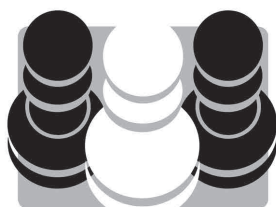


Playing the Caro-Kann

By

Lars Schandorff



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Preface

The Caro-Kann Defence. Genuine bummer.

What is wrong with the Caro-Kann?

It is all pawns and no hope!

– Benny Watts (The Queen’s Gambit)

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

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

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

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

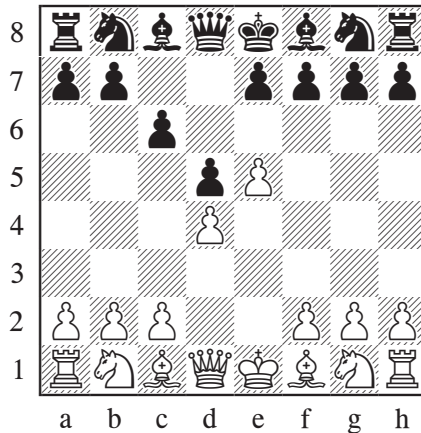
I would very much like to thank my friend Nikos Ntirlis for his helpful research and analysis.

Lars Schandorff

Copenhagen, November 2020

Advance Variation

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5



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

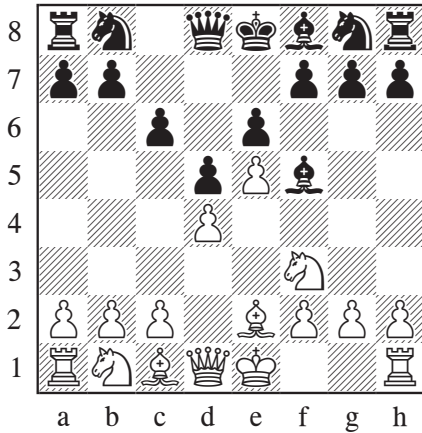
3...♗f5!

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

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

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

4.♘f3 e6 5.♗e2



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

5...c5

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

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

The flexible 5...♖e7 6.0-0 ♘d7 has been another popular choice. Black simply develops

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

6.♗e3

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

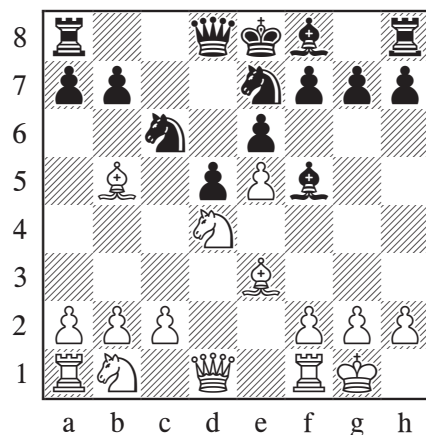
6...cxd4 7.♘xd4 ♖e7

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

8.0-0

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

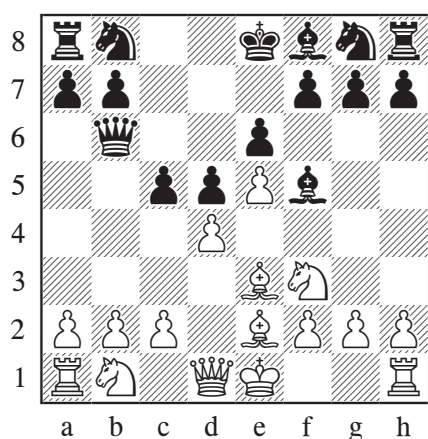
8...♗bc6 9.♗b5!



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

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

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



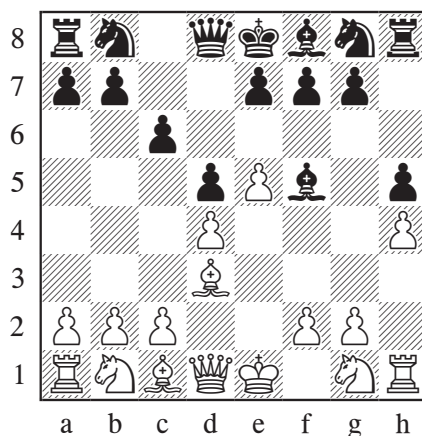
This is hardcore!

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

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

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

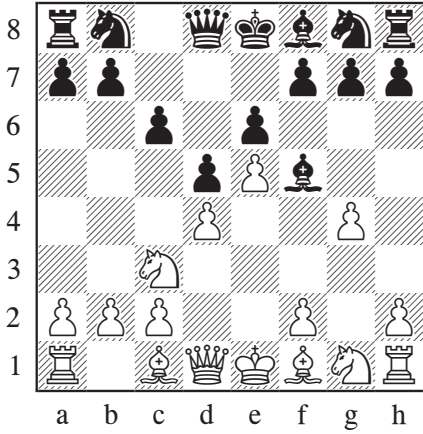
4.h4 h5 5.♙d3



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

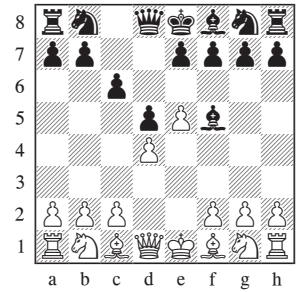
The final part deals with White's sharpest attempts to provoke a direct confrontation. Options such as 4.c4 and 4.h4 h5 5.c4 will be given due consideration. The most dangerous option in this chapter is:

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



This uncompromising attempt to smash through the barriers is named after the brilliant attacking player Alexei Shirov. However, Black has an extremely sound position which cannot be broken so easily. The complications can be hair-raising, but White is burning his bridges on the way, so if Black survives the first wave of the attack then he will have good chances to strike back and take the full point.

Chapter 6



Sharp Lines

Variation Index

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♖f5

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*“You’ll take my life, but I’ll take yours too
 You’ll fire your musket, but I’ll run you through
 So when you’re waiting for the next attack
 You’d better stand, there’s no turning back”*

Iron Maiden – The Trooper

Overview

Like in the previous chapter, we will start by identifying the main lines to be examined.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♘f5

Until now we have seen positional approaches from White, where he mostly tries to keep control. There are numerous aggressive attempts as well: lines well suited for players who like a direct confrontation. A common feature for these sharp lines is that they involve at least one early pawn thrust.

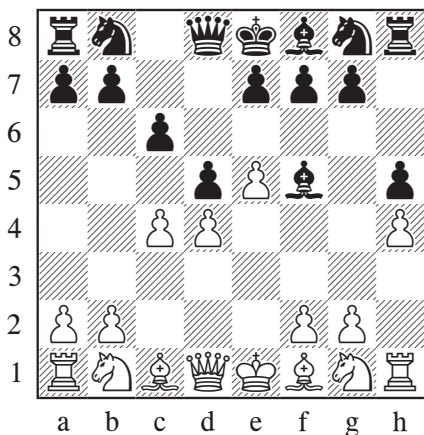
Pawn moves

4.h4

We will briefly consider the premature 4.g4 and 4.f4, which weaken White’s position more than they threaten Black’s.

We will also examine 4.c4, which is closely related to 4.h4 h5 5.c4, but the version with the h-pawns advanced is more aggressive.

4...h5 5.c4



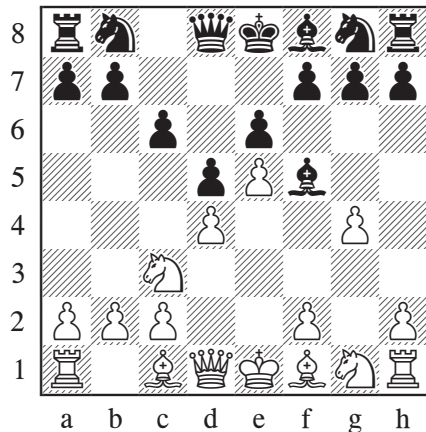
White takes a logical approach of challenging the enemy centre and preparing active development with ♖c3. In general, these c2-c4 lines lead to demanding middlegames where the initiative and dynamic factors are constantly mixed with more positional considerations. Often Black will play ...dxc4 to gain the d5-outpost for his pieces, while White gets the use of the e4-square. As always, the Caro-Kann structure is robust enough to withstand a lot of pressure, so there is no need to panic. The bishop on f5 is often the centre of attention: it might be a target for ♖ge2-g3 (or g2-g4, in the 4.c4 version), but it is also a tower of power.

Knight moves

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♘f5 4.♖c3

We should also mention 4.♖e2, with the idea of harassing the bishop after 4...e6 5.♖g3 ♘g6 6.h4. Bologan even calls it devious, but Black should be comfortable if he knows what he is doing.

4...e6 5.g4



This is without doubt the most intriguing, mythical and violent line of the Caro-Kann. I refer to it as the Shirov Variation, after the brilliant attacking player Alexei Shirov, who

has been a leading flag-bearer for White's cause. The line was heavily analysed as early as the 1980s by the Greek GM and theoretician Kotronias, and many other prominent players have had it regularly in their repertoires. To name a few, Sutovsky, Fedorov, Motylev, Khalifman, Timman, Topalov, Grischuk, Anand and even Kasparov have all played it at least from time to time. I have even faced it against Magnus Carlsen in a blindfold game! To be fair, the World Champion doesn't usually play this way and the same can be said of a lot of the other names above. Nowadays the popularity of this line has waned due to some important resources which have been discovered for Black. Still, the line is dangerous (for both sides) and must be taken seriously.

5...♙g6 6.♗ge2

6.h4 is premature due to 6...h5! when White has to weaken his structure.

6...c5

The position is already rather tense. Black's resources are plenty and there are good reasons to believe that White's super-aggressive approach may backfire. He risks destroying his own pawn structure, and if Black gets the initiative then it can quickly become a one-way struggle. See for example my win over the Danish IM Jakob Aabling-Thomsen, given here as an illustrative game.

White can continue his grand flank strategy with 7.h4, which is the big main line; or he can develop with more of a focus on the centre with 7.♙e3.

Theory

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♘f5

We will cover the sidelines **A) 4.g4**, **B) 4.f4** and **C) 4.♗e2**, followed by the more serious options of **D) 4.c4**, **E) 4.h4** and finally **F) 4.♗c3**.

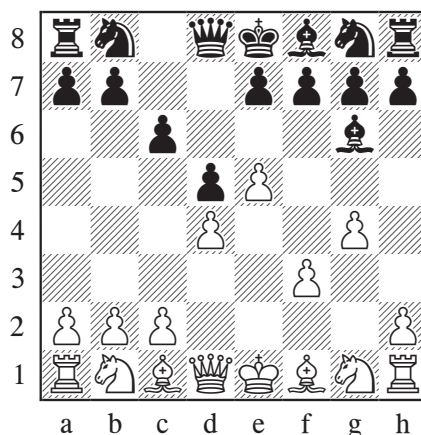
A) 4.g4

White attacks the bishop but significantly weakens his own kingside.

4...♙e4

Provoking another pawn move to compromise White's structure even more.

5.f3 ♙g6

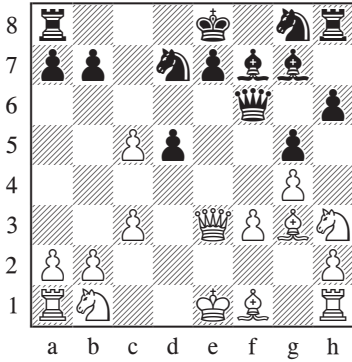


6.h4

Consistent.

White has started with 6.♗e2 in some games, but 6...e6 7.h4 h5 8.♗f4 ♗e7 is good for Black.

6.e6 is interesting. Black should respond with: 6...♗d6! 7.exf7† ♙xf7 8.♗h3 ♗d7 9.♗e2 h6! (9...h5!?:N can also be considered but the text move works well) 10.♙f4 ♗f6 11.♗e3 g5 12.♙g3 ♙g7 13.c3 c5 (13...e5!?:N also looks good) 14.dxc5

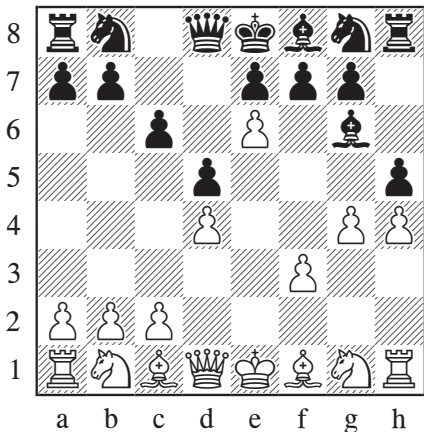


This occurred in Triantos – Olsen, Porto Carras 2018, and now 14...d4!N 15.cxd4 ♖xd4 16.♗xd4 ♔xd4 17.♘c3 ♖c8 is fine for Black.

6...h5 7.e6

Again we see this positional pawn sacrifice.

Both 7.♔d3 ♔xd3 8.♗xd3 e6 and 7.g5 e6 8.♔d3 ♔xd3 9.♗xd3 ♘e7 have been played in many games, with the latter line bearing a strong resemblance to the Nimzowitsch – Capablanca game. Exchanging the light-squared bishops is anti-positional from White’s perspective, and Black is doing well.



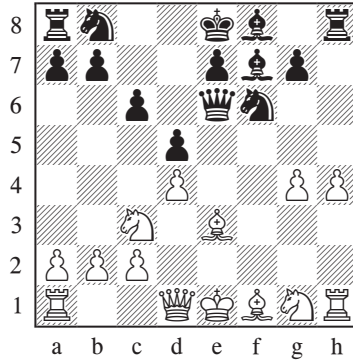
7...♗d6!

And again we see this response.

8.exf7† ♔xf7 9.♘e2

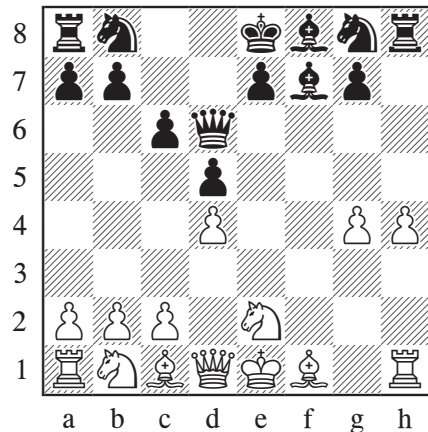
Black was threatening a check on g3.

The only top-level game continued: 9.♔e3 hxg4 10.fxg4 ♘f6 11.♘c3 ♗e6



12.♘d2?! The game was played in the World Cup and White takes too many risks, seeking a winning start in the two-game mini-match. (12.♗e2 ♘xg4 13.♔g5 was preferable although Black is still doing well) 12...♘xg4 13.♔g5 ♘f2 Black simply picked up material and won in Vallejo Pons – So, Tbilisi (3.1) 2017.

9...hxg4 10.fxg4

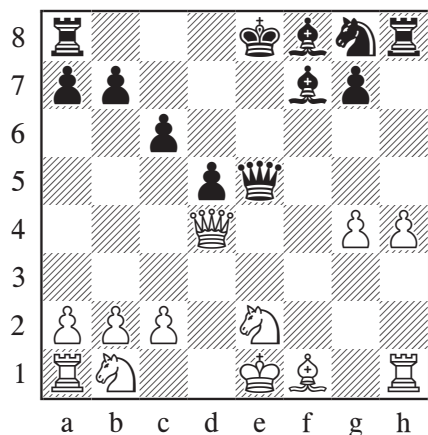


10...♘d7!

Preparing ...e5 next, with great play for Black.

11. ♖f4

11.c3 e5 12.dxe5 ♗xe5 13.♖f4 ♗f6 is hardly an improvement for White.

11...e5 12.dxe5 ♗xe5 13.♖xe5 ♖xe5 14.♗d4

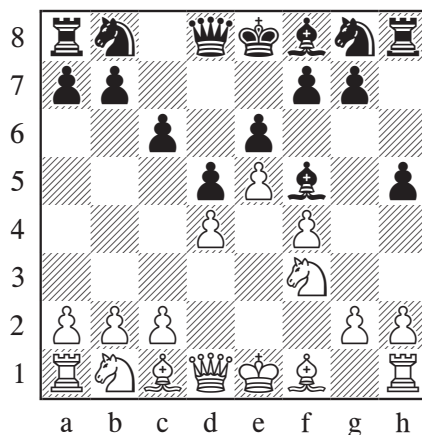
Trying to limit the damage. This position has arisen in a few games, and the most accurate continuation is:

14... ♖xd4! 15. ♗xd4 0–0–0**B) 4.f4**

The positions after this move may not be particularly sharp, but it is an aggressive-looking pawn advance. White seizes space and overprotects the e5-point, but the bishop on c1 does not approve. Black should develop naturally and play on the light squares.

4...e6 5. ♗f3 h5!

5...c5 looks logical but 6.♖b5† (or immediately 6.♖e3!?) 6...♗c6 7.♖e3 sharpens the game unnecessarily. I prefer to keep the position closed for the time being and delay ...c5 until our pieces are better developed.

**6.c3**

This was tried by the American superstar Caruana in a recent game.

6.♖d3 has been the most popular choice, but after 6...♗h6 the exchange of light-squared bishops suits Black.

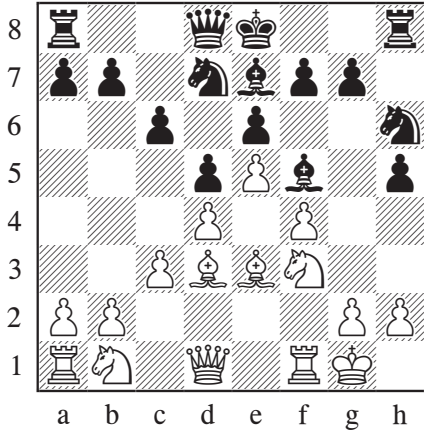
6.♖e2 avoids the exchange but threatens nothing. 6...♗h6 is again the answer, with good play for Black.

6.♖e3 ♖b6 7.♖c1 ♗h6 (7...c5!?) 8.c4 ♗d7 9.♗bd2 was played in Morozevich – Svidler, Monte Carlo (rapid) 2005. Black should simply have continued 9...♖e7N and castled short, with a fine position.

6... ♗d7 7.♖e3 ♗h6 8.♖d3

8.♗bd2 ♖e7 is no problem for Black.

8...♖e7 9.0–0



This was Caruana – Shimanov, Internet 2019. I suggest:

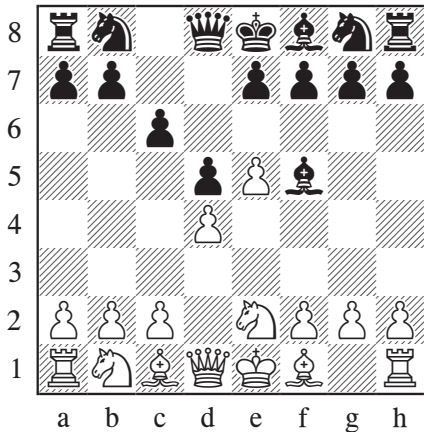
9...♖b6N

9...h4!?N is another idea.

10.b3 ♖c8

Black continues to delay castling and has a comfortable game. The last move will help to strengthen the ...c5 break when it comes.

C) 4.♗e2!?



An offbeat but interesting try.

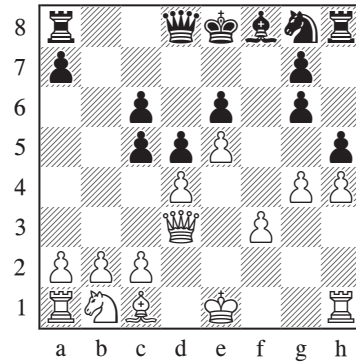
4...e6 5.♗g3

The knight can also take another direction: 5.♗f4

White intends to target the bishop with g2-g4, as in the Shirov Variation (which we will see later). Of course, advancing the g-pawn is a risky strategy, and the present case is no exception.

5...c5! 6.g4 ♗e4 7.f3

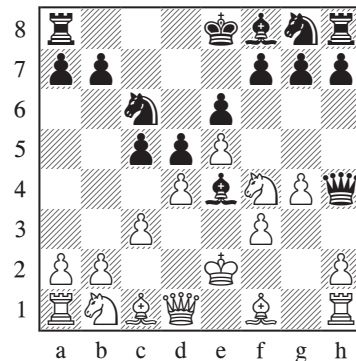
White should try to simplify with: 7.♗b5† ♗c6 8.♗xc6†! (but not 8.f3? because of 8...♖a5†! 9.♗c3 cxd4 10.♖xd4 ♗xf3→) 8...bxc6 Black is in excellent shape. A good example continued 9.f3 ♗g6 10.h4 h5! 11.♗xg6 fxg6 12.♖d3 when Black should have played:



12...cxd4!N (12...♗f7 only led to a balanced position in Bojkovic – Ilieva, Innsbruck 1987) 13.♖xg6† ♗d7+ Black's king is safe enough, while White's centre has been destroyed and his position is riddled with weaknesses.

7...♖h4† 8.♗e2 ♗c6! 9.c3

9.fx4? ♖xg4† 10.♗e1 ♖h4† 11.♗e2 ♗xd4† wins for Black, with 12.♗d3 dxe4† 13.♗xe4!? 0–0–0+ an amusing example of king 'activity' in the opening.



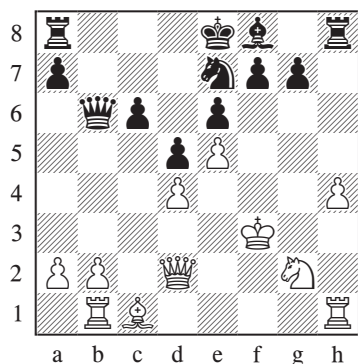
9...cxd4 10.cxd4 ♖c2!

The Caro-Kann bishop stays alive.

11.♖d2 h5!

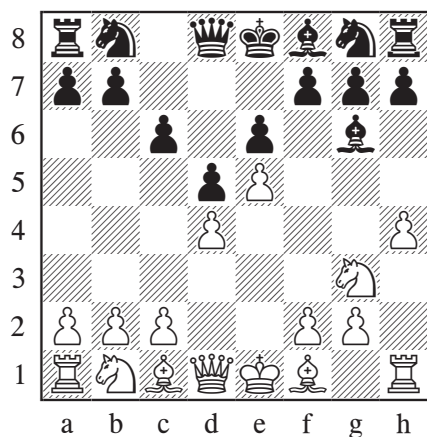
White is crushed.

12.♗g2 ♜d8 13.♕f2 ♖xb1 14.♝xb1 hxg4
15.♖b5 gxf3 16.♕xf3 ♜b6 17.♖xc6† bxc6
18.h4 ♗e7



0–1 Litz – Nagel, email 2006.

5...♖g6 6.h4



6...h5!

6...f6!? is an interesting alternative, when 7.h5 ♖f7 reaches a position rich in possibilities for both sides. Although this would be entertaining to analyse further, it seems best to stick with the main line, which offers a good position with minimal fuss, rather than go to the trouble of analysing an interesting

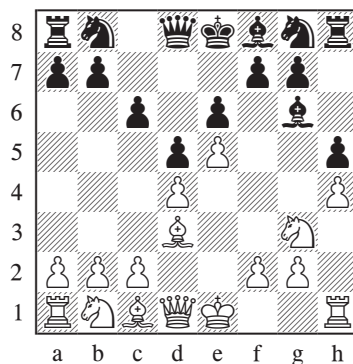
new direction against a variation that you are unlikely to encounter often, if at all.

7.♖e2

Attacking the h-pawn is the natural follow-up, but White will never find a convenient time to capture it.

7.♖d3

This seems anti-positional.



7...♖xd3 8.cxd3!?

8.♖xd3 gives Black a pleasant choice between 8...♖e7, 8...c5 and 8...♜a5† followed by ...♜a6, with pleasant play in all cases.

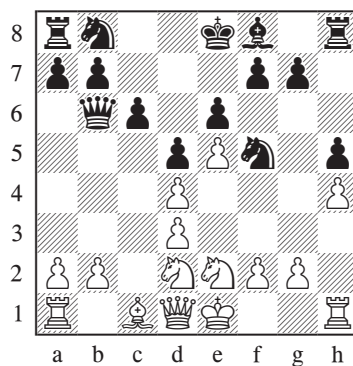
8...♜b6 9.♗e2

9.♖e3?! ♜xb2 10.♗d2 ♜a3 11.♜e2 g6
12.0–0 b6† left White with insufficient compensation in Pecka – Noble, corr. 2015.

9...♗e7

Another good option is 9...♗d7 10.0–0 ♜a6♞ intending ...♗e7 and ...c5.

10.♗d2 ♗f5



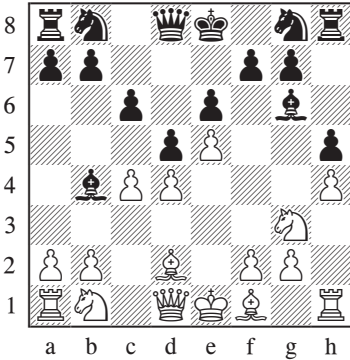
Black is comfortable, for example:

11. ♖f3 c5 12. dxc5 ♙xc5 13. d4 ♙e7

Black had a pleasant game in Spassky – Adams, Cannes 1989.

13... ♙b4!?!N 14. ♙d2 ♙e7 15. ♙c3 ♜c6! could also be considered.

7.c4!?! This delayed version of the c2-c4 plan has scored decently for White, but it's nothing to fear. 7... ♙b4! (Black can of course play 7... ♖e7 or even 7...c5!?! now that the white knight has moved away from the centre.) 8. ♙d2 (8. ♜c3 can be met by 8...c5 or 8... ♖e7.)



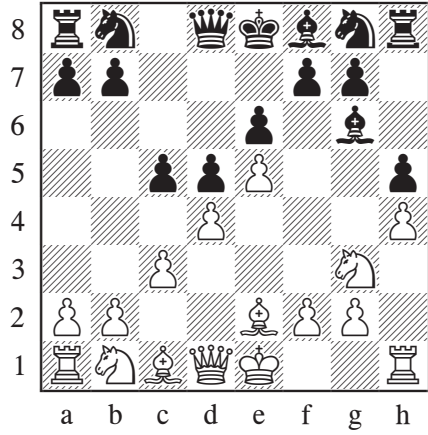
8...c5!?! 9. ♙b4 cxb4 10. ♜d2 ♖e7 11. c5 ♜bc6 12. ♜f3 ♜a5 13. b3 ♙f5 14. ♜g5 ♙g4 15. f3 ♙f5 16. ♜d2 b6! The unusual pawn structure led to an interesting battle with mutual chances in Kyhos – Packroff, corr. 2014.

7...c5!

The counterattack on d4 diverts White's attention from the h-pawn.

8.c3

8. dxc5 ♙xc5 9. ♜d2 (9. ♜c3 ♜c6 10. ♙g5 ♙e7) 9... ♜c6 10. ♜b3 ♙b6 11. ♙xh5 ♙xh5 12. ♜xh5 White collects the h-pawn, but he will soon lose the e5-pawn: not the cleverest swap. 12... ♜c7 13. ♙f4 g6 14. ♜g3 ♜xe5 15. ♜d2 This occurred in Naiditsch – Bologan, Kishinev 2012, and now the simple 15... ♜f6 gives Black an excellent position.

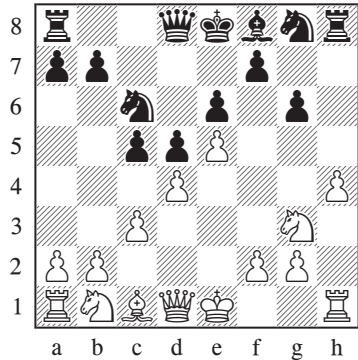


8... ♜c6 9. ♙e3

It still wasn't good to take on h5:

9. ♜xh5 cxd4 10. cxd4 ♜b6 11. ♜f4 should be met by 11... ♙f5!N to safeguard the strong bishop, followed by picking up the d4-pawn.

9. ♙xh5 ♙xh5 10. ♜xh5 g6 11. ♜g3 (11. ♙g5 ♙e7 does not help White) and now a nice finesse is:



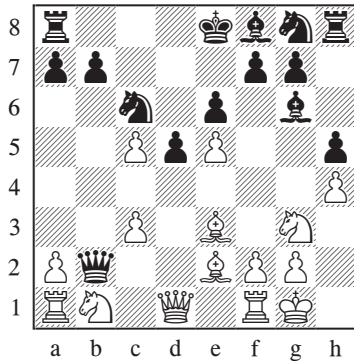
11...cxd4!N (the immediate 11... ♜xh4 12. ♜xh4 ♜xh4 enables White to equalize with 13. ♜d2!) 12. cxd4 ♜xh4 13. ♜xh4 ♜xh4 Now the d4-pawn hangs, as 14. ♙e3 ♙h6!F does not help White.

9... ♜b6 10. ♜b3

It is surprising how quickly White might lose: after 10. ♜d2? cxd4 11. cxd4 ♙xb1! White

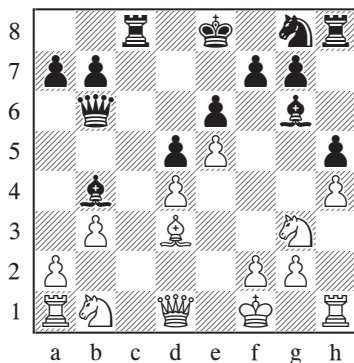
had to resign in Stojanovic – Pikula, Banja Dvorovi 2017, due to 12.♞xb1 ♕b4 and the queen is gone.

10.dxc5?! also looks questionable: 10...♞xb2 (the simple 10...♕xc5 is also good) 11.0–0



11...♘h6!N (11...0–0–0 was somewhat better for Black in Spassky – Dzindzichashvili, Tilburg 1978, but the text move is even more convincing.) 12.♞b3 ♞xb3 13.axb3 ♘g4

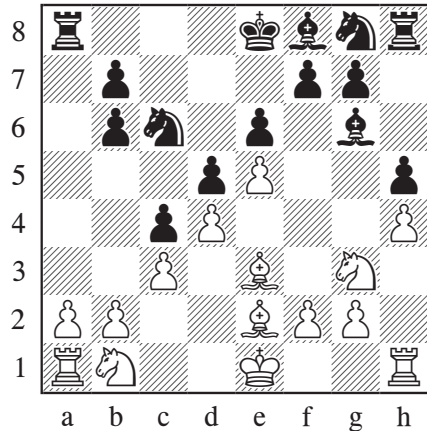
10.b3 weakens White’s position a lot: 10...cxd4 11.♕xd4 (after 11.cxd4 ♘b4! 12.0–0 [12.♘a3? ♞a5–+] 12...♘c2 13.♘c3 ♘xa1 14.♞xa1 Black is simply the exchange up) 11...♘xd4 (even 11...♕c5 12.♕xc5 ♞xc5 turns out great for Black) 12.cxd4 ♕b4† 13.♙f1 ♞c8 14.♕d3



And now I like 14...♘h6!N 15.♕xg6 fxe6 16.♘e2 0–0 when White won’t survive for long.

10...c4! 11.♞xb6 axb6

Black is clearly better thanks to the simple plan of ...b5-b4. White does not have time to prevent it with a2-a3 because his a-pawn will be pinned. A good example continued:



12.♘d2 b5 13.0–0 b4 14.♞fc1?! bxc3 15.bxc3 ♕a3–+

Black was winning material in Lopez Gomez – Yuffa, London 2018.

Abridged Variation Index

The Variation Index in the book is 7 pages long. Below is an abridged version giving just the main variations, not the sub-variations.

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

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B) 6.♕c4 17

C) 6.♗f3 ♕d6! 26

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