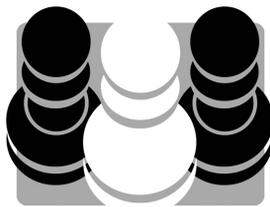


Grandmaster Repertoire 14

The French Defence 1

By

Emanuel Berg



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

Preface

The idea of writing a chess book has been on my radar for many years. When I was first approached about a French repertoire project in 2008 I was keen on the idea, but a hectic tournament schedule meant having to put the plan on hold. When the question arose again in 2011, the timing was more favourable and I decided to go for it. Writing this book has been a lot of fun and even more hard work. In this short introduction I will tell you a bit about my background in chess and specifically with the French Defence.

I grew up in the countryside near the village of Kil in Sweden, and learned to play chess at kindergarten at the age of five. The leader of the chess group quickly saw that I had talent for the game and I soon started taking part in school events and local tournaments. As a youngster I was taught to play a number of gambits, which were objectively unsound but nevertheless brought me a lot of success. This 'education' also helped me to develop a tactical eye which remains one of my greatest strengths at the chessboard. However, as my opponents got stronger it became necessary to change my way of conducting the openings.

My adventures with the French started in 1990 at the age of eight, and since then I have been playing it almost exclusively against 1.e4. After more than two decades, hundreds of competitive games and countless hours analysing this opening, I have developed a deep understanding of the resulting positions. I would also like to mention my former coach, GM Stellan Brynell, who has had a profound influence on my French adventures.

Generally the French can be characterized as a solid opening, but it can be handled in many different ways. In many lines Black has the ability to choose between remaining solid or playing actively and dynamically. As an ambitious player, I tend to go for the latter type of positions with chances to play for a full point.

When working on this *Grandmaster Repertoire* series, my goal has been to share my own interpretation of the French Defence with the readers, not only in terms of moves and recommendations, but also of positional themes and plans. Personally, when reading a chess book I appreciate explanations much more than only long lines with an assessment at the end. While I cannot deny that my analysis is detailed in places, I have endeavoured to give enough explanatory prose to enable the reader to understand what is happening.

The present volume covers all notable lines after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4, with the exception of the main 7.♗g4 variation. The latter is such an important topic that the Quality Chess team and I decided to afford it special coverage in Volume 2 of the series. The third and final volume will cover the Tarrasch, Advance and all other alternatives to 3.♘c3. For now though, the material presented in this book will offer a sound yet ambitious repertoire against all of White's other tries against the Winawer. I hope you will enjoy the book and I wish you every success.

Emanuel Berg
Arvika, September 2013

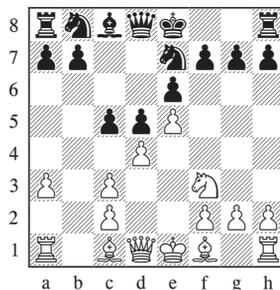
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Chapter 18

7th Move Options



7. ♘f3

Variation Index

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♘xc3† 6.bxc3 ♘e7 7.♘f3

7...h6!?

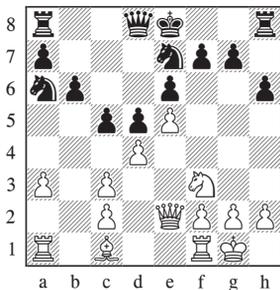
A) 8. ♘e2	238
B) 8. ♘d3	239
C) 8.h4 b6	243
C1) 9.h5	243
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D) 8.a4 0-0N	247
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A) after 12. ♘h4



12...♗c8!N

B) note to 10. ♘h4!?



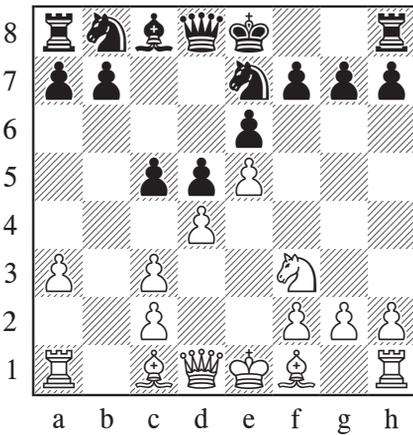
11...♗c8!N

B) after 15. ♗ae1



15...fxc5N

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3
 ♙xc3† 6.bxc3 ♖e7 7.♖f3



This is an extremely important branch of Winawer theory, second only to 7.♗g4 in terms of popularity. Instead of lunging with the queen, White develops a piece and steers the game towards a more positional battle where he hopes his space advantage and bishop pair will prove more significant than the doubled c-pawns.

7...h6!?

An important moment. This is far from the most popular option, and the reader may be forgiven for wondering why we should play such a move. I will answer this question in two parts: firstly by explaining the useful aspects of the move ...h6 itself, and secondly by mentioning some of the drawbacks of Black's more obvious moves.

Starting at the most basic level, Black's last move guards the g5-square, preventing any attacking ideas based on ♖g5 followed by ♗h5. This plan caused considerable problems even for Magnus Carlsen in a game against Caruana at the 2012 Grand Slam Final, which you can find referenced shortly.

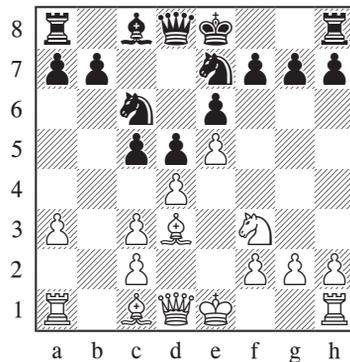
The move ...h6 also has some more subtle prophylactic uses. In positions where Black

opts for short castling, he often has to worry about ♙d3 creating the immediate threat of ♙xh7†, so playing the move ...h6 in advance creates a cushion against this plan. There are other variations where White pushes his h-pawn up the board; once again, the move ...h6 blocks this idea before it has even started.

Despite these virtues, it is still reasonable to ask why Black should commit himself to ...h6 so soon. To answer this point, I would argue that 7...h6 is a high-class waiting move, which actually leads to a mild form of zugzwang, whereby Black intends to choose a specific scheme of development against whichever move his opponent might play.

To illustrate this point more fully, I will present a brief summary of Black's major alternatives, showing how White should react to each one of them. The following moves are arranged in descending order of popularity according to the database.

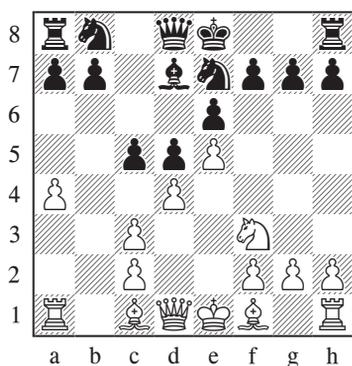
i) 7...♗bc6 can be answered by 8.♙d3.



As a rule, I like to be able to respond to this active developing move with ...b6 and ...♙a6, but with the knight committed to c6 this option is no longer available. Moreover, short castling is prevented due to the thematic sacrifice on h7. One high-profile game continued 8...♙d7 9.0-0 ♗c7 10.♖e1 ♖a5? 11.♗g5± and Black

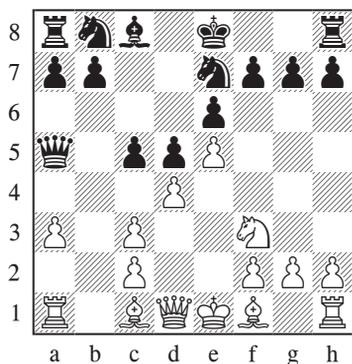
had some problems in Caruana – Carlsen, Sao Paulo/Bilbao 2012. As mentioned previously, this example also highlights the prophylactic value of the move ...h6.

ii) 7...♗d7 is a popular choice but it feels wrong to me, as it completely abandons the idea of exchanging bishops with ...b6 and ...♗a6. White replies with 8.a4!



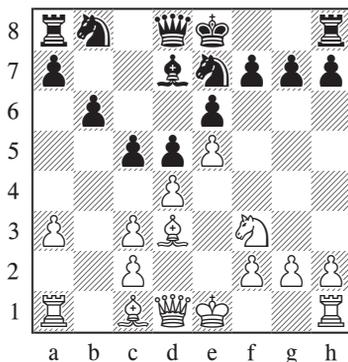
This move secures the a3-square for his bishop while also preventing the black bishop from coming to a4. In my opinion White has a good game.

iii) 7...♙a5 has also been tested extensively, but it is slightly early to commit the queen.



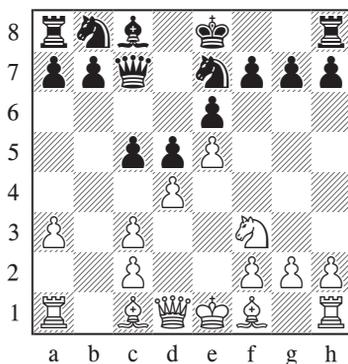
White has achieved a modest plus score with 8.♗d2, and 8.♙d2!? is also interesting, keeping the possibility of developing the bishop on a3 later.

iv) If Black plays 7...b6 intending ...♗a6, then White can play 8.♗b5† ♗d7 9.♗d3 avoiding the exchange of bishops.



We will encounter a similar situation in the main part of the chapter in variation C2, where the moves 7...h6 and 8.h4 have been included. I believe that the inclusion of the pawn moves favours Black slightly, for reasons that will be explained on page 244.

v) 7...♙c7 has occurred in a huge number of games, many of them via a slightly different move order involving 6...♙c7. This move also has the idea of being flexible, but I believe 7...h6 to be a more useful waiting move.



From this position White has achieved a healthy plus score with both 8.a4 and 8.h4.

vi) Finally, 7...0–0 is a sideline which has not been seen in many games. Though it cannot be

refuted directly, Black presents his opponent with a target for a possible kingside attack, and loses the option of long castling, which can be especially useful in blocked positions involving a later ...c4.

Summary

Although the theoretical debate will surely continue, I believe I have demonstrated that Black's natural developing moves all come at a price. They are all playable, but each of them reveals information about Black's set-up that enables White to choose an appropriate plan of action.

This background information helps to put the move 7...h6 into its proper context. We have touched on its various uses, and over the course of the chapter we will see how Black can choose a scheme of development to counter whichever set-up White may choose, rather than the other way around.

Without further ado, we will start looking at some options for White. There are four main candidates: **A) 8.♗e2**, **B) 8.♗d3**, **C) 8.h4** and **D) 8.a4**. A few other rare moves have been tried, but they all carry obvious drawbacks as shown below.

8.♗b5†? is pointless before Black has committed himself to ...b6. Now after 8...♗d7 Black will either get the light-squared bishops exchanged or, in the event that White retreats the bishop, utilize the free tempo to post his bishop on the a4-square.

8.♗d2 has been played on a single occasion, but is not likely to be repeated. The c3-pawn is not yet under threat and White loses the option of developing the bishop on a3. 8...b6 Black proceeds with his standard plan. 9.a4 (9.♗b5†N is met by 9...♗d7 intending either

an exchange of bishops or ...♗a4 if White retreats his own bishop.) 9...♗a6 10.♗e2 ♗xe2 11.♖xe2



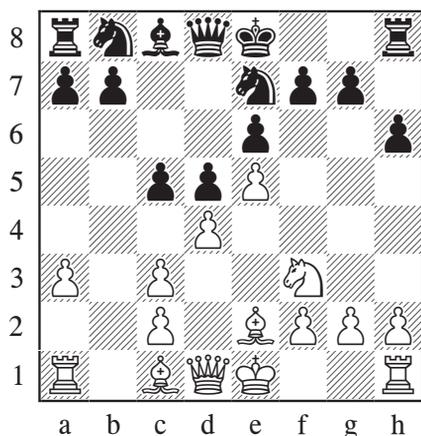
Black already had a comfortable position in Lopez Escobar – Matamoros Franco, Coria del Rio 2002. At this point my suggestion would be 11...0-0N 12.0-0 ♖bc6̄ intending ...♖c7 and ...♗a5-c4 with excellent play on the light squares.

8.dxc5 gives White the d4-square for his knight, but his pawn structure becomes much worse. 8...0-0 Black develops normally; the weak pawn on c5 can be collected at any time. Now White's best seems to be 9.c4 when 9...♗d7 10.cxd5 exd5 transposes to a position analysed under 8.c4 below.

8.c4 opens the position for White's bishop pair, but White will be stuck with several pawn weaknesses. I propose: 8...0-0N 9.cxd5 (9.dxc5 ♗d7 10.cxd5 exd5 transposes) 9...exd5 10.dxc5 ♗d7 11.♗d3 (11.♗e3 ♗f5!) 11...♗xc5 12.0-0 ♗f5= with good prospects for Black.

A) 8.♗e2

This move has only been seen a few times, and Black gets a comfortable position with the typical plan of exchanging light-squared bishops.

**8...b6! 9.0-0**

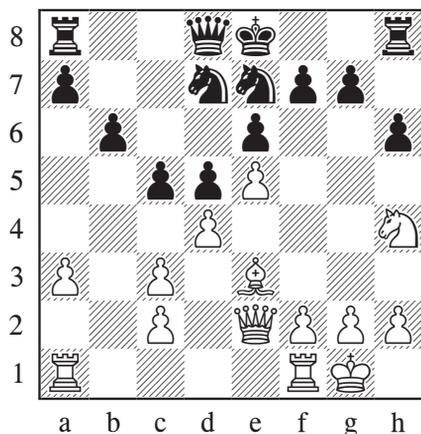
9.♙b5? loses too much time for White. 9...♙d7 10.♙e2?! (10.a4N is a more logical try but after 10...♗c7 Black is fine as he has gained the useful move ...h6 compared with other similar lines.) Now in Schoene – Moor, Dresden 2003, the standard 10...♙a4!N would have given Black the more comfortable game as White has sacrificed two tempos with his bishop.

9...♙a6 10.♙e3 ♙xe2 11.♗xe2 ♘d7

Black has exchanged his bad bishop without a hitch and should be happy with the outcome of the opening.

12.♘h4

White would like to advance his f-pawn. In the game Bellaiche – Shakhmurzova, Prague 2012, Black reacted with the risky 12...g5!?, but I suggest a calmer approach.

**12...♗c8!N 13.f4 g6**

White is unlikely to create any serious problems on the kingside, while Black has excellent long-term chances on the queenside.

B) 8.♙d3

With this move White aims for rapid development and short castling.

8...b6

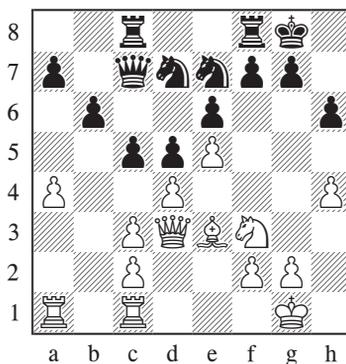
Once again exchanging light-squared bishops is an attractive plan, especially when White has already spent a tempo moving his bishop.

9.0-0

This is the usual choice.

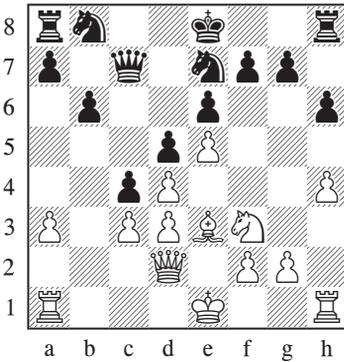
One other example continued 9.♙e3 ♗c7 10.♗d2 ♙a6 11.h4 ♙xd3 with a choice of recaptures for White:

a) 12.♗xd3 ♘d7 13.a4 ♗c8 14.0-0 0-0 15.♗fc1



15...f6! (Perhaps Black was tempted to open the kingside after the white rook moved away. Still, 15...♘f5N would have been a simpler way to maintain at least equal prospects.) 16.♙f4?! (16.exf6N ♗xf6=) 16...fxe5 17.♙xe5 ♘xe5 18.♘e5 ♘f5 Astengo – Drasko, Bratto 2005. Black has a better pawn structure and ongoing pressure along the c-file.

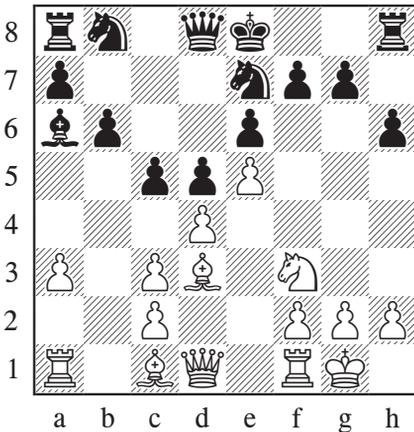
b) 12.cxd3N is well met by 12...c4!:



13.0-0 (13.a4 ♖bc6 14.dxc4 ♗a5! 15.cxd5 ♗xd5) 13...cxd3 14.♖xd3 ♗bc6 15.c4 dxc4 16.♗xc4 ♖c8 Black has a slight edge in view of his better pawn structure and control over the d5-square.

9...♗a6

Black is now about to achieve one of his main goals in the Winawer, exchanging off the light-squared bishops which will give excellent counterplay on the light squares.



10.♗h4!?

This move has been played by Anand. The idea is simply to push the f-pawn and attack on the kingside. Several other moves have been tried, and I have presented a selection of alternatives to show how the game may develop.

10.a4 ♗xd3 11.♖xd3 (11.cxd3 Chumfwa – A. L’Ami, Dar es Salaam 2013. 11...0-0N 12.♗a3 ♗d7=) 11...0-0 12.♗a3 Zeltner – Nickmann, Germany 1995. 12...♗d7N= Black has a solid position with activity on the c-file and light-square control.

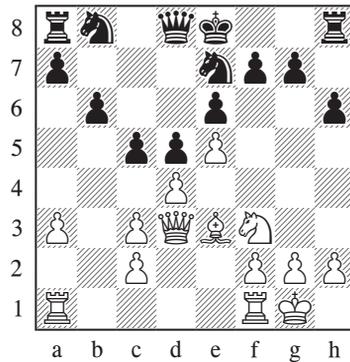
10.♗e1 ♖c8 A useful move, activating the queen along the c-file as well as protecting the bishop on a6. 11.♗e3 Alvarado Rodriguez – Drasko, Dos Hermanas 2004. Here I suggest 11...♗xd3N 12.cxd3 cxd4 13.cxd4 (13.♗xd4 ♗bc6) 13...♗bc6 when Black’s favourable pawn structure gives him an edge.

10.♗e3 ♗xd3

Also possible is 10...♗f5!? intending 11.dxc5 ♗xe3 12.fxex3 bxc5=.

11.♖xd3

11.cxd3N can be met by 11...cxd4 12.♗xd4 (12.cxd4 0-0=) 12...0-0 13.♖g4 ♗h7= intending ...♗bc6.



11...♖c7N

I found three practical examples with 11...♗d7 in the database, but I would prefer to keep the knight more flexible for the moment. A possible line is:

12.dxc5 bxc5 13.c4 d4

13...0-0=

14.♗d2 ♗d7 15.♖fe1 0-0 16.c3 dxc3 17.♗xc3 ♖fd8

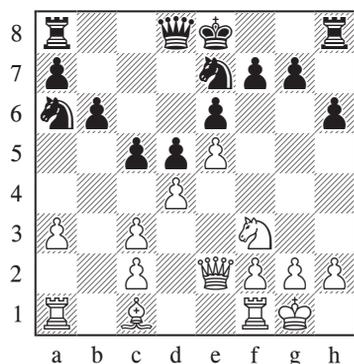
I slightly prefer Black due to his better piece coordination.

A final option is:

10.♙xa6 ♘xa6 11.♚e2

11.♘e1?! is slow, and after 11...0-0N White's kingside counterplay comes a bit too late. Black has firm control over the light squares and good prospects on the c-file. If necessary the move ...f5 can be used to hold up White's kingside play.

11.a4 0-0 12.♙a3 ♚c7N Black keeps the bishop out of the game and is doing fine. The knight can jump out from a6 via b8 when needed.

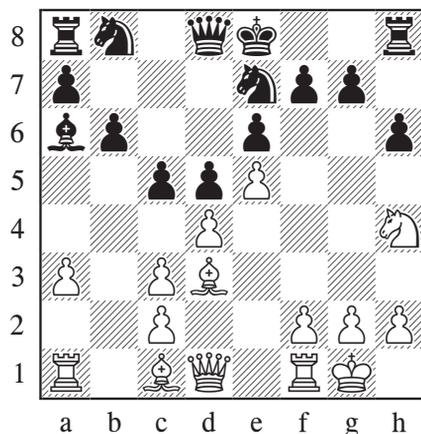


11...♚c8!N

11...♘b8 has been played three times, but I prefer the text move which better anticipates the c3-c4 plan.

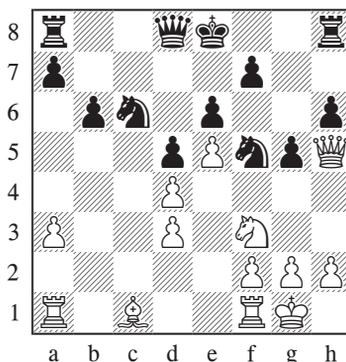
12.c4 0-0 13.cxd5 exd5 14.a4 ♘c7=

Black gets a nice outpost for his knight on e6.

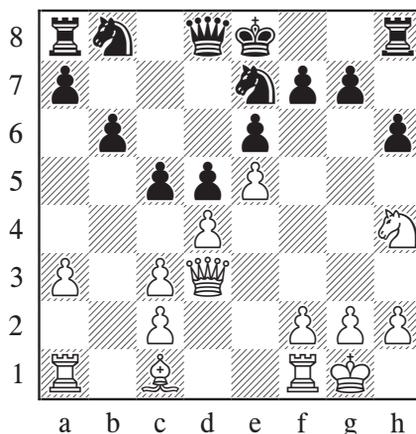


10...♙xd3 11.♚xd3

After 11.cxd3N Black can continue 11...cxd4 12.cxd4 ♘bc6 13.♚g4 g5!? 14.♙f3 ♘f5 with interesting prospects. A possible continuation is: 15.♚h5 Avoiding ...h5.



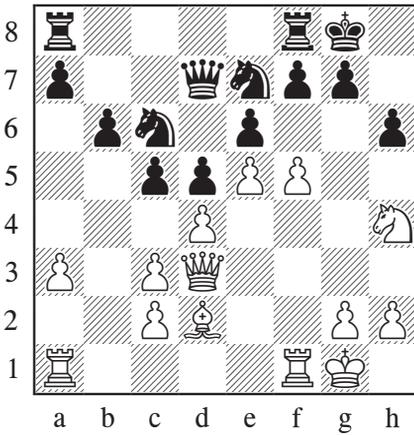
15...♙d7?! (The simple alternative is 15...♙g8 when 16.♚g4 ♙h8= repeats the position.) 16.♚xf7† ♚e7 17.♚h5 (After 17.♚xe7†! ♙xe7 Black will regain the d4-pawn with good play.) 17...♙ag8 Black has an active position with at least equal prospects.



11...♘bc6 12.f4 ♚d7 13.♙d2 0-0

I slightly prefer this over 13...c4 as played in Anand – Ivanchuk, Dortmund 1997. In that case Black remains solid but loses some prospects on the queenside, such as utilizing the open c-file and the c4-outpost for a knight.

14.f5

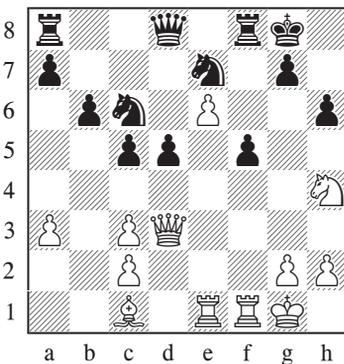


14...f6! 15.♖ae1 fxe5N

Instead after 15...exf5 16.e6 ♖e8 17.♗xf5 ♗xf5 18.♖xf5 ♗e7 19.♖f3 Black had some problems in Badev – Drasko, Plovdiv 2008, due to the strong passed pawn on e6.

16.f6!

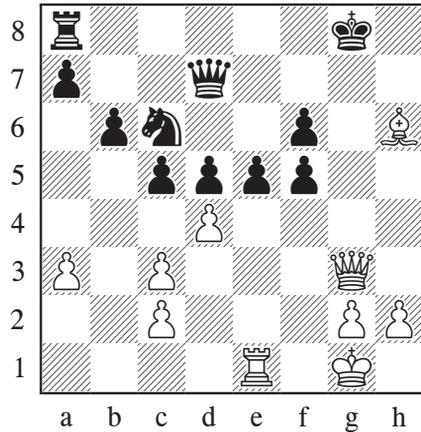
The position calls for this move. 16.dxe5 exf5 17.e6 ♖d6 does not trouble Black: 18.♗f4 (After 18.♗xf5 ♖xf5 19.♖xf5 c4 20.♖f1 ♗xf5 21.♖xf5 ♖f8 Black keeps the passed e-pawn well under control.) 18...♖d8 19.♗c1



Now Black can choose to repeat moves with 19...♖d6 20.♗f4, but it looks more promising to play 19...♖e8! 20.♗xf5 ♖g6 when White's passed e-pawn is outweighed by his many pawn weaknesses.

16...♖xf6 17.♖xf6 gxf6 18.♗xh6 ♗f5
19.♗xf5 exf5 20.♖g3†

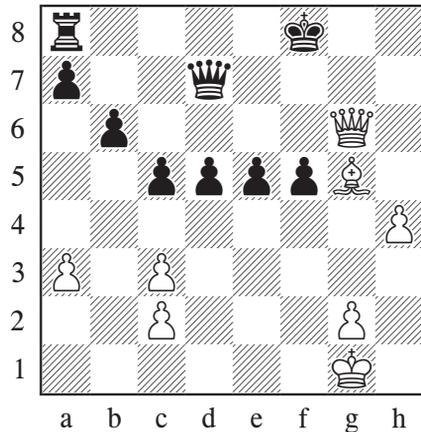
20.dxe5 ♗xe5 21.♖g3† ♗f7 merely transposes.



20...♗f7! 21.dxe5 ♗xe5 22.♖g7† ♗e6
23.♖xe5†! fxe5 24.♖g6† ♗e7 25.♗g5† ♗f8
26.h4!?

26.♗h6†= leads to an immediate perpetual.

Trying to advance the passed h-pawn is the only logical winning attempt, but Black can force a draw all the same.



26...♖f7!

Not the only move, but the safest. Now White really is forced to take the perpetual check.