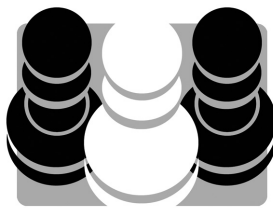


Grandmaster Repertoire 15

The French Defence 2

By

Emanuel Berg



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

Preface

In the Preface of the first volume I talked about my background in both the French Defence and the game of chess in general. Here I will avoid repeating the same story and instead focus on the subject at hand. The starting position for the present volume occurs after the opening moves: **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♘xc3† 6.bxc3 ♜e7 7.♞g4** White's last move introduces the most critical battleground of the Winawer, and indeed the entire French Defence. Black can respond in many different ways, the choice depending on one's personal preferences as well as situational factors such as match or tournament tactics, plus of course the identity of one's opponent. After discussing the options with the Quality Chess team, we decided the best approach would be to cover three major systems in a single, specialized volume for Black.

Part 1 of the book is dedicated to the notorious Poisoned Pawn Variation, which I prefer to enter via the **7...cxd4** move order, rather than the more common **7...♞c7**. This system may lead to massive complications, which is why this section takes up more than half of the total page count. Strangely enough, the variation that currently stands at the cutting edge of theory has still only been tested in a small number of over-the-board games – see Chapters 11-13 for a full discussion.

The remaining part of the book is dedicated to the more solid **7...0-0**. After the usual **8.♙d3** (other moves are covered in Chapter 14), I have covered two systems: **8...f5** and **8...♜bc6**.

8...f5 has the advantage of gaining some space on the kingside. On the other hand, after the standard **9.exf6 ♜xf6** the opening of the centre may favour White's bishop pair in the long run. Indeed, the main theoretical continuation sees Black experiencing unpleasant positional pressure, as shown in Chapter 17. For this reason, in Chapter 18 I have recommended a little-known but promising set-up for Black, which was tested by Magnus Carlsen in 2012 and has since been validated in a number of correspondence games, as well as in my own analysis.

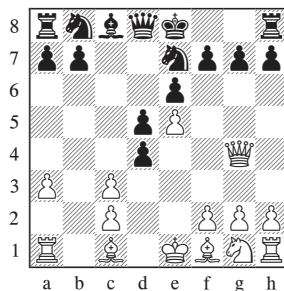
8...♜bc6 is the subject of the final five chapters. With this ambitious move Black avoids weakening his pawn chain and challenges his opponent to produce meaningful threats on the kingside. Generally the e5-pawn will be left unchallenged, and in many lines Black will block the centre completely with ...c4 in due course. In the ensuing positions, both sides must display high levels of strategic understanding, awareness of typical piece manoeuvres and tactical alertness. Here too, I was dissatisfied with Black's chances in the main theoretical variations. This forced me to take a fresh look at the position and I am pleased to say I was able to find a promising new direction that remains virtually untested at the time of writing – see Chapter 23 for details.

With three contrasting, high-quality systems available, some readers may choose to specialize in the single system that best suits their style, while others will wish to incorporate more than one in their repertoires. Whatever your preference, I hope you will not only achieve success with the repertoire, but also be inspired by the rich content of the Winawer, whether in the wild tactical complications of the Poisoned Pawn or the deep positional manoeuvring of the 7...0-0 systems.

Emanuel Berg
Arvika, November 2013

Chapter 1

Poisoned Pawn



7...cxd4

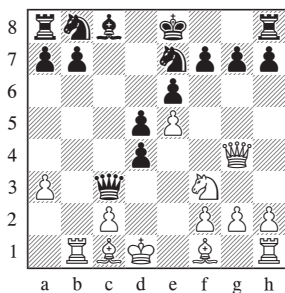
Variation Index

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♘xc3† 6.bxc3 ♘e7 7.♙g4

7...cxd4

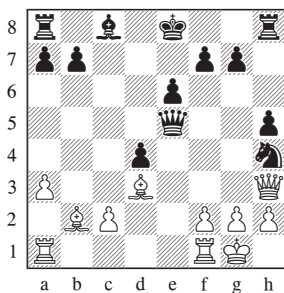
A) 8.♘f3!?	8
B) 8.cxd4 ♙c7	9
B1) 9.♞a2	9
B2) 9.♔d1	11
B3) 9.♙d2	13

A) after 10.♔d1



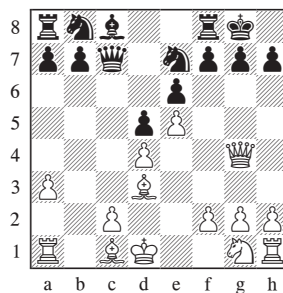
10...♘g6!N

B1) after 17.♙h3



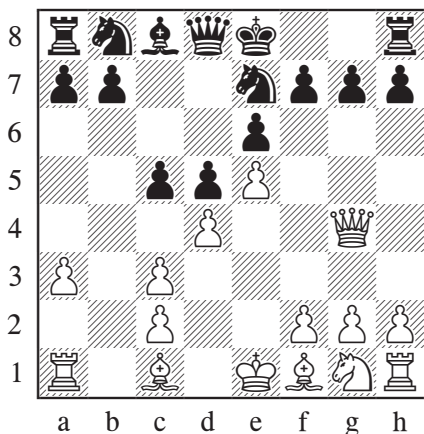
17...♙f6!N

B2) note to 9...h5!



10...b6!N

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3
 ♙xc3† 6.bxc3 ♖e7 7.♗g4



7...cxd4

This is my preferred route to the Poisoned Pawn Variation. 7...♗c7 is a more popular move, which usually arrives at the same position after 8.♗xg7 ♖g8 9.♗xh7 cxd4. However, via this move order Black must also be ready for the challenging sideline 8.♙d3!?: cxd4 (8...c4 is solid, but not really in the spirit of the Poisoned Pawn) 9.♖e2 when White sacrifices his centre, but gets to develop his kingside pieces before taking on g7.

By taking on d4 immediately Black makes the 8.♙d3 option less appealing for White. (We will see in the next chapter that the move is still playable, but does not carry the same bite against the 7...cxd4 move order.) There is a trade-off, as the immediate capture on d4 allows White the additional option of recapturing on d4, but as we will soon see, this is not at all dangerous. To summarize, allowing the possibility of 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 is a small price to pay for avoiding the more venomous 7...♗c7 8.♙d3 line.

After that brief explanation we are ready to consider White's possible responses. In this chapter we will consider A) 8.♘f3!?: and B) 8.cxd4.

8.♙d3 is the subject of the next chapter, beginning on page 15.

The main move is of course 8.♗xg7, coverage of which begins in Chapter 3.

A) 8.♘f3!?:

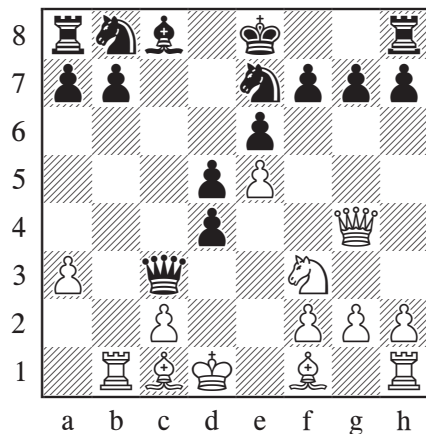
This move is practically unknown to theory, although it was mentioned by Watson in PTF4.

8...♗a5N

8...♗c7 is also possible, with a likely transposition after 9.♖b1 (or 9.♙d1 ♗xc3 10.♖b1) 9...♗xc3†N 10.♙d1. However, it somehow feels correct to begin by placing the queen on the more active a5-square.

9.♖b1 ♗xc3† 10.♙d1

This position occurred in the game Juenger – Liedl, Austria 2010, which arrived here via the 8...♗c7 9.♙d1 ♗xc3 10.♖b1 move order. Here Black's best continuation is:



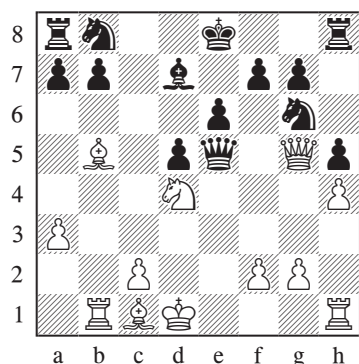
10...♖g6!N

Instead the game saw 10...0–0 11.♙d3 when White had a dangerous initiative on the kingside.

11.h4 h5 12.♗g5 ♗c5

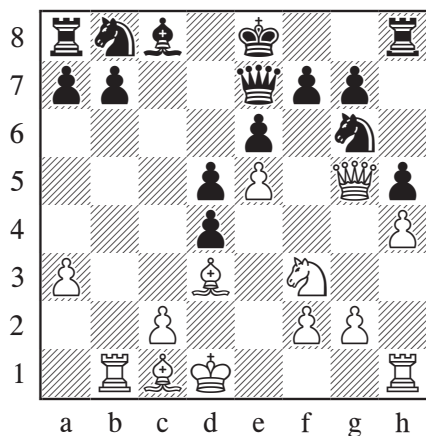
12...♖c7 is given by Watson, who offers the following line: 13.♙d3 ♘c6 14.♙xg6 fxg6 15.♖xg6† ♗f7 16.♖xf7† ♕xf7 17.♙b2 ♜f8 18.♙xd4 ♔g8 19.♙c5 ♜f4 20.♙d6 b6̄ This indeed looks favourable for Black.

However, White can pose more problems with 13.♘d4! when he has lots of activity, although Black should be okay here too. Here is one interesting line: 13...♖xe5 14.♙b5† ♙d7



15.♘xe6! ♖xg5 16.♘g7† ♕f8 17.hxg5 ♔xg7 18.♙b2† ♔g8 19.♙xh8 ♘xh8 20.♙xd7 ♘xd7 21.♞xb7 ♘c5 We have reached a double-edged endgame with roughly equal chances.

13.♙d3 ♖e7



14.♙xg6

White has nothing better than simplifying, as 14.♖g3 ♘c6 favours Black.

14...♖xg5 15.♙xf7† ♕xf7 16.♘g5† ♕e8 17.♞h3 ♘c6 18.♘f3 b6 19.♞g3 ♕f7

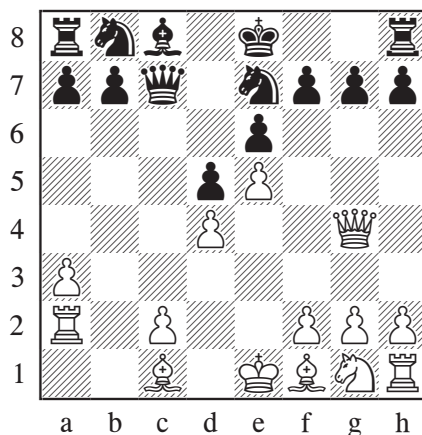
Black is at least equal.

B) 8.cxd4 ♖c7

Threatening the c2-pawn as well as the crucial check on c3. Now it is worth analysing B1) 9.♞a2, B2) 9.♔d1 and B3) 9.♙d2.

9.♘e2 is harmless after 9...♘bc6, while 9...0-0!?N seems promising too.

B1) 9.♞a2

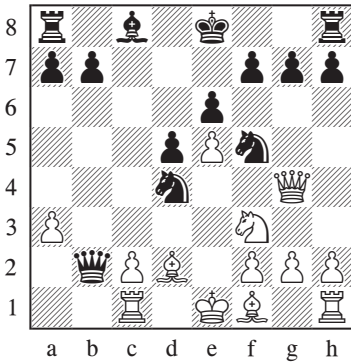


This move defends against the queenside threats but is rather passive.

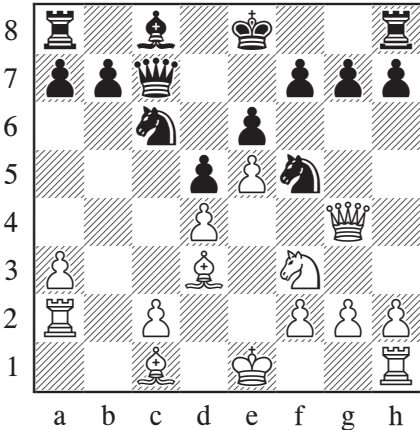
9...♘f5 10.♘f3 ♘c6 11.♙d3

11.♙b2?! has been played, but after 11...♖a5† 12.c3 b6̄ Black was better in Petrova – Weetik, Taganrog 2013. White's rook and bishop look ridiculous on the queenside.

11.♙d2?! has been tried by GMs Hjartarson and Apicella, but not recently. Black achieves an excellent game as follows: 11...♖b6! 12.♞a1 ♖b2 13.♞c1 ♘cxd4



14. ♖xd4 (14.c3? ♜c2† [including 14...h5!N first is even better] 15. ♔d1 ♜xa3 gave Black a clear advantage in Ashley – Arizmendi Martinez, Bermuda 1999.) 14... ♙xd4 15. ♜b5† ♔d7 16. ♚e2 ♚e4 17. ♙xd7† ♔xd7 18. ♚xe4 dxe4 Black was a pawn up with an obvious advantage in Hjartarson – Nikolic, Reykjavik 1991.

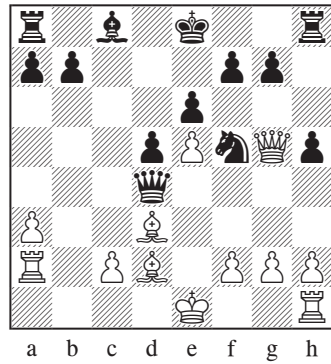


11...h5!

Please don't fall for the trap 11... ♜cxd4?? 12. ♖xd4 ♚c3† 13. ♔f1!+- when Black loses a piece and the game.

12. ♚f4

This seems like the best attempt. The alternative fails to cause Black many problems: 12. ♚g5 ♜cx4 13. ♜xd4 ♚c3† 14. ♔d2 14. ♔f1 ♚xd4† 14... ♙xd4

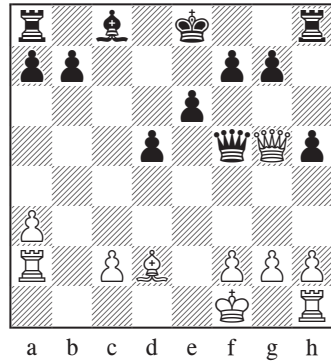


15. ♙xf5?N

Objectively a weak move, but worth checking. The correct continuation is 15.0-0 ♚g4 when Black forced a queen exchange, leaving White struggling to prove full compensation for the pawn in Vogt – Kosten, Graz 2004.

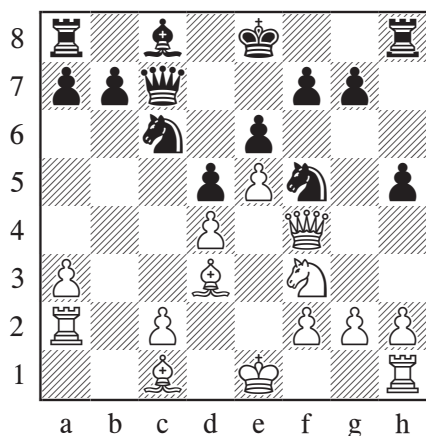
15... ♙xe5† 16. ♔f1 16. ♔d1 ♚xf5 17. ♚g7 ♚g4† 18. ♚g4 hxg4†

16... ♙xf5! The strongest reply, although it allows some mild complications. 16...exf5 17.f4 ♚f6 (17... ♙d4 18. ♜b4) 18. ♚xf6 gxf6†



17. ♚g7 ♚h7 18. ♚g8† ♔d7 Intending ...b6 followed by ...♜b7 or ...♜a6†. Black's position is not perfect, but he is a pawn up while White is totally lacking in coordination. The continuation might be: 19. ♜g5 f6! 20. ♜xf6 b6†

Black's superior development and piece coordination bring him a clear advantage.

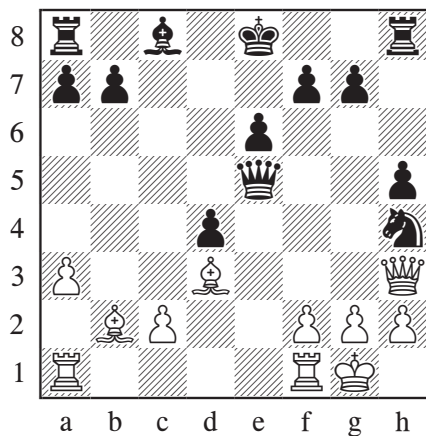


13...dxc4 13-0

After 13. dxc4 ♖c3† 14. ♔d2 ♜xd4 15. ♙xf5 ♜xf4 16. ♙xf4 exf5 ♜ Black was a pawn up with the healthier pawn structure in Mekhitarian – Fier, Americana 2009.

13...dxf3† 14. ♜xf3 ♜xe5 15. ♙b2 d4 16. ♜a1 d4 17. ♜h3

Now in Hou Yifan – N. Pert, Liverpool 2007, Black should have played:



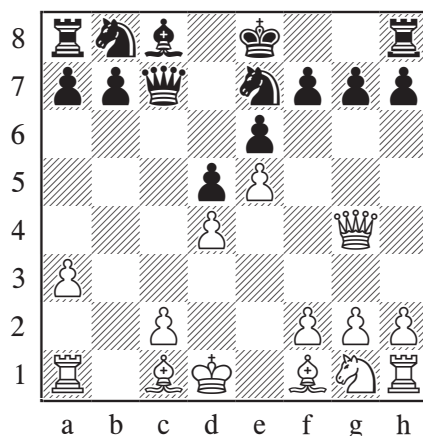
17...♜f6N 18. ♙b5†

18. ♜a1 ♔d7 19. ♜e4 d5 ♜ intending ...0-0-0.

18...♔f8♜

White has some compensation, but I do not believe it is enough for two pawns.

B2) 9. ♔d1

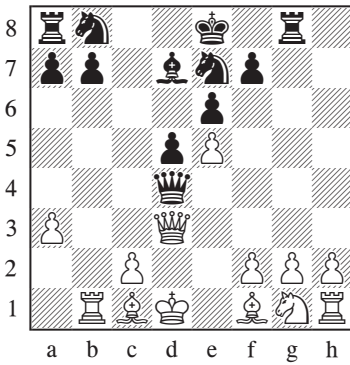


This move has been tested by such strong players as Shirov and Kamsky. Moving the king is of course a concession for White, although it is not an uncommon scenario for the Poisoned Pawn lines in general. On d1 the king avoids the check on c3 and is pretty secure for the time being. Meanwhile White hopes to put Black under pressure on the kingside.

9...h5!

This active move has been favoured by Poisoned Pawn expert Yuri Shulman, as well as Kamsky himself when he faced this line with Black. I will mention two other possibilities; the second in particular looks like a valid alternative.

9...♔d7?! was chosen by Nisipeanu in a recent game. He won, but I believe this move gives White too many opportunities. The game continued: 10. ♜xg7 ♜g8 11. ♜xh7 ♜c3 12. ♜b1 ♜xd4† 13. ♜d3 (13. ♔d2!± is a possible improvement for White.)



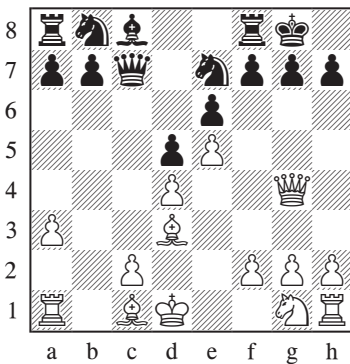
13...♙xf2?! Too ambitious. (13...♙xe5 looks better.) 14.♖xb7 ♜bc6 Sochacki – Nisipeanu, Pardubice 2013, and here 15.♜f3N± would have left White with a clear advantage.

9...0-0!?

This has scored poorly, but this is mainly because Black has followed it up incorrectly.

10.♙d3

10.♜f3 was seen in Kamsky – Nikolic, Monte Carlo 1996. At this point I suggest the novelty 10...b6N in order to exchange off White's dangerous light-squared bishop as soon as possible. After 11.♙d3 ♜f5!= Black prevents any sacrifice on h7 and intends to continue with ...♙a6, or possibly ...♙d7 first to guard f5.



10...b6!N

10...f5 has been played in all ten games in the database. This move might hold for Black, but it gives White a dangerous initiative

after 11.exf6 ♖xf6 12.♙h5↑ as in Shirov – Zhukova, Gibraltar 2006.

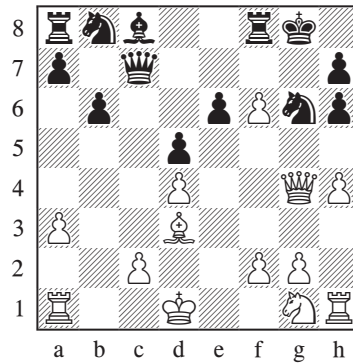
11.♙h6

The sharpest and most straightforward move.

Instead 11.♜f3 leads back to 10.♜f3 above.

11...♜g6 12.h4 f5! 13.exf6 gxh6

Black's position looks risky, but in fact he does not have much to worry about.



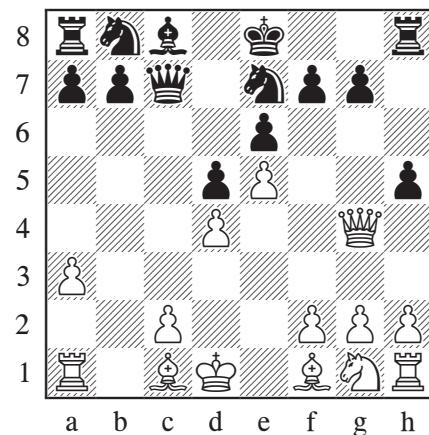
14.♙xg6

14.h5? ♙f4! 15.♖h4 ♙xg4† 16.♖xg4 e5

17.♖g3 e4 18.♙b5 a6 19.♙a4 ♖xf6‡

14...♜h8! 15.♙d3 ♖xf6‡

Black has coped with the attack and emerged with a sound position with good prospects. White remains with a badly placed king and poor coordination amongst his pieces. Objectively 9...0-0!? seems just as good as the main line, the only drawback being the need to navigate a few tricky tactics.



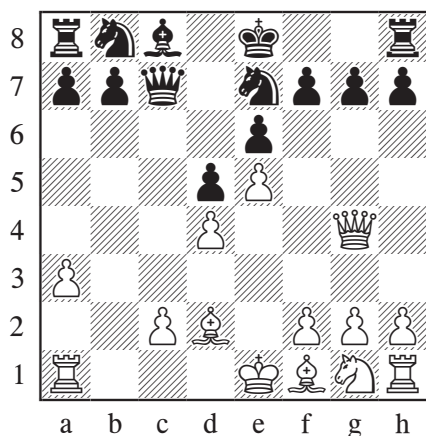
10. ♖xg7

The only critical reply.

10. ♖f4 is well met by 10...b6 intending ...♙a6, for instance: 11. ♙b5† ♜bc6! (11...♙d7 12. ♙d3 was less clear in Savchenko – Kamsky, Baku 2009.) 12. ♜f3 a5! 13. ♖b1 ♙a6 14. ♙xa6 ♖xa6 ♖ Savchenko – Shulman, Khanty-Mansiysk 2009. Black holds a slight advantage due to his safer king, light-square control and pressure along the half-open c-file.

10...♖g8 11. ♖h6 ♖c3 12. ♖b1 ♖xd4† 13. ♙d2 ♖xe5 14. ♜f3 ♖h8 15. ♖xh8 ♖xh8

White did not have full compensation for the pawn in Bennborn – Rakay, corr. 2011, and Black eventually converted his advantage into a full point.

B3) 9. ♙d2

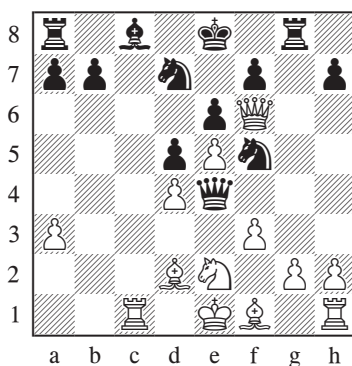
White offers an exchange of the pawns on c2 and g7. Unfortunately for him, the black queen can become quite troublesome on the queenside.

9...♖xc2 10. ♖xg7

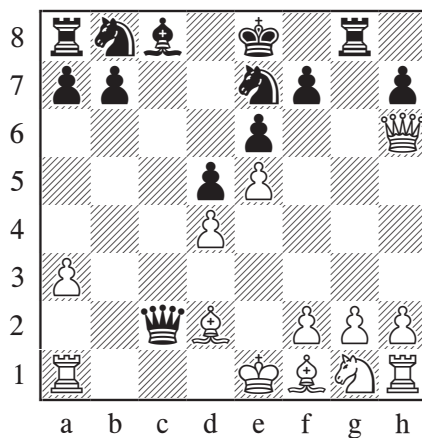
After 10. ♖c1 ♖e4† 11. ♖xe4 dxe4 12. ♜e2 ♙d7 13. ♜c3 ♙c6 White faced an uphill struggle for a draw in Kovchan – Petr, Kharkov 2011.

10...♖g8 11. ♖h6

11. ♖f6? has made a plus score for White, but the rare 11...♜f5! causes him serious trouble: 12. ♖c1N The only chance. (12. ♙b5†? ♙d7 13. ♖c1 ♖e4† 14. ♙e3 ♙c6 With ...♜d7 coming, White was about to lose his queen and the game in Ianocichin – Seifert, Litohoto 1999.) 12...♖e4† 13. ♜e2 ♜d7 14. ♜f3 Both queens are short of squares, but the black one can sacrifice herself on more favourable terms.



14...♖d3 15. ♜c3 ♖xd2†! 16. ♙xd2 ♜xf6 17. exf6 ♜xd4†

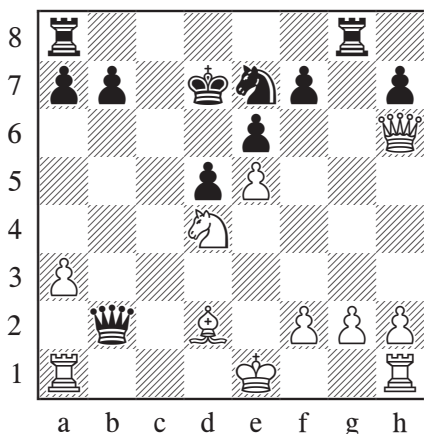
**11...♜bc6 12. ♜f3**

12. ♜e2 merely transposes, as Black has the exact same trick available.

12...♜xd4! 13. ♜xd4 ♖b2 14. ♙b5†

After 14.♖c1 ♗xd4 15.♖e3 ♗xe3† 16.♙xe3
♙d7♣ White had insufficient compensation for
a pawn in Lama Fernandez – Jesus Hurtado,
Barcelona 2011.

14...♙d7 15.♙xd7† ♖xd7



16.♗b3!?

Deflecting the black queen to an inferior
square.

16.0–0 ♗xd4♣ occurred in Srinivasan – Roller,
Toronto 2003. Black is a pawn up with active
pieces, while his king is safely hidden behind
the French pawn chain.

16...♗xb3 17.0–0 ♖f3 18.♙g5 ♖f5 19.f4

Zufic – Grigoryan, Rijeka 2010. Here we
can improve with:

19...♖ac8♣

Black has a healthy extra pawn and active
piece play.

Conclusion

8.♗f3! is an interesting idea but it seems good
enough for equality at best. 8.cxd4 is a more
natural idea, but after 8...♗c7 White must
make a difficult decision. There are three main
ways of handling the threats on the queenside,
but all have their drawbacks, and Black has
excellent chances not only to equalize, but also
to fight for the advantage.