

**Grandmaster Repertoire**

**Michael  
Roiz**

**The Berlin  
Defence**



*Tired of bad positions? Try the main lines!*

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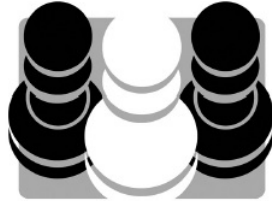
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*Grandmaster Repertoire*  
**The ♔erlin Defence**

By  
**Michael ♔oiz**



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# Key to symbols used

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

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# Preface

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I was delighted when Jacob Aagaard and John Shaw offered me the opportunity to write a book advocating the Berlin Defence, which arises after the opening moves **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5** (the Ruy Lopez) **3...♗f6**.

My favourite weapon against the Ruy Lopez has tended to be the Breyer System in the old main line, which I have employed in nearly forty tournament games, including several victories over strong grandmasters. However, I always had the feeling that the Berlin would also perfectly suit my playing style: it offers Black solidity along with the flexibility to choose between various set-ups. Also, since I was seconding top players such as GM Pavel Eljanov for many years, I had a chance to analyse various Berlin lines in depth, and I will be glad to share my experience and understanding of this opening with the readers.

The Berlin was regarded as something of a second-tier response to the Ruy Lopez for a long time, but that all changed when Vladimir Kramnik famously employed it in the 2000 World Championship match to neutralize the fearsome opening preparation of Garry Kasparov, eventually going on to win the title. Since then, the Berlin has become Black's most popular and reliable response to the Ruy Lopez at the highest levels, and almost all of the world's leading players have incorporated it into their repertoires. In the following pages you can find a breakdown of the chapter structure and the main theoretical battlegrounds of the Berlin, including: the famous Berlin Endgame; the relatively quiet positions with a symmetrical pawn structure (mostly after **5.♖e1**); and strategically complex middlegame positions which can arise after **4.d3**.

The aim of this book is to enable players at various levels to feel comfortable enough to use the Berlin successfully in competitive play. Despite the Berlin's reputation for solidity, this book contains a whole host of tactical and other remarkable ideas, many of which arise at a surprisingly early stage. I hope that every reader will enjoy the book and find success with the Berlin.

Michael Roiz  
Rishon LeZion, July 2021

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Greet: *Play the Ruy Lopez*, Everyman Chess 2006

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Obodchuk: *The Four Knights Game*, New in Chess 2011

## **Electronic Resources**

ChessBase Mega & Correspondence Databases

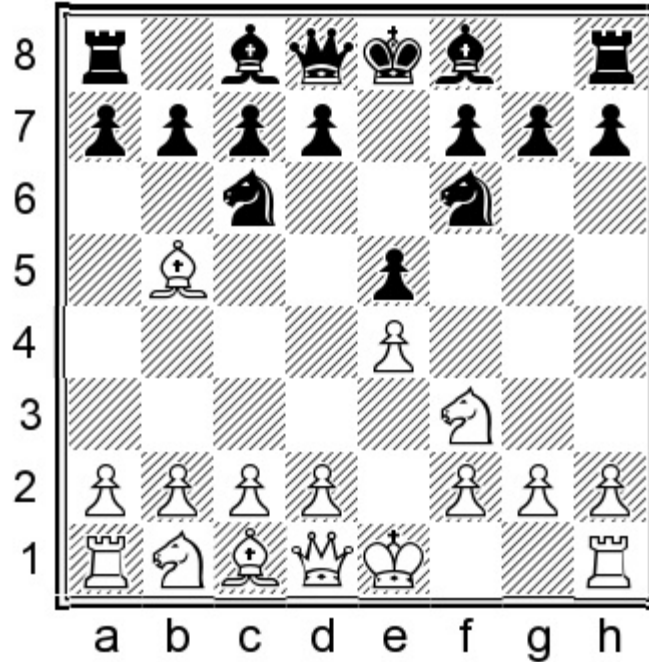
Fat Fritz

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# Introduction

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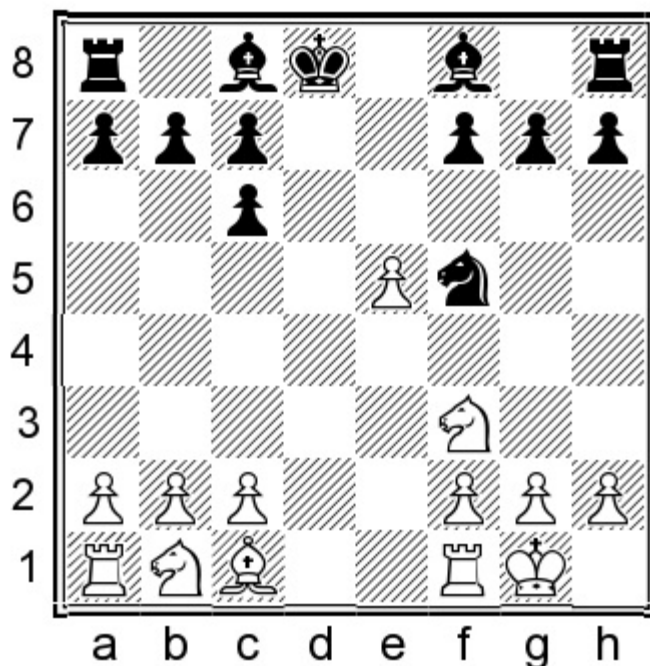
As stated in the Preface, our subject arises after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5, the Ruy Lopez, when 3...♞f6 is the move which defines the Berlin Defence:



With the last move, Black develops the knight to its most natural square and attacks the e4-pawn. Starting from the above position, this book offers a complete repertoire for Black. The material spans nine chapters, divided into four main sections as follows.

## Berlin Endgame

We will start by jumping in at the deep end, analysing White's most theoretically critical approach. This is in stark contrast to my previous books on the Nimzo-Indian and Queen's Indian Defences, both of which started by covering White's sidelines before working up towards the critical main lines. The Berlin differs from the above two defences, in that the viability of Black's entire concept essentially rests on the evaluation of one critical position, arising after the following well-known sequence: 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♞f6 4.0-0 ♞xe4 5.d4 ♞d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♞f5 8.♙xd8† ♞xd8



If you are unable to get comfortable with the black side of this position, then the Berlin is not for you. If, on the other hand, you can become proficient from this position, you need never fear the Ruy Lopez again. (True, White has some other ways of playing, as mentioned below, but none of them are as theoretically challenging.)

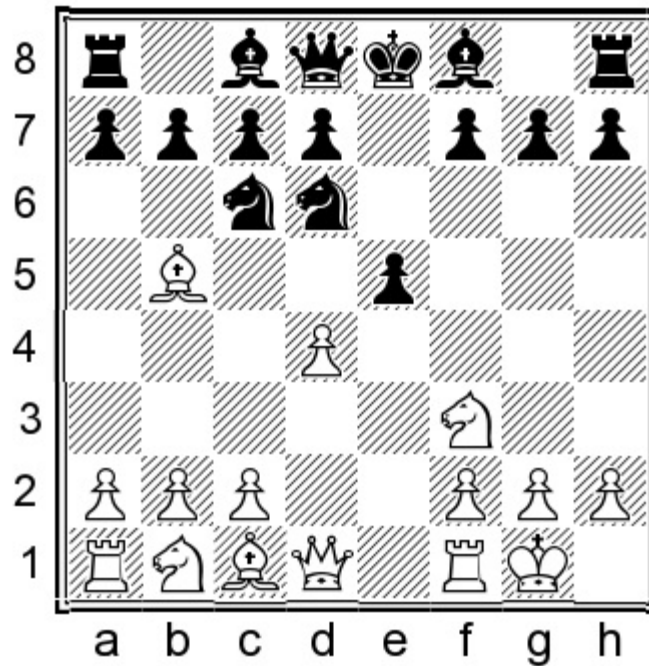
By the way, I have described the above position as the “Berlin Endgame” because it seems to be the most commonly accepted term, but it would be more accurate to think of it as a queenless middlegame. There are many pieces remaining on the board, while the unbalanced pawn structure and Black’s slightly exposed king ensure that there will be no shortage of dynamic possibilities.

As tournament practice shows, White players often seem to overestimate the value of the kingside pawn majority, and in many games Black’s doubled pawns on the queenside have proved the decisive factor. Chapter 1 will briefly cover White’s rare 9th moves, before focusing on the natural and popular developing move  $9.\text{♖c3}$ . The modern continuations  $9.\text{♞d1}†$  and  $9.\text{h3}!?$  will be analysed in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

### Avoiding the Endgame

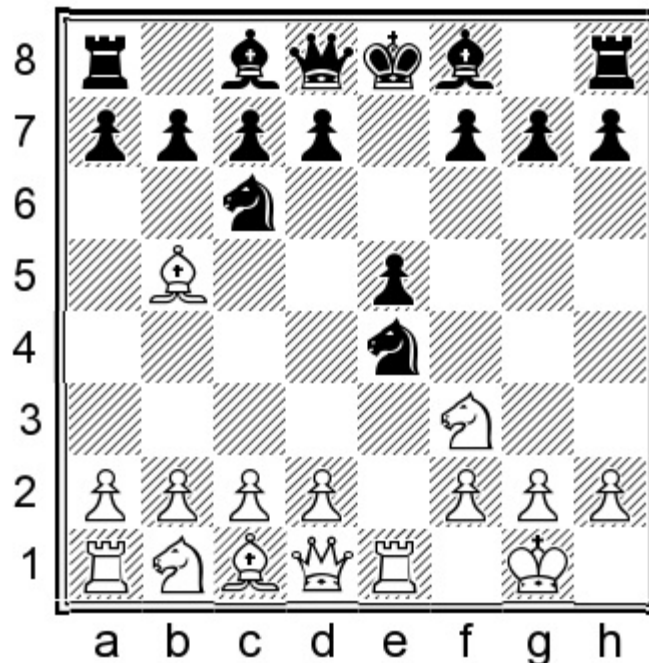
The book’s second section starts in the position after  $1.\text{e4 e5 } 2.\text{♞f3 ♞c6 } 3.\text{♗b5 ♞f6 } 4.\text{0-0 ♞xe4}$ , and deals with all of the plausible ways in which White may deviate from the Berlin Endgame sequence shown earlier.

The position after  $5.\text{d4 ♞d6}$  provides the starting point for Chapter 4:



White has several gambit or pseudo-gambit tries, such as **6. ♕g5**, **6. ♕a4** and **6. dxe5 ♖xb5 7. a4**. Finally, after **6. ♕xc6 dxc6 7. dxe5 ♖f5** White can avoid the queen exchange with **8. ♖e2**.

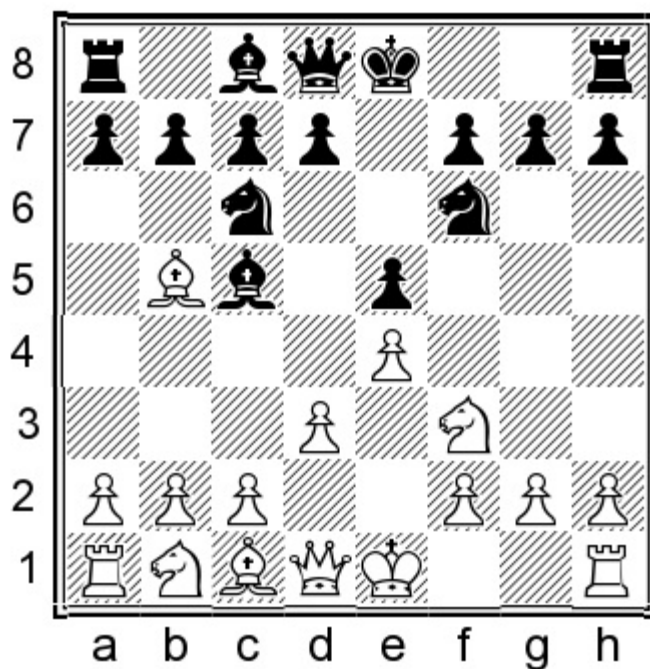
Chapter 5 continues the theme by analysing **5. ♖e2** followed by the more theoretically significant **5. ♖e1**, which reaches the following position:



White will pick up the e5-pawn and attempt to generate some initiative in the ensuing position with a symmetrical pawn structure. Black is in good shape though, as we will see.

### Closed System

After the opening moves 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6, White can also preserve the central pawn with 4.d3, when 4...♙c5 is our choice, reaching the following position:



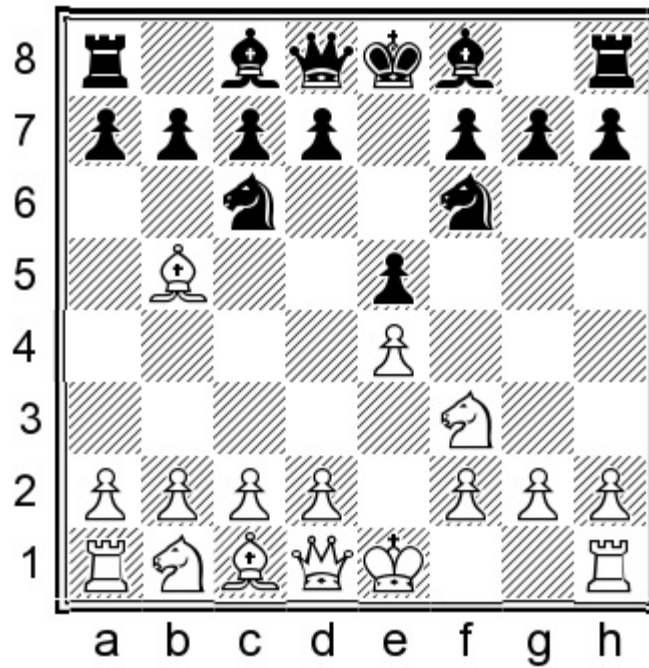
Given the chance, I generally want to follow this active bishop development with ...♘d4 to trade a pair of knights.

5.c3 is the most popular continuation, and is analysed in Chapter 6.

The other main possibilities are 5.♘c3, 5.♘bd2, 5.0-0 and 5.♙xc6, all of which can be found in Chapter 7.

### Other Lines

The final section deals with White's remaining possibilities after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6:



Aside from the main options of 4.0-0 and 4.d3, White does not have all that many reasonable moves available:

**4.♘c3** is a significant option, transposing to the Four Knights Game. This will be the sole focus of Chapter 8.

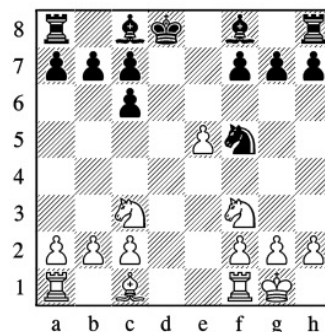
Finally, **4.♚e2**, **4.♙xc6** and **4.d4** will be covered in Chapter 9.

\*\*\*

Now that we know what lies ahead, I invite you to turn the page and we'll get started with the Berlin Endgame.

# Chapter 1

## Berlin Endgame



9. ♖c3

### Variation Index

1. e4 e5 2. ♖f3 ♗c6 3. ♘b5 ♗f6 4. 0-0 ♗xe4 5. d4 ♗d6  
6. ♙xc6 dxc6 7. dxe5 ♗f5 8. ♚xd8 ♜xd8 9. ♖c3

9... ♙d7

A) 10. b3 14

B) 10. ♖d1 ♗c8 18

B1) 11. b3 19

B2) 11. ♗g5 21

B3) 11. h3 h6 12. b3 b6 13. ♙b2 ♗e7 24

B31) 14. ♖d2 26

B32) 14. ♗e2 28

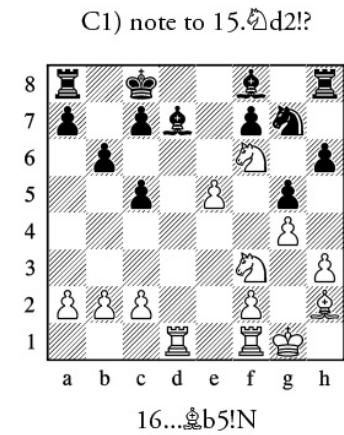
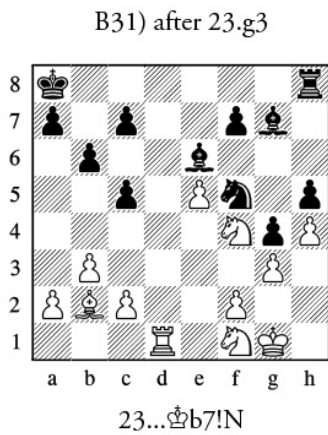
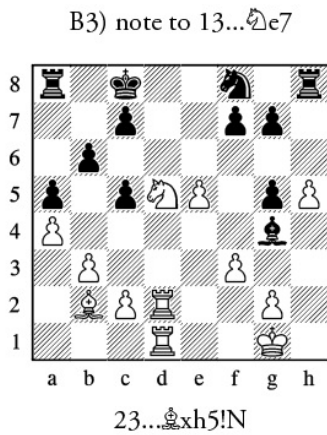
C) 10. h3 h6 30

C1) 11. ♙f4 30

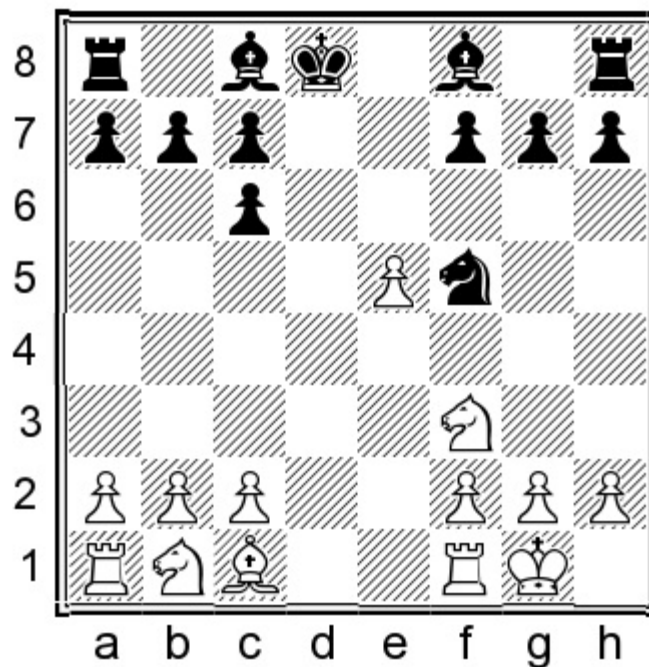
C2) 11. b3 ♗c8 12. ♙b2 b6 13. ♖ad1 c5!? 32

C21) 14. ♖fe1 34

C22) 14. ♗d5 36



1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♙xd8† ♗xd8



We begin our journey with the famous Berlin Endgame. In this chapter, after a brief summary of White's rare options, we will focus on the popular developing move 9.♘c3. It is essential to become familiar with this natural move and the way we will meet it, before we deal with White's two other main options, both of which are designed to steer us away from our intended scheme.

Before getting stuck into the main part of the chapter, here are a few of White's minor options:

The modest 9.♘bd2 definitely shouldn't bother Black. 9...♙d7 I see no reason to deviate from Kramnik's favourite approach. 10.b3 a5 11.a4 ♗c8 12.♙b2 ♙e7 13.♞fe1 c5 Black had more than equalized in Savchenko – Van Beek, Germany 2011.

9.♙g5†

This is an inferior cousin of 9.♞d1† as the bishop is clearly misplaced.

9...♗e8

Provoking this move isn't a big achievement for White. True, Black can no longer host the king on the queenside, but as we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, this is of little concern, and there are better ways for White to provoke ...♔e8.

10.♘c3

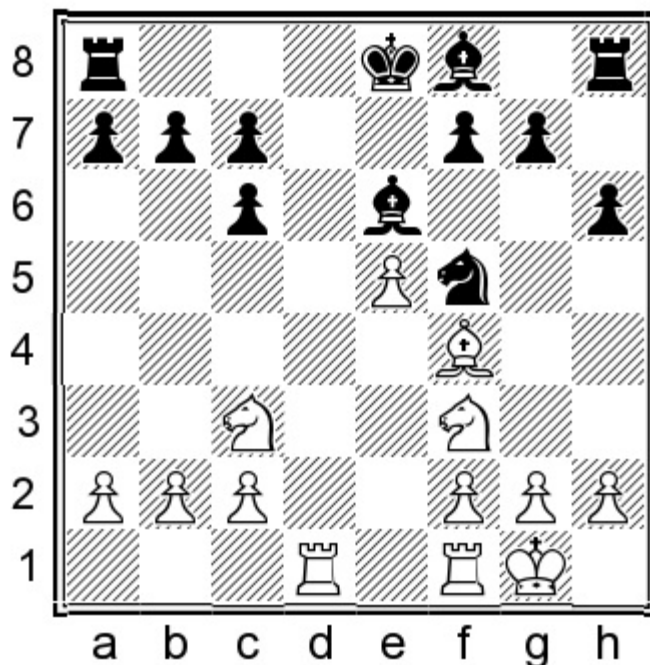
10.♞d1 transposes to 10.♙g5 in the notes at the start of Chapter 2.

10...h6 11.♙f4 ♙e6

The bishop is safe, as g5 is unavailable to White's knight.

12.♞ad1

12.♞fd1 ♙b4 13.♘e4 ♙d5 is also good for Black.



12...♙b4 13.♙d2

This awkward move is the only way to avoid material losses. Clearly, White is not fighting for the advantage after it.

13...♙xc3

A couple of games have been agreed drawn here, but Black could certainly consider playing on.

14.♙xc3 c5 15.h3 a5

Black has reached a harmonious set-up, with the bishop secure on e6, and can soon consider counterattacking measures with ...b7-b5-b4.

9.b3

Among White's minor options, this is the most common. However, it practically has no independent value, as after:

9...♙d7

White can hardly do better than transposing to normal paths with ♘c3 at some point.

10.♙b2

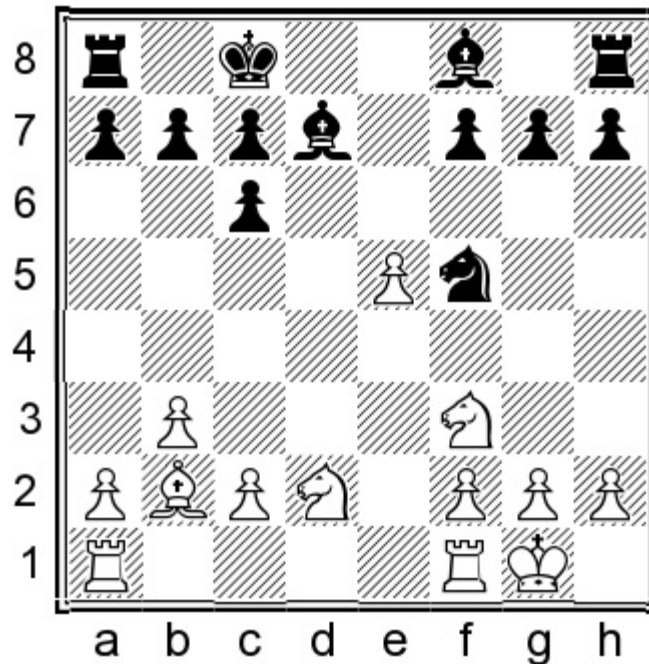
10.♙a3?! is the wrong moment for White to offer the exchange of dark-squared bishops.

10...♙xa3 11.♘xa3 occurred in Havlik – Zaja, Aschach 2005, and now Black could have

exploited the awkward placement of the knight on a3 by means of 11...c5!N 12.♖ad1 ♔e7 followed by 13...♙c6, with the better chances for Black.

10...♔c8 11.♗bd2

11.♗c3 ♙e7 transposes to variation A below after 9.♗c3.



11...♙e7 12.♖ad1

12.♗e4 h5! is also covered via 9.♗c3.

This position was reached in Christenson – Nilsen, Lillehammer 2013. Here Black could have exploited the poor location of the d2-knight with:

12...a5!N 13.a4 b5

White has problems on the queenside.

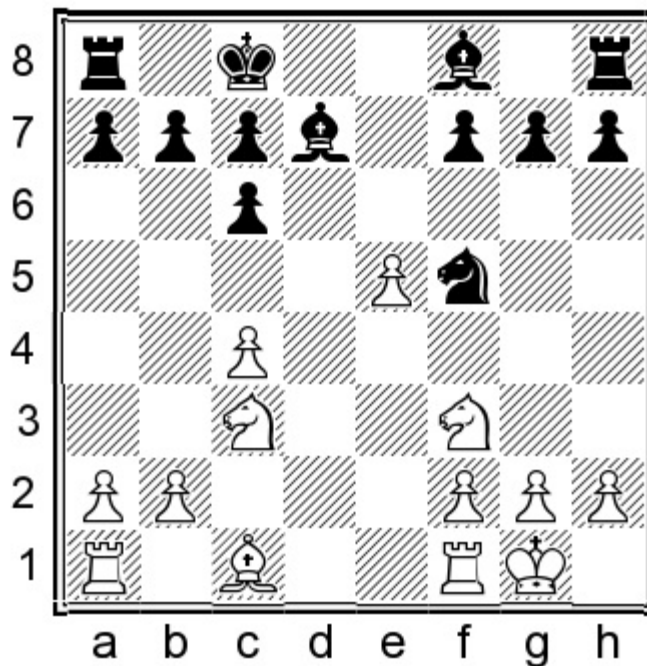
9.c4!?

This surprising move has been employed by many strong players, including Jakovenko, Naiditsch, Savchenko and more. White takes control of the important d5-square, but also weakens other squares along the d-file.

9...♙d7

I find this move sensible, although 9...♙e6 has also been tested with some success.

10.♗c3 ♔c8



11.h3

I think White's most challenging approach is to prepare a kingside advance.

11.b3 ♖e7 12.♗g5 looks inconsistent, as White weakens the dark squares on the queenside. (12.♗b2N seems more to the point, although 12...h5 13.♞ad1 a5 leaves Black with nothing to worry about.) 12...♗b4! Black favourably avoids the bishop exchange. 13.♘e4 This position was reached in Mehaux – Just, email 2014. I think Black should have secured a comfortable retreat spot for the bishop with: 13...♞e8!N 14.a3 ♗f8 15.h3 c5 The bishop will go to c6 soon, and White faces difficulties in guarding the weak e5-pawn.

11...b6!

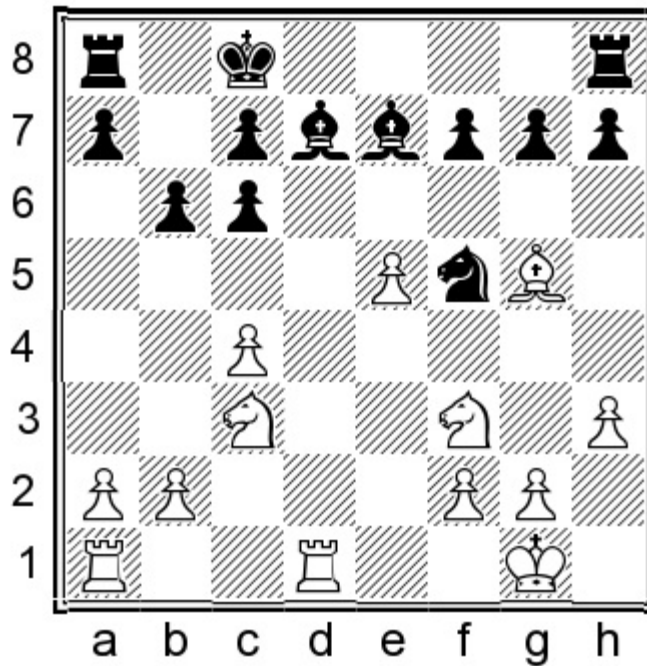
It turns out that White's kingside ambitions can be ignored for the time being.

12.♞d1

In the event of 12.g4 ♘e7 13.♘g5 f6! Black opens the kingside and exploits the fact that White has burned a tempo on c2-c4. 14.exf6 gxf6 15.♘ge4 f5! White's king feels unsafe after this break. 16.♘f6 ♗e6 17.b3 ♖b7 Black takes over the initiative due to the power of the light-squared bishop and the difference in king safety.

12...♗e7 13.♗g5

This position was reached in Naiditsch – Adams, Dortmund 2014. My natural new idea is:



13...c5N

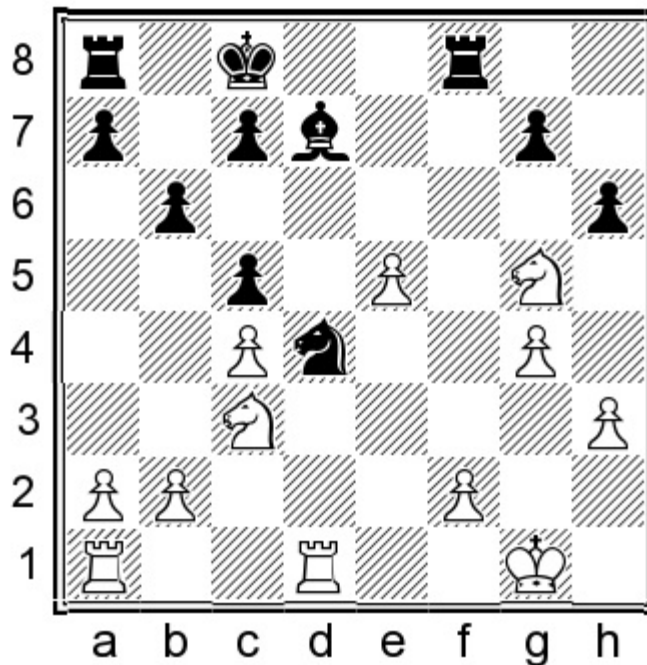
Ensuring that the d4-outpost belongs to Black's knight.

14.g4

This is the only critical move, but it turns out well for Black.

Harmless is 14.♙xe7 ♞xe7 15.♖d2 h6 16.♖ad1 ♕e6 17.b3 ♔b7 when Black connects the rooks and stands at least equal.

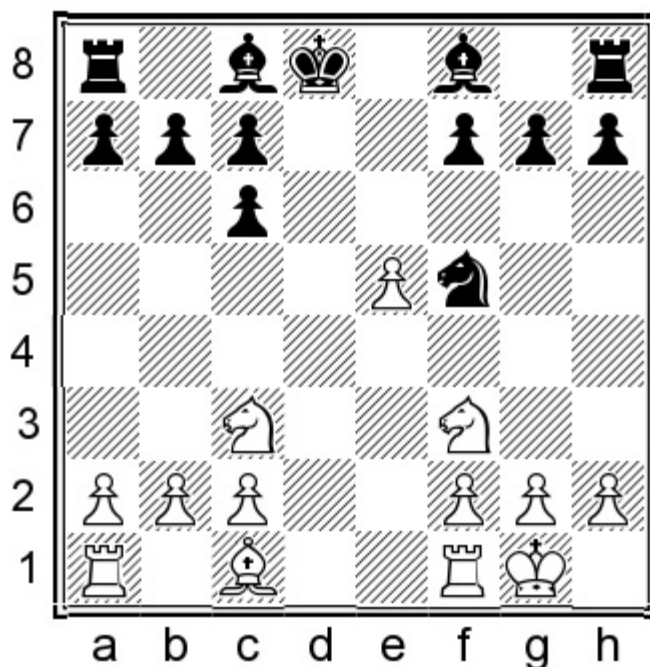
14...♙xg5 15.♞xg5 ♞d4 16.♞xf7 ♖f8 17.♞g5 h6



Black will regain the pawn in a favourable situation, as the light squares around White's king are exposed.

Having dealt with those rare options, we are ready to tackle the main topic of the chapter.

## 9.♘c3



This natural developing move is by far the most common, although in recent years attention has shifted towards the options covered in Chapters 2 and 3. Now Black must make an important decision.

## 9...♙d7

Many moves have been tried. For instance, 9...♙e7, 9...♙e6, 9...♘e7, 9...h6 and 9...♔e8 all have their supporters – the last move being especially popular.

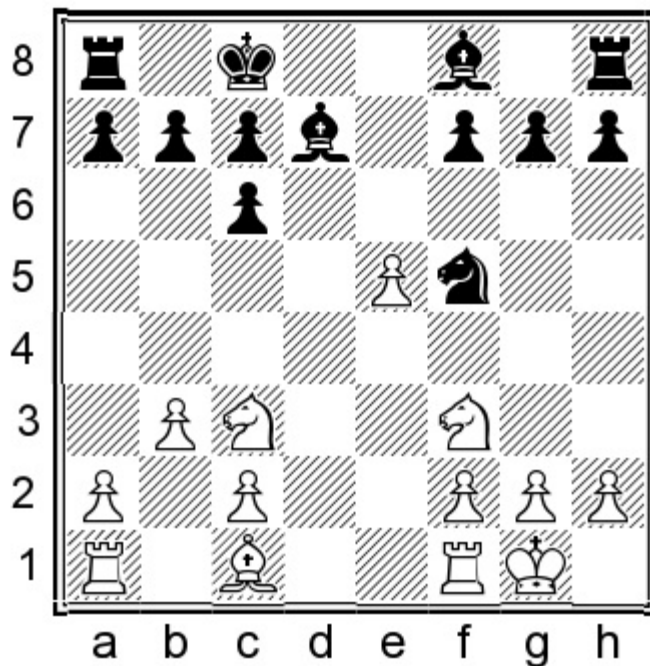
There are all kinds of move-order subtleties, which could make for a rich topic of discussion; suffice to say my choice for this repertoire is the move made famous by Vladimir Kramnik, who chose it in Games 1 and 3 of his World Championship match against Garry Kasparov in 2000. The main point is to prepare to host the black king on the queenside. White has three main options: **A)** 10.b3, **B)** 10.♞d1 and **C)** 10.h3.

### A) 10.b3

This was Kasparov's choice in both of the aforementioned games. The fianchetto is traditionally White's most common set-up in Berlin endgames.

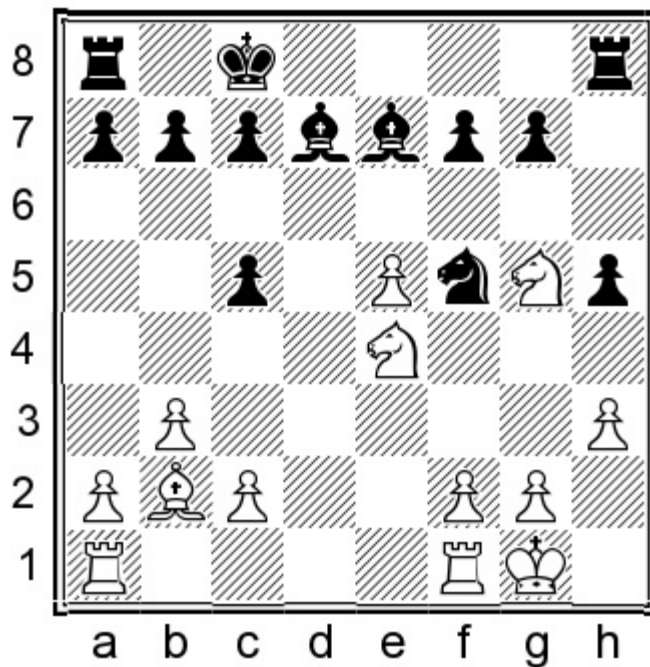
## 10...♔c8

10...h6 was Kramnik's choice in both games against Kasparov, but these days it's considered more accurate not to spend a tempo on the pawn move at this stage.



11.♙b2 ♚e7 12...♞ad1

12.h3 has been tried by some strong GMs but it doesn't have much independent value: 12...h5 13.♘e4 (13...♞ad1 a5 is covered under 13.h3 h5 in the notes to the main line below.) 13...c5 14.♘fg5

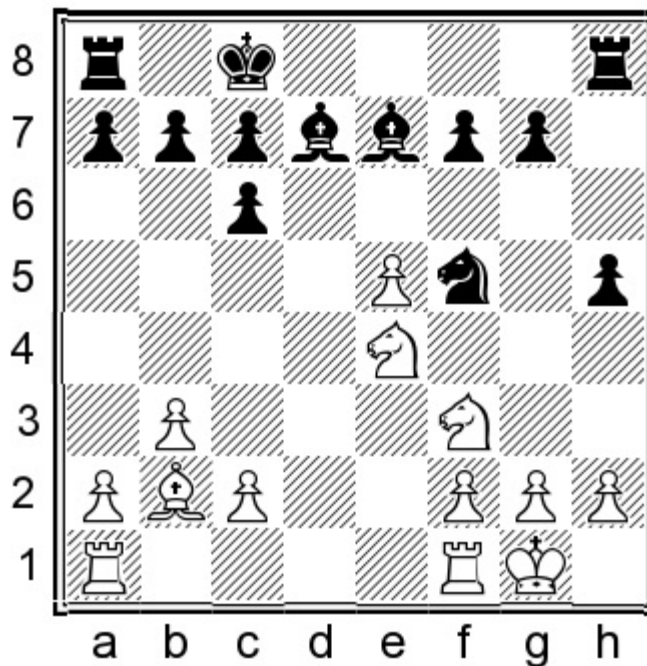


14...♙xg5N (14...♞f8!?) is a valid alternative, and 15...♞ad1 ♙c6 16...♞fe1 b6 17...♞d3 ♚b7 was equal in Alekseev – Romanov, St Petersburg [rapid] 2013) 15.♘xg5 ♙e6 We have transposed to the Stellwagen – Eljanov game noted below.

12.♘e4

This is most accurately met by:

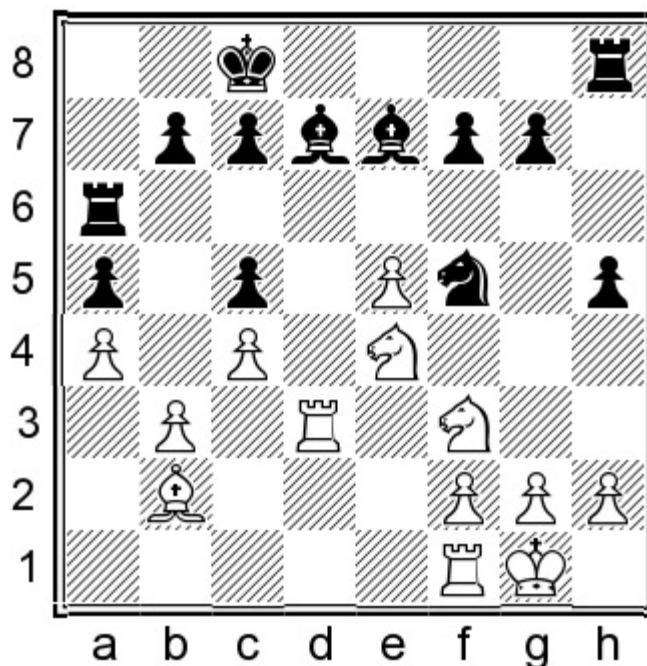
12...h5!



13. ♖ad1

The alternative is: 13. ♗fg5 ♕xg5 14. ♗xg5 ♕e6 Black reaches a harmonious set-up and will soon connect the rooks. Notice the usefulness of the pawn on h5, preventing g2-g4. 15. h3 c5 16. g4 (I also checked 16. ♖ad1 b6 17. g4 ♗e7 18. f3 ♖b7 19. ♗xe6 fxe6 20. ♖d7 ♖ae8 when Black has no problems.) 16... ♗e7 17. f3 ♗d7 18. ♖f2 ♖c6 19. ♖g3 a5 20. f4 g6 21. a4 ♖h6 White's kingside play has hit a wall, while Black is planning to take control over the h-file, Stellwagen – Eljanov, Germany 2007.

13... a5 14. a4 c5 15. c4 ♖a6 16. ♖d3



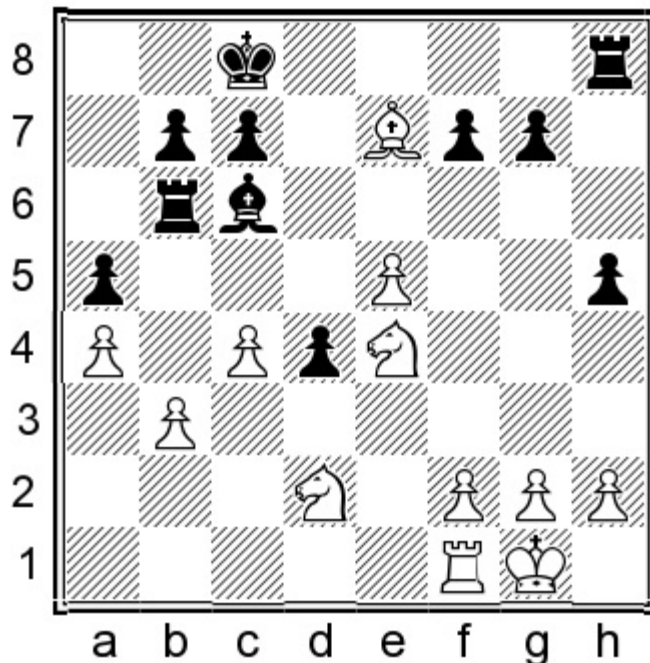
We have been following Caruana – Eljanov, Olginka 2011. In my opinion, the most consistent would be:

16...♖b6!?N

Creating a threat of ...♙xa4.

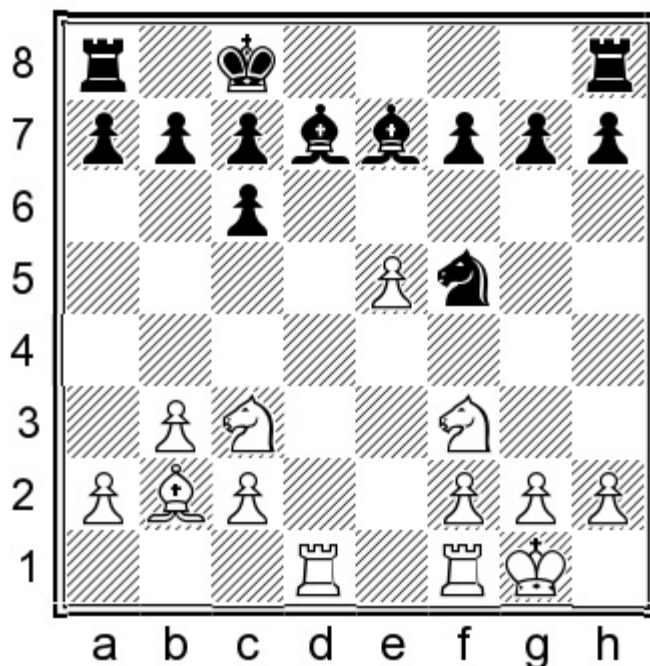
17.♙a3

17.♙a1?! is too passive, and after 17...♞d8 18.♞fd1 ♙c6 19.♞xd8† ♙xd8 Black starts to take over.  
17...♙c6 18.♞fd2 ♞d4 19.♞xd4 cxd4 20.♙xe7



20...♙xe4 21.♞xe4 ♞xb3

The active rook on b3 and the strong passed pawn offer Black sufficient compensation for White's small material edge.



12...a5

This is always a useful move, even if ...a5-a4 is not an immediate threat.

### 13.a4

13.h3 h5

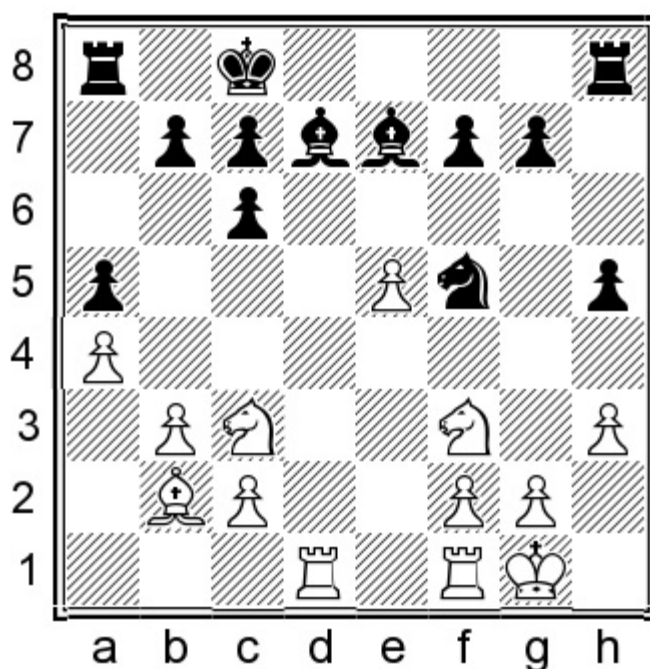
White can also include these pawn moves before deciding what to do next.

14.a4

The inaccurate 14.g3?! was played in Shirov – Kramnik, Monte Carlo (rapid) 2001. The weakness of the light squares around White's king can be exploited by means of 14...a4!N intending 15.♖xa4 c5 16.♗c3 ♕c6 17.♗e1 ♖d4 with total domination.

14.♕c1 b6 15.♕g5 also proved ineffective after 15...♖b4 16.♗e2 c5! 17.♗f4 ♕c6 18.♗d5 a4 and White was doomed to passive defence in Seelig – Panitevsky, corr. 2015.

The text move seems safest, and was played in a few high-level games, including Morozevich – Ivanchuk, Linares 2007. I recommend a fresh plan:



14...♖g8!?N

Removing the rook from the long diagonal in order to launch the g-pawn and open files against White's king!

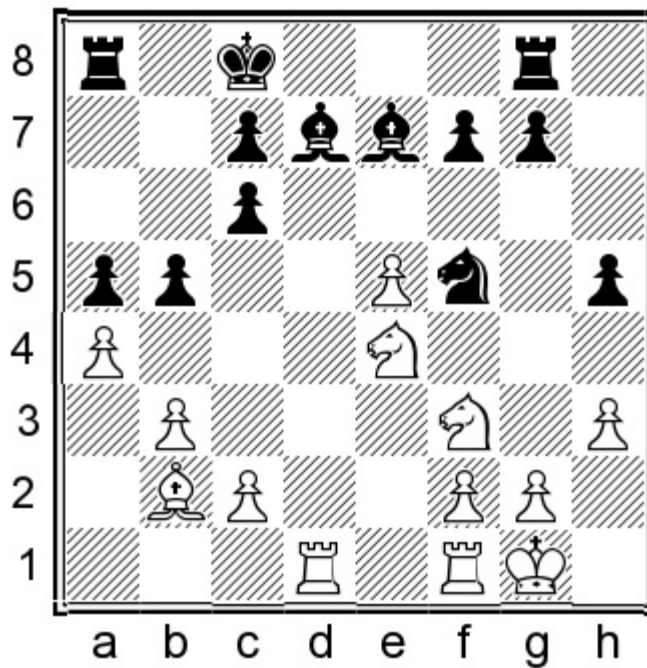
15.♗e4

In the event of 15.♖d3 g5 16.g4 hxg4 17.hxg4 ♗g7 Black stands better; the knight will be transferred to f4 soon.

After the text move, White is ready to meet ...g7-g5 with ♗f6, so it looks like Black's ambitious idea has been neutralized. However, moving the knight away from the queenside has a downside...

15...b5!

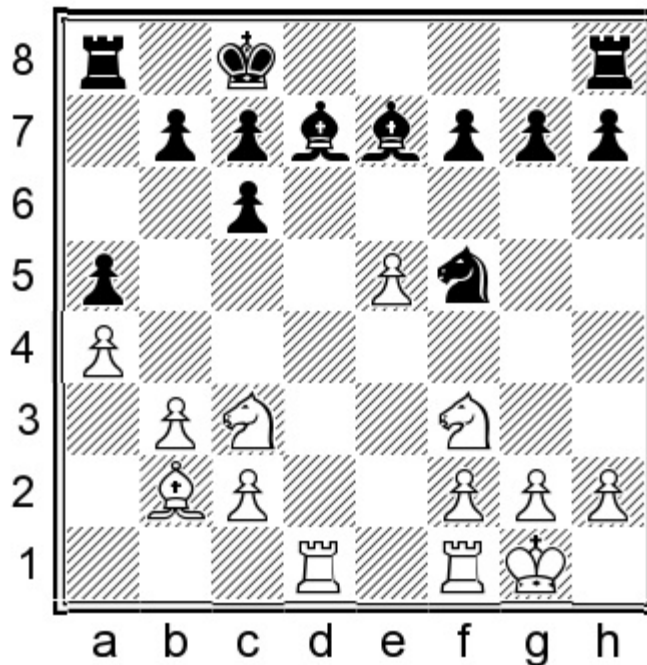
It's clear that provoking a2-a4 opens up significant possibilities for Black on the queenside.



16.♞fe1 bxa4 17.bxa4 c5

The weakness of the a4-pawn makes White's position somewhat shaky.

This position has been reached in the games of many grandmasters, but the next natural move is a novelty:



13...♞h4!?N

Despite never having been played here, this move is a typical concept. Black doesn't mind swapping the knights, as now f5 is vacant for the bishop. Also, it now becomes more difficult for White to expand on the kingside with g2-g4 and f2-f4.

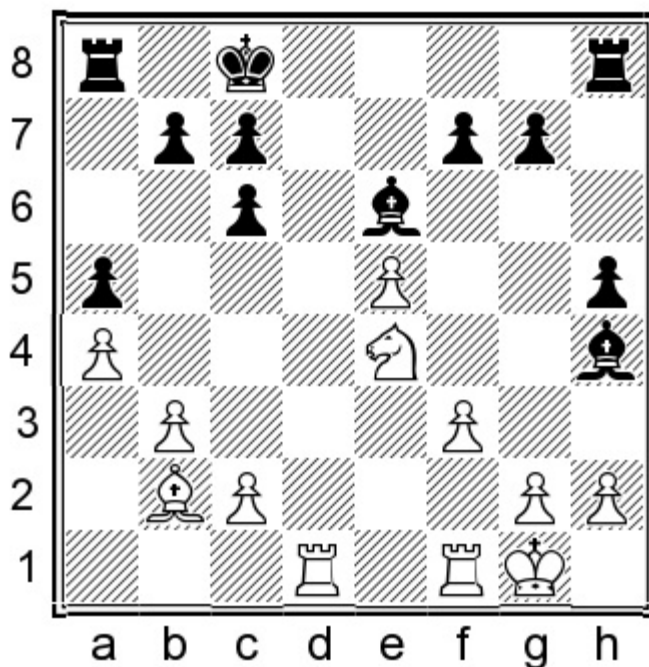
### 14. ♖xh4

Too committal is 14. ♖d4?! b6 15. ♗e4 ♜e8 16. ♝fe1 ♔b7 when White's central pawn and knights are far from secure.

### 14... ♗xh4 15. f3

After 15. h3 ♗f5 16. ♝d2 h5 White's activity is essentially neutralized, while the vulnerability of White's queenside pawns may soon start to tell.

### 15... h5 16. ♗e4 ♗e6



### 17. h3

17. ♖c5 is pointless in view of 17... ♗f5!.

### 17... b6 18. g4 ♔b7 19. ♔g2 ♝ad8

It makes sense to simplify matters and/or contest the open file.

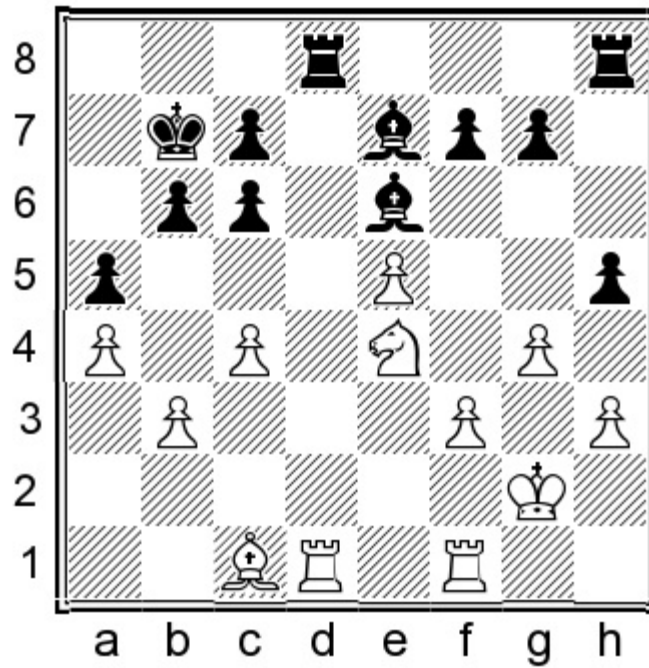
### 20. c4!

Covering the d5-square is surprisingly important.

The careless 20. ♗c1?! allows 20... ♝d5! 21. ♗f4 ♝hd8 when White has to struggle for equality.

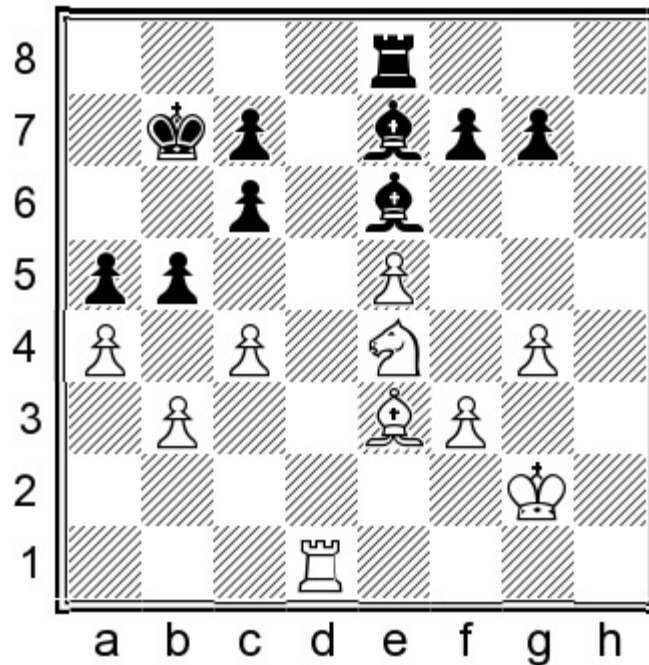
### 20... ♗e7 21. ♗c1

White manoeuvres the bishop towards the g5-spot.



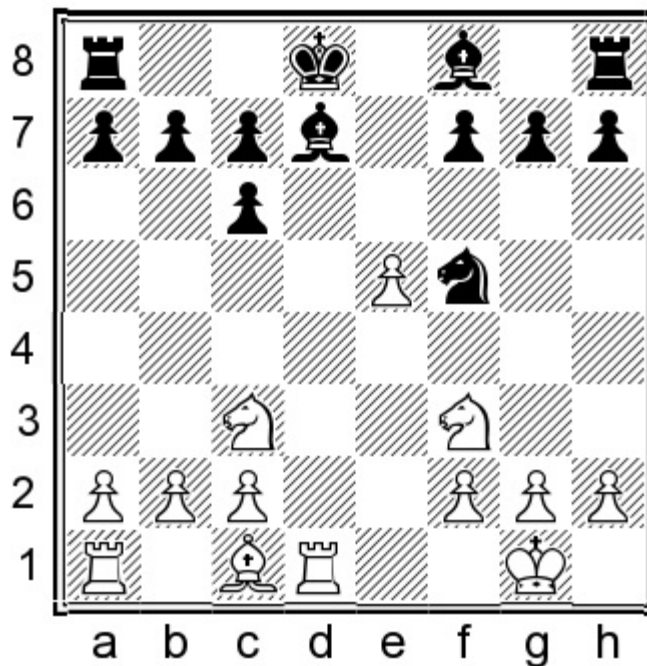
21...♖xd1 22.♖xd1 b5!  
A well-timed break.

23.♙e3 hxg4 24.hxg4 ♖e8



Black's pressure against the queenside pawns compensates for White's kingside majority and outpost on c5.

B) 10.♖d1



With this natural and popular move, White takes over the open file and forces Black to move the king.

### 10...♔c8

10...♔e8 is also playable but we will maintain a consistent policy of moving the king to the queenside unless there is a specific reason not to.

White's most logical continuations are **B1)** 11.b3, **B2)** 11.♘g5 and **B3)** 11.h3.

It is also worth mentioning the possibility of:

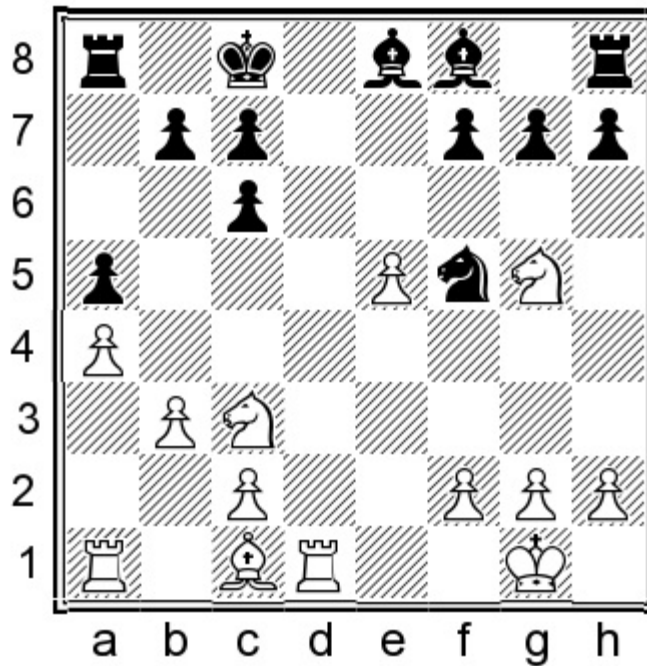
11.a4 a5

White sometimes includes these moves, but doing so hardly achieves much. For instance:

12.♘g5 ♔e8 13.b3

13.e6?! f6 14.♘ge4 ♖a6 15.♙f4 was played in Khorunzhy – Caron, corr. 2018, when 15...c5!N

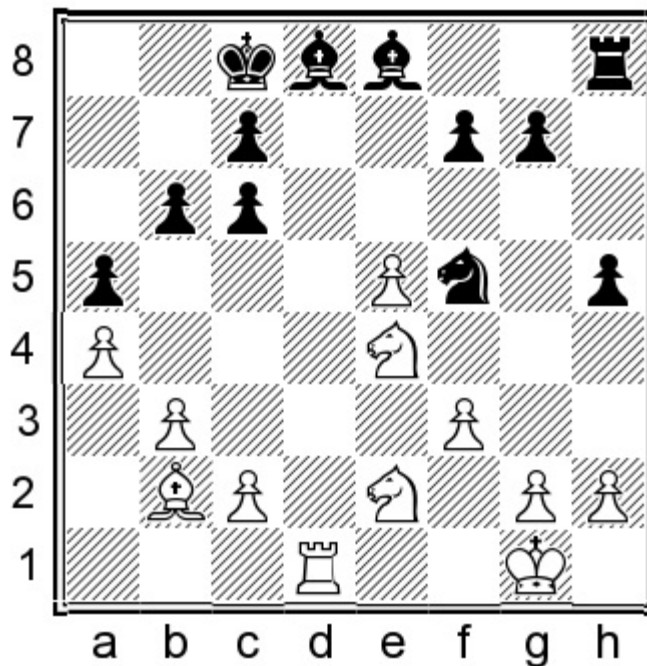
16.♞e1 ♘d4 would have left the e6-pawn in big danger.



13...b6 14.♙b2 ♜e7 15.♘ge4 ♚b7 16.♞d3

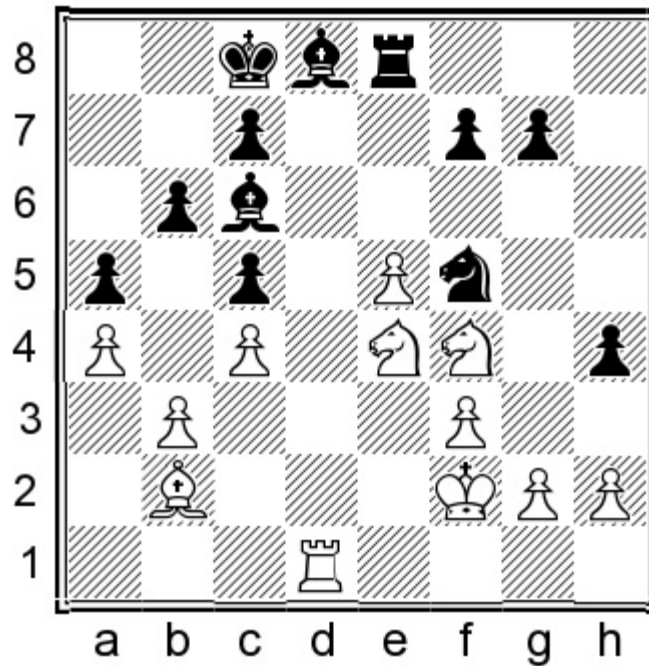
16.h3 h5 17.♞d3 ♞d8 18.♞xd8 ♙xd8 19.♞d1 ♙e7 20.g3 ♚c8 21.♚g2 ♙d7 was equal in Petrigin – Despontin, corr. 2016.

16...♞d8 17.♞xd8 ♙xd8 18.♞d1 ♚c8 19.f3 h5 20.♘e2



After a natural series of moves by both sides, the present position was reached in Svidler – Almasi, Khanty-Mansiysk (ol) 2010. I think this would have been a good moment for Black to activate his light-squared bishop with:

20...c5!N 21.c4 ♙c6 22.♚f2 h4 23.♘f4 ♞e8

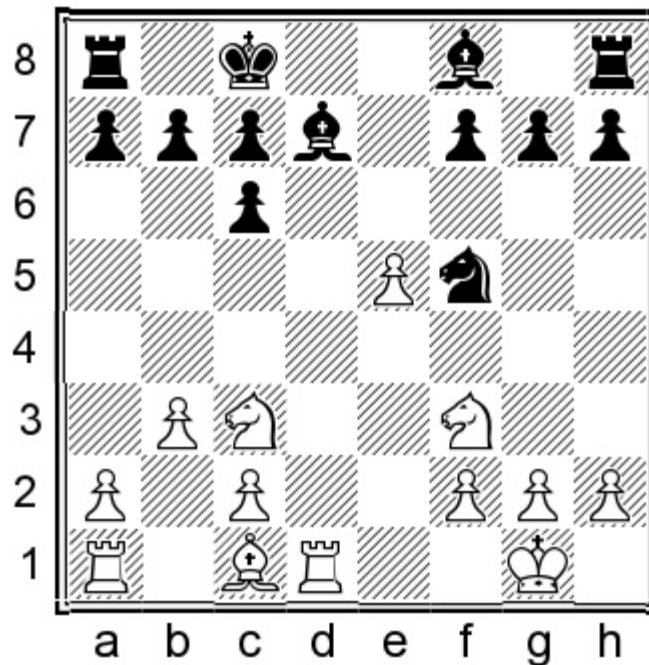


Black has sufficient counterplay due to the bishop pair and the slight vulnerability of the e5-pawn. For instance:

24. ♖d5?! ♜d4! 25. ♙xd4 cxd4 26. ♖xd4 ♜xe5

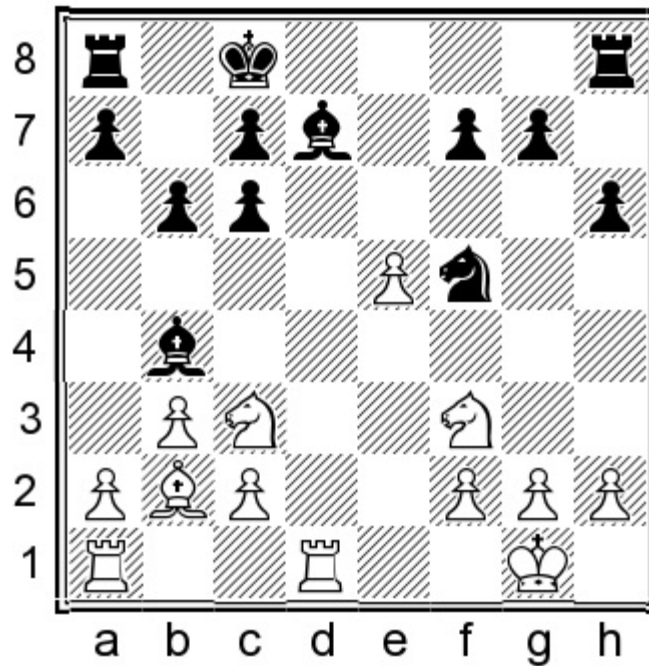
With an obvious edge to Black.

### B1) 11.b3

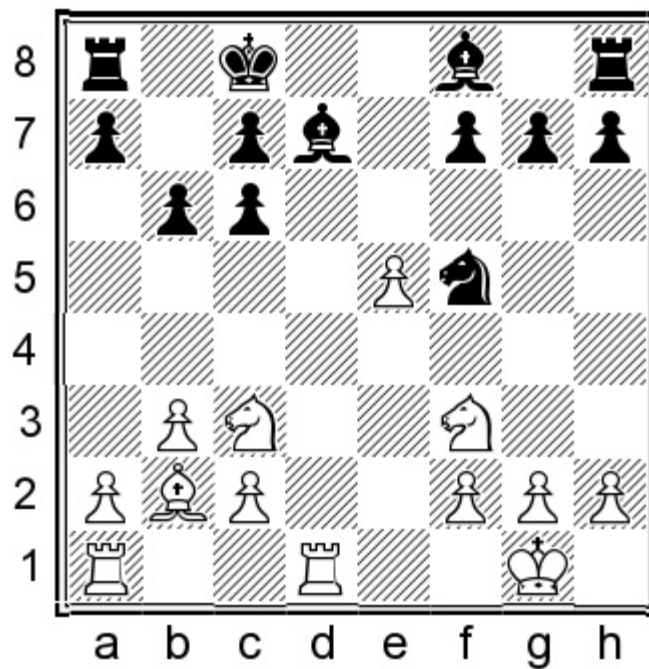


### 11...b6 12. ♙b2

12. ♖g5 is well met by: 12... ♙b4! 13. ♙b2 h6 14. ♖f3 (14. ♖xf7?! is asking for trouble in view of 14... ♜e8 15. e6 ♜xe6! when White still cannot liberate the knight from f7.)



14...♙xc3 15.♙xc3 ♜e6 Black reached a comfortable situation with opposite-coloured bishops in Lavrentyev – Starshov, corr. 2018.

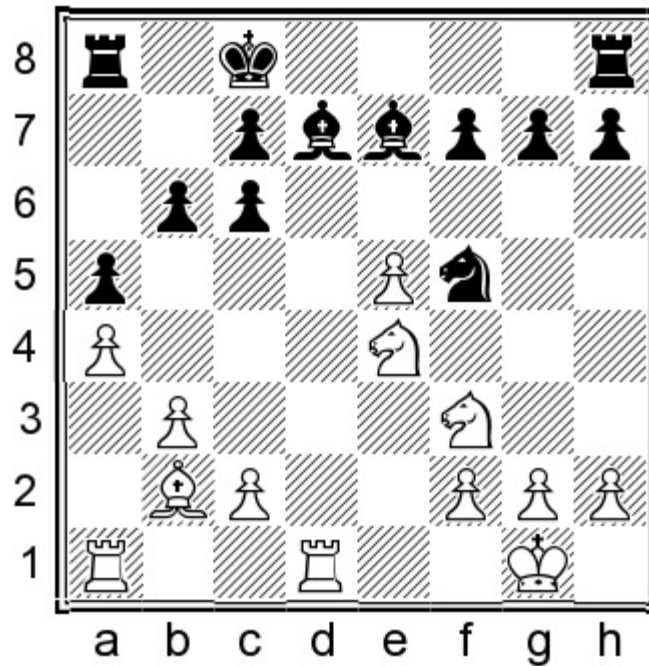


12...♙e7 13.♞e4

13.♞d3 does not change much, and 13...a5 14.a4 ♞h4 15.♞xh4 ♙xh4 16.♞e4 transposes to our main line below; this was the actual move order of the game quoted in the note to move 17 below.

13...a5 14.a4

This position was reached in Di Paolo – Sulava, Imperia 2009. I suggest the following standard plan:



### 14...♘h4!?N

Similar to the 9.h3 ♕e7 lines examined later, Black is happy to exchange these knights, preempting any possible troubles after g2-g4.

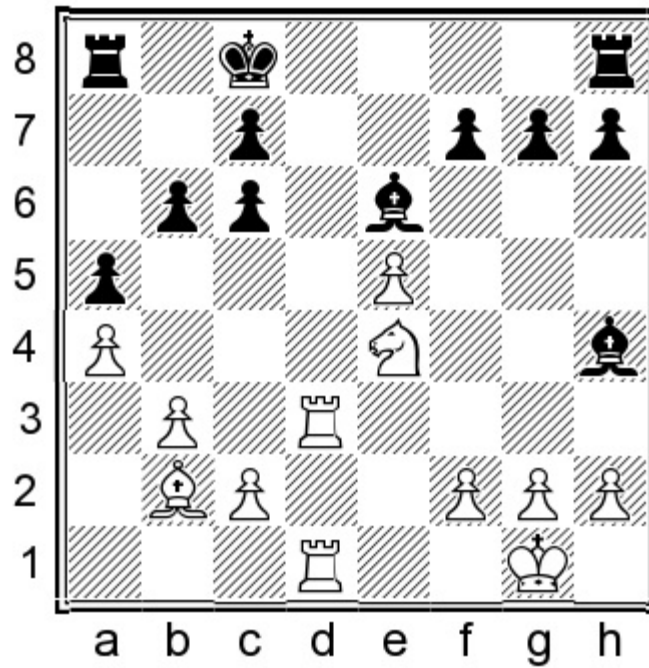
### 15.♘xh4

White also achieves nothing special after 15.♘d4 c5 16.♘e2 ♕c6 17.♘2g3 ♔b7 when the light-squared bishop exerts strong pressure on White's kingside.

### 15...♕xh4 16.♖d3

With this move, we transpose to another game.

### 16...♕e6 17.♖ad1



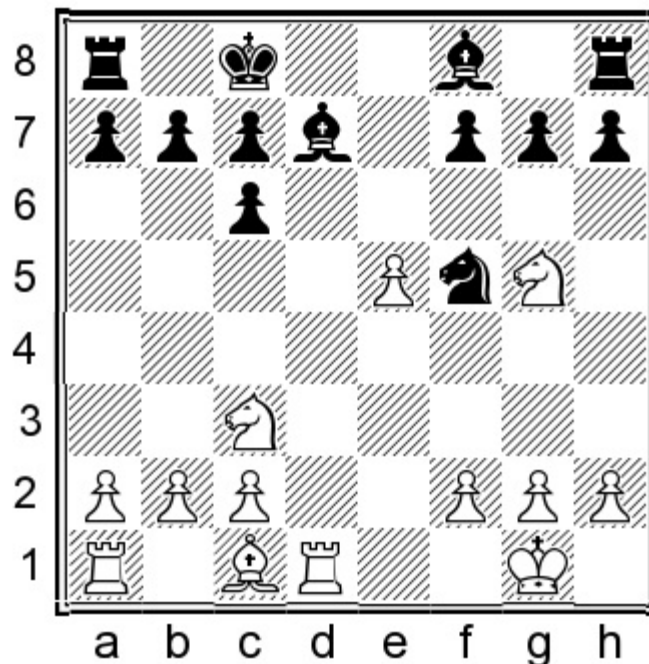
**17...h5N**

17...♔b7 was pretty similar in Maliangkay – Ostriker, corr. 2007.

**18.f3 ♖b7**

Having connected the rooks and preventing White from expanding on the kingside, Black is not worse at all.

**B2) 11.♘g5**



This has been White's most popular choice by a wide margin, and was recommended by Alexander Khalifman in the first volume of the popular *Opening for White According to Anand*

series.

### 11...♙e8

There is no other adequate way of covering f7. Even though almost all Black's pieces are located on the back rank, it does not mean we are doomed to passive defence – after all, the knight will be chased away from g5 soon, after which Black's pieces can start creeping forwards.

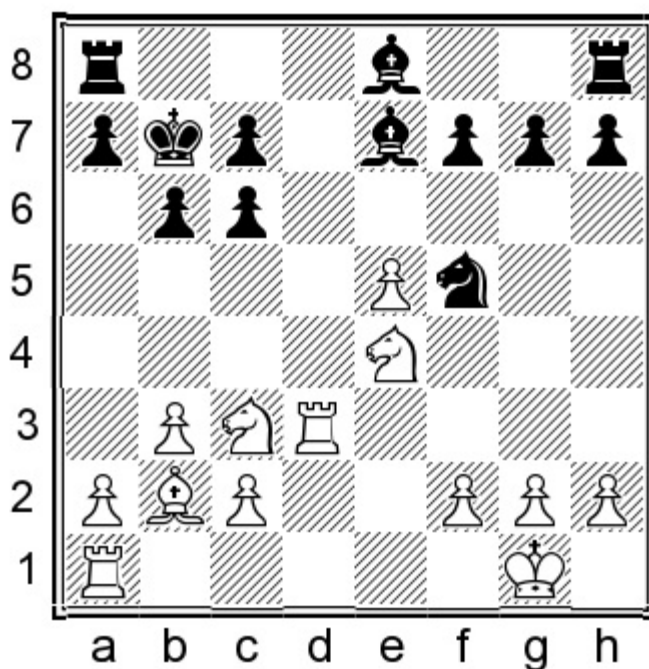
### 12.b3

Here and on the next turn, White has tried some other moves such as 12.♞d3 and 12.♘ge4, but the usual outcome is a quick transposition, as the bishop hardly has a better square available than b2.

### 12...b6

It makes sense to improve the king before doing anything else.

### 13.♙b2 ♖b7 14.♞d3 ♙e7 15.♘ge4



### 15...♞d8

It is logical to exchange one pair of rooks before White doubles on the d-file.

15...c5?! proved premature after 16.♘d5 ♙c6 17.c4 ♞he8 18.♞f3 when Black suffered from a lack of space in Grischuk – Morozevich, Wijk aan Zee 2002.

### 16.♞ad1

The obvious alternative is:

### 16.♞xd8 ♙xd8 17.♞d1 ♖c8

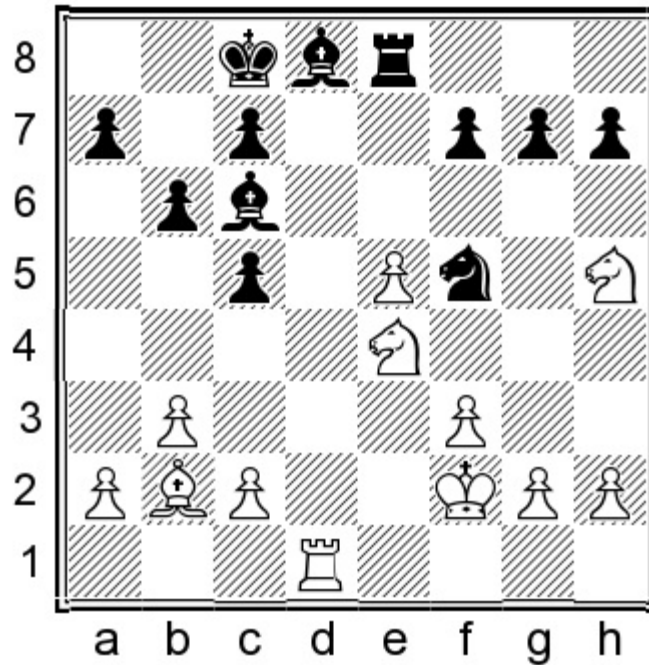
This may seem passive, but now that the a8-rook has been swapped off, there is something to be

said for retreating the king and controlling the d7-square.

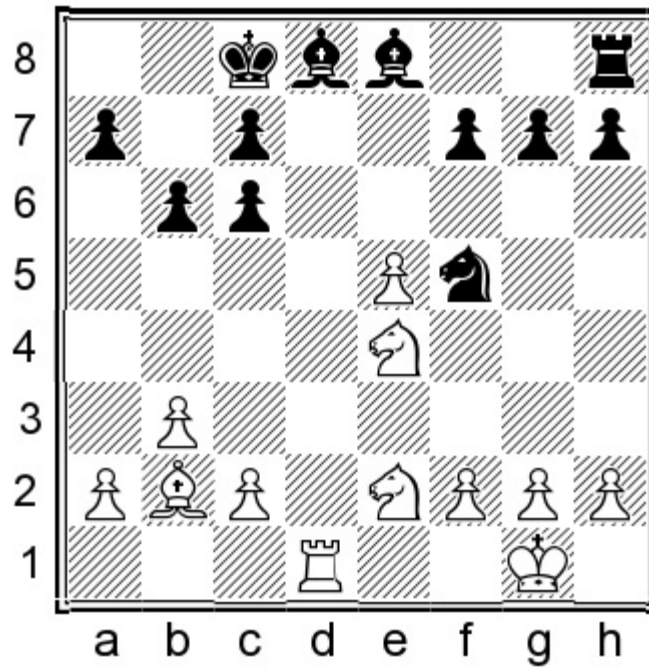
18.♖e2

The aggressive 18.g4?! is liable to backfire, and 18...♗h4 19.f4 h5 20.h3 hxg4 21.hxg4 ♕d7 left White weak on the light squares in Bologan – Hammer, Peristeri 2010.

Another accurately played game continued: 18.f3 ♕d7 19.♗e2 ♖e8 20.♗f4 c5 21.♗h5 (White gains nothing from 21.♗d5 ♕c6 22.c4 ♗d4 when the e5-pawn is in danger.) 21...♕c6 22.♔f2



22...♗d4!? Rather dynamic – but the equilibrium is maintained. 23.♗xg7 ♖xe5 24.♗g3 ♕h4 25.♕xd4 cxd4 26.♖xd4 ♕f6 27.♗7f5 ♖a5 28.♖f4 ♖xa2 29.♗e3 ♕g5 30.♖xf7 A draw was agreed in Keuter – Ostriker, corr. 2013. In a practical game, the upcoming ending with mutual passed pawns could make for an exciting finish, but evidently the correspondence players had already analysed it out to a draw.



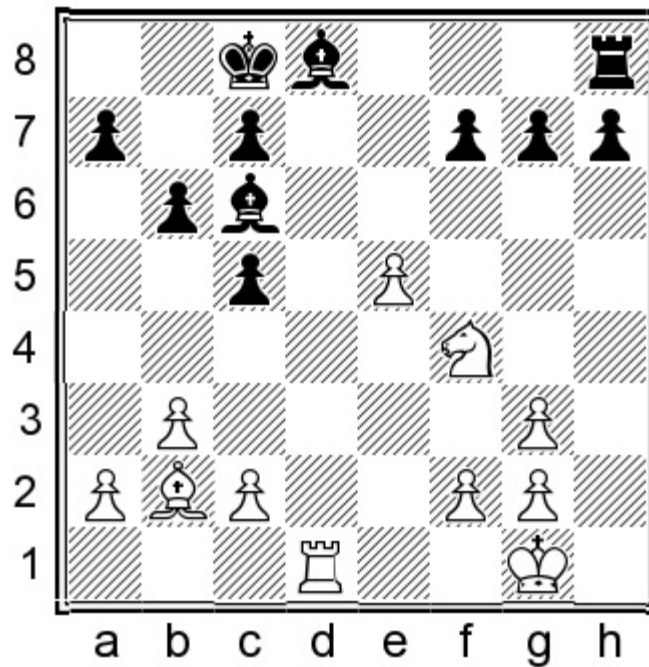
18...c5

Since White moved the knight away from c3, this is a good moment to advance the c-pawn and vacate the c6-square for the bishop, without having to fear a quick  $\text{♞d5}$ .

19.  $\text{♞f4}$   $\text{♙c6}$  20.  $\text{♞g3}$

The hasty 20.  $\text{♞d5}?!$  only helps Black after 20... $\text{♞d4}$  21. c4  $\text{♖e8}$ .

20... $\text{♞xg3}$  21. hxg3



21... $\text{♖g8}!$

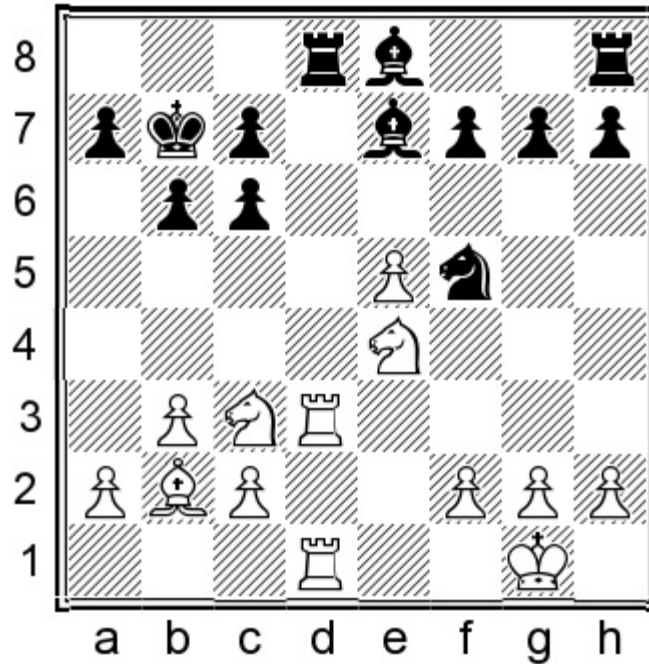
It is vital to cover the g7-pawn in anticipation of e5-e6.

22. e6

The most ambitious try.

22.f3 proves harmless after 22...♔g5 23.c4 ♖d8 24.♗xd8† ♕xd8 with equal play.  
 22...fxe6 23.♗xe6 g6

In Trasciatti – Ferre Perez, corr. 2018, White had nothing better than liquidating into a drawish endgame with opposite-coloured bishops.



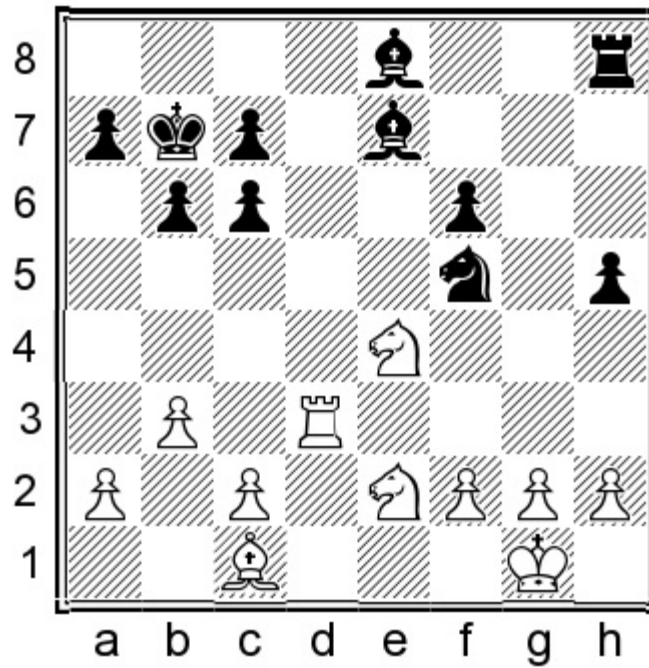
16...♗xd3 17.♗xd3 h5 18.♔c1

18.f3 h4 19.g4 hxg3 20.hxg3 ♕c8 21.g4 ♖h4 22.f4 ♗g6 23.♗e2 ♖h4 yielded Black sufficient counterplay against White's kingside pawns in Sardella – Sinnett, corr. 2018.

18...f6!?

This move is not forced, but the timing is quite logical as White was preparing ♔g5.

19.exf6 gxf6 20.♗e2



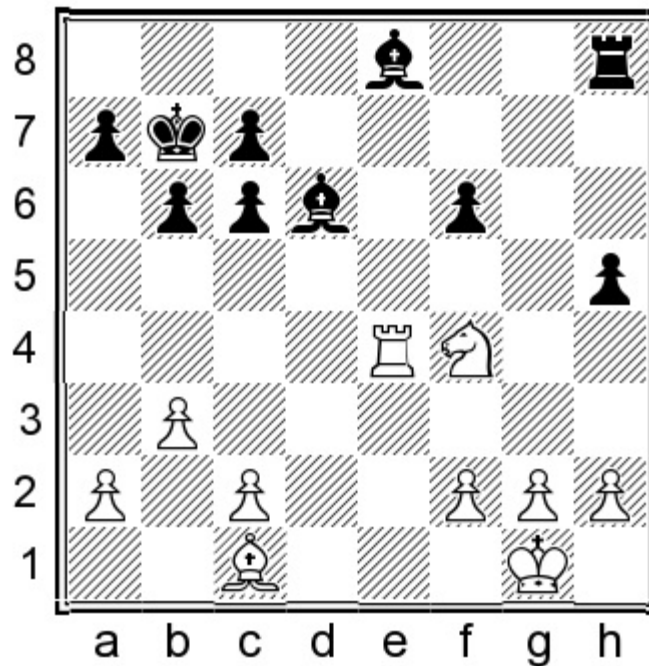
**20...d6!**

Improving on 20...c5 21.♙b2 when the Berlin maestro stood worse and went on to suffer a rare defeat in Leko – Kramnik, Budapest 2001. This was also the game that Khalifman recommended following for White.

**21.♞e3**

21.♞xd6† ♞xd6 22.♙b2 ♞g6 23.♞d2 ♞e8 was at least equal for Black in Llorente – Glaubitz, corr. 2017.

**21...♞xe4 22.♞xe4 ♞d6 23.♞f4**



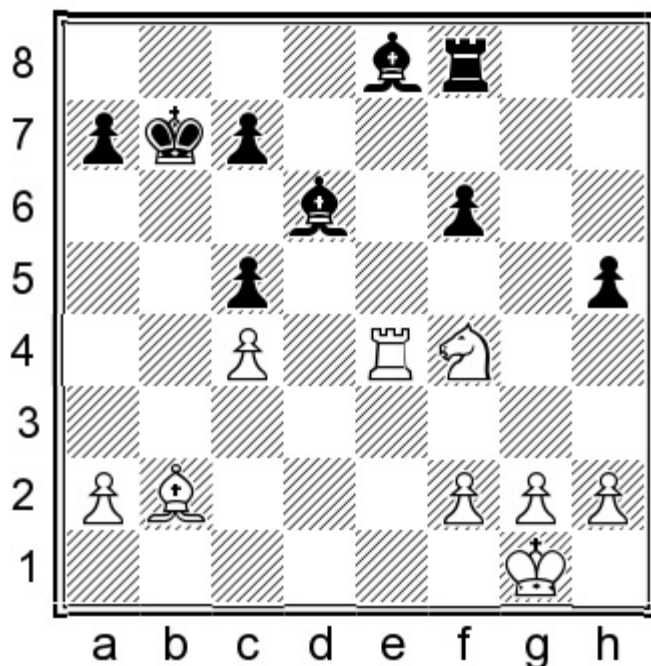
We have been following Hovhannisyán – Pashikian, Yerevan 2013. I think Black's most accurate continuation would have been:

**23...c5N 24.c4 b5! 25.♙b2**

25.cxb5 ♗xb5 26.h4 f5 27.♞e6 c4 sees Black solve the problem of the doubled pawns and create a passer.

**25...bxc4 26.bxc4 ♞f8**

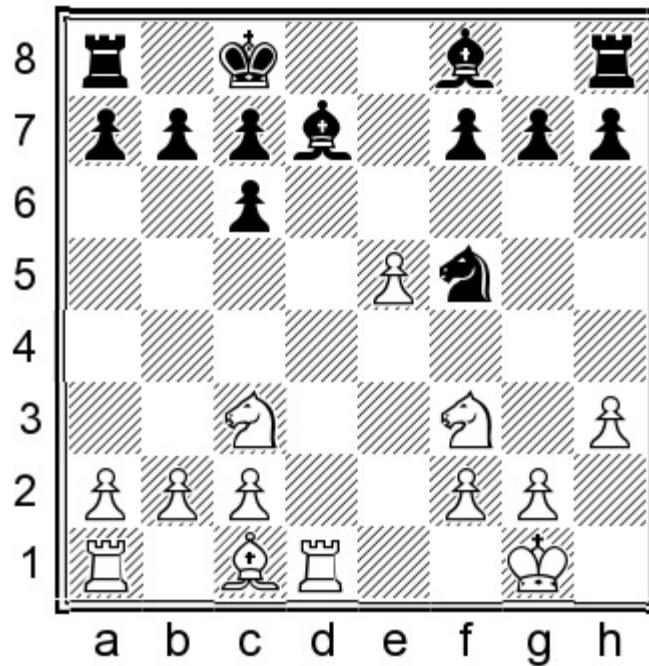
Black's pawn structure may not be the prettiest but the excellent bishops make up for it. For instance:



**27.♘e6 ♞g8 28.♙xf6 ♙c6**

Black will pick up the g2-pawn while retaining two active bishops, so Black's chances are not worse at all.

**B3) 11.h3**



This may be less popular than the previous variation, but it's just as challenging and certainly thematic.

### 11...h6

Taking away the option of  $\text{♞g5}$  for good. After further preparations, the bishop may settle on e6.

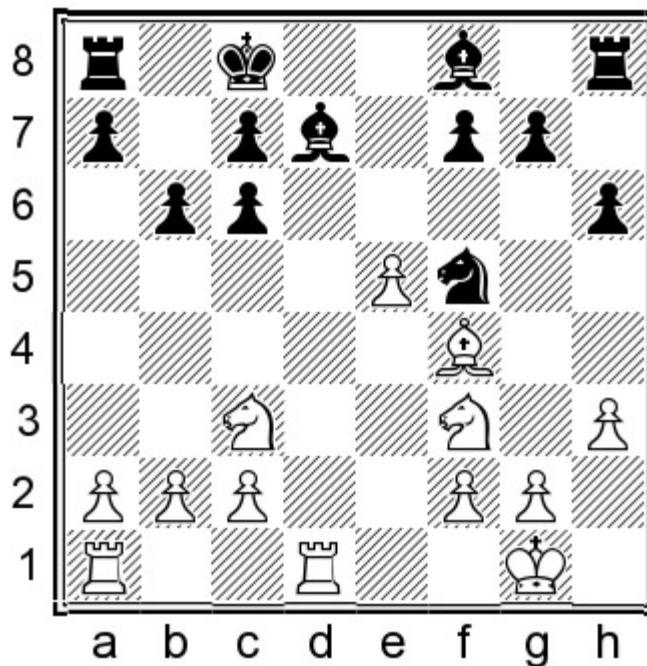
### 12.b3

The fianchetto is once again White's most harmonious scheme of development.

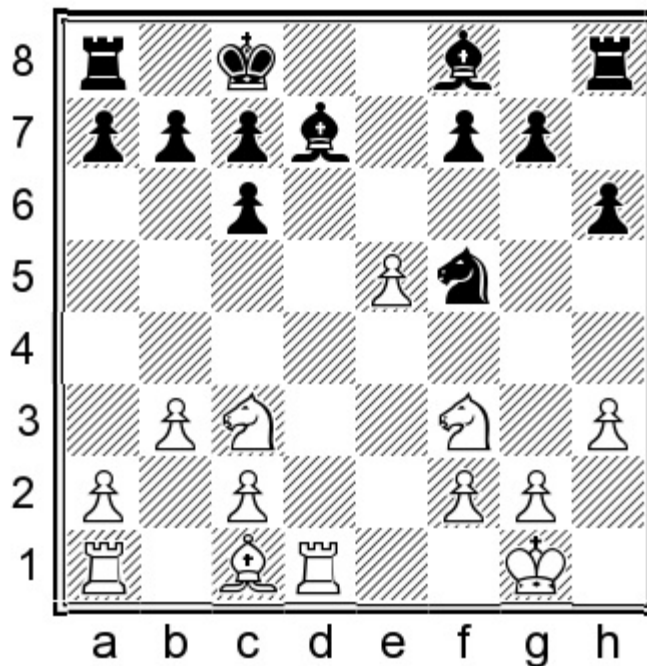
12.  $\text{♞e4}$  b6 13.  $\text{g4?!}$  is premature, and after 13...  $\text{♞e7}$  14.  $\text{♞g3}$  c5 the weakness of the light squares in White's camp was starting to tell in Polgar – Ponomariov, Moscow 2009.

The same can be said about 12.  $\text{g4?!}$   $\text{♞e7}$  13.  $\text{♙f4}$  c5 14.  $\text{♞d3}$   $\text{♙e6}$  15.  $\text{♞ad1}$  b6 16.  $\text{♙g3}$   $\text{♞b7}$  as occurred in Arizmendi Martinez – Ki. Georgiev, Izmir 2004.

12.  $\text{♙f4}$  is playable, but hardly an improvement on the fianchetto. 12...b6 (12...g5!? is also fine, just like in the 10.h3 h6 11.  $\text{♙f4}$  line where the other rook goes to d1.)



13.♞d3 (Worse is 13.a4?! a5 14.♞d3, as seen in Iv. Saric – Ib. Saric, Zadar 2009, in view of 14...♙b4!N 15.♞ad1 ♕e6 16.g4 ♘e7 when White's set-up on the queenside looks shaky.) 13...c5 14.♞ad1 ♕e6 15.b3 ♘e7 Black reached a harmonious position in Parushev – Galliano, corr. 2016.



12...b6

This move has to be made sooner or later, as Black needs to unlock the queen's rook.

13.♙b2 ♘e7

A flexible continuation. Black's knight can be hosted on c6 or g6, while the bishop has the option of going to f5 now.

13...c5!? 14.♘d5 a5 15.a4 ♖e7 has been employed with some success, but I prefer not to relinquish control of d5 so early. (Unlike the analogous situation which occurs after 10.h3 h6 11.b3 followed by ♖ad1, here Black does not have the ...c5-c4 resource, which is quite a significant difference.)

White now has two main options: **B31)** 14.♞d2 and **B32)** 14.♘e2.

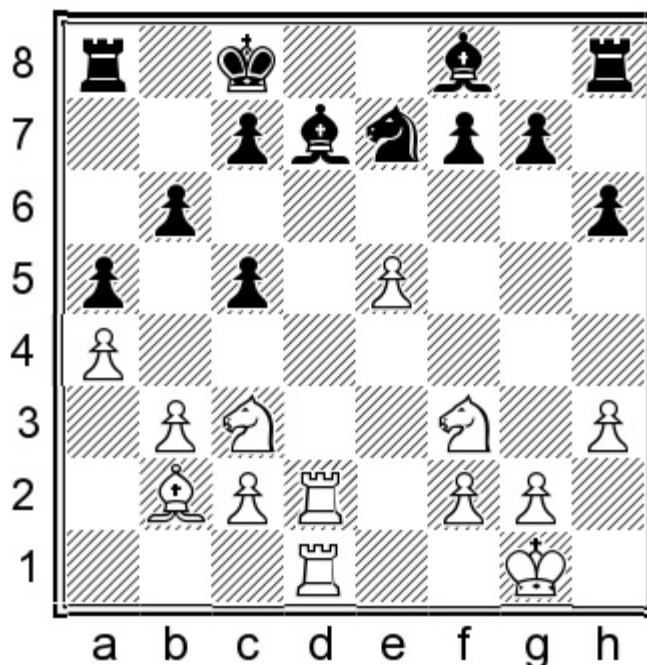
The other possibility worth mentioning is:

14.a4 a5

I am not sure if this move is necessary, but it was played in all the games so far. Anyway, I don't see how White can benefit from the inclusion of these pawn moves.

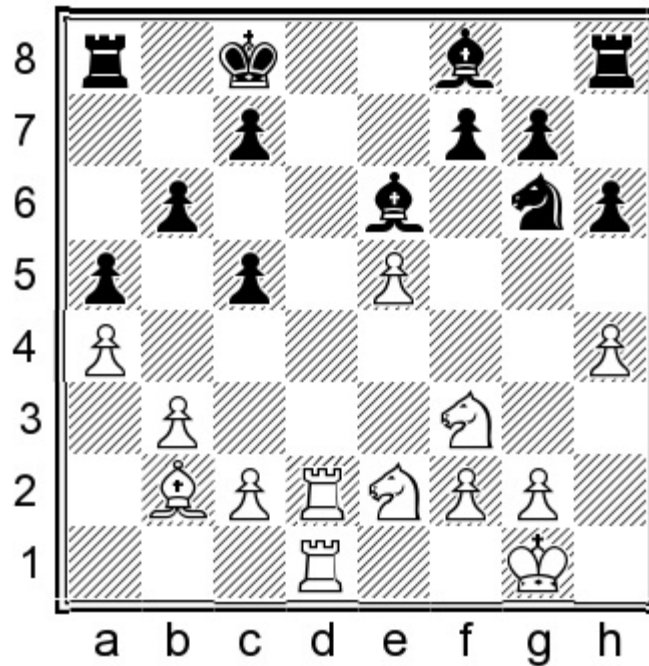
15.♞d2 c5 16.♞ad1

16.♘e2 ♘g6 17.♞ad1 ♕e6 reaches the same position.



16...♕e6 17.♘e2 ♘g6 18.h4

The slower 18.c4 ♕e7 19.♘c3 ♖b7 20.♘d5 ♞ad8 21.♘xe7 ♞xd2 22.♘xd2 ♘xe7 was more or less equal in Grischuk – Kramnik, London 2013, although White has to be slightly more careful due to the vulnerability of the queenside pawns, and Grischuk subsequently cracked under pressure and lost.

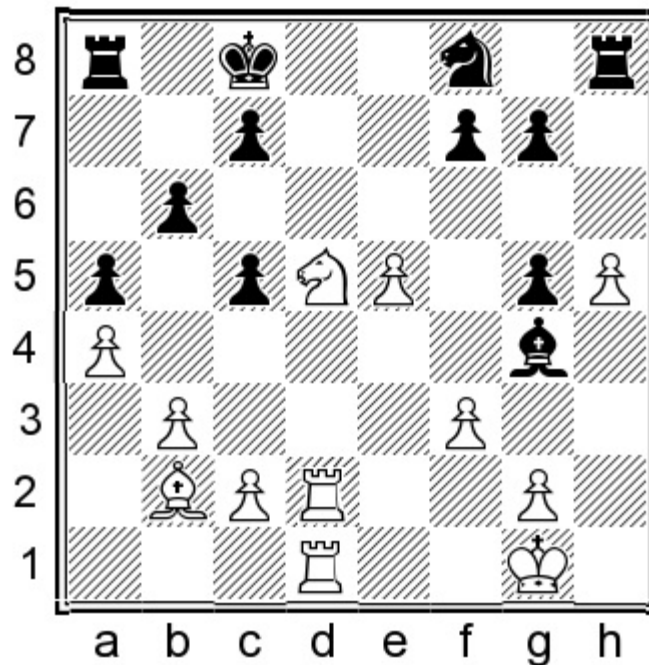


18...♙e7! 19.h5 ♜f8

A standard way to regroup the forces.

20.♜f4 ♙g4 21.♞d5 ♙g5 22.♞xg5 hxg5 23.f3

We have been following Karthikeyan – Grischuk, Internet (blitz) 2020. Black should have accepted the pawn sacrifice:



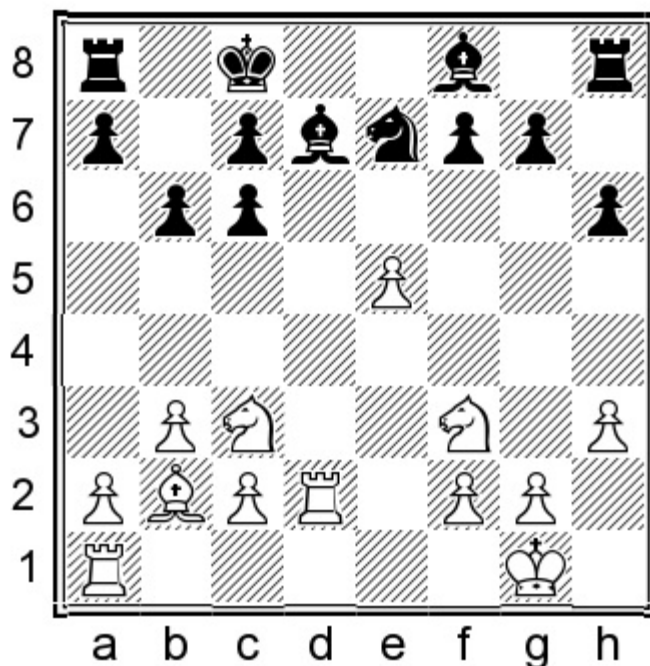
23...♙xh5!N 24.♞e7† ♜b7 25.g4 ♙g6 26.♞xg6 fxg6!

The pawn structure may be ugly, but Black is a pawn up!

27.e6 ♞xe6 28.♞e1 ♞f4 29.♙xg7 ♞hd8

White will have to struggle for a draw.

### B31) 14.♖d2



Taking full control over the d-file is natural and sensible.

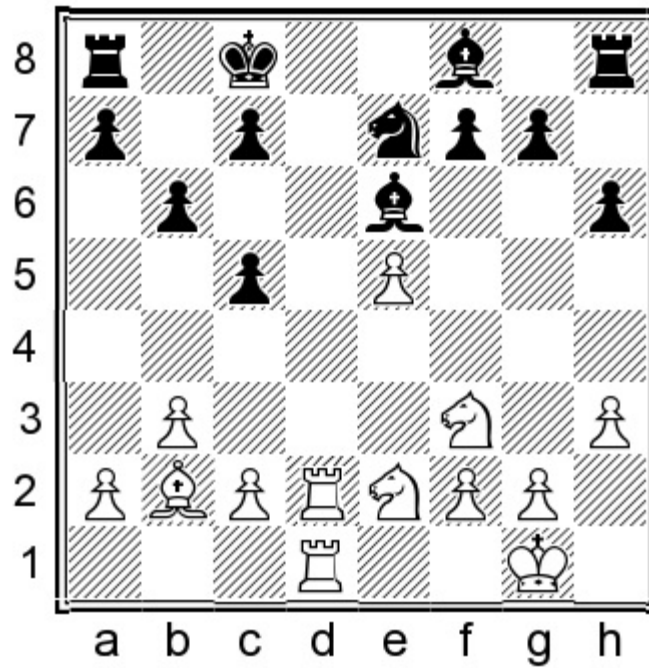
#### 14...c5!

Black restricts the mobility of the f3-knight and secures the e6-post for the bishop. Note that with the knight already on e7, there is no need to fear a knight incursion to d5.

#### 15.♖ad1 ♘e6 16.♗e2

16.♖d8† ♔b7 17.♖xa8 ♔xa8 18.♗e2 ♖g6 transposes to the note to White's 17th move in the analysis of 14.♗e2.

16.♗e4 ♗c6 17.♗h2 was played in the game Severiukhina – Guadamuro Torrente, Chotowa 2010, and now after 17...c4!N 18.f4 ♘b4 19.♖f2 ♘f5 Black's initiative on the queenside overwhelms White's plans with the kingside pawn majority.

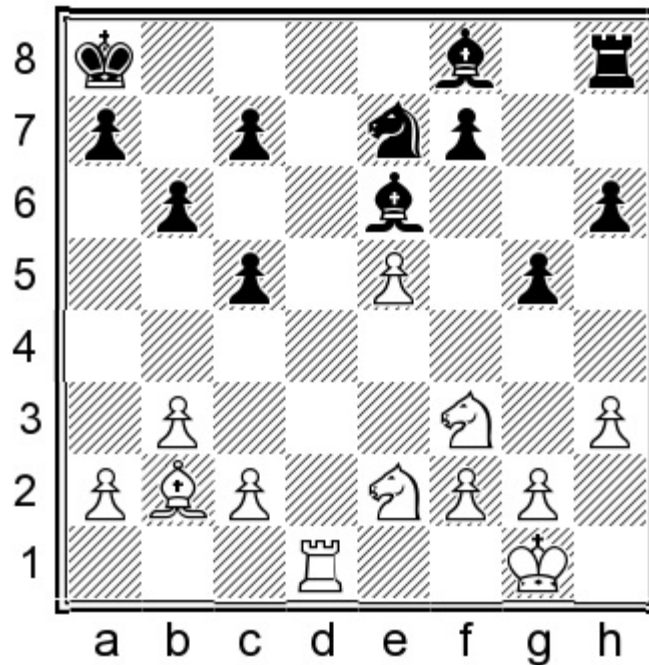


**16...g5!?**

This is an additional option available to Black via the present move order.

16...♘g6 transposes to the analysis of 14.♘e2 below.

17.♞d8† ♔b7 18.♞xa8 ♔xa8



**19.h4!**

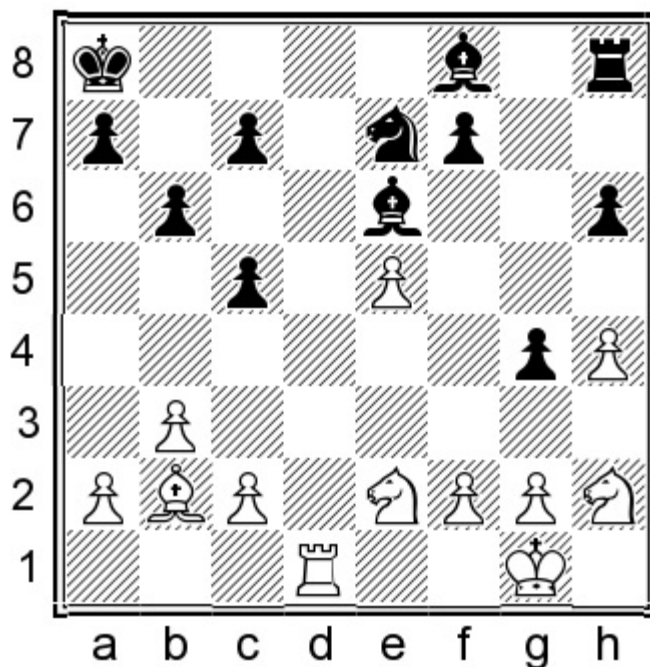
White has to act energetically in order to develop a meaningful initiative on the kingside.

19.♘g3 is too slow. 19...♔b7 20.♘h5 In Nikolova – Jovanic, Cappelle-la-Grande 2011, Black could

have taken over the initiative with 20...♖c6N 21.g4 ♘b4 when White's queenside is too exposed.

**19...g4 20.♘h2**

20.♞d8†?! ♔b7 21.♘h2 ♘c6 22.♞d1 ♙g7 only amounts to a loss of time for White.



**20...♙g7!**

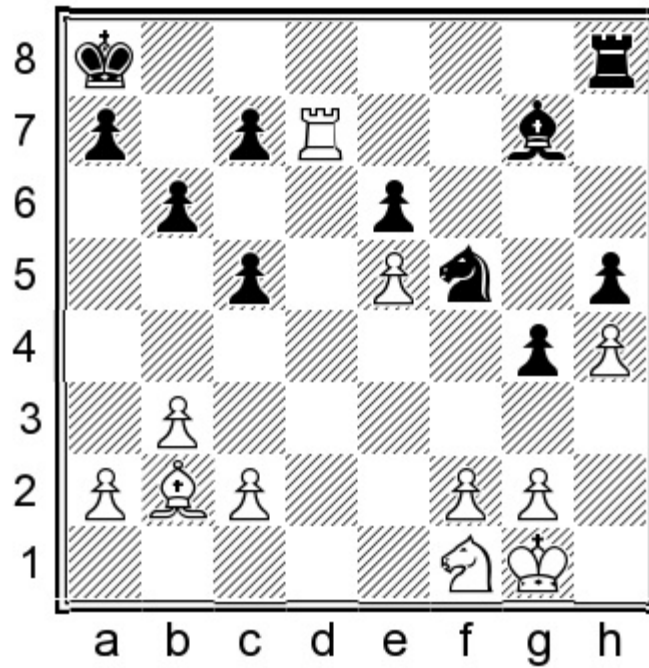
The time has come to unlock the back rank.

20...h5?! proved less precise after 21.♞d8† ♔b7 22.♘f4 ♘g6 23.♘xe6 fxe6 24.g3 when Black was doomed to passive defence in Grischuk – Eljanov, Odessa 2009.

**21.♘f4 h5 22.♘f1**

White should get the knight back into play as soon as possible.

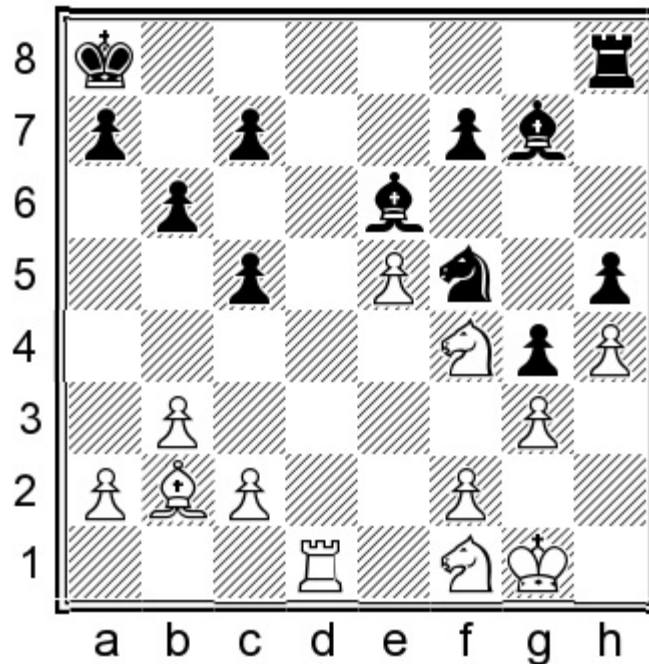
The alternative is: 22.♘xe6 fxe6 23.♞d7 ♘f5 24.♘f1



24...♔b7! Black is in time to expel the rook. 25.♘g3 ♚c8 26.♞f7 ♘xg3 27.fxg3 ♙h6 With equal chances.

22...♘f5 23.g3

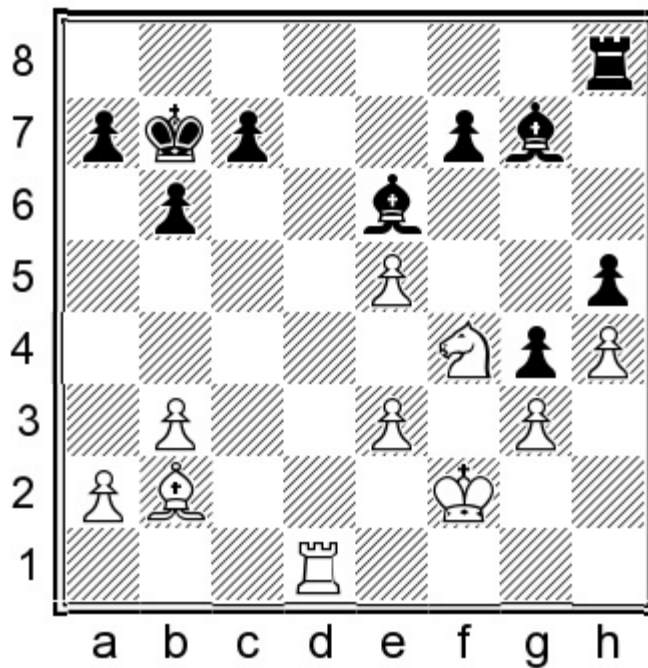
This position occurred in B. Socko – Grabarczyk, Warsaw 2003. Once again, it is advisable to activate the king:



23...♘f5!N 24.g3 ♘xe3 25.fxe3 c4!

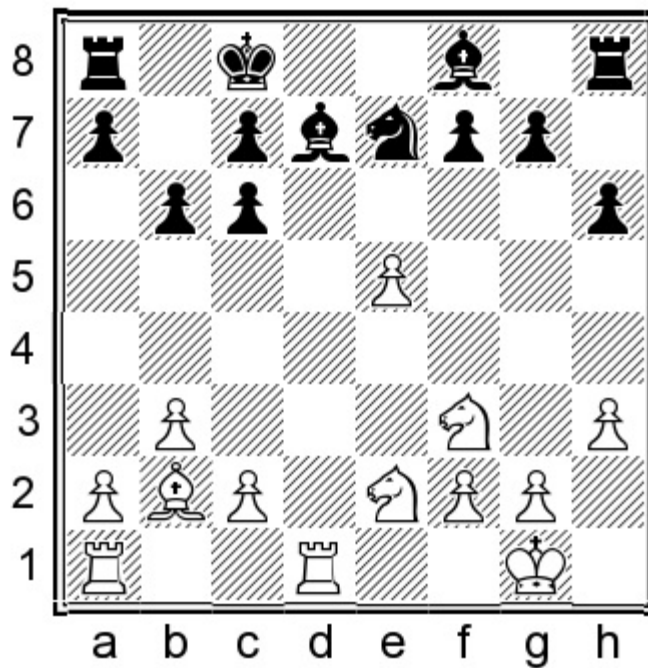
Taking the opportunity to improve the pawn structure.

26.♔f2 cxb3 27.cxb3



27...♖c8 28.e4 ♕f8  
 The endgame is equal.

B32) 14.♘e2



Rerouting the knight has been the most popular choice.

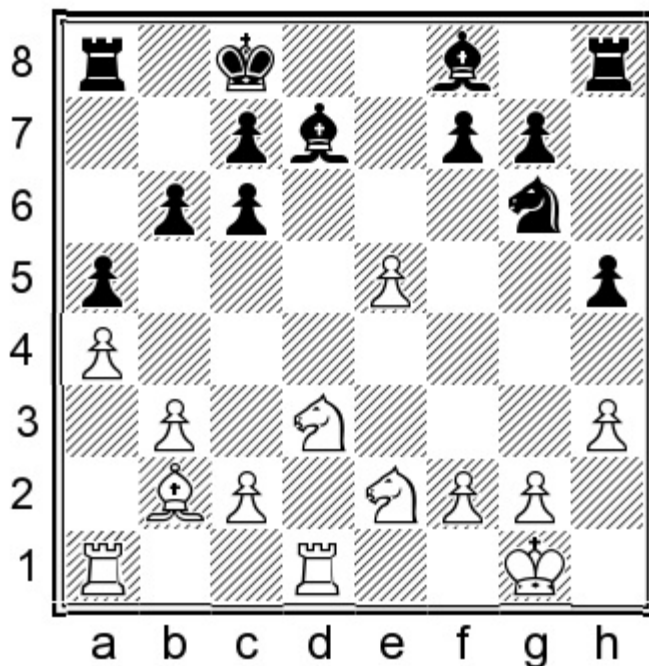
14...♘g6

Unlike the previous variation, ...g5 would be killed by e5-e6, so the text move is the only logical choice.

## 15.♖d2

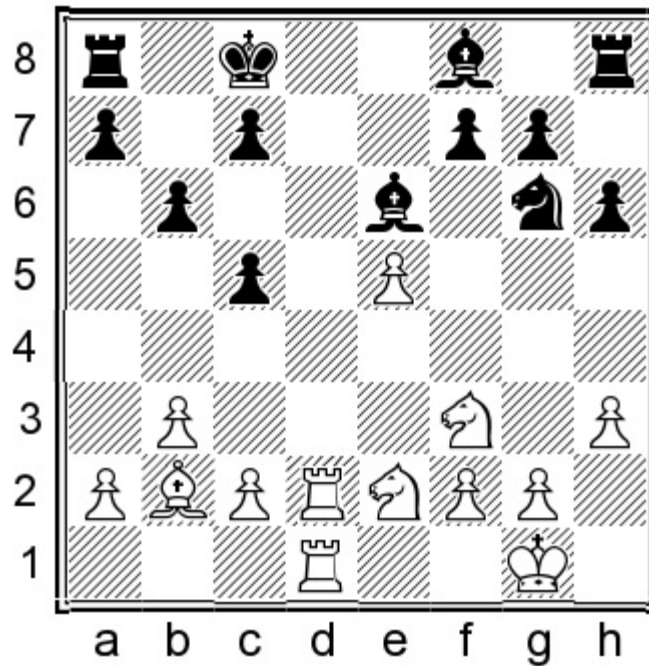
15.c4 a5 16.a4 ♖g8 17.♗e1 ♕e7 18.f4 ♗f8 was comfortable for Black in Rubinas – Ostriker, corr. 2012.

15.♗e1 is a typical manoeuvre for such positions but it proves ineffective after: 15...a5 16.a4 h5! A standard way of neutralizing the classical plan with g2-g4 and f2-f4. 17.♗d3



A draw was agreed here in Nisipeanu – Grabarczyk, Cappelle-la-Grande 2002. I think it was a well-timed offer from the higher-rated player, as Black could have continued with 17...♕e7 18.f4 ♖b7 when White starts to face some difficulties.

15...c5 16.♖ad1 ♕e6

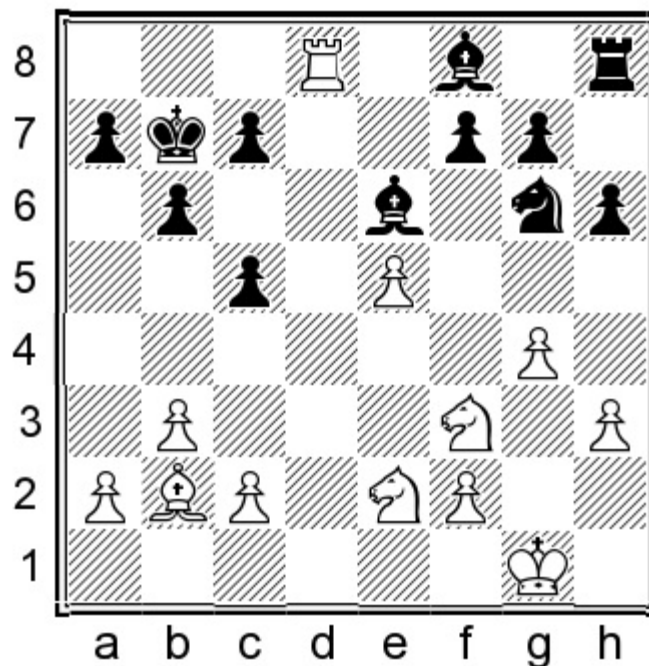


### 17.h4

This is the most aggressive try; White wants to attack the strong bishop on e6 as soon as possible.

17.♘g3 proved harmless after 17...♗f4 18.♞d8† ♔b7 19.♞xa8 ♔xa8 20.c4 ♕c8 when White was unable to prevent Black from hosting the knight on e6 and taking control of the important squares in Stellwagen – Volokitin, Novi Sad 2009.

17.♞d8† may appear tempting but the rook trade definitely suits Black: 17...♔b7 18.♞xa8 ♔xa8 19.♞d8† ♔b7 20.g4



20...♞h7! A somewhat unusual motif, but clearly the right decision. Rather than allowing an exchange

on h8, which would lead to a gross misplacement of the black knight and an easy initiative for White after ♖f4, Black simply steps out of the pin and prepares to expel the intruding rook. 21.♘h2 ♕e7 22.♞d1 ♕g5 23.♘f3 ♔c6 White's kingside play has been slowed down, so Black had no problems in Arenas Vanegas – Matlakov, Chotowa 2010.

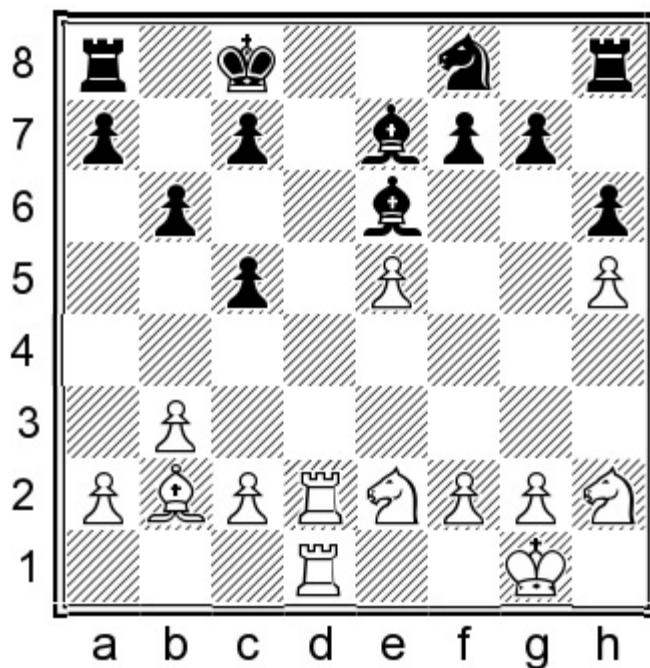
**17...♕e7**

Developing the bishop and vacating f8 for the knight.

**18.h5 ♘f8 19.♘h2**

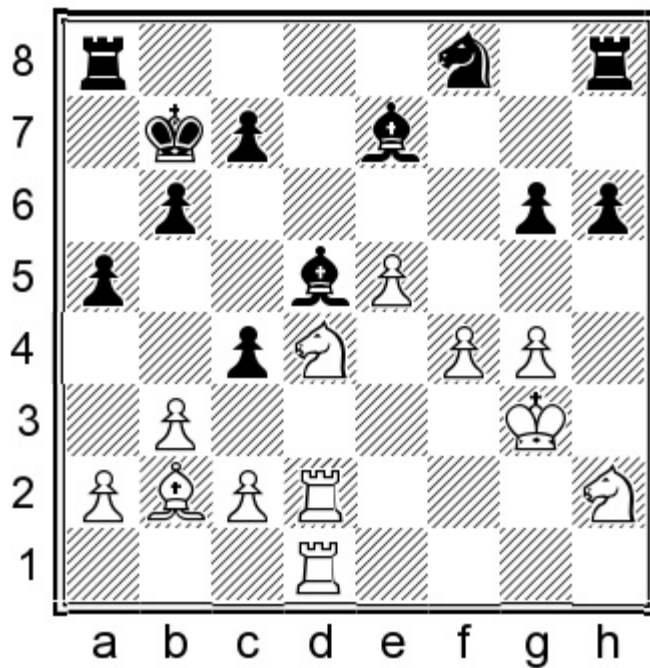
After 19.♘f4 ♕g4 20.♘d5 ♕g5 21.♘xg5 hxg5 White was losing the h5-pawn in Predke – Aleksandrov, St Petersburg 2011.

This position was reached in Ganguly – McShane, Philadelphia 2010, and a few other games featuring strong GMs. The main point of White's last move is to expand on the kingside with f2-f4 and g2-g4. I found an interesting new idea:



**19...c4!? 20.♘f4**

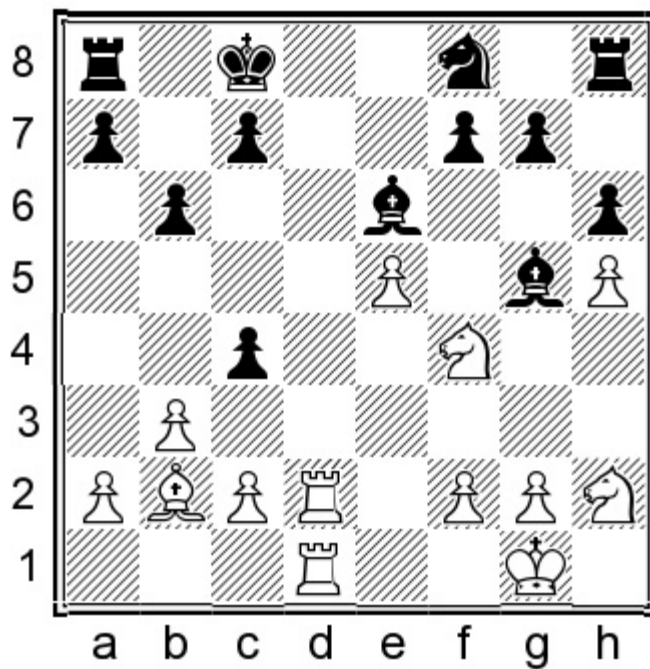
The straightforward 20.f4 ♔b7 21.g4 g6 allows Black to establish a blockade and neutralize White's play. For instance: 22.♔g2 a5 23.hxg6 fxg6 24.♘d4 ♕d5† 25.♔g3



25...cxb3 26.axb3 h5! The vulnerability of the king on g3 starts to tell.

20.♘d4 is hardly more promising in view of 20...cxb3 21.cxb3 a5 22.f4 ♕c5 23.♙f1 g6 when Black has good counterattacking prospects with ...a5-a4.

20...♕g5



21.♘xe6!?

This makes the play much sharper.

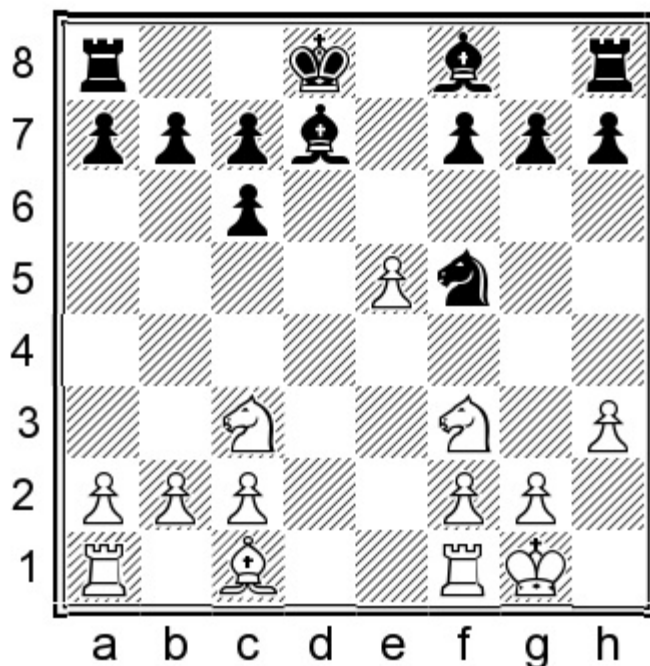
The safer 21.♖d4 can be met by 21...cxb3 22.cxb3 a5 23.♘xe6 ♘xe6 24.♖d7 ♖d8 when Black has no

problems.

21...♙xd2 22.♖xg7 c3 23.♙a3 ♜e6

In this unbalanced position, Black's chances are by no means worse.

### C) 10.h3



This flexible continuation is the most common. White can decide where to host the bishop later, and preparing g2-g4 is always a useful idea in the Berlin Endgame.

### 10...h6

This prophylactic move can be made at various moments, but I find the present move to be as good a time as any. We will analyse C1) 11.♙f4 followed by the main line of C2) 11.b3.

### C1) 11.♙f4

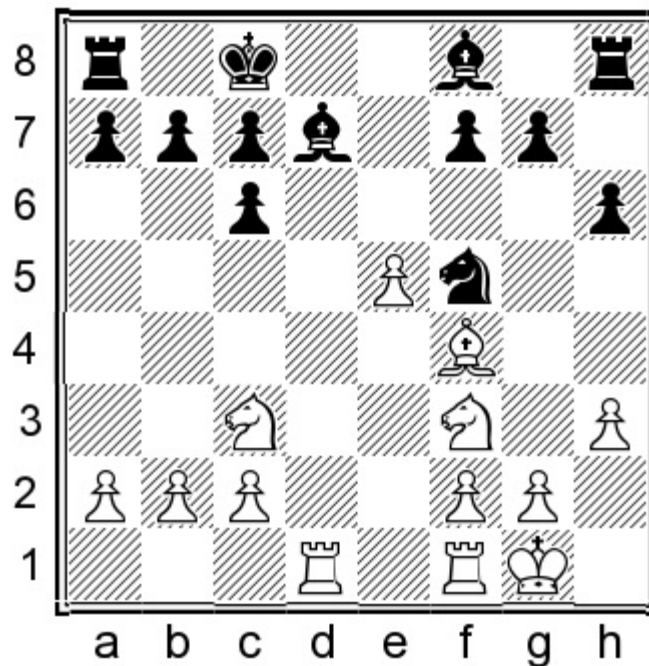
This is less popular than the fianchetto but has been tried by several top players. White connects the rooks at once, but the downside is that the bishop isn't always useful on the h2-b8 diagonal. At the same time, Black should be on the lookout for e5-e6 ideas.

11.♖d1 ♔c8 has been analysed under 10.♖d1.

### 11...♔c8 12.♖ad1

White's chosen move order is usually connected with moving this rook to the d-file.

12.♖fd1 leads back to 10.♖d1 ♔c8 11.h3 h6 12.♙f4, as analysed earlier.



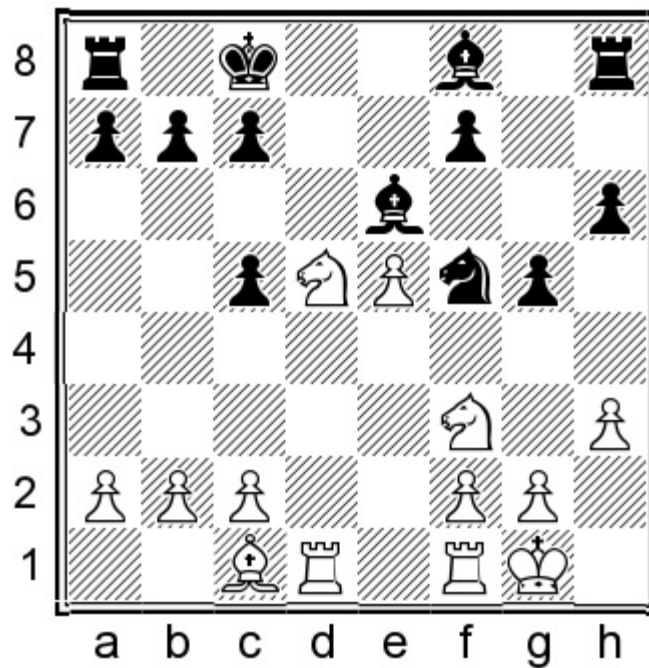
### 12...g5!

This energetic move emphasizes one of the drawbacks of placing the bishop on f4. In addition to winning time against the bishop, Black gains the option of transferring the knight via g7 to e6. In some lines, Black may even go on to develop a kingside initiative.

12...b6 was my main line in the position with the other rook on d1. It is playable here too, but after 13.g4 ♞e7 14.♙g3 White at least has some chances to play for e5-e6 in order to utilize the spare rook on the kingside.

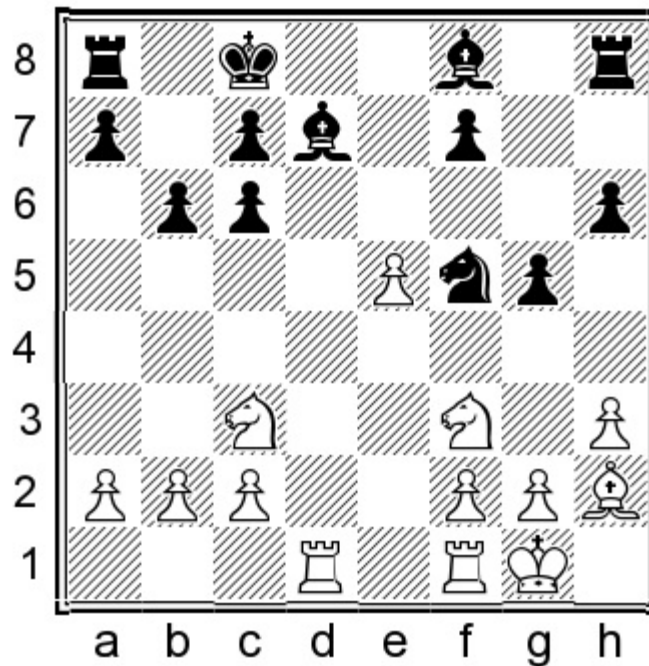
### 13.♙h2

The passive 13.♙c1 makes little sense. 13...c5 In some lines we should be wary about allowing the knight to jump straight to d5, but here there is no need to fear it. 14.♞d5 ♙e6



As usual, the light-squared bishop is perfectly placed when it cannot be attacked by White's knights. 15.b3 b6 16.♘b2 ♖b7 17.♙d2 a5 18.a4 ♜e7 19.c4 ♜g6 Kokarev – Svetushkin, Moscow 2012. Black has reached a harmonious setup, while White lacks any promising ideas.

13...b6



This move is always a vital part of Black's plans when the king is hosted on the queenside.

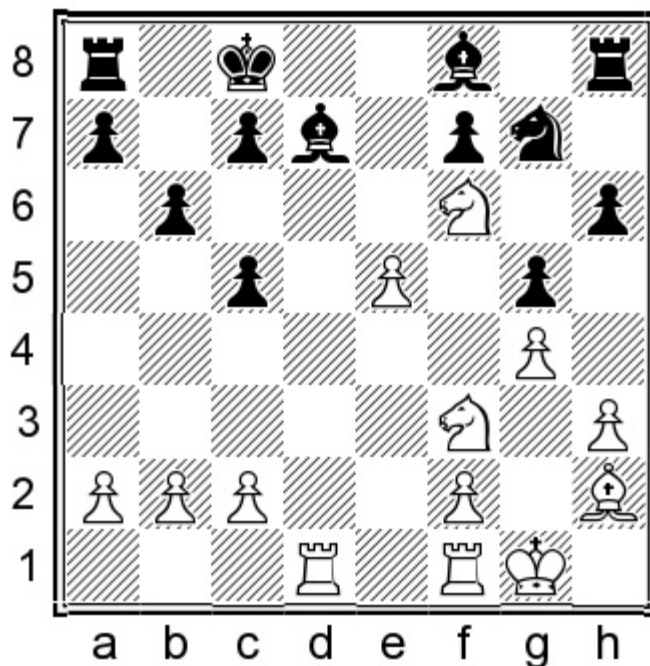
14.g4

14.♘e4 c5 15.g4 ♜g7 is another possible move order.

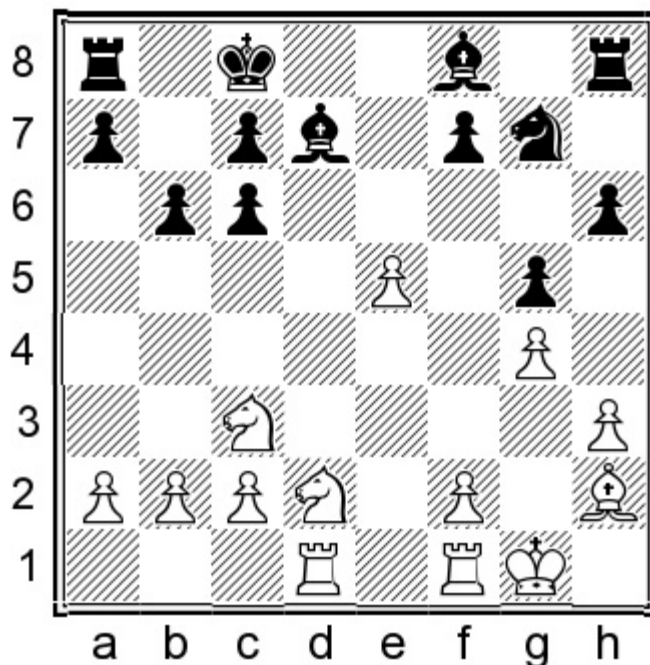
14...♖g7 15.♗d2!?

This seems like White's best idea, intending to transfer the knight to f6.

15.♗e4 is the other natural try, but there is a serious drawback: it diminishes White's control of d5. 15...c5 Of course! This move is especially effective when White's knight cannot occupy the central square that Black has just weakened. 16.♗f6 In Dervishi – Fressinet, Paris 2017, Black's most accurate continuation would have been:



16...♗b5!N 17.♖fe1 ♗e6 18.♗d2 c4! Seizing some space and activating the dark-squared bishop. 19.♗de4 ♖b7 White's play has slowed down, while Black has excellent prospects on the queenside.



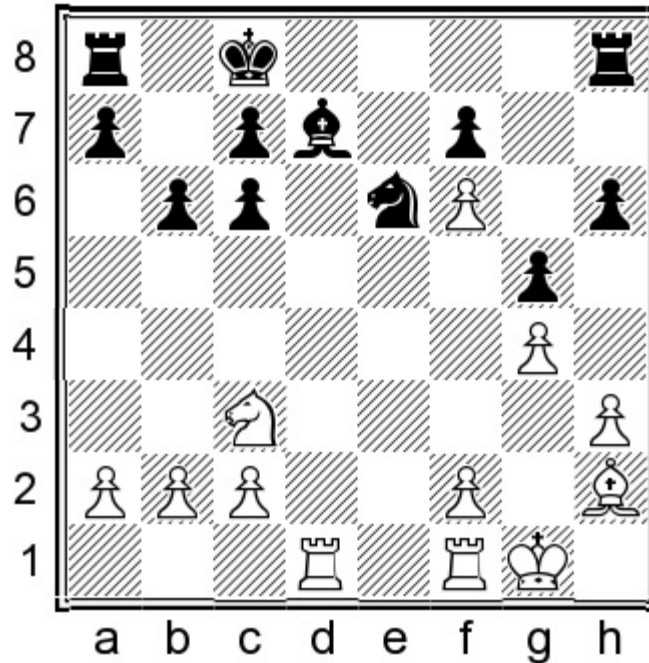
15...♗e6 16.♗de4

16.f4 gxf4 17.♙xf4 h5 is good for Black, whose bishops are getting more powerful.

16...♙g7

It is necessary to cover the f6-spot.

17.♘f6 ♙xf6 18.exf6



18...h5!

A well-timed break. Now White's kingside comes under some pressure.

19.f3 c5N

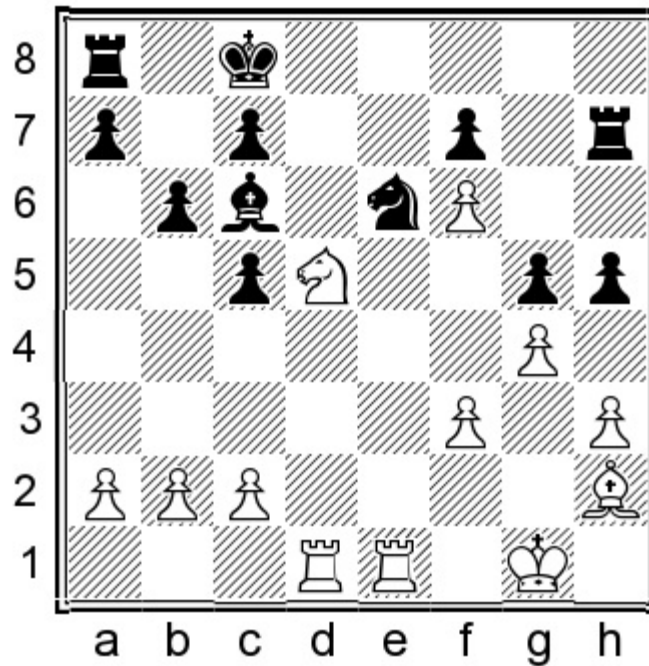
19...hxg4 20.hxg4 c5 is similar, and the players agreed a draw ten moves later in Wassilieff – Lupini, corr. 2019.

The text move vacates c6 for the bishop while maintaining the kingside tension for the time being. A possible continuation is:

20.♘d5 ♙c6 21.♞fe1

White's most dangerous idea is a sacrifice on e6.

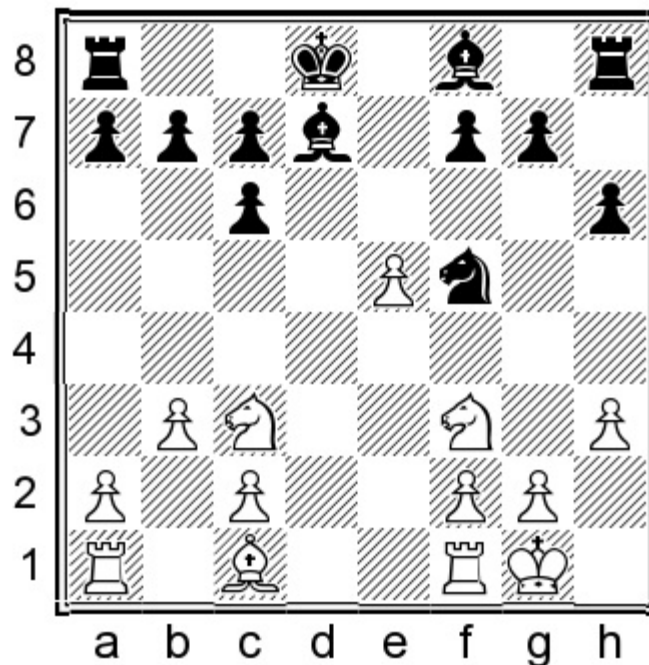
21...♞h7



22. ♖xe6 fxe6 23. ♘e7† ♔b7

The strong f6-pawn yields White sufficient compensation for the exchange, but not more.

### C2) 11.b3



11... ♕c8

Once again, we relocate the king to the queenside in order to connect the rooks as soon as possible. The play is similar to the 10. ♖d1 line and could transpose, but the present line derives

independent significance from the possibility of ♖ad1, intending to use the other rook to support kingside operations.

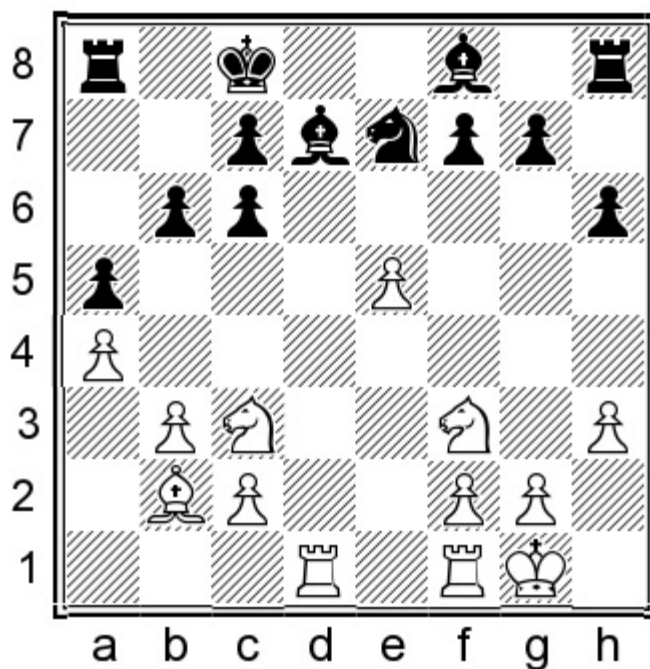
## 12. ♙b2

12. a4 a5

Occasionally White has tried inserting these moves, but it is hard to believe that Black's chances can be any worse here than in the main line.

13. ♙b2 b6 14. ♖ad1 ♞e7

14...c5 is also perfectly adequate, just like in the main line below, and indeed after 15. ♞d5 we get a direct transposition.



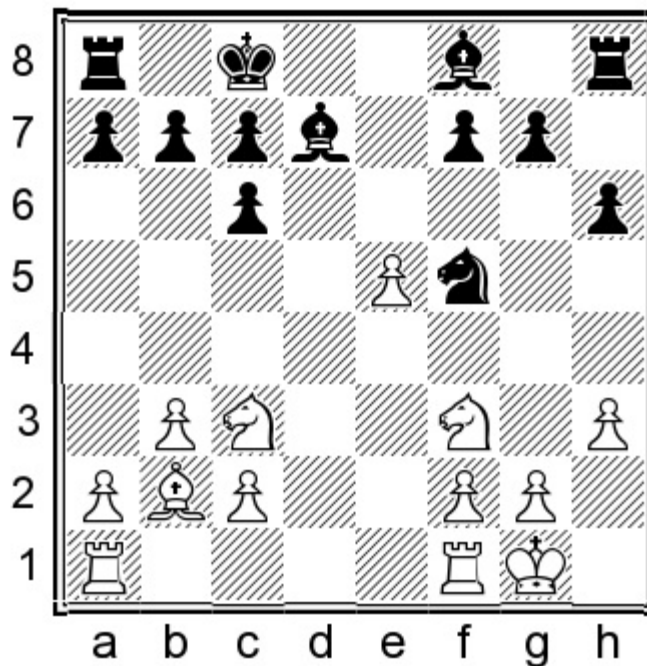
15. ♞fe1

15. ♞d2 c5 16. ♞fd1 ♙e6 reaches a position analysed under 10. ♞d1.

Transferring the knight to g3 also doesn't offer White much: 15. ♞e2 ♞g6 16. ♞g3 ♞f4 17. ♞fe1 c5 18. ♞e4 ♞e6 Black had the most harmonious position in Vallejo Pons – I. Sokolov, Mondariz 2001.

15... ♞g6 16. ♞d2 ♙c5 17. ♞e2 ♙b4 18. c3 ♙e7

Black had a pleasant position in Dolin – Zhak, corr. 2015.



### 12...b6 13.♖ad1

13.♖fd1 is another transposition to the 10.♖d1 variation.

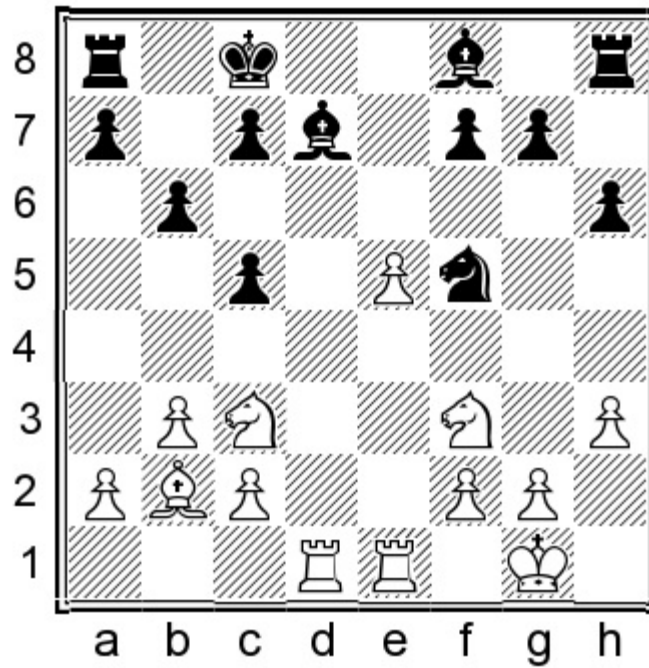
### 13...c5!?

This is where I suggest deviating from the equivalent position where White's other rook went to d1. This move is certainly committal, as Black relinquishes control over d5. However, there are also merits: the bishop can go to e6 without fear of harassment from a knight coming to d4 (for instance, after g2-g4), and Black might undouble the c-pawns in some lines.

13...♞e7 is completely playable, and if White doubles on the d-file we will transpose to the analysis of 10.♖fd1. Obviously White can try to utilize the presence of a rook on f1 instead of a1 in various ways, so you should be mindful of that difference if you play this way; but essentially Black's position is fine.

After the text move, White has two serious tries: **C21)** 14.♖fe1 and **C22)** 14.♞d5.

### **C21) 14.♖fe1**

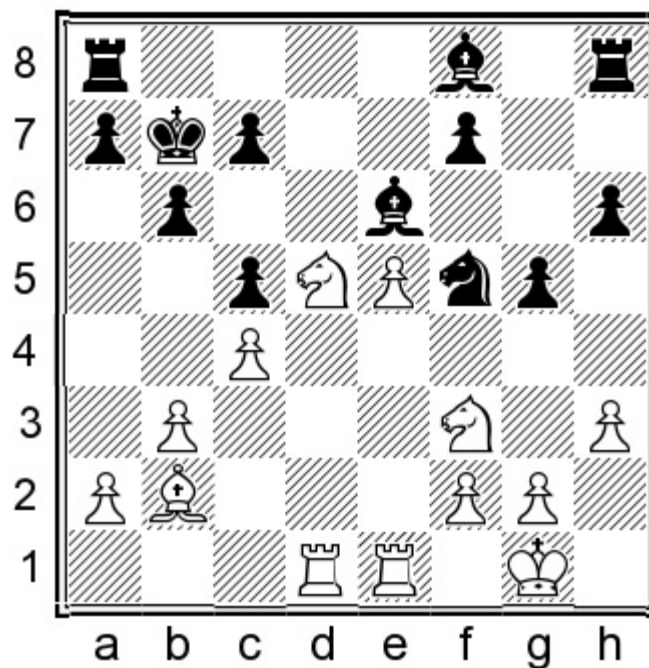


This is the less popular of the two options, but it is still a serious move which has been tested at the highest level.

14...♙e6 15.♞d5 g5!

This brave decision is justified by the fact that Black now gets to keep the light-squared bishop on the optimal e6-square, rather than allow ♞f4. Anand played this move against Carlsen in one of their 2014 World Championship match games, which we will follow for a while.

16.c4 ♖b7



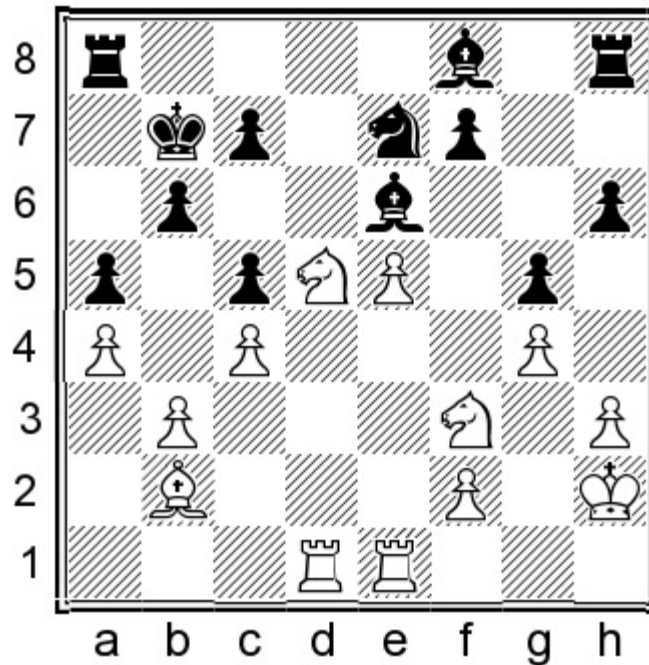
17.♖h2

The immediate 17.g4N 17...♖e7 18.♔g2 can be met by 18...b5! 19.♔g3 bxc4 20.bxc4 ♔c6 with good counterplay.

### 17...a5 18.a4

After 18.g4N 18...♖e7 White has nothing better than 19.a4 with a transposition.

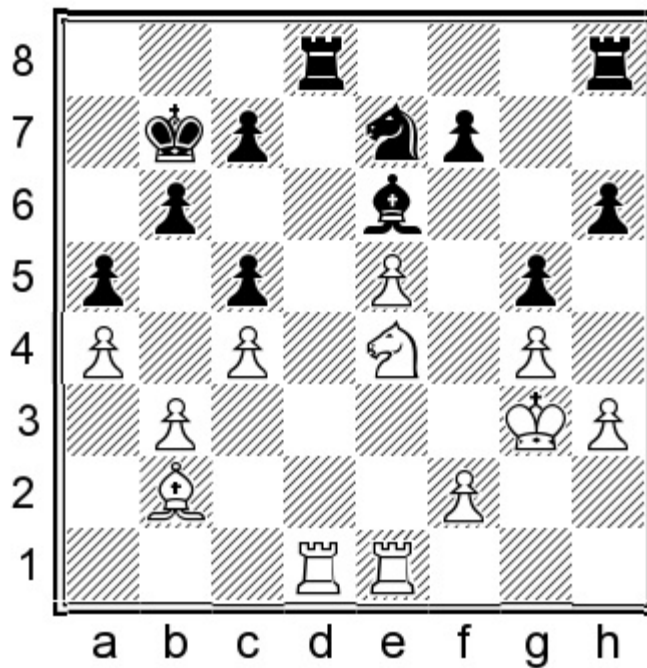
### 18...♖e7 19.g4



This move is an important step in White's plan of opening up the h-file with h3-h4. However, it takes a long time.

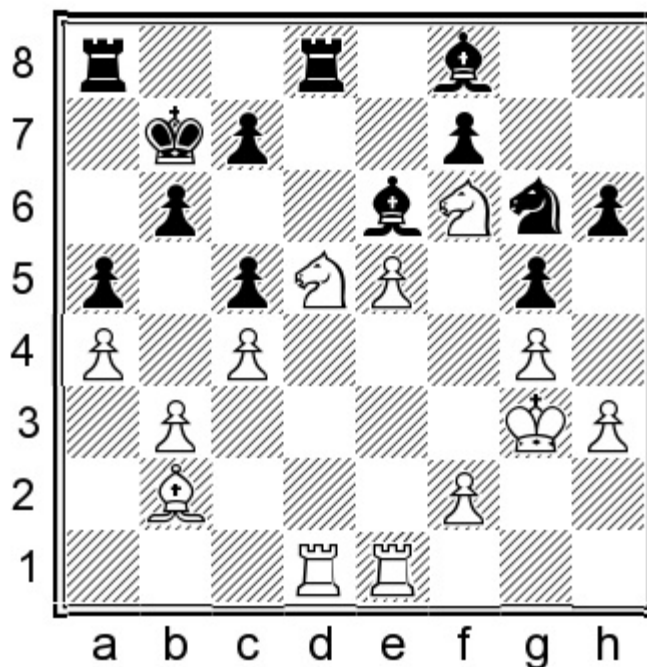
### 19...♖g6 20.♔g3 ♔e7 21.♖d2

After 21.♖xe7 ♖xe7 22.♖d2 ♔ad8 23.♖e4 a draw was agreed in Garcia Ramirez – Oliveira, corr. 2013. Indeed, White lacks any adequate way of making progress. For instance:



23...♘g6 24.f3 ♖c6 25.♙c1 ♜d4 26.♙e3 ♝xd1 27.♝xd1 ♞xe5 Black's extra pawn is of no great significance, so the endgame is equal.

21...♝hd8 22.♞e4 ♙f8 23.♞ef6



White has achieved the most he could; the knights, in particular, are perfectly placed. That is, except for the fact that they enable Black to create queenside counterplay in a most unexpected way.

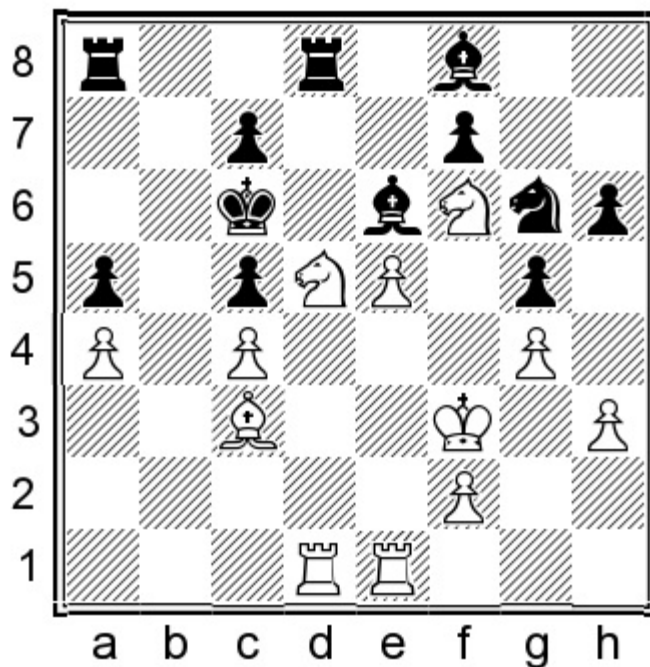
23...b5! 24.♙c3

24.cxb5? c6 25.bxc6† ♖xc6 exploits the instability of the d5-knight, allowing Black to pick up the b3-pawn with an excellent position.

24. axb5 a4 25. bxa4 ♖xa4 also gives Black more than enough activity for the sacrificed pawn.

**24...bxa4 25.bxa4 ♔c6 26.♔f3**

Carlsen is doing a good job of keeping Black's activity at bay. Nevertheless, Black could have fought for the initiative by improving on one of the next two moves.



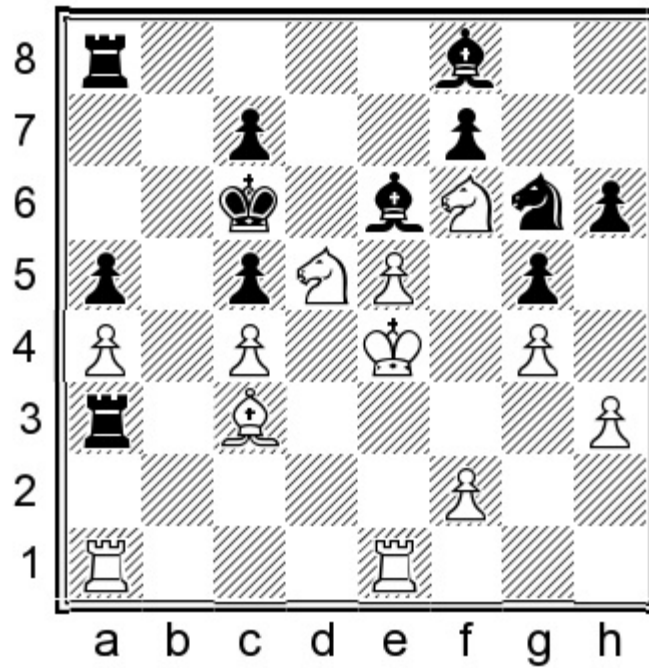
**26...♖db8**

26...♔e7!?N is another good move which poses White some problems.

**27.♔e4**

We have been following the exciting game Carlsen – Anand, Sochi (11) 2014. At this point Black could have played:

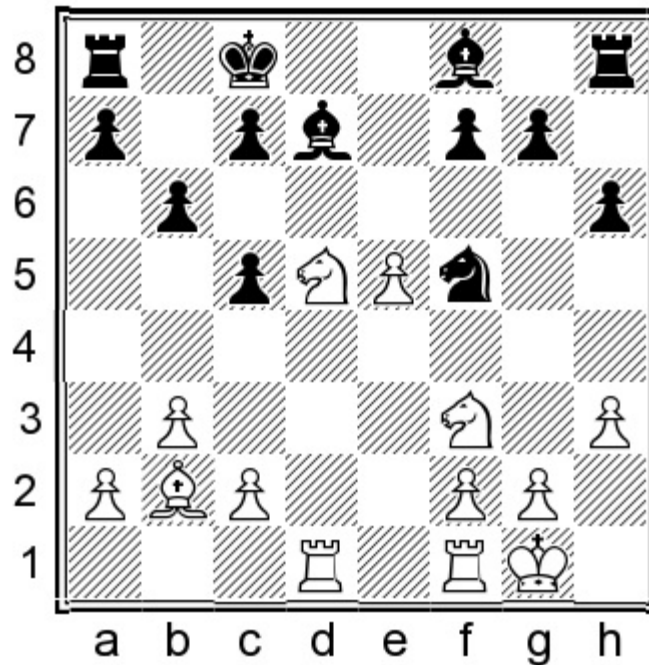
**27...♖b3!?N 28.♖b1 ♖a3 29.♖a1**



29...♖xc3! 30.♘xc3 ♕xc4

With a pawn for the exchange, as well as the passed c-pawns supported by powerful bishops, Black is doing well.

C22) 14.♘d5



This is the most natural reaction to Black's last move; White is happy to post the knight on a central spot.

14...a5!

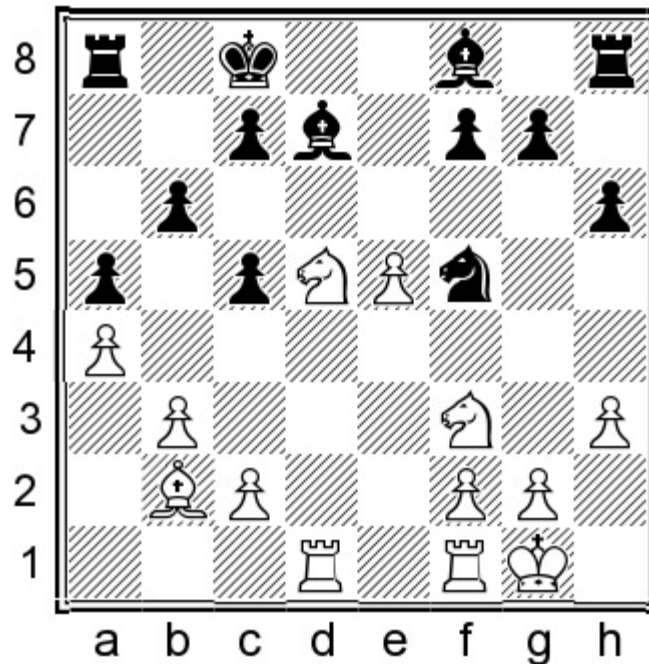
White's choice of rook for the d-file means that Black has additional counterattacking chances on the queenside.

### 15.a4

Blocking the further advance of the a-pawn has been White's usual reaction. Other continuations do not pose Black any problems, for instance:

15.♖fe1 a4 16.c4 ♕e6 17.♗f4 ♘e7 18.♗xe6 fxe6 19.♞d2 ♘c6 favoured Black in Frica – V. Popov, corr. 2015. Normally Black should strive to avoid having the bishop exchanged on e6 like this, but in the present case, the powerful queenside play is more important.

15.♞d2 a4 16.♞fd1 ♕c6 17.c4 ♖b7 18.g4 ♗e7 gave Black good counterplay on the light squares in Tabatabaei – Khairullin, Warsaw 2016.

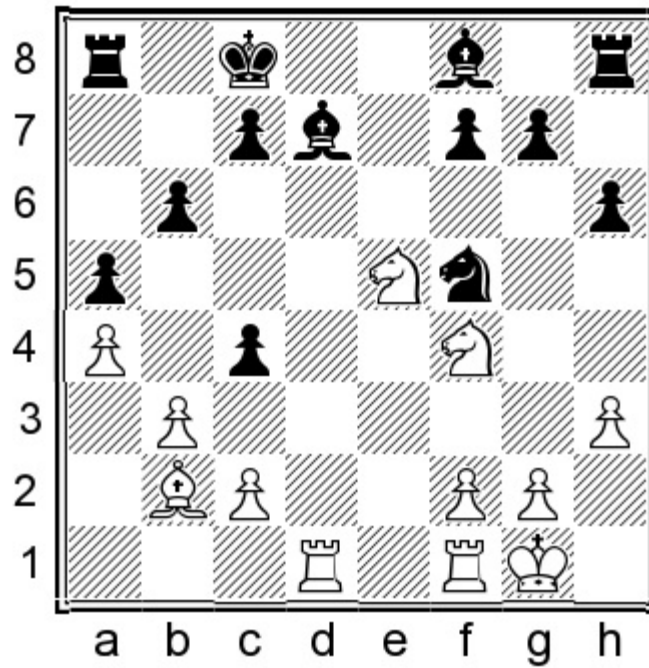


### 15...c4!

Here's the key difference! The a4-pawn no longer enjoys the support of a rook, so Black has this useful resource.

### 16.g4

The ambitious 16.e6 was played in Stellwagen – Efimenko, Germany 2008, when 16...♕xe6!?N would have been good. 17.♗f4 ♕d7 18.♗e5

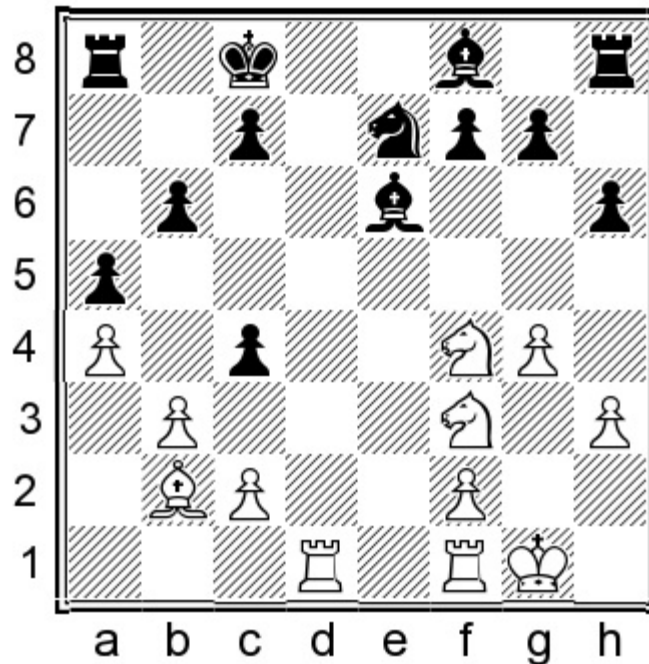


18...♞d6! White's task of proving full compensation for a pawn is not easy. For instance, 19.♞xd7?! ♔xd7 20.bxc4 ♕c6 and White's queenside pawns are likely to fall at some point.

16...♞e7 17.♞f4

An alternative which deserves attention is:

17.e6!? ♕xe6 18.♞f4

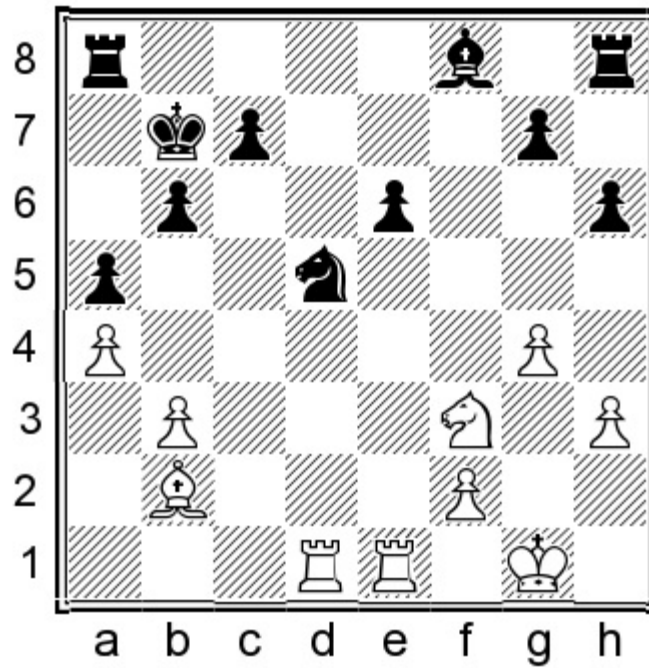


White's pieces are extremely active, so Black has to be accurate.

18...cxb3 19.♞xe6 fxe6 20.cxb3 ♞d5

This is the perfect place for the knight.

21.♞fe1 ♔b7



22. cxd4

I also examined 22. Bxe6 dxf4 23. Bxe4 dxc3† 24. Kg2 d5 with equality.

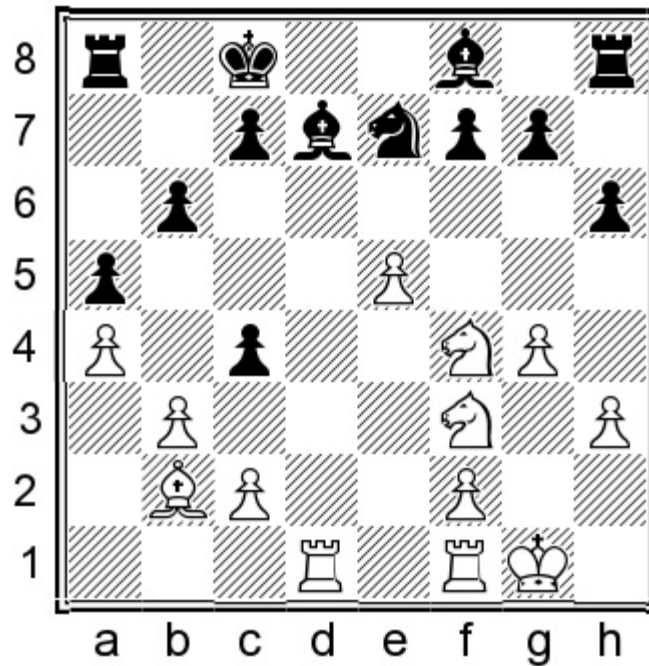
22... Bb4 23. Bxe4

23. Bxe6?! dxf4 favours Black.

In Tateo – Weiss, corr. 2019, a draw was agreed. Play could continue:

23... dxf6 24. Bxe2 Bhd8 25. Bc1 Bxc8 26. dxe6 Bd3

Black has sufficient activity to maintain the balance.



17...cxb3 18.cxb3

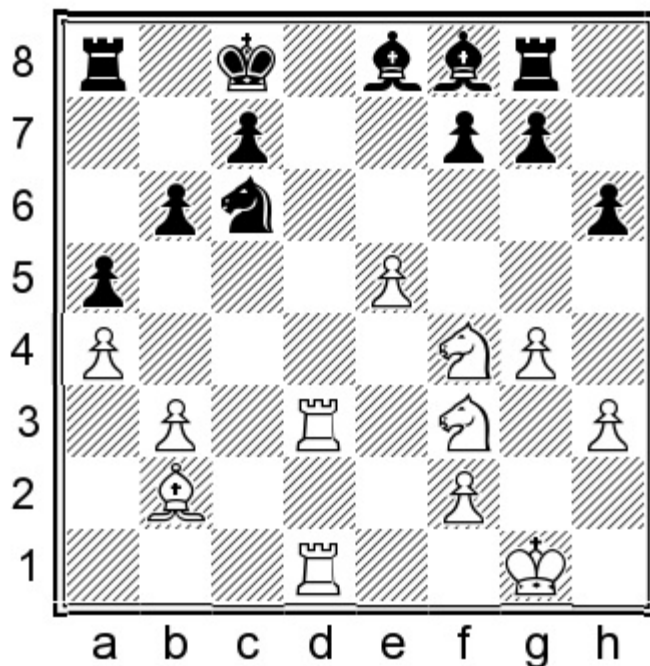
Black's pawn structure has been improved, but White's pieces are still more active.

### 18...♗c6 19.e6!?

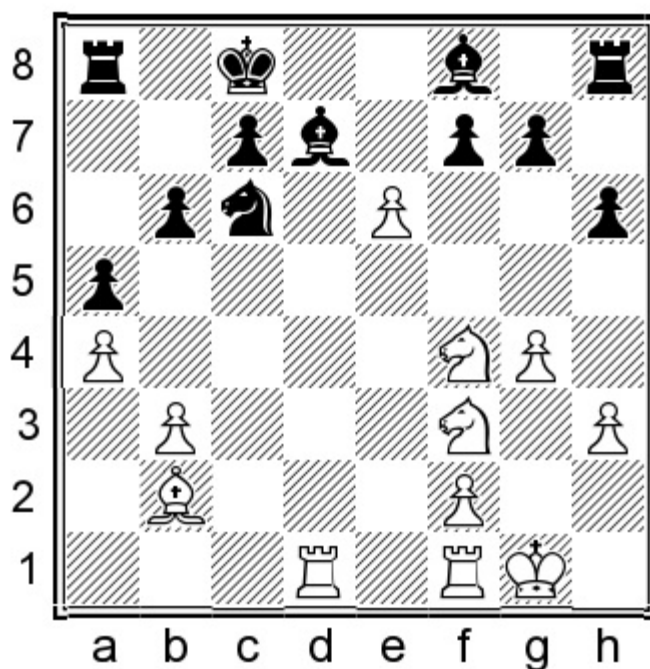
Activating the bishop and opens the kingside.

19.♖fe1 proved harmless after 19...♗b4 20.♖e3 ♗e6 21.♗ed3 ♗c5 22.♗xe6 fxe6 23.♗d7 ♗e7 in H. Rudolf – Tischbierek, Germany 2009.

Another interesting example continued: 19.♗d3 ♗g8 20.♖fd1 ♗e8 Despite the placement of almost all the pieces on the back rank, Black has a perfectly healthy position!

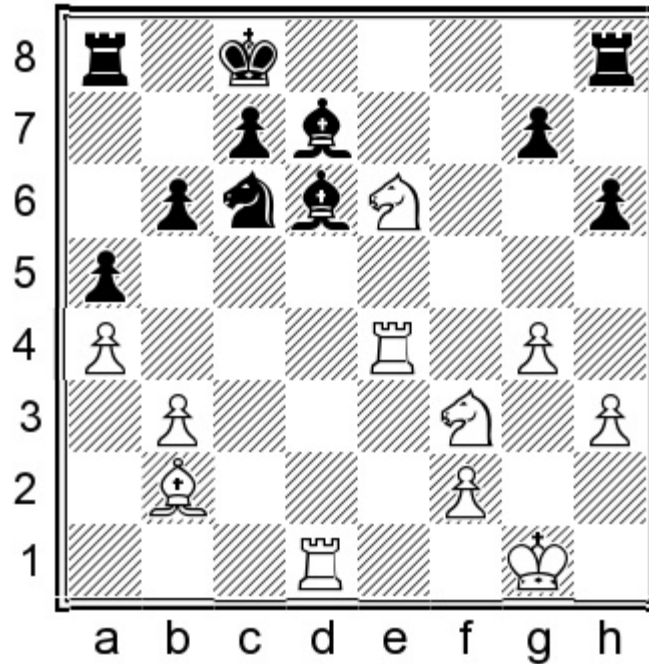


21.e6 ♗b7 22.exf7 ♗xf7 23.♗e5 ♗xe5 24.♗xe5 ♗c8 Black's bishop pair fully compensated for the activity of the enemy pieces in Fabig – Kudr, corr. 2018.



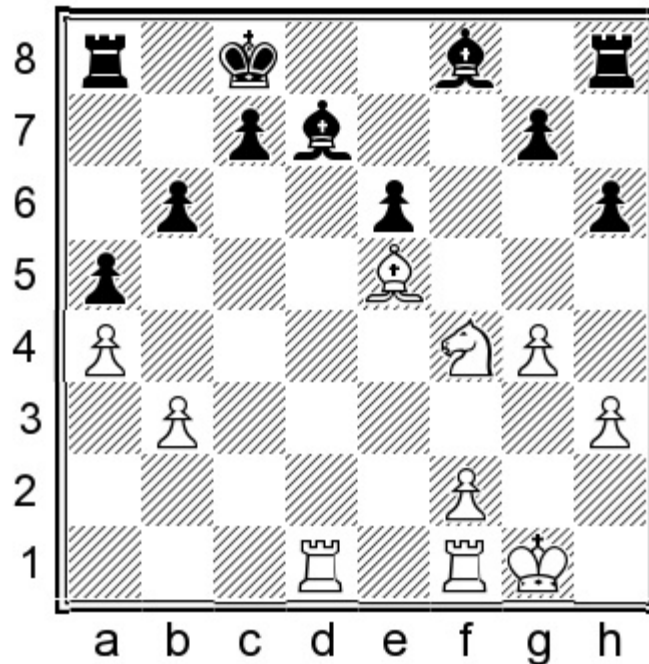
### 19...fxe6 20.♖e5

20.♖fe1 allows the gain of an important tempo with 20...♙b4!, when play could continue: 21.♖e4 ♙d6 22.♗xe6 (22.♙xg7 ♖h7 23.♙f6 ♗b7 is also fine for Black)



22...♖e8 23.♖de1 g6 Black has nothing to worry about.

### 20...♗xe5 21.♙xe5



### 21...♖h7!

This somewhat awkward-looking move is an important step, enabling the bishop to move from f8 at last.

22. ♖g6 ♗c5 23. ♖g2 ♗e8

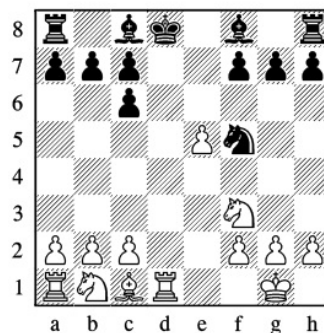
Black had no problems in Adams – Bacrot, Novi Sad 2009.

### Conclusion

9. ♖c3 is the most natural developing move, but it makes it possible for Black to comfortably host the king on the queenside. After Vladimir Kramnik used this approach to shut out Garry Kasparov in their match, it has continued to prove its worth at the highest level. Black has decent counterattacking prospects on the queenside, for instance by advancing the a-pawn and/or executing the ...c5-c4 break. Another common idea is trading knights with ...♖f5-h4, when f5 is vacated for the bishop. As analysis and practice have proven, White fails to convert the kingside pawn majority or successfully penetrate along the d-file.

# Chapter 2

## Berlin Endgame



9. ♖d1†

### Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6  
6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♚xd8† ♚xd8 9.♖d1† ♚e8 10.♘c3

10...♙e7

A) 11.b3 ♘h4 40

A1) 12.♘d4 40

A2) 12.♘xh4 42

B) 11.♘e2 b6 43

B1) 12.♙g5!? 44

B2) 12.b3 45

C) 11.♙g5 ♙xg5! 12.♘xg5 h6 46

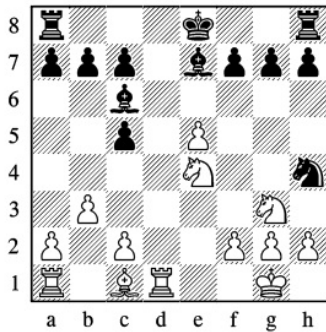
C1) 13.♘ge4 47

C2) 13.♘f3 ♙e6 48

C21) 14.♖d3 49

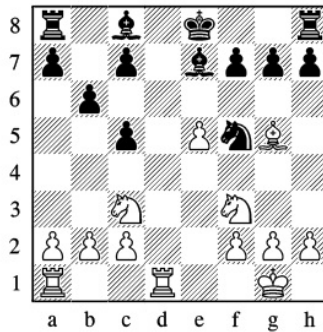
C22) 14.a4 50

A1) after 15.♖2g3



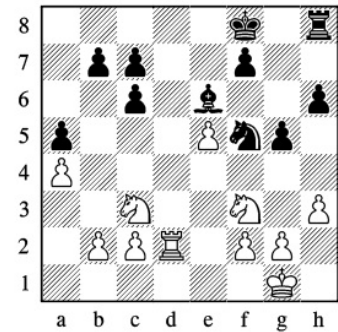
15...a5!N

B1) after 13.♖c3



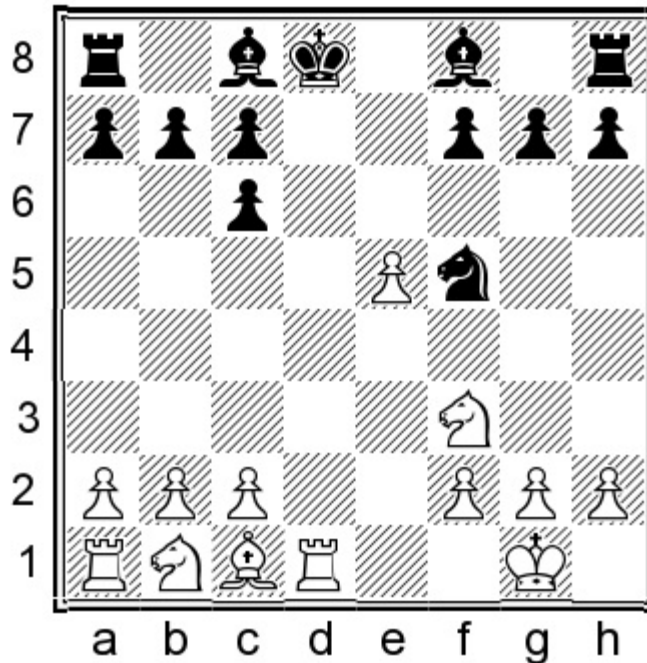
13...♙b7!N

C22) after 18...♔f8!



19.♔h2!N

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♖f6 4.0-0 ♗xe4 5.d4 ♗d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♖f5 8.♙xd8† ♔xd8 9.♙d1†



Some decades ago, this used to be considered a slight inaccuracy, as there are certain scenarios where White would prefer the rook on another square. However, it does have one obvious advantage, as it prevents the black king from escaping to the queenside.

### 9...♔e8

9...♙d7? 10.♖g5 leads to trouble for Black. Therefore we have no choice but to adopt a different set-up than after 9.♖c3. On the plus side, White has lost some useful options against the ...♔e8 set-up by committing the rook to d1 so soon.

### 10.♖c3

Having achieved the mini-objective of forcing the black king to stay in the centre, White has nothing better than developing the knight to the natural square.

10.h3 ♖e7 transposes to variation A of the next chapter under 9.h3!?

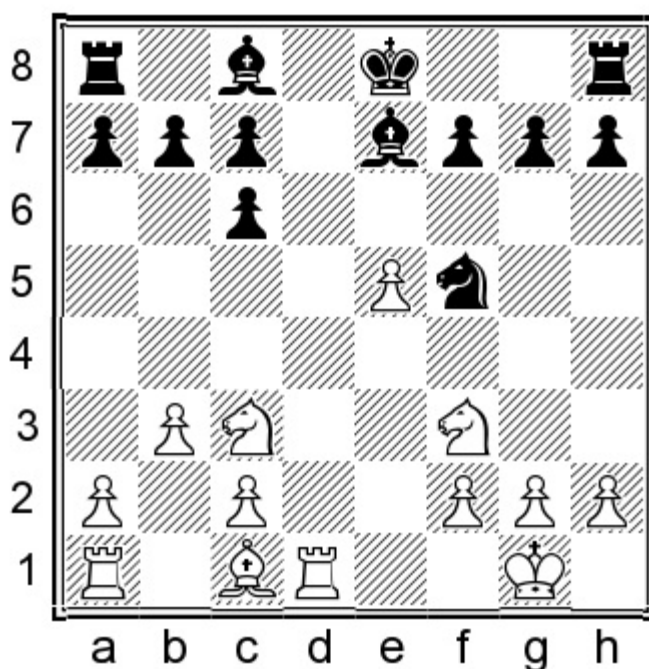
10.♗g5 cheekily threatens mate, but after 10...♗e6 11.♞c3 h6 Black develops harmoniously while gaining a free tempo.

### 10...♗e7

We will analyse three main options: **A) 11.b3**, **B) 11.♞e2** and **C) 11.♗g5**.

11.h3 h5 transposes to variation C3 of the next chapter on page 66.

### A) 11.b3



As we have seen in the previous chapter on 9.♞c3, this is a common method of development in the Berlin.

### 11...♞h4

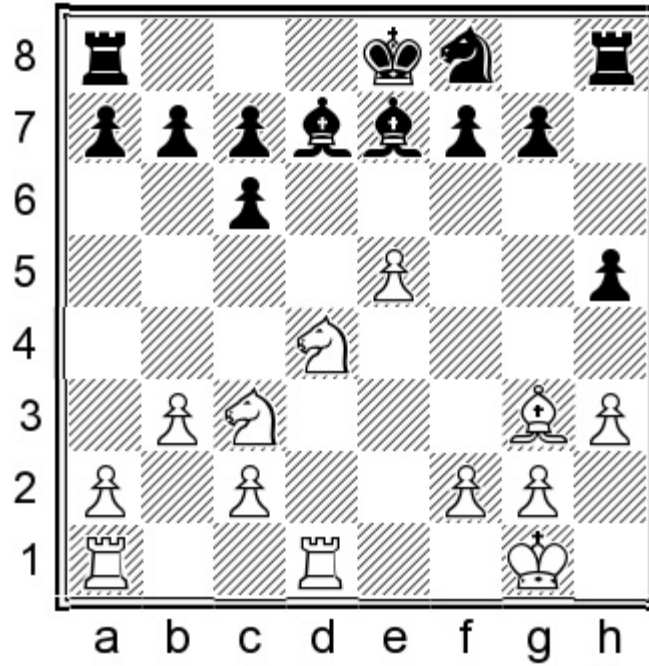
We will see more of this approach in the 9.h3 section. Black vacates the f5-square for the light-squared bishop, and diminishes the potential impact of g2-g4.

We will consider two options. Occasionally White avoids the knight trade with **A1) 12.♞d4**, but most players accept it with **A2) 12.♞xh4**.

### A1) 12.♞d4 ♗d7 13.♞e4

13.♗f4N can be met by 13...♞g6 14.♗g3 h5 15.h3 and now 15...♞f8! is a nice motif to prevent any

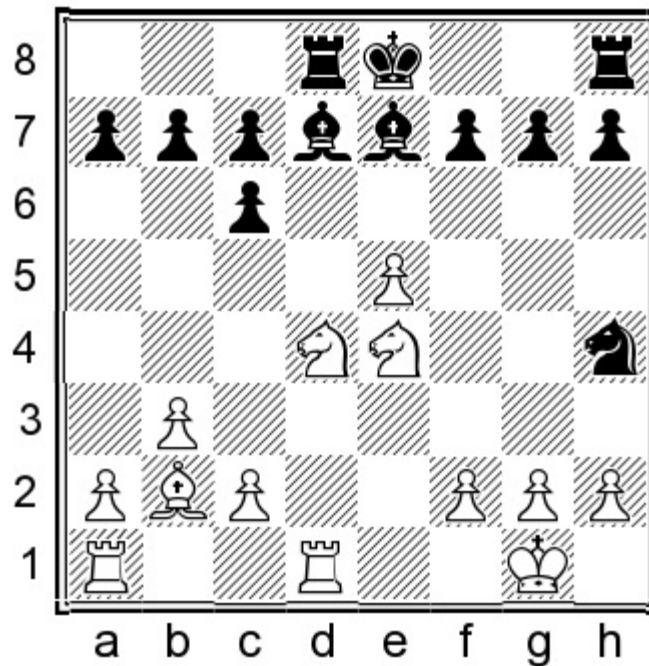
e5-e6 troubles:



16. d4 h4 17. g2 Rh5 Black intends ... e6, reaching a harmonious set-up where White's active possibilities are heavily restricted.

The other natural continuation is:

13. g2 N 13... R8 14. d4



14...f6!

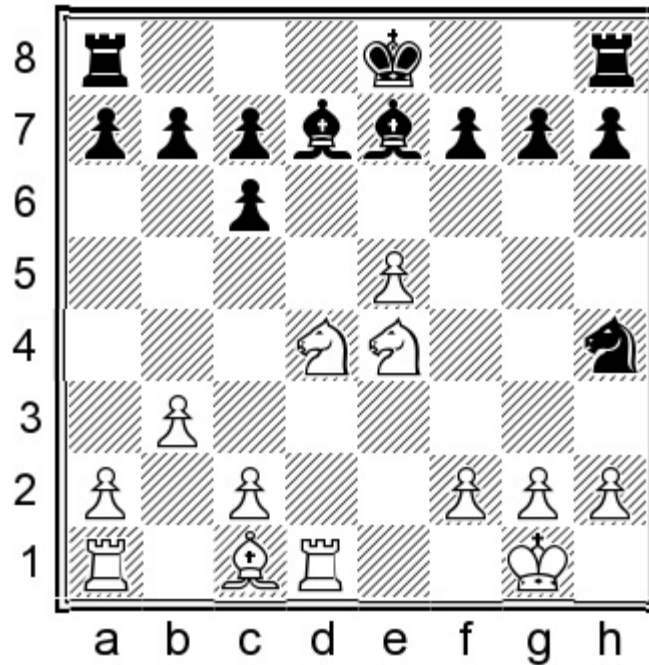
As it often happens, Black shows no fear of having an isolated f-pawn. It is more important to connect the rooks as soon as possible.

15. exf6

15. e6 c8 16. g3 achieves nothing after 16... c5 17. d5 xf5 18. xf5 g6 when Black is fine.

15...gxf6 16.♖d3 ♔f7 17.♞e1 ♞he8

Black's activity and bishop pair are at least as significant as White's better pawn structure.



13...c5 14.♗e2 ♙c6 15.♗2g3

This position occurred in R. Gonzalez – Vieites, corr. 2017. I like the following standard idea:

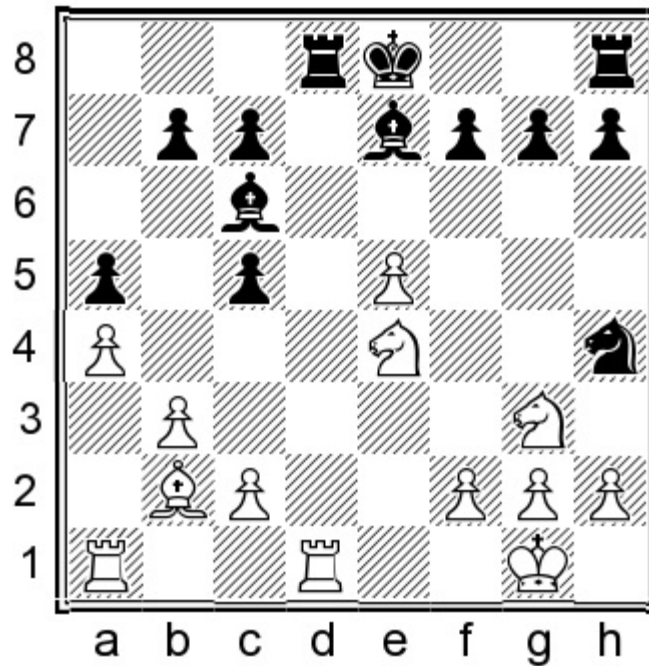
15...a5!?N

Highlighting the drawback of White's fianchetto.

16.a4

After 16.♙b2 a4 17.f3 h5 18.♔f2 ♘g6 the tension on the queenside makes White's set-up a bit uncomfortable.

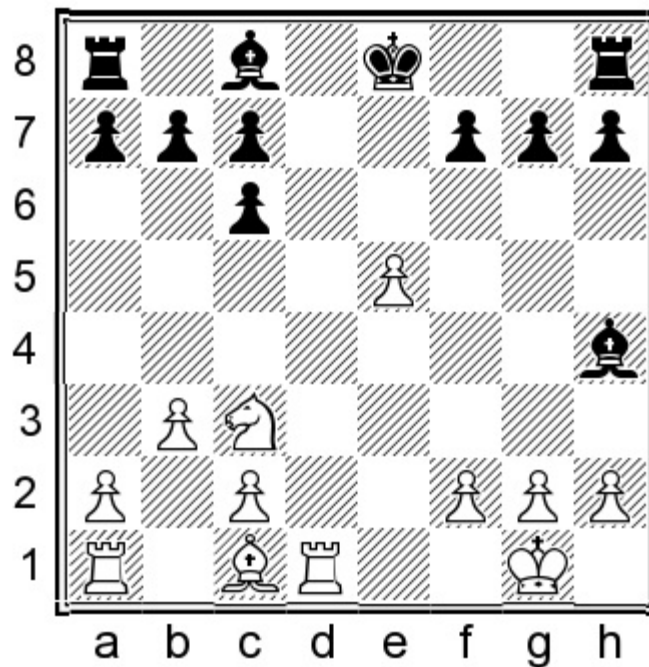
16...♞d8 17.♙b2



17...c4! 18.♖xd8† ♔xd8 19.bxc4 ♔c8

The bishop pair and the weakness on a4 provide Black with excellent compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

A2) 12.♘xh4 ♕xh4

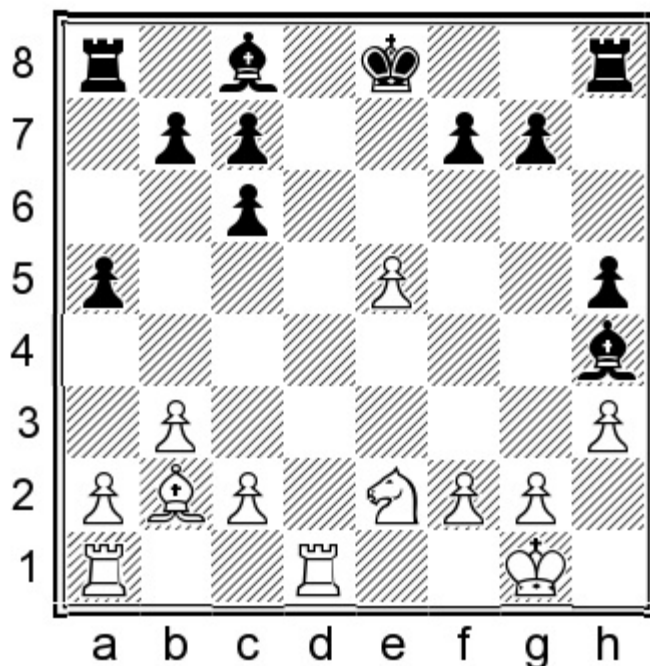


Trading knights is normal, but it leaves Black without any real problems.

13.♘e2

13.♕b2 is well met by: 13...a5 (It is worth pointing out that the tempting 13...♕f5 runs into 14.g4! ♕xc2 15.♖d2 ♕g6 16.f4 when White has a dangerous initiative in view of the awkward bishops.)

14.h3 h5 15.♖e2



15...♗e7 (15...a4!? could also be considered.) 16.♞d2 a4 17.♞ad1 h4 Black was fine in A. Roberts – Rallabandi, corr. 2018.

### 13...♗e7

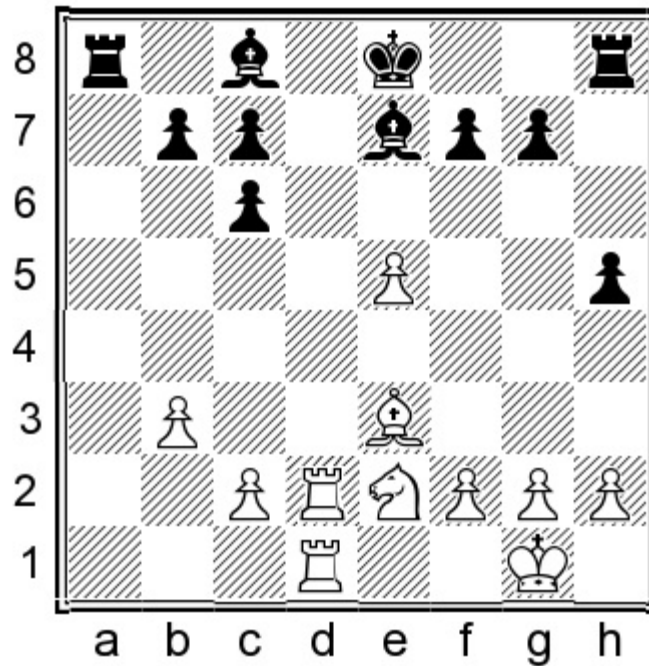
The bishop was doing nothing useful on h4, so we may as well return it to a sensible square before deciding how to proceed.

### 14.♗e3

Another game continued 14.♗d4 ♗d7 15.c4 ♞d8 16.♗b2 h5 17.♕f1 a6 with a safe position for Black, Firnhaber – Zidu, corr. 2014.

The text move has been played more frequently but it seems pretty harmless. A good example continued:

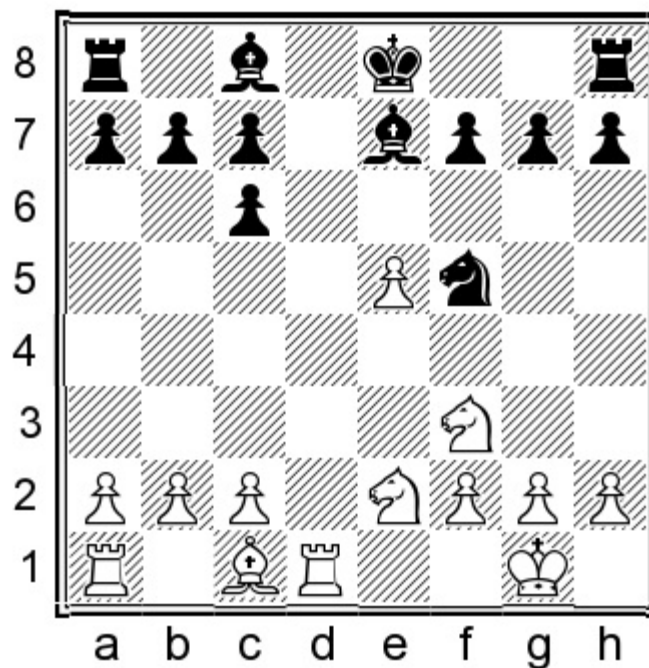
**14...a5 15.♞d2 a4 16.♞ad1 axb3 17.axb3 h5**



18.h3 h4 19.♘d4 ♜h5 20.f4 ♙c5

In this level position, a draw was agreed in Volovici – Bondarenko, corr. 2017.

B) 11.♘e2



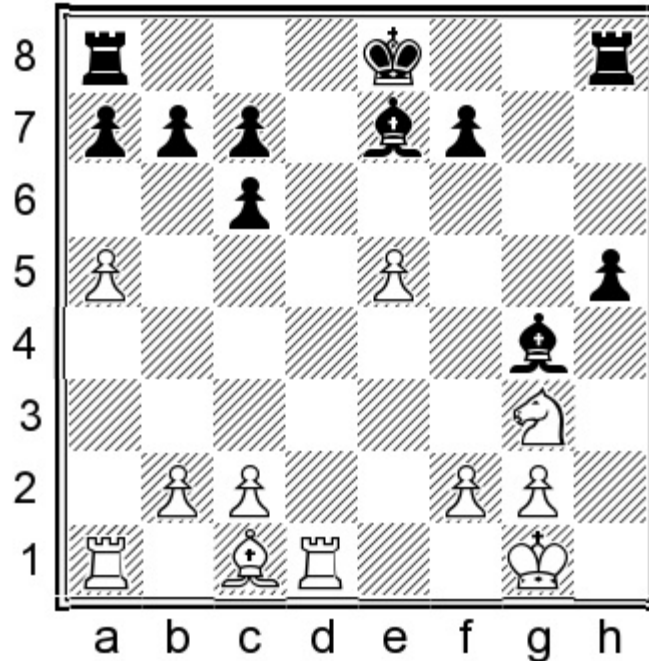
By preparing ♘f4, White prevents the enemy bishop from settling on e6. The knight may also be heading for h5 in some cases.

11...b6

This is a standard reaction to ♘c3-e2 in many Berlin lines. White's knight has moved away from

d5, so the plan of ...c5 and ...♙b7 becomes more sensible.

11...♘h4 12.♗xh4 ♙xh4 is a familiar idea which has been tried by some top players, but here it's not my favourite continuation because White has saved time by omitting h2-h3. A good example continued: 13.a4!? h5 14.a5 ♙e7 15.h3 g5 16.♗g3 g4 17.hxg4 ♙xg4

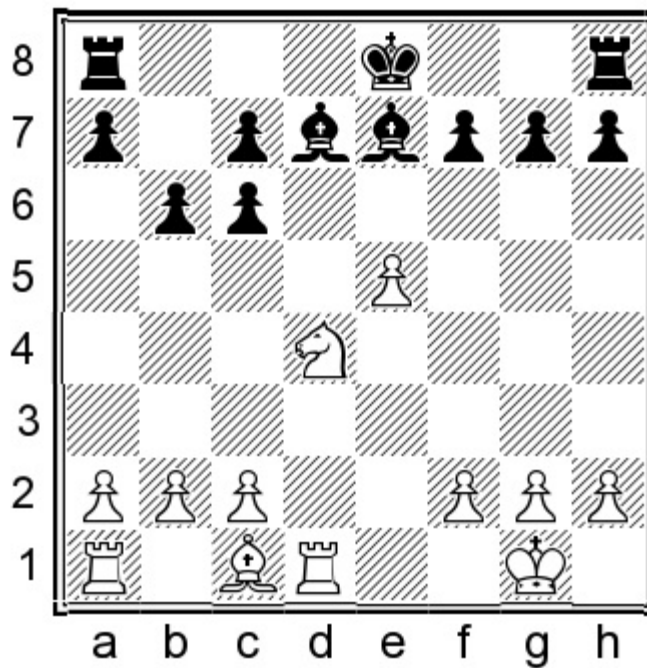


18.f3 ♙e6 19.♙e3 h4 20.♗e4 White had the more pleasant play in Saric – L. Van Foreest, Germany 2019.

After the text move White has tried several continuations, but I will take **B1)** 12.♙g5!? and **B2)** 12.b3 as the main options.

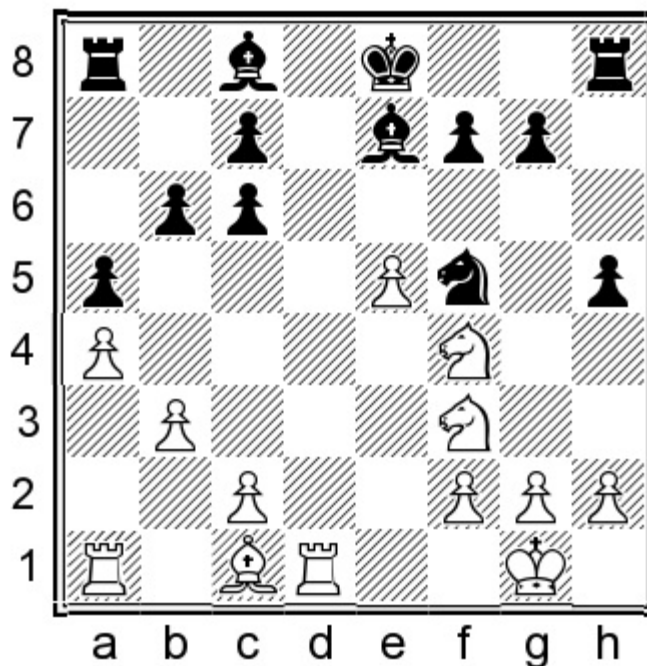
12.♙f4?! is a strange choice which not only stops the knight from moving to f4, but also invites 12...♖g8! when the advancing g-pawn may prove annoying. For instance, 13.♗fd4 g5 14.♙c1 ♙d7 and Black already had the upper hand in Fedak – Zholob, corr. 2014.

12.♗fd4 proves harmless after 12...♗xd4 13.♗xd4 ♙d7 when the queen's rook is ready to join the play. For instance:



14.a4 a6 15.a5 c5 16.♘e2 ♕f5 17.c3 b5 18.♙e3 ♖d8 Black had a pleasant game in Doderer – Zidu, email 2014.

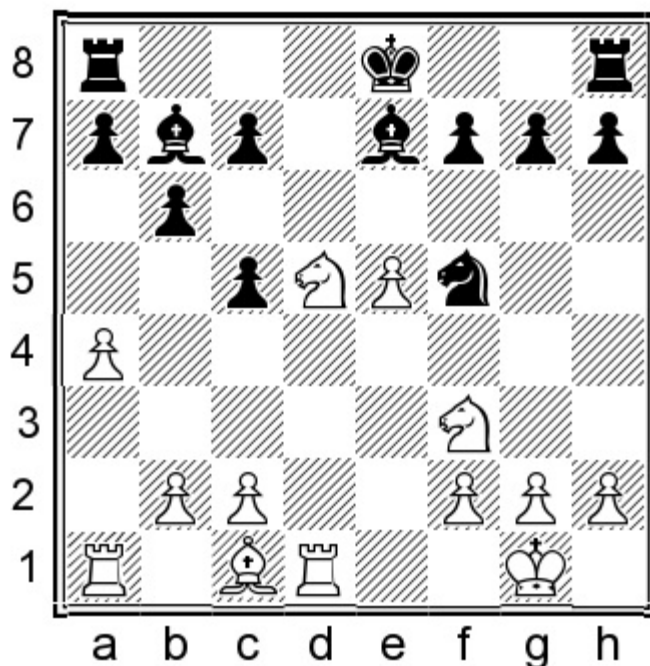
12.♘f4 h5 13.a4 (I also checked 13.e6!?N 13...♙xe6 14.♘xe6 fxe6 15.♖e1 ♕f6! 16.♗xe6† ♔d7 17.♗e1 ♗ae8 when Black's active piece play yields excellent compensation for the slightly inferior pawn structure.) 13...a5 14.b3



14...g5! 15.♘e2 ♖g8 16.♙b2 c5 17.♘c3 g4 White found himself on the defending side in Geryk – Azevedo, corr. 2019.

12.a4 can simply be ignored: 12...c5 13.♘f4 (13.a5?! achieved nothing useful after 13...♙b7 14.axb6 axb6 15.♗xa8† ♙xa8 16.♘e1 h5 when Black was slightly better in Panyushkin – Wichert, corr. 2016.)

13...♙b7 14.♘d5

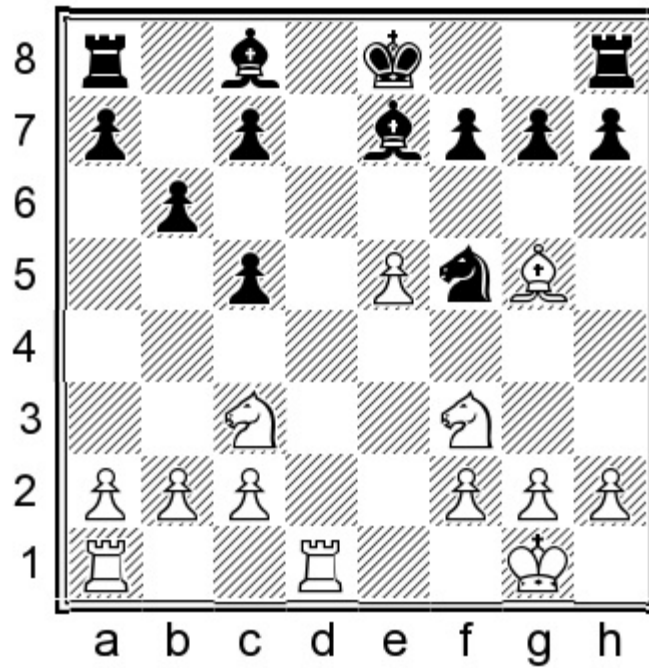


14...♙xd5! Usually Black would prefer not to make such an exchange, but the fact that White's knight has lost two tempos, rather than moving directly from c3 to d5, enables Black to gain the necessary activity. 15.♖xd5 ♜d8 16.♖xd8† ♔xd8 17.a5 ♕d7 18.axb6 axb6 The more active king fully compensates for White's slightly better pawn structure, Lovakovic – Sidenko, corr. 2011.

### B1) 12.♙g5!?

I only found one game where this move was played, but it seems as good a choice as any.

12...c5 13.♘c3



### 13...♙b7!?N

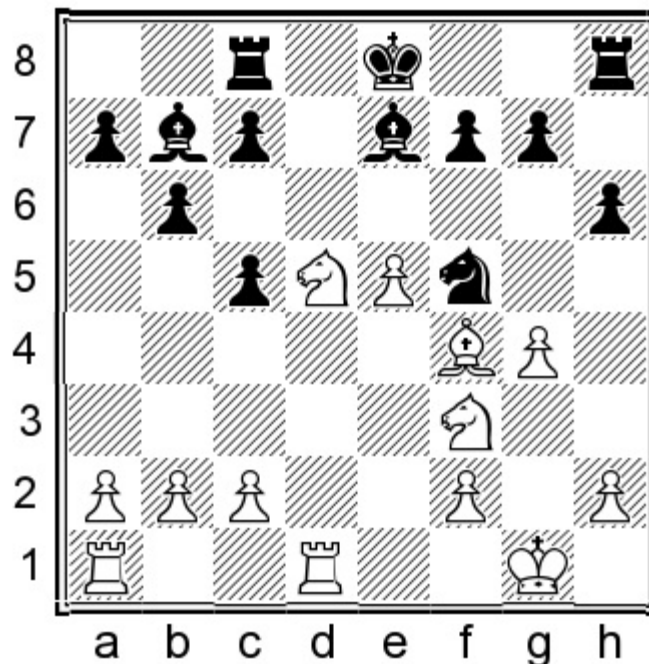
This move is actually a positional pawn sacrifice.

13...♙d7 is less consistent, and 14.♙xe7 ♞xe7 15.♞d2 ♙c6 16.♞ad1 left White enjoying full control over the d-file in Jakubowski – Vetoshko, Pardubice 2016.

### 14.♞b5

This is the only critical move.

14.♞d5 ♞c8 gives Black no problems, for instance: 15.g4 h6! 16.♙f4



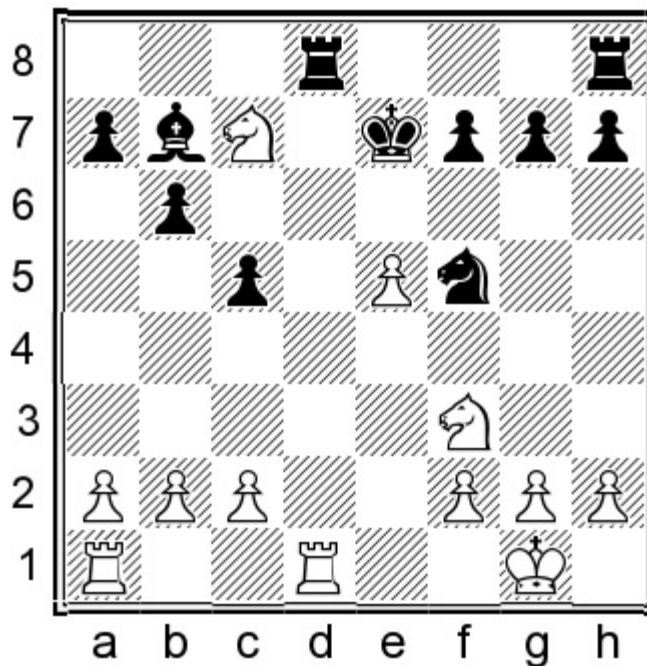
16...♖d4! 17.♗xd4 ♕xd5 18.♗f5 ♕f3 The weakening aspect of the g2-g4 move starts to tell, so White has to struggle for equality.

**14...♕d8 15.♕xd8**

15.♖xd8? ♖xd8 16.♗xc7† ♔d7 17.♕xd8 ♖xd8 18.♗b5 ♕xf3 19.gxf3 ♔e6 leaves White defending a difficult endgame.

15.♖d3 is also no improvement: 15...h6 16.♕xd8 ♖xd8 17.♗xc7† ♔e7 18.♖ad1 ♖xd3 19.♖xd3 ♖d8 White's lack of harmony makes retaining the extra pawn impossible.

**15...♖xd8 16.♗xc7† ♔e7**



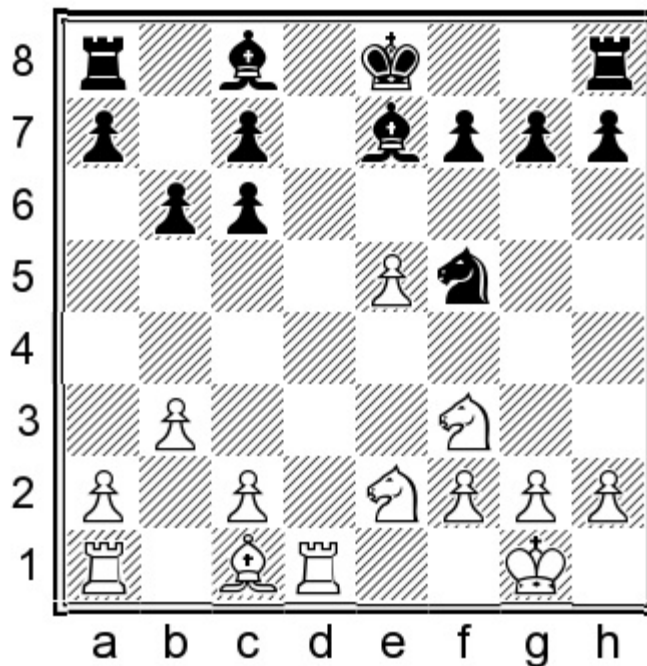
**17.c4**

After 17.♗b5? a6 18.♗c3 ♕xf3 19.gxf3 ♗d4 Black regains the pawn under favourable conditions.

**17...♕xf3 18.gxf3 ♖d4 19.♖xd4 cxd4**

The strong passed pawn and superior structure make Black's position attractive, despite the slight material deficit.

**B2) 12.b3**

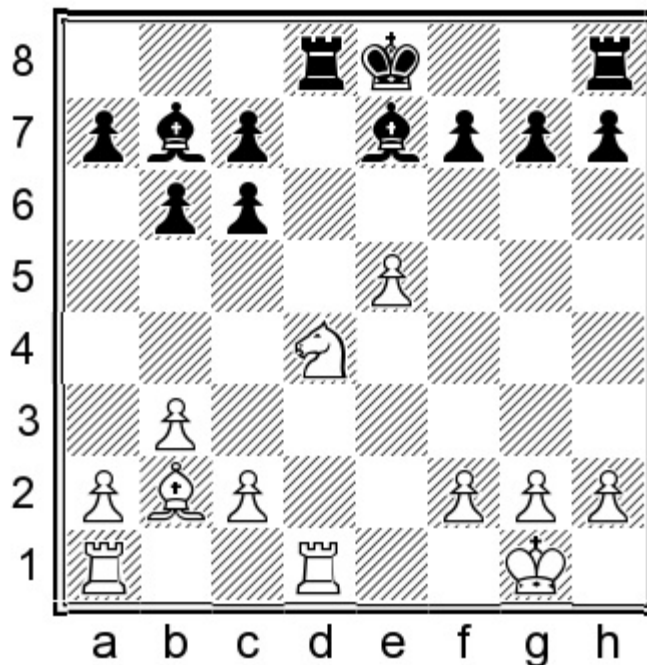


This has been White's most common continuation. We already know that the fianchetto is a standard method of development, but in this case it doesn't bother Black.

**12...♙b7 13.♘fd4**

The other natural continuation is 13.♙b2 c5 14.♘c3 ♙xf3 15.gxf3 c6 when Black is just in time to cover d5, and after 16.♘e4 ♜d8 White had nothing in Belov – Lysyj, Internet 2020.

**13...♘xd4 14.♘xd4 ♜d8 15.♙b2**



**15...g6!**

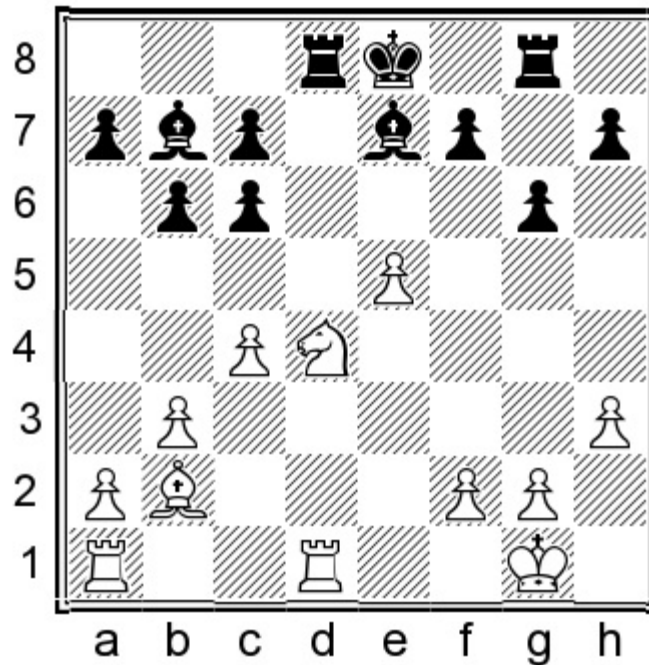
It is important to cover f5, without fearing ghosts on the long diagonal!

## 16.c4

16.e6 gives Black a pleasant choice: 16...♖f8 is a simple way of avoiding danger, while 16...f6!? is the maximalist option, intending to surround and eventually destroy the e6-pawn.

## 16...♙g8 17.h3

This position was reached in Gaposhkin – Babasyan, corr. 2017. Black has more than one playable continuation but I think the simplest and most human option is:



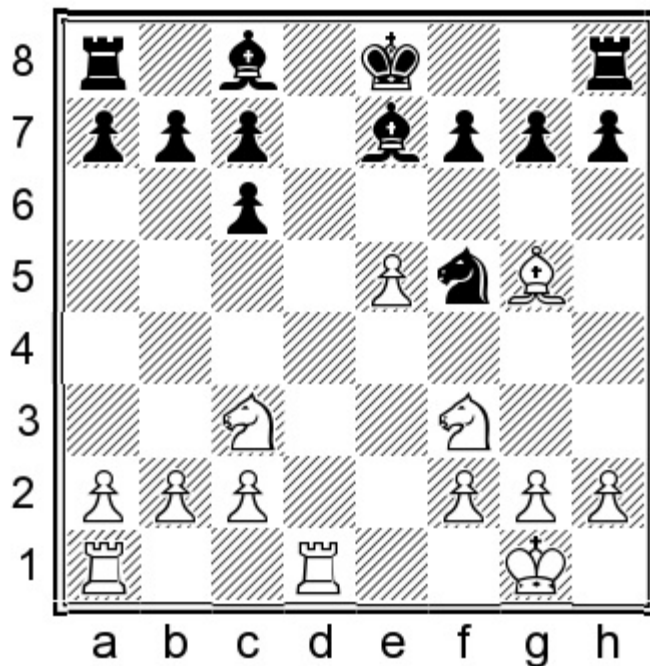
## 17...♙d7N 18.e6

Also after 18.♘e2 ♔d8 19.♙xd7† ♔xd7 20.♙d1† ♔c8 Black has nothing to worry about.

## 18...fxe6 19.♘xe6 ♙xd1† 20.♙xd1 ♔f7

Black has no problems.

C) 11.♙g5

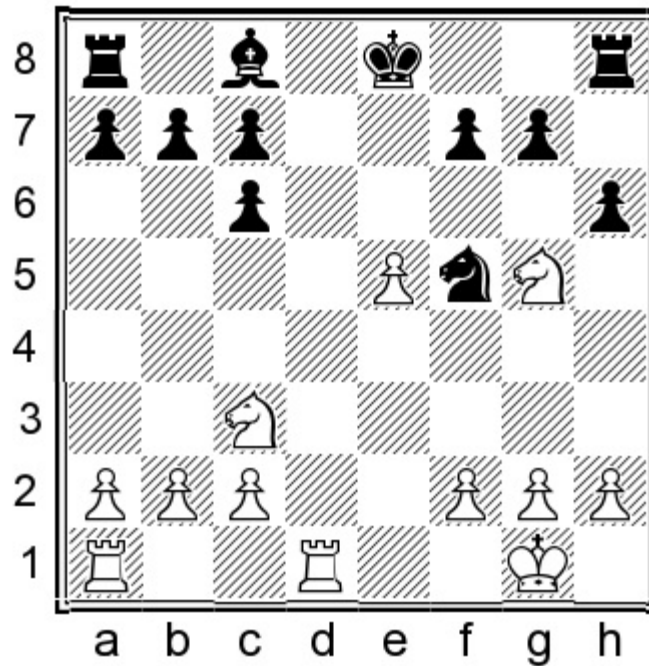


This is the most popular continuation, and has been tested in numerous high-level games. Indeed, the exchange of dark-squared bishops mostly favours White in these positions, so Black needs to play precisely to avoid drifting into an unpleasant position.

### 11...♗xg5!

11...h6 12.♗xe7 ♘xe7 looks fairly similar and has been tried by some top players, but 13.♘d4! highlights Black's issues with developing the bishop. 13...♘g6 (13...♗d7 14.♖d3 ♖d8 15.♗ad1 ♘d5 16.♘e4 was also less than ideal for Black in Gashimov – P.H. Nielsen, Khanty-Mansiysk 2011.) 14.g3! h5 15.♖d2 h4 16.♖e1 White had the more promising play in Caruana – So, Internet (rapid) 2020.

### 12.♘xg5 h6



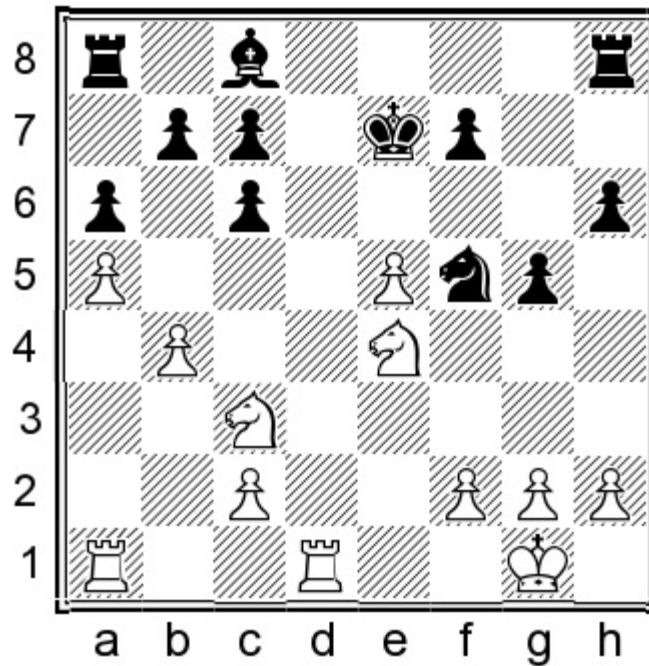
White must choose between C1) 13. ♖ge4 and C2) 13. ♖f3.

### C1) 13. ♖ge4

This rather active continuation makes it easier for White to advance the f- and g-pawns, so Black should act fast. I like the following approach:

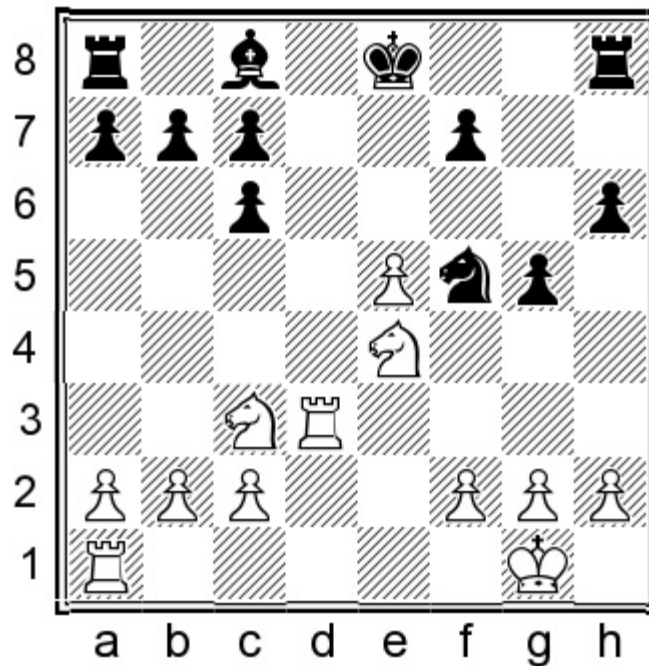
### 13...g5! 14. ♜d3

The main idea of Black's somewhat provocative move was demonstrated in a top-level game: 14. b4 a6 15. a4 ♔e7 This is the point! Black's king is comfortably placed in the centre, and g7 is always vacant in case the knight has to retreat. 16. a5



16...Nf4 The knight takes a different route, which highlights another advantage of having a pawn on g5: White's e-pawn is harder to defend. 17.Nc5 Nf6 18.f3 b6 19.Nd3 Qf5 Black was not worse at all in Vachier-Lagrave – Eljanov, Biel 2015.

The text move was played a couple of years later in Kurylo – Wichert, corr. 2017. Black should have once again improved the king with:



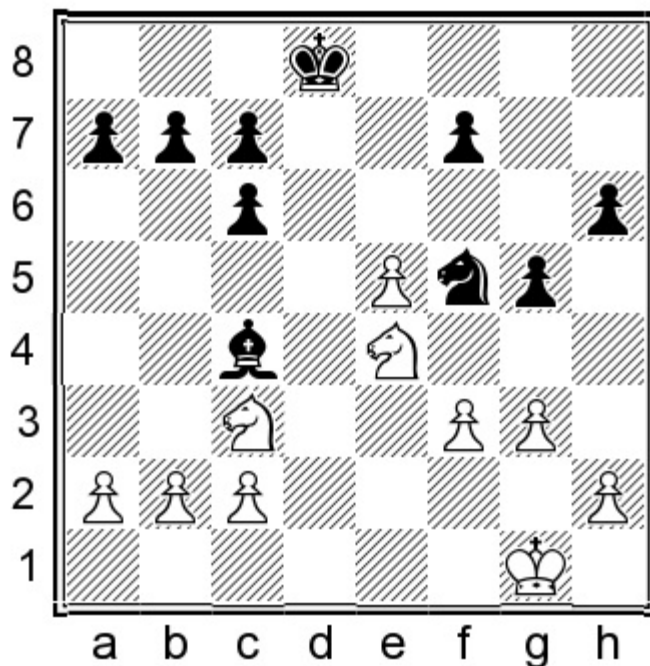
14...Ke7 15.g3

After 15.Nf6!? Ke6 16.Bad1 Nf4 White's central pawn is in grave danger.

15...Ke6 16.Bad1 Ba8!

Allowing the removal of all four rooks is not a decision to take lightly. In some scenarios, this can bring White much closer to a winning endgame where the extra pawn on the kingside decides matters. But on this occasion, Black has nothing to fear.

17.f3 ♔c4 18.♖xd8 ♜xd8 19.♖xd8 ♔xd8

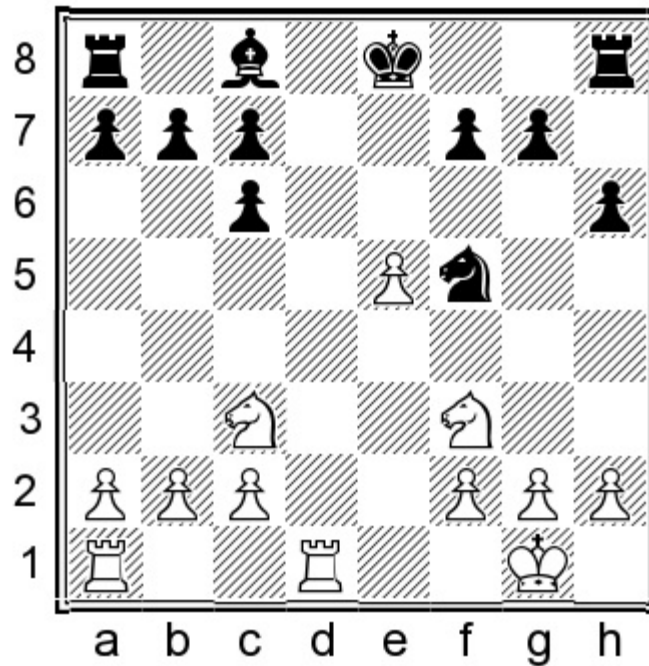


Black has enough counterplay against White's queenside pawns.

20.b3 ♔d5

The threat of ...♞d4 remains annoying for White.

C2) 13.♞f3



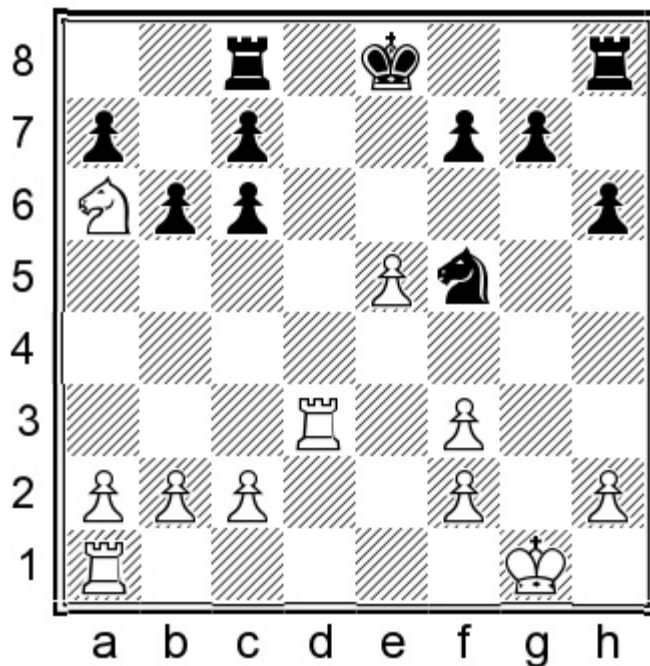
This has been the more popular retreat.

### 13...♙e6

It's always good to be able to develop the bishop to this square without being harassed by an enemy knight. We will analyse **C21)** 14.♞d3 followed by the most popular **C22)** 14.a4. First, here are a few minor alternatives:

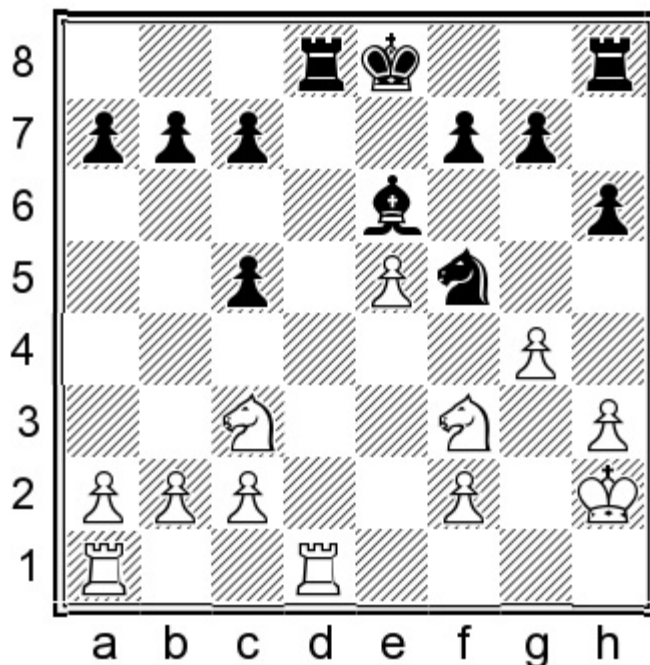
14.♞d2 has been played many times but after 14...♞d8 the play is essentially the same as in variation C21 below.

14.♘e4 is an ambitious choice which runs into a thematic response: 14...♙d5! 15.♘c5 ♙xf3 16.gxf3 b6 17.♘a6 ♞c8 18.♞d3



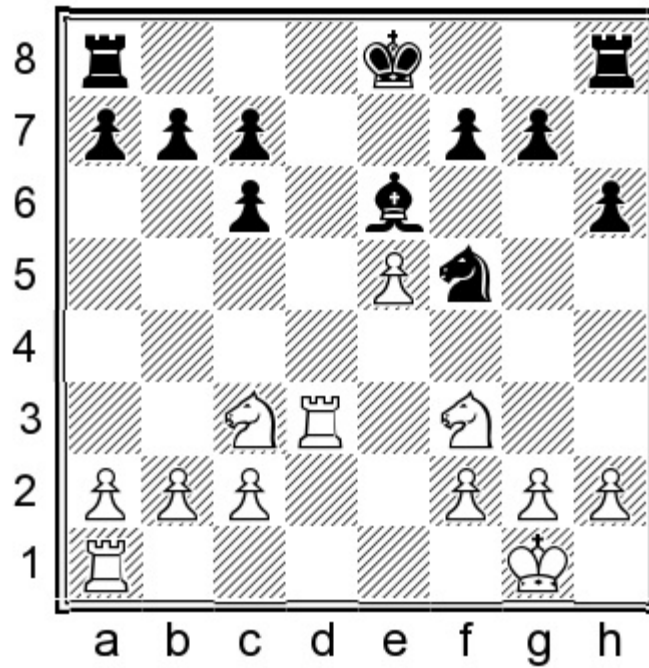
18...Rd8! A nice finesse. 19.Rad1 (19.Nxc7? Qe7 20.Rad1 a5! leaves White's knight trapped.)  
 19...Rxd3 20.Rxd3 Qe7 Black had no problems in "Everest" – "Hedgehog", Internet (freestyle) 2006.

14.h3 is another natural continuation, when a good example continued: 14...Rd8 15.Qh2 (15.Rxd8+ Qxd8 16.Rd1+ Qc8 only makes Black's set-up more harmonious.) 15...c5 16.g4



16...De7! (16...Dd4 may appear tempting, but 17.Dxd4 cxd4 18.De4 b6 19.f4 Qe7 20.Qg3 leaves Black under pressure.) 17.De1 Dg6 18.Rxd8+ Qxd8 19.Dd3 h5 Black was doing well in Mirkowski – Potrata, corr. 2017.

**C21) 14.Rd3**



**14...♖d8**

Black should hurry to trade a pair of rooks before White has time to double on the open file.

**15.♗ad1 ♖xd3**

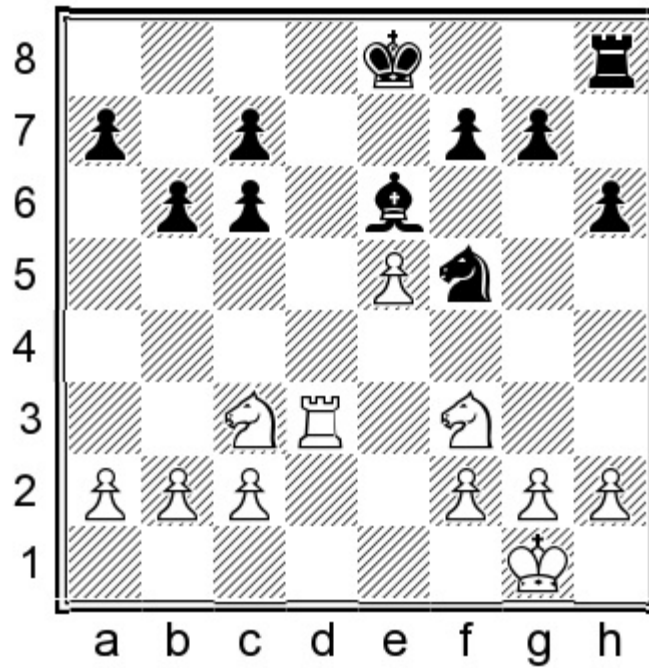
Unlike the 13.♘ge4 line, Black dare not play 15...♔e7?? on account of 16.g4! when the knight is trapped.

**16.♖xd3 b6**

This is almost always a useful positional move.

Once again, 16...♔e7?? 17.g4 would be embarrassing.

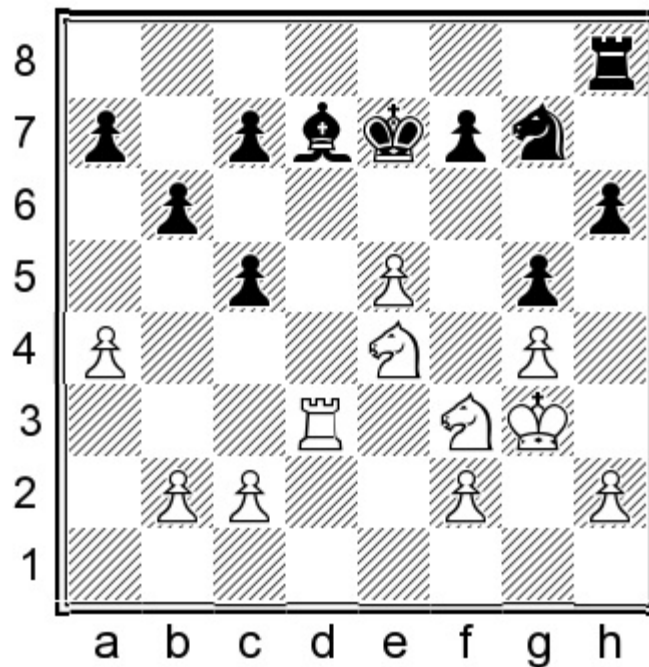
16...g5 has been the most popular choice and is also completely fine.



17.a4 g5

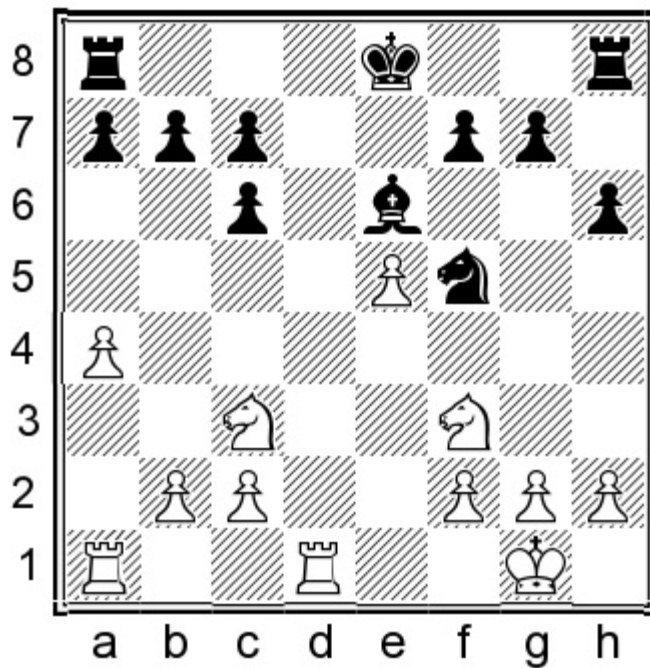
17...a5!?N is also good enough.

18.♖e4 c5 19.g4 ♗g7 20.♙g2 ♕e7 21.♙g3 ♗d7



With the knight coming to e6 next, Black was doing fine in Garus – Harf, corr. 2017.

C22) 14.a4



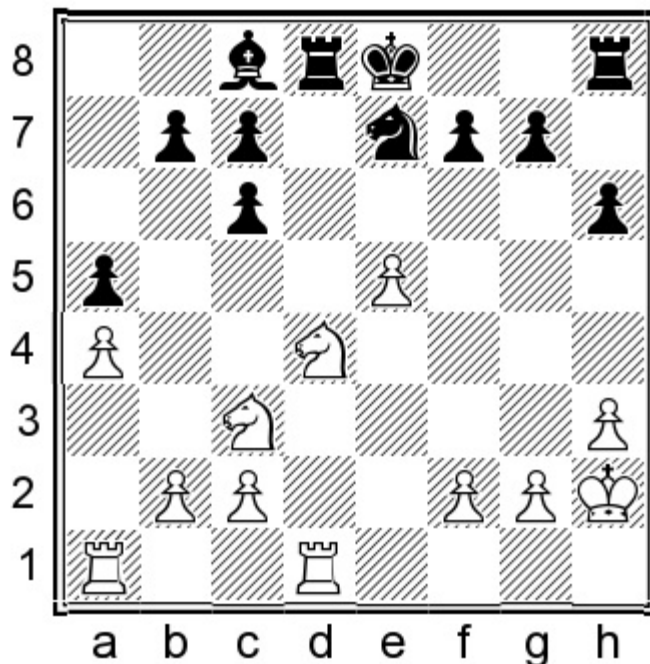
This has been the most popular choice, especially in correspondence games. If White could advance the pawn further then it would give some meaning to the rook on a1, but Black can easily put a stop to such ideas.

#### 14...a5

Not only halting White's ambitions on the queenside, but also fixing the a4-pawn as a potential target for the bishop.

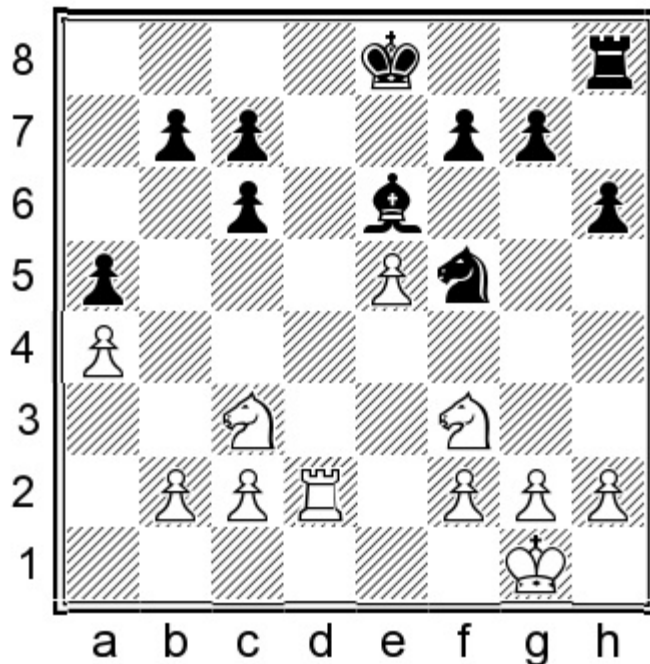
#### 15.♖d2

Another good example continued: 15.h3 ♜d8 16.♕h2 ♝e7 17.♘d4 ♙c8



The bishop is happy enough to drop back to its original square, with the rook having already escaped from the corner. 18.f4 h5 19.♖ac1 h4= Black had successfully neutralized White's kingside pawn majority in Bolz – Prozorovsky, corr. 2017.

15...♞d8 16.♞ad1 ♞xd2 17.♞xd2

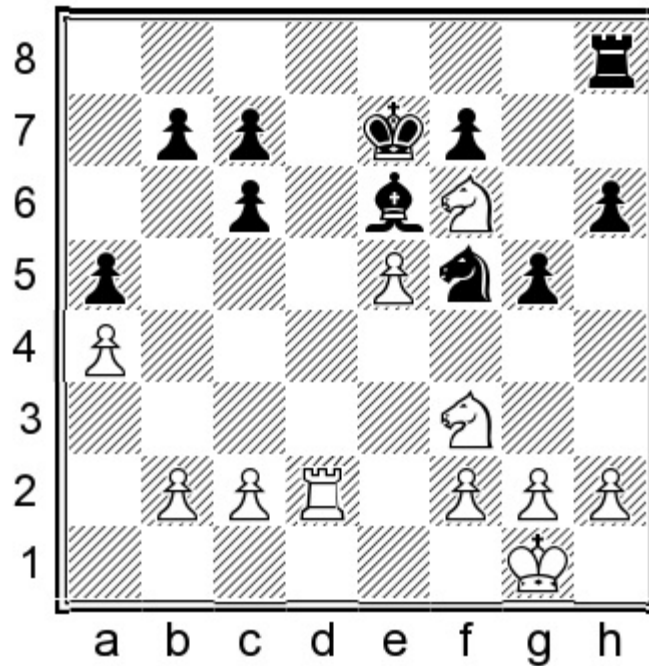


17...g5

We are already familiar with this concept: Black gains space and creates a retreat square for the knight, without fearing the weakening of the f6-square.

18.h3

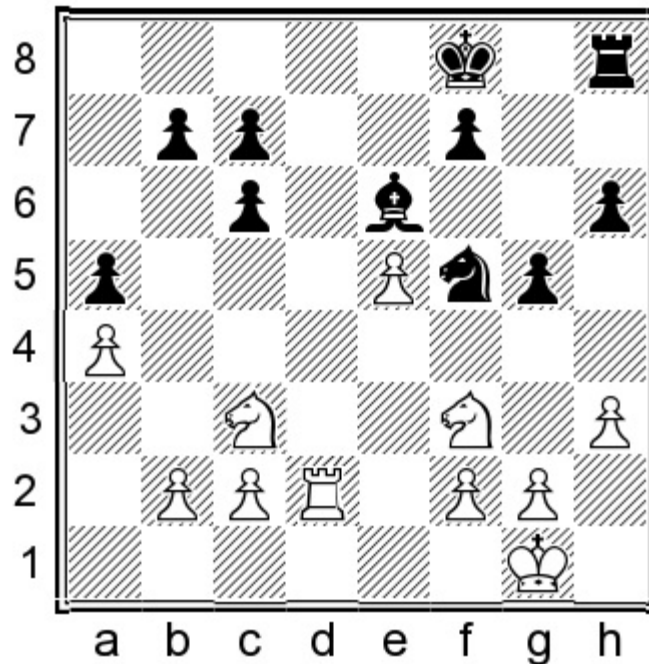
18.♘e4 ♔e7 19.♘f6 is harmless in view of:



19...♞d6! White found nothing better than simplifying to an equal endgame with 20.exd6† ♔xf6 21.dxc7 ♖c8 in Pirs – Tiits, corr. 2012.

### 18...♔f8!

This is more accurate than 18...♔e7, when 19.g4 forces the knight to a suboptimal square.

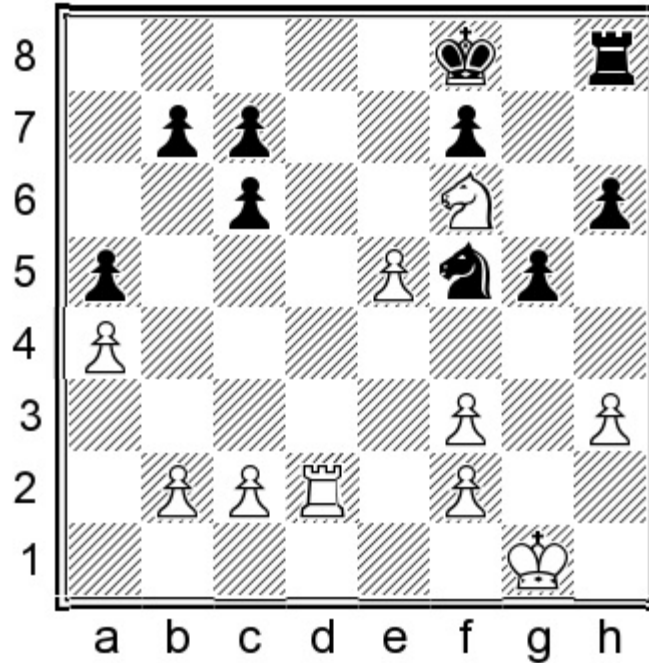


### 19.♔h2!?N

I find this new move to be the most logical. White improves the king with a view to advancing with g2-g4, ♔g3 and h3-h4 at some point.

White achieves no advantage by trading rooks: 19.♖d8† ♔g7 20.♞xh8 ♕xh8 21.g4 ♜e7 22.♘d4 ♙c8  
The e5-pawn is weak.

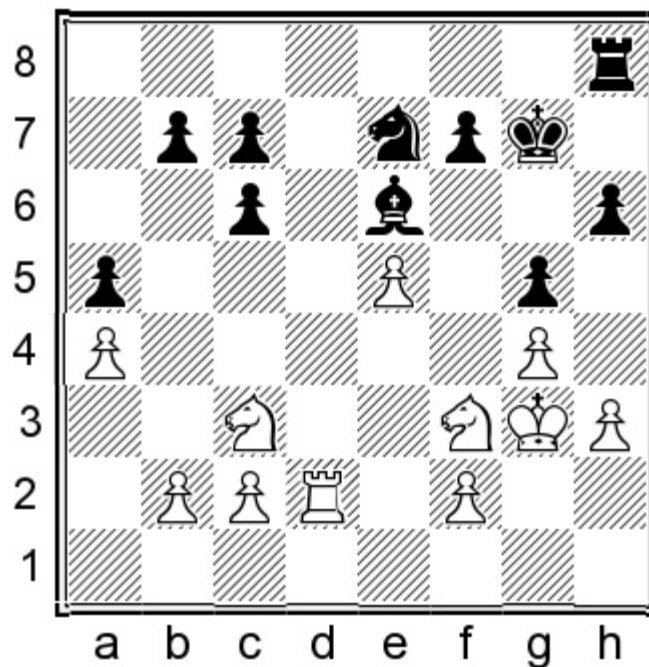
19.♘e4 has been played, only for a draw to be agreed immediately in V.V. Popov – Rivera de Leon, corr. 2017. The likely continuation would have been: 19...♙d5 20.♘f6 ♙xf3 21.gxf3



21...♔e7 22.♞d7† ♔e6 23.♞xc7 ♞d8 Black has a lot of activity and is clearly not in danger.

19...♔g7 20.g4 ♜e7 21.♔g3

White continues with the aforementioned plan, but Black is in time to obstruct it.



21...♘g6 22.♘e4 ♙d5

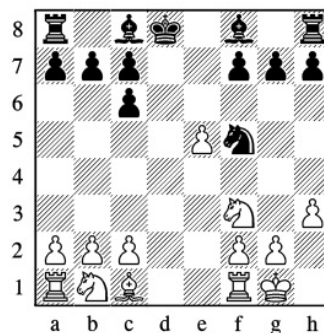
White struggles to make any progress, as Black can exert strong pressure on the e5-pawn.

### **Conclusion**

The main argument in favour of 9.♖d1† is that White prevents Black from relocating the king to the queenside. However, by removing the rook from the f-file White makes a future f2-f4 advance less effective, so Black feels free to trade knights with ...♘h4 followed by deploying the bishop on f5 in most cases. Practice has demonstrated that the bishop pair provides Black with full compensation for White's kingside pawn majority.

# Chapter 3

## Berlin Endgame



9.h3!?

### Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6  
6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♚xd8† ♚xd8 9.h3!?

9...♙e7

A) 10.♞d1† 54

B) 10.g4 ♘h4 56

B1) 11.♘xh4 56

B2) 11.♞d1† 57

C) 10.♘c3 h5!? 60

C1) 11.♙f4 60

C2) 11.♙g5 62

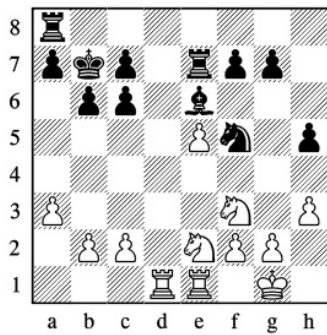
C3) 11.♞d1† ♚e8 66

C31) 12.♘e4 67

C32) 12.♘e2 69

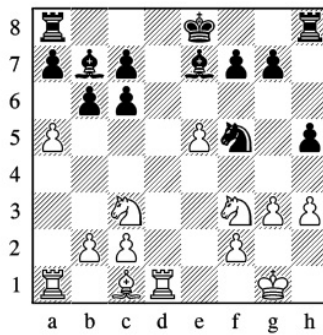
C33) 12.♙g5 71

C1) note to 13.♘g5



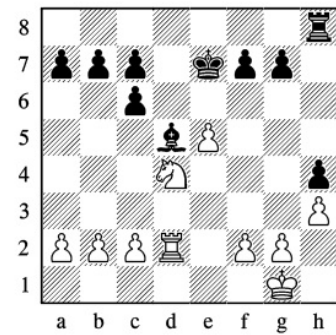
17...♙d5!N

C3) note to 11...♙e8



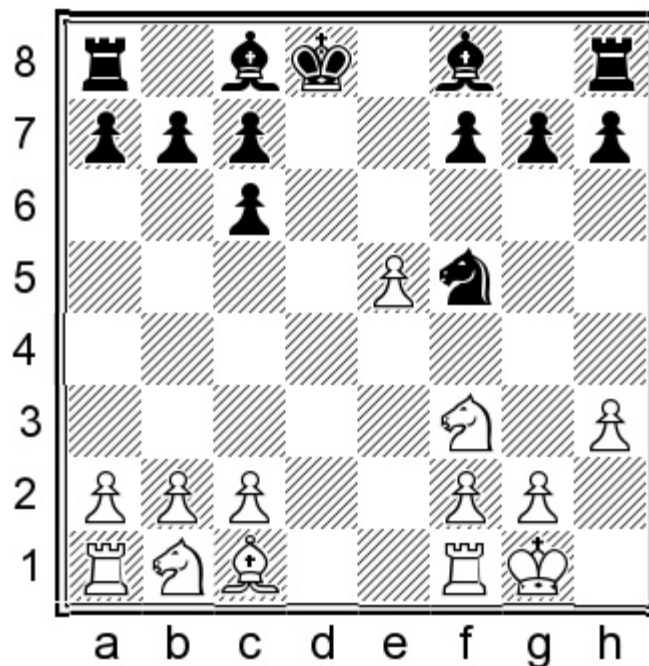
14...♙d8!N

C33) note to 14.♙xd8†



19...♙xa2!N

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♙xd8† ♙xd8 9.h3!?



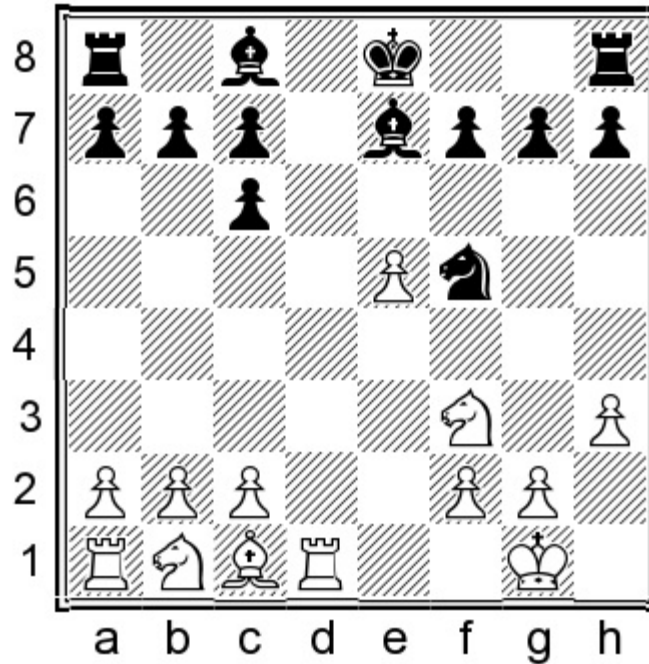
This tricky move has become White's most topical weapon against the Berlin Endgame. In some cases, it may simply transpose to one of the more common lines after a subsequent ♘c3, but it also limits Black's choices.

### 9...♙e7

9...♙d7 10.♙d1 ♙c8 is the scheme made famous by Vladimir Kramnik in his match against Garry Kasparov, and we have already seen that it remains fully viable against 9.♘c3. However, it is more problematic here in view of 11.g4! ♘e7 12.♘g5 ♙e8 13.f4, when White manages to quickly expand on the kingside. The story does not end there, as the arising positions are not one-sided, and there are those who continue to fight for Black's cause at the highest level. However, I prefer not to allow White this degree of activity.

We will analyse White's three main moves: **A)** 10.♙d1†, **B)** 10.g4 and **C)** 10.♘c3.

A) 10.♖d1† ♔e8



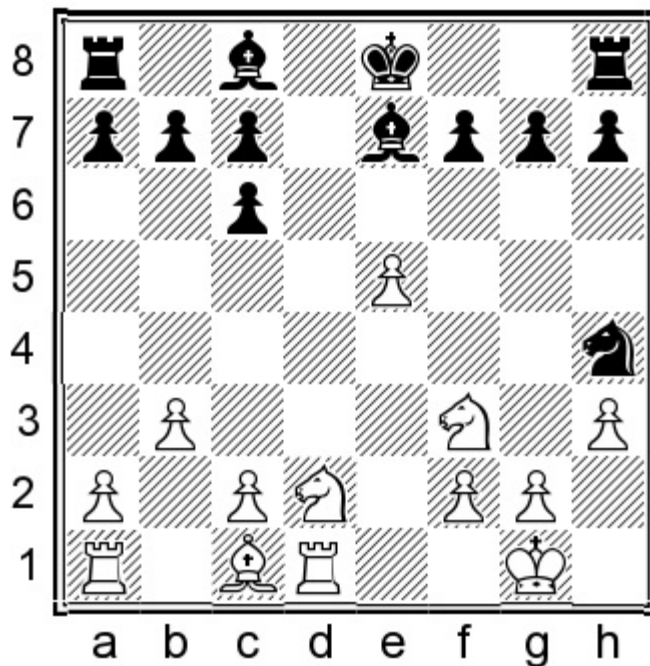
This position can also be reached via the 9.♖d1† move order, as was noted in the previous chapter.

11.♗g5

It is usually a sensible idea for White to exchange these bishops.

11.g4 ♞h4 transposes to variation B2 below.

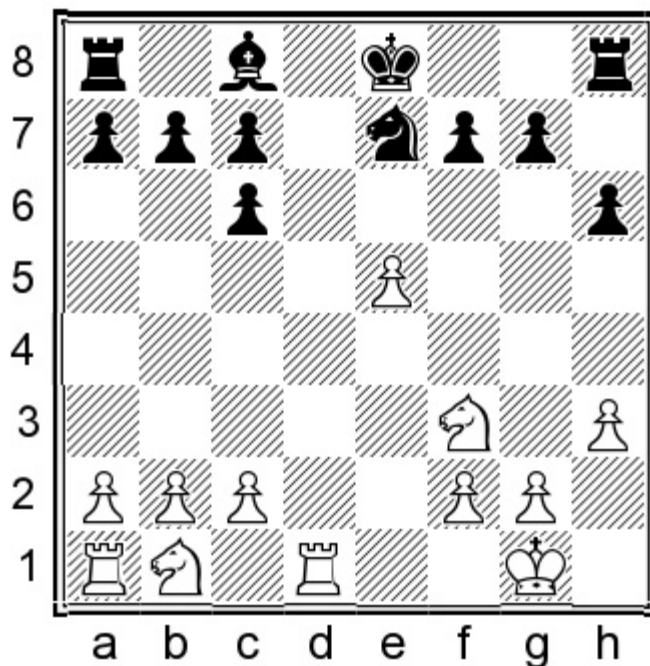
11.b3 ♞h4 12.♞bd2 was a harmless approach seen in Rejaibi – Fontaine, Cap d’Agde 2002. Black’s simplest response is:



12...♞xf3†N 13.♞xf3 c5 14.♙g5 b6 15.♞d2 h6 16.♙xe7 ♔xe7 17.♞ad1 ♙e6 White seems stuck for ideas, while Black is ready to develop queenside play with ...a7-a5 and so on.

11...h6 12.♙xe7 ♞xe7

Of course Black must avoid 12...♔xe7?? 13.g4 when the knight is trapped.



13.♞c3

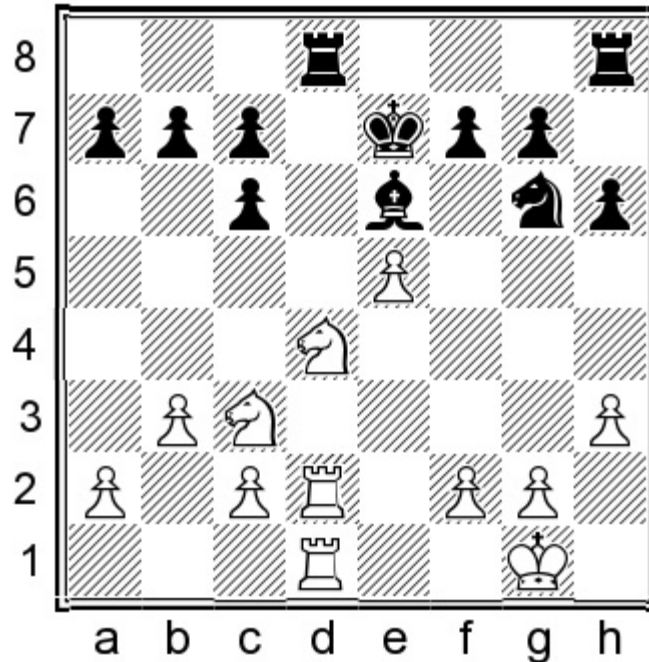
After 13.a4 a5 14.♞c3 ♞g6 15.♞e1 ♔e7 16.♞ad1 ♙e6 17.♞d4 ♞ad8 Black's pressure on the e5-pawn and active king were just as relevant as White's kingside pawn majority in Lindegaard – Szymanski, corr. 2016.

### 13...♞g6

The knight finds a good spot, where it puts pressure on the e5-pawn and can be easily transferred to e6.

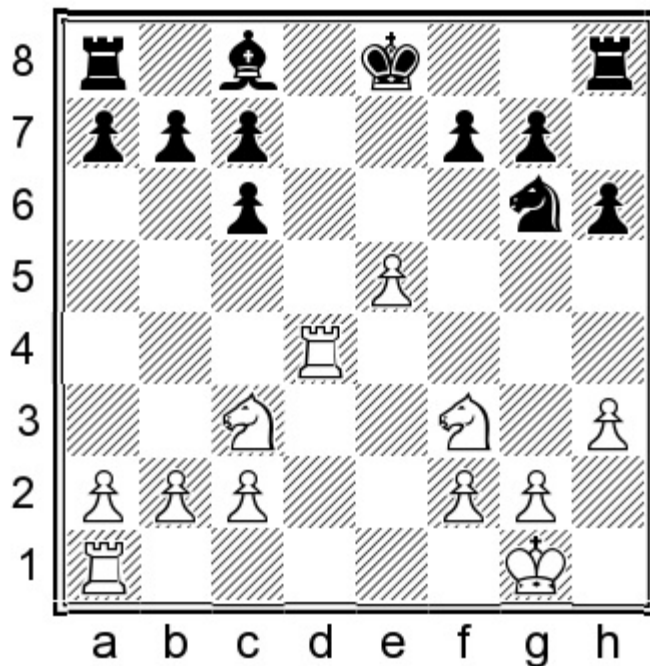
### 14.♞d4

Doubling rooks with 14.♞d2 ♔e7 15.♞ad1 looks natural, but the drawback is that the e5-pawn becomes more vulnerable. 15...♙e6 16.♞d4 ♞ad8 17.b3



This position was reached in Panchanathan – Deepan Chakkravarthy, Nakhchivan 2003, and now the simple 17...c5N 18.♞xe6 fxe6! would have offered Black the better chances.

I also considered 14.♞d4N 14...♔e7 15.♞e1 ♞d8 16.♞ad1 ♙e6 when Black reaches a comfortable set-up.



#### 14...♙e6N

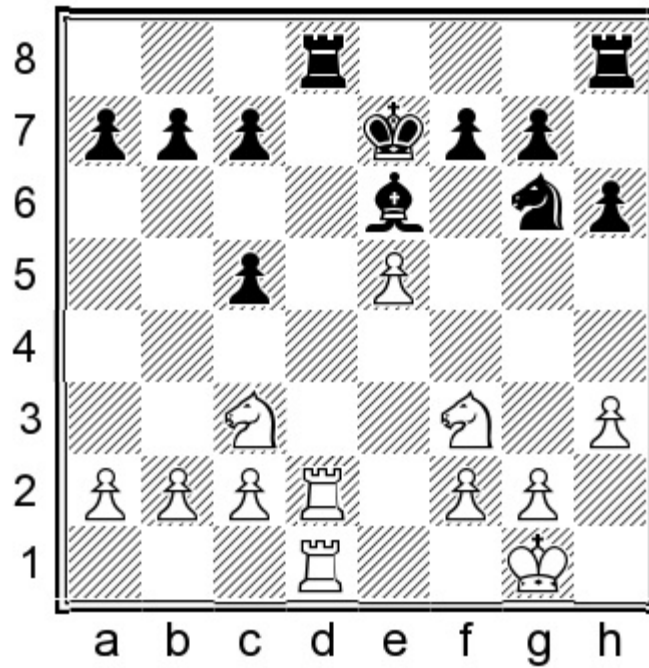
14...♙e7 15.♖e1 ♘e6 proved to be adequate in Miettinen – Balshaw, corr. 2017, but I slightly prefer the text move. Curiously, the database would seem to indicate that my recommended move was played in a different correspondence game between lower-rated players. However, the game in question actually involved a weird pseudo-transposition, as instead of exchanging queens on d8 on move 8, White chose a different move and allowed Black to exchange on d1 – so when the current position arose, Black still had the option of castling!

#### 15.♖e1 c5!

Exploiting the slight lack of harmony in White's camp.

For the record, Black opted to forgo castling and continued with 15...♙e7 in Nicolenco – Mitrovic, corr. 2009, thus reaching the same position as the other correspondence game noted above.

#### 16.♗d2 ♗d8 17.♗ed1 ♙e7

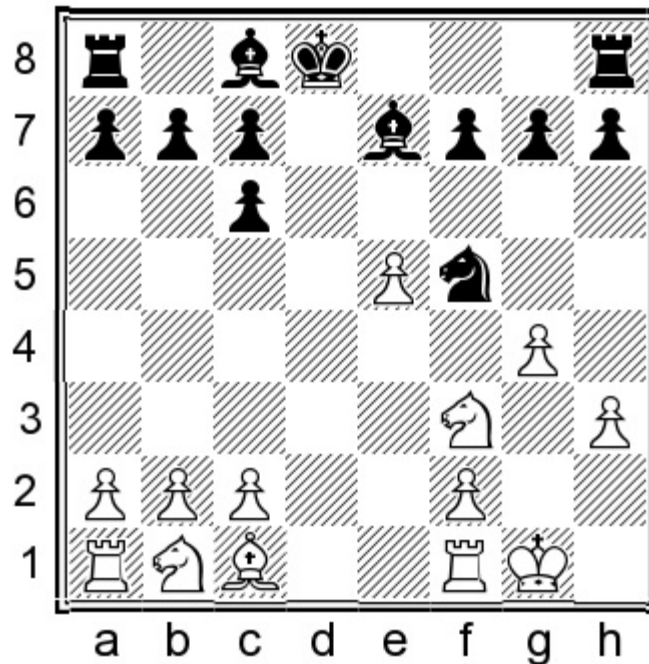


Black stands slightly better. An important detail is seen after:

18. ♖d5† ♕xd5 19. ♖xd5 ♜f4!

It will be hard for White to avoid the loss of the e5-pawn.

**B) 10.g4**



This move is highly ambitious but somewhat risky, as White weakens the light squares around the king while being behind in development.

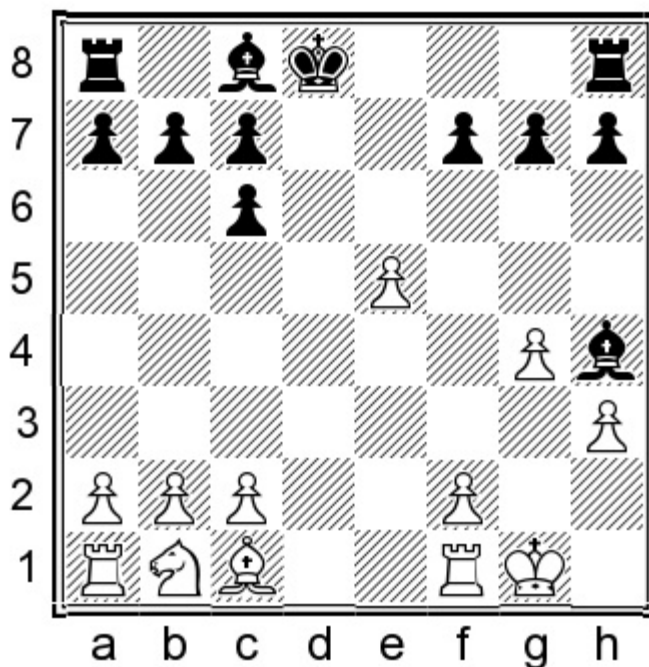
## 10...♖h4

The path divides again: we will analyse **B1)** 11.♘xh4 and **B2)** 11.♞d1†.

### B1) 11.♘xh4

This is the more popular of White's two main options, but it's not so challenging.

## 11...♙xh4



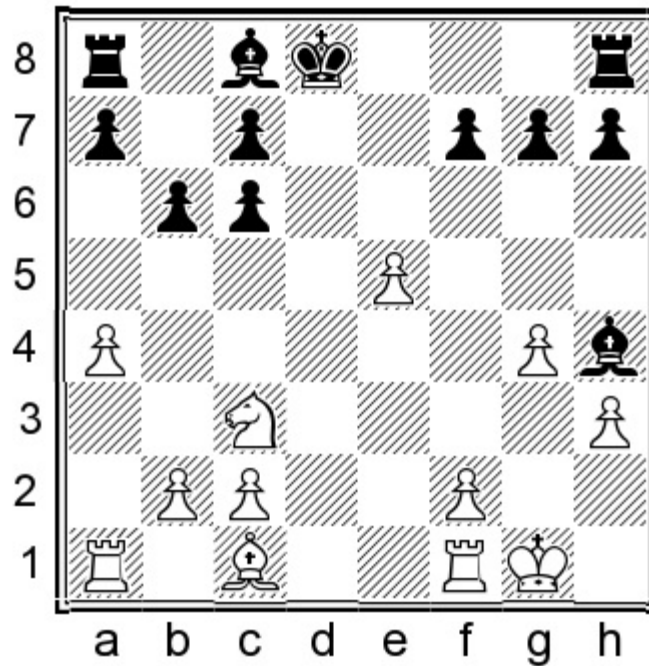
## 12.♘c3 b6

Considering the situation on the kingside, the light-squared bishop could prove especially effective on the long diagonal.

## 13.a4

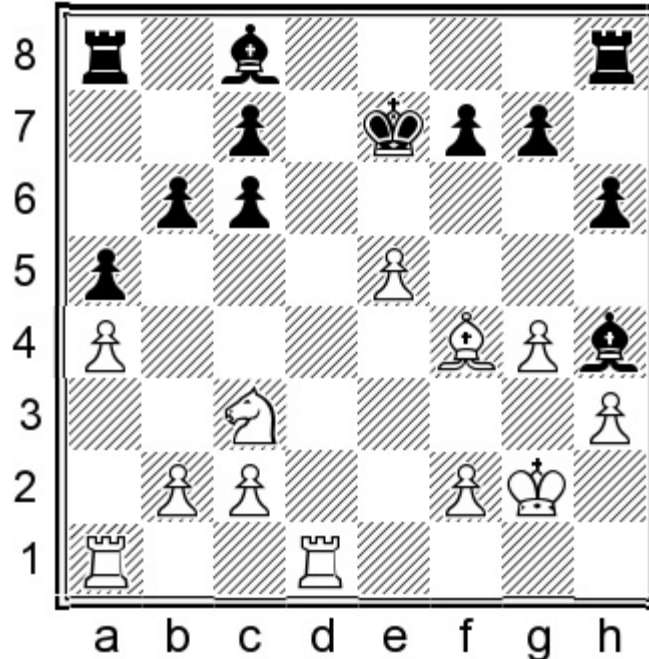
13.f4N looks natural but 13...h5 14.f5 hxg4 15.hxg4 g6 16.♙g2 ♙b7 provides Black with sufficient counterplay, to say the least.

13.♙f4N 13...h5 14.f3 is safer, but after 14...♙e6 15.♘e4 ♙d5 16.♞ad1 ♙e7 Black has nothing to fear.



13...a5 14.♞d1† ♔e7 15.♕g2 h6 16.♙f4

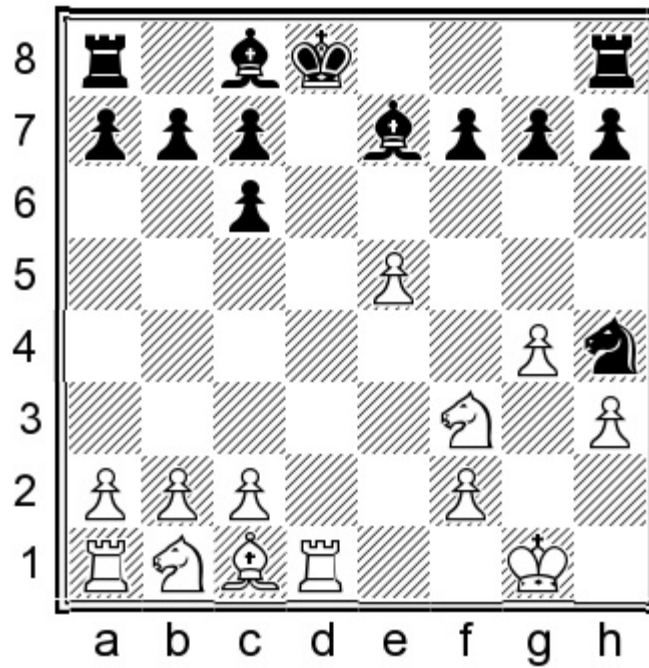
The more aggressive 16.f4N 16...♙b7 17.♙e3 ♞ad8 18.♙f2 c5† 19.♕g1 ♙xf2† 20.♕xf2 ♙c6 also doesn't offer White any advantage; the queenside pawns will never be completely safe from the black bishop.



16...♕e6 17.f3 ♙a6 18.♙g3 ♙e7 19.f4 g6

Having succeeded in neutralizing White's kingside expansion, Black was fine in Rivas Romero – Henry, corr. 2018.

B2) 11.♞d1†



By inserting the check before exchanging on h4, White forces the king to go to e8 rather than e7.

11...♔e8 12.♘xh4 ♙xh4 13.♖c3 h5

I find this move the most challenging.

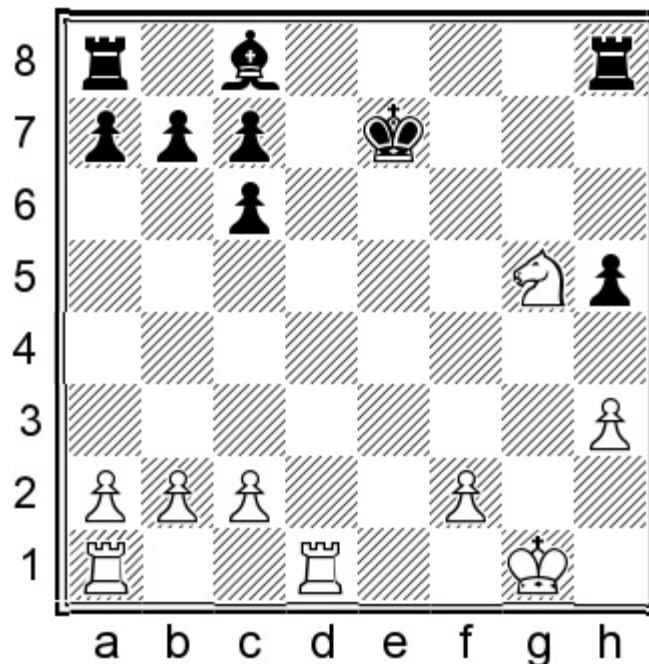
14.f3

The attempt to trap the bishop must be mentioned as well:

14.g5 f6

Of course! Black cannot wait with this break, as ♖d4 was a major threat.

15.exf6 gxf6 16.♗e4 fxg5 17.♙xg5 ♙xg5 18.♗xg5 ♔e7

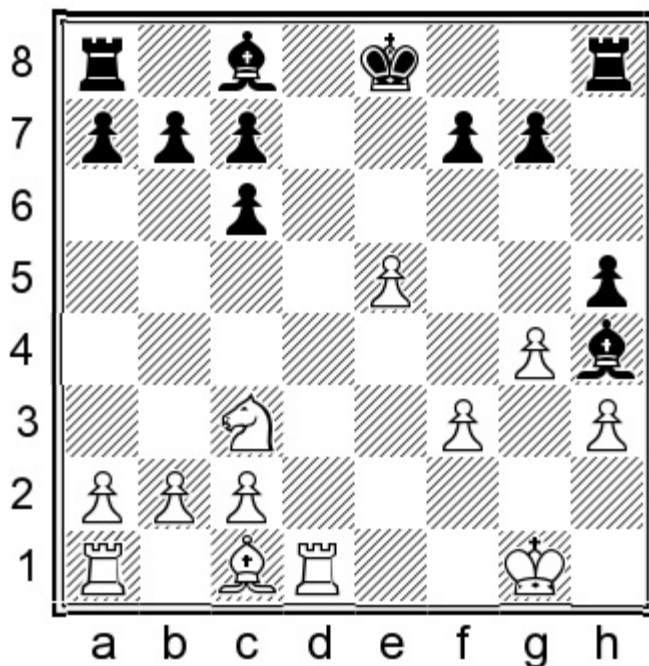


19.h4

The best alternative would be 19.♖d3N, but after 19...♙f5 20.♞e1† ♔f6 21.♘e4† ♖g6 22.♞g3† ♘h6 23.♘g5 ♞he8 Black's king remains safe enough and White has no advantage.

19...♙f5 20.♞d2 ♞ad8 21.♞e1† ♔f6

Black's pressure against White's weak pawns gave Black full compensation for the inferior pawn structure in Koronowski – Ondras, corr. 2013.

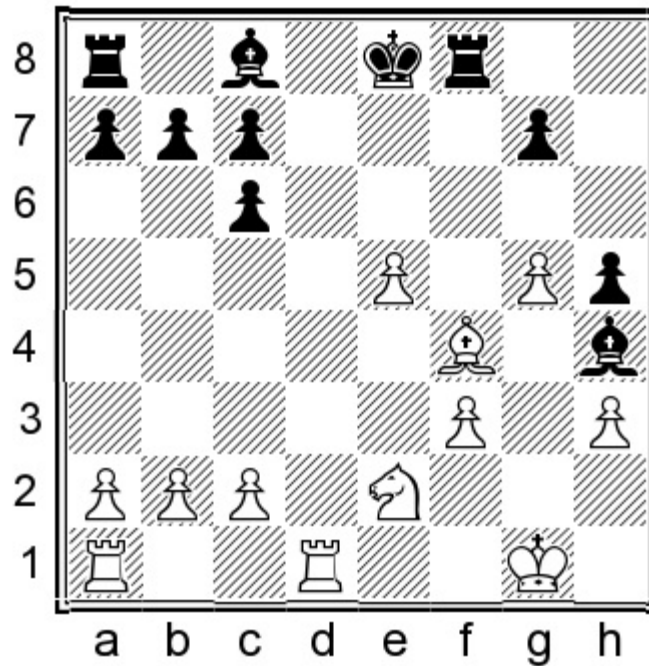


14...f5!

This energetic move exposes the drawbacks of the early g2-g4.

15.exf6

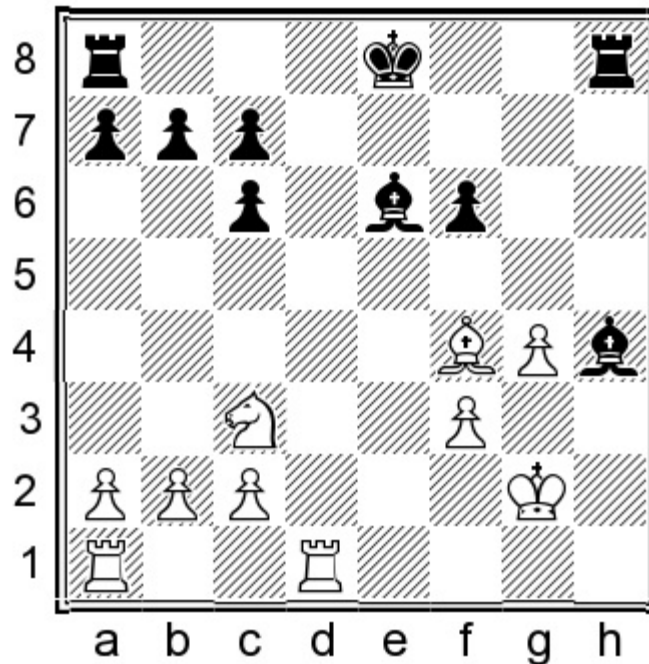
I also considered: 15.g5 f4 16.♙xf4 ♞f8 17.♘e2



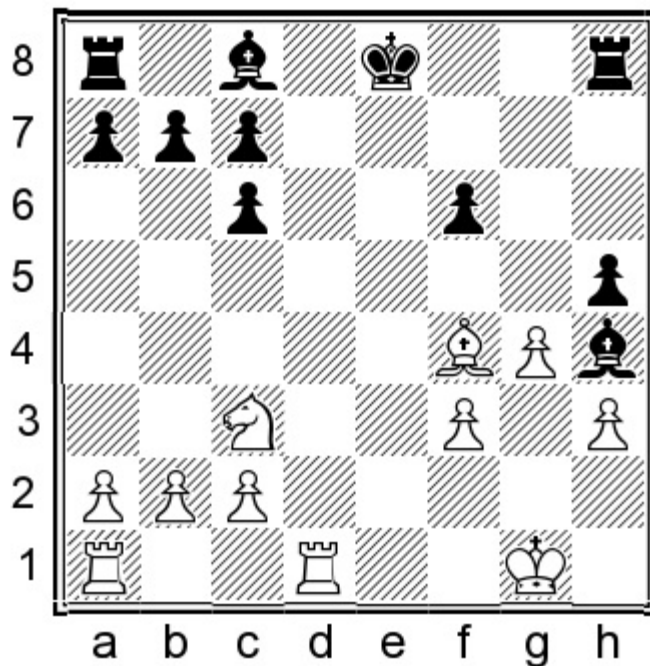
17... ♕xh3N (17... ♕e6!? was also reasonable in Eklund – Muljadi, corr. 2019) 18. ♖d4 ♖d8 White fails to take advantage of the awkward placement of the bishop on h4, and White's weaknesses may soon start to tell.

**15...gxf6 16.♗f4**

The quieter 16. ♖g2 does not pose many problems after: 16... ♕e6 17. ♗f4 hxg4 18. hxg4



18...f5 The same approach, opening the position in favour of Black's bishop pair. 19. ♖h1 fxg4 20. fxg4 ♗f6 21. ♖xh8† ♕xh8 22. ♖g3 ♖f7 Black's strong bishops fully compensated for the g4-passer in Santorelli – Poell, corr. 2017.

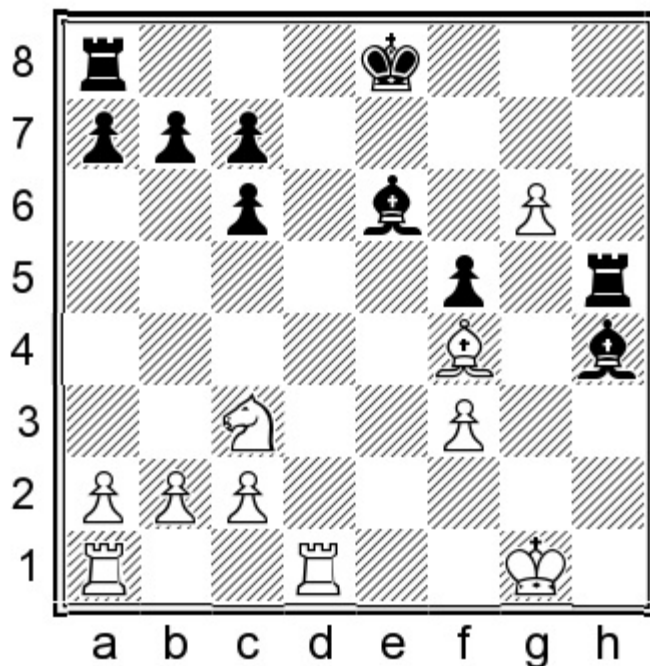


**16...hxg4 17.hxg4 f5 18.g5 ♖h5!**

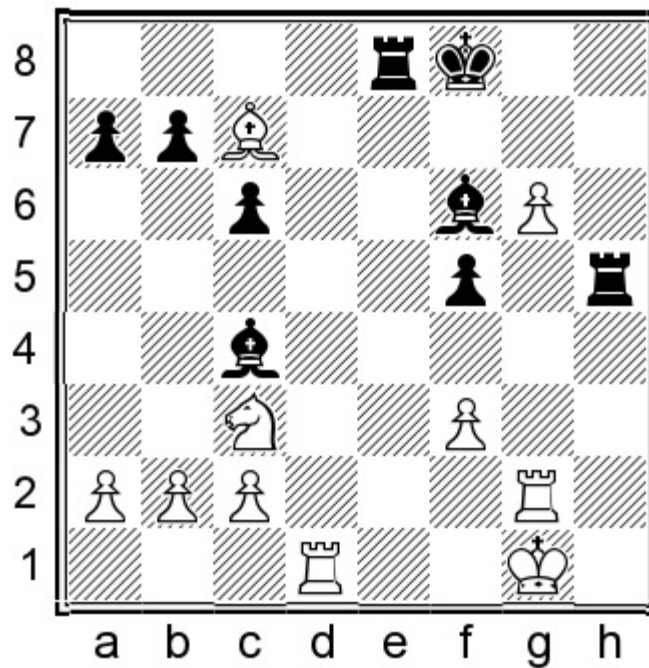
Black must immediately attack the g5-pawn in order to liberate the dark-squared bishop. If 18...♖g8 then 19.♖d2! indirectly defends the pawn.

**19.♗e2**

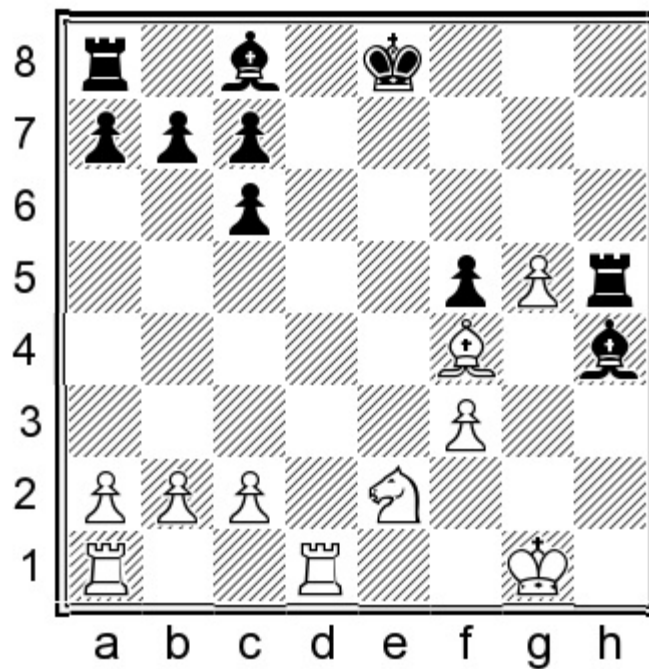
White has also tried: 19.g6 This looks more aggressive but is not dangerous, as Black can easily neutralize the passer. 19...♗e6



20.♖d2 (I examined two alternatives: 20.♗e2N 20...♗e7 21.♗g3 ♗xg3 22.♗xg3 ♖g8; and 20.♗g2N 20...♗e7 21.♖h1 ♗f6 22.♖h3 ♗xg6 23.♖ah1 ♖ah8, with equality in both cases.) 20...♗f8 21.♖g2 ♗f6 22.♖e1 ♗c4 23.♖d1 ♖e8 24.♗xc7



A draw was agreed in Manduch – Dufek, email 2010. Indeed, after 24...♖h3 25.♙g3 f4 26.♙xf4 ♜xf3 27.♙h6† ♜g8 Black has nothing to worry about.



### 19...♜f7!

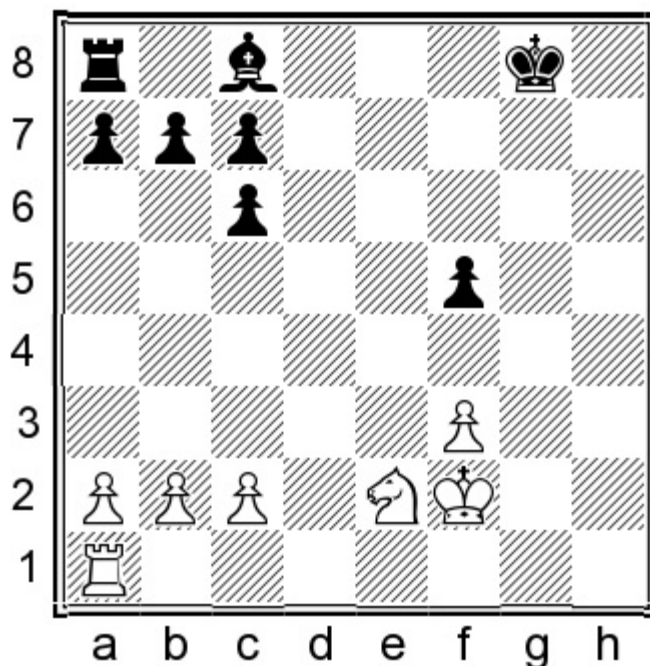
The bishop on h4 is vital, as it controls the e1-square.

19...♙xg5?! is premature due to: 20.♙xg5 ♜xg5† 21.♜f2 ♙e6 22.♞f4 ♙f7 23.♞d4 White's pieces are extremely active, so Black will have to struggle for a draw, despite being a pawn up.

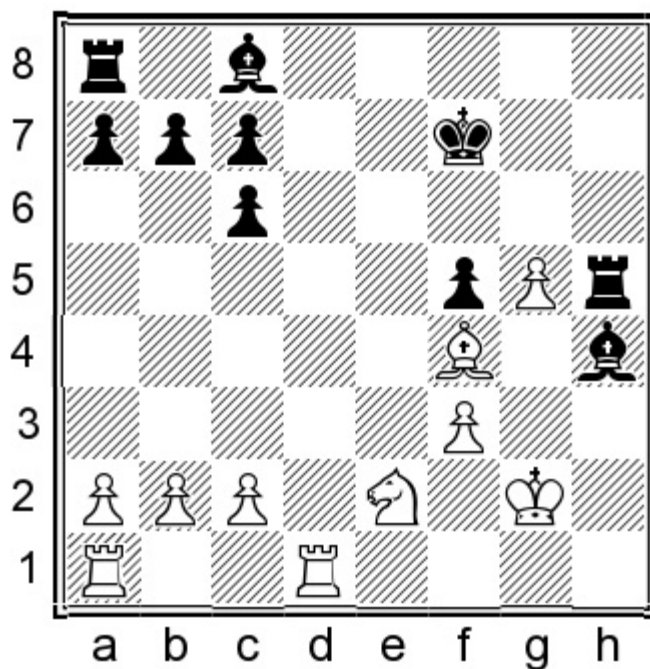
### 20.♜g2

The attempt to paralyze Black's queenside pieces with 20.♞d8 gets nowhere after: 20...♙xg5

21. ♖xg5 ♜xg5† 22. ♔f2 ♜g8 23. ♜xg8 ♔xg8



24. ♔g3 (24. ♘f4 ♔d7 is also fine for Black) 24... ♔e6 25. ♘d4 ♔f7 26. ♜h1 c5 27. ♘xe6 ♔xe6 Black had slightly the easier side of the drawn endgame in Kokkila – Stull, corr. 2012.



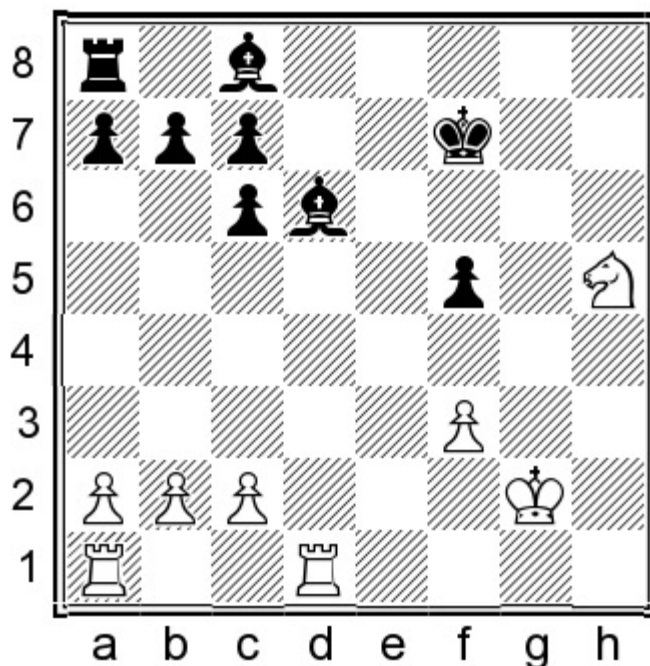
20... ♔xg5!

This move implies an exchange sacrifice.

21. ♘g3

21. ♜h1 leads to major simplifications: 21... ♜xh1 22. ♜xh1 ♔xf4 23. ♘xf4 ♔e6 24. ♜h7† ♔f6 25. ♜xc7 ♔xa2 26. ♜xb7 ♔b1 The endgame is equal.

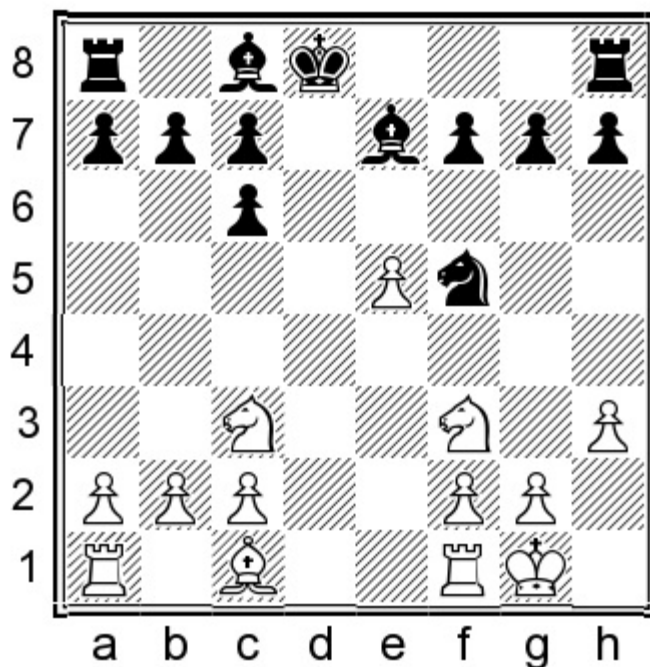
21...♙xf4 22.♘xh5 ♙d6



23.♘g3 ♙e6 24.♘e2 ♙c4 25.♖f2 ♜h8

With a pawn for the exchange, plus two strong bishops and control over the h-file, Black had full compensation in Fenwick – Valinova, email 2010.

C) 10.♘c3



This is by far the most popular choice.

10...h5!?

The most common continuation is 10...♘h4, offering the thematic knight exchange while

vacating f5 for the bishop and limiting White's activity on the kingside.

The text move is a double-edged decision. By making this move Black weakens g5, but makes it much more difficult for White to mobilize the kingside pawns. We will analyse three options: **C1)** 11.♔f4, **C2)** 11.♔g5 and **C3)** 11.♖d1†.

### **C1) 11.♔f4**

This move is usually played with the idea to put the queen's rook on d1. Having the bishop on f4 may also make the e5-e6 break more effective.

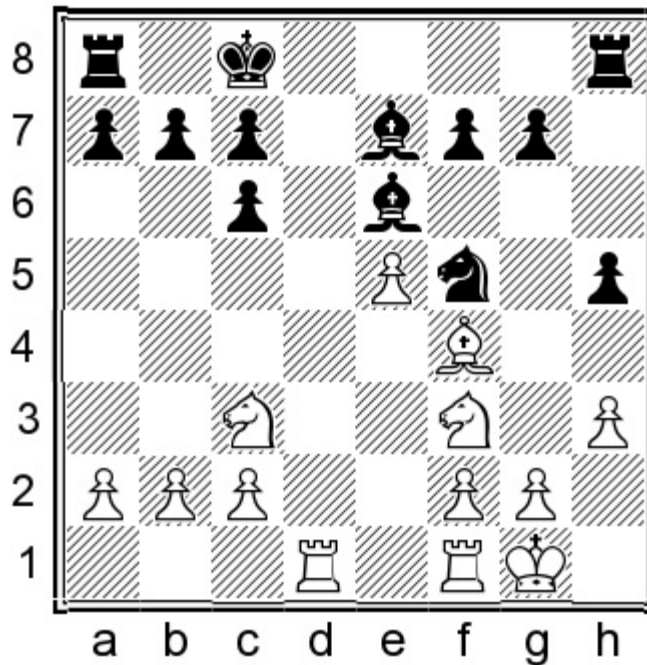
### **11...♗e6**

The bishop goes to its best square while preventing any e5-e6 ideas.

### **12.♞ad1†**

12.♘g5 ♗xg5 13.♔xg5† ♕c8 14.♞ad1 transposes to the main line below.

### **12...♕c8**



### **13.♘g5**

It is almost always undesirable for Black to allow the exchange of White's knight for the bishop on e6 when the only way of recapturing is with the f-pawn. Therefore the text move practically forces Black to exchange on g5. The arising type of endgame with bishops of opposite colour should be perfectly acceptable for us.

Another noteworthy game continued:

13.a3

White plays a useful waiting move, guarding the b4-square and avoiding any future scenarios where the a2-pawn could be left hanging.

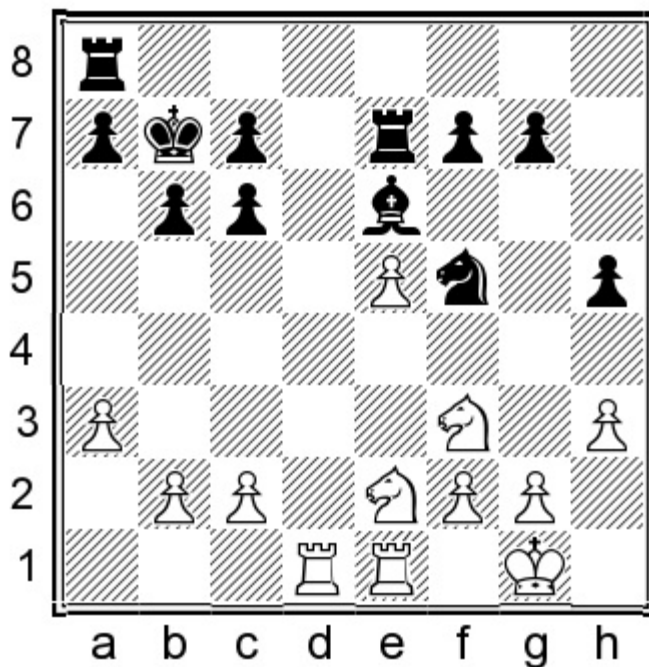
13...b6 14.♔g5 ♖e8

Black does not mind swapping bishops, as the e5-pawn will become more vulnerable.

15.♕xe7 ♜xe7 16.♞fe1 ♔b7 17.♘e2

I also checked 17.♘g5N 17...c5 18.♘xe6 ♜xe6 19.f4 ♔c6 20.♘e4 h4 when the endgame is equal.

Here Black's play can be improved with:



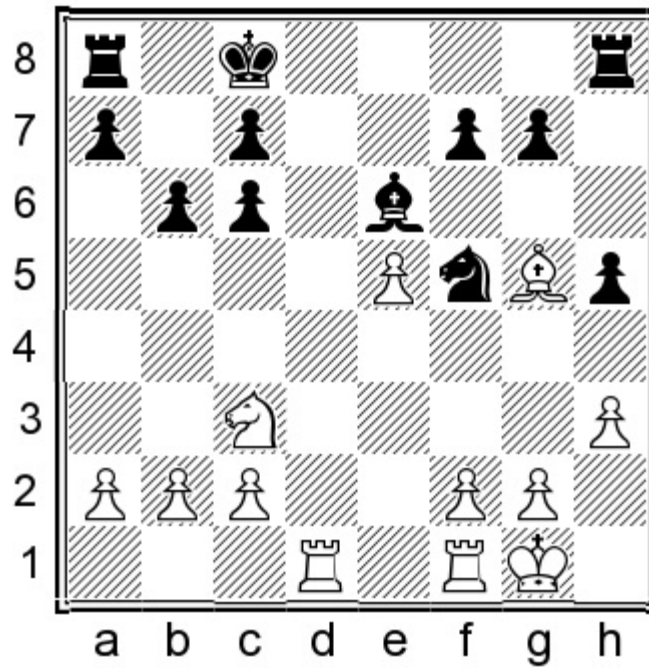
17...♕d5!N

17...g6 18.♘f4 ♘g7 19.♘g5 left Black under some pressure in Vachier-Lagrave – Karjakin, Zagreb 2019.

18.♘ed4 ♘xd4 19.♘xd4 g6 20.f4 f6 21.exf6 ♜f7 22.g3 ♜xf6 23.♞e7 h4

Black has comfortable equality, thanks to the strong bishop and kingside counterplay.

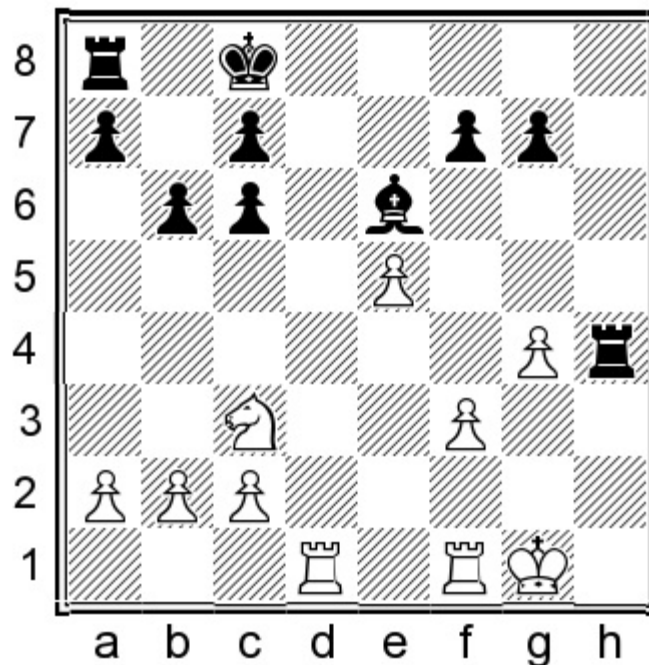
13...♕xg5 14.♕xg5 b6



15.g4

This is the only way to fight for the initiative.

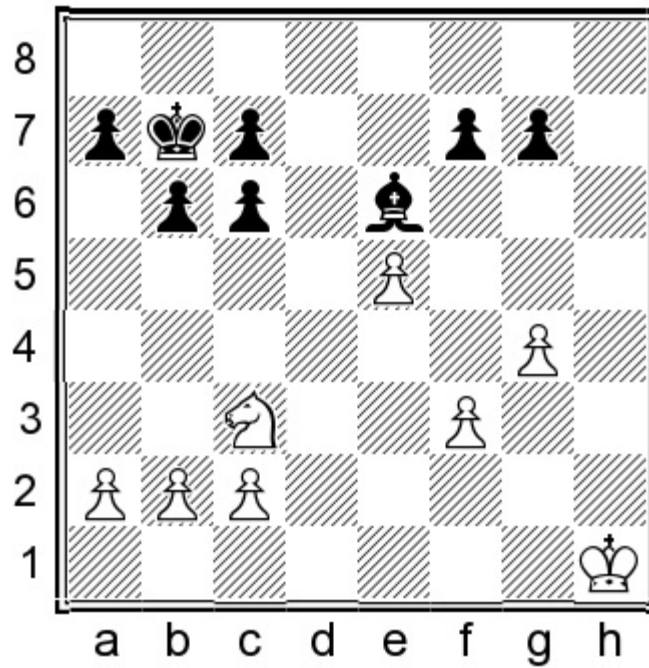
15...hxg4 16.hxg4 ♘h4 17.♙xh4 ♖xh4 18.f3



18...♙b7

Black is ready to double the rooks, so White is practically forced to go for further exchanges.

19.♙g2 ♖ah8 20.♖h1 ♖xh1 21.♖xh1 ♖xh1 22.♙xh1



**22...b5!**

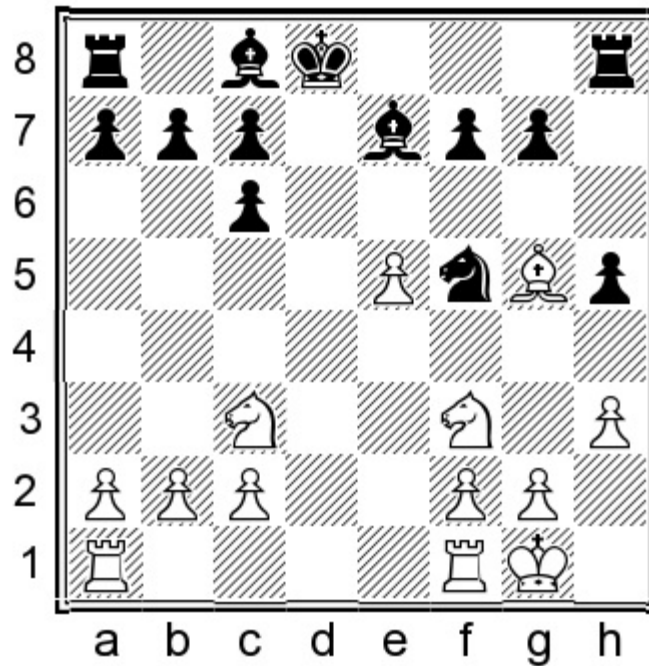
It is important to vacate the b6-spot for the king.

Instead, 22...c5? 23.♔g2 ♕c6 24.a4 a6 25.♔g3 b5 26.axb5† axb5 27.f4 saw White stabilize the situation on the queenside, so Black was doomed to passive defence and eventually lost in Wei Yi – Giri, Bilbao 2016.

**23.a3 ♕b6 24.♔g2 ♕c5 25.♔g3 ♕d4**

With such an active king, Black was in no danger in Labonte – Kluegel, email 2016.

**C2) 11.♙g5**



Occupying the g5-outpost is the most obvious attempt to highlight the drawback of Black's last move.

### 11...♙e6 12.♞ad1† ♚e8

Of course, not 12...♙c8? 13.♙xe7 ♜xe7 14.♞g5 b6 15.♞xe6 fxe6 16.♞e4 when the weak e6-pawn and the lack of connection between the rooks make Black's position awful.

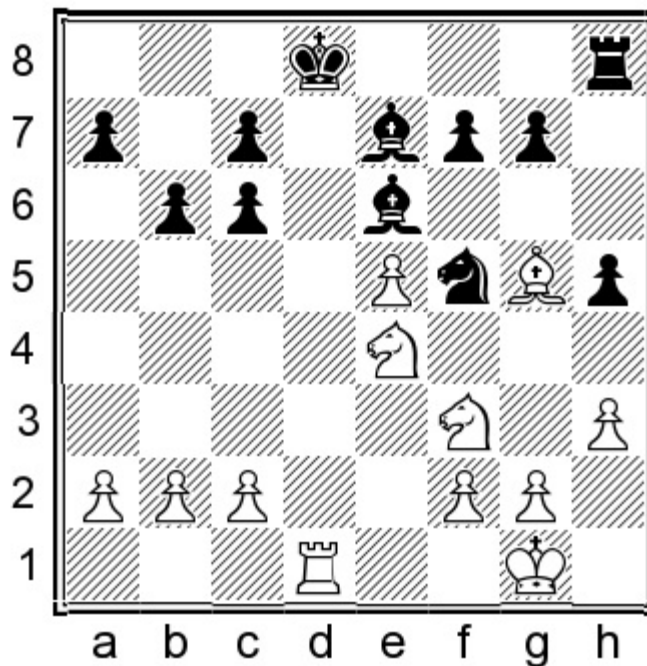
### 13.b3

This prophylactic move is the most common. The mobility of the light-squared bishop is limited now, but the text move also yields Black the possibility of improving the pawn structure with ...c5-c4.

13.♞d2 has no independent significance: 13...♞d8 14.♞xd8† (14.♞fd1 ♞xd2 15.♞xd2 converts to the 14.♞ad1 line in the notes to 11.♞d1† ♚e8 12.♙g5) 14...♙xd8 15.♞d1† This position will be covered under 11.♞d1† ♚e8 12.♙g5.

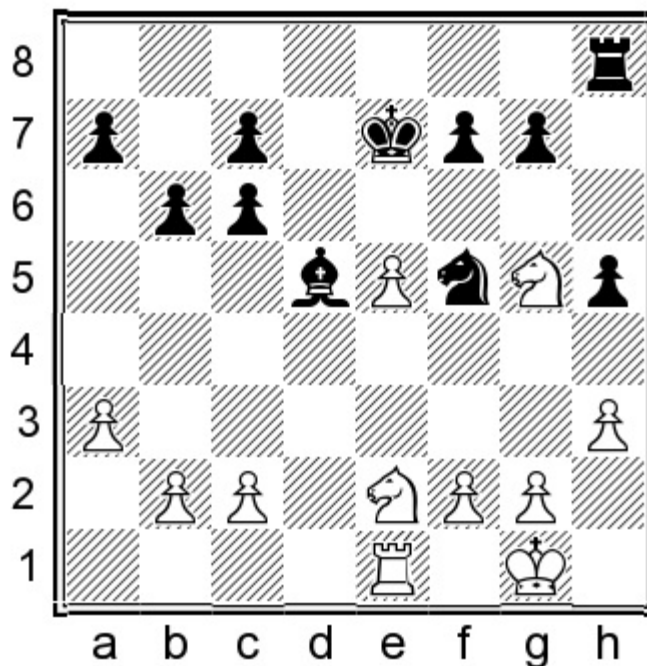
The straightforward 13.♙xe7 ♚xe7 14.♞g5?! ♞ad8 15.♞xe6 ♚xe6 left White in a difficult situation where the e5-pawn was almost lost in Ernst – Faibisovich, Sweden 1998.

13.♞e4 This standard move always diminishes White's control of d5. 13...b6 14.♞d2 ♞d8 15.♞xd8† ♙xd8 16.♞d1†

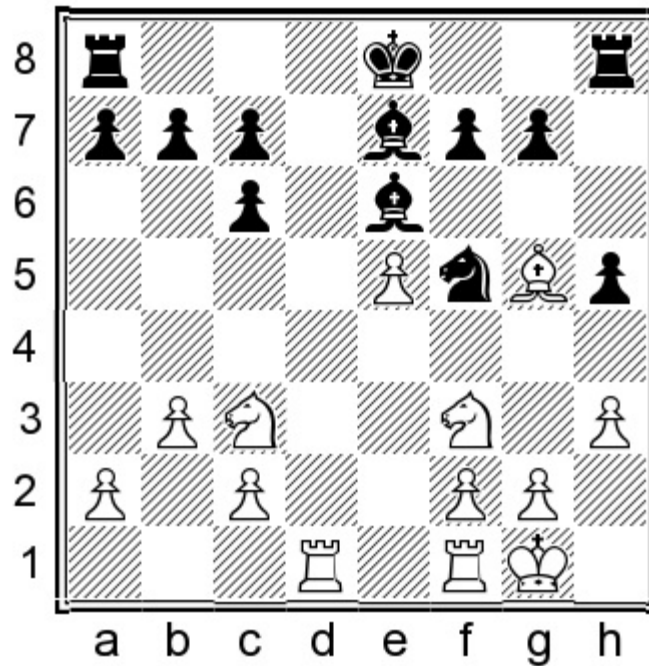


This position was reached in Cole – Oen, corr. 2012. The simplest continuation would have been 16...♔e8N 17.♙xe7 ♜xe7 18.♞eg5 ♘d5 when Black has solved all of the opening problems.

13.♖fe1 ♜d8 14.♙xd8† ♜xd8 15.a3 (15.b3 ♜e8 16.♙d1 is another transposition to the 11.♙d1† analysis.) 15...b6 16.♞e2 ♘d5 17.♙xe7† ♜xe7 18.♞g5 The logical play from both sides led to this position in Maghsoodloo – Karjakin, Internet (blitz) 2020. My natural new idea is:



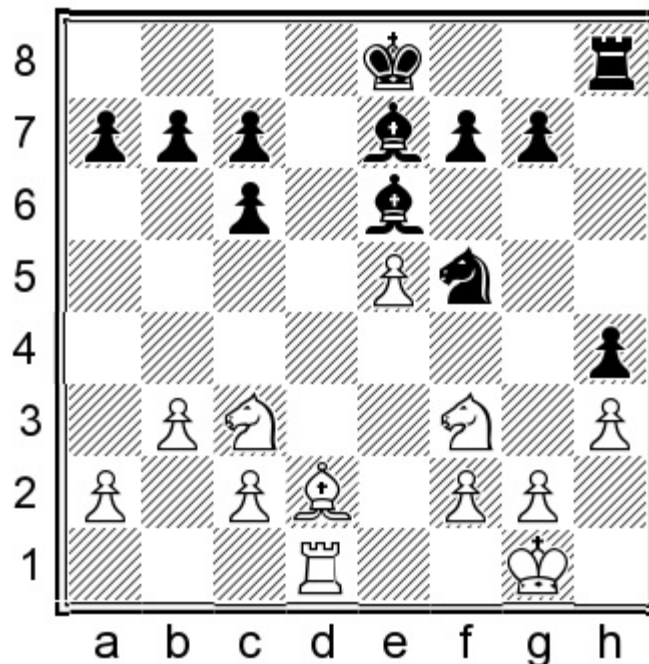
18...♙d8N 19.♞f4 h4 20.e6 f6 21.♞g6† ♜e8 22.♞f7 ♜c8 White's initiative comes to an end, while the e6-pawn feels distinctly weak.



13...h4 14.♘e4

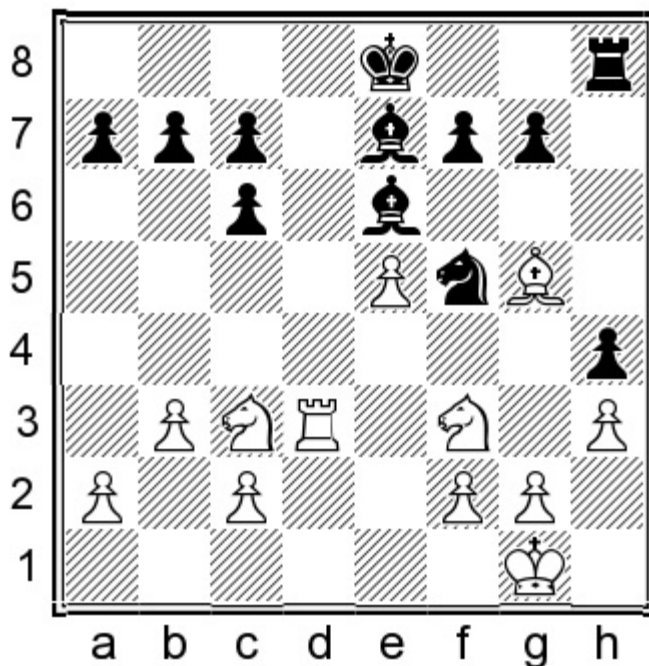
The knight is moving towards g5 in order to exchange the strong bishop on e6. White has also tried a few different rook moves:

The idea of seizing the open file with 14.♖d2 does not achieve much: 14...♖d8 15.♖fd1 (15.♖xd8† ♕xd8 16.♖d1† ♕e8 is another transposition to the 11.♖d1† analysis.) 15...♖xd2 16.♙xd2 (16.♖xd2 transposes to the Filipenko – Slugin game, referred to in a note under 11.♖d1†.)



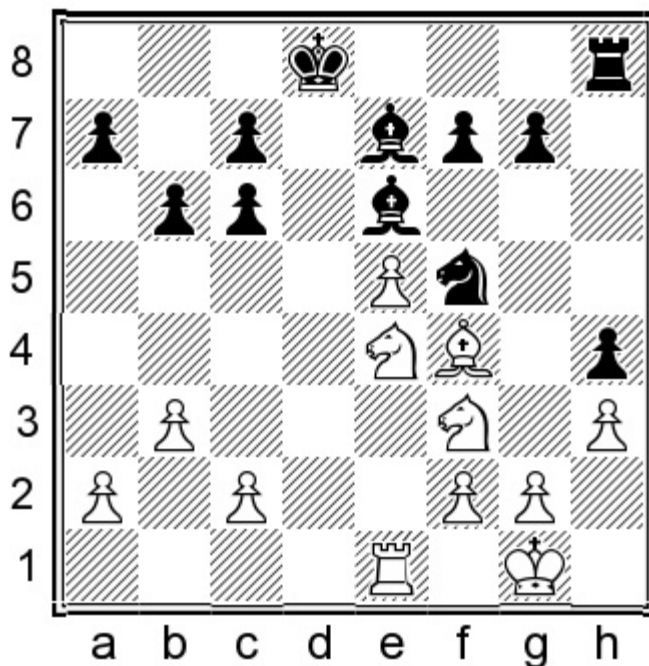
16...♕d7! Black takes the opportunity to improve the king, as none of the discovered checks are harmful at all. 17.♙g5† ♕c8 18.♙xe7 ♘xe7 The knight returned to g6 next, with no problems for Black in Kurgansky – Silin, corr. 2012.

14.♖d3 ♖d8 15.♗fd1 ♗xd3 16.♗xd3 is another way to play on the open file, but a good response is:



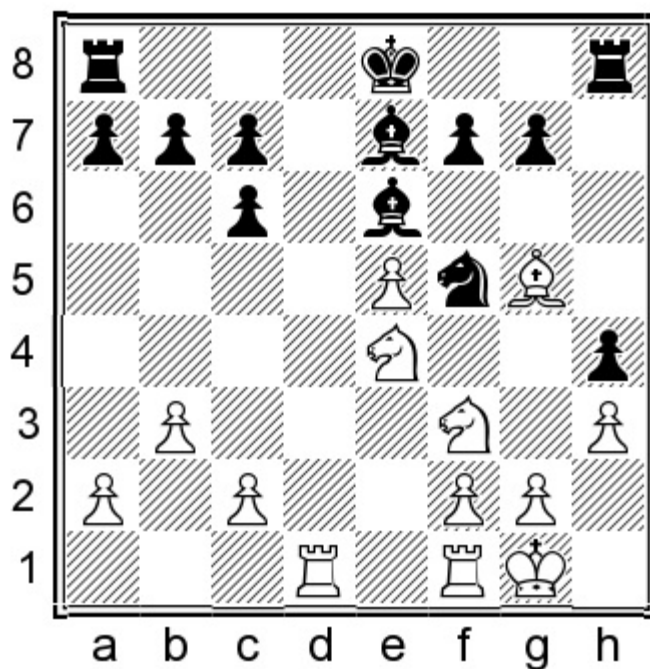
16...a5! 17.♘e2 (17.♙c1 b5 18.♘e2 c5 19.♖d1 c4 saw Black making good progress on the queenside in Kuhne – Jambrich, corr. 2017.) 17...♙d5 18.♙xe7 ♔xe7 19.♘d2 a4 Black managed to demonstrate the drawbacks of the b2-b3 move and develop decent play on the queenside in Volokitin – Pavlovic, Vrnjacka Banja 2010.

14.♗fe1 has been played in a few high-level games but I consider it harmless. 14...♖d8 15.♗xd8† ♔xd8 16.♘e4 b6 17.♙f4 This position was reached in Aronian – Kramnik, Zurich (4) 2012. My preferred continuation would be:



17...c5!?! A standard idea. Black starts to expand on the queenside and vacates c6 for the king.

18.♖d1† (18.♜eg5?! ♗xg5 19.♜xg5 ♖e7 might start to invite some trouble for White.) 18...♗c8  
 19.♜eg5 ♗xg5 20.♜xg5 ♜d4 The active knight gives Black plenty of counterplay.



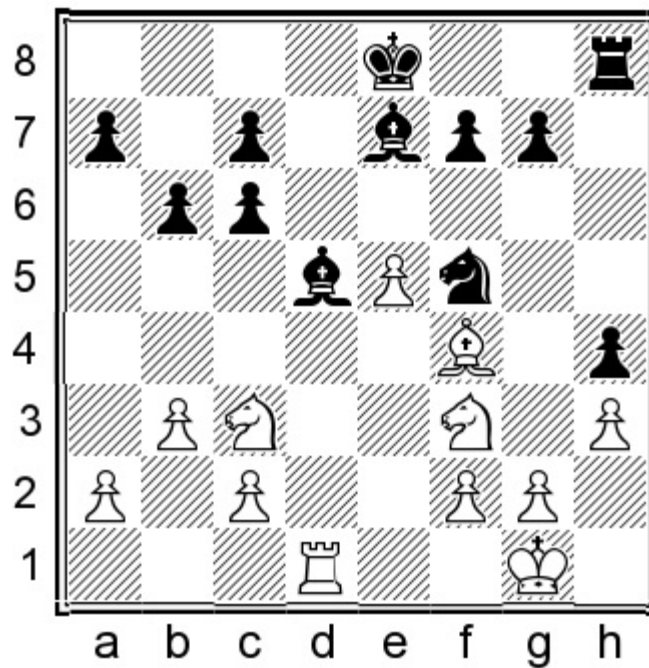
### 14...b6

Once the knight arrives on e4, it is always vital to take c5 under control. By the way, this position occurred in a subsequent Aronian – Kramnik game in 2012, which we will continue to follow.

### 15.c4

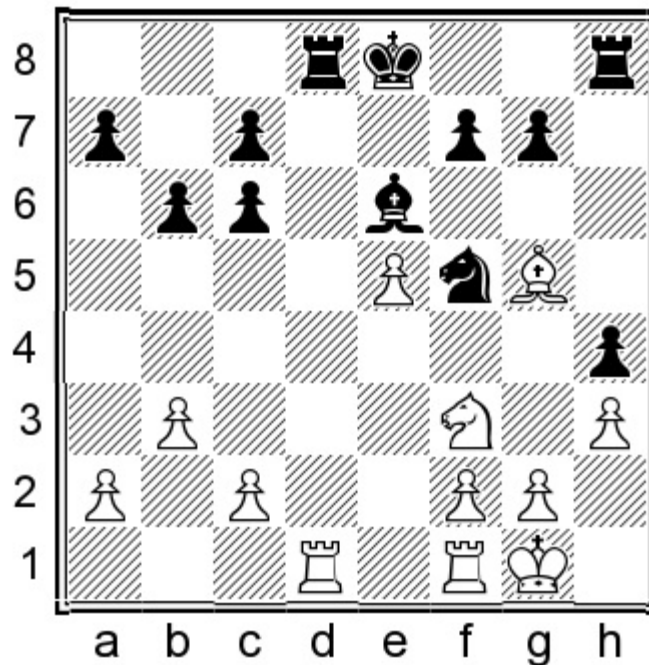
White aims to restrict the mobility of Black’s light-squared bishop. Other continuations shouldn’t bother Black either, for instance:

15.♖d2 ♖d8 16.♖xd8† ♗xd8 17.♖d1† ♗e8 18.♗f4 ♗d5 19.♜c3



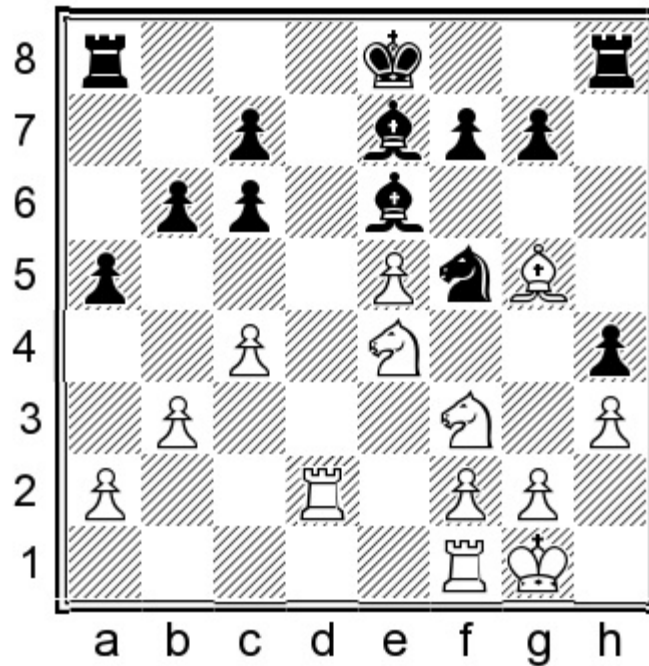
This position has arisen in a couple of games, and both times Black exchanged on f3. Although this is playable, doubling White's pawns is less of an achievement than it may seem, so I propose 19...♙e6N as the safest way to maintain equal chances.

Another game continued: 15.♙f4 ♖d8 16.♘eg5 ♙xg5 17.♙xg5



17...♖d5 18.c4 ♖d7 19.♖xd7 ♙xd7 20.♖d1† ♙c8 Black was fine in Klim – Cvak, corr. 2017.

15...a5 16.♖d2



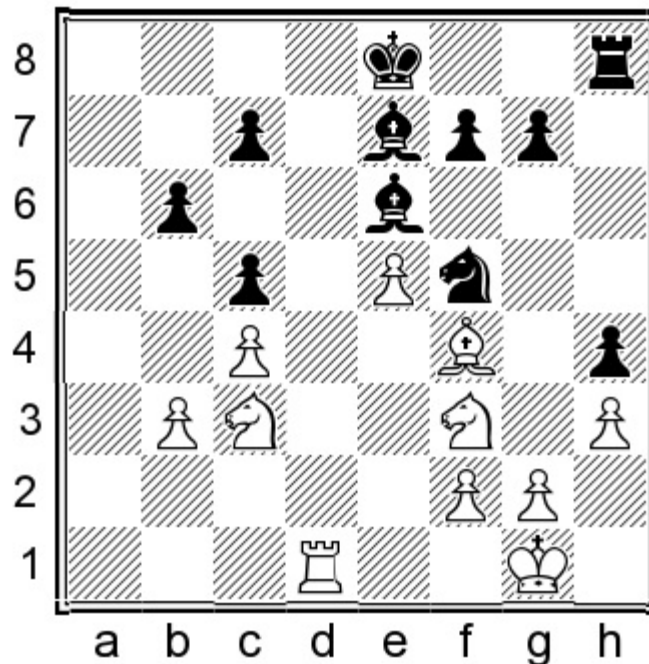
**16...Rd8**

As we have already seen, it is usually a good idea to trade one pair of rooks before White can double on the open file.

**17.Rfd1 Rxd2 18.Qxd2**

18.Rxd2N is hardly more promising, as 18...Qxg5 19.Nfxg5 Qe7 20.Qf1 c5 leaves White with difficulties mobilizing the kingside majority, while Black will always have prospects for queenside counterplay.

**18...c5 19.Qf4 a4 20.Nc3 axb3 21.axb3**



### 21...♔d8!

With this strong prophylactic move, Black defends the c7-pawn in advance.

### 22.♖f1

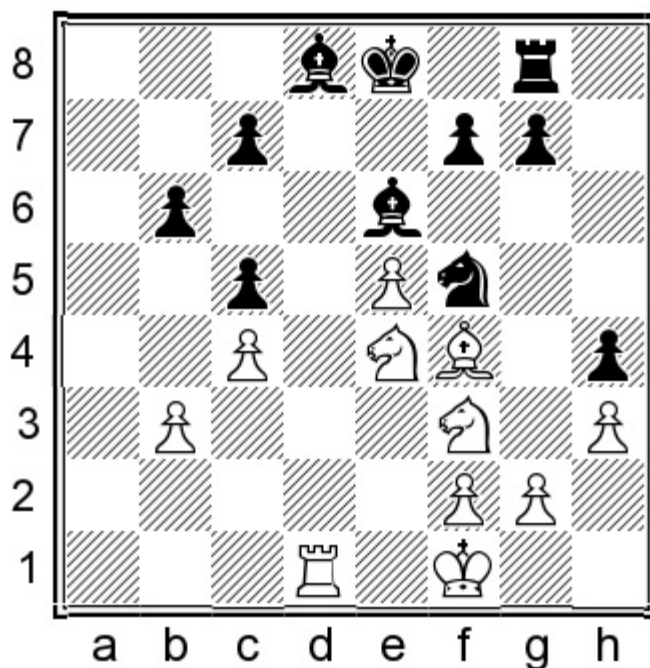
22.♘b5 ♕d7 23.♞a1 ♕xb5 24.cxb5 ♖d7 is also fine for Black.

### 22...♞g8!

Suddenly White has to worry about the ...g6-g5 break.

### 23.♘e4

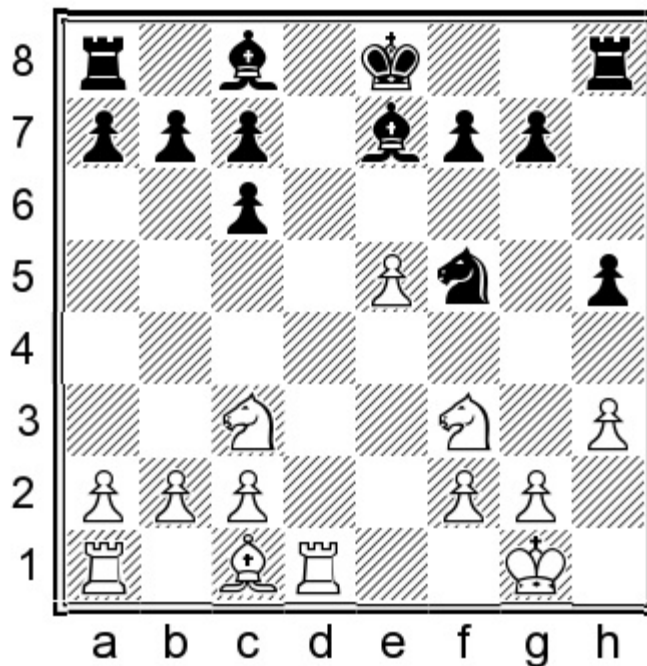
Also after 23.♞a1 g5 24.♕d2 g4 25.hxg4 ♞xg4 Black's chances are by no means inferior.



### 23...♕c8! 24.♞a1 ♕b7

Following Black's successful regrouping, White had to be careful in Aronian – Kramnik, London 2012.

C3) 11.♞d1† ♖e8



This move order gives rise to an interesting transpositional feature. After 9.h3, when it comes to our chosen sequence of 9...♙e7 10.♘c3 h5, White has seldom continued with the immediate rook check. However, when the king moves to e8 we suddenly transpose to hundreds of games which arrived here via different move orders, especially games in which Black has opted to meet 9.h3 with 9...h5, or sometimes 9...♔e8.

From this important tabiya, White has tried several continuations, and of course further transpositions are possible. We will take the most popular options of **C31)** 12.♘e4, **C32)** 12.♘e2 and **C33)** 12.♙g5 as the main lines to study.

### 12.b3

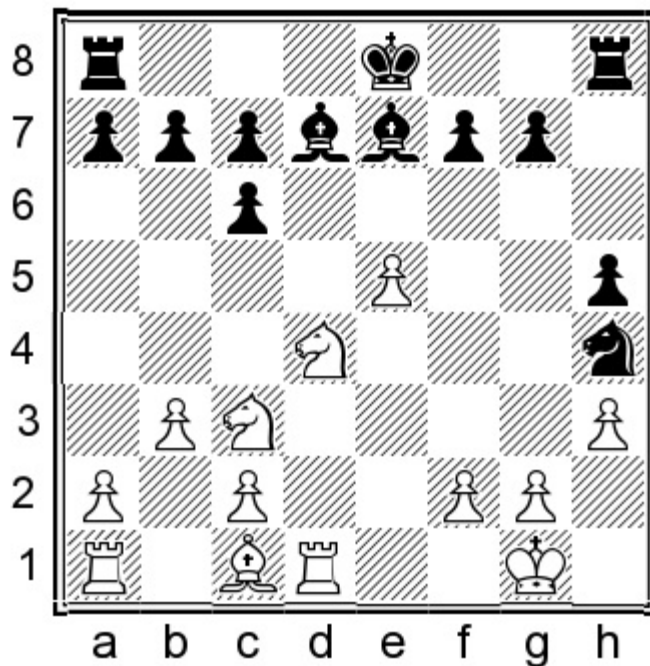
This has also been tried by some strong players. A good reaction is:

12...♘h4 13.♘d4

13.♘xh4 ♙xh4 gives Black no problems. For instance, 14.♘e2 ♙e7 15.♙b2 ♙f5 16.c4 (16.♘d4 ♙g6= is similar) 16...a5 17.♘d4 ♙g6 and the players agreed a draw in Jirku – Kostanjsek, corr. 2015.

13...♙d7

There is nothing wrong with 13...♘f5, as played in Ivanchuk – Oleksienko, Germany 2018, but I see no reason to make a silent draw offer.



14. ♖b2N

This seems like the most human move.

14. ♖h2 ♗g6 15. f4 ♗h4 16. ♖b2 ♖h6 17. ♗de2 ♗f5 saw Black find good squares for the kingside pieces in Urbaniak – Herzog, corr. 2016.

14... ♗d8 15. ♗e4 c5 16. ♗e2 ♖c6

The strong light-squared bishop offers Black sufficient counterplay, to say the least.

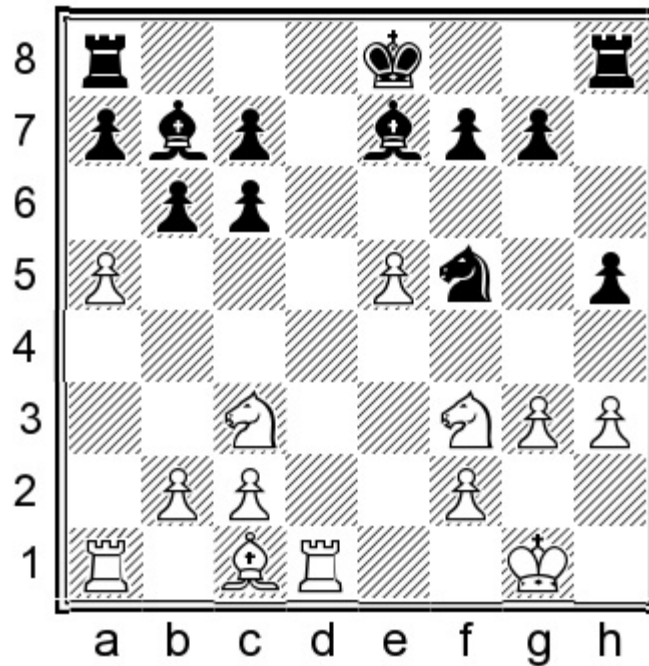
12. g3

This is an ambitious choice which prevents Black from fixing the kingside structure with ...h5-h4, so White maintains kingside flexibility and chances to advance the pawn majority later in the game. However, it seriously weakens the light squares around the white king.

12... b6

I find this fianchetto a natural and promising reaction to White's last move, which weakened the kingside light squares.

13. a4 ♖b7 14. a5



14...Rd8!N

The text move improves on 14...c5?!, when 15.♘d5 ♕d8 16.♙g5 left Black rather cramped in Adams – Anand, London 2014.

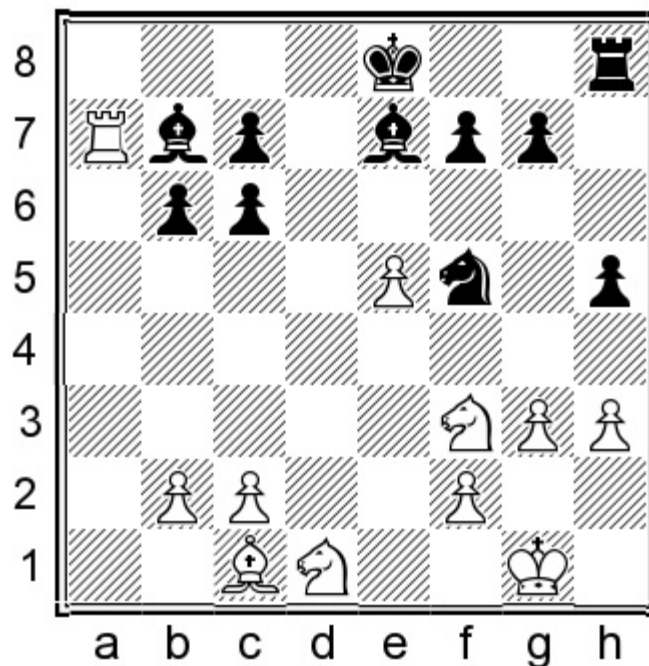
The text move is a well-timed activation of the rook, relying on a tactical justification which we will soon see.

15.axb6

15.♖xd8† ♔xd8 gives Black easy play, for instance: 16.axb6 axb6 17.♙g5 c5 Black takes over the initiative.

15...♖xd1† 16.♘xd1 axb6 17.♖a7

It looks like Black is in trouble, but the key resource is:



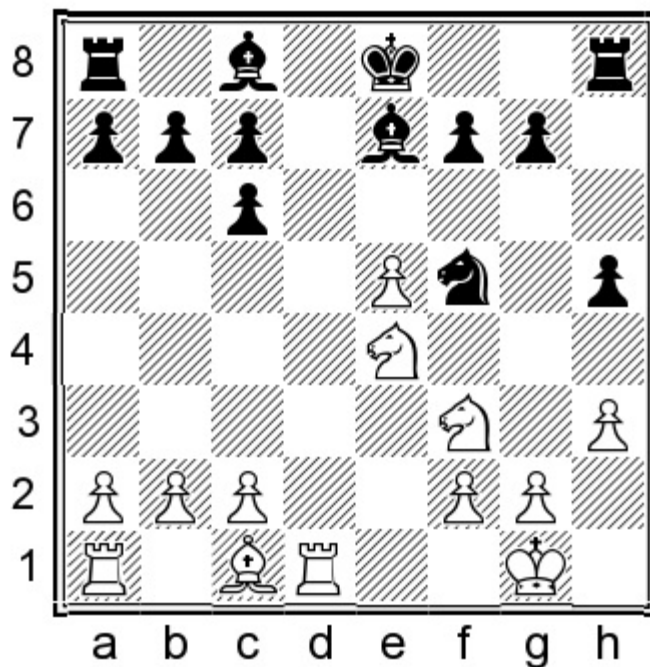
17...♔d7! 18.♖xb7?

White should try something else, but in that case there was no point in putting the rook on a7.

18...♖a8!

White's rook is trapped.

### C31) 12.♘e4



This is a common idea, in the present position as well as in the Berlin Endgame generally. The knight is well placed in the centre, and it can potentially attack the light-squared bishop (once it arrives on e6) from c5 or g5. On the downside, the text move diminishes White's control of d5.

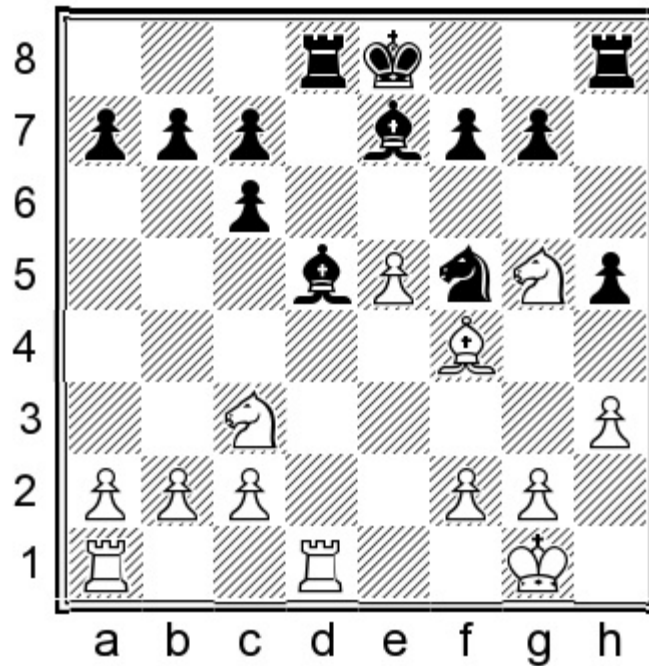
12...♙e6 13.♘fg5

13.b3 ♙d5 14.♘fg5 is another possible move order.

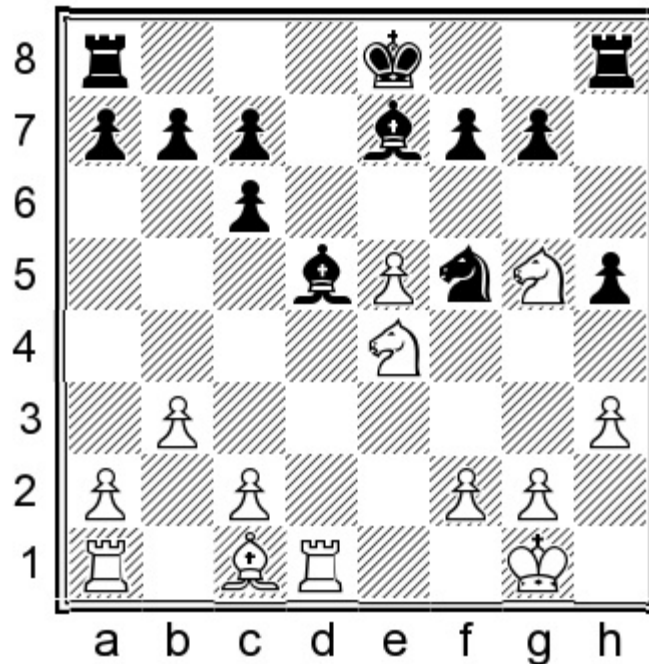
13...♙d5 14.b3

White prepares the fianchetto and supports c2-c4.

14.♘c3 has been tried in a couple of correspondence games but it seems harmless. 14...♖d8 15.♙f4 I found one game which followed this move order, which was agreed drawn at this point. Another game arrived here via transposition, and Black continued with 15...♘h4. Instead, my preference is:



15...h4N Black gets ready to kick the knight away with ...♞h5. 16.♘xd5 cxd5 17.e6 This is White's only real attempt to cause problems, but 17...♙xg5 18.exf7† ♔xf7 19.♙xg5 ♜d7 leaves Black with nothing to worry about.

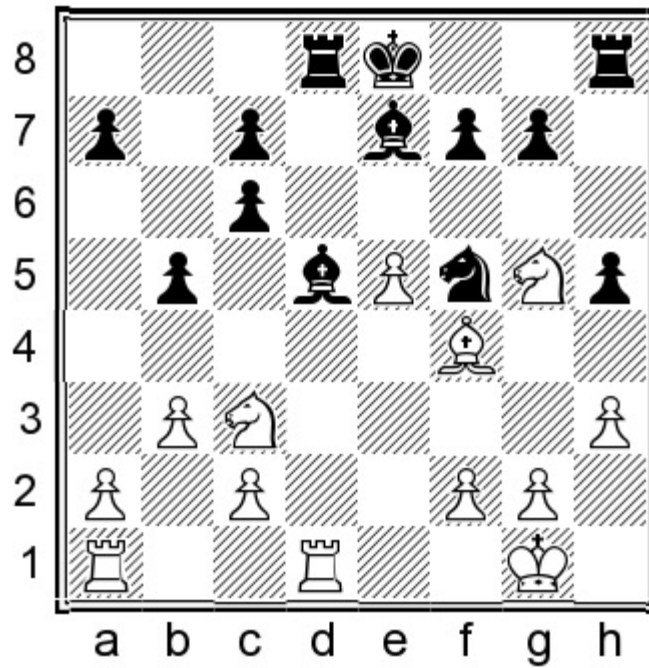


**14...b5!**

A radical way to prevent c2-c4.

**15.♘c3 ♜d8 16.♙f4**

16.a4?! proved dubious after 16...b4 17.♘xd5 ♞xd5 18.♞xd5 cxd5 when White had some problems defending the queenside pawns in Pavoni – Lyukmanov, corr. 2014.



**16...♖h6!**

By deploying the rook via the 6th rank, Black solves all remaining development problems.

**17.♘xd5**

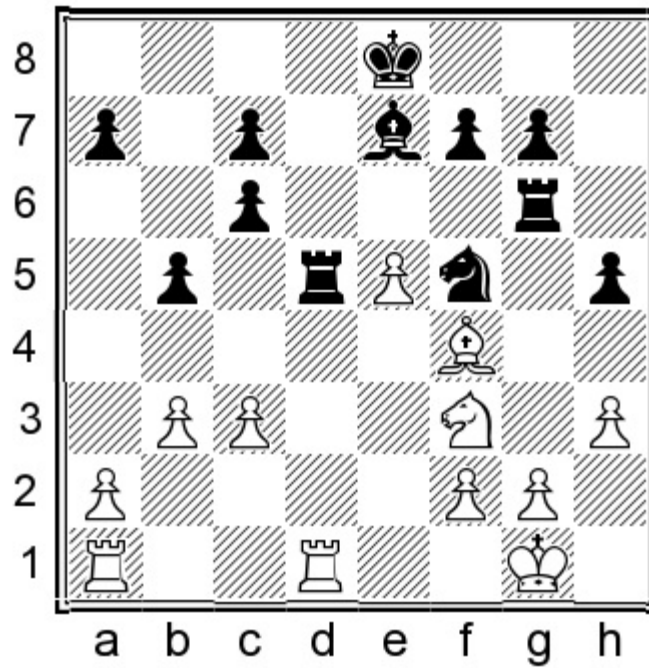
With ...♞g6 on the cards, White would gain nothing from delaying this exchange.

**17...♞xd5!**

Avoiding 17...cxd5? 18.e6! when Black has some problems.

**18.♘f3 ♞g6 19.c3**

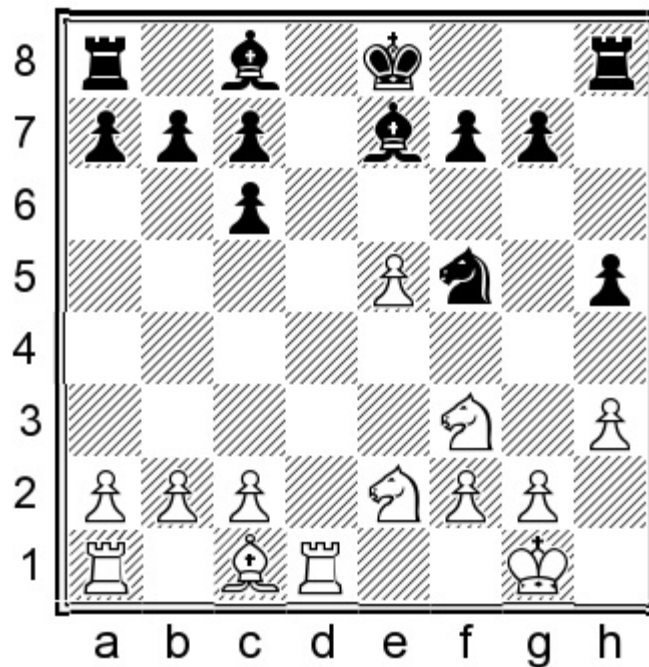
After logical play on both sides, the present position was reached in Azarov – Bacrot, Plovdiv 2012. My new, natural idea is:



19...♘h4!? N 20.♘xh4 ♗xh4 21.♙f1 ♗g5

After the exchange of knights, Black has sufficient counterplay due to the vulnerability of the e5-pawn.

C32) 12.♘e2



As usual, this standard manoeuvre is aimed at preventing Black from hosting the light-squared bishop on e6. Unlike in the 12.♘e4 line examined above, the bishop will not be able to settle on d5 due to the knight's influence from f4.

12...♘h4

The thematic exchange of knights helps to clear the f5-square for the bishop.

### 13. ♖xh4

Avoiding the exchange with 13. ♖fd4 achieved nothing for White after 13... ♗g6 14. f4 ♕d7 15. c4 ♜d8 16. b3 h4, when Black had full control over the light squares in Salinas Herrera – Bosiocic, Doha (rapid) 2016.

### 13... ♕xh4 14. ♕e3

This is by far the most popular choice. Alternatives are no better, for instance:

14. ♖d4 ♕e7 15. ♕f4 is covered via 14. ♕f4 below.

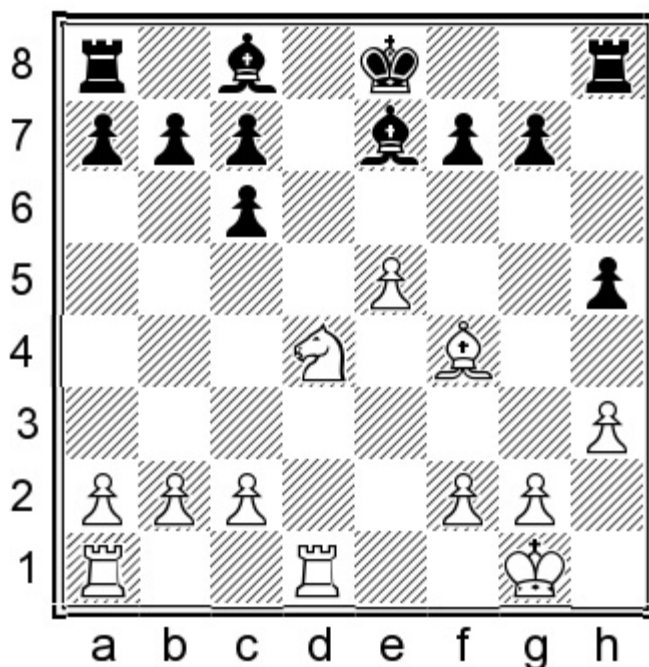
### 14. ♕f4 ♕e7

This should be harmless for Black.

### 15. ♖d4

After 15. a4 g5 16. ♕e3 a5 17. f3 g4! Black managed to activate the light-squared bishop and take over the initiative in Hou Yifan – Adams, Wijk aan Zee 2016.

The text move signifies White's intention to break with e5-e6 at some point. However, Black can afford to lose the c7-pawn in many cases.



### 15...g5!

This somewhat committal move enables Black to employ the king's rook quickly.

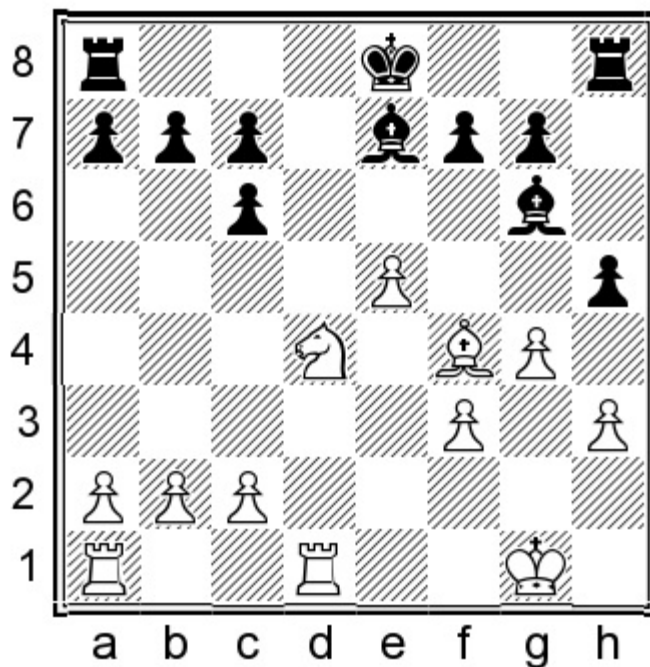
### 16. ♕h2 ♜h6 17. e6

This pawn break is White's only real idea, but it is easily neutralized.

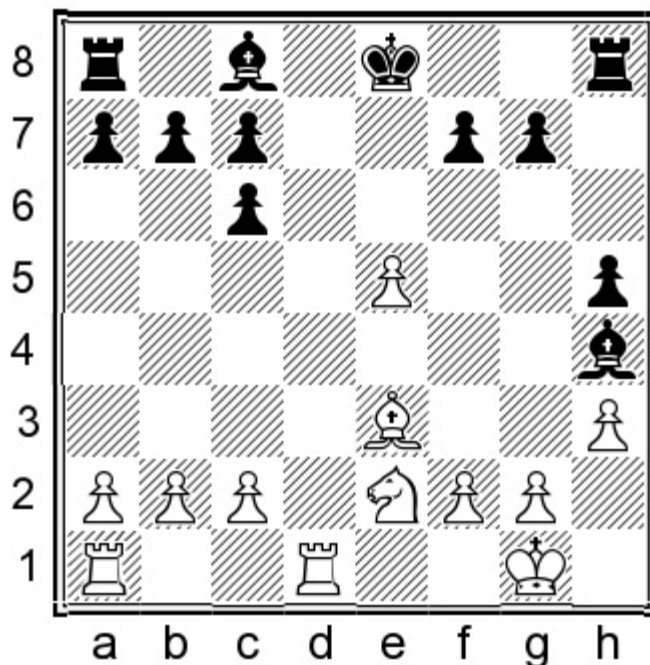
### 17... ♕xe6 18. ♕xc7 ♜c8

Black had no problems in Harikrishna – So, Wijk aan Zee 2014.

The somewhat slow 14.f3, with the intention to expand on the kingside with g2-g4 at some point, meets with the energetic response: 14...♙f5 15.♘d4 ♙g6 16.♙f4 (16.f4N 16...♙e4 17.♙e3 ♖d8 is also fine for Black) 16...♙e7 17.g4

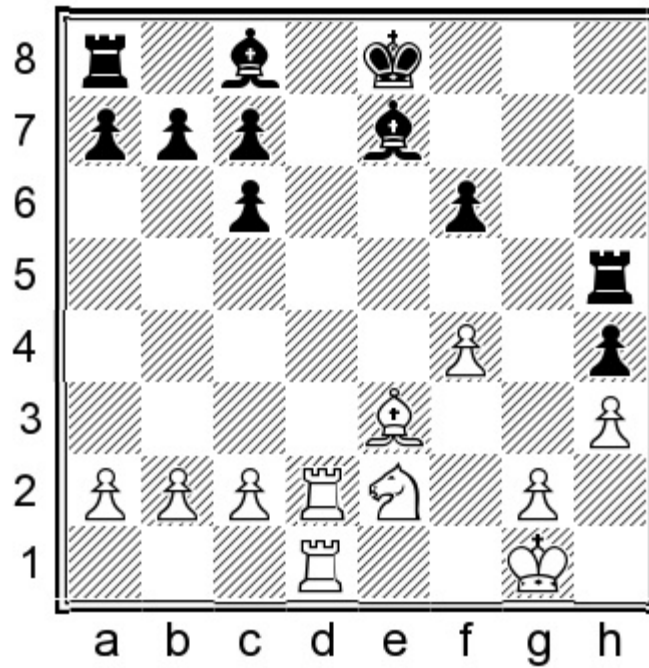


17...♖d8 18.♙g2 hxg4 19.hxg4 ♙c5 In Anand – Carlsen, Saint Louis 2015, the subsequent exchange on d4 made Black's position safe in view of the opposite-coloured bishops.

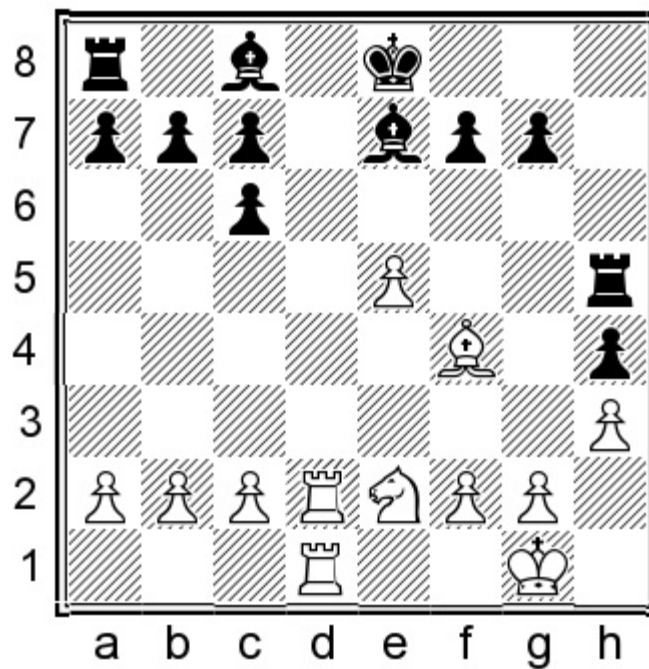


14...♙e7 15.♖d2 h4 16.♖ad1 ♖h5 17.♙f4

The other way of defending the pawn is 17.f4, which heavily restricts the mobility of White's minor pieces, so Black feels free to continue with: 17...f6! 18.exf6 gxf6



19.♘d4 ♔f7 White's pawn majority on the kingside was fully neutralized in Li Chao – Wei Yi, China 2019.



### 17...a6!

A vital move. Black covers the b5-square in advance, since ...c6-c5 is to follow soon.

The immediate 17...c5 18.♘c3 ♕e6 19.♘b5 ♕d8 20.♕e3 offers White more activity than I would like.

### 18.♕h2

The straightforward 18.♘d4 c5 19.♘e2 ♕e6 20.♘c3 ♖d8 21.♘d5 ♖d7 led to an absolutely equal endgame in Caruana – Karjakin, Shamkir 2014.

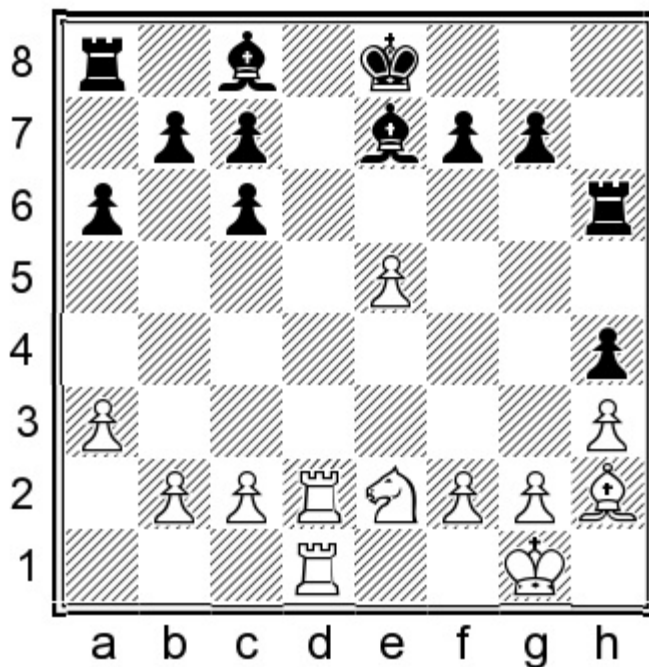
### 18...♖h6

The rook did its job on h5.

### 19.a3

19.e6 ♕xe6 20.♕xc7 ♜c8 21.♗e5 g5 offers White no advantage.

The text move is an attempt to maintain some tension, while admitting that White lacks any constructive ideas. In Vachier-Lagrave – Aronian, Saint Louis 2018, Black’s most promising continuation would have been:



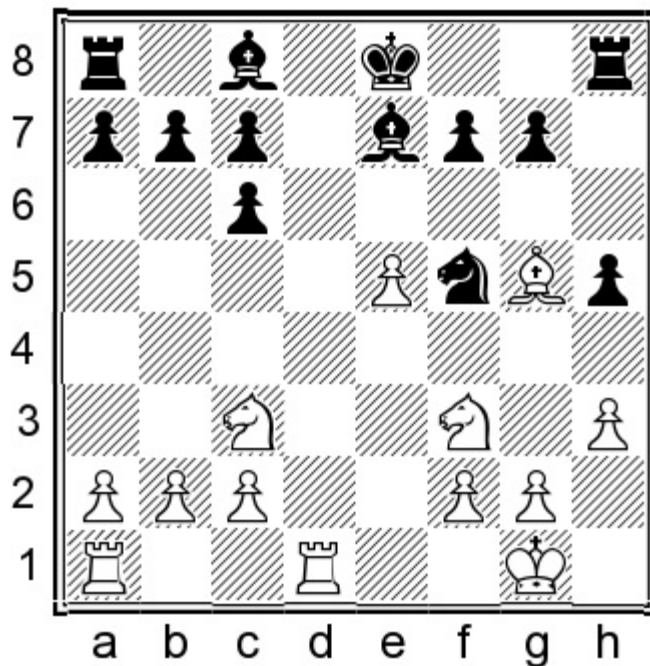
### 19...c5!?N

The main point is that the standard knight transfer to d5 is ineffective:

### 20.♘c3 ♕e6 21.♘d5 ♕xd5 22.♖xd5 ♜b6!

Black starts to attack White’s vulnerable queenside pawns and seizes the advantage.

C33) 12.♗g5



This has been the most popular continuation and it closely resembles variation C2 with 11.♔g5. Indeed, it was noted several times in that section that certain lines involving the arrival of a rook on d1 would transpose to the present variation.

### 12...♔e6 13.♖d2

13.g3 prepares a gradual kingside advance but 13...♗g8! is a clever reply to prepare ...f7-f6. For instance, 14.♕h2 (14.♖d2 is fine for Black after 14...f6 or 14...♖d8) 14...f6 15.exf6 gxf6 16.♔f4 ♖c8 17.♘e2 c5 18.b3 ♕f7 and Black was at least equal in Sychov – Gross Winter, corr. 2016.

### 13...♖d8

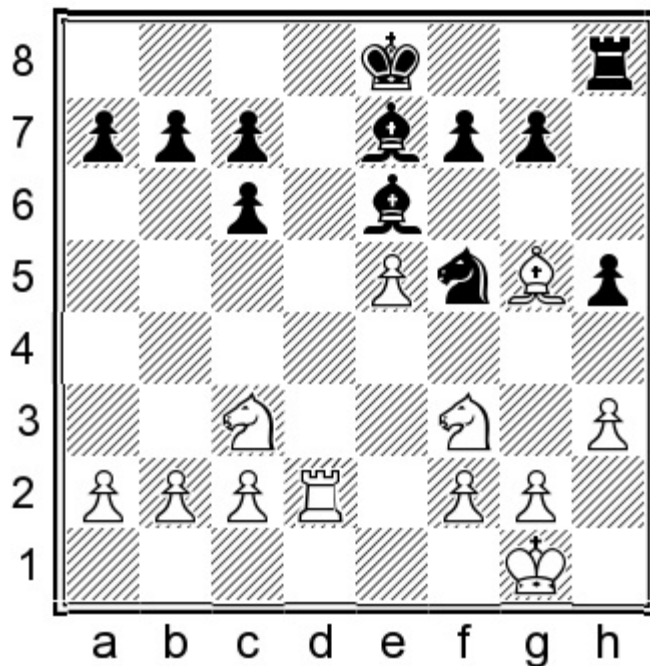
As usual, Black should swap a pair of rooks before White's control over the d-file becomes dangerous.

### 14.♖xd8†

White has also tried:

14.♖ad1 ♖xd2 15.♖xd2

This gives White a slightly less appealing version of the main line below, as there are more useful ways of spending a tempo than moving the rook from d1 to d2.



15...h4

With this move, Black neutralizes White's pawn majority to a certain extent, while also vacating h5 for the rook.

16.♔xe7

16.b3 ♖h5! 17.♔xe7 was seen in Filipenko – Slugin, Dagomys 2010, when Black missed a chance to take the upper hand with 17...♖xe7!N 18.♖e4 ♖g6 when the e5-pawn will soon fall.

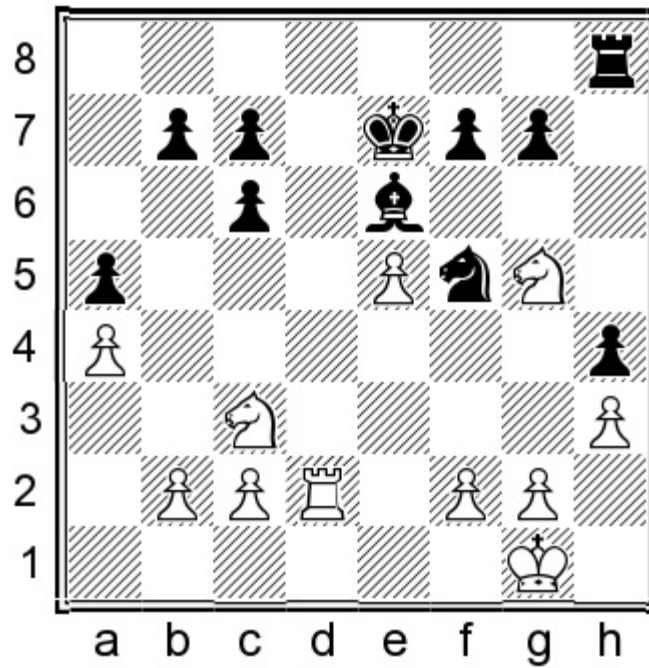
16...♔xe7

Unlike some of the earlier lines with a pawn on h6, the knight is safe from attack on f5, so Black is free to recapture with the king.

17.♖g5

The inaccurate 17.♖e2?! ♔d5 18.♖fd4 ♖xd4 19.♖xd4 was played in Anand – Karjakin, Moscow 2009, and now the courageous 19...♔xa2!N 20.b3 c5 would have posed White serious problems, as the bishop cannot be trapped. Play might continue 21.♖f5† ♔e6 22.♖xg7† ♔xe5 with good winning chances for Black.

17...a5 18.a4



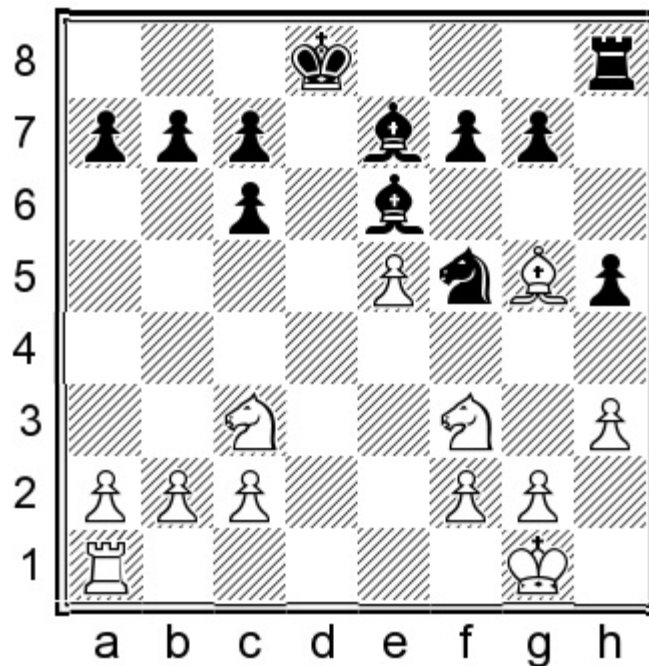
18...Rxe8

A good alternative is 18...Rhh5!?N 19.f4 Rxc8 20.Kf2 b6 when Black doesn't seem to face any problems.

19.b3 Rxc8 20.Kf2 f6 21.Kf3 Kf7 22.exf6 Kxf6

Black was not worse at all in Dolgov – Hartl, email 2012.

14...Kxd8



15.Rd1+ Ke8

It is better to host the king in the centre.

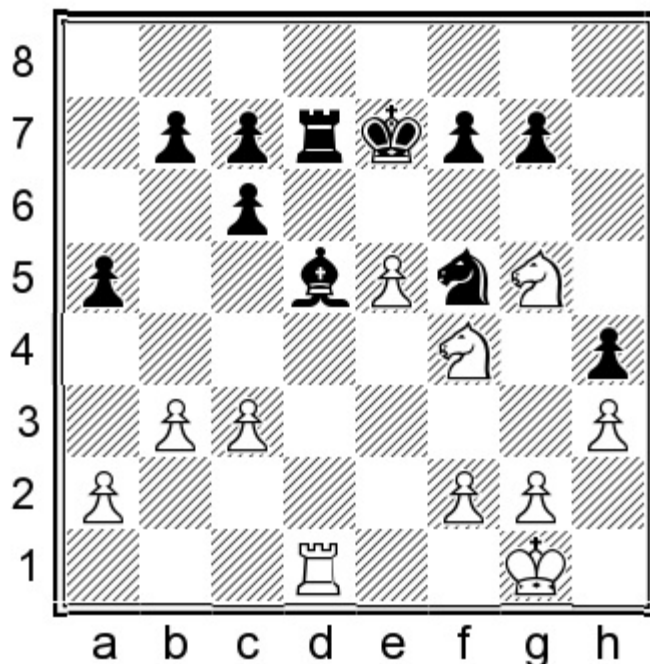
The possibility of 15...♔c8?! is perhaps what has led some strong players to favour the 14.♖ad1 line noted above. However, this option proves weaker after 16.♙xe7 ♘xe7 17.♞g5 followed by the favourable exchange on e6. Black needs the king to be more active in such positions.

### 16.b3

This has been the most popular move, as well as the choice of Anand and Aronian, among others. Here are some other examples:

16.♞d2?! makes no sense via this move order, but it's worth briefly noting that it transposes to the 14.♖ad1 line above, with one extra move played.

16.♞e2 ♙d5 should be pleasant enough for Black: 17.♙xe7 ♔xe7 18.♞g5 h4 (18...f6 has been tried by a few strong players but I see no reason to allow 19.♞f4 with some initiative for White) 19.♞f4 ♞d8 20.b3 ♞d7 21.c3 a5



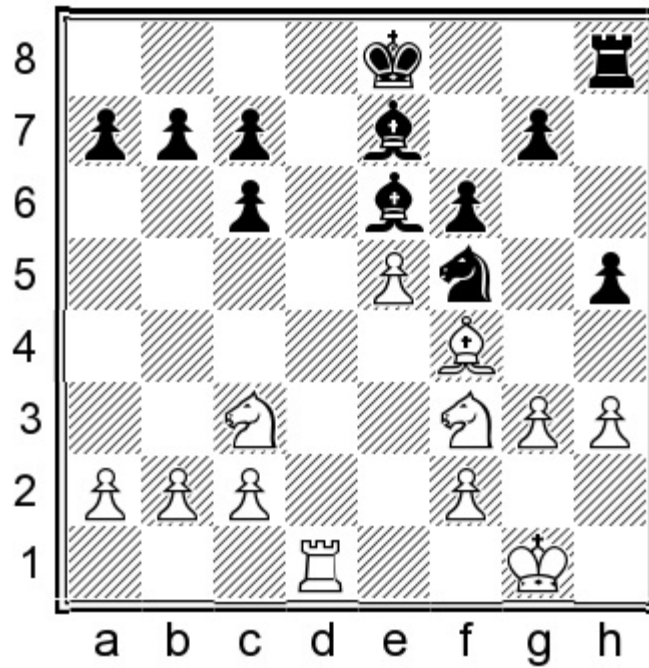
White took the opportunity to mix things up slightly with 22.e6!? ♙xe6 23.♞e1, but after the simple 23...b6 Black's activity on the d-file compensated for the doubled c-pawns in Wagner – Almiron, corr. 2014.

### 16.g3

This move is well met by:

16...f6! 17.♙f4

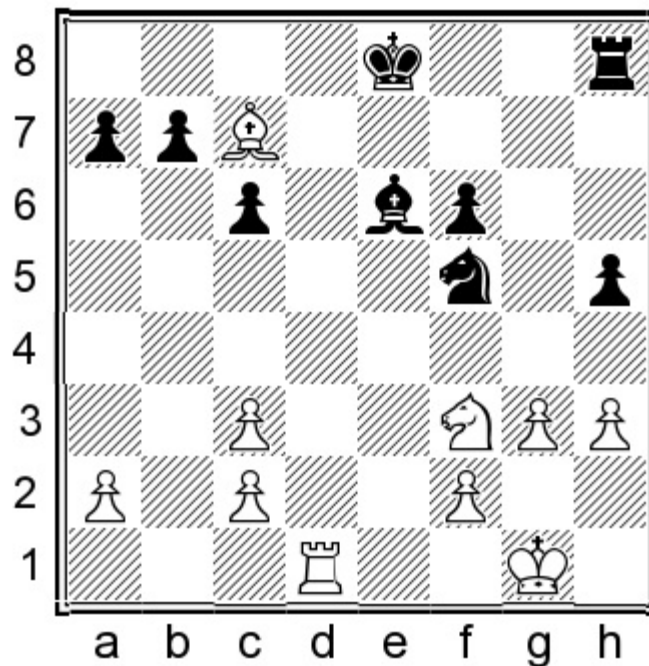
Another example continued 17.exf6 gxf6 18.♙f4 ♞d6 19.♔g2 ♔f7 when Black's strong bishops compensated for White's superior pawn structure in Gomez Esteban – Levin, Benasque 2010.



17...♙b4!?. 18.exf6 ♗xc3 19.bxc3

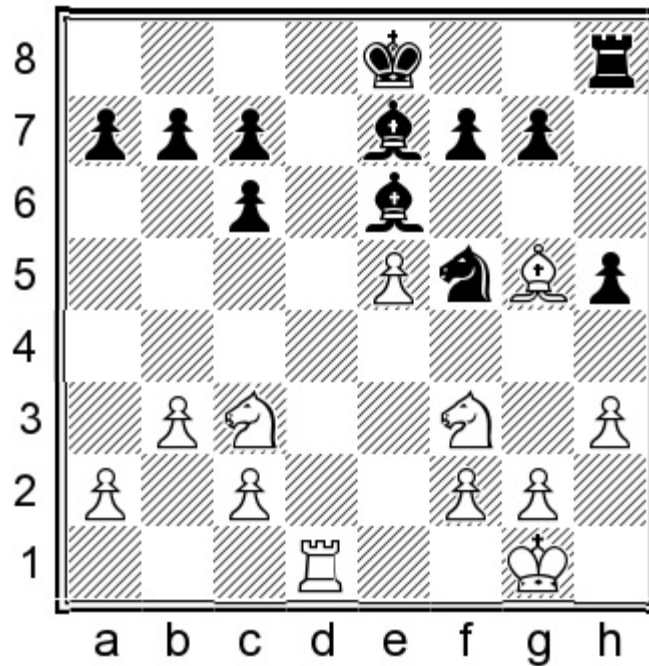
19.f7†!?.N is also possible, but 19...♔xf7 20.♖g5† ♕e7 21.♖xe6 ♕xe6 22.bxc3 ♖d6 gives Black enough counterplay on the queenside.

19...gxf6 20.♗xc7



This position was reached in Swiercz – Hovhannisyán, Chennai 2011. I would continue:  
20...♔f7N 21.a3 b6

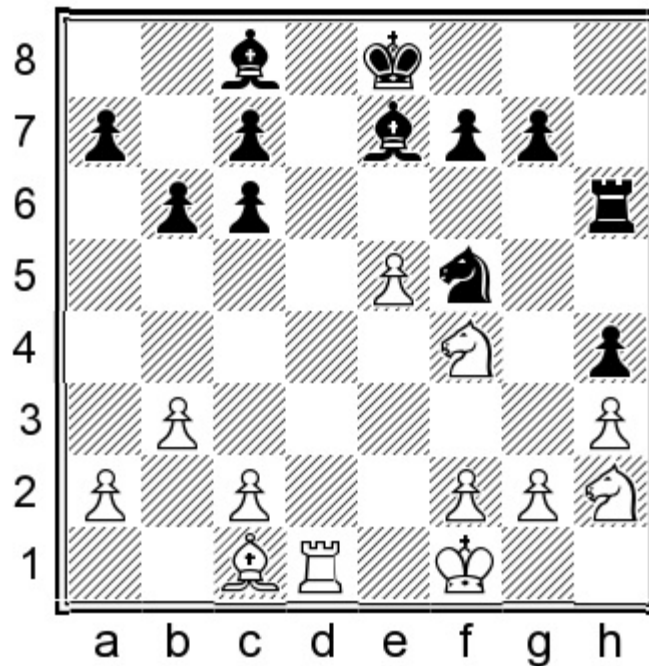
White's extra pawn is mostly of symbolic value.



16...h4 17.♙c1

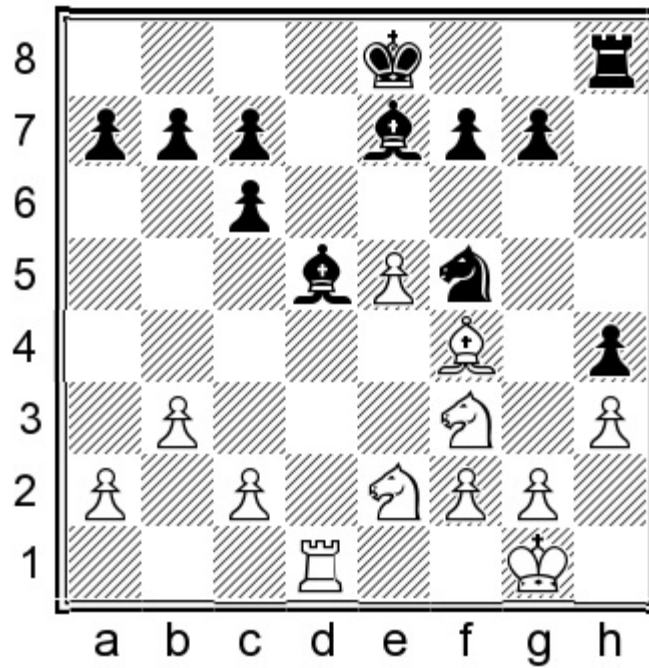
I checked two other continuations which have been tested in top-flight games:

17.♔f1 ♖h5 18.♙c1 b6 19.♘e2 ♙c8 20.♘f4 ♗h6 21.♘h2 This position was reached in Aronian – Karjakin, Saint Louis 2019. My natural new idea is:



21...♖h8N 22.c4 a5 23.♘f3 a4 Black intends to develop further play on the queenside with ...b6-b5.

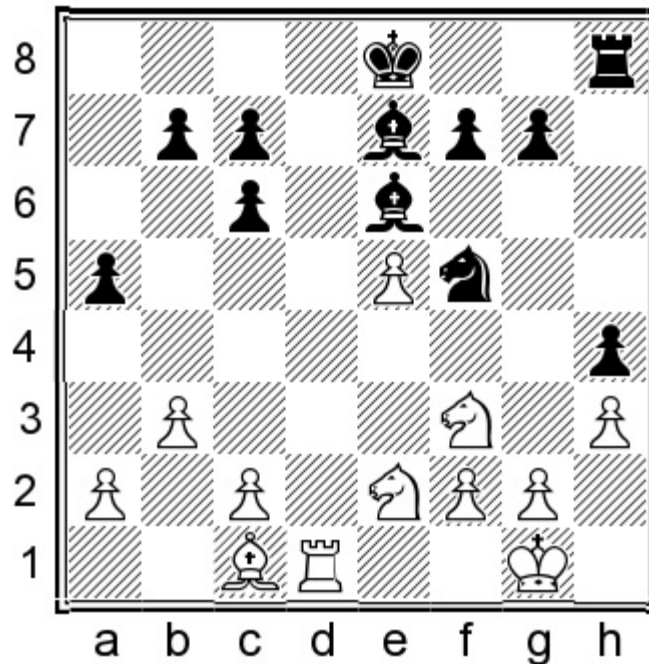
17.♘e2 ♙d5 18.♙f4 was played in Anand – Nakamura, Saint Louis 2019. I think a good idea would have been:



18...♖h5!?N 19.♙c1 ♗e4 Black is provoking 20.c4, when 20...c5 yields an excellent central spot for the knight. 21.♘c3 ♗xf3 22.gxf3 ♘d4 23.f4 f6 Black is not worse at all.

17...a5 18.♘e2

The knight is heading towards f4. All this happened in Aronian – Karjakin, Saint Louis 2018. I think the most logical continuation is:



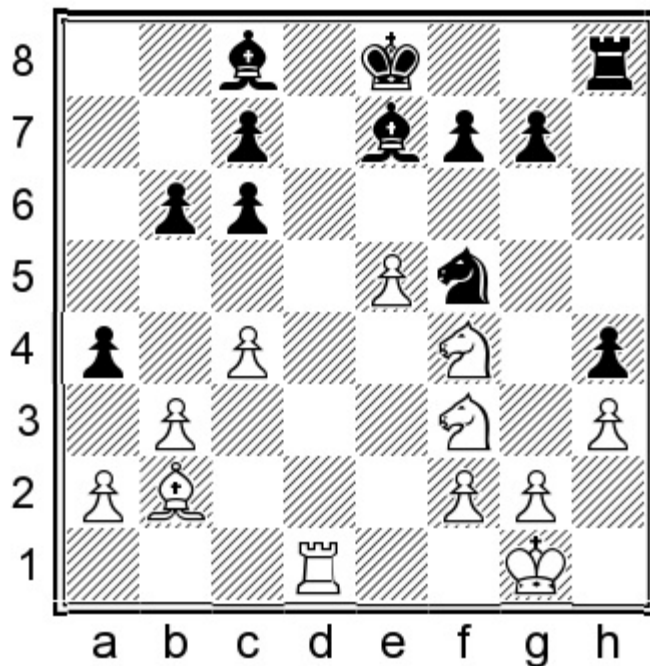
18...b6!?N

In anticipation of White's plan, Black makes the b7-square available for the bishop.

19.♘f4 ♗c8 20.c4

20. ♖b2 g5! 21. ♗e2 ♜g8 22. ♗h2 ♔f8 23. ♗g4 ♔g7 leads to an almost identical situation.

20...a4 21. ♖b2



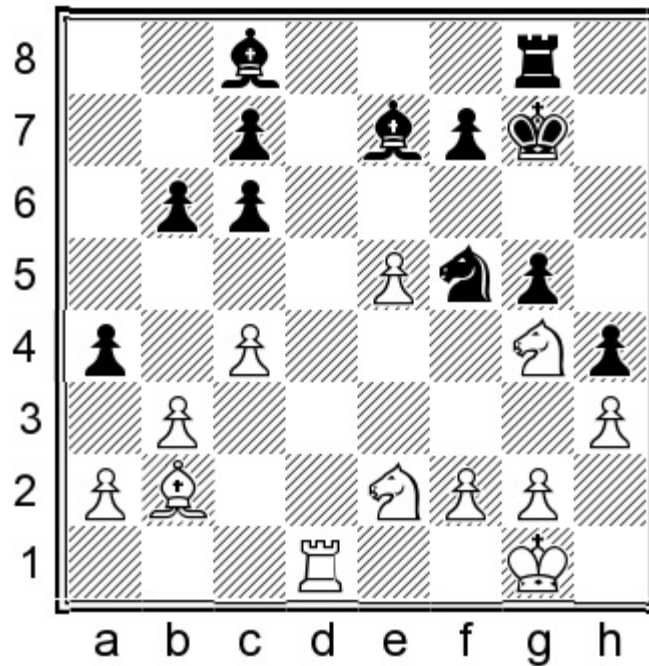
21...g5!

This is a good moment to take some space on the kingside, as the alignment of bishop and rook on the long diagonal is of no consequence.

22. ♗e2

22...e6?! achieves nothing after 22...f6 23. ♗e2 ♜f8 when White's central pawn will soon fall.

22...♜g8 23. ♗h2 ♔f8 24. ♗g4 ♔g7



25. ♖f6 ♗xf6 26. exf6 ♔g6

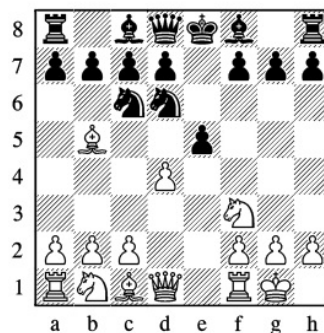
Black has fully consolidated, and is now ready to bring the rook into play.

### Conclusion

The tricky 9.h3!? has become White's main weapon against the Berlin Endgame. This modest-looking move allows White to quickly expand on the kingside and makes Black think twice about relocating the king to the queenside. That's why I recommend switching to another tried-and-tested approach with 9...♗e7 10.♖c3 h5, limiting White's active possibilities with g2-g4 and intending to keep the black king in the centre. We will generally aim to trade one pair of rooks to diminish White's control over the d-file, after which Black may consider some counterattacking measures with ...a5-a4 and/or ...c5-c4, claiming more space and perhaps swapping off one of the doubled pawns.

# Chapter 4

## Avoiding the Endgame



### 5.d4 ♘d6 Sidelines

#### Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4  
5...♘d6

A) 6.♗g5 78

B) 6.♗a4 exd4 80

B1) 7.♞e1† 81

B2) 7.c3 83

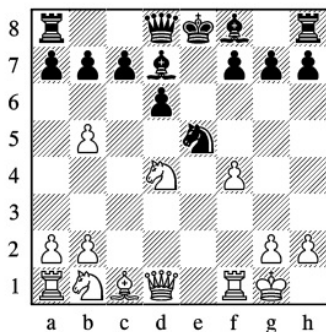
C) 6.dxe5 ♘xb5 7.a4 d6 85

C1) 8.axb5 86

C2) 8.e6 87

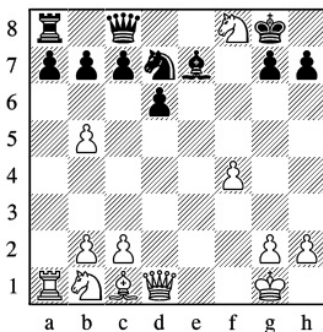
D) 6.♗xc6 90

C) note to 7.a4



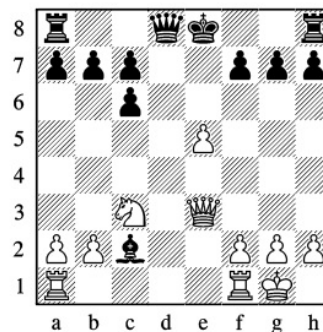
11...c5!N

C2) after 15.♘xf8



15...♗xf8!N

D) note to 9.♘xd4

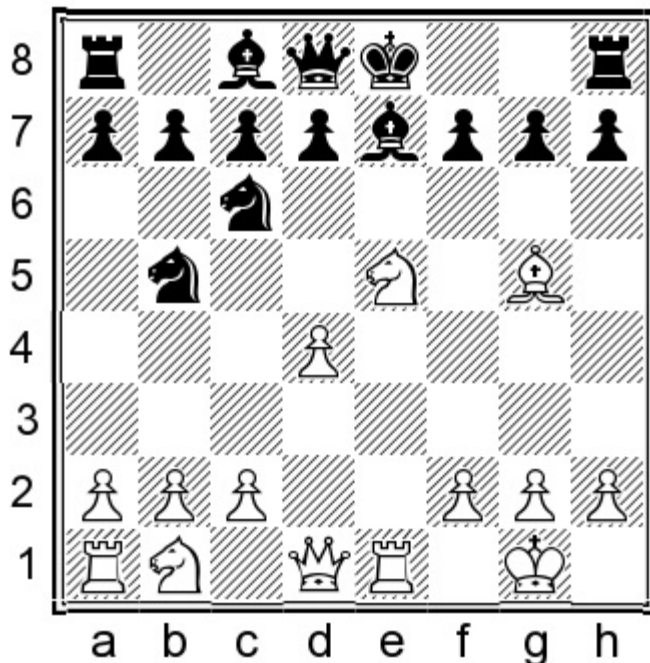


14...♞d3!N

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6

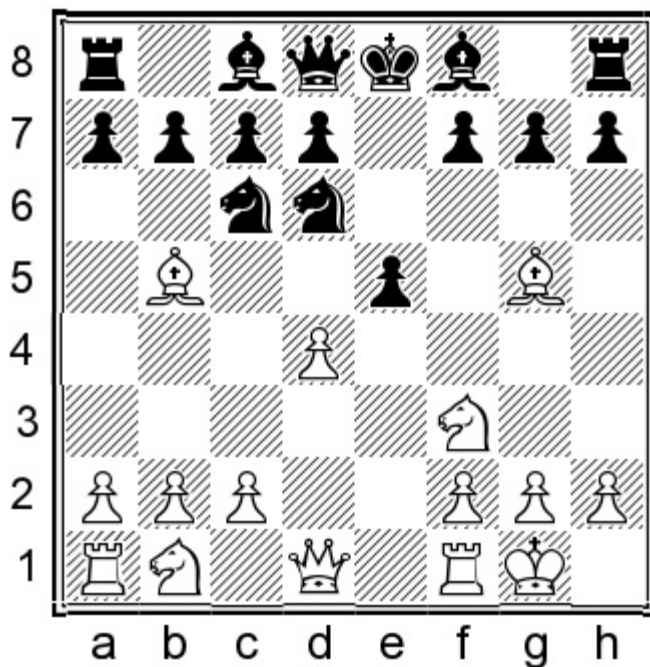
In this chapter we will deal with four main options: **A) 6.♔g5**, **B) 6.♔a4**, **C) 6.dxe5** and finally **D) 6.♔xc6** lines where White avoids the Berlin Endgame.

6.♘xe5? doesn't actually lose a piece, but Black can obtain a clear extra pawn with a few accurate moves. 6...♘b5 7.♖e1 (7.♚e2?? is obviously not an option due to 7...♘bd4.) 7...♔e7 8.♔g5



This is the kind of rapid-fire attack that might work in the occasional bullet game, but the calm 8...♘bd4 9.♔xe7 ♘xe7 10.♚xd4 0-0 left White with no compensation for the missing pawn in Showalter – Pillsbury, New York (4) 1897.

**A) 6.♔g5**



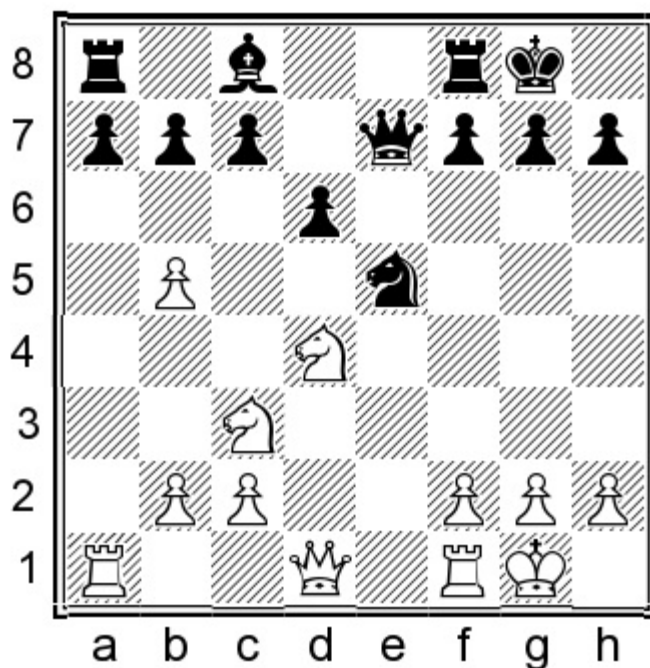
This active move has been known since as far back as 1896, when Pillsbury played it against Lasker, the reigning World Champion at the time. More recently it has been tried by many strong players, such as Caruana and Morozevich just to mention two. Still, it is mostly White who faces theoretical problems in this line.

**6...♙e7**

6...f6!? is playable, although 7.dxe5 ♞xb5 8.exf6 gxf6 9.♙f4 gives White enough play for the sacrificed piece.

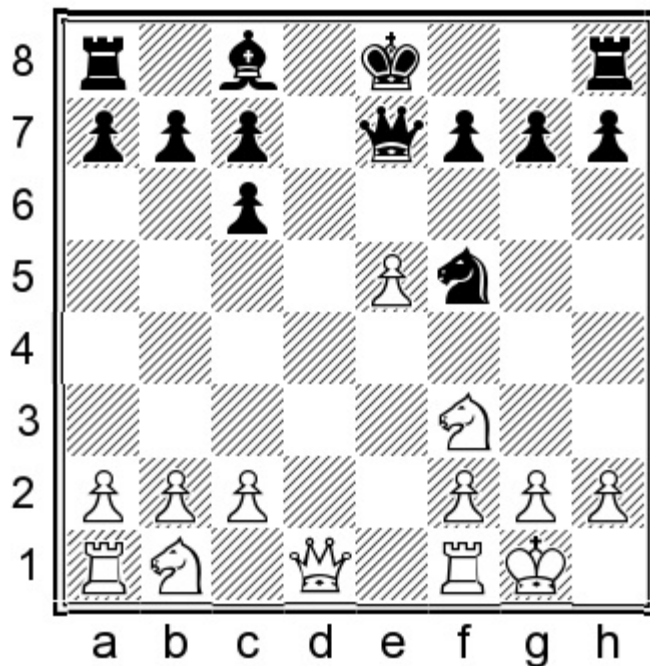
**7.♙xe7 ♚xe7 8.♙xc6**

8.dxe5 proved to be harmless more than a century ago, this time with Pillsbury on Black's side: 8...♞xb5 9.a4 d6 10.axb5 ♞xe5 11.♞d4 0-0 12.♞c3



12...c6 13.bxc6 bxc6 14.♞e1 ♚c7 White failed to show sufficient compensation in Showalter – Pillsbury, New York (2) 1898.

**8...dxc6 9.dxe5 ♞f5**

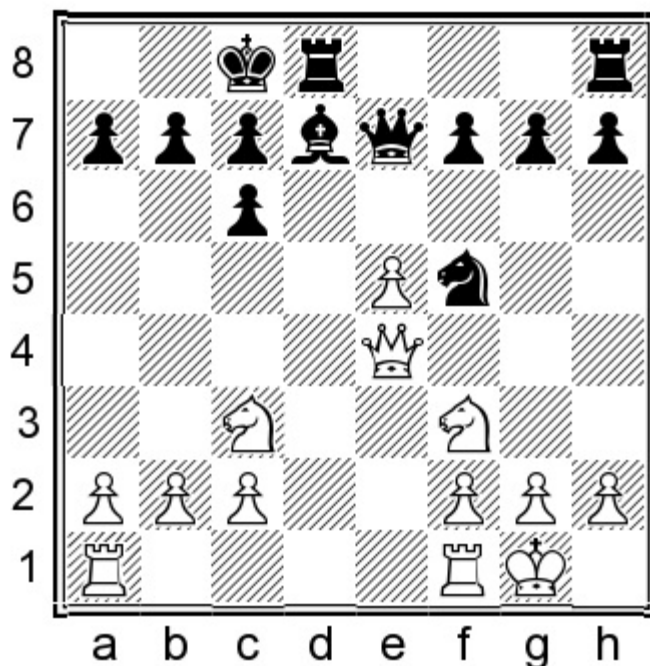


The pawn structure is identical to the Berlin Endgame, but this time queens are on the board. Crucially, Black can still castle in this version.

### 10. ♘c3

10. ♙d2 is sometimes played, but after 10... ♕d7 White has nothing better than 11. ♘c3, transposing to 11. ♙d2 in the notes to the main line below.

10. ♙d3 can also be met by 10... ♕d7!?N intending: 11. ♘c3 0-0-0 12. ♙e4

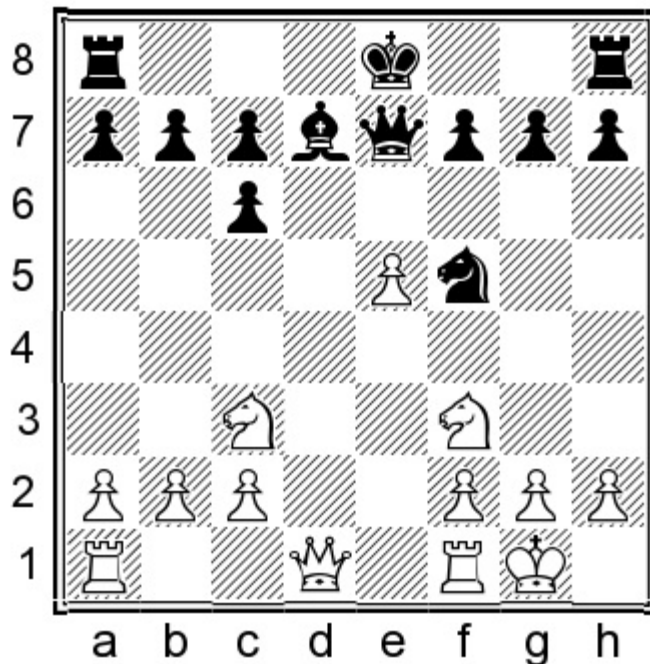


12...g5! Play resembles our main line, and after the most natural 13. ♖ad1 we transpose to 13. ♙e4 in the notes below.

### 10...♔d7!?

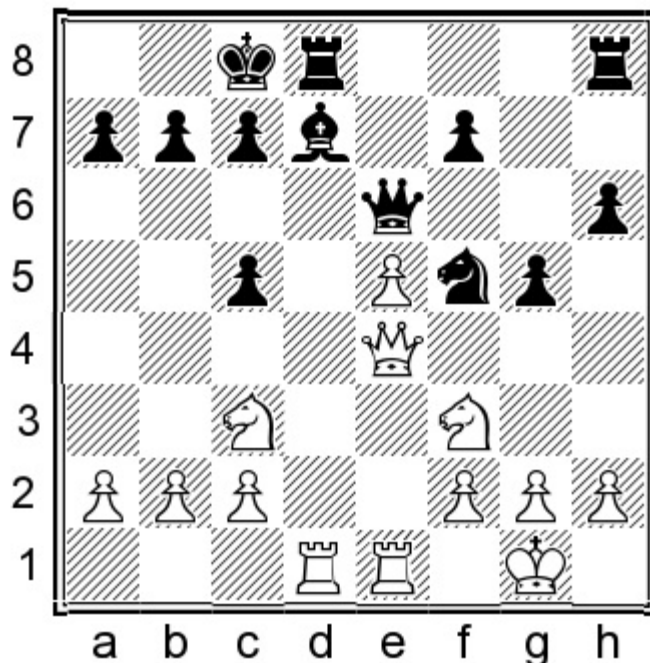
I favour this relatively rare choice.

10...♔e6 11.♚d3 0-0 12.♛e4 ♖ad8 13.♗ad1 h6 has proven to be safe and reliable, but the text move seems more ambitious – Black is preparing long castling!



### 11.♛e2

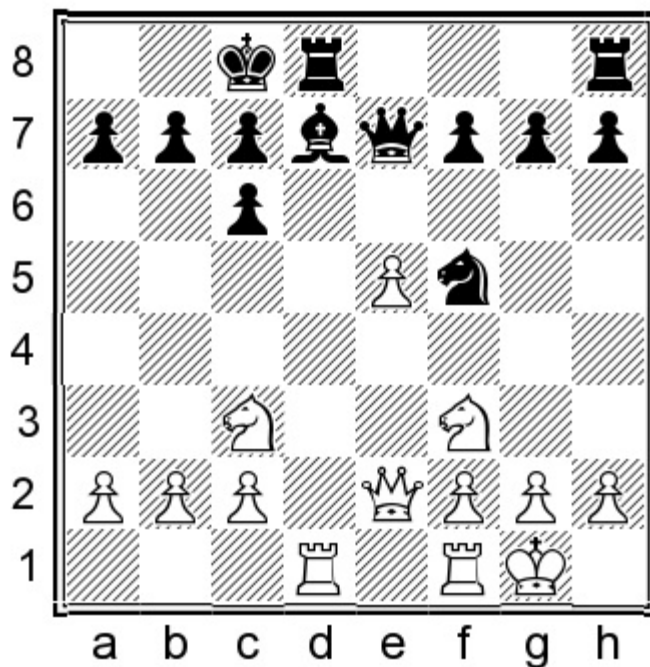
After 11.♛d2 0-0-0 12.♛f4 the placement of White's queen invites 12...h6! 13.♗ad1 g5, when a good example continued: 14.♛e4 c5 15.♗fe1 ♛e6



Black had seized the initiative in Grasis – Antal, email 2011.

### 11...0-0-0 12.♖ad1

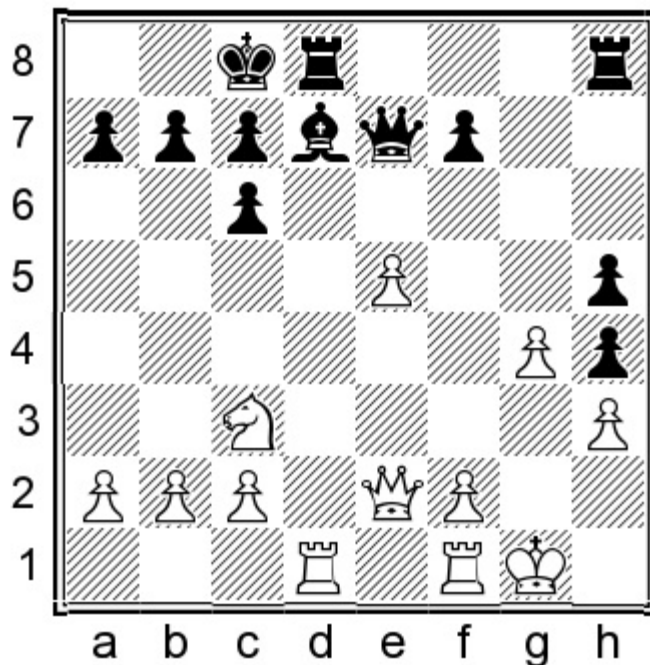
We have been following Caruana – Aronian, Moscow (blitz) 2012. I believe that, here too, Black could have fought for the initiative with:



### 12...g5!?N 13.g4

After 13.♙e4 h5 14.♘d4 ♜xd4 15.♞xd4 g4 Black's expansion on the kingside looks unpleasant for White.

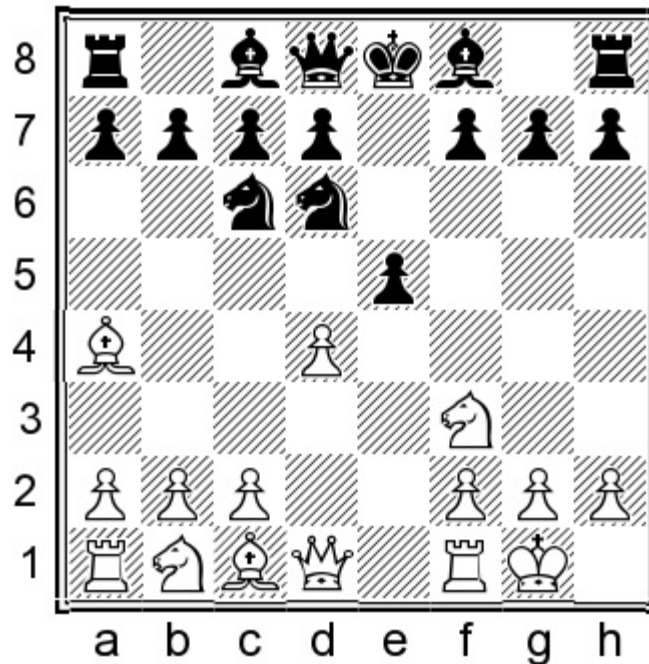
### 13...♘h4 14.♘xh4 gxh4 15.h3 h5



### 16.f3 b6 17.♞d4 ♗e6

The vulnerability of White's king ensures Black of excellent counterplay.

## B) 6.♗a4



This gambit line also has a long history, having first been tested in 1897.

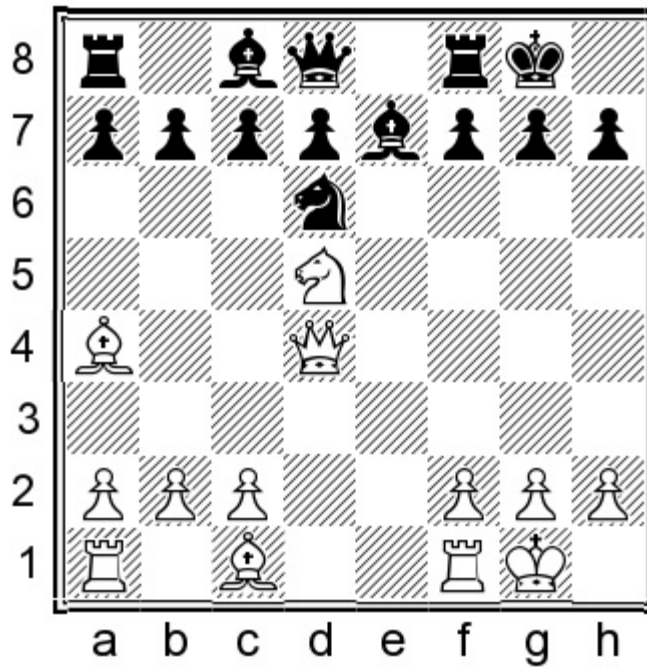
### 6...exd4

This capture is simple and good.

6...e4 is the most common continuation, and after 7.♘e5 ♗e7 8.♘c3 0-0 9.♞e1 White's lead in development yields sufficient compensation for the pawn.

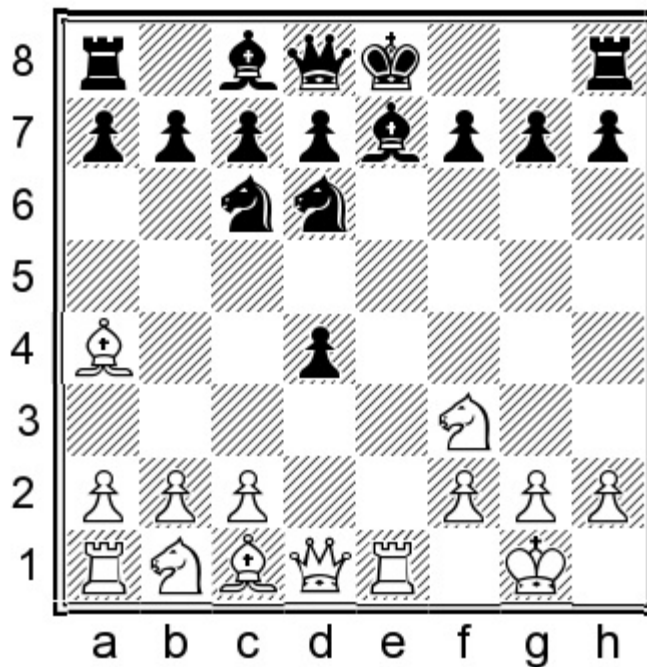
White has two main options: **B1)** 7.♞e1† and **B2)** 7.c3.

The straightforward 7.♘d4 is unconvincing. 7...♗e7 8.♘c3 0-0 9.♘d5 ♘xd4 10.♙xd4 This position occurred in Espinal Garcia – Pena Perez, Santo Domingo 2016. My new idea is:



10...Nf5 11.Qf4 d6 12.Rc6 13.Nxe7 † Nxe7 Black has no weaknesses, so White's compensation is questionable.

B1) 7.Rc1 † Qe7



### 8.c3

White has nothing better than this move, with similar ideas to the more popular 7.c3 line.

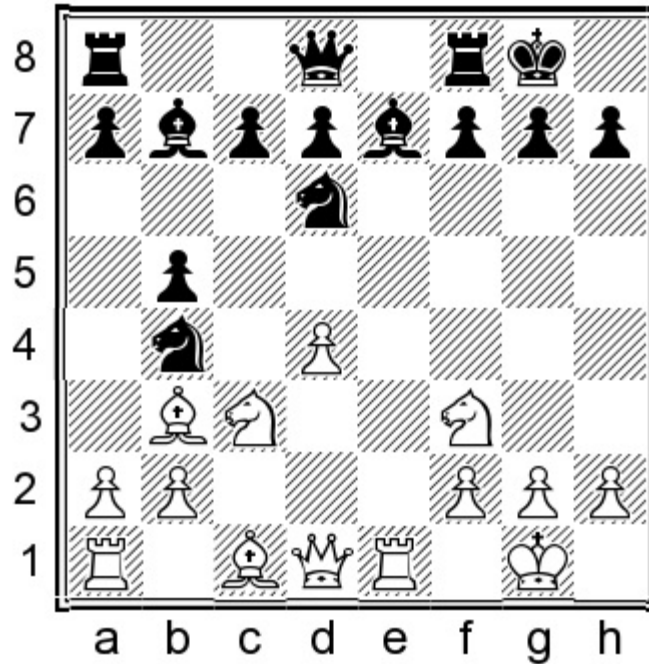
8.Nxd4?! 0-0 leaves White with no compensation for the pawn.

8.Qe2?! also fails to achieve the goal after 8...b5 when White must either allow an undesirable

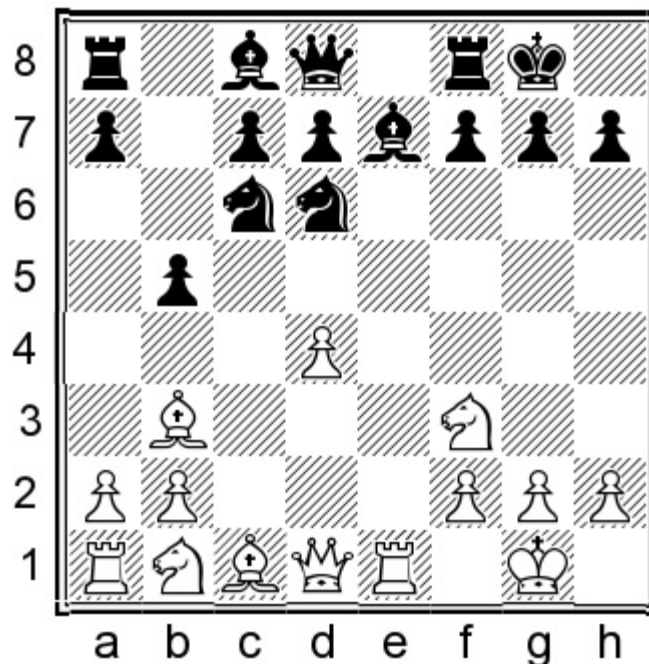
exchange on b5 or struggle on two pawns down. Either way, Black will castle next, with good chances to convert the extra material.

**8...0-0 9.cxd4 b5 10.♙b3**

I also considered 10.♙c2 ♖b4 11.♙b3 ♙b7 12.♘c3 when Black can secure some advantage by means of:



12...a5! 13.a3 a4 Black manages to liquidate the strong light-squared bishop, so White's attacking abilities are severely limited.

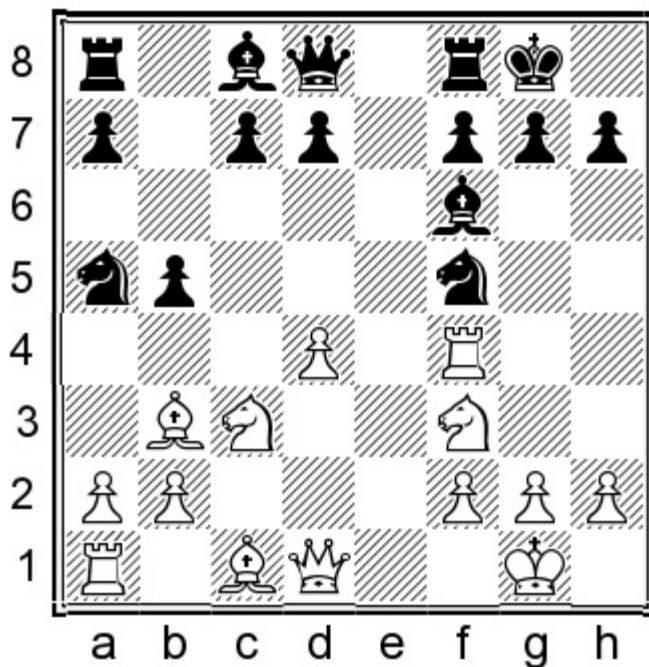


This position was reached in Poulsen – Brinck Claussen, Copenhagen 1977. I think the most logical continuation is:

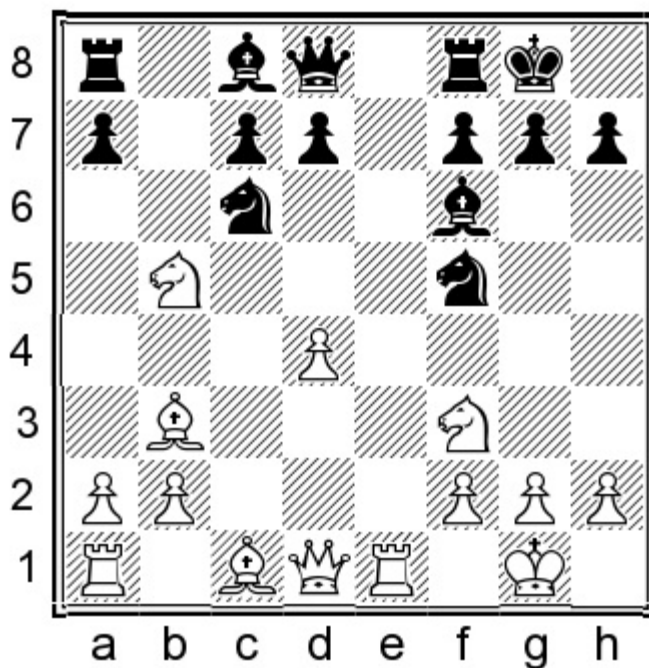
10...♙f6N 11.♘c3 ♘f5 12.♘xb5

12.d5 ♘cd4 13.♘xd4 ♘xd4 leaves White struggling to prove compensation.

I also considered: 12.♞e4 ♘a5 13.♞f4 (13.♙c2 d5 14.♞f4 g6 15.♘xd5 ♞xd5 16.♙e4 ♞d6 17.♙xa8 c6 18.g4 ♘h4 favours Black)



13...♘xb3 14.♞xb3 d6 15.♞xb5 g6 The bishop pair offers Black comfortable play.



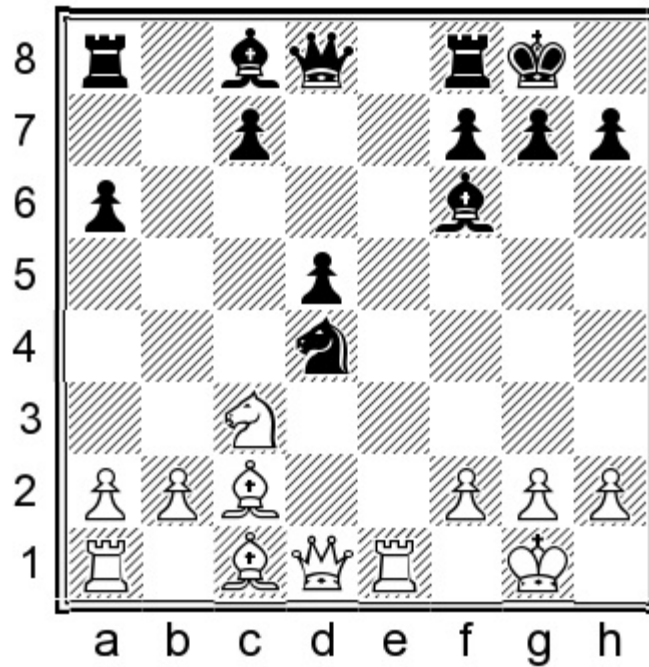
12...a6 13.♙c2 d5

13...d6 also leads to balanced play.

14. ♖c3 ♜fxd4

This leads to a brief tactical skirmish which results in equality.

15. ♜xd4 ♜xd4



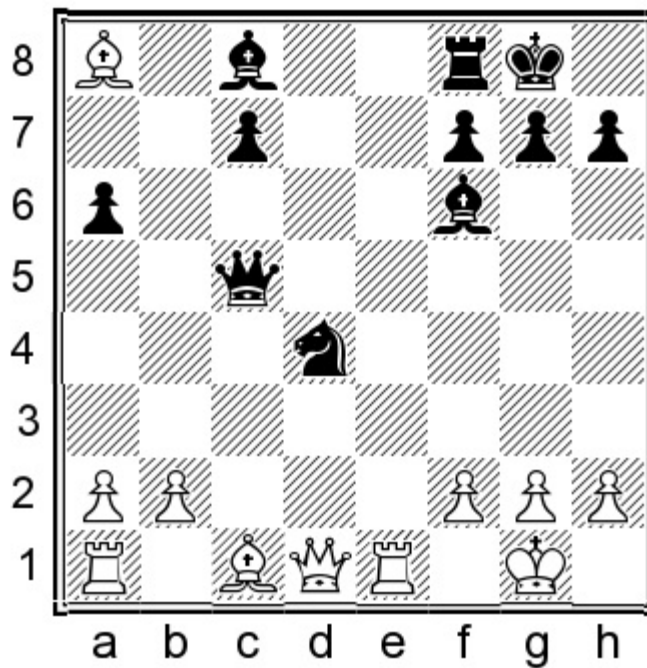
16. ♜xd5! ♚xd5!

16... ♜xc2 17. ♜xf6 † ♚xf6 18. ♚xc2 should of course be a draw, but White has the better pawn structure and can continue playing without risk.

17. ♚e4 ♚c5!

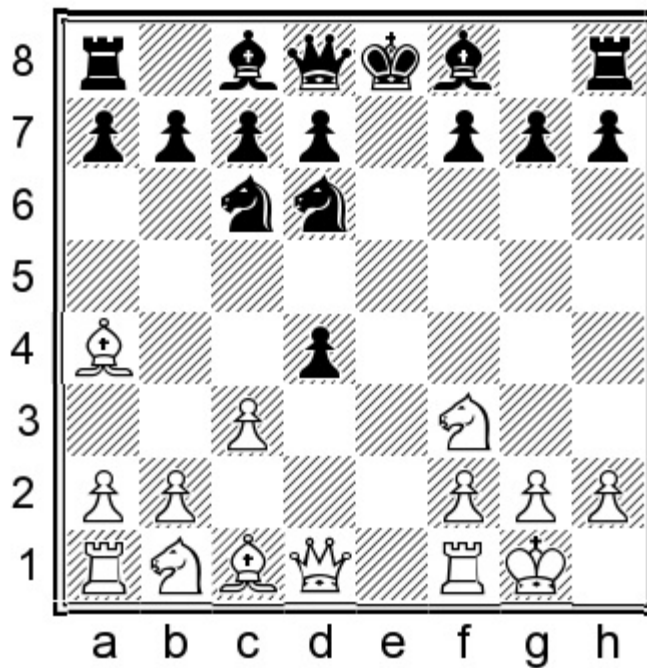
This ensures that Black will be able to regain the exchange.

18. ♚xa8



18...Nc2 19.Ke3 Qf5  
 Black is out of danger.

### B2) 7.c3



White offers a second pawn in order to boost the initiative.

### 7...Ke7

The greedy 7...dxc3? 8.Nxc3 Ke7 9.Nd5 0-0 10.Re1 led Black to an awful situation where he failed to develop most of his pieces in Showalter – Pillsbury, New York (8) 1897.

## 8.cxd4 0-0 9.♘c3

9.♞e1 transposes to the analysis of 7.♞e1 † above.

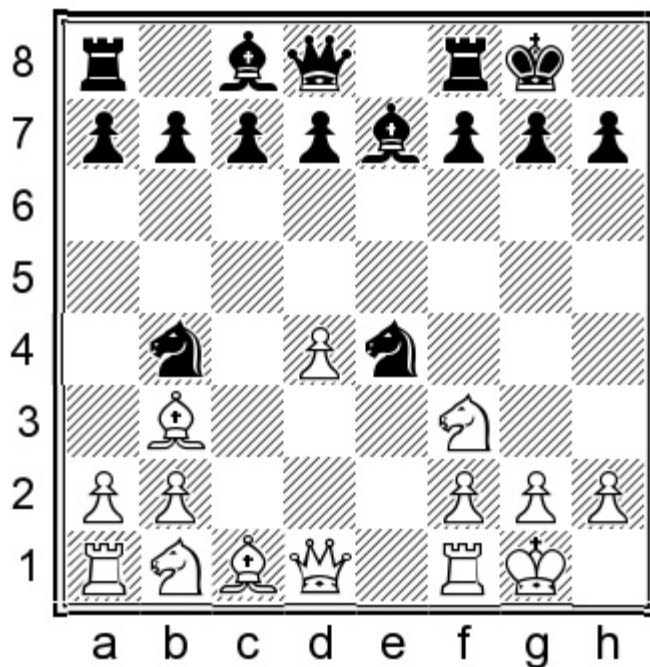
## 9.♙c2

This move naturally runs into:

## 9...♞b4!N

This is more precise than 9...b6 10.♞e1 ♙b7 11.♘c3 ♙f6 12.♘d5 when White had good compensation in Sorcinelli – Willmann, corr. 2014.

## 10.♙b3 ♘e4



The point of this move is of course to prepare ...d7-d5.

## 11.a3 ♘a6 12.d5

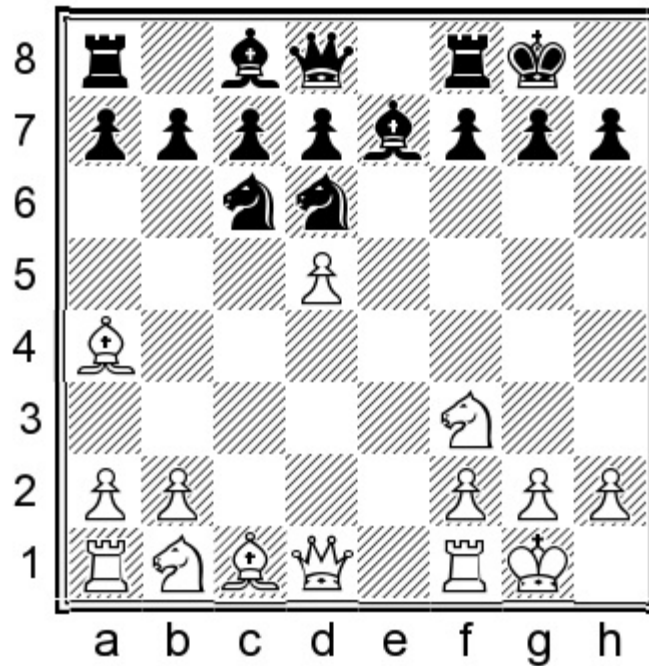
12.♞e1 d5 is obviously good for Black.

## 12...♘ac5 13.♙c2 ♙f6 14.♞e1 ♞e8

Black has no weaknesses and the bishop is strong on f6, so White's compensation is questionable.

## 9.d5

It is important to meet this move with:



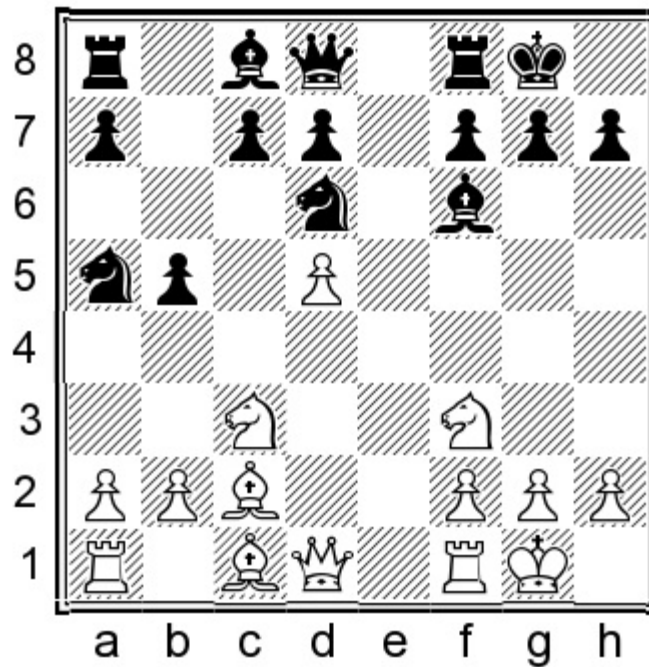
9...b5!

9...♭a5 10.♭c3 would offer White serious compensation.

10.♖b3

I also checked 10.♖c2N 10...♭b4 11.♖b3 a5 12.a3 ♭a6 13.♭c3 ♖b7 14.♖e1 ♖f6 when Black's pieces are well placed, so White can hardly claim adequate compensation.

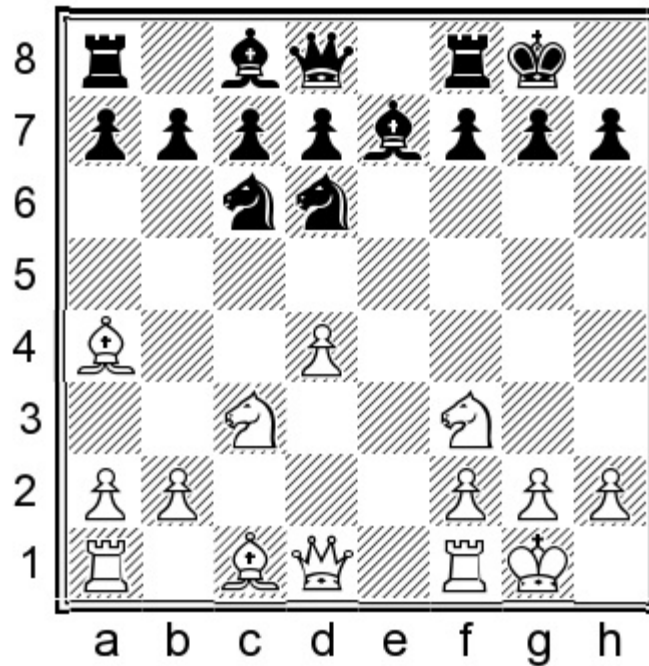
10...♭a5 11.♖c2 ♖f6 12.♭c3



In Shomoev – Alekseev, Internet (blitz) 2020, Black could have neutralized the activity of the enemy pieces by means of:

12...g6N 13.♖e1 ♭ac4 14.h4 ♖b7

The position remains complicated, but objectively White does not have enough for the pawn.



**9...♘c4!**

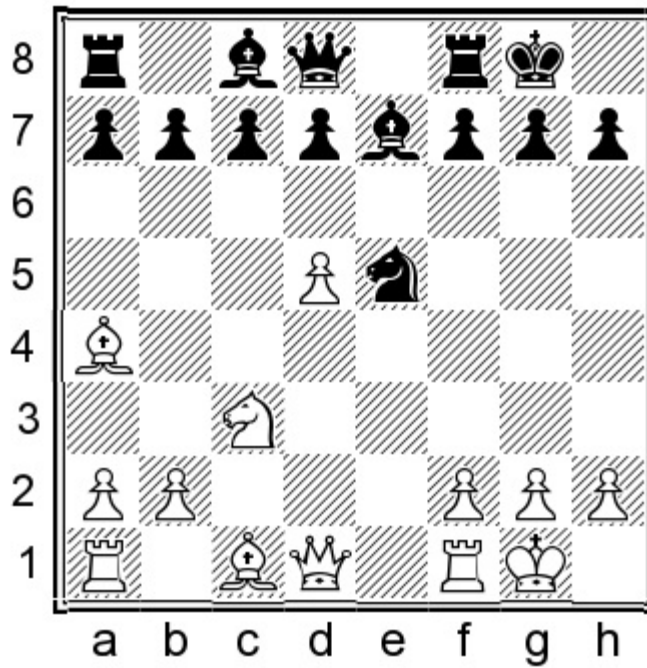
Finally Black manages to unblock the d-pawn and develop the remaining pieces.

**10.d5**

After 10.♘d5 ♘b6! 11.♘xe7 ♗xe7 12.♙b3 d5 White had a hard time proving compensation in Kellett – Tee, corr. 2017.

10.♞e1 d5 11.♘xd5 wins back the pawn, but 11...♙xd5 12.♙xc6 ♙xc6 13.♞xe7 ♘b6 left Black with a pleasant positional edge in Kazoks – Santamaria Perez, corr. 2012.

**10...♘6e5 11.♘xe5 ♘xe5**

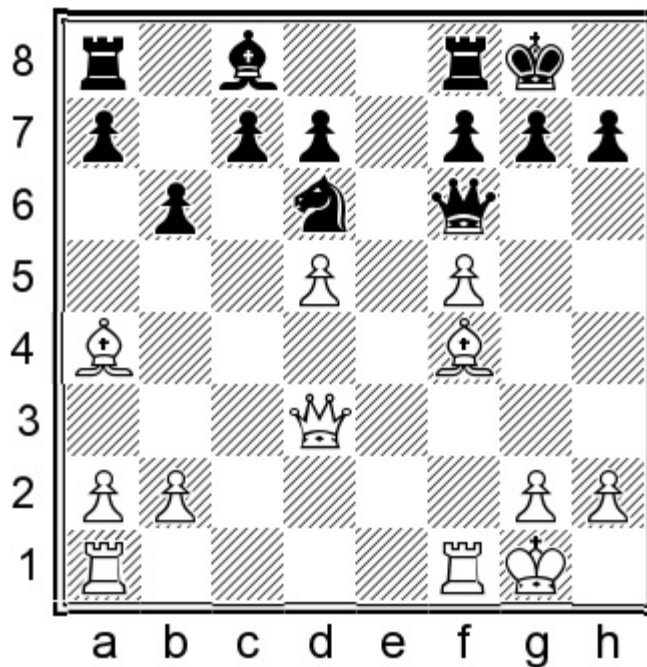


12.f4

There is no way back! White has to play aggressively in order to justify the opening gambit.

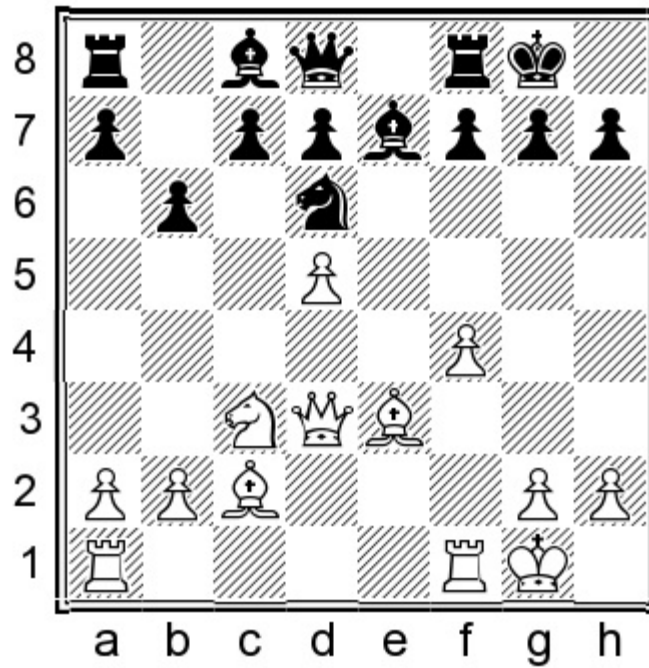
12...♘c4 13.♙d3

I also considered: 13.f5N 13...♙f6 14.♘e4 b6 15.♙d3 ♘d6 16.♘xf6† ♙xf6 17.♙f4



17...a5! Black manages to consolidate and keep the extra pawn, along with some advantage.

13...♘d6 14.♙e3 b6 15.♙c2



15...f5!

This strong move heavily limits White's attacking abilities.

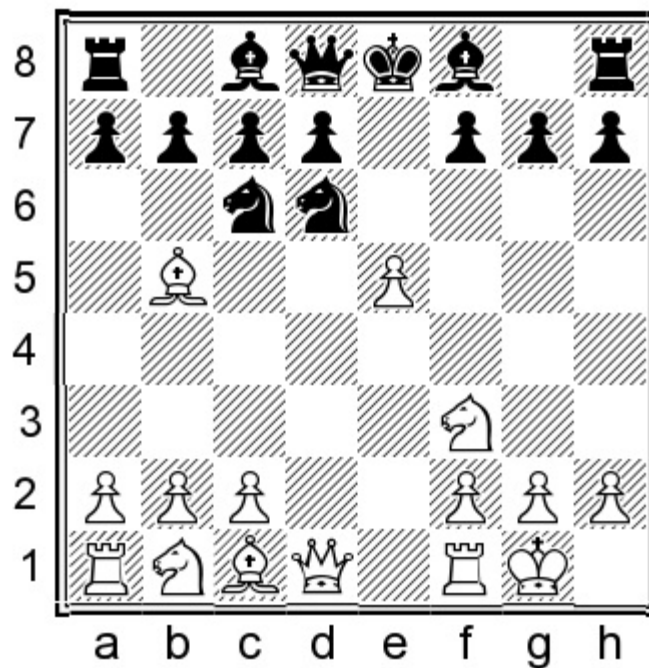
16.♙d4 a5!

It's time to activate the light-squared bishop!

17.♚h3 ♘a6

White had no real compensation for the pawn in Plskova – Barkov, corr. 2017.

C) 6.dxe5



This gambit line is seen from time to time at the highest level. White temporarily sacrifices the light-squared bishop in order to gain some time for development.

6...♞xb5 7.a4

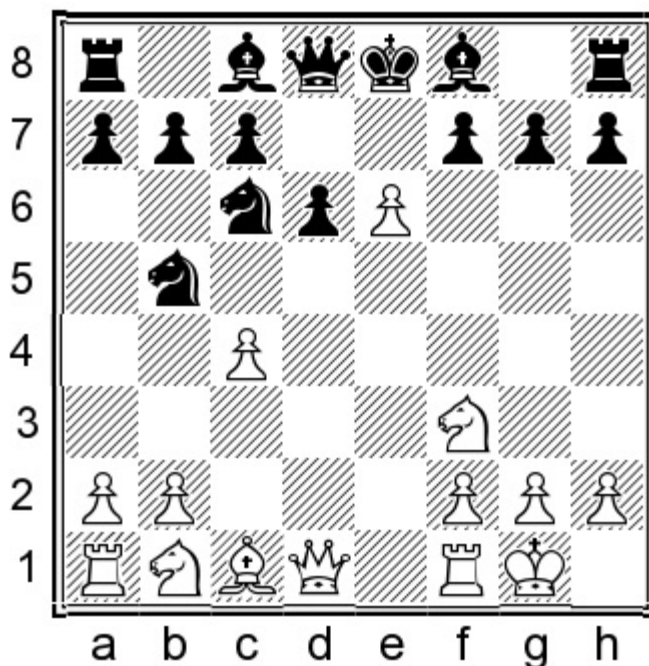
7.c4?!

This alternative method of attacking the knight makes little sense.

7...d6 8.e6

8.cxb5 ♞xe5 needs no further analysis, as White simply has a worse version of the 7.a4 d6 8.axb5 line analysed below, as here White has captured away from the centre and also lacks the open a-file for the rook.

I also considered 8.♙g5N 8...♙e7 9.♙xe7 ♚xe7 10.cxb5 ♞xe5 11.♞c3 ♙g4 12.♞d5 ♚d8 13.♚c1 0-0 14.♞xe5 dxe5 when White's compensation for the pawn is questionable.

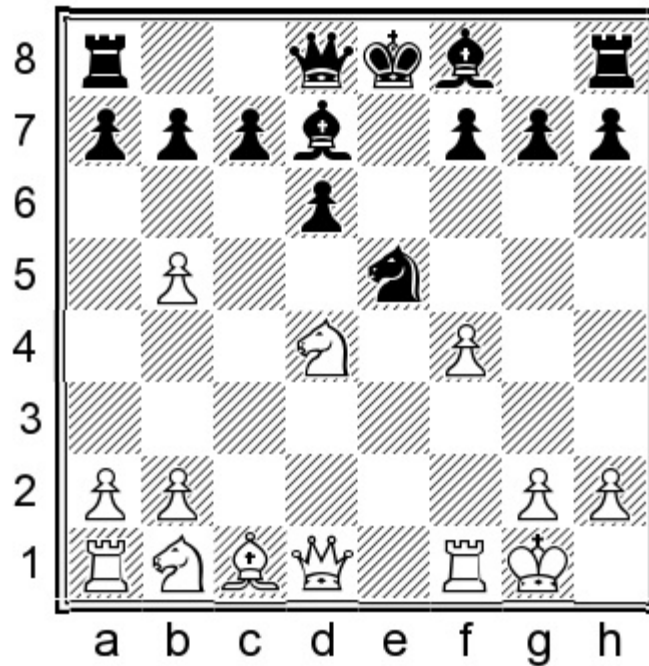


8...♙xe6 9.cxb5 ♞e5 10.♞d4

Here too we can observe that, in comparison to the similar line after 7.a4 d6 8.e6, White's pawn structure is clearly worse and there is no pressure along the a-file.

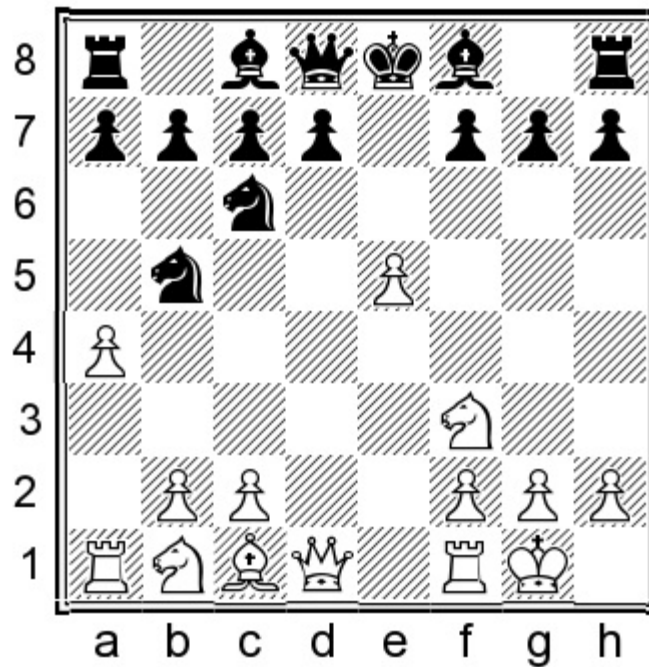
10...♙d7 11.f4

In Shabalov – Bologan, Edmonton 2005, Black could have utilized a nice resource:



11...c5!N 12.fxe5 cxd4 13.♖xd4 ♖c7 14.♞e1 dxe5 15.♞xe5† ♕e6

The powerful bishops offer Black a clear positional advantage.



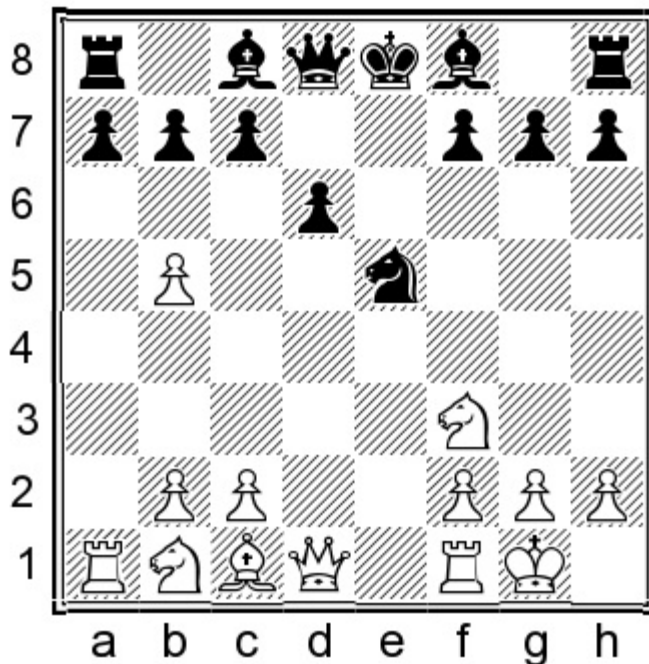
7...d6

7...♘bd4 is much more common but I prefer the text move. Black picks up an extra pawn, at least temporarily, and starts to open things up for the bishop pair. The only downside is that Black's king might become exposed in the centre, but concretely, there is no real danger.

We will analyse White's two main options, starting with **C1)** 8.axb5 before moving on to the most popular **C2)** 8.e6.

8.♞e1? seems like a witty tactic but it proves to be a blunder after 8...♘bd4! 9.♘xd4 dxe5 10.♘xc6 ♚xd1 11.♞xd1 bxc6 with an extra pawn for Black, as first seen in Pekand – Petran, Heraklio 1997.

C1) 8.axb5 ♘xe5

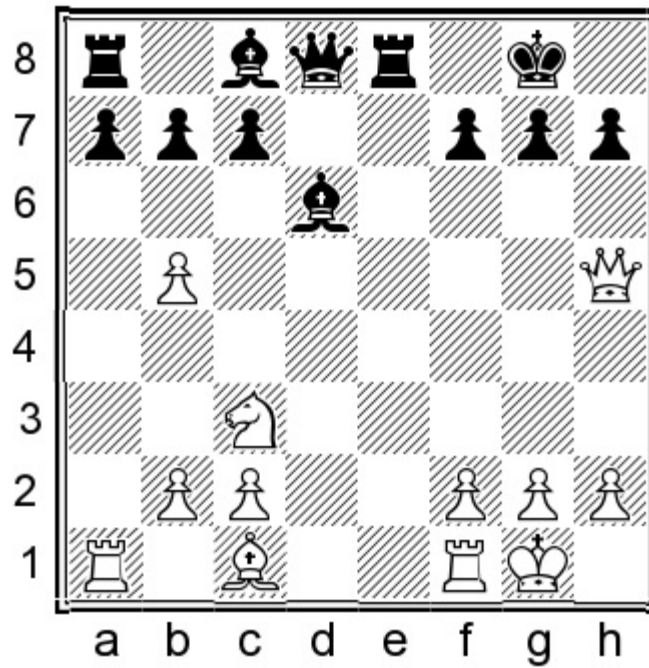


White can regain the pawn in one of a few ways, but Black should be at least equal due to the bishop pair.

9.♞e1

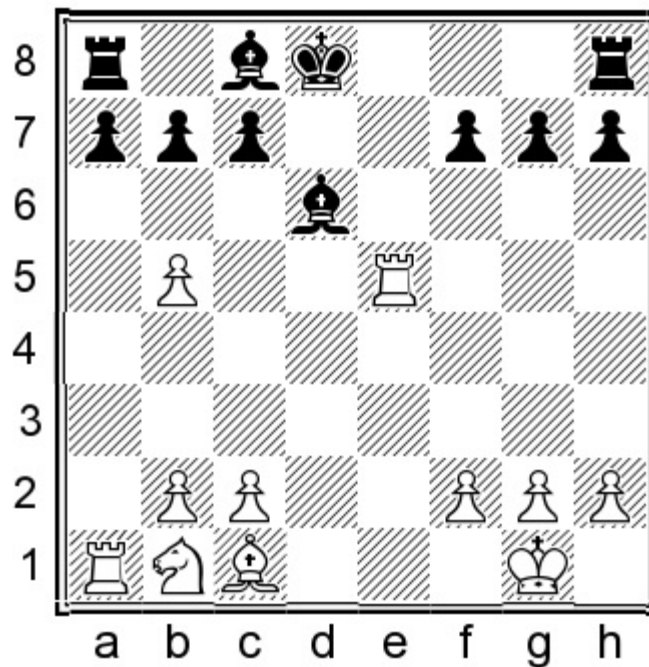
This is the overwhelmingly most popular choice.

9.♞e1!? may be a tad more accurate, when a GM game continued: 9...♙e7 10.♘xe5 dxe5 11.♞xe5 0-0 12.♘c3 ♙d6 13.♞h5 ♞e8



Black had no problems, but White had at least avoided a worse position in Sedlak – Ki. Georgiev, Dresden 2007.

9...♙e7 10.♘xe5 dxex5 11.♚xd8† ♔xd8 12.♞xe5 ♙d6



This position has been tested in dozens of games, and has proved to be absolutely safe and indeed promising for Black.

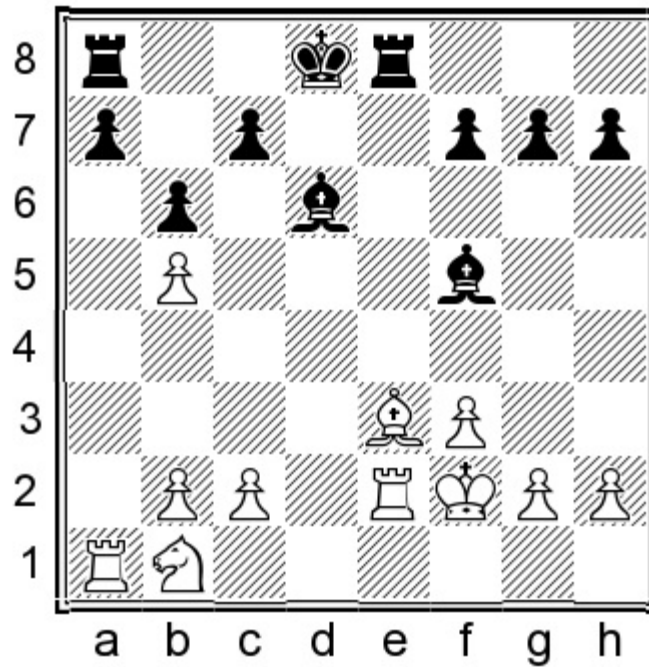
13.♞e2  
 13.♞d5 ♙e6 14.♞d1 ♔c8 was also slightly better for Black in ‘ChessChryssy’ – ‘Souk’, Internet (rapid/freestyle) 2006.

13...♗g4!

Provoking the following weakening pawn advance.

14.f3 ♗f5 15.♗e3 ♖e8 16.♔f2 b6

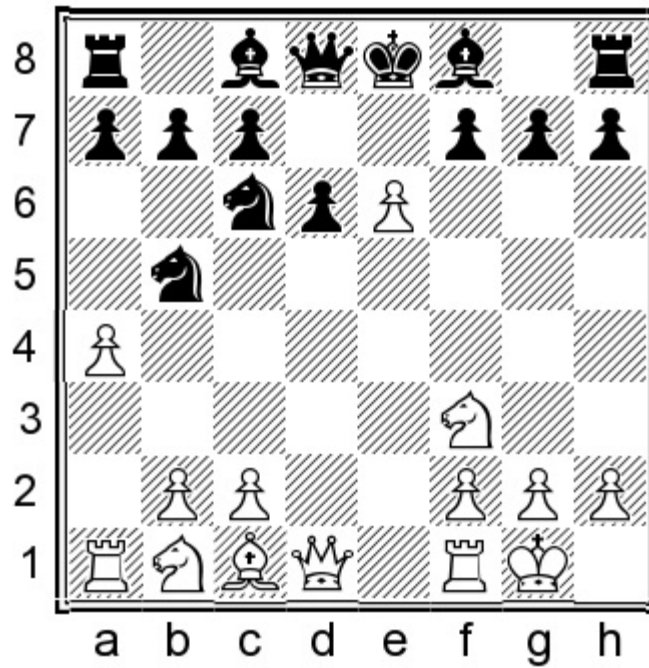
The a7-pawn was not truly threatened yet, but the text move has another useful purpose of making room for the king.



17.♘a3 ♗c8 18.♘c4 ♗f8

Black was better due to his powerful bishops in Nevostrujev – Aleksandrov, Samara 2013.

C2) 8.e6



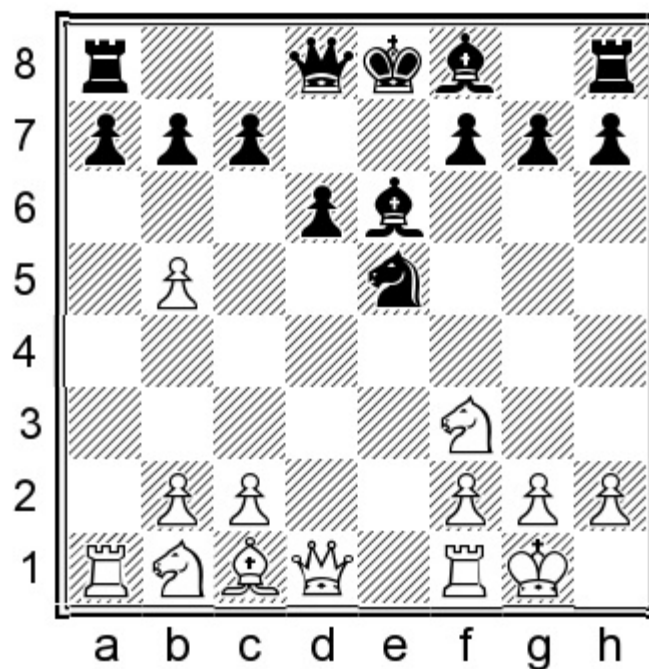
This is the main line. White is trying to disrupt Black's natural development.

8...fxe6

The most solid response.

After 8...fxe6 9.axb5 ♖e7 10.♘c3 Black struggles to develop the kingside pieces, so White's compensation is undeniable.

9.axb5 ♖e5



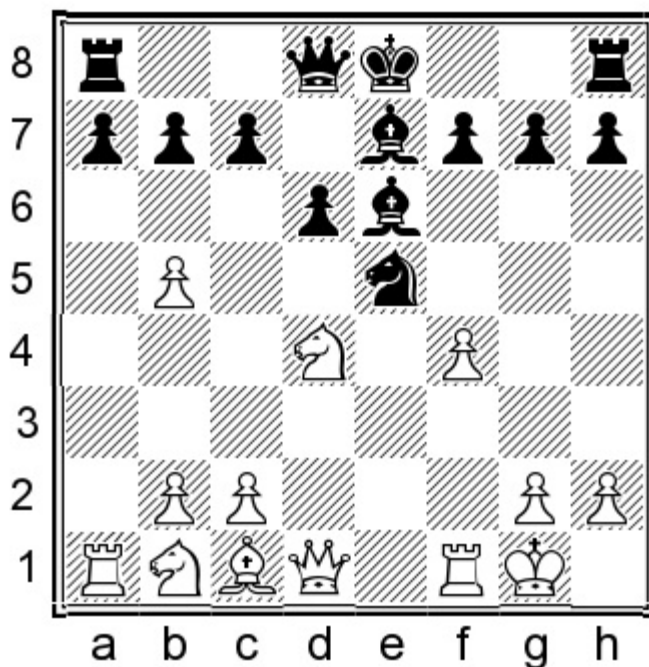
10.♘d4

This is the only adequate idea: White targets the bishop on e6 and prepares the advance of the f-pawn.

### 10...♙e7

10...♙d7 11.f4 ♘g4 12.♖e1† ♙e7 13.♗e2 ♔f8 has yielded an excellent score for Black, but after 14.h3N 14...♙f6 15.♗f3 ♘h6 16.♗c3 White's compensation for the pawn is out of the question.

### 11.f4



### 11...♗d7!

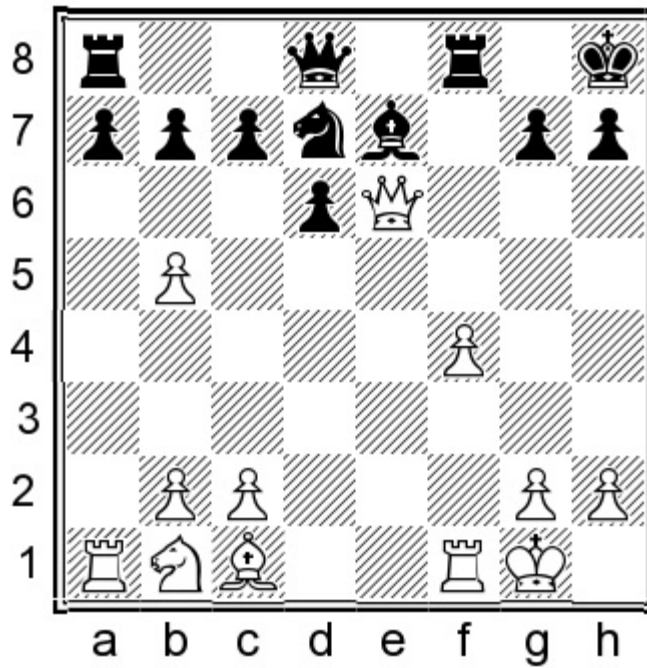
I was surprised to discover that this natural retreat has only been tested in a few games so far. Black prepares to return the extra pawn to reach a safe and reliable position.

11...♙g4 has been more popular but it allows White to keep a useful initiative for the pawn.

### 12.♖e1

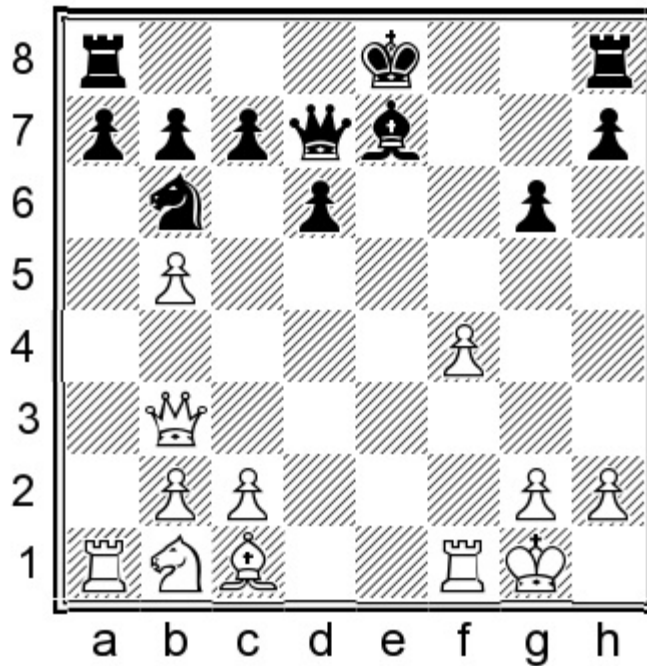
This is one of a few ways for White to regain the pawn. In all cases, White's initiative soon comes to an end.

12.♗e2N 12...0-0 13.♗xe6 fxe6 14.♗xe6† ♔h8 is hardly an improvement, for instance:



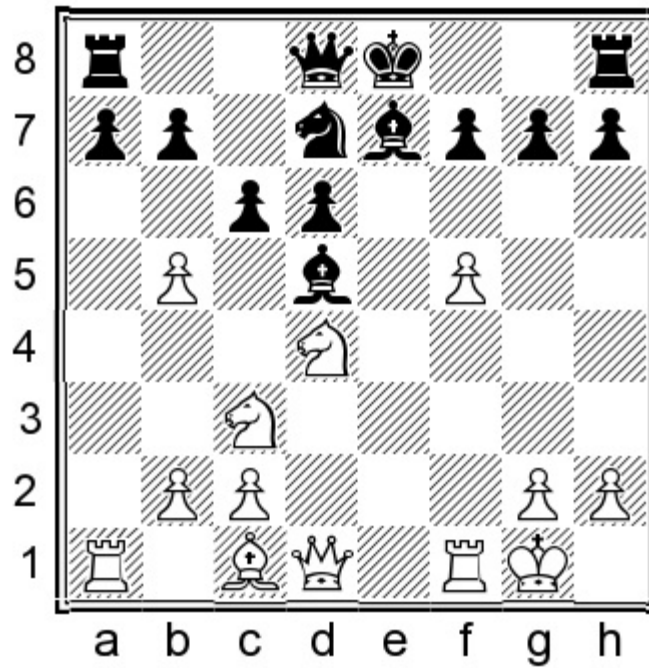
15. ♖c3 ♕f6 16. ♘d5 ♜e8 17. ♚h3 a5 Black is fine.

12. ♗xe6 N 12...fxe6 13. ♚h5† g6 14. ♚h3 ♘b6 15. ♚xe6 ♚d7 16. ♚b3 also fails to cause Black any problems after:

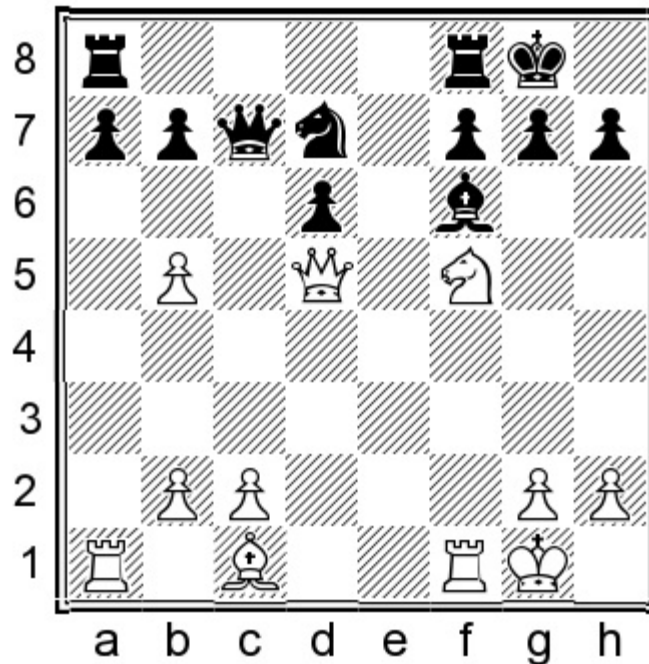


16...d5 17. ♕e3 ♘c4 18. ♕d4 0-0 With equal chances.

The aggressive 12.f5 offers White nothing special after: 12...♕d5 13. ♖c3 c6

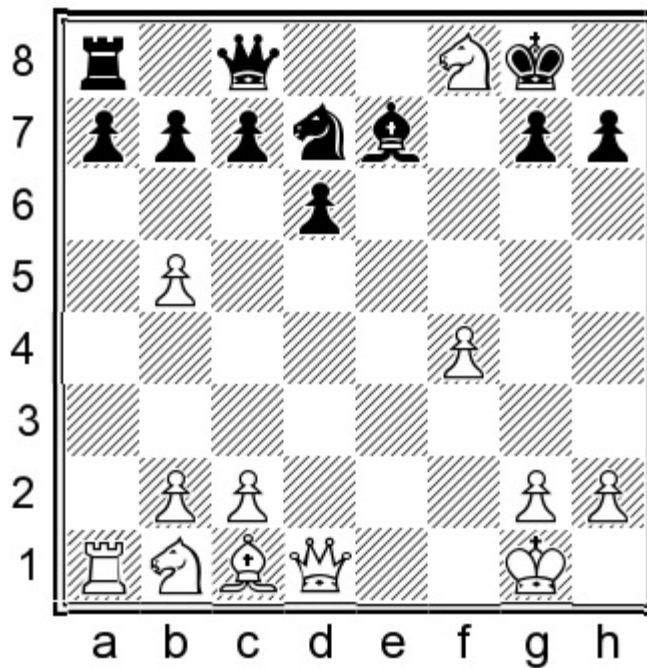


14. f6N It seems best to vacate f5 for the knight. (After 14. ♖xd5 cxd5 15. ♖a3 0-0 16. ♖h3 ♕f6 17. ♕e3 ♗e8 18. c3 ♗e4 White's compensation was questionable in Vasiukov – Shamkovich, Moscow 1962.)  
 14... ♕xf6 15. ♗f5 White will regain both pawns but Black remains fine after: 15... 0-0 16. ♗xd5 cxd5 17. ♖xd5 ♖c7



18. ♖xd6 ♖xd6 19. ♗xd6 a6 The position remains balanced.

12... 0-0 13. ♖xe6 fxe6 14. ♗xe6 ♖c8 15. ♗xf8



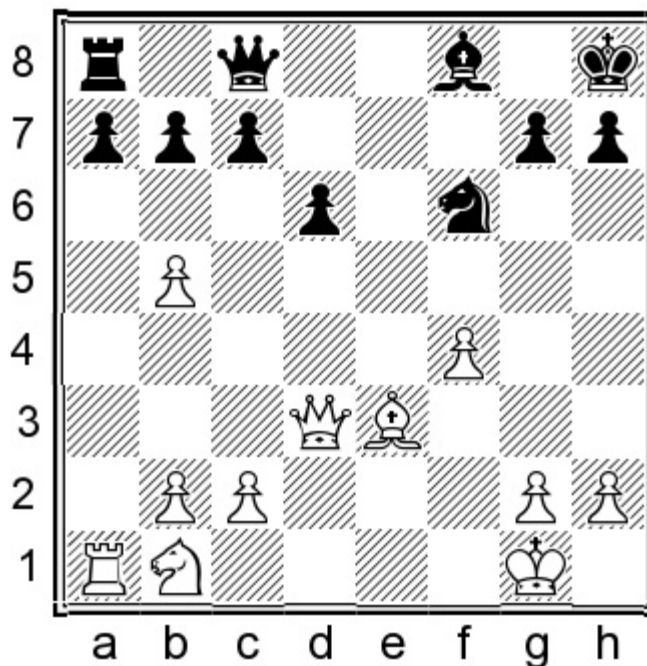
### 15...♙xf8!N

This is more accurate than 15...♘xf8 16.♘c3 ♙e6 as played in Samuelsen – Naes, Torshavn 2003, when 17.♙d3N 17...♙f6 18.♙e3 would have kept Black under some pressure in view of the passive knight on f8.

### 16.♙d5†

In the event of 16.♙e3 c6 17.bxc6 bxc6 18.♘c3 ♙b7 19.b3 d5, both the pawn structure and the general evaluation are approximately the same as in the main line below.

### 16...♔h8 17.♙e3 ♘f6 18.♙d3



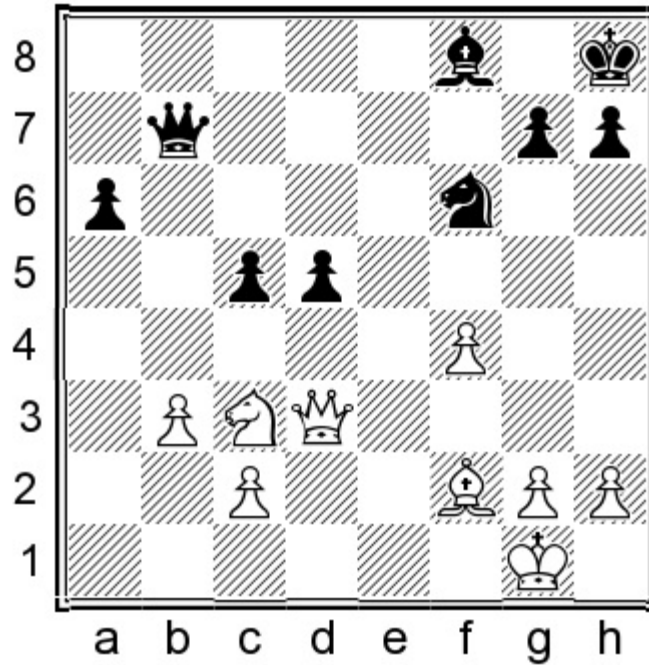
**18...a6!**

Black invites favourable simplifications.

**19.bxa6 ♖xa6 20.♗xa6 bxa6**

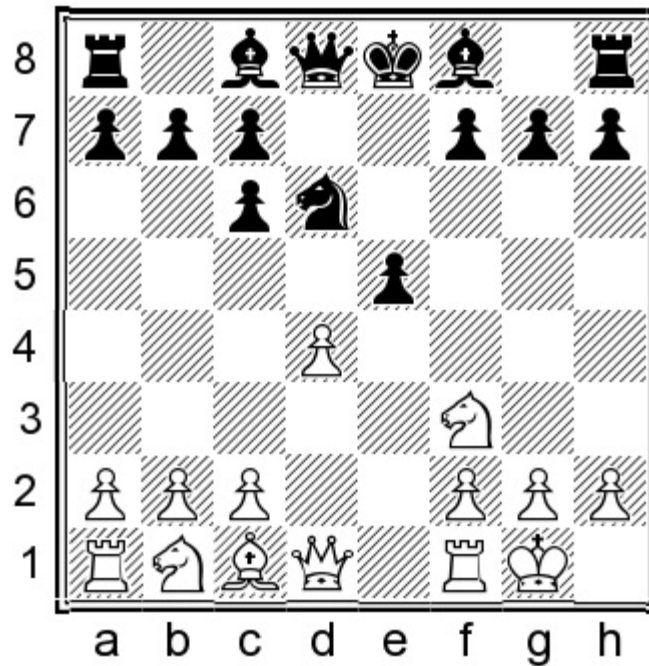
The a6-pawn is somewhat weak, but there are not many pieces to attack it.

**21.♘c3 ♚b7 22.b3 c5 23.♙f2 d5**



Black has comfortable play thanks to the strong pawn centre. Note that White's kingside is less secure than it would be if the f4-pawn was on f3.

**D) 6.♙xc6 dxc6**



### 7.dxe5

7.♘xe5 ♔e7 simply gives Black an easy game with the two bishops.

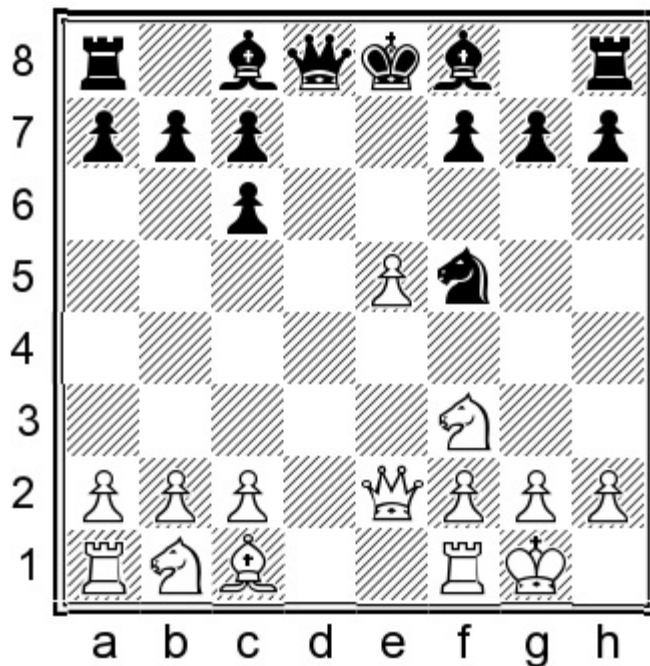
### 7...♘f5

If White wishes to avoid the endgame, the choices are limited.

### 8.♙e2

With this move, White hopes to exert pressure along the open d-file. This ambitious concept has been known since 1880, but nowadays it is rarely seen at high levels.

Neutral moves such as 8.♘c3 are not really relevant. Black can, at the minimum, proceed with 8...♙xd1 9.♖xd1 ♜e7, transposing to the 9.♖d1 ♜ variation of the endgame, except for the fact that Black still has the option of castling.

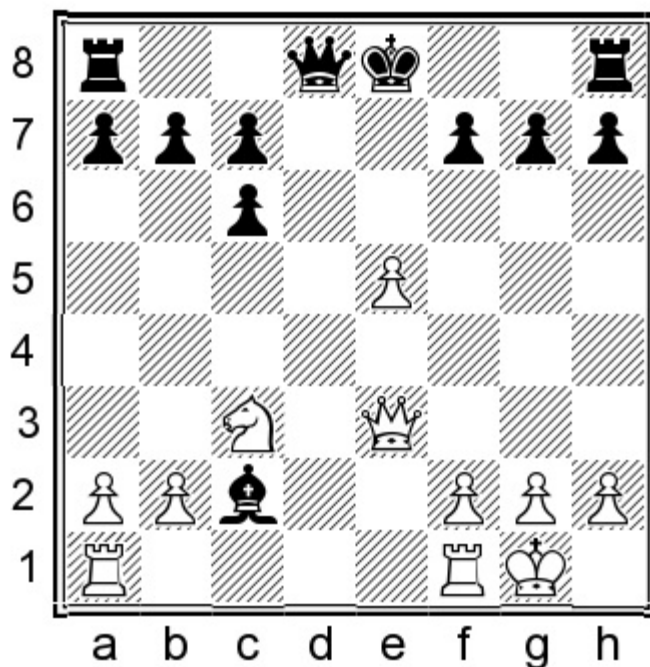


### 8...Nxd4!

By exchanging the knights, Black acquires a few decent spots for the light-squared bishop, while also giving the queen plenty of options to escape the ♖d1 attack. Black's set-up here is much more flexible than in the endgame.

### 9.♗xd4

The rare alternative 9.♗e4 can be met by: 9...♙c5 10.♗c3 (10.♖d1 is ineffective due to 10...♙f5 11.♗e3 ♗xf3† 12.♗xf3 ♗c8 13.♗c3 ♙e7 when White struggles to develop the queenside pieces.) 10...♙f5 11.♗f4 ♗xf3† 12.♗xf3 ♙xc2 13.♙e3 ♙xe3 14.♗xe3



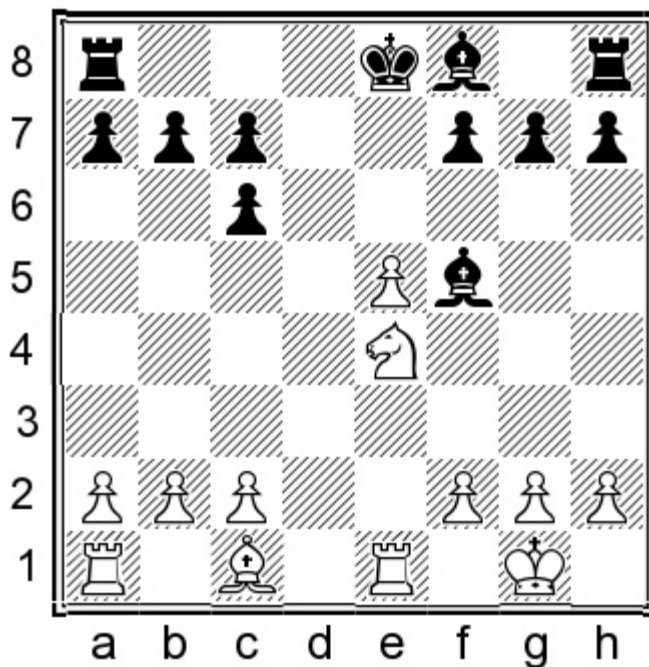
So far we have been following Gunina – Goryachkina, Kazan 2014. At this moment Black should

have played 14...♖d3!N 15.♗f4 0-0, completing development and retaining a healthy extra pawn.

### 9...♗xd4 10.h3

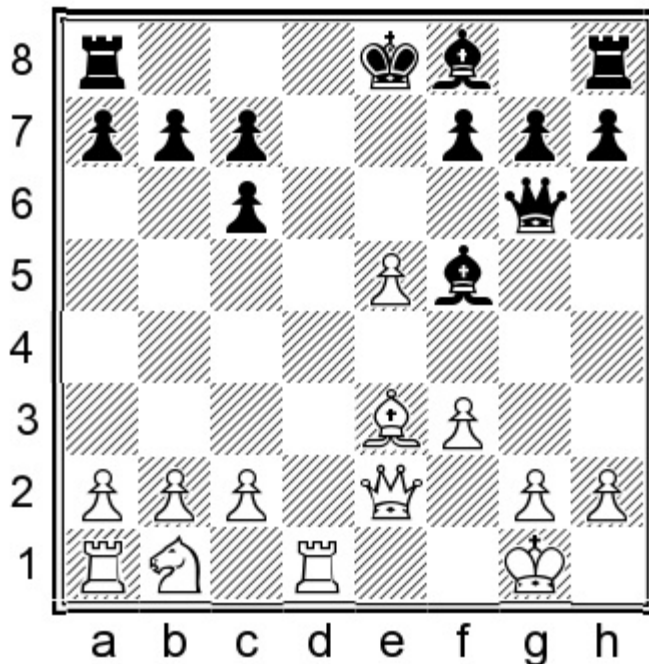
It's vital to take away g4 from Black's pieces. Compare the following lines:

10.♘c3 ♕g4 11.♗e4 ♗xe4 12.♘xe4 ♕f5 13.♞e1

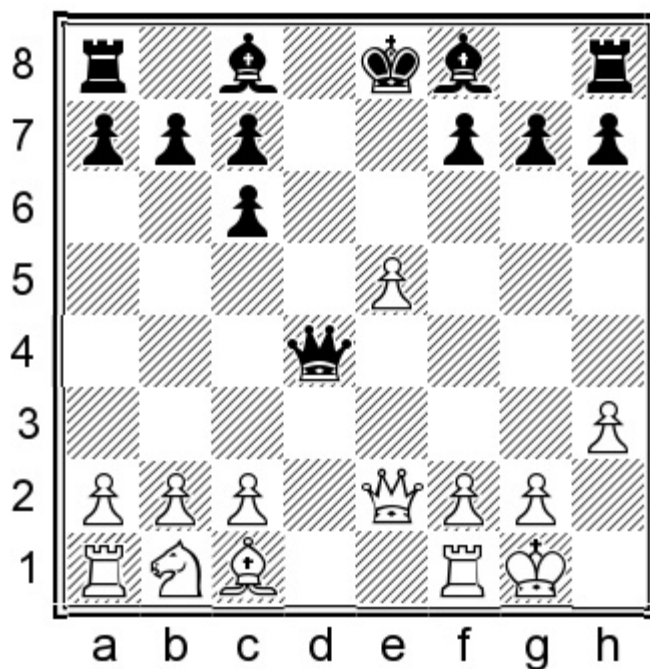


13...0-0-0 14.♘g5 ♞d7 Black was clearly better in Dhar-Barua – Galego, Benasque 1997.

10.♞d1 ♗g4 11.f3 (11.♘c3 ♗xe2 12.♘xe2 ♕d7 13.♕e3 0-0-0 14.♞d2 ♕e7 15.♞ad1 ♞he8 also gave Black the better game in Turowski – Lauer, corr. 2012.) 11...♗g6 12.♕e3 ♕f5



13.♖d2 ♔e7 14.♘c3 0-0 15.♖ad1 ♜fe8 Black's bishops are powerful and the e5-pawn is in some danger, D'Ettorre – Perevozchikov, email 2010.



**10...♔e6**

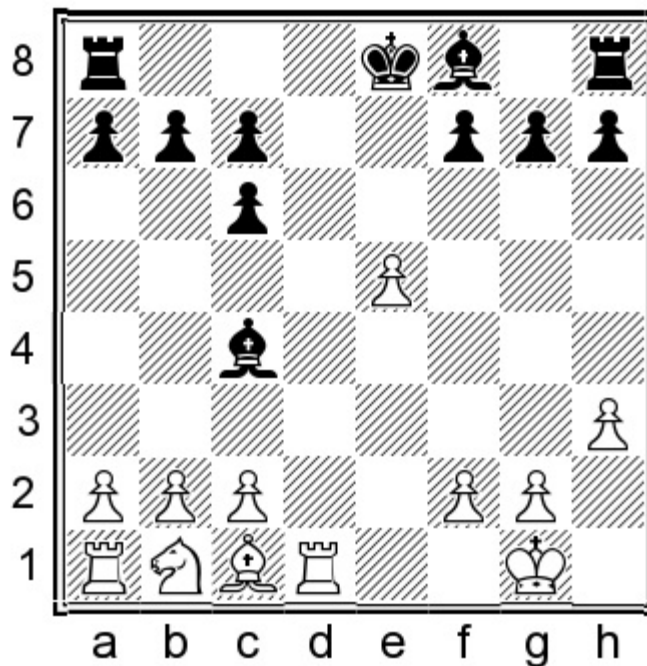
10...♔f5!/? is another interesting option.

**11.♖d1**

Attacking the queen has been the most common continuation.

11.♘c3 is slightly more flexible although 11...0-0-0N 12.♖d1 ♜c4 13.♖xd8† ♔xd8 is still comfortable for Black.

**11...♜c4 12.♜xc4 ♔xc4**



13. ♖c3 ♗e7 14. ♗e3 ♗e6 15. ♗e4 b6

Black had a comfortable version of the thematic endgame in Korze – Lecroq, corr. 2017.

### Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with a number of White's options after 1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♗c6 3.♗b5 ♗f6 4.0-0 ♗xe4 5.d4 ♗d6, which involve avoiding the thematic endgame which we studied previously.

6.♗g5 is well met by the solid 6...♗e7. In the middlegame that arises after the bishop exchange, Black's king finds a comfortable home on the queenside and the ambitious ...g7-g5 advance offers Black excellent counterplay on the opposite flank.

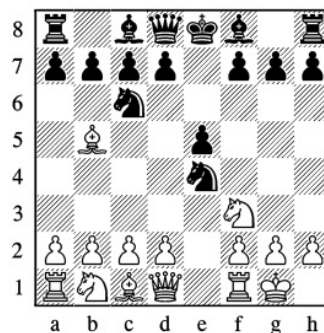
6.♗a4 is a tricky line, where White temporarily sacrifices one or even two pawns in order to highlight the drawbacks of Black's plan of development – mainly the awkward placement of the knight on d6. With precise play, however, Black is able to slowly neutralize the activity of White's pieces, with chances to maintain the extra pawn.

6.dxe5 ♗xb5 7.a4 is the most popular of the options examined in this chapter. I recommend the slightly unusual 7...d6 8.e6 ♗xe6, when White's activity along the e-file will be enough to regain the sacrificed pawn, but the important novelty 15...♗xf8!N offers Black easy equality.

Finally, after 6.♗xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♗f5, White's only real attempt to avoid the endgame is 8.♙e2, but then 8...♗d4! gives Black a pleasant game after the knight trade, and White will have to tread carefully to avoid becoming worse.

# Chapter 5

## Avoiding the Endgame



5. ♔e2 & 5. ♖e1

### Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.♞f3 ♞c6 3.♞b5 ♞f6 4.0-0

4...♞xe4

A) 5. ♔e2 94

B) 5. ♖e1 ♞d6 97

B1) 6.a4 97

B2) 6.♞xe5 ♞e7 99

B21) 7.♞d3 101

B22) 7.♞f1 ♞xe5 8.♖xe5 0-0 103

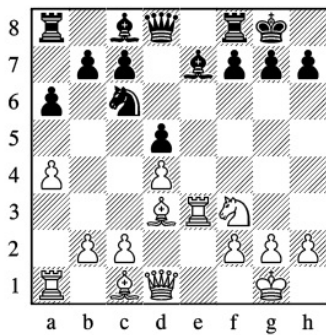
B221) 9.♞c3 103

B222) 9.d4 ♞f6 10.♖e1 ♞f5 11.d5 ♖e8 108

B2221) 12.♞d2 109

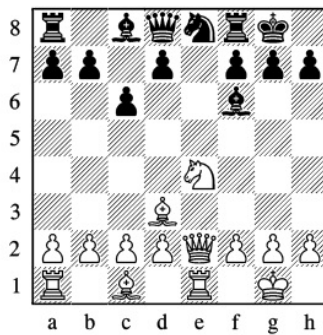
B2222) 12.♖xe8† 110

B1) after 12.♞e3



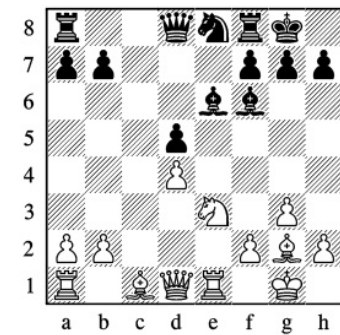
12...♞d6!N

B21) after 12.♟e4



12...♞d4!N

B221) after 17.♞g2

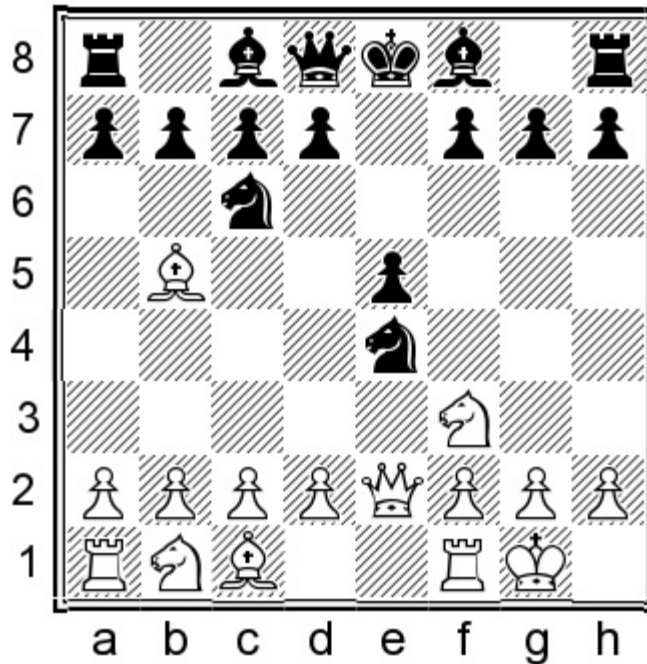


17...♞c8!N

1.e4 e5 2.♟f3 ♟c6 3.♞b5 ♟f6 4.0-0 ♟xe4

Aside from the main line of 5.d4, White has two credible options: A) 5.♞e2 and B) 5.♞e1.

A) 5.♞e2



This is one of a few minor possibilities, which has been known for more than 150 years! White is aiming to regain the pawn without giving up the light-squared bishop.

5...♟g5!?

A somewhat unusual retreat that invites interesting complications.

5...♟d6 is the most common continuation by far.

6.♟xg5

The only way to fight for the initiative.

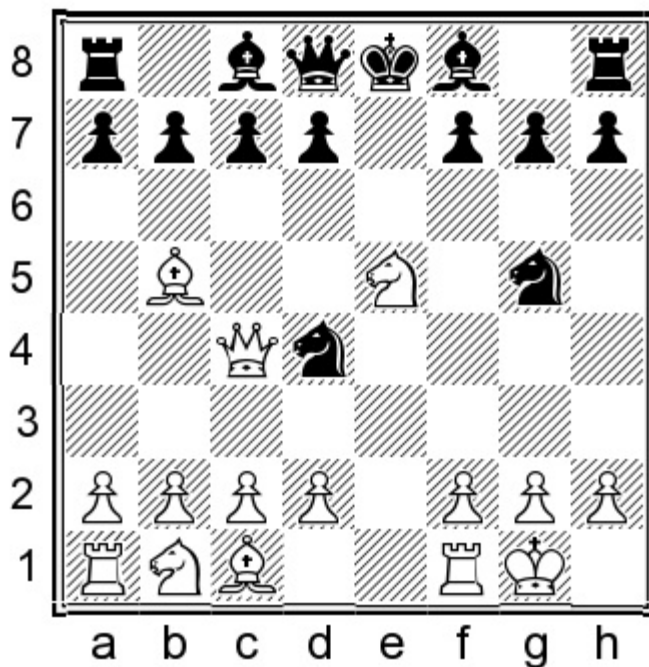
6. ♖xc6?! is too simplistic, and 6...dxc6 7. ♔xe5† ♗e6 8. ♖e1 ♕e7 9. ♗c3 0-0 10.d3 b6 gave Black a slight edge due to the bishop pair in E. Hansen – Dominguez Perez, Internet (rapid) 2018.

Another unfortunate choice for White is:

6. ♗xe5?! ♗d4! 7. ♔c4?

7. ♔d3N is the lesser evil, but 7...♗ge6 8.c3 ♗xb5 9. ♔xb5 ♕e7 10.d4 c6 11. ♔e2 0-0 offers Black some edge due to the bishop pair.

In I. Popov – Santos Ruiz, Moscow (blitz) 2019, Black could have refuted White's play with:



7...♗ge6!N

White will pay a high price for the loss of harmony. For instance:

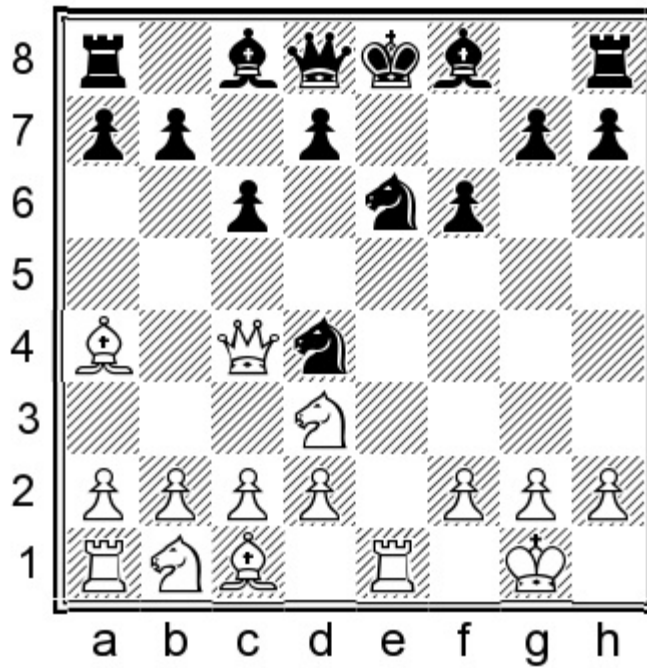
8. ♕a4

8.c3? ♗c2 wins.

8...f6

8...b5!?! is a good alternative, when 9. ♕xb5 ♖b8 10. ♗c3 ♕d6 gives Black an overwhelming initiative.

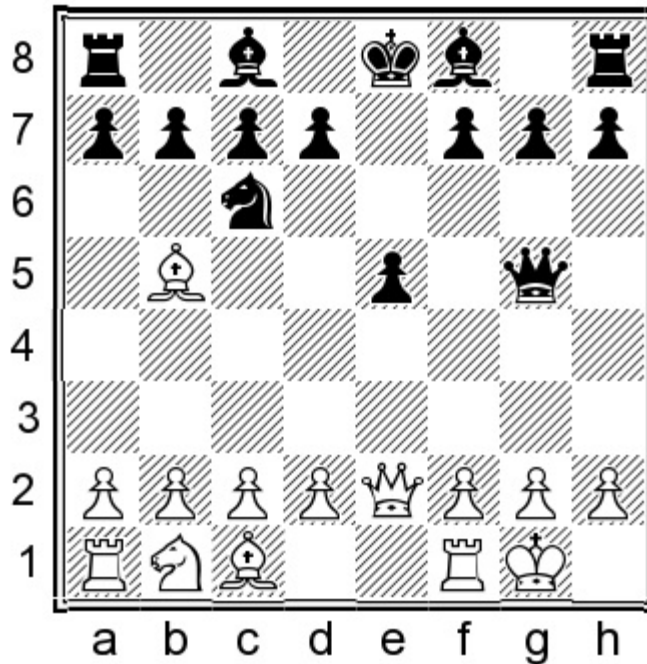
9. ♗d3 c6 10. ♖e1



10...♔f7!

Black will combine rapid development with threats to win material, and White's problems are already insurmountable.

6...♙xg5



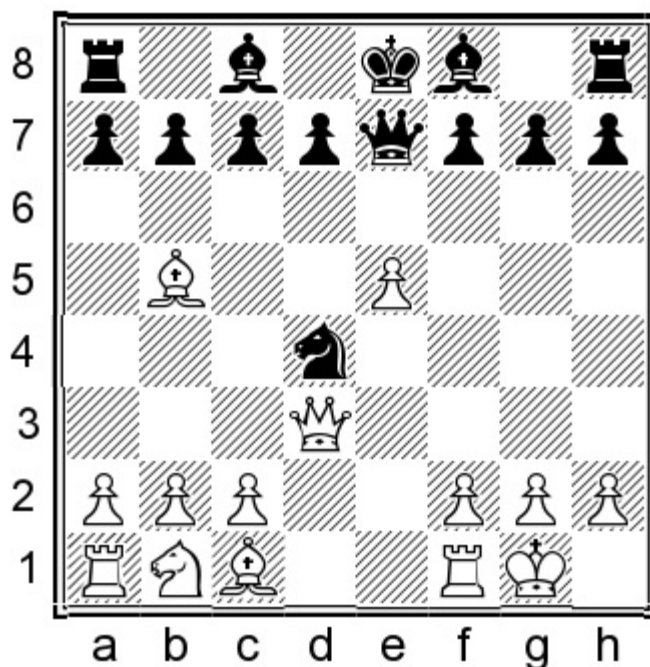
7.d4 ♙e7 8.dxe5

White has an obvious lead in development but the vulnerability of the e5-pawn provides Black with sufficient counterplay.

8...♘d4

Another interesting option is 8...a6!? 9.♙a4 (9.♙xc6?! dxc6 10.♘d2 was an inferior choice for White in Naroditsky – Kramnik, London [rapid] 2014, when 10...♙f5!N 11.♘b3 0-0-0 would have favoured Black) 9...b5 10.♙b3 ♙b7 with a complex, double-edged struggle in Arrega – Jean, corr. 2017.

### 9.♙d3



### 9...♙xe5

Bravely accepting the challenge!

### 10.♘c3

This natural developing move has been tested in a few correspondence games.

The only move to have been tested in over-the-board play is:

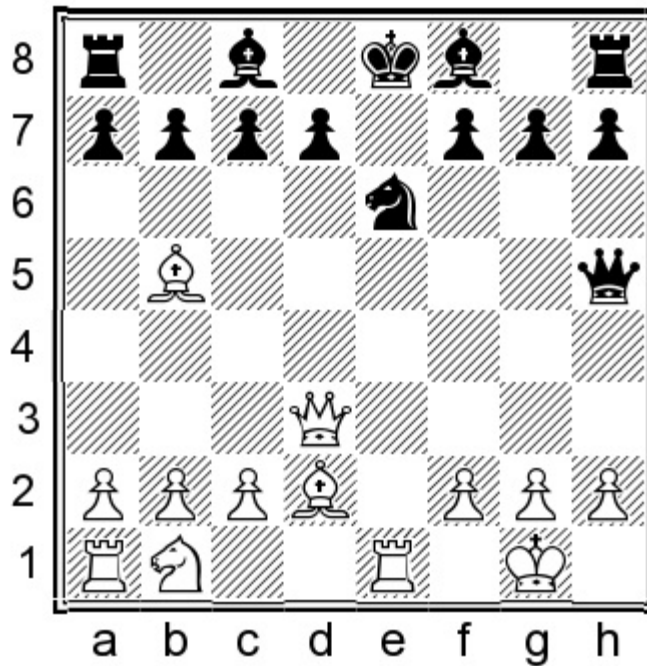
### 10.♙d2 ♘e6

Just as in the main line below, the knight performs a crucial role in blocking the e-file.

### 11.♞e1 ♙h5!

The queen is well placed here: it cannot be attacked by White's pieces and it keeps an eye on the h2-pawn.

11...♙d6?! feels awkward, and 12.♙h3 ♙e7 13.♙d3 c6 14.♘c3 left Black under strong pressure in T. Petrosian – Minasian, Yerevan 2006.



12. ♖c3N

White needs to improve on 12. ♕c4?!, as played in Laine – Nacer, email 2012, when 12...c6!N

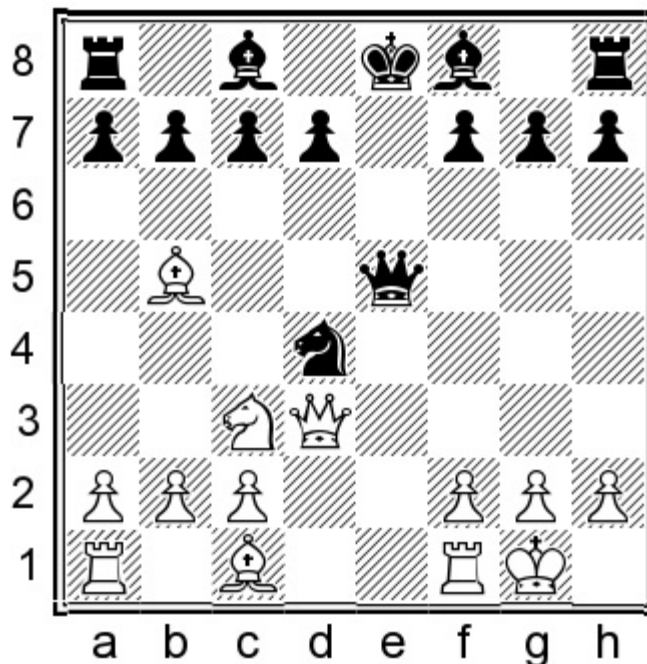
13. ♕xe6 dx6 14. ♖g3 ♖g6 15. ♖c7 ♕c5 would have left White with no real compensation.

12...c6 13. ♕f4

13. ♕c4 ♕e7 leaves White with no compensation at all.

13...♕e7 14. ♕d6 ♕xd6 15. ♖xd6 ♖h4!

The queen will drop back to e7 next, and White will have to work hard to prove compensation for the pawn.



10...♕c5 11. ♖d1!

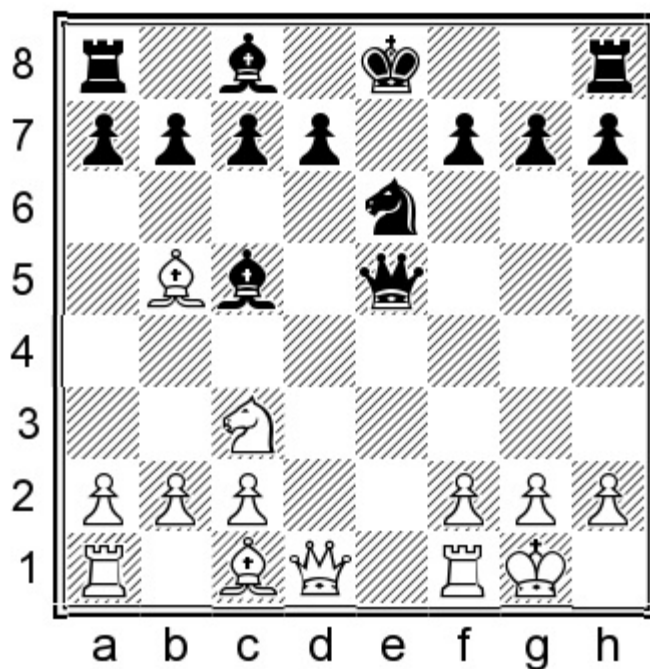
This is the only way of maintaining the tension.

After 11.♔e3?! 0-0 12.♖ad1 ♘e6 Black manages to fully consolidate.

**11...♘e6!**

A precise defensive move.

Instead, after 11...0-0? 12.♖e1 Black struggles to find a good square for the queen, as 12...♔f6 13.♘e4 ♜b6 14.♔d3 offers White a powerful attack.



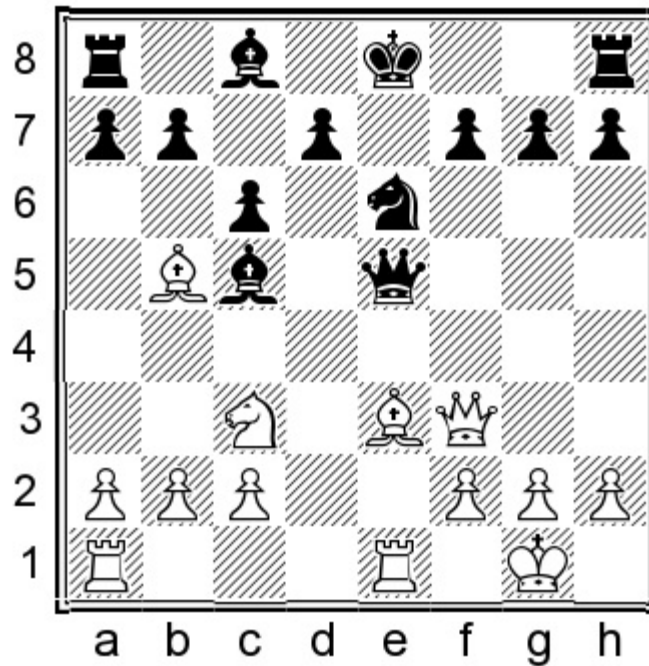
**12.♖e1 ♜d4 13.♔f3**

Obviously White has to avoid the trade of queens.

**13...c6 14.♔e3**

After 14.♔d3?! ♔e7 15.♘e4 d5 16.♘g3 g6 the activity of White's pieces is neutralized, so Black is simply a pawn up.

**14...♔e5**



**15.♔d3?!**

The logical continuation would have been 15.♔h6N 15...♚d4 16.♔e3 ♚e5 when White has nothing better than accepting a draw by repetition.

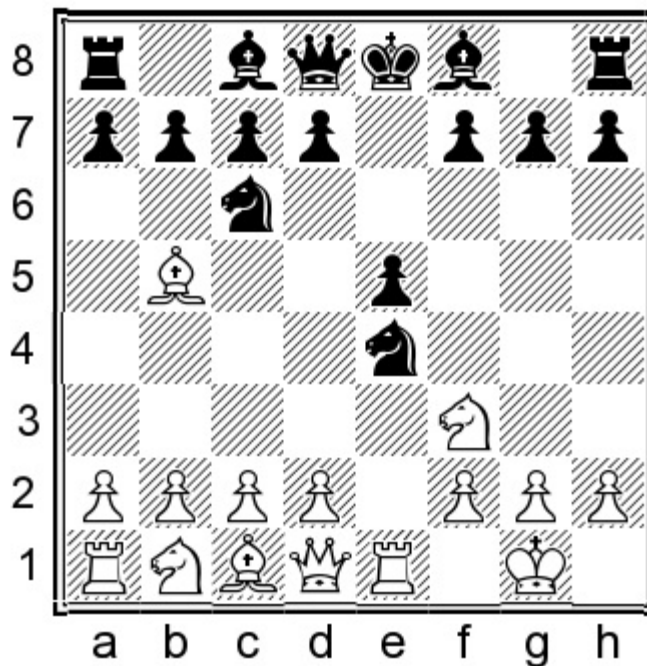
**15...♔e7!**

A cold-blooded move. White cannot make special use of the opposition along the e-file, and must settle for regaining the pawn.

**16.♔xa7 ♚f6 17.♚e3 d5**

Black enjoyed the superior pawn structure and piece coordination in Trofimov – Tyulenko, email 2014.

**B) 5.♖e1**



White intends to win back the pawn in simple fashion, hoping for active piece play.

### 5... Nxd6

We will analyse the sideline **B1)** 6.a4 followed by the normal **B2)** 6.Nxe5.

6.Qf1 Qe7 has no independent value, as White has nothing better than transposing to the main line with 7.Nxe5 – see variation B22.

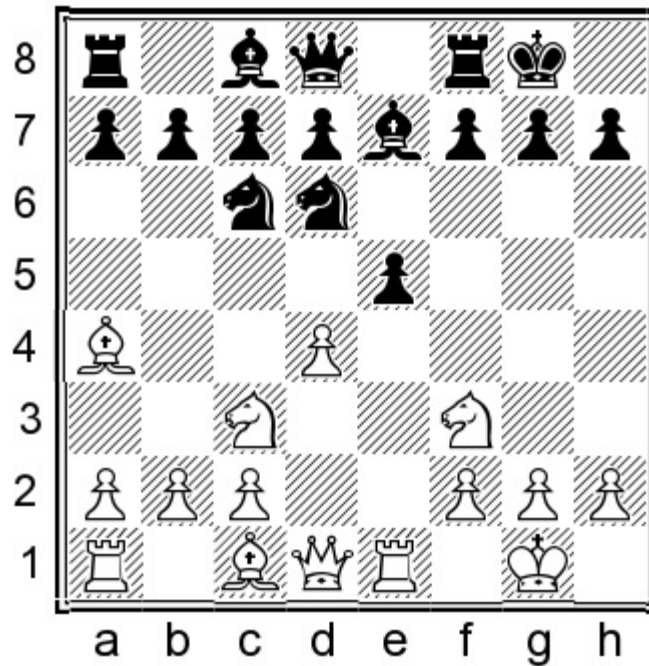
### 6.Qa4

This is a rare move which, like 6.a4, can be played in connection with a d2-d4 gambit.

### 6... Qe7 7.Nc3

7.Nxe5 Nxe5 8.Qxe5 transposes to 7.Qa4 Nxe5 8.Qxe5 in the notes to variation B2 below.

### 7... 0-0 8.d4



8...e4

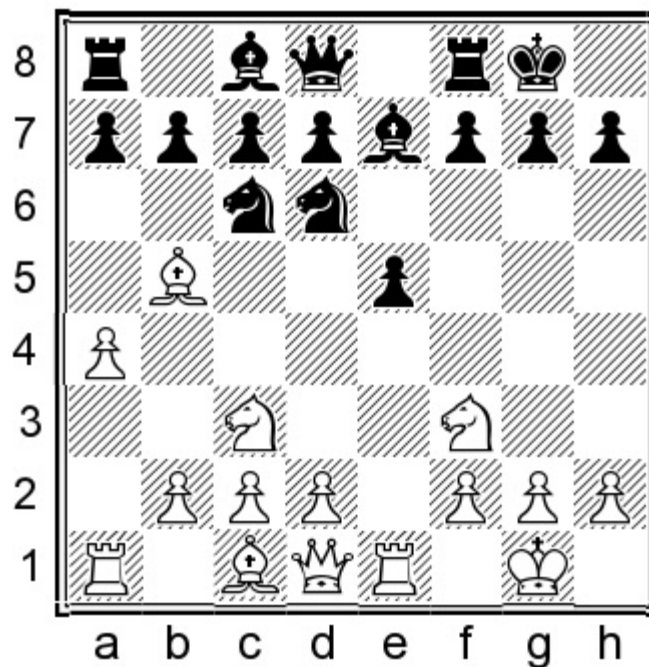
Simple and safe.

8...♞xd4N leads to a more complex type of position, when 9.♞xe5 ♞e6 10.♞d5 offers White long-term compensation for the pawn, in view of Black's difficulties with developing the c8-bishop.

9.♞xe4 ♞xe4 10.♞xe4 d5 11.♞e1 ♞d6 12.c3 ♞e7 13.♞c2 ♞f5

Black had fully equalized in Solodovnichenko – Malakhov, Chartres 2017.

**B1) 6.a4 ♞e7 7.♞c3 0-0**



8.d4

This is the only way of justifying the artificial 6.a4.

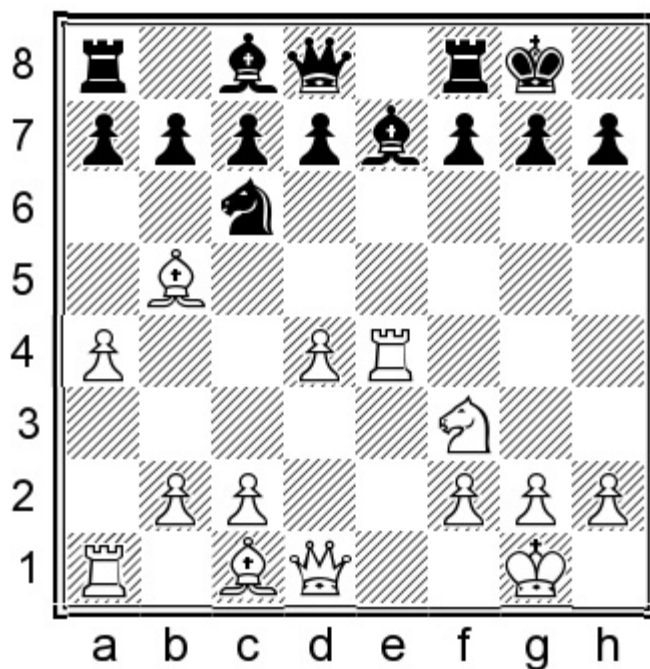
8.♖xe5N is met by 8...♗xe5 9.♞xe5 c6 10.♔f1 ♖e8 followed by ...d6-d5, reaching a normal type of position where a2-a4 is hardly the best use of a tempo.

### 8...e4

A safe choice. Black doesn't mind returning the pawn in order to solve any development problems.

8...exd4 9.♗d5 gives White plenty of compensation, for instance: 9...♞e8 10.♔f4 ♔f8 (10...a6?! 11.♔d3 b6 12.h4! ♔b7 13.♗g5 left Black's king in big danger in Steinberg – Chen Qi, St Petersburg [blitz] 2018) 11.♞xe8 ♗xe8 12.♗g5 White had a promising initiative for the pawn in Osmanodja – Vrolijk, Internet (rapid) 2019.

### 9.♗xe4 ♗xe4 10.♞xe4



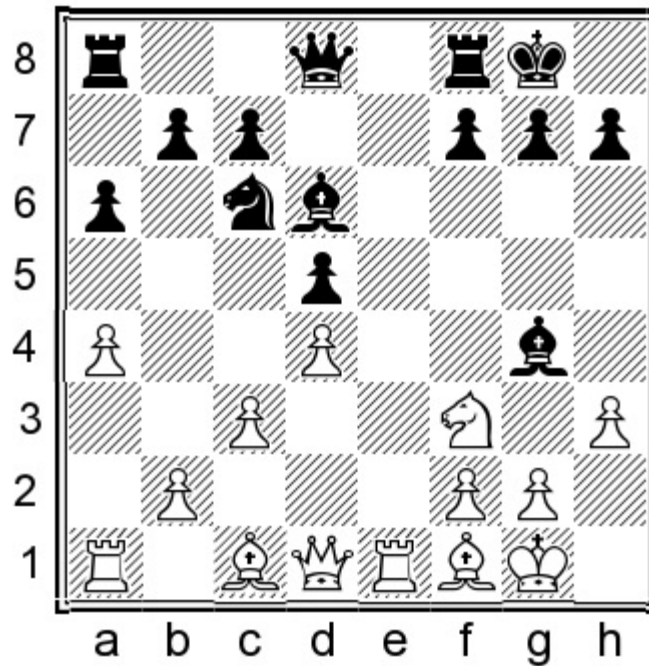
### 10...a6!

The most precise move. It makes sense to chase the bishop away before playing ...d7-d5.

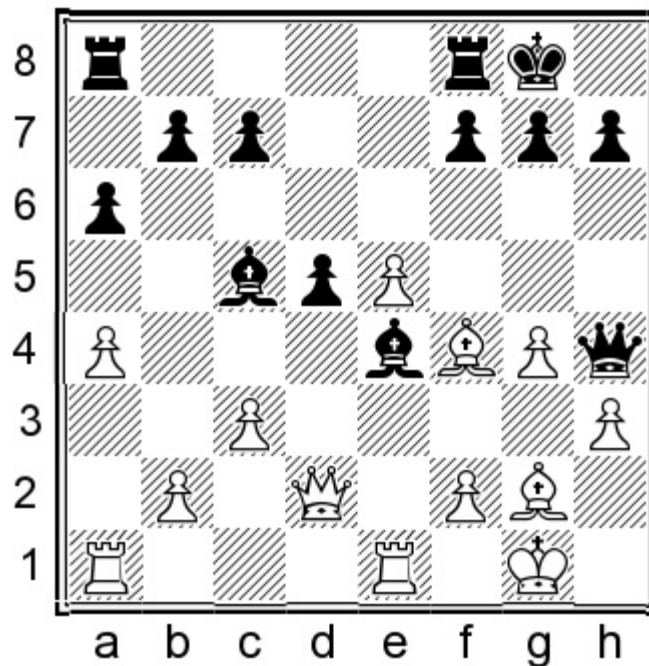
After 10...d5 11.♞e1 ♔g4 12.♔xc6 bxc6 13.♞d3 ♔xf3 14.♞xf3 ♔d6 15.♔f4 White obtained a slight edge due to his control over the e-file in Dubov – McShane, Netanya 2019.

### 11.♔d3

White also achieves nothing special with: 11.♔f1 d5 12.♞e1 ♔g4 13.c3 ♔d6 14.h3

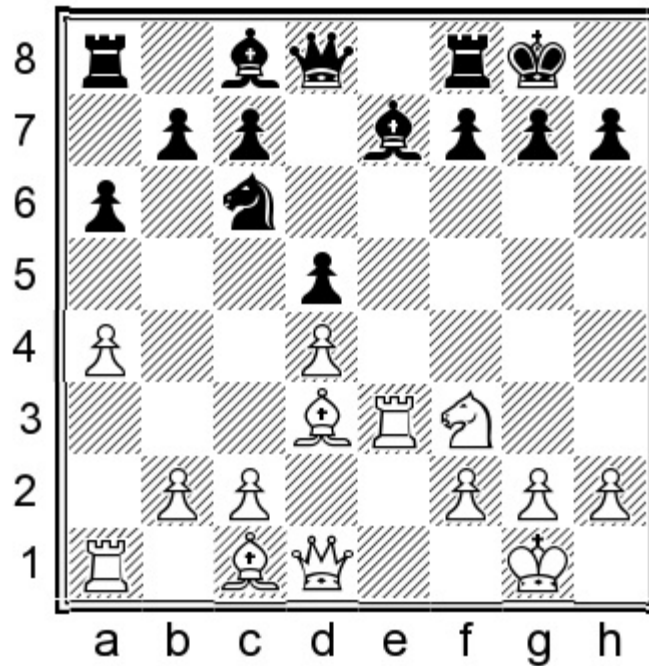


In Mamedov – Kozak, Moscow 2020, the simple 14...♔h5!N would have been best. Presumably Kozak was concerned about 15.g4 ♕g6 16.♖e5, but Black's chances are by no means worse after: 16...♗h4 17.♕g2 (17.♕f4 ♖xe5 18.dxe5 ♘c5 19.♗d2 ♕e4 offers Black good prospects for counterplay.) 17...♕e4 18.♕f4 ♖xe5 19.dxe5 ♘c5 20.♗d2



20...f5! The vulnerability of White's king starts to tell.

11...d5 12.♖e3



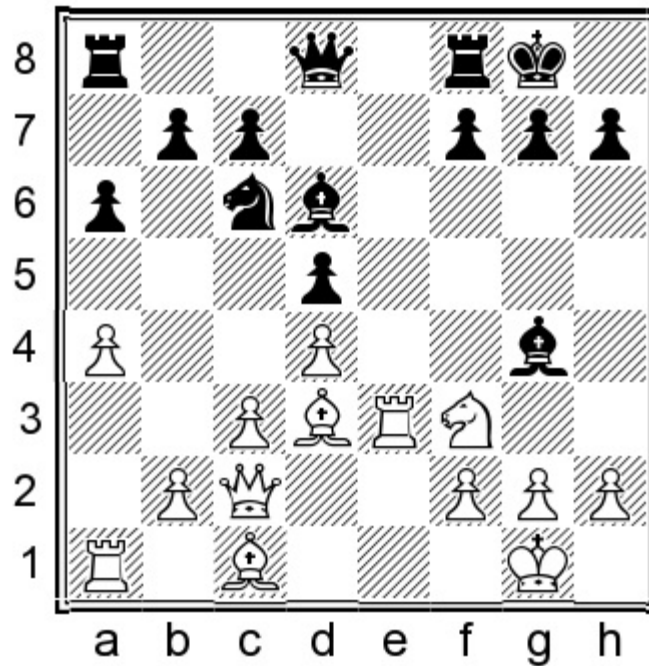
**12...♙d6!N**

This innovation is directed against the drawbacks of White's set-up. In particular, the rook is slightly misplaced on e3.

12...♘b4 has been played in the existing games, but 13.♙f1 ♙f5 14.c3! ♘c6 (14...♘c2? is refuted by 15.♞e5!) 15.♞e1 ♚d7 16.♙f4 yielded White slight yet long-lasting pressure in Kobo – Roiz, Tiberias 2016.

**13.c3 ♙g4 14.♚c2**

14.h3 ♙h5 15.♚c2 is safer, although 15...♙g6 is no problem for Black.



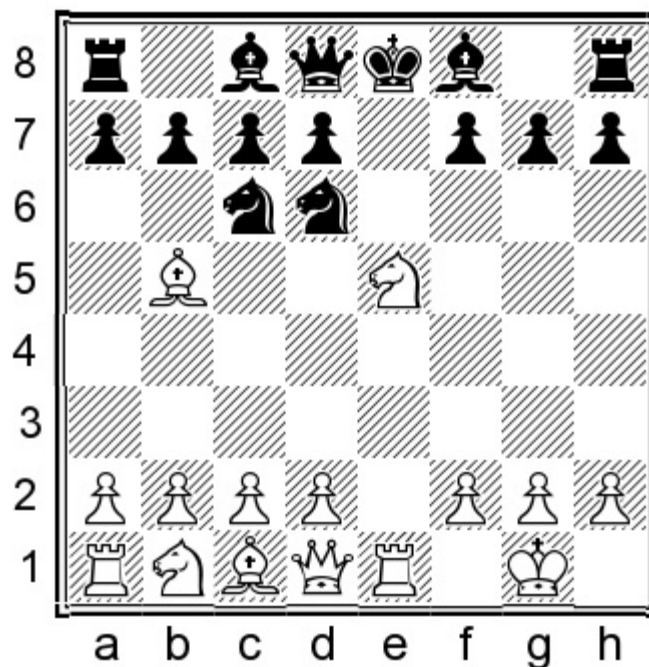
14...♙f4!

This is the logical continuation of Black's previous play.

15.♖e1 ♘xc1 16.♙xc1 ♙xf3 17.gxf3 ♘e7

White has enough activity to compensate for the fractured kingside pawn structure, but Black has no cause for dissatisfaction.

B2) 6.♘e5



Taking the pawn is normal, and of course, the threat of a discovered check makes the b5-bishop

invulnerable.

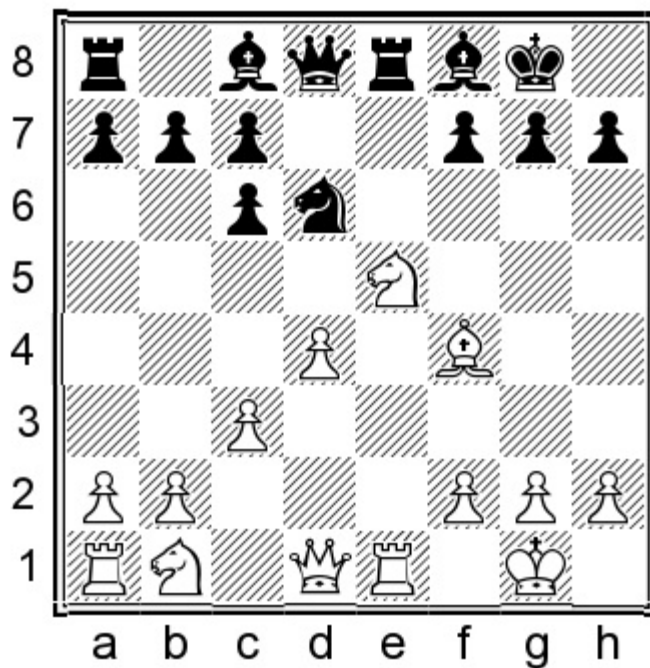
### 6...♙e7

We will analyse **B21)** 7.♙d3 followed by the main line of **B22)** 7.♙f1.

The aggressive 7.♙h5?! g6 8.♙h6 ♘f5 9.♙f4 ♘xe5 10.♙xe5 0-0 left White in an unpleasant position with many misplaced pieces in Jabot – Yarovik, corr. 1999.

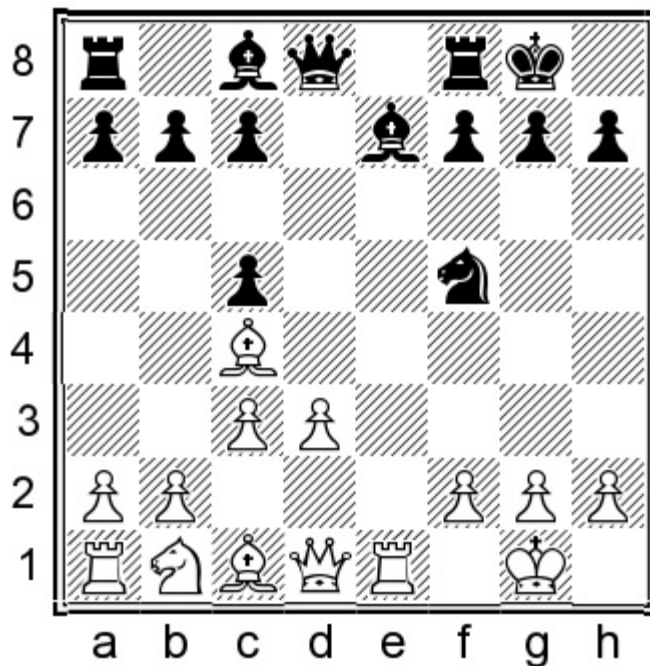
7.♘c3 is pointless in view of: 7...♘xb5 8.♘d5? (8.♘xb5 is necessary, and after 8...♘xe5 9.♙xe5 0-0 10.d4 White will have to struggle for equality.) 8...♘bd4 White has nothing to show for the missing piece.

White doesn't achieve much by giving up the light-squared bishop: 7.♙xc6 dxc6 8.d4 0-0 9.c3 ♖e8 10.♙f4 ♙f8



11.♘d2 ♙f5 12.h3 f6 13.♘ef3 ♙d7 Black had the more comfortable position due to the bishop pair in Moreno Ramos – Perez Castellano, Las Palmas 2011.

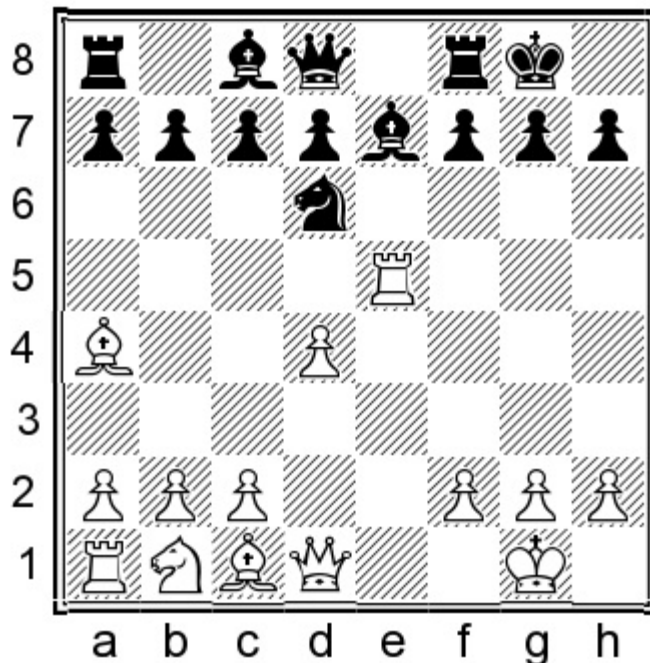
7.♘xc6 dxc6 8.♙f1 is also harmless: 8...♘f5 9.c3 (9.d3 0-0 10.♘c3 ♙e6 11.♙f4 ♙d6 12.♙xd6 cxd6 gave Black easy equality in Gashimov – Karjakin, Beijing 2011.) 9...c5 10.♙c4 0-0 11.d3



This position was reached in Sutovsky – Zubov, Israel 2020. I suggest 11...♖b8N 12.a4 a6 13.a5 b5 14.axb6 cxb6 with a good game for Black.

The other bishop retreat is toothless:

7.♙a4 ♜xe5 8.♖xe5 0-0 9.d4



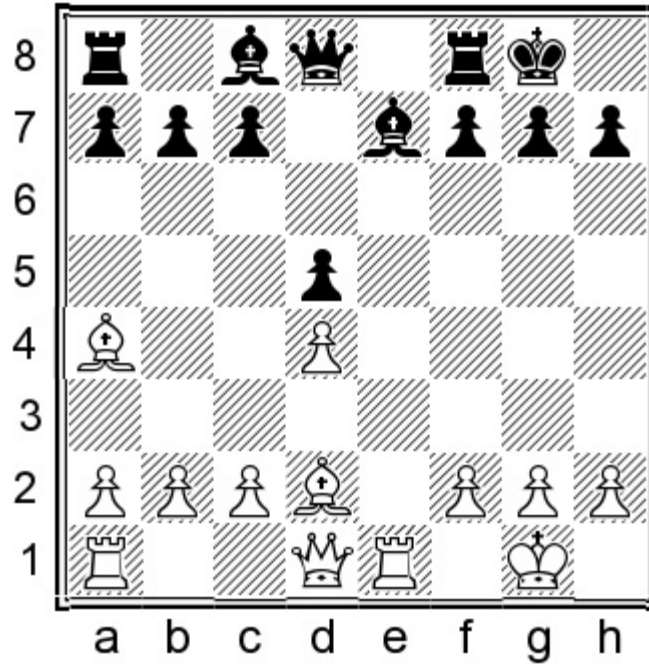
9...♞c4!

This is the way to exploit the placement of the bishop on a4 instead of f1 (or d3). Black moves the knight with gain of tempo and thus solves any development problems with ease.

10.♞e1 d5 11.♞d2 ♞xd2

11...♞d6!? is objectively just as good, and aims for a more complex game by avoiding unnecessary simplifications.

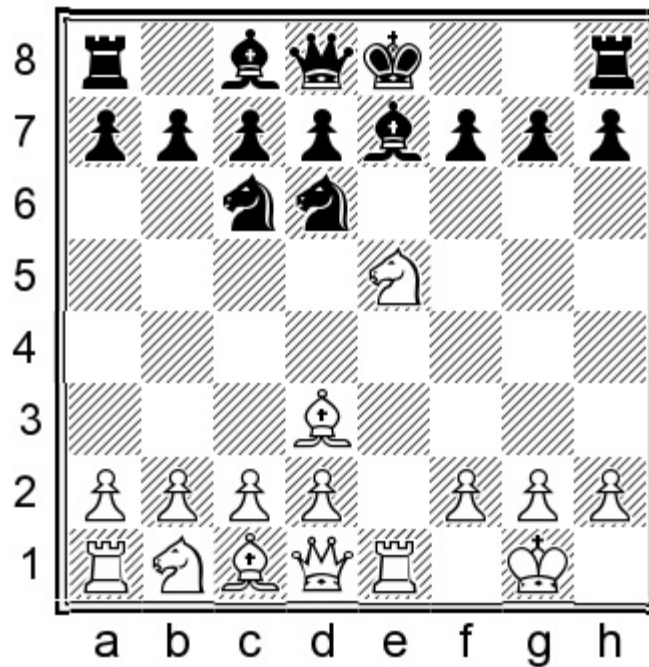
12.♔xd2



12...♕f5 13.♕f4 ♔d6

Black had effortlessly equalized in Westerinen – Nyland, Oslo 2009.

### B21) 7.♕d3

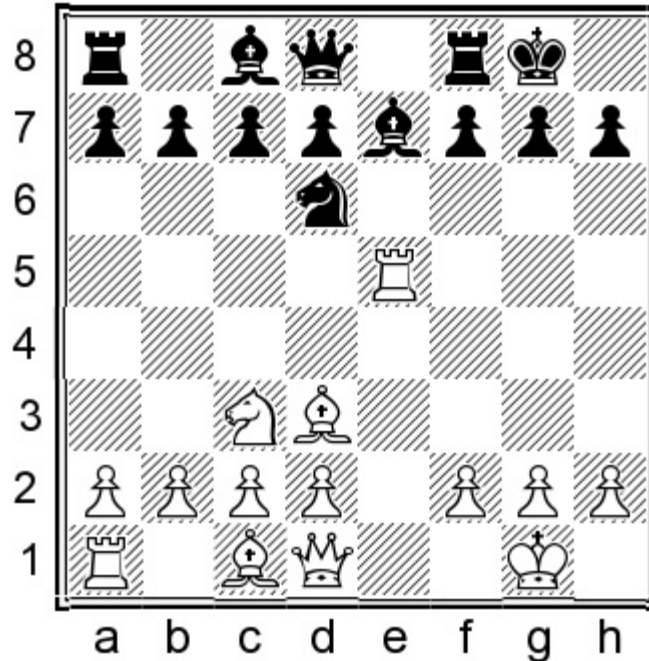


With this old move White demonstrates some attacking ambitions, but blocking the d-pawn is a somewhat anti-positional approach.

7...♘xe5 8.♖xe5 0-0 9.♘c3

This is the most consistent choice. Only active piece play might justify White's artificial 7th move.

The quieter 9.c3 is well met by 9...♘e8 10.♙c2 d5 11.d4 ♘d6 12.♖e1 ♕h4 13.g3 ♖h3 when Black had easily solved his development problems in Baklan – Sethuraman, Vrachati 2011.



**9...c6**

It is logical to restrict the enemy knight and support ...d7-d5 in the near future.

**10.♖e1!?**

This subtle move has been employed a few times by a great Berlin expert, GM Leinier Dominguez.

10.♖f3 ♘e8 11.b3 d5 12.♙b2 is just a transposition to 10.b3 below.

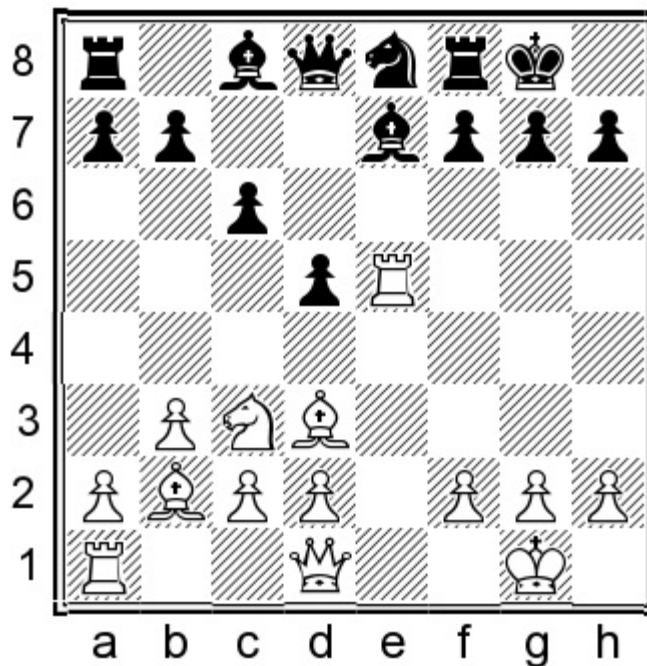
**10.b3**

This is the most common continuation, but it's absolutely harmless.

**10...♘e8**

This is Black's standard regrouping procedure.

**11.♙b2 d5**

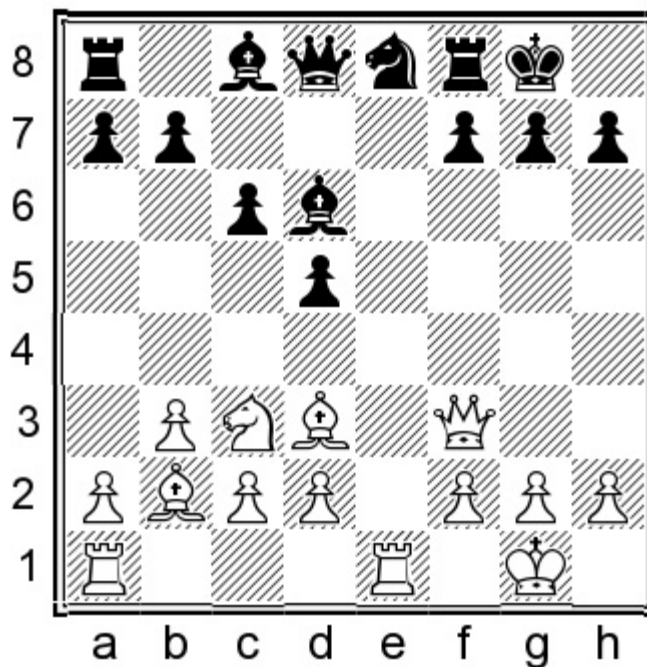


12. ♕f3

After 12. ♕h5 ♖f6 13. ♕h4 ♙e6 14. ♖g5 g6 15. ♕h6 ♜e8 The attack was fully neutralized, leaving White suffering from a lack of harmony in Gazik – Balogh, Slovakia 2019.

12... ♙d6 13. ♖e1

The more ambitious 13. ♖e2, with the intention to double the rooks, is liable to backfire: 13... ♕h4! 14. h3 ♜c7 15. ♙f5 ♜e6 The rook on e2 was misplaced in Rathavel – Ghosh, Mumbai 2018.



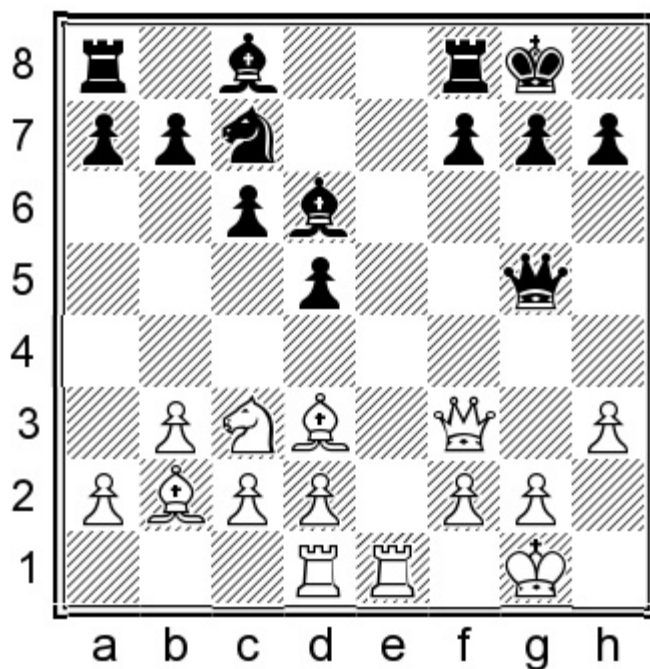
13... ♕g5 14. h3

The dubious sacrifice 14. ♜e2?! ♕xd2 15. ♕h5 h6 16. ♖ad1 ♕g5 left White with not much to show for the pawn in Glaser – Valak, corr. 2005.

14... ♜c7

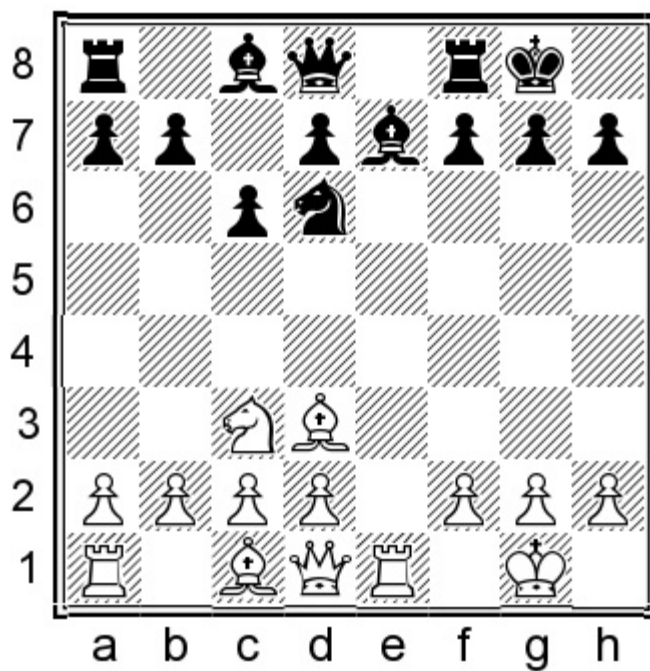
But not 14...♙xd2? 15.♞e3 d4 16.♘e4 ♚b4 17.♞e2 with a powerful initiative for White.  
15.♞ad1

We have been following Gabrielsen – Hammer, Norway 2008. Black's most accurate continuation would have been:



15...♘e6!N 16.♘e2 ♘c5

White faces some difficulties in view of the awkward bishop on d3.



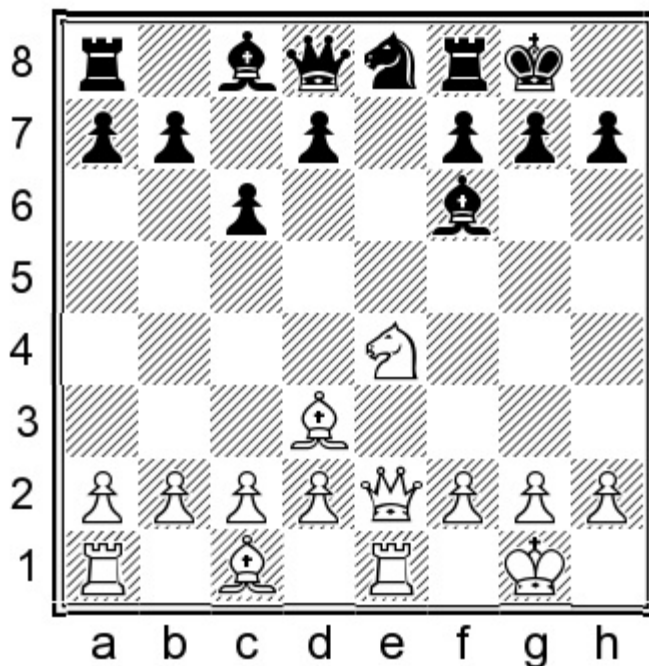
10...♘e8 11.♞e2

The point of White's previous move is to harass the bishop on e7 before ...d7-d5 has been played.

11...♞f6 12.♘e4

12.b3 is once again harmless, and 12...♖c7 13.♙a3 ♜e8 14.♚h5 g6 was fine for Black in Kovalev – Aleksandrov, Viljandi 2014.

The text move is the only real attempt to pose Black any problems; White wishes to gain an edge with the bishop pair. This position was reached in a couple of games, including Dominguez Perez – Radjabov, Tbilisi 2015. I think Black should have played:

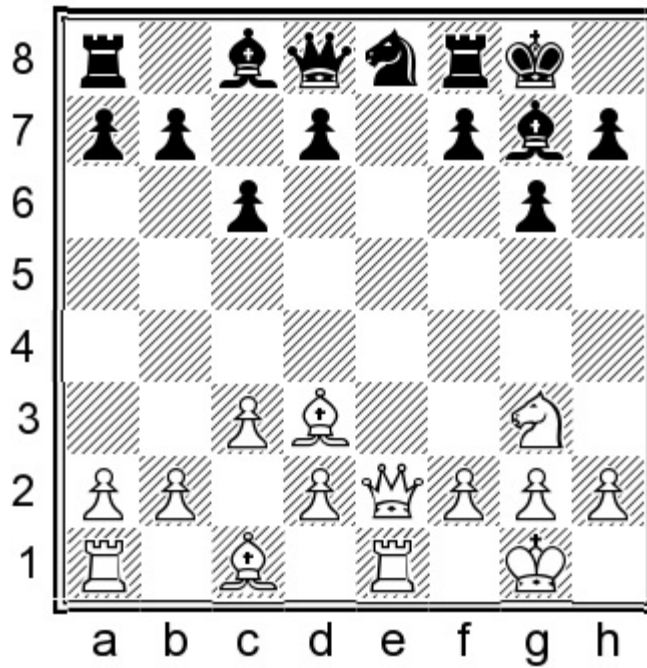


**12...♙d4!N 13.♜g3**

After 13.c3 ♙b6 14.♜g3 d5 15.♙c2 d4 16.d3 ♞f6 Black has no weaknesses, while the d4-pawn exerts a cramping effect on White's position.

**13...g6 14.c3 ♙g7**

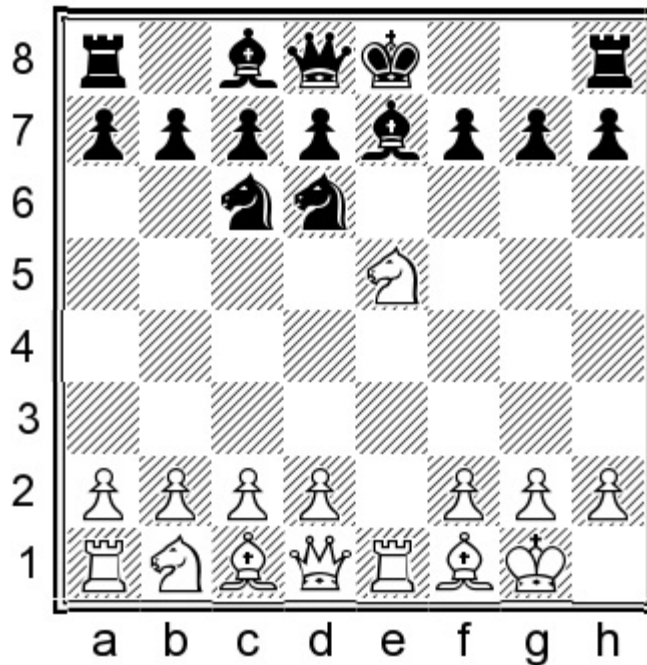
Having safeguarded the bishop and fortified the kingside in the process, Black has no problems. The logical continuation would be:



15.♙c2 d5 16.d4 ♘c7

With a safe and harmonious set-up for Black.

B22) 7.♙f1



This is the main line, avoiding blocking the d-pawn.

7...♘xe5 8.♙xe5 0-0

Black is now ready to expel the rook and develop the queenside pieces. White may proceed with B221) 9.♘c3 or B222) 9.d4.

## B221) 9.♘c3

By developing the knight first, White hopes to force its exchange for the enemy bishop, but we can avoid any such concession.

### 9...♗e8

A standard way of regrouping: the knight was clearly misplaced, so Black retreats it in order to play ...d7-d5 as soon as possible. Later the knight may go via c7-e6, or f6, or even back to d6 (after ...c6 and ...d5).

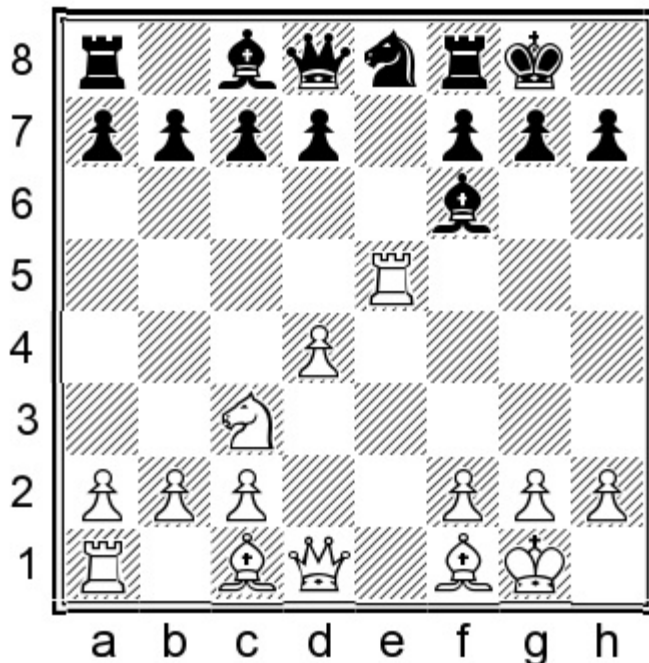
### 10.♘d5

This common move is the most consistent.

### 10.d4

This move is sometimes played with a creative idea in mind:

### 10...♙f6



### 11.♙d3!?

A brave decision! White sacrifices an exchange in order to take control over the dark squares and obtain attacking chances.

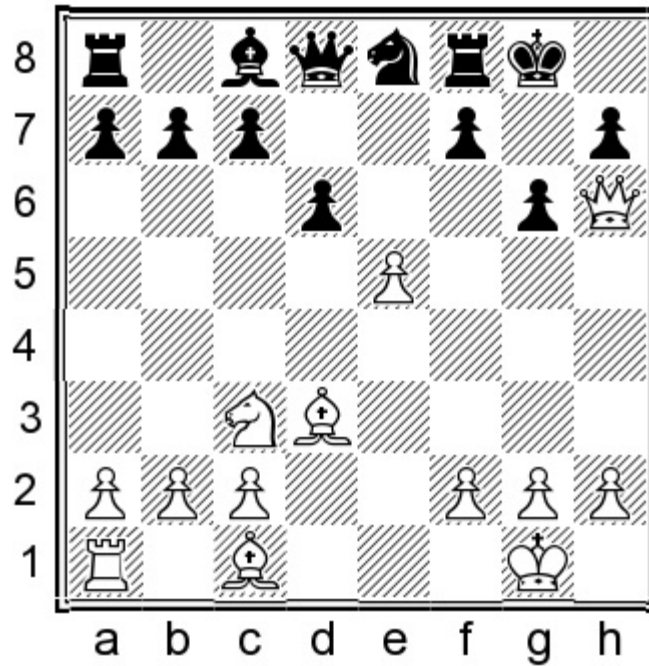
Harmless is: 11.♞e1 d5 12.♘e2 (After 12.♙f4 c6 13.♙e5 ♙f5 14.♙d3 ♙xd3 15.♚xd3 ♘d6 16.b3 ♞e8 17.♞e2 g6! White already faces some problems securing the d4-pawn as Black is ready to play ...♘f5, Polgar – Bacrot, Dubai [rapid] 2014.) 12...♙f5 13.c3 c6 14.♘g3 ♙g6 15.♙d3 ♘d6 The position was absolutely equal in Smirin – Harikrishna, St Petersburg (blitz) 2018.

### 11...♙xe5

Black has to accept the challenge.

Instead, the timid 11...d6?! 12.♞e1 c6 13.d5 leaves Black under long-lasting positional pressure.

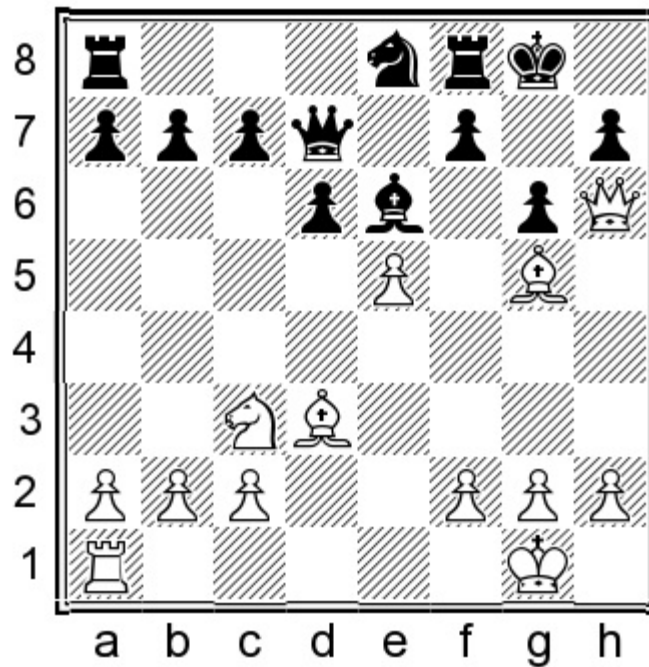
12.dxe5 d6 13.♔h5 g6 14.♖h6



14...♗e6!

This cold-blooded move makes it possible for Black to consolidate and connect the rooks. Curiously, 14...dxe5? was played in a few games involving GMs, even though it is a losing move: 15.♗g5 ♖d7 16.♗e4 f6 17.♗c4† ♜f7 18.♗xf6† Black resigned in Karjakin – Topalov, Abidjan (blitz) 2019. What an opening disaster!

15.♗g5 ♖d7



16.♗e4

16.♗f6?!N 16...dxe5 17.♗e4 ♗f5! 18.♗xe5 ♗xe4 19.♗xe4 f6 leaves White with no real compensation for the exchange.

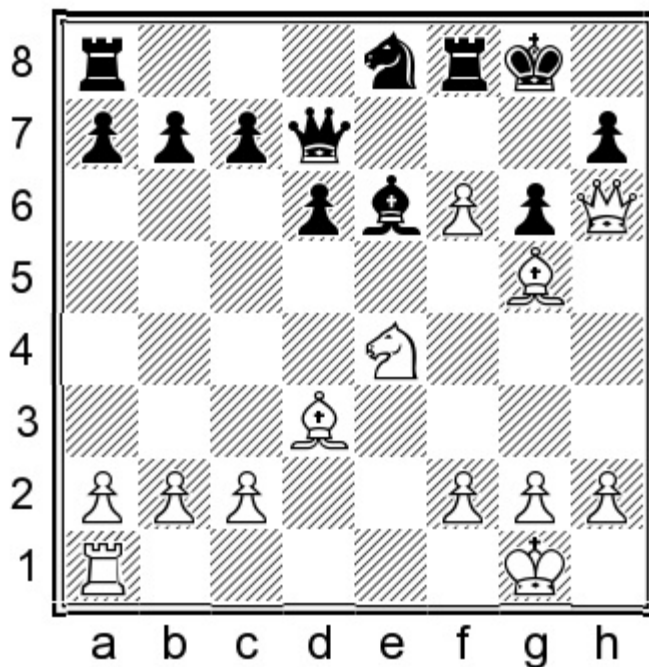
16...f5!

This enables the queen to join the defence.

17.exf6

I also checked 17.♘f6†N 17...♘xf6 18.exf6 ♚f7! when White fails to extend the initiative. For instance, 19.h4 ♖fe8 20.h5 gxh5 21.♙h4 ♚g6 22.♚f4 ♚g4 and White is in big trouble.

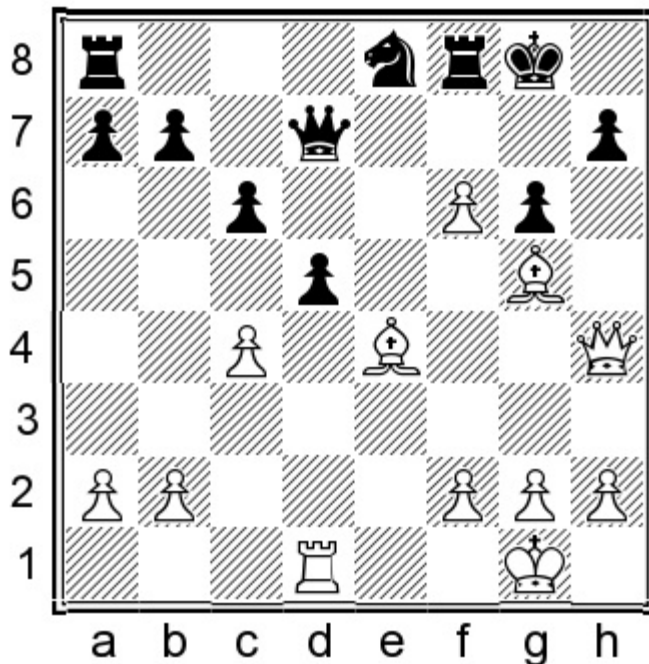
This position occurred in Predke – Kovalev, Khanty-Mansiysk 2016, when Black should have played:



17...♙f5!N 18.♚h4

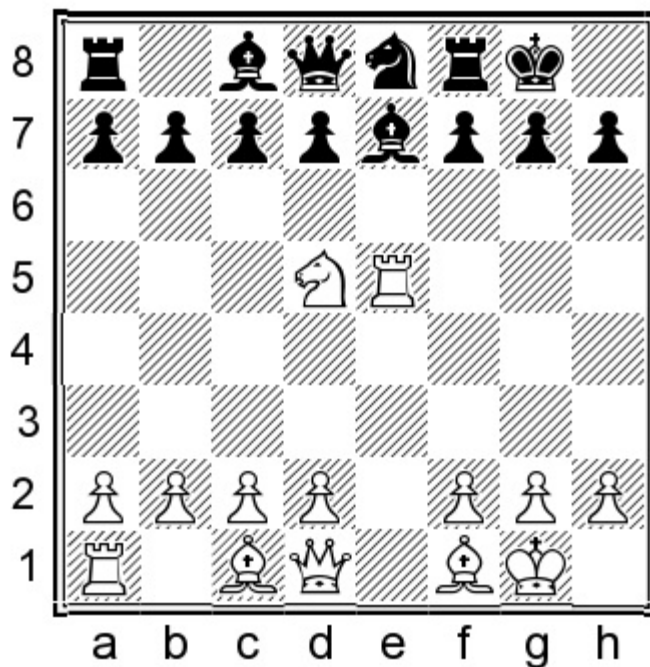
18.♖e1 ♙xe4 19.♖xe4 ♘xf6 20.♖h4 ♖ae8 21.h3 ♖e6 clearly favours Black.

18...♙xe4 19.♙xe4 d5 20.♖d1 c6 21.c4



21...♙f7 22.cxd5 ♘xf6

The attack is gone, so White faces a difficult struggle for a draw.



10...♙d6 11.♞e1

11.♞e2

This alternative rook retreat is well met by:

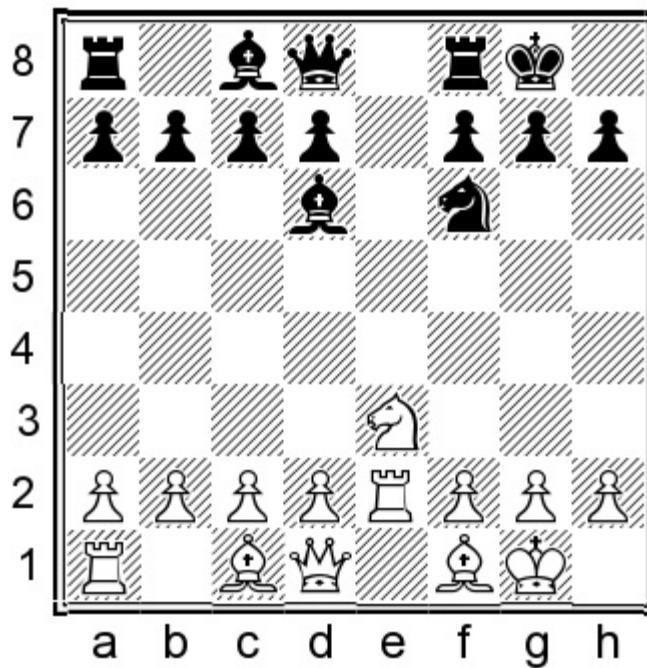
11...♘f6!

11...c6 12.♘e3 ♙c7 13.♘f5 d5 14.♘e7† ♔h8 15.♘xc8 ♜xc8 16.d3 has been tested in many games. I do not believe Black should face serious problems, but this line does justify the awkward-looking 11.♞e2 to some extent, as White has the bishop pair and may double the rooks later.

12.♘e3

This retreat is directed against the misplaced bishop on d6.

12.♘xf6† ♙xf6 13.d4 b6 14.♙d3 ♙b7 15.♙d2 ♜ae8 16.♜ae1 ♞e6 gave Black no problems in Shirov – Kramnik, Zurich 2016.



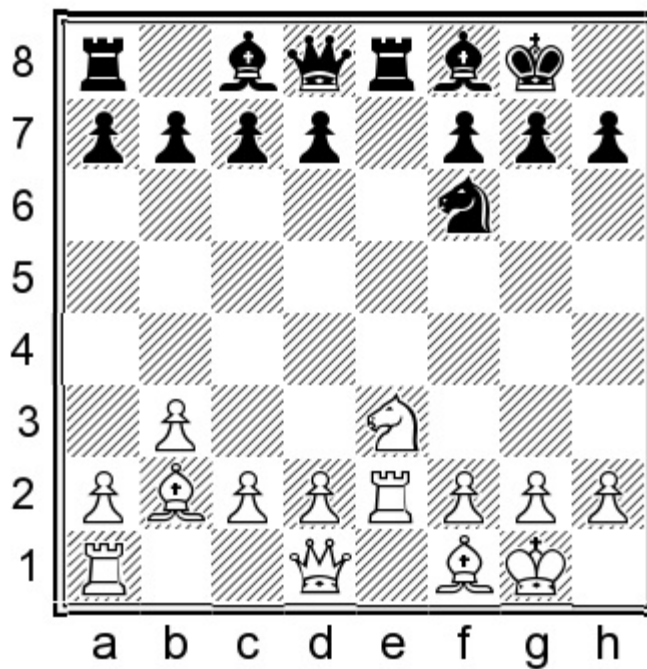
12...♖e8 13.b3

13.d4 is less ambitious: 13...♙f8 14.♗c4 d5 15.♘e5 ♘e4 The natural play by both sides led to equality in Motylev – Fedoseev, Moscow 2014.

13...♙f8

This retreat is the most flexible choice.

14.♙b2



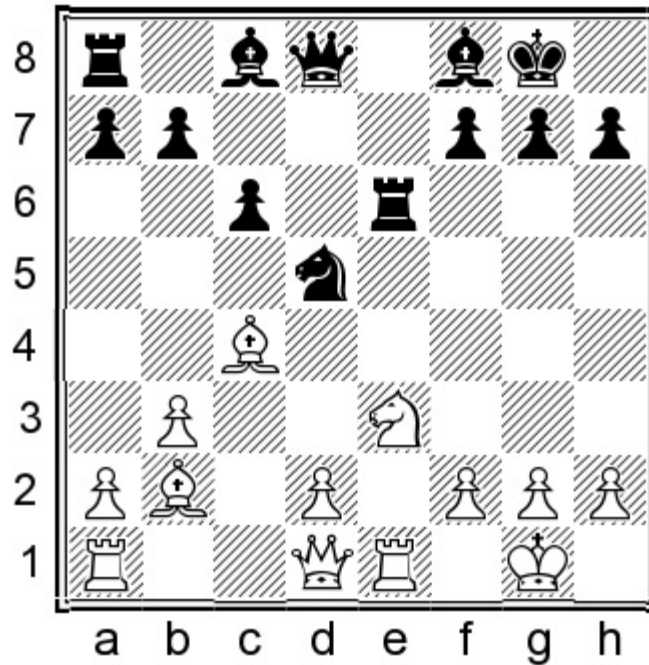
14...♖e6!

It's important to overprotect the knight.

15.c4 c6 16.♖e1 d5 17.cxd5 ♘xd5 18.♙c4

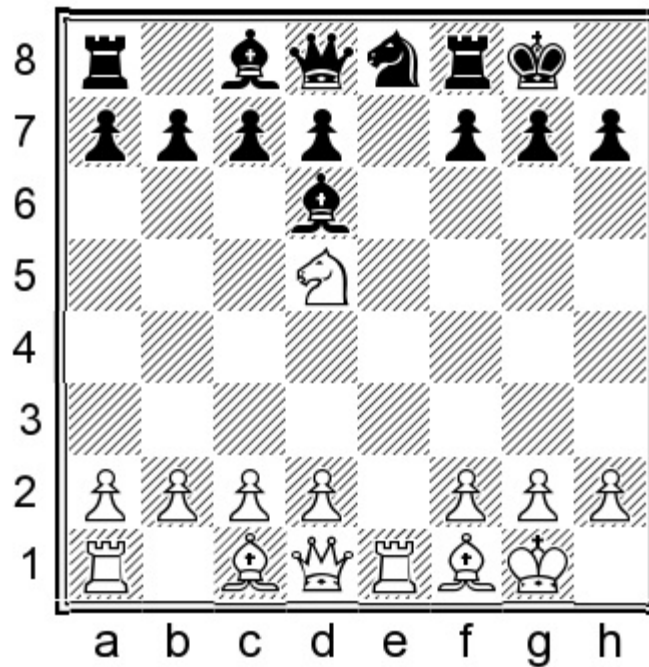
18.♘xd5N doesn't bother Black in view of 18...♖xe1 19.♙xe1 cxd5 20.♙e5 ♙e6 21.♖e1 ♙d6

with equality.



18...♗xe3 19.fxe3 ♖h6 20.♞f1 ♕e6

Black had solved all his opening problems in Nakamura – Giri, London 2014.



11...c6

With the rook on e1 instead of e2, 11...♗f6 is less suitable because of 12.♗xf6† ♕xf6 13.d4 b6 14.♕d3 when White's pieces are much more active. A good example continued 14...g6 15.♕e4 ♖b8 16.♕d3 ♕b7 17.♕xb7 ♖xb7 18.♕h6 and White eventually prevailed in Iordachescu – Aleksandrov, Nakhchivan 2012.

12.♗e3 ♕e7 13.c4

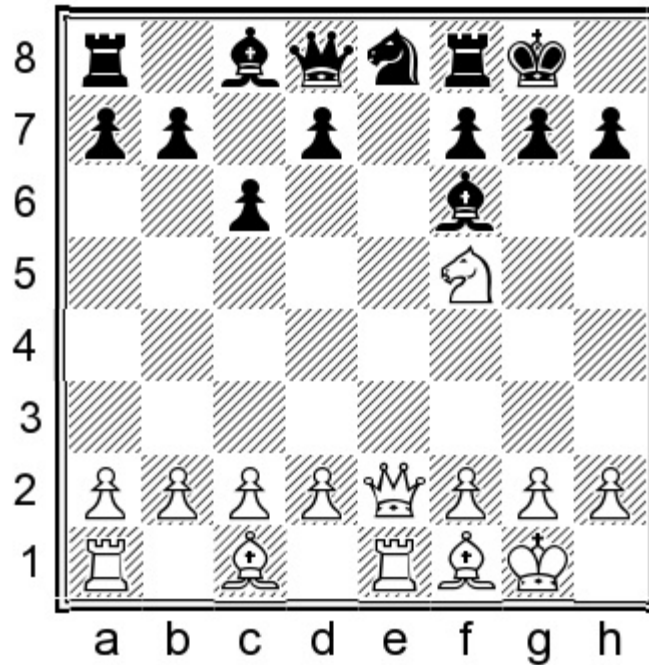
A reasonable idea: White anticipates ...d7-d5 and hopes Black's central pawn may become weak.

13. ♖e2 ♜f6 14. ♘g4 is harmless. (14. ♘f5 is covered below under 13. ♘f5.) 14... ♞g5 15. d4 d5 Black was fine in Saveliev – Lysyj, Tallinn 2019.

13. ♘f5

This move is frequently played with the idea of liquidating one of the enemy bishops.

13... ♜f6 14. ♖e2

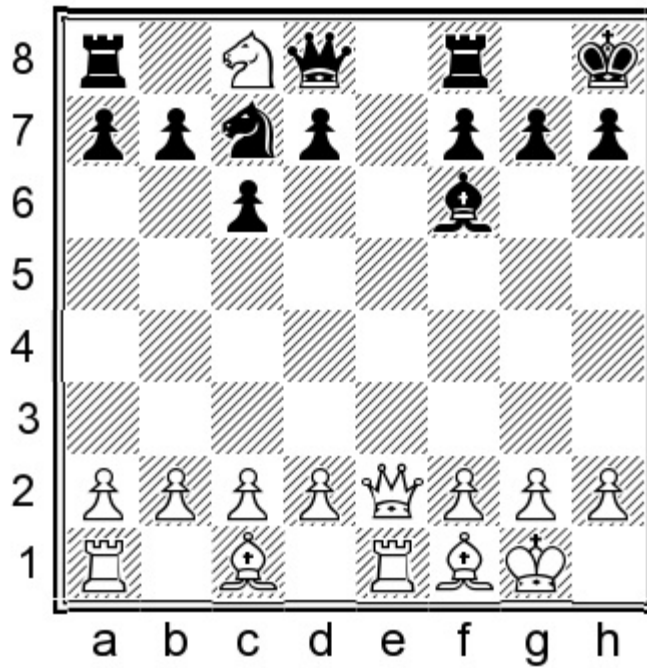


14... ♗h8!

I prefer this prophylactic move over 14... d5 15. ♘e7 ♗h8 16. ♘xc8 ♜xc8 17. d3 when White doesn't have much, but the bishops may nevertheless show their strength in the long run.

15. ♘e7 ♘c7 16. ♘xc8

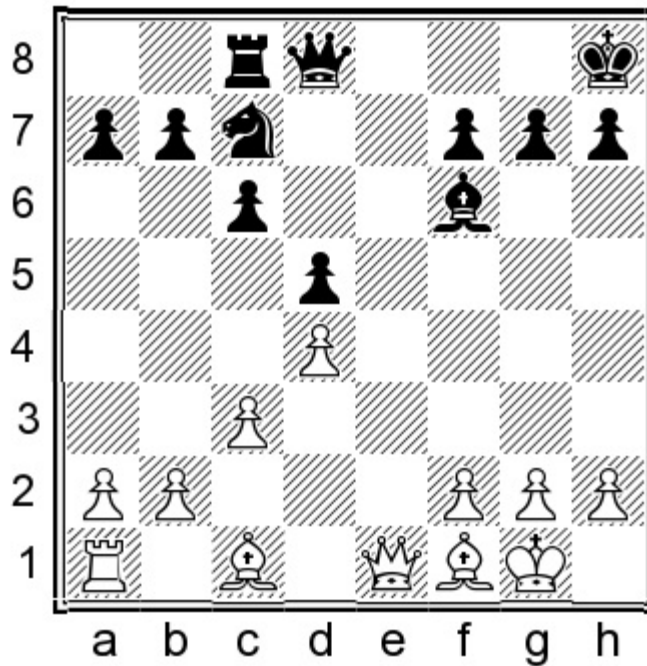
The mission has been completed. However, it turns out that White has lost too much time to claim any advantage.



16...♞e8

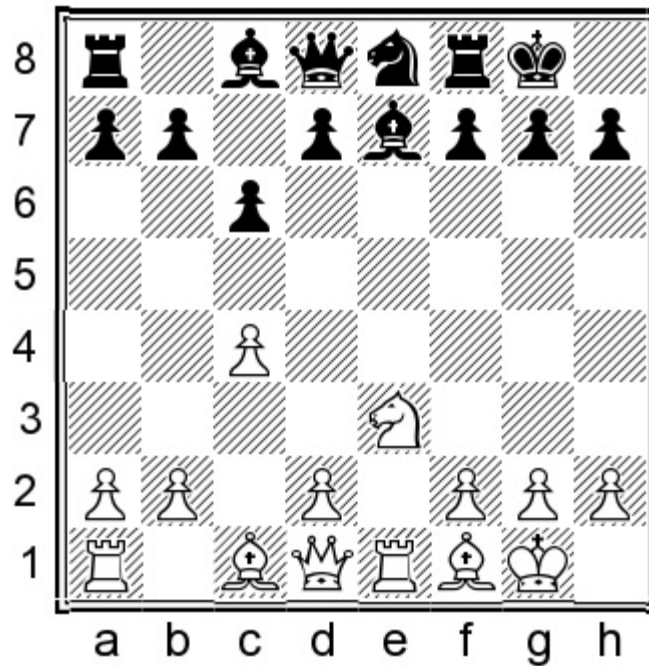
Equally good is 16...♞xc8 17.c3 d5 18.d4 ♞e8 19.♙e3 ♙g5 as seen in L'Ami – L. Van Foreest, Wijk aan Zee 2020.

17.♞d1 ♞xe1 18.♞xe1 ♞xc8 19.c3 d5 20.d4



20...♙g5 21.♞e5 ♙xc1 22.♞xc1 ♞e8

Having eliminated one of the white bishops, Black was not worse at all in Abdusattorov – Antipov, Moscow 2020.

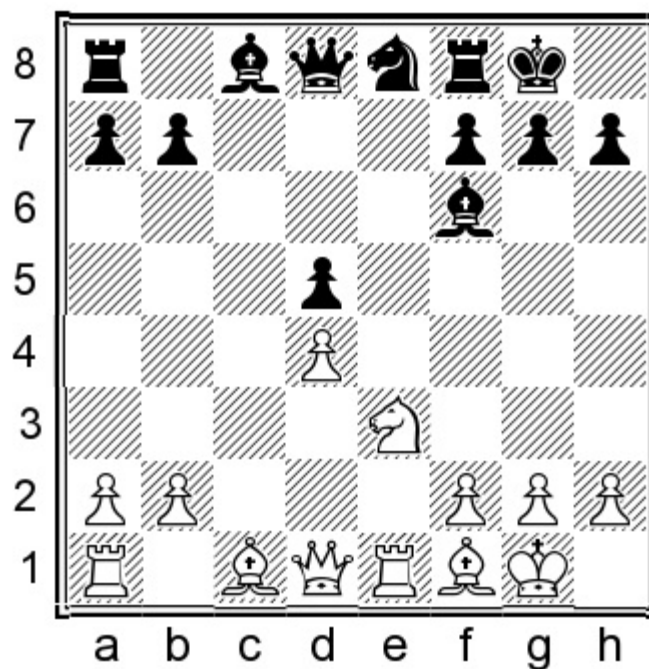


### 13...♙f6!?

I was surprised to discover that this natural move was tested in only three games at the time of writing.

The more common 13...♘c7 14.d4 d5 15.cxd5 ♙b4 16.♙d2 ♙xd2 17.♚xd2 ♘xd5 18.♘xd5 ♚xd5 leads to a solid but somewhat passive position for Black. It should definitely be possible to neutralize the activity of White's pieces, but accuracy is required.

### 14.d4 d5 15.cxd5 cxd5



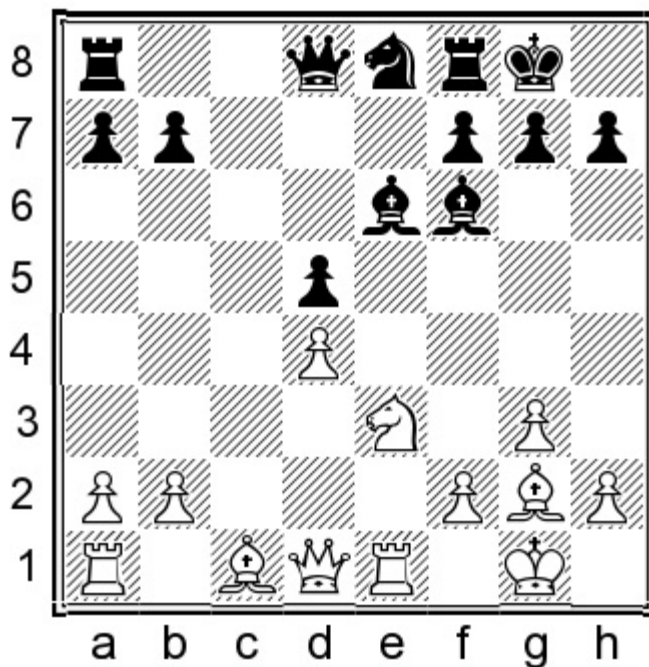
### 16.g3

The most logical plan: White is trying to put more pressure on the d5-pawn.

After 16.b3 ♘c7 17.♙a3 ♖e8 18.♞c1 ♙e6 19.♙b4 ♞c8 Black was able to fully consolidate in Lin Chen – Xiang Zeyu, Beijing 2017.

16...♙e6 17.♙g2

Here I suggest improving Black's play with:



17...♞c8!N

The less precise 17...♞b6 18.♘xd5 ♙xd5 19.♙xd5 ♙xd4 20.♙e3 gave White a slight pull in Yu Yangyi – Nakamura, Las Vegas 2015.

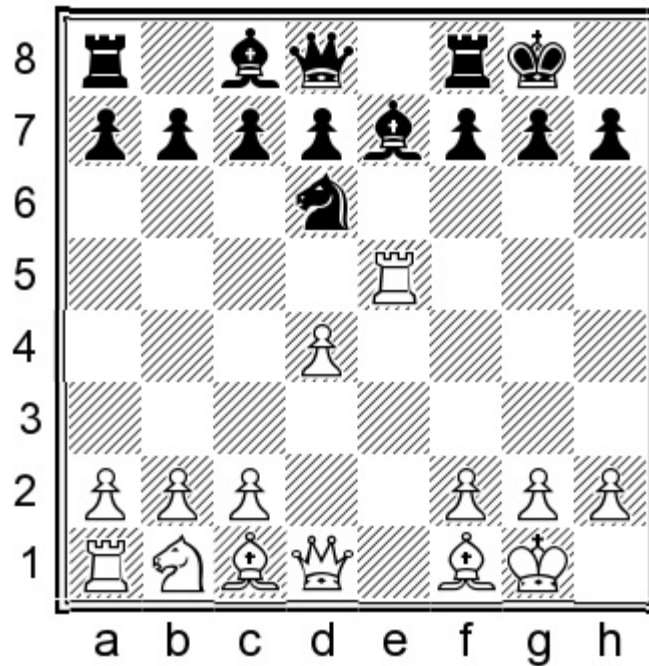
18.♘g4

White also achieves nothing special after 18.♞a4 a5 19.♙d2 b6 20.♞ac1 ♘c7 with equal chances.

18...♞b6 19.♘xf6† ♘xf6 20.b3 h6

White has no advantage, as Black's active piece play fully compensates for White's bishop pair.

**B222) 9.d4**



This is White's most popular choice, immediately seizing the centre and preparing to expand with d4-d5 before Black can arrange ...d7-d5.

### 9...♔f6 10.♖e1

A somewhat artificial alternative is:

10.♖e2

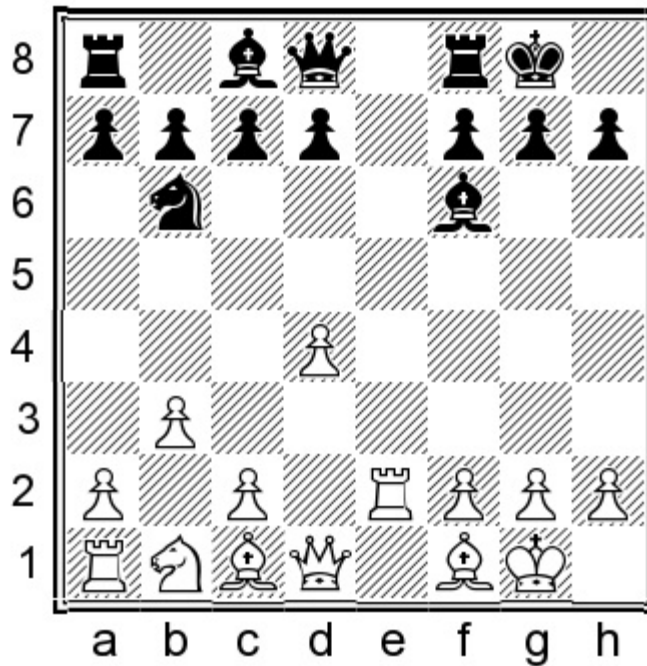
This has been tried many times at the highest level, but I am not impressed by it.

10...♘c4!

This natural idea was recently introduced by Berlin expert Vladimir Kramnik.

10...♘f5 11.d5 d6 12.♘d2 also should be acceptable for Black, but I prefer the text move.

11.b3 ♖b6

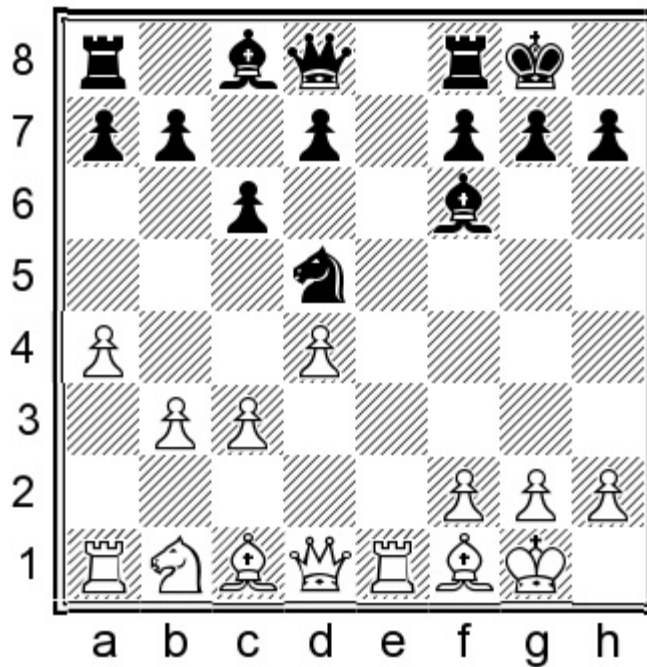


12.a4

12.c3 d5 13.♖e1 ♜e8 14.♗xe8† ♝xe8 15.a4 ♘e6 16.♞a3 ♞c8 17.♙f4 ♚d7 18.♙d3 c6 was pleasant enough for Black in Fedoseev – Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2019.

12...♞d5 13.♖e1 c6 14.c3

This position was reached in Anand – Karjakin, Zagreb 2019. I think Black's easiest way of completing development was:



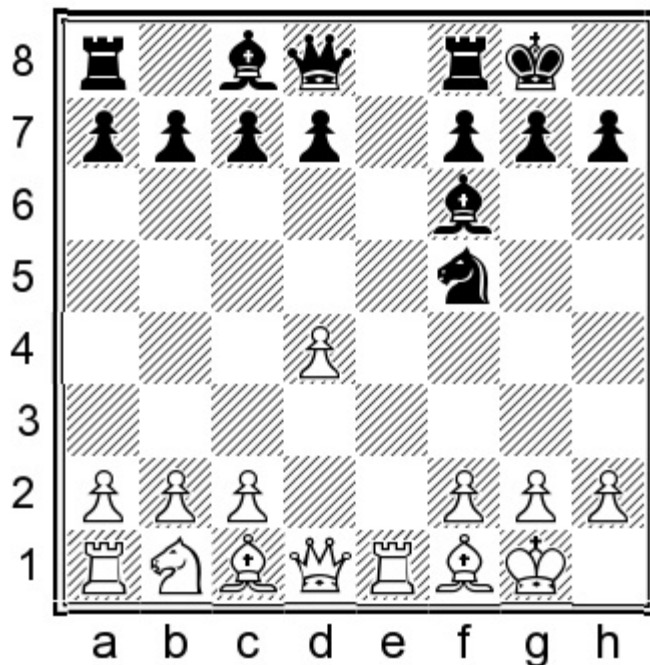
14...♞c7N 15.♙f4 d5 16.♙d3 ♞e6 17.♙e5

17.♙g3 could be met by 17...c5!? with active counterplay.

17...♙xe5 18.♖xe5 ♞f4

With easy equality.

10...♗f5



11.d5

This is undoubtedly the most challenging move and has been the choice of many top players, such as Carlsen and Caruana, to mention just two. White grabs some space and enables the knight to go to e4 unchallenged.

11.c3

This quiet move has been played in hundreds of games, but it doesn't bother Black.

11...d5

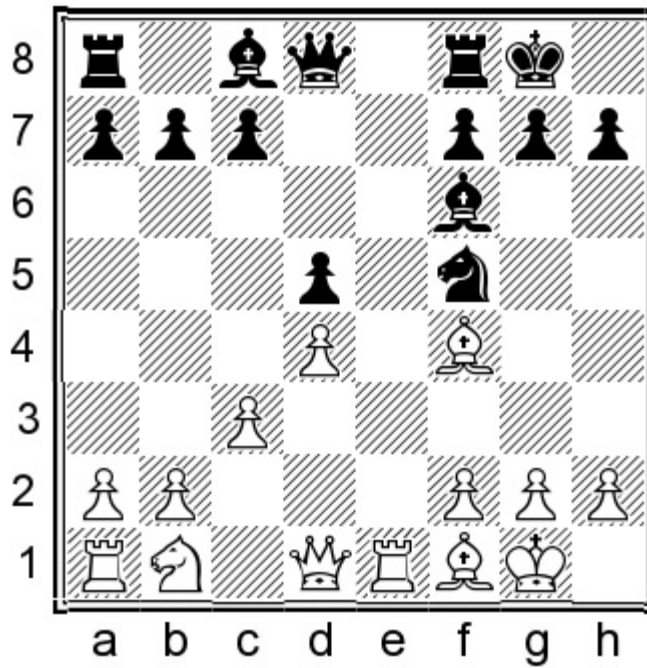
The knight will drop back to d6 at some point, and the light-squared bishop can easily be developed or exchanged.

12.♕f4

Alternatives are equally harmless, for instance:

12.♘d2 ♘d6 13.♗f3 ♕f5 14.♕f4 c6 15.a4 a5 16.h3 ♕e4 was equal in Janisch – Prozorovskij, corr. 2016.

12.♕d3 c6 13.♕f4 ♕g5 14.♖g4 ♕xf4 15.♗xf4 ♖h4 16.♗xh4 ♘xh4 17.♘d2 ♕f5 led to a drawish endgame in Smeets – Giri, Amsterdam 2012.



12...c6 13.♘d2 ♕g5 14.♙xg5

14.♖g4 ♙xf4 15.♗xf4 ♖d6 was also equal in Jovanovic – Stevic, Zagreb 2018.

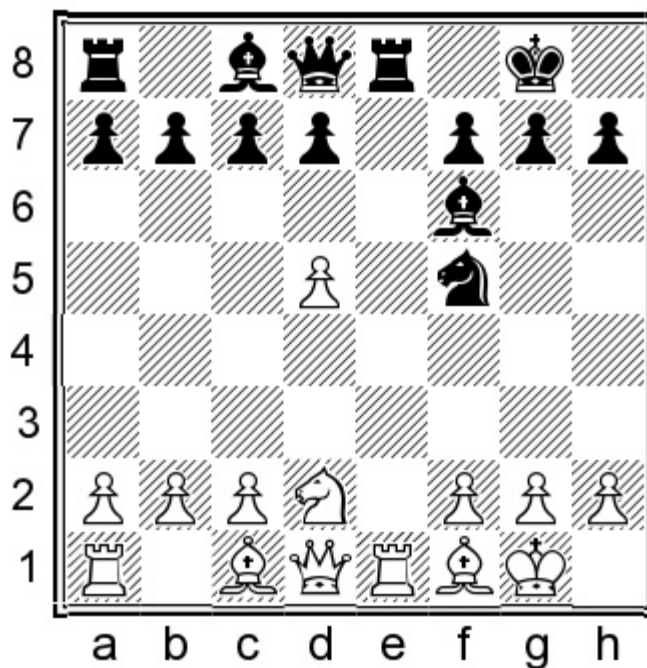
14...♗xg5 15.♘f3 ♖f6 16.♙d3 ♘d6 17.♗b3 ♙f5

Black was not worse at all in Vaibhav – Ovetchkin, Moscow 2012.

### 11...♖e8

White now has two main options: **B2221)** 12.♘d2 and **B2222)** 12.♖xe8†.

#### **B2221) 12.♘d2**



This has been slightly the more common of the two options under examination, although both

moves lead to approximately the same character of play.

### 12...♖xe1 13.♔xe1 d6 14.♘e4

The most consistent: White utilizes the e4-square and aims to liquidate the enemy bishop.

White also achieves nothing special with:

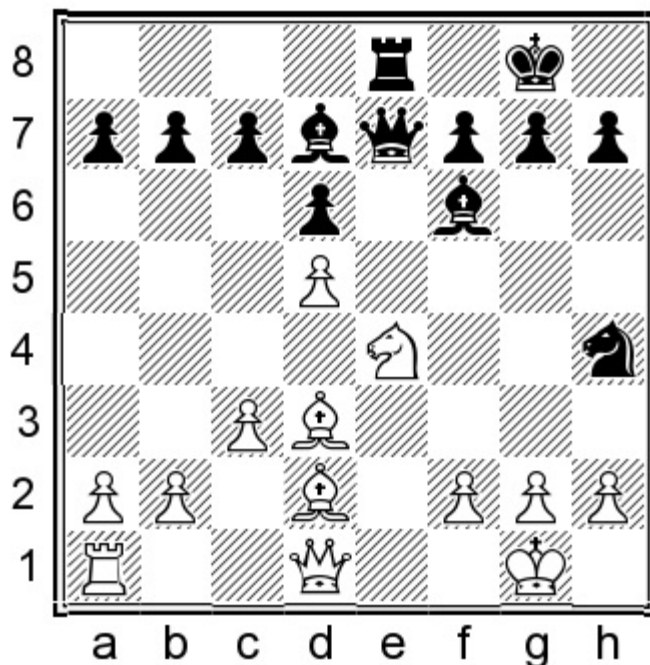
### 14.c3 ♘d7

14...c6 15.♘e4 ♘d7 16.dxc6 ♘xc6 17.♘f4 gave White a slight edge because of the weakness of the d-pawn in Tomashevsky – Esipenko, Moscow 2020.

### 15.♘e4 ♔e7 16.♘d3

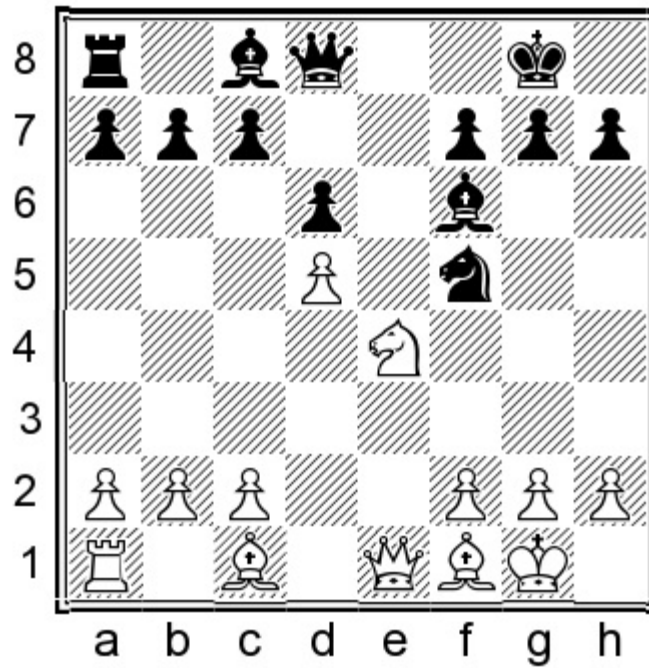
After 16.♘d2N 16...♖e8 17.♘xf6† ♔xf6 18.♔d1 ♘h4 Black's active piece play fully compensates for White's bishop pair.

### 16...♖e8 17.♔d1 ♘h4 18.♘d2



This was seen in Orsini – Mahia, Buenos Aires 2006. I think Black should have regrouped with:  
18...♘g6!?N 19.♔b3 b6 20.♘xf6† ♔xf6

Again with equal play, as the bishop pair does not count for much.



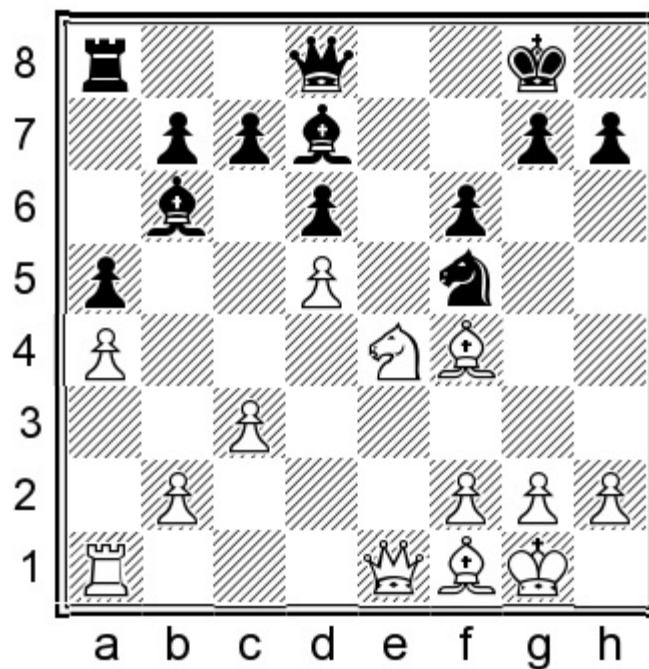
14...♙d4!

It turns out that Black has other plans for the bishop!

15.c3

Another game continued: 15.a4 a5 16.♖a3?! (White should settle for 16.c3 ♘b6 with a transposition to our main line below) 16...♙d7 White's rook development proved slightly dubious in Baron – Antipov, Internet (blitz) 2020.

15...♘b6 16.a4 a5 17.♙g5 f6 18.♙f4 ♙d7



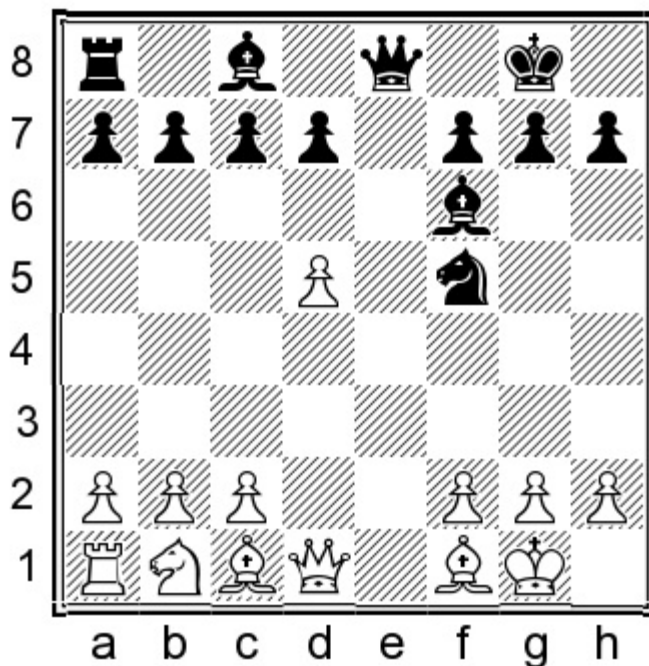
19.♔d3 ♖e7 20.♚e2 ♜e8

White has a slight space advantage but Black is fully compensated by the pressure along the a7-g1 diagonal, Luther – Otero Acosta, Havana 2011.

B2222) 12.♜xe8†

This was used successfully by Carlsen, so we will take it as our main line.

12...♚xe8



13.♚d3!?

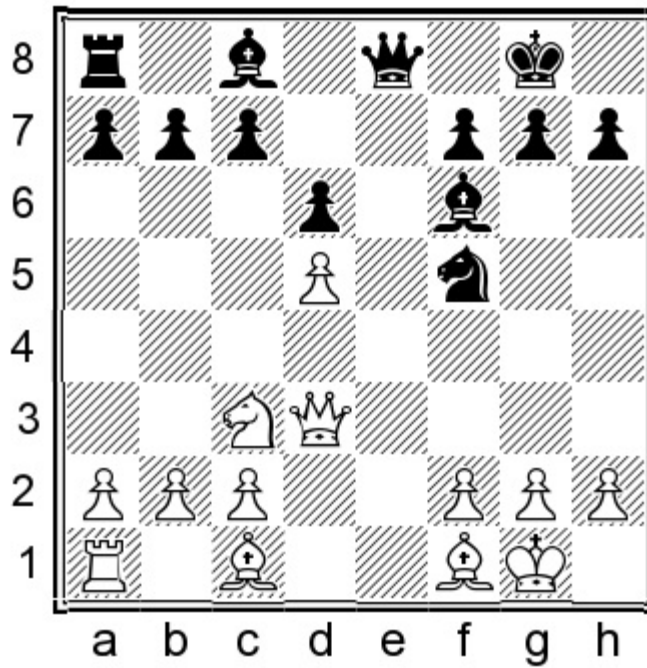
An unusual situation: none of White's pieces are developed, but the queen is nevertheless the next to move!

13.♘c3 was seen in Godzwon – Eynullayev, Internet 2020. Although it's not a bad move, the reason why it has not been played more often is surely 13...♙xc3N 14.bxc3 d6. Play could then continue 15.c4 b6 16.♙b2 f6 17.♙d3 ♙d7 when White's bishops are restricted, while the weakness of the fractured queenside pawns might tell in the long run.

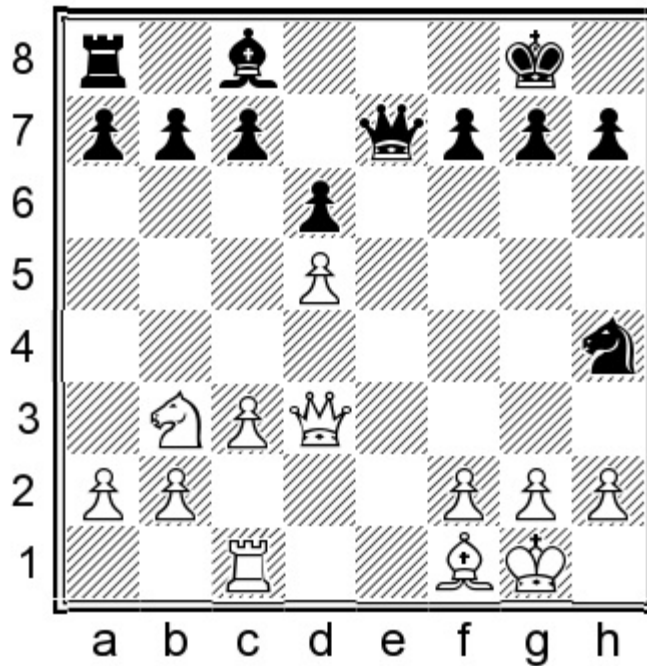
Also harmless is: 13.♘d2 d6 14.c3N (14.c4?! was played in Dragnev – Arzmann, Tschagguns 2012, when 14...♘d4N 15.♘b3 ♚e4 would have given White some problems with neutralizing the powerful bishop on f6.) 14...♘h4 15.♙d3 ♙f5 Black is comfortably equal.

13...d6 14.♘d2

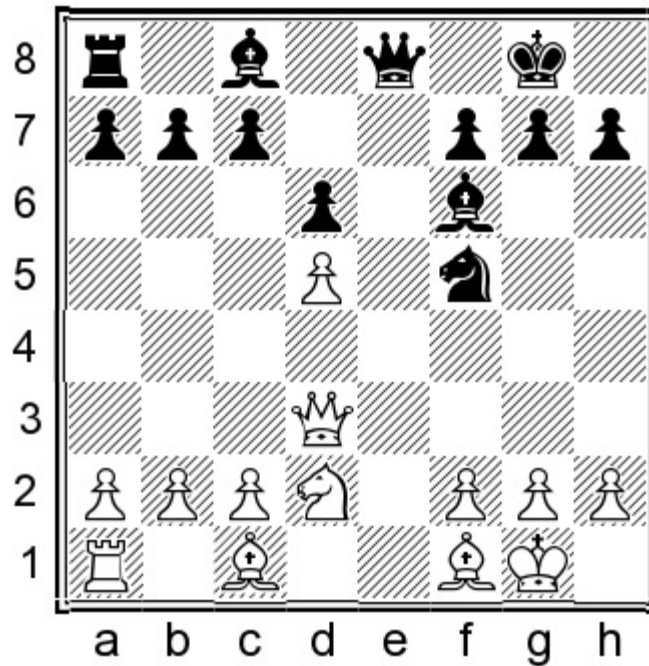
14.♘c3 was tried in Nichols – Larwinski, email 2013:



In my opinion, Black had no reason to reject the ambitious 14...♔e1!?N 15.♘e4 ♕e5 16.c3 ♘f4 when, with such passive pieces, White can hardly hope to claim any superiority. For instance: 17.♘d2 ♘h4 18.♘b3 ♕xc1 19.♖xc1 ♔e7



20.♔d2 ♕d7 21.♖e1 ♔f6 22.♘d4 ♘h6 White's slight space advantage is of no more than symbolic value.



### 14...c6!

Black takes advantage of the slight lead in development to challenge the cramping pawn on d5.

14...♔g5?! proved to be too passive after 15.♘f3 ♕xc1 16.♖xc1 ♕d7 17.♗e1 ♔d8 18.♙c4 when White maintained some pressure in Carlsen – Aronian, Stavanger 2018.

### 15.c3

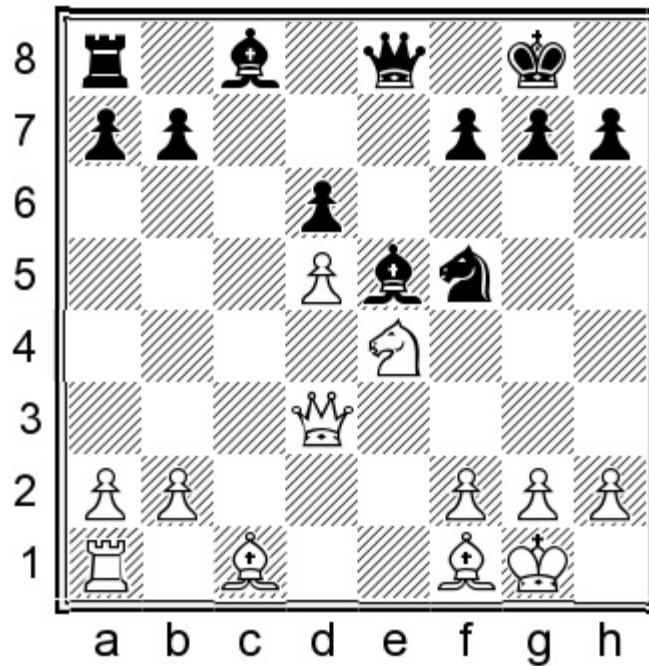
Restricting the mobility of the bishop on f6 is a safe and sensible choice.

15.dxc6N gives Black a choice: 15...♙xc6 might transpose to the main line after 16.c3, and 15...bxc6 is also playable.

Another game continued:

15.♘e4 ♕e5 16.c4

I also considered 16.♕d2 cxd5 17.♙xd5 ♙c6! 18.♕c4 ♕e6 19.♙xc6 bxc6 with equal play.  
16...cxd5 17.cxd5



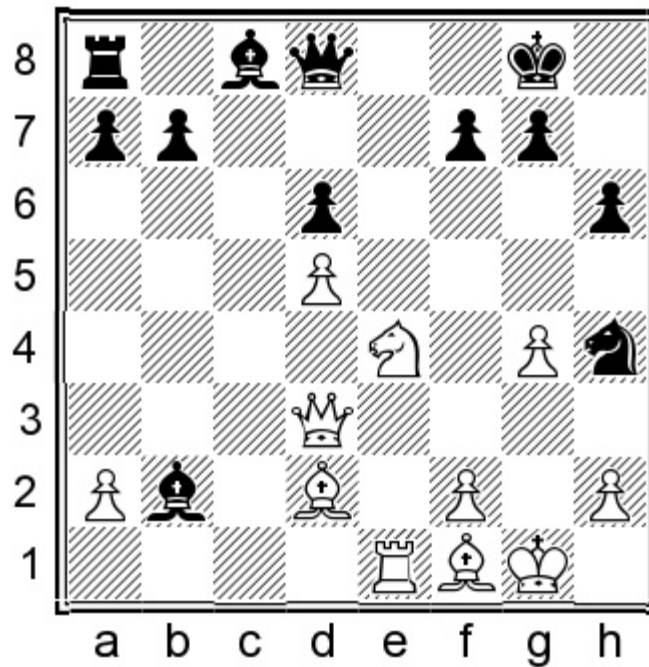
We have been following Oleksienko – Malakhov, Konya 2018. Here I would favour:  
17...h6N

Avoiding any back-rank troubles. Play may continue:

18.♙d2

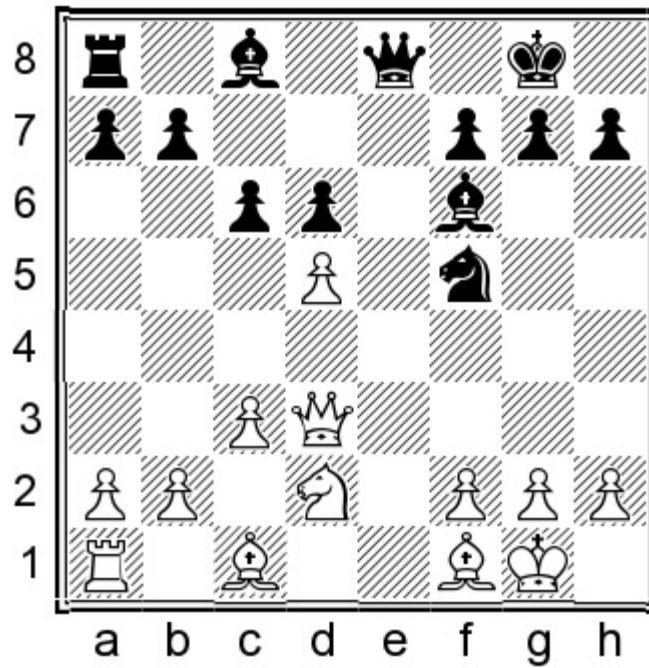
The timid 18.♖b1 ♘a4 19.a3 ♘d4 can only be problematic for White.

18...♙xb2 19.♖e1 ♘d8 20.g4 ♘h4



21.♘xd6 ♙d7 22.♘g3 b5

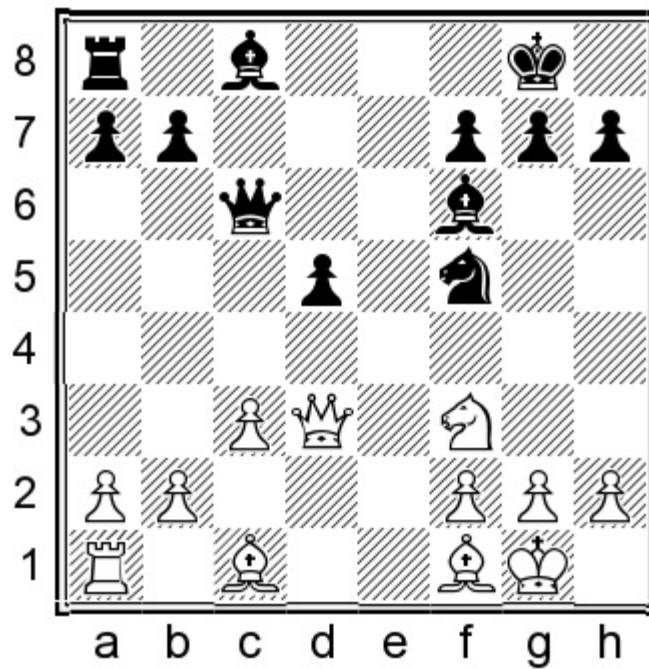
The passed d-pawn is a useful asset but White's king is somewhat exposed, so the chances are balanced.



**15...cxd5 16. ♖xd5 ♜c6 17. ♜d3**

Black had nothing to worry about after 17. ♖xc6 bxc6 18. ♘e4 ♙e7 19. ♙f4 d5 in Jones – Jakovenko, Khanty-Mansiysk 2019.

**17...d5 18. ♘f3**



**18...h6 19. ♙f4 ♙e6 20. ♞e1 ♜c4!**

Black's active piece play offered full compensation for the isolated pawn in Papp – Malakhov, Germany 2020.

## Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with two important options after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♗xe4. Firstly, 5.♚e2 has been known for more than 150 years and is still seen at high levels from time to time. I offer the rare 5...♗g5!? 6.♗xg5 ♚xg5 7.d4 ♚e7, and after 8.dxe5 ♗d4 Black wins the central pawn. As further analysis has demonstrated, White's compensation can only suffice for equality at best.

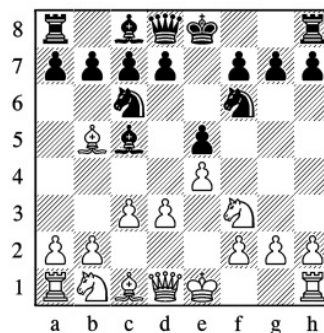
The main topic of the chapter was 5.♞e1, one of White's most common ways of avoiding the Berlin Endgame. Even though it leads to relatively quiet positions with a symmetrical pawn structure, some of the lines are explored so deeply that top players sometimes come up with novelties on move 30 or even 40!

In the main position after 5...♗d6 6.♗xe5 ♙e7 7.♙f1 ♗xe5 8.♞xe5 0-0, White has two major options. Firstly, after 9.♗c3 ♗e8 10.♗d5 ♙d6 11.♞e1 c6 12.♗e3 ♙e7 13.c4, I offer the relatively uncommon 13...♙f6!?, leading to a symmetrical pawn structure where White's attempts to put pressure on the d5-pawn can be neutralized with a novelty on move 17.

The more popular 9.d4 is well met by 9...♙f6 10.♞e1 ♗f5. The critical continuation is then 11.d5, establishing a certain space advantage for White. However, after 11...♞e8 Black's dark-squared bishop and the possible ...c7-c6 break offer Black enough counterplay.

# Chapter 6

## Closed System



### 5.c3

### Variation Index

1.c4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.d3 ♙c5 5.c3

5...0-0

A) 6.♙xc6 118

B) 6.♙g5 ♙e7 7.0-0 d6 122

B1) 8.♘bd2 122

B2) 8.h3 124

C) 6.0-0 d5 126

C1) 7.♙xc6 126

C2) 7.♚e2 128

C3) 7.exd5 ♚xd5 8.♙c4 ♚d8 130

C31) 9.♘bd2 131

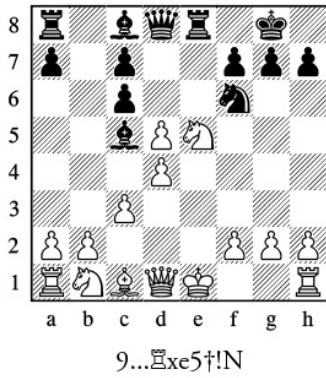
C32) 9.b4!? 133

C4) 7.♘bd2 ♚e8!? 8.exd5 a6! 135

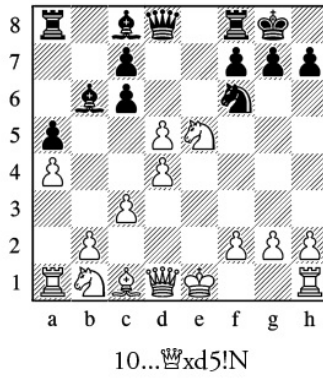
C41) 9.♙xc6 136

C42) 9.♙c4 138

A) note to 8.d4



A) note to 9.0-0



C31) note to 10.We2

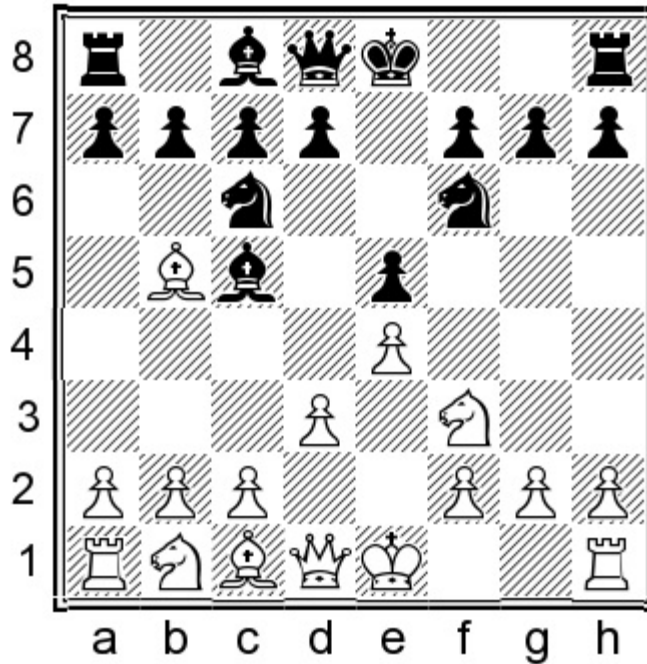


### 1.e4 e5 2.f3 c6 3.b5 f6 4.d3

This is by far White's most popular alternative to 4.0-0, and is often seen at the highest level. White securely defends the central pawn and keeps the centre closed – although as we will see, things can still become quite dynamic in some variations.

### 4...Ke5

I favour this active move which prepares ...Nd4.



### 5.c3

This is White's most popular choice by far. It is useful to prevent the aforementioned knight jump and prepare a future central expansion with d3-d4. Sometimes White may disturb the enemy bishop with b2-b4.

White has tried several other moves, which will be analysed in the next chapter.

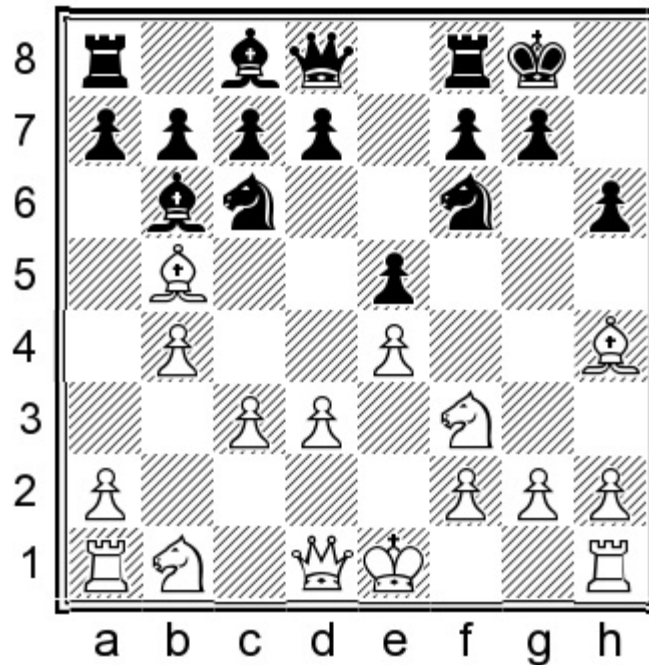
### 5...0-0

Black continues to develop naturally and efficiently. In almost all cases, we will follow up with ...d7-d5. From this popular tabiya, there are three main options to analyse. We will start by seeing what happens when White accepts the pawn sacrifice with **A) 6.♙xc6**, before moving on to **B) 6.♙g5** and finally the main line of **C) 6.0-0**.

Here are a few alternatives where White continues developing while delaying castling:

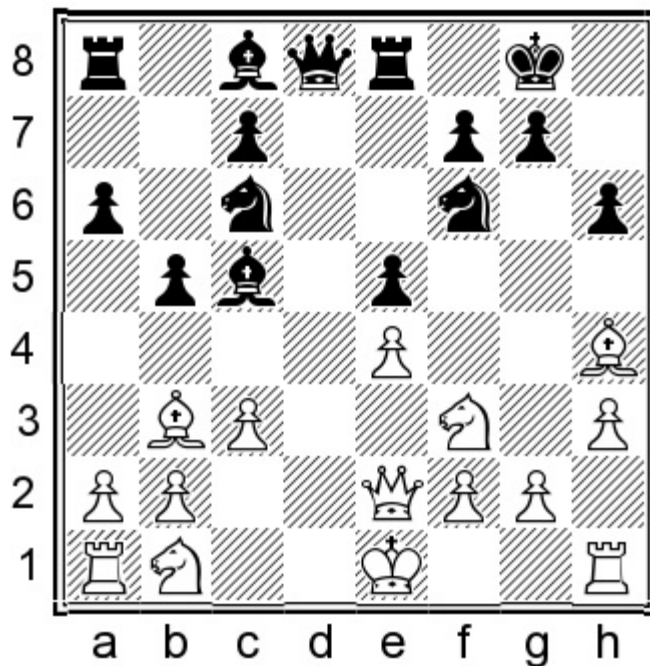
6.♙e3?! is dubious in view of 6...♙xe3 7.fxe3 d5 and White already had to struggle for equality in Zavyalov – Didenko, Kimry 2014.

6.b4 seems premature. After the automatic 6...♙b6, a good example continued: 7.♙g5 h6 8.♙h4



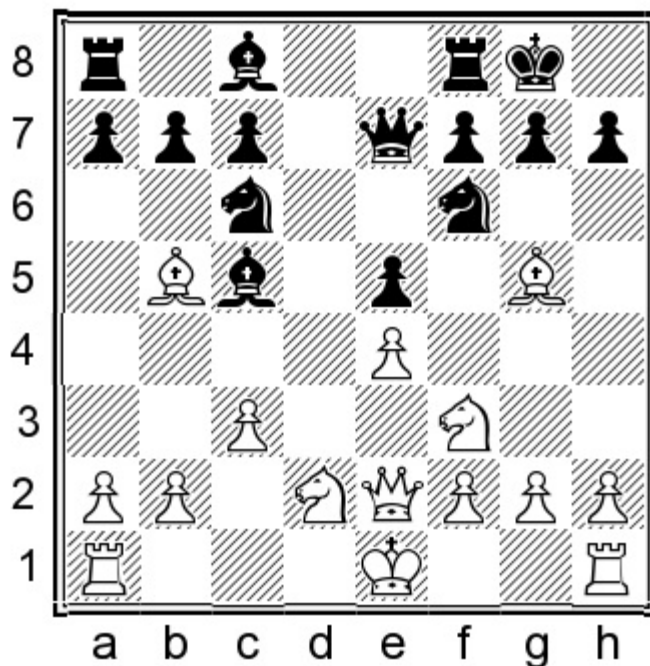
8...a5! Exploiting the weakness created by White's 6th move. 9.♙xc6 dxc6 White's queenside structure was too exposed in Balaram – Thomas, corr. 2010.

6.h3 d5! doesn't seem to offer White any additional possibilities due to having delayed castling. For instance: 7.♙e2 (7.♘bd2 ♖e8 8.0-0 d5 7.♘bd2.) 7...♖e8 8.♙g5 a6 9.♙a4 b5 10.♙b3 dxe4 11.dxe4 h6 12.♙h4 The natural play by both sides led to this position in Bartel – Kryvoruchko, Lublin 2012. I think Black should have continued:



12...♙d6!N 13.♘bd2 ♞h5 Exploiting the poor placement of the bishop on h4, with better chances for Black.

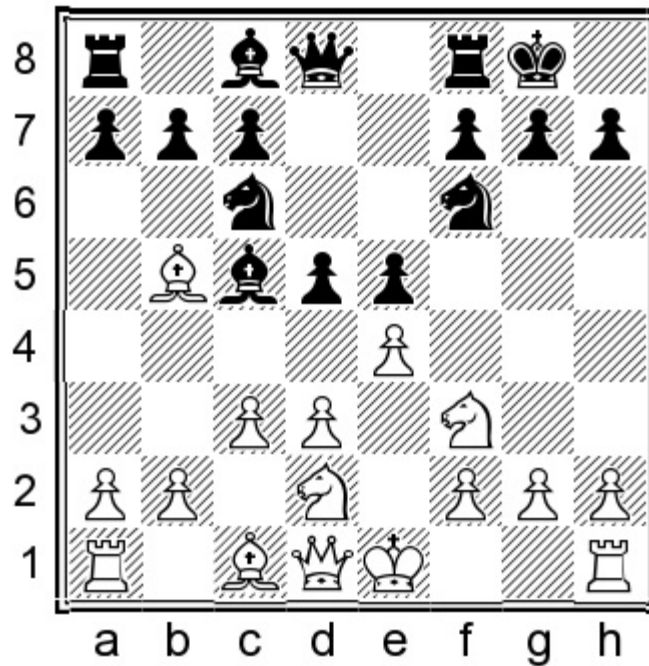
6.♙e2 also doesn't bother Black, who can proceed as normal with: 6...d5 7.♙g5 (7.0-0 is covered via 6.0-0 d5 7.♙e2.) 7...dxe4 8.dxe4 ♙e7 9.♘bd2 Black may take advantage of the somewhat vulnerable location of White's dark-squared bishop with:



9...♞d8! 10.b4 ♙b6 11.♞c4 ♞e6 12.♞xb6 axb6 13.0-0 ♞xg5 14.♞xg5 ♙g4 White found himself in a worse position due to the queenside weaknesses in Smirin – Bologan, Poikovsky 2015.

6.♞bd2 d5

This position usually converts to a main line, but we will consider an independent case.



7.exd5

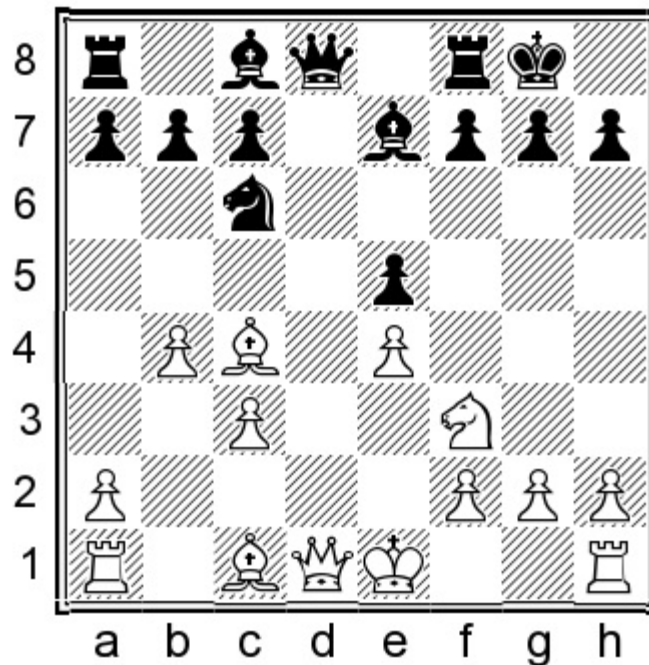
7.0-0 is covered via 6.0-0 d5 7.♘bd2.

7...♙xd5 8.♙c4 ♚d8 9.b4 ♘e7 10.♘e4

10.0-0 once again transposes to the 6.0-0 coverage.

10...♘xe4 11.dxe4

This position was reached in Maerten – Fabri, corr. 2017. At this moment I mostly like the following plan:

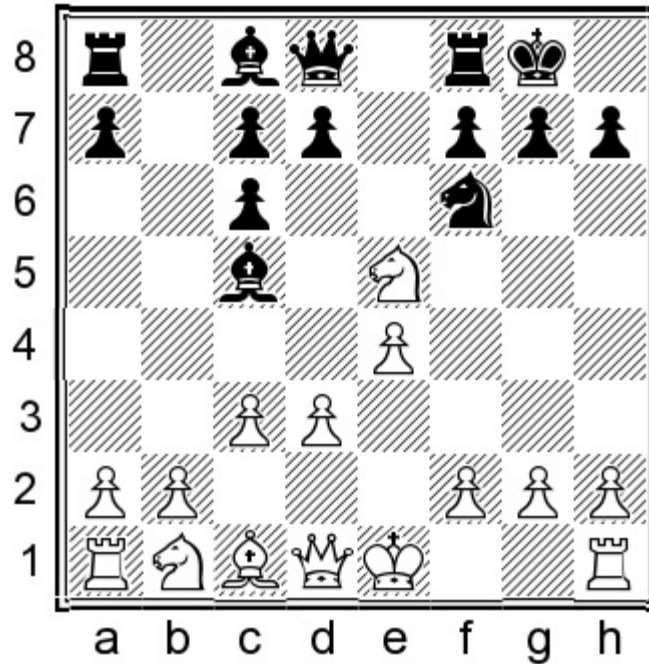


11...♙d6!?N

Notice that 11...♙xd1† 12.♙xd1 ♙d6 13.♙c2 offers White a minimal advantage in the endgame.  
12.0-0 ♙f6 13.♙e3 h6 14.♘d2 ♘e7

Black intends to transfer the knight to f4, while White's play on the queenside is rather slow.

A) 6.♙xc6 bxc6 7.♘xe5



Accepting the pawn sacrifice is a principled decision, but Black should obtain plenty of compensation.

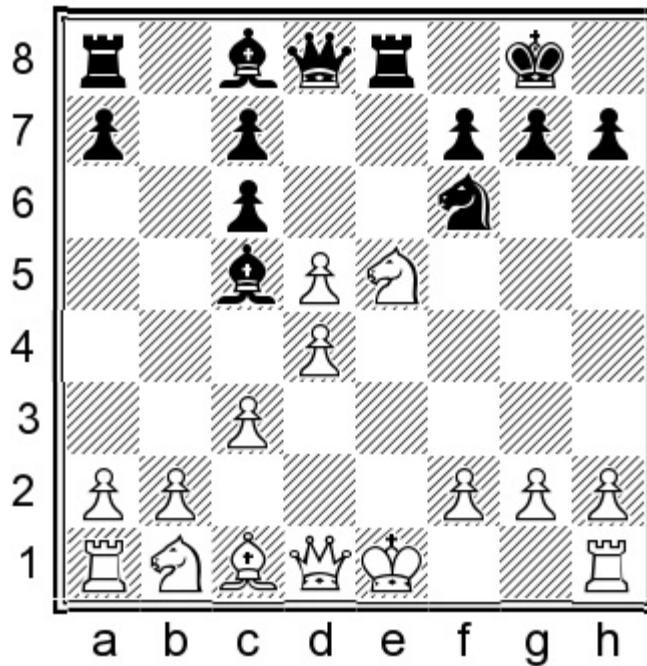
7...d5 8.d4

This natural move is clearly best.

8.0-0 is analysed under 6.0-0 d5 7.♙xc6.

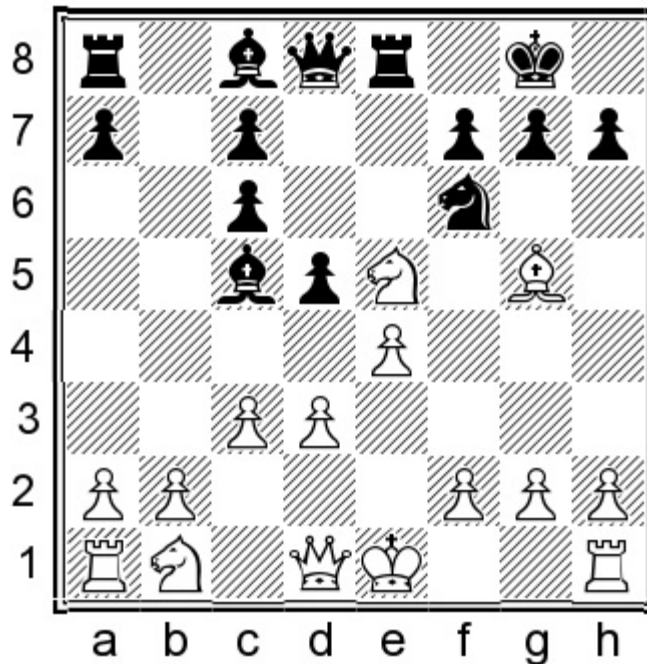
8.♘xc6? is too greedy in view of 8...♙e8 9.♘d4 dxe4 10.0-0 ♙a6 when White's position desperately lacks development.

Even worse is 8.exd5? ♙e8 9.d4, as played in Mestnikov – Sakalli, St Petersburg 2016. Black has a few promising options but the most accurate and elegant is:

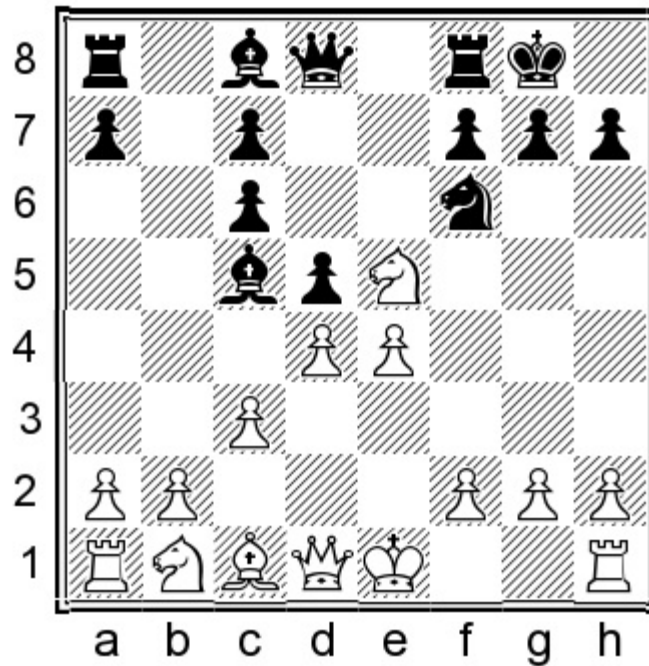


9...♖xe5†!N 10.dxe5 ♘g4 11.♙e3 (11.0-0 ♚h4 is crushing; 11.♖f1 ♘xe5 also gives Black a decisive attack.) 11...♙xe3 12.fxe3 ♘xe3 13.♚e2 ♚g5 Black is winning.

8.♙g5?! ♖e8 is also highly dubious for White:

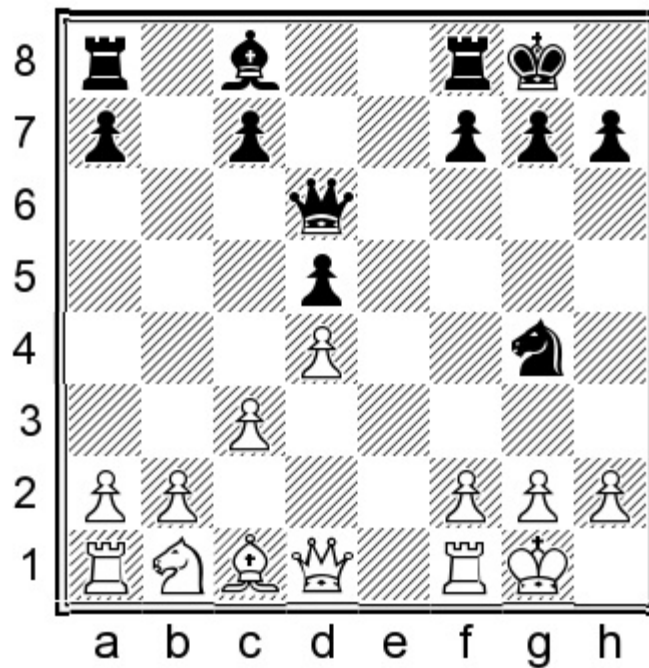


9.f4 (9.d4 is brutally refuted by 9...♖xe5! 10.dxe5 ♙xf2†! 11.♔f1 ♙a6† 12.♔xf2 ♘xe4† with a deadly attack.) 9...dxe4 10.d4 ♙b6 11.♘d2 c5 With White's king stuck in the centre, Black had a powerful initiative in Ivanchuk – Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2001.



### 8...♙b6

8...♙d6!? is an interesting sideline which also deserves attention: 9.♘xc6 (9.exd5?! is playing with fire. 9...♙a6! 10.dxc6 This position was reached in Vocaturo – Ni Hua, Benasque 2013, and now the energetic 10...♖e8!N 11.♙e3 ♘d5 12.♘d2 ♖b8 would have offered Black a dangerous initiative.) 9...♗e8 10.e5 ♗xc6 11.0-0 ♘g4 12.exd6 ♗xd6

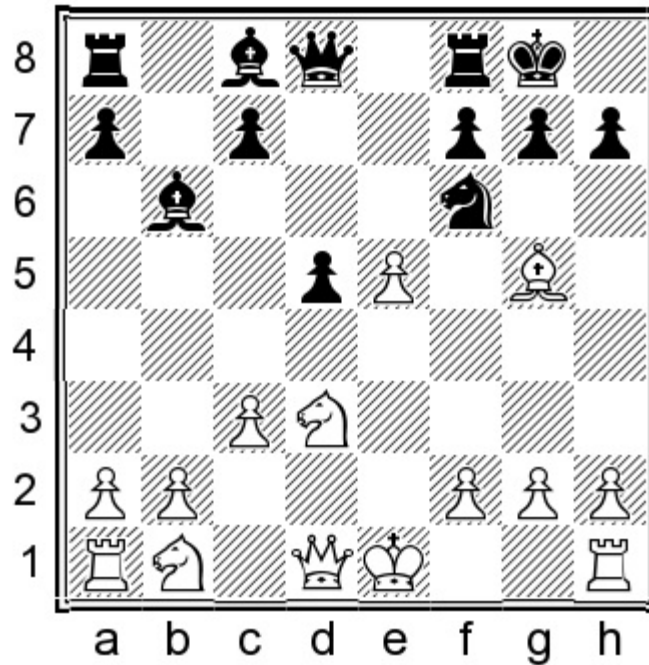


13.g3 ♗g6 14.♙f4 ♙a6 15.♖e1 ♖ae8 Black's active piece play and the weak light squares around White's king provided Black with decent play for the pawn in Lei Tingjie – Xiao Yiyi, China 2018.

### 9.0-0

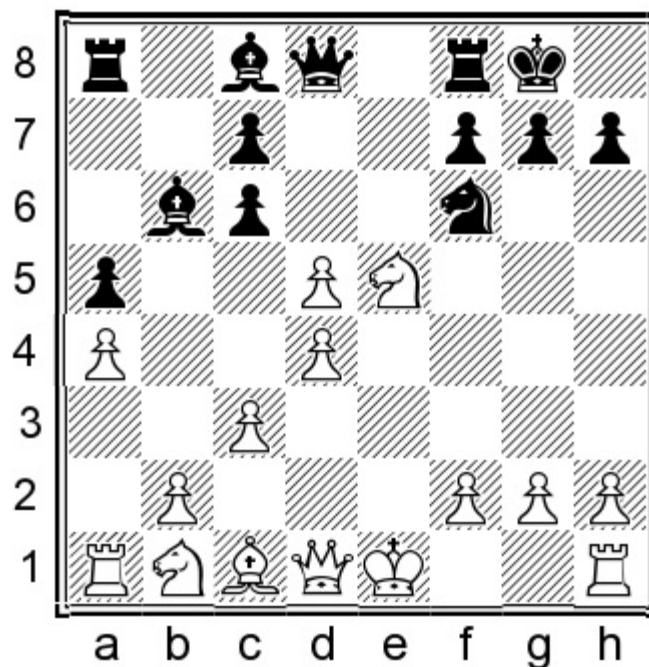
Three other moves have been tried:

9. ♖g5?! is well met by: 9...c5! 10.dxc5 (10.0-0 cxd4 11.cxd4 dxe4 also favours Black.) 10...♙xc5  
 11.♘d3 ♙b6 12.e5



12...♙e8! This accurate move enables Black to regain the pawn in a favourable situation. 13.♙xf6  
 (13.0-0 ♘e4 14.♙f4 f6 gives Black some initiative.) 13...gxf6 14.♙e2 ♙f5 15.0-0 fxe5 Black was  
 much better due to the bishop pair and strong centre in Lagarde – Heimann, Emmendingen 2017.

9.a4 is sometimes played, but after 9...a5 White can hardly benefit from the inclusion of these pawn  
 moves. For instance, 10.exd5 was seen in Vasselon – Pulido Pino, corr. 2018, when Black should  
 have played:

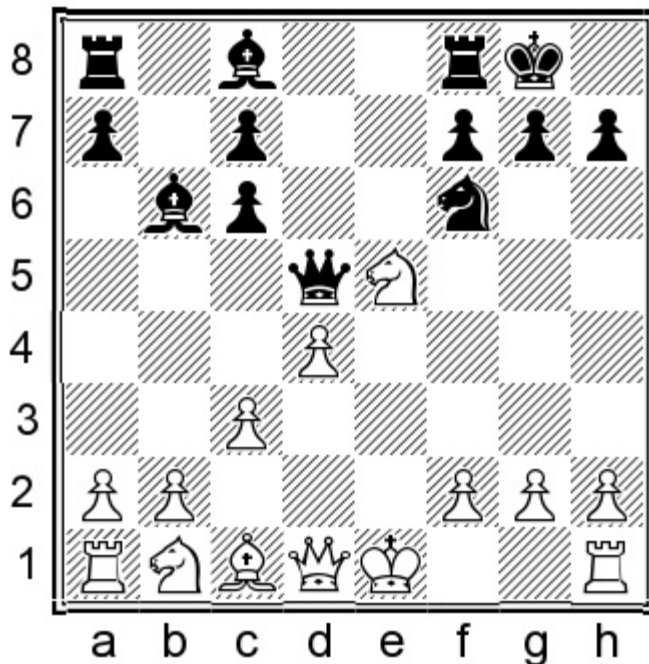


10...♙xd5!N 11.0-0 c5 12.♙e3 ♙b7 (12...cxd4 13.cxd4 ♙b7 14.♙f3 ♙xf3 15.♘xf3 ♙xf3 16.gxf3 ♖fd8

also looks fine, just as in the Lanc – Lipka game quoted below.) 13. ♖f3 ♘e4 With excellent compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

9. exd5 ♙xd5

White has scored well from this position, but objectively Black has no cause for concern. For instance:



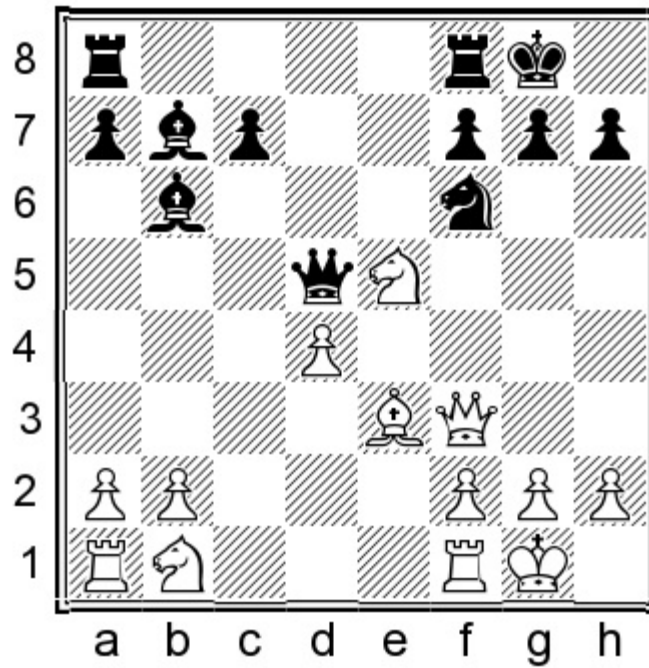
10. 0-0

10. ♖f3 c5 11. ♖xd5 ♘xd5 12. dxc5 ♙xc5 13. 0-0 ♜e8 14. ♘d3 has been played a few times, and now 14... ♙b6 and 14... ♙d6 are both equally good, with full compensation for Black in both cases.

10... c5 11. ♙e3 cxd4

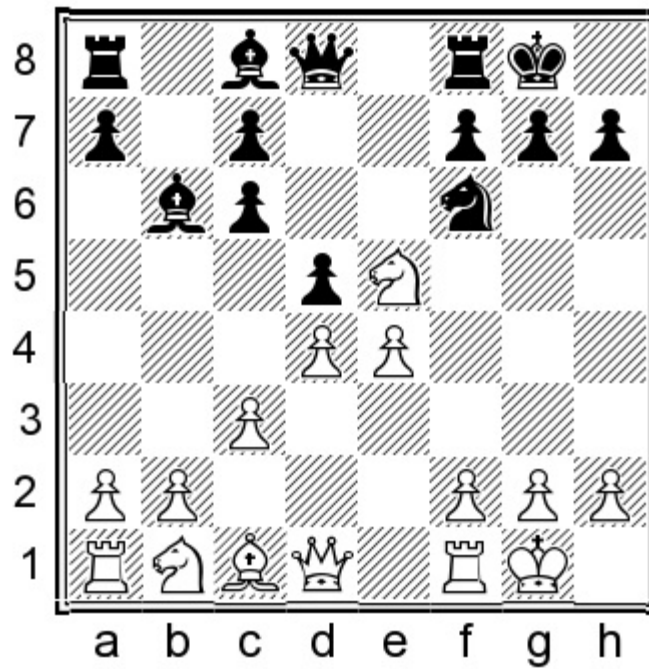
11... ♙b7!?N 12. ♖f3 ♘e4 offers good play for a pawn, just as in 9. a4 a5 10. exd5 above.

12. cxd4 ♙b7 13. ♖f3



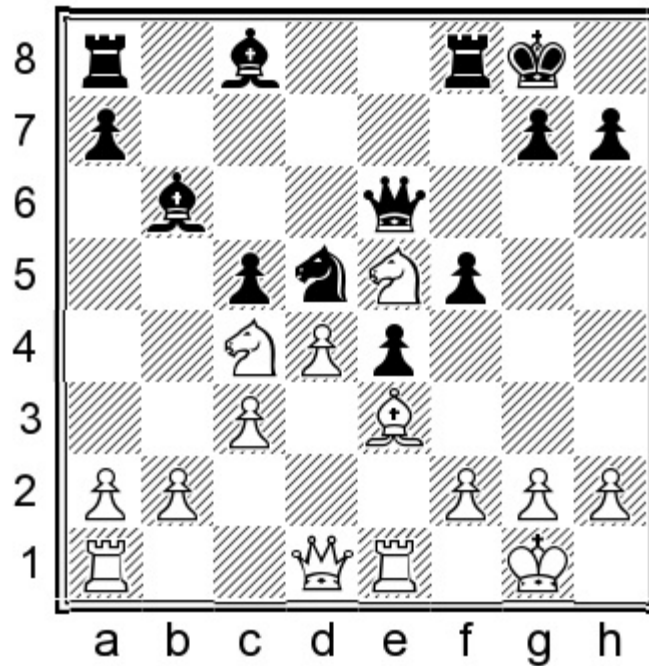
13...♔xf3 14.♘xf3 ♙xf3 15.gxf3 ♖fd8

Black regained the pawn and fully equalized in Lanc – Lipka, Slovakia 2007.



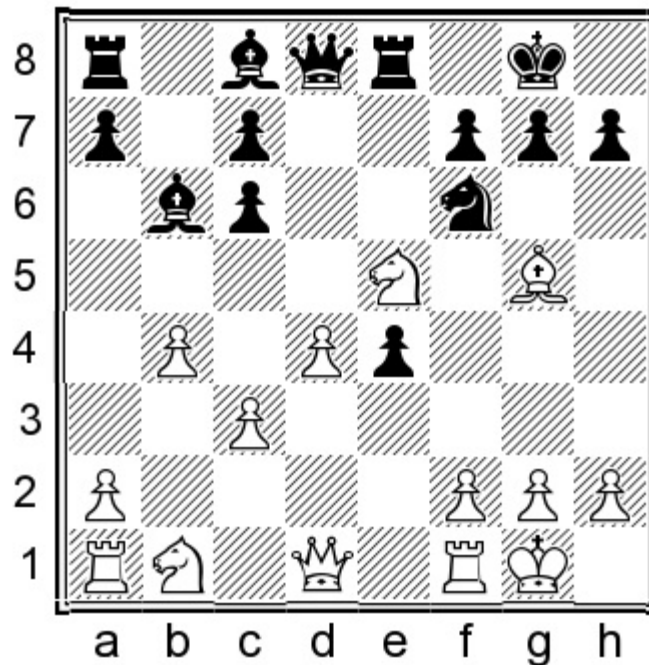
9...dxe4 10.♙g5

10.♘xc6 is an obvious move to check, but after 10...♔e8 11.♘e5 c5 White's lack of development starts to tell. A good example continued: 12.♖e1 ♔e6 13.♙e3 ♘d5 14.♘d2 f5 15.♘dc4

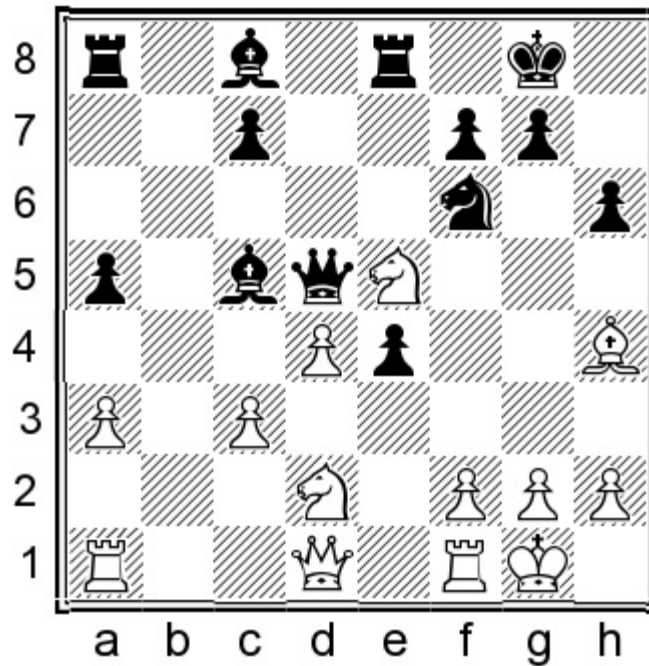


In I. Sokolov – Lorparizangeneh, Guilan 2016, Black should have maintained the tension by means of 15...♙c7!N 16.♚a4 f4 17.♙d2 ♘b7 when the white king is clearly under pressure.

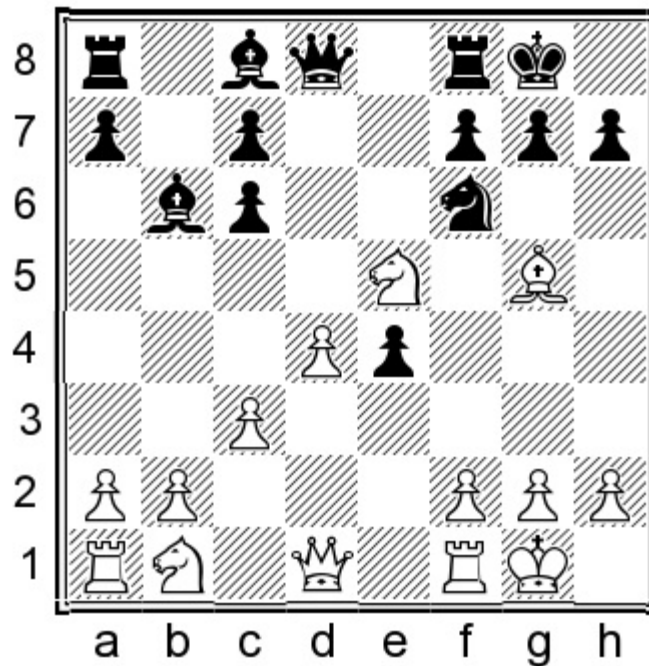
Also worthy of attention is 10.b4!? ♖e8 11.♙g5 as seen in Kudrin – Vigorito, Reno 2004. I think Black should have taken care of the poor bishop on b6 by means of:



11...h6!?N 12.♙h4 a5! 13.♘d2 ♚d5 14.a3 c5! Continuing to liberate the bishop. 15.bxc5 ♙xc5



Black should be fine. For instance, 16.♙xf6 gxf6 17.♘g4 ♚g5 with mutual chances.



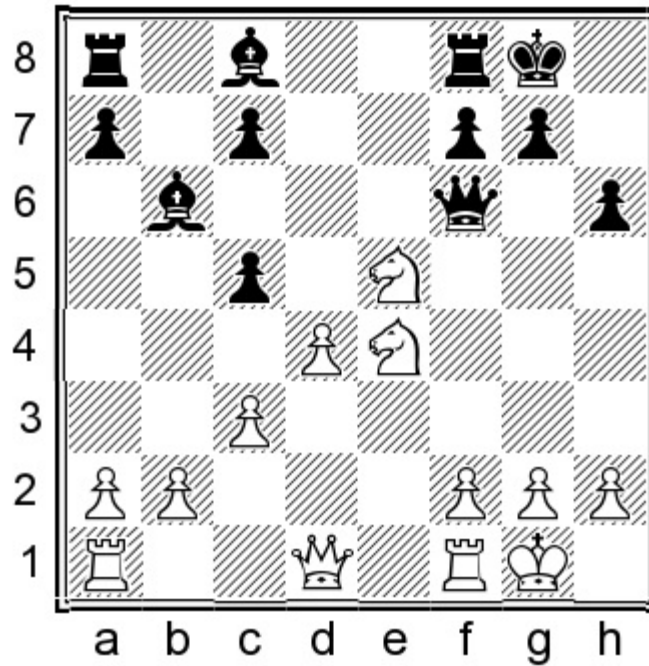
### 10...h6

I find this more attractive than 10...c5 11.♘d2 cxd4?! (it is not too late for 11...h6, when 12.♙xf6 ♚xf6 transposes to our main line below) 12.♘xe4 dxc3 13.♚f3 when Black was clearly under pressure in Wei Yi – Karjakin, Wijk aan Zee 2017.

### 11.♙xf6 ♚xf6 12.♘d2 c5!

It is important to liberate the bishop on b6, while generally opening up the game for the bishop pair.

13. ♖xe4



13... ♕e6!?N

13... ♕e7 14. ♖e1 cxd4 15. cxd4 ♖b7 16. ♖c5 ♖xc5 17. dxc5 ♕xc5 also reached an acceptable position for Black in Luther – Strache, Germany 2014, but I find the text move more convincing.

14. ♖e1 cxd4 15. cxd4 ♖d8

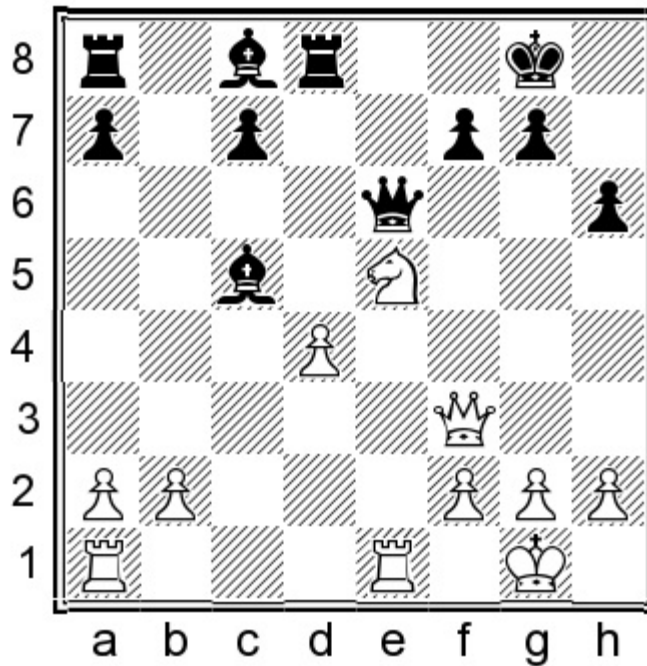
The weak d-pawn and powerful bishops offer Black full compensation. For instance:

16. ♖c5

16. ♕f3 ♖b7 17. ♖c5 ♖xc5 transposes.

16... ♖xc5 17. ♕f3

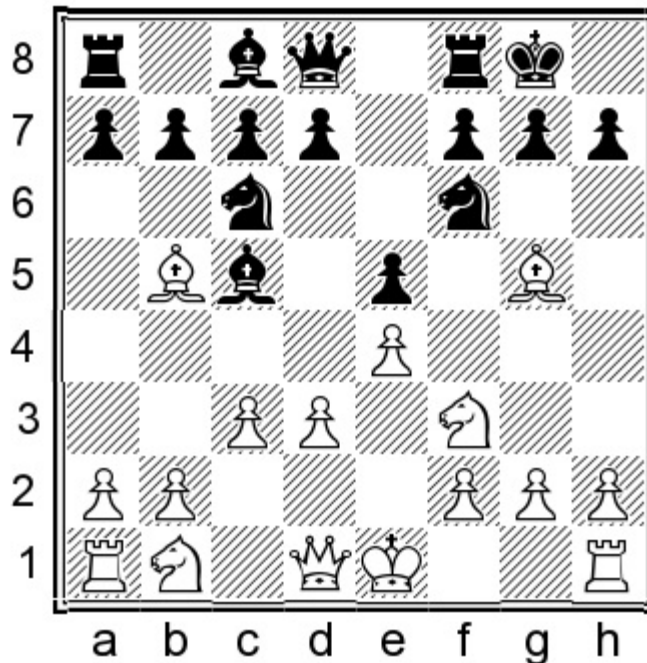
Against 17. ♖d3 Black may even consider 17... ♖xd4!? 18. ♖xe6 ♖xe6 19. ♕e2 ♖ab8, obtaining full compensation for the queen.



17...♙b7 18.♚xb7 ♘xd4 19.♞c6 ♜f6 20.♞xd4 ♜xd4

Black's activity along the d-file fully compensates for the slightly inferior pawn structure.

### B) 6.♘g5



Before developing the b1-knight to d2, White activates the bishop.

### 6...♘e7

I suggest breaking the pin without committing any of the kingside pawns. The loss of a tempo with ...♘c5-e7 is justified by the rather closed nature of the position, as well as the fact that the bishop isn't so well placed on g5.

Another interesting option is 6...h6 7.♔h4 g5!? (7...♔e7 is also playable, with similar ideas as in our main line) 8.♔g3 d6 9.♖bd2 ♗h5, leading to highly complex and double-edged positions.

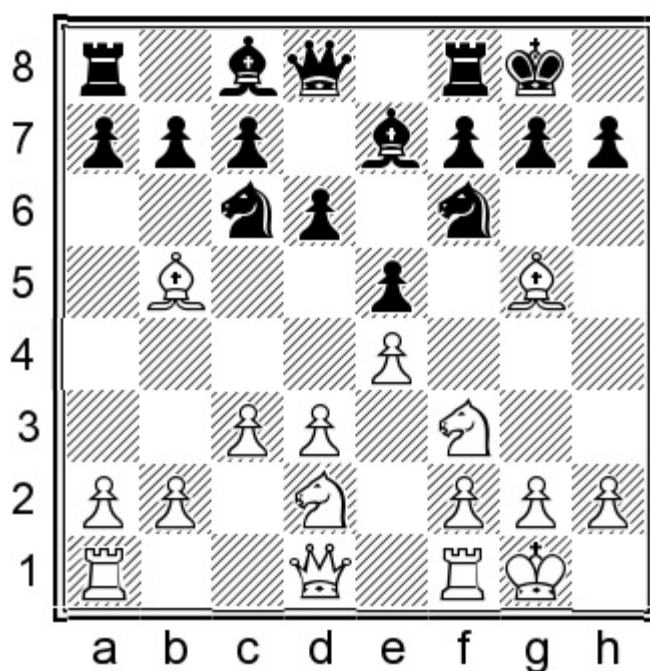
### 7.0-0

7.♖bd2 d6 8.0-0 is another possible move order, transposing to the next line below.

### 7...d6

White has two main options: **B1)** 8.♖bd2 and **B2)** 8.h3.

#### B1) 8.♖bd2



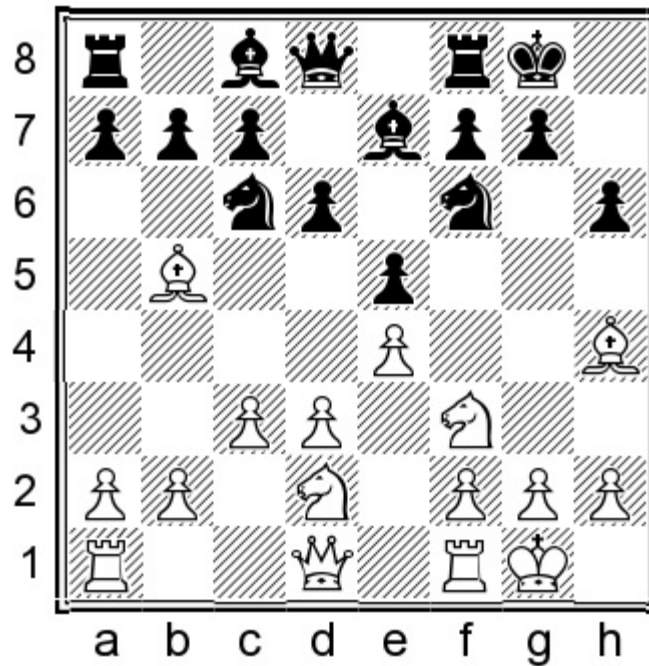
### 8...h6

Unlike in the 8.h3 line below, here the bishop retreat to e3 can be met by ...♗g4, so the most logical choice is:

### 9.♔h4N

Despite being a novelty, this immediately transposes to a number of games where ...h7-h6 was played earlier.

9.♔xf6 ♔xf6 10.♔xc6 bxc6 was seen in Petenyi – Michalik, Slovakia 2015. Although White's position is not so terrible, it is hard to imagine how White can benefit from trading off one or both bishops for the enemy knights, and Black should be happy to reach such a situation.

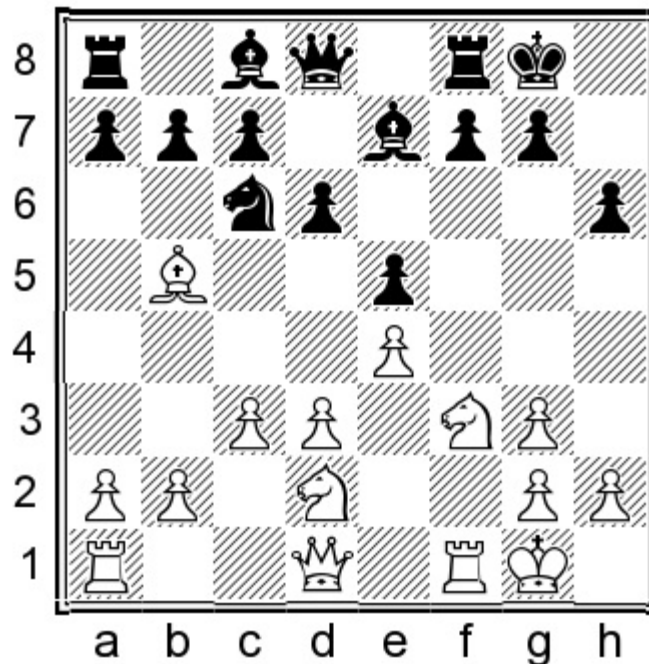


### 9...Nh5

With this typical manoeuvre, Black offers to trade pieces while eyeing the f4-square.

### 10. Bxe7

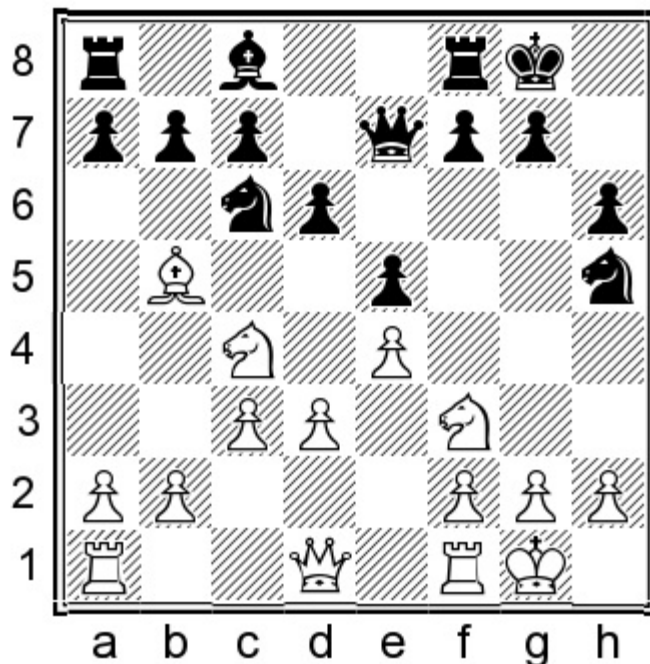
10. Bg3!? Handing over the bishop pair is connected with a definite strategic risk. However, it has been tried by a few strong players. 10... Nxc3 11. fxc3!? (11. hxg3 Bf6 12. Re1 Ne7 13. d4 c6 14. Bd3 Bg4 15. Qc2 Qc7 16. a4 a5 was fine for Black in Fedorchuk – Bindrich, Cappelle-la-Grande 2010.)



The quirky f-pawn recapture was employed in Jakovenko – Belyakov, Sochi 2017. I found an interesting regrouping plan for Black: 11... Nb8!? 12. Bc4 Nd7 13. d4 c6 White has a space advantage and open f-file, but Black is fully compensated by the superior pawn structure and bishop

pair, both of which might tell in the long run.

10...♙xe7 11.♘c4



11...f5!

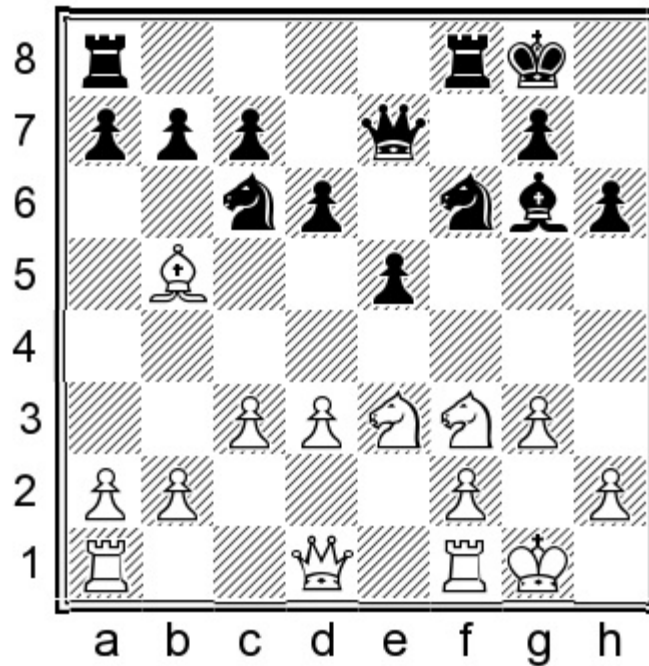
I find this the most attractive way of handling the position. Black takes advantage of the early ...♘f6-h5 and initiates some play on the kingside.

A World Championship match game continued 11...♘f4 12.♘e3 ♙f6 13.g3 ♘h3† 14.♔h1 ♘e7 15.♙c4 c6 16.♙b3 and White subsequently managed to seize the initiative and score a crucial victory in Carlsen – Karjakin, New York (10) 2016. However, at this stage the position is approximately equal.

12.exf5

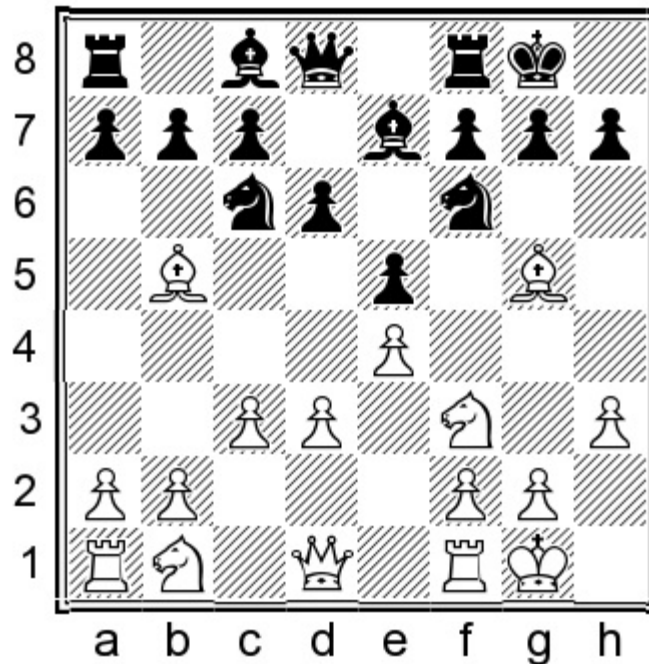
I also considered 12.♘fxe5N 12...♘xe5 13.♙xh5 ♘xd3 14.♘e3 fxe4 15.♙d5† ♔h8 16.♙xd3 exd3 17.♙xd3 ♙e6 when White, once again, achieves no advantage.

12...♙xf5 13.♘e3 ♙g6 14.g3 ♘f6



Black had no problems at all in Komarica – Diaz Rubi, email 2018.

### B2) 8.h3



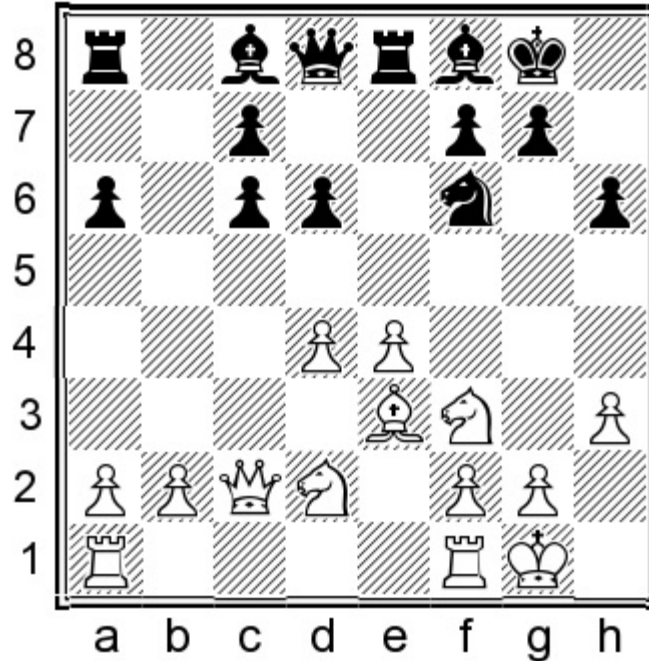
The main purpose of this move is to prepare a different retreat square for the bishop.

### 8...h6 9.♙e3

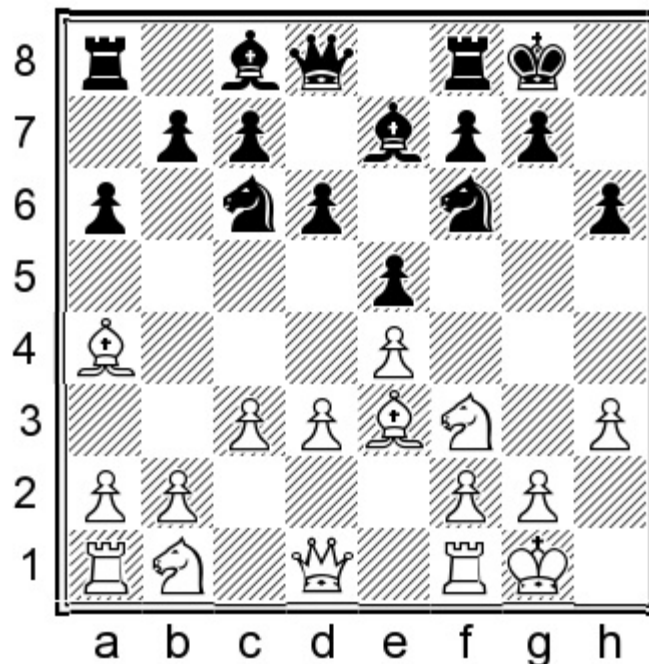
9.♙h4?! makes no sense in view of the familiar 9...♘h5! 10.♙xe7 ♚xe7 11.♖e1 ♘f4 when White's king could soon come under pressure, as it will not be possible to dislodge the knight from f4 for a while.

**9...a6 10.♙a4**

10.♙xc6 bxc6 is quite a serious concession by White, as was demonstrated in the following game:  
11.♘bd2 ♖e8 12.d4 Without this advance, White's set-up would be rather passive. 12...exd4 13.cxd4  
♙f8 14.♚c2

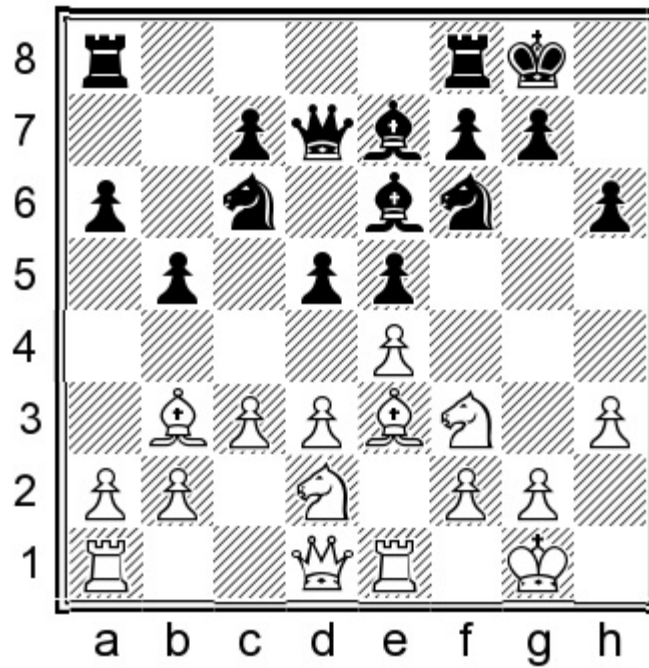


14...♘xe4! 15.♘xe4 ♙f5 Black's unopposed light-squared bishop started to make its presence felt in Shirov – Kramnik, Douglas 2018.



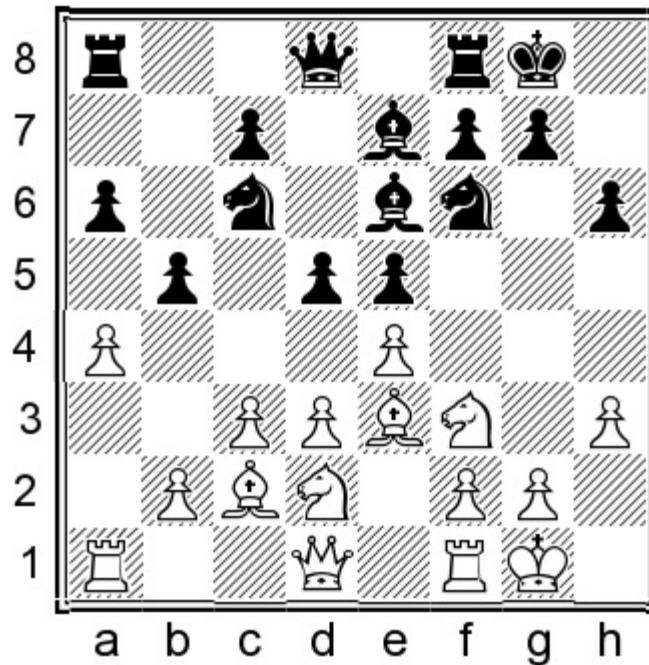
**10...b5 11.♙c2**

11.♙b3 is also well met by 11...d5, when a good example continued: 12.♘bd2 ♙e6 13.♖e1 ♚d7  
All Black's pieces are well centralized, so Black should not face any problems.



14. exd5 ♙xd5 15. d4 ♙xb3 16. ♖xb3 exd4 17. ♖bxd4 ♜ad8 Black was fine in Meono – Vasquez, Lima 2002.

11...d5 12. ♗bd2 ♙e6 13. a4



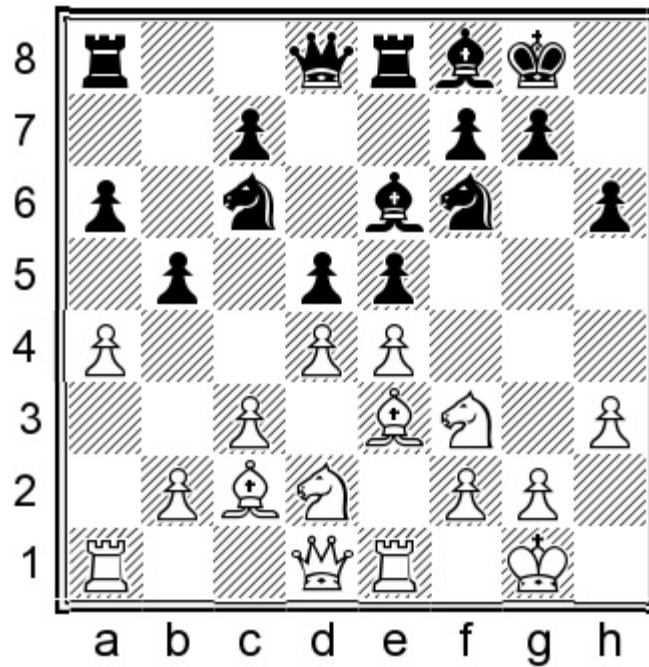
We have been following Shirov – Giri, St Petersburg (rapid) 2018. I like the following way of improving Black's position:

13...♞e8N 14. ♞e1

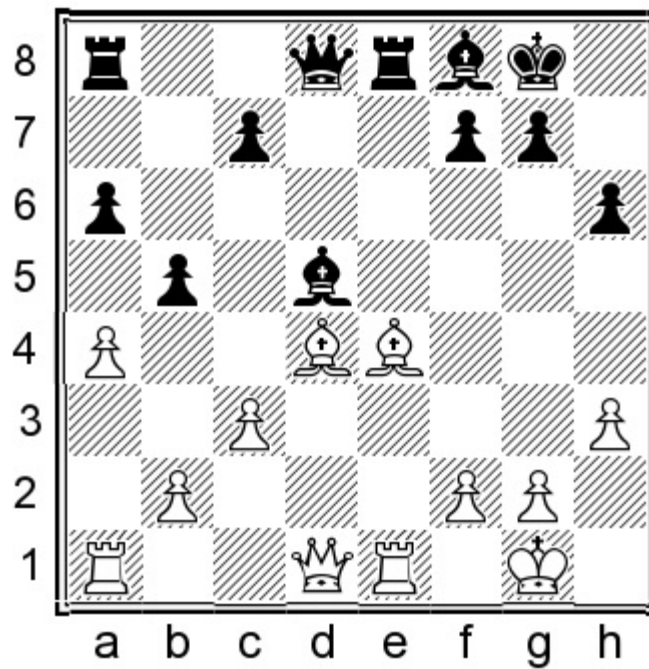
14. d4 exd4 15. ♗xd4 ♗xd4 16. ♙xd4 c5 17. ♙e5 ♜b6 is equally harmless.

14...♙f8 15.d4

Black is perfectly prepared to meet this thematic central break, but there is no other adequate plan!

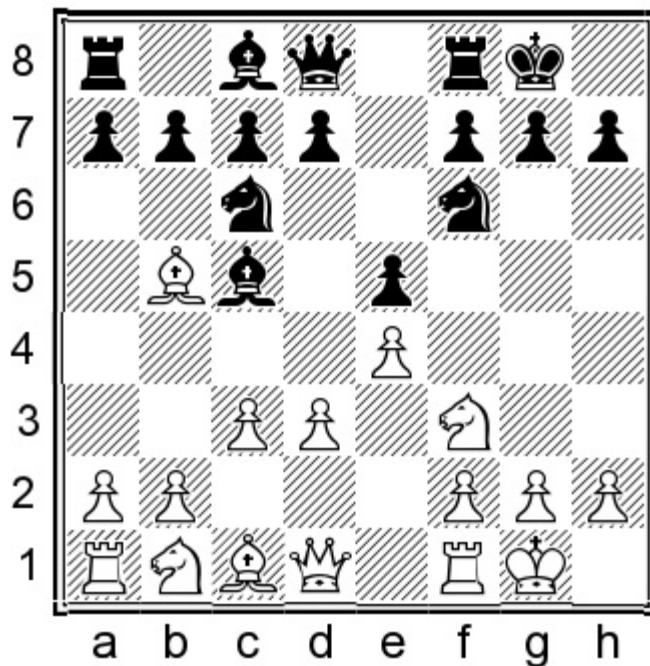


15...exd4 16.♗xd4 ♖xd4 17.♙xd4 ♗xe4 18.♗xe4 dxe4 19.♙xe4 ♙d5



With comfortable equality.

C) 6.0-0



This is the main line by a wide margin.

### 6...d5

We continue with our normal plan. White has four main options: **C1)** 7.♙xc6, **C2)** 7.♚e2, **C3)** 7.exd5 and **C4)** 7.♘bd2.

#### **C1) 7.♙xc6**

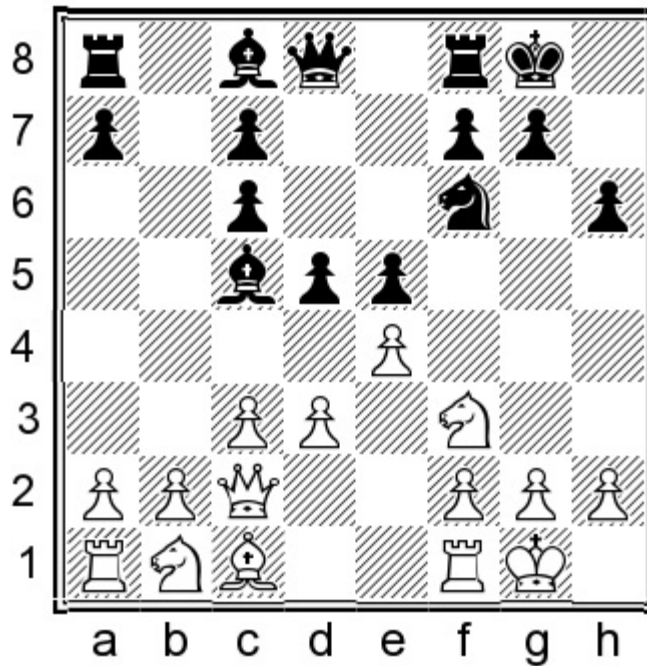
As usual in these positions, giving up the light-squared bishop turns out to be a serious concession.

### **7...bxc6 8.♘xe5**

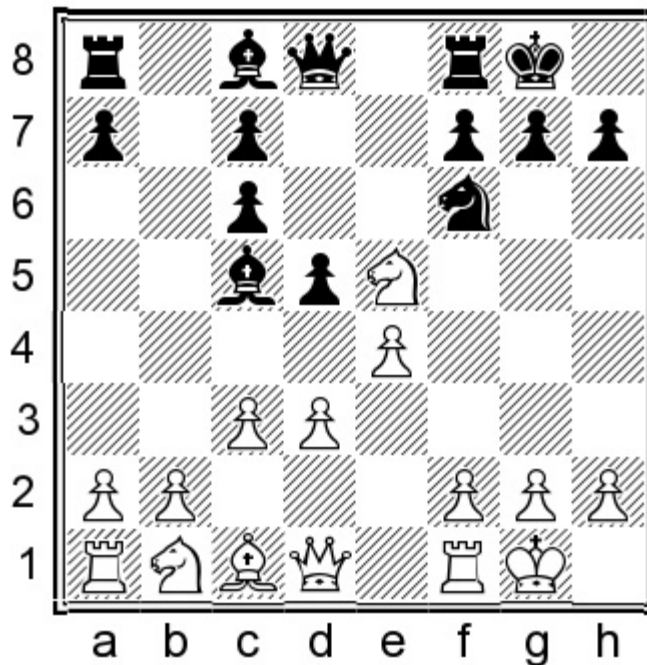
This is the only logical continuation.

8.exd5 seems inconsistent, and after 8...♙xd5 9.d4 exd4 10.cxd4 ♙d6 11.♘c3 ♚h5 Black was fine in Parligras – Bacrot, Rijeka 2010.

8.♚c2 dates all the way back to Anderssen – Riemann, Breslau (1) 1876! 8...h6N is a good answer, for instance:



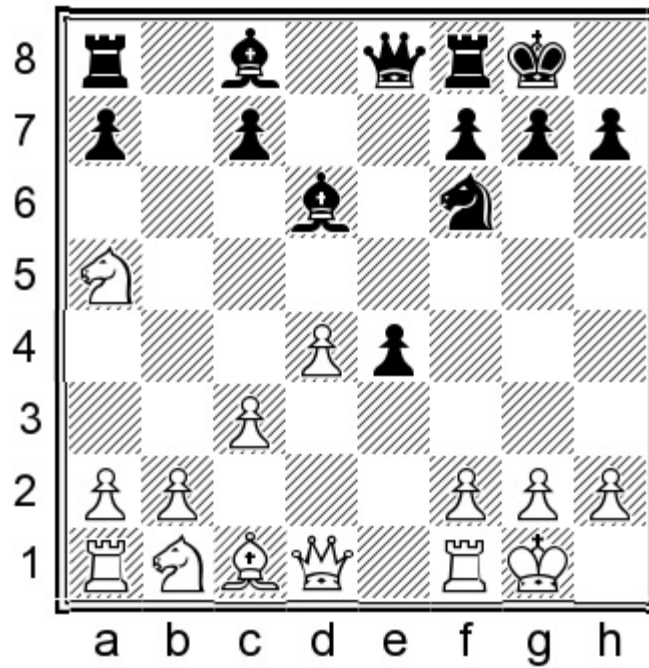
9. ♖xe5 (9. ♖bd2 ♜e8 10. ♝e1 ♔d6 is too passive for White) 9...dxe4 10.dxe4 ♚e8 11. ♗f3 ♚xe4 Black regains the pawn in an excellent situation, as the two bishops turn out to be at least as important as the fractured queenside pawns.



8...dxe4 9.d4 ♔d6 10.♔g5

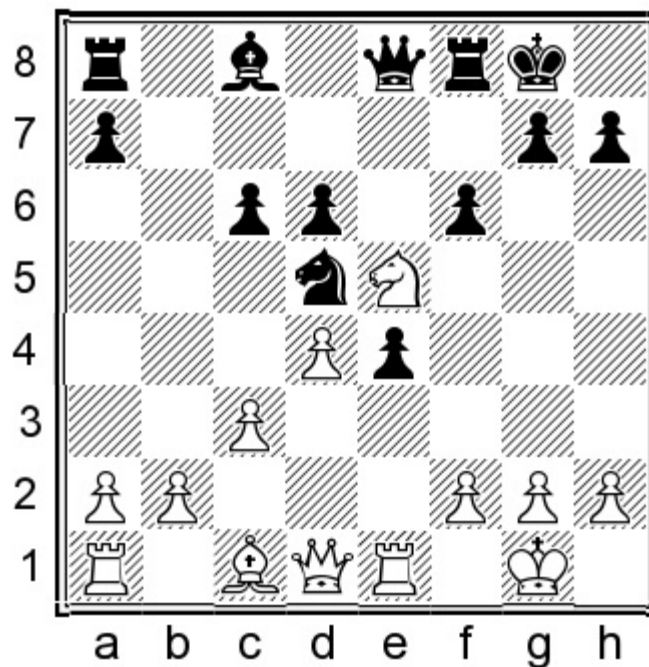
This is the most ambitious method of development. By pinning the knight, White makes the e4-pawn much more vulnerable.

The greedy 10. ♖xc6?! definitely cannot be recommended for White: 10...♚e8 11. ♖a5? (11. ♖e5N is necessary, but after 11...♔xe5 12.dxe5 ♚xe5 White has to struggle for equality.) The text move leads to a disaster after:

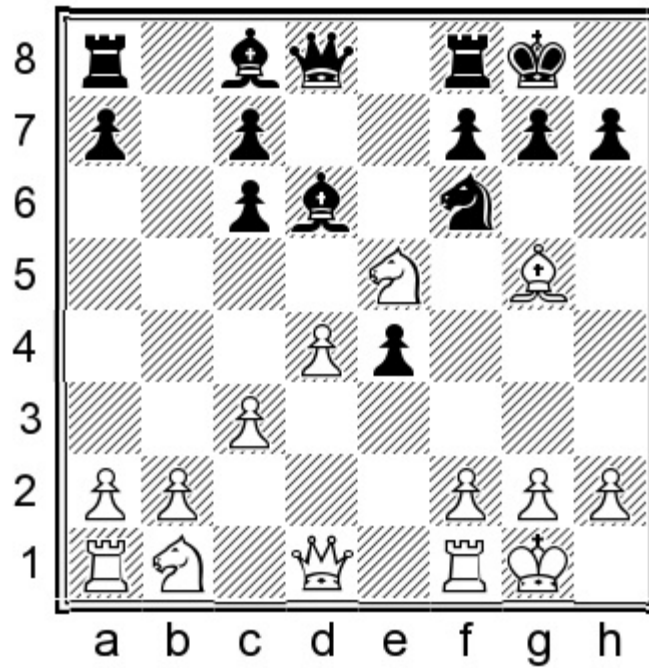


11...♙b5! 12.b4 ♘g4 13.♙d2 ♘xh2† 14.♔xh2 ♙xf1 White was busted in Kovtunenko – Yeletsy, Moscow 2013.

10.♘d2 proves harmless after: 10...♙e8 11.♘dc4 ♘d5 12.♖e1 f6 13.♘xd6 cxd6

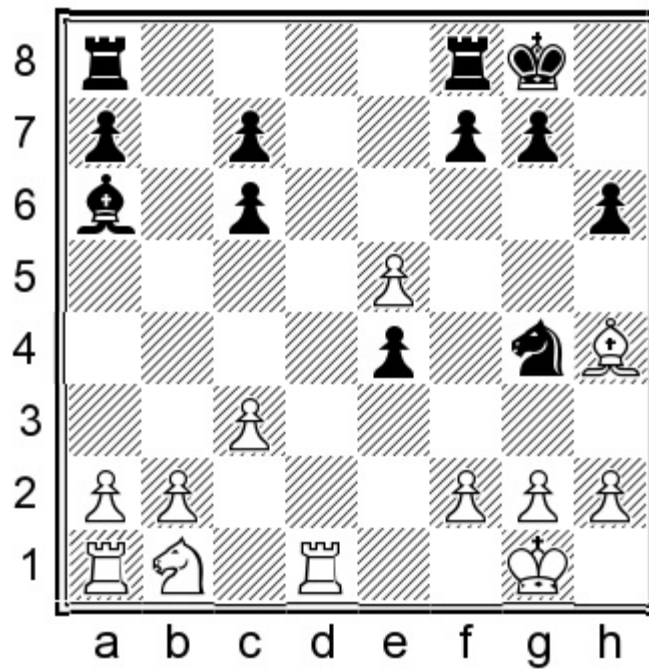


14.♘d3 ♘a6 15.♘f4 ♘xf4 16.♘xf4 d5 Black didn't have any problems in Kudryavtsev – Gus'Kov, email 2017.



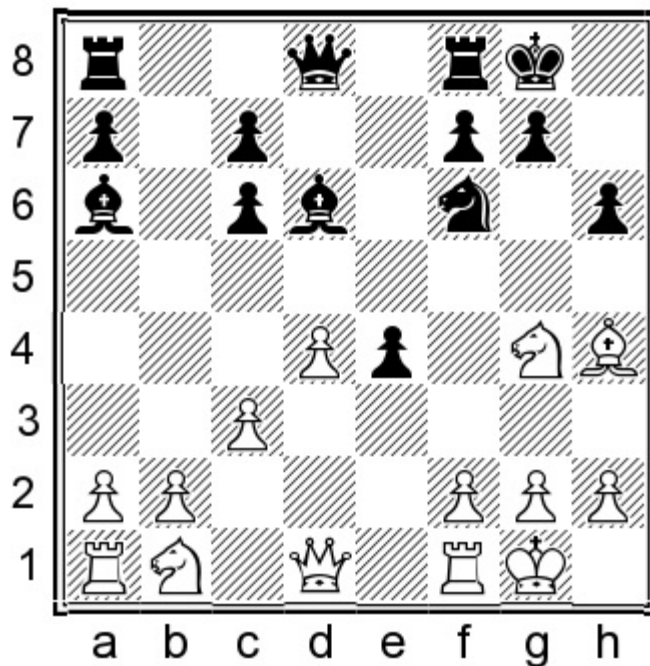
10...h6 11.g4 h4 h6 12.g4

Another example continued: 12.♖e1 ♗xe5 13.dxe5 ♕xd1 14.♖xd1 ♘g4



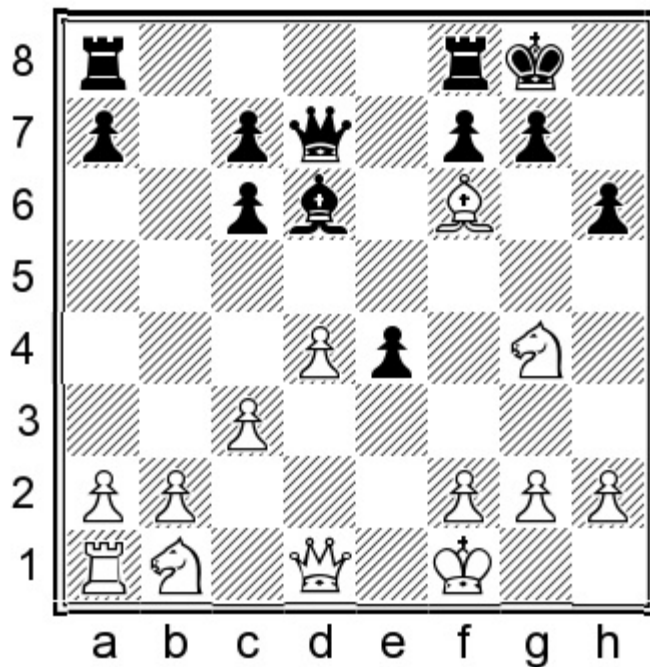
15.g4 16.g4 The activity of the black pieces fully compensated for the structural drawbacks in Navara – Grischuk, Antalya 2017.

The text move is an attempt to exploit the pin, but it doesn't offer White much.



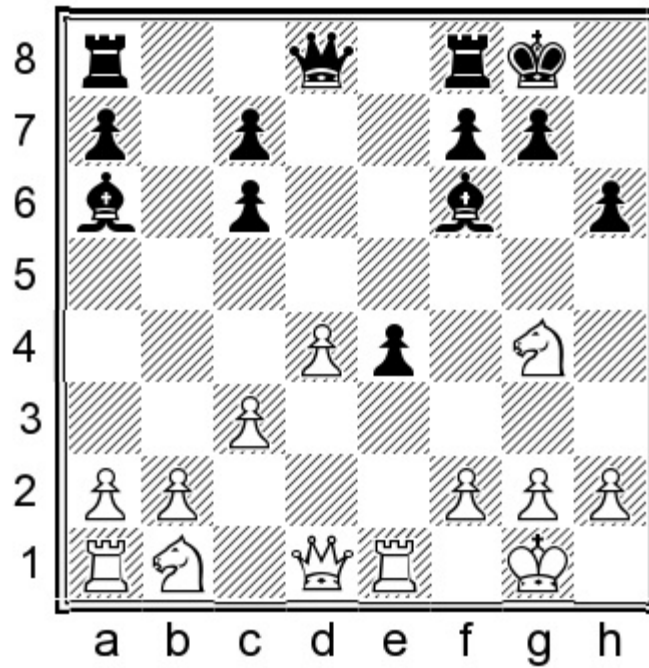
12...♙e7

Another interesting idea is: 12...♙xf1!?N 13.♙xf6 ♖d7 (but not 13...gxf6 14.♘xh6† ♙h7 15.♘f5 and White wins) 14.♙xf1



14...♖e6! 15.♙e5 f5 16.♙xd6 cxd6 In this unbalanced position Black's chances are not worse, as the mobile pawns create strong counterplay.

13.♙xf6 ♙xf6 14.♖e1



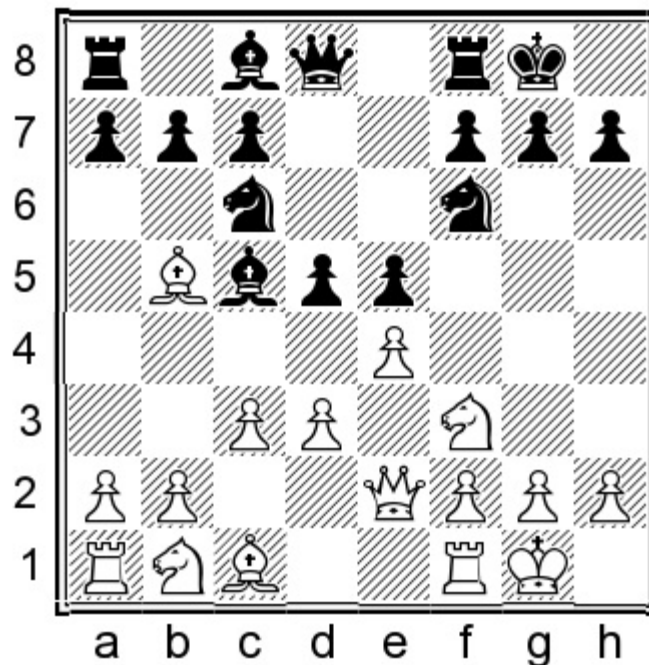
14...♙g5

Indirectly defending the central pawn, due to the possibility of ...f7-f5.

15.♘d2 f5

Black had excellent play due to the bishop pair in Hirsch – Debnar, corr. 2017.

C2) 7.♙e2



Compared with the much more popular 7.♘bd2, the only merit of this way of covering the e4-pawn is leaving the dark-squared bishop unblocked.

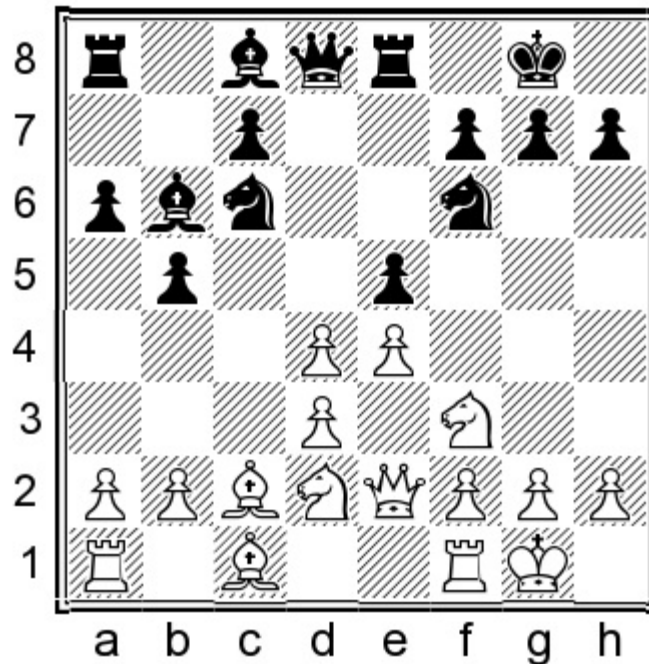
### 7...♖e8

Black sensibly avoids releasing the tension in the centre for a while.

### 8.♙g5

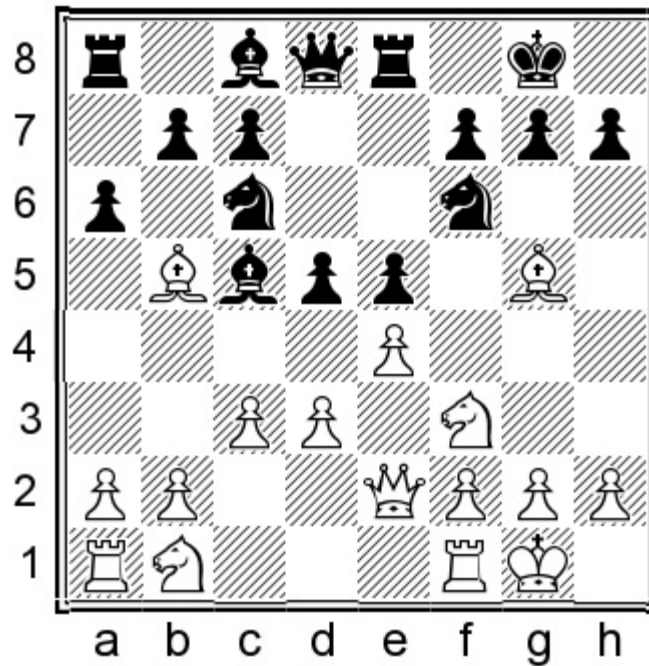
The most consistent. By pinning the knight, White diminishes the opponent's control of d5.

White can hardly fight for the initiative with 8.♘bd2, as it negates the whole purpose of 7.♚e2, and after 8...a6 9.♙a4 b5 10.♙b3 White's position looks too passive. Black has a few interesting options but the most ambitious is: 10...d4!? 11.♙c2 ♙b6 12.cxd4



This position was reached in Anand – Nakamura, Leuven 2016, and now the energetic 12...♙g4!N 13.dxe5 ♘h5 14.♘b3 ♘xe5 would have put White's king in big danger.

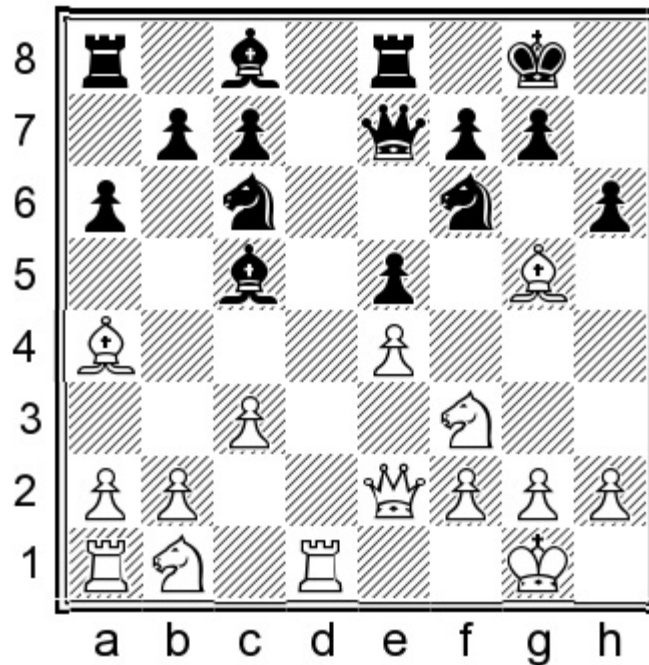
### 8...a6



### 9. ♖a4

After 9. exd5N 9... axb5 10. dxc6 bxc6 11. ♖bd2 ♜f5 12. ♖e4 ♜e7 13. ♖xf6 ♜xf6 Black has, at least temporarily, two bishops against two knights, and the weak pawn on d3 will always offer a target for counterplay.

### 9... dxe4 10. dxe4 h6 11. ♖d1 ♜e7



### 12. ♖h4N

This natural novelty seems the most logical choice.

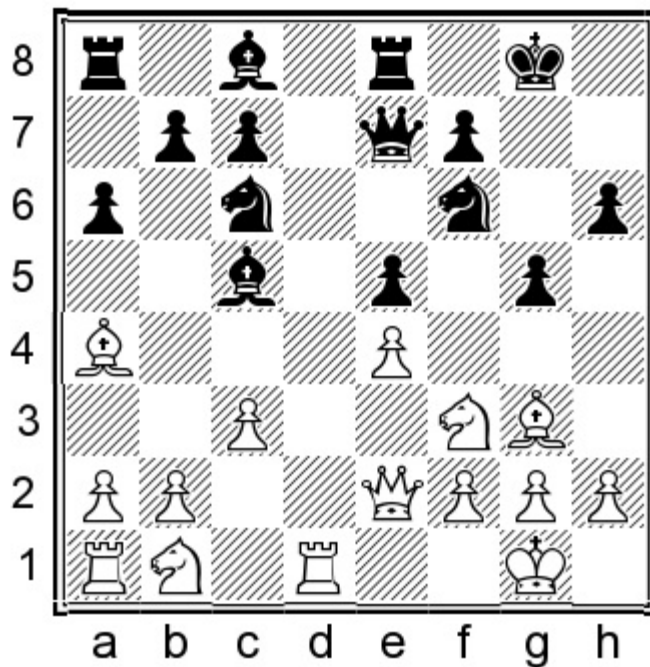
After 12. ♖xc6 bxc6 13. ♖xf6 ♜xf6 14. ♖bd2 a5 15. ♖e1 ♜a6 16. ♜f3 ♜e6 White was under unpleasant pressure because of the strong bishops in Bujdak – R. Bauer, corr. 2013.

12...g5

A typical way of breaking the nasty pin.

13.♟g3

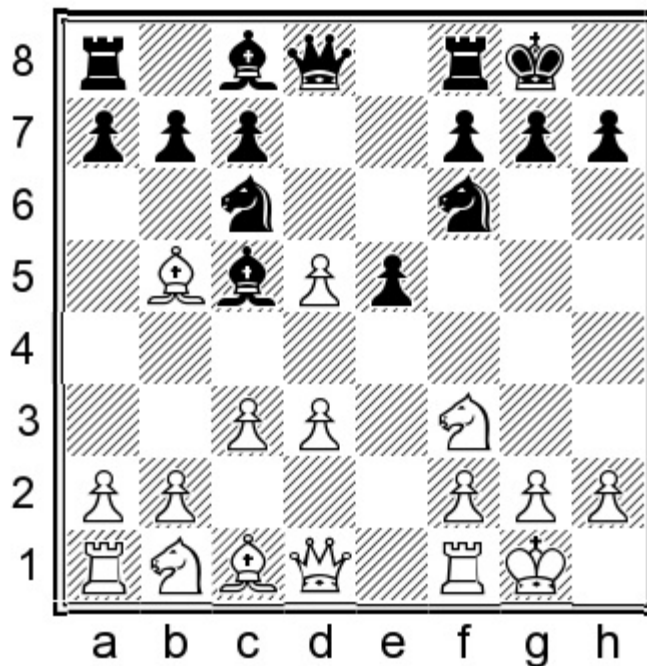
13.♞xg5? hxg5 14.♟xg5 is the kind of response that must always be checked, but on this occasion 14...♟g4 is a simple refutation.



13...♞h5 14.♞bd2 ♚f6

Black has comfortable piece play.

C3) 7.exd5



This is White's second choice by statistics. The arising pawn structure is theoretically favourable for Black, who has a space advantage in the centre, but White intends to exert pressure on the e5-pawn.

### 7... ♙xd5

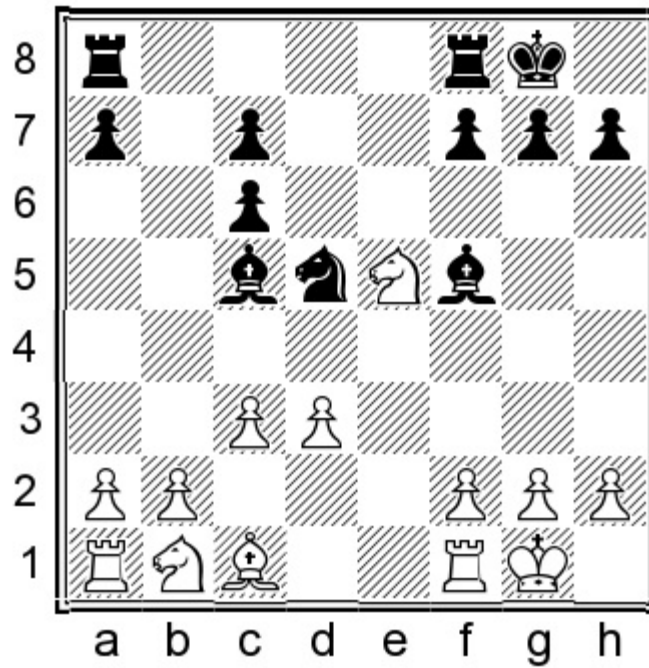
7... ♘xd5?! 8. ♕xc6 bxc6 9. ♘xe5 leaves Black struggling to claim adequate compensation.

### 8. ♕c4

This is the only serious attempt to exploit the drawbacks of Black's early queen deployment. Here are some minor alternatives:

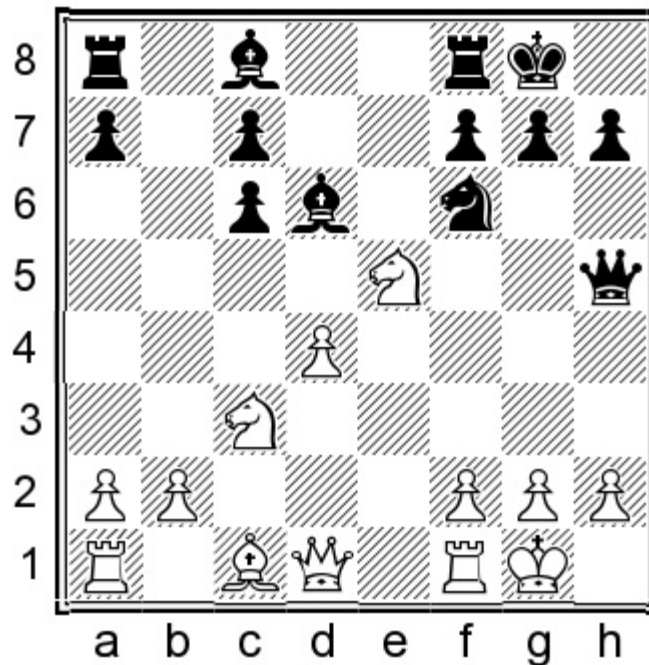
8. ♕g5?! e4 9. ♕c4 ♙f5 10. dxe4 ♘xe4 placed White in a dangerous situation due to Black's active pieces in Murphy – Lund, corr. 2009.

8. ♙b3 proved toothless after: 8... ♕f5 9. ♙xd5 ♘xd5 10. ♕xc6 bxc6 11. ♘xe5

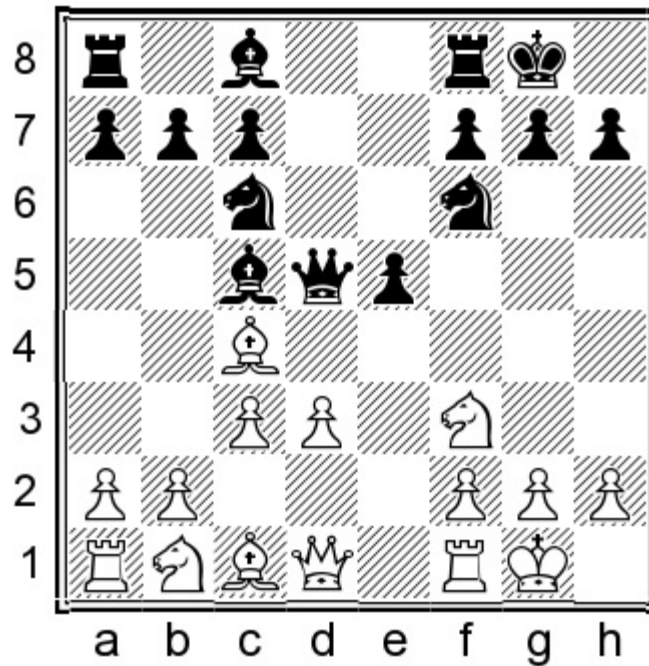


11...♔d6 12.d4 c5 13.♘f3 ♖fe8 14.dxc5 ♕xc5 Black's superior development and strong bishops yielded great play for the pawn in Anand – Giri, Kolkata 2019.

8.♕xc6 Trading this bishop for a knight is a clear concession, so White can hardly fight for an advantage after this move. 8...bxc6 9.d4 exd4 10.cxd4 ♕d6 11.♘c3 ♖h5 12.♘e5



We have been following Parligras – Bacrot, Rijeka 2010. Black has a few interesting options but I prefer 12...♖f5!?N 13.♖e1 c5, with excellent play.



### 8...♔d8

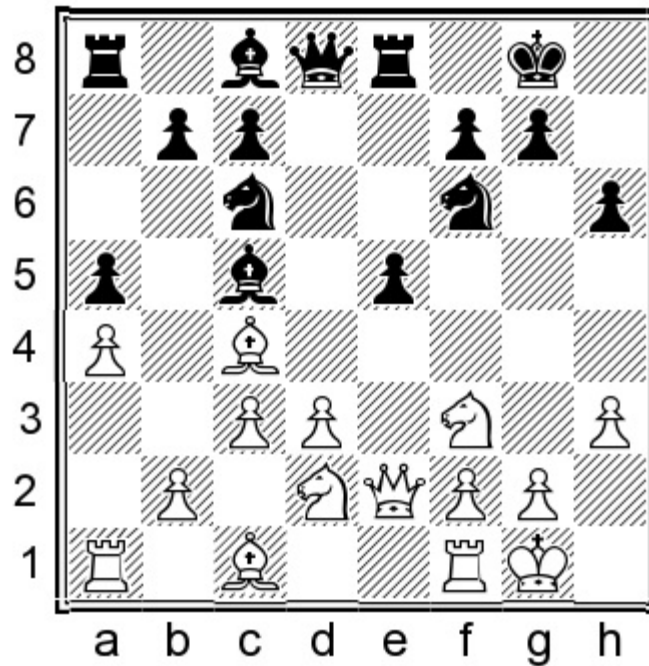
We will consider two options. **C31)** 9.♘bd2 has been White's most popular and higher-scoring continuation, but I believe **C32)** 9.b4!? to be more critical.

### C31) 9.♘bd2

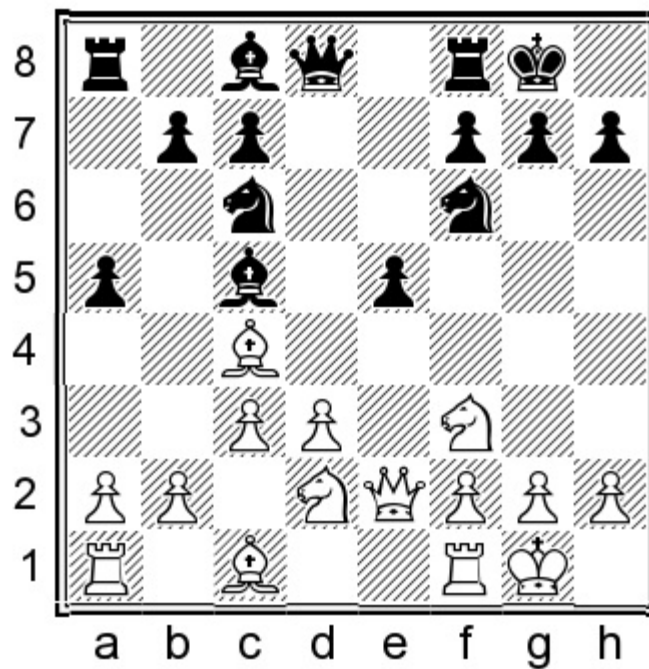
This developing move has been tried by a few top players but I doubt that White can achieve much without expanding on the queenside.

### 9...a5 10.♔e2

10.a4 was employed twice by Fabiano Caruana, so we should consider this somewhat modest move seriously. 10...h6 A decent prophylactic move. With the g5-square no longer available to White's minor pieces, Black's rook can be comfortably placed on e8. 11.♔e2 ♖e8 12.h3 This position occurred in Caruana – Roiz, Internet (blitz) 2020. At this point I should have continued:



12...♙e6!N 13.♙b5 ♘d5 14.♞e4 ♙f8 Black obtains an excellent position with the superior pawn structure, as the d3-pawn is a long-term weakness.



### 10...a4!?N

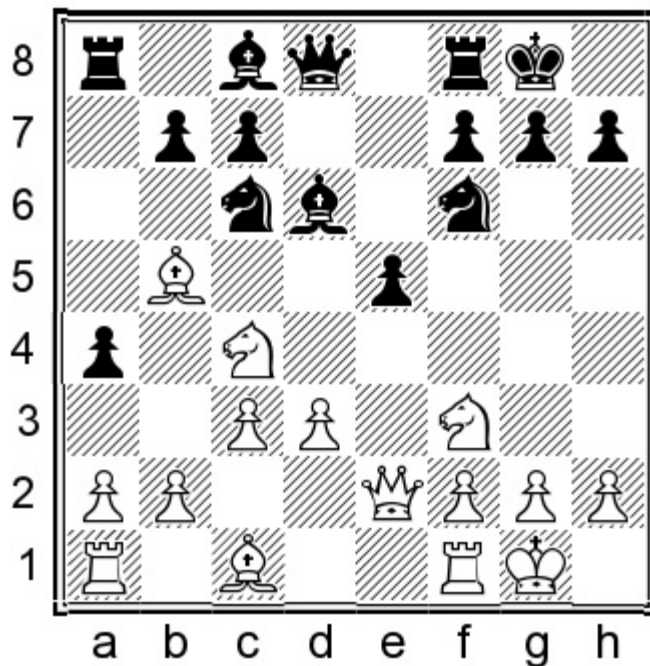
I like this new and ambitious idea. Black seizes even more space on the queenside and sacrifices the central pawn for active piece play.

10...♙d6 11.♞g5 h6 12.♞ge4 a4 was seen in Grischuk – Eljanov, Novi Sad 2016, when 13.f4!N 13...exf4 14.♞xf6† ♚xf6 15.♞e4 would have regained the pawn in a favourable situation for White, whose dark-squared bishop will be extremely active.

## 11. ♖xe5

11. ♖e4 is playable but toothless, and after 11... ♗xe4 12. ♘xe4 (12. dxe4 ♜f6 13. ♕g5 ♜g6 is also equal) 12... ♜f6 13. ♕g5 ♜f5 Black has no problems.

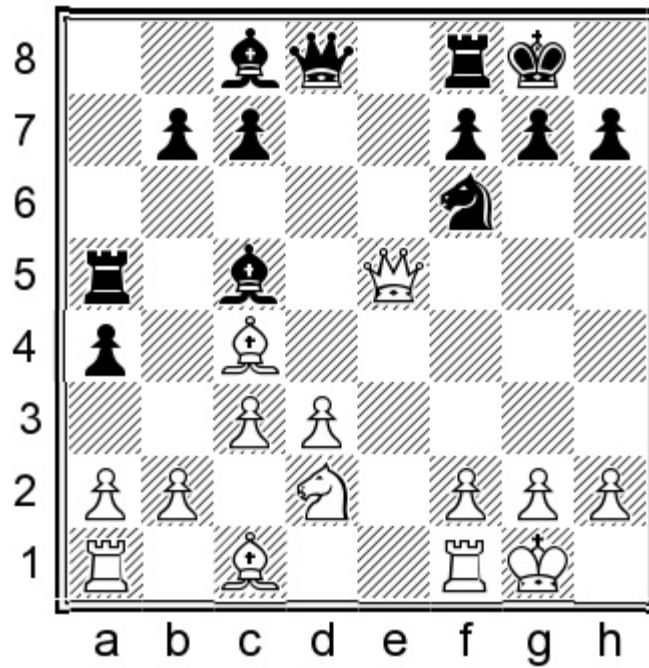
The attempt to put more pressure on the e5-pawn with 11. ♗b5?! ♕d6 12. ♖c4 looks artificial, as the bishop on b5 is clearly misplaced.



This becomes clear after 12... ♖e7! when Black takes the upper hand, as 13. ♖xe5 c6 14. ♕c4 b5 15. ♖xf7 ♜xf7 16. ♕xf7 ♜xf7 leads to a materially unbalanced position where Black's minor pieces should outclass White's rook and pawns. It should be mentioned that the unopposed light-squared bishop could become a monster.

## 11... ♗xe5 12. ♘xe5 ♜a5!

This creative move enables Black to develop the initiative most energetically. White's queen is attacked, and the c4-bishop is unsafe due to ...b7-b5 ideas. Moreover, the rook may swing to the kingside to launch an attack.



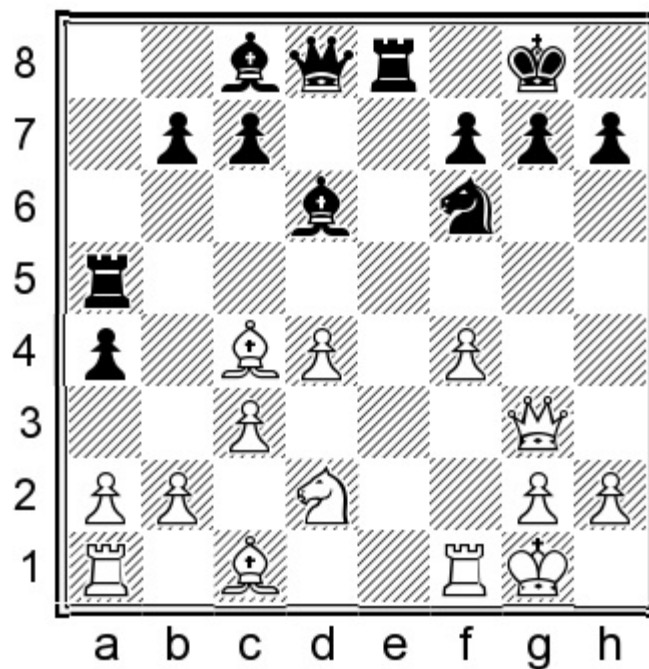
13.d4 ♖e8

Black takes control over the only open file, with gain of tempo.

14.♔g3 ♘d6 15.f4

This weakening move is more or less forced.

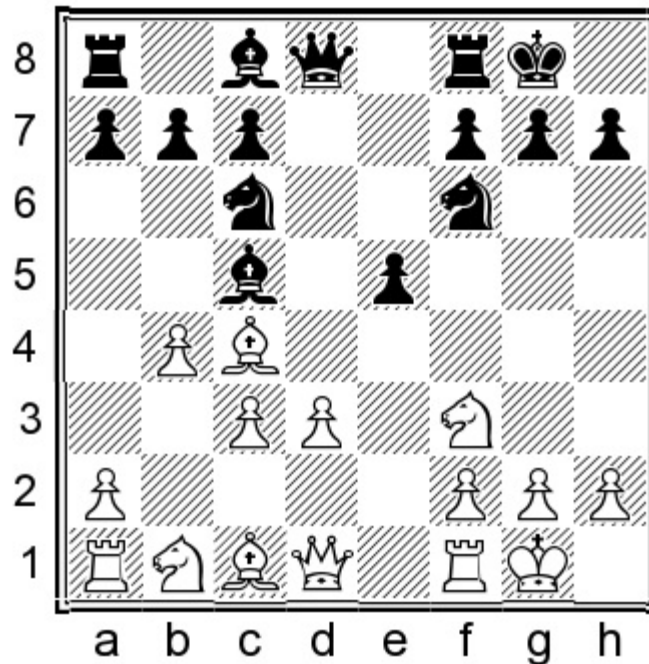
15.♔f3? ♜h5 16.g3 c5! offers Black a huge attack.



15... ♜h5 16.♔f2 ♞xf4

Black has successfully regained the pawn, while maintaining the superior piece coordination.

### C32) 9.b4!?



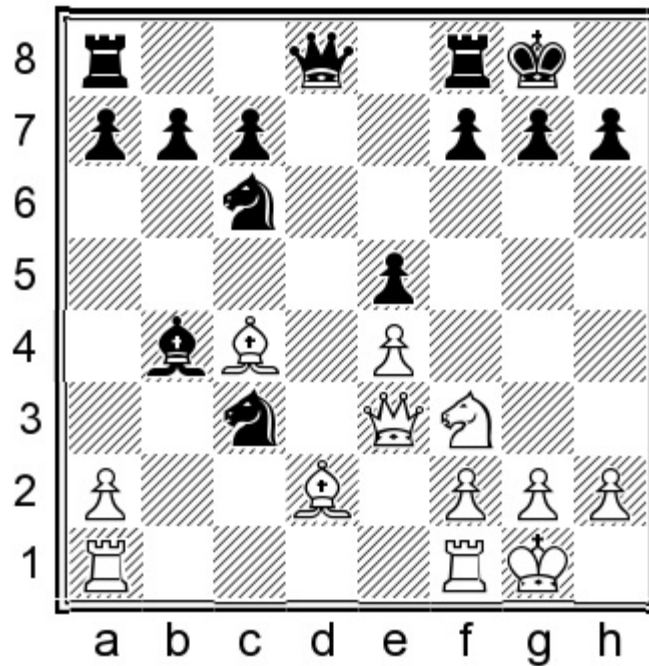
This is the more aggressive and challenging continuation.

#### 9...♙e7 10.♘bd2

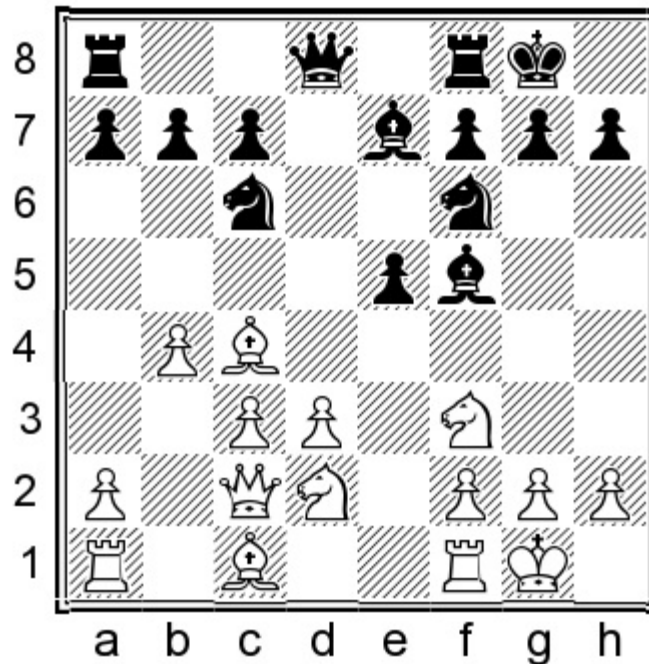
10.b5?! is a mistake in view of 10...♘a5 11.♘xe5 ♘xc4 12.♘xc4 a6 13.bxa6 ♜xa6 when Black took over the initiative in Pavlidis – Bacrot, Karlsruhe 2019.

#### 10...♙f5 11.♚c2

11.♚e2 leaves the c3-pawn unprotected, so 11...♘d5! is the most sensible response. 12.♘e4N (The awkward 12.♘b1? ♙f6 led White to an inferior position in Narayanan – Tate, Pardubice 2015.) 12...♙xe4 13.dxe4 ♘xc3 14.♚e3 ♙xb4 15.♙d2 The knight is in danger, but Black can avoid losing a piece by means of:



15...b5! 16.♙b3 ♞d4 17.♚h1 ♞xf3 18.gxf3 ♚d4 19.♖fc1 (19.a3? is well met by 19...♗ad8! and Black is clearly better.) Black's chances are by no means worse after either 19...♞d5 or 19...♚xe3 20.fxe3 ♞d5.

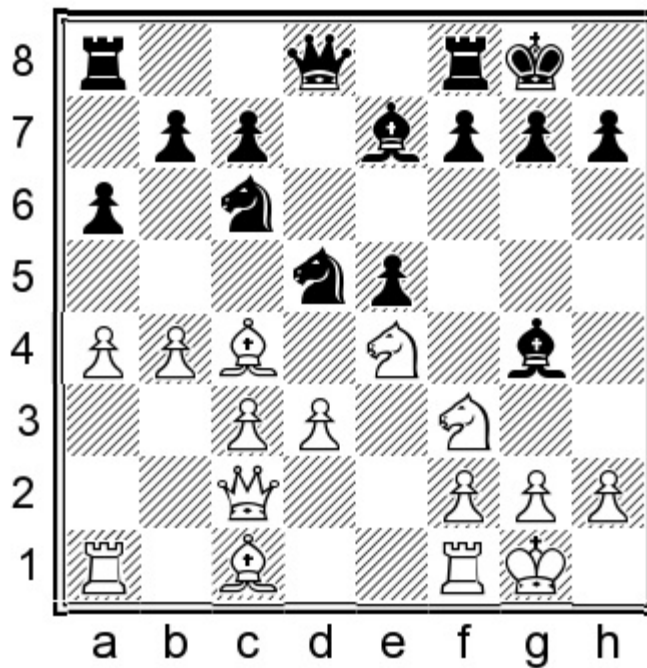


### 11...a6 12.a4

I also considered 12.♞h4!?N 12...♙g4 13.h3 ♙h5 14.a4 ♚d7 15.♞df3 ♞d5 16.♖e1 ♙xh4 17.♞xh4 f6 when Black manages to secure the e5-pawn and equalize.

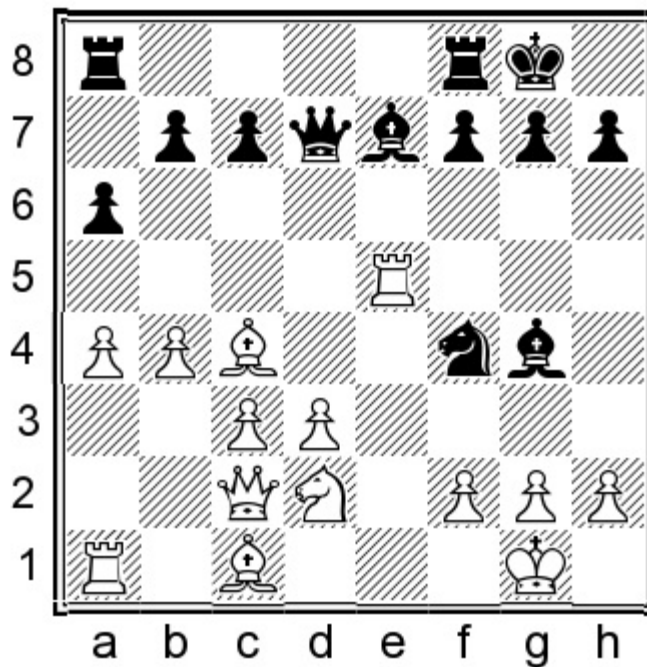
### 12...♞d5 13.♞e4 ♙g4

The positional threat of ...♙xf3 forces White to retreat in one way or another.



**14. ♖d1**

14. ♖ed2, as seen in Durarbayli – Rambaldi, Saint Louis 2017, can be met by the active 14... ♗f4!? N 15. ♖e1 ♗d7, sacrificing a pawn as follows: 16. ♖xe5 ♗xe5 17. ♖xe5

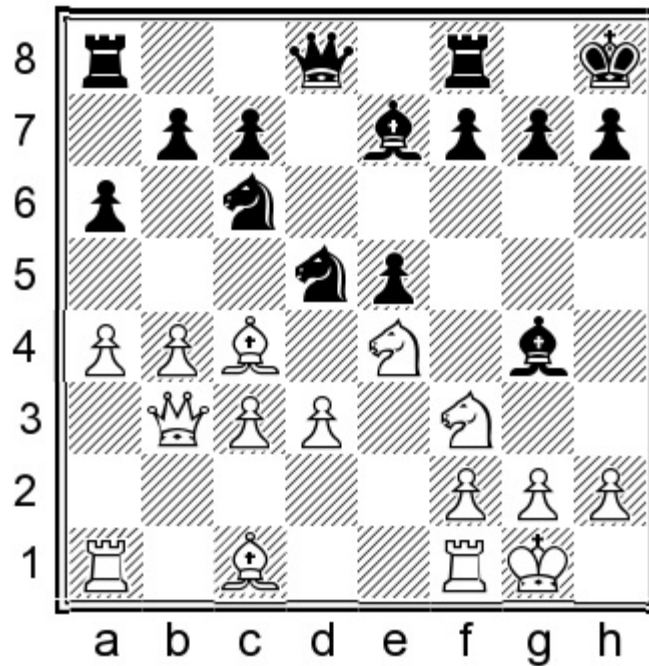


17... ♗d6 18. ♖e3 ♗e2† 19. ♗f1 ♖ae8 Black’s active piece play provides full compensation for the pawn.

**14... ♗h8**

This is played with the obvious intention of expanding on the kingside with ...f7-f5.

**15. ♗b3**



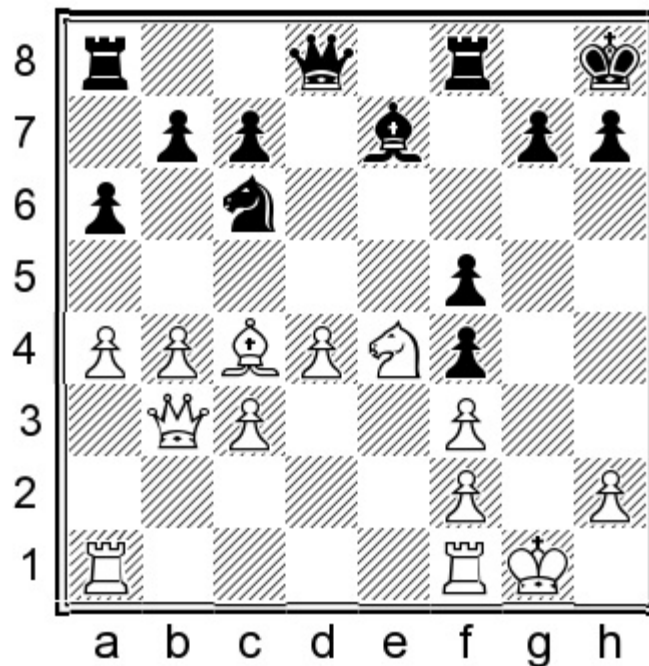
### 15...xf3!?

This new move invites interesting complications.

15...f4 16.gxf4 xf3 17.e3 e2 18.fef1 xd3 19.xd3 xd3 20.c5 gave White interesting compensation for the sacrificed pawn in Svidler – Eljanov, Germany 2016.

### 16.gxd5

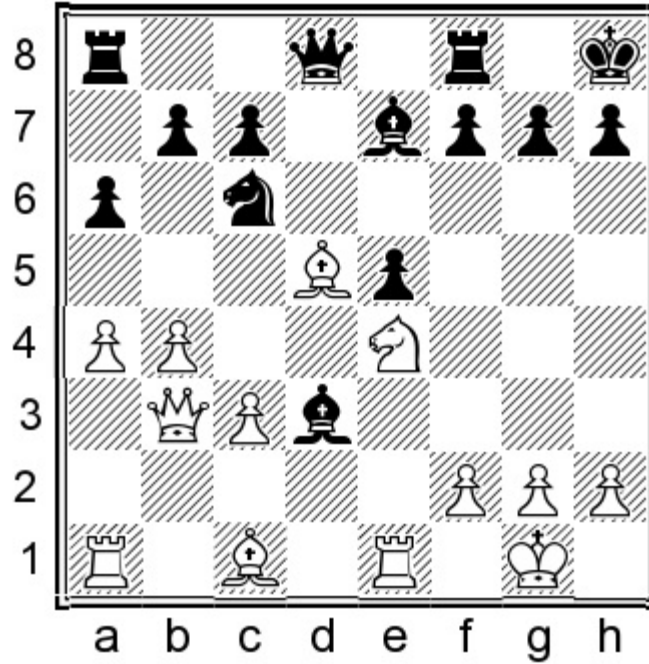
16.gxf3!? is an interesting alternative which needs to be checked: 16...f4 17.gxf4 exf4 18.d4 f5



19.d2 (19.c5 xc5 20.bxc5 a5 gives Black no problems.) 19...d6 20.h1 h4 The damaged

pawn structure on the kingside offers Black sufficient counterplay.

16...♙e2 17.♞e1 ♙xd3

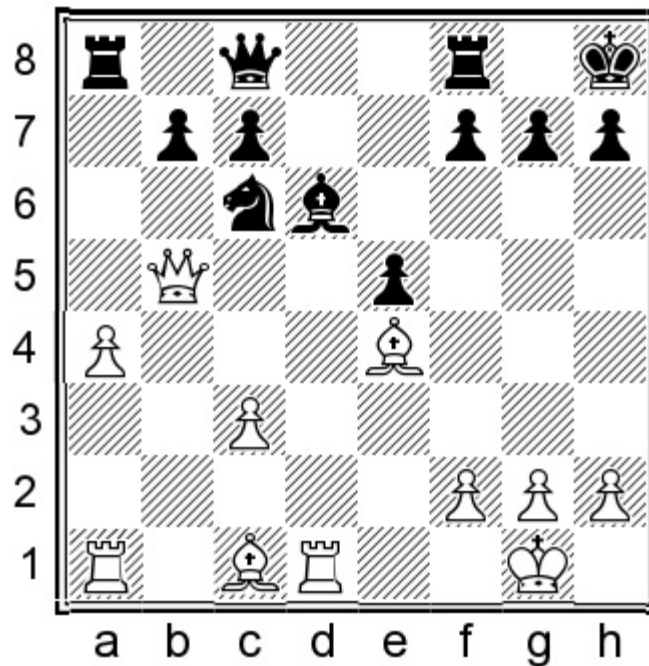


18.♞d1

After 18.♙e3 ♙xe4 19.♙e4 f5 20.♙xc6 bxc6 21.♞ad1 ♙d6 White should be able to regain the pawn at some point, but is hardly fighting for the advantage.

18...♙xe4 19.♙xc6

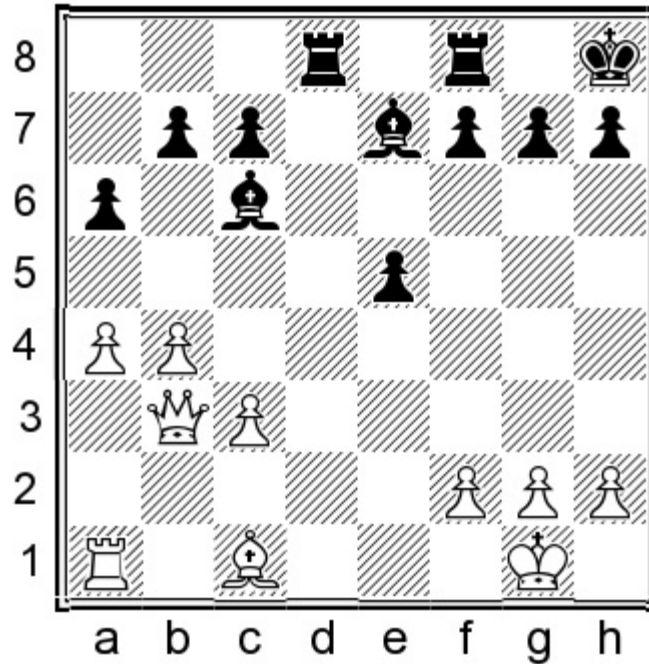
The alternative is: 19.♙xe4 ♙d6 20.b5 axb5 21.♞xb5 ♞c8



22.♙xc6 bxc6 23.♞xc6 ♞a5 With ...♞a8 coming next, Black will neutralize the passed pawn before it

becomes a problem.

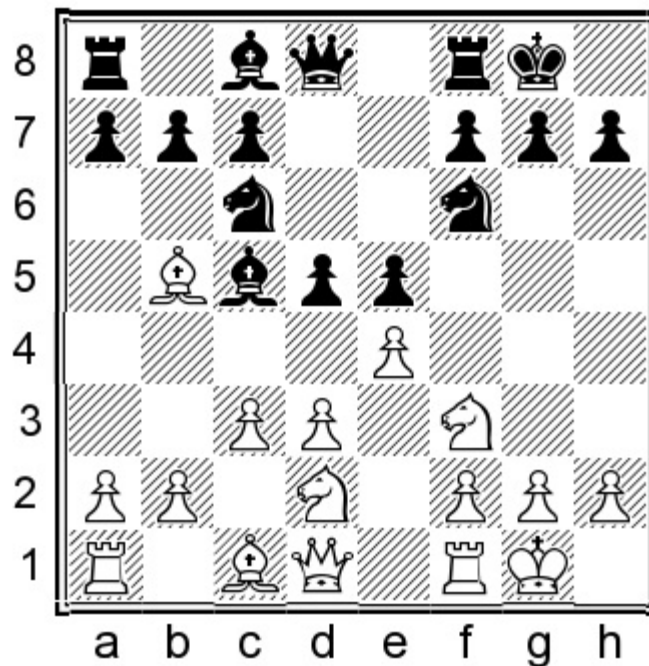
19...♙xc6 20.♖xd8 ♜axd8



21.♙e3 f5

We have reached a position with an unusual material balance. Black's rook, bishop and pawn are not inferior to the enemy queen, and the advancing kingside pawns will offer excellent counterplay.

C4) 7.♘bd2



This is White's most popular choice, maintaining the central tension and preparing the thematic transfer of the knight to g3.

### 7...♖e8!?

I like this ambitious idea. As we will see, the point is to give up a pawn in order to fight for the initiative.

The most popular continuation is 7...dxe4 8.dxe4; I believe Black shouldn't face serious problems there either.

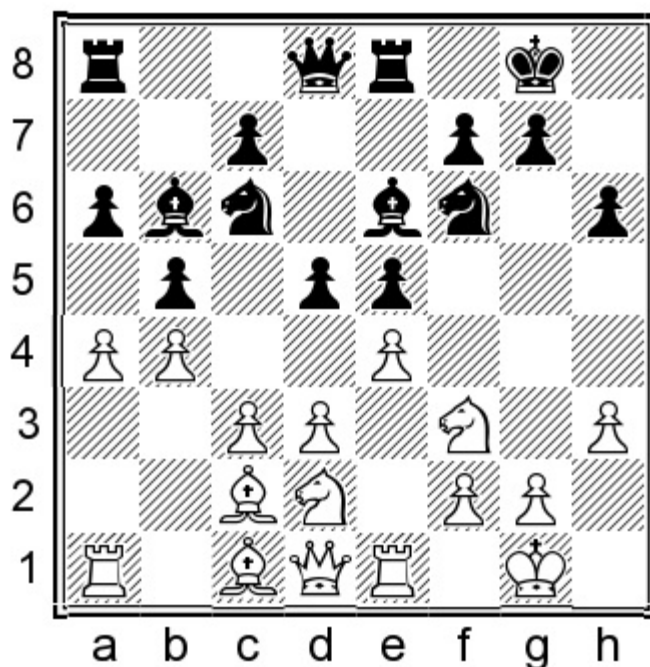
### 8.exd5

This is the only challenging reply.

8.♔e2 has already been covered under 7.♔e2 ♖e8 8.♘bd2.

8.h3 a6 9.♙a4 h6 10.♖e1 b5 11.♙c2 ♙e6 is harmless for Black.

The overoptimistic 12.b4?! ♙b6 13.a4 runs into:

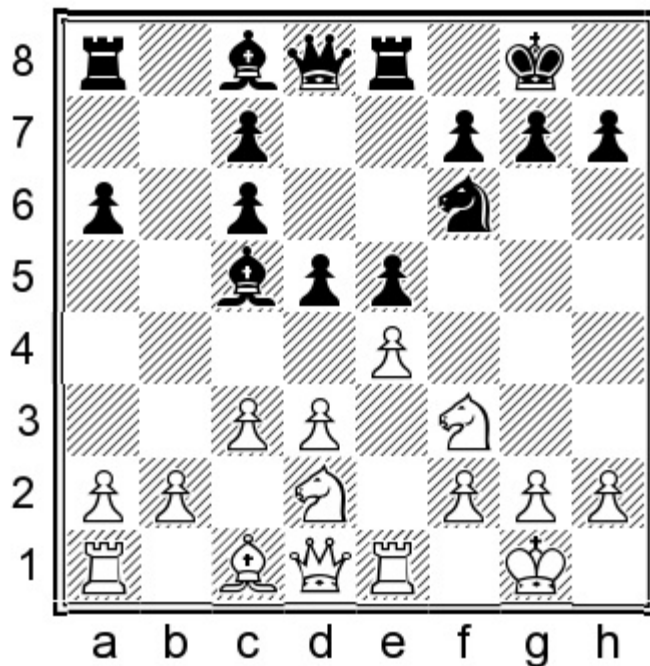


13...d4! 14.♙b2 dxc3 15.♙xc3 ♔d6 Black had the better game in Kovalev – Pogosyan, Moscow 2019.

### 8.♖e1 a6 9.♙xc6

9.♙a4N has not been played here but it immediately transposes to a few other games. 9...b5 10.♙c2 (10.♙b3 d4 11.♔c2 ♔d6 is comfortable for Black, who has gained lots of space.) 10...♙e6 Black has a perfect version of the Giuoco Piano, when d7-d5 is already played. For instance, 11.exd5 ♙xd5 12.♘e4 ♘xe4 13.dxe4 ♙e6 and Black had nothing to worry about in Anand – Nakamura, Stavanger 2018.

### 9...bxc6



10.h3

10.exd5 was seen in Lavigne Quilichini – Moncomble, Mulhouse 2005. In the game Black recaptured with the queen, but there was actually no need to protect the e5-pawn:

10...cxd5!N The point is that 11.♖xe5 runs into 11...♙xf2†! 12.♔xf2 ♜xe5 13.♞xe5 ♘g4† 14.♔g1 ♘xe5 when Black regains the pawn in a favourable situation.

10...♙d6 11.♘f1 h6

Black's space advantage and bishop pair fully compensated for the doubled c-pawns in Cornette – Bacrot, France 2010.

**8...a6!**

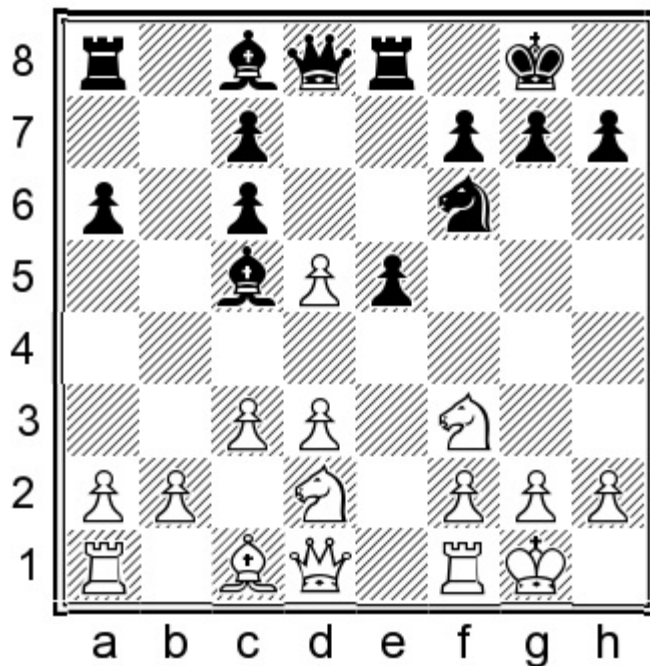
8...♘xd5 9.♞e1 leaves Black under pressure in the centre. 8...♙xd5 9.♙c4 also offers White some initiative.

We will analyse **C41) 9.♙xc6** and **C42) 9.♙c4**.

9.dxc6?! axb5 offers Black superb compensation for a mere pawn.

9.♙a4 ♙xd5 also gives Black a pleasant game. Unlike the 8...♙xd5 line noted above, the d3-pawn requires immediate defence.

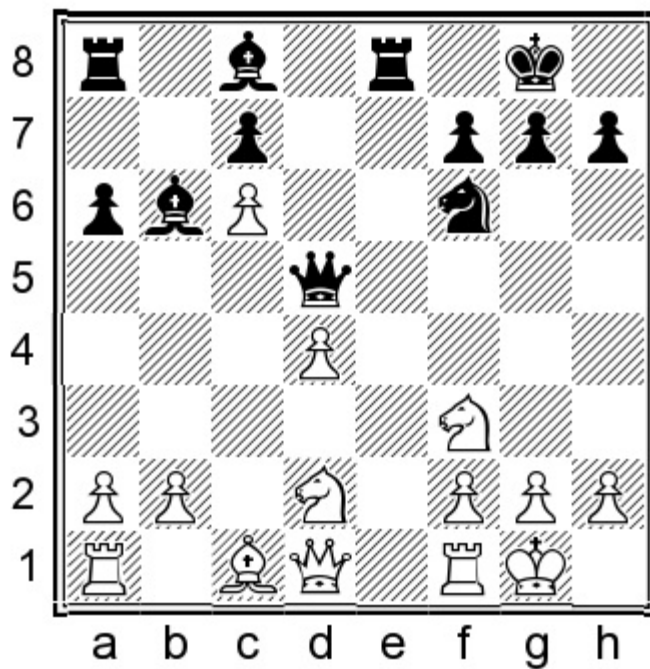
**C41) 9.♙xc6 bxc6**



10.♘e4

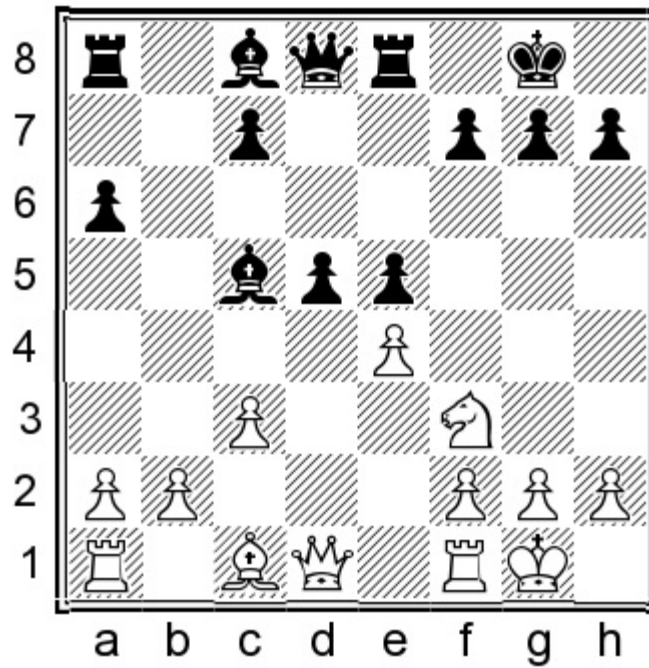
By making this move White invites major simplifications.

A natural alternative is 10.d4N 10...exd4 11.cxd4 ♘b6 12.dxc6 ♙d5 when the c6-pawn falls, so White will be left with just one extra pawn against Black's bishop pair and fast development. Play might continue:



13.♙a4 ♘e6 14.♞e1 ♙b5 15.♙xb5 axb5 16.a3 ♘d5 Black's chances are by no means worse.

10...♘xe4 11.dxe4 cxd5



**12. ♙xd5**

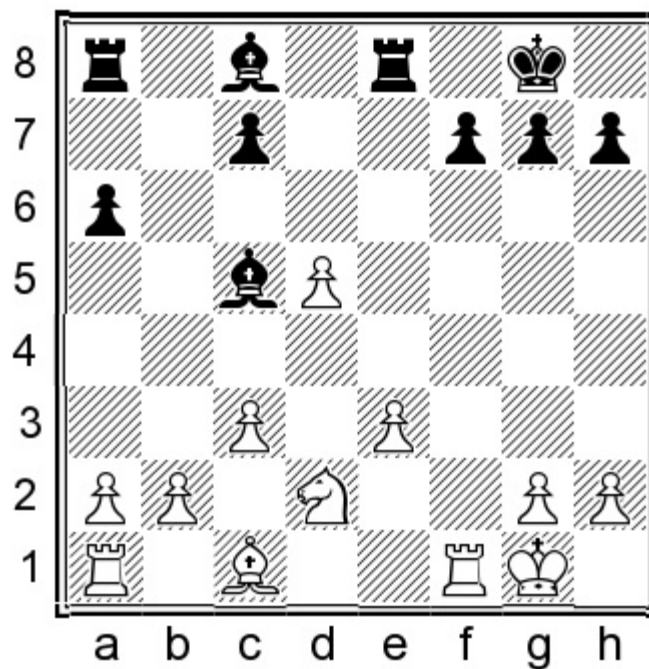
12.exd5?! is too risky in view of 12...♗g4 13.h3 ♖h5 when the pin is dangerous.

**12... ♙xd5 13.exd5 e4 14. ♘d2**

14.♘d4N 14...♗xd4 15.cxd4 ♖d8 16.♞e1 ♗f5 sees Black regain the pawn and reach a drawish endgame. (16...f5 is also adequate.)

**14...e3 15.fxe3**

We have been following Anand – Aronian, Stavanger 2018. My new idea is:



15...♖xe3 16.♔h1

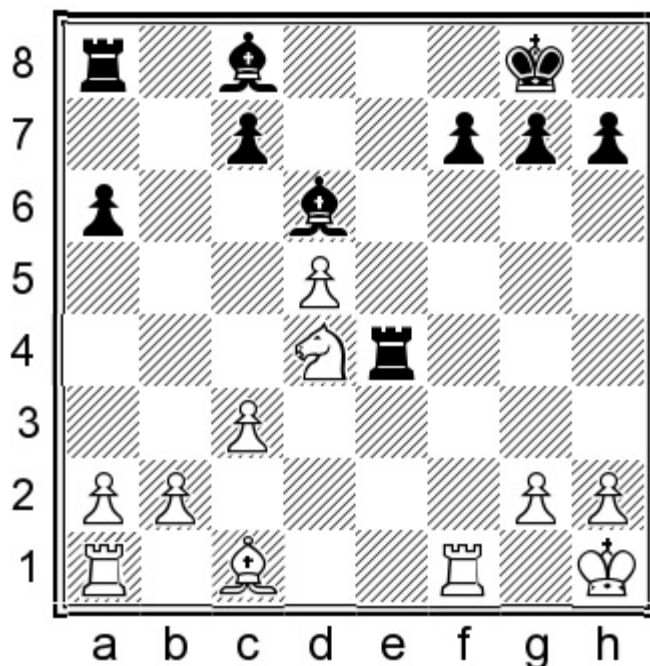
16.♘b3 ♖xc3† 17.♘xc5 ♖xc5 reaches another equal endgame.

16...♖e2

The presence of the rook in White's camp is highly annoying for the first player.

17.♘b3 ♗d6 18.♘d4 ♖e4

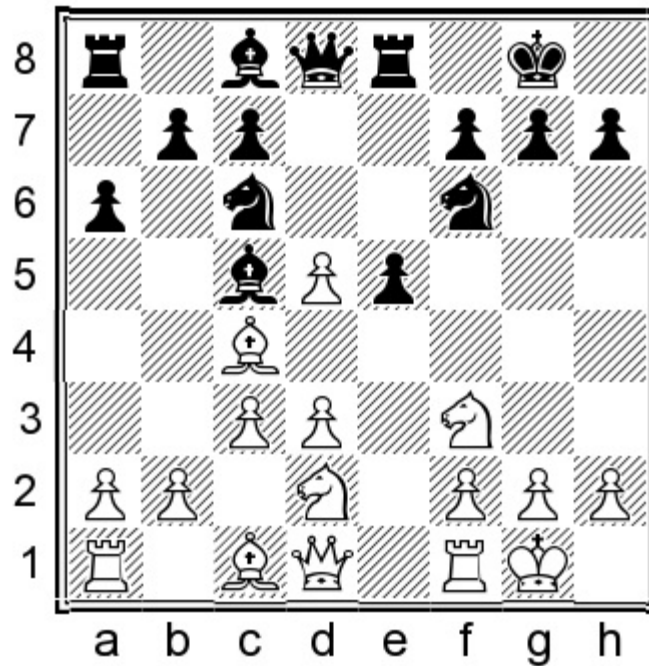
18...♖e5 19.♗f4 ♖xd5 20.♗xd6 ♖xd6 21.♖ae1 ♗e6 is also adequate. True, White can exchange on e6 and reach a rook ending with the better pawn structure, but it's essentially only a symbolic advantage.



19.♗d2 ♗b7 20.♘c6 ♗xc6 21.dxc6 ♖c4

Black regains the pawn and reaches a level endgame.

C42) 9.♗c4



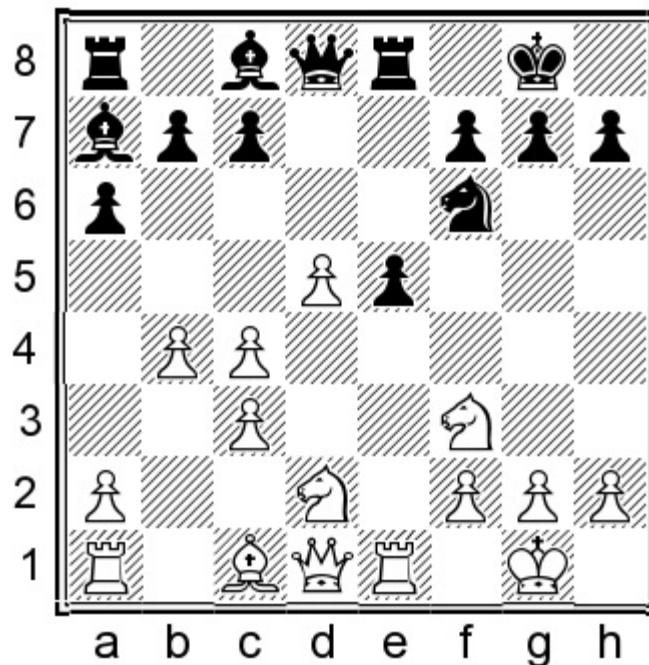
### 9...♘a5!

The whole point of Black's last few moves is to fight for the initiative, rather than settle for 9...♘xd5?! 10.♘e4 when White can follow up with ♘fg5, with various attacking ideas.

### 10.♘b3

This was played in the only game so far. I checked two other possibilities:

10.b4N 10...♘xc4 11.dxc4 (After 11.♘xc4 ♘f8 12.♘ce5 ♘xd5 13.♘d2 f6 14.♘c4 ♘f5 Black's bishop pair and White's structural defects are at least as relevant as White's extra pawn.) 11...♘a7 12.♞e1



12...e4 13.♘d4 ♕xd4 14.cxd4 b5! 15.♚c2 ♖b7 Black succeeds in undermining the enemy pawns, and Black's pieces will soon enjoy the use of the d5-square.

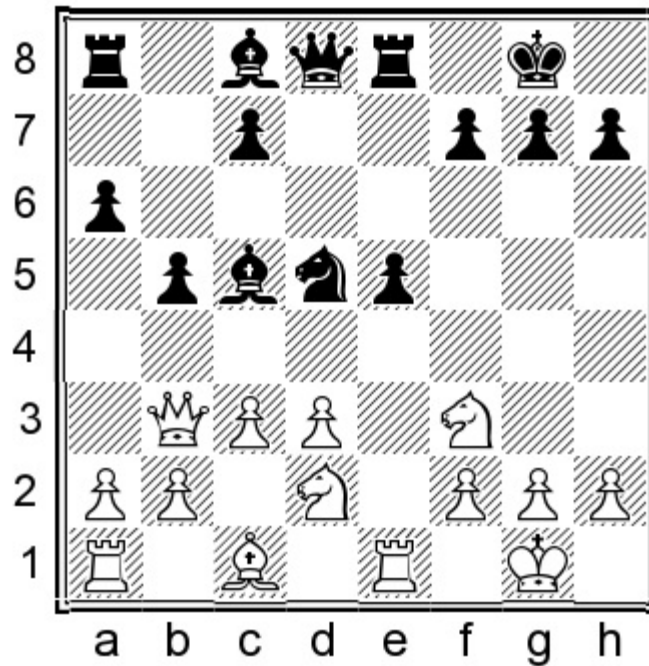
10.♞e1N 10...b5 11.♕b3

11.♘b3 bxc4 12.♘xc5 ♚xd5 13.d4 ♗g4 gives Black a lot of activity.

11...♘xb3 12.♚xb3

12.♘xb3 ♚xd5 13.♘xc5 ♚xc5 14.♗g5 ♚d6 is harmless for Black.

12...♘xd5

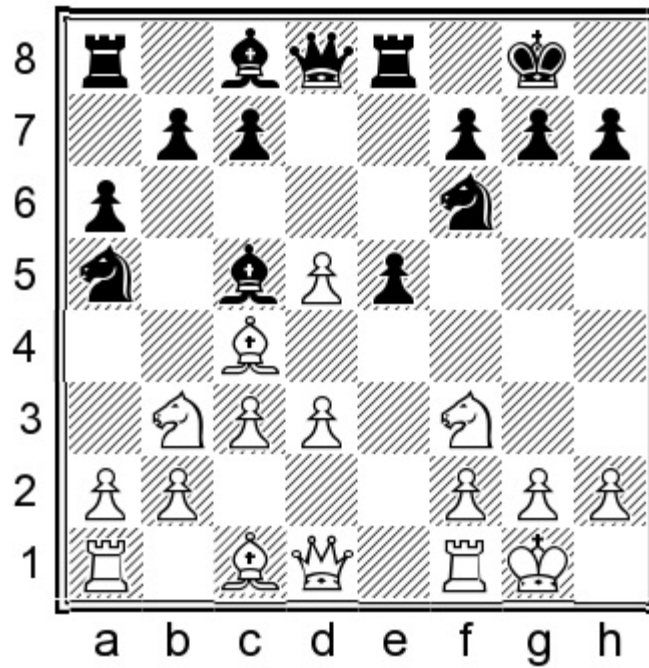


13.♞xe5

13.d4 ♗f8 14.♞xe5 ♞xe5 15.♘xe5 ♗e6 16.♚d1 c5 offers Black excellent compensation for a pawn, due to the bishop pair and superior piece coordination.

13...♞xe5 14.♘xe5 ♗e6 15.♚d1 ♗d6 16.♘df3 c5

Black has excellent piece play, in the spirit of the Marshall Attack.



10...dxc4 11.dxc4

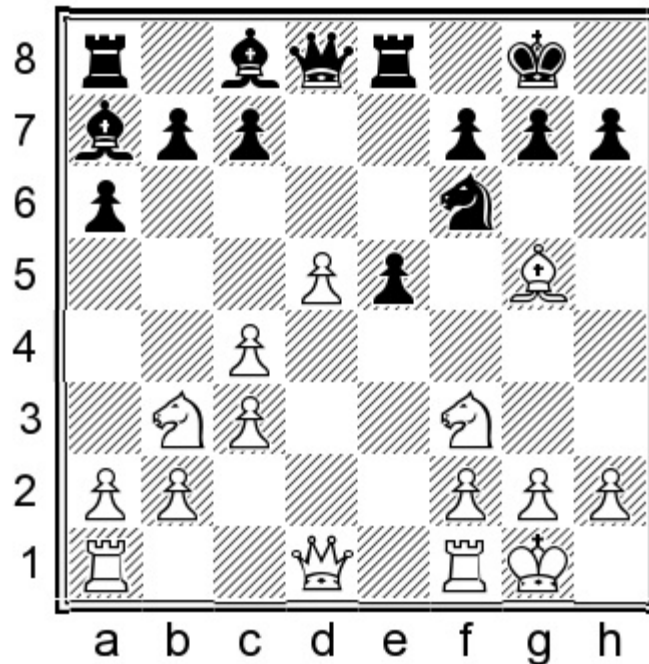
11.dxc5? ♖xd5 leaves White struggling to equalize, and most likely failing.

11...♗a7

Black's main idea is to undermine White's pawn centre with ...b7-b5.

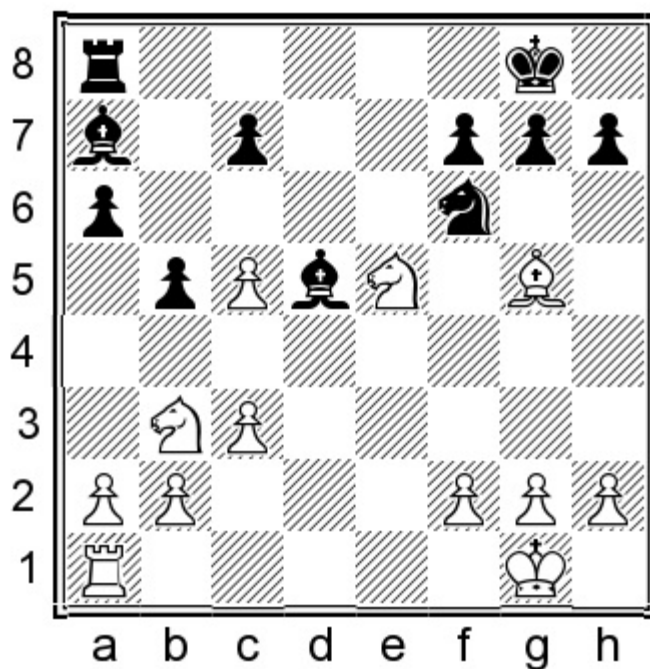
12.♗g5

12.♗e3 ♗xe3 13.fxe3 b5 sees White lose stability in the centre.



12...b5 13.♗bd2

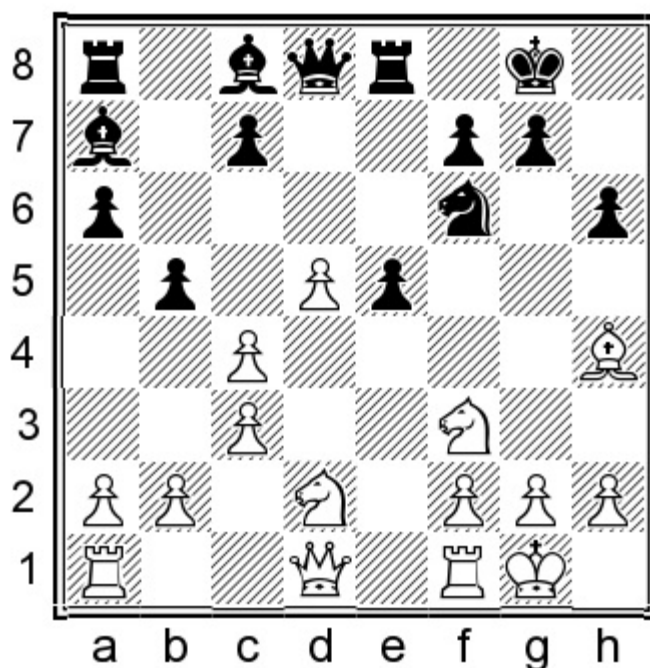
13.c5!? is playable, but after 13...♙xd5 White is unable to exploit the blocked-in bishop on a7. For instance: 14.♖e1 ♗b7 15.♙xd5 ♗xd5 16.♖xe5 ♖xe5 17.♘xe5



17...♘e4 18.♗e3 ♗xb3 19.axb3 ♗xc5 With an equal endgame.

### 13...h6 14.♗h4

14.♗xf6 would be risky in view of 14...♙xf6 15.♖e1 bxc4 16.♘xc4 e4 17.♘d4 ♙g5 18.♘e3 f5 when Black has great attacking potential, helped by the unopposed dark-squared bishop.



After a series of logical moves by both sides, I found a natural way to improve Black's play.

### 14...bxc4N

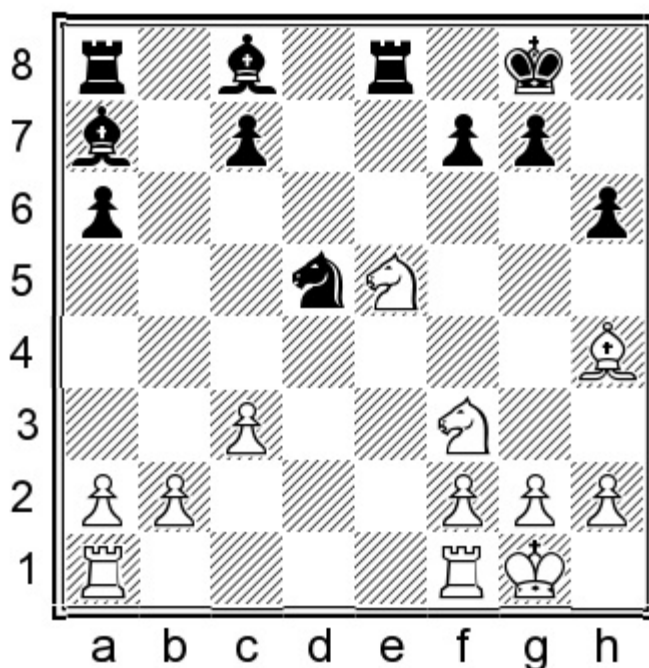
Rather than 14...♔f5?! 15.♖e1 when Black ran into difficulties in Gopal – Melkumyan, Bad Wiessee 2016.

15.♘xc4 ♚xd5 16.♚xd5

This is the critical move as it enables White to keep an extra pawn, but Black obtains plenty of compensation.

16.♕xf6 ♚xd1 17.♞axd1 gxf6 is no problem for Black, whose strong bishops make up for the structural weaknesses.

16...♘xd5 17.♘cxe5



17...g5! 18.♕g3 f5 19.h3 f4 20.♕h2 ♕b7

Black has two strong bishops and the h2-bishop is completely out of play, so Black has full compensation, to say the least.

### Conclusion

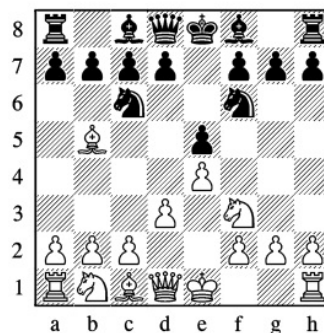
4.d3 ♕c5 5.c3 is one of White's most common ways of handling the Berlin. Like in the Giuoco Piano, White covers d4 and makes the d3-d4 advance possible in some lines. On the other hand, White spends a tempo on a pawn move and restricts the mobility of the b1-knight so I find 5...0-0 followed by a quick ...d7-d5 break the most challenging reaction. After the usual 6.0-0 d5, White has two major options.

In the event of 7.exd5 ♖xd5 8.♗c4 ♖d8 White's play is mainly based on attacking the e5-pawn, often with the help of the b2-b4-b5 advance. On the downside, Black has somewhat more space and the d3-pawn may also become weak. These factors offer Black good play, even if it involves gambiting the central pawn.

The alternative is to maintain the tension with 7.♗bd2. In that case I find 7...♞e8!? an attractive option, the key point being to meet 8.exd5 with 8...a6!, offering a pawn sacrifice in the spirit of the Marshall Attack. Any attempt by White to maintain the extra pawn will involve parting with the light-squared bishop, which is a significant positional concession. As the analysis has demonstrated, Black has great play for a pawn in all variations.

# Chapter 7

## Closed System



### Other 5th Moves

### Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6 4.d3

4...♙c5

A) 5.♗c3 142

B) 5.♗bd2 ♗d4 6.♗xd4 ♙xd4 144

B1) 7.♗f3 145

B2) 7.c3 146

C) 5.0-0 ♗d4 6.♗xd4 ♙xd4 148

C1) 7.♗d2 150

C2) 7.c3 152

D) 5.♙xc6 dxc6 154

D1) 6.♙e2 155

D2) 6.h3 156

D3) 6.♗c3 159

D4) 6.♙e3 162

D5) 6.0-0 ♙e7 7.♗bd2 ♙g4 8.h3 ♙h5 165

D51) 9.♗c4 167

D52) 9.a3 169

D6) 6.♗bd2 ♗d7 171

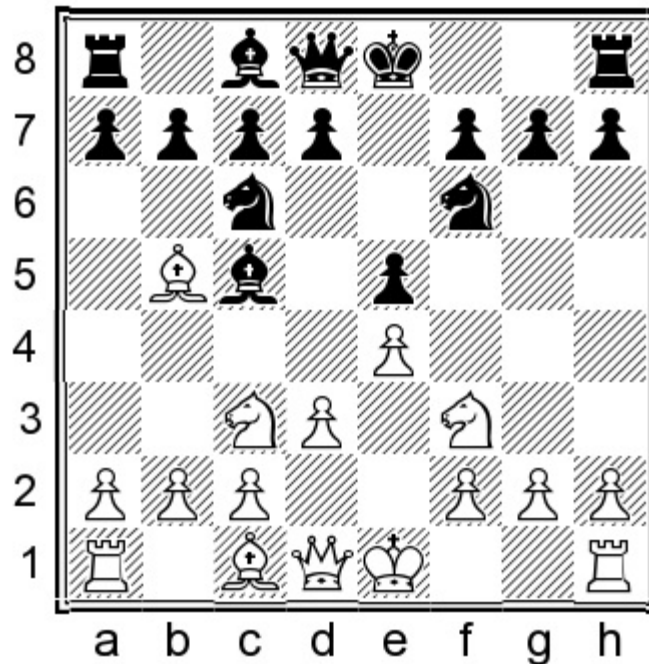
D61) 7.0-0 172

D62) 7.♘c4 175

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.d3 ♙c5

Having previously analysed the main line of 5.c3, this chapter will deal with the alternatives of A) 5.♘c3, B) 5.♘bd2, C) 5.0-0 and D) 5.♙xc6.

A) 5.♘c3



This move is aimed at liquidating the enemy bishop with ♘a4 in some cases.

5...♘d4!?

Unless White forcibly prevents it with 5.c3 or 5.♙xc6, this is generally our preferred follow-up to 4...♙c5. Black is interested in swapping the knights in order to leave the b5-bishop stranded, and perhaps to gain time with ...c7-c6. The text move has actually been a relatively rare choice in this exact position, perhaps because it is connected with a pawn sacrifice, but I am happy with the outcome of it.

5...d6 6.♘a4 ♙b6 7.♘xb6 axb6 8.c3 leads to a long strategic struggle, where the bishop pair offers White a slight pull.

5...0-0 6.♙xc6 dxc6 is possible, but it takes us to the 5.♙xc6 dxc6 6.♘c3 line, where I prefer not to castle so soon.

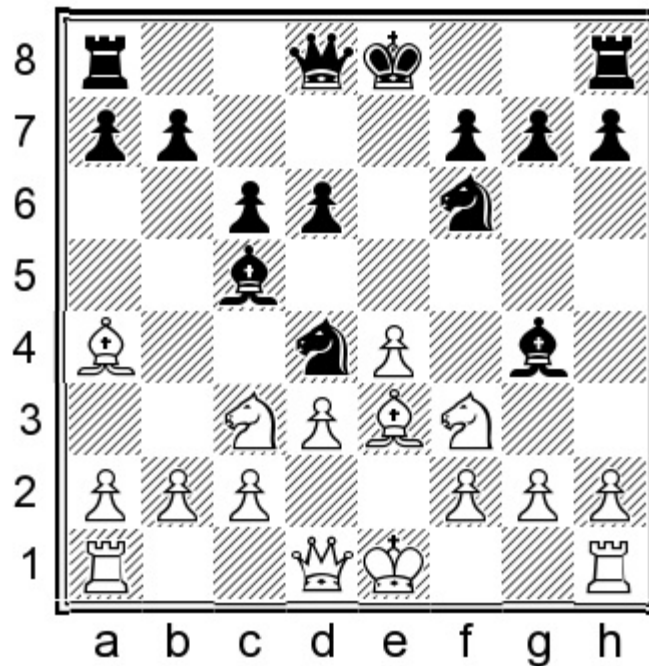
6.♘xe5

Grabbing the central pawn is undoubtedly the most challenging reply. Other continuations might transpose to the Four Knights Game as covered in Chapter 8, where Black does not face any problems.

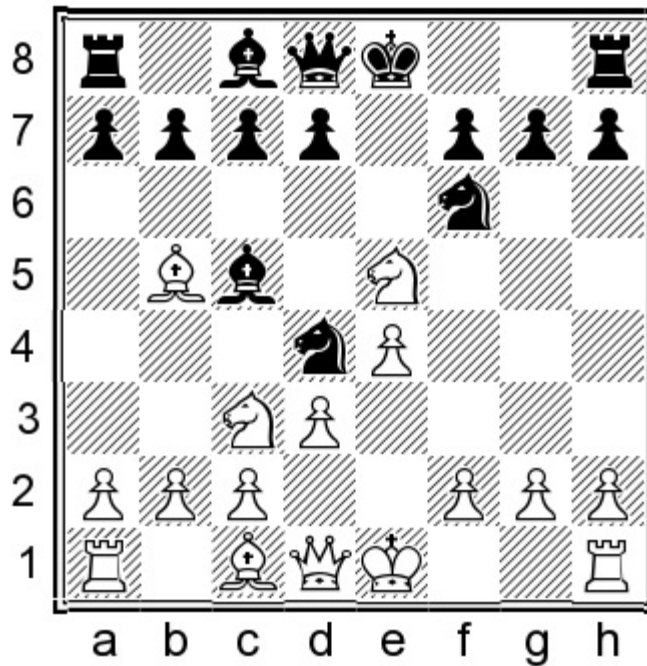
6. ♖xd4 ♘xd4 just leads to a normal type of situation after the knight exchange, where Black has no problems.

If White retreats the bishop from b5, we will transpose to the Four Knights Game. For instance, 6. ♘c4 is covered via 4. ♖c3 ♖d4 5. ♘c4 ♘c5 6. d3.

The other bishop retreat is: 6. ♘a4 c6 7. ♖xe5 (7.0-0 0-0 8. ♖xd4 ♘xd4 can be evaluated in the same way as 6. ♖xd4 ♘xd4 above.) 7...d6 8. ♖f3 ♘g4 9. ♘e3



9...d5 10. ♘xd4 ♘xd4 There arises a curious transposition to one of the main lines of the Four Knights Game, which will be examined via the move order of 4. ♖c3 ♖d4 5. ♘a4 c6 6. ♖xe5 d5 7. d3 ♘d6 8. ♖f3. Here Black has lost a tempo with ...d7-d6-d5, but gained it back by developing the dark-squared bishop via c5-d4, without moving to d6 first.



### 6...c6

6...0-0!? is an interesting alternative, leading to a complex position with unbalanced material:  
 7.♘c4 d6 8.♗xf7 ♖xf7 9.♘xf7 ♗xf7 10.h3 ♕e8 Black eventually prevailed in So – Dominguez Perez, Saint Louis (rapid) 2017, but at this stage I prefer White's chances due to the strong central pawns.

### 7.♘c4

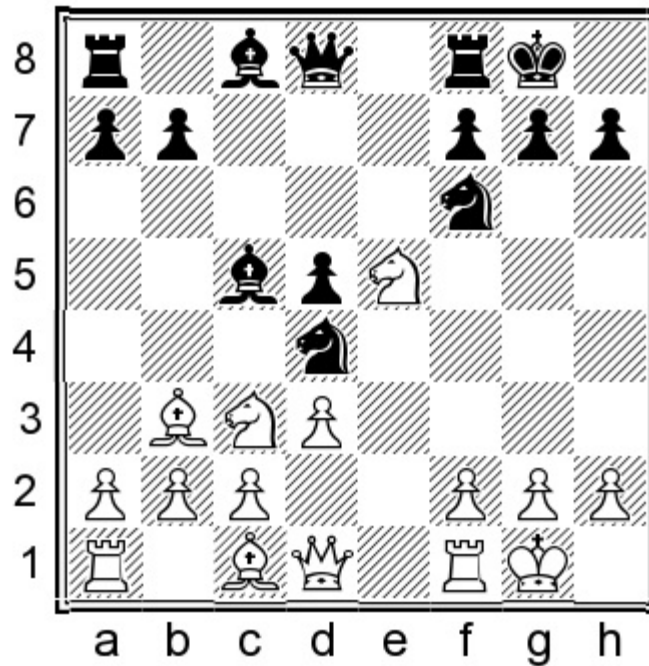
7.♘a4 transposes to the 6.♘a4 line noted above.

### 7...d5

Black wins an important tempo by attacking the bishop again.

### 8.exd5 0-0 9.0-0 cxd5 10.♘b3

The bishop is safe enough, but it will be out of play for a while.



### 10...♖e8 11.♙f4

11.♖e1? is bad in view of 11...♙g4! 12.♘xg4 ♖xe1† 13.♚xe1 ♘xg4 when Black already had a decisive attack in Frydendal – Ovcjak, corr. 2013.

### 11...b5!

Black starts to expand on the queenside and also vacates b7 for the bishop.

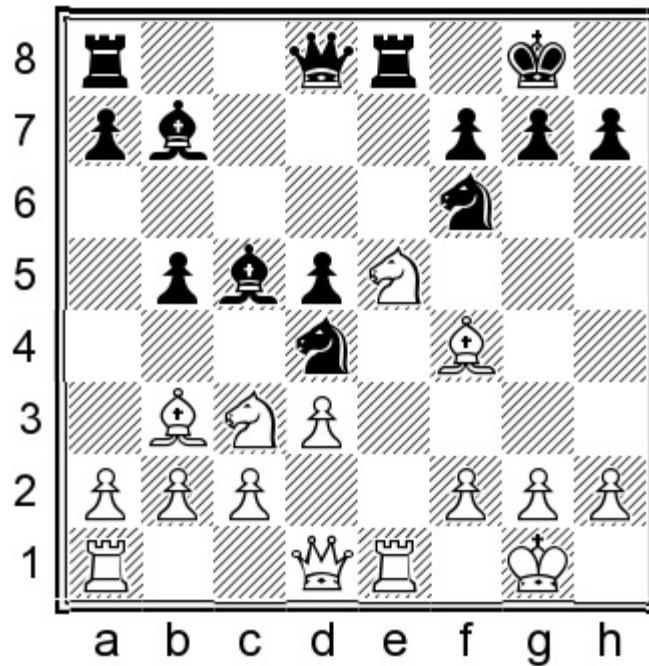
### 12.♖e1

It's important to overprotect the knight.

The careless 12.h3?! runs into 12...♙d6 13.♖e1 b4 when White's set-up is getting dicey.

### 12...♙b7

Here White's play can be improved with:



### 13. ♕g3N

Safeguarding the bishop and overprotecting f2.

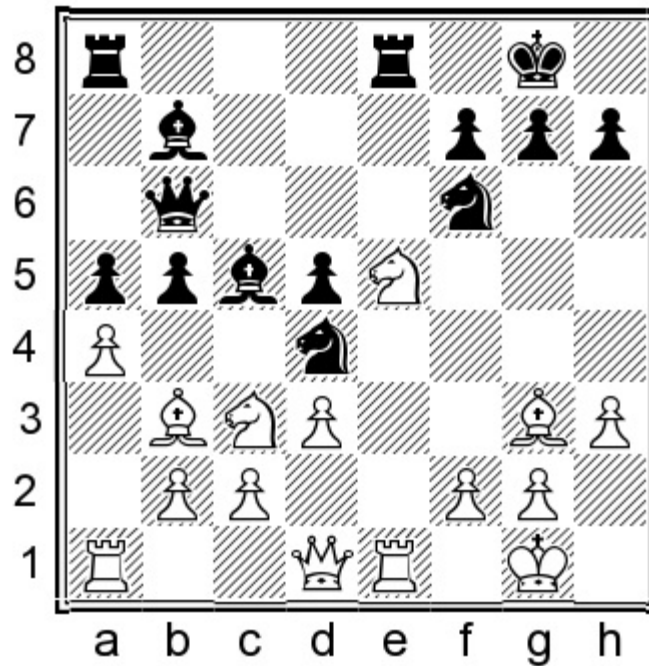
13. ♖c1?! is too passive, and 13... ♙b6 14. ♙d2 a5 left White under strong pressure in Kovalenko – Fressinet, Katowice 2017.

The attempt to release the pressure with 13. ♘e2N 13... ♘xb3 14. axb3 runs into 14... d4 15. ♕g3 ♙b6 when the power of the light-squared bishop outweighs White's extra pawn.

### 13... ♙b6 14. h3

I also considered 14. ♘f3 ♘xb3 15. axb3 d4 16. ♖xe8 ♖xe8 17. ♘e2 ♕xf3 18. gxf3 b4 when White's pawn majority is fully neutralized, while the danger on the kingside will persist for a long time.

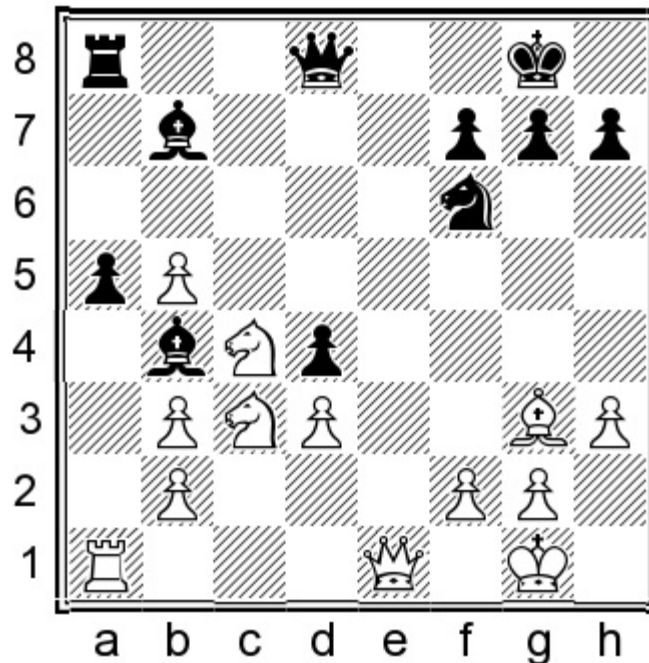
### 14... a5 15. a4



15...♙b4!

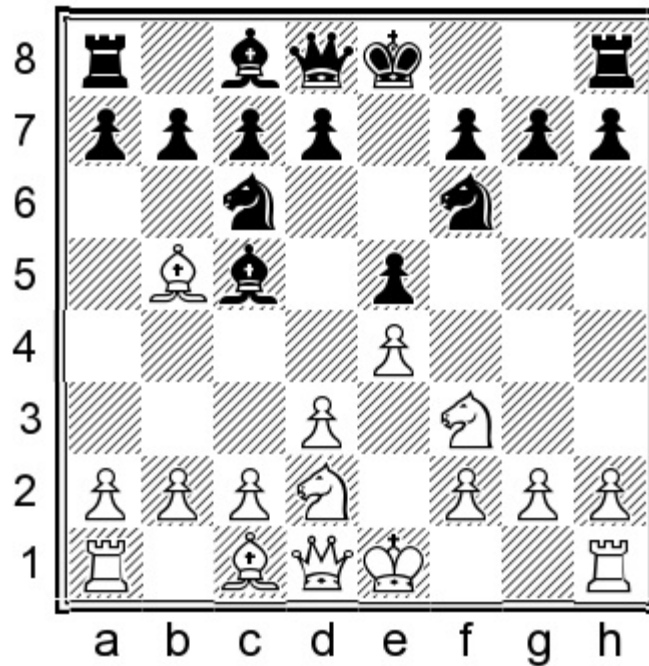
Black manages to take advantage of the poor location of White's queenside pieces. For instance:

16. axb5 ♜xb3 17. cxb3 d4 18. ♘c4 ♞xe1† 19. ♚xe1 ♞d8



Black will emerge with an extra piece against multiple pawns. The outcome is uncertain but, considering Black's bishop pair and generally high level of activity, it is hard to believe Black can be worse.

**B) 5. ♘bd2**



### 5...♘d4

5...0-0 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.♘c4 takes us to a theoretical position which usually arises after 5.♙xc6. I would like to avoid this line.

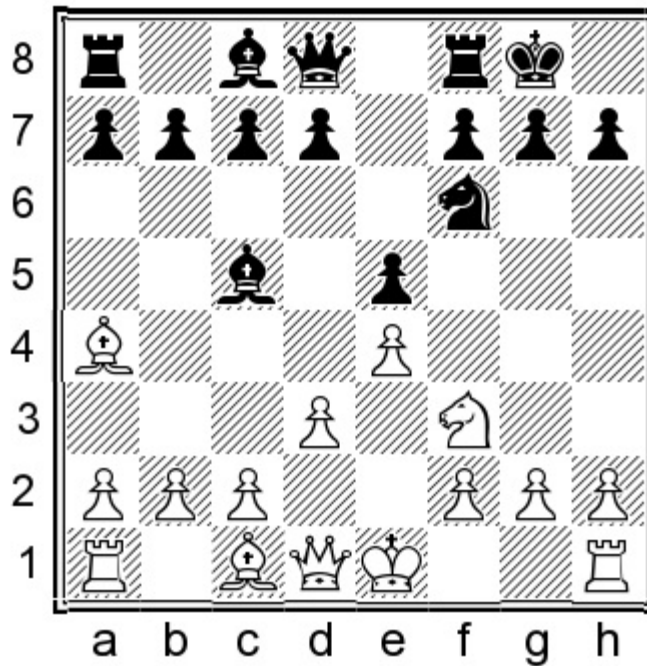
There is nothing wrong with 5...d6, except that 6.c3 0-0 7.0-0 is another line that falls outside of our repertoire.

### 6.♘xd4

#### 6.♙a4

This retreat has been tried by a few strong players but is harmless. Out of a few decent continuations, my choice would be:

6...♘xf3 ♠N 7.♘xf3 0-0



8. ♘xe5

White's only critical continuation is to grab the pawn.

8.0-0 transposes to an existing game, which continued 8...d5 9.exd5 ♙xd5 10.♗b3 ♙d6 with no problems for Black, Freeman – Barkov, corr. 2018.

8...d5 9.exd5

After 9.d4 ♗b6 10.exd5 ♙xd5 11.♘f3 ♗g4 12.c3 c5 Black's full compensation for the pawn is obvious.

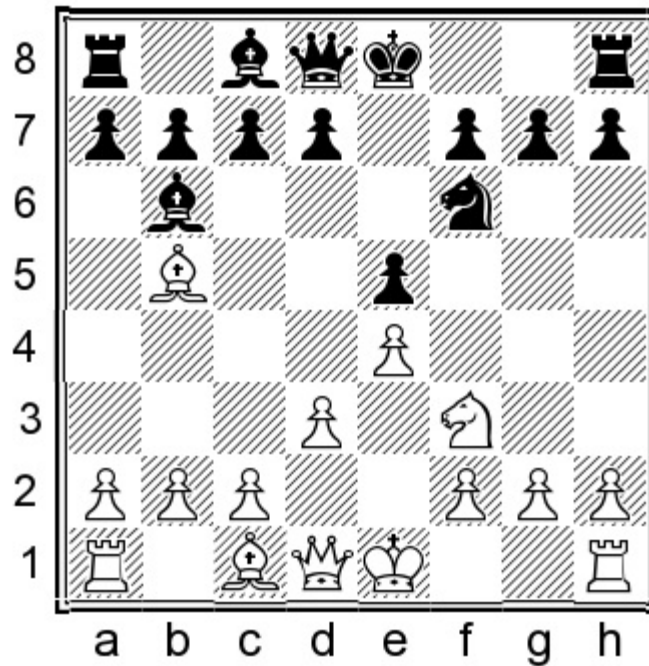
9...♙xd5 10.♘f3 ♗d6 11.0-0 ♙h5

Black has excellent compensation.

6...♗xd4

If White castles here then we reach variation C1 on page 150, which leaves **B1)** 7.♘f3 and **B2)** 7.c3 as the two main options which give the 5.♘bd2 move order independent value.

**B1) 7.♘f3 ♗b6**



### 8.0-0

8. ♖xe5?? ♚e7 wins a piece due to the possibility of a queen fork on b4.

### 8...0-0!

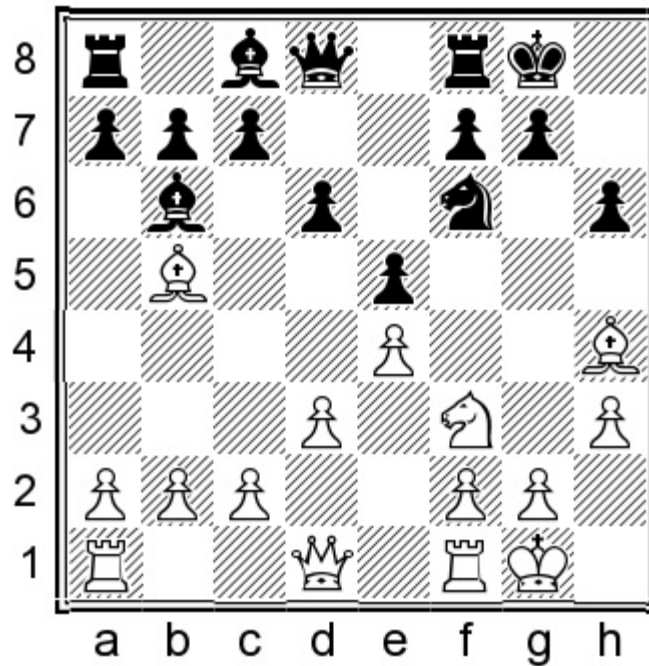
There is still no need to defend e5.

### 9. ♗xe5

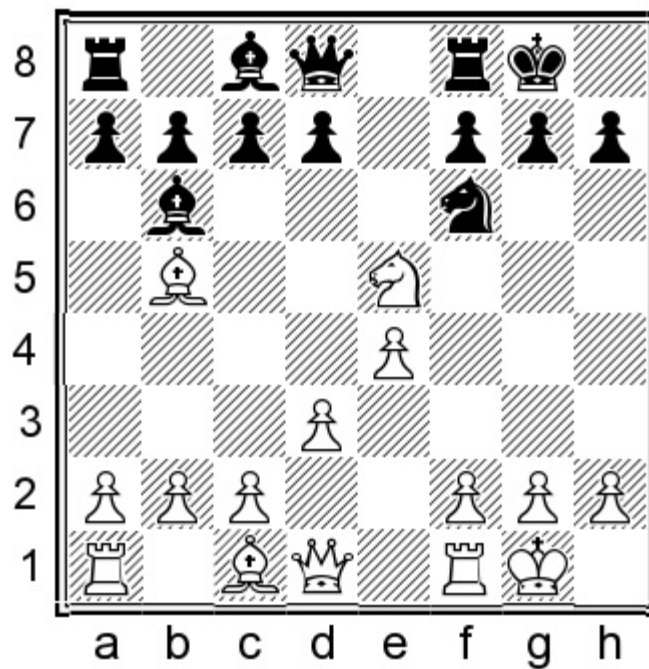
This is the most consistent continuation, but the vulnerable location of White's minor pieces allows Black to immediately regain the pawn.

The quieter 9. ♘c4 d6 10. h3 h6 11. ♖e1 ♜e8 12. a4 c6 yielded White no advantage in Butov – Monakov, corr. 2013.

The pinning 9. ♘g5 proved ineffective in the following game: 9...h6 10. ♘h4 d6 11. h3?! (More to the point was 11. c3, maintaining the balance.)



11...g5! 12.♙g3 ♖h5 13.♜h2 f5 The poor location of the g3-bishop enabled Black to seize the initiative in Antipov – Leko, Moscow (rapid) 2015.



9...d5! 10.♙f4

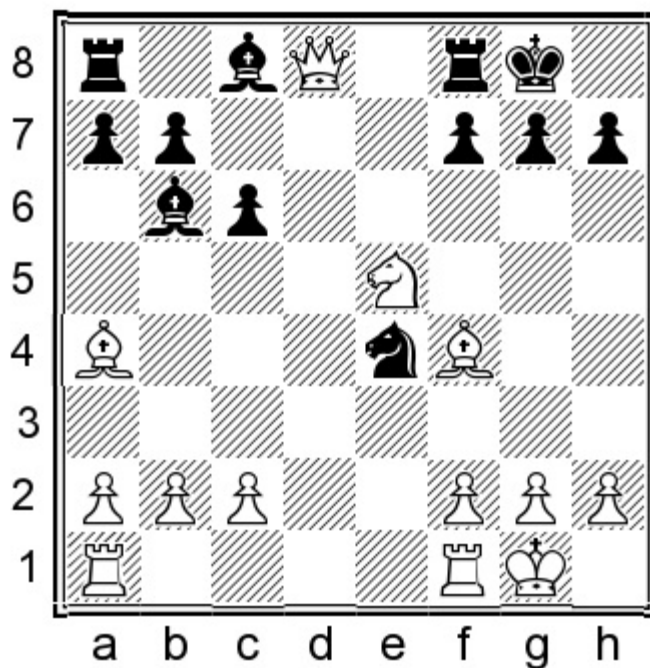
Obviously 10.exd5?? ♚xd5 leads to the loss of a piece for White.

10.♙g5 is playable but harmless, and after 10...c6 11.♙a4 dxe4 12.♙b3 exd3 13.♚xd3 ♚xd3 14.♜xd3 ♙f5 Black had no problems in the endgame in Harikrishna – Leko, Beijing (blitz) 2014.

10...c6 11.♙a4 dxe4 12.dxe4 ♜xe4 13.♚xd8

After natural play by both sides, the present position was reached in Maze – Fressinet, Agen

2017. In my opinion, the easiest way to equalize is:



**13...♙xd8!N**

Keeping the f7-pawn protected. Play could continue:

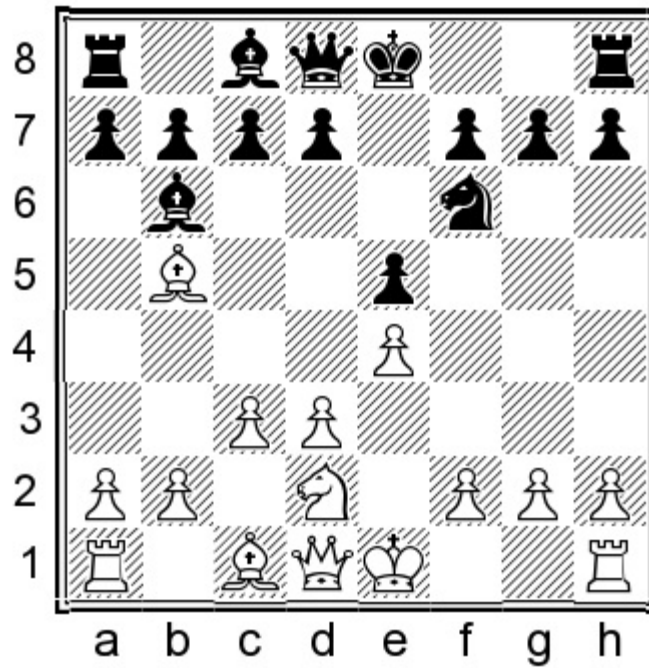
**14.c3**

14.♖ad1 ♜c5 15.♙b3 ♜xb3 16.axb3 ♙e6 reaches an endgame where Black has a minimal advantage due to the bishop pair.

**14...♙f5 15.♞fe1 ♜c5**

Black has nothing to worry about.

**B2) 7.c3 ♙b6**



### 8.d4!?

Other moves are of course legal, but this is the only real way to challenge Black in the opening. White shakes up the centre before Black has time to stabilize with ...d7-d6.

8.0-0 0-0 transposes to variation C1 below.

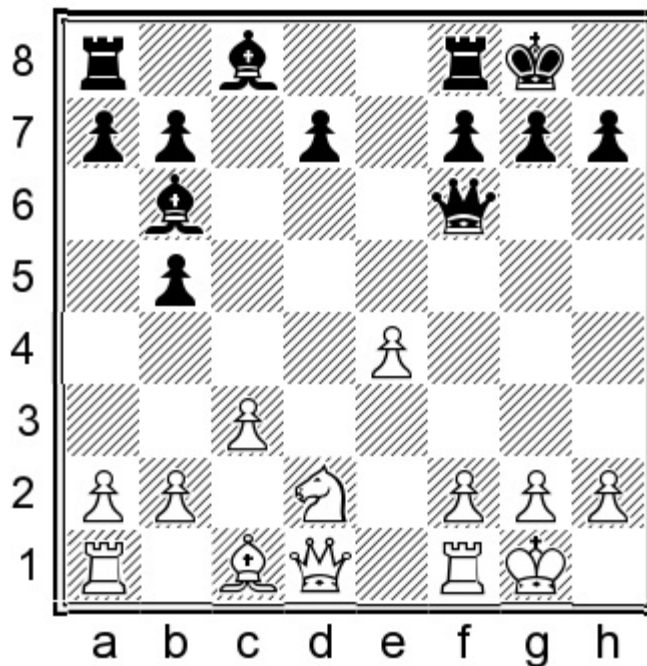
### 8...c6

8...exd4 9.e5 dxc3 10.bxc3 gives White a promising initiative for the pawn.

### 9.dxe5

Again, White should keep up the momentum.

9...cxb5 10.exf6 ♔xf6 11.0-0 0-0

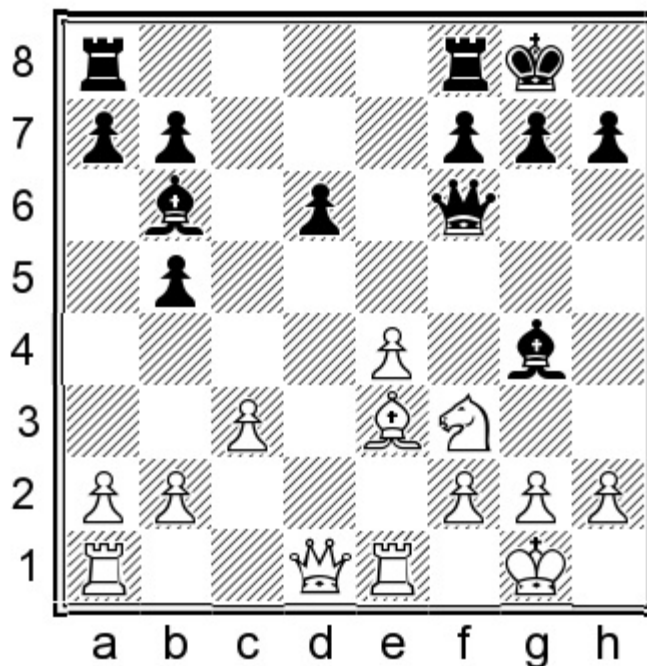


After the last few obvious moves, we reach a position where Black has accepted a weakening of the queenside structure in return for the bishop pair and dynamic counter-chances.

#### 12.a4

This has been White's most popular choice, and has been employed a few times at the highest level. Two other moves have been tried:

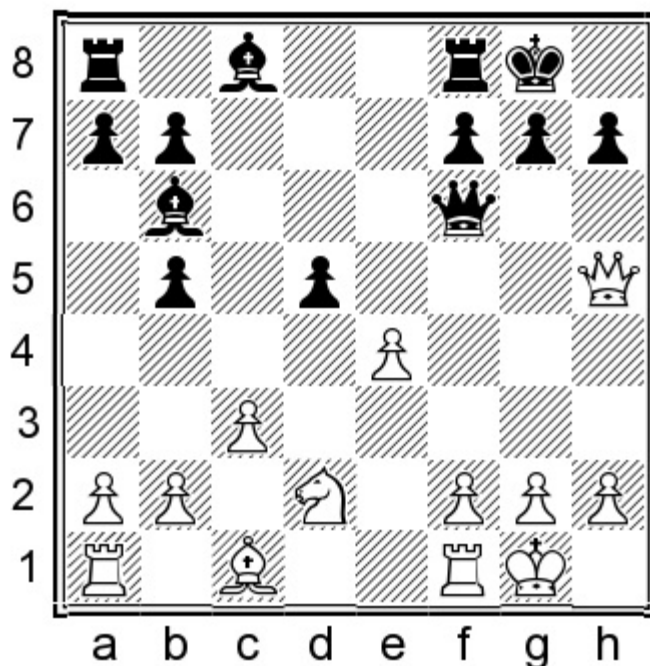
12.♖f3 d6 13.♞e1 ♗g4 14.♙e3 (I also checked 14.h3N 14...♙xf3 15.♚xf3 ♚xf3 16.gxf3 ♞ad8 17.♙e3 ♙xe3 18.fxe3 f5 19.exf5 ♞xf5 when Black's activity along the f-file should suffice for equality.)



14...b4 15.♙xb6 axb6 Black's active piece play fully compensated for the structural drawbacks in

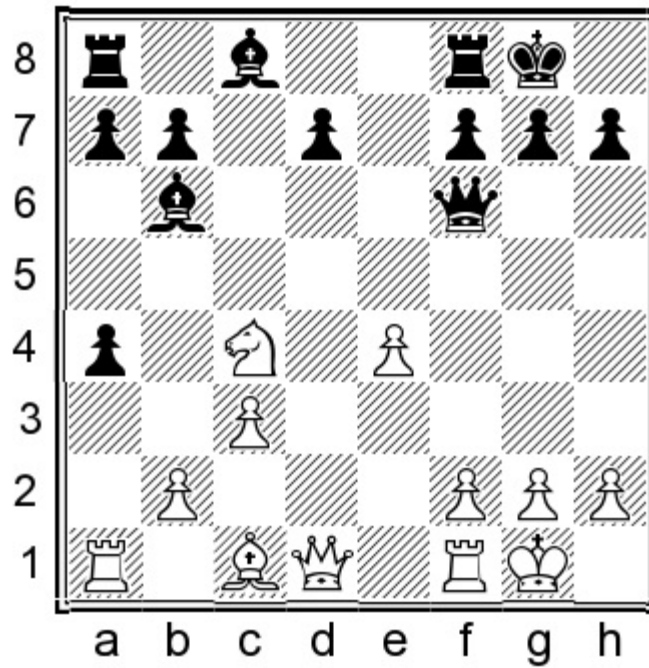
Nakamura – Aronian, Zagreb 2019.

The active 12. ♖h5 can be met in kind with: 12...d5!N (Instead, after 12...♖c6 13. ♗f3 d6 14. ♖e1 f6 15. ♕e3 Black was doomed to passive defence due to his poor pawn structure in Nepomniachtchi – Aronian, Internet [blitz] 2020.)



13. exd5 (After 13. ♖xd5 ♖e8 14. ♖xb5 ♕g4 15. h3 a6 16. ♖c4 ♕d7 Black's powerful bishops and other active pieces are at least as relevant as White's extra pawns.) 13...♕f5 14. ♗f3 ♖fe8 15. ♕g5 ♖d6 16. ♖ad1 f6 17. ♕h4 ♖d7 White's passer is blocked, while Black has strong bishops and play along the e-file, not to mention an immediate threat of trapping the white queen.

12...bxa4 13. ♗c4



### 13...d5!

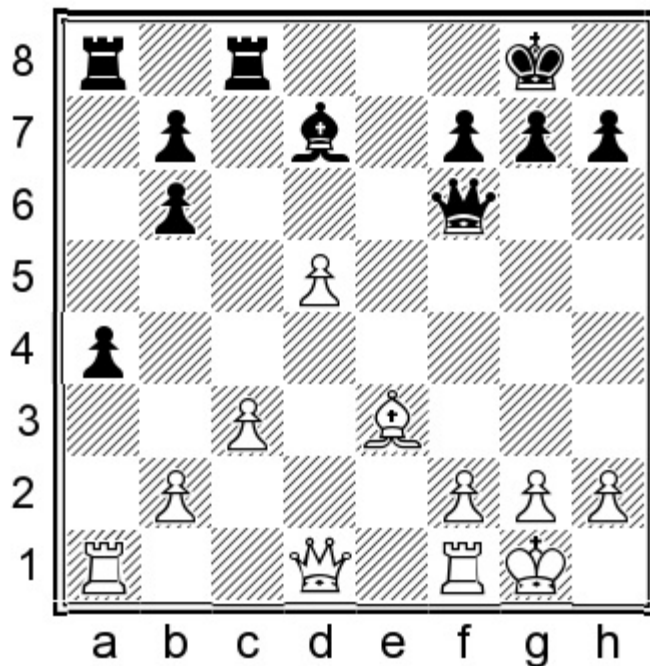
Again we sacrifice the weak pawn in order to develop the light-squared bishop and connect the rooks as quickly as possible.

13...♙c7 14.♘e3 b5 15.♘d5 ♚d8 16.♙g4 gave White promising play for the pawn in Caruana – Kramnik, Paris (rapid) 2018.

### 14.exd5 ♙d7 15.♙e3 ♜fc8 16.♘xb6

After 16.♙xb6 axb6 17.♘e3 b5 18.♙d2 a3 Black's pieces are more active and the c3-pawn feels weak.

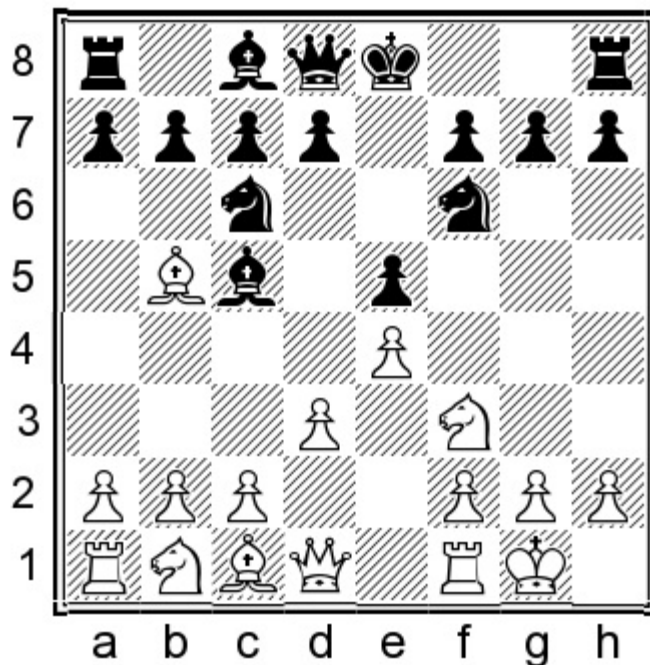
### 16...axb6



17. Ke1 Ke8 18. Qd4 Qxd4 19. Qxd4 b5

The endgame was equal in Lopez Martinez – Roiz, Budva 2019.

C) 5.0-0



This is White's third most popular continuation. Castling is obviously a natural move, and it also creates a concrete threat of Qxc6 followed by Nxe5.

5... Nxd4

Since d2-d3 wasn't the most aggressive move, Black can afford to move the knight for the second time in the opening – especially as it leaves the bishop on b5 looking rather aimless. The knight trade

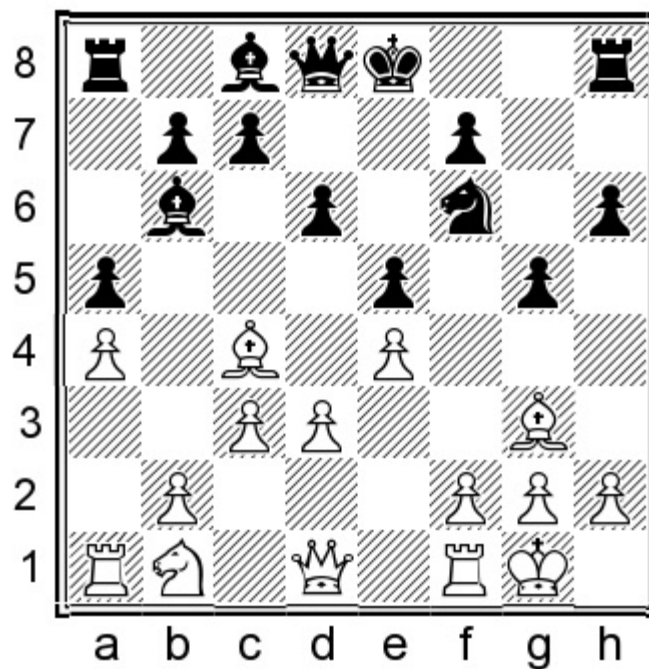
also facilitates ...c7-c6.

5...d6 is a common alternative, but our repertoire is based on playing ambitiously with ...d7-d5 whenever possible.

## 6. ♖xd4

White goes for the knight trade in the great majority of games, but it is worth checking a few alternatives:

6. ♘c4 is harmless. 6...d6 7. ♖xd4 (7.a4 c6 8. ♖xd4 ♘xd4 9.a5 a6 10. ♖d2 0-0 11. ♘b3 h6 was equal in Nepomniachtchi – Giri, Internet (rapid) 2020) 7...♘xd4 8.c3 ♘b6 9.a4 a5 In an equal position, White went for the overoptimistic 10. ♘g5 h6 11. ♘h4? g5 12. ♘g3 in Firouzja – Kobo, Internet (blitz) 2018, and now Black could have exposed the drawback of the bishop on g3 with:



12...h5!N 13.h4 ♖g4 With a decisive attack.

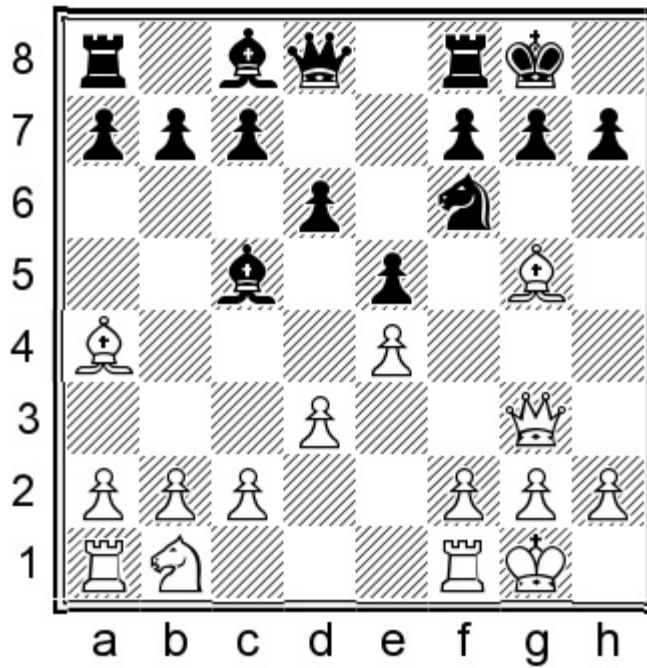
White also gets nothing special with:

6. ♘a4 ♖xf3† 7. ♗xf3 0-0 8. ♗g3

Another instructive line is: 8. ♖c3 d6 9. ♘g5 c6 10. ♗g3?! (White should prefer 10. ♘b3 h6 11. ♘xf6 ♗xf6 12. ♗xf6 gxf6 with an equal ending, as has occurred in several games.) This position was reached in Martin Garcia – S. Diaz, Tenerife 1990, and a few other games. Nobody found the clever resource of 10...♖h5!N 11. ♗h4 f6 when Black is simply better.

8...d6 9. ♘g5

Pinning the knight is a natural idea but this version of it should not bother Black. This position was reached in a few games, most notably Carlsen – Anand, Moscow (rapid) 2011. I like the following ambitious approach:



9...♘h5!N 10.♚h4 f6 11.♙e3 ♘f4

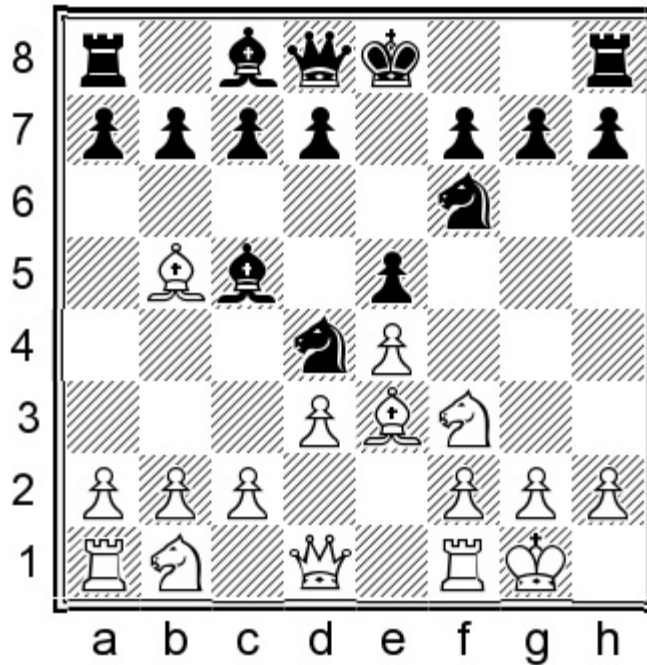
Black has an excellent position. The main justification for Black's play is revealed after:

12.♙xf4?! g5 13.♙xg5 fxg5 14.♚h5 ♜f4!

White is in serious danger on the kingside.

A trickier alternative is:

6.♙e3!?



6...♘xf3†

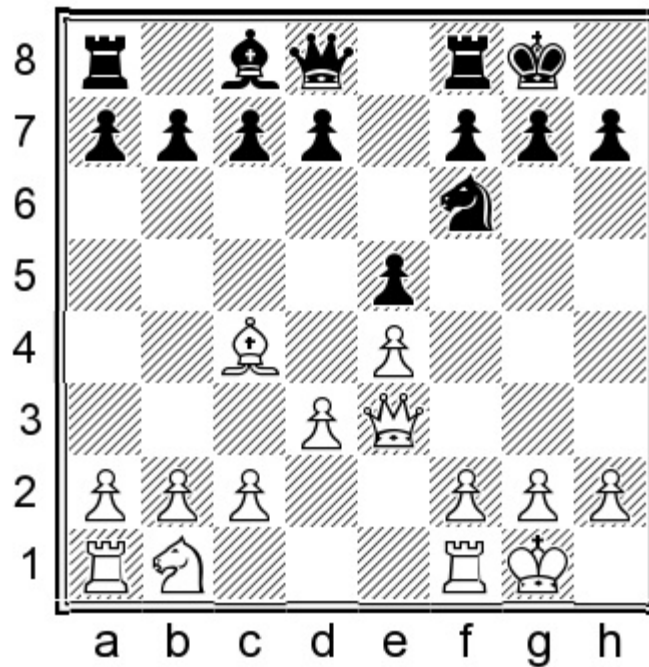
Black should react calmly and simply exchange a few pieces.

7.♚xf3 ♙xe3 8.♚xe3

White's main ideas are to break with f2-f4 or d3-d4.

8...0-0 9.♔c4

9.d4 d6 10.♕e2 c6 11.dxe5 dxe5 12.♖d2 ♕e6 13.a4 ♜b6 gave White nothing in Nakamura – Karjakin, Abidjan 2019.



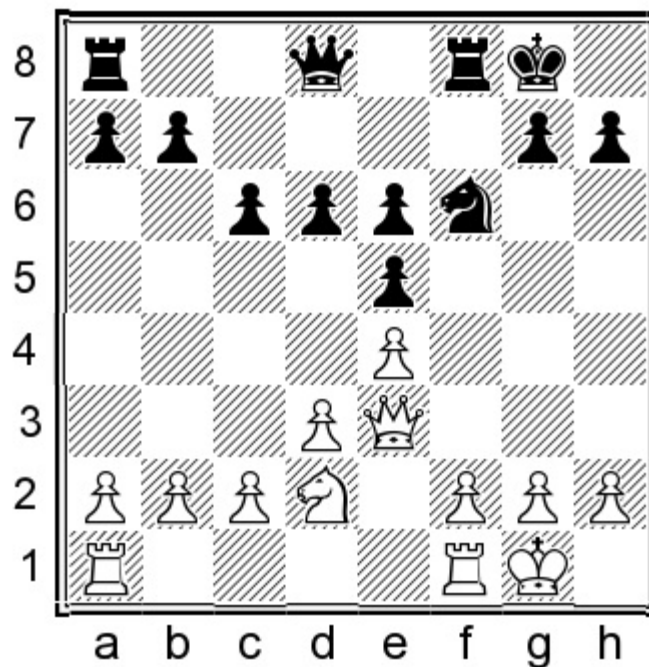
9...c6 10.♕b3 d6!

10...♜e7 seems less precise in view of 11.f4N 11...exf4 12.♖xf4 d5 13.♖d2 with some initiative for White.

11.♖d2 ♕e6 12.♕xe6N

The overambitious 12.f4?! ♖g4 13.♜g3 ♜b6† 14.♔h1 ♕xb3 15.axb3 ♖e3 saw Black take over the initiative in Tokhirjonova – Goryachkina, Internet (rapid) 2020.

12...fxe6



13.c3

White gets ready to grab some space with d3-d4, so a bit of care is needed.

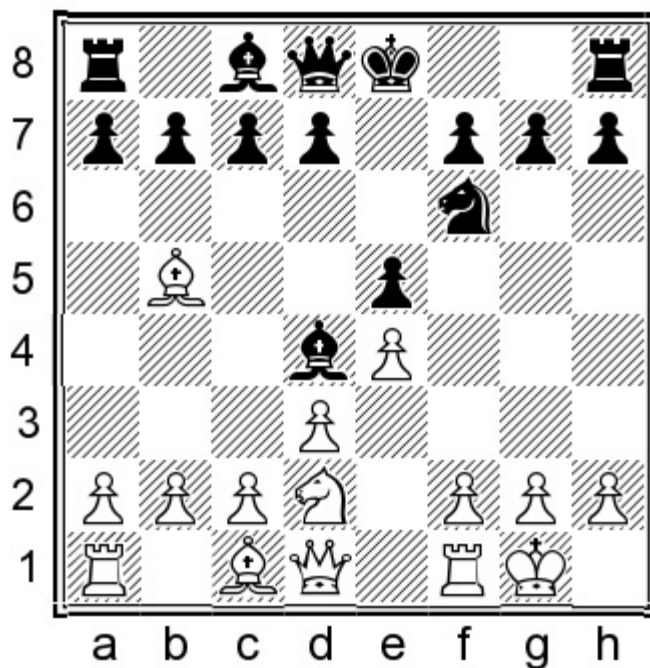
13...c5 14.d4 exd4 15.cxd4 cxd4 16.♙xd4 ♚b6

Black has equalized.

6...♙xd4

We will analyse **C1)** 7.♘d2 followed by the most popular continuation of **C2)** 7.c3.

**C1) 7.♘d2**



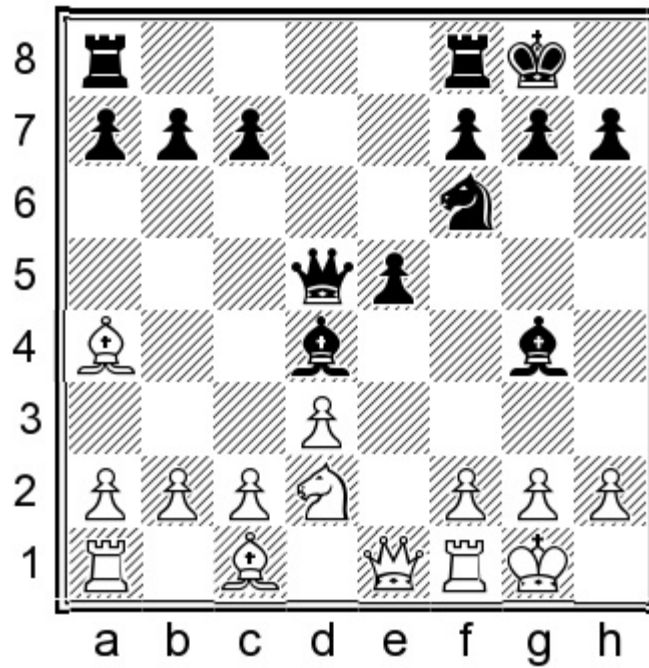
**7...0-0!**

7...c6 has been far more common but I would rather do without this move.

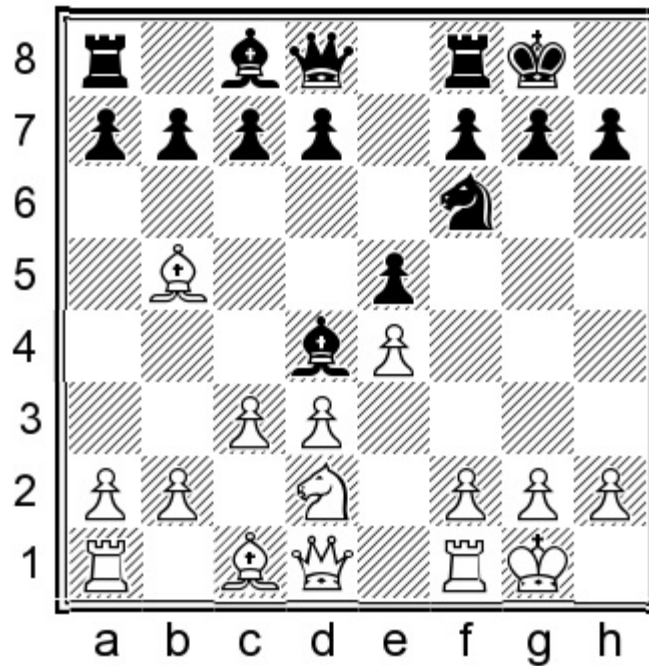
**8.c3**

8.♘f3 ♙b6 takes us back to variation B1 on page 145.

8.♙a4 seems artificial, although it's not a bad move. 8...d5 9.exd5 An important detail is that Black can gain a useful tempo with: 9...♙g4! (9...♙xd5 was the less accurate continuation seen in Caruana – Karjakin, Paris [rapid] 2018, when Black still had to do some work to equalize fully.) 10.♙e1 ♙xd5



11.h3 (I also checked 11.♖b3 ♜d7 12.c3 ♙c5 13.♞xe5 ♙d6 when the lack of development in White's camp starts to tell.) 11...♙f5 12.♜f3 a5 13.c3 ♙b6 14.♞xe5 ♙xd3 Black was fine and a draw soon ensued in Destruels Moreno – Sospedra Sebastian, corr. 2020.



8...♙b6 9.♜c4

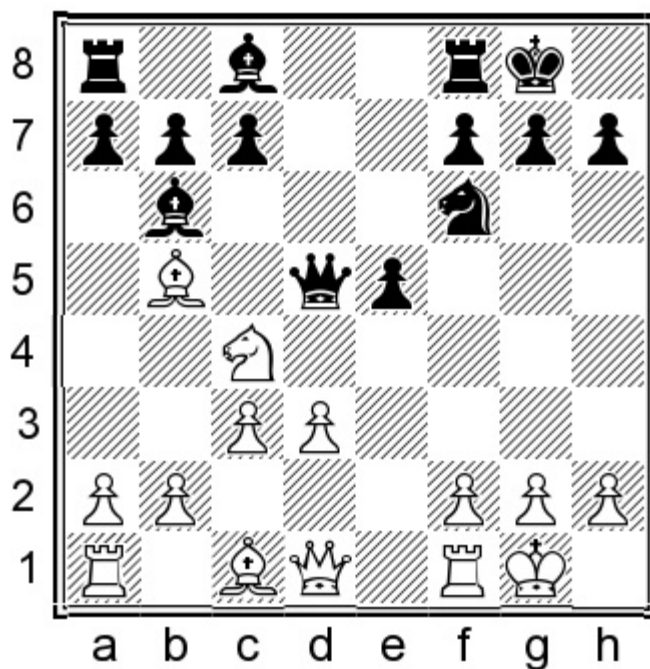
By making this move White guarantees the liquidation of the strong dark-squared bishop, but it costs a few important tempos.

9...d5

This is the most convincing reaction, taking the upper hand in the centre.

### 10. exd5 ♖xd5

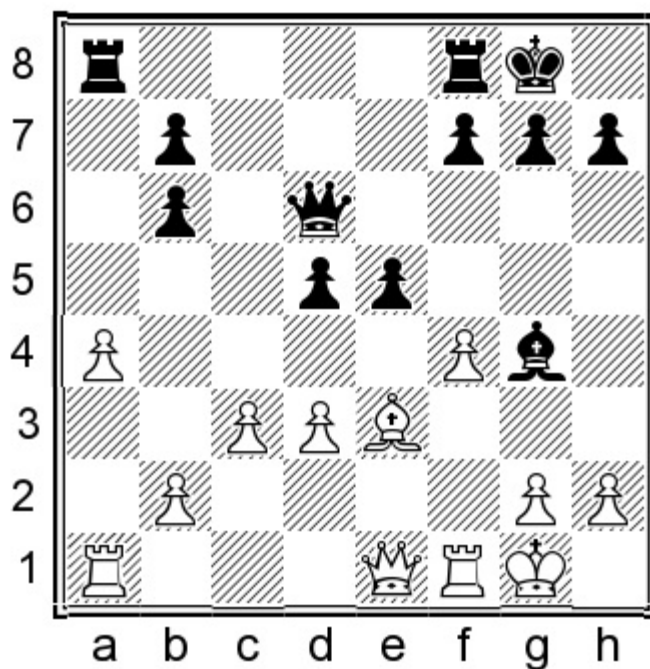
Notice the attack on the b5-bishop, which shows why it was useful to delay ...c7-c6.



### 11. ♘xb6

The most consistent.

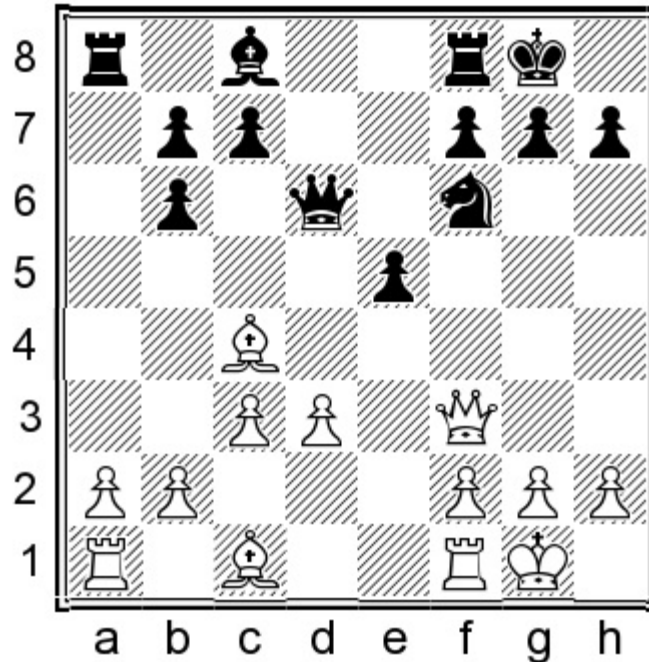
11. a4!? ♗g4 12. ♕e1 is an interesting try, although White's set-up appears somewhat awkward. 12...c6 13. ♘xb6 axb6 14. ♗c4 ♖d6 White has the bishop pair but Black's pawn structure is better. In the game that we are following, White soon traded off one of the bishops anyway. 15. ♗e3 ♘d5 16. ♗xd5 cxd5 17. f4



This position was reached in Vachier-Lagrave – Jakovenko, Tbilisi 2015. Black should have

played: 17...♖fe8!N 18.fxe5 ♕xe5 19.♗xb6 ♖e2 Regaining the pawn to reach an equal position.

11...axb6 12.♗c4 ♕d6 13.♖f3



We have been following Fedorchuk – Balogh, Bastia 2014. Black can choose between a few decent possibilities, but I find the most sensible to be:

13...♗e6N

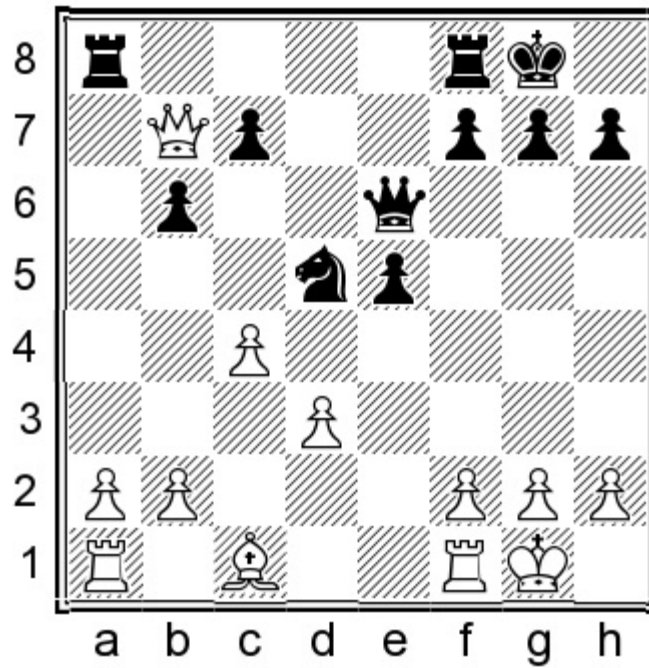
Neutralizing one of the enemy bishops. Play might continue:

14.♗xe6 ♕xe6 15.♖xb7

This is White's only attempt to claim any superiority.

15...♗d5! 16.c4

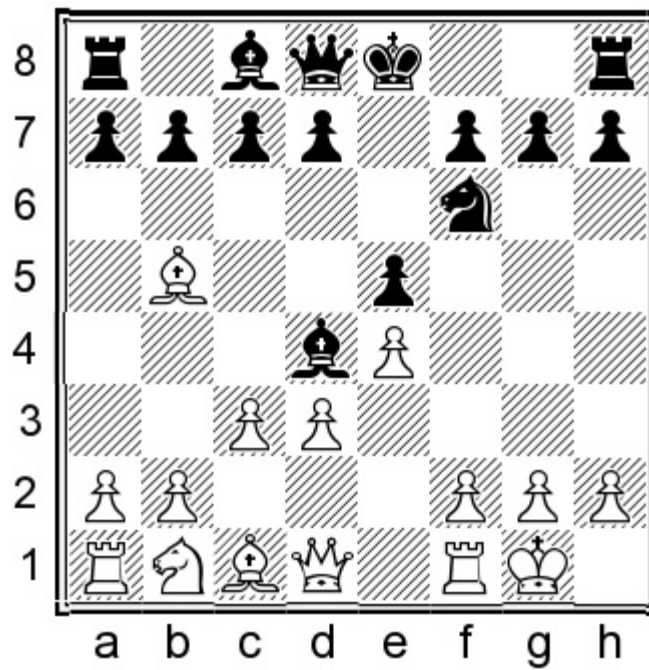
The only way to liberate the queen.



16...d4 17. Qxc7 Nxd3

With such a dominant knight, Black has nothing to worry about.

### C2) 7.c3

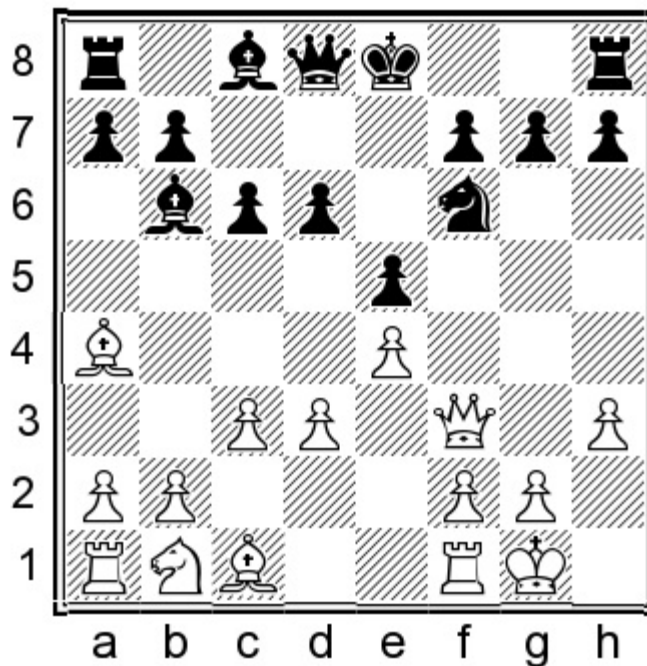


As stated earlier, this is the most popular continuation.

7...Qb6

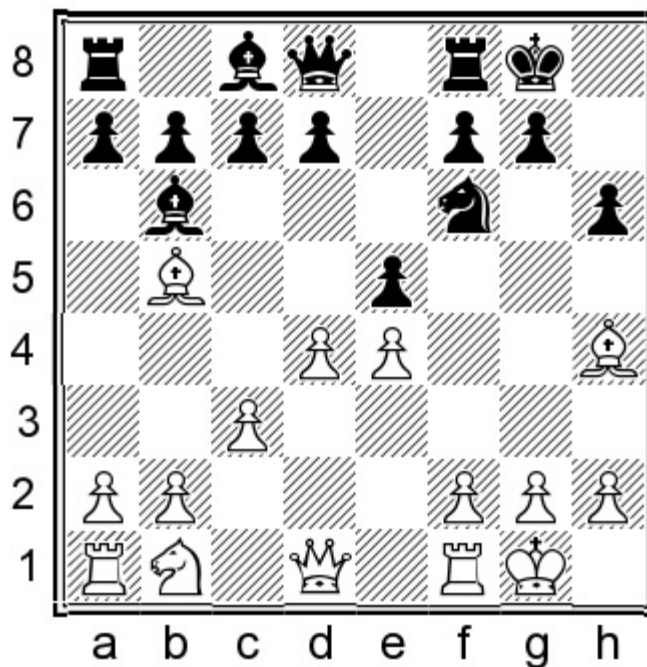
White has a wide choice of logical continuations from here.



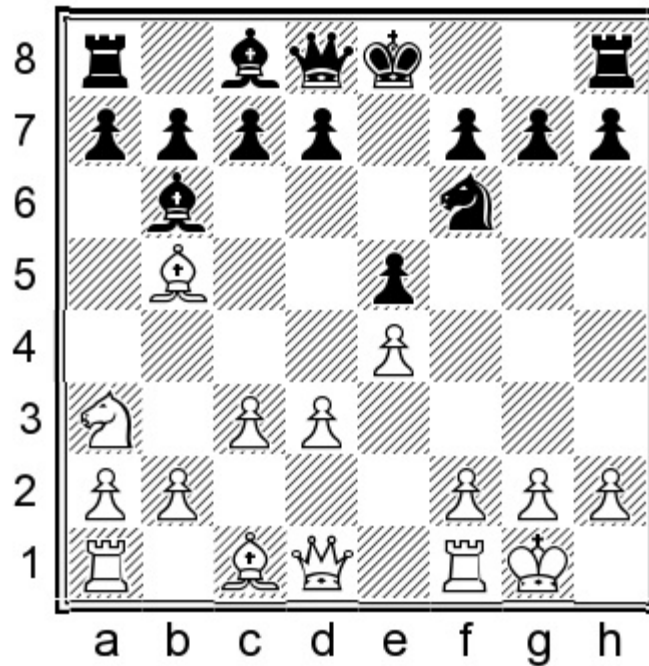


10...Rg8!N 11. Qg5 Otherwise the advance of the g-pawn will give Black a huge attack. 11...h6  
 12. Qxf6 Wxf6 13. Wxf6 gxf6 14. Qh1 f5 White has no compensation for Black's powerful bishop pair.

White's other natural try is: 8.d4 0-0 9. Qg5?! The pin isn't so effective in this situation. (White should settle for 9.dxe5 Nxe4 10. Nd2, although 10...d5! 11. Nxe4 dxe4 leaves Black with no worries.) 9...h6 10. Qh4 (Giving up the dark-squared bishop is a serious concession in such positions, so it's no surprise that 10.dxe5 hxg5 11. exf6 Wxf6 12. Nd2 d6N favours Black.)



10...g5 11. Qg3 This was Shubin – Yeritsyan, Moscow 2018, and now the simple 11...exd4N 12. e5  
 Nxe4 13. Wh5 Qg7 would have left White with no compensation for the missing pawn.



### 8...0-0!

I like this move for its flexibility.

8...c6 9.♙a4 d6 is much more common.

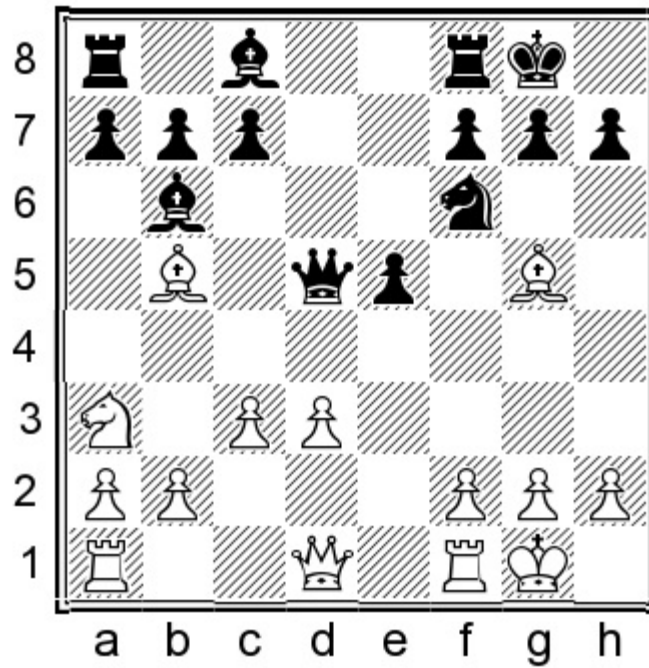
### 9.♙g5

9.♘c4 has been analysed via 7.♘d2.

### 9...d5!

Black has no fear of ghosts and lets White inflict structural damage on the kingside. In return, Black obtains active piece play, while provoking the exchange of the strong dark-squared bishop for the knight is also an achievement of sorts.

### 10.exd5 ♚xd5



### 11. ♖xf6

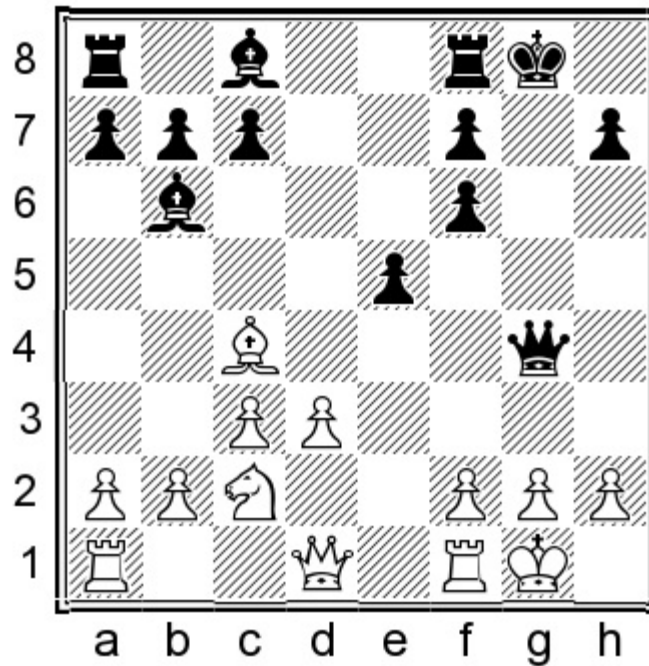
11. ♖c4 leads to major simplifications after 11... ♕d6 12. ♗b3 ♘f5 13. ♘c4 ♕xd3 14. ♘xe5 ♕xd1 15. ♖axd1 ♖ae8 when the position was equal in Efimenko – Hovhannisyán, Yerevan 2015.

11. ♖e1, as seen in Kryvoruchko – Bacrot, Linares 2020, makes no real difference after 11...c6!N 12. ♖xf6 (12. ♖c4?! ♕d6 favours Black) 12...gxf6 13. ♖c4 ♕d7 with ... ♕g4 to follow.

### 11...gxf6 12. ♖c4 ♕d7!

This and the following queen move enable Black to secure the kingside.

### 13. ♘c2 ♕g4



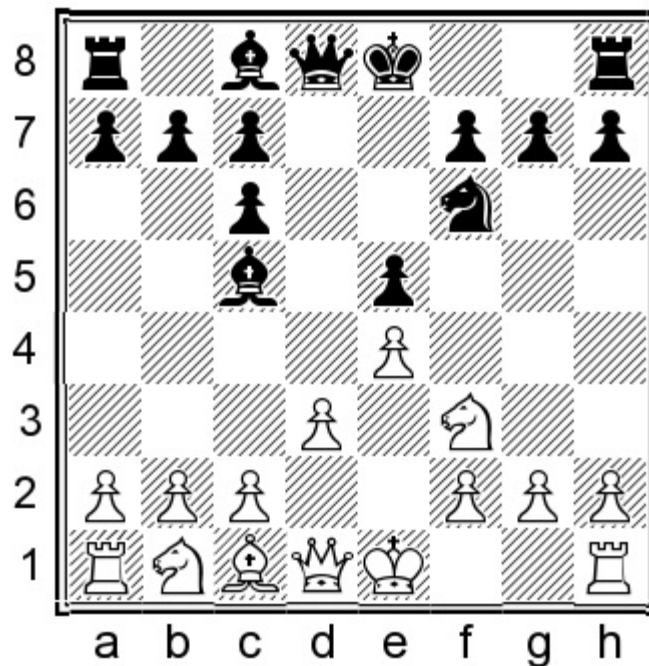
14.d4 ♔xd1 15.♖axd1 ♘g4

The endgame was equal in Anand – Kramnik, Zurich 2016.

#### D) 5...♗xc6

A double-edged continuation. Since the Exchange Variation of the Ruy Lopez mostly doesn't bother Black, exchanging on c6 without provocation may seem harmless. However, in comparison to the Exchange Variation, Black has deeper strategic problems to solve. The presence of the knight on f6 makes it tougher to secure the e5-pawn, and there are various plans at White's disposal.

5...dxc6



We will analyse six main options: **D1)** 6.♞e2, **D2)** 6.h3, **D3)** 6.♘c3, **D4)** 6.♙e3, **D5)** 6.0-0 and **D6)** 6.♘bd2.

### **D1) 6.♞e2**

This move is primarily aimed at covering f2, so the e5-pawn is really threatened now. The queen move can also be a part of an attacking plan involving long castling.

### **6...♘d7**

I find this thematic move the most sensible. Black retains the bishop pair, while the knight is heading towards e6.

### **7.♘c3**

7.♘bd2 transposes to 7.♞e2 in the notes after 6.♘bd2 ♘d7.

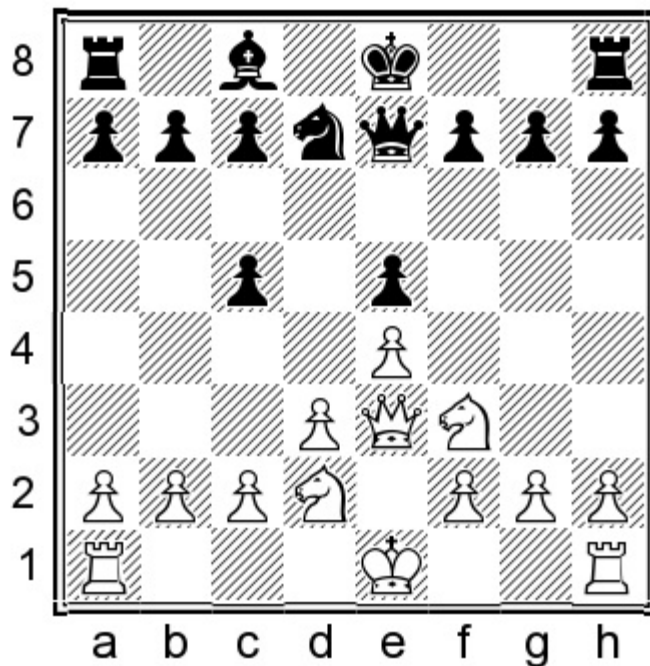
### **7.♙e3**

This invitation to exchange bishops can be met by:

7...♞e7 8.♘bd2

In the event of 8.♘c3 f6 9.0-0-0 Black can favourably deviate from exchanging bishops with: 9...♙b4! 10.♘b1 ♞f7 11.a3 ♙d6 12.d4 0-0 Black has good attacking prospects, with ...b5-b4 to follow soon.

8...♙xe3 9.♞xe3 c5

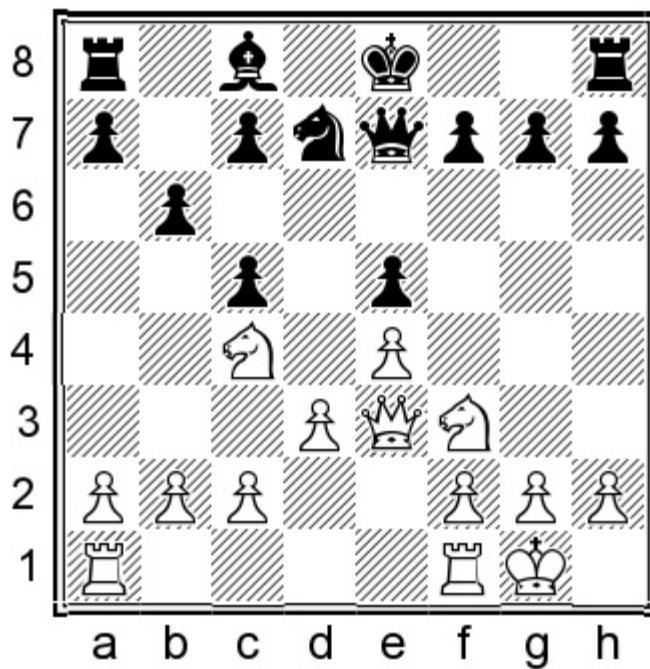


10.♘c4

10.h4N 10...♘b8 11.h5 is too slow in view of 11...♘c6 12.0-0-0 ♗e6 with the better play for Black.

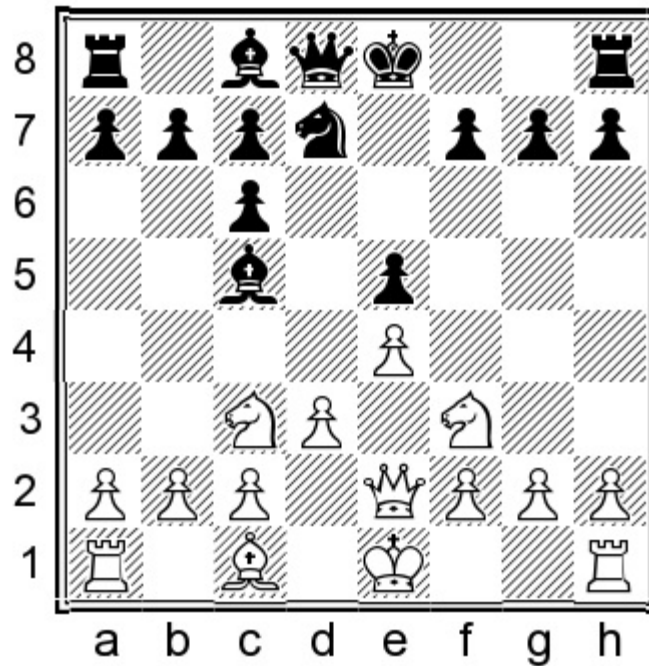
10...b6 11.0-0

11.h4N is not so bad here, although 11...f6 12.h5 ♘b8 13.♘h4 ♘c6 14.0-0-0 ♗f7 is fine for Black.



11...0-0 12.♗d2 ♗e8 13.♞ae1 a5

Black reached a harmonious position in Alekseenko – Kryvoruchko, Porto Carras 2018.



### 7...♚e7!?N

I was surprised to discover that this natural move is a novelty. Black maintains the option of castling queenside.

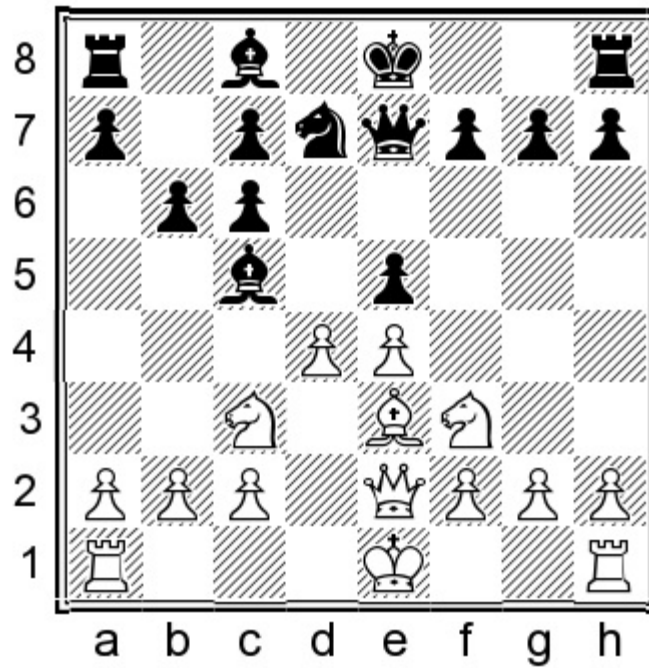
7...0-0 is also perfectly playable: 8.♘g5 (8.♘d1 seems artificial, and 8...♞e8 9.♘e3 ♘f8 10.g3 ♘e6 11.♘f5 ♘f8 12.h4 c5 13.h5 ♞f6 was fine for Black in Eljanov – Karjakin, Wijk aan Zee 2017.)

8...♘e7 9.h4 a5 10.a4 ♞e8 11.g4 ♘c5 12.♞g1 ♘e6 The play was double-edged in Motylev – Kobalia, Moscow 2019.

### 8.♘e3 b6 9.d4

9.a3 ♘b7 10.b4 ♘d6 looks problematic for White, as Black intends ...a7-a5 to expose the frailty of the queenside pawn chain.

Black is also doing well after 9.0-0-0 ♘b4 10.♚e1 a5 11.d4 0-0, when the pin on the c3-knight causes White definite problems.



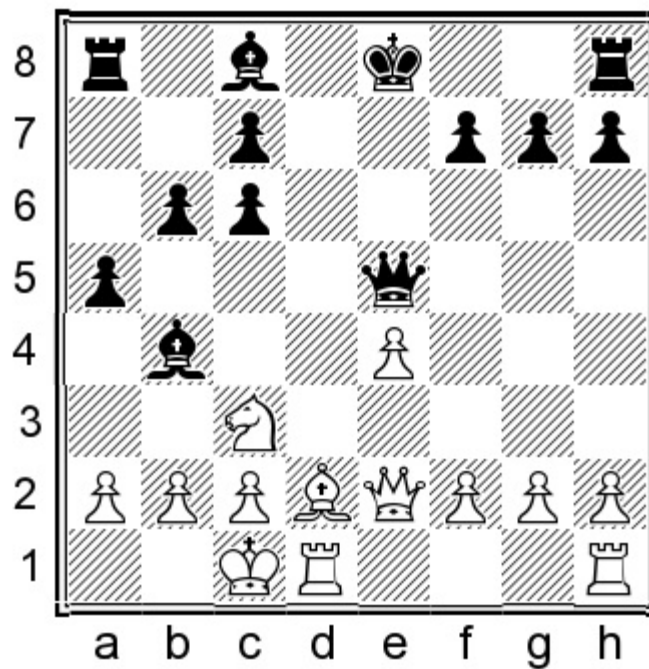
9...♙b4 10.♙d2 a5!?

Preparing to develop the bishop on a6 with gain of tempo.

11.♘xe5!?

This is the most ambitious reply, leading to forcing play.

11...♘xe5 12.dxe5 ♙xe5 13.0-0-0



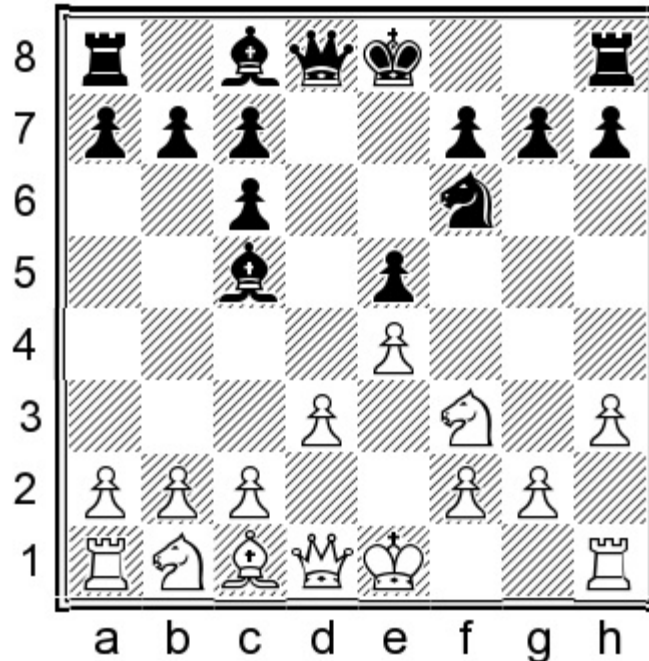
13...♙e6!

The queen retreats in anticipation of f2-f4, while also attacking a2.

14.a3 ♖e7 15.f4 ♖a6 16.♗f3 0-0-0

The bishop pair fully compensates for White's pawn majority on the kingside.

### D2) 6.h3



With this move, White avoids the pin along the d1-h5 diagonal and prepares a potential expansion on the kingside.

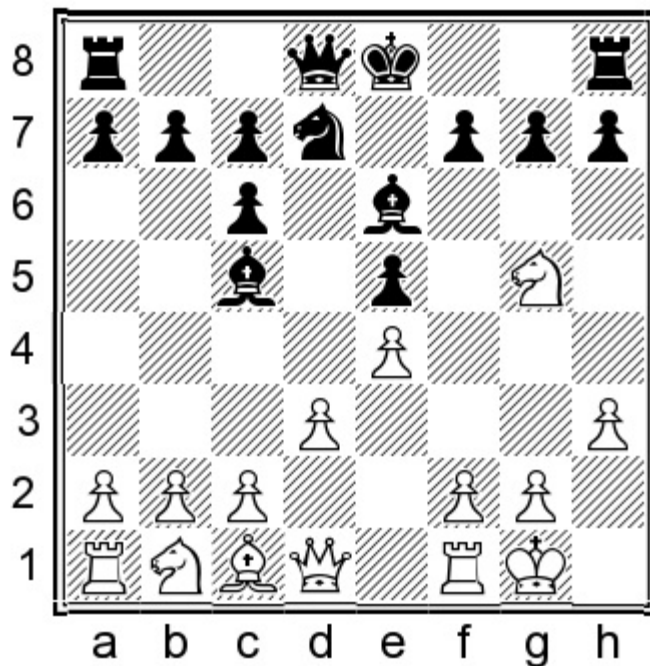
### 6...♖e6

This is the most flexible choice. As it often happens in this line, Black can guard the e5-pawn without blocking the bishop on c8, which in turn means that the king can make its way to either flank.

### 7.♘c3

This has been White's usual choice at the top level. Considering the non-forcing nature of the position, it is unsurprising that several other ideas have been tried:

7.0-0 ♞d7 8.♞g5 was played in Achatz – Despontin, corr. 2017. I suggest:



8...♘f8!?N A standard regrouping move. Play may continue 9.♙h5 ♘d6 10.♘xe6 ♘xe6 11.♘d2 ♙e7 12.♘c4 0-0-0 13.♙e3 ♖b8 when Black has reached a harmonious set-up with control over the d4-spot, and may consider advancing the kingside pawns in the near future.

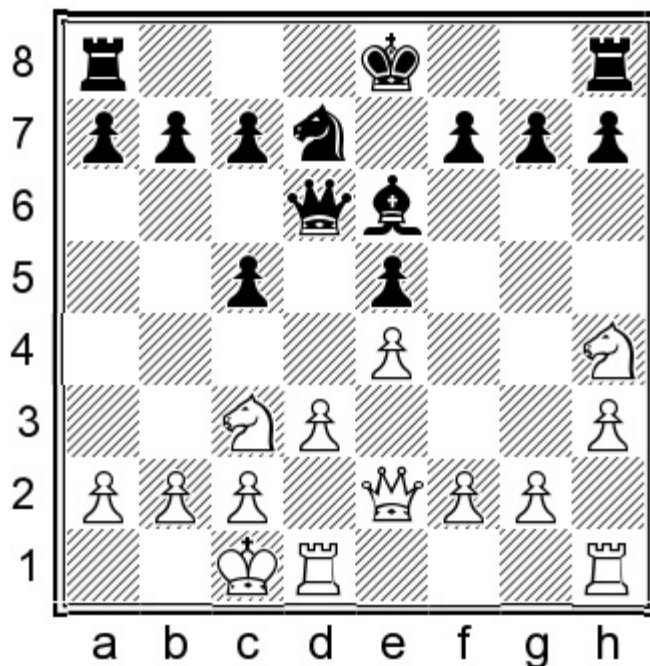
7.♙e2 ♘d7 8.♙e3

8.♘g5 is met by the familiar 8...♘f8, and after 9.♙h5 ♘d6 10.♙e3 g6 11.♙e2 ♙e7 12.♘d2 0-0-0 the position was balanced in T. Petrosian – Hovhannisyan, Yerevan 2018.

8...♙e7 9.♙xc5 ♙xc5

The exchange of the dark-squared bishops doesn't offer White much either.

10.♘c3 ♙d6 11.0-0-0 c5 12.♘h4



We have been following Morozevich – Caruana, Tashkent 2012. I suggest the following new idea:

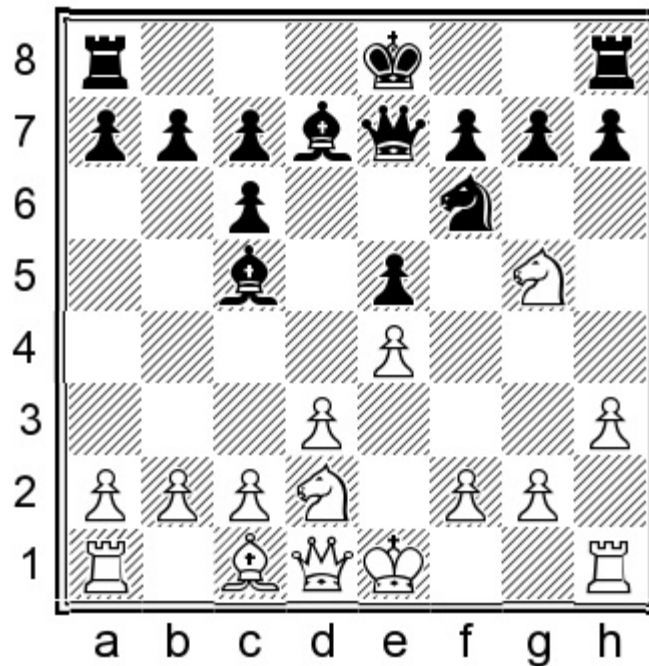
12...g6N 13.♖e3 f6 14.g3 0-0-0 15.f4 a6 16.♞df1 b5!

White's space advantage on the kingside is fully compensated for by Black's fast counterplay on the opposite wing.

7.♘g5

This move has been played several times but, for some reason, Black has only once replied with the natural and challenging:

7...♙d7!? 8.♘d2 ♖e7



9.♘c4N

This seems like the most natural choice.

9.♘gf3 0-0-0 10.a3 ♙e6 11.b4 (11.♘xe5?! ♙xf2†! only helps Black) 11...♙b6 12.♖e2 ♘d7 led to a double-edged game where Black had a full share of the chances in Astroukh – Kazmin, corr. 2019.

9...0-0-0 10.♙d2

10.♘f3?! is well met by 10...♙e6! when the e4-pawn is under attack.

10...♘e8 11.♘f3 f6

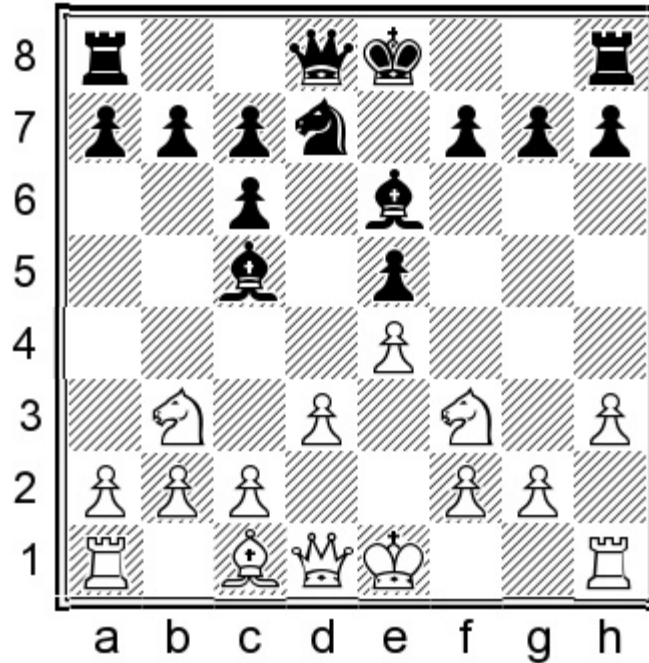
Black has reached a harmonious set-up with the e5-pawn covered, and the prospect of advancing the kingside pawns offers Black decent counterattacking prospects.

A rare but rather tricky alternative is:

7.♘bd2!? ♘d7 8.♘b3

The other knight transfer makes little sense: 8.♘f1?! f6 9.♙e3 ♖e7 Black already has the more harmonious set-up, and after the further inaccuracy 10.d4? exd4 11.♘xd4 0-0-0 White's king was in danger in Warakomska – Zimina, Vysoke Tatry 2018.

Here it is important to retain the light-squared bishop with:



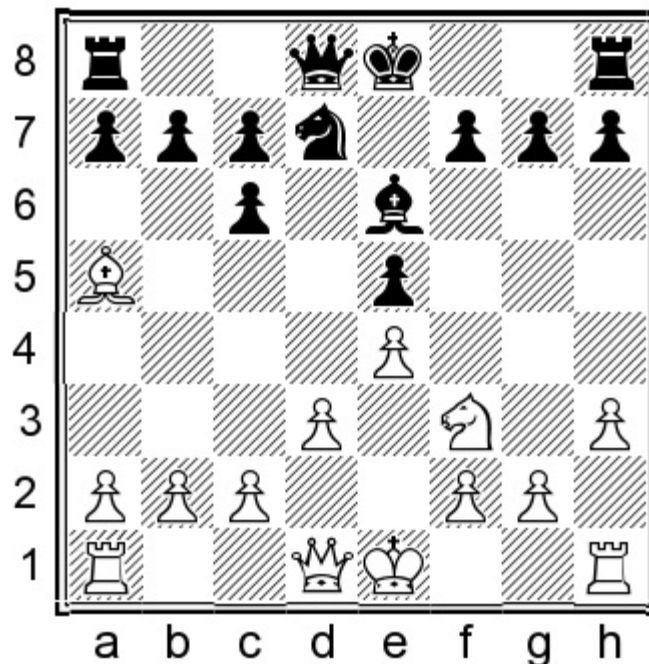
8...♙e7!

After 8...♙b6 9.♘g5 ♚e7 10.♘xe6 ♚xe6 11.♚g4! Black was under some pressure on the kingside in Sevian – Radjabov, Baku 2015.

9.♘a5

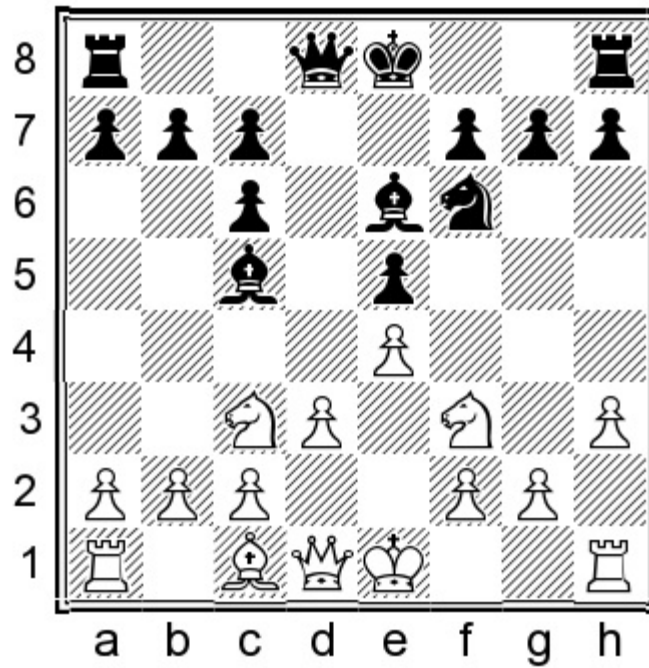
I also examined 9.d4N 9...♙d6 10.0-0 0-0 11.dxe5 ♘xe5 12.♘xe5 ♙xe5 13.f4 ♚xd1 14.♖xd1 ♙f6 when Black's strong bishops provide full compensation for White's kingside pawn majority.

9...♙b4† 10.♙d2 ♙xa5 11.♙xa5



11...c5 12.♙c3 f6

Black had no problems in Warmerdam – Swinkels, Maastricht 2016.

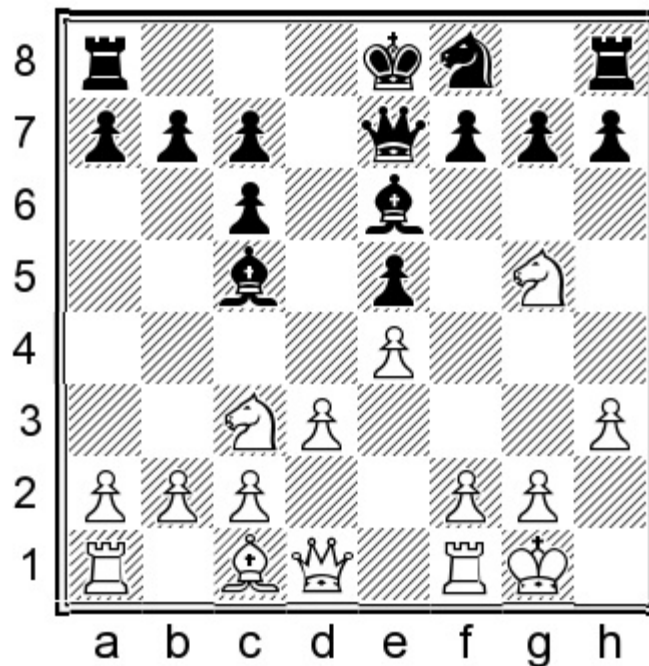


7...♞d7 8.♞g5 ♞f8!

This move presents White with something of a dilemma. Clearly, White's last move prepared to eliminate the light-squared bishop, but doing so would now enable the black knight to settle on the ideal e6-square.

The alternative 8...♞e7 9.♞xe6 ♞xe6 10.♞g4 ♞g6 11.♞e2 ♞d6 12.♞g3 left Black in a solid but rather passive position in Anand – Nakamura, Saint Louis 2016.

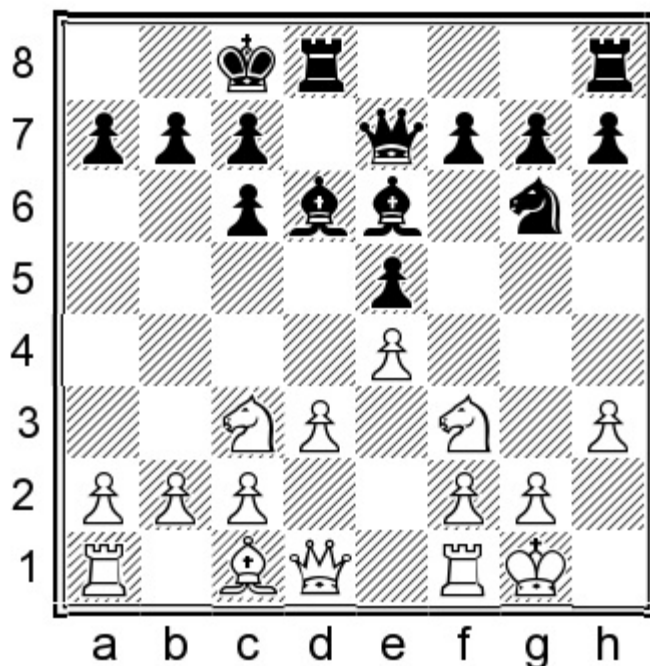
9.0-0 ♞e7



10.♞a4

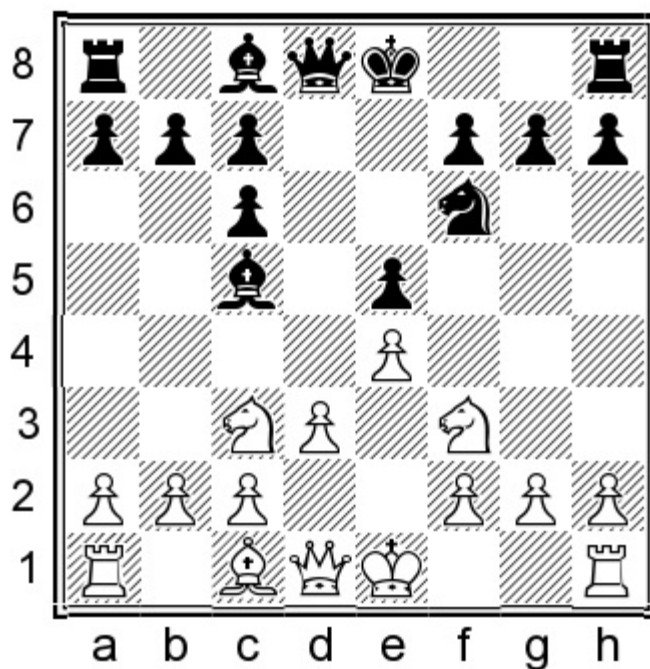
After 10. ♖xe6 ♜xe6 11. ♔e3 0-0-0 White's superior pawn structure is of mostly symbolic value, while Black is ready to develop a dangerous attack on the kingside.

10... ♗d6 11. ♞f3 ♞g6 12. ♝c3 0-0-0



White found himself in a passive position with no counterplay in Anand – Kramnik, Paris (rapid) 2018.

D3) 6. ♞c3



This developing move has been employed by several top players, including Magnus, but it

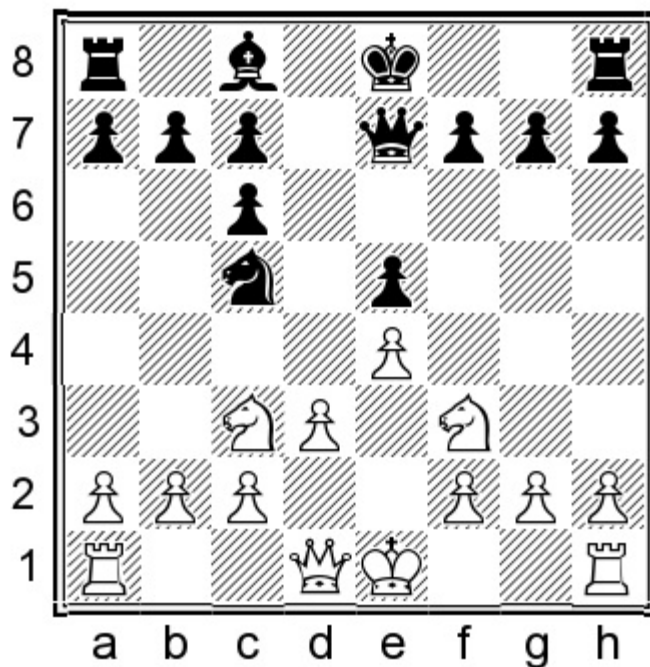
doesn't pose Black too many problems.

### 6...♗g4

I see no reason to deviate from this active move.

Another interesting option is:

6...♘d7!? 7.♙e3 ♚e7 8.♙xc5 ♘xc5



### 9.h3N

This prophylactic move is more challenging than 9.♚d2 ♗g4 10.♚e3 ♗xf3 11.♚xf3 ♘e6 when Black had easily equalized in Yu Yangyi – Abdusattorov, Moscow (blitz) 2019.

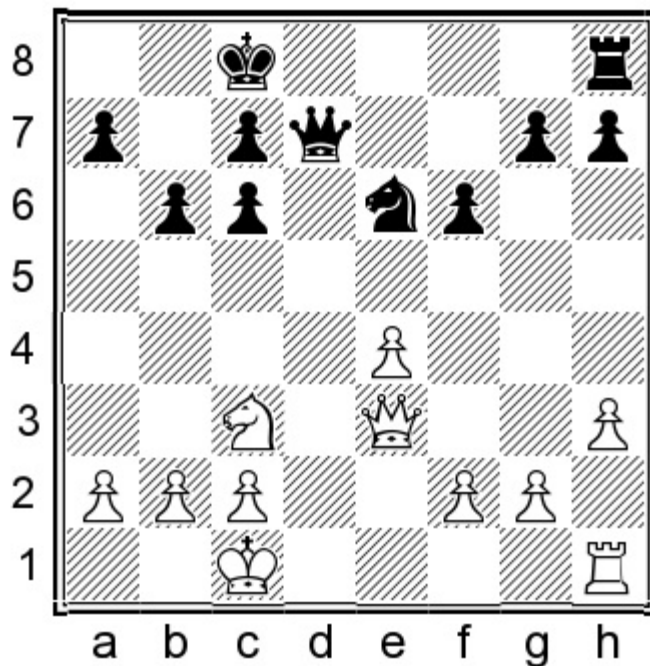
### 9...♗d7 10.d4

This is the only real attempt to fight for an edge.

10...exd4 11.♚xd4 ♘e6 12.♚e3

The position strongly resembles an Exchange Ruy Lopez.

12...b6 13.0-0-0 0-0-0 14.♘e5 f6 15.♘xd7 ♗xd7 16.♗xd7 ♚xd7



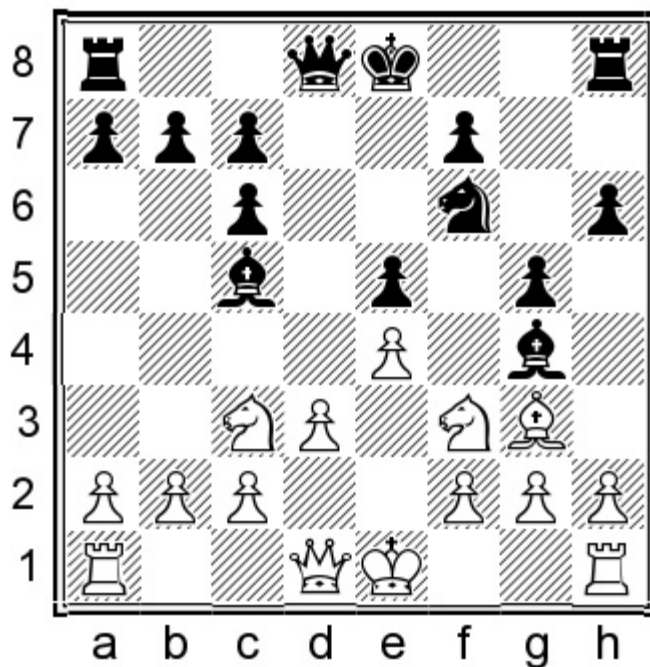
Despite the simplifications and superior pawn structure, White has no advantage. For instance:  
 17.♖d1 ♔f7 18.f4 ♜e8

The pressure on the e-pawn compensates for White's pawn majority.

### 7.h3

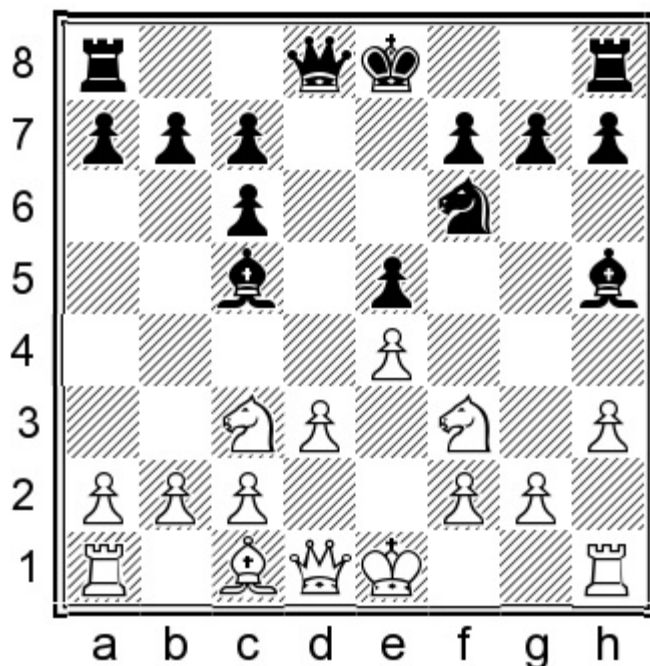
7.0-0!? only makes it harder for White to break the pin, and 7...♘d7 8.h3 ♗h5 9.♗e3 ♚e7 was promising for Black in Lauer – Ustimenko, corr. 2012.

As it often happens in such cases, 7.♗g5 h6 8.♗h4?! is well met by 8...g5 9.♗g3 as played in Jagtenberg – Span, Hengelo 1996, when the best continuation would have been:



9...♞d7N 10.h3 ♞h5 White is left with a poorly-placed bishop, while the pin along the h5-d1 diagonal is rather annoying.

7...♞h5



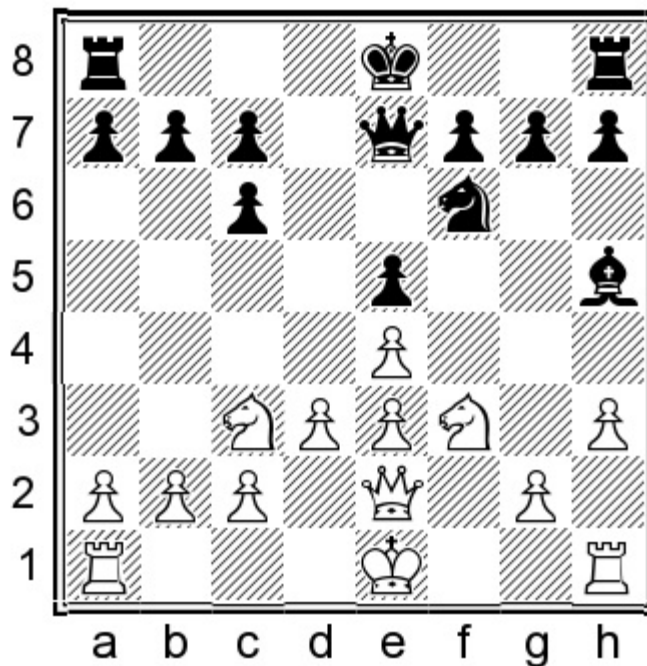
Of course, giving up the bishop would be a concession.

8.g4

The most consistent choice. Still, even though White has delayed castling, the kingside weaknesses might become a factor later.

In the event of 8.♞e2 ♞d7 9.♞e3 f6 10.g4 ♞f7 11.0-0-0 ♞d6 the committal nature of the g2-g4 move makes White's set-up strategically dicey.

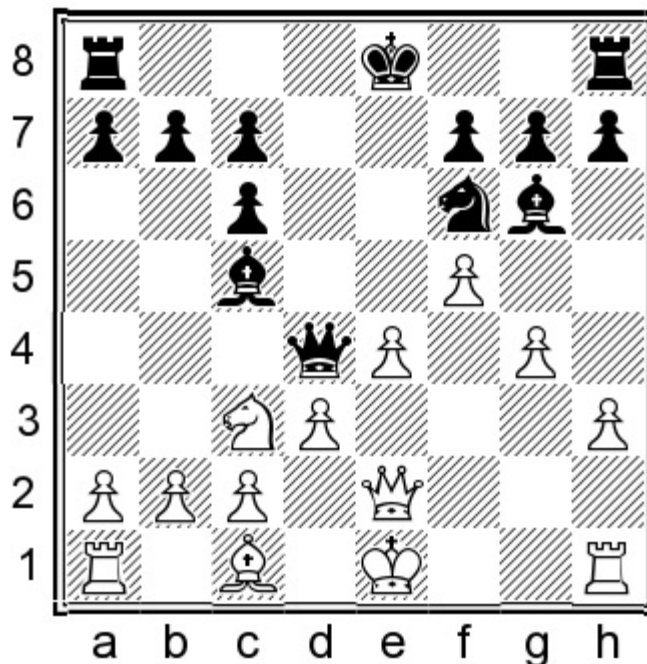
8.♞e3 has been played in a bunch of games but on this occasion the following exchange of bishops suits Black. 8...♞xe3 9.fxe3 ♞e7 White does not have the best version of the fxe3 structure, as the knight is not so well placed on c3. 10.♞e2



In Koseska – Pedrak, Leba 2009, a logical continuation would have been 10...♘d7N 11.g4 ♗g6 12.0-0-0 0-0-0 13.h4 f6 when Black’s position is not worse, to say the least.

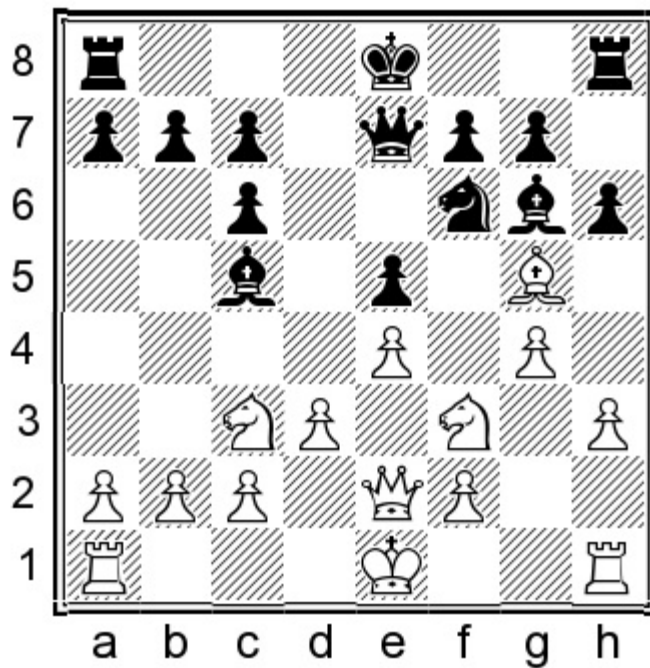
8...♗g6 9.♗g5

9.♘xe5?! ♕d4 clearly helps Black. True, after 10.♖e2 ♖xe5 11.f4 ♖d4 12.f5 White regains the lost piece, but Black obtains an excellent game with:

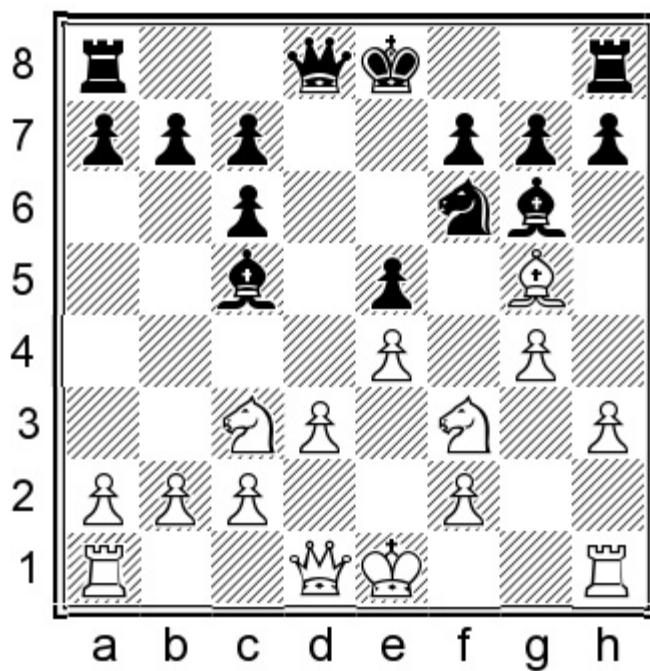


12...h5! 13.fxg6 fxg6 14.g5 ♘d7 White’s king is too exposed in the centre.

White has also tried: 9.♖e2 ♖e7 10.♗g5 h6



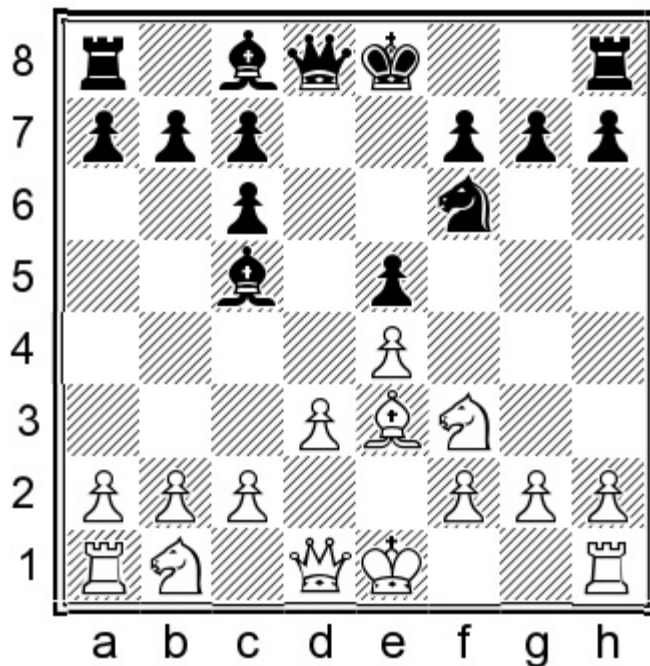
11.♞d2 (11.♞h4N 11...♞b4 12.a3 ♞xc3† 13.bxc3 ♚c5 14.c4 ♞d7 also leads to a balanced game)  
 11...♞d7 12.♞d1 h5 Black was fine in Mouradian – Al Rufeï, Beirut 2000.



9...h6 10.♞h4 ♚d6 11.♞g3 ♞d7

Black didn't face any problems in Dzivak – Bogi, Slovakia 2018.

D4) 6.♞e3



### 6...♔d6

I think Black should avoid changing the pawn structure with 6...♔xe3 7.fxe3 on this occasion. Unlike the similar situation which occurred in a note to the previous variation, when the white knight was already on c3, here the knight has better routes available, such as d2-c4. White also benefits from the semi-open f-file, while the d4-square is no longer available for Black's knight.

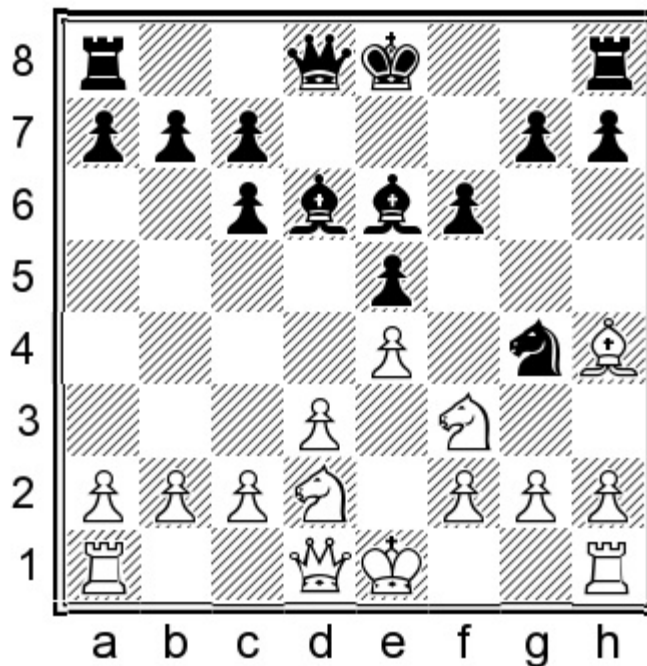
### 7.h3

White can hardly do without this prophylactic move for too long.

7.♘c3 ♔e6 leaves White with nothing better than 8.h3, transposing to the main line below. (8.d4?!, as played in Simalcikova – Hudakova, Liptovsky Mikulas 2017, runs into 8...♘g4!N 9.♔g5 f6 10.♔h4 ♙d7 11.h3 exd4 12.♘xd4 ♘e5 with a lot of activity for Black.)

### 7.♘bd2

This move has been tested by some strong players, but here too, Black gets a good game with:  
7...♘g4 8.♔g5 f6 9.♔h4 ♔e6



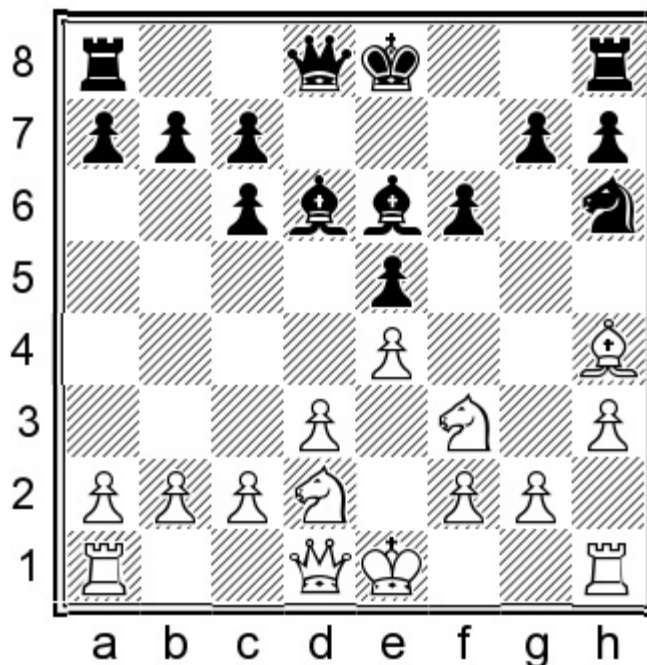
White's set-up has lost some of its flexibility. The bishop isn't great on h4, while the black knight can easily drop back via h6 to f7.

10.h3

The ambitious 10.d4?! is liable to backfire, as White's pieces are undeveloped. Indeed, after 10...exd4 11.♘xd4 ♕e7 12.♘xe6 ♕xe6 13.♕e2 0-0-0 Black seized the initiative in Rausis – Fressinet, France 2007.

10.♕e2 c5 11.♘c4 ♕d7 (11...♗e7!? deserves attention as well) 12.♘fd2 b5 13.♘xd6† cxd6 was equal in Vachier-Lagrave – Bacrot, Pau 2008.

10...♘h6

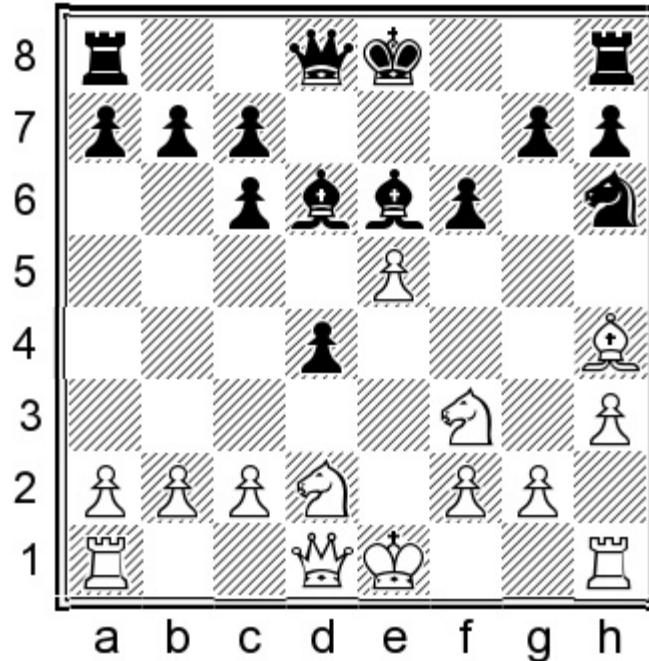


11.d4

This is the only ambitious attempt to justify White's previous play, but it entails certain risks.

The slower 11.♔e2 was seen in another high-level game: 11...♘f7 12.d4 ♔d7 13.c3 0-0-0 14.0-0  
 A draw was agreed here in Cheparinov – Dorfman, Mallorca 2004, but Black should have  
 continued 14...g5 15.♙g3 h5 when White's king is in considerable danger.

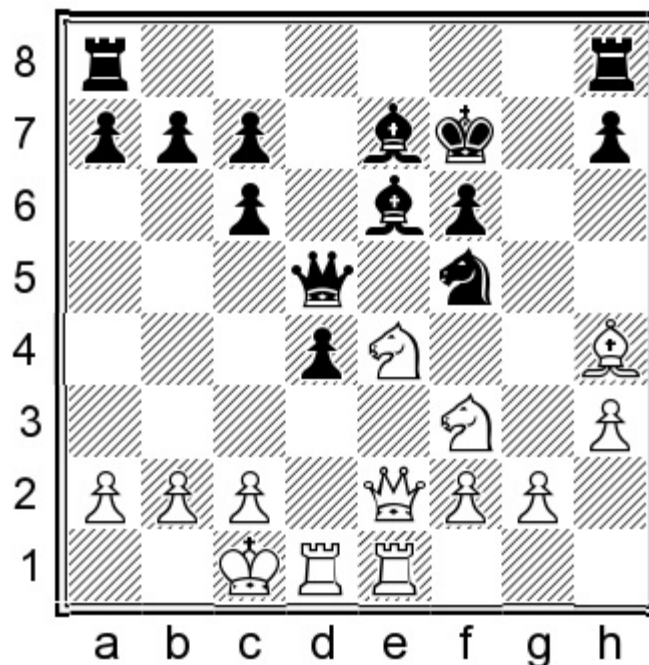
11...exd4 12.e5



12...♙e7 13.exf6 gxf6 14.♔e2

White is a pawn down, but relies on some concrete threats along the e-file.

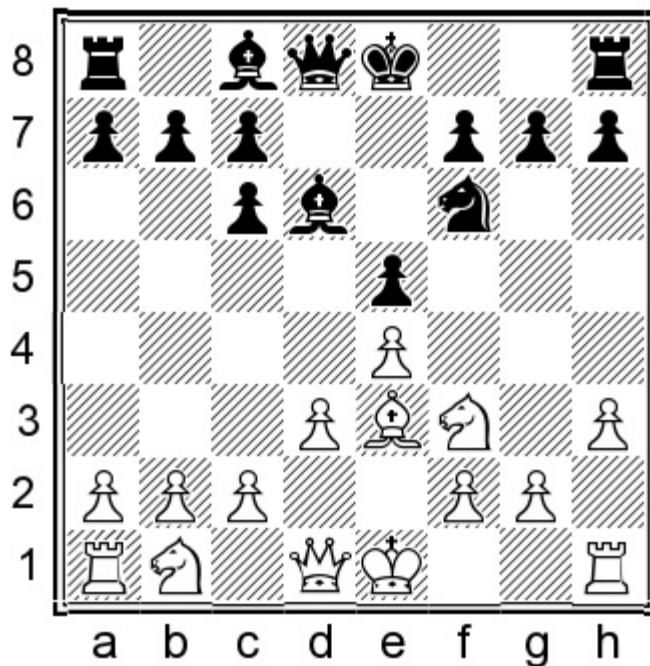
14...♔d5 15.0-0-0 ♘f5 16.♖he1 ♔f7 17.♘e4



In Shirov – Bacrot, Odessa 2010, Black should have continued with:

17...♖ae8!N 18.a3 h5

With a clear advantage.



7...♙e6 8.♘c3

8.♘g5 ♕d7 9.♘d2 h6 10.♘gf3 ♕e6 transposes to 8.♘bd2 h6 below.

8.♘bd2

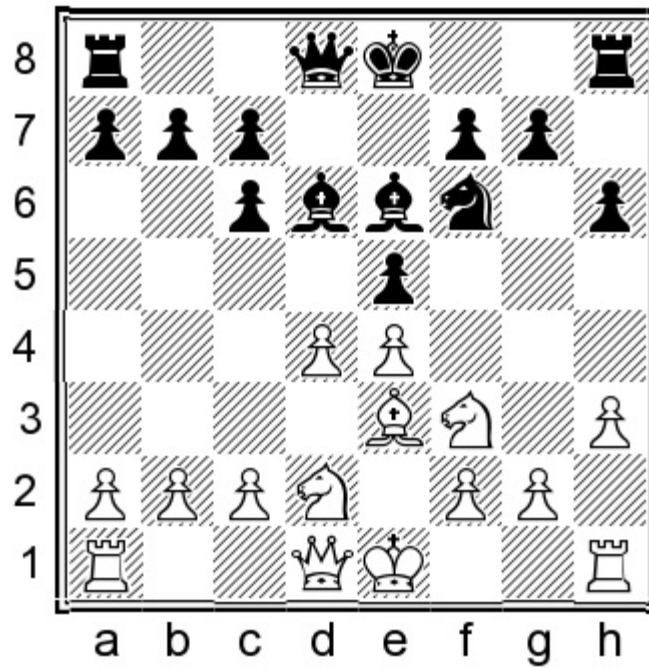
The knight is somewhat more flexible on d2 than c3, but it also looks a bit passive.

8...h6

8...♘d7?! is premature in view of 9.♘g5 ♘f8 10.♘xe6 ♘xe6 11.♘c4 with an edge for White.

9.d4

9.c3 seems slightly risky due to 9...c5 when the weakness of the d3-pawn may cause White some problems. 10.♘c4?! (10.0-0N 10...0-0 11.♞e1 is safer.) 10...♕xc4 11.dxc4 ♘xe4 12.♙d5 ♘f6 13.♙xb7 ♞b8 14.♙c6† ♙d7 Black had the better pawn structure in the endgame in Kalegin – Lysyj, Voronezh 2012.

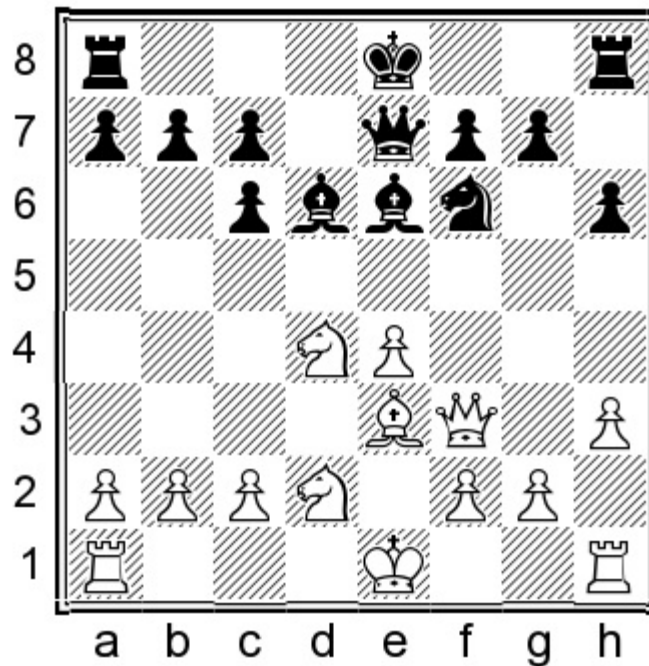


9...exd4 10.♘xd4 ♕e7

10...♗d7 11.♖f3 0-0 12.0-0-0 ♜e8 is also possible, but there is something to be said for not wasting a tempo.

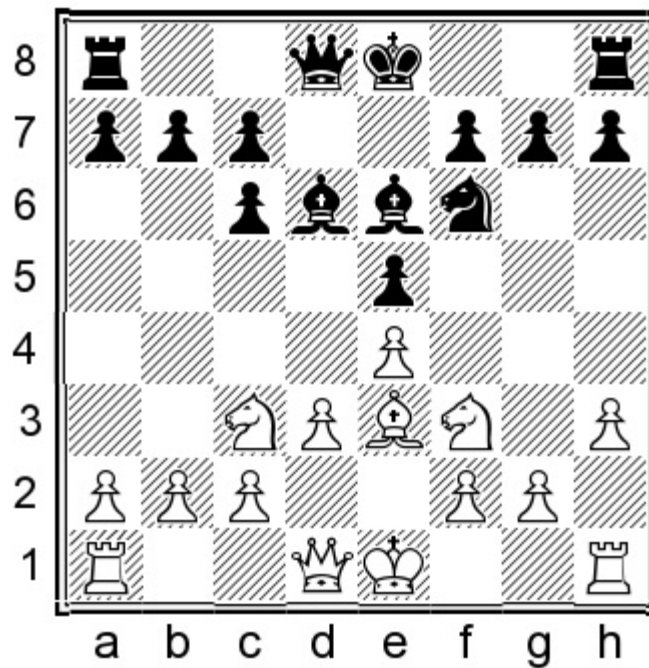
11.♖f3

11.f4 0-0-0 12.♖f3 ♗d7 13.0-0-0 c5 14.♘f5 ♗xf5 15.exf5 ♜he8 is also comfortable for Black.



11...0-0 12.0-0 ♜fe8 13.♞fe1 ♞ad8 14.c3 ♗c8

Black had the more flexible set-up in Nepomniachtchi – Kramnik, Khanty-Mansiysk (ol) 2010.

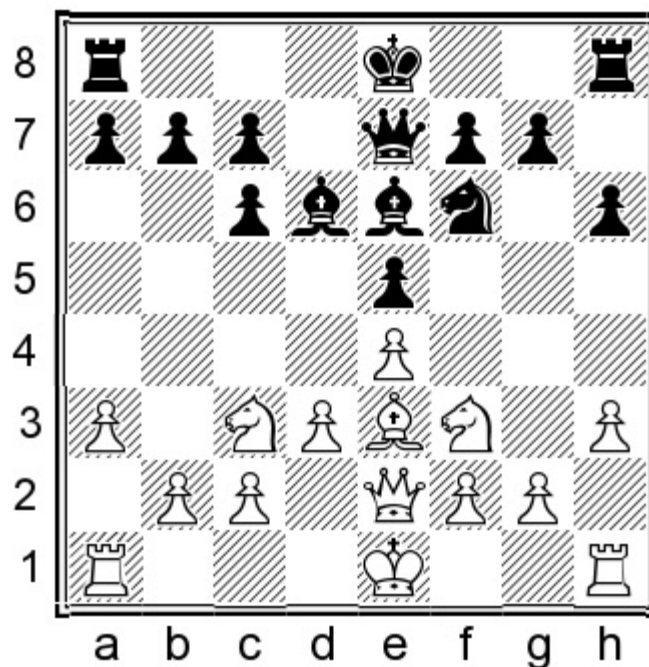


**8...h6 9.♔e2**

9.d4 ♘d7 10.♕d3 exd4 11.♙xd4 0-0 12.0-0 ♔e7 was equal in Vidit – Ganguly, Kolkata 2018.

**9...♔e7 10.a3**

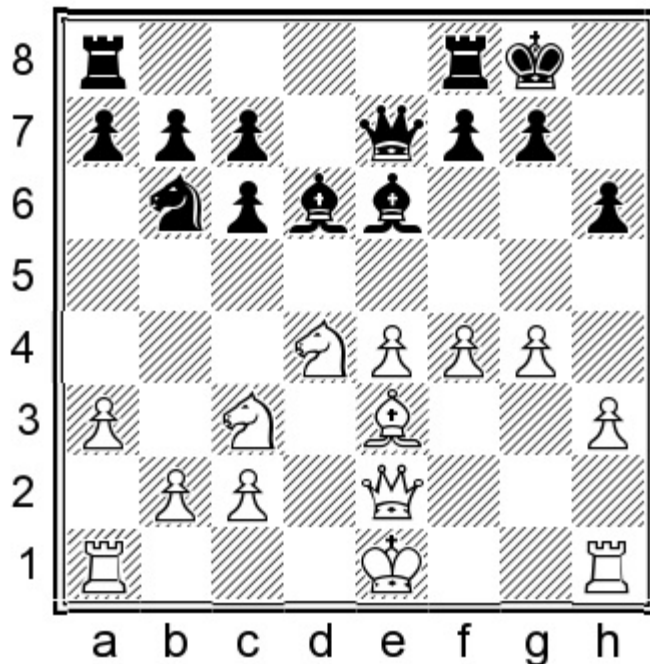
The main point of the text move is shown after 10.0-0-0 0-0-0 11.d4?!, when 11...♙b4! is annoying for White.



**10...♘d7 11.d4 0-0 12.g4 exd4 13.♘xd4 ♘b6 14.f4?!**

A more logical continuation would have been 14.♞g1N 14...♘c4 15.♘f5 ♙xf5 16.gxf5 ♘xe3 17.♕xe3 ♔h7 18.0-0-0 g6, reaching a complex position with mutual chances.

We have been following Zhigalko – Salomon, Moscow 2018. White's last move was an overly optimistic one, which should have been met by:



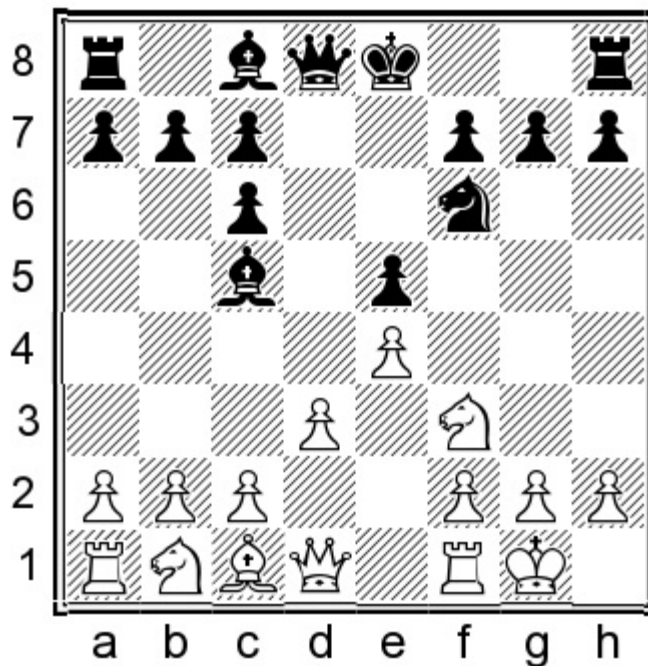
**14...♖c4!N 15.♗f5**

15.♗xe6?! ♗xe3 16.♙xe3 (16.♗xf8? is even worse in view of 16...♙xf4 and White's position is ruined) 16...fxe6 17.♖f1 ♙c5 would be riskier for White.

**15...♙xf5 16.♙xc4 ♙e6 17.♙e2 f6**

White has overextended on the kingside, and the king will have a hard time finding a safe haven.

**D5) 6.0-0**



### 6...Qe7

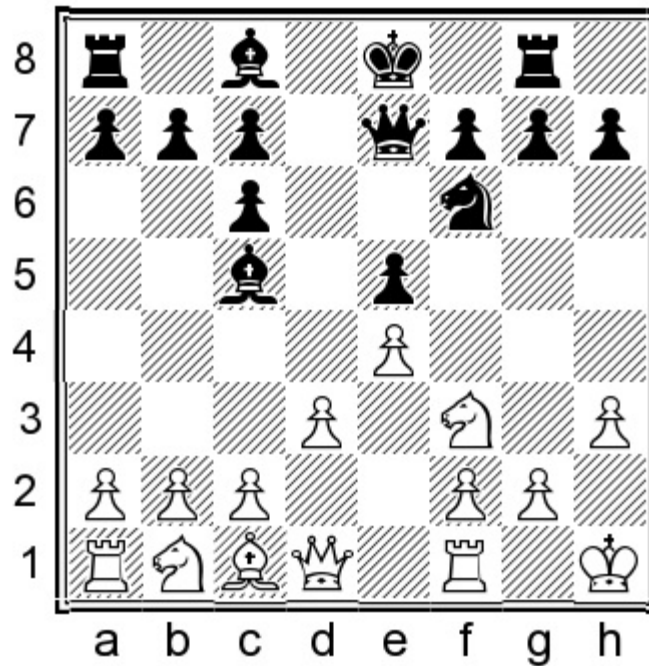
I prefer this flexible choice.

The immediate 6...g4 7.h3 forces Black to either give up the bishop pair or enter dubious complications with 7...h5 8.g4 h4 9.hxg4 hxg4; this may appear dangerous for White, but after 10.e3 d6 11.h1 f5 12.g1 Black did not have enough compensation for the sacrificed piece in Leko – Navara, Linares 2018.

Another common way of defending the pawn is 6...d7, but after 7.c3 0-0 8.d4 d6 9.g5 f6 10.h4 Black's position is somewhat cramped, as demonstrated in a few high-level games.

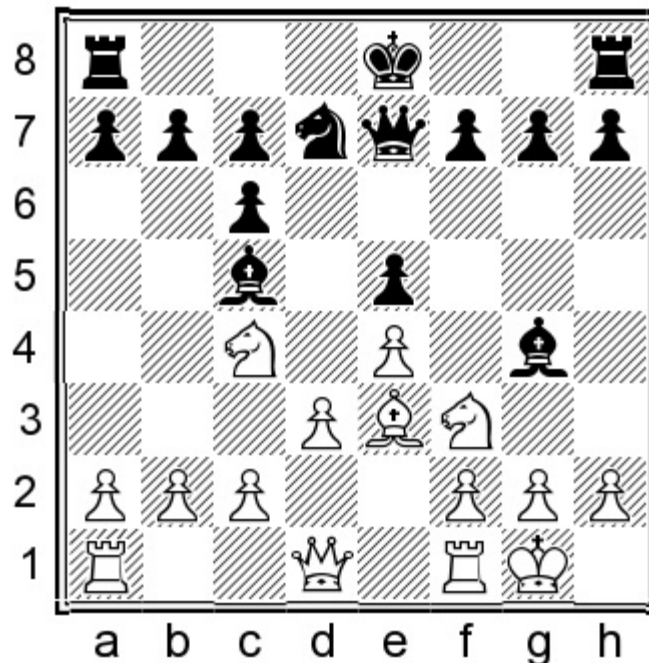
### 7.h3

The prophylactic 7.h3?! is well met by 7...g8! when White's previous move is called into question. A memorable game continued: 8.h1 (8.h2 g5 9.d4 is a slight improvement, although White still had to struggle for equality after 9...xd4 10.h2xd4 exd4 11.e5 d5 12.h2e4 xe5 13.e1 e6 14.h2c5 wf5 15.wxd4 0-0-0 in Felytin – Susedenko, email 2014.)



8...Nh5 9.c3 g5! White was subsequently crushed by a direct attack in Aronian – Kramnik, Berlin 2018.

7.f3 is playable but fairly harmless. A good reply is: 7...g4 8.Nbd2 Nd7 9.Nc4 (9.a3 f6 10.b4 Nxe3 11.fxe3 0-0 was fine for Black in Quesada Perez – Bok, Internet [rapid] 2020.)

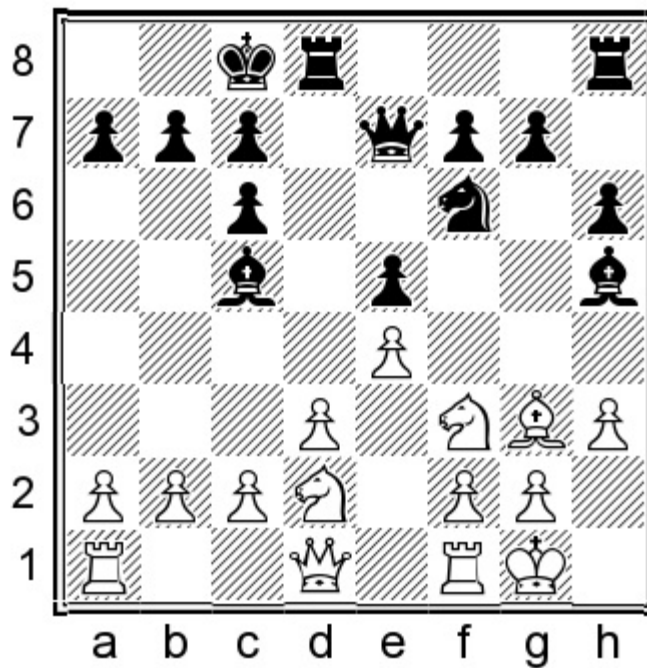


9...f6 10.a3 0-0 11.b4 Nd6 12.h3 Nh5 Black had no problems in Jones – Howell, Saint Louis 2019.

White has also tried:

7.g5 h6 8.h4 g4 9.h3 h5 10.Nbd2 0-0-0 11.g3

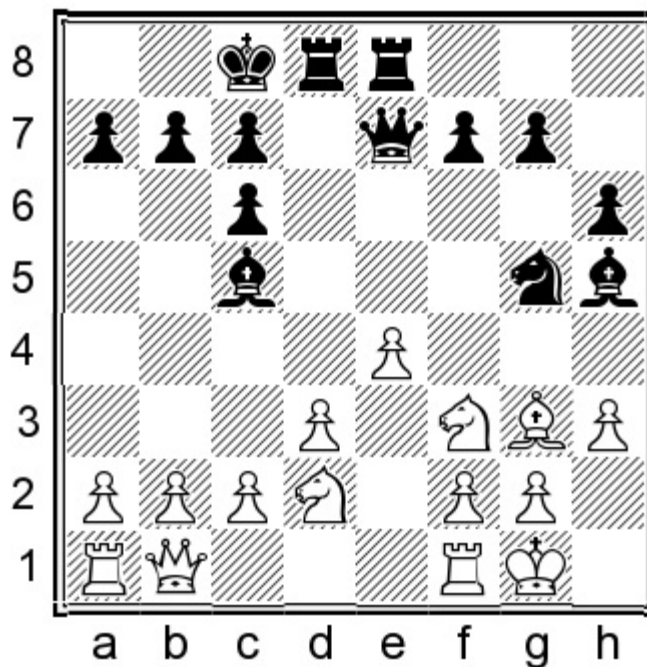
11.Wxe2? proved an unfortunate choice after 11...g5 12.g3 g4 13.hxg4 Nxg4 when White was in trouble on the kingside in Solak – Bartel, Plovdiv 2012.



This position was reached in Turowski – Niewold, email 2014. My new, natural idea is:  
 11...♖he8N 12.♗b1 ♘h7!

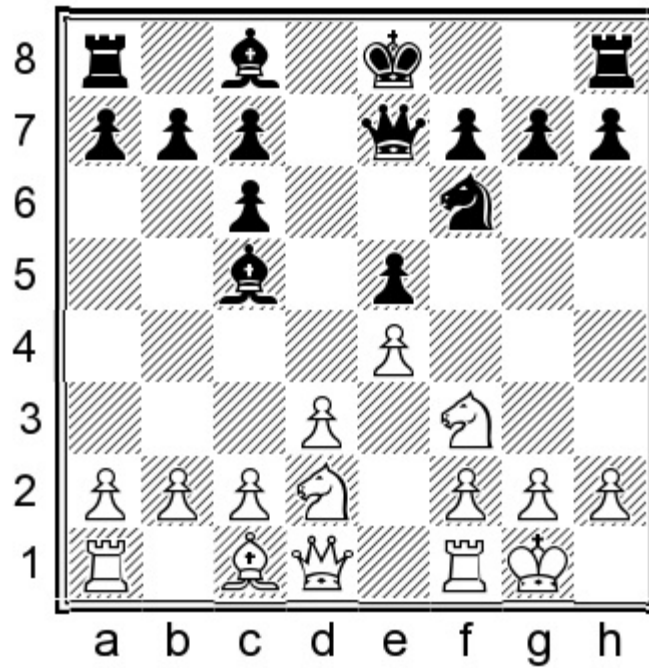
By sacrificing the pawn, Black quickly develops an initiative on the kingside.  
 13.♙xe5 ♘g5 14.♙g3

14.♘xg5 ♗xg5 15.♙c3 ♖d6 is also promising for Black.



14...♘xf3† 15.♘xf3 ♙xf3 16.gxf3 f5

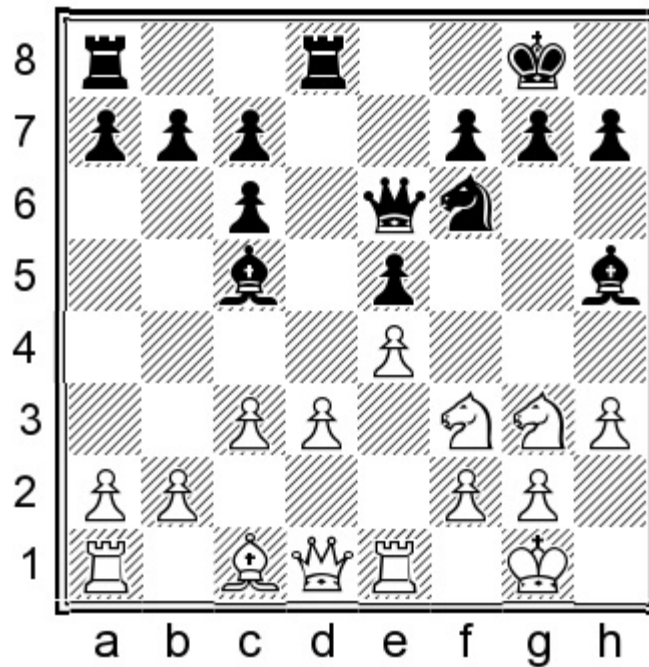
Black has more than sufficient compensation for the pawn.



7...♙g4 8.h3 ♙h5

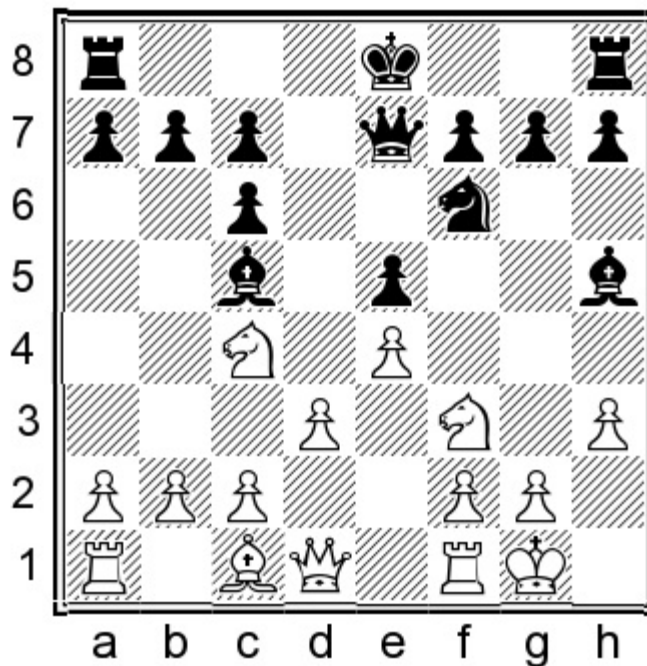
We will analyse two main options: **D51)** 9.♘c4 and **D52)** 9.a3.

9.c3 0-0 10.♖e1 ♜fd8 11.♟f1 ♚e6 12.♞g3 occurred in Hjaltason – Guerra, email 2015, and here I would suggest:



12...♙xf3N 13.♚xf3 ♜d7 14.♙g5 ♞e8 15.♟f5 f6 The pressure on the d3-pawn offers Black comfortable play.

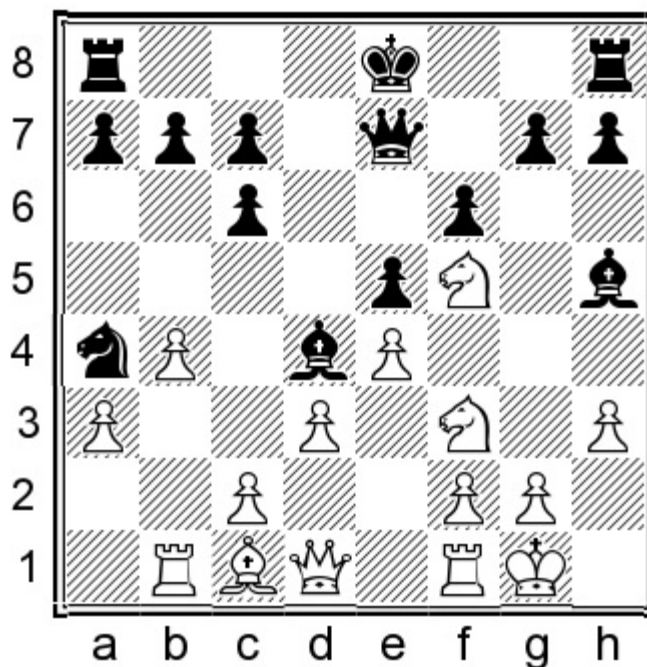
**D51) 9.♘c4**



This is a typical square for the knight in these positions.

### 9...♞d7 10.♙d2

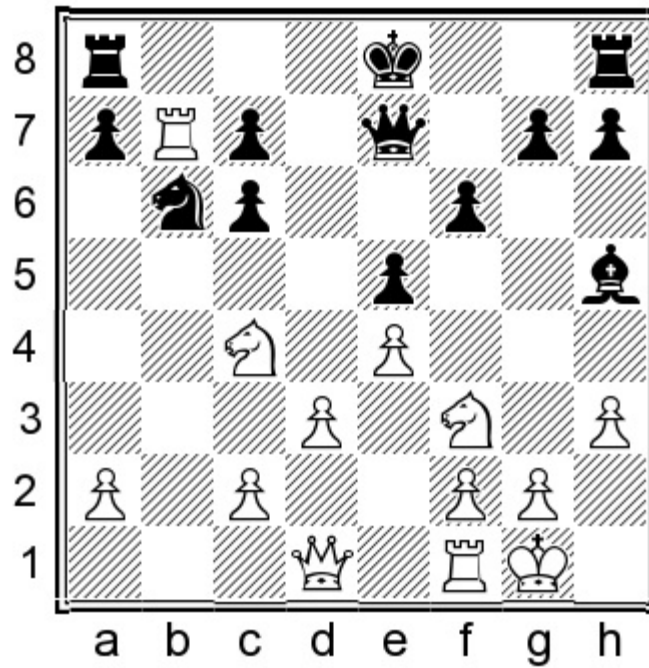
The straightforward 10.a3 f6 11.b4 runs into: 11...♙d4! 12.♖b1 ♞b6 13.♘e3 ♞a4 14.♞f5



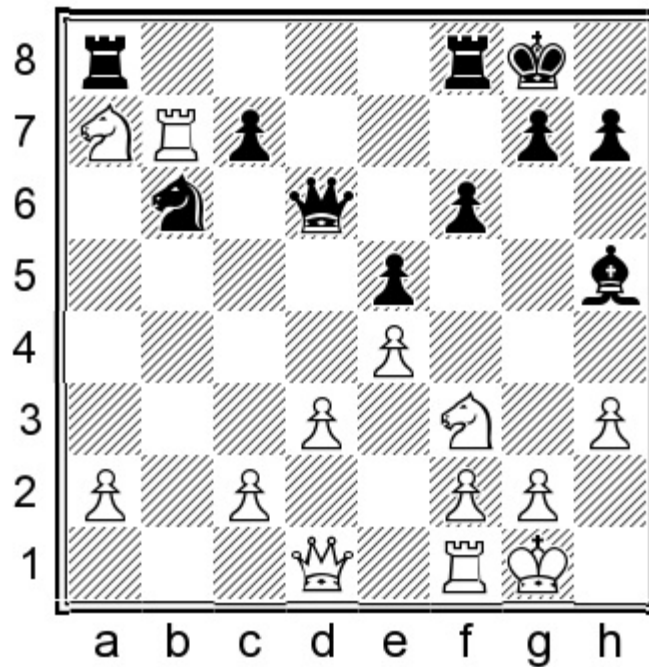
This was played in Roebers – Jonkman, Amsterdam 2000, and now the natural 14...♙d7N 15.♞5xd4 exd4 16.♙d2 0-0-0 would have offered Black the better prospects.

### 10...f6 11.♖b1

The more aggressive 11.b4?! ♙xb4 12.♙xb4 ♖xb4 13.♖b1 ♖e7 14.♖xb7 ♞b6 leaves White with a trapped rook.

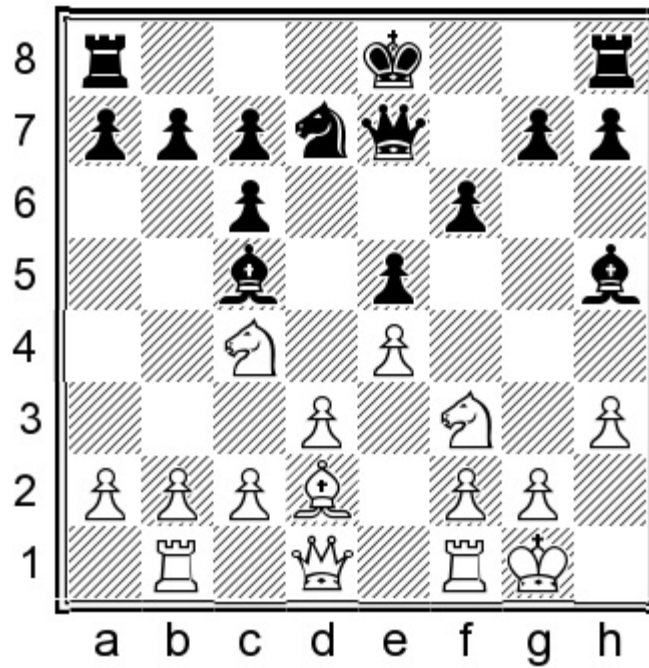


The attempt to liberate it with 15. ♖a5 0-0 16. ♖xc6 ♔c5 17. ♖xa7 ♔a3 18. ♖c6 ♔d6 19. ♖a7 took place in Naiditsch – Howell, Batumi (ol) 2018, when Black should have played:



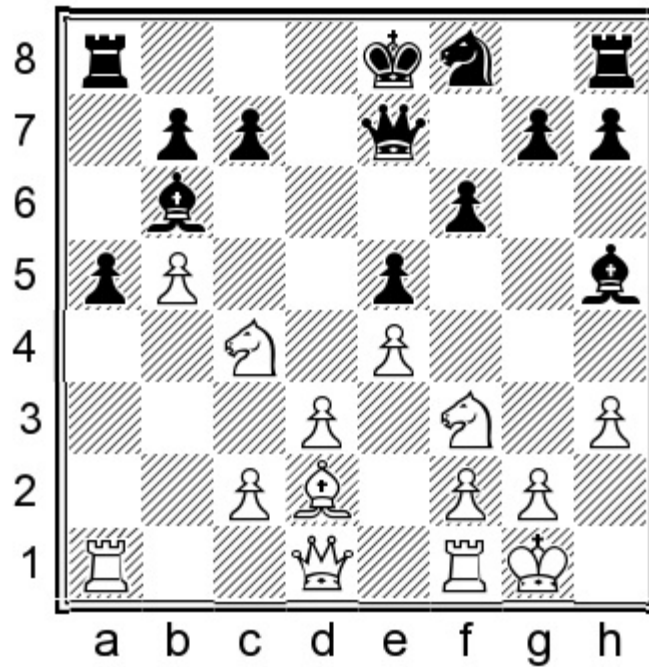
19... ♖a4!N 20.d4 ♔a6 Obtaining a big material advantage.

This position has arisen in a couple of correspondence games. In my opinion, Black can favourably delay castling with:



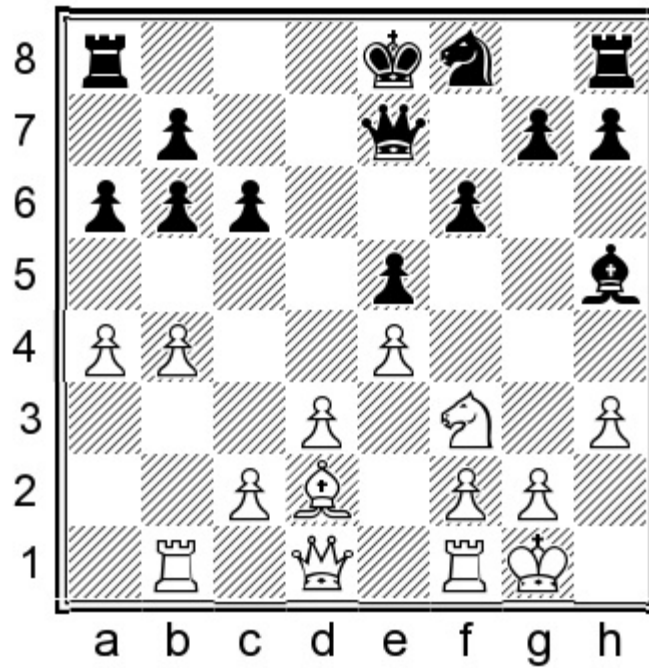
11...♗f8!?N 12.b4 ♕b6 13.a4 a6 14.♗xb6

The other consistent continuation is: 14.b5 cxb5 15.axb5 a5 16.♖a1



White intends to pick up the a-pawn. However, after 16...♗e6 17.♗xa5 0-0 18.♗c4 ♕c5 19.g4 ♕f7 Black's powerful bishops and the vulnerability of the white king ensure Black has a full share of the chances.

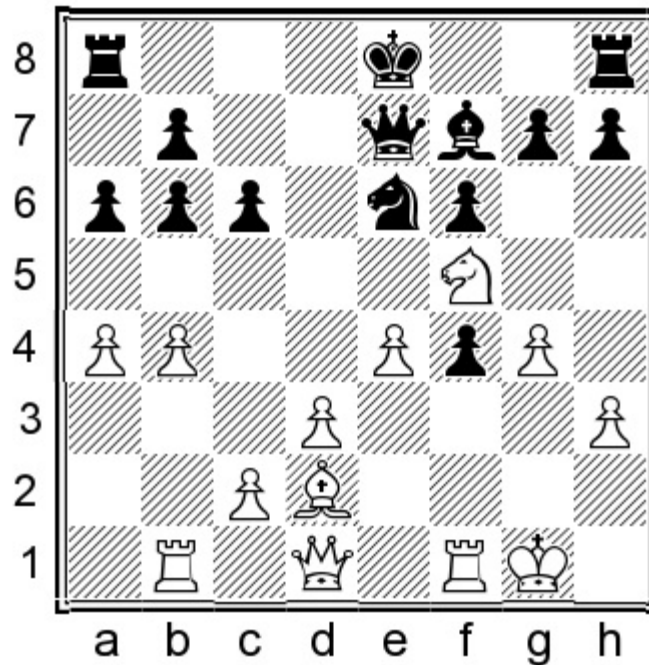
14...cxb6



15.g4!?

15.♙e3 ♘e6 16.♙xb6 ♘g5 offers Black sufficient counterplay, to say the least.

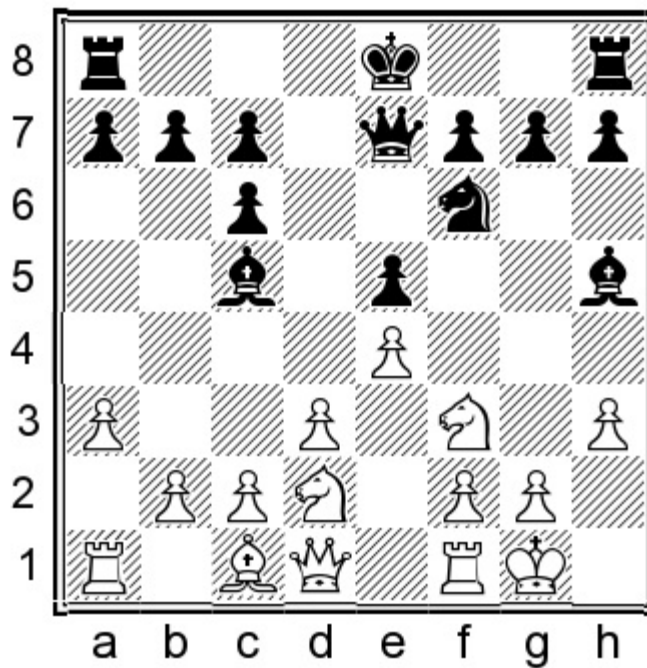
15...♙f7 16.♘h4 ♘e6 17.f4 exf4 18.♘f5



18...♙d7 19.♙xf4 ♘xf4 20.♙xf4 ♙e6

With such an exposed king, White can hardly hope to claim an advantage.

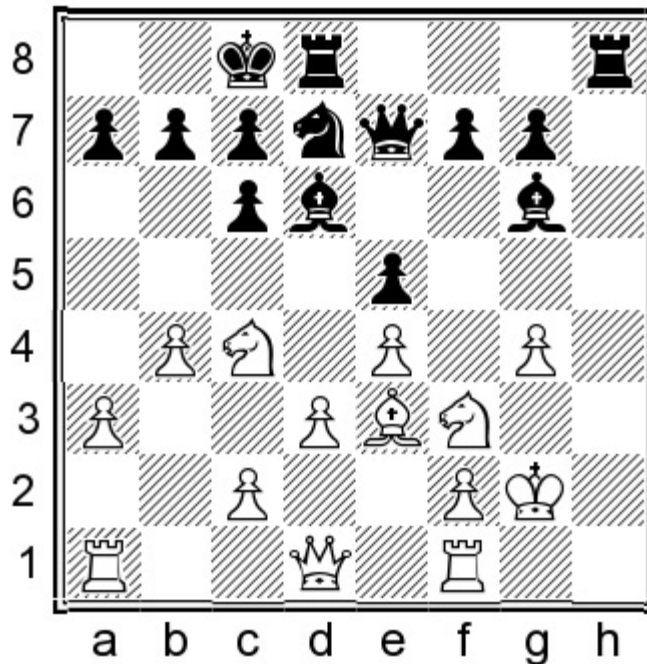
D52) 9.a3



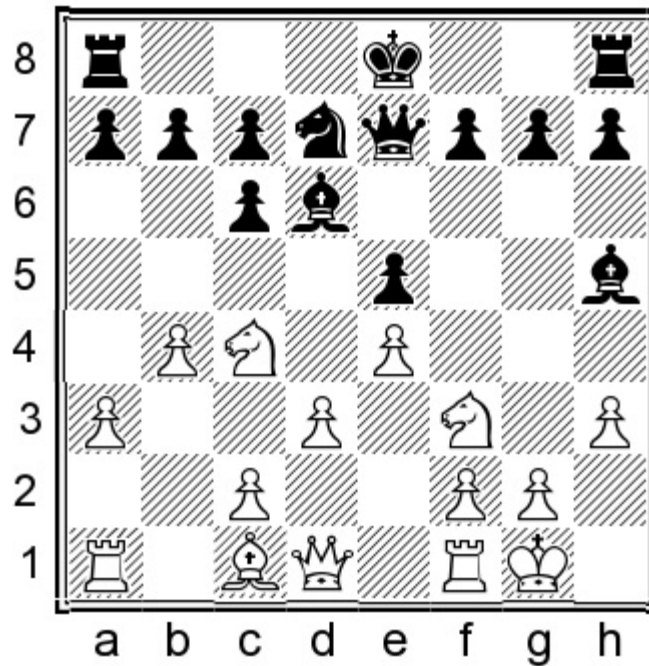
This move, which prepares a queenside expansion, has been tried by a few elite players.

9...♘d7 10.b4 ♙d6 11.♘c4

11.g4?! is premature in view of 11...♙g6 12.♘c4 h5 13.♔g2 0-0-0 14.♙e3 hxg4 15.hxg4 as played in Anand – Cheparinov, Germany 2019, when the natural and strongest continuation would have been:

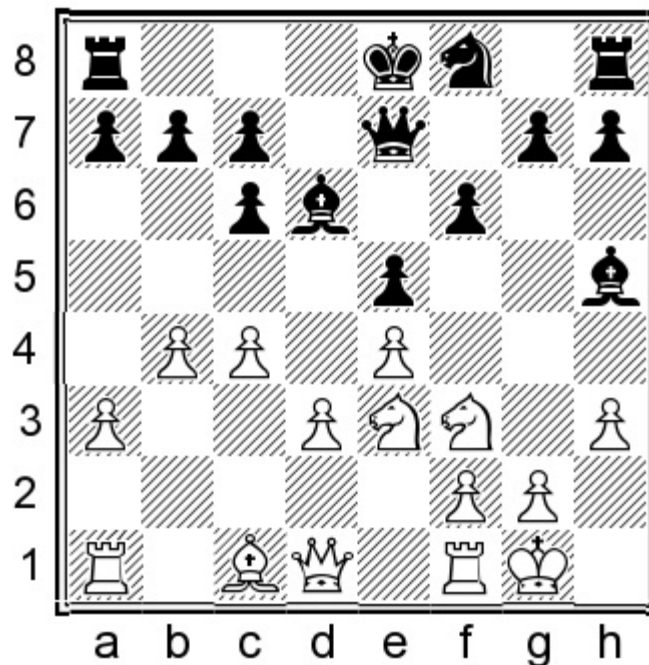


15...f6!N 16.♞h1 ♙f7 Black improves the bishop and has good attacking chances against White's exposed king.



11...f6 12.♘e3 ♘f8 13.♘f5  
13.c4

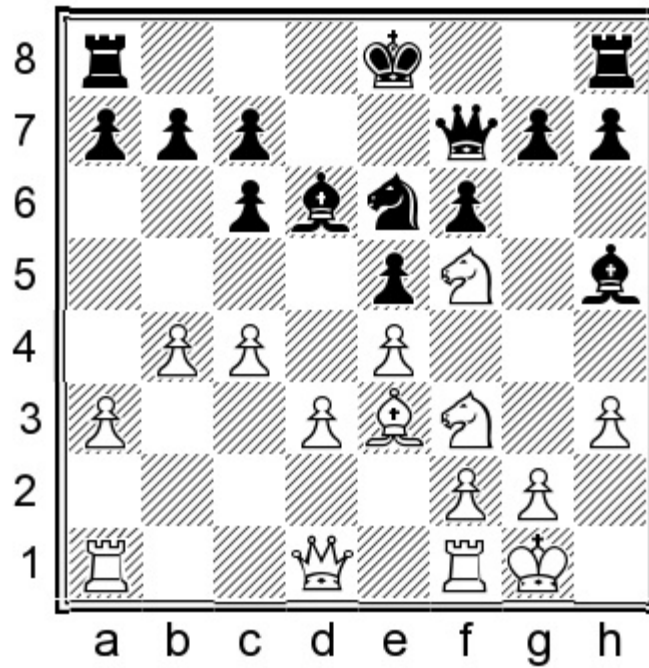
This move led to success for White in a high-level blitz encounter, but Black can obtain a comfortable game with:



13...♙f7!N

13...♙d7?! proved less precise after 14.c5 ♕e7 15.♘xe5! ♕xd1 16.♘xd7 ♕e2 17.♖e1 ♕xd3 18.♘xf8 ♖xf8 19.♘f5 with the better pawn structure for White in So – Nakamura, Internet (blitz) 2020.

14.♘f5 ♘e6 15.♕e3

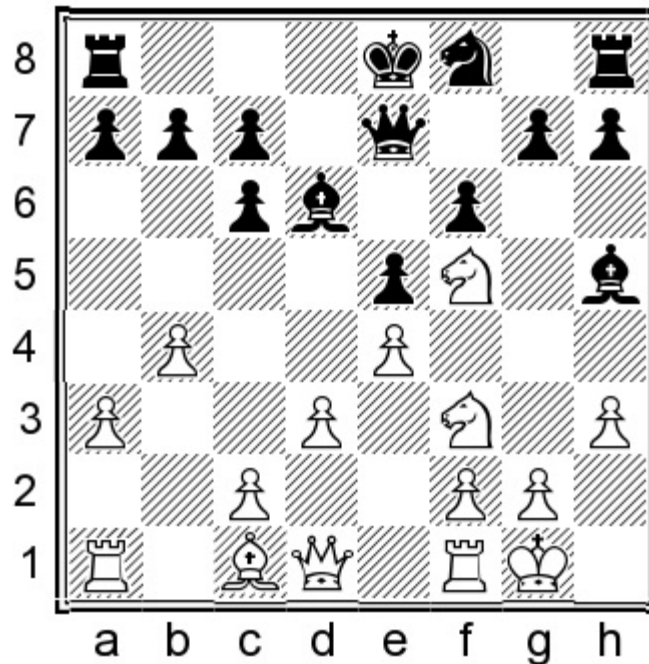


15...♙f8! 16.♘g3

16.d4 exd4 17.♘5xd4 ♘xd4 18.♙xd4 ♙xf3 19.gxf3 ♙h5 is equal.

16...♙xf3 17.♙xf3 0-0-0 18.♖fd1 ♙e7

Black has excellent play against the backward d-pawn.



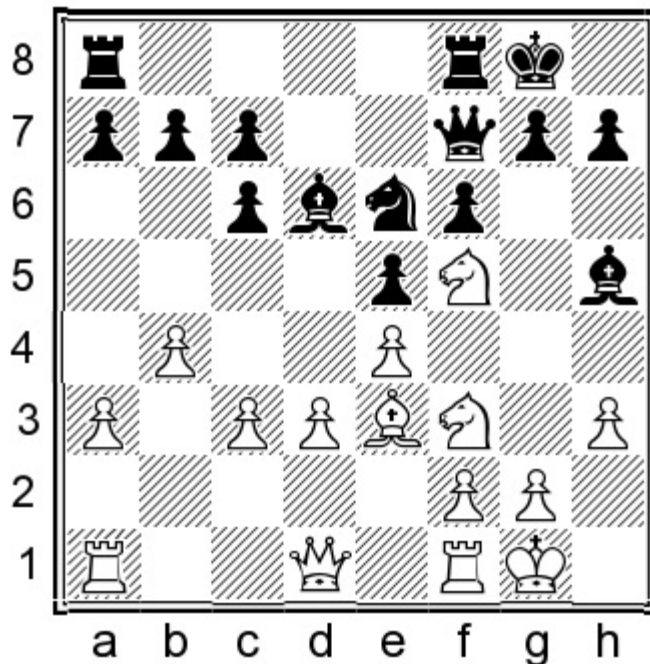
13...♙f7!

As we will see, it is useful to protect the bishop on h5.

13...♙d7 14.♙e3 ♘e6 15.c3 0-0-0 16.♘g3 ♙xf3 17.♙xf3 ♖b8 18.♖fd1 put Black under some pressure in Giri – Topalov, Shamkir 2019.

## 14. ♖b1

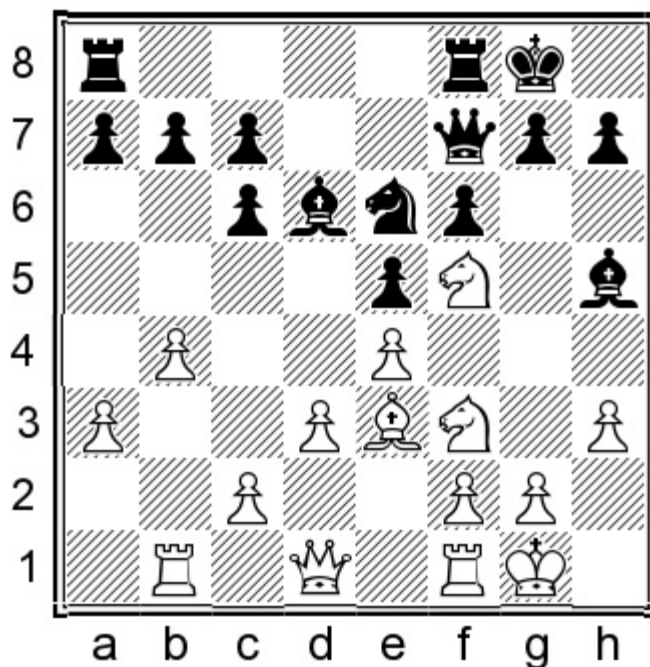
The value of the queen on f7 can be seen after: 14. ♕e3N 14... ♘e6 15. c3 0-0 If Black had castled short in Giri – Topalov above, where the queen was on d7 instead of f7, he would have had to contend with ♘xe5 tricks, unlike here.



16. d4 Expanding in the centre is logical enough, but after 16... exd4 17. cxd4 ♖fe8 18. ♖e1 a5 Black has enough counterplay.

## 14... ♘e6 15. ♕e3 0-0

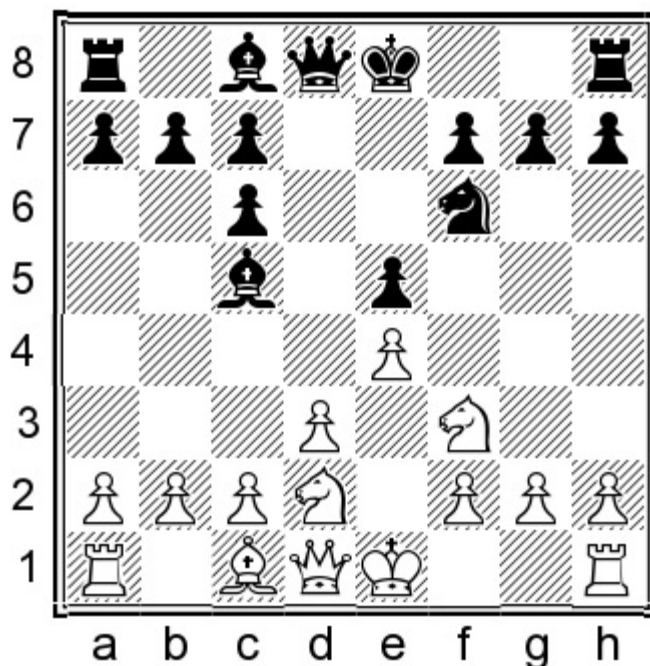
Once again, Black can safely castle without fear of a ♘xe5 trick.



## 16.a4 b6 17.a5 ♖fd8

Black had no problems in Romm – Coklin, email 2019.

### D6) 6.♘bd2



This is the common continuation. From this square, the queen's knight has a few possible routes: it can be placed on c4, increasing the pressure on the e5-pawn; on b3, where it supports the d3-d4 break; or on f1 – which is especially effective when Black's bishop has moved to g4. Another important point is that White's king can still be housed on either side of the board. The flipside of White's last move is that the c1-bishop is temporarily blocked, while the f2-pawn remains somewhat tender. In particular, ♖xe5 is still not a threat because of the ...♙xf2† trick.

### 6...♘d7

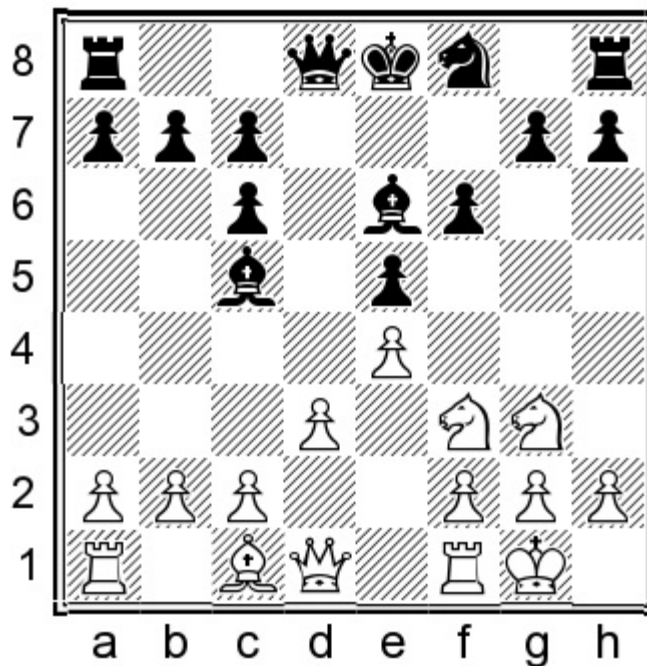
This way of defending the e5-pawn makes most sense, now that it's tougher for White to carry out the d3-d4 push.

Another common continuation is 6...♙e6 7.0-0 ♘d7 when Black's minor pieces are placed harmoniously, but after 8.♘b3 ♙b6 9.♘g5 the light-squared bishop will be exchanged, so White's position is practically risk-free.

We will analyse the two main lines of **D61)** 7.0-0 and **D62)** 7.♘c4, after briefly checking a few minor alternatives:

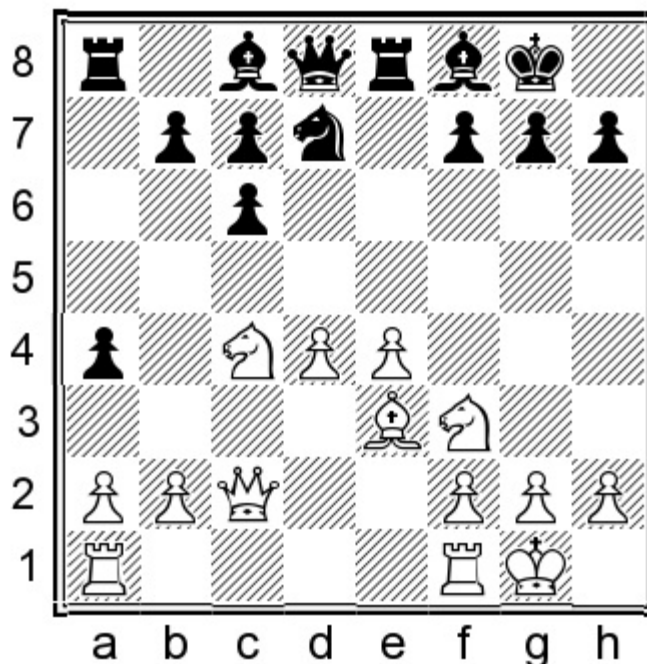
7.♘b3 ♙d6 8.♘a5 proved harmless after 8...0-0 9.♙d2 ♘c5 when the knight on a5 didn't bother Black at all in Durarbayli – Lorparizangeneh, Albena 2015.

7.♘f1 was played in Nisipeanu – Bindrich, Dresden 2017, and now 7...f6!?N would have been thematic. A logical continuation would be: 8.♘g3 ♘f8 9.0-0 ♙e6



10.c3 Advancing in the centre seems natural, but 10...♔d7 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 ♘d6 13.♙e3 ♖g6 leaves Black with a harmonious set-up and nothing much to worry about.

7.c3 has also been tried, but White's current set-up is not so well suited for initiating a conflict in the centre. 7...0-0 8.0-0 ♜e8 Black is anticipating the d3-d4 break. 9.♘c4 ♙f8 10.♙e3 a5 (10...c5!? was another good option) 11.♚c2 a4 12.d4 exd4 13.cxd4 We have been following Anand – Aronian, Kolkata 2019. Here Black could have seized the initiative by means of:

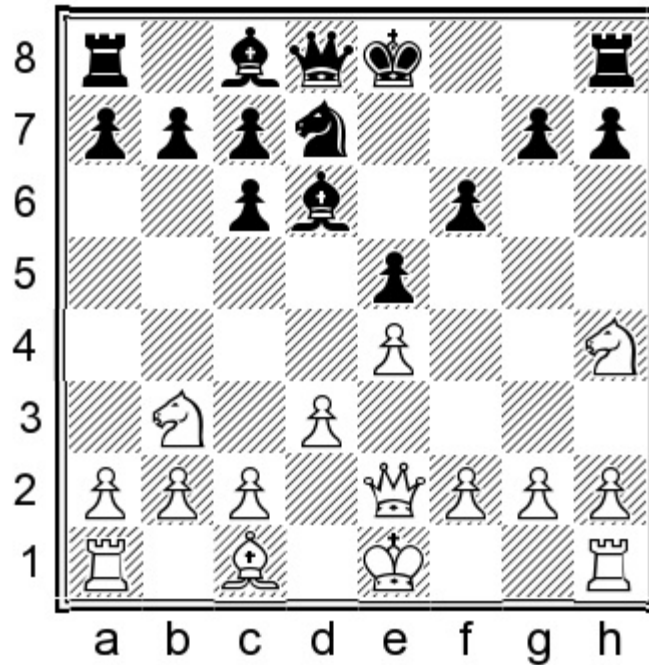


13...c5!N 14.d5 b5 15.♘cd2 ♚f6 Black's bishops are powerful.

7.♚e2 f6 8.0-0

Most games have continued with 8.♘c4, which transposes to our coverage of 7.♘c4.

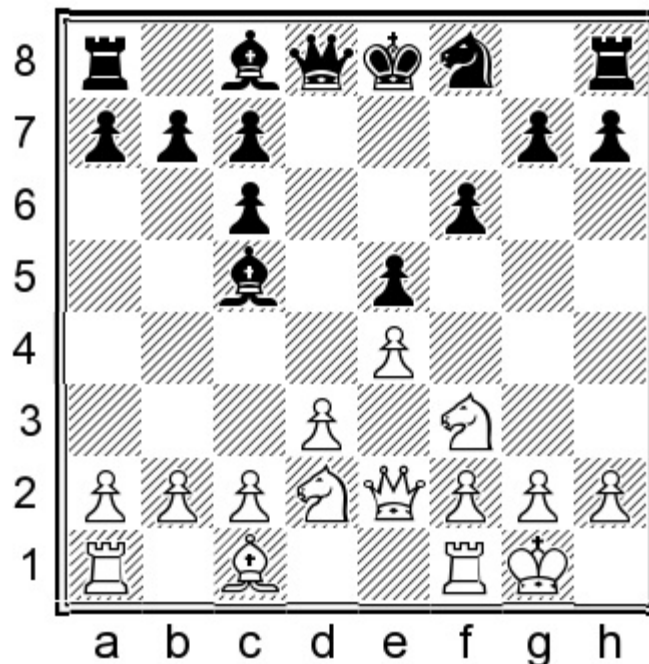
8.♘b3 ♕d6 9.♘h4, as played in Perez Rodriguez – Soto Hernandez, Havana 2018, can be comfortably met by:



9...g6N White fails to exploit the slight loosening of the kingside dark squares. For instance: 10.f4 exf4 11.0-0 b6 12.♕xf4 ♕xf4 13.♖xf4 ♕b7 14.e5!? Trying to exploit the uncastled king, but Black is safe enough. 14...fxe5 15.♘f3 ♖e7 16.♖e1 0-0-0 17.♘xe5 c5 With excellent play for Black.

8...♘f8

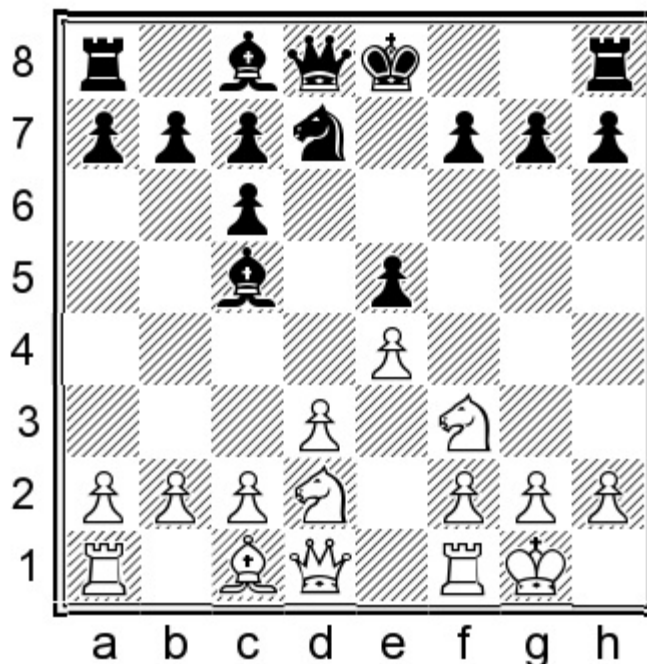
Here too, Black gets a good position with this thematic regrouping plan. Play may continue:



9.♘h4!?N 9...♕e6 10.♘b3 ♕b6 11.♕e3 ♖d7

Black is on the verge of completing development and does not stand worse at all.

## D61) 7.0-0



The only downside to this move is that White no longer has the option of long castling. Apart from that, White has a flexible set-up, with different routes available for the d2-knight, plus the possibility of expanding in the centre.

### 7...f6!?

I like this move, even though it has only been seen in a few correspondence games. Still, in some cases the play transposes to known paths.

7...0-0 has been almost the universal choice.

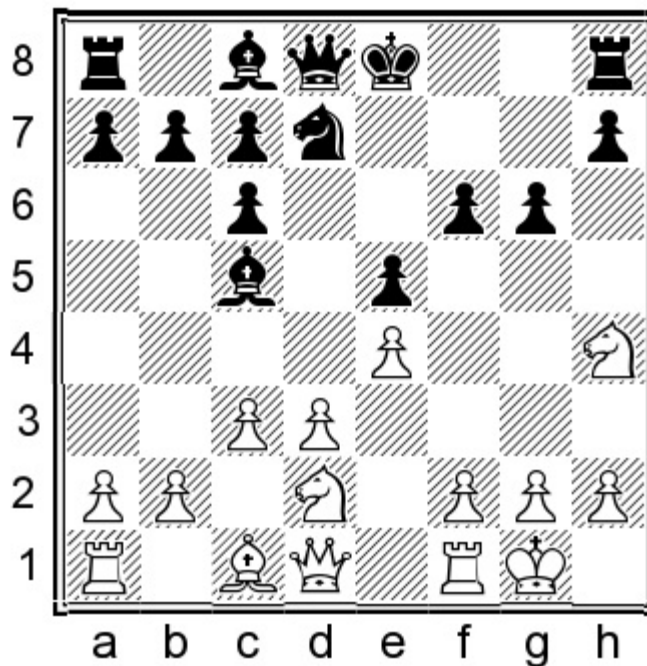
### 8.c3

I find this reply the most challenging. White aims to open lines in the centre in order to exploit the slowness of Black's last move.

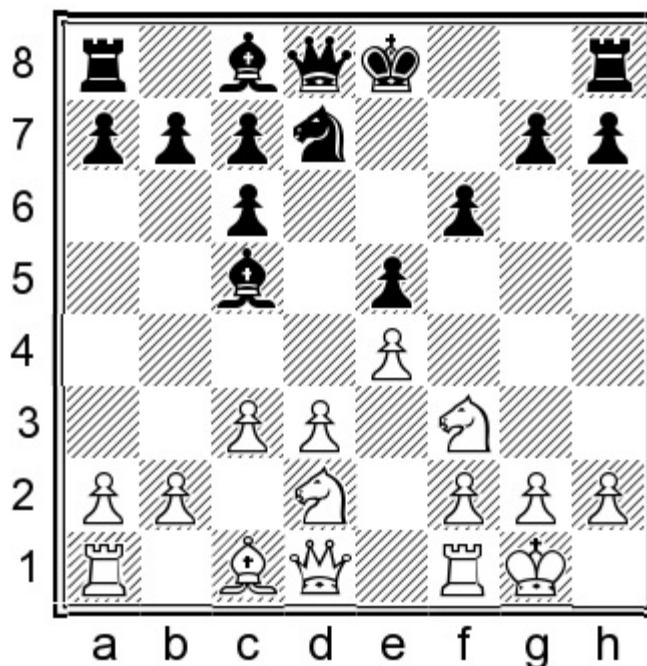
8.♘c4 ♘f8 transposes to the analysis of 7.♘c4.

8.♘b3 ♘b6 9.h3 0-0 didn't pose Black any problems in Volovik – Tsitsulin, corr. 2017.

8.♘h4 g6 9.c3 is another possible attempt by White to exploit the slight weakness caused by ...f7-f6. In Potrata – Shishkov, corr. 2020, Black castled, but I would prefer:



9...♞f8! Black can tolerate the slight kingside weaknesses and has time to regroup the knight, while the h4-knight is misplaced. Play could continue: 10.♞b3 (10.b4 ♕e7 11.♞c4 ♞e6 12.♕e3 0-0 is also nothing special for White.) 10...♖b6 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 ♕e6 13.♞f3 ♜e7 Black intends ...0-0-0, with strong pressure on the d4-pawn; the bishop pair is also a significant factor.



### 8...0-0N

8...♞f8 was tested in Das – Alexeyenko, corr. 2018, and seems reasonable enough, but I slightly prefer the text move.

### 9.d4

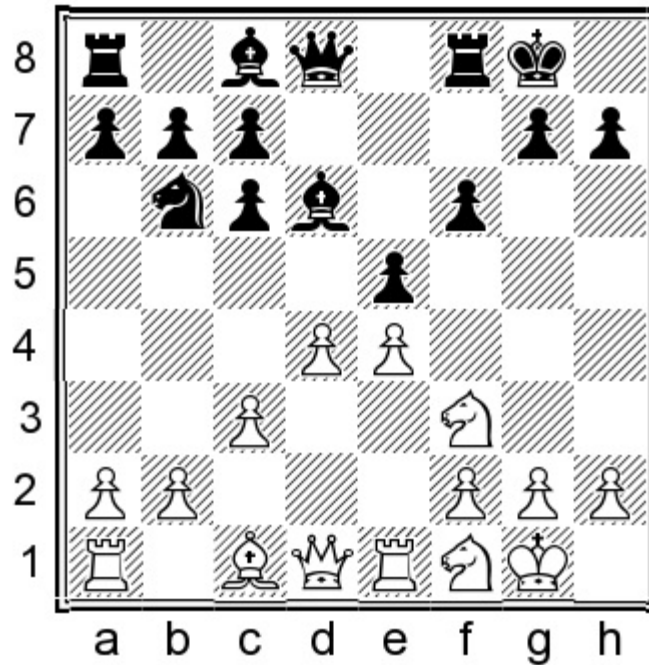
I also examined: 9.♖e1 ♖e8 10.d4 ♕f8 This is the downside of delaying d3-d4: Black manages to

comfortably regroup the pieces. 11.♖f1 exd4 12.cxd4 ♖b6 13.♘g3 ♕e6 Black's bishop pair fully compensates for White's superior pawn structure. One of the key ideas is ...a5-a4, initiating some play on the queenside.

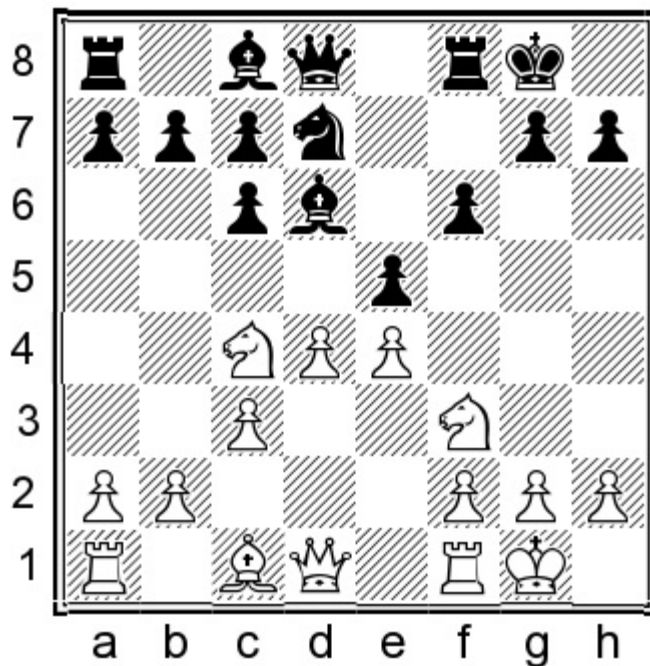
### 9...♕d6 10.♘c4

White increases the pressure on the e5-point and also considers the option of capturing on d6. After this move, we transpose to a high-level rapid game, which we will follow for a while.

The quieter 10.♖e1 is well met by: 10...♖b6! 11.♖f1 (After 11.dxe5 fxe5 12.h3 ♕f6 Black's pressure on the f-file outweighs any structural drawbacks.)



11...exd4 12.cxd4 ♕e6 13.♘g3 ♖d7 With a harmonious position. In addition to the ...a5-a4 advance mentioned previously, Black's potential plans also include the ...f6-f5 break, fighting for control over the central light squares.

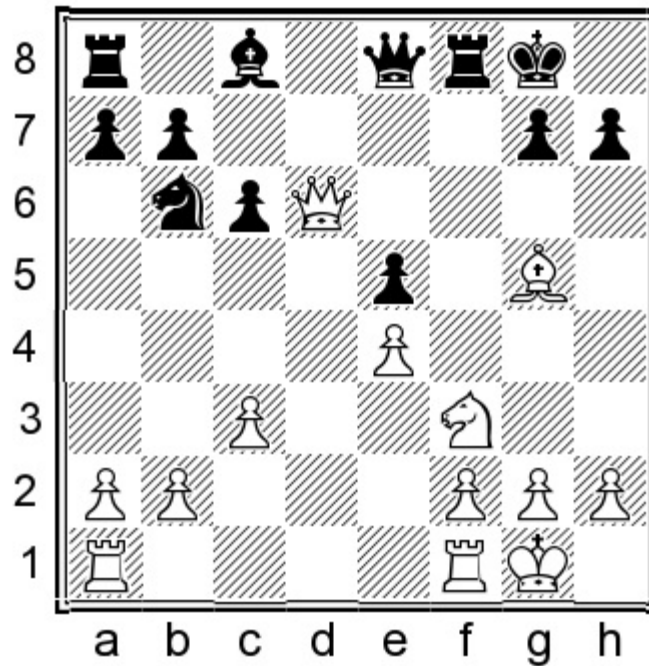


10...♖b6 11.♗a5

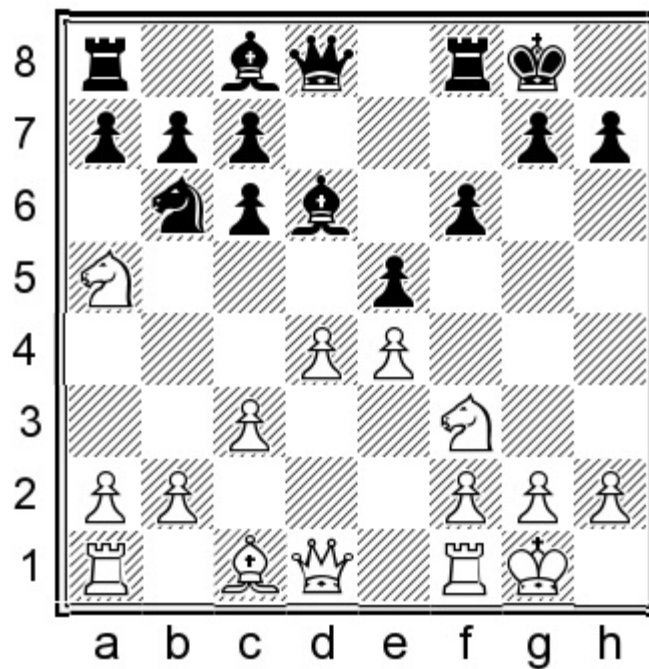
White is trying to prevent the natural development of Black's queenside pieces, but it looks a bit artificial.

By liquidating the unopposed dark-squared bishop, White also repairs the opponent's pawn structure: 11.♗xd6 cxd6 A possible continuation is 12.♕b3† ♔h8 13.a4 ♕e7 14.a5 ♘e6 15.♖c2 ♗d7 and Black has nothing to worry about.

White also achieves nothing special with: 11.dxe5 fxe5 12.♙g5 (12.♗fxe5 ♕e7 13.♗xd6 cxd6 14.♗d3 ♕xe4 is level) 12...♕e8! Black is ready to give up material in order to activate the queen. 13.♗xd6 cxd6 14.♕xd6



14...♖xf3! This thematic exchange sacrifice is especially effective now. 15.gxf3 ♕h3 16.♖fd1 h6 The vulnerability of the white king certainly offers Black sufficient counterplay.

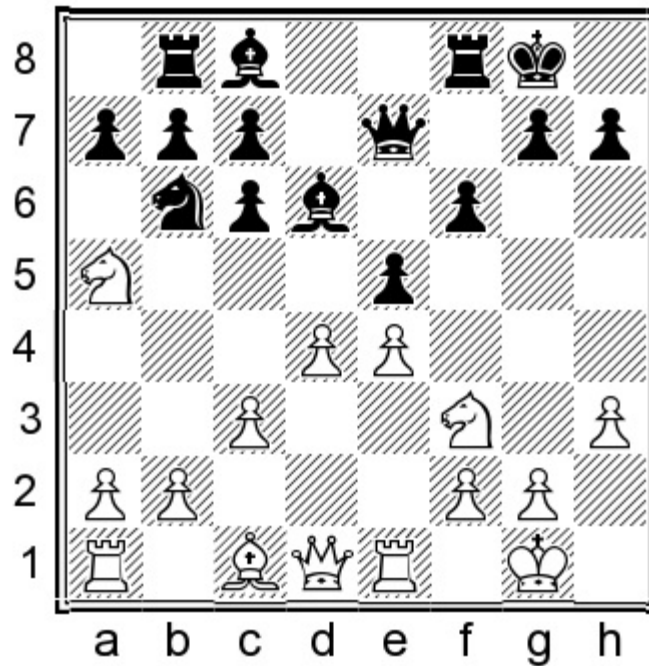


11...♕e7 12.♖e1 ♜b8

Liberating the c8-bishop.

### 13.h3

Since move 10 we have been following the aforementioned game, Caruana – So, Internet (rapid) 2020. I like the following new approach:

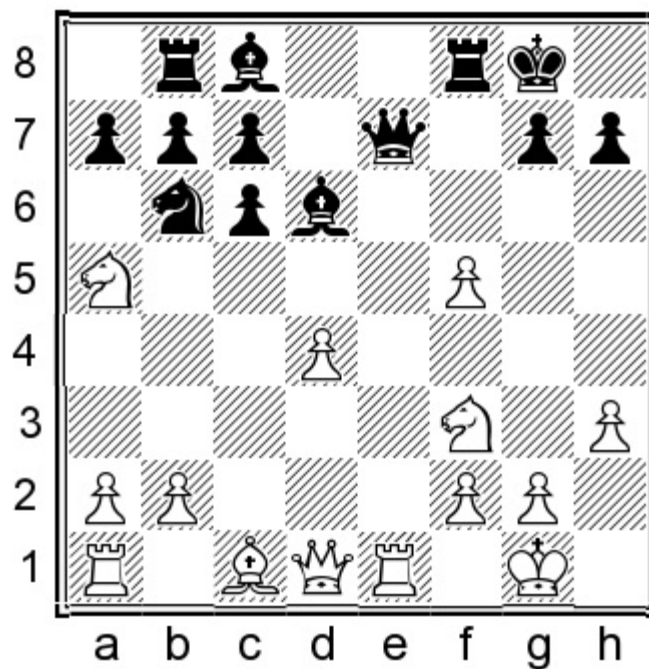


**13...exd4!?N 14.cxd4 f5!**

This positional plan has already been mentioned in the comments to move 10 above. After this move, Black's unopposed light-squared bishop starts to become powerful.

**15.exf5**

15.♔g5 ♚f7 16.e5 ♘b4 17.♘d2 ♘xa5 18.♘xa5 h6 gives Black the better chances, as the central pawns are blocked and White lacks any constructive ideas.



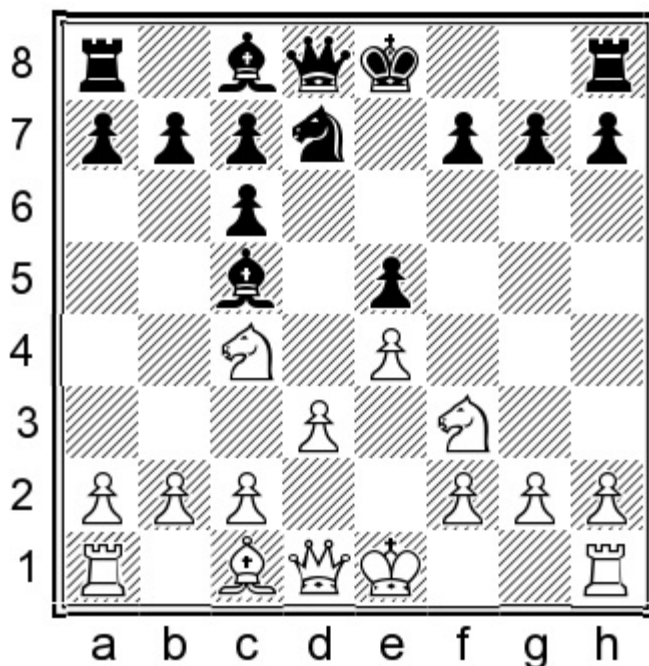
**15...♚f7 16.♚b3**

16.g4? ♘xf5! 17.gxf5 ♚xf5 sees Black regain the piece with a huge advantage.

16...♙xb3 17.♘xb3 ♕xf5

With the bishop pair and control over d5, Black has an excellent position.

### D62) 7.♘c4



This has been the most popular choice. White activates the knight and attacks e5, while keeping the option of castling on either side.

### 7...f6!

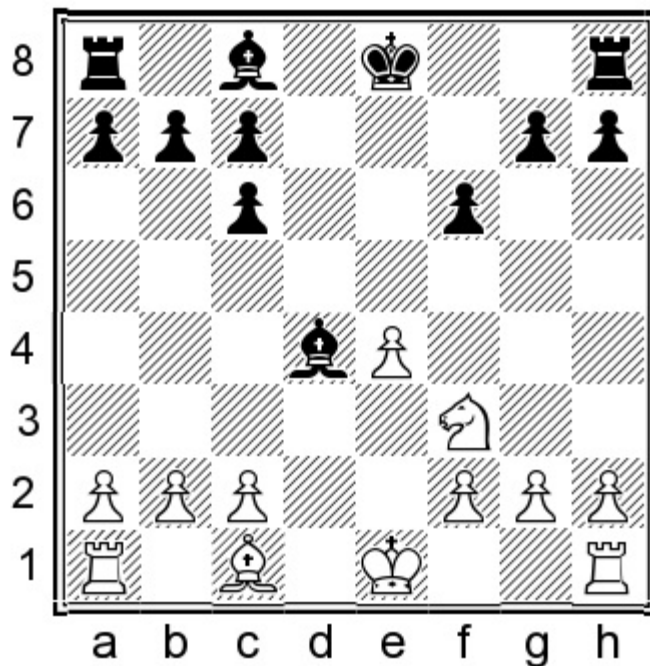
By covering the e5-pawn Black facilitates the important transfer of the knight to e6. It is also useful to delay committing the king for a while.

7...0-0 has been the most common choice, but relocating the king doesn't guarantee safety, as was proved in many games. For instance, 8.h4!? ♖e8 9.h5 b5 10.♘e3 ♘f8 11.♕d2 ♜b8 12.a3 ♕d4 13.c3 ♕c5 14.♙c2 ♙f6 15.0-0-0 and White had excellent attacking prospects in Ivanchuk – Deac, Forni di Sopra 2019.

### 8.c3

This is the most ambitious try. White wants to expand in the centre before Black completes development.

Opening the centre with 8.d4?! is dubious. 8...exd4 9.♘xd4 ♘e5 10.♘xe5 ♙xd4 11.♙xd4 ♕xd4 12.♘f3 was seen in Kogan – Codenotti, Jerusalem 2015, when the most precise choice would have been:



12...♙b6N 13.♙f4 ♙e6 14.♖d1 ♔f7 15.0-0 ♜ad8 Black's powerful bishops overwhelm White's superior pawn structure.

White also achieves nothing with: 8.♙e3 ♙xe3 9.♘xe3 (9.fxe3 proved equally harmless after 9...♚e7 10.♚d2 ♘b6 11.♘a5 c5 in Lopez Martinez – Pap, Roquetas de Mar 2015) 9...♘c5 10.0-0 0-0 11.♚e2 ♘e6 Black had no problems in Stevic – Pap, Gunja 2014.

I also considered: 8.♚e2 ♘f8 This manoeuvre was, of course, the main reason for Black's 7th move. 9.♙e3 ♙xe3 10.♘xe3 (10.fxe3 ♙e6 11.♘cd2 ♘g6 12.♚f2 c5 gave Black a slight space advantage in So – Dominguez Perez, Saint Louis 2017.) 10...♘e6 11.0-0-0 c5 12.g3 ♘d4 Black was firmly in control in Anand – So, Bucharest 2019.

8.0-0

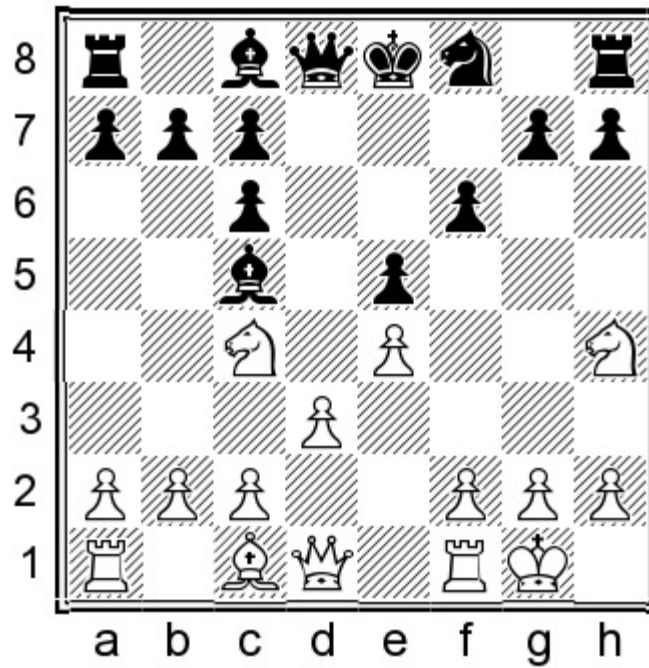
Here too, Black continues thematically with:

8...♘f8! 9.♘h4

Other continuations also fail to cause Black problems. For instance, 9.c3 ♙e6 10.b3 was seen in Stromberg – Simashkevitch, corr. 2014, and here I like 10...♘g6 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 ♙e7 with a good game for Black.

9.♙e3 ♙xe3 10.♘xe3 ♘e6 also gave Black a solid position in a couple of correspondence games. I considered 11.♘h4!?N 11...g6 12.g3 ♚d6 13.♘hg2 as an interesting attempt to arrange a pawn break, but 13...♙d7 14.f4 exf4 15.♘xf4 0-0-0 is decent enough for Black.

The text move was an ambitious choice in Almasi – Kryvoruchko, Germany 2019. I like the following natural response:

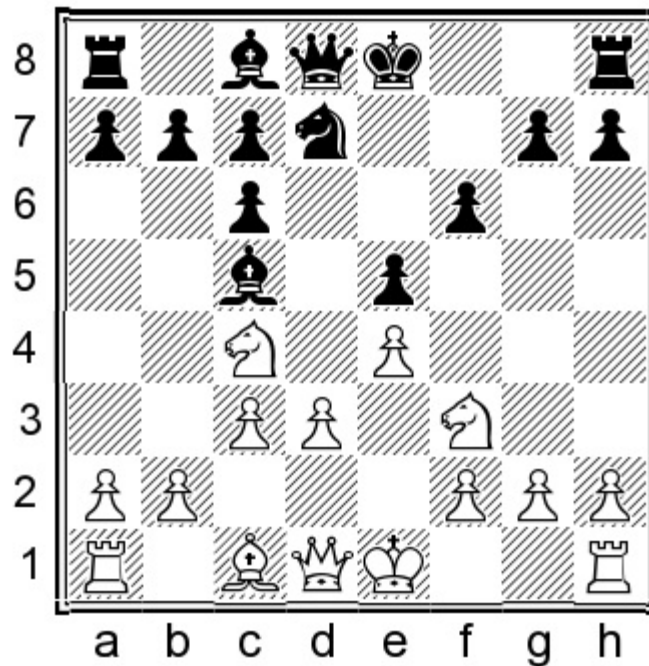


9...♙e6N 10.♙e3

The main point of Black's last move is that 10.♘f5? ♙xc4 11.dxc4 ♚xd1 12.♖xd1 g6 13.♘h6 ♘e6 leads White to a difficult endgame.

10...♙xe3 11.♘xe3 ♚d7

I slightly prefer Black's chances.



8...♘b6!

An important move, interrupting the coordination between White's pieces and making d3-d4 less effective.

9.♘a5

9.b4 ♖d6 (9...♗e7 also looks fine) 10.♘a5 (10.♘xd6† cxd6 gives Black no problems) 10...0-0 was the move order of the Anand – Leko game noted below.

Retreating with 9.♘e3N makes White's set-up less harmonious, so after 9...♗e6 10.0-0 ♔d7 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 ♖d6 Black has great play.

### 9...♖d6

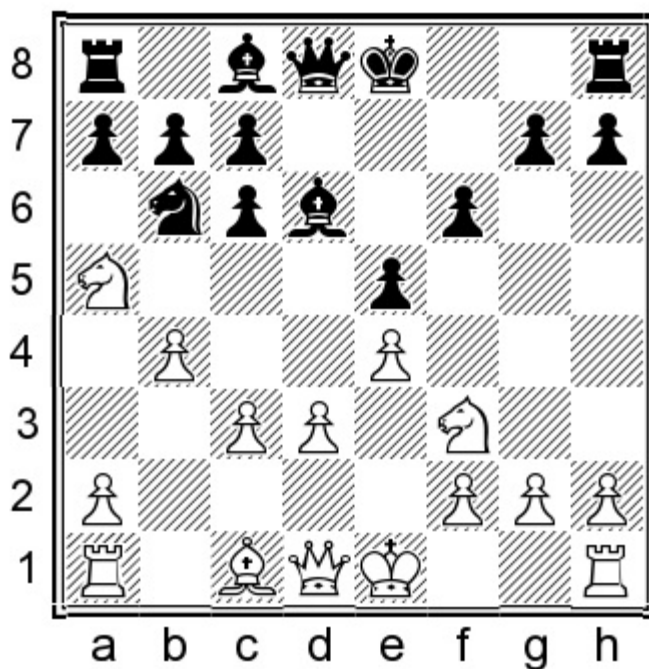
The bishop makes a pre-emptive retreat.

9...0-0 is likely to transpose.

### 10.b4

This move is aimed at restricting Black's minor pieces.

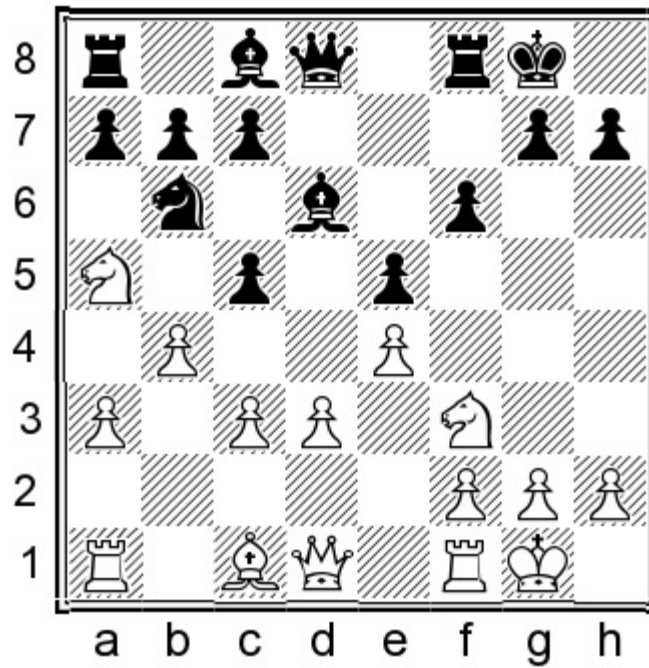
10.0-0 0-0 11.♗e3 proved harmless after 11...♔e8 12.♘h4 c5 13.♘f5 ♖f7 14.♘b3 ♔c6 in De Heer – Galliano, email 2014.



### 10...0-0 11.0-0

11.♗e3 is well met by 11...f5! followed by ...♔e8, as played in Lombeck – Woznica, corr. 2017, when Black's counterattacking abilities should not be underestimated. (11...♔e8 followed by ...♘d7-f8 was less dynamic, but still gave Black a reasonable game in Anand – Leko, Internet [rapid] 2020.)

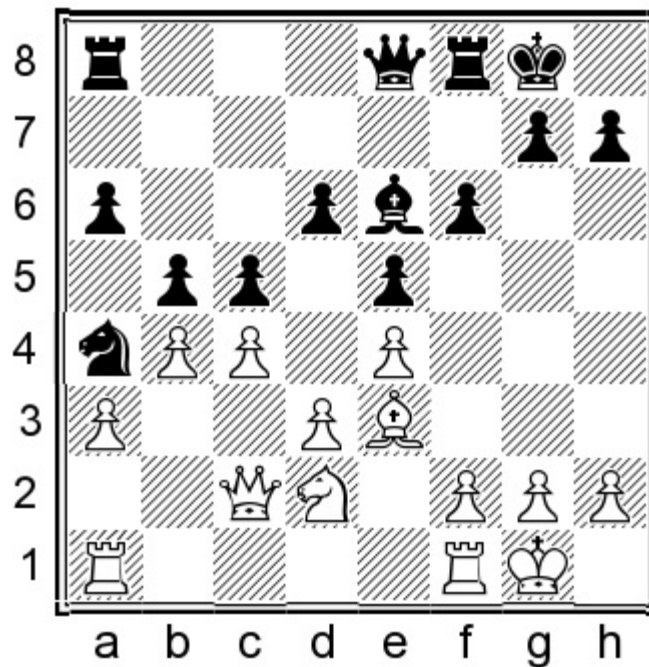
### 11...c5 12.a3



12...♔e8!

A useful multi-tasking move. Black's queen does a great job by keeping an eye on the queenside light squares, and it may also play a role in kingside play via g6 or h5.

13.♙e3 ♘a4 14.♚c2 b6 15.♞c4 ♙e6 16.♞xd6 cxd6 17.c4 a6 18.♞d2 b5



Black was doing fine in Kulick – Lewis, email 2018.

### Conclusion

This chapter has completed our 4.d3 ♖c5 coverage by considering White's four main alternatives to 5.c3. The general rule is that Black should follow up with 5...♗d4, unless White forcibly prevents it.

5.♗c3 ♗d4 6.♗xe5 c6 foreshadows the kind of pawn sacrifice we will see in the next chapter. Tournament practice and analysis both demonstrate that Black obtains plenty of compensation, thanks to fast development and the offside placement of White's light-squared bishop.

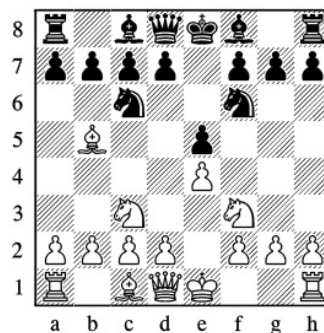
5.♗bd2 and 5.0-0 should both be met by 5...♗d4 6.♗xd4 ♕xd4, when White has a few ideas involving attacking the bishop in some way, in conjunction with either attacking the e5-pawn or executing a quick d3-d4 break, but Black has sufficient resources in all variations. It is worth remembering that Black should not automatically play ...c7-c6 to chase the enemy bishop. In some cases, it is better to castle and play ...d7-d5, and if the queen recaptures on d5 then Black gains a tempo against the bishop.

Lastly we analysed 5.♕xc6 dxc6, which leads to a totally different type of game. We examined six (!) main continuations, all with their own nuances. Depending on the exact line White chooses, Black may follow up with any of 6...♕g4, 6...♖e7 or 6...♗d7. The centre is closed and often long castling is an attractive option, so it's useful for Black to avoid committing the king prematurely.

The flexible 6.♗bd2 is White's main attempt to claim superiority in this variation. In addition to the typical follow-up with ♗c4, the knight may also go via b3 or f1, according to Black's reaction. We should also keep in mind the possibility of c2-c3 and d3-d4. I recommend 6...♗d7, usually followed by 7...f6, keeping the king flexible and preparing the thematic knight transfer via f8. A complex game lies ahead but Black has a full share of the chances, and we saw in many lines how the bishop pair can make its presence felt as the game goes on.

# Chapter 8

## Other Lines



4. ♖c3

### Variation Index

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙b5 ♘f6 4. ♖c3

4... ♗d4

A) 5. ♗xe5 180

B) 5. ♗xd4 183

C) 5. 0-0!? c6!? 185

C1) 6. ♙c4 185

C2) 6. ♙d3!? 186

D) 5. ♙c4 ♙c5 6. ♗xe5 ♔e7 7. ♗f3 d5! 189

D1) 8. ♗xd5 191

D2) 8. ♙xd5 193

E) 5. ♙a4 c6 197

E1) 6. d3 198

E2) 6. ♗xe5 d5 200

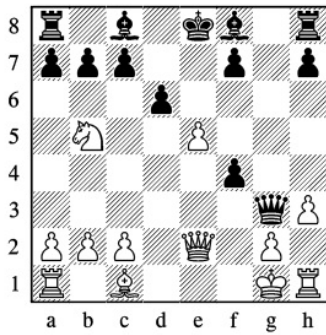
E21) 7. exd5?! 200

E22) 7. d3 ♙d6 202

E221) 8. ♗f3 202

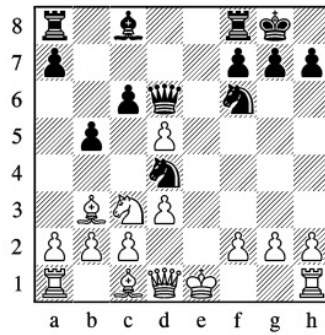
E222) 8. f4 203

A) note to 14.♖f3



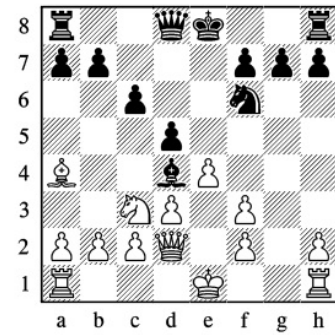
17...♖d8!N

E21) after 11.d3



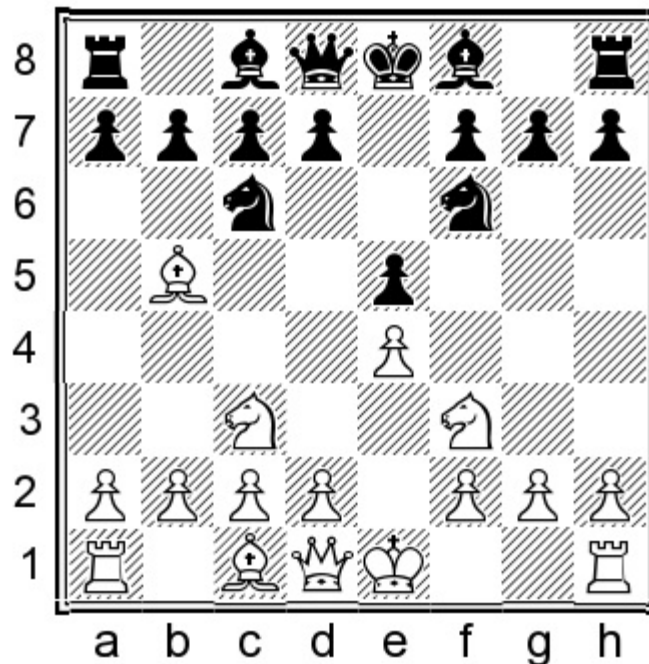
11...♗g4!N

E221) after 12.gxf3



12...a5!N

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♗c6 3.♗b5 ♖f6 4.♖c3



This move takes the game into the territory of the Four Knights Game, and the present position has most commonly been reached via the move order 3.♖c3 ♗f6 4.♗b5. At the same time, 4.♖c3 is among White's most popular ways to avoid the main Berlin lines after 4.0-0 or 4.d3.

#### 4...♖d4

Moving an already-developed piece at such an early stage of the game is justified by a few factors: the bishop on b5 comes under fire, and the exchange of knights of d4 will lead to an attack on the c3-knight. Moreover, the thematic d2-d4 break is delayed.

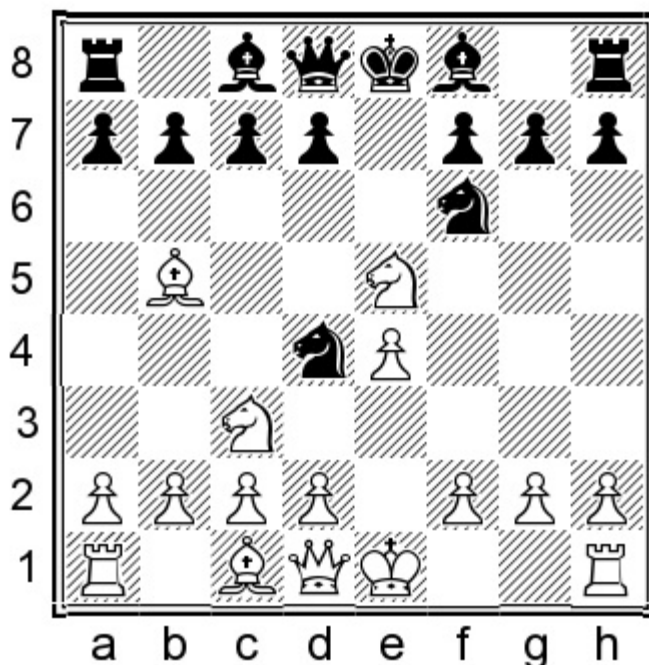
4...♗b4 is the most popular continuation, but I would like to deviate from copying White's moves. Also, the text move leads to the most attractive and complicated positions in my opinion.

White has five main options: **A)** 5.♖xe5, **B)** 5.♖xd4, **C)** 5.0-0!?, **D)** 5.♗c4 and **E)** 5.♗a4.

5.d3 gives Black a few good options:

- a) Simplest for our purposes is 5...c6, when 6.♘a4 transposes to 5.♘a4 c6 6.d3. (6.♘c4?! is poor in view of 6...d5 7.exd5 cxd5 8.♘b3 ♘g4 9.♘a4† ♖d7 10.♗xd5 ♚a5† 11.♗c3 0-0-0 when Black had a tremendous initiative in Kohler – Zaccaria, corr. 2020.)
- b) 5...♗xb5 6.♗xb5 should be fine for Black, especially as White no longer has the option of d2-d4 (unlike the analogous position that could arise after 5.0-0).
- c) 5...♘c5 is another decent option which we have already analysed via 4.d3 ♘c5 5.♗c3 ♗d4. This is consistent with our repertoire as well, although I would evaluate the 5...c6 line as giving Black a simpler task in the opening.

### A) 5.♗xe5



This move has been played successfully by Yu Yangyi and Nigel Short, among others. It is connected with a concrete idea, but objectively White can hardly even achieve equality in this line.

### 5...♚e7

Weaker is 5...♗xb5?! 6.♗xb5 c6 7.♗c3 ♚e7 8.♗f3 ♗xe4 9.0-0 when White's lead in development looks threatening.

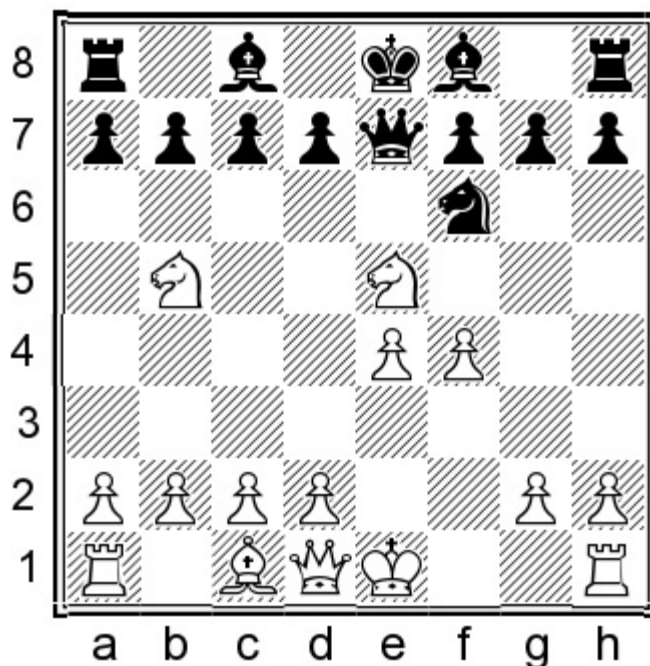
### 6.f4

Only this continuation might justify White's risky decision to grab the pawn.

6.♗f3 ♗xb5 7.♗xb5 ♚xe4† sees Black regain the pawn, and after 8.♚e2 ♚xe2† 9.♗xe2 Black has a

clear positional advantage due to the bishop pair. It is worth adding that 9...♘d5 conveniently defends the c7-pawn, and Black will follow up with ...a7-a6 to drive away the knight.

6...♘xb5 7.♘xb5



7...d6

The process of regaining the pawn reminds me of the Petroff Defence, when after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♘xe5 Black should chase the knight with 3...d6 before capturing on e4.

8.♘f3 ♚xe4† 9.♔f2

White has lost the right to castle and the set-up with f2-f4 instead of d2-d4 looks weird. However, Black has to deal with two nasty threats: 10.♘xc7† and 10.♖e1.

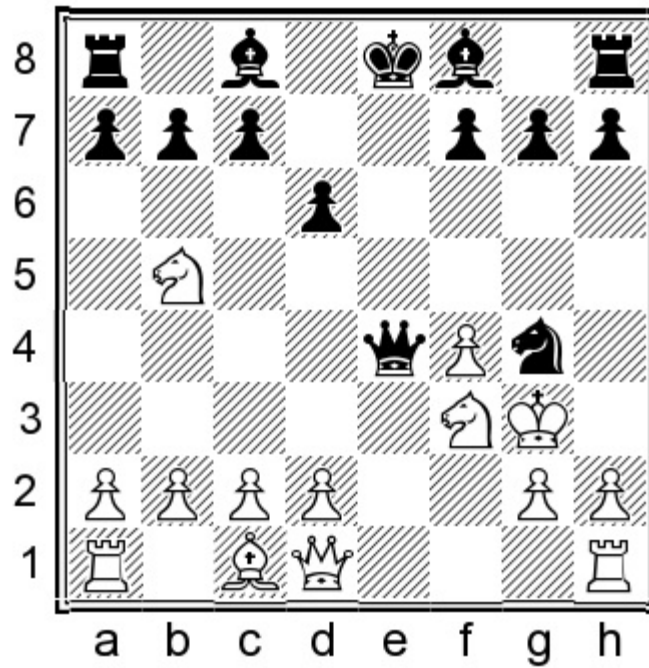
9...♘g4†

9...♔d8 is playable but I would prefer to force the white king to move to a more exposed square.

10.♔g3

White continues to play bravely! It is important to avoid obstructing the h1-rook.

10.♔g1 is too timid, and 10...♚c6 11.a4 ♔e7 gave Black the better game due to the bishop pair in Platz – Schmoyer, USA 1948.

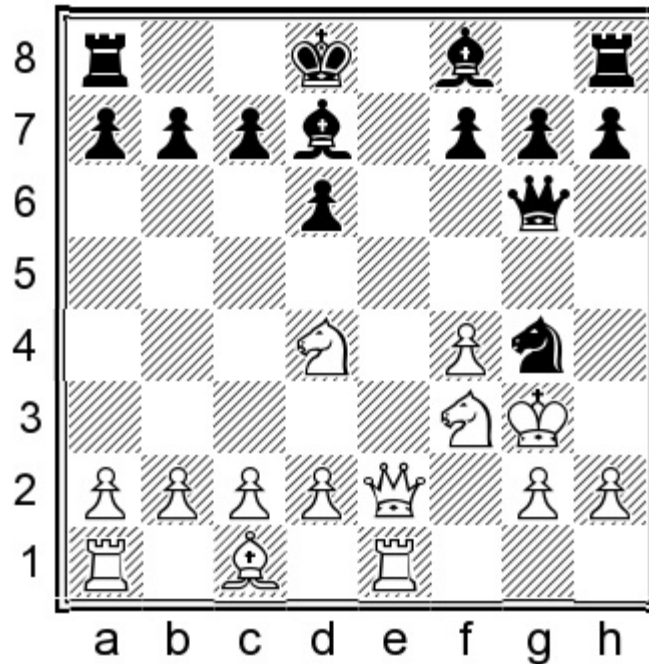


10...♙g6

Black reminds White of the unsafe king.

11.♘h4

No better is: 11.♙e2† ♔d8 12.♞e1 (12.h3? led to a near-decisive advantage for Black after 12...♞e3† 13.♔h2 ♞xc2 in Hruschka – Horst, corr. 2017.) 12...♙d7 13.♞bd4



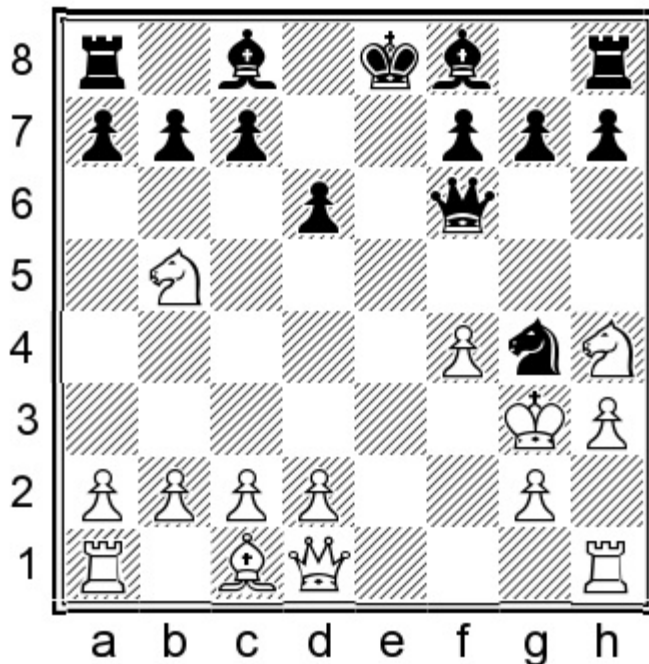
13...♞e3† 14.♔f2 ♞xc2 15.♞xc2 ♙xc2 White had no real compensation for the pawn in Spielmann – Rubinstein, Baden-Baden 1925.

11...♙f6

11...♔h5 should also turn out well for Black, but I like the text move even more.

### 12.h3

The greedy 12.♘xc7? ♔d8 13.♘xa8 runs into 13...g5! with a decisive attack, as 14.fxg5 ♕f2† 15.♔h3 ♘e3† wins on the spot.



### 12...g5!

It turns out that Black can ignore the threats to both g4 and c7.

### 13.♕e2† ♘e5! 14.♘f3

The more ambitious

### 14.d4?

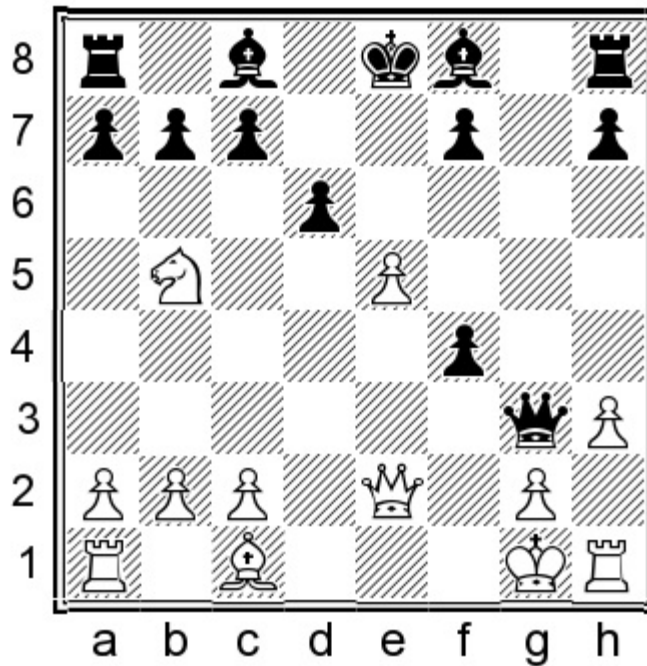
was seen in another high-level game:

### 14...gxf4† 15.♔h2 ♕xh4

Obodchuk gives 15...♔d8?! as leading to the same position, but 16.♕e1! is an extra option which White should not be allowed.

### 16.dxe5 ♕g3† 17.♔g1

This position was reached in I. Popov – Svidler, Aix-les-Bains 2011, and now Black should have continued:



17...♔d8! 18.exd6 ♕d7!

This cold-blooded continuation would have been great for Black, for instance:

19.a4

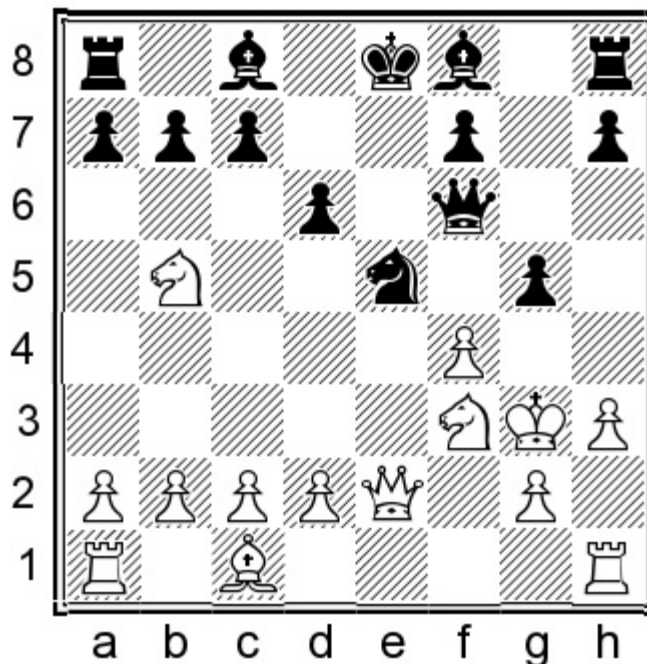
19.dxc7† ♔c8 and 19.♖c3 ♕c6 both leave White facing decisive threats.

19...♕xb5 20.axb5

20.dxc7† ♔xc7 21.♗xb5 b6 leaves White facing the terrible threat of ...♕c5†.

20...♕xd6

Black stands clearly better, due to having an extra pawn as well as the safer king.



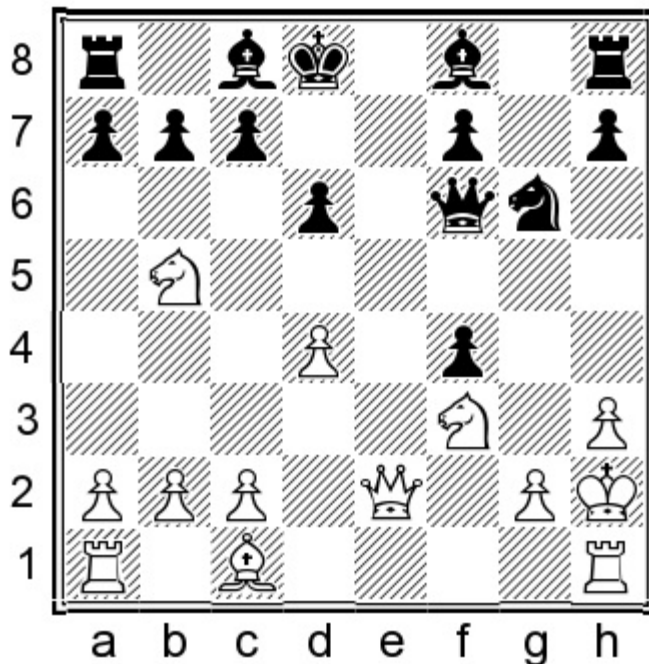
14...gxf4† 15.♔h2

White's king is relatively safe now, but so is Black's. Meanwhile, the extra pawn and bishop pair

remain.

15...♔d8 16.d4 ♘g6!

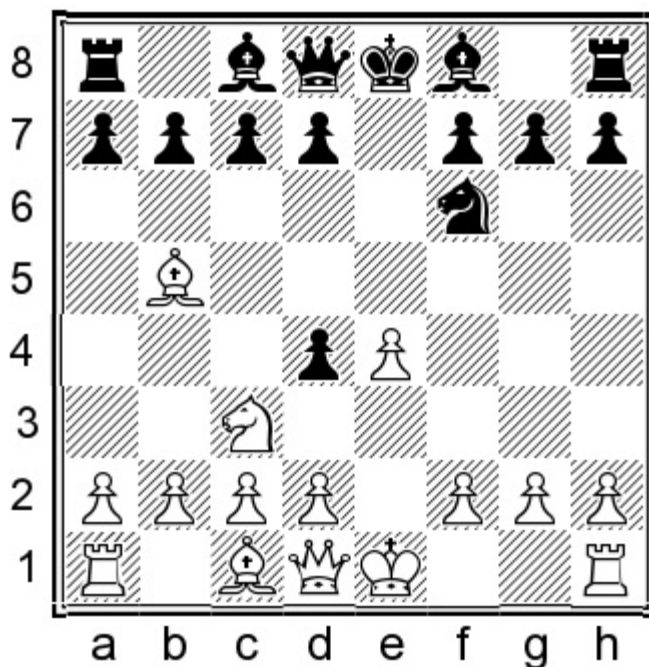
It is important to guard the f4-pawn, which heavily restricts the mobility of White's dark-squared bishop.



17.♖e1 ♕d7 18.c4 ♕g7

White did not have sufficient compensation for the pawn in Johansen – Chen, corr. 2017.

B) 5.♘xd4 exd4



By choosing this continuation White mostly demonstrates a willingness to exchange many pieces

and call it a day. Indeed, the database indicates that there are a lot of short draws in this line. However, many great players have employed it in recent years.

### 6.e5

This is the most common continuation. White invites major simplifications.

6.♘e2?! c6 gives Black an easy initiative, for instance: 7.♙d3 (7.♙c4 ♘xe4 8.♘xd4 d5 is also clearly better for Black) 7...d5 8.exd5 ♖xd5 9.0-0 ♙d6 White has a cramped position and difficulties developing the queenside pieces.

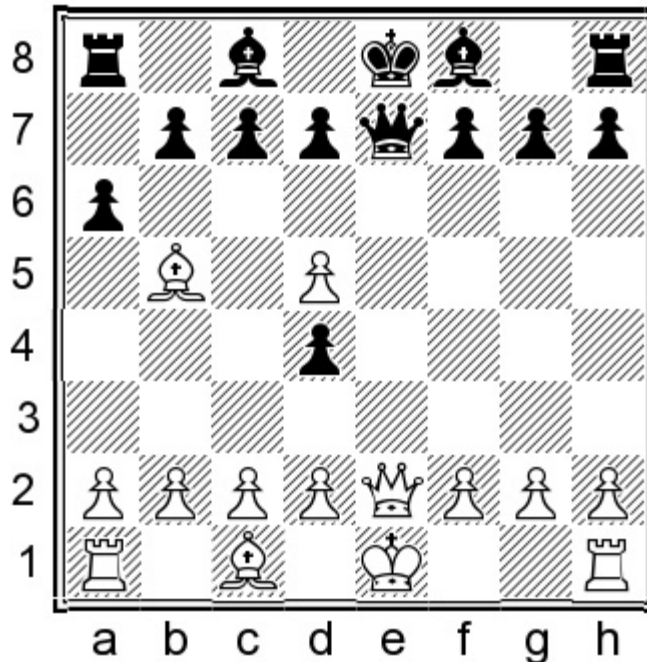
If White wishes to deviate from the main line, a better option is:

6.♘d5 ♘xd5 7.exd5 ♖e7†

Interrupting White's natural development.

7...c6 has achieved good results but 8.0-0!N would be slightly annoying.

8.♖e2 a6



9.♙d3

After 9.♙a4 Black can choose between a few good possibilities, the most aggressive being: 9...d3!? 10.♖xe7†? (Correct was 10.♖e3N 10...b5 11.♙b3 dxc2 12.0-0 ♖xe3 13.dxe3 c5 14.dxc6 dxc6 with a balanced endgame.) 10...♙xe7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♞e1 ♙c5 13.cxd3 b5 14.♙b3 d6 White had a horrible position with many weaknesses and a rotten bishop on c1 in Ringoir – Short, Gauteng 2011.

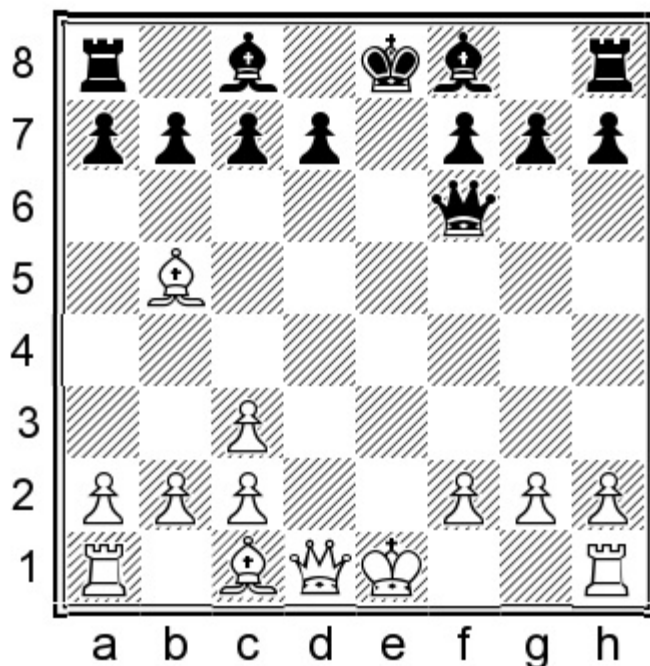
9...d6 10.b3 g6 11.♙b2 ♙g7

Black had no problems in Naiditsch – Leko, Novi Sad 2016.

6...dxc3 7.exf6 ♖xf6 8.dxc3

8.bxc3?! slows White's development, and 8...c6 9.♘e2 d5 10.0-0 ♘d6 gave Black the more active game in Firat – Kovalev, Kocaeli 2013.

8.♙e2† proves toothless after 8...♙e6 9.dxc3 c6 10.♘d3 ♘c5 11.0-0 ♙xe2 12.♘xe2 d5 as played in Skripchenko – Aronian, Bastia (rapid) 2003.



### 8...♘c5!?

8...♙e5† 9.♙e2 is the most popular continuation, leading to further simplifications and a high percentage of draws. I prefer to keep more pieces on the board for the time being.

### 9.♙e2†

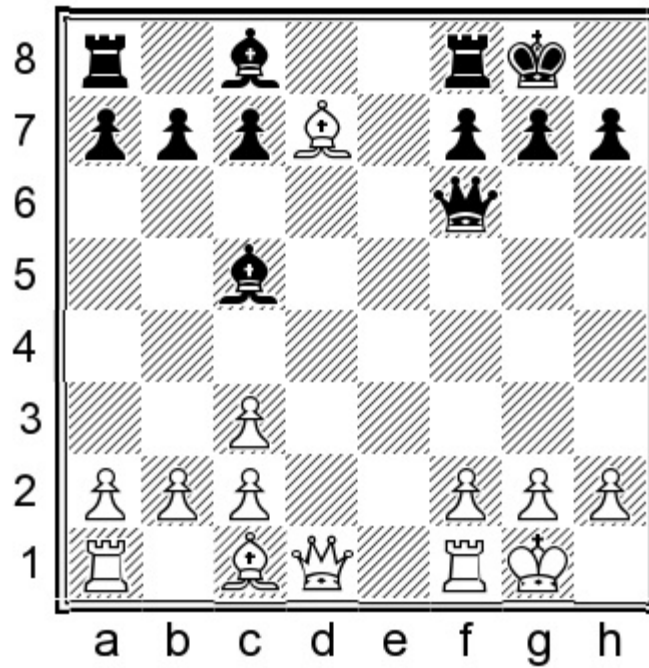
9.0-0

This is the other main option; it is important to realize that White will have the option of grabbing a pawn on the next move.

9...0-0 10.♘xd7!?

10.♙h5 d6 11.♙g5 ♙xg5 12.♘xg5 is the dull path to equality.

10.♘d3 h6 11.♙g4 d5 12.♙f4 ♙xf4 13.♘xf4 c6 was also level in Salamon – Hauser, corr. 2009.



10...♙xd7

10...♞d8?! 11.♚h5! is the justification for White's previous move.

11.♚xd7 ♞ae8

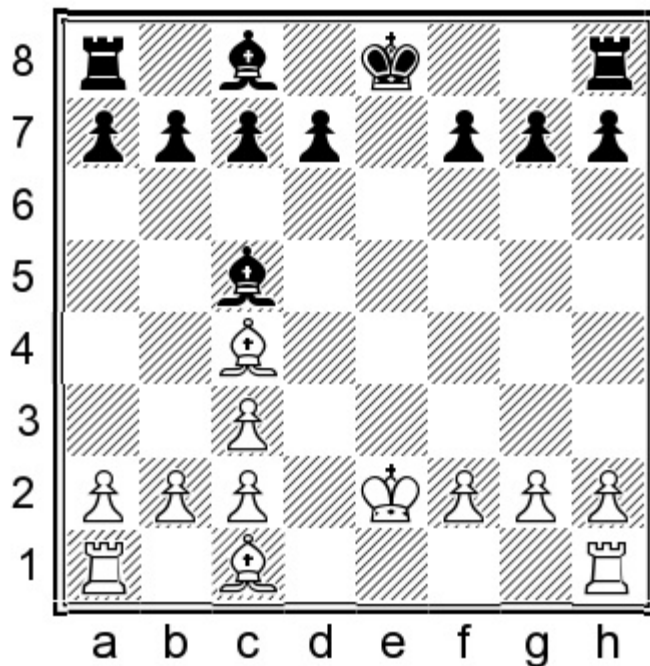
Threatening ...♚xf2† and mate.

12.♚d3 ♞e5

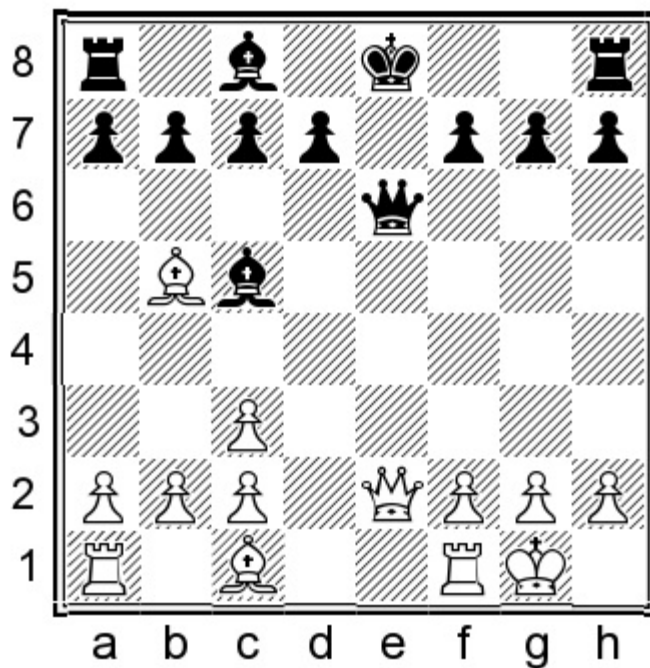
Black has scored extremely well from this position; the active pieces provide excellent compensation for White's extra doubled pawn.

**9...♚e6 10.0-0**

10.♙c4 ♚xe2† 11.♙xe2 gives Black a marginally improved version of the endgame variation noted at move 8:



Still, after 11...0-0 12.♞e1 ♞e8† 13.♙f1 ♞xe1† 14.♙xe1 d6 the endgame is rather drawish.



### 10...0-0 11.♞f3

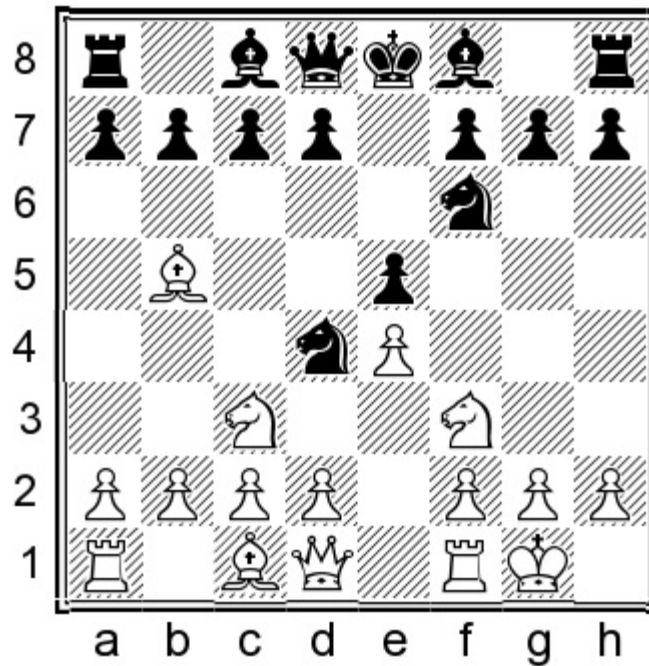
Equally harmless is 11.♞e1 ♞xe2 12.♞xe2 d5 13.♙f4 c6 14.♙d3 ♙g4 as played in Bar Ziv – Schmitz, corr. 2018.

11.♙f4 ♞xe2 12.♙xe2 d6 13.♙f3 a5 14.♞fe1 ♙e6 was also equal in Talpak – Busemann, corr. 2010.

### 11...d6 12.♙g5 ♞f5

Black had equalized effortlessly, and even went on to win after some inaccurate moves by White in Short – Kramnik, London 2011.

### C) 5.0-0!?



White is ready to give up the bishop pair in return for a development advantage. This idea was recommended by GM John Emms in a chapter of *Dangerous Weapons: 1 e4 e5* and has been tested at high levels, especially at faster time limits.

#### 5...c6!?

This has been a rare choice but I find it rather logical: Black avoids falling in with White's plan and starts fighting for the central squares.

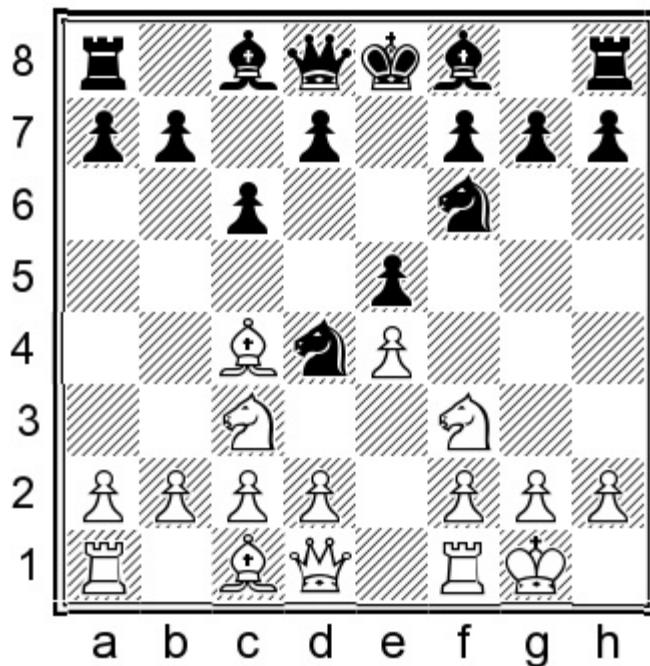
5...♘xb5 6.♗xb5 c6 7.♘c3 d6 8.d4 ♚c7 is another solid option. 9.a4 ♕e7 10.h3 0-0 11.♕g5 This position has occurred in several games, the most notable being Nepomniachtchi – Karjakin, Moscow 2019. I don't think Black is objectively worse, but White's position looks slightly easier to handle due to the space advantage.

White's two main options are C1) 6.♕c4 and C2) 6.♕d3!?

6.♕a4 transposes to the harmless 5.♕a4 c6 6.0-0 line which will be covered later.

6.♕e2 is too passive to offer White any advantage. 6...d6 7.d3 ♗xe2† 8.♚xe2 ♕e7 9.♕g5 0-0 Black had no problems in Van Erps – Pauls, email 2002.

#### C1) 6.♕c4



This move looks most natural, and is Emms' main line. However, there is a downside: the e4-pawn is left vulnerable, so Black can continue developing without any fear of an exchange on d4.

### 6...d6

It is worth knowing that 6...d5? 7.exd5 cxd5 8.♖xd5! ♜xd5 9.♗xd4 exd4 10.♙h5 is a nasty trap to avoid.

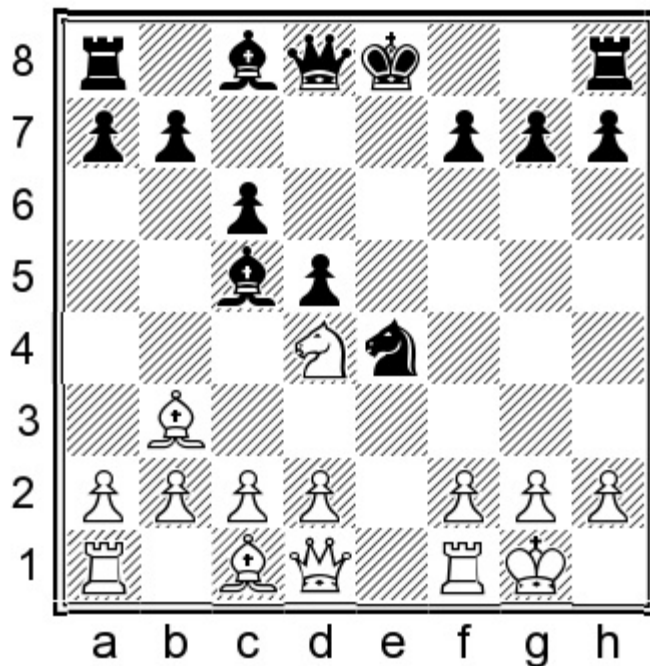
6...b5 7.♙b3 ♜xb3 8.axb3 d6 looks natural, but 9.d4 gives White a decent position.

### 7.h3

White has to avoid the nasty pin in one way or another.

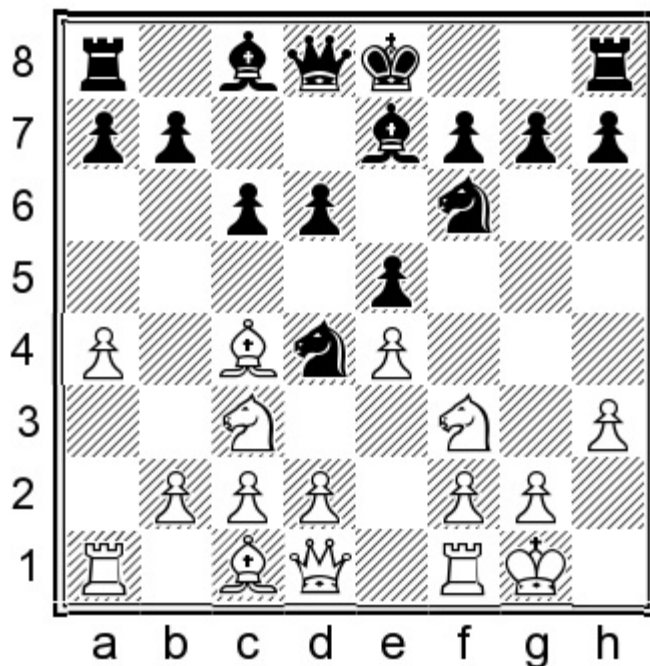
7.♗g5?! was once played in a low-level game, when the simple 7...d5N 8.exd5 cxd5 9.♙e2 ♙d6 would have been excellent for Black.

7.♗xd4 exd4 8.♗e2 is toothless in view of 8...♗xe4 9.♗xd4 d5 10.♙b3 ♙c5 when, in order to avoid being worse, White has to find the following precise continuation:



11.d3! ♖xd4 (11...♜xf2? 12.♞e2† ♜e4 13.c3 wins for White) 12.dxe4 dxe4 13.♙g5 ♚xg5 14.♞xd4 0-0 15.♞xe4 Emms gets to this point and calls it level, and indeed it was not long before a draw was agreed in Koezler – Antal, corr. 2002.

7...♙e7 8.a4

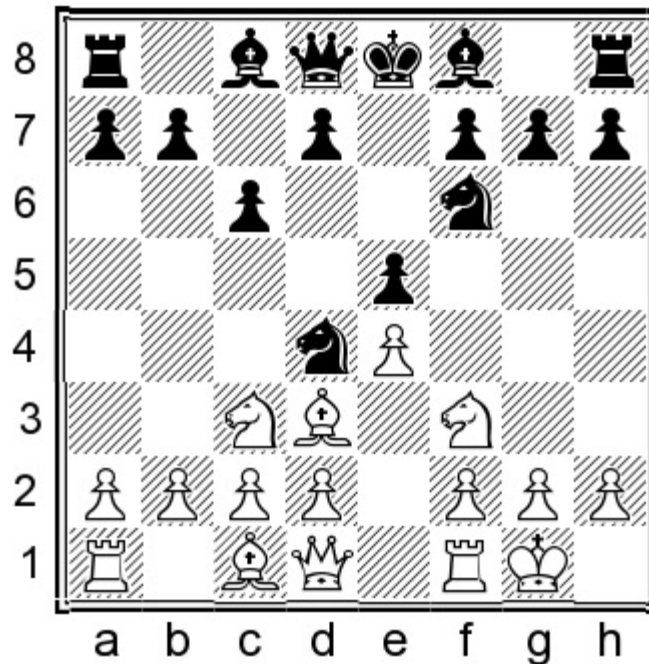


This position was reached in Howell – Hebden, Halifax (rapid) 2009. In my opinion, at this point Black should have opted for the ambitious approach with:

8...d5!?N 9.exd5 cxd5 10.♙a2 ♜c6! 11.d4 e4 12.♜e5 0-0

Black has seized some central space and the position is dynamically balanced.

## C2) 6.♔d3!?



This somewhat awkward-looking move is the most popular choice. Emms mentions it as an alternative to 6.♔c4. By overprotecting the e4-pawn, White creates a positional threat of 7.♘xd4.

### 6...♘xf3†

Maintaining the tension with 6...d6?! is overoptimistic, and 7.♘xd4 exd4 8.♘e2 d5 9.exd5 ♔xd5 10.♖e1 ♔e7 11.h3 is dangerous for Black, whose king is stuck in the centre.

### 7.♔xf3

“...reaching a position that should be okay for Black, but he still has to be careful” is Emms’ assessment.

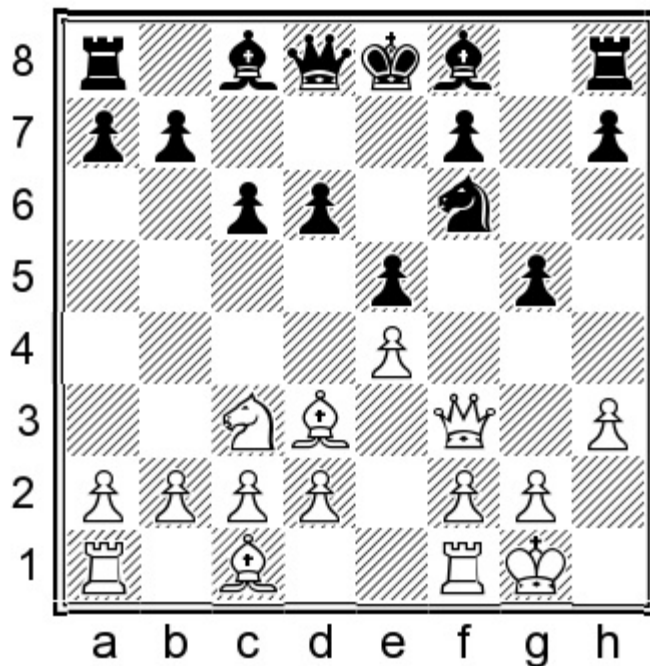
### 7...d6

7...g6 is the only continuation mentioned by Emms, who quotes some further moves of a game, followed by an improvement for White. Frankly, Black should be completely fine here too, but I find the text move more natural.

### 8.♔e2

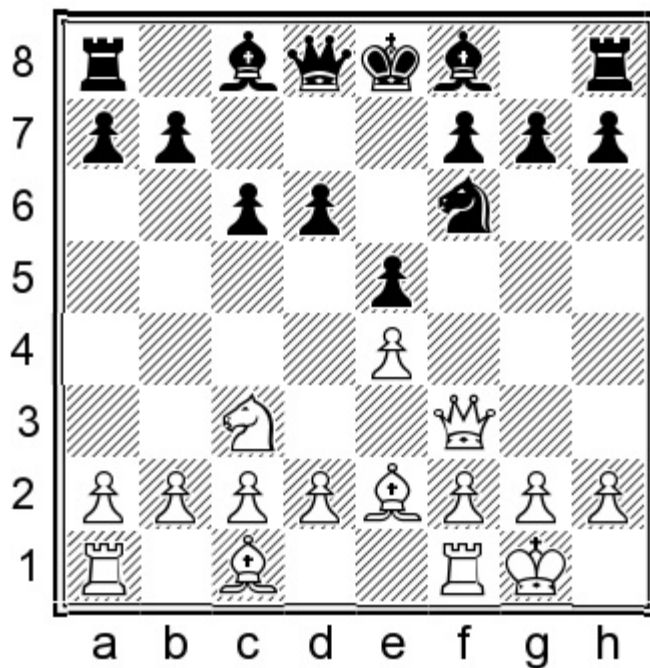
This move is connected with an interesting idea: White is planning to play f2-f4 soon.

The careless 8.h3?! allows Black to benefit from not having castled yet: 8...g5!



9.♘c4 g4 10.hxg4 ♘xg4 11.♚e3 ♖g8 White was soon crushed by a direct attack in Fitzsimons – Turner, Dublin 2020.

8.♘c4 appears more active but the bishop may prove to be exposed. In any case, after 8...g6 9.d3 ♘g7 10.h3 0-0 11.♘b3 ♔h8 Black was fine in Bellini – Brunello, Palermo 2007.



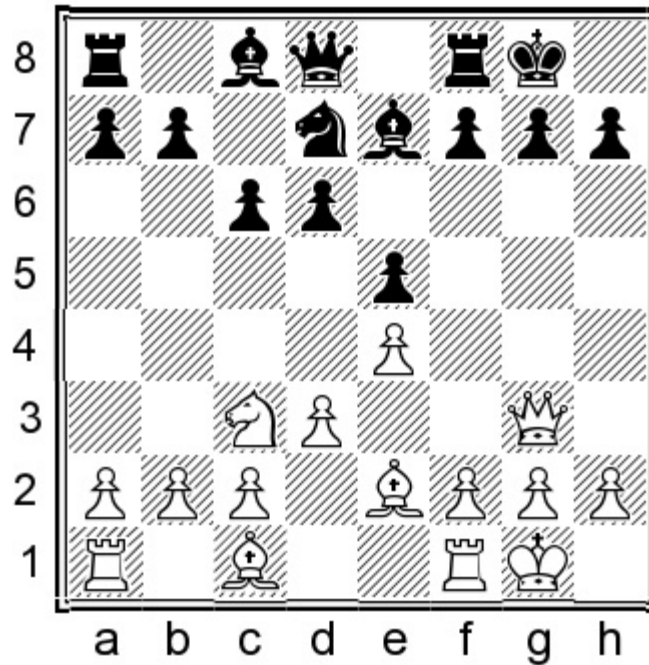
8...♘e7 9.d3 0-0 10.♚g3

This position has been tested in a few high-level games in recent years.

10...♘d7!?

By relocating the knight, Black makes f2-f4 less effective. I first analysed this as a novelty before it was played in a correspondence game.

White's play isn't as harmless as it looks, as can be seen after 10...♙e6. Interestingly, Dmitry Andreikin has been on the white side of this position twice: against Grischuk 2017, and Yu Yangyi in 2019. Both times Andreikin opted for the prophylactic 11.♖h1, but it would have been better to go for 11.f4!N immediately, since 11...exf4 12.♙xf4 ♜b6† 13.♖h1 ♜xb2 14.d4 gives White a powerful initiative.

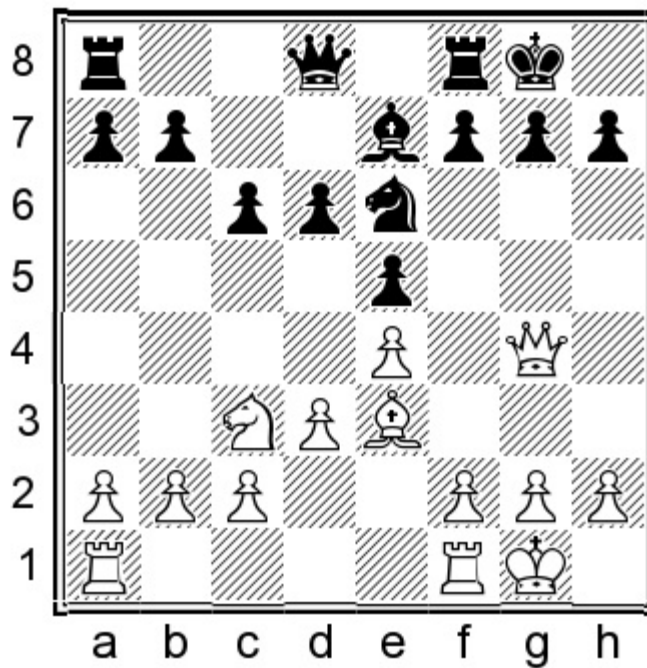


### 11.f4N

I will take this as the main line, as it's the most consistent and ambitious choice.

11.♖h1 is too slow and after 11...♙h4 12.♜e3 ♘c5 13.f4 exf4 14.♜xf4 f5! Black's set-up is more harmonious.

The correspondence game proceeded: 11.♙g4 ♘c5 12.♙e3 (My original line continued 12.♙xc8 ♜xc8 13.f4 exf4 14.♙xf4 ♘e6 when Black has nothing to worry about as the king is perfectly safe.)  
12...♙xg4 13.♜xg4 ♘e6

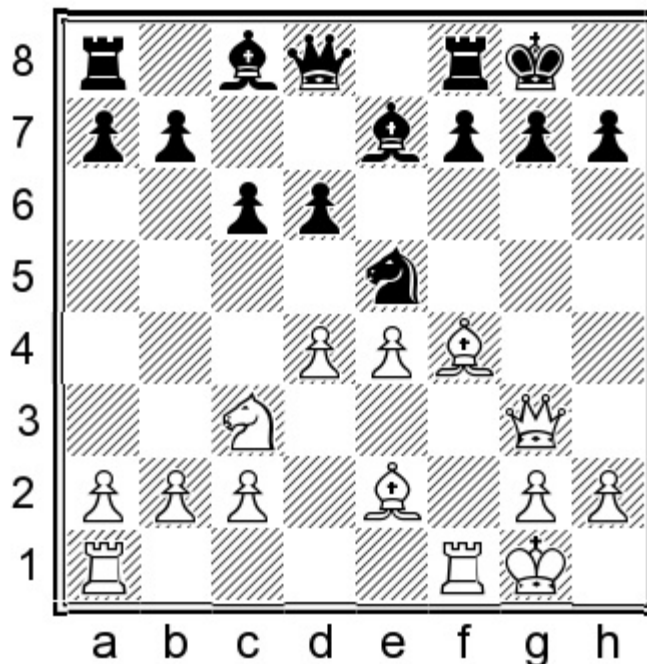


14. ♖e2 ♜f6 15. ♜ad1 g6 16. f4 exf4 17. ♞xf4 ♞xf4 18. ♚xf4 ♜g7 Black was absolutely fine in Stephan – Kogler, corr. 2020.

11...exf4 12. ♜xf4 ♞e5 13.d4

This seems like the only way to fight for the initiative, but White's centre is not entirely safe.

Of course, we should be happy to see 13. ♜xe5?! dxe5 14. ♚xe5? because of 14...♜d6 15. ♚h5 ♚b6† 16. ♜h1 ♚xb2 when White's position is ruined.

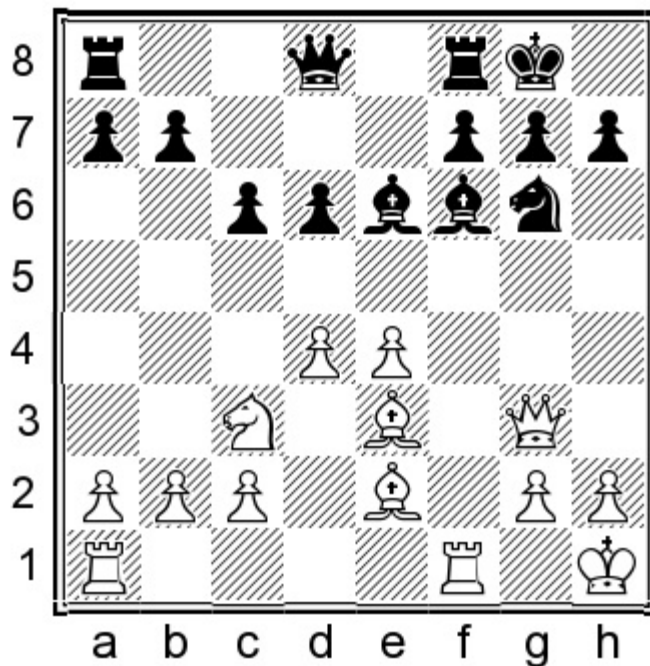


13...♞g6 14. ♜d2

White must safeguard the dark-squared bishop from being traded for a knight.

14. ♖e3?! is inaccurate due to 14...f5! and Black takes over the initiative.

14... ♖e6 15. ♔h1 ♖f6 16. ♖e3



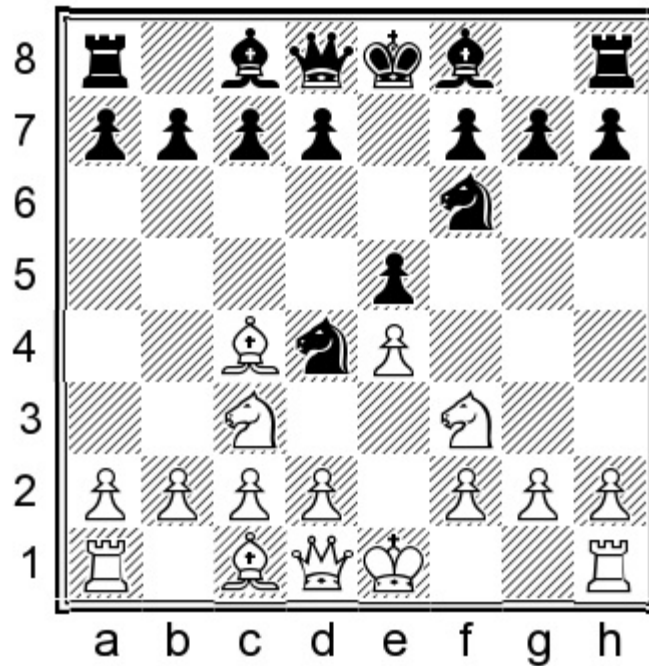
16... ♖h4!

This precise move forces White to place the queen on an unfavourable square.

17. ♔f3 f5

With an active game for Black.

D) 5. ♖c4



Compared to the more popular retreat to a4, the bishop is placed more purposefully on c4, keeping an eye on the f7-pawn. However, there is also a downside: it can often be attacked by ...d7-d5.

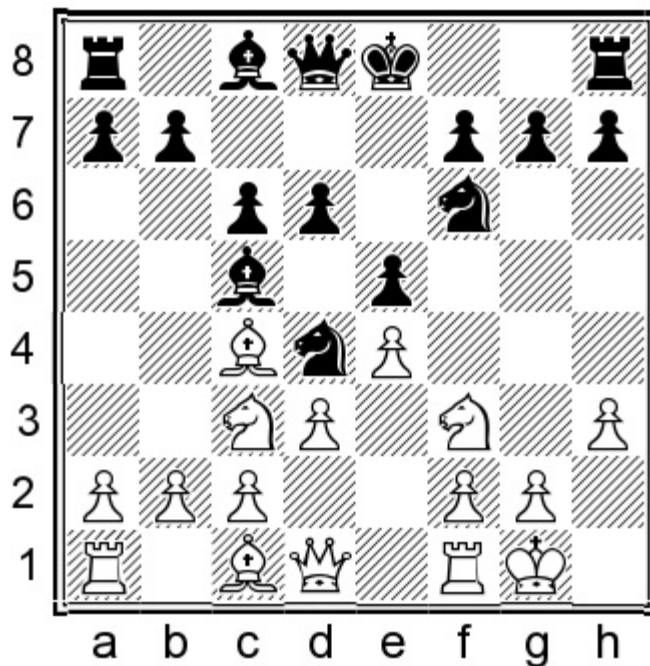
### 5...♖c5

This developing move is the main line. Black continues to let the e5-pawn hang.

### 6.♘xe5

Accepting the pawn is the only way to challenge Black's play.

6.0-0 achieves nothing for White after 6...d6, for instance: 7.h3 (7.♘xd4 ♖xd4 8.d3 ♖e6 9.♘e2 ♖b6 10.♘g3 0-0 was also fine for Black in Artemiev – Vitiugov, Izhevsk 2019.) 7...c6 8.d3 White's quiet set-up is well met by:



8...b5! 9.♔b3 a5 Forcing a positional concession on the queenside. 10.a3 ♖xb3 11.cxb3 0-0 12.♙g5 h6 13.♙h4 ♜e8 14.d4 exd4 15.♗xd4 ♙d7 Black had a full share of the chances in Ananian – Hrynovets, corr. 2012.

6.d3

This move has been played in hundreds of games, but it requires surprisingly little analysis.

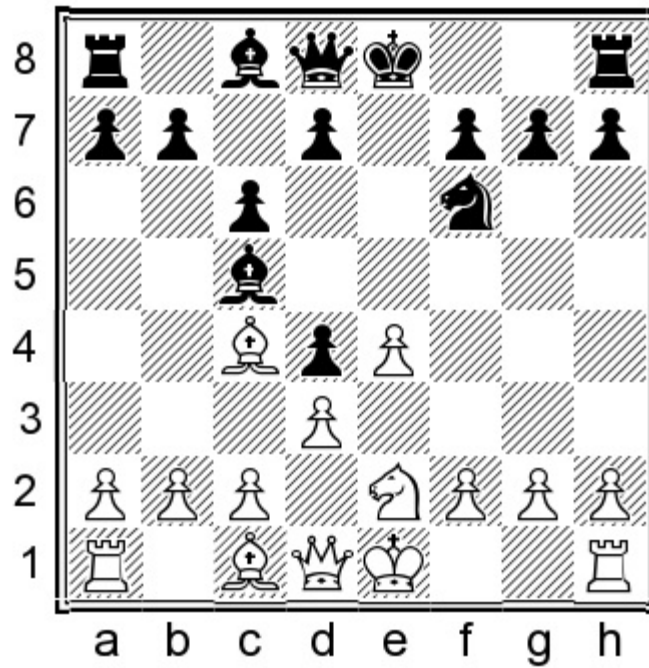
6...c6!?

6...d6 has been much more common and Black should equalize with it, but I like the more dynamic text move.

7.♗xd4

The more ambitious 7.♗xe5 has already been covered via 4.d3 ♙c5 5.♗c3 ♗d4 6.♗xe5 c6 7.♙c4.

7...exd4 8.♗e2

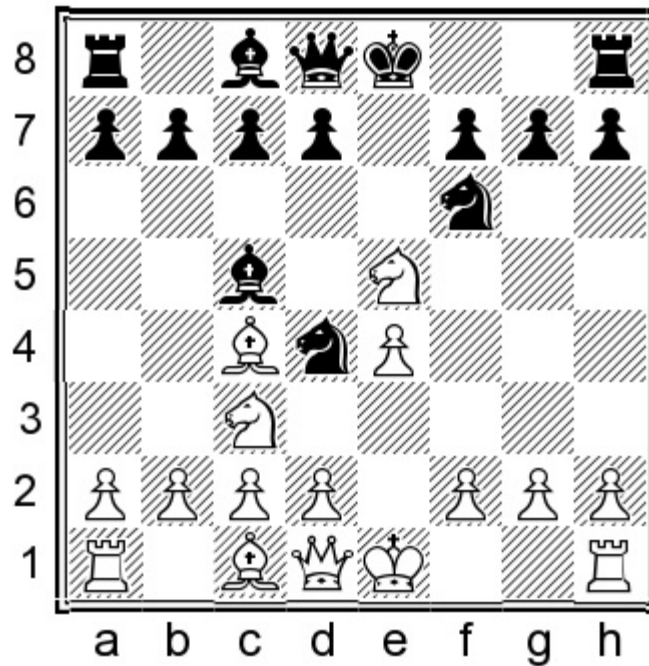


8...d5 9.exd5 Nxd5

Black has nothing to worry about. For instance:

10.0-0 0-0 11.Nf4 Nxf4 12.Bxf4 Qf6 13.Qh5 Qf5

With full equality, Bodo – Lengyel, Hungary 2004.



6...Qe7

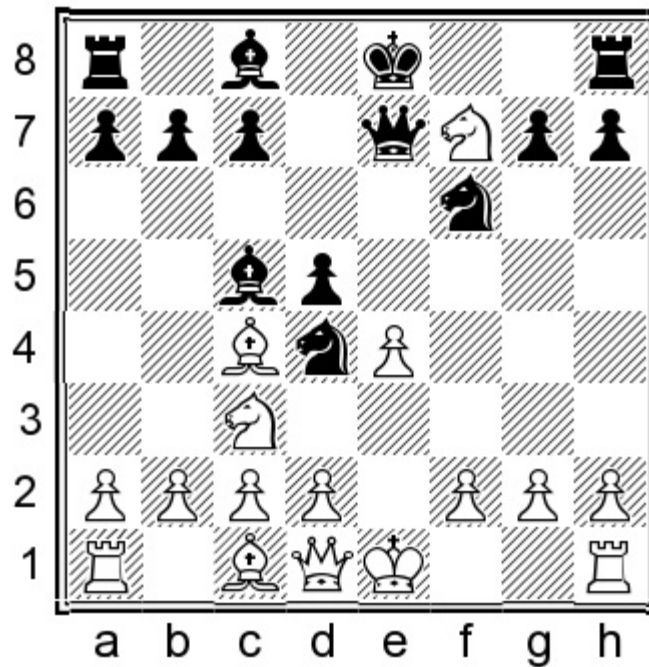
Other options exist, but the text move is the most popular and reliable.

7.Nf3

7.Bxf7+? Qf8 just loses material for White.

The main tactical justification of Black's last move is revealed after:

7. ♖xf7?! d5!



White is already in trouble. The lesser evil seems to be:

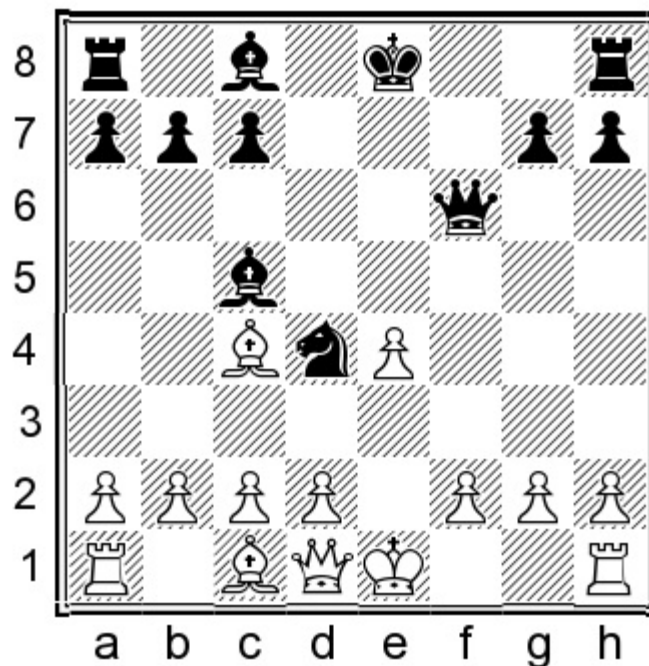
8. ♖xd5

8. ♖xh8 has been more common, but 8...dxc4 9.d3 ♕g4 10.f3 ♕h5 11.♕g5 0-0-0 gave Black a great attack in Lipecki – Fessler, corr. 2011.

8... ♖xf7 9. ♖xf6†N

9. ♖b6? ♖g6 gave Black an easy win in an old online game.

9... ♖xf6



10. ♖h5† ♖g6 11. ♖xg6†

11. ♖xc5? ♗xe4† 12. ♔f1 ♜xc2 wins.

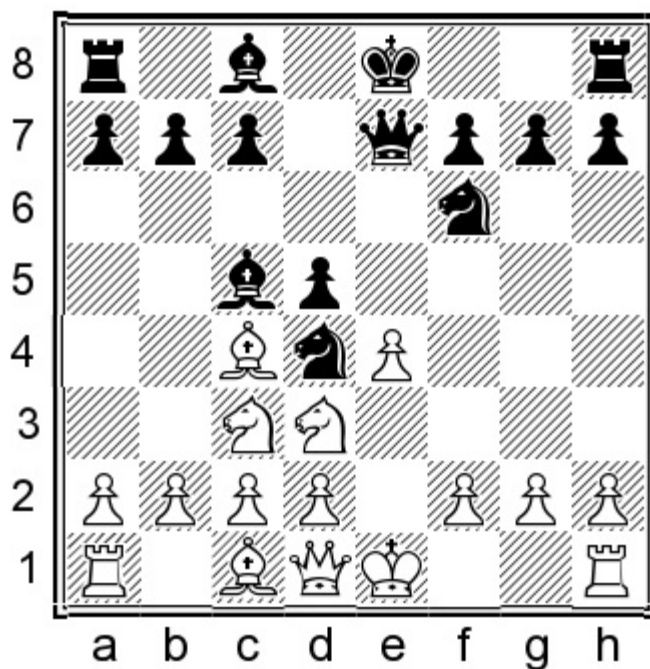
11...hxc6

White has three pawns versus a piece, but Black is noticeably ahead in development and has a lot of activity, so Black is the clear favourite.

7. ♞d3

This knight retreat feels more awkward than the main line. Black proceeds in the same way:

7...d5!



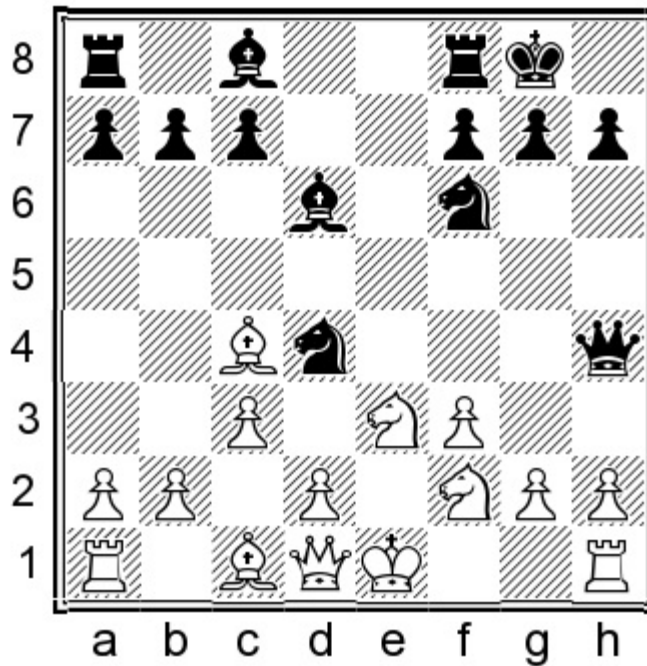
8. ♞xd5

8. ♙xd5 ♜xd5 9. ♞xd5 ♗xe4† 10. ♞e3 ♙b6 11. 0-0 0-0 12. ♞e1 c5 13. c3 ♞c6 gave Black excellent play for the pawn due to the bishop pair and more active pieces in Reig Pinol – Minchev, corr. 2009.

8... ♗xe4† 9. ♞e3 ♙d6 10. f3

10. 0-0?! is worse due to 10...b5! 11. ♙b3 0-0 12. f3 ♗h4 and White fell under a strong attack in Gutfleisch – Waterson, email 1996.

10... ♗h4† 11. ♞f2 0-0 12. c3

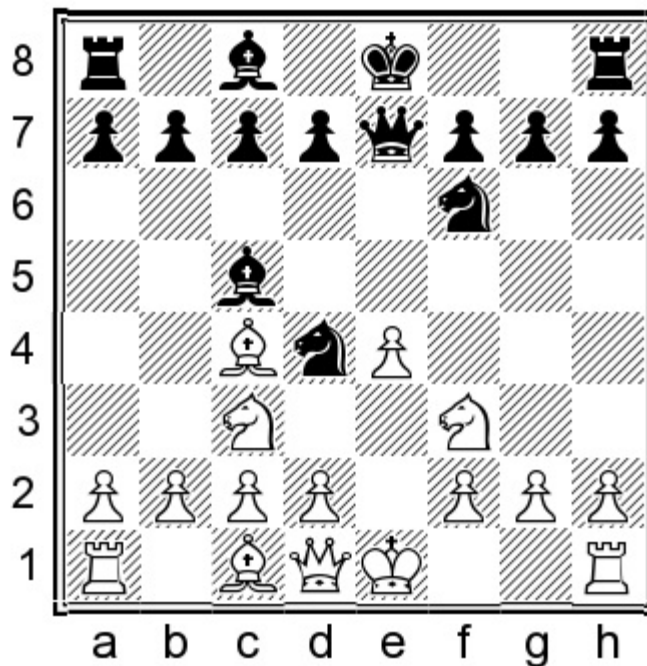


12... ♞f5

Winning more time by targeting the loose bishop on c4.

13. ♔d3 ♜e8 14. g3 ♚h5

White's position was scary to the human eye in Grill – Van Tricht, corr. 2013.



7...d5!

Only this energetic move can justify Black's previous sacrificial play.

7... ♞xe4?! should be rejected due to 8.0-0 ♞xf3† 9. ♚xf3 ♞g5 10. ♚g3 and White took over the initiative in Chadaev – Pruijssers, Groningen 2009.

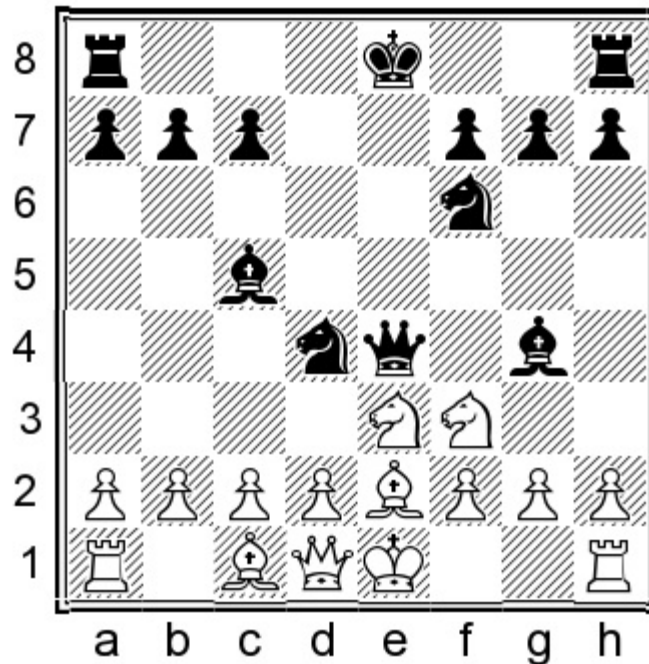
We will analyse **D1)** 8.♘d5 followed by the most popular **D2)** 8.♙xd5.

8.♘d4?! dxc4 9.♘f3 ♘xe4 10.0-0 0-0 gave Black an easy game with the bishop pair in Spielmann – Rubinstein, San Sebastian 1912.

**D1)** 8.♘d5 ♙xe4†

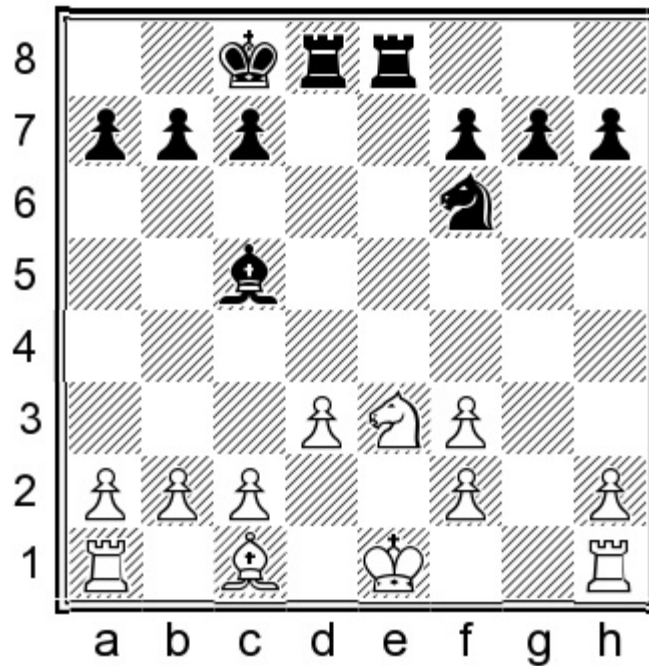
White's next few moves are forced.

9.♘e3 ♙g4 10.♙e2



White's set-up looks passive, but it has been employed by a few strong players. Most notably, Yu Yangyi used it to score 3½/4 in blitz games in 2019.

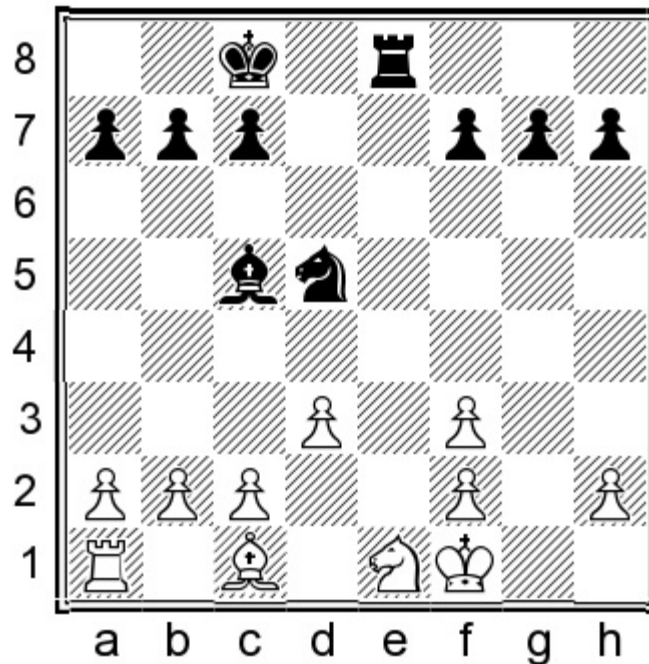
10...♘xe2 11.♙xe2 0-0-0 12.d3 ♙xf3 13.♙xf3 ♙xf3 14.gxf3 ♙he8



Despite the significant simplifications, Black retains excellent compensation for the pawn. White suffers from a damaged pawn structure and difficulties in connecting the rooks.

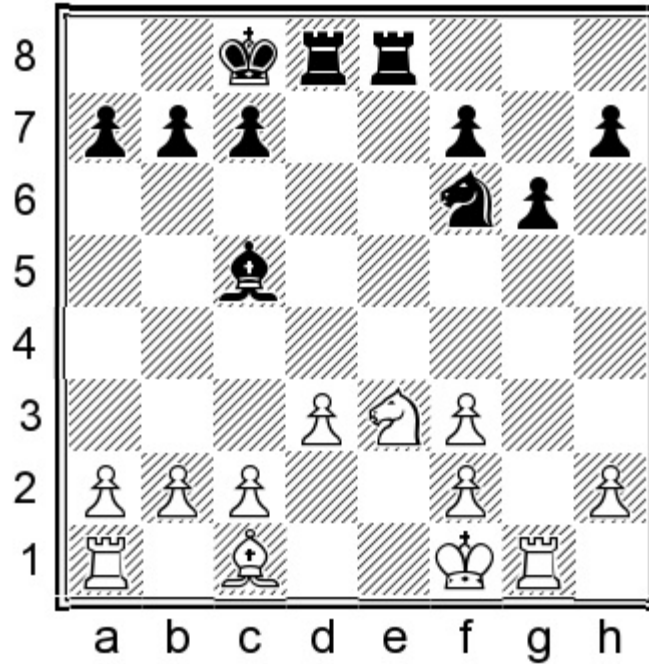
### 15. Rg1

15.0-0 ♘d5 16. Rē1 meets with: 16... Rē6! 17. ♘g2 (17. ♕d2 Rf6 puts White under some pressure.) 17... Rxe1† 18. ♘xe1 Rē8 19. ♕f1



Now in Xu Xiangyu – Ju Wenjun, Xinghua 2020, 19... Rē5N would have been the easiest way to maintain the dynamic balance. The rook will swing to the kingside, and it will be hard for White to keep the weak pawns protected while keeping the king shielded from checks.

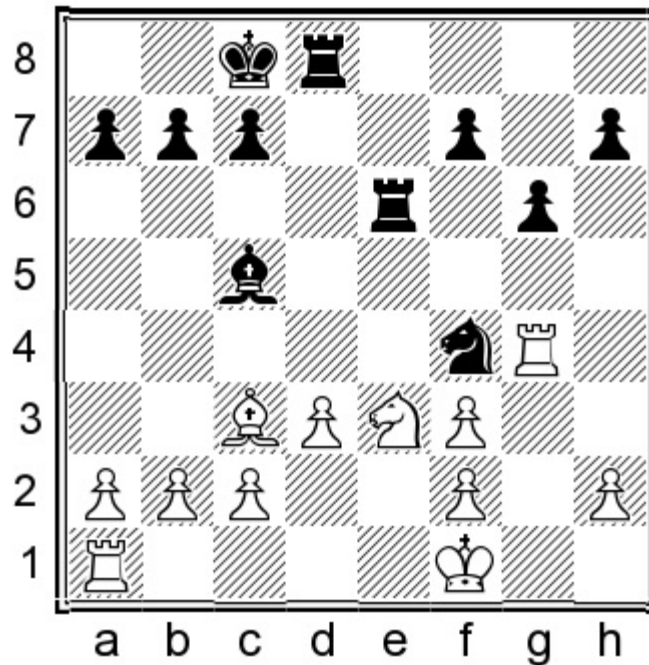
15...g6 16.♔f1



16...♖e6!

An essential spot for the rook. Black can double the rooks along the e-file, and also utilize the front rook along the 6th rank.

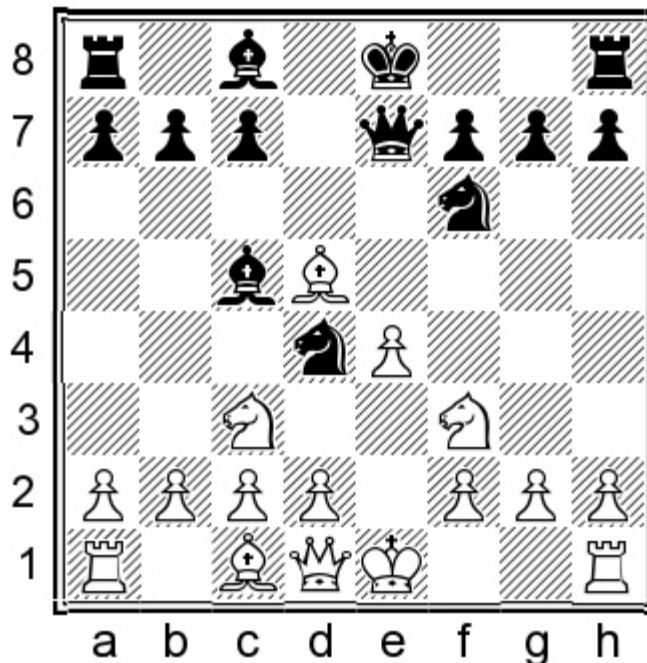
17.♙d2 ♘h5 18.♙c3 ♘f4 19.♖g4



19...♙xe3 20.fxe3 ♘d5

Black managed to regain the pawn in a good situation in Mijovic – Todorovic, Belgrade 2009.

## D2) 8. ♕xd5



This has been White's most popular and best-scoring continuation.

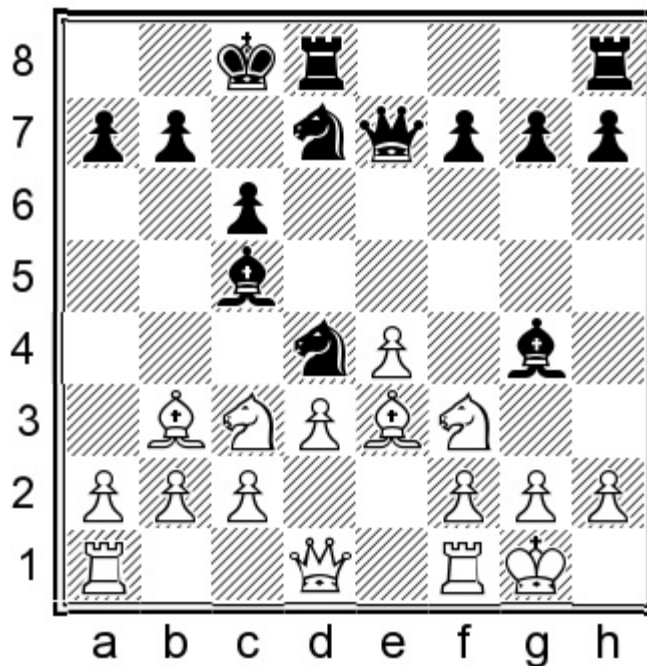
### 8... ♗g4

Black develops quickly and prepares to damage White's structure.

8... ♘xd5?! 9. ♘xd4 would leave Black a pawn down for questionable compensation.

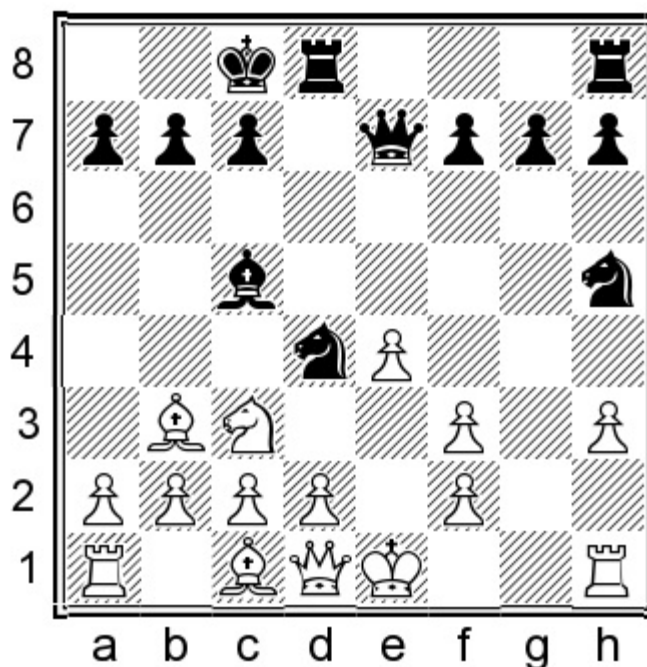
### 9.d3

9.0-0? was played in Grego – Sorcinelli, corr. 2012, when Black could have obtained a huge initiative with 9...0-0-0!N followed by exploiting the pin and damaging White's kingside, as shown after: 10.d3 c6 11. ♕b3 ♘d7 12. ♕e3 Obodchuk mentioned this untested line in connection with an interesting queen sacrifice for White. However, he overlooked that Black can simply keep attacking with:

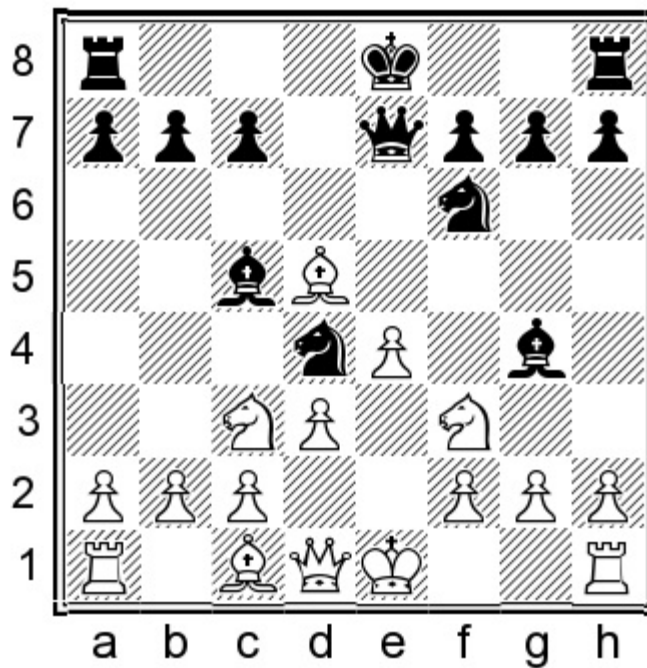


12...Nxf3! (12...Nxe5 13.Nxd4 Qxd1 14.Nf5 is White's idea, with clear practical compensation for the queen.) 13.gxf3 Qh5 White is in grave danger on the kingside.

9.h3?! is another deservedly rare choice, when play continues: 9...Qxf3 10.gxf3 0-0-0 11.Qb3 Nf5



12.f4N (This is certainly an improvement over 12.d3? as played in Paravyan – Motylev, Moscow 2019, when 12...Qh4!N 13.Rh2 Rd6 would have busted White's defence.) 12...Nxf4 13.d3 Ng6 14.Qe3 Ne5 Black has sufficient compensation for a pawn, to say the least.



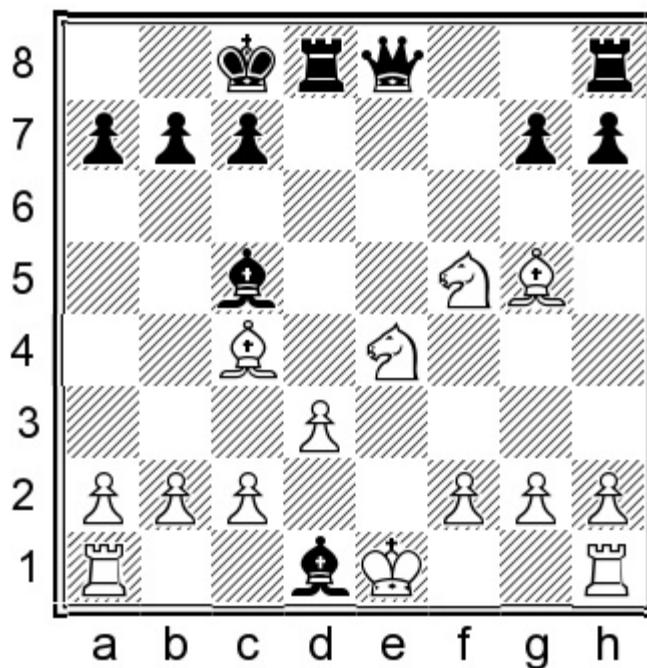
**9...0-0-0**

Threatening to take twice on d5, exploiting the pin along the e-file.

**10.♙e3**

White should aim to liquidate the powerful knight on d4 as soon as possible.

The quiet 10.♙c4 runs into 10...♞xe4! 11.♞xe4 f5 12.♙g5 ♚e8 with a powerful attack. For instance, 13.♞xd4 ♙xd1 14.♞xf5 was seen in Charbonneau – Ippolito, corr. 2009, and now Black should have played:



14...♙xc2N 15.0-0 ♚e5 16.♙xd8 ♞xd8 Retaining a material plus and a clear advantage.

10. ♖g5

This move has been played a few times but it seems risky.

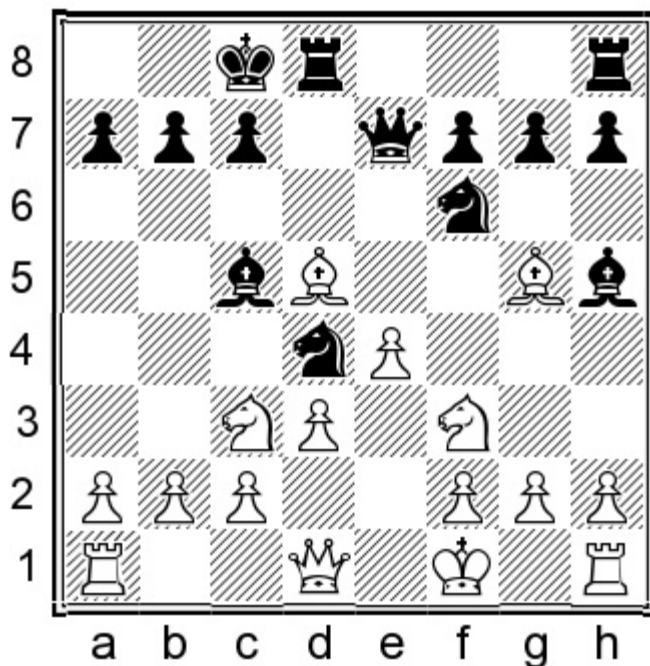
10... ♗h5

With this useful waiting move, Black prepares to trade knights on f3 without having to lose a tempo with the bishop after gxf3.

11. ♖f1

11. ♗b3 ♜he8 12. ♖f1 h6 13. ♗e3 leads to the same thing, and was the actual move order of the correspondence game quoted below.

I would like to improve Black's play by means of:

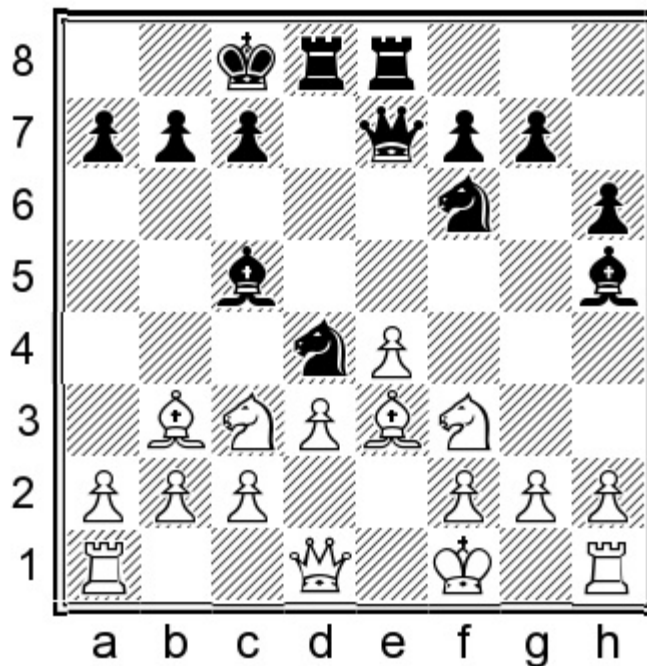


11...h6N

11...c6 was seen in Sutovsky – Kramnik, Baku (rapid) 2010, when 12. ♗b3 would have been best; Black still has decent compensation here, but it seems best not to drive the bishop away from d5, where it is rather vulnerable.

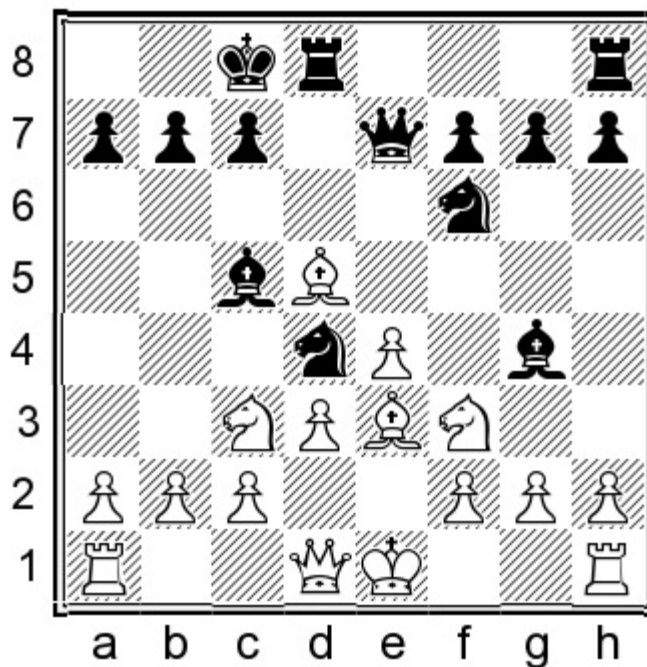
12. ♗e3 ♜he8 13. ♗b3

After this move, we transpose to a couple of correspondence games.



13... Nxf3 14. gxf3 Bb4

Black eventually prevailed in Freeman – Makina, corr. 2017. Black's initiative is more important than the two extra pawns, as White's pieces are uncoordinated and the king is exposed.

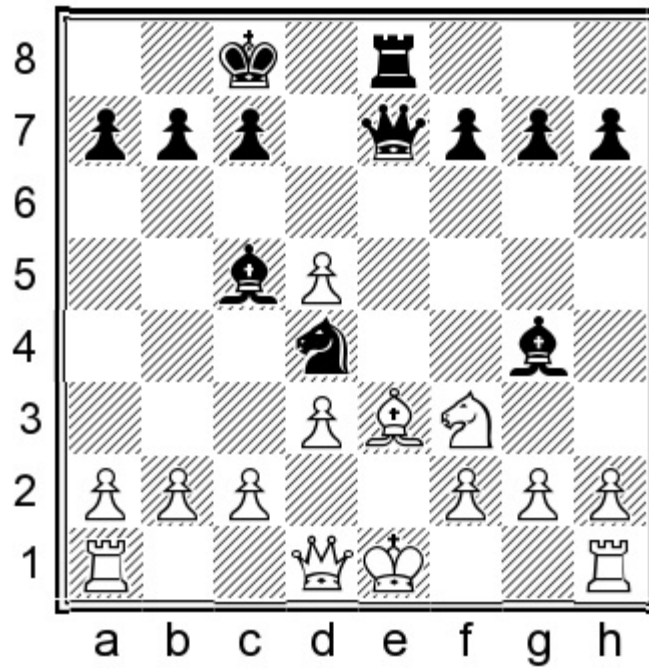


10... Nxd5 11. Nxd5 Bxd5!

Of course Black should not fear further sacrifices – there is no turning back!

12. exd5 Bxh8!

All Black's pieces are well mobilized, so White's king is in considerable danger. Nevertheless, there are two playable continuations for White which should both lead to a draw.



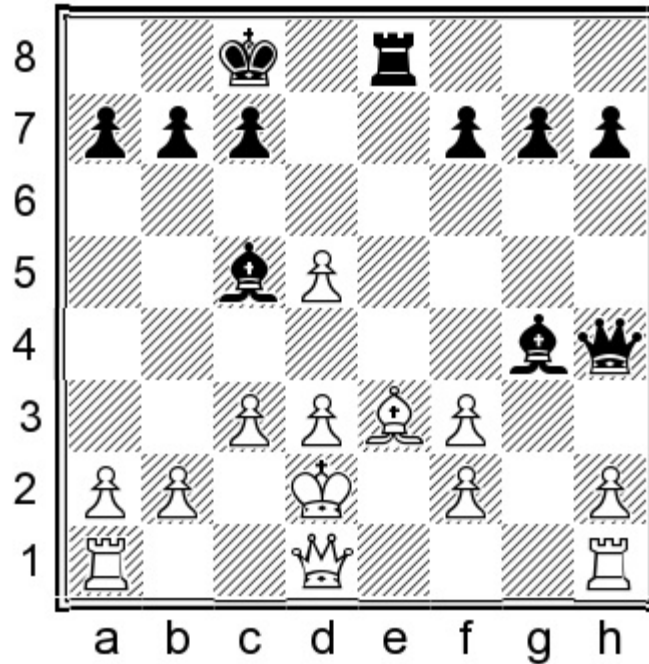
**13.0-0!?**

This may appear highly risky, but Black can only force a draw.

13.h3? ♕xf3 14.gxf3 ♘f5 gives Black a deadly attack.

The other drawing line is:

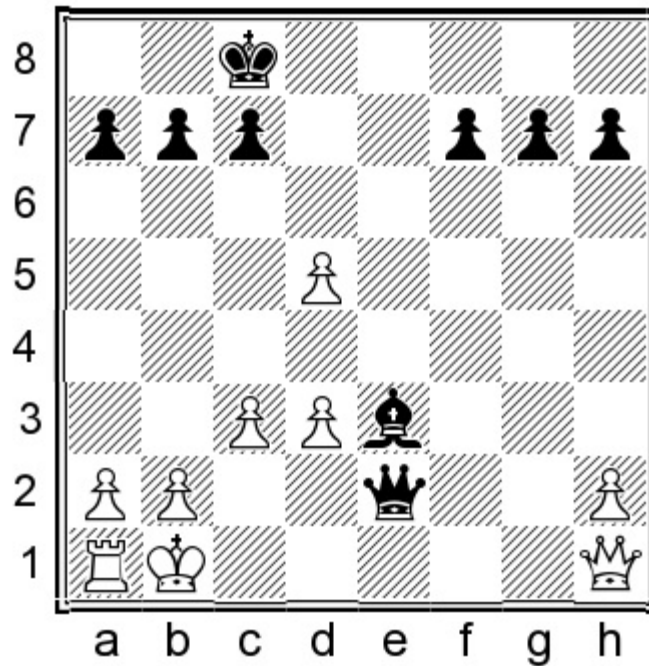
13.c3 ♘xf3† 14.gxf3 ♚h4 15.♔d2



15...♖xe3!

The last sacrifice.

16.fxe3 ♚f2† 17.♔c1 ♕xe3† 18.♔b1 ♕xf3 19.♚e1 ♕xh1 20.♚xh1 ♚e2

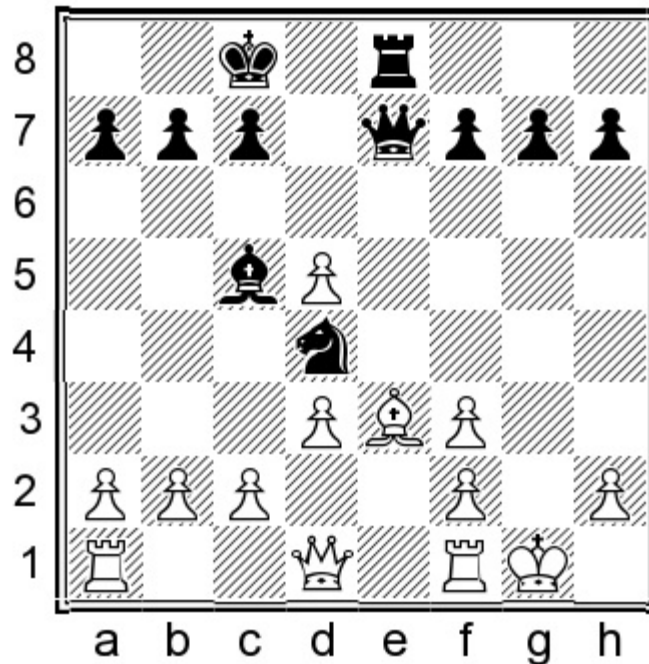


The awkward placement of White's pieces makes it impossible for the king to escape. A likely finish is:

21. a3 ♔xd3† 22. ♕a2 ♔c4†

With perpetual check.

13... ♖xf3 14. gxf3



14... ♖d6!

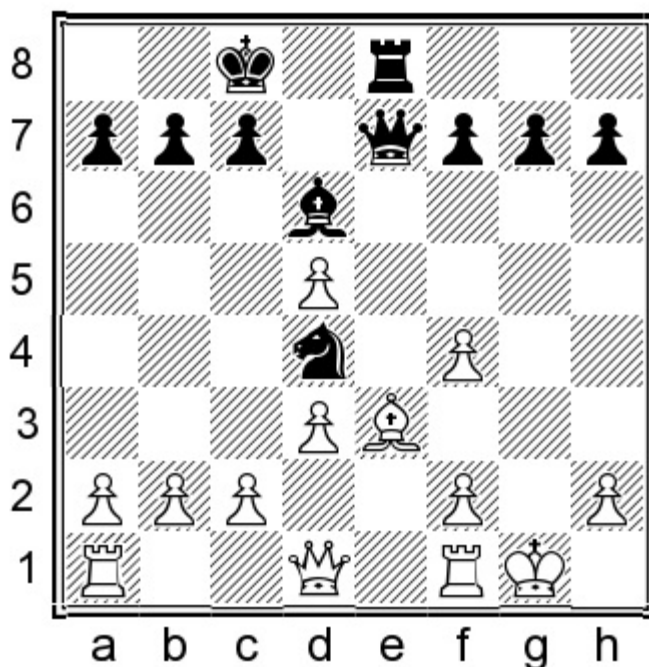
14... ♖h4 has been played and it may easily transpose, but 15. ♕g2!? is an extra option for White. Ultimately this should be a draw as well, but some precision is needed, so it's better to reduce White's possibilities.

## 15.f4

15.♙xd4?? ♚g5† 16.♔h1 ♚f4 leads to a quick mate.

15.♔g2?! is no good here due to 15...♚e5! 16.♖h1 ♜f5, when the benefits of delaying ...♚h4 are clear.

15.c3 ♚h4 16.f4 is just another way of reaching the main line below.



## 15...♚h4 16.c3

16.♙xd4 ♙xf4 17.♔g2 ♚xh2† (or 17...♚g5†) 18.♔f3 ♚h3† 19.♔xf4 ♚h2† is another possible draw which has occurred in some games.

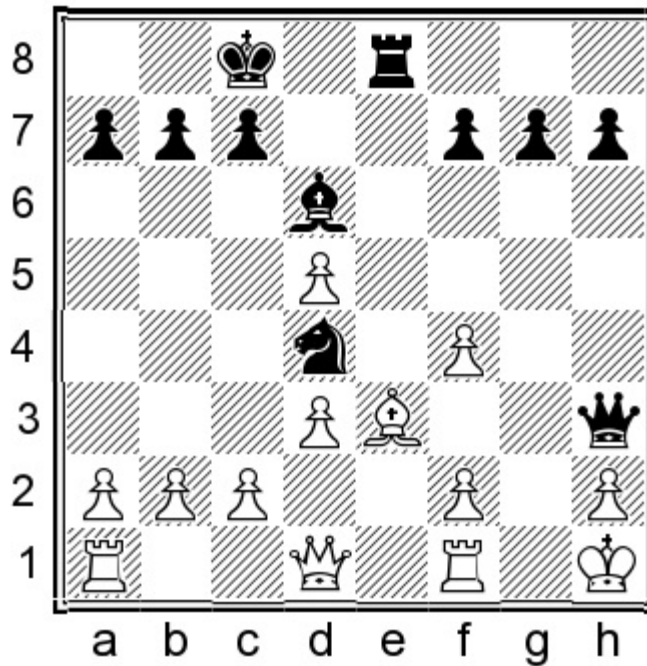
16.♔g2 ♜xc2 17.♚xc2 (17.♚f3 ♜xa1 18.♖xa1 ♚f6 can be dangerous only for White) 17...♚g4† 18.♔h1 ♚f3† was agreed drawn after a few more checks in Short – McShane, London 2017.

## 16.♔h1

This move avoids a forced draw, but White seems to be risking more than Black.

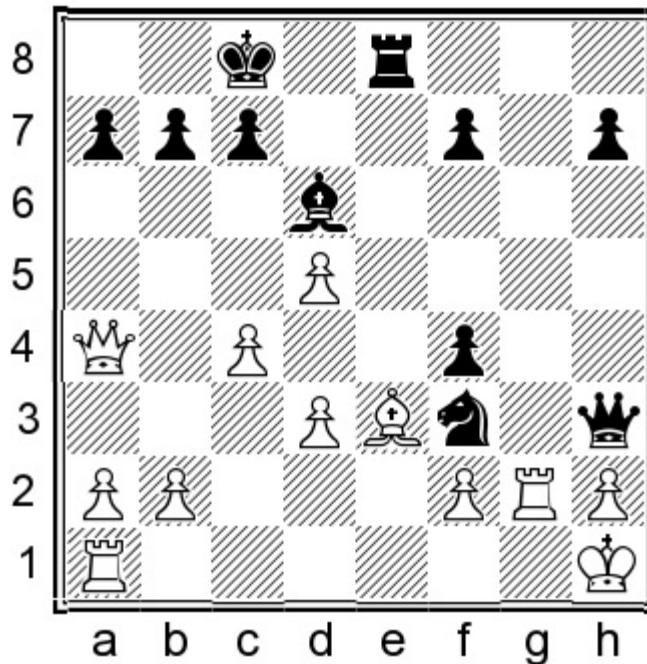
## 16...♚h3!

White's next few moves are forced.



17. ♖g1 ♜f3 18. ♝g2 g5! 19. c4 gxf4 20. ♛a4

20. ♔d2? ♜xd2 21. ♛g4† ♛xg4 22. ♝xg4 ultimately resulted in victory for White in one online game, but at this point Black is clearly winning.



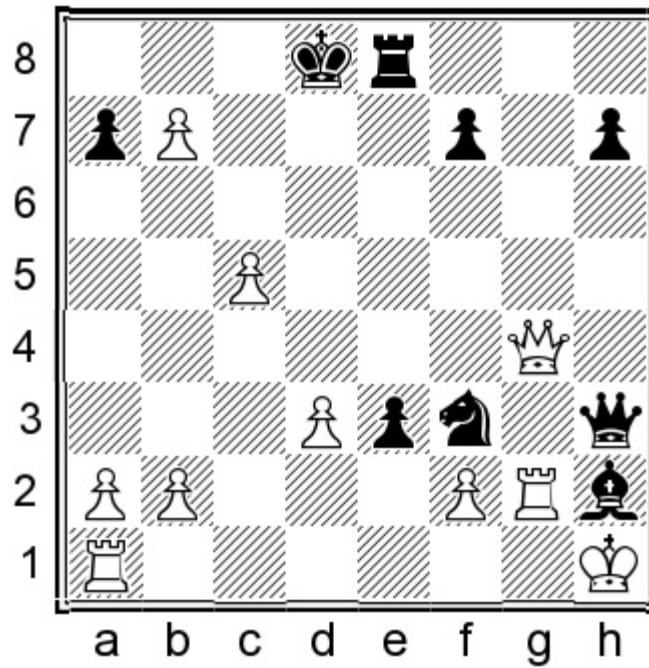
20...c6!?

This is the most accurate according to the engine.

20... ♔d8 is perfectly playable, and after 21. c5 ♜h4 22. ♝ag1 ♔e5 23. ♔xf4 ♜xg2 24. ♝xg2 ♛f3 Black went on to win in Motylev – Radjabov, Khanty-Mansiysk (ol) 2010, although White's position should be tenable with accurate defence.

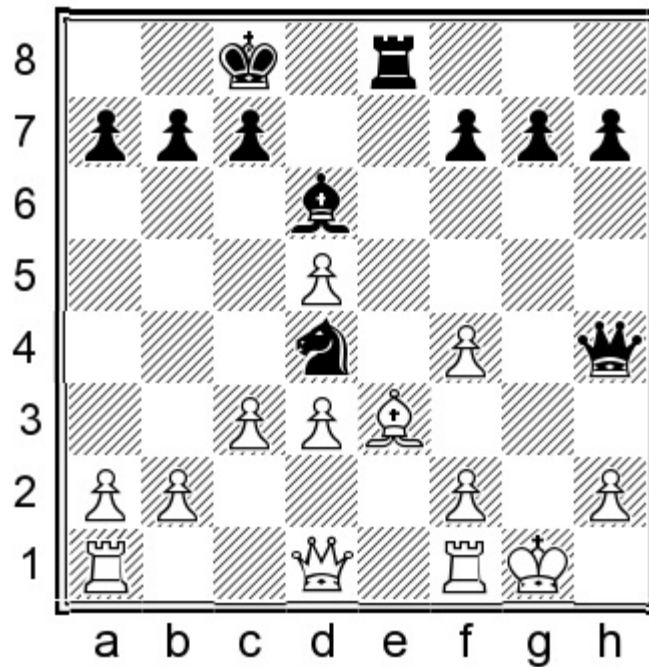
21. dxc6 fxe3 22. cxb7† ♔d8 23. c5 ♔xh2 24. ♛g4

Otherwise White will be swiftly mated.



24...♙xg4 25.♞xg4 e2 26.♔g2 e1=♙ 27.♞xe1 ♜xe1† 28.♔xh2 ♔c7

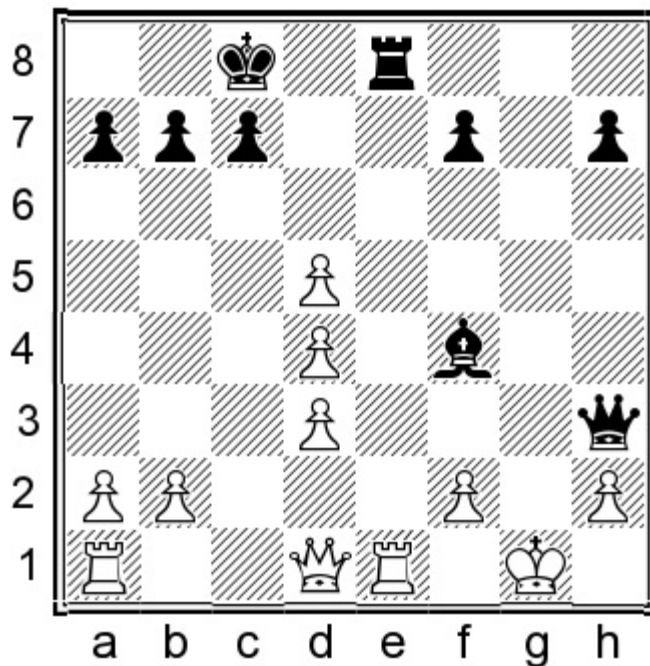
Black had the better endgame although White managed to hold it in Brayman – Lebedev, corr. 2016.



16...g5! 17.cxd4 ♙h3

17...gxf4 18.♙f3 fxe3 19.h3 e2 20.♞fe1 ♙f4 should also lead to a draw, but the text move is simpler.

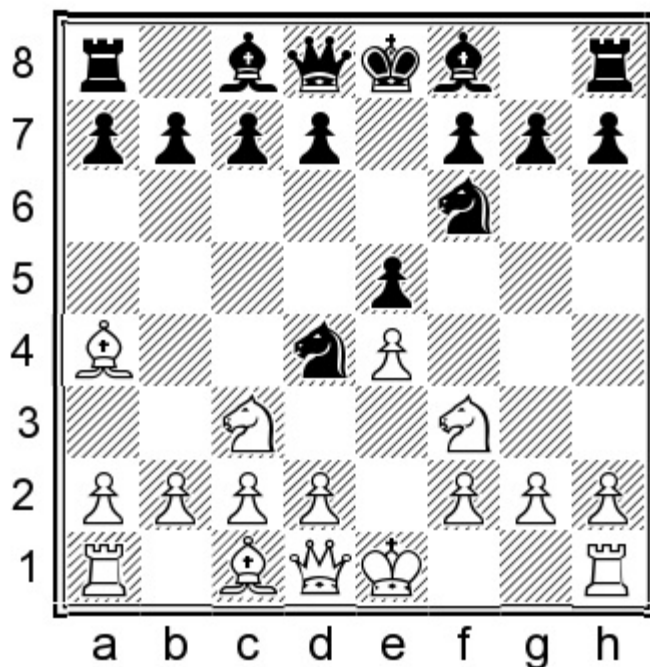
18.♞e1 gxf4 19.♙xf4 ♙xf4



20. Rxe8+ ♔d7 21. Re7+ ♔d6

In view of the imminent perpetual check, a draw was agreed in Tinture – Jasinski, corr. 2016.

E) 5. ♗a4



This is by far the most common continuation.

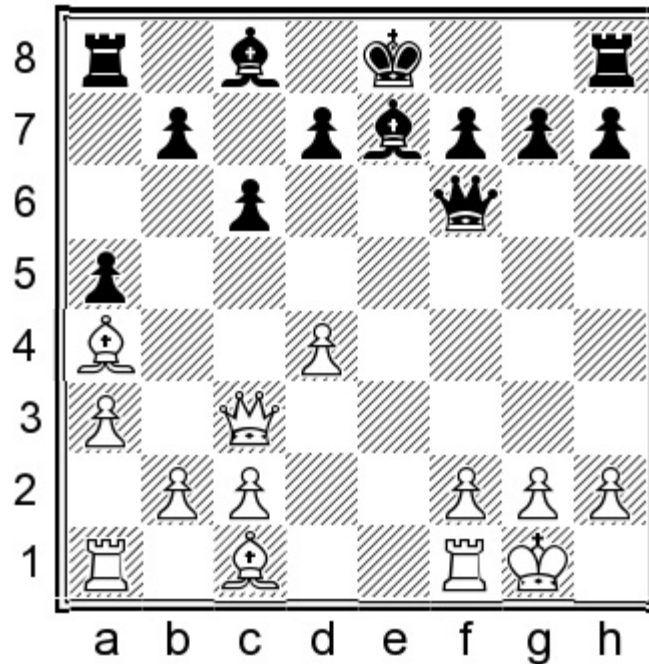
5...c6

By blocking the a4-e8 diagonal, Black aims to move the d-pawn and quickly develop the light-squared bishop. A secondary purpose is revealed in the next note.

5...♙c5 6.♘xe5 0-0 is another decent option which offers Black good compensation for the pawn.

We will examine **E1)** 6.d3 followed by the main line of **E2)** 6.♘xe5.

6.0-0 enables Black to highlight the awkwardness of the bishop on a4 by means of: 6...a5! 7.a3 (7.♘xe5? d6 leads to big trouble for White.) 7...♙c5 8.♘xd4 (8.♘xe5? again turns out badly for White after 8...d6 9.♘f3 ♙g4.) 8...exd4 9.e5 dxc3 10.d4 ♙f8! 11.exf6 ♗xf6 12.♚e1 † ♙e7 13.♗xc3



This was Kolek – Keber, corr. 2017, and now the simple 13...d5N 14.♚e1 0-0 would have offered Black some advantage in view of the misplaced bishop on a4.

### **E1) 6.d3**

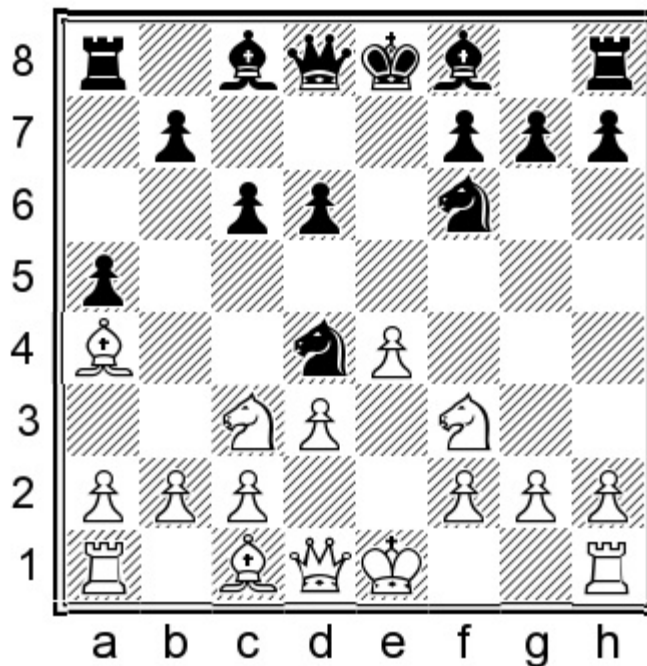
This has been played in hundreds of games and has achieved a modest plus score, but Black can obtain a good position in the same fashion as in the sideline noted above.

#### **6...a5!**

6...♙c5 is fine, and this position is briefly discussed under the 4.d3 ♙c5 5.♘c3 ♘d4!? 6.♙a4 c6 move order. However, when the present move order arises, I find it more attractive to chase the bishop.

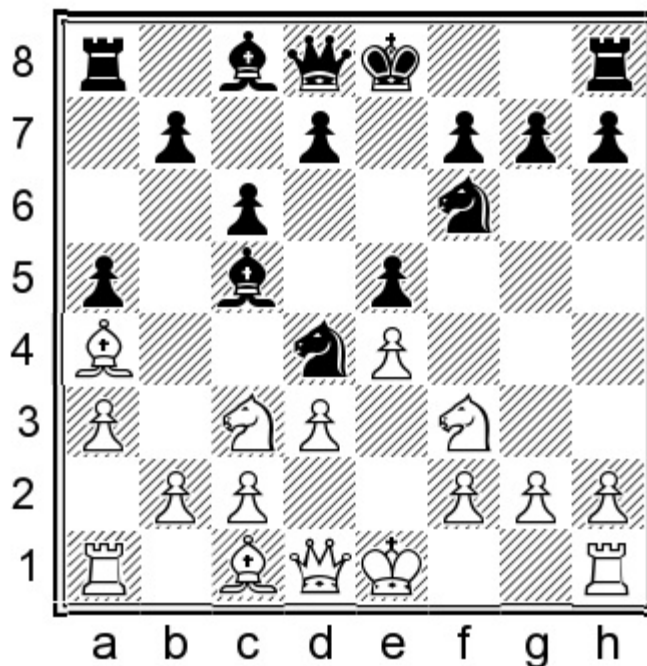
#### **7.♙b3**

7.♘xe5 d6 8.♘f3 is well met by:



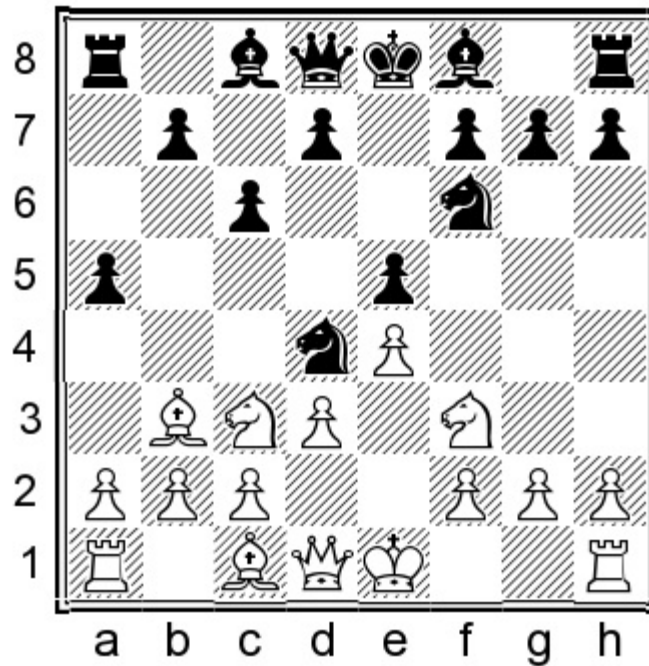
8...♞xf3†! (8...♙g4 is a typical move which offers compensation, but trapping the bishop seems preferable.) 9.♙xf3 ♙g4 10.♙g3 b5 11.♞xb5 cxb5 12.♙xb5† ♙d7 White's compensation for the piece was questionable in Vallejo Pons – Giri, Linares 2013.

The most precise reaction to 7.a3 is: 7...♙c5!N (7...b5 8.♙b3 ♞xb3 9.cxb3 d6 10.d4 gave White active central play to compensate for the damaged queenside in Dzhumaev – Aagaard, Tromso [ol] 2014.)



The main justification for Black's last move is that 8.♞xe5?! is too risky in view of 8...d6 9.♞f3 ♙g4 10.h3 ♙xf3 11.gxf3 0-0 12.f4 d5 when White's king will be stuck in the centre for a long time.

The text move is well met by:



### 7...d6!

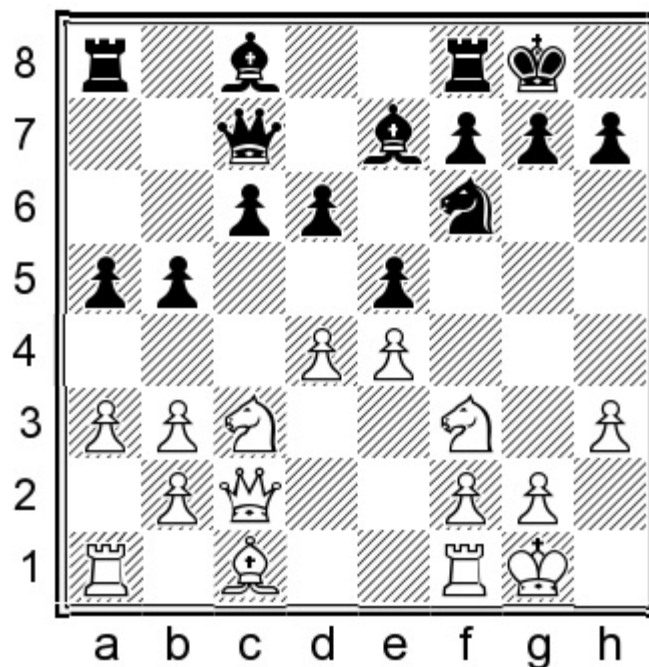
The positional threat of ...♙g4 enables Black to gain some extra mileage out of the knight on d4 before trading it for the b3-bishop.

### 8.h3 b5 9.a3 ♘xb3 10.cxb3 ♙e7

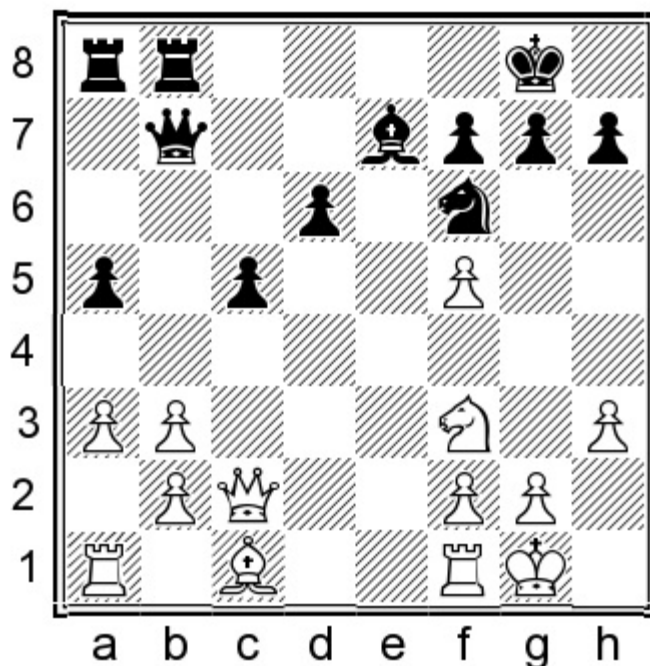
Black has an improved version of the Dzhumaev – Aagaard game noted above, as White has spent a tempo on h2-h3.

### 11.0-0 0-0 12.d4 ♔c7 13.♙c2

This was the continuation of Wang Hao – Dominguez Perez, Hengshui 2019, and here I suggest:

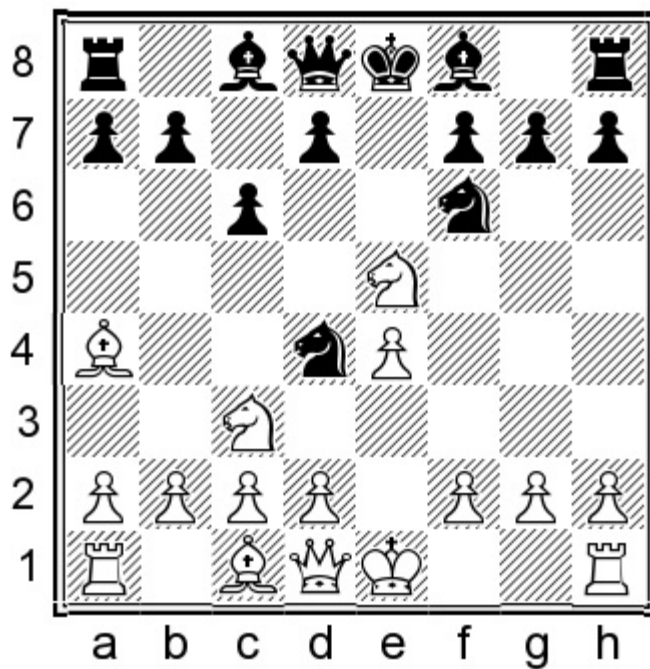


13...exd4N 14.♗xb5 ♔b7 15.♗bxd4 c5 16.♗f5 ♕xf5 17.exf5 ♖fb8



With an active game for Black, who will either regain the pawn on b3 or force White into a passive set-up with the knight retreating to d2.

E2) 6.♗xe5



Capturing the central pawn is of course the only critical test.

6...d5

This aggressive continuation has become popular in recent years.

6...d6!? 7.♘f3 ♘g4 8.d3 d5 has also been tested at the highest level many times, with satisfactory results for Black.

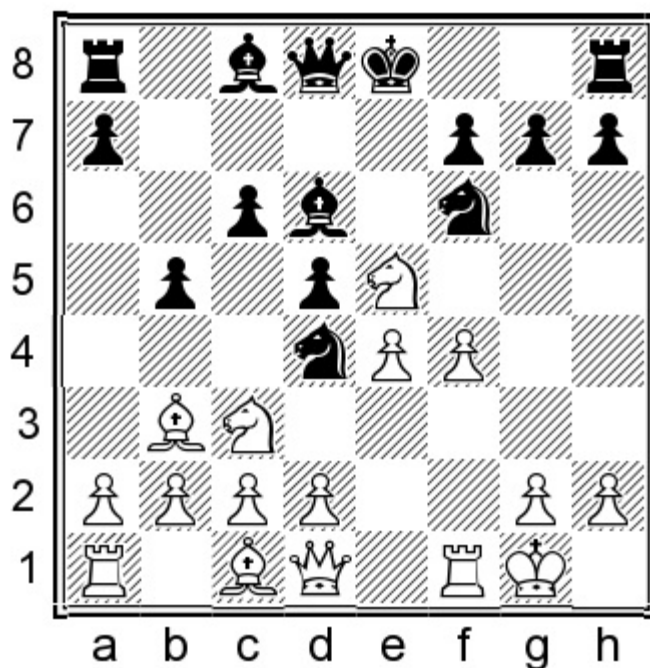
We will analyse the risky **E21) 7.exd5?! followed by the more sensible E22) 7.d3.**

The other possible continuation is:

7.0-0 ♘d6 8.f4

8.♘f3 ♘g4 9.e5 leads to interesting tactics but Black emerges on top after: 9...♘b8 10.exf6 ♔d6 11.♔e1† ♘e6 12.♘e5 gxf6 (12...♔xe5 also looks good) 13.♘e2 ♘xe2† 14.♔xe2 ♔xe5 15.♔xe5 fxe5 Cardelli – Semenov, corr. 2007.

8...b5 9.♘b3



The players agreed a draw here in Short – Piket, Debrecen 1992, presumably with White making the offer after the opening turned out less well than he had hoped. The logical continuation would be:

9...a5 10.a3 ♘xb3 11.cxb3 dxe4

Black is slightly better due to the two bishops.

### **E21) 7.exd5?!**

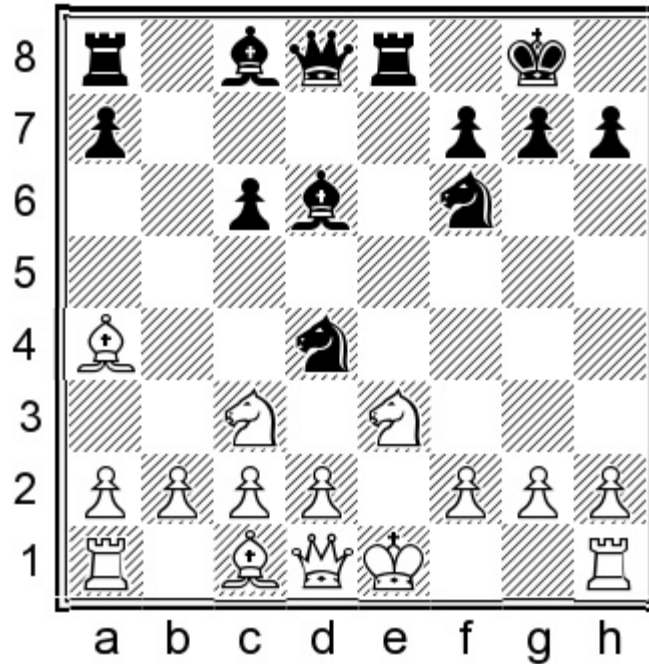
This greedy move leaves White dangerously underdeveloped, while also opening the e-file for Black's attack.

**7...♘d6**

The precariousness of White's set-up is well illustrated after:

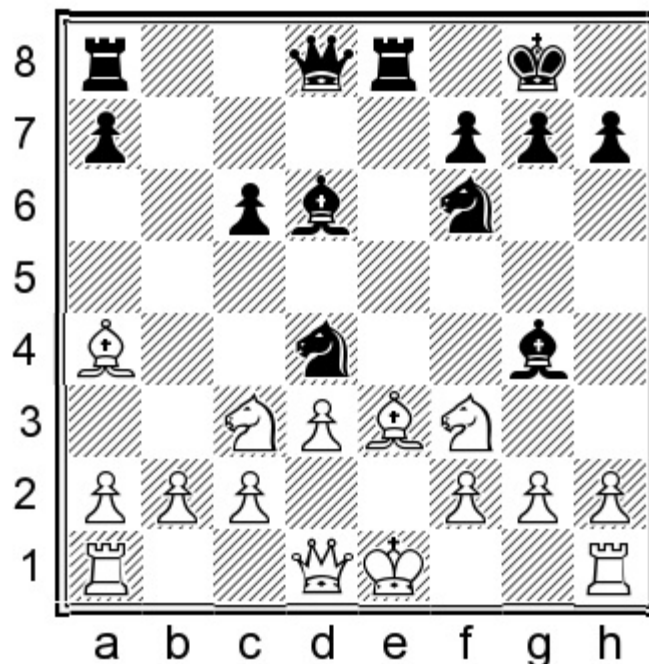
### 8. ♖c4?

8.dxc6 improves on the text move, although 8...0-0 9. ♖c4 ♜e8† 10. ♗e3 bxc6 still leaves White in danger:

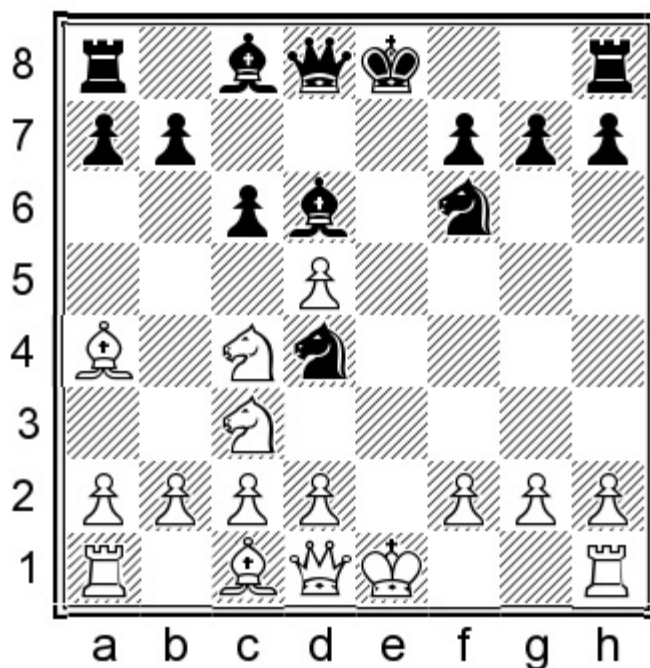


11.d3 (11.0-0? ♜xh2†! 12. ♖xh2 ♗g4† 13. ♗xg4 ♜h4† 14. ♖g1 ♜xg4 is a winning line showing the destructive power of Black's active pieces; 11.h3 is well met by 11...♜a5 12.d3 ♗d5 with some initiative for Black, as played in Buydts – McLeod, email 2003.) 11...♗g4 Black had a powerful attack in E. Popov – Ballow, corr. 2010.

8. ♗f3!? was played in Pinho – Walther, corr. 2019, and now the natural continuation is: 8...♜g4N 9.dxc6 0-0 10.d3 bxc6 11. ♗e3 ♜e8



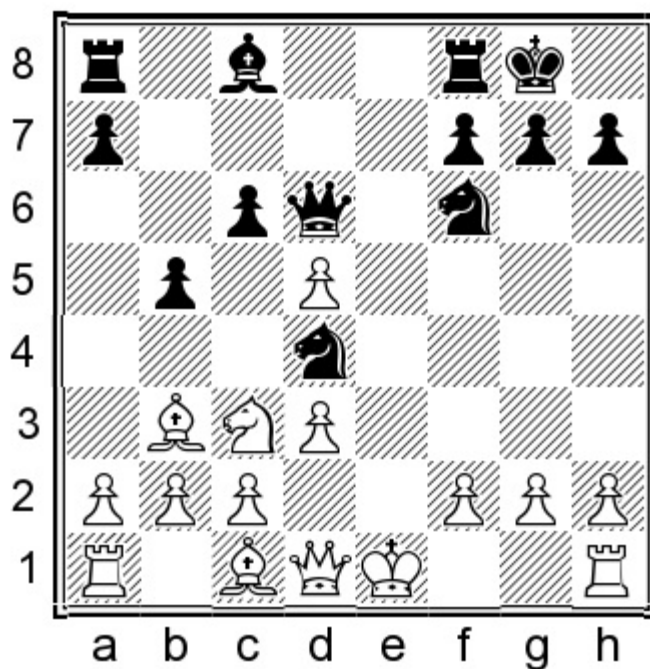
Reaching a position which the engine evaluates as completely level. Black obviously has a lot of compensation for the two sacrificed pawns.



**8...b5! 9. Nxd6+ Qxd6 10. Bb3 0-0 11.d3**

Another game continued: 11.0-0 Nf4 12.g3 (12.f4 is slightly more resilient although 12...Re8 still leaves Black with a decisive initiative.) 12...Qh6 13.h4 Ne5 The kingside threats were overwhelming in Makowski – B. Benko, email 2004.

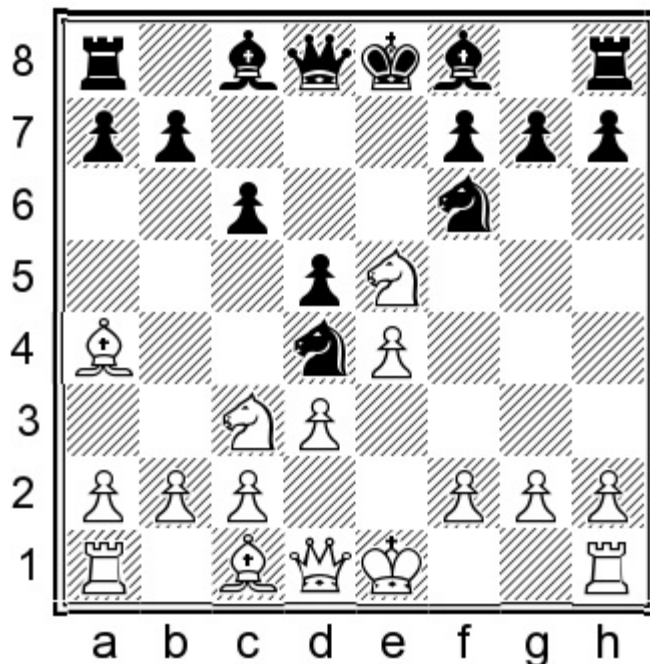
We have been following the game Stukopin – Utegaliev, Samara 2016, when Black should have played:



**11...Bg4! N 12.f3 Bae8+ 13. Qf1 b4! 14. Ne4 Nxe4 15.dxe4 Bxe4**

With a crushing attack.

### E22) 7.d3



This seems like White's best approach, taking care of development.

### 7...♔d6

Developing the bishop with gain of tempo is an automatic choice. We will consider the rather timid E221) 8.♘f3 followed by the more principled E222) 8.f4.

### E221) 8.♘f3 ♔g4

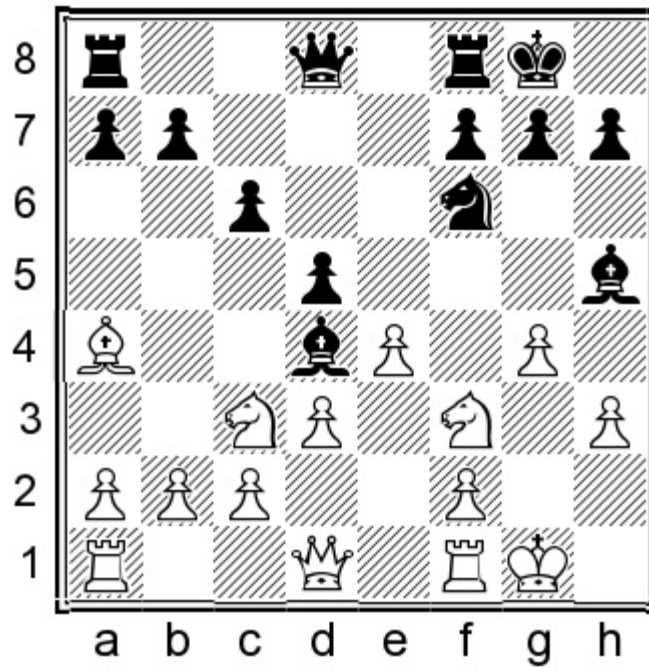
8...♘f3†!? 9.gxf3 0-0 is another decent option, when Black definitely has sufficient play for a pawn.

### 9.♔e3 ♔e5

9...♔c5 is an equally valid option which usually leads to the same thing; this was the actual move order of the high-level game quoted below.

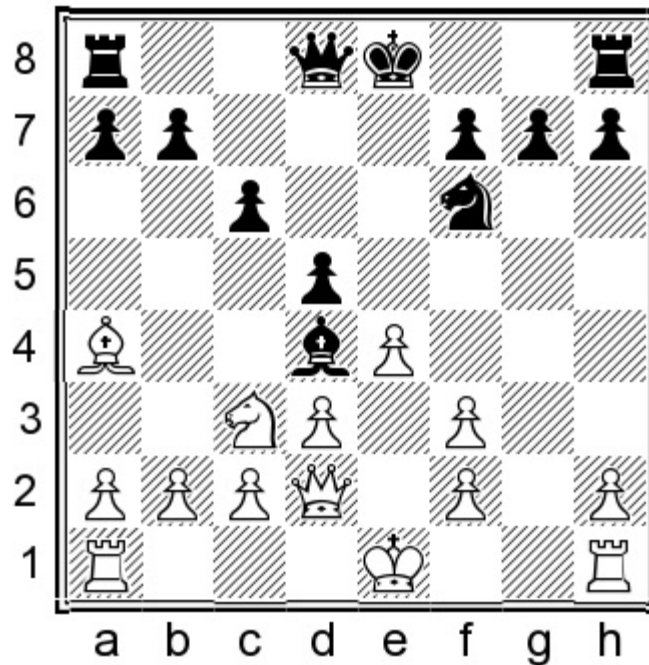
### 10.♔xd4 ♔xd4 11.♚d2

11.0-0 0-0 leaves White stuck in an annoying pin, and the attempt to break it with 12.h3 ♔h5 13.g4 runs into:



13...♙xc3 14.bxc3 dxe4 15.gxh5 exf3 16.♚xf3 ♚a5 Black regained the pawn while leaving White with a ruined pawn structure in Reis – Castilho, corr. 2007.

11...♙xf3 12.gxf3

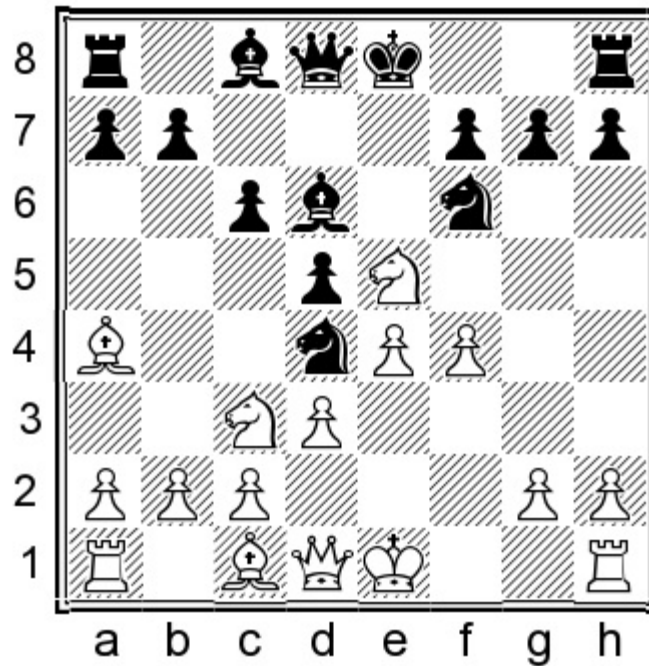


This position was reached in Shirov – I. Sokolov, Linares 1995, and a few other games. Black has a number of possible ideas but my favourite is:

12...a5!N 13.a3 0-0 14.♙b3 b5

Black's initiative is worth at least a pawn. There is no safe spot for White's king, and the bishop will be stuck out of play on b3 for a long time.

## E222) 8.f4



There are obvious risks involved in weakening the a7-g1 diagonal while the white king is stuck in the centre. On the other hand, this ambitious approach is entirely in the spirit of this line, where White's whole idea is to seize an extra pawn and keep it.

### 8...♙c5!

8...0-0 is a decent alternative, but I find the text move the most challenging reaction to White's last provocative move.

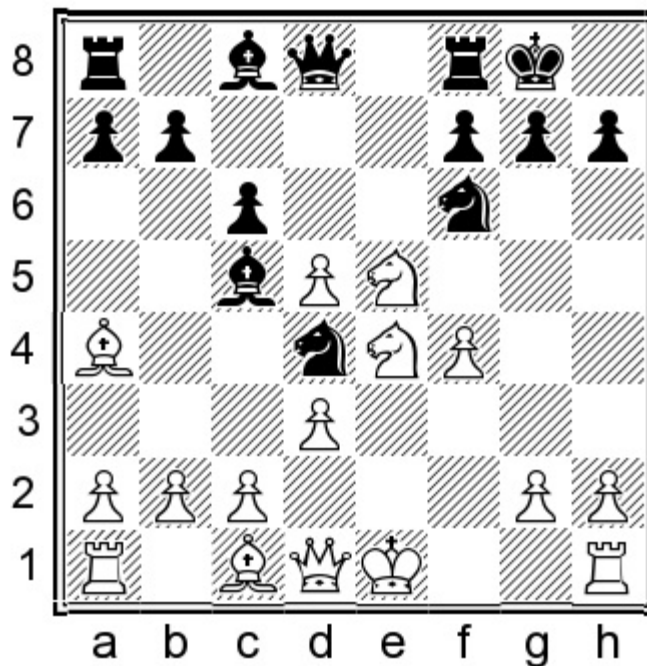
### 9.exd5 0-0

The time for counting pawns has passed!

### 10.dxc6

Obodchuk calls this dubious, but modern analytical tools demonstrate that it is White's only way to maintain the balance. From a practical perspective though, White is clearly risking a lot by pawn-grabbing while the king is still in the centre.

10.♘e4?! proved unsatisfactory after:

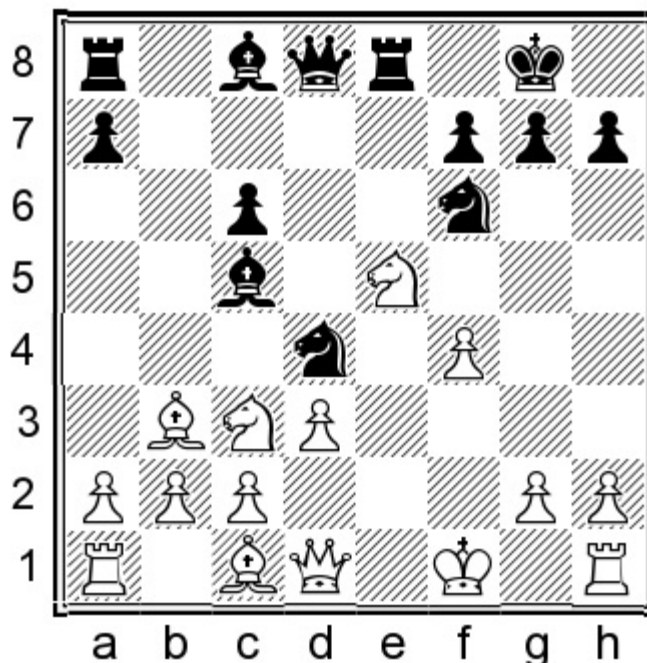


10...♞xe4! 11.dxe4 ♞h4† 12.g3 ♞h3 13.♙e3 ♞g2 White got into trouble and was soon defeated in Rublevsky – Mamedyarov, Foros 2006.

### 10...bxc6 11.h3

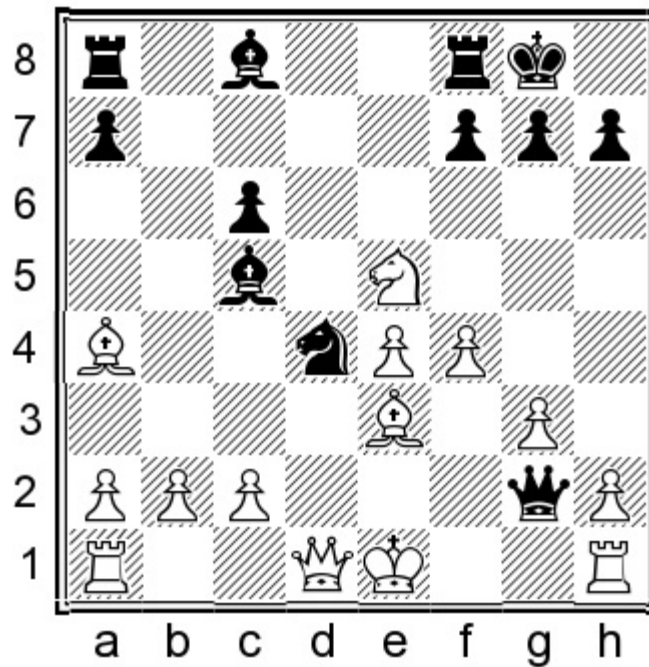
A sensible idea: White must keep an eye on the g4-square, as the appearance of Black's minor pieces there may cause serious problems.

11.♙f1 ♞e8 12.♙b3 is hardly a satisfactory way to neutralize Black's activity. In Berbatov – Mikhalevski, Aix-les-Bains 2011, Black could have improved patiently with:

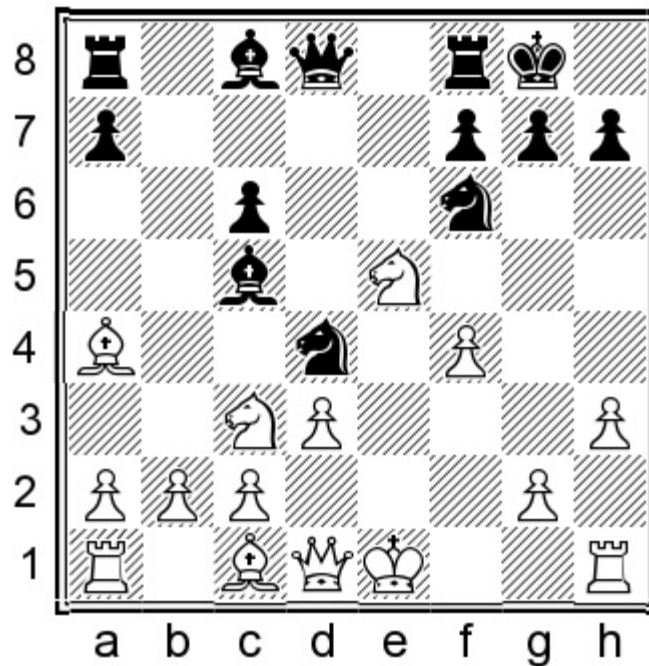


12...♞e7!?N 13.♙d2 ♞c7 14.♙c4 ♙d6 White struggles to secure the king and connect the rooks.

11.  $\text{N}e4$  is a better idea than it was on the previous move. Nevertheless, after 11...  $\text{N}xe4$  12.  $\text{d}xe4$   $\text{Q}h4$ †  
 13.  $\text{g}3$   $\text{Q}h3$  14.  $\text{Q}c3$   $\text{Q}g2$  Black manages to regain both pawns and emerge from the opening with no  
 problems:



15.  $\text{R}g1$   $\text{Q}xe4$  16.  $\text{Q}d3$   $\text{N}xc2$ † 17.  $\text{Q}xc2$   $\text{Q}xe3$ † 18.  $\text{Q}xe3$   $\text{Q}xe3$  The position was equal in Reinhart – A.  
 Silva, corr. 2006.

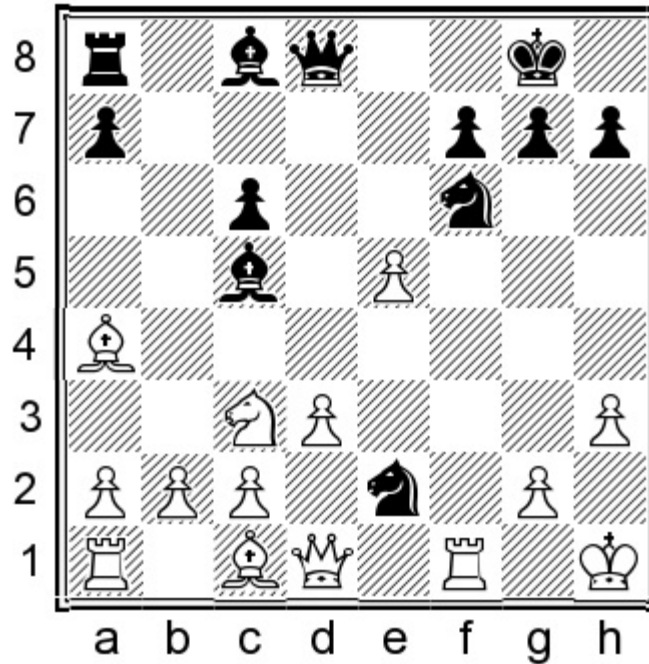


11...  $\text{R}e8$  12.  $\text{Q}d2$ !?

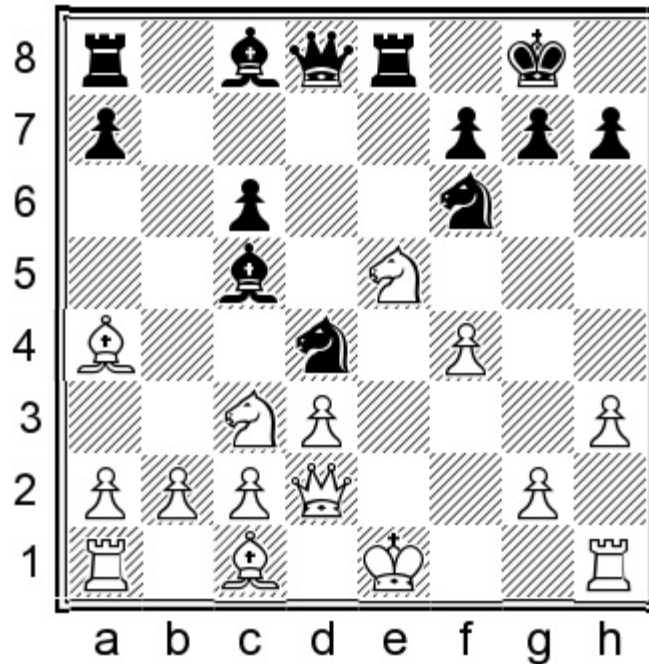
With this interesting move, White vacates d1 for the king in order to avoid the annoying pin  
 along the e-file.

12.0-0!? may look like a blunder but there are actually no fatal consequences. 12...  $\text{R}xe5$  This

leads to a forced draw. (If you wish to keep the game going, then 12...♖xc2!?! 13.♔h2 ♕xa1 14.♙xc6 ♜b8 15.♙xe8 ♚xe8 leads to complicated, double-edged play.) 13.fxe5 ♕e2† 14.♔h1 (14.♔h2?? ♕g4† leads to mate next move.) In Rosh – Sherwood, corr. 2015, the players agreed a draw in view of:

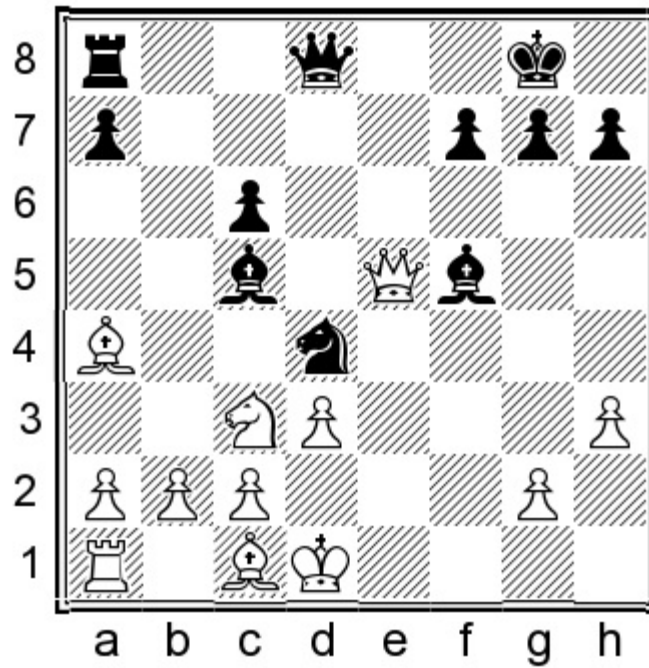


14...♕g3† 15.♔h2 ♕xf1† 16.♚xf1 ♕g4† 17.♔h1 ♕f2† 18.♔h2 ♕g4† With a perpetual.



12...♕h5!

White's idea was fully justified in the following high-level game: 12...♕d7 13.♔d1 ♕xe5 14.fxe5 ♜xe5 15.♞e1 ♜xe1† 16.♚xe1 ♙f5 17.♚e5



17...♔f8?! (17...♕b6N would have maintained some compensation for Black.) 18.♕xc6 ♖xc6  
 19.♔xf5 White soon converted his material advantage in Wei Yi – Rodshtein, Tsaghkadzor 2015.

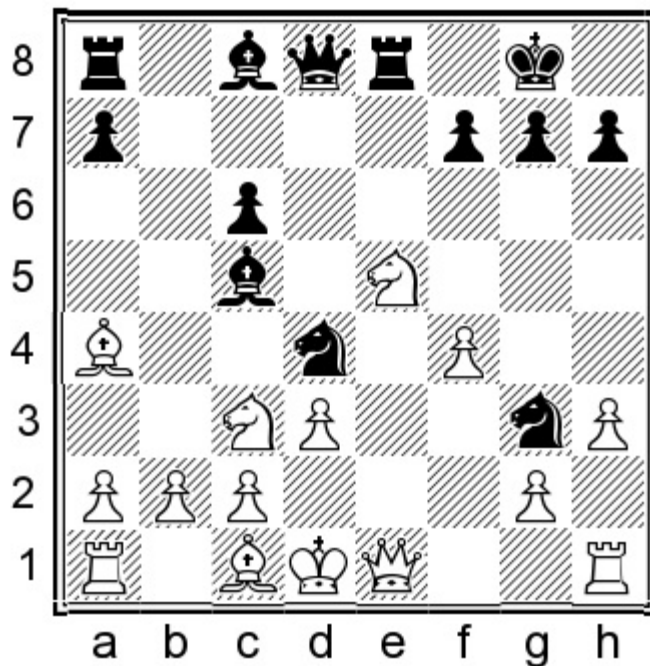
### 13.♔d1

The careless 13.♖e4? runs into 13...♔h4† 14.♔d1 ♜xe5 15.fxe5 ♕g4† 16.hxg4 ♔xh1† 17.♔e1  
 ♔xg2 when White is on the verge of collapse.

### 13...♖g3 14.♔e1

A sad necessity.

14.♜e1?! runs into 14...♔h4! 15.♖f3 ♕g4! 16.hxg4 ♔xg4 with a vicious attack.



14...♖xh1 15.♔xh1 ♕h4

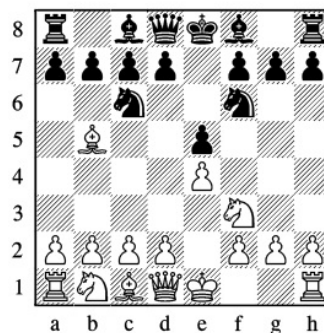
This double-edged position was reached in Eckhardt – Koesebay, corr. 2015. As often happens, the correspondence game was subsequently drawn. In a practical game, Black’s play is surely easier, as White’s king is still in danger and it will be quite a while before the a1-rook gets into play.

### Conclusion

4.♘c3 takes us into a different territory: the Four Knights Game. I recommend the ambitious 4...♘d4, which we have analysed in depth. The arising positions are full of dynamism, and Black should be ready to sacrifice at least a pawn, and sometimes further material, in order to seize the initiative. There are many options at White’s disposal, but none of them seem to bother Black.

# Chapter 9

## Other Lines



### Sidelines

### Variation Index

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5

3...Nf6

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A1) 5.0-0 208

A2) 5.c3 209

A3) 5.d3 210

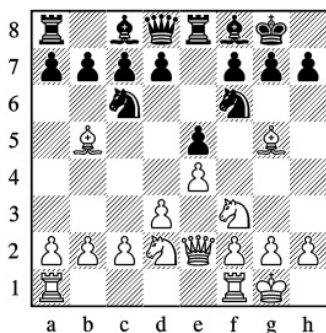
B) 4.Qxc6 dxc6 213

B1) 5.d3 213

B2) 5.Nc3 214

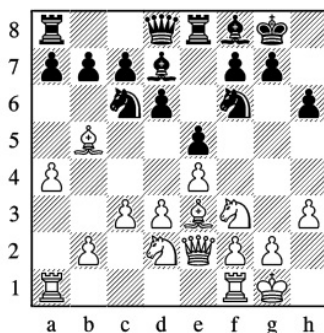
C) 4.d4 216

A3) note to 7.c3



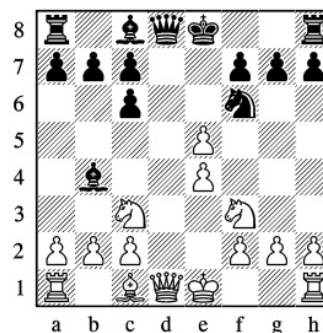
8...h6N

A3) note to 9.Qa4!?



12...d5!N

B2) note to 7.Nxe5

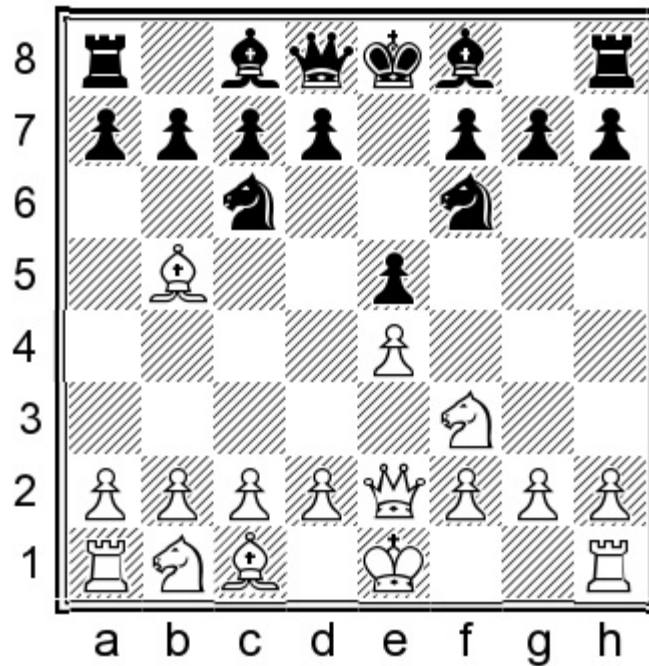


7...Qxc3!N

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6

In this final chapter, we will consider three sidelines: A) 4.Qe2, B) 4.Qxc6 and C) 4.d4.

### A) 4. ♔e2



This is one of a few possible ways of deviating from the endgame. By covering the e4-pawn in this way, White dreams of building a strong pawn centre with c2-c3 and d2-d4, but the queen may prove to be awkwardly placed.

#### 4... ♖d6!?

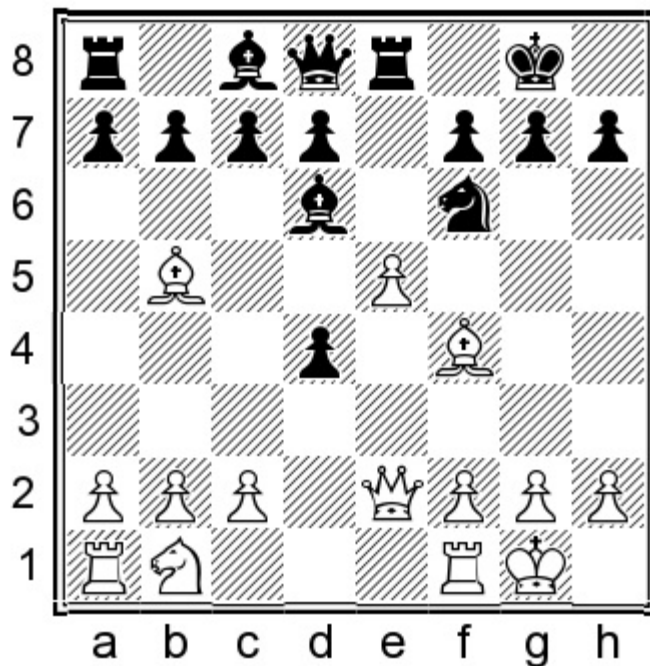
I like this somewhat unusual move. The bishop is temporarily blocking the d-pawn, but it can be relocated soon enough. In the meantime, there is no longer any need to worry about the e5-pawn.

4... ♖c5 is the most common alternative.

There isn't a great deal of theory in this variation but White has tried several moves, and numerous transpositions are possible. We will consider the most natural continuations of **A1)** 5.0-0, **A2)** 5.c3 and **A3)** 5.d3.

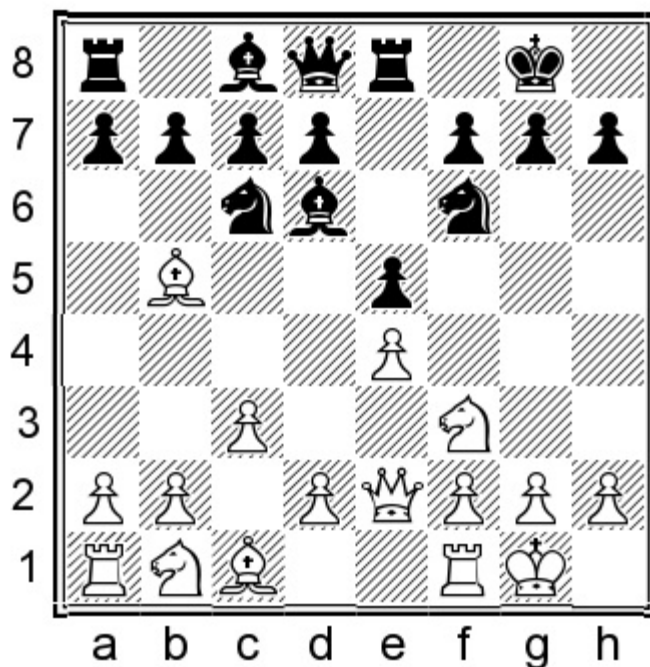
5. ♕xc6 dxc6 only gives White an inferior version of the Exchange Variation, since 6.d4?! exd4 7.e5 0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8 is once again extremely bad for White.

5.d4?! is premature. 5... ♗xd4 6. ♗xd4 exd4 7.e5 0-0 8.0-0 ♖e8 9. ♕f4



This position was reached in Kr. Georgiev – Gavrilakis, Poros 1998, and now 9...c6N 10.♔d3 ♕c7 would have left White with no compensation for the pawn.

A1) 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3 ♖e8



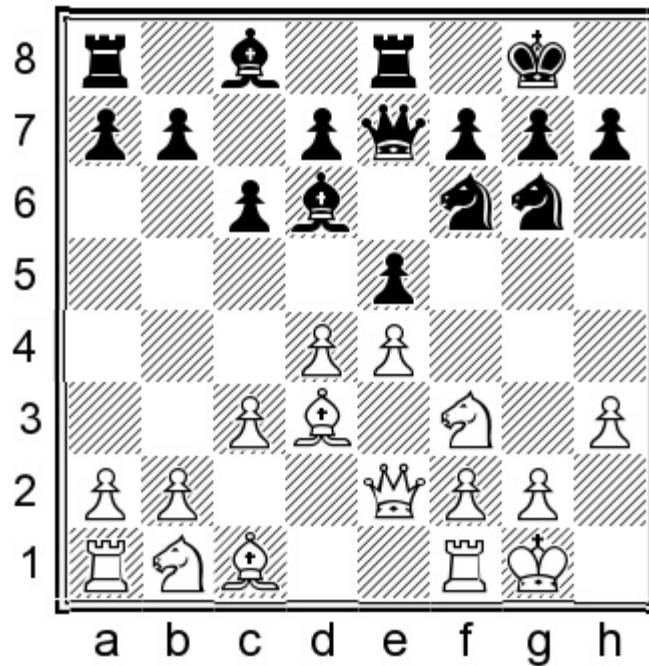
7.d3

White's moves have been sensible and thematic, although Black has more than one way to reach a comfortable set-up.

7...♘e7

I like this typical regrouping plan.

8.d4 ♖g6 9.♔d3 c6 10.h3 ♚e7

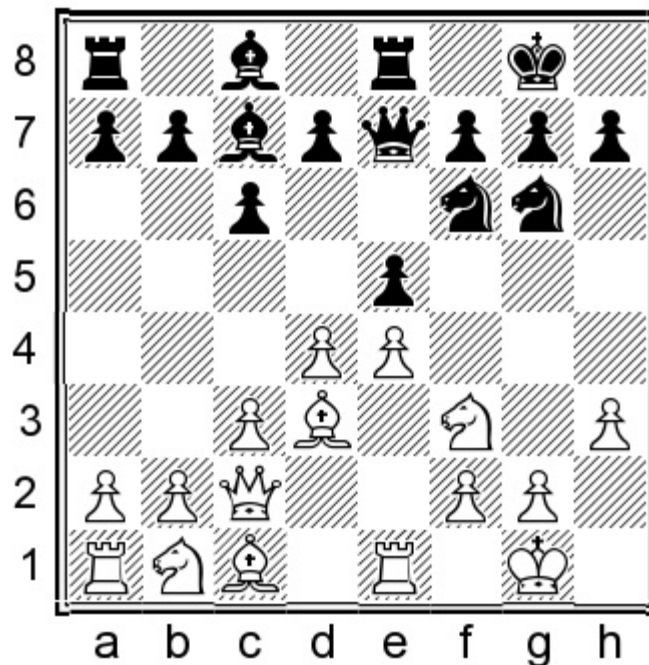


11.♔e1!?N

11.dxe5 ♖xe5 12.♖bd2 ♖xd3 13.♚xd3 ♔c7 gave Black a pleasant game with the two bishops in Kratochvil – Rohde, corr. 2019.

The text move seems like a plausible attempt to improve White's play by maintaining the tension, but it can be countered as follows:

11...♔c7 12.♚c2



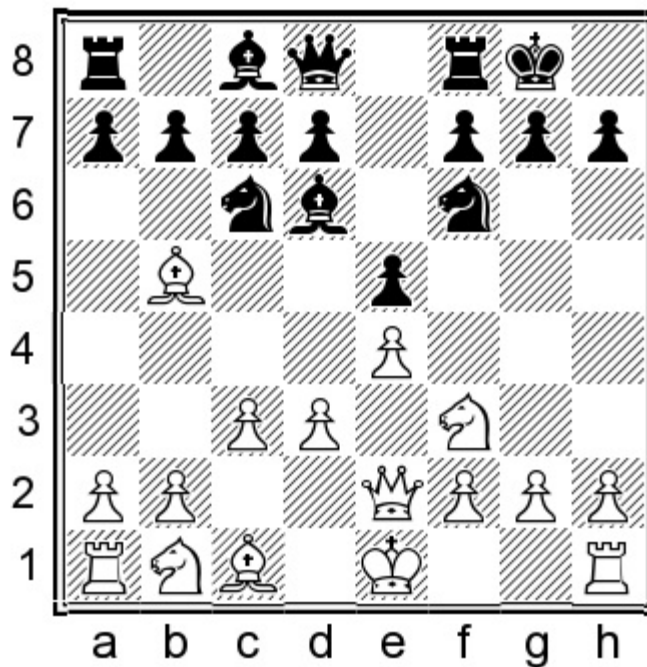
12...d5! 13.♗g5

Without this move, White could easily fall into trouble.

13...dxe4 14.♗xe4 exd4 15.cxd4 ♔d6

Black is doing fine.

A2) 5.c3 0-0 6.d3



This is similar to the previous variation, except that White may attempt to benefit from delaying castling, for instance by manoeuvring the knight via f1 and/or attacking on the kingside in some lines. This line was also recommended for White by my editor Andrew Greet in his 2006 book *Play the Ruy Lopez*. He considered a few possible replies, but I would like to take a different path for Black.

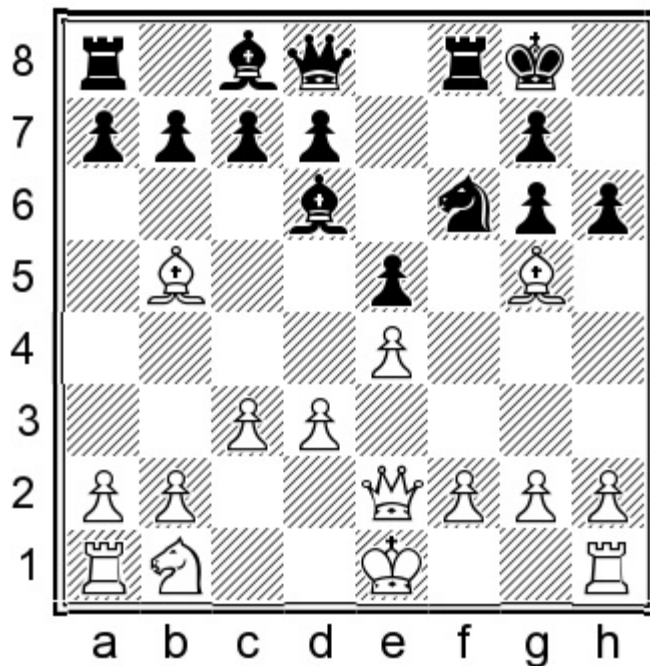
6...♞e7!?

I was surprised to discover that this natural move has only been tested in a single game. The standard relocation of the knight to g6 will bring harmony to Black's set-up.

6...♞e8 has been almost the universal choice.

7.♞bd2

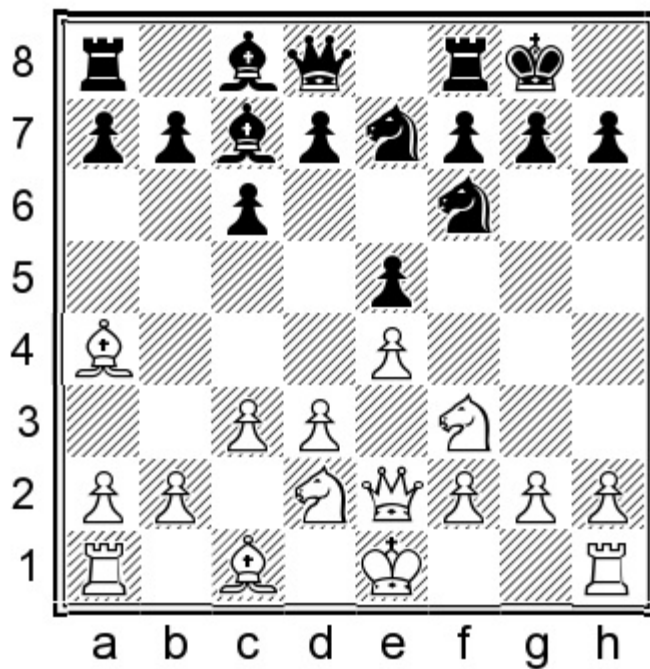
I also considered 7.♗g5N 7...♞g6, when 8.♞h4! is a principled attempt to challenge Black's set-up, but a strong reply is: 8...h6! 9.♞xg6 fxg6



10.♘h4 c6 11.♘c4† ♖h8 12.♗d2 ♘c7 White's dark-squared bishop will soon be stuck on g3, and Black will seize the centre with ...d7-d5.

This position was reached in Sapkaroski – Kizov, Struga 2002. At this point Black should have continued thematically with:

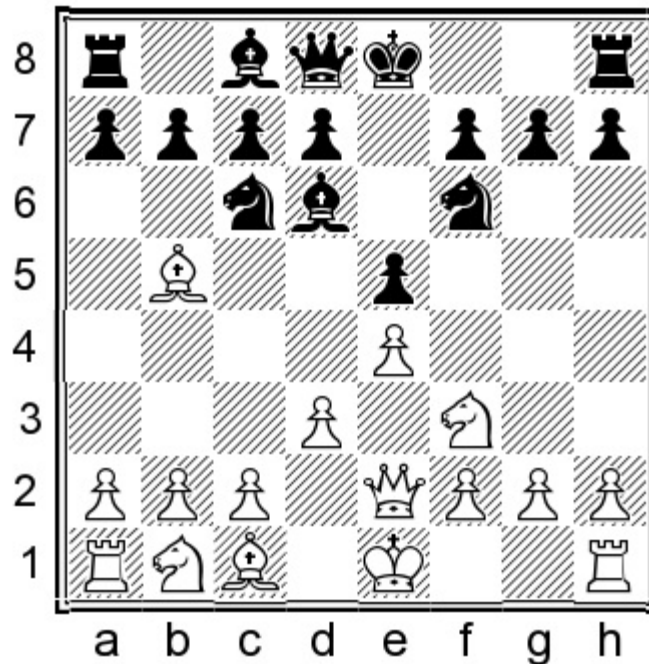
7...c6N 8.♘a4 ♘c7



9.0-0 d5 10.♞e1 ♗g6

Black has the better chances, due to the central control and harmonious piece arrangement.

### A3) 5.d3



This modest move demonstrates that White is not planning to occupy the centre soon.

### 5...0-0 6.♔g5

6.c3 has been covered above via 5.c3.

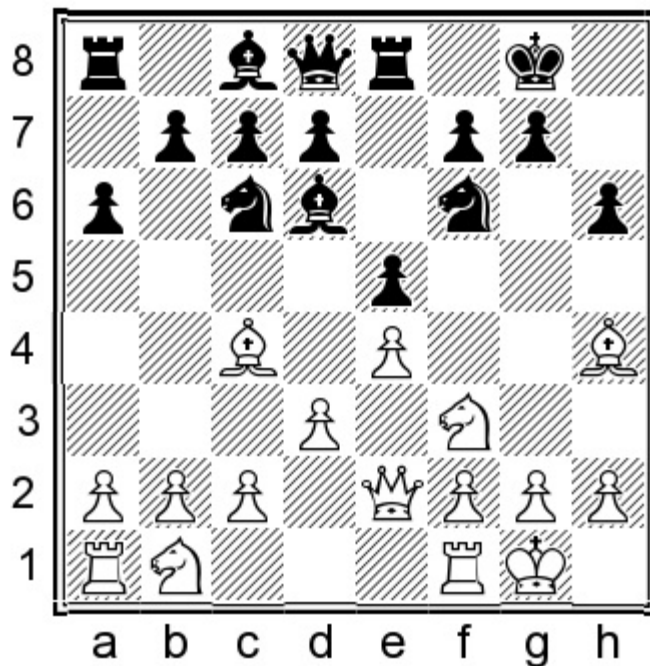
### 6...♖e8

It's safest to postpone ...h7-h6 until White has castled, to avoid any possibility of a dangerous attack with g4-g5.

### 7.c3

As usual in these positions, White can proceed in a few different ways, without changing the general evaluation all that much. Here are a few examples:

7.0-0 h6 8.♔h4 a6 9.♕c4 (After 9.♕xc6 bxc6 10.♞bd2 ♕f8 successfully regroups while maintaining the merits of the bishop pair and strong centre.)



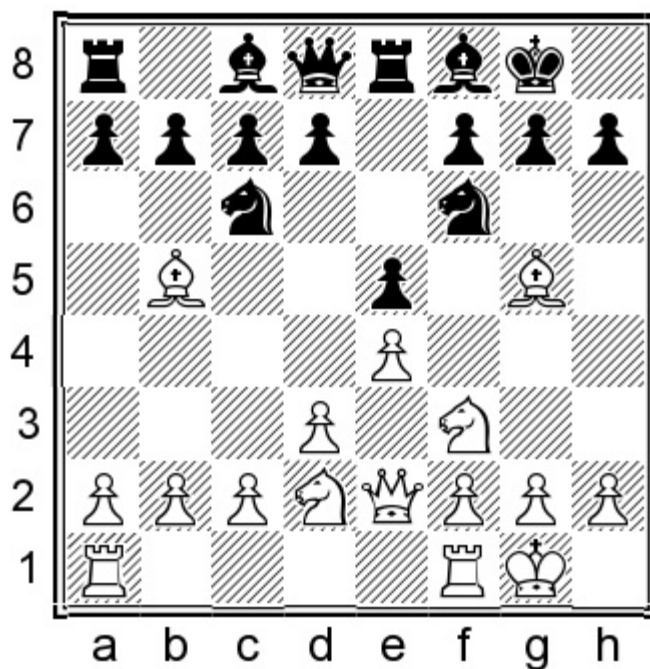
9...♖a5 10.♗c3 b5 11.♙b3 ♘xb3 12.axb3 ♕b7 Black was not worse at all in Adams – Malakhov, Konya 2012.

7.♗bd2 ♕f8

Black regroupes the bishop and prepares to move the d-pawn.

8.0-0

This position was reached in Najer – Levin, Groningen 1999. Since White has now castled, it would have been logical to continue with:



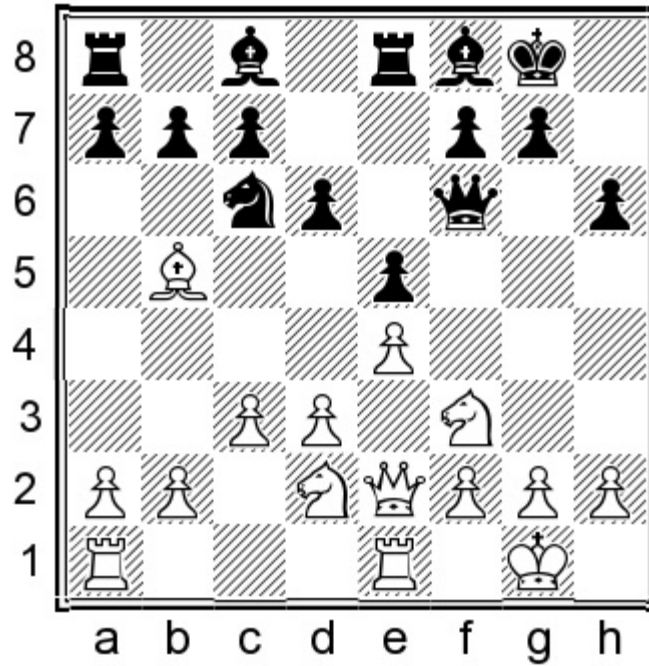
8...h6N

There is no need to delay this natural move any longer. Now White has to make a commitment.

9.♙xf6

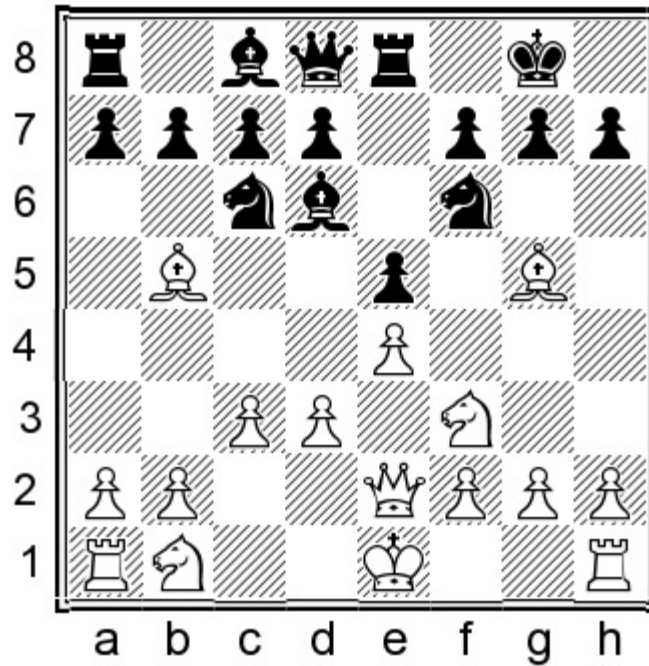
9. ♖h4 d6 10. ♘c4 g5 11. ♙xc6 bxc6 12. ♙g3 ♗h5 gives Black an excellent game thanks to the bishop pair and the misplaced bishop on g3.

9... ♙xf6 10.c3 d6 11. ♖fe1



11... a6 12. ♙a4 ♙d7

Black has no problems, while White has to take into account the positional threat of ... ♗d4.



7... ♙e7

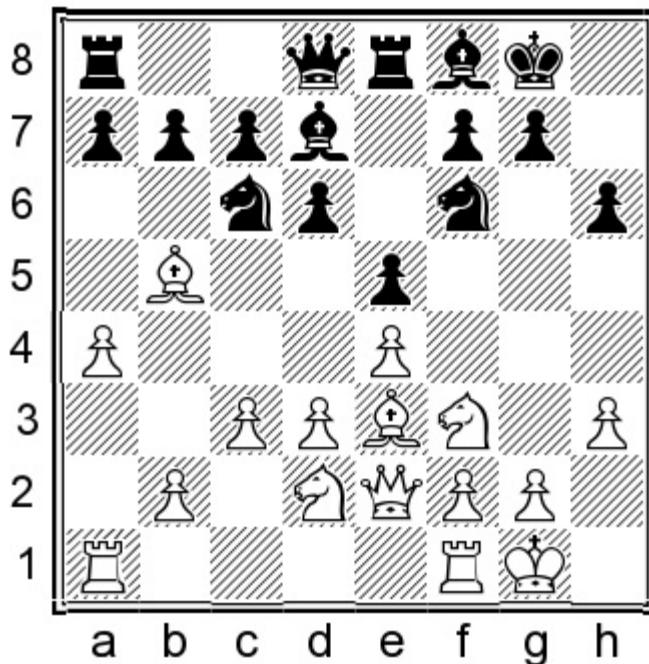
Since the position is closed, Black can afford to move the bishop again in order to unblock the d-pawn.

8. ♗bd2

The tactical point of Black's last move is 8.♙xc6 bxc6 9.♘xe5 ♖xe4! when Black regains the pawn in a favourable situation.

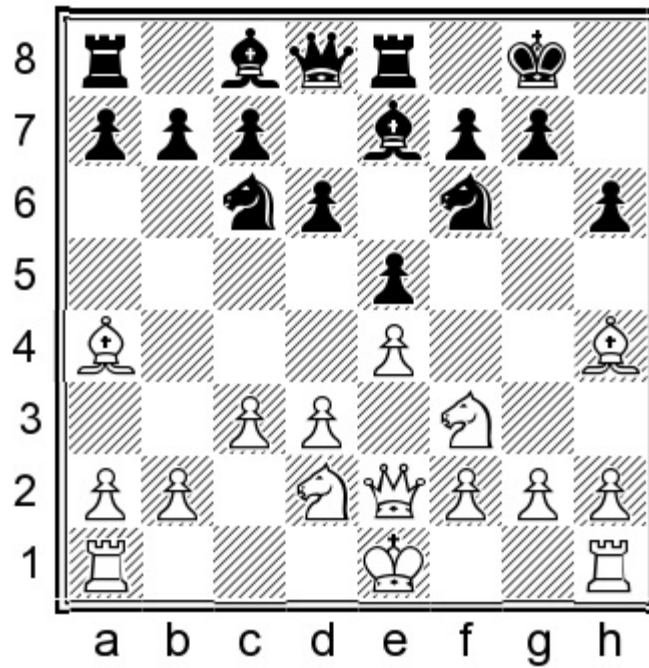
### 8...d6 9.♙a4!?

This somewhat mysterious retreat is aimed at avoiding the exchange of light-squared bishops. The obvious alternative is: 9.0-0 h6 10.♙e3 This is not the optimal placement for the bishop, but White hopes to advance with d3-d4 at some point. (Another example continued 10.♙h4 a6 11.♙a4 b5 12.♙b3 ♖a5 13.♙c2 c5 and White achieved no advantage in Johansen – Barkov, corr. 2018.) 10...♙f8 11.h3 ♙d7 12.a4



The natural play by both sides led to the current position in Short – Howell, Sheffield 2011. I think the most logical continuation would have been: 12...d5!N 13.a5 ♖b8! 14.♙xd7 ♖bxd7 Black reaches a comfortable set-up with a certain superiority in the centre.

### 9...h6 10.♙h4



**10...♖d7!**

Inviting favourable simplifications.

**11.♙g3**

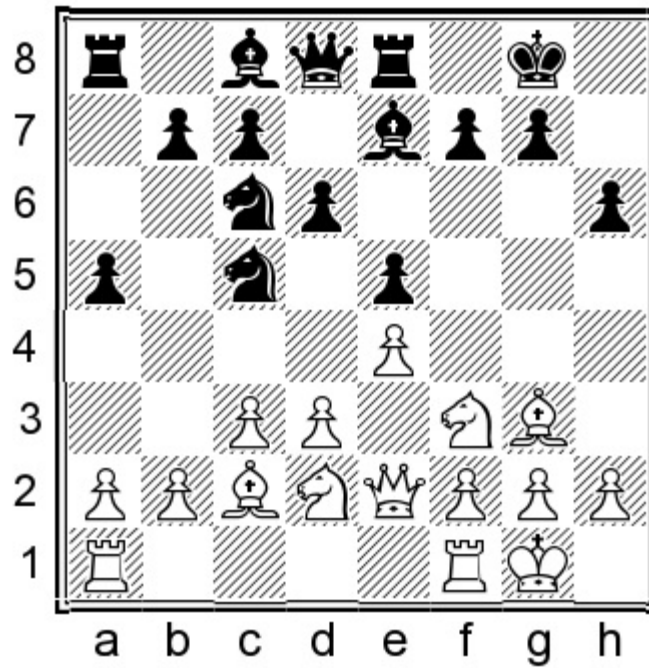
It is hardly more promising to go for 11.♙xe7N 11...♘xe7 12.0-0 ♘g6, when the white queen may start to feel uncomfortable.

**11...♘c5 12.♙c2 a5**

Black grabs some space on the queenside and prevents b2-b4.

**13.0-0**

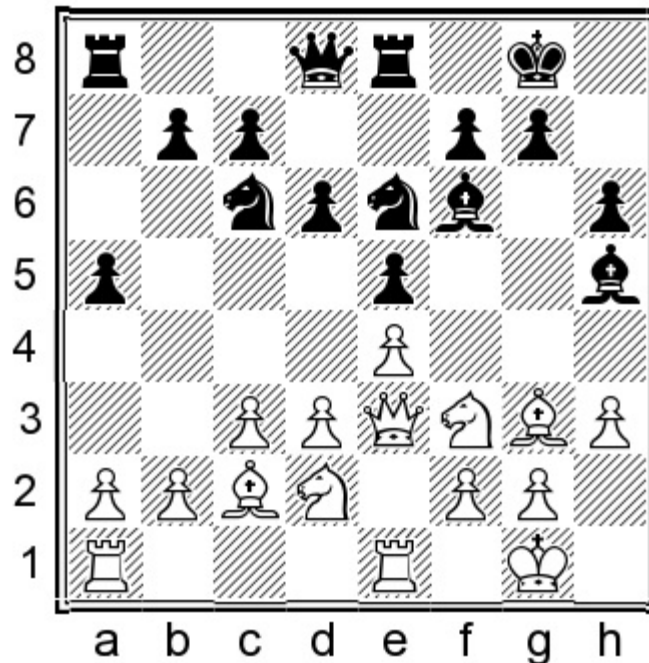
We have been following the game Tiviakov – Malakhov, Konya 2012. My new, natural idea is:



13...♙g4N 14.h3 ♗h5 15.♚e3

The only adequate way of escaping the pin.

15...♙f6 16.♜fe1 ♞e6

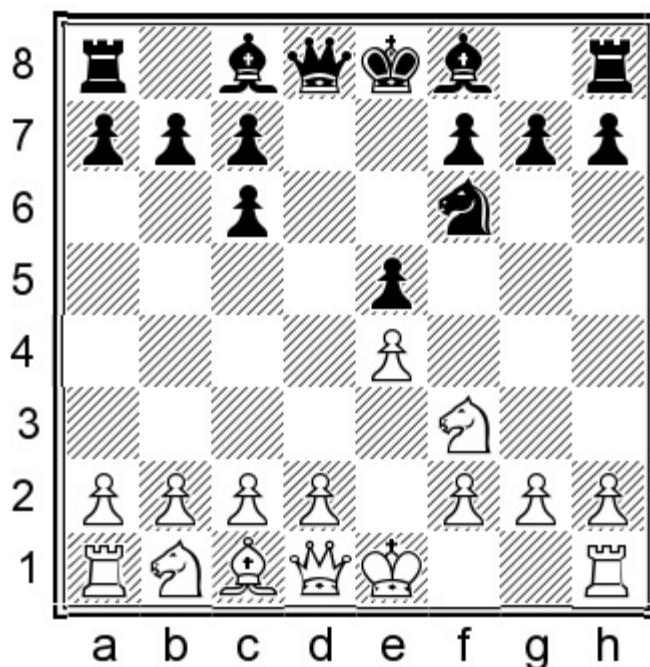


Black has a comfortable game.

B) 4.♙xc6

I was surprised to discover that this move has been tried by many strong players, including Hikaru Nakamura.

## 4...dxc6



In comparison to the Exchange Ruy Lopez, Black practically has an extra tempo. We will consider the modest-looking **B1)** 5.d3 followed by the slightly more dynamic **B2)** 5.♘c3, whereby White maintains the option of d2-d4.

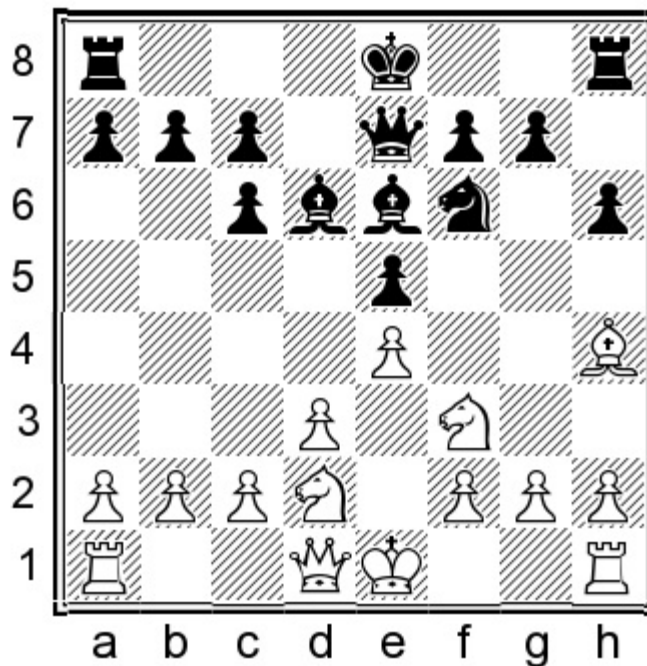
### **B1) 5.d3 ♕d6**

Of course it is possible to play 5...♕c5 and transpose to variation D of Chapter 7; but when the present move order arises, the text move is more attractive. (The bishop would often retreat from c5 to d6 anyway in some lines.)

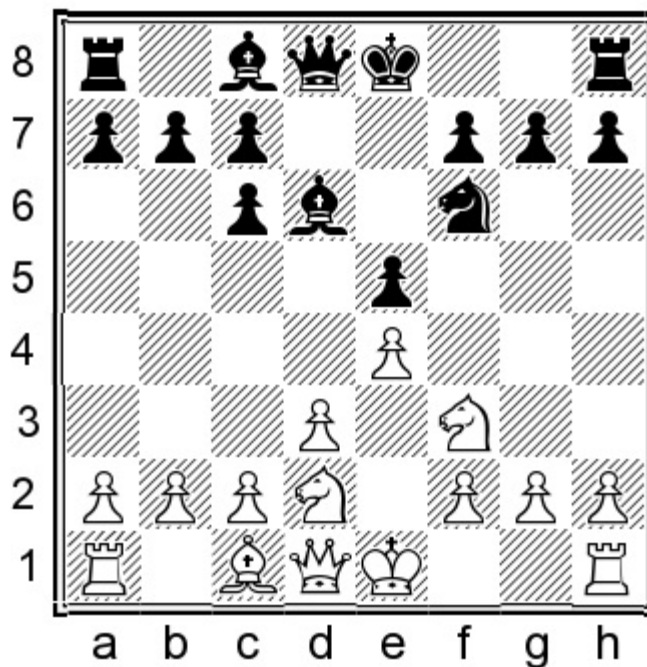
### **6.♘bd2**

6.♘c3 transposes to 6.d3 in the notes to variation B2 below.

Another example continued: 6.♕g5 As we saw in Chapter 7, this pin tends to be ineffective when Black's king is still in the centre. 6...h6 7.♕h4 ♔e7 8.♘bd2 ♕e6



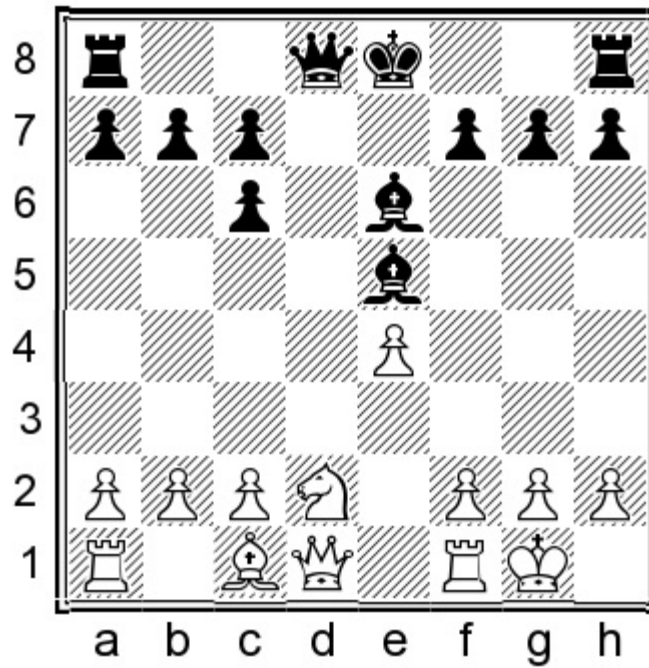
9.0-0 (9.d4N seems better, although 9...♙g4 10.0-0 0-0-0 also leads to excellent play for Black.) 9...0-0-0 10.♙g3 ♘d7 In Trube – Gutt, Troisdorf 2010, White had a passive position with a misplaced bishop, while Black had an easy plan of attack on the kingside.



### 6...♙e6 7.b3

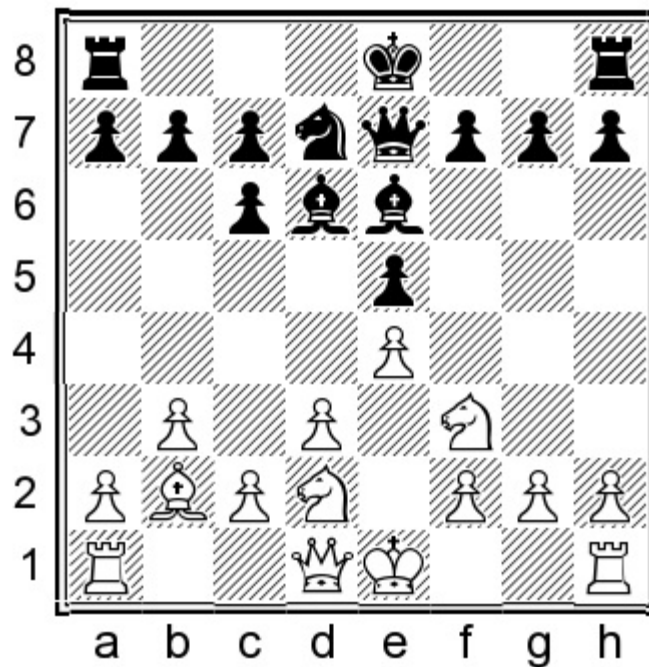
7.♘g5?! runs into 7...♙g4 8.f3 ♙d7 when Black stands better, as the subsequent ...h7-h6 will force the knight to retreat to h3.

This also seems like the wrong time for the ambitious 7.d4 break, as 7...♘d7 is an effective reply. 8.dxe5 ♘xe5 9.♘xe5 ♙xe5 10.0-0 was seen in Sutovsky – Sakaev, Istanbul (ol) 2000, and now Black had every reason to continue aggressively with:



10...♙f6N 11.c3 0-0-0 12.♙e2 ♘d6 13.♘f3 ♗g4 White has definite problems due to the pinned knight.

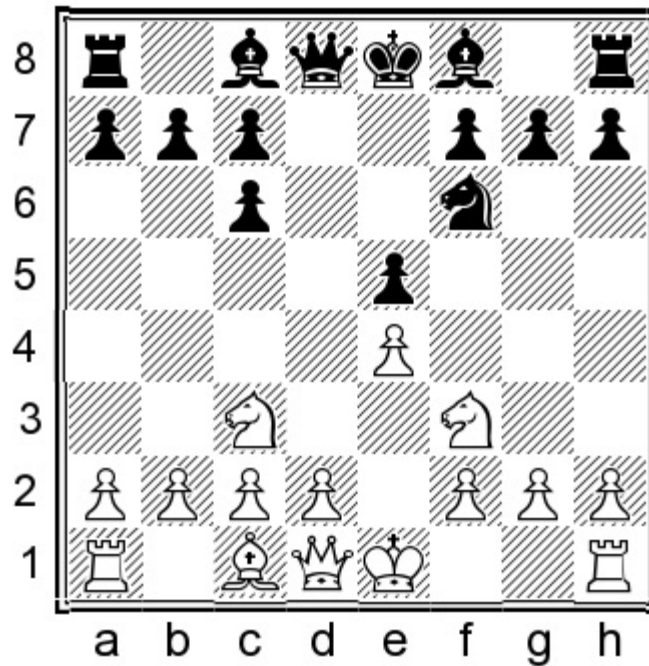
7...♘d7 8.♗b2 ♙e7



9.0-0 0-0-0 10.♘c4 f6 11.a4 ♗b8

The king is safe on the queenside, and Black soon started attacking measures with ...g7-g5 to take over the initiative in Stany – Eljanov, Internet (blitz) 2020.

B2) 5.♘c3



This is a pet line of Turkish GM Dragan Solak. White defends the central pawn while maintaining the option of a quick d2-d4.

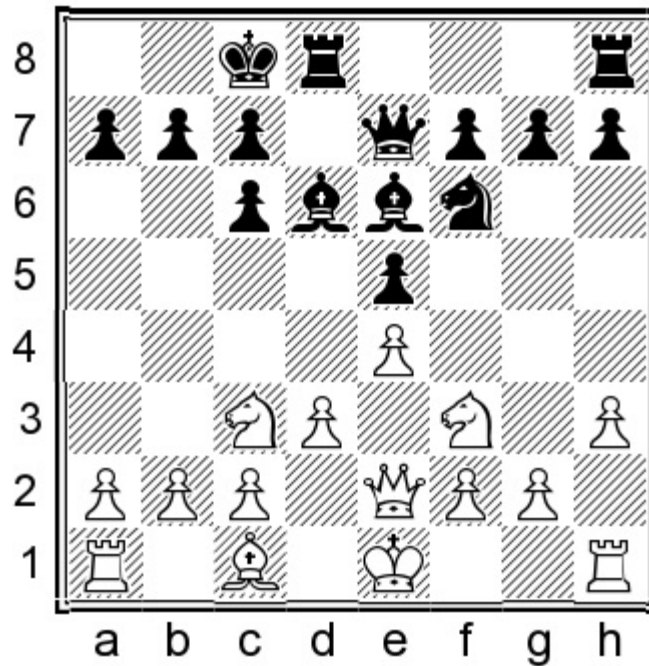
### 5...♔d6

Developing in the same way as in the previous line.

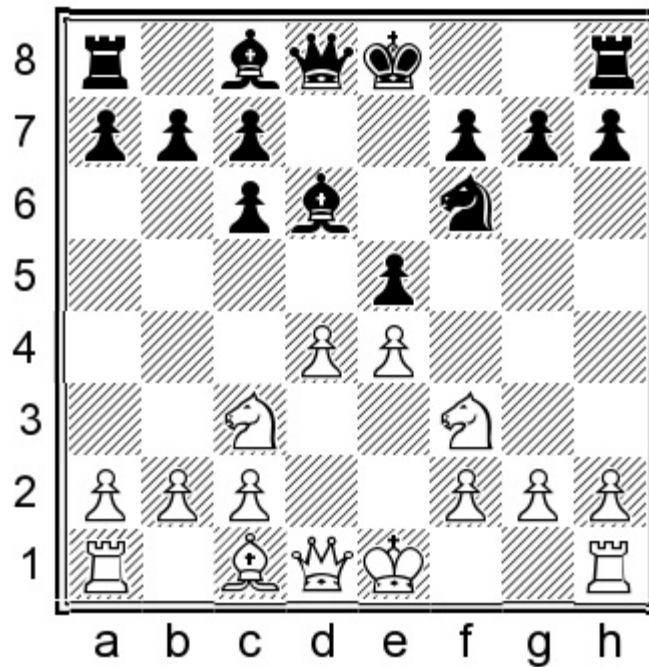
### 6.d4

This seems most consistent with White's previous move.

A quieter approach is: 6.d3 ♖e7 7.h3 (7.♔e3 is similar to variation D4 of Chapter 7, where Black met the early ♔e3 by retreating the bishop from c5 to d6; so in the present position, the saved tempo obviously stands Black in good stead.) 7...♔e6 8.♖e2 0-0-0



9.♙d2 h6 10.0-0-0 ♖b8 Black was already at least equal, and went on to win with a positional masterclass in Atabayev – Kramnik, Baku (ol) 2016.



**6...♙b4!**

Black can afford to move the bishop for a second time – the quick attack on the e4-pawn is worth it!

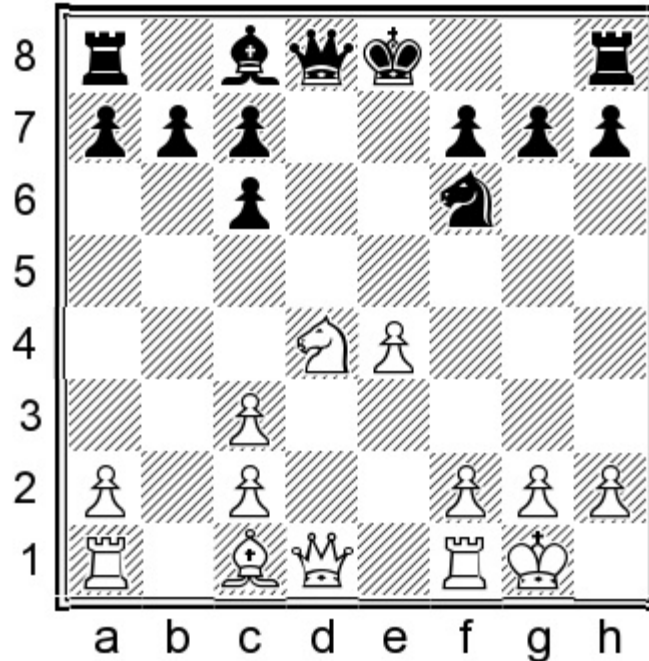
6...♙g4 7.dxe5 ♙xf3 8.♚xf3 ♙xe5 was my choice in Solak – Roiz, Internet (rapid) 2020, but now I would prefer the text move.

6...exd4 has been the most common choice, but 7.♚xd4 0-0 8.♙g5 gives White a safe position.

## 7.♘xe5

7.dxe5? was played by one of the all-time greats in Capablanca – Cohen, New York (blindfold simul) 1911, but it's a clear mistake due to 7...♙xc3! 8.bxc3 ♚xd1 † 9.♙xd1 ♞xe4 when White loses a pawn for nothing.

7.0-0 was seen in Pastor Alonso de Prado – Aguera Naredo, Sanxenxo 2017, when natural and good would have been: 7...exd4 8.♞xd4 ♙xc3 9.bxc3 Now both sides have doubled pawns, but all of White's queenside pawns are isolated and weak, whereas Black's form a cohesive unit.

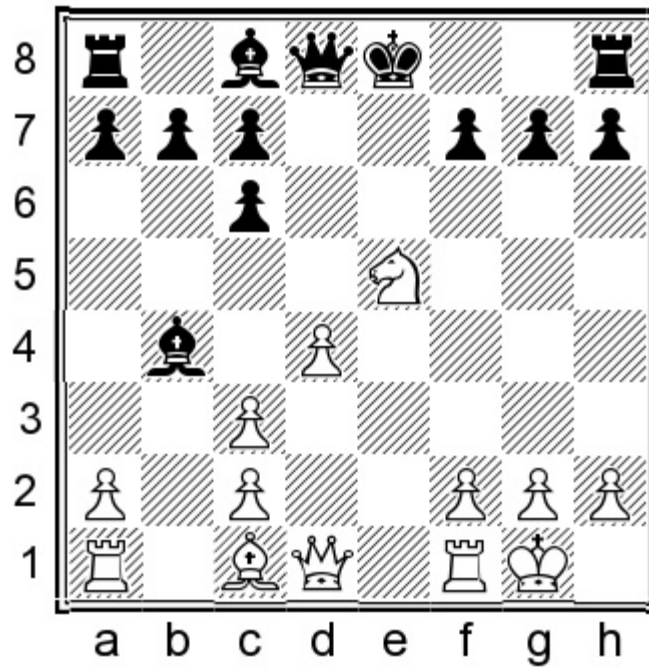


9...c5 10.♞b3 ♚xd1 11.♙xd1 b6 Black has an excellent version of the endgame, partly due to White's damaged structure, but also because Black's rooks can be easily connected, not to mention White's misplaced knight.

## 7...♞xe4 8.0-0

8.♚f3N is not dangerous. Out of a few playable moves, 8...♚d5! looks most precise, with somewhat better chances for Black.

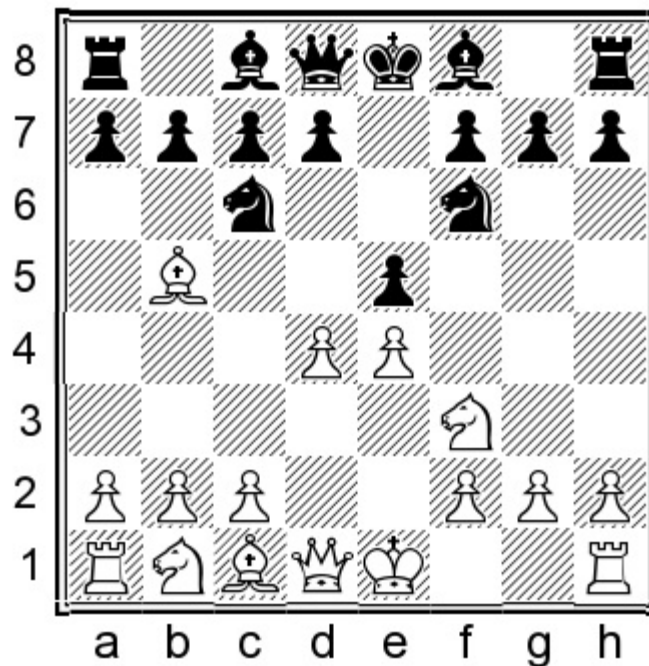
## 8...♞xc3 9.bxc3



9...♙d6 10.♙f4 0-0

Black was slightly better due to the bishop pair in Kovac – Kuskov, Liptovsky Mikulas 2018.

C) 4.d4



This aggressive move has been known for more than 150 years! As in some gambit lines after 3.♙c4 and d2-d4, White's main idea is to liquidate the e5-pawn as soon as possible in order to follow up with e4-e5, seizing space and chasing the f6-knight.

4...♘xd4!?

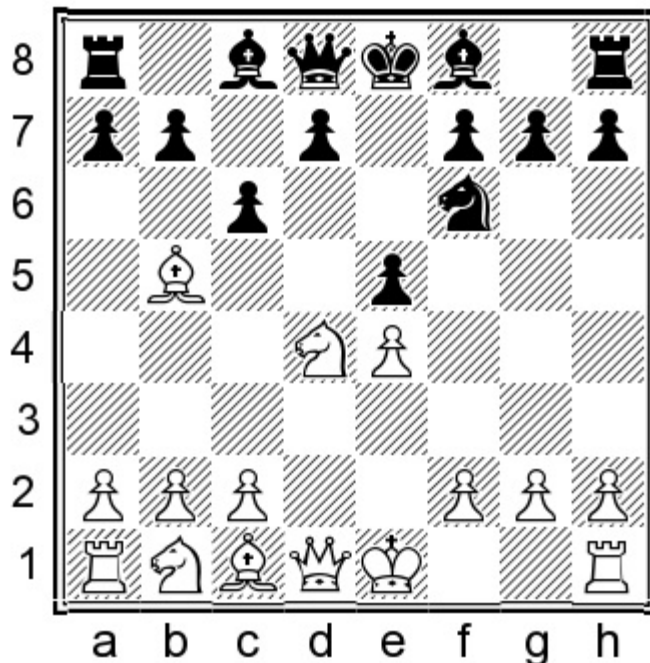
This is a rare choice but I find it logical to prepare ...c7-c6.

Of course there is nothing wrong with the more common 4...exd4 5.e5 ♞e4 6.0-0 a6 7.♙a4, reaching a well-known theoretical position which usually arises via 3...a6.

### 5.♞xd4 c6!

This intermediate move is essential!

5...exd4?! 6.e5 ♞d5 7.♙xd4 c6 8.♙c4 is much less attractive.

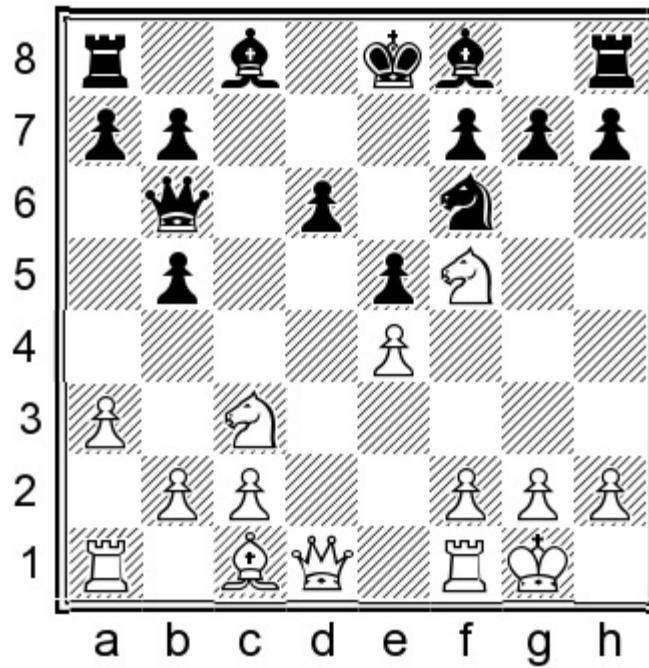


### 6.♙c4

The timid 6.♞f3?! cxb5 7.♞xe5 ♙e7 8.♙d4 d6 will leave White a pawn down for no real compensation after e4 falls.

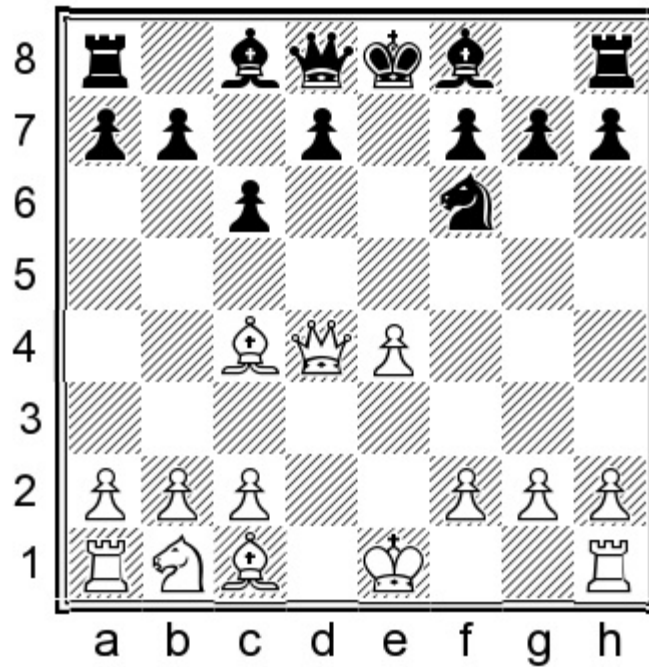
6.♙e2 is too passive, and 6...exd4 7.♙xd4 d5 8.exd5 ♙xd5 9.♙xd5 ♞xd5 gave Black the more pleasant side of the queenless middlegame in Martin Del Campo – Krykun, Charlotte 2020.

6.0-0!? is slightly trickier, but an excellent reply is: 6...♙b6! (6...exd4 7.e5 would justify White's previous move.) 7.♞f5 cxb5 8.♞c3 d6 White will struggle to prove sufficient compensation. For instance, after 9.a3, as seen in Rombaldoni – Codenotti, Porto Mannu 2015, Black should play:



9...♔xf5 10.exf5 h6 11.♚d3 a6 12.♕e3 ♖c6 The spare b-pawn gives Black the advantage.

6...exd4 7.♚xd4



7...♚b6!

Trading queens definitely suits Black in the present situation.

7...d5 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.♘c3 offers White some nagging pressure with no risk.

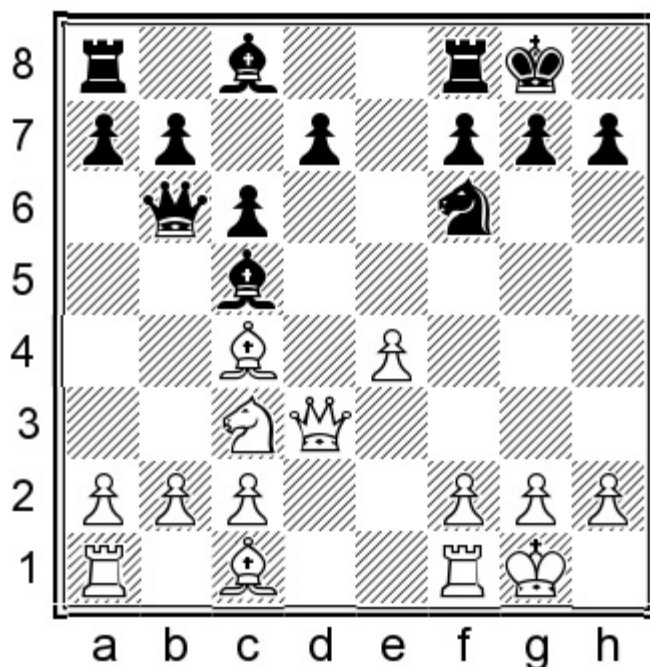
8.♚d3

Keeping the queens on is the most ambitious approach, but Black has little to fear.

8. ♖xb6 axb6 9. ♕d3 d5 gave Black a comfortable game in Kosteniuk – Lysyj, Internet 2020.

I also checked the untested yet natural 8. ♖e5†N, after which 8... ♕e7 9. 0-0 d6 10. ♖g3 0-0 11. ♗c3 ♜e8 offers Black sufficient counterplay along the e-file.

8... ♕c5 9. 0-0 0-0 10. ♗c3



10... ♕c7

Recentralizing the queen and making way for the following pawn advance.

11. ♖f3 b5 12. ♕d3 ♜e8

Black had a full share of the chances in Mamedov – E. Hansen, Doha 2014.

## Conclusion

This final chapter has dealt with some miscellaneous options after 1. e4 e5 2. ♗f3 ♗c6 3. ♕b5 ♗f6.

4. ♖e2 defends the e4-pawn but, in comparison to 4.d3, White maintains the option of an early d2-d4. However, there is also a downside: the queen may prove to be awkwardly placed, especially after Black puts a rook on e8. My recommendation of 4... ♕d6!? enables Black to quickly complete kingside development and reach a harmonious position.

4. ♕xc6 has been employed by many strong grandmasters but cannot be considered a promising

weapon against the Berlin, as 4...dxc6 leads to a version of the Exchange Ruy Lopez where White is practically a tempo down, and Black can comfortably place the bishop on d6. A noteworthy line is 5.♘c3 ♕d6 6.d4, when Black can quickly switch to counterattacking measures with 6...♕b4!, putting the e4-pawn under strong pressure.

Finally, 4.d4 is a well-known gambit, which I recommend meeting with 4...♘xd4!? 5.♘xd4 c6!, which may throw your opponents off guard. This important intermediate move prepares a timely ...♙b6, after which all of Black's development problems are solved.

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