



SKITTLES ROOM

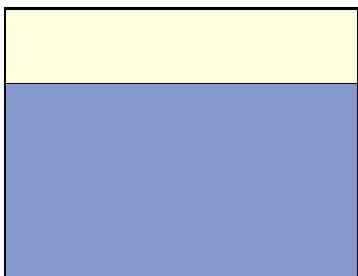
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Giuoco Fortissimo: The Rousseau Gambit

Part 1

by Tim McGrew

Warning: This column is not for the faint of heart. If you scroll down just a little bit, you are going to be staring at a raw, unvarnished gambit idea for Black against 1.e4 straight out of the nineteenth century.

This line is not "safe" for either player. It may very well not be sound against theoretical best play, and it is unlikely that you will be able to score an upset over Ivanchuk using it. (I suggest that you remember this next time you are paired against Ivanchuk and select something with which you can beat him, like the Najdorf Sicilian, which I'm told he doesn't know at all.) Your master and GM friends will sneer at this and tell you to go back to memorizing *Informants* like they do.

If you can already tell that the material below is going to be too intense for you, feel free to do a web search for "chess" together with "calm," "passive," and perhaps "Caro-Kann."

Now that the theoretical purists have gone elsewhere, let's talk straight.

If you're reading this column, odds are good that you play more chess online than over the board. If you play online, you probably play more fast games than slow ones – five-minute, three-minute, two-minute, maybe even one-minute games. As the time control drops, the importance of opening preparation increases and three factors become critical:

(1) You need openings that appear on the board a high percentage of the time. The Marshall Gambit in the Ruy Lopez, for all of its undoubted merits, can be frustrating here; you can play a hundred games in a row without encountering anyone who will allow you to play it. This is not an efficient use of your study time.

(2) You need openings that are likely to give you the initiative against "normal" moves. Face it: attack is easier than defense. If,

right in the opening, you are figuring out your opponent's threats and countering them when you have less than three minutes on your clock, life is very hard. In fast games, Tim's Rule of Thumb says that the initiative is worth a pawn.

(3) You need openings that your opponent is unlikely to know. The Latvian Gambit is a good illustration of something that does not meet this criterion. It is an interesting opening, but if you play above the 1500 level it is not realistic to expect that your opponents will never have seen it. Ideally, your opening should be something that is hard to look up -- existing analysis in the major opening reference works should be non-existent, scanty, outdated, or (best of all) positively misleading.

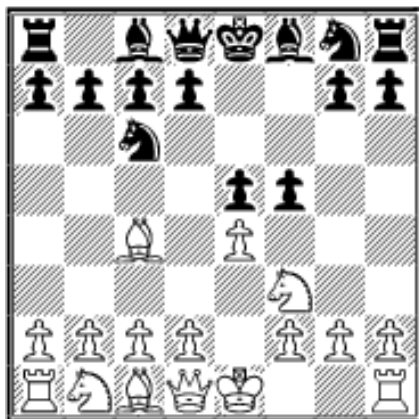
Notice what I did not mention here: I did not say that your openings had to be absolutely theoretically sound. They could be; but this is really a secondary consideration for the practical player.

The Rousseau Gambit (see, you haven't heard of it either, have you?) was used by several of the strongest players in the world during the 19th century -- Anderssen and Steinitz, to name two -- with crushing results. In recent outings it is most often reached by transposition from the Latvian Gambit, but that doesn't happen too often because (A) White more often plays something other than 3.Bc4 against the Latvian, and (B) when he does play 3.Bc4, Latvian players are usually having way too much fun in the Svedenborg variation to look at the alternatives. It is good enough to score roadkill tactical victories in fast games online against players rated in excess of 2200, as you will see below; at the other end of the speed spectrum, of the 143 correspondence games with the Rousseau in my database, Black scores 49% (60 - 25 - 57). It is full of really good practical traps into which my opponents have stumbled more than half of the time. In dozens of games, nobody has played the theoretically approved line against me.

And that line is hard to find, since it is undocumented in most of the opening manuals available to the average club player: MCO 13, BCO 2, Zagorovsky's *Romantic Chess Openings*, Benjamin and Schiller's *Unorthodox Openings* and Watson and Schiller's *Big Book of Busts*. There is a footnote in NCO that goes *one move deep*, does not mention the most critical move, and assesses the position as *slightly* favorable to White. The gambit is mentioned in Keene's *Complete Book of Gambits*, but his analysis is so perfunctory that I actually hope my future opponents have read it. The analysis by Unzicker in ECO volume C is a bit more substantial, but it turns out to be a rehash of lines given more than a hundred fifty years ago in Bilguer's *Handbuch*.

Let's plunge in.

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 f5!?



"A defence too bad, it would appear, to have a name. It is a poor relative of the Greco," writes Philip Sergeant in *Morphy's Games of Chess*. In the progress of nomenclature the move has been named after the French American player Eugene Rousseau who lost a game with it to Morphy. But if we are going to dismiss openings because forgettable players lost with them to Morphy, we should begin by abandoning 1...e5 altogether.

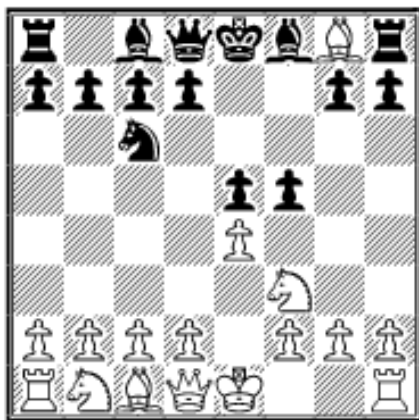
It might be worth pausing here for a moment and looking at the position from White's point of view. Black's immediate threat is 4...fxe4, not only winning a pawn but also creating a monster center. In fact, monster centers are a large part of what the Rousseau Gambit is all about. Black is, in effect, playing a Vienna Game a tempo down, counting on the exposure of White's Bishop at c4 to give him ...d5 with a gain of time.

White has five major alternatives:

- A. 4.Bxg8
- B. 4.exf5
- C. 4.Nc3
- D. 4.d3
- E. 4.d4

Only the last two of these hold out any hope for an advantage, and only the last one is critical. We will consider the first four of them in part I of this article since they comprise about half of the theory and since they are played, according to my database of a couple hundred Rousseaus, about half of the time. In part II, we will cover the critical variation E

A) 4.Bxg8



Trading a well-developed piece for an unmoved Knight cannot be very dangerous unless White has some stunning follow-up. He doesn't. **4...Rxf8** Once again Black is threatening ...fxe4 with a massive center.

A1) 5.exf5 This cedes the center for no apparent reason and scores wretchedly in practice. Daikeller-Bethmann, corr 1987 continued 5...e4 (5...d5 looks very good as well) 6.Ng1 Qg5 7.g3 (Fritz suggests 7.g4 but if White is forced to play such a move then

Black is doing well already.) 7...Qxf5 White has exactly one pawn on a square where it did not begin the game. Black's position unfolds with frightening speed. 8.Ne2 Bc5 9.0-0 (9.d4 exd3 is not much prettier.) 9...Ne5 10.d4 Nf3+ 11.Kh1 (11.Kg2 delays the catastrophe, but after 11...d6 Black threatens ...Qh3+ so White

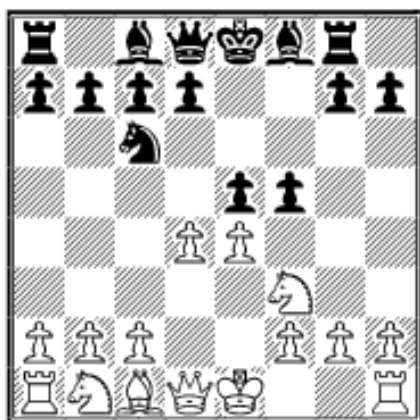
must grovel with 12.Ng1 Nxd4 -- and Black holds all the trumps.) 11...Qh3 and Black mates next move on h2.

A2) 5.d3 This looks plausible but has not been played in the 200+ games in my database. Black should be at least equal -- and perhaps a little bit more comfortable than his opponent -- after 5...d6 6.Bg5 Be7 7.Bxe7 Qxe7=

A3) 5.Nc3 This just invites the Black pawns to roll forward. 5...fxe4 6.Nxe4 d5 and now the Knight must find new lodgings:

A3a) 7.Ng3 Qf6 8.d4 e4 9.Nh5 Qd6 10.Ng1 Bd7 (10...Nb4!?) 11.Ne2 0-0-0 with a solid edge for Black (-/+)

A3b) 7.Nc3 A perfect picture of unsupported cavalry. White was crushed in Plath-Holwell, corr 1987 after 7...e4 8.Ng1 Qg5 9.g3 Qe5 Making the freeing d3 unattractive. Yes, White is already having trouble freeing himself. 10.Nce2 Bc5 11.Nf4 (Now 11.d3 would be met by 11...Rf8 12.d4 Nxd4 13.Be3 Ne6-- when Black can claim advantages in space, time, and force.) 11...Bf5 12.Nge2 0-0-0 Here White, understandably discouraged, decided to economize on postage.



A4) 5.d4 The main move, and a better try for an advantage. Black has a number of choices at this point, but 5...fxe4 is the most thematic move. Black gets his Vienna Center and White has to find some justification for having given it to him.

(For the record, 5...Qe7!/? was favored by Gunderam, who used it with mixed success in a set of postal games against Studier in the 1960's. The alternative 5...d6 is given as equal in Freeborough & Ranken.)

5...fxe4 6.Nxe5 Qf6 (6...Qh4!/? is worth exploring here too.) **7.Nxc6** Now Black has to decide which pawn to recapture with:

A4a) 7...dxc6 This is less in keeping with the spirit of the Rousseau than 7...bxc6, but I cannot see anything terribly wrong with it. Black's pieces come out just a little faster and Queenside castling is a live option.

A4a1) 8.0-0 Bd6 (8...Qg6 9.f3 Bh3 10.Qe2 0-0-0 looks at least equal for Black, whose King is quite secure on the Queenside.) 9.f3 Qh4! 10.g3 Bxg3 11.hxg3 Qxg3+ 12.Kh1 Bh3 13.Rg1 Qxf3+ 14.Qxf3 exf3 =+

A4a2) 8.Qh5+ 8...g6 9.Qxh7 Here this does not lose the Queen, since the Black d-pawn has moved and c7 is accessible. Still, White is losing an awful lot of time with his Queen. 9...Rh8 10.Qxc7 Bd6 11.Qa5 Qxd4 12.Qd2 Qe5 This is quite unclear. Black is a pawn down with two isolated pawns but his development is excellent -- particularly when compared with White's -- and White dare not castle Kingside.

A4b) 7...bxc6 The thematic move and apparently quite playable.

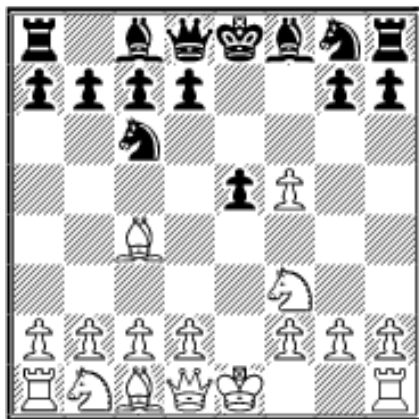
A4b1) 8.Qh5+? The check is pointless here. 8...g6! Now White's d-pawn is hanging, so he has a bitter choice to make:

A4b11) 9.Qd1 d5 and Black is a tempo ahead on the game continuation below, so White can no longer break safely with f3. For example, 10.0-0 Bd6 11.f3 Qh4 12.g3 (12.h3 Bxh3 -+) 12...Bxg3 13.hxg3 Qxg3+ 14.Kh1 Rf8! and the threat of Rf5-h5 is decisive (-+).

A4b12) 9.Qxh7?? Rh8 bags the Queen

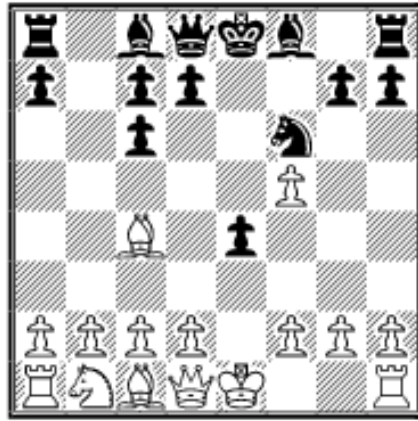
A4b2) 8.0-0 d5 This position typifies what Black gets in many lines of the Rousseau: a solid phalanx of pawns, more Kingside space, and some attacking chances unless White acts fast to neutralize the pawn on e4. 9.f3! The right idea: White gets rid of that pawn before Black can play ...Bd6 and create mating threats. 9...exf3 10.Rxf3 Qg6 11.Qe2+ Be6 12.Bf4 Kd7! The Black King is quite safe here. Now Black threatens ...Bg4 picking up material. 13.Rc3 With ideas of Qa6 hitting c6, but Black has plenty of resources. 13...Qg4 Heavy exchanges are in the offing. (13...Bg4!? might be the way to play for a win, especially if White carries on with his plan of attacking c6, e.g. 14.Qa6 Bb4 15.Rb3 Qe4 16.Be3 Rge8 =+ and the tide is turning in Black's direction) 14.Qxg4 Bxg4 15.Rg3 Bf5 16.c3 Bd6 (16...c5!? would mix things up a little more.) 17.Bxd6 cxd6 18.Nd2 and the antagonists called a truce in Tuchtenhagen-Bethmann, corr 1987. This is a fair result, though Black could consider playing on for a little while with 18...Rae8.

B) 4.exf5



This variation illustrates how Black can gain time with ...d5 kicking White's Bishop. **4...e4!** It is better to play this first, giving the Knight the boot, rather than playing an immediate ...d5 which allows White to pin with Bb5, giving his Knight at f3 extra options. **5.Nd4** (A cheap trap: 5...Nxd4?? 6.Qh5+ etc. Black should just continue developing. On the other hand, the pin 5.Qe2 should be met with 5...d5 6.Bb5 and now not the Nge7 of Van Eerd - Den Haan, Hengelo Jr 2001 (1-0, 42)

but rather 6...Kf7! 7.Ng1 Nf6 8. Qd1 c6 9.Nge2 Nxe2 10.Qxe2 d5 11.Bb3 Bxf5 with a fantastic center, Andre-Fiebig, corr 1986 (0-1, 22).) Back to 5.Nd4, we see Black avoiding the trap with **5...Nf6!** **6.Nxc6 bxc6** (6...dxc6 is less thematic) and now:



B1) 7.d3 d5 8.Bb3 Bxf5 It is very hard to get positions like this with Black in most normal openings! White needs to be thinking about equalizing now. 9.dxe4 Nxe4 10.Qf3 Qd7 11.0-0 Bc5 (11...Bd6 is a natural move here as well, e.g. 12.Nc3 Nxc3 13.Qxc3 0-0 14.Ba4 Rf6 with reasonable prospects for Black thanks to his space advantage. The c-pawn is, of course, tactically defended: 15.Bxc6? Bxh2+ 16.Kxh2 Rxc6 -+) Black's claim to an advantage here seems borne out by both practice and analysis:

B1a) 12.Nc3 0-0-0 (12...0-0?? drops a piece because the d-pawn is pinned: 13.Nxe4 Bxe4 14.Qxe4 Rae8 15.Qd3 Rxf2 16.Kh1 Rxf1+ 17.Qxf1 and White makes off with his booty) 13.Bc4 Rhf8 14.Nxe4 Bxe4 15.Ba6+ Kb8 and Black's attacking chances look better than White's, e.g. 16.Qb3+ Bb6 and White has no time to force matters as 17.a4? is met strongly by 17...Qg4! 18.Qg3 (18.g3?? Qh3 wins on the spot.) 18...Qxg3 19.hxg3 Bxc2 with a very welcome extra pawn (-/+).

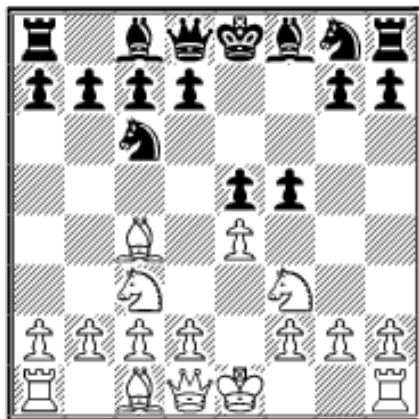
B1b) 12.Be3? Missing a tactical shot based on the limited mobility of White's Queen. 12...Bg4! 13.Qxg4 (13.Qf4 Bd6 traps the Queen in the middle of the board.) 13...Qxg4 14.f3 Bxe3+ 15.Kh1 Ng3+ and White is mated next move. Andre-Schilling, corr 1986.

B2) 7.0-0 This comes to much the same sort of thing as line B1. 7...d5 8.Bb3 Bxf5 9.Re1

B2a) 9...Bd6!? This is very attractive since it sets up the threat of a Greek Gift sacrifice on h2, e.g. 10.d3 Bxh2+ 11.Kxh2 Ng4+ 12.Kg1 Qh4 13.Qd2 (13.Be3? 0-0 leaves White lost) 13...Qh2+ 14.Kf1 0-0 15.Qf4 Qh1+ 16.Ke2 Qxg2 and Black has all the chances even after the best defense 17.Qg3 exd3+ 18.Kd2 Qxf2+ 19.Qxf2 Nxf2 Four pawns are worth more than a piece (-/+)

B2b) 9...Be7 10.h3 0-0 11.Qe2 Qd7 12.g4 Nxg4 13.hxg4 Bxg4 14.f3 Bxf3 15.Qh2 Qg4+ 16.Kf2 Be2+ 17.Ke3 Bc5+ 18.d4 and now Black forced White's resignation with 18...Bd6 in Jenc-Hromas, Plzen 1995, but 18...Qf3+! 19.Kd2 Bb4+ 20.Nc3 e3# (or 20.c3 Qd3#) is even more convincing.

C) 4.Nc3



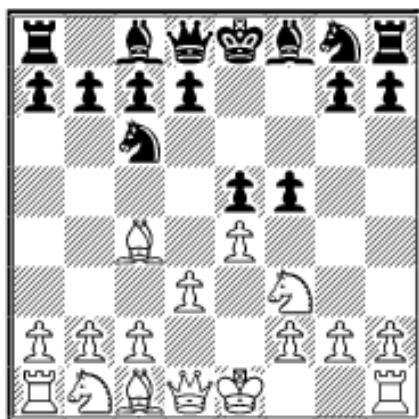
This developing move can give rise to some very sharp play, but Black has most of the fun. Interestingly, this move has been seen in some of the more recent OTB outings of the Rousseau. Black's main move now is **4...fxe4**. None of the alternatives is so good that it should replace this as the main line, though one deserves mention: **4...Nf6 5.Ng5!?** leads to an obscure sort of Two Knights position after **5...d5 6.exd5 Na5 7.Bb5+ c6 8.dxc6 bxc6 9.Be2 Bd6 10.0-0 0-0** when Black has some compensation for the pawn.

After **4...fxe4**, the way divides:

C1) 5.Nxe4? This would be good if it didn't lose a piece. **5...d5 6.Bb5** Yes, we have on the board in front of us a main line Schliemann with an entire extra move for Black! (**6.Nxe5** doesn't seem to work, though it is about the best thing White has left in this position: **6...Nxe5 7.Qh5+ Ng6 8.Bxd5 Nf6 9.Nxf6+ Qxf6 10.0-0** If White could catch Black's King in the center he might have something to play for here, but he can't, e.g. **10...c6 11.Re1+ Be7 12.Bb3 Rf8 13.Re2 Bf5 14.d3 0-0-0** -> Black's King is safe and his extra piece should easily outweigh the two pawns) **6...dxe4 7.Nxe5** We've been following Broden-Horstmann, Germany 1996 (0-1, 22), and now the most precise move seems to be **7...Qg5 8.d4 Qxg2 9.Rf1 Nf6 10.Nxc6 a6 11.Ba4 Bd7** -> and White has absolutely nothing to show for his piece.

C2) 5.Bxg8 Rxg8 Simple and thematic: Black plays for the big center. We have transposed into line A3, above. This seems to be a risk-free way for Black to obtain the advantage. The alternative **5...exf3!?** wins a pawn but allows White to keep his lightsquare Bishop. Still, after **6.Bd5 fxg2 7.Bxg2** Black is probably better, so perhaps this is just more evidence that White has problems in this variation.

D) 4.d3



This quiet move is recommended in a footnote on page 311 of NCO. Nunn gives no further analysis; he simply stops with the assessment \pm , which is hardly damning. Perhaps Nunn is simply paying homage to Paul Morphy, who played like this against Rousseau in 1849.

If White plays well, I think Nunn's evaluation is just about right. But I would add that if this were the best White can do against the Rousseau Gambit, we would see it much more often at higher levels of play. Black's natural

response is **4...Nf6**, when we have a parting of the ways:



D1) 5.exf5 Abandoning the center with this move gives Black a fine game. 5...d5 6.Bb5 Bd6 7.d4 (7.0-0 0-0 with a fine position for Black.) 7...e4 8.Ne5 Black has two reasonable choices here: he can defend c6 or just sacrifice a second pawn there to highlight his own advantages in time and space.

D1a) 8...0-0 9.Nxc6 bxc6 10.Bxc6 Rb8 (10...Bxf5!? is for the truly daring: 11.Bxa8 Qxa8 leaves Black down the exchange and a pawn but five or six moves ahead in

development. Certainly lazy play by White will be punished, e.g. 12.0-0 Qe8 13.Nc3 Qg6 14.Kh1 Bg4! 15.Qe1 Bf3!! 16.gxf3 Qh5 17.f4 Ng4 and White is getting mated.) 11.g4 Bd7 12.Bxd7 Qxd7 and Black has a sort of dream King's Gambit with colors reversed. White's position is precarious, e.g. 13.Nd2 e3 14.fxe3 Rbe8 15.0-0 Rxe3 16.g5 Bxh2+! 17.Kg2 (17.Kxh2? allows Black to force mate with 17...Qd6+ 18.Kg1 Qg3+ 19.Kh1 Qh3+ 20.Kg1 Rg3+ 21.Kf2 Qg2+ 22.Ke1 Re3+ 23.Qe2 Qxe2#) 17...Bd6 and Black has a very strong attack.

D1b) 8...Bd7 White seems to have nothing special against this simple treatment. 9.Bxc6 bxc6 10.Nd2 0-0 11.c4 Bxf5! Trading one pawn for another. Black's Queen belongs on e8 -- compare a Vienna Game with colors reversed. 12.Nxc6 Qe8 13.cxd5 Nxd5 14.Ne5 Bxe5 (14...Nf4!? may be even sharper, aiming at d3, e.g. 15.0-0 Bxe5 16.dxe5 Qg6! 17.g3 Nd3 -/+ and White's Kingside is being infiltrated) 15.dxe5 Qxe5 16.Nc4 Qe6 17.0-0 Rad8 Black's pawns are ragged, but his space and piece activity are ample compensation. 18.Qa4 Qg6 More Vienna themes. 19.Qa3 Qh5 20.Ne3 Nf4 21.Nxf5? Ne2+! 22.Kh1 Rxf5 23.Be3? White was in bad shape anyway, but this lets Black pull off a pleasing finish: 23...Qxh2+! and White saw the handwriting on the wall in Duarte-Fabris, Mogliano Veneto 1994.

D2) 5.Ng5 According to my database, this aggressive sally is untried. Black can make a sort of Two Knights out of it with 5...d5 6.exd5 Na5!? 7.Bb5+ (7.0-0 Nxc4 8.dxc4 Bd6 looks like a good Elephant Gambit of the sort Halasz used to get for Black. White's extra pawn doesn't mean very much and Black has very real Kingside attacking prospects.) 7...c6 8.dxc6 bxc6 9.Ba4 Bd6 10.0-0 0-0 11.Bd2 h6 12.Nf3 Nb7 13.Bxc6 e4! 14.Bxb7 Bxb7 and Black has considerable compensation for his pawn.

D3) 5.Nc3 This completes a transposition into a King's Gambit Declined with colors reversed. Black is a tempo down but has a very playable position after 5...Bb4 This pin is positionally desirable (Black wants to keep a White Knight out of d5) and once in a while White even plays it at a loss of tempo in the KGD. Play is about equal here.

D4) 5.0-0 Morphy's choice against Rousseau. Black hasn't fared too well in this position, but he hasn't tried out what I consider to be the right move: 5...fxe4! 6.dxe4 Bc5 White's only hope of causing trouble here lies in a quick strike at f7, but in that case Black gets the sort of position he aims for in the Traxler/Wilkes

Barre lines of the Two Knights, e.g. 7.Ng5 Qe7 8.Bf7+ (8.Nf7? is a complete waste of time and is properly punished by 8...Rf8 9.Ng5 h6 10.Nf3 Nxe4 with a huge position and an extra pawn for Black.) 8...Kf8 (8...Kd8?? 9.Ne6+ would be most disappointing) and here, despite his displaced King, I think that Black has a playable position. A few sample variations:

D4a) 9.Bc4 h6

D4a1) 10.Nf3 d6 (10...Nxe4!? may even be possible) 11.Nc3 Bg4 12.h3 Bh5 13.Be2 Bg6= and Black has nothing to worry about.

D4a2) 10.Nf7 10.Rh7-/+ and the Knight is trapped.

D4b) 9.Bd5 d6 Sure, Black would rather have the f8 square free, but White has no d-pawn. White does not seem to me to have much of an advantage here, and he can easily get into trouble:

D4b1) 10.Nc3 Bg4 11.Qd2 h6 12.h3 (12.Nf7? Rh7! -- leaves the White Knight trapped in enemy territory.) 12...hxg5 13.hxg4 Nxc4 14.Qxc5 Qxc5 15.Bxc5 Nd4 16.Bxb7 Rb8 17.Ba6 Rxb2 and White is still puzzling over how to regain his lost material.

D4b2) 10.Nf7? 10...Nxd5 11.Nxh8 (11.exd5 Qxf7 12.dxc6 bxc6 and Black's extra pawn and fine center give him a clear advantage.) 11...Nf6 Black's King is going to pick up the Knight in the corner, when Black will be up two pieces for a Rook with excellent prospects.

My hearty congratulations to those persevering readers who have hacked their way through that dense thicket of variations. As we pause on our analytical safari, let's try to recapitulate the main points that seem, at least provisionally, to have been established.

Line A (4.Bxc8) gives White nothing. A1 and A3 are positively bad for White; A2 is insipid and A4 is perhaps about equal but certainly nothing for Black to fear.

Line B (4.exf5) is one of White's worst options. Black gets a sizeable space advantage for free, and White has none of the counterplay we encounter in E.

Line C (4.Nc3) is another lemon. White's minor pieces are simply too exposed, and the piece sacrifice 4...fxe4 5.Nxe4 d5 6.Nxe5 is pretty clearly insufficient.

Line D (4.d3) is much more stable. White can nudge Black's King to f8 (line D4), but the inconvenience does not seem very great and White can get in hot water trying to stage an invasion at f7. White may have a small edge here -- then again, maybe not -- but in any event the variation seems quite playable for Black.

In the next installment, we will examine line E (4.d4), the critical variation, and introduce some new ideas for Black.



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