

Play the French with 3...dxe4

Andrew Martin



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About the Author

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Also by the Author:

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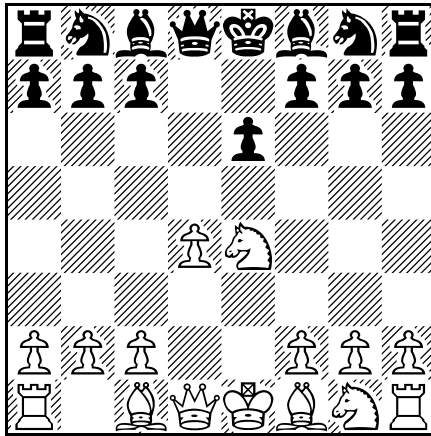
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Introduction

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 dxe4 4 Nxe4



Welcome to this new book on the French Defence, an opening described by Mikhail Botvinnik as “difficult and dangerous”. Much time has passed since that remark was made, but I think the statement is as true today as it ever was. The French can be a winning weapon in the fight against 1 e4.

What makes this book different is that I am going to focus on lines which are not considered mainstream, but which I think give good chances, as long as you learn them properly. Let me begin by mapping out the various lines we’ll be covering in our opening chapter.

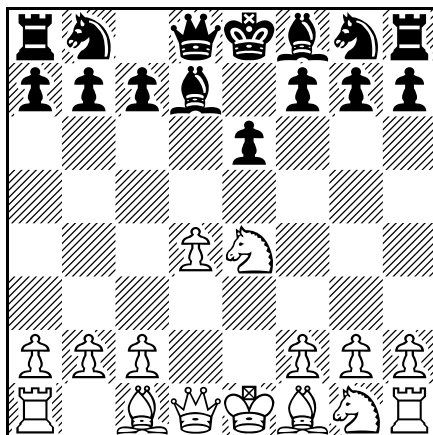
I hope you will enjoy our journey through the highways and byways of the French. Good luck with your French Defence games and may I wish you all the very best with your chess!

Andrew Martin,
Bramley, September 2023

Chapter Thirteen

Fort Knox: Introduction and Main Line

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♞xe4 ♙d7

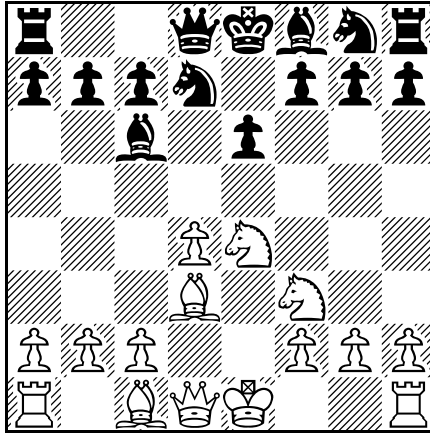


The Fort Knox Defense is played by Black players who want a relatively easy life in the opening. Black is going to bring the bishop to c6 and exchange it for a knight. After that he erects the small centre with ...c7-c6.

I think Black can get to a position of harmonious development using this method, but his game can often end up passive. This is why, at higher levels, this method is usually reserved for quick play of some kind. At slower time controls, White can set up a sort of squeeze position which is difficult to break free from. Nevertheless, 4...♙d7 enjoys reasonable results and is ideal for club players who just want to get into the game without having to burn the midnight oil.

The Main Line

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♙d7 5 ♗f3 ♙c6 6 ♙d3 ♘d7



This is the starting position for what might be called the main line. Both sides have developed normally, and Black is getting ready to exchange his bishop for knight. White must decide how he is going to proceed.

Game 68

I.Saric-V.Ivanchuk

Julius Baer Generation Cup (online rapid) 2022

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♙d7 5 ♗f3 ♙c6 6 ♙d3 ♘d7 7 0-0

White sticks to traditional, solid ideas and castles. It will come as no surprise to learn that this is the most common move.

7... ♘gf6

I prefer this over 7... ♙e7 or 7... ♙xe4. Black attacks the knight on e4 and forces a decision.

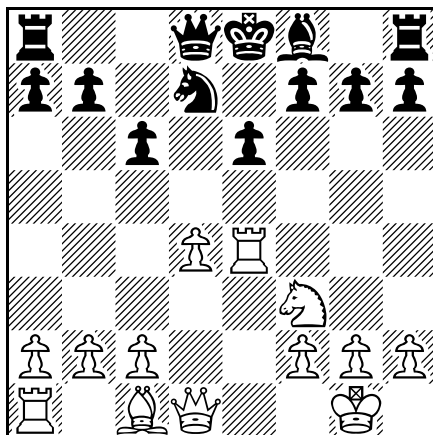
8 ♖e1

This game is a perfect example of why top players use the Fort Knox in rapidplay against strong opponents. Black gets to a solid position, which is easily understood, having to expend very little effort. Although 8 ♖e1 cannot be a bad move, it allows Black to put into practice the first thematic idea of this line.

8... ♙xe4

Simplification eases the defence.

9 ♙xe4 ♘xe4 10 ♖xe4 c6



This is what we call the small centre. The twin pawns on c6 and e6 keep White at bay long enough for Black to complete development.

10...♘f6! is a good alternative, the idea being 11 ♖g5 (or 11 ♜e1 ♙d6! 12 c4 0-0 13 ♙g5 h6 14 ♙h4 c5) 11...♙e7 12 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 13 d5 ♙xb2 14 ♜b1 ♙f6 15 ♜xb7 0-0. Black saves a tempo having not yet played ...c7-c6 and is less vulnerable to a quick d4-d5 strike.

11 c4

White is thinking about d4-d5, and Black does not want that to happen with his king stuck in the middle. Fortunately, easy defence is at hand.

11...♘f6! 12 ♜h4!?

12 ♙g5 seems more critical to me, when Black can consider 12...♞a5! (12...♙e7 13 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 14 d5 cxd5 15 cxd5 0-0 16 dxe6 fxe6 17 ♞e2 looks a bit better for White as he is going to win a pawn, but even so, Black has compensation after 17...♞d5 18 ♜xe6 ♜ac8) 13 ♙xf6 (or 13 ♜e3 ♙e7) 13...gxf6 14 d5 0-0-0. This is about as sharp as it gets in the Fort Knox. The position looks OK for Black to me, and the engines agree.

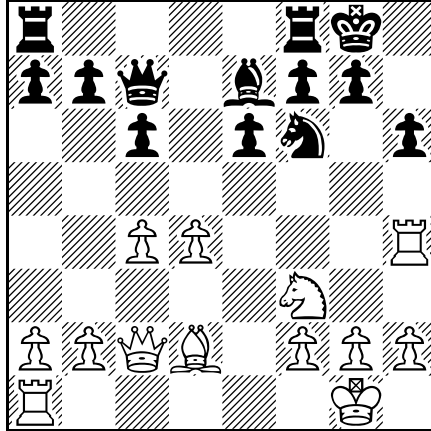
12...♙e7 13 ♞c2 0-0 14 ♙g5 h6 15 ♙d2

15 ♙xh6? gxh6 16 ♜xh6 is quite unsound and is refuted by 16...♙g7 17 ♜h4 ♜h8.

15...♞c7

There are many similar positions that occur in this line and Black's next task is to station the major pieces. The black queen usually finds a good square on any of a5, b6, c7 or e7 and the rooks often come to the d-file, specifically d7 and d8. After or during that process, Black tries to break free.

In our featured game White goes ballistic early, so Ivanchuk doesn't have to worry about any of this.



16 ♖e1 ♜ad8 17 ♙xh6

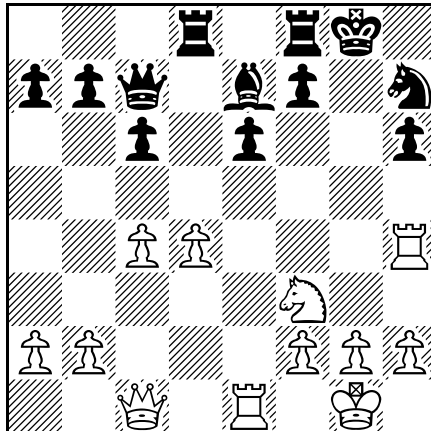
Bang! Saric clearly wants to blow Ivanchuk away.

17 ♙f4 ♜a5 18 a3 ♜d7 was a more sober way to proceed.

17...gxf6 18 ♜c1

18 ♖xh6 ♙g7 19 ♜d2 ♜g8! 20 ♖xe6 fxe6 21 ♜g5+ ♙f7 22 ♘e5+ would have been pretty scary to face, but looks like it is only a draw after 22...♙f8 23 ♖xf6+ ♙xf6 24 ♜xf6+ ♙e8 25 ♜xe6+ ♙f8 26 ♜f6+. I am guessing Saric did not play this, because he didn't have time to work it all out. Employing the Fort Knox almost guarantees you a time edge coming out of the opening.

18...♘h7



19 ♖h5!?

19 ♖xh6 ♜fe8 20 ♖e4 had to be calculated, doubtless using up even more time, but Black is hanging on: 20...♙f8 21 ♜g4+ ♙g7 22 ♖h5 f5 23 ♜g6 ♜e7 24 ♜h6 ♙f8 25 ♜xh7

Play the French Rubinstein

♔f4. In this remarkable situation it may be White to has to be careful, having committed almost his entire force to the pursuit of checkmate.

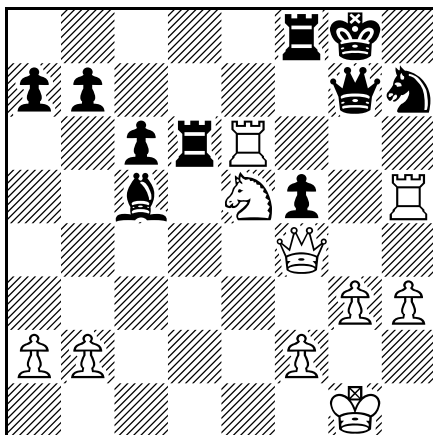
19...f5 20 ♖xh6 ♕f6 21 ♜xe6 ♔g7 22 ♖f4

Maybe 22 ♖xg7+ ♔xg7 23 ♜xf5 ♜fe8 24 ♜xe8 ♜xe8 25 ♔f1 was best, but he cannot bring himself to play it.

22...♕xd4 23 h3 ♕b6 24 g3 ♜d7 25 c5

25 ♔g2! looks right.

25...♕xc5 26 ♞e5 ♜d6



Imagine these moves being played at express speed.

27 ♜hh6??

27 ♜eh6 was the right way.

27...♜xe6 28 ♜xe6 ♞g5!

A crushing fork.

29 ♖c4 ♞xe6 30 ♖xe6+ ♔h7 31 ♔g2 ♖f6 32 ♖d7+ ♖e7 33 ♖d1 ♖xe5 34 ♖h5+ ♔g8 35 ♖g6+ ♖g7 0-1

This was a noble attempt by Saric to put the boot in, which probably cost him most of his time and in the melee, the black position held up. My suggestion at move 10 for Black is worth noting, avoiding too much early excitement.

Game 69
J.Polgar-A.Karpov
 Madrid 1992

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♞c3 dxe4 4 ♞xe4 ♕d7 5 ♞f3 ♕c6 6 ♕d3 ♞d7 7 0-0 ♞gf6 8 ♖e2

Although this is one of the most natural moves in the world, it proves very hard for White to claim any advantage if Black now exchanges in the usual way.

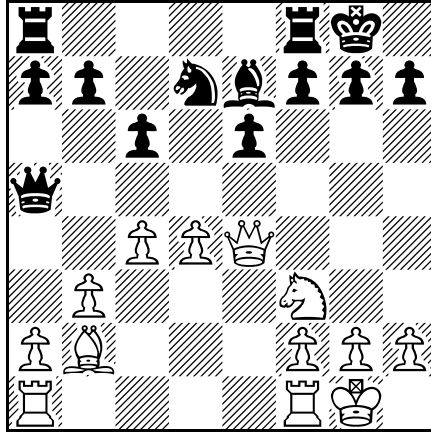
8...♖xe4 9 ♘xe4 ♘xe4 10 ♚xe4 c6

It is a question of what White does next. Black intends to play ...♙e7 or ...♙d6 and castle short. White has a space advantage, but very few tools to do anything with it. Polgar develops in approved fashion, but so does Karpov and in some comfort.

11 c4 ♘e7 12 b3

There is no better square for the bishop than b2. If White could ever force through d4-d5 at the right moment, the bishop would be well placed. Can she, or can't she?

12...0-0 13 ♘b2 ♚a5!



A nice square for the queen, restraining d4-d5 and thinking about ...♙a3.

14 ♚e3

Polgar lets it happen.

White could try 14 a3, but then 14...♜ad8 15 ♜ad1 (15 b4 ♚h5 16 ♜ad1 ♞f6 17 ♚e5 ♚xe5 18 dxe5 ♞d7 19 c5 b6 is very equal) 15...♞fe8 is as solid as a rock for Black.

14...♙a3! 15 ♘c3 ♘b4 16 ♘b2 ♙a3 17 ♘c3 ♘b4 18 ♘b2 ½-½

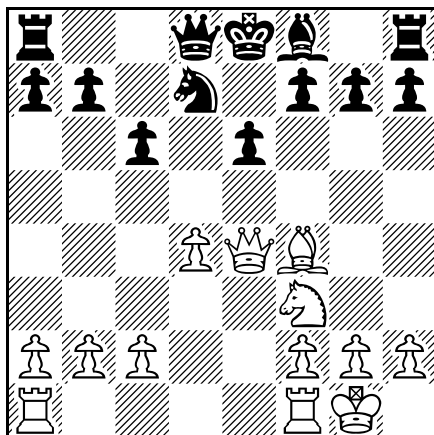
A convenient draw for both and a game which has been more or less replicated countless times. It is hard for White to get an edge after 8 ♚e2.

Game 70
D.Harika-B.Jobava
 Titled Tuesday Blitz 2022

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♞d2 dxe4 4 ♞xe4 ♙d7 5 ♞f3 ♙c6 6 ♙d3 ♞d7 7 ♚e2 ♞gf6 8 0-0 ♞xe4 9 ♙xe4 ♙xe4 10 ♚xe4 c6 11 c4

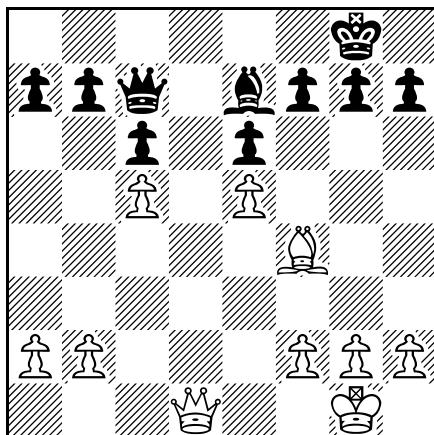
This looks a little more challenging and if White is very patient, she can hope for an edge. Given that d4-d5 can be met by ...♞d7-f6, Jobava simply develops.

Cast your eye over 11 ♙f4.



One of the biggest issues for White in this line is where to station the remaining bishop. We have seen the bishop go to b2 and 11 ♙f4 is an alternative. It's worth mentioning that 11 ♙d2 and 11 ♙e3 are less demanding from Black's perspective.

After 11 ♙f4, B.Maksimovic-I.Kovalenko, Belgrade 2021, continued: 11...♙e7 12 ♗fe1 0-0 13 c4 ♗b6 (when the bishop leaves home, b2 becomes a legitimate target) 14 ♖c2 (perhaps now the idea of d4-d5 comes into focus) 14...♙f6! (the impact of d5 is nullified) 15 ♗ad1 ♗fe8! (further prophylaxis against d4-d5) 16 ♘e5 ♗ad8 17 c5 ♖c7! 18 ♖c3 (instead, 18 ♙g3 ♘xe5 19 ♙xe5 ♙xe5 20 dxe5 ♗xd1 21 ♖xd1 ♗a5 is not what White wants at all; 18 ♘d3 may be a possibility, but Black is OK after either 18...♖c8 or 18...♗a5 19 b4 ♖a3) 18...♘e5 19 dxe5 ♗xd1 20 ♗xd1 ♗d8 21 ♗b3 ♗xd1+ 22 ♖xd1 ♙e7.

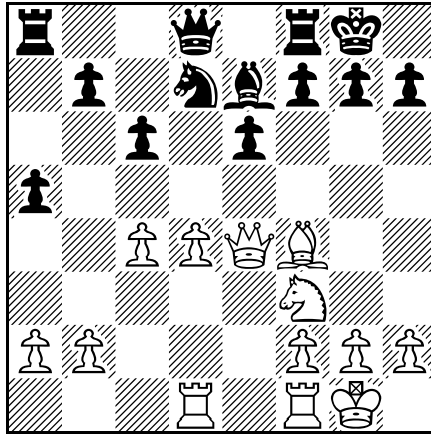


This is a typical Fort Knox ending. Black has the better bishop and less exposed pawns. White clearly overstretched somewhere, but it is hard to pinpoint the mistake. Exchanging pieces willy-nilly on the d file achieves nothing, or less than nothing, as we can see. Maksi-

movic-Kovalenko, concluded: 23 b4 a5 24 a3 axb4 25 axb4 g5 26 ♖g3 b6! 27 h4 (27 cxb6 ♜xb6 is going to win Black a pawn) 27...bxc5 28 bxc5 h6 29 ♜h5 ♖g7 30 f4 ♙xc5+ (better still was 30...♜a5 31 hxg5 ♜xc5+ 32 ♚h2 hxg5 33 fxg5 ♜c1!) 31 ♚h2 ♜d8 32 ♜g4?! (he should take twice on g5 and try to tough it out: 32 hxg5 hxg5 33 fxg5 ♜d3 34 ♜h6+ ♖g8) 32...♙e7 33 fxg5 hxg5 34 hxg5 ♜d3 35 ♙h4 ♖g6! 36 ♙g3 ♙xg5 37 ♜h3 ♜e2 0-1. This game is essential viewing for all Fort Knox fans.

Returning to 11 c4:

11...♙e7 12 ♙f4 0-0 13 ♜ad1 a5



Gaining some space on the queenside in the knowledge that d4-d5 can currently be met by ...♘d7-f6.

14 ♜fe1 a4 15 ♙e5

Has White conjured up a threat? I cannot see one.

15...♜e8 16 d5?

This is the big moment and in a blitz game, must have seemed irresistible. Yet it is a mistake and White should have been more patient.

16 ♜g4 is comfortably met by 16...♘xe5 17 ♘xe5 (alternatively, if 17 dxe5 ♜b6 or 17 ♜xe5 ♙f6 18 ♜e2 ♜c7) 17...♙f6, so a quiet move like 16 ♜e3 should have been tried, when the position is about equal.

16...exd5 17 cxd5 ♘xe5?!

17...♙d6! 18 ♜d4 ♘xe5 19 ♘xe5 ♜a5 would have been far more difficult to meet. We note this is a blitz game and move on.

18 ♘xe5

18 ♜xe5! ♜a5 19 g3 ♜xd5 20 ♜xd5 was the way to defend, and Black's advantage is no more: 20...cxd5 (if 20...♜xd5 21 ♜xd5 cxd5 22 ♜e5!) 21 ♜d1 ♙f6 22 ♜xd5 ♜xd5 23 ♜xd5 ♙xb2 24 ♜b5 a3 25 ♜xb7.

18...♙d6 19 dxc6?? ♜xe5 20 ♜xe5 ♙xe5 21 ♜xd8+ ♜xd8 22 cxb7 f6

Because the queening square is dark, Black can tidy up the position easily.

23 ♖c1 ♘f7! 24 f4 ♟xf4 25 ♜c4 ♟e5 26 ♜xa4 ♜d1+ 27 ♘f2 ♜d2+ 28 ♘f3 ♜xb2 29 ♜a7 ♘g6
 30 a4 ♟b8 31 ♜a8 ♜xb7 32 g3 f5 33 a5 ♜b3+ 34 ♘g2 f4 35 gxf4 ♟xf4 36 a6 ♜a3 37 ♜f8 ♟e3
 38 ♜f3 ♜a2+ 39 ♘h3 ♟a7 40 ♜g3+ ♘h6 0-1

The instant White tried to do something, she was worse. Is this the game plan for Fort Knox fans?

I had a difficult experience playing Black in this variation when I decided to try an original idea of Baadur Jobava.

Game 71
S.Collins-A.Martin
 British League (4NCL) 2015

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♟d7 5 ♘f3 ♟c6 6 ♟d3 ♘d7 7 0-0 ♘gf6 8 ♘g3!

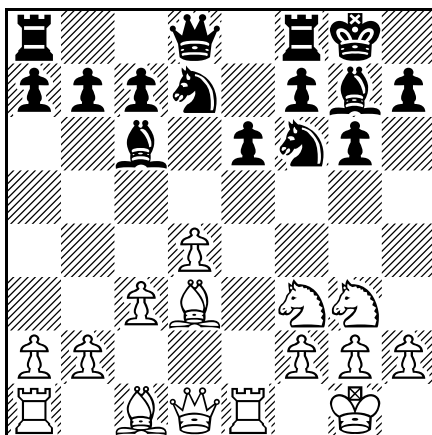
Preserving the pieces makes sense, as this is the only way that White will ever make anything of his early space advantage.

8...g6!?

Naturally, Black can also play 8...♟e7 and 8...♟xf3, which is probably the move most in keeping with the theme of the Fort Knox, but I wanted to try and station my dark-squared bishop more actively.

9 b3!

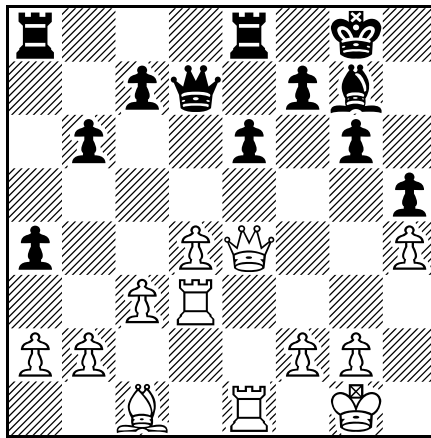
9 ♜e1 ♟g7 10 c3 is another possibility, which can lead to sharp play after 10...0-0 and then:



a) 11 h4!? (a very modern move; White attempts to soften up the black king) 11...♟d5 (was 11...♟xf3 12 ♜xf3 c5 possible? the engines seem to think so and a strike in the centre could be the perfect response to White's flank intentions; then 13 ♜xb7 cxd4 14 cxd4 ♘b6

gives Black control of key squares in the centre and good compensation for the pawn) 12 b4 a5 13 b5 c5 14 ♖e5 c4!? 15 ♙c2? (15 ♜xc4 ♚c7 16 ♚e2 ♜ac8 17 ♖e3 was a better route for White to take) 15...♜xe5 16 dxe5 ♜d7 17 ♚d4 f6 18 h5 ♜xe5 19 ♜f1 ♜d3 20 ♙xd3 f5 21 ♚e3 f4 22 ♚h3 cxd3 23 hxg6 hxg6 24 ♜xe6 ♙xe6 25 ♚xe6+ ♜f7 26 ♚xg6 ♚d7 27 ♙d2 ♚xb5 28 ♜e1 ♚f5 29 ♚d6 ♜a6 30 ♚b8+ ♜h7 31 ♜h2 ♜h6 32 ♚d8 ♙f8 33 ♚d4 ♙c5 34 ♚e5 ♚xe5 35 ♜xe5 ♙xf2+ 36 ♜xf2 ♜xh2 37 ♙g1 f3 0-1 A.Liang-A.Ramirez lvarez, Charlotte 2022.

b) 11 ♙f4 b6 12 ♚e2 ♙b7 13 ♜ad1 ♜e8 14 ♖e5 a6 (14...♜d5 15 ♙c1 ♜xe5 16 dxe5 ♚h4 was an aggressive possibility) 15 ♙g5 h6 16 ♙c1 ♚e7 17 ♜xd7 (I wonder about 17 ♜xg6 fxg6 18 ♙xg6 here and then 18...♜f8 19 ♙xe8 ♚xe8 20 ♚d3 ♚d7 21 f3 ♜d8 22 ♙f4 is not at all easy for Black to handle, while here 19...♜xe8 20 ♜f5 ♚f7 21 ♜xg7 ♚xg7 22 f3 leaves White with a much easier position to play) 17...♚xd7 18 ♖e4 ♖xe4 19 ♙xe4 ♙xe4 20 ♚xe4 a5 21 h4 h5 22 ♜d3 a4...

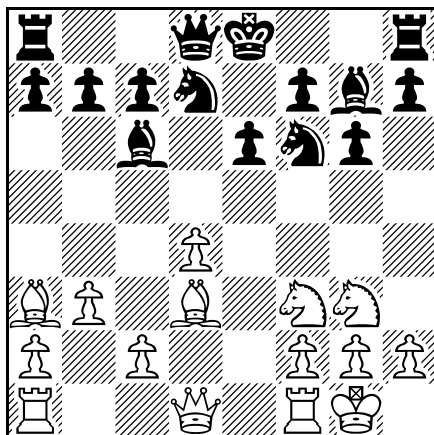


...23 g4!? (23 ♙f4 preserves the balance) 23...hxg4 24 ♚xg4 ♚d5 (24...♜a5!) 25 ♜g3 ♜a5 26 ♙f4 ♚xa2 27 ♙e5 a3 (I am not sure why he does not play 27...♚xb2, aside from a shortage of time; since this is blitz, we let the game career to the finish) 28 bxa3 ♚d2 29 ♜ee3 ♙xe5 30 dxe5 ♜d8 31 ♙g2 ♚d5+ 32 ♜gf3 ♜h7 (32...♚b5 33 ♜f6 ♚b1 34 ♜e4 ♚d1 35 ♜xg6+ fxg6 36 ♚xg6+ ♜h8 37 ♚h6+ ♙g8 38 ♜e3!! wins) 33 ♙h2 ♚d7 34 h5 ♜g8 35 ♚g5 ♜a4 36 ♜h3 ♙g7 37 hxg6 ♙f8 38 g7+ ♙e8 39 ♜h8 ♚d1 40 ♜xg8+ 1-0, F.Svane-B.Jobava, Titled Tuesday Blitz 2022.

Thus the 8...g6 variation leads to much more complicated play than we are used to in the Fort Knox. There is no simplification on e4 and Black must ready himself for a fight, where he is operating at the outset with less space.

Returning to Collins's 9 b3:

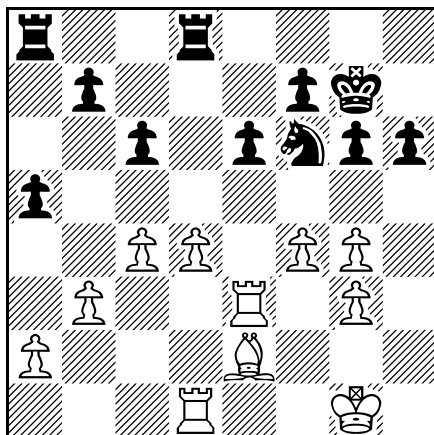
9...♙g7 10 ♙a3



Well played! In order to get the king to safety, Black must retreat with 10...♙f8, which could lead to a boring draw by repetition. However, White can deviate with 11 ♖b2 and ends up gaining a move.

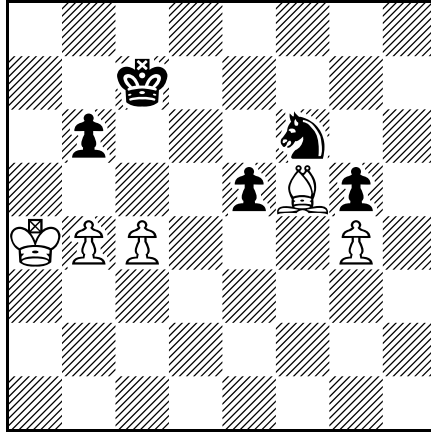
10...♙f8 11 ♖b2

11 ♖xf8 does not inconvenience Black that much. The king will go to g7 where he is quite safe: for instance, 11...♙xf8 12 ♖e1 ♙xf3 13 ♗xf3 c6 14 c3 ♙g7 15 ♖ad1 a5 16 ♘f1 ♗c7 17 ♘e3 ♗he8 18 g4!? (ambitious) 18...♘d5! 19 c4 ♗f4! (Duda defends accurately and trades into an ending where he cannot be worse) 20 ♗g3 (20 ♗xf4 ♘xf4 21 ♙f1 g5! looks most unpromising for White, whose bishop is getting worse by the move) 20...♗xg3+ 21 hxg3 ♘xe3 22 ♗xe3 h6 23 ♙e2 ♘f6 24 f4 ♗ed8.



One of the main positional ideas of the Fort Knox is to focus on the white pawn on d4, if possible. L.Aronian-J.Duda, Stavanger (armageddon) 2020, concluded: 25 ♙f2 ♗d6 26 ♙f3 ♖ad8 (Black has the edge, and Duda grinds on to win) 27 ♗ed3 b6 28 ♙e3 c5 29 a3 ♙f8 30

b4 axb4 31 axb4 cxd4+ 32 ♖xd4 ♗xd4 33 ♖xd4 ♕e7 34 ♖xd8 ♗xd8 35 ♗d4 g5 36 ♗e5 ♗e7
 37 f5 ♗d7+ 38 ♗d4 ♗d6 39 fxe6 fxe6 40 ♗d1 e5+ 41 ♗e4 ♗e6 42 ♗c2 ♗f6+ 43 ♗f3 ♗d6 44
 ♗e4 ♗d7 45 ♗f5 ♗f6 46 ♗e3 ♗c6 47 ♗d3 ♗d6 48 ♗e3 ♗c6 49 ♗e4+ ♗d6 50 ♗f3 ♗d7 51
 ♗e4 ♗e6 52 ♗d3 ♗d6 53 ♗b7 ♗f6 54 ♗c8 ♗c7 55 ♗f5 ♗d6 56 ♗c3 ♗c6 57 ♗c2 h5 58 gxh5
 ♗xh5 59 g4 ♗f6 60 ♗b3 ♗d6 61 ♗a4 ♗c6 62 ♗b3 ♗d6 63 ♗a3 ♗c6 64 ♗a4 ♗c7...

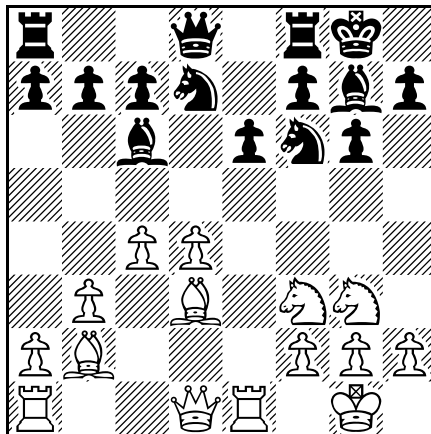


...65 ♗b5?? (although natural enough, this loses; 65 ♗b3 is just a draw) 65...e4 66 ♗a6
 (66 c5 e3 and then 67 ♗d3 ♗d5 68 ♗c4 ♗f4 69 ♗f1 bxc5 70 bxc5 ♗c6 71 ♗d4 e2 72 ♗xe2
 ♗xe2+ 73 ♗e4 ♗g1! 74 ♗e5 ♗xc5 75 ♗f5 ♗h3 or 67 cxb6+ ♗b8 68 ♗d3 ♗d5 69 ♗c4 ♗f4
 70 ♗c3 e2 71 ♗xe2 ♗xe2+ 72 ♗d3 ♗f4+ 73 ♗e4 ♗b7 74 ♗f5 ♗h3 highlights the winning
 procedure) 66...e3 67 ♗d3 ♗xg4 68 ♗e2 ♗e5 69 c5 bxc5 70 b5 ♗d7 71 ♗g4 ♗b6 0-1.

11...♗g7 12 ♗a3 ♗f8 13 ♗b2 ♗g7 14 ♖e1

On with the show.

14...0-0 15 c4

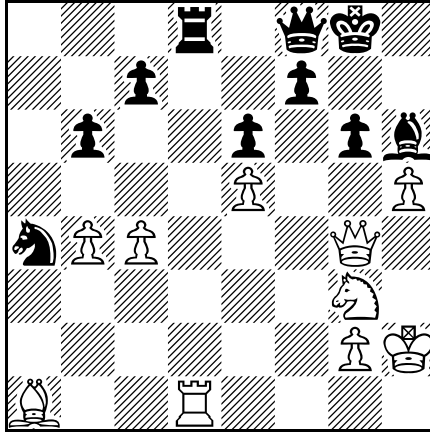


Collins now plays powerfully until the end.

29...♖g7 30 b4 ♕a4

30...axb4 31 axb4 ♘a4 32 ♕a1 b5 33 c5 does not really help, with the knight on a4 stranded out of play.

31 ♕xa4 ♘xa4 32 ♕a1 axb4 33 axb4 ♖f8 34 h5 ♗d8



Perhaps 34...♖g7 was a better try, but running short of time, I did not like 35 ♘e4!

35 ♘e4 ♗xd1 36 ♖xd1 ♖xb4?

36...b5 37 hxg6 ♘b6 38 cxb5 fxg6 does not seem at all promising, but might hold out longer.

37 hxg6 ♖xc4 38 ♗d8+ ♕f8 39 ♖h4 1-0

In the end, a nice attack by White.

To summarise, I believe 8...g6!? to be playable and different to the usual Fort Knox fare. Early simplifying exchanges are frowned upon and a complicated middlegame is likely, with play spread across the board. As a surprise weapon, 8...g6 has value.

Game 72

S.Ter Sahakyan-B.Jobava

European Individual Championship, Gjakova 2016

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♕d7 5 ♘f3 ♕c6 6 ♕d3 ♘d7 7 0-0 ♘gf6 8 ♘g3 g6 9 c4

A move which crops up frequently in the Fort Knox. White takes the centre and in this special case, has a pawn sacrifice in mind.

9...♕g7 10 d5!?

Without this move, we would just be heading for a normal position, where Black has enough cover over the d5-square and is eyeing up the pawn on d4. It appears White is go-