

James Schuyler

the
dark knight
system

a repertoire with 1...Nc6

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About the Author

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Introduction

1...♖c6 and the Kevitz System

Why another repertoire book on 1...♖c6 - ? Didn't one come out just a few years ago? As it turns out, the subject matter here is completely different, as are the types of positions reached. 1...♖c6 isn't really an opening yet, but the starting point for many openings. This book generally concerns itself with Black's plans for using 1...♖c6 to force ...e7-e5, as played by Tony Miles, for instance. This idea is properly known as the Kevitz System. (Wisnewski's repertoire book on ...♖c6 was all about the Nimzowitsch and Chigorin Defences, in which Black plays 1...d5 or 2...d5.)

The Dark Knight System?

For reasons I will lay out, I will be recommending a fianchetto of the king's bishop if White resists the ...e7-e5 advance. These are in fact the most common positions, and they have a much different feel from a typical Kevitz System. Furthermore, I believe that the fianchetto is a substantial improvement over the commonly played moves, and therefore a new name is in order. Since

it is a black knight venturing out from a dark square to initiate a strategy of dark-square control... need I go on?

Does the Dark Knight System work?

It works wonderfully, and in two ways. Firstly, it can throw White on his own devices as early as move one! When forced to improvise, even titled players can play shockingly weak moves or expend their time and energy in the opening. Secondly, the opening is fully sound and playable against all calibre of opposition. Black is fundamentally okay so there will be no need to abandon the repertoire just because your opponents are no longer surprised. Furthermore, this book is intended to leave you a step or two ahead of even very well-prepared opponents.

I would like to take the opportunity to say that, in general, the quality of play in Dark Knight variations has been low for both colours. In many common positions, as early as moves six, five, four, and three (!) the unquestionably best moves have been rarely or *never*

played! To some extent this is understandable in an “unorthodox” opening, particularly for White, who has more important things to worry about. It is less understandable for Black, who can hardly be surprised by his own opening. However, from Black’s standpoint, this is highly correctable – and what better opening to use than one in which there is a long history of incompetence by the opponent, even at the GM level? I suggest that Black’s practical results (which are by no means bad) can be substantially improved.

Who plays it?

As far as I know, nobody plays the Dark Knight in exactly the fashion I will be recommending, but many strong players use large parts of the repertoire, and most of the bits and pieces have been tested in high-level encounters.

In spite of the relative obscurity of the Kevitz System, it should be noted that it was one of Miles’s regular weapons against both 1 e4 and 1 d4, and IM Zvonimir Mestrovic plays it frequently – they each have hundreds of 1...c6 (with the idea of ...e7-e5) games to their credit.

It has also seen use by GMs Bogoljubow, Mikenas, Short, Hoi, Lazic, Velimirovic, Benjamin, Gausel, Svidler, Huang Thong Tu, Hort, A.Sokolov, Sulskis, Godena, Izeta Txabarri, Gulko, Klingler, Rogers, Olafsson, Tolnai, Art.Minasian, Ubilava, Sadler, Anand, Dizdarevic, Gonzales, Speelman, Mohr,

Bachmann, Zarnicki, Gelashvili, Leko, Johansen, Shkuro, Rohde, Karpatchev, Ermenkov, Bezgodov, and de facto GM Nikolaevsky – not to mention IMs Kjeldsen, Cvetkovic, Przewoznik, Vlassov, Danailov, Tarlev, Barle (frequently), Z.Nikolic, Vujadinovic, Wohl, Sommerbauer, Mascaro, Matikozian, O’Donnell, Eid, Ambrus, Kos, Bus, and presumably many others that I have missed.

So, as we can see, not only are strong players willing to play these positions (and against other strong players) they do so over and over, in some cases without any expectation of surprising their opponents. This says a lot about the hidden consensus as to the merits of the opening among those in the know.

Coverage

This is a repertoire book, but I am not adhering slavishly to the concept. Sidelines for Black are presented if they are useful or enlightening. One situation that sometimes comes up is that a main line, while objectively fine for Black, offers very few winning chances. In this case, I will try to offer an alternative which makes it more practical to play for a win, normally with substantial additional risk (otherwise it would have been chosen as the main line).

Transpositions to other openings are obviously frequent, but I will not abandon the reader just because we have reached a position that happens to be known by a different name. I will

mention transpositions when available *and cover the transpositions that I recommend.*

That being said, it is not simple to fit a whole Black repertoire into one volume, and decisions needed to be made about what to devote space to. Except for here, I will not waste space expressing the wish that I had more space. However, if certain positions receive light treatment, this is generally the reason. When deciding what to focus on, I weighed both frequency and danger, only intentionally ignoring White moves that are both rare and weak. Besides, space aside, I see no point bogging down the reader with information he won't need.

Transpositions? Aargh!

Why would anyone want to learn independent Dark Knight and Kevitz positions when they are just going to have to learn regular (transpositional) openings on top of it? One part of the answer is that a player may greatly enjoy the non-transpositional positions, and these are reached frequently. Another important part is that White normally has to give up valuable options in order to enter the transposition. For instance, in the Pirc reached through the Dark Knight System, White can only play the Classical Variation which, though fairly popular, is just not very challenging for Black. Admittedly, Black's knight reaches the slightly unusual square c6, and does so unusually early, but I will

demonstrate that this is not a problem. With White's options limited and Black committed to this sideline, the study material is relatively small.

To continue, a player who plays 1 e4 e5 must typically learn the Ruy Lopez, Two Knights, Scotch, King's Gambit, Vienna, and other sidelines. Compared to this, the Scotch reached via the Dark Knight is a light workload, not particularly dangerous, and not a popular choice for White. Therefore, play the Dark Knight System still.

Oh, the humanity!

I am admittedly human and, furthermore, fallible, but I will refrain from continuously hedging in the text (e.g. "If my analysis holds up, it seems to me that perhaps Black may indeed have the better practical chances, though this idea is untried and further investigation is needed"). If there are particular doubts about conclusions, the normal solution is not to express them, but to rectify them.

Hopefully I am far less fallible with the help of chess engines, especially *Houdini* (whom I sometimes refer to affectionately as "Mr. H"). Everything presented is computer-checked, which offers the reader substantial protection when relying on the analysis. However, I have only used long computer-generated variations when absolutely necessary; i.e. there are no relevant human games to draw from, and the positions aren't settling down into

something that can be understood and assessed. In other words, fairly often.

I am inevitably prone to error when I quote statistics, or when I say that a move is new. These statements are necessarily based on games I have access to. I will try to avoid saying, “according to my database” every time, since that should be taken as a given. And I apologize in advance to the true originators for such errors in attribution.

Untested? (*gasp*!)

In opening books, untested – or lightly tested – moves are typically treated like embarrassing relatives, introduced quickly for propriety’s sake and then shuffled off to somewhere they won’t bother anyone. Admittedly it is far *easier* to discuss and analyse moves that have been played repeatedly by GMs, but ultimately moves need to stand on their own merits, and we should not shy away from a little work in order to play better chess. Besides, isn’t it *good* to catch our opponents unprepared?

As for enemy novelties, it is also sensible to be ready, especially if it is a computer novelty. After all, if “my” *Houdini* says a move is best, my opponent’s will too, and I will soon be facing this move at the board.

Who?

“I” is me, James Martin Schuyler. “You” is you, the reader. “We” is not the royal we – it is me and you, the reader. “Our” opening is the Dark Knight System. I

am nobody in particular. My qualification for writing this book is the fact that I wrote the excellent book you are now holding in your hands.

Assessments

Chess writers will often tell you that your understanding of a position is more important than the objective assessment. No doubt this is true, but this is not a good reason to be unconcerned with assessments. An objectively poor position will require a great deal of preparation and understanding in order to be worth playing. Also, what if your opponent happens to understand it too?! Wouldn’t it be better to take the time to understand a sound position instead of a questionable one?

I will try to convey as much of my understanding as possible, but I am also extremely concerned with the objective quality of the position (to the extent that it is possible to determine it). I do not want to place us one or two inaccuracies away from an extremely difficult position, nor do I want our opponent to have the luxury of one or two inaccuracies and still retain chances for an advantage.

If you are not concerned with assessments, simply ignore them, or cross out the words and write in crayon, “Black is okay”. I do not find this useful, but it is sufficient for many and true as far as it goes – if the position were not extremely playable, it would not be in the book.

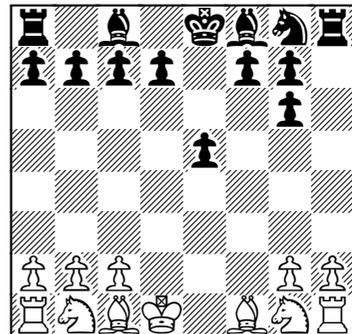
Houdini is not the final arbiter of anything – especially since it is people who must play the positions – but he is a far stronger player than I am, and he is nothing if not objective, so when looking for what passes for the truth, his assessments carry considerable weight. When his opinions have not made sense to me, I have looked deeper. Typically, I have become convinced, but sometimes I am able to convince him – rarely do we continue to disagree.

Assessments in this book are intended to apply to narrow ranges. “Equal” corresponds to an advantage for one player of no more than 0.09 pawns. “Comfortably equal” is the more pleasant half of that range. “Tiny advantage”, “tiny edge”, or “slightly better” is an advantage of 0.10 to 0.17 pawns, while “nearly equal” would be a similar disadvantage. In most chess works, such positions are simply labelled as equal, but I believe that there is far too big a difference between +0.15 and -0.15 (two to three inaccuracies or even two to three tempi in many positions) to let it go without mention. An “edge” or “small advantage” is between 0.18 and 0.25 pawns. In other works, such positions are often called “approximately equal” or $\pm/=$. I understand that the style of assessment I am using implies a degree of precision that is difficult to attain, but I would rather strive for precision and risk falling short than strive for vagueness in the hopes of evading criticism.

I have not found it necessary to include in the repertoire positions worse than a quarter pawn disadvantage, but they are not uncommon in the notes. I have not tried to be as precise in my descriptions of theoretically unimportant positions, but the unadorned words “advantage” and “better” mean approximately 0.26 to 0.39 pawns, while 0.4 to 0.6 is a “comfortable advantage” and more would be “clearly better” or some such, while more than one pawn would be “nearly winning”.

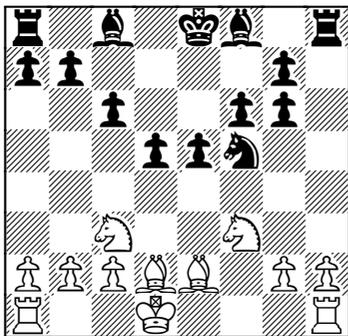
Personal history (with 1...♘c6)

My love affair with 1...♘c6 goes back to the late ‘80s, and my trusty old *Batsford Chess Openings*. I had owned it for some time before I came across a single line by Bogoljubow concerning the amazing 1 d4 ♘c6!?. Should White “take the bait” and try to play a kind of mirrored Alekhine’s, a wonderfully interesting position may be reached: 2 d5 ♘e5 3 f4 ♘g6 4 e4 e5 5 f5(?) ♙h4+ 6 ♔d2 ♚xe4(?) 7 fxg6 ♚xd5+ 8 ♔e1 ♚xd1+ 9 ♔xd1 hxg6.



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Although labelled as unclear, Black's compensation seemed tremendous to me, with three premium pawns and the half-open h-file for a small knight. My shoddy but practical analysis confirmed this: after 10 ♖c3?! c6 11 ♘f3 f6! 12 ♙d3?! ♗e7 13 ♙d2 d5 14 ♙e2 ♘f5



White will be lucky to survive, even should he find a defence to 15...e4 and 16...♘g3 17 ♖g1 ♙c5. This is, in fact, what many players tend to do as White. Importantly, after the correct 10 c4! I still preferred Black.

Two of Bogo's opponents were kind enough to allow 5...♗h4+!. Alas, after 26 years of 1...♘c6, I have yet to bring this variation to the board during a tournament game. (And now I never will. Even if White plays into it, I will be obligated to correct Black's sixth move. More on this in Chapter Three.) On the plus side, I have yet to encounter any real opening difficulties against any calibre of opposition.

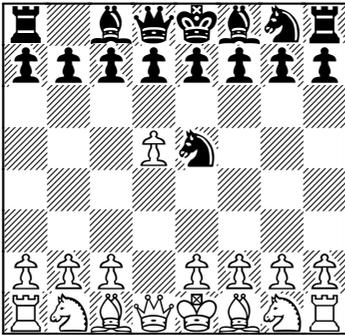
Therefore, play the Dark Knight System!

Chapter Three

1 d4 c6 2 d5

White takes the bull by the horns – a surprisingly uncommon reaction. It is worth noting that this is how Miles played against his own specialty when he faced Zvonimir Mestrovic.

2...e5



White normally chooses between:

A: 3 e4 43

B: 3 f4 46

Others:

a) After 3 f3 Black may wish to try 3...xf3 4 exf3 e5 (or 4...e6 or 4...g6), but I don't care for it – White has de-

velopment, space, and open lines in exchange for his anti-positional capture. Simply 3...d6 transposes to 1 d4 c6 2 f3 d6 3 d5 e5 in Chapter One.

b) 3 f4 g6 4 g3 – does the bishop dominate the knight, or does the knight dominate the bishop? In the blitz game E.Bacrot-C.Bauer, Ajaccio 2007, it looked like the latter after 4...f6 5 c3 e5 6 e4?! b4 7 d3 d6 8 f3 h5 9 f2 c6! 10 dxc6 bxc6 11 g3 a5 12 f4?! f6 13 f5 e7 14 ge2 g4, when Black has a huge advantage (though he went on to lose). Bauer's method of meeting 3 f4 should be copied exactly. 6 dxe6 is an improvement for White, but Black has nothing to fear after 6...fxe6 and 7...b4.

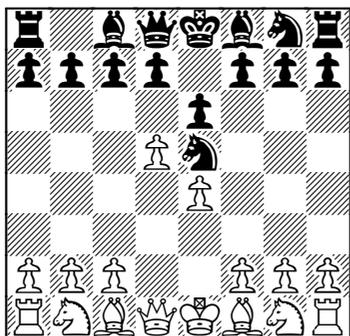
c) 3 c3 e6 will soon transpose to other lines in this chapter; e.g. 4 dxe6 fxe6 5 e4 (see line A) or 4 f4 g6 5 dxe6 fxe6 6 e4 (see 6 c3! in line B).

A: 3 e4 e6

Mestrovic played 3...d6!? 4 f4 d7 5 c3 c6 and went on to draw with GM

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Drasko (Game 24). Black has also scored well with 3...♖g6?!, which can transpose into lines considered below, but his position is highly suspect after 4 h4!



4 dxe6!

4 f4?! is seen here most often and seemed fine the first 55 times it was used, but on the 56th, the German master Lutz Diebl played 4...exd5! and drew with GM Gyimesi in the Bundesliga. Bravo! If White takes the knight, Black draws by perpetual: 5 fxe5 ♖h4+ 6 ♔e2 ♖h5+ 7 ♔d2 ♖h6+ 8 ♔c3 ♖c6+ 9 ♔d3 ♖a6+ etc.

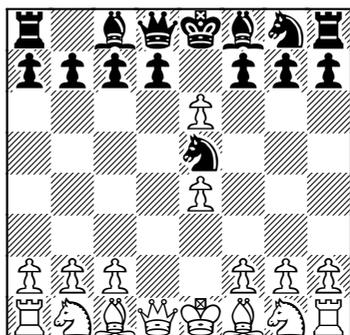
If 6 g3?, as Gyimesi actually played, then 6...♖xe4+ 7 ♖e2 ♖xh1 8 ♖f3 b6 9 ♖c3 and now, rather than Diebl's premature 9...♔a6?, the preliminary 9...c6! maintains Black's nearly winning advantage (10...♔a6 is still coming to extricate the queen).

Meanwhile, White doesn't need to go in for Gyimesi's contortions (Gymnastics?) to avoid a forced draw; he can play 5 exd5 or 5 ♖xd5, although he cannot hope for an opening advantage after such concessions. The best re-

sponse is 5 ♖c3! ♖g6 6 ♖xd5 ♖f6 7 ♖d3 ♔c5 8 ♔e3 ♖e7 9 0-0-0 0-0 10 ♖f3 with a small advantage for White.

Diebl's 4...exd5 was tested again in V.Erdos-R.Rapport, Hungarian Team Championship 2012, to produce another entertaining draw (see Game 25).

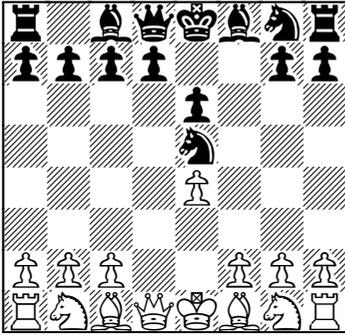
If it is Black who is keen to avoid the draw, he needs to forego 4...exd5 and play 4...♖g6, transposing to positions considered in line B below.



4...fxe6

This recapture is certainly dynamic, although the somewhat exposed position of Black's king requires careful treatment.

Many players prefer 4...dxe6 5 ♖xd8+ ♔xd8, but Black's results have been poor – pretty much draws and losses. Nonetheless, Short made it look easy to defend in S.Gordon-N.Short, British Championship 2011, so his method could certainly be tried (see Game 26); and M.Gurevich-M.Rohde, Philadelphia (blitz) 1989, shows that it is possible for Black to win if White overextends (see Game 27).

**5 ♖c3**

This flexible move makes it hard for Black to activate his f8-bishop, since 5...♙c5?? loses to 6 ♖h5+ and 5...♙b4? is met by 6 ♖d4!, targeting Black's loose bits on b4, e5, and g7.

Alternatively:

a) 5 f4 ♖g6 is line B below. 5...♗f7!? and 5...♖c6!?, are fine too, but no better than the text.

b) 5 ♖f3 ♗xf3 6 ♖xf3 ♖f6 is already equal according to Kalinin, but 7 ♖g3 will gain some advantage – White's queen is active while Black's is mainly awkward. Therefore, just 5...♗f7 which is similar to the main line (and transposes after 6 ♖c3 b6).

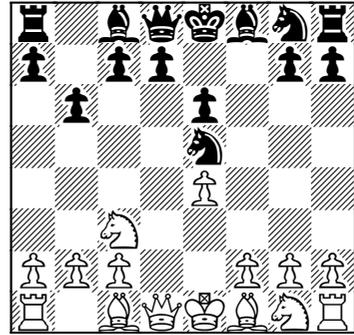
c) 5 ♙f4 is untried but should lead White to a normal plus; e.g. 5...♗g6 (5...♗f7!?) 6 ♙g3 ♙c5 7 ♖c3 a6 8 ♖f3 ♗h6 9 ♖d2 0-0 10 0-0-0 d6 11 h4 b5.

d) 5 ♙e3?! ♗f6 6 ♖c3 ♙b4 7 ♙d4?! ♖c6 8 a3 ♙a5 9 e5 ♗xd4 10 ♖xd4 ♗d5 is a pleasant position for Black.

5...b6!

The fastest way for Black to mobilize. The fianchettoed bishop is active

and occupies a diagonal which may soon be lengthened by White's e4-e5. 5...♖c6!?, as recommended by *Rybka 3*, is also possible – after all, the knight retreats sooner or later, and c6 is not a bad square.

**6 ♗f3**

V.Burmakin-J.Ulko, Moscow 1995, continued 6 ♙f4 ♗g6?! 7 ♙g3 ♙b7 8 h4 h5?!, and after the simple 9 ♖f3 White would have been much better. Instead, 6...♗f7 7 ♖f3 ♙b4! 8 ♙d3 ♙xc3 9 bxc3 ♙b7 10 0-0 ♗f6 11 ♖e1 0-0 12 e5 ♗d5 13 ♙d2 c5 14 ♖e2 c4! 15 ♙xc4 ♖c8 16 ♙b3 ♖c7 is only a bit better for White.

6...♗f7!

It is a bad idea to activate White's queen with 6...♗xf3+, as tried by B.Savchenko.

7 ♙c4?!

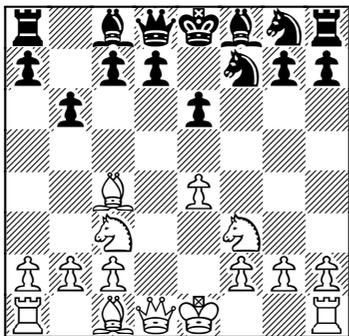
Instead:

a) 7 ♙f4 transposes to 6 ♙f4 ♗f7 7 ♗f3 above.

b) 7 ♙d3 is stronger – at this stage White is more likely to play e5 than Black is. After 7...♙b7 8 0-0 ♗f6 9 ♖e2

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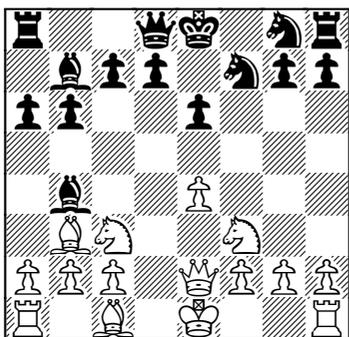
♙b4 10 ♖e1 ♗g4! 11 h3 ♗ge5 12 ♗xe5
 ♗xe5 13 ♖h5+ ♗f7 14 ♙f4 ♙xc3 15
 bxc3 g6 16 ♖g4 ♗e7 White has a small
 advantage, though he has long-term
 concerns about his pawn structure.
 Black still has a useful choice as to
 where he should castle. 17...♗c5 is
 usually a good move.



7...♙b7 8 ♗e2 a6

This useful little move prevents ♗b5
 and ♙a6, while preparing ...b6-b5-b4.

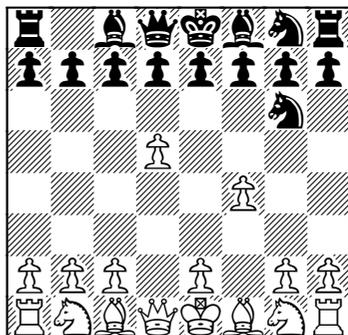
9 ♙b3 ♙b4



Here 9...♗f6?! was played in C.Crouch-
 A.Karpatchev, Cappelle la Grande,
 1993, starting complications which
 objectively favour White. The straight-

forward 9...♙b4 can also lead to com-
 plications – e.g. 10 0-0 ♗f6 11 ♖d1 ♗e7
 12 e5 ♙xc3 13 bxc3 ♗e4 14 ♖d4 ♗xc3
 15 ♗d3 ♗d5 – but here Black is fine.

B: 3 f4 ♗g6



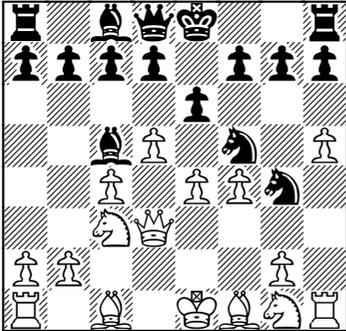
4 e4

Other moves:

a) 4 h4 is an interesting attempt to
 take advantage of Black's inflexible
 knight. In the expert section of the
 1985 New York Open, I fell for White's
 trap and played 4...e5? 5 h5! ♗xf4!? 6
 e3, though I went on to win an ugly
 miniature with 6...♗g5! 7 ♗f3 ♗xd5 8
 ♗xd5 ♗g3+ 9 ♗d1 d6 10 ♙b5+ ♗d8 11
 ♗xf7 ♗f6 12 ♗f3?? ♗xg2 13 ♖f1 ♙g4
 14 ♙e2 ♗xf1+! 15 ♙xf1 ♙xf3+ 16 ♙e2
 ♙d5 (trapping White's queen) 0-1. Hi-
 larious!

Instead, 4...e6! 5 h5 ♗6e7 6 c4!? (6
 dxe6 fxe6 7 e4 d5 transposes to 6 h4 d5
 7 h5 ♗6e7 in the notes to Position
 Three below) 6...♗f6 7 ♗c3 ♗f5 8 ♗d3
 (if 8 dxe6 fxe6 9 g4, then 9...♗xg4!? 10
 e4 ♗fe3 or 10...♗fh6 is possible, but
 relatively simplest is 9...♗g3 10 ♖h3

♗xf1 11 g5 ♗xh5 12 ♖xh5 ♗g3 13 ♖h3 ♗f5 14 e4 ♗d6 15 ♗f3 ♗xc4 16 ♗h4 ♖g8 17 ♖h5+ g6 18 ♖xh7 ♖g7 19 ♖h6 ♖g8 with a draw) 8...♗c5! 9 e4 ♗g4 is fine for Black, according to Mr. H, though there are some crazy variations to consider:



a1) 10 exf5 ♗f2 11 ♖g3 ♗xh1 12 ♖xg7 ♖h4+ 13 ♗d2 (or 13 ♗d1 ♖g4+! 14 ♖xg4 ♗f2+) 13...♖f8 14 ♗ge2 ♗f2 15 ♗b5 ♗b6 16 d6 ♖xh5 17 fxe6 ♗e4+ 18 ♗c2 ♗xd6 is in Black's favour.

a2) 10 dxe6 ♗f2 11 ♖d5 (not 11 exf7+? ♗f8 12 ♖d5 ♗xh1) 11...d6 12 ♖xf5 ♗xe6 13 ♖xc5 dxc5 14 ♗xf2 ♗xc4 with an unbalanced but roughly equal position.

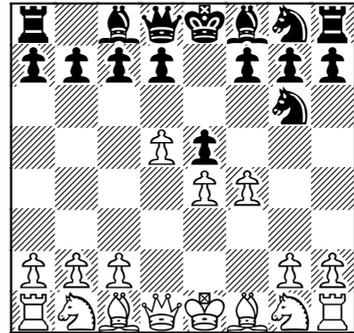
a3) 10 ♗d1 ♗fh6 11 dxe6 f5! 12 ♗e2 ♖e7! with excellent play for the pawn.

b) 4 f5 overextends: 4...♗e5 5 ♗f4 d6 6 e4 g6! (in practice, Black has played 6...♗f6?! or 6...e6? but it is best to challenge White's space immediately) 7 ♗f3 ♗g7 8 ♗b5+ ♗d7 9 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 10 ♗xd7+ ♖xd7 11 ♗xe5 dxe5 12 0-0 ♗f6 with equality; e.g. 13 ♖d3 c6 14 c4 cxd5 15 cxd5 ♖c8 16 ♗c3 0-0.

c) 4 ♗f3 is legal and was in fact the move order for Onischuk-Shkuro mentioned below (see note 'e' to Position Three). 4...e6 5 dxe6 fxe6 6 e4 transposes to the main line, while 5 c4 ♗c5 will not bring White any happiness.

4...e5

4...e6 may transpose after 5 fxe6, or it may turn into a kind of mirrored Alekhine, which usually works badly for White because of the weak a7-g1 diagonal; e.g. 5 c4?! exd5 6 cxd5 ♗c5 or 5 ♗f3 exd5 6 exd5?! ♗c5. However, 5 ♗c3! exd5 6 ♖xd5! ♗f6 7 ♖d3 ♗c5 8 ♗e3 ♖e7 9 0-0-0 0-0 10 ♗f3 is better for White (though Black is still okay).

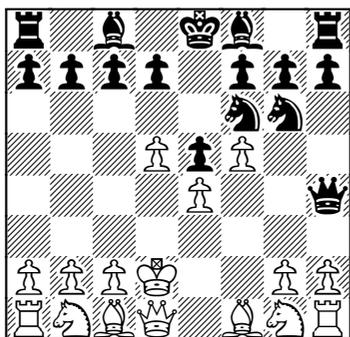


5 dxe6!

White's only good move.

a) 5 f5? could lead to the position mentioned in the introduction to this book after 5...♖h4+ 6 ♗d2 ♖xe4 7 fxe6 ♖xd5+ 8 ♗e1 ♖xd1+ 9 ♗xd1 hxe6, assessed as unclear by Bogoljubow. The endgame is favourable to Black, but that is a moot point because 6...♗f6! is even stronger – as one of my students, Matthew Shih, was kind enough to

point out to me last year.



a1) 7 fxg6? ♖xe4+ 8 ♖e2 ♖f2+ 9 ♖d3 ♖c5+ 10 ♖c3 ♖a4+ 11 ♖b3 ♖b6+ 12 ♖c4 ♖a6+! 13 ♖b3 ♖c5+ 14 ♖c3 ♖e4+ 15 ♖b3 ♖b6+ 16 ♖c4 ♖b4+ 17 ♖d3 ♖f2+ wins White's queen.

a2) 7 ♖c3 ♖b4 8 fxg6 ♖xe4+ 9 ♖e2 ♖f2+ 10 ♖d3 f5 (10...♗xc3 11 ♖xe4! ♖a5 12 c3 hxg6 13 ♖d3 d6 14 ♖c4 ♖f5 15 ♖e2 ♖b6 may be better, but it's far more complicated, as Black will still be down material for some time) 11 ♖xe4 ♖d4+ 12 ♖e2 ♖xe4+ 13 ♖e3 f4 14 ♖d3 ♖xe3+ also leaves Black much better.

a3) 7 ♖f3 ♖xe4+ 8 ♖e2 ♖f4+ 9 ♖xf4 ♖xf4 10 ♖xf4 exf4 11 ♖f3 ♖f6 12 ♖c3 ♖b4 13 ♖ge2 (13 ♖e1+ ♖f8 14 ♖c4 b5! 15 ♖xb5 ♖b7) 13...d6 14 ♖xf4 h5! is relatively best, but still very good for Black.

b) 5 ♖f3? is apparently tempting (it has been played several times), but after 5...exf4 6 ♖c3 ♖c5 7 ♖d3 ♖e7! 8 ♖e2 d6 9 ♖a4 (9 ♖d2?! a6! is even worse) 9...♖b6 10 ♖d2 ♖f6 White has far too little for the pawn.

c) 5 ♖f3 exf4 6 ♖c3 (6 ♖xf4 ♖xf4 7

♖xf4 ♖f6 8 ♖xf6 ♖xf6 leaves Black with a superior pawn structure and White with an acute shortage of dark-squared bishops) 6...♖c5 7 ♖xf4 ♖xf4 8 ♖xf4 ♖f6 9 ♖g3 d6 10 ♖b5+ ♖f8 11 ♖f3 ♖g6 and Black can look forward to a long and pleasant endgame.

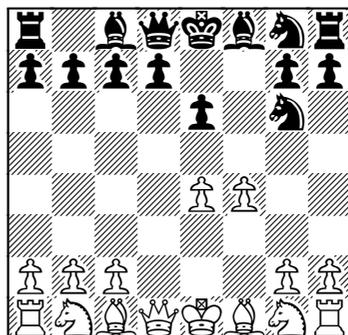
d) 5 ♖e2 (or 5 ♖h3) 5...exf4 6 ♖xf4 ♖d6! already puts the enemy kingside under pressure: 7 ♖xg6?! hxg6 8 ♖f3 ♖h4+ 9 ♖d1 ♖f6 10 ♖d3 ♖e5 is obviously not satisfactory for White, but 7 ♖f3 ♖f6 8 ♖c3 0-0 9 ♖d3 leaves Black with several good ideas, the simplest being 9...♖e5 (9...c6!? 9...♖e5!?) 10 0-0 d6 11 h3 c5, when Black's activity and strong e5-point give him the advantage.

5...fxe6

The endgame after 5...dxe6 6 ♖xd8+ ♖xd8 is playable in theory, but with Black's slightly misplaced g6-knight, it is less appealing than the similar ending in line A (without 3 f4 ♖g6). In practice, Black's results are quite poor.

Instead, 5...fxe6 brings us to:

Position Three



Not to put too fine a point on it, but the players who have reached this position with the black pieces need collectively to have their heads examined. White's main asset is his powerful pawn duo on e4 and f4. Black's main asset is his central pawn majority. One need notice only one of these two things in order to come up with the correct plan (or at least the correct sixth move) for Black. In fact, I'm not even going to insult my readers by saying it out loud, so if you still don't know, see Wood-Penrose below and then read *Pawn Power in Chess* by Hans Kmoch.

Instead of taking the opportunity to strike in the centre, Black has generally been seduced by 6...♙c5, occupying the a7-g1 diagonal, presumably to stop White from castling. Naturally this is less important than the central battle and, what's worse, it doesn't even work. If White finds the bishop troublesome, he can trade it off with a timely ♖a4 or ♜e2 and ♙e3. To add insult to injury, White is usually better off castled long anyway. Sometimes 7...♙c5 is a good idea (or 7...♙b4+ 8 c3 ♙c5), but if there is a knight on c3, it is much better to put pressure on White's centre with 7...♙b4, which prepares ...♗f6-e4.

Black's e4-knight can be a very annoying piece. As we see in the following analysis, White's light squares are usually too weak (because he has had to play g2-g3) to allow him to eliminate the knight comfortably with ♙d3 and

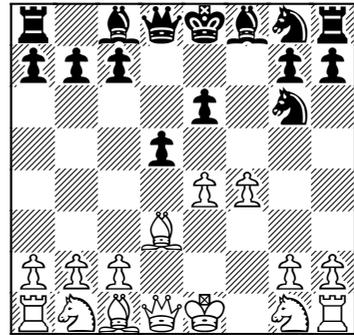
♙xe4, even if this wins a pawn.

Let's get to the analysis.

6 ♗f3

Other moves:

a) 6 ♙d3 is less popular and less successful. Then Black has done fine with 6...♙c5, but 6...d5! is more accurate, as in B.Wood-J.Penrose, Southend 1957(!),

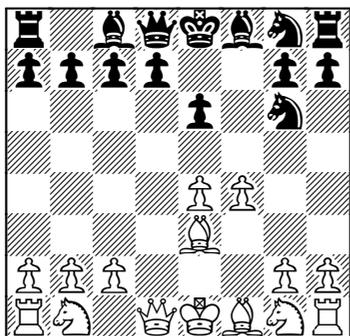


which continued 7 e5 ♗h6 8 ♙e3?! and now not the game's 8...♗f5?! 9 ♙xf5 exf5 10 ♗f3 ♙e7?! (10...c5!) 11 c4 which is good for White, but instead 8...♗h4! 9 ♜e2 c5! and Black is better.

No better is 7 ♗c3 ♙b4 8 ♙d2 ♗h6 9 ♗f3 0-0 10 g3, when Black gently plays 10...e5!! and lets White try to work out the details with his king in the centre. The correct solution is 11 ♗xd5 ♙xd2+ 12 ♜xd2 c6 13 ♗e3 exf4 14 ♙c4+ ♗h8 15 ♜xd8 ♗xd8 16 gxf4 ♗xf4 17 ♗g1 b5 with equality. According to *Houdini*, 11 f5 dxe4 12 ♗xe4 ♙xd2 13 ♜xd2 ♙xf5 14 0-0-0 ♜e7 is also equal, but to me it looks a lot like White is down a pawn for nothing. Fortunately, it's not really our problem.

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b) 6 ♙e3 is seldom played – although it prevents ... ♙c5 , White's important dark-squared bishop is vulnerable:



6...d5 (of course) 7 g3 (7 ♘c3 ♙b4 8 ♙d3 ♙xc3 9 ♙xc3 ♗f6 10 0-0-0 0-0 11 exd5 exd5 12 ♗f3 ♙g4 is equal) 7...c5! 8 ♗d2 ♙b6 9 ♙b1 (sad, but there's really nothing better: 9 f5 exf5 10 exd5 ♗f6 11 ♙e2 ♙e7 12 ♗c4 ♙a6 13 d6 b5! or 13 ♙xc5 0-0 14 d6 ♙d8 15 d7 ♙xd7 16 ♙xf8 ♗xf8 gives Black more than enough for a small exchange; while 9 ♙d3 ♙e7 10 ♗f3 ♗h6 11 ♙e2 ♗g4 12 exd5 exd5 13 ♙g1 0-0 14 0-0-0 ♙d6 15 h3 ♗f6 is fine for Black) 9... ♙d7 10 ♗f3 ♗f6 11 e5 ♗g4 12 ♙g1 ♙c7 13 c4! d4 14 ♙d3 ♙c6 15 h3 ♗h6 16 ♙f2 ♙e7 17 0-0 0-0 18 b4 b6 19 ♗e4 . White's play makes an excellent impression, but here Black has 19... ♗xf4 ! 20 gxf4 ♙xf4 21 ♙e2 ♗f5 22 ♙b3 ♙f8 , which reverses the initiative at the cost of a small material investment. *Houdini* calls it equal, but if I had the choice, I'd sit behind the black pieces.

c) 6 g3 d5 7 ♗f3 transposes to 6 ♗f3

d5 7 g3 below.

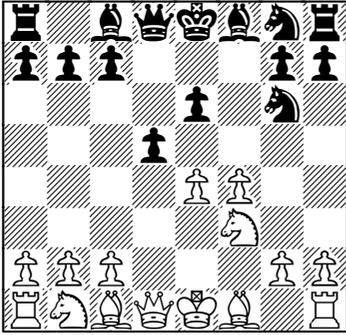
d) 6 h4!? has never been played, but it's a venomous move. The tactical justification is 6... ♗xh4 ? 7 ♙g4 ! ♙e7 (7... ♗g6 8 ♙xh7) 8 ♙xg7 with a large advantage for White. Correct is the anti-shocker 6...d5 even though 7 h5 ♗e7 blocks the f8-bishop. After 8 ♗f3 ♗c6 9 ♗c3 ♙b4 10 ♙d2 ♗f6 11 e5 ♙xc3 12 ♙xc3 ♗e4 13 ♙d3 ♗xc3 14 bxc3 Black gets out of Dodge with 14... ♙e7 15 ♗g5 ♙d7 16 ♙xh7 0-0-0, when White has space and a pawn, but is badly overextended with nowhere for his king. I will utter a naughty word: unclear.

e) The rare 6 ♗c3 !? is logical, fighting for the d5-square, but Black forces ...d7-d5 anyway with 6... ♙b4 ! 7 ♗e2 (other moves, such as 7 ♗f3 and 7 ♙d3 , transpose elsewhere) 7...d5 8 ♙d3 c6 9 ♙d2 ♗f6 (after 9... dxe4 10 ♙xd8 ♙xd8 11 a3 ♙a5 White is a little better in the endgame) 10 e5 ♗g4 11 h3 ♗h6 12 0-0-0 0-0 13 g4 b5 14 ♙b1 ♙c5 15 ♙g2 a5 and although White had a head start in the race, it is difficult for him to advance further. Then 16 ♗d4 !? ♙b6 17 ♗xc6 ♙b7 18 ♗xd5 exd5 19 ♗xa5 ♗xf4 20 ♙xf4 ♙xa5 21 ♙xd5 + ♙h8 22 ♙xh6 gxf6 is certainly complicated, but not unfavourable to Black.

The text move, 6 ♗f3 , is by far the most common – apparently with good reason since White has won the last five games in a row from this position, most notably A.Onischuk-I.Shkuro, Ukrainian Team Championship 2009,

which is a perfect example of what Black must avoid (see Game 28). Clearly we need some new and improved ideas.

6...d5!



This move is part of my original analysis that dates back to 1986, and inspired the above variations. In twenty-five opportunities, Black has somehow failed to try this, so we analyse in a vacuum. For most players, the following lines need hardly be memorized, but offer an excellent opportunity to get acquainted with the wide variety of plans for both sides.

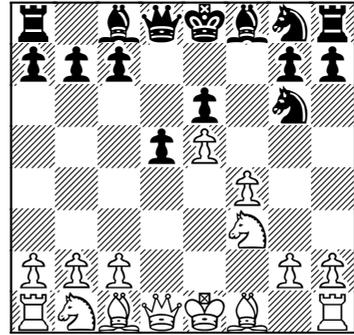
7 ♖c3

a) The first thing I realized 26 years ago was that 7 f5?! is not a problem: 7...dxe4 8 ♖xd8+ ♕xd8 9 ♖g5 exf5 10 ♖f7+ ♕e8 11 ♖xh8 ♖xh8 12 ♖c3 c6 13 ♕c4 (13 g4!?) 13...♖f6 14 ♕e3 ♕d6 is a bit better for Black. As it turns out, 7...exf5 is also okay: 8 exd5 ♖f6 9 ♖c3 ♕b4 10 ♖e2+ ♕f7! 11 ♖g5+ ♕g8 12 ♕d2 ♕xc3 13 ♕xc3 ♖xd5 14 ♕d2 h6 15 ♖f3 ♕h7 16 0-0-0 ♖e8 and it is White who has the hard job of proving full

compensation.

Notice that Black isn't actually threatening 7...dxe4, so White has an array of options:

b) 7 e5 may not be best, but it is certainly critical.

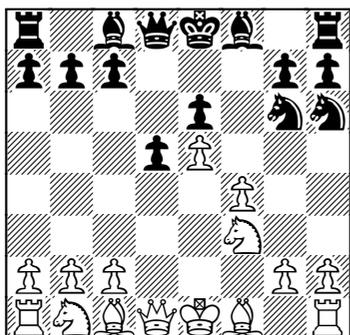


White plans ♖g5 and ♖xh7, an argument he will try to enhance with h4-h5, ♕d3, or ♖h5. This plan is indeed dangerous, especially if Black is castled on that side of the board. However, Black does not skip his turns, and as long as White is pursuing this plan he is neither developing quickly nor attending to his own king. For instance, 7...♖h6! 8 g3 (or 8 ♕e3 ♖g4 9 ♖d2 ♖xe3 10 ♖xe3 ♖e7! 11 ♖c3 ♖b4) 8...c5 9 ♖g5 ♕e7 10 ♖xh7 (after 10 ♕b5+ ♕f8 White has to worry about both 11...c4 and 11...♖xe5) 10...♖f5 11 ♖h5 ♕f7, when Black has good compensation after White's failed attack; e.g. 12 ♖c3 ♕g8 13 ♖f6+ ♕xf6 14 ♖xg6 ♕e7 15 ♕g2 c4 16 0-0 ♖h6 17 ♖g4 ♖b6+ 18 ♕h1 ♕d7 and White is having trouble with development, the centre, and his king, which doesn't leave much to be

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happy about. There is also 8 h4!? ♔c5 9 h5 (or 9 ♔d3 ♖g4 when, according to *Houdini*, White has nothing better than 10 ♖d4 ♖h6 11 ♖f3, with a repetition) 9...♗e7 10 ♖g5 ♖hf5 11 ♗d3 h6 12 g4 ♖d4 13 c3 ♖dc6 14 ♖f3 a5! with equal chances. Black intends ...b7-b6, ...♔a6 (...♔b7), ...♗d7 (or ...d5-d4, ...♗d5), and will have the choice of which side to castle. White may enjoy his space, but may also find himself overextended.

Hold on: what's so great about 7...♖h6 - ?

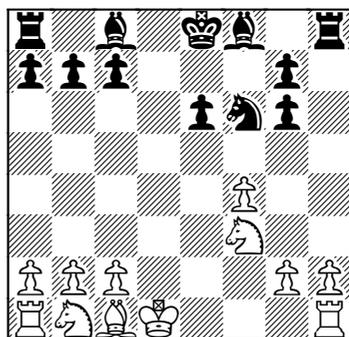


I used to have problems in this position in blitz games because I didn't know the proper arrangement for the pieces – especially whether to play 7...♔c5 or 7...c5, and also whether to play ...♖h6 or ...♖e7. As it turns out, it is not yet clear whether it is the bishop or the pawn that belongs on c5, so it makes sense to wait on that decision, but the knight is just about always best on the h6-square. All of ...♖g4, ...♖f5, and ...♖f7 are useful options from there, and it can hold up White's g- and f-pawns. Just as important, developing

the knight to h6 avoids a traffic jam on the e7-square, which may be needed for Black's other knight, not to mention the bishop and queen. (You may now resume your normal programming.)

c) The immediate 7 h4!? is also possible, but Black is already fine after 7...♔b4+! 8 c3 (not 8 ♔d2? dxe4!) 8...♔c5 9 h5 ♖6e7; e.g. 10 b4 ♔b6 11 c4!? dxc4 12 ♗xd8+ ♖xd8 13 ♔b2 (not 13 ♖g5? ♔d4!) 13...exf3 14 ♔xg7 ♖f5 15 ♔xh8 f2+ 16 ♖d2 ♖g3 17 c5 ♖xh1 18 cxb6 axb6 19 ♖c3 ♖e7, which is certainly no worse for Black.

d) 7 ♔d3 allows us to surprise White with 7...dxe4! 8 ♔xe4 ♗xd1+ 9 ♖xd1 ♖f6 10 ♔xg6 hxg6.

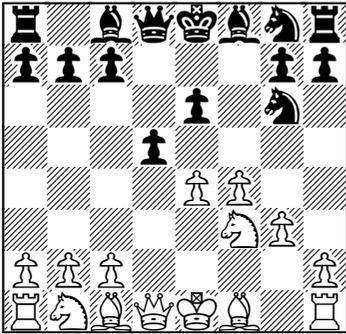


Although our pawns are vile, our bishop pair and overall activity are quite enough, particularly since the enemy king is a bit loose; e.g. 11 ♖bd2 ♔d6 12 ♖c4 b5 13 ♖ce5 ♔b7 14 ♖e2 ♔xe5 15 fxe5 ♖d7 and Black is more comfortable because of White's bad bishop; or 11 ♔e3?! ♔d6 12 ♖c3 ♖g4 13 ♖e2 0-0! 14 g3?! (14 ♔c1!) 14...b6! and suddenly White is in big trouble; or

11 ♖c3 ♙d7 12 ♗e5 (12 ♙e2 ♙d6! 13 ♗e5 ♙xe5 14 fxe5 ♗g4 nets a pawn) 12...0-0-0!! 13 ♗f7 ♙c6+ 14 ♗xd8 ♙xd8 15 h4 ♙xg2 16 ♖h2 ♙f3+ 17 ♙e1 ♙c5 and how is White going to untangle himself without shedding any material?

e) 7 c4!? does force 7...dxe4, but weakens White's position as well: 8 ♖xd8 ♙xd8 9 ♗g5 ♙e8 10 ♗xe4 ♗f6 11 ♙d3 b6 12 ♗bc3 ♙b7 13 0-0 ♖d8 and Black is comfortably equal.

f) 7 g3

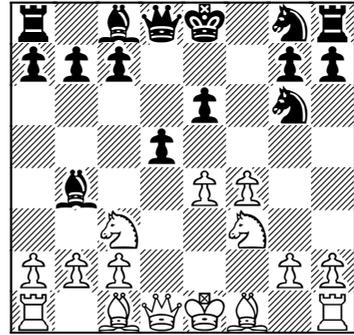


7...♙c5 (7...♙b4+ 8 c3 ♙c5 9 ♖e2 ♖e7 10 ♗bd2 ♗h6 11 ♗g5 0-0 12 h4 ♖e8 is okay, too) 8 ♖e2 (8 ♗c3 ♗f6! 9 e5 ♗g4 10 ♗d4 0-0 11 ♖xg4 ♙xd4 12 ♙d2 c5! 13 0-0-0 ♖b6 with equal chances) 8...♗f6 9 e5 ♗e4 10 ♙e3 ♙xe3 11 ♖xe3 ♗e7! 12 ♙d3 ♙d7 13 ♗bd2 ♗xd2 14 ♗xd2 (14 ♖xd2 c5) 14...0-0 15 0-0 ♗f5 and with 16...♖e7 (or 16...b6) and 17...c5 coming, Black has sufficient counterplay.

g) 7 exd5?! exd5 8 ♙d3 makes no sense – it surrenders the centre and activates Black's problem piece, the c8-

bishop. Unsurprisingly Black has many ways to play: 8...♙g4 9 0-0 ♙c5+ 10 ♙h1 ♗8e7 11 h3 ♙xf3 12 ♖xf3 0-0 seems simplest, or Black can enter an equal endgame with 8...♙b4+ and 9...♖e7+.

7...♙b4



8 g3

White usually finds it necessary to play this sooner or later. Otherwise:

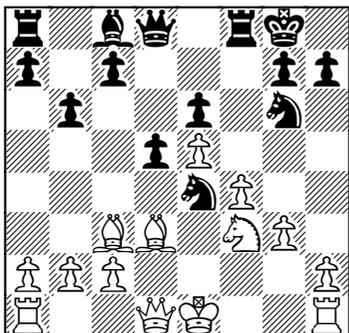
a) 8 ♙d3 ♙xc3 9 bxc3 dxe4 10 ♙xe4 ♖xd1+ 11 ♙xd1 ♗f6 12 ♙d3 0-0 13 ♖e1 ♗g4 14 ♙xg6 hxg6 15 h3 ♗f6 16 ♗e5 ♗h5 17 ♙xg6 ♖f6 18 ♗e7+ ♙f7 19 ♗xc8 ♗xf4! with equal chances.

b) 8 e5 ♗8e7 (8...c5 isn't bad either) 9 g3 0-0 10 ♙d3 c5 and Black's good centre and rapid deployment ensure that he will not be rolled up on the kingside and that his chances are not worse.

c) 8 ♖d3!? ♙xc3+! 9 ♖xc3 ♗f6 10 e5 ♗e4 11 ♖a3 ♖e7 12 ♖xe7 ♗e7 13 ♙d3 b6 14 ♙xe4 dxe4 15 ♗g5 h6 16 ♗xe4 ♙b7 17 ♗c3 ♗f5 18 0-0 0-0 and Black has the d-file, while White's c1-bishop is a huge problem, a situation which fully compensates for the pawn.

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8... ♖f6! 9 ♙d2 0-0 10 e5 ♙xc3 11 ♙xc3 ♘e4 12 ♙d3 b6!



White's c3-bishop is a silly piece – at the moment Black is far better off keeping the e4-knight and blocking the other bishop.

a) 13 ♙xe4 dxe4 14 ♘g5 is pointless

because of 14...h6! 15 ♘xe4?! ♙b7 16 ♖e2 ♗d5 17 ♘f2 ♘xf4! 18 gxf4 ♖xf4 19 ♖f1 (not 19 ♗d1?! ♖xf2!) 19...♖af8 20 ♙d2 (still not 20 ♗d1?! ♗xa2! 21 ♗d7 ♗a4 22 ♖xc7 ♙g2 and White is toast) 20...♖f3 21 a4 ♖8f5 22 0-0-0 ♖xe5 23 ♗xf3 ♗xf3 24 ♘d3 ♗d5 25 ♘xe5 ♗xe5 26 ♙c3 ♖e3+ 27 ♙b1 ♙d5 28 h4 g5 with some advantage to Black.

b) 13 ♖e2 ♙b7 14 0-0-0 ♖e8 15 ♙xe4 dxe4 16 ♘g5 e3 17 ♖he1 h6 18 ♘f3 ♘e7 19 ♗xe3 ♘d5 with enough play for the pawn; e.g. 20 ♗d3 a5 21 ♘d2 ♘b4! or 21 ♘d4 a4 22 a3 c5 23 ♘e2 b5.

c) 13 0-0 ♘e7 14 ♖e2 ♙b7 (14...♘c5? 15 ♙xh7+ is too strong) 15 ♗ad1 ♖e8 is equal.