

opening repertoire

the Caro-Kann

Jovanka Houska

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About the Author

Jovanka Houska was the 2013 Commonwealth Ladies Champion and is a many-time winner of the British Women's Championship. She has represented the English team, on top board, at numerous Chess Olympiads, and qualified for the 2006 Women's World Championship. In 2006 she won the English Chess Federation Player of the Year award, the first time a female chess player had received this prestigious recognition.

Also by the Author:

Play the Caro-Kann

Starting Out: The Scandinavian

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Introduction

Welcome back, dear reader. It has been shockingly over seven (!) years since I wrote my first chess book, *Play the Caro-Kann* – a long time in the chess world. A few years ago I developed a niggling feeling that I hadn't quite written all I had to say on my favourite opening and it was a marvel at how the opening had changed so much. I have been pretty much loyal to the Caro-Kann, using it as a weapon against all types of opponents from beginners to 2700s, so I consider it a very diverse weapon. Most of my resulting positions ended in the better player winning – I have yet to find an opening that has given me such a positive results. In fact I have converted a husband and a few of my students to the Caro-Kann cause!

History of the Opening

It was two German players, Horatio Caro and Marcus Kann, who introduced this defence during the second half of the nineteenth century. At the time, chess was very much in its 'Romantic' stage, a time when it was rude not to accept sacrifices, and gambits were all the rage. Unsurprisingly, the Caro-Kann did not find too many adherents, but as the concepts of positional chess developed, people began appreciating the qualities of the opening: Black gets easy development of the pieces, clear plans with a solid pawn structure, and safe but active play.

Today, the Caro has a grand heritage with many great players, including world champions Botvinnik, Petrosian and, most significantly, Anatoly Karpov using it with great success. Modern advocates of the Caro include distinguished grandmasters such as Riazantsev, Laznicka, Andreikin, Dreev, Lalith and Gunina to name just a few. I fully advocate following the games of these players and shamelessly copying what they play. After all, why not have a top grandmaster play your opening for you?

Aims of the Caro-Kann

The Caro-Kann has often been maligned for being dry and boring, played by those wishing to bore their opponents to death. However, the fundamental aim of the opening is to achieve full development, particularly of the light-squared bishop, and then begin active play to challenge White's space advantage. Our basic pawn structure with pawns on c6-e6 (and d5 – if it is still there) is flexible and easy to play.

There are, however, many sides to the Caro and one should not lose sight that at times it can be very sharp as well as positional. Don't be swayed by assumptions and stereotypes. Some of the lines I have recommended are solid, others are sharp, and yet others are based on obtaining a more comfortable endgame. We must simply get used to playing what the position demands.

The whole premise of 1...c6 is very much based on the logic that is also behind the French Defence: with the first move Black gets ready to support the ...d7-d5 advance. The advantage of our move is that Black does not block the light-squared bishop on c8, but there is also a disadvantage in that the important move ...c6-c5 is not available to Black in most lines, at least not immediately.

The centre is usually filled with too much tension for Black to be able to spend two tempi achieving ...c5, and Black must usually wait until he is fully developed before he can afford to expend another tempo in pushing the c-pawn one square further. There is one exception to this and that is in the Advance Variation (Chapters 7-8), the justification being that White has already eased the tension in the centre by advancing the e-pawn.

As I stated earlier, Black's main aim is to complete development before beginning any active operations (although of course there are some exceptions). However, when playing the opening, it is very useful to keep in mind the following six factors. Some of them are clearly self-explanatory; others, I will explain how they should be applied to the Caro-Kann directly.

1) The Centre

The centre plays a very important part in most openings and the Caro-Kann is no different. The nature of the centre is flexible and dependent on the variation chosen by White: at times it can be full of high tension as in the Panov; relatively static, as in the Exchange Variation; or dynamic, as in an isolated queen's pawn (IQP) position. Black should always value the importance of the centre, especially the four centre squares e4, e5, d4 and d5.

2) Open Lines

Again this is dependent on which variation is played, but as a very general point Black should be looking to contest the central files, in particular if there is a half-open d-line. Naturally we must pay attention to the pawn breaks ...c5 and ...e5, placing pressure on the central square d4. As a very general formula, the ...e5 break becomes more attractive if (a) the white king is in the centre, and/or (b) White has made no effort to control any squares in the centre.

3) Piece Activity

Both sides use this concept a lot in the Caro-Kann. White primarily uses this dynamic concept to speed up his opening development by attacking the light-squared bishop to gain more space and attacking potential. Black, on the other hand, depends on easy development and his solid pawn structure to withstand White's early initiative. My recommenda-

tion in the Advance Variation, however, is based first on early pawn challenges to the centre and then the resulting dynamism of the pieces.

4) Pawn Structure

Generally speaking Black has a good structure with pawns usually occupying light squares, the only disadvantage being that to begin with Black's structure does not control much space. One point to understand is that if Black exchanges his light-squared bishop for a knight, he should very much play on the dark squares and use the pawns as a light-square blockade.

5) Strong and Weak Squares

As a very rough guide, Black's weakest point is the e5-square and this is often utilized by a white knight to commence an attack. A strong square for Black, if the pawn has been exchanged, is the d5-square, but if the d5-pawn remains then the c4- and e4-squares are potential strengths.

6) King Safety – Take care of your King!

This is pretty much explanatory one would think? Not the case! It's surprising to me how many people don't follow this advice. In some lines in the Classical Main Line, Black's play takes the form of preventing any g2-g4 pawn storms. In other lines, it means not opening the position when his Majesty hasn't got cover. In a few lines when White has gone for the jugular very early on, sacrificing all kinds of material to get at our king, I would recommend sitting down and memorizing the defences. Take care of the elderly monarch, he needs physical help.

The Modern Approach to the Caro-Kann

Since the introduction of computers and the rise of opening theory, Black openings in general have taken some serious poundings and the Caro-Kann is no exception. Lines that were perceived to be simple have become amazingly complex or White has simply become more confrontational. There is no denying things: opening theory has become more complicated which accounts for the increase in size of this book. White players, no longer content with simply playing a position as it is, have adopted three approaches: the first is to try to completely blast Black off the board, the second an attempt to force Black to 'grovel' for the draw in a chanceless position, and the last to catch Black in unknown territory.

Unfortunately, it has become more and more necessary for players to have a deeper knowledge of the theory, so I would suggest that readers make a real effort to understand the moves and ideas in the sharp lines (Advance, Panov) and the Classical main lines, whilst simply learning some basic principles for the lines which are known to be less dangerous for Black. In the latter case, having a decent positional understanding will count for much more than simply memorizing variations.

My Approach to this Book

I have very much tried to write this book exactly how I like books to be written – with plenty of explanations of ideas and basic principles, along with some new theory. I have also added some ‘Houska’ formulas and taglines, which are designed to help the reader memorize/understand all the lines. I am famous amongst my students for carrying notebooks and jotting down piece formations, rules and ‘special’ moves when I prepare and I have continued this trend here.

On the whole I have tended to avoid lines where I feel Black only has the chance of playing for ‘two results’ (a loss or a draw), and instead chosen lines with ‘three results’ on offer. Sometimes this has led to me, following in my dad’s footsteps, and like the last edition, adding little Houska twists. However, I would like to add a practical word of advice – an opening repertoire is most effective when one has a few weapons of choice; it is good to have within an opening the option of a few choices. I would recommend all readers to include as many twists and turns in their repertoire as possible – a good player is a slippery fish to catch!

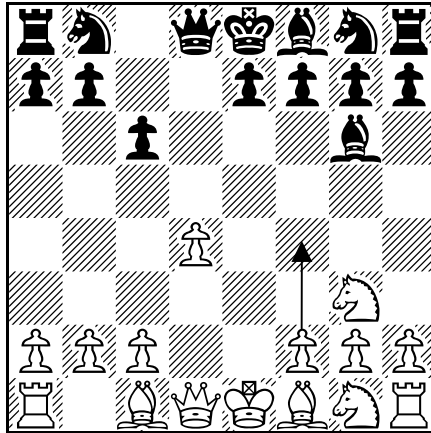
So to all Caro players out there, good luck!

Jovanka Houska,
Bergen,
December 2014

Chapter Three

Classical Variation: the f4 Plan

1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♗xe4 ♕f5 5 ♘g3 ♗g6



One of the downsides of developing the bishop to f5 is that it becomes a target for attack. We saw in the previous chapters White targeting the bishop with h2-h4-h5. However, there are two alternative forms of attack: the not-so-subtle idea of playing f2-f4 and catching the king in the centre, and the subtle ♗e2/h3-f4, inconveniencing the bishop.

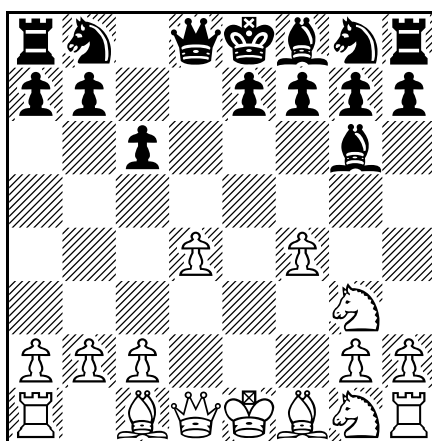
There are two forms of the f2-f4 attack. The first sees White choose to simply march the pawn on move 6 with a direct show of aggression. The second version usually arises once Black has committed his king's knight to f6. A word of caution: once White has played f2-f4, we must always anticipate the move f4-f5 even if it costs White material. Should Black gain

an iron grip over the f5-square then White will soon come to regret the weakening of his kingside and leaving the e4-square so vulnerable.

We will first look at the immediate 6 f4 and then at a manipulation of this basic idea when White plays 6 ♖c4 e6 7 ♘1e2 (or 7 ♘h3) 7...♘f6 8 0-0 ♘bd7 9 f4.

- A) 6 f4
- B) 6 ♖c4
- C) 6 ♘h3

The Direct Attack: 6 f4



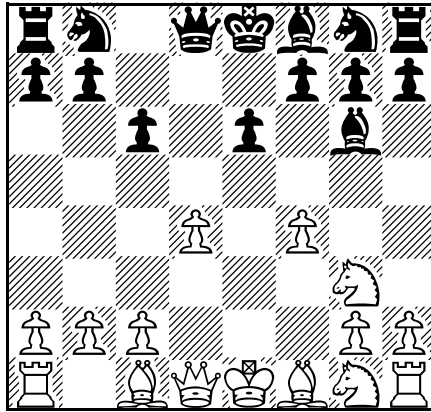
One of the disadvantages of attacking early in such a forthright manner is that it allows Black to make preparations and develop with the following in mind:

- a) Take control over the f5-square. This means that Black may develop the g8-knight to e7 to reinforce his control: for instance, if the white bishop develops to d3.
- b) Break open the position in the classical way with ...c6-c5 when White's dark squares will become even more vulnerable.

A) 6 f4

This move is a speciality of IM Kofidis, but has even been played by GM Judit Polgar on occasion. The main advantages to this aggressive system are that White has a massive grip on the important e5-square and can play for the dangerous pawn thrust f4-f5 when the knight on g3 will spring into life. However, there are also some drawbacks: the first is that Black's natural break ...c6-c5 will be more powerful than normal as the g1-a7 diagonal has been weakened. Secondly, from a positional perspective, White has voluntarily given himself a bad bishop on c1.

6...e6

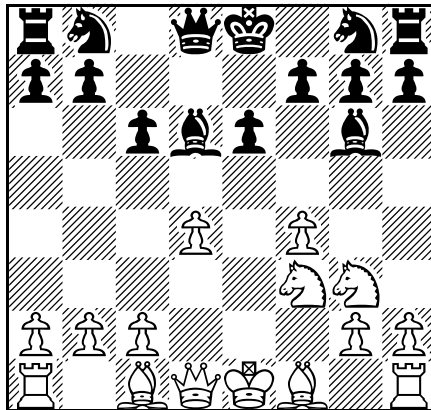


7 ♘f3

I have also faced 7 h4 h6 8 ♘f3. Here I played the perfectly acceptable 8...♘d7 9 h5 ♙h7 10 ♙d3 ♙xd3 (10...♙b4+ is also an interesting idea, forcing White to make an additional queenside weakness) 11 ♚xd3 ♘gf6 12 ♙d2 c5!? (a thematic reaction) 13 0-0-0 cxd4 14 f5 e5 15 ♜he1 ♙e7 16 ♘xe5 ♘xe5 17 ♜xe5 0-0 18 ♘e4 (if 18 ♙f4 ♙d6) 18...♘xe4 19 ♜xe4 ♙f6 20 g4 (already I think my position is preferable as the attack on the c-file should swing the game in Black's favour) 20...♜c8 21 ♙b1 ♚b6 22 g5 hxg5 23 ♜h1 ♜fe8 24 ♜xe8+ ♜xe8 25 h6 ♚c6 26 ♚h3 and now in N.Khoudgarian-J.Houska, Dresden Olympiad 2008, I would have had a clear advantage if I had played 26...d3! 27 c3 gxh6 28 ♚xh6 ♜e2.

Instead, after 7 ♙c4 ♘f6 8 c3 ♘bd7 9 ♚e2 ♙d6! (preventing White from playing f4-f5 by attacking the knight on g3) 10 ♘f3 ♘d5!? Black doesn't have any problems, M.Demirkesen-Y.Bozdemir, Antalya 2011.

7...♙d6!



This is the problem with White showing his cards so early. Black can develop whilst guarding the f5-square at the same time.

8 ♖d3

Exchanging Black's most active piece. Other possibilities are:

a) Should White wish to preserve the light-squared bishop with 8 ♖e2, as in J.Polgar-A.Khalifman, Las Vegas 1999, Black has a choice:

a1) I played 8... ♖f6 9 0-0 ♖bd7 10 ♗e5 0-0 11 h4 c5! 12 c3?! (12 h5 has to be played, although after 12... ♗f5 13 ♗xf5 exf5 14 h6 g6 15 ♗f3 ♖c7 16 c3 ♗e4 I don't think Black has any troubles) 12... cxd4 13 cxd4 ♖c8 14 ♖e3 ♗d5 15 ♖f3 ♗xe3 16 ♖xe3 ♗xe5 17 fxe5 in A.Nikolova-J.Houska, Plovdiv 2008, but here I missed the chance for 17... ♖c2 18 ♖e1 ♖e7 with a decisive advantage.

a2) 8... ♗e7 is another pleasant knight move: for example, 9 ♗e5 ♖xe5 10 fxe5 c5! (White's centre must be broken up, otherwise he will have a very nice space advantage along with the two bishops) 11 dxc5 ♖xd1+ 12 ♖xd1 ♗a6! (preventing b2-b4) 13 0-0 (13 ♖e3 ♗b4 also regains the pawn) 13... ♗xc5 14 ♖f3 ♗c6! targeting the weak e5-pawn. Black has already equalized here, as he is not lagging behind in development, while his two knights are doing an excellent job of controlling the key squares and attacking White's isolated pawn on e5.

b) 8 ♗e5 has hardly been played. It's not so convincing here, though, primarily because it is simply too early. Indeed, after 8... ♖xe5 9 fxe5 c5 10 ♖b5+ ♗c6 11 ♖xc6+ bxc6 12 ♖e3 ♗e7! 13 dxc5 ♗d5 14 ♖f2 ♖b8 15 b3 ♗b4 White must return the extra material.

c) After 8 c3 again it is up to the reader to choose where to develop the g8-knight. In both cases the plan is the same: to break with a well-timed ...c6-c5. For example, 8... ♗e7 (8... ♗f6 9 ♖e2 0-0 10 ♗e5 ♖c7 11 h4 c5 12 h5 ♖f5 13 ♗xf5 exf5 is a different flavour of how to play with Black) 9 ♖c4 ♗d7 10 h4 h6 11 h5 ♖h7 12 ♖d3 ♖xd3 13 ♖xd3 ♖c7 14 ♗e5 ♖d8 15 ♖e2 c5 16 0-0 cxd4 17 cxd4 0-0 is slightly better for Black, A.Papastavropoulos-P.Prohaszka, Achaea 2012.

d) Black can meet 8 ♖c4 in the standard way, completing development and then pushing ...c6-c5: for example, 8... ♗e7 9 0-0 0-0 10 ♖e2 c5 11 ♖e3 ♖c7 12 c3 ♗d7 13 ♗g5 cxd4 14 cxd4 ♗f6 15 ♖ac1 ♖a5 16 ♖h1 h6 17 ♗f3 ♗f5 and Black has a pleasant game. White has not managed to launch an attack and the hole left on e4 will soon start to tell in, D.Vargic-I.Saric, Bizovac 2005.

8... ♗e7!

Now because White has played ♖d3 it is vital to play the knight to e7. Remember to never let White play f4-f5 easily.

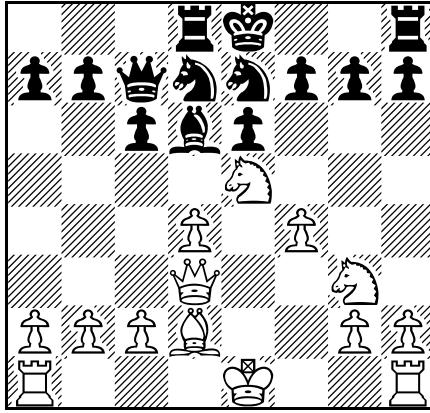
9 ♖e2

Instead, after 9 0-0 ♗d7 10 ♖h1 ♖c7 11 ♗e5 ♖d8 12 ♖g4 (12 ♖e2 ♖xd3 13 ♗xd3 0-0 14 ♖d2 c5! is very thematic; Black does not have to think too hard about opening the position and already has a very satisfactory set-up) 12... ♗f6 13 ♖h3 ♖xd3 14 ♗xd3 0-0 15 c4 (Y.Kim-D.Kononenko, Taganrog 2013) 15... ♖a5 White is struggling to find a plan while Black plans to undermine the with ...b7-b5.

9...♘d7

Black should develop calmly.

10 ♖d2 ♙xd3 11 ♚xd3 ♚c7 12 ♞e5 ♜d8!



Generating X-ray threats against the white queen.

13 ♚e2 c5!

The battle for the e5-square has begun. Black begins to weaken White's control of this critical square by loosening up the white centre, while White, on the other hand, must do everything possible to maintain it, otherwise his dark squares will become very weak.

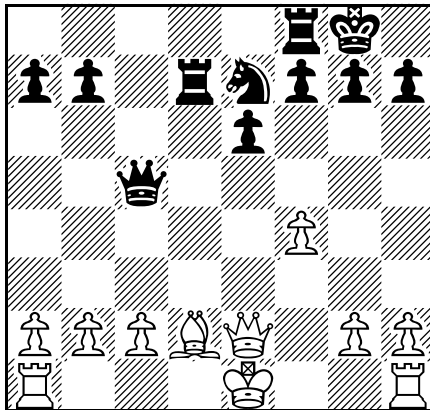
14 ♞e4 0-0

Preventing any tactics on f7. White must now do something about the pawn on d4 and so initiates a series of exchanges, but from now on the initiative lies with Black.

15 ♘xd6

After 15 c3 cxd4 16 cxd4 ♞f5 the d-pawn is nothing more than a nuisance for White.

15...♚xd6 16 ♞xd7 ♜xd7 17 dxc5 ♚xc5



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The position is already slightly better for Black.

18 0-0-0 ♖d5!

Centralizing the knight.

19 ♕e3 ♜a5 20 a3 ♝c8

Black has a very pleasant position. He will double rooks on the c-file and play ...b7-b5-b4, attacking the white king. Indeed, White is simply struggling to hold it together and didn't survive in A.Kofidis-S.Atalik, Panormo 1998.

B) 6 ♕c4 e6 7 ♘1e2

Instead, 7 ♘h3 would transpose to Line C, below.

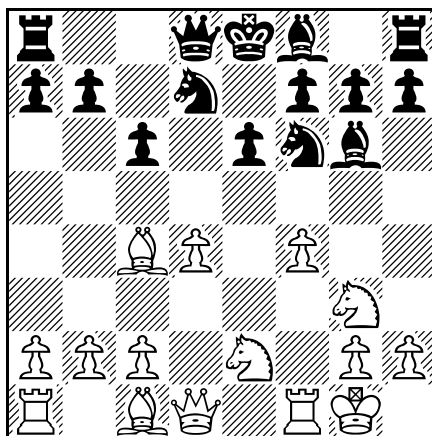
7... ♘f6

7... ♕d6 is a viable alternative.

8 0-0 ♘bd7!

This is safer than 8... ♕d6 which leads to massive complications after 9 f4 ♜d7 10 ♕d3 ♕xd3 11 ♜xd3 g6 and now White can play the complicated 12 f5!

9 f4



One of the points behind delaying f2-f4 is that Black has developed the knight to f6, thereby lessening his control over the important f5-square. This is a very enterprising move. White has the obvious and aggressive idea of playing f4-f5, aiming to open the f-file and get the knight to the dangerous f5-square. Black's task naturally is to prevent or dissuade this from happening.

The move 9 f4 has from a positional standpoint some flaws: it makes White's dark-squared bishop bad (Black can even play a little bit on this idea by going ... ♕f5), and it also gives Black the hope that one day there just might be one of his minor pieces sitting pretty on e4.

9... ♘b6!

Chasing the bishop back.

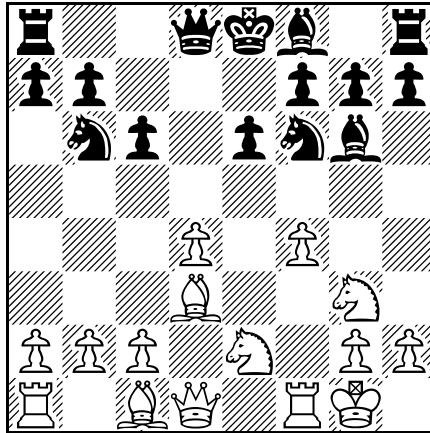
9...♙d6 allows White's main idea, namely to open up the position for his bishops: 10 f5! exf5 11 ♖xf5 ♙xf5 12 ♜xf5 ♚c7 13 ♙f4 0-0 14 ♙xd6 ♚xd6 15 ♖g3 is slightly better for White and even has some similarities to a King's Gambit position.

Here White has two main moves:

B1) 10 ♙d3

B2) 10 ♙b3

B1) 10 ♙d3



10...♙xd3 11 ♚xd3 g6!

Covering the critical f5-square. In order to crash through White must now take tremendous risks.

12 f5

This does not give White enough compensation for the piece, but to be honest it is still quite scary. For those who are too scared by it all, I would recommend playing 7...♙d6, allowing the knight on g8 to develop to e7.

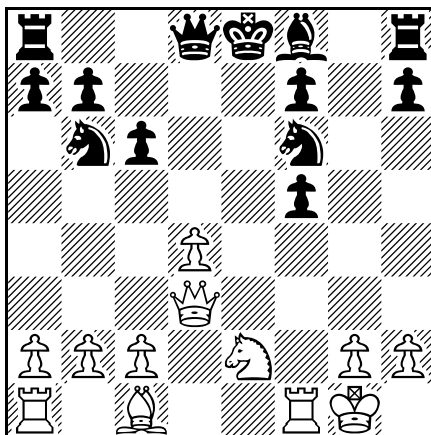
The more slowly White plays the position, the more risky the sacrifice f4-f5 becomes. As general advice I would recommend that Black should clear a path for the king to flee to the queenside if needs be: for instance, after 12 b3 I like 12...♚c7 (12...♚d7 is also possible) 13 ♙b2?! (better is 13 c4 ♙g7! 14 ♙a3 0-0-0 with a complex position) 13...♙g7 14 c4 0-0 and Black's position is rock solid.

Instead, 12 c4 was a recent try by White. After 12...♚d7 13 b3 ♙g7 14 ♙a3 Black should play 14...h5 followed by queenside castling. In D.Bisby-P.Sowray, British League 2013, 14...♖c8?! was premature as White had the sacrifice 15 f5 gxf5 16 ♖xf5! exf5 17 ♖g3 and it was already becoming dangerous for Black.

12...gxf5

This is where White plays something scarily crazy.

13 ♖xf5!? exf5



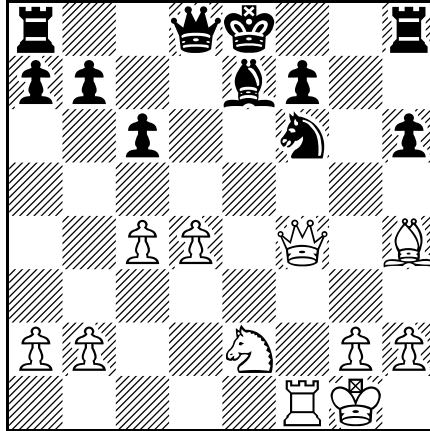
A critical position. Black must defend accurately here with different moves, so I will provide some triggers on how to remember the right defences.

14 ♗g5

Alternatively:

a) 14 ♖g3 is another scary move when Black must play the accurate 14...♖g8!. The idea is to threaten *mate* with ...♗d5: for example, 15 ♖e1+ (we can easily conclude that if White plays 15 ♖xf5 we follow our plans with 15...♗d5, threatening mate) 15...♖d7 (the king must now *run*) 16 ♗f4 (if 16 ♗xf5+ ♖c7 and the black king is merrily on its way to safety) 16...♗d6 17 ♗xd6 ♖xd6 18 ♖xf5+ ♖c7 19 ♖e7+ ♖b8 20 c4 a6. Black has started consolidating his king position, so, for instance, if 21 ♖xf7 ♖a7 22 ♖e1 ♖f8 23 ♖fe7 ♖c8 and Black will soon start to mobilize his extra piece.

b) After 14 ♗xf5 we must begin the defence with the theme *cover, defend and counter-attack*: 14...♗e7! (this bishop is required to do two things: break any potential pin and cover the exposed king on the e-file) 15 ♗g5 ♖bd5 (the only move to defend the other knight) 16 c4 h6! (a necessary counterattack) 17 ♗h4 ♖e3 18 ♗f4 ♖xf1 19 ♖xf1.



Now Black needs to play the deep defensive concept 19...0-0! 20 ♖f3 (if 20 ♜xh6 ♘h7! and 20 ♘g3 ♘h7 also saves the game) 20...♗e4!!, which is actually winning for us.

14...♗e7

This useful covering move also defends the knight.

15 ♘g3

Instead, 15 ♖ae1!? ♗fd5 16 ♜xf5 f6 17 ♗h6 ♜d7 parries all the threats.

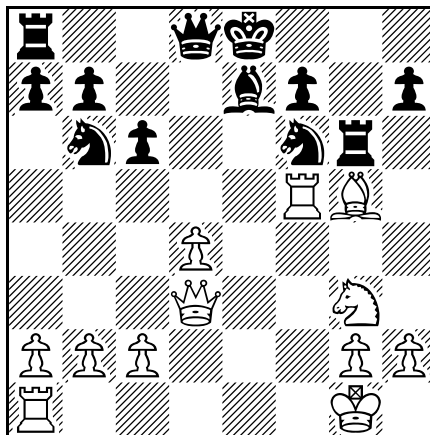
15...♖g8!

Utilizing all the pieces in the defence of the black king.

16 ♖xf5

16 ♘xf5 ♖xg5 17 ♘xe7 is strongly met by 17...♗xe7! 18 ♜e3+ ♗e4!! 19 ♜xe4+ ♗f8 and the king has escaped.

16...♖g6!



This is the idea – the rook protects the knight and *builds* a shelter for the black king.

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17 ♖e1 ♘f8 18 ♞h5

After 18 ♖xe7 ♜xe7 19 ♞h5 ♝xg5! White loses on the spot.

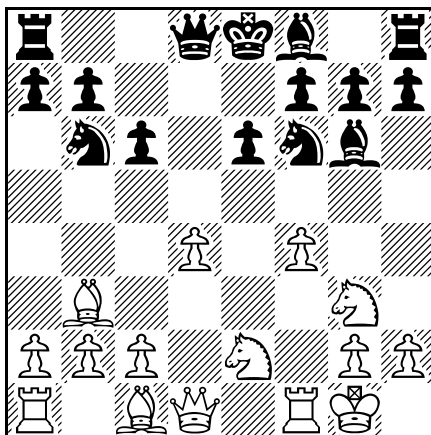
18...♞bd5! 19 c4 ♞xh5 20 ♝xd5 ♙xg5 21 ♝xd8+ ♝xd8 22 ♜a3+ ♚g8 23 ♜xa7

This eventually led to a draw in M.Khachian-K.Asrian, Yerevan 1999, but here Black should play:

23...♙f6!

White has problems with his own king's safety.

B2) 10 ♙b3



The bishop is out of play here and now Black is given the time to play a handy, little move.

10...♜d7!

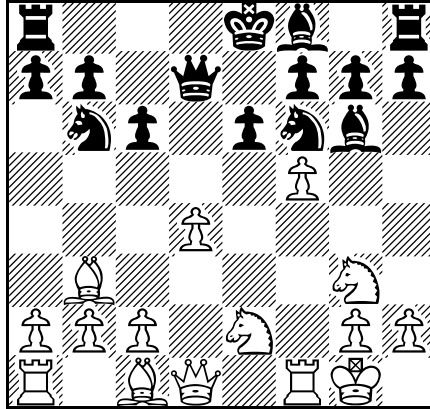
As we have seen, the pawn push f4-f5 carries a lot less danger if Black can make a quick getaway with his king.

11 c4

White can play several other moves:

a) 11 a4 allows Black to play 11...♞bd5! fixing some weaknesses. After 12 ♙d2 ♙e7 13 ♜e1 0-0 14 c4 ♞c7 Black will secure the b4-square and target the d4-pawn, I.Bugarcic-P.Antanaskovic, Petrovac 2004.

b) 11 f5 is a critical pawn sacrifice, as well as the very move we have tried to prevent.

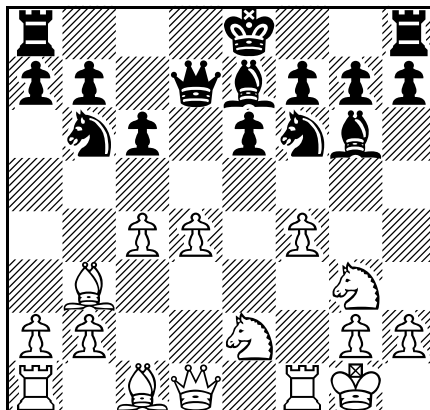


After 11...exf5 12 f4 0-0-0 13 c3 e6 14 h4 h6 15 e2 (A.Faizulaev-D.Khamrakulov, Tashkent 2008) 15...f8 (a solid choice) 16 a4 b8 17 a5 b5 18 exf5 exf5 19 dxd5 exg3 20 xf6 gxf6 21 f3 exh4 22 xf5 xf5 23 xf5 e2 Black has the preferable position.

c) 11 e1 has the sneaky if obvious threat of f4-f5. Following 11...0-0-0! 12 a5 (12 a4 should be met with the mirror pawn push 12...h5: for example, 13 a5 b5 14 a6 h4 15 axb7+ xb7 16 h1 h3 17 g3 c5 and it is White's king which will be the more vulnerable) 12...b8 13 a3 e6 14 c4 e7 15 c3 c8 16 e3 h5 Black has the advantage and the easy attacking plan of ...h5-h4, H.Vedder-M.Becker, Belgian League 2011.

d) 11 c3 doesn't do too much apart from reinforcing the centre. After 11...e6 12 f5 exf5 13 dxf5 exf5 14 e2 g6 15 e5 g5 e4 16 ex4 fe4 17 f6 0-0 Black's king is safe for the time being as we will quickly challenge the nasty bishop on f6. Indeed, 18 d2 fe8 leaves White with nothing.

11...e7



Opening Repertoire: The Caro-Kann

The immediate 11...h5!? also looks promising: 12 f5 ♖xf5 13 ♘xf5 exf5 14 ♚d3 g6 15 a4 ♚d8 16 a5 ♘c8 17 ♙g5 ♙g7 18 ♙c2 ♘d6 19 ♘c3 0-0 and Black was a pawn up for not much in E.Gullaksen-G.Østmoe, Oslo 2011.

12 ♙h1?!

This move is too cautious.

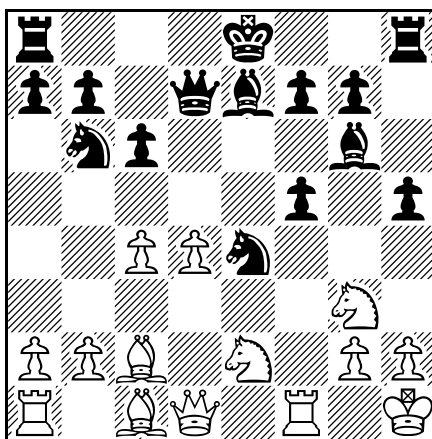
12...h5!?

Black begins active operations to evict the knight from the g3-square.

13 f5 exf5

Preferable to 13...♙xf5, after which 14 ♘xf5 exf5 15 ♙g5 g6 16 ♘c3 gave both sides equal chances in M.Crosa-G.Milos, Sao Paulo 2003.

14 ♙c2 ♘e4!



Guarding the f5-pawn.

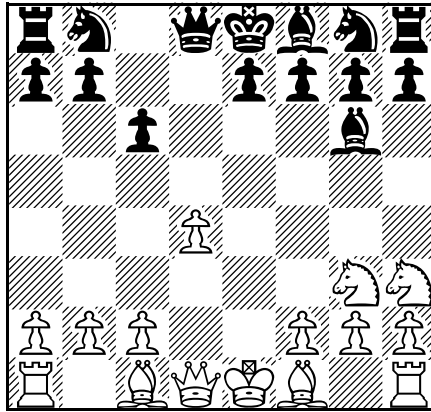
15 ♘xe4 fxe4 16 ♘f4 ♙f5 17 ♘xh5?

A mistake, although likewise after 17 ♚e2 ♚xd4 18 ♘xh5 ♙e6 19 ♙xe4 0-0-0 Black is just winning.

17...0-0-0!

White has big problems with his king.

C) 6 ♖h3



6 ♖c4 e6 7 ♗h3 is another move order.

6...e6 7 ♖c4

After 7 f4 ♗d7 8 ♖c4 ♖d6 the king's knight will soon emerge on e7.

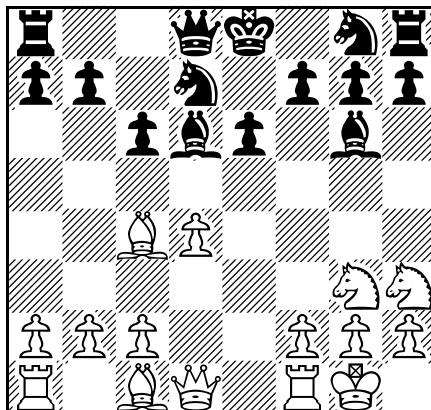
7...♖d6

Delaying the development of the knights for a while and leaving the white knight out there on h3. Very recently I tried a similar approach to our plan against the ♖c4 and ♗e2 variation, but the white knight is actually better placed on h3 than on e2. Indeed, 7...♗f6 8 f4 ♗bd7 9 0-0 ♗b6 10 ♖b3 ♗d7 11 ♗f3! revealed one of the points behind putting it on h3.

8 0-0

White again plays a waiting game before advancing the f-pawn. Instead, 8 ♗f4 ♗f6 would transpose to Line B.

8...♗d7



Black joins in and delays making a decision over the g8-knight.

9 ♖e1

Now that the rook has moved from the f-line, it will be safe to develop the knight to f6. However, 9 f4 is met by 9...♗e7!, 9 ♗f4 ♗gf6 10 c3 ♗d5 11 ♗xg6 hxg6 12 h3 ♗7f6 13 ♘b3 ♗c7 14 ♗f3 0-0-0 is fine for Black, and 9 ♗h5 ♘xh5 10 ♗xh5 ♗gf6 11 ♗h4 0-0 12 ♗f4 ♗d5 leaves him with an excellent knight on d5.

9...♗gf6 10 ♗f4 0-0 11 ♗xg6

In the end White changes plan to winning the bishop-pair, but Black still stands well.

11...hxg6 12 ♗e4 ♗xe4 13 ♗xe4 ♗f6 14 ♗e1 ♗c7 15 g3 c5 16 dxc5 ♘xc5 17 ♗e2 ♗ac8 18 ♘b3 ♗fd8 19 ♘f4 ♗c6

Black has fully equalized, S.Azarov-A.Riazantsev, European Club Cup, Rhodes 2013.

Summary

The f2-f4 push can be played directly or in a more controlled manner. I believe that playing f4 directly, i.e. on move 6, is not subtle enough and Black simply needs to develop with the idea of preventing f4-f5. Black's counterplay is based on achieving ...c6-c5 to exploit White's weakened dark squares. Positionally speaking, Black may also be able to establish a base on e4.

Should White play f2-f4 after Black has played ...♗f6 then Black needs to take measures against f4-f5. He should not make the break too easy for White and so ...♗bd7-b6 is a good plan. Eventually White may still play f4-f5, but he will have to sacrifice material in order to do so.

Finally, combining ♘c4 with ♗h3 is a less effective method of playing f2-f4. Here Black should delay developing the g8-knight until it is clear that White will not be playing for f2-f4-f5.