THE MODERNIZED O'KELLY SICILIAN

Jan Boekelman

Thinkers Publishing

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The Modernized O'Kelly Sicilian

by

Jan Boekelman

Thinkers Publishing 2022

www.thinkerspublishing.com

First edition 2022 by Thinkers Publishing

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All sales or enquiries should be directed to Thinkers Publishing, 9850 Landegem, Belgium.

Email: info@thinkerspublishing.com

Website: www.thinkerspublishing.com

Managing Editor: Adrien Demuth

Assistant Editor: Daniël Vanheirzeele

Proofreading: Bob Holliman

Software: Hub van de Laar

Cover Design: Philippe Tonnard

Graphic Artist: Philippe Tonnard

Production: BESTinGraphics

ISBN: 9789464201666

D/2022/13732/36

Key to Symbols

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

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Foreword

Writing forewords is usually a routine task. The person who writes the foreword introduces the subject matter and how the author's contribution ties into the subject matter. It is common for the author and the person who writes the foreword to know each other quite well. But in this case, I have never met Jan Boekelman from the Netherlands therefore I must skip the usual comments about the author and discuss the author's text.

The content had a profound enough impact on me that I decided to add the O'Kelly to my repertoire within a short period of time when participating in my first luckless US championship this year. While I lost both of my games to Super GM Sam Shankland and one of the best players in the world, GM Wesley So, the outcome of both openings was more than satisfactory for me. Given that I only added the O'Kelly as a surprise weapon for one game, it was pretty remarkable that it worked the second time since GM So could easily have anticipated facing it.

You are in for a treat. Jan Boekelman is either a chess enthusiast who likes to learn different openings in-depth, a very competitive player or a bit of both. In either case Jan has provided you with a playable repertoire out of a somewhat sideline of an opening. This is something which no one has dared to attempt before.

I offer the following suggestions to maximize your benefit from this book.
1. Try to expand your knowledge in the 3.c3 variation and go beyond the book's content.
2. Deepen your knowledge in the 3.c4 variation and do not play it before you know it well.
3. Study the games of super GM Vladislav Artemiev as he has had a relatively successful run with this opening in rapid online events.

Generally, I am a man of few words, which also applies to this foreword. I hope you find as much fun as I had while reading this book and learn the nuances of this opening while enjoying the newest evaluation of modern engines in this opening!

GM Elshan Moradiabadi
Durham, North Carolina, United States of America, October 2022.

Preface

Interest in the Sicilian O'Kelly Variation

Count Albéric O'Kelly de Galway

As a result of the COVID pandemic there has been a soaring increase in the number of games as players have undertaken rapid and blitz. This increased chess activity has also seen an increasing interest in new ways to play the opening or to refresh old and forgotten lines. One of the openings benefitting from this trend has been the Sicilian O'Kelly which has recently attracted considerable attention. Apart from the surprise value it still carries, especially at the club level, the opening is attractive as it is based on sound Sicilian principles. Those players already familiar with the Sicilian Defence will find the O'Kelly Variation an easy fit into their repertoire.

The Sicilian O'Kelly is named after Albéric Joseph Rodolphe Marie Robert Ghislain O'Kelly de Galway (*pictured*), who lived from 17 May 1911 to 3 October 1980. O'Kelly was a Belgian chess grandmaster (1956), an international correspondence chess grandmaster (1962), and the third ICCF world champion in correspondence chess (1959–1962). O'Kelly won the Belgian championships thirteen times between 1937 and 1959. He placed first at Beverwijk 1946. In 1947 he became one of Europe's leading players having finished first at the 1947 European Zonal tournament at Hilversum. He earned the IM title in 1950 which was the first year the title was awarded. In his youth he took lessons from the legendary Akiba Rubenstein.

For many years O'Kelly was a strong grandmaster in both over-the-board and correspondence play. During the 4th Capablanca Memorial (Havana, 1965) he drew with Black against future world champion Robert Fischer using a Ruy Lopez Marshall Attack. In that tournament Fischer famously played his games by telex from the Marshall Chess Club in New York.

O'Kelly descended from John O'Kelly, an Irish-born British army officer who was granted a nobility title in 1720 in the then Austrian Low Countries. Consequently, he was often styled as 'Count O'Kelly de Galway', for example on the front cover of his 1965 book about Tigran Petrosian.

A short history

Christof Sielecki

2...a6 in the Sicilian was already known long before O'Kelly adopted it regularly. During his initial use its application was more trial and error as key moves following 3.d4 did not demonstrate a good positional understanding of the opening. Straight after the second world war the opening became very fashionable. In 1948 former World Champion Max Euwe became the first to play the typical 5...e5 after 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3. The ...e5 (5...e5) maneuver in the Open Sicilian would later become common ground in variations like the Najdorf, the Sveshnikov and the Kalashnikov. During the next few years O'Kelly himself was the one playing the opening on a consistent basis, with excellent results for Black. Soon a number of strong masters and grandmasters joined in the exploration of this opening set up. Nicolas Rossolimo, Lodewijk Prins, Enrico Paoli and Laszlo

Szabo all used the O'Kelly frequently from 1949. Max Euwe played the O'Kelly various times around 1950. Mark Taimanov picked up the O'Kelly in the second half of the 1950s and played it as one of his main defences against 1.e4 until the mid-1970s.

Presently several elite players have employed the O'Kelly as well, although many of them only use it in rapid and blitz or against weak opposition. A number of grandmasters are an exception to this rule and have shown their ongoing commitment to the O'Kelly in games with classical time limits against strong opposition, notably Vladislav Artemiev, Nikita Vitiugov, Dmitry Andreikin, and Richard Rapport.

Artemiev leads the way in particular. The number of games in the databases in which he played the O'Kelly is high and show many new ideas introduced into existing lines. His enthusiasm for the O'Kelly is strong and he has achieved a healthy positive score with Black against strong opponents.

Important theory

Many Sicilian repertoire books treat the O'Kelly from a White perspective and while I will elaborate on the existing theory the repertoire books currently tend to give superficial analysis whicle not challenging the longevity of the O'Kelly. From Black's perspective there exist a few current resources. W. John Lutes wrote the first complete book on the O'Kelly. The book is a bit difficult to navigate, but it contains some interesting chapters and covers the entire opening spectrum. With the increased interest in the O'Kelly, more publishers have recently published work on the O'Kelly. Andrew Martin presents a nice set of full games which serves as a good primer to an opening repertoire for Black based on the O'Kelly. Christof Sielecki (*pictured,still with hair!*) in his Chessable course is more thorough. Due to the nature of the Chessable approach, he cannot give a full overview of the O'Kelly from Black's perspective, but he shows a good selection of lines covering important highlights. I usually agree with the theoretical choices he makes. The course is a welcome addition to the book you hold in your hand.

Acknowledgements

Kirill Georgiev

A thank you to Daniel Vanheirzeele and his colleagues at Thinkers Publishing for the opportunity to publish this book. Their enthusiasm and understanding provided an excellent breeding ground for such an effort.

A thank you as well to Elshan Moradiabadi who was so kind to write the foreword to this book.

At the grandmaster level the O'Kelly has yet to become a mainstream opening against 1.e4. After Teimour Radjabov's fiasco against Fabiano Caruana in the Candidates Tournament of 2022 that will probably not change any time soon. As a result, there is still a lot to be discovered. I have based this book mainly on my own insight and practice with it on Chess.com and

lichess.org. By doing so I have tested my own ideas about this opening. Therefore, I must apologize in advance for the disproportionate number of my own games that appear in these pages. A thank you to all of my opponents who kindly let me play the O'Kelly against them! A big thank you in particular to Kiril Georgiev (*pictured*) who employed the 3.c3 variation on many occasions but, as one might expect, he has yet to find a refutation.

Another great thank you to my beloved partner Leonoor, who supported me so kindly during the time I was working on this book.

In summary

The O'Kelly is the 5th most popular response to 2.♘f3 in the Sicilian. It is a sound weapon and still contains a lot of surprise value. You will notice this in the time White generally takes for his third move when you play on one of the internet platforms. With some general knowledge about the Sicilian Defence and good theoretical preparation, built on the basis of the lines presented in this book, you will have an excellent starting point to obtain good results in this intriguing chess opening.

Jan Boekelman
Overveen, the Netherlands

Theoretical Overview

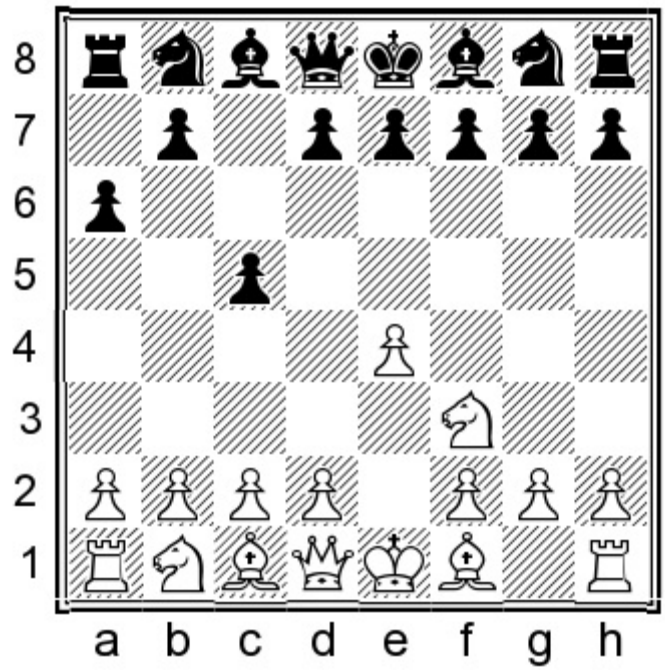
1.e4 c5

Black chooses the Sicilian Defence, an opening normally used by ambitious Black players. It general the Sicilian is the most popular response to 1.e4.

2.♘f3

White develops his knight naturally prior to playing d4 to reach the open variations of the Sicilian. In chapter 7 of the book, I will demonstrate that Black can do good business with an early...a6 against a number of anti-Sicilians as well, i.e. the Morra Gambit (2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 a6), the Alapin (2.c3 a6), the Chameleon (2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2), the Grand Prix (2.♘c3 a6 3.f4) and the Closed Sicilian (2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 and various other third moves). Our knowledge of the O´Kelly will ensure that we can apply the setups with an early ...a6 in those systems as well.

2...a6



The modest 2...a6 is the starting point of the O'Kelly Variation. Now White has various options:

Chapter 1: 3. others – Slow setups by White
Chapter 2: 3.d4 – the Routine Open Sicilian
Chapter 3: 3.c4 – the Maroczy Bind
Chapter 4: 3.c3 – the Delayed Alapin
Chapter 5 & 6: 3.♘c3 – the Sicilian Kan

White's slow setups (e.g., 3.b3, 3.d3 or 3.g3) will be countered with a Botvinnik system, i.e., ...♘c6,

...g6, ...♗g7, ...e5 and ...♘ge7. In the closed nature structures of the Botvinnik Black will have excellent chances. Often 2...a6 is a welcome addition to Black's development setup.

In part II we analyze the routine 3.d4. This move has a dubious reputation for some reason as Black actually has to be precise to maintain the balance. More often than not, Black should not open the centre with a quick ...d5 (after the thematic 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 etc.), which was the standard practice in the early years of the opening. New and more sophisticated methods of a more positional nature have since been developed that offer Black something to play for with less risk and more opportunity.

After the enthusiasm for 3.d4 waned, White began exploring other methods of fighting the O'Kelly. A principled one is 3.c4 (Chapter 3), as Black is not in a position to close the centre quickly with ...e5. White takes a lot of space like in the Maroczy Bind. One consideration to bear in mind is that White has to make sure that he stays within his opening repertoire as Black may decide to play 3...e6 (4.d4) which after 4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 leads to a 5.c4 Sicilian Kan. Negi explains in his book that that is the reason he cannot recommend 3.c4 against the O'Kelly, as his main line Sicilian Kan is played with 5.♗d3. In this book I will examine the thematic 3...♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5. At this point 6.♘f5 is the critical choice when I examine the modern 6...d6, followed by 7...g6, which is Artemiev's favourite, as well as the classical 6...d5.

Another method to try to show that 2...a6 is less useful than 2.♘f3 is the transposition into a late Alapin with 3.c3 (Chapter 4). Theorists like Negi and Khalifman recommend this approach in their highly valued repertoire series. There are many ways to respond to this setup. The current day elite prefer 3...d5 4.exd5 ♕xd5, playing against an isolated white d-pawn with the queen on d5. I will investigate this mainstream solution in a separate chapter. This book makes a case for 3...d5 4.exd5 ♘f6, intending to take the pawn on d5 with the knight. This is less well known and relatively aggressive as it may involve the long-term sacrifice of material by Black. Previously this setup was not held in high esteem, but I will show that it is very much alive and kicking.

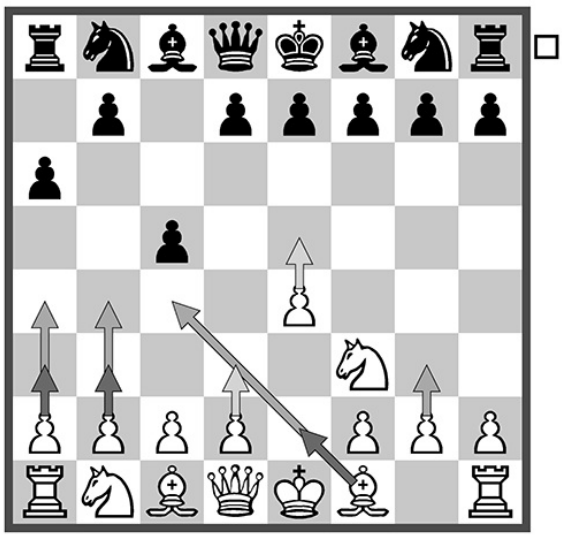
If White plays the clever 3.♘c3, the O'Kelly player essentially has three options. He can select one of the specialized systems recommended by some other books on the O'Kelly. These systems tend to place Black in cramped positions with a high Benoni content, unlike the open positions we aim for in a Sicilian. Alternatively, he can play a Sicilian Najdorf. This is typically the choice of grandmasters with the O'Kelly in their repertoire. As we all know playing the Najdorf is a rather laborious challenge for the non-professional player. That is the reason this book has chosen the third option, the Sicilian Kan. The Kan is an elegant system that arises after 3...e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4. I will investigate the classical 5...♕c7. The positions that arise after that move are strategic in nature and quite interesting. A lot of attention has been paid lately to the more aggressive 5...b5, e.g., by Adrien Demuth in his excellent "The Modernized Sicilian Kan", and Christof Sielecki in his Chessable course. That is another good reason to look at the alternative 5...♕c7 in this book. The Kan will give Black a fair share of chances in the ensuing game.

That is the overview of what is covered in this book. It has been very rewarding to work on such an interesting and respectable system as the Sicilian O'Kelly. Black already has an answer to White's 2.♘f3. The underlying development plans and structures are sound, natural and easy to understand

especially if you have some basic knowledge of the Sicilian as a whole. White players are generally not well prepared for the O'Kelly. Recent theoretical developments have further enhanced Black's case. The Sicilian O'Kelly gives Black an excellent opportunity to leave the opening phase in positions with mutual chances, both in theory and in practice. I hope this book contributes to the knowledge of the O'Kelly variation in general and will further increase the enthusiasm for using it in practice.

Chapter 1
Slow Set-Ups By White

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.--



Chapter Guide

Chapter 1 – Slow Set-Ups By White

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6

a) 3.--

b) 3.b4 - The Wing Gambit

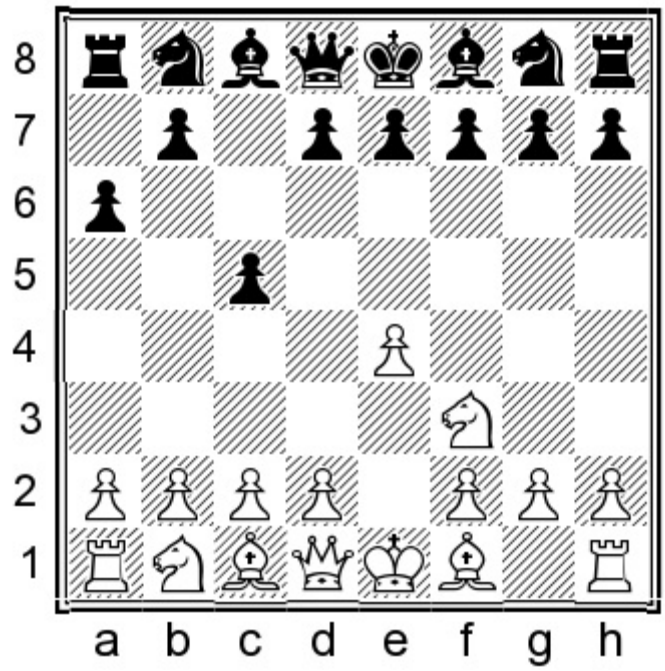
c) 3.b3

d) 3.d3 – The King's Indian Attack

e) 3.g3 – The Modern King's Indian Attack

a) 3.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6



Position after: 2...a6

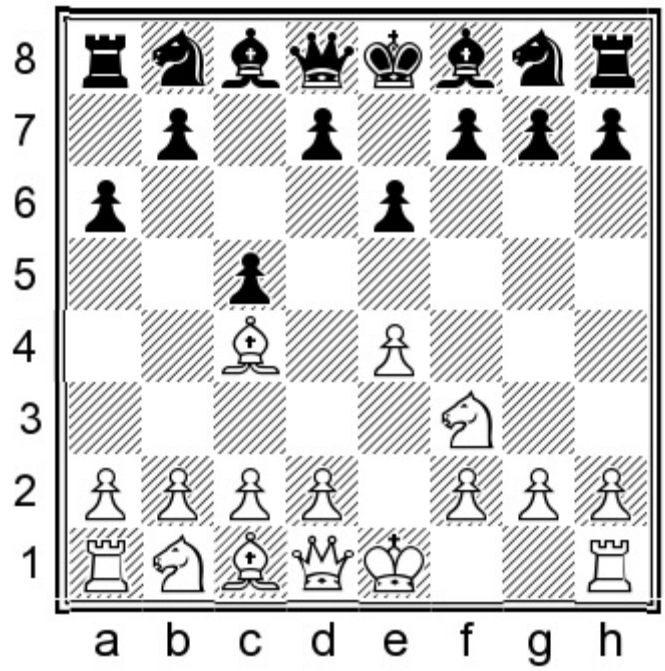
In this chapter we examine odd third moves by White.

3.a4

A knee-jerk reaction to Black's second move. Black's queenside expansion has been prevented, but Black's ...a6 is much more useful than White's a4 in the positions which will follow. Now Black must decide which of the many open Sicilians he wants to play.

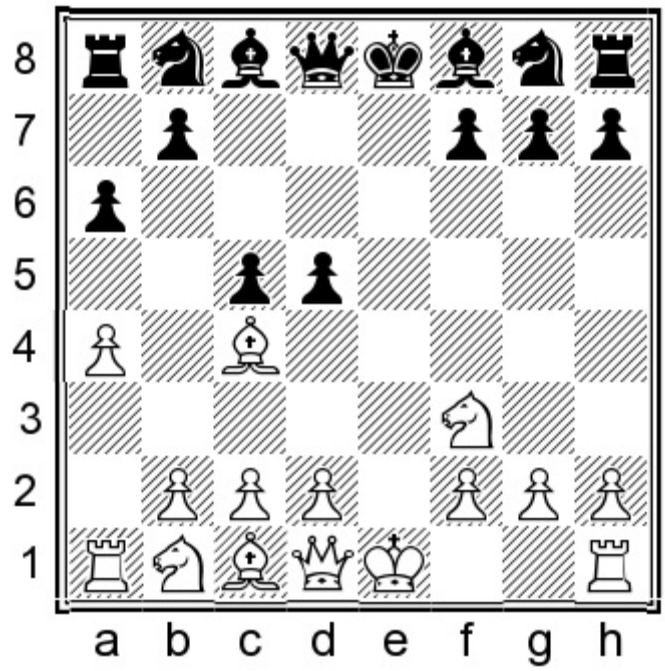
A) 3.e5?! ♘c6 4.♘c3 g6 5.♗c4 ♗g7 6.♕e2 e6∓ White's setup is artificial.

B) 3.♗c4 This is one of the less impressive continuations for White and it is mainly seen at the amateur level. The c4 square is not a secure place for the bishop was White will lose time after ...d5 or ...b5. 3...e6! [3...b5 4.♗d5! is not what we want.]



Position after: 3...e6!

B1) 4.a4 d5! With instant equality. 5.exd5 exd5



Position after: 5...exd5

Now White has to retreat the bishop as there is no ♗b5+.

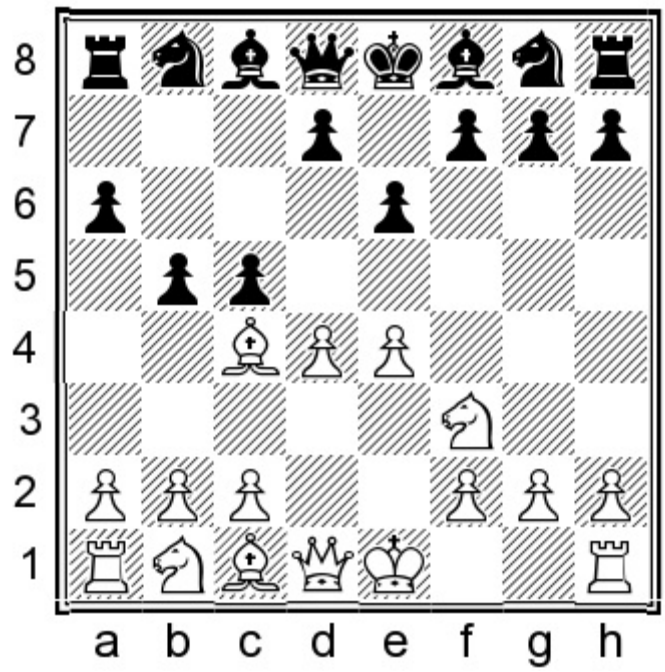
B1.1) 6.♗a2 After this move Black can develop naturally and castle quickly to reach a better position. Black should not allow ♗g5 by White. Outside of this concern Black has an easy game. 6...♘f6 7.0-0 ♗e7 8.♘c3 0-0 9.♖e1 ♘c6 10.d3 ♘b4 11.♗b3 h6! 12.♗f4 ♗e6 13.h3 ♖c8∓ Black is

about to play ...c5-c4, putting White's light-squared bishop on cold ice.

B1.2) 6.♗e2 ♘f6 7.0-0 ♗d6 8.d4 0-0 9.dxc5 ♗xc5 10.♘c3 h6∓ White plays a theoretical position from the Tarrasch French, but waisted two tempi, one on the not very useful a4 and one on the extra move ♗f1-c4-e2.

B2) 4.♘c3 b5! 5.♗e2 ♗b7 6.d4 [6.a3 b4∓] 6...b4 7.♘b1 ♗xe4 8.dxc5 ♗xc5 9.0-0 ♘f6∓ 0-1 (35) Da Silva, A (1896) – Rodriguez Vila, A (2505) Cuiaba 2011.

B3) 4.d4 b5!



Position after: 4...b5!

If you like to play the Kan this is the best way to do it. [4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♘f6 6.♘c3 ♕c7 7.♗b3! b5= is an excellent alternative with a Kan character, but in this line White has not lost a tempo.] 5.♗e2 [5.♗d3 c4 6.♗e2 ♘f6 7.e5 ♘d5 8.0-0 ♗b7=] 5...cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♗b7= Black plays the Sicilian Kan with an extra tempo. 0-1 (54) Ekmescic, E (1862) – Bogut, Z (2426) Neum 2014.

C) 3.a3!? Normally this move has no independent meaning. 3...e6 [3...♘c6 4.b4!? The delayed wing gambit is one idea for White.] 4.d4 [4.b4 cxb4 takes us into the O'Kelly Wing Gambit, treated under 3.b4.] 4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♘f6 6.♘c3 ♕c7 transposes to the Sicilian Kan with an early a3.

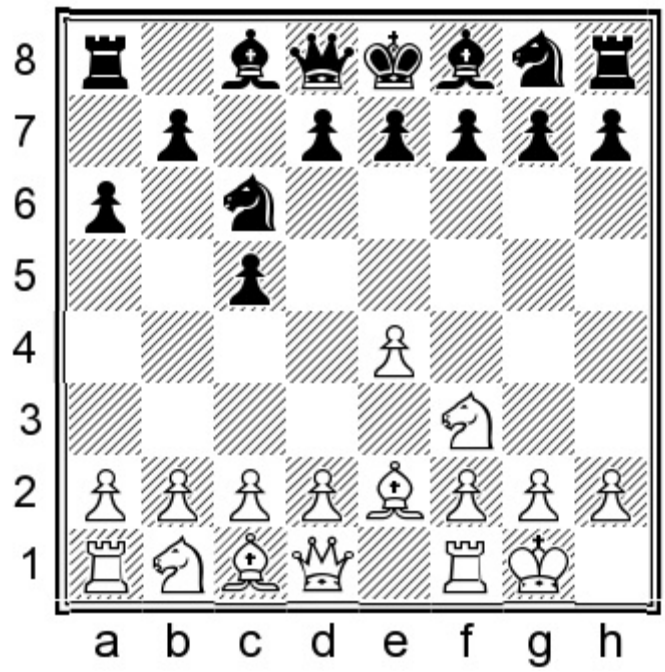
D) 3.♗e2!? A subtle move which has been played more than 200 times. It has been tried by strong grandmasters like Najer, Zvjaginsev and Fedorchuk. White aims for a regular Open Sicilian with an early ♗e2, without having to learn reams of theory about the O'Kelly. Black must avoid move order tricks that may place him in a system outside his repertoire with a later d2-d4. At the same time White has a few ideas inspired by IM Michael Basman based on an early e4-e5, followed by the pawn sacrifice b2-b4.

D1) 3...e6 The recipe against 3.♘c3 does not work here. 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 takes us into a line of

the Sicilian Kan (5.♗e2) which is outside our repertoire and actually quite dangerous.

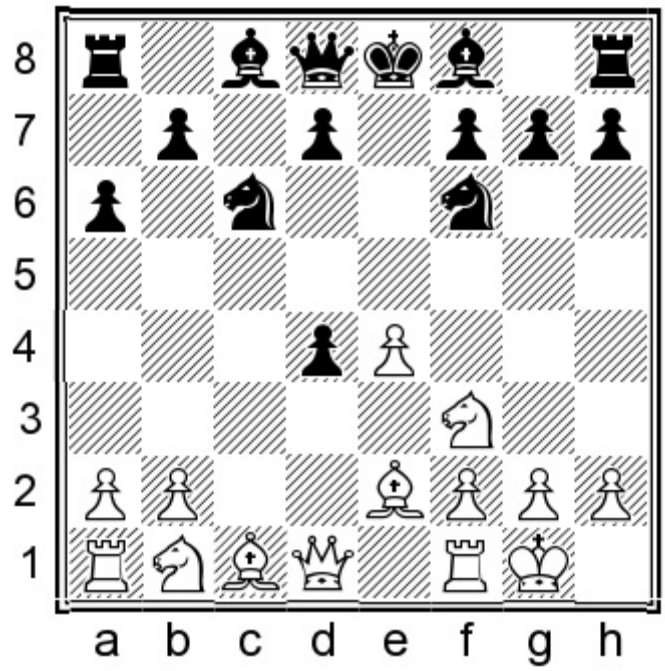
D2) 3...b5 The preference of the other O'Kelly veteran Kazakovskiy. Black combines the approaches in the Sicilian Kan (after a subsequent d4) with those of the Closed Sicilian.

D3) 3...♘c6! I like this move the most. It is in line with the recommendations against other slow systems by White and we are aiming for a Botvinnik setup. 4.0-0



Position after: 4.0-0

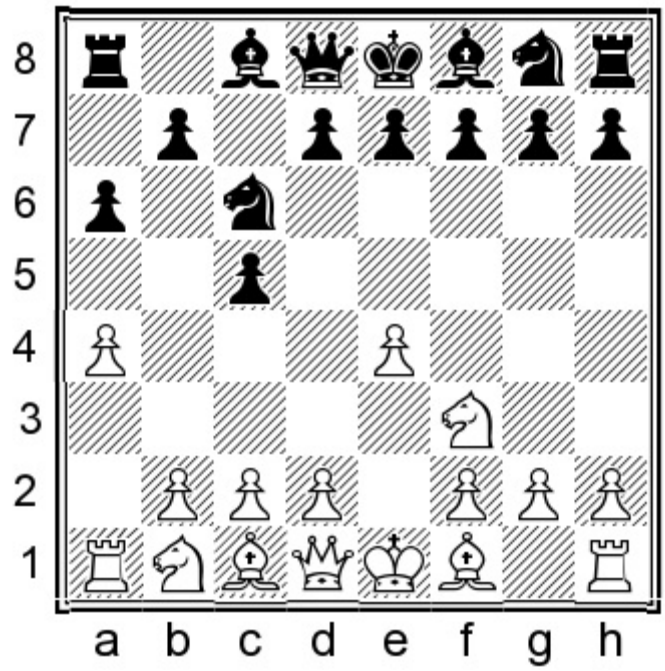
[4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♘f6 6.♘c3 e5! brings us into an attractive Svesnikov Variation similar to those we will see later in the genuine O'Kelly.] 4...e5! A precise move. [4...♘f6 5.e5 ♘g4 6.b4!?⩱ is one of Basman's famous pawn sacrifices which I would rather avoid, 0-1 (26) Basman, M – Franklin, M London 1974.] 5.c3 Against other moves Black plays his familiar Botvinnik plan. 5...♘f6! 6.d4 [6.d3 d5! 7.♘bd2 ♗e7= Black plays an Old Indian with inverted colors where the move 2...a6 fits nicely in that opening. At the right time Black will take more space on the queenside with b7-b5.] 6...cxd4 7.cxd4 exd4



Position after: 7...exd4

8.♘xd4 [8.e5 ♘e4 9.♖e1 ♗e7 10.♗f1 d5 11.exd6 ♘xd6 12.♘xd4 ♘xd4 13.♕xd4 0-0=] 8...♗c5 9.♗e3 ♕b6 10.♘f5 0-0=

3...♘c6



Position after: 3...♘c6

The advantage of this move is that if White does not play d4 Black can employ the Botvinnik

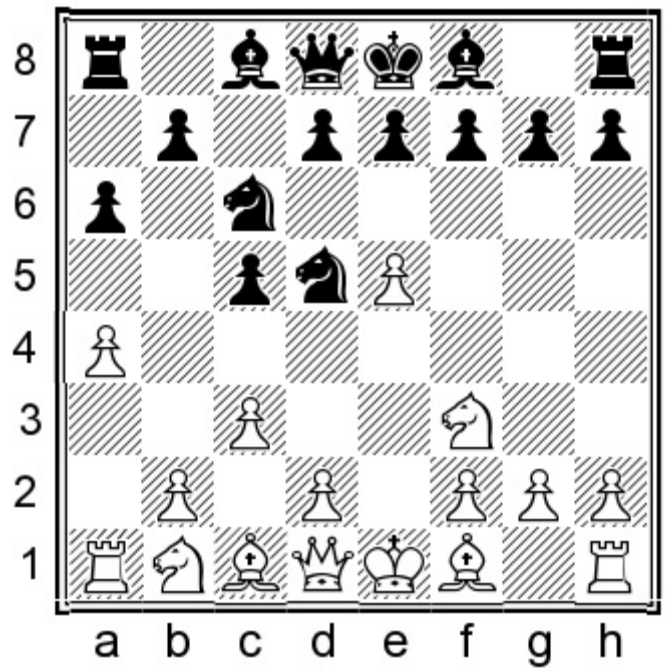
structure, as we recommend after 3.d3, 3.g3 and 3.b3. One advantage of the O'Kelly move order is that Black need not worry about the Rossolimo!

3...e6 Nothing wrong with a Sicilian Kan either.

4.d4

A) 4.♗c4 transposes to 3. ♗c4.

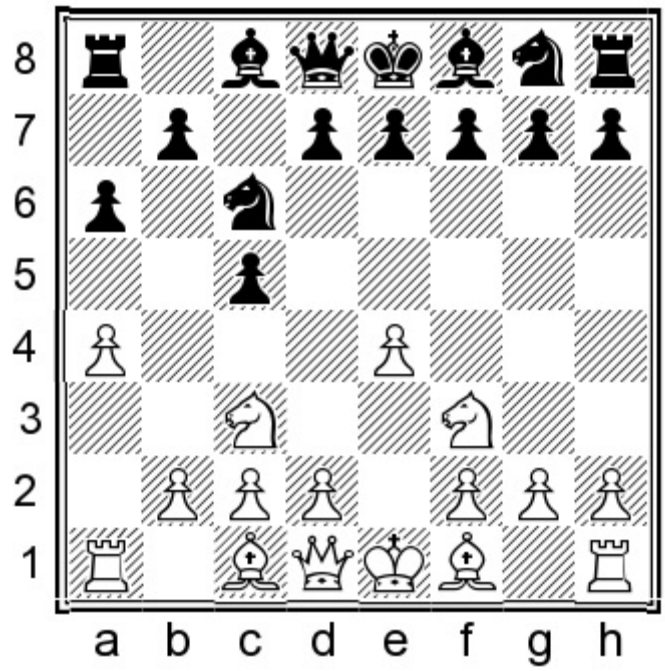
B) 4.c3 A delayed Alapin. 4...♘f6! 4...d5 is the alternative. 5.e5 [5.♗d3 d5 6.exd5 ♕xd5∓] 5...♘d5



Position after: 5...♘d5

6.♗c4 [The regular 6.d4 cxd4 7.cxd4 d6 8.♗c4 allows 8...♘db4!∓.] 6...e6! The knight is less secure on b6 as we have moved the a-pawn. 7.0-0 d6=

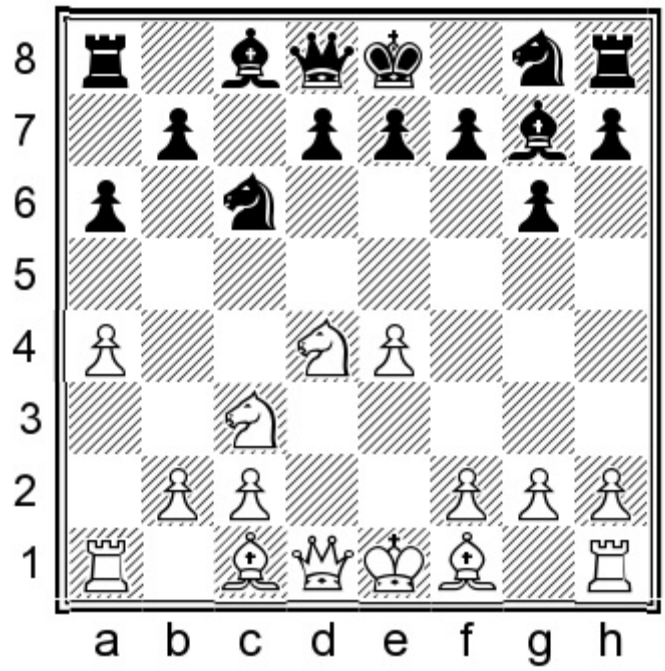
C) 4.♘c3 White postpones deciding if he wants an Open Sicilian for a move.



Position after: 4.♘c3

C1) 4...♘f6 5.d4 [The most popular move, 5.♗c4 followed by Black's 5...e6, is treated under the move order 2.♘c3 a6 3.♗c4 e6 4.a4 ♘c6 5.♘f3 ♘f6.] 5...cxd4 6.♘xd4 e5 This requires some knowledge of the Svesnikov, but White has to do without the optimal ♘db5. 7.♘f5 d5 8.exd5 ♗xf5 9.dxc6 bxc6 10.♕f3 ♕c8 11.♗g5 ♘d5 12.♘xd5 cxd5 13.♕xd5 ♗b4+ 14.c3 ♗xc3+ 15.bxc3 ♕xc3+ 16.♔e2 ♖b8 17.♖d1 0-0 18.♗e3 ♗e6

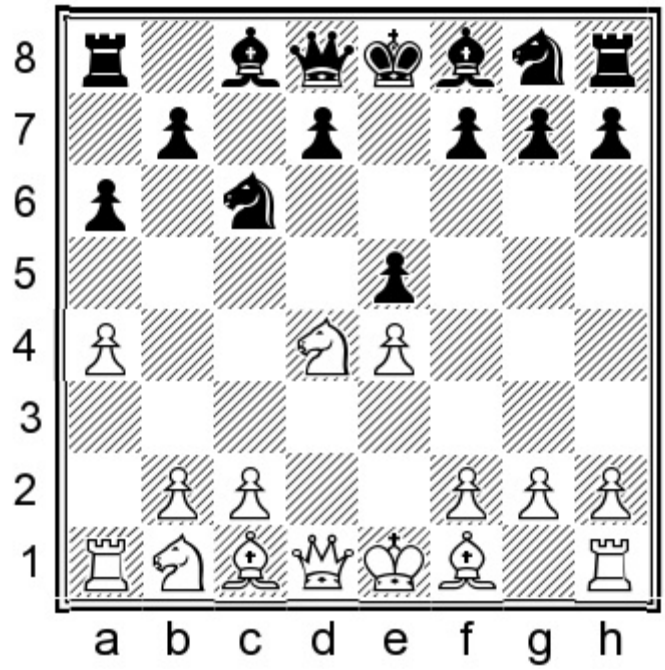
C2) 4...g6 This requires some knowledge of the Dragon, but with the white pawn on a4 White has to do without the most aggressive setups with 0-0-0. 5.d4 [5.♗c4!?] 5...cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♗g7



Position after: 6...♗g7

7.♗e3 [7.♘de2 ♖b8 8.g3 b5 9.axb5 axb5 10.♗g2 b4 11.♘d5 e6 12.♘e3 ♘ge7 13.0-0 0-0 14.f4 ♕b6∓ ½ – ½ (54) Olszewski, M (2525) – Saric, I (2652) Tornelo 2020.] 7...♘f6 8.♘b3 0-0 9.♗e2 d6 10.0-0 ♗e6= ½ – ½ (51) Yu, R (2439) – Wang, H (2728) Ningbo 2011.

4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5!



Position after: 5...e5!

Black plays an improved Kalashnikov. This looks very much like the lines we will investigate after 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5. White's a4 is not very useful, whereas Black's ...♘c6/...a6 are.

6.♘b3

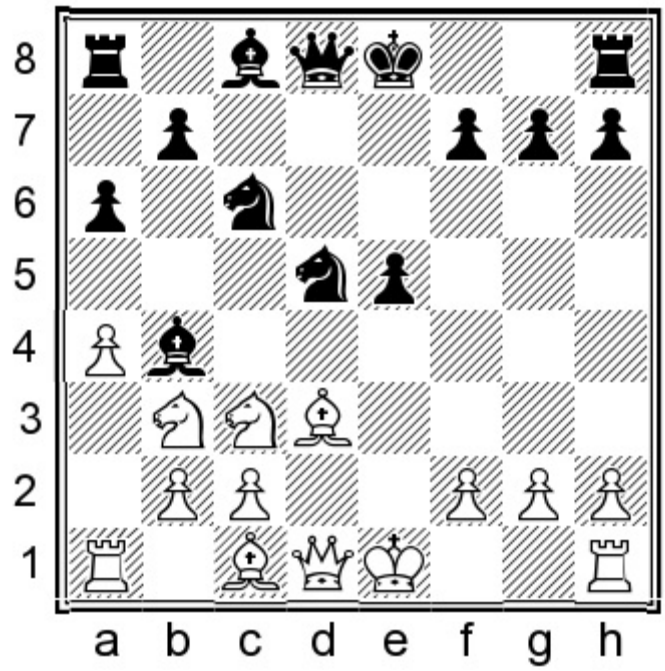
A) 6.♘f5!? d5 7.exd5 ♗xf5 8.dxc6 ♕xd1+ 9.♔xd1 bxc6= 10.♗e3 ♘f6 11.♘d2 ♘d5 12.♘c4 f6!= [12...♗e7?! 13.♘xe5± 1-0 (39) Diatsintos, A (2115) – Gogolis, A (2280) Athens 1996]

B) 6.♘e2 ♗c5 7.♘g3 d6 8.♗e2 ♘f6 9.0-0 0-0=

6...♘f6 7.♘c3 ♗b4 8.♗g5

A) 8.♗c4 ♘xe4! 9.♕d5 ♘d6 10.0-0 0-0∓

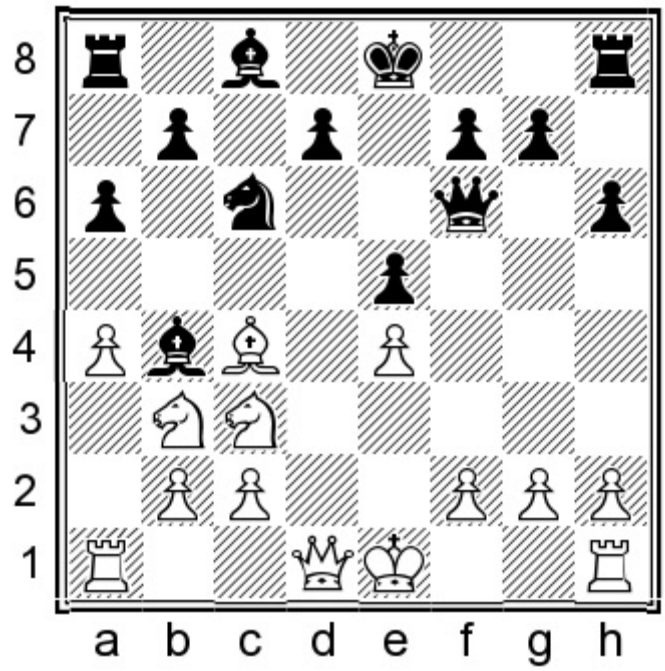
B) 8.♗d3 d5 9.exd5 ♘xd5



Position after: 9...♘xd5

10.0-0 [10.♗d2 ♗e6 11.0-0 0-0 12.♗e4 ♘de7∓ 0-1 (25) Lee, J – Zuk, R (2350) Canada 1984] 10...♘xc3 11.bxc3 ♗xc3 12.♗a3 ♕c7∓ followed by ...♗b4.

8...h6 9.♗xf6 ♕xf6 10.♗c4



Position after: 10.♗c4

10...♘e7 11.0-0 ♗xc3 12.bxc3 d6 13.♕d3 0-0=

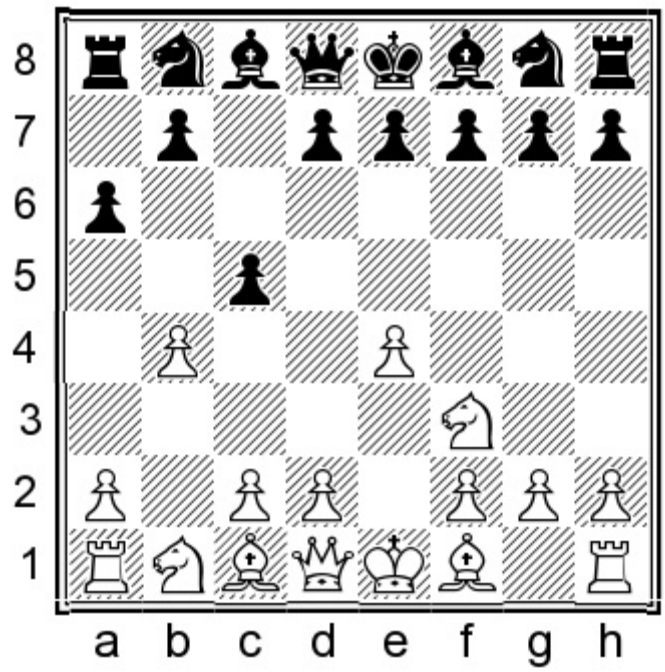
0-1 (33) Montes de Oca, J (2121) – Pedro, F (2154) Pinamar 2006. As we will see more often in this repertoire, White has the familiar damaged pawn structure, compensated by Black's backward pawn on d6 and the hole on d5. Chances are balanced.

Conclusion

Moves like 3.e5, 3.a3, 3.♗c4, 3 ♗e2 and 3.a4 are absolutely no concern to Black. With common sense development Black can easily reach an equal game, if not aim for more. Against the subtle 3.♗e2 Black is advised to play 3...♘c6 in order to avoid a transposition into a system outside our repertoire. Against 3.a4 Black may choose his preferred Open Sicilian system which has been improved due to the inclusion of ...a6 and a4. I recommend an improved Kalashnikov.

b) 3.b4 - The Wing Gambit

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.b4



Position after: 3.b4

This gambit idea originates from Paul Keres in the 1930s. It is the recommendation of Gawain Jones in his book "How to beat the Sicilian". White plays the delayed Sicilian Wing Gambit assessing that the b2-b4-gambit as more effective one move later because Black has "wasted" a tempo on 2...a6. Practice shows that 2...a6 is actually quite useful in many cases and the knight on f3 is not always optimal. With deliberate play Black should be better out of the opening against this gambit.

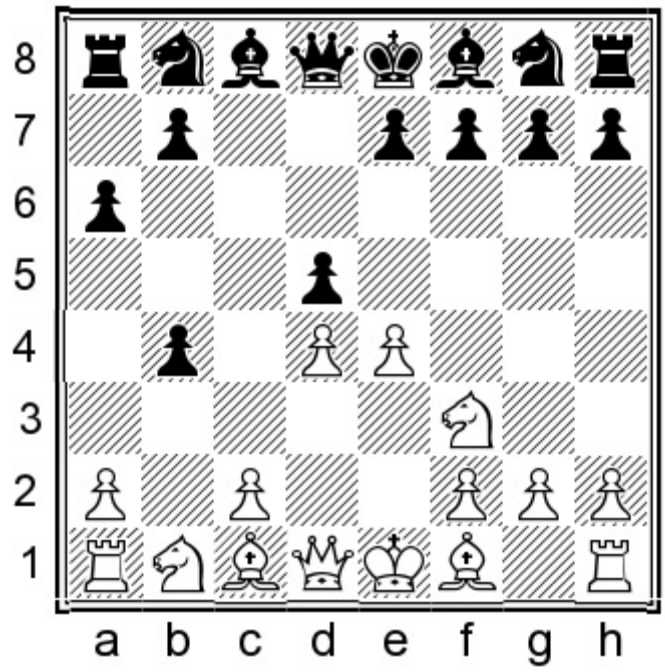
3...cxb4

There is a large following who decline the gambit with 4...d6 but the age-old saying that "the best way to refute a gambit is to accept it" is also true here.

4.a3

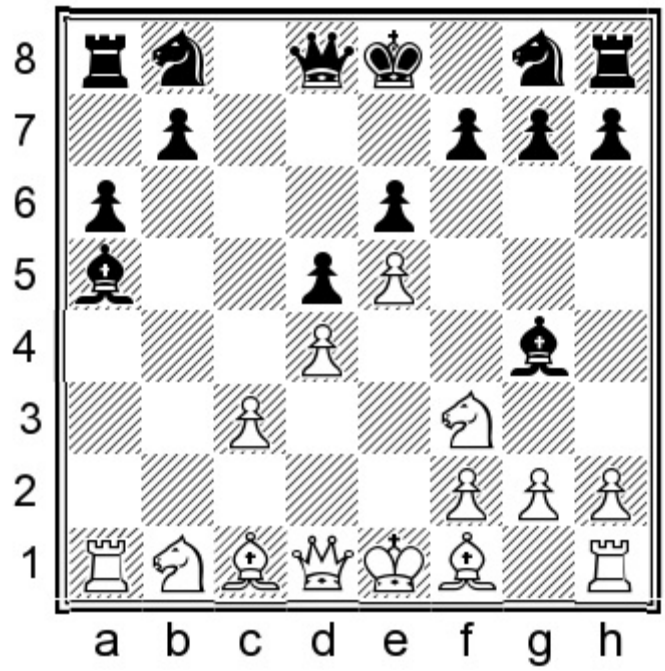
The most popular move in this position as White aims to get Black's b-pawn out of the way in order to erect a broad pawn center.

4.d4 The alternative way to continue with the Wing Gambit thematically. White immediately takes extra space in the center. 4...d5! The familiar counter push in the center.



Position after: 4...d5!

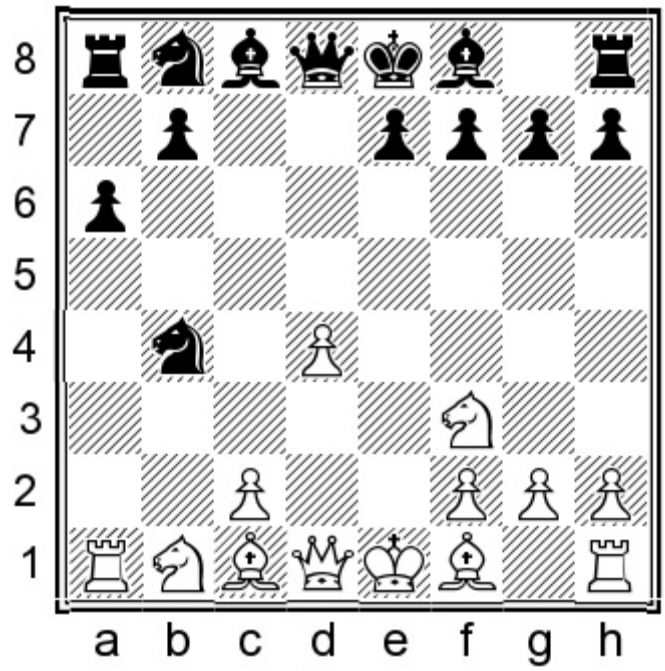
A) 5.e5 Closing the position only helps Black. 5...♗g4! White's extra move has advantages for Black since he can now develop his light-squared bishop to its most active post. Black intends a quick ...e6 in order to give the b4-pawn some extra support from the dark-squared bishop. For that reason ...♘c6 has a lower priority. 6.a3 [6.h3 ♗xf3 7.♕xf3 e6∓] 6...e6! 7.axb4 ♗xb4+ 8.c3 ♗a5!



Position after: 8...♗a5!

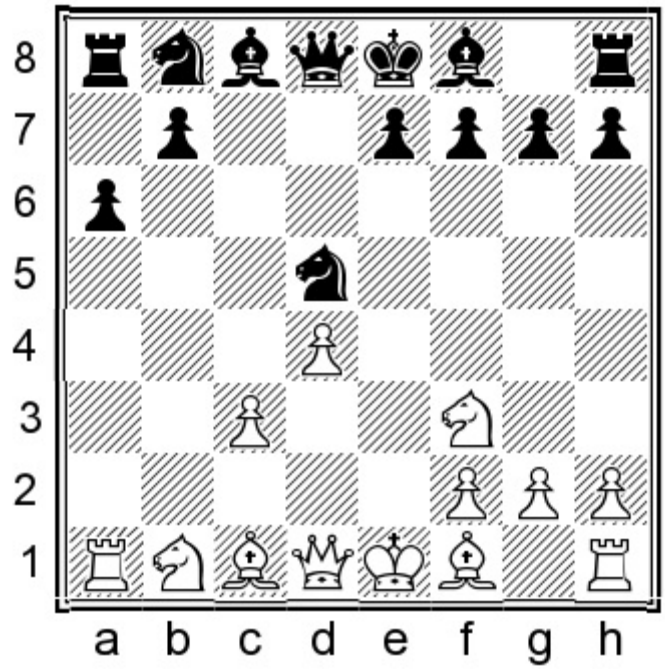
In these Advance French structures, the e7-square should be left for the knight. 9.♗d3 [9.h3 ♗h5 10.♗d3 ♘e7 11.0-0 ♘bc6 12.♗a3 b5∓; 9.♗a3 ♘c6 10.♗d3 ♘ge7 11.h3 ♗xf3 12.♕xf3 ♘xd4–+] 9...♘c6 10.0-0 ♘ge7 11.♗a3 b5 12.♗d6 h6 13.h3 ♗h5 14.♖a2 0-0 15.♕e2 ♗xf3 16.♕xf3 ♗c7∓

B) 5.exd5 Keeps the position fluid, but Black is well prepared for the ensuing complications. 5...♘f6! The same move as we play in our main line 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6. It is better to have the knight on d5 than the queen. 6.♗b5 by White, which in other situations speeds up White's development and may disrupt the ...♘xd5 plan, is not available in this position. 6.a3 ♘xd5 7.axb4 ♘xb4



Position after: 7...♘xb4

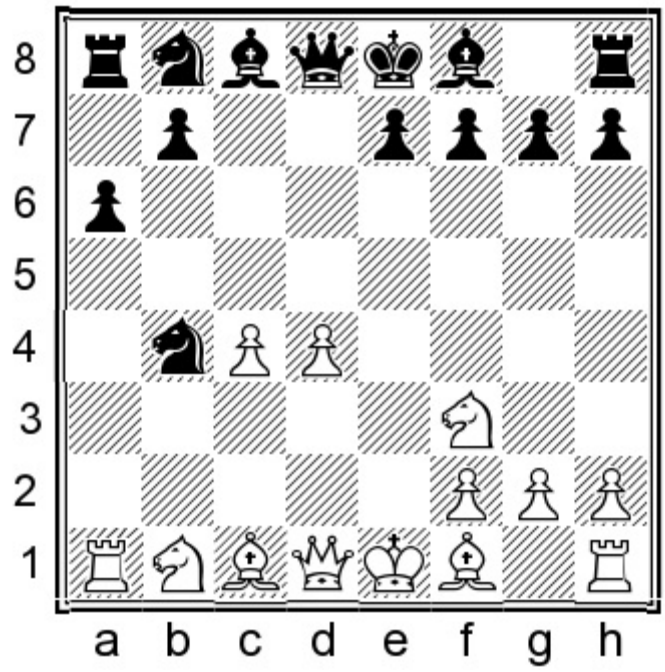
8.c3! [8.c4?! ♗f5 9.♘a3 e6 10.♗e2 ♗e7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♕b3 ♘8c6 13.♖d1 ♕c7!∓ 0-1 (40) Pyhala, A (2320) – Salonen, J (2365) Finland 1980.] 8...♘d5



Position after: 8...♘d5

B1) 9.♗c4 e6 10.0-0 ♗e7 11.♖e1 [11.♕d3 0-0 12.♘bd2 ♘d7 13.♘e4 ♕c7 14.♖e1 h6 15.♘g3 ♘7f6∓] 11...0-0 12.♕b3 ♘c6 13.♘bd2 ♖b8 14.♗f1 b5∓ 0-1 (39) Adda, O (2068) – Hourlier, C (1989) Vaujany 2014.

B2) 9.c4 ♘b4!



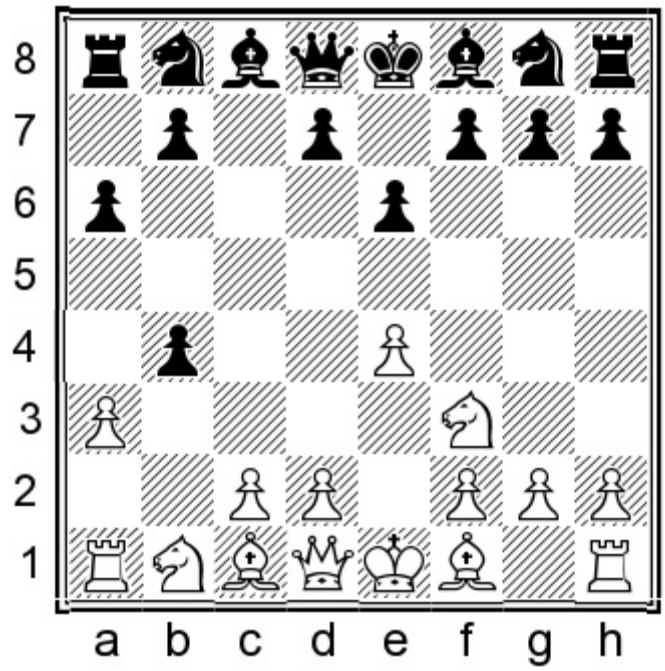
Position after: 9...♘b4!

10.♗e2 [10.♕a4+ ♘8c6 11.d5?! ♗f5 12.♗e2 ♗c2 13.♕a3 e6∓] 10...e5! 11.♗g5 f6 12.♗e3 exd4 13.♘xd4 ♘8c6 14.0-0 ♘xd4 15.♗xd4 ♘c6 16.♗e3 ♕xd1 17.♖xd1 ♗b4∓

B3) 9.♘e5 ♘b6! 10.♗d3 g6 11.0-0 ♗g7 12.♖e1 0-0∓

B4) 9.♗b5+ ♗d7 10.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 11.♕b3 e6 12.♕xb7 ♗e7 13.0-0 0-0 14.♗a3 [14.♖xa6?? ♖b8 15.♕c6 ♖xb1–+] 14...♗xa3 15.♖xa3 ♘7b6 16.♖xa6 ♖b8∓

4...e6!



Position after: 4...e6!

Transposing to an interesting version of the normal Wing Gambit. This move has been adopted by Richard Rapport who is one of the strongest GMs who play the O'Kelly on a regular basis.

5.axb4

The most popular and thematic way to continue the gambit. White tries to gain a few tempi to erect a strong center.

5.d4 This central thrust is White's main alternative. It is the preference of the engines. Black's light-squared bishop is inside the pawn chain so White does not have to worry about ...♗g4 anymore.

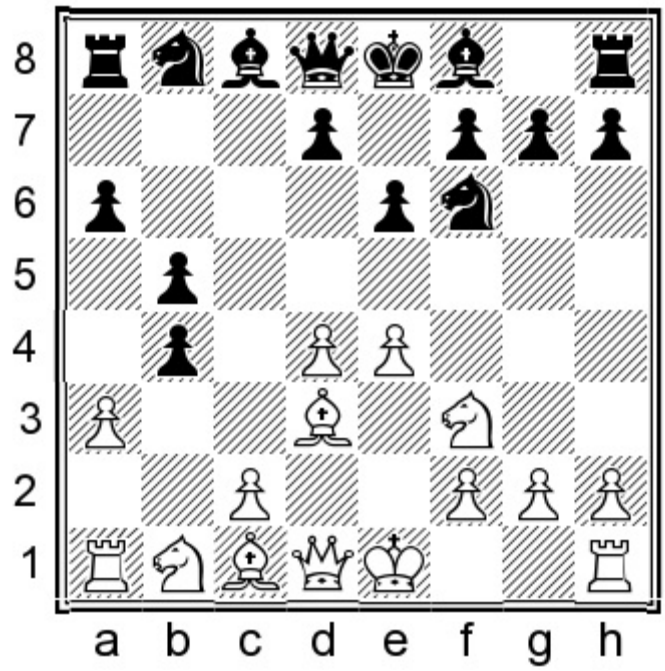
A) 5...d5 This tends to lead to positions with the character of an Advanced French. White is more or less forced to close the center where in other lines he is able to maintain the tension in the center longer. As these French structures are not to my liking, I will not investigate them further.

B) 5...b5 is a valid alternative. 6.♗d3 ♗b7 7.0-0 ♘f6 leads to the line investigated under 6.♗d3.

C) 5...♘f6!

C1) 6.e5 ♘d5 7.♗d3 [7.axb4 ♗xb4+ 8.♗d2 ♗xd2+=] 7...b5!N 8.0-0 ♗b7 9.♗e4 h6∓

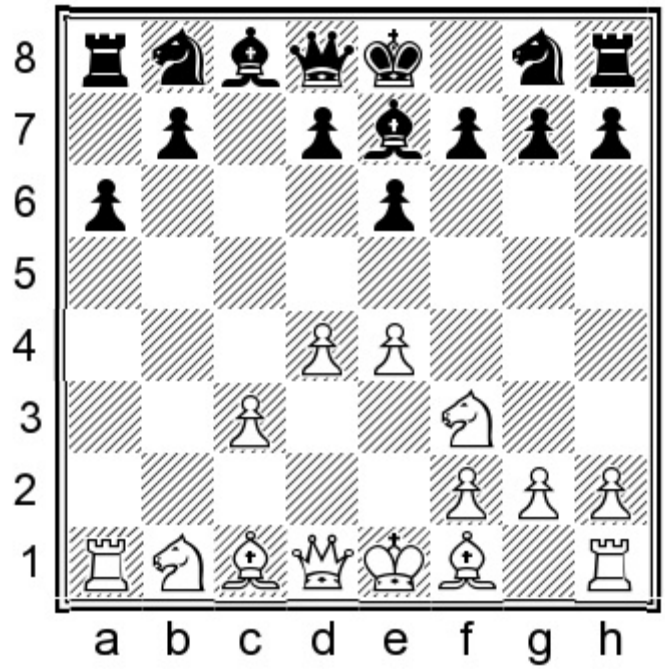
C2) 6.♗d3 b5!



Position after: 6...b5!

A typical O'Kelly way of treating the Wing Gambit. 7.0-0 ♗b7 Black completes his development without any problems. It can be concluded that White does not have sufficient compensation for the pawn (Taylor). 8.♖e1 [8.d5?! exd5 9.exd5 ♗xd5∓ 0-1 (36) Taylor, T (2318) – Banawa, J (2340) Los Angeles 2011] 8...bxa3 9.♘xa3 [9.c3 ♗e7 10.♗xa3 ♗xa3 11.♘xa3 0-0∓] 9...d5 10.exd5 [10.e5 ♘e4∓] 10...♗xd5 11.c4 bxc4 12.♘xc4 ♗e7∓

5...♗xb4 6.c3 ♗e7 7.d4



Position after: 7.d4

White has a lot more space, but is it enough compensation for a pawn?

7...d6!

The small center is best.

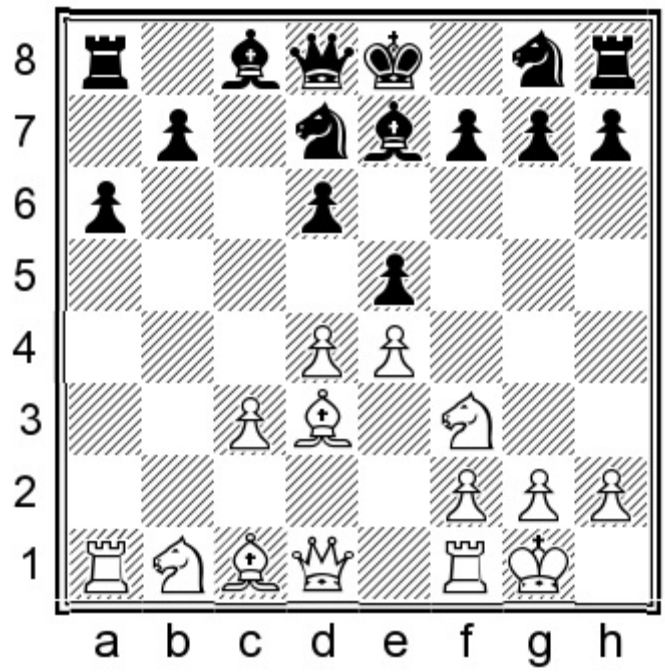
A) 7...♘f6 8.e5 ♘d5 9.c4⩲ 0-1 (31) Bodi, T (2035) – Hando, V (2344) Budapest 2013.

B) 7...d5 8.e5⩲ 1-0 (13) Hilbert, S (1499) – Sternik, R (1816) corr. 2014.

8.♗d3 ♘d7

Black plays carefully, preventing White's e4-e5 even though it is not much of a danger.

9.0-0 e5!?

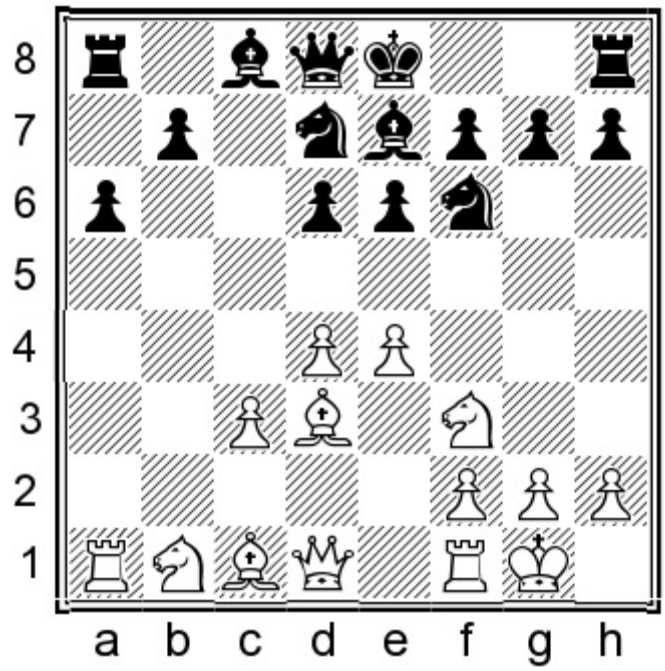


Position after: 9...e5!?

With the bishop on d3 Black can allow himself to spend an extra tempo establishing a favorable pawn structure.

A) 9...b6 is an interesting thought as well. Black plays a kind of hedgehog and develops his queenside before he castles. 10.♕c2 ♗b7 11.c4 ♖c8 12.♘c3 ♘gf6 13.♗a3 0-0 14.♖fb1⩲ Black›s position is under pressure.

B) 9...♘gf6



Position after: 9...♘gf6

This is a valid alternative and was the choice of Richard Rapport. 10.♘bd2 [10.♗f4 0-0 11.♕c2 g6 12.♘bd2 ♕c7 13.♘c4 ♘xe4–+ 0-1 (25) Tukhvatullin, T (2248) – Gabdrakhmanov, R (2413) Kazan 2008; 10.e5 dxe5 11.dxe5 ♘d5∓ 12.h4 ♕c7 13.♖e1 b6 14.♘a3 ♗b7∓ 0-1 (39) Soors, S (2391) – Rapport, R (2704) Riga 2014.] 10...0-0 11.♗a3 is given as "compensation" by Jones, but Black plays 11...b6 12.♕e2 ♗b7∓ when White's initiative starts to lose its momentum.

10.♘bd2

A) 10.♘e1 ♘gf6 11.f4 White's kingside action takes too much time. 11...0-0 12.♘d2 0-1 (33) De Gleria, F (2346) – Adamski, J (2267) Germany 2016 12...♕c7!∓.

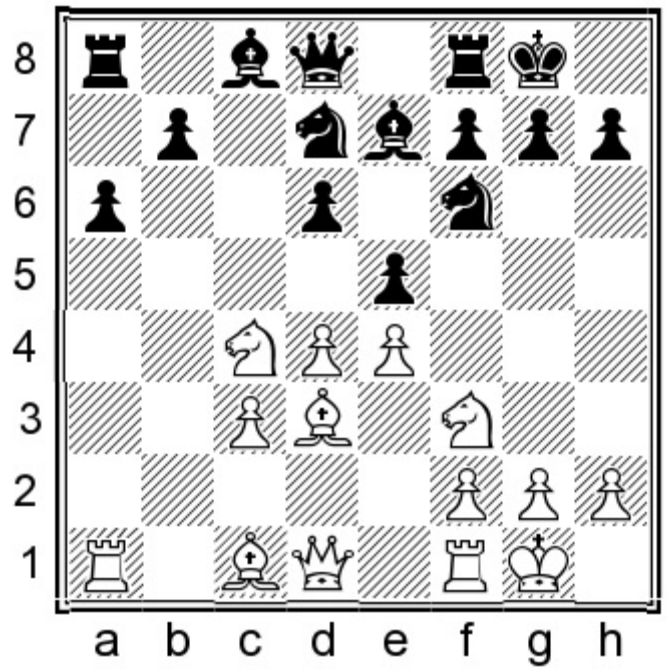
B) 10.♖e1 ♘gf6 11.♘bd2 0-0 12.♘f1 ♖e8 13.♘g3 ♕c7∓ 14.♗d2 ♖b8 15.♕e2 b5∓ 0-1 (23) Tarek Abdo, A (2306) – Boekelman, J (2442) Chess.com 2022.

C) 10.♗a3N 10...♘gf6 11.♖e1 0-0 12.♘bd2 ♕c7= White has more space; Black has extra material.

10...♘gf6 11.♘c4

Or 11.♗a3 per Jones. 11...♕c7 12.♖e1 0-0 with play similar to the main line.

11...0-0!N



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

Simple chess.

12.♗a3

Increasing the pressure.

A) 12.dxe5?! regains the pawn but only helps Black. 12...dxe5 13.♘cxe5 ♘xe5 14.♘xe5 ♕c7! 15.f4 [15.♘f3 ♕xc3∓] 15...♖d8!∓ White has weaknesses all over the place.

B) 12.♘e3 ♖e8 13.♘f5 ♗f8∓ with an extra pawn.

12...♕c7

From here it is difficult for White to further improve his position.

13.♗b4

13.♘e3 ♖e8 14.♖e1 ♗f8∓

13...♖e8 14.♘e3 ♘f8∓

Black keeps his stronghold on e5. With each move Black improves his development while retaining the extra pawn.

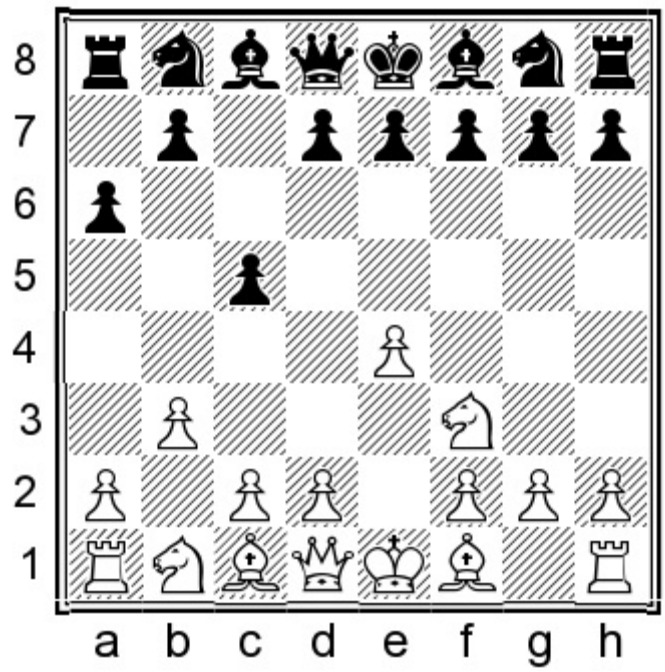
Conclusion

The Wing Gambit against the O'Kelly is a viable proposition as Black must more or less accept the pawn. His best approach is to take a small center, ...♗xb4-e7 and ...d6. A subsequent ...♘bd7 and

9...e5 prevent White's e4-e5. The position keeps its quiet character. With natural moves known from the Hedgehog and Ruy Lopez Breyer variation supplemented by ...♖b8 and ...b5, Black will slowly but surely improve his position while retaining the extra gambit pawn.

c) 3.b3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.b3



Position after: 3.b3

After 2...e6 this is a valid and interesting way to further develop White's forces. White puts his bishop on b2 and then decides whether to continue with d4 going for piece play and/or to prepare for 0-0 or 0-0-0. Against this system, I recommend the Botvinnik structure for Black as it corresponds thematically with the suggested choices after 3.d3 and 3.g3. It also dampens White's more aggressive intentions, especially those of his bishop on b2 as it stares at a brick wall on the a1-h8 diagonal.

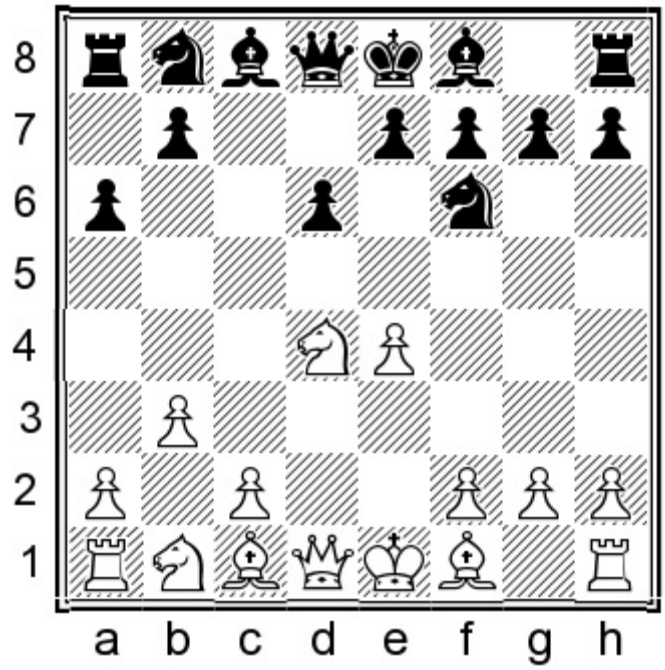
3...d6!

The established theoretical path. Black prepares for a set-up with ...e5 as quickly as possible. A minor disadvantage of this move is that with 4.d4 White can move into an Open Sicilian, where Black no longer has the opportunity to take his dark-squared bishop outside the pawn chain.

3...♘c6 looks natural as well, but it enables White to take a more attractive position in the center. 4.♗b2 White prevents ...e5. 4...d6 5.d4! cxd4 6.♘xd4± and White has all he wants when he played 3.b3 in the first place. White is still able to strengthen his central presence with a subsequent c4.

4.♗b2

4.d4!? Is White's last chance to prevent Black's Botvinnik structure. However, b2-b3 is not always an asset in a standard Open Sicilian. The fact that Black has not played ...♘c6 yet works in his favor as we will see. 4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 [5.♕xd4 ♘c6 6.♕d2 ♘f6 7.♘c3 g6 8.♗b2 ♗g7 9.0-0-0 0-0 10.♔b1 b5= ½-½ (51) Weber, F – Rychagov, M (2485) Mittelrhein 1995.] 5...♘f6

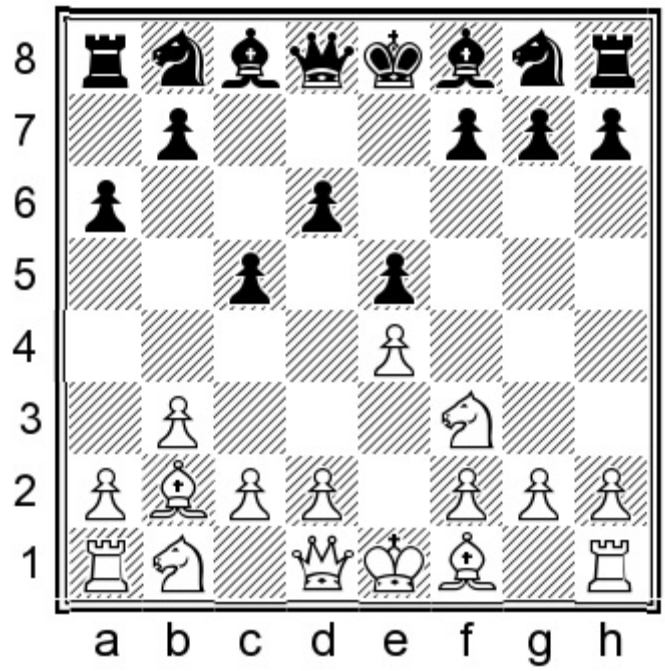


Position after: 5...♘f6

A) 6.♗d3 g6 The Dragon delivers more play. 7.0-0 ♗g7 8.♗b2 [8.c4 ♘g4 9.♗b2 ♕b6 10.♗e2 ♘xh2! 11.♔xh2 ♘c6∓] 8...b5=

B) 6.♘c3 White plays a Najdorf with 6.b3! Black will play the Dragon with 6...g6. 7.g3 ♘c6 8.♘de2 [8.♗g2 ♘xd4 9.♕xd4 ♗g7=] 8...♗g7 [8...♗d7 9.♗g2 ♕c8 10.♗b2±] 9.♗g2 0-0 10.0-0 ♖b8=

4...e5



Position after: 4...e5

This move has the best statistics in ChessBase and is played by O'Kelly specialist Valeriy Kazakovskiy.

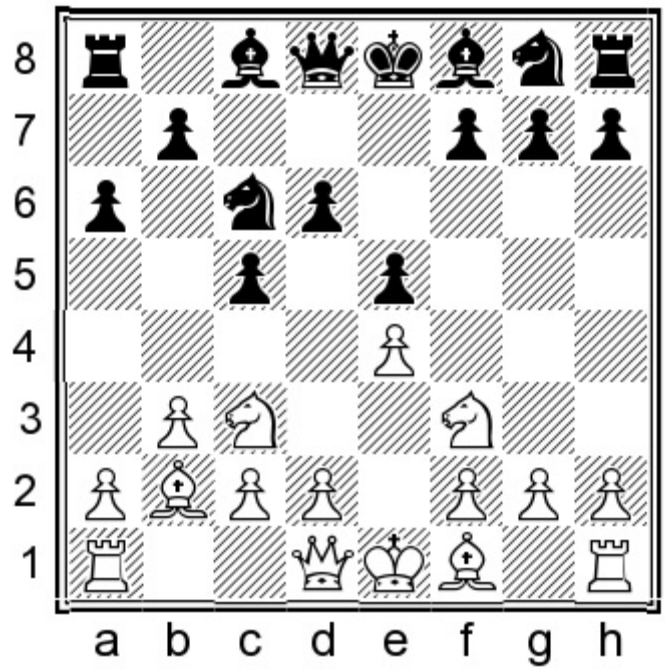
Black has reached the Botvinnik structure while the a6-pawn prevents ♗b5 by White and may later become useful for a queenside expansion with ...b7-b5. Theoretically one may claim that Black is a bit behind in development but there is hardly any added value in b3+♗b2 in this structure. While White has many options given the closed/quiet nature of the position our response to each of these will be fairly consistent with a few exceptions.

5.c3!?

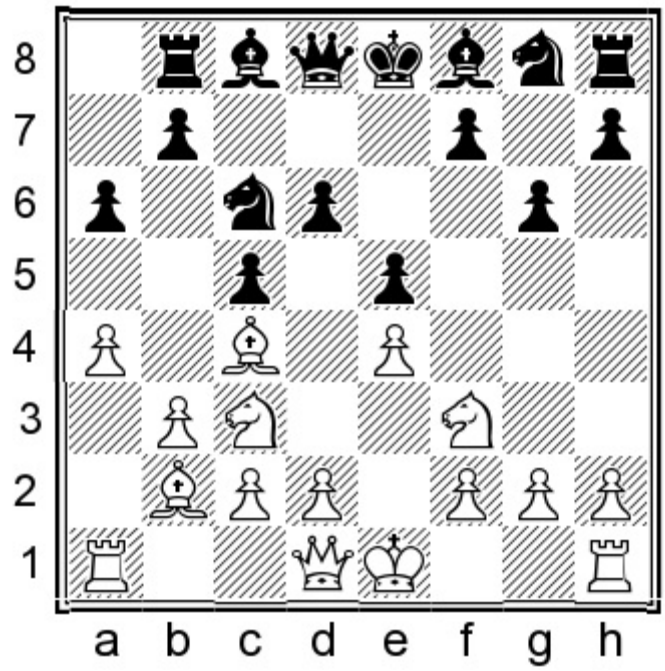
White prepares d4, a natural way for him to increase his influence in the center. It looks as if this is the most challenging way to make use of Black's lag in development.

A) 5.d4?! An inspiration from the Morra gambit. 5...cxd4 6.c3 dxc3 7.♘xc3 ♘f6∓ White's play is just too slow to be able to get something out of this. 8.♗c4 ♗e7 9.0-0 0-0 10.♘d5 b5 11.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 12.♗d5 ♖a7 13.♕e2 ♘d7 14.♖ad1 0-1 (38) sQatles (2205)-alifie (2425) lichess.org 2018. 14...♕c7∓

B) 5.♘c3 White focuses on the weak d5-square. 5...♘c6



B1) 6.a4 g6 7.♗c4 ♖b8!



Position after: 7...♖b8!

A fine move as Black more or less prevents an early ♘d5. This allows Black to quietly complete his development. 8.♕e2 The only way to provide extra control over b5. 8...♗g7 9.♘d5 ♘ge7 10.0-0 ♘xd5 11.♗xd5 ♘b4∓ But now the weakness of c2 gives Black a small advantage.

B2) 6.♘d5 g6! and White cannot maintain his bishop on the ideal c4-square. 7.♗c4 [7.a4 ♖b8! 8.♗c4 b5∓] 7...b5∓

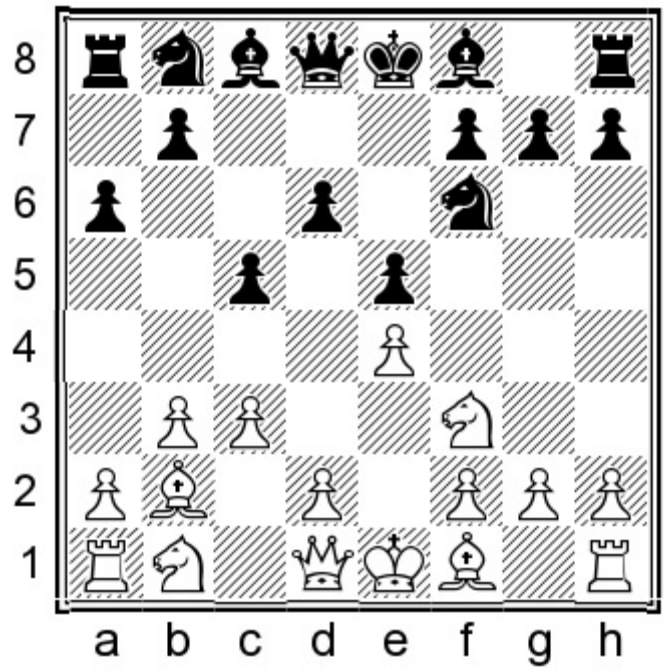
B3) 6.♗c4 b5! 7.♗d5 ♘ge7! 8.0-0 g6! 9.d3 ♗g7 10.♘d2 0-0∓ White will be forced to surrender his

bishop on d5 under unattractive conditions.

5...f5!

A late Latvian Gambit! I conder this to be more promising than the main alternative 5...♘f6.

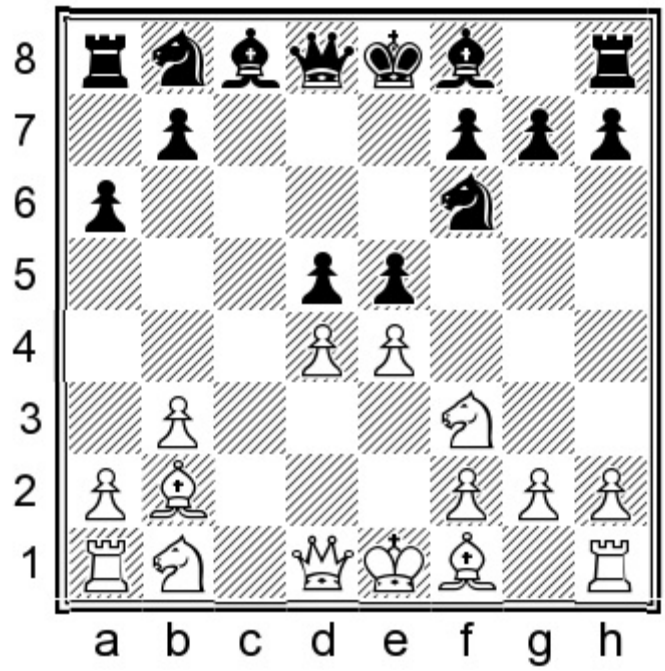
5...♘f6! A reasonable option giving White a narrow path to a more or less equal position.



Position after: 5...♘f6!

A) 6.♗d3 d5! 7.exd5 [7.♕e2 ♗d6∓] 7...e4! 8.♕e2 [8.♗xe4 ♘xe4 9.♕e2 ♕e7 10.0-0 ♘f6 11.♕d3 ♕d6 12.c4 ♗e7 13.♘c3 0-0∓] 8...♕xd5 9.♗c4 ♕h5 10.d4 [10.♘g1 ♕g6 11.f3 ♗d6∓] 10...b5 11.♗d3 ♖a7!∓

B) 6.d4 cxd4! 7.cxd4 [7.♗d3? results in a failed Morra Gambit after 7...dxc3! 8.♗xc3 ♗e7 9.0-0 0-0∓.] 7...d5!



Position after: 7...d5!

with a nice blockade in the center.

B1) 8.dxe5 ♘xe4 9.♗e2 [9.a3 ♗c5∓] 9...♗b4+ 10.♘bd2 ♘c3 11.♗xc3 ♗xc3 12.♖c1 ♗b4 13.0-0 ♘c6=

B2) 8.exd5 ♗b4+! 9.♘bd2 e4 10.♘e5 ♘xd5 11.a3 ♗xd2+ 12.♕xd2 0-0∓ 13.♗e2 f6 14.♘c4 f5 15.♘e3 ♗e6 16.♘xd5 ♗xd5∓ 0-1 (29) Farahat, A (2584) – Boekelman, J (2552) Chess. com 2022. Black's central pawns became very strong.

B3) 8.♘xe5 ♘xe4 9.a3 ♗f5 10.♗d3 ♘d7 11.♕e2 ♘xe5 12.dxe5 ♗c5 13.0-0 0-0=

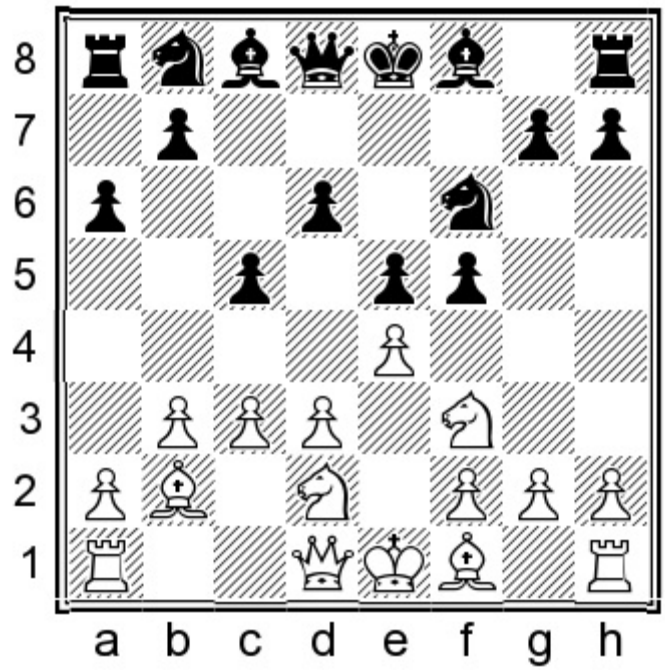
6.d3

White has to forget about a quick d2-d4.

A) 6.♗d3 fxe4 7.♗xe4 d5! 8.♘xe5 dxe4 9.♕h5+ g6 10.♘xg6 ♘f6 11.♕e5+ ♗e7 12.♘xh8 ♘c6 13.♕g3 ♗e6 14.0-0 ♕d7∓

B) 6.exf5 ♗xf5 7.d4 e4! 8.♘fd2 d5! 9.c4 cxd4 10.cxd5 ♘f6 11.♗xd4 ♘c6!∓

6...♘f6 7.♘bd2



Position after: 7.♘bd2

7...♘c6

7...♗e7 8.g3 [8.♕e2 0-0 9.0-0-0 ♘c6∓ 0-1 (35) OtpravlyauKPraotsam (2509)-alifie (2511) lichess.org 2020.] 8...♘c6 9.♗g2 0-0 10.0-0 b5=

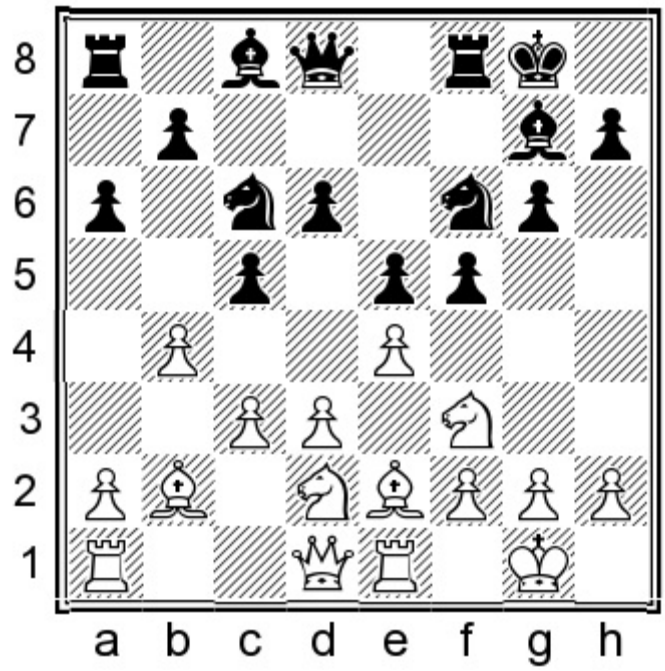
8.♗e2 g6!?

Why not? White's position is quite passive.

9.0-0

9.exf5 ♗xf5 10.d4? is a principled way to challenge Black's center, but here it explodes in White's face. [10.0-0 ♗g7=] 10...cxd4 11.cxd4 e4! 12.♘g5 d5!∓ Black's central position is strong. The white bishop on b2 is completely out of play.

9...♗g7 10.♖e1 0-0 11.b4



Position after: 11.b4

11...♔h8 12.bxc5 dxc5 13.♗f1 ♕c7=

The position is equal, but Black's play is easy. The variations that arise after 3.b3 have their own challenges.

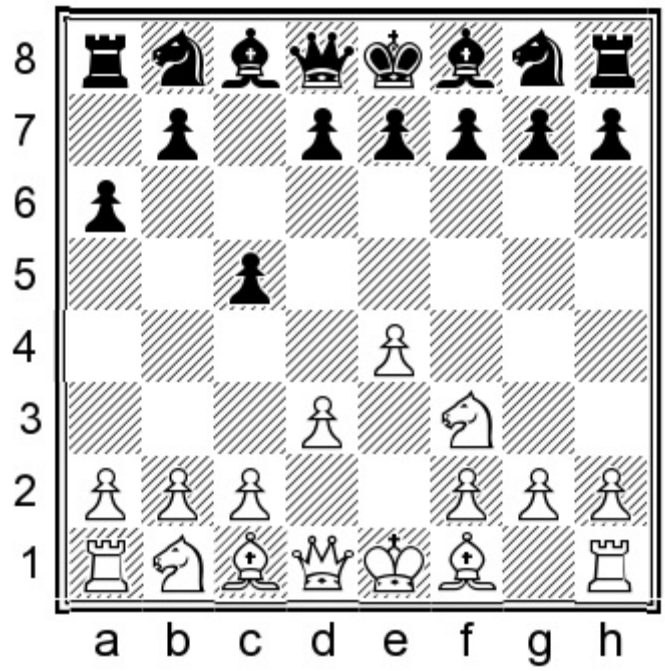
Conclusion

If the position remains relatively closed our basic plan is to play the Botvinnik structure with ...d6, ...e5, ...♘c6, ...g6 and ...♗g7. The Botvinnik structure gives black a solid starting point for his middlegame activities. Alternatively, White can try to develop piece play in the center with ♗c4, ♘c3-d5 and a4. A well-timed ...♖b8 prevents that plan because Black will play ...b5 as soon as the knight arrives on d5. White's last and most principled plan is based on a quick c3+d4. If prepared by 5.h3 Black is in time to challenge White along the long diagonal after ...exd4 or cxd4. If White moves his pawn on move 5, i.e., 5.c3, the 5...g6 plan is too slow. Black lags behind in development.

Black has good alternatives in the measured 5...♘f6 and the aggressive 5...f5. Both lead to interesting play with roughly equal chances. 3.b3 is not a concern for Black.

d) 3.d3 – The King's Indian Attack

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d3

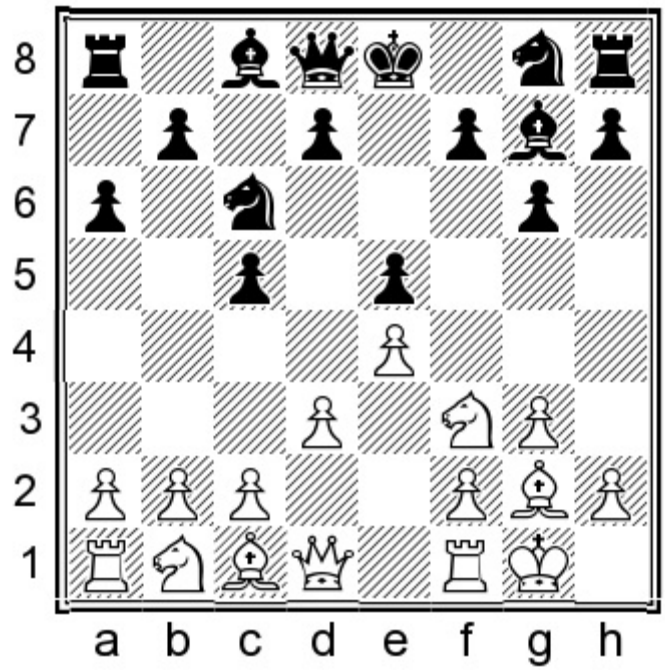


Position after: 3.d3

The classical way to play the King's Indian Attack (KIA). With the text move White argues that Black has lost a tempo with 2...a6 and transposes the game into the positional waters of the KIA. However, the KIA system is not very challenging to Black's concept. Both parties develop easily, and the real combat starts in the middlegame.

Black continues with a kingside fianchetto which is the standard recommended in this book, aiming for a Botvinnik set-up. Unlike the situation after 2....e6, 3.d3 Black's extra move may not be completely wasted. The pawn on a6 is especially useful if White plays one of the modern KIA set-ups, expanding on the queenside with c3, a3 and b4. More recently White has become more resourceful with the KIA and has started to play 3.g3, withholding an early d2-d3. This leaves open the option of d2-d4 later on if circumstances allow. Setups based on 3.g3 without an early d3 will be further examined in the next chapter.

3...♘c6 4.g3 g6 5.♗g2 ♗g7 6.0-0 e5

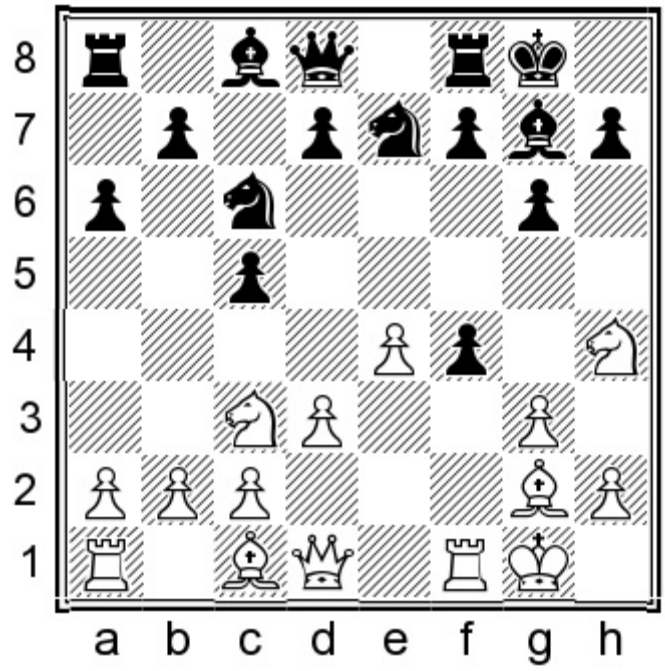


Position after: 6...e5

7.c3

The modern treatment by White of the KIA against the Botvinnik set-up: queenside expansion first, pieces later.

A) 7.♘c3 White plays a closed Sicilian with the knight already on f3. 7...♘ge7 8.♘h4 White tries to open up the position as quickly as possible. [8.♗e3 d6 9.♕d2 0-0 10.♘e2 b6 11.♘h4 d5!∓ ½ – ½ (27) Tyulenko, Y (2453) – Nekhaev, A (2475) corr. 2019; 8.a3 d6 9.♖e1 0-0 10.♘d5 ♘xd5 11.exd5 ♘e7 12.c4 b5∓.] 8...0-0 9.f4 exf4!



Position after: 9...exf4!

10.gxf4 [10.♗xf4 d6 11.♕d2 ♖b8=] 10...f5!= This is standard Botvinnik play, Black has already equalized. [10...d5!?=] 11.exf5 ♘xf5 12.♘xf5 ½-½ (53) Dahl, T (2169) – Teplyi, I (2440) Ballerup 2017. 12...♖xf5! 13.♗e3 d6=

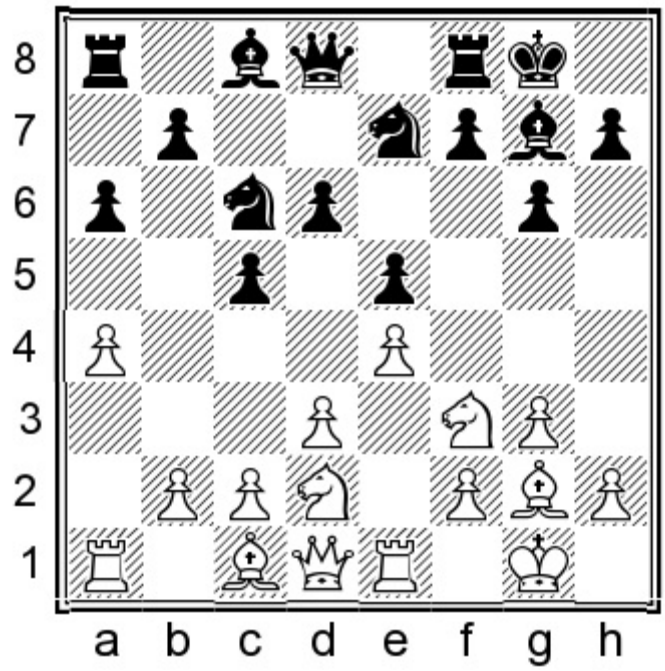
B) 7.♘bd2 The traditional way to develop is pieces first, then the pawns. A later a3+b4 may take us back into the main line. 7...♘ge7

B1) 8.a4 d6! 9.♘c4 b6!= [9...0-0 10.a5!±]

B2) 8.♖e1 This is part of the KIA setup, but one may wonder what the rook is doing on e1 instead of f1 in this structure. 8...0-0

B2.1) 9.♘f1 Tries to get the knight into the game via the kingside. 9...d6 10.♗g5 [10.h3 h6 11.♗e3 ♗e6 12.♕d2 ♔h7 13.♘3h2 ♕d7 14.g4 f5∓] 10...h6 11.♗d2 ♗e6 12.♕c1 ♔h7∓ 13.♖b1? ♗xa2–+ 0-1 (35) Salisbury, P (1787) – Almazedi, F (1945) Wakefield 2016.

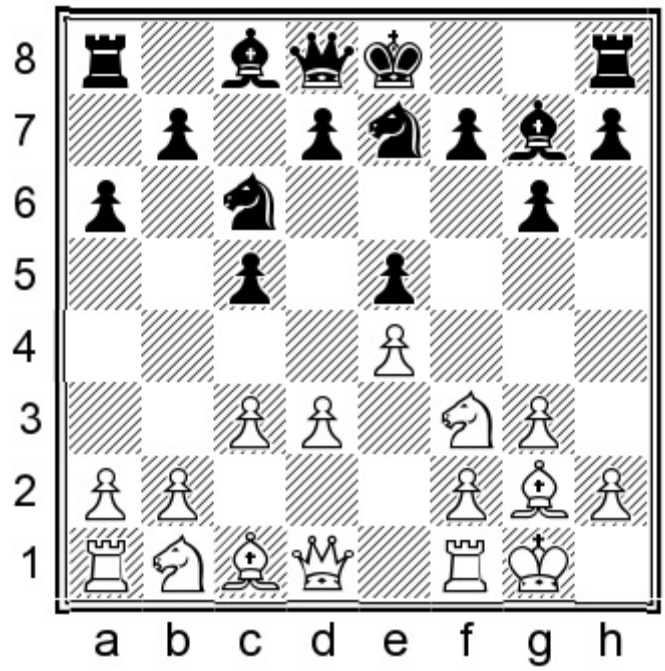
B2.2) 9.a4 White secures c4 for his knight. 9...d6



Position after: 9...d6

10.♘c4 [10.♘f1 h6 11.h4 f5 12.♘1h2 ♗e6∓ 0-1 (32) Zayadeh, R (1776) – Dubkov, A (2138) Germany 2002.] 10...b6! 11.♘fd2 ♖b8! 12.f4 exf4 13.gxf4 d5∓ 0-1 (46) Pekacki, S (2124) – Mazalon, M (2096) Lublin 2006.

7...♘ge7



Position after: 7...♘ge7

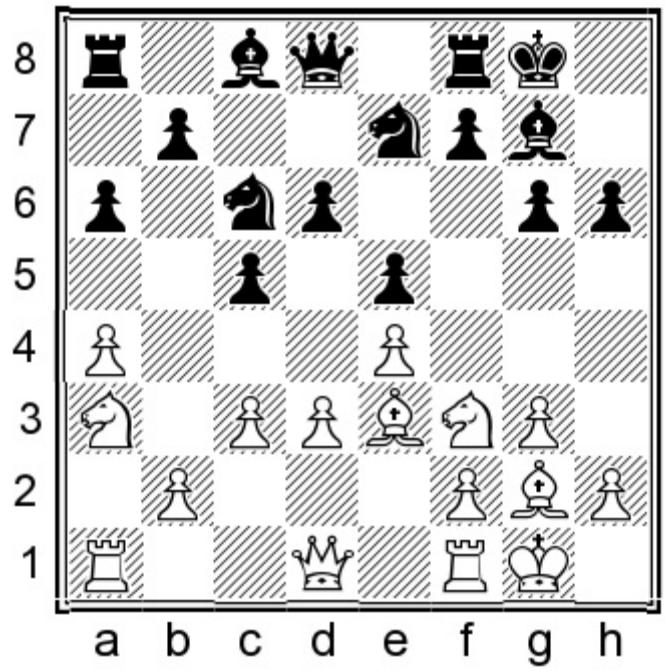
8.a3

White has a wide range of options here. Expanding on the queenside with a3, c3 and b4 is the most popular approach in this type of position.

A) 8.♘a3 0-0 9.♘c2 d5!= One of the few instances where Black plays an early ...d5 in the Botvinnik set-up. Black transposes into a reverse KID, with the knight on c2 wondering what on earth it is doing on that square.

B) 8.♖e1 0-0 9.♘a3 [9.♘bd2 d6 10.a4 h6 11.♘c4 ♗e6 12.a5 f5 13.exf5 ♘xf5!=] 9...d6 10.♘c2 d5!= The same idea as after 8.♘a3. With the knight misplaced on c2, this makes a lot of sense. 11.♕e2 d4! 12.c4 ♗e6 13.a3 b5!∓ With good play for Black. 14.♘d2? bxc4–+

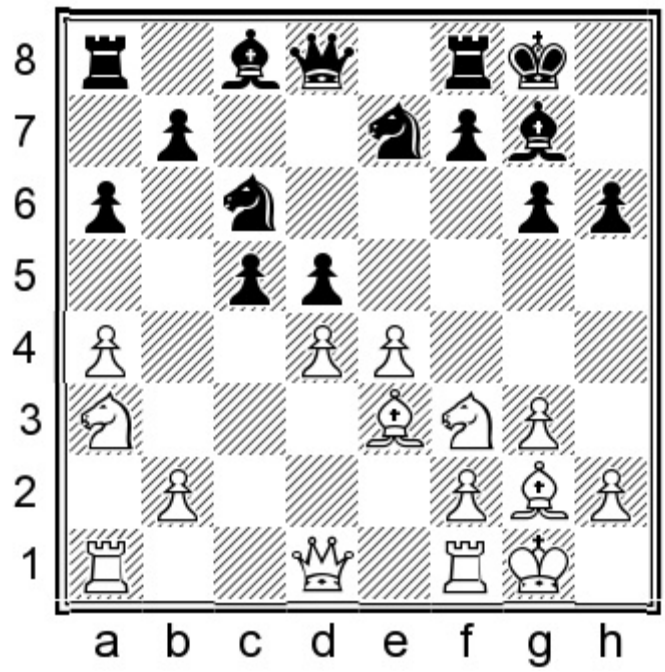
C) 8.a4 Securing c4 for a knight while preventing any further queenside expansion by Black. 8...0-0 9.♘a3 d6 10.♗e3 [10.♘c4 h6 11.♘e3 ♗e6 12.♘d2 f5 13.♘d5 f4 14.♘c4 g5= 0-1 (57) Braun, C (2322) – Epishin, V (2566) Maastricht 2008.] 10...h6=



Position after: 10...h6=

If White now plays a slow game on the queenside the position is equal.

C1) 11.d4?! White is stubborn and wants to become active in the center. 11...exd4 12.cxd4 d5!∓



Position after: 12...d5!∓

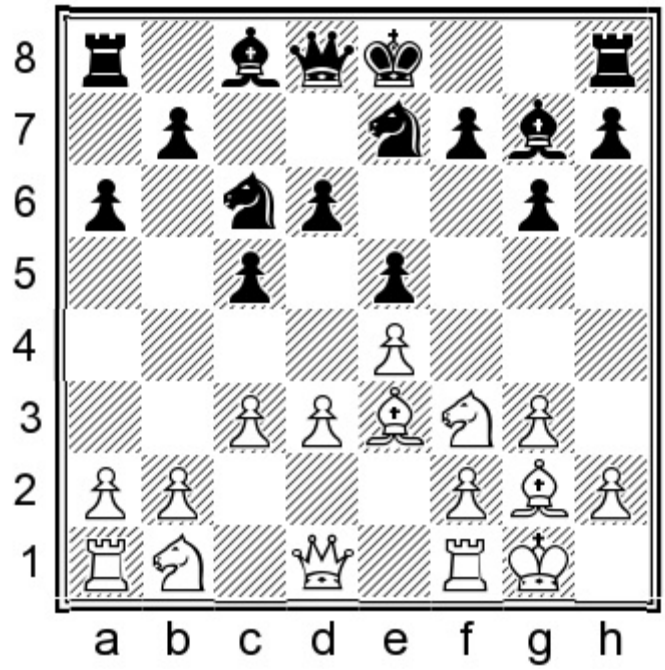
A thematic maneuver borrowed from the Botvinnik with colors reversed! Black temporarily sacrifices a pawn for active piece play. 13.exd5 [13.♕c1? dxe4–+; 13.e5 cxd4 14.♗xd4 ♗g4∓] 13...♘xd5 White is in a difficult situation.

C1.1) 14.dxc5 ♘xe3 15.fxe3 [15.♕xd8 ♖xd8 16.fxe3 ♗xb2–+] 15...♕e7!∓

C1.2) 14.♘c4 ♘xe3 15.fxe3 cxd4 16.exd4 ♗e6∓ Black is in no hurry to pick up an extra pawn as his bishops are very strong and will make the decisive difference. 17.♘ce5 ♖c8! 18.♘xc6 ♖xc6 19.♘e5 ♖d6–+

C2) 11.♘c4 ♗e6! 12.♘fd2 b6=

D) 8.♗e3 d6 White has many options. A few examples.



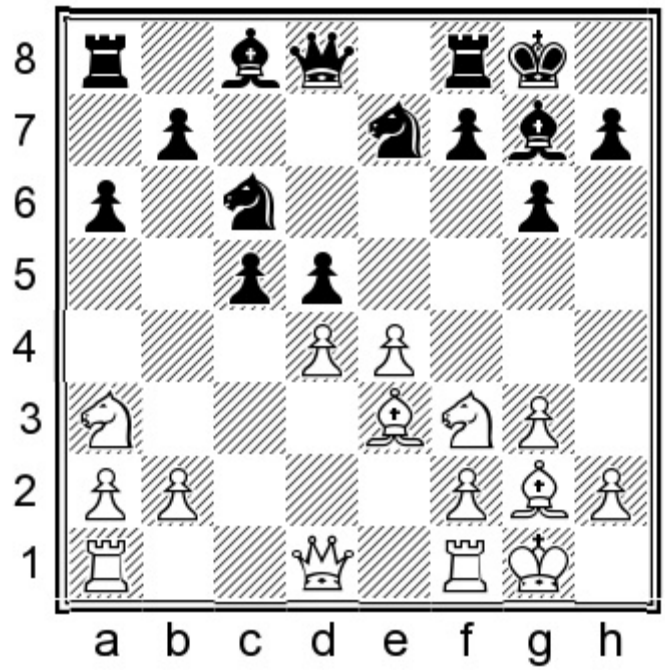
Position after: 8...d6

D1) 9.♕d2 0-0 10.♗h6 f5! 11.♗xg7 ♔xg7 12.exf5 gxf5 13.♘a3 f4!∓ Black has a strong initiative.

D2) 9.♘bd2 0-0 10.a3 f5! The weakness of the a2-g8 diagonal is of less importance. 11.♕b3+ ♔h8 12.♗g5 [12.♘g5 f4∓] 12...h6 13.♗xe7 ♘xe7 14.exf5 ♗xf5 15.♘e1 ♖b8∓ 0-1 (31) Kubasky, A (2260) – Blasberg, G (2500) corr. 1997.

D3) 9.d4 exd4 10.cxd4 d5!N The surprising move we have seen before in this chapter. It is a finesse known from the Botvinnik with reversed colors. 11.dxc5 [11.exd5 ♘xd5 12.♗g5 ♘de7=] 11...dxe4 12.♕xd8+ ♘xd8 13.♘d4 ♘e6 14.♘xe6 ♗xe6 15.♘c3 f5 16.♖ad1 ♘c6=

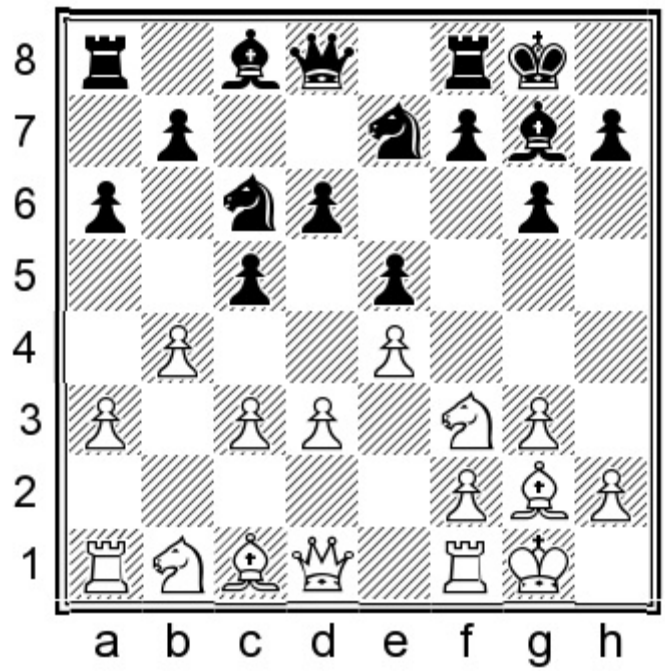
D4) 9.♘a3 0-0 10.d4 exd4 11.cxd4 d5!



Position after: 11...d5!

Spassky knows the classics! 12.exd5 [12.e5 cxd4 13.♗xd4 ♘xd4 14.♕xd4 ♘c6 15.♕f4 ♕b6∓; 12.dxc5 dxe4 13.♘g5 ♘d5=] 12...♘xd5 13.♗g5 ♕b6 14.♘c4 ♕b5 15.♘fd2? [15.♘fe5 ♘xe5 16.dxe5 ♕xc4 17.♗xd5 ♕b4 18.f4 h6 19.♗h4 ♗f5=] 15...cxd4 16.♘d6 ♕c5 17.♘6e4 ♕a7∓ 0-1 (41) Krogius, N – Spassky, B Leningrad 1957.

8...0-0 9.b4 d6



Position after: 9...d6

We have reached a position which normally arises from the Reti or the Closed Sicilian. In those openings Black plays ...a6 later in order to prevent White's b4-b5. There are some 230 games in the database with this position. It is also quite fashionable among stronger grandmasters including Amin and Adly who have played this position with White more than once. As always in the KIA, White has a wide range of candidate moves yet none of them promise anything more than an equal game.

10.♗b2

A) 10.♗e3 b6 11.♘bd2 h6 12.♘b3 ♗e6 13.♖b1 ♖c8= [13...cxb4 14.axb4 d5∓] 14.♘fd2 f5 15.f4 exf4 16.♗xf4 g5–+ 0-1 (67) Adly, A (2607) – Vidit, S (2721) Moscow 2019.

B) 10.♘bd2 h6 11.♖b1 [11.♗b2 is our main line.] 11...♗e6 12.♖e1 [12.♗b2 is the main line.] 12...b6 [The immediate 12...b5 13.bxc5 dxc5 14.♘b3= is a bit risky for Black.] 13.♘c4 b5! 14.♘e3 cxb4 15.cxb4 d5 16.exd5 ♘xd5= 0-1 (54) Amin, B (2690) – Cheparinov, I (2686) Europe Echecs 2020.

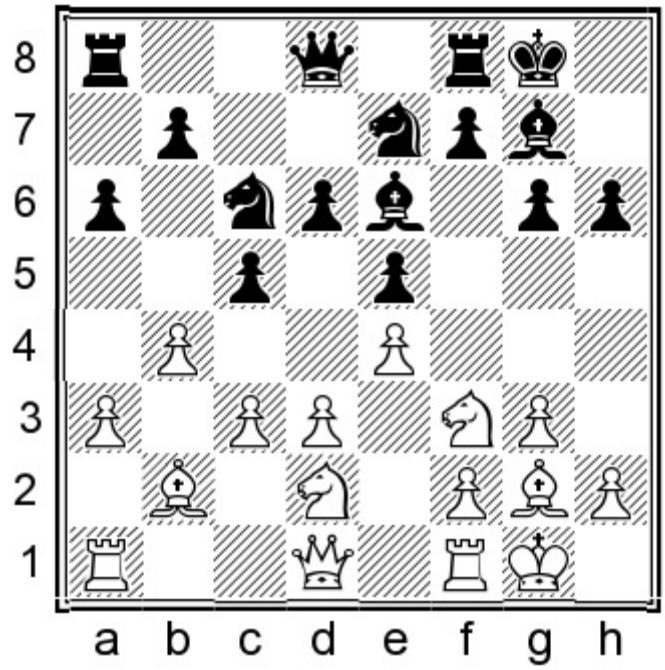
C) 10.♗g5 h6 11.♗e3 b6 12.♕d2 ♔h7 13.a4 ♗e6 14.a5 ½ – ½ (68) Nenezic, M (2532) – Cheparinov, I (2667) Tornelo 2021. Here Cheparinov missed the elegant 14...b5! 15.bxc5 d5∓ when Black has excellent play.

D) 10.♖e1 h6 11.♘bd2 ♗e6 12.♗b2 b5 13.♖b1 leads to a position in the main line.

10...h6

Enabling Black's next move.

11.♘bd2 ♗e6=



Position after: 11...♗e6=

The position is roughly equal, although I would rather have Black.

12.♖b1

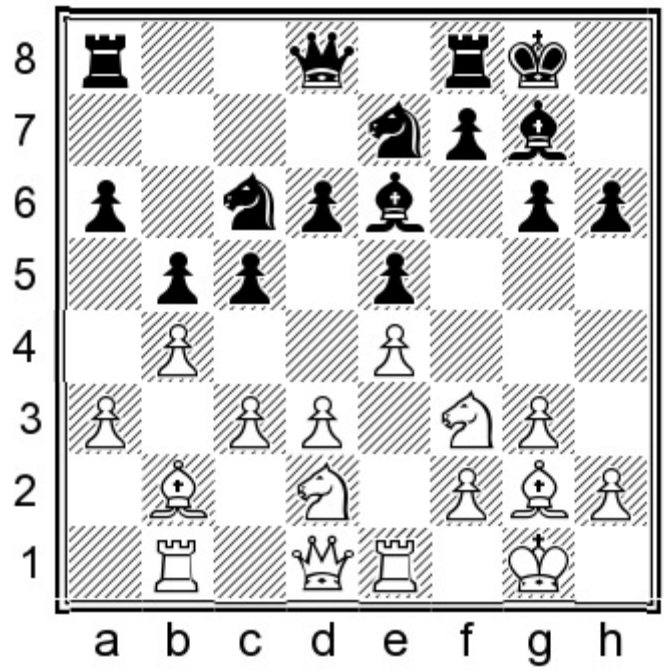
A) 12.♖e1 b5! 13.♕b1 [13.d4? exd4 14.cxd4 cxb4 15.axb4 ♘xb4∓ 1-0 (35) Svidler, P (2723) – Yilmaz, M (2630) chess24.com 2020.] 13...♕b6∓ 0-1 (40) Adly, A (2589) – Vidit, S (2630) Tsaghkadzor 2015.

B) 12.♕c2 b5! 13.♖fd1 ♖c8 14.bxc5 dxc5 15.a4 ♕b6 [15...b4!?] 16.axb5 axb5 17.♕b1 ♖fd8∓ ½-½ (38) Beckemeier, W (2374) – Kasimdzhanov, R (2614) Germany 2000.

12...b5!

With ...a6 already played this is an obvious move to gain further space on the queenside.

13.♖e1



Position after: 13.♖e1

A tense situation has arisen as no pawn exchanges have taken place.

13.d4!? exd4 14.cxd4 ♘xd4 [14...cxd4!? 15.♘b3 ♗c4 16.♖e1 d3 17.♗xg7 ♔xg7 18.♗f1 ♘e5 19.♘c1 d2 20.♘xd2 ♕b6∓] 15.♘xd4 cxd4 16.♘f3 ♗a2 17.♖c1 ♗c4 18.♖e1 ♘c6 [18...d3 19.♗xg7 ♔xg7 20.♗f1=] 19.♘xd4 ♘e5!= with nice piece play. 0-1 (49) Maghsoodloo, P (2671) – Xiong, J (2679) Chess.com 2019

13...♕b6!

Connecting the rook and anticipating further action on the queenside.

13...♖c8 This was played in a typical GM-beats-amateur game. 14.♗a1 ♕d7 15.d4 cxd4 16.cxd4 exd4 17.♘b3 ♘e5 18.♘fxd4 ♗c4 19.f4 ♕a7 20.♔h1 ♘d3 21.♖e3 ♘f2+ 0-1 (21) Pon, M (2185) – Vitiugov, N (2722) Chess.com 2020.

14.♘b3

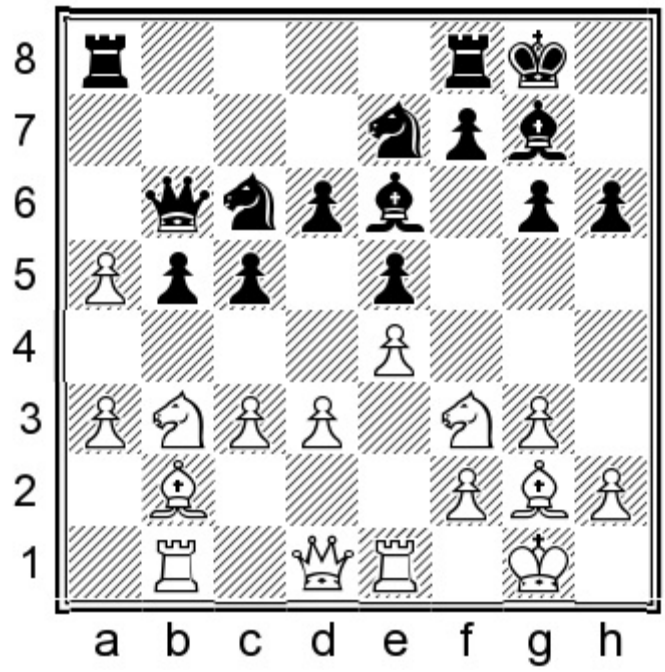
A) 14.♘f1 ♖ad8 [14...a5!?∓] 15.♘e3 d5 16.bxc5 ♕xc5 17.d4 ♕b6 18.exd5 ♘xd5∓ 0-1 (28) Tapia Fuentes, J (2213) – Zambrana, O (2465) Antofagasta 2015.

B) 14.♗f1 ♖fd8 15.♕e2 ♖ac8 16.♖ec1 ♕a7 17.bxc5 dxc5 18.a4 g5∓ ½ – ½ (42) Rubio Doblas, R (2222) – Garcia Ramirez, C (2196) corr. 2012.

14...a5!

Even better than 14...c4 15.dxc4 bxc4 16.♘bd2 f5∓ which gave Black good play as well in 0-1 (32) Lind, J (2234) – Jones, G (2645) Reykjavik 2016.

15.bxa5



Position after: 15.bxa5

A quick draw was agreed here in Thimognier, D (2401) – Le Bled, P (2207) France 2002. Black is clearly better despite the 200 rating point difference!

15...♘xa5! 16.♘xa5 ♕xa5∓

Black has won the opening battle. Black has more space in the center and on the queenside and the

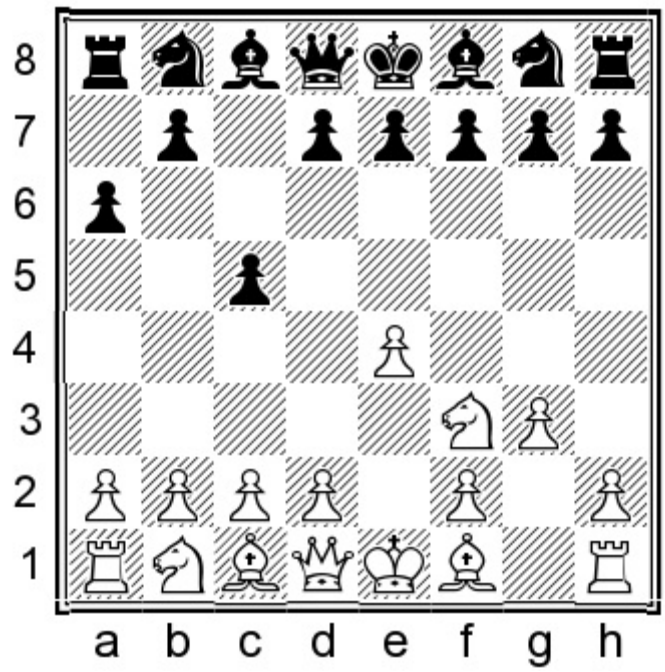
better bishops. White has weak pawns.

Conclusion

As is the case for the Sicilian with 2...e6, the King's Indian Attack (3.d3) is an interesting system against the O'Kelly. White develops his forces quietly with g3, ♗g2 etc. In this repertoire I recommend that Black strive for the Botvinnik setup of ...♘c6, ...g6, ...♗g7, ...e5 and ...♘ge7. Play is positional in nature. Long term plans have to be made by both parties to develop their forces and take the initiative on either side of the board. Note that an early d3-d4 by White can normally be challenged with the ...exd4 ...cxd4 ...d5 maneuver known from the Botvinnik with reversed colours. A white knight appearing on c2 is the signal for Black to take the center with ...d5. In general, the chances are balanced, but Black's game is easier to play.

e) 3.g3 – The Modern King's Indian Attack

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.g3



Position after: 3.g3

A popular response to Black's second move trying to avoid the risk of home preparation in the regular O'Kelly. For the time being White does not show his intention to play a traditional KIA structure with d3 , c3 and d4 or an Open Sicilian with d4.

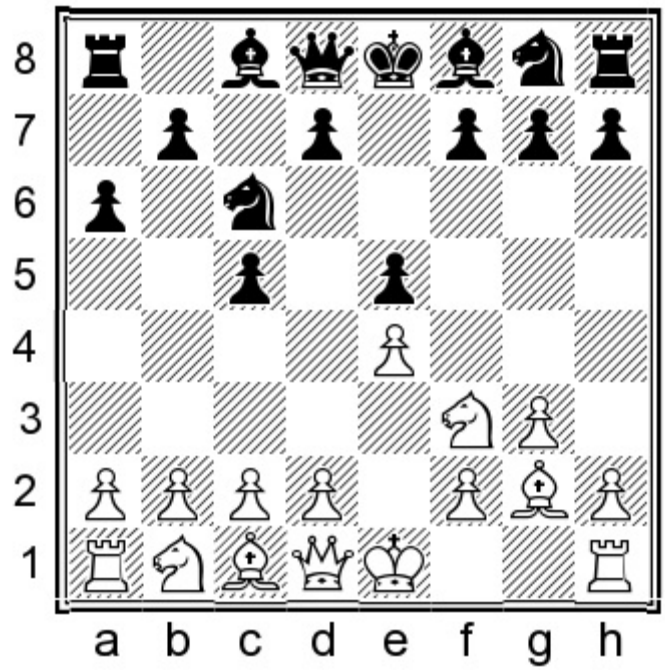
3...♘c6

Black aims for the solid Botvinnik formation (...♘c6, ...g6, ...♗g7, ...e5). For that reason, Black keeps the g8-knight in the stable for the time being.

4.♗g2

4.c3 d5 5.exd5 ♕xd5 6.♗g2 ♕e4+ 7.♕e2 ♗f5 8.♘h4 1-0 (49) Wegener, H (2105) – Wollsdorf, F (1770) Bad Woerishofen 2000. 8...♕xe2+! 9.♔xe2 ♗g4+ 10.♗f3 ♗d7=

4...e5!



Position after: 4...e5!

This is the most precise way to aim for the Botvinnik structure without allowing White all kinds of alternatives.

4...g6 looks like the most natural choice for Black as it is in line with the move order we have analysed for the 3.d3 KIA setup. There are a few reasons why this move is less attractive.

A) 5.0-0 ♗g7 is precisely what Black is after. After a subsequent ...e5 we have transposed into our main line.

B) 5.d4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♗g7 White plays an Open Sicilian, Dragon Fianchetto variation. Not the scariest of openings, but it contains a lot of theory and requires precision from Black to reach an equal position. 7.♘e2 is the main line. [7.♗e3 is an alternative Black would need to investigate as well. ½-½ (43) Najer, E (2663) – Vitiugov, N (2736) Sochi 2015.]

C) 5.c3! This is a promising suggestion from Stockfish. There are only a few cases in practice. Black has no clear path to equality.

C1) 5...e5 6.d4 cxd4 7.cxd4 exd4 8.♘xd4 ♗g7 9.♗e3± 1-0 (79) Jakubowski, K (2475) – Marcziter, D (2227) Chess. com 2022.

C2) 5...♗g7 6.d4 cxd4 7.cxd4± is good for White as Black has no means to put the white center

under pressure quickly. 1-0 (58) Paravyan, D (2629) – Balakrishnan, P (2500) Chess.com 2021.

C3) 5...d6 6.d4 cxd4 7.cxd4 ♗g4 8.0-0 ♗g7 9.♗e3± White maintains his center. Black struggles to show anything concrete. 9...e6 10.♕d2 ♗xf3 11.♗xf3 ♘f6 12.♖d1 0-0 13.♘c3± ½ – ½ (37) Roberts, A (2279) – Szabo, R (2344) corr. 2018.

C4) 5...♘f6 after others Black is too late in the center. 6.e5 ♘d5 7.d4 cxd4 8.♘xd4! [8.cxd4 d6=] 8...♘c7 9.♘xc6 [9.♕e2!?±] 9...bxc6 10.0-0 ♗g7 11.♖e1± A typical 2...♘f6 Alapin position, but White is clearly a bit better.

5.0-0

If White plays d2-d3 here or on any of the following moves, we transpose to the regular King's Indian Attack with 3.d3, as analyzed previously.

5.c3 d5! 6.exd5 ♕xd5 7.0-0 [7.d3 ♗g4 8.0-0 0-0-0=] 7...e4 8.♖e1 ♗e7 9.♘h4 ♘f6= 0-1 (36) Wilshusen, H (1603) – Szczepanski, Z (2233) corr. 2019.

5...g6

At last Black is able to launch his kingside fianchetto.

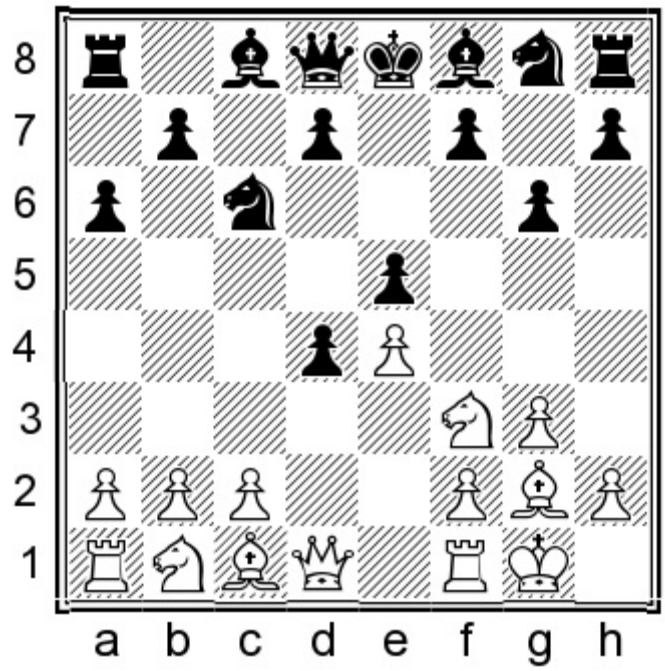
6.c3

In this position White normally continues slowly and positionally, but he has various ways to spice up the position with a pawn sacrifice either on d4 or on b4.

A) 6.♘c3 ♗g7 7.d3 ♘ge7 is the previous subchapter.

B) 6.d4 cxd4! [6...exd4 7.e5!?⩲] 7.c3 ♗g7 transposes to the main line.

C) 6.b4!? A Wing Gambit known from similar structures in the English and the Rossolimo. It is the preference of the engines, but there is not much practical experience with it. 6...cxb4

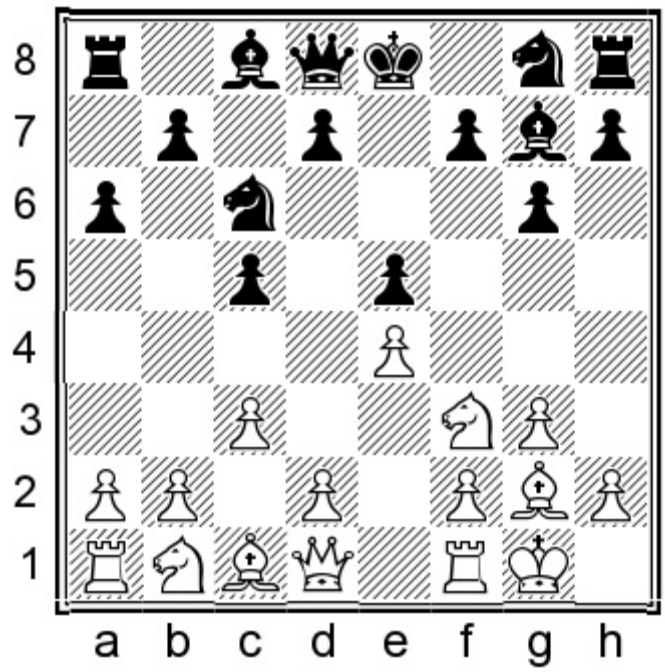


Position after: 6...cxb4

C1) 7.d4 exd4 [7...♗g7 8.d5±] 8.a3 d6 9.♘xd4 ♗g7=

C2) 7.a3 bxa3 8.♘xa3 d6 9.d4 ♗g4 10.c3 exd4 11.cxd4 ♗g7 12.♖b1 b5!=

6...♗g7



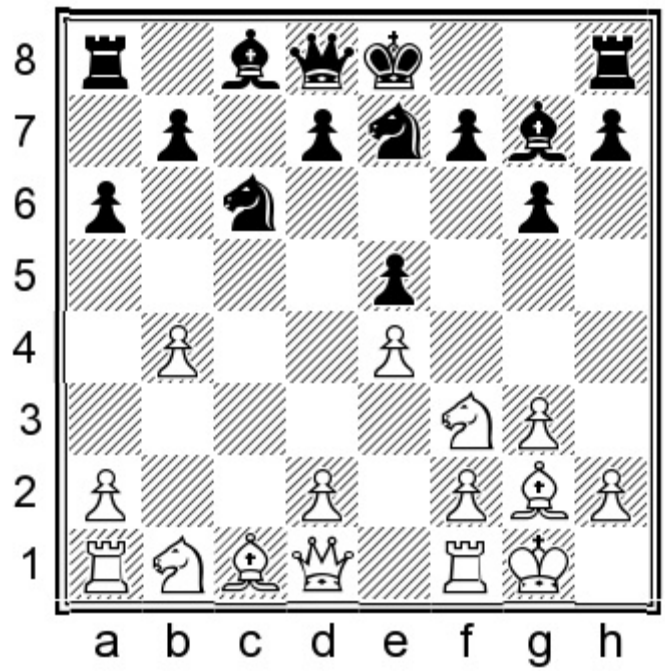
Position after: 6...♗g7

7.d4!?

The immediate pawn sacrifice on d4 is a testing option.

A) 7.d3 is the normal KIA again.

B) 7.b4!? Another version of the Wing Gambit. 7...cxb4 [7...b6?! This slow response is less convincing. 8.bxc5 bxc5 9.♗a3 d6 10.d4!± White has excellent play.] 8.cxb4 [8.d4 exd4 9.cxd4 ♘ge7∓] 8...♘ge7



Position after: 8...♘ge7

Another simple response. 2...a6 comes in handy! 9.♖e1 0-0 10.♗b2 ♖e8 11.♕b3 d6 12.♘c3 ♗e6 13.♘d5 h6=

C) 7.♘a3 Rerouting the knight to lend support to d2-d4. 7...♘ge7 8.♘c2 d5! The typical way to take the sting out of White's threat of d2-d4 with the knight on c2.. 9.exd5 [9.d3∓ is already a favorable KID fianchetto variation with reversed colors.] 9...♘xd5 10.d4 cxd4 11.cxd4 exd4 12.♘fxd4 [12.♖e1+ ♘de7 13.♗g5 ♗e6 14.♗xe7 ♕xe7 15.♘fxd4 ♘xd4 16.♘xd4 ♗xd4 17.♕xd4 0-0= with an equal position.] 12...♘xd4 13.♘xd4 0-0= This position is almost symmetrical and completely equal. 0-1 (32) Iglesias Fernandez, L (1829) – Vera Jimenez, A (2035) Aragon 2008.

7...exd4 8.cxd4 cxd4

Not 8...♘xd4?! 9.♘xd4 ♗xd4 10.e5± 0-1 (59) Perez Candelario, M (2628) – Del Rio de Angelis, S (2464) Evora 2019.

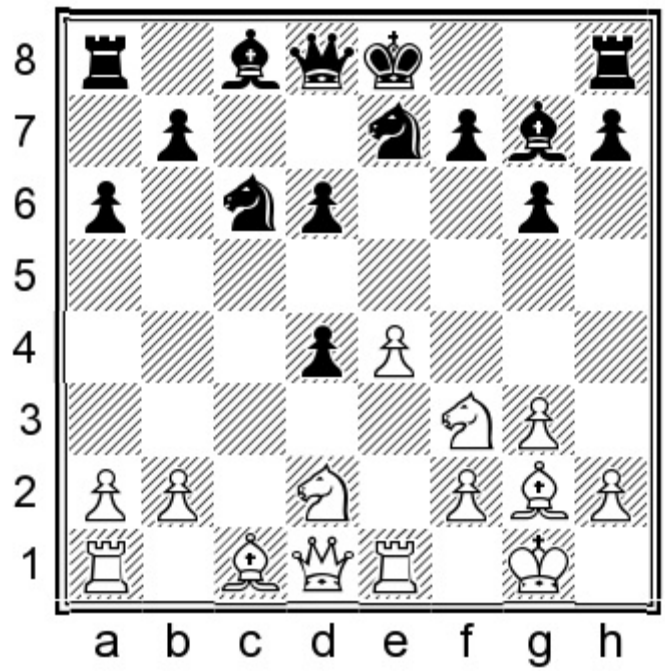
9.♘a3

White has some compensation for the pawn. He has to create counterplay quickly to justify it. Here ...a6 comes in handy, as ♘a3-b5, recovering the d-pawn or increasing the pressure against d6, is not

an option for White.

A) 9.♗g5 ♘ge7 10.♖e1 d6 11.♘a3 0-0 12.♕d2 ♗g4∓ 1-0 (43) Seret, J (2380) – Marcantoni, H (2211) France 2008.

B) 9.♖e1 ♘ge7 10.♘bd2 [10.♗f4 d6 11.♘bd2 0-0 12.♘b3 ♗g4∓; 10.e5 d6 11.exd6 ♕xd6 12.♗f4 ♕d8∓] 10...d6!N



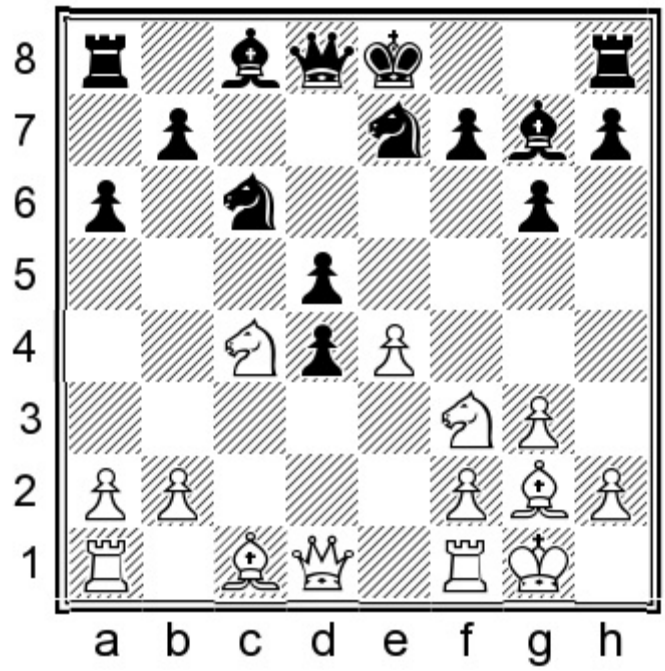
Position after: 10...d6!N

Black prepares ...♗g4. [10...0-0 11.♘b3 d5 12.e5 ♘f5 13.♗f4 ♖e8 14.♖c1⩲ 1-0 (27) Vazquez, G (2527) – Blit, J (2331) Chess.com 2021.] 11.♘b3 [11.h3 ♘e5 12.b3 ♘7c6∓] 11...♗g4∓

9...♘ge7 10.♘c4

10.♘c2 ♕b6! Black holds on to his extra pawn for the time being. 11.h4?! [11.♗f4 d5!=] 11...0-0∓ Black is already a bit better, e.g., 12.♘a3 d6 13.♘c4 ♕c7 14.♗f4 ♘e5∓.

10...d5!



Position after: 10...d5!

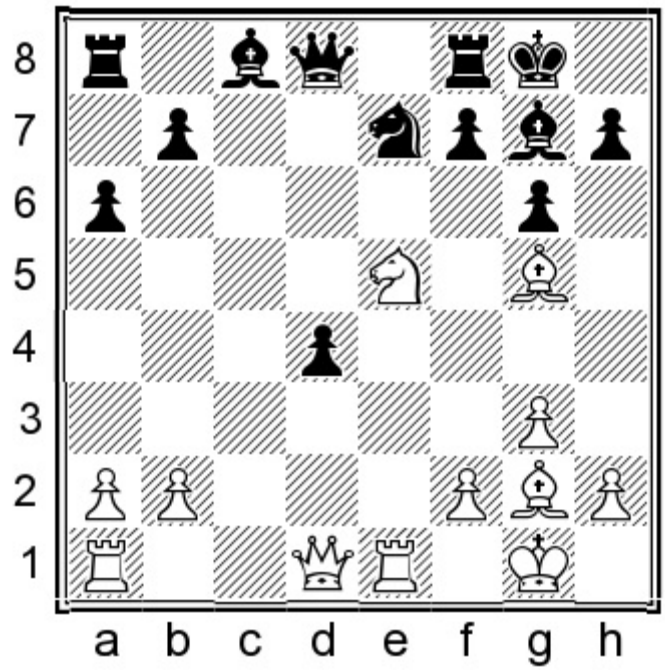
Black completely liberates his position.

11.exd5 ♘xd5 12.♖e1+ ♘de7 13.♘fe5!

13.♗f4 0-0 14.♘fe5 ♗e6 15.♘xc6 ♘xc6 16.♘d6 ♕b6∓ 0-1 (22) BadApp_le (2410)-alifie (2404) lichess. org 2018.

13...0-0 14.♗g5 ♘xe5 15.♘xe5

So far I have been following Eyesless18 (2772)-cutemouse83 (2897) lichess.org 2021 which ended in 1-0 (43). Here Black has the forcing

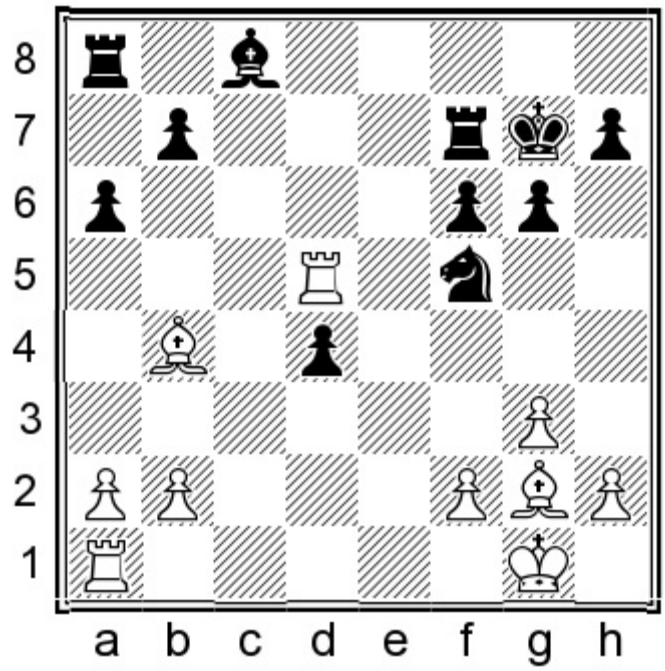


Position after: 15.♘xe5

15...♗xe5!N 16.♖xe5 f6 17.♕b3+ ♔g7 18.♕b4 ♘f5

18...♖e8 19.♖ae1 fxe5 20.♕c5 h5 21.♕xe5+= is trickier but leads to an equal position as well.

19.♖d5 ♕e7 20.♗d2 ♕xb4 21.♗xb4 ♖f7=



Position after: 21...♖f7=

Reaching a completely level position.

Conclusion

In this subchapter I looked at the modern way to play the King's Indian Attack against the O'Kelly.

White starts with 3.g3. Black has to make sure he does not transpose into a Dragon Fianchetto Variation, although that in itself is not very scary but does require knowing a lot of theory. In addition, Black must make sure that he avoids 3.g3 ♘c6 4.♗g2 g6 5.c3 followed by d4.

For that reason, the recommendation of this repertoire is to play 4...e5 which avoids all these variations. White completes his development with ♗g2 and 0-0 while Black completes his Botvinnik structure. White may subsequently choose from one of three options:

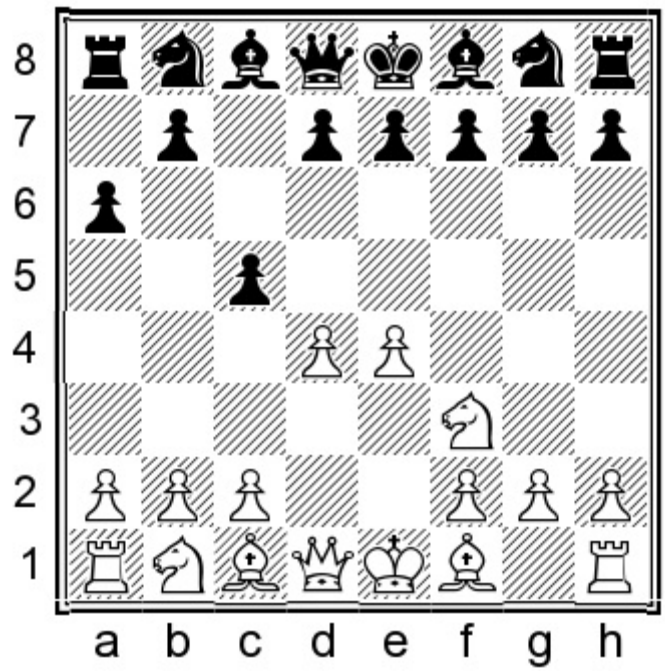
1. A transposition into the classic KIA with d3, see the previous subchapter;

2. A wing gambit with a quick b2-b4;

3. A central break with c3-d4, which becomes a gambit most of the time. Black can neutralize all these gambits relatively easily and can reach a position with equal chances and enough to play for.

Chapter 2
The Routine Open Sicilian – 3.d4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4



Chapter Guide

Chapter 2 – The Routine Open Sicilian – 3.d4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4

a) Introduction

b) 4.♕xd4 – The Hungarian Connection

c) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♗d3

d) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.f3 – Prins Variation

e) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f5

f) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘de2

g) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘b3

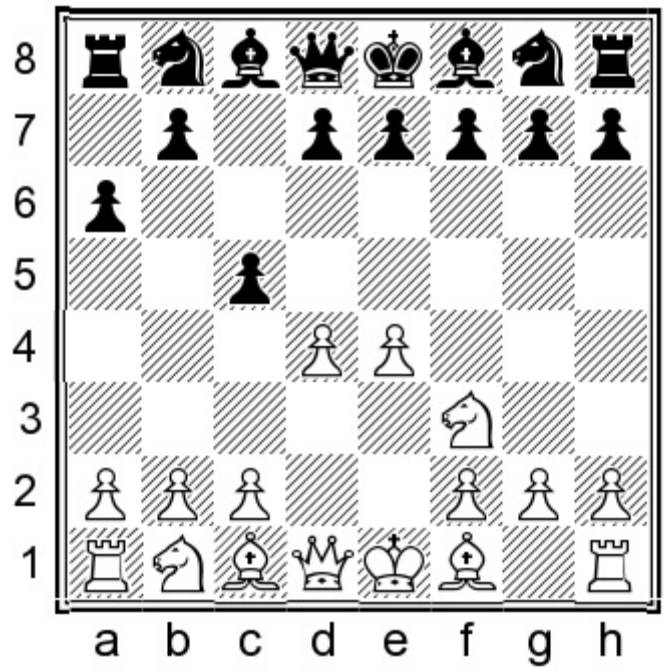
h) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.--

i) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗c4

j) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗d2

a) Introduction

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4



Position after: 3.d4

This routine move going for an Open Sicilian allows Black to execute the original intention behind the 2...a6 O'Kelly in full. Theory condemns White's 3.d4, claiming that it helps Black to execute the only trick he has up his sleeve after 2...a6. The move 3...cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5! with a quick 6...♗b4 and a subsequent 7....d5 indeed appears attractive but cannot always be recommended. The reality of the situation is that, in the open positions which arise, Black is behind in development. He should play carefully to obtain equality and still reach positions in which he keeps chances to win. As a result, other strategies have been developed for Black based on an early ...♗xc3 or on central piece play.

3...cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6

The regular move.

4...e5 is an alternative on which Martin examines. Often it just transposes to the lines with 4...♘f6. As the main line is quite attractive for Black, I will not look any further into 4...e5.

5.♘c3

A) 5.e5? is a bit silly as it just loses a pawn for nothing. 5...♕a5+ 6.♘c3 ♕xe5+ 7.♗e2 ♘c6 8.♘f3 ♕c7 9.0-0 e6–+ 0-1 (21) matej221 (2292) – Pap, G (2676) lichess.org 2018.

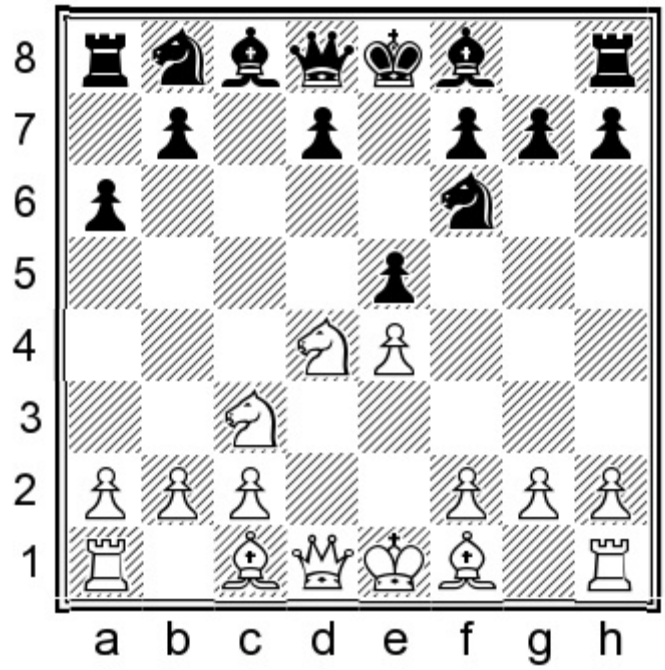
B) 5.♗d3 is reminiscent of the 5. ♗d3 variation in the Sicilian Kan. I recommend 5...♘c6 6.♘xc6

dxc6 with interesting piece play for Black.

C) 5.f3 covers the e4-pawn like in the Prins variation (2...d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.f3). The big difference is that after 5...e5 6.♘b3 d5 7.♗g5 d4 Black has gained an important tempo due to ...a6 as after 8.c3 ♘c6 White's best move 9.♗b5 is not available anymore.

5...e5!

The typical move and the key behind the success of the O'Kelly after 3.d4. Previous world champion Max Euwe introduced this move into master practice in his game against Arni Snaevarr, Reykjavik 1948. Since then the statistics have always been in favor of Black, but that is also due to the fact that the white players tend to be the ones with the lower ratings. White has four feasible squares for the knight.



Position after: 5...e5!

6.♘f3

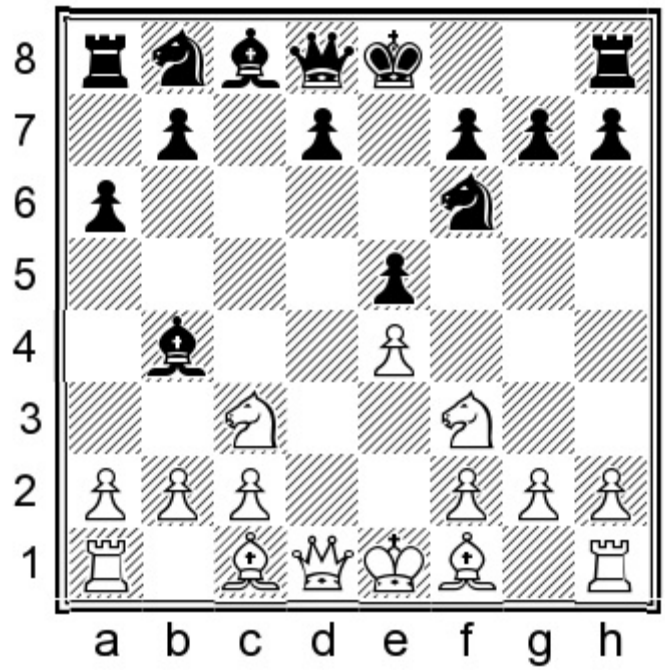
The most active continuation, putting pressure on e5 and not hindering the development of his other pieces.

A) 6.♘f5 in this position the knight is vulnerable to central action by Black. 6...d5 7.♗g5 d4 8.♗xf6 gxf6 9.♘b1 ♗e6∓ Black has more space and better development to compensate for his pawn structure.

B) 6.♘b3 is a natural retreat but here the white knight does not achieve anything in particular and it is often in the way. 6...♗b4 7.♗d3 ♗xc3+! [7...d5 is the preference of Martin, but I do not fancy 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.0-0!? a double-edged pawn sacrifice I would rather avoid.] 8.bxc3 0-0 9.0-0 d6= Black has easy play against White's damaged pawn structure.

C) 6.♘de2 White aims for g3 and ♗g2 but he will not have time for that. The move just highlights White's weaknesses along the g1-a7 diagonal. 6...♗c5! 7.♘g3 Black was threatening ...♘g4 or ...♕b6. 7...d6 8.♗e2 again ...♘g4 had to be prevented. 8...0-0 Black has easy play in the center.

6...♗b4



Position after: 6...♗b4

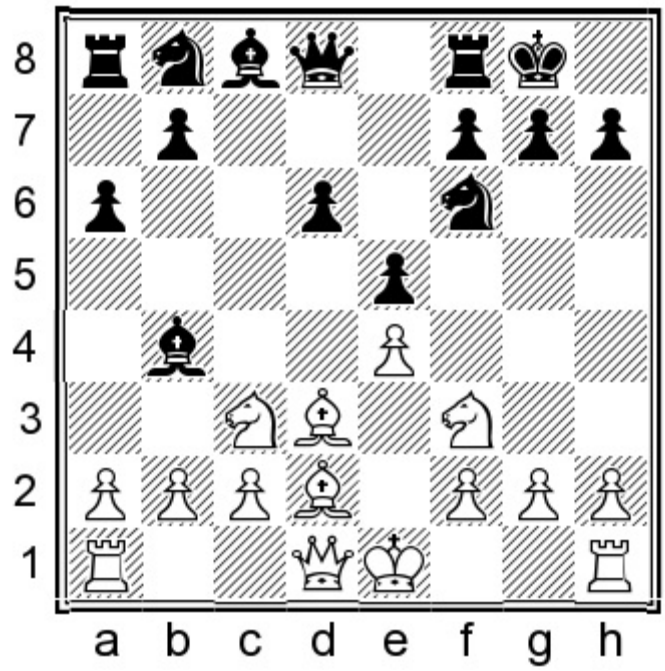
Developing a piece and increasing the pressure against White's center.

7.♗d2

A) 7.♗d3?! A natural move, but it is dubious. 7...d5!∓ Black is already slightly better. White has to take special measures as 8.exd5? fails to 8...e4 and Black wins a piece.

B) 7.♗c4 ♕c7! Offensive and defensive at the same time. 8.♕d3 d6 9.0-0 ♗xc3 10.♕xc3 [10.bxc3 is the familiar damaged pawn structure.] 10...0-0= [10...♘xe4? 11.♗xf7++–] 11.♕d3 b5 12.♗b3 ♗b7= Black has enough pressure against White's center to compensate for White's bishop pair.

7...d6 8.♗d3 0-0



Position after: 8...0-0

9.h3

9.0-0 ♗g4!=

9...♘bd7=

Black will follow up with ...♘c5. Chances are equal.

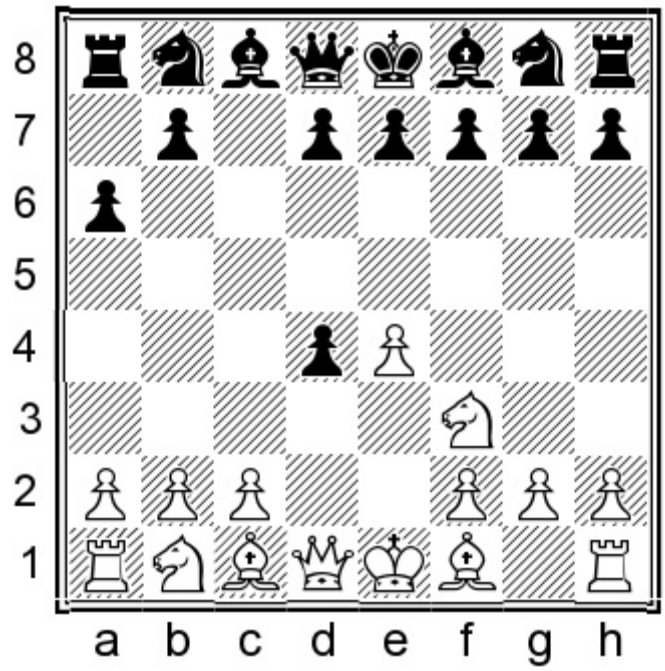
Conclusion

Life is not as easy for Black after 3.d4 as old theory claimed. 5...e5 is indeed Black's best but Black's next move depends on where White places his knight. An automatic ...d7-d5 is no longer part of the standard program and we will only see it in a few cases (6.♘f5 d5! and 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗d3?! d5!).

New strategies have been developed based on reaping positional advantages for Black, especially the damaged white queenside pawn structure. In general Black keeps an easier game and should be able to achieve balanced positions with good chances to outplay his opponent in the ensuing game.

b) 4.♕xd4 – The Hungarian Connection

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4



Position after: 3...cxd4

In the vast majority of games White takes back with the knight on d4, but he has a few interesting alternatives.

4.♕xd4

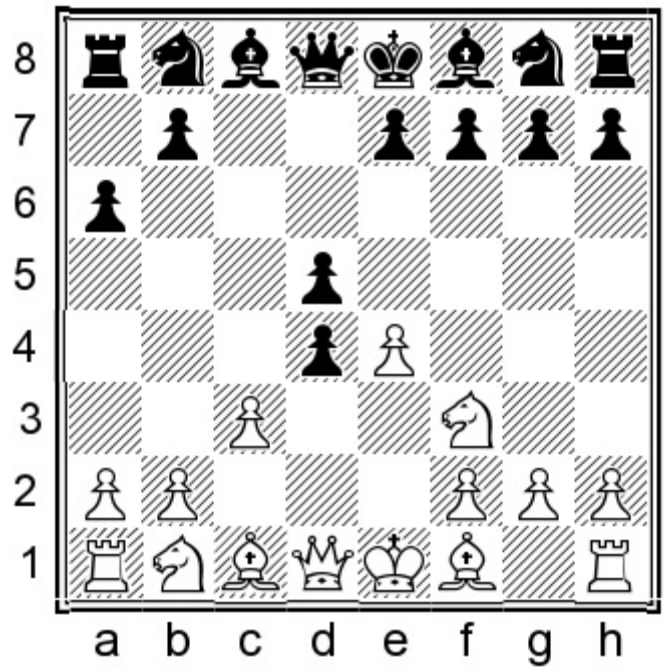
Just like in the Hungarian/Chekhover system in the main line Open Sicilian after 2...d6 3.d4 cxd4, it makes sense to take on d4 with the queen. After all, Black has 'wasted' a tempo on 2...a6. We will see that after a subsequent ...d6 the game often transposes to that very same system.

A) 4.♗c4 Puts the bishop on the wrong diagonal in a Sicilian Kan structure. 4...e6 5.♘xd4 ♘f6 6.♘c3 ♕c7 7.♗b3 b5!= as in 0-1 (39) Olivare, C (1996) – Lemos, D (2511) Mar del Plata 2009 and some 25 other games. Statistics for White in this position have been abysmal.

B) 4.c3 White intends to play the Morra Gambit. No worries for the O'Kelly practitioner!

B1) 4...dxc3 Black could play the preference of theory and the engines. 5.♘xc3 ♘c6 6.♗c4 e6 7.0-0 ♘ge7 [7...b5 8.♗b3 ♘a5 is Sielecki's suggestion, which has hardly been tested at more senior levels and looks quite interesting.] 8.♗g5 is Martin's preference and a more mainstream choice which will be welcomed by Morra Gambit players who love to play this.

B2) 4...d5!



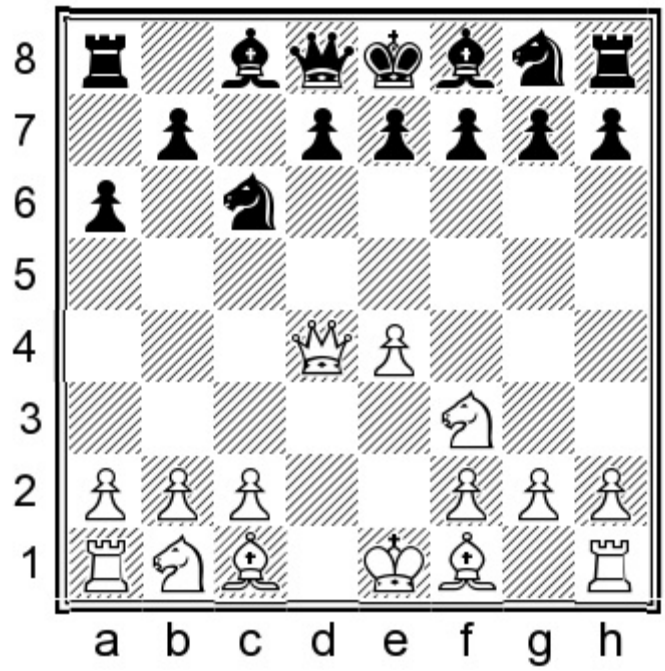
Position after: 4...d5!

Given our repertoire, Black should seriously consider this move, which normally transposes to positions which are dealt with later in the move order 3.c3 d5. An additional advantage is that the Morra player is taken out of his comfort zone.

B2.1) 5.♕xd4 ♘f6! 6.exd5 [6.e5 ♘c6 7.♕f4 ♘d7 8.♗e2 e6∓] 6...♕xd5 transposes to 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 6.♕xd4 ♕xd5.

B2.2) 5.exd5 ♘f6! transposes into positions arising after 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4.

4...♘c6



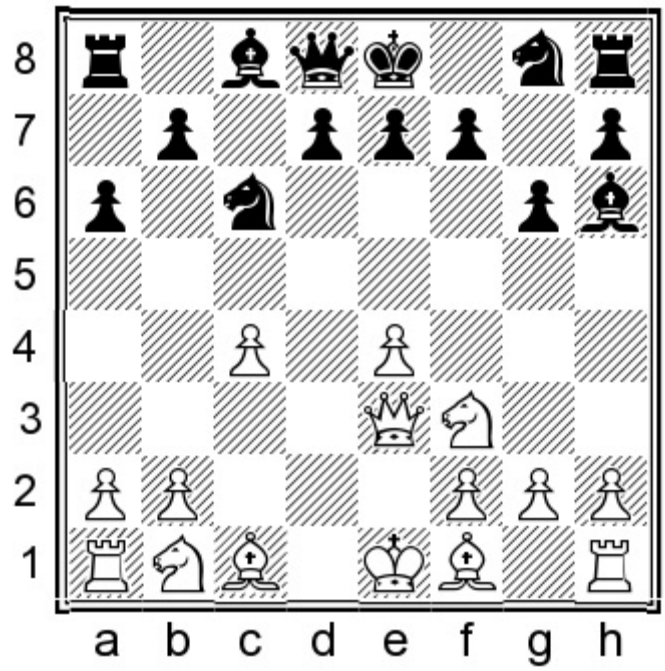
Position after: 4...♘c6

Black's most natural move. I will investigate structures where Black follows up with a kingside fianchetto. Unlike the situation in the normal Hungarian, White is not in a position to play systems based on ♗e3 or ♗g5.

5.♕d2

Any move of the white queen makes sense and has been seen in practice. The text move appeared in a recent high-level encounter with Artemiev playing the black pieces.

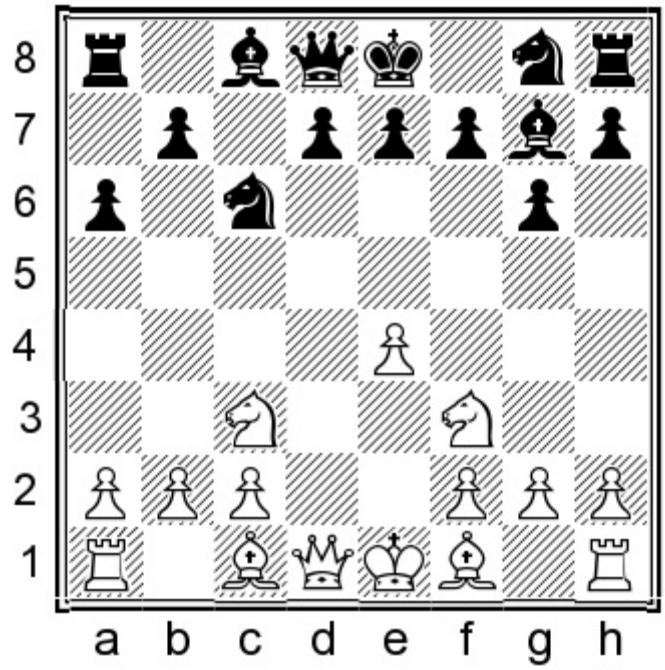
A) 5.♕e3 g6 6.c4 [6.♗d2 ♗g7 7.♗c3 ♘f6∓] 6...♗g7 [6...♗h6?!



Position after: 6...♗h6?!

This maneuver only works when there is a knight on c3. 7.♕c3! ♕a5 8.♕xa5±] 7.♘c3 d6 8.h3 ♘f6 9.♗e2 0-0 10.0-0 ♘d7 11.♖d1 ♕b6!= 1-0 (78) Demchenko, A (2654) – Fishbein, A (2443) Chess.com 2022.

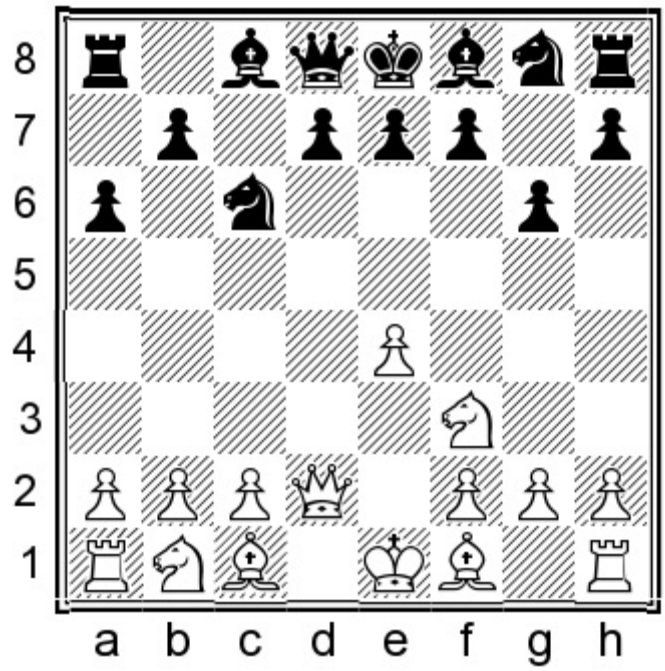
B) 5.♕d1 g6 6.♘c3 [6.c4 ♗g7 7.♘c3 d6 is investigated under the move order 5.♕d2 g6 6.c4 d6.] 6...♗g7



Position after: 6...♗g7

7.♗c4 [7.♗d3 ♘f6 8.0-0 0-0 followed by 9...d5 with a dead equal position.] 7...d6 8.0-0 ♘f6 9.a4 0-0= 0-1 (19) Gevorgyan, M (2219) – Tejedor Fuente, E (2434) Chess.com 2021.

5...g6



Position after: 5...g6

Since White has lost time with his queen moves it makes sense to play a Dragon/Maroczy structure with Black.

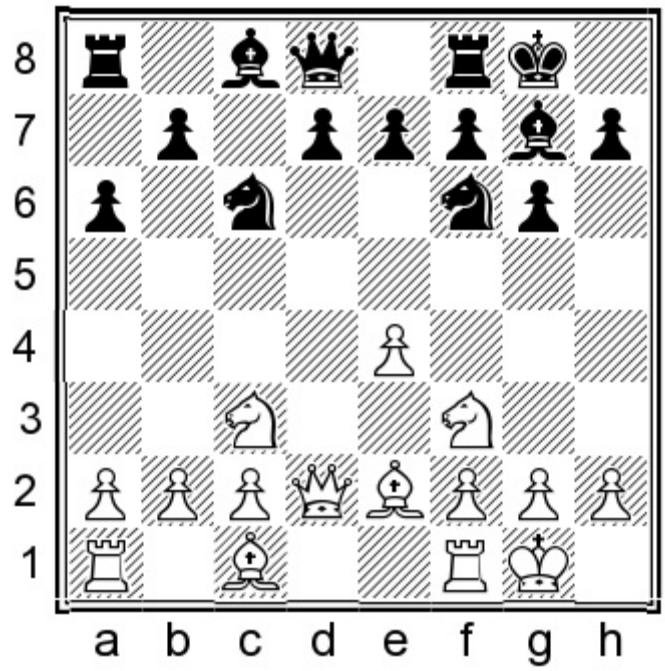
6.c4

White aims for the Maroczy Bind structure.

6.♘c3 This is the other natural choice for White. White concentrates on quick piece development. Black plays a standard Sicilian game. 6...♗g7

A) 7.b3?! In this move order White has no time to play the popular Carlsen system (♕d2+b3+♗b2+0-0-0), due to weaknesses along the long diagonal. 7...♘f6! 8.e5 [8.♗b2? ♘xe4∓ 9.♕e3 ♕a5 0-1 (9) ARDosina (2454) -ustedesunmarrano (2540) lichess.org 2022.] 8...♘g4 9.♗b2 ♘gxe5 10.♘xe5 ♗xe5 11.0-0-0 d6∓ White has insufficient compensation for the pawn.

B) 7.♗e2 ♘f6 8.0-0 0-0



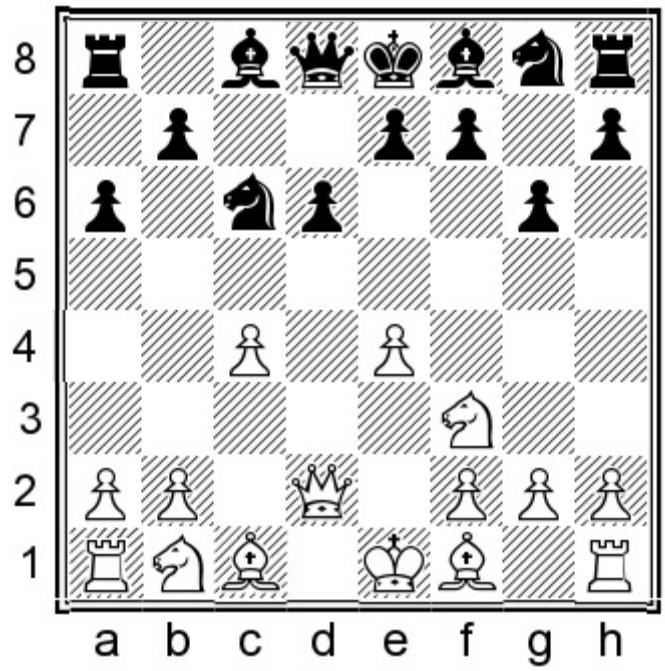
Position after: 8...0-0

Black plays an attractive Sicilian Dragon.

B1) 9.♖d1 d6 10.♕d3 ♗g4 11.♗g5 ♗xf3 12.♗xf3 ♘e5 13.♕d2 [13.♕e3 ♖c8 14.♗e2 ♘c4 15.♗xc4 ♖xc4 16.h3 ♕a5∓] 13...♘xf3+ 14.gxf3 ♖e8∓ 0-1 (49) Serbulet, A (1001) – Vass, R (1473) Calimanesti 2014.

B2) 9.♕f4 d6 10.♕h4 b5 11.♗g5 White tries to create attacking chances against the black king. 11...♗e6 12.♖ad1 ♕c7= Black has a comfortable Dragon game. In the remainder of the game White had his chances but Black showed that he was a more skillful blitz player. 0-1 (30) Dubov, D (2699) – Artemiev, V (2716) Chess. com 2020.

6...d6!



Position after: 6...d6!

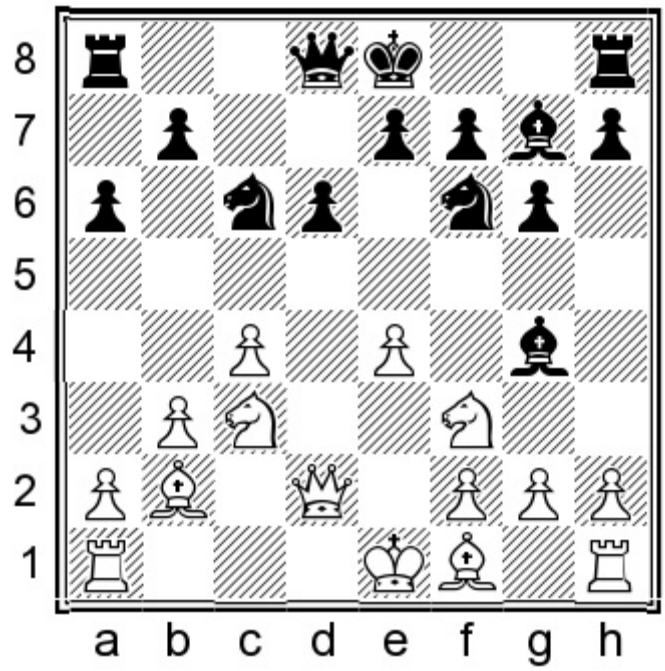
A precise move. This completes the transposition to the Hungarian system of the Sicilian with 2...d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♕xd4 a6, with hundreds of games in the database. Black waits with the next move of his dark-squared bishop until White has shown his hand with regard to his queenside development. There are a few thematic games demonstrating this system in the databases. I prefer setups where Black strives for an early ...♗g4. If White prevents that with h3 Black should focus on a quick ...b5, even sacrificing a pawn if necessary.

7.h3

White prevents ...♗g4. Not the most popular move but in my view a thematic approach in this position.

A) 7.♘c3 ♗h6! This important finesse chases the white queen to a less attractive square. 8.♕c2 ♗g7 9.♗e3 [9.b3 f5!∓] 9...♘f6 10.♗e2 0-0 11.0-0 ♗g4! 12.♖ad1 ♘d7 13.b3 ♖c8= 0-1 (45) Kasimdzhanov, R (2595) – Kasparov, G (2812) Wijk aan Zee 1999.

B) 7.b3 The most popular choice, delaying ♘c3 in order to prevent ...♗h6. 7...♗g7 [7...♗h6?! makes less sense now 8.♕c3! ♕a5 9.♕xa5 ♘xa5 10.♗xh6± with two black knights on the rim.] 8.♘c3 ♘f6 9.♗b2 ♗g4!



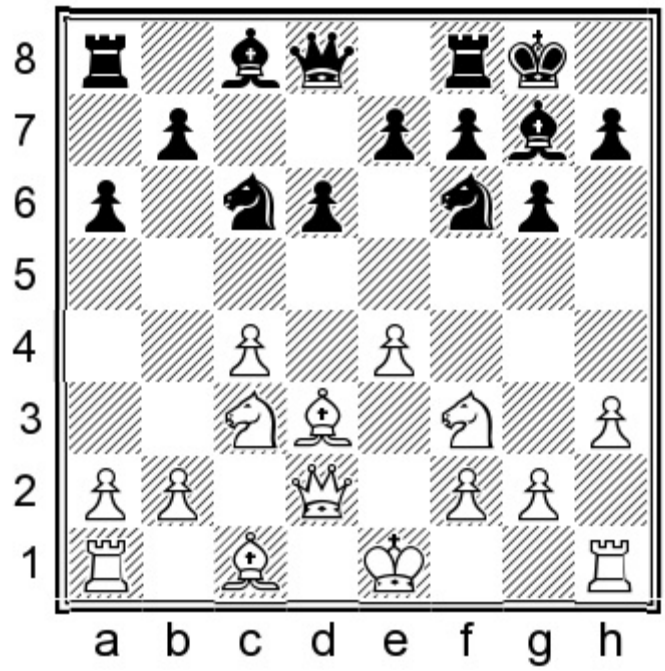
Position after: 9...♗g4!

The key move.

B1) 10.♘d4 has been played in a handful of games. 10...♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♕a5 12.f3 ♗e6 13.♕d2 0-0!N [13...h5 was Black's choice in 1-0 (48) Tiviakov, S (2663) – Deepan Chakkravarthy, J (2487) Kolkata 2012. Black was gradually pushed from the board by the experienced Dutch GM.] 14.♖b1 [14.♗e2 b5!∓] 14...b5=

B2) 10.♗e2 The normal continuation. 10...0-0 11.0-0 ♕a5 12.♖fd1 ♖fc8 Black has an ideal Maroczy Bind. 13.h3 [13.a3 b5!N 14.cxb5 axb5 15.b4 ♕b6 Black's b-pawn is untouchable. 16.♖ac1 ♖ab8=] 13...♗xf3 14.♗xf3 b5= as in 0-1 (54) Sarakauskas, G (2429) – Balogh, C (2616) Beijing 2008. Black has scored excellently from this position.

7...♘f6 8.♘c3 ♗g7 9.♗d3 0-0



Position after: 9...0-0

White has prevented ....♗g4, but now he has to deal with Black's activity on the other side of the board. A quick ...b5 is Black's path to equality.

10.0-0

10.b3 b5!N no need for further preparation. 11.cxb5 axb5 12.♗b2 [12.♗xb5 ♗b7 13.♗b2 ♕a5∓ Black wins back his pawn with interest.] 12...♗a6 13.0-0 b4 14.♘a4 ♘e5 15.♘xe5 dxe5 16.♖ad1 ♗xd3 17.♕xd3 ♕xd3 18.♖xd3 ♘xe4=

10...♗e6! 11.b3

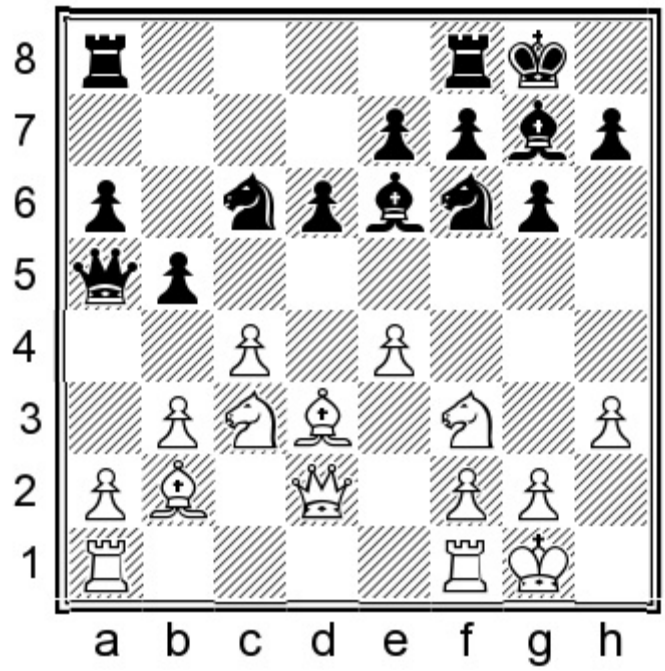
11.♘g5 ♘d7=

11...♕a5 12.♗b2

This position has been reached in half a dozen games.

12.♖b1N 12...♖fc8=

12...b5!N



Position after: 12...b5!N

is my simple improvement for Black.

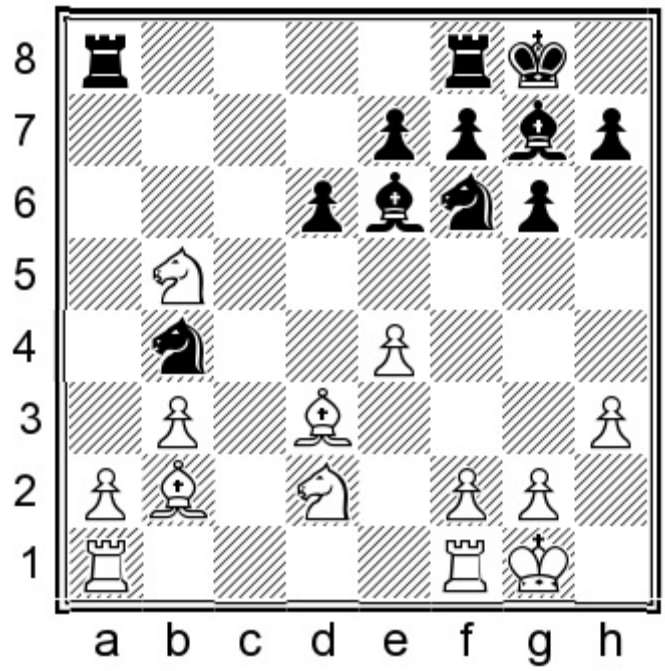
13.cxb5 axb5 14.♘xb5

A) 14.♗xb5 ♘xe4 15.♘xe4 ♕xb5 16.♗xg7 ♔xg7 17.♖fe1 ♖fc8=

B) 14.♖fe1 ♖ab8=

14...♕xd2 15.♘xd2 ♘b4∓

White cannot hold on to his extra material for long.



Position after: 15...♘b4∞

16.♗b1 ♖fc8 17.a3 ♘c6 18.♘d4

18.♘c4 ♗xc4 19.bxc4 ♘a5∓

18...♘xd4 19.♗xd4 ♖ab8 20.♖d1

20.b4 ♘xe4∓

20...♗xb3 21.♘xb3 ♖xb3=

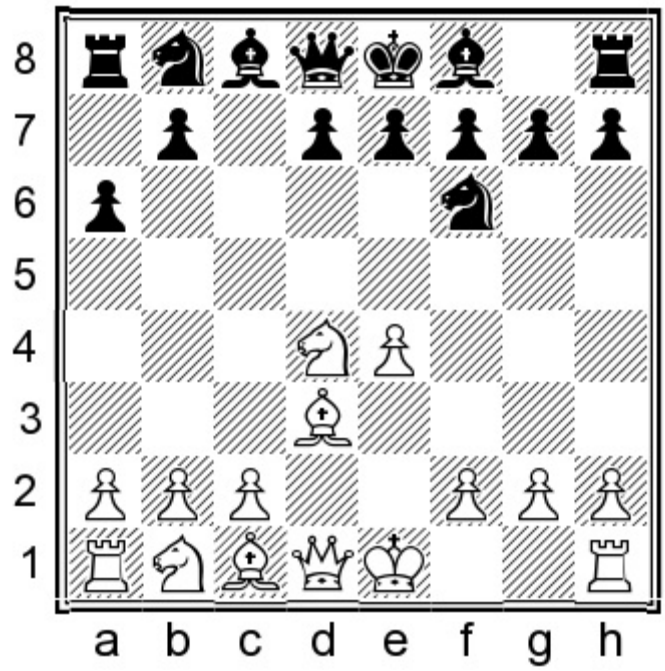
with an equal endgame.

Conclusion

Alternative moves to (3.d4 cxd4) 4.♘xd4 are not dangerous for Black. The Morra gambit 4.c3 will be declined with 4...d5 which immediately leads to the 3.c3 O'Kelly. 4.♕xd4 ♘c6 followed by a kingside fianchetto by Black transposes into the Hungarian/Chekhover system in the 2...d6 Sicilian. In the c4 based structures Black needs to be precise, but either ...♗g4 or a well-timed pawn sacrifice on b5 will deliver him sufficient counter chances.

c) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♗d3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♗d3



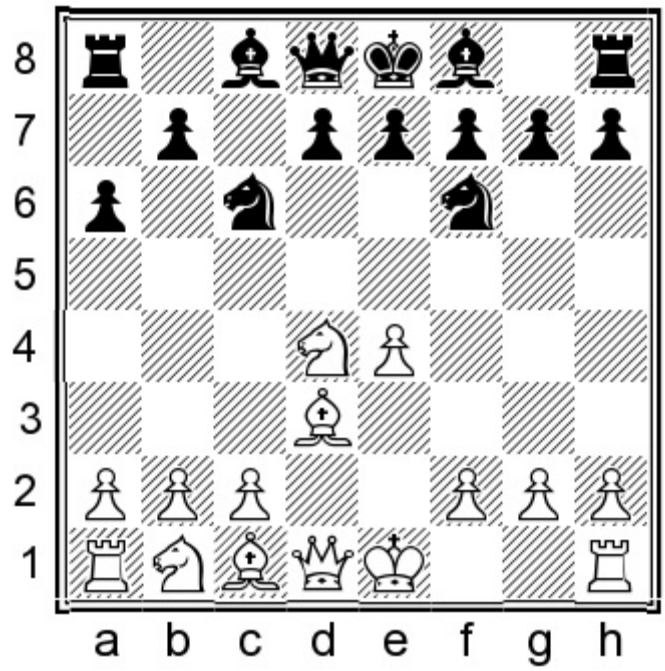
Position after: 5.♗d3

Theoretically this is a sideline, even for the O'Kelly. However, in master practice it has been played more than 700 times. I have seen this in my own practice frequently therefore it must be taken seriously. I suggest the less frequently played development of the knight.

5...♘c6!

A slightly unusual, but quite attractive way to respond to 5.♗d3. It carries the seal of approval of O'Kelly who played it in 1950. Black immediately challenges the central knight as it lacks the support of the queen after White's fifth move. This maneuver is known from the regular Sicilian Kan after 5.♘c3 ♕c7 6.♗d3 ♘c6. In the current situation Black may play a later ...e7-e5 in one move and he can put his queen on a more useful square than c7 given the pawn configuration on the board. Those pluses guarantee him at least equal chances.

5...e5 There is nothing wrong with this move. It is the main line and the move played by top level masters who may wait till White has played 5.♘c3. Black continues with 6...d5 on the next move. This leads to an open position with a black queen or knight on d5. There are a few reasons why I am less enthusiastic about 5....e5. Black is slightly behind in development unlike the situation after 5.♘c3 Black lacks the disruptive pin ...♗b4. Further, White is only one move instead of two moves away from castling. Theoretically, chances are balanced, but in my view it is difficult to generate winning chances for Black in the positions which arise.



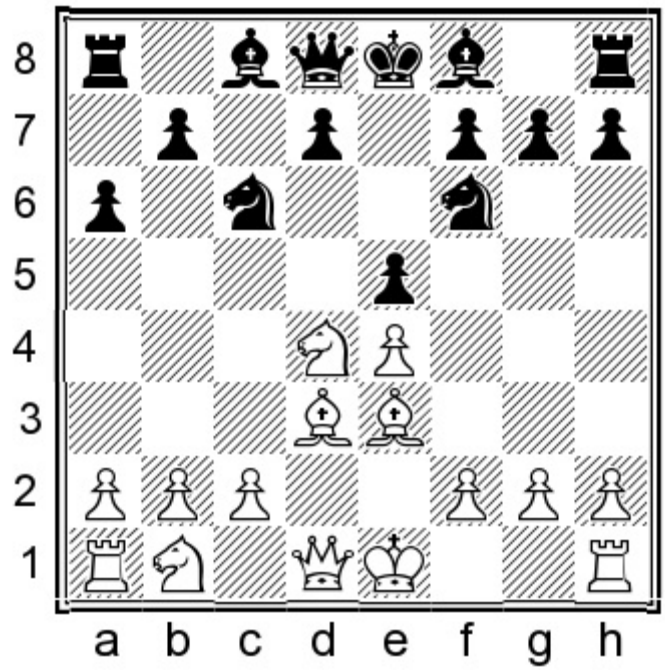
Position after: 5...♘c6!

6.♘xc6

The most common move.

A) 6.♘b3 g6 After two slow developing moves by White, Black can comfortably transfer into the Dragon. 7.♘c3 [7.c4 ♗g7 8.♘c3 d6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗g5 ♖e8= The white knight is slightly misplaced on b3.; 7.0-0 ♗g7 8.c3 0-0 9.♗e3 d5∓.] 7...♗g7 8.0-0 0-0 9.♗e3 d6 10.♔h1 b5= Black has the typical Dragon counterplay, 0-1 (37) Kind, V (1867) – Foisor, C (2417) Germany 2006.

B) 6.♗e3 This natural move may become very risky for White. 6...e5!

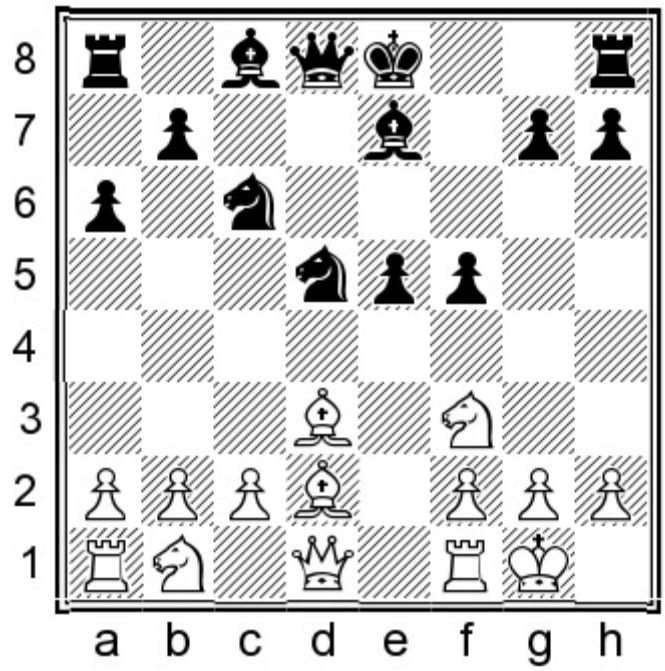


Position after: 6...e5!

With White's two bishops in sub optimal positions it makes sense to take the initiative in the center.

B1) 7.♘f5 d5 8.exd5 [8.♘g3 d4∓] 8...♕xd5 9.f3 [9.♘h4 e4 10.♗e2 ♕e5–+] 9...♘b4!∓

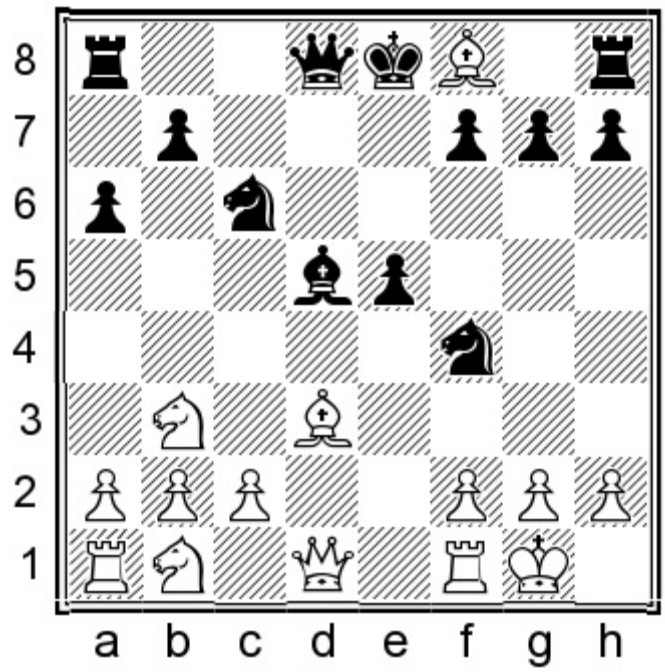
B2) 7.♘f3 d5 8.exd5 ♘xd5 Black centralizes his knight with tempo. 9.♗d2 White loses more time with his bishop, but he has to do something against the threat of 9...♘xe3. 9...♗e7 10.0-0 [10.♘c3? ♘db4!∓ 11.♗e2 ♗f5! 12.♖c1 e4 13.♘g1 0-0 White's position is a complete mess. 14.a3 ♘d5 15.♘xd5 ♕xd5 16.♗c3 ♕e6–+ There are too many threats now.] 10...f5∓



Position after: 10...f5∓

Black is already a bit better due to his position in the center. Waldemar, C (2094) – Boekelman, J (2229) Chess.com continued 11.♗c4 ♗e6 12.♕e2 ♕d6 13.♘c3 e4 14.♘g5 ♘xc3 15.♗xc3 [15.bxc3 ♗xc4 16.♕xc4 0-0-0∓] 15...♗xc4 16.♕xc4 ♗xg5–+ and Black won quickly.

B3) 7.♘b3 d5 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.0-0 ♗e6= The same story as after 7.♘f3. Black has nicely centralized knights and White's bishops struggle. E.g., 10.♗c5?! ♘f4 11.♗xf8 [11.♗e3 ♘xd3 12.cxd3 ♗e7∓] 11...♗d5!!

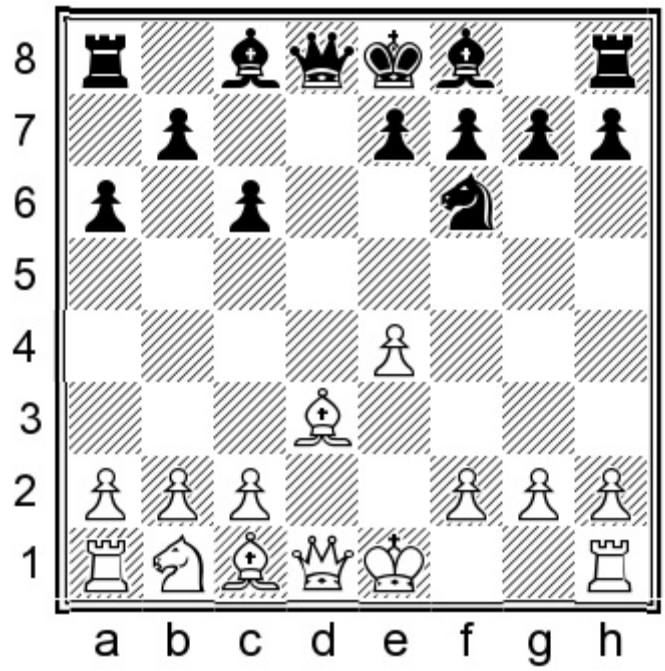


Position after: 11...♗d5!!

12.f3 due to the threat 12...♕g5 White has no time to rescue the bishop on f8. 12...♖xf8∓ Black is about to play ...♕g5 and ...0-0-0 with a strong attack. 13.♘c5? ♕b6–+ 0-1 (13) Chenyu Zhao (2237) – Boekelman, J (2195) Chess.com 2022.

B4) 7.♘xc6 is best and after 7...dxc6 we transpose into the main line.

6...dxc6!



Position after: 6...dxc6!

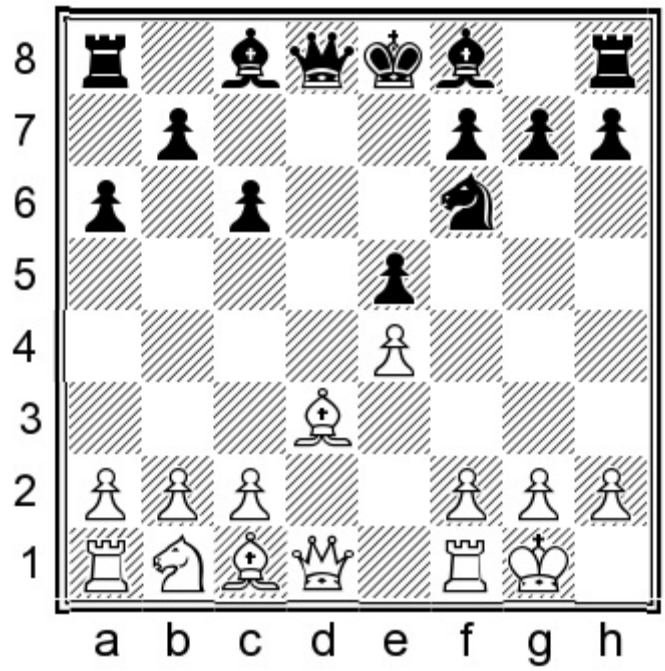
Black clarifies the position in the center to his advantage. He will play ...e5 next and can count on at least equal chances. The symmetrical pawn structure may be a concern if we want to go for a win. However, Black's piece placement is sufficiently active to create winning chances. O'Kelly himself continued with the equally attractive 6...bxc6, 0-1 (27) Poulsen, C – O'Kelly de Galway, A Dubrovnik 1950.

7.0-0

The natural continuation. White's knight is better developed via d2 than via c3.

7.♘c3 e5 8.h3!? [8.0-0 ♗c5 transposes to the main line with 8.♘c3.] 8...♗e6 9.♕e2 ♗c5 10.♗e3 ♕b6 11.♘a4 ♕a5+ 12.♘c3 ♘d7 13.♗d2 ♕c7 14.0-0 0-0=

7...e5!



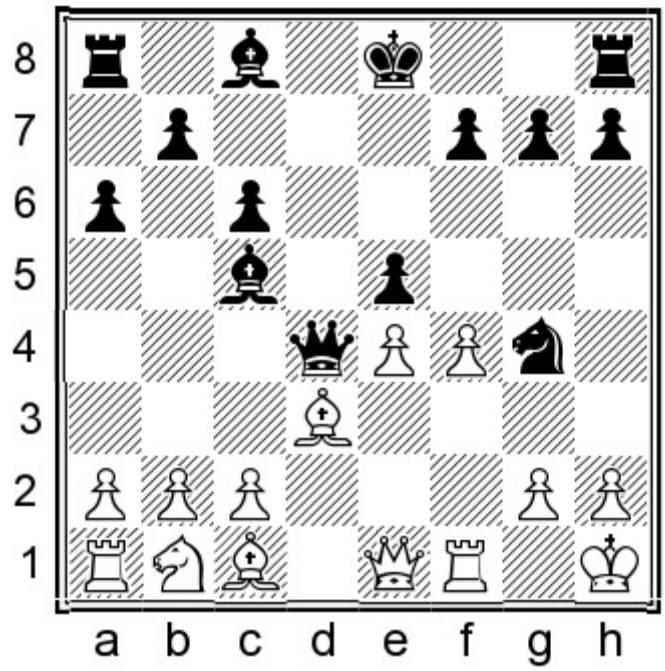
Position after: 7...e5!

By now White threatened 8.e4-e5, but Black was planning 7...e5 anyway. Black has gained time compared to the similar variation of the Sicilian Kan by playing ...e5 in one go and leaving the queen on a better spot back home. Black has an easy game and will continue with ...♗c5, ...♕e7 and ...♗g4/♗e6. Note that White is not properly prepared for a quick f2-f4, the thematic maneuver in the Kan, as we will see. Black gets a dangerous counterattack.

8.♘d2

White's most flexible development move. The knight can jump to the kingside or the queenside, depending on the circumstances. This maneuver is seen in the Sicilian Kan in similar structures as well.

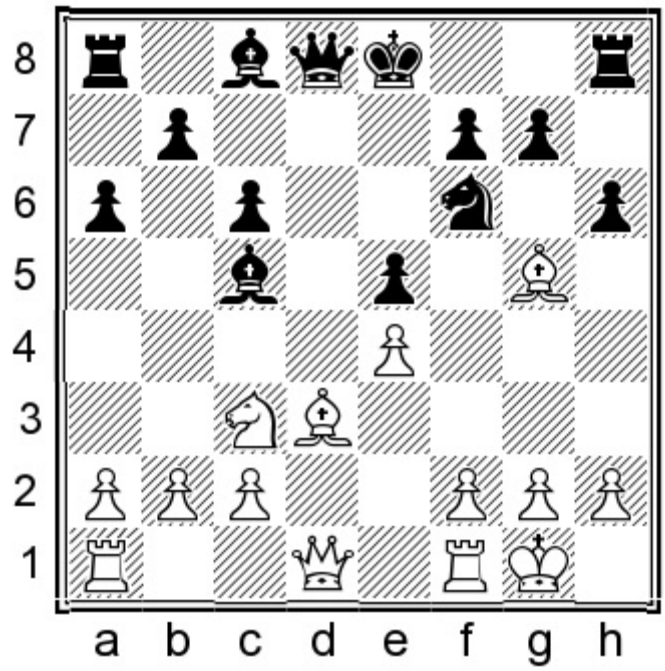
A) 8.f4?! The normal aggressive move as in the Kan is dubious here. 8...♗c5+ 9.♔h1 ♘g4 10.♕e1 ♕d4!



Position after: 10...♕d4!

That is an important difference with the Kan. With the black queen on c7, this queen maneuver cannot be played. 11.h3 ♘f2+ 12.♔h2 exf4! Here Black needs to be precise. [12...♘xd3 13.cxd3 ♕xd3∞ gave White more than sufficient counterplay for the pawn in Estrin, Y – Letic, S corr. 1977, 1-0 (34).] 13.♗xf4 ♗e6! 14.♘c3 0-0 Black times taking on d3 carefully. 15.♖c1 ♖fe8 16.♘e2 ♘xd3 17.cxd3 ♕b4∓

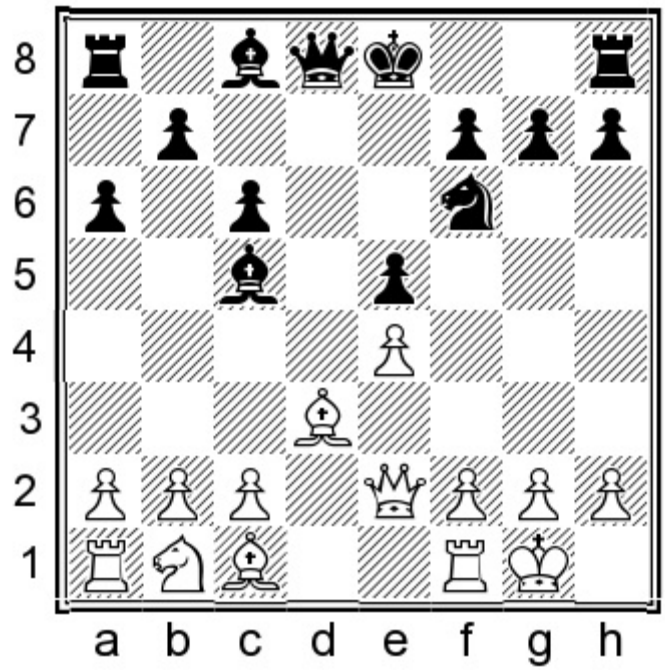
B) 8.♘c3 The knight is better off on d2. 8...♗c5 9.♗g5 [9.♔h1? preparing f2-f4, but White misses Black's response. 9...♘g4! 10.♕f3 ♕h4–+; 9.♕f3 h6! 10.♕g3 ♕e7! 11.♕xg7 ♖g8 12.♕xh6 ♘g4 13.♕h5 ♕f6∓ with excellent attacking chances for the sacrificed pawns.] 9...h6



Position after: 9...h6

10.♗d2 [10.♗h4? Another instance where this natural retreat leads to a quick disaster for White. 10...g5 11.♗g3 ♕e7∓ 12.♔h1 h5! 13.h3 h4 14.♗h2 g4 15.♗e2 gxh3 16.g3 hxg3 17.fxg3 ♗d4–+] 10...♕e7 11.a4 a5=

C) 8.♕e2 White plans to neutralize Black's strong bishop as soon as it arrives on c5. 8...♗c5!



Position after: 8...♗c5!

Even if White succeeds in exchanging the bishops, ...♗c5 is worth the effort as the f4-square will

become even more attractive for the black knight.

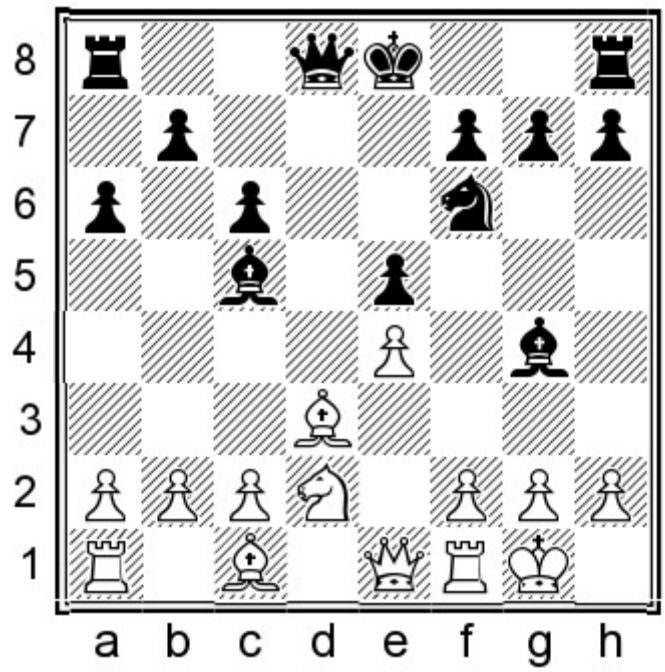
C1) The immediate 9.♗e3 meets 9...♕b6! 10.♗xc5 ♕xc5 11.♘d2 ♗e6 12.a4 [12.♘b3 ♗xb3 13.axb3 0-0 14.c3 a5=] 12...0-0 13.a5 ♖fd8= Black has the better bishop.

C2) 9.a4 ♗g4! 10.♕e1 ♘h5! The thematic maneuver to create chances. 11.♗e3 exchanging the dark-squared bishops relieves the pressure but allows Black to use the f4-square for his knight. 11...♗xe3

C2.1) 12.fxe3 0-0 13.a5 ♕g5 Threatening to start an attack with the rook lift ...♖a8-d8-d6. White has no time to play against Black's weaknesses on the queenside but must use the knight for the defense of the kingside. 14.♘d2 ♖ad8 15.♘f3 ♕e7=

C2.2) 12.♕xe3 ♘f4 13.♖e1 ♕g5 14.♗f1 ♖d8 15.♘a3 h5!=

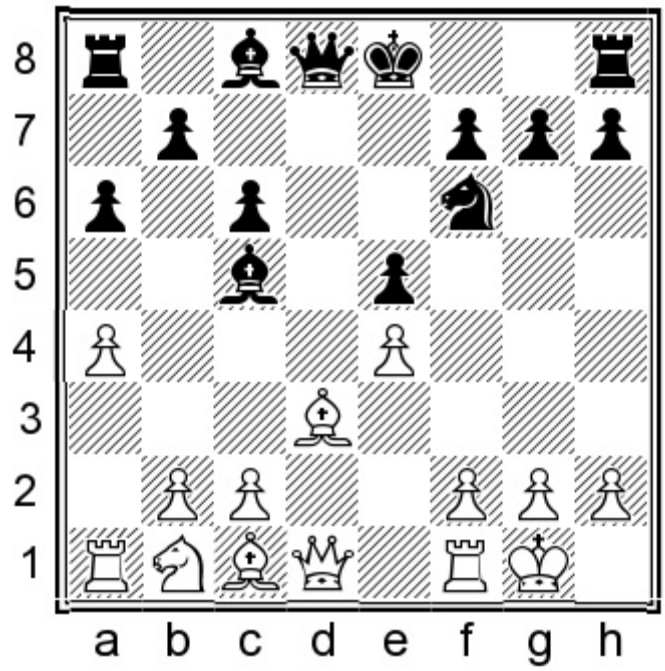
C3) 9.♘d2 This is the best way for White to achieve the earlier mentioned objectives. 9...♗g4 Black develops with tempo. 10.♕e1



Position after: 10.♕e1

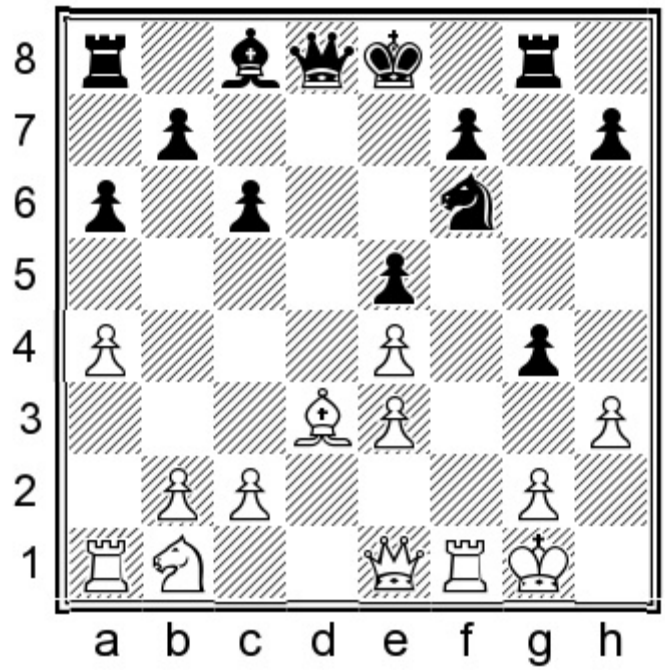
10...♕e7! [Unfortunately, 10...♘h5 is less precise here. 11.♘b3 ♗a7 12.♕b4! and Black has to exchange queens with 12...♕e7= to maintain the balance.] 11.♘b3 [11.♘c4 b5 12.♘a5 ♖c8 13.a4 0-0 14.♘b3 ♗b4=] 11...♗a7 12.♗e3 ♗xe3 13.♕xe3 ♗e6 14.c3 [14.♘c5?? ♘g4–+] 14...0-0 15.♗e2 ♗xb3 16.axb3 ♖fd8 17.♖fd1 g6 18.h4 ♔g7 19.g3 h5=

D) 8.a4 containing Black's queenside is the preference of the engines. Often it transposes to the main line. 8...♗c5



Position after: 8...♗c5

D1) 9.h3 White prevents any tricks with ... ♗g4 or ...♘g4. But this natural move is actually quite risky! 9...g5! Black starts a strong initiative on the kingside. [Black should not lose time preparing ...g5. 9...h6 10.♘d2 ♗e6 11.♕e2 g5 12.♗c4 ♕e7 13.♘b3 ♗a7 14.♗xe6 ♕xe6 15.♗e3 ♗xe3 16.♕xe3± 1-0 (60) Armanda, I (2316) – Mravunac, D (2176) Zagreb 2002.] 10.♗e3 [10.♕e1 g4 11.♗e3 ♗xe3 12.♕xe3 gxh3 13.g3 h5–+] 10...♗xe3 11.fxe3 g4 12.♕e1 ♖g8!

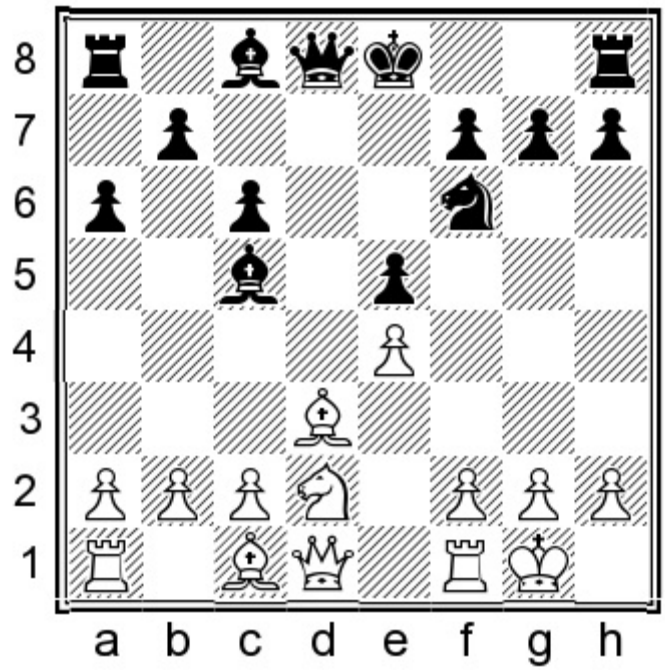


Position after: 12...♖g8!

13.h4 [13.♕h4 ♖g6 14.hxg4 ♗e6∓] 13...g3 14.♘d2 ♕e7 15.♘f3 a5 Preventing b2-b4. 16.♖a3 ♖g7 17.♖b3 ♔f8 18.♕c3 ♘g4∓

D2) 9.♘d2 Piece development is better than a pawn move in this position. 9...♕e7 10.♘c4 0-0 11.a5 is the main line.

8...♗c5!



Position after: 8...♗c5!

9.♘c4

A) 9.h3?! Prevents ...♗g4 but weakens the kingside. 9...♕e7 10.♘f3 h6 11.♕e1 g5!∓ Black is in excellent shape for a nice kingside attack. 1-0 (38) Beltrami, N (1934) – Laco, G (2098) Arvier 2012.

B) 9.♘f3 ♕e7! 10.♕e2 h6 11.♗e3 ♗g4 [11...♗e6? 12.♘xe5±] 12.♖fd1 0-0 13.h3 ♗xe3 14.♕xe3 ♗xf3 15.♕xf3 ♖ad8= The position is just a bit better for Black due to the good knight versus the bad bishop. Black's game is easier to play.

9...♕e7 10.a4

White secures the position of his knight on c4.

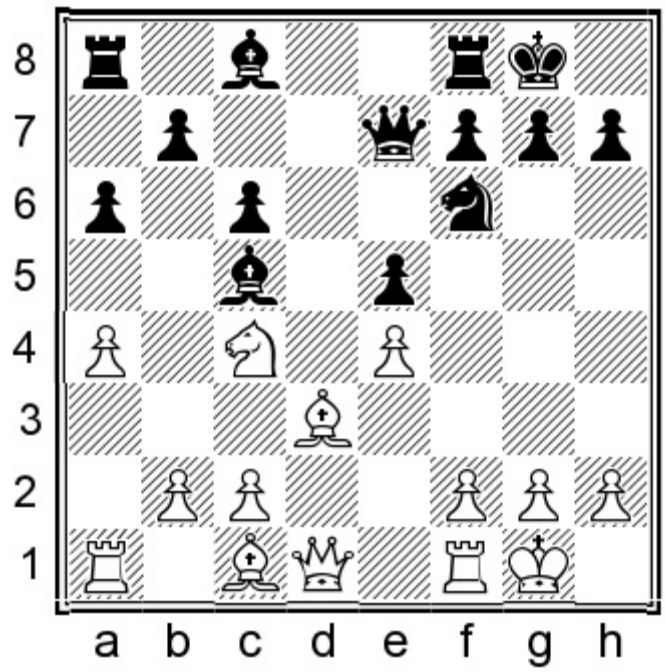
10.c3 b5!

A) 11.♘a5 0-0 12.♘xc6 ♕d6 13.♘a5 [13.♘b4 ♗e6⩱] 13...♖d8 14.♘b3 ♗xf2+ 15.♖xf2 ♕xd3 16.♕xd3 ♖xd3 17.♘c5 ♖d1+ 18.♖f1 ♖xf1+ 19.♔xf1 ♘d7∓

B) 11.♘e3 0-0 12.♕f3 ½-½ (17) Koskinen, H – Bachtiar, A (2400) Siegen 1970. 12...g6! 13.a4 ♗e6

14.♗c2 a5∓

10...0-0



Position after: 10...0-0

Black has reached his optimal set-up and may initiate a kingside initiative with the familiar ...♗g4 followed by ...♘h5.

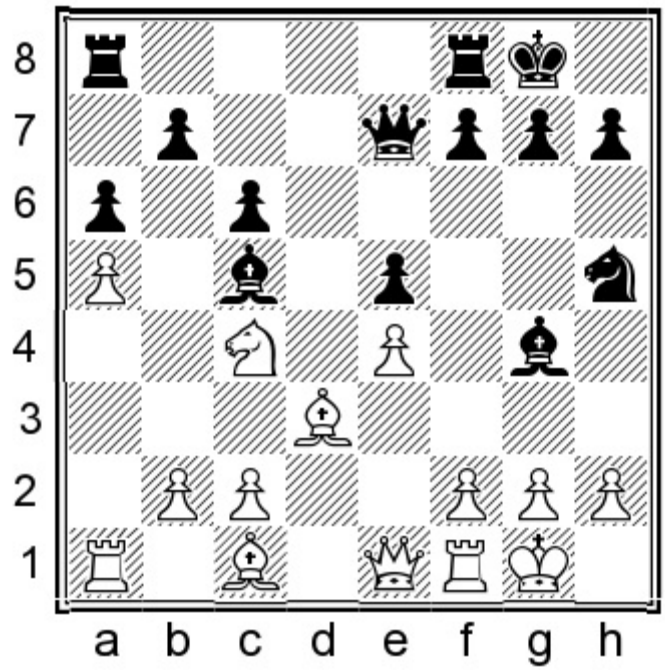
11.a5

A) 11.♗e3 ♗e6 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5 13.♘e3 ♖ad8 14.♕f3 ♖d4!∓

B) 11.♗g5 h6! 12.♗h4 b5 13.axb5 cxb5 14.♘e3 g5 15.♗g3 ♗d4 16.c3 ♗xe3 17.fxe3 ♖d8 18.♕f3 ♔g7 19.♗xb5 [19.♗c2 ♖d2∓] 19...♗g4 20.♕xf6+ ♕xf6 21.♖xf6 ♔xf6 22.♗c6 ♖ab8∓

C) 11.♕f3 b5 12.axb5 cxb5 13.♘e3 ♗e6 14.h3 ♖fd8=

11...♗g4 12.♕e1 ♘h5

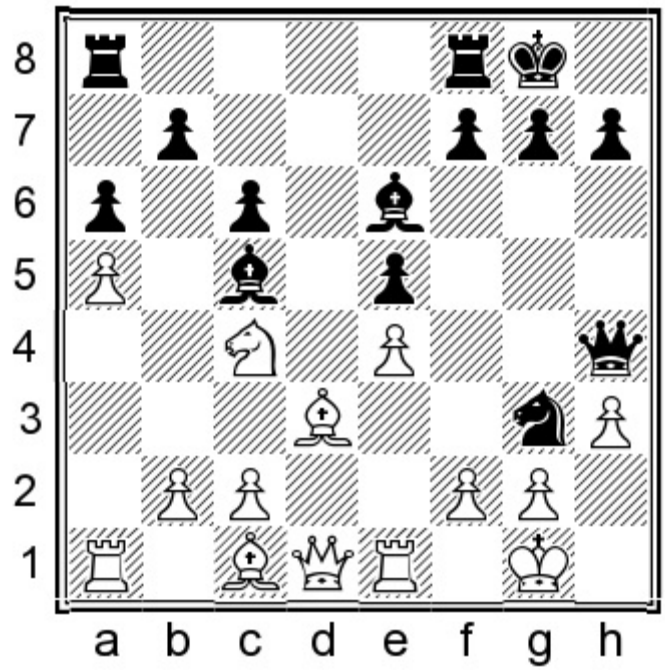


Position after: 12...♘h5

Here we go again!

13.♗e2

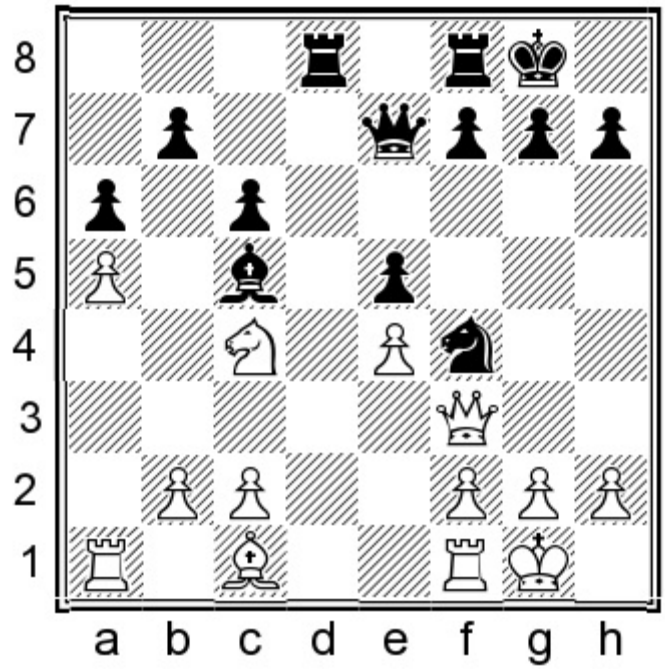
13.h3 ♗e6 14.♕d1 [14.♔h2 ♗d4 15.c3 ♗c5 16.♘xe5 ♗d6 17.f4 ♕c7 18.♗c2 ♘xf4 19.♗xf4 ♗xe5 20.♗xe5 ♕xe5+ 21.♕g3 f6=] 14...♘g3!? leads to interesting tactics with a draw as the most likely outcome. 15.♖e1 ♕h4



Position after: 15...♕h4

Now White has to be precise. 16.♕f3 [16.♘xe5 ♗xh3!∓; 16.♗e3 ♘xe4 17.♗xe4 ♗xe3 18.♖xe3 ♗xc4 19.♗f3 ♖fd8 20.♕e1 ♗e6 21.♖xe5 h6=] 16...f5 17.♗e3 fxe4 18.♕xg3 ♕xg3 19.fxg3 ♗xe3+ 20.♖xe3 exd3 21.cxd3 ♗xc4 22.dxc4 ♖ad8=

13...♗xe2 14.♕xe2 ♘f4 15.♕f3 ♖ad8



Position after: 15...♖ad8

16.g3

A) 16.♗xf4 exf4 17.♕xf4? ♖d4∓

B) 16.♘xe5 ♘xg2 17.♘xc6 bxc6 18.♔xg2 ♖d4 19.♖e1 f5 20.e5 ♖g4+ 21.♔h1 ♕e6⩲ 22.♗d2?! ♗xf2∓

16...♘e6 17.c3

17.♘xe5 ♘d4–+

17...f6=

Chances are equal.

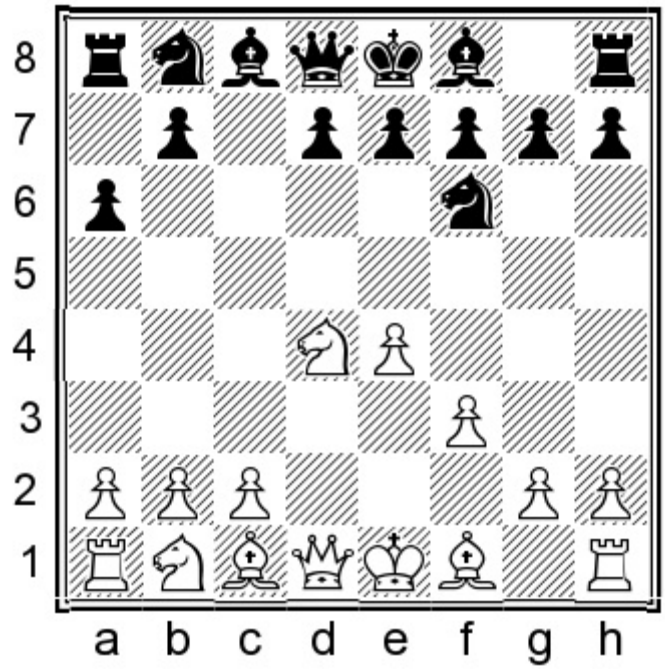
Conclusion

After White's (3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6) 5.♗d3 Black has an interesting option in the less well-known 5...♘c6. Following 6.♘xc6 dxc6! we have arrived in structures familiar from the Sicilian Kan.

Compared to those positions Black has a few pluses here. He will be able to move his e-pawn to e5 in one go. Black's queen is still at home which allows the best development of her majesty to e7. Black's setup prevents an early f2-f4 by White. These advantages promise Black at least an equal game. If White is not precise, Black may even be able to build up a quick kingside attack based on the maneuvers ...♘f6-h5-f4 and/or ...h6, ...g5, in particular if White retreats his dark-squared bishop to h4 after Black's ...h7-h6.

d) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.f3 – Prins Variation

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.f3



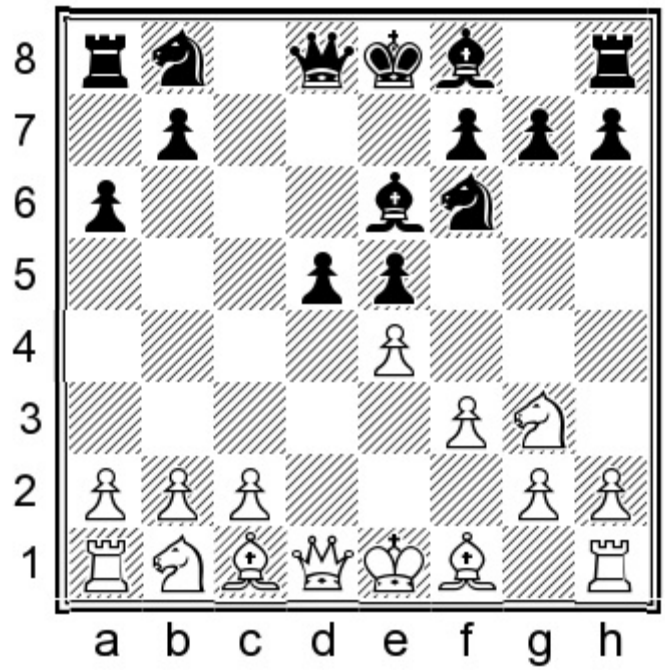
Position after: 5.f3

A solid approach for White which avoids the Svesnikov type of positions which arise after 5.♘c3 e5. White plays a Prins variation of the Sicilian (1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.f3), but with an extra tempo for Black as ...a6 has been included for free. In the Prins it took the black d-pawn two steps to arrive at d5, in the current situation only one, which explains the value of ...a6 for Black.

5...e5! 6.♘b3

The natural continuation. The alternatives are unattractive for White.

A) 6.♘f5?! d5! 7.♘g3 [7.♘c3 d4 8.♘b1 g6 9.♘g3∓ ♗e6] 7...♗e6!N

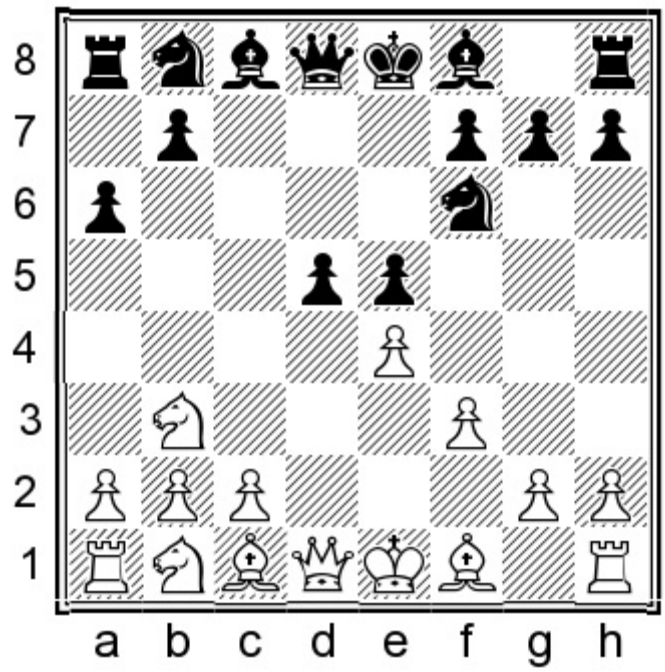


Position after: 7...♗e6!N

8.♗g5 [8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.c4 ♗b4+ 10.♘c3 ♘xc3 11.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 12.a3 ♗e7 13.bxc3 ♘d7∓] 8...d4∓ Black has an improved version of the main line with 7...d4!?.

B) 6.♘e2 ♗c5 7.♘ec3 d6 [7...h6 8.♘d2 d6 9.♘b3 ♗a7 10.♕e2∓] 8.♗g5 ♕b6! 9.♕c1 ♗e6∓

6...d5!

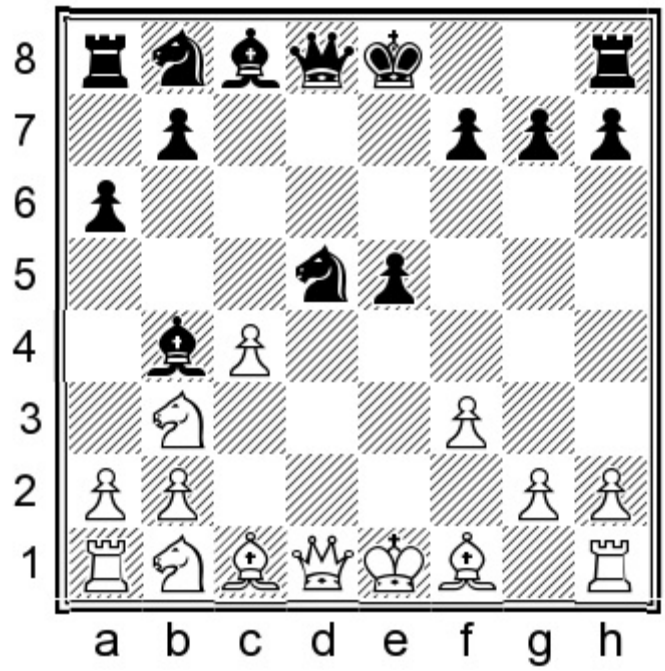


Position after: 6...d5!

7.♗g5

If White is still aiming for an opening advantage this is the principled continuation from the pure Prins.

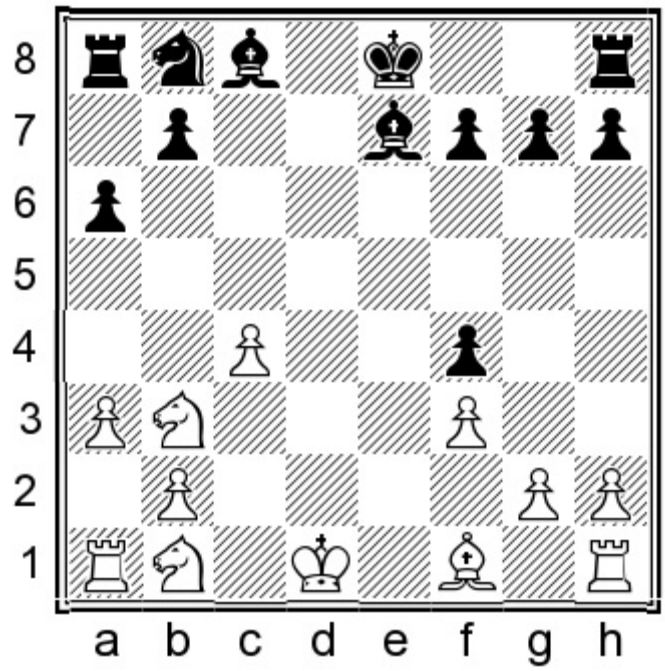
7.exd5 ♘xd5 8.c4 [8.♗c4? Actually played in half a dozen games or so! 8...♕h4+–+; 8.♗d3 ♗e6 9.0-0 ♘b4 10.♗e3 ♗xb3 11.axb3 ♘xd3 12.♕xd3 ♕xd3 13.cxd3 ♘c6∓] 8...♗b4+!



Position after: 8...♗b4+!

A) 9.♗d2 ♘e3! 10.♕c1 ♘c6 11.a3 [11.♘c3 ♘xf1 12.♔xf1 ♕d3+ 13.♔f2 ♕xc4∓ ½ – ½ (72) TaYebliTeQrci (2280) – Undercover1 (2305) lichess.org 2021.] 11...♗xd2+ 12.♕xd2 ♕b6–+

B) 9.♔e2 ♘f4+ 10.♗xf4 ♕xd1+ 11.♔xd1 exf4 12.a3 ♗e7



Position after: 12...♗e7

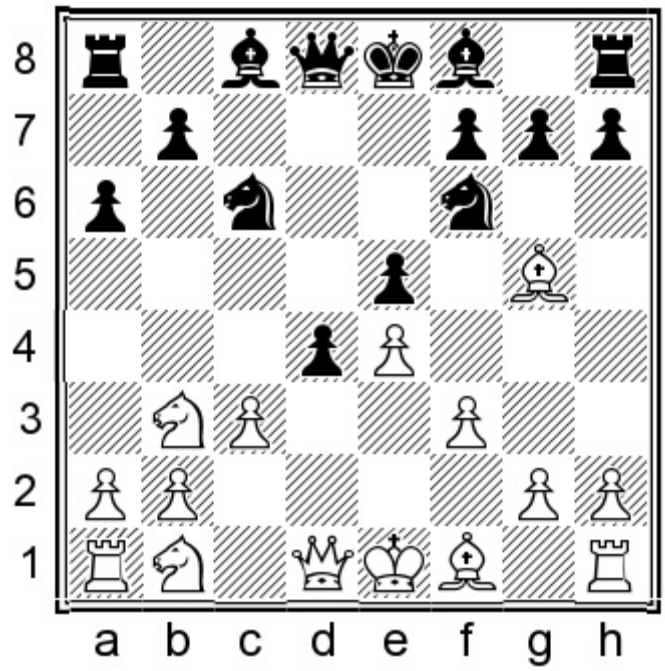
13.♘c3 [13.♗d3 ♘c6 14.♔e2 ♗e6 15.♘c3 0-0-0∓] 13...♗e6 14.♔c2 [14.g3!? fxg3 15.hxg3 ♘c6 16.f4 0-0-0+∓ ½-½ Kaddu, I – Kizza, F Kampala 2011.] 14...♘c6 15.♖d1 ♖c8=

7...d4!

This is an interesting option in the regular Prins as well.

7...♗e6 is the most popular move in the regular Prins variation. With precise play White should be able to reach an equal ending.

8.c3 ♘c6!∓



Position after: 8...♘c6!∓

In the Prins, White's best is 9.♗b5, with an unclear game. That move is not available here.

9.♗c4

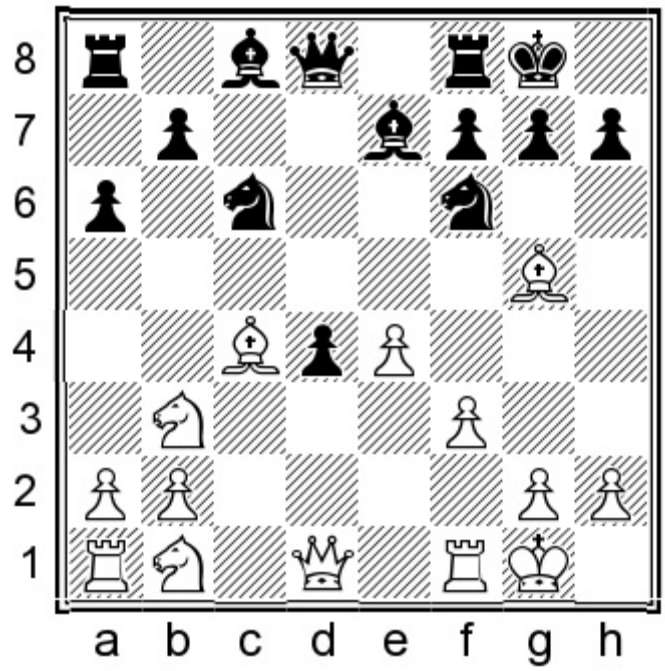
A) 9.♗xf6 White increases his control over the d5-square. 9...♕xf6 10.♗c4 ♗e7∓ It does not look too scary for White, but he lacks space and proper squares for his pieces. 0-1 (30) Mello, W – Andrades, D Sao Bento do Sul 1996.

B) 9.cxd4 White tries to clarify the situation in the center. 9...exd4!

B1) 10.♗d3 h6! 11.♗h4 ♗d6! 12.♕e2 ♗e6 13.0-0 [13.♘1d2 0-0 14.♗f2 ♘d7] 13...♕c7!∓

B2) 10.♘1d2 h6 11.♗h4 ♗e7∓ The white pieces lack proper squares for their development.

9...♗e7 10.0-0 0-0 11.cxd4 exd4∓



Position after: 11...exd4∓

White's position is not very well organized. The diagonal g1-a7 is weak and his pieces cannot go to their natural squares due to Black's strong passed pawn.

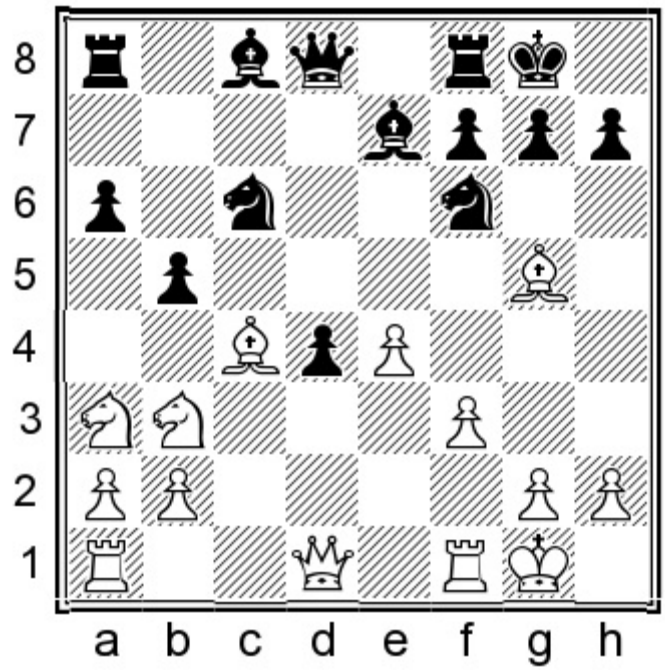
12.♘a3

As played by a young Firouzja.

A) 12.♖e1 b5 13.♗f1 h6 14.♗h4 ♗e6∓ Black's development is very natural. ½ – ½ (45) Djuric, G – Talic, M (2237) Banja Luka 2004.

B) 12.♘1d2 b5 13.♗xf6 ♗xf6 14.♗d5 ♕b6 15.f4 d3+ 16.♔h1 ♗e6∓

12...b5!N



Position after: 12...b5!N

An important improvement upon a blitz game between two well-known players.

12...♗e6 13.♖c1 ♖c8 14.♔h1 ♗xc4 15.♘xc4 h6= 0-1 (30) Firouzja, A (2456) – Vitiugov, N (2726) Doha 2016.

13.♗d3 ♗e6∓

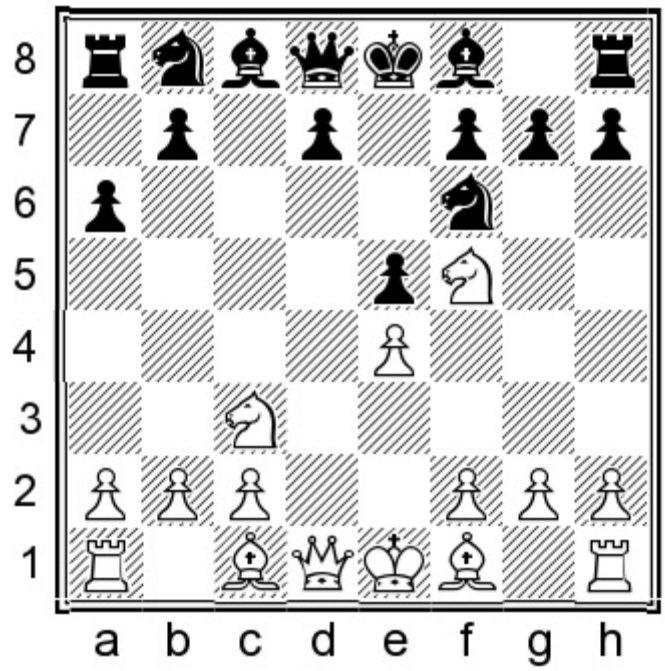
Black clearly has the better chances as he has more space, good central control, a passed pawn, and better piece placement.

Conclusion

In this subchapter we have investigated a line similar to the Prins variation in the 2....d6 Sicilian. Black plays one of the principled lines to combat the Prins, i.e., 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.f3 e5 6.♘b3 d5 7.♗g5 d4 8.c3 ♘c6. In the 2...d6 version, Black now plays 9.♗b5 but that move has been prevented by Black's 2...a6. From here on Black just need to develop slowly, but naturally. He will end up in a position with more space, good central control, a passed pawn, and better piece placement.

e) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f5

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f5



Position after: 6.♘f5

In the Svesnikov and in some lines of the Najdorf, this is an interesting idea. In the 3.d4 O'Kelly it is rather dubious. Black should be able to obtain an edge.

6...d5!

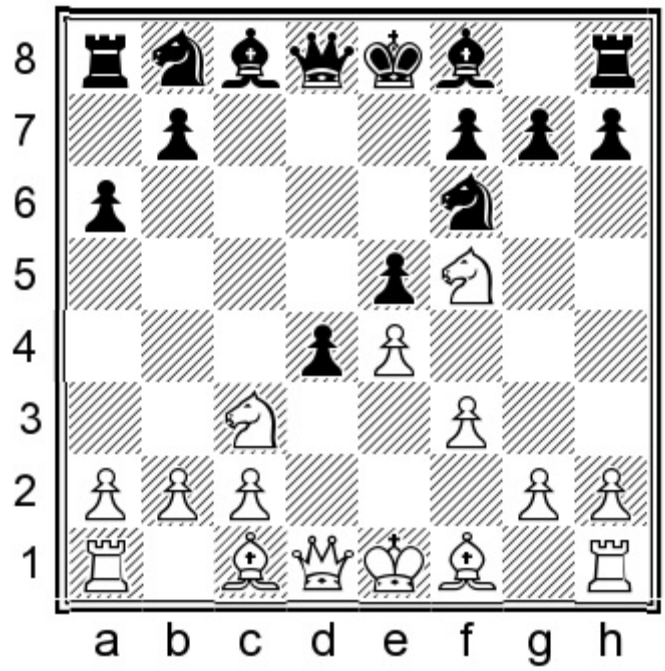
The statistics are already heavily in Black's favor.

7.♗g5

White's best, although White will struggle to maintain the balance after this move as well.

A) 7.♘xd5? ♘xd5 8.♘xg7+ [8.♕xd5 ♕xd5 9.♘xg7+ ♗xg7 10.exd5 0-0–+] 8...♗xg7 9.exd5 0-0 10.♗d3 f5 11.0-0 ♕xd5–+ 0-1 (20) rizkyPRIMA2009 (2033) – Pap, G (2734) lichess.org 2021.

B) 7.f3?! On move 5 this is not such a bad idea. On move 7 it is just incorrect. 7...d4! We follow our approach as in the Prins, expanding in the center and gaining a tempo against the c3-knight.

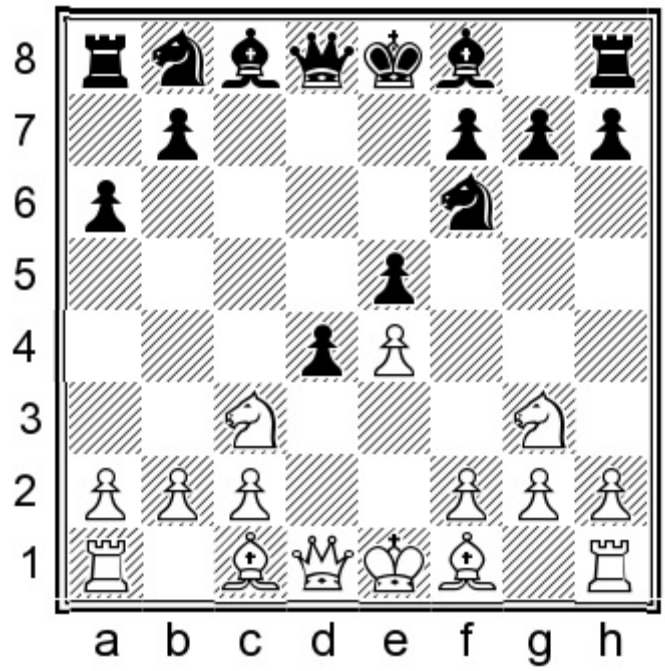


Position after: 7...d4!

B1) 8.♘e2 ♘c6! 9.a3 [9.c3 ♗xf5 10.exf5 ♕c7∓ followed by ...0-0-0.] 9...h5! Reversing the moves prevents White's ♘h6. 10.♗g5 g6 11.♘e3 ♗e7 12.♘c4 h4–+ White is completely outplayed.

B2) 8.♘b1 g6! 9.♘g3 [9.♘h6? ♘xe4! Is excellent for Black. 10.♘xf7 ♔xf7 11.fxe4 ♕h4+–+] 9...h5! 10.♗d3 h4 11.♘e2 ♗e6 12.0-0 ♘c6∓

C) 7.♘g3 As popular as our main line, but not as active. White retreats the knight from its vulnerable position and defends the e4-pawn another time in case the c3-knight gets chased away. On g3 the knight is not totally safe as it will be vulnerable to the pawn march ...h7-h5-h4. 7...d4 as in the Prins, Black first takes extra space and stabilizes the center.



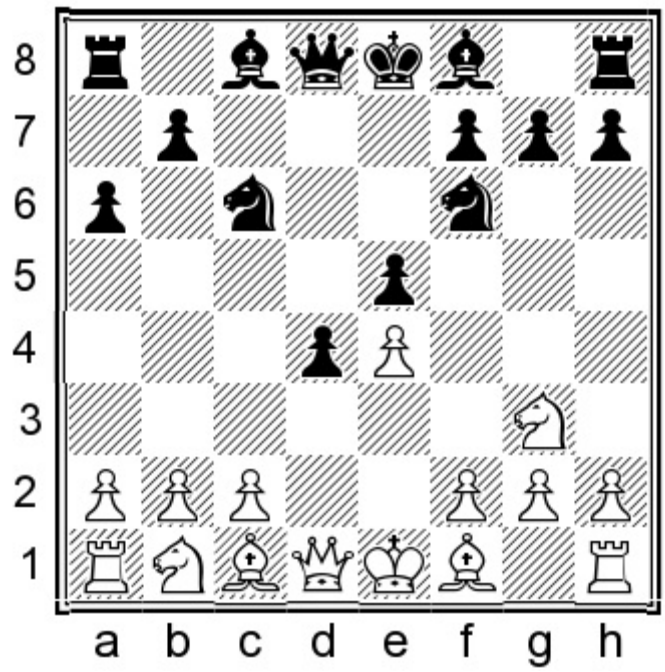
Position after: 7...d4

C1) 8.♘ce2?! The knight is in the way here. 8...♘c6

C1.1) 9.c3 h5 10.h4 ♗e6! 11.a3 [11.cxd4 ♘g4 12.d5 ♗c5 13.♗e3 ♗xe3 14.fxe3 ♕f6–+] 11...♗c5∓

C1.2) 9.f4 ♗c5 10.f5 [10.fxe5 ♘g4–+] 10...h5 11.h4 ♕b6 12.♘g1 [12.♕d3 ♘b4 13.♕b3 ♗d7 14.a3 ♘xc2+ 15.♕xc2 d3 16.♕xd3 ♗f2+ 17.♔d2 ♖d8–+] 12...d3! 13.♘h3 dxc2 14.♕xc2 ♗b4+–+ It is total chaos in White's camp.

C2) 8.♘b1 The most natural move which maintains some coordination with the white pieces. 8...♘c6∓

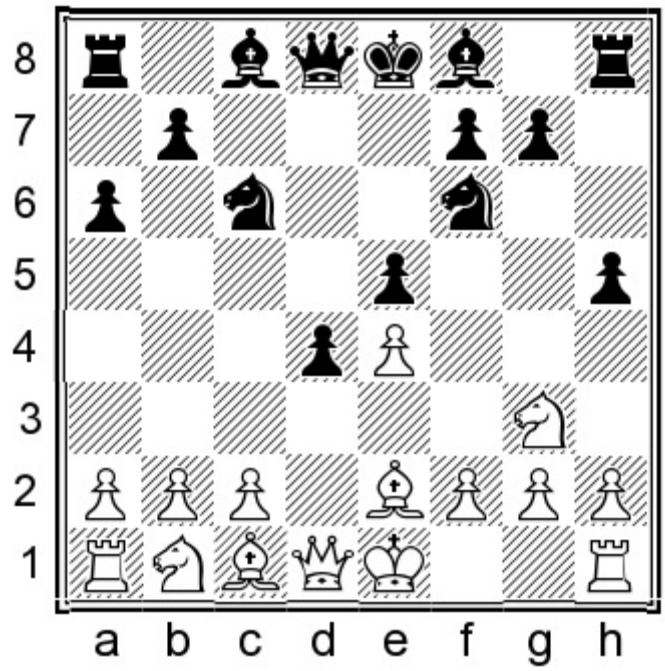


Position after: 8...♘c6∓

The position looks simple and equal, but in fact White is in a difficult situation. He has lost a lot of time with his knight moves whereas Black has strengthened his central presence. As a result, Black has more space and a lead in development. The knight on g3 is in a bad position with no influence in the center. It will be challenged with ...h5-h4. The move ...♗g4 allows Black to exchange bishops, or White will further weaken his pawn structure. The bishop on c1 has no useful squares. The best it can hope for is to be exchanged against the knight on f6. Black can choose on which side of the board he wants to play the game: a kingside attack with ...h5 and ...g5, or building up pressure against White's queenside by focusing on the c-file and White's weak c2-pawn.

C2.1) 9.c3 h5! 10.h4 [10.cxd4 h4 11.♘e2 exd4 12.f3 h3 13.g3 ♘e5!∓] 10...♗e6 11.♗e2 g6 12.♗g5 ♗e7 13.♕c2 ♖c8∓

C2.2) 9.♗e2 h5!



Position after: 9...h5!

This pawn can hardly be taken.

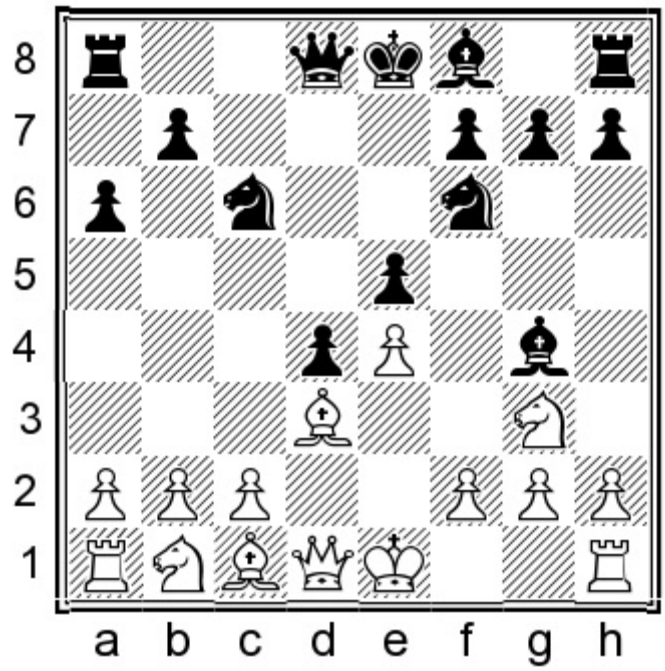
C2.2a) 10.♗xh5? ♘xh5 11.♘xh5 ♕h4 12.♘g3 ♗g4! 13.♕d2 [13.f3 ♕xg3+!−+; 13.♕d3 ♘b4–+] 13...♗b4 14.c3 dxc3 15.♘xc3 ♖d8 16.♕c2 ♖d1+–+

C2.2b) 10.h4 g6 11.♘d2 [11.♗g5 ♕d6 12.♗c4 ♗g7 13.♘d2 ♘g4–+] 11...♗g4 12.f3 ♗e6 13.♗d3 ♗e7 14.0-0 ♘d7∓

C2.3) 9.♗c4 h5 10.h4 ♗e7 11.♗g5 ♗g4 12.f3 ♗d7 13.♗b3 0-0∓

C2.4) 9.♗g5 h6 10.♗xf6 ♕xf6 11.♘d2 g6 12.♗c4 h5! 13.♕f3 ♕e7 14.h3 ♗h6 15.0-0-0 0-0∓ 0-1 (27) Esper, C – Joksic, S (2281) Bern 2000.

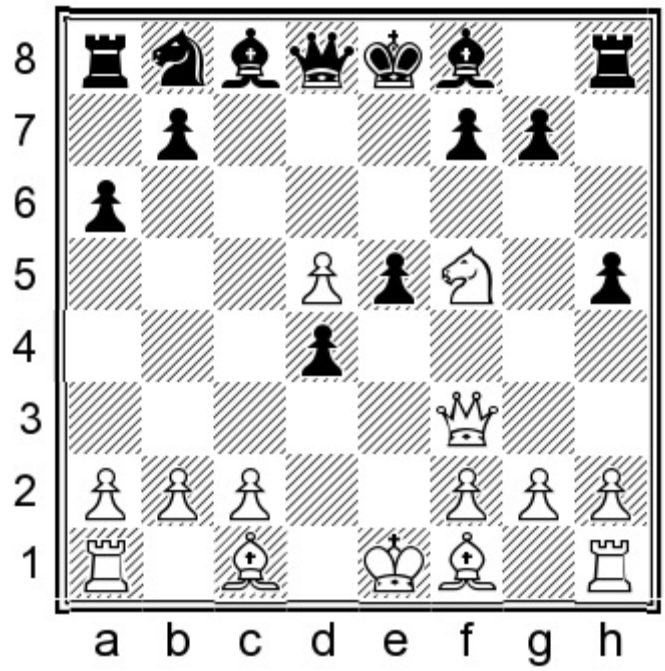
C2.5) 9.♗d3 The most natural continuation. 9...♗g4! Black starts by creating some weaknesses on White's kingside.



Position after: 9...♗g4!

10.f3 ♗e6 11.0-0 h5∓ White is basically without play and has to wait and see what Black comes up with. 12.♗g5 h4 13.♘e2 h3 14.g3 ♕b6 15.♘d2 [15.♗xf6 gxf6 16.b3 0-0-0–+ is no picknick either] 15...♘h7 16.f4 ♘xg5 17.fxg5 0-0-0 18.b3 ♗e7–+ White is still without a plan and has weaknesses everywhere.

D) 7.♕f3 White prepares to jump to d5 with the knight without losing a piece. 7...d4! 8.♘d5 ♘xd5 9.exd5 h5!N

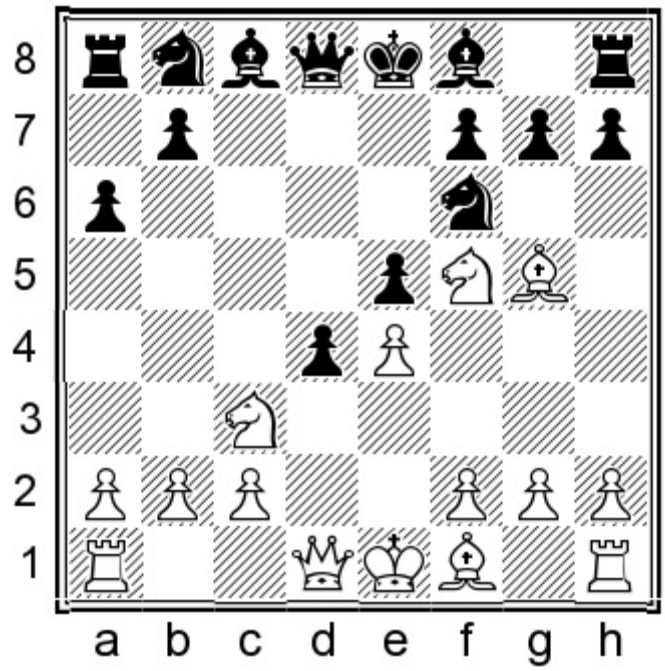


Position after: 9...h5!N

A nice novelty. Black prepares ...g6 without being bothered by ♘h6. The pawn on h5 stands ready for ...h5-h4 and/or ...♗g4. 10.♗c4 [10.h4 g6 11.♘g3 ♗g4 12.♕e4 ♗d6∓] 10...g6 11.♘g3 ♗g4 12.♕e4 ♘d7∓

7...d4!

The alternative leads to an equal game. 7...♗xf5 8.exf5 ♗b4 9.♕f3! ♘c6 10.0-0-0 ♗xc3 11.♕xc3 ♘e4 [11...d4 12.♕b3=] 12.♗xd8 ♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♖xd8= 0-1 (27) Dincer, O (1304) – Darban, M (2333) Izmir 2018.



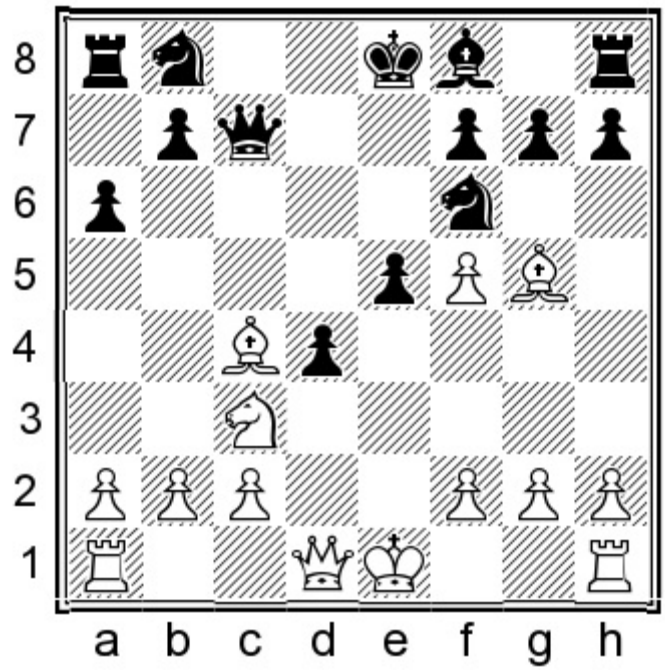
Position after: 7...d4!

8.♗xf6!

White takes the knight at a time when it is less attractive for Black to take back with the queen.

A) 8.♘d5? ♗xf5 Black wins a piece. 9.♗xf6 [9.♘xf6+ gxf6–+; 9.exf5 ♕xd5–+] 9...gxf6 10.♕f3 White makes the best out of a lost position. 10...♗e6 11.♘xf6+ ♔e7–+ The black king is a bit uncomfortable, but Black will play ...♘d7, consolidating his material advantage. White has no dangerous follow-up and remains a piece down.

B) 8.♗c4? White tries a little trick. 8...♗xf5! [8...dxc3?? 9.♗xf7++–] 9.exf5 ♕c7!–+

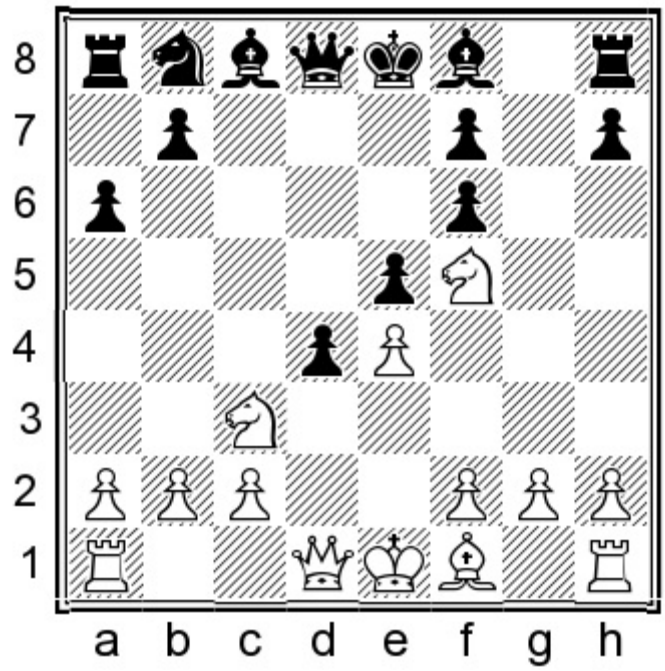


Position after: 9...♕c7!−+

Black wins a piece. 10.♕e2 dxc3 11.bxc3 b5 12.♗xf6 gxf6 0-1 (12) Flamant, J (1702) – Dgebuadze, A (2474) Charleville Mezieres 2014.

C) 8.♘e2?! makes it too easy for Black because he can now take back with his queen without allowing a white knight to land on d5. Black's plan is to harass the f5-knight with ...g6 and ...h5. Black has a nice position. 8...h6! 9.♗xf6 [9.♗h4?? ♕a5+ 10.c3 ♘xe4–+ 0-1 (19) Kostikov, E – Naumov, N (1981) Tula 2004.] 9...♕xf6 10.♘fg3 [10.♕d3 g6! 11.♘fg3 h5 12.h4 ♕b6 13.0-0-0 ♘c6∓ followed by ...♗e6. White is completely disorganized. Black almost has a winning advantage.] 10...h5 11.h4 g6 12.a3 ♘c6 13.♘g1 ♗h6 14.♗d3 0-0∓ 0-1 (44) Kolar, S (2095) – Strasil, P (2125) Czechia 2011

8...gxf6!



Position after: 8...gxf6!

Taking back with the pawn is better than with the queen although even after 8...♕xf6 Black ends up with a slight advantage.

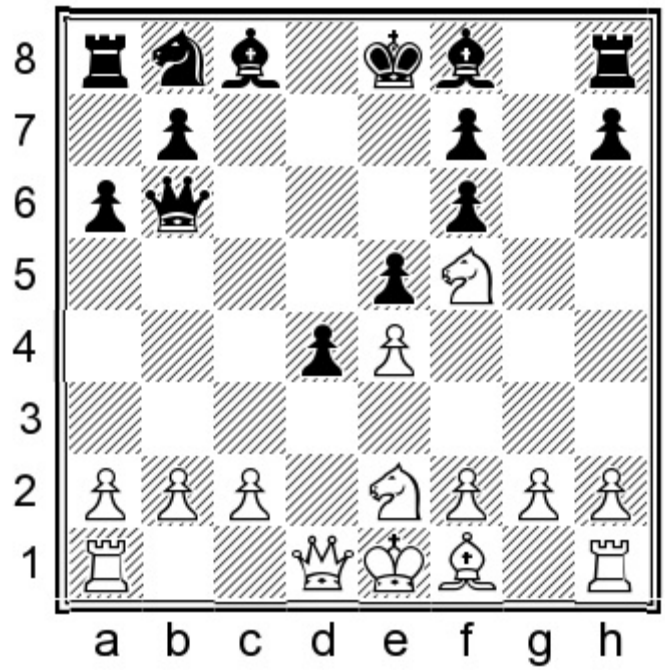
9.♘b1

The best place for the knight, although White's position remains worrisome.

A) 9.♗c4? ♗xf5 [9...dxc3?? 10.♗xf7+] 10.exf5 ♕c7! 11.♘d5 ♕xc4 12.♘xf6+ ♔e7 13.♘e4 ♘d7–+

B) 9.♘d5? ♗xf5 White loses a piece. 10.♕f3 ♗e6 11.♘xf6+ ♔e7–+

C) 9.♘e2?! The knight on e2 hinders the coordination between the white pieces. 9...♕b6!

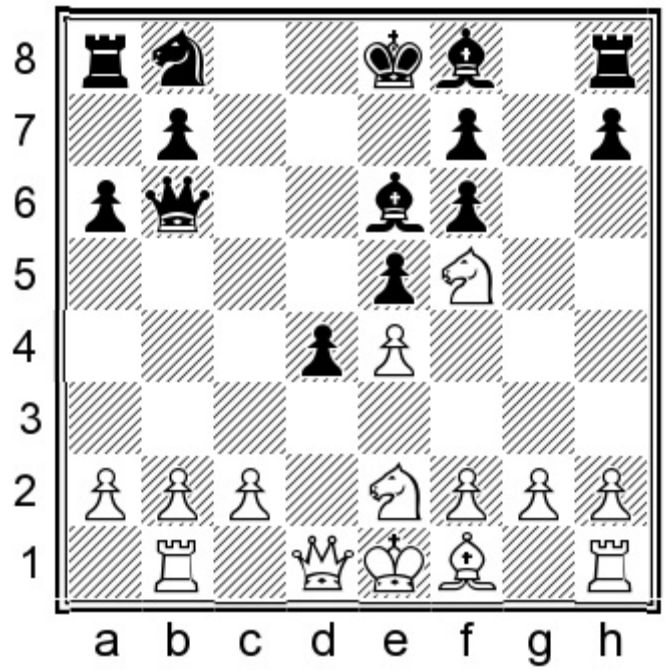


Position after: 9...♕b6!

9...♘c6 is not bad either, but it allows White to somewhat organize his defense of the queenside with 10.a3, preventing the 10.♖b1 ♗e6 maneuver as we will see later.

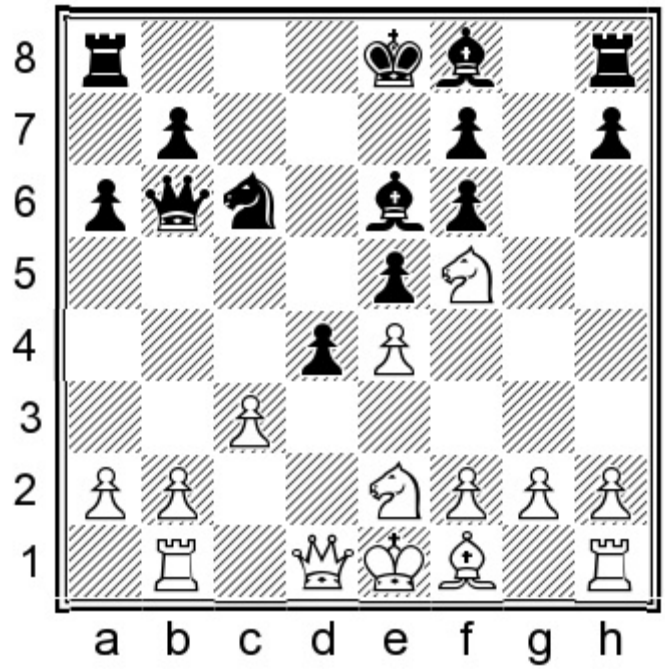
C1) 10.♕c1 ♗xf5 11.exf5 h5! 12.g3 [12.♘g3 ♗h6 13.♕d1 ♕b4+ 14.♔e2 ♘c6 15.♘e4 d3+!−+] 12...♗h6 13.♕b1 ♕a5+ 14.b4 ♕d5 15.♖g1 e4–+ Black wins a pawn on f5 and remains better coordinated.

C2) 10.♖b1 ♗e6!



Position after: 10...♗e6!

Other moves are good as well and have led to quick victories for Black, but this is the cleanest approach. Black threatens to win a pawn on a2 while White's defense is in dire straits. 11.c3 indirectly protecting the a-pawn. [11.b3 ♗b4+!−+; 11.g3 ♗xa2! 12.♖a1 ♕xb2−+] 11...♘c6!



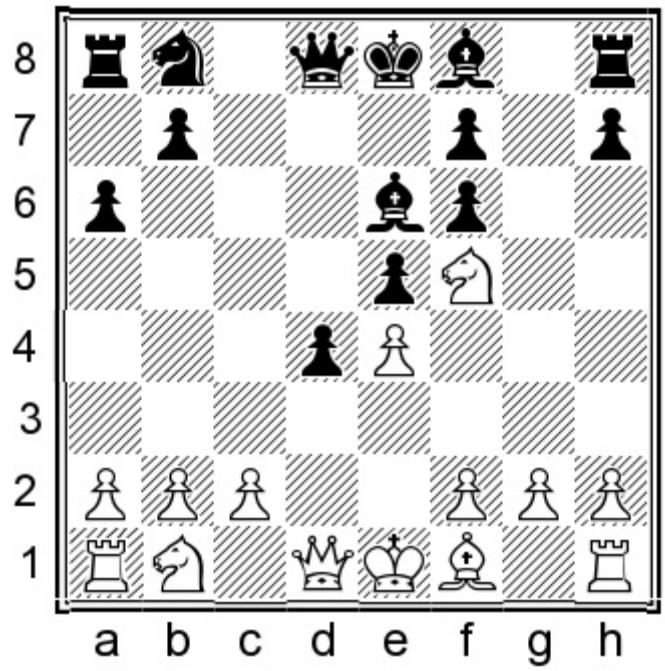
Position after: 11...♘c6!

White needs to do something about a2. 12.a3 0-0-0! Simple chess. 13.cxd4 exd4 14.♘eg3 [14.♘c1 ♗xa3−+] 14...d3−+ There is not much White can do. His knights are on silly squares and the rest of his army is in the starting position.

C3) 10.g4 ♗e6! 11.♗g2 ♘c6 12.0-0 h5∓ White's kingside collapses

C4) 10.♘eg3 ♕b4+! 11.c3 [11.♕d2 ♕xb2−+] 11...dxc3 12.a3 ♕xb2 13.♗c4 ♗e6−+ 14.♖a2 ♕b6 15.♗xe6 fxe6 16.♕h5+ ♔d8 17.0-0 ♘d7 18.♕f7 ♔c7 19.♘e3 ♗c5−+

9...♗e6!

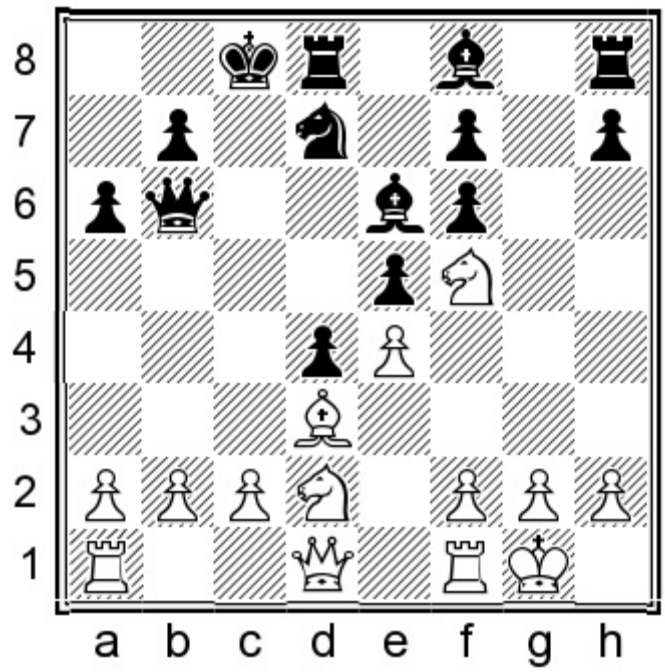


Position after: 9...♗e6!

10.♘d2N

A) 10.c3 ♕b6! 11.♕c2 [11.b3 dxc3 12.♘xc3 ♗b4 13.♘g7+ ♔e7–+ White will not survive the pin of the c3-knight. 0-1 (17) highsky (2229) -matgross (2256) lichess.org 2020.] 11...♘c6 12.♗e2 0-0-0! 13.0-0 [13.cxd4 ♗xf5! 14.exf5 ♔b8!–+] 13...♔b8∓ Black controls important files.

B) 10.♗d3 ♕b6! 11.♘d2 ♘d7 12.0-0 0-0-0



Position after: 12...0-0-0

13.♕e2 [13.♘c4 ♕c7 14.b3 ♔b8∓] 13...♘c5 14.♖fb1 [14.♘b3 ♘a4∓] 14...♔b8 15.a4 h5 16.a5 [16.b4 ♘xd3 17.cxd3 ♗xb4∓] 16...♕c6 17.b4 ♘xd3 18.cxd3 ♖c8∓

10...♕c7!

Black keeps the light-squared bishop and prevents ♗c4.

11.♗d3

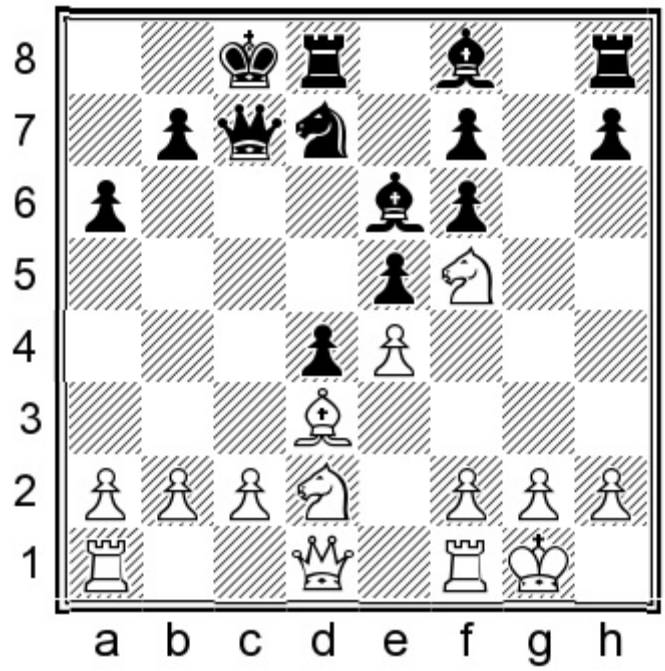
White has to develop.

11.♖c1 ♘c6 closing the c-file in preparation for a future ...0-0-0. 12.♗c4 ♗xc4 13.♘xc4 ♘b4 Black is better. 14.♘a3 0-0-0 15.0-0 ♘xa2 16.♖a1 ♗xa3∓

11...♘d7

On its way to c5.

12.0-0 0-0-0



Position after: 12...0-0-0

It is hard to give White good advice. His position is difficult. Black easily builds up an attacking position.

13.♕h5

A) 13.c3? dxc3 14.♖c1 ♘c5–+

B) 13.♖c1 ♔b8 14.c3 dxc3 15.♘b3 ♗xb3 16.axb3 ♕b6∓

13...♔b8 14.♖fc1 ♖g8 15.♘f1

A) 15.♕xh7?? ♗b4–+

B) 15.♘b3 ♕b6∓

15...♖g5 16.♕xh7 ♗c5 17.g3 ♖dg8∓

Black has excellent compensation for his pawn.

Conclusion

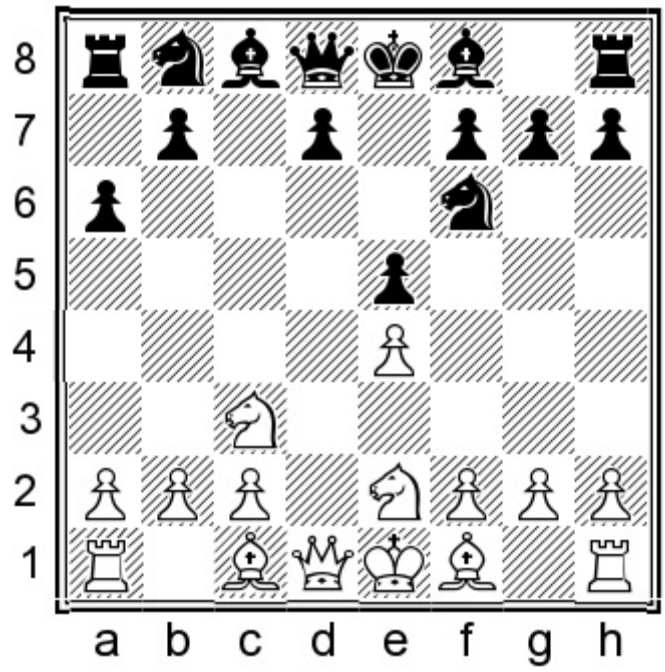
6.♘f5 has a dubious reputation and practice confirms that. The statistics are strongly in Black's favor, but those are biased by the relatively strong ratings of the players with Black.

After 6.♘f5 White should not be allowed to play 7.♘e3 with total control of d5. The thematic central break 6...d5 is the obvious antidote. White has a few positional assets, especially in the lines arising after 7.♗g5 d4 8.♗xf6 gxf6. Black must play accurately. The game becomes strategically complex. The situation is not so straightforwardly better for Black in spite of the assessment of the engines.

There are many games where White was able to recover his position due to his better pawn structure and kingside control, even after earlier material losses on the queenside. In the main line Black should answer 9.♘e2 with 9...♕b6! taking advantage of the lack of coordination in White's camp. After 9.♘b1, that maneuver is less convincing, and the focus should be on controlling the light squares and quick development with 9...♗e6 and castling queenside. Black can then indeed look forward to a somewhat better game.

f) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘de2

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘de2



Position after: 6.♘de2

This response to ...e5 is well known from other Open Sicilian systems. Generally, White aims for a kingside fianchetto with positional play against the weak d5-square and along the open d-file.

6...♗c5!

In this position White has to be careful. Black threatens ...♘g4 or ...♕b6 or both thereby emphasizing the weakness of the f2-pawn. White is more or less forced to move the knight again to an unattractive square. White is not allowed to consolidate his position with g3, ♗g2 and 0-0 reaching a normal += position. That is the reason why the immediate 6...♗c5 is more precise than 6...♘c6.

7.♘g3

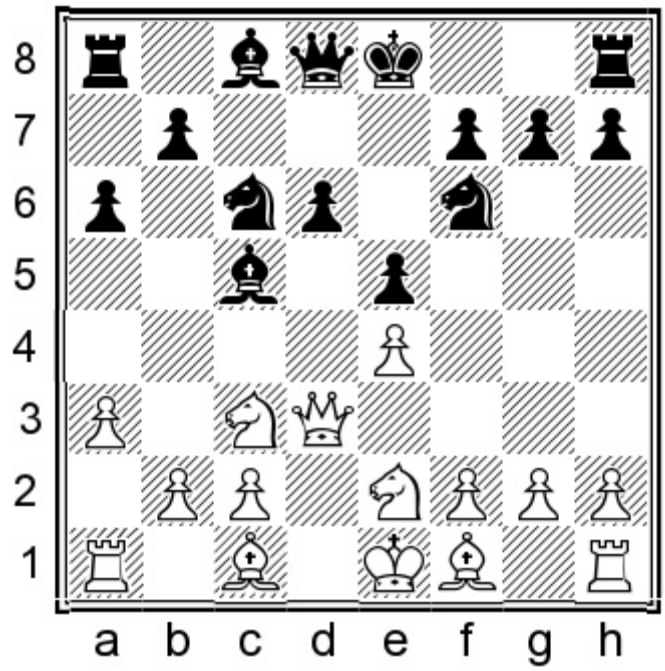
The right response to Black's 6th move, although g3 is not an ideal square for the knight and the kingside fianchetto is out of the question for the time being.

A) 7.♗g5? blunders a pawn after 7...♗xf2.

B) 7.g3?! White would love to play ♗g2 and 0-0 but at this stage that is not such a good idea. 7...♕b6!∓ Even better than 7...♘g4.

C) 7.♕d3 The only alternative for White besides 7.♘g3 which does not lose instantly. The line is not menacing though. White's forces lack coordination, and he is behind in development. 7...♘c6!

[7...♘g4 8.♘d1!=; 7...♕b6 8.♕g3!=] 8.a3 Black gains another development tempo. [8.♗e3 ♗xe3 9.♕xe3 d6 10.0-0-0 0-0=] 8...d6

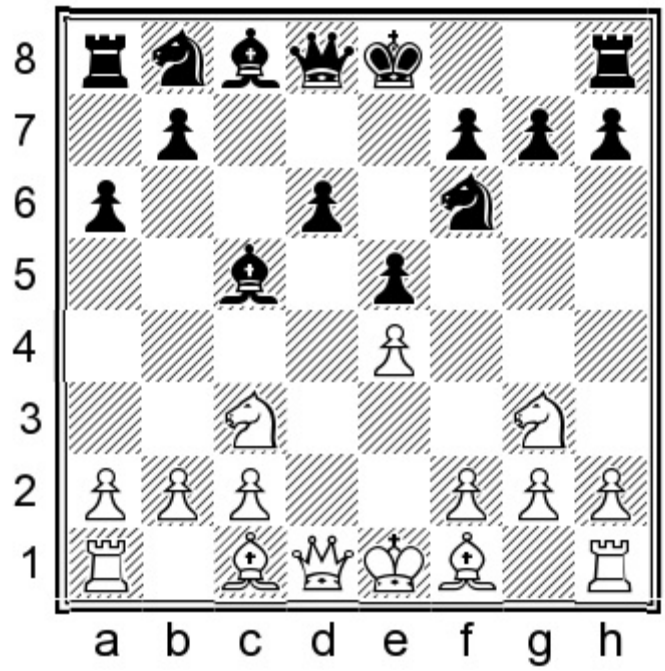


Position after: 8...d6

C1) 9.♗e3 0-0 10.0-0-0 ♗e6 11.♗xc5 dxc5 12.♕e3 ♕a5 13.♘d5 ♗xd5 [13...♘d7= 1-0 (28) Cemhan, K (1767) – Visanescu, D (1920) Kemer 2009.] 14.exd5 ♘d4∓

C2) 9.h3 ♗e6 10.♗g5 [10.♘g3 ♕b6 11.♕d2 h5 12.♘a4 ♕c7 13.♘xc5 dxc5∓] 10...h6 11.♗xf6 ♕xf6 12.f3 0-0 13.♘d5 [13.0-0-0 ♖fb8∓ and Black's attack is much faster.] 13...♗xd5 14.♕xd5 ♘e7! 15.♕d2 [15.♕xb7 ♖fb8 16.♕c7 ♖xb2–+] 15...d5! 16.exd5 ♕b6–+ Black has all kinds of threats. White is busted. 0-1 (21) Siamakis (2307) – Boekelman, J (2398) Chess.com 2022.

7...d6

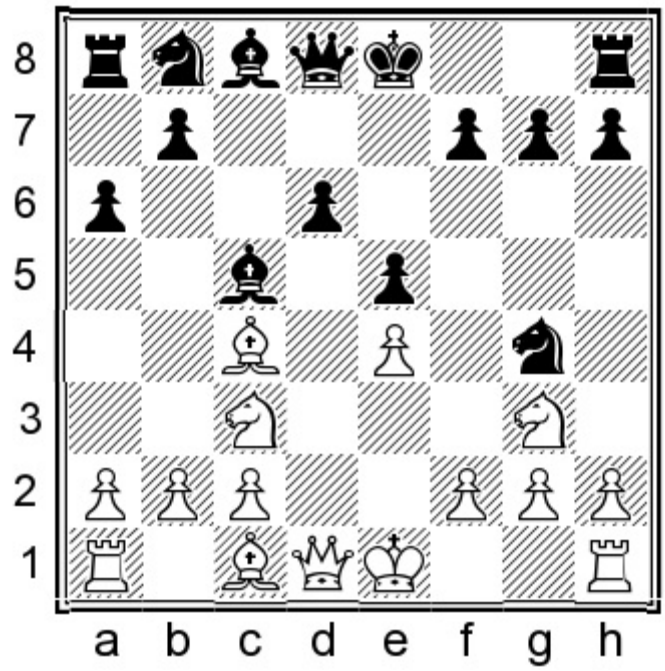


Position after: 7...d6

The most common move here. Black renews the threat ...♘g4 which is often missed by White.

8.♗e2

8.♗c4 This natural move, hitting f7 and covering the weak d5-square, is rather risky. 8...♘g4! Again, Black attacks the weak spot in White's camp. In the end this will lead to an equal position. If Black would like to obtain more he could also consider 8...♗e6 or 8...0-0.



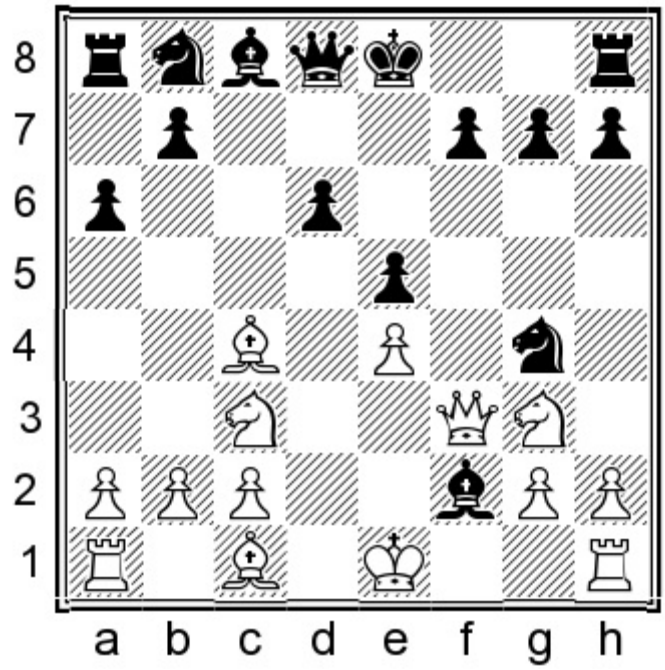
Position after: 8...♘g4!

A) 9.0-0?! A serious mistake. 9...♕h4 10.h3 ♘xf2–+ 11.♖xf2 [11.♗xf7+ ♔d7!–+ White faces significant material losses.] 11...♕xg3 12.♗xf7+ ♔f8 0-1 (12) Shigarev, A – Bondarenko, V (2300) Moscow 1996.

B) 9.♗e3 ♘xe3! 10.fxe3 0-0 11.♕d3 ♗e6 12.0-0-0 ♘d7∓ followed by ...b5.

C) 9.♖f1 0-0 [9...♘xh2? 10.♕h5+–] 10.h3 ♘f6= White will have some trouble completing his development.

D) 9.♕f3! With a clear threat but as a result the white king stays out in the open. 9...♗xf2+!



Position after: 9...♗xf2+!

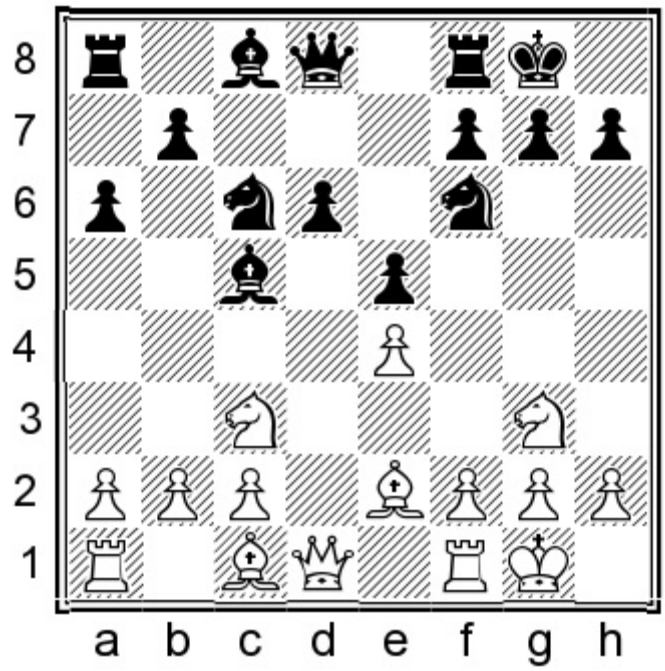
D1) 10.♔e2?! ♕c7!∓ With the white king on e2 this move is possible. Black can move his knight to d4 with check. 11.♗b3 [11.♗d5 ♘c6! 12.♗xc6+ ♕xc6 13.h3 ♕c4+ 14.♔d1 ♕d4+ 15.♔e2 ♗e6 16.♘d5 ♕c4+ 17.♔d1 ♗xg3 18.♕xg3 ♕d4+–+] 11...♘c6 12.♖d1 ♘d4+ 13.♖xd4 exd4 14.♘d5 ♕a5 15.c3 dxc3 16.bxc3 ♗xg3 17.hxg3 ♘e5 18.♕f4 ♗e6–+

D2) 10.♔d1! Counterintuitive but best. 10...0-0 [10...♕c7 11.♗b3±] 11.♘f5! [11.h3 ♕h4∓] 11...♗xf5 12.exf5 ♕h4 13.♘e4 ♗b6 14.♗d5 [14.♗g5 ♘f2+–+] 14...h6=

8...0-0

A high-level encounter continued with 8...♗e6 9.0-0 ♘bd7 10.♘d5 ♗xd5 11.exd5 0-0 12.c4 ♖c8± 1-0 (40) Nakamura, H (2736) – Artemiev, V (2716) Chess.com 2020. White was slightly better

9.0-0 ♘c6



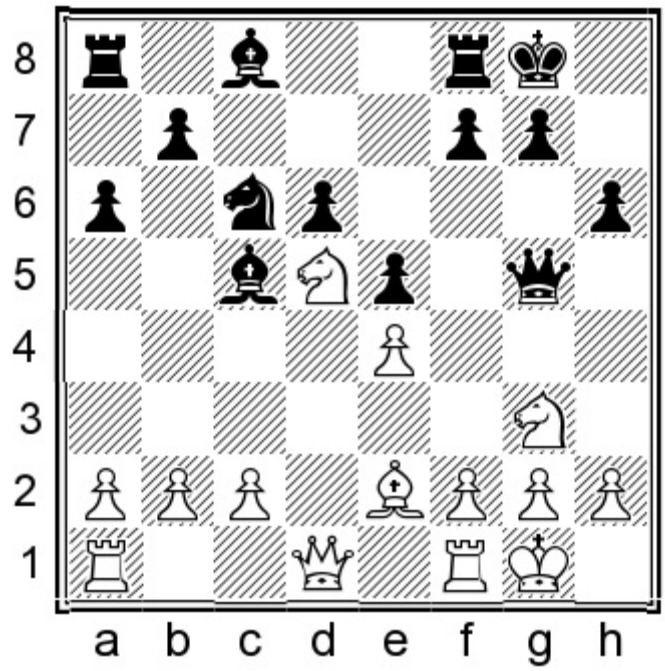
Position after: 9...♘c6

10.♗g5

Just like in the Svesnikov, White fights for the control of the d5-square.

10.♔h1 ♗e6 11.f4 [11.♗g5 h6 12.♗xf6 ♕xf6 13.♘d5 ♕g5 14.♘c7 ♖ac8 15.♘xe6 fxe6=] 11...exf4 12.♗xf4 ♗d4 13.♕d2 ♗e5 14.♖ad1 ♘d4 15.♗d3 ♘c6 16.♘f5 ♗xf5 17.exf5 ♕b6= ½-½ (70) Andriasian, Z (2619) – Sanjay, N (2331) Visakhapatnam 2011.

10...h6 11.♗xf6 ♕xf6 12.♘d5 ♕g5!



Position after: 12...♕g5!

Puts the queen on an active square and prevents White from moving his knight from g3 to f5.

13.c3

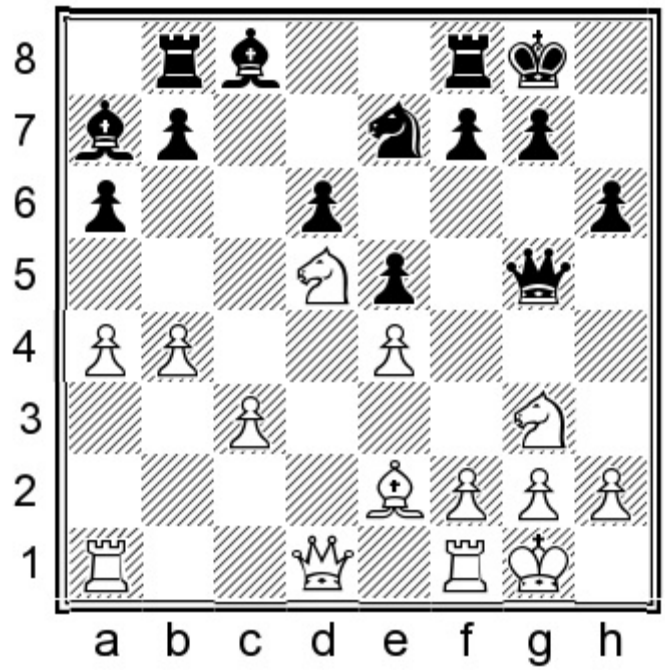
A critical position has arisen. The position is dynamically equal. Strategically, Black has a weak d6-pawn and a hole on d5. White has to develop chances on the queenside. Black has long term dynamic potential on the kingside and owns the bishop pair with the dark-squared bishop outside the pawn chain. Black's game is easier to play, as demonstrated in practice.

A) 13.♕c1!? exchanging queens does not ease White's task. 13...♗e6 [13...♘d4 14.♗c4 g6! 15.c3 ♘e6 16.a4 ♔g7 17.a5 ♗d7= leads to an equal ending.] 14.♕xg5 [14.♘c7 ♕xc1! 15.♖axc1 ♖ac8 16.♘xe6 fxe6∓ is somewhat better for Black with the open f-file, pressure against f2 and the pawn mass in the center.] 14...hxg5 15.c3 g6 Controlling the f5 square and preparing to use the h-file. 16.♖fd1 ♔g7∓ Black will soon push ...f7-f5 with the initiative.

B) 13.♔h1 g6 14.♕c1 ♔g7∓ Nice preparation for further activity. 15.c3 ♗d7 16.b4 ♗a7 17.a4 ♘d8 18.f4 exf4 19.♘xf4 ♘e6∓ 20.♕d2 ♖ac8 21.♕xd6 ♘xf4 22.♕xd7 ♖xc3–+ 0-1 (33) Viscaino Yanez, J (1875) – Titichoca Daza, D (2250) Guayaquil 2022.

13...♖b8!? 14.a4

14.b4 ♗a7 15.a4 ♘e7!



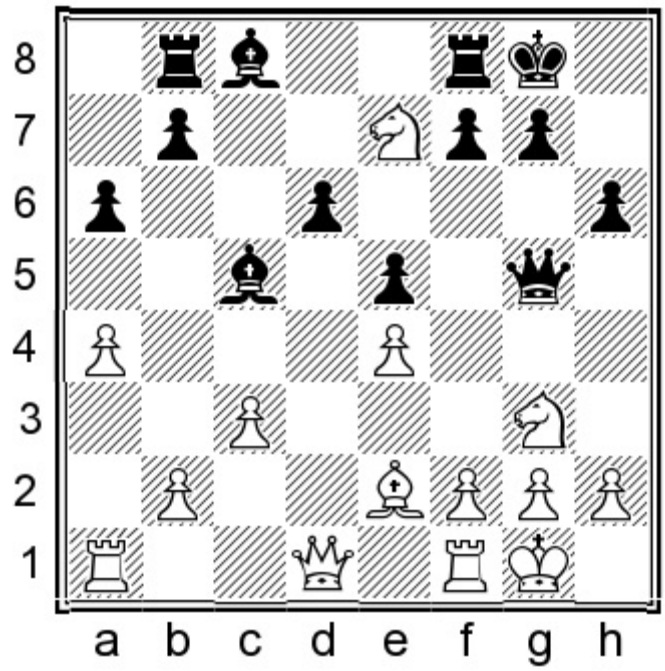
Position after: 15...♘e7!

Challenging the strong knight on d5, a maneuver well known from the Svesnikov. 16.a5?! [16.♘xe7+! ♕xe7 17.♗c4 ♗e6 18.♘f5 ♗xf5 19.exf5 ♖bc8= With the opposite-colored bishops and no real attack, the game is equal.] 16...♘xd5! Both ways of taking back the knight have their issues.

A) 17.exd5 f5 18.c4 ♗d7 19.♖b1 h5!∓ Black starts a strong attack. 20.♗xh5 [20.♘xh5? The knight gets caught. 20...f4 21.♕c1 ♗e8–+] 20...♖f6 21.b5 axb5 22.cxb5 ♗c5! Maintaining the attacking position of the bishop. 23.♖e1 ♕h4 24.♖c1 ♗xf2+–+

B) 17.♕xd5 ♗e6 18.♕d3 [18.♕xd6? The d6-pawn is poisoned. 18...♖bd8 19.♕c7 ♖d7–+] 18...g6∓.

14...♘e7 15.♘xe7+



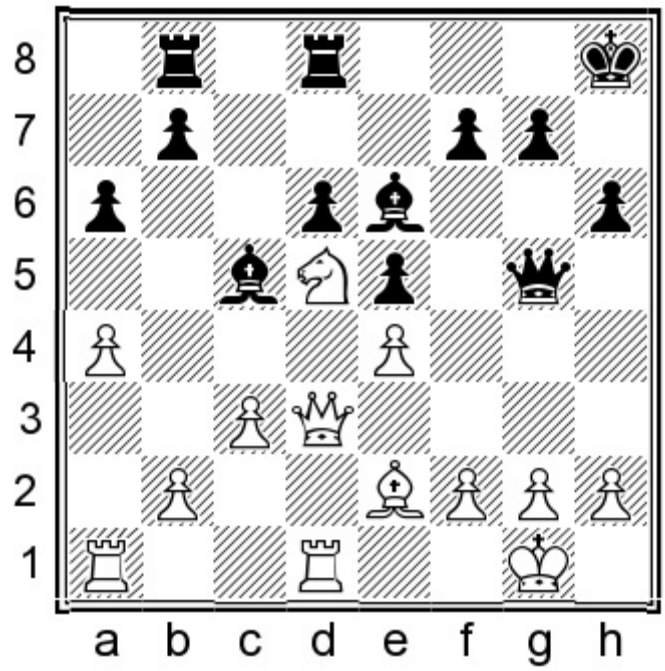
Position after: 15.♘xe7+

As shown in the previous line, taking on e7 is generally best.

15...♕xe7 16.♘f5 ♕f6 17.♕d3 ♖d8

17...♗e6!? leaves Black a little bit more in the driver's seat. 18.b4 ♗a7 19.♕xd6 [19.♘xd6? ♖fd8 20.♖ad1 ♗b3 21.♖d2 b5–+] 19...♖fd8 20.♕e7 ♕xe7 21.♘xe7+ ♔f8 22.♘d5 [22.♘f5 ♖d2∓] 22...♗xd5 23.exd5 ♖xd5 24.♖fd1= Another opposite-colored bishop endgame arises on the board.

18.♘e3 ♗e6 19.♘d5 ♕g5 20.♖fd1 ♔h8=



Position after: 20...♔h8=

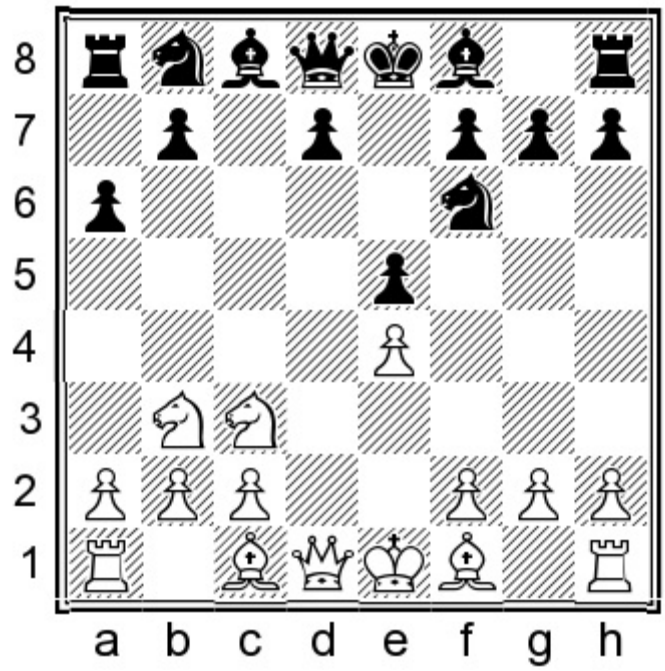
The game is still fairly equal although I'd rather have Black with the bishop pair. 0-1 (54) Andreikin, D (2726) – Ismagambetov, A (2528) Chess.com 2020.

Conclusion

Initially, White needs to be careful after 6.♘de2, due to the weakness of his f2-square. After 6...♗c5 7.♘g3 d6 White has another chance to go astray with 8.♗c4 ♘g4 when he has to be very precise to maintain an equal position. Instead after 8.♗e2 0-0 9.0-0 ♘c6 (9...♗e6 is a quick road to a drawn position as already played by Max Euwe in the early 1950s) 10.♗g5 h6 11.♗xf6 ♕xf6 12.♘d5 ♕g5 the position has the character of a classical Svesnikov, with Black's dark-squared bishop already outside the pawn chain. The game is essentially equal, but Black has his fair share of the chances.

g) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘b3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘b3



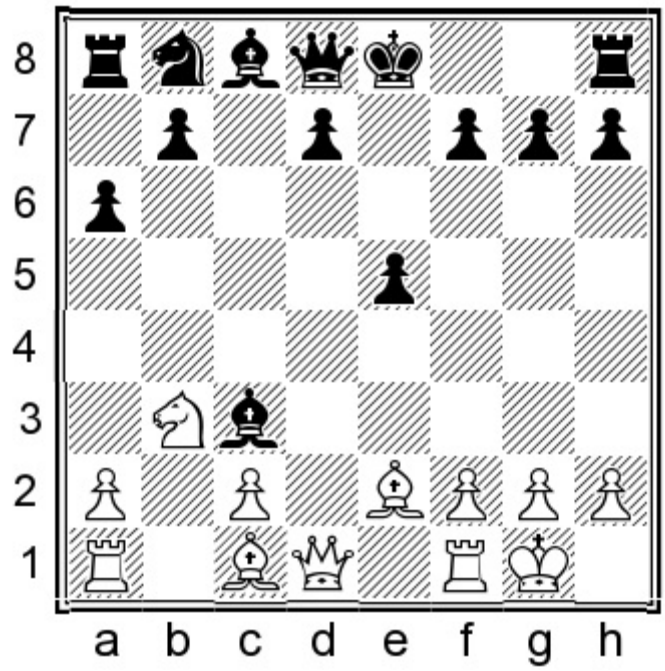
Position after: 6.♘b3

Like in the Sicilian Najdorf, this is the natural retreat of the knight after ...e5, as the b5-square is unavailable. Together with 6.♘f3 it is the most popular way to respond to Black's 5...e5. However, the knight is poorly placed on b3 as it is outside the combat zone and with few prospects. Black's bishop will move to b4, making long castling an unattractive proposition for White. With precise play, Black may reach an interesting strategic game with somewhat better prospects.

6...♗b4 7.♗d3

The most common and natural move, developing a piece and safeguarding the e-pawn at the same time. It all looks like a quiet affair, but White has quite an interesting gambit up his sleeve which could make this line pretty dangerous for Black, see the analysis after 7...d5.

A) 7.♗e2? A little careless. This just drops a pawn as the normal response ...♕g4 has been blocked by the white bishop on e2. 7...♘xe4! 8.0-0 A typical sacrifice we will see again after 7.♗d3 d5 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.0-0. The big difference is that here Black has an extra pawn! [8.♕d3 ♘xc3 9.bxc3 ♗e7 10.♕g3 0-0 11.0-0 ♘c6∓ Black has a healthy extra pawn.] 8...♘xc3 9.bxc3 ♗xc3

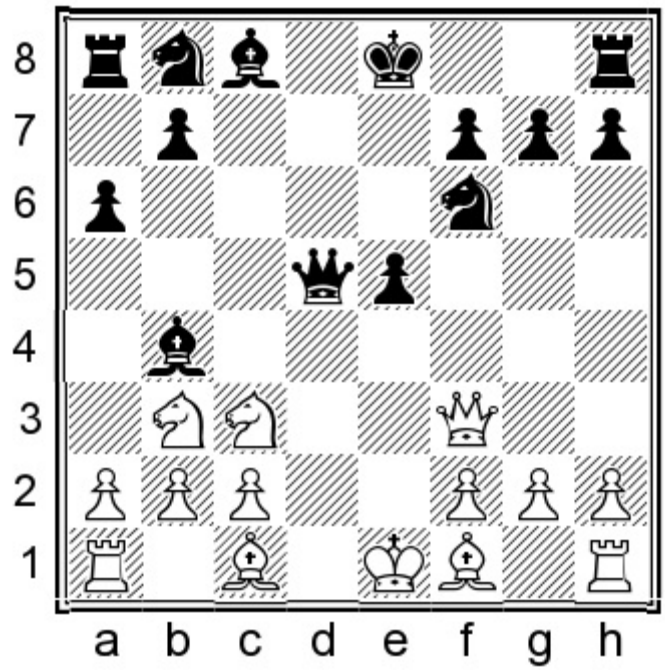


Position after: 9...♗xc3

A1) 10.♗a3 d5! followed by ...♘c6 and ...♗b4, the thematic way to regain control over the a3-f8 diagonal. [10...♗xa1 is playable but seems to give White good attacking chances for the exchange.]

A2) 10.♖b1! d5 11.♕d3 [11.♗a3 ♘c6∓ and ...♗b4 next.] 11...♗b4 12.♖d1 [12.c4 dxc4 13.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 14.♗xc4 ♔e7 15.f4 ♘c6∓] 12...♘c6! 13.♕xd5 ♕xd5 14.♖xd5 ♗e6∓

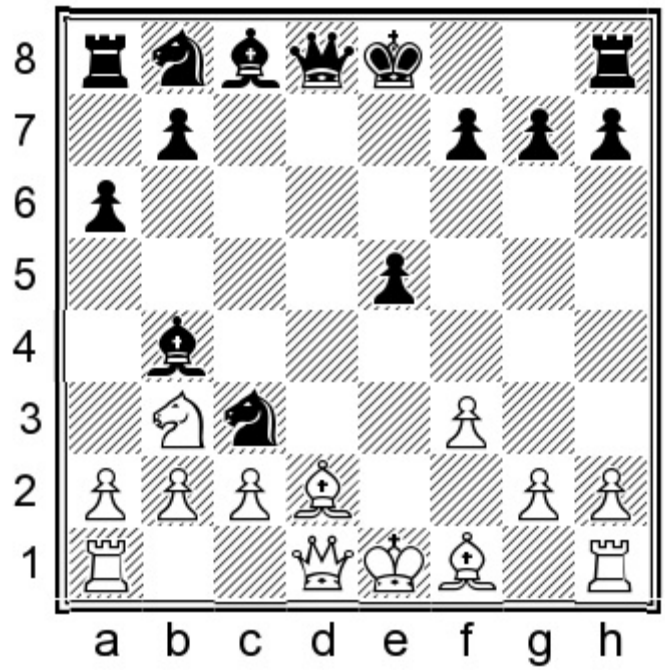
B) 7.♕f3 Almost 100 games have been played with this somewhat strange move. It does not stop ...d5, but it does prepare a quick ♗d2 and 0-0-0 if Black selects a slow development scheme. 7...d5! The central break is not always Black's favorite in the O'Kelly, but here White waisted a tempo in the opening so it makes a lot of sense. 8.exd5 ♕xd5!



Position after: 8...♕xd5!

9.♕xd5 ♘xd5 10.♗d2 ♘xc3 one way or the other Black will cause damage to White's pawn structure. Black ends up with a slightly better endgame. 11.bxc3 [11.♗xc3 ♗xc3+ 12.bxc3 ♔e7! 13.0-0-0 ♗e6∓] 11...♗e7 12.♗d3 ♗e6 13.0-0 0-0 14.♗e3 ♘d7∓

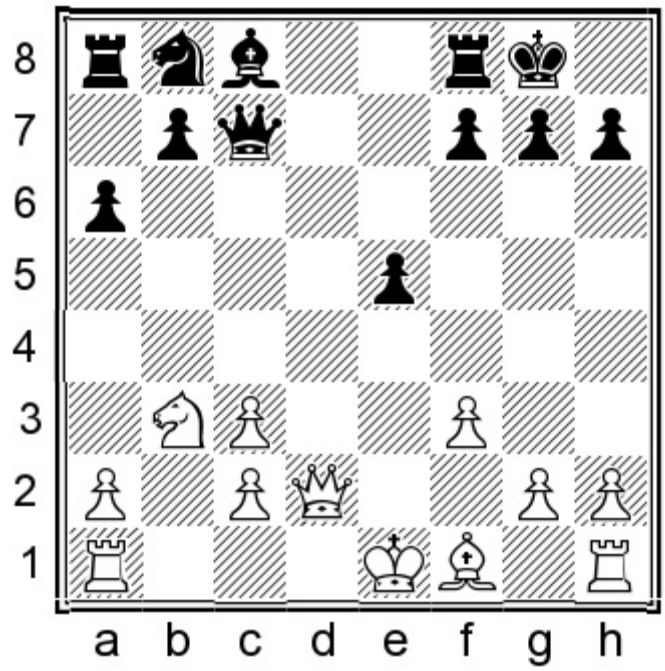
C) 7.f3 After such a slow move, without developing a piece, Black runs no risk if he opens up the center. 7...d5!. No need to postpone this move as Black will be getting a somewhat better game anyway. 8.exd5 [8.a3?! ♗xc3+ 9.bxc3 dxe4 10.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 11.fxe4 ♘xe4∓ White's bishop pair is not enough compensation for the loss of the pawn.] 8...♘xd5 9.♗d2 ♘xc3!



Position after: 9...♘xc3!

C1) 10.bxc3 ♗d6! Even more active than the satisfactory 10...♗e7. 11.♗d3 [11.c4 ♕h4+ 12.g3 ♕e7 13.♗e3 ♗b4+ 14.♔f2 ♗e6∓] 11...0-0 12.0-0 ♗e6 13.f4 ♘d7∓ 14.f5 ♗d5∓

C2) 10.♗xc3 ♗xc3+ 11.bxc3 ♕c7∓ This position has been seen in some 20 games. 12.♕d2 0-0



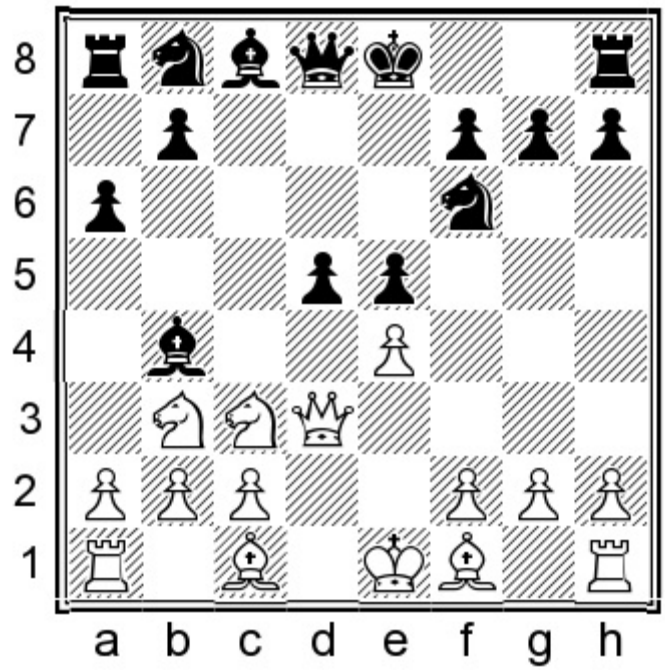
Position after: 12...0-0

White plays an uphill battle with his backlog in development, fractured pawn structure and weak g1-a7 diagonal. Here are a few typical examples how the game might proceed.

C2.1) 13.♗d3 ♗e6 14.0-0 ♘d7 15.♖fe1 [15.f4 exf4 16.♖xf4 ♘e5 17.♗e4 ♖ad8∓ 0-1 (26) Minko, D (2298) – Migot, T (2353) Chess.com 2022.] 15...♖ac8 16.c4 ♖fd8 17.♖ac1 ♗xc4 18.♗xc4 ♕xc4–+ GM Pap has picked up his first pawn. 0-1 (27) Supercell2000 (1646) – Pap, G (2614) lichess.org 2020.

C2.2) 13.0-0-0 a5 14.a4 ♗d7 15.♗b5 ♗xb5 16.axb5 a4–+ 17.♘a1 ♕c4 18.♕d3 ♕a2 0-1 (18) Alves Campelo, D (2044) – Howell, D (2646) Chess.com 2022.

D) 7.♕d3 White aims for quick development with ♗d2 and 0-0-0 banking on his lead in development. 7...d5!



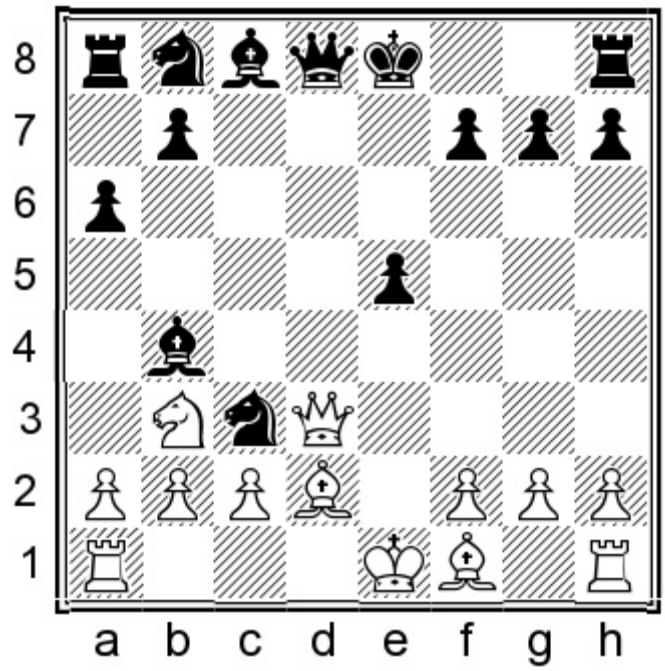
Position after: 7...d5!

After 7.♕f3 the central break makes a lot of sense as White has lost a tempo in the opening.

D1) 8.a3 ♗xc3+ 9.♕xc3 0-0! 10.exd5 ♘xd5 11.♕g3 [11.♕f3 ♗e6! 12.♗d2 ♕c7∓] 11...♗f5 12.♗g5 ♕c7 13.c4 ♘f4∓ 0-1 (33) Van Steenis, H – O'Kelly de Galway, A Beverwijk 1949.

D2) 8.♗g5 d4 9.0-0-0 ♗e7 10.♗xf6 ♗xf6 11.♘d5 0-0=

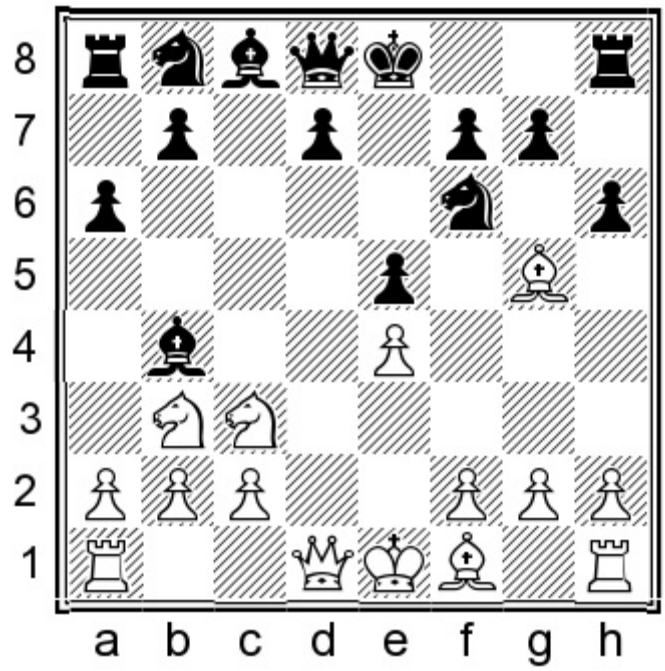
D3) 8.exd5 ♘xd5! 9.♗d2 ♘xc3!



Position after: 9...♘xc3!

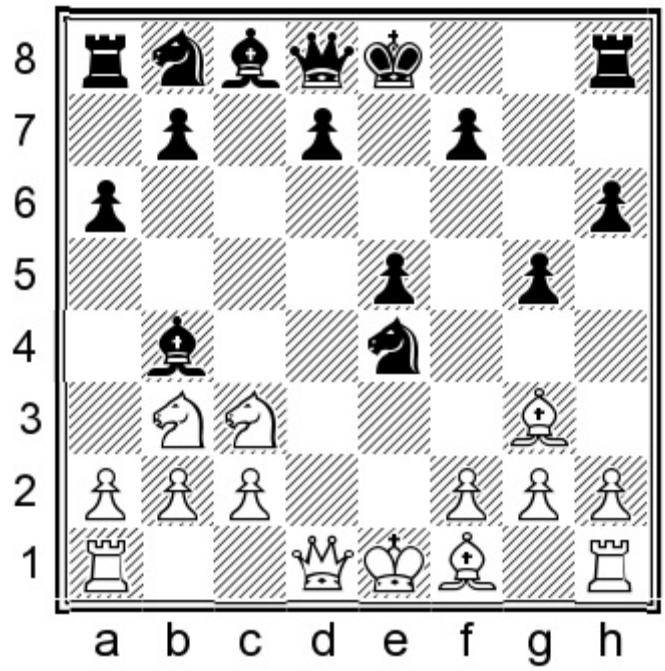
A few precise moves by Black, and we have another example of an O'Kelly endgame with White having a damaged queenside pawn structure. 10.bxc3 [10.♗xc3 ♕xd3! First we look at how White takes back on d3. 11.cxd3 ♘c6!N 12.g3 ♗f5∓; 10.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 11.bxc3 ♗d6∓ In this structure the black king is probably best on c7.] 10...♗d6 11.♗e2 [11.♖d1 ♕c7∓] 11...♕c7∓ Black was slightly better, although later in the game the opponent of our honorable grandmaster was able to equalize the position. ½ -½ (26) Platt, J – O'Kelly de Galway, A Trencianske Teplice 1949.

E) 7.♗g5 White challenges the control of the d5-square as known from other Sicilians, but in this case the idea is less effective. 7...h6!



Position after: 7...h6!

E1) 8.♗h4 White is unwilling to hand over the bishop pair. 8...g5 This is the most straightforward path to equality. 9.♗g3 ♘xe4!?



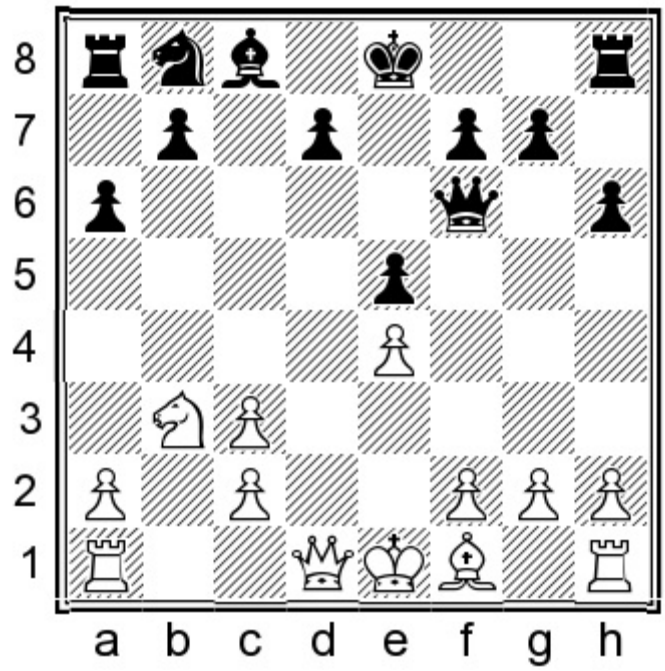
Position after: 9...♘xe4!?

White is temporarily a pawn down but will recover the material with the position leading to a more or less equal endgame.

E1.1) 10.♗xe5 is a bit riskier. 10...♕e7 11.♕d4 the only move to stay in the game. 11...♘xc3! 12.bxc3 ♘c6∓ 13.♕e3 ♘xe5 14.cxb4 ♕xb4+ 15.c3 ♕e7 16.0-0-0 [16.♗e2 ♘g6 17.♕xe7+ ♔xe7 18.0-0 d6∓ 0-1 (57) Candian, L (1835) – Lumachi, G (2314) Bassano del Grappa 2021.] 16...d6 17.♕d4 ♗e6 18.♕xd6 ♖d8 19.♗b5+ axb5 20.♕xe5 0-1 (27) Toro Castaneda, E (1975) – Montilla Reyes, J (2150) Santa Rosa 2021. 20...♕a3+! 21.♔b1 0-0∓

E1.2) 10.♕e2 or ♕d5 10...♘xc3 11.♕xe5+ ♕e7 12.♕xe7+ [12.a3 ♘c6 13.♕xe7+ ♗xe7 14.bxc3 0-0 15.♔d2 d5=] 12...♔xe7 13.a3 ♗xa3 14.♖xa3 ♘e4= with an equal ending.

E2) 8.♗xf6 By far the most popular. 8...♗xc3+! That move makes the difference. 9.bxc3 ♕xf6 White has a damaged pawn structure. This is a position which typically arises between a weak White player and a strong Black player.

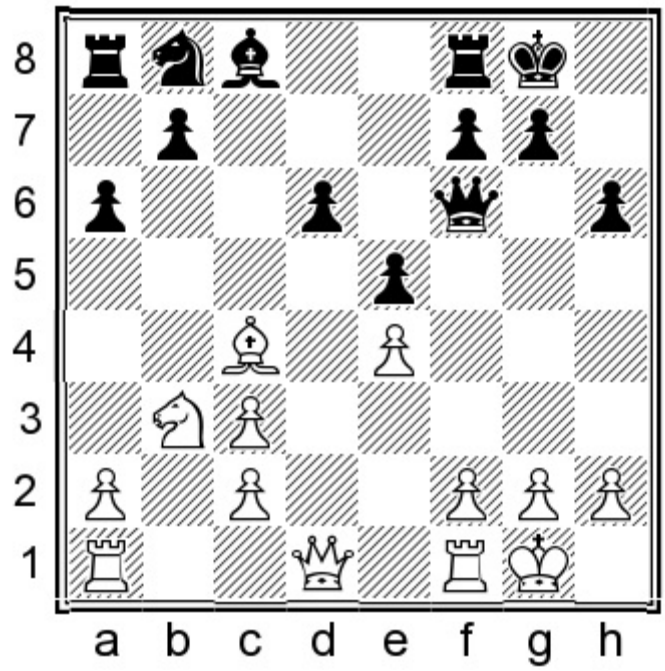


Position after: 9...♕xf6

E2.1) 10.♕d3 0-0 11.a4 d6 12.♖d1 ♖d8 13.♕e3 ♘c6∓ 0-1 (91) Papastavropoulos, A (2250) – Grivas, E (2475) Athens 1996.

E2.2) 10.♗d3 0-0 11.0-0 d6 12.♘d2 ♘d7 13.♕h5 ♘c5 14.♘f3 ♘e6 15.g3? [15.♕h4 g5 16.♕g3 ♗d7∓] 15...g6 16.♕h4 ♕xf3–+ 0-1 (19) chessfan1 (2033) – Pap, G (2734) lichess.org 2021.

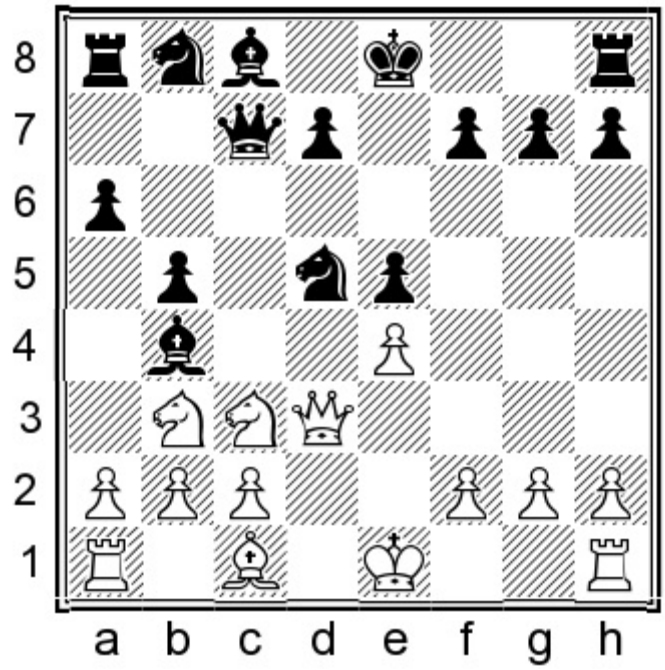
E2.3) 10.♗c4 0-0 11.0-0 d6



Position after: 11...d6

Black has equalized. Whatever White's next move, the character of the game will not change. White needs to take care of his damaged pawn structure and has insufficient piece activity to compensate for that. 12.♕d3 [12.♕d2 ♗e6 13.♘a5 ♘c6 14.♗xe6 ♘xa5 15.♗d5 ♖ac8 16.♖fe1 ♕e7= 0-1 (45) Praggnanandhaa, R (2200) – Deepan Chakkravarthy, J (2476) Kolkata 2015.] 12...♘c6 13.♖ad1 ♖d8 14.♖d2 ♗e6 15.♖fd1 ♔f8= 0-1 (38) Zhotev, J (2086) – Donchev, D (2452) Sofia 2009.

F) 7.♗c4 This is not a threat to Black. It will be difficult for the bishop to find a secure place with the knight preventing a retreat to b3. 7...♕c7! After this move White's pieces are uncoordinated. 8.♕d3 [8.♕e2 ♗xc3+ 9.bxc3 d6 10.0-0 ♘bd7∓ 0-1 (47) Thorhallsson, G (2219) – Roussel Roozmon, T (2479) Reykjavik 2009.] 8...b5! 9.♗d5 ♘xd5

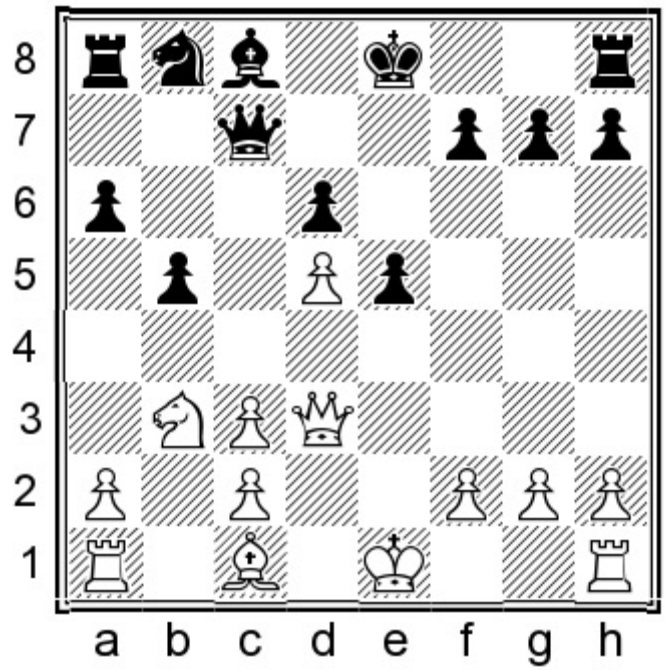


Position after: 9...♘xd5

Whichever way White takes back on d5 Black will get good counterplay against White's damaged queenside pawn structure.

F1) 10.♕xd5 ♗b7 11.♕d3 ♗xc3+ 12.bxc3 0-0 13.0-0 [13.♗a3 ♖c8 14.0-0-0 ♕xc3 15.♕xc3 ♖xc3 16.f3 f6=] 13...♖c8∓ 0-1 (33) Negi, V (2165) – Sanjay, N (2339) Dindigul 2007.

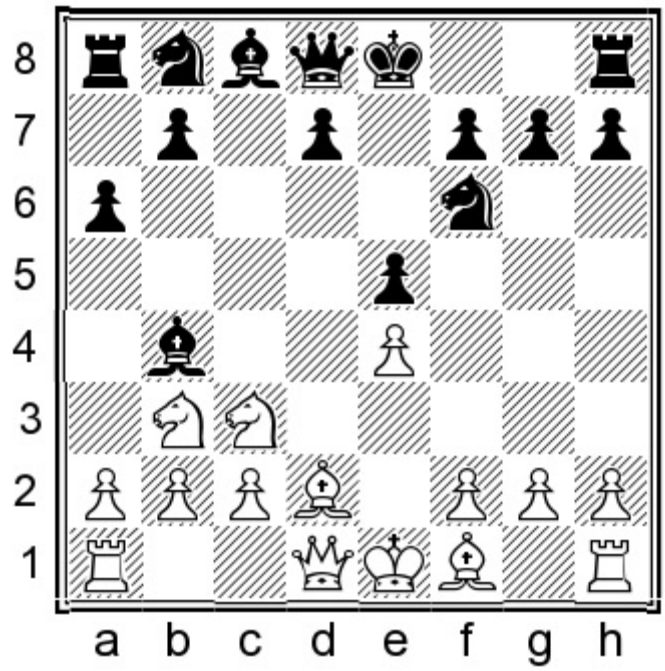
F2) 10.exd5 ♗xc3+! 11.bxc3 d6



Position after: 11...d6

Black has equalized quite easily. 12.a4 bxa4 13.♖xa4 a5 14.c4 ♗d7 15.♖a1 0-0 16.0-0 a4= ½ – ½ (40) Ustimenko, A (2240) – Krause, P (2409) corr. 2015.

G) 7.♗d2



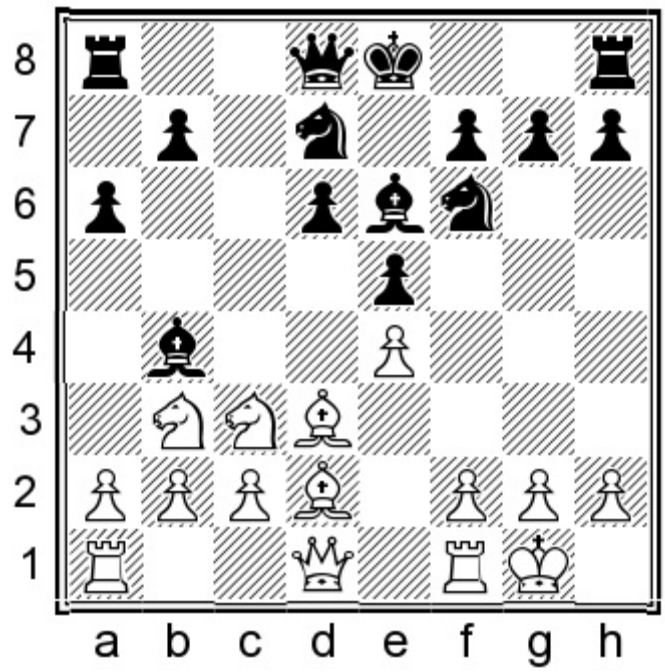
Position after: 7.♗d2

This is a serious option for White as he prevents the doubling of the c-pawns. He will soon be the proud owner of the bishop pair.

G1) 7...♗xc3 8.♗xc3 ♘xe4?! It is unwise to take the e-pawn at this stage. 9.♕g4! ♘f6 10.♕xg7 ♖g8 11.♕h6 ♖g6 12.♕h4±

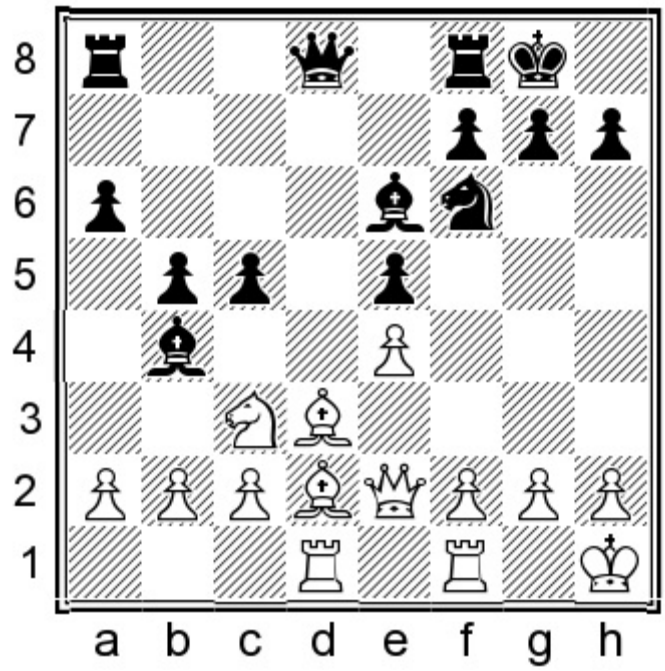
G2) 7...0-0 Black plays for the central break. For the time being he refrains from ...d6, in order to be able play ...d5 in one go. This is a serious option, but I prefer the text move.

G3) 7...d6! Black plays positionally and waits with his knight until he knows whether c6 or d7 is its best destination. 8.♗d3 [8.♗c4 0-0 9.♕e2 ♗xc3 10.♗xc3 b5 11.♗d3 ♘c6 12.a4 b4 13.♗d2 ♗e6= ½-½ (27) Kovacs, L – Csom, I (2545) Hungary 1989.] 8...♗e6 9.0-0 [9.♕e2 ♘c6 10.0-0 0-0 11.a3 ♗c5 12.♗c4 ♘d4∓ 0-1 (35) Stelzer, H (2183) – Meier, G (2628) Bensheim 2020.] 9...♘bd7



Position after: 9...♘bd7

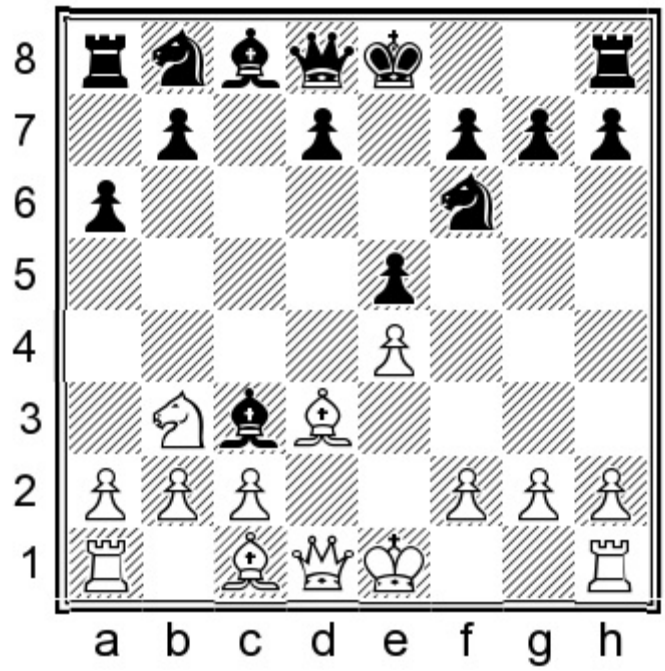
Black will soon lose the bishop pair but he has taken an active position in the center. 10.♕e2 0-0 11.♖ad1 [11.f4 exf4! 12.♖xf4 ♖e8 13.♖af1 ♗xb3 14.axb3 d5 15.♕d1 ♗xc3 16.♗xc3 dxe4 17.♗e2 ♖e7∞] 11...b5 12.♔h1 [12.a3 ♗xc3 13.♗xc3 ♘b6=] 12...♘c5 13.♘xc5 dxc5



Position after: 13...dxc5

14.♘d5 [14.♕e1 c4 15.♗e2 ♕b6=] 14...♗xd2 15.♕xd2 ♗xd5 16.exd5 c4 17.♗e2 ♕d6∓ 0-1 (44) Kara, G (1925) – Stearman, J (2310) Corum 2019.

7...♗xc3+!



Position after: 7...♗xc3+!

The choice of the grandmasters! This is a refined way to play this variation and has recently been

seen in the games of GM's Hou Yifan and Bogdan Daniel Deac and it is preferred by the engines. Black avoids the risks he runs after opening the center with 7...d5 where he has a serious lag in development. He will play a relatively straightforward and positional game against the weakened pawn structure on the queenside. Given the calm nature of the position Black can make up for the difference in development. White hardly has any pressure along the d-file so there is no risk of a quick counterattack on Black's backward pawn on d6.

8.bxc3 0-0

In order to prevent any issues with his king's safety Black castles immediately. Black will build up his position with ...d6, ...♗e6 (via g4 if needed), ...♘bd7, ...♕c7 and ...♖fc8. The black a8-rook is left where it stands as the ...a6-a5 maneuver often needs support from behind. Also ...b7-b5 may be needed at one stage after White has played a4-a5 when the a6 pawn needs extra cover as well. Black should refrain from an early ...b7-b5 as White will then get rid of one of his weak pawns with a2-a4. As soon as the d6-pawn is properly protected and all his pieces are in place Black can start thinking about consuming White's weak pawns on the queenside, often starting with ...♘b6.

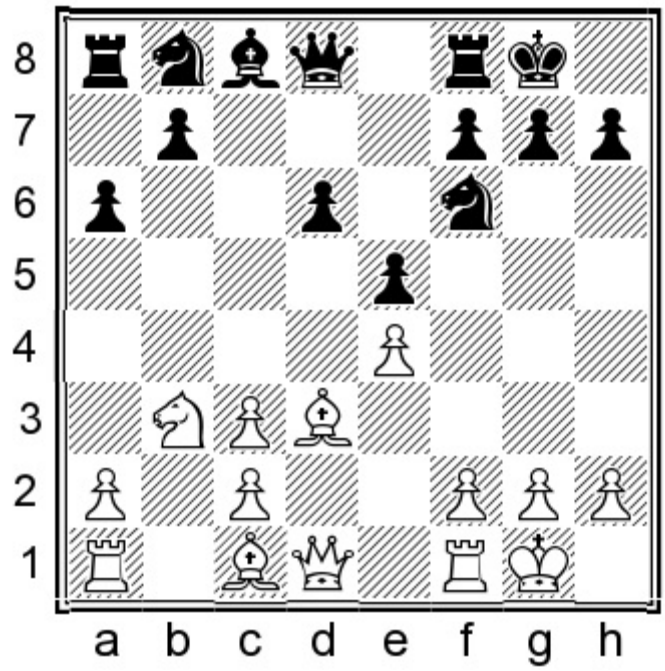
9.0-0

A) 9.♗a3 d6 With his bishop on d3 there is no way White can quickly increase the pressure against d6. Besides, his own pawn on e4 needs support as well. 10.0-0 [10.♗c4?! ♘xe4 11.♕d3 ♗f5∓] 10...♕c7 11.♖e1 [11.♕e2 ♗e6 12.c4 ♘bd7∓] 11...♖d8∓ 12.♗b2 ♗g4 [12...b5? 13.a4= 1-0 (68) Hermanowicz, D – Ziogaite, J Mureck 1998.] 13.f3 ♗e6 14.a4 ♘bd7∓ Black has reached his ideal position.

B) 9.c4 d6 10.0-0 transposes to 9.0-0 d6 10.c4

9...d6

The game is quiet and positional in nature. White has a few key options. He may try and prepare for a kingside attack with f4-f5, or he may be more centrally focused seeking to eliminate his weakened pawn structure with c4-c5.



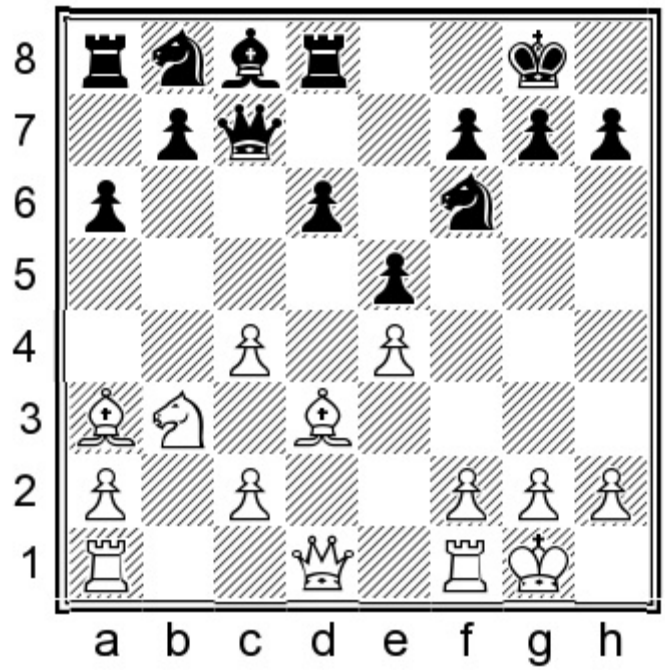
Position after: 9...d6

10.♗g5

An active development move by White preventing the optimal ...♗e6 and ...♘bd7.

A) 10.♗b2 White plays a central game, based on c4 and f4. 10...♗e6 11.c4 ♕c7 12.f4 ♘bd7!∓ [12...♗xc4 13.♗xc4 ♕xc4 14.♕xd6=] 13.♕e2 ♖ac8∓

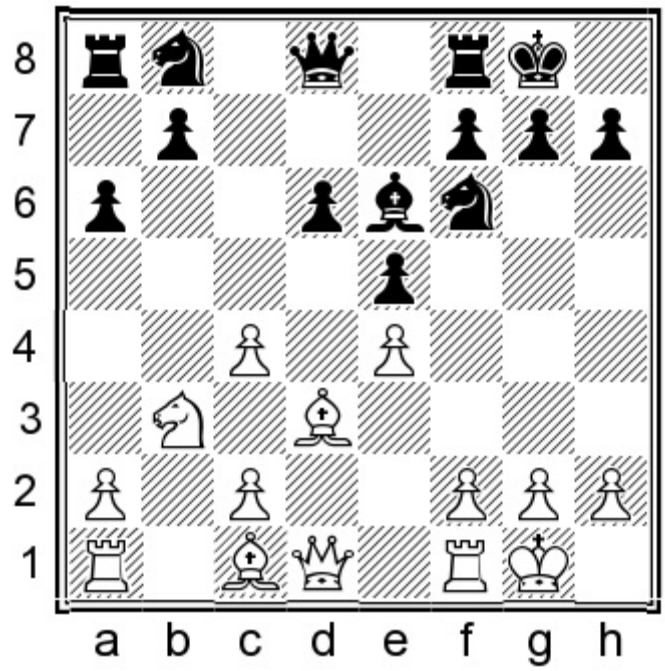
B) 10.♗a3 A knee-jerk reaction but White has insufficient punch to increase the pressure against Black's weak d-pawn. 10...♕c7 11.c4 [11.f4 ♘bd7 12.♔h1 ♖e8 13.f5 b5–+ White's attacking idea fails.] 11...♖d8!



Position after: 11...♖d8!

This is the difference with the lines after 10.c4. Black is well prepared for c4-c5. 12.h3 [12.c5 dxc5 13.♘xc5 ♘c6∓ and Black's harmonious development outweighs White's bishop pair.] 12...♗e6 13.♕e2 ♘bd7 14.♖ad1 b5!∓ with complications favoring Black.

C) 10.c4 White tries to get rid of one of his doubled pawns. 10...♗e6!



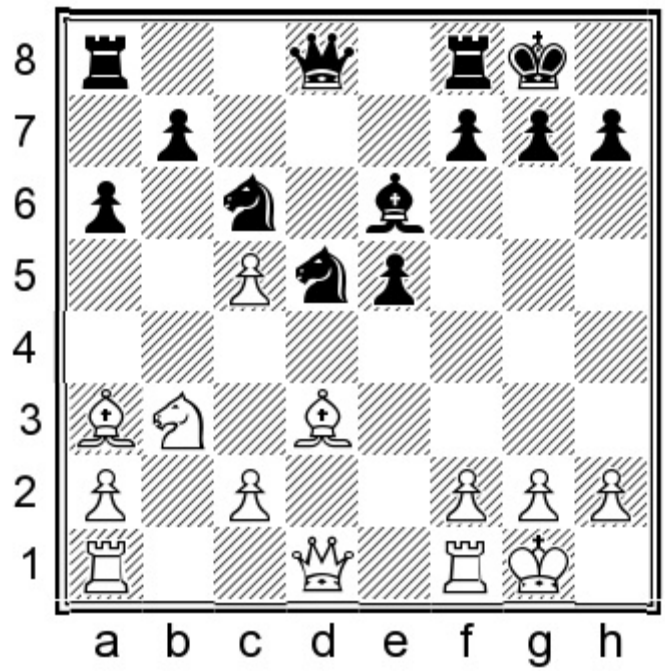
Position after: 10...♗e6!

C1) 11.c5 ♗xb3! 12.axb3 dxc5∓ 13.♗e3 ♕e7 14.f3 ♘c6 15.c3 ♘d8 16.♕c2 ♘e6 17.♗c4 ♖fc8∓ ½ –

½ (23) Litz, K – Loeffelbein, K corr. 2013.

C2) 11.♗e3 ♘bd7! 12.a4 [12.c5? ♘g4∓] 12...a5!∓

C3) 11.♗a3 ♘c6! Black must deviate from his standard development scheme in order to be prepared for White's c4-c5. [11...♕c7 12.c5!=] 12.c5 d5! That is the difference. Black is already better due to the disorganized white camp. 13.exd5 ♘xd5

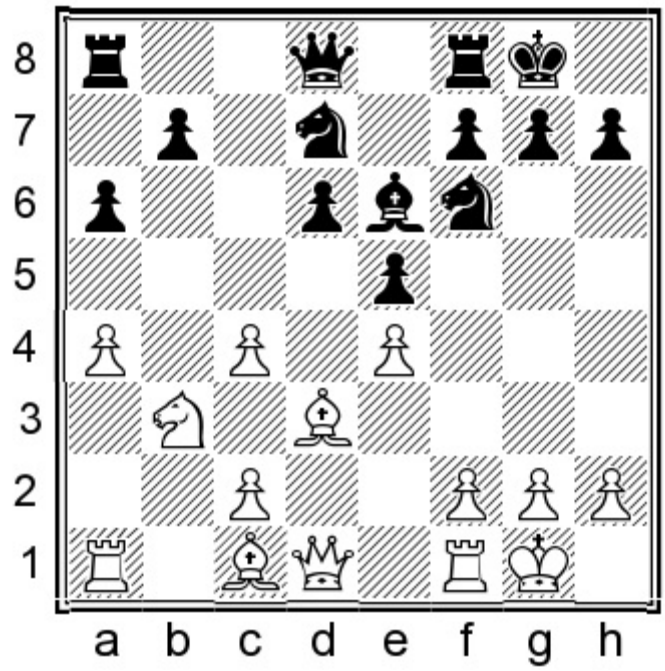


Position after: 13...♘xd5

C3.1) 14.c4? ♘f4 and Black wins due to the combined force of ...♕g5, ...♖ad8 and ...♖d3. 15.♗e2 ♕g5 16.♗f3 [16.g3 ♖ad8 17.♕e1 ♗h3–+] 16...♖ad8 17.♕c2 ♗f5–+

C3.2) 14.♗e4 f5 15.♗xd5 ♗xd5∓ 16.♕d2?! ♗xb3 17.♕xd8 ♖axd8 18.cxb3 ♖d2–+ and Black is nearly winning. 0-1 (32) Zaozerskih, S (1902) – Gurvich, V (2331) St Petersburg 2015.

C4) With ...b5 out of the picture, this is the best slot for the bishop. In addition, it more or less prevents 12.c5. 11.a4 White shifts plans as he sees that c4-c5 cannot be pushed through. 11...♘bd7!



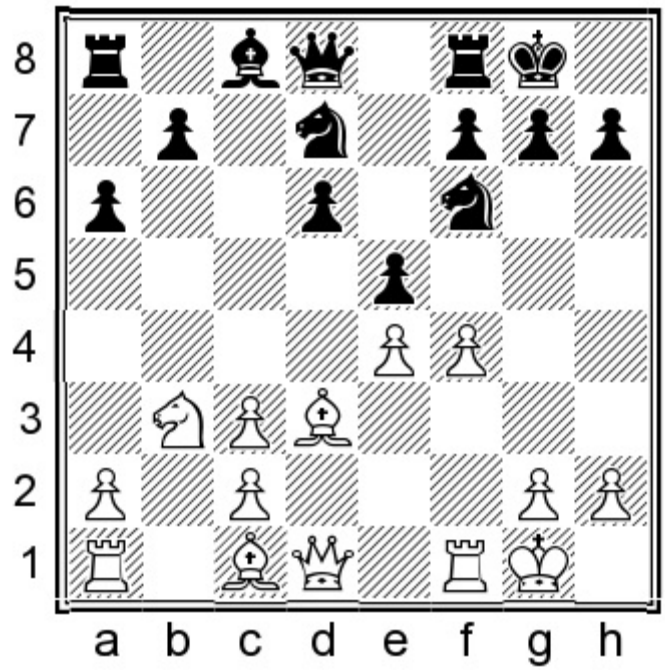
Position after: 11...♘bd7!

Back in familiar grounds.

C4.1) 12.♗a3 ♕c7∓ 13.♕e2 [13.a5 ♖fd8 Providing some extra support to d6 and enabling a capture on c4. 14.f3 ♘e8 15.♕e2 ♖ac8∓; 13.♖e1 ♖fc8 14.♖e2 a5∓] 13...♖fc8! 14.♖fd1 a5 15.♖ac1 ♘b6∓

C4.2) 12.a5 ♕c7 13.♕e2 ♖fc8 14.♖a4 b5∓ 15.cxb5 axb5 16.♗xb5? ♗xb3 17.cxb3 ♕xc1–+

D) 10.f4 White thematically challenges the black center in anticipation of further kingside action. However, White's kingside initiative lacks punch. Black responds with a counterattack on the queenside. 10...♘bd7!



Position after: 10...♘bd7!

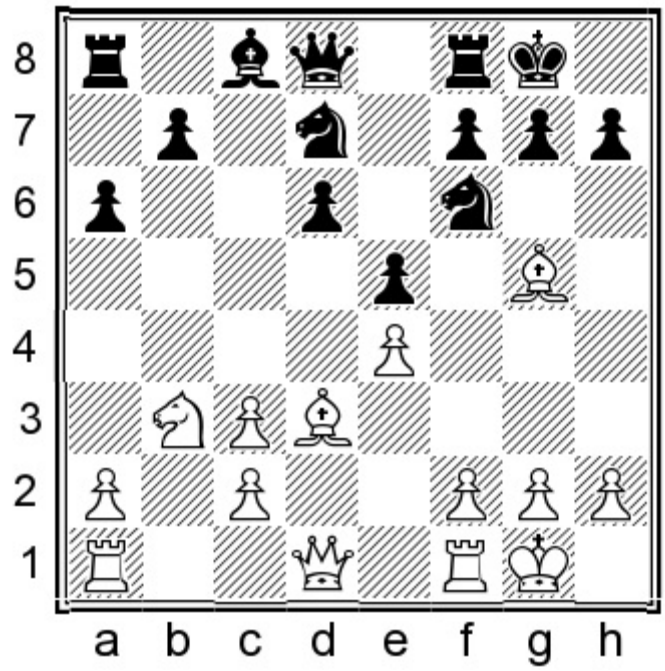
or 10...h6 first. The standard 10...♗e6 is not on as White will gain time with f4-f5. The c8-bishop should move to b7.

D1) 11.f5 b5! The e4-pawn is vulnerable. 12.a4 ♗b7 13.axb5 axb5 14.♖xa8 ♕b6+! This maneuver would not be available if Black had played 10...♖e8 first. 15.♔h1 ♖xa8∓ Black holds all the trumps in this position.

D2) 11.♗a3 ♖e8 12.f5 b5!∓ This typical maneuver appears again. 13.♔h1 ♗b7 14.♕e2 d5–+ 0-1 Vignoli, M – Ivanov, M (2463) Bergamo 2004.

D3) 11.♕f3 ♕c7 [11...♖e8!?] 12.c4 ♖e8= followed by 13...b6 or the pawn sacrifice 13...b5.

10...♘bd7!



Position after: 10...♘bd7!

Black prepares to take back with the knight on f6 before challenging the bishop with ...h6.

11.♕d2

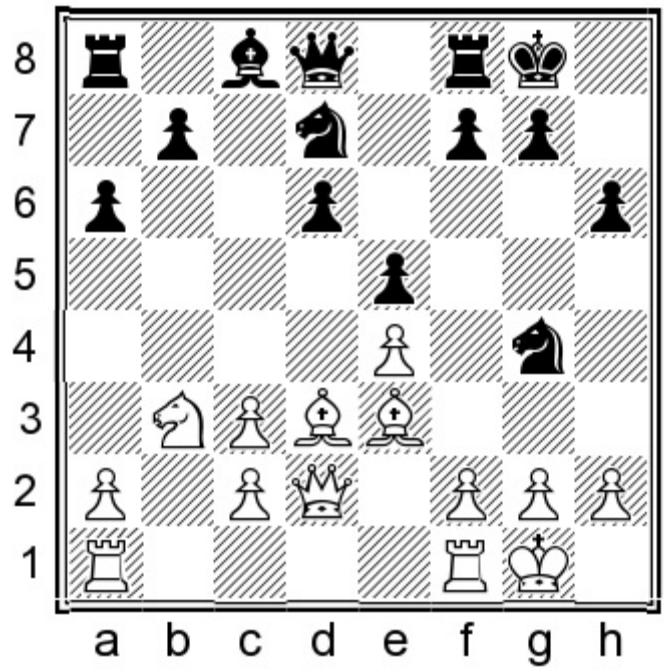
A) 11.♖e1 ♕c7 12.♕d2 b6 13.♖ad1 ♗b7 14.c4 ♖fc8 [14...a5N Followed by ...♗a6 increasing the pressure with more or less equal chances.] 15.♕e3 ♘e8 16.♕g3 ♘f8 17.♘d2 ♘e6 18.♘f3 ♘xg5∓ 0-1 (64) Hernandez Moya, Y (2206) – Pina Vega, S (2325) Ciudad de Holguin 2011.

B) 11.c4 h6! 12.♗e3 ♕c7 13.♕f3 b5!N 14.cxb5 axb5 15.♗xb5 ♗b7 16.♗d3 ♖a4 17.♘d2 ♖fa8= Black has excellent play.

11...h6 12.♗e3

12.♗h4?! ♘xe4! 13.♕xh6! [13.♗xd8 ♘xd2∓] 13...gxh6 14.♗xd8 ♖xd8 15.♗xe4 ♘f6∓

12...♘g4!∓



Position after: 12...♘g4!∓

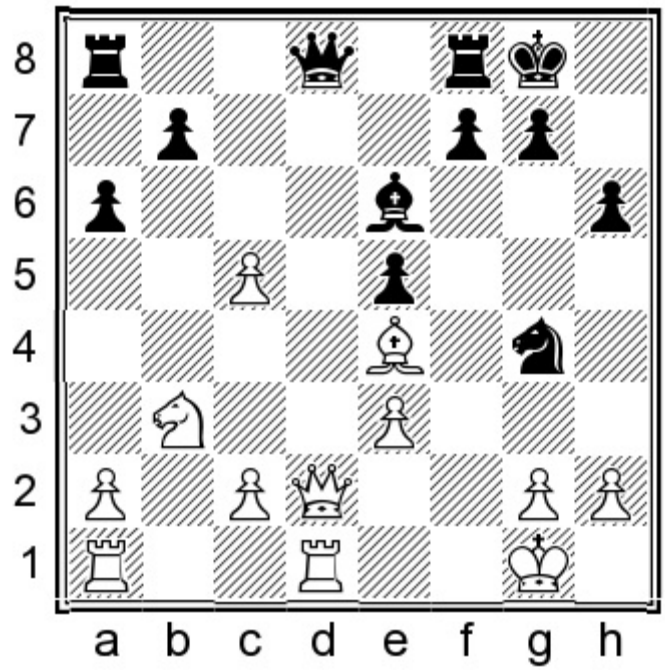
13.♖fd1

13.♗e2 ♘xe3 14.♕xe3 ♕c7 15.♖fd1 ♘f6 16.f3 ♗e6 17.♖ab1 b5!∓ All the positional trumps are with Black. a2-a4 is not an issue. 0-1 (38) Lambach, M (1962) – Migot, T (2353) Europe Echecs 2020.

13...♘df6 14.c4 ♗e6 15.c5 d5

This is often the right response to White's c4-c5. Black takes the center, and the white pieces have no future.

16.exd5 ♘xd5 17.♗e4 ♘dxe3 18.fxe3



Position after: 18.fxe3

White remains the proud owner of weak queenside pawns.

18...♕e7∓

0-1 (32) Sukandar, I (2396) – Hou, Y (2661) Tromsoe 2014, a convincing game by Hou Yifan.

Conclusion

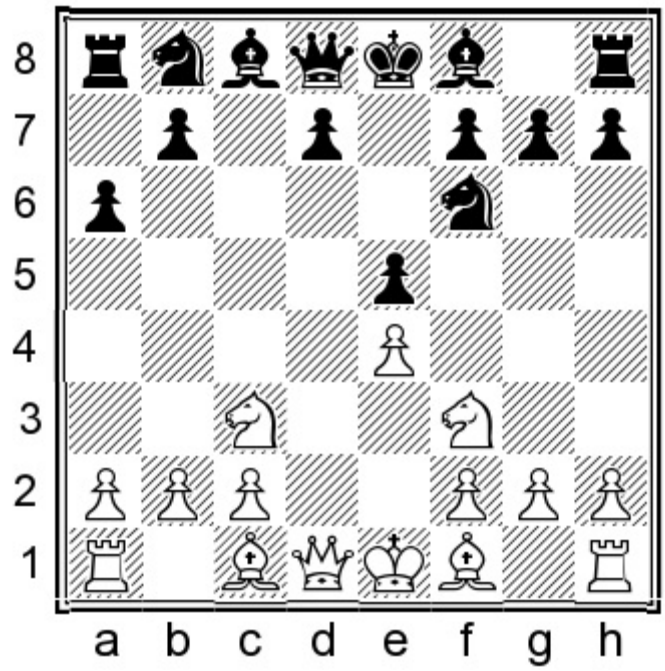
The natural 6.♘b3 does not present Black with any kind of problems. After 6...♗b4 and the more popular 7.♗d3, Black takes on c3 causing long term damage to White's pawn structure. Subsequently, Black builds up his fortifications, preferably on the basis of ...0-0, ...d6, ...♗e6, ...♘bd7, ...♕c7. Winning the pawn on c3 is not a priority and will only become topical after Black has completed his development. Even then, it is often better to further improve Black's position (...a5, ...♖fc8, ...♘b6). The c4-pawn will not run away, and taking the pawn gives some breathing space to White's forces. White has no active plan and has to wait, defending his weaknesses.

White's other 7th moves do not pose any specific problem. Generally, if White plays a slow 7th move, Black can afford to open up the center with ...d5, with an easy game. One exception is 7.♗d2 which is a serious option and the second most popular move in the position.

The pawn on e4 is poisoned: 7...♗xc3 8.♗xc3 ♘xe4 9.♕g4! and White is better. Black should calmly continue with 7...d6 and play a quiet game. Chances are about equal.

h) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3

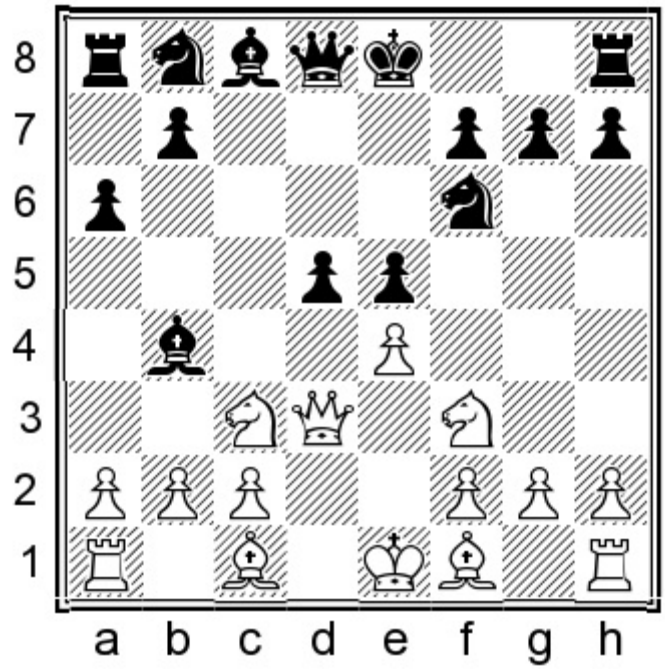


Position after: 6.♘f3

6...♗b4 7.♗d3?!

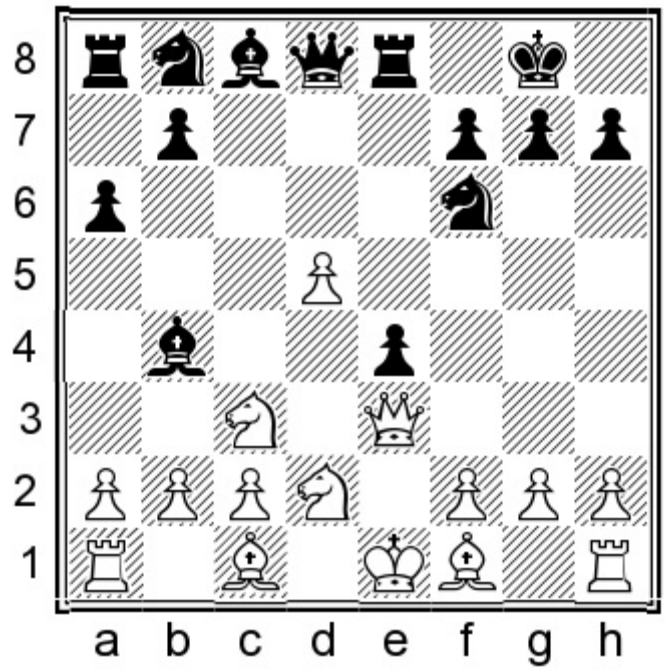
This natural continuation is taken as the main line as it is White's second most popular choice. This is good for us as it is a serious mistake and only leads to better positions for Black.

A) 7.♕d3?! This just loses time in the opening. 7...d5! With a tempo lost on 7.♕d3, the central break is the obvious response. Black is already at least equal.



Position after: 7...d5!

A1) 8.exd5?! e4∓ 9.♕e3 White does not lose a piece, but his position is difficult. 9...0-0 10.♘d2 ♖e8!N

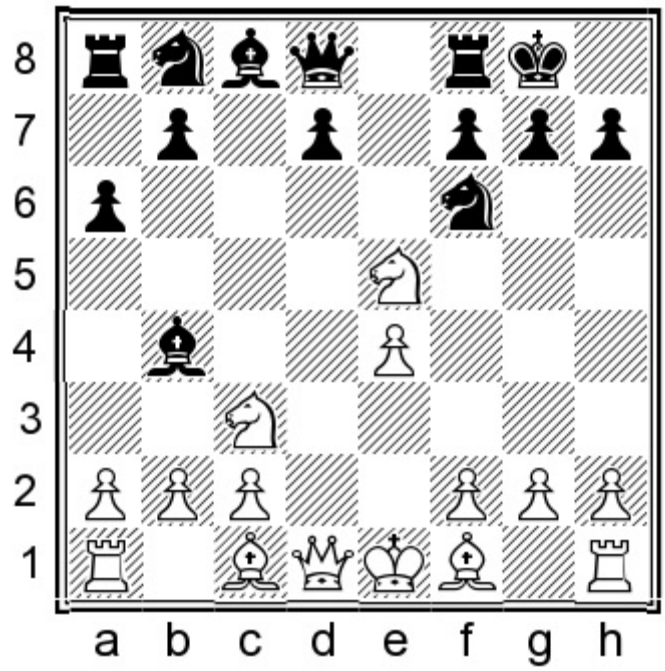


Position after: 10...♖e8!N

11.♕g3 [11.♗c4?! ♘g4 12.♕g3 e3–+] 11...♗g4 12.♗c4 b5 13.♗b3 ♗d6 14.♕e3 ♘bd7∓

A2) 8.♗g5 d4 9.0-0-0 ♘c6 10.♗xf6 [10.♘d5 ♗e7 11.♗xf6 ♗xf6 12.c3 ♗e6 13.cxd4 exd4 14.♘xf6+ ♕xf6∓ 15.♘xd4 ♖d8–+] 10...♕xf6 11.♘d5 ♕d6 12.♔b1 ♗c5∓

B) 7.♘xe5 White goes pawn hunting at the cost of development. White is unlikely to keep his extra pawn for long in the open positions which follow. 7...0-0!

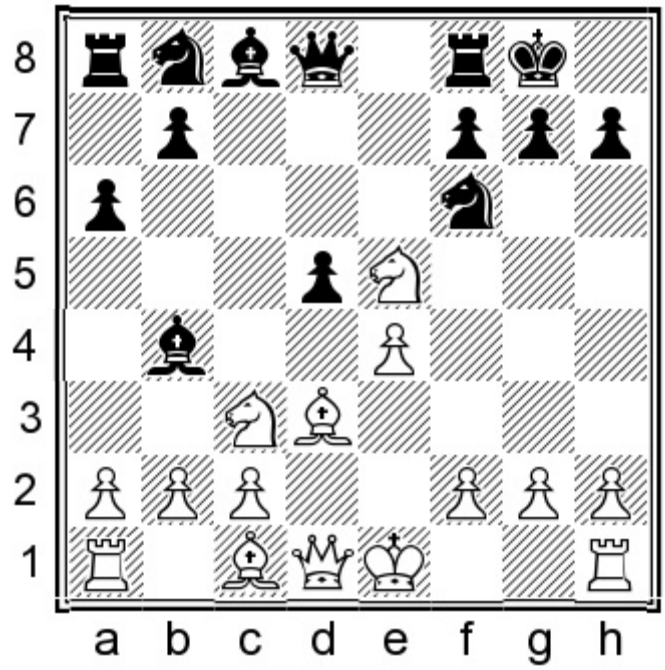


Position after: 7...0-0!

7...♕e7 shows good results as well because of the traps that White needs to avoid along the way.

B1) 8.♕d4 Recommended by the engines. This is White's best move, but it has not been played very often. 8...♗xc3+ 9.♕xc3 [9.bxc3 d6 10.♘c4 ♘xe4 11.♗d3 ♘c6∓] 9...♘xe4 10.♕d4 ♖e8 11.♕xe4 ♘c6 12.f4 d5! 13.♕e3 f6 14.♗e2 fxe5 15.0-0 ♘d4 16.♗d3 ♘f5 17.♗xf5 ♗xf5 18.fxe5 ♗xc2=

B2) 8.♗d3 is the most popular continuation, defending e4 and enabling a quick 0-0. 8...d5! This strong move destroys White's ambition to gain any advantage after 7.♘xe5. It was first played in the O'Kelly classic Keres, P – Olafsson, F Belgrade 1959.



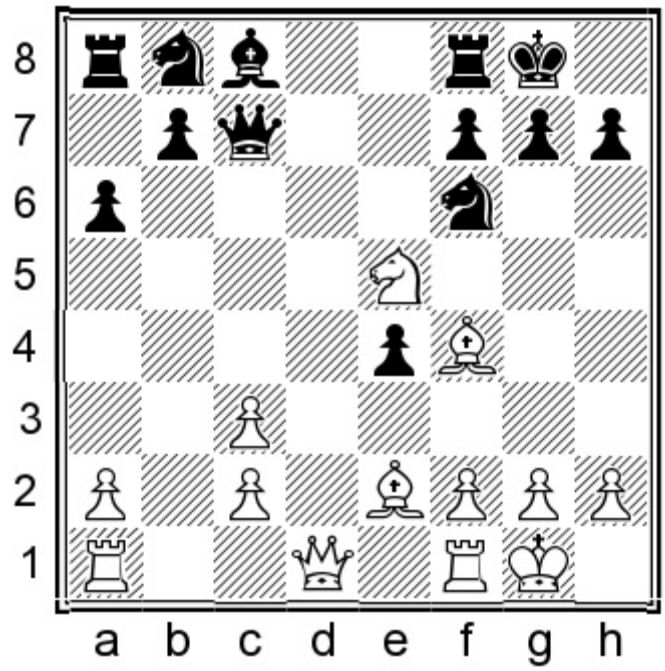
Position after: 8...d5!

B2.1) 9.♗g5? This is even worse than on move 8. 9...d4! 10.a3 ♗e7 11.♘e2 ♕a5+–+ and Black picks up a piece

B2.2) 9.exd5 ♖e8! 10.f4 ♗c5! 11.♕f3 [11.♔f1 ♘bd7∓] 11...♘bd7∓ Black wins back his pawn with interest.

B2.3) 9.0-0 White's king leaves the danger zone as quickly as possible. Then the most practical solution is 9...♗xc3 10.bxc3 dxe4.

B2.3a) 11.♗e2 ♕c7 12.♘c4 [12.♗f4?



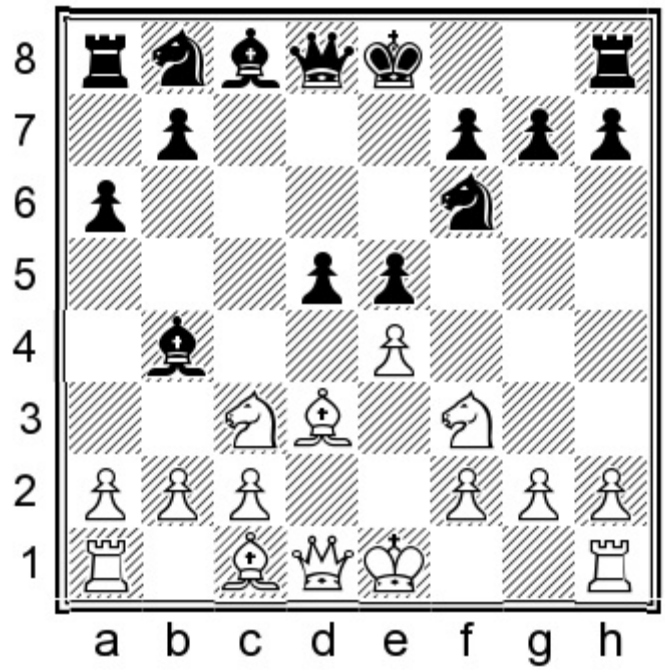
Position after: 12.♗f4?

12...♖e8 13.♘d3 exd3!–+] 12...♖d8 13.♗f4 ♕e7 14.♘b6 ♖xd1 15.♖fxd1 ♘c6 16.♘xa8 ♗g4 17.♗xg4 ♘xg4∓ 0-1 Keres, P – Olafsson, F Belgrade 1959.

B2.3b) 11.♗c4! ♘bd7 [11...♕e7!?] 12.♗f4 ♕e7=

C) 7.♗g5 A counter pin to defend the e-pawn. 7...h6! then 8.♗xf6 allows Black to cause damage to White's pawn structure. [8.♗h4 g5 9.♗g3 d6∓ 0-1 (27) Markiewicz, M (1973) – Mucha, R (2088) Lublin 2007.] 8...♗xc3+! 9.bxc3 ♕xf6= The position has been reached in a handful of games. It is more or less equal, but much easier to play for Black. 0-1 (33) Tvarijonas, P (2221) – Gumula, D (2373) Frydek Mistek 2007.

7...d5!



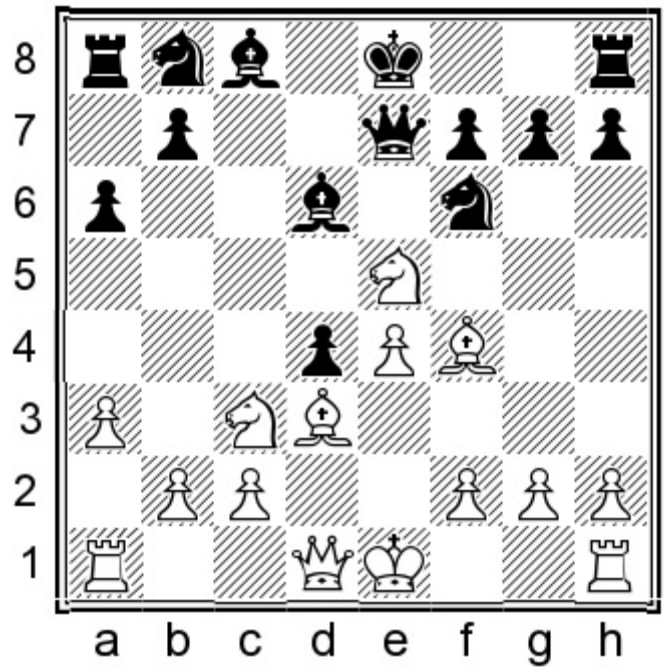
Position after: 7...d5!

White is already in big trouble as Black threatens to gain material on e4.

8.♘d2

Avoids material loss and keeps White's position together. However, Black gets much more space and the white pieces have little room to move.

A) 8.♘xe5? White is greedy. 8...♕e7! Instead of playing 8...d4 immediately, which is also promising for Black, Black attacks the other knight first. 9.♗f4 [9.f4 d4!N 10.a3 dxc3 11.axb4 cxb2 This is the tactical justification of 8...♕e7. After White takes back on b2, he loses a piece anyway.] 9...d4 10.a3 ♗d6!



Position after: 10...♗d6!

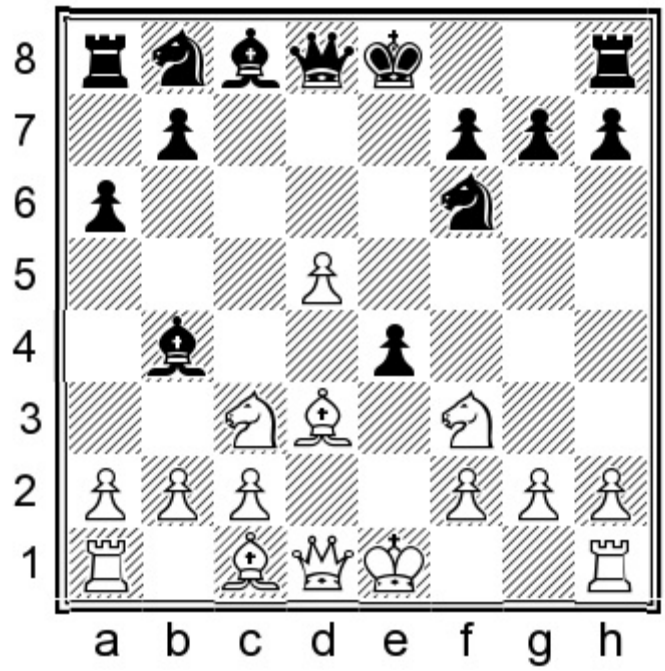
White has three options to get something back for the piece he is about to lose.

A1) 11.♘e2 ♗xe5 12.♗xe5 ♕xe5 13.f4 ♕c5 14.♘xd4 ♘c6 15.♘xc6 ♕e3+ 16.♕e2 ♕xe2+ 17.♔xe2 bxc6 18.c4 0-0–+ 1-0 (66) Mischeryakov, A (1911) – Safonov, N (2080) Moscow 2015.

A2) 11.♘d5 ♘xd5 12.exd5 ♗xe5 13.♗xe5 ♕xe5+ 14.♕e2 ♘d7 15.♕xe5+ ♘xe5 16.0-0 ♘xd3–+ 0-1 (26) Carias, A – Carbonell Bofill, C corr. 2008.

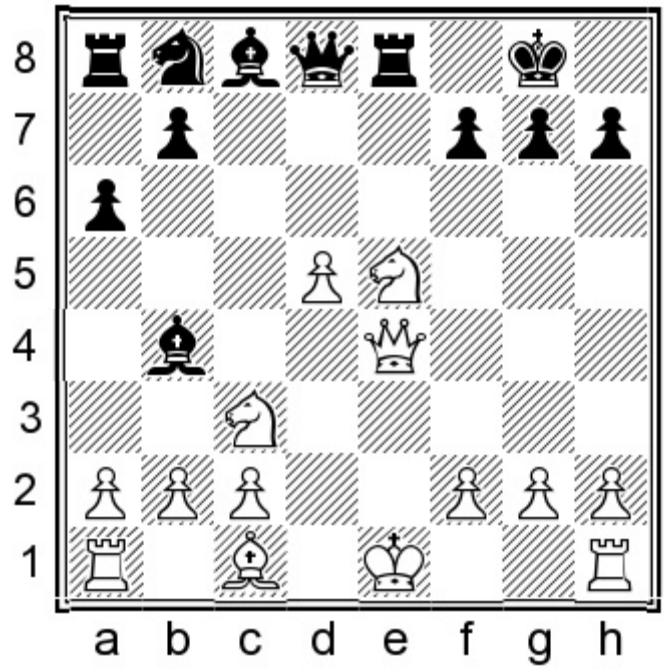
A3) 11.♘xf7 ♗xf4 12.♘e2 ♕xf7–+ 0-1 (52) Jabloun, B (2013) – Taieb, S (2115) Hammam Sousse 2020.

B) 8.exd5? Surprisingly, this is seen quite often. There are more than a 100 games with this move in the database. White is obviously still drinking his post-lunch coffee and expects Black to play 8...♘xd5. White is in for a nasty surprise! 8...e4! Bingo! This wins a piece. Black gets an almost winning advantage.



Position after: 8...e4!

B1) 9.♕e2 This only makes things worse. 9...0-0! 10.♗xe4 [10.0-0 exd3–+] 10...♘xe4 11.♕xe4 ♖e8 12.♘e5



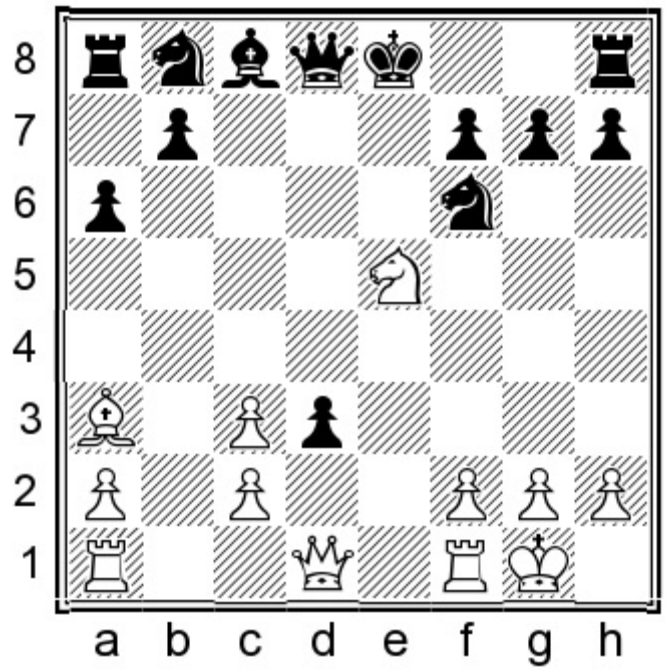
Position after: 12.♘e5

Black has a comfortable problem on how to win material. 12...♗d6 13.0-0 [13.f4 f6 14.0-0 fxe5 15.f5 ♘d7–+] 13...♗xe5–+

B2) 9.♗xe4 ♘xe4 10.♕e2 0-0 11.♕xe4 ♖e8 12.♘e5 takes us back into the previous line.

B3) 9.0-0 ♗xc3! 10.bxc3 0-0!–+ A precise move order. Black first takes his king into safety as the piece will not run away. I have 12 games in the database which reached this point. Only one did not end in a win for Black. An example where White lost quickly is from the practice of Milos Perunovic, also known as “TheButcher”. 0-1 (21) TheButcher (2536) – Luna_moonfang (2443) Chess.com 2018.

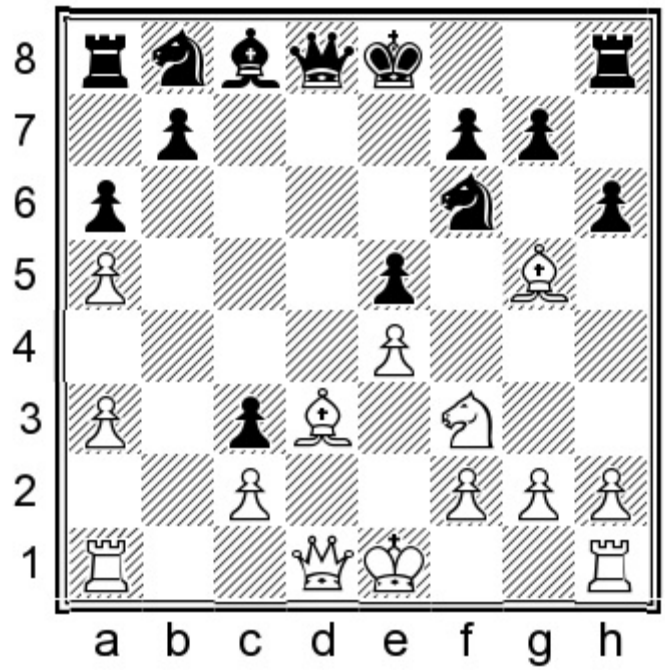
C) 8.0-0?! Introducing a tricky line. White does not have enough compensation for the sacrificed material, but he has a vicious attack and Black has to be precise. 8...♗xc3 9.bxc3 dxe4 10.♘xe5 [10.♕e2 exd3 11.♕xe5+ ♕e7 12.♕d4 ♘c6 13.♕xd3 0-0–+] 10...exd3 11.♗a3!



Position after: 11.♗a3!

White is a piece behind, but the black king cannot find shelter on the kingside for the time being. Fortunately, Black will soon be able to play ...0-0-0 or stay safely in the middle, which determines the outcome of the game. 11...♗e6! 12.cxd3 [12.♘xd3 ♘c6 13.♕e2 ♕a5 14.♗c5 0-0-0–+ 0-1 (21) Vagvolgyi, I (1937) – Feher, A (2127) Hungary 2012; 12.♖e1 ♕c7! 13.♕xd3 ♘bd7 14.♘c4 0-0-0–+.] 12...♘c6!N [12...♕a5?! is the only move played, but it fails to impress after 13.♘c4∓ 0-1 (25) Doucin, P – Frank, A (2125) Massy 1995.] 13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.♕a4 ♕d7 15.♕a5 ♘d5–+ followed by ...f6 and ...♔f7. Black is winning.

D) 8.♗g5 together with 8.♘d2 is one of the better options for White, although here too Black ends up with a dominant position. 8...d4! Ensures that White’s pawn structure will be damaged. 9.a3 ♗a5 10.b4 dxc3 11.bxa5 White’s a-pawn is weak, but White has the bishop pair as compensation. 11...h6!



Position after: 11...h6!

A new move which challenges White's dark-squared bishop before going after the a-pawn. 12.♗e3 keeping the bishop in the middle of the game makes sense. [12.♗xf6 ♕xf6 13.0-0 ♘c6 14.h3 ♗e6! 15.♕b1 ♖b8∓; 12.♗h4 reduces the future scope of the bishop but holds on to the pin. 12...♘c6 13.0-0 ♕xa5 14.♗xf6 gxf6 15.♗c4 ♕c5 16.♗a2 ♗e6∓] 12...♕xa5 13.h3 [13.0-0 ♘g4 14.♗c1 0-0 15.h3 ♘f6 16.♗e3 ♘c6 leads to the same position.] 13...♘c6 14.0-0 0-0∓ Black is a pawn ahead and not behind in development. White has to create chances otherwise he will just go down ingloriously. The open b-file and Black's h6-pawn are his areas of interest.

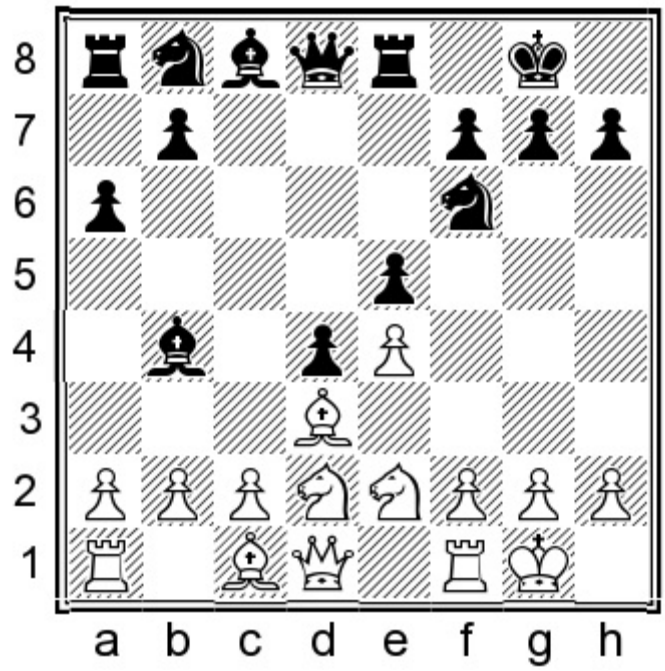
8...d4!

If there is no material gain we will go for a gain of space!

9.♘e2

9.♘cb1 0-0 10.0-0 ♘c6 11.♘b3 ♗e6 12.♗d2 ♖c8∓ 0-1 (24) Martinez Perez, C – Ariste Justo, J (1960) Cordoba 2006.

9...0-0 10.0-0 ♖e8!N



Position after: 10...♖e8!N

Indirectly putting pressure against the white e4-pawn and making space for the retreat of the dark-squared bishop.

11.a3 ♗f8! 12.♘f3

12.♘c4 b5∓

12...h6!

Prevents ♗g5.

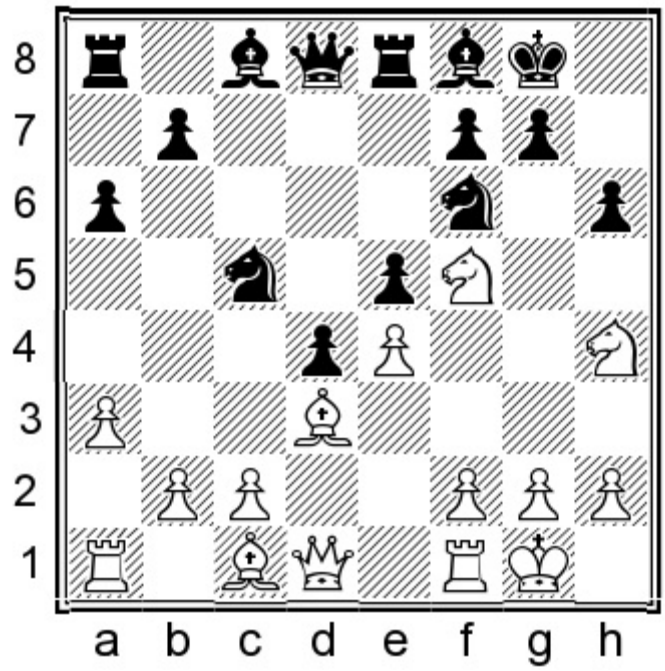
13.♘g3 ♘bd7∓

Black is much better here. White has a weak e-pawn and Black may consider exchanging his knight for the d3-bishop, building up an attractive initiative on the queenside.

14.♘f5?!

Better is 14.♗d2 ♘c5∓ White has a difficult position.

14...♘c5 15.♘3h4?!



Position after: 15.♘3h4?!

Sacrificing a pawn for the attack, but the attack is not very threatening.

15...♘cxe4! 16.♗xe4 ♘xe4 17.♕g4 ♘f6!–+

White must have missed this one. The h6-pawn is untouchable.

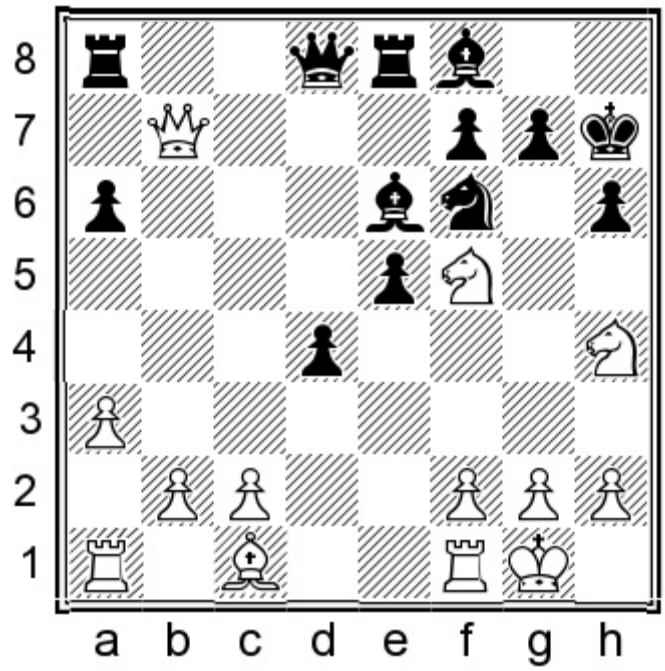
18.♕g3

18.♘xh6+? ♔h7–+

18...♔h7 19.♕b3

An attack against f7.

19...♗e6 20.♕xb7??



Position after: 20.♕xb7??

A final mistake in a lost position.

20.♕d3 g6–+

20...♗d5

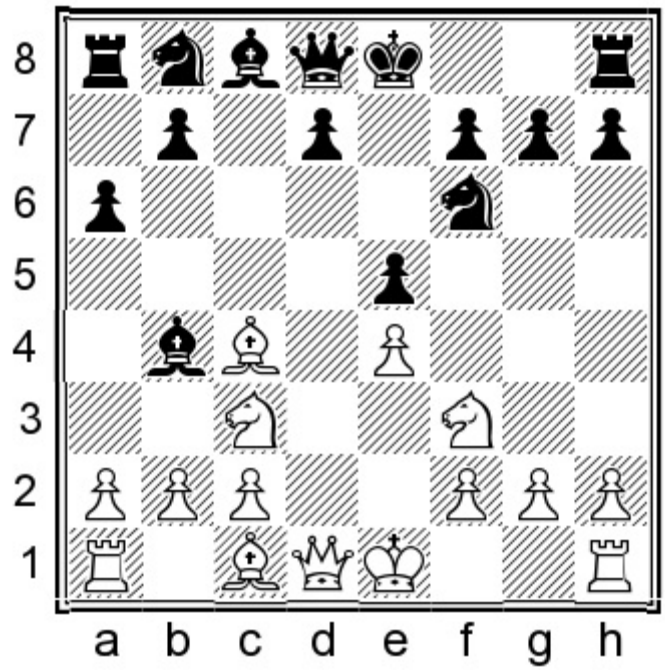
The white queen is trapped thanks to the small pawn on a6! 0-1 (20) Leumi (2289) – Boekelman, J (2436) Chess.com 2022.

Conclusion

In the 3.d4 main line with 6.♘f3 ♗b4 White needs to be very precise on his 7th move. The popular but mistaken 7.♗d3 d5!, the careless 7.♕d3 d5 and the risky pawn grab 7.♘xe5 0-0! are all quite promising for Black. The move 7.♗g5 is able to maintain the balance, where I recommend 7...h6 8.♗xf6 ♗xc3! We will soon reach positions in which White has the familiar weakened queenside pawn structure. In this case, he does not even possess the bishop pair. 7.♗d3 d5 is played most often and for that reason is the main line of this chapter. Only two moves by White, 8.♗g5 and 8.♘d2 give White the prospect of a more or less balanced position. In summary, one can say that if White refrains from playing 7.♗c4 or 7.♗d2, Black will obtain a promising position and can look forward to playing for two results.

i) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗c4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗c4



Position after: 7.♗c4

One of the more active continuations White may choose after having allowed Black to play 5...e5.

7...♕c7!

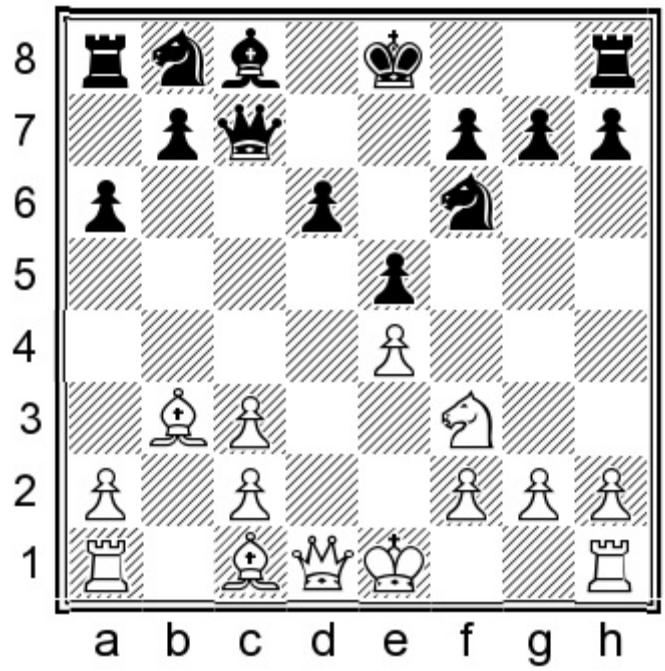
The choice of the grandmasters. Black threatens the bishop and defends the e5-pawn. Note that the white e-pawn is poisoned due to 8.♕d5.

8.♕d3

The normal continuation. The bishop on c4 needs to be taken care of and White may be hesitant to sacrifice a pawn with 8.♗b3. With 8.♕d3 White is also able to keep his pawn structure intact.

A) 8.♕e2 b5 9.♗b3 ♗xc3+ 10.bxc3 d6 [10...♕xc3+ 11.♕d2! ♕xd2+ 12.♘xd2 ♗b7 13.0-0 d6∓] 11.0-0 ♘bd7∓ Black plays his familiar game against the weakened white queenside, whereas White´s pieces are not optimally positioned.

B) 8.♗b3 is a bit cooperative. 8...♗xc3+! Our standard plan. 9.bxc3 d6!



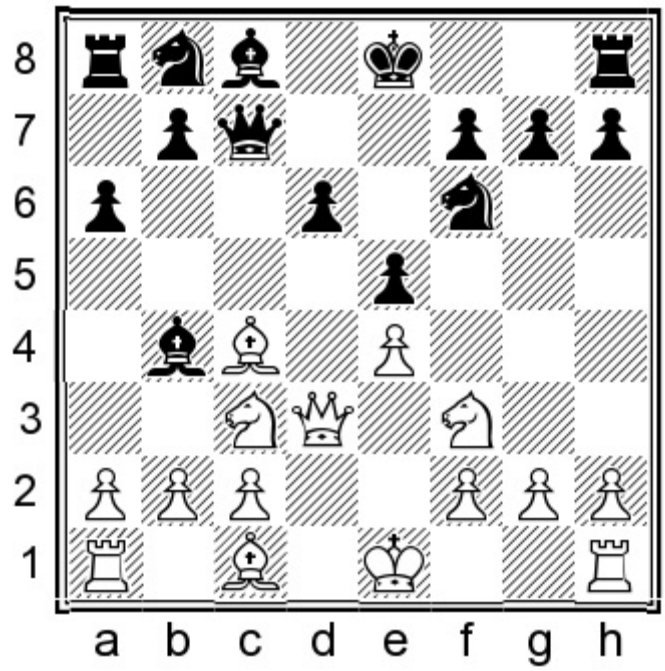
Position after: 9...d6!

White's weak pawns will not go away by themselves. Black first completes his development. 10.0-0 [Unlike the situation after 8.♕d3 White has no time for 10.♗a3? ♕xc3+ 11.♔f1 ♘xe4–+.] 10...♘bd7! we have reached our familiar pawn structure in the 3.d4 O'Kelly. The text move is the standard recipe in the 7.♗c4 line. Black has invested his dark-squared bishop but can look forward to a nice positional game against White's damaged pawn structure. White has tried many moves in this position, but the conclusion is that Black is at least slightly better against each of them.

B1) 11.♘g5 White tries to develop a quick initiative, but this backfires. 11...0-0 12.f4 ♕c5+! Black first stops ♗a3. 13.♔h1 h6! Then the knight is kicked out. 14.♘f3 ♘xe4∓ with an extra pawn for Black. 15.♕e1 ♘df6 16.fxe5 dxe5 17.♗e3 ♕c7 18.♘d2 ♘xd2 19.♗xd2 ♘h7 20.♕g3 ♔h8 21.♖ae1 f6–+ Black had a winning position although he could not claim a victory. ½–½ (79) Pitra, A (2390) – Pham, T (2154) Ho Chi Minh City 2017.

B2) 11.♗a3 An obvious place for the bishop but now White has to hand in his bishop pair. 11...♘c5! The typical move for this variation. 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5 13.♕d3 ♗d7!N 14.♖fd1 ♔e7 known from similar situations in the fianchetto Taimanov. Black can afford to keep his king in the middle in order to perform defensive duties as the dark-squared bishops have left the board. 15.♘d2 [15.♘h4 g6] 15...♖ac8 16.♘c4 ♖c6 17.♘e3 ♕xc3 18.♕e2 ♗e6∓

8...d6!

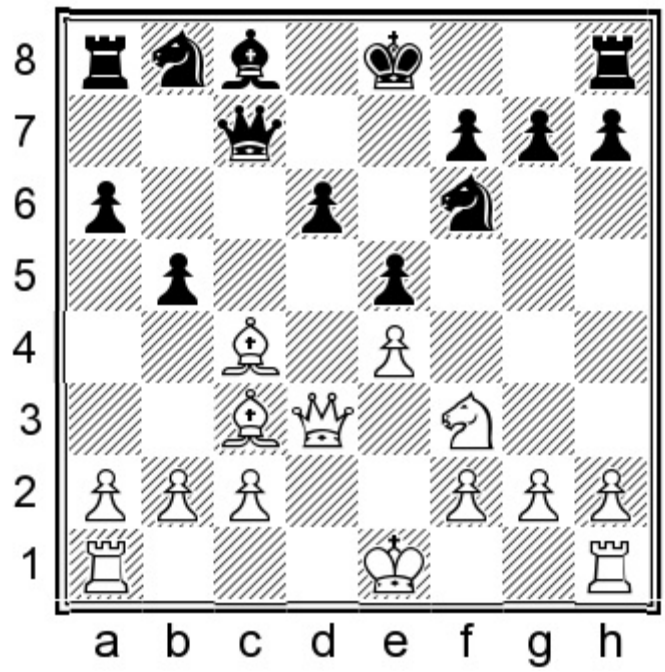


Position after: 8...d6!

8...b5 is an alternative but often ends up in the same position. With the text move Black aims for a quick ...0-0 before determining how to progress on the queenside.

9.0-0

9.♗d2 ♗xc3! If Black wants to play for more than a draw he should go for this move. 10.♗xc3 b5



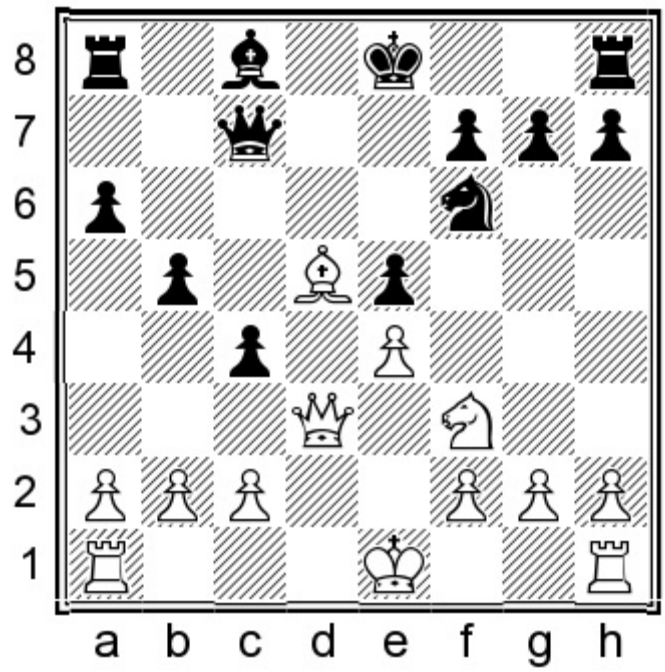
Position after: 10...b5

White has gained the bishop pair, but Black is very active and will soon exchange one white bishop.

A) 11.♗d5 is recommended by the engines, but Black has a nice position at the end of this line. 11...♘xd5 12.♕xd5 [12.exd5 ♘d7∓] 12...♗b7 13.♕d3 a5! 14.♕xb5+ [14.a3 ♘d7 15.♖d1 ♔e7 16.♘h4 g6 17.♕d2 ♘c5 18.f3 ♘a4∓] 14...♘d7 15.0-0-0 0-0 16.♘d2 ♖fc8∓ White has an extra pawn, but Black has excellent attacking chances against the white king.

B) 11.♗b3 The only move played in practice. 11...♘bd7!

B1) 12.♗b4 ♘c5 13.♗xc5 dxc5 14.♗d5 c4

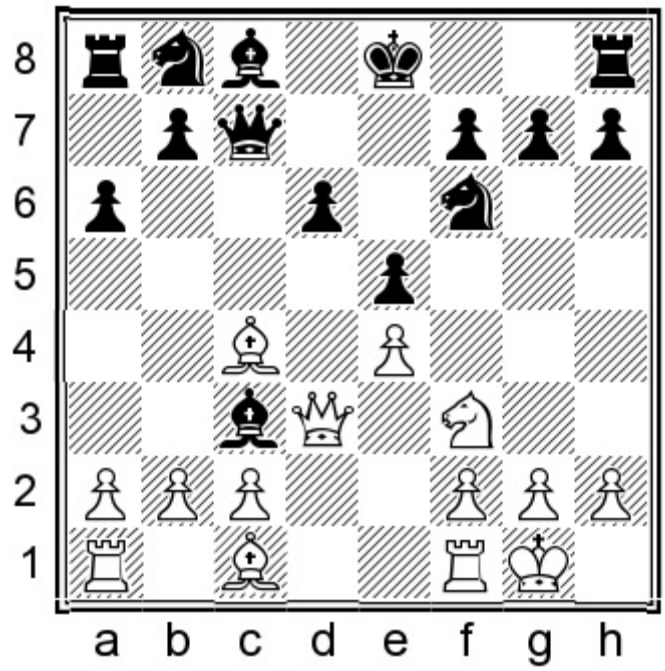


Position after: 14...c4

15.♕d2 [15.♕e3 ♘xd5 16.exd5 0-0 17.0-0 f6∓ 0-1 (67) Traczewski, W (1767) – De Melo, G (2124) corr. 2009.] 15...♖b8 16.♕g5 0-0∓ ½-½ (69) Sefc, J – O'Kelly de Galway, A Trencianske Teplice 1949.

B2) 12.0-0-0 ♘c5 13.♕xd6 ♕xd6 14.♖xd6 ♘xb3+ 15.axb3 ♘xe4 16.♖c6 f6 17.♖c7 0-0= 18.♖e1 ♘xc3 19.bxc3 a5 20.♖c5 a4 21.♖xb5 axb3 22.cxb3 ♖a2⩱ Black›s rook is very active.

9...♗xc3



Position after: 9...♗xc3

Now Black is in time to defend his d6-pawn from behind.

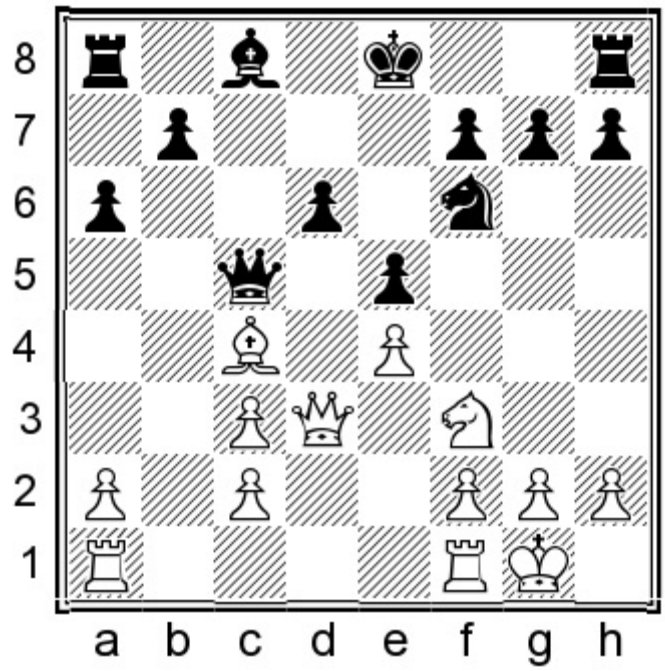
10.♕xc3!

The principled continuation. White becomes the owner of the bishop pair. He will lose time but keeps his pawn structure in good shape.

10.bxc3 One wonders what 8.♕d3 was all about if White takes back with the pawn on c3 anyway. Maybe White did not see the trick after 10.♕c3 ♘xe4?

10...♘bd7!

A) 11.♗a3 is not as strong as it looks since White will give up his bishop pair while keeping his damaged pawn structure. 11...♘c5! 12.♗xc5 ♕xc5!



Position after: 12...♕xc5!

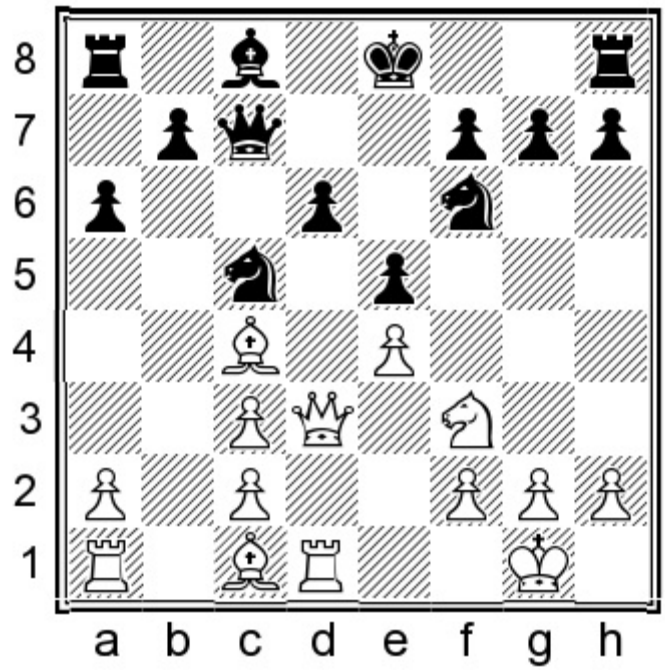
For the time being the d6-pawn is less weak than its White colleagues.

A1) 13.♖ad1 ½ – ½ (13) El Taher, F (2468) – Dutreeuw, M (2389) Turin 2006. The opponents agreed to a draw, but Black is better after 13...♗d7 14.♗b3 ♔e7∓. After ♖ad1 leaving the king in the middle is not such an issue anymore.

A2) 13.♖fd1 ♗d7 14.♗b3 ♗c6∓ White is without a plan. Soon his bishop will be locked up on the queenside. White's weak pawns are an easy target. 15.♕xd6 ♕xd6 16.♖xd6 ♘xe4 17.♖d3 f6∓

A3) 13.a4 0-0 14.♖fb1 [14.a5 h6=; 14.♗b3 ♗g4 15.♘d2 ♖ac8 16.♘c4 ♖fd8 17.a5 ♗e6∓] 14...a5 15.♗d5 ♘xd5 16.exd5 f5= [16...b6!?]

B) 11.♖d1 White is willing to exchange central pawns without the loss of his bishop pair. 11...♘c5!



Position after: 11...♘c5!

No defense, counterattack! 12.♕xd6 ♕xd6 13.♖xd6 ♘fxe4 14.♖d1 [14.♖b6 f6 15.♗a3 ♘a4 16.♖b3 ♘ec5 17.♖bb1 ♗f5∓] 14...f6! The key move, supporting Black's e-pawn and accentuating the weakness of White's queenside pawns. 15.♖e1 ♔d7 16.♗a3 ♔c6 the king is quite safe and active. 17.♖e3 b6∓ 18.♘d4+!? exd4! 19.cxd4 ♘d6 20.♗e2 ♘cb7 21.♗f3+ ♔c7 22.♖c3+ ♔b8 23.♗xd6+ ♘xd6 24.♗xa8 ♔xa8∓ A long engine line, but at the end the material difference makes the difference.

10...0-0

Black has to be careful. After this move White has to look after his e-pawn and ...b5 is threatened as well.

A) 10...♘xe4? The pawn is poisoned! 11.♗xf7+! ♔d8 12.♕b3+–

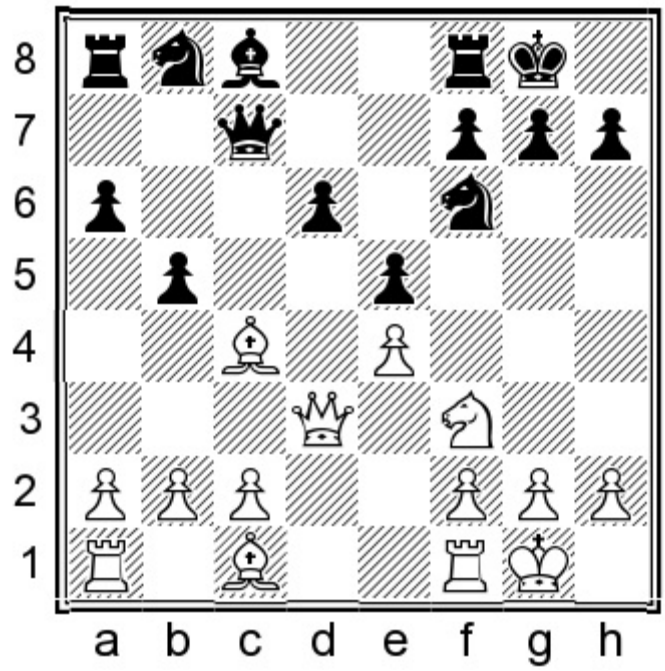
B) 10...b5? We see the same tactic. 11.♗xf7++–

11.♕d3

A) 11.♘g5 ♘c6 12.♗d5 h6 13.♘f3 ♗e6!N 14.♗xc6 [14.♖d1 ♖ac8∓] 14...♕xc6 15.♕xc6 bxc6 16.♖e1 a5∓ Black has a slightly easier endgame.

B) 11.♗d3 brings White his weak pawns again. 11...♕xc3 12.bxc3 d5 13.♘d2 ♘c6 14.♖b1 [14.♖e1 ♖d8=] 14...b5 15.a4 bxa4 16.♗a3 ♖d8 17.c4 dxe4 18.♘xe4 a5!= Preparing a future ...♘b4.

11...b5!



Position after: 11...b5!

12.♗b3

12.♗d5 White hands in the bishop pair for nothing. 12...♘xd5 13.♕xd5 [13.exd5 ♘d7 14.♘g5 ♘f6 15.f4 ♕a7+ 16.♗e3 ♗f5!∓] 13...♗b7∓ 14.♕d3 ♘d7 15.♗e3 ♘f6 16.♘d2 d5!∓ One cannot hope for a better position than this from the opening! ½-½ (30) Meijers, V (2445) – Eingorn, V (2590) Boeblingen 1997.

12...♗b7

This keeps the game a bit more complicated.

12...a5 is a good equalizer. 13.♖d1 a4 14.♗d5 ♗b7 15.♗xb7 ♕xb7 16.♕xd6 ♘c6 17.♗g5 ♖ad8 18.♕a3 ♖xd1+ 19.♖xd1 ♘xe4= An even game arises with few chances for either side.

13.♖d1!N

Counterattacking the d6-pawn is better than the passive defense of the e4-pawn, although this move has yet to be played in practice.

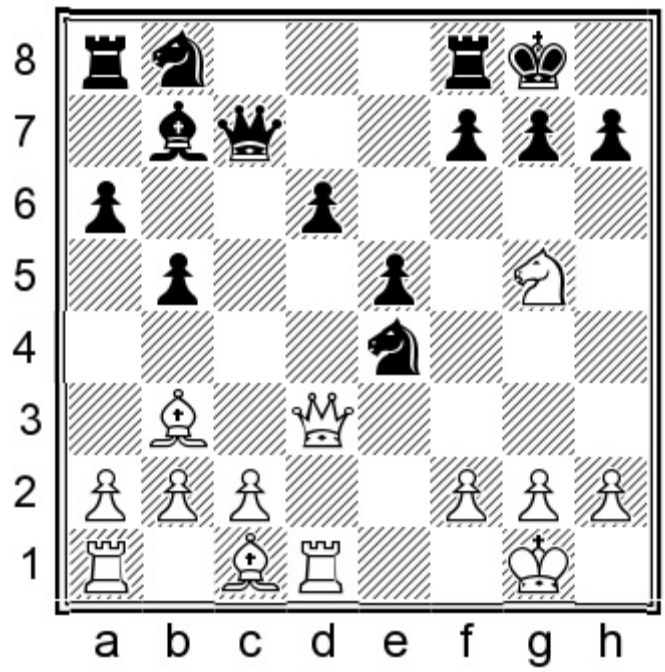
13.♖e1 a passive move which enables Black to execute his standard plan. 13...♘bd7 14.♘d2 ♘c5!∓

13...♘xe4

Defending the d6-pawn is not an option.

13...♖d8? 14.♘xe5+–

14.♘g5!



Position after: 14.♘g5!

14...d5!

14...♘xg5 15.♗xg5 is White's concept. Black cannot defend the d6 pawn anymore. 15...♘d7 16.♕xd6 ♕xd6 17.♖xd6 ♘c5=

15.♘xe4

15.♗xd5 ♘f6 16.♗xb7 ♕xb7 17.♕e2 h6 18.♘f3 ♖e8=

15...dxe4 16.♕h3 a5 17.a4 bxa4 18.♖xa4 ♖a6=

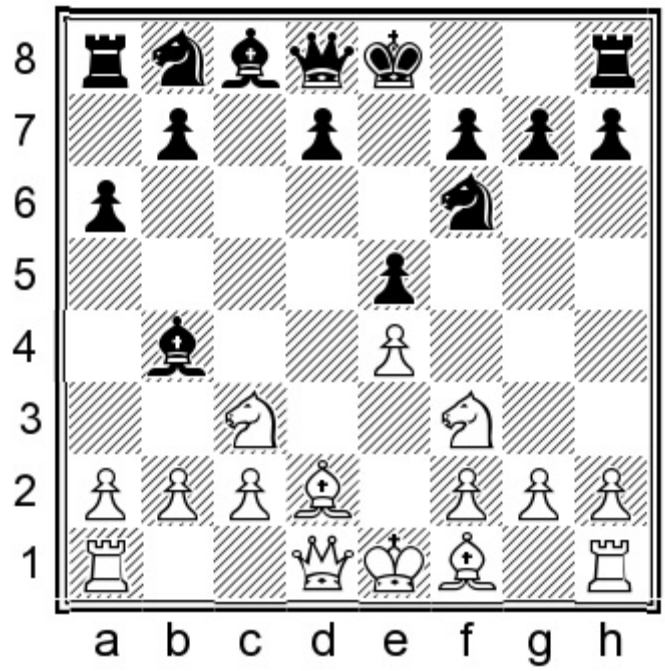
White has the bishop pair as compensation for Black's extra pawn. Black's minor pieces still need to develop further. The rook on a6 will go to g6 and will add to Black's attacking chances.

Conclusion

In the main line after 3.d4 the maneuver 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗c4 is one of the more active ways for White to play. Black responds with the precise 7...♕c7 attacking the bishop on c4 and defending his e5-pawn. White will lose time with 8.♗b3 allowing the thematic 8...♗xc3 9.bxc3 d6 with standard play against White's weakened pawns. More refined is 8.♕d3. Here the immediate 8...♗xc3 is a mistake. Black should first prepare this move with 8...d6. Whatever White's next step, Black will take on c3. After bxc3 we are on familiar grounds again. After White takes back with a piece (the queen or the bishop) Black's lead in development and active pieces compensate for the loss of the bishop pair.

j) 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗d2

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘f3 ♗b4 7.♗d2



Position after: 7.♗d2

The most common continuation. White prevents the double pawns on the c-file and plans to complete his development with ♗d3/♗c4 and 0-0.

7...d6

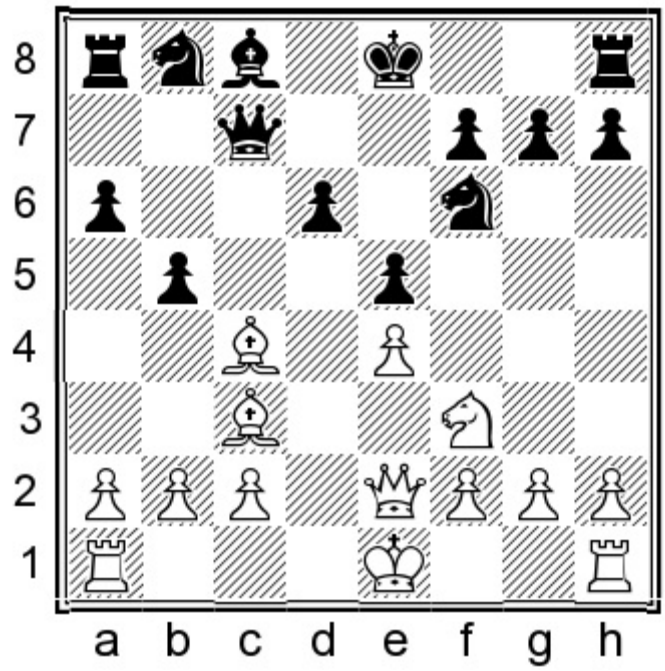
With the bishop outside the pawn chain it is time to defend the central point.

A) 7...♗xc3 8.♗xc3 ♘xe4?! [8...d6] 9.♗xe5 ♕a5+ 10.c3 0-0 11.♗c4± White is better developed and stands better.

B) 7...0-0 leads to the same positions as White can hardly take on e5. 8.♘xe5 ♗xc3 9.♗xc3 ♘xe4∓

8.♗d3

8.♗c4 ♕c7 Immediately questioning the bishop just as in 7.♗c4. 9.♕e2 ♗xc3! 10.♗xc3 b5!



Position after: 10...b5!

Black has excellent results from this position.

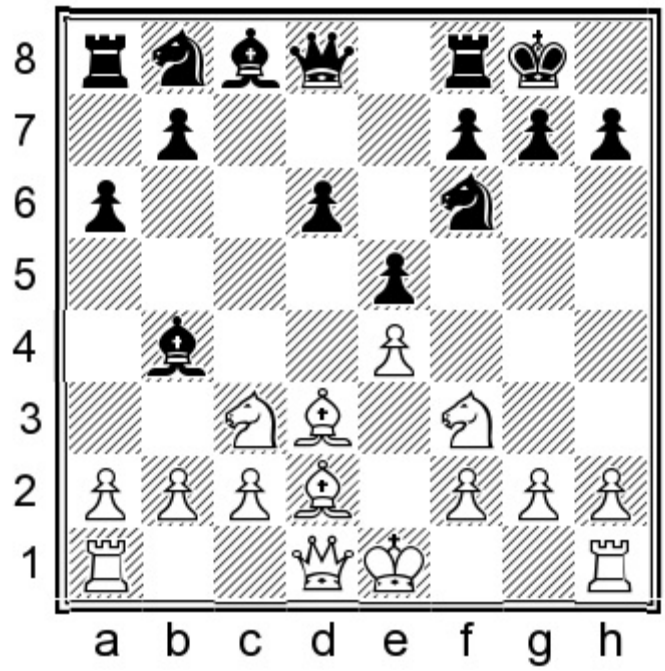
A) 11.♗d5?! ♘xd5 12.exd5 0-0∓ The pawn structure is in Black's favor and White no longer has the bishop pair.

B) 11.♗b3 The white bishops on the queenside are vulnerable. 11...♗b7 12.♘d2 [12.0-0-0 ♘xe4∓; 12.♘g5 0-0 13.0-0-0 ♘c6∓] 12...♘bd7 13.a4 [13.0-0 a5! 14.a3 ♕c5 15.♖fd1 0-0∓] 13...0-0 14.0-0 ♘c5 15.axb5 axb5 16.f3 b4 17.♗xb4 ♘xb3 18.♘xb3 ♕b6+–+ 0-1 (47) Pemberton, C (1920) – Grabitz, G (2079) Dresden 2007.

C) 11.♗d3! ♘c6 12.h3 [12.a3 0-0 13.0-0 h6= 0-1 (63) Cunha Pereira, S – Saboya, F Rio de Janeiro 1974.] 12...♗b7 13.0-0 0-0 14.♗d2 ♖fe8 15.♗g5 ♘d7= 16.♘h2?! ½ – ½ (32) Bassani, J – Trois, F (2363) Indaial 2004. 16...♘d4! 17.♕g4 f5 18.exf5 e4 19.c3 ♘e5 20.♕d1 ♘xd3 21.cxd4 ♖f8∓

8...0-0

8...♗g4 I suggest playing this move only after White has put his king on the kingside. 9.h3! ♗h5 10.♕e2 ♘c6 11.g4 ♗g6 12.0-0-0= White has overcome the worst.

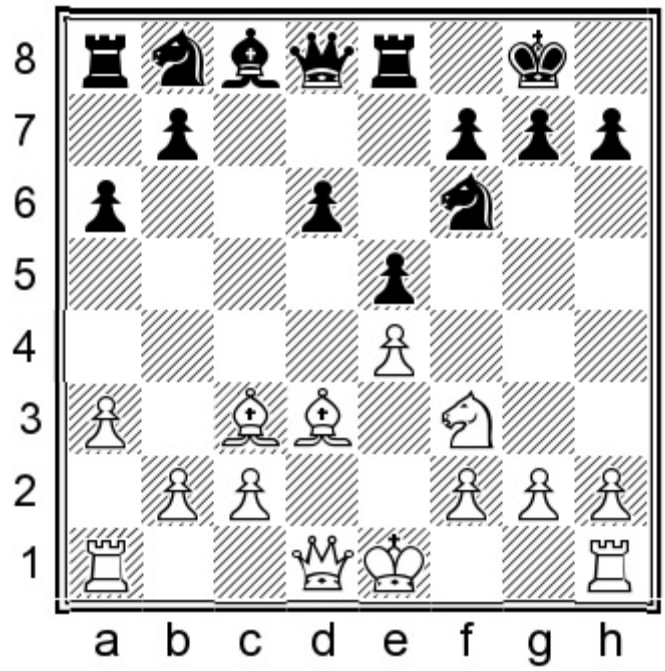


Position after: 8...0-0

9.h3

Many players with White prefer to prevent the pin of the knight.

A) 9.a3 ♗xc3 10.♗xc3 ♖e8! A new move. Black will only consider ...♗g4 after White has played 0-0.



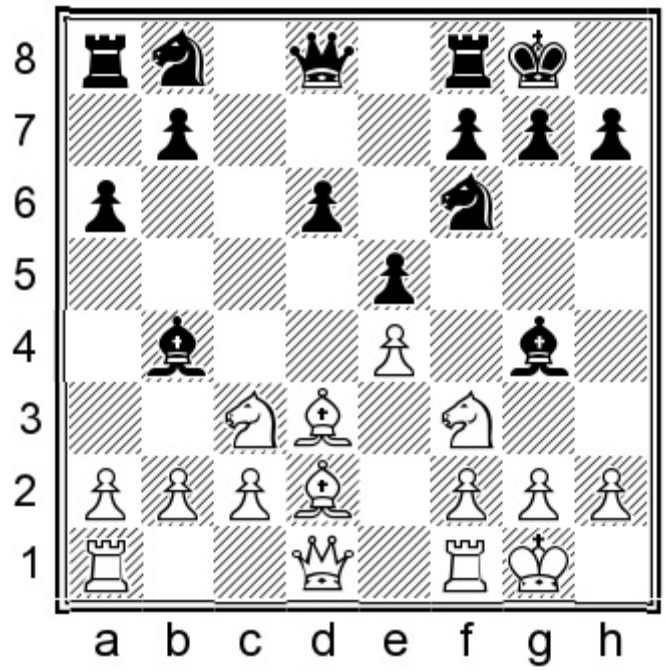
Position after: 10...♖e8!

A1) 11.h3 d5∓

A2) 11.♗c4 ♗e6! 12.♗xe6 ♖xe6∓ 13.0-0 [13.♕d3 ♘bd7∓] 13...♘bd7 14.♖e1 ♘c5∓

A3) 11.0-0 ♗g4∓ transposes to our main line.

B) 9.0-0 ♗g4!



Position after: 9...♗g4!

Black's game is based on a quick ...♖e8, ...♘bd7 and ...d5.

B1) 10.h3 ♗h5 11.♗g5 [11.g4 ♗g6 12.♖e1 ♘bd7 13.♘h4 ♘c5 14.♘f5 ♖c8∓] 11...♗xc3! 12.bxc3 ♘bd7 thematic play against the doubled pawns. 13.g4 ♗g6 14.♖e1 h6 15.♗h4 ♕c7∓ [15...b5∓ 0-1 (45) Nortes Hernandez, P (1850) – Kurajica, B (2517) Tenerife 2009.]

B2) 10.a3 ♗xc3! 11.♗xc3

B2.1) 11...♘c6 was seen in an O'Kelly classic. 12.h3 ♗h5 13.♕e2 ♖e8 14.♖ad1 d5 15.♗c4? [15.♖fe1=] 15...♘d4!–+ 16.♗xd4 exd4 17.♖xd4 ♖xe4 18.♖xe4 dxe4 and White cannot avoid losing material. 0-1 (23) Klein, J – Gligoric, S Santa Fe 1960.

B2.2) 11...♖e8! This is even better than the move of Gligoric. Black covers e5 to enable a future ...d6-d5. 12.♖e1 ♘bd7 The knight is better on d7.

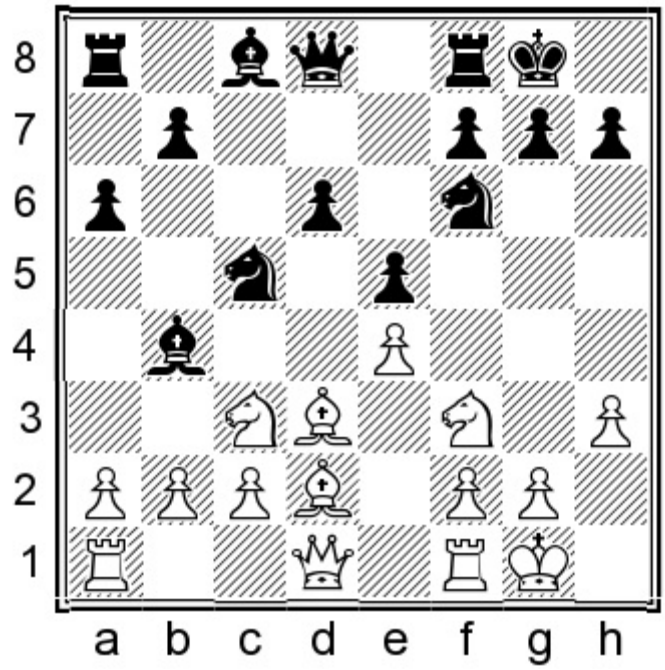
B2.2a) 13.♗b4 d5! 14.h3 [14.exd5?? e4–+] 14...♗h5 15.g4 dxe4 16.♗xe4 ♘xe4 17.gxh5 ♘ef6∓

B2.2b) 13.h3 ♗h5 14.g4 [14.a4?! d5∓; 14.b4 d5 15.♗b2 dxe4 16.♗xe4 ♘xe4 17.♖xe4 f6∓] 14...♗g6 15.♘d2 ♘c5 16.♕f3 ♕c7∓ and Black had the better game. ½ – ½ (39) Barua, D (2393) – Meleshko, V (2270) Pardubice 2019.

9...♘bd7

With ...♗g4 prevented a quick ...♘b8-d7-c5 is Black's best plan.

10.0-0 ♘c5



Position after: 10...♘c5

White needs to think about what to do with his e-pawn.

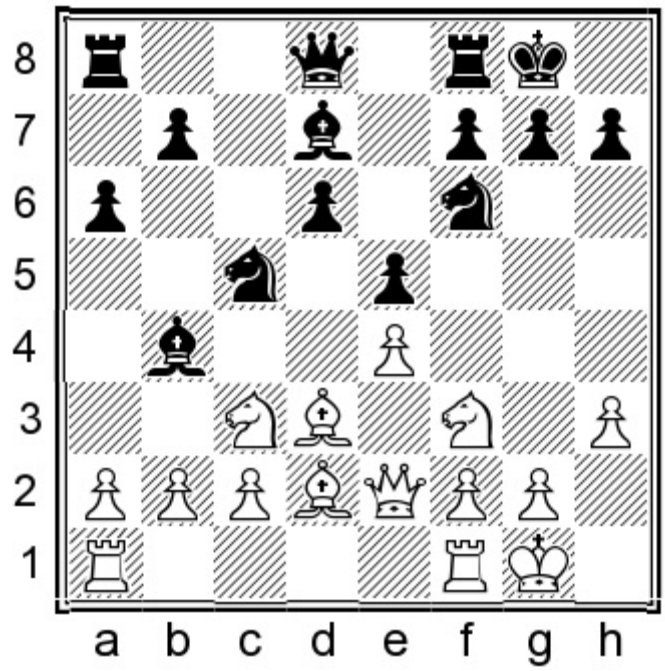
11.♕e2

A) 11.♖e1 b5 12.♘h2 ♗b7 13.♘g4 ♗xc3 14.♘xf6+ ♕xf6 15.♗xc3 ♘a4 16.♖b1 ♘xc3 17.bxc3 ♗c6= ½-½ (116) Zhou, L (2056) – Lianes Garcia, M (2351) Collado Villalba 2020.

B) 11.♘a4 ♗xd2! 12.♘xc5 ♗f4 13.♘b3 ♔h8 14.♕e2 ♗e6 15.♖fd1 ♖c8∓

11...♗d7!∓

11...b5 is far more popular but I prefer the text move. Black's simple plan is ...♗c6 and either take on e4 or play ...d5.



Position after: 11...♗d7!∓

12.♘d1

A) 12.a3 ♗xc3 13.♗xc3 ♗c6 14.♘d2 ♘a4∓ and White's pawn structure will be ruined anyway.

B) 12.♖fe1 ♖e8! 13.a3 ♗xc3 14.♗xc3 ♗c6 15.b4 [15.♘d2 d5∓] 15...♘cxe4 16.♗b2 b5∓

12...♗xd2 13.♘xd2

White has prevented the damaging of his queenside, but now his pieces are not optimally placed for the action Black is about to start.

13...♗c6!

13...♘e6 is not bad either and was played in the only game which reached this position. 14.♘c3 ♘f4∓ 15.♕f3 ♖c8 16.♘e2 ♘6h5 17.♗c4?! b5 18.♗b3 ♘xe2+ 19.♕xe2 ♘f4 20.♕e3 ♕g5–+ 21.g4 ♗xg4! 22.♔h2 ♗xh3 23.♖g1 ♗g2 0-1 (23) Poitras, L (2095) – Kostadinov, G Vancouver 1998.

14.♘e3 d5

is the thematic continuation.

15.♖ad1 ♖e8∓

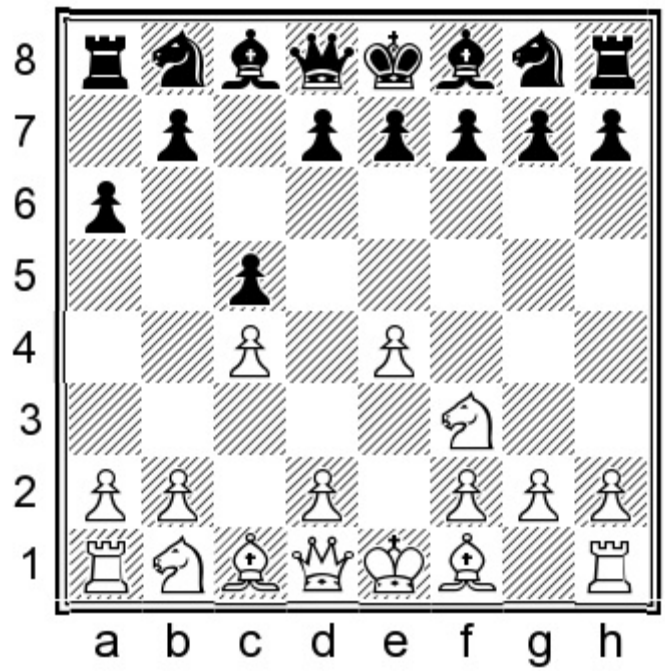
White is struggling. His pieces lack proper squares.

Conclusion

The main line after 3.d4 followed by 6.♘f3 and 7.♗d2 prevents both an early ...d5 and our positional plan of playing against a damaged pawn structure that arises after ...♗xc3 bxc3. White's maneuvers cost time and this allows Black to develop quickly and organize further pressure against the white center with either a well-timed ...♗g4 (after White's 0-0) or otherwise by ...♘b8-d7-c5 and ...♗d7-c6. Black's lead in development allows him to create good counterplay in the center to achieve at least balanced positions, with enough play to aim for more.

Chapter 3
The Maroczy-Bind – 3.c4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4



Chapter Guide

Chapter 3 – The Maroczy-Bind – 3.c4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4 ♘c6

a) Introduction

b) 4.♘c3

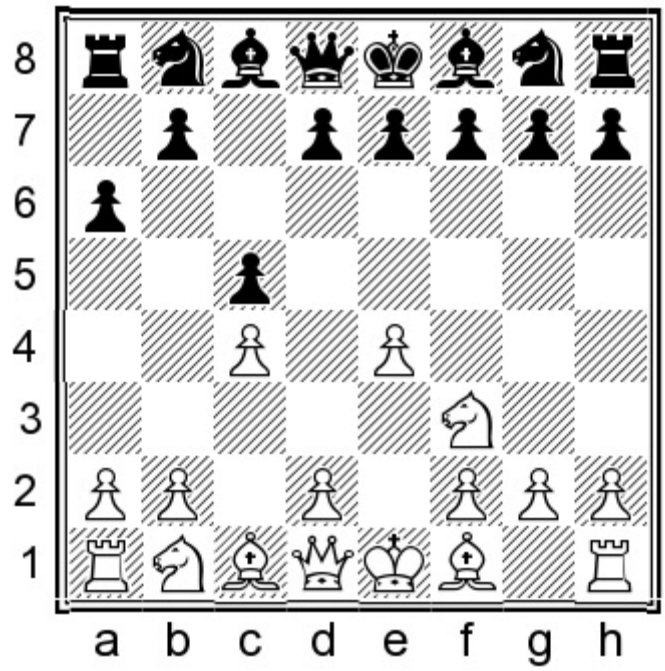
c) 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.--

d) 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.♘c2

e) 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.♘f5

a) Introduction

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4



Position after: 3.c4

As Black's 2...a6 does not challenge White's center (2...d6, 2...♘c6 or 2...e6 directly or indirectly all do), White takes the opportunity to increase his central presence with 3.c4. This is one of the key theoretical battlegrounds of the O'Kelly variation. As recent as the 2022 Candidates Tournament we have seen this principled approach, so one may expect to see more of it in the near future.

3...♘c6

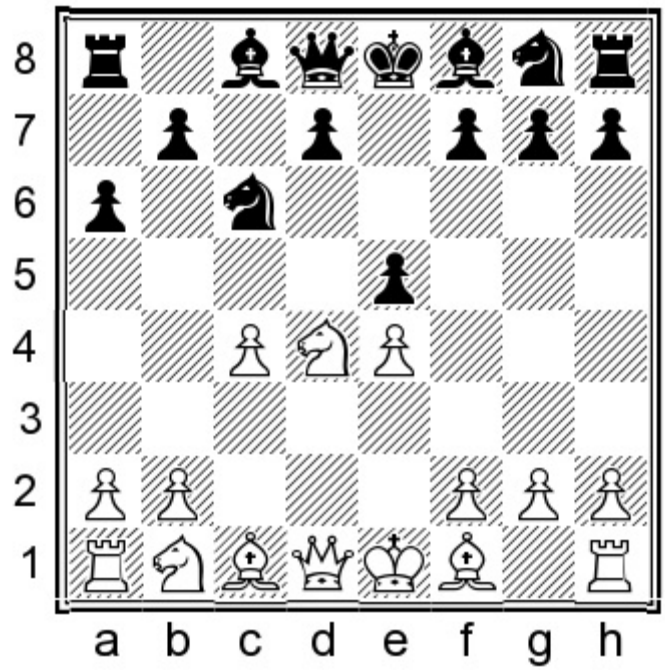
We follow the main line here.

4.d4

The principled continuation.

4.♘c3 [White refrains from the immediate 4.d4. 4...e5! This gives Black the opportunity to close the center and aim for a Botvinnik setup (...c5, ...e5, ...g6, ...♗g7, ...♘ge7 etc.), where the white knight, misplaced on f3, compensates for the potentially less relevant ...a6. The game is equal, but Black's play is easier.

4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5



Position after: 5...e5

The typical O'Kelly move, just like in the Kalashnikov – played immediately after the knight arrives on d4. This way Black maintains the flexibility to put his g8-knight on e7. White has a choice of 5 squares for the knight.

6.♘f5!

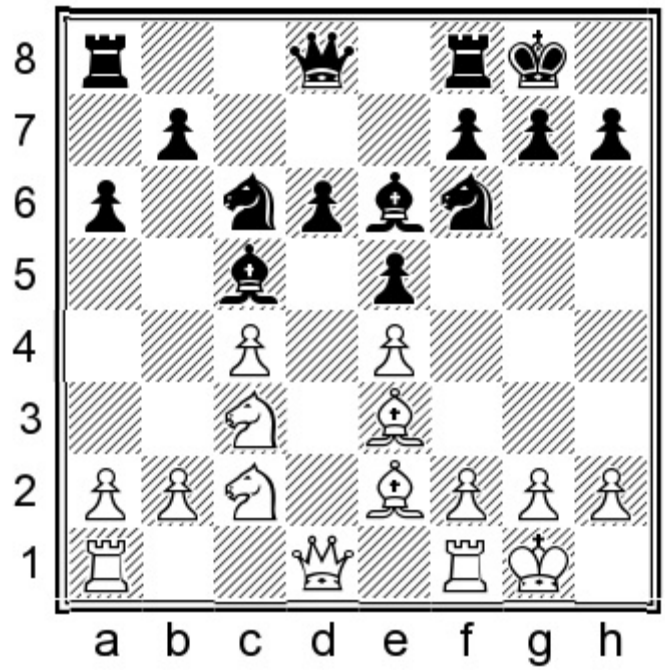
White's best. Theoretically, this is the most challenging continuation. White plans ♘e3 and ♘ed5 with a full bind, Black has to act quickly.

A) 6.♘f3 ♘f6 7.♘c3 ♗b4 8.♗d3 ♗xc3+! A maneuver we have seen before in the lines starting with 3.d4. The pawn on c4 does not improve the story for White. 9.bxc3 d6 First ...d6 to be ahead of c4-c5. 10.0-0 0-0= 0-1 (48) Haskin, Z (1945) – Grinberg, E (2491) Lichess.org 2020.

B) 6.♘xc6 dxc6! A nice move reintroduced by Rapport instead of the usual 6...bxc6. 7.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 8.♗e3 ♔c7 9.♘c3 ♘f6= This ending is equal, but Black has good chances to outplay his opponent. 0-1 (74) Socko, B (2622) – Rapport, R (2701) Budapest 2014.

C) 6.♘b3 ♘f6 7.♘c3 ♗b4 8.♗d3 ♗xc3+! Again, this maneuver in which we damage White's pawn structure on the queenside. 9.bxc3 d6 10.0-0 0-0 11.h3 [11.c5 d5!∓ an important move, keeping White's double pawn in place.] 11...♗e6 12.f4 exf4 13.♗xf4 ♖c8∓ 0-1 (108) Saranya, J (2094) – Pantsulaia, L (2597) Chennai 2019.

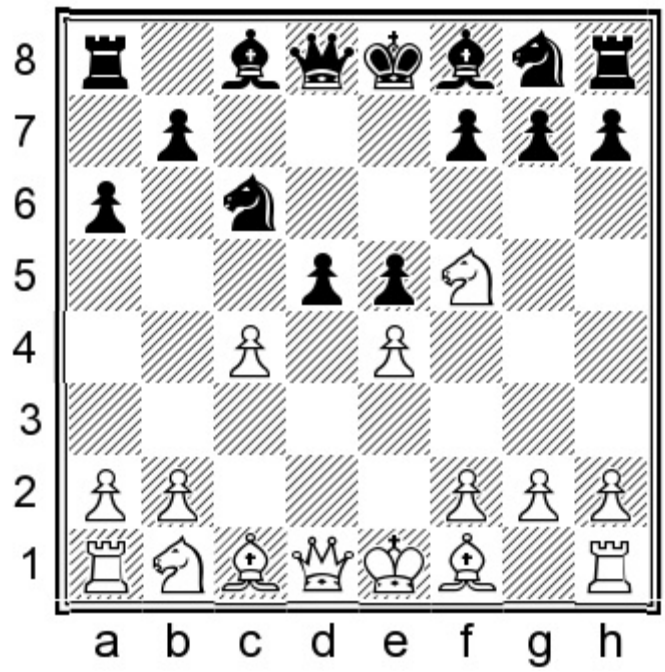
D) 6.♘c2 A move popular in the early days of the O'Kelly. 6...♗c5 As the b4-square is not available to the bishop this is best. 7.♘c3 [7.♗e3 d6!= We would rather be taken, than take.] 7...♘f6 8.♗e2 d6 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗e3 ♗e6!



Position after: 10...♗e6!

We only take on e3 vey late in this variation, if ever. 11.♕d2 More than 70 years ago this was already an important line! 11...♖c8!= Generally followed by ...♘b4 with equal chances. 12.♖ab1 ♘b4 13.♗xc5 dxc5 14.♕xd8 ♖cxd8= ½ – ½ (27) Pilnik, H – Euwe, M New York 1948.

6...d5!



Position after: 6...d5!

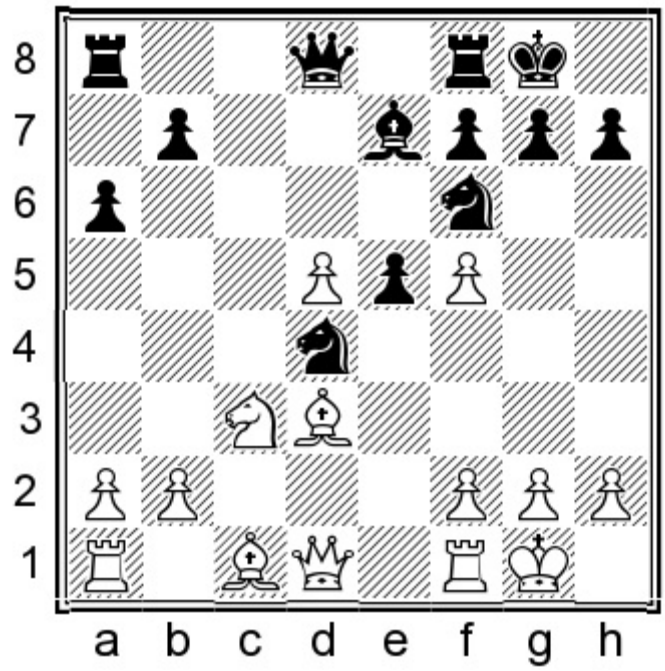
The classical response to 6.♘f5.

7.cxd5 ♗xf5 8.exf5 ♘d4 9.♘c3

This is the main move, defending the d-pawn.

9.♗d3!? will be investigated as well. It was the choice of Caruana against Radjabov in the 2022 Candidates Tournament. As Fabi achieved such a relatively easy and straightforward success with it in that game, it is more than likely that this will receive more attention in the near future.

9...♘f6 10.♗d3 ♗e7 11.0-0 0-0

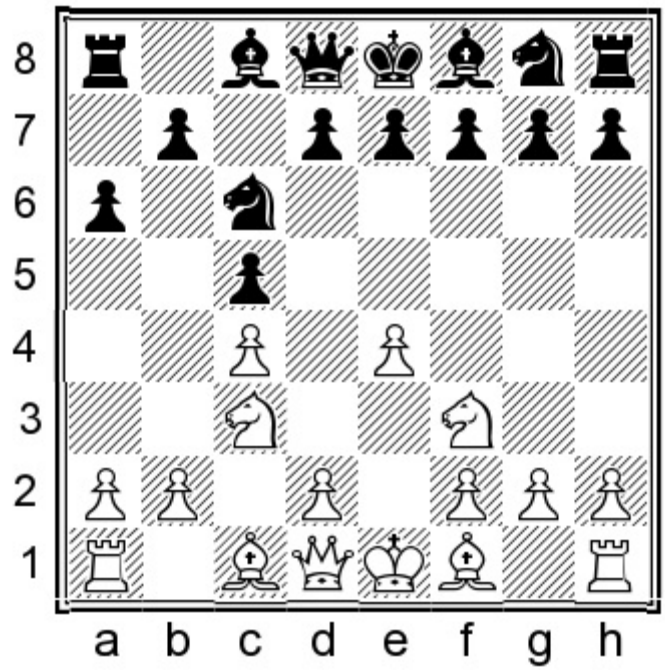


Position after: 11...0-0

This is the key position after 6....d5. Black's e-pawn is relatively weak. With a precise move order, White should be able to unleash an attack on the kingside. The variations get quite complex, but Black seems to have enough resources to hold his own.

b) 4.♘c3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4 ♘c6 4.♘c3



Position after: 4.♘c3

White refrains from the immediate 4.d4 which gives Black the opportunity to close the center and aim for a Botvinnik setup where the misplaced white knight on f3 compensates for the potentially less useful 2...a6. In my experience, this is a popular choice. White players shy away from the theoretical 4.d4 after having played 3.c4.

4...e5

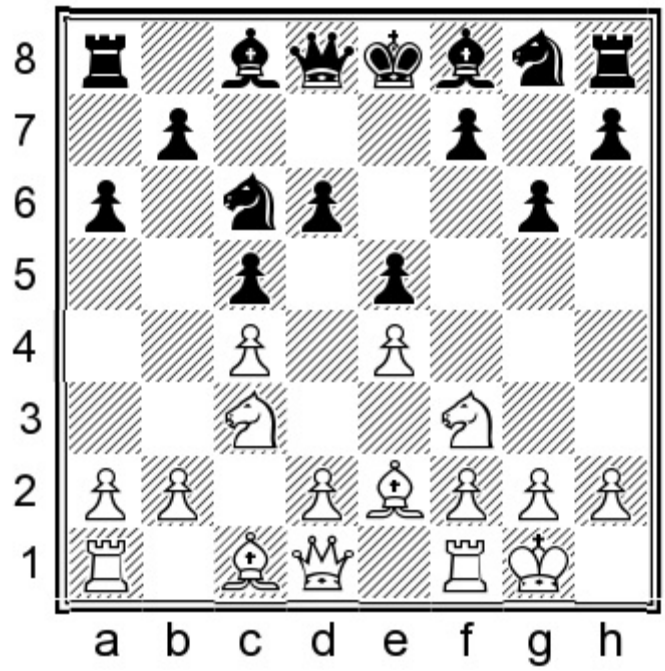
The obvious move and a good one.

5.d3

White prepares for a game in the Botvinnik trenches.

A) 5.a3!? Immediately expanding on the queenside is a pet line of Israeli WIM Masha Klinova. 5...d6 6.♖b1 a5 in these closed positions the loss of a tempo is not something to worry about. 7.♗d3 [7.g3 transposes back into the main line.] 7...g5 8.♗c2 g4 9.♘g1 ♗g7 10.♘d5 ♘ge7 11.♘e2 h5= 0-1 (44) Klinova, M (2368) – Golod, V (2532) Saint Vincent 2003.

B) 5.♗e2 This is an elegant setup with its own characteristics. A dozen or so games have been played with this modest move. White postpones d2-d3 in order to maintain control over the b5-square. A later d2-d3 will transpose to the main line with 6.♗e2. 5...d6 6.0-0 g6!.

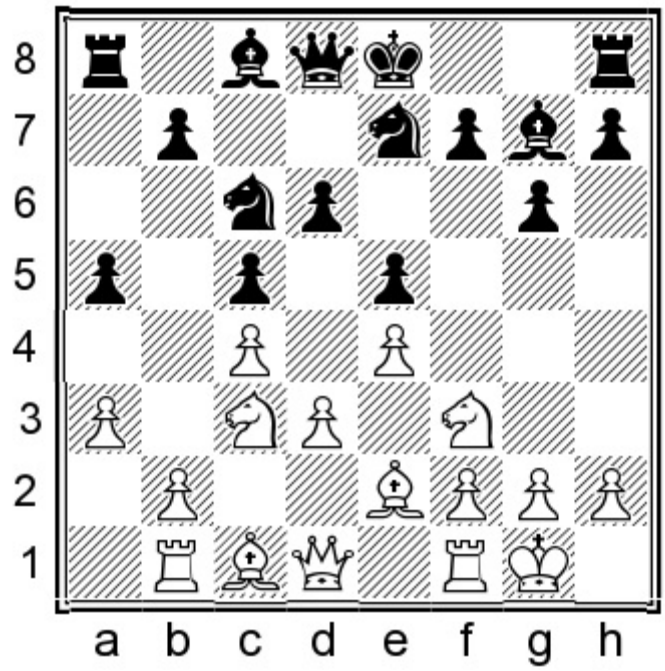


Position after: 6...g6!

The most practical solution. Black waves activity on the queenside based on ...b7-b5 and is prepared to lose a tempo with ...a6-a5 when needed against the threat of b2-b4. Black has all the benefits of the Botvinnik setup with a kingside initiative in due course. White's light-squared bishop is rather passive on e2.

B1) 7.d3 ♗g7 8.♘e1 [8.♘d5 ♘ge7 9.a3 a5=; 8.♗e3 ♘ge7 9.♕d2 h6 10.♘d5 f5 11.exf5 gxf5 12.♕d1 ♘xd5 13.cxd5 ♘e7 14.♕b3 0-0∓ 1-0 (70) JurgenSanchez97 (2861) – Pap, G (2855) lichess.org 2022.] 8...♘ge7 9.f4 0-0 10.fxe5 ♘xe5 11.♗g5 h6 12.♗xe7 ♕xe7 13.♘d5 ♕d8∓ 0-1 (27) Pavlov, V (2043) – Nikolov, M (2542) Kiten 2021.

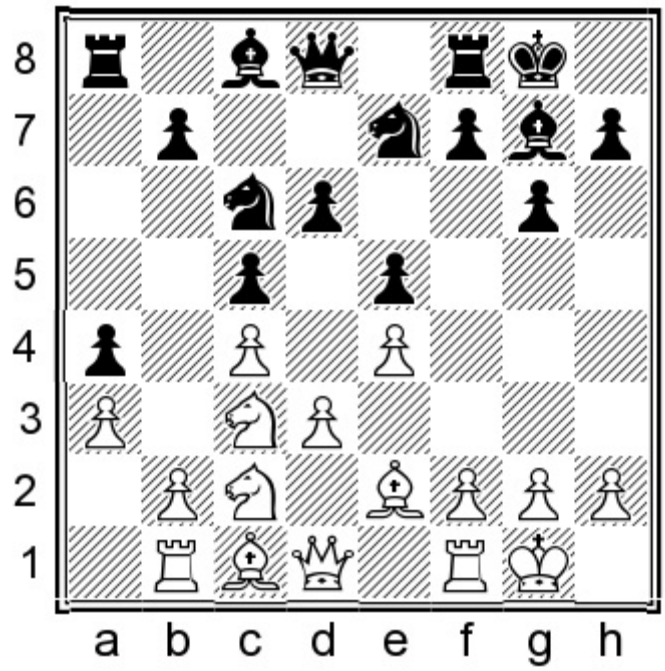
B2) 7.♖b1 ♗g7 8.a3 a5! As already mentioned, Black loses a tempo, but it is important to stop White's b2-b4. 9.d3 ♘ge7



Position after: 9...♘ge7

B2.1) 10.♘b5 0-0 11.♘e1 f5∓ 1-0 (39) putraf (2091)-ustedesunmarrano (2159) lichess.org 2018.

B2.2) 10.♘e1 0-0 11.♘c2 White has made all the thematic moves and is ready for b2-b4. [11.f4 f5∓ 0-1 (34) Kiss, K (2060) – Kovacs, G (2067) Hungary 2008.] 11...a4!

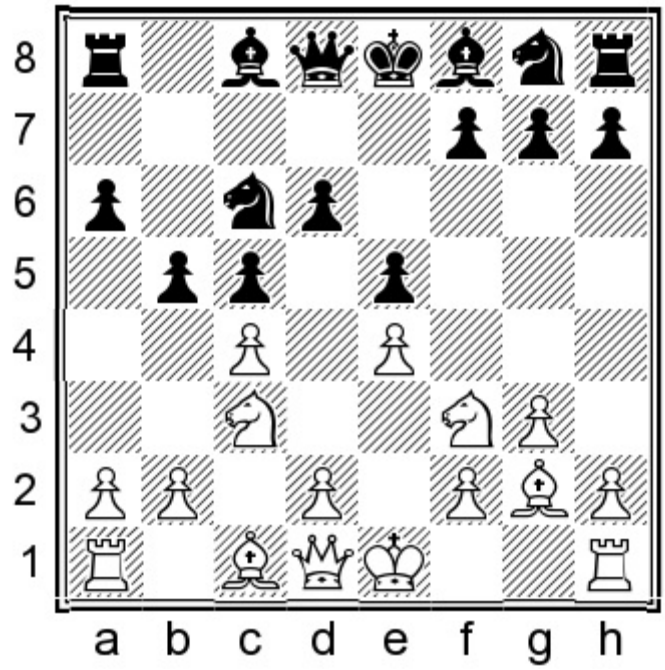


Position after: 11...a4!

In the English opening it is not that easy for Black to play this move as the pawn on a4 may become weak. 12.b4 [12.♘e3 ♘d4! Black makes handy use of the bishop on e2. 13.♘ed5 ♘xd5

14.♘xd5 f5 15.♔h1 ♗e6∓ ½-½ (35) Nikcevic, N (2468) – Tkachiev, V (2642) France 2003.] 12...axb3 13.♖xb3 ♘d4 14.♘xd4 cxd4 15.♘b5 ♘c6= 0-1 (52) Gorbatov, A (2363) – Plischki, S (2333) Hradec Kralove 2012.

C) 5.g3 The most natural way forward but this may allow Black to stir things up a bit. 5...d6! Black plays carefully and waits for the bishop to arrive on g2. 6.♗g2 (6.d3 goes back to the main line.) 6...b5!?

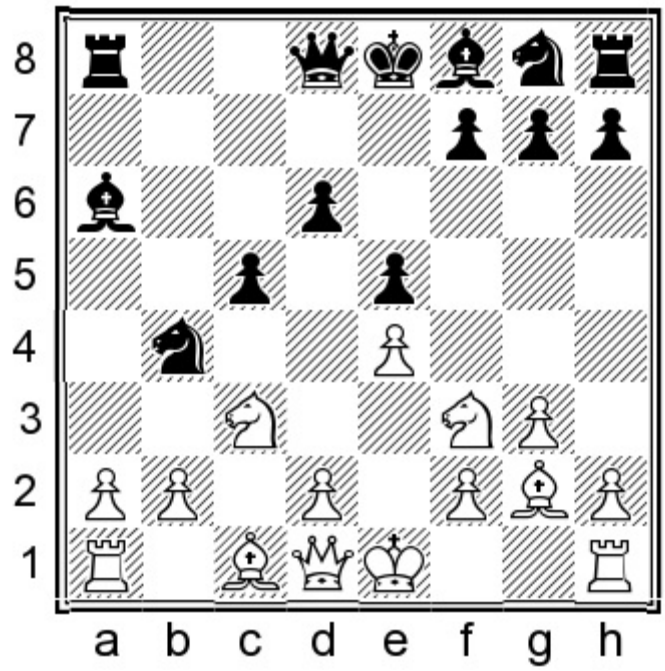


Position after: 6...b5!?

An interesting pawn sacrifice played twice by Andreikin. With a smart move order starting with 5.d3 White can avoid it, so the main line with kingside fianchetto's on both sides remains relevant. If Black does not like this variation, he can take the main line as his compass.

C1) 7.cxb5 Accepting the pawn sacrifice gives Black excellent chances. 7...axb5 8.♘xb5 ♗a6⩱

C1.1) 9.♘c3 ♘b4

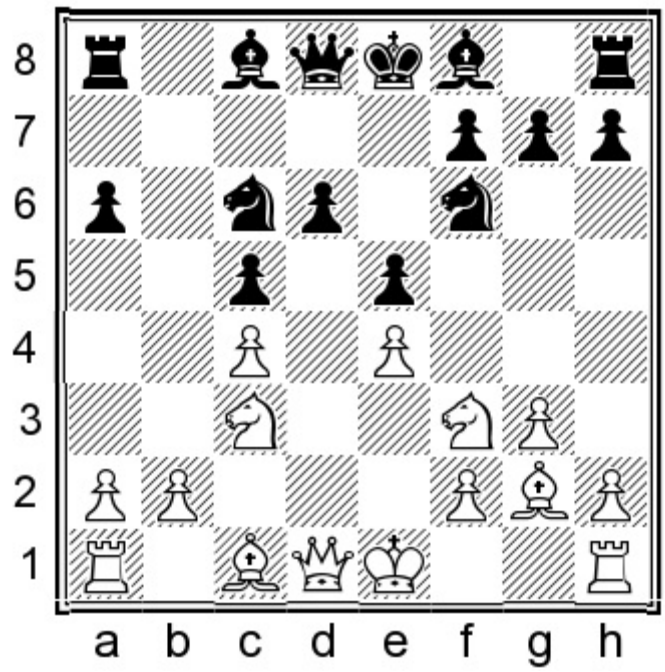


Position after: 9...♘b4

10.♕a4+ [10.♗f1 ♘d3+ 11.♗xd3 ♗xd3∓] 10...♕d7 11.♕xd7+ ♔xd7 12.♘d5 ♘d3+! 13.♔d1 ♘xf2+–+ 0-1 (22) badplayer_CM (2330) – Boekelman, J (2317) lichess.org 2022.

C1.2) 9.♗f1 ♘f6 10.♘c3 ♗xf1 11.♔xf1 d5 12.exd5 ♘xd5 13.♔g2 ♗e7 14.♖e1 ♘db4! 15.♘xe5 ♘d4 16.♖b1 ♘bc2 17.♖e4 ♖a6 18.♔g1 0-0∓

C2) 7.d3! bxc4 Black creates a juicy outpost for his knight on d4. [7...♖b8 was the stem game of this gambit and play went into positional territory instead of tactics. 1-0 (40) Neshkov, V – Alagulian, K (2263) Samara 2002.] 8.dxc4 ♘f6

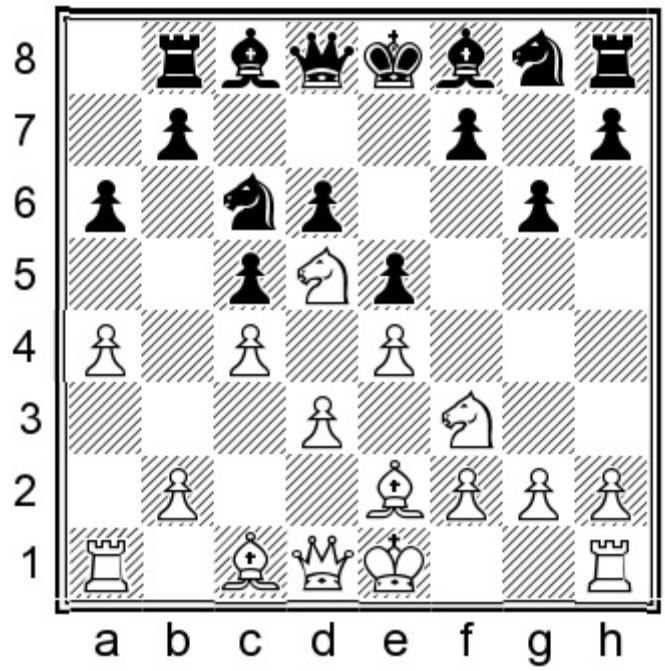


Position after: 8...♘f6

This time we do not go for the Botvinnik set-up. 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.♘h4 ♘d4! 11.♗e3 0-0= 12.h3 ♖b8 13.b3 ♘e8 14.♘f3 ♗e6 15.♘d5 a5 16.♘d2 ♗g5 17.f4 ♗h6 18.f5 ♗xd5∓ 0-1 (33) Mammadova, G (2382) – Andreikin, D (2725) Chess. com 2021.

5...d6 6.g3

6.♗e2 The bishop on e2 gives this line its own character. It has a lot of similarities with 5.♗e2 and the lines often transpose into each other. With a white pawn on d3, Black's plan with a quick ...♖b8 makes good sense. 6...♖b8! With the bishop on e2 Black should immediately push ...b5 otherwise he runs the risk that he played ...a6 for nothing. 7.a4 stops Black's queenside expansion and builds a nice trap. [7.0-0 transposes to 5.d3.] 7...g6 8.♘d5



Position after: 8.♘d5

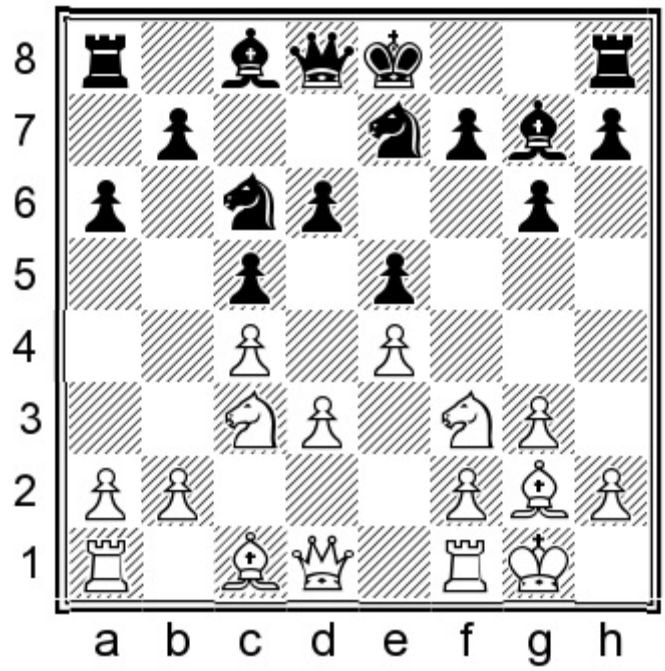
8...♗g7! 9.0-0 ♘ge7 No need to be concerned about White's next move. 10.♗g5 h6! 11.♗xe7 [11.♗f6 0-0 12.♘xe7+ ♘xe7 13.♗xe7 ♕xe7∓] 11...♘xe7 12.a5 0-0 13.♕d2 ♘xd5 14.cxd5 b5=

6...g6 7.♗g2 ♗g7 8.0-0

A) 8.♗e3 ♘ge7 9.♘d2 h5!? 10.h3 h4 11.g4 ♘d4 12.f4 exf4 13.♗xf4 ♘e6 14.♗e3 ♘c6= ½ – ½ (42) Jaro13 (2224) – Pap, G (2695) lichess.org 2022.

B) 8.♘d5 ♘ge7 9.♗g5 h6! 10.♗xe7 ♘xe7∓ White cannot maintain the knight on d5.

8...♘ge7



Position after: 8...♘ge7

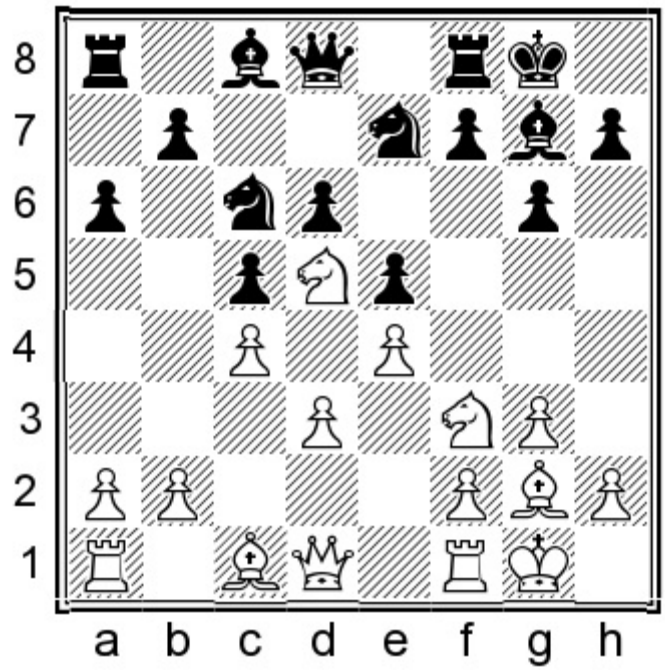
Time to take stock of the situation. Both sides have a sort of a Botvinnik development structure and will complete their development smoothly. White may be a move ahead but the position is relatively closed so that should not matter too much. Black has a number of small, but important advantages. He is one step ahead on the queenside which ensures that he will keep the initiative there. Furthermore, White's knight is misplaced on f3. If White wants to push f4 the knight must move first. Finally, when a black knight arrives on d4 a subsequent ...♗g4 will force White to make a difficult decision. Either the f3-knight must move to an inactive square or the e3-bishop must be exchanged for Black's knight on d4.

9.a3

The thematic continuation. Immediately trying to expand on the queenside.

A) 9.♘h4 White prepares f2-f4. 9...0-0 10.f4 exf4 11.♗xf4 [11.gxf4 f5! 12.♘f3 ♔h8 13.♕e1 ♗e6 14.♘g5 ♗g8 15.♕h4 h6 16.♘h3 fxe4 17.♗xe4 ♘f5 18.♕g4 ♘cd4∓ 0-1 (39) Legend_of_Death (2166) – Pap – G (2711) lichess.org 2022.] 11...♖b8 12.♕d2 ½-½ (76) Nunez Painchaud, R – Zhu, H (2293) Laval 2018. 12...b5! 13.♗g5 f6 14.♗e3 ♘e5∓

B) 9.♘d5 0-0!



Position after: 9...0-0!

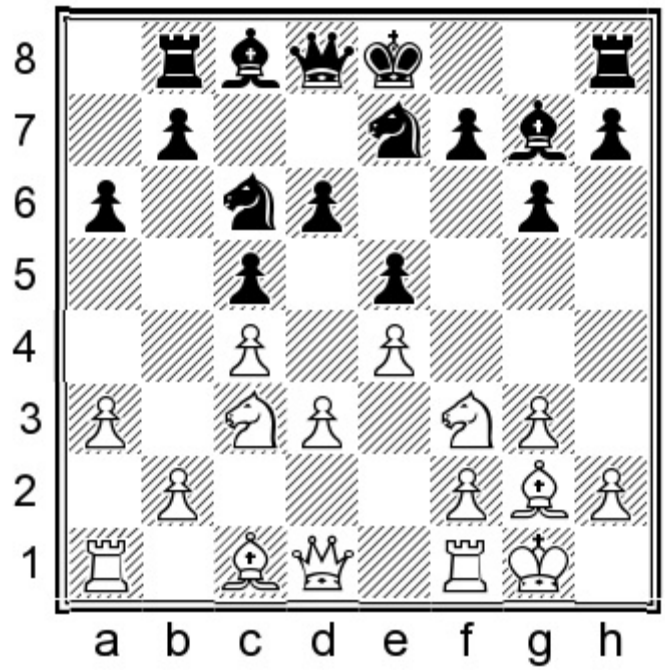
We first complete our development and next will play ...b5.

B1) 10.♘d2 b5! 11.♘xe7+ ♕xe7 12.♘b1 ♗e6 13.♘c3 ♘d4 14.♘d5 0-1 Mestrovic, Z (2397) – Boskovic, D (2402) Zenica 2003. 14...♕a7! 15.b3 bxc4 16.bxc4 ♗xd5 17.cxd5 ♖fb8∓

B2) 10.♘h4 ♘xd5! 11.cxd5 [11.exd5 ♘d4 12.a4 f5∓] 11...♘d4 12.♗e3 b5∓

B3) 10.♗g5 h6! 11.♗xe7 ♘xe7 12.♘d2 b5∓ ½-½ (53) Dominguez Aguilar, G (2347) – Leon Hoyos, M (2428) Mexico City 2006.

9...♖b8!



Position after: 9...♖b8!

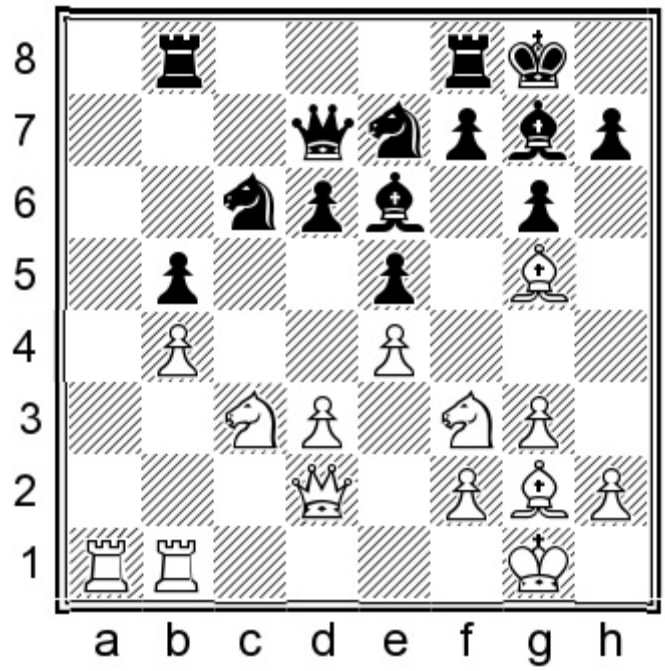
With this move Black maintains a one move advantage on the queenside.

10.♗g5

A) 10.♘d5 0-0 11.♗g5 h6! 12.♗d2 0-1 (24) Ofstad, P (2182) – Sloth, J (2328) Reykjavik 2011. 12...b5=

B) 10.♖b1 b5= 11.cxb5 axb5 12.b4 cxb4 13.axb4 0-0 14.♗e3 ♗g4 15.♕b3 1-0 (47) Formanek, M (2233) – Dolensky, M (2073) Pardubice 2022. 15...♕d7!=

10...b5 11.cxb5 axb5 12.b4 cxb4 13.axb4 0-0 14.♕d2 ♗e6 15.♖fb1 ♕d7=



Position after: 15...♕d7=

In this almost symmetrical position Black's pieces have developed slightly more harmoniously.

16.♗e3

With a draw in Anastasian, A (2520) – Minasian, A (2425) Yerevan 1995.

16...f5! 17.♖a3 f4 18.gxf4 ♗h3⩲

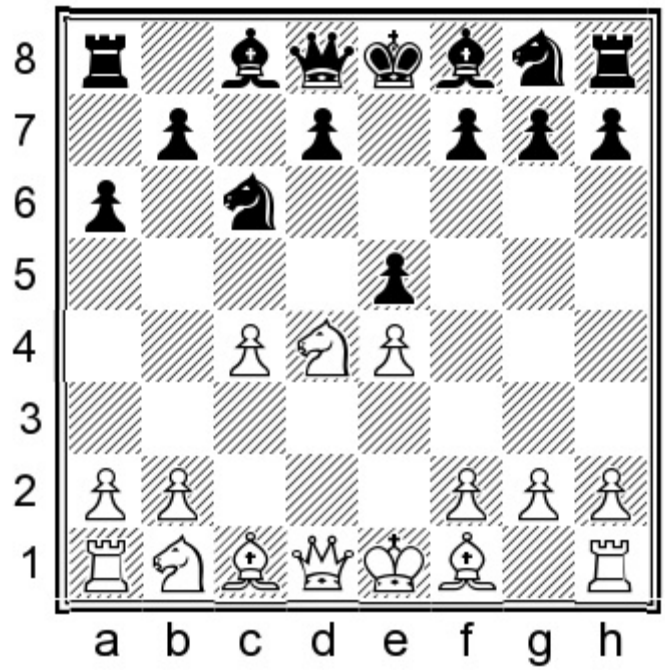
Conclusion

The line 3.c4 ♘c6 4.♘c3 e5! does not pose any serious theoretical problems for Black. In general Black will aim for a Botvinnik structure (...d6, ... g6, ...♗g7, ...♘ge7) where he can take the initiative on both sides of the board. Black has some interesting ideas on his way to that position. One of these is Andreikin's pawn sacrifice with a quick 6....b5 after White has played 5.g3 and 6.♗g2. If White is more careful with 5.d3, Black will aim for the standard Botvinnik structures. He can start a queenside initiative with ...♖b8 and ...b5 or take the lead on the kingside with ...f5, possibly preceded by ...h6, ...♗e6. White's knight on f3 hinders White's options to produce some serious counterplay against Black's plans.

c) 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5

In this subchapter we look at the non-critical continuations for White after 5...e5.

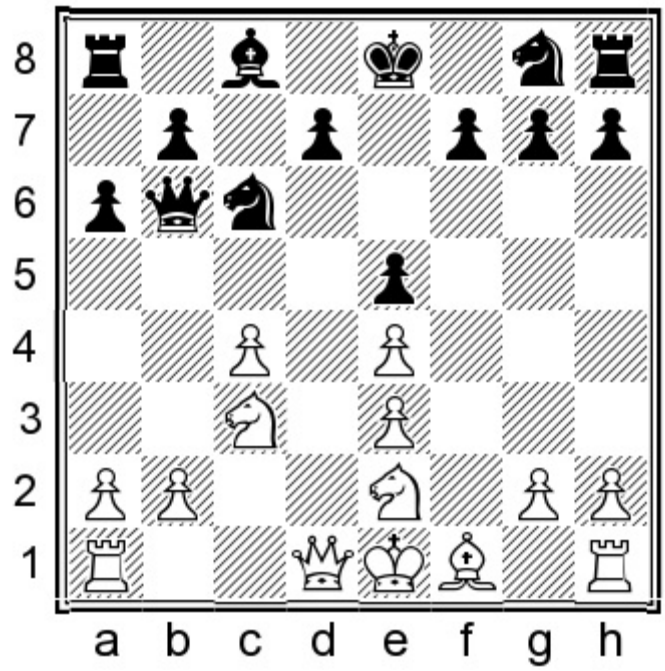


Position after: 5...e5

6.♘xc6

Taking the knight strengthens Black's influence in the center.

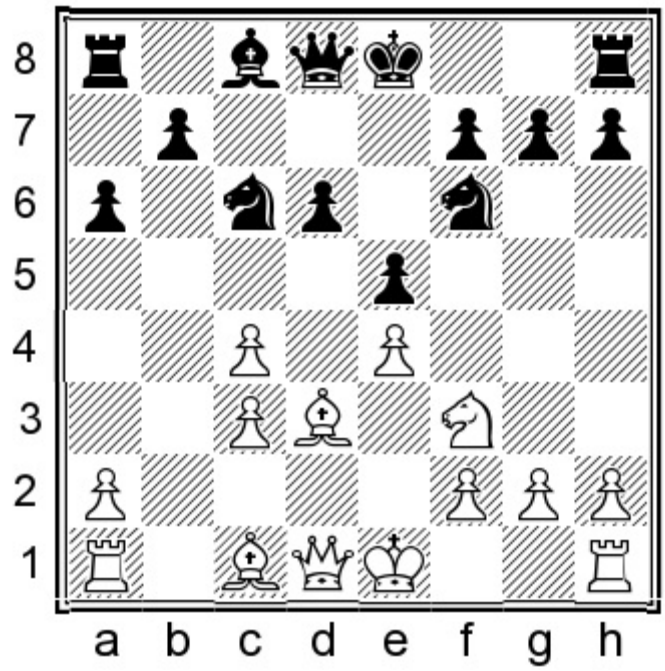
A) 6.♘e2 Not very popular and for good reason: the f2-b6 diagonal is weak. 6...♗c5 7.♘bc3 [7.g3? ♕b6!–+] 7...♕b6 8.♗e3 ♗xe3 9.fxe3



Position after: 9.fxe3

9...♘f6 [9...♕xe3? 10.♘d5+–] 10.♕d2 0-0 11.♘d5 ♕d8 12.♘g3 d6 13.♗d3 ♘xd5 14.exd5 White has eliminated his ugly double pawn but now has to live with a bad bishop and good attacking chances for Black. 14...♘e7 15.0-0 f5= Black has a nice Svesnikov. 0-1 (34) Jun, R (1931) – Mitra, R (2104) Pardubice 2018.

B) 6.♘f3 The knight is not terribly active on f3. This normally leads to our thematic game against White's weakened queenside pawn structure after a subsequent ...♗f8-b4xc3. 6...♘f6 [Martin makes a case for 6...♗c5 as after 6.♘e2, but in my view the ...♘f6 and ...♗b4 approach is more thematic and promises more.] 7.♘c3 [7.♗d3 ♗b4+ 8.♗d2 d6!=] 7...♗b4 8.♗d3 ♗xc3+! 9.bxc3 d6



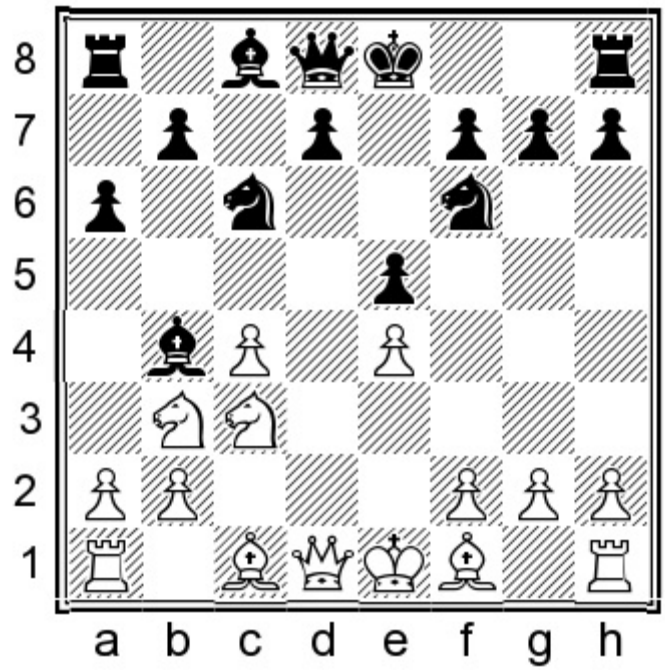
Position after: 9...d6

White has to decide how he wants to complete his development.

B1) 10.♗a3 Without any serious pressure along the d-file this immediate attack against the d6-pawn just puts the bishop on the wrong diagonal. 10...0-0 11.♗c2? ♕a5∓

B2) 10.0-0 0-0 11.♗a3 [11.♖b1 ♘d7 12.♗e3 ♘c5=] 11...♕c7 12.♕e2 ♖d8 13.♖ab1 b6= 0-1 (64) Richter, S (1754) – Schreiber, F (1791) Mecklenburg VP 2013. Theoretically an equal game, but Black's position is easier to play.

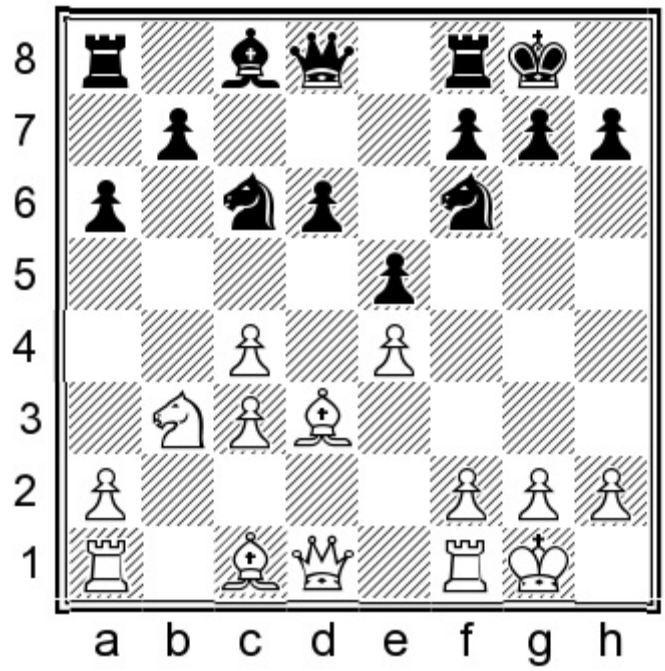
C) 6.♘b3 A bit more interesting than the retreat to f3. Anatoly Karpov, Pavel Eljanov and other strong GMs have tried this line. The knight covers c5 and stands ready for any activity on the queenside. We will combat this option with our thematic ...♗f8-b4xc3, followed by positional play against White's weakened queenside pawns. 6...♘f6 7.♘c3 [7.♗d3 ♗b4+ 8.♗d2 ♗xd2+ 9.♕xd2 0-0 10.♘c3 d6 11.0-0 ♗e6= Black is fine here. ½–½ (57) Eljanov, P (2672) – Bernadskiy, V (2629) Chess.com 2020.] 7...♗b4



Position after: 7...♗b4

C1) 8.f3 0-0 9.♗e3 ♗xc3+! This is even simpler and in line with the maneuvers we have seen elsewhere in the O'Kelly. 10.bxc3 d6 11.♗e2 ♗e6 the thematic way to equality. 12.0-0 ♕c7 13.♕d3 [13.g4?! ♘e7 14.h4 h5 15.g5 ♘d7∓; 13.c5 d5!∓] 13...♖ac8 14.♖fd1 ♖fd8=

C2) 8.♗d3 The most natural contin-uation developing a piece and defending the e4-pawn 8...♗xc3+! 9.bxc3 d6 10.0-0 [10.♗a3 ♗e6! 11.♗c2 ♗xc4 12.♗xd6 h5!= Activating the rook via h6 (Sielecki).] 10...0-0 Simple chess. Without any direct threats against d6 Black calmly completes his development. No need to chase away the knight on b3 with ...a5-a4. The knight is not in an optimal position and will need to be repositioned to defend the c-pawn or to open the b-file. The pawn on a4 may become weak. ...d6-d5 is nearly always the response to White's c4-c5 as it improves Black's central influence.

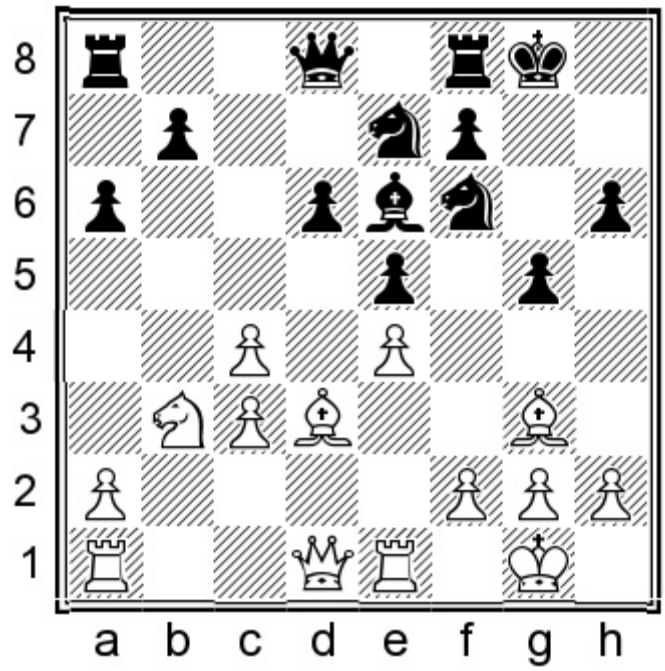


Position after: 10...0-0

C2.1) 11.c5 d5! An important finesse, keeping White's doubled pawns in place and increasing Black's presence in the center. 12.♗g5 dxe4 13.♗c2 [13.♗xe4? ♕xd1–+] 13...♕xd1 14.♖axd1 ♗e6 15.♘d2 [15.♗xf6 gxf6 16.♗xe4 a5∓] 15...♘d5 16.♘xe4 f5∓

C2.2) 11.♗a3 ♗e6! 12.♕e2 [White cannot move the light-squared bishop yet. 12.♗c2 ♗xc4∓] 12...♕c7 13.♖ab1 ♖fc8∓ The ideal configuration for Black is with ...♖fc8 and the a-rook on a8. There is no need to put a rook on d8 because White has no serious pressure against d6.

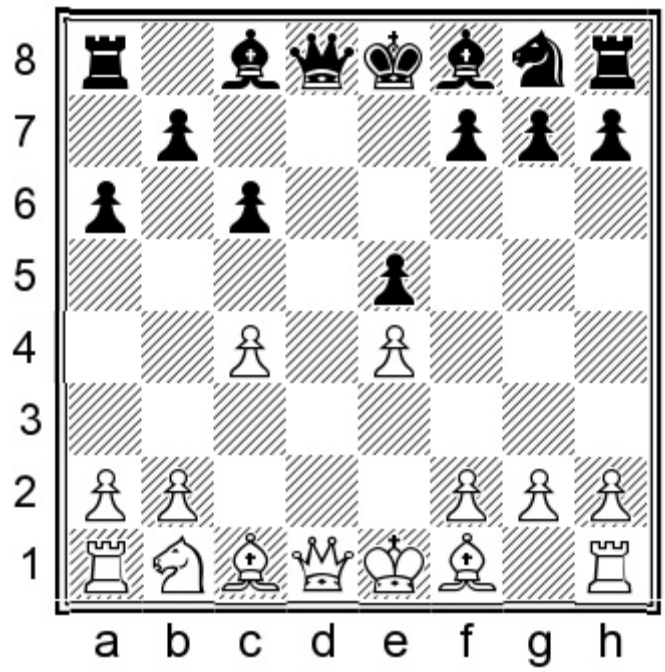
C2.3) 11.♗g5 Threatening ♕f3 and our pawns will be weakened as well. 11...h6 12.♗h4 [12.♗e3 ♗e6 13.♕f3 ♖c8= 14.c5? d5∓] 12...g5 13.♗g3 ♗e6 14.♖e1 ♘e7!



Position after: 14...♘e7!

transferring the knight to g6 and opening up the c-file. [14...a5 15.♖b1 ♕e7 16.♘d2 ♖ab8 17.♘f1± 1-0 (50) Kobalia, M (2599) – Kryakvin, D (2567) Kolomna 2018.] 15.♖b1 ♘g6 16.♘d2 ♕c7∓

6...dxc6!



Position after: 6...dxc6!

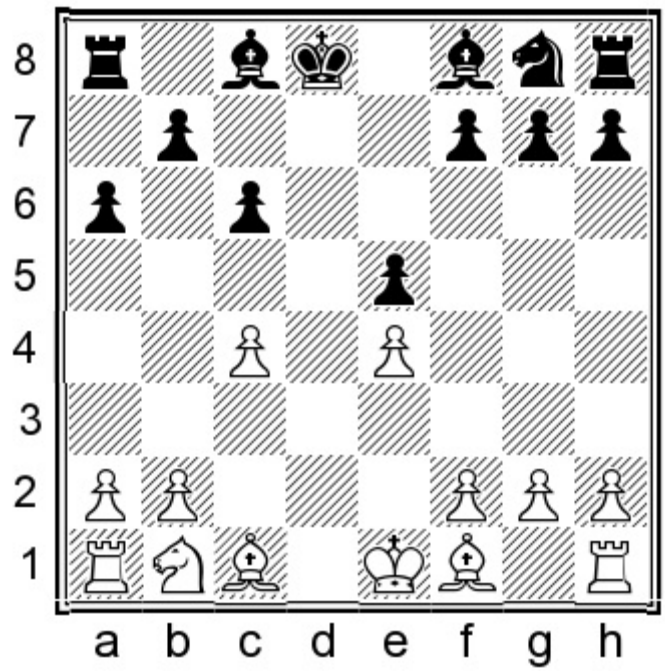
We follow in the footsteps of O'Kelly specialist Richard Rapport. In 2014 he reintroduced this move into master practice. The move is not very popular and has only been played in a handful of games but it shows great results for Black. It is the first choice of the engines.

7.♕xd8+

The most natural continuation.

7.♘c3 ♕xd1+ 8.♘xd1 [8.♔xd1 ♗c5∓] 8...♘f6 9.f3 [9.♗d3 ♗c5 10.0-0 ♗e6 11.♗e3 ♗xe3 12.♘xe3 0-0-0∓ 1-0 (40) Nimmes_97 (2380) – AndyBoehme (2283) lichess.org 2021.] 9...♗e6 10.♗e3 [10.♗d2 ♗c5∓ 0-1 (59) Abik02 (2812) – Experience_Chess (2767) lichess.org 2022.] 10...♘d7 11.♘c3 ♗c5∓

7...♔xd8



Position after: 7...♔xd8

Objectively speaking, this endgame is balanced. However, Black's game is much easier to play as various factors are in his favour. Black tends to gain control of the d4 square, whereas White has no control over d5. Black's king will find a nice place on c7, controlling key squares along the d-file whereas his white colleague struggles to find a secure place. White and Black will both contest the d-file but Black will decide whether and when exchanges take place. It is easy for Black to exchange his dark-squared bishop when White runs the risk of an ending up with a bad bishop.

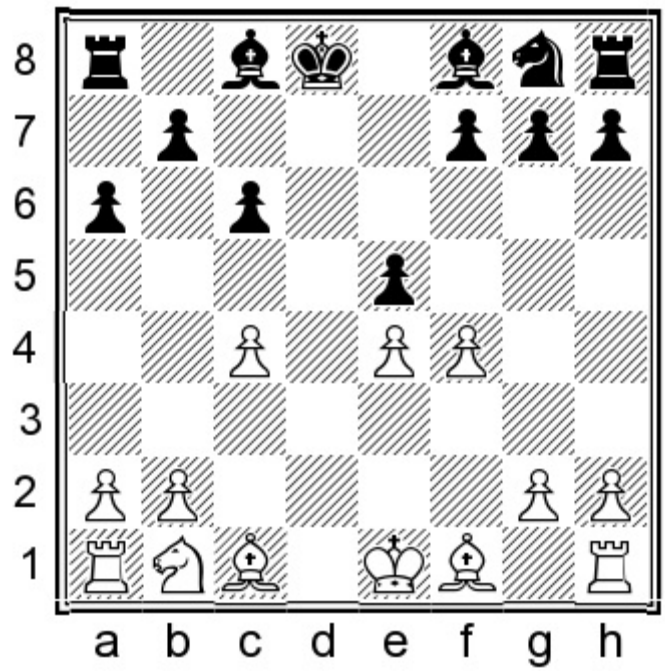
8.♗e3!

Otherwise, Black just needs to put his bishop on c5 to achieve a somewhat better position.

A) 8.♗e2 ♗c5 9.0-0 ♘f6! 10.♗g5 ♔c7 11.♗f3 [11.♗xf6 This gives a lot of dynamic potential to

Black's bishop pair. 11...gxf6 12.♘c3 f5∓] 11...♗d4∓ 0-1 (35) mariodan1985 (2302) – Wlfi (2336) lichess.org 2021.

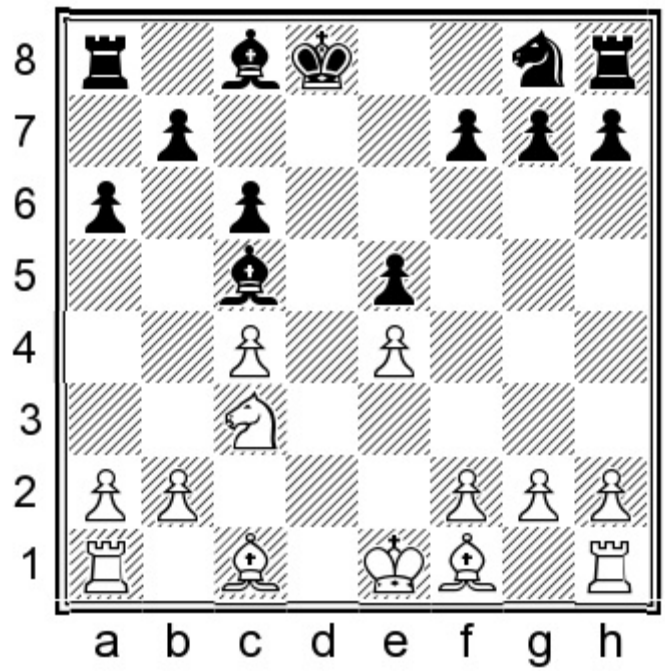
B) 8.f4



Position after: 8.f4

Here White runs the risk of weakening his pawn structure. 8...♘f6! 9.♘c3 [9.fxe5 ♘g4! A maneuver known from the Sicilian Kan. 10.♗e2 ♘xe5 11.♗e3 ♗e6 12.♘d2 ♔c7 13.0-0-0 ♖d8∓] 9...♗b4 10.♗d3 ♔e7 11.♗d2 ♗c5 12.♘a4 ♗d4∓

C) 8.♘c3 This is inaccurate. 8...♗c5!



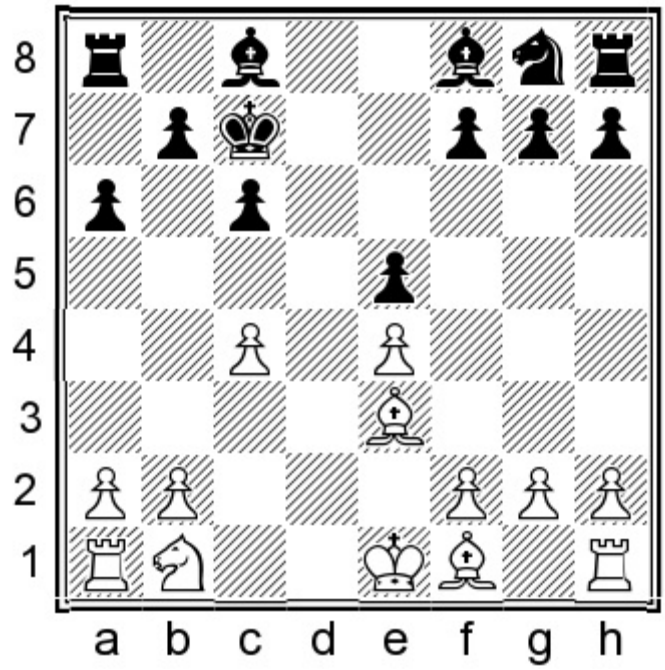
Position after: 8...♗c5!

Black takes immediate ownership of the important diagonal.

C1) 9.♗d3 ♗e6 10.♔e2 [10.♘a4 ♗d4!∓] 10...♘f6! 11.♗e3 ♘d7∓ Maintaining the tension is better than exchanging on e3. 12.♘a4?! ♗xe3 13.♔xe3 b5 14.cxb5 axb5 15.♘c3 b4 16.♘e2 ♔c7∓

C2) 9.♘a4 ♗d4! Always the place to move to after ♘a4. 10.♗d2 ♘f6 11.f3 b5! 12.♗a5+ ♔e7 13.♘b6 ♖b8 14.♘xc8+ ♖hxc8∓ 0-1 (36) Cappelletto, J (2051) – Lodici, L (2469) Chioggia 2019.

8...♔c7!



Position after: 8...♔c7!

In order to be able to develop the knight to f6, without being bothered by ♗g5. While the structures after ♗xf6 gxf6 tend to favour Black there is not much difference between 8...♔c7, 8...♗e6 or 8...♘f6.

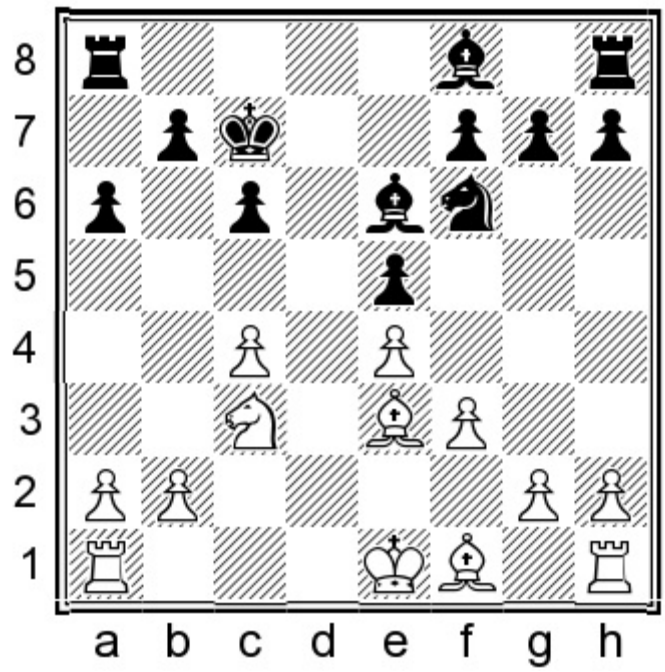
9.♘c3

9.c5? White's pawn structure is too loose to play such a move successfully. 9...♘f6 10.f3 [10.♘c3 ♘g4∓] 10...♘d7 11.♗c4 [11.b4 a5 12.b5 ♗xc5 13.♗xc5 ♘xc5∓ and Black had an extra pawn, ½ – ½ (72) CuattroPrincesses (2506) – Romvid (2721) lichess.org 2022.] 11...f6 12.b4 a5∓ and White's queenside collapses, 0-1 (35) jshutzman (2474) – DeathDynasty (2549) lichess.org 2021.

9...♘f6 10.f3

10.♗e2 ♗b4 11.f3 ♗e6= Black will follow with ...♘d7 and ...♗c5.

10...♗e6



Position after: 10...♗e6

This endgame is equal, but it is easier to play for Black.

11.c5

White takes space on the queenside.

A) 11.a3 White prevents ...♗b4 and prepares expansion on the queenside. 11...♘d7 12.♗e2 [12.b4 a5∓; 12.♘d5+!? cxd5 13.cxd5 ♗xd5 14.exd5 ♗c5 15.♗d2 ♔d6=] 12...♗c5∓ 0-1 (59) Martynyuk, E (2059) – Afonasieva, A (2133) Loo 2016.

B) 11.♖c1 Anticipating further piece activity on the queenside, including potentially ♘d5. 11...♘d7

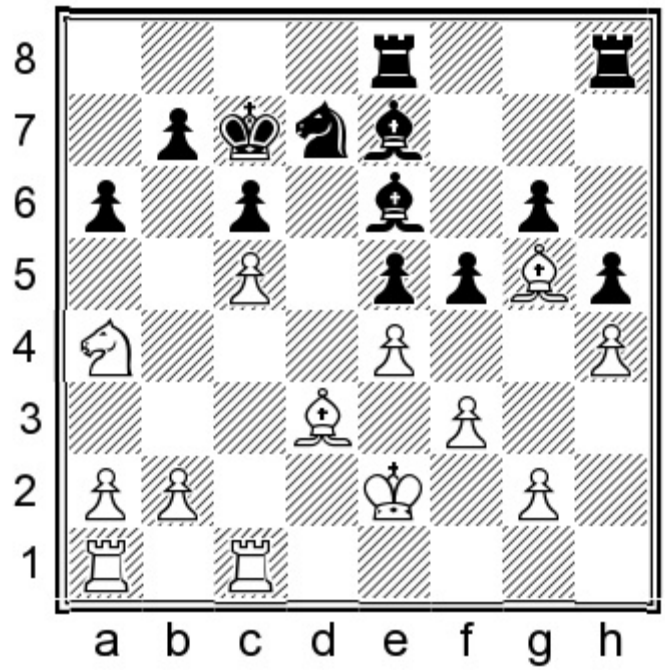
B1) 12.♗e2 a5 13.♘a4 b6 14.a3 ♖b8! 15.0-0 [15.h4 ♘c5 16.♘xc5 ♗xc5 17.♔f2 ♖hd8 18.♖hd1 ♗xe3+ 19.♔xe3 c5∓] 15...♘c5!∓ 0-1 (60) Popovich, A (1891) – Lvov, N (2007) Cheliabinsk 2021.

B2) 12.♘d5+! If White misses this one, Black is already slightly better. 12...♔b8 13.♘b6 ♘xb6 14.♗xb6 a5 15.h4 a4=

11...g6 12.♘a4 ♘d7 13.♗d3 ♖d8 14.♔e2 f5

Time to show who is the better chessplayer.

15.♗g5 ♖e8 16.♖hc1 h5 17.h4 ♗e7∓



Position after: 17...♗e7∓

0-1 (74) Socko, B (2622) – Rapport, R (2701) Budapest 2014. Black is about to enter a good versus bad bishop ending.

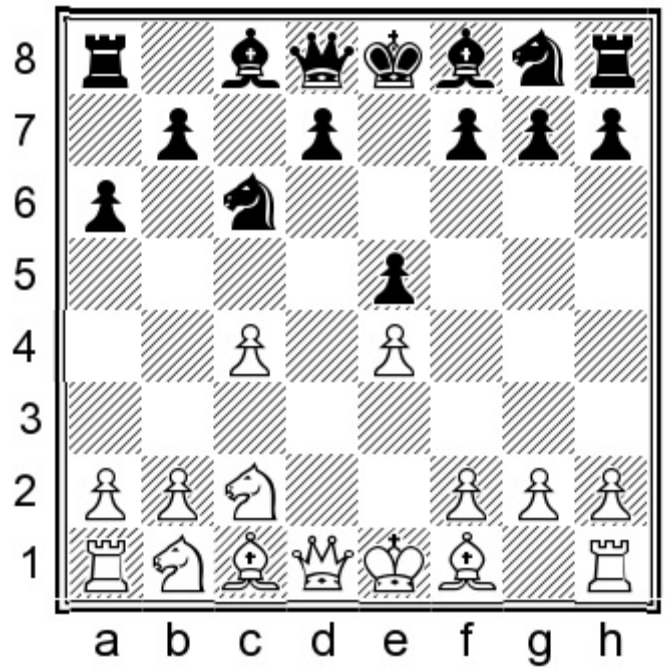
Conclusion

In this subchapter we analyzed the positions where White plays alternatives to 6.♘f5 or 6.♘c2 in the main line 3.c4 O'Kelly. 6.♘e2 may cause White problems along the g1-a7 diagonal. He has to play carefully to fight the danger and will lose valuable time in the process.

6.♘f3 is an easy target for our standard strategy of playing against White's weakened pawn structure with ...♗b4xc3. 6.♘b3 moves the knight to an inactive square. Again, the standard strategy of weakening White's pawn structure with ...♗xc3 will do its job. With the unexpected 6.♘xc6 dxc6! Richard Rapport has added a new chapter to the 3.c4 O'Kelly. Black ends up in an easier ending with a better pawn structure and better options for his pieces. White has to be precise to keep the balance.

d) 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.♘c2

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.♘c2



Position after: 6.♘c2

A pawn structure known from the Sicilian Kalashnikov has arisen. White has gained time with his knight, having spent only one move instead of three to go from d4 to c2. In return Black will have his bishop outside the pawn chain in an influential position on c5. Exchanging this bishop against White's dark-squared bishop will automatically leave White with a bad bishop. Black has his familiar hole on d5 and weak pawn on d6. In return Black has access to the d4-square and dynamic possibilities like ...b5, ...f5, or kingside piece activity. Black has the more active pieces. The chances are equal as confirmed by the statistics which level out. That does not take away the fact that strategically Black has a much more straightforward and active game to play.

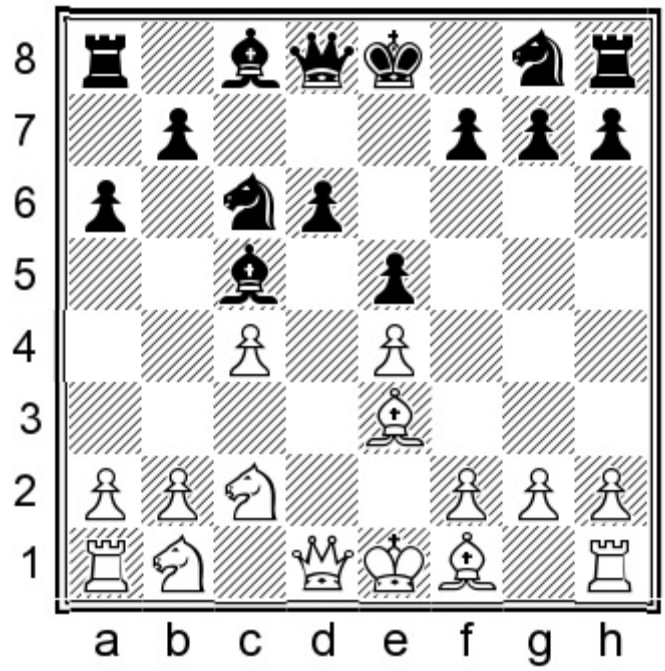
6...♗c5!

As b4 is not available for the bishop c5 is perfectly acceptable.

7.♘c3

A) 7.♗d3 White waits with challenging the strong bishop. 7...d6 8.0-0 ♘ge7 9.♘c3 is the main line.

B) 7.♗e3 Assisted by his knight on c2 White wants to get rid of the strong black bishop immediately. 7...d6!

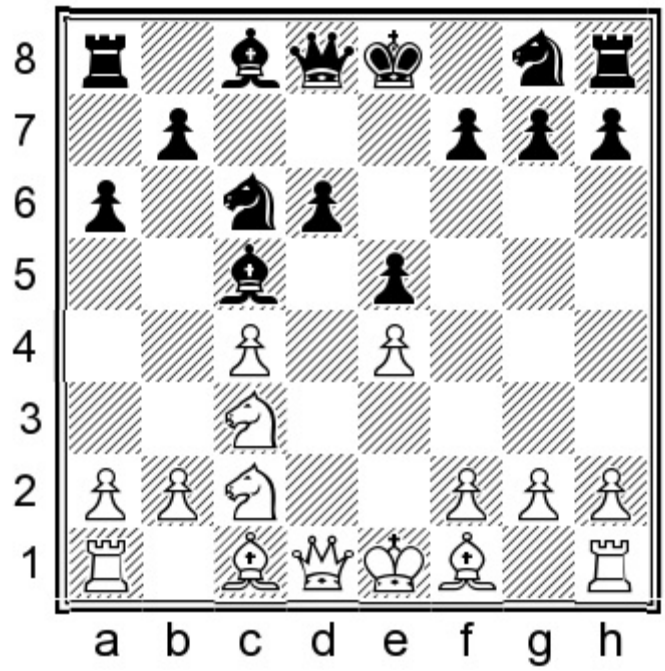


Position after: 7...d6!

In the 1900s GMs had established that “being taken” is advantageous compared to “taking” in this instance.

8.♗xc5 is hardly ever played, and for good reason. Black is ahead in the quest for a central outpost, and he has the a6 pawn as a bonus. Moreover, unlike his black colleague, the white bishop is bad. 8...dxc5 9.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 10.♘c3 [10.f3 ♗e6 11.♔f2 ♘d4 12.♘e3 ♘e7 13.♘c3 ♔c7 14.♘cd5+ ♗xd5 15.cxd5 b5∓] 10...♘f6 11.♘e3 [11.0-0-0+ ♔c7 12.f3 ♗e6= 13.g4 ♘d4∓] 11...♗e6 12.♘ed5 ♗xd5 13.exd5 ♘d4 14.0-0-0 ♔c7∓

7...d6



Position after: 7...d6

8.♗e2

A belated 8.♗e3 is a valid option after which 8...♘f6 is the most solid continuation which normally transposes into the main line.

8...♘f6 9.0-0 0-0

Black first completes his development before determining where to put his light-squared bishop.

10.♗e3

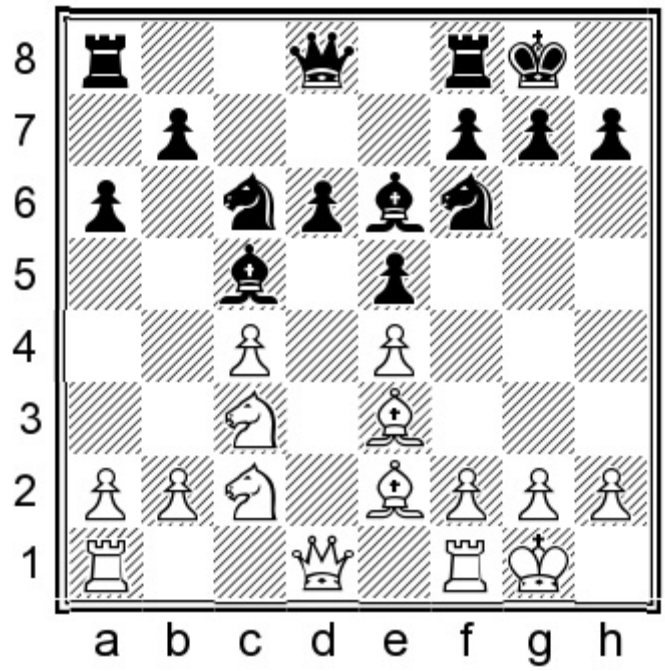
Thematic and leading to the key position of this variation. This position can be reached via many different move orders.

A) 10.♗g5 h6 11.♗h4 the bishop is going astray here. 11...♗e6 12.♘e3 g5! 13.♗g3 ♘d4= 14.h4? ♘xe2+ 15.♕xe2 ♗xe3 16.♕xe3 ♘g4 17.♕e2 gxh4∓

B) 10.a3 White prepares an expansion on the queenside. 10...♘d4!. The simple equalizer. 11.b4 ♘xc2 12.♕xc2 ♗d4 13.♗b2 ♗e6= Here Black has nothing to worry about.

C) 10.♔h1 White prepares f2-f4. 10...♘d4! 11.♖b1 [11.♗g5 h6 12.♗xf6 ♕xf6 13.♘e3 ♕d8=] 11...♘xc2 12.♕xc2 ♗d4!= An important maneuver.

10...♗e6



Position after: 10...♗e6

The main move in this position since the early 1950 as well as the main line in the variation starting with 6.♘c2.

11.♕d2!

The most logical move, connecting the rooks and facilitating ♕xe3 and making doubling along the d-file possible. In this structure it is quite challenging for Black to create sufficient counterplay.

A) 11.♗xc5?! dxc5 12.♘e3 ♘d4 13.♘ed5 ♗xd5 14.exd5 ♘e8N 15.♖e1 ♘d6 16.♗f1 ♖e8∓

B) 11.a3 ♗xe3! 12.♘xe3 ♘d4 13.♗d3 ♖c8 14.♖c1 [14.b4 b5∓] 14...h5 15.♘e2 g6=

11...♖c8!

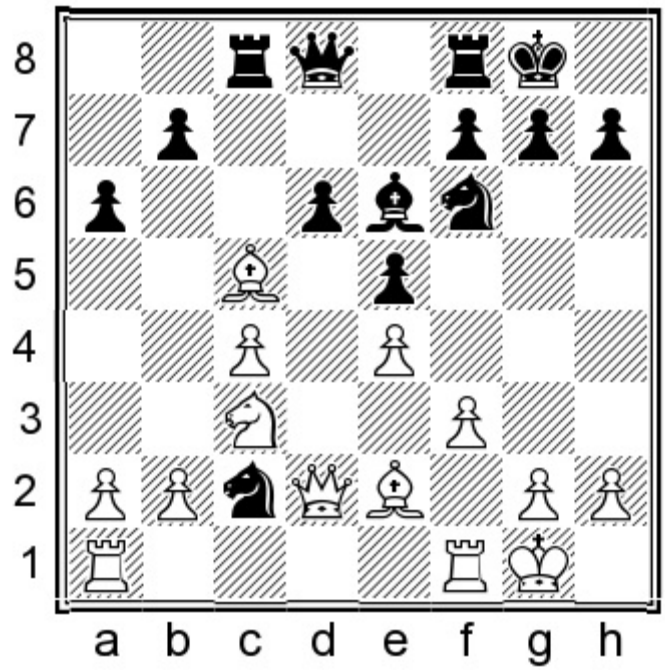
The old masters already played this move as It solves Black's problems.

12.b3!

A) 12.♖fd1?! ♘b4! Black's key move in this position. 13.b3 [13.♗xc5 dxc5=] 13...♘xc2 14.♕xc2 [14.♗xc5 ♘xa1∓] 14...♗xe3 15.fxe3 b5∓

B) 12.♖ad1 ♘b4 13.b3 ♕a5∞ [13...♘xc2 14.♗xc5!]

C) 12.f3 ♘b4 13.♗xc5 ♘xc2

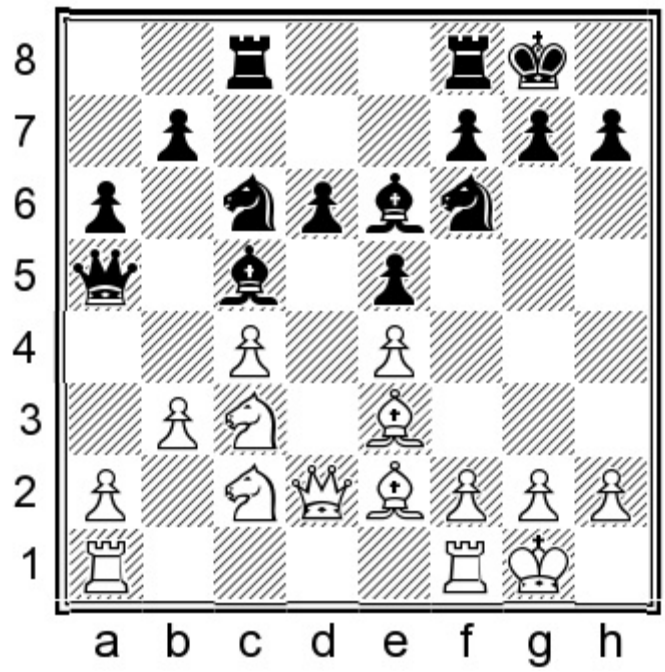


Position after: 13...♘xc2

14.♕xc2 [14.♕xd6 ♕xd6 15.♗xd6 ♘xa1 16.♗xf8 ♔xf8 17.♖xa1 ♗xc4=] 14...♖xc5! 15.b3 b5=

D) 12.♖ab1 ♘b4! 13.♗xc5 dxc5 14.♕xd8 ♖cxd8 15.♘e3 ♘c6 16.♖fd1 ♘d4= ½ (27)-½ (27) Pilnik, H – Euwe, M New York 1948.

12...♕a5



Position after: 12...♕a5

This is Black's most precise move.

13.♖fd1

A) 13.♖ad1 ♗xe3 14.♕xe3 ♖fd8 15.♖b1 ♕c5!= Black has the better bishop.

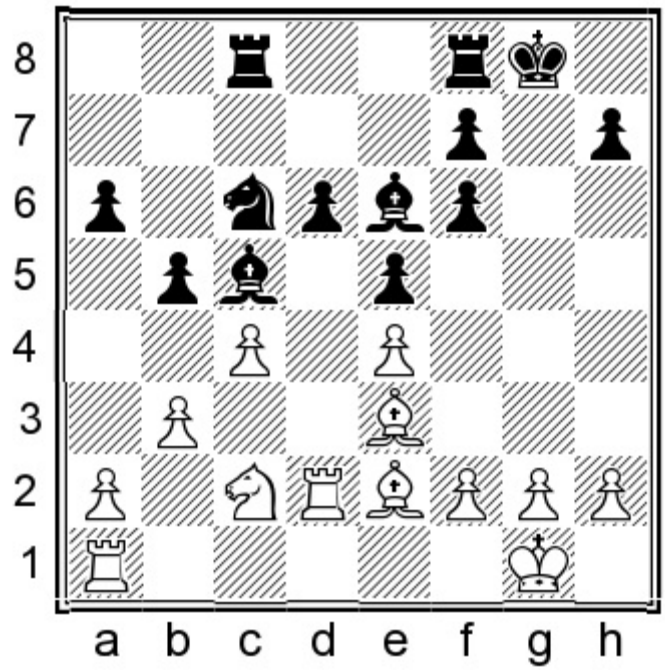
B) 13.a4 ♘d4 14.♘xd4 exd4 15.♗xd4 ♘xe4 16.♘xe4 ♕xd2 17.♘xd2 ♗xd4 18.♖ad1 ♗c5 19.♘e4 ♖fd8=

C) 13.♗g5 ♘d4=

13...b5!

This move liberates Black's game.

14.♘d5 ♕xd2 15.♘xf6+ gxf6 16.♖xd2



Position after: 16.♖xd2

16...♗xe3

16...bxc4 17.♗xc4 ♗xc4 18.bxc4 ♘a5=

17.♘xe3 ♘d4=

Black's fractured pawn structure is compensated for by his better minor pieces. Only Black can play for more.

Conclusion

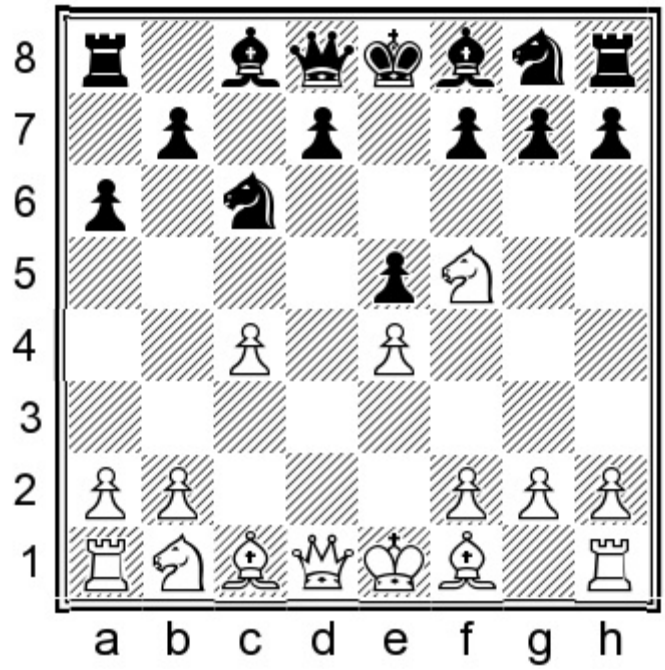
In the early 1950s the variation 3.c4 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 (or 5...♘f6 6.♘c3 e5 7.♘c2) 6.♘c2 was one of the most popular lines against the O'Kelly. White has lost less time than in the Kalashnikov to put his knight on c2.

At the same time, Black has his dark-squared bishop outside the pawn chain in an influential position. The masters of the past did their analysis properly and have shown us how Black can reach a comfortable position. Black should not take the bishop on e3 but maintain the tension. The black knight on g8 should preferably be put on f6 although on e7 it is not bad.

Black should complete his development with ...0-0, ...♗e6 and ...♖c8. Then he should take stock and make up his mind whether he can best continue with 12...♘b4, preparing for exchanges, or with 12...♕a5, with a subsequent ...b5 in mind. Black should not have any difficulties reaching an equal position.

e) 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.♘f5

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c4 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e5 6.♘f5



Position after: 6.♘f5

The critical continuation in the 3.c4 line. Recently there have been quite a few theoretical developments in this line.

6...d5

The traditional response to 6.♘f5, and the main line of the system started with 3.c4.

A) 6...♘f6 It has a very low independent value as the logical continuation transposes back into the

main line. 7.♘c3 d5 8.cxd5 ♗xf5 9.exf5 ♘d4

B) 6...d6 It has also proved to be quite popular recently, but I prefer to keep the text move as our main line.

7.cxd5

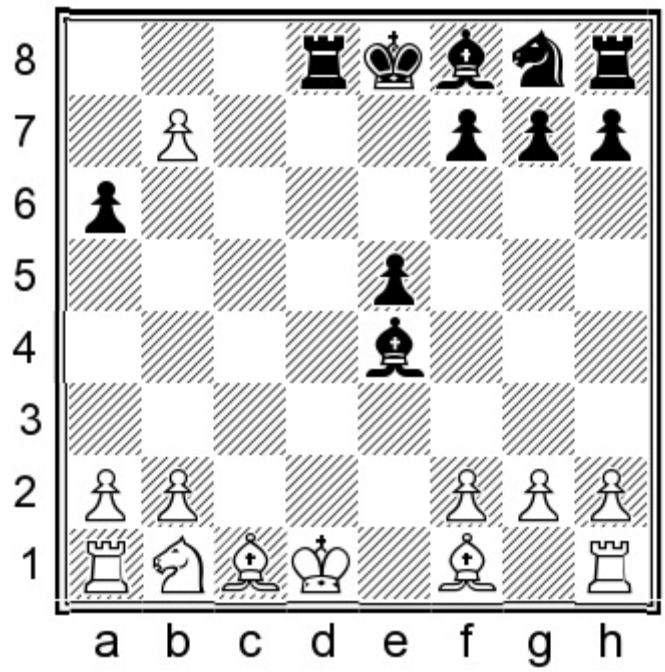
Alternatives are better for Black.

A) 7.exd5 ♗xf5 8.dxc6 ♕xd1+ 9.♔xd1 bxc6 10.♗e3 ♘f6 11.f3 0-0-0+∓ Black is much better developed, and White's king is exposed, ½–½ (26) Benza, A (2130) – Zhuravlev, A (2348) Smolensk 2005.

B) 7.♕xd5 ♗xf5! 8.♕xd8+ ♖xd8 9.exf5 ♘b4 10.♘a3 ♗c5∓ Black is very active for the sacrificed pawn.

7...♗xf5 8.exf5

8.dxc6?! ♕xd1+ 9.♔xd1 ♗xe4! 10.cxb7 ♖d8+!



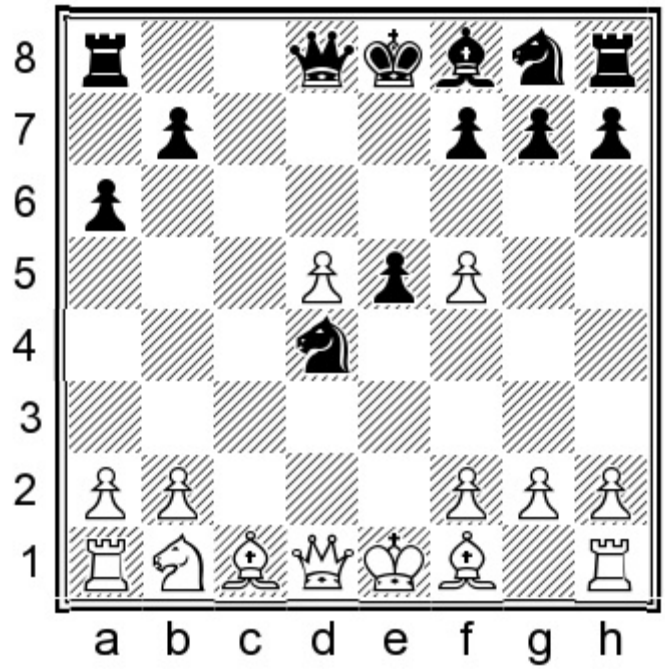
Position after: 10...♖d8+!

Immediately a nuisance to the white king.

A) 11.♗d2?! ♗xb7 12.♘c3 ♗c5 13.♔c2 [13.f3 ♗e3∓] 13...♗xf2–+ 0-1 (18) Protput (2479) – Undercover1 (2315) lichess.org 2021.

B) 11.♔e1 ♗xb7 12.♘c3 ♘f6 13.f3 ♗c5 14.♗g5 ♔e7 15.a3 h6 16.♗xf6+ ♔xf6 17.♖d1 ♔g6∓ Black is much better developed in this endgame. 1-0 (39) Lakarah (2237) – Undercover1 (2320) lichess.org 2021.

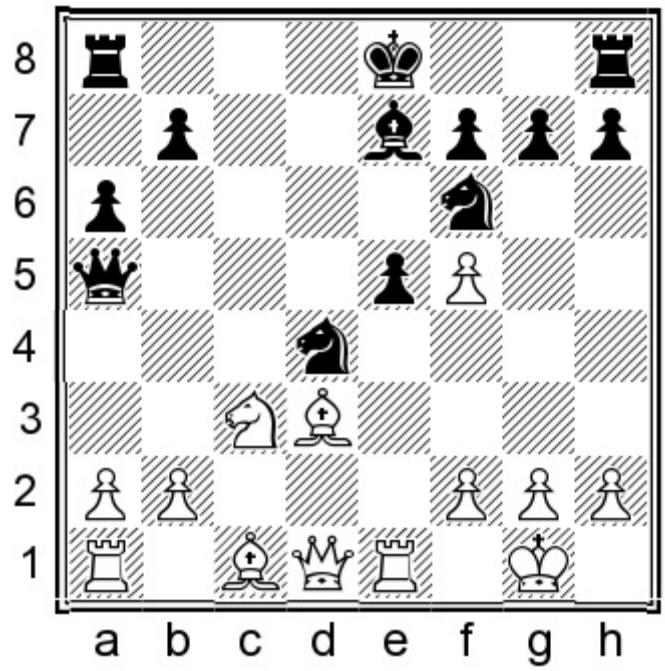
8...♘d4



Position after: 8...♘d4

9.♘c3

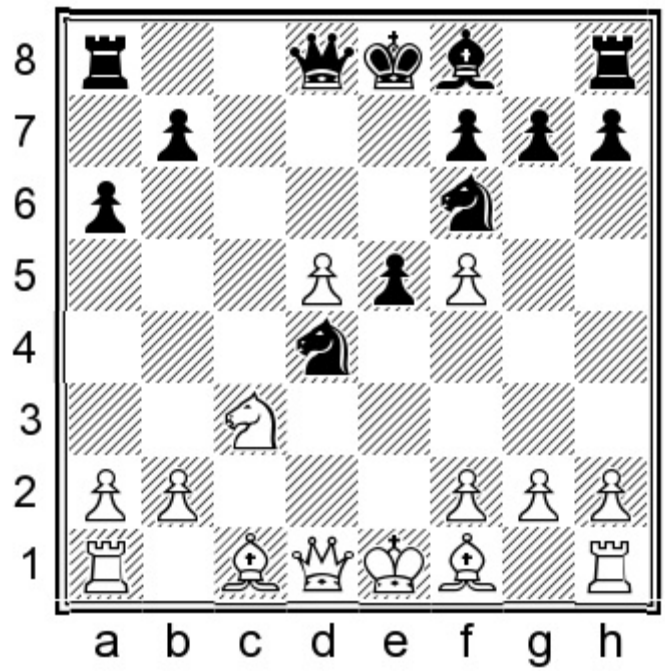
9.♗d3!? An interesting concept. White postpones ♘c3 which would take us into the main line. White tries to get a rook on e1 as quickly as possible to focus on the main weakness in Black's camp, his e-pawn. As Fabiano Caruana played this move quite successfully in the 2022 Candidates Tournament, we may see more of it in the near future. 9...♘f6! is the better move, as already demonstrated by a number of O'Kelly regulars. 10.0-0 ♗e7! 11.♖e1 ♕xd5! That is a better idea! By taking at the last possible moment Black can optimize how to take the pawn and, if taken by the queen, where to put his queen after White's next move. 12.♘c3 ♕a5!



Position after: 12...♕a5!

Black should defend his e-pawn. 13.♗g5 [13.♗d2 ♖d8 14.♘e4 ♕b6 15.♗c3 0-0 16.♘xf6+ ♕xf6 17.♕g4 b5=] 13...0-0 14.♗xf6 ♗xf6 15.♘e4 ♕d8! 16.♕g4 ♖c8 17.♖ad1 [17.♖e3 g6 18.♘xf6+ ♕xf6 19.h4 ♘c2 20.♗xc2 ♖xc2 21.♖f3 ♕d6=] 17...b5= It will be difficult for White to set up an attack on the kingside, as in the main line, as he has exchanged his dark-squared bishop. The chances are even.

9...♘f6



Position after: 9...♘f6

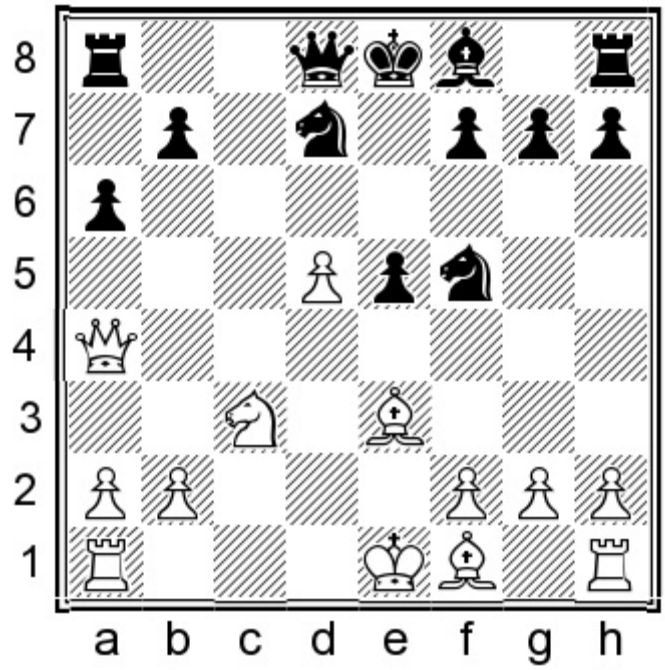
The most natural continuation which transposes to the next chapter.

10.♗d3

White defends his pawn on f5. This is seen most often in practice.

A) 10.♗c4 ♖c8! With a free tempo for Black. 11.♗d3 [11.♗b3 ♗b4! 12.0-0 0-0 13.♗e3 ♘xf5∓ 1-0 (75) Galan, A (2210) – Manak, J Slovakia 1997.] 11...♗e7 12.0-0 0-0=

B) 10.♗e3 White challenges the strong knight in the center, but after Black's next move it is clear that this is not the most principled continuation. 10...♘xf5! Time to take back some material. Now it is Black's turn to challenge the white bishop. 11.♕a4+ The idea behind White's 10th move. Black has two good moves. [11.♗c4?! ♘xe3 12.fxe3 ♗c5∓] The quiet option is 11...♘d7.



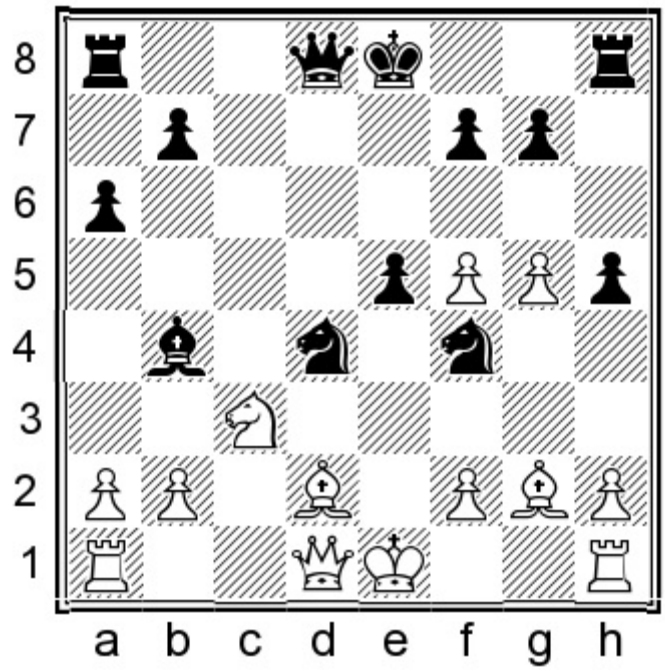
Position after: 11...♘d7

Black will gain further time as the white queen is in a vulnerable position.

B1) 12.♗d2 saving the bishop costs time. 12...b5!? 13.♕d1 ♗c5∓

B2) 12.0-0-0 ♘xe3! 13.fxe3 b5!N 14.♕g4 ♘f6 15.♕g3 ♗b4 [15...♗d6 16.♕xg7 ♖g8 17.♕h6 ♗b4∓] 16.♕xe5+ ♕e7 17.♕xe7+ ♔xe7= Black will soon win back a pawn leading to an equal endgame.

C) 10.g4 A sharp continuation which weakens White's kingside. 10...h5! A good recipe against and early g2-g4. We first weaken White's kingside before taking the d-pawn. 11.g5 ♘xd5 12.♗g2 ♗b4! 13.♗d2 ♘f4!



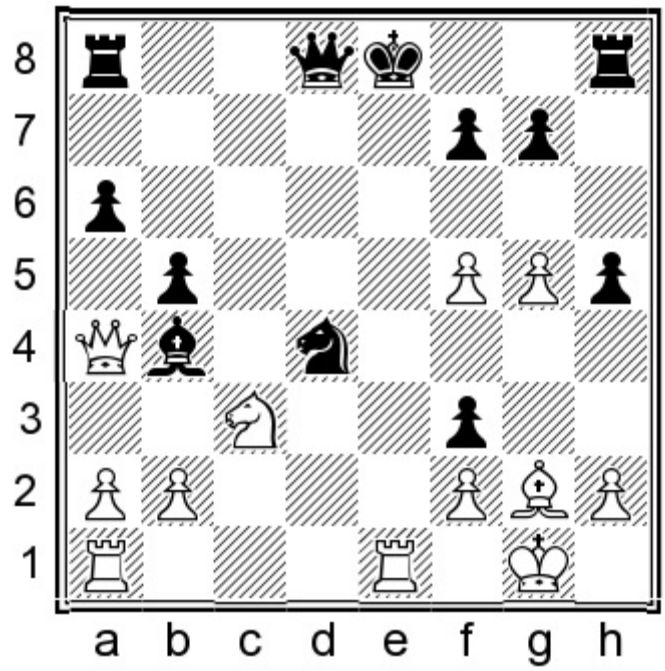
Position after: 13...♘f4!

The board is on fire, but Black has excellent chances in the complications which follow.

C1) 14.♗xb7 ♘d3+ 15.♔f1 ♘xb2 16.♕c1 ♖b8 17.♗g2 ♘d3 18.♕d1 ♘xf5–+

C2) 14.♗e4 0-0 15.a3 ♗xc3 16.bxc3 [16.♗xc3 ♕xg5] 16...♘de2 17.♗f3 ♘xc3 18.♗xc3 ♕c8⩱

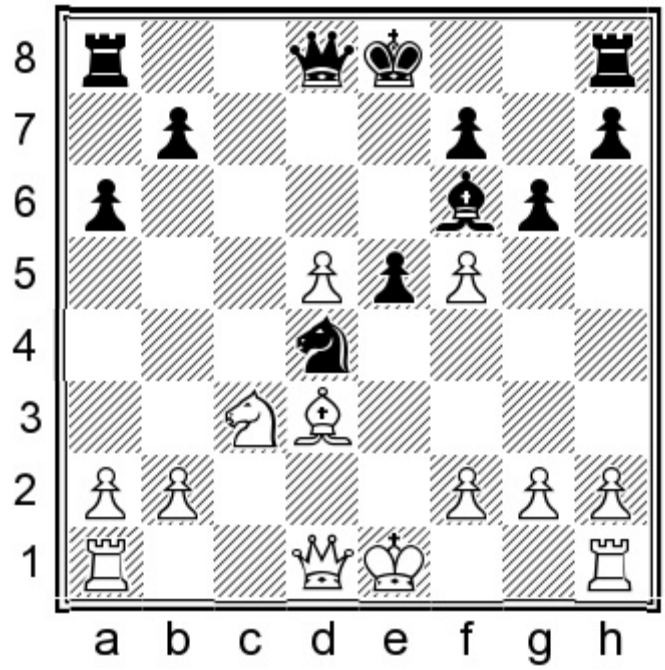
C3) 14.♗xf4 exf4 15.0-0! [15.♕a4+ b5∓; 15.f6 gxf6 16.0-0 ♗xc3 17.bxc3 ♘e6 18.g6 ♕xd1 19.♖axd1 ♖d8=] 15...f3! 16.♕a4+ b5 17.♖fe1+!



Position after: 17.♖fe1+!

17...♗e7 18.♕d1 fxg2 19.f6 gxf6 20.gxf6 ♘e6= With equal chances.

D) 10.♗g5 White is materialistic and exchanges the bishop pair in order to keep his extra pawn. 10...♗e7! 11.♗xf6 White must avoid losing a pawn after ...♘xd5. [11.f4 ♘xd5 12.♗xe7 ♘xe7 13.fxe5 ♘exf5∓ 0-1 (28) marbingao (2270) – Undercover1 (2332) lichess.org 2022.] 11...♗xf6 12.♗d3 [12.g4?! h5!∓ and White cannot maintain his kingside structure.] 12...g6!

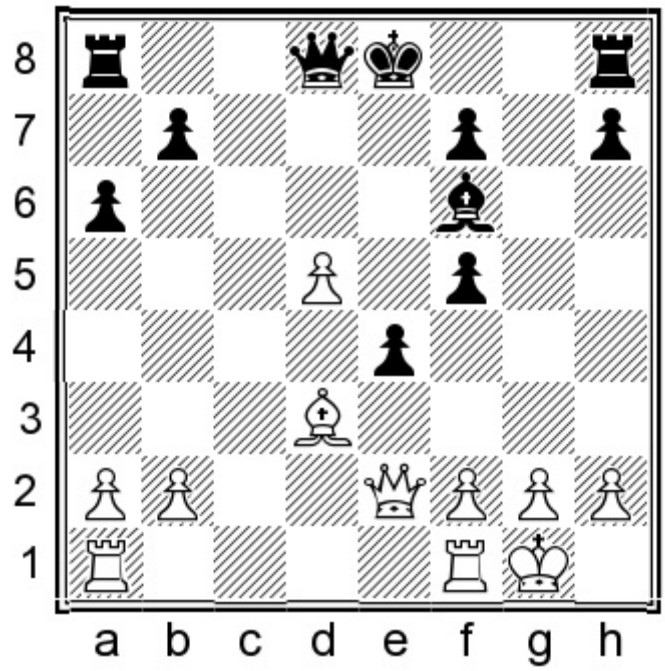


Position after: 12...g6!

An essential move to keep the initiative. If Black does not sacrifice a pawn this way he is already in serious problems. Black will be a pawn behind but will create more than sufficient counterplay with his strong knight in the center and the open h-file.

D1) 13.fxg6 The most natural move and played most often. 13...hxg6 14.0-0 [14.a4 ♗g7 15.a5 f5 16.♕a4+ ♔f7 17.♖d1 ♕d6 18.h4 ♖ac8⩱ 0-1 (31) Cadavid, J (1992) – Ruiz Jaraba, V (1850) Pereira 2022.] 14...♔f8⩱ Black castles by hand and keeps the rook on the h-file.

D2) 13.0-0! The best choice but only seen in one game. White does not accept the pawn sacrifice. 13...gxf5 14.♘e2 ♘xe2+ 15.♕xe2 e4!



Position after: 15...e4!

An improvement on the known game. The situation becomes rather complicated. 16.♖ad1 ♕d6 17.f3 [17.♗c2 h5 18.f3 ♗e5 19.h3 0-0-0⩲] 17...0-0-0 Again Black sacrifices a pawn with a tense struggle ahead. The opposite-colored bishops ensure that Black will not run into any problems in the endgame. 18.fxe4 fxe4 19.♗xe4 ♔b8⩱

10...♗e7!

Black should postpone taking the d-pawn as long as possible and give priority to development.

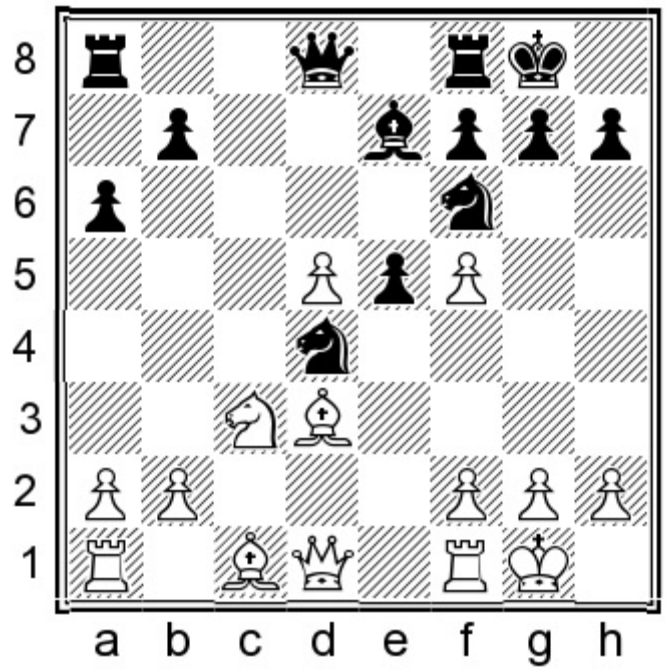
A) 10...♘xd5?! 11.♗e4± is an example of where Black loses more time. [11.0-0 ♗e7 12.♗e4± is also good for White.]

B) 10...♕d7?! This is a nice defensive move against a white attack with a queen on g4. However, Black played it with something else in mind. 11.0-0 0-0-0?! This is too risky. The king is in the open air on the queenside. My database shows a 100% score for White. 12.♗g5!± 1-0 (26) Fiensch, G – Schuetz, H DDR 1978.

11.0-0

11.♗e3 0-0 12.f4?! ♘xd5∓ 0-1 (25) dashjury (2528) – Romvid (2658) lichess.org 2022.

11...0-0



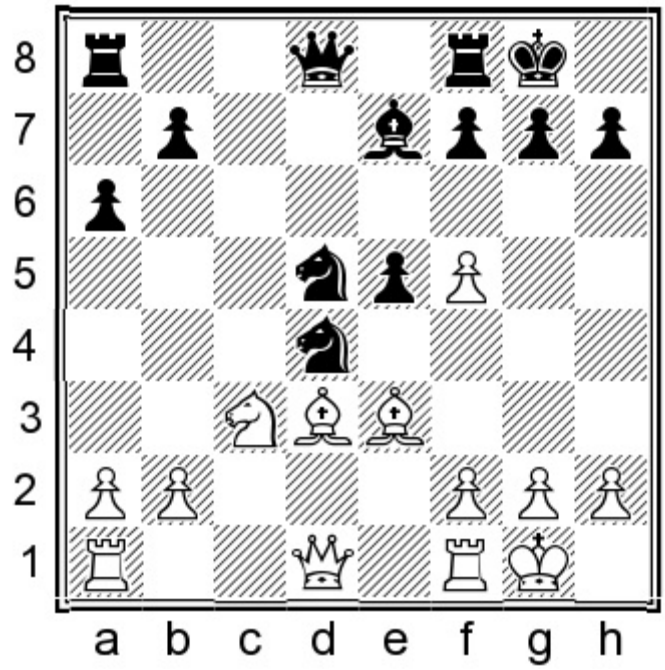
Position after: 11...0-0

12.♖e1

The natural continuation, played most often and preferred by the engines.

A) 12.f4 exf4! 13.♗xf4 ♘xd5! 14.♕d2 [14.♗d2 ♘f6∓] 14...♗f6 15.♘e4 ♘xf4 16.♕xf4 ♕e7=

B) 12.♗e3 ♘xd5! Soon leads to an equal position.

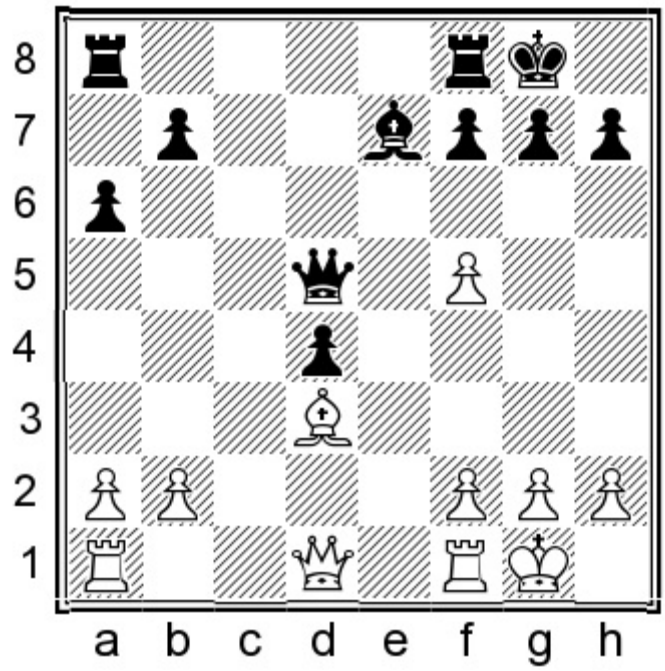


Position after: 12...♘xd5!

B1) 13.♘xd5 ♕xd5 14.♕g4 ♗f6 and we play the main line where 12.♖e1 has been replaced by the less effective 12.♗e3.

B2) 13.♗e4 ♘f6! 14.♗xb7 [14.♕d2? ♘xe4 15.♘xe4 ♘xf5∓] 14...♖b8 15.♗xa6 ♖xb2 16.♗d3 ♕a5 17.♘e4 ♘xe4 18.♗xe4 ♘e2+ 19.♔h1 ♖d8! [19...♘c3? 20.♕f3= 1-0 (34) higescha– Romvid (2594) lichess.org 2020.] 20.♕e1 ♗b4–+

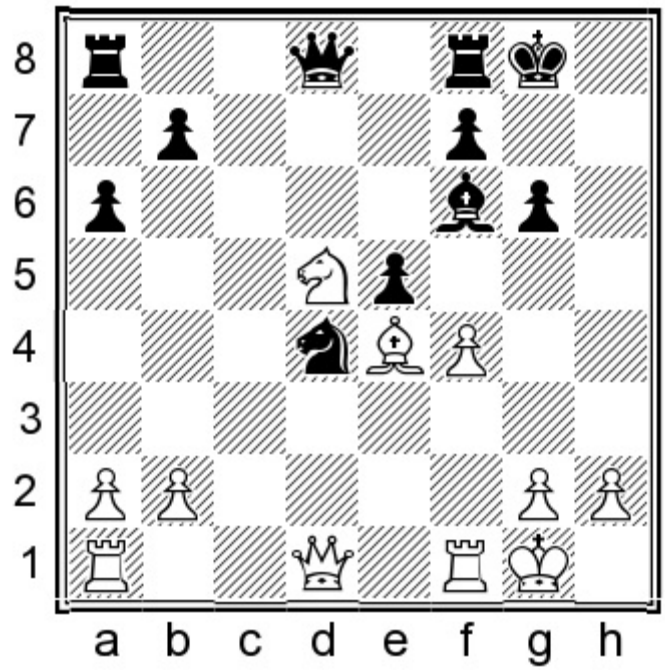
B3) 13.♗xd4 exd4 14.♘xd5 ♕xd5



Position after: 14...♕xd5

15.♕h5 ♗f6 16.♖fe1 ♖fe8 17.b3 b5= ½ – ½ (23) Chesstomioka (2624)-cutemouse83 (2911) lichess.org 2021.

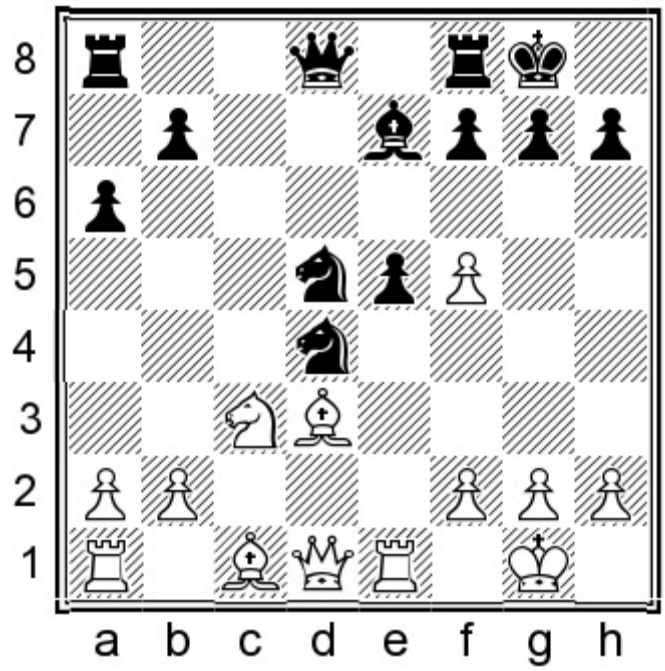
C) 12.♗g5 ♘xd5 13.♘xd5 ♗xg5 14.♗e4 g6! 15.f4 ♗f6 16.fxg6 hxg6



Position after: 16...hxg6

17.f5 gxf5 18.♕h5 ♗g7 19.♖xf5 ♘xf5 20.♗xf5 ♖e8 21.♗h7+ ♔f8 22.♕f3 ♖e6 23.♖f1 ♕d7 24.♗f5= There is too little material on the board for White to have any winning ambitions.

12...♘xd5!



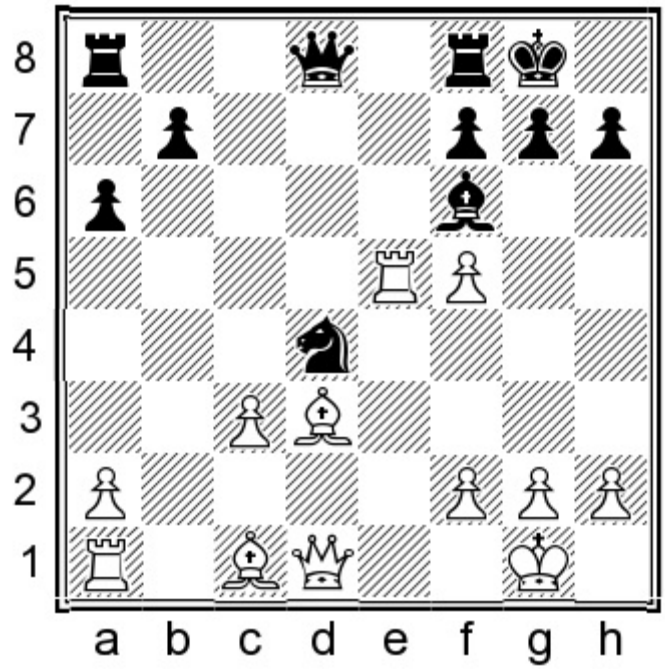
Position after: 12...♘xd5!

It is time to take the pawn and introduce some tactics into the position.

13.♘xd5!

Together with 13.♕g4 this is White's most dangerous response. It could be the start of a ferocious attack against the black king.

A) 13.♖xe5 If White plays the 3.c4 O'Kelly unprepared you will probably face this move. White temporarily wins a pawn, but has to be very careful as there are all kind of tactics which are favorable for Black. 13...♘xc3 14.bxc3 ♗f6!



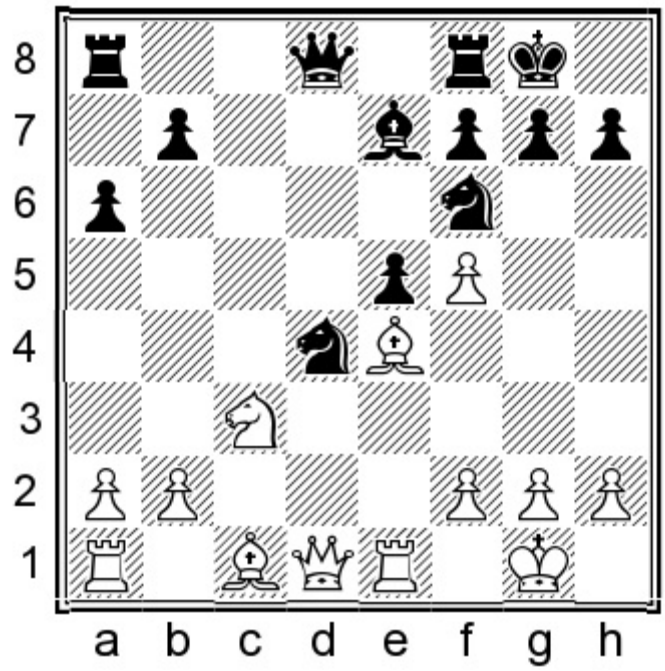
Position after: 14...♗f6!

This has led to a lot of accidents for White.

A1) 15.cxd4? White expects 15...♗xe5 winning material, but it is Black who immediately wins with a much better move. 15...♕xd4!–+ White's position can no longer be saved. 16.♖b1 ♗xe5 17.♗b2 [17.♖xb7 ♖fb8–+ 0-1 (53) MarkusMaischberger (2623) – Romvid (2748) lichess.org 2022.] 17...♕d5 18.f6 the final trick. 18...g6 19.♕e2 ♗xb2 20.♖xb2 ♖ad8 21.♕e3 ♕xd3–+

A2) 15.♖e1 Herewith White saves the game. 15...♘b5! This will result in massive exchanges leading to an equal endgame. 16.♗xb5 [16.♗b2 ♘xc3 17.♕f3 b5! 18.♖ac1 b4∓] 16...axb5! 17.♕b3 [17.♗d2?! b4! 18.♕c2 ♖c8 19.♖ab1 bxc3 20.♗e3 ♕d7∓] 17...♕d3 18.♗e3 ♕xf5! 19.♗d4 g6= It is time to agree to a draw.

B) 13.♗e4 Putting pressure on Black's centralized knight, with an X-ray towards Black's queenside pawns. 13...♘f6!



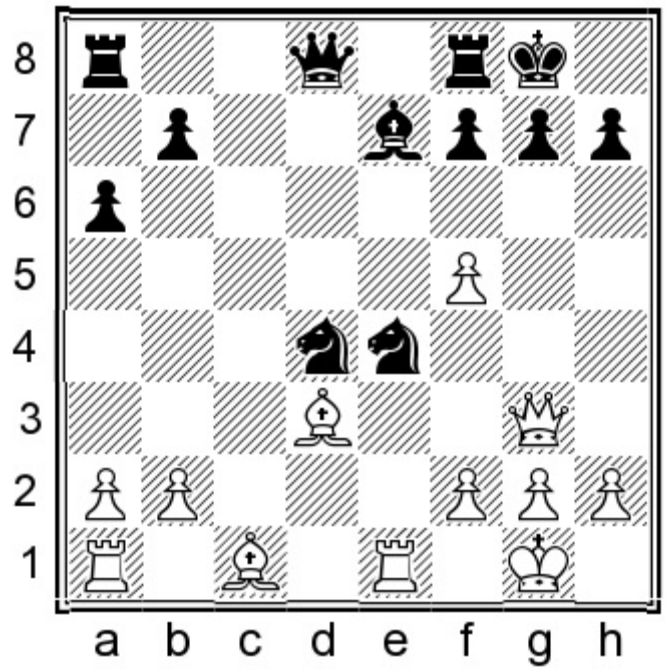
Position after: 13...♘f6!

Active defense, keeping the d4-knight in position and mobilizing the rook if White takes on b7. That is the reason why in the main line White exchanges on d5 first. 14.♗xb7 [14.♗d3 ♕c7 15.♗g5 ♖ad8=] 14...♖a7

B1) 15.♗f3 ♖d7 16.♗g5 [16.♖xe5?? ♘c6–+] 16...♘xf5 17.♕a4 ♘d4 18.♗e2 a5= The pawn count is equal again but Black still has a strong knight on d4. ½ – ½ (31) Patrelakis, E (2281) – Enchev, I (2483) Paleochora 2021.

B2) 15.♗e4 may be a bit better, but Black should be able to obtain enough counterplay for the pawn. 15...♖d7 16.♕a4 ♕c8 17.♗g5 ♘xe4 18.♗xe7 ♖xe7 19.♖xe4 [19.♘xe4 ♕xf5=] 19...f6 20.♖d1 ♖b7⩲

C) 13.♕g4!? Another method to build up an initiative on the kingside. In itself an interesting idea but Wesley So had an unfortunate experience with this maneuver. 13...♘f6 14.♕g3 [14.♕h3 ♕d6=] 14...e4! 15.♘xe4 ♘xe4



Position after: 15...♘xe4

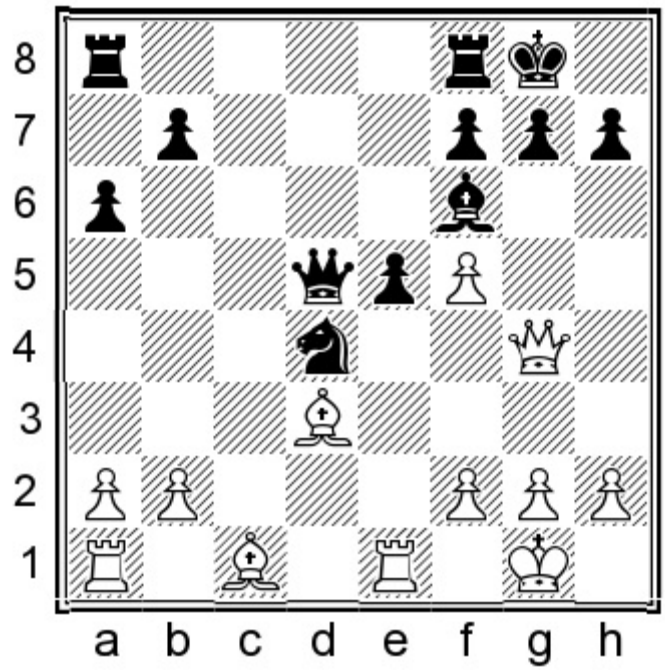
16.♖xe4 [16.♗xe4 ♘e2+–+] 16...♘xf5 17.♕f3 [17.♕h3 g6=] 17...♕d7= White has the bishop pair, but Black is solid.

13...♕xd5 14.♕g4

White has the bishop pair, a nice pawn on f5 and good chances to develop an attack against the black king. Black has a nice knight and a centralized queen.

14.♗e4 ♕d7 looking forward to playing ...g6 at the right time, to get rid of White's annoying f-pawn. 15.♗e3 [15.♕g4 g6 16.♗h6 ♖fe8 17.♖ad1 ♖ad8 18.♖d3 ♔h8 19.h3 ♗f6=] 15...♖ad8 [15...g6? 16.♗xd4 exd4 17.♕b3±] 16.g3 [16.♕g4 g6=] 16...g6=

14...♗f6



Position after: 14...♗f6

Black should defend carefully.

15.h4

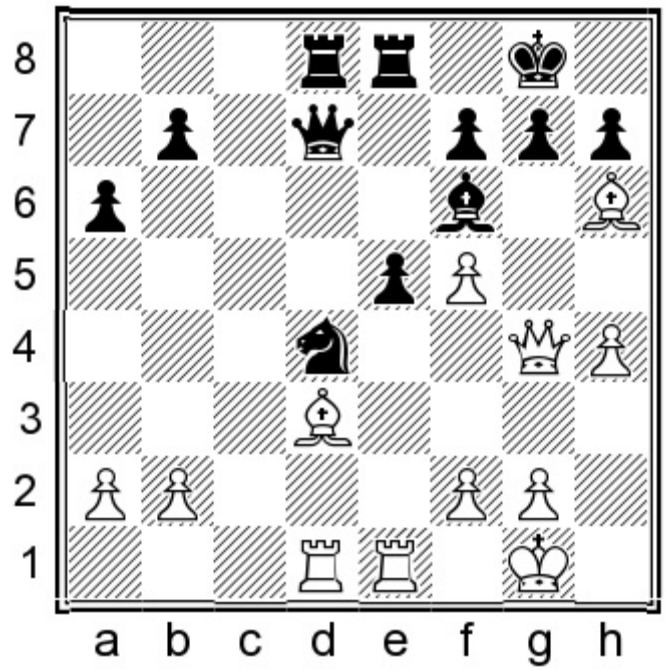
White gradually builds up his attack.

A) 15.♗e4 only improves the position of the black queen. 15...♕d7! 16.♗e3 g6 17.♖ad1 ♖ad8 18.♖d2 ♕c8 19.♗xd4 ♖xd4 20.♖xd4 exd4 21.♕f3 ♖e8= 1-0 (59) Checkmate_2022 (2333) – Undercover1 (2388) lichess.org 2022.

B) 15.♗h6 This move immediately is an important alternative. 15...♕d7! Black's best. It puts the queen on its best square preventing a future f5-f6.

B1) 16.h4 ♖ad8 17.♖ad1 ♖fe8 etc. with ...g6 next. [17...♔h8 18.♗g5]

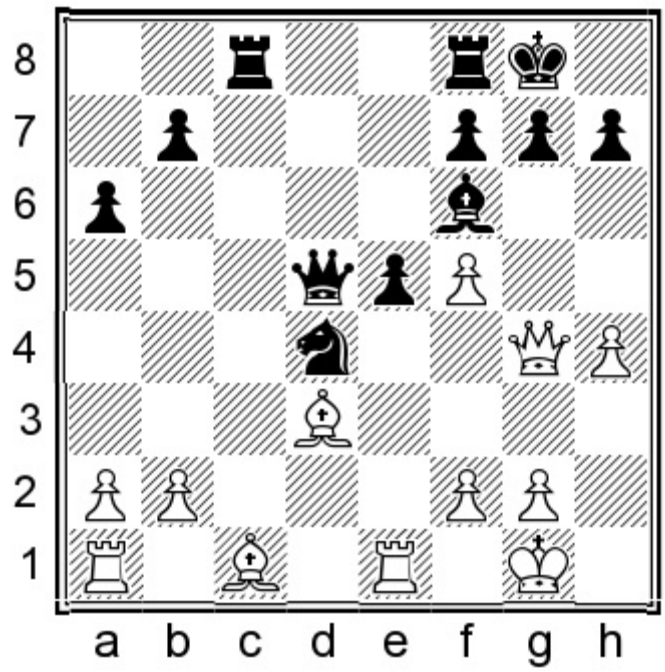
B2) 16.♖ad1 ♖ad8 17.h4 ♖fe8!



Position after: 17...♖fe8!

Black plays for a counterattack in the center. 18.h5 [18.♗e4 ♔h8 19.♗e3 ♕a4 20.♖d2 ♕xa2= Black has good counterplay.; 18.♗g5 ♗xg5 19.hxg5 g6=] 18...e4! equalizing the position. 19.♗xe4 ♖xe4 20.♖xe4 ♘f3+ 21.gxf3 ♕xd1+ 22.♔g2 ♔h8 23.♗g5 h6 24.♗xf6 gxf6=

15...♖ac8



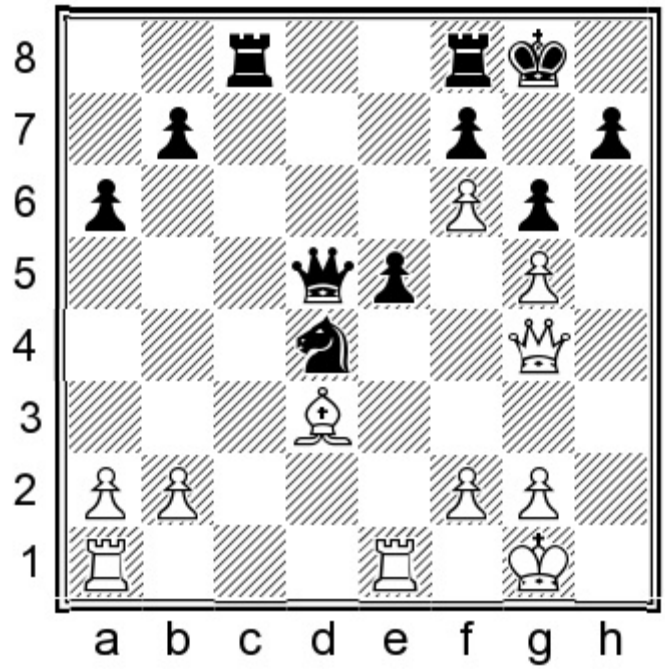
Position after: 15...♖ac8

Black brings ...♘c2 into the equation.

16.♗e4

A) 16.♗h6 ♘f3+! This is possible as White has two pieces hanging. 17.gxf3 [17.♕xf3 ♕xf3 18.gxf3 gxh6=] 17...♕xd3 18.♖ad1 ♕c4=

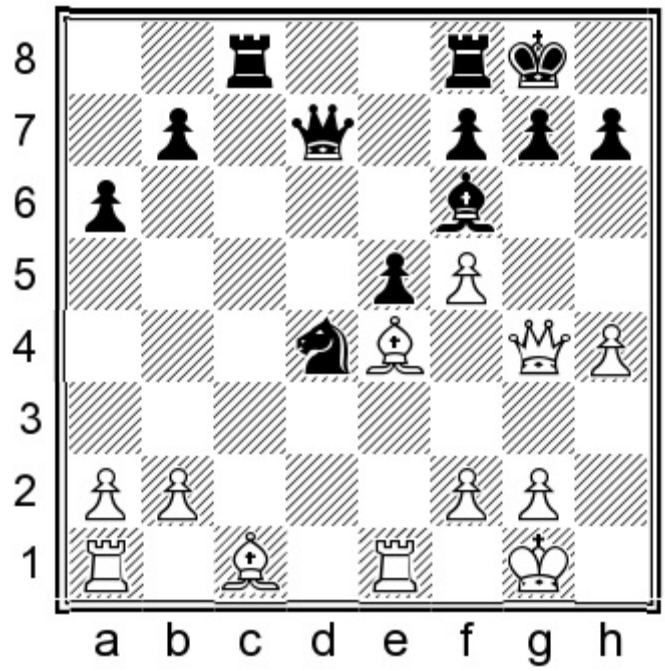
B) 16.♗g5!? ♗xg5 17.hxg5 g6 18.f6



Position after: 18.f6

looks frightening, but Black can defend easily. 18...♖fd8 19.♖ad1 [19.♗e4 ♕d7 20.♕h4 h5!=] 19...b5 20.♕h4 h5 21.gxh6 ♔h7=

16...♕d7



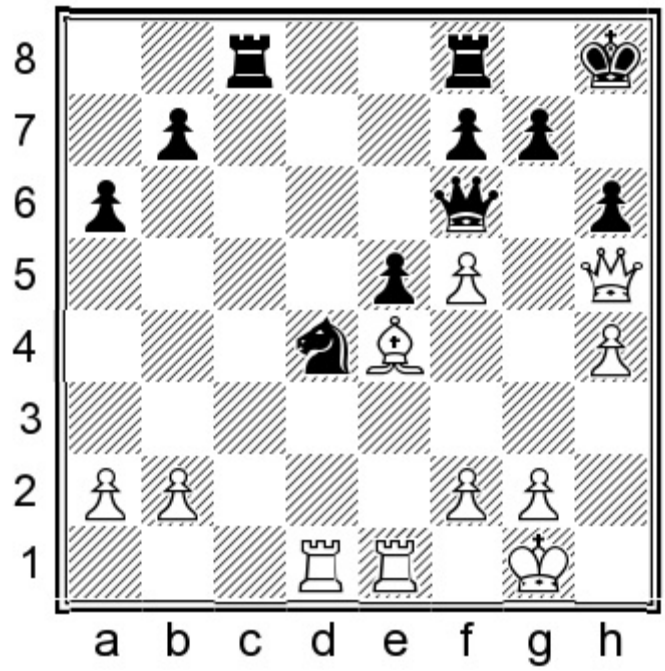
Position after: 16...♕d7

The ideal square for the queen.

17.♗h6

17.h5 ♔h8 18.♖d1 ♖fd8 19.♗g5 ♗xg5 20.♕xg5 h6 21.♕h4 f6=

17...♔h8! 18.♗g5 ♕e7 19.♖ad1 h6 20.♗xf6 ♕xf6 21.♕h5



Position after: 21.♕h5

21...♖cd8 22.♖d3 ♔h7 23.♔h1 ♖d6=

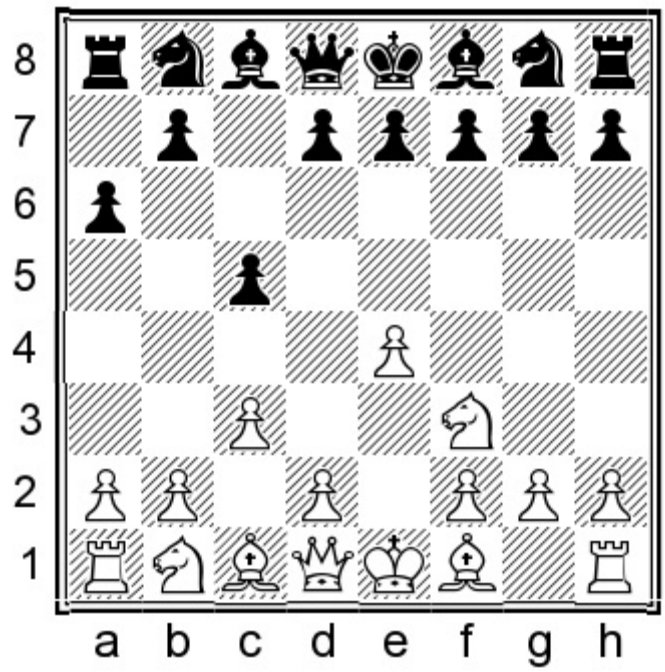
½ – ½ (56) Ivic, V (2620) – Van Foreest, L (2532) Terme Catez 2021.

Conclusion

Black's traditional method of combatting the system with 3.c4 and 6.♘f5 has long been under a cloud. Recent theoretical developments and elite practice have changed the assessment and have shown that Black should be able to obtain equality more easily with 6...d5 than with the fashionable 6...d6. The positions are sharp, White is often able to build up an initiative. The key to Black's success is the postponement of taking back the pawn on d5 or on f5. Black should still not be materialistic but play for piece activity. The finesse 13.♗e4 ♘f6! in the main line, a renewed pawn sacrifice, is a case in point. If White plays precisely with 13.♘xd5, he will be able to develop attacking chances on the kingside. Black should be able to secure a draw with precise play.

Chapter 4
The Delayed Alapin – 3.c3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 4 – The Delayed Alapin – 3.c3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5

a) Introduction

b) 4.e5

c) 4.exd5 ♕xd5

d) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.--

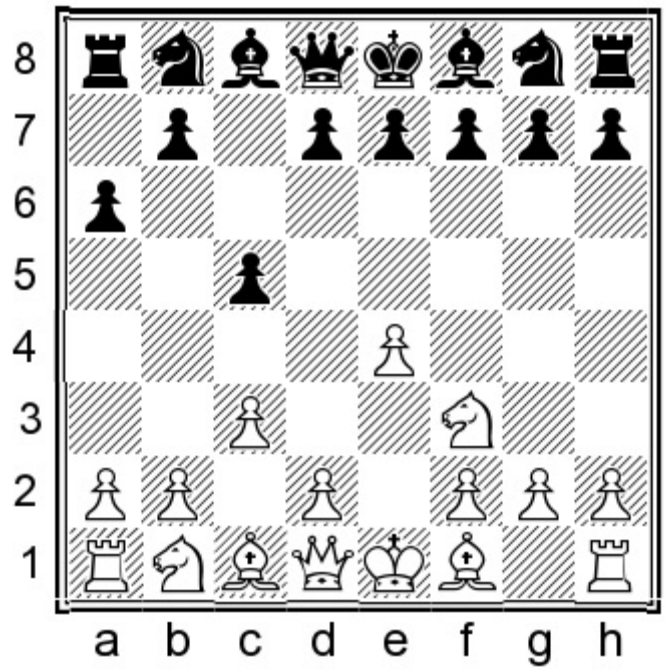
e) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.♕a4+

f) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 6.--

g) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4

a) Introduction

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3



Position after: 3.c3

Theoretically, this is one of the more challenging attempts against the O'Kelly. White transposes into a Sicilian Alapin (1.e4 c5 2.c3) and claims that his 2.♘f3 is more useful in the ensuing positions than Black's 2....a6. Black has many ways to respond to 3.c3. The main options seen in opening literature are as follows.

3...d5

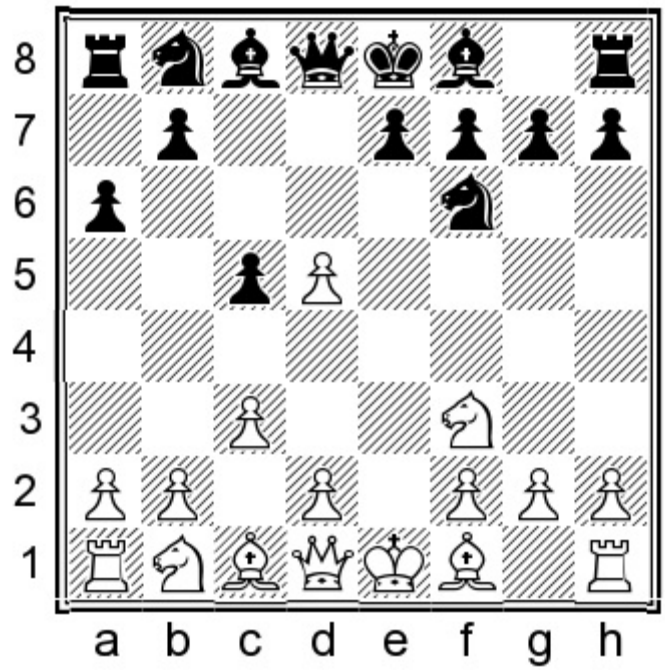
A) 3...e6 4.d4 d5 3. A French (1.e4 e6) setup. Khalifman claims an advantage after 5.exd5. Other sources prefer to transpose into a line of the Advance French after 5.e5 with Black's somewhat odd ...a6. Black has a playable game, but it is clear that the inclusion of an early ...a6 is not the most optimal way to fight the Advance French.

B) 3...♘f6 4. A Sicilian Alapin setup with 3...♘f6 4.e5 ♘d5 5.d4 cxd4. This is the pet line of Armenian IM and O'Kelly specialist David Kalashian. He even played a draw with it against Grischuk in a blitz game. Again 2...a6 is not Black's strongest move in such positions.

4.exd5

4.e5 is definitely not critical. After 4...♘c6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4 ♗g4 Black has already achieved at least an equal game.

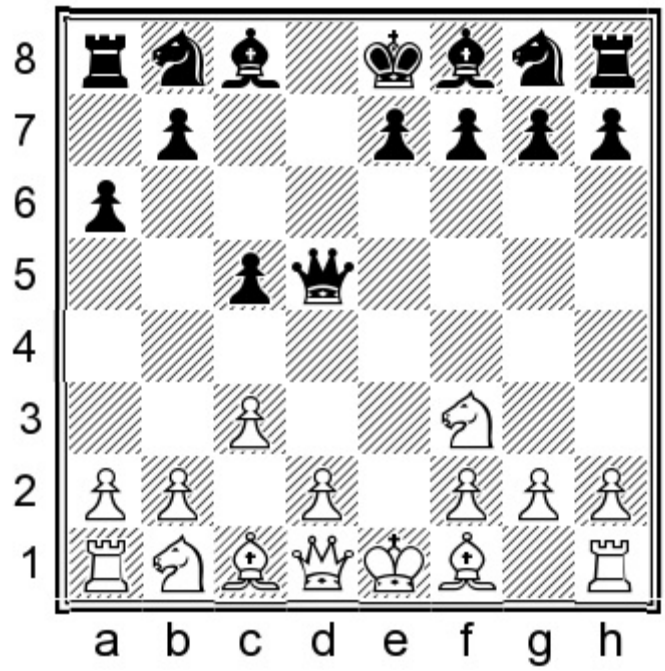
4...♘f6!?



Position after: 4...♘f6!?

A relatively rare, somewhat eccentric yet aggressive system that has a reputation of being theoretically dubious. It still carries a lot of surprise value. It was analyzed by John Emms in his book "Dangerous Weapons – Sicilian", but only with a few lines. Parimarjan Negi's impressive series on the Sicilian "1.e4 vs The Sicilian III" and the popular "Keep It Simple 1.e4" by Christof Sielecki do not mention it at all and only look into 4...♕xd5. 3...d5 followed by 4...♘f6 was developed in the 1970s by the Belgian IM Josef Boey, who had more rogue systems up his sleeve, for example the QGD Chigorin and the Ruy Lopez Jaenisch. In what follows I will demonstrate that the negative theoretical judgment on 4...♘f6 is not justified. Black can keep an interesting and (almost) equal game against all of White's alternatives. When Black plays against an IQP, it will be with the knight on d5 rather than the queen, which makes those lines much more attractive. Often Black will fianchetto his bishop to g7, playing a QGD Tarrasch with reversed colors. In other lines there are nice tactical complications, reminiscent of the Icelandic Gambit in the Scandinavian Defense (1.e4 1...d5 2.exd5 ♘f6 3.c4 e6 etc.). The Brazilian GM Alexandr Fier is the specialist in this line. He has introduced many new ideas which strengthen Black's case.

4...♕xd5



Position after: 4...♕xd5

A ...d5 Sicilian Alapin position with 3...d5 4.exd5 ♕xd5. This is the highroad of theory, one of the most solid approaches against 3.c3.

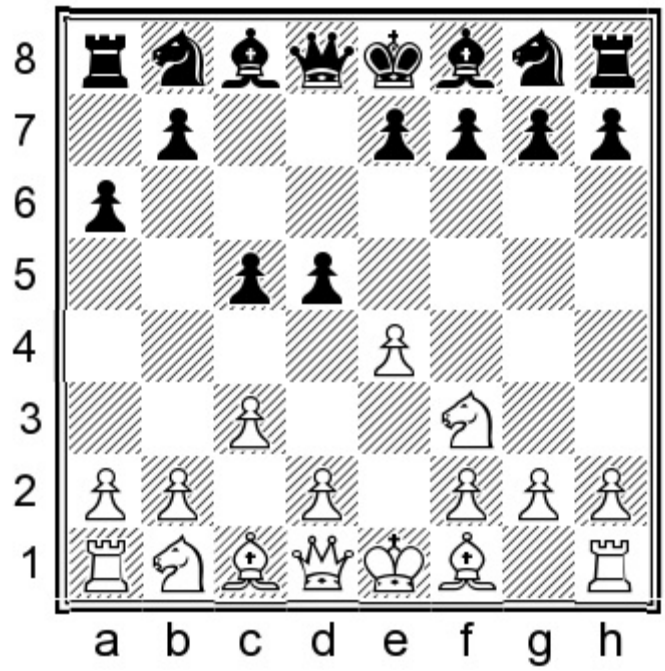
It has been played by all the big names who have the O'Kelly in their opening repertoire, such as Csom, Artemiev and Taimanov. In many cases Black experimented with one of the other alternatives for the third move only to later conclude that this approach is the best.

Taking the light-squared bishop outside the pawn chain is too risky as a tempo has already been spent on ...a6. If necessary, there is the follow-up in ...♕d5-d6, taking advantage of the fact that the pawn on a6 prevents White's ♘b5. Later Black can consider expanding on the queenside with ...b7-b5.

Traditional IQP positions will arise where Black has his share of the chances. This is a serious system that I would recommend if you are less enthusiastic about 4...♘f6 as I propose in this book. Martin and Sielecki both recommend this approach in their respective theoretical works on the O'Kelly. I give a summary overview of the theoretical status of 4...♕xd5.

b) 4.e5

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5



Position after: 3...d5

4.e5

This move gives Black an excellent Caro Kann Advance variation. Due to the early ♘f3 Black will be able to develop his light-squared bishop to the optimal g4-square, indirectly increasing the pressure against one of White's weak spots, the d4-pawn.

4...♘c6

Or 4...♗f5 5.d4 e6 which is an improved Short system in the Advance Caro Kann. While it has not yet been played at the GM level it is a good alternative to the text and produces excellent results for Black in the 30 or so games in the database with it.

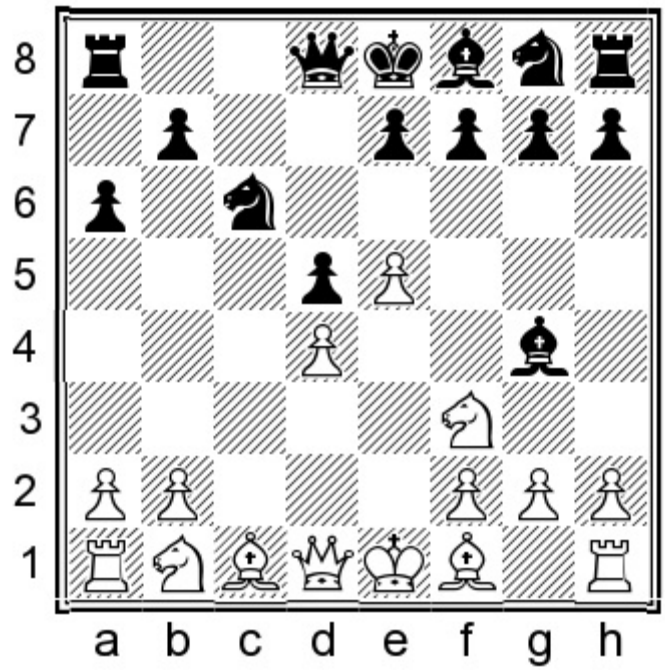
5.d4 cxd4

Taking on d4 has been the preference of most O'Kelly practitioners.

6.cxd4

6.♘xd4? ♘xe5∓ wins a pawn for free. 0-1 (61) Siegenthaler, J – Kadiltzoglou, P Szeged 1994.

6...♗g4



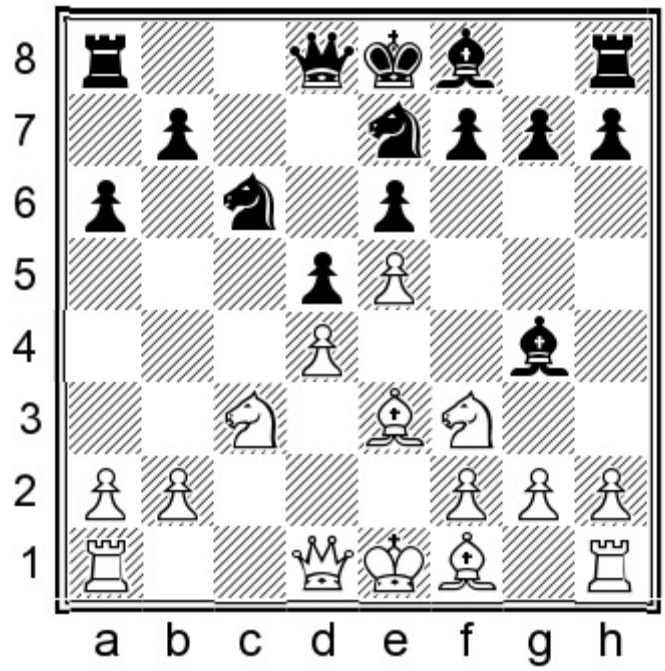
Position after: 6...♗g4

The bishop goes to its optimal square in one go. From here Black's focus is on natural development, while increasing the pressure against the white center. Chances are already balanced.

7.♗e2

A) 7.♘bd2 we will see this idea later as well. White intends to play h3 and take back on f3 with the other knight. 7...♕a5! White suddenly has problems defending his pawns. 8.♕b3 [8.♗e2 ♗xf3 9.♗xf3 e6 10.0-0 ♘xd4∓] 8...♖b8 9.♕c3 e6 10.♕xa5 [10.a3?! ♗b4!∓] 10...♘xa5∓

B) White may try to play ♗e2 later and develop his queenside first. 7.♘c3 e6 8.♗e3 ♘ge7



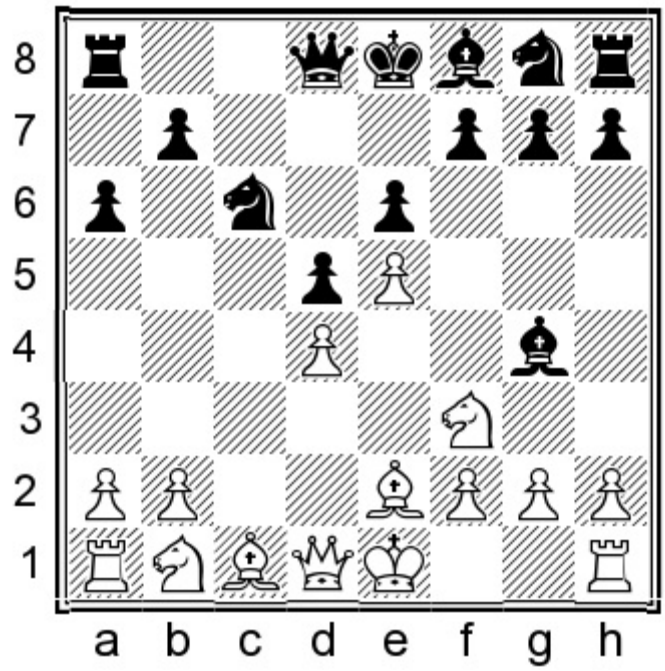
Position after: 8...♘ge7

Black has played all his usual moves. 9.♗e2 [9.h3 ♗xf3 10.♕xf3 ♘f5∓ 11.0-0-0?! ♗b4! 12.g4 ♘xe3 13.♕xe3 ♗xc3 14.♕xc3 ♘xe5∓; 9.♗d3 ♘f5! 10.♗xf5 ♗xf5 11.h3 ♗e7∓] 9...♘f5

B1) 10.♕d3?! f6! Another way of attacking the white center. 11.exf6 ♕xf6 12.0-0 ♗d6∓ 13.♖fe1 0-0 14.♖ad1 ♘xe3 15.♕xe3 [15.fxe3 ♕h6–+] 15...♗f4 16.♕d3 ♗f5 and the white queen is caught in the middle of the board. 0-1 (16) Schnabeltierli (2304) – Boekelman, J (2435) Chess. com 2022.

B2) 10.0-0 transposes to later variations.

7...e6

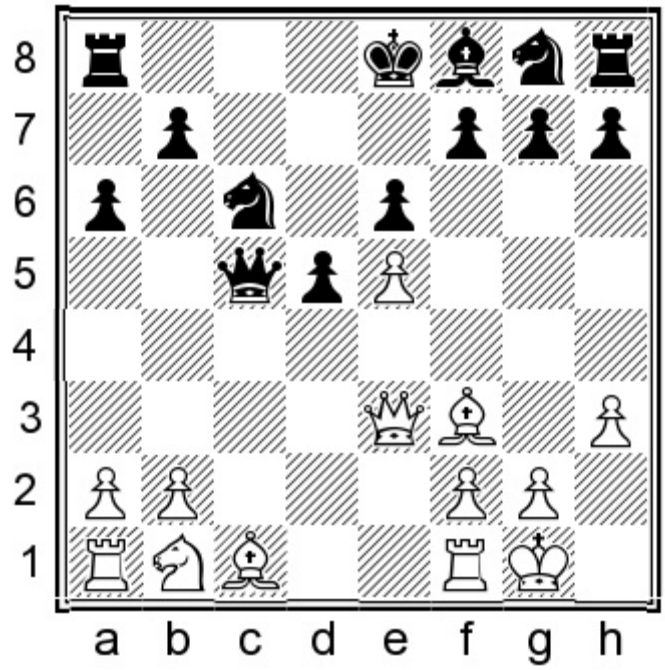


Position after: 7...e6

8.0-0

White develops naturally as well. He keeps the options for his b1-knight open.

A) 8.h3?! Thematic, but poorly timed. An early h3 accentuates White's weaknesses on d4 and b2. 8...♗xf3! 9.♗xf3 ♕b6∓ Black wins a pawn. The move 2...a6 comes in handy, as in the Millner Barry Gambit in the French Advance Variation. 10.0-0 ♕xd4 11.♕b3 ♕b4 12.♕e3 ♕c5

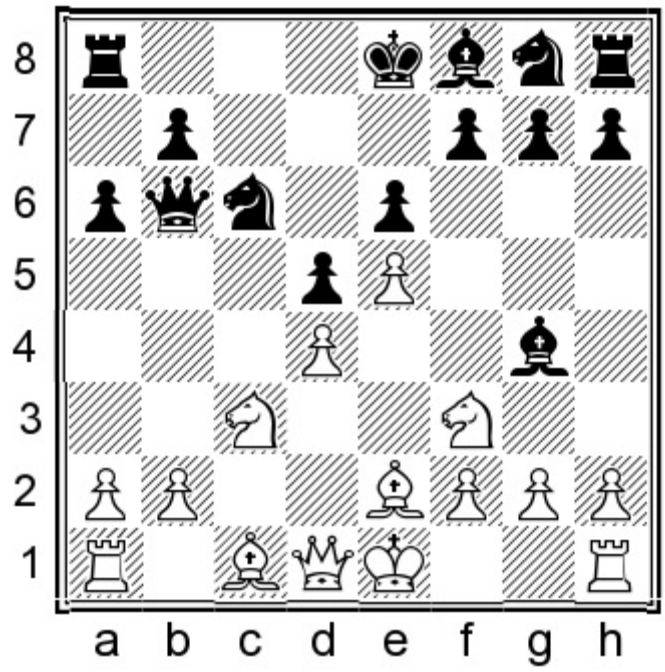


Position after: 12...♕c5

13.♕g5 [13.♕e2 ♘ge7 14.♗e3 ♕a5–+] 13...♘ge7 14.♘c3 ♘g6 15.♗e3 ♕a5–+ and, in addition to the weakness of his e-pawn, White has to watch out for the ...d5-d4 threat.

B) 8.♗e3 ♘ge7 9.h3?! Others transpose. An early h3 accentuates White's weaknesses on d4 and b2. 9...♗xf3 10.♗xf3 ♕b6! 11.0-0 ♕xb2 12.♘d2 ♘f5∓

C) 8.♘c3 the knight is not a happy camper on c3, especially as it is not in a position to play a role in defending d4. 8...♕b6!?



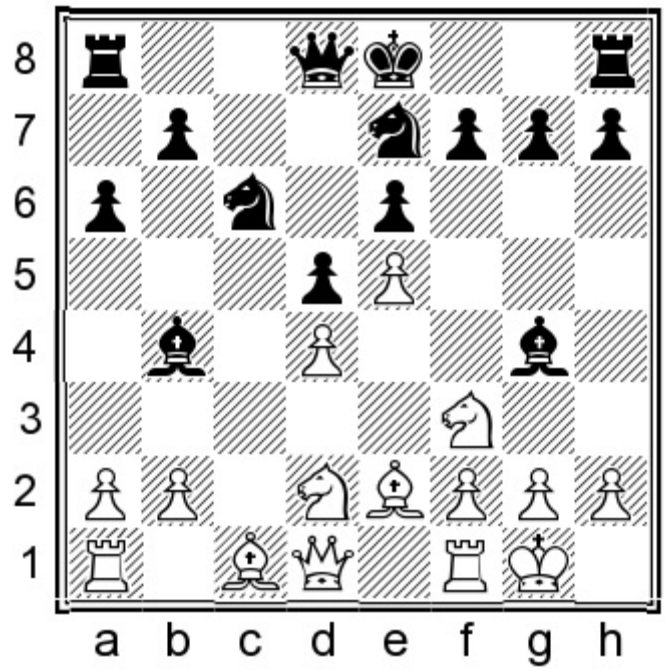
Position after: 8...♕b6!?

In this move order, Black can immediately go for ...♕b6. It emphasizes the fact that White has weak pawns. White has to take unorthodox measures to maintain the balance. Alternatively, Black may consider 8....♘ge7, most likely transposing to positions dealt with in the main line.

C1) 9.♘a4 ♕a5+ 10.♔f1 ♘ge7! Even better than the often-played 10...b5. The knight on a4 is vulnerable anyway. 11.♘g1 [11.♗d2 ♕d8 12.♘g1 ♗xe2+ 13.♘xe2 ♘f5 14.♗f4 g5∓] 11...h5 12.♗d2 ♗xe2+ 13.♘xe2 ♕b5∓

C2) 9.♘h4! This saves the show for White. 9...♗xe2 10.♘xe2 ♕b4+ 11.♗d2 [11.♔f1 ♘xe5! 12.a3 ♕c4 13.b3 ♕d3∓] 11...♕xb2 12.0-0 ♗b4 13.♗e3 [13.♗xb4 ♕xb4 14.♖b1 ♕a5 15.f4 ♘ge7 16.♖xb7 g6=] 13...♘ge7 14.a4 ♗a5 15.♖b1 ♕a2 16.♖a1 ♕b2= If Black wants more than a draw, 8...♘ge7 is the move.

D) 8.♘bd2 A creative continuation enabling ♘xf3 if Black takes on f3. 8...♗b4! Black prevents White's idea. The early ♘bd2 makes this pin possible. 9.0-0 ♘ge7



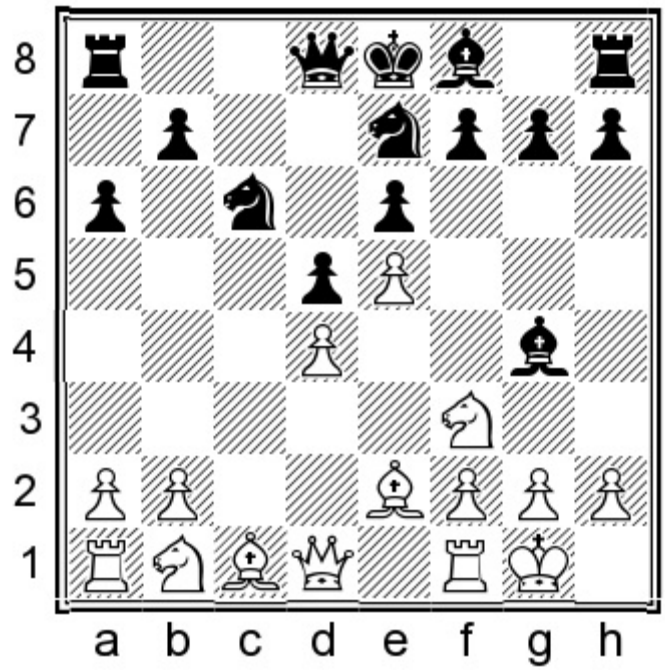
Position after: 9...♘ge7

Soon enough White will have problems with the defense of his d-pawn.

D1) 10.h3 ♗h5 11.a3?! [11.♘b3 leads to developments as in the Caruana game.] 11...♗xd2 12.♕xd2 ♗xf3 13.♗xf3 ♕b6!∓ The loss of the d4-pawn cannot be avoided.

D2) 10.♘b3 0-0 11.a3 [11.h3 ♗xf3 12.♗xf3 ♗a5 13.♗g4 ♗b6 14.♗f4 a5 15.a4 ♖c8=] 11...♗a5 12.♘c5 [12.♗d3 h6 13.h3 ♗f5 14.♘h4 ♗xd3 15.♕xd3 ♗b6=; 12.♘xa5 ♕xa5 13.♗e3 ♘f5 14.h3 ♗xf3 15.♗xf3 ♕b6∓] 12...♗b6 13.b4 ♗xc5! 14.bxc5 b6 15.cxb6 ♕xb6 16.♗e3 ♘f5∓ A typical position in this line. White is about to lose his d-pawn. 0-1 (32) Caruana, F (2822) – Artemiev, V (2731) Bucharest 2019. Since it was a blitz game Caruana may not have been inclined to use his best weapons for White against the O'Kelly. Or maybe he was just having a bad day.

8...♘ge7



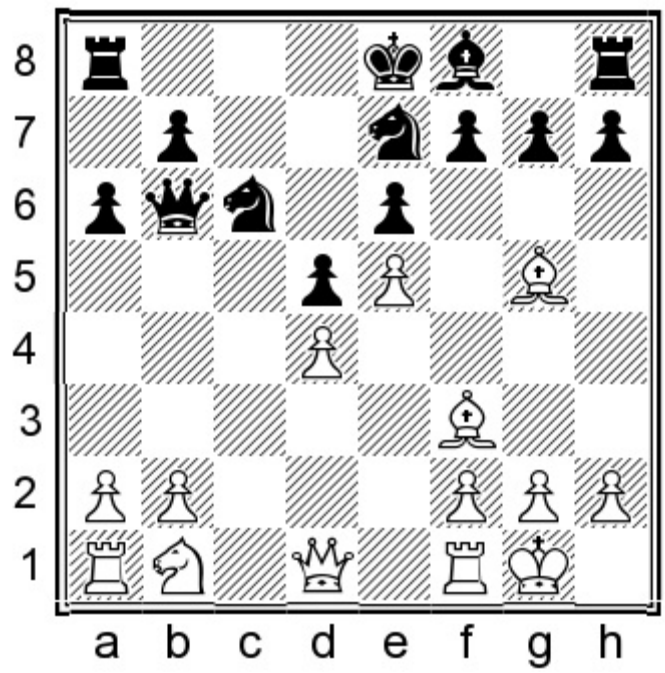
Position after: 8...♘ge7

With clear intentions.

9.♘c3

The main move, but not necessarily the best.

A) 9.♗g5 Trying to hinder Black's smooth development. 9...♗xf3! 10.♗xf3 ♕b6! Now White has problems with his d4-pawn.

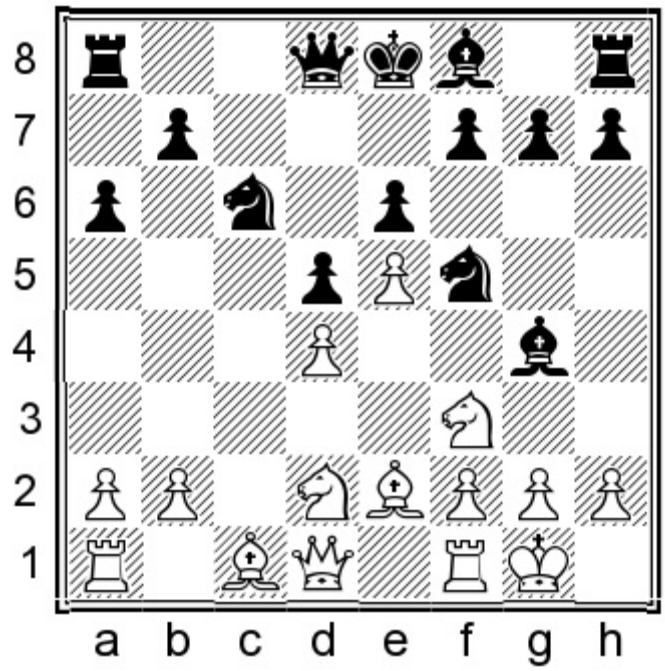


Position after: 10...♕b6!

A1) 11.♗xe7 ♗xe7 12.♘c3 ♘xd4 13.♘a4 [13.♕a4+ ♔f8∓] 13...♕a7 14.♖c1 b5 15.♘c3 ♗g5 16.♖b1 0-0–+ White has no compensation for the pawn.

A2) 11.♗e3! ♘f5 12.♘c3 ♘cxd4!∓ With this knight move Black will easily untangle from the pin. Black has won a pawn.

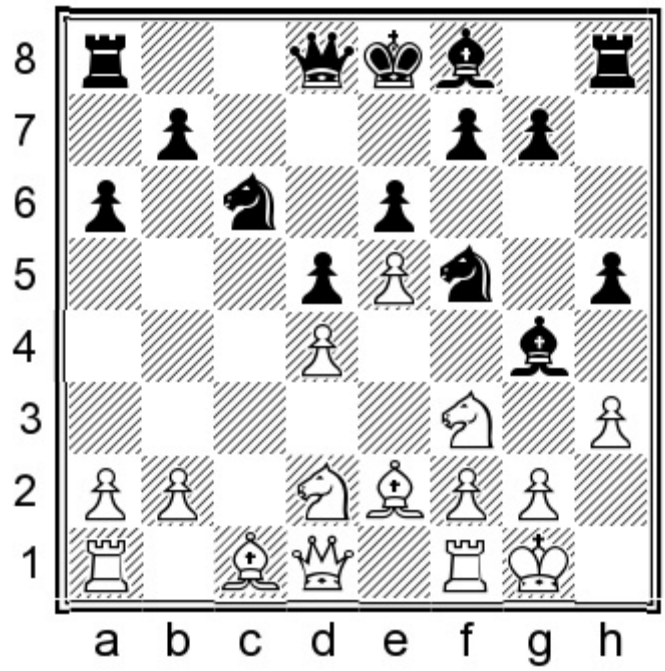
B) 9.♘bd2 intending to play h2-h3, with the idea of recapturing with the knight on f3. 9...♘f5



Position after: 9...♘f5

B1) 10.♘b3 ♗e7 11.h3 [11.♗e3 0-0 12.h3 ♗xf3 13.♗xf3 a5∓] 11...♗xf3 12.♗xf3 0-0 13.♗e3 a5 14.♖c1 ♕b6 15.♕d2 ♖fc8∓ 0-1 Sen, I – Hajiyev, S (2113) Edirne 2013.

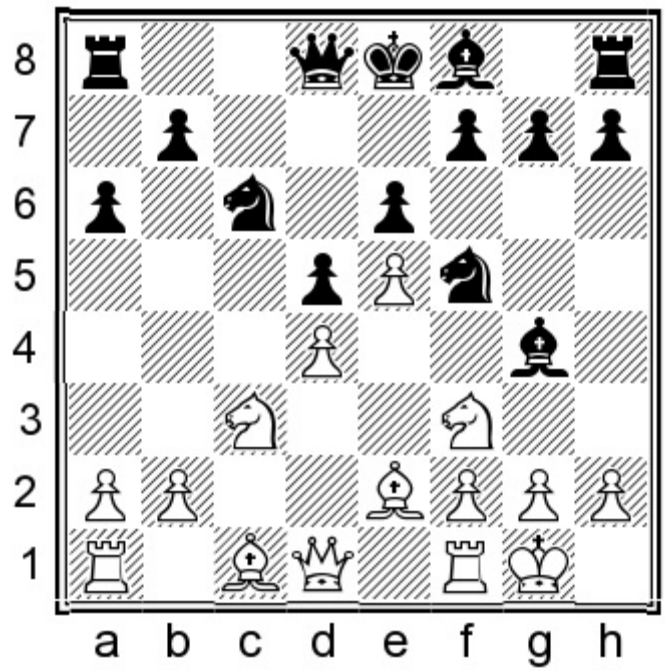
B2) 10.h3! h5!?



Position after: 10...h5!?

This leads to interesting attacking positions. 11.a3! [11.hxg4 hxg4 12.g3! gxf3 13.♘xf3 ♕b6 14.♗e3 ♗e7 15.♖b1 0-0-0∞] 11...♕c7! 12.♖b1 [12.hxg4 hxg4 13.♘g5 ♘cxd4 14.♗xg4 ♕xe5 15.♘h3 ♗d6 16.f4 ♕e3+ 17.♖f2 ♗c5 18.♘f1 ♕b3 19.♗d2 ♕xd1 20.♗xd1 ♔d7∞] 12...g5 13.♘b3 f6 14.exf6 ♗xf3 15.♗xf3 g4 16.♗e2 0-0-0∞

9...♘f5



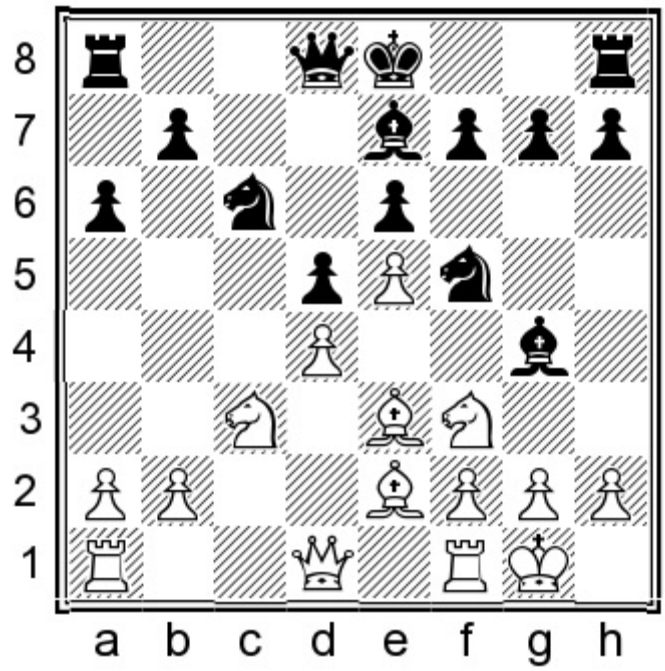
Position after: 9...♘f5

10.♘g5!

White has to come up with some smart

moves otherwise the pressure against his center will become too strong.

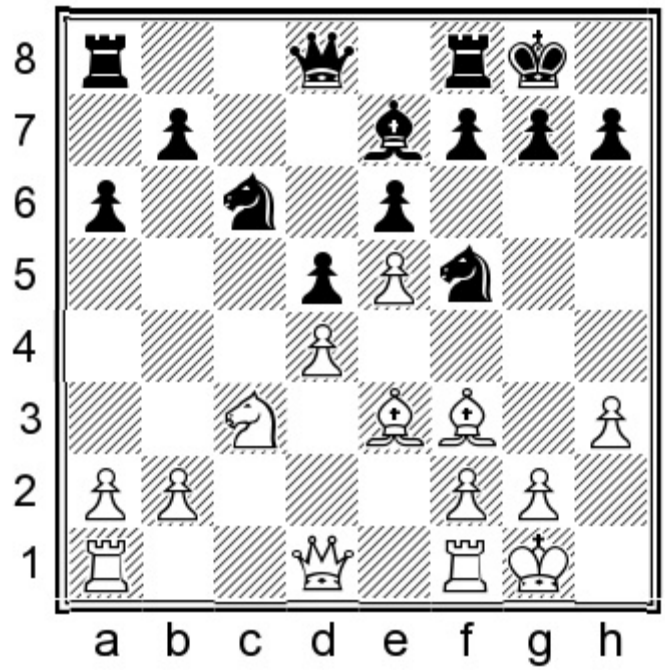
A) 10.♗e3 The natural way of defending d4, but a pedestrian type of development only suits Black in this position. 10...♗e7! Black waits to show his cards (...f6, ...g6, ...♖c8 or ...♕b6) until he has completed his development.



Position after: 10...♗e7!

A1) 11.♖c1 0-0! 12.♘a4?! [12.h3 ♗xf3 13.♗xf3 ♕b6∓] 12...♖c8∓ White's structure is weak, he will soon lose a pawn. 13.b3 ♗xf3 14.gxf3 [14.♗xf3 ♘cxd4–+] 14...♗a3! 15.♖c2 ♘cxd4–+

A2) 11.h3 ♗xf3 12.♗xf3 0-0



Position after: 12...0-0

Chances are roughly equal, although there is some dynamic potential in Black's position.

A2.1) 13.g4?! ♘xe3∓ 14.fxe3 ♖c8! securing the c4-square for the knight. 15.♗g2 ♘a5 16.♕d3 ♘c4 17.♖ab1 [17.♖f2 ♗g5 18.♖e2 ♕a5∓] 17...♕a5! 18.b3 ♘xe5!–+

A2.2) 13.♖b1 g6!? 14.♗g4 ♘xe3 15.fxe3 h5 16.♗e2 ♗g5 17.♕d2 ♕e7∓

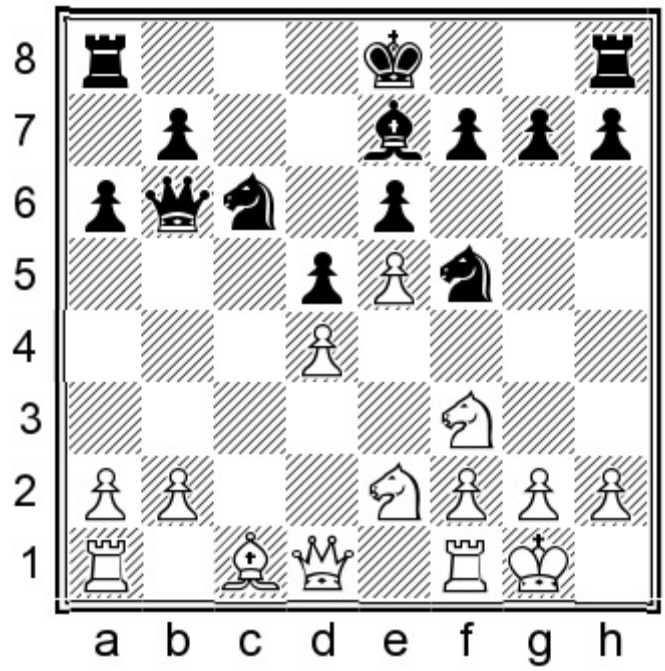
A2.3) 13.♗g4 ♘xe3 14.fxe3 ♗g5 15.♕d3 ♖c8 16.♖f2 ♕b6=

B) Alternatively, 10.♘e1! is worth considering. 10...♗xe2 11.♘xe2 ♗e7 12.♘f3 leads to the same position as the main line.

10...♗xe2 11.♘xe2 ♗e7

Black has the better bishop.

12.♘f3 ♕b6



Position after: 12...♕b6

With pressure against the queenside and the d-pawn.

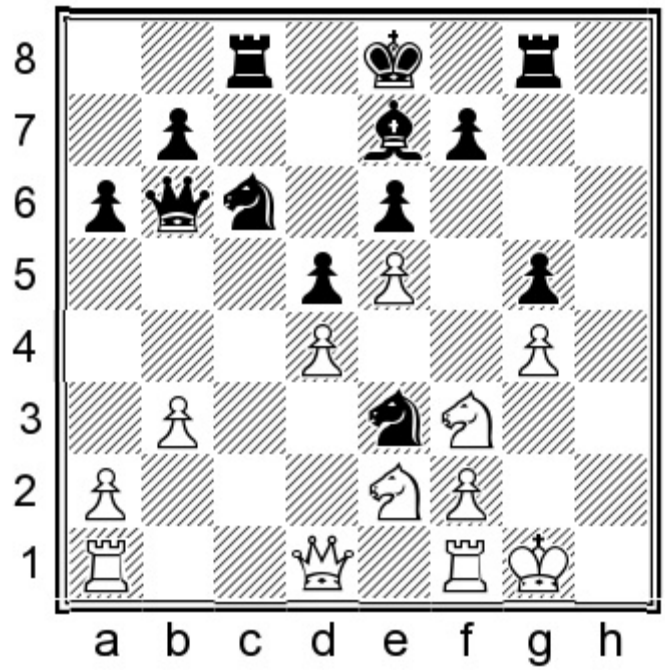
13.b3 h5!∓ 14.h3

14.a3 h4 15.♖b1 ♖c8∓

14...♖c8 15.♗f4

15.♗g5? White cannot exchange the bishops due to the weakness of d4. 15...♗xg5 16.♘xg5 ♘cxd4–+

15...♖g8! 16.♗e3 g5 17.g4 hxg4 18.hxg4 ♘xe3!N



Position after: 18...♘xe3!N

19.fxe3 ♔d7∓

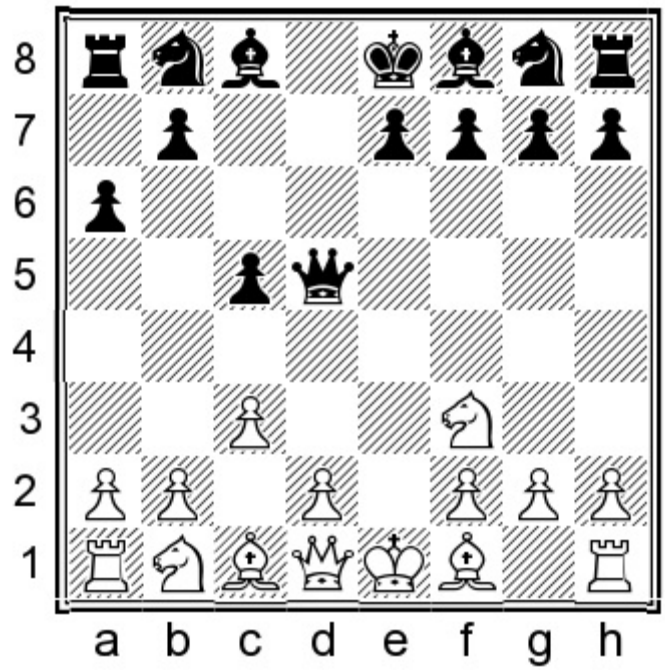
Black's position is intrinsically more attractive.

Conclusion

Closing the center after 3.c3 d5 4.e5 leads to positions where Black can fully execute his strategy of undermining the white center. He plays a successful advanced Caro Kann, with his light-squared bishop on g4 and with an extra tempo as he played ...c7-c5 in one move. White has to be very careful not to immediately lose his d-pawn. With standard maneuvers like ...e6, ...♘ge7, ...♘f5 it should be simple for Black to reach at least an equal position. Generally, Black should first complete his development before he increases the pressure against the white center or the b2-pawn. White has to be quite creative (10.♘e1/10.♘g5) to reach an equal position.

c) 4.exd5 ♕xd5

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♕xd5



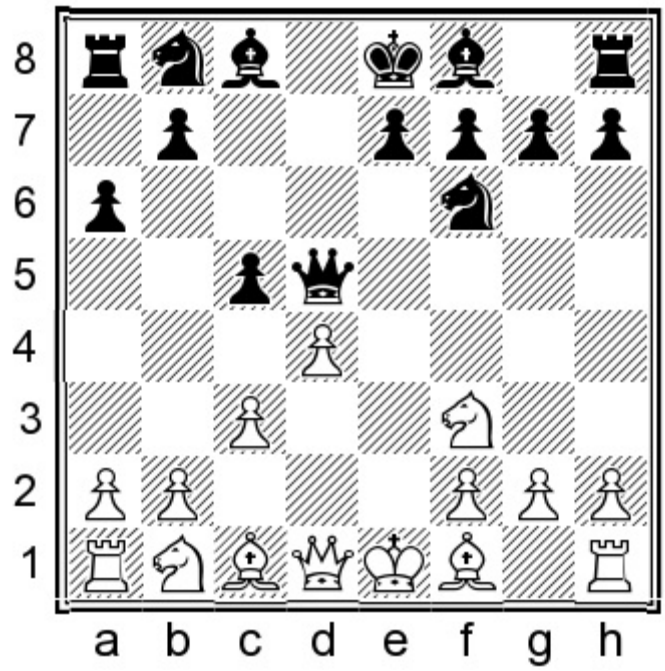
Position after: 4...♕xd5

The mainstream response to White's late Alapin approach.

5.d4 ♘f6

Artemiev has tried 5...♗g4 here as well, but I will focus on the setup with ...♘f6 followed by, if appropriate ... e6. I prefer 5...♘f6 first, so Black may still consider options like ...♗g4 and ...g6.

Sielecki builds a whole repertoire around the interesting 5...e6!? 6.♗d3 [6.♗e3 ♘d7! is the clever idea behind 5...e6, in the footsteps of Artemiev, taking the punch out of 6.♗e3. This was played in Giri, A (2764) – Artemiev, V (2708) 0-1(47) Chess.com 2020.] 6...♘f6 7.0-0 ♗e7 8.c4 [8.♖e1 0-0 9.♗g5 ♘bd7=] 8...♕d6 9.dxc5 ♕xc5 10.♘c3 b6 11.♗f4 ♗b7 12.♕e2 [12.♘a4 ♕c6 13.♖e1 g5!?⩲] 12...0-0 13.♖ad1 ♘bd7 and chances are nearly equal.

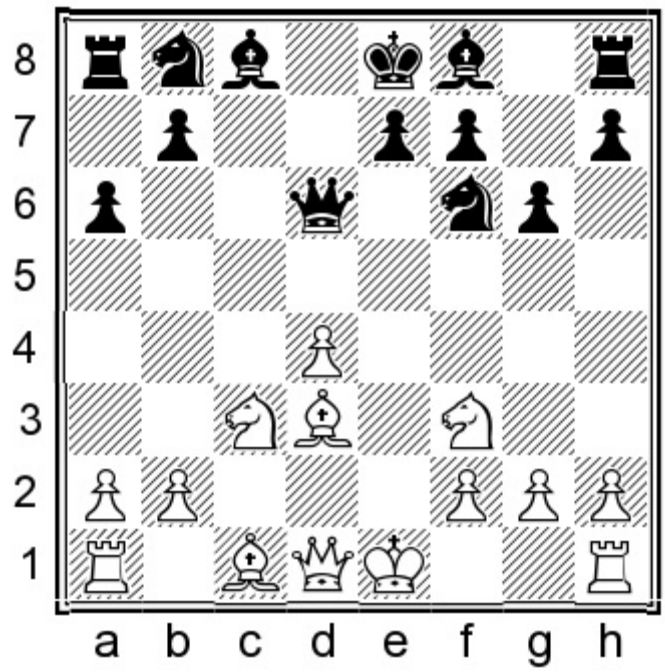


Position after: 5...♘f6

6.♘a3

This is a testing line, which a number of elite players have used against the O'Kelly crowd. White prepares to centralize his knight on c4 and to put pressure on Black's queenside.

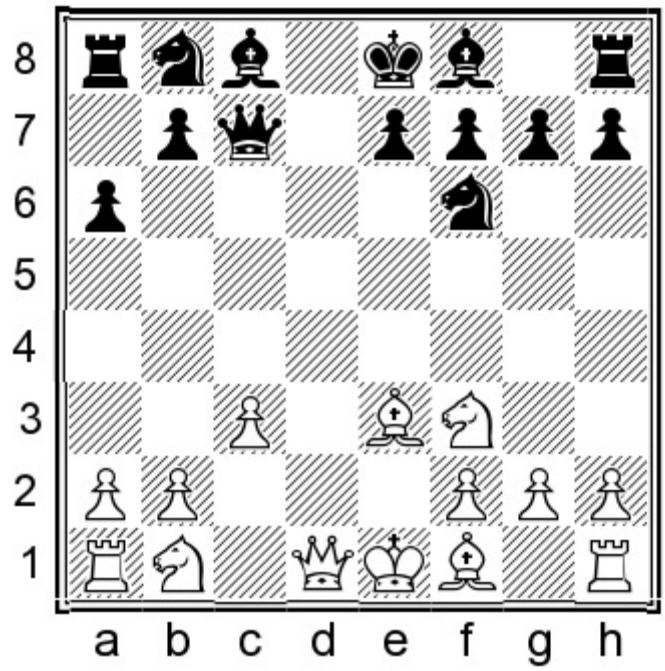
A) 6.♗d3 White has the light-squared bishop on d3 rather than on e2 in the IQP positions which tend to arise. However, White has to wait for ...e6. Black may now even consider a kingside fianchetto based structure, solving all of his problems. 6...cxd4 7.cxd4 g6! 8.♘c3 ♕d6



Position after: 8...♕d6

9.0-0 [9.♗e2 is just too slow.] 9...♗g7 10.♖e1 [10.♗e3 0-0 11.♖c1 ♘c6 12.h3 ♗e6= 1-0 (19) Florez, L (2032) – Bravo, J (1740) Medellin 2015.] 10...0-0 11.♗c2 ♖d8 12.♗g5 ♗e6 13.♕d2 ♘c6= Black has an ideal Tarrasch defense with reversed colors. Chances are balanced. 0-1 (58) Hiebler, L (1771) – Pallitsch, C (2109) Oberwart 2012.

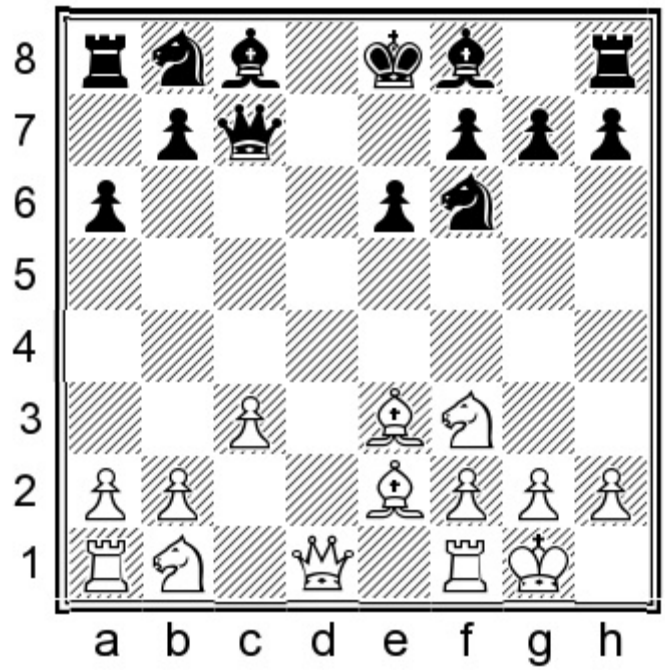
B) 6.dxc5 A maneuver familiar from the normal Alapin, but here it does not make an impact. The move ...a6 comes in quite handy providing the black queen a safe shelter on c7. The white bishop on e3 may actually get in the way after a subsequent ...♘d5. 6...♕xc5 7.♗e3 [7.♗f4 g6 8.♘bd2 ♗g7 9.♗c4 0-0 10.0-0 ♘c6= 0-1 (67) Borriss, M (2439) – Georgiev, V (2564) Germany 2000.] 7...♕c7



Position after: 7...♕c7

B1) 8.♘bd2 g6 9.♘c4 [9.♕b3 ♗g7= 0-1 (62) Plotkin, V (2215) – Jiang, L (2250) Guelph 2009.] 9...♘bd7 10.a4 ♗g7 11.a5 0-0 12.♗e2 ♖d8= ½-½ (14) Sermek, D (2550) – Sakaev, K (2600) Budapest 1996.

B2) 8.♗e2 e6 9.0-0

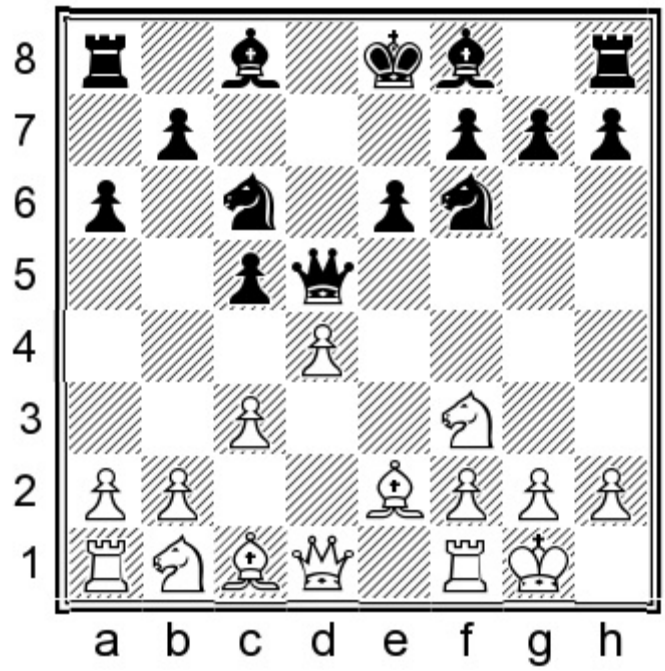


Position after: 9.0-0

9...♗e7 Quick development and castling prior to determining where to put the b8-knight. [Alternatively, 9...♘bd7 10.a4 b6 11.h3 ♗b7 12.b4 ♗e7 13.♕b3 ♘d5∓ 0-1 (43) Yuffa, D (2150) – Papin, V (2548) Khanty – Mansiysk 2010.] 10.♘bd2 0-0 11.♘c4 ♘d5∓ 0-1 (56) Terry, R (2504) – Artemiev, V (2716) Chess.com 2020.

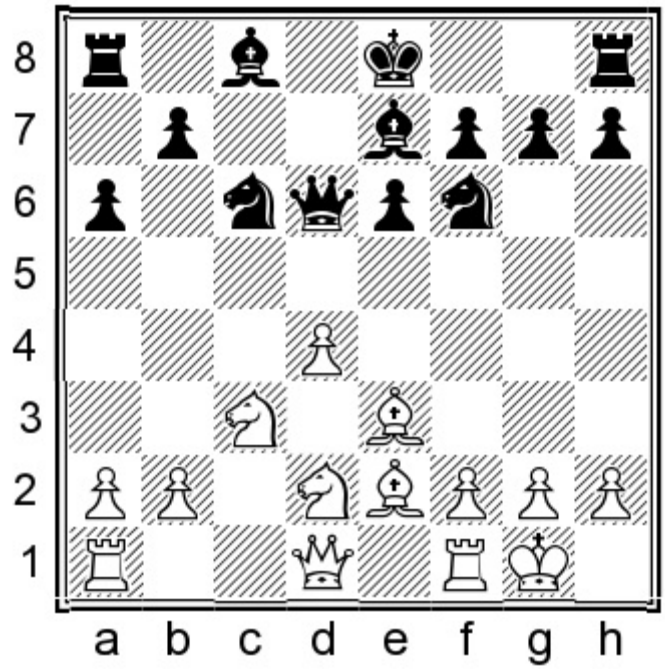
C) 6.c4 White tries to refute Black's setup. 6...♕e4+ 7.♗e2 cxd4 8.♕xd4 ♕xd4 9.♘xd4 e5 10.♘f3 ♘c6 11.♘c3 e4= 1-0 (59) Nepomniachtchi, I (2784) – Artemiev, V (2716) chess24.com 2020.

D) 6.♗e2 The most popular move for White, and next to 6.♘a3 and 6.♗e3 one of the three attractive propositions for White. Old theory actually considers this move to be best. 6...e6 7.0-0 ♘c6 is the main line.



Position after: 7...♘c6

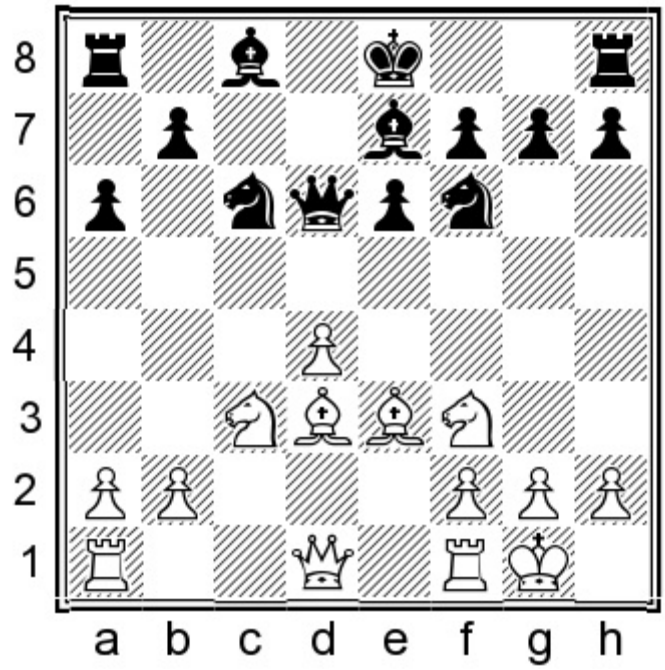
White has to make an important decision now. 8.♗e3 White threatens to win an important pawn. [8.c4!? ♕d6 9.dxc5 ♕xd1 10.♖xd1 ♗xc5 11.♘c3 0-0 12.a3± ½-½ (58) Saulin, D (2475) – Arzumanian, G (2416) Tula 2004.] 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 [Or 9.♘xd4 e5 10.c4 ♕d6 11.♘xc6 ♕xc6 12.♘c3 ♗e6 13.♕a4± Even here White is slightly better. ½ – ½ (42) Milliet, S (2403) – Narva, M (2276) Iasi 2021.] 9...♗e7 10.♘c3 ♕d6 the key maneuver made possible by Black's second move. It gives this delayed Alapin structure its own special flavor. 11.♘d2!



Position after: 11.♘d2!

The most promising continuation. 11...♘d5! 12.♘de4 [12.♘c4 ♕c7 13.♗f3 ♘xe3 14.fxe3 0-0 15.♖c1 ♖b8!N 16.b3 h6= Not very exciting. White may be an inch better] 12...♕d8 13.♘xd5 exd5 14.♘c5 0-0 15.♖c1!± White is slightly better, but Black should be able to hold, as he did in ½ – ½ (39) Leko, P (2731) – Morozevich, A (2724) Moscow 2014.

E) 6.♗e3 White forces the matter in the center, with the objective to subsequently play a standard IQP position with White's light-squared bishop on its most active square. At the same time White's bishop is not very active on e3. If Black really does not like these positions, he should consider Sielecki's 5...e6 (6.♗e3 ♘d7 etc.) 6...cxd4 7.cxd4 e6 8.♗d3 [8.♘c3 normally transposes to the lines analyzed.] 8...♘c6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.♘c3 ♕d6



Position after: 10...♕d6

and we have reached a standard IQP position. The pawn on a6 prevents any white piece from reaching b5, and prepares ...b5 by Black. These positions are not necessarily bad for Black, but for the IQP on d4 White gets nice attacking chances against the black king.

E1) 11.♕e2 0-0 12.♖ad1 ♘b4 13.♗b1 b5 14.a4 bxa4 15.♘xa4 a5!?∓ [15...♗d7= ½-½ (46) Bajarani, U (2413) – Heydarli, K (2402) Baku 2010.]

E2) 11.♖c1 0-0 12.♖e1 ♘b4 13.♗b1 b5 14.♗g5 ♗b7 15.a3 ♘bd5 16.♘xd5 ♘xd5 17.♕d3 g6 18.♗h6 ♖fc8= Black has weathered the first storm and went on to win later, 0-1 (44) Giri, A (2764) – Artemiev, V (2708) Chess.com 2020.

E3) 11.a3! The most precise. 11...0-0

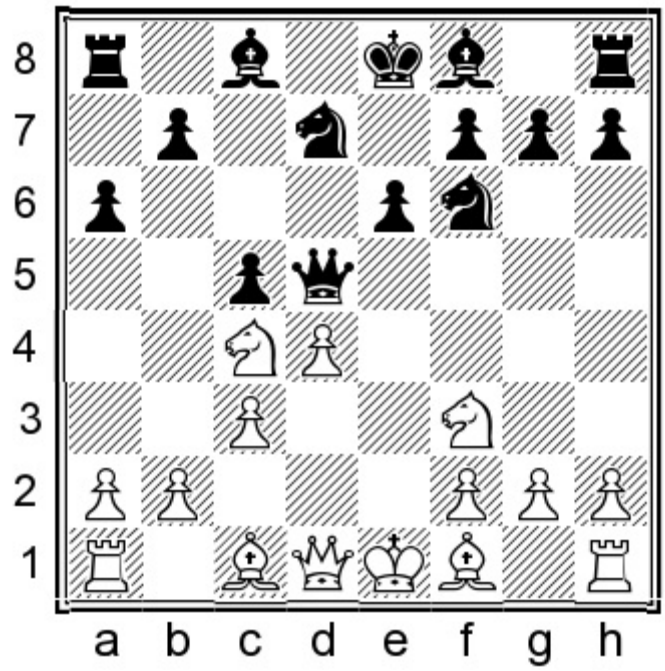
E3.1) 12.♗c2 b5 13.♕d3 ♗b7 14.♖fd1 g6∓ 0-1 (43) Segal, A (2200) – Lederman, L (2335) Beersheba 1991.

E3.2) 12.♖c1 ♗d7 13.b4 [13.♗b1 ♖fd8 14.♕d3 g6 15.♖fd1 ♗e8 16.♕d2 ♘d5 17.♘e4± 1-0 (42)

Guz, A (2310) – Deac, B (2679) Chess.com 2021.] 13...♖fd8 14.♕b3 ♗e8 15.♘e4 ♕d5 16.♕b1 h6± Black has carefully defended, and White is only marginally better. ½ – ½ (42) Schroeder, J (2514) – Van Foreest, J (2615) Douglas 2016.

E3.3) 12.♕e2! The quickest way to reach the most optimal attacking position with White. 12...b5 13.♖ad1 ♗b7 14.♗b1± The engines regard this position as equal. In practice, White has a success rate of 77% in 11 games in the database, a TPR that is about 200 rating points above White's actual average rating. In other words, an engine-like defense with Black allows you to keep the balance. Mere mortals will struggle from here on. 1-0 (52) Bortnyk, O (2598) – Manukyan, S (2244) Chess. com 2020.

6...e6 7.♘c4 ♘bd7



Position after: 7...♘bd7

The most solid response to White's setup. All of the important squares have been covered,

8.♗e2

Alapin specialist Sergei Tiviakov has an excellent track record with this setup.

8.a4 here is a bit early, but it is certainly not bad either. 8...cxd4 8...b6 is the key alternative. 9.♕xd4 ♗c5 10.♕xd5 [10.♕h4 ♕e4+=] 10...exd5 11.♘e3 0-0= White has an easier game and indeed shows better results from here but realistically speaking this endgame is equal. ½ – ½ (34) Nakamura, H (2736) – Artemiev, V (2716) Chess.com 2020.

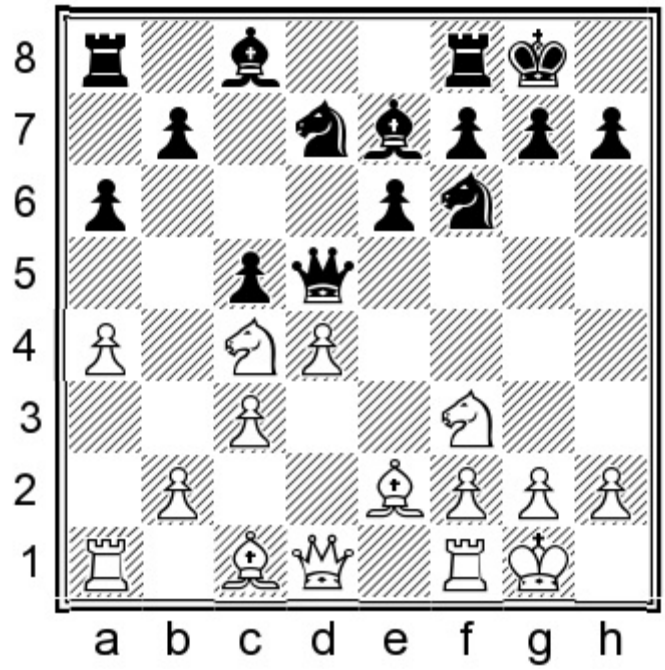
8...♗e7

Artemiev's latest try in this position. Black does not expand on the queenside yet, but first focuses on completing his development.

8...cxd4 the most popular choice. 9.♘xd4 e5 10.♘f5 ♘c5 11.♘fe3± [11.♕xd5 ♘xd5= ½-½ (53) Tiviakov, S (2697) – Balogh, C (2609) Wroclaw 2009.]

9.0-0 0-0 10.a4!

This makes more sense a few moves later. The move is not mentioned by Martin. From here, I have been unable to find a clear path to (near) equality.



Position after: 10.a4!

10.dxc5 ♕xc5 11.♗f4 b5= 0-1 (30) So, W (2767) – Artemiev, V (2746) Chess.com 2019.

10...b5

A) 10...♕c6 11.♗f4 ♘d5 12.♗g3 ♘7f6 [12...b6 13.♘fe5 ♕b7 14.♗f3± ½-½ (14) Van de Oudeweetering, A – Kudrin, S (2485) Dieren 1985.] 13.♘fe5+– 1-0 (65) Baratosi, D (2407) – Balla, T (2378) Brasov 2011.

B) 10...cxd4 11.♘xd4 [11.cxd4?! b5= 0-1 (65) Zhang, Z – Stojanovic, M (2325) Bratislava 1993.] 11...♖e8 12.a5!±

11.♘e3 ♕b7 12.axb5 axb5 13.♖xa8 ♕xa8 14.♗xb5±

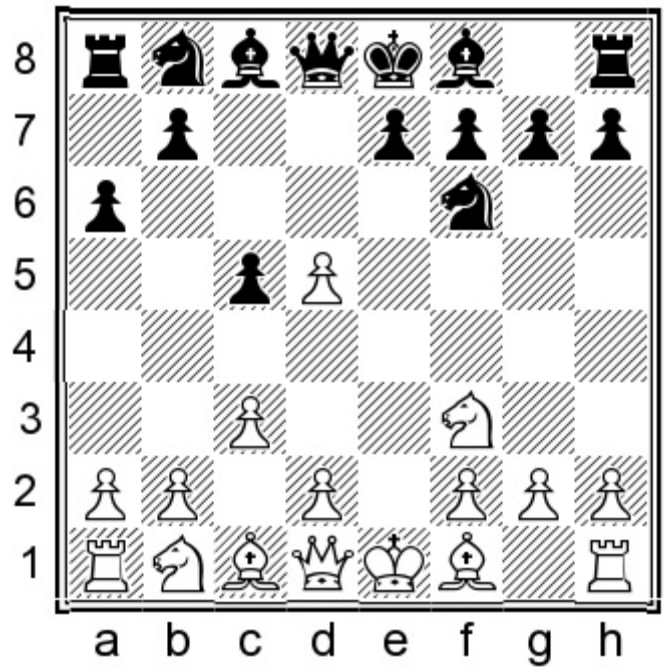
Black has some compensation for the pawn, but it is not enough. 1-0 (64) Nguyen Huynh Trong, H – Le, M Vung Tau 2004.

Conclusion

I have always been a bit surprised by the enthusiasm the O'Kelly guild has embraced the 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♕xd5 line as the key response to the late Alapin with 3.c3. Indeed, it is a safe and secure way to complete Black's development, and indeed it is the preference of the world elite. Initially, the game remains relatively quiet, just like in the regular Alapin. However, with the extra move for White, he has several ways to demonstrate an advantage. 6.♗e2, the traditional Alapin approach, enables White to reach a slightly better position which Black should be able to hold. 6.♗e3, among others chosen by Giri, facilitates the transposition to a classical IQP position which is not necessarily better for White, but also not necessarily leading to a structure liked by many for Black. Statistics are strongly in White's favor, showing that these IQP positions are easier to play for White than for Black. Finally, White has the subtle 6.♘a3, developing smoothly and focusing on the weak dark squares in Black's camp. It delivers White good chances for an opening advantage of a positional nature as Alapin specialist Sergei Tiviakov has shown on numerous occasions.

d) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6



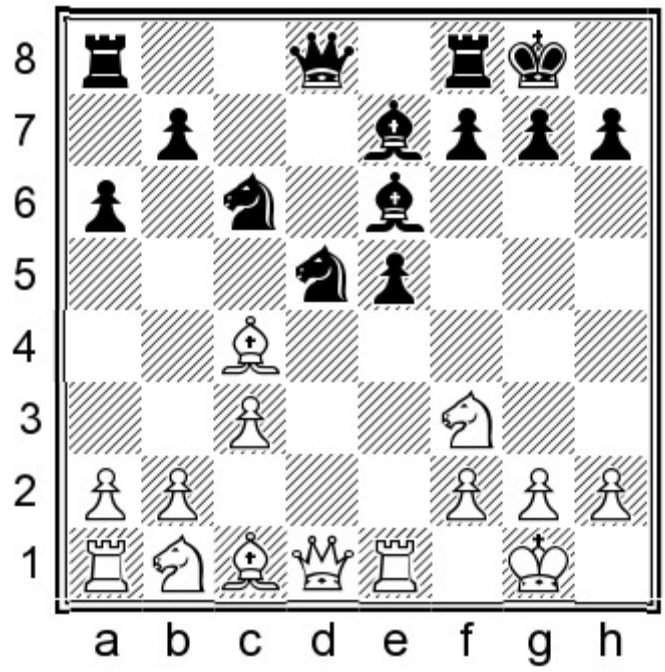
Position after: 4...♘f6

5.c4

White hangs on to his extra pawn.

5.♗e2!? This looks a bit slow but is not without venom. Black would prefer to play his favorite ...g6 structures but that is not possible after White's 5th move. 5...♘xd5

A) 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 e5! 8.♘f3 ♘c6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.♖e1 0-0 11.♗c4 ♗e6!

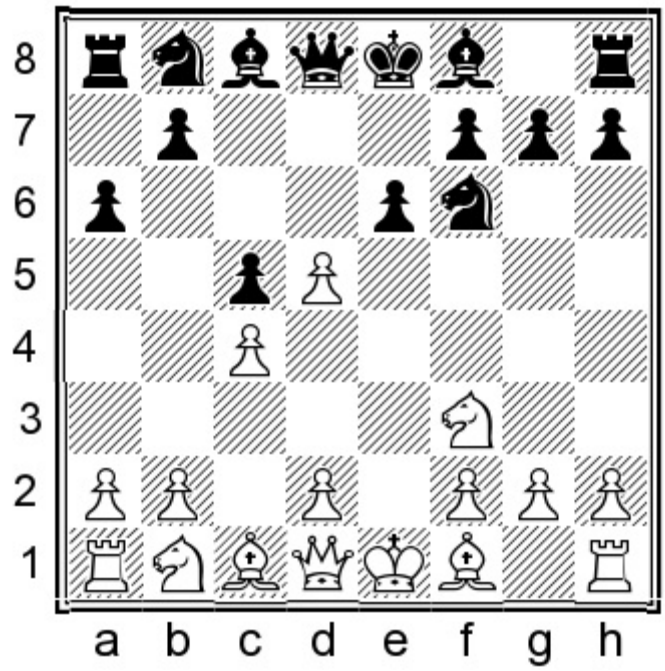


Position after: 11...♗e6!

White may take a pawn on e5. 12.♘xe5?! [12.♗b3 ♕d6 13.♘g5 ♘a5 14.♘xe6 ♘xb3 15.♕xb3 ♕xe6=] 12...♘xe5 13.♗xd5 [13.♖xe5?! ♘b4!! 14.♘d2 ♗xc4 15.cxb4 ♖e8∓] 13...♗xd5 14.♖xe5 ♗c6⩱ Black is much better developed than White.

B) 6.0-0 e6! 7.d4 cxd4 8.cxd4 [8.♘xd4 ♕c7=] 8...♘c6 9.♘c3 ♗e7= A typical IPQ position where White has played the passive ♗e2 instead of the more active ♗d3.

5...e6



Position after: 5...e6

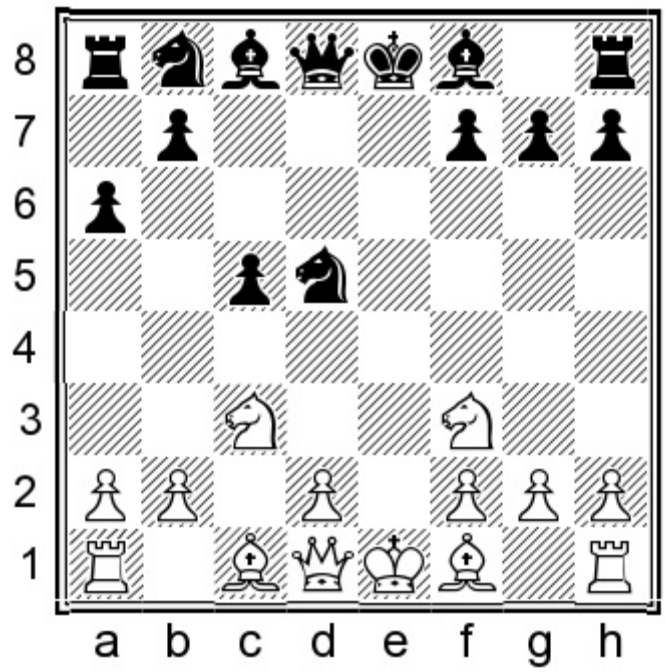
Black sacrifices the pawn in an Icelandic Gambit manner.

6.dxe6

A) 6.♘c3 White does not hang on to his extra pawn. 6...exd5

A1) 7.d4 cxd4 8.♘xd4 ♗c5 9.♘b3 [9.cxd5 0-0=] 9...♗b4=

A2) 7.cxd5 ♘xd5

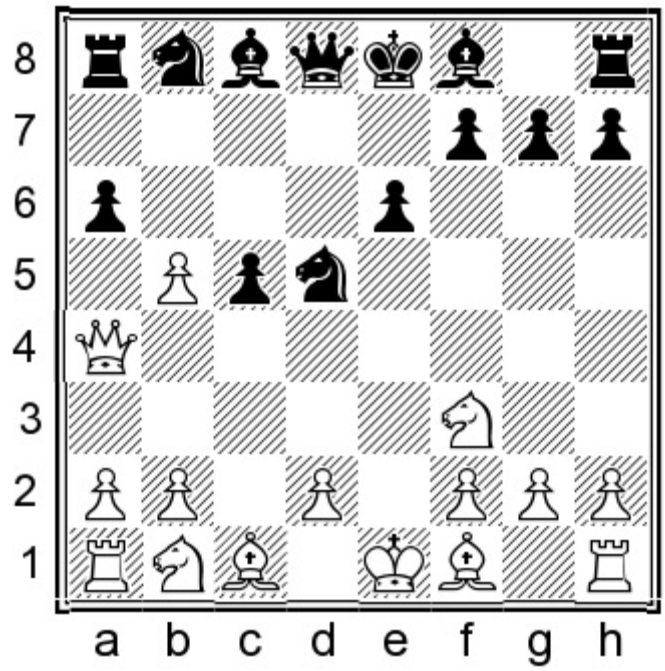


Position after: 7...♘xd5

A2.1) 8.♗c4 ♘b6 Pushing the bishop away to unattractive squares. 9.♗b3 c4 10.♗c2 ♕e7+ 11.♕e2 ♘c6∓ With the better pawn structure the ending is slightly better for Black.

A2.2) 8.d4! Otherwise, White may get stuck with a backward pawn. 8...♗e7 9.♗d3 0-0 10.0-0 A quiet position has arisen. Both players have developed their pieces. Chances are about equal. 10...cxd4 11.♘xd4 [11.♗e4? ♘xc3 12.bxc3 dxc3∓ 1-0 (48) JulieBulletGrind (2621)-alifie (2497) lichess.org 2020.] 11...♘c6 12.♘xc6 bxc6 13.♘xd5 cxd5 14.b3 a5=

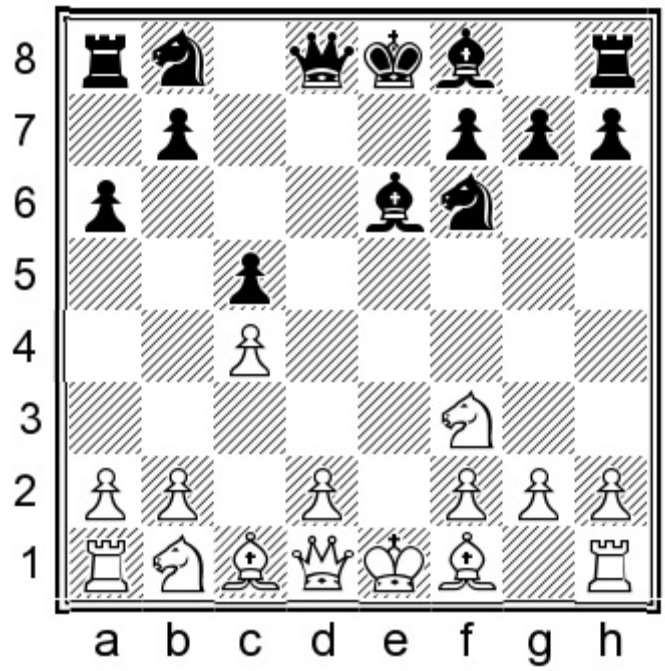
B) 6.♕a4+ An intermediate check which has not been played frequently. As in other lines this check leads to interesting positions. There is a cautious response and an aggressive response. 6...b5!? Black sacrifices the queenside pawns and will get Benko Gambit inspired compensation back for it. 7.cxb5 ♘xd5!



Position after: 7...♘xd5!

8.♘c3 [8.bxa6+ ♗d7 9.♗b5 ♘b4 10.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 11.0-0 ♖xa6 12.♕b3 ♘b6⩲] 8...♗e7 9.♗e2 0-0 10.0-0 ♗b7 11.d3 [11.d4 axb5 12.♕xb5 ♕c7 13.dxc5 ♘d7⩲] 11...axb5 12.♕xb5 ♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♗c6 14.♕b3 ♘d7⩲ 0-1 (38) Nyse, A (2243) – Boekelman, J (2416) Chess.com 2022.

6...♗xe6



Position after: 6...♗xe6

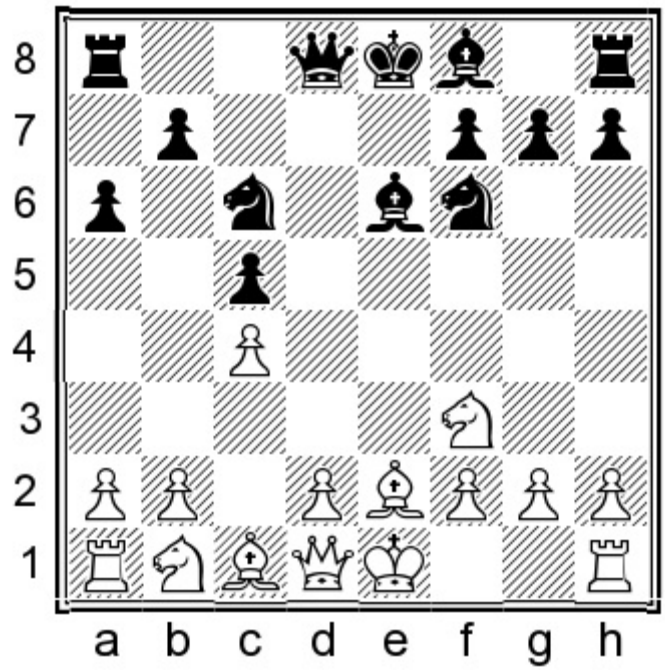
Here it makes no sense to sacrifice the f7-pawn as White has not yet played d2-d4.

7.d4!

Liberating the white position with this move is the most natural continuation although White is slightly behind in development. After slow moves (d3, ♗e2, b3) Black will, in the footsteps of 2.c3 a6 specialist GM Aleksandr Fier, play a quick ...♕c7 and ...0-0-0, putting pressure along the d-file and threatening ...♗xc4. The position of Black's dark squared bishop will be decided later. Black has good compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

A) 7.d3 slow development by White does not deliver the goodies. 7...♘c6 8.♗g5 h6 9.♗h4 g5! 10.♗g3 ♗g7∓ Black has excellent compensation for the pawn.

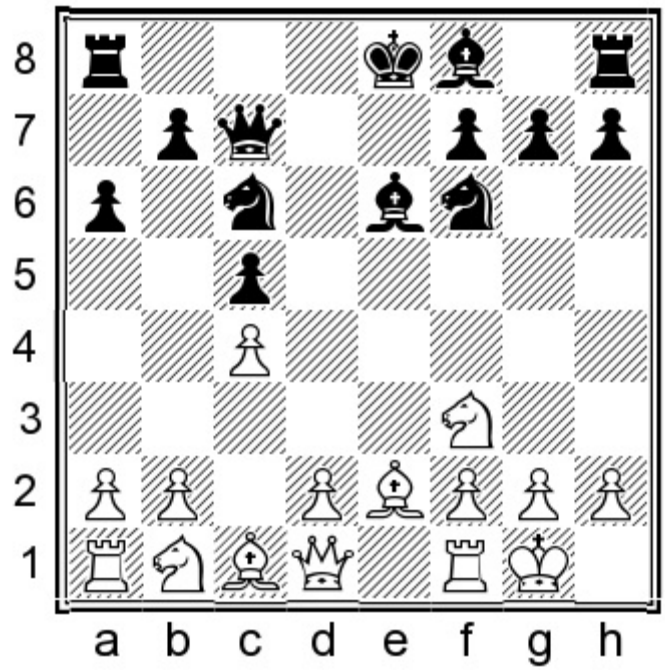
B) 7.♗e2 Again Black will be able to create good counterplay for the invested material. 7...♘c6



Position after: 7...♘c6

B1) 8.d3 ♕c7 9.♘c3 0-0-0 10.♕a4 [10.0-0 ♗xc4!] 10...♘d4⩲ 11.♘xd4!? cxd4 12.♘d1 ♗d7 13.♕b3 [13.♕c2 ♗b4+ 14.♗d2 ♗d6 15.h3 ♖he8∓] 13...♖e8 14.♕c2 ♗b4+ 15.♔f1 ♖xe2!–+

B2) 8.0-0 ♕c7!



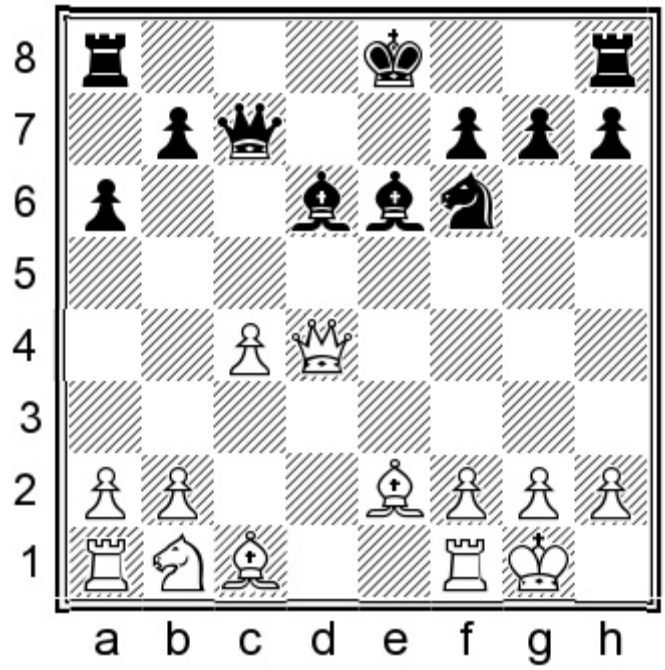
Position after: 8...♕c7!

B2.1) 9.b3 0-0-0 the thematic set-up to be followed by ...♗d6. 10.♗b2 ♗d6 11.d3 [11.d4? cxd4 12.♘xd4 ♗xh2+ 13.♔h1 ♘xd4 14.♗xd4 ♕f4–+] 11...♘g4 12.h3 h5 13.♘bd2 ♗h2+ 14.♔h1 ♗e5!

15.♗xe5 ♘gxe5 16.♘xe5 ♘xe5=

B2.2) 9.♘c3 0-0-0 10.b3 ♗d6 11.♗b2 [11.d3 ♔b8 12.♗b2 h5! 13.h3 ♖hg8∓] 11...h5 12.h3 ♖h6!∓

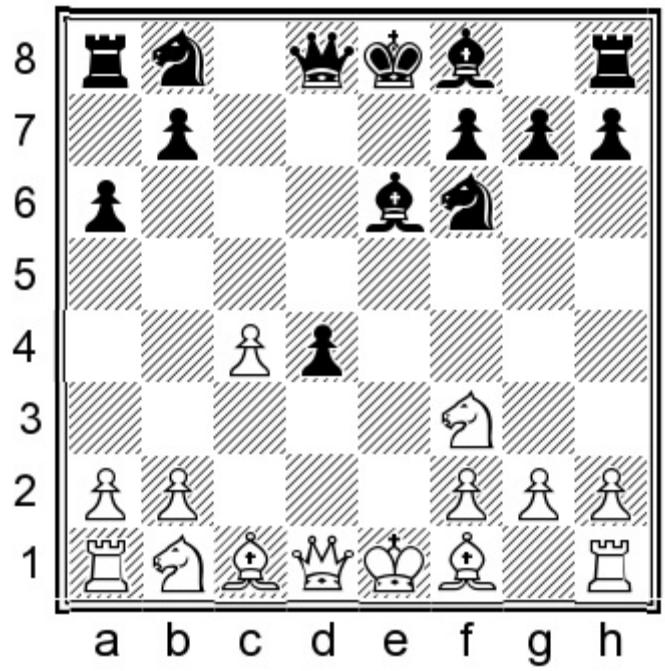
B2.3) 9.d4! given the opportunity, it makes sense to push d2-d4 anyway. 9...cxd4 10.♘xd4 ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♗d6



Position after: 11...♗d6

12.♕h4 [12.h3 0-0 13.♕h4 ♖ac8 14.♗e3 ♗e5 15.♗d4 ♖fd8= 1-0 (39) Duchrow, O – Volz, H (2128) Willingen 1999.] 12...0-0-0 13.♗e3 h5 14.♗g5 ♗e5 15.♘c3 ♖d4⩲

7...cxd4



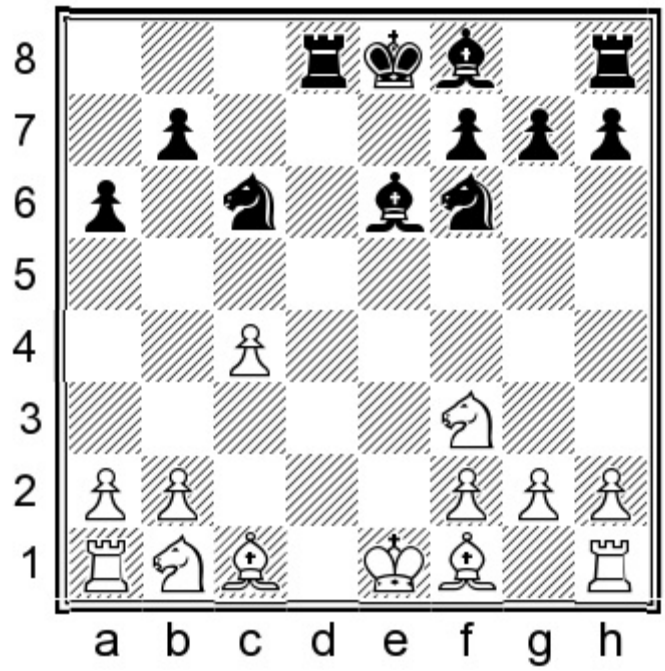
Position after: 7...cxd4

8.♘xd4

This is best, although the white knight will soon be chased away from the center.

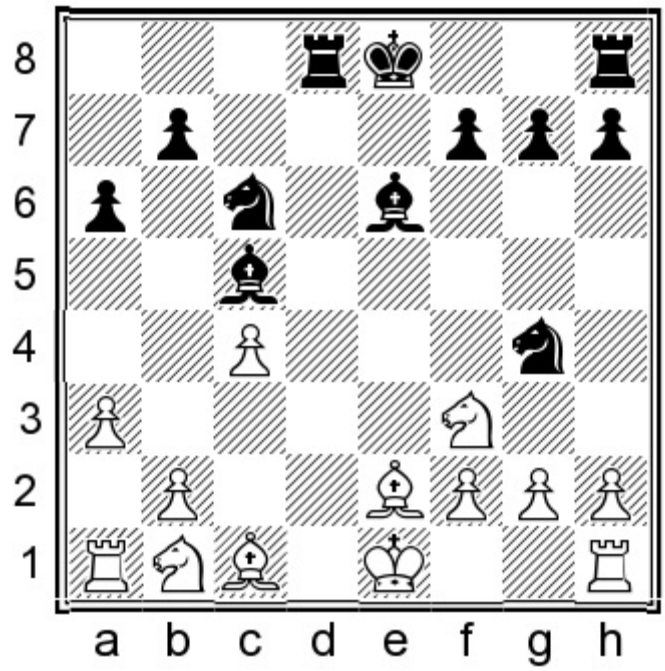
A) 8.♗d3 White leaves the extra pawn for what it is and concentrates on development. 8...♘c6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.h3 h6 11.a3 a5 12.b3 ♘d7 13.♗e4 ♘de5 14.♘xe5 ♘xe5 15.♗f4 ♘c6= ½-½ (55) Zhigalko, S (2656) – Fier, A (2577) Jurmala 2013.

B) 8.♕xd4 generally, it makes sense to try and exchange as many pieces as possible in case of a material advantage. Here it is less convincing. Black's development advantage becomes overwhelming. 8...♘c6 9.♕xd8+ White has to exchange queens. 9...♖xd8



Position after: 9...♖xd8

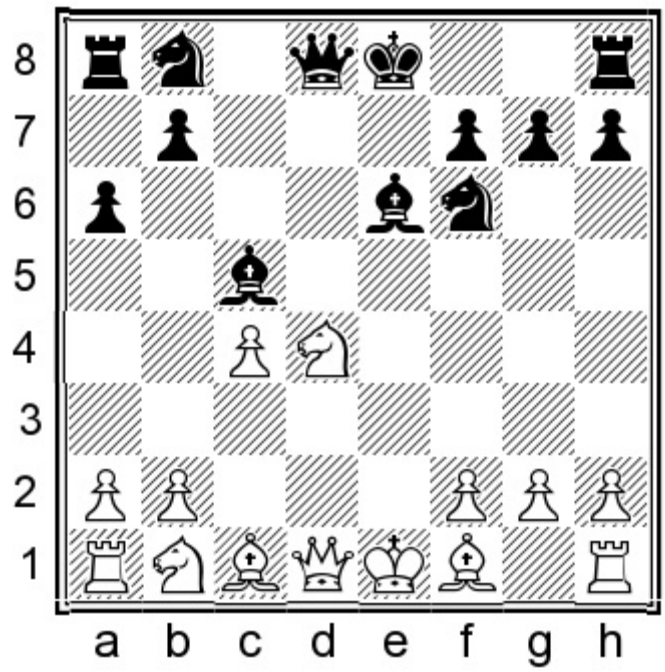
Black has developed four pieces, against one for White. That should be enough compensation. 10.a3 The move played most often. It prevents ...♘b4. [10.♗e3!?N 10...♘b4 11.♘a3 ♘e4 12.♗e2 ♗c5 13.0-0 0-0⩲ leaves Black with very active pieces for the pawn, but White has no clear weaknesses.; 10.♗e2 ♘b4 11.♘a3 ♗c5 12.0-0 0-0 13.♗g5 h6 14.♗xf6 gxf6 15.♖fd1 ♗f5!∓] 10...♗c5! An important position of the 5. c4 line has arisen. Black plays a kind if Schara von Hennig gambit, with a pawn deficit, but with a big lead in development. 11.♗e2 [11.♘c3 ♘g4!N 12.♘e4 ♘d4 13.♘xd4 ♗xd4 14.♗e2 f5 15.h3 ♘e5 16.♘d2 0-0 17.0-0 ♗xb2 18.♖a2 ♗xc1 19.♖xc1 ♖f7∓; 11.b4 ♗d4 12.♘xd4 ♘xd4 13.♖a2 0-0 14.f3 ♖c8 15.♘d2 b5=] 11...♘g4!



Position after: 11...♘g4!

The majority of games went 11...0-0 from here but the text introduces some nice tactics. 12.0-0 ♘xf2! 13.♖xf2 [13.b4! ensures that White's problems remain manageable. 13...♗a7 14.c5 ♘e4 15.♗b2 0-0 16.♘c3 ♘d2∓ ½ – ½ (46) Wills, T (1967) – Venkatesan, K (1971) Lichess.org 2020.] 13...♗xc4!!∓ The finishing touch. This opens the way to d1 for the black rook. White is in serious trouble. 14.♗xc4 [14.b4 ♗xe2!–+ 15.bxc5 ♖d1+ and White resigned as it is mate in two, 0-1 (15) Selwink (2417) – Boekelman, J (2383) Chess.com 2022.] 14...♖d1+ 15.♗f1 ♖xc1 16.b4 ♗a7 17.♘fd2 0-1 (45) Fantin, L (2247) – Debray, C (2132) France 2003. 17...♘d4! 18.g3 0-0 19.♔g2 ♘c2 20.♘b3 ♘e3+∓

8...♗c5!



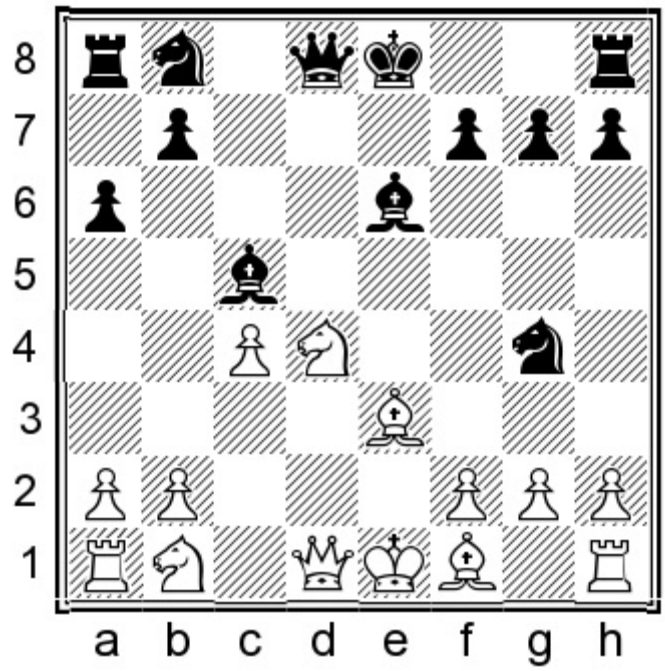
Position after: 8...♗c5!

9.♗e3

White tries to maintain the knight in the center.

9.♘xe6?! This results in a slightly better ending for Black. 9...♗xf2+! 10.♔e2 [10.♔xf2? ♕xd1 11.♘c7+ ♔d8–+] 10...♕xd1+ 11.♔xd1 fxe6∓ Black has regained his pawn. His pawn structure is slightly weaker than White's, but he has more active pieces and White's king is exposed. In summary, Black is slightly better in the endgame, although the specialist of this line, GM Alexandr Fier, lost the game he played from this position.

9...♘g4

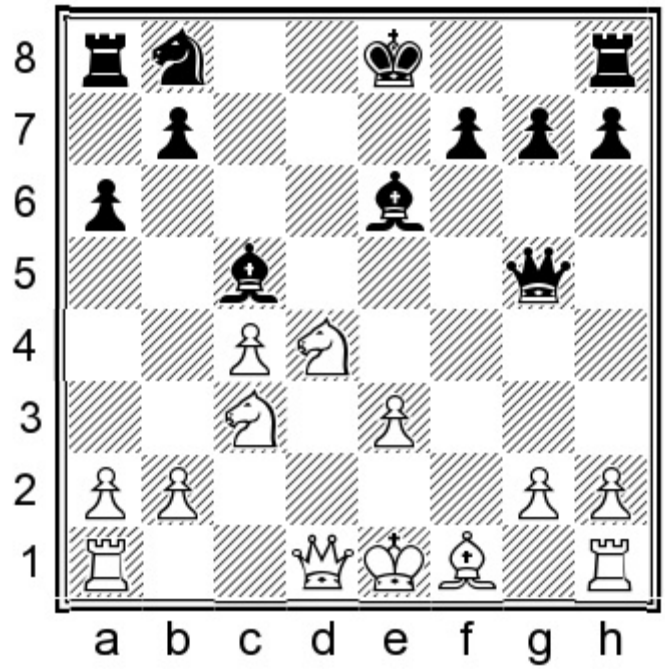


Position after: 9...♘g4

10.♘xe6

The most natural move and the preference of the engines. White remains a pawn up for the time being.

10.♘c3 As in the main line this move allows Black to equalize reasonably comfortably, in spite of his pawn deficit. 10...♘xe3 11.fxe3 ♕g5! The most active square for the black queen.



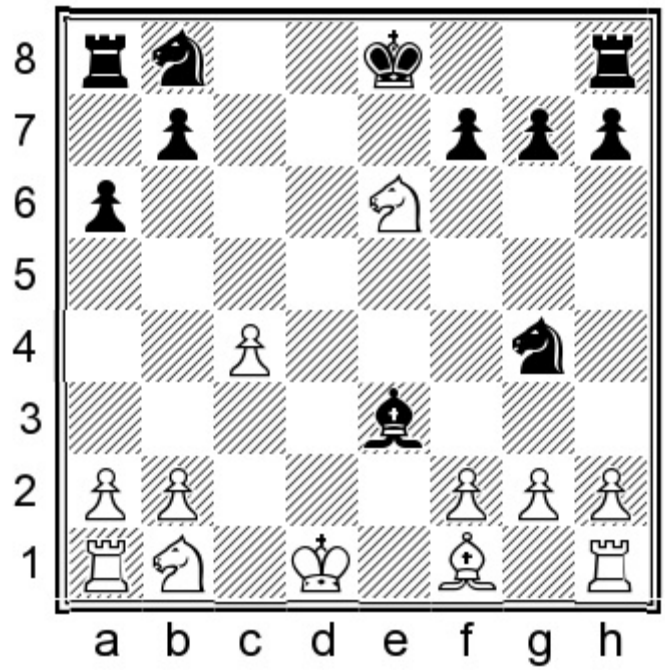
Position after: 11...♕g5!

A) 12.♕d3 ♘c6 13.♘e4 ♗b4+! 14.♔f2 ♕g6! 15.♗e2 ♖d8 16.♖hd1 ♘xd4 17.exd4 ♗f5 18.♗f3 0-0 19.♔g1 ♖fe8∓

B) 12.♕d2 ♘c6 13.0-0-0 0-0N 14.♘e4 [14.♘c2 ♖fd8∓] 14...♕e5 15.♘xc5 ♕xc5 16.♘xe6 fxe6 17.♕d6 ♕xe3+ 18.♕d2 ♕c5 19.♕d6=

C) 12.♕f3 0-0 13.♕g3 [13.♘e4 ♗b4+! 14.♔f2 ♕g6 15.♗e2 ♘c6∓] 13...♕xg3+ 14.hxg3 ♖e8 15.♘xe6 ♖xe6 16.♘d5 ♘c6 17.♗e2 ♖b8 18.♗g4 ♖ee8= Black is still a pawn behind, but chances are even.

10...♕xd1+ 11.♔xd1 ♗xe3!



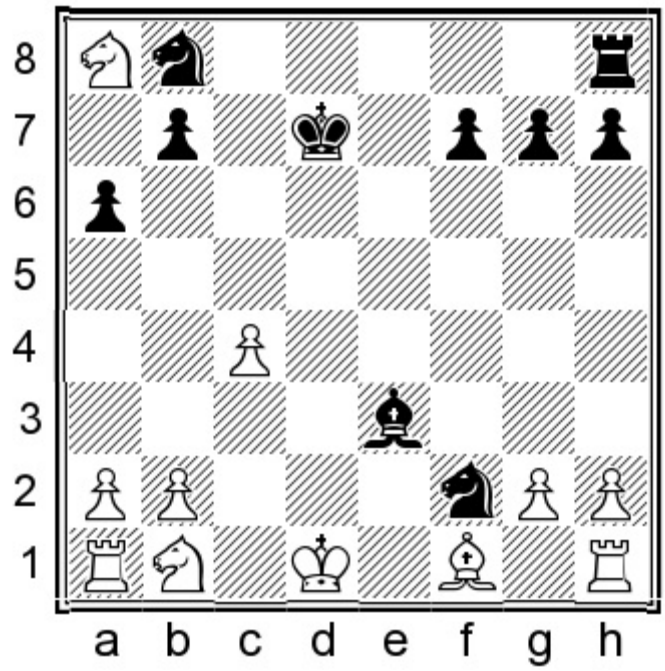
Position after: 11...♗xe3!

We have reached a critical position. White has three possible continuations.

12.fxe3

White sticks to his extra pawn.

A) 12.♘c7+ This leads to long and complex lines. 12...♔d7 13.♘xa8 [13.fxe3?! ♔xc7 14.♔d2 ♖d8+ 15.♔c3 ♘xe3 16.♘d2 ♘d7! 17.♘f3 ♘c5 18.♖e1 ♘e4+ 19.♔b3 ♘f2 20.♖g1 ♖e8∓] 13...♘xf2+



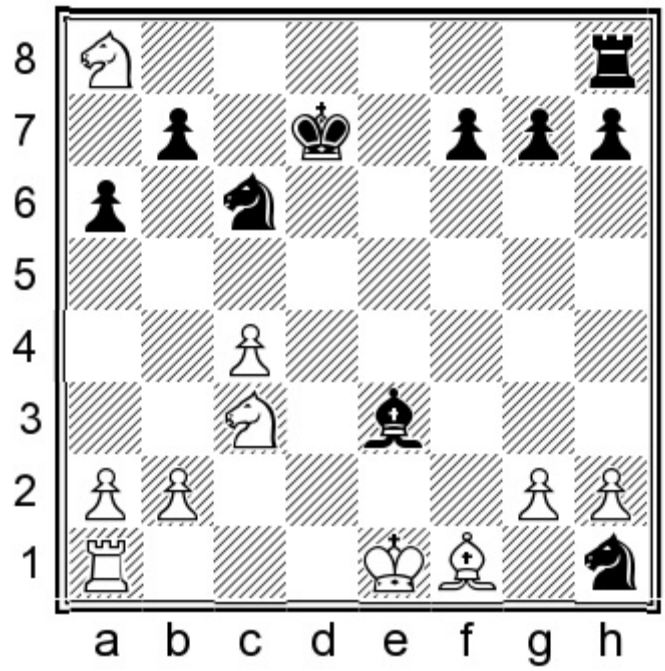
Position after: 13...♘xf2+

The white monarch has three options. Note that after taking on h1 the material balance is even. Both parties may have difficulties getting their knights out of the corner alive, but for White that is more of a problem than for Black.

A1) 14.♔e2?! ♖e8! 15.♖g1 [15.♘d2 ♘xh1 16.♘b3 ♘c6 17.♔f3 ♗a7∓] 15...♘c6–+ and ...♘d4 wins.

A2) 14.♔c2 ♘c6 15.g3 [15.♖g1? ♘d4+! 16.♔c3 ♘d1+ 17.♔d3 ♗xg1 18.♘b6+ ♔c6 19.♘d5 ♘xb2+–+] 15...♘xh1 16.♘c3 ♘f2 17.♘d5 ♗d4 18.♘ab6+ ♔d8 19.♖b1 h5∓

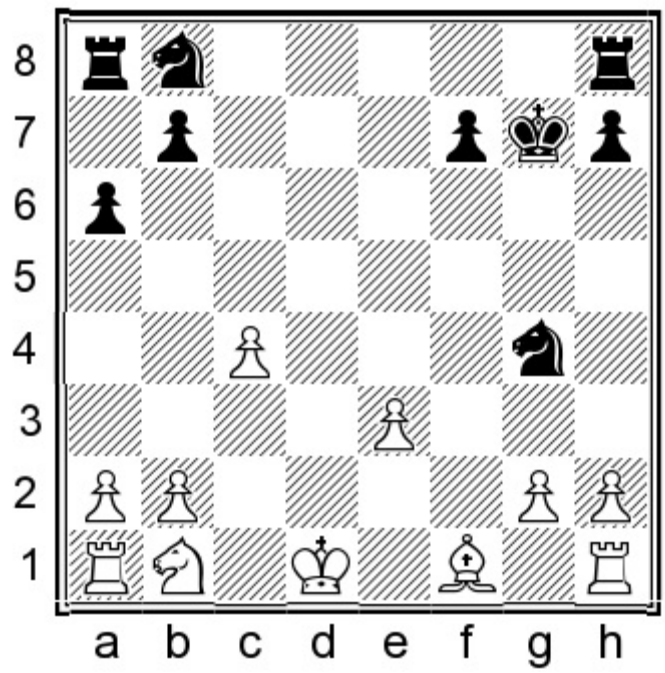
A3) 14.♔e1! Here the white king is relatively safe. 14...♘xh1! 15.♘c3 ♘c6!



Position after: 15...♘c6!

16.♘d5 [16.♖d1+ ♔c8 17.♘d5 ♗g1! 18.♘ab6+ ♔b8 19.b4 ♖d8 20.♖b1 ♗xh2∓] 16...♗d4 17.♘ab6+ ♔d6 18.♖d1 ♖e8+ 19.♗e2 ♘f2 20.♖d2 [20.♖xd4? ♘xd4–+] 20...♘e4 21.♖d3 ♖d8∓

B) 12.♘xg7+ Another interesting line that Black should keep in mind. It is the first choice of the engines. White seems to easily remain two pawns ahead. 12...♔f8 13.fxe3 ♔xg7



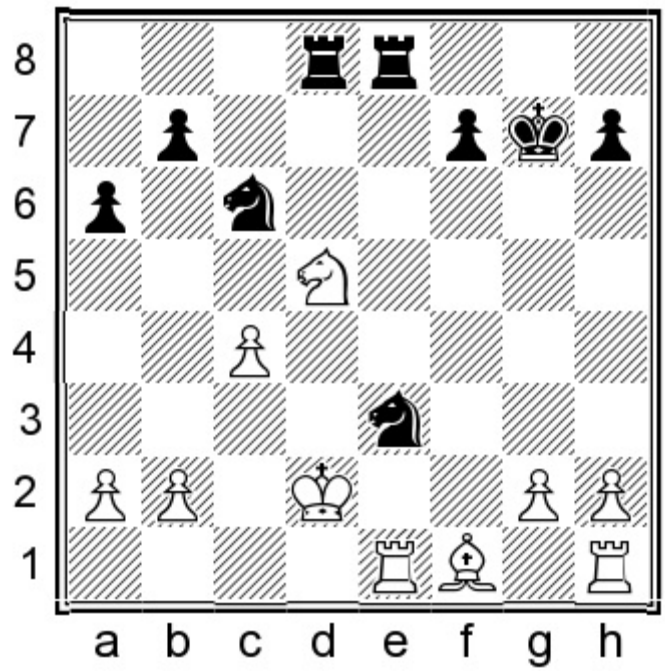
Position after: 13...♔xg7

Black is indeed two pawns behind but will soon win back the e3-pawn. Due to White's coordination

problems Black has more than sufficient compensation for the remaining pawn deficit.

B1) 14.♔e2 ♖e8 15.♘c3 ♘xe3 16.♔f2 [16.♔d2 is the line starting 14.♔e1.] 16...♘d7! 17.♗e2 [17.♘d5 ♘xd5 18.cxd5 ♘c5 19.♖d1 ♖ad8 20.♗c4 b5!=] 17...♘f6 18.♖hc1 [18.♖ab1 ♖ac8 19.b3 b5=] 18...♖ad8= White cannot cash in his extra pawn.

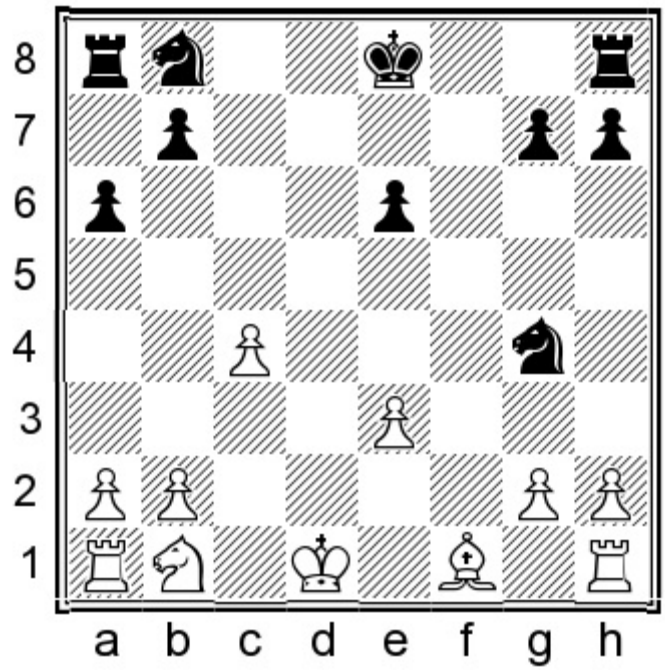
B2) 14.♔e1 ♖e8! 15.♘c3 ♘xe3! 16.♔d2 ♘c6 17.♖e1 ♖ad8+ 18.♘d5



Position after: 18.♘d5

18...♘xd5 19.♖xe8 ♖xe8 20.cxd5 ♖d8! 21.♗c4 b5 22.♔e2 [22.♔c1 ♘a5=] 22...♖e8+ 23.♔f2 bxc4 24.dxc6 ♖c8 25.♔e3 [25.♖c1 ♖xc6 26.♔e3 ♖e6+ 27.♔d4 ♖e2=] 25...♖xc6 26.♔d4 ♖e6!= The rook ending is equal.

12...fxe6



Position after: 12...fxe6

In spite of White's extra pawn, this endgame is more or less equal. It is better to have a knight on g4 than a bishop on c5 (as after 11...♘xe3), as the knight supports rook activity by Black along the f-file. In addition, Black may still play ...♘f2.

13.♔e2

13.♔d2? was played in a classic game with the O'Kelly. 13...♘c6 14.♗e2 ½-½ (45) Zuidema, C (2445) – Boey, J (2415) Willemstad 1976. [14.♔c3 ♘f2 15.♖g1 ♘d1+ 16.♔c2 ♘xe3+ 17.♔c3 ♘d1+ 18.♔c2 ♖d8∓ 19.♘c3 ♘e3+ 20.♔b3 ♘d4+–+; 14.♘c3 0-0-0+ 15.♔e2 ♖hf8 16.♘e4 ♘b4∓] Black now missed 14...♖d8+! 15.♔c3 ♘xe3 16.♖e1 [16.♖g1? 0-0–+] 16...♘xg2∓.

13...0-0! 14.♘d2

14.h3 ♘f2 15.♖g1 ♘e4 16.♔e1 ♘g3 17.♗d3 ♘d7 18.♘a3 ♘e5 19.♖d1 ♖ad8 20.♗e2 ♖xd1+ 21.♗xd1 ♘d3+= ½-½ (24) Mihelic, V (1831) – Dakic, M (1725) Bratislava 2019.

14...♖f2+!

This may become a draw. Otherwise, Black just improves the position of his rook.

15.♔e1 ♖f7!

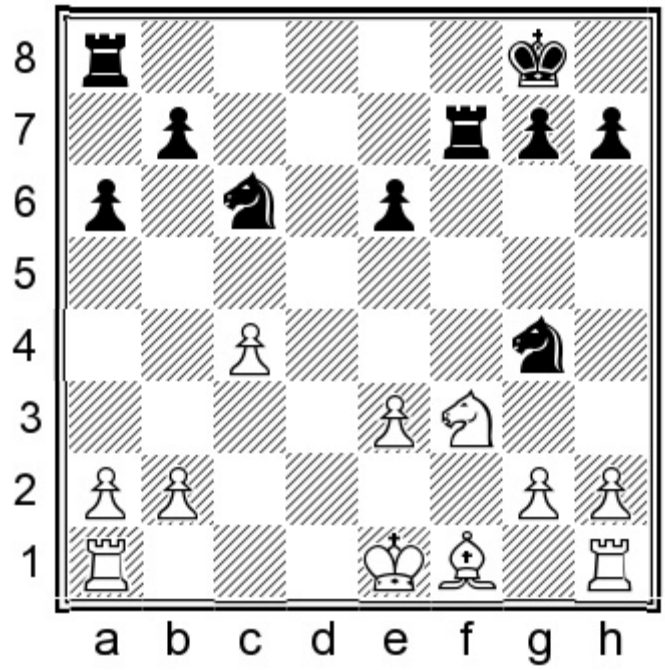
This move is only available after 13...0-0.

16.♘f3

A) 16.♔e2 is a perpetual.

B) 16.e4 ♘c6⩱

16...♘c6!



Position after: 16...♘c6!

The e3-pawn will not run away. Better to continue developing.

17.♗d3

A) 17.h3 ♘xe3 18.♔f2 ♘c2 19.♖c1 ♘2d4 20.♗e2 ♖af8 21.♖hd1 e5∓ 0-1 (25) Perez, F – Ponce, H ISLA V op 1993.

B) 17.♖c1 ♘xe3 18.♖c3 ♘g4=

17...♘xe3 18.♔f2

The g-pawn needs cover.

18...♘g4+ 19.♔g3 ♘ge5=

The material balance has been restored. Black's pawn structure is slightly weakened, but Black has the more active pieces. ½ – ½ (29) Broniek, M (2259) – De Melo, G (2145) corr. 2009.

Conclusion

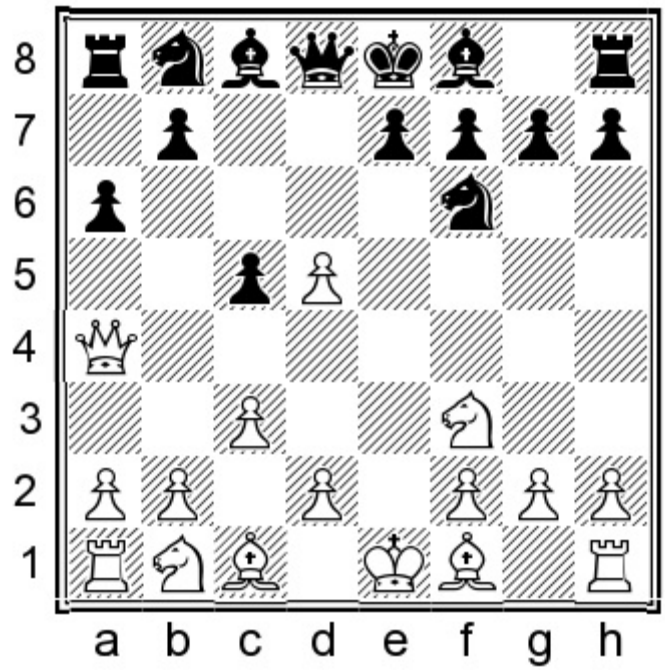
This subchapter investigates the position after 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 if White does not play 5.♕a4 or 5.d4. 5.♗e2 is a sideline, but it highlights some of the subtleties Black has to cope with in this system.

Black will take back the pawn on d5 with the knight and will soon end up in a standard IQP position, but without a thematic bishop on g7. It is equal as White has put his bishop on an active square. The main part of this chapter focuses on 5.c4 e6, a pawn sacrifice similar to the one in the Icelandic Gambit of the Scandinavian Defense.

If White does not accept the pawn, the position soon becomes balanced. If White accepts the pawn, Black will gain sufficient compensation. Unless White plays a quick 7.d4 Black will play ...♕c7 and ... 0-0-0 with pressure along the d-file and good chances for an initiative against White's castled king. A quick 7.d4 avoids these passive positions and may question the viability of Black's setup. The queens get exchanged, but the endgames remain tactical in nature and complex. We have shown that Black maintains his lead in development into the endgame. This is sufficient to maintain the balance.

e) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.♕a4+

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.♕a4+



Position after: 5.♕a4+

A key line against Black's concept. This is seen by a number of theoretical sources as the refutation of 4...♘f6. Statistically White scores excellent with this move. In my database Black has not won a single game against it. 5.♕a4 disrupts the coordination of the black pieces forcing him to either allow an unattractive exchange of queens or misplace a piece on d7 making recovery of the d5-pawn difficult. Only a handful of games have been played with 5.♕a4 thus it is not well known at this time although a number of theoretical sources mention. With the renewed interest in the O'Kelly it is likely that this move will soon be known to a wider audience.

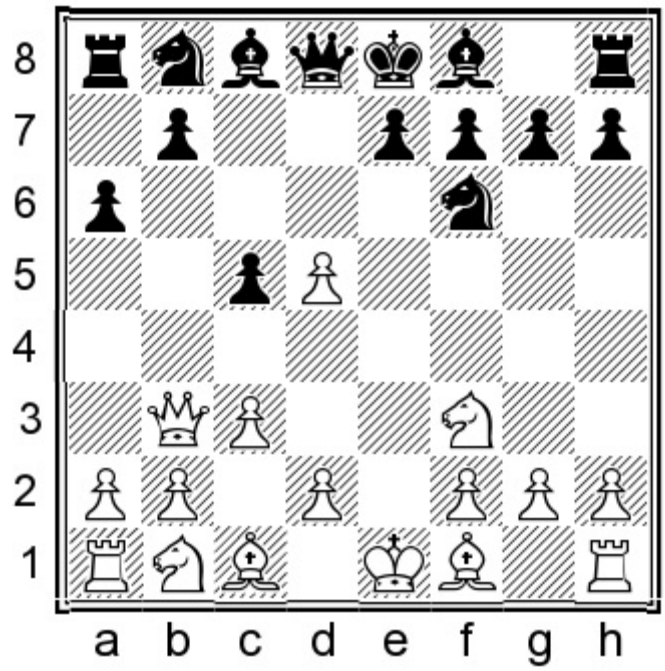
5...♗d7!

Objectively speaking, this is the best move for Black. The problem with it is that White will be able to force a draw through repetition at various moments in the lines that follow. If Black is in a must-win situation, he should play 5...♘bd7, although White could then gain a (small) advantage, if he plays precisely.

6.♕b3 ♗c8!

A bit counterintuitive as White has a position where he has played ♕b3 for free, but this is the narrow path that provides Black with a playable position. It is supported by the engines and was introduced into practice in 2016. It is not mentioned in any of the theoretical sources I have consulted. The key

question is whether the white queen is indeed that much better on b3 than on d1.



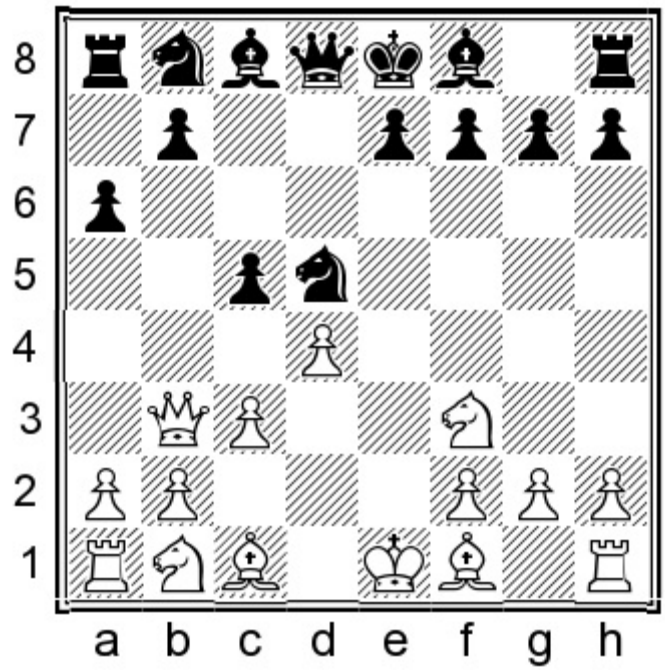
Position after: 6...♗c8!

7.c4

White hangs on to the pawn.

A) 7.♕a4+ ♗d7 leads to a draw which we will have to live with against our much lower-rated opponent unless we want to try one of the riskier alternatives mentioned above.

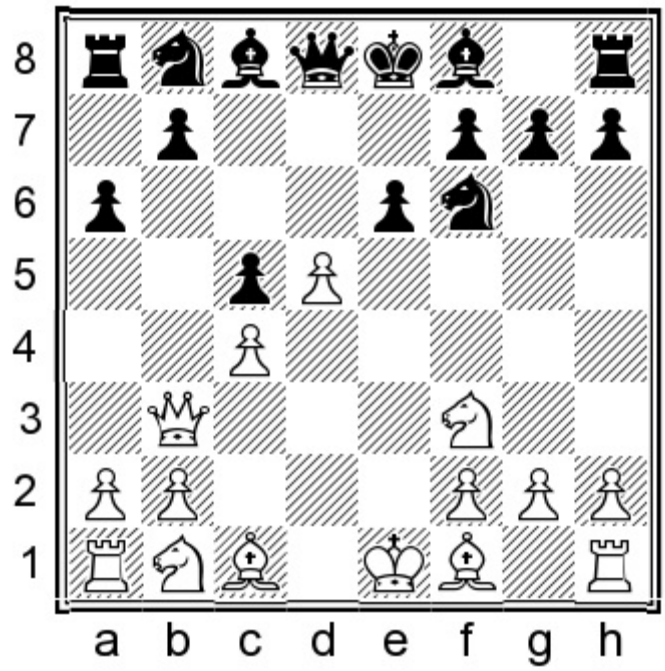
B) 7.d4 If White does not want to hang on to the pawn with 7.c4, this is the most attractive way to continue the game. 7...♘xd5!



Position after: 7...♘xd5!

B1) 8.dxc5 quickly leads to equal positions. 8...e6 9.c4 ♘f6 10.♘c3 [10.♗e3 ♘g4=] 10...♗xc5 11.♗e2 ♘bd7 12.0-0 ♕c7=

B2) 8.c4 is a natural way to take some extra space in the center. 8...♘f6 9.d5 e6



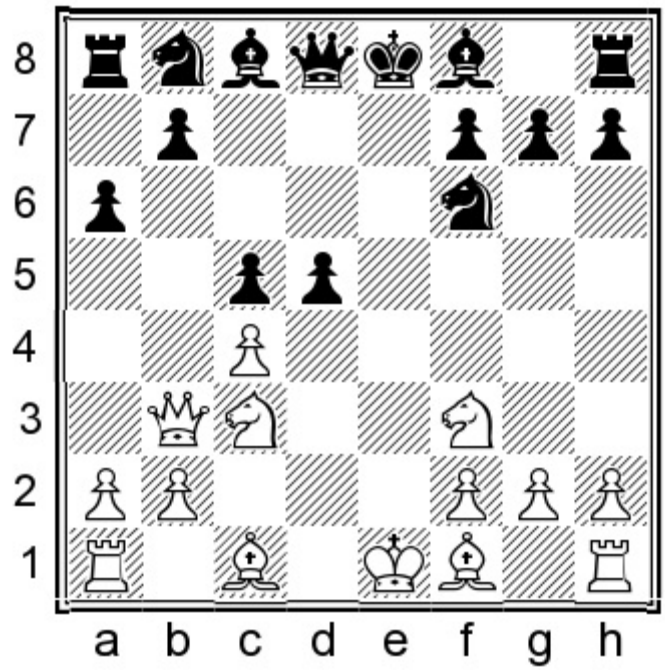
Position after: 9...e6

B2.1) 10.dxe6 leads to similar tactics as in the main line. 10...♗xe6! an unexpected response providing good prospects for Black.

B2.1a) 11.♗e2 ♘c6 12.0-0 ♕c7 13.♘c3 ♖d8 14.♗e3 [14.♘g5 ♗f5 15.♗e3 h6! 16.♘f3 ♗d6∓] 14...♗d6 15.♖ad1 0-0= There is still enough to play for both sides. Black's pieces are a fraction more harmoniously placed.

B2.1b) 11.♕xb7 ♘c6 12.♕xc6+ ♗d7 13.♕b7 ♖b8 As in the main line, the material situation becomes imbalanced, but Black has a lot of play. 14.♕xa6 ♖a8 15.♕b7 ♖b8 16.♕xb8 ♕xb8 17.♗e2 g5! The key move to create chances. 18.♘xg5 [18.♗xg5? ♕xb2–+] 18...♖g8 19.0-0 ♗d6∓

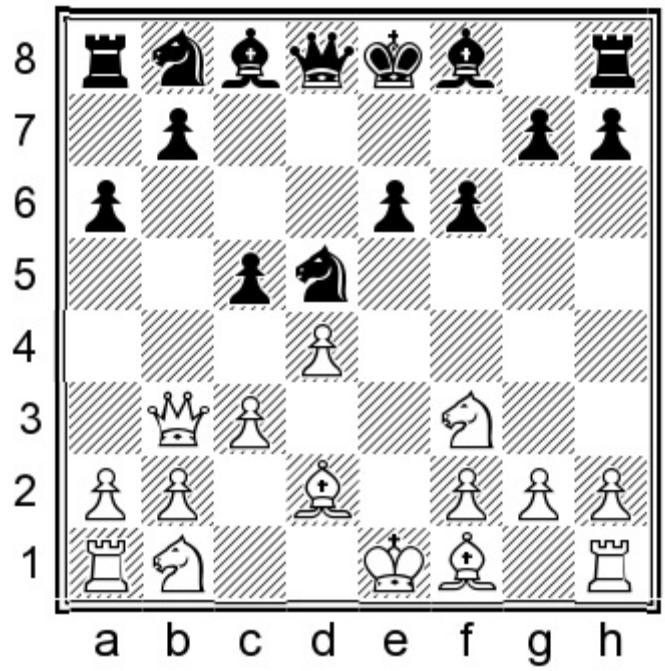
B2.2) 10.♘c3 exd5



Position after: 10...exd5

11.♘xd5 [11.cxd5 ♗d6 12.♗e2 0-0 13.0-0 b5∓] 11...♘xd5 12.cxd5 ♗d6 13.♗g5 f6 14.♗e3 0-0 15.♗e2 ♗g4 16.0-0 ♘d7=

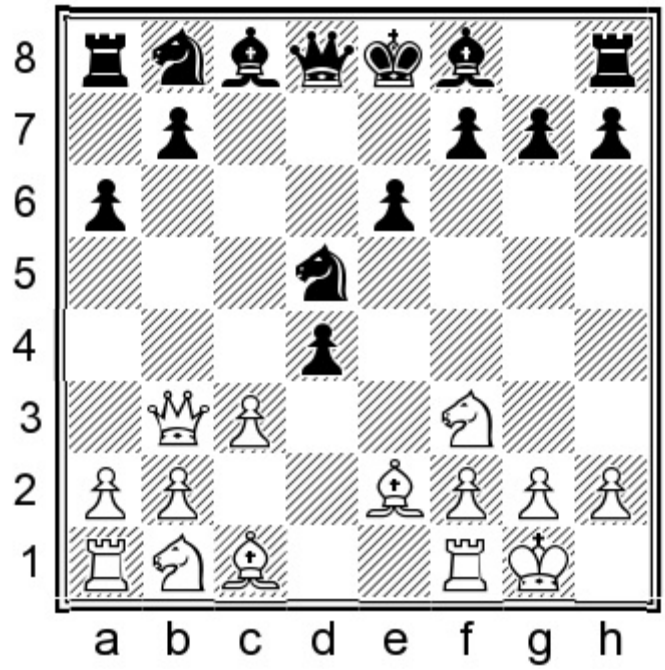
B3) 8.♗g5 is an interesting move for White and the first choice of the engines. Further, it is recommended by Wesley So in his Chessable Lifetime Repertoire 1.e4. White tries to create weaknesses in Black's position. White's immediate threat is 9.♗c4. 8...f6 is not mentioned by So in his course. 9.♗d2 [9.♗c4 e6=] 9...e6



Position after: 9...e6

10.c4! [10.♗d3 ♕b6 11.0-0 cxd4 12.♘xd4 ♗c5 13.♕d1 0-0= Black has solved all his opening problems. ½–½ (56) Schmidt, J (1874) – Tsygankov, E (2432) corr. 2016.] 10...♘c7 11.dxc5 [11.d5 exd5 12.cxd5 ♕xd5 13.♗c4 ♕e4+ 14.♗e3 ♗e6=] 11...♗xc5 12.♘c3 e5 13.♗e3 ♘d7 14.♖d1 ♕e7 15.♗e2 0-0 16.0-0 ♔h8± Black has a nicely developed position. White is only slightly better

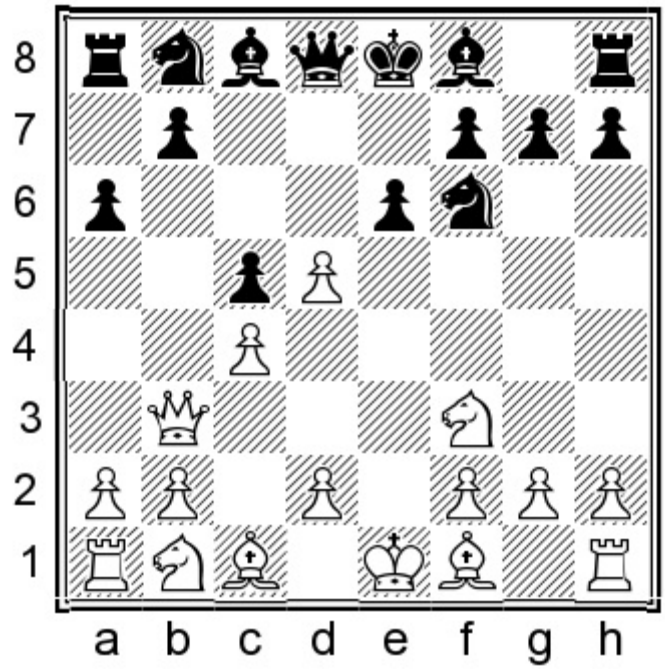
B4) 8.♗e2 in my view this is the most secure solution. 8...cxd4 9.0-0 e6



Position after: 9...e6

10.♘xd4 [10.cxd4 ♘c6 11.♘c3 ♗e7 12.♖d1 0-0 is a standard IQP position which is only slightly better for White. The white queen is not terribly well placed on b3.] 10...♗d6 11.c4 [11.♖d1 ♕c7 12.c4 ♘e7 13.♘f3 0-0=] 11...♘f6 12.♖d1 ♕c7± White's game is slightly easier, but Black is well placed for an interesting battle.

7...e6!



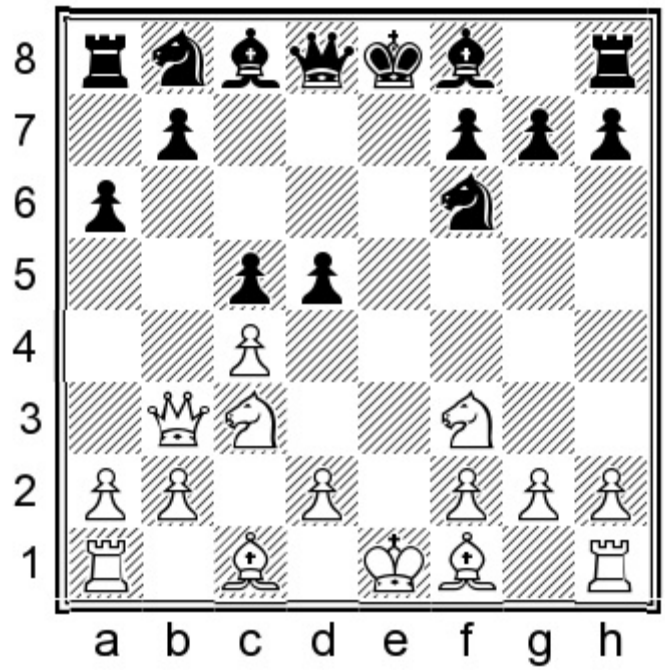
Position after: 7...e6!

A familiar concept, sacrificing a pawn for speedy development. This time Black has a nice surprise in store for White as well.

8.dxe6

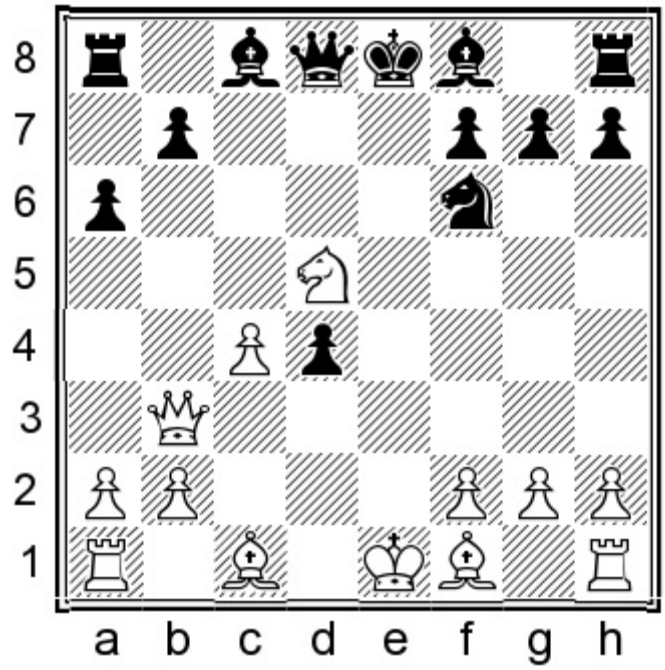
White consolidates his extra pawn.

8.♘c3 White plays on development. 8...exd5



Position after: 8...exd5

A) 9.d4 ♘c6 leads to an almost symmetrical position. 10.♘xd5 [10.♗e3 ♗e7 11.cxd5 ♘a5 12.♕c2 c4=] 10...♘xd4 11.♘xd4 cxd4

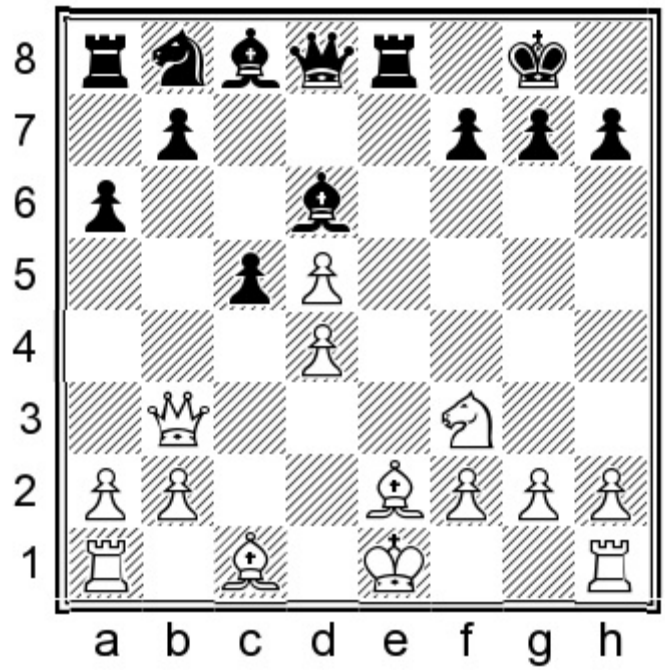


Position after: 11...cxd4

12.♗g5 ♗e7 13.♗xf6 ♕a5+ 14.♔d1 ♗xf6 15.♕b6 ♕xb6 16.♘xb6 ♖b8 17.♘xc8 ♖xc8 18.♗d3=

B) 9.cxd5 b5 10.♗e2 ♗d6 11.0-0 0-0 12.d3 ♘bd7⩱ Black has nice compensation for the pawn.

C) 9.♘xd5! ♘xd5 10.cxd5 ♗d6 11.d4 0-0 12.♗e2 ♖e8

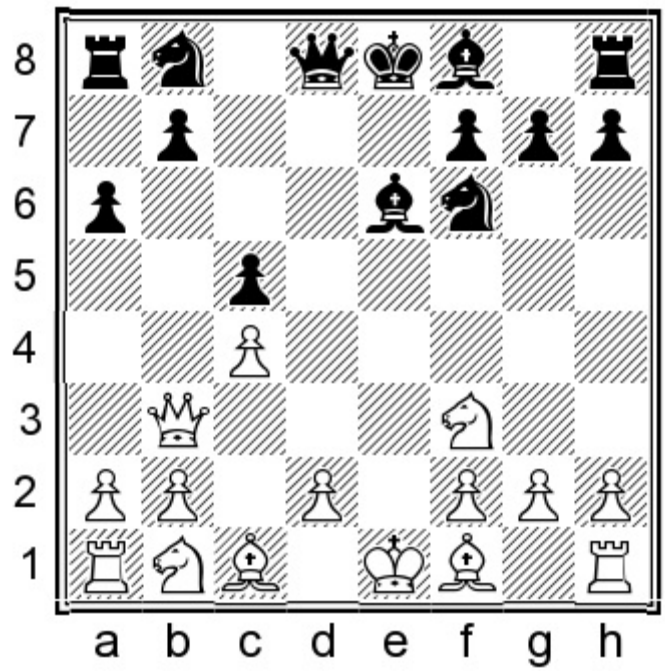


Position after: 12...♖e8

C1) 13.♕c2 cxd4 14.0-0 [14.♘xd4 ♕a5+∓] 14...♘d7=

C2) 13.♗e3 cxd4 14.♘xd4 ♕a5+ 15.♗d2 ♕c5 16.♘c2 [16.♗e3 ♕a5+=] 16...♗g4 17.♗e3 ♕a5+ 18.♕c3 ♕xc3+ 19.bxc3 ♗xe2 20.♔xe2 ♘d7 and the position is nearly equal as Black will soon win back one pawn.

8...♗xe6!



Position after: 8...♗xe6!

That is Black's unexpected idea!

9.♕xb7

Accepting the challenge.

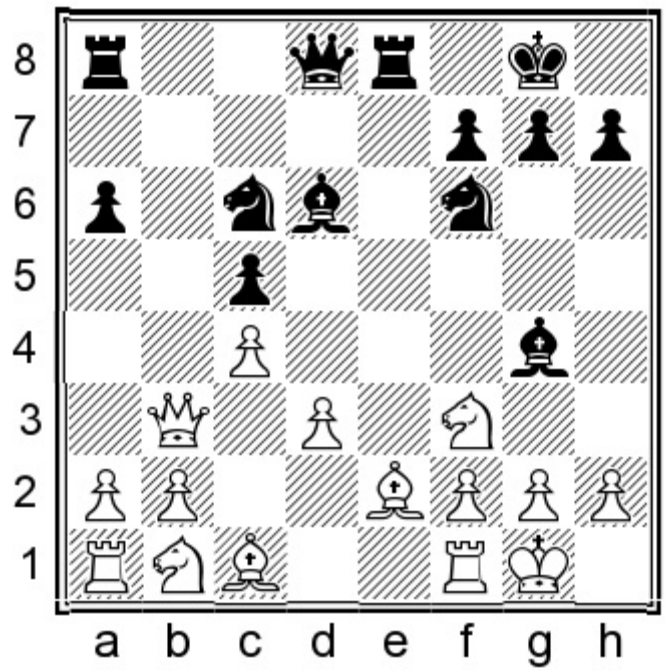
Slow play with 9.d3 gives Black his normal compensation. 9...♘c6 10.♘c3 [Now it is too late for 10.♕xb7? ♘a5–+] 10...♗d6 11.♗e2 [11.♗g5 0-0 12.♗e2 h6 13.♗h4 b5⩲] 11...♘d4 12.♕d1 0-0 13.0-0 ♖e8⩲

9...♘c6!

This move completes Black's idea behind 8...♗xe6.

10.♕xc6+

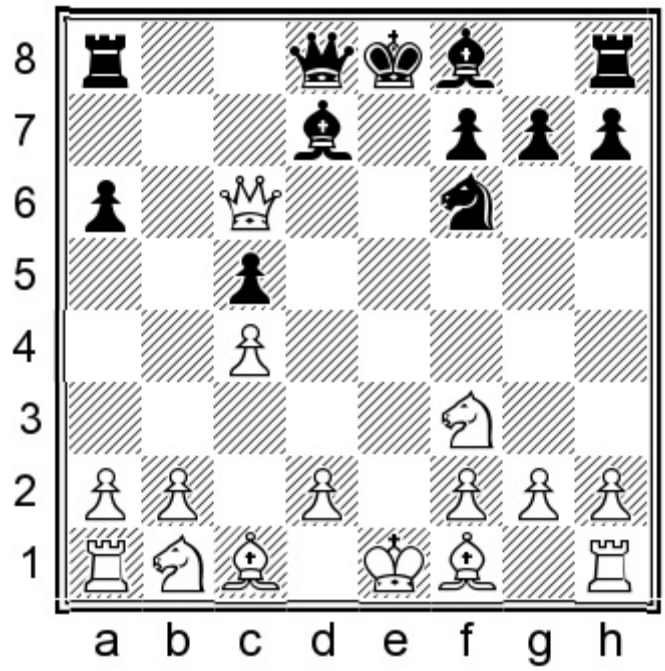
10.♕b3 White gets cold feet and declines the tasty knight. Despite being two pawns behind, Black has excellent chances. 10...♗d6 11.♗e2 0-0 12.0-0 ♖e8 13.d3 [13.♘c3 ♘d4 14.♕d1 ♗f5∓] 13...♗g4



Position after: 13...♗g4

White is having a hard time completing his development. 14.♘c3 [14.♕d1 ♖xe2 15.♕xe2 ♘d4 16.♕d1 ♗xf3 17.gxf3 ♘h5–+] 14...♘d4 15.♕d1 ♖xe2 16.♘xd4 ♖xf2 17.♘de2 ♗xe2 18.♘xe2 ♘g4! 19.♖xf2 ♗xh2+ 20.♔f1 ♘xf2 21.♔xf2 ♕f6+ 22.♘f4 ♕h4+ 23.♔f1 ♗xf4 24.♗xf4 ♕xf4+ 25.♕f3=

10...♗d7



Position after: 10...♗d7

A really nice concept: the white queen cannot escape thanks to our little pawn on a6.

11.♕b7 ♖b8 12.♕xa6 ♖a8 13.♕xa8

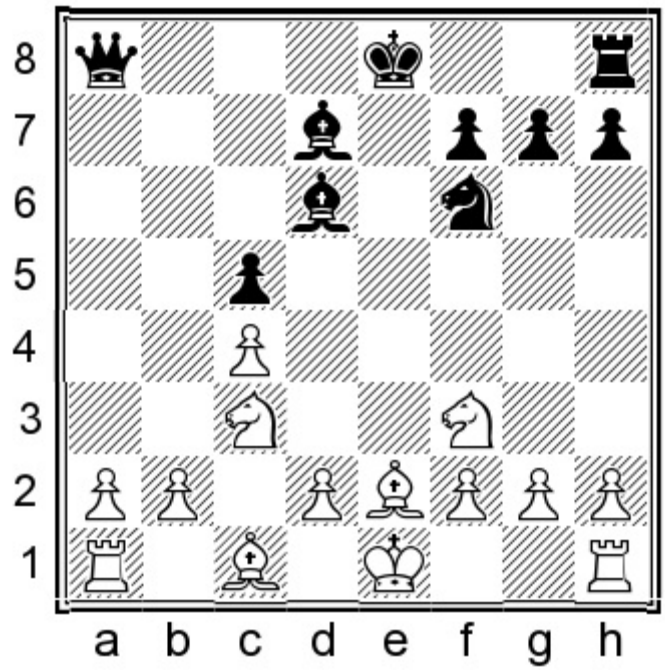
If White wants to play on it is best to take the rook on a8. If White takes on b8 Black gains pressure against b2 and h2 for free thus hindering natural development by White.

13.♕b7 ♖b8 14.♕a6 ♖a8= is a draw if White so wishes.

13...♕xa8

White has more than enough material for the queen. The question is whether Black can create dangerous threats quickly enough before White is fully mobilized and/or the a-pawn starts to run.

14.♘c3 ♗d6 15.♗e2



Position after: 15.♗e2

A principled choice. White first completes his development.

15...0-0 16.0-0

16.d3?! Normal development one would say. 16...♖e8! A critical juncture. I have not been able to find a satisfactory continuation for White.

A) 17.♗e3?! ♗c6 18.h3 ♘h5 19.0-0 ♘g3∓

B) 17.a4 too little, too late. 17...♗c6 18.♔d1 [18.0-0 ♖xe2 19.♘xe2 ♗xf3 20.gxf3 ♕xf3∓] 18...♗c7 19.a5 [19.♔c2 ♗a5 20.♗d1 ♗xc3 21.♔xc3 ♘g4 22.♖f1 ♕d8 23.a5 ♗xf3 24.♗xf3 ♘xh2∓] 19...♗xa5 20.♗e3 ♕d8∓

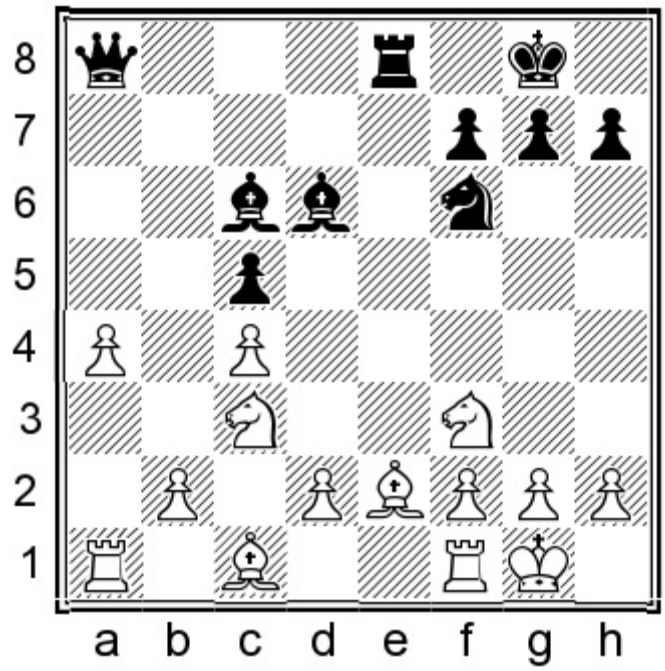
C) 17.♗d2 ♗c6 18.♔d1 ♘h5 19.♖e1 ♘f4 20.♗xf4 ♗xf4 21.♔c2 ♖b8∓

16...♖e8 17.a4

Time to run with our key asset!

17.d4 cxd4 18.♘xd4 ♗e5 19.♗e3 [19.♗f3? ♕b8∓] 19...♕b8 20.h3 ♕xb2 21.♖ac1 ♕b4= White has lost an important pawn. His queenside structure is fractured. Black will have no problems maintaining the balance.

17...♗c6



Position after: 17...♗c6

White has to make an important choice.

18.♗d1

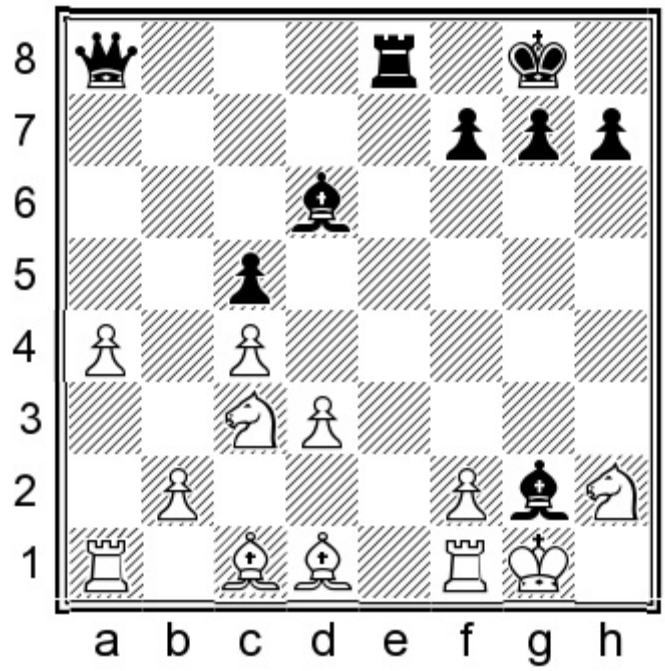
18.♖a3 g5 19.a5 ♘e4!? 20.♘xe4 ♖xe4 21.♗d3 ♖g4 22.♗e2 ♖e4=

18...♘g4 19.d3

A) 19.♖a3 ♘xh2 20.♘xh2 ♗xg2∓

B) 19.♘b5 ♗b8∓

19...♘xh2 20.♘xh2 ♗xg2



Position after: 20...♗xg2

21.♘e4

21.f4 ♗xf1 22.♘xf1 ♕c8 23.♔g2 [23.♗e3 ♕h3 24.♘d5 ♖e6∓] 23...♕b8 24.♔f3 ♕c8 25.♔g2 ♕b8=

21...♗xe4 22.dxe4 ♗xh2+ 23.♔xh2 ♕xe4 24.f4 ♕xc4=

A perpetual will soon arrive.

Conclusion

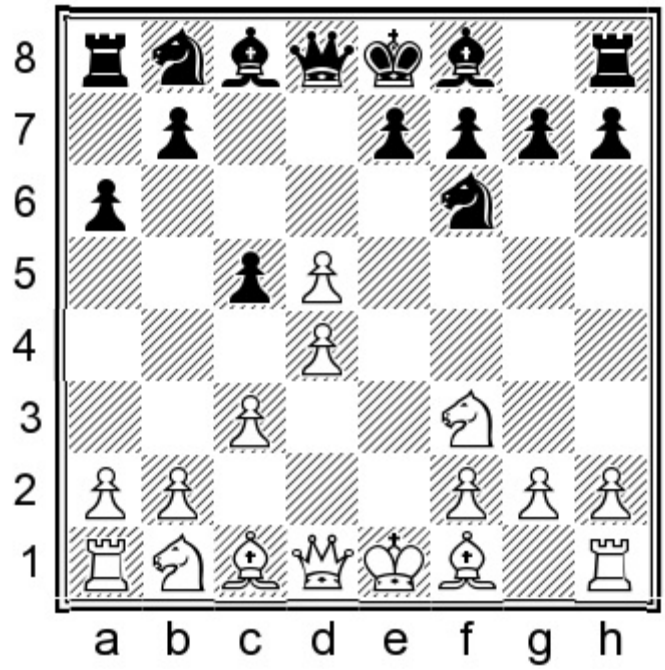
3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.♕a4 is a critical line in our O'Kelly repertoire. It is not seen often in practice, and I have only a handful of games with it in the database. By a number of theoretical works, it is seen as a refutation of Black's setup with 4...♘f6. Common wisdom is that Black has to play 5...♘bd7. That does lead to playable positions (6.c4 b5 7.cxb5 g6!), but there is no doubt that White is slightly better in the end. In this chapter the fairly unknown maneuver 5...♗d7 6.♕b3 ♗c8!? has been further investigated. Of course, this is not enough as a winning attempt, but if White is familiar with 5.♕a4 we are playing against a well-prepared opponent.

The principled continuation for White is 7.c4 e6 8.dxe6 and here we have the brand-new 8...♗xe6!. An unexpected and new idea based on the fact that the white queen cannot escape from Black's queenside after 9.♕xb7 ♘c6!! 10.♕xc6 ♗d7. White has to agree to a repetition of moves or, in order to continue the fight, he has to exchange his queen for a lot of material. From a material perspective, White is more than okay but Black has a big lead in development and a very strong queen in the ensuing positions. From here on White has two winning strategies. One is to push his a-pawn as quickly as possible. The other idea is to complete his kingside development first. Against both strategies Black has more than sufficient resources. If White is not precise, Black can even fight for

an advantage. There is an element of “long analysis, wrong analysis” in the variations we have investigated but there is no practical experience with them. The lines above give us a good idea of how the game may continue.

f) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 6.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4



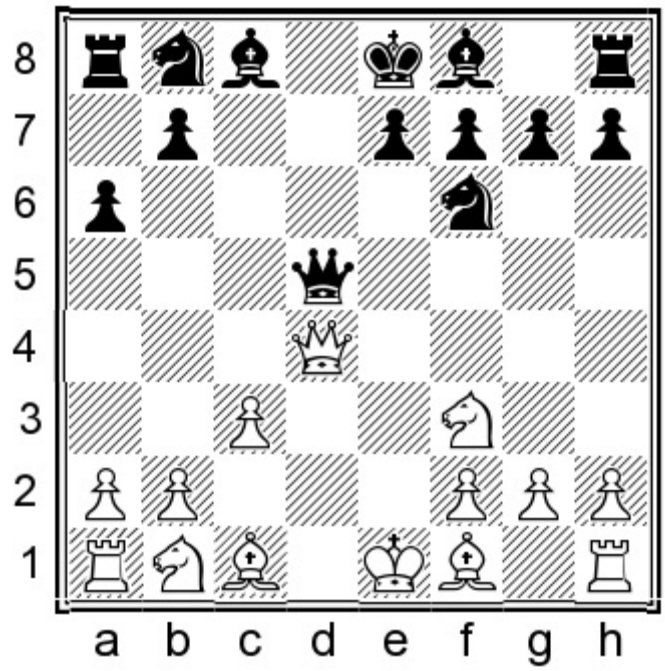
Position after: 5.d4

The most natural continuation and the most commonly played.

5...cxd4 6.c4!?

White holds on to the pawn in a simple way. He is in for an unpleasant surprise.

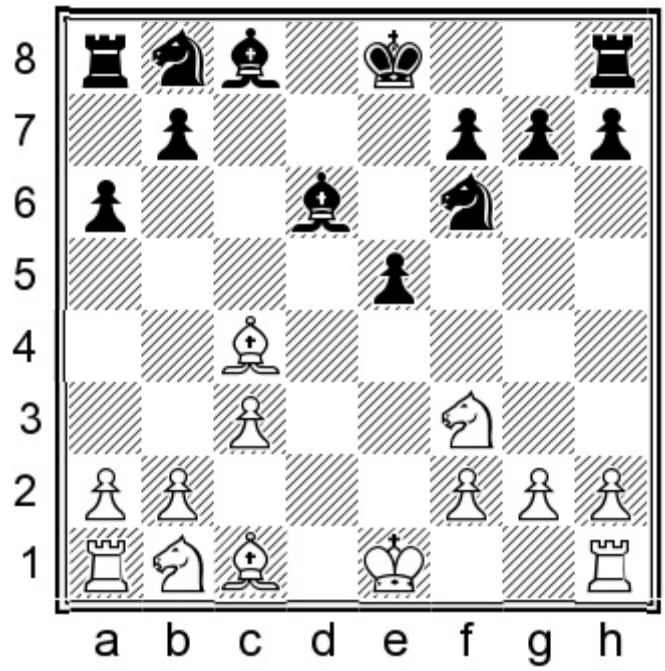
A) 6.♕xd4 If White likes to play a technical game, this is the way to go. It is a pet line of GM Sergei Zhigalko, who makes a living on lichess.org milking these queen less middlegames for White. 6...♕xd5! Preferred by strong players like Jorden Van Foreest, Fier and Kazakovskiy when they reach this position. We will soon see an endgame in which it is hard for either side to find opportunities to play for a win. One could argue that the c3-pawn hinders White’s development on the queenside. At the same time, White is still one move ahead in development, has a queenside pawn majority and may make use of the weakness of the b6-square.



Position after: 6...♕xd5!

A1) 7.♕xd5 ♘xd5 is not a threat to the viability of 4...♘f6 according to Emms, but of course Black needs to play accurately. 8.♗c4 [8.♘bd2 ♘c6 9.♘c4 ♗g4 10.♘fe5 ♘xe5 11.♘xe5 ♗f5 12.♗c4 ♖d8 13.0-0 f6 14.♖d1 e6= ½-½ (33) Alekseev, E (2589) – Turov, M (2565) St Petersburg 2021.] 8...♘b6! 9.♗b3 ♗f5! pre-empting ♘g5. 10.0-0 [10.a4 ♘6d7 11.♗e3 ♘c6 12.♘bd2 e6 13.♘c4 ♘c5 14.♗d1 ♖d8=; 10.♗e3 ♘8d7 11.♘bd2 e6 12.0-0-0 ♖c8= Preventing ♘c4 before completing his development on the kingside.] 10...e6 11.♘d4 ♗g6 12.♗e3 ♘8d7 13.f4 ♗c5 14.♔h1 0-0=

A2) 7.♗c4 ♕xd4 8.♘xd4 e5! 9.♘f3 ♗d6!

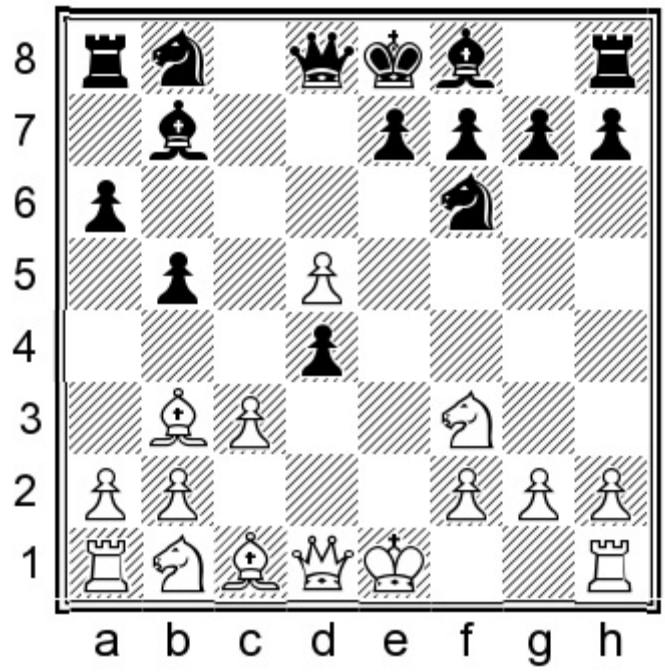


Position after: 9...♗d6!

A2.1) 10.♗g5 ♘bd7 11.0-0 transposes. [11.♘bd2 h6 12.♗e3 ♘g4 13.♘f1 0-0=]

A2.2) 10.0-0 0-0 11.♗g5 [11.♖d1 ♗c7 12.h3 h6 cautiously preparing the b8-knight to be developed to c6. 13.♗e3 ♘c6 14.♘bd2 ♗f5=] 11...♘bd7 12.♘bd2 [12.♖e1 b5 13.♗b3 ♗b7 14.♘bd2 ♖fe8= This position is completely equal.] 12...h6 13.♗h4 b5 14.♗b3 ♗b7 15.♖fe1 ♖fe8! 16.♗g3 ♘h5 17.♖ad1 ♘xg3 18.hxg3 ♘c5=

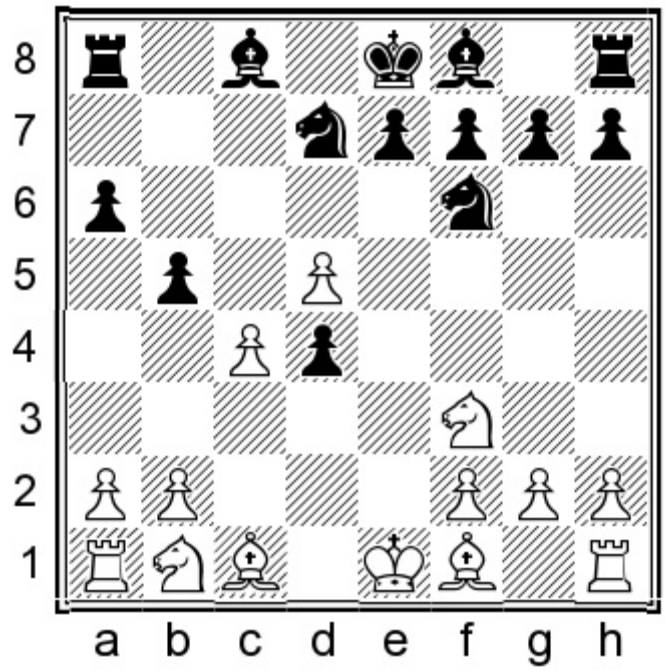
B) 6.♗c4!? This is the move recommended by Lakdawala in his "Opening Repertoire 1.e4". Morra Gambit specialist Mark Esserman has tried it once. If Black takes on c3, the character of the game would indeed resemble his beloved Morra Gambit, although without the investment of a pawn. 6...b5! 7.♗b3 ♗b7



Position after: 7...♗b7

8.a4 [8.0-0 ♗xd5! It is desirable to exchange White's strong bishop and maintain the knight on f6 in the IQP positions which we are about to arrive in. 9.♗xd5 ♕xd5 10.cxd4 g6 11.♘c3 ♕b7=] 8...♗xd5 9.axb5 axb5 10.♖xa8 ♗xa8 11.0-0 e6 12.♘xd4 ♕b6 [12...♗c5 13.♘xb5 ♘bd7⩱] 13.♘xb5 ♗c5 14.♘d4 0-0⩲ 0-1 (53) Esserman, M (2596) – External_Student (2686) lichess.org 2020. Black›s strong bishops are excellent compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

C) 6.♕a4+!? Just like the intermediate check on move 5 White disrupts Black's coordination. 6...♕d7! [6...♘bd7 7.♕xd4± is the same story. Black is a pawn behind.] 7.♕xd7+ Now the O'Kelly specialists disagree as to what is the best way to recapture the queen. [7.♕xd4 ♕xd5 is the main line with an extra move for each side.] 7...♘bxd7 The preference of Alexandr Fier. 8.c4 Other moves equalize immediately. 8...b5!

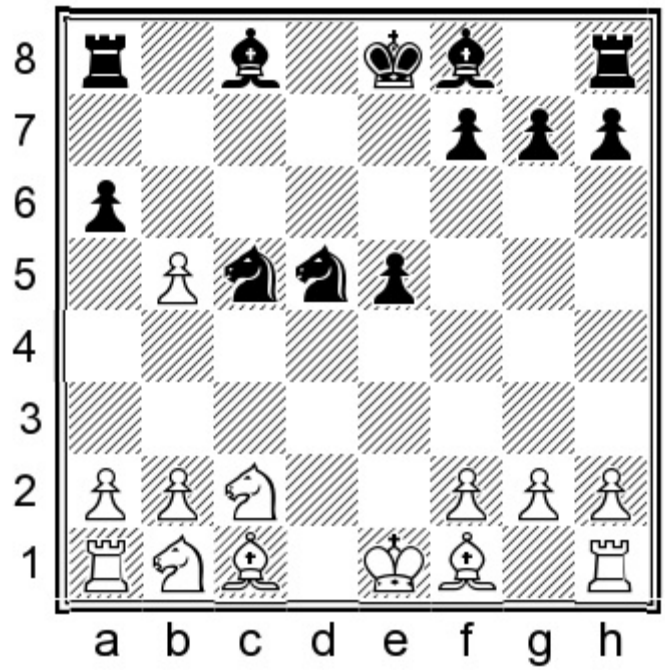


Position after: 8...b5!

With the queens off this is much more convincing.

C1) 9.b3 bxc4 10.bxc4 e6 11.dxe6 fxe6 12.♘xd4 e5! Black should take active steps in the center. 13.♘e6 [13.♘c2 ♗b7 14.♘d2 ♘c5 15.♖b1 0-0-0 16.♘e3 ♘a4⩲; 13.♘b3 ♗b7 14.♗d2 ♗e7 15.♘c3 0-0⩲] 13...♗b4+ 14.♗d2 ♗xd2+ 15.♘xd2 ♔e7 16.♘xg7 ♘c5 17.♗e2 h5 18.♘b3 ♘xb3 19.axb3 ♔f7 20.♖a5 ♔xg7 21.♖xe5 ♖b8∓ ½ – ½ (50) Frijling, J (2295) – Leoni, A (2010) corr. 2003.

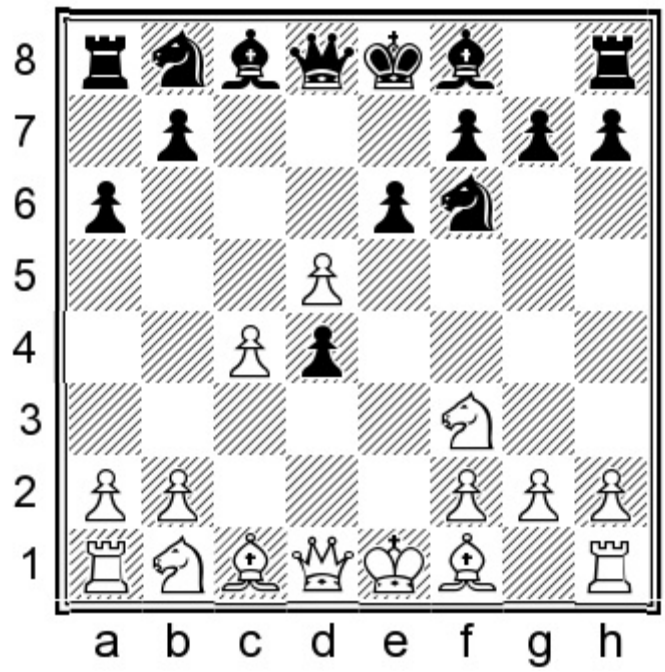
C2) 9.cxb5 ♘xd5 10.♘xd4 e5 11.♘c2 ♘c5!



Position after: 11...♘c5!

As played by GM Alexandr Fier, a specialist in the system with 3...d5 and 4...♘f6. 12.♘c3 [12.bxa6 ♗xa6! 13.♗xa6 ♖xa6 14.♔e2 e4 15.♘c3 ♘xc3+ 16.bxc3 ♘a4 17.♗d2 ♗d6! 18.♖hb1 0-0 19.♖b5 ♖c6=] 12...♘xc3 13.bxc3 axb5 14.♗xb5+ ♗d7 15.♗xd7+ [15.c4!? ♗d6] 15...♔xd7 16.♔e2 ♘e4 17.♗d2 ♗c5= ½-½ (22) Alekseev, E (2698) – Fier, A (2572) Zürich 2013.

6...e6

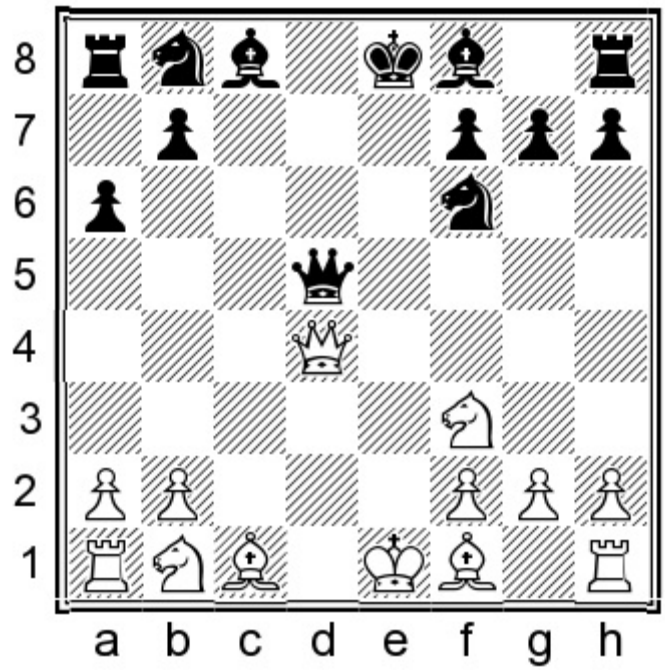


Position after: 6...e6

7.dxe6

A) 7.♘xd4 the knight is a bit insecure. 7...exd5 8.♘c3 ♗c5! 9.cxd5 [9.♗e3 0-0 10.♗e2 dxc4∓ 11.♗f3 ♕c7∓; 9.♕e2+ ♗e7 10.♗e3 ♘c6 11.♖d1 0-0 12.♘xc6 bxc6 13.♕c2=] 9...0-0! 10.♗e2 ♘xd5 11.0-0 ♘xc3 12.bxc3 h6 followed by ...♕f6=. Black's pawn structure is a bit better than White's, but the game is level.

B) 7.♕xd4 if White plays precisely, he may use this move to reach an equal endgame. Black is certainly not worse, although winning chances for either side are slim. 7...exd5 8.cxd5! The only serious try for White. [8.♗g5? ♘c6 9.♕d1 h6 10.♗h4 g5 11.♗g3 ♗b4+–+] 8...♕xd5



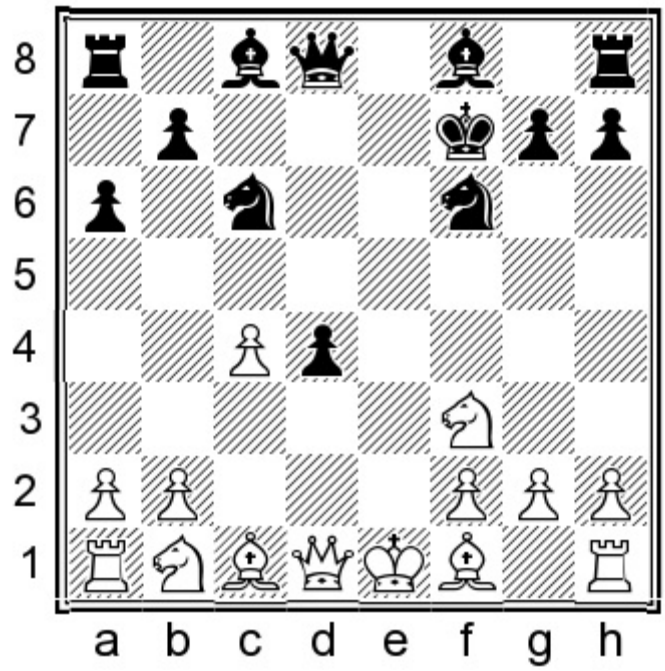
Position after: 8...♕xd5

This results in an equal endgame. 9.♘c3 [9.♕xd5 ♘xd5 10.♗c4 ♘b4 11.♗b3 ♘d7 12.0-0 ♘c5 13.♖e1+ ♗e7∓; 9.♗c4 ♕xd4 10.♘xd4 ♗c5 11.♘b3 ♗a7 12.0-0 0-0 13.a4 ♘c6 14.a5 ♗f5∓] 9...♕xd4 10.♘xd4 ♗c5 11.♘b3 ♗a7 12.♗e2 ♘c6 13.0-0 ♗g4!? 14.♗xg4 ♘xg4 15.h3 [15.♖e1+ ♘ce5 16.♖e2 0-0∓ 17.h3? ♘xf2∓] 15...♘ge5=

7...♘c6!

In the spirit of the Icelandic Gambit. This is a risky maneuver borrowed from the 2...♘f6 Scandinavian opening. Black stays a pawn behind and sacrifices the safety of his king for good piece activity. Black's monarch is indeed a bit on shaky grounds as the White's queen's d1-a4 diagonal is open, but White has to handle a number of threats.

8.exf7+ ♔xf7



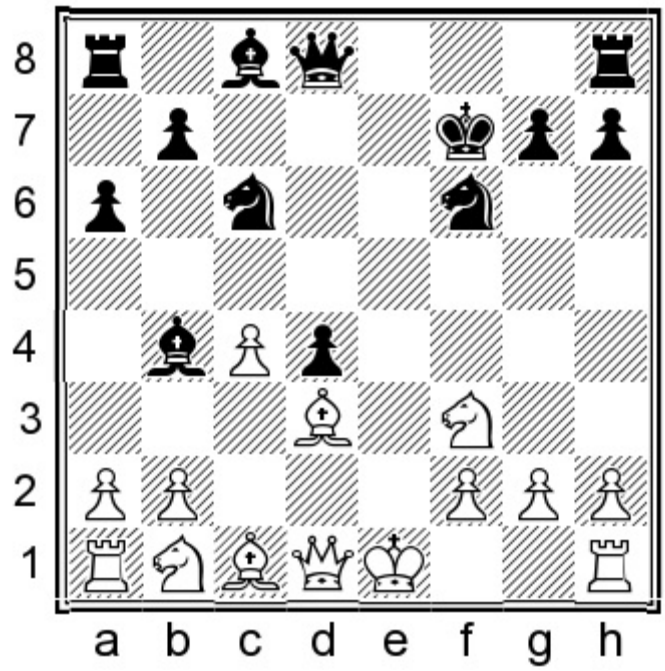
Position after: 8...♔xf7

A spicy position has emerged. Black has sacrificed a pawn and in return he is well ahead in development, and he has dangerous piece play.

9.c5!

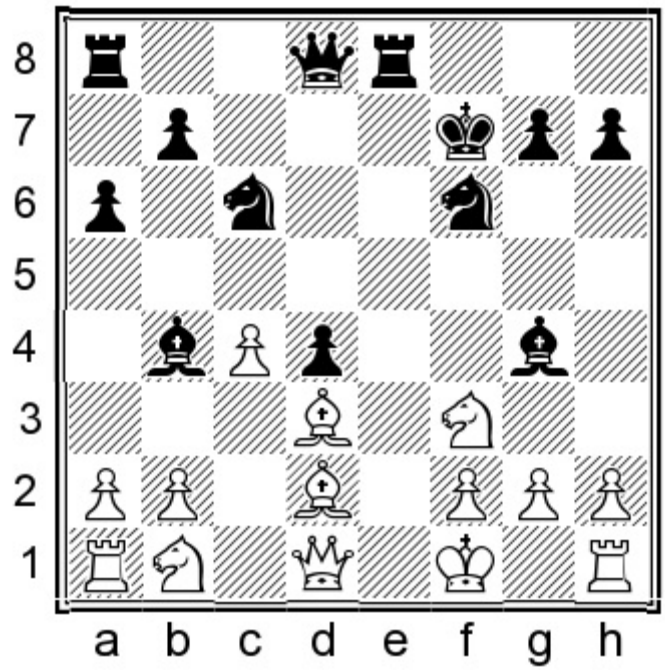
The most challenging choice. White opens the a2-g8 diagonal emphasizing the fact that the black king is in the danger zone.

A) 9.♗d3 The most popular choice, but this is easy for Black. 9...♗b4+! Again, Black starts with this disruptive check.



Position after: 9...♗b4+!

A1) 10.♗d2 The natural response is not convincing. 10...♖e8+! Black is already slightly better, in spite of White's extra pawn. 11.♔f1 White's pieces lack coordination, his king is vulnerable, his queenside structure is relatively weak, and it will take some time before the rook reaches h1. 11...♗g4!

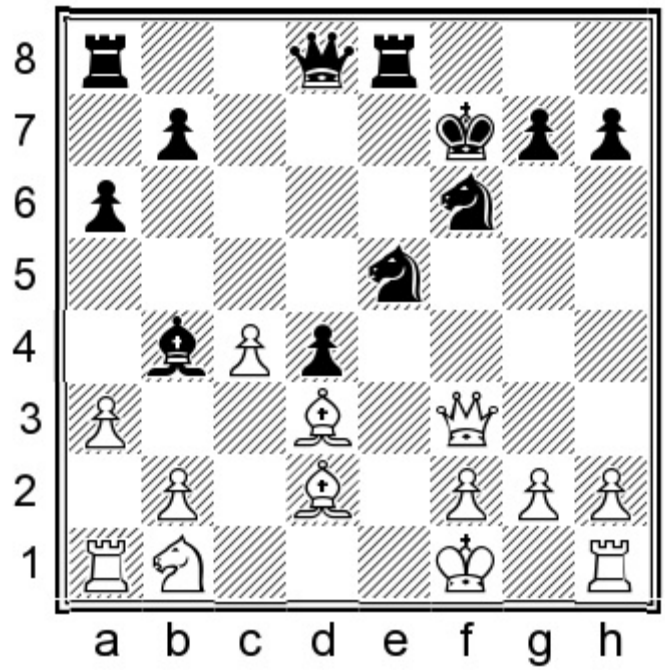


Position after: 11...♗g4!

Pinning the knight in order to prevent counterplay with ♘g5 and to create new threats.

A1.1) 12.h3 ♗xf3 13.♕xf3 ♕a5!−/+ The killer move! White is unable to defend against all of the threats. 14.♕d1 [14.♗xb4 ♕xb4 15.♕d1 ♘e5 leads to the same position] 14...♘e5 15.♗xb4 ♕xb4 and White was about to lose material.

A1.2) 12.a3 ♗xf3 13.♕xf3 ♘e5!



Position after: 13...♘e5!

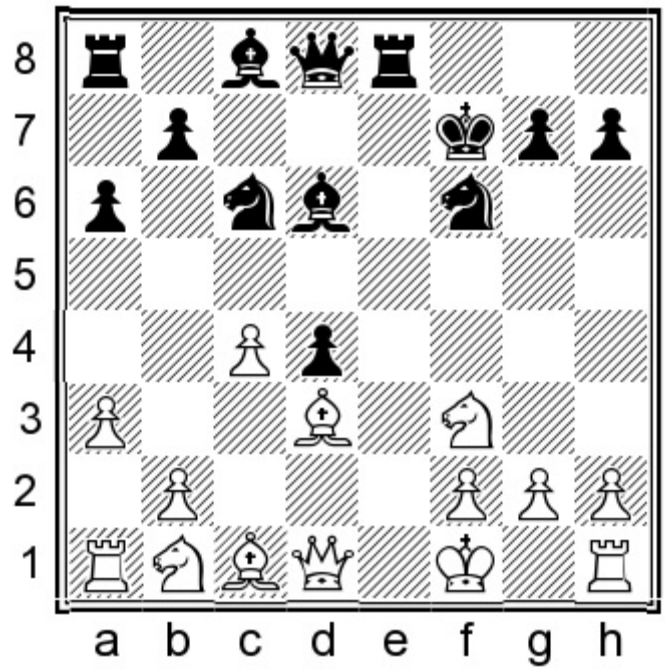
White's situation is already precarious. 14.♕e2 [14.♕xb7+? ♔g8 15.♗xb4 ♘xd3 16.♗d2 ♘e4!–+] 14...♗d6 15.♗e1 ♔g8 16.♘d2 ♔h8 17.♘f3 ♘xc4∓

A2) 10.♘bd2 This is better. 10...♖e8+ 11.♔f1 ♔g8 Black has sufficient compensation for his pawn. 12.a3 [12.h3 ♘d7!=] 12...♗xd2 13.♗xd2 ♗g4!

A2.1) 14.h3 ♗xf3 15.♕xf3 ♘e5 16.♕e2 [16.♕g3 ♘h5–+] 16...♔h8!∓ Taking the pawn on c4 can hardly be prevented. 17.♗g5 ♘xc4–+ 0-1 (30) Georgiev, K (2517) – Boekelman, J (2589) Chess.com 2022.

A2.2) 14.♗f4 ♘e5 15.♗xe5 ♖xe5 16.♕d2 ♗xf3 17.gxf3 ♕d7⩲

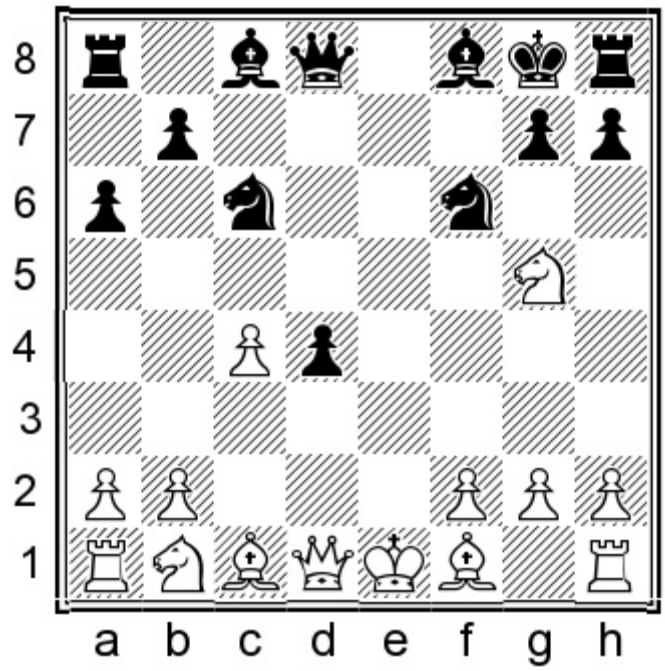
A3) 10.♔f1 as the king will have to move to f1 anyway, why not now? 10...♖e8! 11.a3 [11.♘bd2 transposes to 10.♘bd2] 11...♗d6



Position after: 11...♗d6

12.♗g5 [12.b4 ♔g8 13.h3 b6 14.♗b2 ♖a7 15.♘bd2 ♖ae7∓ Black's initiative is worth more than a pawn.] 12...h6 13.♗xf6 ♕xf6 14.♘bd2 ♔g8⩱ White is solid with an extra pawn, but I'd rather have Black.

B) 9.♘g5+ An interesting way of chasing the black king. 9...♔g8



Position after: 9...♔g8

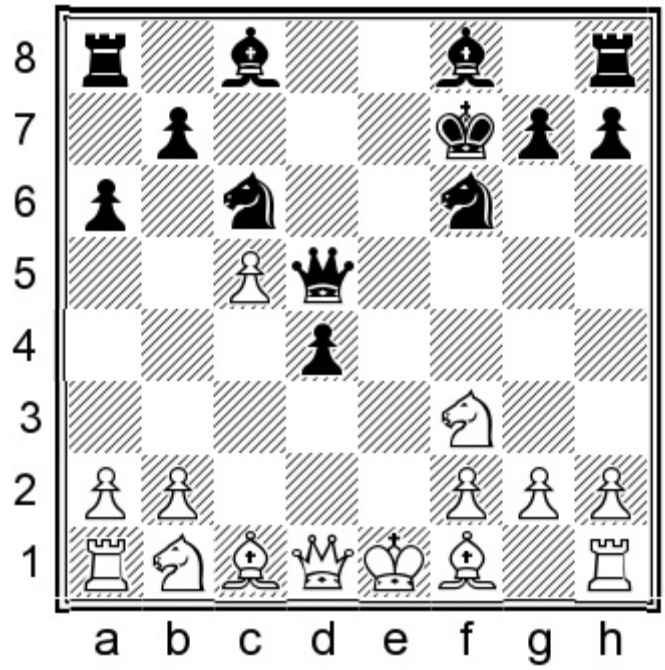
B1) 10.♗d3 ♕e7+! Checks displace the white king in this line. 11.♔f1 [11.♕e2? ♘b4! 12.♕xe7

♘xd3+ 13.♔d2 ♗xe7 14.♔xd3 ♗f5+–+] 11...h6 12.♘f3 ♘e4∓ Black will follow up with ...♘c5.

B2) 10.c5 ♕d5! Centralizes the queen and handles White's threat via the a2-g8 diagonal. 11.♕b3 ♕xb3 12.axb3 ♗xc5 regaining the pawn. 13.♗c4+ ♔f8 14.0-0 [14.♘f7? b5–+] 14...h6=

9...♕d5!

A relatively new move. Black prevents 10.♗c4.



Position after: 9...♕d5!

10.♘bd2!

White renews the threat of 11.♗c4.

10.b3 b5! 11.♗e2 [11.cxb6? ♗b4+ 12.♗d2 ♖e8+ 13.♗e2 d3–+] 11...♗f5 12.0-0 ♖c8 13.♘bd2 ♕xc5=

10...d3!

Checks along the e-file really become a problem for White.

11.♕b3!

The only move to stay alive. After other moves Black is much better.

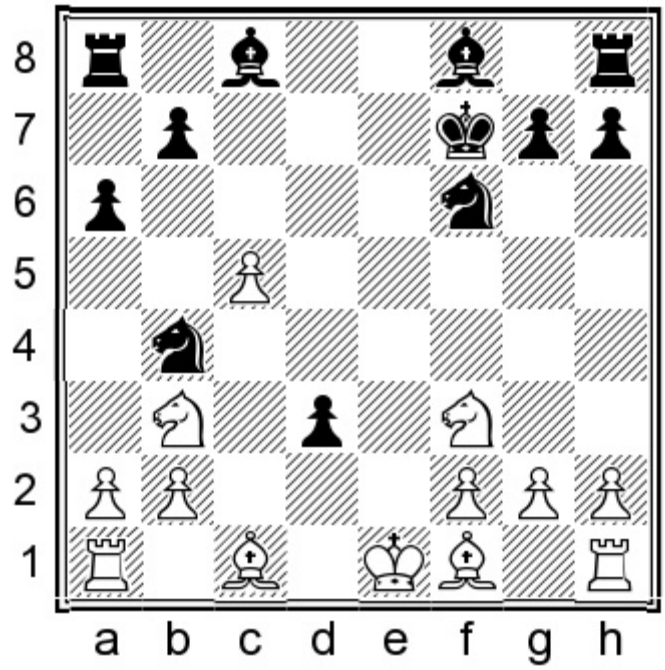
11.♘b3 ♗f5 12.♗e3 ♖e8 13.♖c1 g6 Black will follow up with ...♘g4 or ...♗h6∓.

11...♕xb3 12.♘xb3

12.axb3 ♗f5! 13.♘c4 ♖d8 14.♗g5 [14.♘g5+ ♔g8 15.♘e3 ♗c8 16.♗d2 ♗xc5∓] 14...♗xc5 15.0-0-0

♖he8∓

12...♘b4!



Position after: 12...♘b4!

Black's initiative is strong and compensates for the pawn deficit.

13.♘fd4

13.♘e5+ ♔e6 14.♘xd3 ♘c2+ 15.♔d1 ♘xa1 16.♘xa1 ♗e7= White has two pawns for the exchange, but his pieces are less harmonious.

13...♗e6!

Up until here the moves after 9.c5 have been more or less forced. White has various options to reach an equal ending.

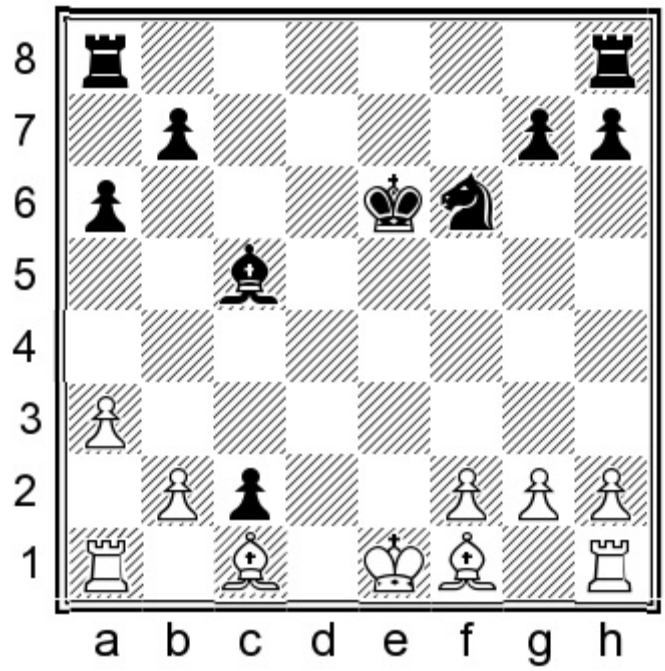
14.a3

14.♘xe6 ♔xe6! 15.♔d1 ♘g4 16.♗e3 ♘c2 17.♘d4+ ♘xd4 18.♗xd4 ♖d8 19.♗e3 ♘xe3+ 20.fxe3 ♗xc5 21.♖c1 ♗xe3 22.♖c3 ♗d4=

14...♘c2+ 15.♘xc2 dxc2 16.♘d4 ♗xc5 17.♘xe6

17.♘xc2 ♖ac8 18.♗e3 ♖he8=

17...♔xe6



Position after: 17...♔xe6

18.♗c4+

18.♔d2 ♖ac8 19.♗c4+ ♔d7 20.♔xc2 ♗xf2 21.♖d1+ ♔c7= Black has comfortably equalized.

18...♔e5!?

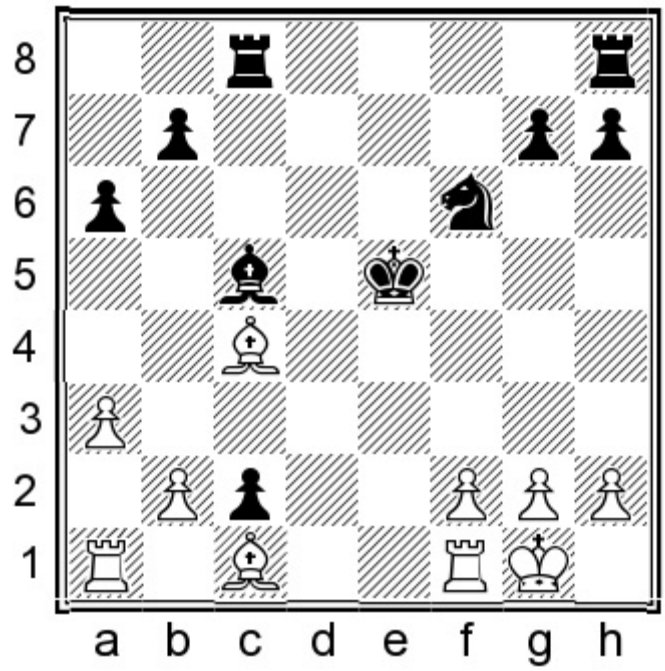
Black's king is well centralized for the endgame!

19.0-0

19.b4 ♗d4 20.♖a2 ♖ac8 21.♖xc2 b5 22.♗b3 ♖xc2 23.♗xc2 ♖c8 24.♔d1 ♘g4 25.♖e1+ ♔f6 26.♗b1 ♘xf2+ 27.♔e2 ♖e8+ 28.♔f1 ♖xe1+ 29.♔xe1 h6=

19...♖ac8

A tricky position. White has to defend carefully.



Position after: 19...♖ac8

20.♗b3!

The only move to maintain the balance.

A) 20.♖e1+? This is a serious mistake. 20...♘e4! The damage caused by White's 20th move cannot be repaired. 21.♗d3 [21.♖e2 ♖hd8 22.♖xc2 ♖d1+ 23.♗f1 ♗xf2+–+] 21...♗xf2+ –/+

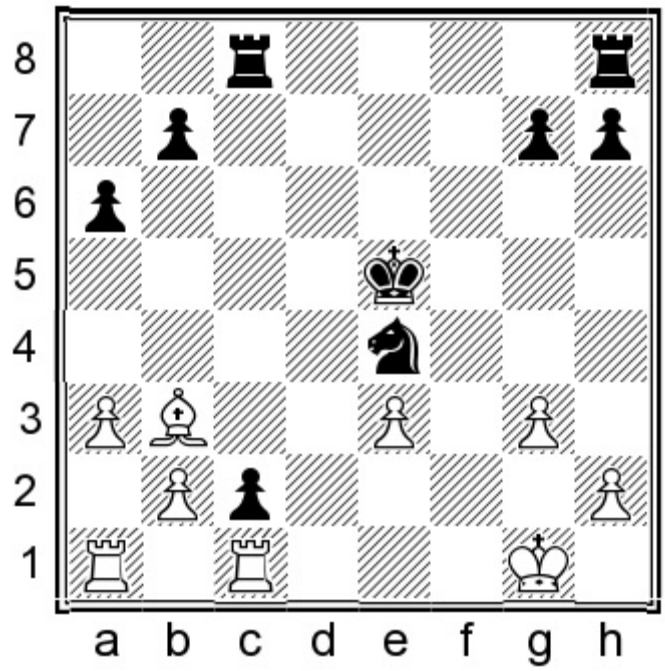
B) 20.♗d3 ♘g4! 21.h3 [21.♖e1+ ♔f6 22.♖e2 ♖he8–+] 21...♖hd8 22.♗xc2 ♗xf2+ 23.♖xf2 [23.♔h1 ♖xc2 24.hxg4 ♖d6–+] 23...♘xf2 24.♗g5 ♖xc2 25.♗xd8 ♘d3∓

20...♘e4 21.g3 ♔f6 22.♗e3 ♗xe3 23.fxe3+ ♔e5

Black's active king secures the draw.

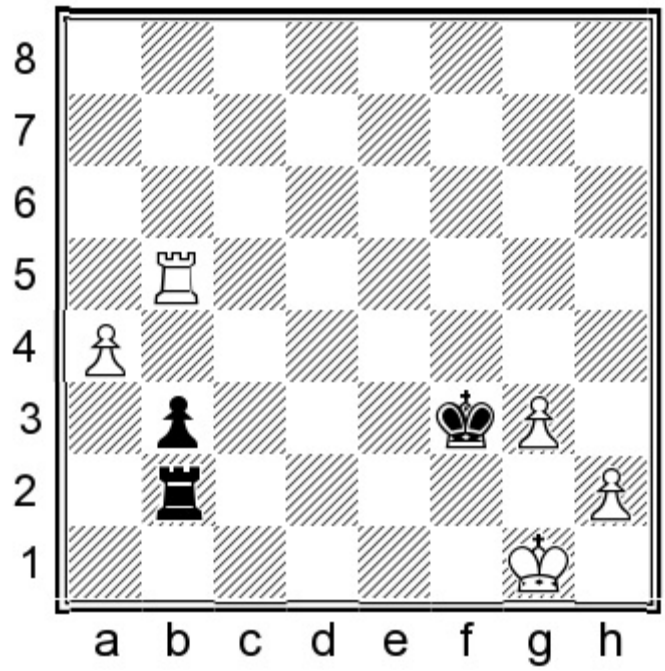
24.♖fc1

The only move.



Position after: 24.♖fc1

24...♖hd8 25.♗xc2 ♖d2 26.♗xe4 ♖xc1+ 27.♖xc1 ♔xe4 28.♖c7 ♖xb2 29.♖xg7 h5 30.♖g5 b5 31.♖xh5 a5 32.a4 b4 33.♖xa5 b3 34.♖b5 ♔f3 35.♖f5+ ♔xe3 36.♖b5 ♔f3=



Position after: 36...♔f3=

Conclusion

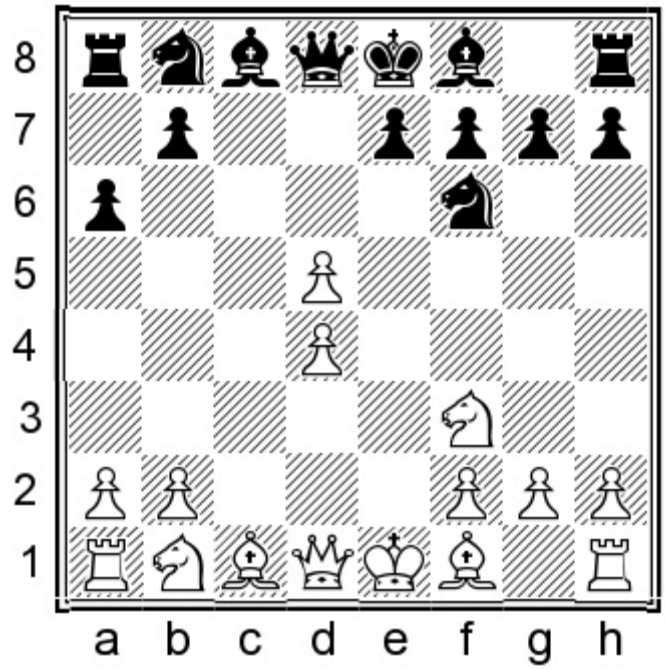
Alternatives to 6.c4 give Black easy piece play in the center and are no cause for concern. It should be relatively easy for Black to reach an equal endgame. Black should have a look at 6.♕a4 in particular

as that requires accurate play. The fun starts when White wants to hold on to his extra pawn with 6.c4 as Black challenges White's stronghold with 6...e6. Most of the time we see White accepting the gambit with 7.dxe6.

Besides the most popular 7...♗xe6, which transposes to the line discussed in the previous chapter, Black can use the adventurous 7...♘c6!? 8.exf7 ♔xf7. This gambit is inspired by the Icelandic Gambit in the Scandinavian Defense. White now has many threats to deal with. Three moves seem sufficient to keep the balance. The cautious 9.a3, the active 9.♘g5 and the vicious 9.c5. All require accurate play by Black, but in the end, he should be able to equalize. In many lines, a small misstep by White will lead to worrisome consequences for him.

g) 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4



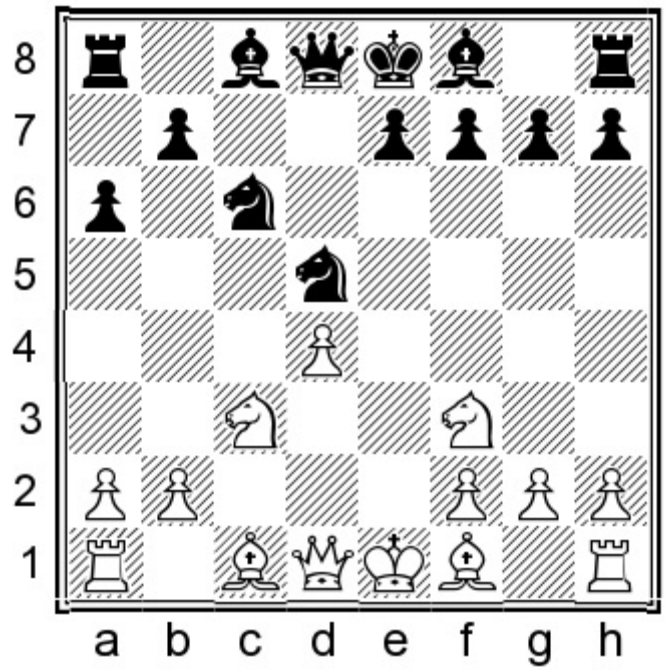
Position after: 6.cxd4

The most natural move in this position and the most commonly seen. When you play 3...d5 and 4...♘f6 you will meet this position a lot.

6...♘xd5

A standard IQP position has been reached with Black's knight on d5 and a pawn on a6. If allowed, Black aims for ...g6 playing a Rubinstein set-up against the QGD Tarrasch with reversed colors.

7.♘c3 ♘c6



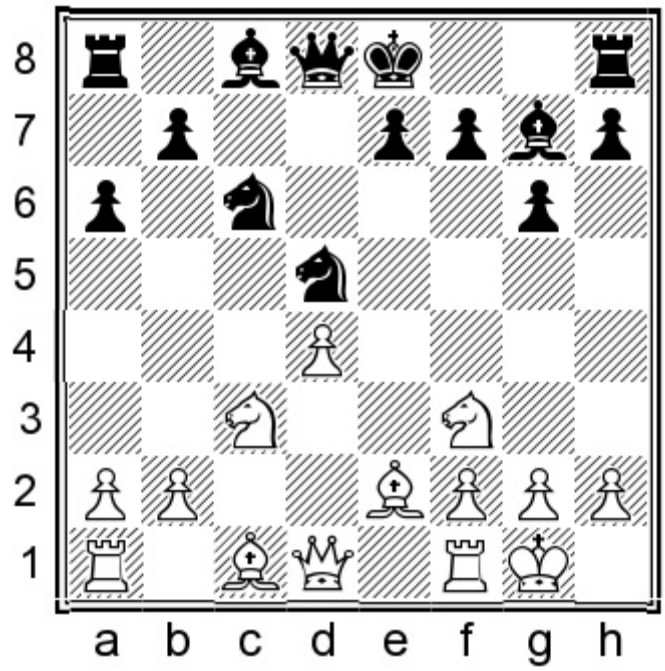
Position after: 7...♘c6

This is a key position which has become quite popular recently. This position can be reached via various move orders from the Caro Kann Botvinnik Panov and the Sicilian Alapin as well as the Morra Gambit. We continue to focus the repertoire on continuations where Black aims for a kingside fianchetto.

8.♗c4

The most principled continuation, trying to create an initiative based on the extra tempo from Black's ...a6.

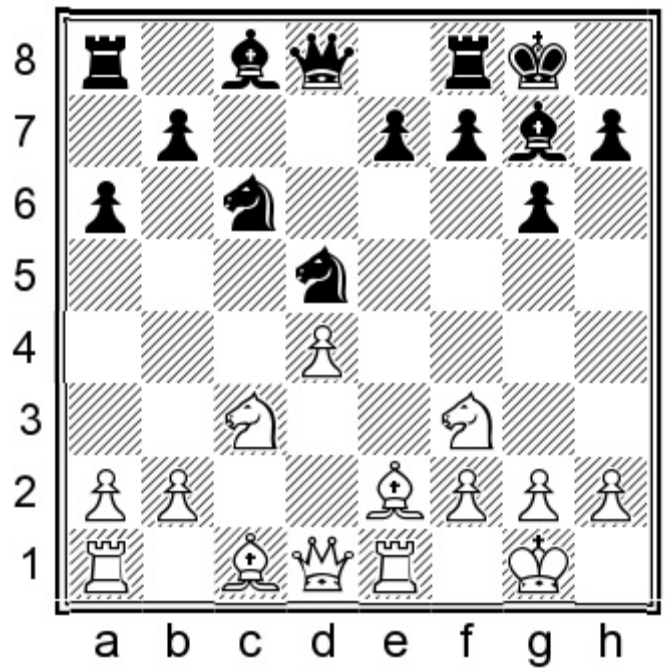
A) 8.♗e2 White essentially is okay with a QGD Tarrasch with reversed colors (perhaps unknowingly) , but he has already taken the pawn on d5, while in the regular Tarrasch Black has to spend a tempo on ...♗g4 (♗g5) in order to make the pawn exchange happen, normally followed by h3 (...h6) and ...♗e6 (♗e3). Black's ... a6 may well become useful during the next few moves. 8...g6 9.0-0 [9.♕b3 ♗e6 10.♘g5 ♗g7 11.♘xe6 fxe6 12.♗e3 0-0=] 9...♗g7



Position after: 9...♗g7

A1) 10.♕b3?! poor timing for this move. 10...♗e6! 11.♕a3 [11.♕xb7?? ♘a5–+; 11.♘g5? ♘xc3! 12.♕xc3 ♘xd4–+; 11.♗c4? ♘a5 12.♕a4+ b5 13.♘xb5 axb5 14.♗xb5+ ♗d7! 15.♗d2 ♗xb5 16.♕xb5+ ♕d7 17.♕d3 ♘c6–+] 11...0-0 12.♗g5 ♕c7∓

A2) 10.♖e1 0-0 and White is about to lose a tempo with h3 or ♗c4. Black plays as if he were White in a QGD Tarrasch.



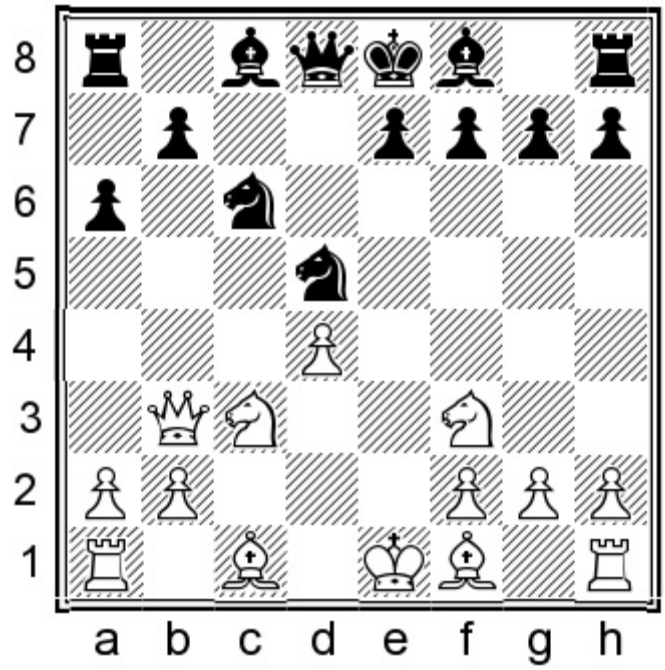
Position after: 10...0-0

A2.1) 11.♗e3?! ♘xe3 12.fxe3 ♕b6 13.♕d2 ♗f5 14.♔h1 ♖ad8∓ again ...a6 is quite helpful as ♘a4 loses its impact.

A2.2) 11.h3 ♗e6∓ with a regular Tarrasch with reversed colors. 12.♗f1 ♖c8 13.♘a4 [13.♗g5∓] 13...♕d6∓ 14.♘c5?? ♘xd4–+

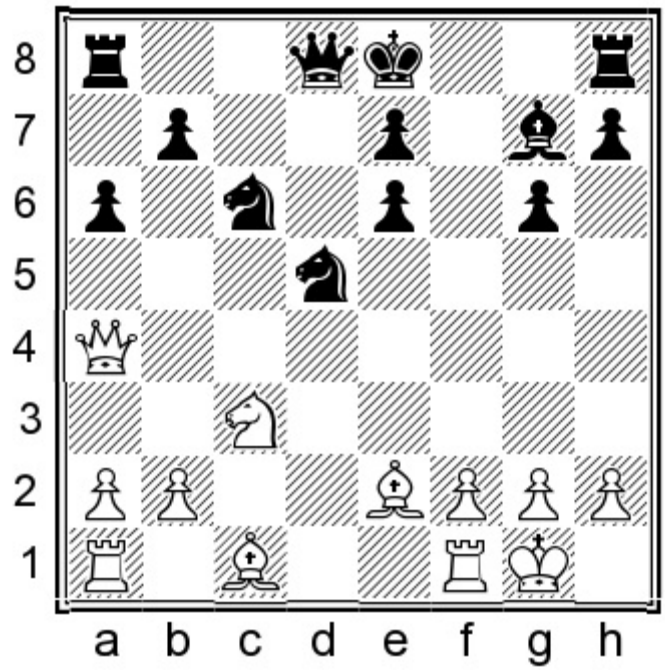
A2.3) 11.♗c4 ♘b6! 12.♗b3 ♗g4 Black takes the opportunity when presented. 13.h3 ♗xf3 14.♕xf3 a5∓

B) 8.♕b3



Position after: 8.♕b3

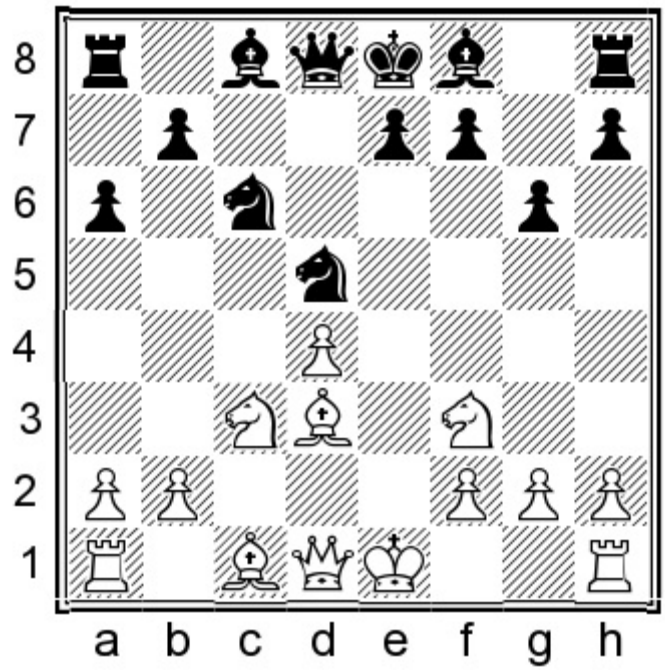
A standard move in the Panov to strengthen White's center after ...♘xc3 bxc3. 8...♗e6! This is always our response to ♕b3. White cannot take on b7 thanks to the O'Kelly move. 9.♘g5 [9.♕c2 ♘db4 10.♕d2 ♘xd4–+ 0-1 (32) Scarsi, A (1668) – Babiy, O (2300) Lichess.org 2021.] 9...♘xd4 10.♕a4+ ♘c6 11.♘xe6 fxe6 12.♗e2 White has some compensation for the lost pawn. 12...g6!N 13.0-0 ♗g7



Position after: 13...♗g7

14.♗g4 [14.♖d1 ♕b6 15.♘xd5 exd5 16.♖xd5 0-0= 17.♗e3 ♕xb2 18.♕c4 ♔h8 19.♖e1 ♖ad8 20.♖xd8 ♖xd8 21.♗f3 a5= White's bishop pair is sufficient compensation for Black's extra pawn.] 14...♘xc3 15.bxc3 ♗xc3 16.♖b1 ♕d4 17.♕c2 ♕xg4 18.♕xc3 ♘d4 19.♕e3 0-0= White will win back one pawn on b7 with equal chances.

C) 8.♗d3 This puts the bishop in a more active position than the thematic e2-square in the Tarrasch, but it weakens the defense of White's d4-pawn. White has to watch out for a well-timed ....♗g4 and the question arises: what is next for the d3-bishop? 8...g6

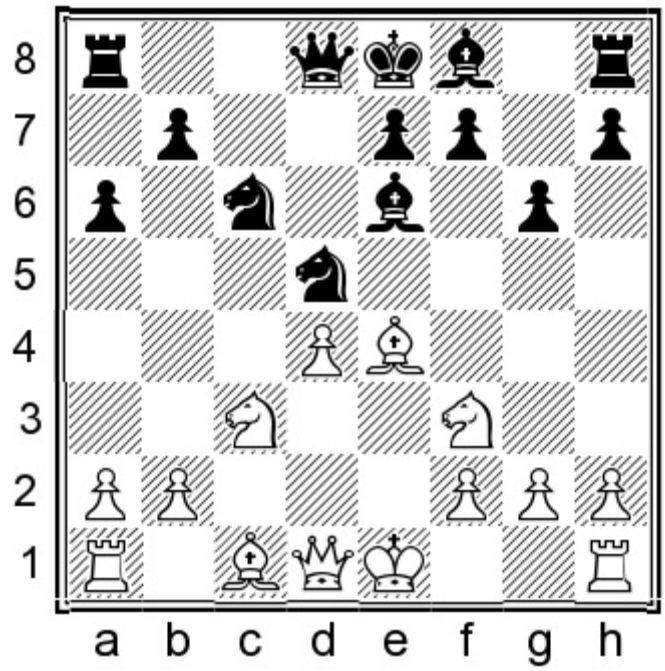


Position after: 8...g6

The regular development scheme for Black in this variation. [Whether one plays the text or 8...♗g4 is a matter of taste, more than anything else. I prefer my bishop on g7.]

C1) 9.h4!? Fairly aggressive for the Alapin! 9...♗g4! The key move. 10.h5 [10.♗e4 ♘f6 11.♗xc6+ bxc6 12.♕d3 ♗g7=] 10...♗g7 11.hxg6 hxg6 12.♖xh8+ ♗xh8∓ Black is already slightly better, having good play against White's IQP.

C2) 9.♗e4 This move tends to transpose to later lines. 9...♗e6!



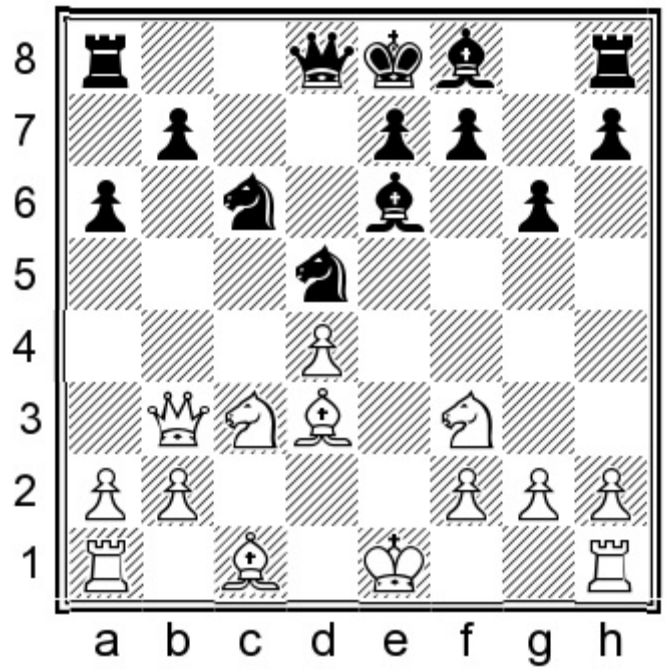
Position after: 9...♗e6!

Again, Black should refrain from ...♘xc3 which unnecessarily strengthening White's center pawn structure unless there is an immediate follow-up with ...♗c4 or ...♘a5.

C2.1) 10.♘g5 ♘xc3 11.bxc3 [11.♘xe6 ♘xd1 12.♘xd8 ♖xd8 13.♗xc6+ bxc6 14.♔xd1 ♗g7∓] 11...♗c4! 12.♖b1 ♕d7=

C2.2) 10.0-0 ♗g7 transposing to 9.0-0.

C3) 9.♕b3 A tricky move Black needs to be prepared for. 9...♗e6! The familiar recipe. Now White has to be precise as only one move leads him to an equal position.

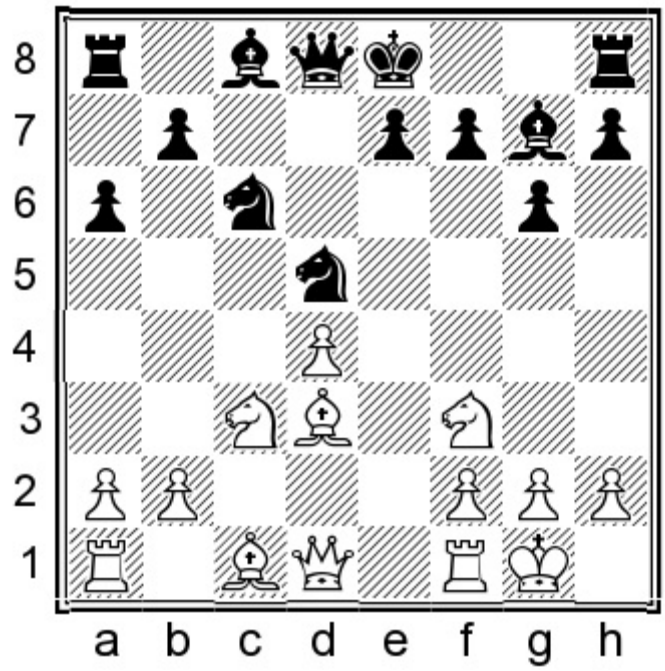


Position after: 9...♗e6!

C3.1) 10.♘g5? ♘db4! 11.♘xe6 [11.♕d1 ♕xd4 12.♗b1 ♗c4 13.a3 ♕xd1+ 14.♘xd1 ♘d3+ 15.♗xd3 ♗xd3 16.♗d2 ♗g7 17.♗c3 0-0–+ Black is a solid pawn up with a better position.] 11...♘xd3+ 12.♔d2 fxe6 13.♔xd3 ♕xd4+ 14.♔e2 ♖d8 15.♗e3 ♕d3+–+ 16.♔e1 ♗g7 17.♖d1 ♗xc3+ 18.bxc3 ♕xd1+∓ In this worse position van Riemsdijk made use of his 135 rating point difference and accepted Black's proposal of a draw. ½ – ½ (18) Van Riemsdijk, H (2435) – Pelikian, J (2295) Brasilia 1994.

C3.2) 10.♗e4! ♘a5 11.♕c2 ♖c8! 12.0-0 ♘xc3! 13.bxc3 ♗g7 14.♖e1 [14.♘g5 ♗d5∓] 14...♕c7 15.♗g5 0-0= Black can happily start to play against White's hanging pawns.

C4) 9.0-0 There cannot be anything wrong with quickly completing one's development. 9...♗g7



Position after: 9...♗g7

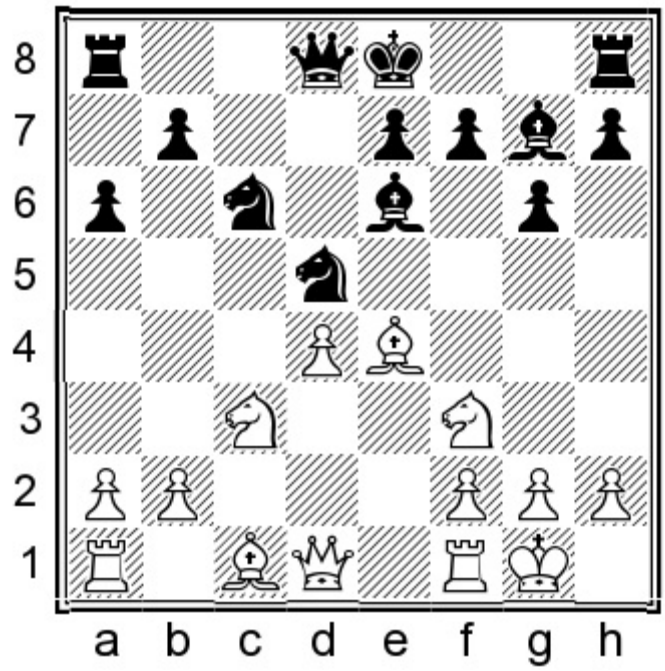
We have reached a QGD Tarrasch with reversed colors with the a-typical bishop on d3. This gives White some extra options as he can immediately use the e-file and he can put his bishop on e4 in order to further increase the pressure against Black's central pieces.

C4.1) 10.♗e3 0-0 11.♖c1 [11.h3 ♗e6 12.♖c1 ♘xe3 13.fxe3 ♗h6∓] 11...♘xe3 a favorable exchange for Black. 12.fxe3 e5! 13.d5 ♘e7 14.e4 [14.♕b3 b5 15.a4 ♖b8∓] 14...♗d7∓

C4.2) 10.♖e1 ♗e6! 11.♗e4 [11.♘g5 ♘xd4 12.♘xe6 fxe6 leads to a double-edged position in which Black has good play.] 11...0-0 12.♗g5 ♖c8= generally followed by ...♘xc3 and ...♘a5 when Black has his standard edge.

C4.3) 10.h3 Not strictly necessary, as Black does not plan to play ...♗g4 yet. 10...0-0 White now needs to worry about his d-pawn. 11.♗e4 [11.♖e1?! ♘xd4! 12.♘xd4 ♗xd4 13.♗xg6 ♗xf2+ 14.♔xf2 fxg6+ 15.♔g1 ♕b6+ 16.♔h2 ♘xc3 17.bxc3 ♗e6∓; 11.♗g5 ♗e6! 12.♗e4! h6 13.♗h4 ♘xc3 14.bxc3 ♗d5 15.♖e1 ♗xe4 16.♖xe4 ♕d5= ½ – ½ (30) Lopez Gracia, F (2299) – Jaracz, P (2456) Chess.com 2021.] 11...♗e6!= Black plays a promising Tarrasch with reversed colors.

C4.4) 10.♗e4 Increasing the pressure against the black pieces in the center. 10...♗e6!



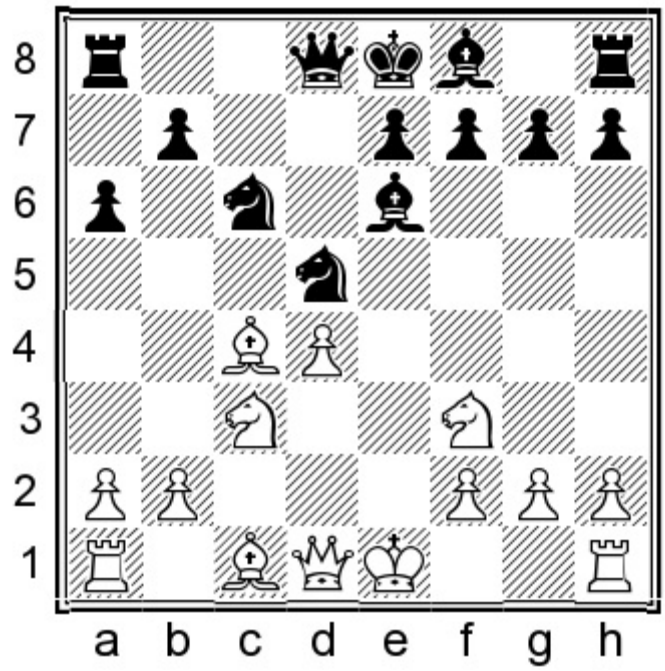
Position after: 10...♗e6!

As a rule, Black tries to maintain control over d5.

C4.4a) 11.♗g5 0-0 12.♖e1 ♖c8= This is all standard Tarrasch stuff. 13.♕a4 h6 14.♘xd5?! [14.♗h4 g5 15.♗g3 f5 16.♗xd5 ♗xd5 17.♘xd5 ♕xd5 18.♗e5=] 14...hxg5 15.♘c3 ♘xd4 16.♘xg5 ♗c4 17.♗xb7 ♖c5∓

C4.4b) 11.♘g5 ♘xc3! 12.bxc3 [12.♘xe6? ♘xd1 13.♘xd8 ♖xd8 14.♖xd1 ♖xd4∓ and Black has an extra pawn.] 12...♗c4! 13.♖e1 [13.♗d3 ♗xd3 14.♕xd3 ♕d5! 15.♖b1 b5=] 13...0-0= with balanced chances. The white knight on g5 is a bit unfocussed and might get into trouble.

8...♗e6!



Position after: 8...♗e6!

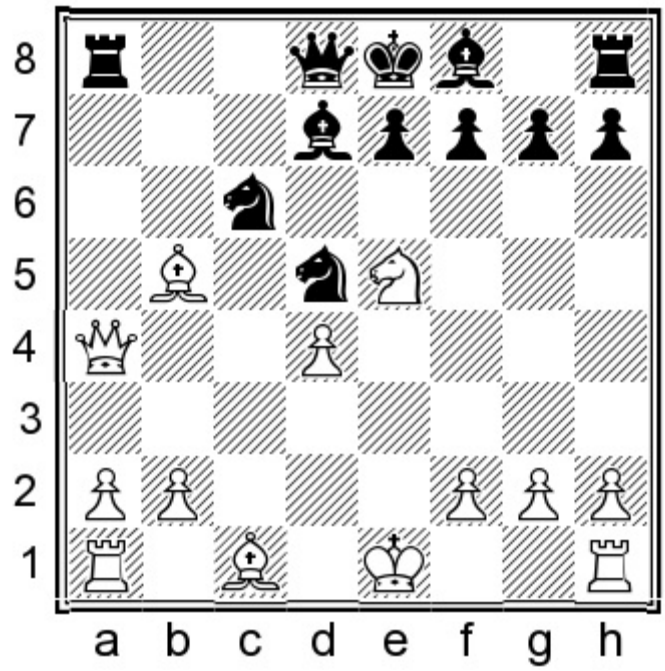
That is the point of Black's 6th move and the cornerstone of this system. From here White has tried nearly every legal move. Without ...a6 White would easily be winning with 9.♕b3! With ...a6 included that move becomes less impressive.

9.♗b3

The correct move and a fighting choice by White.

A) 9.0-0?? Blunder. White completely misses Black's threat. 9...♘xc3–+ and Black wins a piece.

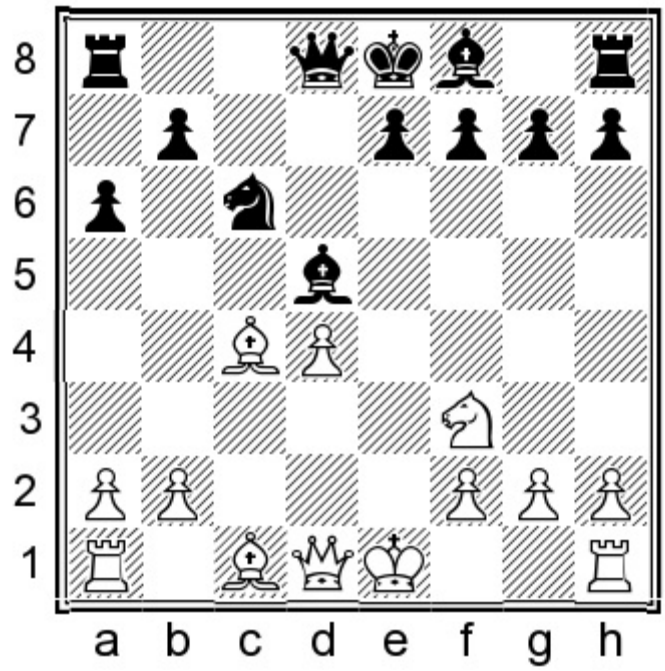
B) 9.♕b3? ♘a5! Thanks to the O'Kelly pawn on a6, Black wins a piece against two pawns. 10.♕a4+ b5 11.♘xb5 axb5 12.♗xb5+ ♗d7 13.♘e5 The critical continuation, but it is not good enough. [13.♗d2 e6 14.0-0 ♗d6–+ Black is about to consolidate his advantage.] 13...♘c6!



Position after: 13...♘c6!

The winning move. 14.♗xc6 ♖xa4 15.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 16.♘xd7 ♔xd7–+ 0-1 (39) Highhope (2409)-hyperreal (2601) lichess.org 2020. With his extra piece Black will soon make further material gains.

C) 9.♘xd5?! ♗xd5 Exchanges help Black's play against the IQP.



Position after: 9...♗xd5

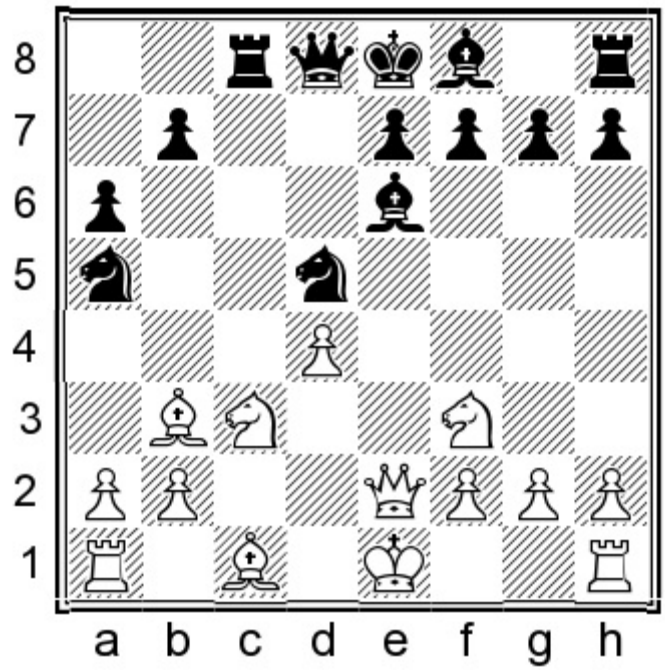
C1) 10.♕b3? While this move increases the pressure on the bishop and the black b-pawn it simply backfires! 10...♘a5!–+ Thank you, I'll have a pawn! 11.♕a4+ b5 12.♗xb5+ axb5 13.♕xb5+ ♗c6

14.♕h5 ♘b3–+

C2) 10.♗xd5 ♕xd5 11.0-0 e6 12.♗e3 ♗d6 13.♕e2 0-0∓ A typical situation where White's opening setup has completely failed, and he is stuck with a weak IQP.

C3) 10.♗b3 g6 11.0-0 ♗g7∓ Black has an optimal Rubinstein Tarrasch structure.

D) 9.♕e2 Defends the bishop from a safer position than b3, but again not a very convincing concept. 9...♖c8! With a small hidden threat. 10.♗b3 [10.0-0?? ♘xc3 11.bxc3 ♘xd4 with a significant material gain for Black. 0-1 (11) Rejans (2503) – Boekelman, J (2342) lichess.org 2022.] 10...♘a5! The thematic continuation.



Position after: 10...♘a5!

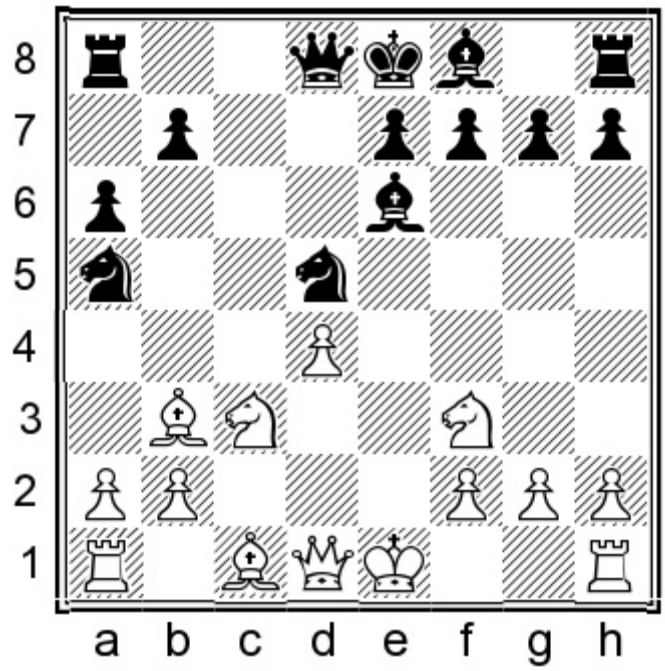
11.♗xd5 [11.♗a4+ b5 12.♘xb5 axb5 13.♗xb5+ ♘c6! 14.♗d2 ♗d7∓; 11.♗c2 ♘xc3 12.bxc3 ♖xc3 13.♗b2 ♖c7∓] 11...♗xd5 12.♘xd5 ♕xd5 13.♗d2 ♘c6 14.♗c3 e6 15.0-0 ♗e7 16.♘e5 0-0∓ 1-0 (106) Gahan, M (2265) – Bluebaum, M (2669) Chess.com 2021. White has a poor IQP position with hardly any attacking chances.

E) 9.♘g5 heading toward a perpetual. 9...♘xc3!

E1) 10.♘xe6? ♘xd1 11.♘xd8 ♖xd8 12.d5! [12.♔xd1? ♖xd4+ wins a piece.] 12...♘e5 13.♗e2 ♘xf2! 14.♔xf2 ♖xd5–+ Two extra pawns should be enough against White's bishop pair.

E2) 10.♗xe6! ♘xd1 11.♗xf7+ ♔d7 12.♗e6+ An interesting position where Black normally accepts the perpetual. 12...♔e8 A famous drawing maneuver of lower rated players against strong GMs. ½ – ½ (12) Mason, D (2280) – Speelman, J (2569) West Bromwich 2004. 13.♗f7+= with a draw.

9...♘a5!



Position after: 9...♘a5!

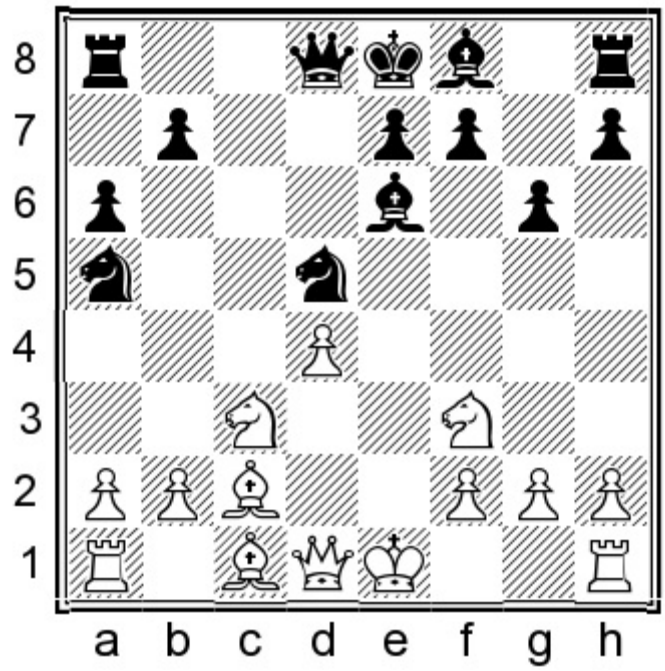
A thematic move in these Tarrasch type of positions. White is unable to maintain his light-squared bishop on the active a2-g8 diagonal. He has to withdraw it to c2, or in due course his bishop will be exchanged for Black's knight.

10.0-0

White is not concerned about the bishop pair and focuses on his lead in development.

A) 10.♗xd5 This leads to an IQP position which is slightly better for Black. 10...♗xd5 11.♘xd5 [11.0-0 e6 12.♘e5 ♗e7 13.♕h5 0-0=] 11...♕xd5 12.0-0 e6 13.♖e1 ♘c6 14.♗f4 ♗e7 15.♖c1 0-0∓ 0-1 (59) Holtel, J (2305) – Svane, R (2613) Magdeburg 2020.

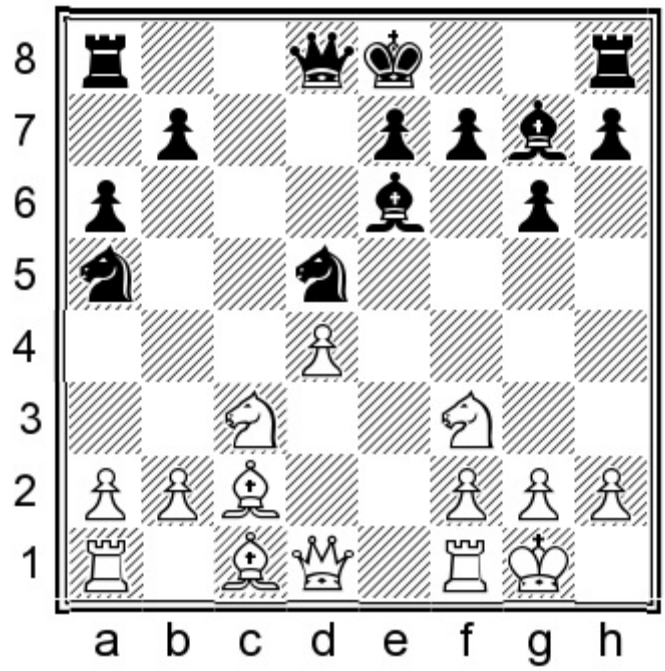
B) 10.♗c2 White saves his bishop but this takes too much time as Black has easy equality. 10...g6! [Again 10...♘xc3 only strengthens White's center. Black should only play this move when he is forced to do so.]



Position after: 10...g6!

B1) 11.♘g5 ♘xc3 12.bxc3 [12.♘xe6? ♘xd1 13.♘xd8 ♖xd8∓ Black wins a pawn] 12...♗d5 13.0-0 ♗g7 14.♖e1 0-0= and we have reached a position from 11.0-0 ♗g7 12.♘g5.

B2) 11.0-0 ♗g7

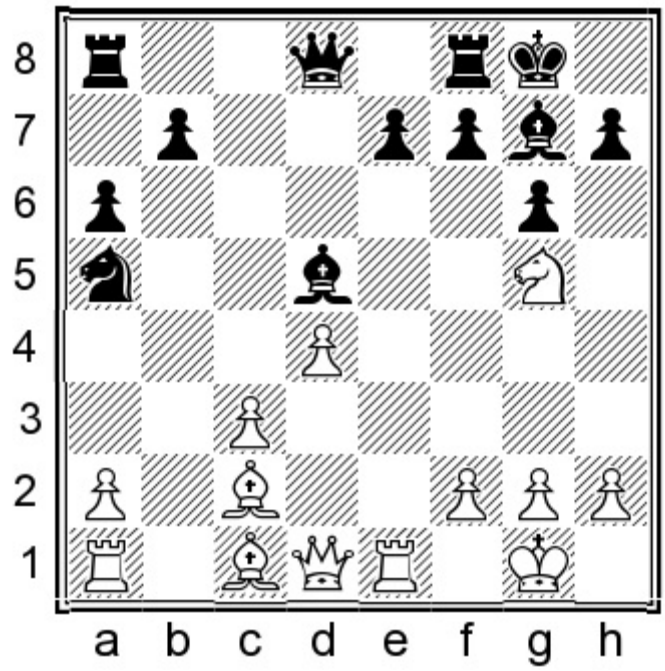


Position after: 11...♗g7

White has placed his bishop on an odd square while Black has only played thematic moves of the Tarrasch with reversed colors.

B2.1) 12.♘e4 0-0 13.♘c5 [13.h3 ♘b4∓ 14.♗b1 ♘bc6 15.♗e3 ♗d5∓ 16.♖e1 ♘c4 17.♗c1 ♕b6 18.♘c3 ♗xf3 19.♕xf3 ♘xd4–+ and Black has won a pawn with a better position. 1-0 (50) Durarbayli, V (2606) – Svane, R (2613) Chess.com 2021.] 13...♗g4!∓ 14.♗e4 b6 15.♘b3 ♘c6! 16.h3 ♗e6 17.♗g5 ♖c8 18.♖c1 a5∓

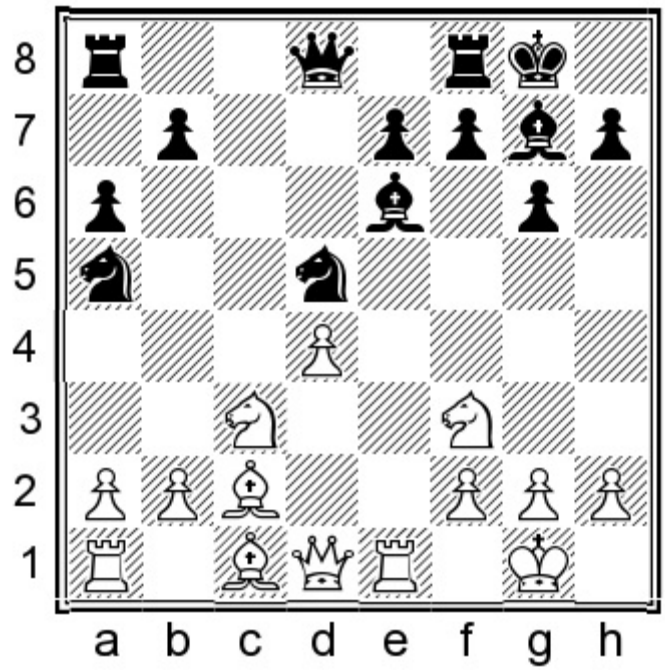
B2.2) 12.♘g5 ♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♗d5 Note that c3-c4 is not available due to the silly bishop on c2 instead of e2. 14.♖e1 [14.♗e4 h6!N 15.♗xd5 ♕xd5 16.♕a4+ ♘c6 17.♘f3 0-0 18.♕b3 ♖fd8∓] 14...0-0



Position after: 14...0-0

15.h4 ♖c8 16.♖e3 [16.♗a3?! ♖e8∓ and White cannot defend the c-pawn.] 16...♘c4 17.♖g3 h5=

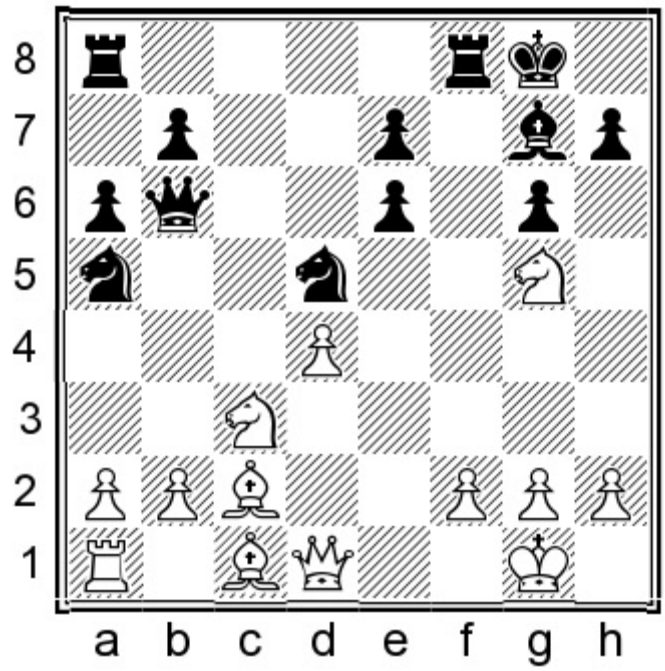
B2.3) 12.♖e1 0-0



Position after: 12...0-0

B2.3a) 13.♘g5 ♘xc3 with so many white pieces misplaced, it makes sense to put pressure on White's hanging pawns. With precise play, White should be able to hold the balance. 14.bxc3 ♗d5 15.h4 ♖c8 16.♖e3 ♘c4 17.♖g3 h5 18.♘h3 ♗e6! 19.♘f4 ♗g4 20.f3 ♗d7=

B2.3b) 13.♖xe6!? A thematic sacrifice of the exchange. 13...fxe6 14.♘g5 ♕b6!



Position after: 14...♕b6!

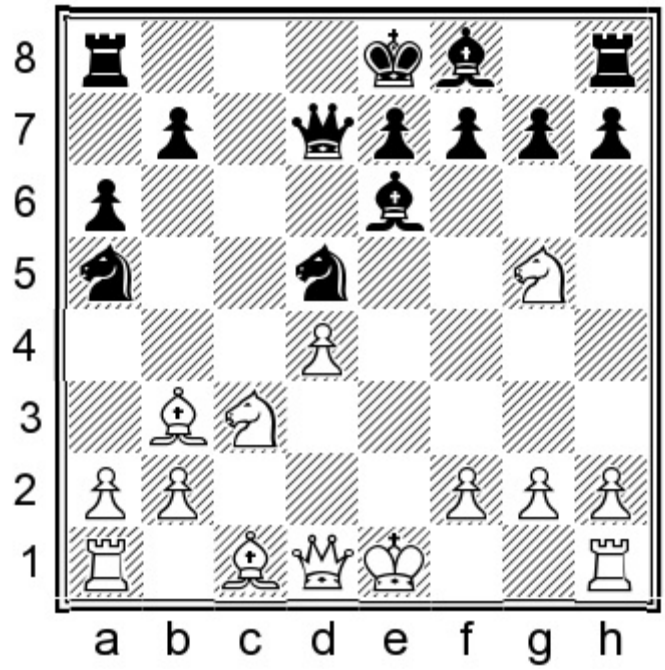
15.♘xh7 ♔xh7 16.♕h5+ ♔g8 17.♗xg6 ♘f6 18.♕h3! threatening a ♕xe6-h3 perpetual at an

appropriate moment. [18.♕h4 ♘c6–+] 18...♖ac8 19.♘e4 ♖c6 20.g4 ♕c7 21.♗e3 ♘c4 22.♘g5 ♘xe3 23.♗h7+=

B2.4) 12.♕e2 ♖c8 13.♘g5 ♘xc3 14.bxc3 ♗d5 15.♗d2 0-0 16.♗e4 e6∓

B2.5) 12.♗g5!?N 12...0-0 13.♖e1 ♘xc3 14.bxc3 ♕d6! 15.♗b3 ♘xb3 16.axb3 ♖fe8=

C) 10.♘g5 ♕d7! White's light-squared bishop is defended therefore Black has to come up with something else.

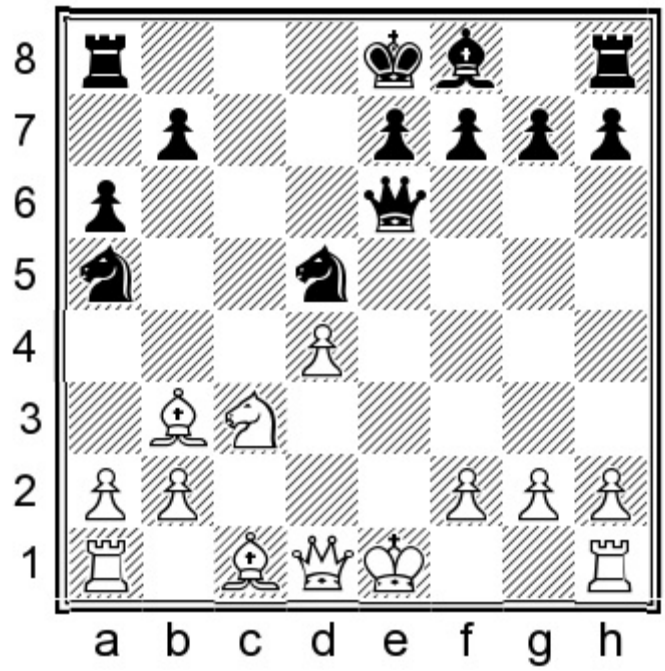


Position after: 10...♕d7!

C1) 11.0-0 ♘xb3 12.♕xb3 ♘xc3! 13.♕xc3 [13.♘xe6? ♘e2+–+] 13...♗d5 14.♖e1 e6∓ and Black has a strong bishop pair and good play against White's isolated d-pawn.

C2) 11.♗c2 ♗g4! softening the white kingside with tempo. 12.f3 ♗f5 13.♗e4 ♘xc3 14.bxc3 h6 15.♗xf5 ♕xf5 16.♘e4 ♕b5 17.♔f2 e6 18.♗f4 ♕c6∓ 0-1 (52) Zierk, S (2517) – Fier, A (2549) Saint Louis 2019.

C3) 11.♘xe6 ♕xe6+

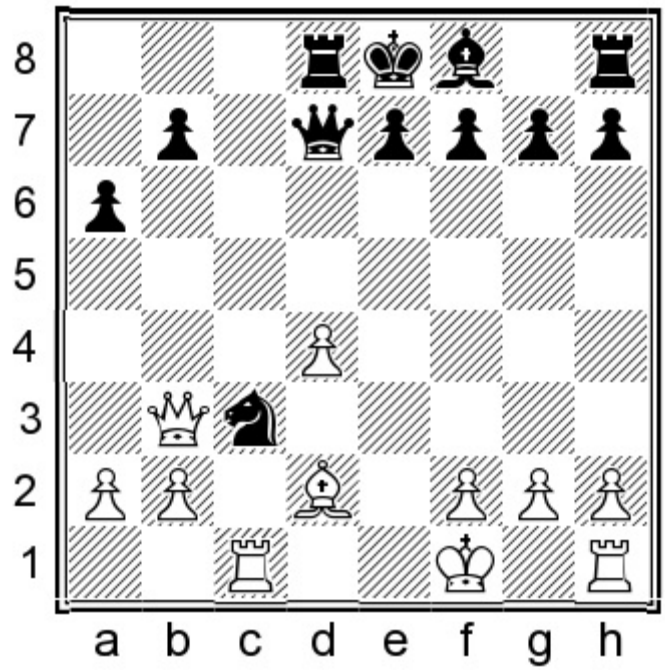


Position after: 11...♕xe6+

C3.1) 12.♗e3?! ♘xe3 13.fxe3 [13.♗xe6 ♘xd1–+] 13...♘xb3 14.axb3 ♕xe3+ 15.♕e2 ♕xe2+ 16.♔xe2 g6–+ Black has a safe extra pawn.

C3.2) 12.♔f1! with this move White can still fight for equality. 12...♘xb3 13.♕xb3 ♖d8! Theoretically, this is an equal position, but Black holds all the trumps. White has an IQP and a badly placed king. Black has a clear plan of action.

C3.2a) 14.♗d2 ♕d7! 15.♖c1 ♘xc3



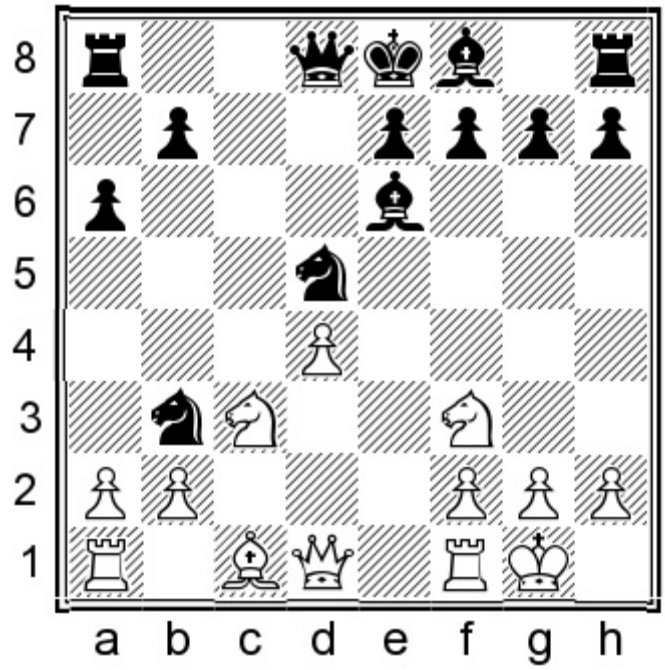
Position after: 15...♘xc3

16.♗xc3 [16.bxc3 e6=] 16...h5 17.♗a5 ♖c8 18.♖xc8+ ♕xc8 19.d5 ♖h6 20.h4 ♕c5∓ 0-1 (20) Georgiev, K (2420) – Boekelman, J (2374) Chess. com 2022. White lost on time in a bad position.

C3.2b) 14.♘xd5 ♕xd5 15.♕xd5 ♖xd5 16.♗e3 e6 this endgame is slightly better for Black. 17.♖c1 ♔d7 18.♔e2 ♗d6 19.♖hd1 h5∓ 0-1 (52) Rostgaard, T (2372) – Grandelius, N (2651) Ballerup 2020.

C3.2c) 14.♕xb7 ♘xc3 15.bxc3 ♕c4+ 16.♔g1 ♕xc3 White sacrifices the rook on a1 for a perpetual. This is the cleanest path to equality for White. 17.h4! ♕xa1 18.♕c6+=

10...♘xb3



Position after: 10...♘xb3

11.axb3!N

11.♕xb3?! The only move that has been played in this position in practice is less precise. 11...♘xc3 12.♕xc3 ♖c8!N 13.♕e3 ♗d5 14.♖e1 e6∓ with a nightmare IQP scenario for White.

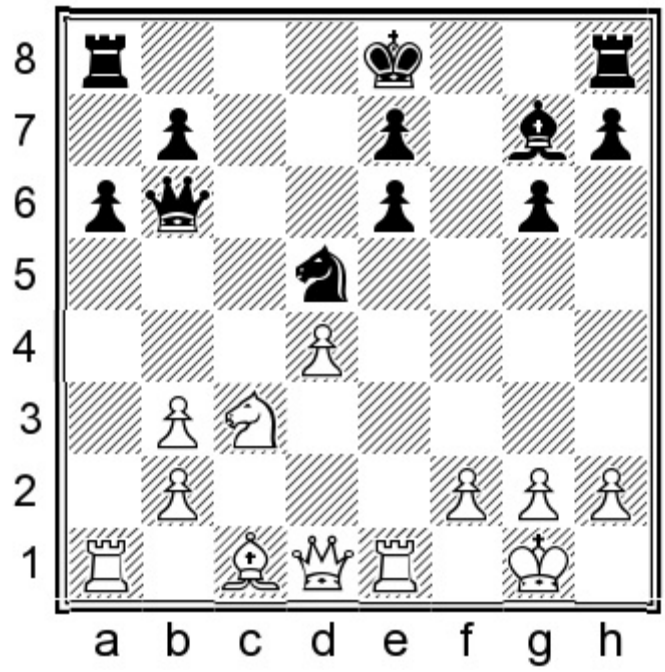
11...g6 12.♘g5 ♗g7

Allowing himself to be given a doubled pawn.

13.♘xe6 fxe6 14.♖e1

14.♕f3 ♖c8 15.♘e4 ♖c6 16.♖d1 ♕c8 17.♗g5 ♖f8 18.♕h3 h5 19.♕d3 ♖f5= and the black king will find safety on the kingside, castling by hand.

14...♕b6!



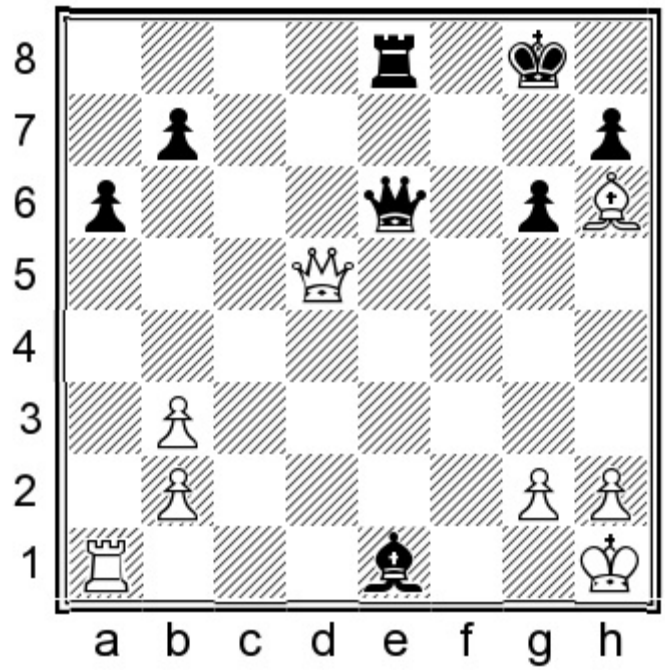
Position after: 14...♕b6!

Black has more active pieces.

15.♘xd5 exd5 16.♗g5 0-0 17.♗xe7 ♗xd4 18.♗xf8 ♗xf2+ 19.♔h1 ♗xe1 20.♗h6

20.♗a3 ♗b4 21.♕xd5+ ♔h8 22.♕e5+ ♔g8 23.♖f1 ♗xa3 24.♕d5+ ♔h8 25.bxa3 ♕c7 26.h3 ♖e8=

20...♖e8 21.♕xd5+ ♕e6



Position after: 21...♕e6

Note the subtle black pawn on a6 as part of the full picture!

22.♕xb7

A) 22.♖d1?! ♕xd5 23.♖xd5 ♗h4 24.♖d1 ♖d8∓

B) 22.♕d4 ♕f7 23.♕d3 ♗h4 24.h3 ♕f2=

22...♗c3! 23.♖f1 ♗xb2 24.h3 ♗f6=

With completely balanced chances in the endgame.

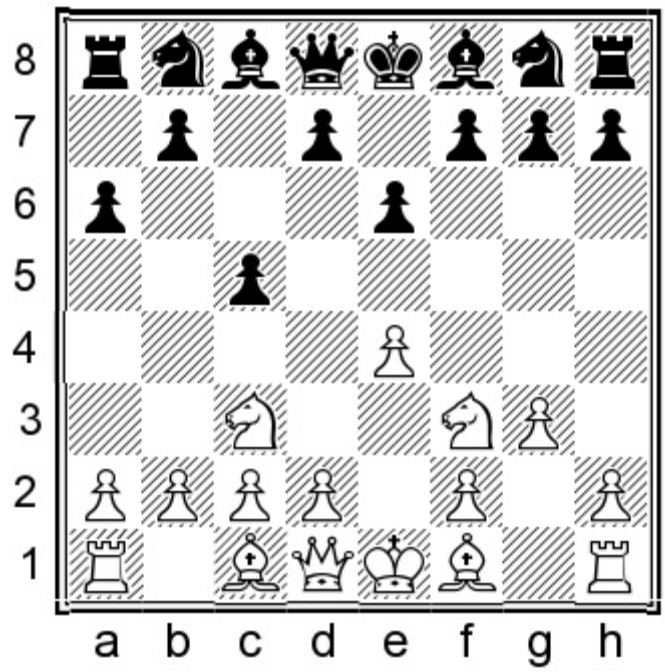
Conclusion

In this subchapter we investigate the most natural approach for White to combat our aggressive 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 system. The positions which arise are commonly reached via other openings like the Caro Kann Panov.

In the main line Black is able to put his knight on d5. His subsequent plan is to develop as in the QGD Tarrasch variation with reversed colors. In general, Black is well geared to reach =+ positions. In the main line with 8.♗c4 Black has the nice 8...♗e6 immediately challenging White's strong bishop. The subsequent 9.♗b3 is answered with 9...♘a5, ensuring White's light-squared bishop cannot be maintained on the a2-g8 diagonal. In the subsequent positions Black will be able to put a kingside fianchetto in place and reach a comfortable equilibrium.

Chapter 5
The Sicilian Kan – Via 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 5 – The Sicilian Kan – Via 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3 b5 5.♗g2 ♗b7

a) Introduction

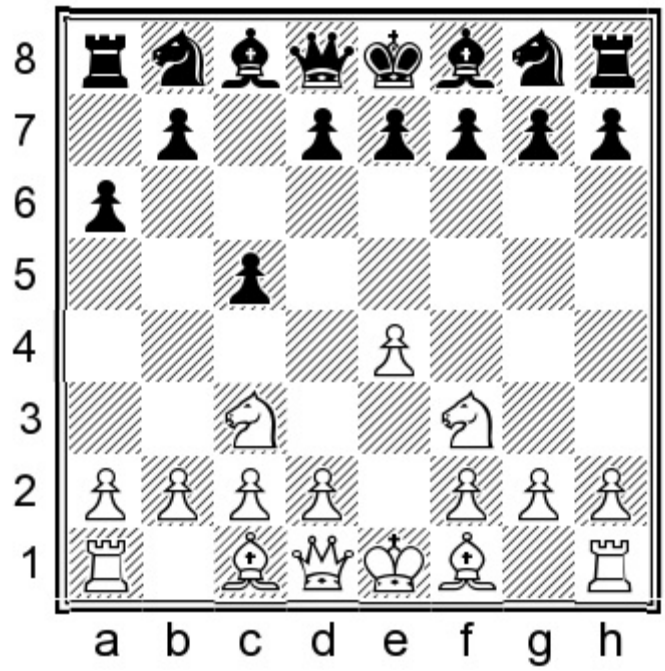
b) Early Divergences

c) 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6 8.--

d) 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6 8.0-0

a) Introduction

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3



Position after: 3.♘c3

Earmarked by Timothy Taylor as the most player-friendly move! It is indeed the most practical choice White has, if he normally plays the Open Sicilians with an early ♘c3. In theory, he should be able to transpose to one of his favorite systems.

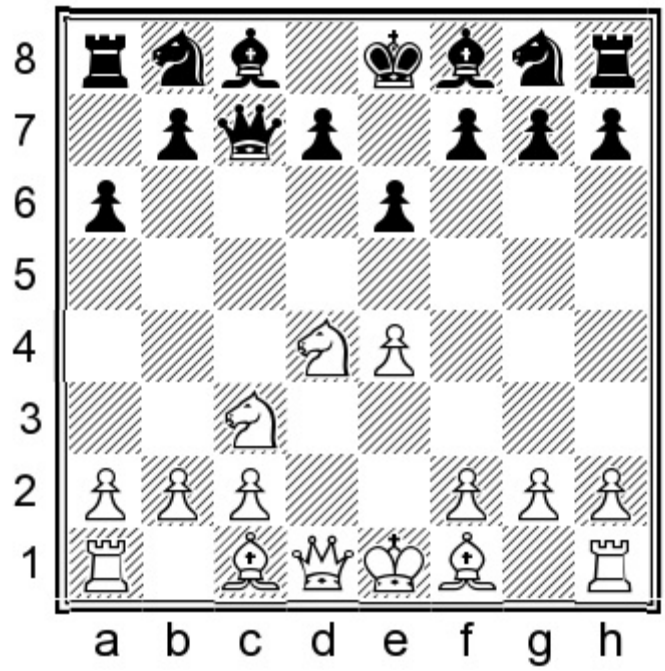
3...e6

The repertoire choice for this book. If Black likes to play the Najdorf or the Dragon, he should choose 3....d6, with the bonus that he need not worry about the Moscow Variation (3.♗b5+) and a few other anti – Sicilians. There are many pure O'Kelly solutions as well for Black but White can also go for Benoni type positions with closed and cramped positions which are not the kind of Open Sicilian positions Black normally strives for.

4.d4

White may postpone this move by playing 4.g3 first which may lead to interesting gambit play.

4...cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7



Position after: 5...♕c7

Black could also consider the Taimanov with 5....♘c6, although current day practice prefers the early ...♕c7 instead of the early ...a6 to play that opening. 5...♕c7 is the repertoire choice and the classical way of playing the Sicilian Kan. Recently theory has focused on 5....b5. It is Sielecki's recommendation via a minor transposition (first ...b5 and then ...e6. 5...b5 is a bit riskier than the text move, which times a subsequent ....b5 depending on the developments in the opening. 5...♕c7 covers the e5-square which prepares a future ...♘f6 and may give a subsequent ...♗b4 extra bite against the knight on c3. Those are a few highlights of the lines I will be investigating in this part of the book.

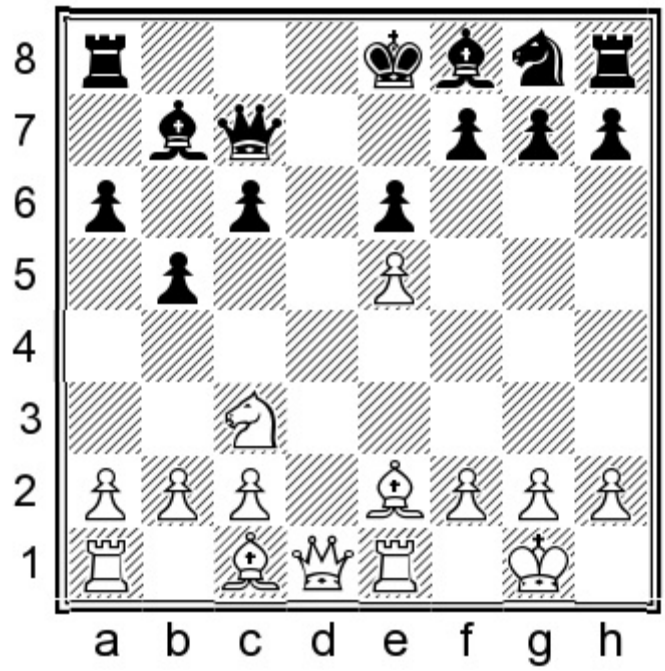
6.♗d3

The most critical continuation in the position. White develops smoothly and covers e4 in anticipation of a future ...b5-b4.

A) 6.♗e3 The most popular move in this position is not very accurate. 6...♗b4! Normally White continues with 7.♕d2?! ♘f6∓. The English Attack is not a good idea against this system. Black is already slightly better after 7...♘f6.

B) 6.g3 The fianchetto system is solid, but unlike the situation in the Taimanov it loses its punch because of Black's 6th move. 6...♗b4! White has to misplace a piece to cover the threat against c3, losing valuable time in the opening.

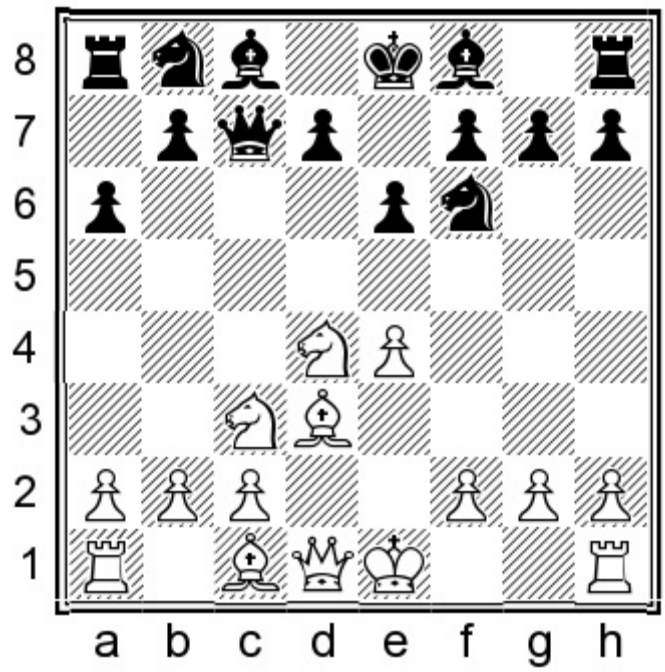
C) 6.♗e2 The classical approach. 6...b5! The right time, as the bishop is not defending e4. 7.0-0 ♗b7 8.♖e1 ♘c6 9.♘xc6 dxc6 10.e5



Position after: 10.e5

Here I recommend 10...♘e7! [10...♖d8 11.♗d3 c5 is a main line against the 6.♗e2 system but 12.♕e2 c4 13.♗e4 ♗xe4 14.♘xe4! is a hard nut to crack. According to the engines White is struggling.] 11.♗d3 ♘g6 12.♕h5 ♗e7!= The move of Lajos Portisch. Black is able to equalize.

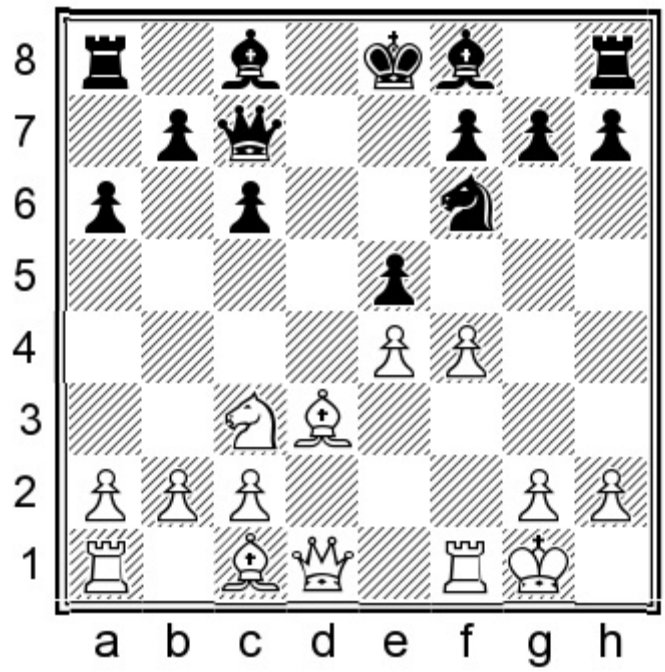
6...♘f6



Position after: 6...♘f6

Black has tried some 13 responses to White's set-up which demonstrates the strength of 6.♗d3 and the flexibility Black has in the Sicilian Kan. I recommend a classical approach. With 6...♘f6 Black plays the most popular move and aims towards a hedgehog structure (...d6, ...♘bd7 etc.) for his pawns and pieces.

6...♘c6 is a popular alternative. Now the principled move is 7.♘xc6. [7.♗e3 is an excellent alternative, transposing into a main line Taimanov.] 7...dxc6 Black can also take with the other pawn, which is equally popular, or even with the queen as played by Alexander Grischuk. I originally intended to have 7...dxc6 as my main line as I personally have had positive experiences with that move, and the change in pawn structure is one we will see more often in this chapter. Unfortunately, during the analysis for this book I was unable to find satisfactory answers to the following development plan for White against 7...dxc6 8.0-0 e5 9.f4 ♘f6.



Position after: 9...♘f6

A) 10.a4!? as recommended by De la Villa & Illingworth in their "Dismantling the Sicilian", whose analyses I follow in the lines below. White plays a useful move before he shows his hand in the center. In the meantime, he prevents ...b5 which is a move that can be quite useful for Black in this structure. White's subsequent action consists of f4-f5, ♕f3 and g4-g5. 10...♗d6 11.f5 ♗c5+ 12.♔h1 b6 13.♕f3 ♗b7 14.♗g5 0-0-0 15.♘b1±

B) 10.♔h1!? The main line and it is difficult for Black to address. 10...♗d6 11.f5 b5 12.a4 ♗b7 13.axb5 axb5 14.♖xa8+ ♗xa8 15.♗xb5! cxb5 16.♘xb5 ♕c6 17.♕xd6 ♕xb5 18.♖d1 ♘d7 19.♗g5 White has sacrificed a piece to reach a dangerous attacking position. Statistically, Black is in reasonable shape, but in my view the only thing Black can fight for is a draw.

7.0-0

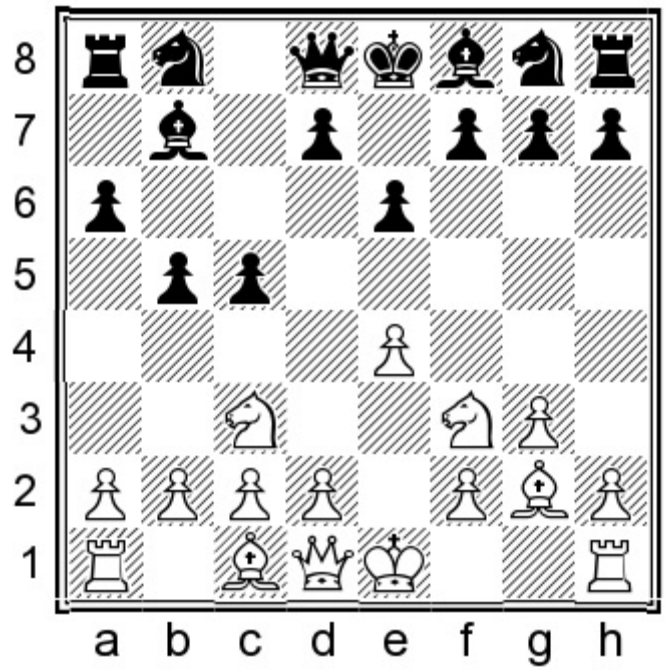
7.♕e2 is an important alternative. 7...d6 We will investigate this further under 7th move alternatives. [7...♗d6? This used to be the theoretical response, but it has been refuted.]

7...d6

We are in the main line, which will be further investigated in a number of subchapters.

b) Early Divergences

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3 b5 5.♗g2 ♗b7



Position after: 5...♗b7

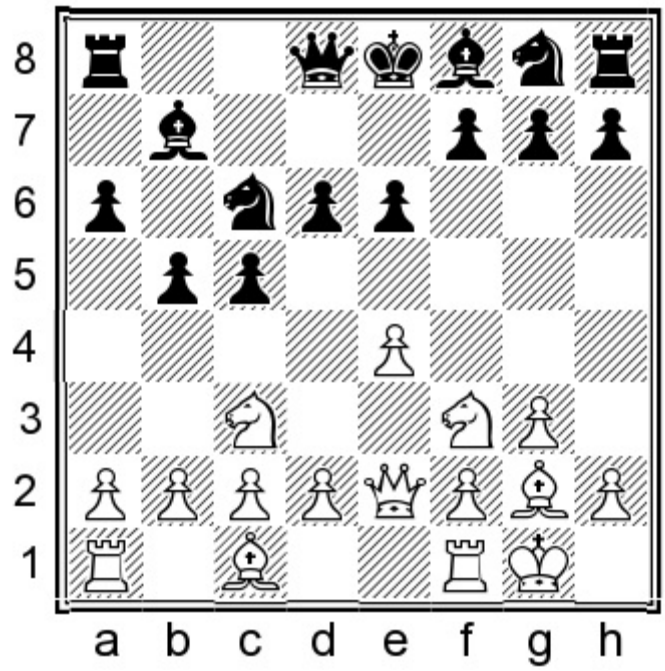
6.0-0!?

White sacrifices his e-pawn before playing d2-d4. It is not very popular, but still quite dangerous. Bent Larsen played it against Jan Hein Donner back in the 1960s and Daniil Dubov tested it more recently, so maybe it will become fashionable.

A) 6.d3 takes us into the anti-Sicilians chapter.

B) 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6 8.0-0 b4 is the main line of the pawn sacrifice variation.

C) 6.♕e2 is a bit slow and not a critical continuation. A few examples demonstrate that natural moves by Black suffice for equality. 6...♘c6 7.0-0 d6



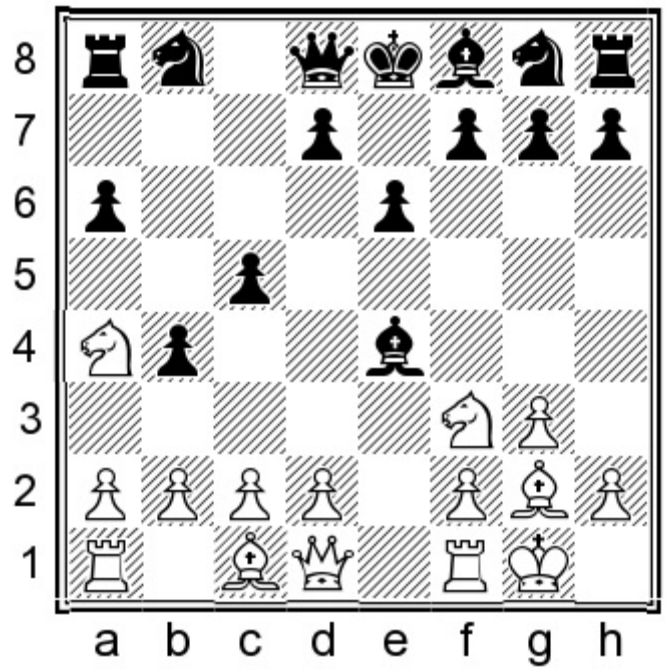
Position after: 7...d6

8.a4 [8.d3 ♗e7 9.♘d1 ♘f6 10.c3 0-0 11.♘e3 ♖e8= 0-1 (33) Rustamov, A (2210) – Zubarev, A (2546) Tashkent 2016.] 8...b4 9.♘b1 g6 10.d3 ♗g7 11.♘bd2 ♘ge7 12.♘c4 0-0∓ ½-½ (68) Schachinger, M (2445) – Hera, I (2619) Austria 2017.

6...b4!?

The principled continuation, played by nearly all strong GMs who reached this position as Black.

7.♘a4 ♗xe4



Position after: 7...♗xe4

8.d4

Opening up the position to create chances.

A) 8.♖e1 It is natural to gain a tempo this way, but Black's move was in the pipeline anyway. 8...♘f6 waiting before playing ...d5 avoids giving White any points to fight against in the center (c4!). 9.d4 cxd4 10.♕xd4 ♘c6 11.♕d1 d5∓. Only now do we play d5, White has insufficient compensation.

B) 8.a3 This does not change the character of the position. 8...a5! 9.d4 [9.d3 ♗c6 10.c4 bxc3 11.♘xc3 ♘f6∓] 9...cxd4 10.♘xd4 [10.♕xd4 ♘f6 11.♗g5 ♘c6 12.♕e3 ♗xc2!–+ wins with 8.a3 a5 included. 13.b3 bxa3.] 10...♗xg2 11.♔xg2 ♘f6 12.♕f3 d5∓ 13.♗f4 bxa3 14.♘b5 [14.bxa3 ♗d6∓] 14...♘a6 15.bxa3 ♗e7 16.c4 ♖c8 17.♖ac1 0-0∓ 0-1 (24) Zanolin, H (2117) – Pavlicek, M (2252) corr. 2013.

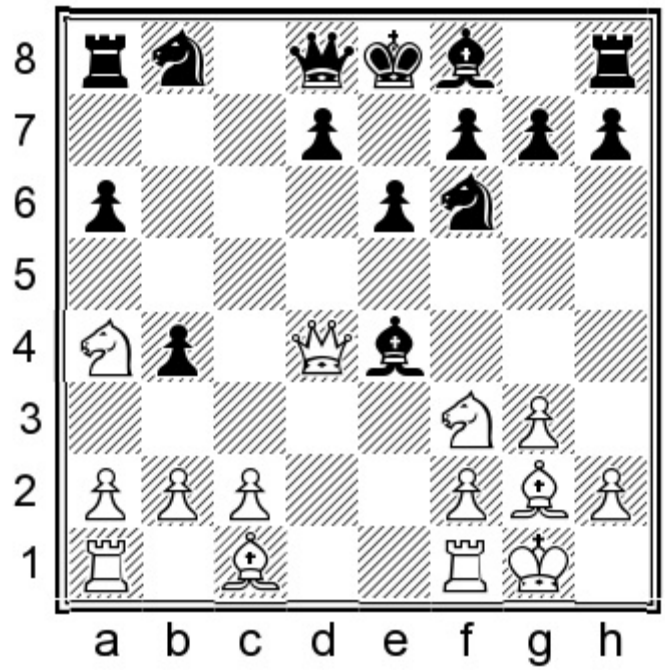
8...cxd4!

The main line. Black better be prepared!

9.♕xd4

9.♘xd4 ♗xg2 10.♔xg2 ♘f6∓ Black has a significantly improved version of our main line with 6.d4.

9...♘f6!



Position after: 9...♘f6!

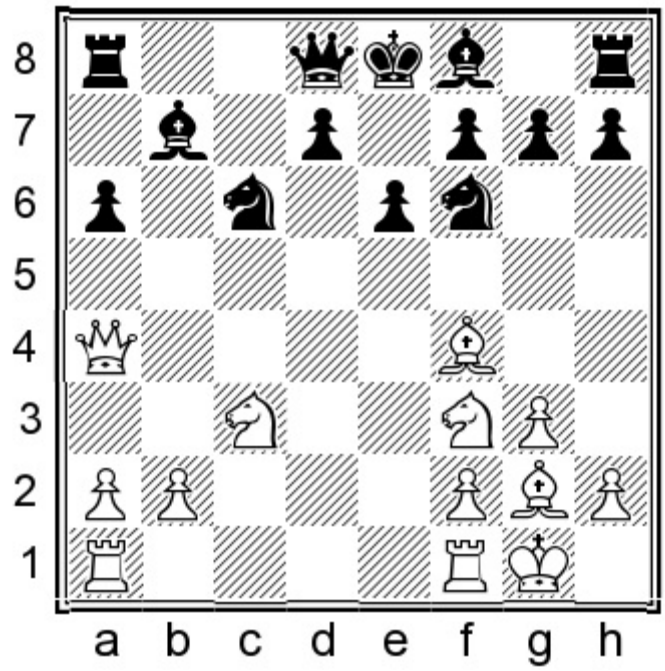
10.♗g5!

White has to maintain the momentum.

A) 10.c3?! ♘c6 11.♕d1 d5 12.♖e1 ♗e7 13.♗e3 0-0∓ 0-1 (28) Khakimov, T (2380) – Simonian, H (2435) Kharkov 2008.

B) Larsen played the less aggressive 10.♗e3?! ♘c6 11.♕d2 ♗e7 12.♖fd1 d5 13.c4 0-0∓ and Black had covered all his weak points and was just a pawn up. ½ – ½ (48) Larsen, B – Donner, J Amsterdam 1964.

C) MVL had to cope with 10.c4?! bxc3 11.♘xc3 ♗b7 12.♗f4 ♘c6 13.♕a4



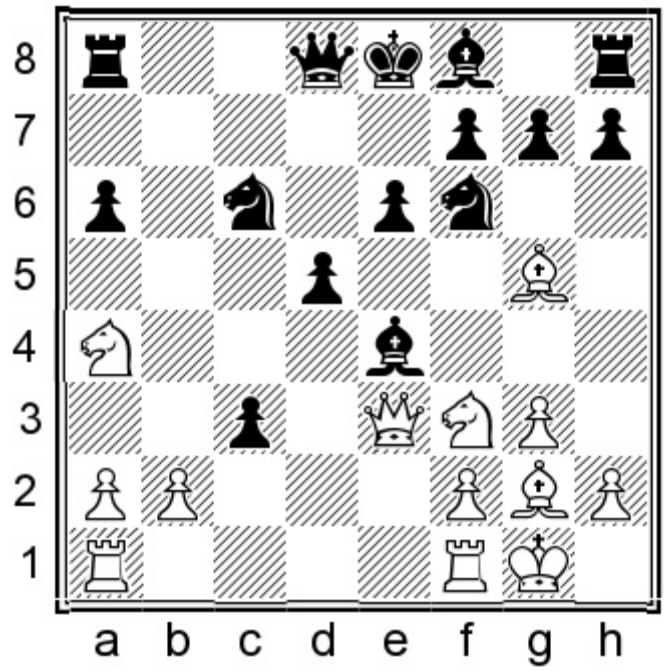
Position after: 13.♕a4

13...♘e7!? [13...♕b6 14.♖fe1 ♗e7 15.♖e2 0-0 16.♖d1 d5∓ 0-1 (40) Gozzoli, Y (2445) – Vachier Lagrave, M (2386) Aix les Bains 2003.] 14.♖fd1 [14.♘e5 ♗xg2 15.♔xg2 ♘g6∓] 14...♗c6 15.♕b3 ♘g6∓.

10...♘c6

The only move played in practice.

11.♕e3 d5 12.c4! bxc3

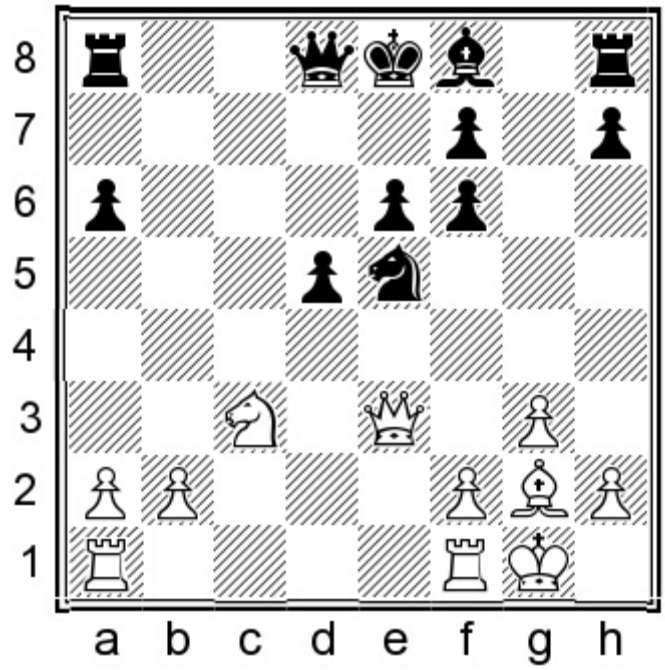


Position after: 12...bxc3

Black accepts the challenge. This is the only move seen in practice.

13.♘xc3 ♗xf3 14.♗xf3

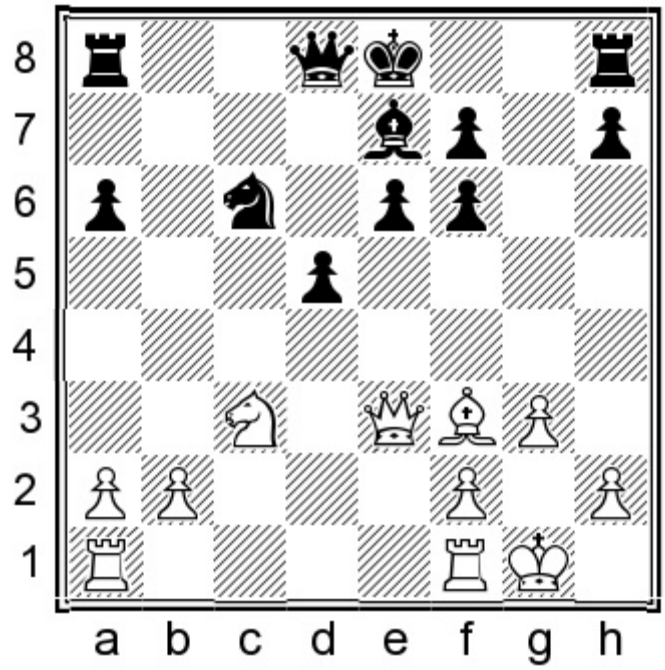
14.♗xf6 gxf6 15.♗xf3 ♘e5 16.♗g2



Position after: 16.♗g2

16...♖c8! 17.♕e2 ♗c5 18.♕xa6 0-0∓

14...♗e7 15.♗xf6 gxf6

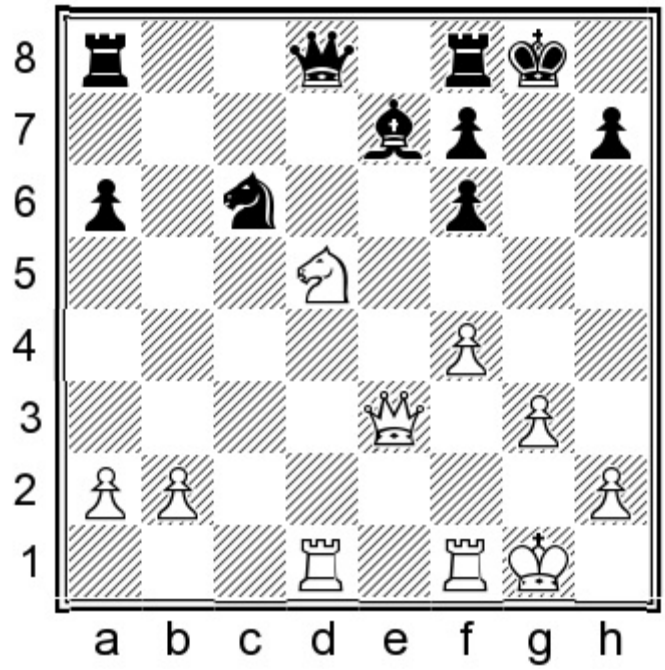


Position after: 15...gxf6

16.♘xd5!?N

Throwing more wood on the fire. This leads to hair-raising complications.

A) 16.♖ad1 ♘e5 17.♗xd5 exd5 18.♘xd5 0-0!∓ Black will get enough material for the queen. 19.f4 [19.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 20.♖xd8 ♖fxd8∓ is good for Black.] 19...♘c6

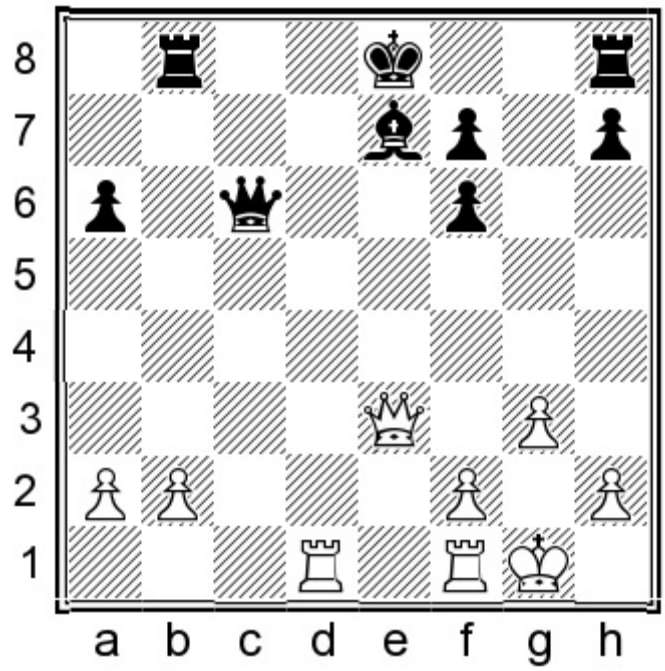


Position after: 19...♘c6

20.♖fe1! [20.♕c3 ♘b4 21.♘c7 ♕b8 22.♖fe1 ♕b6+–+ 0-1 (36) Cao, S (2381) – Pichot, A (2558) Hanoi 2018.] 20...♕b8 21.♘xe7+ ♘xe7 22.♕xe7 ♕xb2=

B) 16.♕h6 ♗f8!∓ 17.♕h5 ♘e5 18.♗d1 ♗g7 19.♗a4+ ♔f8 20.♖ac1 f5∓ Black has managed the worst and continued on to win a nicely defended game. 0-1 (41) Muchnik, K – Taimanov, M Baku 1958

16...exd5 17.♖ad1 ♖b8 18.♗xd5 ♕b6 19.♗xc6+ ♕xc6



Position after: 19...♕xc6

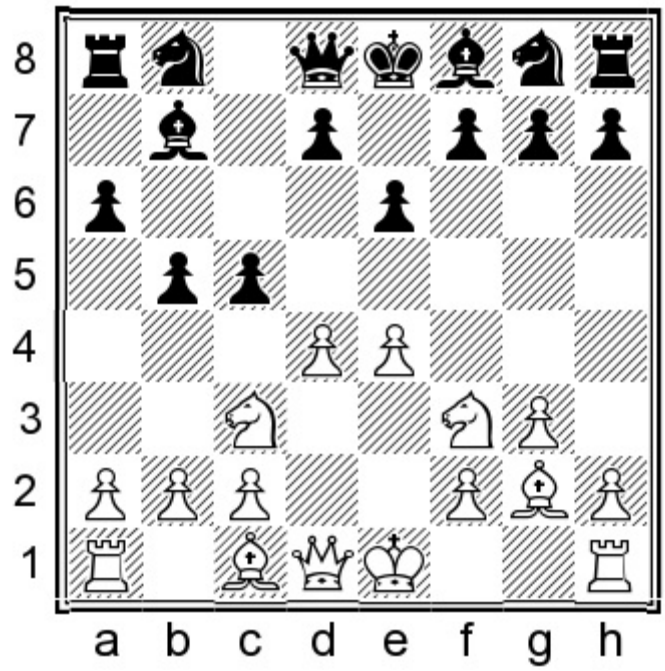
20.♖fe1 ♖b7 21.♕h6 ♕f3 22.♕g7 ♖f8 23.♖d6 ♖b4 24.♖xf6 ♕d5 25.♖xa6 ♖e4=

Conclusion

This main line following 6.0-0 b4 7.♘a4 ♗xe4 is risky for Black. Even in the final position of the main line the black king is not completely out of danger. My recommendation for the variations after 6.0-0 is to investigate the alternatives 10...d5 or 12...♗e7 as presented in the comments. These are safe options to reach an equal position.

c) 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6 8.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3 b5 5.♗g2 ♗b7 6.d4

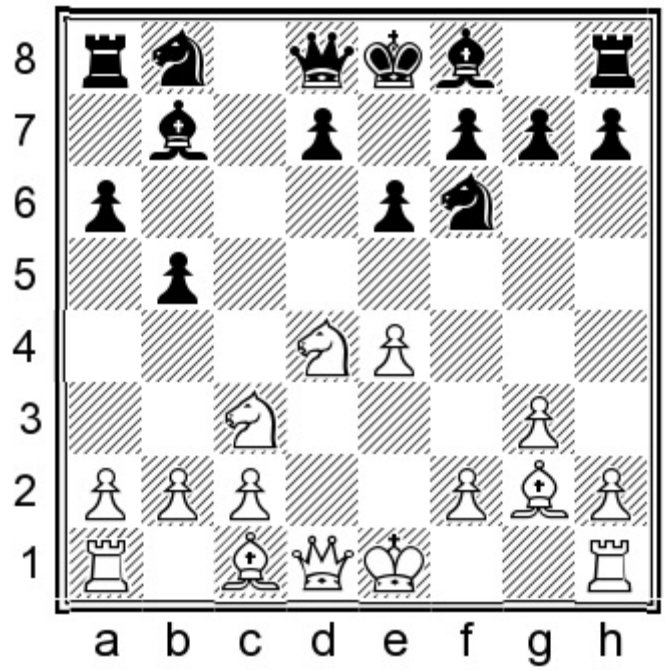


Position after: 6.d4

6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6

This is the critical line, and it requires learning a lot of theory after White's pawn sacrifice after 8.0-0 b4. Black has interesting alternatives in 7...♘e7 and 7...h5 as analyzed by IM Renier Castellanos in his course for Modern Chess. After the text move White has a number of ways to defend the e-pawn directly or indirectly if he does not like the gambit after 8.0-0 b4 etc.

Black better not play ...b5-b4 first. 7...b4 8.♘a4 ♘f6 9.c4!± White is able to play this thematic move early. This is a promising approach for White, as investigated by Kaufman.

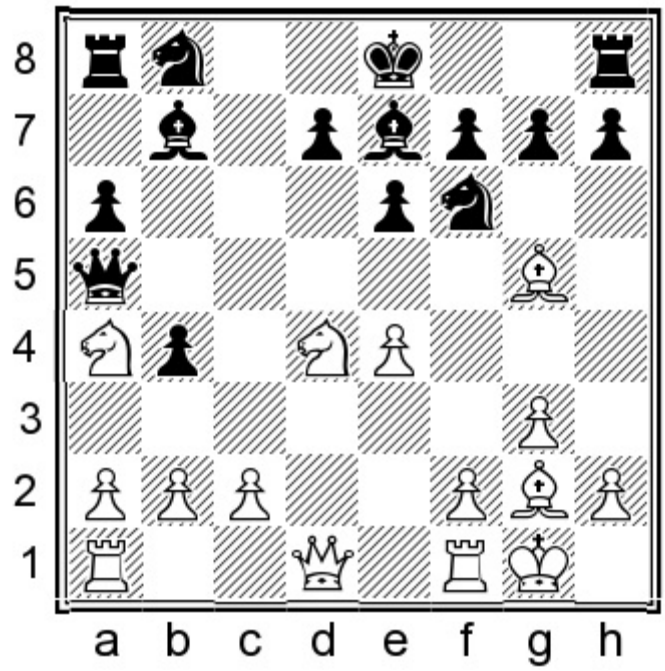


Position after: 7...♘f6

8.a3

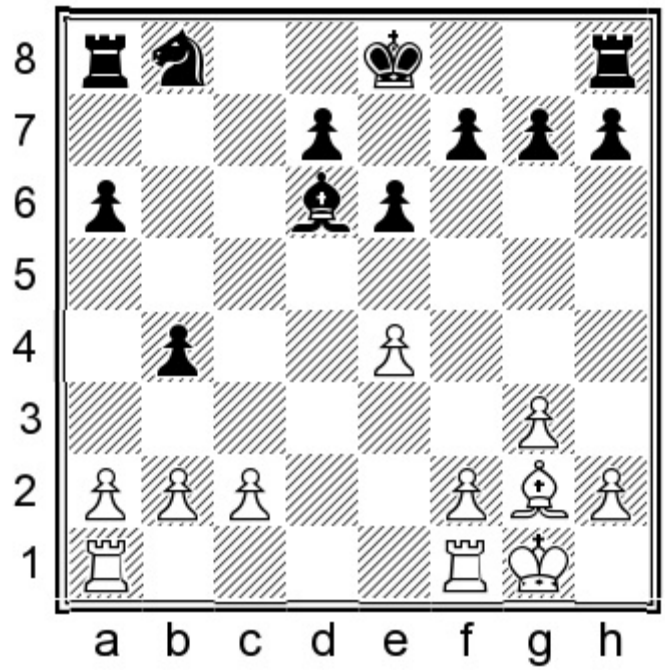
White insists on playing an interesting Sicilian game. While Black's ...b5-b4 has more or less been prevented the price White pays is that he plays a move which does not develop and that he will lose more time if in future he wants to play a thematic a4 in order to break up Black's queenside. Via a slightly different move order 8.a3 is analyzed in the respectable "Modernized: The Open Sicilian" by Amanov & Kavutskiy.

A) 8.♗g5 Defending the e-pawn with the pin of the knight makes less of an impression. 8...b4 9.♘a4 ♗e7! 10.0-0 ♕a5



Position after: 10...♕a5

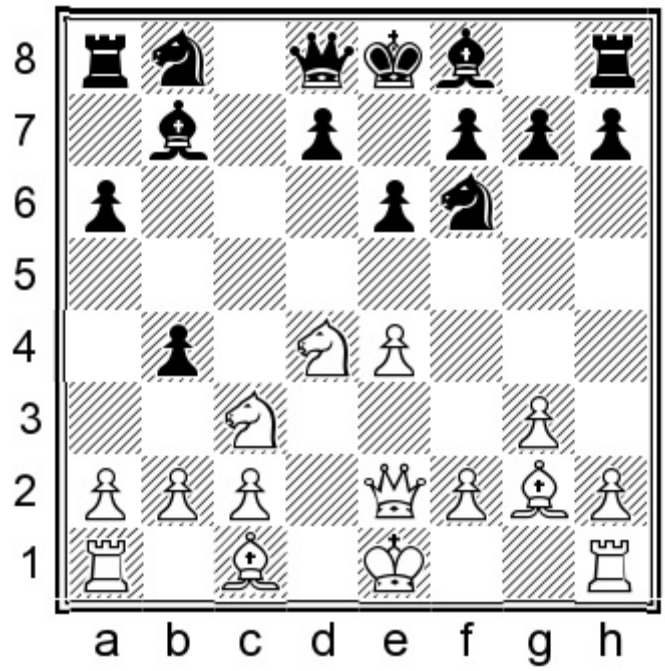
With a double attack. 11.♗xf6 [11.e5 ♗xg2 12.♔xg2 ♕xe5 13.♗f4 ♕a5 14.c3 0-0 15.cxb4 ♕xb4∓ ½ – ½ (64) Becerra Rivero, J (2559) – Serper, G (2499) ICC 2007.] 11...♗xf6 12.♘b3?! [12.c3 ♘c6= ½-½ (31) Kozlowski, P (1970) – Czernek, T (2199) Lublin 2021. 13.cxb4 ♕xb4 14.e5 ♗xe5 15.♘xc6 ♗xc6 16.♗xc6 dxc6 17.a3 ♕b5 18.♖c1 ♖d8 19.♕c2 ♗d4=] 12...♕xa4! 13.♘c5 ♕c6 14.♘xb7 ♗e5! 15.♘d6+ ♕xd6 16.♕xd6 ♗xd6



Position after: 16...♗xd6

17.e5 ♗xe5 18.♗xa8 ♗xb2∓ and White was tortured for the rest of the game. 0-1 (32) Bistric, F (2400) – Sax, G (2550) Sarajevo 1982 and two other games.

B) 8.♕e2 We will see that the white queen is quite vulnerable on d3 after ...♘bd7 followed by ...♘c5 or ...♘e5. On e2 her majesty is a bit more secure, but now Black can act in the center. 8...b4!

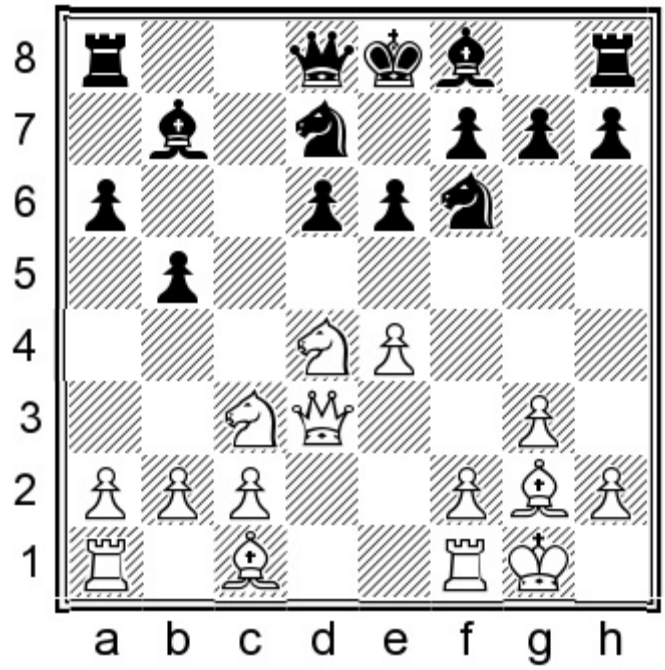


Position after: 8...b4!

Not only chasing away the knight to an uncomfortable position, but also introducing the maneuver

...♗b7-c6-b5. 9.♘a4 [9.♘d5? exd5 10.exd5+ ♕e7–+ and White has a piece less for nothing.] 9...e5 others equalize as well, but this is the cleanest approach with a nice break in the center after White's slow maneuvers. 10.♘f5 is the better option. [10.♘b3 ♗c6 11.♘ac5 a5!N 12.♗e3 ♗e7 13.♖d1 d6 14.♘d3 ♘bd7∓] 10...♗c6 11.b3 g6! 12.♘e3 [12.♘h6 ♗b5 13.♕d1 ♘c6∓] 12...♗xa4 13.bxa4 ♗c5= 14.0-0 0-0 15.a3 a5 with an equal game.

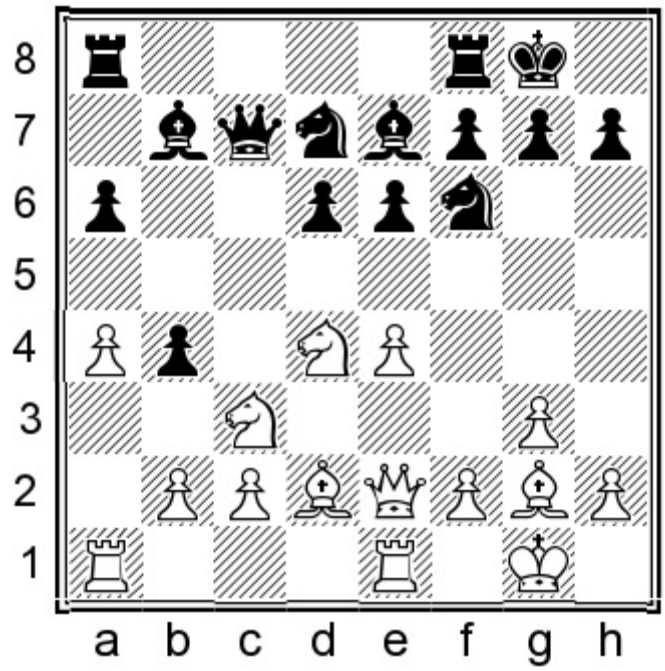
C) 8.♕d3 a solid move which has been played by some GMs. 8...d6 9.0-0 ♘bd7



Position after: 9...♘bd7

Threatening to play ...♘c5 or ...♘e5 at the right time.

C1) 10.♖e1 ♗e7 11.♕e2 In anticipation of a future a4, White prevents the ...b4, ... ♘c5 and ...e5 maneuver. The queen remains vulnerable on e2. 11...♕c7 12.♗d2 White prepares the standard move a4. [12.a4 b4 13.♘a2 ♘c5 14.♗d2 ♘cxe4 15.♗xb4 0-0∓] 12...0-0 13.a4 b4

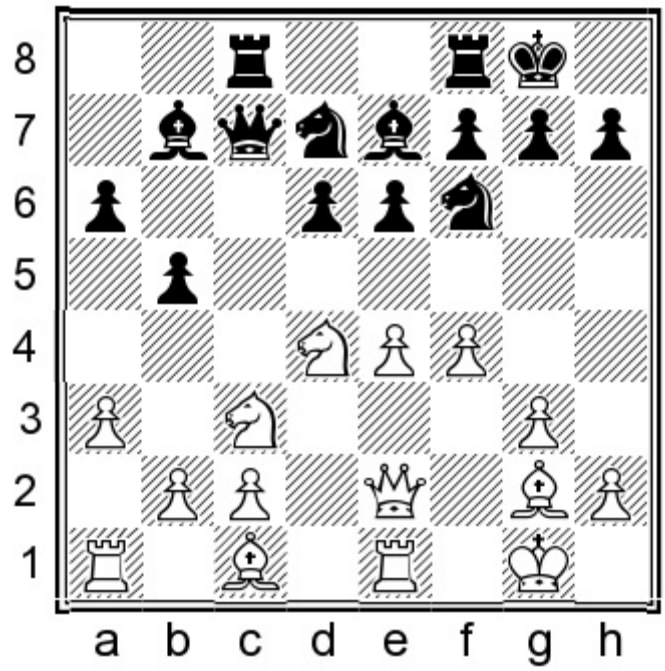


Position after: 13...b4

C1.1) 14.♘d1 ♘c5 15.♗xb4 [15.f3 a5∓] 15...♗xe4! 16.♗xc5 ♗xg2 17.♔xg2 ♕xc5 18.♘b3 ♕b6∓

C1.2) 14.♘a2 ♘c5 15.♗xb4 ♘cxe4!N 16.♘c3 [16.c4 ♖ac8 17.b3 ♘c5∓] 16...♘xg3 17.hxg3 ♗xg2 18.♔xg2 ♕b7+∓

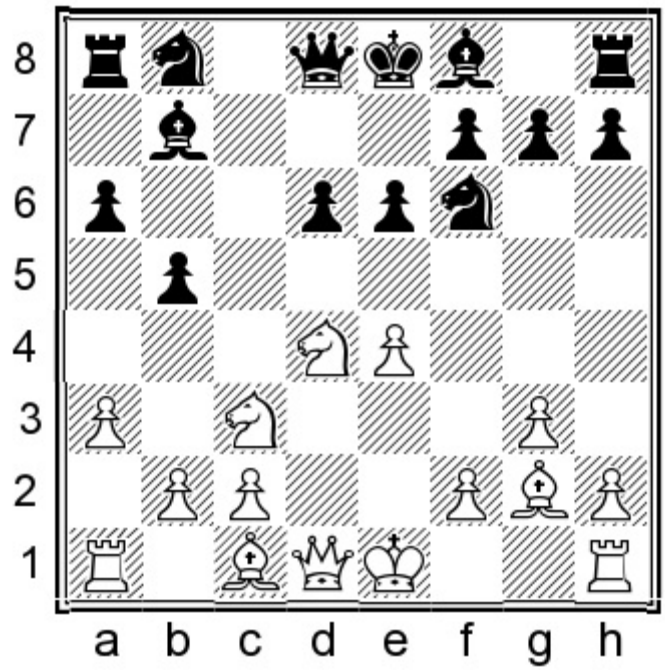
C2) A queenside break with 10.a3 is just too slow for a Sicilian. Black responds with 10...♗e7 and there follows 11.♕e2 0-0 when White has lost a tempo with the queen. Black is at least equal. 12.♖e1 [12.♖d1 ♕c7 13.a4 b4 14.♘a2 ♘c5∓] 12...♕c7 13.f4 ♖ac8!∓



Position after: 13...♖ac8!∓

14.♗e3 ♘b6!N [14...♖fe8 15.♖ad1 ♗f8 16.♘b3 ♗a8∓ 0-1 (48) Pena Duarte, F (2226) – Oratovsky, M (2501) San Sebastian 2017.] 15.♗f2 g6 16.g4 e5 17.♘b3 exf4 18.e5 ♘fd5–+

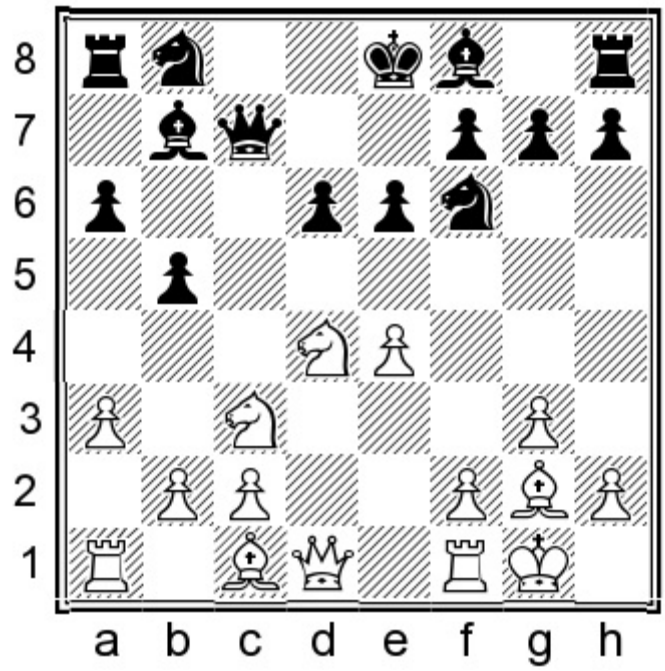
8...d6



Position after: 8...d6

Keeping an eye on e5.

9.0-0 ♕c7



Position after: 9...♕c7

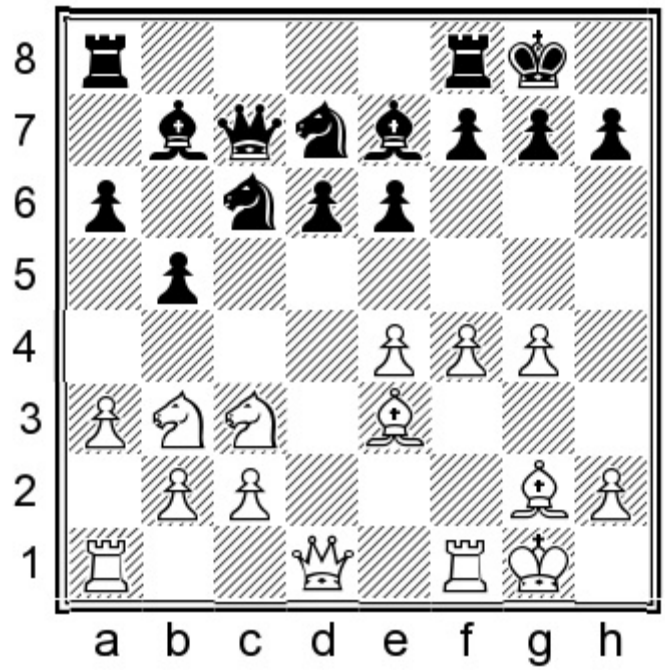
Due to 8.a3 Black has been able to put his pieces on the optimal squares against White's Sicilian fianchetto variation without having to worry about a piece sacrifice on d5 or b5, or a pawn sacrifice e4-e5.

10.♖e1

The most popular move. White increases the pressure along the e-file and threatens ♘d5. The extra support of e4 further enables a future a3-a4.

A) 10.♗e3 Piece play in the center is a bit slow. 10...♗e7 11.♕e2 ♘bd7 12.f4 ♖c8! 13.♖ad1 [13.♖ae1 h6 14.♔h1 ♘b6=] 13...♘c5 14.♗c1 0-0 15.g4 d5=

B) 10.f4 White starts his thematic pawn storm on the kingside. 10...♘c6! 11.♘b3 [11.♗e3 ♗e7 12.♕e2 0-0 13.♖ad1 ♘xd4 14.♗xd4 ♘d7 15.♕f2 ♖ad8=] 11...♗e7 12.♗e3 0-0 13.g4 ♘d7



Position after: 13...♘d7

B1) 14.♕e2 is preferred by Amanov & Kavutskiy. 14...♘b6! 15.♖ad1 ♘c4 16.♗c1 but they missed the immediate 16...a5!N 17.g5 [17.♔h1 ♗a6∓] 17...♗a6∓.

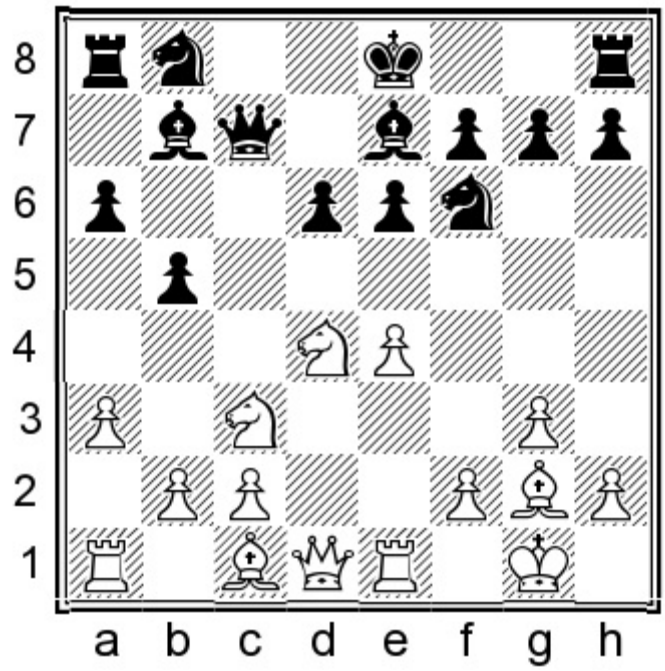
B2) 14.g5 ♘b6! The black defense plays itself. The attack on the kingside can be easily parried. White has to work hard to maintain the balance.

B2.1) 15.♘d2 ♘a5! 16.f5 [16.♕h5 ♘ac4 17.♘xc4 ♘xc4 18.♖ae1 d5!∓] 16...♘ac4 17.♘xc4 ♘xc4 18.♗c1 d5! 19.♔h1 d4 20.♕xd4 ♖ad8 21.♕f2 ♗d6 22.f6 ♗xh2 23.fxg7 ♔xg7∓

B2.2) 15.♕h5 ♘c4 16.♗c1 g6 17.♕h6 ♖fe8 18.♖f3 ♗f8 19.♕h4 b4! 20.axb4 ♘xb4∓ 21.♖h3 ♗g7 22.♕xh7+? ♔f8–+

B2.3) 15.f5 ♘c4 16.♗c1 ♖fe8 17.♔h1 ♗f8=

10...♗e7!



Position after: 10...♗e7!

Quickly preparing for ...0-0 with a potential knight sacrifice on d5.

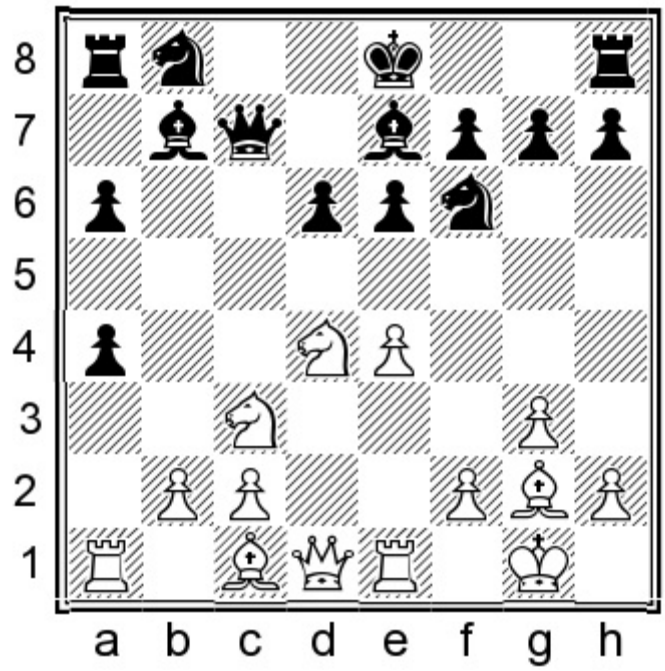
11.a4

Underlining the fact that White lost time earlier with a3.

A) 11.♗g5 0-0 12.♕e2 ♘bd7 13.♖ad1 ♖ac8∓ and Black has everything he has been aiming for by playing the Sicilian: maneuvers with his knight to c4 and queen to a8.

B) 11.♗f4 0-0 12.e5 dxe5 13.♗xe5 ♕b6 14.♗xb7 ♕xb7 15.♗xf6 ♗xf6 16.♘e4 ♗e7 17.♕f3 ♔h8 18.♖ad1 ♘d7 19.♘d6 [19.♘g5 ♕xf3 20.♘gxf3 ♘c5 21.♘c6 ♗f6 22.♘fe5 ♖ac8= is a suggestion of Carsten Hansen. White has some initiative due to his ownership of the d-file, but the engines consider it equal.] 19...♕xf3 20.♘xf3 ♘b6= ½-½ (52) Al Modiahki, M (2567) – Tukhaev, A (2537) Moscow 2012.

11...bxa4!



Position after: 11...bxa4!

12.♖xa4

The best continuation.

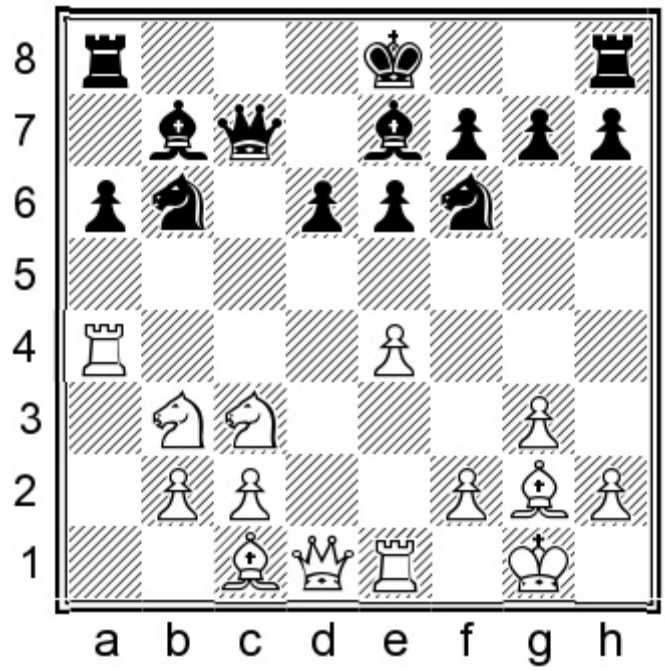
A) 12.♘d5?! A brave sacrifice, however, after 12...exd5 13.exd5 0-0–+ White has no compensation whatsoever for the piece.

B) 12.♘xa4 leads to positions which are easy to play for Black. 12...0-0 13.b3 [13.c4 ♘c6 14.b3 ♖fe8 15.♗b2 ♘d7 16.♖e3 h6 17.h4 ♗f6 18.♘xc6 ♗xc6 19.♗xf6 ♘xf6= 0-1 (24) Bodnaruk, A (2414) – Popov, V (2557) St Petersburg 2012.] 13...♘bd7 14.c4 ♖ab8 15.♘c3 ♘c5= 0-1 (51) Wang, R (2403) – Lu, S (2570) China 2015.

12...♘bd7 13.♘b3

13.♕e2 ♘b6 14.♖b4 0-0 15.♘a4 [15.♗e3 ♘fd7 16.♘a4 ♘xa4 17.♖xa4 ♖fc8= 0-1 (42) Alavkin, A (2492) – Shomoev, A (2528) Tomsk 2006.] 15...♘xa4 16.♖xa4 ♖fc8 17.b3 ♘d7 18.♖c4 ♕b6 19.♗e3 ♖xc4 20.♕xc4 ♖c8 21.♕e2 ♕b4= ½-½ (41) Berelowitsch, A (2571) – Drabke, L (2405) Germany 2006.

13...♘b6

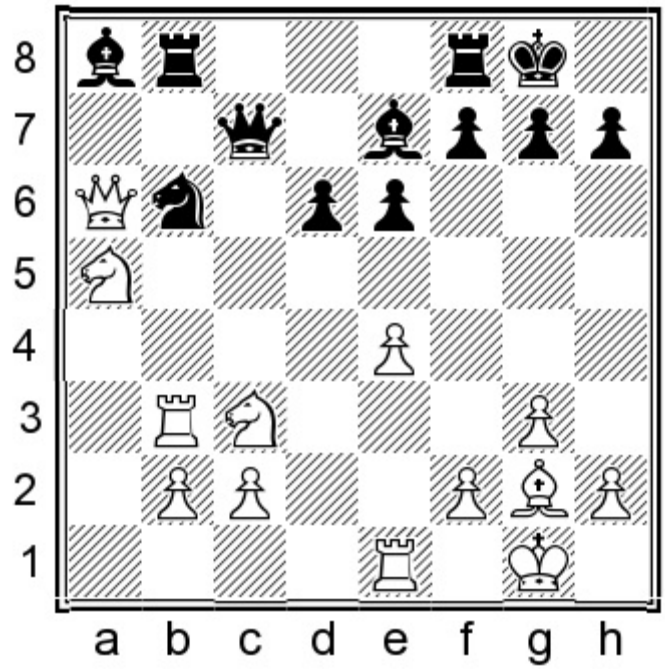


Position after: 13...♘b6

14.♖b4

14.♖a2 ♘c4 15.♖a4 ½-½ (17) Schulze, L (2284) – Hunt, H (2381) London 2022 15...♘b6 16.♖a2 ♘c4 17.♖a4 ½-½ (17) Schulze, L (2284) – Hunt, H (2381) London 2022.

14...♘fd7 15.♗e3 0-0 16.♘a5 ♖ab8 17.♕e2 ♗a8 18.♕xa6 ♘c5 19.♗xc5 ♕xc5 20.♖b3 ♕c7∞



Position after: 20...♕c7∞

Black has the bishop pair and the better organized pieces as compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

Conclusion

If White is unwilling to sacrifice a pawn with 8.0-0, or not familiar with the razor-sharp positions which then arise, he can choose one of the slower options as detailed in this chapter.

8.f3 is just ugly, 8.♗g5 is too slow and hands in the bishop pair, and queen moves to ♕d3 or ♕e2 put the queen in vulnerable positions and take too much time to be critical. That leaves 8.a3 as the only viable option. Black is allowed to complete the development of his queenside with ...b5 and ...♗b7. White essentially has two important options. He can start a pawn storm on the kingside with 10.f4. As we have seen Black is quicker with his counterplay based on ...♘f6-d7-b6-c4. Alternatively, White may play a more central game with 10.♖e1 followed by 11.a4. In these lines Black has to be a bit more careful. 10...♗e7 aiming for a quick ...0-0 is the most circumspect, avoiding any piece sacrifices on d5. Black should be able to reach fully equal positions.

d) 6.d4 cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6 8.0-0

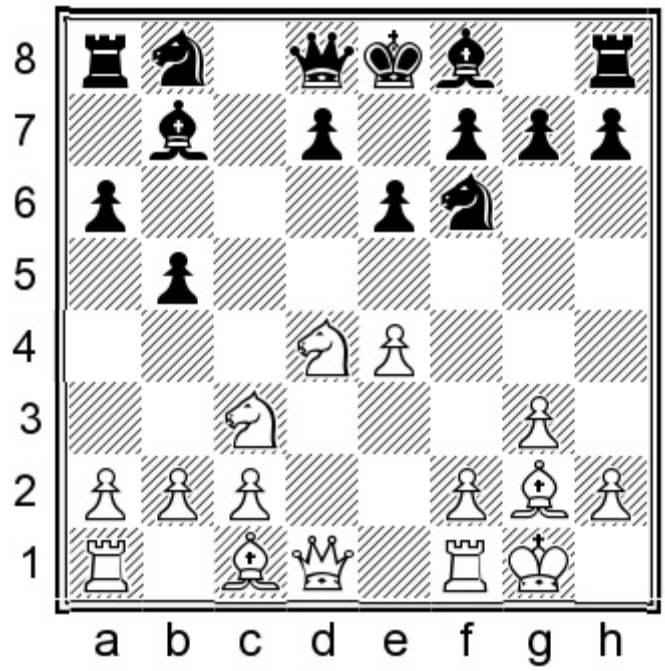
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3 b5 5.♗g2

5.d4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♗b7 7.♗g2 leads to the same position.

5...♗b7 6.d4

The most common way to reach the main line of the variation with the pawn sacrifice on e4. 6.d4 is the move order propagated by Gawain Jones in his recent Coffeehouse Chess part 1.

6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♘f6 8.0-0



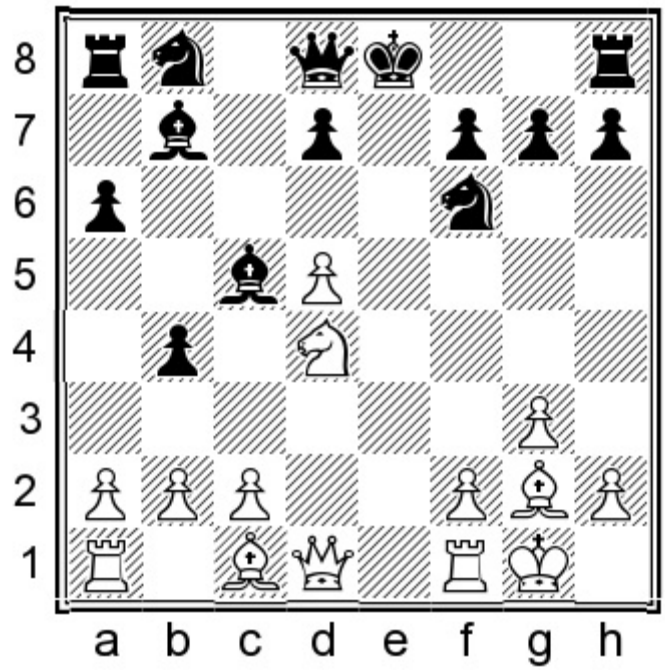
Position after: 8.0-0

The most aggressive way to play this line. White sacrifices his e-pawn. Alternatives have been investigated in the previous chapter.

8...b4 9.♘a4

The main continuation. White sacrifices his central pawn but will get a lead in development in return as Black will have to lose time winning the pawn and safeguarding his position.

A) The brave 9.♘d5?! is a thematic piece sacrifice in this type of position. It has been played in some 40 games. Generally, these sacrifices work pretty well for White but here it is the exception as it fails to impress by scoring poorly in practice. 9...exd5 10.exd5 puts Black's king in danger along the e-file, but after the key move 10...♗c5!



Position after: 10...♗c5!

the bishop goes to an active square and the black king can move aside to f8. 11.♖e1+ ♔f8 The black king is relatively safe here. It is possible to do without castling as seen in similar situations of the Fianchetto Sicilian.

A1) 12.c4 d6 13.♗f4 ♕b6∓ keeping an eye on d6 and c6 before playing ...♘bd7.

A2) 12.♘f5 the most aggressive move, but not the best. 12...d6

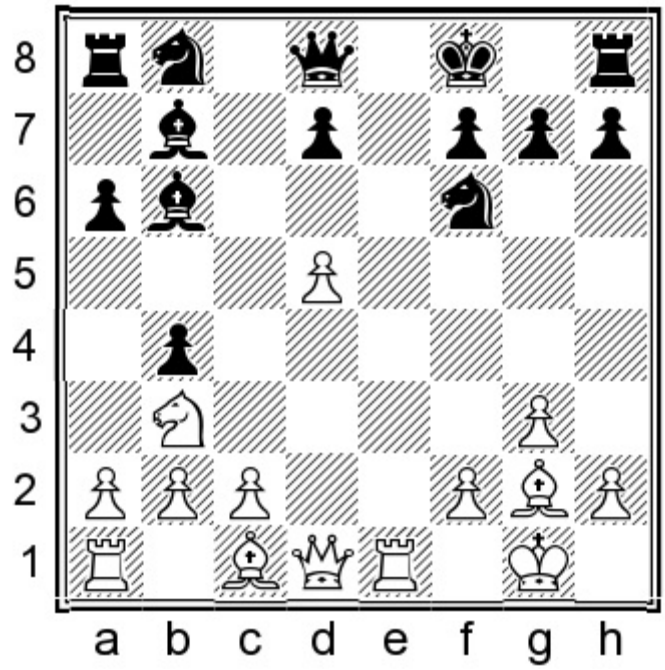
A2.1) 13.♗f4 is what White preferred in most of the games in the database but after 13...h5! making some space for the king and also preparing...♘g4 14.a3 ♘g4 15.♕e2 g6 White is already completely lost. 0-1 (28) Rezan, S (2265) – Sulava, N (2450) Pula 1998.

A2.2) 13.a3 This looks consistent as White is trying to bring the queen's rook into the fray. After

13...♗c8! Black activates an inactive piece. 14.axb4 ♗xf2+! 15.♔xf2 ♗xf5–+ White is practically lost. 0-1 (36) Pokrupa, M (2142) – Kalod, R (2512) Havlickuv Brod 2006.

A3) 12.a3 a5! 13.♘b3 transposes to 12.♘b3

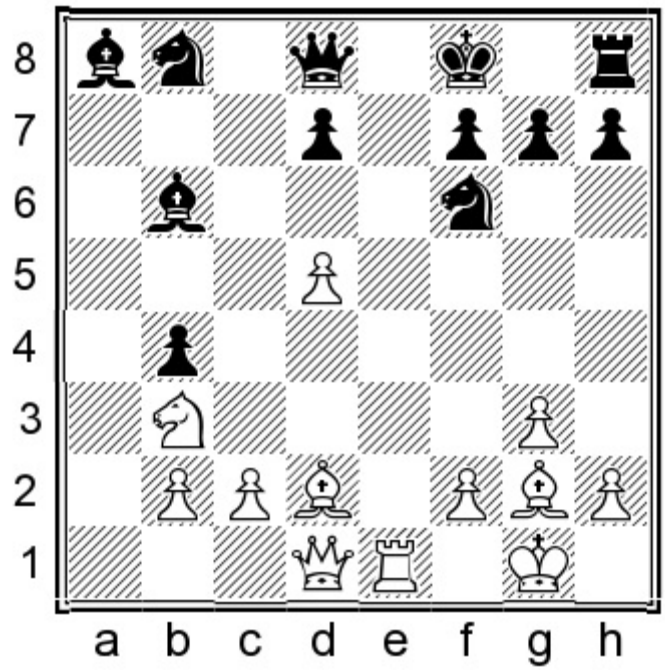
A4) 12.♘b3 is relatively best. 12...♗b6



Position after: 12...♗b6

A4.1) 13.♗f4 d6 14.♘d4 ♗xd4 15.♕xd4 a5! Is the key move in many lines which allows Black to complete his development. 16.♖e3 [16.c4 ♘a6!] 16...♘a6 17.a3 ♔g8∓ 0-1 (26) Chan, E (2332) – Boekelman, J (2351) Chess.com 2022.

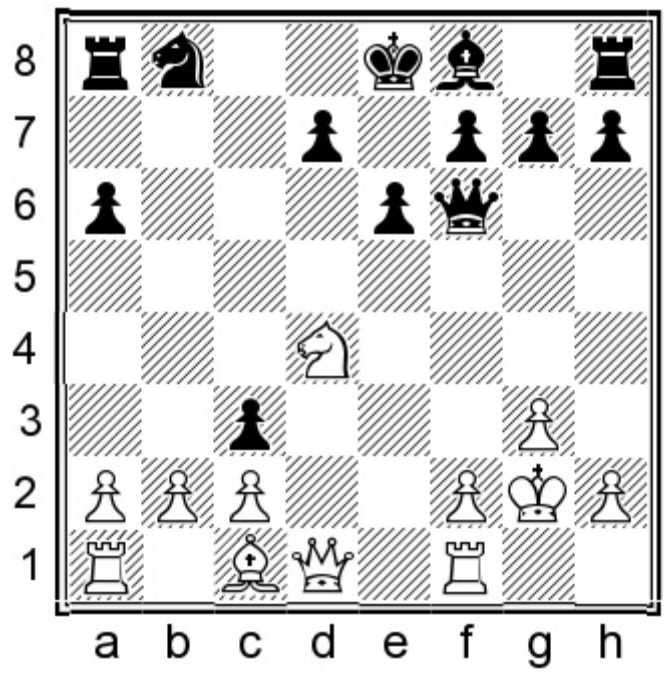
A4.2) 13.a3 White needs to create action on the queenside. 13...a5! 14.axb4 axb4 15.♖xa8 ♗xa8 16.♗d2!



Position after: 16.♗d2!

White picks up a second pawn for his piece. 16...d6 17.♗xb4 h5 18.♕d2 ♘a6 Black is fine and can even start thinking about his own initiative on the kingside after 19.♗a3 h4∓.

B) 9.e5 This leads to major simplifications. It does not cause Black any problems. 9...♗xg2 10.♔xg2 bxc3 11.exf6 ♕xf6



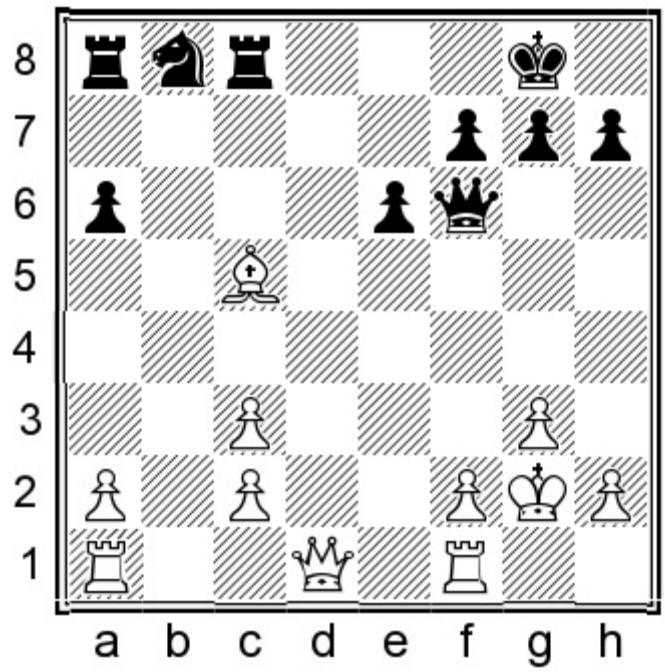
Position after: 11...♕xf6

So far more or less forced. 12.bxc3 [12.♕d3!? trying to keep his pawn structure in order. 12...♗c5!

forces White to take with the pawn on c3 anyway. ½ – ½ (64) Szakall, T (2149) – Kerek, K (2345) Paks 1999.] 12...♗c5! The most active way of development. White's pawn structure is a shambles. Black hardly has any development issues.

B1) 13.f4?! is tricky for White as well as it weakens the position of White's king. 13...0-0 14.♖b1 ♖c8 15.♗b2 ♗xd4 16.cxd4 ♕f5 17.♖f2 ♘c6∓ Black has a bind on the position and White has a bad bishop. 0-1 (21) Krasucki, Y (2026) – Dgebuadze, A (2521) Charleroi 2005.

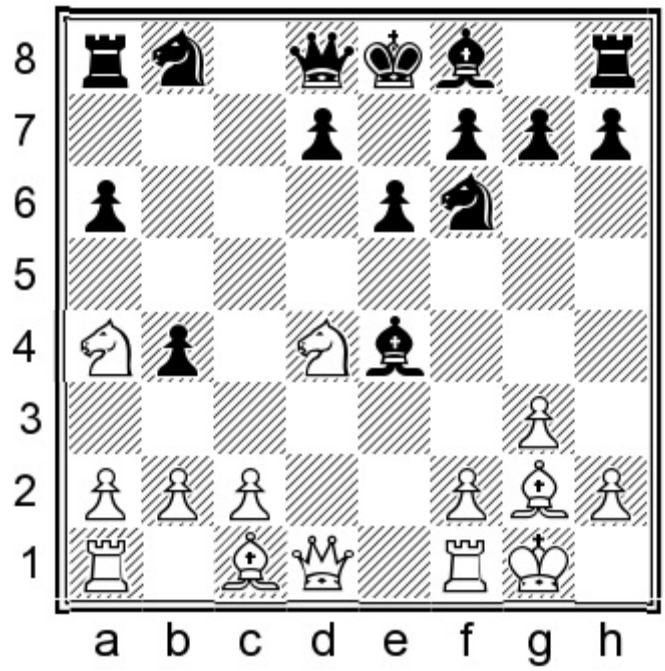
B2) 13.♗e3 0-0 14.♘xe6!? This tactical shot enables White to temporarily win a pawn. [14.♕h5 ♖c8 15.♖ad1 ♗e7 16.♖d3 g6 17.♕f3 d5∓ The weaknesses in White's pawn structure start to be felt.] 14...dxe6 15.♗xc5 ♖c8



Position after: 15...♖c8

The damaged pawn chain on the queenside forced White to struggle for equality. Cagasik, T – Antoniewski, R Czech Republic 2000. 16.♕d4 [16.♗d4 e5∓] 16...♕f5 Keeps more pieces on the board. White's pawn weaknesses will not go away automatically. 17.♖fd1 ♘c6 18.♕e3 ♘e5 19.♗d4 ♘c4∓ Black continued his game with a pawn less and was able to win. 0-1 (52) Cagasik, T – Antoniewski, R (2417) Czech Republic 2000.

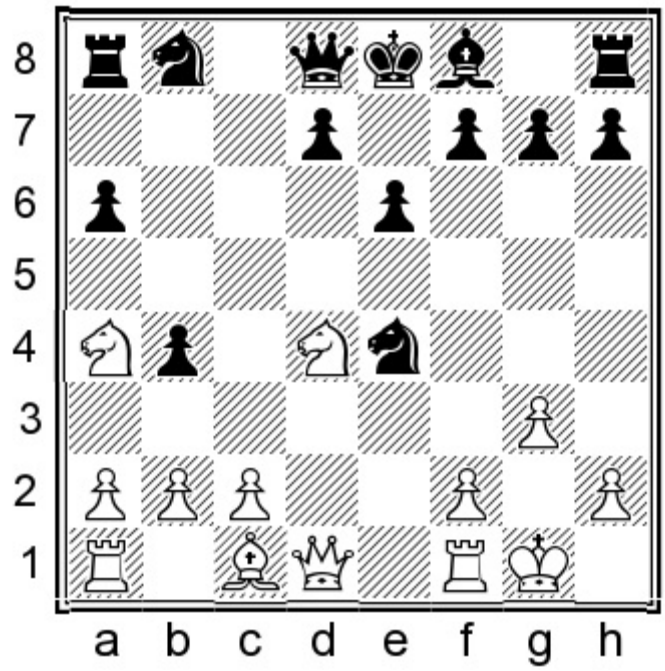
9...♗xe4



Position after: 9...♗xe4

This pawn sacrifice has attracted a lot of attention recently, although it has been played since the early 1990s. Richard Palliser gave an in-depth analysis of it in his “Fighting the Anti – Sicilians” (2007). It is the recommendation of Gawain Jones in the Coffee House Chess series (2021). From Black’s perspective, it has been explored by Adrien Demuth (2022) and Michael Roiz (2021) in their studies of the Sicilian Kan with an early 5...b5. The good news is that Black holds up well in the lines we will discuss. The bad news is that gut feeling will not get you very far, a significant amount of memorization is inevitable to survive the complications.

10.♗xe4 ♘xe4



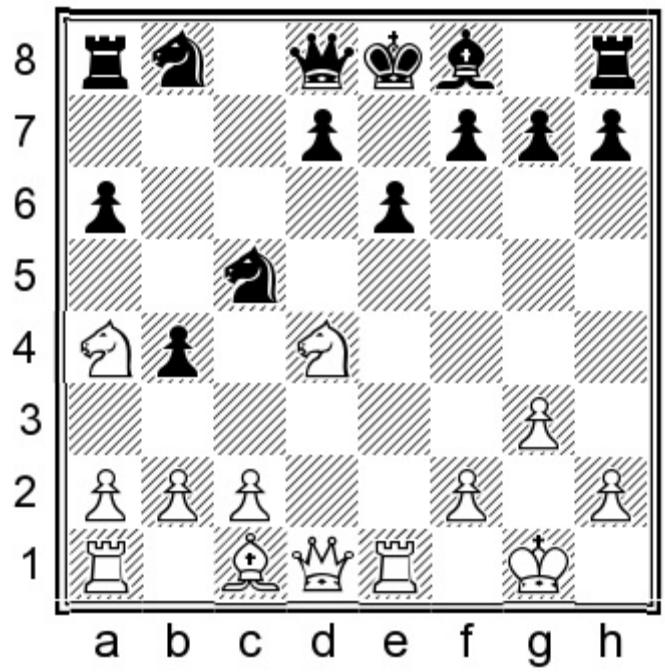
Position after: 10...♘xe4

11.c4!?

This is the recent way by which White searches for compensation for his pawn. It is has been known since 2010, and has mainly been tried by stronger players.

A) 11.♕f3?! d5∓ is easy for Black.

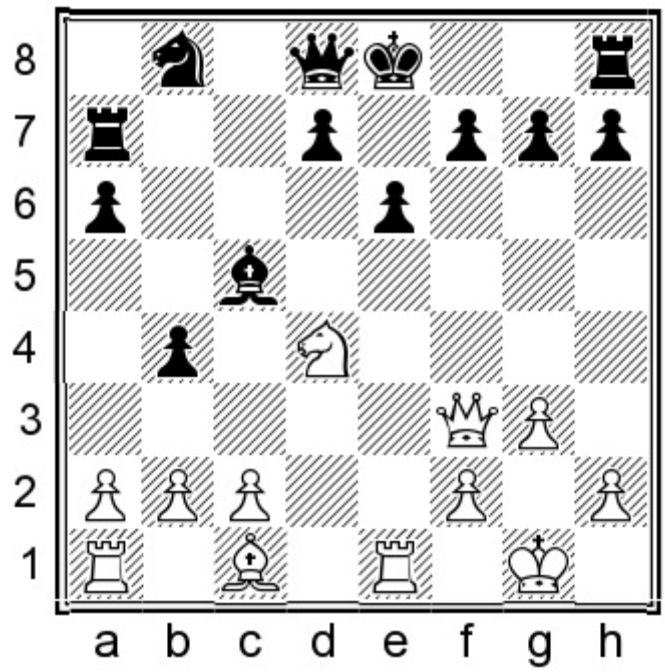
B) 11.♖e1 The traditional main line, which lost its attraction a few years ago. 11...♘c5!



Position after: 11...♘c5!

Black's strongest defense, preferred by both Roiz and Demuth, which has completely overtaken the more often played 11...d5. The maneuver with the knight basically defuses White's attacking plans. The exchange of knights will support the development of Black's pieces. With the black pawn on d7 instead of d5, sacrifices on e6 become more difficult to achieve.

B1) 12.♕f3 Curiously, this dubious move is the most common choice in this position. 12...♖a7 [Watch out for the careless 12...d5? 13.♘xc5 ♗xc5 14.♘xe6+–.] 13.♘xc5 ♗xc5 White has difficulties proving sufficient compensation for the pawn he sacrificed.

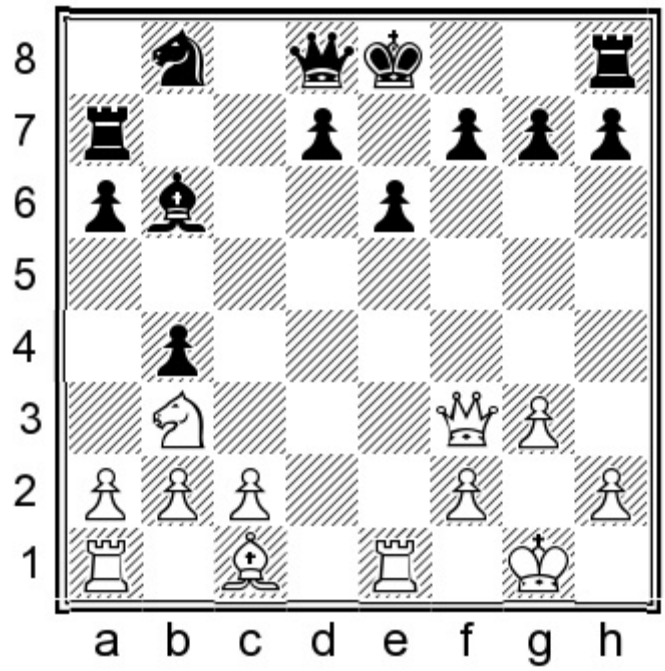


Position after: 13...♗xc5

B1.1) 14.♘f5? 0-0! 15.♘xg7 [15.♗e3 ♗xe3 16.♕xe3 ♖c7 17.♘d6 ♖xc2–+] 15...♔xg7 16.♖e5 a desperate attempt to bring more pieces into the attack 16...d6 17.♖h5 f5 18.♗h6+ ♔g8–+.

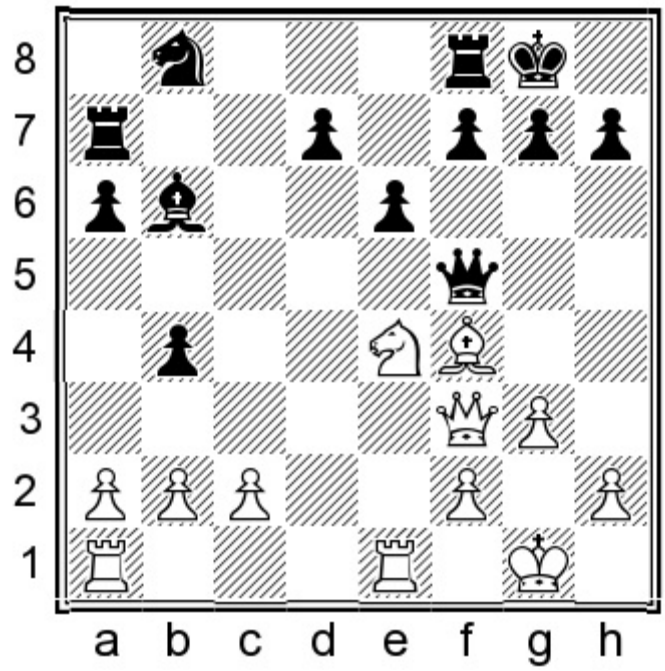
B1.2) 14.♗e3 ♕b6 15.♖ad1 0-0 allows Black to fully consolidate. For instance, 16.c3 bxc3 17.bxc3, as in Simonian, H – Vorobiov, E Gyumri 2008. Now the simple 17...d6N 18.♖b1 ♕c7∓ does not leave White any compensation for a pawn.

B1.3) 14.♘b3 ♗b6! Black has overcome the worst. White's attack is running out of steam. With ...♕f6 or ...0-0 next, Black consolidates his position.



Position after: 14...♗b6!

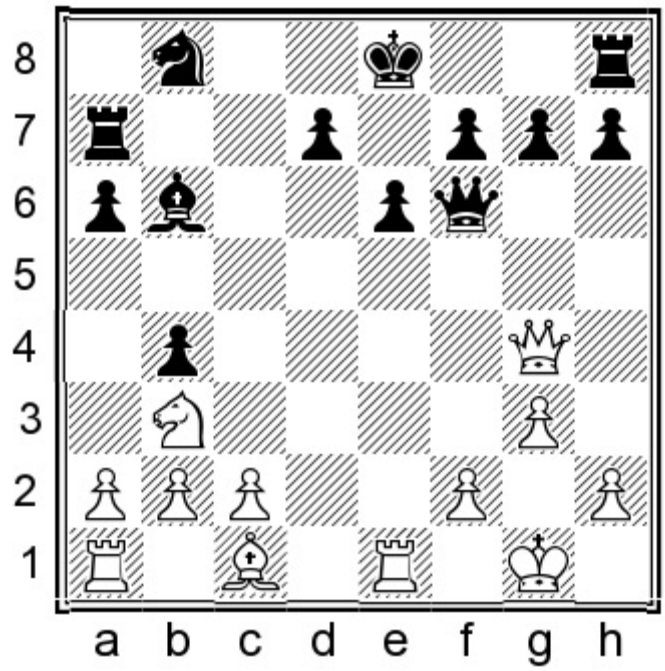
B1.3a) 15.♗f4 ♕f6 16.♘d2 0-0 17.♘e4 ♕f5



Position after: 17...♕f5

18.♘d6 [18.g4 ♕g6 19.♘g3 ♘c6∓ 0-1 (64) Gongora Montes, B (2251) – Soto Paez, O (2388) San Jose 2009.] 18...♕g6∓ Bellahcene, B – Sanal, V Kemer 2009.

B1.3b) 15.♕g4 ♕f6

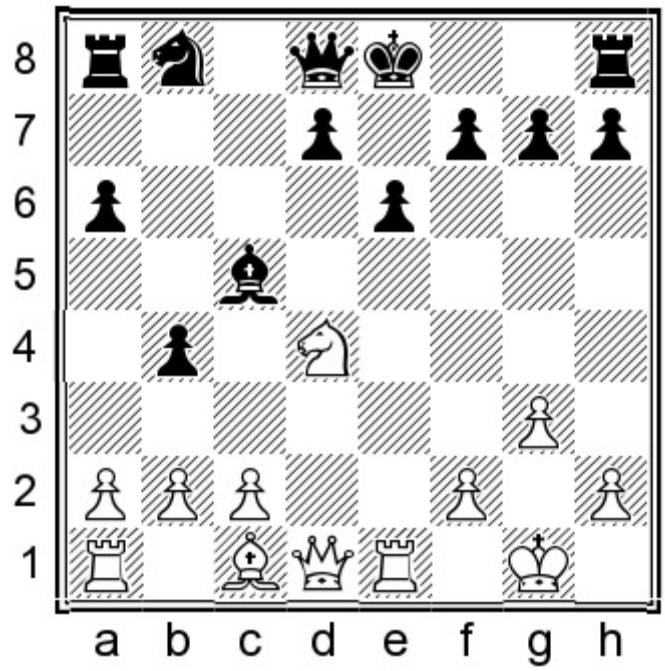


Position after: 15...♕f6

16.♖e2 [16.♗g5 ♕xf2+ 17.♔h1 0-0 18.♖e2 f5–+] 16...a5 17.♗f4 0-0∓ Black was a pawn up with a better position. Korchagina, V – Kindinova, E Smolensk 2008.

B1.3c) 15.c4 ♕f6! 16.♕xf6 gxf6 17.♗f4 ♘c6 18.♖ad1 ♔d8∓ 0-1 (40) Nikolenko, O (2511) – Abhishek, K (2375) Moscow 2016.

B2) Illogical is 12.♘xc5 ♗xc5

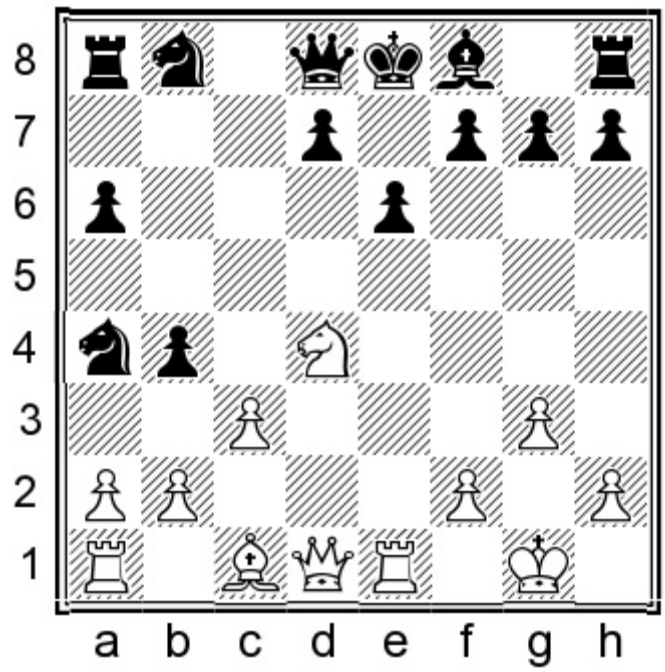


Position after: 12...♗xc5

13.♗e3 [13.♕f3 ♖a7∓ see the previous line.; 13.♕g4? ♕f6∓] 13...♕b6 14.a3 ♘c6 15.♘xc6 ♕xc6 16.♗xc5 ♕xc5 17.axb4 ♕xb4. Here it is White who has to fight for equality 1-0 (41) Safarli, E (2463) – Yakovich, Y (2600) Dresden 2007.

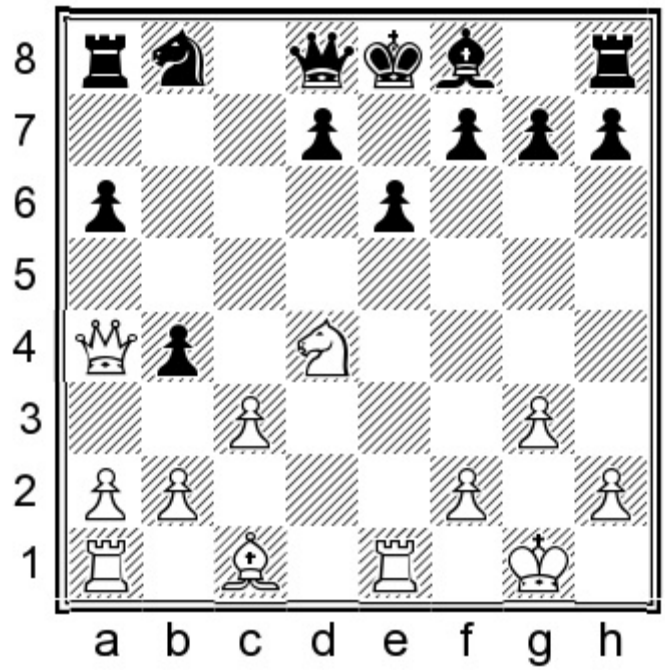
B3) 12.c4 One move later this is no longer a concern. 12...♘xa4! 13.♕xa4 ♕b6! 14.♗e3 [14.♘f5 ♕c5 15.♕c2 g6∓ 1-0 (49) Krastev, A (2057) – Carow, J (2420) Neustadt an der Weinstrasse 2017.] 14...♗c5 15.♖ad1 0-0∓ 0-1 (30) Rouffignac, T (2230) – Loiseau, Q (2630) Chalons en Champagne 2015.

B4) 12.c3 The trickiest line White can play. White aims to open up files on the queenside. 12...♘xa4!



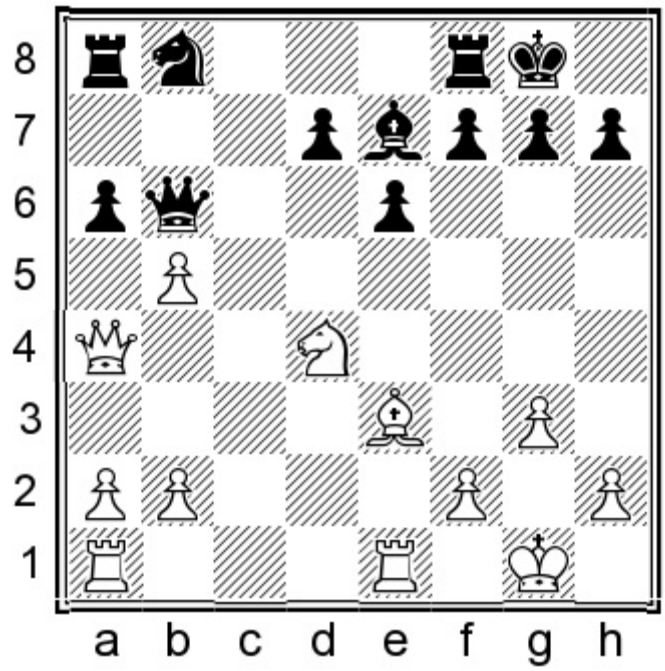
Position after: 12...♘xa4!

[12...bxc3 13.♘xc3± Black›s knight is on the wrong square. 1-0 (29) Pergel, L (2245) – Schneider, V (2297) Hungary 2012.] 13.♕xa4



Position after: 13.♕xa4

13...♗e7! This could be an even better option for Black than 13...♕b6 (the engine move). It is time to complete development. The move closes the e-file thereby preventing a number of tactical tricks. 14.cxb4 ♕b6 15.b5 [15.♘c2 0-0 16.♗e3 ♕b7 17.♗d4 ♘c6 18.♗c3 d5∓ 0-1 (51) Englert, F (2242) – Kunz, K (2138) Schweinfurt 2012.; 15.♗e3 ♕xb4 16.♕xb4 ♗xb4 17.♖ec1 ♔e7∓ 0-1 (52) Thiel, T (2277) – Holtel, J (2210) Germany 2018.] 15...0-0 16.♗e3



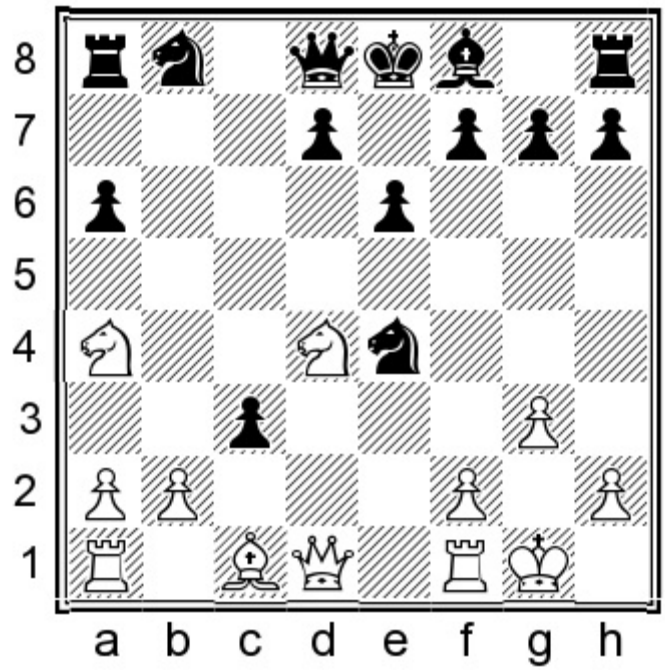
Position after: 16.♗e3

16...♗c5 Black keeps on neutralizing the white infantry.

B4.1) 17.♖ec1 ♗xd4 18.♗xd4 ♕xb5 19.♕d1 [19.♕xb5 axb5 20.♖c7 ♖d8∓] 19...♘c6 20.♗c5 ♖fd8∓ 0-1 (26) Skonnord, U (2112) – Kamer, K (2355) Belgrade 2021.

B4.2) 17.♖ed1 Jones presents this novelty in his book to try and put some life into this line. The other rook covers a2 and may want to go to c1. 17...axb5! was not analyzed by Jones but is a simple equalizer. 18.♕xb5 ♕xb5 19.♘xb5 ♗xe3 20.fxe3 g6 21.b3 ♖d8 22.e4 ♘c6= The ending is completely equal as White will have severe difficulties advancing his passed pawns.

11...bxc3



Position after: 11...bxc3

The main move.

11...♘c5 is a quiet alternative which is less theory heavy and delivers Black a playable position as well. Jones covers this neatly. 12.a3!? [12.♗f4 is solid. 12...♘xa4 13.♕xa4 ♗c5 14.♖ad1 ♕c8 15.♖fe1 ♘c6 16.♘b3 ♗e7 17.♗d6 ♗xd6 18.♖xd6 0-0= ½–½ (24) Feldmann, G (2024) – Skeels, J (2207) corr. 2010.] 12...♘xa4 13.♕xa4 ♕b6! 14.♗e3 [14.♘b5 ♘c6 15.axb4 ♗xb4 16.♗f4 0-0 17.♘c7 ♖a7 18.♘xa6 ♘d4= 19.♕xb4 ♘e2+ 20.♔g2 ♕c6+ 21.f3 ♘xf4+ 22.gxf4 ♖xa6] 14...bxa3!? 15.♘xe6 ♕xe6 16.♖ae1 ♗e7 17.♗d4 ♕g4 18.♗c5 0-0 19.♗xe7 ♖e8 20.♗xa3 ♘c6=

12.♖e1

After 12.bxc3 ♗e7 13.♖b1 0-0 14.♗f4 ♘c6 Black has nothing to worry about.

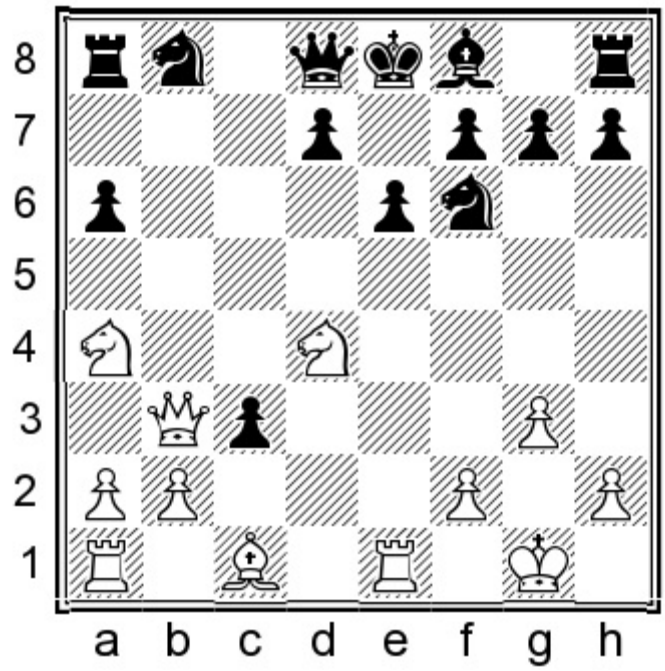
12...♘f6!

A calm response.

A) Instead, 12...d5?! 13.♘xc3 and especially after 13...♘xc3? 14.♕h5!+– tricks us into an old line when White's attack is unstoppable.

B) 12...♘c5?! 13.♘xc3± and the knight on c5 hangs in the air.

13.♕b3



Position after: 13.♕b3

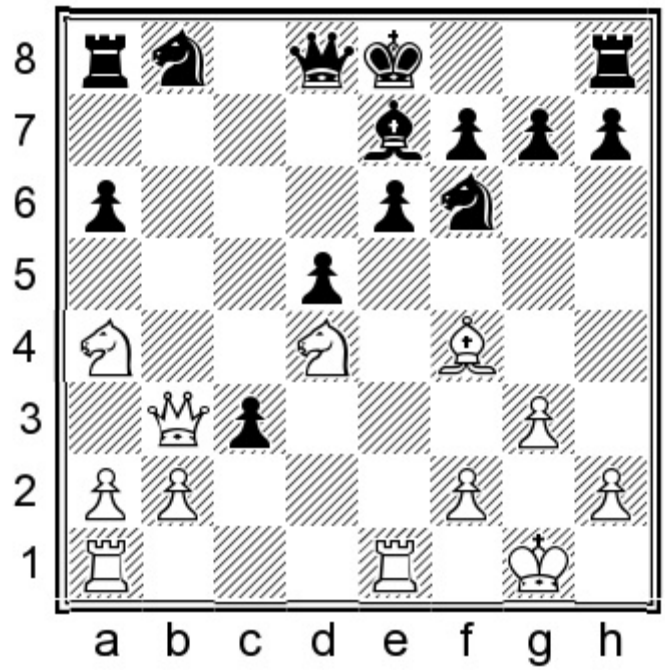
Making a threat of 14.♕b7

The gambit 13.♕f3 d5 14.♗g5 [14.bxc3 ♘bd7! Demuth 15.♕e2 ♖c8 16.♕xa6 ♖a8 17.♕b5 ♕c7 18.♖b1 ♗d6∓ With the return of the pawn, Black has reached an excellent position with a much better pawn structure.] 14...cxb2 15.♖ad1 ♘bd7 16.♘c3 took place in Demchenko, A – Korobkov, P Sochi 2005. Now the simple 16...♗c5N 17.♘xd5 ♗xd4 18.♘c7+ ♔e7 would have forced White to struggle for a draw with 19.♘d5+.

13...♘c6

This is Demuth's preference in this position and the main line of Jones. This could well be the simple solution instead of the complexities which arise after 13...d5.

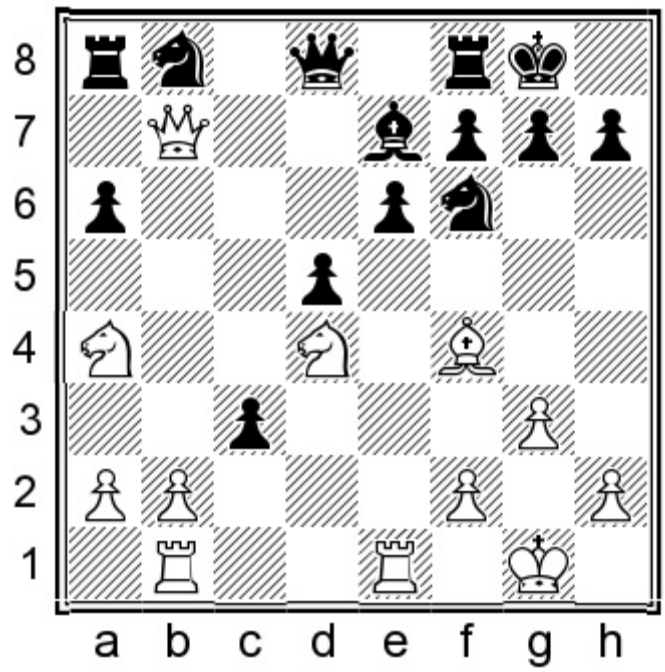
13...d5 14.♗f4 White has to play energetically. This new move was suggested by Jones. [14.♕b7 ♘bd7∓; 14.bxc3?! ♘bd7 15.♗e3 ♕c8 White found himself in a ruined position with no compensation for the pawn. 0-1 (25) Paredes Galan, A (2334) – Yakovich, Y (2560) Paris 2005.] 14...♗e7



Position after: 14...♗e7

A) 15.♘b6 this move invites exciting complications. 15...♖a7 16.♗xb8 ♖b7! White is a piece up, but it is tough to defend everything. 17.♗a7 0-0 [17...♖xa7 18.♘c6+–] 18.♘c6 a very unusual placement of minor pieces! 18...cxb2! 19.♕xb2 [After 19.♘xd8 bxa1=♕ 20.♖xa1 ♖xd8 only Black can be better.] 19...♕e8 20.♖ac1 ♖c7 21.♕c3 ♔h8!= A decent prophylactic move. The threat of 22...♘e4 makes White's position somewhat uncomfortable.

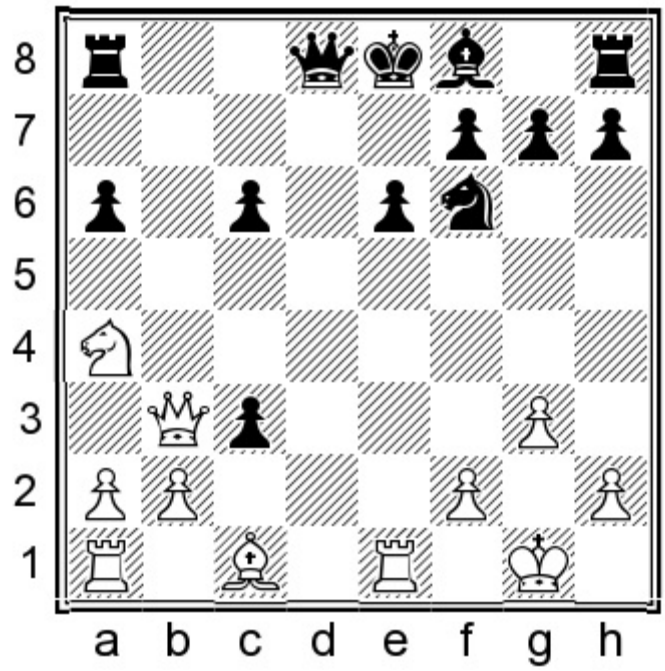
B) 15.♖ab1! 0-0 16.♕b7



Position after: 16.♕b7

16...♘bd7 [16...c2 17.♖bc1 ♘bd7 18.♘c6 ♕e8 19.♖xc2 ♔h8 20.♘xe7 ♕xe7 21.♘c5 ♖ac8 22.♖ec1 ♖fe8⩲ White has significant pressure for the pawn.] 17.♘c6 ♕e8 18.♘xc3⩲ Jones.

14.♘xc6 dxc6

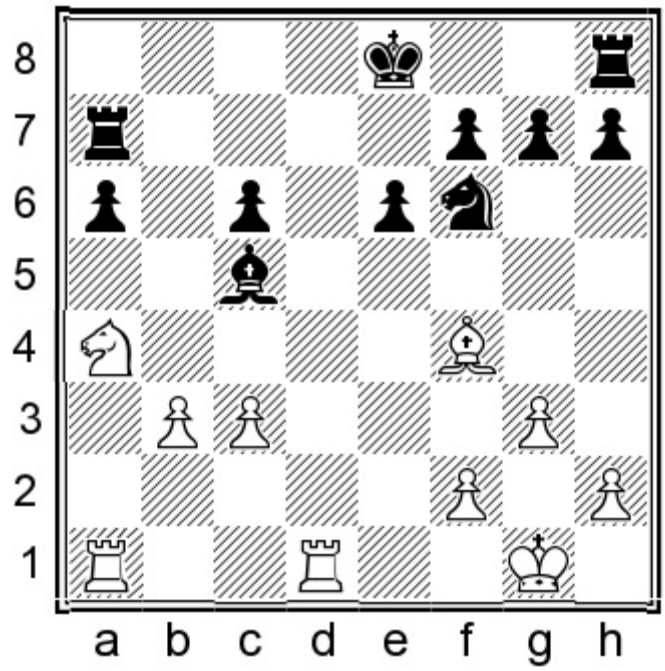


Position after: 14...dxc6

15.♖d1

15.♕xc3 ♖c8 16.♗e3 ♘d5 17.♕c4 ♗b4! 18.♖ed1 [18.♘c3 a5 19.♗c5 ♗xc5 20.♕xc5 ♕b6∓] 18...♕a5=

15...♕b8 16.♘b6 ♖a7! 17.♗f4 ♕b7 18.bxc3 ♗c5 19.♘a4 ♕xb3 20.axb3



Position after: 20.axb3

20...♗e7 21.♗e3 ♖d7 22.♖xd7 ♔xd7 23.♘b6+ ♔c7 24.♖xa6 ♔b7 25.♖a4 c5=

With a completely equal ending.

Conclusion

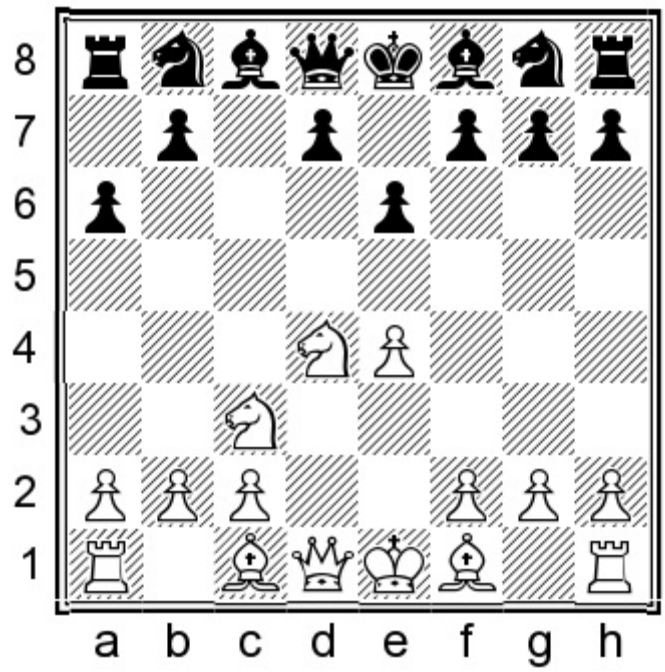
The pawn sacrifice 8...b4 9.♘a4 ♗xe4 is undoubtedly one of the more interesting and complex variations in this book. White sacrifices a central pawn for activity and the initiative. The pawn sacrifice is a key line in Gawain Jones' recently published Coffeehouse Repertoire. I expect many more games with it in the near future and at the non-professional levels as well.

In the main line, 11.c4 instead of the more traditional 11.♖e1, is a recent addition to White's armour in the search for compensation. Black should be able to hold his own in both lines, but this will require a few hours of studying the lines analyzed in this chapter.

My gut feeling is not good enough in these positions! In the main line 11...♘c5 and Demuth's 13...♘c6 are two options worth investigating further as they may be simpler solutions than the complex alternatives like 13...d5.

Chapter 6
The Sicilian Kan – Via 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4



Chapter Guide

Chapter 6 – The Sicilian Kan – Via 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7

a) 6.--

b) 6.♕f3

c) 6.♗e3

d) 6.a3

e) 6.f4

f) 6.g3 ♗b4 7.--

g) 6.g3 ♗b4 7.♘de2

h) 6.g3 ♗b4 7.♗d2

i) 6.♗e2

j) 6.♗d3 - Introduction

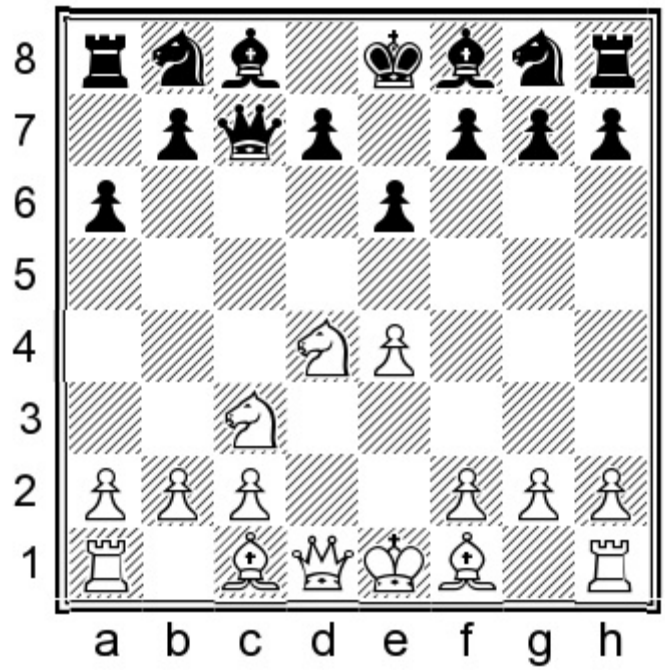
k) 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.--

l) 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 8.--

m) 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 8.f4

a) 6.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7

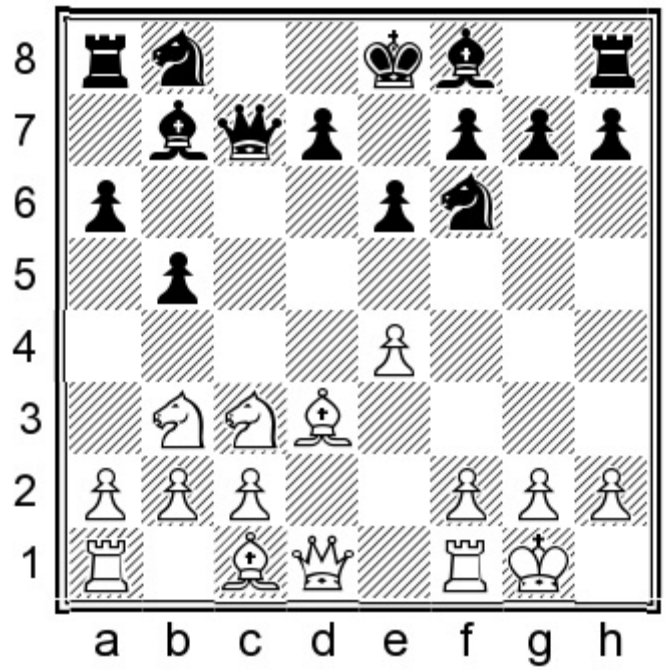


Position after: 5...♕c7

6.♗g5

White hopes to move the game into lines of the Najdorf. However, Black will not cooperate by playing ...♘f6 and/or ...d6 and keeps the game in the Kan variation.

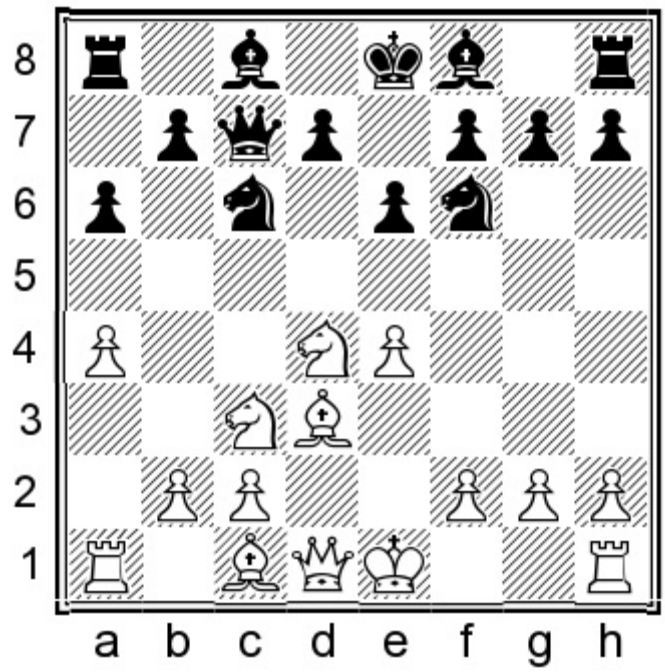
A) 6.♘b3 Puts the knight out of the center and invites Black to play a nice hedgehog system. 6...b5 7.♗d3 ♗b7 8.0-0 ♘f6



Position after: 8...♘f6

9.a3 [9.♖e1 ♗d6! 10.h3 0-0 11.♗g5 ♗e5= 0-1 (28) Kamberi, F (2267) – Boekelman, J (2460) Chess.com 2022.] 9...d6 10.♖e1 ♘bd7 11.♗g5 ♗e7 12.h3 0-0∓ 0-1 (55) Zhakamukhov, E (1938) – Rublevsky, S (2683) Sochi 2017.

B) 6.a4!? Looking for unexplored territory. While this is not a very popular continuation it has been given a try by GMs Kamsky and Savchenko. 6...♘f6 7.♗d3 ♘c6!



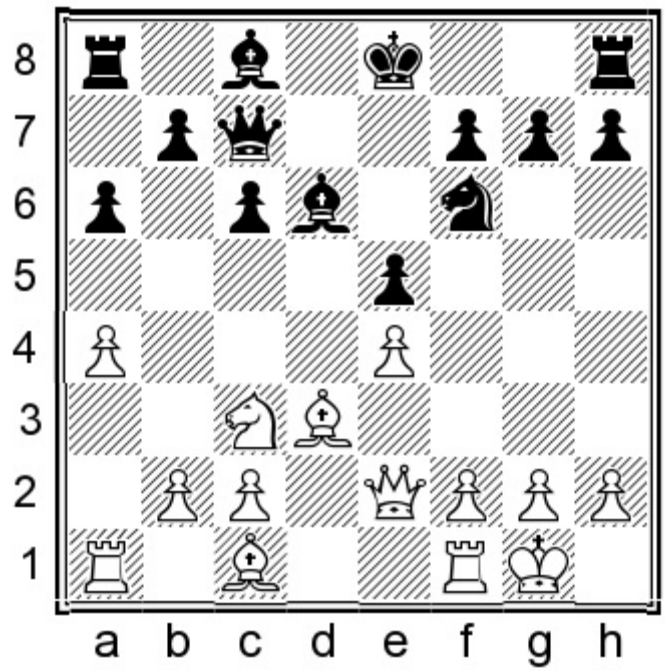
Position after: 7...♘c6!

The choice of Kan specialist Korneev. Black plays it just like in the Taimanov, but with an unfortunate a4 included.

B1) 8.♘de2 d6 9.0-0 ♗e7 10.f4 b6 11.♕e1 ♗b7 12.♕g3 g6 13.♗e3 ♘b4= 0-1 (33) Sarwat, W (2398) – Korneev, O (2601) Casablanca 2005.

B2) 8.♗e3 ♘e5!? 9.h3 ♗c5 10.0-0 0-0 11.f4 [11.♕e2 d5=] 11...♘c6 12.e5 ♘xe5 13.fxe5 ♕xe5 14.♖e1 ♗xd4 15.♗xh7+ ♘xh7 16.♗xd4 ♕a5=

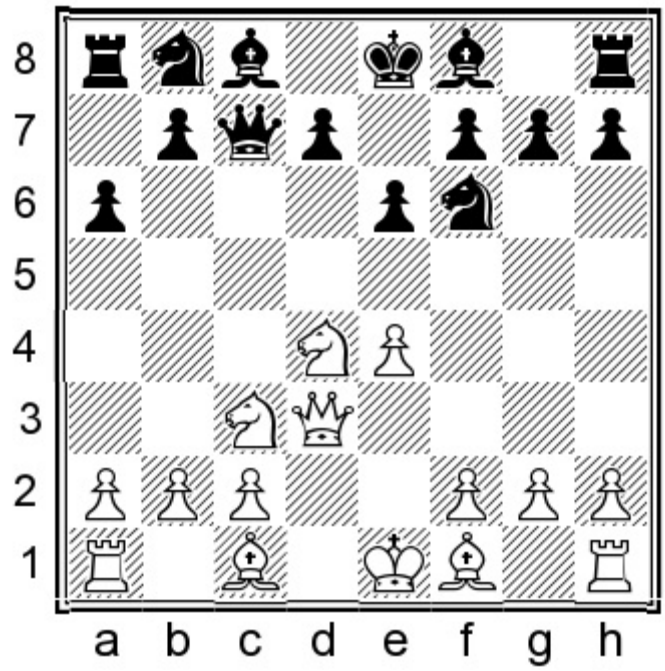
B3) 8.♘xc6 dxc6 the familiar Kan way of taking back the knight. 9.0-0 e5 10.♕e2 ♗d6!



Position after: 10...♗d6!

making the thematic f2-f4 difficult to achieve. 11.♗e3 [11.a5 ♗b4! 12.♗d2 0-0= White must avoid losing a pawn.] 11...a5! another precise move. 12.♗c4 ♕e7= With a few precise moves Black has completely equalized.

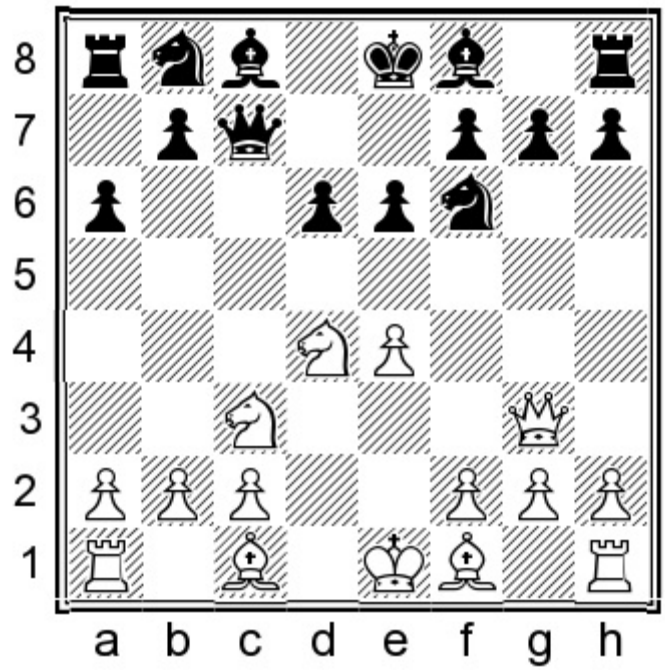
C) A modern idea to combat the Kan is 6.♕d3. Theory is still developing in this variation... 6...♘f6 [6...d6 7.g4!±]



Position after: 6...♘f6

C1) 7.♗e2 b5! 8.♕g3 [8.f4 ♗b7 9.♗f3 d6 10.0-0 ♘bd7 11.♕e2 b4! 12.♘d1 e5∓] 8...d6 as always. 9.a3 ♗b7 10.f3 g6 11.♗g5 ♘bd7 12.♖d1 h6 13.♕h3 ♗g7 14.♗e3 d5∓ 0-1 (37) Oldrati, P (1993) – Kruis, R (2428) corr. 2008.

C2) 7.♕g3 d6

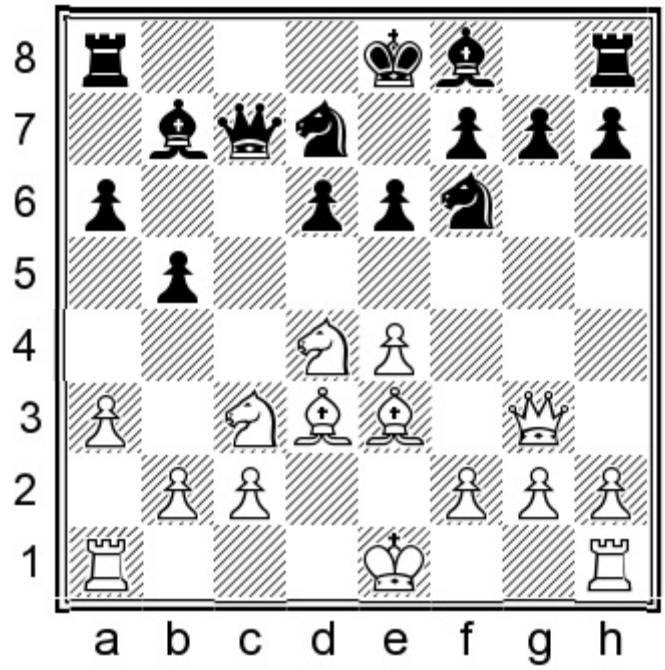


Position after: 7...d6

C2.1) 8.♗d3 b5 9.a4 [9.0-0 ♘bd7 10.a3 ♗b7 transposing to 8.♗e3.] 9...b4 10.♘a2 e5 11.♘e2 ♗b7

12.f3 d5∓ ½-½ (46) Damia, A (2223) – Nikolov, M (2501) Cattolica 2022.

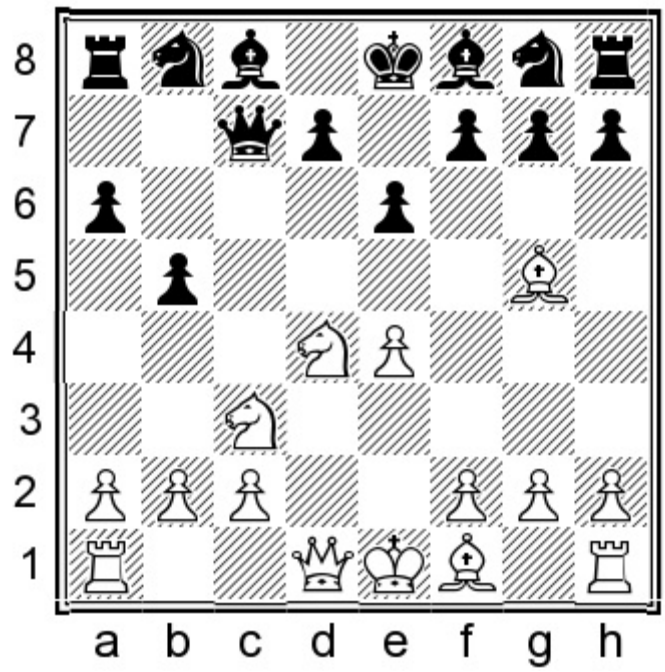
C2.2) 8.♗e3 b5 9.a3 ♗b7 10.♗d3 ♘bd7



Position after: 10...♘bd7

11.0-0 [11.♘b3 g6 12.0-0 ♗g7 13.♖ad1 0-0∓] 11...♘c5 12.f3 g6 13.♗e2 ♗e7 14.♗h6 e5 15.♘b3 ♘e6∓ 16.♕f2?! g5–+ 0-1 (27) Odeev, H (2405) – So, W (2669) Guangzhou 2010.

6...b5!



Position after: 6...b5!

The standard Kan plan, developing the queenside and increasing the pressure against e4.

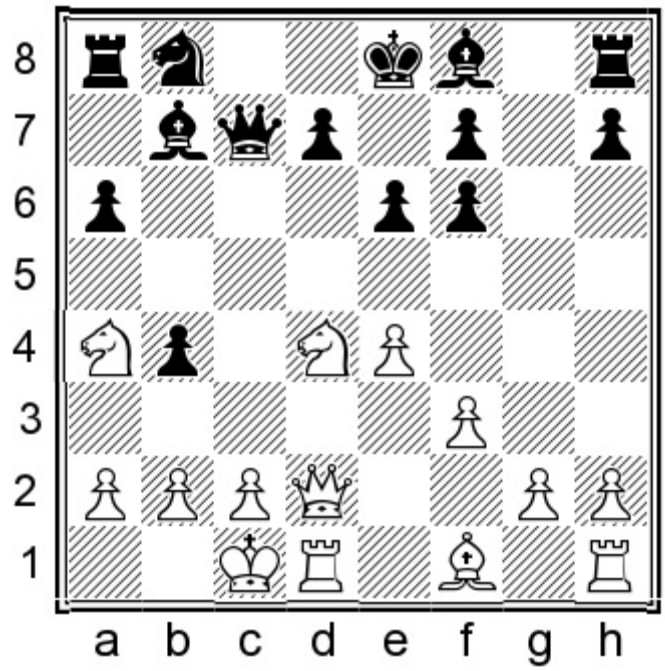
7.♕d2

7.f4?! White continues as in the 6.♗g5 Najdorf, but he drops an important pawn without the regular compensation. 7...h6! 8.♗h4 ♕xf4 9.♗g3 ♕e3+ 10.♗e2 ♗b4 11.♘b3 A subsequent queen exchange, needed to bring White's king into safety, will only help Black. White is left without any compensation for the lost pawn. 11...♗b7!∓ White cannot castle, Black is much better. 12.♗d6 ♗xd6 13.♕xd6 ♗xe4–+

7...b4!N 8.♘a4 ♘f6 9.♗xf6

9.f3 is the alternative. 9...♗b7 10.0-0-0 ♗e7 11.♔b1 ♕a5 12.e5 [12.b3?? ♘xe4–+] 12...♘d5 13.♗xe7 ♘xe7 14.b3 0-0 15.a3 ♘bc6 16.♘xc6 ♘xc6 17.h4 [17.♕xd7?! ♖ad8–+] 17...♖ab8∞ with a tense Sicilian battle.

9...gxf6 10.0-0-0 ♗b7 11.f3=



Position after: 11.f3=

Here Black has an easy Rauzer. Black continues to postpone ...d6 to a suitable moment.

11...♘c6 12.♔b1 ♘xd4 13.♕xd4 ♖g8 14.g4

14.♕xf6?? ♗c6 15.b3 ♗g7–+ and Black already has a winning attack base on the weak long diagonal.

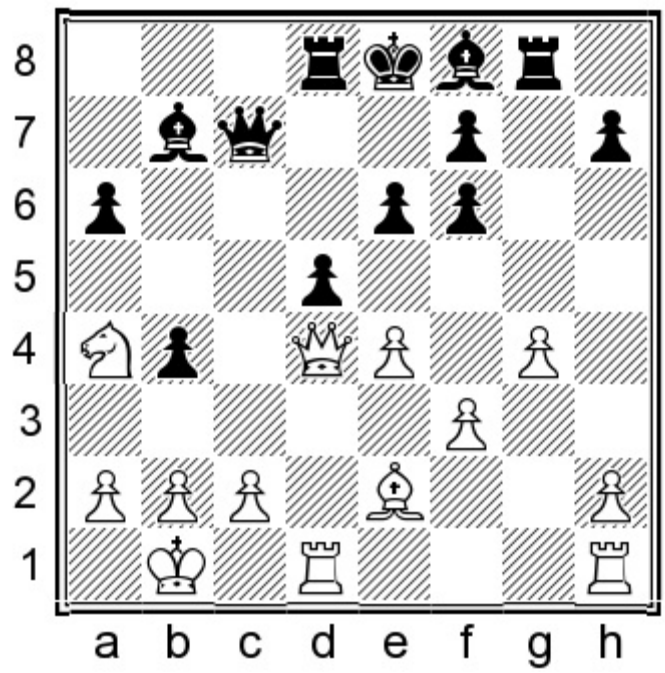
14...♖d8!

The f6-pawn is still poisoned.

15.♗e2

15.♗d3 ♕e5∓

15...d5



Position after: 15...d5

Black's king is safe in the middle and his bishop pair starts to make an impact.

16.♕a7

16.♕xf6?! ♖c8 17.♖d2 dxe4–+

16...♗d6 17.♗xa6 ♗c6 18.♕xc7 ♗xc7 19.♘c5 dxe4∓

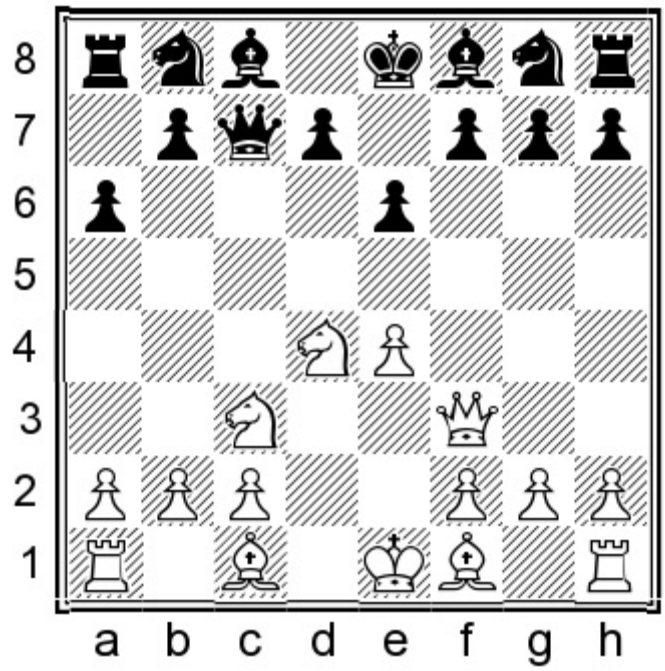
The endgame is more attractive for Black.

Conclusion

In this subchapter we have investigated various weapons White may use as a surprise against the Sicilian Kan. None of them (6.♘b3, 6.a4, 6.♕d3 and 6.♗g5) are frightening, although, as always in the Kan, Black needs to be careful in the earlier parts of the game not to be blown of the board. Fortunately, with a bit of preparation and some gut Sicilian feel, it should not be much of a problem for Black to reach equal positions.

b) 6.♕f3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 a6 5.♘c3 ♕c7 6.♕f3!?



Position after: 6.♕f3!?

A highly aggressive move which has recently become quite popular. Since 6.♗e3 followed by 7.♕f3 became mainstream in the Sicilian Taimanov, White has started to take an interest in ♕f3 against other Sicilians as well. The move is actually not that new. Kortschnoj introduced it against Taimanov as early as 1958. Originally it was used as a means to stay out of theory yet arrive in attractive Open Sicilian attacking positions for White. In my database White has a reasonable 55% with 6.♕f3. This is not exceptional as such but from a statistical perspective it makes 6.♕f3 one of the best lines for White in the Sicilian Kan with 5.♘c3 ♕c7.

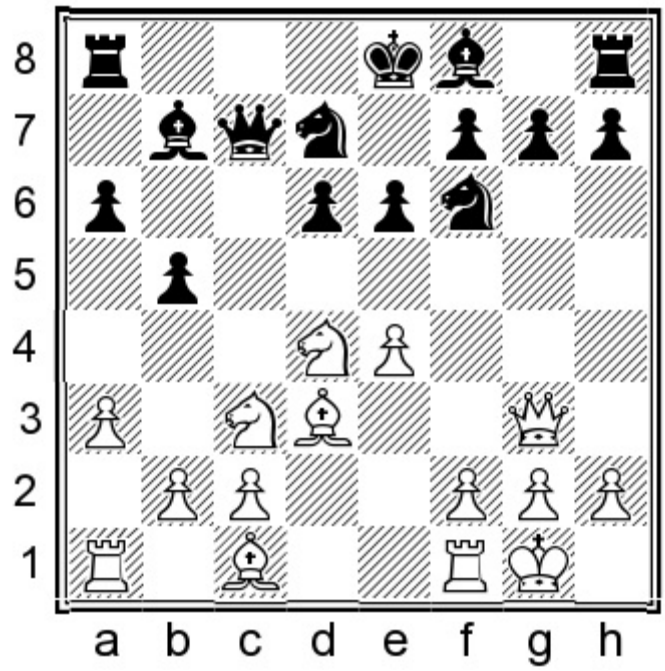
6...d6

This may well be the best if Black does not like the endgames which we see after 6...♘f6 7.♕g3 ♕xg3. Black postpones ...♘f6 in order to prevent the transposition into a Najdorf Line. A quick ...b5 puts additional pressure against the white queenside and the e4-pawn.

7.♗e3

The thematic continuation, aiming for a quick 0-0-0.

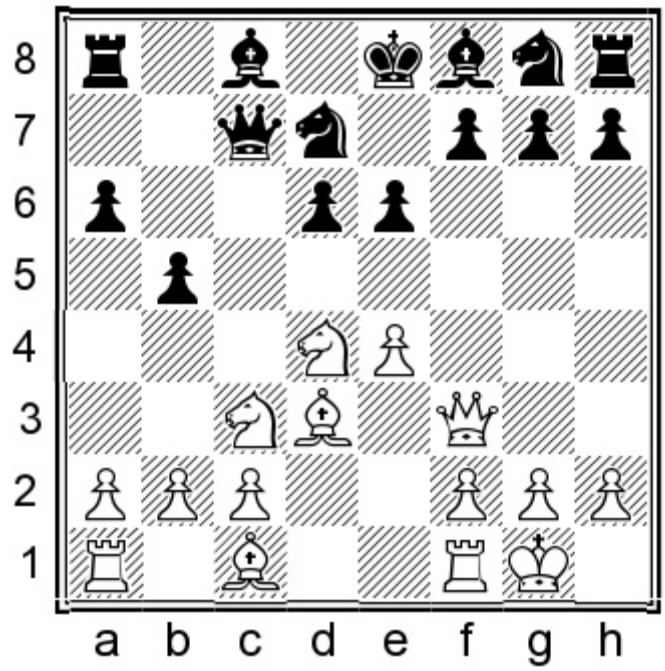
A) 7.♕g3 ♘d7 8.♗d3 [8.♗e3 b5! transposes to the main line.] 8...b5 9.a3 ♗b7 10.0-0 ♘gf6



Position after: 10...♘gf6

is a standard line in the 5...♕c7 6.♗d3 variation. White has spent time on the position of his queen and as a result of this Black shows better results from here. Following are a few examples. 11.♗d2 [11.♗e3 h5 12.h3 h4 13.♕f3 ♗e7 14.♘b3 d5 15.♗f4 e5 16.♗h2 dxe4= 0-1 (31) Escobar Medina, A (2343) – Iturrizaga Bonelli, E (2663) Medellin 2017.] 11...h5 12.♖ae1 ♘e5 13.♘f3 ♘fd7 14.♘xe5 dxe5 15.♖c1 h4 16.♕g4 g6= 0-1 (58) Zeng, C (2536) – Wang, C (2505) Xinghua 2017.

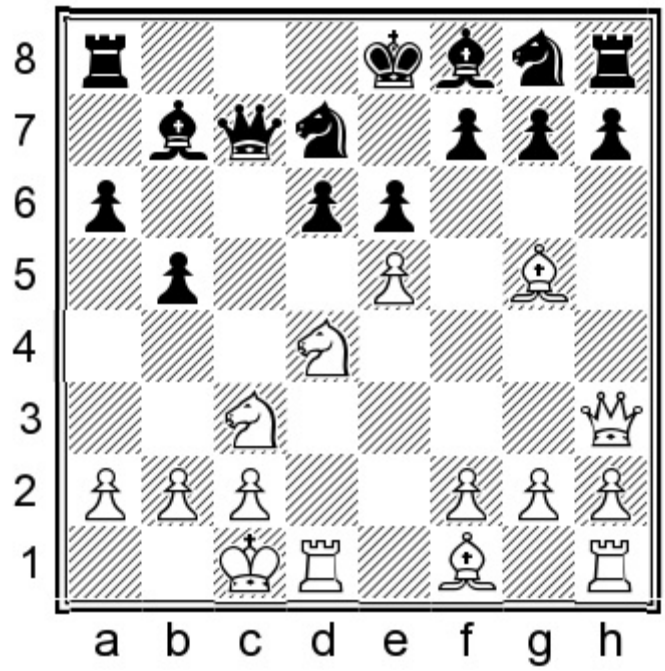
B) 7.♗d3 ♘d7 8.0-0 b5



Position after: 8...b5

9.e5 [9.♗d2 ♗b7 10.♕g3 ♘gf6=] 9...♗b7 10.exd6 ♗xd6 11.♗e4 ♘c5 12.♗xb7 ♕xb7 13.♖d1 ♕xf3 14.♘xf3 ♗e7=

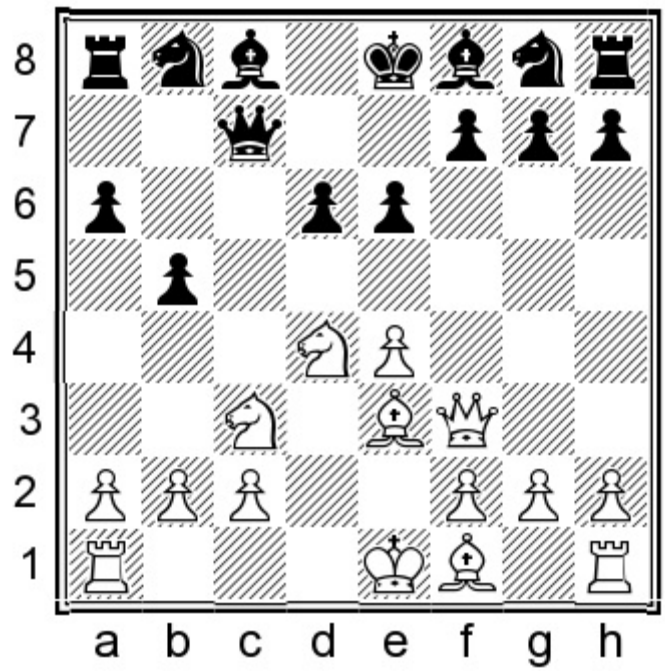
C) 7.♗g5!? b5! 8.0-0-0 ♘d7 9.e5 ♗b7 10.♕h3



Position after: 10.♕h3

10...dxe5 11.♘xe6 fxe6 12.♕xe6+ ♗e7 13.♗xb5 axb5 14.♘xb5 ♕c6 15.♘d6+ ♔d8 16.♗xe7+ ♘xe7 17.♘f7+ ♔e8 18.♘d6+ ♔d8=

7...b5!?



Position after: 7...b5!?

Immediately making Black's intentions clear.

8.0-0-0

A) 8.e5 ♗b7 9.exd6 [9.♘e4 dxe5–+] 9...♗xd6 10.♕g4 ♗e5∓ 11.0-0-0 ♘f6 12.♕xg7 ♖g8 13.♕h6 ♘c6∓

B) 8.♕g3 b4! 9.♘d1 ♘f6 10.♗d3 e5 11.♘b3 ♗e7 12.0-0 0-0=

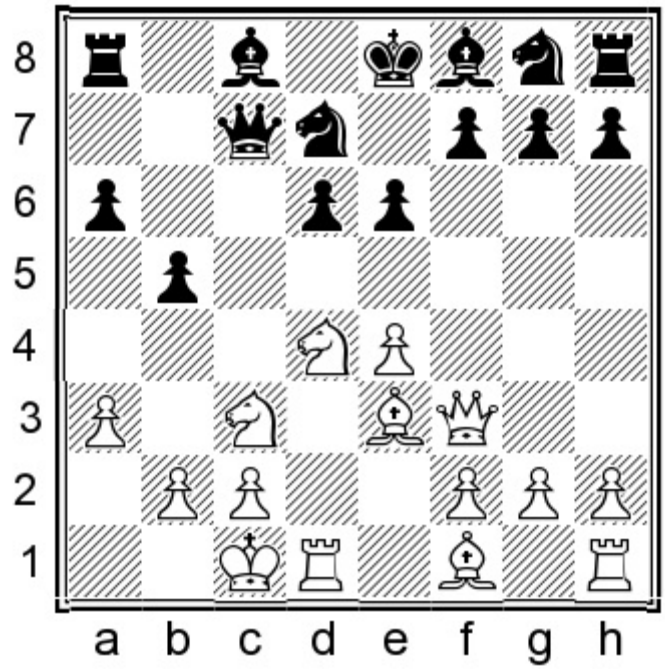
C) 8.a3 ♗b7 9.♕g3 ♘f6 10.f3 [10.♗d3 ♘bd7 11.♘b3 g6!=] 10...♘bd7 11.♘b3 ♖c8 12.0-0-0 ♘e5= 0-1 (36) Winkelman, A (2176) – Erigaisi, A (2526) Xingtai 2019.

8...♘d7

Black has no time for 8...b4 9.e5! ♗b7 10.♘e4± dxe5 11.♗b5+ axb5 12.♘xb5 ♕c6 13.♘f6+ ♔e7 14.♘xg8+ ♖xg8 15.♗c5+ ♕xc5 16.♕xb7+ ♔f6 17.♕f3+ ♔g6 18.♕xa8 ♕xb5 19.♖d8 and the position of the black

monarch is hardly enviable.

9.a3



Position after: 9.a3

Here Black was threatening ...b5-b4.

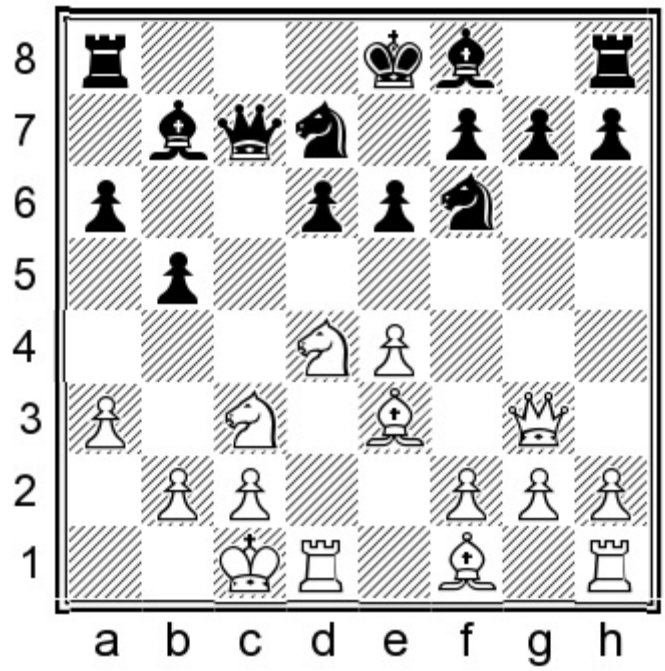
A) 9.♕g3 b4! 10.♘a4 e5 11.♘f3 ♘gf6 12.♘d2 ♗b7∓

B) 9.e5 ♗b7 10.exd6 ♗xf3 11.dxc7 ♗xd1∓

9...h5!N

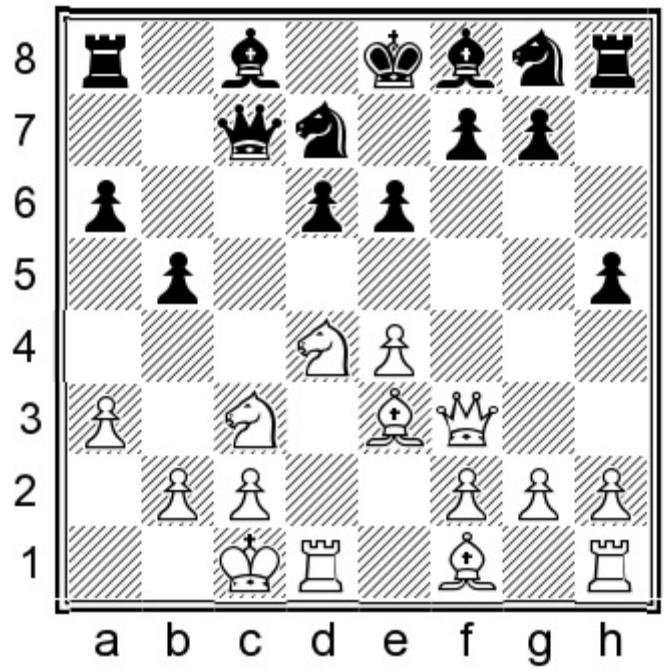
A new move in this particular position, although later we transpose into existing games. The concept of a pre-emptive ....h5 in the Sicilian is not new. Black leaves the c8-bishop on its starting square for now enabling Black to play against White's queenside in Najdorf fashion with ...♖b8 and ...b4. Black hinders White's kingside expansion with g4 which would be the move after 9...♖b8. Finally, the white queen will not have an easy life as soon as she lands on g3.

9...♗b7 is not the original intention of our queenside expansion. White may now toy with piece sacrifices on b5. 10.♕g3! ♘gf6



Position after: 10...♘gf6

11.♗xb5!? [11.♗d3 ♖b8 12.f4 ♘c5= 0-1 (32) Pultinevicius, P (2385) – Herrera Reyes, J (2314) Chess.com 2018.] 11...axb5 12.♘dxb5 ♕c6 13.♖xd6 ♗xd6 14.♕xd6 ♖b8∞



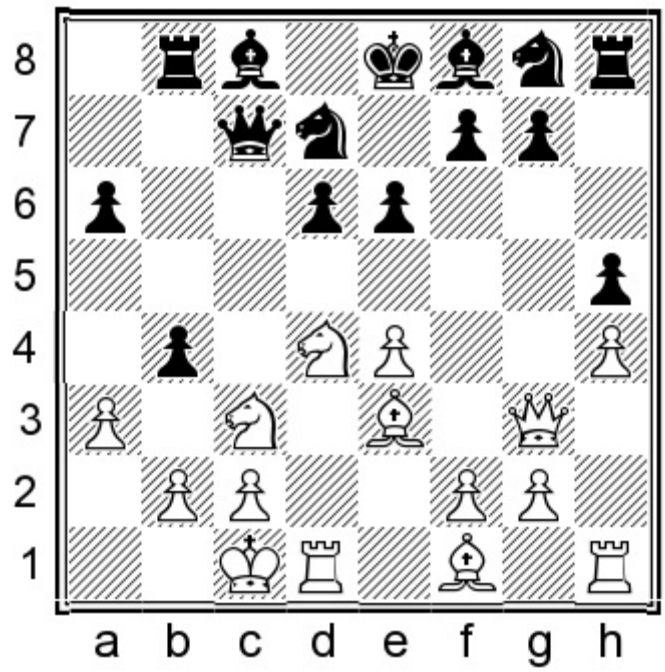
Position after: 9...h5!N

10.h3

A) 10.♗xb5 only makes sense with the white queen on g3. 10...axb5 11.♘dxb5 ♕b8∓

B) 10.♕g3 ♘gf6 11.♗xb5?! this is now a mistake. [11.h4 ♗e7 12.♔b1 ♖b8=] 11...axb5 12.♘dxb5 ♕b8 13.♘xd6+ ♗xd6 14.♕xd6 [14.♖xd6? h4–+] 14...♕xd6 15.♖xd6 ♘g4∓

C) 10.h4 ♖b8 11.♕g3 [11.♗xb5? axb5 12.♘dxb5 ♕c6–+] 11...b4!

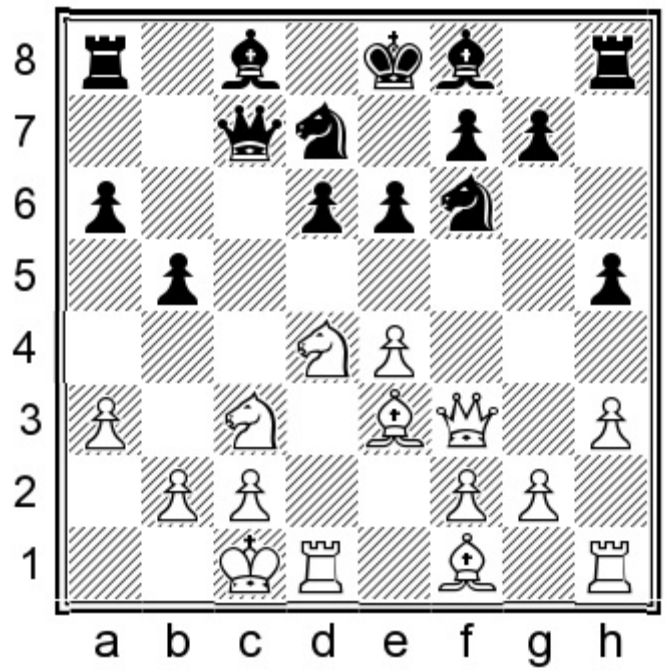


Position after: 11...b4!

Just in time. 12.axb4 [12.♘cb5 axb5 13.♘xb5 ♕a5 14.♘xd6+ ♗xd6 15.♕xd6 bxa3–+] 12...♖xb4∞

D) 10.g4 hxg4 11.♕xg4 ♘gf6 12.♕g3 ♗b7 13.♗d3 ♘c5 14.f3 [14.♗xb5+? axb5 15.♘dxb5 ♕c6 16.♖xd6 ♘fxe4–+] 14...♘xd3+=

10...♘gf6



Position after: 10...♘gf6

11.♗d3

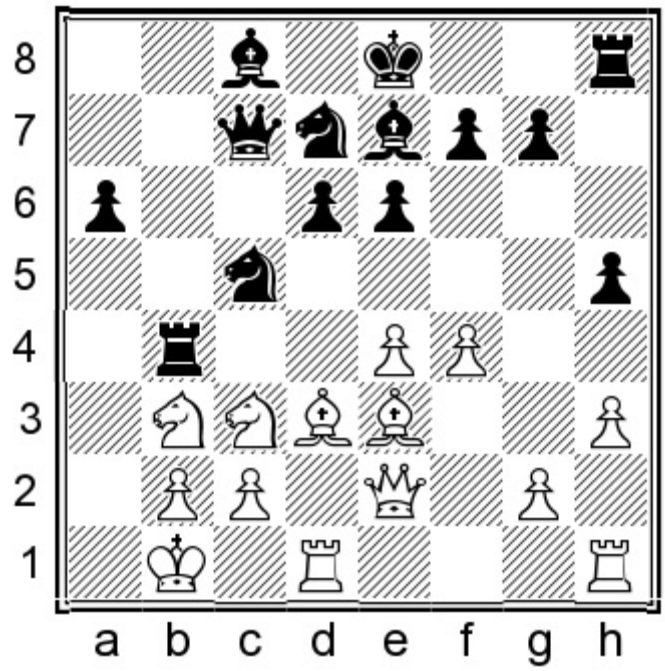
A) 11.g4 ♘e5 12.♕g2 hxg4 13.♗e2 ♖xh3 14.♖xh3 gxh3 15.♕xh3 ♗b7 16.f3 0-0-0=

B) 11.♕g3 h4 12.♕h2 ♖b8∓ Black neatly prevents any sacrifices on b5 and prepares his own attack against the white queenside.

11...♖b8∞

A typical Najdorf move.

12.♔b1 ♗e7 13.♕e2 ♘c5 14.♘b3 ♘fd7 15.f4 b4 16.axb4 ♖xb4



Position after: 16...♖xb4

17.♘a2 ♖b8 18.♗d4 ♘xd3 19.♕xd3 e5 20.♕c3 ♕xc3 21.♗xc3 f6=

The ending is equal. ½ – ½ (66) Copar, A (2516) – Jonsson, D (2542) corr. 2015.

Conclusion

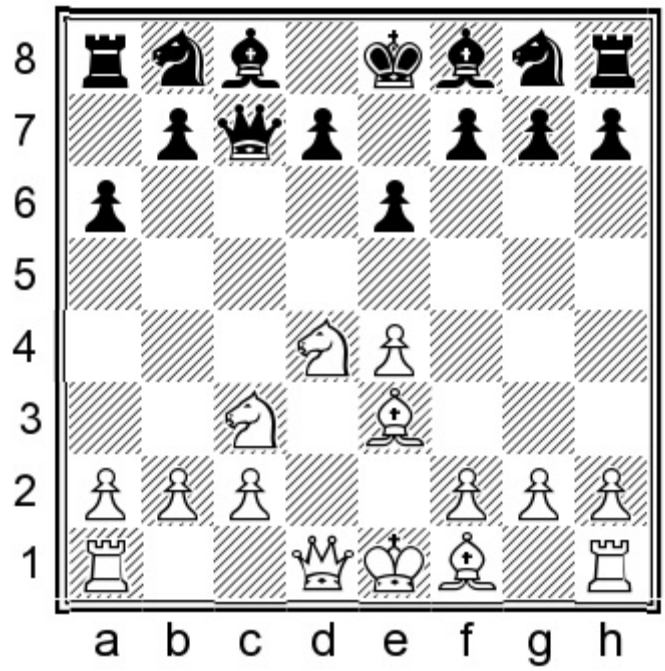
Theoretically, this has been one of the more challenging subchapter. The move 6.♕f3 is a highly aggressive option for White on his sixth move.

After a subsequent 7.♗e3 we arrive in positions normally seen in the Taimanov or in the Najdorf. Play becomes very concrete. Black has to be cautious to avoid being walked over by White. I have looked at various options for Black to tackle this setup as 6.♕f3 is very fashionable, and the assessment of certain lines may change quickly. Black can play a relatively safe game by accepting the ending after 6...♘f6 7.♕g3 ♕xg3. The position is even but there are few options for Black to have an interesting game either. He also has to prepare himself for 7.♗g5 and the murky positions this creates.

Alternatively, Black can enter into Najdorf inspired lines following 6...d6 7.♗e3 where Black postpones ...♘f6. I have demonstrated that a well-timed 7...b5 accompanied by the subtle 9...h5!N should present Black with more than sufficient chances for an interesting game. This move order prevents any sacrifices on b5 or e6. Over the next few moves Black should watch out for these piece sacrifices, in particular when the white queen arrives on g3 with an x-ray to d6.. In true Najdorf style, Black should not play ...♗b7 too quickly in order to be able to create counterplay against White's king with ...♖b8 and ...b4. This is a popular line, so it remains important to follow recent developments in master practice. Potentially new systems for Black will be developed which may work even better than the ones recommended here.

c) 6.♗e3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 a6 5.♘c3 ♕c7 6.♗e3



Position after: 6.♗e3

This is the most popular choice for White on his 6th move, but it is less precise. The move may not be that bad, but quite often White uses it as an introduction to the English Attack, a development plan which is actually quite dubious against the Sicilian Kan.

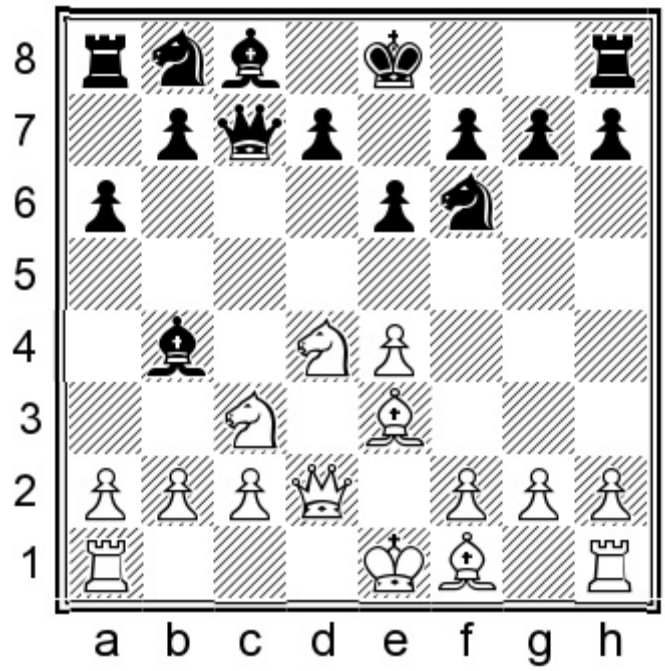
6...♗b4!

Black should not hesitate to apply pressure to the knight on c3 as well as indirectly the white e- pawn. Otherwise, White may still transpose into more respectable lines.

7.♕d3

Strong players have tried this move as it combines the aspects of quick development (0-0-0) and defending the weak spots c3 and e4.

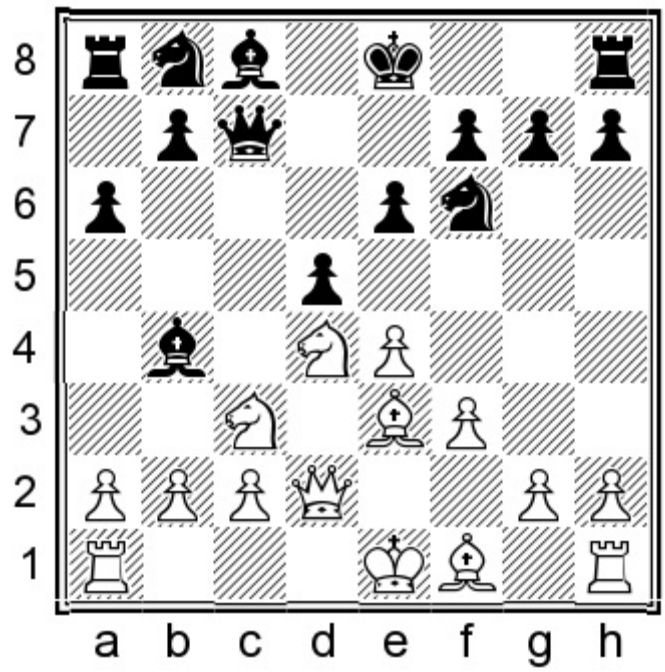
A) 7.♕d2?! This is step 2 towards the structure of the English Attack and the most common move in the position albeit mainly at the amateur level. White lives in his own fairy tale world and has not done his theoretical homework. 7...♘f6! How about your e-pawn, sir?



Position after: 7...♘f6!

A1) 8.♗d3 is the last chance to prevent a complete disaster. 8...d5 9.exd5 [9.f3 e5∓ is a costly affair.] 9...♘xd5 10.♘de2 ♘xe3 11.♕xe3 White has lost his bishop pair and will have difficulties maintaining the balance. 11...♗c5! 12.♕g3 ♕xg3 13.hxg3 h6∓ with a slightly better endgame for Black. 0-1 (57) Nabuurs, M (2248) – Lemmers, O (2372) Netherlands 2012.

A2) 8.f3?! White still assumes that he can play an English Attack against the Sicilian Kan, but that is a misconception. 8...d5!∓



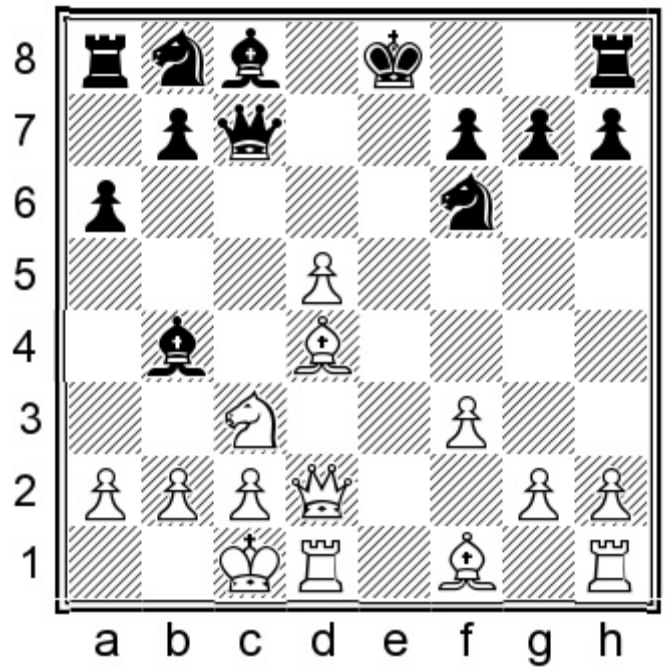
Position after: 8...d5!∓

White is without a satisfactory response to Black's central thrust. Black threatens the white e-pawn, but ...e5 followed by ...d4 with even heavier material loss should also be addressed.

A2.1) 9.♗d3 is the most frequent move, but it leads to a completely lost game. 9...e5! 10.♘b3 d4 White has to sacrifice a piece for two pawns. 11.♘xd4 exd4 12.♗xd4 ♘c6–+ The database contains more than 60 games which reached this position. Black is winning. 0-1 (27) Bruned, V (1933) – Farago, I (2499) Balaguer 2005.

A2.2) 9.exd5 ♘xd5 10.♘de2 ♘xe3! 11.♕xe3 0-0 12.0-0-0 ♘c6∓ White survived the first skirmishes and did not lose any material. Black's bishops are monsters in this position. White has no serious counterplay. 0-1 (32) Bolzoni, V (2330) – Chuchelov, V (2530) Brussels 1995.

A2.3) 9.0-0-0 e5 10.exd5 exd4 11.♗xd4

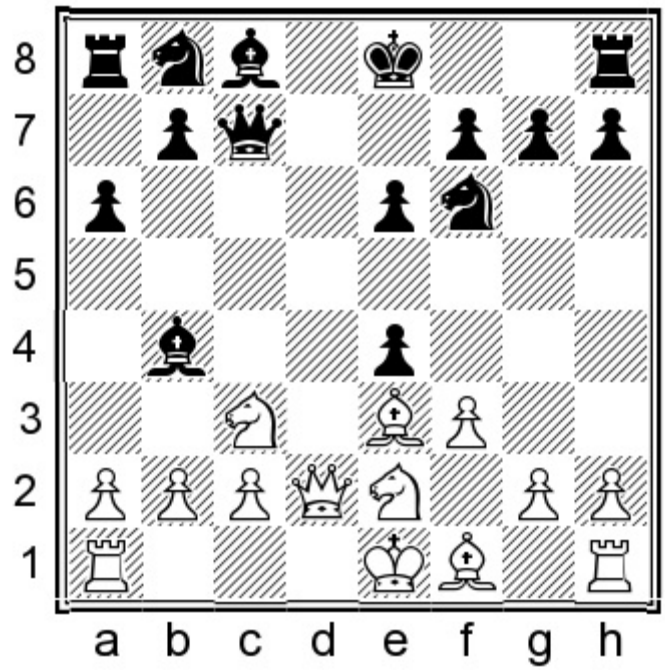


Position after: 11.♗xd4

White tries to play on his lead in development. 11...0-0! 12.♗xf6 gxf6 13.♗d3 ♔g7∓ White has no entry points on the kingside. Black is winning.

A2.4) 9.a3 ♗xc3 10.bxc3 [10.♕xc3 ♕xc3+ 11.bxc3 dxe4∓ Black has an extra pawn and the more harmonious position. 0-1 (36) Da Mata, L (2122) – Panno, O (2485) Sao Paulo 2004.] 10...dxe4∓ White is in dire straits being down a pawn with a broken structure. 11.♘b3 [11.♗e2 e5 12.♘b3 0-0 13.0-0-0 exf3 14.gxf3 ♗f5–+ 0-1 (23) Drel, N – Horvath, C (2545) Haarlem 2001.] 11...0-0 12.c4 ♘c6! 13.♕f2 e5 14.♗b6 ♕d7 15.♗e2 exf3 16.gxf3 ♖e8–+ 0-1 (35) Laihonen, P (2260) – Landa, K (2614) Rethymno 2003.

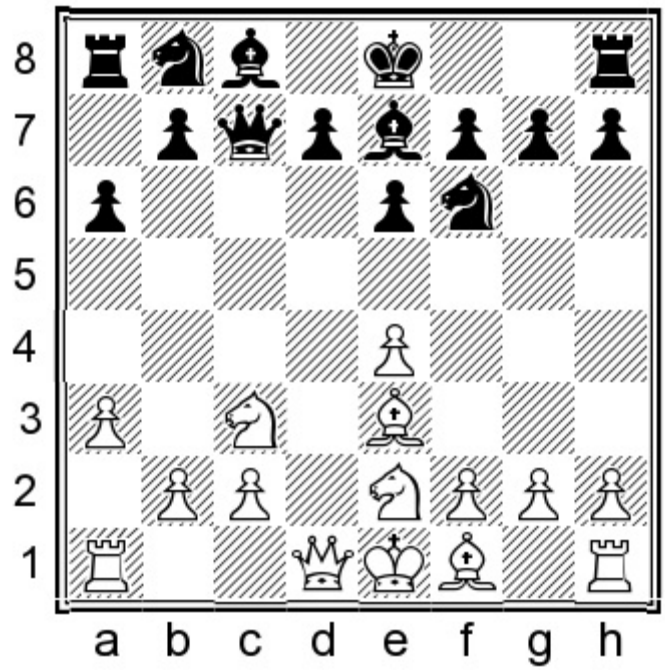
A2.5) 9.♘de2 One of White's better tries. 9...dxe4



Position after: 9...dxe4

10.a3 ♗a5 11.b4 ♗b6 12.♘xe4 ♘xe4 13.fxe4 0-0! 14.♗xb6 ♕xb6 15.♕d4 [15.♘g3 a5 16.b5 ♘d7 17.♕f2 ♕c7∓ 0-1 (24) Cuberli, E (2248) – Mareco, S (2644) Buenos Aires 2017.] 15...♕c7 16.♕c3 ♘c6 17.♘g3 ♖d8∓ 0-1 (24) Kraus, T (2402) – Babula, V (2542) Havlickuv Brod 2015.

B) 7.♘de2 is very slow. Natural moves give Black an equal game. 7...♘f6 8.a3 ♗e7

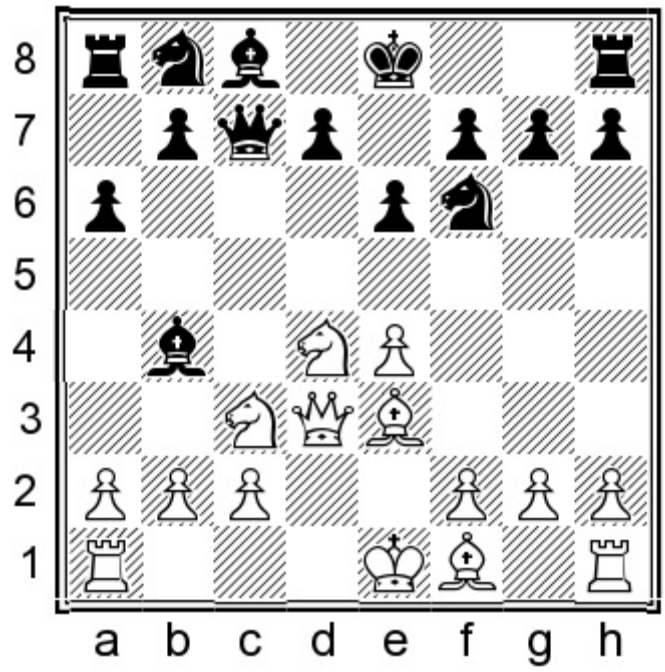


Position after: 8...♗e7

9.f3 [9.♘a4 ♘c6 10.♘b6 ♖b8 11.♘c3 d6 12.♗e2 ♘d7 13.♘ca4 ♘c5!= Black gets rid of the

annoying knight on b6.] 9...♘c6 10.♕d2 b5 11.♗f4 ♕a5= ½-½ (27) Gamundi Salamanca, A (2443) – Delchev, A (2638) Jaen 2014.

7...♘f6



Position after: 7...♘f6

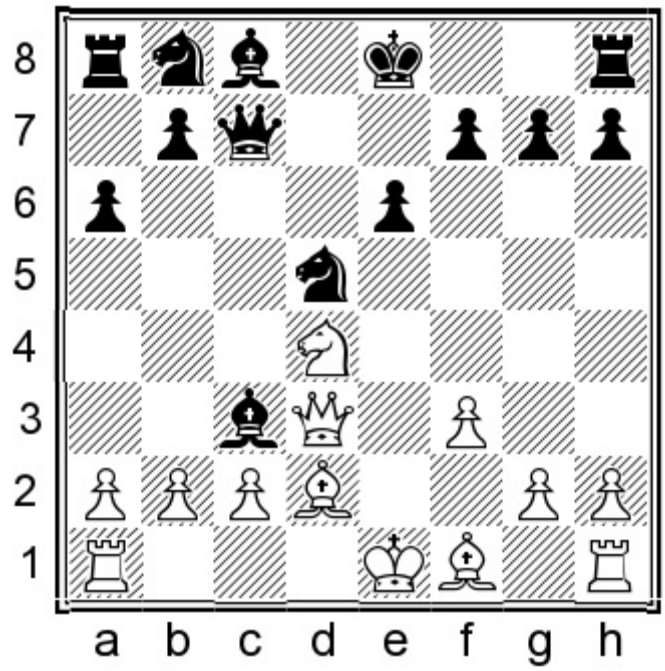
8.♗d2!

Safety first, even at the cost of a developing move.

A) 8.♗e2? White has no time for this. 8...♘xe4! 9.♗d2 [9.♕xe4 ♗xc3+∓ and White will lose his b-pawn as well.] 9...♘xd2 10.♕xd2–+ Black has an extra pawn and the bishop pair. This has been played in more than 40 games. 10...♘c6 11.a3 ♗e7 12.0-0 0-0–+ 0-1 (28) Dudel, M (1868) – Vitiugov, N (2638) Warsaw 2008,

B) 8.f4? ♘xe4 The same trick works here as well. 9.♕xe4 ♗xc3+ 10.♗d2 ♗xb2 11.♖d1 d5 12.♕d3 ♘c6–+ 0-1 (55) Markovic, P – Djordjev, B (2117) Obrenovac 2008.

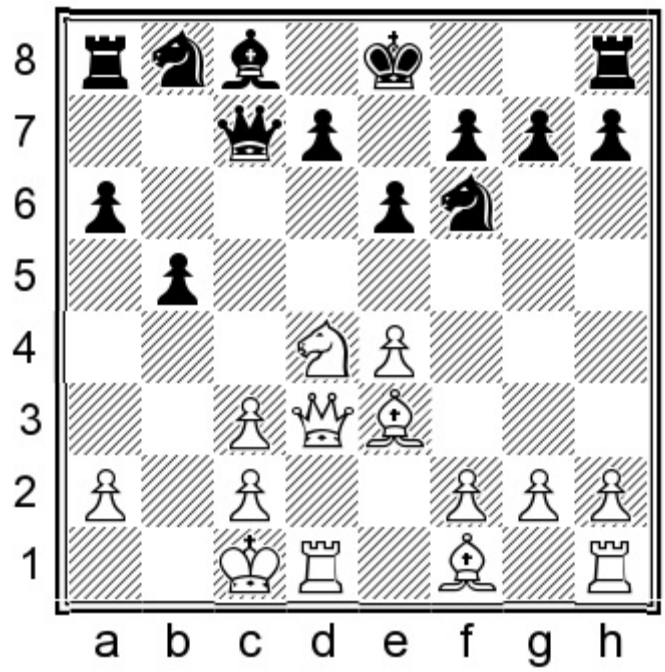
C) 8.f3 The variation after Black's next move has more than 100 occurrences in the database. 8...d5! White failed to prevent this with is previous move. 9.exd5 ♘xd5 10.♗d2 ♗xc3!



Position after: 10...♗xc3!

Better than the much more often played 10...♘xc3. Black has a slight advantage after 11.bxc3 0-0. White's pawn structure and development are a nightmare. 12.♕c4 [12.♗e2 e5 13.♘b3 ♖d8 14.♕c4 ♘c6 15.0-0 ♗e6 16.♕h4 ♘ce7∓ 0-1 (55) Malicka, M (2311) – Hansen, E (2606) Chess.com 2021.] 12...♕d8! 13.♗d3 ♘d7 14.0-0-0? b5 15.♕c6 ♘7b6 16.♘b3 ♖a7 17.♗e3 ♗d7–+ 0-1 (38) Beaudin, J (1963) – Hansen, E (2579) Calgary 2012.

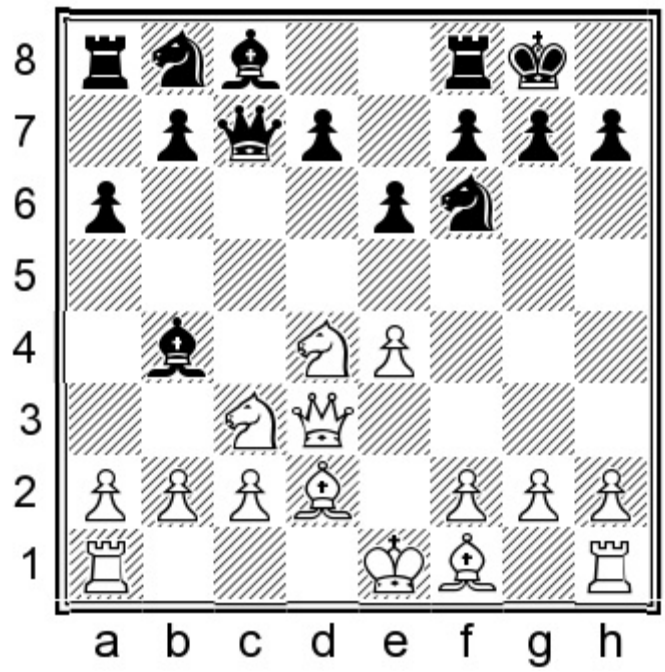
D) 8.0-0-0 ♗xc3 9.bxc3 b5!∓



Position after: 9...b5!∓

10.c4 [10.♔d2 ♗b7 11.f3 d5–+] 10...bxc4 11.♕xc4 ♕xc4 12.♗xc4 ♘xe4∓

8...0-0



Position after: 8...0-0

9.0-0-0

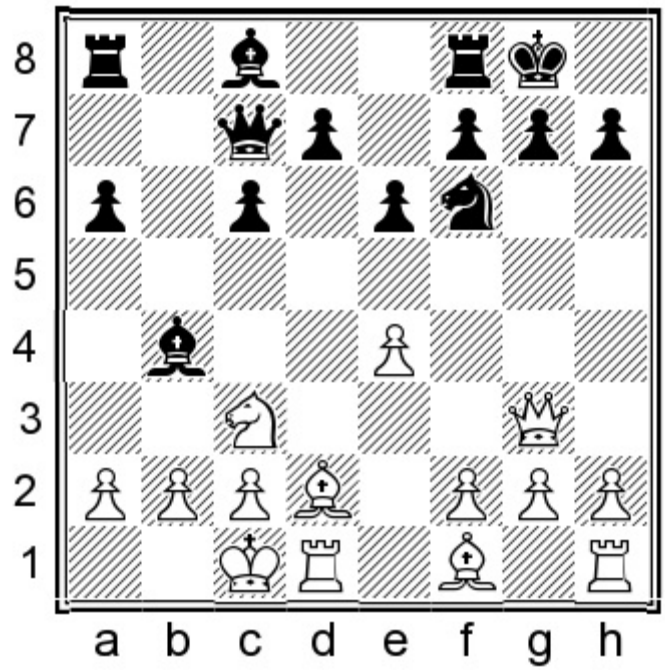
A) 9.♗e2 ♘c6 10.♘xc6 bxc6 11.a3 ♗e7 12.0-0 d5 13.♕f3 ♗d6 14.h3 ♗b7∓ 0-1 (23) Calandri, F (2117) – Mchedlishvili, M (2633) Porto San Giorgio 2013.

B) 9.♕g3 ♕xg3 10.hxg3 ♗xc3 11.♗xc3 ♘xe4∓

9...♘c6 10.♘xc6

10.f3?! ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♗c5 12.♕d3 b5∓

10...bxc6 11.♕g3



Position after: 11.♕g3

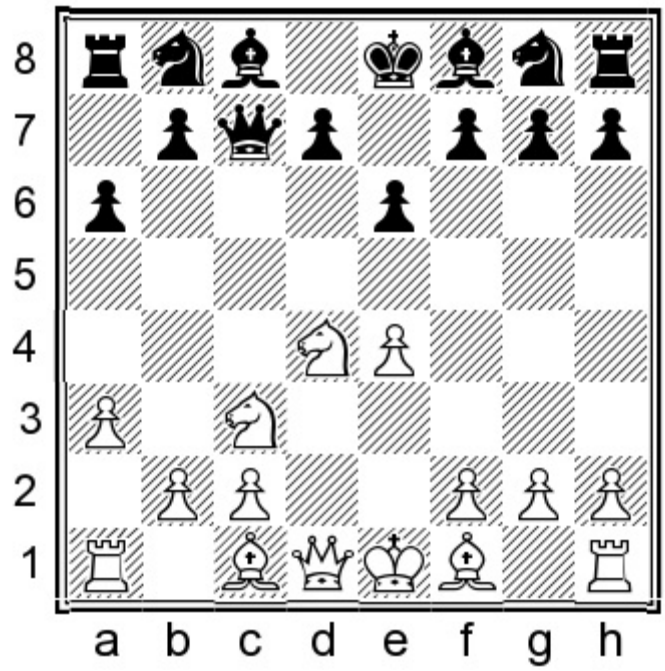
11...♕xg3 12.hxg3 ♗xc3 13.♗xc3 ♘xe4 14.♗d3 f5=

Conclusion

6.♗e3 is the most popular move against the 5.♘c3 ♕c7 Sicilian Kan, but it definitely is not the best. If White's objective is to play the English Attack against the Kan (7.♕d2 and 8.f3), he will be in serious trouble. Against the more robust 7.♕d3, Black has no problems equalizing with natural moves like 7...♘f6, 8...0-0 and 9...♘c6. White is the one who has to be precise to maintain the balance.

d) 6.a3

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.a3



Position after: 6.a3

This stops ...♗b4 once and for all but it is a move in the opening not spent on White's development and will allow Black to complete his own development smoothly.

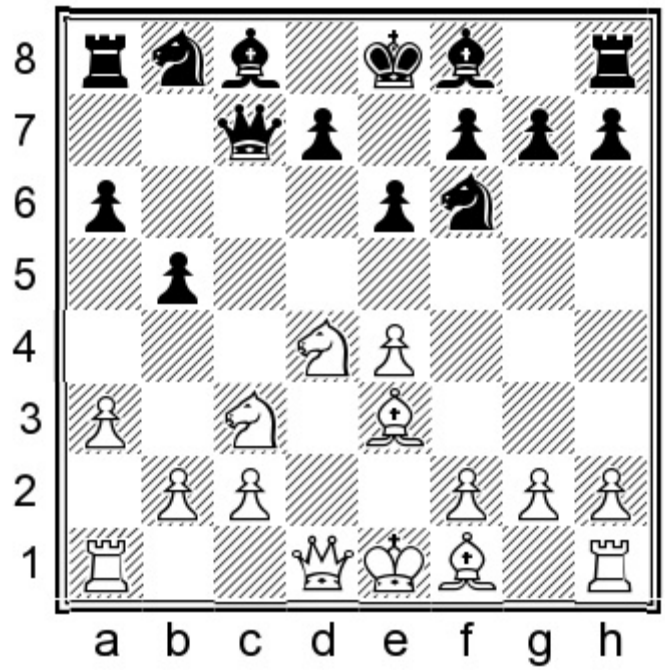
6...b5!

After such a slow move Black has many options. I follow the recommendations of Adrien Demuth in his excellent book on the Sicilian Kan. As Adrien explains, it has the big advantage that Black plays a structured plan which he can apply against various methods White may choose.

7.♗e2

The classical Scheveningen move.

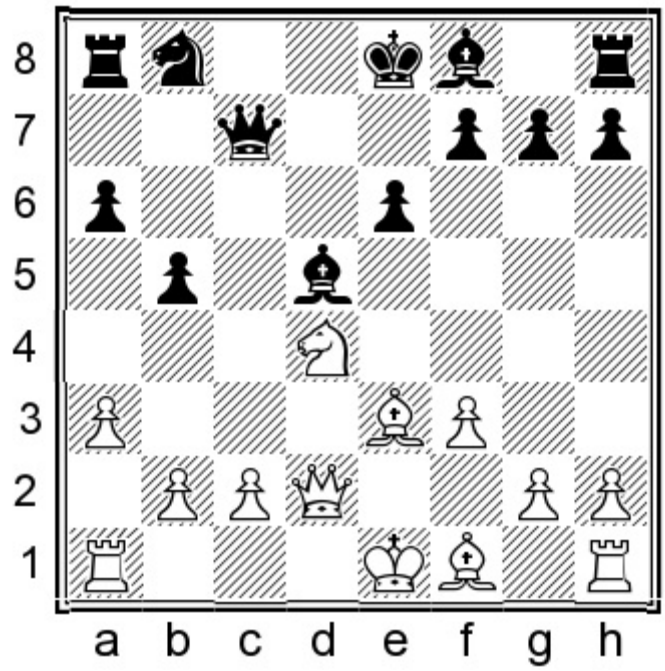
A) 7.♗e3 is often seen via the move order 6.♗e3 ♘f6 7.a3 7...♘f6.



Position after: 7...♘f6

8.♕d2 [8.♗d3 ♗b7 is treated under 7.♗d3] 8...♗b7 9.f3 d5!

A1) 10.exd5 ♘xd5 11.♘xd5 ♗xd5 The situation in the center has been clarified and Black has already equalized.



Position after: 11...♗xd5

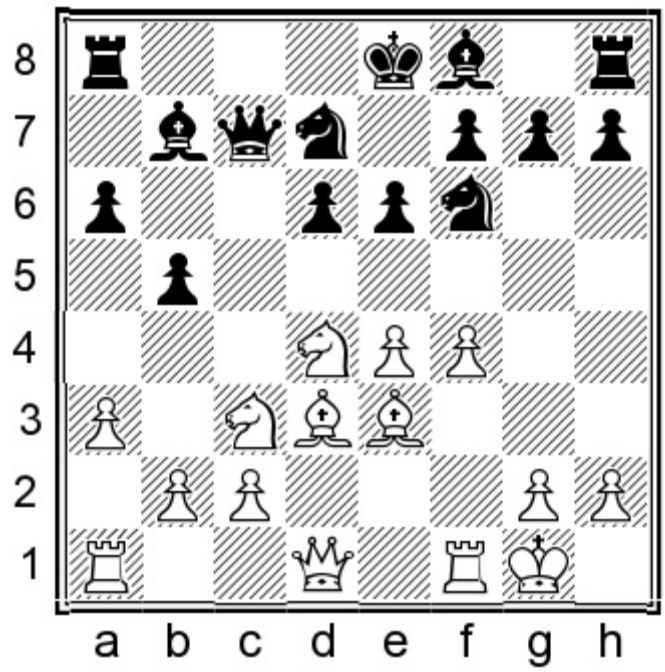
12.a4 [12.0-0-0 ♘c6 13.♘xc6 ♕xc6 14.♗d4 ♖c8 15.♗d3 f6= ½-½ (15) Restuccia, F (2164) – Sanduay, N (2025) Villa Martelli 2010.] 12...b4 13.c3 bxc3 14.♕xc3 ♕b7 15.♘c2?! ♘c6 16.♗d3

♖c8∓ 0-1 (22) Bojczewski, M (1960) – Fus, J (2401) Pokrzywna 2020.

A2) As White has engaged in slow development (6.a3 and 9.f3) Black is correct in having opened the center. 10.♗f4! ♕b6 11.e5 ♘fd7 12.♘b3 ♕c7 13.0-0-0 ♘xe5 14.♕d4 ♘bc6 15.♗xb5 axb5 16.♘xb5 ♕d8 17.♕c3 ♗d6–+ 0-1 (36) Feyz Javadian, S (1720) – Pantsulaia, L (2592) Tabriz 2012.

B) 7.♗d3 A natural developing move. White gives extra support to the e-pawn at the expense of pressure along the d-file. 7...♗b7

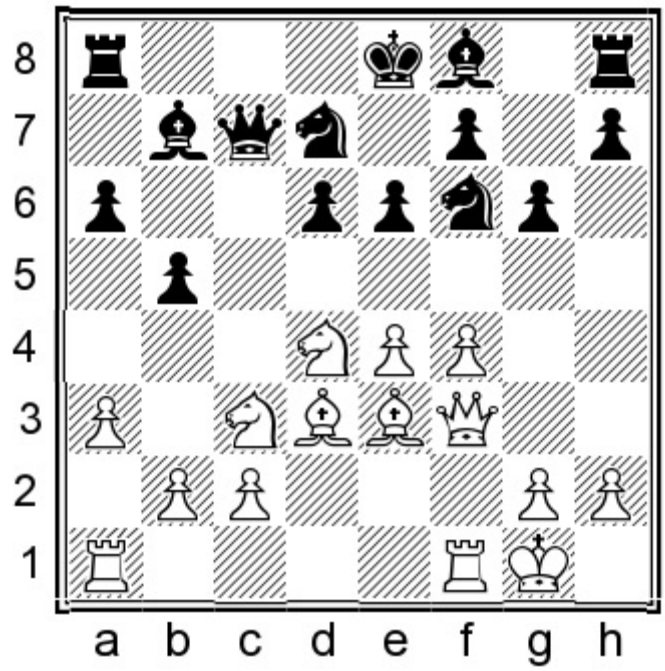
B1) 8.♗e3 ♘f6 9.0-0 d6 10.f4 ♘bd7



Position after: 10...♘bd7

B1.1) 11.♘b3 g6 12.♕f3 ♗g7 13.g4 0-0 14.g5 ♘h5 15.♖ae1 ♖ac8 [15...♖ae8!?] 16.♕f2 ♖fe8 17.♗d2 ♘c5∓ 0-1 (33) Graf, L (1984) – Siebrecht, S (2429) Playchess.com 2020.

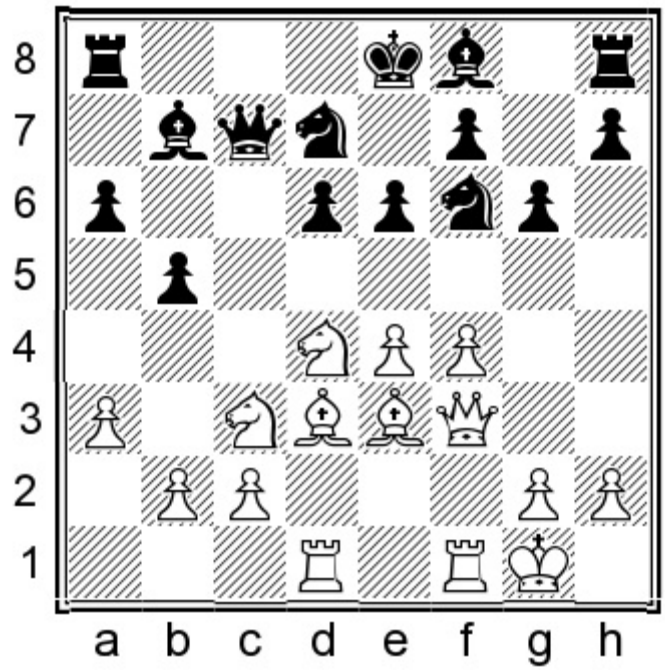
B1.2) These positions are the sole of the Sicilian Defense. They are complex and many games have been played with them. Black needs to decide where to put his dark-squared bishop. Demuth investigates ...♗e7 but considering White's slow setup I prefer the equally attractive ...♗g7. 11.♕f3 g6



Position after: 11...g6

B1.2a) 12.♖ae1 ♗g7 13.♕g3 ♘c5= 14.♗xb5+? axb5 15.♘dxb5 ♕c6 16.e5 ♘fe4–+ 0-1 (26) Jorritsma, S (1864) – Shchekachev, A (2537) Ghent 2011.

B1.2b) 12.♖ad1!

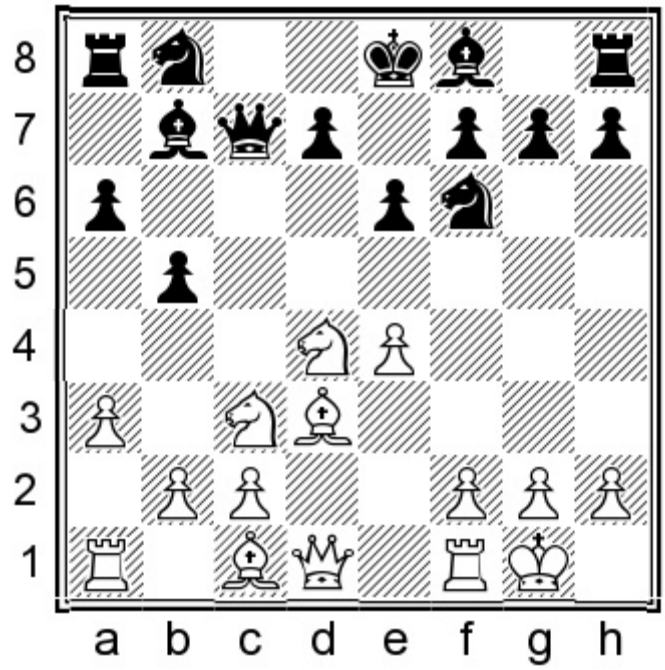


Position after: 12.♖ad1!

With an X-ray on the d6-pawn White prevents 12...♗g7. 12...♗e7 13.♔h1 [13.♕h3 ♘c5 14.e5 dxe5 15.♘dxb5 axb5 16.♗xb5+ ♗c6 17.fxe5 ♘fd7 18.♕h6 ½-½ (18) Sax, G (2550) – Tringov, G

(2480) Buenos Aires 1978.] 13...0-0 14.♕h3 e5 15.♘f3 exf4! 16.♗xf4 ♘e5 17.♗h6 ♖fd8=

B2) 8.0-0 ♘f6

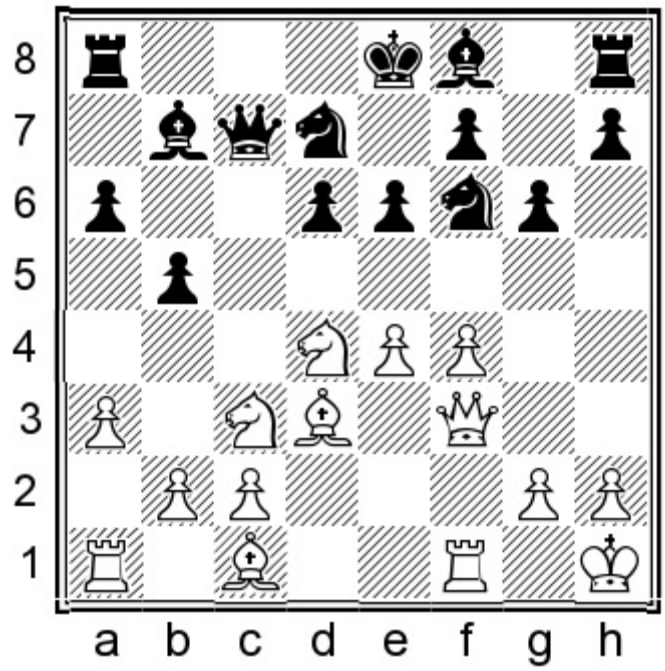


Position after: 8...♘f6

Black has reached the optimal position for his pieces. Depending on White's next steps Black may consider the kingside fianchetto to complete his development.

B2.1) 9.f4? This is a mistake. 9...♗c5! 10.♗e3 ♘c6 11.♘f5 ♘e7!–+ 12.♘d4 [12.♘xg7+? ♔f8 13.♗xc5 ♕xc5+ 14.♔h1 ♔xg7 0-1 (32) Komiagina, M (2241) – Aldokhin, I (2413) Chess.com 2021.] 12...♕b6 13.♘ce2 ♘xe4∓ with an extra pawn for Black.

B2.2) 9.♔h1 d6 10.f4 ♘bd7 11.♕f3 g6 As always an interesting option, in particular if White develops slowly (♔h1) and puts his queen on f3.

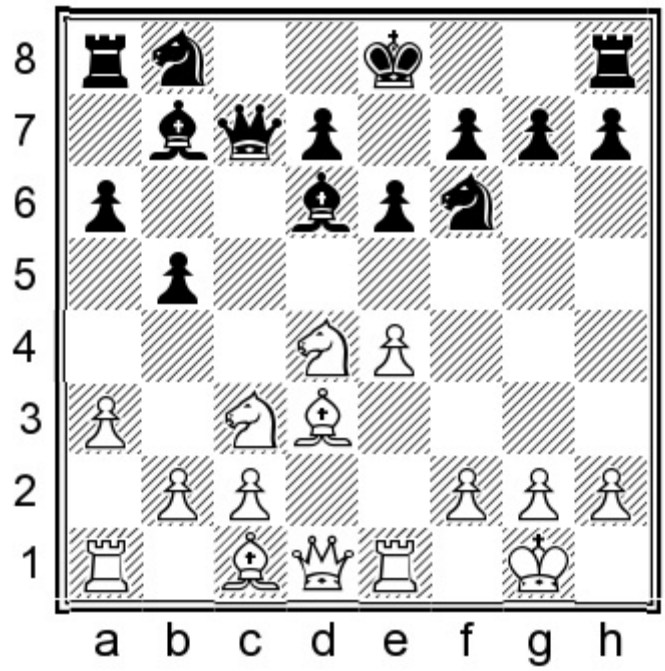


Position after: 11...g6

B2.2a) 12.♗e3 ♗g7 13.♖ae1 0-0 14.♕h3 ♖ae8! 15.♘f3 [15.♕h4 ♘c5!∓] 15...e5 16.f5 [16.♕h4 exf4 17.♗xf4 ♘h5 18.♗e3 ♘c5∓] 16...d5=

B2.2b) 12.♗d2 ♗g7 13.♘b3 0-0 14.♕e2 ♖ac8∓ 0-1 (50) Hocevar, M (1994) – Ushenina, A (2486) Ljubljana 2007.

B2.3) 9.♖e1 ♗d6!?

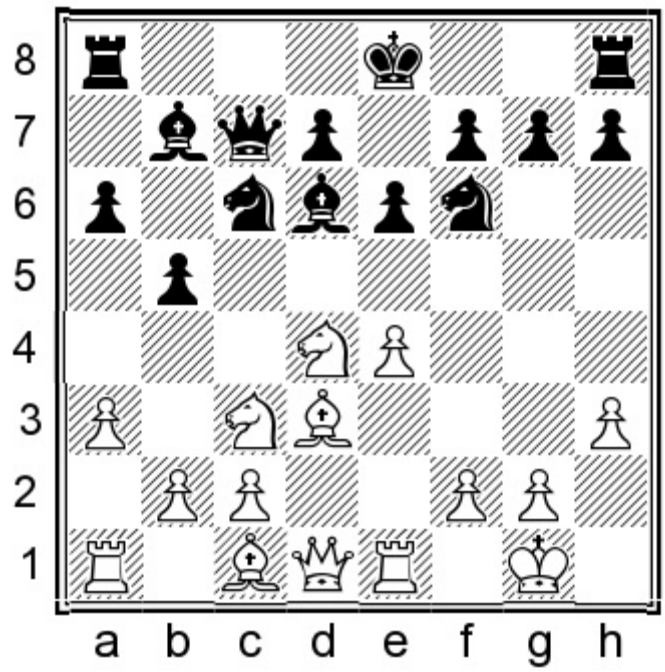


Position after: 9...♗d6!?

as there is no risk of a piece sacrifice on b5 Black contests the e5-square with the bishop.

B2.3a) 10.g3 prevents ...♗h2 in case White sacrifices on b5. 10...♘c6 [10...h5 11.♗xb5! leads to complex position, well explained by Demuth.] 11.♘xc6 [11.♗xb5? ♘xd4!–+] 11...dxc6∓ and we have our familiar structure where Black is slightly better.

B2.3b) 10.h3 ♘c6

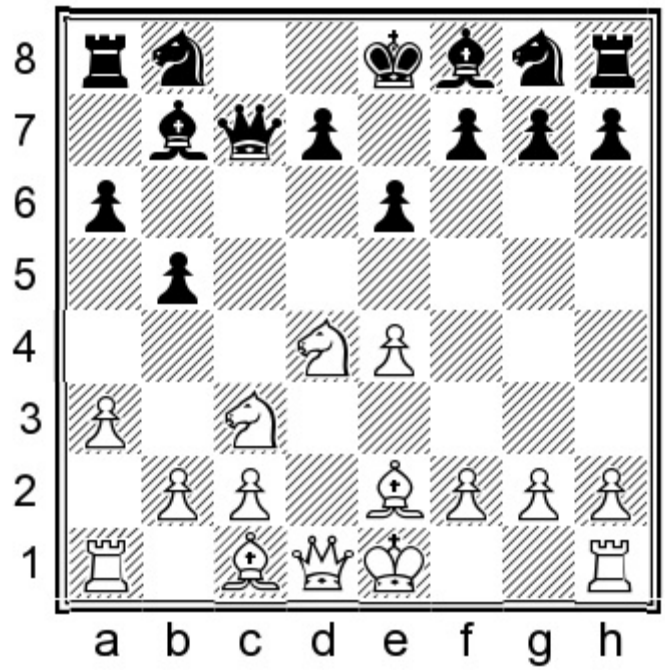


Position after: 10...♘c6

11.♗e3 [11.♘d5? exd5 12.exd5+ ♘e7 13.♘f5 ♔f8–+; 11.♘xc6 dxc6 12.♕e2 ♘d7! A novelty suggested by Demuth. 13.a4 0-0 14.♖d1 ♖fd8 15.♗g5 f6 16.♗e3 ♘e5∓] 11...♘xd4 12.♗xd4 ♗h2+ 13.♔h1 ♗e5= 0-1 (64) Morkunas, G (1955) – Toktomushev, T (1935) Rhodes 2022.

B2.4) 9.♕e2 White develops naturally and prepares to push the e-pawn. 9...♗d6 Sielecki makes a case for this maneuver. 10.h3 [10.f4? ♗c5–+] 10...♘c6 11.♘xc6 [11.♗e3 ♗h2+ 12.♔h1 ♗f4= Black prevents f2-f4 and can start thinking about playing a typical Sicilian game.] 11...dxc6 12.a4 [12.f4 e5=] 12...0-0 13.♘d1 ♘d7∓ 0-1 (33) Schmid, W (2236) – Siebrecht, S (2366) Germany 2005.

7...♗b7

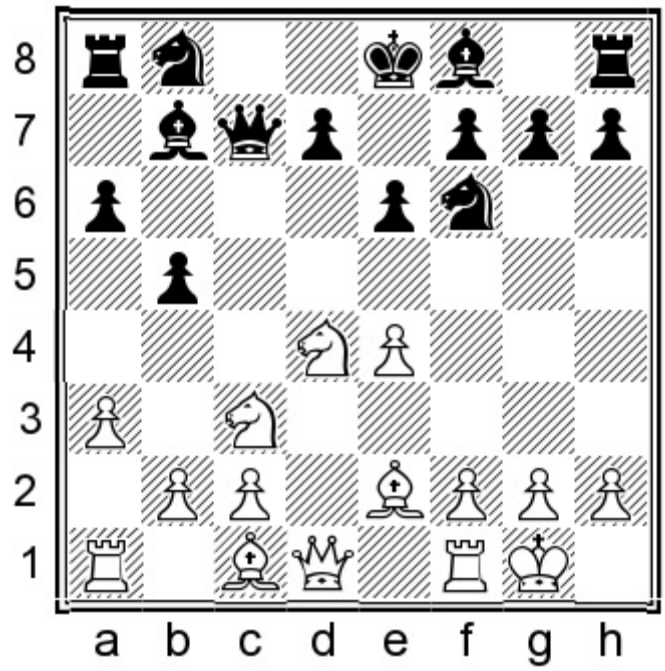


Position after: 7...♗b7

8.f4!

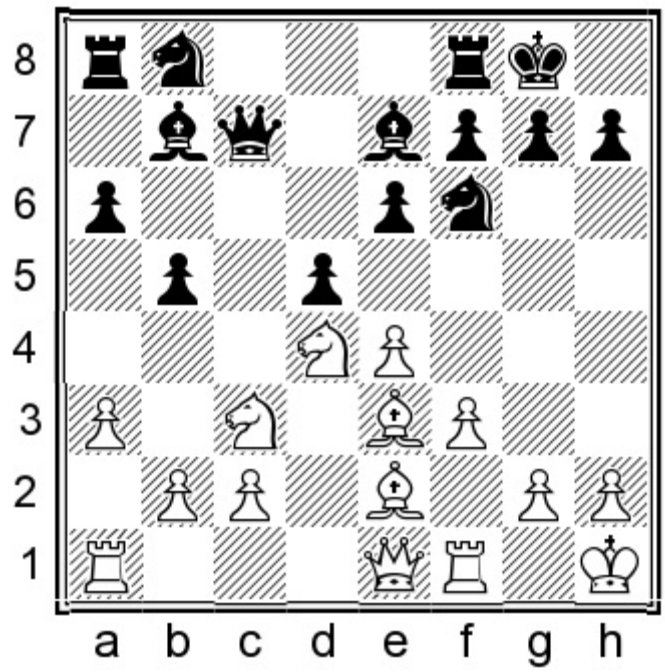
The best move to maintain some kind of initiative.

White's most common move here is 8.0-0?! but it is definitely not the best. 8...♘f6 White will have to play a sub-optimal move to defend his e-pawn.



Position after: 8...♘f6

A) 9.f3 ♗d6! [Demuth looks at 9...♘c6 which is also good.] 10.♔h1! Now White is threatening a sacrifice on b5. [10.g3 0-0 11.♗e3 ♗e7 12.♗d3 d5 13.exd5 ♘xd5 14.♘xd5 ♗xd5 15.♗e4 ♖d8∓ 0-1 (33) Abdullah, A (2125) – Nguyen, A (2500) Kuala Lumpur 2010.] 10...♗e7 [10...♗xh2? 11.f4 e5 12.♘f5!+–] 11.♗e3 0-0 12.♕e1 d5

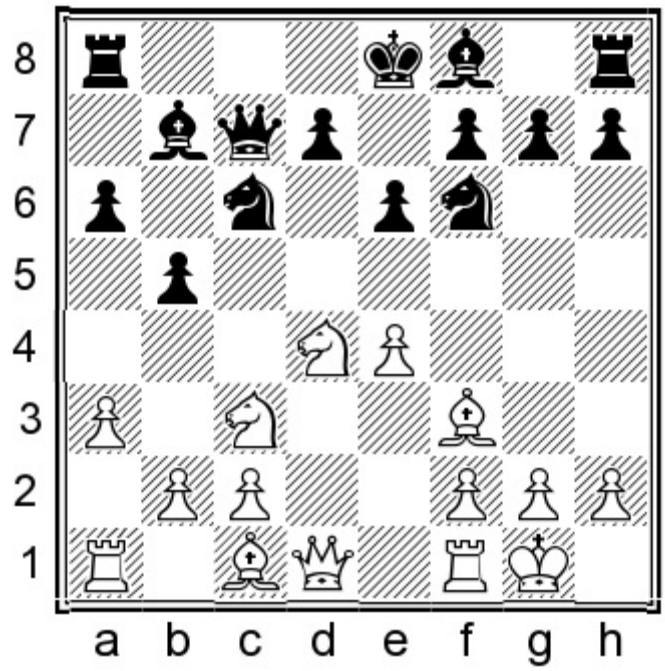


Position after: 12...d5

13.♗d3 [13.exd5 ♗xd5! 14.♖d1 ♘c6 15.♘f5 exf5 16.♘xd5 ♘xd5 17.♖xd5 ♗f6 18.c3 ♖fe8∓ 0-1 (23) Shim Ng Min, F (1096) – Stillerud, L (1500) corr. 1998.] 13...♘bd7 14.exd5 ♘xd5 15.♘xd5 ♗xd5 16.♗f2 ♘c5∓ 0-1 (63) De Souza, A – Li, S (2522) Dos Hermanas 2004.

B) 9.♕d3 and the same story here. 9...♘c6! 10.♘xc6 ♗xc6 [10...dxc6 is quite playable.] 11.f4 ♗c5+ 12.♔h1 h5!?= With typical active Taimanov play for Black. 13.♗e3 [13.b4 ♗b6 14.e5 ♘g4 15.♘e4 ♗xe4 16.♕xe4 ♖c8 17.♗xg4 hxg4∓ 0-1 (55) Rjanova, V (2135) – Makarov, M (2505) St Petersburg 2009.] 13...♕b6 14.♗xc5 ♕xc5 15.♖ad1 ♘g4 16.♗xg4 hxg4= 0-1 (38) Blit, J (2270) – Duarte, L (2379) San Luis 2006.

C) 9.♗f3 ♘c6!



Position after: 9...♘c6!

After White misplaced his pieces Black transposes to the Taimanov. 10.♘xc6 dxc6∓ With the familiar change in pawn structure.

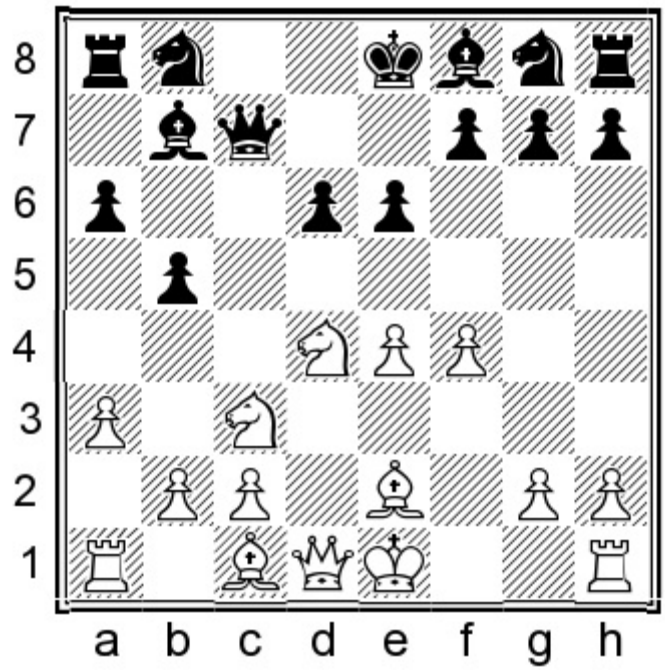
C1) 11.g3 ♗d6 12.♗g2 0-0∓

C2) 11.♗g5 ♗d6 12.g3 ♗e5 13.♗g2 c5 14.♕e2 h6! 15.♗d2 0-0 16.♘d1 ♖ad8 17.f4 ♗d4+ 18.♔h1 c4∓ 0-1 (37) Fischbach, H – Fish, G (2502) Germany 2001.

C3) White's thematic pawn sacrifice 11.e5, hardly any sense here. Black is too well developed. 11...♕xe5 12.♖e1 ♕c7 13.♘e4 ♗e7 14.♗g5 ♘xe4 15.♗xe7 ♕xe7 16.♗xe4 0-0∓

C4) 11.♕e2 ♗d6 12.g3 0-0 13.♗g2 [13.♗g5 ♗e5 14.♗g2 h6 15.♗e3 c5∓ 0-1 (41) Herrera, I (2425) – Perez Fungueiro, M (2295) Nigran 1998.] 13...c5 14.f4 e5∓

8...d6



Position after: 8...d6

Black has a wide choice.

8...♗e7 is another idea that Demuth analyzes. It also makes a good impression. Allowing White to play 9.e4-e5 after the development of either knight are two other serious options for Black.

9.0-0

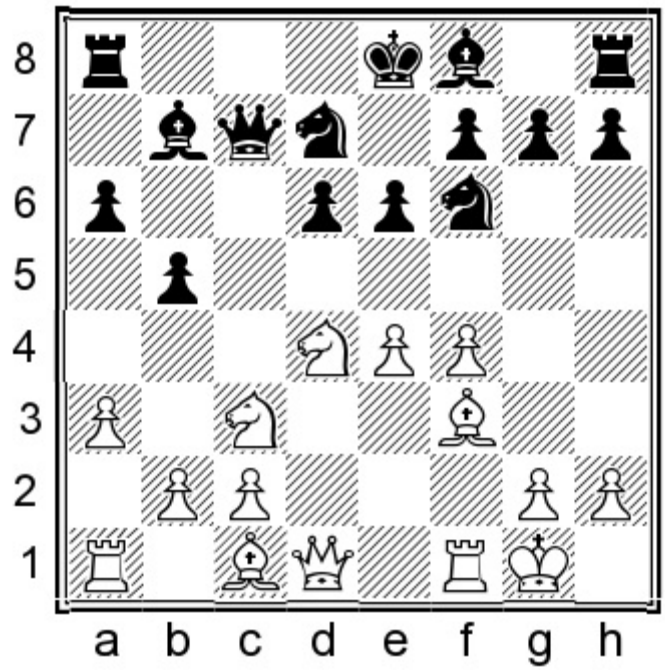
9.♗f3 ♘f6 10.g4!? A bold and risky possibility recommended by Taylor. 10...♘c6 11.♗e3 ♗e7 12.♕e2 [12.g5 ♘d7 13.♘xc6 ♗xc6 14.♕e2 0-0 15.0-0 ♖fe8= 0-1 (35) Brenjo, S (2492) – Mijailovic, Z (2394) Kragujevac 2000.] 12...♘a5 13.0-0-0 ♖c8 14.g5 ♘d7 15.♗g4 ♘c5⇄

9...♘f6 10.♗f3

On f3 the bishop will not easily be vulnerable to an attack by a black knight. The bishop also supports a future g2-g4-g5 and it neutralizes Black's light-squared bishop along the diagonal. Unlike the situation with the bishop on d3, the bishop on f3 cannot play an important role in the attack against the black king after ...0-0.

10.♗d3 ♘bd7!∓ followed by ...g6, ...♗g7. Black has an optimal position to play the kingside fianchetto. 11.♕e2 g6 12.f5 gxf5 13.exf5 e5!∓ 0-1 (19) Campora Perez, D (2172) – Gonzalez Garcia, J (2503) Seville 2011.

10...♘bd7



Position after: 10...♘bd7

11.♔h1

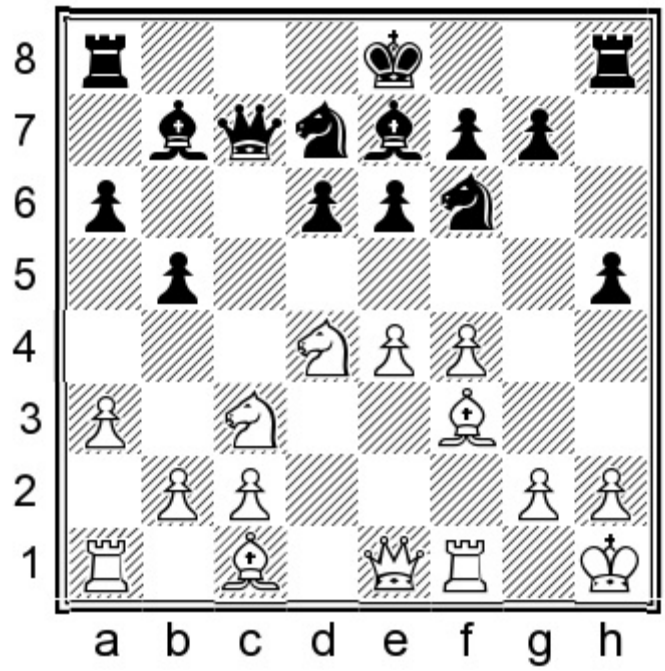
A move one would typically find in the games of Anatoly Karpov.

11.♕e2 ♖c8 12.♔h1 ♗e7 13.♗e3 0-0 14.♖ae1 ♘b6=

11...♗e7

With the bishop on f3, a setup with ...g6 is not an option as White will sacrifice a piece on b5. With the bishop on e7 we have reached a nice hedgehog position for Black. These positions are complicated with chances being equal. Black is already a bit ahead of the game as he had the opportunity to expand on the queenside.

12.♕e1 h5!?



Position after: 12...h5!?

A typical move in these positions. It is not the most popular, but I like it because it immediately puts White under pressure.

13.♗e3

A) 13.b3 h4 14.♗b2 g6 15.e5 dxe5 16.fxe5 h3 17.♗xb7 ♕xb7 18.♘f3 hxg2+ 19.♔xg2 ♘g4∓ 0-1 (28) Vestby Ellingsen, M (2084) – Zubov, A (2606) Fornebu 2016.

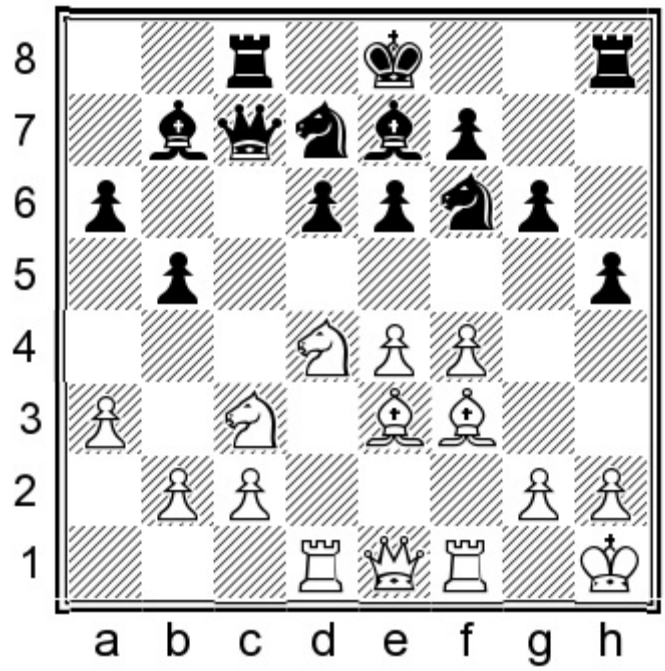
B) 13.e5!? dxe5 14.fxe5 ♘g4 15.♗xb7 ♕xb7 16.♘f3 ♖d8! 17.♕g3 ♘f8 18.h3 ♘g6=

C) 13.♕g3 h4! 14.♕f2 [14.♕xg7? ♖h7 15.♕g5 0-0-0–+] 14...0-0-0 15.h3 ♘h5=

13...g6

Safety first.

14.♖d1 ♖c8!



Position after: 14...♖c8!

A useful move which delays ...0-0 without harm.

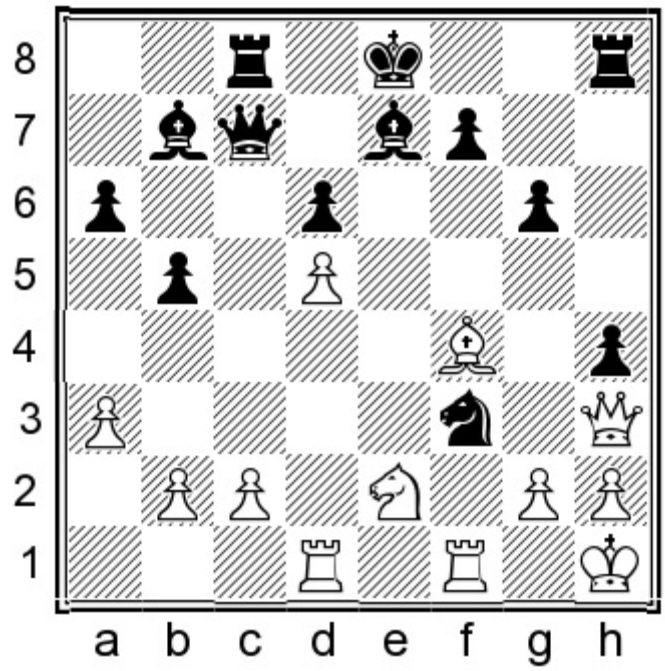
15.♕g3 h4!

Pushing the queen to an inactive square.

16.♕h3 e5!

Black takes thematic countermeasures in the center.

17.♘de2 exf4 18.♗xf4 ♘e5 19.♘d5 ♘xd5 20.exd5 ♘xf3



Position after: 20...♘xf3

21.♕xf3

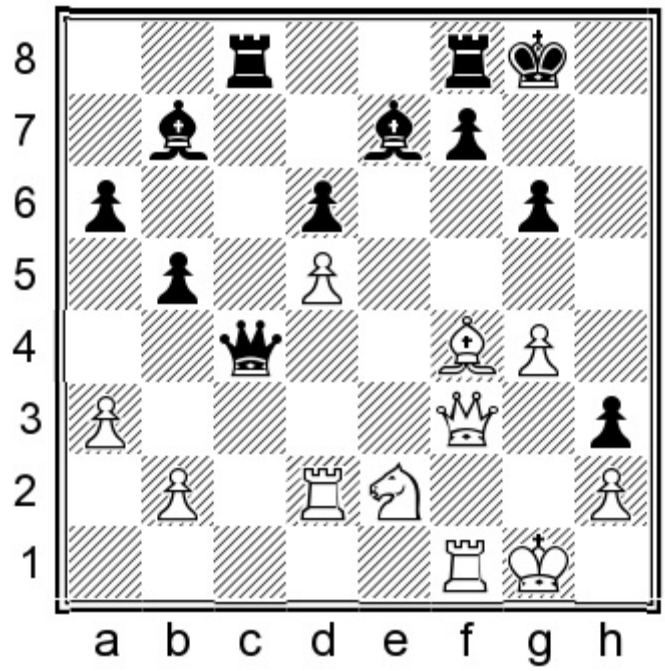
A) 21.gxf3 ♕d7∓

B) 21.♖xf3 ♕d7∓

21...h3 22.g4 ♕xc2 23.♖d2

23.♗xd6 ♗xd6 24.♕xf7+ ♔d8–+

23...♕c4 24.♔g1 0-0=



Position after: 24...0-0=

25.♗h6 f5 26.♗xf8 ♖xf8♒

Black has sufficient compensation for the exchange.

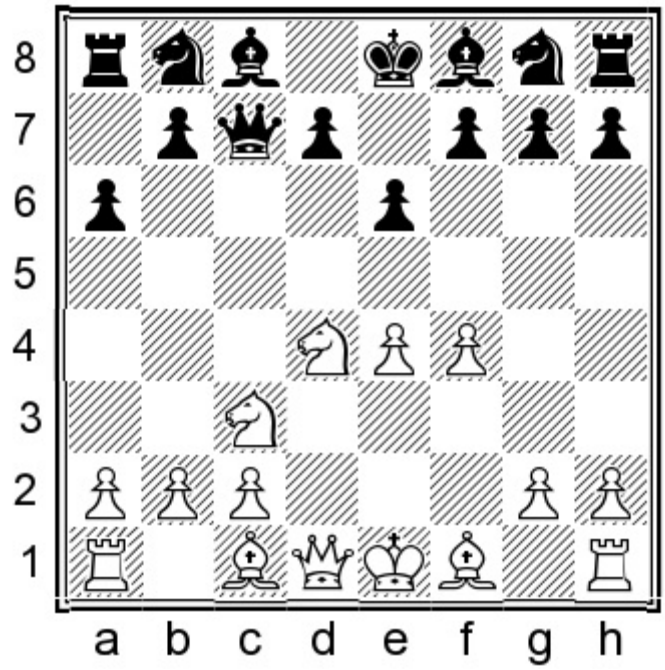
Conclusion

6.a3 is the preference of White players who enjoy a genuine Sicilian battle and do not mind losing some time with this modest pawn move early in the game. Often a3 needs to be played after Black's ...b5.

With 6.a3 White prevents a number of standard systems Black may have prepared for. The move itself is slow and gives Black the opportunity to build a presence on the queenside with ...b5 and ...♗b7, without any immediate risk. In the lines following 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 we do not have the same luxury although in many of the development schemes we investigate here we will see in the subchapters on 6.♗d3. After normal developing moves the positions remain complex, and it is difficult to give any general advice. I like to aim for positions where Black puts his dark-squared bishop on g7. We have seen many instances of that in this subchapter, in particular if White plays another slow move (♔h1, ♗d2). If Black achieves ...0-0 he is a little bit better in most cases. But prior to ...0-0, White often has a central breakthrough (e5, f5) or a piece sacrifice on b5. So careful handling is necessary. On a safety-first basis one can always revert back to ...♗e7 after ...g6 as the latter move is useful anyway. Although there are a few traps and tricks early in the game, 6.a3 generally gives strategically interesting battles where the better (prepared) player should be able to shine.

e) 6.f4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.f4



Position after: 6.f4

An aggressive continuation. Black needs to play a few precise moves in order to ensure we stay within our repertoire.

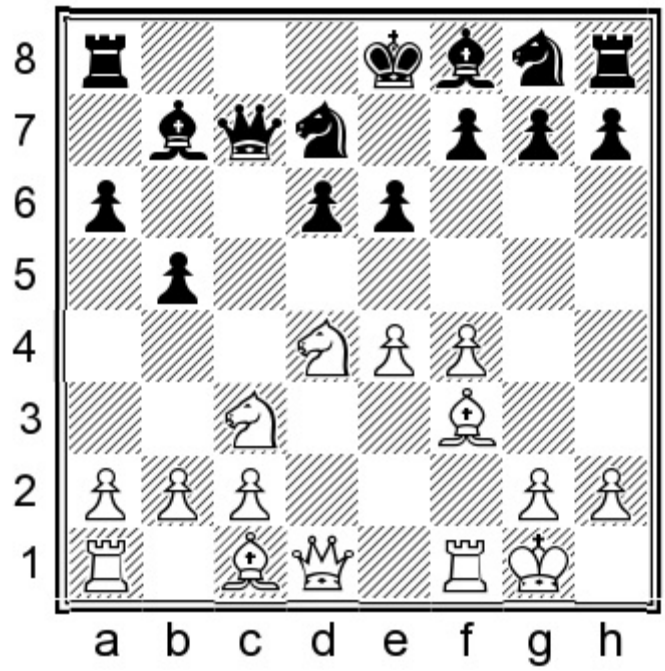
6...b5!

The typical Kan move reducing White's options due to the weakness of the e-pawn. Of all 6th move responses it is the only one with a positive score for Black. Black should not give White too much freedom with 6...d6 as White can choose any kind of attacking scheme he likes, in particular those with an early ♕e2, g4 and postponing castling .

7.♗d3

The most solid continuation. White defends e4 and leaves e2 vacant for the knight or the queen.

7.♗e2 ♗b7 8.♗f3 puts the bishop on a less active diagonal. Black can choose now between a number of equivalent structures including the hedgehog or Taimanov. [8.a3 is the more popular choice which, after 8...d6, leads to the main line of 6.a3] 8...d6 9.0-0 ♘d7



Position after: 9...♘d7

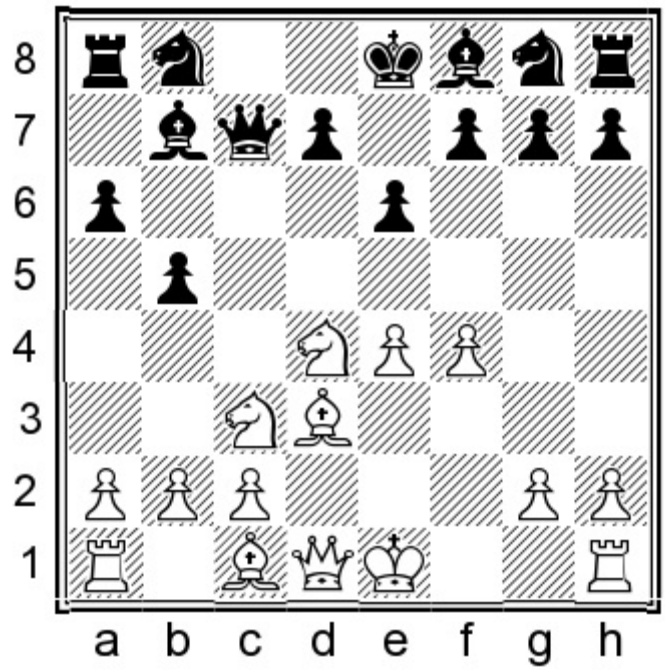
Black prepares for a standard hedgehog structure.

A) 10.a3 ♘gf6 is another route to the 6.a3 chapter.

B) 10.♔h1 b4 11.♘a4 ♘gf6! 12.e5 is not a serious threat in this position. 12.♕e1 [12.e5? dxe5 13.fxe5 ♘xe5!N 14.♗f4 ♗xf3 15.♘xf3 ♗d6∓] 12...♗e7 13.a3 a5=

C) 10.♕e2 b4! 11.♘d1 e5 12.♘f5 g6 13.♘fe3 ♘gf6 14.f5 a5=

7...♗b7

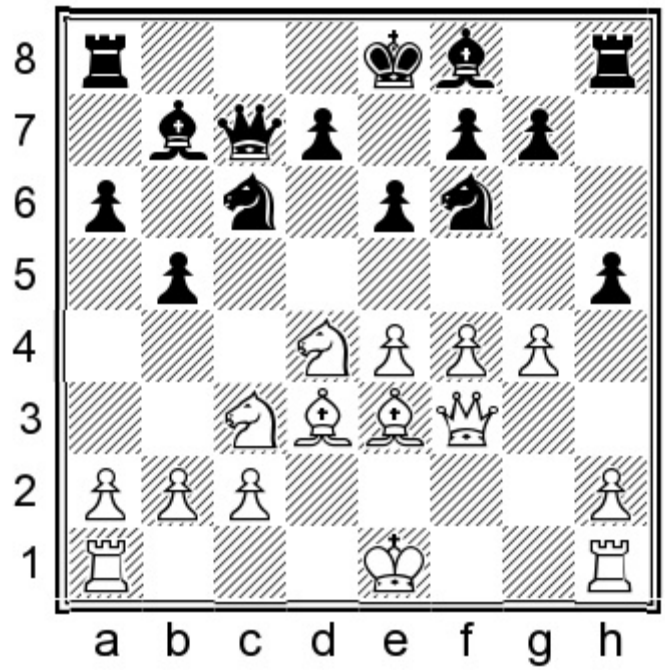


Position after: 7...♗b7

8.♕e2

This is considered to be the main line in the 6.f4 system. White has put his pieces in active positions.

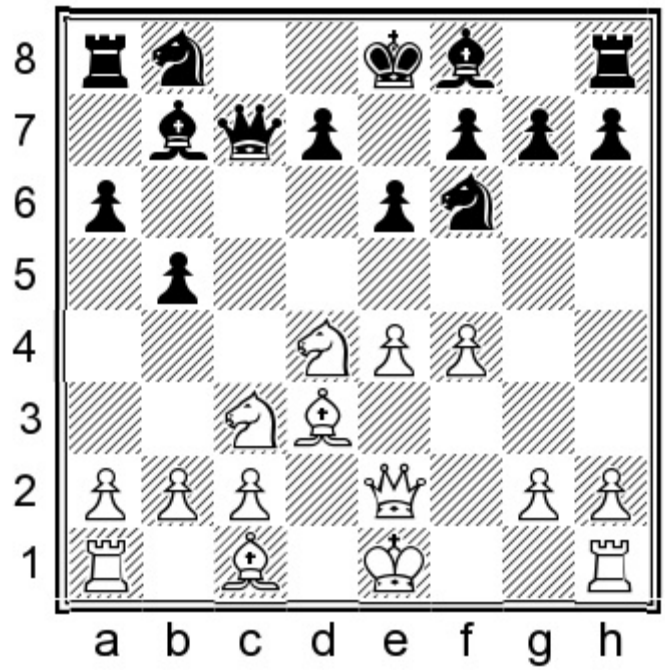
8.♕f3 is another way of developing the queen. 8...♘f6 9.♗e3 ♘c6! White develops quite aggressively. Black needs to take countermeasures by trading White's active pieces. 10.g4 h5!



Position after: 10...h5!

With the white bishop on e3 this becomes a viable option. 11.g5 the regular choice. [11.gxh5 ♘a5!N 12.0-0-0 ♘c4∓ 13.♘ce2 ♘xe3 14.♕xe3 ♖xh5∓] 11...♘g4 12.♗g1 ♘xd4 13.♗xd4 e5 14.fxe5 ♗c5 15.♗xc5 ♕xc5 16.0-0-0 0-0! 17.♘d5 ♖ae8N 18.h3 ♕f2 19.♖hf1 ♕xf3 20.♖xf3 ♘xe5∓

8...♘f6



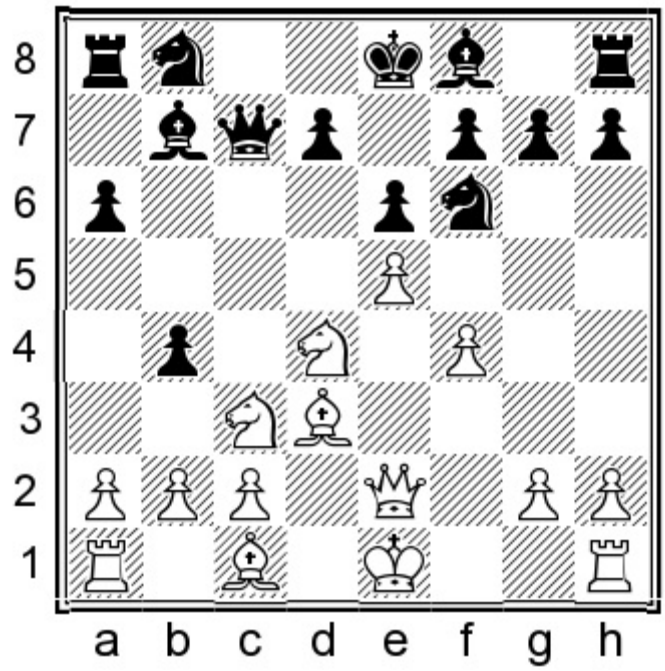
Position after: 8...♘f6

9.♗d2

White continues his development putting his pieces in attacking positions. On d2 White's dark-squared bishop has influence on both sides of the board.

A) 9.a3 d6 is yet another way of reaching the chapter on 6.a3.

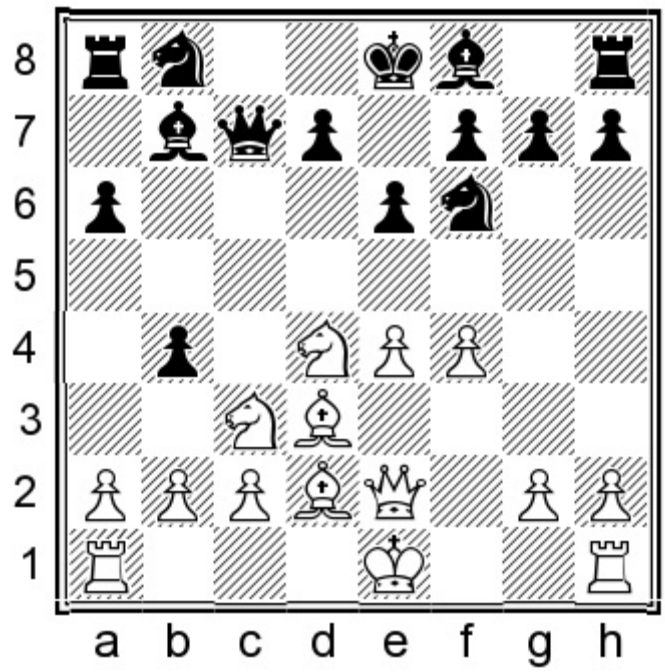
B) 9.e5 White tries to force the issue as Black is yet to play ...d6. 9...b4!



Position after: 9...b4!

An important intermediate move which ensures Black's knight will be exchanged with the knight on c3 one way or the other. 10.♘e4 [10.exf6 bxc3 11.fxg7 ♗xg7 12.♘f5 ♗f6!N 13.♖b1 ♖g8 14.bxc3 ♗xc3+ 15.♔d1 ♗d5=] 10...♘xe4 11.♗xe4 ♘c6! 12.♗e3 [12.♘f3 ♘e7! 13.♗d3 g6 14.0-0 ♘f5=] 12...♘e7 13.♗f2 ♗xe4 14.♕xe4 ♘d5 15.0-0 ♗c5 16.♔h1 ♖c8=

9...b4



Position after: 9...b4

The most principled continuation. Black forces the issue on the queenside in order to be able to push his d-pawn. We see this idea in the Closed Sicilian lines.

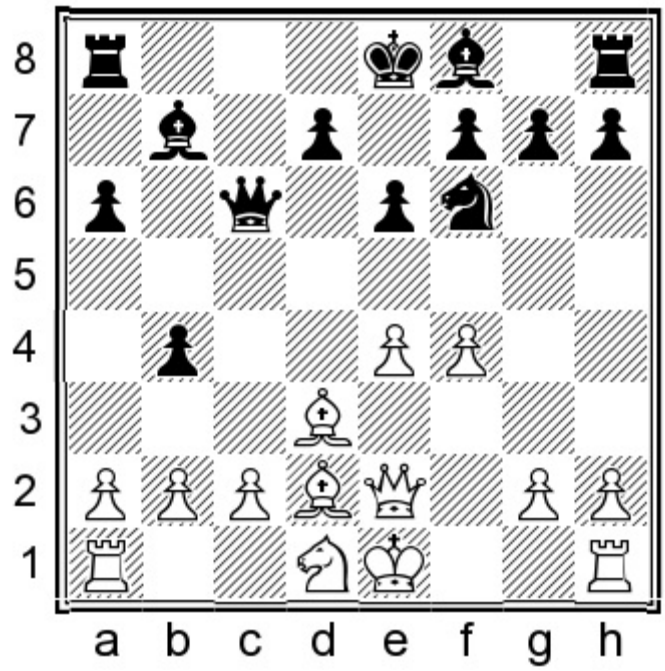
10.♘a4!

10.♘d1 is already a bit better for Black. 10...♘c6

A) 11.c3 bxc3 12.bxc3 [12.♗xc3? ♕xf4–+ 0-1 Arvola, B (2217) – Miezis, N (2555) Fagernes 2011.] 12...♗c5∓

B) 11.♘b3 a5! 12.♗e3 a4 13.♘d2 d5∓ 14.e5 d4! 15.♗f2 [15.exf6 dxe3 16.♘xe3 gxf6∓] 15...♘d5 16.♗g3 ♗e7∓ 0-1 (43) Lanka, Z (2496) – Lutz, C (2567) Germany 2009.

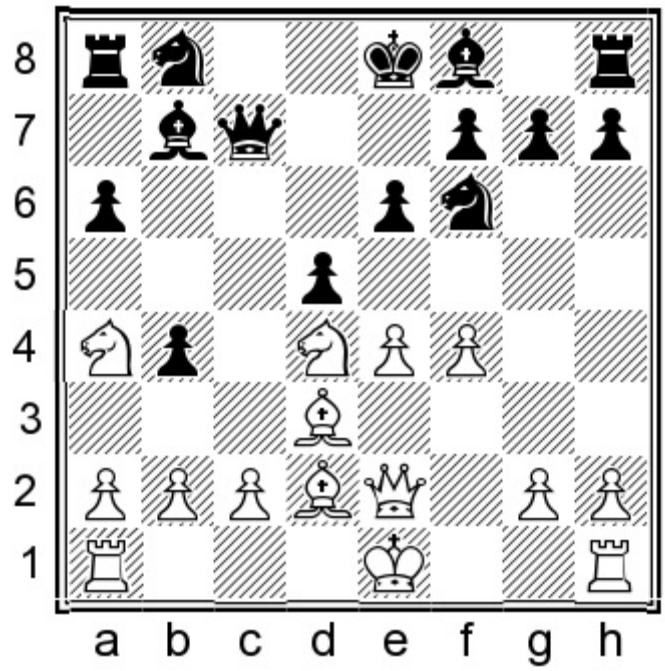
C) 11.♘xc6 ♕xc6



Position after: 11...♕xc6

12.♘f2 [12.e5 ♘e4 13.♗e3 h5∓] 12...♗c5 13.♗e3 0-0 14.0-0 d6∓

10...d5!?



Position after: 10...d5!?

Rublevsky has tried this pawn move three times against strong opposition and scored 50%.

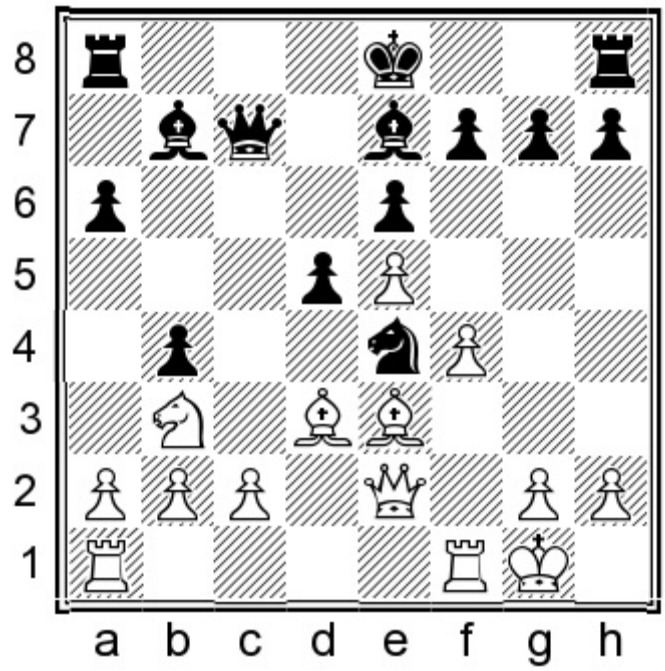
11.e5

11.exd5 ♘xd5 12.0-0 ♘c6 13.♘b3 ♗d6 14.♕f2 0-0∓ 0-1 (28) Petrov, M (2425) – Nikolov, M (2446) Plovdiv 2006.

11...♘e4 12.♗e3 ♘d7 13.0-0 ♘dc5 14.♘xc5 ♗xc5 15.♘b3

The last few moves were all more or less forced but here Black has a choice.

15...♗e7!



Position after: 15...♗e7!

Black holds on to his good bishop.

16.♖fc1

Prepares for c2-c3.

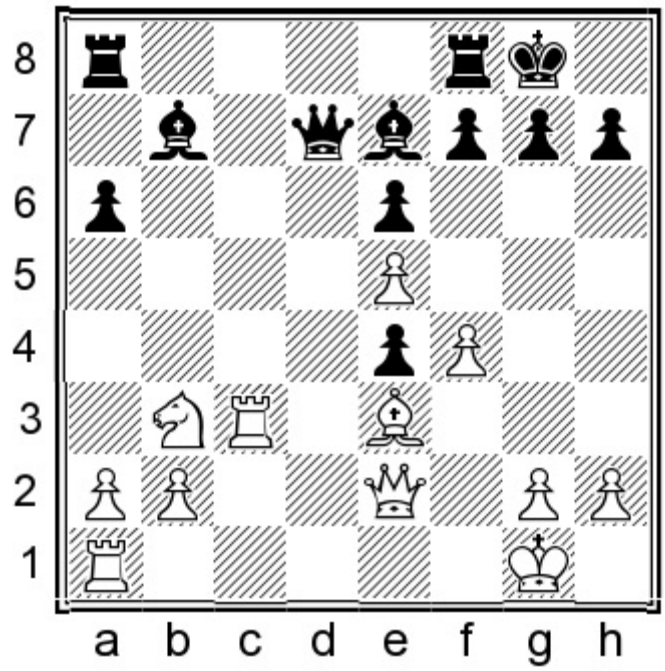
A) 16.♕h5 0-0 17.♖f3 g6 18.♕h6 f5! 19.♔h1 ♖f7 20.♖g1 ♕d7 21.♘d4 ♗f8 22.♕h4 ♗c5= 23.g4 fxg4 24.♖xg4 ♖e8 25.♖f1 ½ – ½ (25) Haraldsson, H (2394) – Sutkus, V (2258) corr. 2009.

B) 16.♗d4 0-0 17.♘d2 ♖fd8 18.♕e3 a5 19.♔h1 [19.♗b6 ♕c6!∓] 19...♘xd2 20.♕xd2 ♗a6! 21.f5 ♗xd3 22.cxd3 exf5 23.♖xf5 ♕c6=

16...0-0 17.c3

17.♗xe4 dxe4 18.c3 bxc3 19.♖xc3 ♕d7 transposes into the main line.

17...bxc3!N 18.♗xe4 dxe4 19.♖xc3 ♕d7



Position after: 19...♕d7

This position is equal.

20.♗c5

20.♖ac1 ♖ac8=

20...♗d5 21.♗xe7 ♕xe7 22.♖ac1 f6 23.♖c7 ♕d8=

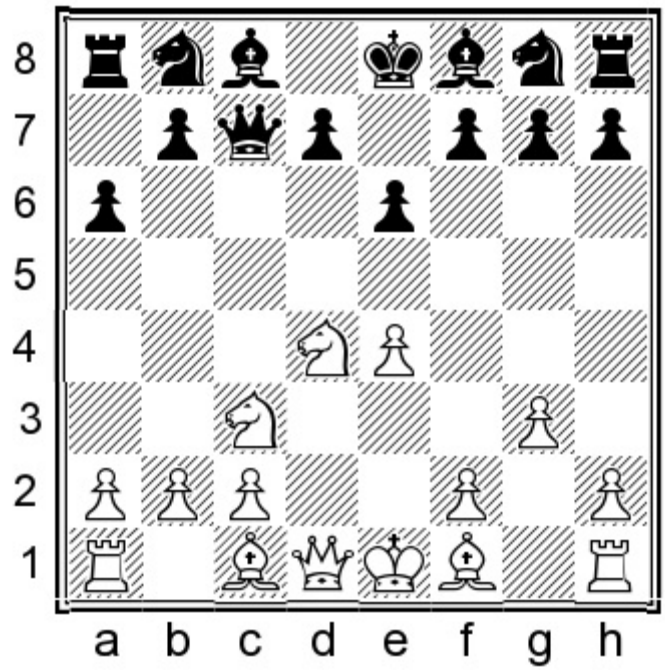
Conclusion

The variation starting with 6.f4 has a special place in Sicilian Kan theory. White's moves are natural and if not properly addressed will almost automatically lead to active positions for him. After 6...b5! and the most popular 7.♗d3 ♗b7 White has to make up his mind where to put his queen. After 8.♕f3 ♘f6 9.g4 (or 9.♗e3 ♘c6 10.g4) 9...♘c6! 10.♗e3 the move 10...h5! ensures Black creates sufficient counterplay with a subsequent ... e6-e5. The more sophisticated 8.♕e2 ♘f6 9.♗d2 b4! 10.♘a4 leads us to Rublevsky's interesting pawn push 10...d5!?. This move spices up the position and creates good chances for Black.

Note that at any time in these variations an intermediate a2-a3 leads to positions in the chapter on 6.a3.

f) 6.g3 ♗b4 7.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.g3



Position after: 6.g3

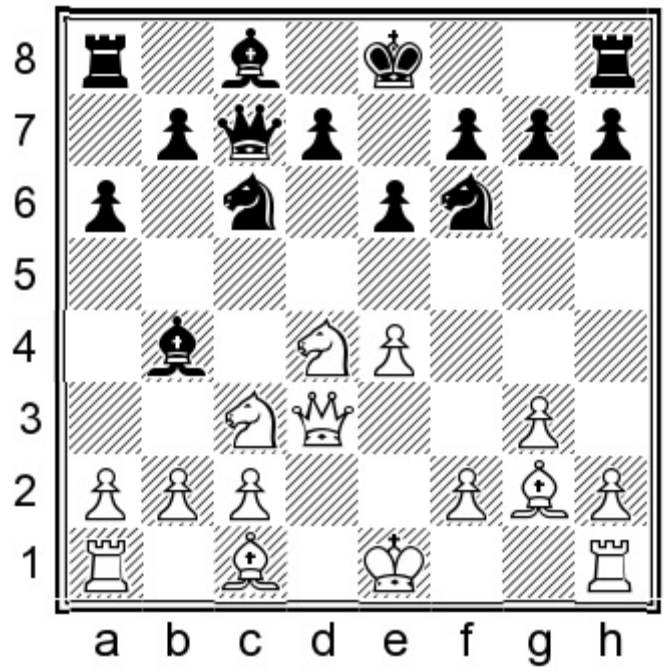
6...♗b4

The critical way to play against the fianchetto variation.

7.♘b3!?

Not very popular, but an interesting approach. White aims for the 7.♗d2 main line without having wasted a tempo on that particular move. On the way White does not mind sacrificing a pawn on c3.

7.♕d3 This is a concession as the queen is in a rather vulnerable position on this square. 7...♘f6 Always this knight first thereby avoiding 7...♘c6 8.♘xc6 dxc6?! 9.♕d4 ♗f8 10.♗f4 when Black cannot play ...e6-e5. 8.♗g2 ♘c6

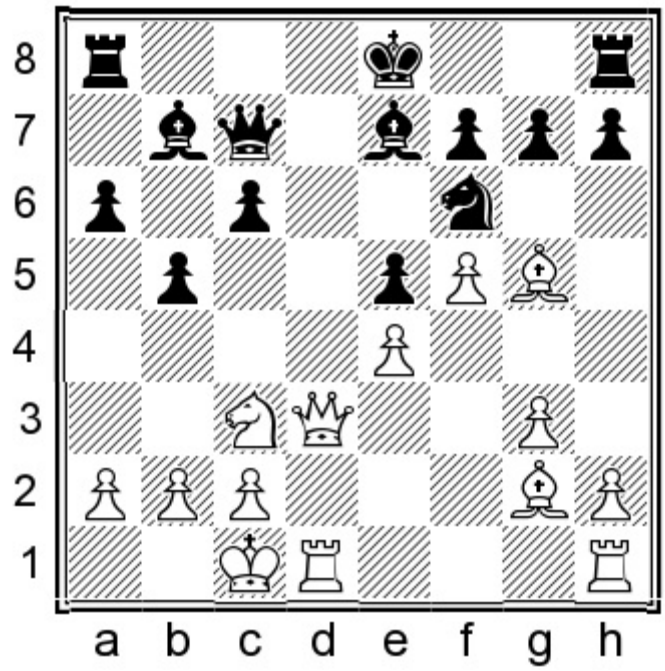


Position after: 8...♘c6

The familiar sequence in the development of the knights. 9.♘xc6 [9.0-0 ♘e5! 10.♕d2 ♗c5 11.♔h1 d6 12.a4 ♗d7=; 9.♘b3 ♗e7 10.0-0 b5=] 9...dxc6! As seen in many Sicilian Kan lines. After a subsequent ...e6-e5 White's g2-bishop is very passive and Black's position is easy to play. Black is at least equal.

A) 10.♗g5 ♗e7 11.f4 e5 12.f5 b5 transposes.

B) 10.f4 e5! The typical move in the center. 11.f5 [11.fxe5 ♘g4∓; 11.0-0 b5! 12.♔h1 ♗e6 and Black threatens ...♗c4 and ...♖d8.] 11...b5 12.♗g5 ♗e7 13.0-0-0 ♗b7

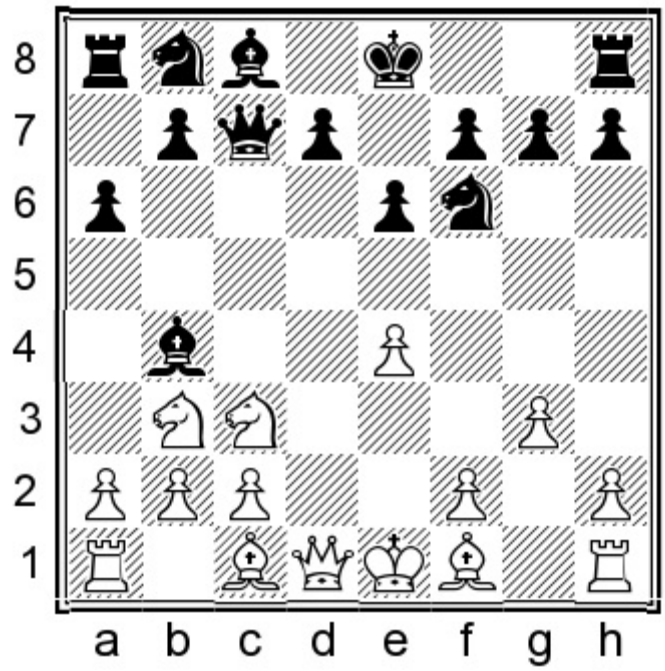


Position after: 13...♗b7

14.♔b1 [14.♗f3 a5 15.h4 ♗a6 16.♘b1 h6∓ 0-1 (40) Klimakovs, S (2242) – Miezis, N (2551) Riga 2014.] 14...h6 15.♗c1 ♘d7 intending ...0-0-0. Black has a pleasant game. 16.h4 ½-½ (16) Berelowitsch, A (2513) – Brodsky, M (2528) Dieren 2001.

C) 10.0-0 e5 11.h3 ♗e6= 12.g4?! ♖d8 13.♕g3 h5! 14.♕h4 ♗e7 15.g5 ♘d7∓ 0-1 (65) Baklan, V (2646) – Smirin, I (2648) Ohrid 2009.

7...♘f6!



Position after: 7...♘f6!

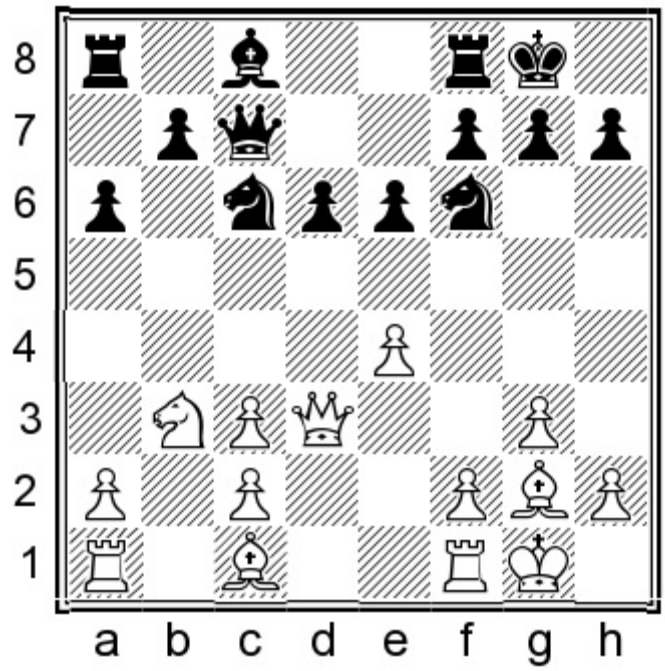
8.♗g2 0-0 9.0-0 ♗xc3 10.bxc3 d6

is the thematic way to play against the weaknesses of White's queenside.

11.♕d3

11.a4 e5 12.♕d3 ♗e6 13.♖d1 ♘bd7 14.♗b2 ♘b6∓ 0-1 (60) Bersamina, P (2404) – Paragua, M (2492) Subic Bay 2016.

11...♘c6



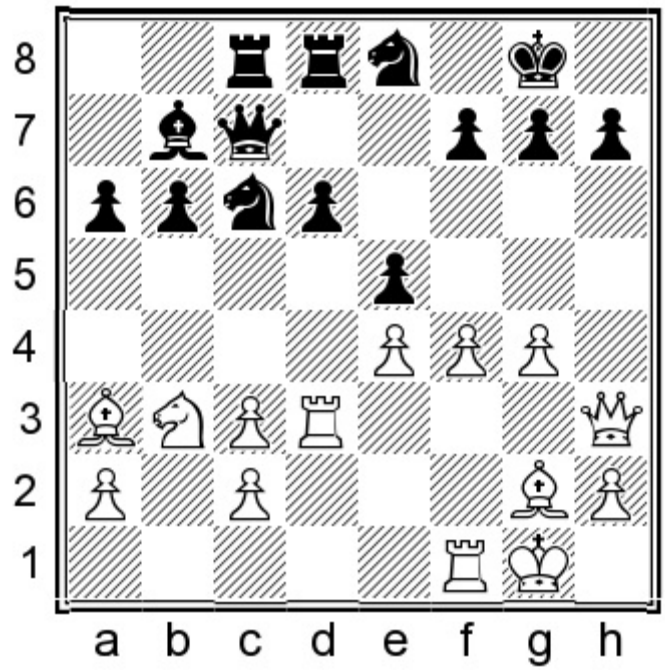
Position after: 11...♘c6

12.♗a3

A) 12.f4 ♖d8 13.h3 b6 14.♗e3 ♗b7 15.♕e2 ♘e7∓ 0-1 (37) Arizmendi Martinez, J (2495) – Korneev, O (2572) Mislata 2001.

B) 12.♖d1 ♖d8 13.♗a3 ♘e8∓ Black plays ...♘e5 or ...b5 on the next move.

12...♖d8 13.f4 b6 14.♖ad1 ♘e8 15.g4 ♗b7 16.♕h3 ♖ac8 17.♖d3 e5

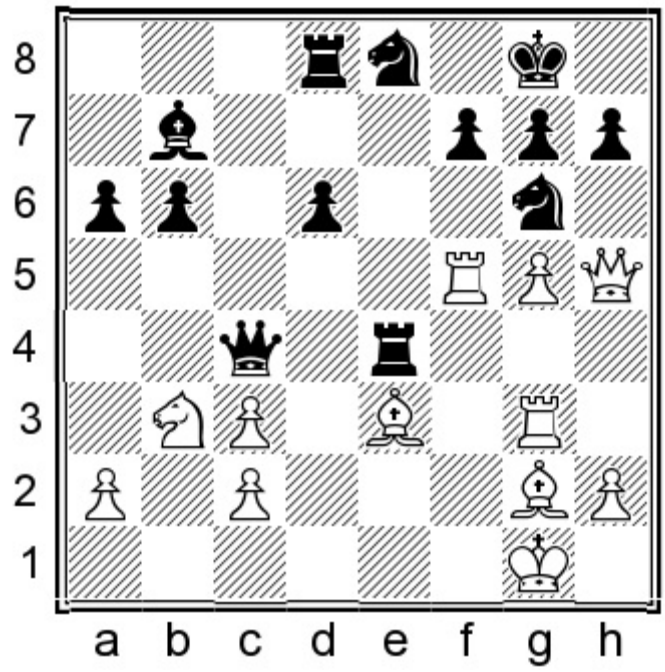


Position after: 17...e5

18.g5

18.f5 f6=

18...exf4 19.♖xf4 ♘e5 20.♖g3 ♘g6 21.♖f5 ♕c4 22.♕h5 ♖c7 23.♗c1 ♖e7 24.♗e3 ♖xe4



Position after: 24...♖xe4

25.♘d2 ♕e6 26.♘xe4 ♗xe4 27.♖f2 ♗a8 28.♖h3

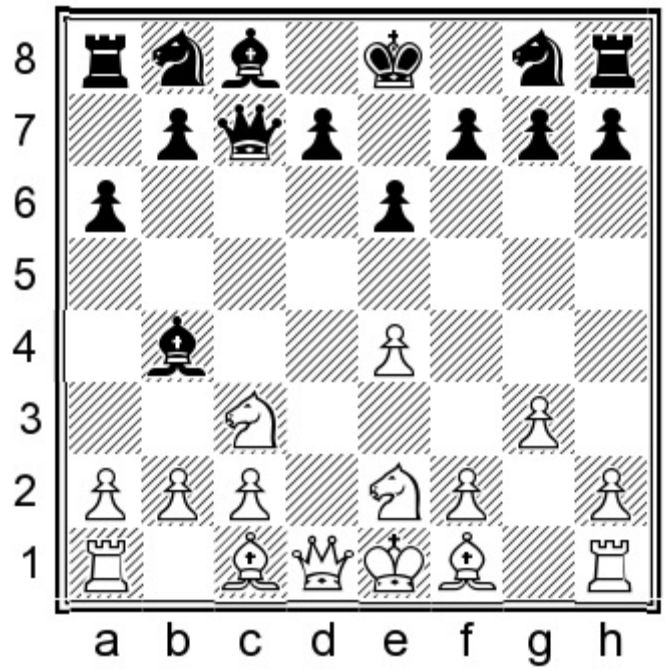
½ – ½ (28) Hamdouchi, H (2615) – Korneev, O (2613) Catalan Bay 2003.

Conclusion

Alternatives to 7.♘de2 and 7.♗d2 pose no serious problems for Black. 7.♕d3 is answered by 7...♘f6 followed by 8...♘c6. The pawn structure that arises after 9.♘xc6 dxc6 is very easy for Black to play and promises at least an equal game. 7.♘b3 is a bit more sophisticated. Black does not take the pawn on c3 and has two ways to go for an active position. 7...♘f6 8.♗g2 ♗xc3 9.bxc3 d5 is a setup with interesting prospects. 8...0-0 9.0-0 ♗xc3 10.bxc3 d6 with a more positional game against White's setup which we have also seen in variations of the O'Kelly. Both systems give Black good chances to finish on top.

g) 6.g3 ♗b4 7.♘de2

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.g3 ♗b4 7.♘de2



Position after: 7.♘de2

The most popular move defending against the threat on c3. The knight on e2 might be a bit misplaced but later in the game, after a subsequent g3-g4, it will be transferred to g3 to join the kingside attack. Still, White's kingside attack looks less impressive than in the regular Scheveningen with a white kingside fianchetto and the knight still on d4. White would rather have the knight back in the center. There have been games by strong grandmasters where indeed a later ♘e2-d4 was played with loss of tempo. This explains why 7.♗d2 is nowadays seen as theoretically stronger as White will maintain his knight on d4.

7...♘f6

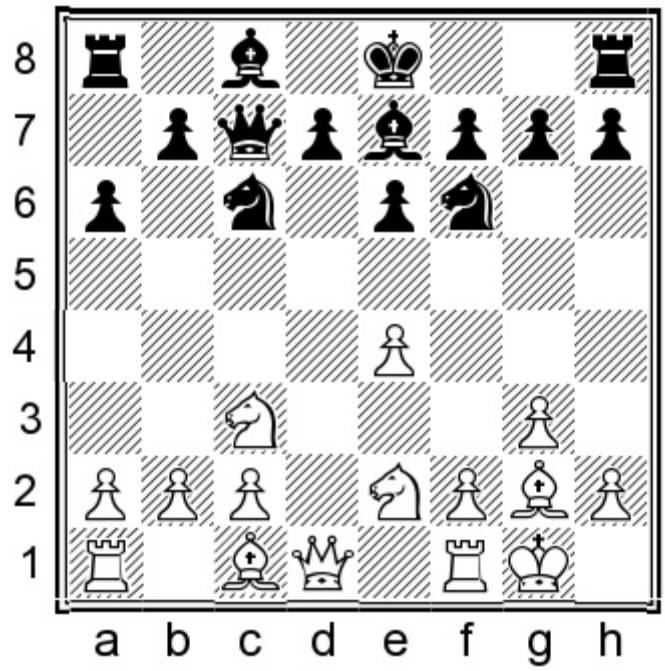
Black continues his natural piece development starting on the kingside and then the queenside, knights first then bishops.

8.♗g2 ♗e7

There is nothing left to do on b4 because there is always the other knight to replace the knight on c3. Black further has to watch out for combinations based on the loose position of the bishop, tricks with ♘d5 or ♘b5. On e7 the bishop fits nicely into a hedgehog/three-row structure. Delchev & Semkov argue here for a different system with the dark-square bishop outside the pawn chain. Obviously, that's also a pretty viable way to make progress and it boils down to a matter of taste.

8...0-0?! 9.♗f4 d6 10.a3±

9.0-0 ♘c6



Position after: 9...♘c6

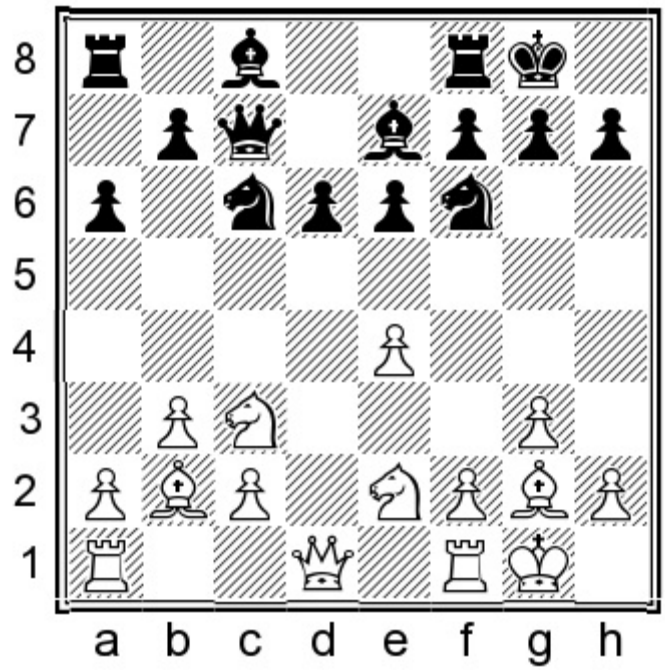
9...b5?? 10.e5+– is a bit silly.

10.h3

A popular choice in this position. White needs to build up his pawn storm on the kingside.

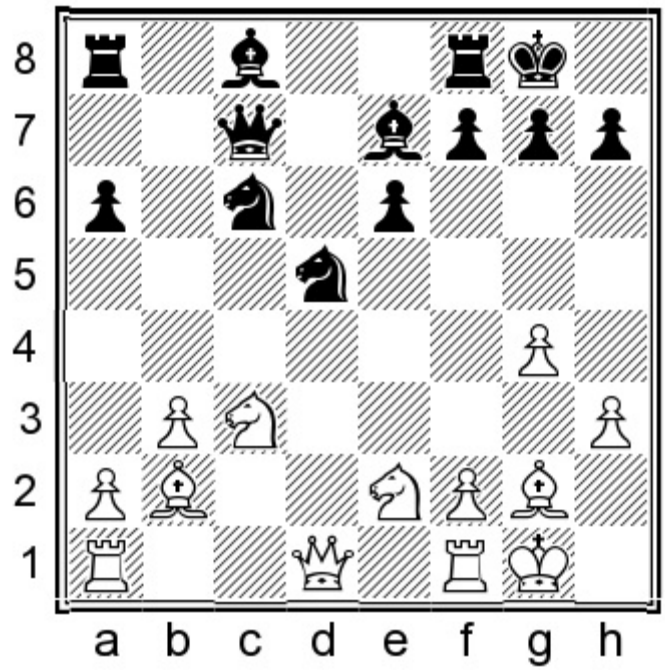
A) 10.♗f4?! White increases the pressure against the d6-pawn. But the bishop will stand in the way on f4. 10...d6 11.♕d2 0-0 12.♖ad1 ♘e5!∓ Black puts his knight on e5 which is the thematic way of removing the pressure against d6 and not being afraid of the knight being taken. 0-1 (32) Goncalves Barbosa, E (1772) – Supi, L (2441) Campo Grande 2015.

B) 10.b3 slow development by White is not a concern for Black. 10...0-0 11.♗b2 d6



Position after: 11...d6

12.h3 [12.a4 b6 13.h3 ♗b7 14.g4 ♖fd8 15.g5 ♘e8 16.h4 d5 17.exd5 ♘b4= ½-½ (20) Atlas, V (2460) – Bischoff, K (2550) Austria 1997.] 12...b5 13.g4 b4 14.♘a4 d5! 15.exd5 ♘xd5 16.c4 [16.♗xd5? exd5 17.♕xd5 ♖d8 18.♕e4 ♗b7–+ 0-1 (26) Dunne, D (2290) – Smejkal, J (2555) Valetta 1980.] 16...bxc3 17.♘axc3

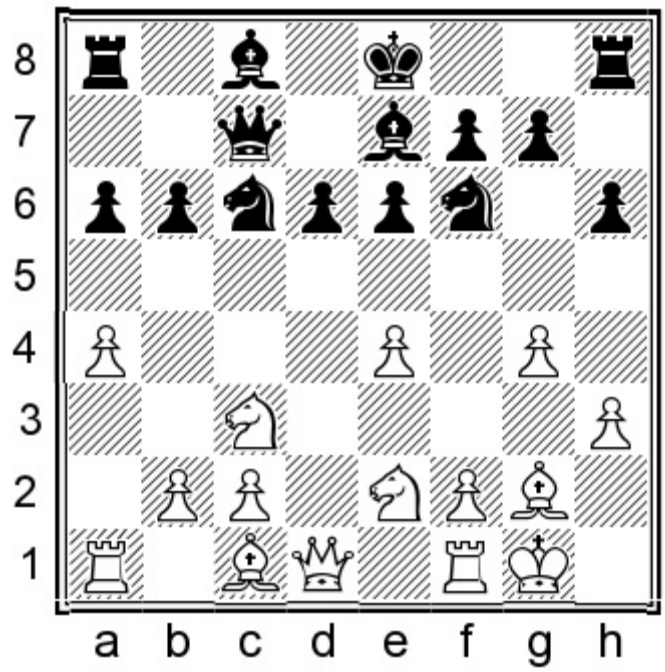


Position after: 17.♘axc3

17...♘db4 18.a3 ♖d8 19.♕b1 ♘d3 20.♘d5! ♖xd5 21.♗xd5 ♘xb2 22.♗g2 ♗f6 23.♖a2 ♗b7 24.♖xb2

♗xb2 25.♕xb2 ♘e7= A long analysis, leading to a completely even endgame.

C) 10.a4 White hampers Black's plans on the queenside. 10...d6 11.h3 b6! Still going for the queenside fianchetto and keeping the option of ...0-0-0 open. 12.g4 h6!

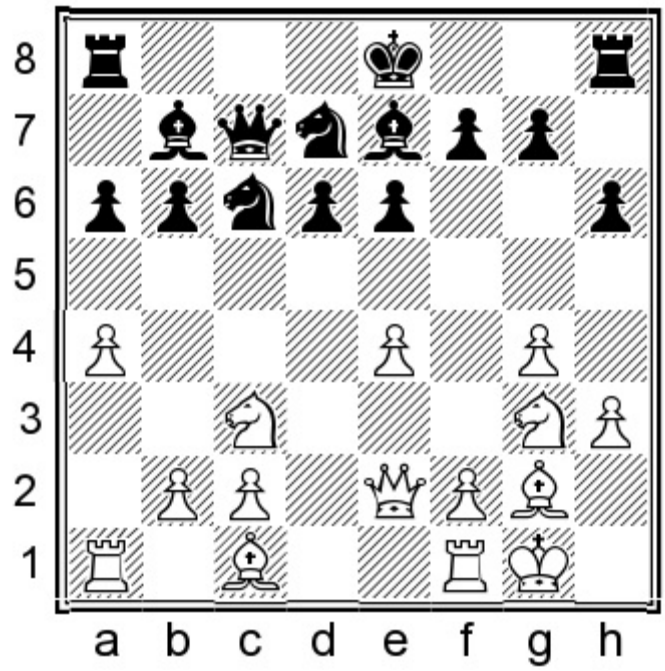


Position after: 12...h6!

Black hinders g4-g5 while at the same time he eyes the white kingside in case White opens the structure on that side.

C1) 13.f4 This has been played on a number of occasions, but it unnecessarily weakens the White kingside. 13...♗b7 14.♗e3 d5! A nice move which breaks up the harmony in White's position. Now the a8 rook can freely move to d8. 15.e5! [15.exd5?!N A risky move. 15...♖d8 16.g5 hxg5 17.fxg5 ♘xd5 18.♘xd5 ♖xd5!! 19.♗xd5 exd5∓ Black has excellent attacking chances against White's weakened kingside, more than sufficient compensation for the sacrificed exchange.] 15...♘d7 16.♘d4 ♘xd4 17.♗xd4 g5! 18.♕f3 0-0-0= With an interesting battle ahead where Black will have a fair share of the chances.

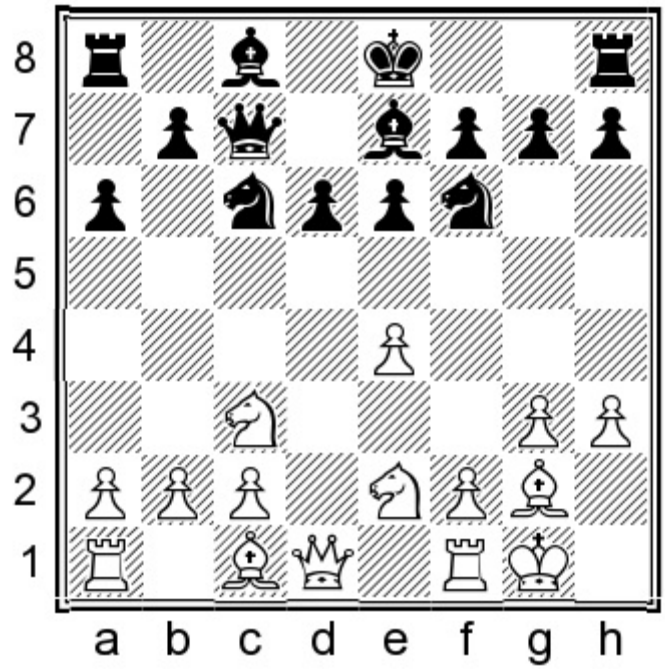
C2) 13.♘g3 ♗b7 Black completes his development and postpones castling until White's plans have become concrete. 14.♕e2 the best spot for the queen preventing the ...d5 push and it is not vulnerable to a future ...♘c4. 14...♘d7



Position after: 14...♘d7

14...♘d4 is potentially enough for a draw. 15.♗e3 ♘a5 immediately making use of the fact that White's bishop landed on e3. 16.f4 ♖c8∓ and the initiative has transferred to Black with serious counterplay on the queenside.

10...d6

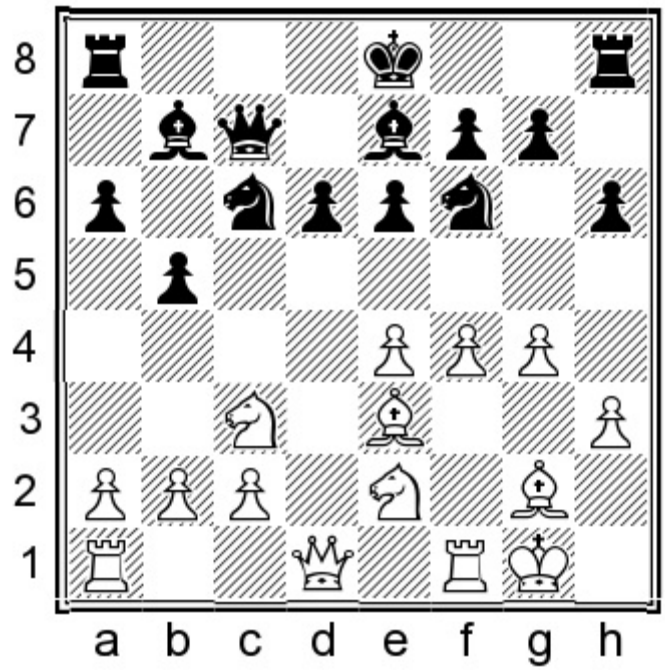


Position after: 10...d6

11.g4

Starting the long-awaited kingside initiative.

11.♗e3 b5! 12.f4 ♗b7 13.g4 [13.♕e1 0-0 14.♕f2 b4 15.♘a4 ♘d8∓ 0-1 (26) Darga, K – Portisch, L Hastings 1958.] 13...h6!



Position after: 13...h6!

The key move to trim down White's ambitions on the kingside. 14.♘g3 [14.♕e1 d5!=] 14...♘a5 15.♕e2 ♘c4 16.♗c1 1-0 (41) Campora, D (2485) – Cvitan, O (2465) Bor 1985. 16...0-0∓

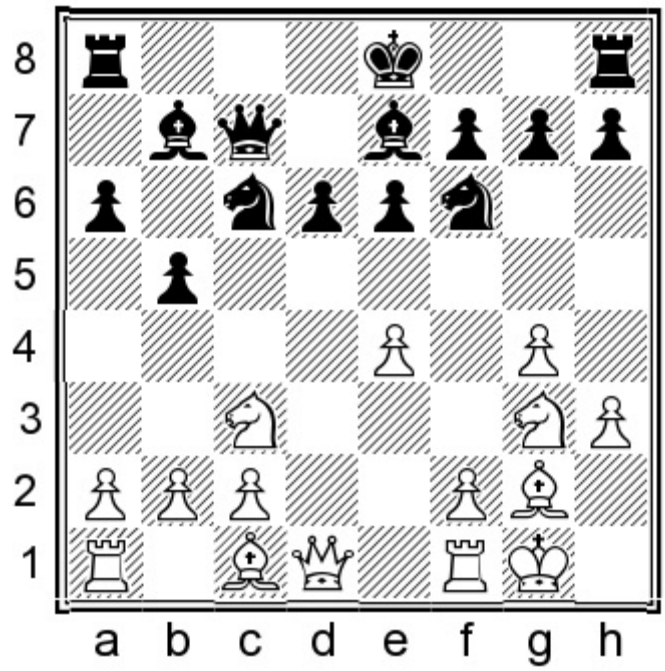
11...b5

The natural response by Black, aiming to complete the development of his queenside.

12.♘g3

12.a3 ♗b7 13.♘g3 h6!∓ 0-1 (41) Spiriev, P (2285) – Schlosser, P (2465) Budapest 1991.

12...♗b7



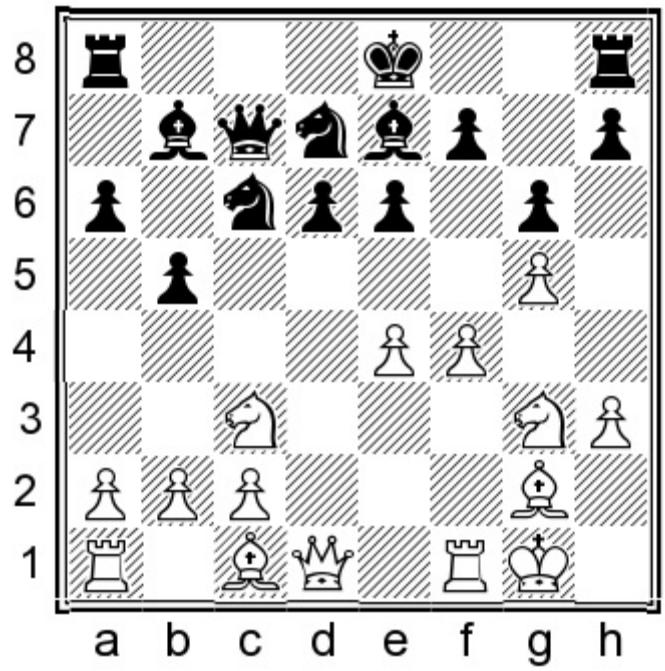
Position after: 12...♗b7

13.g5

13.f4 b4 14.♘a4 [14.♘d5 exd5 15.exd5 ♘b8 16.♔h2 0-0 17.g5 ♘e8∓] 14...d5!∓ Capturing the d5-pawn is prevented because of ♖a8-d8.

13...♘d7 14.f4 g6

White has completed the first phase of his kingside plan, but Black is well prepared for any subsequent action. Postponing castling is a key concept for Black. If White becomes too enthusiastic on the kingside Black may thematically push back in the center.



Position after: 14...g6

15.♗e3

15.b3 h6 16.gxh6 ♗f6 17.♗b2 ♖xh6∓ as in 0-1 (23) Safarli, E (2328) – Kobalia, M (2644) Dubai 2005. Black's strategy is a complete success.

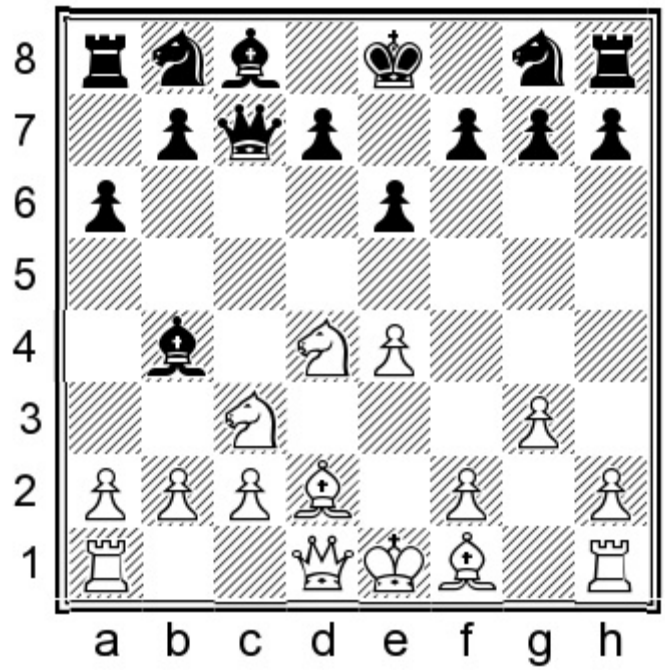
15...h6 16.gxh6 ♖xh6 17.a4 b4 18.♘ce2 ♘c5∓

Conclusion

Pulling the knight back to e2 after 6.g3 ♗b4 is a serious concession. White's normal pawn storm in the g3 Scheveningen is impeded by the somewhat lame knight on e2. Black simply completes his development including ...b5 and ...♗b7. He keeps his king in the center to take the steam out of White's kingside initiative. A well-timed ...h6, if necessary, accompanied by ...b4 and/or ...d5 assures Black of at least an equal game.

h) 6.g3 ♗b4 7.♗d2

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.g3 ♗b4 7.♗d2!



Position after: 7.♗d2!

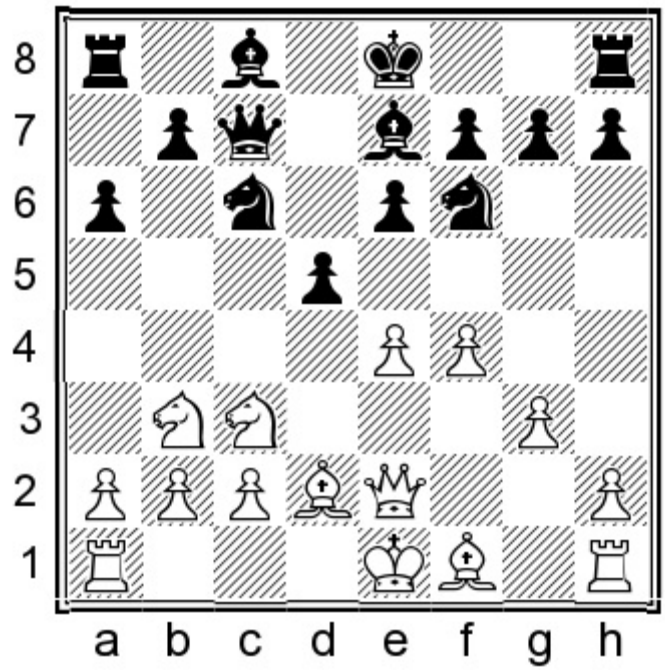
The most challenging move to meet. White prevents damage to his pawn center while maintaining the knight on d4. After a subsequent 0-0 White may threaten ♘d5, with favorable developments. That is the reason why Black often repositions his dark-squared bishop from b4 to e7. White's will then move ♗d2-e3 which will recover the tempo loss on move 7. White is back on track with his standard fianchetto variation against Black's Kan/ Scheveningen set-up although the dark-squared bishop may have appeared on e3 a bit early.

7...♘f6

The immediate 7...♘c6, recommended by some sources, is less precise because of 8.♘xc6 followed by 9.♕g4. By first playing the text move White's ♕g4 has been prevented.

8.♗g2

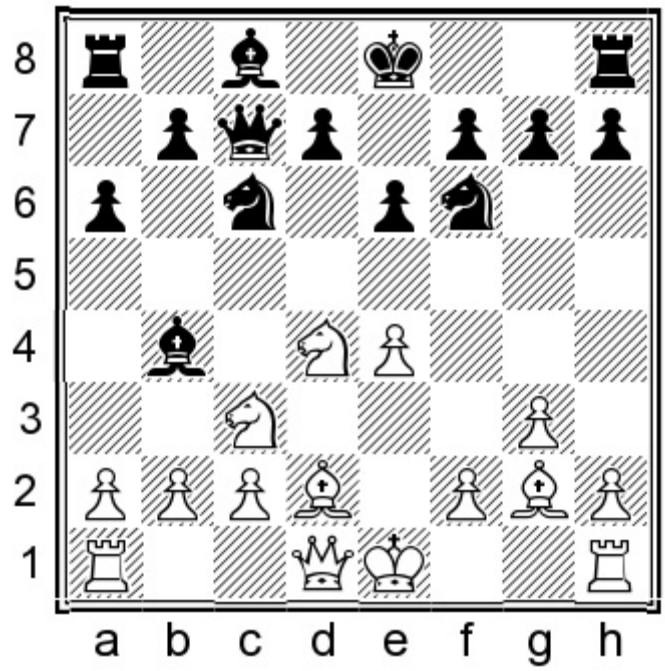
8.♕e2 has hardly any independent meaning. The game tends to develop as in the main lines after 7.♗d2. 8...♘c6 9.♘b3 [9.♘xc6 dxc6 10.♗g2 e5 11.0-0 ♗e7 12.a4 a5!= 0-1 (42) Bittencourt, J (2448) – Felgaer, R (2539) Rio de Janeiro 2007.] 9...♗e7 10.f4 d5!N.



Position after: 10...d5!N

This novelty is in line with our main line recommendation. 11.e5 ♘d7 12.♗e3 b5∓ Black has an optimal French Steinitz with a silly knight on b3.

8...♘c6



Position after: 8...♘c6

We are at a critical juncture. This is the thematic move for this variation. Black challenges the knight

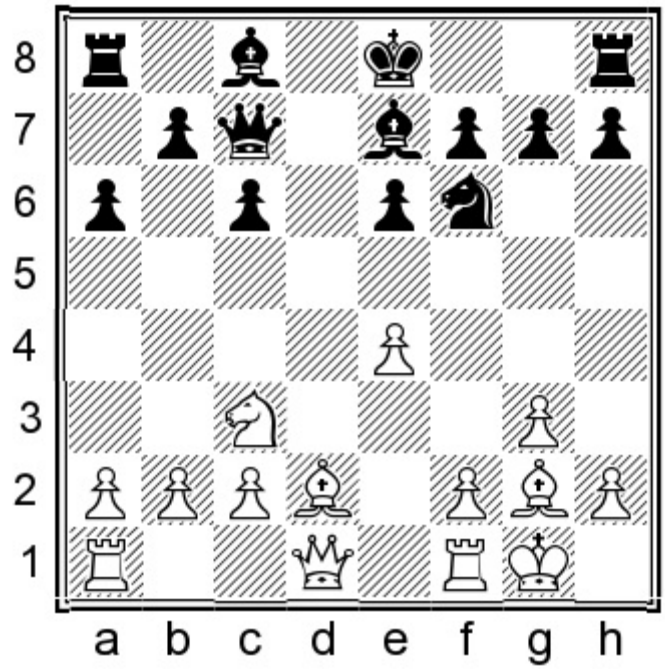
in order to prevent a transposition into a standard fianchetto variation. White has to either take on c6 or retreat the knight to a lesser square and play a more classical Sicilian game.

9.♘b3!

If White likes to play a regular Sicilian battles in the fianchetto variation against the Kan/ Scheveningen then this is the way he should proceed. This set up has been played many times by Azerbaijani GM Gadir Guseinov, who scored 80% in 10 games in my database!

A) 9.♘de2 ♗e7 10.0-0 0-0= The strange combination of 7.♗d2 and 7.♘de2 fails to impress.

B) 9.♘xc6 A key option for White which does not waste time retreating. The character of the game changes as we reach pawn structures which we have seen in other lines of the Kan. 9...dxc6! White's kingside fianchetto this is a favorable change in the pawn structure. White's bishop on g2 will lose its impact after a subsequent ...e6-e5. Black has easy development of his pieces and need not worry about White's f2-f4. 9...bxc6 is more common for Sicilian Kan players but with 9...dxc6 the game is more thematic and familiar. 10.0-0 [10.f4?! e5! 11.f5 b5 12.g4 h6 13.♕e2 ♗b7 14.0-0-0 0-0-0 15.h4 ♘d7= 0-1 (40) Lupulescu, C (2467) – Manolache, M (2394) Targoviste 2001.] 10...♗e7!



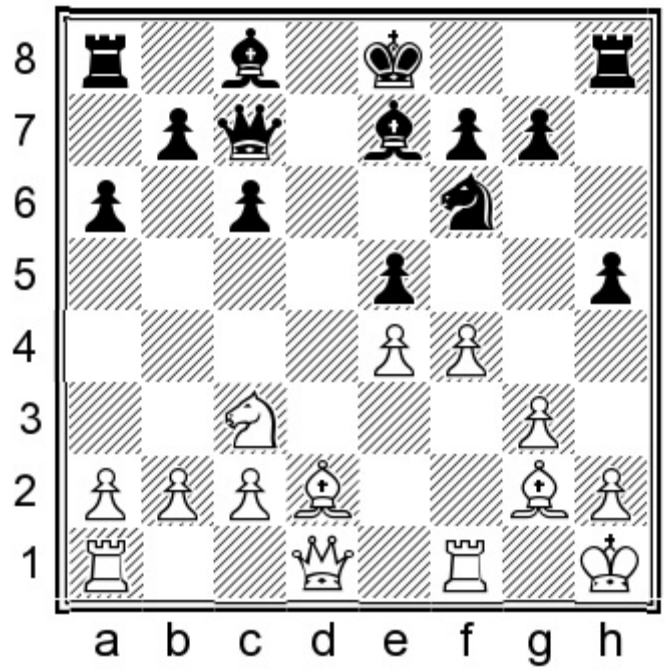
Position after: 10...♗e7!

Black's main idea is to play e6-e5. It blocks White's light-squared bishop, controls the center, and releases Black's own light-squared bishop. But at this moment it is not so good due to (10...e5) 11.♘d5! ♘xd5 12.exd5 ♗xd2 13.♕xd2 cxd5 14.♕xd5 and White is better.

B1) 11.♗e3 e5! Better to keep the knight on f6 for the time being, preventing f2-f4. 12.♘a4 ♘d7 13.♗h3 ♘c5! 14.♗xc5 ♗xh3 15.♗b6 [15.♖e1?! b5 16.♕h5 ♗e6 17.♗xe7 ♕xe7 18.♘c3 ♕c5 19.♖ad1 0-0∓ 0-1 (56) Klimakovs, S (2244) – Neiksans, A (2622) Riga 2016.] 15...♕c8 16.♖e1 0-0= 0-1 (26) Mokal, A (2046) – Sanchez Enriquez, O (2401) Montcada 2014. It is mate in two.

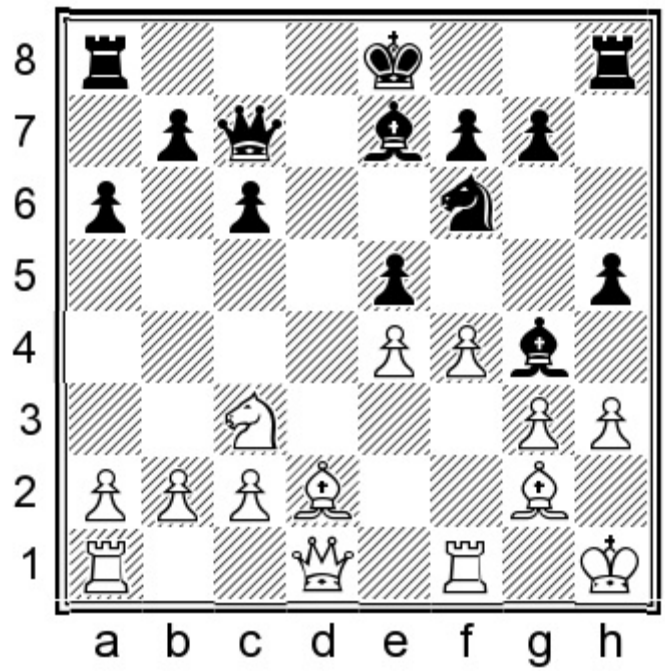
B2) 11.♗f4 e5 12.♗e3 ♘g4 13.♗d2 ♗c5 14.h3 ♘f6 15.♕e2 ♗e6=

B3) 11.f4 e5! 12.♔h1 [12.fxe5 ♘g4! Standard stuff in the Kan. 13.♕e1 ♗e6∓; 12.f5 b5 followed by ...♗b7, ...♘d7, ... 0-0-0, which looks excellent for Black.] 12...h5!



Position after: 12...h5!

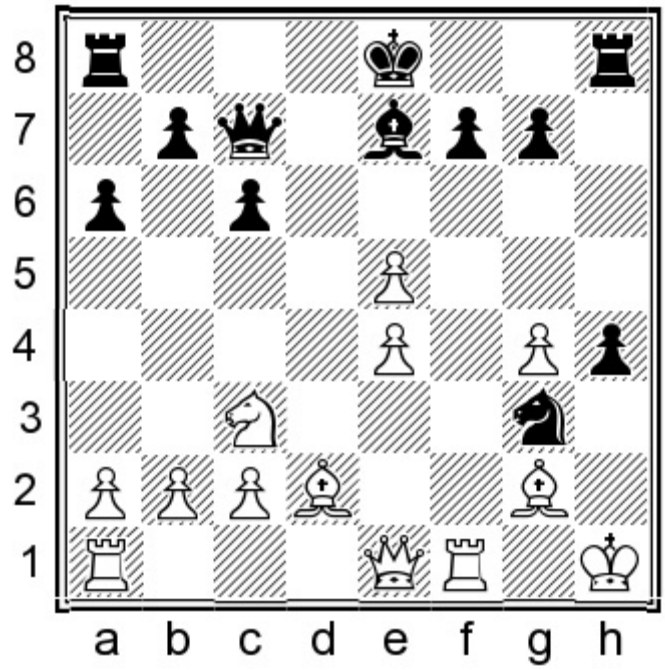
Considering the situation on the h-file, this is much more interesting than the pedestrian 12...0-0 as played in ½ – ½ (41) Zelic, Z (2343) – Sprenger, J (2496) Mali Losinj 2018. 13.h3 [13.f5 b5= and Black completes his development on the queenside.] 13...♗g4!! An excellent suggestion from Viktor Neustroev. The main idea of 13...♗g4 is to prevent White from playing g3-g4.



Position after: 13...♗g4!!

B3.1) 14.hxg4?! hxg4+ 15.♔g1 ♗c5+ 16.♖f2 ♖d8! 17.♕e1 [17.fxe5 ♕xe5–+] 17...♖xd2 18.♕xd2 exf4 19.♔f1 ♗xf2 20.♕xf2 f3 21.♗xf3 gxf3 22.♕xf3 ♘g4!–+ Black is winning

B3.2) 14.♕e1 h4 15.fxe5 [15.gxh4 0-0-0 16.hxg4 ♘xg4 17.♗h3 ♕d7! 18.♖f3 ♖xh4 19.♖d1 ♘f2+ Simplifying the position. 20.♕xf2 ♖xh3+ 21.♖xh3 ♕xh3+ 22.♔g1 exf4–+ Black has an extra pawn in the endgame.] 15...♘h5 16.hxg4 ♘xg3+

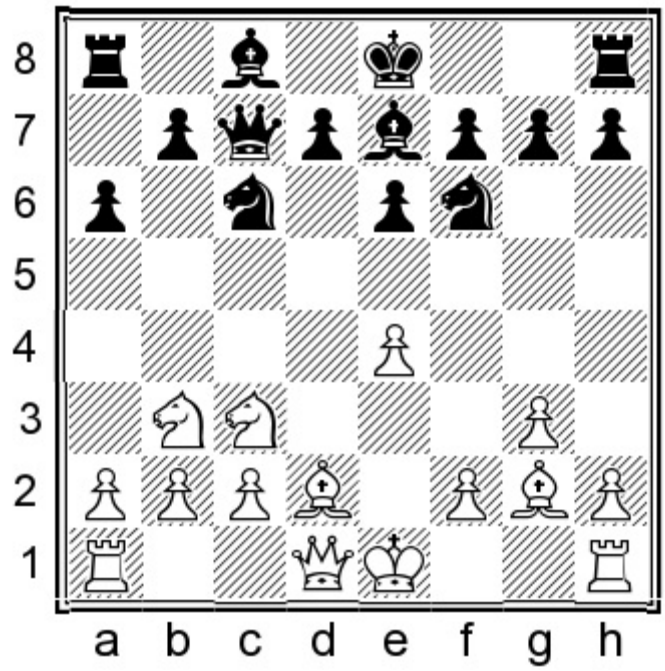


Position after: 16...♘xg3+

17.♔g1 ♘xf1 18.♕xf1 h3 19.♗xh3 [19.♗f3 ♕xe5⩱ Black has sufficient compensation for the material sacrificed.] 19...♖d8 20.♗e3 ♕xe5∞ The position is equal, but sharp. Black has the better practical chances due to weak white king.

9...♗e7!

The most flexible choice for Black, keeping all the options open and preparing for a future 0-0.



Position after: 9...♗e7!

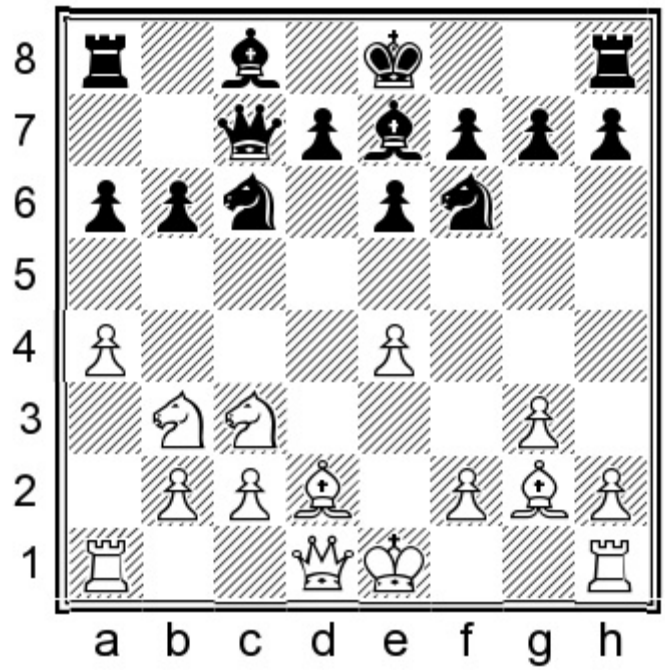
Delchev & Semkov explain that this may look like a tempo loss for Black but if White develops his bishop to e3 Black will actually gain a tempo with ...♘c6-e5-c4. In addition, White can no longer take on c6 which is a normal maneuver in these fianchetto structures. Black will further develop his queenside pieces postponing a decision on where to put his king.

10.0-0

A natural developing move.

A) 10.♗e3 0-0 11.0-0 transposes to 10.0-0.

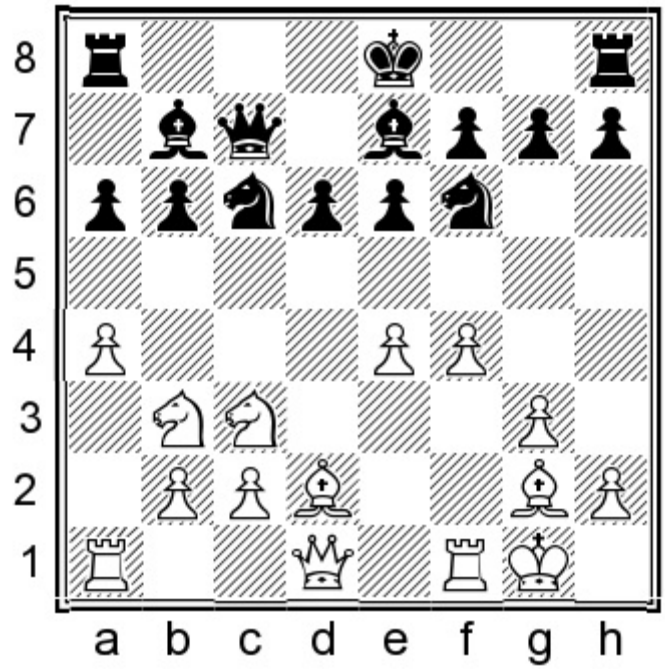
B) 10.a4 b6!



Position after: 10...b6!

B1) 11.f4 d6 12.g4 h6! 13.♕e2 An aggressive structure for White with his kingside pawns already in motion. White prepares for 0-0-0. 13...♘d7! Removing the knight before White plays g4-g5. Black waits with ...♗b7 until White plays 0-0. 14.h4 [14.0-0-0 b5! 15.axb5 axb5 16.♘xb5 ♕b8∓] 14...♘c5 15.♗e3 ♗d7=.

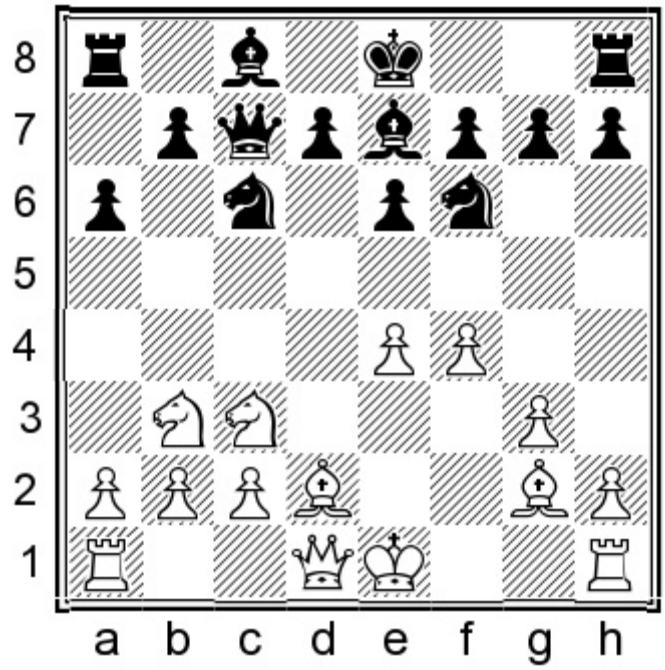
B2) 11.0-0 ♗b7 12.f4 d6



Position after: 12...d6

13.g4 [13.♗e3 Is a line of the Taimanov, which explains why there are many more entries in the database. 13...♘a5!? A typical move in this structure. 14.♘xa5 bxa5 15.f5 ♖b8 16.g4 h6 17.h3 0-0! 18.♕d3 d5∓] 13...h6! 14.♕e2 [14.♕f3 ♘d7 15.♕h3 0-0-0!∓ 16.♗e3 g5 17.f5 ♗f6 18.a5 b5 19.fxe6 fxe6 20.♗b6 ♘xb6 21.♖xf6 ♕e7∓ 0-1 (51) Forcen Esteban, D (2438) – Korneev, O (2597) La Roda 2012.] 14...♘d7 15.♗e3 g5 16.f5 ♘ce5 17.♘d4 ♕c4=

C) 10.f4 White immediately threatens e4-e5.



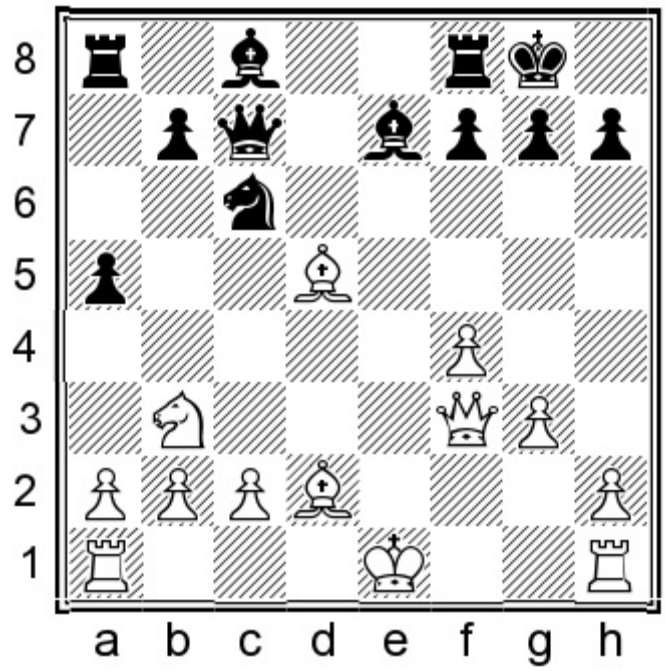
Position after: 10.f4

C1) 10...d6 is a valid choice transposing into a standard Sicilian Scheveningen Fianchetto variation. It requires a lot of theoretical knowledge and practical experience to play these positions correctly. Hence my suggestion to go for an early ...d5 whenever possible as our opponents are probably less familiar with and can lead to interesting complications which are not necessarily bad for Black.

C2) 10...d5! Black could not care less! This is the thematic pawn sacrifice which we will meet a number of times in this variation. Apart from the interesting complications which arise, its biggest strength is that Black need not play the standard Sicilian Scheveningen game White is most likely very experienced in.

C2.1) 11.0-0 dxe4 12.♘xe4 ♘xe4 13.♗xe4 0-0 14.♗e3 a5 15.a4 ♘b4 16.♗f2 ♗d7 17.c3 ♘d5=

C2.2) 11.exd5 exd5 12.♘xd5 [12.♗xd5 0-0 13.0-0∓ ♖d8] 12...♘xd5 13.♗xd5 0-0 14.♕f3 a5

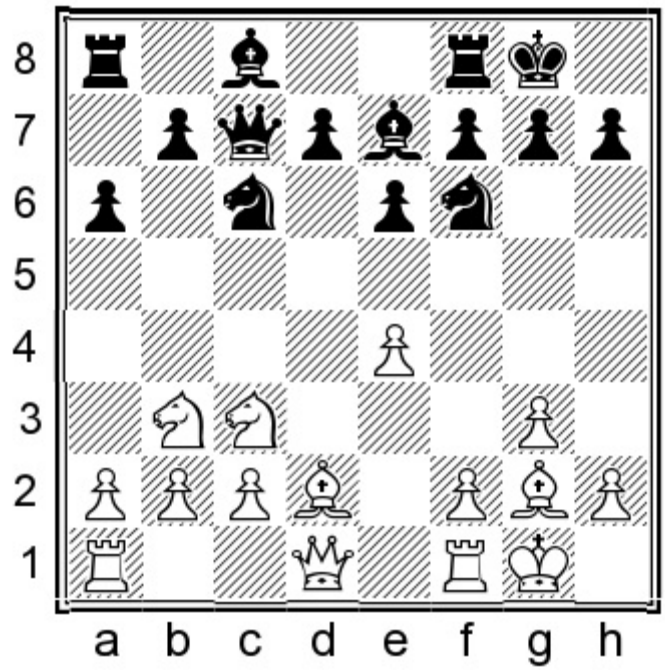


Position after: 14...a5

Prevents 0-0-0. 15.♗xc6 [15.0-0-0 a4 16.♘a1 ♘d4 17.♕e3 ♗c5∓] 15...bxc6 16.0-0-0 a4 17.♘d4 a3 18.b3 ♗d7 19.♖he1 ♖ae8 20.♕d3 ♗g4! and Black has sufficient counterplay for the pawn.

C2.3) 11.e5 ♘d7 12.0-0 ♘b6 The key maneuver, on its way to c4. 13.♕e2 ♗d7 14.♗e1 g5!∞ Black might even consider ...0-0-0 at a later stage and start a kingside attack.

10...0-0!



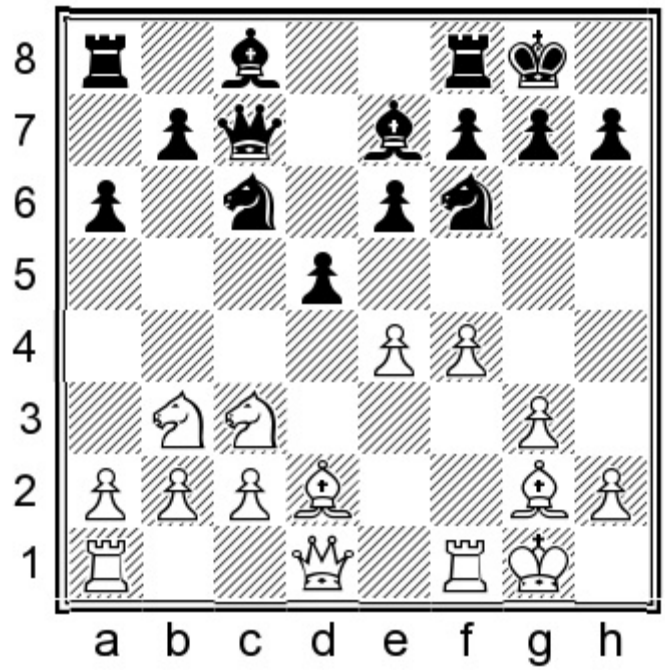
Position after: 10...0-0!

Black postpones ...d6 in order to keep the option of a direct ...d7–d5 in the position.

11.f4

11.♗e3 ♘e5! With the white bishop arriving on e3 this early, the maneuver ...♘c6-e5-c4 is rather strong. 12.♕e2 [12.♗f4 d6 13.♘d4 b5 14.a3 ♗b7 15.♕e2 ♘c4 16.♗c1 ♖fe8 17.♔h1 d5∓ 0-1 (30) Moore, G (2320) – Boekelman, J (2313) Chess. com 2022.; 12.♗d4 ♘c4 13.♘e2 e5 14.♗c3 b5∓] 12...♘c4 13.♗c1 d6=

11...d5!



Position after: 11...d5!

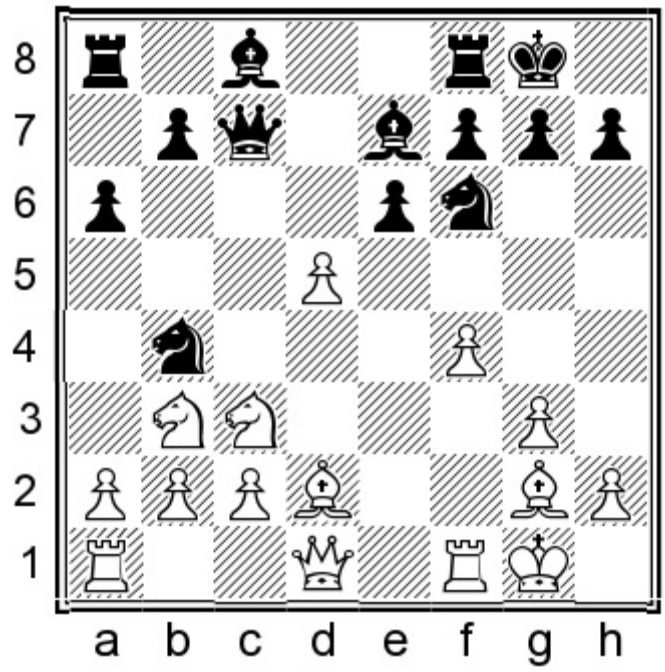
This beautiful pawn sacrifice was proposed by Delchev & Semkov. It works best after 10.0-0 and 11.f4. Since they published their analysis, it has been played only twice in master practice, so it still contains good surprise value. It is only analyzed by Amanov and Kavutskiy after 11...d6 12.g4 and then 12...d5. The pawn on g4 certainly works in White's favour.

12.e5

The transition into French structures is White's safest option. The structures which arise are quite comfortable for Black.

A) 12.♗e3 this makes life easy for Black. 12...♖d8! 13.e5 d4! 14.exf6 ♗xf6 15.♘e4 dxe3 16.♘xf6+ gxf6 17.♕g4+! ♔f8 18.♖ae1 ♘e7 19.♕e2 ♘f5∓

B) 12.exd5 The principled response but Black is well equipped to counter this move. 12...♘b4!



Position after: 12...♘b4!

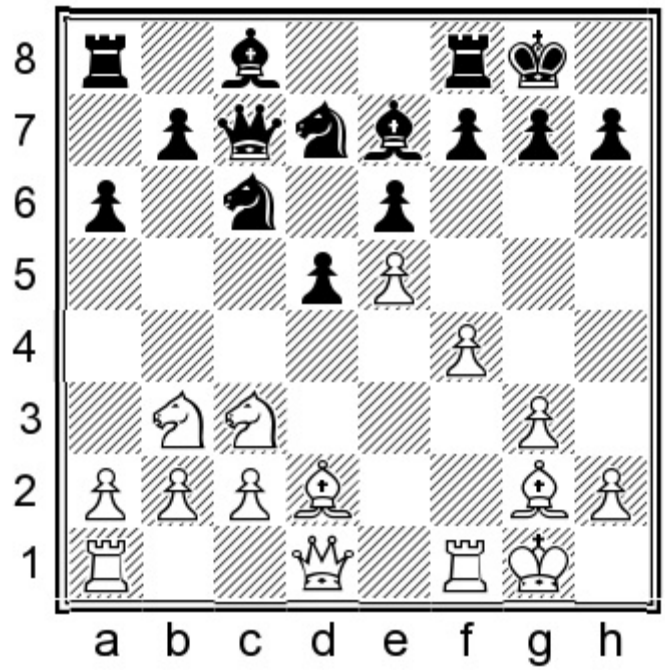
B1) 13.dxe6 taking this pawn is precisely what Black looks forward to. 13...♗xe6 14.♔h1 ♖ad8 15.f5 ♗c4 16.♖e1 b6⩱ Black has full compensation for the pawn. 17.♗f4 ♗d6 18.♗xd6 ♖xd6 19.♕c1 ♖fd8.

B2) 13.♖c1 is mentioned by Delchev & Semkov. 13...♘bxd5 14.♘xd5 exd5 15.♗a5 b6 16.♗c3 ♗f5=

B3) 13.d6! ♗xd6 14.a3 ♘bd5 15.♘xd5 exd5 16.♗c3 ♗g4 17.♕d3 ♘e4=

C) 12.♕f3 The suggestion of the engines which keeps the balance. 12...dxe4 13.♘xe4 ♘xe4 14.♕xe4 a5 15.a4 ♗f6 16.♖ab1 ♗d7 17.♗e3 b6 18.♖fd1 ♖ac8 19.c3 ♘e7= Black's position is harmonious; he has nothing to worry about.

12...♘d7



Position after: 12...♘d7

Positions with a French character have entered the scene and Black is in good shape. Due to the weakness of his e-pawn, White cannot push f4-f5 for the time being.

13.♘e2

13.♔h1 b5 14.♘e2 a5 15.c3 ♘b6=

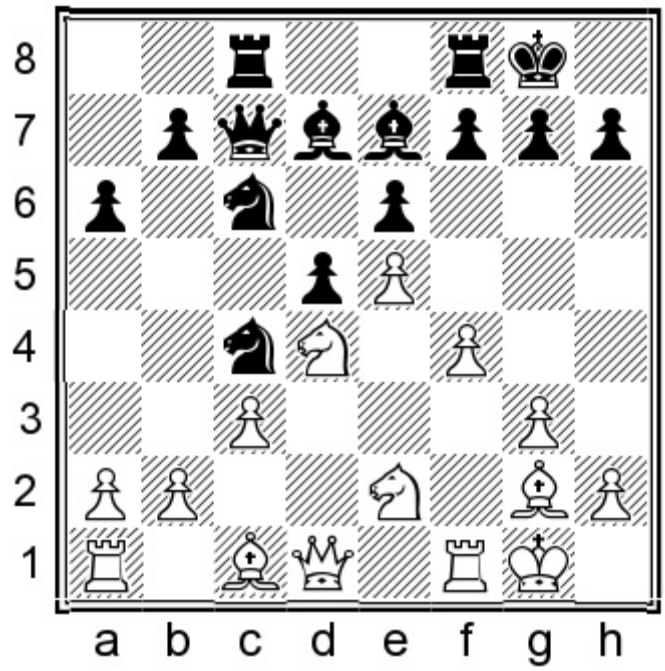
13...♘b6! 14.♘bd4 ♘c4

An important maneuver to gain the initiative. White's play on the kingside is not making any progress.

15.♗c1 ♗d7 16.c3

16.b3 ♘xd4 17.♘xd4 ♘a3!= 18.♗b2 ♖ac8 19.c3 a5∓

16...♖ac8=



Position after: 16...♖ac8=

Black will soon question White's e5-pawn with ...f6.

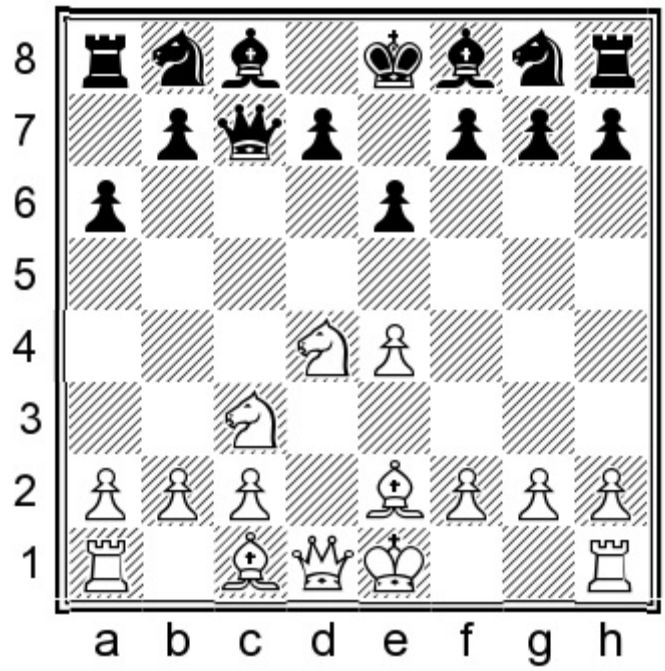
Conclusion

7.♗d2 is the most challenging way to respond to 6.g3 ♗b4 as White maintains his knight on d4. (7.♗d2) Play continues with 7...♘f6 8.♗g2 ♘c6. White is at an important crossroad. 9.♘xc6 dxc6 10.0-0 ♗e7 leads to pawn structures that we have seen before in the Sicilian Kan. Black is well placed to play these, in particular as White´s bishop on g2 hardly plays any role of significance.

9.♘b3 is the more challenging option and is preferred by Open Sicilian with g3 specialist Gadir Guseinov. The game retains its Open Sicilian character. Fortunately, Black is not required to play the standard Scheveningen structures with pawn storms on both sides of the board. Black can use the special features of the position with a well-timed ...d7-d5. Even if it is a pawn sacrifice Black can create good counterplay before White's kingside attack picks up steam. In the main line, Black's initiative on the queenside is running full steam whereas White struggles to get something moving on the kingside. The chances are balanced. The pawn sacrifice makes it unnecessary for Back to understand and play against White's standard attacking schemes.

i) 6.♗e2

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.♗e2



Position after: 6.♗e2

White develops his light-squared bishop in a classical way with the objective to transpose into a regular Taimanov or Scheveningen position. It is a natural and straightforward system against the 5...♕c7 Kan and will have a place in contemporary theory no matter what fashion describes at the moment. One of the advantages of our O'Kelly move order (3.♘c3) is that White is not in the position to play the modern and subtle 5.♗e2 (as against the regular Kan move order), leaving the b1-knight in the stable for the time being. That system is quite a tough nut to crack in a normal Kan as an early ...b5 is not so good.

6...b5!

With the white knight on c3 and the e-pawn undefended by the white bishop this move makes a lot of sense. Black will develop his c8-bishop to the long diagonal, threatening to win a pawn, and hoping to gain time for the completion of his development after White defends the pawn. Certain authors do not like to spend yet another move on something which is not piece development. However, moves like 6...♘f6 or 6...♘c6 would take us into the domain of the Scheveningen or the Taimanov and would require learning reams of theory from those openings. Moreover, practice shows that with some careful handling Black should be able to reach good positions with 6...b5.

7.0-0

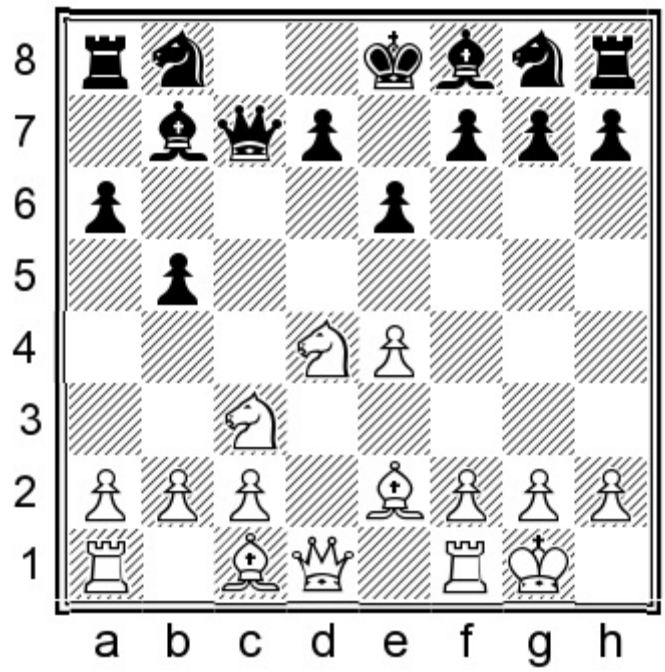
Other moves make the issue of defending the e-pawn even more pronounced.

A) 7.a4 b4 8.♘b1 ♗b7 9.♘d2 ♘f6∓

B) 7.f4 ♗b7 8.♗f3 is analyzed after the move order 6.f4 b5 7.♗e2 ♗b7 8.♗f3 .

C) 7.a3 takes us to the chapter with 6.a3.

7...♗b7

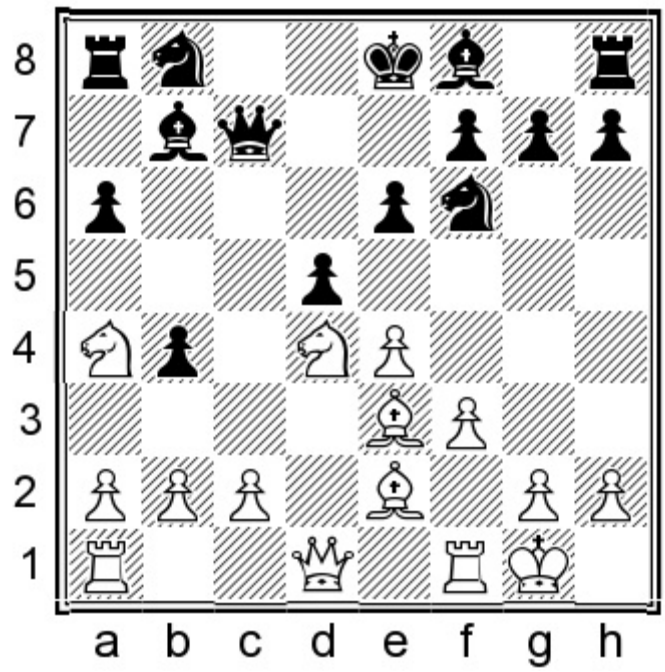


Position after: 7...♗b7

8.♖e1

The most challenging move since defending the e-pawn is hardly attractive.

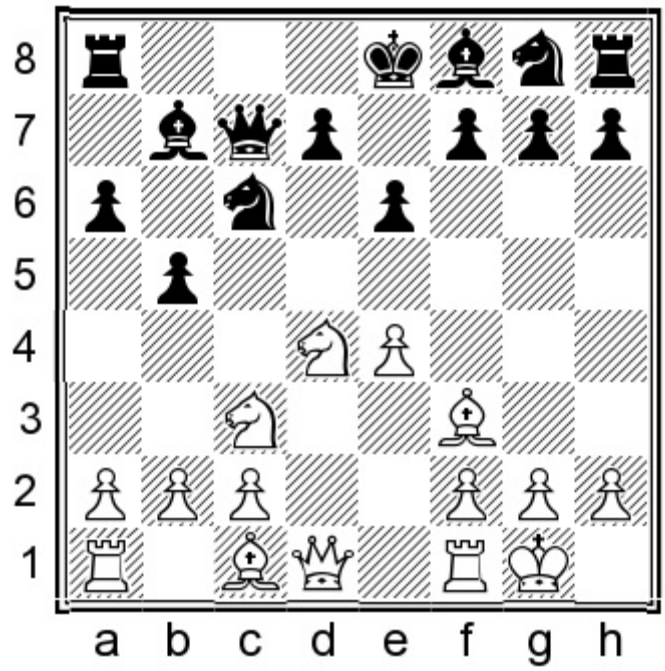
A) 8.f3 leads to slower play. 8...♘f6 9.♗e3 b4!? 10.♘a4 d5



Position after: 10...d5

11.c3 [11.exd5 ♘xd5 12.♗f2 ♗d6 13.g3 h5= 0-1 (27) Olofsson, H (1898) – Blomqvist, E (2507) Lidkoping 2019.; 11.♔h1 ♘bd7 12.♖c1 dxe4 13.c3 b3 14.♕xb3 ♖b8=] 11...dxe4 12.fxe4 ♘bd7 13.cxb4 ♗d6 14.♖c1 ♗xh2+ 15.♔h1 ♕e5=

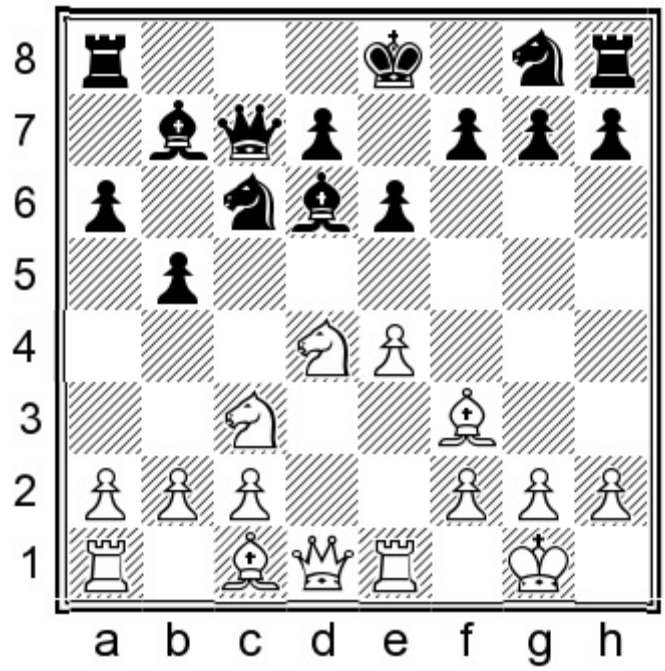
B) 8.♗f3 This way of playing is only interesting if White is willing to sacrifice material. 8...♘c6!



Position after: 8...♘c6!

The bishop on f3 is the signal for this move as the bishop is not very useful in the pawn structure which normally arises.

B1) 9.♖e1 ♗d6!



Position after: 9...♗d6!

The critical move, which is not available if White had played the kingside fianchetto instead of ♗e2-f3. White is one move too late to bring ♘d5 into the equation.

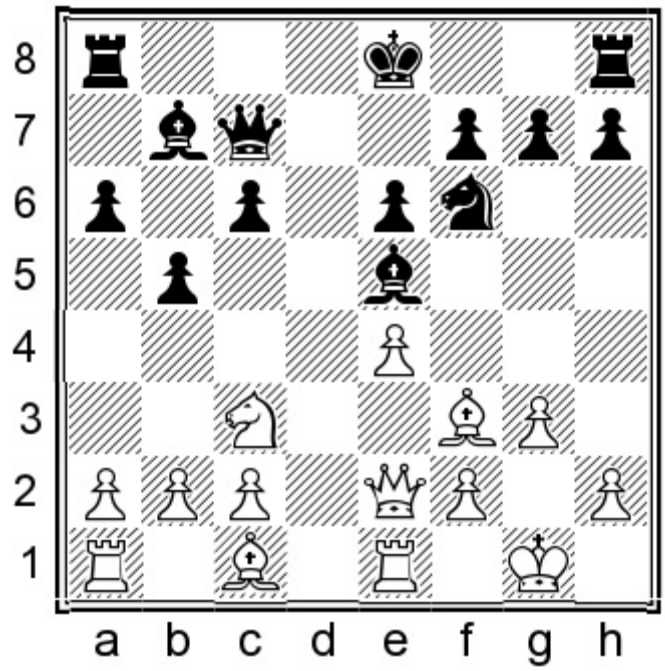
B1.1) 10.♘dxb5? ♗xh2+ 11.♔h1 axb5 12.♘xb5 ♕a5–+

B1.2) 10.♔h1 ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♗e5 12.♕d3 ♘f6 13.a4 b4 14.♘d1 ♖c8 15.♗d2 h5∓ [15...a5 16.c3∓ 0-1 (39) Kaplan, S (2430) – Bercys, S (2420) Brownsville 2010.]

B1.3) 10.g3 now ♘db5 is in the air. 10...♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♗e5 12.♕d3 ♘f6 13.♗g2 ♖c8 14.a3 0-0 15.♗d2 ♖fd8 16.f4 [16.♕e3 ♕b8!∓] 16...♗d6! 17.♔h1 ♗e7

B1.4) 10.h3 ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♗e5 12.♕d3 ♖c8 13.a3 ♘e7 14.♗d2 0-0∓ 0-1 (34) Pinkas, K (2405) – Kochyev, A (2450) Voronezh 1987.

B1.5) 10.♘xc6 By far the most popular continuation. 10...dxc6 11.g3 the safest option for White. 11...♘f6 12.♕e2 ♗e5!

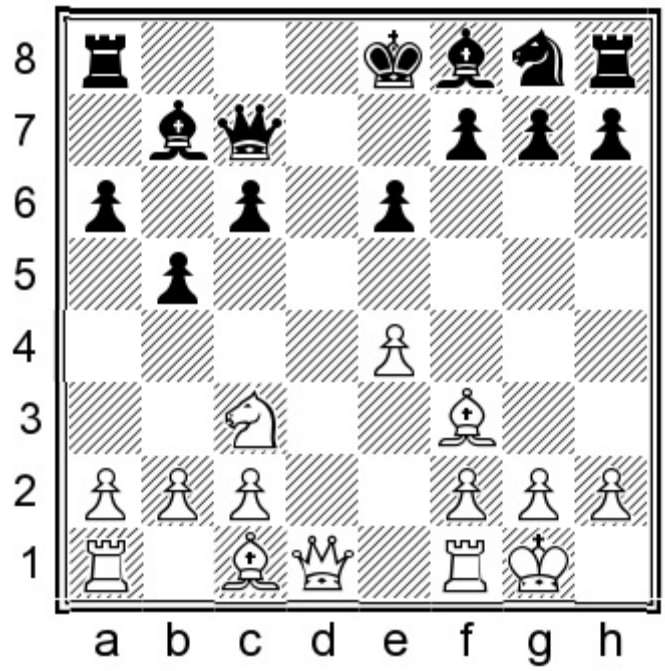


Position after: 12...♗e5!

This typical maneuver improves the bishop's position. This is even better than the thematic 12...e5. 13.♗g2 [13.♘d1 0-0 14.c3 c5 15.♗g2 ♘d7 16.♗e3 ♗d6 17.f3 c4∓ ½-½ (41) Ahmed, E (2337) – Volzhin, A (2548) Cairo 1999.] 13...0-0! 14.♘d1 c5∓

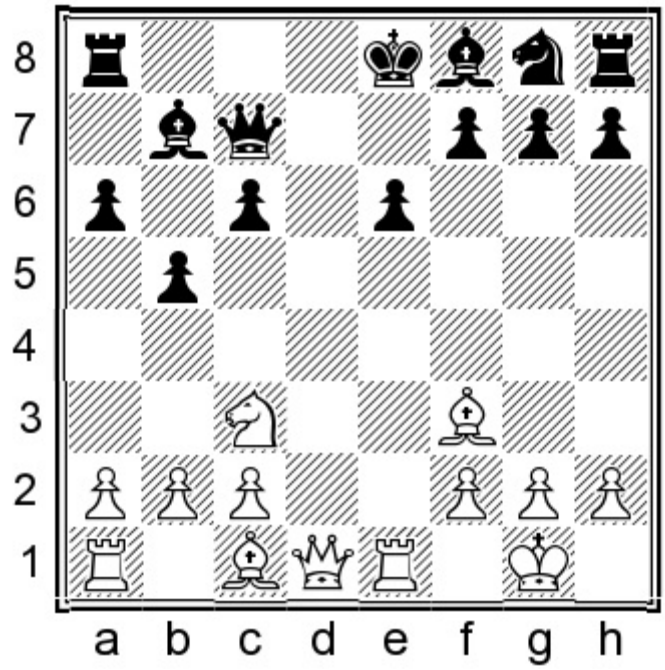
B2) 9.a4 b4□ 10.♘xc6 bxc3 11.♘d4 ♘f6 12.e5 [12.bxc3 Tseshkovsky 12...♗xe4∓.; 12.♖e1 ♗d6=] 12...♗xf3 13.♘xf3 ♘d5 14.b3 ♗c5=

B3) 9.♘xc6 dxc6 to sacrifice or not to sacrifice, that is the question!



Position after: 9...dxc6

B3.1) 10.e5 The famous pawn sacrifice first played by a 15-year-old Garry Kasparov, crushing chess icon Lev Polugaevsky in the Soviet championship in 1978. By now it is known how Black should react to this. 10...♕xe5 11.♖e1 ♕c7



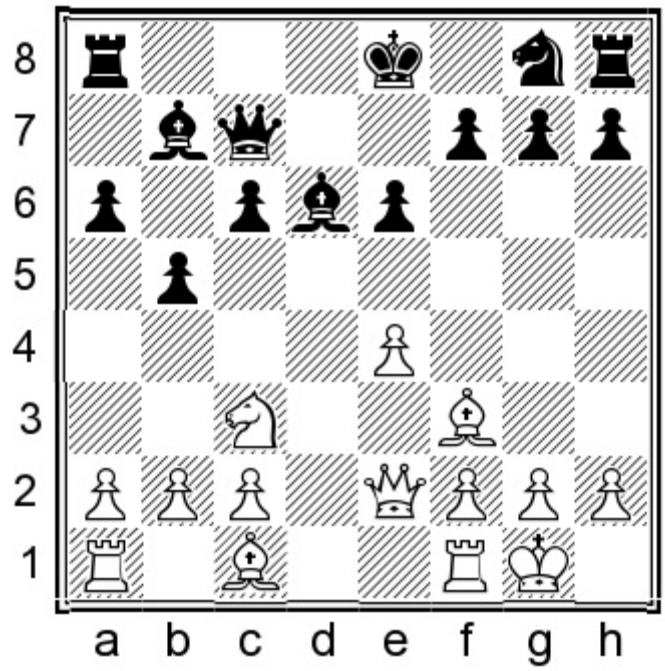
Position after: 11...♕c7

B3.1a) 12.♗h5 ♗e7 13.♖xe6 g6 14.♖e1 [14.♕d4 fxe6 15.♗f4 ♗f6 16.♕e3 e5 17.♗g4 ♔f7 18.♗g3 h5 19.f4 ♖e8 0-1 (19) Bensch, P (2279) – Maiwald, J (2503) Austria 2006.] 14...gxh5! 15.♘e4 ♔f8 16.♕d4 f6∓ 0-1 (40) Wojtkiewicz, A – Ionov, S Jurmala 1980.

B3.1b) 12.a4 ♘f6 13.axb5 axb5 14.♘xb5 cxb5 15.♖xa8+ ♗xa8 16.♗xa8 ♗d6 17.g3 0-0 18.♗g2 b4= and Black is fine. ½ – ½ (49) Navara, D (2707) – Movsesian, S (2718) Czech Republic 2010.

B3.2) 10.♖e1 ♗d6 11.g3 is treated under 9.♖e1.

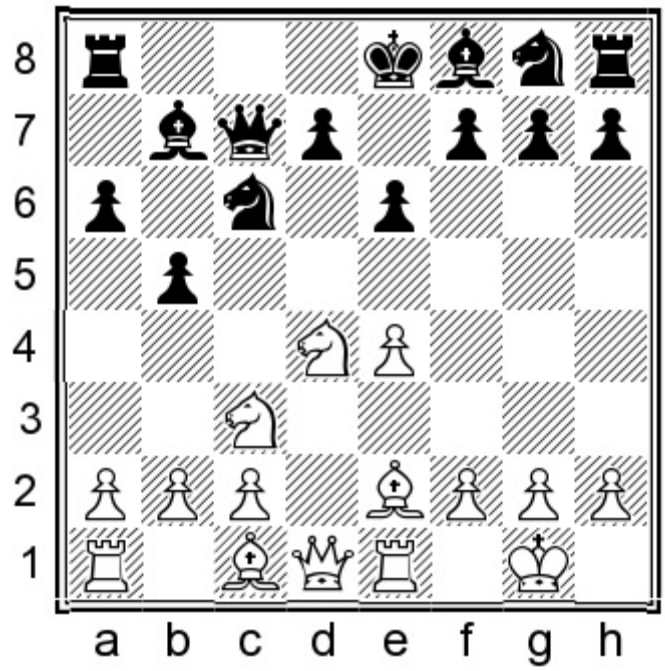
B3.3) 10.♕e2 ♗d6!



Position after: 10...♗d6!

11.g3 ♘f6 12.♗g2 0-0 13.f4 e5∓ Black has kept the position fluid and only now responds with this thematic central thrust against White's f2-f4. 14.f5 White hopes for a quick kingside attack but he receives a rude awakening. 14...a5! White has to do something about the threat of ...♗a6 and/or ...b4. 15.♖d1 b4 16.♘a4 ♗a6 17.♕f3 ♗b5∓ 18.b3 ♗xa4 19.bxa4 ♖fd8 20.♗e3 c5 21.g4 c4 22.g5 ♘d7 23.f6 ♗c5∓ 0-1 (44) Michailov, M (2263) – Jia, H (2331) Chess.com 2020.

8...♘c6



Position after: 8...♘c6

The typical continuation.

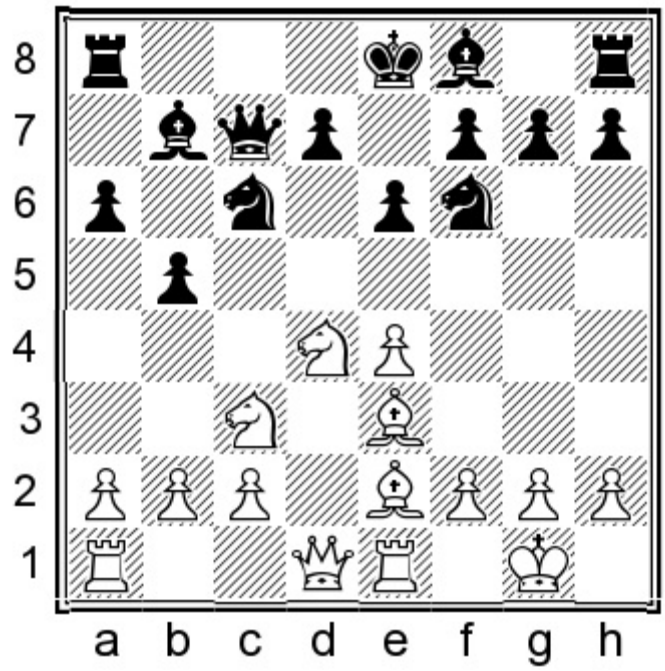
8...b4? has more or less been prevented by White's last move. For example: 9.♘d5 exd5 10.exd5 ♗c5 11.♗h5+ ♔f8 12.♕e2+–.

9.♘xc6

A) 9.♗f3 ♗d6 transposes to 8.♗f3.

B) 9.♘d5 is not a problem. 9...exd5 10.exd5 ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 [11.♗h5+ ♘e6–+] 11...0-0-0! The idea behind 8...♘c6. 12.♗e3 ♖e8 13.c4 ♖xe3 14.♕xe3 ♗c5 15.♕e8+ ♕d8∓

C) 9.♗e3 A main line Taimanov has been reached in which White has played a silly ♖e1 instead of ♗e3. 9...♘f6



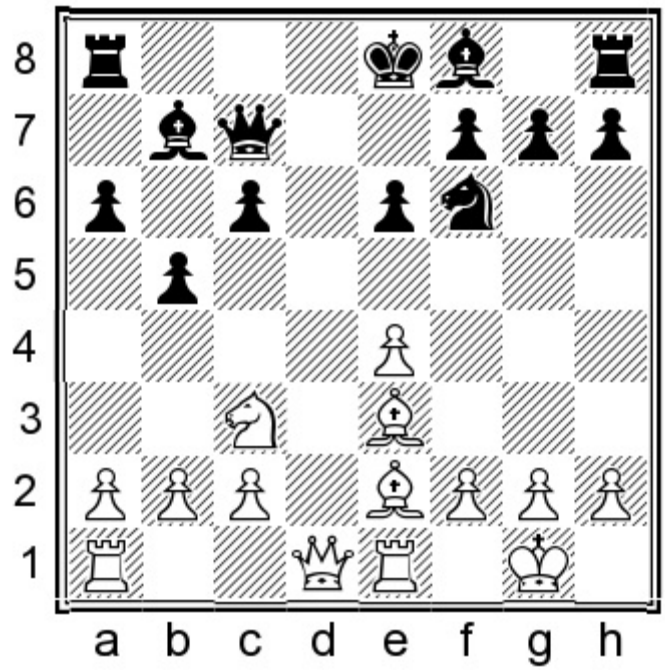
Position after: 9...♘f6

Now White has to be careful that he does not lose material.

C1) 10.a3?! ♘xd4 11.♕xd4 ♗d6 12.f4 [12.g3 ♗e5∓ and Black will pick up material.] 12...♗xf4∓

C2) 10.♗f3 ♘e5 11.♗f4 d6 12.♗g3 [12.♗h5 g6 13.♗e2 b4 14.♘a4 ♘xe4∓ 0-1 (49) Blazquez Gomez, J (2270) – Cramling, P (2504) Cala Galdana 1999.] 12...♗e7 13.♕e2 0-0 14.♖ad1 ♖ac8 15.a4 b4 16.♘a2 ♕b6∓ 0-1 (44) Al Hajiri, B (2165) – Sethuraman, S (2646) Riadh 2017.

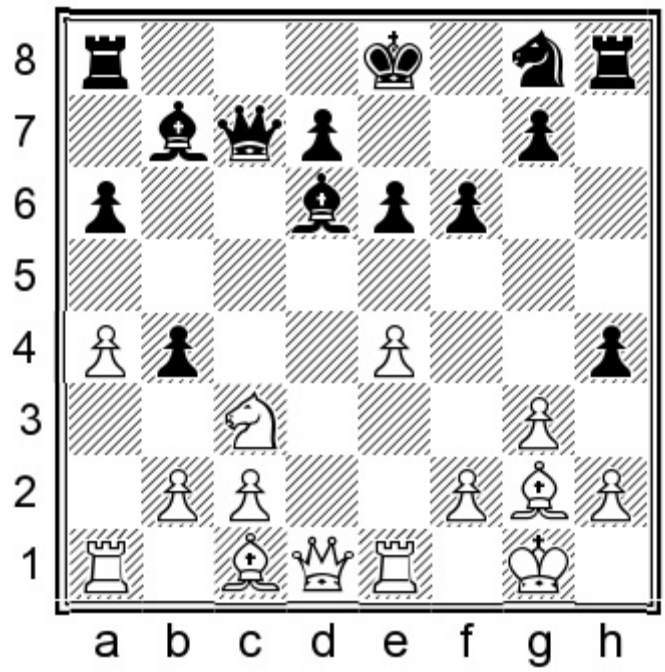
C3) 10.♘xc6 dxc6



Position after: 10...dxc6

11.f4 [11.e5 ♕xe5 12.♗b6!? ♕b8 13.♗h5 g6 14.♕d4 ♗g7 15.♘e4 ♘xh5∓] 11...b4 12.♘a4 ♖d8 13.♗d3 c5 14.♕e2 ♗e7∓

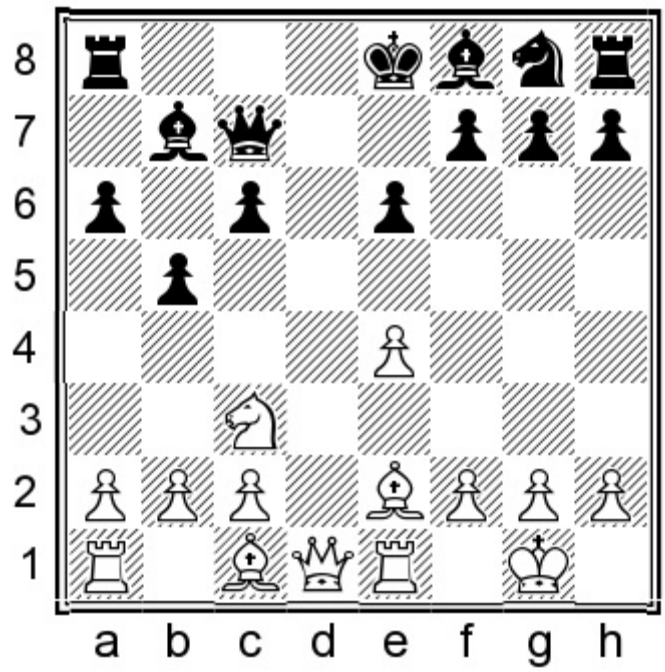
D) 9.♗f1!? Putting the threat of ♘d5 in place again. 9...♘xd4! 10.♕xd4 f6! As once played by GM Normund Miezis who is a specialist in the Sicilian Kan. This takes the sting out of 11.♘d5 as the black king has a safe hiding place on f7. This ensures that black has a playable game. 11.♕d1 [11.♘d5? exd5 12.exd5+ ♔f7–+] 11...♗d6 12.g3 h5 13.♗g2 h4 14.a4 b4



Position after: 14...b4

15.♘e2 [15.♘a2 a5∓] 15...♘e7 16.♗e3 h3 17.♗h1 f5∓

9...dxc6



Position after: 9...dxc6

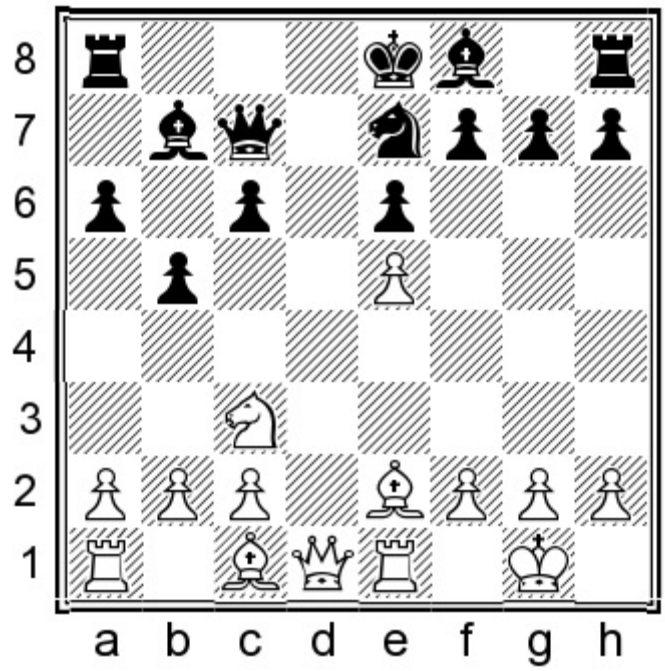
This standard recapture opens the d-file.

10.e5!

Otherwise, Black will gain control of e5 with an easy game. Black cannot take the pawn.

10.a4 is not dangerous. Black has two ways to equalize. 10...♗d6 Milov's line. 11.g3 ♗e5 12.♗d3 ♘f6 13.♗e3 0-0 14.♗c5 ♖fd8∓ 15.f4 0-1 (35) Asrian, K (2600) – Milov, V (2640) Groningen 1998. 15...♘d7!N 16.♗f2 b4∓

10...♘e7



Position after: 10...♘e7

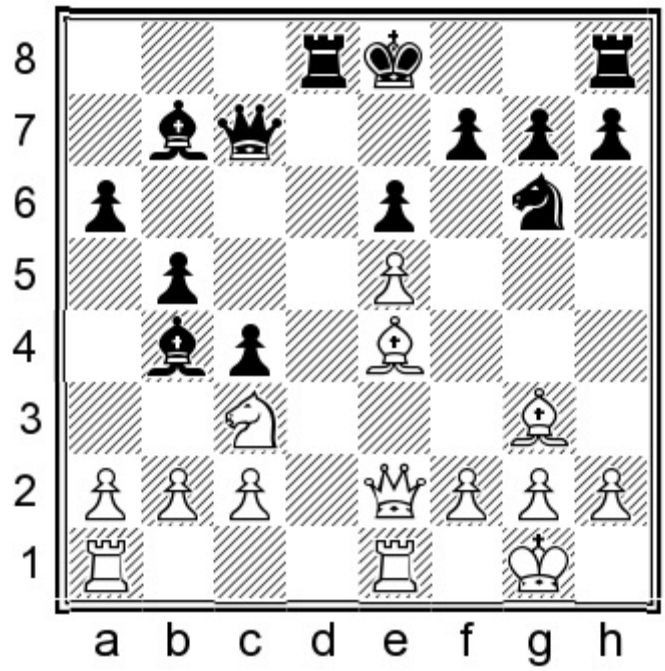
Hellsten sees this as a viable alternative to the main move 10...♖d8. In my opinion it is Black's best move and the only chance for an equal game. It was the preference of Lajos Portisch in this position, and Normund Miezis has given it a try as well. Many games in the database are correspondence games thus we know that 10...♘e7 has been given a proper test.

10...♖d8 Is the preference of theory but I have difficulties recommending it. If Black has done his homework, the best he can hope for is a slightly worse endgame.

11.♗d3

A) 11.a4 ♘g6 [11...♕xe5?! 12.♗xb5± 1-0 (52) Fier, A (2573) – Kekelidze, M (2362) Almaty 2017.] 12.♗d3 ♗e7=

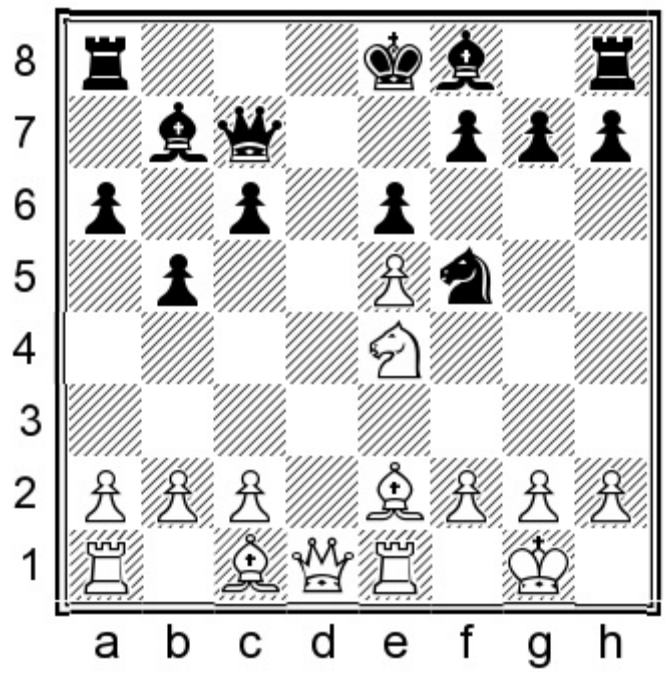
B) 11.♗f4 This is not very difficult for Black to meet. 11...♖d8 with the extra move this maneuver makes sense. 12.♗d3 c5 13.♕e2 ♘g6 14.♗g3 c4! 15.♗e4 ♗b4



Position after: 15...♗b4

After a series of more or less forced moves White is at a critical juncture. 16.h4 [16.♗xb7 ♕xb7 17.♕e3 h5 18.h3 0-0!N 19.a4 ♗xc3 20.bxc3 b4∓] 16...♗xc3 17.bxc3 ♗xe4 18.♕xe4 ♘e7 19.h5 [19.♗f4 0-0 20.♗g5 ♖d5∓] 19...h6 20.♗h4 0-0= with a comfortable position for Black.

C) 11.♘e4 ♘f5!



Position after: 11...♘f5!

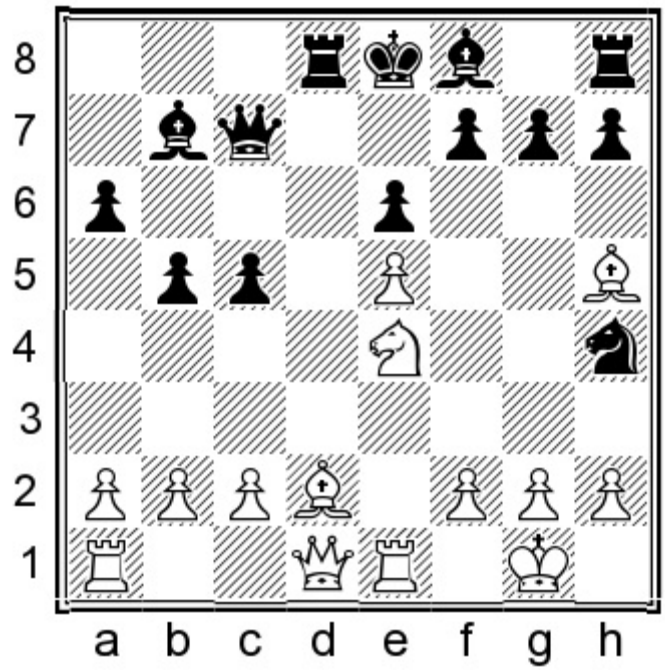
Keeping control of d6. [Not 11...♘d5 12.c4± 1-0 (18) Zemlyanov, S (1883) – Perez, G (1895) corr.

2010.]

C1) 12.g4 ♘h4 13.♘d6+ ♗xd6 14.exd6 ♕d7=

C2) 12.♗f4 ♖d8 13.♗d3 c5! 14.♕h5 ♕c6 Black has created sufficient counterplay. White needs to play precisely so that he does not lose the balance. 15.♗g5! [15.♕h3 c4!N 16.♘f6+ gxf6 17.♗xf5 ♖d4 18.exf6 ♖xf4 19.♗xe6 ♕xg2+ 20.♕xg2 ♗xg2 21.♗d5+ ♔d8 22.♗xg2 ♗c5=] 15...♖d7 16.♖ad1 h6 17.c3 ♗e7 18.♗xe7 ♔xe7 19.♗c2 ♖hd8= 20.♖xd7+ ♖xd7 21.g4 ♖d2 22.gxf5 exf5 23.♗b1 g5!. ½ – (35) ½ (35) Pereira, N (2246) – Leite, D (2324) corr. 2016.

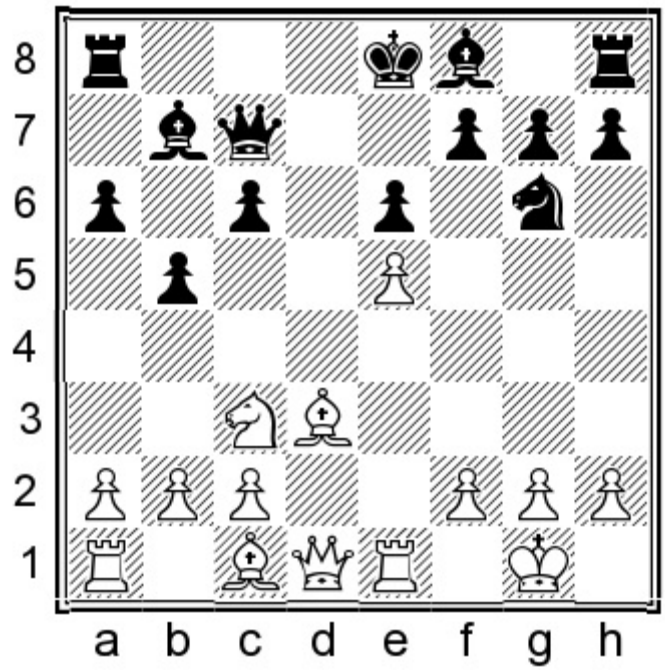
C3) 12.♗g4 ♖d8 13.♗d2 ♘h4 14.♗h5 c5



Position after: 14...c5

15.♕g4 ♘g6 16.♗g5 ♖d4 17.c3 ♖xe4 18.♖xe4 ♗xe4 19.♕xe4 ♗e7 20.♗xe7 [20.♕a8+ ♕d8 21.♕xd8+ ♔xd8 22.♗e3 ♘xe5 23.a4 bxa4 24.♖xa4 ♔c7 25.♖xa6 ♖b8=] 20...♔xe7 21.♗xg6 hxg6= ½ – ½ (24) Altieri, C (2175) – Alves Farias, S (2232) corr. 2014.

11...♘g6!



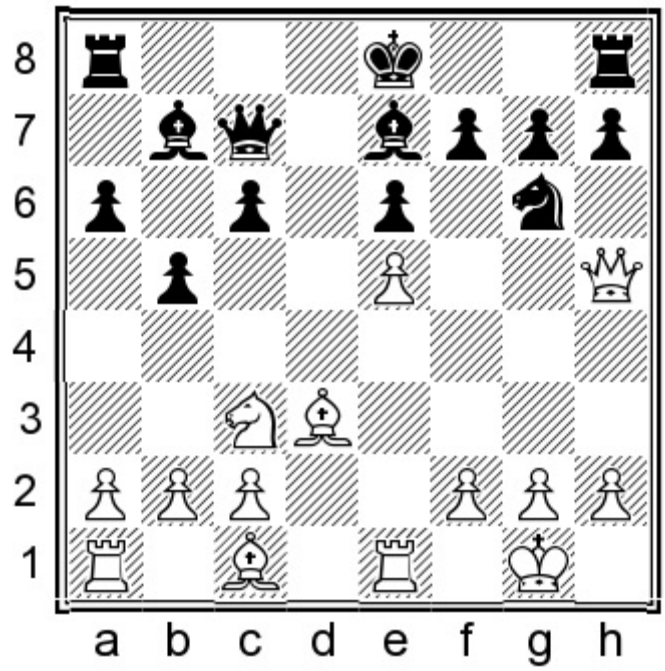
Position after: 11...♘g6!

12.♕h5

A) 12.♘e4 0-0-0! soon Black will have an extra pawn and ...0-0-0 has become attractive again. 13.a4 [13.♕h5 ♕xe5∓; 13.♘d6+ ♗xd6 14.exd6 ♖xd6 15.♕e2 ♖d7=] 13...♕xe5 14.♗d2 b4 15.♘g5 ♕c7=

B) 12.a4 ♗e7 13.♘e4 ♖d8 14.♘d6+ ♗xd6 15.exd6 ♕xd6 16.♕g4 0-0 17.♗g5 ♖d7=

12...♗e7!



Position after: 12...♗e7!

As played by Lajos Portisch, an expert on the Kan, at the end of the last century.

13.♗g5

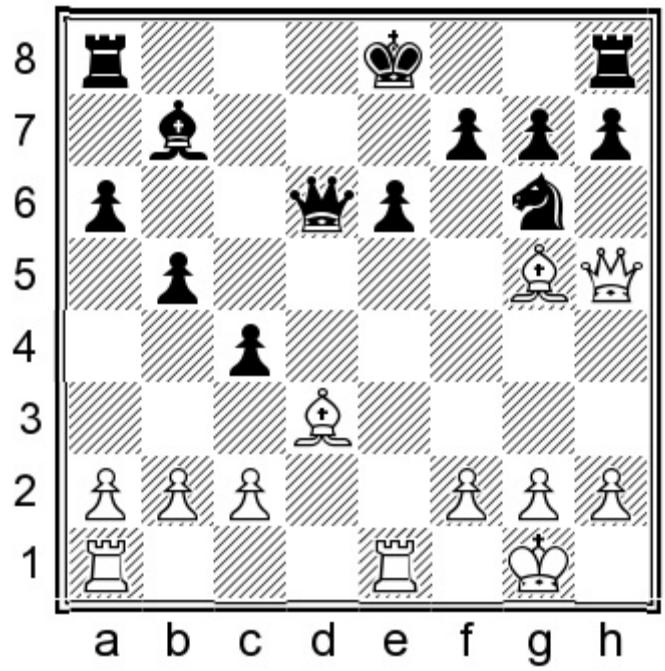
A) 13.a4 b4 14.♘e2 c5 15.♘f4 ♘xf4 16.♗xf4 c4 17.♗e4 ♗xe4 18.♖xe4 ♕c6 19.♖ee1 0-0∓

B) 13.♗xg6 fxg6 14.♕h3 0-0 15.♕xe6+ ♔h8 16.♕g4 ♖f5⩱ Black has excellent compensation for the pawn.

13...c5! 14.♘e4

14.♗xe7 ♕xe7 15.♘e4 0-0 16.♖e3 ♗xe4 17.♗xe4 ♖ad8 18.♖h3 h6 19.♗xg6 fxg6 20.♕xg6 ♕f7 21.♕xf7+ ♖xf7 22.♖c3 ♖d2 23.♖f1 c4= The double rook ending is a draw.

14...c4 15.♘d6+ ♗xd6 16.exd6 ♕xd6



Position after: 16...♕xd6

17.♗xg6 fxg6 18.♖ad1 ♕b6 19.♕e2 0-0=

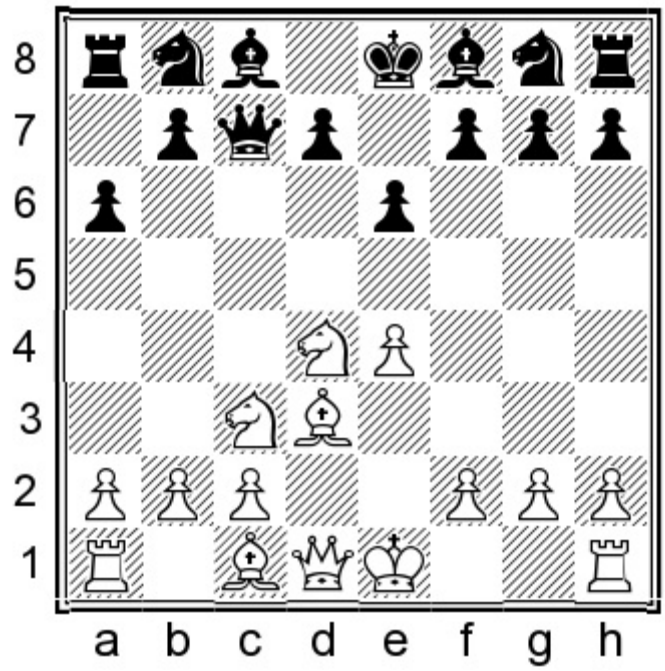
The bishops of opposite colors ensure that this ending is a draw.

Conclusion

The Sicilian Kan with 5...♕c7 6.♗e2 is one of the highroads of opening theory, aiming for the classical positions of the Scheveningen or the Taimanov. White plays a straightforward and attractive game, not worried about a pawn more or less. Black has to be careful. In order to avoid the theory of those two openings, Black should play 6...b5. The use of strong engines has changed the view on one of the main lines after 6...b5, i.e., 7.0-0 ♗b7 8.♖e1 ♘c6 9.♘xc6 dxc6 10.e5. It used to be thought that Black could create counterplay with 10...♖d8 11.♗d3 c5, but 12.♕e2! is difficult to meet as the analysis shows. As a result, Black has turned to the alternative 10...♘e7, an old-time favorite of Lajos Portisch. After the natural 11.♗d3 ♘g6 12.♕h5 Black must remain accurate but obtaining equal positions must then be within reach.

j) 6.♗d3 - Introduction

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.♗d3



Position after: 6.♗d3

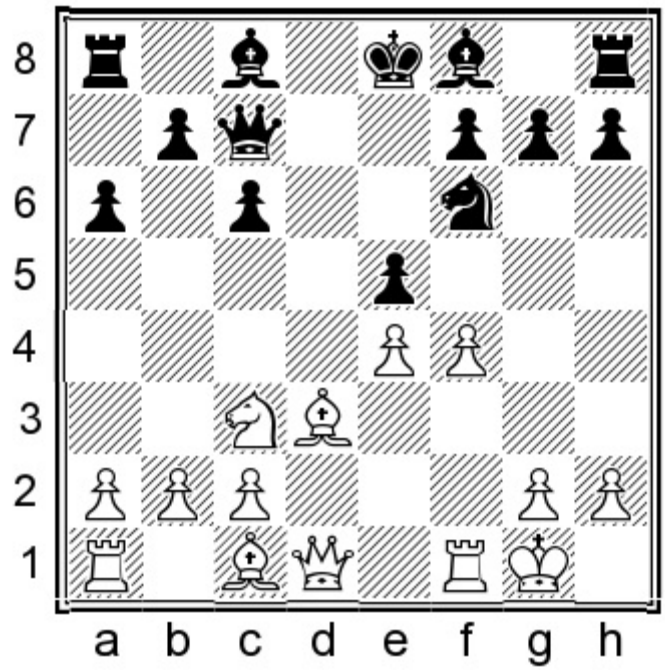
The most active move for White in this position. This is the critical test of the 5.♘c3 ♕c7 Sicilian Kan. White develops naturally and defends the e-pawn against potential queenside action by Black. The bishop stands ready for action against Black's kingside, and the e-file is left open for a future ♕e2/♖e1 in order to prepare e5 or ♘d5. Many theoretical sources treat this line from Black's perspective. For a nice summary of the most challenging lines Black has to face from White's perspective I can recommend the analysis in "Dismantling the Sicilian" by de la Villa & Illingworth.

6...♘f6

The most popular continuation.

A) 6...g6?! it is not the right time for this move. 7.♗e3 ♗g7 8.♕d2± White can still establish an anti – Dragon position.

B) 6...♘c6 is an option for Black I have seriously considered as my repertoire suggestion. Unfortunately, the main line is not good enough to create any serious counter chances for Black. It is just easier for White to play. 7.♘xc6! dxc6 8.0-0 e5 9.f4 ♘f6



Position after: 9...♘f6

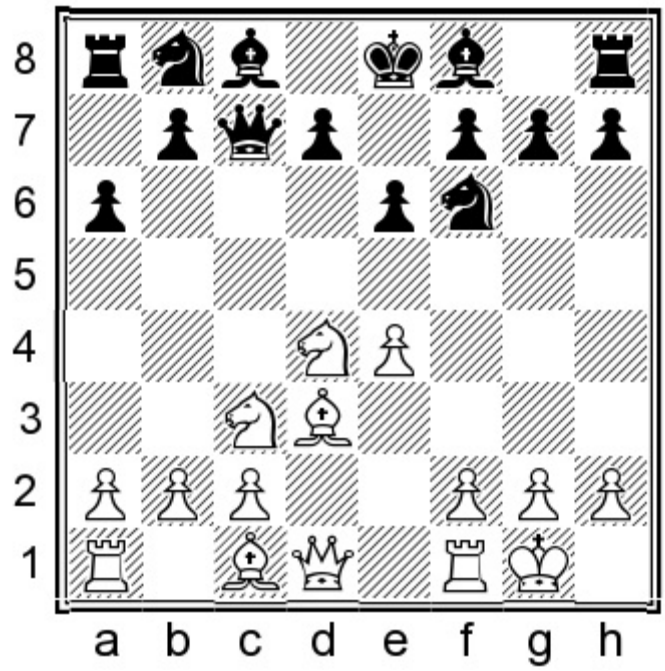
By far the most popular line with more than 400 entries in the database. It has been played a lot by GMs including Miezis, Korneev and Zapata. Black wants to keep a flexible and active piece configuration.

B1) 10.fxe5 The most popular move and often seen at the amateur level is exactly what Black has been waiting for. 10...♘g4!∓

B2) 10.a4!? on the other hand is an interesting alternative. It is the line analyzed by de la Villa & Illingworth.

B3) 10.♔h1! White anticipates a future ...♗c5 and keeps the position fluid for now. 10...♗d6 11.f5± This has been seen in some 200 games. Black's position is cramped. In various lines he has to fight for a draw.

7.0-0



Position after: 7.0-0

This is the starting point of our analysis of the Sicilian Kan with 6.♗d3. Black develops according to hedgehog principles. In general, we will focus on those variations where Black develops his kingside first, preferably with ...g6, although that is not always possible. Queenside expansion with ...b5 is kept in store for later. An early ...b5 gives White too many opportunities on the queenside. White will challenge our pawns with an immediate a4 b4 ♘a2 followed by c3, and our pawn chain collapses. Alternatively, ♗d2 and b4 followed by a4 give White a healthy initiative on the queenside as well. Therefore, as a rule of thumb, kingside development has priority. We wait with ....b5 until we are ready on the kingside and until we are sure our queenside activity will survive White's countermeasures. As mentioned, we try to execute the modern ...g6 followed by ...♗g7, instead of the traditional ...♗e7. The black bishop has more influence on g7 than on e7. The pawn on g6 provides extra security to the kingside and prepares for ...e5 to clear the center without being surprised by ♘f5. As White has put his bishop on d3 there is little risk that White will put a lot of pressure on our d-pawn. Unfortunately, ...g6 is only feasible in exceptional circumstances if White has been too cautious in the opening. If White is a bit alert, he can prevent it and punish us with quick breakthroughs in the center, sacrifices on b5 or attacks on the kingside if we try ...g6 anyway. In general, ...g6 works well if White has spent time on slow developing moves, for example ♔h1 and ♗d2, and refrains from the most active f4 and ♕e2. In other cases, we must defend carefully against White's attacking plans and play ...♗e7. In the analysis we will regularly look at the possibilities of ...b5 and/or ...g6 in order to understand whether these moves are appropriate or not at that particular moment. By understanding these ideas, we will get an understanding of White's thematic antidote to any of these moves.

A) 7.♕e2 ♗d6!? with the queen misplaced the bishop move makes good sense. This will be investigated in another section.

B) 7.f4 ♗b4! is the other line we will look into in the next chapter as well.

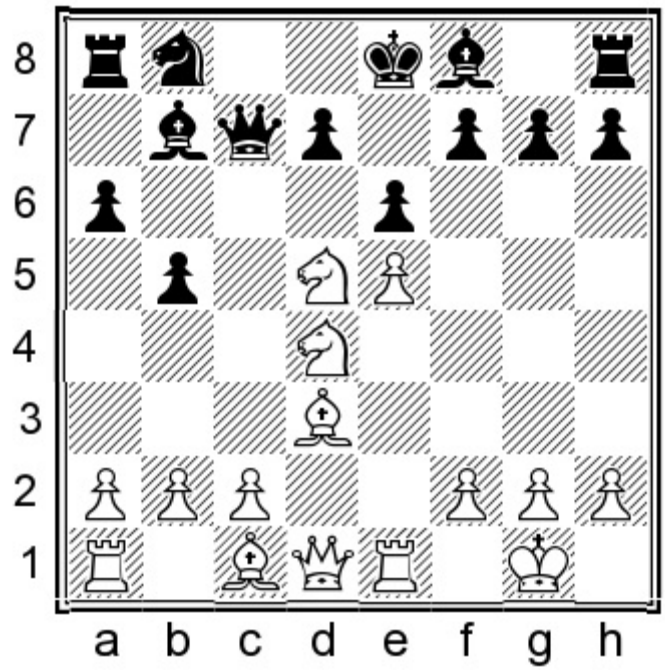
7...d6

In the diagrammed position 8.f4 is the absolute main line closely followed by 8.a4 and 8.♕e2. White also often plays 8.♔h1 but that normally transposes into one of the three main lines.

A) 7...b5 is rather risky at this stage of the game. White plays 8.♖e1! threatening e5 and potentially ♘d5.

A1) 8...d6 9.a4 b4 10.♘a2 e5 [10...♗b7 11.♘xb4±] 11.♘f3 ♘c6 12.♗d2± followed by c3.

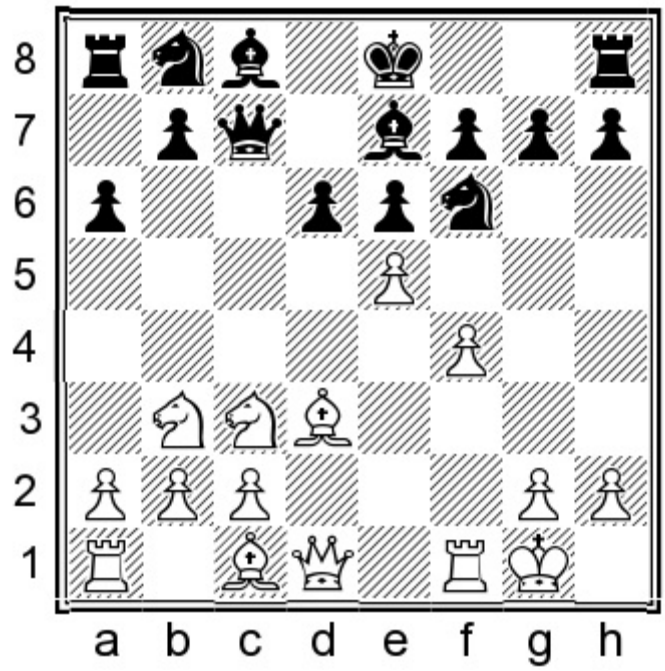
A2) 8...♗b7 9.e5 ♘d5 10.♘xd5



Position after: 10.♘xd5

10...♗xd5 11.a4 b4 12.♕g4!± ½ – ½ (25) Felgaer, R (2574) – Flores, D (2548) Buenos Aires 2008.

B) 7...♗c5 is a line that Hellsten devotes an entire chapter to in his book, but his concept is flawed. 8.♘b3 ♗e7 was Hellsten idea with an improved hedgehog in mind with the white knight less active on b3. [8...♗a7!? This is actually safer than the retreat to e7. It has recently attracted attention at the elite level although White tends to do good business with this version as well.] 9.f4 d6 10.e5!

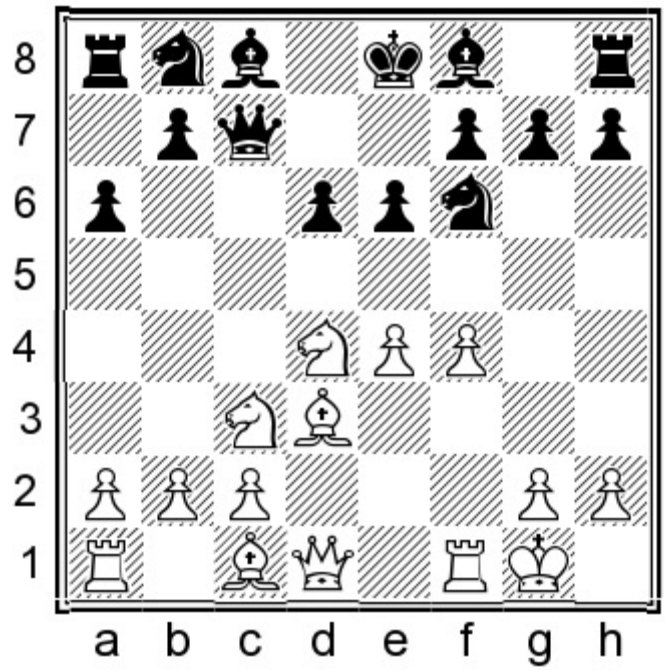


Position after: 10.e5!

This maneuver was already known in the early 1990s. 10...dxe5 11.fxe5 ♕xe5 12.♗f4 ♕h5 13.♗e2 ♕g6 14.h4!± Kozul was the last grandmaster to fall victim to this clever idea. Black›s position is a mess. 1-0 (27) Mihok, O (2559) – Kozul, Z (2593) Hungary 2020.

C) 7...♗e7!? is a subtle and interesting alternative to the main line recommended by some sources. It makes White's immediate 8.f4 less attractive because Black can respond with 8...♗c5. Still, I prefer the text move because I would like to keep the option open for the fianchetto of the dark-squared bishop on g7.

8.f4



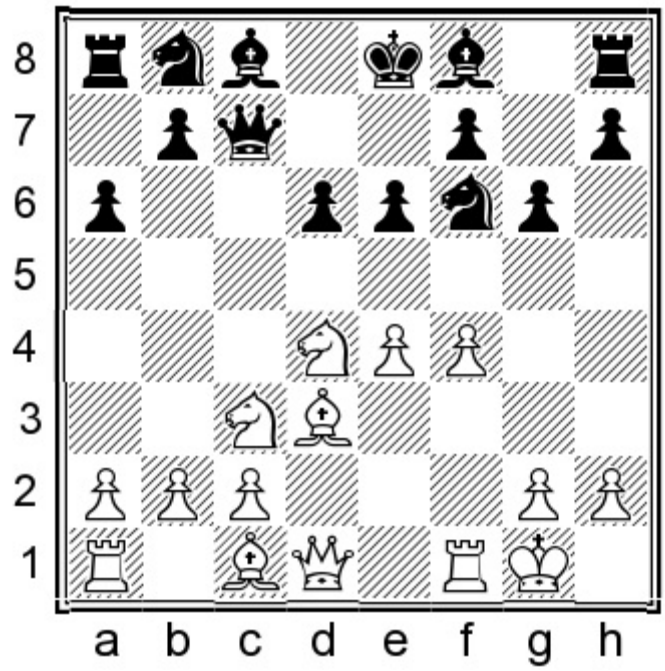
Position after: 8.f4

The most challenging setup for White.

8...♘bd7

de la Villa & Illingworth agree that this is Black's best. Black overprotects the e5-square and thus excludes all ideas based on a quick e4-e5 for the time being. By leaving the dark-squared bishop on f8 Black keeps the option open for kingside development with ...g7-g6, although, with the knight on d7, White's f4-f5 often becomes too strong as the e6-pawn is not well defended anymore by the bishop on c8.

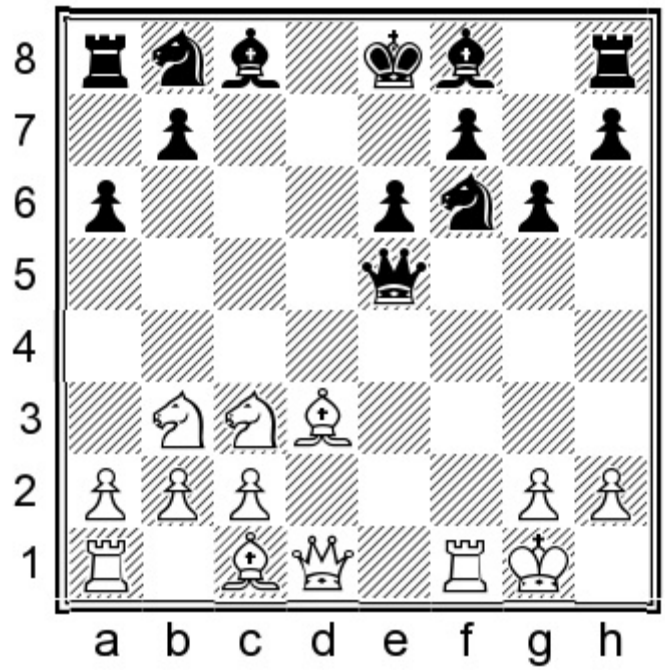
A) 8...g6?! This is recommended by Baldauf & Seyb, but it is rather risky. If Black is allowed to develop calmly he would indeed be okay. However, Black is having a difficult time after two more aggressive approaches by White.



Position after: 8...g6?!

A1) 9.♕e2 White aims for a quick central breakthrough. The main line runs as follows. 9...♗g7 10.e5!? dxe5 11.♘db5! axb5 12.♘xb5 ♕e7 13.fxe5 0-0 Black cannot keep his extra piece. [13...♘d5 14.♘d6++–] 14.exf6 ♗xf6 this is a line most of the time reached via the Sicilian Kan with 5.♗d3. Negi recommends it for White, whereas Baldauf & Seyb assess Black to have sufficient defensive resources. There has not been a lot of experience with it yet, but practical results tend to favour White

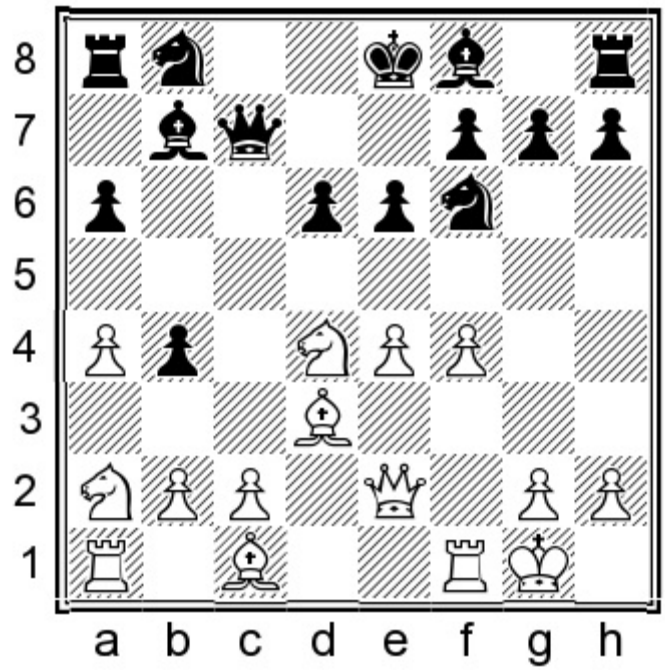
A2) 9.e5 Even more aggressive than in the line with 9.♕e2. This is recommended by de la Villa & Illingworth. White sacrifices a pawn. 9...dxe5 10.fxe5 ♕xe5 11.♘b3!



Position after: 11.♘b3!

11...♘bd7 12.♗f4 ♕h5 13.♗e2 ♕h4 14.g3 ♕h3 15.♕d4± 1-0 (37) Vocaturo, D (2570) – Siebrecht, S (2439) Wijk aan Zee 2011.

B) 8...b5 Hellsten's preference 9.♕e2! ♗b7 10.a4! b4 11.♘a2.



Position after: 11.♘a2

The thematic way to break up the queenside. 11...♘bd7! [11...♗e7 12.♘xb4 ♕c5 13.c3 e5 14.fxe5 dxe5 15.♗e3 exd4 16.♗xd4±] 12.♘xb4 [12.c3?! ♘c5 13.♗c2 b3 14.♗xb3 ♘xb3 15.♘xb3 ♗xe4]

12...♘c5! 13.e5! ♘fe4 Hellsten's analysis stops here, claiming that Black has sufficient compensation for the pawn. 14.c3! [Or 14.♘xa6 ♗xa6 15.♗xa6 ♖xa6 16.b4±.] 14...♘xd3! 15.♘xd3 ♗e7 [15...dxe5 16.fxe5±] 16.a5± White is better developed and has an extra pawn.

9.♕e2

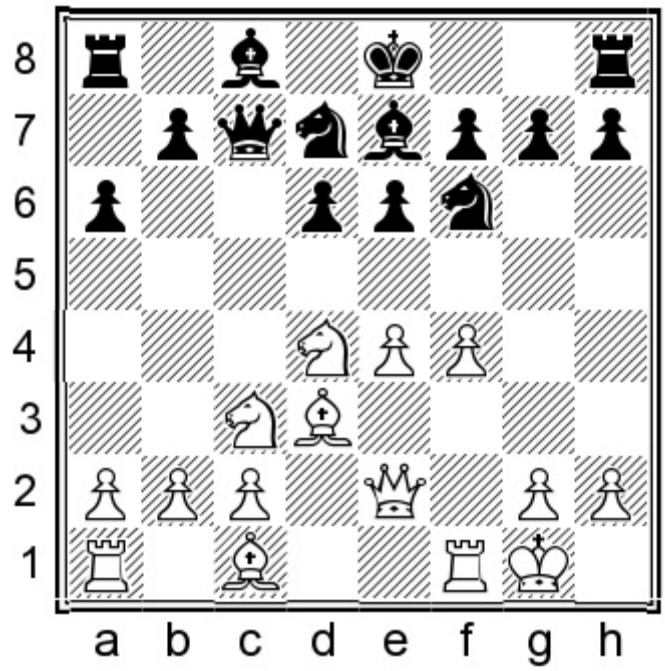
This is the critical move order (8.f4 and 9.♕e2) which significantly reduces the options Black has to complete his development. An early 9...g6 or an early 9...b5 by Black have both been prevented.

A) 9.♘f3 This is an old-fashioned move that you do not see very often these days. It works well if Black plays a quick ...e5. White exchanges on e5 and uses the open f-file to launch an attack on the kingside. Instead of ...e5 Black has various other methods to respond to White's idea.

B) 9.♕f3 White focuses his attention on the kingside and takes an aggressive attacking position. White's dark-squared bishop tends to be developed to e3. In this situation White is less well geared for play on the queenside thus ...b5 by Black is one of the maneuvers which comes to mind. Black now has 9...g6! Which works well against the ♕f3 systems as Black has ...♘e5 as an intermediate move after White's f4-f5.

C) 9.♔h1 Often this leads to the main line but White prevents any complications associated with a quick ...♕b6. This is the move order preferred by de la Villa & Illingworth. 9...♗e7 10.♕f3 [10.♕e2 is the main line.] 10...b5! Note that with the queen on f3 Black can more easily play ...b5. 11.♗d2 ♗b7 12.♖ae1 b4!?= Black follows with ...♘c5 and has good counterplay.

9...♗e7

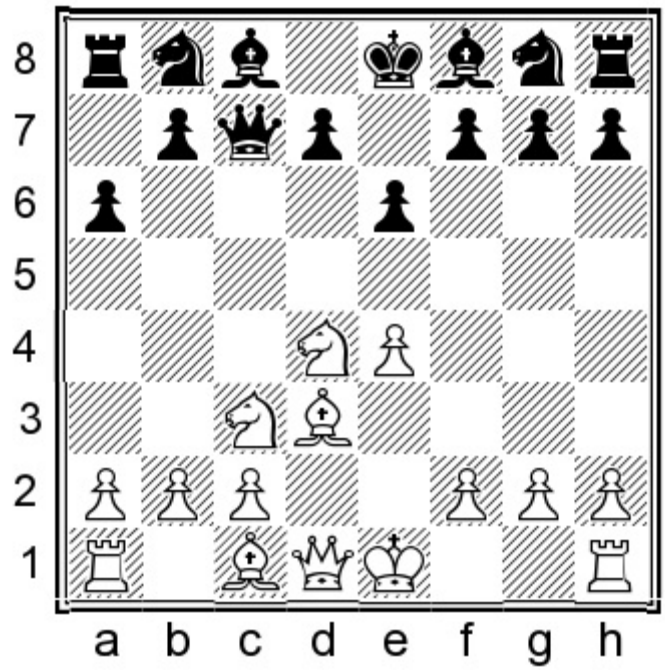


Position after: 9...♗e7

Black is more or less forced to develop his bishop on e7. Running down the list of candidate moves, the obvious alternatives for Black all have their issues. Black has nearly completed his development, albeit without a kingside or a queenside fianchetto. From here White has many options which will be further investigated in the chapter on 8.f4 and 9.♕e2.

k) 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.♗d3

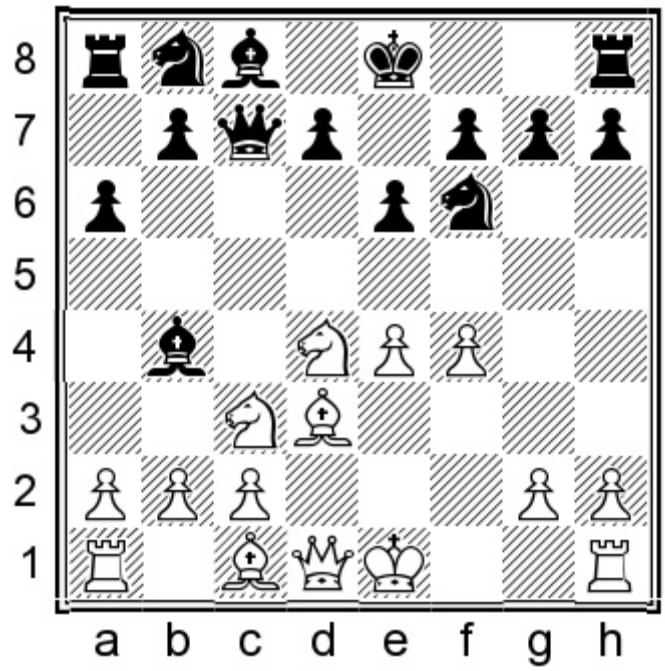


Position after: 6.♗d3

6...♘f6 7.♕e2!?

Just like in the position after 7.f4 d6 8.♕e2 White tries to “move order” us into a Scheveningen position without 0-0.

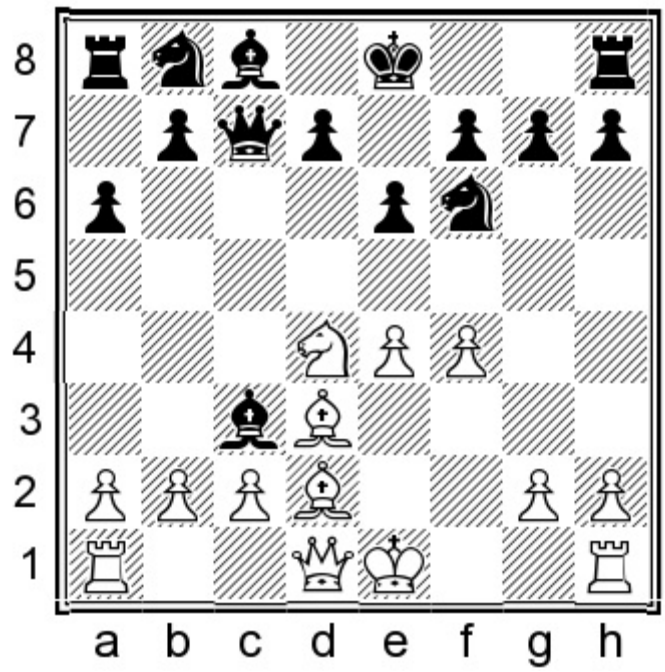
7.f4 In the first edition of the popular “Dismantling the Sicilian” (2009), this was the recommended move. As a result, it became a regular guest in over the board practice and correspondence games. In the second edition of the book (2017) the authors changed to 7.0-0, acknowledging that Black’s next move provides him with more than sufficient counterplay. The interest in 7.f4 has since waned.
7...♗b4!



Position after: 7...♗b4!

Developing quickly and increasing the pressure against c3.

A) 8.♗d2 ♗xc3! The principled continuation.

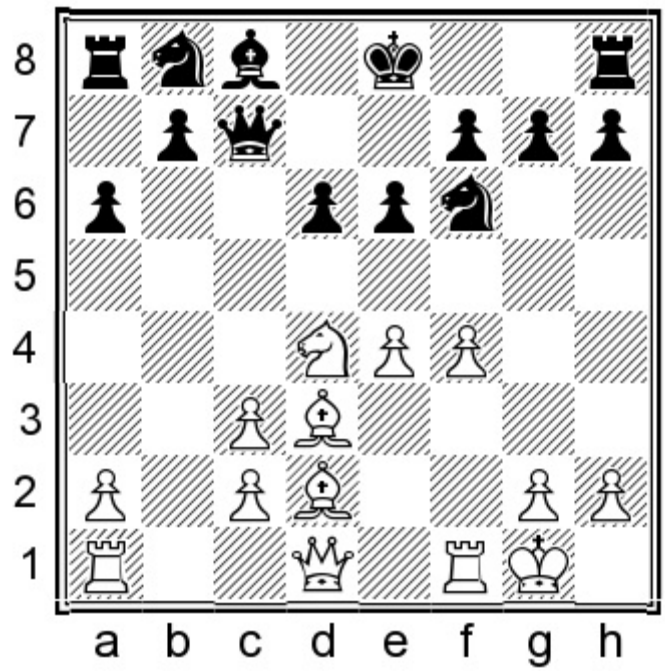


Position after: 8...♗xc3!

A1) The c-pawn has been saved after 9.♗xc3 but now comes 9...♕xf4! winning the f-pawn. 10.♕e2 d6 11.♘f3 e5! 12.♗b4 [12.0-0 ♕g4=] 12...d5 13.♗d2 ♕g4 14.exd5 0-0 15.♘xe5 ♕xe2+ 16.♗xe2 ♖e8= with a balanced endgame.½ – ½ (25) Balzert, A (2360) – Campant, B (2432) corr.

2012.

A2) 9.bxc3 was tested in a number of correspondence games but White failed to gain any advantage. 9...d6 10.0-0

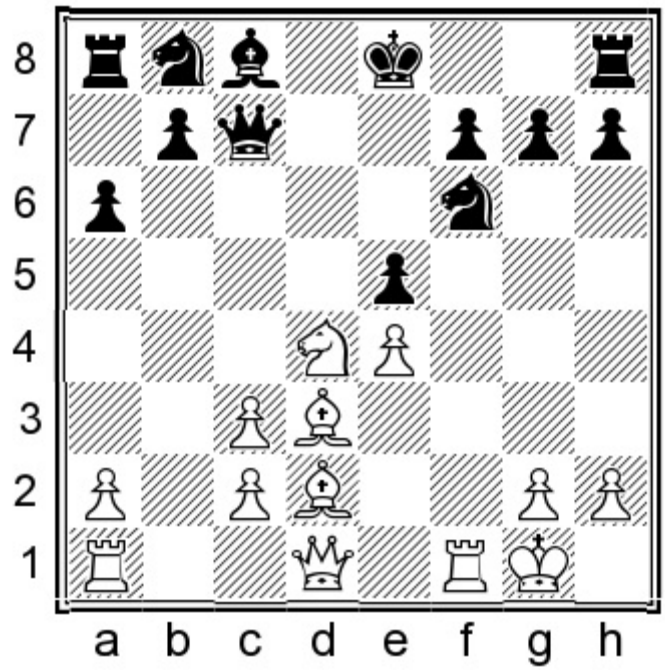


Position after: 10.0-0

10...e5!

A2.1) 11.♘b3 ♘bd7 12.fxe5 [12.f5?! This looks quite natural, but it gives Black an excellent position. 12...b5 13.a4 ♗b7 14.axb5 axb5 15.♖xa8+ ♗xa8 16.♕e2 0-0∓ 0-1 (42) Tyutyunnik, R (2364) – Philippart, C corr. 2009.] 12...dxe5 13.c4 a5 14.♕e1 b6 15.c5 a4 16.cxb6 ♕xb6+ 17.♗e3 ♕d6= ½ – ½ (31) Van Leeuwen, E (2484) – Kruis, R (2486) corr. 2012.

A2.2) Putting a familiar pawn structure in place which we have seen many times in the O'Kelly. The white bishop is inactive on d2. 11.fxe5 dxe5

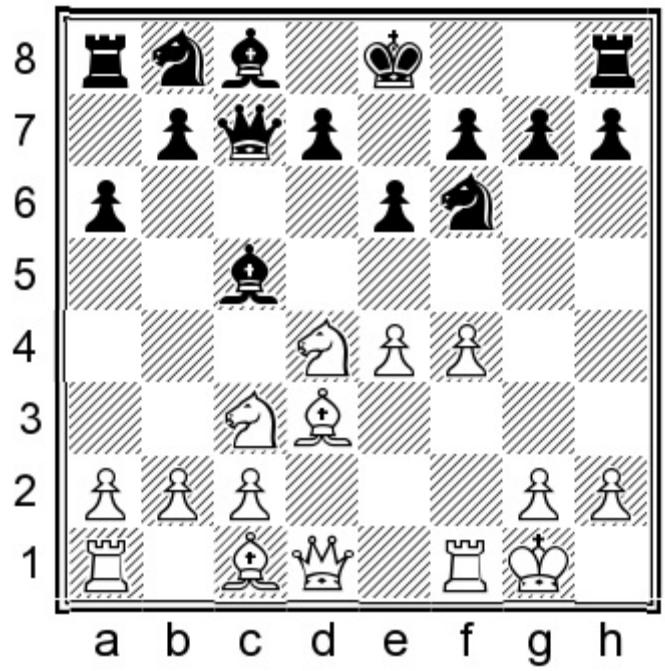


Position after: 11...dxe5

12.♕e1 [12.♘f5 ♗xf5 13.♖xf5 ♘bd7 14.♕f3 0-0 15.♖f1 ♖ae8! 16.g4 ♖e7=] 12...exd4 13.cxd4 ♘c6 14.e5 ♘g4 15.h3 ♘xd4! 16.hxg4 ♘c6 17.♕f2 ♗e6 18.♖ae1 ♖c8= ½ – ½ (46) Doderer, H (2312) – Ruokokoski, H (2312) corr. 2018.

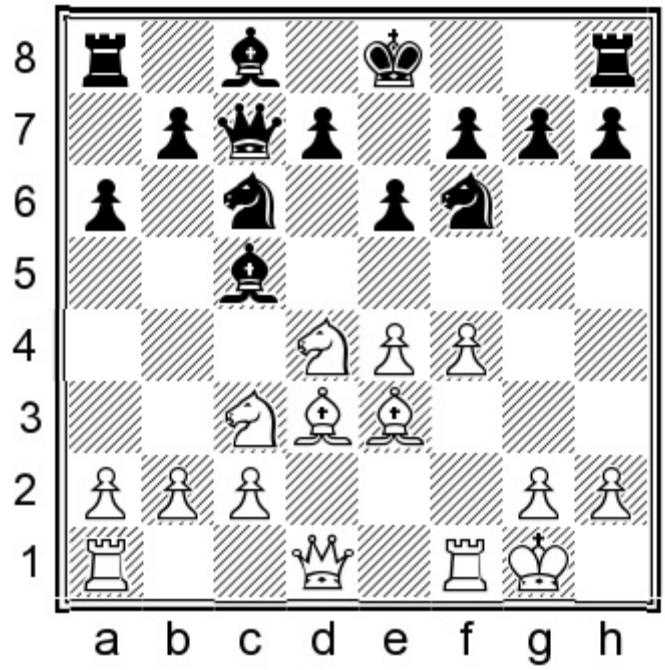
B) 8.♘b3 ♗xc3+ 9.bxc3 d6! with a quiet game. Black will develop his kingside before taking the c3-pawn. 10.♗a3 [10.0-0 ♘bd7 11.a4 0-0 12.♕e1 b6= 1-0 (32) Vergara Rodriguez, J (1544) – Csernus, R (1610) corr. 2015] 10...0-0 11.♕d2 ♖d8 d6 is well defended. 12.0-0 ♘bd7 13.♖ad1 e5= once again we have a structure we have seen before in the 3. d4 line. Strictly speaking it is equal, but Black has an easier game

C) 8.0-0 White is not concerned about the c3-pawn. 8...♗c5!



Position after: 8...♗c5!

A nice retreat! Black is not interested in the c3 pawn but hunts for bigger game. 9.♗e3 ♘c6 White has an issue he needs to sort out.

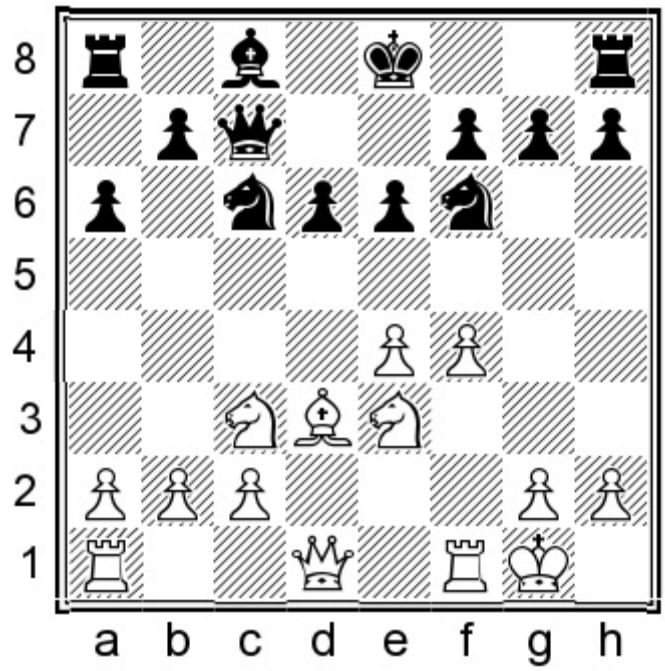


Position after: 9...♘c6

C1) 10.♗e2 ♕b6! 11.♘a4 ♗xd4 12.♘xb6 ♗xe3+ 13.♔h1 ♗xb6∓ The material balance is equal, but Black's game with three pieces against the queen is much easier to play. 14.♗f3 0-0 15.e5 ♘e8 16.♕d3 ♗c7 17.♖ad1 d6 18.exd6 ♗xd6 19.♗e4 h6 20.g4 ♗c7 21.♕a3 f5!∓ ½ – ½ (28) Fernandez

Vicente, C (2408) – Dibley, S (2466) corr. 2009.

C2) 10.♘f5 This was all the rage in the 1990s, but it was already played as early as 1967. 10...♗xe3+! The safest option. Other moves are quite dangerous for Black. We reach a normal Sicilian position after 11.♘xe3 d6.

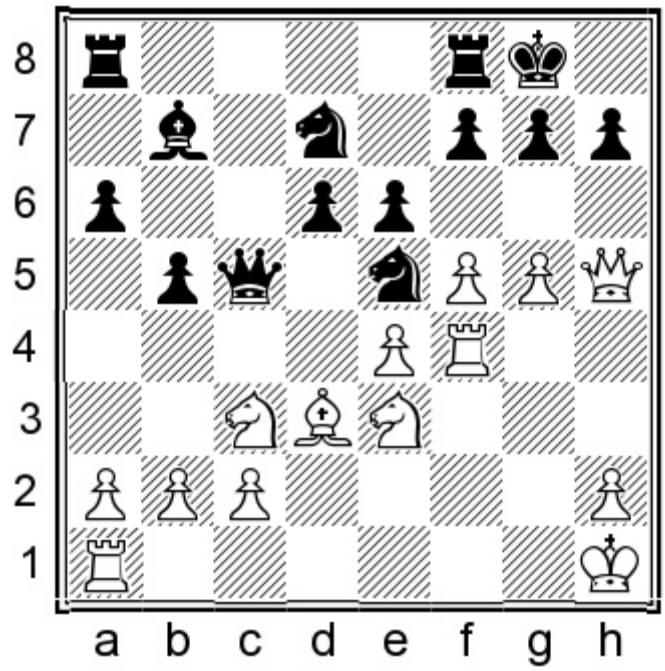


Position after: 11...d6

Although the knight is a bit unusual on e3 Black has more than enough resources to weather the storm on the kingside. The most frequent continuation is 12.♔h1 0-0 13.g4 b5 14.g5 ♘d7 15.♕h5 [15.♖f3 ♗b7 16.♖h3 g6 17.♕g4 ♘d4 18.♕h4 h5 19.gxh6 b4 20.♘cd1 ♕d8= 0-1 (37) Ramesh, R (2415) – Miles, A (2635) Sakthi 1996.] 15...♗b7 16.f5 ♘ce5. The other knight has to keep control over f6.

C2.1) 17.f6?! ♕c5! 18.♖ae1 [18.fxg7 ♔xg7 19.♘g2 ♔h8 20.♖f4 ♖g8∓ 0-1 (31) Zezulkin, J (2473) – Tregubov, P (2570) Rowy 1999.] We have been following Timman, J (2620) – Short, N (2665) 0-1 (56) Amsterdam 1996. Black -could have obtained an advantage with 18...gxf6!N 19.gxf6 ♔h8 20.♖f4 ♖g8∓ 21.♖h4? ♘xf6–+.

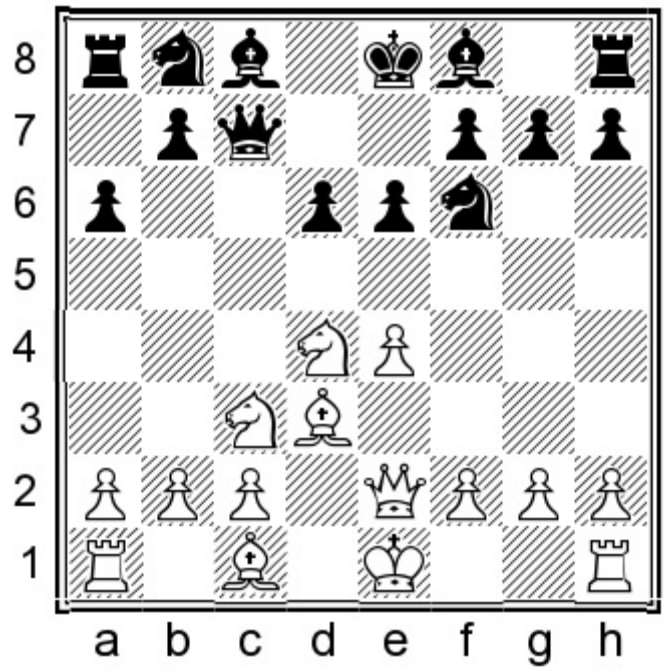
C2.2) 17.♖f4 ♕c5!



Position after: 17...♕c5!

Always the key move to at least equality. 18.♖h4 h6 19.♖e1 [19.gxh6 g6 20.fxg6 ♘xg6∓] 19...♖fe8=

7...d6



Position after: 7...d6

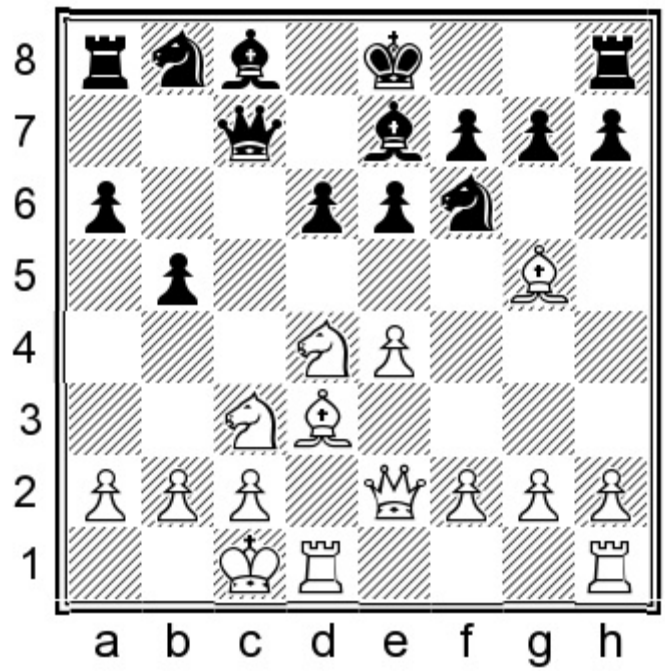
This natural move prevents 8.e5.

8.f4

The immediate expansion on the kingside is the most principled approach in this position.

A) 8.0-0 transposes to the main line with 7.0-0.

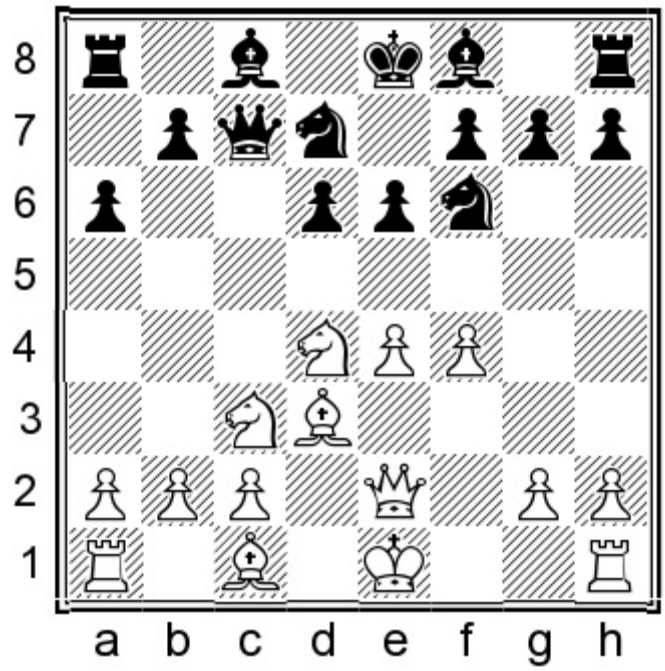
B) 8.♗g5 ♗e7 9.0-0-0 [9.f4?! This is a poor Najdorf! 9...h6! 10.♗h4 ♘xe4 11.♗xe7 ♘xc3 12.♕g4 ♔xe7 13.♕xg7 ♖e8!∓ 14.bxc3 ♕xc3+ 15.♔e2 e5 16.♘f3 ♘c6∓ Both kings are fairly drafty, but Black has an extra pawn.] 9...b5



Position after: 9...b5

10.a3 [10.♗xf6 ♗xf6 11.♗xb5+ axb5 12.♘dxb5 ♕c5 13.♘xd6+ ♔f8!∓] 10...♘bd7! 11.f4 ♗b7 This position is normally reached via the Najdorf. 12.♖he1 0-0 13.♔b1 ♘c5= 0-1 (29) Jonasson, B (2280) – Wojtkiewicz, A (2560) Reykjavik 1994.

8...♘bd7



Position after: 8...♘bd7

9.g4!

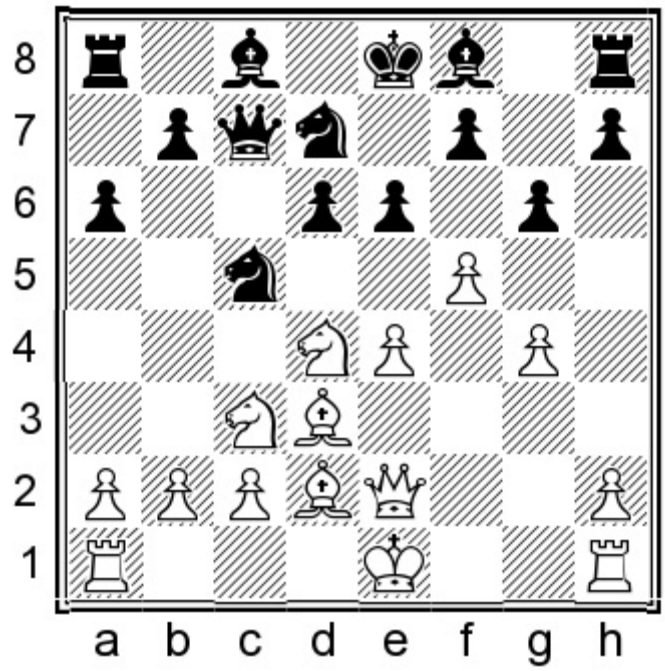
The preference of grandmasters like Grischuk, Sutovsky and Mamedov.

9.♗d2 g6! The thematic way to develop the kingside when the d-file is full of white pieces. Black creates changes along the long diagonal, strengthens the defense of his kingside and covers the f5-square against a future ♘f5.

A) 10.♘f3 slow development fits precisely into Black's plans and allows him to reach an optimal position. Chances are even, but Black's game is easier to play. 10...♗g7 11.0-0 [11.a4 0-0 12.0-0 ♘c5 13.♔h1 b6 14.b4 ♘cd7 15.♖a3 ♗b7 16.a5 ½-½ (16) Mahdy, K (2394) – Poetz, F (2376) Austria 2019.] 11...0-0 12.♔h1 b5 13.a3 ♗b7 14.♖ae1 ♖ac8∓

B) 10.0-0-0 ♗g7 11.♘b3 b5 12.a3 0-0= Black has reached the optimal position for his pieces and went on to win with thematic play. 0-1 (29) Uribe Arteaga, D (2285) – Aroshidze, L (2582) Montcada 2012.

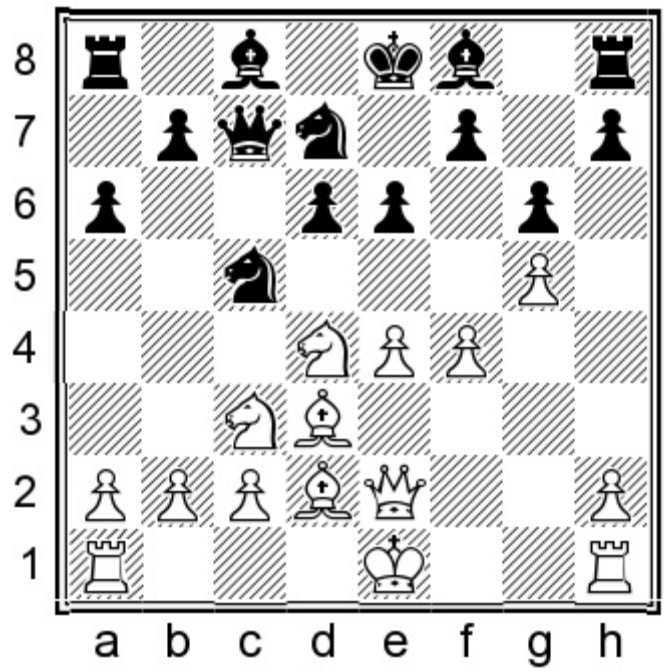
C) 10.g4! White needs to become active on the kingside. 10...♘c5 11.f5 ♘fd7!



Position after: 11...♘fd7!

Black prepares himself for the pawn storm and postpones the development of his dark-squared bishop. 12.b4 [12.fxe6 fxe6 13.♕e3 ♕b6] 12...♗g7 13.♕e3 ♘xd3+ 14.cxd3 ♕b6 15.♘c2 ♕xe3+ 16.♘xe3 0-0= with a level endgame. 0-1 (53) Lu, S (2514) – Yu, Y (2615) Xinghua 2012.

9...♘c5 10.g5 ♘fd7 11.♗d2 g6



Position after: 11...g6

This provides Black with good counterplay.

12.f5

12.b4 ♗g7 13.♕f2 ♘xd3+ 14.cxd3 ♕b6= Neustroev.

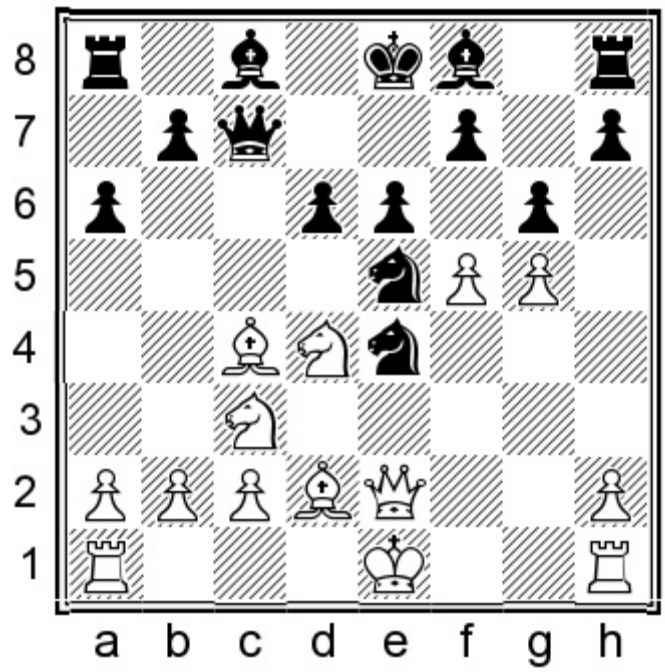
12...♘e5!

In spite of White's aggression, Black is still close to equality in this position.

13.b4

A) 13.h4 ♗d7! 14.♖f1 ♕b6 15.♘b3 0-0-0=

B) 13.♗c4?! ♘xe4

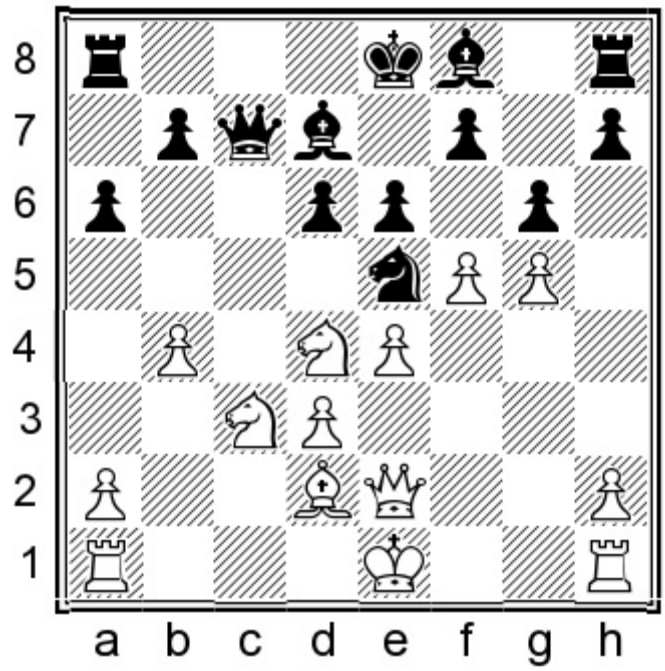


Position after: 13...♘xe4

14.♗b5+ [14.♘xe4 ♕xc4 15.0-0-0 ♕xe2 16.♘xe2 gxf5 17.♘f6+ ♔e7 18.♗b4 ♘c4=] 14...axb5 15.♘dxb5 ♕c6 16.♘xe4 gxf5 17.♘f6+ ♔d8∓ 0-1 (39) Goudriaan, E (2369) – Zakhartsov, V (2560) Dieren 2013.

C) 13.♘f3!? b5 14.b4 [14.♘xe5!? dxe5 15.a3 ♘xd3+ 16.cxd3±] 14...♘cxd3+ 15.cxd3 ♘xf3+!N 16.♕xf3 gxf5 17.exf5 ♕b7=

13...♘cxd3+ 14.cxd3 ♗d7!



Position after: 14...♗d7!

15.♖c1

A) 15.0-0 ♖c8 16.♖ac1 ♕b6∓ 17.♗e3 ♕xb4 18.fxe6 fxe6 19.♘xe6 ♖xc3–+ 0-1 (27) Ostos, J (2272) – Zuluaga Mancilla, C (2350) Fuerte Tiuna 2014.

B) 15.a3 ♖c8 16.♖c1 ♗e7 17.0-0? ♕b6 18.♗e3 ♗xg5 19.fxe6 fxe6∓ ½-½ (30) Gashimov, V (2740) – Ivanchuk, V (2748) Nice 2010.

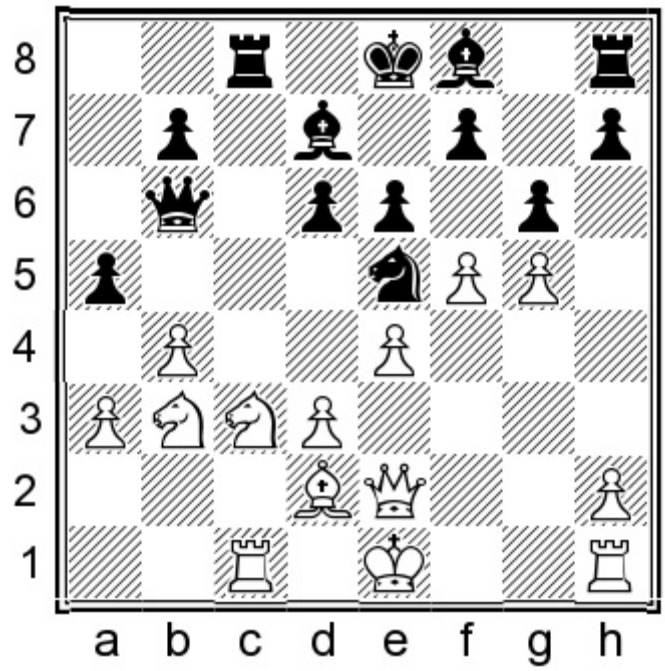
15...♖c8 16.♘b3 ♕b6=

Some engines prefer Black here.

17.a3?!

17.h4 h6 18.♖f1 ♗e7 19.gxh6 a5=

17...a5!∓



Position after: 17...a5!∓

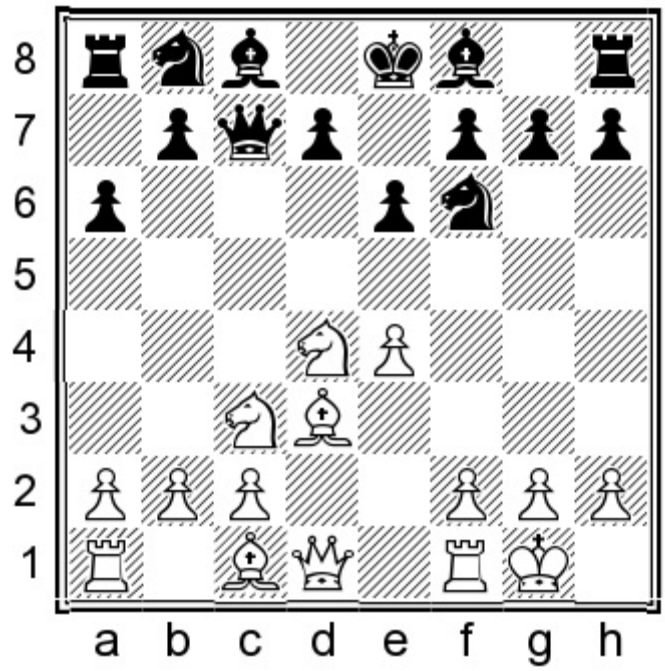
instead of 17...h6?! 18.h4 ♗b5 as played in 1-0 (41) Teclaf, P (2341) – Pietruszewski, M (2208) Bialystok 2016.

Conclusion

After the text White has difficulties keeping his position together. In the Sicilian Kan with 5...♕c7 6.♗d3 ♘f6 White has two serious alternatives to the main line 7.0-0. 7.f4 Black answers with 7...♗b4. The pressure against c3 and f4 provides Black with sufficient counterplay. 8.♗d2 ♗xc3 9.♗xc3 ♕xf4 demonstrating a problem with White's setup. Black has to be a bit careful here, but it should not be too much of a problem for him to reach a good position. With 7.♕e2 White postpones castling as well. Unfortunately, the darling of theory 7...♗d6 has been refuted by 8.♘cb5, in spite of all the analyzes which claim differently. Black will have to live with 7....d6, going for standard Scheveningen positions where White has not played 0-0 yet. White's most active treatment lies in quick advancement of his kingside pawns even before playing 0-0-0. Black's response is to optimize the position of his knights and to prepare for a fianchetto of his dark-squared bishop and, if necessary, ...0-0-0 as well. The game will be a typical Sicilian, exciting and double-edged. Black should be able to maintain the equilibrium.

l) 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 8.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0

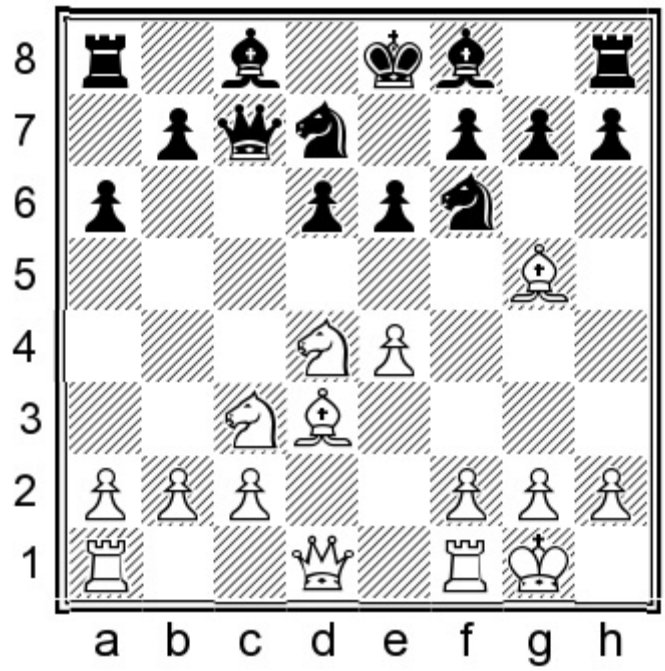


Position after: 7.0-0

7...d6 8.a4

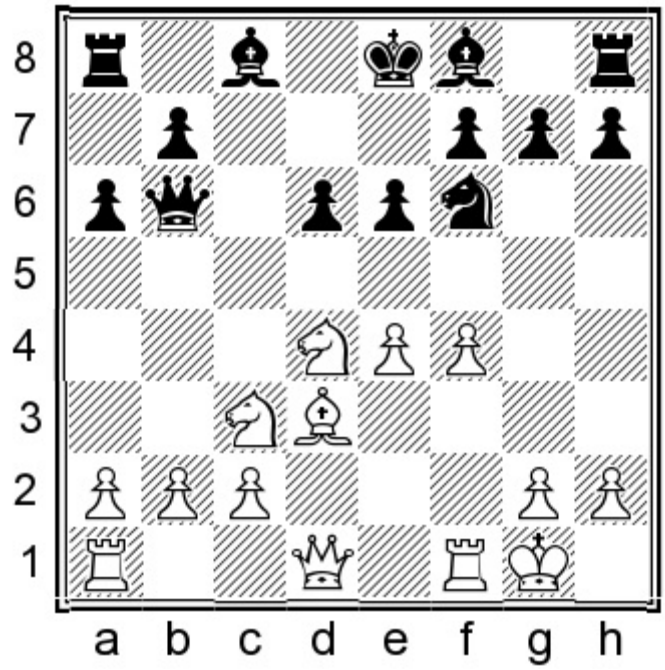
This is one of the main lines against Black's set-up. White invests a tempo to contain Black's queenside. As a result, Black will easily complete his development. In the next chapter we will investigate the ultimate main line with 8.f4.

A) 8.♗g5 White plays the opening as if he has a 6.♗g5 Najdorf. Unfortunately for him, his king is on the wrong side of the board. As a result, his attack on the kingside lacks punch. White's king often ends up in a more dangerous situation than Black's. Black continues with natural development 8...♘bd7.



Position after: 8...♘bd7

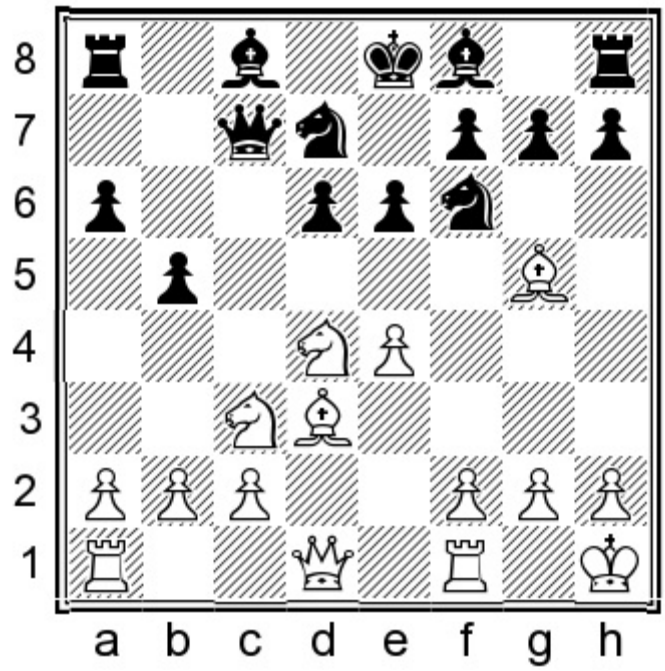
A1) 9.f4?! White continues with his Najdorf moves. 9...♕b6! With the white bishop outside the pawn chain on g5 and the g1-a7 diagonal unprotected, Black's best is to go after the poisoned pawn. 10.♗xf6 the only move that does not lose immediately. 10...♘xf6



Position after: 10...♘xf6

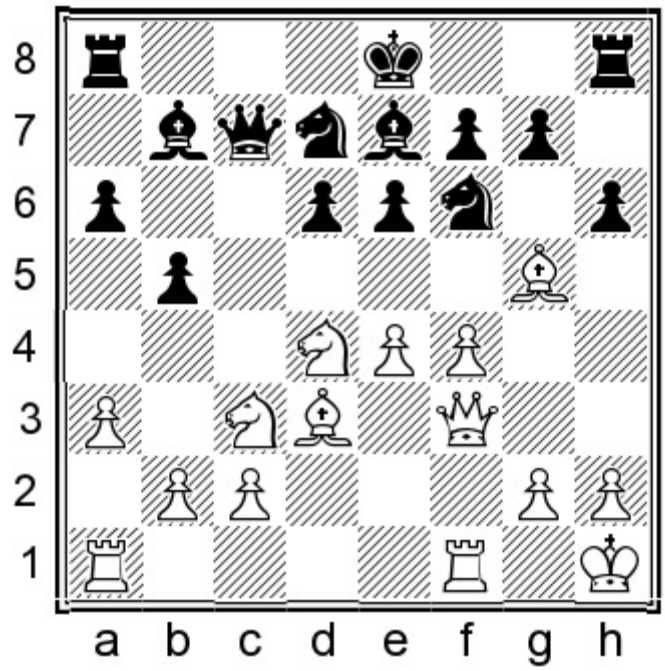
11.♔h1 [11.♗c4? e5–+ 0-1 (20) Pepi, L (961) – May, J (2023) St Leon Rot 2011.] 11...♕xb2 12.♕d2 ♕b6!∓ White has little compensation for the pawn.

A2) 9.♔h1 Safety first. 9...b5



Position after: 9...b5

10.f4 [10.a3 ♗b7 11.f4 ♗e7 12.♕e2 h6∓ leads to similar situations as our main line.] 10...♗e7 11.♕f3 [11.♗h4 ♗b7 12.♕e2 0-0!N 13.a3 ♖fe8∓] 11...♗b7 12.a3 [12.a4 b4 13.♘ce2 ♘c5! 14.♘g3 h6 15.♗xf6 ♗xf6 16.♕e3 h5∓ 0-1 (32) Parol, M (1800) – Golichenko, I (2411) Lublin 2012.; 12.f5 e5 13.♘de2 b4 14.♗xf6 ♘xf6 15.♘d5 ♗xd5 16.exd5 0-0∓; 12.♕h3 b4 13.♘ce2 h6 14.♘g3 0-0-0! 15.♗xf6 ♗xf6∓ 0-1 (51) Sarwat, W (2305) – Odeev, H (2405) Moscow 1994.] Black now plays a thematic move from the Najdorf 12...h6.



Position after: 12...h6

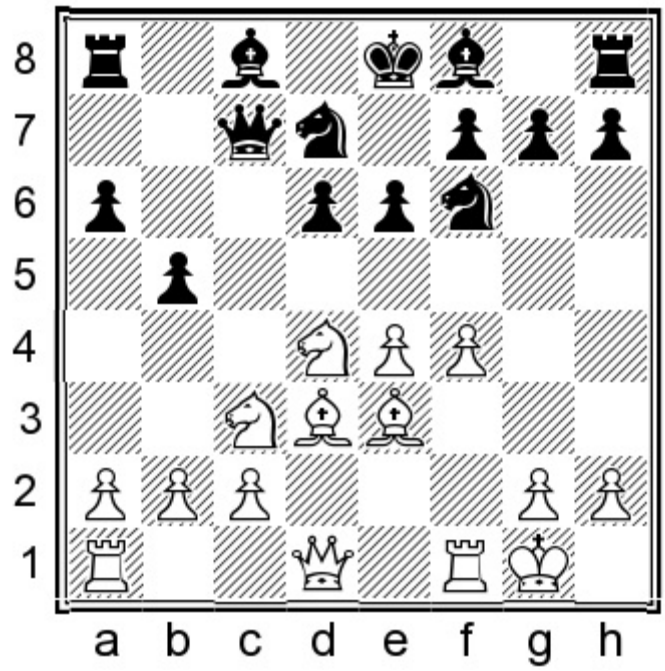
A2.1) 13.♗h4 g5!N 14.fxg5 ♘e5 15.♕e2 hxg5 16.♗f2 [16.♗e1 0-0-0–+; 16.♗xg5 ♘h5!–+] 16...0-0-0∓

A2.2) 13.♗xf6 ♗xf6 14.♘ce2 ♘c5∓

B) 8.♖e1 White plays for quick development and hopes to be able to play ♘d5. 8...♘bd7! nearly always the preferred move. 9.a4 ♗e7! 10.a5 0-0= White's configuration lacks any punch.

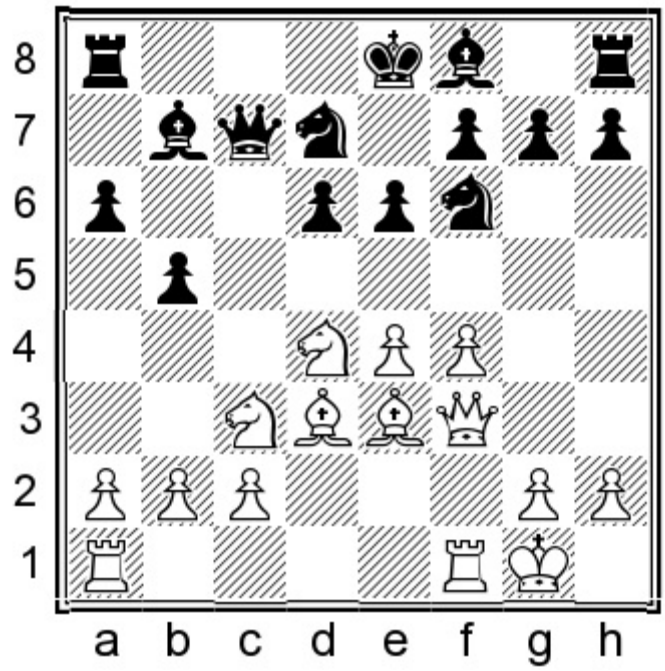
C) 8.♔h1 This has no independent meaning. For example: 8...♘bd7 and now 9.f4, 9.♕e2, 9.♗g5, and 9.a4 all lead to 8.f4, 8.♕e2, 8.♗g5 and 8.a4 lines.

D) 8.♗e3 The bishop on e3 works best if followed by f4 and ♕f3 as we will analyze after 8.f4. As a rule, the bishop is better on d2 in this line, but White's move has its own subtleties. 8...♘bd7 9.f4 [9.a4 b6! is 8.a4] 9...b5!



Position after: 9...b5!

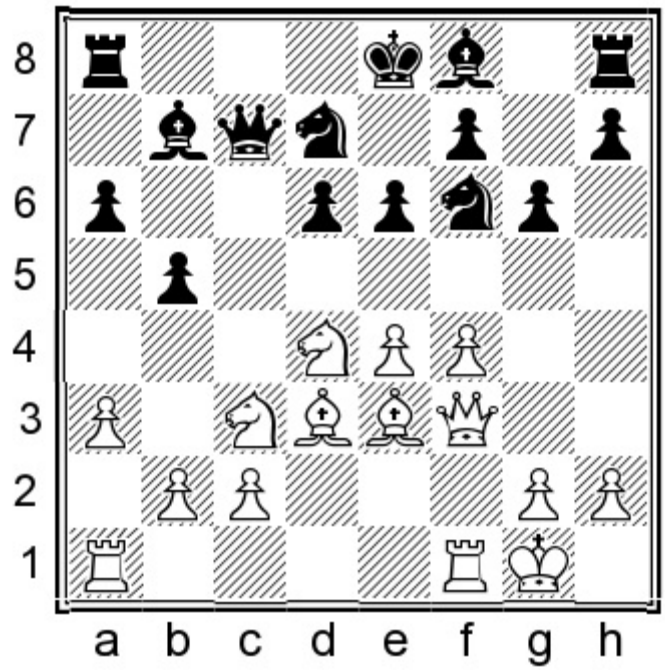
Best. The option of ...g6 is held in store for later. In the ♕f3 systems ...g6 is attractive as we will see later. 10.♕f3 ♗b7 White has to decide whether he allows Black to play ...b5-b4 or not.



Position after: 10...♗b7

D1) 11.♖ae1 b4! 12.♘d1! [12.♘ce2 ♘c5 13.♘g3 h5 14.♗f2 h4 15.♘h1 ♗e7∓ 0-1 (42) Debray, C (2383) – Aroshidze, L (2568) Barcelona 2012.] 12...♘c5 13.♘f2 ♗e7=

D2) 11.a3 White prevents ...b4. 11...g6!



Position after: 11...g6!

Now we are in a position to play ...g6. Sacrifices on b5 do not work although Black has to remain alert.

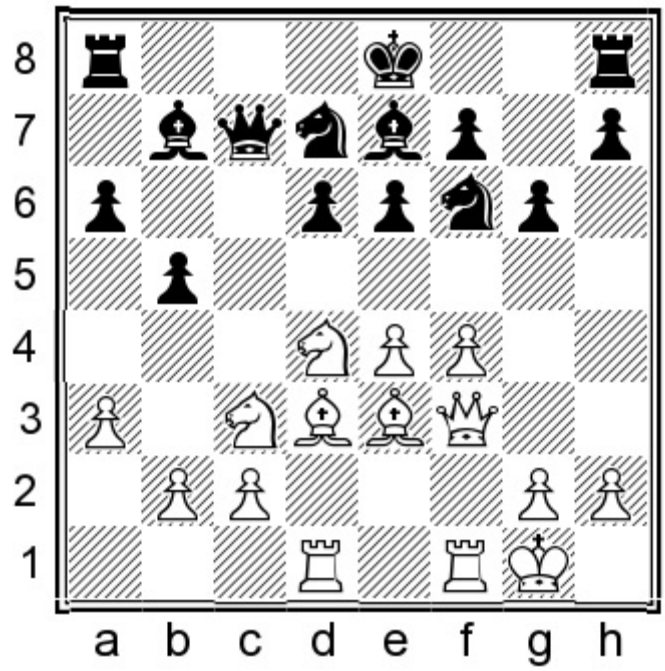
D2.1) 12.f5? With the black bishop on b7 and the white queen on f3, the move f4-f5 is not an issue anymore. 12...gxf5∓ Black may play ...0-0-0 and start an attack along the open g-file.

D2.2) 12.♖ae1 ♗g7 13.♕g3 ♘c5 14.♗xb5+? axb5 15.♘dxb5 ♕c6–+ 0-1 (26) Jorritsma, S (1864) – Shchekachev, A (2537) Ghent 2011.

D2.3) 12.♕h3 ♗g7 13.♗xb5 [13.f5 exf5 14.exf5 0-0= followed by ...♖ae8.] 13...axb5 14.♘cxb5 ♕b8 15.♘xe6? [15.e5 0-0 16.exf6 ♘xf6=] 15...fxe6 16.♕xe6+ ♔d8 17.♘xd6 ♖a6–+ 18.♖ad1 ♖e8 19.♘f7+ ♔c8 20.♕c4+ ♖c6 21.♕b5 ♖xe4 22.♖d3 ♕c7 0-1 (22) Mrdja, M (2432) – Meijers, V (2487) Saint Affrique 2004.

D2.4) 12.♕g3 ♗g7 13.f5 exf5 The right way to take a pawn in these configurations. 14.exf5 ♘e5 15.♗e2 0-0=

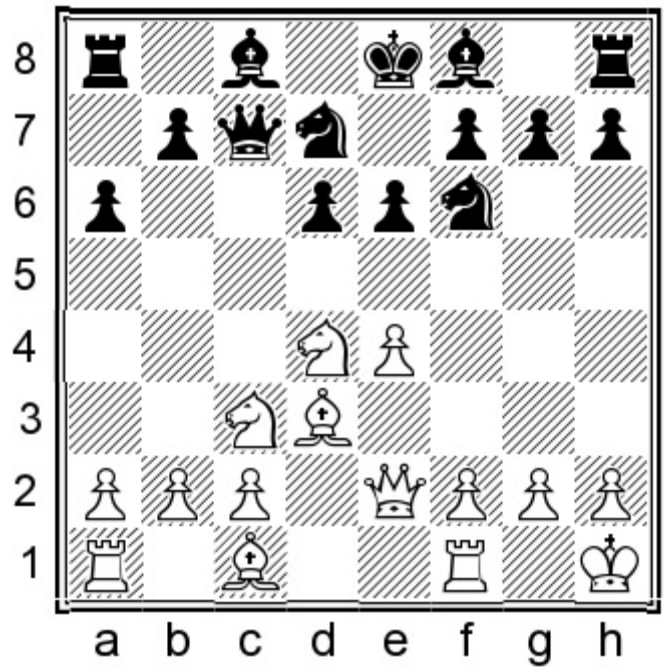
D2.5) 12.♖ad1 The most natural move, increasing White's presence in the center. 12...♗e7!



Position after: 12...♗e7!

One instance where we cannot complete our fianchetto. 13.♔h1 [13.♕h3 ♘c5! 14.e5 dxe5 15.♘dxb5 axb5 16.♗xb5+ ♘fd7!∓] 13...♖c8!N Black anticipates the opening of the c-file after ...♘d7-c5xd3. 14.g4 e5! 15.♘de2 exf4 16.♗xf4 0-0∓ White's activity on the kingside has only weakened his position.

E) 8.♕e2 is a key move in this position, often followed by f2-f4 on one of the next few moves which takes us into the next chapter. Here we investigate the positions where White keeps f2-f4 in store a bit longer. 8...♘bd7 9.♔h1

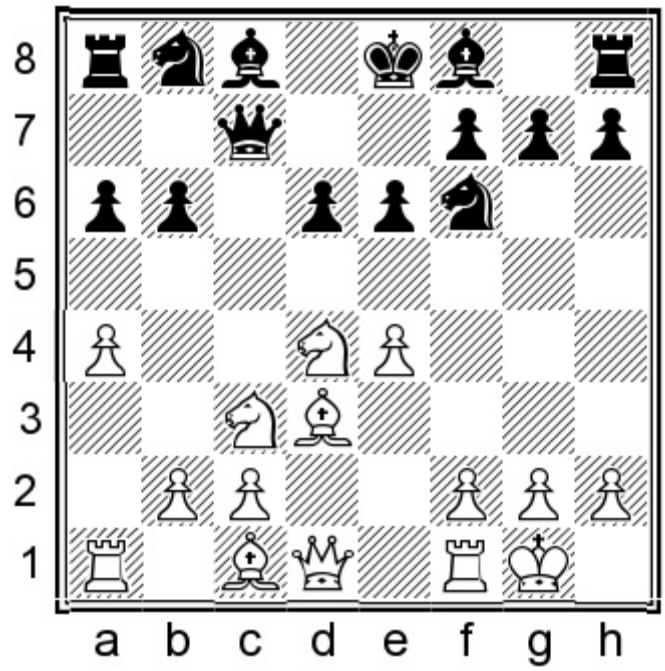


Position after: 9.♔h1

White postpones f2-f4 to prevent Black from playing ...♕b6 and ...b5 but this gives Black the time for [9.♗d2 a somewhat slow move allowing 9...g6!? 10.a4!? b6 11.f4 ♗g7!. It is important to keep an eye on the e6-pawn. 12.f5 ♘e5 the e6 pawn is properly supported! 13.fxe6 fxe6 14.♘f3 ♘xd3 15.♕xd3 0-0=] 9...g6!? 10.f4 ♗g7 11.f5 ♘e5!= With the bishop on c8 this is the obvious continuation. 12.♗g5 0-0 13.♕d2 [13.♘f3 ♘xd3 14.cxd3 exf5 15.♘h4 h6∓ 16.♗xf6 ♗xf6 17.♘d5 ♕d8 18.♘xf5 gxf5 19.exf5 ♗d7–+ 0-1 (26) Groszpeter, A (2541) – Almasi, Z (2684) Szeged 2009.] 13...b5= 0-1 (34) Baba, M (2213) – Papin, V (2475) Cappelle la Grande 2008.

F) 8.f4 is the main line, investigated in the next chapter.

8...b6!



Position after: 8...b6!

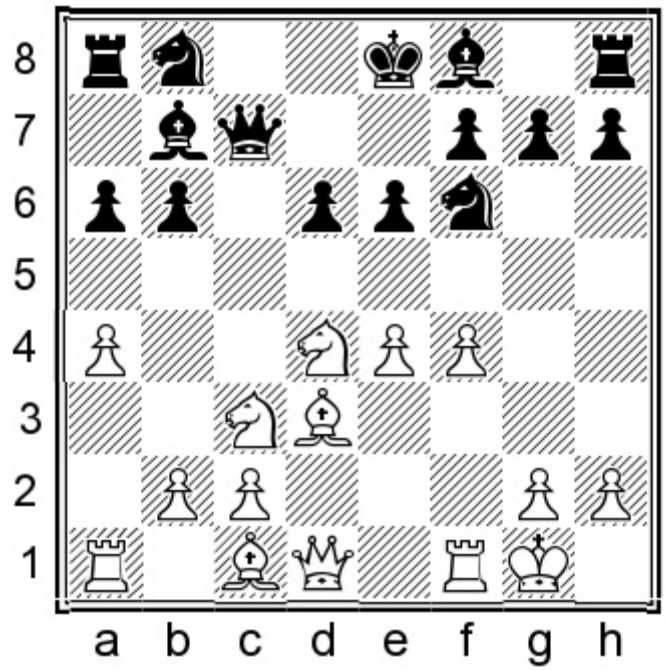
The standard reaction to 8.a4. Black has been given the time and the opportunity to develop his queenside safely.

9.f4

A) 9.♖e1 ♗e7! Closing the e-file and leaving the c8-bishop at home for defensive purposes. 10.♕f3 0-0! It is important to have ...♗f8 available as quickly as possible. 11.♕g3 ♖e8! 12.♗h6 [12.♗e2 ♗b7 13.♗f3 ♘bd7 14.♗h6 ♗f8∓ ½-½ (49) Juciute, H (1843) – Jakaityte, R (1980) Lithuania 2014.] 12...♗f8 13.♗g5 ♘bd7 14.♖ad1 ♗b7=

B) 9.♗e3 ♘bd7 10.f4 ♗b7 is treated in the lines below.

9...♗b7

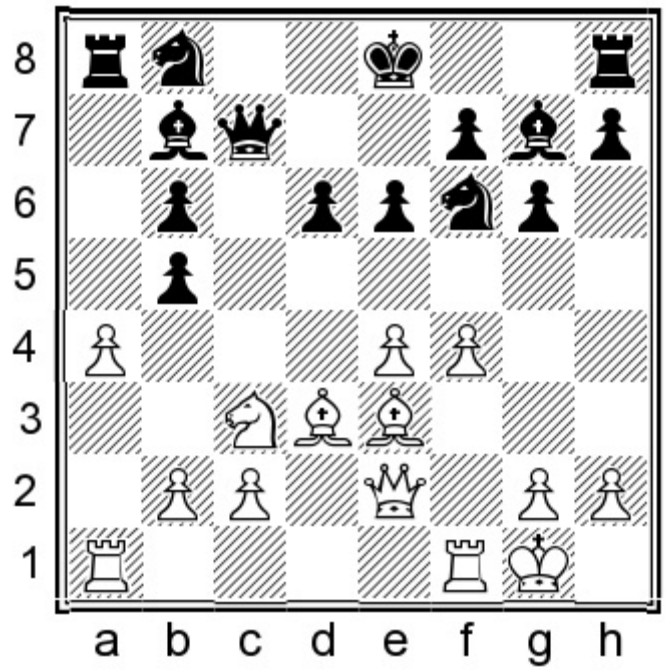


Position after: 9...♗b7

10.♕f3

White's setup is focused on a kingside attack. White's idea is to play ♕g3 or ♕h3 increasing the pressure against Black's kingside.

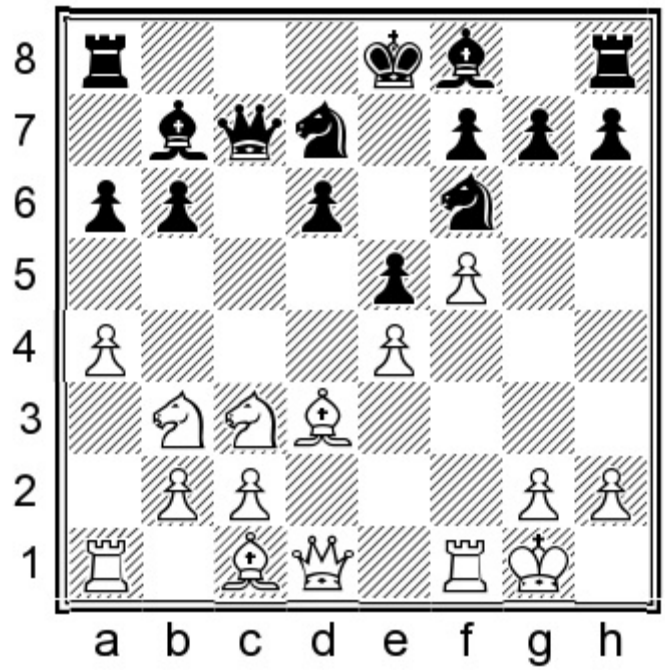
A) 10.♗e3 natural development of the bishop, but it takes away the opportunity to put pressure on Black via the e-file. 10...g6 11.♕e2 ♗g7 A typical position for this variation has arisen. In a nutshell we will analyze all the attacking schemes White may try. 12.♘db5!? [12.g4 ♘c6 13.g5 ♘d7 14.♘f3 ♘b4 15.♖f2 ♘c5∓; 12.e5 dxe5 13.♘db5 axb5 14.♘xb5 ♕e7 15.fxe5 leads to the same position as 12.♘db5.] 12...axb5



Position after: 12...axb5

13.e5! [13.♘xb5 ♕e7 14.e5 leads to the same position.] 13...dxe5 14.♘xb5 ♕e7 15.fxe5 0-0 16.exf6 ♗xf6 17.c3 ♘d7= A double-edged position.

B) 10.f5 White would like to force the issue at an early stage but Black has not yet weakened his kingside with ...g6. 10...e5! 11.♘b3 There are no tricks here with ♘e6. 11...♘bd7

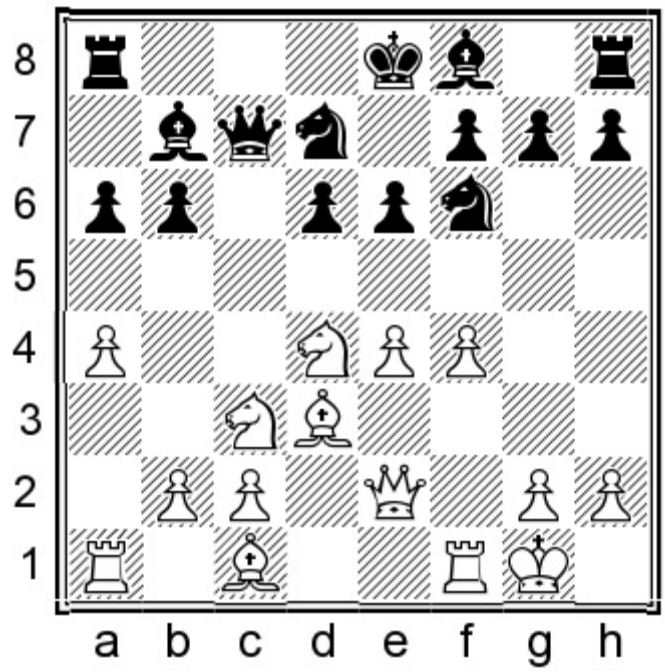


Position after: 11...♘bd7

12.♕f3 [12.♖f3 d5 13.exd5 ♘xd5 14.♘xd5 ♗xd5 15.♖g3 ♗d6 16.♕e2 h6 17.♔h1 ♘f6 18.♗xa6

♖xa6 19.♕xa6 ♕xc2 20.♕d3 ♕c6⩱ ½ – ½ (40) Firnhaber, I (2515) – Kruis, R (2500) corr. 2015.] 12...♗e7 13.♔h1 [13.♗e3 0-0 14.g4 d5 15.exd5 ♘c5⩲] 13...0-0 14.♗e3 [14.g4 d5! 15.g5 dxe4 16.♘xe4 ♘xe4 17.♗xe4 ♗xe4 18.♕xe4 ♘c5 19.♘xc5 ♗xc5 20.♗d2 ♖ad8∓] 14...♖fd8! [14...d5 15.♘xd5 ♗xd5 16.exd5 e4 17.♗xe4 ♘e5 18.♗f4±] 15.♖ac1 h6=

C) 10.♕e2 is the main alternative to the text. White builds up his standard attacking structure, aiming for a quick e4-e5. 10...♘bd7



Position after: 10...♘bd7

C1) 11.♔h1 g6 after two slow moves Black can afford to play ...g6.

C1.1) 12.e5!? dxe5 13.fxe5 ♕xe5 14.♕xe5 ♘xe5 15.♖xf6 ♘xd3 16.cxd3 ♗g7 17.♗g5 [17.♖f4 e5–+] 17...0-0 18.♖af1 ♖ad8 19.♘b3 h6 20.♗c1 ♗xf6 21.♖xf6 ♖xd3= Black has active rooks and two more pawns for his material deficit.

C1.2) 12.♗d2 ♗g7 13.♖ae1 [13.f5 gxf5 14.exf5 e5∓] 13...0-0 14.♘f3 ♘c5 15.b4 ♘xd3 16.cxd3 ♖ac8 17.♖c1 ♕e7= ½ – ½ (39) Polgar, J (2665) – Van Wely, L (2605) Tilburg 1996.

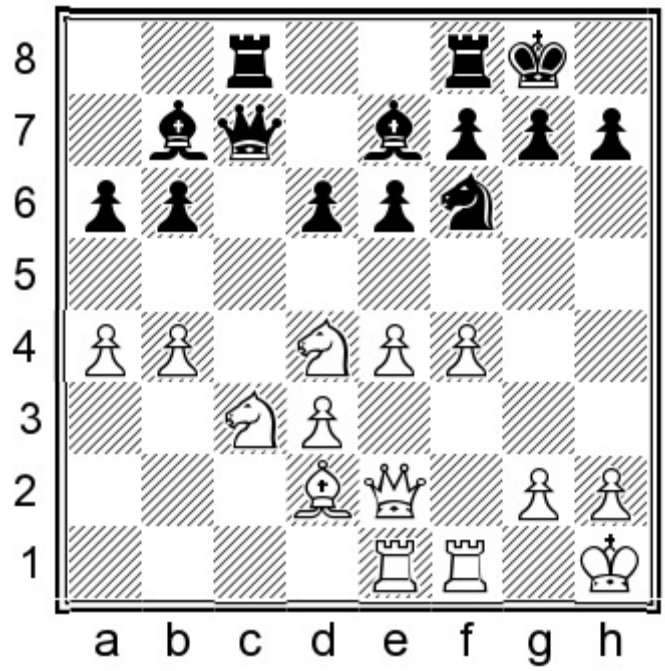
C2) 11.f5 White immediately forces the issue. 11...e5! 12.♘b3 [12.♘f3 ♗e7 13.♗g5 0-0 14.♘d2 ♖fe8 15.♔h1 d5=] 12...h6 13.♗e3 ♗e7 14.♖ad1 0-0 15.♗f2 ♖fc8 16.♖d2 d5!∓

C3) 11.♗d2 ♗e7! 12.♔h1 0-0 13.♖ae1 ♘c5! and the f6-knight has a proper square to retreat to after e4-e5.

C3.1) 14.f5 e5 15.♘f3 h6!∓

C3.2) 14.e5 ♘fd7 15.♗xh7+?! [15.♗c4 dxe5 16.fxe5 ♖ac8∓] 15...♔xh7 16.♕h5+ ♔g8 17.♖e3 f5! 18.♖h3 dxe5 19.♕h7+ ♔f7 20.♕h5+ g6 21.♕h7+ ♔e8 22.♕xg6+ ♔d8–+ 0-1 (30) Subasic, I (2320) – Cvitan, O (2465) Zenica 1986.

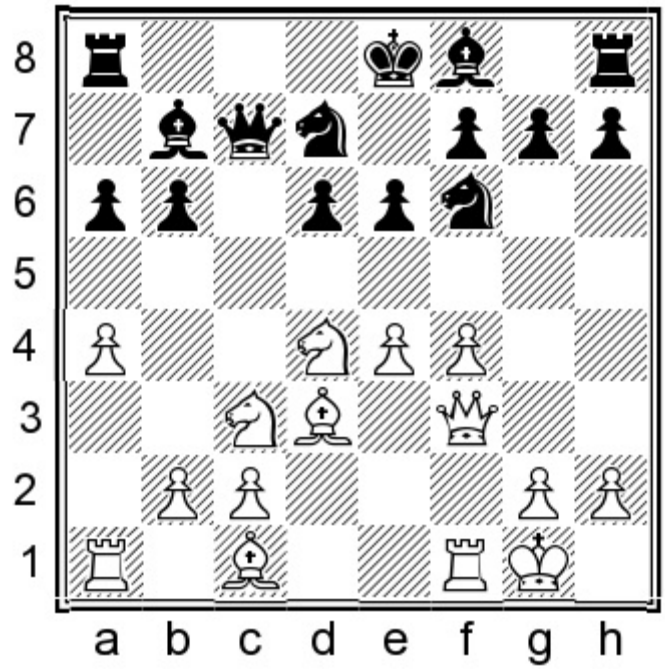
C3.3) 14.b4 ♘xd3 15.cxd3 ♖ac8



Position after: 15...♖ac8

16.♖c1 [16.♕f2 ♘d7 17.♕g3 ♕d8 18.♖c1 ♗f6! 19.♗e3 g6= Hellsten] 16...♕d8 17.b5 ♘d7=

10...♘bd7



Position after: 10...♘bd7

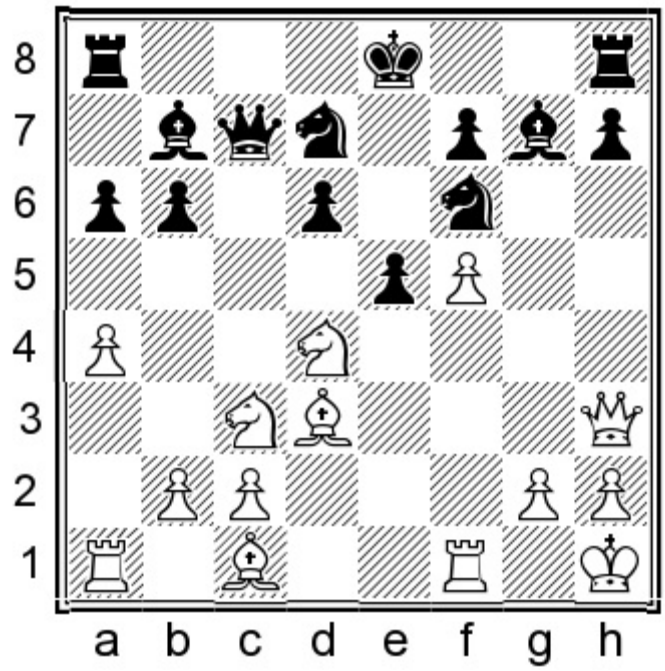
Black plays his thematic moves before deciding where to put the dark-squared bishop.

11.♗d2

The most refined move. White connects the rooks enabling ♖ae1 while maintaining the pressure along the e-file and keeping an eye on the queenside as well.

A) 11.g4 h6!N 12.♗e3 g6 13.a5 ♗g7!=

B) 11.♔h1 g6! 12.♕h3 [12.♗d2 transposes to a line treated under 11.♗d2.] 12...♗g7 13.f5 [13.♘f3 ♘c5! 14.e5 ♘fd7!∓] 13...gxf5 14.exf5 e5

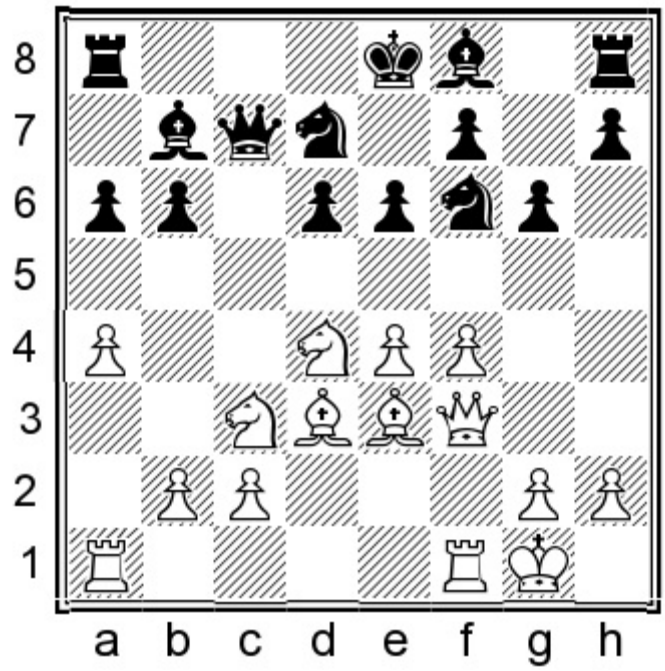


Position after: 14...e5

B1) 15.♘e6!? fxe6 16.fxe6 ♘c5 17.♗g5 [17.♖xf6 ♗xf6 18.♕h5+ ♔d8–+] 17...♘xd3 18.♖xf6 [18.♗xf6 0-0!–+] 18...♗xf6 19.♕h5+ ♔f8 20.♖f1 ♘f4 21.♖xf4 exf4 22.♗xf6 ♖e8=

B2) 15.♘f3 0-0-0 16.♖e1 d5∓

C) 11.♗e3 g6!



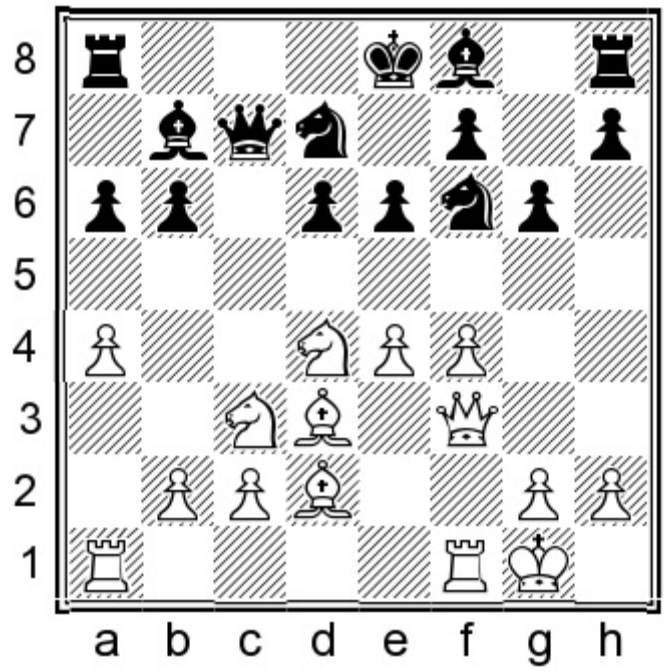
Position after: 11...g6!

Again, the kingside fianchetto. There is little risk of a successful pawn breakthrough by White in the center.

C1) 12.♖ae1 ♗g7 13.♔h1 0-0 Black can start thinking about an advantage. 14.♕h3 ♘c5 15.♗g1 [15.f5 exf5 16.exf5 ♖ae8 17.♖e2 ♖e5=] 15...e5 16.♘b3 exf4 17.♘xc5 dxc5∓ 0-1 (59) Noshin, A (1905) – Radeva, V (2337) Chess. com 2020.

C2) 12.g4 ♘c5 13.g5 ♘fd7 14.h4 h6 15.♗e2 hxg5 16.hxg5 f5 17.gxf6 ♘xf6 18.♕g2 0-0-0= ½ – ½ (35) Prakash, O (2366) – Ronat, O (2371) corr. 2016.

11...g6

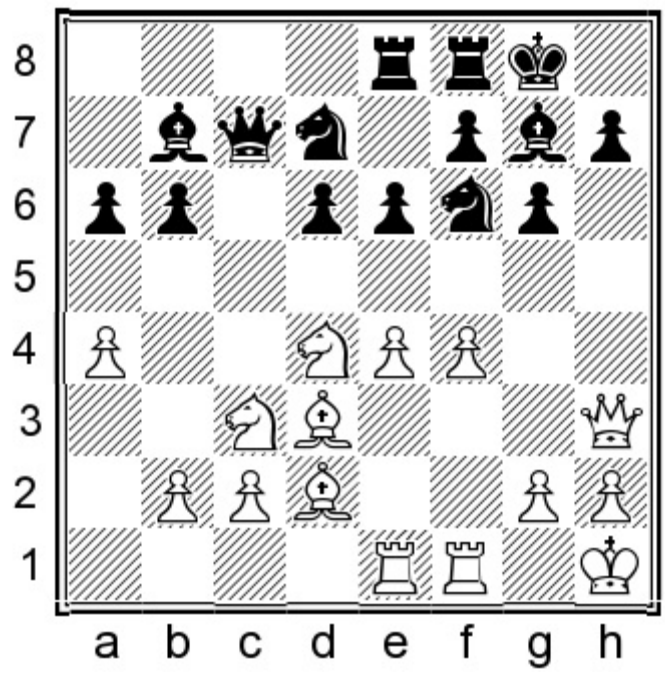


Position after: 11...g6

As recommended by Hellsten. This makes life easy for Black. With the white queen on f3 aiming for g3 or h3 the fianchetto builds a nice fortress around the black king.

12.♕h3

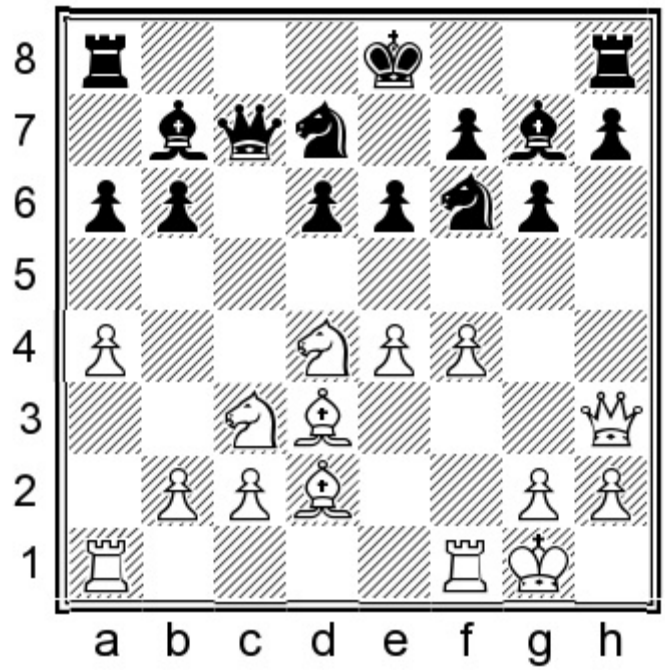
12.♔h1 ♗g7 13.♖ae1 0-0 Black is completely developed and can look forward to a bright future and an interesting game. 14.♕h3 [14.♗e3 ♘c5! 15.♗g1 ♖ae8! 16.♕h3 e5 17.fxe5 ♖xe5!∓ 18.♘f3 ♖h5 19.♕g3 ♖e8] 14...♖ae8!



Position after: 14...♖ae8!

All thematic moves have been played. With Black's kingside properly defended White has to focus on pushing e4-e5. 15.♘f3 [15.f5 exf5 16.exf5 ♖xe1 17.♖xe1 ♘e5∓] 15...♘c5 16.♕h4 [16.e5 ♘fd7! 17.♘g5 h6 18.♘ge4 dxe5 19.fxe5 ♗xe4 20.♘xe4 ♘xe4 21.♗xe4 h5∓] 16...d5! 17.e5 ♘fe4 18.♘xe4 [18.♗xe4 dxe4 19.♘g5 h6 20.♘gxe4 ♘xe4 21.♘xe4 ♕xc2∓] 18...dxe4 19.♘g5 h6 20.♘xe4 ♘xe4 21.♗xe4 ♗xe4 22.♖xe4 ♕xc2∓ Black has the initiative on the queenside and the better bishop. ½ – ½ (47) Quezada, Y (2515) – Arencibia Rodriguez, W (2549) Santa Clara 2007.

12...♗g7!



Position after: 12...♗g7!

13.a5!?

A) 13.♘xe6? the piece sacrifice is incorrect. 13...fxe6 14.♕xe6+ ♔d8! 15.b4 ♖e8∓ 0-1 (48) Mueller, W (2166) – Matt, F (2347) St Veit 2016.

B) 13.f5!? gxf5 14.exf5 e5! intending ...0-0-0 and ...d5. 15.♘e6! fxe6 16.fxe6 ♘c5 17.♗f5 ♖g8=

C) 13.♘f3 Hellsten's main line in this position. 13...0-0 14.f5 exf5! 15.exf5 ♖ae8= with ...♘c5 coming next with equal chances.

D) 13.♖ae1 0-0 14.f5 exf5 15.exf5 ♖ae8=

13...0-0! 14.f5

14.axb6 ♕xb6 15.♗e3 ♘g4!∓

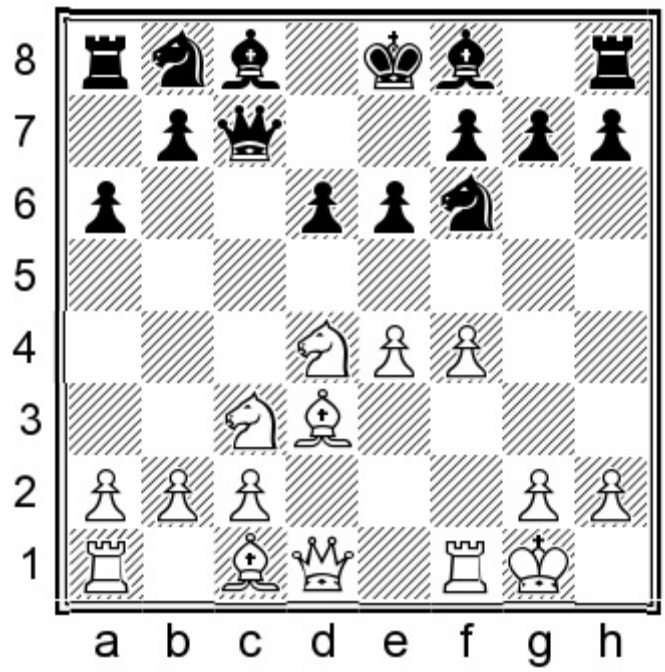
14...exf5 15.exf5 ♖ae8∓

Conclusion

The main line in the 5...♕c7 Sicilian Kan continues with 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6. Instead of the most popular 8.f4 which we will discuss in the next subchapter. White has many alternatives, yet they are not so difficult Black. The general theme in these positions is that Black must always be prepared for a breakthrough by White in the center, either e4-e5 or f4-f5. For that reason, Black will generally first move the knight to d7. Depending upon the circumstances he will subsequently aim for ...g6 or continue developing on the queenside. As a rule of thumb Black can play ...g6 after two slow development moves by White (a4, ♔h1, ♗d2). Given the generally slow nature of White's moves, a black kingside fianchetto can normally be put in place. After completion of his development Black has a comfortable starting point for the game to come.

m) 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 8.f4

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 a6 3.♘c3 e6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 6.♗d3 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 8.f4



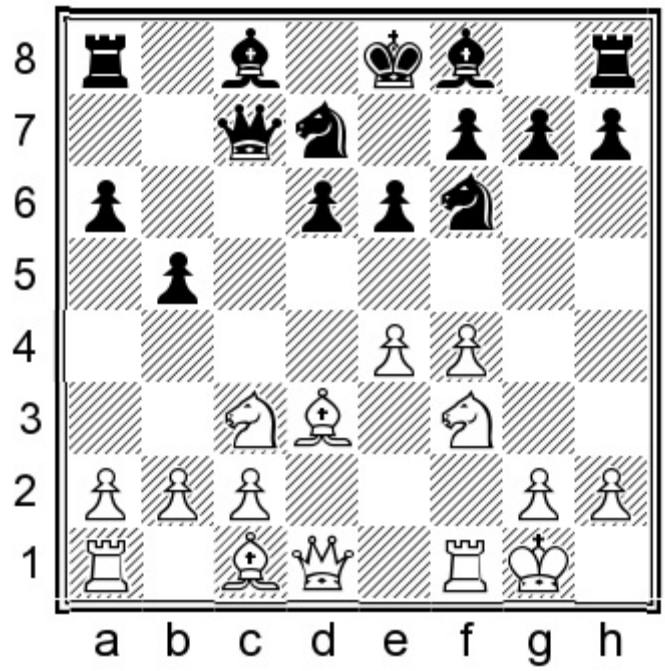
Position after: 8.f4

8...♘bd7 9.♕e2

The main line and the most all-round move. The white queen is put on an active square and keeps an eye on both the kingside and the queenside. The move allows the rooks to be connected and supports a future breakthrough (e4-e5, f2-f5) in the center.

A) 9.♘f3 This is an old-fashioned move that you do not see very often these days. It works well if Black plays a quick ...e5, White exchanges on e5 and uses the open f-file to launch an attack on the

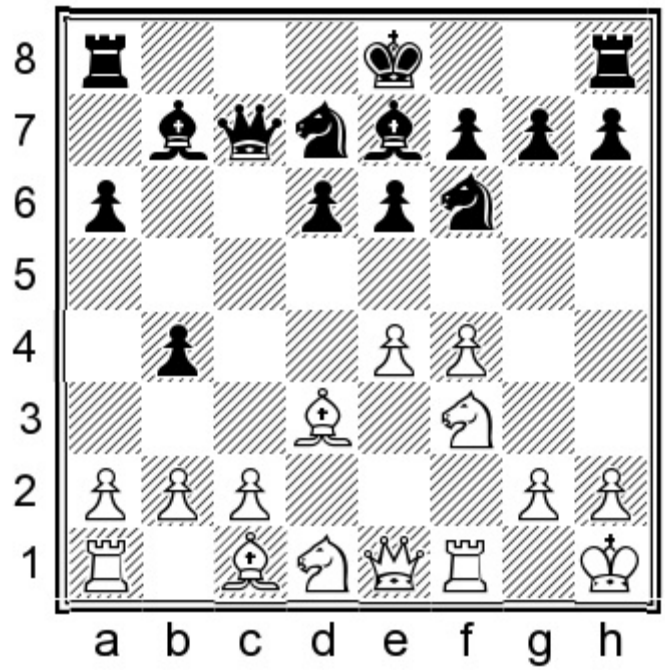
kingside. Instead of ...e5 Black has various other methods to respond to White's idea. 9...b5! The most trustworthy alternative for Black.



Position after: 9...b5!

A1) 10.♕e1 ♗b7 11.♗d2 ♗e7 12.b4 [12.e5 dxe5 13.fxe5 ♘g4∓ 0-1 (25) Manso Gil, A (2260) – Vehi Bach, V (2390) Barbera del Valles 1997.] 12...0-0 13.a4 bxa4 14.♘xa4 d5! 15.e5 ♘e4 16.♗e3 ♗c6 17.♘c3 ♖fb8∓ 0-1 (26) Eife, G (1902) – Crapulli, G corr. 2015.

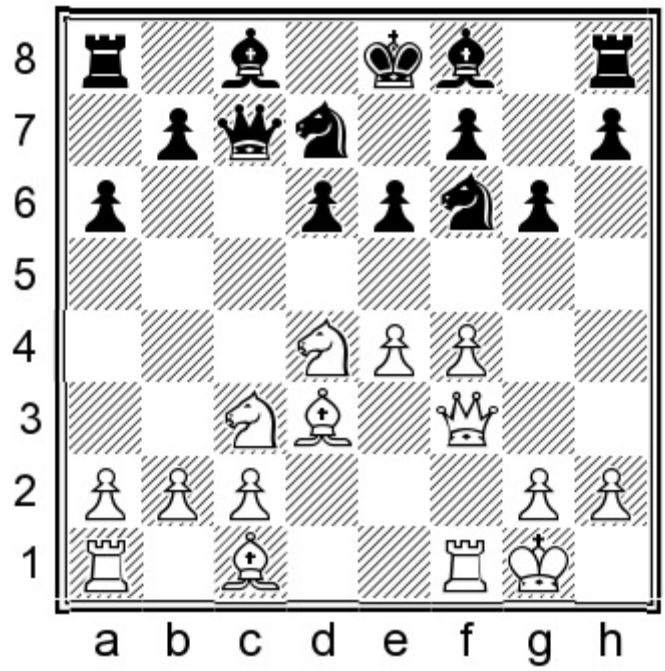
A2) 10.♔h1 ♗b7 11.♕e1 b4! 12.♘d1 ♗e7!



Position after: 12...♗e7!

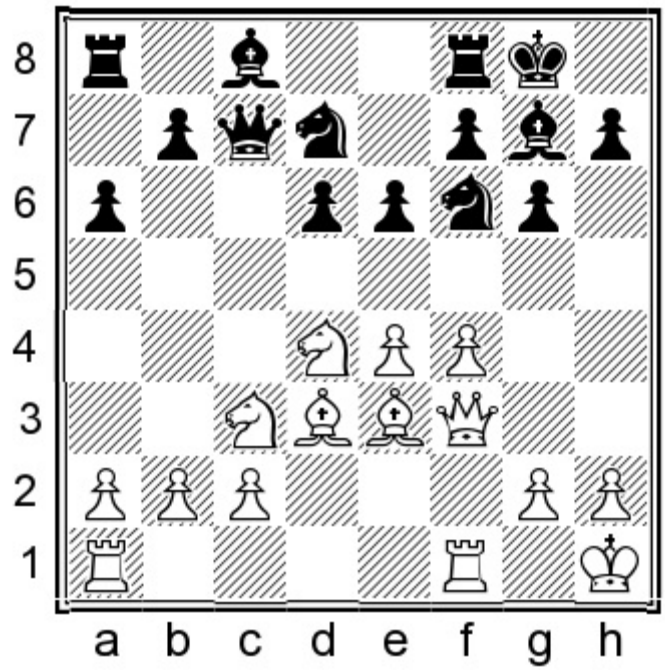
13.♘f2 [13.♗d2 ♘c5 most of the time this simply transposes.] 13...♘c5 14.♗d2 a5 15.a3 bxa3! 16.♖xa3 a4 17.♗b5+ ♘fd7 18.b4 axb3! 19.♗a5 ♕b8 20.cxb3 0-0=

B) 9.♕f3 White focuses on the kingside and takes an aggressive attacking position. White's dark-squared bishop tends to be developed to e3. In this situation White is less suited to play on the queenside thus an early ...b5 from black is one of the maneuvers Black should consider. 9...g6! In particular against the ♕f3 systems a ...g6 based setup works well for Black. Black prepares a nice fortress for his king in anticipation of kingside actions by White. Forcing pawn moves in the center do not make much of an impact. Black always has ...♘e5 as an intermediate defensive move, for example if White shows his aggressive intentions with f4-f5. Note that the situation is different from the position after 8.♗e3 (8...b5 9.f4 ♗b7 10.♕f3) as in that move order Black has developed his queenside first.



Position after: 9...g6!

B1) 10.♔h1 ♗g7 11.♗e3 0-0

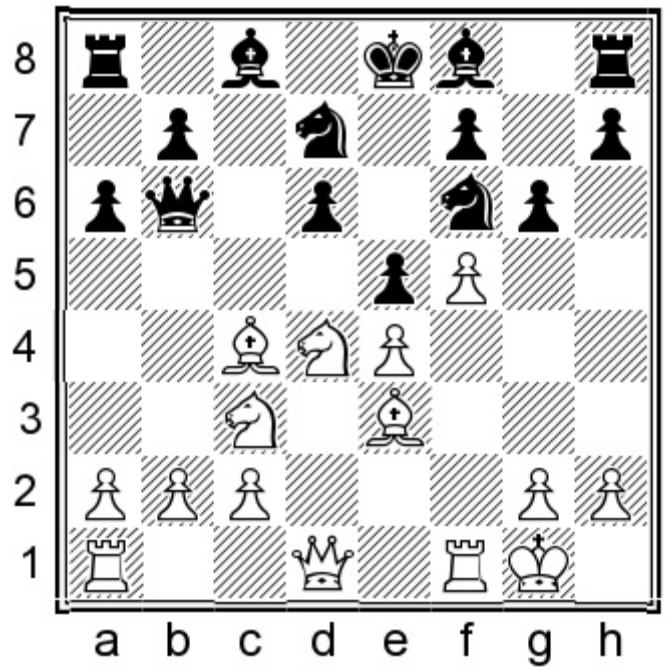


Position after: 11...0-0

Black has solved all of his problems and his king is well defended. 12.♖ae1 [12.a4 b6 13.♖a3 ♗b7 14.♘de2 d5∓ 0-1 (29) Houtman, J – Goldstern, F (2300) Netherlands 1987.] 12...b5!∓ 13.a3 [13.e5 ♗b7!N 14.exd6 ♕b8! 15.♘e4 ♘xe4 16.♗xe4 ♗xe4 17.♕xe4 ♕xd6∓ This structure is strongly in Black's favor.] 13...♗b7 14.♕h3 ♘c5 15.f5 ♖ae8 16.♗h6 ♕d8!∓ 0-1 (32) Schmaltz, R (2534) – Zeller, F (2465) Landau 2002.

B2) 10.f5 ♘e5! 11.♕h3 ♗g7 12.fxe6 ♕c5! A nice intermediate move. White cannot take on f7. 13.♖xf6! ♗xf6 14.♗e3 ♘g4 15.exf7+ ♔xf7 16.♖f1 ♔e8 17.♖xf6 ♘xf6 18.♕h4 ♖f8=

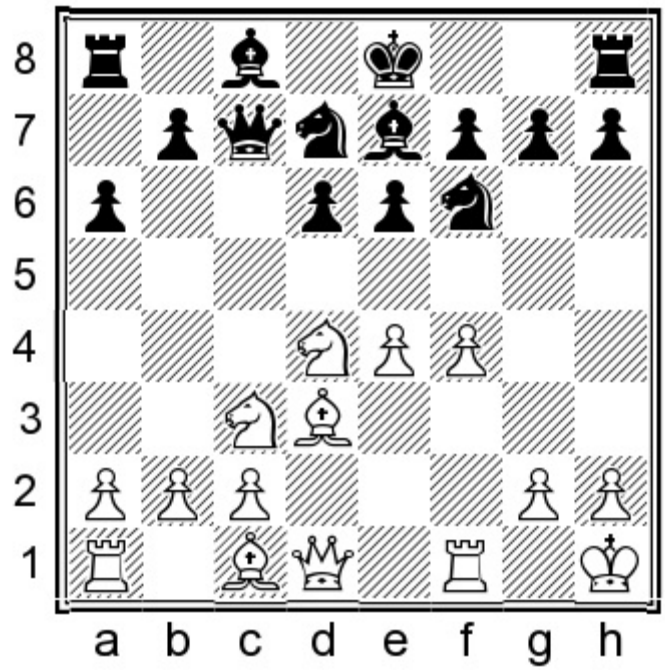
C) 9.♗d2!? A thematic move in this system, but the loose situation along the g1-a7 diagonal gives Black extra opportunities. 9...g6! According to the rule that we should play a fianchetto after two slow moves from White. 10.f5!? Thematic. 10...♕b6! With an extra development move we are happy to accept the complications. 11.♗e3 e5∓ 12.♗c4



Position after: 12.♗c4

12.♘f5 is not available. 12...d5! 13.♘a4 [13.♘xd5 ♘xd5 14.exd5 exd4 15.♕xd4 ♕xd4 16.♗xd4 ♗c5 17.♗xc5 ♘xc5 18.♖ae1+ ♔d8∓] 13...♕c7 14.♗xd5 exd4 15.♗f4 [15.♗xd4 ♗d6∓] 15...♕a5 16.c4 ♗e7∓

D) 9.♔h1 A smart waiting move. Often this leads to the main line but White prevents any complications based on ...♕b6. This is the move order preferred by de la Villa & Illingworth. 9...♗e7

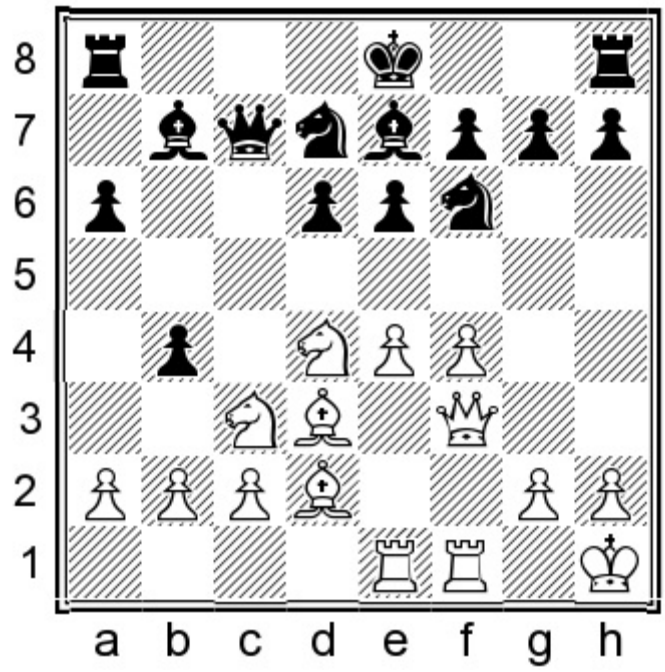


Position after: 9...♗e7

The most solid continuation, but the bishop is relatively passive here.

D1) 10.♕e2 is our main line.

D2) 10.♕f3 b5! With the queen on f3 Black can more easily play ...b5. Due to White's move order our bishop already arrived on e7, so we are not in a position to put our bishop on g7, the optimal square for the bishop against ♕f3 setups. 11.♗d2 [11.e5?! ♗b7 12.♕h3 dxe5∓ White has no way to strengthen his attack.] 11...♗b7 12.♖ae1 White has chosen the most active position for his pieces and has not wasted any time on securing his queenside with a3. [12.♘b3 0-0= followed by ...♖e8; 12.b4 0-0 13.a4 bxa4 14.♖xa4 is less impressive with the white queen on f3. 14...♖fc8 15.♖aa1 ♘b6 16.♕h3 ♘c4=] 12...b4!



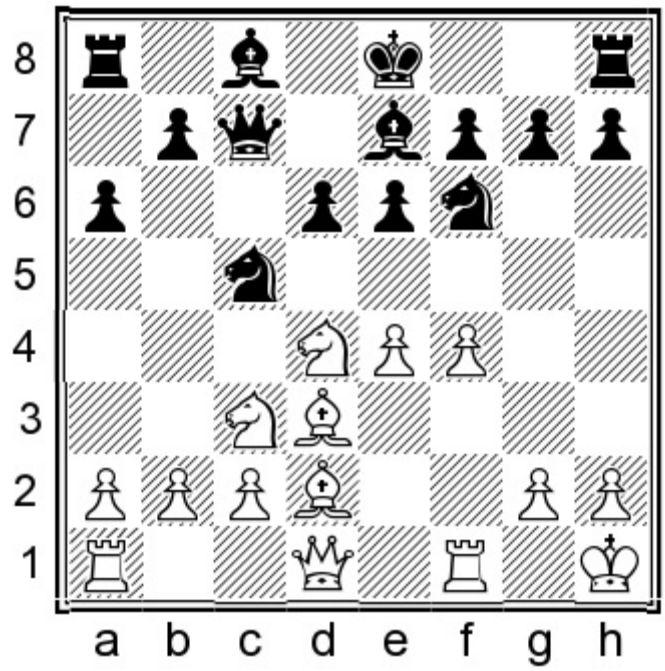
Position after: 12...b4!

Exchanging White's strong bishop on d3 as well and keeps the position fluid. [12...♘c5 is the safe option, but the positions which arise are not very interesting. 13.b4 ♘xd3 14.cxd3 0-0=]

D2.1) 13.♘a4 ♘c5! 14.b3 [14.♘xc5 dxc5 15.♘e2 c4–+] 14...♘xa4 15.bxa4 d5 16.e5 ♘e4 17.♗e3 g6∓

D2.2) 13.♘d1 ♘c5 14.♘f2 [14.f5 e5 15.♘b3 ♘xd3 16.cxd3 a5 17.♗g5 0-0=] 14...a5! 15.♗b5+ ♘fd7=

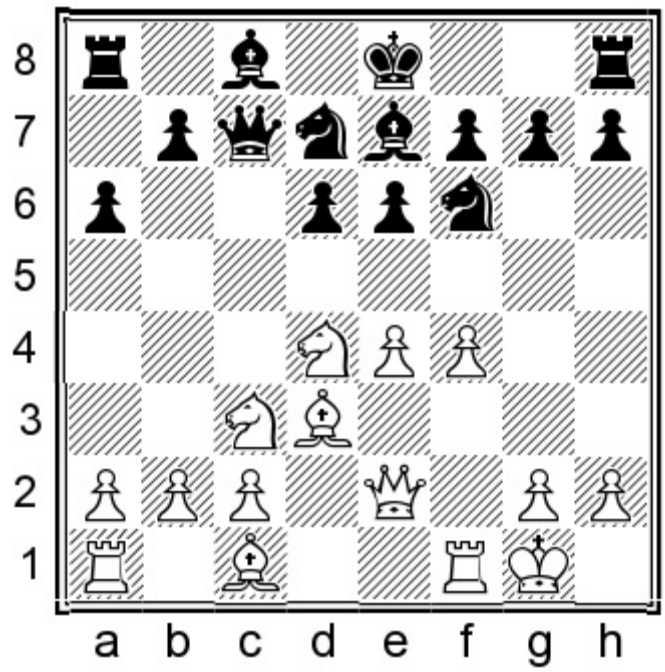
D3) 10.♗d2 Recommended by de la Villa & Illingworth. 10...♘c5!



Position after: 10...♘c5!

11.b4 [11.♕f3 0-0 12.b4 ♘xd3 13.cxd3 ♕b6 14.♘b3 ♗d7 15.a3 ♖ac8 ½-½ (15) Kalegin, E (2456) – Grigoriants, S (2562) Rijeka 2010; 11.♕e2 0-0 is our main line.] 11...♘xd3 12.cxd3 0-0 13.♖c1± This is slightly better for White and leads to structures we will see later in the main line of this chapter as well. It should not be too difficult for Black to maintain the balance.

9...♗e7



Position after: 9...♗e7

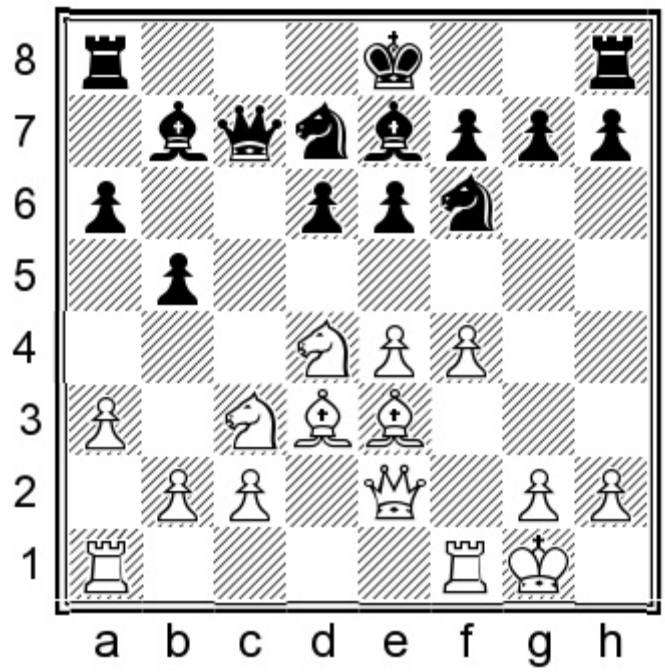
Classical development of the bishop to e7. Running down the list of candidate moves; the obvious alternatives all have their deficiencies.

10.♔h1

With the bishop on e7 instead of f8, the weakness of the g1-a7 diagonal may become an issue.

A) 10.g4?! ♕b6! with the extra move this is the right maneuver to take the sting out of White's attack on the kingside. 11.♗e3 [11.g5 ♕xd4+ 12.♗e3 ♕b4 13.a3 ♕a5 14.gxf6 ♘xf6∓] 11...♕xb2 12.♘db5 axb5 13.♘xb5 ♕b4 14.♘c7+ ♔f8 That move is available after 9...♗e7. It makes a difference. 15.g5 ♘e8 16.♘xa8 ♕a5∓

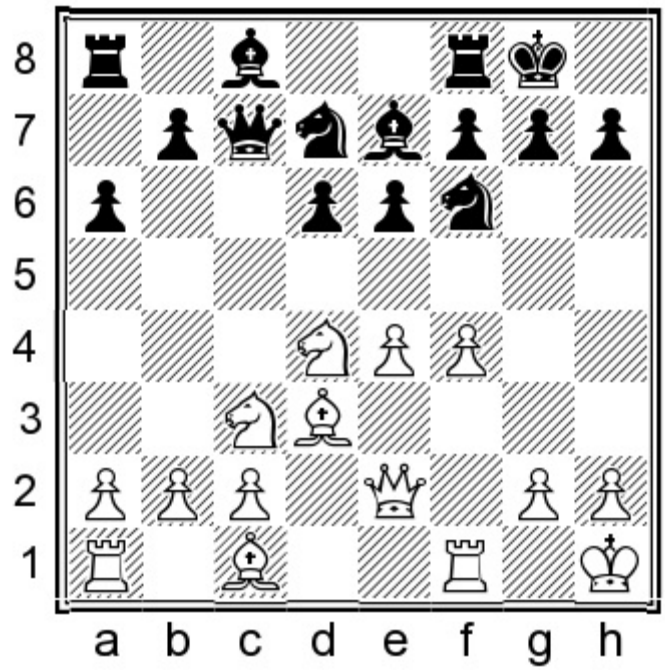
B) 10.♗e3 b5 11.a3 ♗b7



Position after: 11...♗b7

12.♖ae1 [12.♘b3 h5 13.h3 h4 14.♗d4 e5 15.fxe5 dxe5 16.♗e3 ♘c5= 0-1 (27) Padmini, R (2370) – Giri, A (2764) Chess. com 2020.] 12...0-0 A traditional setup by both sides. Only the bishop on e3 is a bit out of place and would rather sit on d2. Black is ready for ...♘c5. 13.♔h1 [13.g4 ♘c5 14.♗f2 d5! 15.e5 ♘fe4 16.♗xe4 ♘xe4 17.♘xe4 dxe4 18.c3 ♖ad8∓ 1-0 (31) Pranav, V (2486) – Martic, I (2287) Chess.com 2021.] 13...♘c5 14.♗g1 [14.♗d2 ♖fe8=] 14...♘xd3! 15.cxd3 ♖ac8 16.♖f3 [16.e5?! ♘d5 17.♘xd5 ♗xd5∓ ½-½ (30) Fastova, T – Shipilova, O Dagomys 2004.] 16...g6 17.♖ef1 ♕d7!= The black queen plays a pivotal role on d7, vacating the c-file for the rook and defending against f4-f5. [17...♖fe8? 18.f5± 0-1 (30) Le Corre, B (2271) – Geller, J (2548) Nancy 2014.]

10...0-0



Position after: 10...0-0

With the queen on e2 White is well prepared for a queenside expansion by Black.

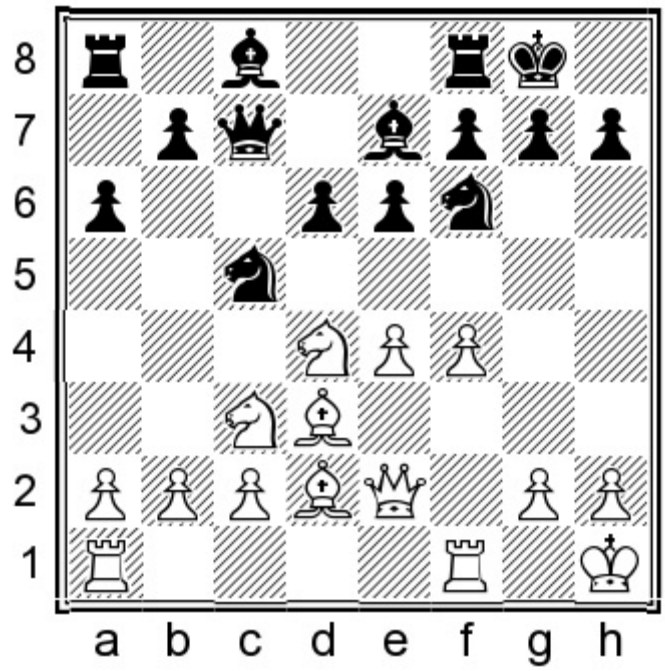
11.♗d2

The thematic continuation, preparing ♖a1-e1 and keeping an eye on the queenside.

A) 11.a4 b6 leads to the previous chapter.

B) 11.♘f3 ♘c5! 12.e5 [12.♗e3 b5 13.♗d4 ♗b7 14.b4 ♘xd3 15.cxd3 ♗c6= ½-½ (31) Howell, J (2450) – Vasiukov, E (2545) Belgorod 1990.] 12...♘xd3 13.cxd3 ♘d7! 14.♗d2 dxe5 15.fxe5 b5∓ 1-0 (27) Castrillon Gomez, M (2206) – Velasco, L (1708) Palmira 2017. It took Velasco nearly a century to improve upon his famous predecessor!

11...♘c5!



Position after: 11...♘c5!

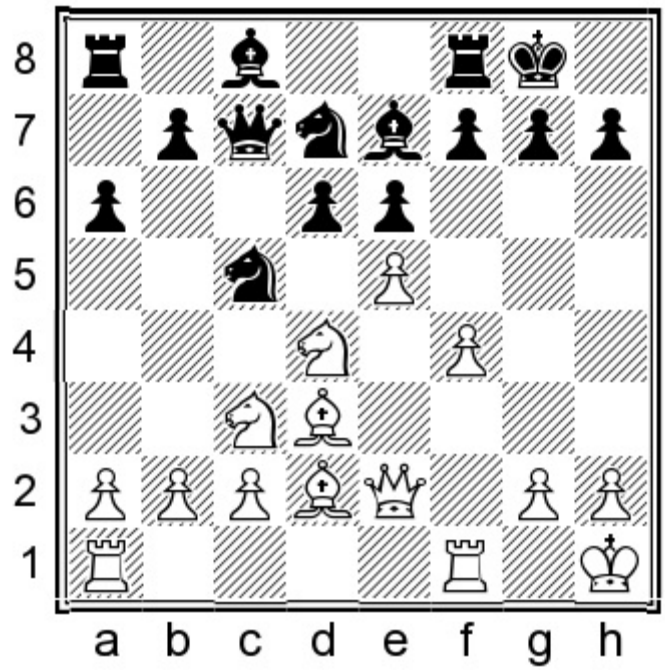
With the white pieces standing ready to develop a strong initiative on the kingside it is time to get rid of White's light-squared bishop. Alternatives are less attractive.

12.b4!?

The move recommended by de la Villa & Illingworth.

A) 12.g4?! White is not ready for this. 12...d5! Black starts a counter-initiative in the center. 13.e5 ♘fe4 14.g5 b5∓ 15.a3 ♗b7 16.♖f3 ♖ac8 17.♖h3 g6!∓

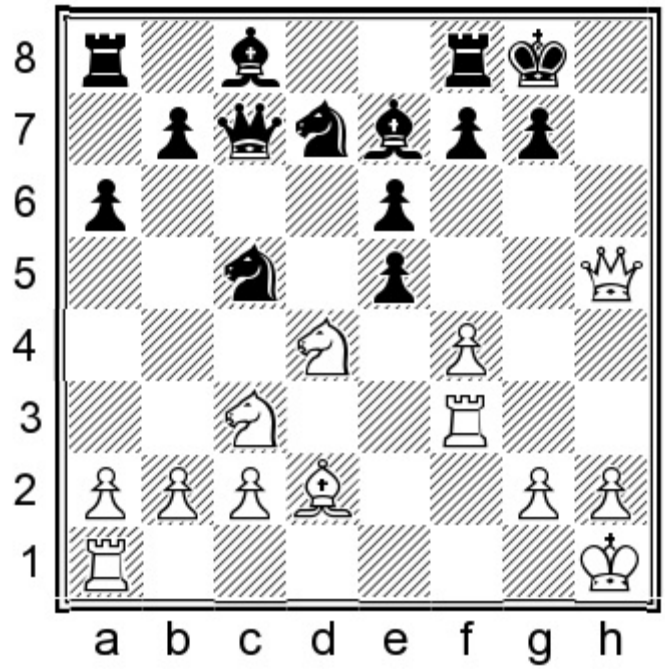
B) 12.e5 White forces the issue. 12...♘fd7



Position after: 12...♘fd7

B1) 13.♖ae1?! ♘xd3 14.cxd3 dxe5 15.fxe5 ♗h4!∓ and important move, softening White's kingside. 16.g3 [16.♖c1 ♕xe5∓] 16...♗e7 17.♘f3 [17.♗f4 b5 18.h4 ♗b7+ 19.♔h2 ♘c5∓ 0-1 (51) Jakic, I (2410) – Mazi, L (2377) Zadar 2013.] 17...b5∓ 18.♗f4 ♗b7 19.♘e4 ♖ac8!N 20.♖g1 ♗d5–+ White's initiative has stalled, and he is left with many weaknesses.

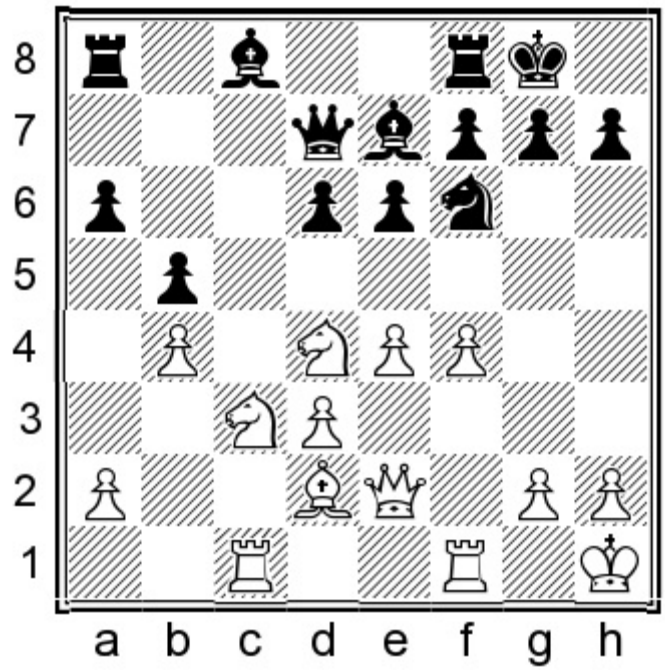
B2) 13.♗xh7+! ♔xh7 14.♕h5+ ♔g8 15.♖f3 dxe5!



Position after: 15...dxe5!

This more or less forces White to take the draw. 16.♖h3 [16.♘f5 ♘f6 17.♕h4 exf5 18.♖h3 ♘h5 19.♕xh5 f6 20.♕g6 ♗d8=] 16...f5 17.♕h7+ ♔f7 18.♕h5+ ♔g8=

C) 12.♖ac1 The most popular move, anticipating the opening of the c-file. 12...b5 13.b4 ♘xd3 14.cxd3 ♕d7



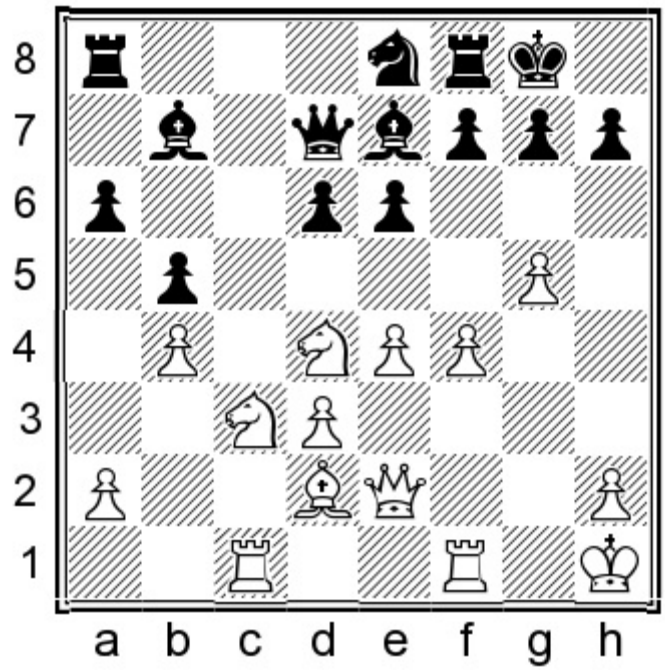
Position after: 14...♕d7

Black steps out of the White rook's range.

C1) 15.♘b3 ♗b7 16.a3 ♖ac8 17.e5 ♘d5 18.♘e4 ♖xc1 19.♖xc1 ♗a8 20.exd6 ♗xd6= ½ – ½ (49) Bubir, A (2545) – Kruis, R (2507) corr. 2014.

C2) 15.f5 ♗b7 16.♕f3 [16.fxe6 fxe6 17.a4 bxa4 18.♕d1 a3 19.♘a4 ♖ac8=] 16...e5! 17.♘b3 d5∓ ½-½ (52) Nitin, S (2377) – Aczel, G (2502) Zalakaros 2016.

C3) 15.g4! Making use of the fact that the knight cannot go to the natural d7-square. 15...♗b7 16.g5 ♘e8

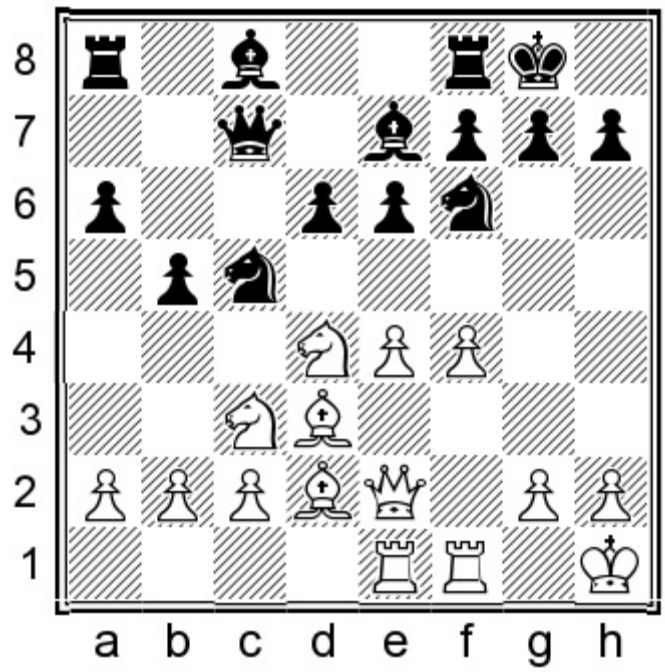


Position after: 16...♘e8

C3.1) 17.a3 f5!N 18.gxf6 [18.♔g1 ♗d8 19.♗e3 g6∓] 18...♗xf6 19.♗e3 ♖c8∓

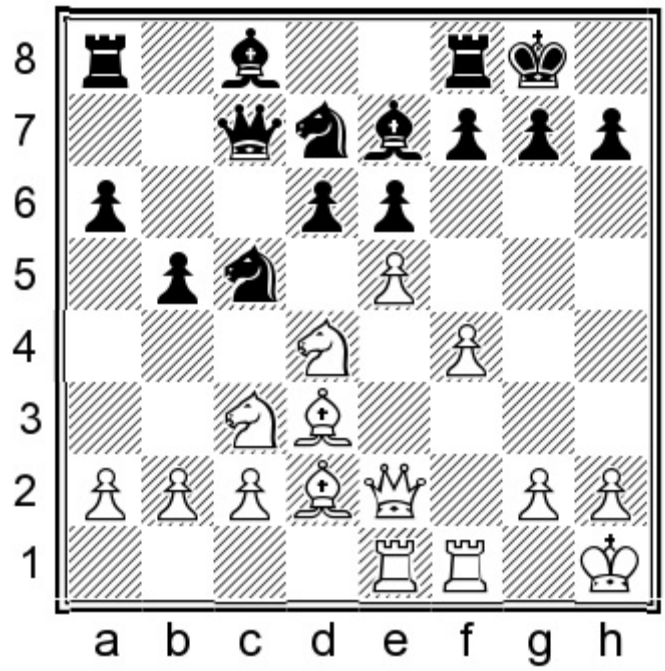
C3.2) 17.f5 d5=

D) 12.♖ae1 Supporting a central breakthrough. 12...b5! This is most active, but it allows White a forced draw.



Position after: 12...b5!

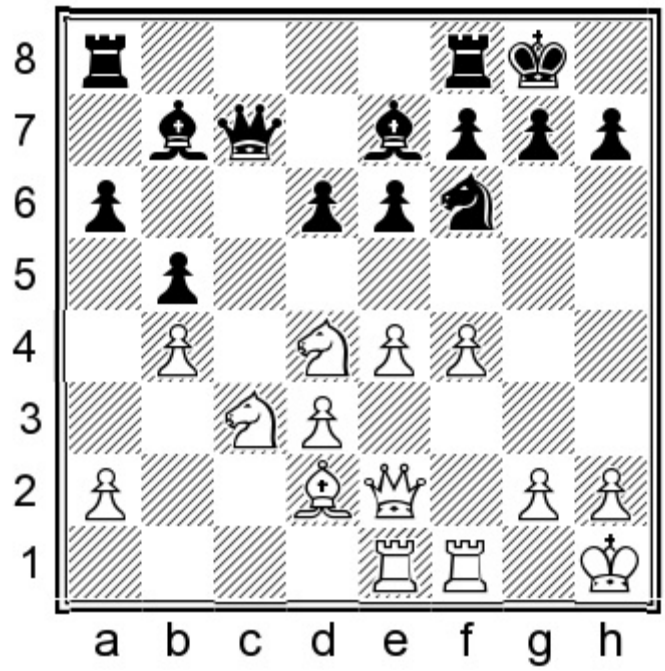
D1) White can now force a perpetual. 13.e5 ♘fd7



Position after: 13...♘fd7

14.♗xh7+ [14.♖f3 ♘xd3 15.cxd3 dxe5! 16.fxe5 ♗h4∓] 14...♔xh7 15.♕h5+ ♔g8 16.♖f3 dxe5 17.♖h3 f5 18.♕h7+ ♔f7 19.♕h5+ ♔g8 20.♕h7+ ♔f7 21.♕h5+ ♔g8 22.♕h7+ ½-½ (22) Bergsson, S (2333) – Meier, G (2570) Reykjavik 2008.

D2) 13.b4 The thematic move but Black is prepared for it. 13...♘xd3 14.cxd3 ♗b7

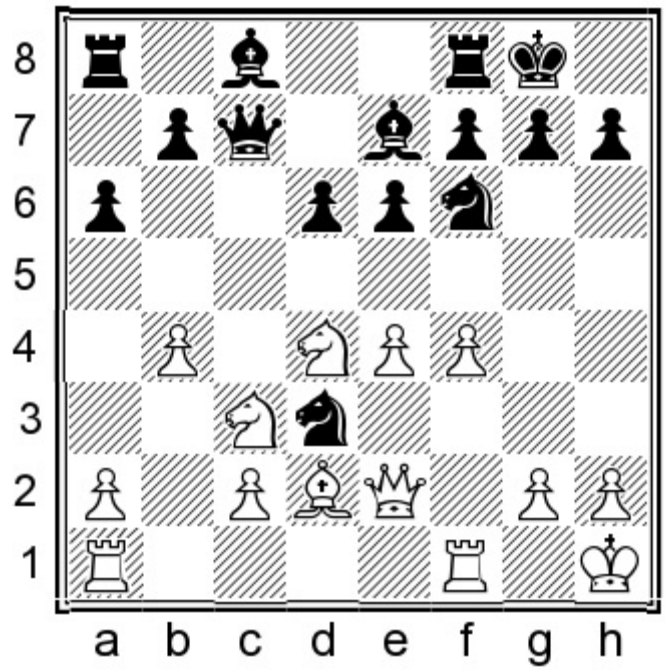


Position after: 14...♗b7

15.♖c1 [15.♖f3 ♖fe8 16.♖h3 ♘d7 17.♕h5 ♘f8 18.♘f3 ♗f6 19.d4 g6∓ ½-½ (90) Szabo, K (2548) –

Kulaots, K (2577) Zadar 2011.] 15...♕d7 This position is fine for Black. 16.a3 [16.g4 ♖fc8!∓] 16...♖ac8 17.f5 [17.♘b3 e5 18.fxe5 dxe5 19.♗e3 ♕e6= 1-0 (39) Frolyanov, D (2487) – Ghaem Maghami, E (2549) Moscow 2004; 17.♗e3 ♖fe8 18.g4 g6! 19.g5 ♘h5 20.♕g4 ♗f8∓ 0-1 (47) Pandavos, P (2315) – Velikov, P (2495) Xanthi 1990.] 17...e5∓ 18.♘f3 ♖c7! 19.♘b1 ♖fc8 20.♖xc7 ♖xc7∓ 0-1 (29) Videki, S (2375) – Velikov, P (2485) Agneaux 1997. Black continues with ...♕c8 and ...d5.

12...♘xd3



Position after: 12...♘xd3

Black gets rid of White's most dangerous attacking piece.

13.cxd3

According to de la Villa & Illingworth, Black should objectively be fine in this position. It is just a bit of hard work for Black to keep the balance.

13.♕xd3? e5! 14.♘f5 [14.♘de2 ♗e6∓] 14...♗xf5 15.exf5 ♖ac8∓

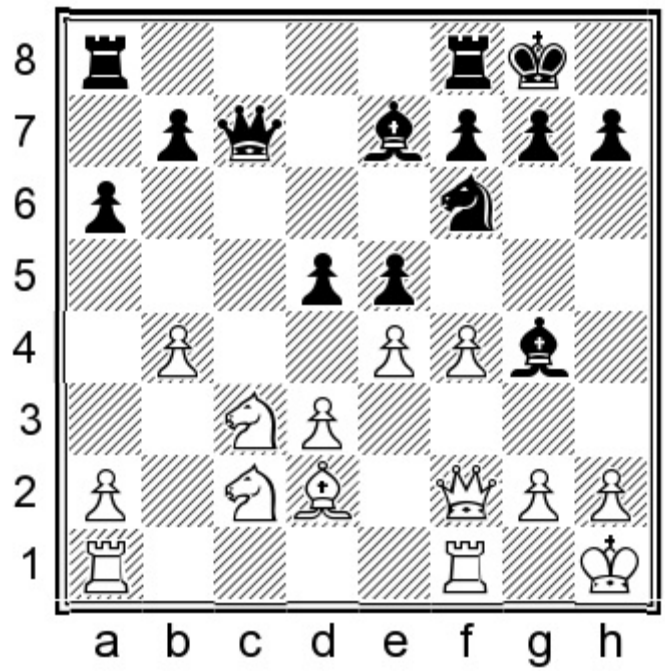
13...e5! 14.♘c2

14.♘b3 ♗e6 15.♖ac1 exf4 [15...♕b6!=] 16.♘d5 ♕d8 17.♘xf4 ♖c8 18.♘d4 ♕d7 19.a3 ♗d8 20.h3 ♗b6 21.♗e3 ♖xc1 22.♖xc1 ♖c8 23.♕b2 ♖xc1+ 24.♕xc1 ♗d8= 0-1 (26) Nolte, R (2393) – Zhou, J (2595) Philadelphia 2017.

14...♗g4 15.♕f2

15.♕e1 exf4=

15...d5!



Position after: 15...d5!

16.♘e3

16.exd5 exf4 17.♕xf4 ♕xf4 18.♗xf4 ♖ac8∓

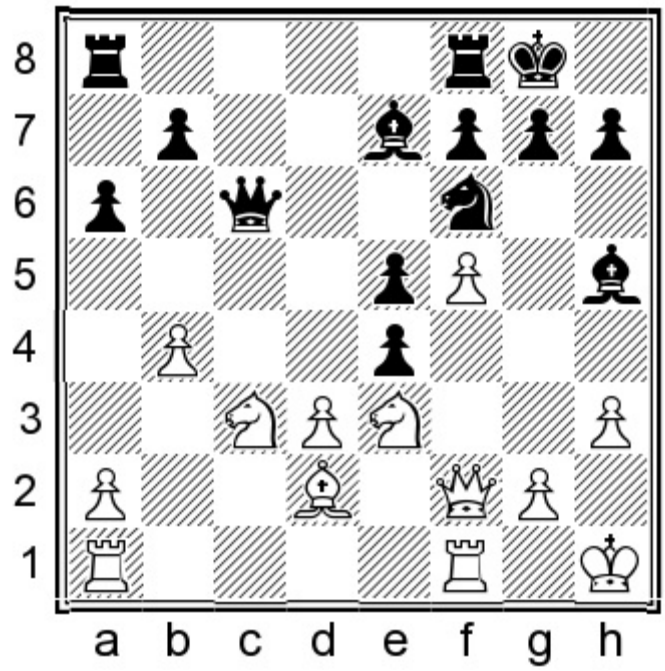
16...dxe4 17.f5

17.♕g3 exf4 18.♕xf4 ♕xf4 19.♖xf4 ♗e6∓

17...♕c6 18.h3

18.♖ac1 exd3 19.♘cd5 ♕xd5 20.♘xd5 ♘xd5∞

18...♗h5

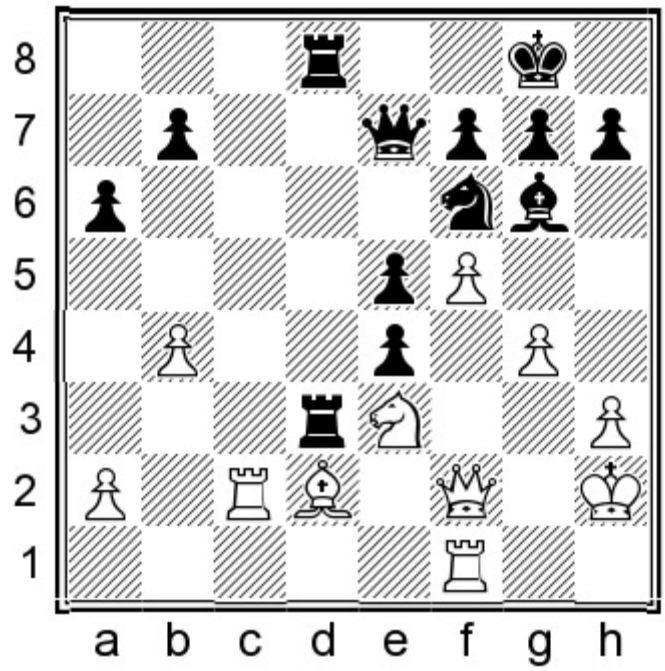


Position after: 18...♗h5

19.♖ac1

19.g4 exd3+ 20.♕g2 ♕xg2+ 21.♔xg2 ♗xb4 22.♖ab1 ♗xc3 23.♗xc3 ♖ac8 24.♖b3 ♖fd8♾

19...♖ad8 20.♘cd5 ♕d6 21.♘xe7+ ♕xe7 22.g4 ♖xd3 23.♖c2 ♗g6 24.♔h2 ♖fd8♾



Position after: 24...♖fd8♾

Black has excellent compensation for the piece he is about to lose.

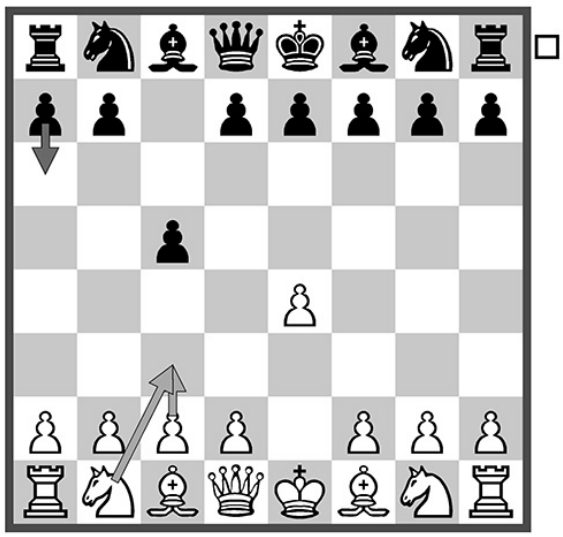
Conclusion

The main line in the 6.♗d3 ♘f6 variation continues with 7.0-0 d6 8.f4 ♘bd7 9.♕e2 with an optimal development of White's forces. As a result, Black is not in a position to put his bishop on g7 or to expand his queenside. He has to live with the modest 9...♗e7.

We will see traditional build-ups by both colors, Black postponing any action on the queenside until after he has taken his king into safety. Normally, Black continues at a certain stage with ...♘c5xd3, exchanging one of the stronger white pieces and taking the punch out of White's attack. In the subsequent positions Black should be able to maintain the balance although the game remains complex and may even involve piece sacrifices by Black.

Chapter 7
Anti-Sicilians – With an Early ...a6

1.e4 c5



Chapter Guide

Chapter 7 – Anti-Sicilians – With Early ...a6

1.e4 c5

a) 2.c3 a6 – Alapin Sicilian

b) 2.♘c3 a6 – Introduction

c) 2.♘c3 a6 3.♗c4

d) 2.♘c3 a6 3.a4

e) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g4

f) 2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2 e6 4.g3 – Chameleon Variation

g) 2.♘c3 a6 3.f4 – Grand Prix Attack

h) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 Closed Sicilian 3...b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.--

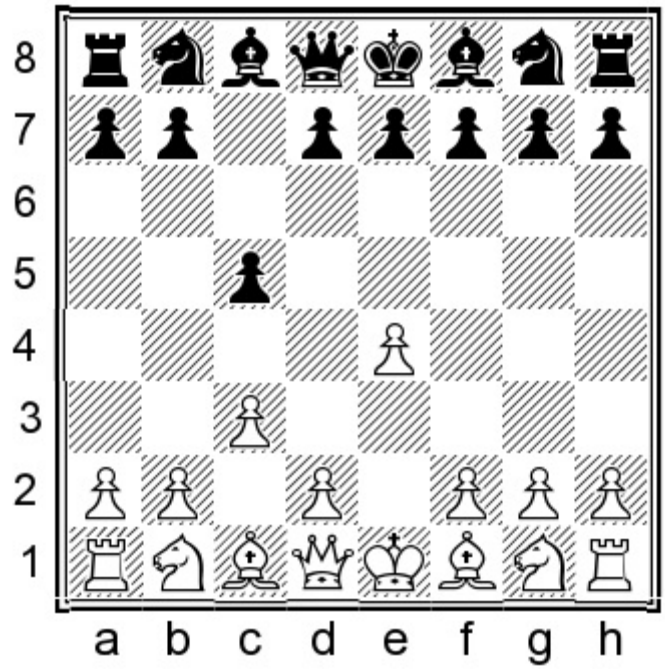
i) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.f4

j) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘ge2

k) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘h3

a) 2.c3 a6 – Alapin Sicilian

1.e4 c5 2.c3



Position after: 2.c3

The Sicilian Alapin is a respectable if White wishes to avoid the open systems based on 3.d4. The Russian GM Evgeny Sveshnikov, one of the foremost opening theorists of the 20th century, was a great champion of this opening scheme.

2...a6!?

What is this? There are about 350 games in the database with this intriguing move, so it is not completely unknown. However, most opening books including the 2.c3 Bible by Sveshnikov, do not mention it. The strongest player who regularly uses this setup, both in rapid and classical games, is the Brazilian GM Aleksandr Fier. Several other players such as Luthanian IM Valeriy Kazakovskiy have also played it many times. We will see a lot of similarities and transpositions into the 2.♘f3 a6 3.c3 d5 O'Kelly in this line. Theoretically, Black appears to be doing fine. The really good news about 2...a6 is that it is probably an unexpected and unknown move for our opponent.

3.d4

The move that you will encounter most in practice. White continues to expand thematically in the center.

3.♘f3 is the recommendation of a few theoretical sources that do analyze 2...a6. It directly transposes into the O'Kelly with 3.c3.

3...cxd4

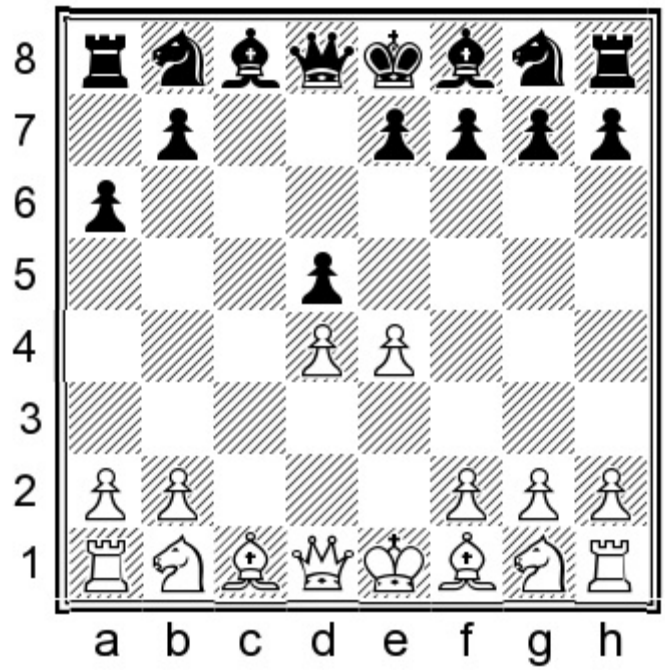
leads to the same position, so this line can be used against the Alapin and against the Morra.

4.cxd4

4.♘f3 d5! is a direct transposition to the 3.c3 O'Kelly. [4...dxc3 is a genuine Morra gambit which will not investigated any further here.]

4...d5!

Black takes the well-known position in the center. With this move Black shows that he was not mistaken with his second move but that it was part of his 2.c3 a6 master plan.

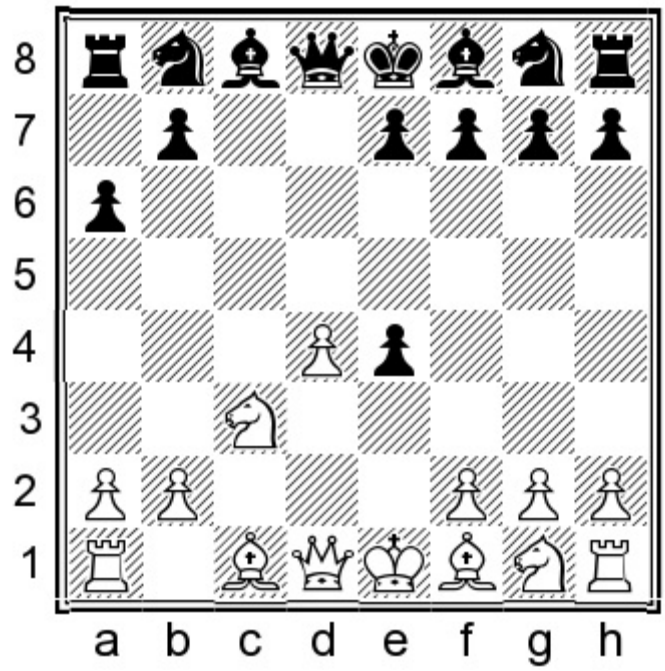


Position after: 4...d5!

5.e5

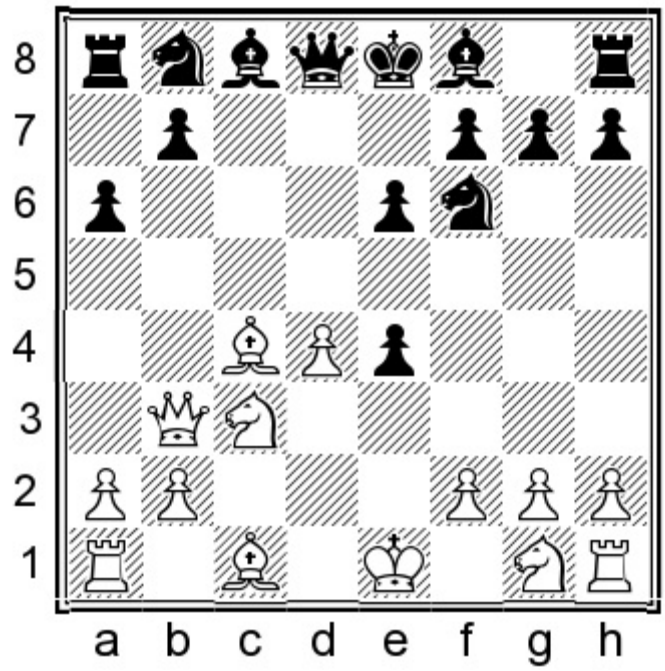
The move which gives this variation its independent flavor. As the white knight is not on f3 Black does not have ...♗g4 as in the 3.c3 O'Kelly and so he has to build up his game differently.

A) 5.♘c3!? is an interesting thought, aiming for open play in the center in line with the ideas of the Alapin. White accepts an isolated queen pawn and counts on active piece play and attacking chances as compensation. It is not very threatening though as Black basically goes for an improved version of the classic main line Caro Kann. 5...dxe4



Position after: 5...dxe4

A1) 6.♗c4 ♘f6 7.♕b3 e6∓

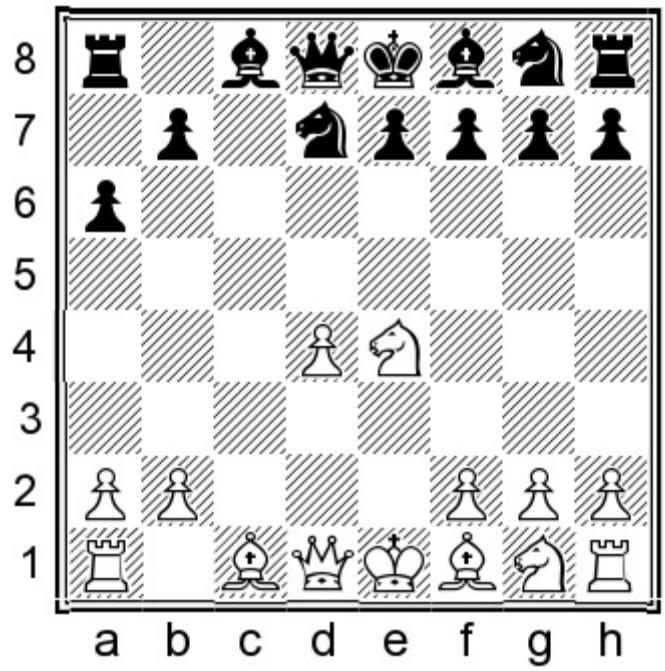


Position after: 7...e6∓

8.d5 [8.♘ge2 b5 9.♘xb5 axb5 10.♗xb5+ ♗d7 11.♗g5 ♕a5+ 12.♘c3 ♗b4 13.♗xd7+ ♘bxd7 14.0-0 0-0–+ 0-1 (20) Hunt, J (1455) – Barendswaard, W corr. 2017.] 8...b5 9.dxe6 bxc4 10.♕a4+ ♔e7 11.♗e3 1-0 (35) Lavrov, M (2387) – Gorbatov, A (2389) Moscow 2018. 11...♕c7! 12.♘ge2 [12.♘b5? ♕c6–+] 12...fxe6–+

A2) 6.f3 e5! No need to accept the gambit. 7.dxe5 [7.d5 ♘f6! 8.fxe4 ♗c5∓] 7...♕xd1+ 8.♘xd1 ♘c6 9.fxe4 ♘xe5∓

A3) 6.♘xe4 playing in Caro Kann style. 6...♘d7!



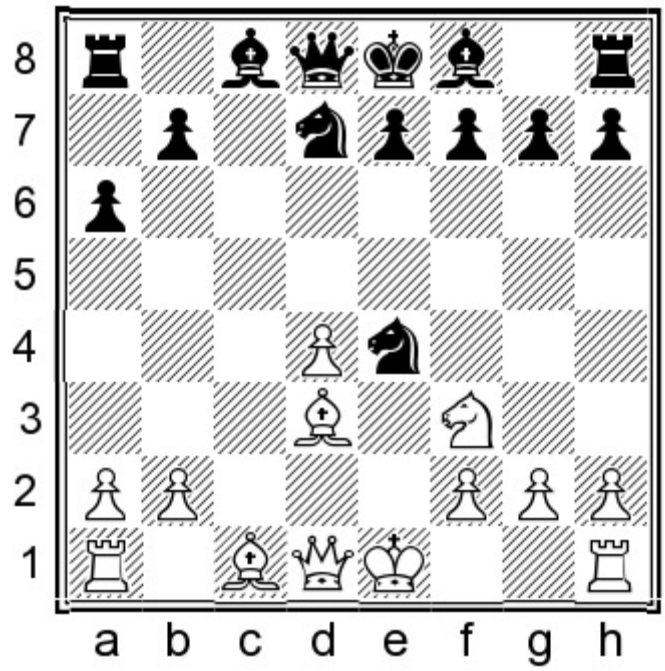
Position after: 6...♘d7!

Back wants to keep the position complex. The fact that both c-pawns are gone is in Black's favor.

A3.1) 7.♗c4 ♘gf6 8.♘xf6+ [8.♘g5?! is a maneuver borrowed from the Caro Kann, but here it is asking too much. 8...e6 9.♕e2 ♘b6! Black defends against ♘xf7 or taking on e6. Now White is about to lose his d-pawn. 10.♗d3 ♗b4+ 11.♔f1 ♕xd4∓] 8...♘xf6 9.♘f3 b5 10.♗d3 e6=

A3.2) 7.♗d3 ♘gf6 8.♘g5 h6 9.♘e6 ♕b6 10.♘xf8 ♘xf8 11.♘e2 ♘e6 12.0-0 0-0=

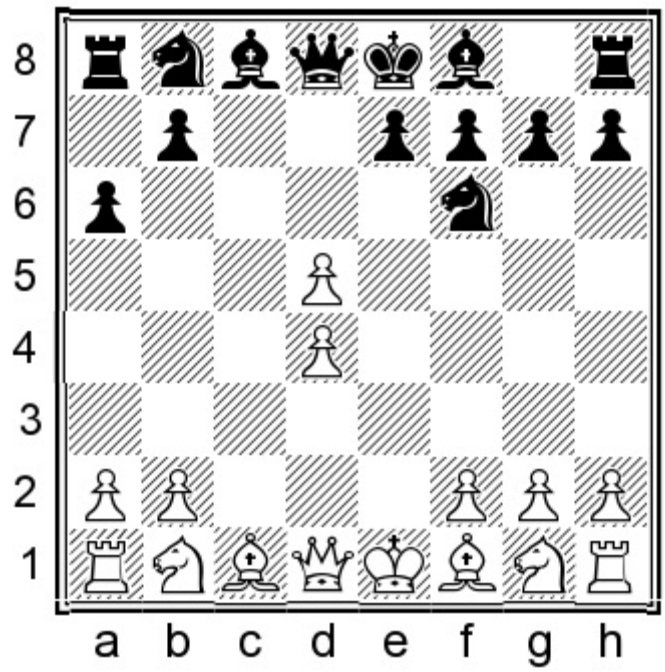
A3.3) 7.♘f3 ♘gf6 8.♗d3 [8.♘g3 g6 9.♗c4 ♗g7 10.0-0 0-0=] 8...♘xe4!



Position after: 8...♘xe4!

Exchanges are attractive when playing against an IQP. 9.♗xe4 ♘f6 10.♗d3 [10.♗c2 g6 11.0-0 ♗g7 12.♗b3 0-0= Black has easy play against the IQP.] 10...g6 11.0-0 ♗g7 12.♖e1 0-0 13.♗g5 [13.h3 b6=] 13...♗e6 14.a3 ♗d5∓

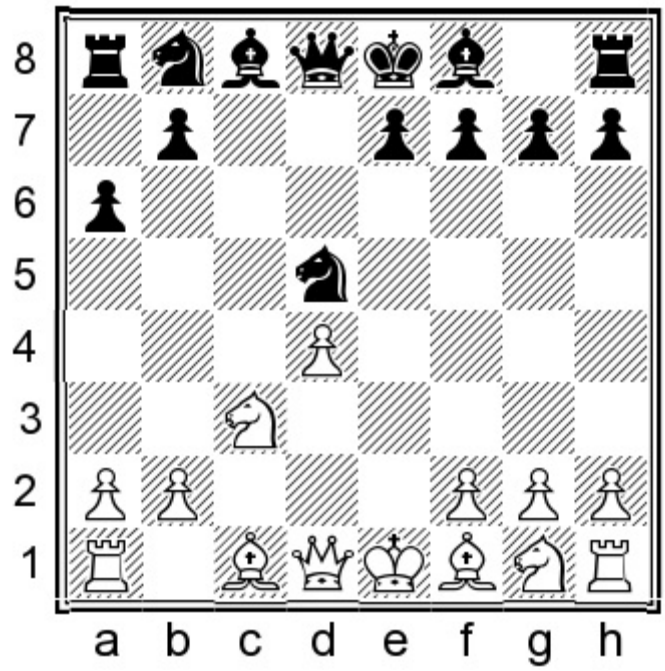
B) 5.exd5 is seen more often than the text line and leads to another type of open positions a Morra/Alapin player generally is aiming for. After 5...♘f6 it normally transposes into our 3.c3 O'Kelly with 3...d5 4.exd5 ♘f6 5.d4 cxd4 etc. 5...♘f6



Position after: 5...♘f6

B1) 6.♘f3 ♘xd5 7.♗c4 ♘c6 8.♗xd5!? White plays on his lead in development. 8...♕xd5 9.♗e3 [9.♘c3 ♕c4 10.♗e3 ♗g4 11.♖c1 e6=] 9...♗g4 10.♘c3 ♕c4! 11.d5 ♗xf3 12.♕xf3 ♘e5=

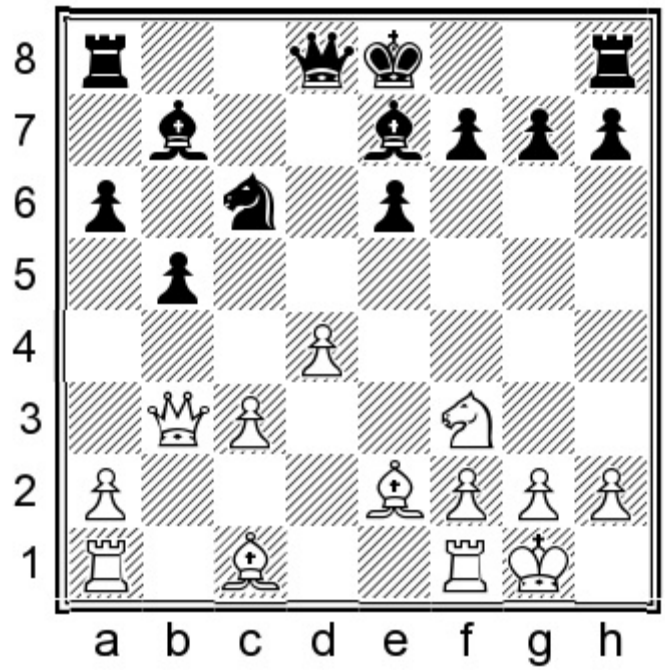
B2) 6.♘c3 ♘xd5



Position after: 6...♘xd5

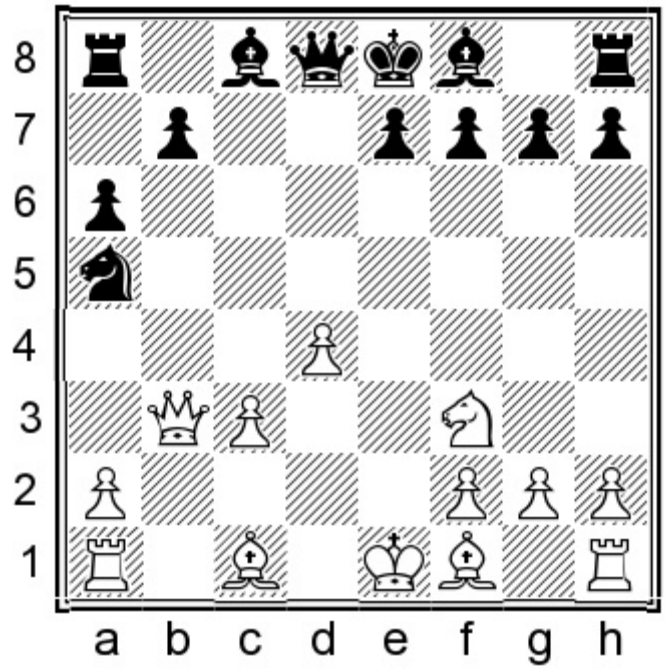
B2.1) 7.♘f3 ♘c6 is the 3.c3 O'Kelly.

B2.2) 7.♕b3 This is Evgeny Sveshnikov's and Mark Esserman's recipe on lichess against the Alapin/Morra with an early ...a6. 7...♘xc3 [7...e6!?N is less dynamic but makes one wonder what the white queen is doing on b3.] 8.bxc3 [8.♗c4!? e6 9.bxc3 b5! 10.♗e2 ♘c6 11.♘f3 ♗e7 12.0-0 ♗b7



Position after: 12...♗b7

Black has gained time, and White's hanging pawns are more of a weakness than a strength. 13.a4 b4 14.cxb4 ♘xb4 15.♗d2 ♗d5 16.♗c4 ♖b8=] 8...♘c6! 9.♘f3 [9.♗c4 e6 10.♗d3 ♗d6=] 9...♘a5!

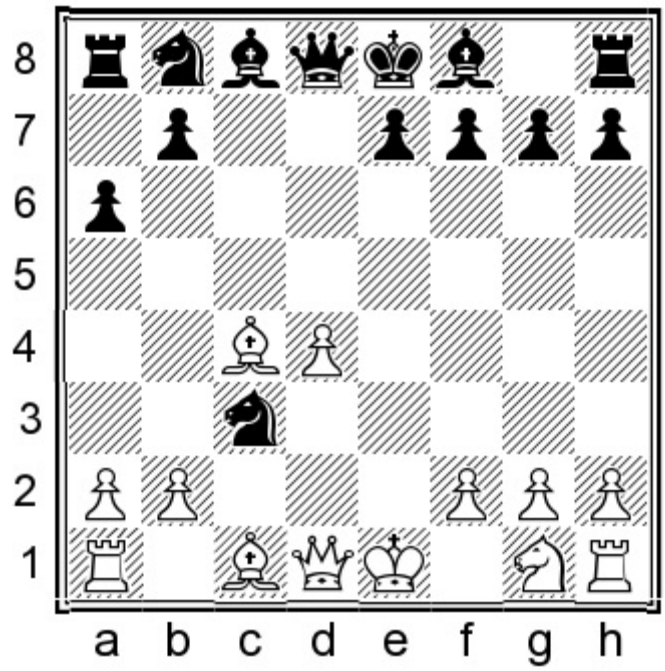


Position after: 9...♘a5!

An improvement upon the known 9...e6 and 9...b5. The move ...♘a5 generally fits in nicely with White's hanging pawns and it enables a kingside fianchetto by Black. The bishop on g7 is strong in these structures. 10.♕c2 g6 11.♗d3 ♗g7 12.0-0 ♗g4! Hitting the knight before White increases

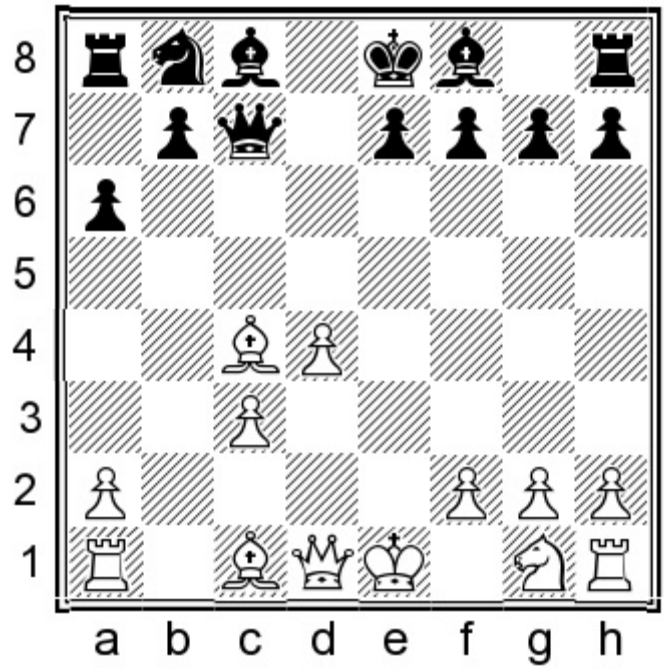
the pressure along the e-file with 13.♖e1. 13.♘e5 ♗e6 14.♖e1 0-0= followed by ...♖c8 with an equal game.

B2.3) 7.♗c4 The natural way of chasing away the Black knight on d5. 7...♘xc3!



Position after: 7...♘xc3!

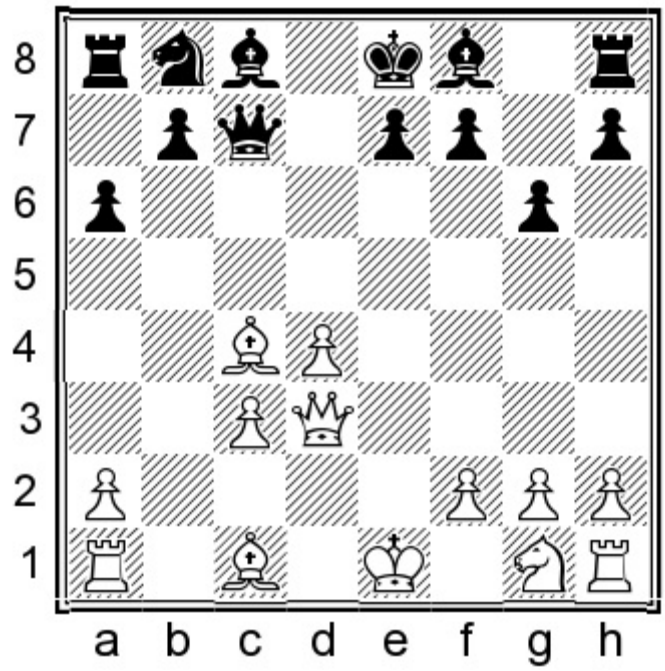
8.bxc3 [8.♕b3 e6 9.bxc3 ♗d6=] 8...♕c7! This forces White to make a concession.



Position after: 8...♕c7!

B2.3a) 9.♕e2?! ♗e6! [Not 9...b5?! 10.♗d5!] 10.♗xe6 ♕xc3+ 11.♕d2 ♕xa1 12.♗b3 ♘c6 13.♘f3 ♖d8 14.d5 ♘e5 15.0-0 ♘xf3+ 16.gxf3 ♕f6∓

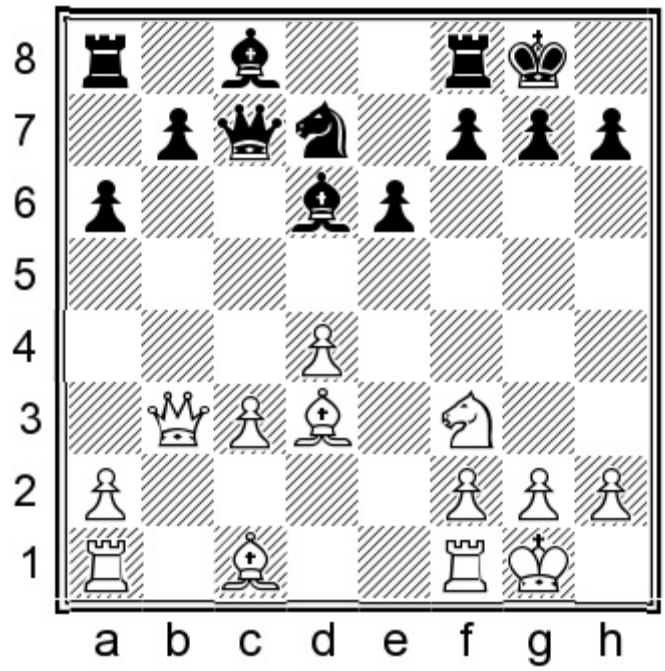
B2.3b) 9.♕d3 makes life easy for Black. 9...g6!



Position after: 9...g6!

10.♗b3 [10.♘f3 ♗f5 11.♕e2 b5 12.♗d5 ♕xc3+ 13.♕d2 ♕xd2+ 14.♗xd2 ♖a7∓] 10...♗g7 11.♘f3 ♘c6= Black is well prepared to play against the hanging pawns.

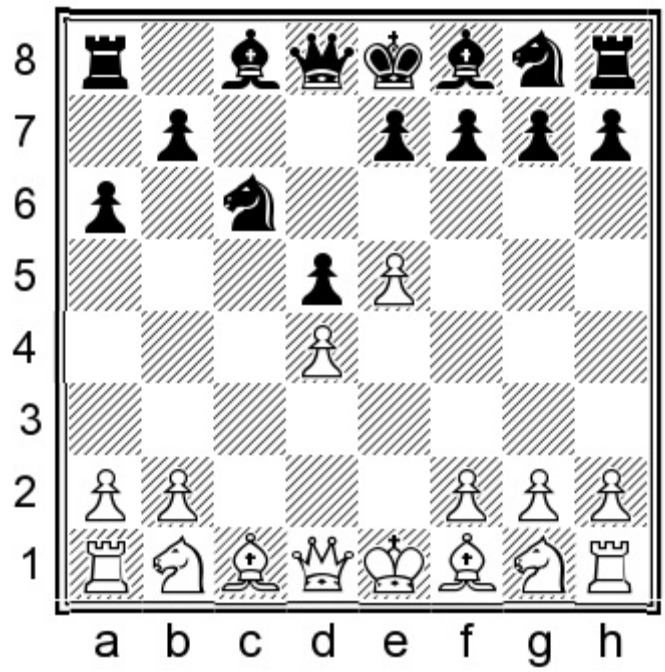
B2.3c) 9.♕b3! White prevents a kingside fianchetto by Black. 9...e6 10.♘f3 [10.♘e2 White prepares ♗f4. 10...♗d6!= We were planning this move anyway.] 10...♗d6! 11.0-0 0-0 12.♗d3 [12.♖e1 ♘d7 13.♗g5 h6 14.♗h4 b6 15.♗g3 ♗b7 16.♘d2 ♗xg3 17.hxg3 ♖ac8=] 12...♘d7



Position after: 12...♘d7

In anticipation of a future ♗xh7. 13.c4 b6 14.♖b1 ♖b8= Black has developed harmoniously. He will play ...♗b7 followed by ...♖fc8 to increase the pressure against White's hanging pawns and to enable ...♘f8 against a potential white queen-bishop battery on the b1-h7 diagonal. Chances are balanced.

5...♘c6

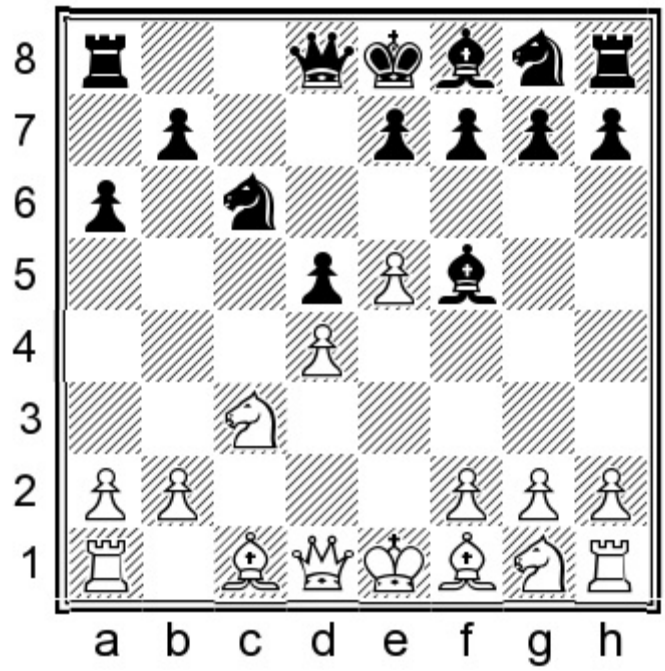


Position after: 5...♘c6

6.♘c3

6.♘f3 ♗g4 takes us again into a regular 3.c3 O'Kelly.

6...♗f5



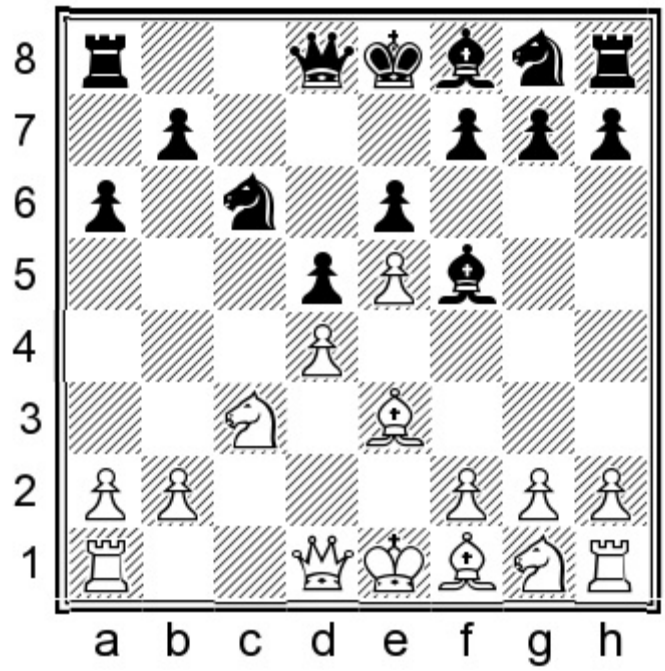
Position after: 6...♗f5

This is the big difference with the analogous line in the 3.c3 O'Kelly. The white knight is not on f3, hence Black has to develop his bishop to f5. We arrive in positions similar to an Advance Caro Kann but with an extra tempo for Black (...c7-c5 in one go). Black may have exchanged a bit early on d4, but in this case that just emphasizes the weakness of the d4-pawn. White will proceed in the spirit of the Advanced Caro Kann. From a theoretical point of view Black has nothing to worry about.

7.♘f3

A) 7.♕b3? ♘xd4 8.♕a4+ ♘c6–+ with an extra pawn for Black.

B) 7.♗e3 e6



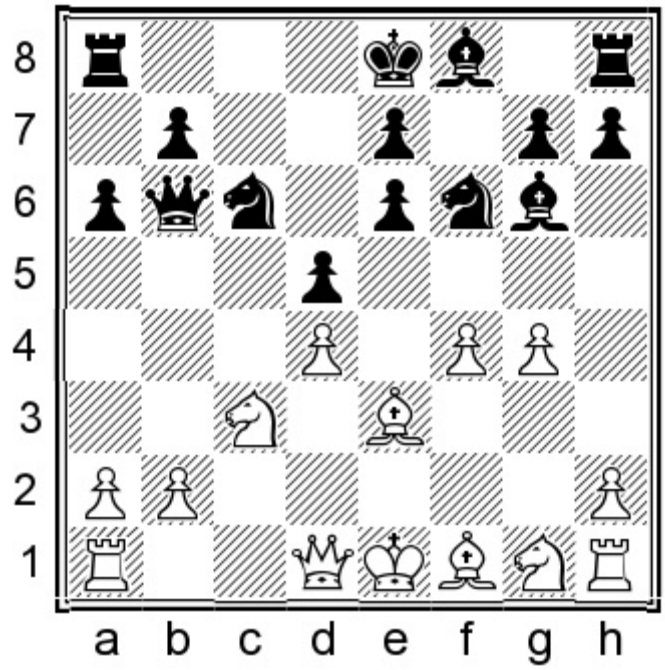
Position after: 7...e6

B1) 8.g4 ♗g6 9.♘ge2 [9.h4 h5∓ 10.♘ge2 hxg4 11.♘f4 ♗f5∓] 9...♘b4∓

B2) 8.♗d3 ♘ge7 9.♘f3 ♗xd3 10.♕xd3 ♘f5 11.0-0 ♗e7= 12.♖ac1 0-0 13.♖fd1 f6 [13...♘xe3=] 14.exf6 ♗xf6= 1-0 (20) Polak, I (2300) – Boekelman, J (2300) lichess.org 2022.

B3) 8.♕b3 ♗g6 9.h4 [9.♕xb7? ♘a5–+; 9.♘h3 ♘h6! 10.♘f4 ♘f5∓] 9...h5=

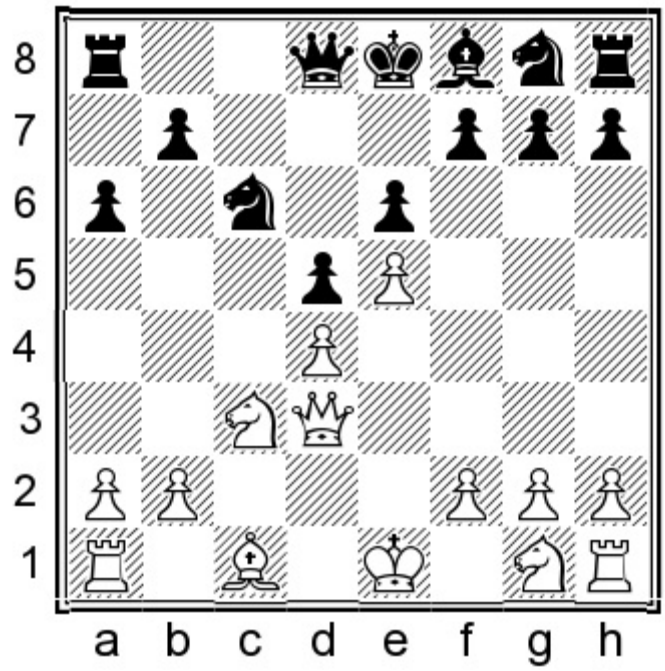
C) 7.g4 ♗g6 8.e6 [8.h4 h5 9.g5 e6 10.♗d3 ♗xd3 11.♕xd3 ♘ge7 12.♘f3 ♘f5∓] 8...fxe6 9.f4 ♘f6 10.♗e3 ♕b6!∓



Position after: 10...♕b6!∓

Black wins more material. 11.h3 ♕xb2 12.♖c1 ♘e4 13.♘ge2 ♘xc3 14.♖xc3 ♕xa2∓ [14...e5 0-1 (23) Vlassov, N (2352) – Kazakovskiy, V (2473) Chess.com 2020.]

D) 7.♗d3 ♗xd3 [7...♘xd4? 8.♕a4++–] 8.♕xd3 e6

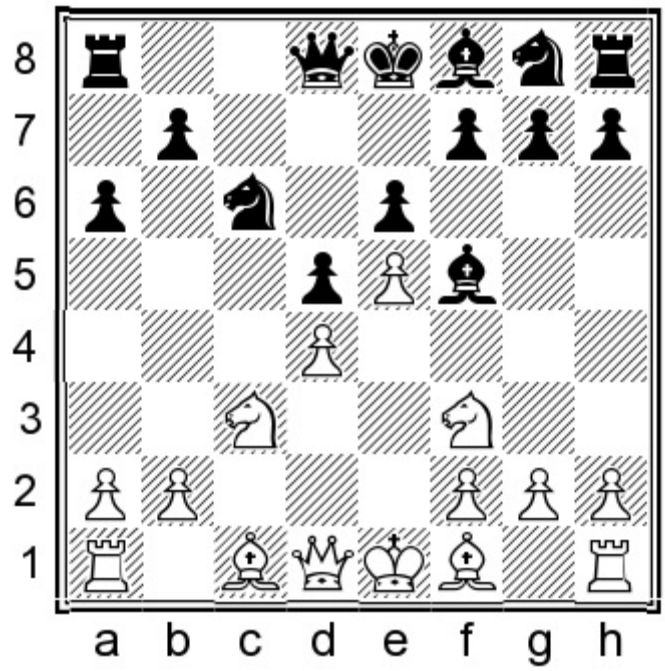


Position after: 8...e6

D1) 9.♘ge2 ♘ge7 10.0-0 ♘f5= 11.g4?! ♘h4 12.f4 h5! 13.g5 [13.h3 hxg4 14.hxg4 f5∓] 13...♘f5∓

D2) 9.♘f3 ♘ge7 10.0-0 [10.♗g5 h6 11.♗xe7 ♗xe7 12.0-0 0-0 13.a3 f6=] 10...♘f5 11.♘e2 [11.b3 h5 12.♗b2 g5 13.♘d1 g4 14.♘e1 ♗h6∓ 0-1 (40) Ledger, S (2177) – Gordon, S (2443) Swansea 2006.] 11...♖c8 12.♗g5 ♗e7 13.♗d2 h5 14.h3 g5 15.♖ad1 g4 16.hxg4 hxg4 17.♘h2 ♖g8∓

7...e6



Position after: 7...e6

Before playing ...♗g4 or ...♗e4 it is better to complete our development.

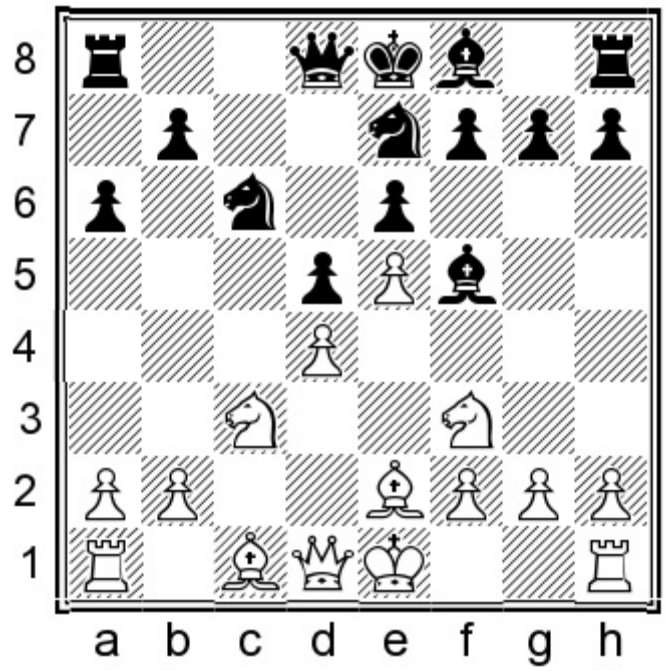
8.♗e2

White plays somewhat of an Advance Caro Kann Short system.

A) 8.♗d3 ♘ge7! 9.0-0 ♗g4 10.♗e2 is a genuine 3. c3 O'Kelly. [10.h3? ♗xf3 11.♕xf3 ♘xd4∓ ½-½ (22) Sminia, J – Van Deutekom, Y Leiden 1999.]

B) 8.♕b3 ♘ge7 9.♗e2 ♗e4∞ 10.♕xb7 ♗c2 11.♗d1 ♖a7 12.♕xa7 ♘xa7 13.♗xc2 ♘ec6∓

8...♘ge7!



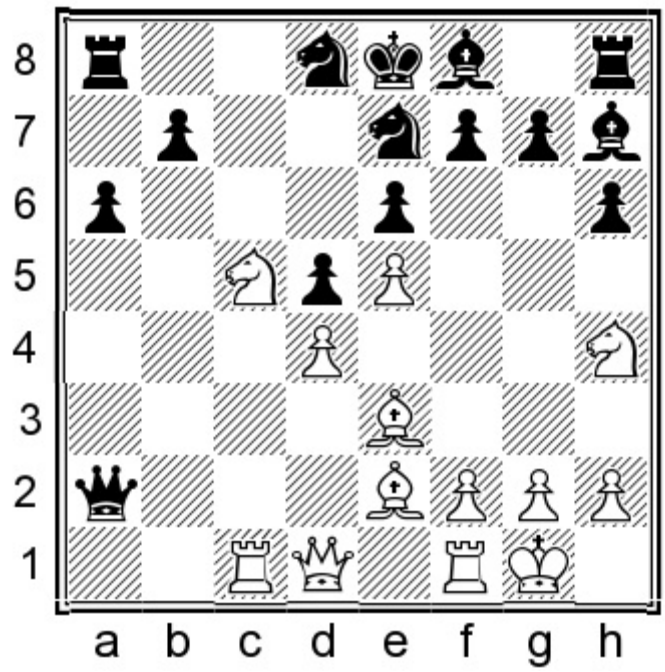
Position after: 8...♘ge7!

No worries about ♘h4.

9.♗e3

The safest continuation.

A) 9.♘h4 ♕b6! The thematic move as soon as one of the defenders of the d4-pawn leaves its position. 10.♗e3 ♕xb2! 11.♖c1 h6 12.0-0 ♗h7 13.♘a4 ♕xa2 14.♘c5 ♘d8

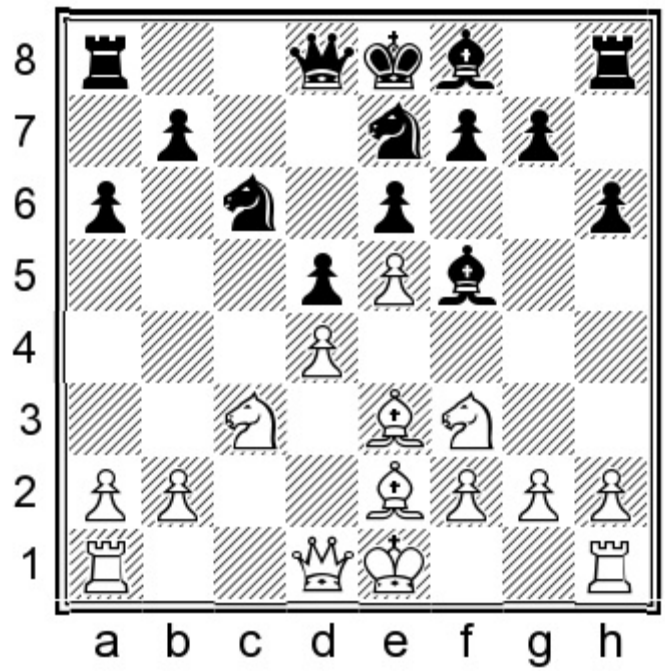


Position after: 14...♘d8

15.♗h5 [15.♖a1 ♕b2∓ b1 is covered; 15.f4 ♘ec6 16.♘xb7 ♘xb7 17.♖xc6 ♗e7∓] 15...g6 16.♖a1 ♕b2 17.♖b1 ♕a3 18.♖a1 ♕b4 19.♗e2 g5∓

B) 9.0-0 ♗e4! Black increases the pressure against the white knight and indirectly against the d4-pawn without the need to exchange on e2 if the f3-knight moves away. 10.♘h4 ♕b6 11.♗e3 ♕xb2 12.♖c1 ♕a3 13.♘xe4 dxe4 14.♕c2 ♘d5 15.♕xe4 ♗e7 16.♘f5 0-0 17.♗c4 ♖ad8 18.♘xe7+ ♘cxe7 19.♗g5 ♖d7=

9...h6



Position after: 9...h6

10.0-0

10.♕b3 b5 11.a4 b4 12.♘a2 ♗e4!N Black thematically increases the pressure against d4. 13.♖c1 [13.♕d1 ♘f5∓] 13...♕d7

10...♗h7 11.a3 ♘f5 12.♗d3 ♗e7=

Black has reached an equal position. Nearly all of Black's piece have been developed optimally. The moves ...♘xe3, ...♖c8 and/or ...♕b6 are Black's most obvious next moves. Black may castle short, but under circumstances he may also consider ...g5 and ...h5, starting an initiative on the kingside.

Conclusion

One of the really fun attractions of playing the O'Kelly is that some anti – Sicilians can be tackled actively and thematically in essentially the same way. Against the Sicilian Alapin 2...a6, and against

the Morra Gambit 3...a6 are excellent surprise weapons which are theoretically robust. Normally, we arrive in positions similar to the Advanced Caro Kann but with an extra move for Black.

The «worst» that could happen to Black, as recommended by some theorists, is 3.♘f3 which is no concern to us as it is a direct transposition to the main body of our book on the O'Kelly.

In the main line we have seen that Sicilian Alapin specialist Evgeny Sveshnikov and Morra Gambit specialist Mark Esserman were unable to show anything special against this setup. By playing in this way Black will have a theoretical head start against these two systems which tend to be quite a nuisance when one uses the Sicilian in response to 1.e4.

b) 2.♘c3 a6 – Introduction

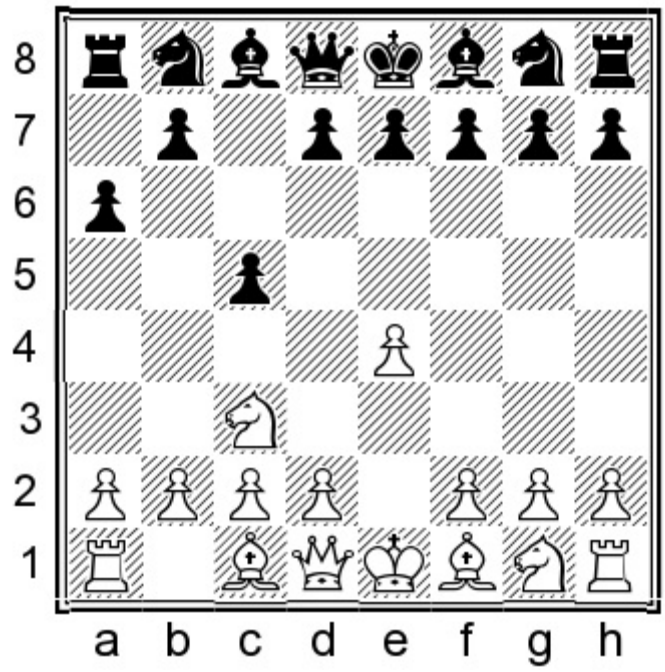
1.e4 c5

With a good understanding of the O'Kelly under our belt it makes sense to deepen our understanding of those anti-Sicilian systems to which we can apply our early ...a6. We now turn our attention to the following: the Morra – 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 a6, the Alapin – 2.c3 a6, the Chameleon – 2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2, the Grand Prix – 2.♘c3 a6 3.f4, the Closed Sicilian – 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 and other third moves by White.

2.♘c3

This introduction looks further into the anti – Sicilians starting with 2.♘c3 a6.

2...a6!?



Position after: 2...a6!?

The little move we love! The pioneer of this move was GM Konstantin Landa, former champion of Russia.

Nowadays 2...a6 has become mainstream with more than 12, 000 games in the database. Big names like Magnus Carlsen, Lev Aronian and Dimitri Andreikin have played the move more than once. Those normally employing our ...a6 move typically play the Najdorf, Kan and Taimanov with an early ...a6. Others run the risk of being move-ordered into unknown territory after a quick ♘g1-f3/e2 and d2-d4 by White. As we are O'Kelly specialists this is not a problem for us. We are more than happy to play the move!

At the non-professional level 2...a6 is often still an unexpected move. Black intends to first develop his queenside, putting pressure on the e4-pawn, before taking a stance in the center. In our repertoire choices we will focus on those lines where Black plays a subsequent ...e6 and pushes ...d7-d5 after all the necessary preparations have been taken to ensure that we can take back on d5 with a piece.

Richard Palliser in his book *Fighting the Anti-Sicilians* (2007) was one of the first to methodologically investigate the pros and cons of 2.♘c3 a6. Much of his analysis still stand today.

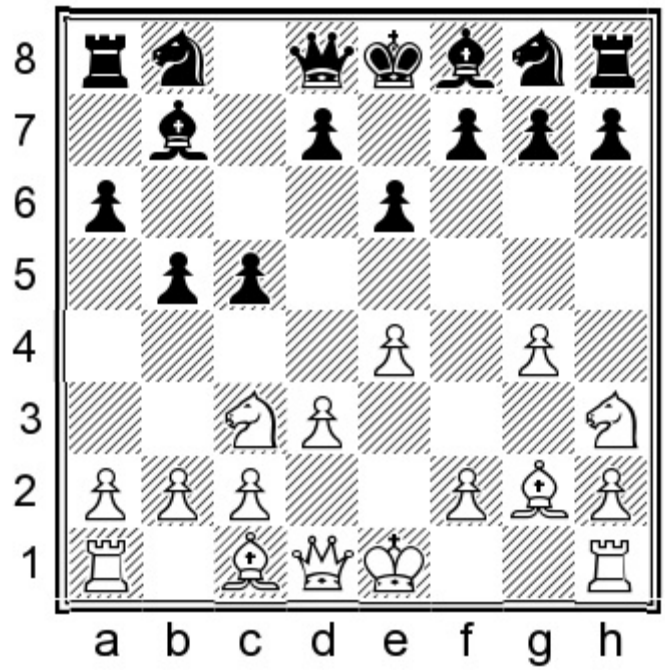
3.g3

The Closed Sicilian and the absolute main line after 2.♘c3 a6.

A) 3.♘f3 is a transposition into the O'Kelly with 3.♘c3

B) 3.d4 Less popular than the other third moves treated here, but something Black has to consider. 3...cxd4 4.♕xd4 ♘c6 generally followed by ...g6 and Black has an easy to play Dragon. 5.♕d2 White aims for the Carlsen setup which normally arises after 2..d6 3.d4 etc.

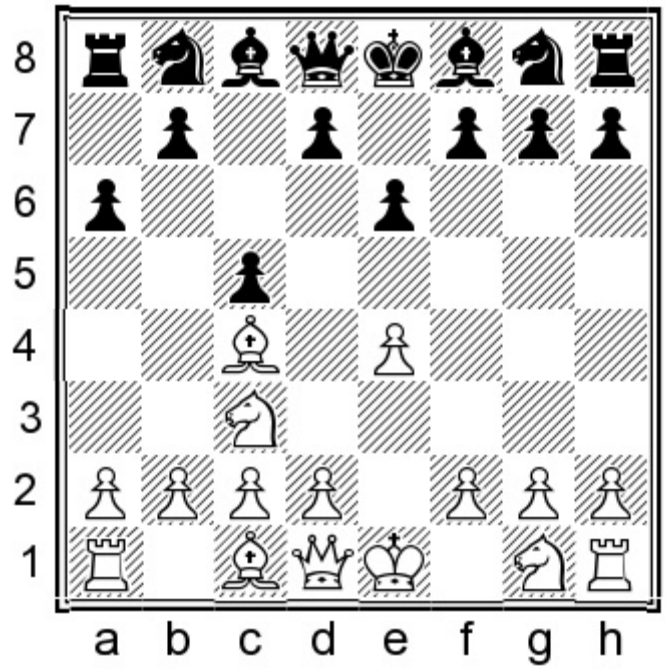
C) 3.g4 The extended fianchetto is not as eccentric as it looks. White plays a Closed Sicilian (3.g3), but immediately takes some extra space on the kingside. Recently this has become quite popular under the influence of the good results with it by GM Vallejo Pons. 3...b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘h3



Position after: 6.♘h3

This is the main line. Black continues with the thematic 6...b4 7.♘e2 d5 with an interesting position.

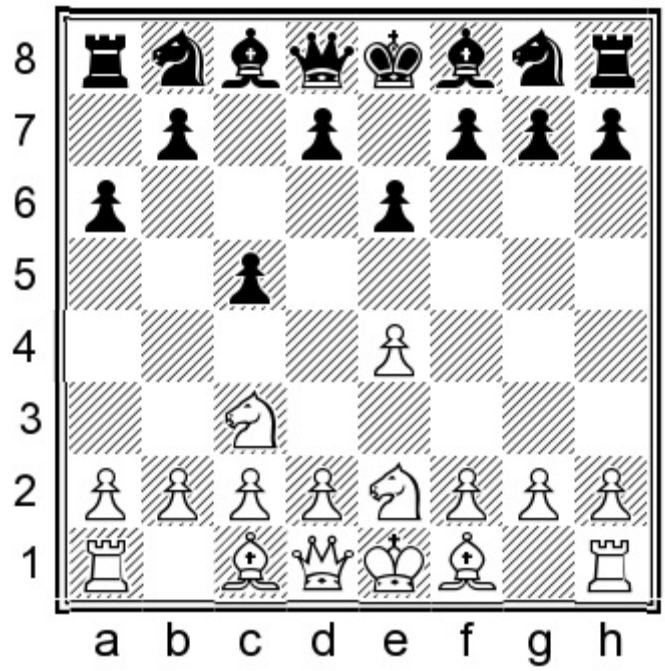
D) 3.♗c4 A typical continuation at the non-professional level. 3...e6!



Position after: 3...e6!

4.a4 [4.d4 b5! 5.♗e2 cxd4=] 4...♘c6 5.♘f3 ♘f6 results in positions where Black has all of the active chances.

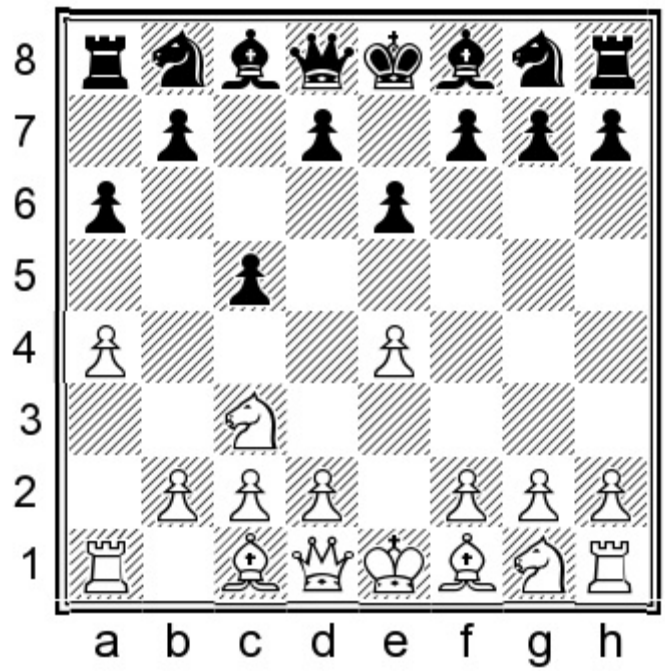
E) 3.♘ge2 The Chameleon is a sophisticated weapon which often leads to an Open Sicilian. Note that a late d2-d4 will be tackled via the O'Kelly move order 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3 b5. Now, 3...e6



Position after: 3...e6

4.g3 [4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♕c7 transposes to the Sicilian Kan, treated as part of the O'Kelly with 3.♘c3.] 4...b5 5.♗g2 ♗b7 6.0-0 [6.d3 takes us to 6.♘ge2 main line of the Closed Sicilian.] 6...♘f6! 7.d3 a position which could also be reached via a Closed Sicilian move-order. [7.♖e1 b4! and White has to be precise to maintain the balance.] 7...d5! and Black equalizes relatively simply.

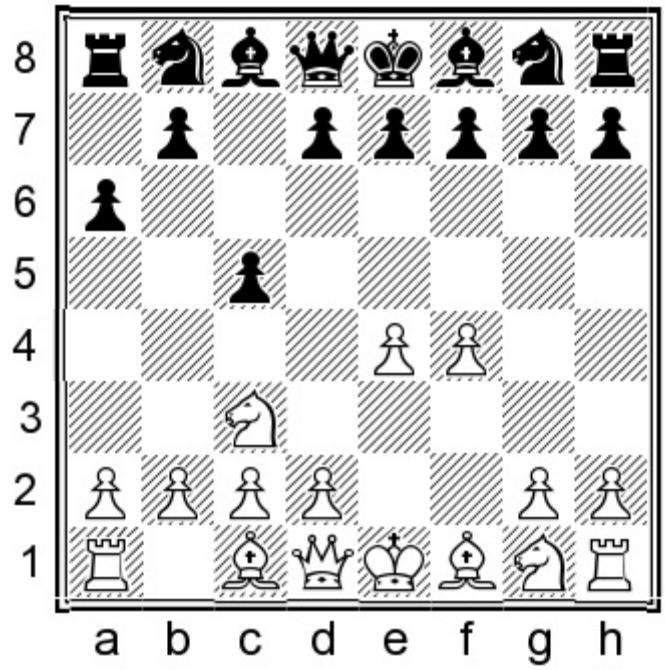
F) 3.a4 A kneejerk reaction. 3...e6!



Position after: 3...e6!

Black is happy to go back to the original 2...e6 variation against the Closed Sicilian with the handy a4 a6 included. 4.g3 [4.♗c4 ♘c6 5.♘f3 ♘f6 transposes to 3.♗c4 e6 4.a4 ♘c6 etc.] 4...d5 5.exd5 [5.♗g2 d4 6.♘ce2 d3∓ with an interesting blockade of the White position.; 5.d3 d4 6.♘b1 ♘c6 7.♗g2 e5∓ 0-1 (47) Starostits, I (2442) – Milov, V (2592) Lausanne 2003.] 5...exd5 6.d4 cxd4 7.♕xd4 ♘f6 8.♗g5 ♘c6∓ ♗b5 is not available.

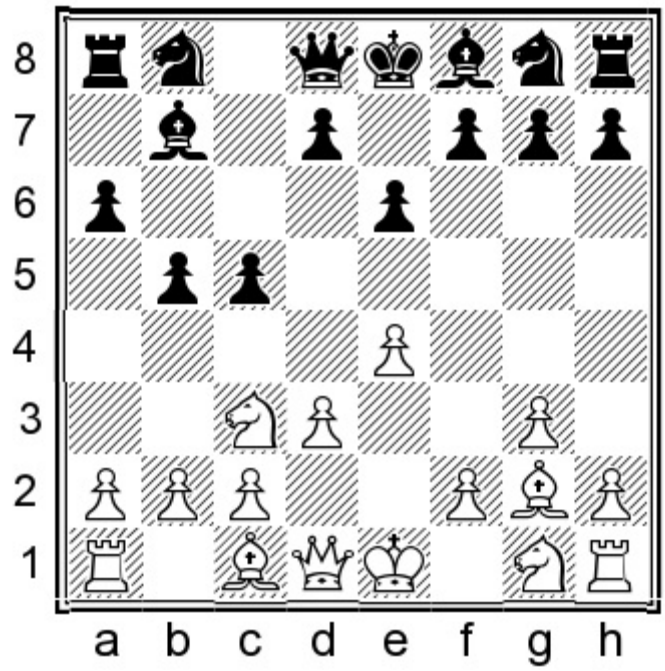
G) 3.f4



Position after: 3.f4

The Grand Prix loses its shine against the 2...a6 move-order. Gawain Jones in his recent *Coffeehouse Repertoire* even suggests going back to more regular Open Sicilians with a quick d2-d4 supported by a knight instead of 4. 3...b5 4.♘f3 ♗b7 5.d3 e6= and Black plays ...d5 on the next move.

3...b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6



Position after: 5...e6

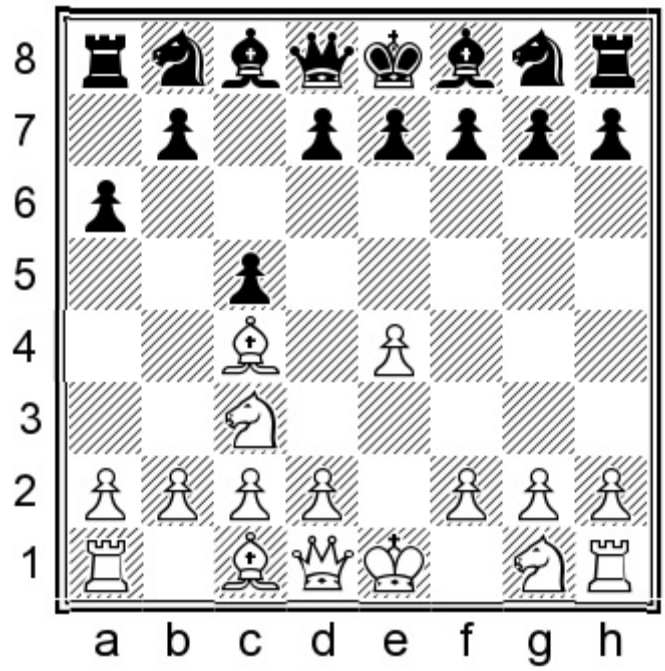
White is at a major crossroads. Many moves have been tried from this position. Black will aim to push ...d7-d5 if necessary, preceded by ...b5-b4, in order to ensure that he can take back on d5 with a piece.

Conclusion

The O'Kelly approach with an early ...a6 is a viable and theoretically solid system against the Morra Gambit, the Alapin, the Chameleon, the Grand Prix, and the Closed Sicilian. Black's play is relatively simple and straightforward. Many players for White are unfamiliar with this approach giving Black a head start in the game.

c) 2.♘c3 a6 3.♗c4

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.♗c4



Position after: 3.♗c4

A move you will not often see from professionals, but it is quite popular among club players.

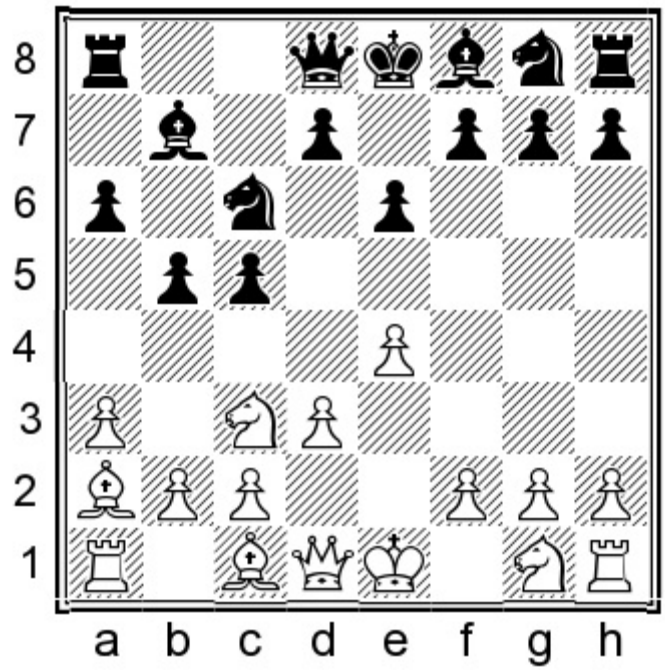
3...e6

The routine choice for Black.

4.a4

The normal way to secure the position of the white bishop and contain Black's expansion ideas on the queenside.

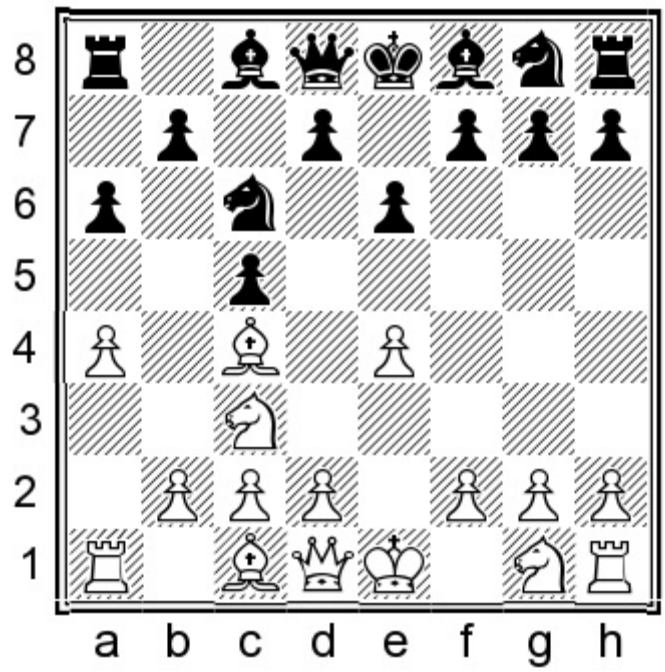
4.a3 b5 [4...♘f6 5.d3 d5 6.♗a2 h6 7.♗d2 ♘c6 8.h3 ♗e7 9.♘f3 0-0 10.0-0 b5 11.exd5 exd5 12.♗f4 ♗f5 13.♘e2 d4 14.♘g3 ♗h7=] 5.♗a2 ♗b7 6.d3 ♘c6



Position after: 6...♘c6

7.♘f3 [7.f4 b4 8.♘ce2 d5 9.e5 ♘h6 10.♘f3 ♘f5 11.0-0 ♗e7= 0-1 (52) Trnovec, M (2145) – Romanishin, O (2600) Dresden 1998.] 7...♕c7 8.0-0 ♘f6 9.a4 b4 10.♘e2 h6 11.c3 ♗e7 12.♘g3 0-0-0=

4...♘c6

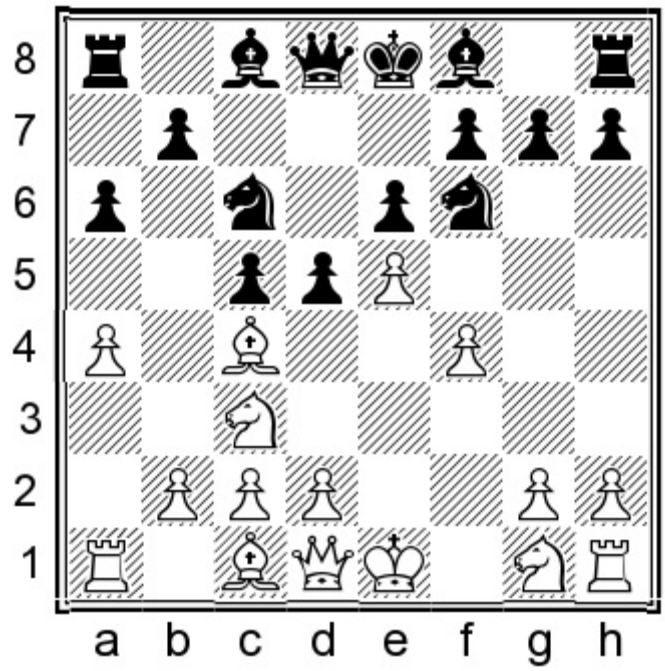


Position after: 4...♘c6

5.♘f3

White continues with his development.

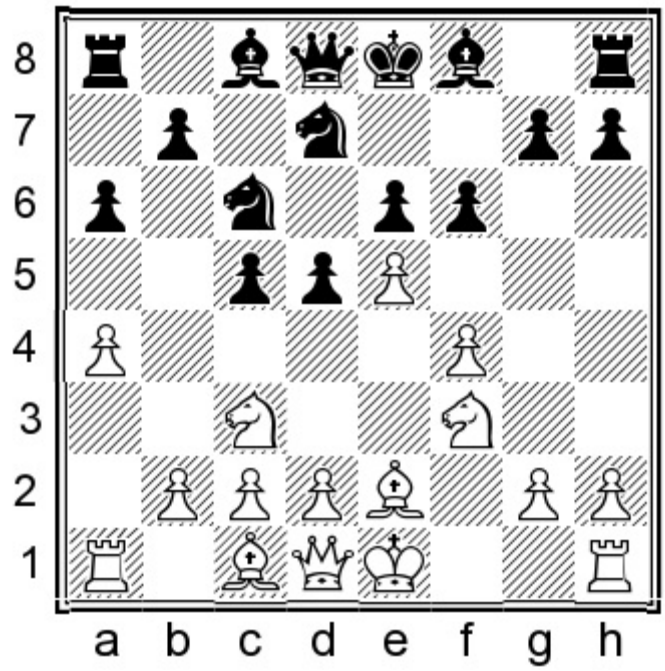
White can prepare a beachhead on e5 with 5.f4 but Black is well prepared to address this. 5...♘f6 6.e5 [6.♕e2 It is too late for this. 6...d5 7.exd5 ♘d4! 8.♕d1 exd5 9.♗e2 ♗d6∓ 0-1 (16) Karlsson, A – Bergqvist, M Taby 1991.] 6...d5!



Position after: 6...d5!

A) 7.exd6 ♗xd6 8.♘ge2 b6!N The typical development scheme I recommend for these structures. Unlike his colleague on c4, Black's light-squared bishop is very influential along the long diagonal. 9.0-0 ♗b7 10.d3 ♕d7∓ Depending on further events Black may consider ...0-0-0 followed by ...♖hg8 and ...g5 with a nice attack.

B) 7.♗e2 ♘d7 8.♘f3 f6!



Position after: 8...f6!

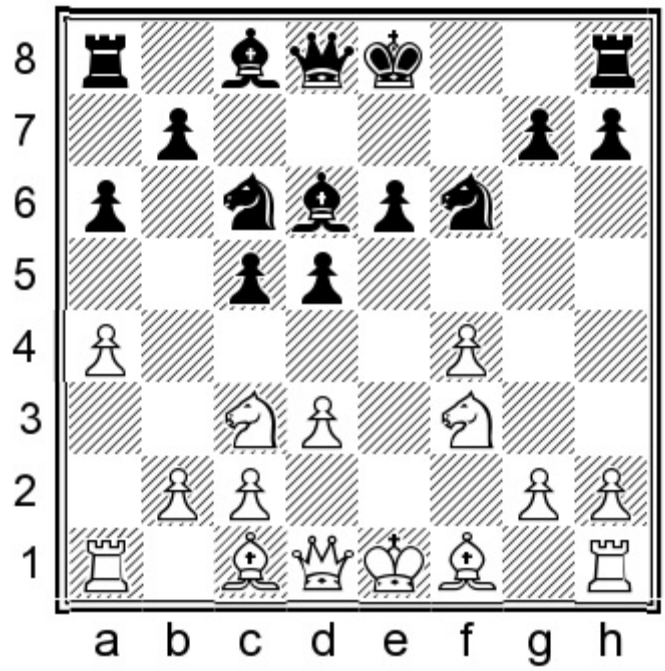
White has difficulties maintaining his pawn on e5.

B1) 9.0-0 fxe5 10.♘xe5 ♘dxe5 11.fxe5 g6! 12.♗g4 ♗g7 13.♘e2 ♘xe5∓ 0-1 (29) Boricsev, O (2298) – Vypkhaniuk, I (2389) Mukachevo 2018.

B2) 9.exf6 ♘xf6 10.0-0 [10.d4 ♕c7∓] 10...♗d6 11.g3 0-0 12.♔h1 d4! 13.♘b1 e5 14.fxe5 ♘xe5 15.♘xe5 ♗xe5 16.d3 ♗h3–+ 0-1 (21) Banov, B (2159) – Goumas, G (2391) Golden Sands 2014.

B3) 9.d3 fxe5 10.♘g5 ♘f6 11.0-0 ♗d6–+ ½-½ (66) Rujevic, M (2296) – Xie, G (2313) Melbourne 2004.

C) 7.♗f1 ♘d7 8.♘f3 f6 9.exf6 ♘xf6 10.d3 ♗d6

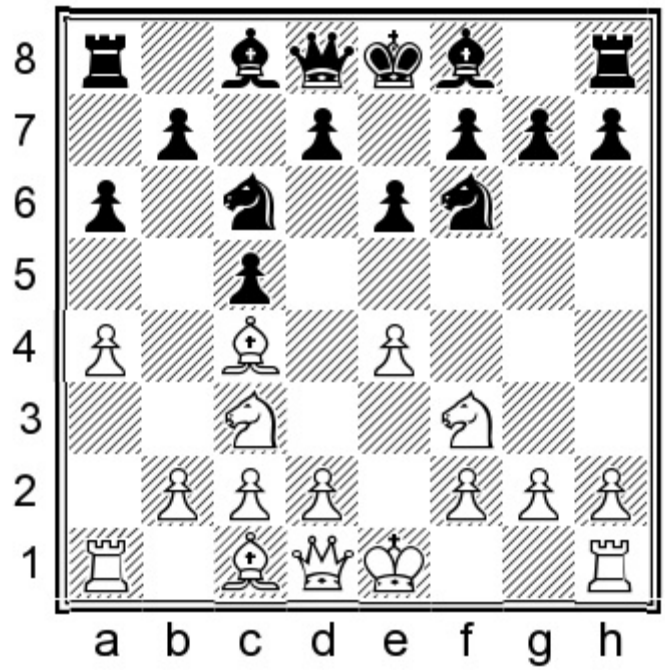


Position after: 10...♗d6

11.g3 [11.♕e2?! 0-0 12.♗d2 e5–+ 0-1 (23) Popadic, D (2281) – Sedlak, N (2518) Vrnjacka Banja 2005] 11...0-0 12.♗g2 ♗d7 13.0-0 ♕c7 14.♗d2 ♖ae8∓ ½ – ½ (102) Gorovets, A (2345) – Kovalev, A (2565) Minsk 2005.

After 5.♘f3 most games continue with:

5...♘f6!



Position after: 5...♘f6!

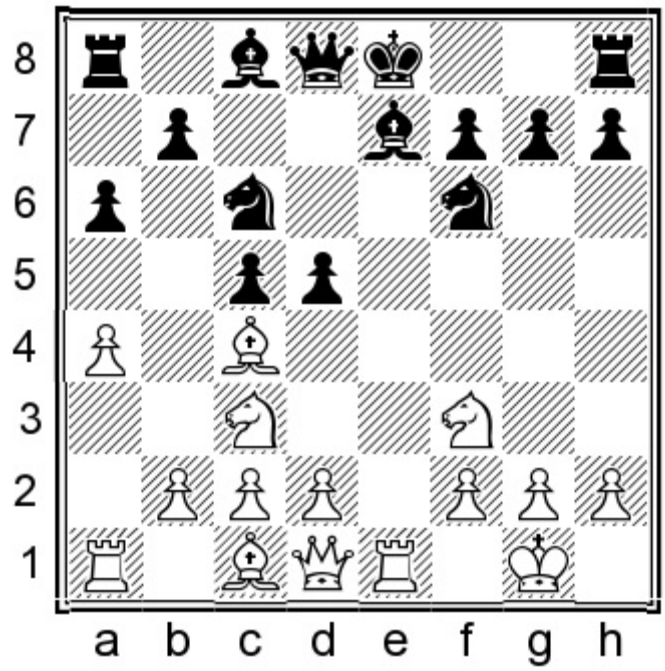
After 5.♘f3 most games follow Black's 5...♘f6 which forces the white queen to a suboptimal square if White wants to prevent ...d5. As Black, we would rather have a queen on e2 for this than a rook on e1. Hence the text is better than playing 5...♕c7 as it gives White the time to play 0-0 and ♖e1.

6.♕e2

White already has to play precise not to end up in a worse position. With his move White stops ... d7-d5.

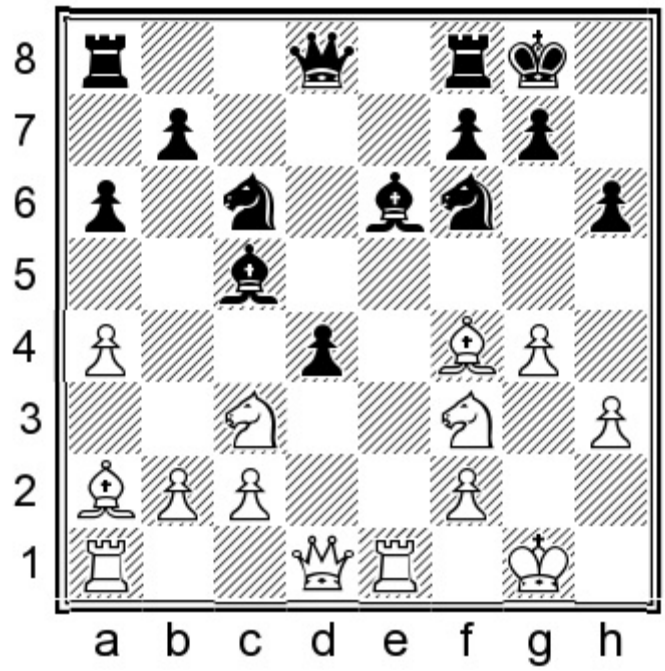
A) 6.e5?! This may become a costly affair for White. 6...♘g4 7.♕e2 ♕c7 and there is no way White can save his e-pawn. 8.d3 ♘gxe5 9.♘xe5 ♕xe5–+ 0-1 (45) Mwanyika, G (1922) – Shaw, J (2419) Tromsoe 2014.

B) 6.0-0 Again this is too slow. 6...d5! 7.exd5 exd5 8.♖e1+ ♗e7



Position after: 8...♗e7

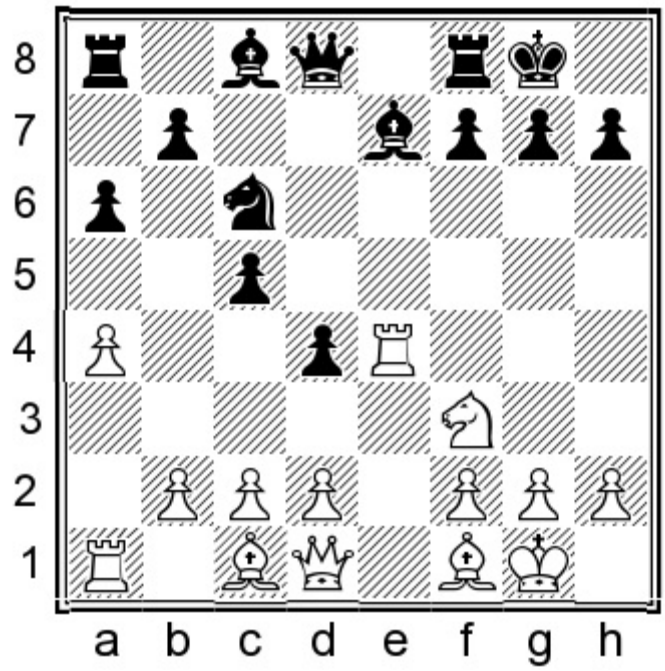
B1) 9.♗a2 0-0∓ For the rest of the game White will have to look at Black's strong central pawn wall. 10.h3 [10.d4?! c4 11.b3 ♗b4 12.♗d2 ♕a5∓] 10...♗f5! 11.g4 ♗e6 12.d4 h6! 13.dxc5 ♗xc5 14.♗f4 d4!



Position after: 14...d4!

15.♘e4 [15.♗xe6 fxe6 16.♘e4 ♗b4–+] 15...♘xe4 16.♖xe4 ♗xa2–+ 0-1 (27) Bongo Akanga Ndjila, B (1850) – Luey, R (2230) corr. 2018. White cannot take back on a2 due to 17...♕d5.

B2) 9.♗f1 d4! With the bishop on the other side of the board this makes sense. 10.♘e4 ♘xe4 11.♖xe4 0-0

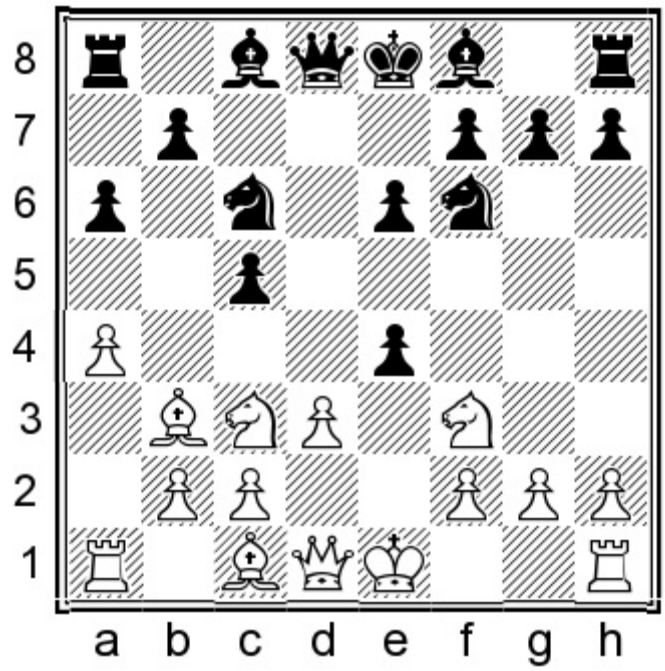


Position after: 11...0-0

12.h3 [12.b3 ♗f5 13.♖e1 ♕d7 14.♗b2 ♗f6 15.d3 ♖fe8∓ 0-1 (37) Pettigrew, S (1467) – Hansen, M

corr. 2015.] 12...h6 13.♗c4 ♗f5 14.♖e1 d3 15.cxd3 ♗xd3∓ 16.♗xd3 ♕xd3 17.♖e3 ♕d5 18.♕c2 ♗f6–+ 0-1 (22) Dunn, J (1618) – James, A corr. 2016.

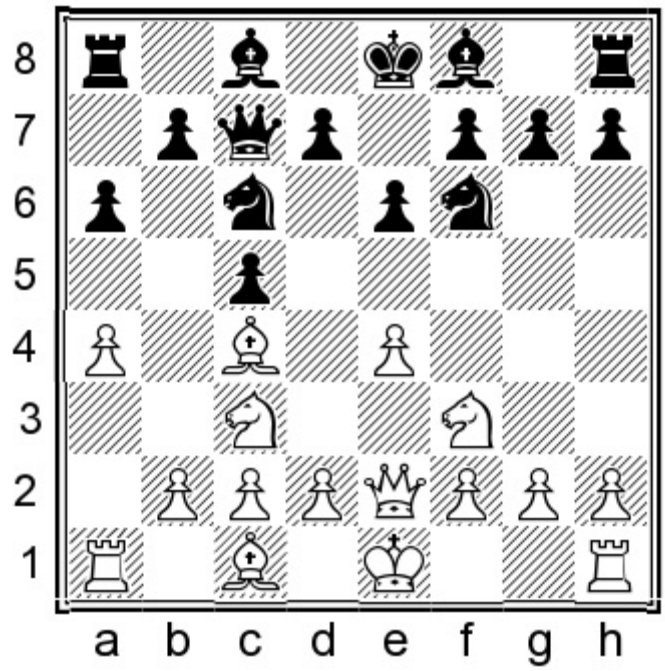
C) 6.d3 This enables Black to play his pawn push in the center. 6...d5! 7.♗b3 [7.exd5 Gives the center away. 7...exd5 8.♗a2 h6 9.h3 ♗e7 10.0-0 0-0∓ White's bishop on b3 is out of play.] 7...dxe4



Position after: 7...dxe4

8.♘xe4 [8.dxe4 ♕xd1+ 9.♔xd1 ♗d6! 10.h3 b6 11.♖e1 ♘d7∓ Black has a better structure, and his pieces are nicely developed. 0-1 (54) Agustini, G – Dias, A (2209) Curitiba 2010.] 8...♗e7!N Keeping White's suboptimal pawn structure as is. 9.♕e2 b6 10.0-0 0-0∓ Black has the ideal pawn structure and the better bishops.

6...♕c7



Position after: 6...♕c7

The text is a bit more ambitious than the alternative 6...d6.

7.0-0

A) 7.e5?! ♘g4∓ drops the e-pawn without compensation.

B) 7.d3 b6!N 8.e5!? ♘g4 9.♗f4 ♗b7 10.h3 ♘d4 11.♘xd4 cxd4 12.♕xg4 dxc3 13.bxc3 b5∓

7...b6!

A relatively new move in this position although the concept is not new: postponing ...0-0 for queenside development and potentially central action and/or ...0-0-0. Via transposition we sometimes arrive in existing games.

8.d3 ♗b7

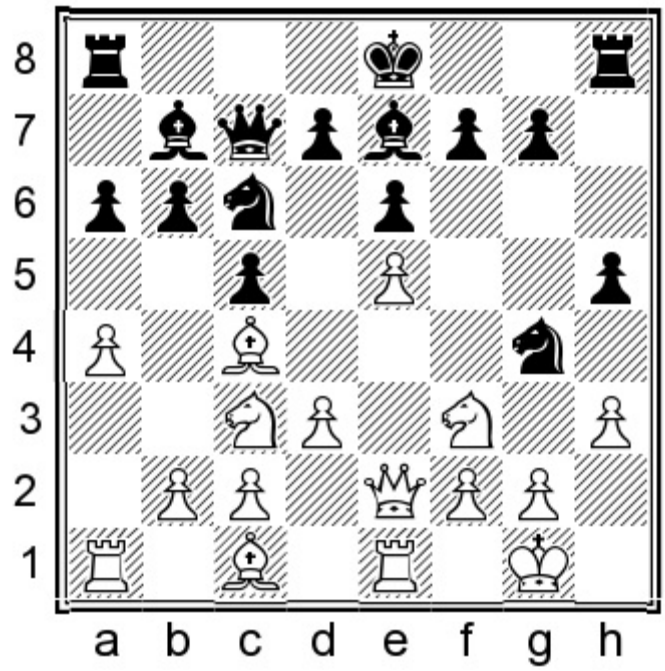
Black is very flexible. He can play aggressively with ...0-0-0, quietly with ...0-0, in the center with ...♘d4 or on the kingside with ...h6+...g5.

9.♖e1

This gives Black the opportunity to demonstrate the basic idea behind his setup.

A) 9.♗a2 0-0-0 10.♗e3 d5 11.exd5 exd5 12.d4 c4 13.♗g5 ♔b8∓

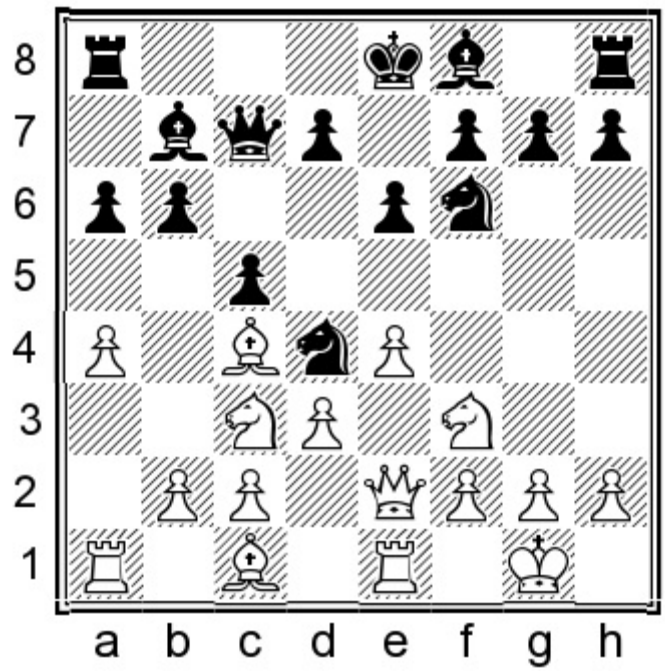
B) 9.e5 ♘g4 10.♖e1 h5! 11.h3 ♗e7!



Position after: 11...♗e7!

Despite the slowness of the attack, the piece sacrifice on g4 works fine for Black. 12.♗f4 [12.hxg4?! hxg4 13.♘g5 f5 14.f4 ♘d4 15.♕f2 0-0-0–+ ...♖h5 and ...♖dh8 will deliver the decisive blow.] 12...♘d4 13.♘xd4 cxd4 14.♘e4 ♘xe5 15.♗b3 d6 16.♘xd6+ ♗xd6 17.♗xe5 ♗xe5 18.♕xe5 ♕xe5 19.♖xe5 ♖c8∓

9...♘d4!

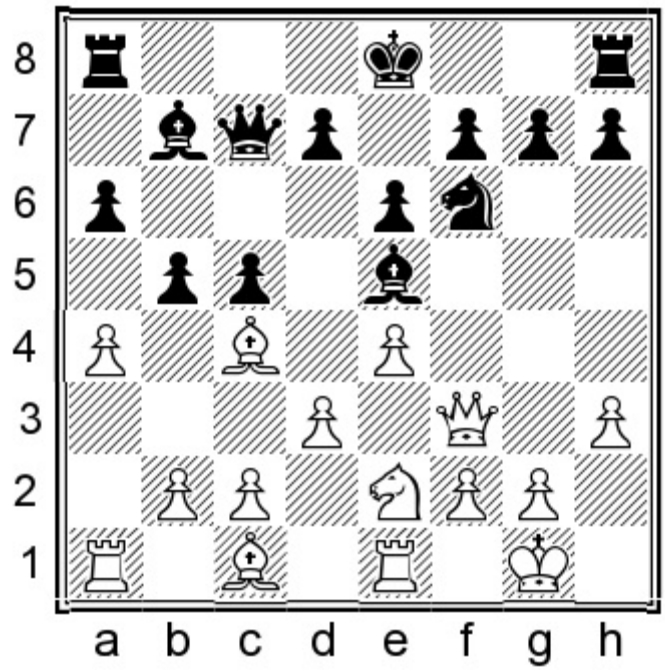


Position after: 9...♘d4!

This is the key idea behind 7...b6 and 8...♗b7. Black improves his presence in the center significantly. It also explains why we have postponed moving our d-pawn.

10.♘xd4

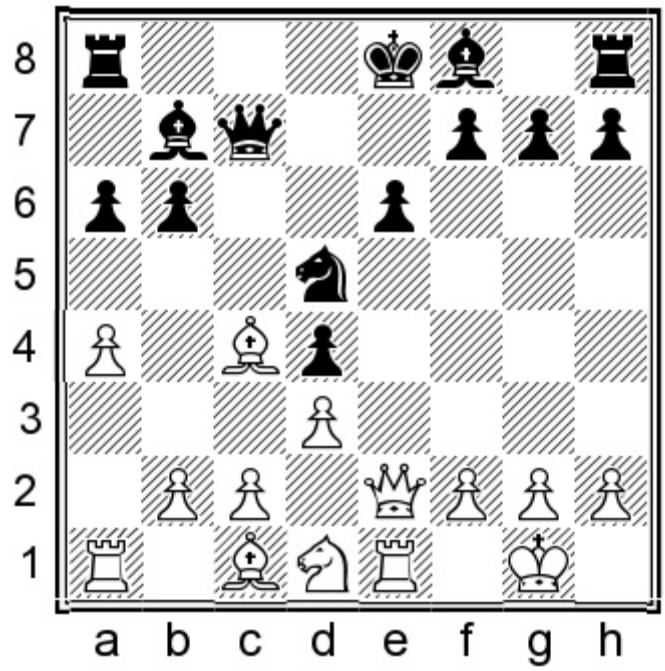
10.♕d1 is too quiet as it gives Black excellent attacking chances. 10...♗d6! 11.h3 [11.g3 h5!∓] 11...♘xf3+ 12.♕xf3 ♗e5 13.♘e2 b5!



Position after: 13...b5!

14.♗a2 [14.axb5 axb5 15.♖xa8+ ♗xa8 16.♗xb5 ♕a5!–+] 14...bxa4∓ followed by ...a3 or ...d5. White struggles to find a good continuation.

10...cxd4 11.♘d1 d5! 12.exd5 ♘xd5



Position after: 12...♘xd5

Black's pawn structure and pieces are better, but he is slightly behind in development.

13.♗xd5 ♗xd5 14.♕g4 0-0-0 15.a5 b5 16.♗f4 ♕d7 17.♕e2 ♔b7∓

Black's bishops are strong.

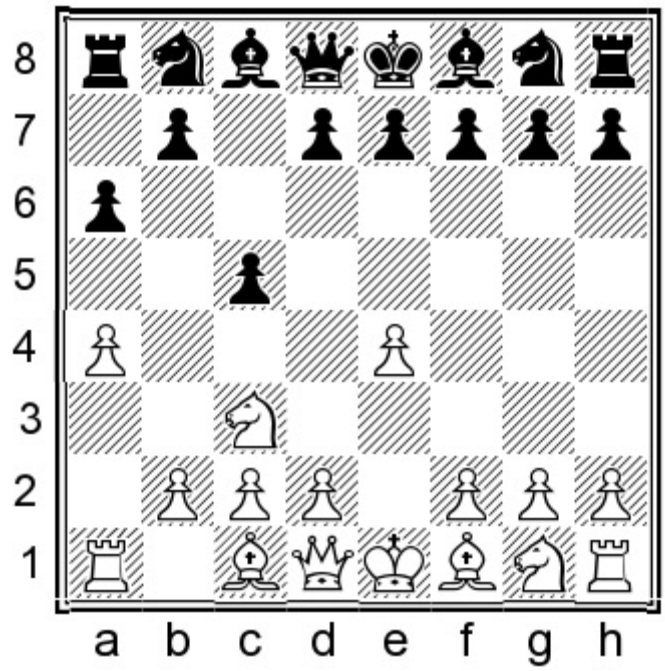
Conclusion

3.♗c4 is a move you will not often see at the grandmaster level, 3...e6 4.a4 is the most likely continuation. Black should focus on remaining flexible by first developing his queenside and withholding his d-pawn and castling for now.

Black can later play aggressively with ...0-0-0, quietly with ...0-0, in the center with ...♘d4 or on the kingside with ...h6+ ...g5. White must decide on his plan, but Black has resources with which to respond and even seize the initiative.

d) 2.♘c3 a6 3.a4

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6!? 3.a4



Position after: 3.a4

This popular move has around 1800 games in the database. It is often seen at the club level, but there are a number of stronger players who make use of it as well. White prevents 3...b5 but frankly that is about all there is to say in favor of this move. Black continues as in the 2...e6 Closed Sicilian and will be playing a much better version of it.

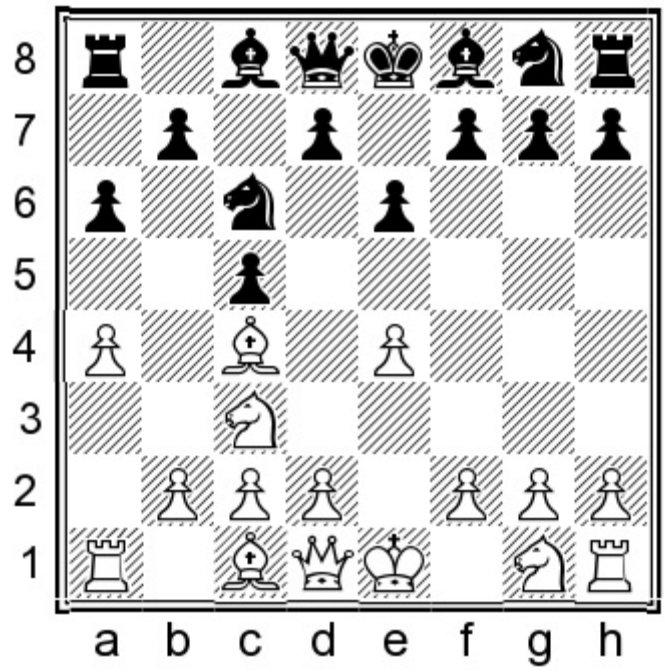
3...e6!

No need to play a traditional kingside fianchetto in this variation like in the regular Closed Sicilian. Black is happy to go back to the original 2...e6 variation against the Closed Sicilian. The inclusion of the moves a4 and ...a6 assists Black significantly.

4.g3

White continues as if it were a classical Closed Sicilian.

A) 4.♗c4 ♘c6

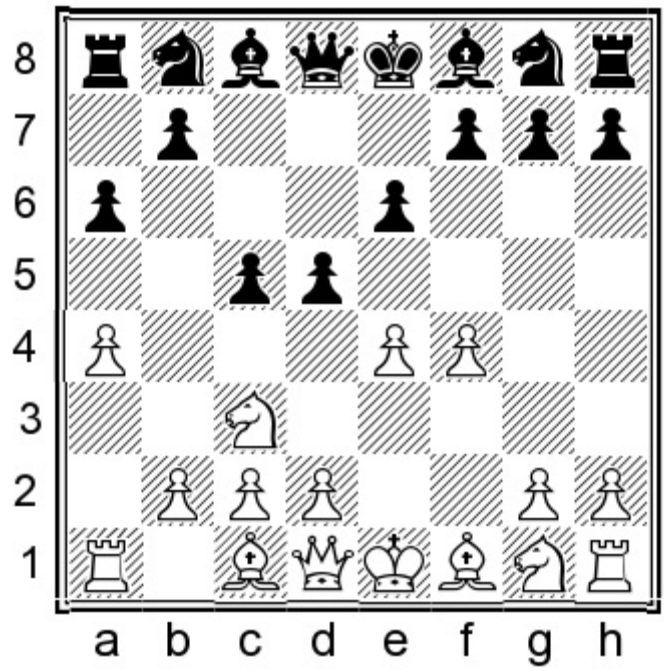


Position after: 4...♘c6

A1) 5.d3 ♘f6 6.♗b3 [6.♗g5 h6 7.♗xf6 ♕xf6 8.♘ge2 b6 9.0-0 ♗b7∓] 6...d5 7.♘f3 c4 8.♗a2 [8.exd5 cxb3 9.dxc6 bxc6 10.cxb3 c5 11.♗e3 ♗b7⩲] 8...cxd3 9.cxd3 dxe4 10.dxe4 ♕xd1+ 11.♔xd1 ♗b4∓

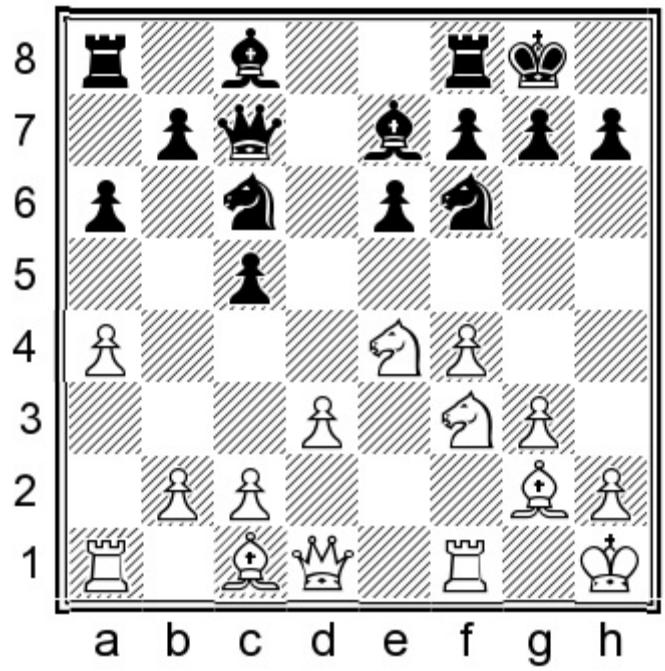
A2) 5.f4 ♘ge7 6.d3 d5 7.♗b3 ♘d4 8.♗a2 b6=

B) 4.f4 While has no disrupting check on b5 with his bishop allowing Black to reply to the Grand Prix with ...d5. 4...d5!.



Position after: 4...d5!

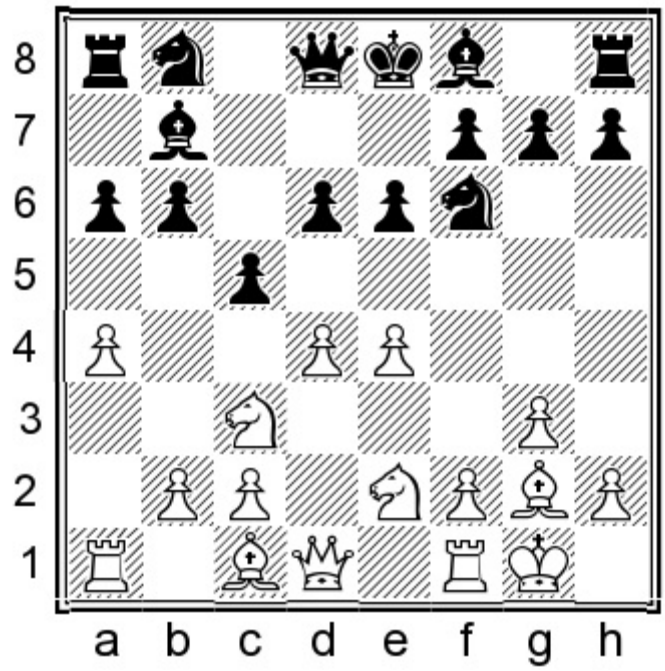
5.♘f3 [5.d3 ♘c6 6.♘f3 g6 7.g3 ♘ge7 8.♗g2 ♗g7 9.0-0 0-0=] 5...dxe4 the is nothing wrong with keeping the tension in the center with 5...♘c6, but with this move the center position remains fluid with a somewhat better structure for Black. It is in line with the choice of the elite if a4 and a6 had not been included. 6.♘xe4 ♘c6 7.d3 ♗e7 8.g3 ♘f6 9.♗g2 [9.♕e2 0-0 10.♗g2 ♘xe4 11.dxe4 e5 12.f5 ♘d4∓ 0-1 (27) Penalonga Sweers, A (2075) – Paunovic, D (2496) Ortiguera 2003.] 9...0-0 10.0-0 ♕c7 11.♔h1



Position after: 11.♔h1

11...b6 12.♘e5 ♗b7 13.♘xc6 ♗xc6 14.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 15.♗xc6 ♕xc6+ 16.♕f3 ♕d7∓ 0-1 (52) Wallach, K (2151) – Finegold, B (2507) Las Vegas 2013.

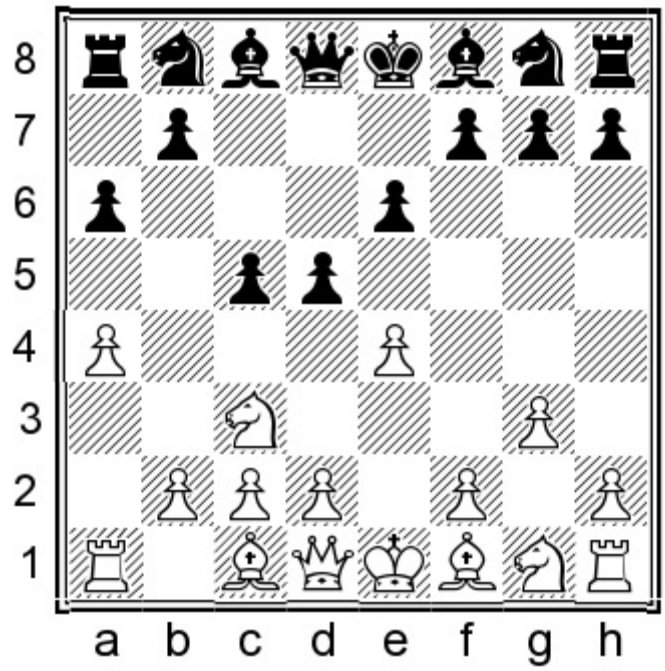
C) 4.♘ge2!? Is not a bad move as White may always consider transposing into a more regular Open Sicilian with d2-d4. 4...b6 5.g3 [5.d4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♗b7 7.♗d3 ♕c7 8.0-0 ♘f6 9.♕e2 d6 10.♗d2 ♗e7 11.♖ae1 ♘bd7 12.f4 leads us to a regular Sicilian Kan 5...♕c7 6.♗d3.] 5...♗b7 6.♗g2 ♘f6 7.0-0 d6 8.d4



Position after: 8.d4

The white knight on e2 is slightly misplaced to continue with the regular Closed Sicilian kingside expansion. 8...cxd4 9.♘xd4 ♕c7 10.♗e3 ♘bd7 11.♕e2 ♗e7 12.f4 0-0 13.f5 e5= 0-1 (41) Bodnaruk, A (2470) – Hou, Y (2635) Novi Sad 2016.

4...d5!



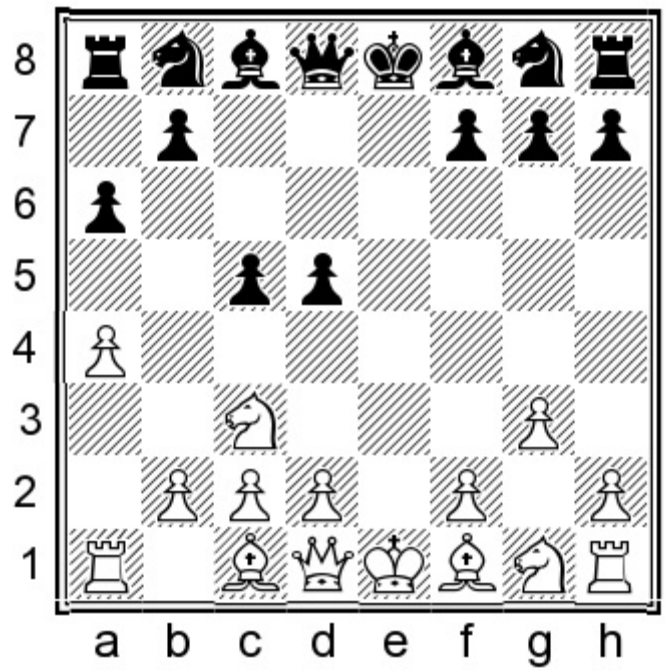
Position after: 4...d5!

5.exd5

A) 5.♗g2 d4! 6.♘ce2 [6.♘b1 e5! 7.d3 ♘c6 8.h3 ♗d6∓] 6...d3∓ with an interesting blockade of the White position.

B) 5.d3 d4 6.♘b1 ♘c6 7.♗g2 e5∓ 0-1 (47) Starostits, I (2442) – Milov, V (2592) Lausanne 2003.

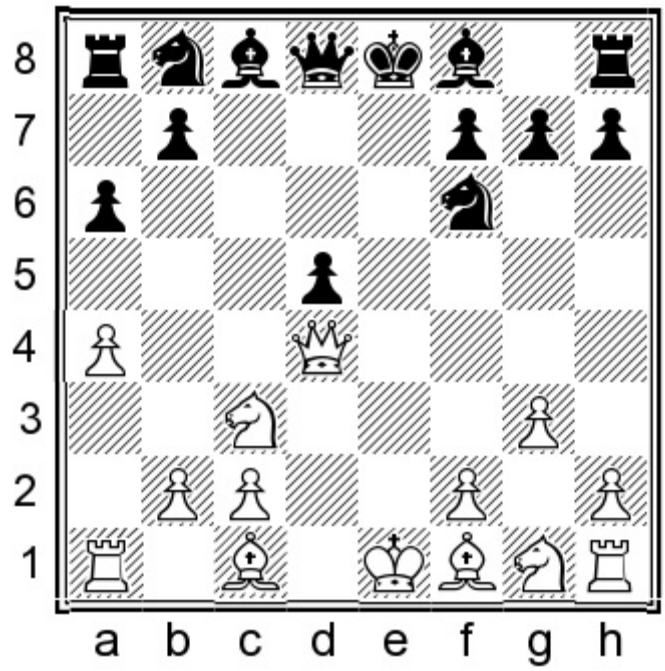
5...exd5



Position after: 5...exd5

6.d3

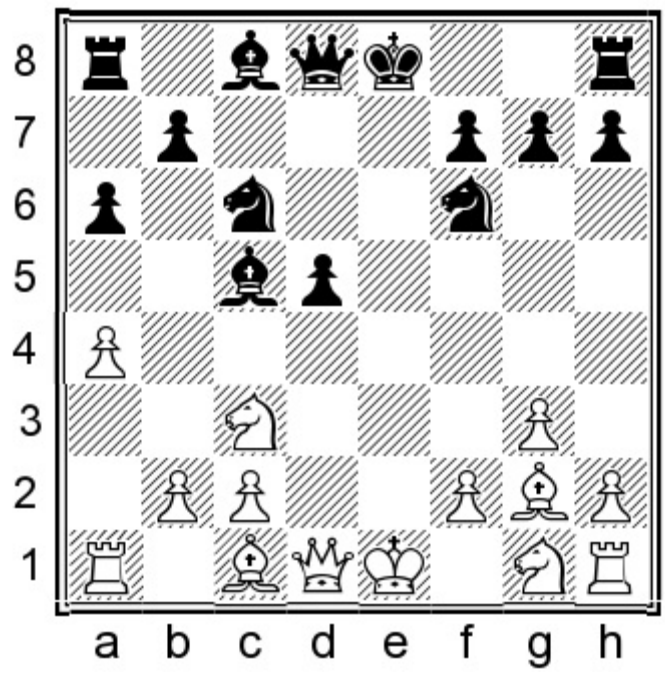
A) 6.d4?! Is a standard maneuver without the moves of the a-pawns. Here it is ineffective as ♗b5 is not available to maintain the white queen on d4. 6...cxd4 7.♕xd4 ♘f6



Position after: 7...♘f6

A1) 8.♗g5 ♘c6!∓ White already has some slight problems. 9.♕e3+ ♗e6 10.0-0-0 [10.♗xf6 ♕xf6 11.♘xd5 ♕xb2 12.♖d1 0-0-0–+ ½-½ (32) Woestmann, U (2007) – Spiess, T (2100) Germany 2015.] 10...d4 11.♕e2 ♕a5–+ 0-1 (21) Vrana, F (2209) – Pacher, M (2499) Tatranske Zruby 2016.

A2) 8.♗g2 ♘c6 9.♕d1 ♗c5!?

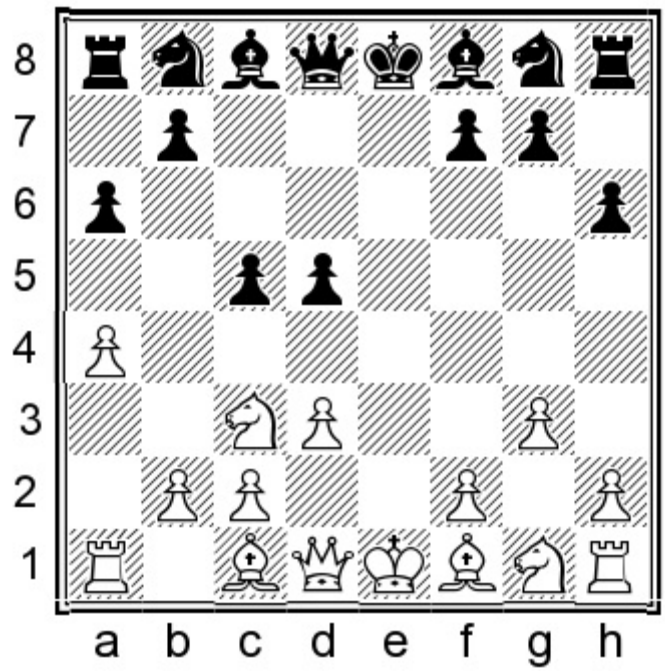


Position after: 9...♗c5!?

10.♘f3 [10.♘xd5 ♗g4 11.♗f3 0-0∓] 10...h6 11.0-0 0-0∓

B) 6.♗g2 ♘f6 7.d3 brings us into the main line.

6...h6!



Position after: 6...h6!

Prevents ♗g5.

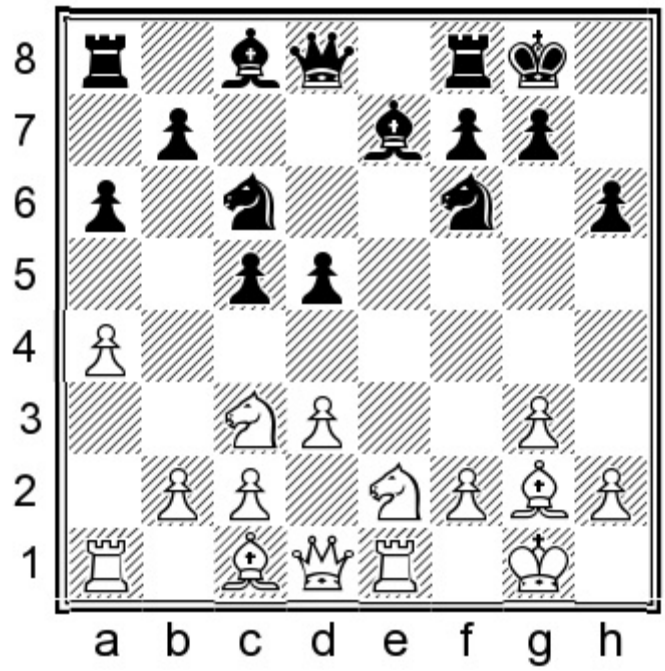
7.♗g2 ♘f6 8.♘ge2 ♘c6 9.0-0

9.♘f4 ♗g4!∓ 10.f3 ♗c8 11.0-0 ♗e7 12.♘ce2 0-0 13.d4 cxd4 14.♘xd4 ♘xd4 15.♕xd4 ♗f5 16.♘d3 ♖c8–+ 0-1 (19) Koukoufikis, A (2169) – Hellsten, J (2477) Aghios Kirykos 2002.

9...♗e7 10.♖e1

10.h3 0-0 11.d4 ♗f5!N 12.dxc5 ♗xc5 13.g4 ♗h7=

10...0-0=



Position after: 10...0-0=

Both parties developed naturally. Black has the center and controls a number of key squares. The engines consider it equal, but I would rather have Black.

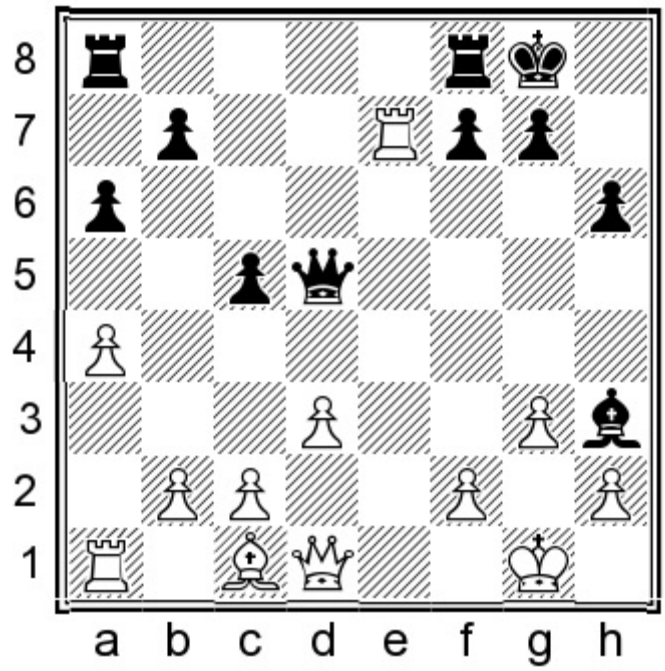
11.♘f4

11.h3 d4 12.♘b1 ♗d6 13.♗f4 ♖e8=

11...♘b4 12.♘cxd5?!

12.h3!=

12...♘bxd5 13.♘xd5 ♘xd5 14.♗xd5 ♕xd5 15.♖xe7 ♗h3∓



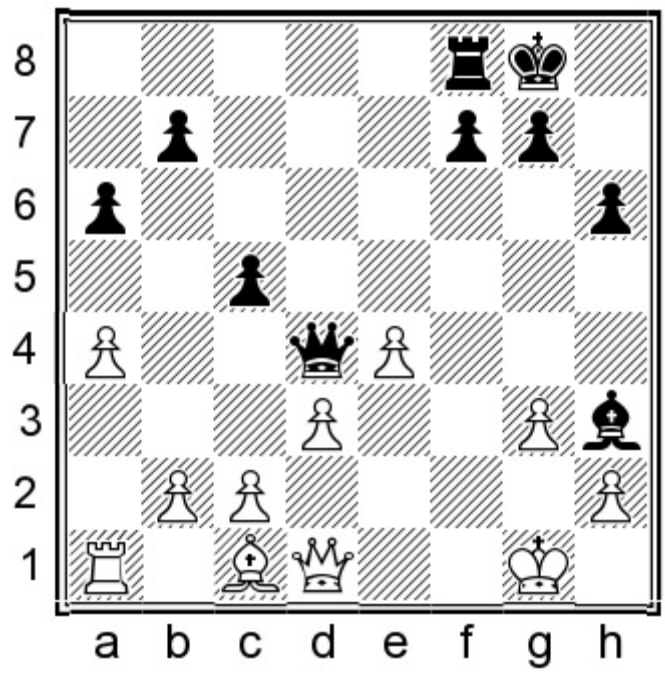
Position after: 15...♗h3∓

White has won a pawn, but Black's attack is worth more than a pawn.

16.f3 ♖ae8 17.♖e4?

17.♖e3 ♗d7∓

17...♖xe4 18.fxe4 ♕d4+–+



Position after: 18...♕d4+−+

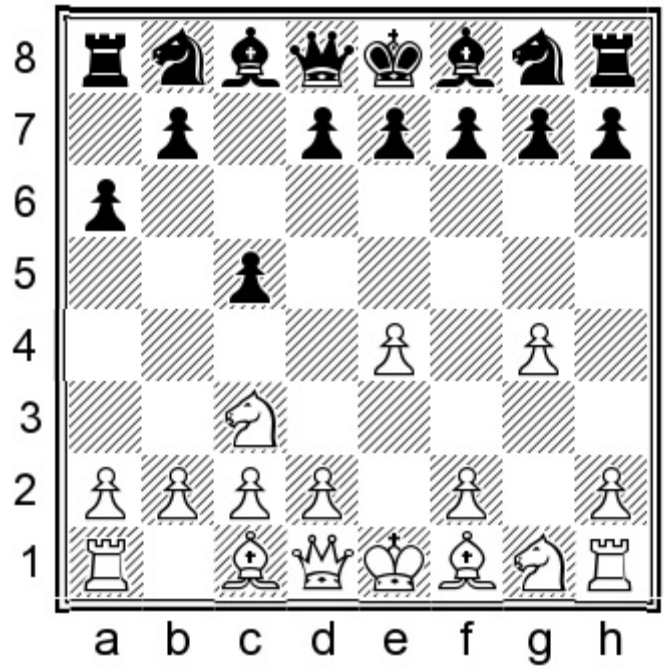
0-1 (21) Kart, M (1683) – Firat, B (2408) Konya 2012.

Conclusion

It is clear that 3.a4 is not a serious test of Black's system with 2.♘c3 a6. (3.a4) White stops 3...b5 but enters a version of the regular 2...e6 Closed Sicilian in which his options are severely limited. With precise play Black should be able to obtain a comfortable position

e) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g4

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.g4!?



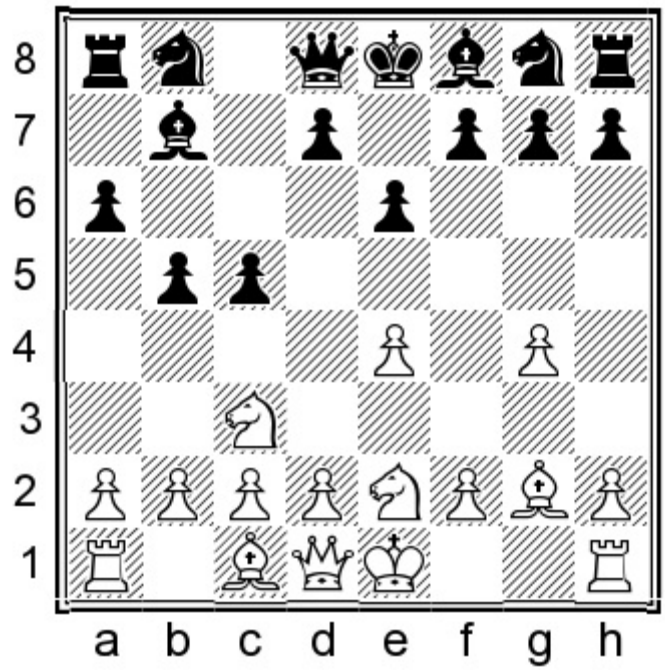
Position after: 3.g4!?

Pioneered by GM Vallejo Pons between 2009 and 2015, this weird move has found its way to the blitz and rapid games of the world's elite. Although still not very common, there is definitely sense in the move. If Black disregards the center and focuses on the queenside, why should White not do something similar and gain some space on the kingside? And if 3.g3 is the main line in the Closed Sicilian, with g3-g4 often coming later, why is it not a good idea to take that extra space sooner?

3...b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3

White shows his hand. He will use the Closed Sicilian structures.

White could also have played 5.♘ge2 keeping various options open. However, Black can now open various diagonals for his queen with 5...e6!.



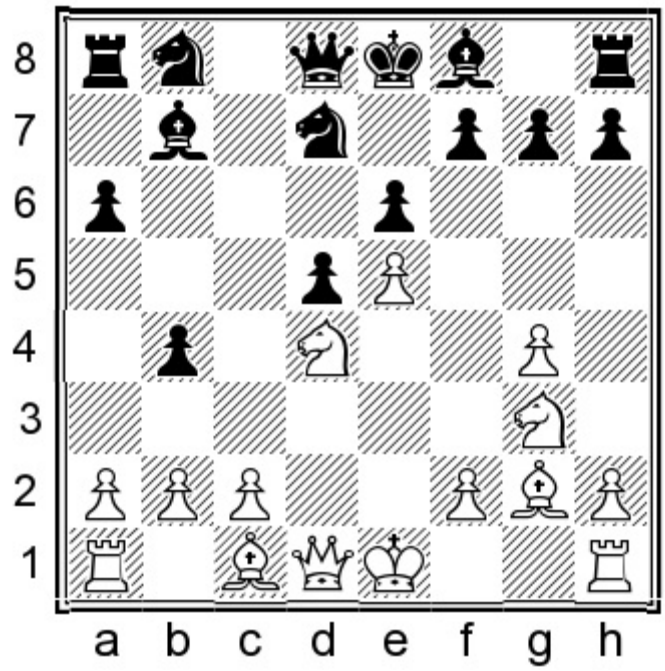
Position after: 5...e6!

This move also facilitates ...♘g8-e7-g6.

A) 6.0-0 h5! 7.gxh5 ♕h4! The pawn will not run away. Black first improves his overall position before regaining the pawn. 8.♘g3 ♘c6 9.d3 ♘f6∓

B) 6.♘g3 ♘c6 7.d3 [7.h4 ♗e7 8.h5 h6 9.d3 ♕c7∓ 0-1 (46) Egorov, E (2314) – Lettieri, G (2435) Chess.com 2020.] 7...♕c7 8.0-0 0-0-0∞

C) 6.d4 White prefers an Open Sicilian with 6...cxd4 7.♘xd4. By transposition we have reached a position of the Sicilian Kan with an early g2-g4. 7...b4!? 8.♘ce2 ♘f6 9.♘g3 d5! 10.e5 ♘fd7!

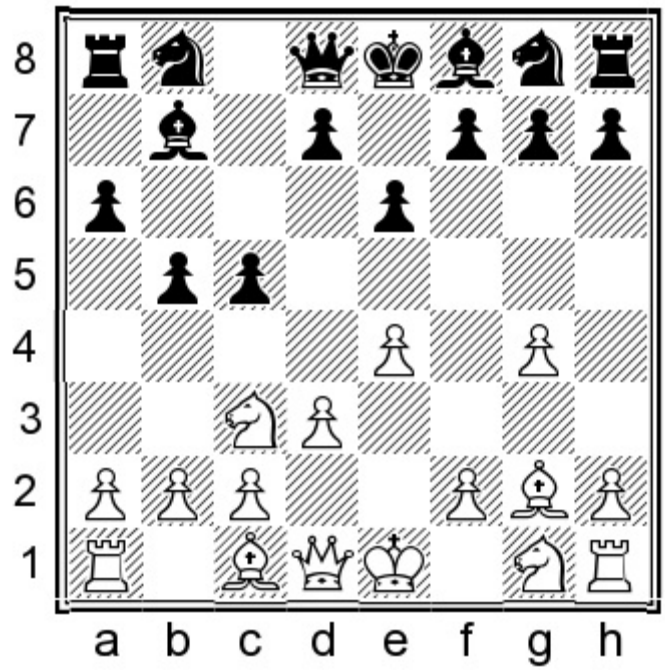


Position after: 10...♘fd7!

11.f4 [11.♕e2 ♕b6 12.♘b3 a5 13.♗e3 ♕c7 14.f4 ♘c6 15.♖d1 a4 16.♘d4 ♗a6 17.♕d2 ♖c8∓ 0-1 (28) Asensio Linan, T (2156) – Inants, A (2288) Benidorm 2011.] 11...♗c5 12.c3 ♘c6 13.0-0 ♕b6 14.♗e3 0-0! 15.♔h1 a5∓ 1-0 (29) Blaskowski, J (2280) – Ruzele, D (2525) Germany 1998.

D) 6.d3 reverts to the main line.

5...e6



Position after: 5...e6

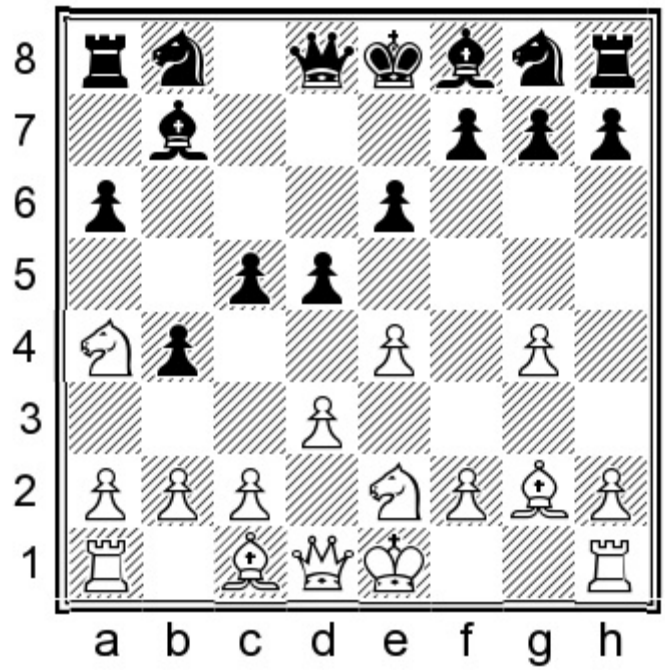
As after 5.♘ge2 it is important to keep an eye on the kingside.

6.♘h3!

White's most dangerous option and the main line. White keeps the light-squared bishop's diagonal open while preparing 0-0.

A) 6.h4 White plays as if he is in the Scheveningen Keres Attack. 6...d5! The thematic break in the center. 7.e5?! h5! 8.gxh5 ♘c6 9.f4 [9.♗f4 ♕c7 10.♘f3 ♘f6!∓] 9...♘h6∓

B) 6.♘ge2 b4 7.♘a4 d5

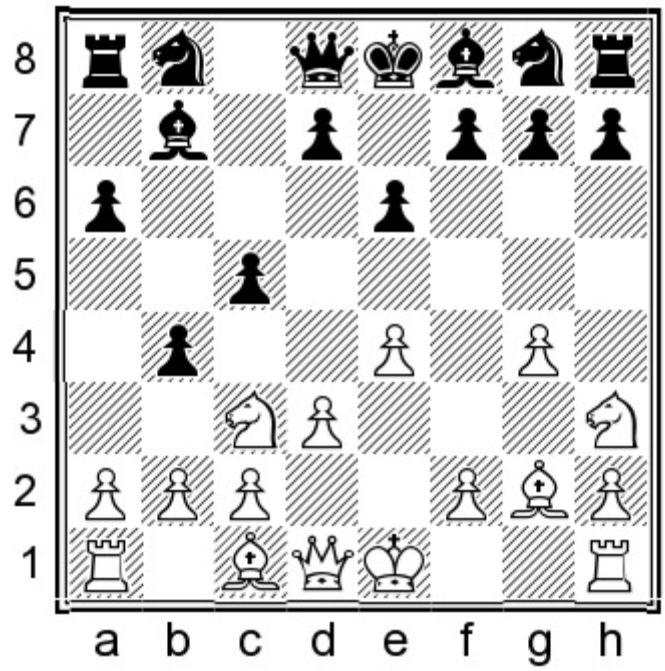


Position after: 7...d5

8.0-0 [8.exd5 ♘f6 9.♘f4 g5 10.♘e2 ♗xd5 11.♗xd5 ♕xd5∓] 8...dxe4 9.dxe4 ♘d7=

6...b4!

Before our central thrust ...d7-d5, we first push the c3-knight away. This is a maneuver from the regular Closed Sicilian with 2...a6. White would otherwise challenge Black's concept with a well-timed ♘h3-f4.

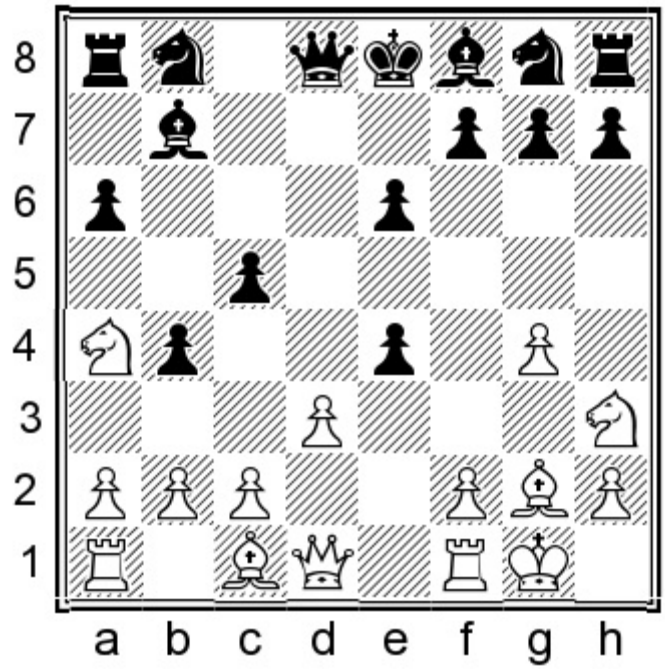


Position after: 6...b4!

7.♘e2!

The knight has more of a future on this square than on the alternative squares.

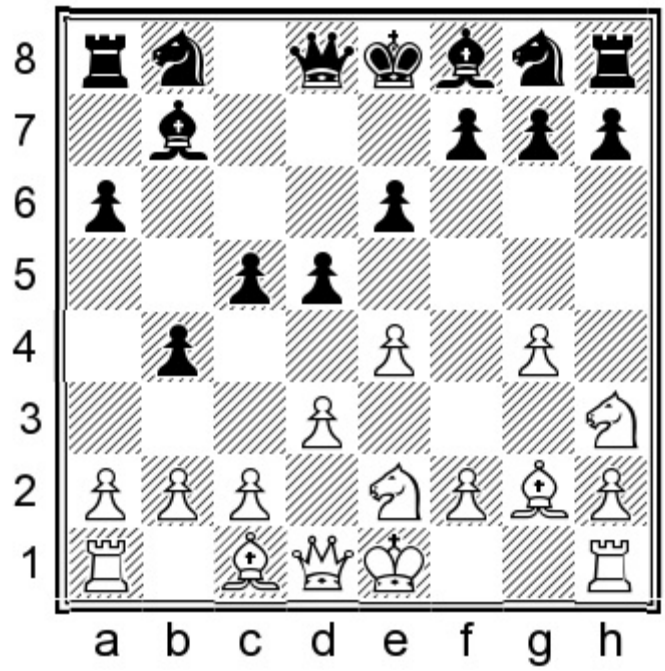
7.♘a4 A vulnerable position for the white knight. Various lines for Black make good use of this. 7...d5! 8.0-0 [8.♕e2?! dxe4 9.dxe4 ♗c6! An important idea in this setup. 10.b3 ♗b5! Black is already better. 11.♕e3 ♘c6 12.♗b2 e5 13.♖d1 ♘d4∓ 0-1 (22) Marrero Martin, M (1836) – Hernandez Leon, A (2304) Santa Cruz de Tenerife 2015.] 8...dxe4



Position after: 8...dxe4

9.dxe4 [9.c3 ♘d7 10.dxe4 ♗c6=] 9...♕a5!N 10.b3 [10.c3 ♗c6 11.b3 bxc3∓] 10...♘c6 11.♘b2 ♖d8 12.♗d2 ♕c7 13.♘c4 ♘f6 14.f4 ♘a5 15.♘xa5 ♕xa5 16.♘f2 c4∓

7...d5!



Position after: 7...d5!

8.0-0

White plays just like in the regular Closed Sicilian.

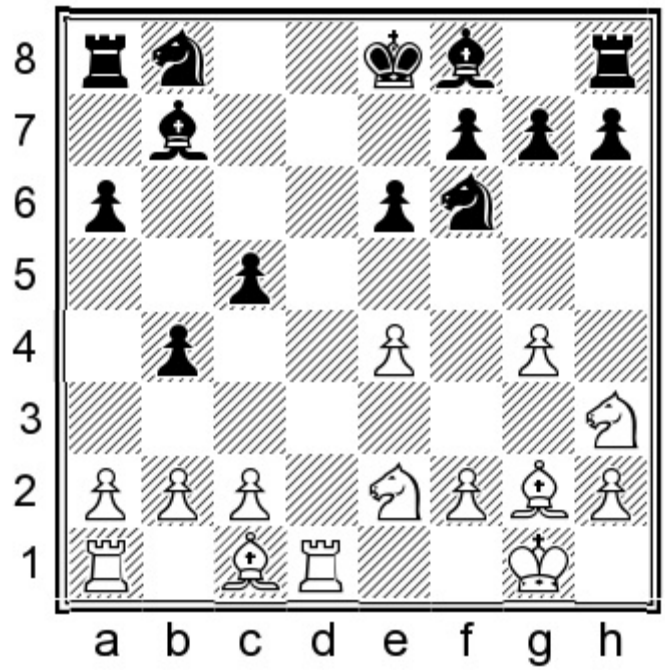
8.♘g3 dxe4! 9.♘g5 ♘f6 10.♘5xe4 ♘xe4 11.♘xe4 ♗e7!= Leads to similar positions as those in the Adhiban game, without the weakening of Black's kingside.

8...dxe4 9.dxe4

A) 9.♘g3 ♘c6 10.dxe4 ♕xd1 11.♖xd1 ♘f6 12.g5 ♘d7=

B) 9.♘g5 ♘f6 10.♘g3 ♗e7 11.♘5xe4 ♘xe4 12.♘xe4 0-0 13.♗e3 ♘d7=

9...♕xd1 10.♖xd1 ♘f6=



Position after: 10...♘f6=

What has two pawns hanging and must make an ugly move.

11.f3 ♘c6 12.♗e3 ♗e7 13.♘hf4?! ♘d7∓

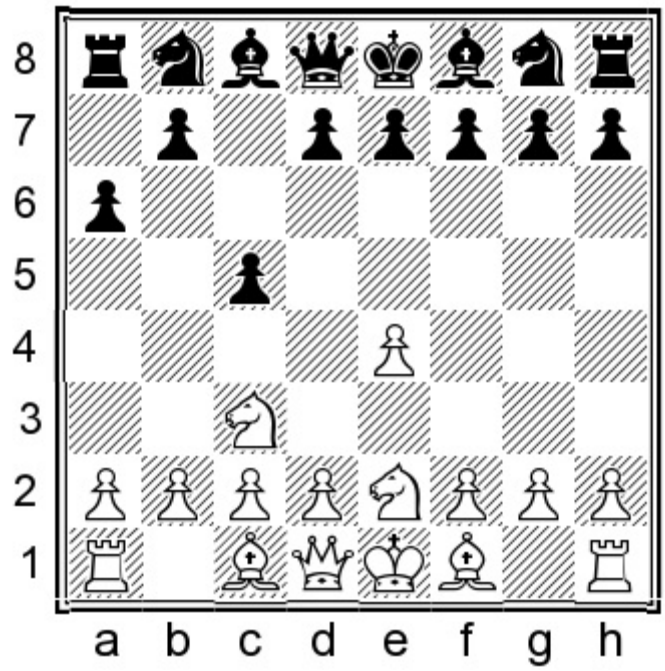
This endgame is better for Black. 0-1 (28) Amores Gago, J (2167) – Escobar Forero, A (2466) Barbera del Valles 2013.

Conclusion

Looking at the lines in our analysis, one may conclude that the eccentric (2.♘c3 a6) 3.g4 has had its best days. With some precision (6...b4!, 7...d5! and 10...♘f6) Black is able to reach an endgame which is at least equal for him.

f) 2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2 e6 4.g3 – Chameleon Variation

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2



Position after: 3.♘ge2

The Chameleon Variation is a flexible way to fight the Sicilian Defense. For the time being White leaves his options free between the Open or Closed Sicilian. The Chameleon is the weapon of players who try to avoid learning large amounts of Open Sicilian theory and prefer to see how the game develops. We will fight the Chameleon with these two cardinal directions in mind.

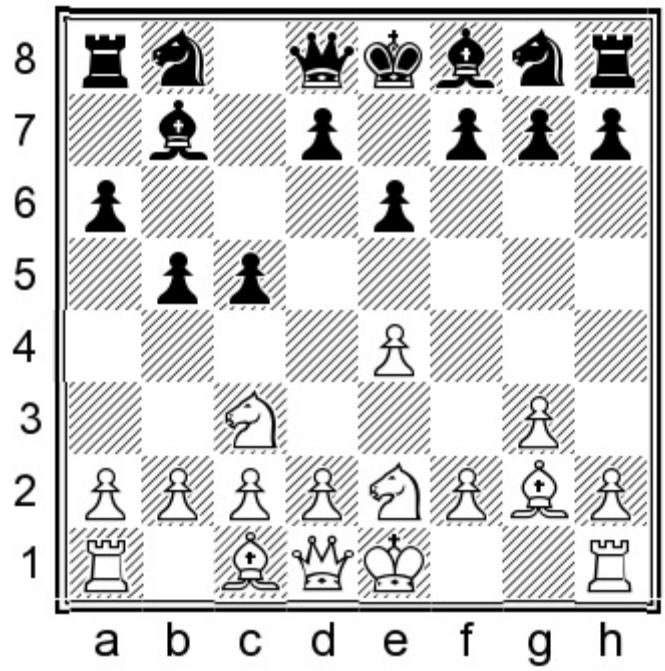
3...e6

3...b5 4.d4! leads to positions outside our repertoire. A Najdorf specialist would prefer 3...d6 here.

4.g3 b5

Now we can expand on the queenside without having to worry about d2-d4.

5.♗g2 ♗b7



Position after: 5...♗b7

At this critical juncture White can choose between three main options.

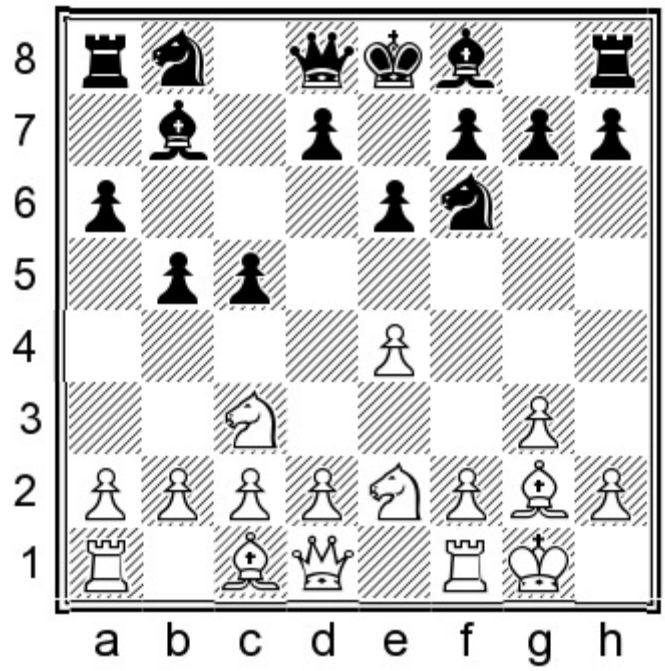
6.0-0

White postpones for one more move whether it will be a Closed Sicilian or an Open Sicilian.

A) 6.d3 is the positional option which is less intense than the variations explored after 6.d4. The positions are still good enough for White to fight for an advantage. 6.d3 will be treated as the main line of the 2...a6 Closed Sicilian with 6.♘ge2.

B) 6.d4 is the most common move, and the move recommended by Jones. 6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 is treated under the O'Kelly move order 3.♘c3 e6 4.g3 b5 5.♗g2 ♗b7 6.d4.

6...♘f6!



Position after: 6...♘f6!

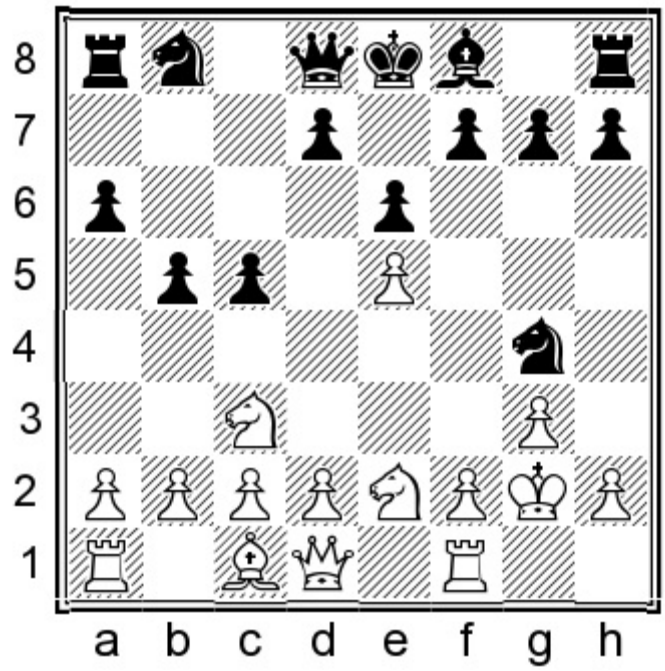
The repertoire choice for this position. White has to make up his mind whether he wants to open up the position or play a Closed Sicilian.

7.d3

The quiet, positional option. We are back in the Closed Sicilian but with an early ....♘f6 which we normally like to postpone in our repertoire until White has taken on d5.

A) 7.d4 White's last chance to transpose to the sharp pawn sacrifice variation after 7...cxd4 8.♘xd4 b4.

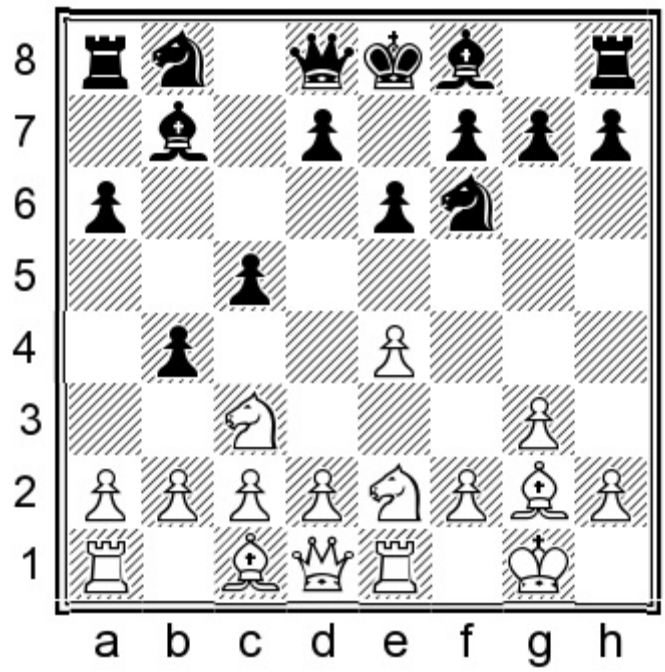
B) 7.e5 opens the position too early at the expense of White's long-range bishop. 7...♗xg2 8.♔xg2 ♘g4!



Position after: 8...♘g4!

White is slightly better developed but has lost his light-squared bishop. 9.f4 [9.d4 cxd4 10.♕xd4 h5 11.f4 ♘c6 12.♕e4 ♖c8 13.h3 ♘h6 14.♗e3 ♘f5= 0-1 (44) Knoppert, E (2340) – Handke, F (2476) Belgium 2004.] 9...♘h6! 10.d4 d5 11.exd6 [11.♗e3 ♘f5 12.♗f2 ♘d7=] 11...♕xd6 12.dxc5 ♕c6+ 13.♖f3 ♗xc5∓ 1-0 (37) Vasques, A (2237) – Romano, L (1960) Lisbon 2015.

C) 7.♖e1 is a tricky sideline. 7...b4



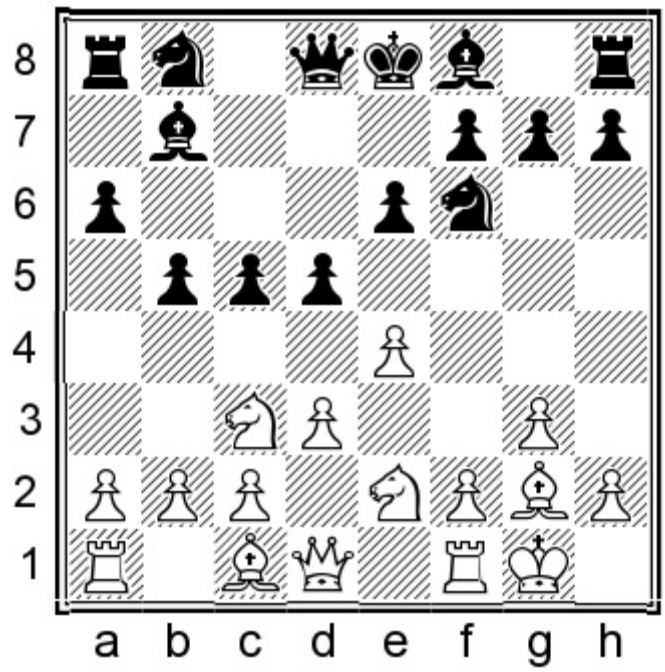
Position after: 7...b4

C1) 8.e5 ♗xg2 9.♔xg2 ♘g4 10.♘e4 ♘xe5 11.d4 cxd4 12.♘xd4 ♕b6 13.♗e3 ♘c4 14.♕d3 ♘xe3+ 15.♖xe3 ♘c6∓ 0-1 (43) Tassone, R (2195) – Varkentin, W (2197) corr. 2016.

C2) 8.♘a4 ♗xe4 9.♗xe4 ♘xe4 10.d4 d5 11.c4 bxc3 12.♘exc3 ♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♗e7 14.♕g4 0-0= 0-1 Kempinski, T (2196) – Gumularz, S (2241) Krakow 2015.

C3) 8.♘d5 exd5 9.exd5 d6 10.♘d4+! [10.d4 c4 11.g4 ♗e7 12.♘f4 0-0 13.g5 ♘e8 14.h4 ♘c7 15.a3 a5∓ 1-0 (31) Prudlo, S (2128) – Hunold, R (2119) Germany 2003.] 10...♔d7∞

7...d5



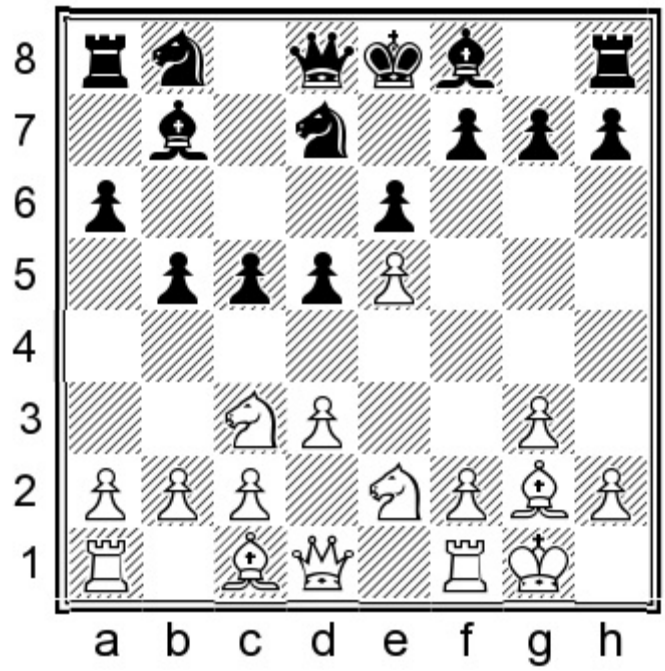
Position after: 7...d5

The familiar central break before Black has completed his development.

8.exd5

A) 8.♗g5 d4! 9.♗xf6 gxf6 10.♘b1 ♗d6 11.♘d2 ♘c6=

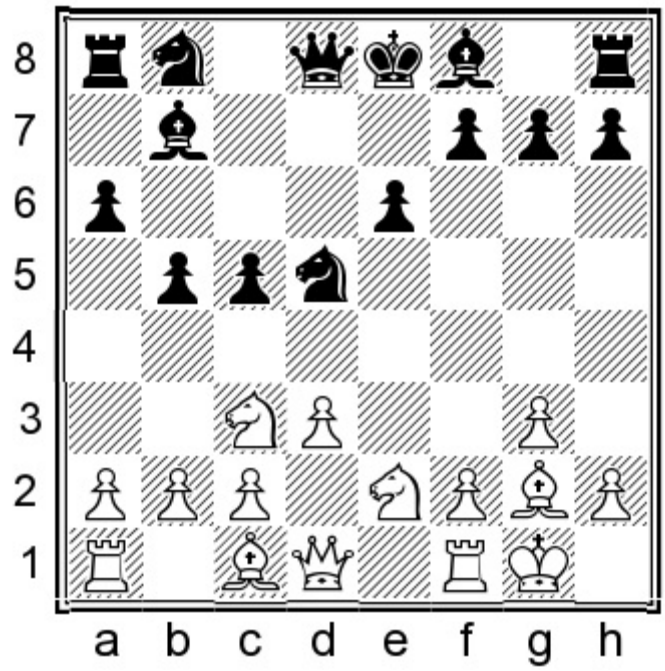
B) 8.e5 unlike other situations where White pushes his e-pawn after Black's ...♘f6, this is less of an issue here. Black's pawn center is still nicely aligned and the white knight on e2 is not in a very active position. 8...♘fd7



Position after: 8...♘fd7

9.f4 [9.♘f4 ♗e7! 10.♕g4 0-0 11.♘xe6 fxe6 12.♕xe6+ ♖f7 13.♘xd5 ♘f8∓] 9...♘c6! White has to decide how he wants to continue his development. In the seven games in my database, Black achieved a 100% score. 10.♘b1 [10.f5 ♘dxe5 11.fxe6 fxe6 12.♘f4 ♕d6 13.♗h3 ♗c8 14.♘h5 ♗d7 15.a4 b4 16.♘e2 0-0-0∓ 0-1 (29) Canbulan, A (1889) – Ozturk, F (1689) Antalya 2017.; 10.♗d2 ♗e7 11.♕e1 0-0 12.g4 ♖c8 13.♕g3 ♘d4∓ 0-1 (31) Kuklin, V (2236) – Hort, A (2015) Voelklingen 2003.] 10...♗e7 11.c3! d4∓

8...♘xd5



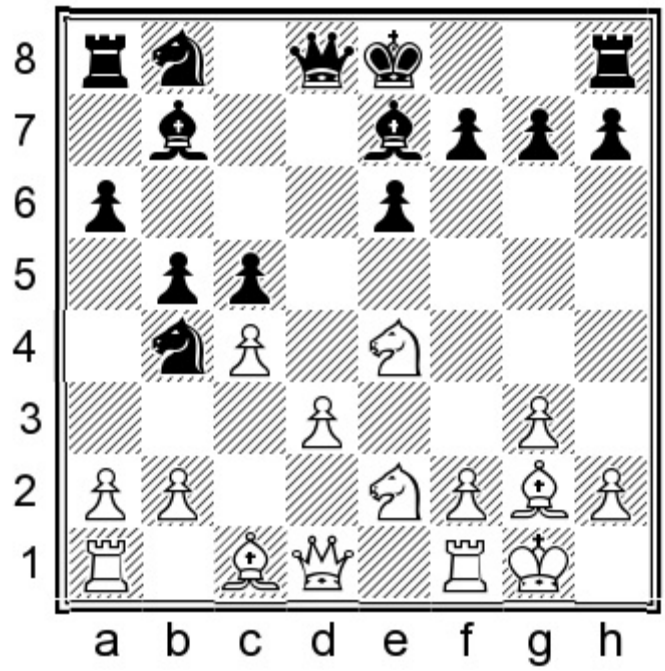
Position after: 8...♘xd5

9.♘xd5

The most popular move.

A) 9.a4 ♘xc3 10.♘xc3 ♗xg2 11.♔xg2 b4 12.♕f3 ♖a7!= [12...♘d7 13.♗g5±]

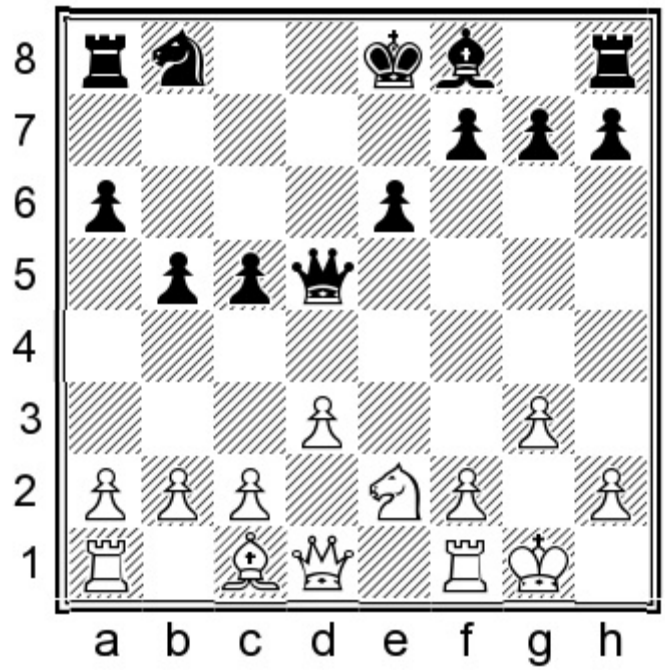
B) 9.♘e4!? sets a nice trap. 9...♗e7! 10.c4 [10.♘f4 0-0 11.♖e1 ♘d7 12.h4 ♖a7= 0-1 (33) Ermolov, V (2146) – Barhudarian, R (2321) St Petersburg 2007.] 10...♘b4



Position after: 10...♘b4

11.♘f6+ [11.d4 cxd4 12.♘xd4 bxc4= 0-1 (44) Zhelnin, V (2459) – Piasetski, L (2298) Kamena Vourla 2012.] 11...♗xf6 12.♗xb7 ♖a7 13.♗e4 ♖d7 14.cxb5 axb5 15.♗e3 c4 16.d4 ♘4c6=

9...♗xd5 10.♗xd5 ♕xd5



Position after: 10...♕xd5

White has a small lead in development although the knight's position on e2 is hardly impressive. Black's pawn structure is much better, and his position is quite robust. After kingside castling he can build on his extra space on the queenside or put a knight on d4 first. White has trouble creating anything tangible from this position.

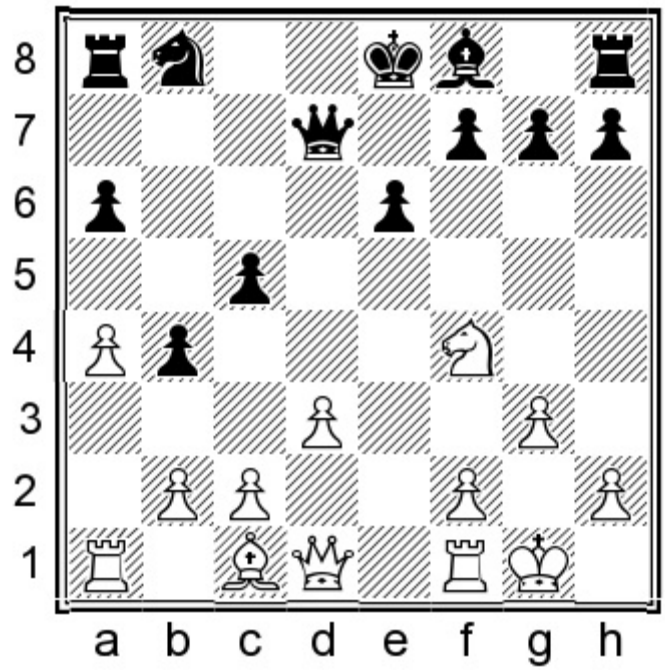
11.♘f4

A) 11.♘c3 ♕d8 it is important to have d7 available to the knight when White plays ♘c3. 12.♗e3 ♗e7 13.♘e4 Black is prepared for that. 13...♘d7=

B) 11.a4 b4

B1) 12.c4?! White rocks the boat. 12...♕f5! 13.d4 [13.a5 ♘c6 14.♗e3 ♗e7∓] 13...♘c6 14.d5 0-0-0∓

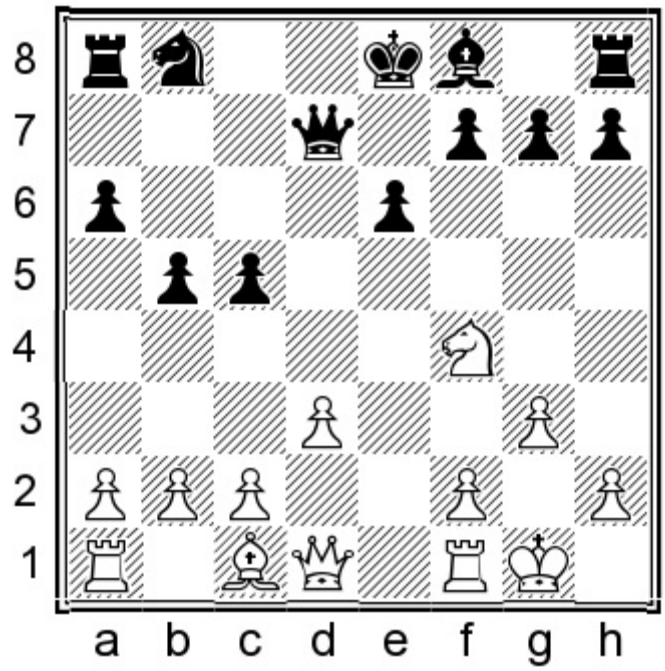
B2) 12.♘f4 ♕d7



Position after: 12...♕d7

13.♖e1 [13.♘g2 ♘c6 14.♘e3 ♗e7! 15.♘c4 ♖d8∓] 13...♘c6 14.♘h5 ♖g8! 15.b3 e5 16.♗b2 f6 17.♘f4 0-0-0=

11...♕d7!



Position after: 11...♕d7!

The simplest solution. Other queen moves suffice for equality as well.

12.♘h5

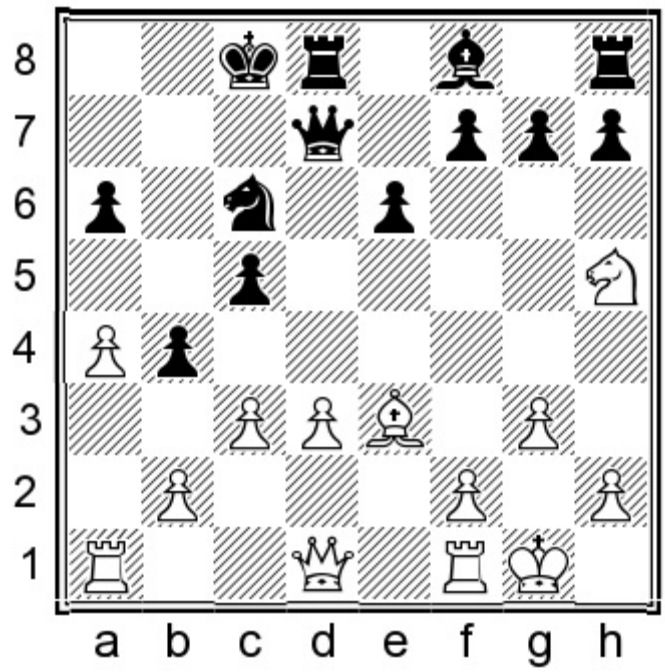
A) 12.♕f3 ♕c6 13.♕g4 ♘d7 14.♖e1 ♘f6 15.♕h3 ♗e7 16.♕g2 ♕xg2+ 17.♘xg2 0-0-0= 0-1 (57) Kiran, M (2208) – Sunilduth Lyna, N (2355) Tirupati 2012.

B) 12.b3 ♗d6 13.♕f3 ♕c6 14.♕h5 ♗xf4 15.♗xf4 ♘d7 16.♗e5 ♘xe5 17.♕xe5 0-0= ½-½ (26) Tomazini, A – Alonso Rosell, A (2196) Herceg Novi 2006.

12...♘c6 13.♗e3

13.b3 0-0-0 14.♗b2 f6=

13...0-0-0!? 14.a4 b4 15.c3



Position after: 15.c3

15...♔b7 16.cxb4 cxb4=

The position of Black's king is a bit drafty, but it should not be too much effort for him to keep the balance.

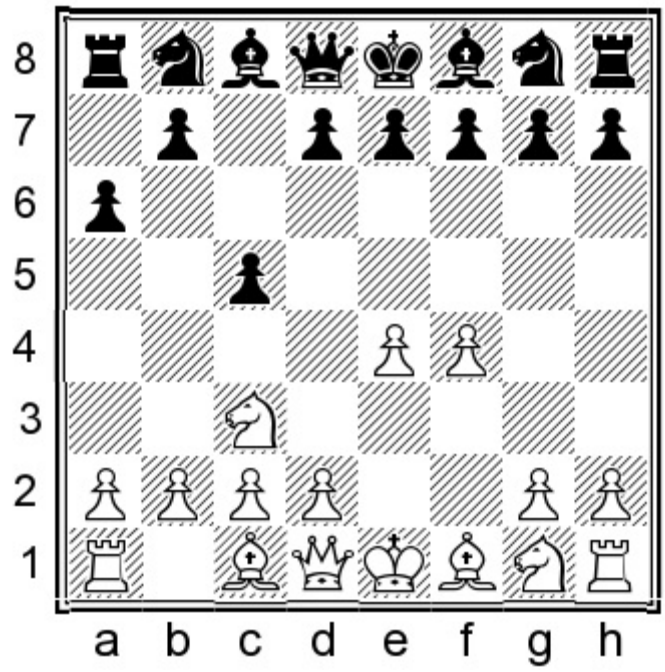
Conclusion

The Chameleon is a challenging variation to manage. White's sophisticated move order 2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2 keeps all kinds of options open. White develops quickly and a transposition into the Open Sicilian with d2-d4 is always one of the possibilities. The Chameleon calls for a clever response from Black. The key position arises after 3...e6 4.g3 b5 5.♗g2 ♗b7 6.0-0. Here Black has to be very careful as there are many traps into which he can fall. The most reliable move that aligns with our repertoire is 6...♘f6. White's most challenging response is 7.d3 which will be answered by the thematic 7...d5.

Despite our knight being on f6 the analysis shows that Black is fine after the principled 8.e5, as well as after the more popular 8.exd5.

g) 2.♘c3 a6 3.f4 – Grand Prix Attack

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.f4



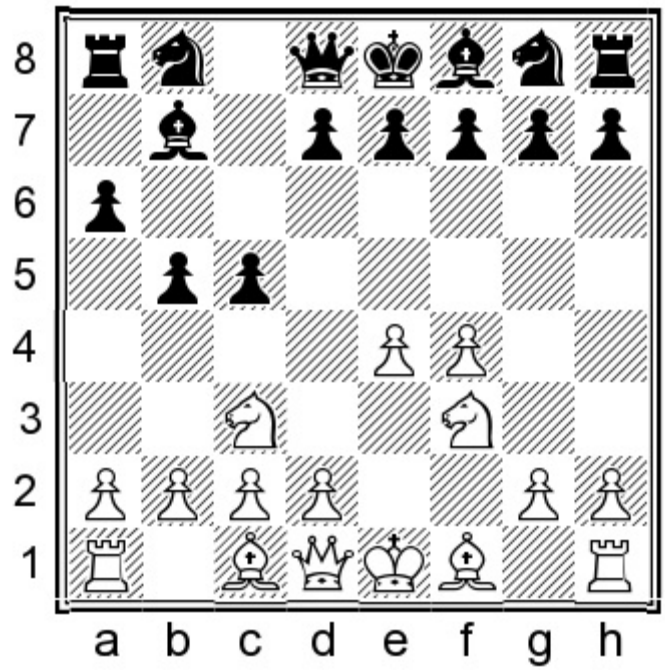
Position after: 3.f4

The Grand Prix is normally an aggressive system for White against the Sicilian. However, without a kingside fianchetto by Black it is less threatening.

3...b5 4.♘f3

4.a4 b4 5.♘d5 e6 6.♘e3 ♗b7 7.d3 d5∓

4...♗b7



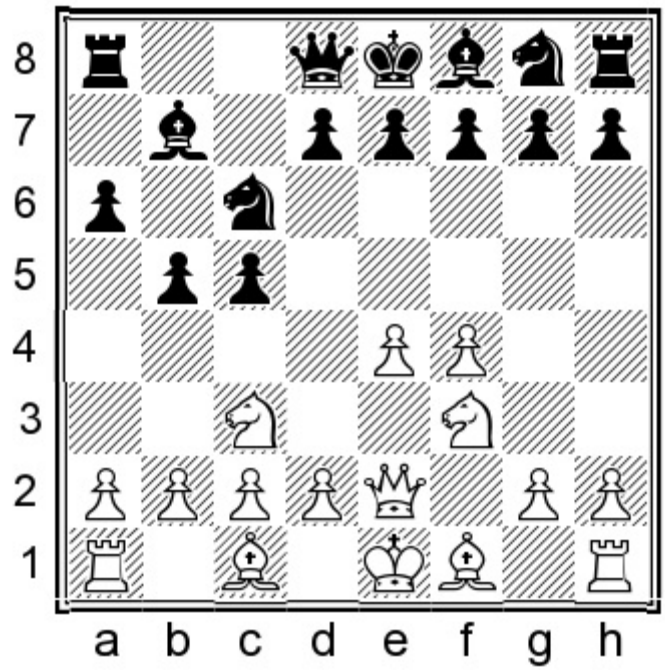
Position after: 4...♗b7

White now has to avoid losing a pawn for nothing after Black plays ...b5-b4.

5.d3

A natural response with the e-pawn under attack. It is by far the most popular way to continue this system. White guards the e-pawn and keeps the position closed. As there is no future for the light-squared bishop on c4 or b5, it is not an issue that it is locked in within the pawn chain.

A) 5.♕e2 Not the most principled move, but every now and then tried by stronger players in less important games. 5...♘c6!

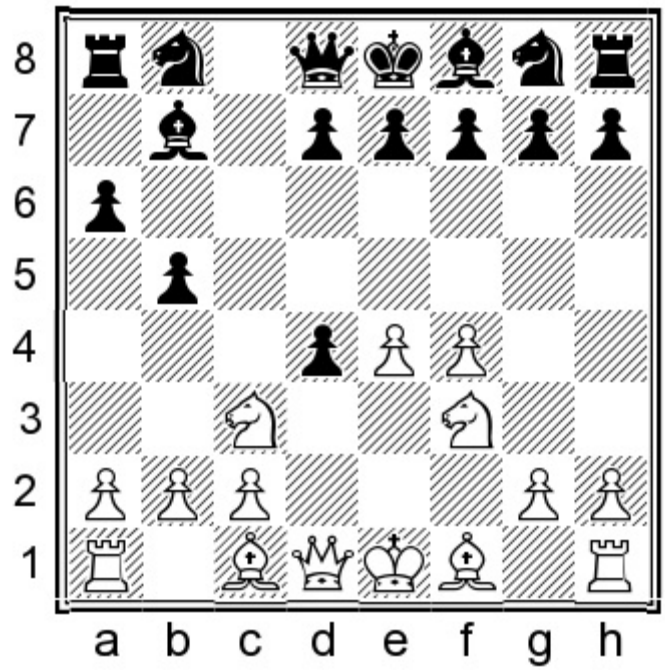


Position after: 5...♘c6!

A1) 6.g3?! is already inaccurate. Black can gain an advantage with the following more or less forced line. 6...♘d4 7.♘xd4 cxd4 8.♘d1 ♖c8 9.d3 e6 10.♗g2 ♗b4+ 11.c3 dxc3 12.bxc3 ♖xc3!∓ as in 0-1 (34) Maze, S (2612) – Gharamian, T (2614) Nimes 2018.

A2) 6.d3 ♘d4 7.♘xd4 cxd4 8.♘d1 ♖c8 9.♕f2 d5!? 10.♕xd4 dxe4 11.♕xd8+ ♖xd8= and Black had equalized comfortably. 0-1 (40) Gamboa, N (2363) – Zapata, A (2541) Medellin 2002.

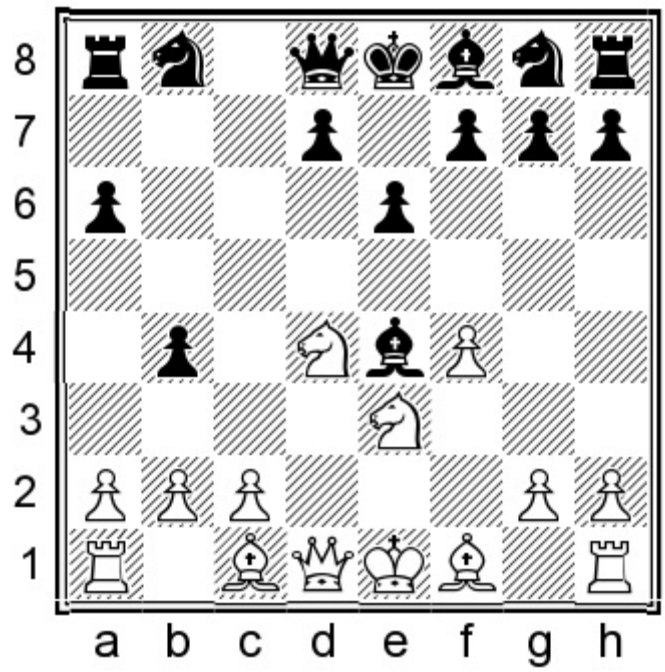
B) 5.d4!? This is an interesting way to sidestep the slow play of 5.d3. It has been tried by the likes of Nakamura and Tiviakov. It is the pet line of Macedonian GM Nikola Mitkov. White tries to lure us into variations with an Open Sicilian character which are not part of our O'Kelly/Kan repertoire. 5...cxd4



Position after: 5...cxd4

B1) 6.♘xd4 this is the move White may have had in mind with 5.d4, hoping to get to a normal Kan – Taimanov position after 6...e6, but Black can do better. He can make good use of the fact that he did not spend time yet on ...e6 by immediately playing against the weak e4-pawn. 6...b4! The principled continuation. The alternatives are unattractive from Black's point of view.

B1.1) 7.♘d5?! e6 8.♘e3 ♗xe4



Position after: 8...♗xe4

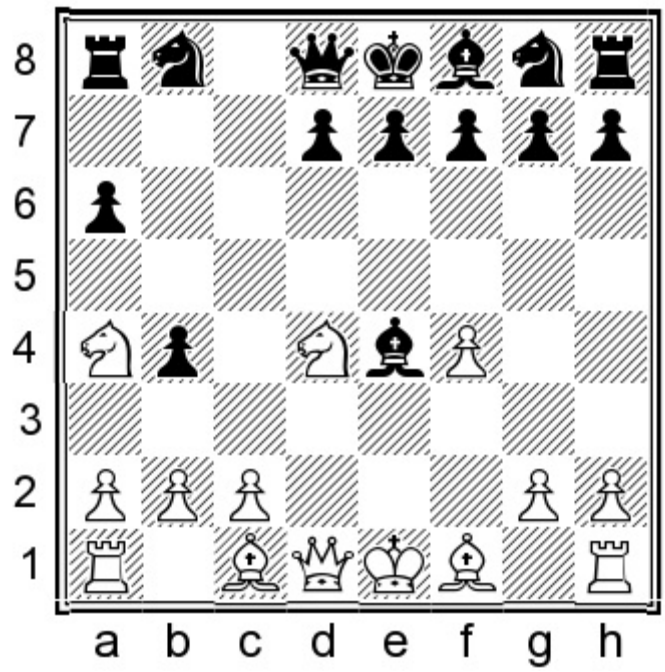
White has little compensation for the pawn.

B1.1a) 9.♗e2 ♗c5 10.0-0 ♘f6 11.c3 ♘c6 12.♔h1 bxc3 13.bxc3 0-0–+ Black has a solid extra pawn and the better position, although he did lose in Moskalenko, A (2514) – Sunilduth Lyna, N (2551) Chess.com 2017.

B1.1b) 9.f5 Searching for complications is counterproductive. 9...e5 10.♘f3 ♗c5!N 11.♗c4 [11.♘xe5? ♕h4+ 12.g3 ♕e7–+] 11...♘c6 12.♗d5 [12.0-0? d5–+] 12...♗xd5 13.♘xd5 h6 14.♕d3 ♘f6 15.♗d2 0-0 16.0-0-0 ♖e8–+ White struggles to show anything concrete for his lost pawn.

B1.2) 7.♘b1 ♗xe4 there is scant compensation. 8.♘d2 ♗b7 9.♘2f3 e6!N 10.♗d3 ♗c5 11.♕e2 ♘f6∓ On top of the loss of a pawn, White has problems with the safety of his king

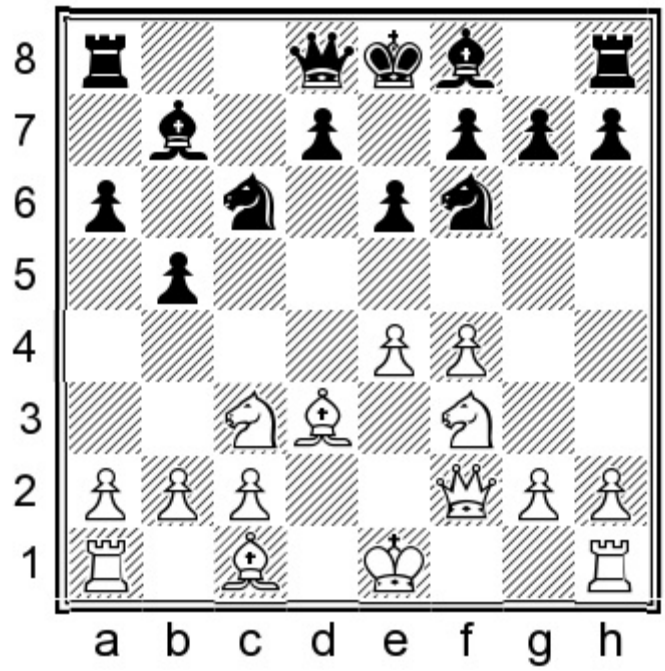
B1.3) 7.♘a4 ♗xe4!



Position after: 7...♗xe4!

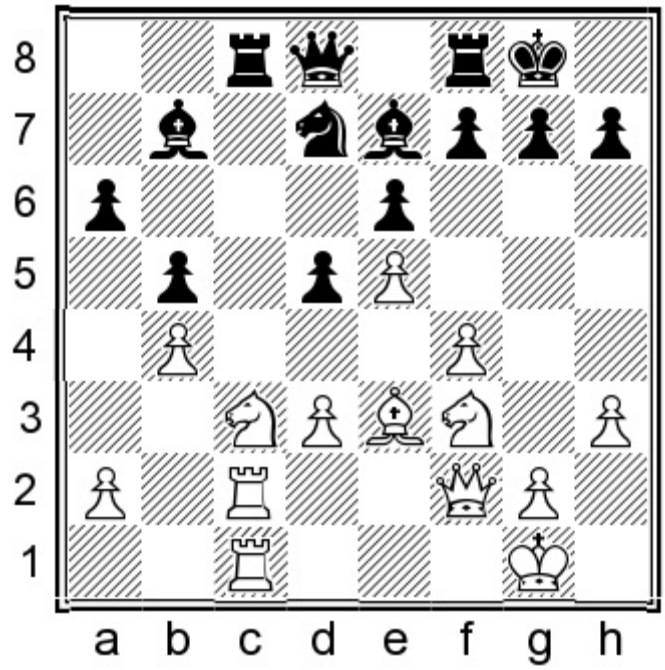
8.c4 [8.♘c5 ♗d5 9.a3 bxa3 10.c4 ♕a5+ 11.♕d2 ♕xc5 12.cxd5 ♘f6∓] 8...e6∓

B2) 6.♕xd4! The fascinating choice for White. 6...♘c6 7.♕f2 e6 8.♗d3 ♘f6



Position after: 8...♘f6

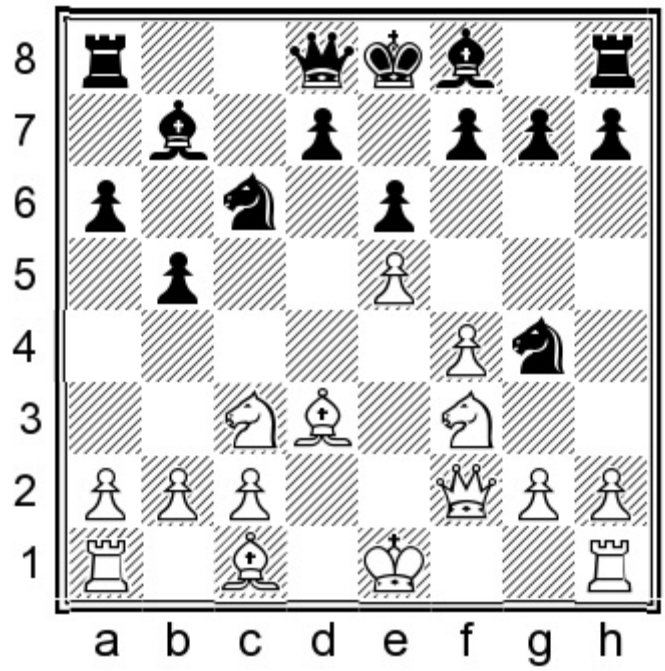
B2.1) 9.h3 ♘b4 10.0-0 ♘xd3! 11.cxd3 ♗e7 12.♗e3 0-0= 13.♖ac1 ♖c8 14.♖c2 d6 15.♖fc1 ♘d7 16.b4 d5 17.e5?!



Position after: 17.e5?!

17...♗xb4 18.♘e2 d4! 19.♘exd4 [19.♖xc8?? dxe3 20.♖xd8 exf2+ 0-1 (20) Flierl, P (2331) – Boekelman, J (2413) Chess.com 2022.; 19.♗xd4 ♖xc2 20.♖xc2 ♘b8∓] 19...♘c5∓

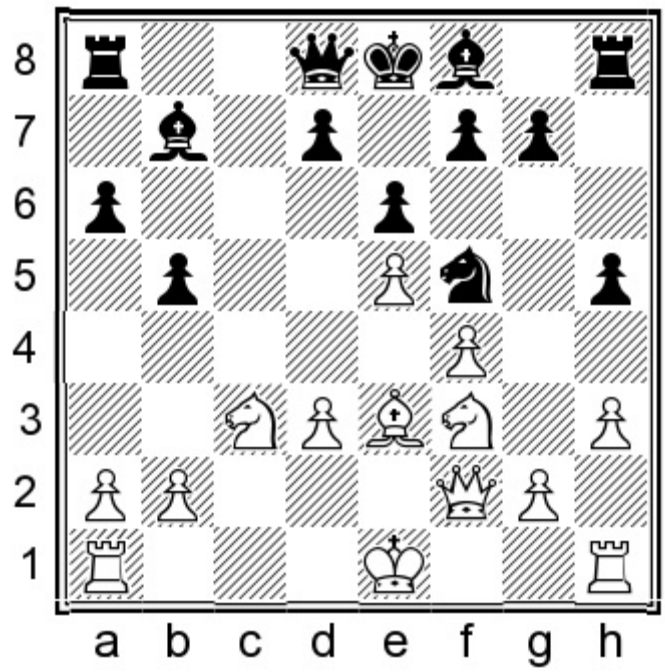
B2.2) 9.e5 ♘g4



Position after: 9...♘g4

B2.2a) 10.♕e2 ♘b4! 11.♗e4 [11.h3 ♘xd3+ 12.cxd3 ♘h6 13.♗e3 ♘f5 14.♗f2 h5 15.0-0 ♖c8= 1-0 (46) Mitkov, N (2508) – Burgos Figueroa, C (2192) Guatemala City 2020.] 11...d5! 12.exd6 ♗xe4 13.♘xe4 ½ – ½ (13) Tiviakov, S (2637) – Vachier Lagrave, M (2721) Sibenik 2010. 13...♗xd6 14.c3 ♘d5 15.f5 0-0 16.fxe6 f5! 17.♘xd6 ♕xd6 18.0-0 ♖ae8 19.♖e1 ♖f6=

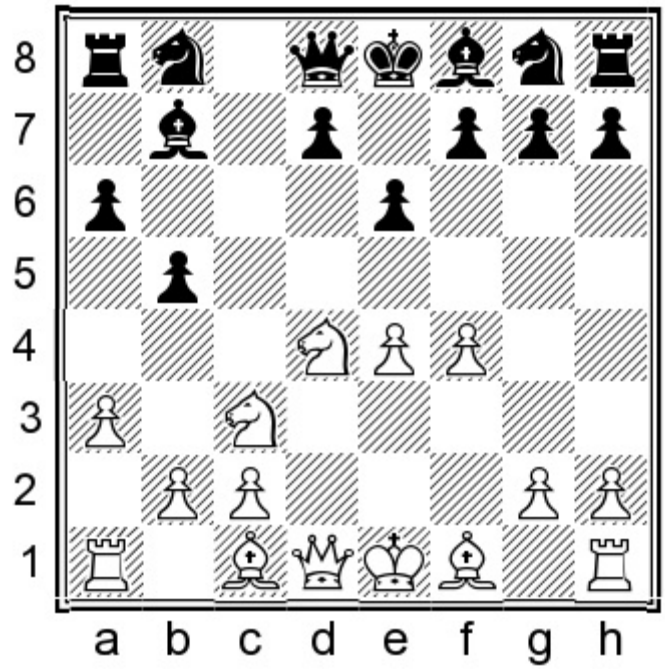
B2.2b) 10.♕g3 h5 11.h3 [11.a3 ♘e7 12.♗d2 ♕b6=] 11...♘h6 12.♗e3 ♘b4 13.♕f2 ♘xd3+ 14.cxd3 ♘f5!



Position after: 14...♘f5!

15.0-0 ♖c8 16.♔h2 [16.♗b6? ♕xb6∓] 16...♘xe3 17.♕xe3 ♗e7∓

C) 5.a3!? e6 [5...b4 6.♘a4!±] 6.d4!? Not the most common move in this position, but one where White is still fighting for a small advantage. Many lines transpose to variations of the Kan. [6.g3 b4 7.♘a4 ♗xe4∓; 6.d3 ♗e7 7.g3 d5 8.exd5 exd5 9.♗g2 ♘f6∓ 10.♘e5 ♕c7 11.0-0 ♘bd7 12.♕f3 0-0 13.g4 ♖a7∓] 6...cxd4 7.♘xd4

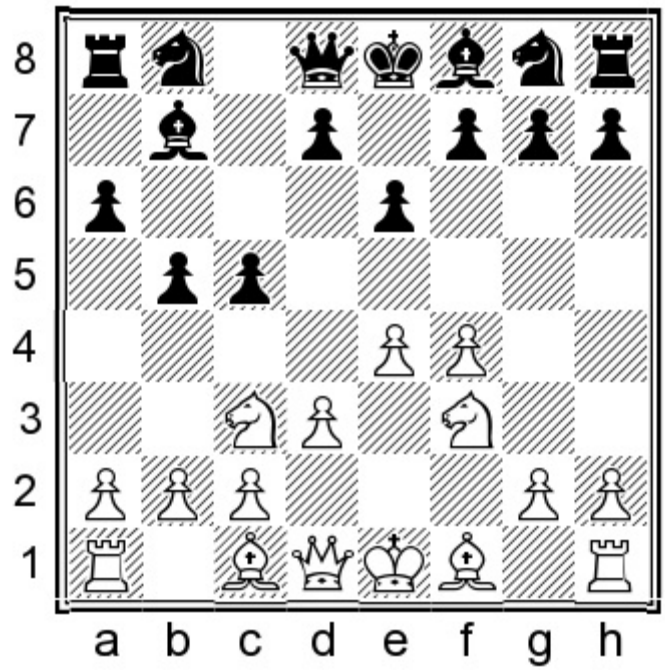


Position after: 7.♘xd4

7...♕c7 and the game has the character of the Sicilian Kan with an early a3 which we will discuss in another place.

D) 5.♗d3 g6 6.b3 ♗g7= 1-0 (30) GibletGrey(2203)-antonjboekelman01 (2319) Chess. com 2022.

5...e6



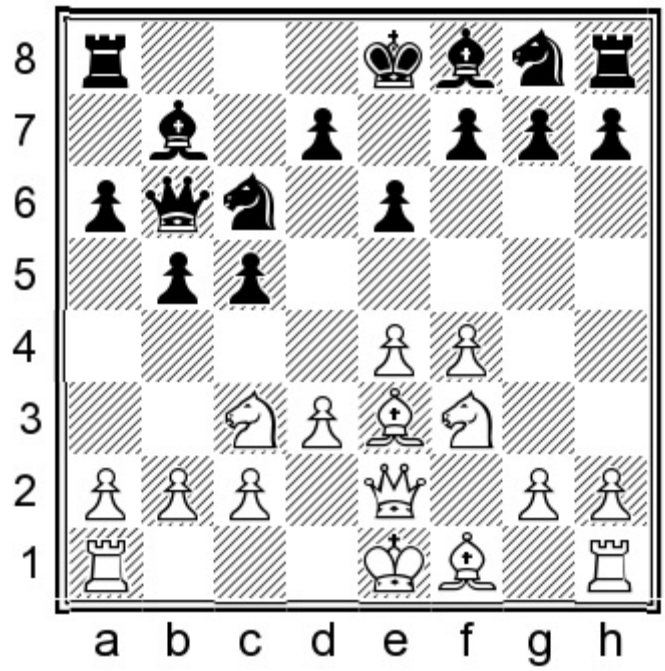
Position after: 5...e6

6.g3

White takes the game into normal Closed Sicilian waters. This is the most popular move in this position. Due to the early f2-f4 and the slow kingside fianchetto the positions are slightly different from those we will analyze as part of the Closed Sicilian while the thematic moves are very much the same.

A) 6.g4 is an aggressive choice, but it is too early for this move. Black needs to be precise in his response. 6...b4! 7.♘e2 d5! 8.e5 h5! An important follow-up. White cannot maintain his pawn chain on the kingside. 9.gxh5 [9.g5 ♘e7= is precisely what Black is after.] 9...♖xh5 10.♘g3 ♖h8= With an interesting position with chances for both sides.

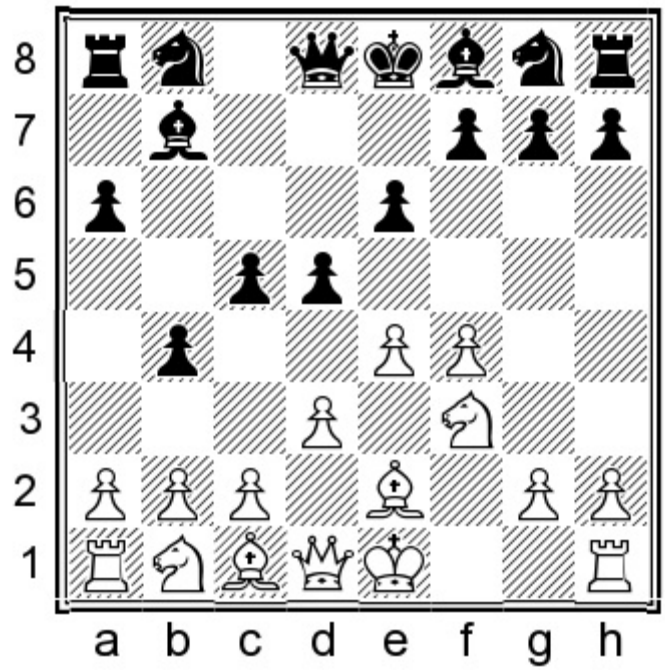
B) 6.♕e2 Putting pressure along the e-file and, if possible, preparing 0-0-0. 6...♘c6 7.♗e3 ♕b6!



Position after: 7...♕b6!

The combined power of ...d5 and ...♘d4 gives Black a good position. 8.g4 [8.0-0-0 ♘f6! 9.h3 b4 10.♘a4 ♕a5 11.b3 d5 12.e5 ♘d7 13.♔b1 ♘b6 14.♘xb6 ♕xb6 15.g4 ♘a7 16.f5 ♘b5 17.♗g2 ♘c3+ 0-1 (17) Durlin, M (1946) – Hansen, K (1874) corr. 2012.] 8...♘d4 9.♕f2 ♘xf3+ 10.♕xf3 d5!∓ 11.♗d2 b4 12.♘e2 0-0-0!?∓

C) 6.♗e2 allows Black time to execute his thematic plan. 6...b4! Black first chases away the knight so he can take back on d5 with a piece after a subsequent ...d5 exd5. 7.♘b1 d5!=

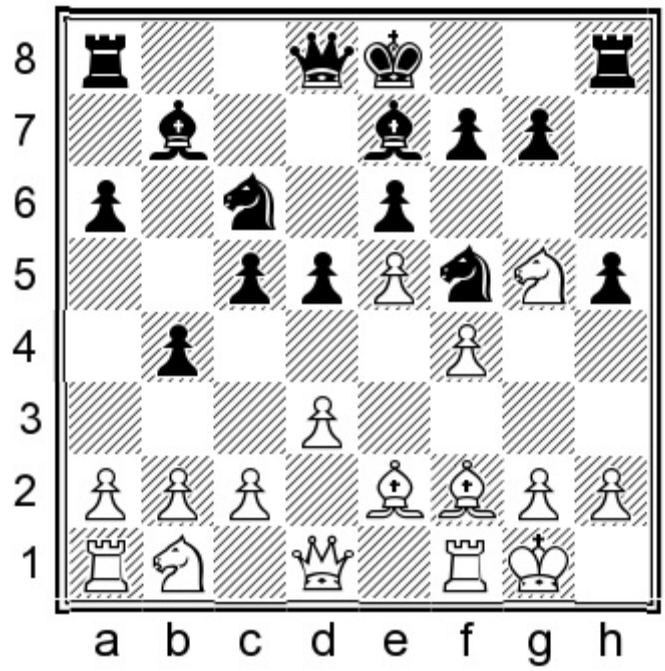


Position after: 7...d5!=

C1) 8.exd5 exd5 with the e-file closed, this is not a bad thought. Thematic is 8...♗xd5. 9.0-0 ♗d6 10.c3 ♘c6 11.cxb4 cxb4 12.d4 ♘f6∓. White has an ugly pawn structure. 0-1 Dobre, F (1994) – Ardelean (2502) Baile Herculane 2010.

C2) 8.♘bd2 is rather slow and puts the knight on a poor square. 8...♘h6∓ 9.c4?! dxe4 10.dxe4 ♗e7 11.♕c2 ♘c6∓

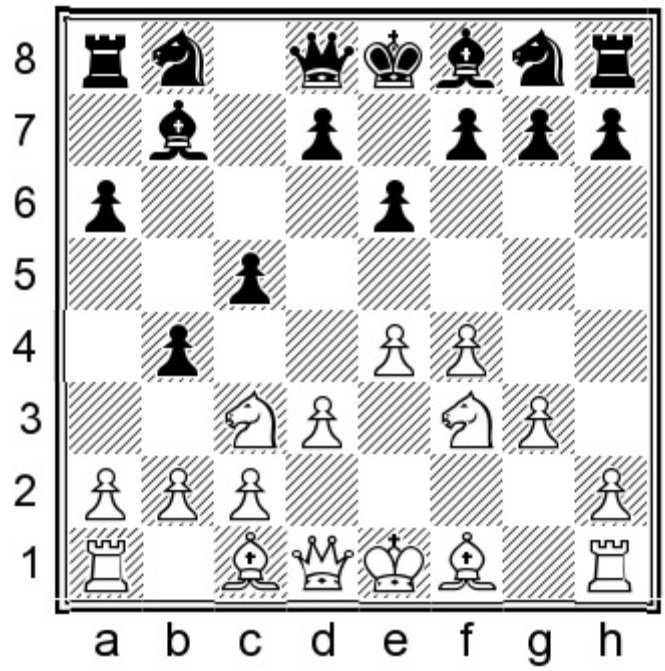
C3) 8.e5 ♘c6 9.♗e3 h5! 10.0-0 ♘h6 11.♘g5 ♘f5 12.♗f2 ♗e7!



Position after: 12...♗e7!

13.♘h3 [13.♗xh5? ♗xg5 14.fxg5 ♕xg5–+] 13...g6 14.♘d2 ♘cd4 15.♘f3 ♘xf3+ 16.♗xf3 ♕c7 17.c3 a5 18.♕d2 0-0∓ 0-1 (50) Diller, P (2017) – Swiercz, D (2585) Bad Wiessee 2011.

6...b4!



Position after: 6...b4!

After 6.g4 we play this thematic move as well. It is important for Black to take back on d5 with a piece.

7.♘e2 d5 8.e5

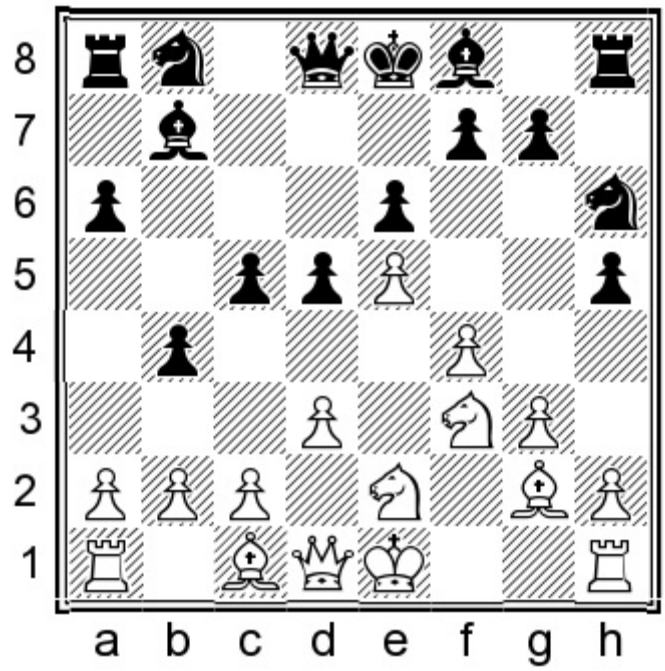
The typical continuation.

8.exd5 ♘f6 9.♗g2 ♗xd5! Even better than taking back with the knight. 10.0-0 ♗e7 11.c4 [11.h3 0-0∓ ½-½ (55) Shyam, N (2300) – Adly, A (2507) New Delhi 2007.] 11...♗b7 12.b3 0-0 13.h3 ♕c7∓ 1-0 (68) Taylor, R (1907) – Miles, R (1980) Wales 2017.

8...h5 9.♗g2

9.h3 ♘h6 10.♗g2 ♗e7 11.0-0 ♘f5 12.♕e1 ♘c6 13.♕f2 a5∓

9...♘h6



Position after: 9...♘h6

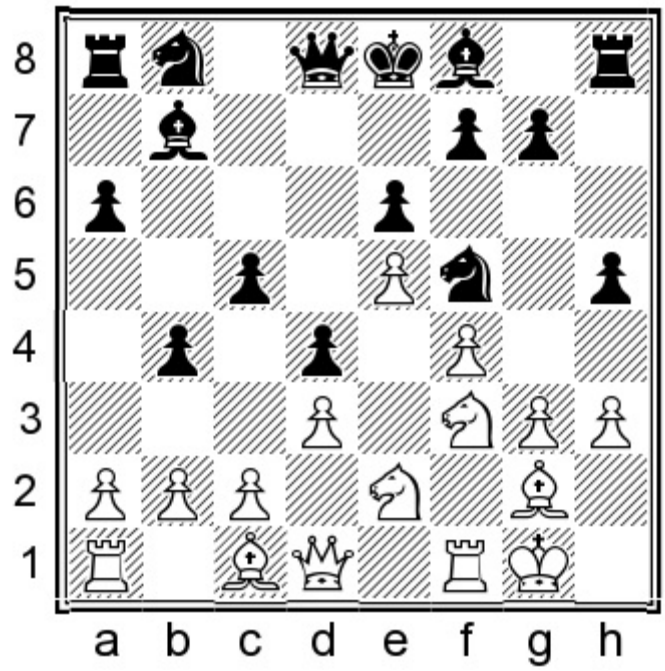
10.0-0 d4!∓

A nice way to open the long diagonal.

11.h3

11.a3 a5 12.axb4 axb4 13.♖xa8 ♗xa8 14.c3 dxc3 15.bxc3 ♗e7∓ 0-1 Davtyan, D (2312) – Rakotomaharo, F (2429) Chess.com 2021.

11...♘f5

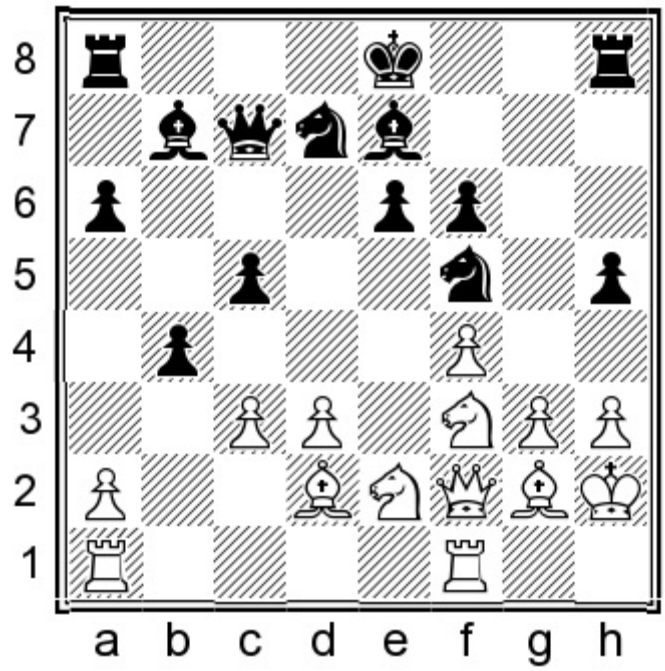


Position after: 11...♘f5

12.♔h2

12.♕e1 ♗e7 13.♕f2 ♘c6 14.♗d2 ♕b6∓

12...♘d7 13.♕e1 ♗e7 14.♕f2 ♕c7 15.♗d2 f6 16.exf6 gxf6 17.c3 dxc3 18.bxc3



Position after: 18.bxc3

18...a5 19.♖ac1 ♕b6∓

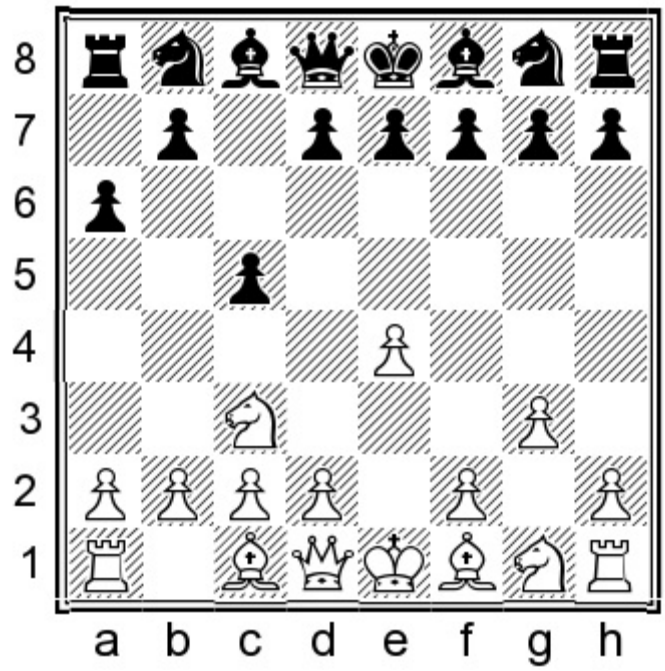
0-1 (28) Guseinov, G (2667) – Rakotomaharo, F (2422) Europe Echecs 2020.

Conclusion

One of the nice features of the variations after 2.♘c3 a6 is that the Grand Prix Attack with 3.f4 just loses its sting. Black continues with his standard development on the queenside with 3...b5 4.♘f3 ♗b7 and White already has to take special measures so as not to lose a pawn on e4. An interesting way to do that is 4.d4 cxd4 5.♕xd4 leading to Open Sicilian positions. A well-timed ...♘b4xd3 ensures that Black equalizes. Alternatively, White protects his e-pawn with d2-d3. After that move, the game takes on the character of a Closed Sicilian in which Black can easily reach at least an equal position with the thematic ...b4 and ...d5.

h) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 Closed Sicilian 3...b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.--

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3



Position after: 3.g3

3...b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3

5.♘ge2 is the move order recommended by Gawain Jones in his Coffeehouse Repertoire. It is treated under 2.♘c3 a6 3.♘ge2.

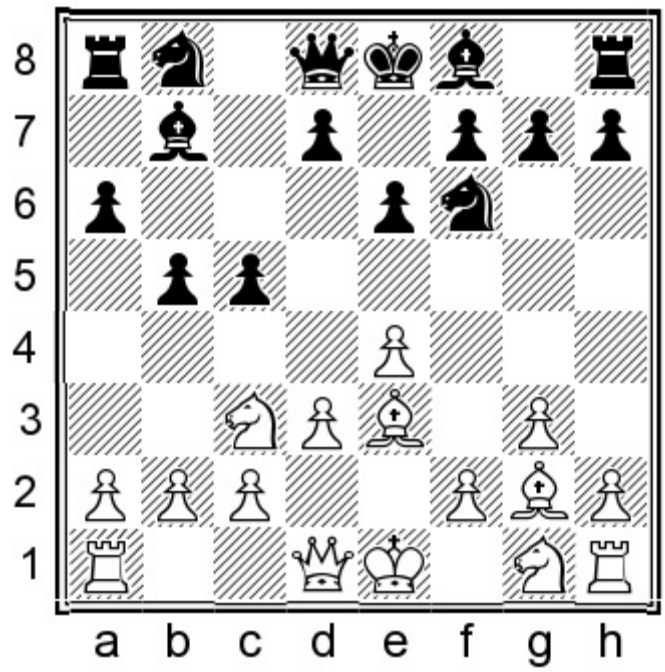
5...e6

Here we start our investigation of the classical Closed Sicilian.

6.♘f3

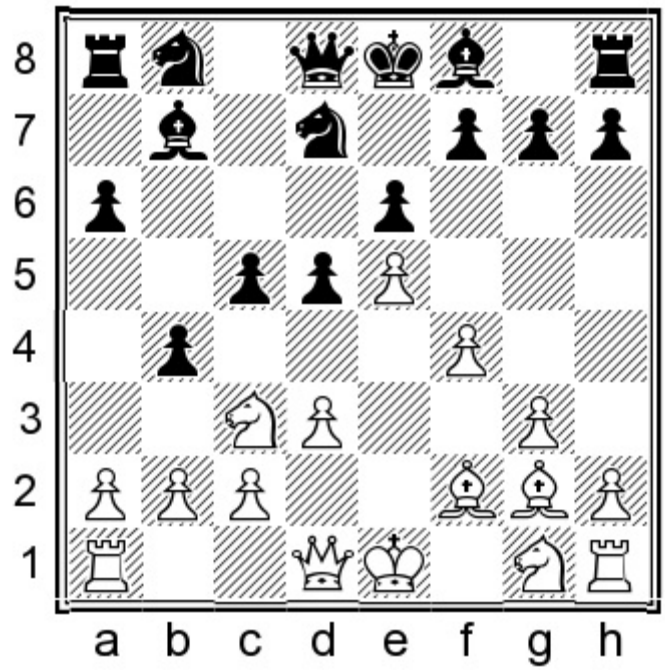
Still played quite often at this particular stage, although many of the positions we will be discussing are reached via transposition.

6.♗e3 The move you will most likely face at the club level. It is theory in the ...g6 based Closed Sicilians, but it is a bit out of place in the present structures. The bishop will be vulnerable to a quick ...d5-d4 and/ or ...♘g4. 6...♘f6! Black takes his time and develops a piece before deciding how he will progress in the center.



Position after: 6...♘f6!

A) 7.f4 d5 8.e5 ♘fd7 is not the optimal f5-position for the knight, but after 6.♗e3 White loses a lot of time putting his bishop on a suboptimal square. On f2 it hinders a smooth f4-f5 by White. 9.♗f2 [9.♘ge2 b4! 10.♘b1 ♘c6 11.0-0 a5! 12.♘d2 ♗e7 13.d4 ♗a6∓ 0-1 (47) Schmuck, C (2013) – Msellek, I (2261) Nancy 2020. Black plays an excellent Steinitz variation of the French.] 9...b4!



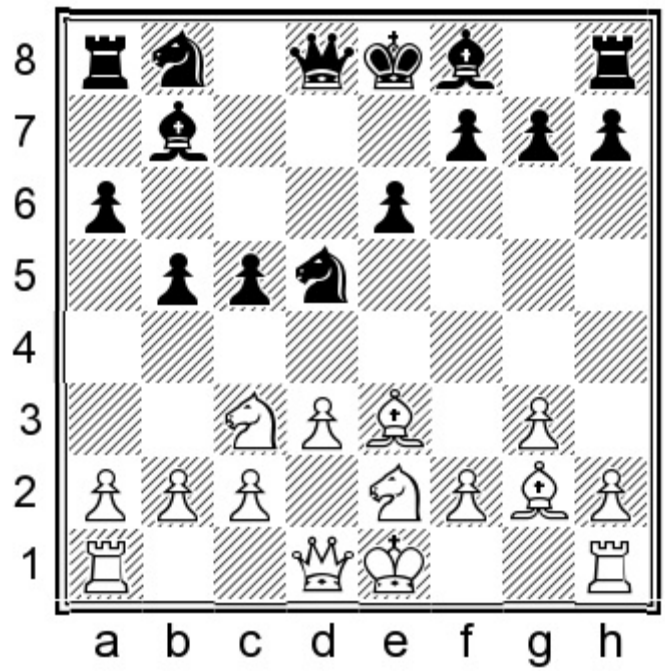
Position after: 9...b4!

The key to success on the queenside is an early push forward of Black's pawns. 10.♘ce2 ♘c6 11.♘f3 ♗e7 12.0-0 0-0 13.a4 a5= 14.c4?! bxc3 15.♘xc3 ♗a6∓ 0-1 (29) Spinelli, D (2151) – Sulava, N (2492) Imperia 2008.

B) 7.♘ge2 A natural continuation, but it allows Black to make use of the g4-square. 7...d5

B1) 8.d4 cxd4 9.♗xd4 [9.♕xd4 ♘c6 10.♕d3 ♘b4 11.♕d2 dxe4 12.0-0-0 ♕c7∓ 0-1 (31) Lanzilotta, F (1224) – Rodriguez Farias, E (1942) Montevideo 2021.] 9...dxe4 10.♗xf6 ♕xf6∓

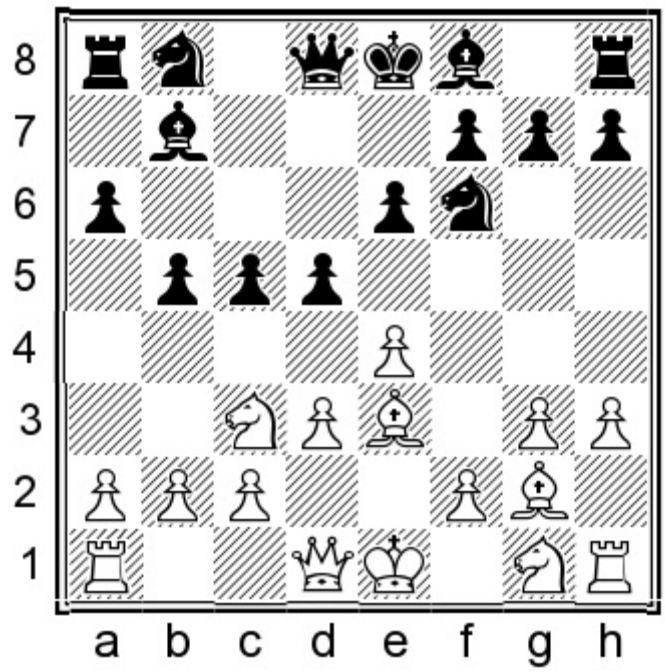
B2) 8.exd5! ♘xd5



Position after: 8...♘xd5

9.♘xd5 [9.♕d2 ♗e7 10.0-0 0-0 11.♘xd5 ♗xd5 12.♗xd5 ♕xd5∓ 0-1 (63) Deutsch, E (2374) – Meister, J (2490) Playchess.com 2005.; 9.0-0 ♘xe3N 10.fxe3 ♗xg2 11.♔xg2 ♗e7∓] 9...♗xd5 10.♗xd5 ♕xd5 Black has achieved the optimal way to take back on d5. 11.0-0 ♘c6 12.c4 ♕f5 13.♕b3 ♗d6 14.cxb5 ♘e5∞ with an active position for Black.

C) 7.h3 is the most popular move in the position and a typical move in the Closed Sicilian. It secures the position of the bishop on e3 while preparing for a future g3-g4. 7...d5



Position after: 7...d5

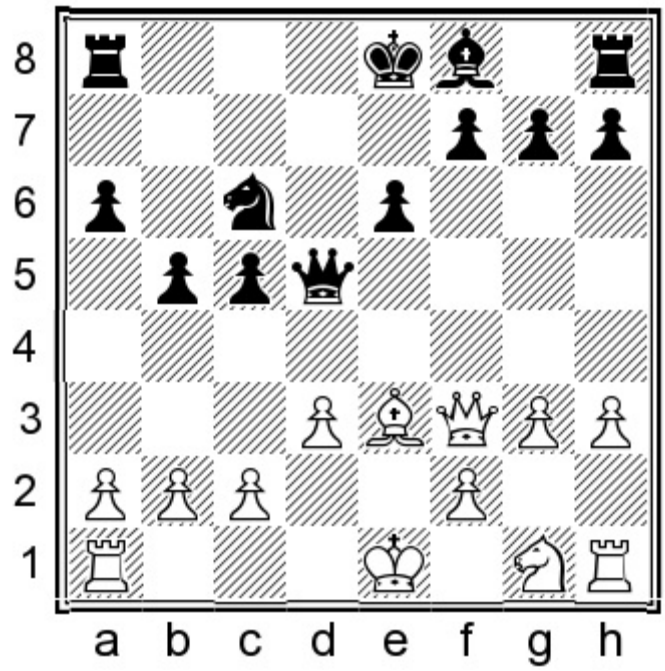
Black has gained a valuable tempo for seizing the initiative in the center.

C1) 8.e5 is just too slow. 8...♘fd7 9.f4 ♘c6 10.♘ce2 White is not in time for the defensive ♘f3. 10...d4 11.♗f2 g5!∓ An important move, made possible as White had to look after his pieces. Black completely undermines White's central position.

C2) 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.♘xd5 ♗xd5

C2.1) 10.♘f3 ♘d7 11.0-0 ♗e7 12.d4 0-0 13.♘e5 [13.c3 ♕c7 14.♖e1 ♕b7∓ ½-½ (23) Schmidt, A (2115) – Meyers, M (2074) Dortmund 2016.] 13...♘xe5!N 14.dxe5 ♕c7 15.♗f4 ♖fd8∓

C2.2) 10.♗xd5 ♕xd5 11.♕f3 ♘c6 The endgame which will soon arise is about equal, but Black has more space and the more pleasant pawn structure.

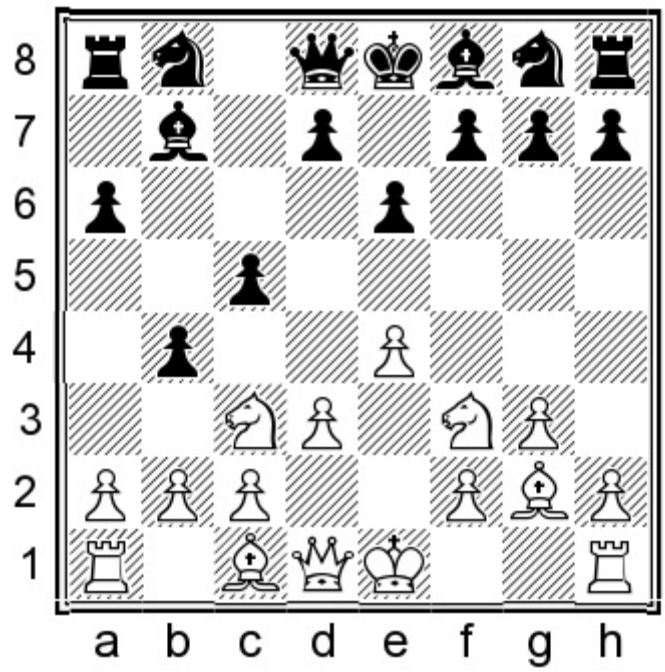


Position after: 11...♘c6

C2.2a) 12.♕xd5 exd5 13.♘f3 [13.a3 ♔d7∓] 13...♗d6 14.0-0-0 f6∓

C2.2b) 12.0-0-0 ♗e7 13.♕xd5 exd5 14.d4 c4∓

6...b4



Position after: 6...b4

The standard recipe. With the long diagonal closed the knight has to be chased away in order to take

back on d5 with the bishop. 6...♗e7 followed by ....d6 is a different approach.

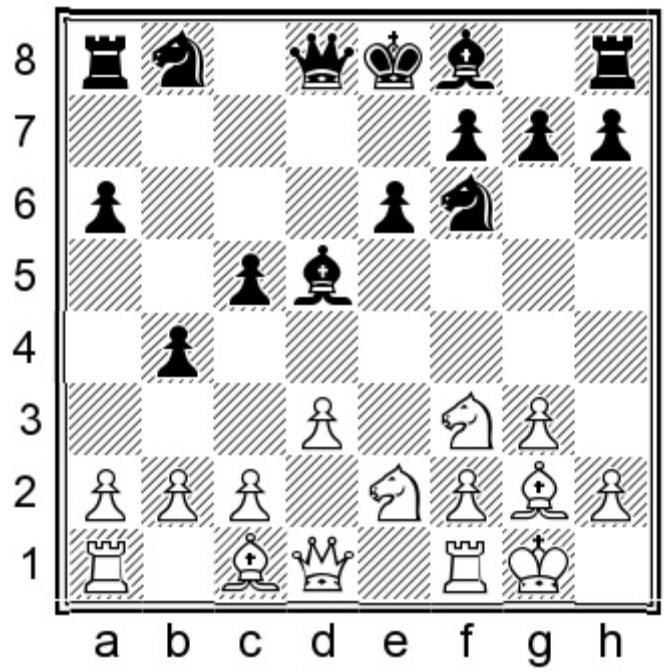
7.♘e2 d5 8.exd5 ♗xd5

From here there are many transpositions which all lead to the same position.

9.0-0

9.♘f4 ♗b7 10.0-0 ♘f6 11.♖e1 ♗e7 is the main line.

9...♘f6



Position after: 9...♘f6

Black has to catch up with his development.

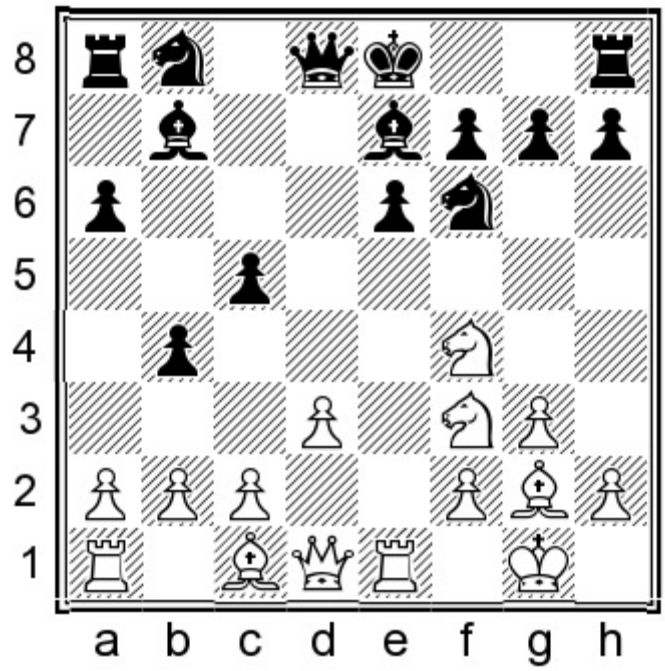
10.♘f4

The most natural move and preference of the engines.

A) 10.♖e1 ♗b7 11.♘f4 ♗e7 is the main line.

B) 10.a3 a5! 11.c4 [11.axb4 axb4 12.♖xa8 ♗xa8 13.♘f4 ♗e7 14.♗e3= 1-0 (42) idkanyTheory (2355) -amrsobh (2429) lichess.org 2022.] 11...bxc3 12.♘xc3 ♗c6 13.♘e5 ♗xg2 14.♔xg2 ♗e7 15.♕a4+ ♘fd7 16.♗f4 0-0 ½-½ (16) Kulaots, K (2426) – Magem Badals, J (2557) Andorra 1999.

10...♗b7 11.♖e1 ♗e7



Position after: 11...♗e7

The key position of this variation. Black is about to castle and leave all of his opening problems behind him. In the current position he has to stay alert as White has a number of interesting piece sacrifices on e6 in the lines we will analyze. With accurate defense Black should be able to equalize.

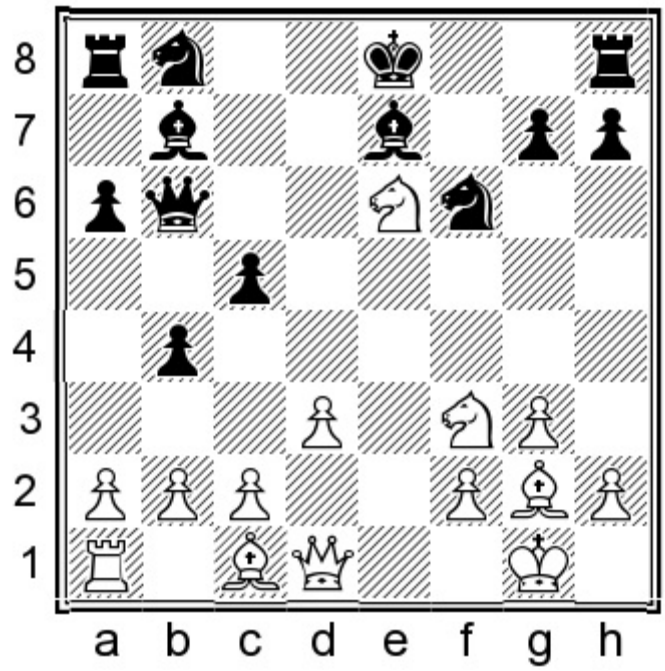
12.♕e2

In order to fight for some advantage, White needs to increase the pressure against e6. With this move he introduces this idea of knight sacrifices on e6.

A) 12.♘g5?! White is forcing the issue a bit early. 12...♗xg2∓ 13.♘gxe6 [13.♔xg2 ♘c6 14.c3 ♕d7 15.♕f3 0-0∓ 0-1 (36) Rico Amortegui, O – Martinez, J (2219) Pamplona 2012.] 13...fxe6 14.♘xe6 ♕d7 15.♔xg2 ♔f7∓

B) 12.a3 0-0 13.♗d2 ♘bd7 14.♕e2 So far, so good. Black now misses the threat. 14...a5?? [14...♘d5=] 15.♘xe6! fxe6 16.♕xe6+ ♖f7 17.♘g5+– 1-0 (17) Terry, R (2504) – Naudier, S (2097) Europe Echecs 2021.

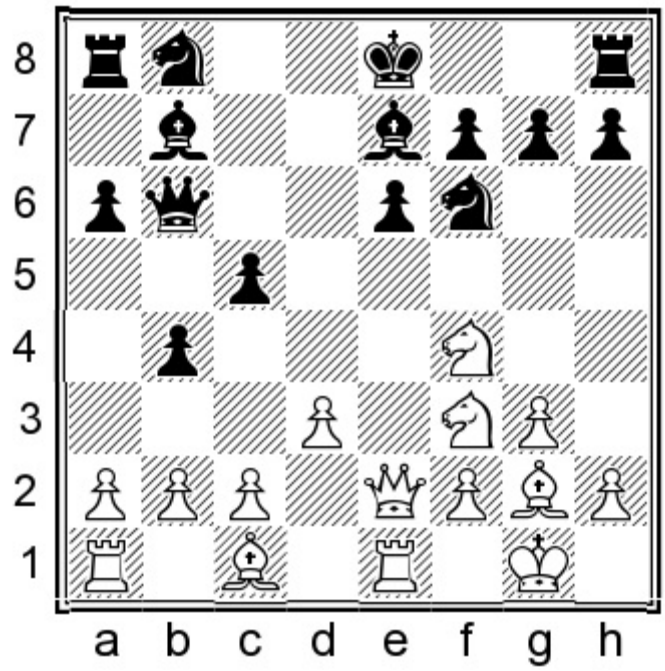
C) 12.♖xe6!?N Even this rook sacrifice is a possibility in this position. It is good enough for equality! 12...fxe6 13.♘xe6 ♕b6



Position after: 13...♕b6

14.♕e2 ♗xf3 15.♗xf3 ♖a7 16.d4 ♕b5 17.♕e3 cxd4 18.♕b3 ♘c6 19.♘xg7+ ♔d8 [19...♔f8 20.♗h6+–] 20.a4 bxa3 21.♕xb5 axb5 22.♗xc6 b4=

12...♕b6



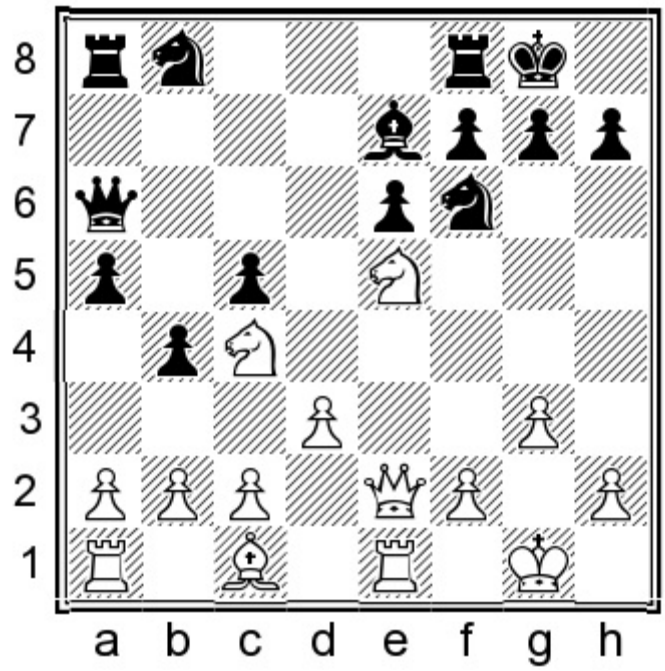
Position after: 12...♕b6

The simplest way to address the various issues.

13.♘e5

13.a3 a5 14.axb4 axb4 15.♖xa8 ♗xa8 16.b3 0-0 17.♗b2 ♘bd7=

13...♗xg2 14.♘xg2 0-0 15.♘e3 a5 16.♘3c4 ♕a6=



Position after: 16...♕a6=

The danger has passed leaving equal chances for both sides.

17.♗g5 ♘d5 18.♗xe7 ♘xe7 19.f4 ♖d8 20.♕f2 ♕a7 21.♖ad1 ♘bc6=

½ – ½ (29) Castle, K (1941) – Bildat, J (2157) Hamburg 2005.

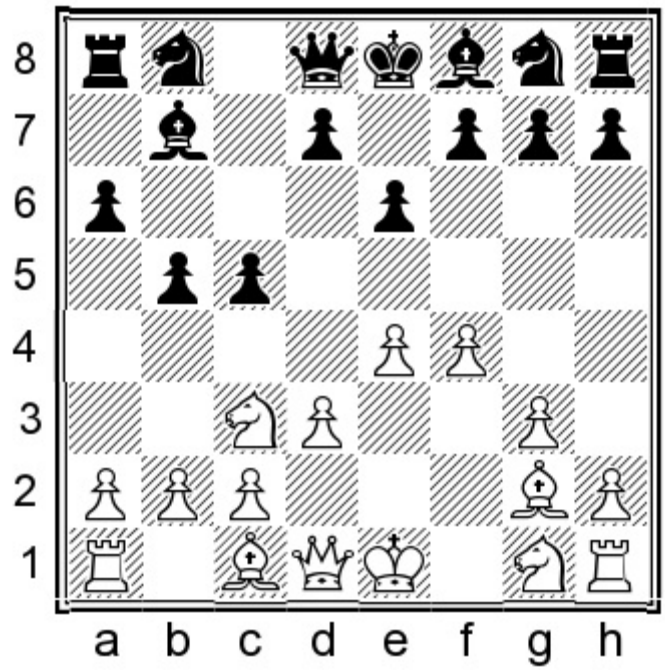
Conclusion

We have examined the classical Closed Sicilian against 2...a6 in this chapter. 6.♗e3 is answered by the precise 6...♘f6 followed by 7...d5. The white bishop has to move to f2 which hinders White in developing his kingside initiative.

The more popular 6.♘f3 meets the classical response 6....b4 followed by 7...d5. As always, Black takes back on d5 with pieces. In the variations that follow White will have a slight lead in development allowing him to play for the attack against the black king which is still in the center. Accurate defending by Black will ultimately lead to equal positions.

i) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.f4

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.f4



Position after: 6.f4

Next to 6.♗e3 this is the other traditional main line of the Closed Sicilian. It gives Black the opportunity for a nice thematic break in the center.

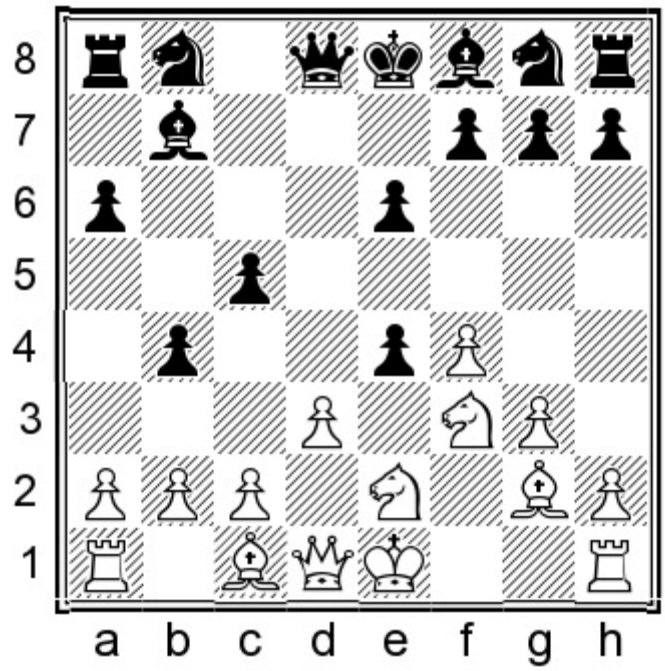
6...d5!

This is the key move for Black in this line. Due to the weakness along the long diagonal, there is no need to first play ...b4. Black challenges the White center before he decides where to put his f6-knight. In case White closes the center with e4-e5, Black will play ...h5 followed by ...♘h6/e7-f5. A subsequent ...d5-d4 will confirm Black's advantage. If White takes on d5, Black ensures he can take back on d5 with a piece giving him an attractive pawn structure. Black scores a nice 60% after 6...d5. However, we should be aware that this may be, to a certain extent, due to the difference in ratings between the players.

7.e5

The main move, recommended by various theoretical sources.

A) 7.♘f3 White develops further and defends the e-pawn through tactical means. 7...b4 8.♘e2 [8.♘a4 ♘f6 9.exd5 ♘xd5 10.0-0 ♗e7 11.c4 bxc3 12.bxc3 0-0 13.♖b1 ♗c6= ½ – ½ (21) Ivanov, S (2546) – Popov, V (2593) St Petersburg 2002.] 8...dxe4

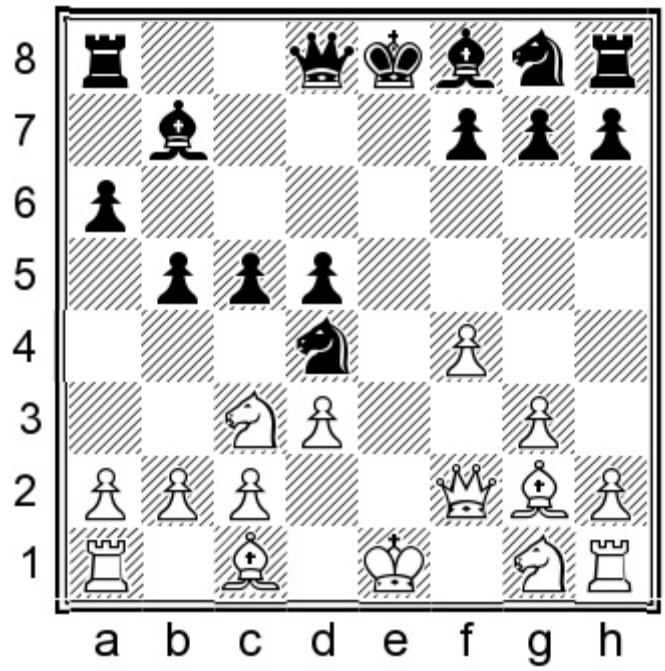


Position after: 8...dxe4

A1) 9.♘g5 ♕b6! This ensures White has to retake on e4 with his bishop. 10.♗xe4 [10.♘xe4? f5–+; 10.dxe4?! h6 11.♘h3 ♘f6 12.♘f2 c4∓] 10...♘c6∓ White has difficulties completing his development.

A2) 9.♘d2 ♕c7 10.dxe4 ♘c6 11.0-0 ♖d8 12.♕e1 ♗e7∓

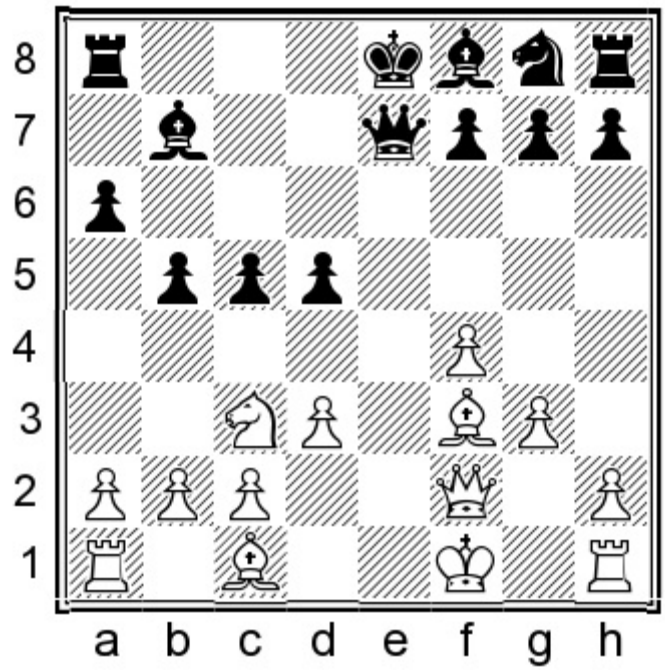
B) 7.♕e2!? White quietly defends his e4-pawn. 7...♘c6! 8.exd5 [8.♘f3 ♘d4 9.♘xd4 cxd4 10.♘d1 dxe4 11.dxe4 ♖c8 12.0-0 ♘f6 13.♘f2 ♕b6∓] 8...♘d4 9.♕f2 exd5!



Position after: 9...exd5!

B1) 10.♗e3 ♘f6!N 11.h3 [11.♗xd4 cxd4 12.♕xd4 giving Black excellent play for the pawn. 12...♖c8 13.♘f3 ♗c5 14.♕e5+ ♗e7 15.0-0 0-0∓] 11...♕c7 12.g4 [12.♗xd4 cxd4 13.♕xd4 ♗e7 14.♘f3 0-0 15.♕f2 ♗a3–+] 12...0-0-0 13.0-0-0 ♘xc2 14.♔xc2 d4∓

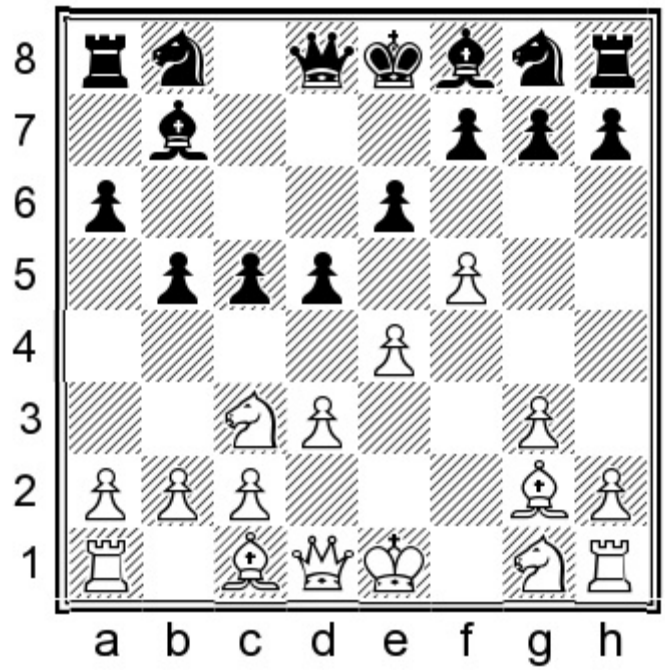
B2) 10.♘f3 ♕e7+ 11.♔f1 ♘xf3 12.♗xf3



Position after: 12.♗xf3

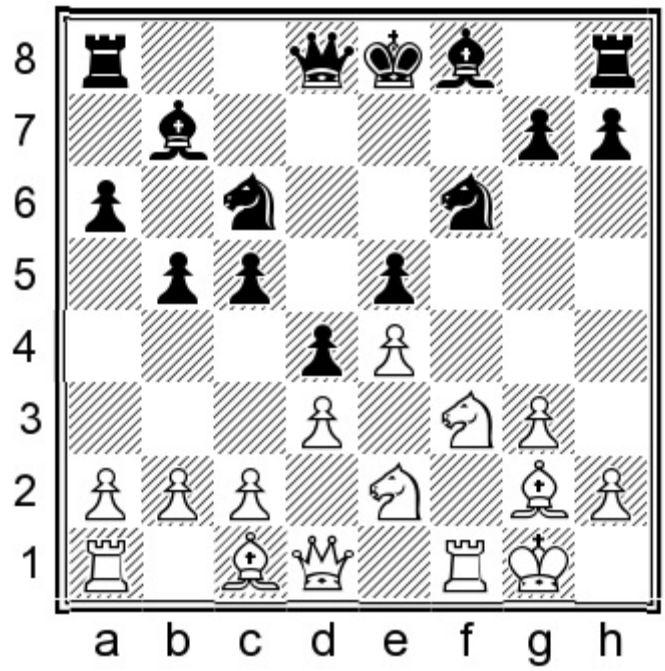
12...0-0-0 13.♔g2 h5 14.♖e1 ♕d7 15.h3 f5∓ ½ – ½ (49) Steinkellner, P – Polyakov, D corr. 2011.

C) 7.f5!?



Position after: 7.f5!?

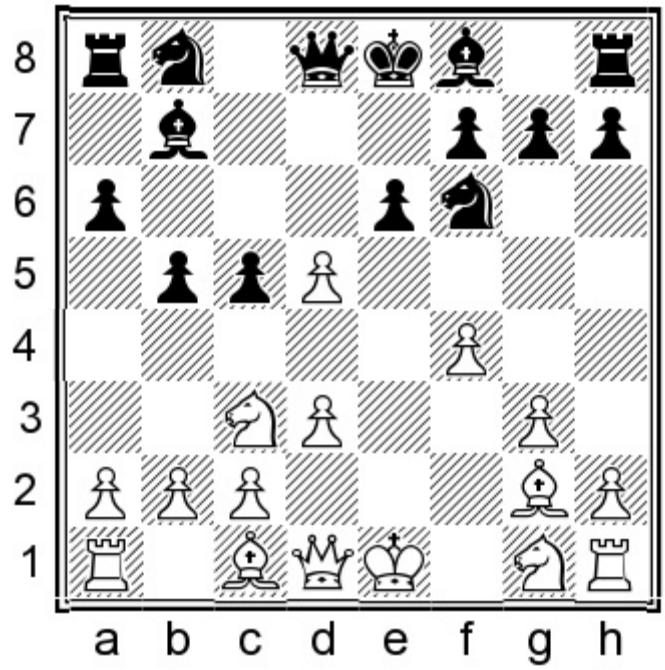
This move has recently gained a lot of attention and should be treated carefully. It is the reason why Sielecki recommends preparing ...d5 with 6...♗e7. 7.f5 has been played by a number of strong grandmasters and has excellent statistics. If Black plays carefully he does not run any risks. 7...d4! 8.fxe6 [8.♘ce2 exf5 9.♘h3 ♘f6 10.0-0 fxe4 11.dxe4 ♗e7∓ with an extra pawn for Black. 1-0 (29) Tari, A (2660) – Ibarra Jerez, J (2570) Chess.com 2022.] 8...fxe6 9.♘ce2 [9.♘b1 ♘f6 10.♘f3 ♗d6 11.0-0 e5!=] 9...e5! 10.♘f3 ♘c6 11.0-0 ♘f6



Position after: 11...♘f6

The pawn structure now favors Black although he is still a bit behind in development. The early opening of the f-file is advantageous for Black as White cannot develop the standard KID play with reversed colors. This position has been reached in half a dozen correspondence games. 12.a4 b4 13.♗h3 ♗c8 14.♗xc8 ♕xc8 15.♗g5 ♘g4!=

D) 7.exd5 is a principled response to Black's opening play and the second most popular move in the position. 7...♘f6!

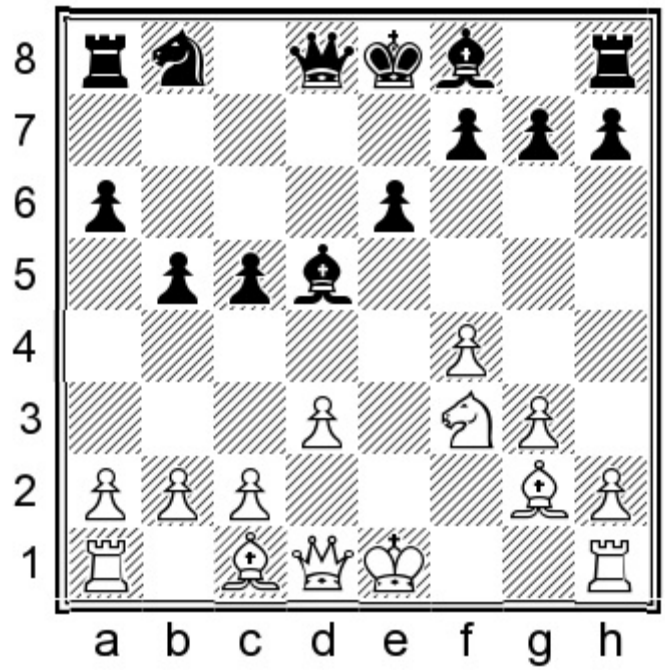


Position after: 7...♘f6!

The thematic continuation, better than the often-played 7...exd5. Black plans to take back on d5 with his knight and, if necessary, subsequently with the bishop. He then gets a Dutch type of position with reversed colors, in which he has a structural advantage because of his extra space on the queenside and better pawn structure. White lacks chances on the kingside and has a weak d4-square. To address the latter with c3 will lead to a weak white pawn on d3.

D1) 8.♕e2 ♘xd5 9.♘xd5 [9.f5!? ♘xc3 10.bxc3 ♗xg2 11.♕xg2 ♕d5=] 9...♗xd5 10.♗xd5 ♕xd5 11.♘f3 [11.♕e4 ♘c6 12.♘f3 g6 13.♕xd5 exd5 14.0-0 ♗d6 15.♖e1+ ♔d7∓ 0-1 (28) IVEY1218 (2282) – Boekelman, J (2423) Chess.com 2022.] 11...♘c6 12.0-0 ♗e7 13.♗e3 0-0 14.a4 h6∓ 0-1 (36) Prosviriakov, V (2232) – Khenkin, I (2605) Hastings 2016.

D2) 8.♘f3 ♘xd5 9.♘xd5 ♗xd5



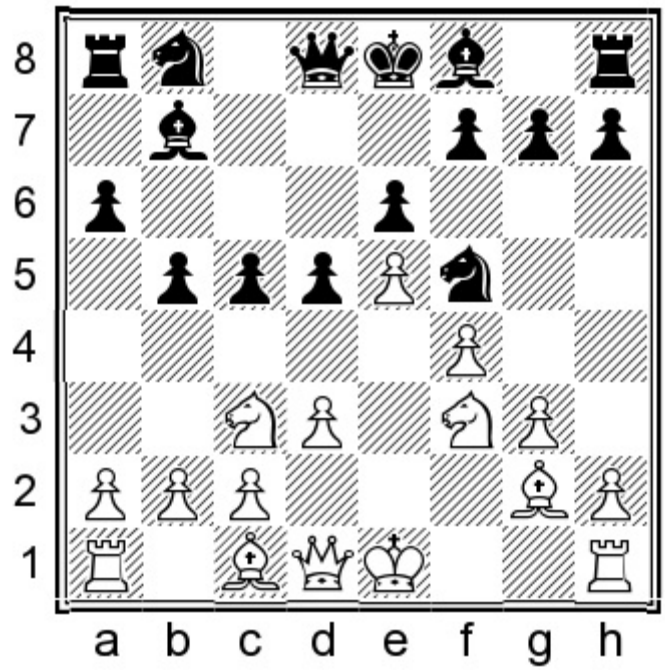
Position after: 9...♗xd5

10.0-0 [10.c4 This is not as bad as it looks. 10...♗c6 11.0-0 ♗e7 12.♕e2 0-0 13.♗e3 ♘d7 14.♖ad1 ♕c7 15.b3 ♖fe8∓ ½-½ (35) Marholev, D (2381) – Vehi Bach, V (2423) San Sebastian 2005.] 10...♗e7 11.♗d2 0-0 12.a3 ♘c6!N 13.♗e3 a5! 14.♕e2 [14.d4 ♕b6∓] 14...♖c8 15.c3 b4∓

7...♘h6

7...h5 Black aims for the same pawn structure as in the main line, but this move allows White to muddy the water with 8.f5!? exf5 9.♘f3 ♘e7 10.0-0 ♘bc6 11.♗g5 ♕d7 12.♗h3 ♕c7=.

8.♘f3 ♘f5



Position after: 8...♘f5

9.0-0

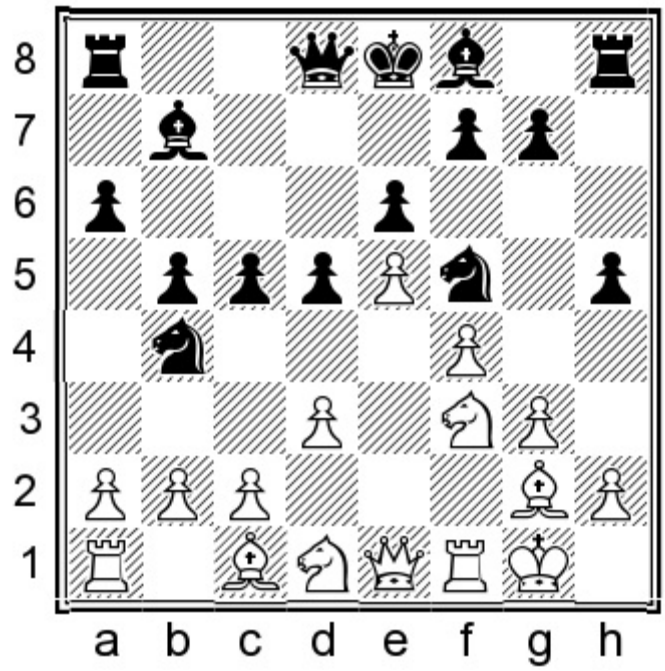
9.♕e2 leads to similar play as in the main line. 9...♘c6 10.♕f2 h5 11.0-0 ♕c7 12.♘e2 d4! 13.♗d2 ♗e7 14.a4 b4 15.h3 0-0-0∓ 0-1 (31) Meinhardt, M (2378) – Sasikiran, K (2676) Mainz 2007.

9...h5 10.♘e2

A standard maneuver in the normal Closed Sicilian. White prepares c3 and d4.

A) 10.a4 b4 11.♘e2 ♘c6 12.c3 d4!N 13.cxd4 ♘a5! 14.♗d2 ♗d5∓ Black has sacrificed a pawn, but his bishops are monsters.

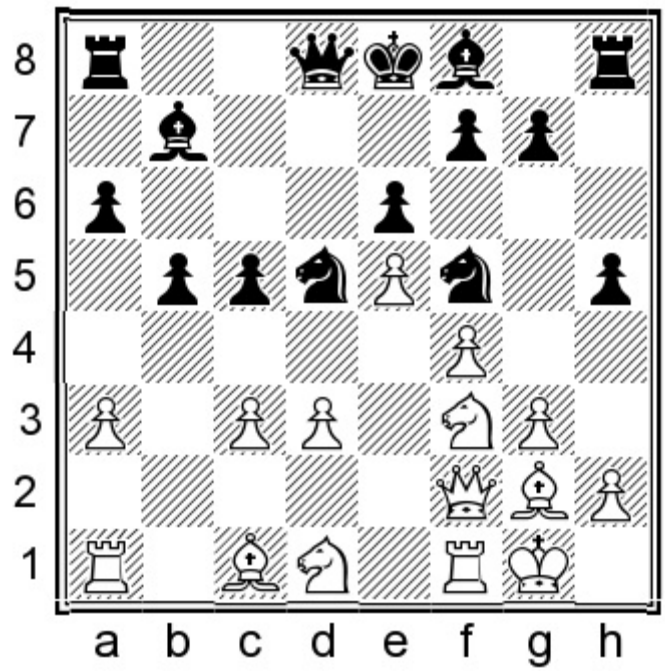
B) 10.♕e1 White makes room for the knight on d1 to prepare the central pawn moves c3+d4. 10...♘c6 11.♘d1 ♘b4!



Position after: 11...♘b4!

Black makes use of White's coordination difficulties.

B1) 12.♕f2 d4 13.a3 ♘d5 14.c4 [14.♘g5 c4! 15.dxc4 bxc4 16.♘e4 a5∓] 14...dxc3! 15.bxc3



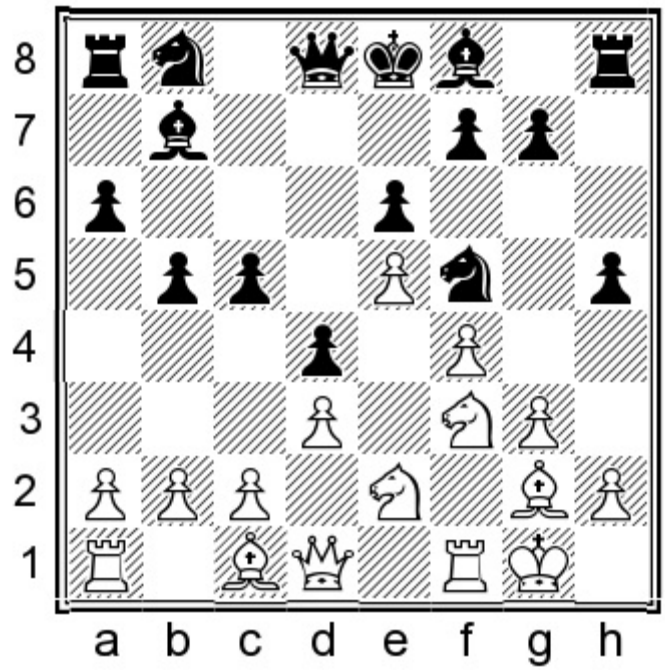
Position after: 15.bxc3

15...c4 16.d4 ♗e7 17.♖b1 ♕d7 18.♘g5 a5∓

B2) 12.♕e2 d4∓ as played by a young Artemiev in his early years with 2...a6. 13.♘g5 ♗xg2

14.♕xg2 ♗e7 15.♘e4 ♖c8 16.a4 c4 17.axb5 cxd3 18.cxd3 axb5 19.♗d2 ♘d5∓ ½-½ (29) Andreikin, D (2723) – Artemiev, V (2474) Kirov 2012.

10...d4!

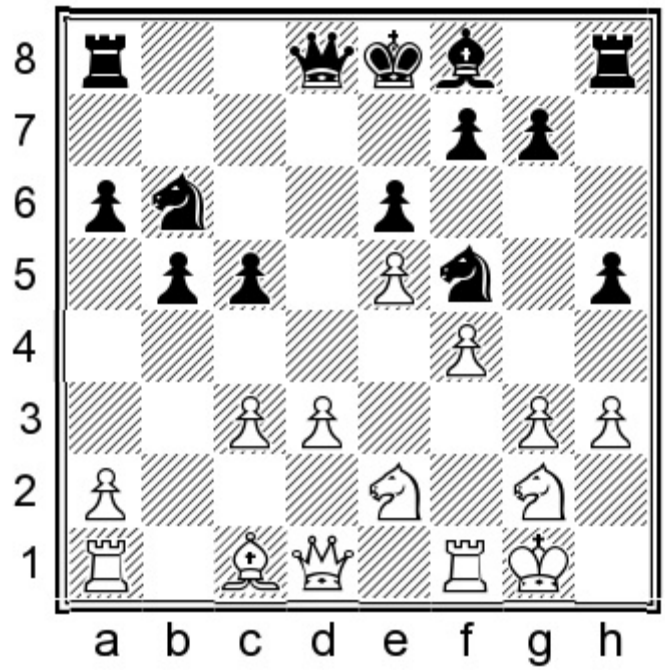


Position after: 10...d4!

The critical move. After only 10 moves Black has a dominant position. There have not been that many games played with this position, so let us have a look how practice has been kind to Black in a few games.

11.♘g5

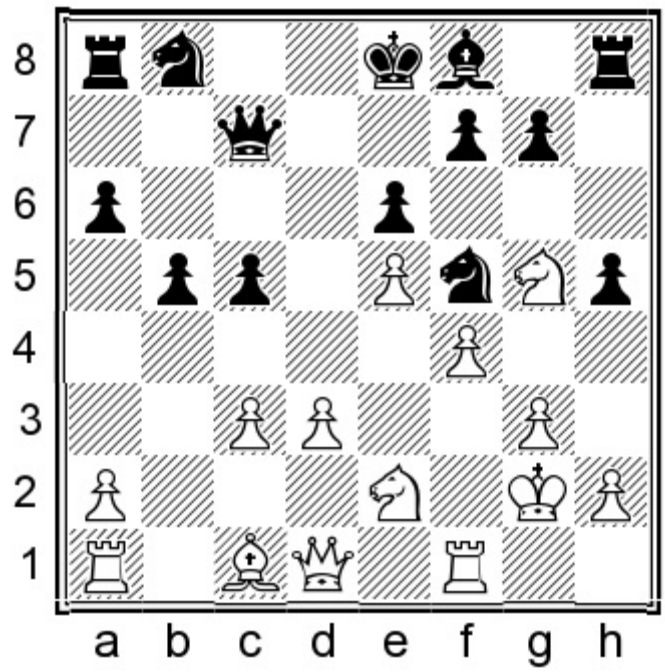
11.h3 ♘d7 12.♕e1 [12.c3 dxc3! 13.bxc3 ♘b6 14.♘h4 ♗xg2 15.♘xg2



Position after: 15.♘xg2

15...♘d5 16.♕e1 ♗e7 17.♕f2 ♕d7 18.♗b2 ♘b6 19.♖ad1 0-0-0∓ 0-1 (61) Moshovakis, A (1933) – Petrakis, S (2041) Porto Rio 2016.] 12...♗e7 13.♗d2 ♘b6 14.♕f2 ♘d5 15.♖fc1 ♘de3! 16.♗xe3 ♘xe3 17.♗h1 ♖c8∓

11...♕c7 12.c3 ♗xg2 13.♔xg2 dxc3! 14.bxc3



Position after: 14.bxc3

Emphasizing White's weak pawns.

14...♗e7∓

White has weak pawns and a bad bishop, and he is weak on the long diagonal.

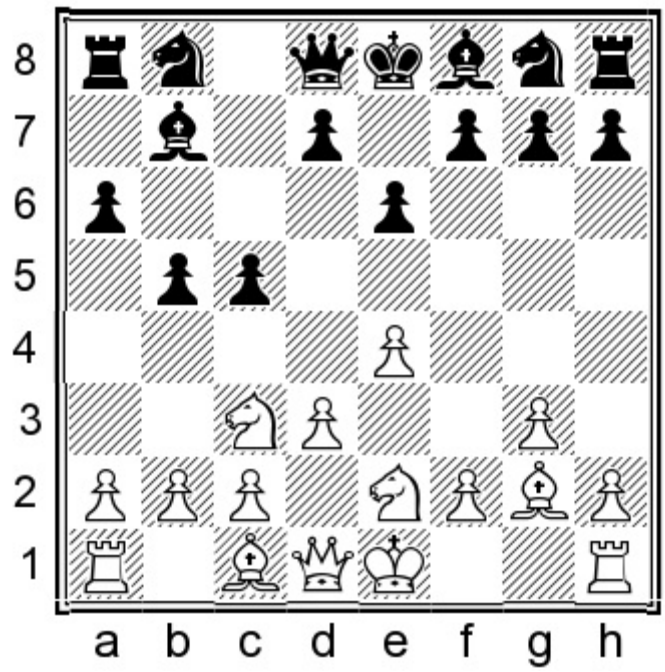
Conclusion

6.f4 is the traditional way of playing the Closed Sicilian. Black is well prepared for this and responds with 6...d5. White has three options to tackle the issues raised by Black's move. White is not well developed enough to maintain the center. Black takes on e4 once and if White takes back with the bishop ...♕c7 ensure a slightly better position for Black. Exchanging on d5 (7.exd5) allows Black to complete his strategy with 7....♘f6.

Black will take back on d5 with a piece, ensuring a better pawn structure with only a small lag in development. Finally, pushing the e-pawn is played most often and leads to positions where Black has more space and the better pieces. A well-timed ...d5-d4 completes Black's strategy by providing him with a nice shelter for his king on the queenside, or confronting White's weak center pawns.

j) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘ge2

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘ge2



Position after: 6.♘ge2

A natural square for the knight where it is focused on the center but less well prepared for any kingside activity. The immediate ...d5 has more or less been prevented as White can maintain the tension along the long diagonal with a subsequent ♘f4. A disadvantage of the move is that after ...b5-b4 by Black, White's other knight has to move to a suboptimal square. That is the reason why 6.♘h3

is currently seen by theory as the most precise continuation. The other knight can then withdraw to e2 after Black's ...b5-b4.

6...b4!?

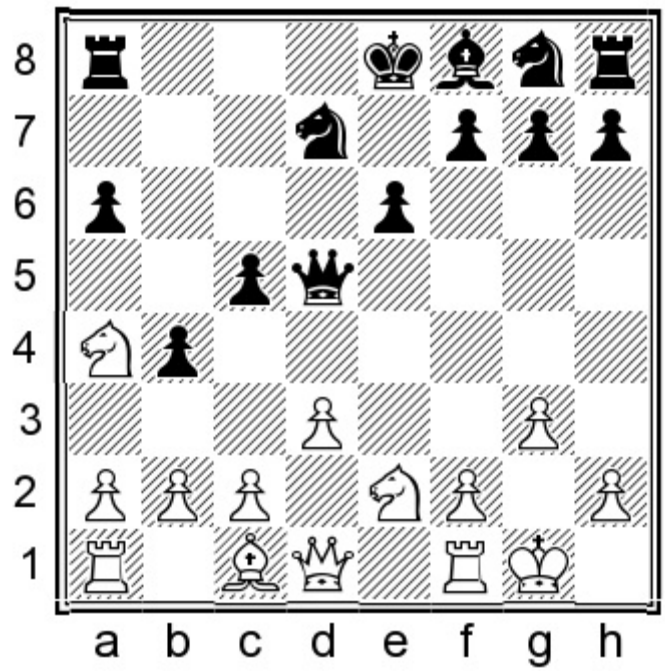
By first chasing away the knight, Black prevents the option of the knight moving to e4 after 6...d5 7.exd5 b4 8.♘e4!

7.♘b1

The better option with the knight which will be rerouted back into the game via d2.

7.♘a4 White's knight is out of play and vulnerable on a4. 7...d5! The thematic break in the center. As usual Black intends to take back with a piece on d5.

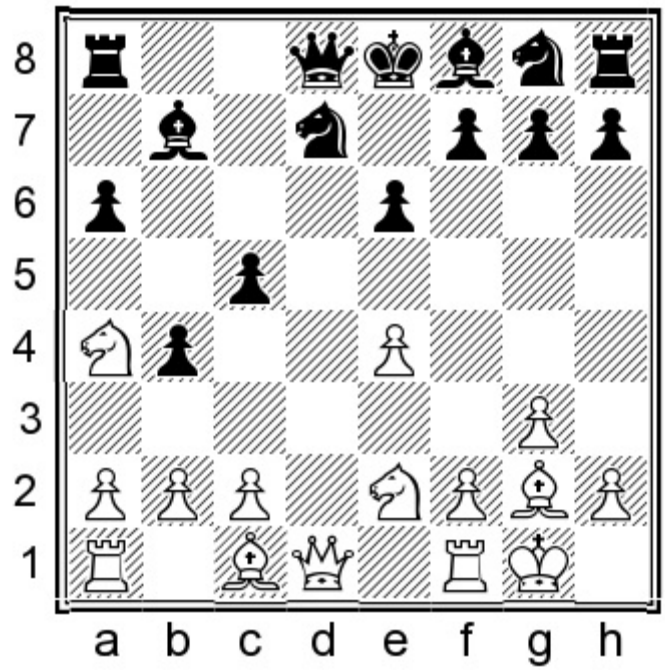
A) 8.exd5 ♗xd5 9.♗xd5 ♕xd5 10.0-0 ♘d7=



Position after: 10...♘d7=

Black has already achieved comfortable equality. 11.b3 [11.♘f4 ♕c6 12.b3 ♘gf6 13.♘b2 ♗e7 14.♘c4 0-0 15.♗b2 ♘d5 16.♕f3 ♗f6= ½-½ (67) Kriste, V (2169) – Kaenel, H (2356) Leukerbad 2011.; 11.a3 a5 12.c4 ♕b7 13.d4 ♘gf6=] 11...♘gf6 12.♗b2 ♗e7 13.♘f4 ♕c6= 1-0 (84) Saya, E (2219) – Priyanka, K (2218) Chess.com 2020.

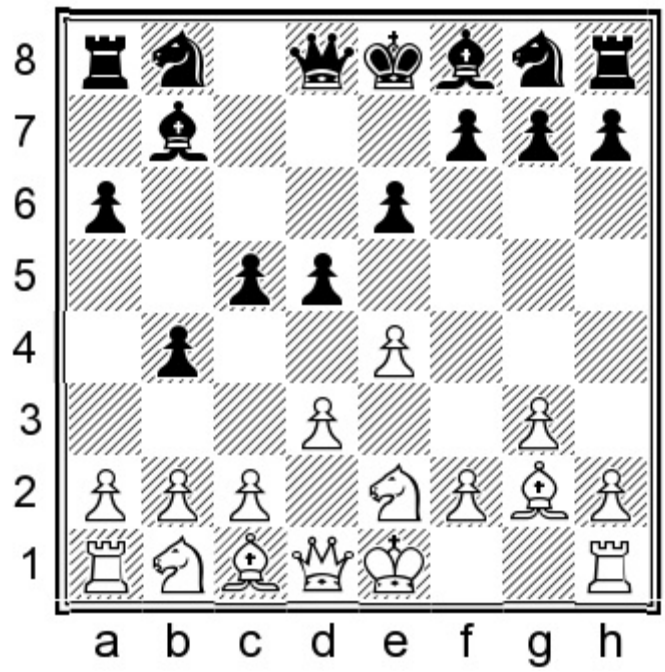
B) 8.0-0 dxe4! 9.dxe4 ♘d7!



Position after: 9...♘d7!

A nice move to keep the battle going. The knight on a4 is misplaced. 10.c3 [10.a3 h5!? 11.axb4 cxb4 12.♘f4 h4 13.♕e2 ♕c7 14.♖d1 ♗e7=] 10...♘gf6 11.♗g5 a5 12.♕c2 ♕c7 13.cxb4 axb4 14.♗xf6 gxf6 15.b3 ♗e7 16.♖ac1 0-0 17.♘f4 ♖fc8∓ Black had a tremendous position. The knight on a4 is completely out of play. Black's kingside weaknesses are not an issue. 0-1 (32) Kovalenko, S (2281) – Boekelman, J (2326) Chess.com 2022.

7...d5



Position after: 7...d5

8.0-0

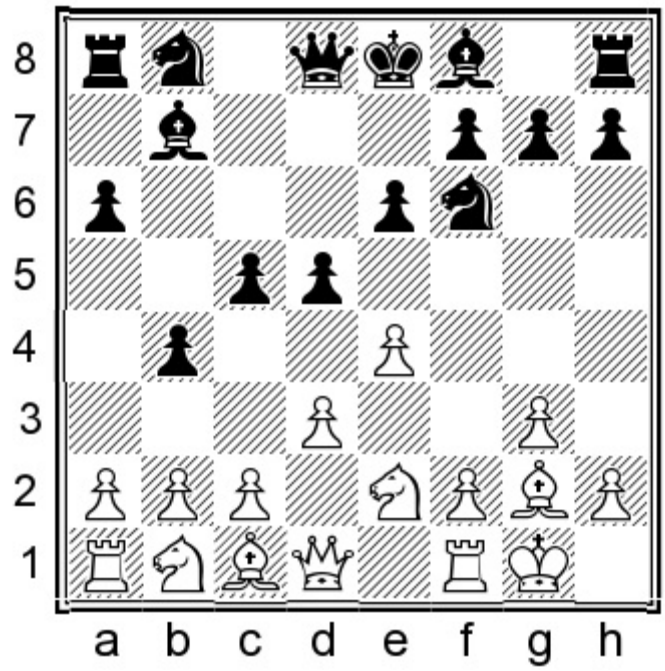
White postpones e4-e5.

A) 8.e5?! ♘c6 9.f4 ♘h6 10.0-0 ♘f5∓ followed by ...h5. The black knight has reached its optimal position. We have seen this structure before in the variations starting with 6.f4. Black has his usual positional superiority.

B) 8.exd5 ♗xd5 9.0-0 [9.♘f4 ♗xg2 10.♘xg2 ♘c6 11.0-0 ♘f6∓ 12.b3? ♕d4–+ 0-1 (37) Mizik, Z (2088) – Okhotnik, V (2426) Hungary 2012.] 9...♗xg2 10.♔xg2 ♘f6∓

C) 8.♘d2 as in the main line. 8...♘f6 9.0-0 [9.f3?! ♗e7 10.0-0 0-0 11.e5 ♘fd7 12.f4 ♘c6∓ 0-1 (48) Chowdhury, S (2190) – Ahmed, S (2315) Dhaka 2008.] 9...♗e7 is the main line again.

8...♘f6



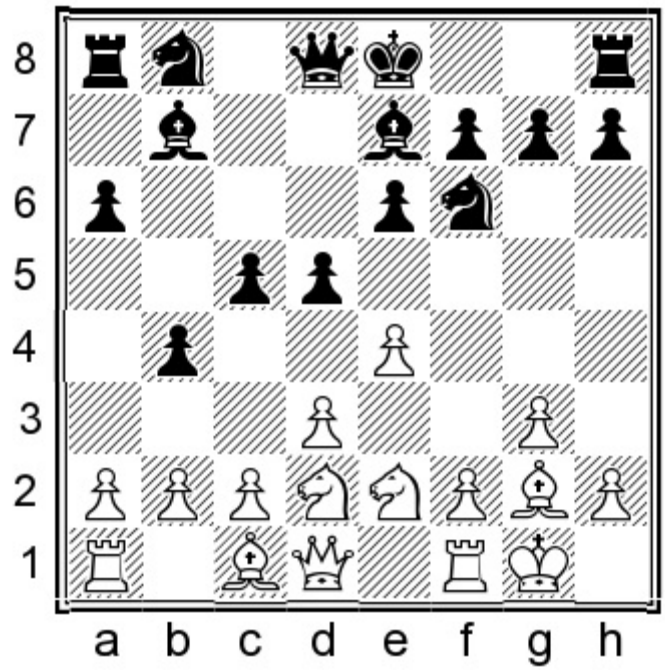
Position after: 8...♘f6

8...dxe4 9.♘d2 ♘f6 10.dxe4±

9.♘d2

9.e5 ♘fd7 10.f4 [10.c3? ♘xe5∓] 10...♘c6 11.♗e3 [11.c3 ♗e7 12.c4?! ♘b6!∓ 0-1 (29) Kolendo, M (2065) – Kozel, R (2420) Poznan 1995.] 11...♗e7 12.♘d2 a5=

9...♗e7

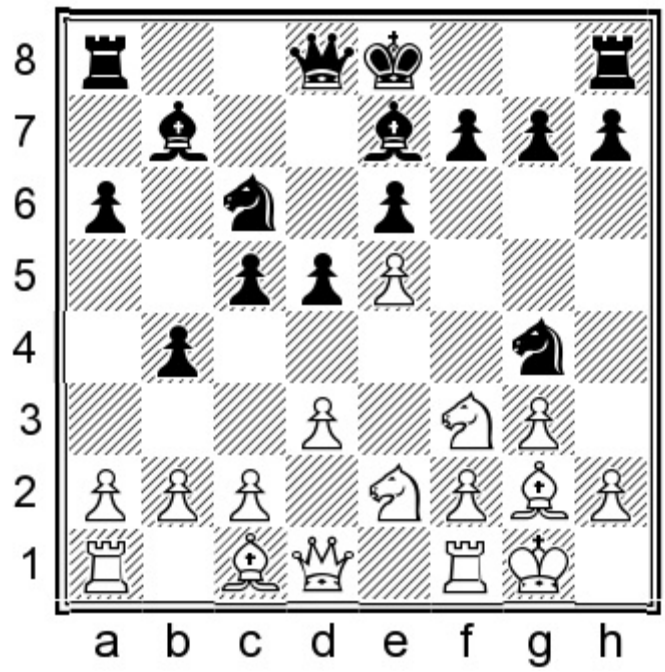


Position after: 9...♗e7

As in the regular KIA, this is the preference of the master that reached this position.

10.♘f4

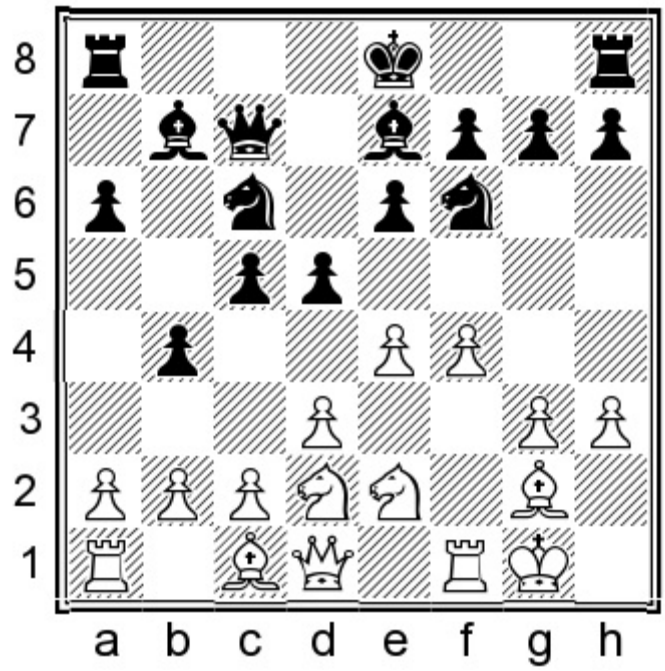
A) 10.e5 Due to the knight on d2, Black has extra options here. 10...♘g4! 11.♘f3 [11.f4? is not available. 11...♘e3–+] 11...♘c6!



Position after: 11...♘c6!

12.♗f4 [12.♘f4 ♘gxe5 13.♘xe5 ♘xe5 14.♕h5 ♕d6 15.♖e1 ♗f6 16.♘xe6=] 12...g5 13.♗c1 h6 14.d4 cxd4 15.♘exd4 ♘gxe5 16.♘xe5 ♘xe5 17.c3 ♕d6=

B) 10.h3 The traditional preparation for a kingside initiative. 10...♘c6 11.f4 ♕c7



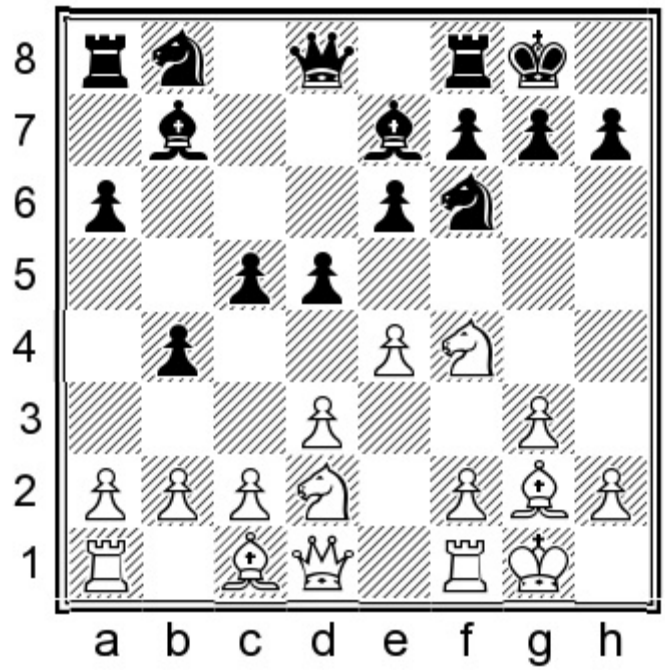
Position after: 11...♕c7

12.b3 [12.e5 ♘d7 13.♘f3 a5 14.g4 a4 15.♘g3 ♕b6 16.♗e3 a3 17.b3 g6∓] 12...dxe4∓ ½-½ (24) Noriega, M – Fier, A (2632) Lima 2015.

C) 10.exd5 ♗xd5! 11.♘c4 0-0 12.♘f4 ♗xg2 13.♘xg2 ♘c6∓ ½-½ (50) Barreto, I – Disconzi da Silva, R (2360) Fortaleza 1994.

D) 10.c3 ♘c6 11.f4 dxe4! 12.dxe4 0-0∓ 13.e5 ♘d5 14.♘c4 a5 15.f5 ♗a6∓

10...0-0!



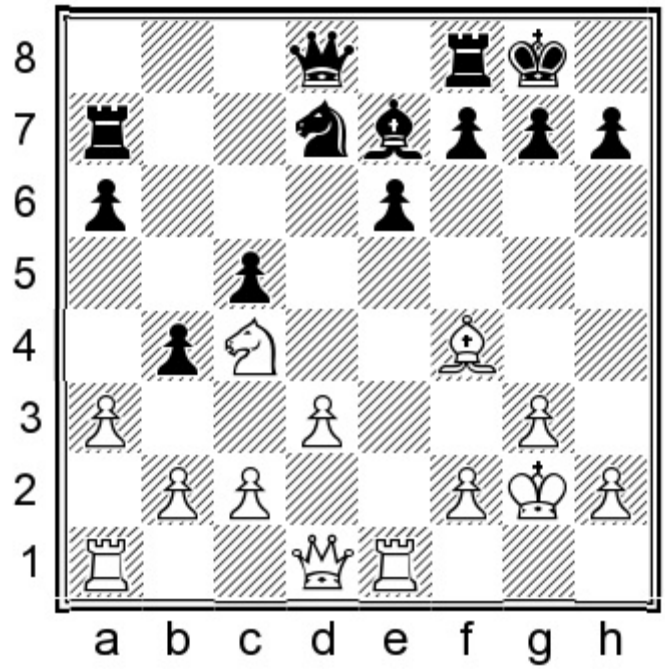
Position after: 10...0-0!

The black d-pawn needs cover for the time being so the knight on b8 is left at home for now.

11.♖e1

A) 11.c3 a5! 12.e5 [12.cxb4 axb4∓ with pressure along the a-file.] 12...♘fd7 13.♖e1 ♘c6 14.♘f3 a4 15.d4 a3∓ and Black's initiative on the queenside is far quicker than White's on the kingside.

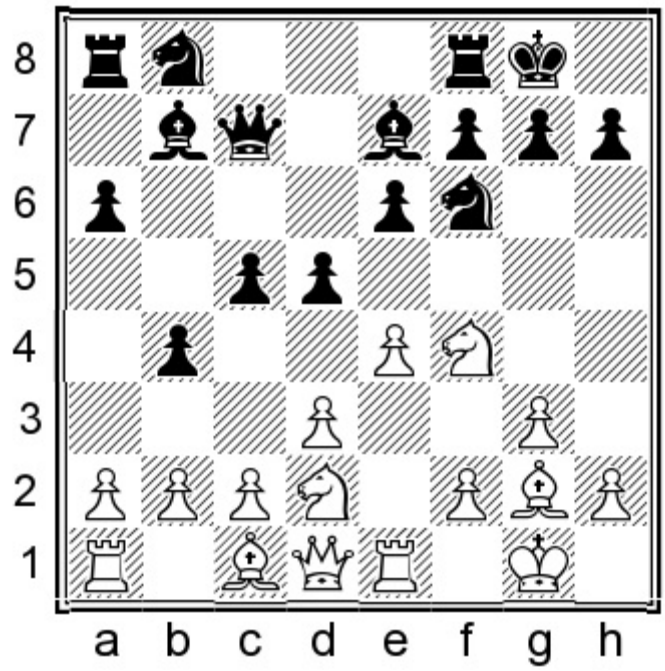
B) 11.exd5 ♘xd5 12.♘c4 ♘d7 13.♖e1 ♖a7 14.a3 ♘xf4 15.♗xf4 ♗xg2 16.♔xg2



Position after: 16.♔xg2

16...a5 17.axb4 ♕a8+ 18.♕f3 axb4 19.♖xa7 ♕xa7= 1-0 (64) Simacek, P (2469) – Zeberski, J (2386) Czech Republic 2011.

11...♕c7!



Position after: 11...♕c7!

For the same reason that we did not develop our knight to c6.

12.c3

12.exd5 ♘xd5 13.♘c4 [13.♘xd5 ♗xd5 14.♗xd5 exd5 15.a3 ♘c6 16.axb4 cxb4=] 13...♘f6 14.♗xb7 ♕xb7 15.b3 ♘c6=

12...a5 13.e5 ♘fd7 14.d4 a4=

Black's attack on the queenside is in full swing, while White's attack on the kingside has yet to begin.

Conclusion

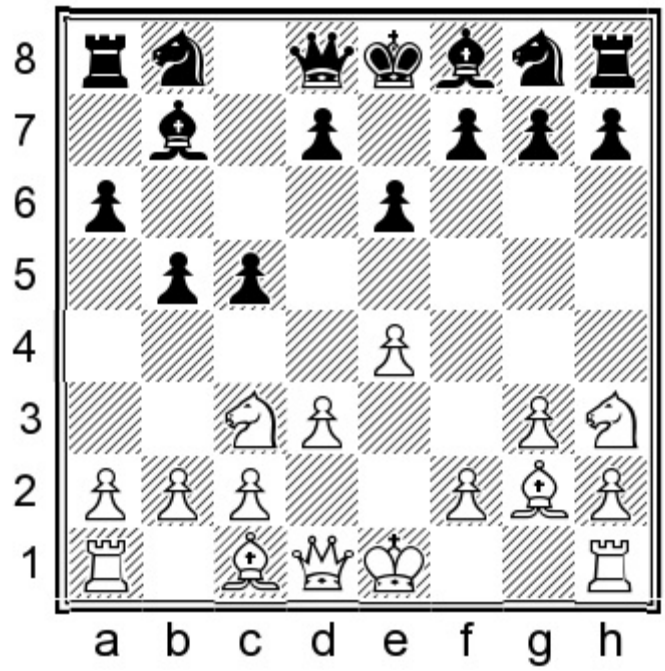
The Closed Sicilian with 6.♘ge2 is tackled by the thematic 6...b4 followed by 7...d5. Unlike previous variations of the Closed Sicilian, we looked at, White is in a position to maintain the tension in the center with 7.♘b1 and 8.♘d2.

The lines that arise have a strong KIA character, although White's pieces are not optimally positioned for it. Black will develop quickly and build up an initiative on the queenside. He has no problems maintaining the balance in the ensuing positions as his pawns tend to run faster than White's initiative

on the kingside.

k) 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘h3

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 a6 3.g3 b5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.d3 e6 6.♘h3



Position after: 6.♘h3

The most refined 6th move for White. As we have seen, this is also the preference in case of the extended fianchetto after 3.g4. White keeps the diagonal open, leaves the e2-square for the other knight, and puts the knight in a position where it can quickly be used in an initiative on the kingside.

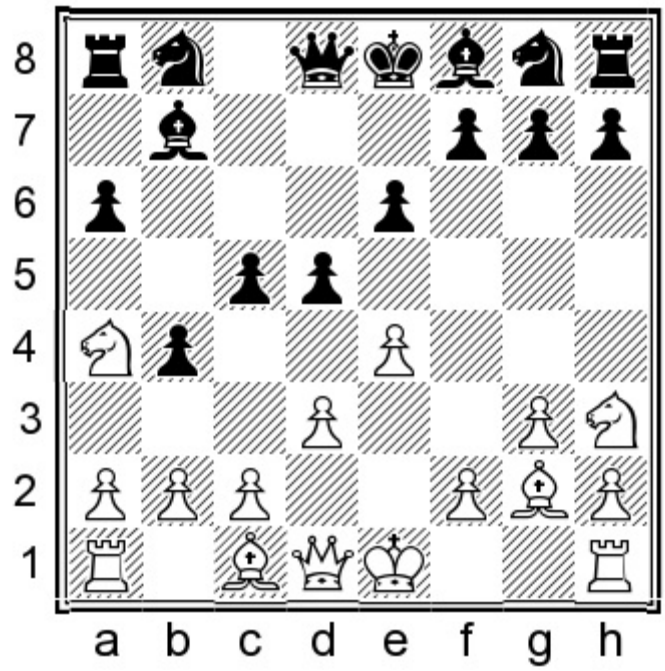
6...b4

Our standard recipe to ensure Black can take back on d5 with a piece.

7.♘e2!

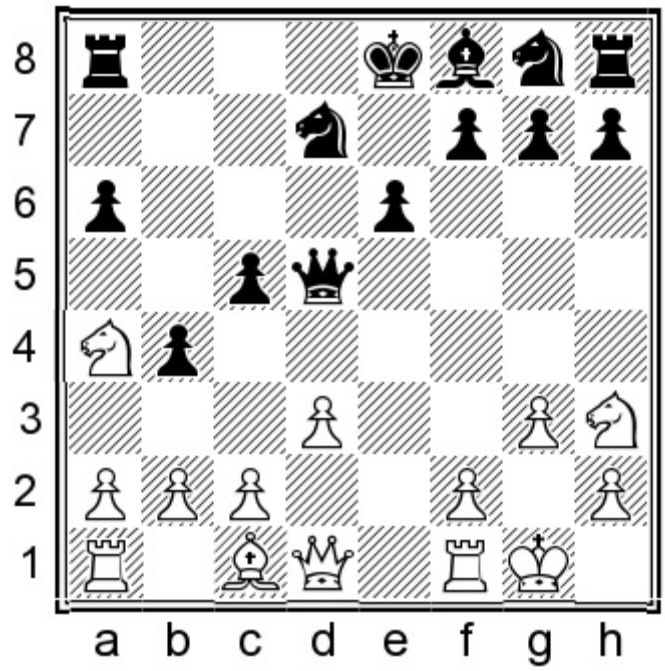
The most active square for the knight. In the future it may move to f4 and join White's initiative on the kingside.

A) 7.♘a4 The knight is in no man's land here. 7...d5!



Position after: 7...d5!

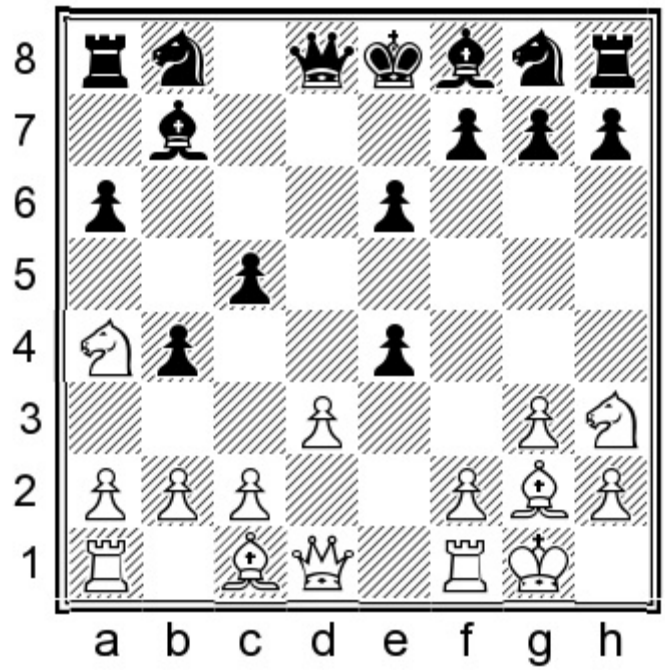
A1) 8.exd5 ♗xd5! 9.♗xd5 ♕xd5 10.0-0 ♘d7



Position after: 10...♘d7

11.c4 [11.♘f4 ♕c6 12.b3 ♘e5 13.f3 ♘f6 14.♗b2 ♘ed7= ½-½ (34) Petrushin, A (2456) – Papin, V (2485) Taganrog 2009.] 11...♕c6 12.b3 ♗d6 13.♗b2 ♘gf6 14.♘g5 0-0 15.♖e1 ½-½ (15) Landaw, J (2350) – Ramirez Alvarez, A (2583) Las Vegas 2014.

A2) 8.0-0 dxe4

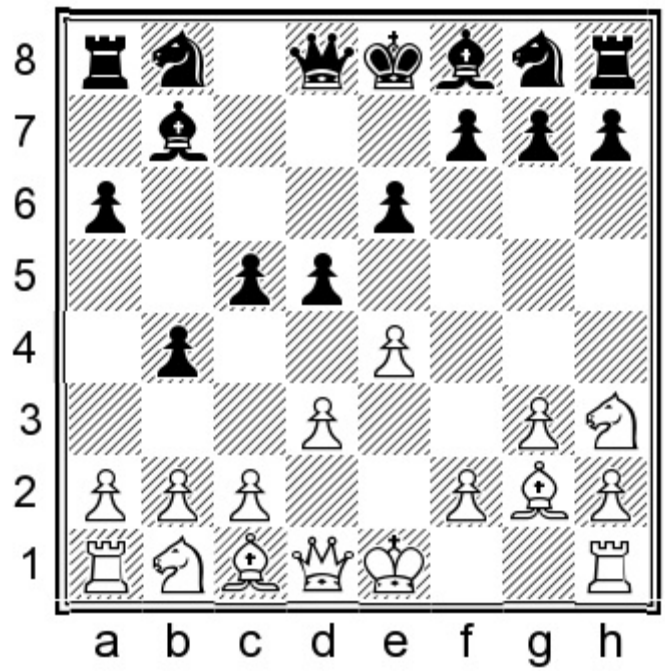


Position after: 8...dxe4

A2.1) 9.♘g5 ♘f6! Compared to the main line it is clear that the white knight is doing nothing on a4. 10.♘xe4 [10.♗e3 ♘bd7 11.♘xe4 ♘xe4 12.♗xe4 ♕c8 13.♕f3 ♗xe4 14.dxe4 ♕c6 15.b3 ♗e7=] 10...♘xe4 11.♗xe4 [11.dxe4 ♘d7! 12.c3 ♗e7 13.♕c2 0-0 14.♖d1 a5=] 11...♗xe4 12.dxe4 ♘d7 13.b3 ♗e7 14.♕e2 0-0 15.♗f4 ♕c8 16.♖fd1 ♕c6 17.♖d2 ♘f6=

A2.2) 9.dxe4 ♘d7! 10.b3 ♘gf6 11.♗b2 ♕c7 12.♖e1 c4 13.c3 ♖d8 14.♕e2 ♘e5=

B) 7.♘b1 White reroutes the knight. It does have new pastures on d2, but this cannot be a threatening continuation for Black. 7...d5!

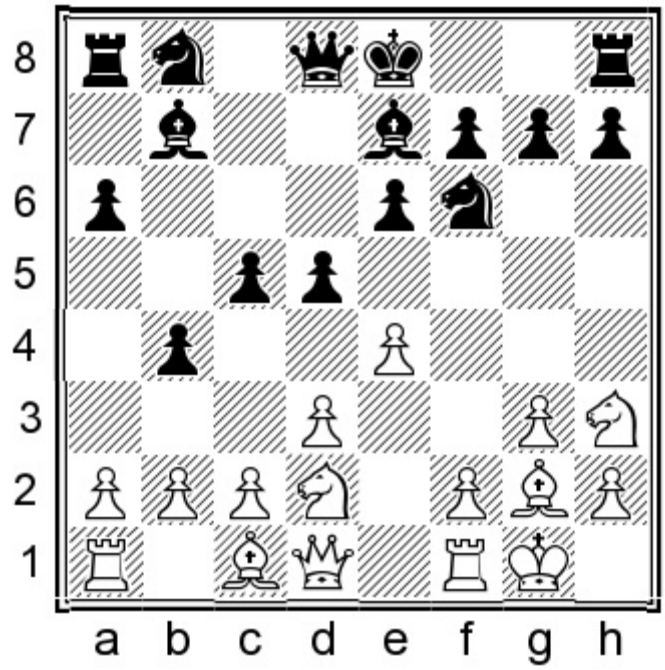


Position after: 7...d5!

8.0-0 ♘f6 White needs to deal with the pressure against e4.

B1) 9.e5 ♘fd7 10.f4 [10.♖e1 ♘c6 11.f4 ♗e7 12.♕g4 0-0 13.♗e3 a5∓ White is underdeveloped and plays a difficult KIA.] 10...♘c6= 11.f5? exf5 12.♖xf5 ♘dxe5∓

B2) 9.♘d2 Again a KIA structure, as we have seen before with the h3-knight on e2. 9...♗e7!



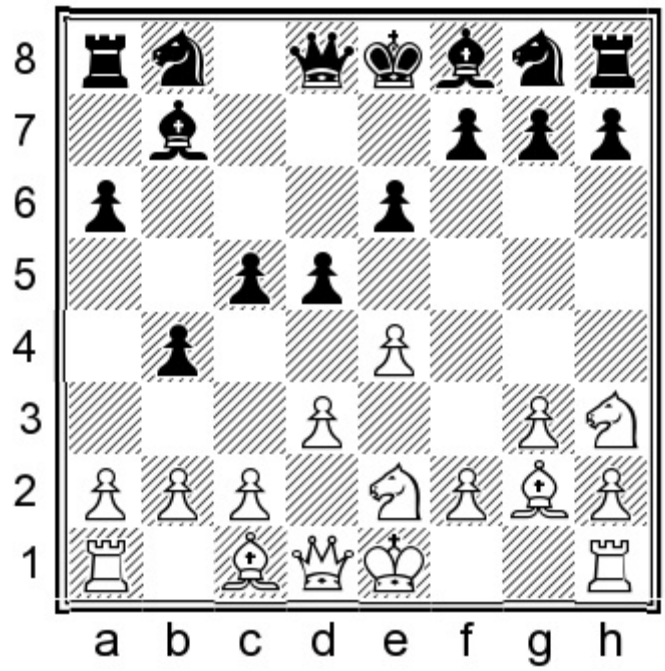
Position after: 9...♗e7!

...0-0 is a priority and the b8-knight stays in the stable for a bit longer maintaining the pressure on the diagonal and keeping an eye on d5.

B2.1) 10.♖e1 0-0 11.e5 [11.exd5 ♗xd5 12.♘f3 ♘bd7 13.♘f4 ♗b7∓ 0-1 (32) Vazquez, G (2374) – Karthikeyan, M (2497) Doha 2014.] 11...♘fd7 12.♕g4 ♘c6=

B2.2) 10.♘f4 0-0 11.exd5 ♘xd5 12.♘c4 ♘d7 13.♖e1 ♖a7 14.a3 ♘xf4 15.♗xf4 ♗xg2 16.♔xg2 a5= 1-0 (64) Simacek, P (2469) – Zeberski, J (2386) Czechia 2011.

7...d5!



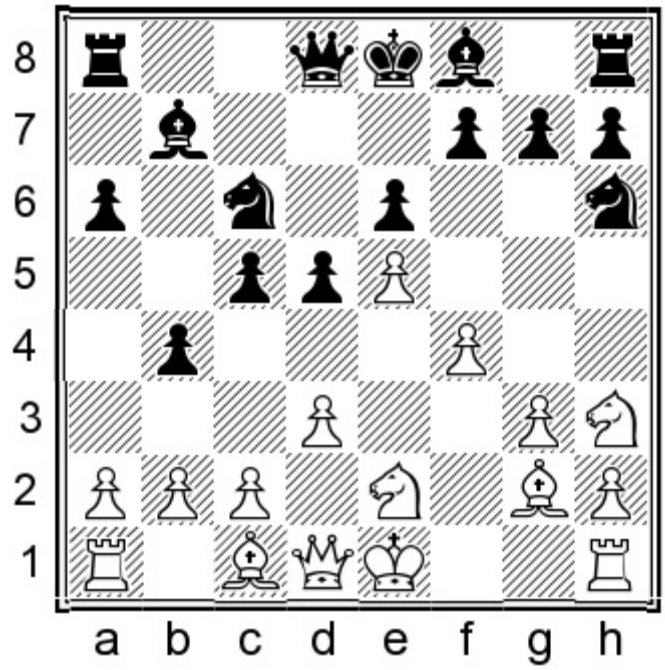
Position after: 7...d5!

That is what our setup is all about.

8.0-0

The critical continuation. White plays on his lead in development and is prepared to sacrifice material for the attack.

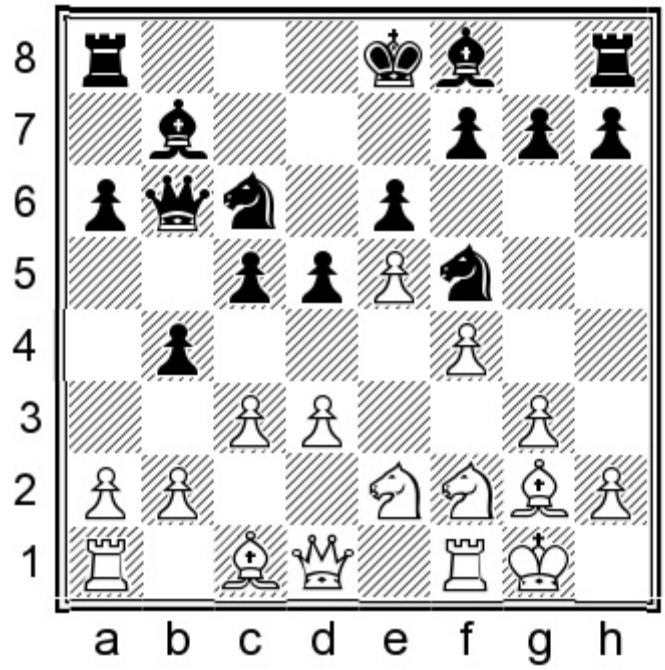
A) 8.e5 Closing the position only helps Black. 8...♘c6 9.f4 ♘h6!∓ Black's position is better. White lacks activity on the kingside, whereas Black will continue on the queenside.



Position after: 9...♘h6!∓

A1) 10.0-0 ♘f5 11.g4 [11.c3 h5! Blacks secures his knight. 12.d4 cxd4 13.cxd4 ♕b6! 14.♔h1 ♘cxd4 15.♘xd4 ♕xd4 16.♕e2 ♗c6–+ 1-0 (61) condansator3 (2657)-vbatman2004 (2494) lichess.org 2019.] 11...♘h4 12.♘g3 ♘xg2 13.♔xg2 ♕d7 14.♕e1 0-0-0∓ 0-1 (40) Mack, W (2257) – Hillarp Persson, T (2577) Guernsey 2009.

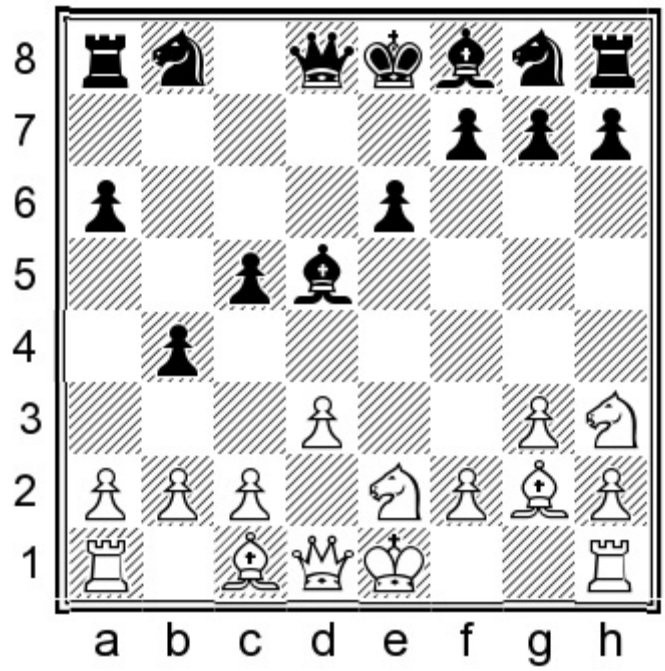
A2) 10.♘f2 ♘f5 11.0-0 ♕b6 12.c3



Position after: 12.c3

12...♗e7 13.g4 ♘h4 14.♗h1 h5∓ 0-1 (35) Yu, Y (2738) – Khismatullin, D (2639) Moscow 2017.

B) 8.exd5 exchanging on d5 is precisely what Black is prepared for. 8...♗xd5!



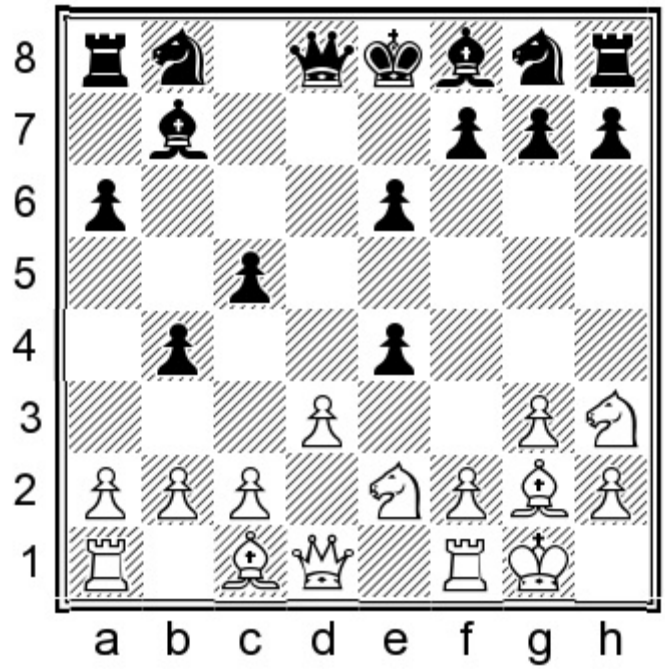
Position after: 8...♗xd5!

All according to plan. White's kingside position will soon become vulnerable.

B1) 9.0-0 ♗xg2 10.♔xg2 ♘f6 11.♘ef4 ♘c6! Black first prevents d3-d4. 12.♘g5 ♗e7 13.♔g1 0-0∓

B2) 9.♘ef4 ♗xg2 10.♘xg2 ♘c6 11.♘g5 [11.0-0 ♘f6 12.♘g5 ♗e7 13.♗e3 0-0 14.♘e4 c4∓ 0-1 (32) Dorca Dilme, R (2229) – Oratovsky, M (2482) Barcelona 2017.] 11...♘f6 12.♘e3 ♗e7 13.0-0 ♘d5 14.♘f3 ♕d7∓

8...dxe4



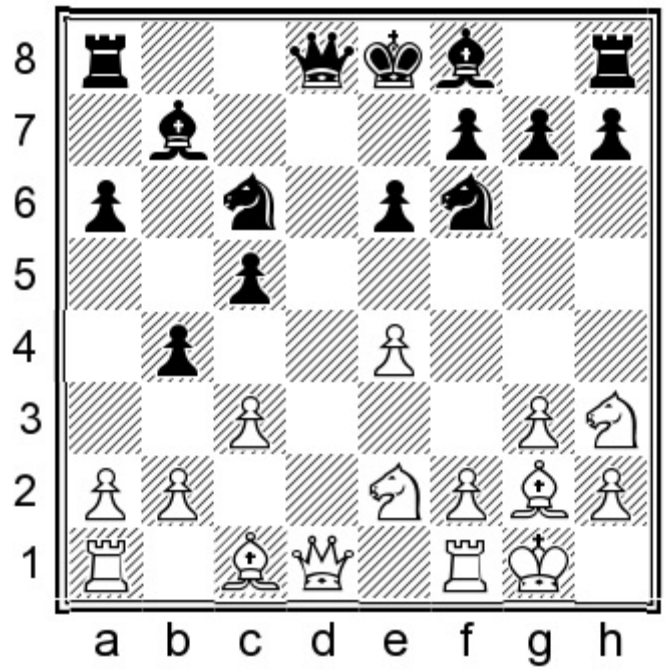
Position after: 8...dxe4

9.♘g5!

Maintaining the initiative.

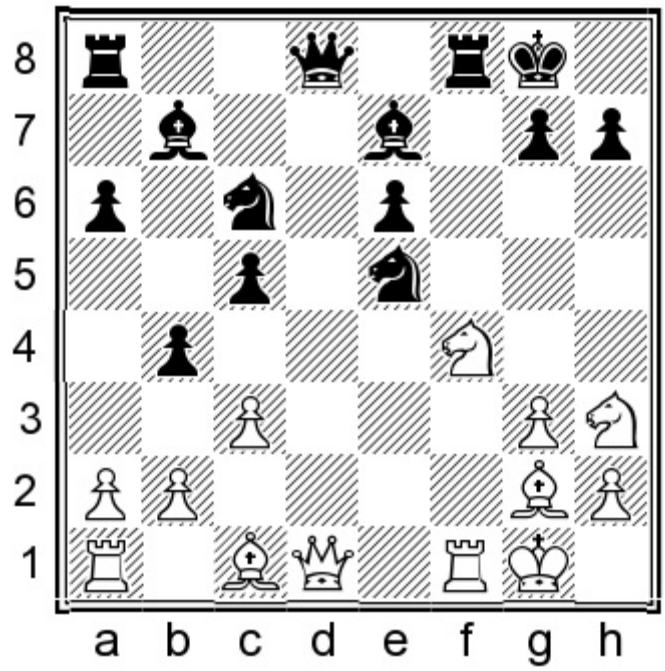
A) 9.♘ef4 e5! 10.♘h5 g6 11.f4 exf3 12.♗xf3 ♖a7! 13.♘g5 f6 14.♗xb7 ♖xb7 15.♕f3 ♖b6 Precise play by the black rook, defending all of Black's weak spots. 16.c3 ♘d7∓

B) 9.dxe4 ♘c6! As a rule, Black should not exchange queens on d1 in this line unless it is with check. 10.c3 ♘f6



Position after: 10...♘f6

11.e5 [11.cxb4 cxb4 12.e5 ♘d7 13.♗e3 ♘dxe5 14.♘d4 ♕d7=] 11...♘d7 The pressure against e5 is more important. 12.f4 ♗e7 13.f5! 0-0 White has to decide how to further the attack. 14.fxe6 [14.f6 gxf6 15.exf6 ♘xf6 16.♗g5 ♘g4 17.♗xe7 ♕xe7 18.♗xc6 ♗xc6 19.♘d4 cxd4 20.♕xg4+ ♔h8 21.♕xd4+ e5 22.♕xb4 ♕a7+ 23.♘f2 f6⩱] 14...fxe6 15.♘ef4 ♘dxe5

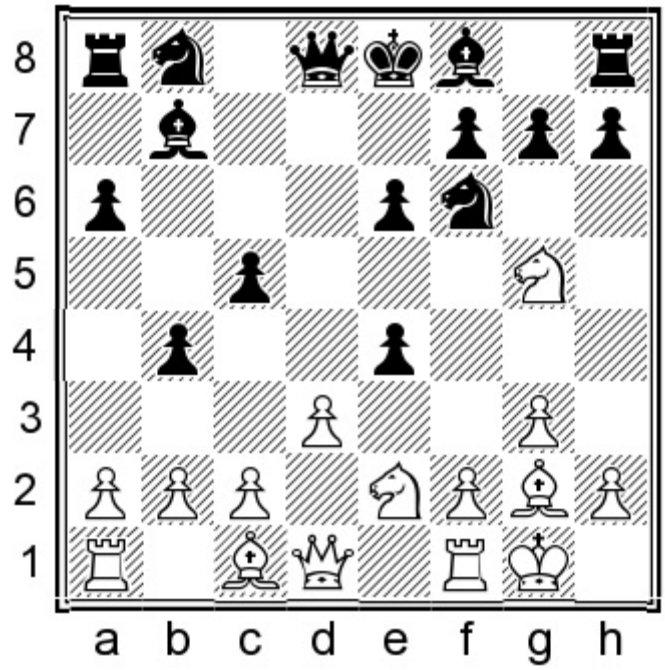


Position after: 15...♘dxe5

B1) 16.♘xe6 ♖xf1+! 17.♕xf1 ♕d7 18.♘ef4 [18.♘hf4 g5∓] 18...♘a5∓

B2) 16.♕xd8 ♖axd8 17.♘xe6 ♖xf1+ 18.♔xf1 ♖d6 19.♘ef4 ♘a5 20.♗xb7 ♘xb7=

9...♘f6!

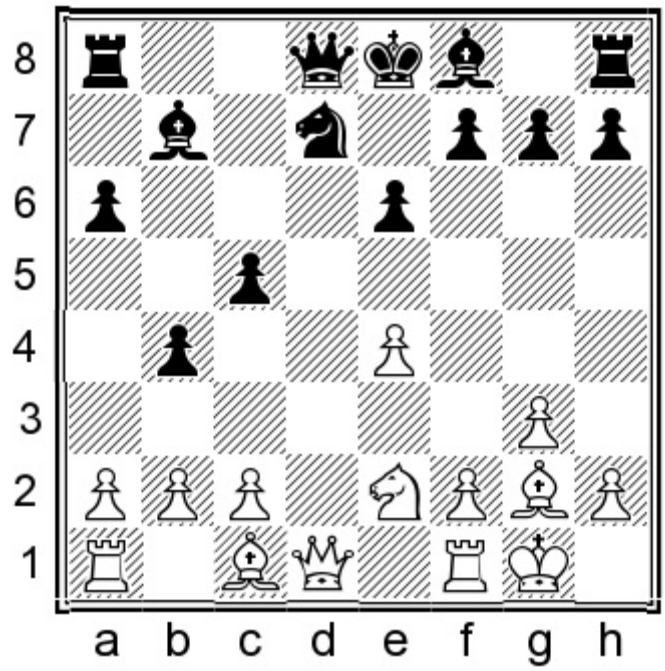


Position after: 9...♘f6!

10.♘f4

A) 10.dxe4?! ♕xd1 11.♖xd1 h6 wins a clean pawn. 12.e5 ♗xg2 13.♔xg2 [13.exf6 ♗d5! 14.fxg7 ♗xg7 15.♘h3 ♘c6–+] 13...hxg5 14.exf6 gxf6∓ with the better endgame for Black.

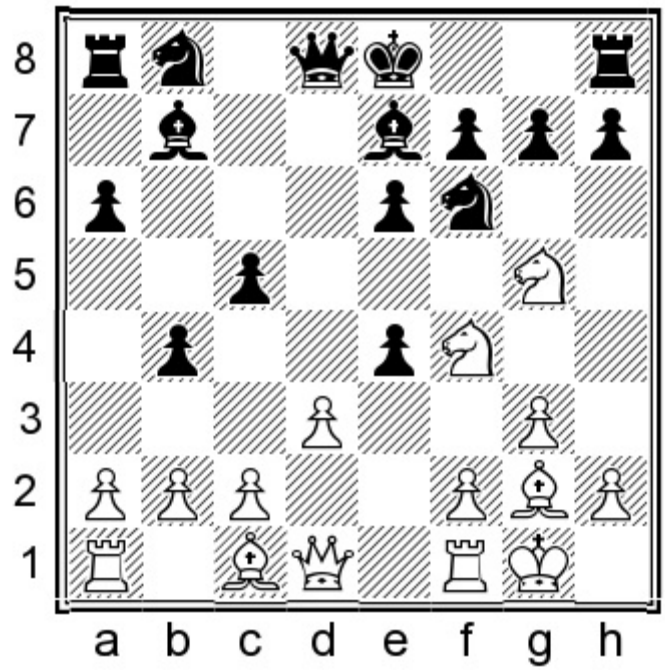
B) 10.♘xe4 ♘xe4 11.dxe4 ♘d7!



Position after: 11...♘d7!

Black's initiative on the queenside is more valuable with the queens still on the board. 12.♘f4 [12.c3 a5 13.a3 ♗e7 14.♗e3 0-0 15.cxb4 cxb4 16.♘d4 ♘e5∓] 12...♕c7 13.♕e2 ♗e7! 14.♗e3 0-0 15.♖fd1 a5∓

10...♗e7!



Position after: 10...♗e7!

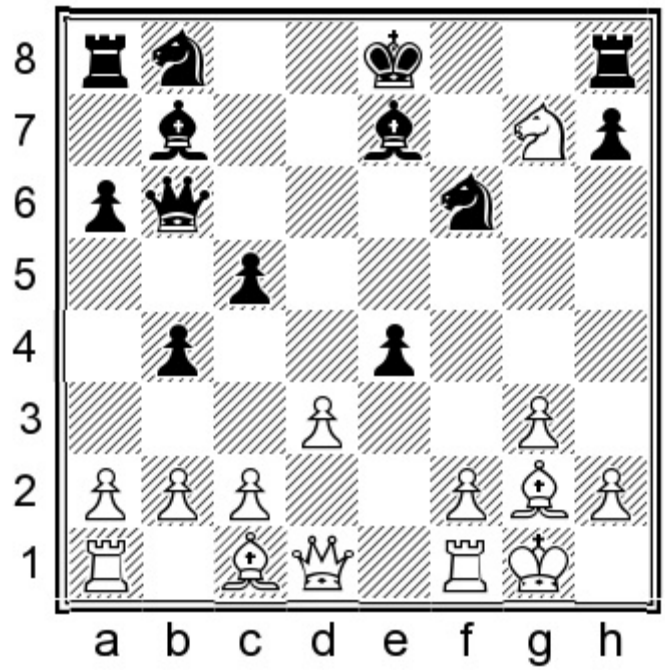
11.♘gxe6!?

A dangerous move and the idea behind 10.♘g5. Black can defend himself but must be careful.

A) 11.♘xe4 ♘xe4 12.♗xe4 [12.dxe4 0-0∓] 12...♗xe4 13.dxe4 0-0 14.♕g4 ♕d4! 15.♕e2 ♖d8∓ ½-½ (77) Paszewski, M (2293) – Teclaf, P (2399) Suwalki 2018.

B) 11.♘h5 continues the attack without sacrificing material. 11...0-0! 12.♘xf6+ ♗xf6 13.♘xe4 ♗e7 14.♘f6+ ♗xf6 15.♗xb7 ♖a7= ½–½ (37) Rocco Ruiz, J (2319) – Kowalczyk, R (2314) corr. 2017.

11...fxe6 12.♘xe6 ♕b6 13.♘xg7+



Position after: 13.♘xg7+

White picks up another pawn.

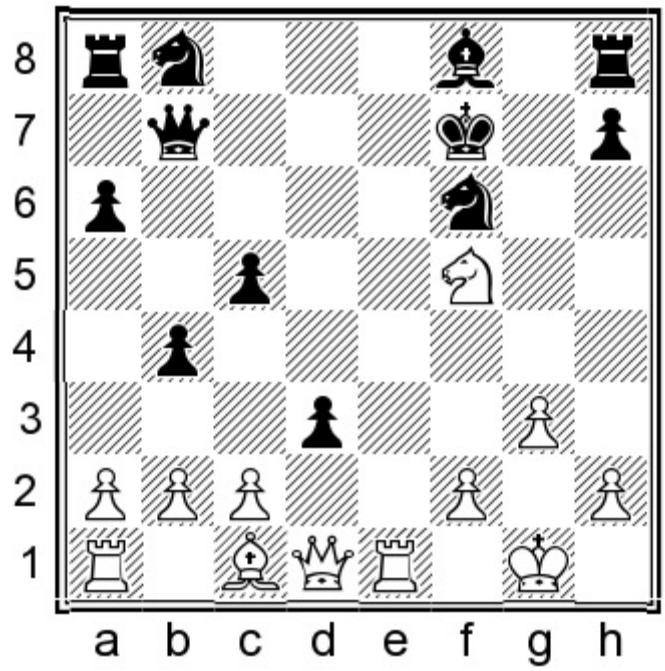
13...♔f7 14.♘f5

14.♗h6 ♗f8 15.♘f5 ♕e6 16.dxe4 ♗xe4 17.♗xe4 ♕xe4 18.♗g7! [18.♘d6+ ♗xd6 19.♕xd6 ♖e8 20.♕xc5 ♘bd7∓] 18...♕xf5 19.♗xh8 ♘c6∞

14...exd3 15.♗xb7

15.♖e1 ♗f8!=

15...♕xb7 16.♖e1 ♗f8

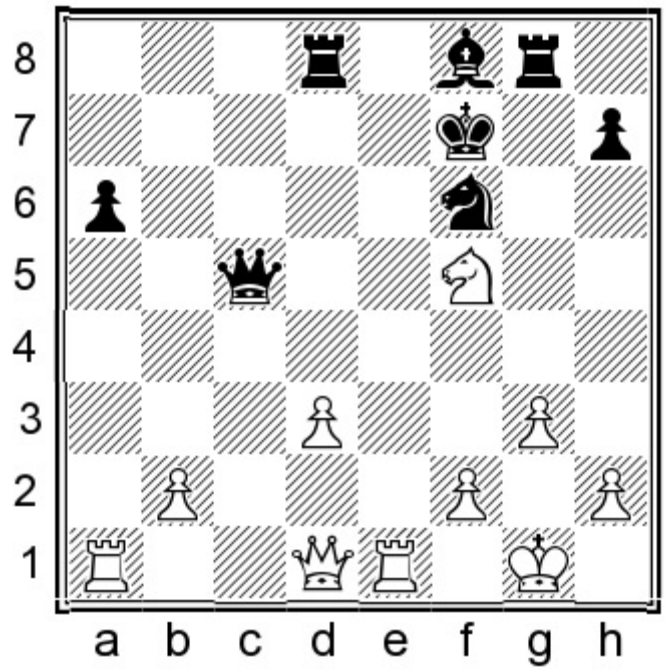


Position after: 16...♗f8

17.♗g5

17.cxd3 ♘bd7 18.♗g5 ♖e8 19.♖xe8 ♔xe8 20.♕e2+ ♔f7 21.♖e1 ♕d5=

17...♘bd7 18.cxd3 ♕c6 19.a3 ♖g8 20.♗xf6 ♘xf6 21.axb4 ♖d8 22.bxc5 ♕xc5=



Position after: 22...♕xc5=

White has three pawns for the piece while the black king is still out in the open. The chances are balanced.

Conclusion

With 6.♘h3 we have the most sophisticated way by which White can play the Closed Sicilian against 2...a6. Black continues with the thematic 6...b4 and 7...d5. White's play is based on piece activity. He is less concerned about material.

In the main line, White does not touch his e-pawn but an invests in piece play against the black king. Black has to defend carefully, in particular against White's sharp idea of 11.♘xe6 (11.♘gxe6). With some good maneuvering Black should be able to reach a position in which he has three pawns for his piece, a position which the engines assess as equal. If Black would like to play for safety first he should consider 6...♘f6 instead of 6...b4.

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