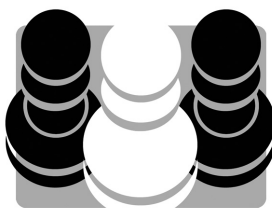


The King's Gambit

By

John Shaw



Quality Chess
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Preface

The King's Gambit has a long and glorious history. It has created famous games and been enthusiastically adopted by many great players of the past couple of centuries. From the likes of Morphy, Steinitz and Anderssen in the 19th century, to Spassky and Bronstein in the 20th, and now, on occasion, modern players such as Short, Shirov, Nakamura, Morozevich, Federov, Shulman and Zvjaginsev.

For all its supporters, there is no disputing that 2.f4 is out of fashion. Far more popular, by a massive margin, is 2.g3. So what is the problem with 2.f4? Is it too risky? Does it weaken the king? Or maybe it just loses a pawn? These issues, and more, will be considered in the following pages.

Adverse Opinions

The King's Gambit has been around so long that many famous names have stated an opinion. Let's see a brief sample.

David Bronstein's views of 2.f4 exf4 could be summarized as: 3.g3=; 3.g4∞. In fact he said, "You want to play the King's Gambit? Well, Black can draw after 3.g3. Play 3.g4 if you want to win!"

In *The System* Hans Berliner advocates a repertoire with 1.d4, but in passing he stated an opinion on the King's Gambit. "If there is a correct move after 1.e4 e5 it must be 2.f4, since 2.g3 limits further aggression in the centre because the f2-pawn will not be able to participate. Since 2.f4 is not feasible, it is likely 1.e4 is wrong."

In this book we will demand evidence of 2.f4's infeasibility. And at least Berliner appreciates that 2.f4 is the logical move. Others have been less kind in their opinions.

"The King's Gambit is busted. It loses by force." Bobby Fischer, 1961.

I once asked English GM Mark Hebden, who played the King's Gambit for many years, what the most effective defences against it were. "All of them." Hebden later gave up the King's Gambit in favour of offbeat 1.d4 lines. I too used to be a practitioner of 2.f4, but I replaced it with the Exchange Variation of the Ruy Lopez, as did a couple of fellow King's Gambit players. Such a change may seem odd, as it is a shift from one end of the spectrum to the other: from sacrificing a pawn in search of the initiative to a rock-solid opening that aims directly for an endgame. However, the switch makes sense when one realizes that King's Gambit players are extremists – it is all or nothing. And there are none so virtuous as a reformed King's Gambit player.

As the above quotes show, there are many who doubt the soundness of the King's Gambit, but after many years of analysis I cannot find a line that forces an advantage for Black. Certainly there are various equalizing lines, but then the experts tell me that the Ruy Lopez also gains no advantage if Black knows his way around the Marshall Attack.

Positional Themes

The positional themes of the King's Gambit are classical and clear: White wishes to dominate the centre. On move 1 Black has mirrored White's central occupation, so on move 2 we set out to destroy the offender. As every novice should know, White is not yet threatening $fxe5$ due to $\dots\text{Wh4}\dagger$, but that trick will not last for long. Later White can perhaps use the half-open f-file as a conduit for his heavy pieces. In principle, this is one of the main potential pluses of $2.f4$ over $2.\text{d}f3$. In many of the lines after $2.\text{d}f3$ the rooks are much delayed in entering the game.

Naturally, a possible strategic drawback of $2.f4$ is that it weakens the $h4-e1$ diagonal and creates long-term issues with the king's safety. White used to castle kingside in most games, but nowadays going long is trendy. This makes a lot of sense as White's kingside is undeniably weakened by the absence of the f-pawn, especially if Black captures on $f4$ and follows up with an early $\dots g7-g5$. With the king on the left, White can eschew trying to recapture on $f4$ in favour of blasting open the kingside with $g2-g3$. We will see examples of this plan in various lines including $3.\dots g5$, $3.\dots d6$ and $3.\dots h6$. This plan is one of my main hopes for White in the King's Gambit.

Should I play the King's Gambit?

Is the King's Gambit the ideal choice as a competitive weapon? In a top-level correspondence game, I think the honest answer is no. If Black can consult the relevant sources (I hope this book will become the most important source!) and use an engine, then he should be able to solve his opening problems more easily than against $2.\text{d}f3$. However, over the board it is clear that the King's Gambit is effective at all levels up to and including 2800+. White is almost certain to know the theory and standard ideas better than Black. It is, however, essential that White is ready to duck and dive by varying his replies to the critical systems. This is hardly exclusive to the King's Gambit; even in the most respectable openings there are very few players who play the same exact moves repeatedly, as their opponents will bash out a string of memorized moves of Houdini-like power.

Guide to Contents

This is a big book, so I should offer some guidance to what it contains. Of course all Black's respectable ways to decline the gambit are considered, while after the critical $2.\dots exf4$ there is a lot about $3.\text{d}f3$ but just one chapter about $3.\text{g}c4$. This is not just a matter of taste; it is my belief, backed up by analysis, that White cannot equalize after $3.\text{g}c4$. To summarize my view in the same way as I did Bronstein's, it would be $3.\text{d}f3=\infty$ and $3.\text{g}c4\bar{}$. For that reason I offer one chapter to help Black try to refute the Bishop's Gambit. I know the Bishop's Gambit has fans who will be less than happy with this, but I have to be honest about where my analysis has led me.

This book does not cover every possible variation after $2.f4$, but there is more than enough material to build several repertoires for White. There is also plenty of guidance for those who expect to face the King's Gambit with Black. My guiding principle has been "Don't include analysis of inferior replies to inferior lines." If neither side should play the position, then it is irrelevant. I have, admittedly, broken this rule in certain places, if the 'irrelevant' lines are sufficiently instructive or entertaining.

Chapter Order

The chapters are ordered so that 2...exf4 is covered first, then the declined lines later. Some books start slowly and simply, then build up to the most difficult material. This book does the reverse. Thus when you turn the page from this preface you will land headfirst in some of the sharpest lines of the 3...g5 variation. I prefer this order, as creating and controlling chaos is a large part of the King's Gambit's appeal. If you prefer to read the chapters out of order, then the Contents page or Index of Variations will allow easy navigation. Fair warning: this book contains a plethora of mind-bending variations. It's probably best not to try to read it all in one sitting, or a Scanners-style disaster may occur.

Years in the making...

I should say a few words about the process of writing this book. Originally we hired Polish IM Jan Pinski to write it, but Jan had to withdraw before he had even started, to concentrate on his day job as a journalist. We had promised a book on the King's Gambit, so in a moment of weakness I volunteered to write it in my spare time at work. That was five years ago; it turned out I don't have much spare time at work, and the planned quick and breezy 250-page guide turned into a 680-page theoretical monster. On the plus side, there is a lot of interesting and original analysis in this book. If White is familiar with this book and Black is not, then I would expect many quick results of 1–0. Many of the novelties given in these pages can only be met by defences that I suspect could not be found by any unprepared human.

Acknowledgments

This book is very much a team effort. Within Quality Chess there were contributions from GMs Jacob Aagaard and Keti Arakhamia-Grant, and especially IM Andrew Greet. Many outside Quality Chess have also helped – over the years I have asked most of the people I know for their opinion and help with the King's Gambit; luckily most of the people I know are strong chess players. I cannot mention everyone (no doubt my memory would fail to complete the list anyway) but I shall pick out a few of the major contributors. GM Martin Petr offered helpful analysis of many troublesome lines. Playing “in Quaade style” is an important part of this book, as Chapter 5 will explain; I was inspired in this direction by the games and analysis of Michael Jensen. Professor Jesús Seoane of Madrid sent me an excellent game of his that fit perfectly into this book. The outside contributor who helped me most was ‘Micawber’ of the ChessPublishing forum. His King's Gambit files were an invaluable starting point for my research. Those files were also a nuisance on several occasions when I realized that a new move I had found was not as new as I had hoped.

As I mentioned earlier, I used to play the King's Gambit. This was way back in the early 90's when I was becoming an FM. I had not studied the theory much and I didn't play it very well, but back then I didn't play anything particularly well. I gave up playing the King's Gambit after a few ugly losses – it's always easier to blame the opening rather than confront one's own analytical shortcomings. I now know the theory, I understand the positions and am sharpening my tactics with puzzle books. As a King's Gambit player, I shall return.

John Shaw
Glasgow, June 2013

Section 1

The 4...g4 Variation

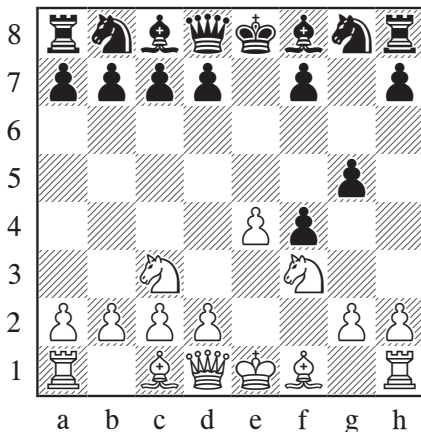
GAME 2

Jesús Seoane Sepúlveda – Ignacio Prieto

Cádiz 1986

In the following game White is a Professor of Physics from Madrid, Spain. While I was writing this chapter Jesús emailed me asking about the book and he also shared an old game of his. I was surprised to learn that his game was precisely in a line I recommend against 3...g5. In 1986 he created the following miniature masterpiece.

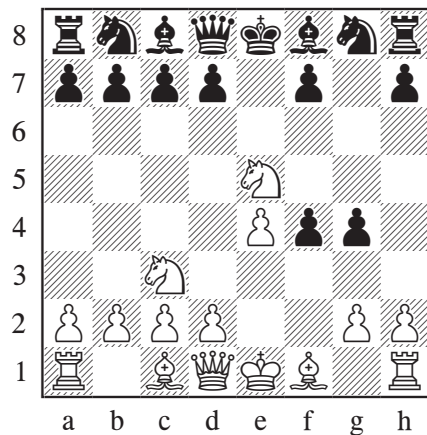
1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.♘f3 g5 4.♘c3



4...g4

The move that will tempt those taken by surprise. The alternatives are generally more challenging, as we will see in later games.

5.♘e5



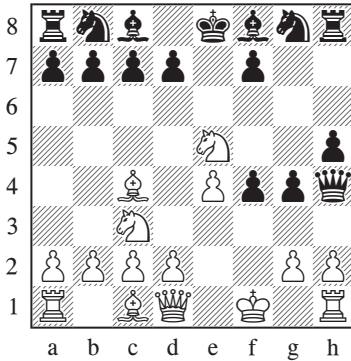
5...♙h4†

Almost universally played. Black will be asking himself, “Otherwise, why play the weakening ...g5-g4?” Still, we shall have a look at alternatives, as one of them is certainly the best move.

5...h5 6.♙c4

This is a much improved Kieseritzky for White, who has not had to play the weakening tempo-burner h2-h4.

6...♖h4† 7.♕f1



7...♘h6

Or 7...♖h7 8.♘d5 ♖d8 9.d4 d6 10.♘d3↑
 What's the assessment? 'Unclear' or 'Initiative to White'? The answer is 'both' but if you don't prefer White then 2.f4 is not the move for you.

8.d4↑

In this classical-style King's Gambit position, note that:

8...d6

is met by

9.♙xf4!

One knows this move is right before a single tactic has been calculated. The idea is:

9...dxe5 10.♙xe5

Hitting the rook and planning ♘d5. For example after:

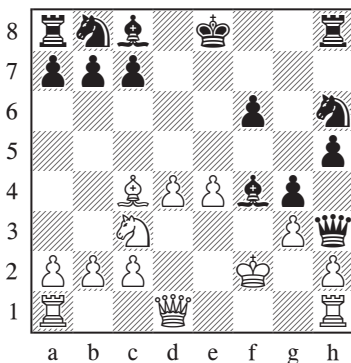
10...f6 11.♙f4

The black queen is now the target.

11...♙d6?

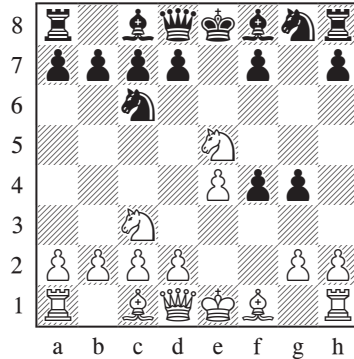
11...g3 is essential but White is better after either 12.♖d2 or simply 12.♙xg3.

12.g3 ♖h3† 13.♕f2 ♙xf4



In this fun position White has two winners: the immediate 14.♘d5! or White can amuse himself with: 14.♙f1! ♙xg3† 15.hxg3 ♖xh1 16.♙b5† c6 17.♖xh1 cxb5 18.♘d5+–

5...♘c6!N

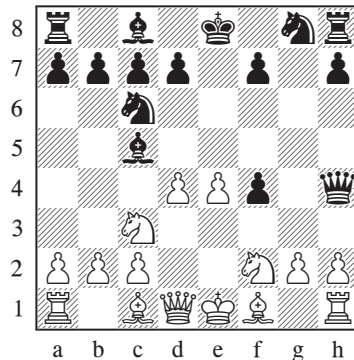


Curiously, no one has tested this sensible move over the board. White must be precise just to reach a balanced messy position:

6.♘xg4 ♖h4† 7.♘f2 ♙c5

It looks like a disaster as either queen defence of f2 will be smashed by ...♘d4, but White has a defence based on interference (it's not just for puzzles).

8.d4□



Now there are two moves to consider:
 i) 8...♘xd4 or ii) 8...♙xd4.

i) 8...♘xd4 9.b4

I like this forcing move.

Petr's 9.♘a4 also looks good after: 9...d6 10.♘xc5 Keep it simple. 10...dxc5 11.c3± But

note that instead of the effective 10. ♖xc5, 10.b4 leads to a mess after 10... ♗g4 11. ♖d2 0–0–0∞.

9... ♗b6 10. ♖d5±

White will take on b6 and follow up with ♗b2.

I will give one sample line:

10... ♖c6 11. ♖xb6 axb6 12. ♗b2 f6 13. ♗e2 d6 14.0–0↑

The f4-pawn will not last long.

ii) 8... ♗xd4

After the text move there are no ... ♖d4 ideas to worry about, so:

9. ♖f3

Now Black can choose between many moves. In general the position is reminiscent of the 4.h4 g4 5. ♖e5 d6 line (I know that is a curious thing to say when Black's d-pawn is sitting on d7, but it is true nonetheless). With so many options I will just offer just a short illustrative line:

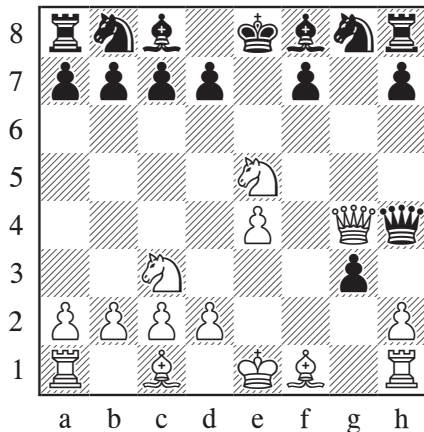
9... ♖b4!?

Petr pointed out that 9... ♗e5 is well met by 10. ♖e2±.

10. ♗d3 d6 11. ♖e2 ♗b6 12. ♖xf4 ♖e7=

The chances are balanced and the result would be decided later in the game.

6.g3 fxg3 7. ♖xg4



7...g2?!

Tempting but wrong.

7... ♗e7 is the second best move in the position, but allows an easy edge to White. 8. ♖xg3 d6 9. ♖f3 ♖xg3† 10.hxg3± White has more of the centre and a fine rook on h1.

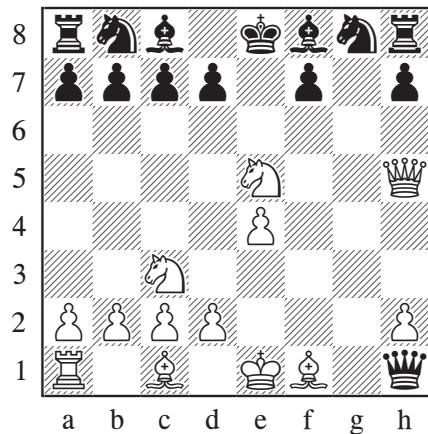
7... ♖xg4! is essential, as we shall study on page 145.

8. ♖xh4 gxh1=♖

Reminiscent of Shaw – Nunn (page 232) except in the present case the rook sac was intentional.

9. ♖h5!

White is close to winning. To be precise, the best Black can do is reach a bad position a pawn down. This position has been known to be good for White (most claim it is winning) for decades. My notes suggest those who have analysed it include Korchnoi and Zak, and before them, Levenfish. The new ideas about 4. ♖c3 are about what to do if Black does not play ...g5-g4.



9... ♗d6

We shall have a look at a few other defensive tries: 9... ♗e7, 9... ♗b4 and 9... ♖h6.

9... ♗e7

This allows some smothered mate themes with the victim king in the centre rather than its traditional corner location.

10. ♖xf7!+-

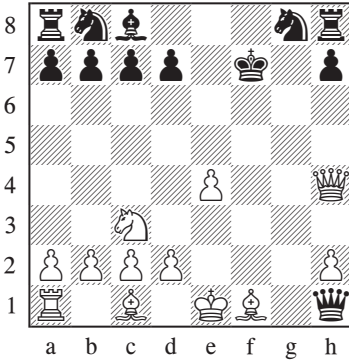
10. ♖xf7? ♖d8 is not at all convincing.

10...♙h4†

Every other move loses immediately whereas this effort loses more slowly and painfully.

10...♘f6 is what White hopes to see: 11.♘d6† ♔d8 12.♖e8† ♜xe8 13.♘f7#

11.♖xh4 ♔xf7



This is like a crazed Muzio, except White's attack really is winning. There are various ways to finish Black off, so I shall just offer what I think is the most natural line.

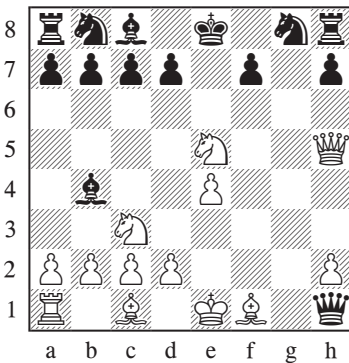
12.d4 ♘c6 13.♖h5†!

Preparing to castle long without being bothered by a disruptive ...♖f3.

13...♔g7 14.♙e3 d6 15.0-0-0 ♙d7 16.♙c4

Black must give up his queen, but even that does little to slow the attack.

9...♙b4



This move changes the themes slightly, as in some lines the black queen can hope for an escape to e4.

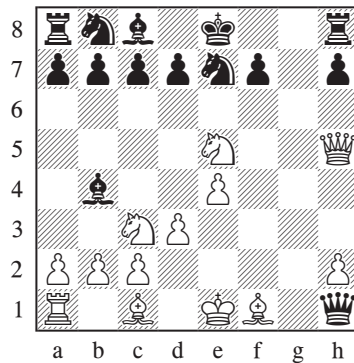
10.d3!

10.♖xf7† ♔d8 11.♖g7 is also good, but note that White must be precise with his move order as now 11.d3 can be met by 11...♖g1! stopping ♙g5.

10.♘xf7? misses the mark as with the e7-square available there will be no smothered mates. 10...♘f6 11.♘d6† ♔d8 In Gualtieri – Rigo, Collecchio 2004, White quickly lost but he was still at least level. 12.♘f7† (12.♖h6!?) 12...♔e7 13.♘d5† ♘xd5 14.♖e5† ♔xf7 15.♖xd5†=

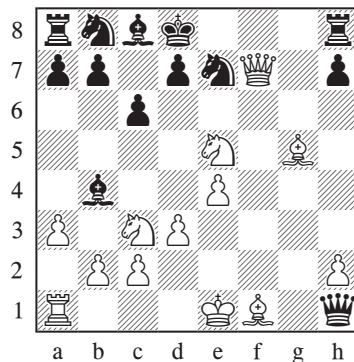
10...♘e7

10...♖g1 11.♙g5!



11.♖xf7† ♔d8 12.♙g5 c6 13.a3!+-

Sometimes it pays to be crude. The e7-knight loses its only friend.



13...♙xc3† 14.bxc3 ♜e8 15.♖f4

Dropping back to f4 is a recurring theme; the black queen is dominated and ♘f7† is devastating.

Black's stoutest defence is:

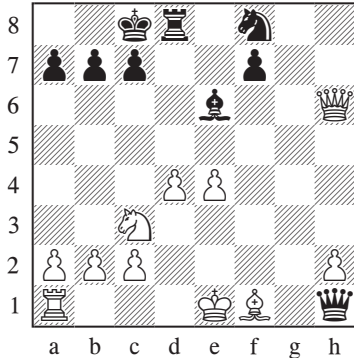
9...♖h6

But the resulting position is grim.

10.d4 d6 11.♙xh6 dxe5 12.♚xe5† ♙e6 13.♚xh8

Black can avoid instant defeat with:

13...♗d7 14.♙xf8 0–0–0 15.♚xh7 ♗xf8 16.♚h6±



White might lose one of his two extra pawns but his advantage is beyond question. For example:

16...♗g6 17.0–0–0 ♖h8 18.♚d2!?

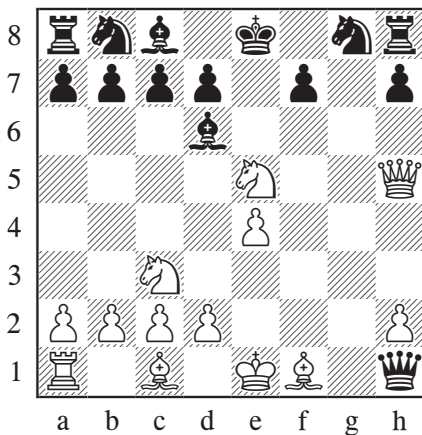
Most of the other queen retreats are also good.

18...♚xh2

18...♙xh2?! 19.♚e3+– leaves the black queen in trouble.

19.♚xh2 ♖xh2 20.♙d3±

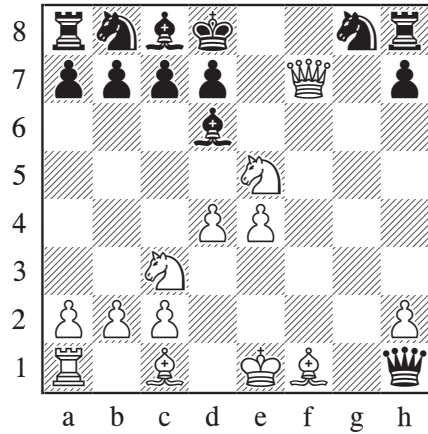
Opinions may vary about exactly how low Black's drawing chances are.



10.♚xf7† ♙d8 11.d4

The most appealing continuation.

The crude 11.♚g7 also works as long as White meets 11...♚xh2 with 12.d4.



11...♗e7

11...♚g1 stops ♙g5 for just a move. One of the possible refutations is 12.♗e2!.

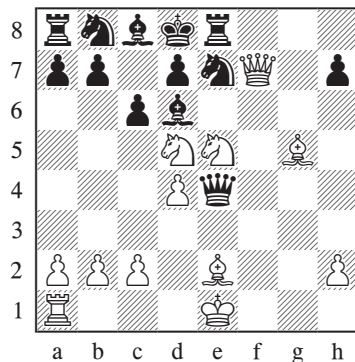
11...h6 is another anti-♙g5 try, but it rather obviously gives away the g6-square. For example: 12.♗g6 ♚xh2 13.♙f4! is the end.

12.♙g5

Now the direct threats are ♚f6 or ♚g7, hitting the rook and clearing f7 for the knight.

12...♗bc6

No better is: 12...♖e8 13.♗d5 ♚xe4† 14.♙e2 c6



Just for fun, White can win by giving up his queen on e7 or e8:

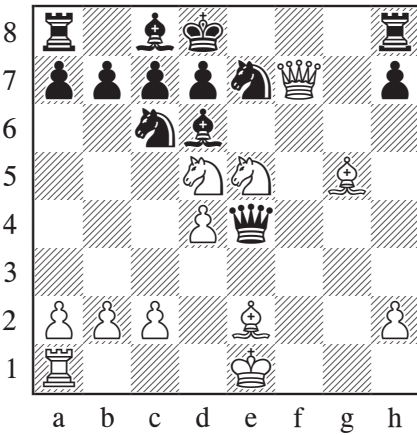
15.♚xe8† ♔xe8 16.♞f6† ♔d8 17.♞f7† ♔c7
18.♞xe4

Or 15.♚xe7† ♚xe7 16.♞f7† ♔e8 17.♞xd6†
♔d8 18.♙xe7† ♚xe7 19.♞xe7 ♔xe7 20.♞xc8†.

13.♞d5!

Once again the most effective move is also the most stylish. The simple 13.0-0-0 should also get the job done.

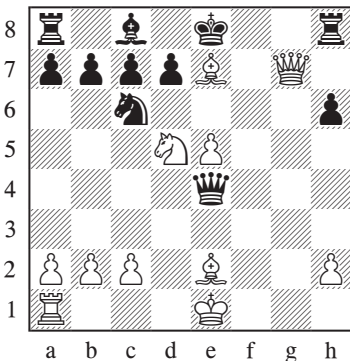
13...♚xe4† 14.♙e2



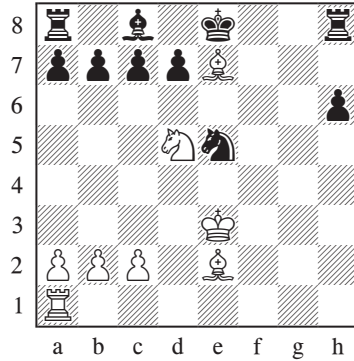
14...♚h1†

In true 19th century style, Black sportingly grabs material and allows the most beautiful finish.

The more prosaic line could also have been fun:
14...h6 15.♚g7! ♙xe5 16.♙xe7† ♔e8 17.dxe5

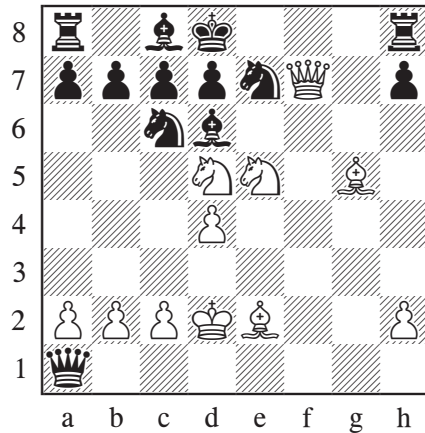


Black has to watch out for ♙h5†. 17...♚h1†
18.♞f2! ♚xh2† 19.♞e3! ♚xe5† 20.♚xe5 ♞xe5
The queens disappear, leaving Black an exchange
and two pawns ahead, but the attack is still
killing.



21.♙h5† ♞f7 22.♙f6+- Black can choose which
rook to lose.

15.♞d2 ♚xa1



White to play and win beautifully (ugly wins
don't count).

16.♚e8†!!

It is true that White can mate just as quickly
with 16.♞xc6† dxc6 17.♙xe7† ♙xe7 18.♚xe7#
but if you think that is "just as good" then I am
worried about you.

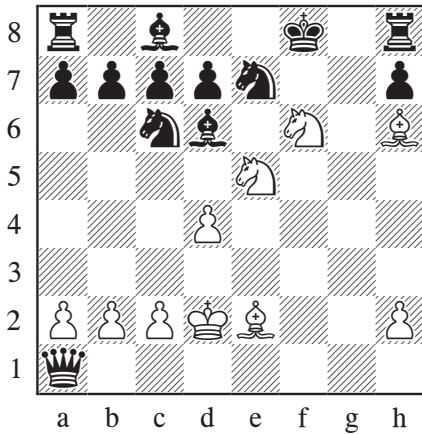
16...♔xe8

Black decides to avoid a smothered mate.
 16...♖xe8 17.♘f7#

17.♘f6† ♔f8

Or 17...♔d8 18.♘f7#.

18.♙h6#



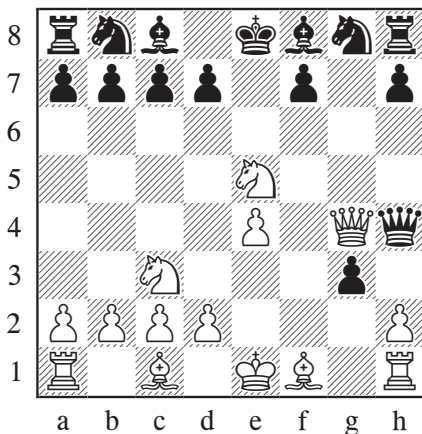
Games like this are why the King's Gambit has fanatical supporters. Sure, there will be days when White loses a pawn down in an ending, but there will also be days when the black king is filleted by a flurry of sacs.

4...g4 – The 7...♙xg4 ending

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.♘f3 g5 4.♘c3 g4

As we shall see, this is not the most challenging defence (see 4...♙g7 in Section 4 on page 177).

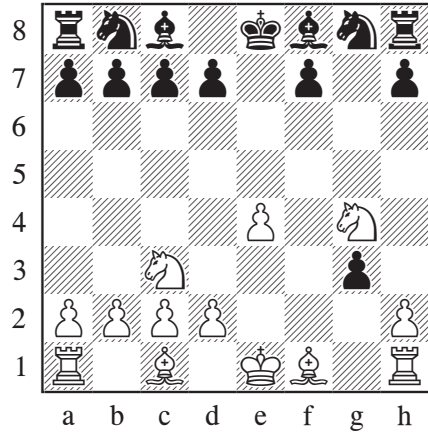
5.♘e5 ♖h4† 6.g3 fxg3 7.♙xg4



7...♙xg4

Making the best of a bad job. In the previous game we saw the wonders of 7...g2†? 8.♙xh4 gxh1=♙ 9.♙h5.

8.♘xg4



So there will be no quick mates, but the ending should offer pleasant compensation for White who has a lead in development, the better structure and more of the centre. The only question is whether Black can exploit the loose knight on g4.

8...d5

This is obviously critical.

8...d6

This places no pressure on White, so many rather promising lines are possible. For example:

9.♘e3

9.♙e2!?? is equally interesting. If Black decides to exchange on g4 then he would have to watch out for ♙c8.

9...gxh2 10.♘ed5 ♔d8 11.d4 ♙h6

Now in Millstone – Gerzina, email 1998, instead of starting some adventures with 12.♘b5 White could simply have played:

12.♙xh6 ♘xh6 13.♙xh2

This is typical of the sort of excellent compensation White can expect after 8...d6: