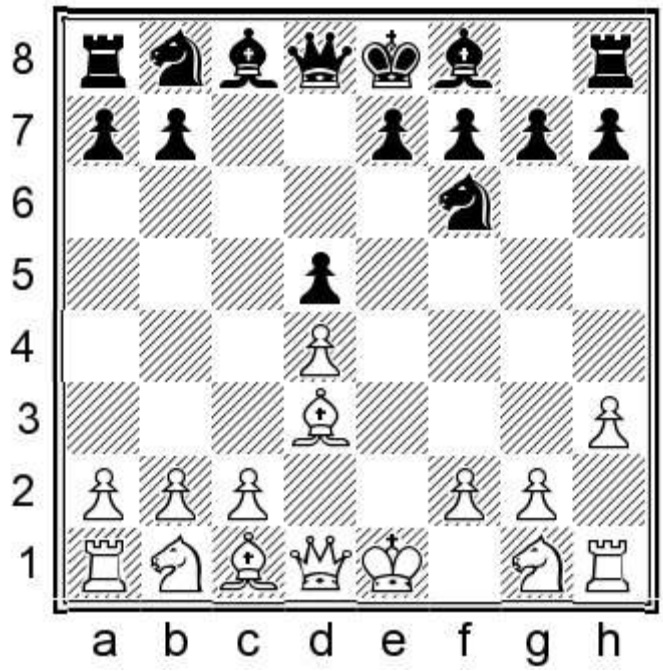
d) 5.h3 ♘c6 6.c3 e5

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘f6

As we discussed in the previous chapter, Black's idea is to play ...♗g4 to develop his light-squared bishop outside of his pawn chain. However, White can prevent this with

5.h3



Position after: 5.h3

Since ...♗g4 is no longer an option, the only way for Black to develop his light-squared bishop is through ...g6, with the idea of playing ...♗f5. While ...g6 is not Black's ideal continuation, it solves two problems at once by supporting ...♗f5 and preparing ...♗g7. The idea is that Black agrees to play an inferior setup because White has wasted a tempo with h3. Alternatively, Black can give up on developing the light-squared bishop and switch gears with 5...♘c6 6.c3 e5. In the same vein, Black can argue that, although ...e5 is not typically a good move because it creates an isolated pawn on d5, White has wasted critical time with h3 and Black will be able to exploit this to generate counterplay. As always, the philosophical arguments are cast away by the concrete and specific variations, but it is important to keep the general picture in mind.

5...♘c6

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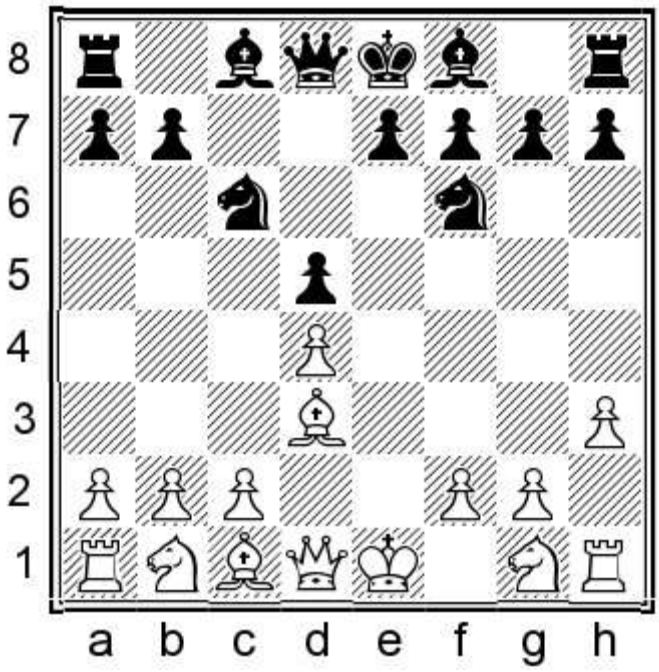
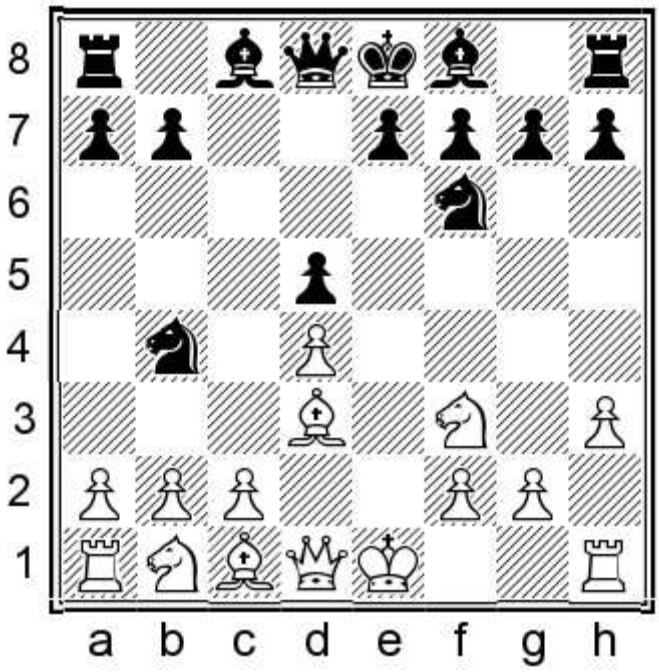


Position after: 5...♘c6

6.c3

White cannot do without c3 because ...♘b4 is a serious threat. 6.♘f3 ♘b4!



Position after: 6...♘b4!

A) 7.♗b5+ ♗d7 solves the very problem Black is struggling with by trading the light-squared bishops. 8.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 9.0-0 e6 10.♘e5 ♕c7= Stangl, A (2146) – Mueller, C (1987) Germany 2013.

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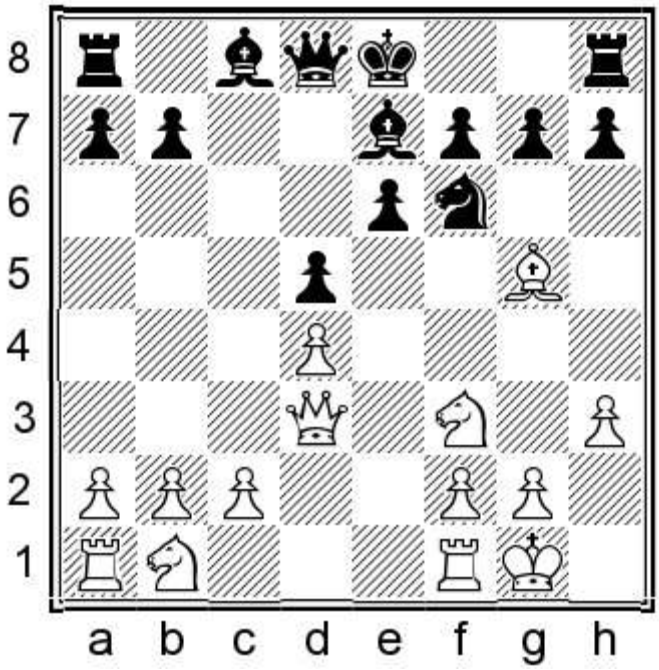
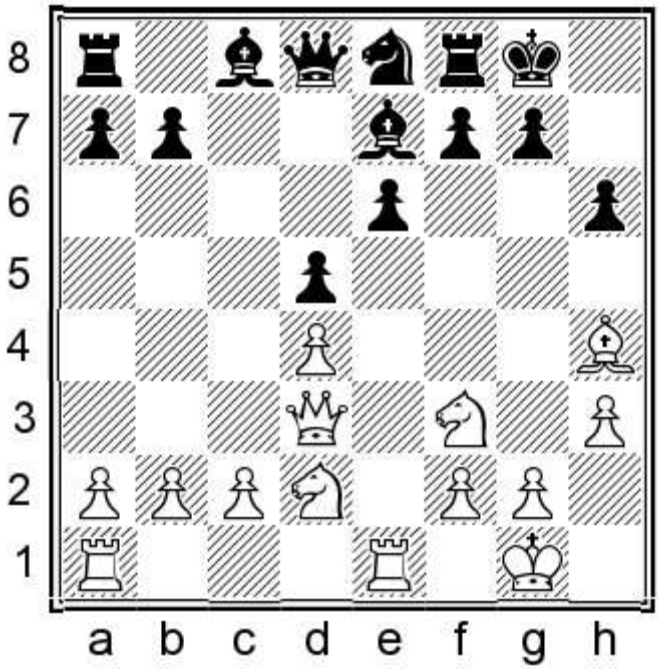
B) 7.♗e2 concedes the f5-square: 7...♗f5 8.0-0N 8...e6 9.c3 ♘c6=.

C) 7.0-0 White can part with his d3-bishop, but this takes the sting out of his position. 7...♘xd3 8.♕xd3 e6 9.♗g5 ♗e7



Position after: 9...♗e7

10.♘e5 [10.♘bd2 0-0 11.♖fe1 h6 12.♗h4 ♘e8!



Position after: 12...♘e8!

This is an important maneuver. The knight comes to d6 and Black can take control of the critical e5-

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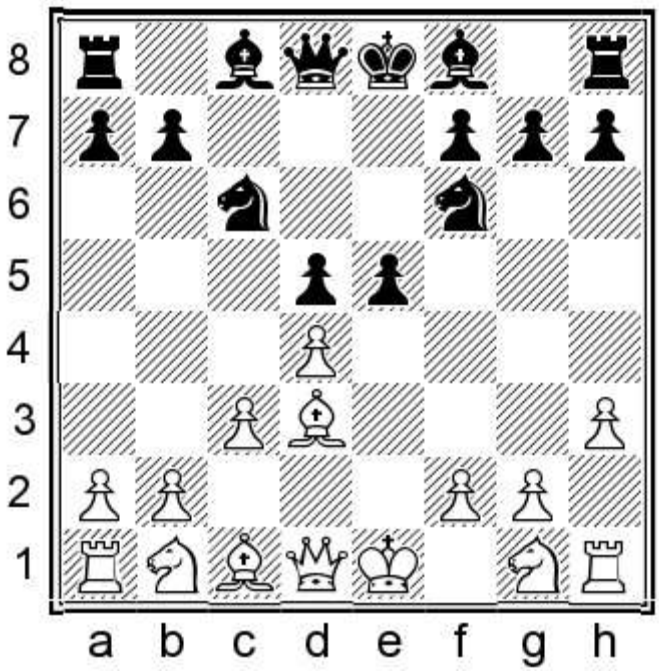
square with ...f6 at any time. 13.♗xe7 ♕xe7 14.♘e5 ♘d6 15.c3 ♗d7=] 10...0-0 11.♘c3 ♘e8! 12.♗xe7 ♕xe7 13.♖fe1 f6 14.♘f3 ♕b4 15.a3 ♕b6 16.♘e2 ♗d7= White is left without much play. The e6-pawn is weakened but Black's counterplay on the queenside will prevent White from exploiting this.

6...e5!?



Position after: 6...e5!?

Whereas 6...g6 (see the next subchapter) leads to a positional struggle, the text move is very forcing and sharp. Black opens the center and looks forward to active and tactical play through the center.

While 6...g6 is my main recommendation, I suggest that you keep 6...e5 as an alternative since White needs to be very well-prepared to pose any problems to Black.

7.dxe5 ♘xe5

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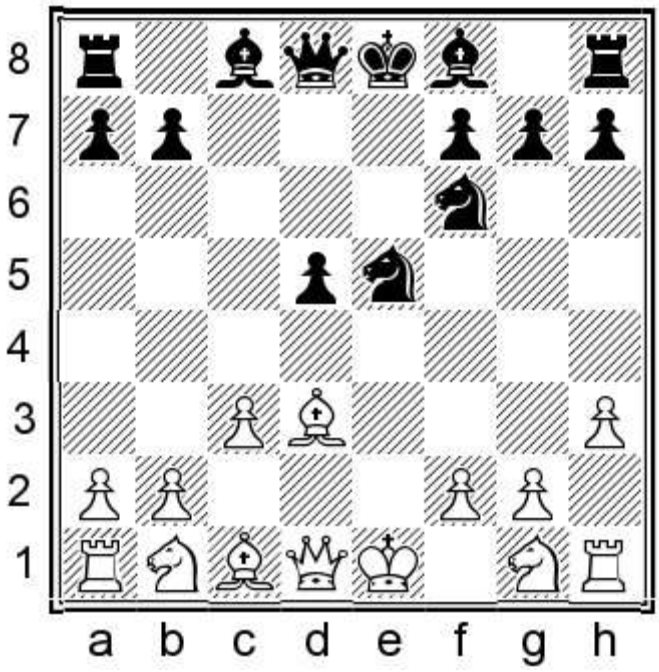

Position after: 7...♘xe5

White has two main options: 8.♘f3 and 8.♕e2. Other moves are too slow and give Black time to complete his development.

8.♕e2!?

This is the most critical variation. White exploits the open e-file and the fact that Black is not fully developed to create immediate threats.

A) 8.♗e3 transposes to 8.♘f3 ♘xd3+ 9.♕xd3 ♗d6 10.0-0 0-0 11.♗e3 after 8...♗d6 9.♘f3 ♘xd3+ 10.♕xd3 0-0 11.0-0.

B) 8.♗c2 ♗c5 9.♘f3 ♘xf3+ 10.♕xf3 ♕e7+ 11.♗e3 0-0 12.0-0 ♗xe3 13.♕xe3 ♕xe3 14.fxe3 ♖e8= Janjusevic, B (2036) – Juhasz, L (2221) Senta 2006

C) 8.♗b5+ ♗d7 9.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 10.♘f3 ♘xf3+ 11.♕xf3 ♕e6+! Black immediately poses problems to White on the open e-file.

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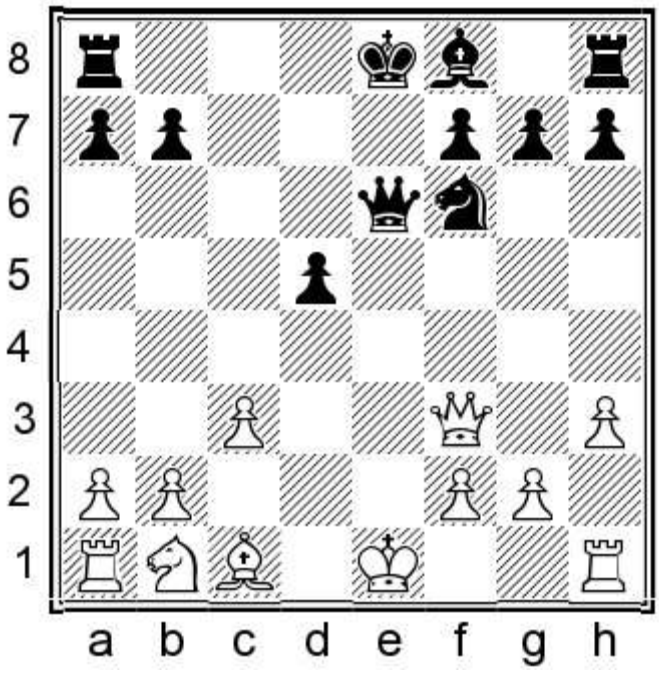
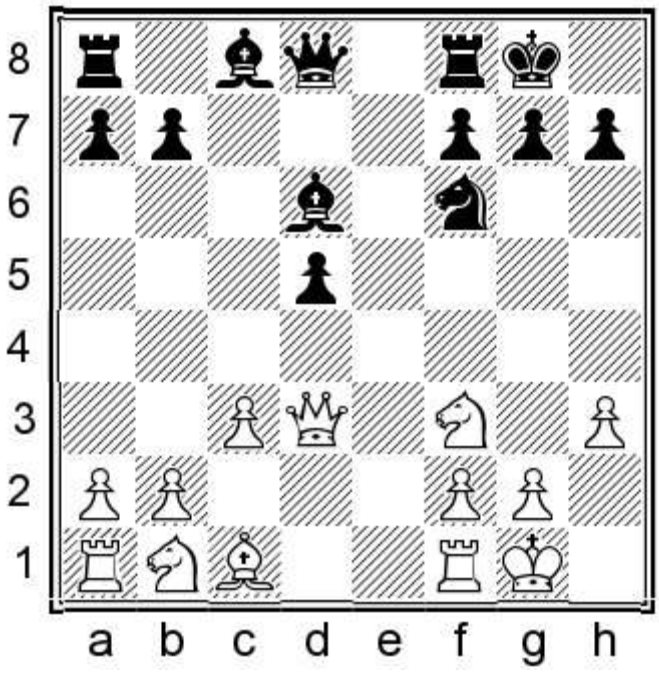


Position after: 11...♕e6+!

After 12.♗e3 ♗c5= White will have to concede a weak pawn on e3.

D) 8.♘f3!? With this move, White continues his development but he gives up the d3-bishop. Since the position is quite open, this is a major concession. Nevertheless, White's position remains very solid and Black needs to be precise. 8...♘xd3+ 9.♕xd3 ♗d6 10.0-0 0-0



Position after: 10...0-0

D1) 11.♗e3!? is possible, but Black's active pieces don't allow White to organize his position and

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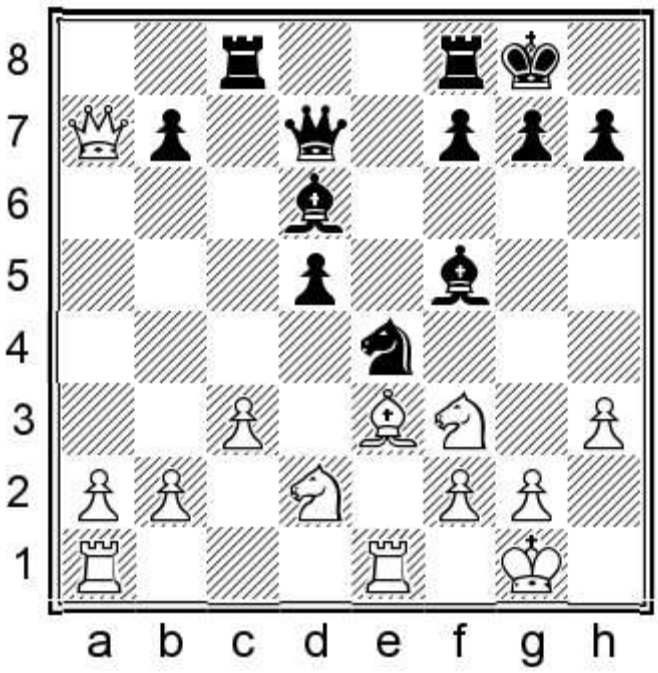
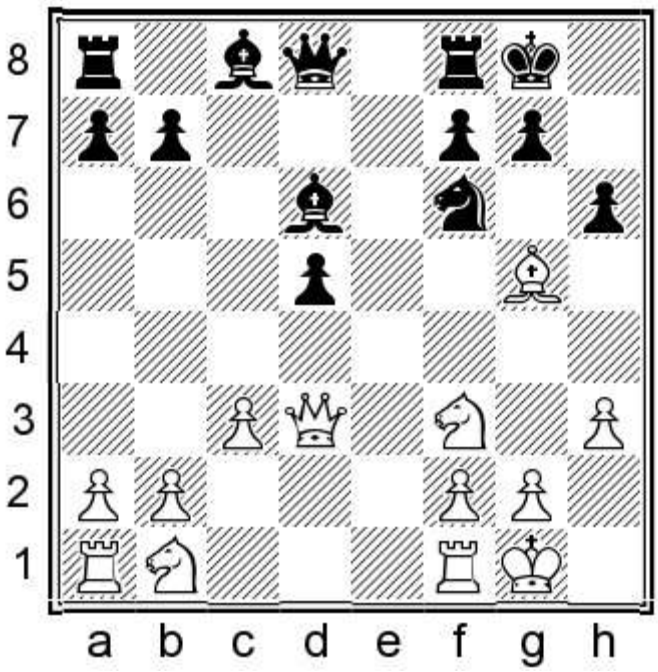
pressure the d5-pawn: 11...♗e6 12.♘bd2 ♕d7!. Black will play ...♗f5 and bring the light-squared bishop into the game. 13.♖fe1 ♗f5 14.♕d4N 14...♖ac8! 15.♕xa7 ♘e4!∓



Position after: 15...♘e4!∓

Black has excellent compensation through the center of the board and on the kingside with threats like ...♗xh3 looming on the horizon.

D2) 11.♗g5 This is the most challenging move. Black needs to resolve the pin immediately or he will face considerable pressure. 11...h6



Position after: 11...h6

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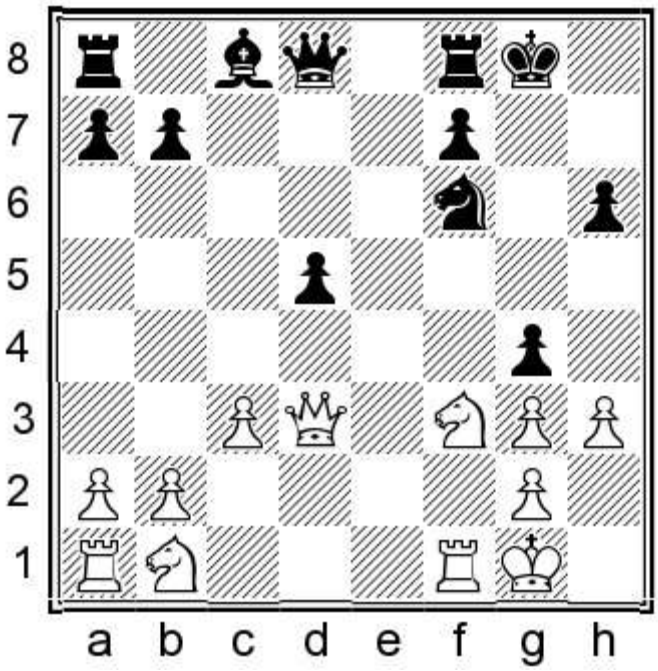
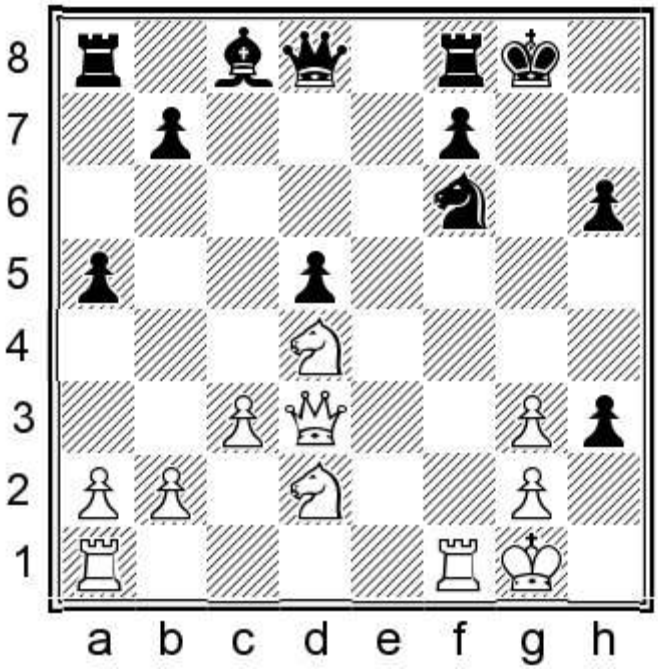
12.♗h4 [12.♗xf6 ♕xf6 13.♕xd5 wins a pawn for White, but Black's bishop pair easily compensates for it. 13...♕g6!?N 14.♔h1 ♖d8 White has no better option than to give the pawn back with 15.♘bd2 ♗xh3! 16.gxh3 ♗f4! 17.♕e4 ♗xd2 18.♕xg6 fxg6=.] 12...g5! Black cannot develop without eliminating the pin first. The text move weakens Black's kingside, but White is not in a position to exploit this. As it often happens, Black's active position conceals his positional frailties. 13.♗g3 ♗xg3 14.fxg3 g4! Continuing the advance and exerting additional pressure on White's position.



Position after: 14...g4!

D2.1) 15.♘d4 gxh3 The players curiously agreed to a draw despite the double-edged position in Degraeve, J (2569) – Khenkin, I (2604) Belgium 2005. 16.♘d2N 16...a5!



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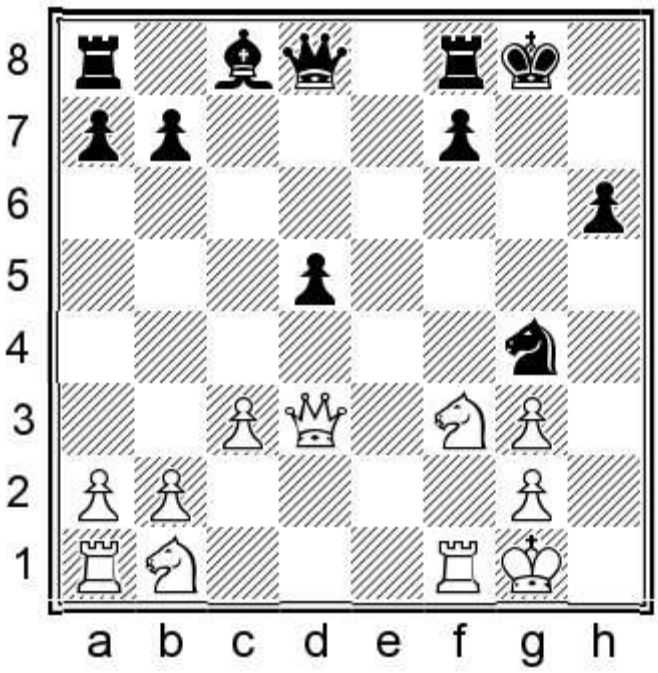
Position after: 16...a5!

This is a key idea for Black: the a8-rook is brought into the game via the 6th rank. 17.gxh3 ♗xh3 18.♖f4 ♖a6 19.♖h4 ♗d7 20.♖xh6 ♔g7= Black's king is surprisingly safe on g7 and White has to retreat his rook and surrender the initiative.

D2.2) 15.hxg4 ♘xg4



Position after: 15...♘xg4

The g4-knight is very strong: it contributes to both attack and defense. 16.♘bd2 ♖e8 17.♖ae1 [17.♕d4N 17...♘e3 18.♖fc1 a5! is just another example of this important idea. 19.♘f1 ♖e4 20.♕d2 ♘c4 21.♕f2 ♖a6=] 17...♕b6+ 18.♘d4N [18.♕d4 ♕xd4+ 19.♘xd4 ♗d7= Khegay, D (2504) – Urazayev, A (2433) Almaty 2019] 18...♖xe1 19.♖xe1 ♗d7 20.♕f3

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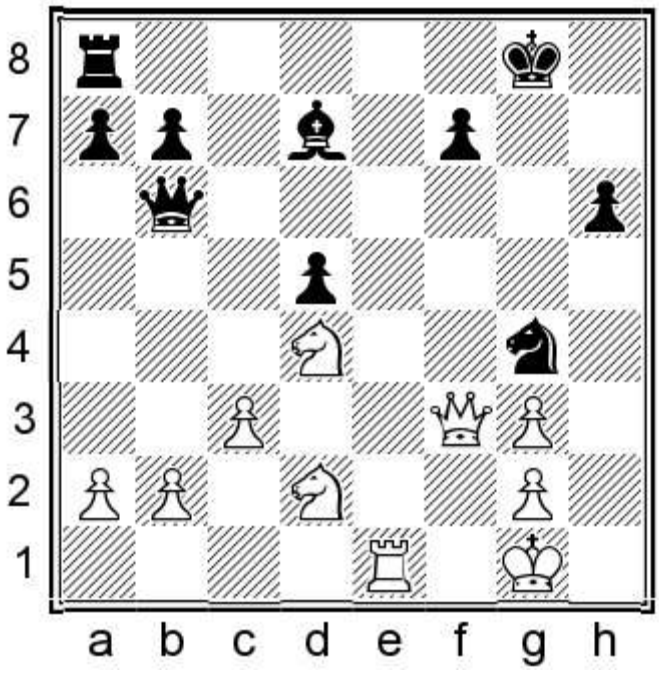

Position after: 20.♕f3

Although White needs to improve his position in the short term, the d5-pawn will remain a weakness for the rest of the game. It's difficult to imagine that Black can win from this position. 20...♕xb2! 21.♘2b3 ♖f8! 22.♘c5 ♗c8 23.♘de6 ♗xe6 24.♘xe6 ♕b6+ 25.♘d4 h5 26.♕xd5 ♕f6=

8...♕e7!

8...♘e4 is also playable but I prefer White after 9.♗b5+! ♗d7 10.♘f3 ♗xb5 11.♕xb5+ ♕d7N 12.♕xd7+ ♘xd7 13.♘bd2 ♗c5 14.0-0∞. Although White needs to improve his position in the short term, the d5-pawn will be a weakness for the rest of the game and I can hardly see how Black can win from this position.

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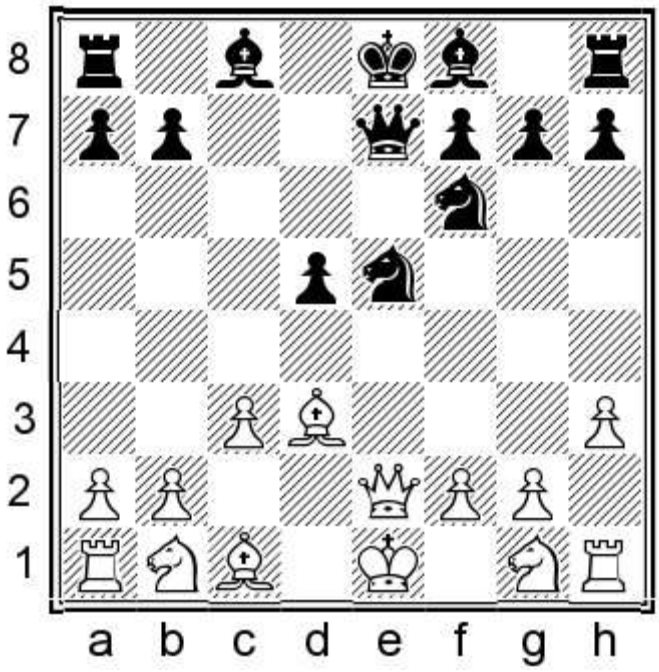
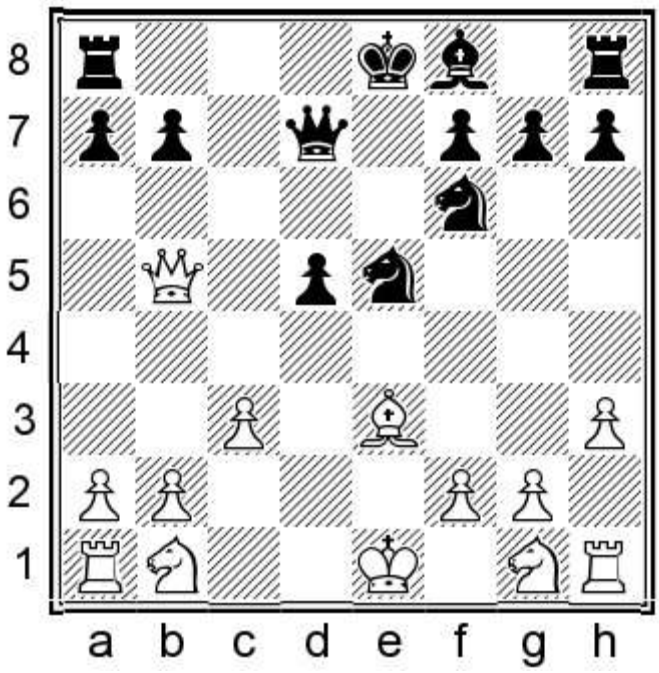


Position after: 8...♕e7!

9.♗c2

White retreats his bishop, having encumbered Black in his development. Other moves are not as good for White:

A) 9.♗b5+ ♗d7 10.♗e3 ♗xb5 11.♕xb5+ ♕d7



Position after: 11...♕d7

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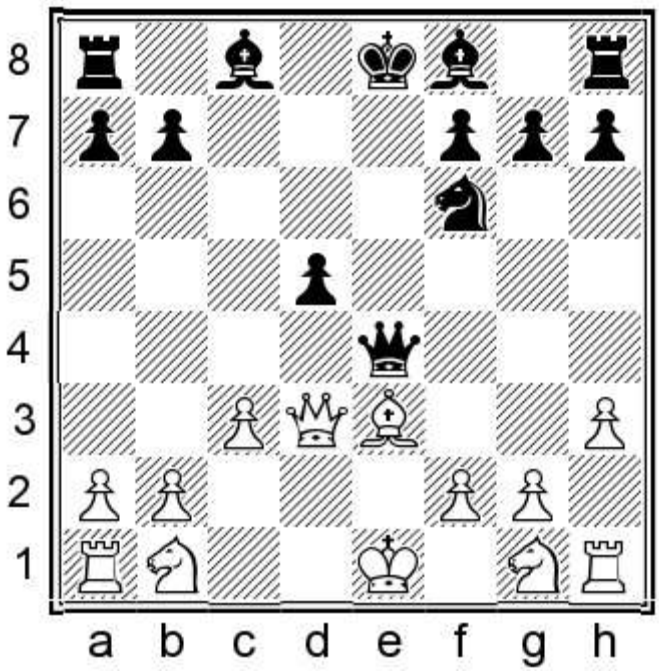
The difference here (compared to the position after 8...♘e4) is that Black has imminent threats with ...♘d3 and ...♘c4 if White trades queens. 12.♕e2 ♘c4!?N 13.♗d4+ ♕e6 14.b3 ♘a5 15.♘f3 ♘c6= Black's piece activity abundantly compensates for the isolated pawn.

B) 9.♗e3 ♘xd3+ 10.♕xd3 ♕e4!N



Position after: 10...♕e4!N

Again, Black creates concrete pressure to resolve his problems. 11.♕b5+ [11.♕xe4+ fixes Black's pawn structure and leads to an equal endgame: 11...dxe4 12.♘d2 b6 13.♘e2 ♘d5 14.♗d4 f5=] 11...♗d7! Black sacrifices the b7-pawn for a dangerous initiative against White's underdeveloped position. 12.♕xb7 ♖c8 13.♘f3 ♗d6

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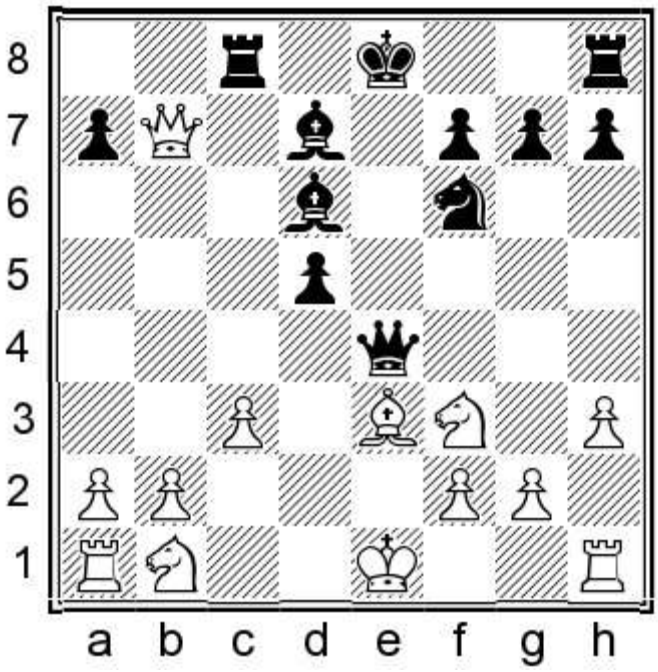
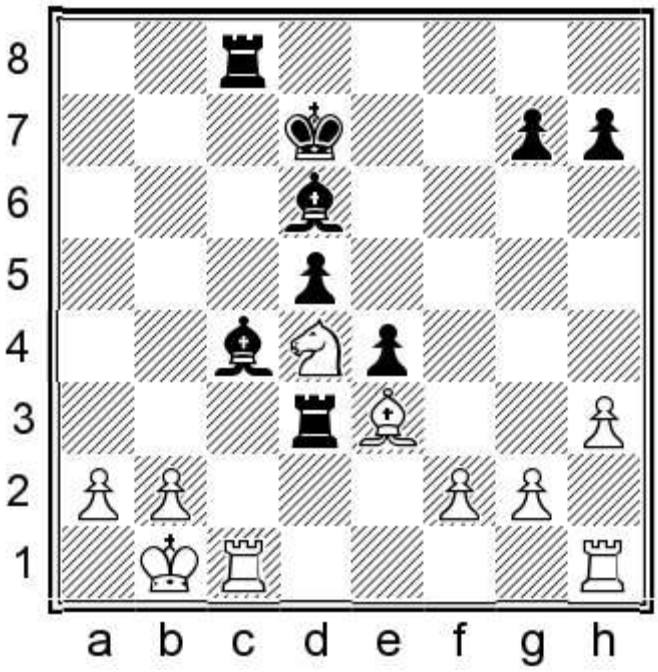


Position after: 13...♗d6

B1) 14.♘bd2 leads to a very forcing line: 14...♕d3! 15.♕xa7 ♗b5 16.♔d1 ♘e4 17.♕d4 ♖xc3! 18.♕xd3 ♖xd3 19.♖c1 ♔d7 20.♔c2 f5! 21.♘xe4 fxe4 22.♘d4 ♖c8+ 23.♔b1 ♗c4



Position after: 23...♗c4

Still, Black has excellent compensation for the pawn as the initiative continues into the endgame. White should immediately dissolve the position with 24.b3 ♗e5 25.bxc4 ♗xd4 26.♗xd4 ♖xd4 27.cxd5 ♖b8+ 28.♔a1 ♖d2=.

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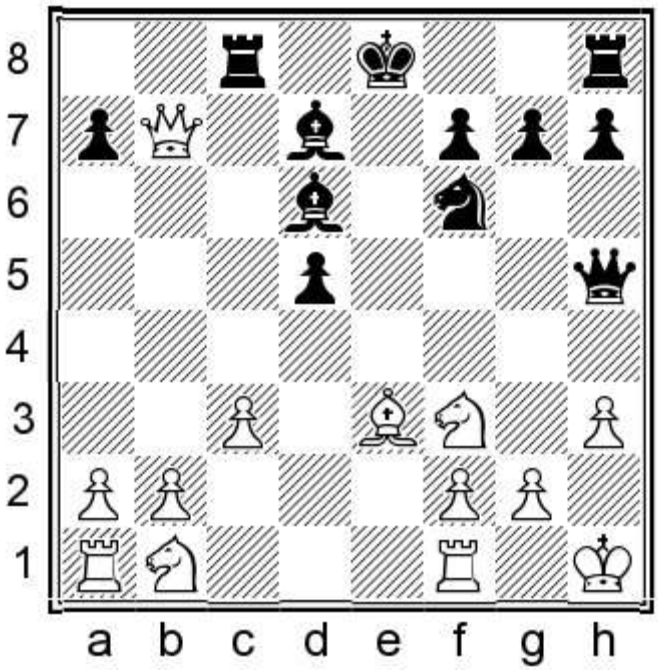
B2) 14.0-0 ♕g6! White's king is under attack, and he should proceed with extreme caution.

B2.1) 15.♔h1 ♕h5



Position after: 15...♕h5!

16.♘g1 This is an ugly-looking idea, but it successfully defends against ...♗xh3. Black should now force a repetition. [16.♖e1?! allows Black to display his attacking potential: 16...0-0 17.♘bd2 ♗xh3! 18.gxh3 ♕xh3+ 19.♔g1 ♘g4! 20.♕xd5 ♖cd8 21.♕g5 ♗h2+ 22.♘xh2 ♕xh2+ 23.♔f1 ♕h3+ 24.♔e2 ♘xe3 25.♕xe3 ♖fe8∓. The attack continues and White will soon have to give some material back to slow it down.] 16...♕e5! 17.♘f3 ♕h5=

B2.2) 15.♗d4 0-0

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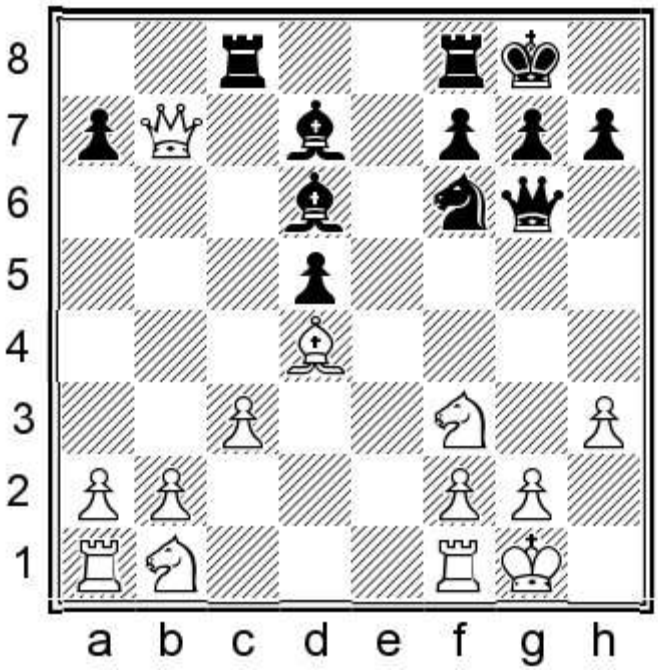
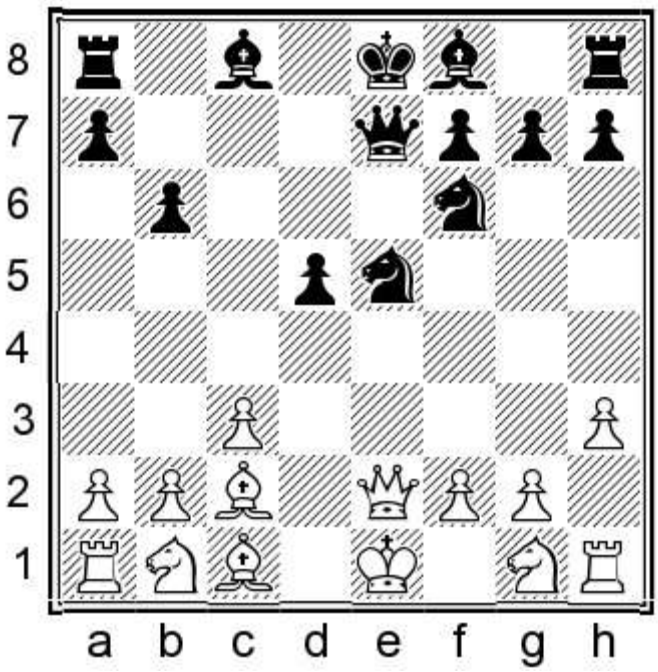


Position after: 15...0-0

16.♗e5 This is White's best way to deal with Black's initiative, but it does little to stop the flow of pieces to the kingside: [16.♗xf6 is met by 16...♗xh3! 17.♗g5 ♖c4! and White's king is feeling the heat. 18.g3 h6 19.♖e1 ♖g4 20.♕xd5 ♗xg3 21.fxg3 ♖xg3+ 22.♔h2 ♗e6 23.♕e4 ♖h3+ 24.♔g2 ♕h5∓] 16...♗xh3! 17.♘h4 ♕g5 18.♗xd6 ♖c4! 19.♗xf8 ♖xh4 20.g3 ♗xf1 21.♗e7 h6 22.♗xf6 gxf6 23.♘d2 ♗e2 24.♕e7 ♕h5 25.gxh4 ♕g4+=

9...b6!



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Position after: 9...b6!

This is a key move. Black abandons his original plan to castle kingside and instead switches gears to play on the queenside with ...♗a6 and ...0-0-0.

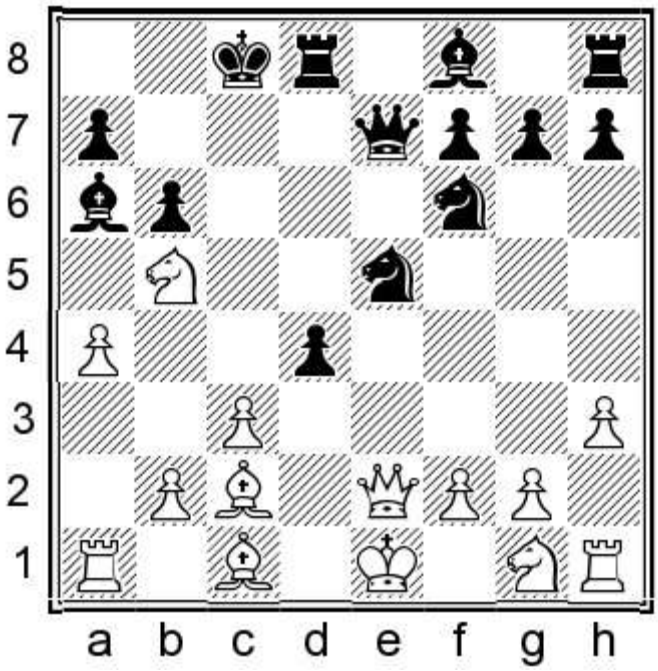
10.♘a3!N

White needs to oppose Black's threat of ...♗a6 and the best way to do so is to bring the knight to b5. 10.♗e3 ♘c4= was equal in Sorcinelli, A (2020) – Siger, I LSS email 2009.

10...♗a6! 11.♘b5

11.♕xa6?? loses instantly to 11...♘f3+ with checkmate on the next move.

11...0-0-0 12.a4 d4!



Position after: 12...d4!

Just when it seemed that Black's initiative had withered away, Black strikes in the center. Tactical fireworks ensue.

13.cxd4

13.♗f4 d3! 14.♕xe5 ♕xe5+ 15.♗xe5 dxc2 16.♘f3 ♘e4 17.0-0 ♘c5 18.♖ac1 f6 19.♗g3 ♘xa4 20.c4 ♘c5 21.♖xc2 ♔b7=

13...♖xd4

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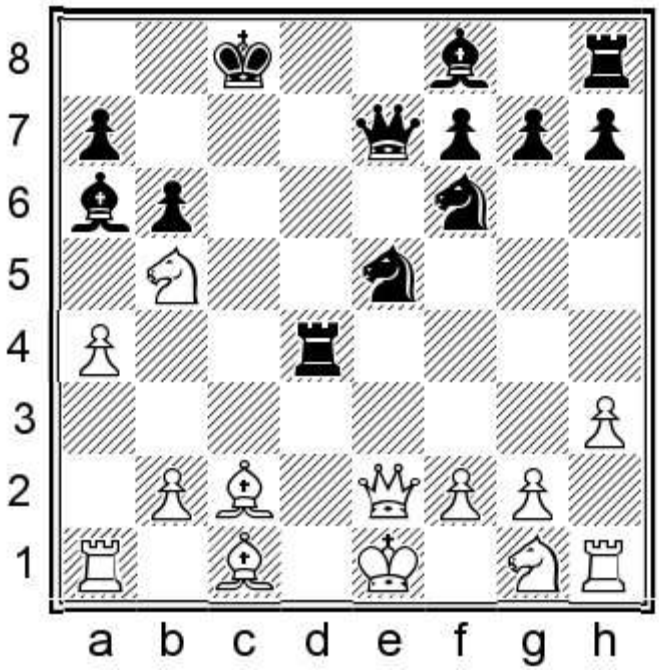
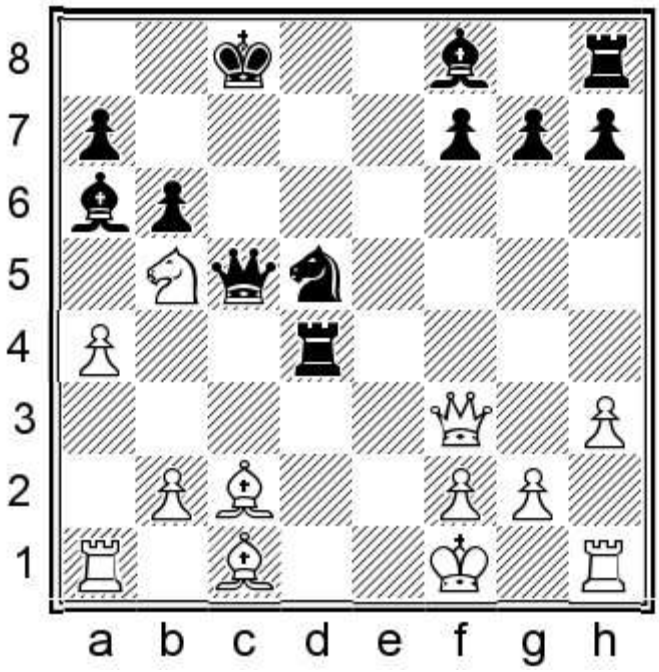


Position after: 13...♖xd4

14.♘xd4!

14.♔f1 is also possible but Black's initiative persists with 14...♘d5! 15.♘f3 ♘xf3 16.♕xf3 ♕c5!



Position after: 16...♕c5!

The computer finds an incredible amount of resources for both sides but evaluates this position with the usual "0.00". A couple of fascinating variations are: 17.♗d3 [17.♕e2 ♔b7 18.♗d3 ♖xa4! 19.♖xa4 ♕xc1+ 20.♕e1 ♕xe1+ 21.♔xe1 ♘b4 22.♗e4+ ♔b8 23.♘d4 ♗c5 24.♘c6+ ♘xc6 25.♗xc6 ♗d3 26.♔d2

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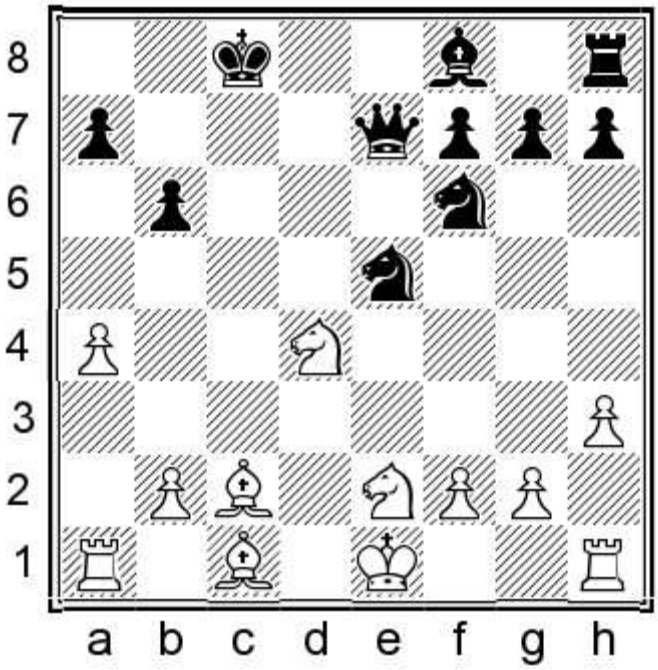
♖d8 27.♔c3 ♗g6⩲] 17...♖xa4 18.b4 ♘xb4 19.♕a8+ ♔d7 20.♖xa4 ♕xc1+ 21.♔e2 ♕b2+ 22.♔f3 ♕f6+=.

14...♗xe2 15.♘gxe2

We have reached the critical position for the 6...e5 variation. Although we have gone quite far away from anything that has already been played, the evaluation of this position determines whether 6...e5 is playable or not because Black does not have good alternatives along the way.



Position after: 15.♘gxe2

This position may appeal to very tactically aware players who like a dynamic fight, but I don't think that it suits the style of a typical Caro-Kann player, even if it were objectively equal. For this reason, my main recommendation is 6...g6. I present a few continuations so that you can see where the game is heading, but without too many comments because most of the moves are backed by concrete lines rather than positional concepts.

15...♕c7! 16.0-0 ♗c5

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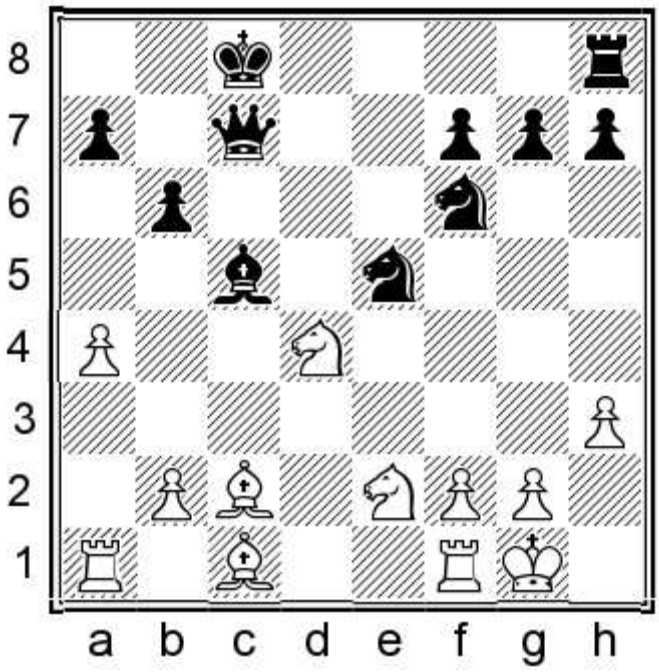
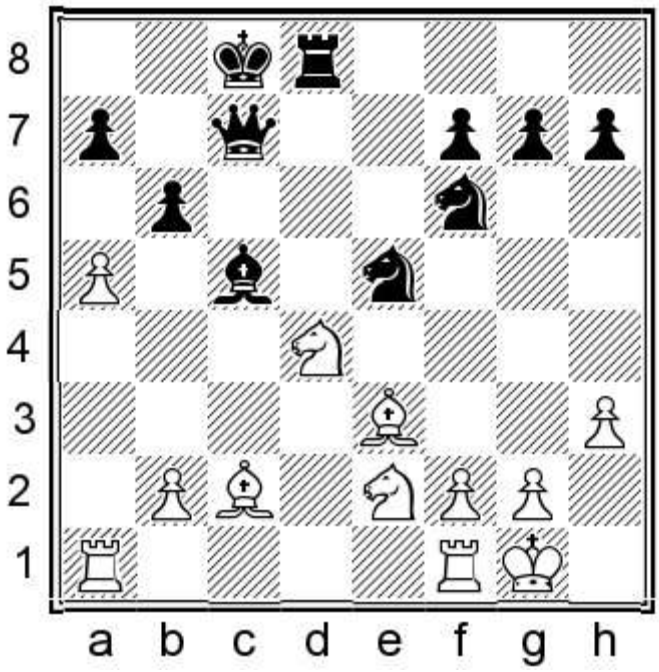


Position after: 16...♗c5

White has three interesting options:

17.b4!?

A) 17.a5!? ♖d8 18.♗e3

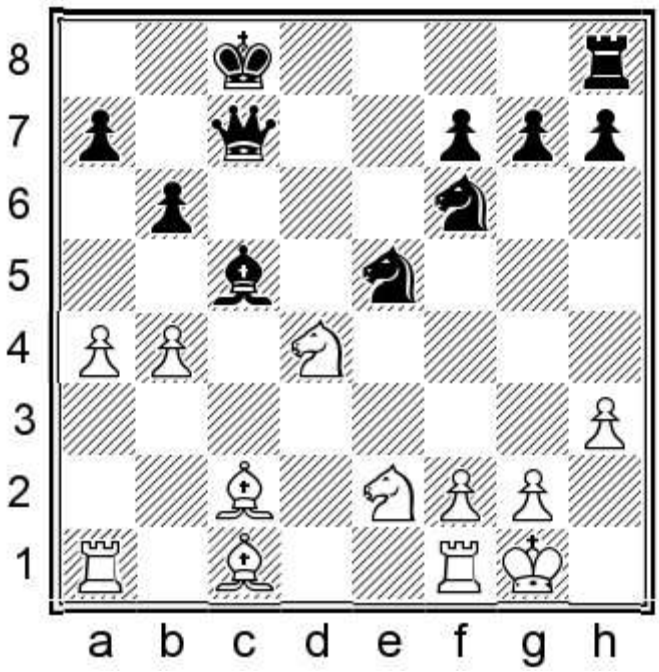


Position after: 18.♗e3

18...bxa5 [18...♘d5 19.♗g5 f6 20.♗d2∞] 19.♖fc1 ♔b7 20.♗a4 ♕b6 21.♖c3 ♗xd4 22.♘xd4 ♖xd4

23.♖b3 ♕xb3 24.♗xb3 ♖b4 25.♖a3 ♘c4 26.♗xc4 ♖xc4 27.♖xa5 a6∞ Black should be able to hold although White is still pressing.

B) 17.♗g5!? ♖d8 18.♖fc1 ♔b8 19.♘b3! a5 20.♘xc5 ♕xc5 21.♗f4 g5! 22.♗g3∞ The position remains very complicated, but Black's king will be a liability throughout the rest of the game.



Position after: 17.b4!?

17...♗xd4

This move seems like a better option than 17...♗xb4, at least from a practical perspective, since it keeps the b-file closed.

17...♗xb4 18.♗f4 ♔b7 19.a5 bxa5 20.♖fc1 ♖e8! 21.♗a4 ♕d8!∞

18.♘xd4 ♖d8

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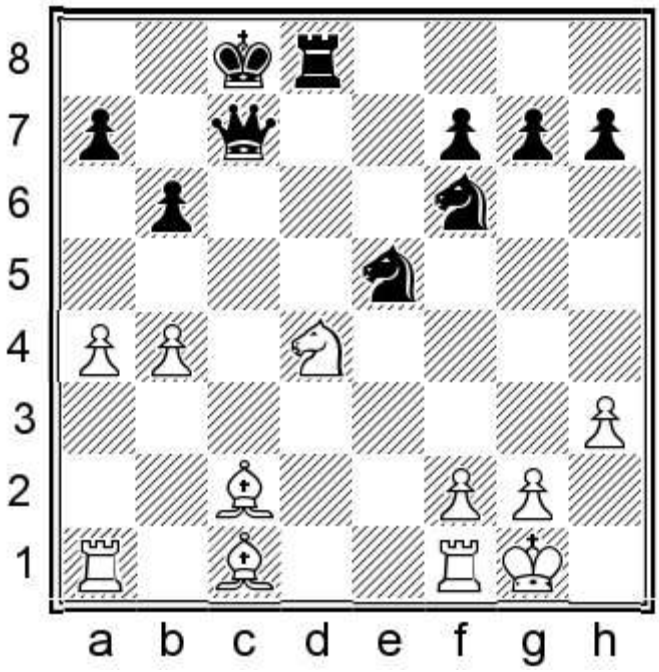
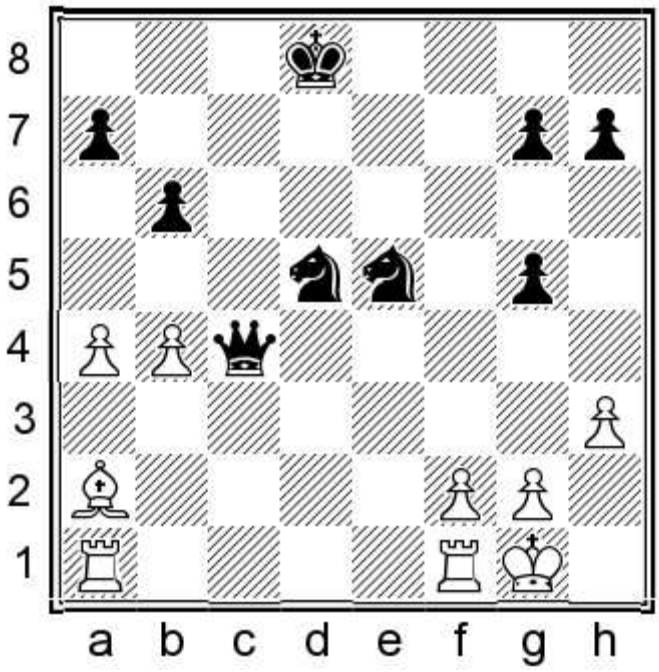


Position after: 18...♖d8

19.♗e3

19.♗b2 ♘c4 20.♖fc1 ♘xb2 Black happily returns the material to ease the pressure. 21.♗f5+ ♔b7 22.♖xc7+ ♔xc7=

19...♘d5 20.♗g5 f6 21.♘e6 ♕c4 22.♘xd8 ♔xd8 23.♗b1 fxg5 24.♗a2



Position after: 24.♗a2

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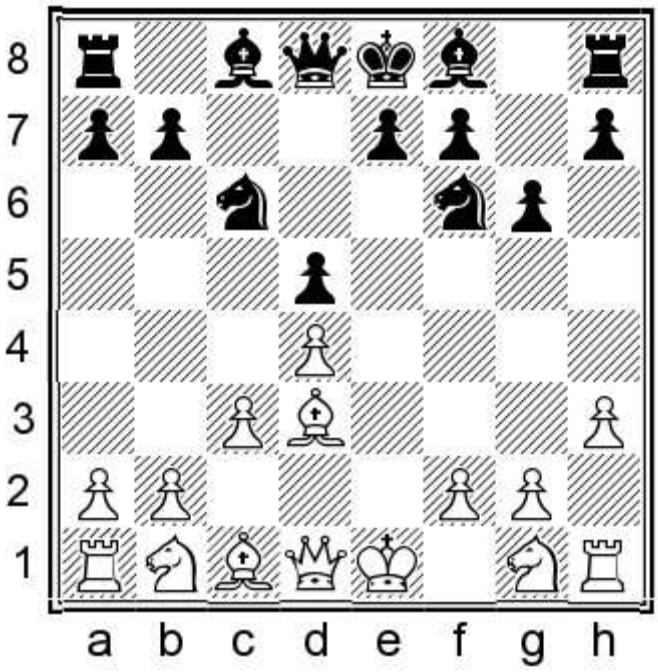
24...♕d4 25.♖ad1 ♘d3 26.♗xd5 ♕xd5 27.♖d2 ♕b3 28.♖fd1 ♕xa4 29.♖xd3+ ♔e7∞

Black should be able to hold this although White remains in the driver's seat.

e) 5.h3 ♘c6 6.c3 g6

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♗d3 ♘f6 5.h3 ♘c6 6.c3 g6!?



Position after: 6...g6!?

Black's idea is quite simple: he will play ...♗f5 on the next move. If he is able to trade the light-squared bishops and continue his development, he will have resolved his openings problems. White's most insidious attempts involve ♗e2, preventing the trade.

7.♘f3

A) 7.♕c2 prevents ...♗f5, but now Black is ready to open the center: 7...e5! 8.dxe5 ♘xe5

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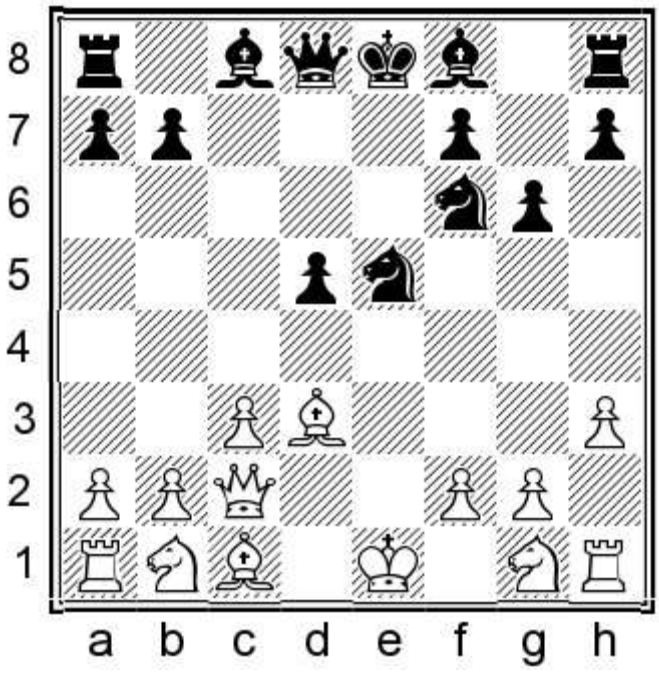


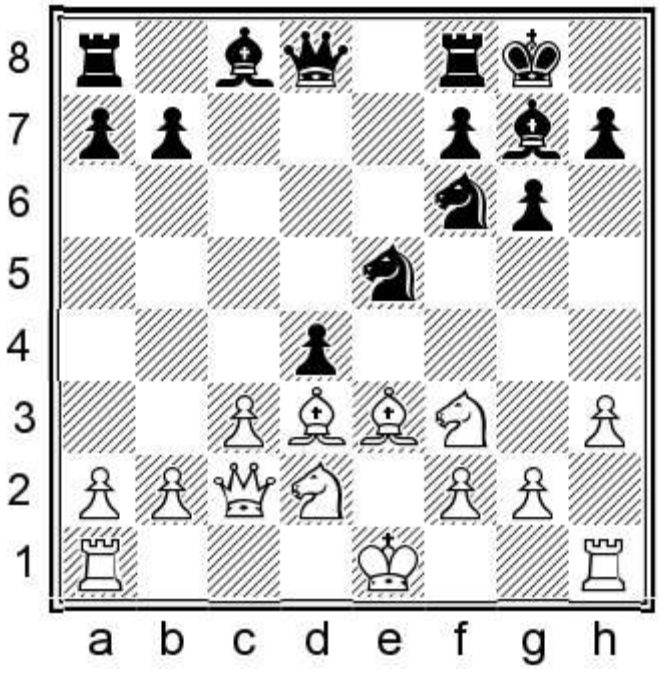
Position after: 8...♘xe5

A1) 9.♗b5+ is met by 9...♘fd7!?N and Black's knights will trouble White in a few moves.

A2) 9.♘d2 ♘xd3+ 10.♕xd3 was played in Aronian, L (2767) – Caruana, F (2822) chess.com INT 2018, and Black could have continued with 10...♗g7N. In the game, Caruana placed his bishop on d6 but this leaves the dark squares on the kingside unguarded.

A3) Note that 9.♕e2 is not as good as it was after 6...e5 7.dxe5 ♘xe5 because Black is up a tempo and can develop his f8-bishop on the next move: 9...♕e7 10.♗c2 ♗g7=.

A4) 9.♗e3 ♗g7 10.♘d2 0-0 11.♘gf3 d4!?N



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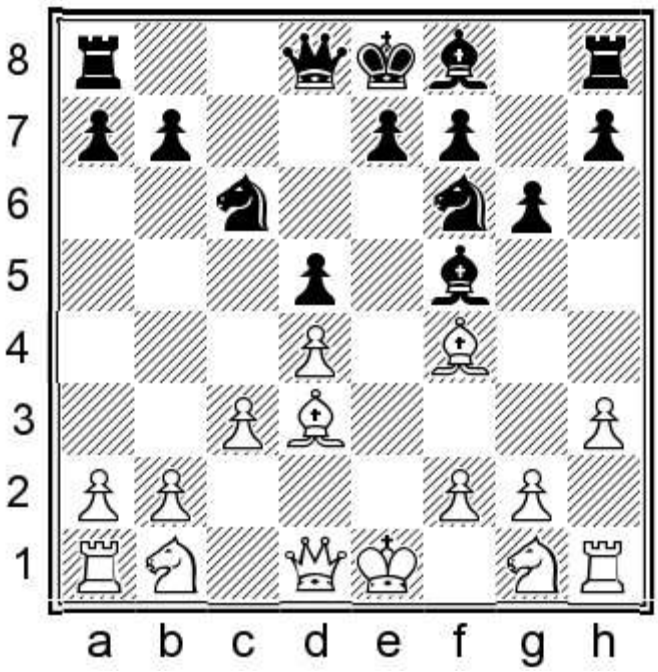
Position after: 11...d4!?N

Black had a few good moves, but the text move exemplifies how Black should play his position. By giving up the pawn, Black opens the position and activates his pieces. 12.cxd4 [12.♘xd4 ♘d5!⩱] 12...♘xd3+ 13.♕xd3 ♗f5⩱

B) 7.♗f4!? Whereas White commits to playing ♘f3 in the main line, he keeps his options open with the text move. The difference is particularly notable after 7...♗f5 8.♗xf5 gxf5.

7...♗f5!



Position after: 7...♗f5!

B1) 8.♗xf5 gxf5 9.♘d2! [9.♘f3 transposes to 7.♘f3 ♗f5 8.♗xf5 gxf5 9.♗f4, but White is better off keeping the f3-square for his queen.] 9...♖g8 10.♕f3

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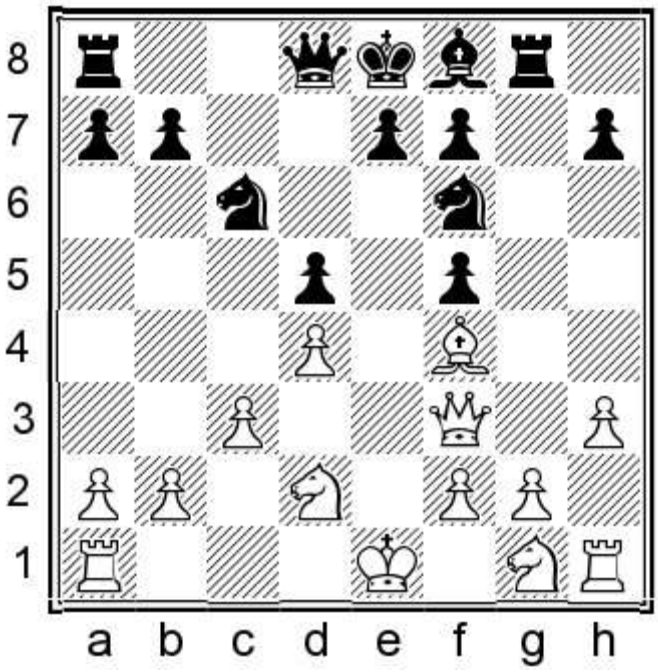
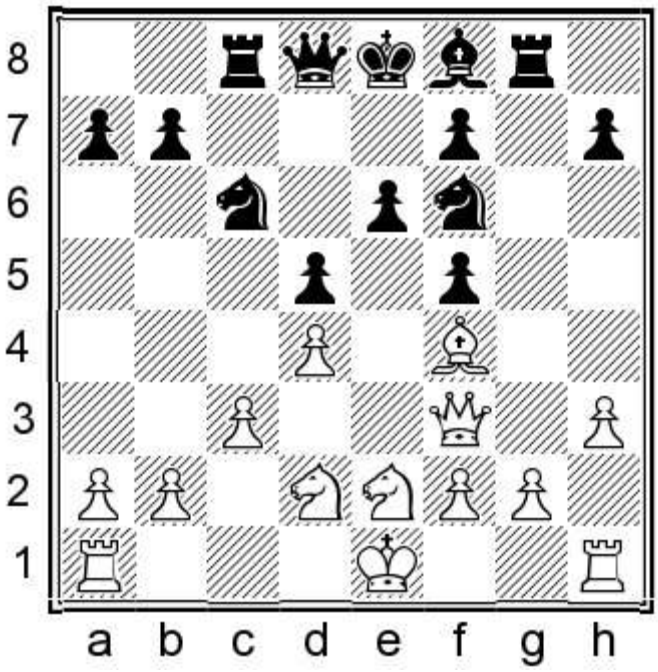


Position after: 10.♕f3

This is an important difference compared to the 7.♘f3 variation. The g2-pawn is protected, and White can leverage g4 ideas in the future. Nevertheless, Black has a solid position and should pursue active counterplay on the queenside. 10...e6 11.♘e2 ♖c8



Position after: 11...♖c8

12.0-0-0N [12.0-0N is inconsistent, since White is now deprived of an active plan (g4 is no longer possible). 12...♘e7! Black relocates the knight to the kingside. 13.♕e3 ♘g6 14.♗g5 ♗e7=] 12...♕b6

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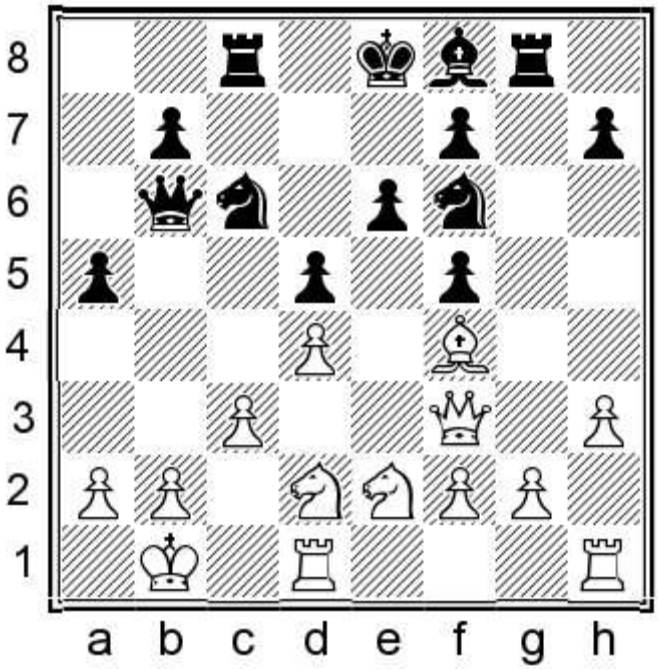
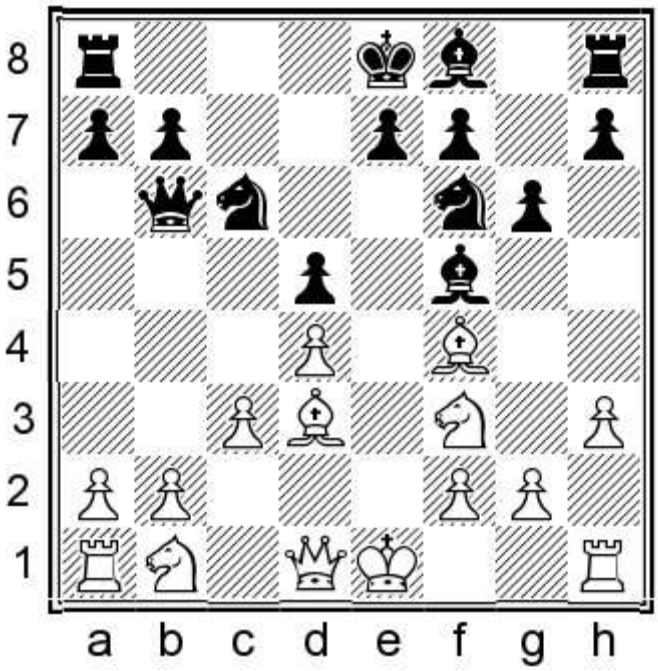
13.♔b1 a5!



Position after: 13...a5!

Black must go after White's king. 14.♖c1 a4! [14...h5?! prevents g4 but White can play 15.♘g3!± and White's attack has not been slowed down.] 15.g4!? White finally opens the kingside. This is not a disastrous outcome for Black, however, since he maintains a solid position: 15...fxg4 16.hxg4 ♘xg4 17.♖xh7 ♘f6 18.♖hh1 ♗e7∞.

B2) 8.♘f3 is imprecise in this move order due to 8...♕b6! and White has no good way of dealing with the threat of ...♕xb2.



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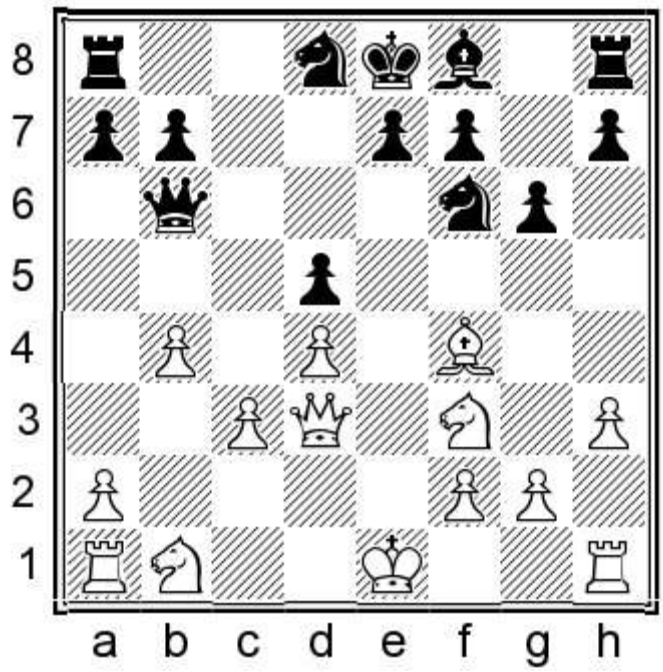
Position after: 8...♕b6!

9.b4 This move defends the pawn, but it is clearly not an attractive option from a positional point of view. [9.♗xf5 confines White to a rather passive position after 9...gxf5 10.♕e2 ♘e4 11.0-0 e6=; whereas 9.0-0 allows Black to ruin White's pawn structure with 9...♗xd3 10.♕xd3 ♕xb2 11.♘bd2 ♕a3 12.♖fb1 ♗g7 13.♖xb7 0-0=] 9...♗xd3 10.♕xd3 ♘d8!?



Position after: 10...♘d8!?

Black has many other moves, but I particularly like this one. The knight will come to e6 and drive White's bishop away from f4. Moreover, the c-file is now cleared so that Black can pressure the c3-pawn. 11.a4 ♘e6 12.♗e3 ♗g7=

B3) 8.♗e2!? This is White's most critical continuation, both here and after 7.♘f3 ♗f5. Since Black is unable to trade his light-squared bishop, he will have to secure its spot on f5. This is not trivial because Black does not want to develop his dark-squared bishop to g7 since it would have no prospects there. Instead, Black wants to play ...e6 and ...♗d6. This means that he will also have to play either ...h5 or ...h6 and ...g5 to give the f5-bishop some breathing room. 8...e6!

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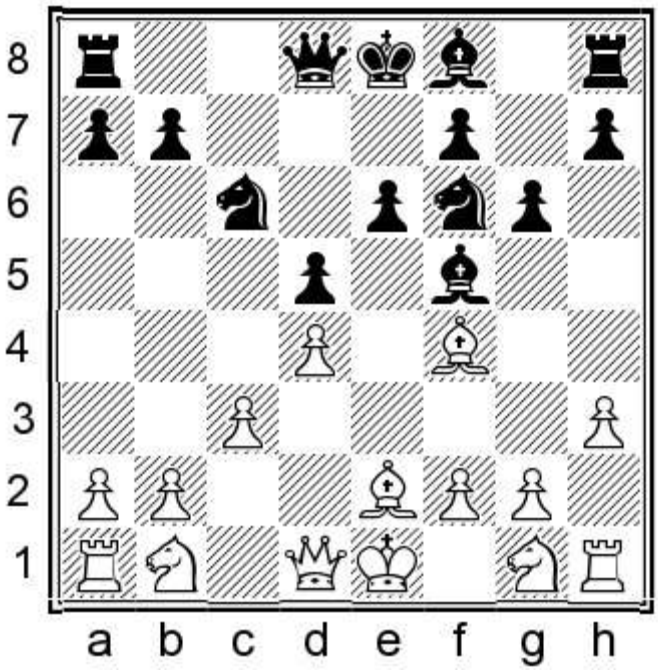
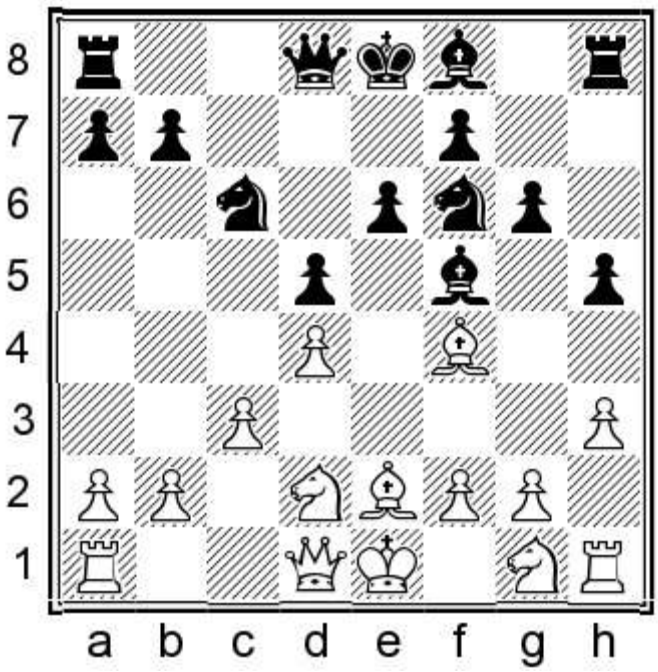


Position after: 8...e6!

This is an important move. The dark-squared bishop would not be useful on g7. [White is better after 8...♗g7 9.♘f3 0-0 10.0-0 ♘e4 11.♘bd2± since Black struggles to find an active plan.] 9.♘d2 [9.♕b3N is met by the customary 9...♗d6! and White's queen is simply misplaced on b3. 10.♗h6 ♕e7! Black is ready to open the center since White's pieces lack coordination. 11.♘f3 ♘h5 12.g3 0-0-0 13.♘bd2 e5∞] 9...h5!



Position after: 9...h5!

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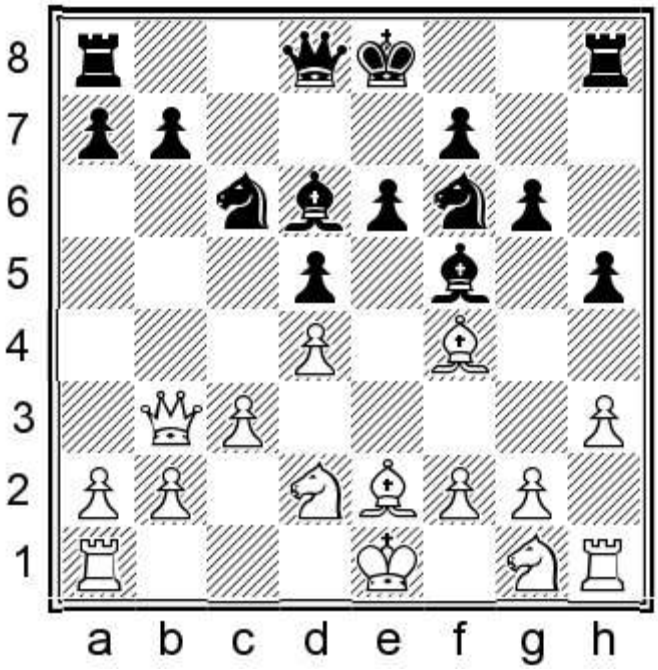
...♗xb1 was no longer a valid reply to g4, so Black needs to take preventive action.

B3.1) 10.♕b3 has been played before, but White does not achieve much by attacking the b7-pawn. 10...♗d6



Position after: 10...♗d6

11.♗g5 [11.♕xb7? ♗xf4 12.♕xc6+ ♔f8 13.♘gf3 ♔g7∓ gave Black the upper hand in Shuvalova, P (2419) – Girya, O (2462) Izhevsk 2019.] 11...♖b8 12.♘gf3 ♔f8 13.0-0 ♔g7= The king has walked its way to g7 and Black has completed his development, Svidler, P (2729) – Riazantsev, A (2645) Douglas 2019.

B3.2) 10.♘gf3N 10...♗d6 11.♗xd6 ♕xd6 12.♗b5 ♔f8!

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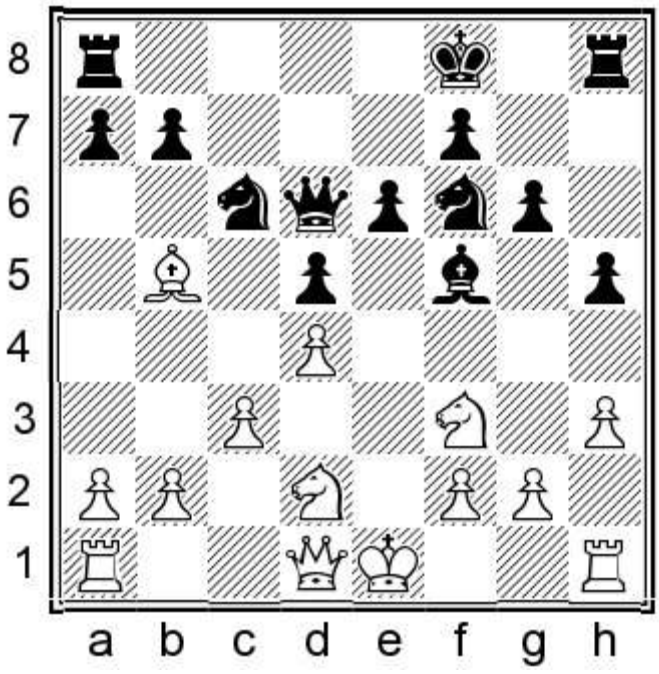
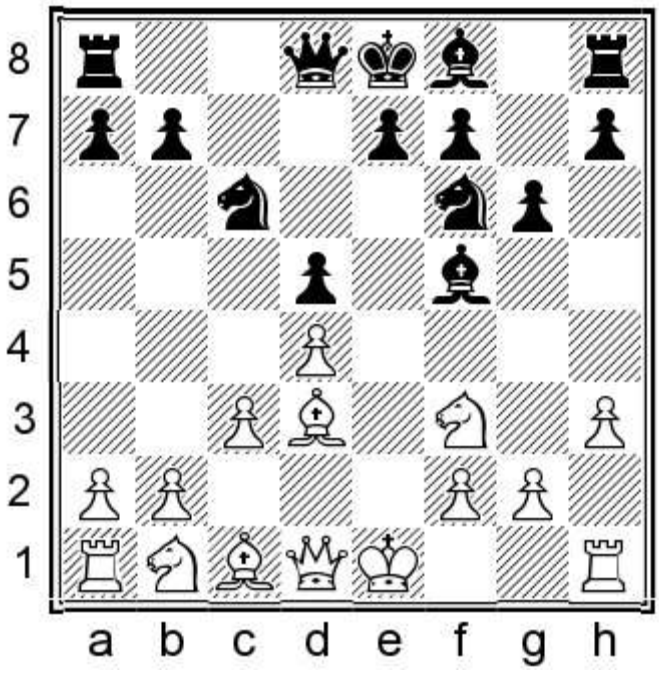


Position after: 12...♔f8!

Black walks the king to g7 to keep the rook on h8. This is important because Black can play ...h4, ...♕f4 and ideas like ...g5 once White castles kingside. 13.0-0 ♘e7!= The knight is brought to the kingside to fuel Black's potential for an initiative. Depending on White's next moves, Black can play ...♔g7, ...h4, ...♕f4 or ...♖g8 and ...g5. The f5-bishop is secure and Black has a good position.

7...♗f5



Position after: 7...♗f5

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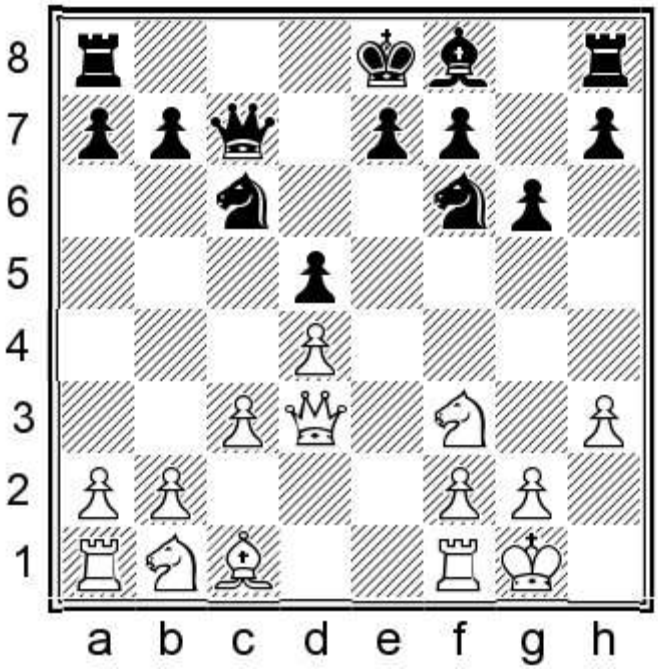
8.♗e2

A) 8.♗xf5 is not critical here since the f3-knight makes White's life more difficult. 8...gxf5 9.♗f4 ♖g8 10.0-0 e6 11.♘bd2 ♘e4=

B) 8.♗f4 is met by 8...♕b6! and we have transposed to 7.♗f4 ♗f5 8.♘f3 ♕b6.

C) 8.0-0 ♗xd3 9.♕xd3 ♕c7!



Position after: 9...♕c7!

Since White has not played ♗f4 yet, Black can prevent it before he proceeds with his development. 10.♖e1 ♗g7 11.♘e5 0-0 12.♗f4 ♘h5! Black should immediately counterattack in the center to prevent White from establishing a firm grip on the e5-square. 13.♗h2 ♗xe5!

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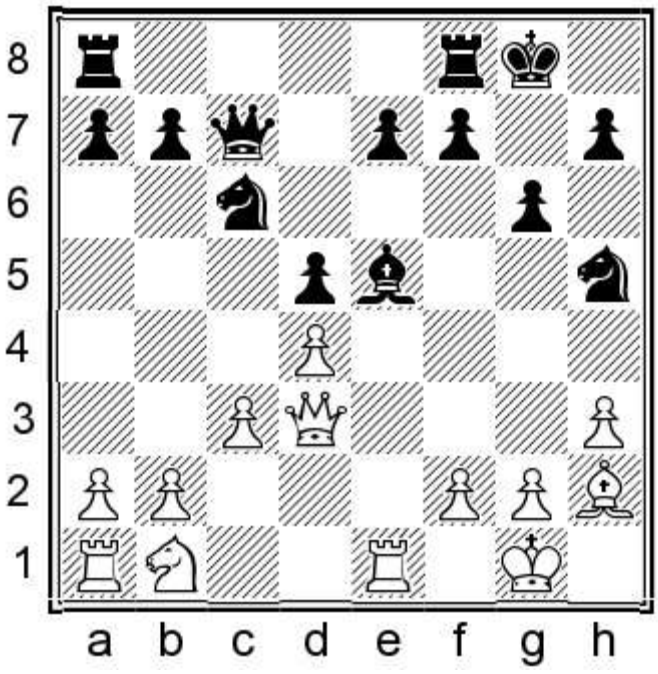
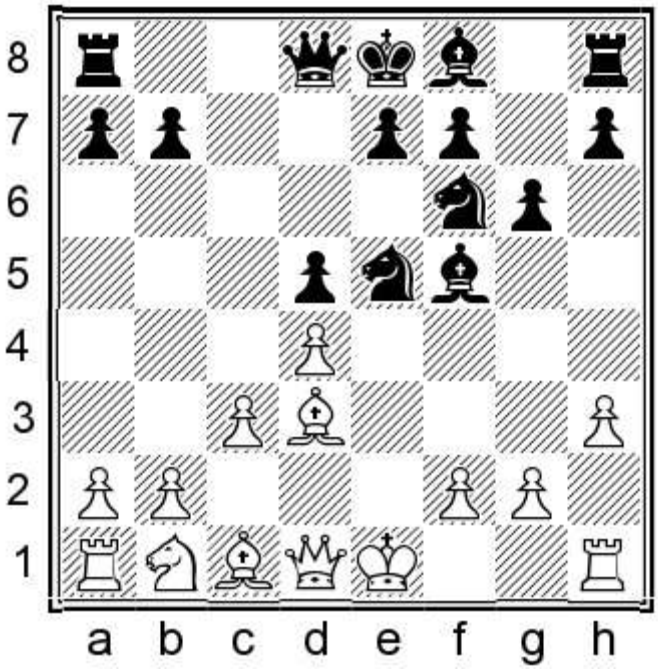


Position after: 13...♗xe5!

The bishop was Black's worst piece! Now, Black will exploit his superior development with some concrete ideas. 14.♗xe5 [14.dxe5N 14...♕b6! 15.b4 a5!? 16.b5 ♘d8 17.♕xd5 ♘e6⩱ Black has given up the d5-pawn to open files for his rooks and improve his queenside knight.] 14...♘xe5 15.dxe5N [15.♖xe5?! f6!∓ was better for Black in Kuerten, D (2055) – Gierth, K (2224) ICCF email 2012.] 15...♕b6! 16.♘d2 ♘f4 17.♕e3 ♕xe3 18.♖xe3 ♘e6=

D) 8.♘e5!? ♘xe5!N



Position after: 8...♘xe5!N

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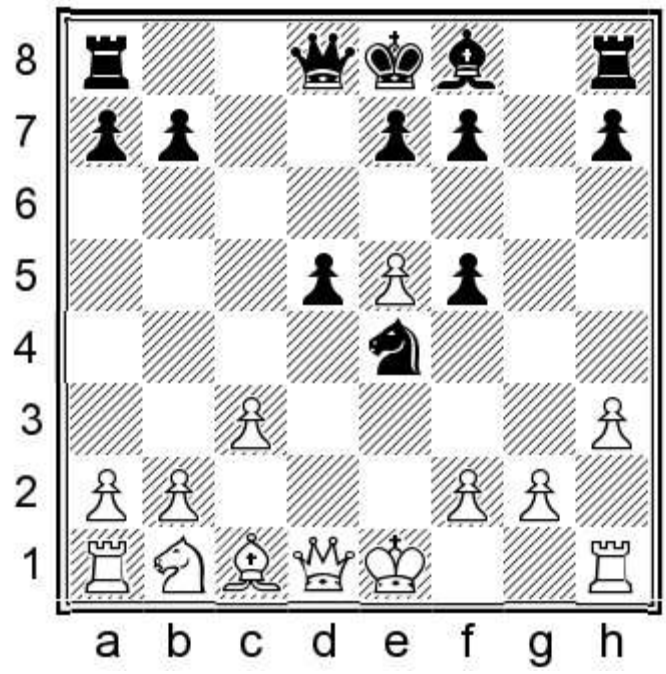
[White stands better after 8...♗xd3?! 9.♘xd3± because White's d3-knight is ideally placed and supports White's play on the kingside.]

D1) 9.♗xf5 gxf5 10.dxe5 ♘e4



Position after: 10...♘e4

It's quite obvious to the human eye that Black has resolved his opening problems. His pawn structure is not perfect but he has excellent piece play. 11.♘d2 ♖g8 12.0-0 [12.g4 only helps Black by weakening White's kingside. 12...e6 13.gxf5 exf5=] 12...♕c7! 13.♘xe4 dxe4 14.♗e3 ♖g6!= Black is ready to play ...♗g7 and shield his king on the kingside.

D2) 9.dxe5 ♗xd3 10.♕xd3 ♘e4 11.♘d2 ♘xd2 12.♗xd2 e6

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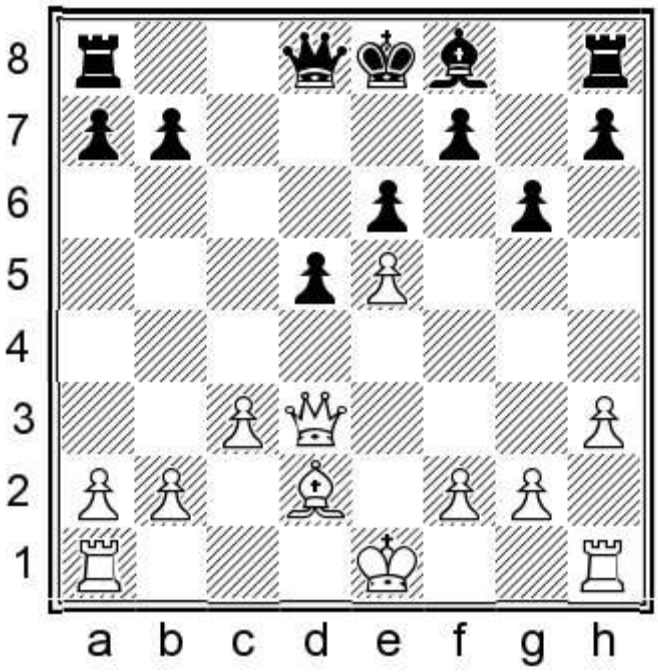
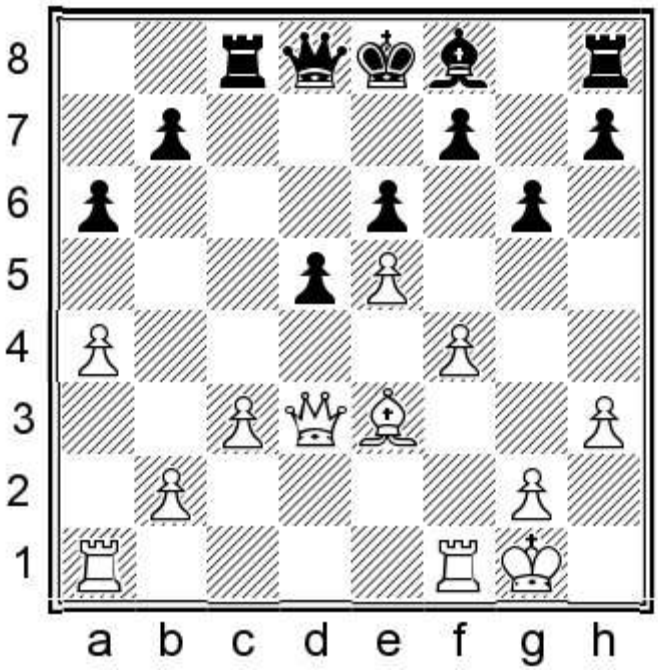


Position after: 12...e6

White has more space, but there are few pieces left on the board and Black can easily improve his position. 13.0-0 [Black should castle queenside after 13.0-0-0 to avoid a kingside attack: 13...♕c7 14.♔b1 a6 15.♖he1 h5 16.g4 0-0-0=] 13...♗g7!? Although the bishop does not stand well on g7, Black is happy to provoke f4 since it will place another pawn on the dark squares. 14.f4 ♖c8 15.♗e3 a6 16.a4 [16.♗d4 ♗f8 17.♕e3 h5=] 16...♗f8! The bishop comes back to the center of the board, with the idea of playing ...♗c5.



Position after: 16...♗f8!

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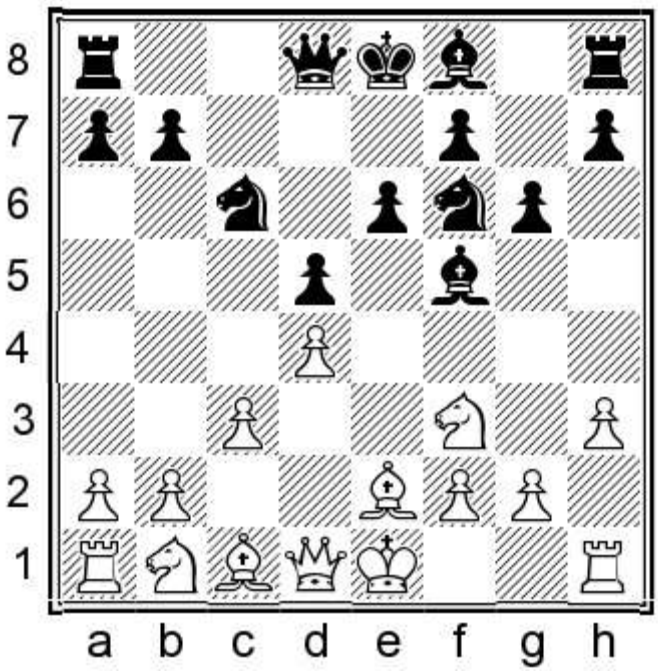
17.b4 h5 18.g3 ♖c4 19.a5 ♗e7 20.♗d4 ♕d7= Neither player can make progress and so the position is just equal.

8...e6



Position after: 8...e6

9.0-0

This was played in the game Safarli, E (2593) – Berkes, F (2667), Douglas 2019.

A) 9.♗e3 h5 10.0-0 ♕c7 11.♖e1 ♗d6 12.♘bd2 ♔f8=

B) 9.♗f4 – see 7.♗f4.

9...h6!?N

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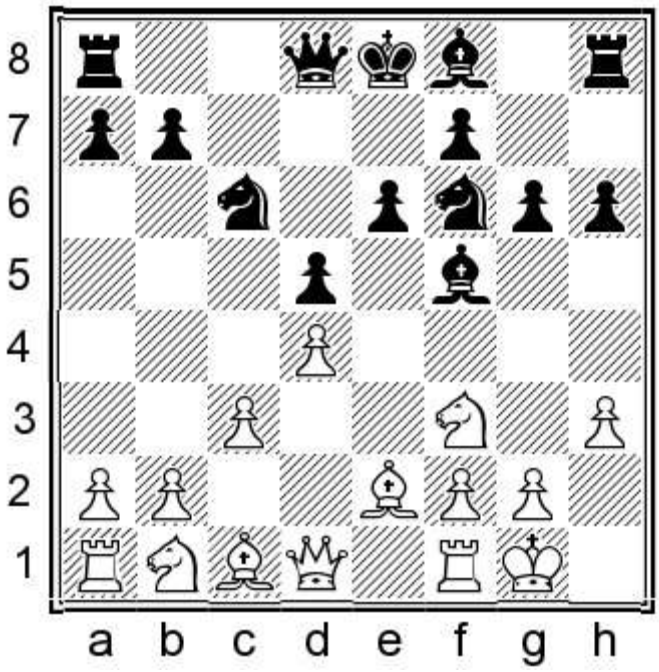

Position after: 9...h6!?N

Black discourages ♗f4 since ...g5 would immediately displace the bishop. Black will likely play ...g5 anyway to generate counterplay on the kingside.

9...h5!? is also possible and leads to positions akin to the ones we discussed in the 7.♗f4 ♗f5 8.♗e2 variation.

10.♗b5

10.♘e5 does not achieve much as Black can follow up with 10...♘xe5 11.dxe5 ♘d7 12.♘a3 h5=.

10...♗d6 11.♘e5 ♖c8 12.♘d2 g5 13.♖e1 0-0 14.♘f1 ♕c7 15.♕e2 ♔h7!

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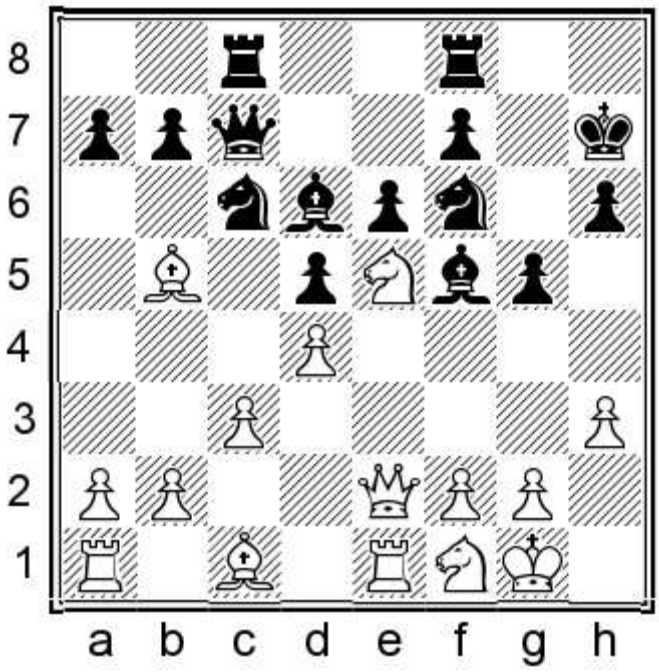

Position after: 15...♔h7!

Black's initiative on the kingside continues! The king finds shelter on h7 and Black can play ...♖g8 and ...♘e4.

16.♘g3 ♘e4!=

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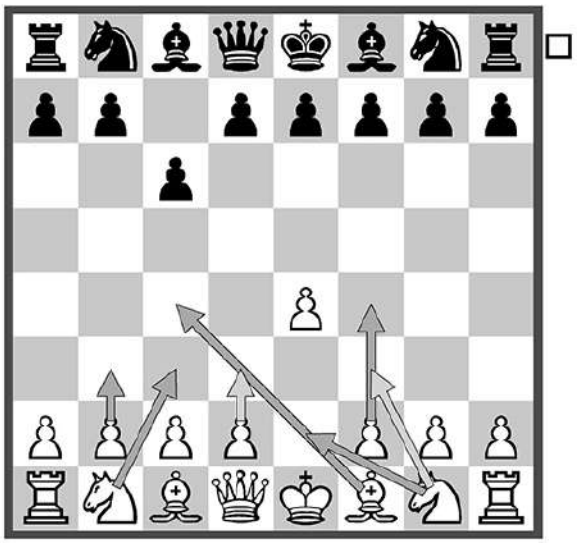
Part VI
Miscellaneous

Chapter 16
Minor alternatives

1.e4 c6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 16 – Minor alternatives

1.e4 c6

a) Alternatives on move 2

b) 2.♘f3 d5 3.exd5, 3.d3 ♕c7 4.--

c) 2.♘f3 d5 3.d3 ♕c7 4.♘c3

a) Alternatives on move 2

Whereas most of the chapters that you find in this book contain lengthy discussions of critical variations, the present one is lighter and more relaxed. Most of the variations that I cover here are not too challenging for Black, but the book would not be complete without them.

1.e4 c6

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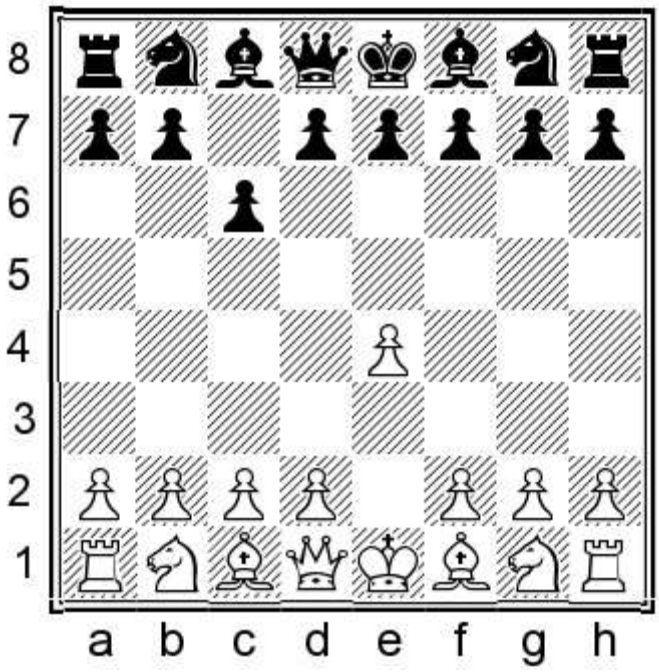
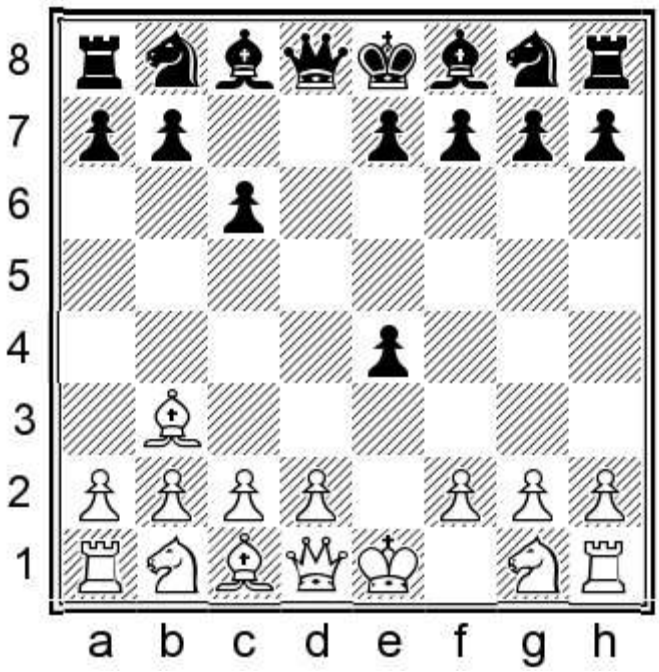


Position after: 1...c6

2.d3

A) 2.♗c4 This move goes against every chess principle: White is allowing Black to gain space in the center and continue his development with tempo (since 2...d5 will attack the bishop). Nevertheless, White has an idea in mind. 2...d5 3.♗b3!? This is White's idea: he gives up the e4-pawn with the hope that, when he will regain it, he will have a better position. Although this move is not sound, it can be tricky to handle in a blitz game. 3...dxe4



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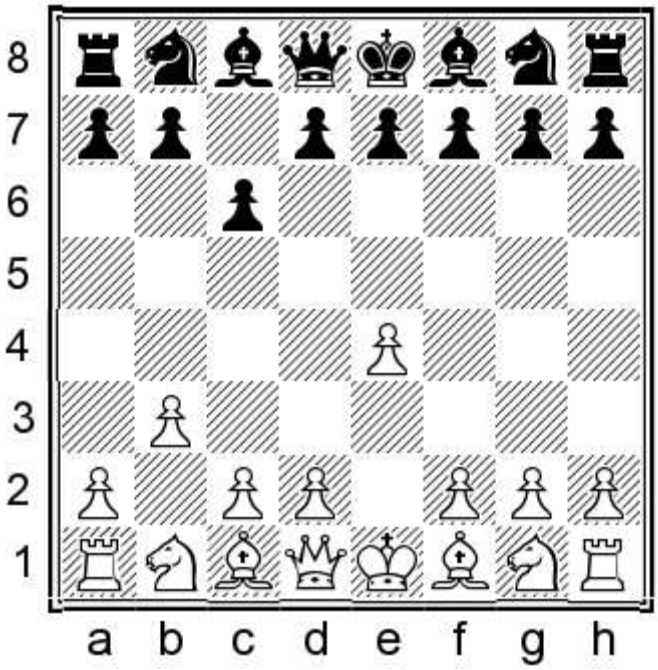
Position after: 3...dxe4

A1) 4.♕h5 g6 5.♕h4 ♗f5!N Surprisingly, no one has played this logical move yet. White is unable to recapture the e4-pawn and simply stands worse. 6.f3 [6.♘c3 e6!∓] 6...exf3 7.♘xf3 e6∓

A2) 4.♘c3 ♘f6 5.f3!? White gives up the pawn for quick development, but Black is just too solid for White to claim any serious compensation. 5...exf3 6.♘xf3 ♗f5 7.♘g5 ♗g6∓ White has already run out of ideas and Black eventually won in Shirazi, K (2333) – Arkell, K (2443) Bled 2018.

B) 2.b3



Position after: 2.b3

While there is little to be gained from developing the c1-bishop so early, b3 has its backers in just about every opening. 2...d5 3.♗b2 [3.exd5 gives White a bad Exchange Caro-Kann since b3 is not helpful to him there. 3...cxd5 4.♗b2 ♘c6 5.♘f3 ♗g4=] 3...dxe4 4.♘c3 ♘f6 5.♘ge2 White will eventually recapture the e4-pawn, but Black will be better developed. 5...g6! 6.♘g3 ♗g7 7.♘cxe4 0-0∓

C) 2.♘e2 This move has been popularized by the ever-creative Nigel Short.

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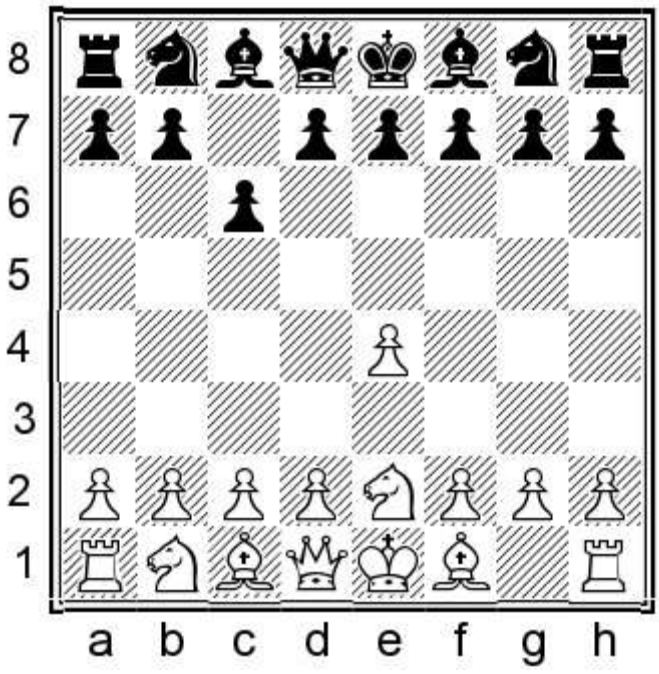
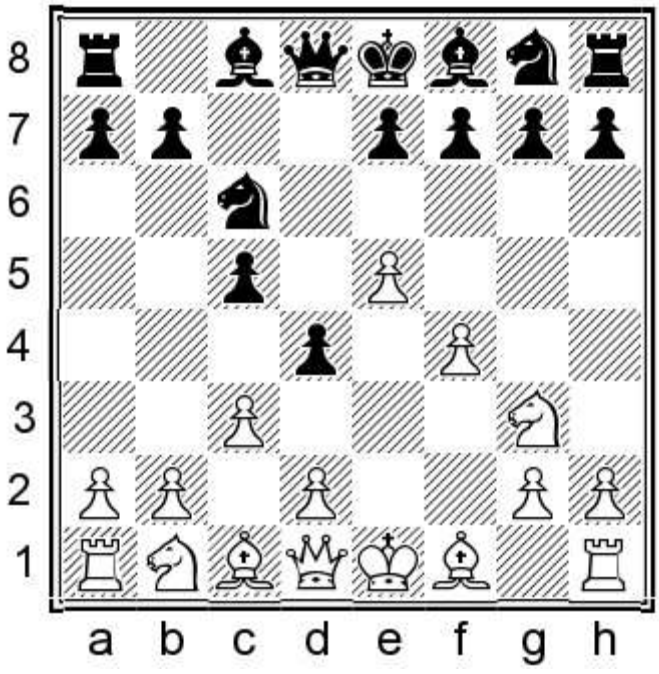


Position after: 2.♘e2

The idea is to discourage Black from playing 2...d5 3.e5 ♗f5, which is Black's most logical continuation, because White will immediately harass the f5-bishop. 2...d5 3.e5 d4!? This move highlights the drawback of White's play: he has left the center unattended and the e2-knight is misplaced. [3...♗f5 is also possible, but I like the idea of taking space in the center and not allowing White to carry out his plan.] 4.c3 [4.f4 is met by 4...♘h6N 5.d3 g6 6.♘d2 ♗g7 7.♘e4 c5 8.g3 0-0 9.♗g2 ♘c6 10.0-0 ♕b6=] 4...c5 5.f4 [5.b4 ♘c6! 6.bxc5 d3! 7.♘f4 ♘xe5 8.♕h5 ♘c6∞ Black already had the upper hand in Van Foreest, J (2519) – Paehtz, E (2463) Lueneburg 2015 EXT 2016.] 5...♘c6 6.♘g3



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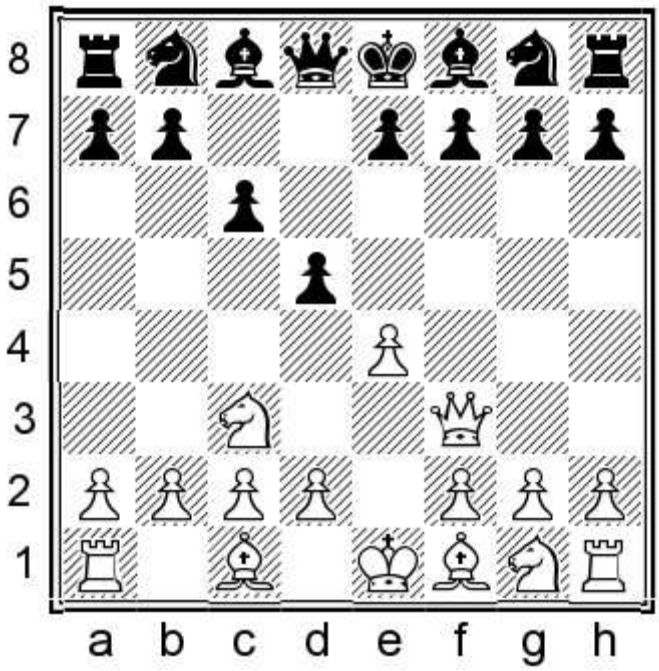
Position after: 6.♘g3

6...f5!?N Why play such a fancy move? Well, why not?! In so doing, Black restricts White's options and stops his initiative right in its tracks. 7.♗c4 e6 8.d3 ♘ge7∓ The knight will come to d5 and Black will stand better due to his space advantage.

D) 2.f4 This pawn advance does not exert any pressure on the key squares: d5, f5, e4. 2...d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.♘f3 e6 5.d4 h5!= Black now wants ...♘h6, ...♗e7 and later ...c5. Although the pawn looks pretty on f4, it does not help White in any way.

E) 2.♘c3 Whereas this move is generally played with the intention of playing the Two Knights variation, White can also play the unconventional 3.♕f3!?. 2...d5 3.♕f3



Position after: 3.♕f3

White is forcing Black to make a decision regarding his d5-pawn, but this is not a problem. 3...dxe4 [3...d4 4.♗c4! is White's idea and, although Black is not worse by any means, I think the text move is easier to play.] 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♗c4 [5.♘xf6+ exf6 is just an excellent version of our open Caro-Kann repertoire.] 5...♘bd7 6.♗b3 g6= White's pieces are not well placed and Black can continue his development without additional hurdles.

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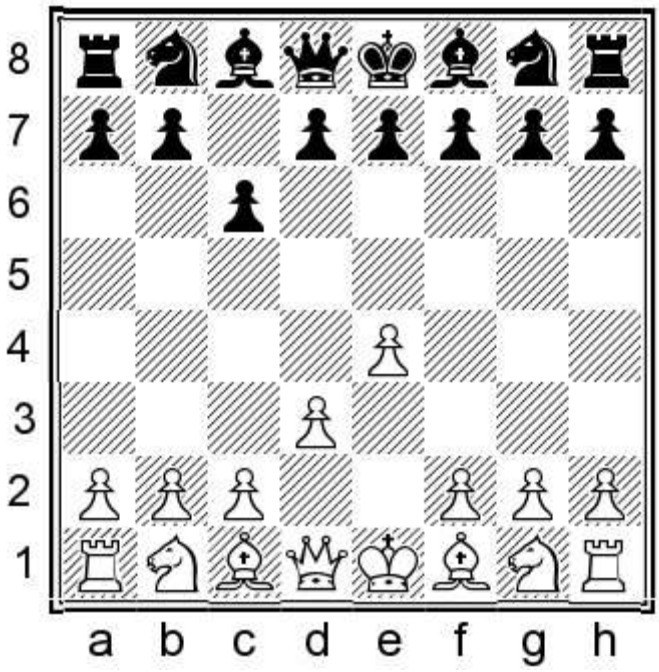
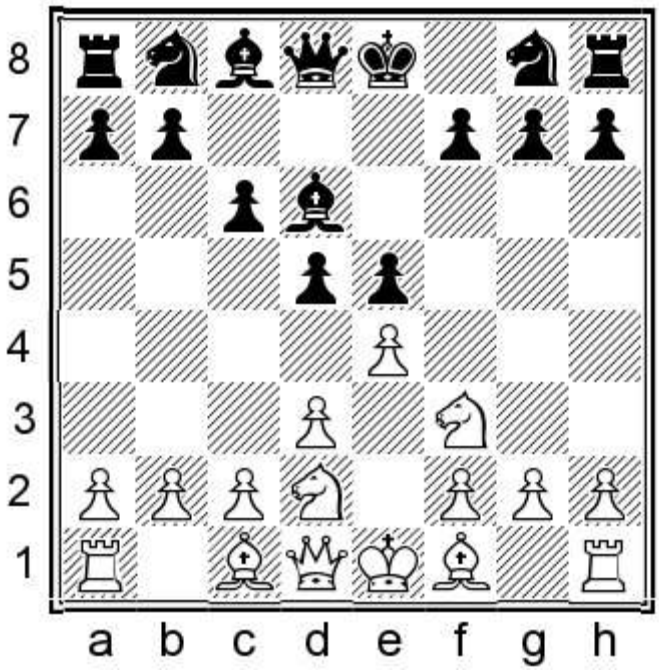


Position after: 2.d3

2...d5 3.♘d2

White can employ this setup against pretty much every opening, including this one. That being said, it is particularly unimpressive here.

3...e5 4.♘gf3 ♗d6



Position after: 4...♗d6

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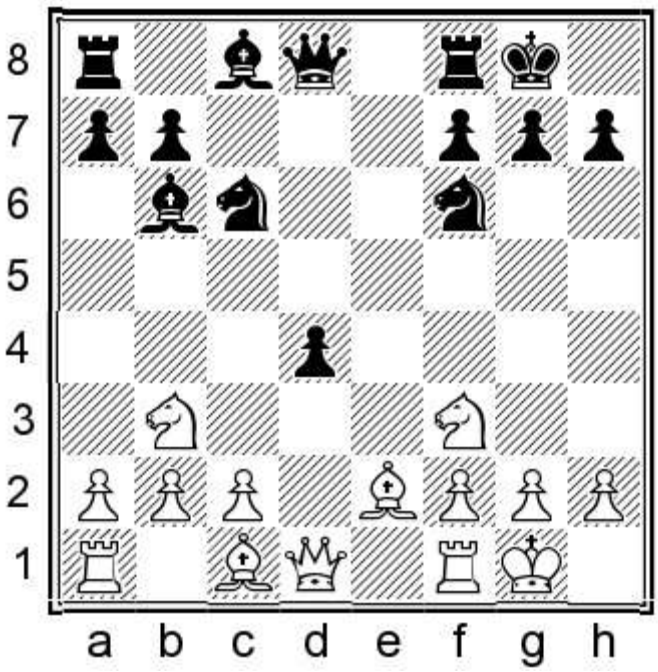
5.d4!?

A) 5.g3 ♘f6 6.♗g2 0-0 7.0-0 ♗c7!? This move prevents any idea related to d4 and solidifies Black's position. 8.♖e1 ♖e8=

B) 5.♗e2 Just as in the 5.g3 note above, Black can play 5...♗c7!? to eliminate the threat of d4 so that he can develop his g8-knight to f6. [5...♘f6?! would be met by 6.d4!∞.] 6.d4 [6.0-0 ♘f6 7.♖e1 0-0= Black is already doing well since White has a rather passive position.] 6...exd4 7.exd5 ♘f6 8.dxc6 ♘xc6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♘b3 ♗b6=



Position after: 10...♗b6=

Rutkowski, I (2211) – Henzner, R (2138) Frankfurt 2000.

5...exd4

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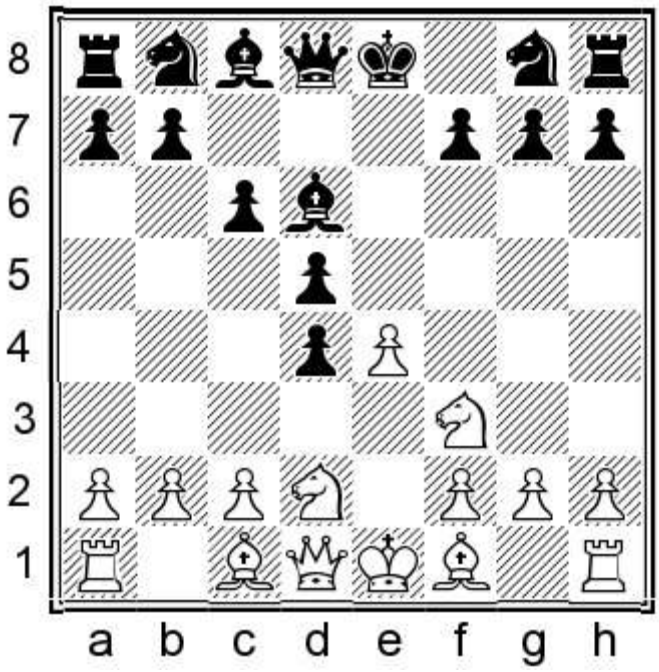

Position after: 5...exd4

6.exd5

This is White's most interesting idea: he is hoping to force Black into an 'IQP' position. However Black is too active for White to get to exert any pressure.

6.♗d3 is also possible, but White will eventually recapture the d4-pawn and the position will be very symmetrical.

6...♘e7 7.0-0 0-0 8.♘xd4 ♘d7 9.exd5 ♘xd5 10.♘e4 ♘e5= Marcuzzo, G (2021) – Lagergren, H (1904) ICCF email 2017.

6...♘f6 7.dxc6

7.♘xd4 ♘xd5= is just equal.

7...♘xc6 8.♗e2 0-0 9.0-0 ♗c7 10.♘b3 ♗b6 11.♗g5 h6 12.♗h4 ♖e8=

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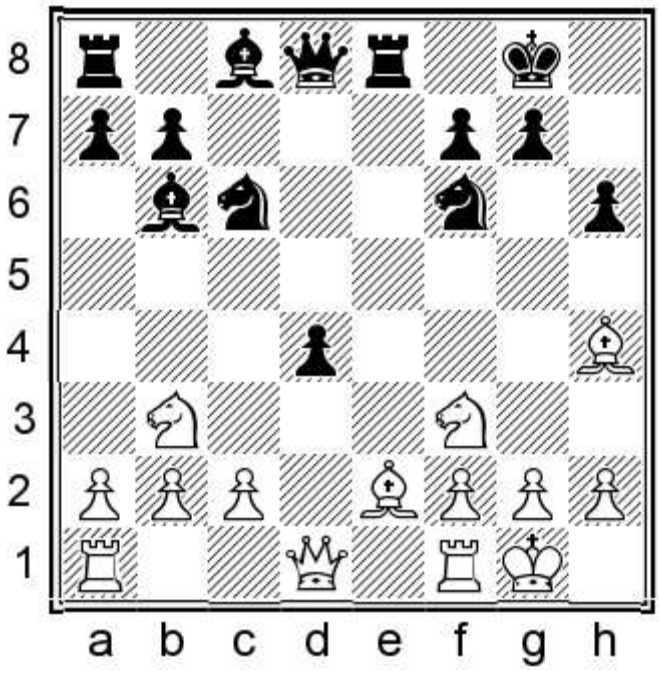

Position after: 12...♖e8=

As Black's track record shows, he is the one in charge since White's position is quite passive.

b) 2.♘f3 d5 3.exd5, 3.d3 ♕c7 4.--

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.d3!?

Of all the variations that we cover in this chapter, this is by far the most challenging. This rare idea has been rediscovered in recent years and it turns out that Black faces a surprinsingly difficult task in equalizing. White's idea is to maintain a flexible position so that he can pick and choose his desired setup based on how Black proceeds.

3.exd5 cxd5 4.♘e5!? This odd-looking idea is not without its venom. White intends to play ♗b5+ and trouble Black on the d7 and c6 squares. [4.♗b5+ is met by 4...♗d7=] 4...♘c6

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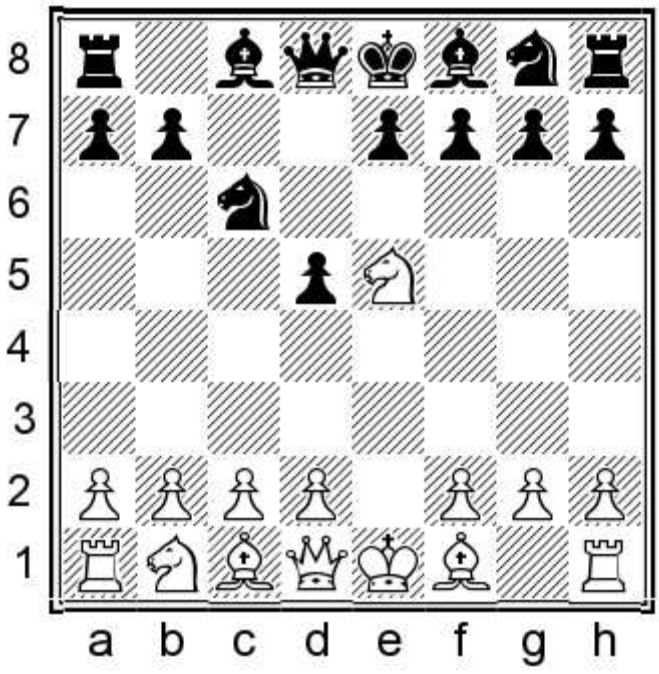
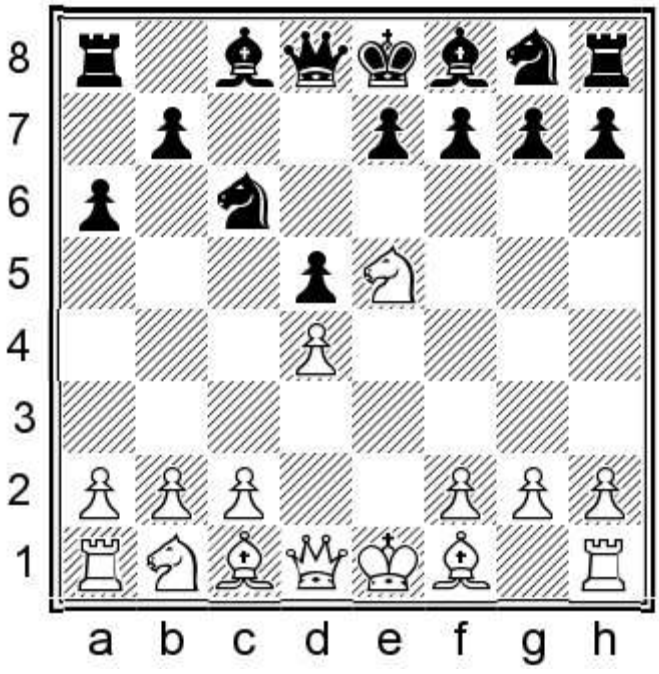


Position after: 4...♘c6

A) 5.♗b5 ♗d7 6.♘xd7 ♕xd7 7.d4 a6! By playing this move now, White forces the bishop to e2 (since 8.♗d3 is not possible in view of 8...♘xd4 with a clear extra pawn.) 8.♗e2 e6 9.c3 ♗d6 10.♘d2 f5!N Black cannot let White complete his development or the bishop pair will make a difference, sooner or later. Instead, Black uses his lead in development to jumpstart his initiative. 11.0-0 ♘f6=

B) 5.d4 a6!? Black has other options, but they all involve giving up the light-squared bishop at some point, usually with ...♗d7. I'd rather keep the bishop alive.



Position after: 5...a6!?

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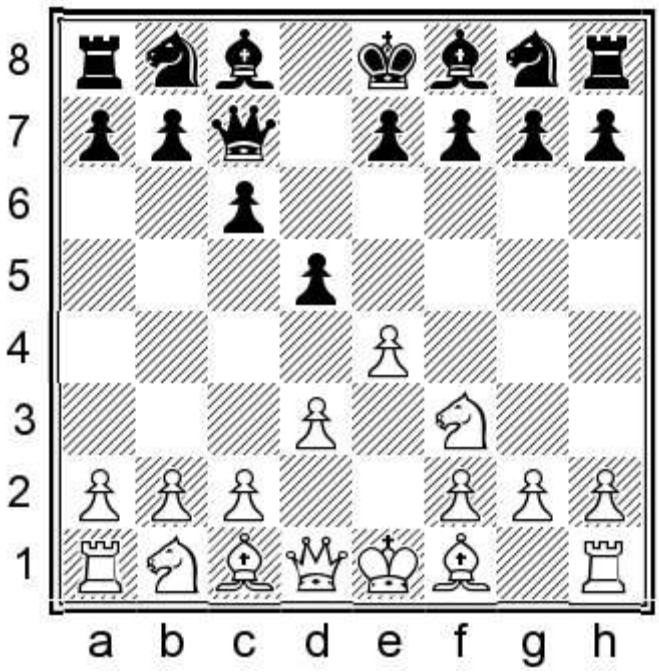
B1) 6.c4 was tried in a few games, but there is little justification for this move since the knight is misplaced on e5 in the Panov. 6...e6 7.♘xc6 bxc6 8.♘c3 ♗d6= Bellahcene, B (2501) – Donchenko, A (2614) Manavgat 2018.

B2) 6.c3 ♘xe5 7.dxe5 ♗f5= Black has resolved his issues on the a4-e8 diagonal and he can now proceed with normal development with ...e6, ...♘e7, ...♘c6 and ...♗c5.

3...♕c7!?



Position after: 3...♕c7!?

It's quite extraordinary to think that Black's first three moves have been 1...c6, 2...d5, and now 3...♕c7! However strange that may seem, this sequence is actually an interesting way to respond to White's idea. With 3...♕c7, Black essentially acknowledges that he should not commit to any specific setup and instead plays a useful move while he awaits White's next move. Moreover, Black introduces the idea of playing ...dxe4, (dxe4), ...e5.

A) The idea behind White's setup is particularly obvious after 3...g6: White can play either 4.e5, forcing Black into a dubious hybrid of the Modern Defense and Caro-Kann, or 4.exd5!? cxd5 5.d4 transposing to the exchange Caro-Kann but with ...g6 included. This does not favor Black since he normally prefers to develop his dark-squared bishop to d6. Although Black has playable positions after both continuations, they do give White the more comfortable game.

B) 3...dxe4 4.dxe4 ♕xd1+ 5.♔xd1

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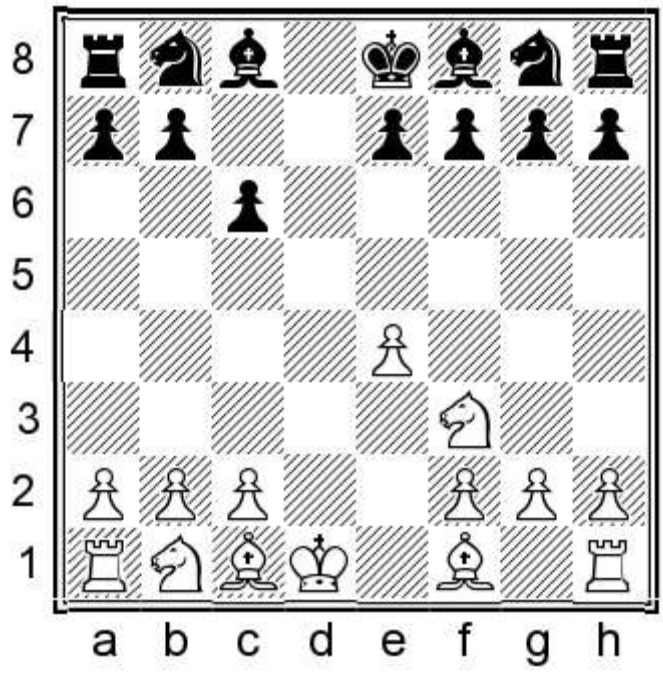

Position after: 5.♔xd1

seems like a rather equal endgame but further inspection reveals that Black does not have an easy time. This is due to White's space advantage in the center and, especially, to Black's queenside weaknesses caused by ...c6.

The following lines illustrate this point.

B1) 5...f6 6.a4 e5 7.♗c4 ♗c5 8.♔e2 ♘e7 9.♘bd2 ♘g6 10.♘b3 ♗d6 11.g3 ♔e7 12.♗e3 ♗e6 13.♘fd2 ♘d7 14.♗xe6 ♔xe6 15.♘c4± White went on to win a fine game in Bacrot, E (2669) – Petrosyan, A (2331) Marseille (blitz) 2019.

B2) 5...♘f6 6.♘fd2 h5!? is a computeresque idea, but it still fails to equalize. [6...g5 7.♘c3!N] 7.h4 ♘g4 8.♔e1 g6 Antipov, M (2549) – Wojtaszek, R (2725) Moscow 2019. 9.♘b3!N 9...♗g7 10.f3 ♘e5 11.a4±

B3) 5...♗g4 6.♗e2 ♘d7 7.♘e1! ♗xe2+ 8.♔xe2 e6 9.♘d2N 9...♘gf6 10.a4 ♗d6 11.f3± White will proceed with ♘d3, ♘c4, ♗e3 and b4, and Black has no counterplay.

C) 3...♗g4, as in the Two Knights variation, is met by 4.h3 ♗h5 [4...♗xf3 5.♕xf3± gives White a good version of the Two Knights since his knight can directly head to d2, which is a significant improvement.] 5.♘c3!± and Black faces a rocky road due to White's threat of g4, followed by h4.

4.exd5N

A) 4.g3 allows Black to showcase his idea: 4...dxe4 5.dxe4 e5 6.♗g2 ♘f6 7.0-0 ♗c5=

B) 4.♘bd2 is best met by 4...♗g4! since the d2-knight is badly placed in positions where Black has not taken on f3. [4...e5 5.d4! exd4 6.♗d3!±] 5.h3 ♗h5 6.g4 ♗g6 7.♗g2 e6= Black will continue with ...♗d6, ...♘d7 and ...♘e7, with an excellent position.

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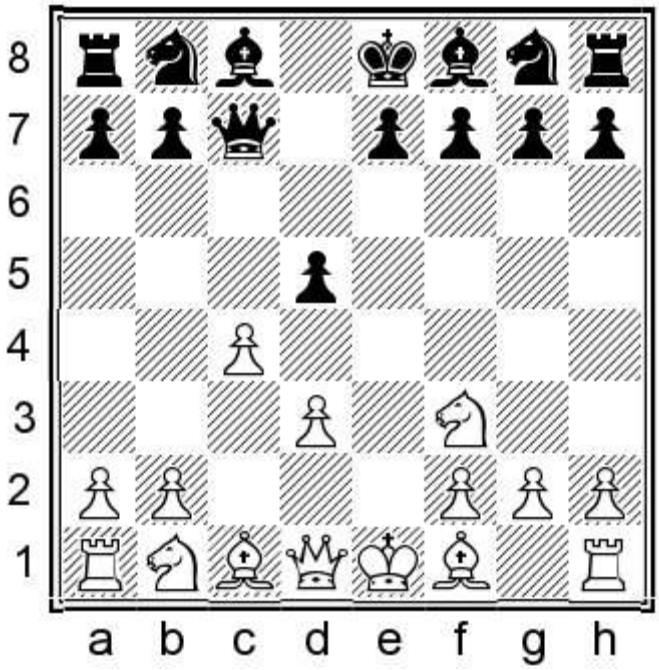
C) 4.♘c3 – see the next subchapter.

4...cxd5 5.c4!?



Position after: 5.c4!?

This is an attempt to exploit the positioning of Black's queen. We are already in uncharted territory, but I think we should take a look at how the game can continue.

Black is is excellent shape after 5.d4 ♘f6= since ...♕c7 is a useful move in the Exchange systems.

5...♘f6 6.♘c3 e6

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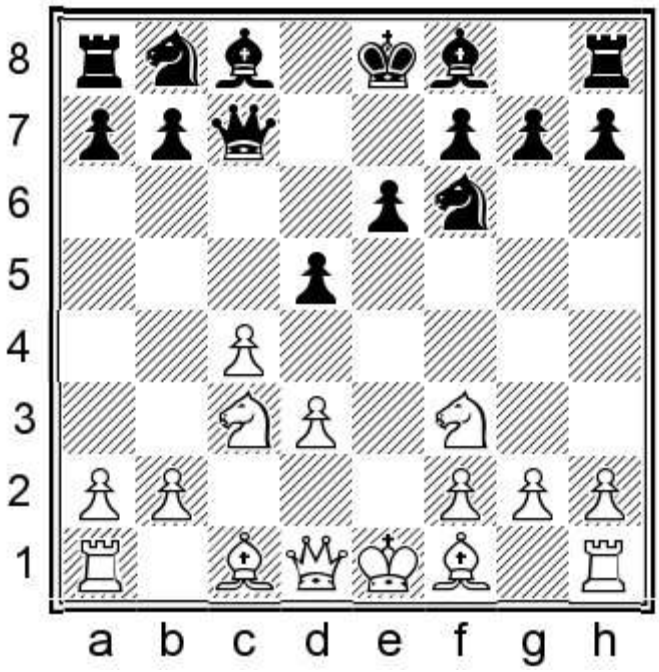
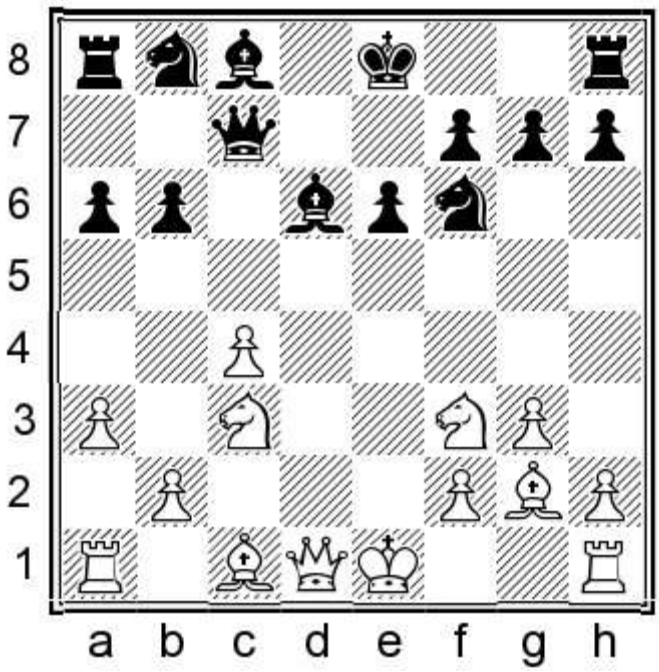


Position after: 6...e6

7.g3

A) 7.♗e2 ♗b4! Black wants to cut out any idea of ♘b5 and streamline his development. 8.0-0 [8.♕b3 ♘c6 9.0-0 0-0 10.cxd5 ♘xd5 11.♘xd5 exd5 12.♕xd5 ♗e6 13.♕e4 ♕d7⩲] 8...♗xc3 9.bxc3 0-0 10.cxd5 ♘xd5 11.c4 ♘c3 12.♕d2 ♘xe2+ 13.♕xe2 b6=

B) 7.a3 Since ...♗b4 is a key idea for Black, White can prevent it. However, this delays his own development. 7...a6! Black needs to prevent ♘b5. 8.g3 dxc4 9.dxc4 ♗d6 10.♗g2 b6! Black needs to play this now (while he still can) and challenge the g2-bishop.



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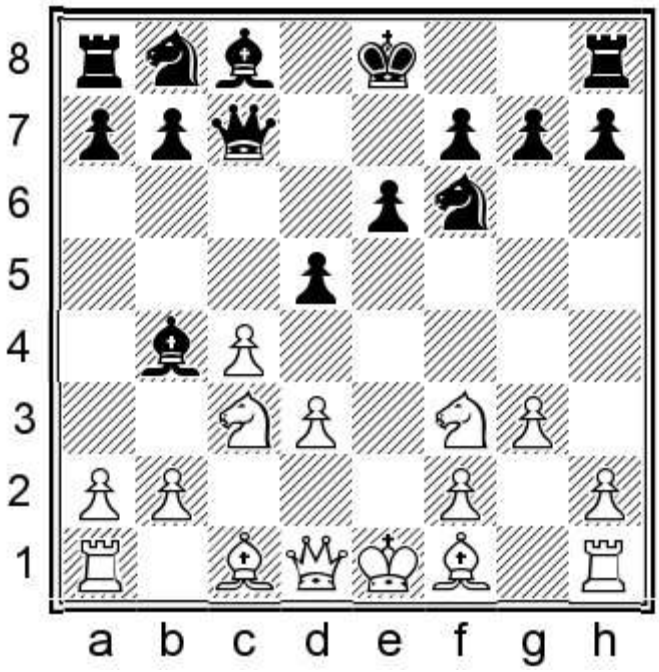
Position after: 10...b6!

11.0-0 ♗b7 12.♕d3 [12.♗e3 0-0 13.♖c1 ♘bd7=] 12...♘c6! Although the knight is usually better placed on d7, Black needs to be able to play ...♖d8 in this case. [12...♘bd7 13.♖d1±] 13.♗e3 [13.♖d1 ♖d8=] 13...♘e5! 14.♘xe5 ♗xe5 15.♗xb7 ♕xb7=

7...♗b4



Position after: 7...♗b4

Again, Black must eliminate the c3-knight to prevent White from developing a dangerous initiative on the queenside.

8.♗g2

8.♗f4 ♗xc3+ 9.bxc3 ♕a5 10.♗d6 [10.♕b3 dxc4 11.♕xc4 0-0 12.♗g2 ♘c6=] 10...♕xc3+ 11.♘d2 ♘c6 12.♖c1 ♕a5 13.♗g2 ♕d8 14.♗c5 b6 15.♗a3 ♘e7!= White has compensation for the pawn, but nothing more since Black will be able to castle on the next move.

8...dxc4 9.♗f4

9.0-0 cxd3 10.♕xd3 0-0∞

9...♕a5 10.dxc4 ♗xc3+ 11.bxc3 ♕xc3+ 12.♘d2 0-0 13.0-0 ♘c6 14.♖c1 ♕a5∞

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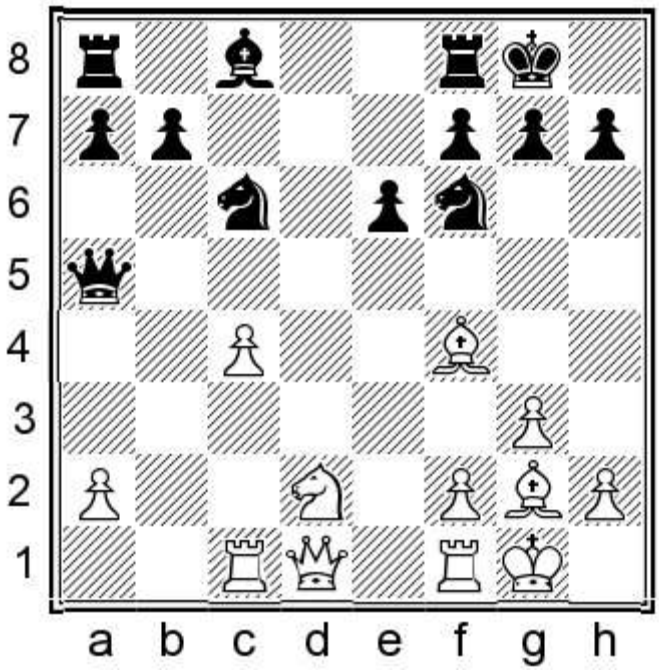
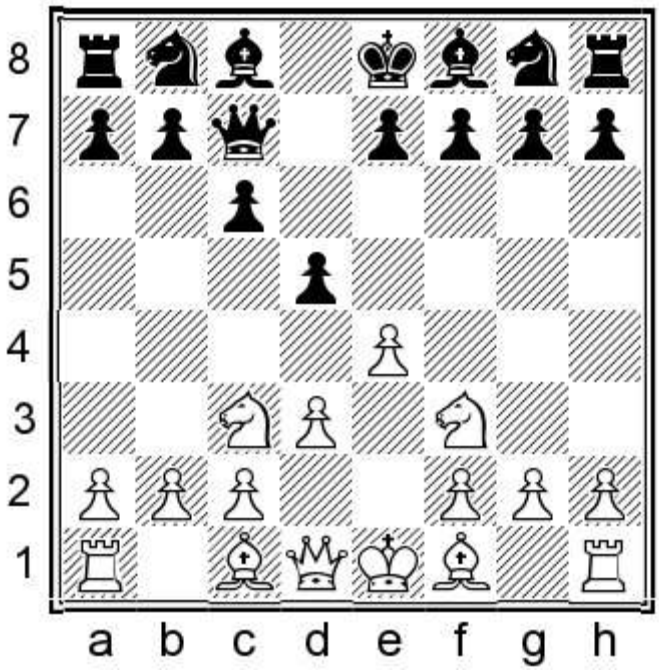


Position after: 14...♕a5∞

Just as in the previous lines, White has compensation; however, Black is very solid and should be able to neutralise the pressure by returning the pawn.

c) 2.♘f3 d5 3.d3 ♕c7 4.♘c3

1.e4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.d3!? ♕c7!? 4.♘c3



Position after: 4.♘c3

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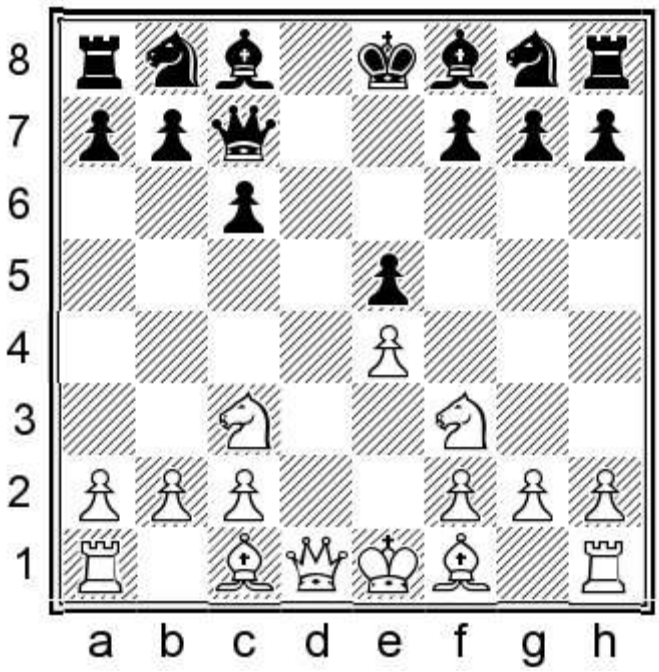
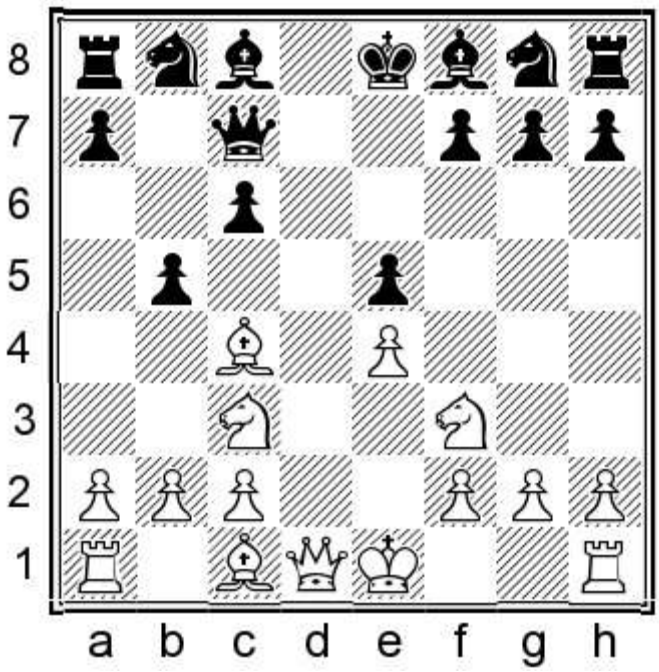
4...dxe4 5.♘xe4

5.dxe4 e5



Position after: 5...e5

This position resembles the Philidor Defense: we can easily get this structure from the Philidor if White plays dxe5. However, White generally prefers not to play dxe5 in the Philidor since it releases the pressure on Black's position and opens up the a3-f8 diagonal for his dark-squared bishop. While Black needs to play accurately due to his lag in development, he is essentially fine. 6.♗c4 [6.a4 is too slow to pose any problems and can be met by 6...♘f6 7.♗c4 ♗b4 8.0-0 0-0=.] 6...b5!



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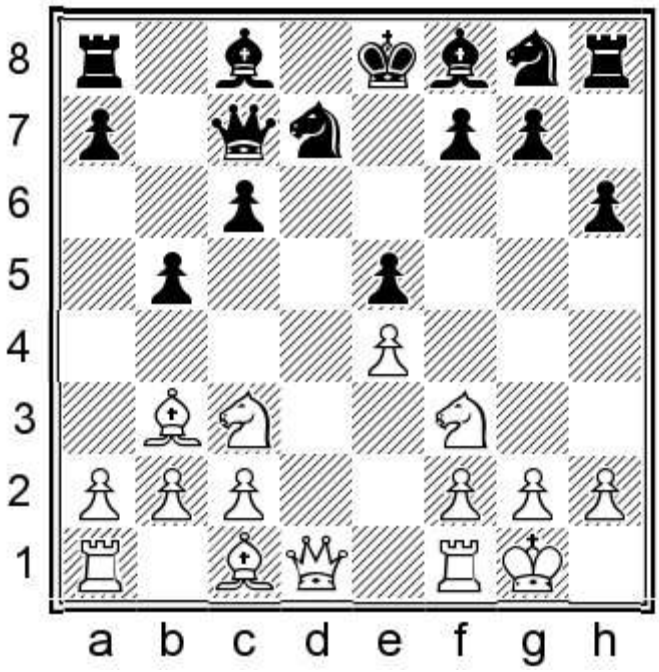
Position after: 6...b5!

Black must gain space on the queenside before he continues his devleopment. [6...h6 is a natural continuation: Black wants to play ...♘f6 but first prevents ♘g5. However, White can use his lead in development to develop an initiative. 7.a4 ♘f6 8.0-0 ♗b4 9.♘h4!±]

A) 7.♗d3 cancels the plan to play ♘g5, so Black can resume his development. 7...♘f6 8.a4 [8.0-0 ♗e7 9.b3 0-0 10.♗b2 ♗b7 11.a4 a6=] 8...b4 9.♘e2 ♗e7 10.b3 0-0 11.♗b2 ♗d6 12.♘g3 c5 13.0-0 ♘c6=

B) 7.♗b3 h6 8.0-0 ♘d7! Black can also play 8...♘f6 but the text move is more precise: now, White also has to deal with the idea of ...♘c5.



Position after: 8...♘d7!

B1) 9.♘xb5 is tempting but Black can easily defend: 9...cxb5 10.♕d5 ♘b6 11.♕xb5+ ♗d7 12.♕xe5+ ♕xe5 13.♘xe5 ♗e6 14.♗xe6 fxe6 15.♘g6 ♖h7=. White has three pawns to compensate for the piece. While this is surely enough for equality, there is no basis for White to claim an advantage.

B2) 9.a4 b4 10.♘e2 ♗a6! 11.♖e1 0-0-0!

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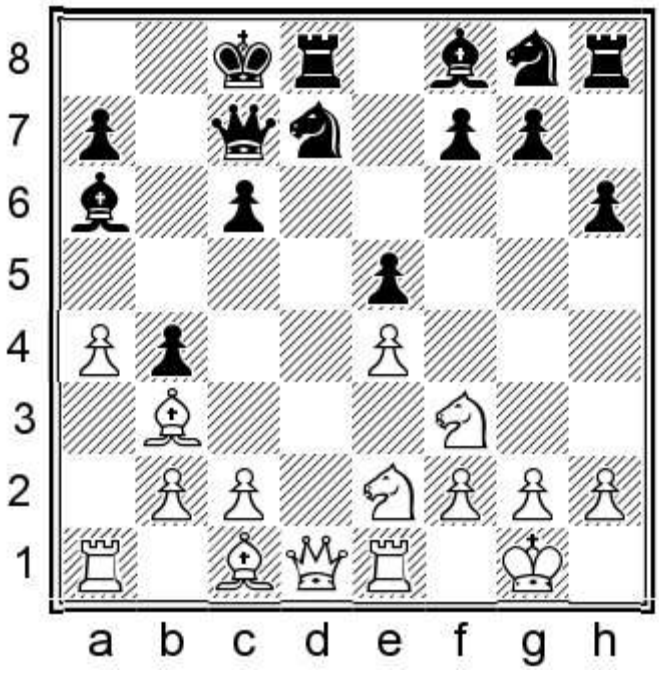

Position after: 11...0-0-0!

Black is solid enough to take the liberty of castling queenside! The position is quite double-edged but Black controls all the key central squares and this allows him to play ambitiously. 12.♗d2 [12.♗e3 ♘gf6=] 12...♘c5 13.♘g3 h5!∞

5...♘f6

Whereas the alternatives to 4.♘c3 dxe4 5.♘xe4 lead to very unique positions, the present line brings us back to Caro-Kann territory.

6.♕e2!?

This idea is reminiscent of the Two Knights variation with 3...dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘f6 5.♕e2. White intends to recapture on e4 with the queen and then continue his development.

6.♘xf6+ exf6= is just a good version of the open Caro-Kann with 4...♘f6 5.♘xf6+ exf6 since the pawn on d3 does not fit White's setup at all.

6...♘bd7

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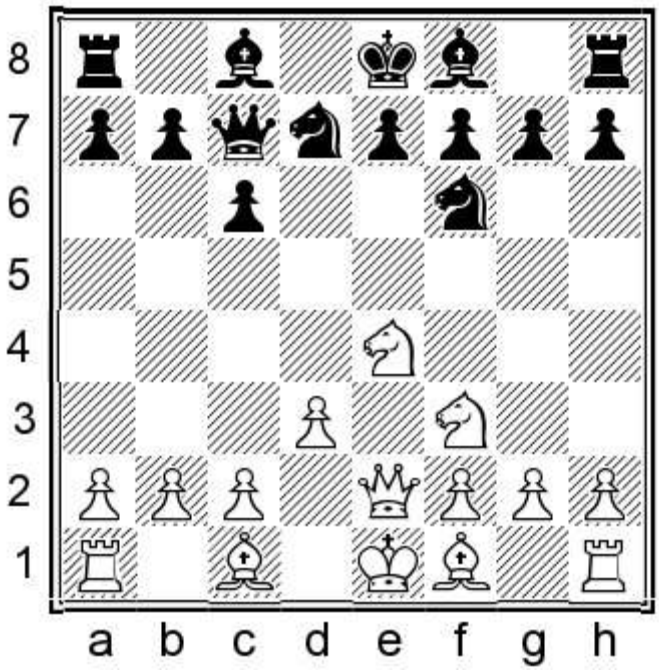


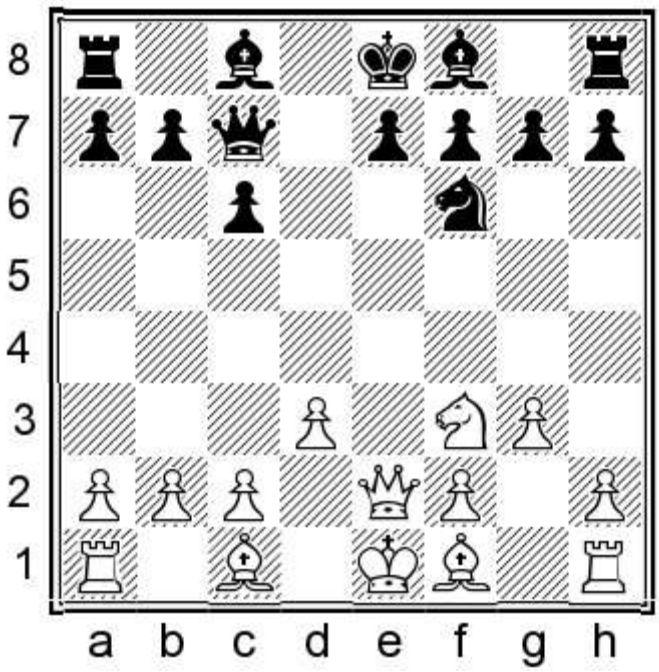
Position after: 6...♘bd7

7.g3

A) 7.♘xf6+ ♘xf6 8.g3 transposes to the main line (7.g3 ♘xe4 8.♕xe4 ♘f6 9.♕e2).

B) 7.d4 is playable but White gets nothing more than a typical Caro-Kann position with a symbolic edge. 7...♘xe4 8.♕xe4 ♘f6 9.♕e5 ♕xe5+ 10.dxe5 ♘d5 11.♗d2 ♗g4 12.♘d4 e6=

7...♘xe4 8.♕xe4 ♘f6 9.♕e2



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Position after: 9.♕e2

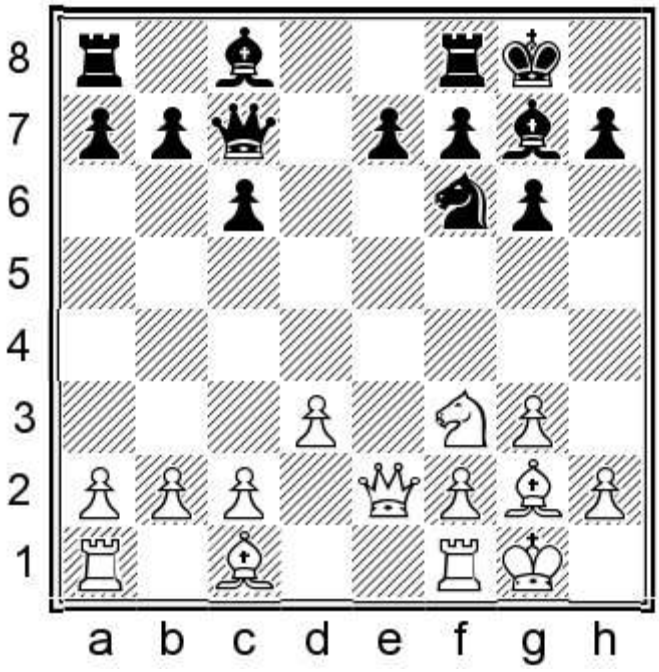
We have now reached an important position: Black can choose to develop his pieces in two ways. He can either start by developing his light-squared bishop outside the pawn chain with ...♗g4 or ...♗f5 or he can forego the development of his light-squared bishop and play 9...g6.

The problem with the first approach is that the bishop is not well placed on g4 or on f5 and that White will be able to go after the bishop and cause trouble for Black. I recommend the second approach for the flexibility that it offers Black, and because it makes White's moves less intuitive.

9...g6

9...♗g4 should be met by 10.♗g2 e6 11.h3 ♗h5 12.♗d2!± and I dislike Black's position. White will continue with 0-0-0, g4 and ♘e5 and Black will be quite passive.

10.♗g2 ♗g7 11.0-0 0-0



Position after: 11...0-0

The most pressing issue for Black is the development of his light-squared bishop. If Black can trade light-squared bishops, or solve his issue by finding a good square for the c8-bishop, he will have equalized completely. Black also welcomes the trade of dark-squared bishops, since he can then trade his light-squared bishop for White's knight without giving White the bishop pair.

12.♖e1

A) 12.♗f4 ♕b6 13.♗e5 ♖e8= only helps Black since he will be able to trade White's e5-bishop (when it suits him) with a move like ...♘d7.

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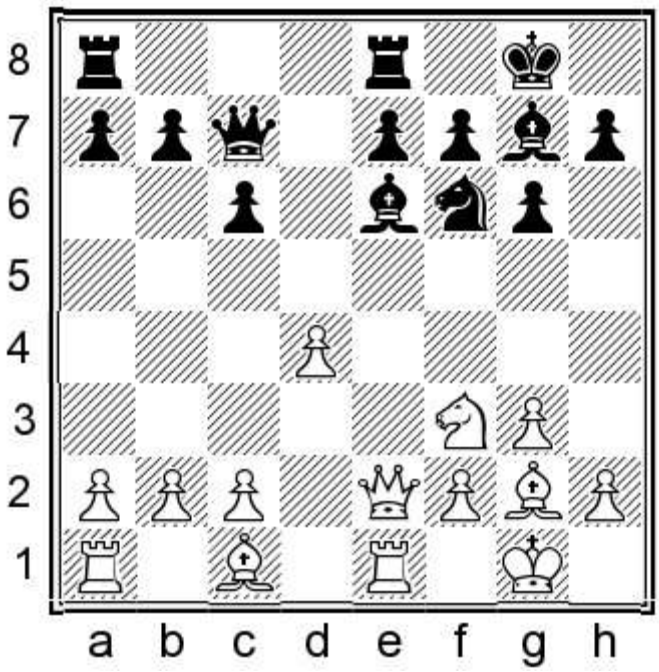
B) 12.h3 prevents ...♗g4 but Black can continue 12...♗e6! connecting rooks and hinting at the idea of ...♗d5. 13.♖e1 [13.c4 prevents ...♗d5 but White's position is unstable after 13...♖ad8; 13.♗f4 ♕d7 14.♘e5 ♕c8 15.g4 ♗d5!=] 13...♖fe8 14.♗f4 ♕c8 15.♔h2 ♘d5 16.♗c1 ♗f5=

12...♖e8 13.d4

13.♗f4 ♕b6 14.a4 a5 15.♗e5 ♗g4! 16.h3 ♗xf3 17.♗xf3 ♘d7= Black has traded his light-squared bishop, making it a good idea to also break up the bishop-pair by trading dark-squared bishops. Then the remaining f3-bishop will be no better than the d7-knight.

13...♗e6!



Position after: 13...♗e6!

Just like in the 12.h3 variation, Black places his bishop on e6. There is no point in playing ...♗g4 since White can respond with h3.

14.♗f4

14.c4 ♖ad8 15.♗f4 ♕c8 16.♖ad1 ♗g4=

14...♕d7 15.c3

A) 15.c4 ♖ad8 16.♖ad1 ♗g4= Once the pawn is on c4, Black can even afford to give up the bishop pair because his counterplay against the d4-pawn will drain White's resources.

B) 15.♖ad1 ♘d5 16.♗d2 ♖ad8=

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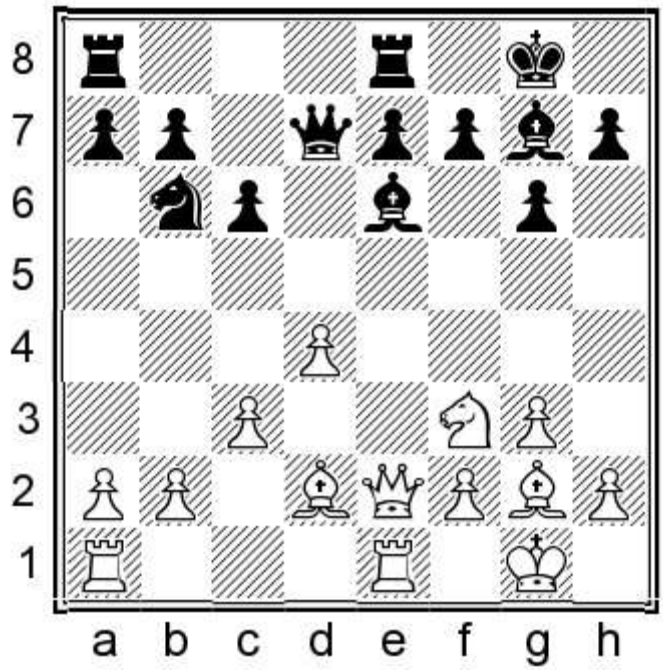
15...♘d5 16.♗d2 ♘b6=



Position after: 16...♘b6=

The knight has been transferred to the queenside and now Black can expand there with ...a5 and possibly ...a4. White has a bit more space, but Black is very solid and controls all the most important central squares.

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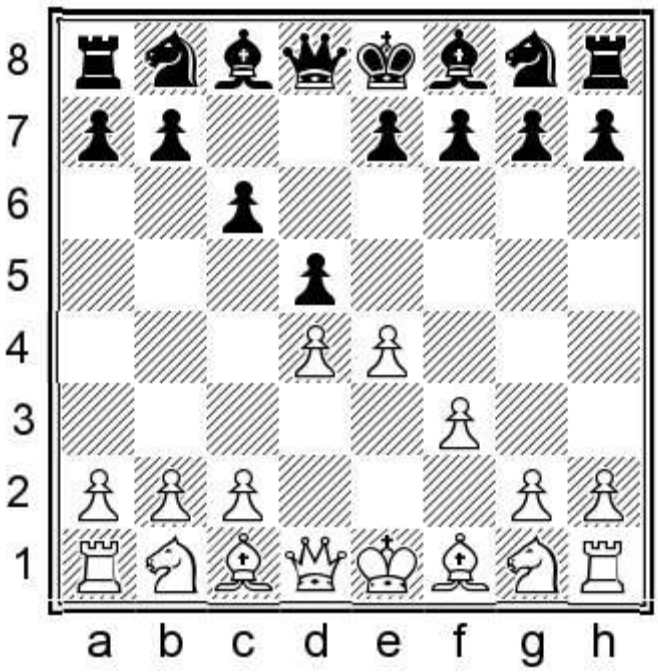
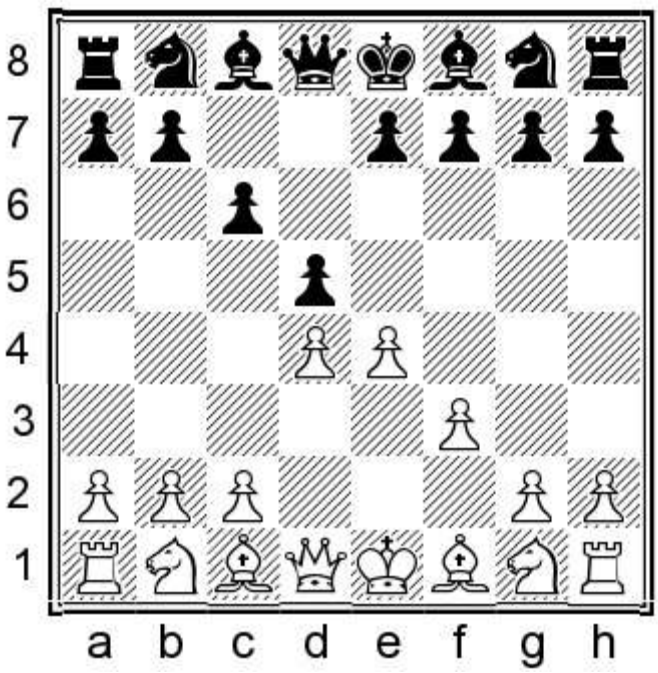
Chapter 17
The Fantasy Variation

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.f3



1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.f3



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Position after: 3.f3

The Fantasy variation is an original way of meeting the Caro-Kann. White solidifies his center by defending the e4-pawn with another pawn, and aims to maintain control over the central squares that Black is fighting for. The drawbacks are quite obvious: White weakens his position and takes away the f3-square for his g1-knight.

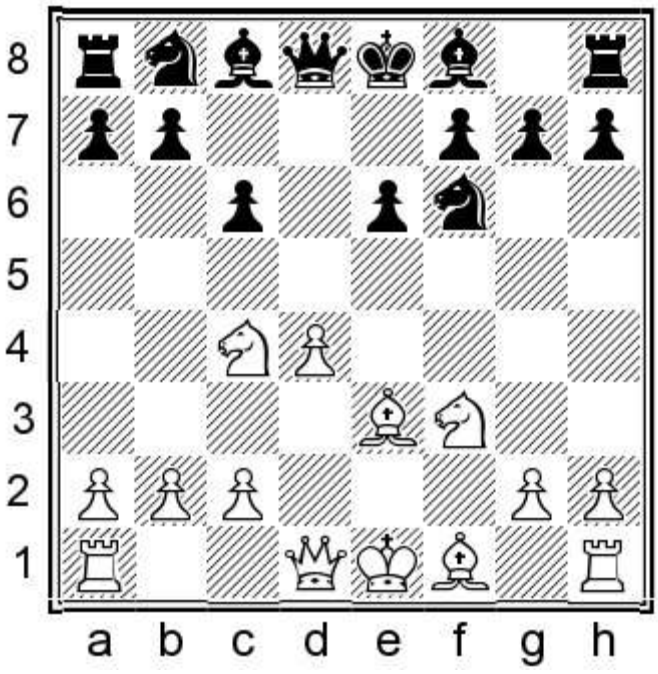
The positions that arise in the Fantasy Caro-Kann are quite different from the rest of the positions that we have discussed in this book because the pawn structure is so different.

3...e6

I like this move for its simplicity: Black calls time on trying to develop the c8-bishop to an active square and instead proceeds with kingside development. Black threatens ...dxe4 and ...♕h4+, an idea with which White must deal with.

4.♘c3

4.♗e3 is also possible – White gives up the e4-pawn for quick development. Even though he has some compensation, Black is not in danger. 4...dxe4! 5.♘d2 [5.fxe4 ♕h4+ 6.g3 ♕xe4 7.♕e2 ♘f6 8.♗g2 ♕g4! 9.♘f3 ♘bd7N 10.0-0 ♗e7∞] 5...exf3 6.♘gxf3 ♘f6 7.♘c4 [7.♗d3 ♗e7=]



Position after: 7.♘c4

This is described as “an important manoeuvre” in Bezgodov’s “*The Extreme Caro-Kann*”, but Black can play 7...♘d5! 8.♗d2 b5!N 9.♘ce5 f6!∓ and White’s knight is chased away from e5.

4...♗b4

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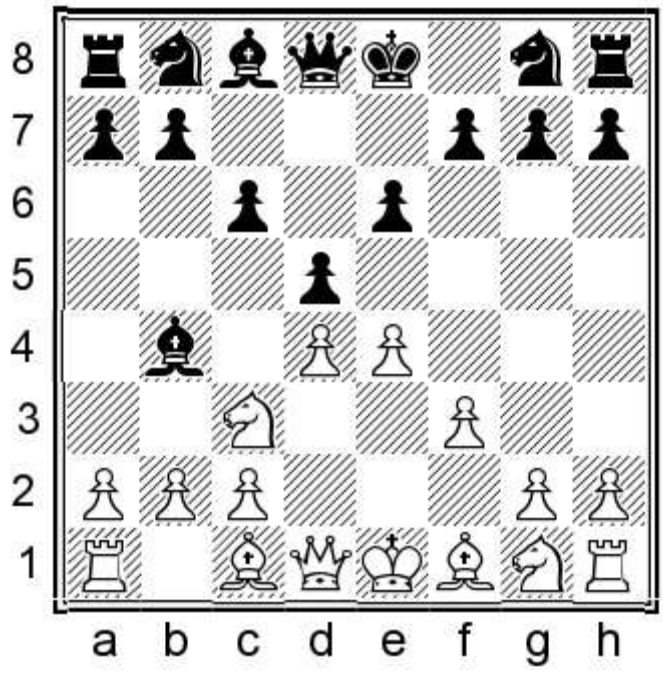

Position after: 4...♗b4

Just like Black does so often in the Caro-Kann, he develops his bishop first with the intention of following up with ...♘e7. Black will seek to complete his development and then generate counterplay, either in the center (with ...c5) or on the queenside (with ...b5).

5.♗f4

A) 5.♕d3 ♘e7 6.♗d2 [6.♗f4 is covered via the 5.♗f4 move-order.] 6...b6! Black prepares to go after White's queen with ...♗a6 and break open the center with ...c5. 7.♘ge2 0-0 8.a3 ♗a6 9.♕e3 ♗d6 10.0-0-0 c5!∞

B) 5.♘ge2 This move defends against Black's threat of ...dxe4 and ...♕h4+, but it is a suboptimal way of developing for White. 5...♘e7 6.a3 ♗a5 7.♗e3 0-0 8.♕d2 ♘d7 9.♘g3 f5!

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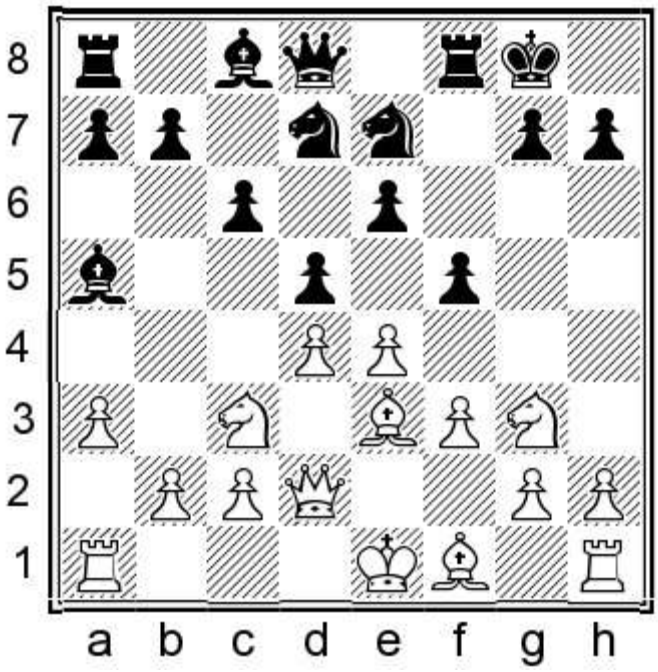
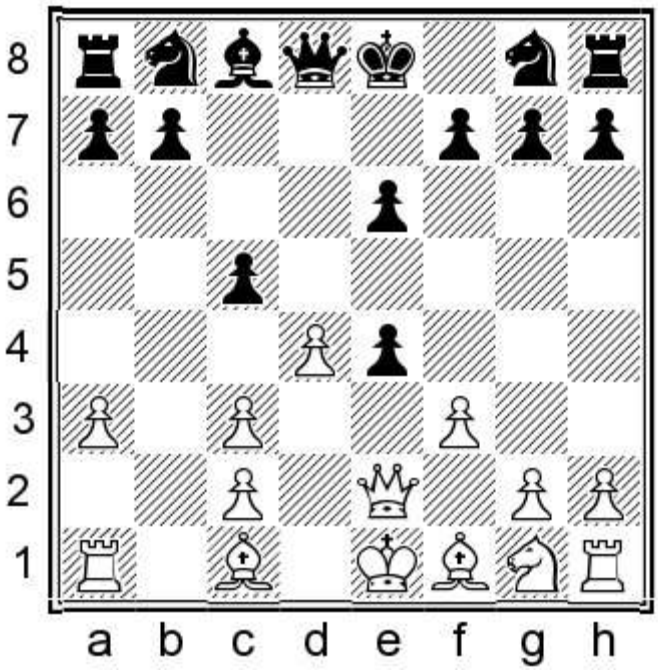


Position after: 9...f5!

Black claims space on the kingside. 10.exf5 exf5!?N [10...♘xf5 11.♘xf5 exf5= is fine, but I don't see any special reason to trade knights.] 11.♗d3 ♘f6=

C) 5.a3 is an interesting gambit line. Similarly to the 4.♗e3 line, White gives up the e4-pawn for the initiative. 5...♗xc3+ 6.bxc3 dxe4 7.♕e2 c5!



Position after: 7...c5!

Black does not take the pawn and instead focuses on attacking White's weaknesses while he

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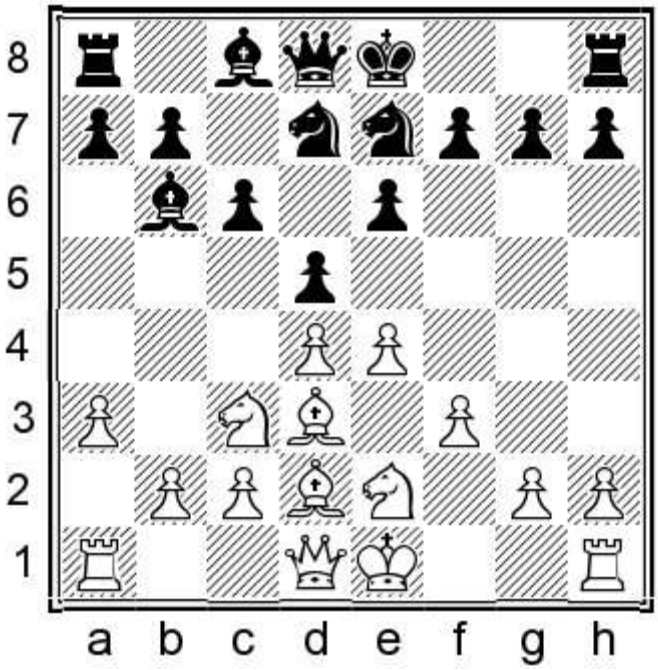
recaptures the e4-pawn. [The greedy approach plays into White's hands: 7...exf3 8.♘xf3 ♘f6 9.♕e3!± when White indeed has a dangerous kingside attack.] 8.♕e3 [8.♕xe4 ♘f6 9.♕h4 cxd4 10.cxd4 ♘c6 11.c3 e5!∓ Black is ready to castle, whereas White is far behind in development and the center is about to be ripped open.] 8...♘c6 9.dxc5 ♕h4+ 10.g3 ♕e7 11.fxe4 ♘f6= White is the one with an extra pawn, but we can see quite easily that this does not give him an advantage, since his pawn structure is completely ruined. Black will finish his development and then target White's weaknesses.

D) 5.♗d2 ♘e7 6.a3 [6.♘ce2 is met by 6...♗a5!= and White has not improved his position.] 6...♗a5 7.♗d3 White intends to play ♘ge2 and 0-0. If he is able to do so, he will achieve an edge due to his space advantage. Therefore, Black should immediately counterattack in the center. 7...♗b6! [7...♘d7 is another way to begin the same plan, but White can play 8.f4!∞ and Black has no more chances to play ...e5.] 8.♘ge2 ♘d7



Position after: 8...♘d7

Black wants to play ...e5 and open the position to profit from White's weaknesses and activate his own pieces. 9.exd5 White renounces his space advantage to keep the position closed. Of course, it's difficult to imagine that he can achieve any advantage with this continuation. [9.f4? no longer works because Black can simply play 9...c5!∓; 9.♗e3 is met by 9...♘e5!= eliminating White's best piece while giving his own pieces a lot more space; 9.♗g5 e5! 10.exd5 exd4 11.♘a4 ♘e5=.] 9...exd5 10.♗g5 h6 11.♗h4 ♘f8 12.♕d2 ♘fg6 13.♗f2 ♘f5=

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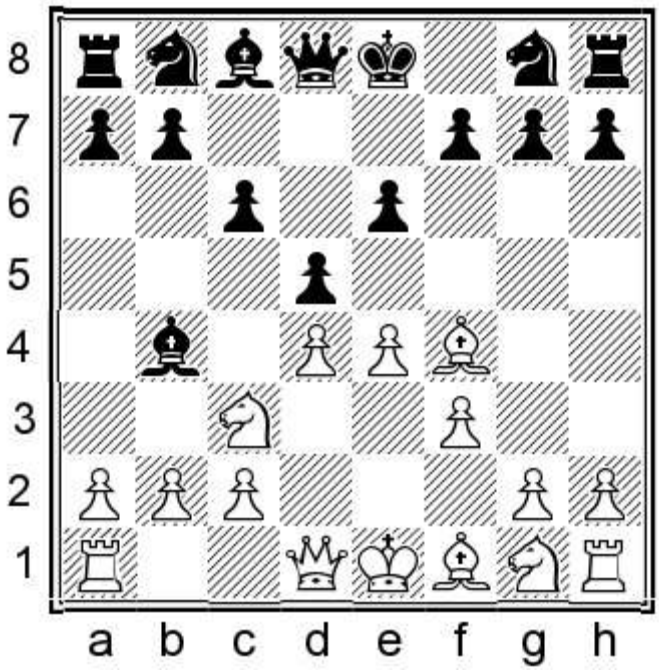

Position after: 5.♗f4

5...♘e7

5...♘f6 is also playable, and most likely Black can equalize with correct play, but I find White's position nicer to play.

A) Black has a better version of the main line after 6.♕d3 0-0 since the knight is better placed on f6 than e7. 7.♘ge2 [7.a3 ♗e7=] 7...b5!→

B) White has an interesting alternative in 6.e5! ♘fd7 7.a3 ♗xc3+ [7...♗e7 gives us a position akin to the main lines of the Steinitz French. Although it is certainly playable, I prefer to remain within Caro-Kann territory. 8.♗e3 c5 9.f4 cxd4 10.♕xd4 ♘c6 11.♕d2∞] 8.bxc3 c5 9.a4!N

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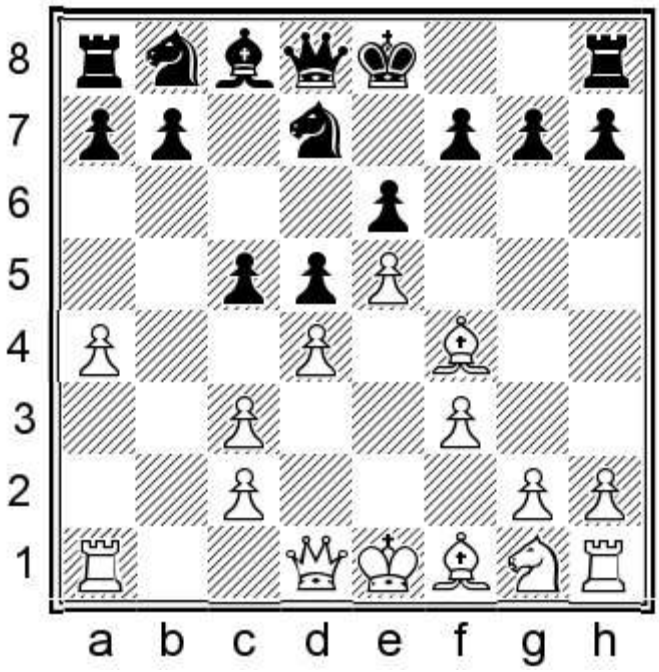
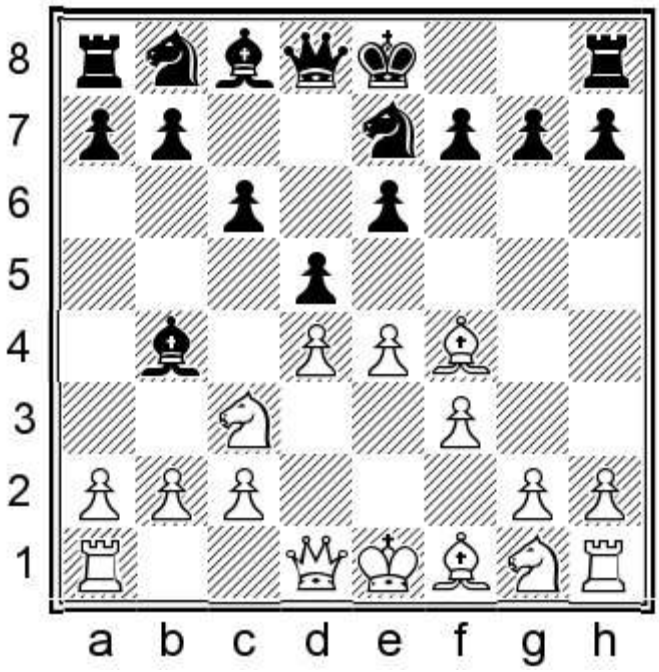


Position after: 9.a4!N

This position should be analyzed further. The structure is very similar to that of the Winawer French but there are some key differences. Importantly, Black's g8-knight is on d7, making it difficult for Black to target the d4-pawn; his plans will now instead focus on generating counterplay with ...f6.



Position after: 5...♘e7

6.♕d3

A) 6.a3 does not achieve much: 6...♗xc3+ [6...♗a5 7.h4∞] 7.bxc3 0-0 8.♗d3 c5! 9.dxc5 ♘d7 10.♗d6

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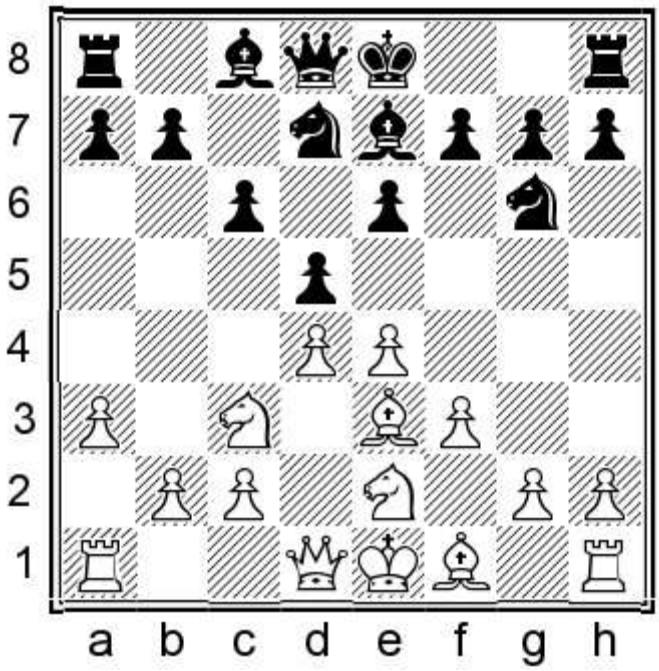
♖e8 11.♘e2 ♕a5=.

B) 6.♘ge2 ♘g6! This move was not considered by Bezgodov in his book (his line continued 6...0-0), but I think it solves Black's problems. Now, the b4-bishop can retreat to e7, whence it will participate in both Black's kingside defense and his queenside initiative. 7.♗e3 [7.♗g3 dxe4! 8.fxe4 e5! 9.dxe5 0-0=] 7...♘d7 8.a3 ♗e7= Weber, B – Groiss, W Vienna 2006.



Position after: 8...♗e7=

6...0-0

6...b6 has been played more frequently, but I prefer the text move. 7.♘ge2 ♗a6 8.♕e3 0-0 9.0-0-0 [9.a3 ♗xc3+ 10.♘xc3 ♗xf1 11.♖xf1 c5⇄] 9...c5 10.a3 ♗xc3 11.♕xc3 ♘d7∞ The position is quite unclear and could be analyzed further, but one good line for Black is enough.

7.0-0-0 ♘d7

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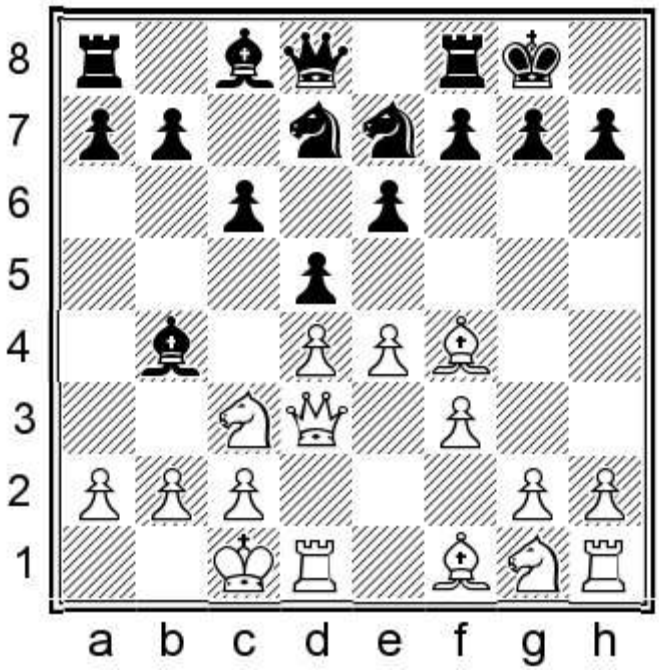


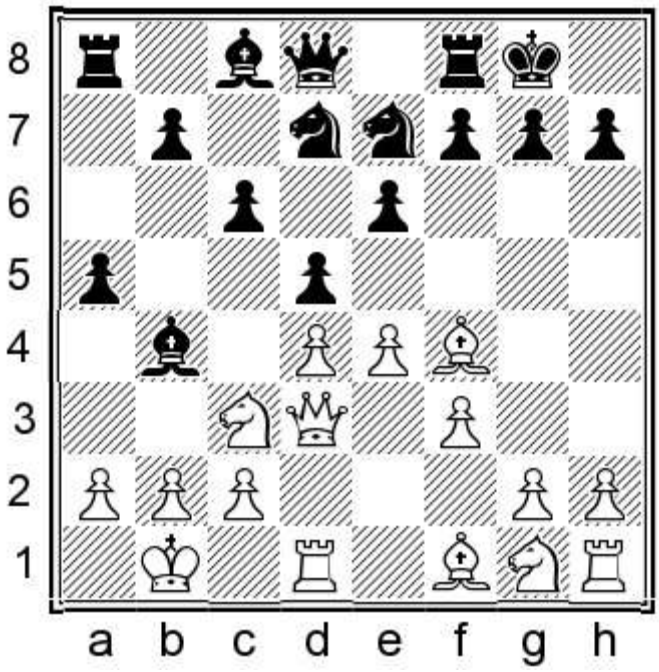
Position after: 7...♘d7

Keeping open options of playing ...b5 or ...c5 (depending on White's next moves).

8.h4

A) 8.♘ge2 ♘g6 9.♗g3 ♖e8 10.h4 ♘gf8 11.h5 ♗e7! 12.h6 g6∞ White has advanced his pawn to h6, but he has no way of making progress whereas Black will play ...b5 on the next move.

B) 8.♔b1N 8...a5!



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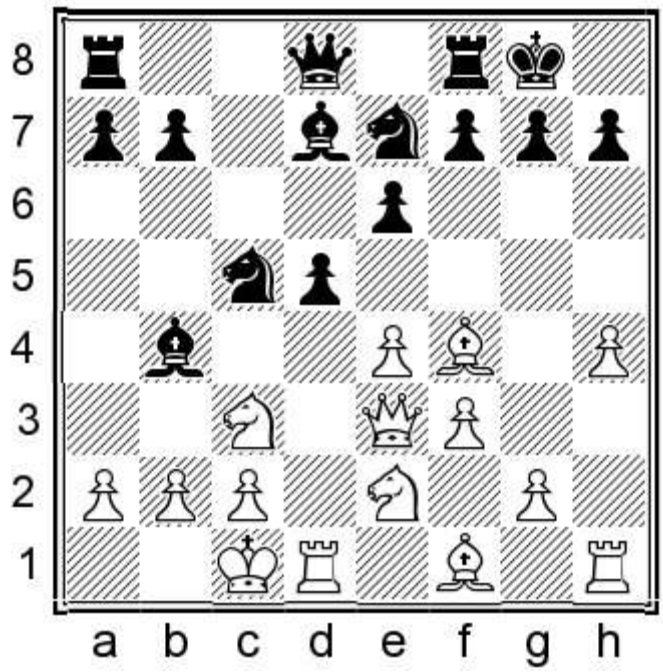
Position after: 8...a5!

[8...c5 is not as precise: 9.dxc5 ♘xc5 10.♕e3 ♗d7 11.♗d6 ♖c8 12.♘ge2∞] 9.h4 [9.a3 can be answered with 9...♘g6! 10.♗d2 ♗e7∓ and the a3-pawn is now a target that will help Black in his attack.] 9...c5! 10.dxc5 [10.♘b5 c4 11.♕e3 ♘f6 12.♘c7 ♖a7 13.h5 b5! Black must open the queenside. 14.h6 g6 15.♘xb5 ♖b7 16.a4 ♗d7→ Once again, White's kingside attack has stalled whereas Black is ready to put pressure on White's queenside.] 10...d4! 11.♘a4 e5 12.c3 b5!∞ The position is messy but the complications work out well for Black.

8...c5! 9.dxc5 ♘xc5 10.♕e3 ♗d7! 11.♘ge2



Position after: 11.♘ge2

11...♘a4!N 12.h5

12.exd5 ♕a5! 13.dxe6 ♗xe6∞ gives Black excellent compensation for the pawn as both players are only focused on the queenside.

12...♕a5 13.♘xa4 ♗xa4 14.a3 ♖fc8! 15.axb4 ♖xc2+ 16.♔b1 ♖xb2+ 17.♔xb2 ♕xb4+ 18.♔a1 ♗xd1 19.♕d2 ♕a3+=

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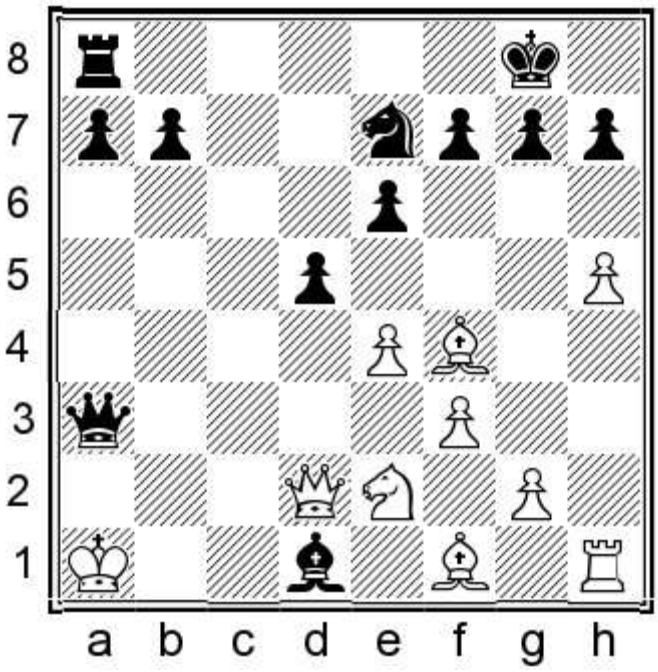

Position after: 19...♕a3+=

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