

# First Steps : the French

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# About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

## **Also by the Author:**

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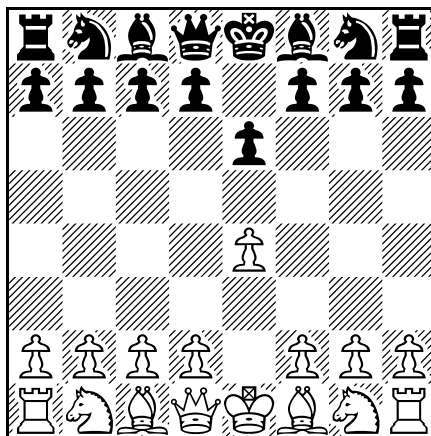
*Anti-Sicilians: Move by Move*

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# Introduction

## What makes a French player?



The French is an opening so vast in scale, that it almost defies classification. If you enter closed games with the rapt contentment of a positional player, and if you feel agoraphobic in 1...e5 or 1...c5 situations, then you may qualify as a natural French player.

Fashionable openings go in and out of favour like ageing rock stars, who were huge 40 years ago, but now have trouble selling tickets at the local swap meet. The French isn't like this, and from my perspective, is as much fun to play at age 55 as it was to play at age 8. Now a lack of space is an issue baked into the opening. So if you love open games, the French from Black's side is probably the wrong fit for your needs. When we misplay a French we know it, since it becomes hard for our pieces to breathe, and the feeling is similar to being buried while still alive in a coffin, in Uma Thurman fashion in *Kill Bill* (I forgot if it's volume one or two!).

The entry of beginning level club players can feel like Gulliver, who gets tied down in Lilliputian theoretical details. My job in this book is to try and demystify an otherwise intimidating opening and make clear the various positions we may face. Even if you don't reach the *exact* position we cover in the book, you won't be adrift, since you will be familiar with simulacrum positions, which always come with a known antecedent, where at least you move in the right direction.

In most of the positions, the players' views tend to be irreconcilable, like space versus coun-

terattack potential, or bishop-pair and dark squares versus superior structure. Our choices tend to exude a quality of absolutism, with no space for a fuzzy grey middle ground.

## **Books versus Databases**

When we face a booked-up opponent and get slaughtered, not even surviving the opening stage, we leave the game feeling like the village idiot. The skill levels required to play the French range enormously. Some lines are just much harder to handle than others.

In this era of databases and books published every week, the days of winging it in the opening are over. We must grasp our lines just to survive at the club level, but should we study from books or from databases? My advice: you don't really need a soulless database until your rating passes the 2000 Expert level.

Many of my students who are below that level prefer to study from databases which offer no explanations, rather than study from books. This is a mistake, and a bit like claiming that photography renders realistic art redundant, since the photo is so much more realistic. Maybe I'm a creature of the past, but even as an IM, I still find books infinitely more helpful than the dry savannah of databases, which offer data, but no direction. Beware, though, the difference between reading a chess book and applying the knowledge over the board is akin to reading a book on Mount Kilimanjaro and actually scaling it.

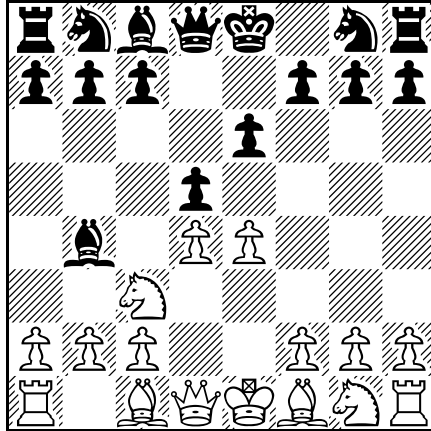
The Roman statesman and scholar Pliny the Younger once advised the cure for the common cold is to kiss a mouse on both the snout and lips. Moral: that which constitutes scholarship alters with time. In our modern database era, to survive at the ruthlessly Darwinian club levels, we *must* survive the gauntlet of the opening stage. In this book we aren't overly concerned with the concrete and the specific.

It isn't an easy task to travel the road of innocent entry into the chess world, to the road to sophistication to the upper levels of A-Class, Expert and Master. When we first walk through the intimidating doors of our chess club, we may feel like a third grade kid, asked by a philosophy professor: "What is the origin of intelligence?" Our answer would be: "How the hell should I know? I'm just a kid in the third grade!".

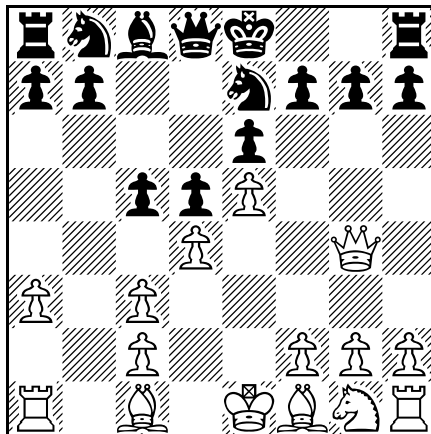
The minds of many club players I know are dumpsters for partially remembered opening lines. Our goal in this book is to simply introduce key ideas and positions of the French Defence to the beginning and intermediate club player, just so you get a feel for the lines, as Black or White. We concentrate on the universal, rather than fret too much over the local, as we do for instance, in the *Move by Move* series. The plan here is to begin with the fuzzy generalities, avoiding a stale recycling clutter of memorized lines, and then only later get down to the unpleasant work of the study of the details to move up in the chess world. Eventually, we *must* further research individual lines to move upward. It was the poet Alexander Pope who warned us: "A little learning is a dangerous thing: Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring."

## **A Snapshot of Our Lines**

Below are a few of the critical positions we may reach:



The Winawer is a vast strategic web without centre, beginning or end. Soon we will probably play ... $\text{xc3+}$ , where White accepts a slightly dishevelled queenside structure in return for the bishop-pair and the potential for dark-square control.

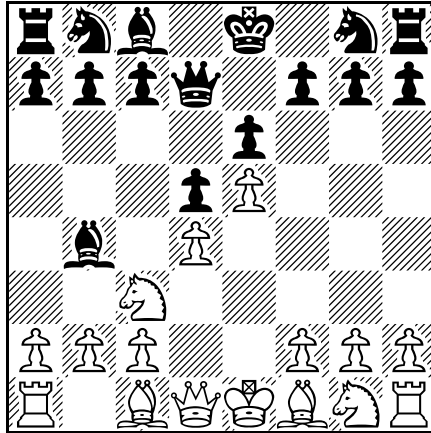


In the diagram above, the opening feels like a bit of a contrivance, since White plays 7  $\text{Wg4}$ , bringing out the queen before the minor pieces. The gendarmes arrive in force, attacking the g7-pawn, and where we enter a predatory society of kill or be killed. We have a choice: we can castle into the teeth of White's attack or respond with 7... $\text{Wc7}$ .

When I was a kid, and a bully picked a fight, my strategy was to taunt my opponent and get him as angry as possible (I would imitate him in gross caricature), because I realized that an angry fighter tends to swing wildly and without accuracy. In this position Black does just that by castling.

If such provocation isn't your cup of Darjeeling, then Black can also play 7... $\text{Wc7}$ , entering the wild Poisoned Pawn Gambit, where we give up a pawn for a development lead and open lines, and in the ensuing confusion it feels as if random, non-related events tumble and crash into each oth-

other in the middle. Be warned though, the early moves of the Poisoned Pawn Gambit are a stiffly ritualized forcing line, in many cases with little room for deviation via personal preference or whim, for either side. This line is probably the most theory dense one of the entire book, so don't enter it with the excuse: "My dog ate my homework!".

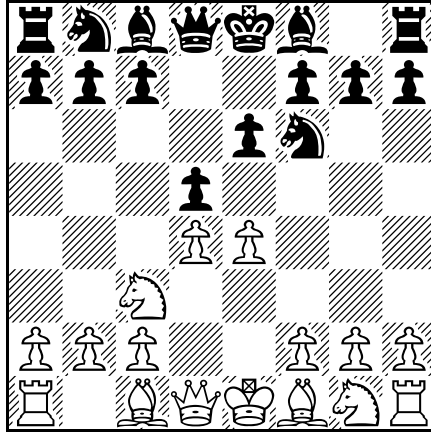


In the above diagram, is Black's introverted plan one of a realist or a defeatist? It's a scary feeling when we suspect our sinister opponent of manipulating us in a certain direction, yet we are unable to comprehend the purpose. Black lures White into an ambiguous world, where nothing is out in the open, and nothing is as it appears.

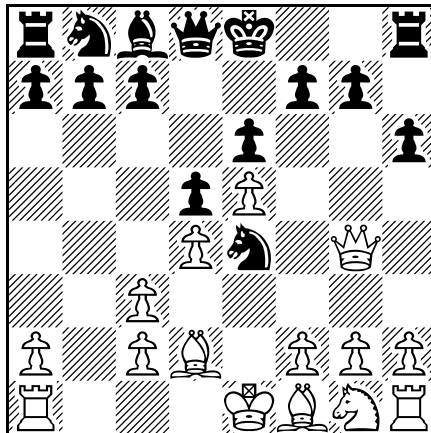
Black's last move 4...♔d7 almost looks like a typo. The cunning idea is to meet 5 ♖g4, with either 5...f5, protecting g7 laterally, or play the retro-developing 5...♘f8, a move which may have White questioning our sanity. The point is White's development lead can be shockingly ineffective, since Black's position remains target free. So it can sometimes feel like White fights an invisible enemy.

You may ask: "What about Black's bad light-squared bishop?". The answer: we conveniently unload it for White's powerful counterpart with the manoeuvre ...b6 and ...♘a6. White's pieces may soon remind us of those stern Easter Island statues, who just sit there and glower at Black's position, without the ability to inflict actual harm.

In the next position we enter the Classical French, where unlike the Winawer, we are not quick to hand White dark-square control with ...♘b4 and ...♘xc3+.

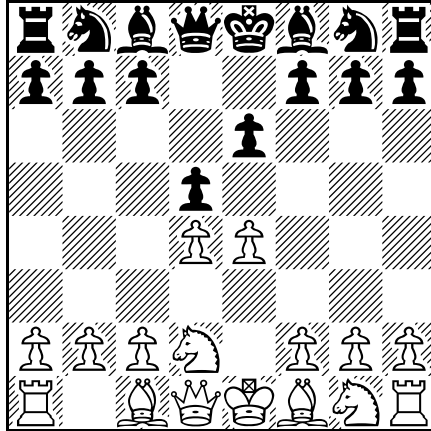


In the Winawer, we pit our generalship with our opponent's in closed positions, with White's structure damaged, while we as Black are missing our important dark-squared bishop. In the McCutcheon Variation, after 4 ♕g5 ♖b4, we inflict damage on White's structure *and* pick up White's all-important dark-squared bishop.



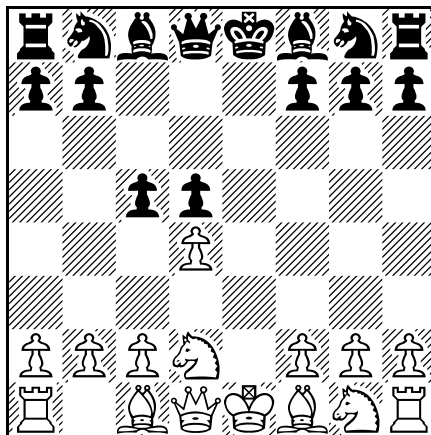
The cost? White's queen attack on g7 forces a concession of either ...g6, weakening our king-side dark squares, or ...♖f8, which forces us to renounce castling. Students tend to ask me impossible-to-answer questions like: "Which line is better: the Winawer or the Classical? This is like asking if Beethoven was a better musician than John Lennon. The answer, of course, is that the position *you* favour is the 'better' line.





Welcome to the Tarrasch, the safest and most solid of White's choices against the French. With 3  $\text{N}d2$ , White denies Black any version of the ... $\text{Q}b4$  pins, as seen in Winawer or McCutcheon lines. Also, White gives him or herself options to build an imposing pawn centre with ideas like e5, f4 and c3.

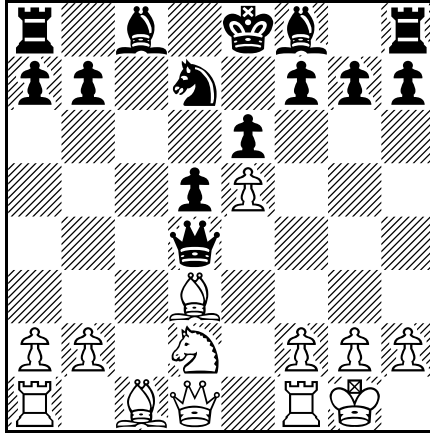
Since White passively developed the knight to d2, this emboldens Black into an immediate central strike with 3...c5. When White plays exd5, Black can either recapture with the queen, made more attractive by the fact that White no longer has a  $\text{N}c3$  tempo-gaining option, or Black can play 4...exd5 taking on a future isolani on d5, which some view as a strategic burden to shoulder, while to others it represents freedom.



Why do we as Black deliberately take on a pawn weakness? The answer is freedom, which is our considerable compensation, and an unusual luxury in the French. Now this isn't simply a case of White foisting a pawn weakness upon us, since with the isolani comes a degree of central control, coupled with enhanced freedom and piece activity, the magic spell which compensates stra-

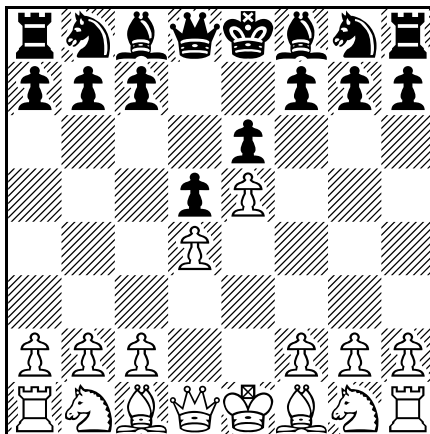
tegic deficiencies. Taking on an isolani is certainly a risk of sorts, but not that much, since we aren't signing over our mortgage with this minor structural concession.

In the position below, a sharp gambit situation arises, where the realization of one goal (initiative and attack) requires the sacrifice of another (a pawn sacrifice). Here, even Nostradamus would be hard pressed to tell us what happens next.



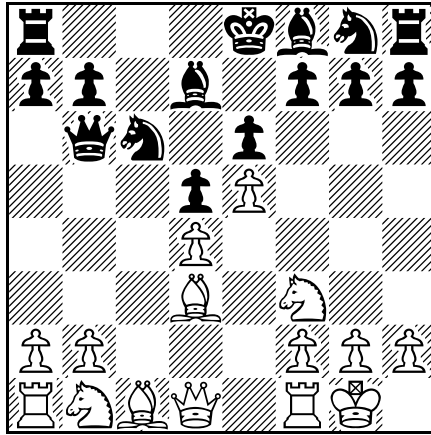
Suspense is fun if we are reading a mystery or gothic horror novel, and not as much fun when we are sweating it out over the board with our clocks ticking away mercilessly. This line defies regulation. Black's extra pawn is no freebie, since White gets a dangerous development lead for it.

In the diagram below we see the Advance French, where we can't accurately describe Black's position as commodious lodgings. There is no way to invade another country diplomatically. Black is dispossessed of land early on, when White's e-pawn crosses the neutral zone into Black's territory. The invading e5-pawn is yoked tightly, so Black tends to go after the weak link, d5, with a quick ...c5 break, and only later on decide if ...f6 is necessary or not.

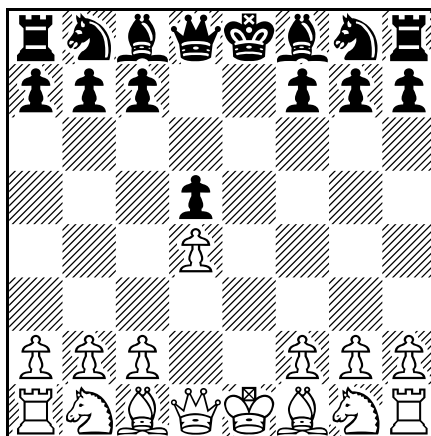


## First Steps: The French Defence

Unsound attacks, by their nature, are contingent upon the opponent blundering, which is a reasonable supposition, since we are flawed humans, not computers. The position below is the dubious (yet dangerous!) Milner-Barry Gambit, an offshoot of the Advance line.

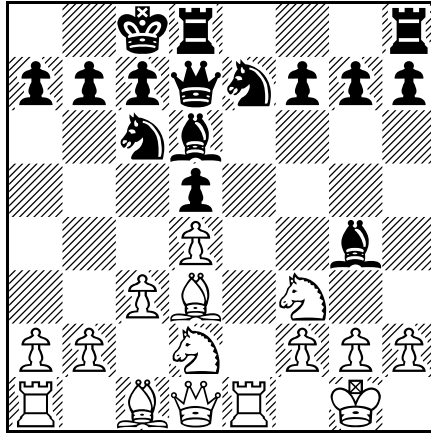


Now why is an unsound line dangerous? The answer is we may show up to the board unprepared and bungle the defence. When we refuse to keep up with current theory we risk being the small mom and pop store, being pushed aside by a giant corporation who just moved across the street as our competition. Education doesn't equal infallibility over the board, since even professional players go blank (I don't understand why I remember with photographic detail every character in the millions of novels I have read in my life, yet routinely go comatose in opening variations I have played for 40 years!). Our daunting job is to learn the gambit's antidote and never forget it.



Everywhere we turn, we are confronted by dreary uniformity of the two identical structures. The Exchange French can be like reading a book on the tax code as a source of poetic inspiration.

If the variation were a painting, then the artist's rendering is exclusively in shades of grey. I have at some points in my career temporarily shelved the French, mainly due to my deep and abiding hatred of the Exchange line. It's a variation generally used by lower-rated players to 'threaten' us with a draw, which to outraged French players is akin to a kind of moral blackmail. My goal in this book is to offer Black options to re-energize Black's dynamic potential, from this boring starting position.



The position doesn't have to be the cake without frosting. By castling long, that which distinguishes the two sides is suddenly given greater weight than what they originally had in common.

Many thanks to editors John Emms and Richard Palliser, and also to Nancy for proof reading, and for not deleting most of my jokes in the book.

May our French wall eternally hold firm against all barbarian aggressors.

Cyrus Lakdawala,  
San Diego,  
July 2016

## Summary

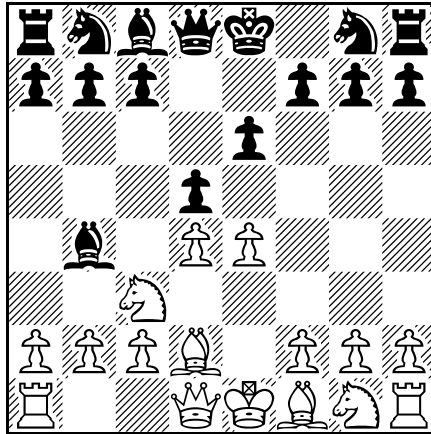
Both 4 ♙d3 and 4 ♖d3 fly in the face of historic trends, and can be effectively met with 4...dxe4 and 5...♗f6, gaining a tempo for Black.

### Game 13

J. Timman-R. Vaganian

Amsterdam 1986

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 ♙d2



**Tip:** This dangerous line is a pawn sacrifice from White, which I would advise dodging.

4...♗e7

Black continues cautiously as if a distant threat is now imminent. 4...dxe4 5 ♖g4 ♗xd4 6 0-0 may actually favour Black, if you ask the comps. For us humans, White's development lead looks rather dangerous.

5 ♙d3!?

Just because a move defies reason, doesn't automatically qualify it as an error. White offers a rather speculative pawn sacrifice, and then follows it with a second one. Otherwise:

a) 5 ♖g4 is safely met with 5...0-0.

b) 5 e5 c5 transposes to a position we looked at in the previous chapter.

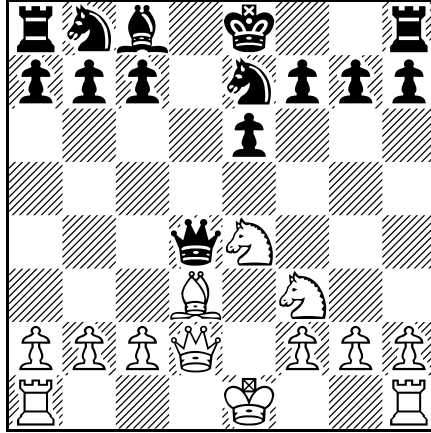
5...dxe4 6 ♗xe4 ♗xd4

Well, Bobby Fischer did say that a pawn is worth a bit of trouble. In this case Black is only one move from castling, so the grab is quite justified.

7 ♗f3!?

Timman continues with unremitting hostility, offering a second pawn, rather than backing down with 7  $\text{♞c3}$  which to an attacker is a bit like turning a five star hotel into a monastery. Carvier/champagne and austerity measures don't mix well.

7...  $\text{♙xd2}$ + 8  $\text{♚xd2}$



8...  $\text{♚d5?!}$

Excess apprehension has a way of hampering our otherwise sound plan. Black's last move is made with the thought: if you don't start a fight, you can't lose one either. Yet, I argue: if you are going to be greedy, then be consistent about it. Black digests the choices before him and incorrectly declines White's second gift. He should accept with 8...  $\text{♚xb2!}$ . White's attack has all the spurious markings of a slightly unsound attack, for two reasons:

1. The move deprives White of queenside castling.

2. Black is now up two pawns, and although I never was very good in maths, I'm almost certain that two is a higher (and therefore better!) number than one. I don't believe in White's full compensation for two pawns after 9 0-0  $\text{♞bc6}$  10  $\text{♚g5}$   $\text{♞g6}$ .

9 0-0-0

Now White gets a scary looking development lead for the pawn.

9...  $\text{♞bc6}$

Wise, as a2 is poisoned: 9...  $\text{♚xa2??}$  allows 10  $\text{♙b5+}$  and the problem is 10...  $\text{♞bc6}$  11  $\text{♚d8}$  mate!

10  $\text{♚c3 f6}$

Blunting the white queen's influence, while preparing ...e5.

11 a3

White finally covers the hanging a2-pawn.

11...e5?

Premature. This move gravely weakens the light squares. Black looks okay after 11...  $\text{♚a5}$  when we feel an easing of tension in Black's position, similar to the release of pent up breath.

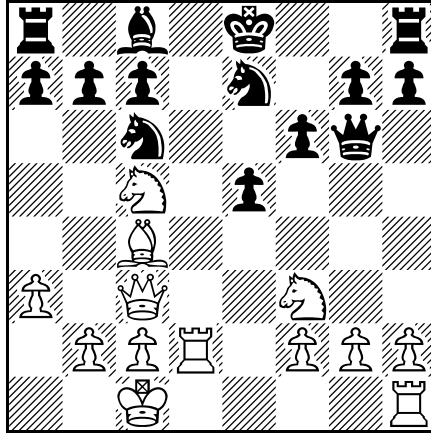
12  $\text{♞c5!}$

Black's queen is in danger of discovered checks from White's bishop.

**12... ♖f7 13 ♙c4**

Suddenly White's forces hum with menace. Black's king is now stuck in the centre and Vaganian's position is overtaxed on the weak light squares.

**13... ♖g6 14 ♖d2**



**14... ♖xg2!?**

**Warning:** Don't create confrontation or open the position when lagging in development.

Correct was 14... ♖b8.

**15 ♖g1 ♖h3 16 ♖xg7 ♖h6 17 ♖g1 b6 18 ♘e4 ♙d7?!**

18... ♖f8 was necessary.

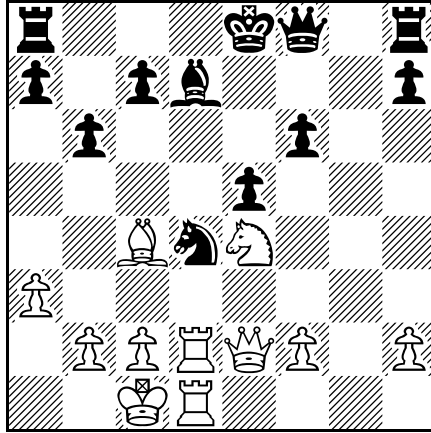
**19 ♖e3! ♖f8**

White's last move forced this stilted response. After 19... ♖xe3?? 20 ♘xf6+ ♙d8 21 fxe3 Black's pinned bishop is lost.

**20 ♖gd1 ♘f5 21 ♖e2 ♘cd4**

21...0-0-0 is met with 22 ♙a6+ ♙b8 23 ♖xd7 winning a piece.

**22 ♘xd4 ♘xd4**



**Exercise (combination alert):** How does White continue his attack?

**Answer:** Clearance/annihilation of defensive barrier. This sacrifice enables a deadly discovered check next move.

**23 ♖xd4!**

The phrase “There’s more where that came from” is inapplicable in a sacrificial attack since on the chess board our resources are finite. Yet to Black, it surely must have felt the opposite.

**23...exd4 24 ♘d6+ ♔d8**

The silence in the room gets awkward when Black’s terrified king unburdens the contents of his bladder and bowels on the floor.

**25 ♞f7+ ♔c8 26 ♚f3! ♔b8 27 ♖xd4 ♚c5 28 ♖xd7 ♖g8 29 ♙a6 1-0**

## Summary

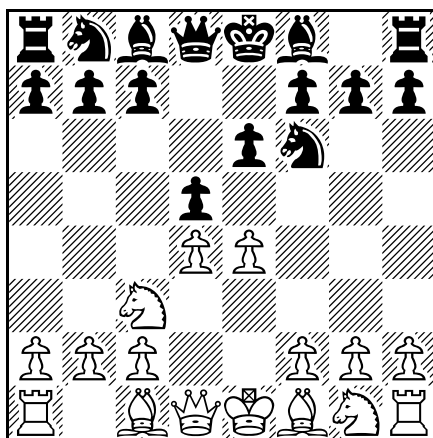
4 ♙d2 is a dangerous sacrificial line, which I would meet with the cautious 4...♘e7.



# Chapter Three

## The Classical Variation

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3  $\text{Nc3}$   $\text{Nf6}$



The strategic challenges of the Classical Variation can feel like looking into the cavernous mouth of a pitch black cave. In the above diagram Black's knight taunts White into 4 e5, resolving the central tension, allowing White a significant space advantage after an f4 follow up. At first it can feel like the black pieces walk under water, but the Classical isn't a one way conversation, with White doing all the talking, so don't underestimate Black's counterattacking resources.

As always, we hit back at White's giant centre with ...c5, ... $\text{Nc6}$  and possibly... $\text{Bb6}$  in some cases. When ...cxd4 occurs, the fight begins in earnest for the d4-square, when Black can even play ... $\text{Nc5}$ . Black's developmental issues: how to activate the c8-bishop and the d7-knight? The bishop can be activated in two ways:

1. By playing ...a6, ...b5, ...b4, ...a5, and then the bishop, suddenly infused with significance, emerges on a6 to swap itself away for White's dangerous light-squared bishop.

2. Black can play ...f6 and if exf6, then ...♞xf6, when we take on a backward e6-pawn. In this case the undeveloped c8-bishop slithers to relevance via d7, e8 and then finally on to an active diagonal with ...♞g6 or ...♞h5, where it issues an imperious challenge to the white pieces.

Black's d7-knight may later go back to f6 after ...f6; exf6 ♞xf6, or, if the players castle on opposite wings, Black's knight can lunge directly at White's king after ...cxd4 and ...♞c5.

White's alternative strategy to Black's 3...♞f6 is to maintain pawn tension, for at least one more move with 4 ♞g5, which leads to the unbalanced McCutcheon Variation, 4...♞b4, where Black ignores White's 'threat' of e5. Here we walk a narrow line, where with even a single step off the theoretical path, our grand narrative can be unceremoniously dismantled by a single idea. 4 ♞g5 can also lead to several other lines like 4...dxe4, a Rubinstein hybrid, and 4...♞e7, which allows White 5 e5 and ♞xe7, leaving Black with the issue of a remaining bad bishop.

Our goals as Black in the Classical are well defined:

1. Fight for the d4-square.
2. Counterattack White's giant centre with ...c5 and sometimes ...f6.
3. Find a way to activate the bad light-squared c8-bishop.
4. Keep our king safe.

If we succeed in these goals, we can be certain to emerge with a healthy middlegame position, with dynamically balanced chances.

### Game 14

## W. Steinitz - A. Sellman

Baltimore 1885

"Please do not be disappointed by the relative weakness of Black's play – to some extent it helped Steinitz to demonstrate the essence of his plan in the purest form," writes Garry Kasparov. A copy is rarely clearer than the original. This game is one of the earliest of this variation in the database. When I first played this game over at the age of nine, I swooned in an epiphanic moment when I discovered the secret of weak squares of a single colour.

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♞c3 ♞f6**

Black develops his knight, while seeking to create a central resolution with either 4 exd5, or 4 e5.

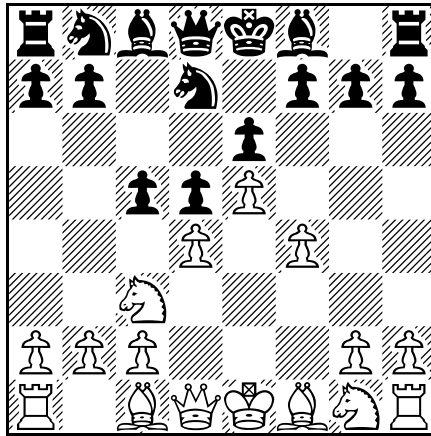
**4 e5**

***Did You Know?** Thus spake Steinitz. This game, a strategic masterpiece, left such a deep impression on the chess world, that the line is to this day called the Steinitz Variation. White seizes useful central space, while gaining a tempo on Black's knight.*

**4...♞fd7 5 f4**

White continues to expand on the kingside.

5...c5



6 dxc5?!

**Note:** Avoid making non-developing moves which help your opponent's development.

I love annotating games from the Great Romantics, since the jokes write themselves. Even the greats bungle it from time to time. I read that the Irish poet William Butler Yeats once blew an academic job application when he misspelled the word "professor", the job for which he applied! This unnecessary concession benefits Black's development. Next game we look at White's modern interpretation 6  $\text{Nf3}$   $\text{Nc6}$  7  $\text{Oe3}$ .

6... $\text{Oxc5}$

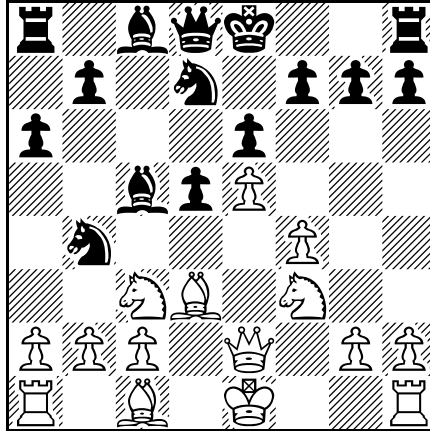
Black's bishop cuts through the central dark squares and makes it difficult for White to castling kingside.

7  $\text{Nf3}$  a6

Black misplaces priorities. After 7... $\text{Nc6}$  8  $\text{Oe3}$  f6! the immediate central counter gives Black an excellent position.

**Warning:** Be careful to avoid the Greek Gift sacrificial theme, which goes like this 8...0-0?? 9  $\text{Oxh7+!}$   $\text{Oxh7}$  10  $\text{Ng5+}$   $\text{Kg6}$  (unfortunately for Black, playing the king to g8 is even worse, since it allows the deadly  $\text{Wh5}$ ) 11  $\text{Nd3+}$  f5 12  $\text{Wg3}$  with a nasty attack for White.)

8  $\text{Oe3}$   $\text{Nc6}$  9  $\text{We2}$   $\text{Nb4?!}$



**Warning:** Avoid early adventures like this where you are tempted to move an already developed piece.

This move is dubious for the following reasons:

1. Black wastes time.
2. Black weakens his control over the key d4-square – a factor for which he later dearly pays.

**10 ♕d2 b5 11 ♞d1 ♞xd3+ 12 cxd3!**

This move opens the c-file, while ensuring that Black's knight won't be able to roost one day on e4 or c4.

**12... ♖b6?!**

Black can prevent Steinitz's coming plan with 12...b4!, intending to activate his bad bishop with ...a5 and ...♕a6.

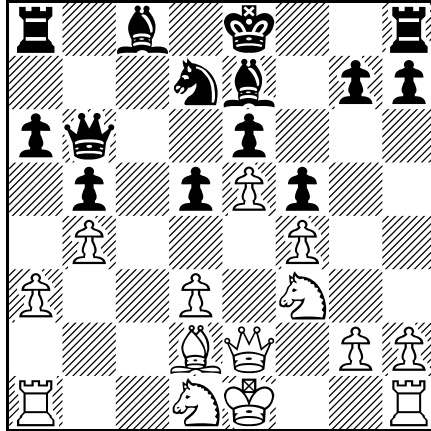
**13 b4!**

**Note:** In the Classical French, both sides should fight to seize control over the d4-square.

**13... ♗e7 14 a3**

Securing b4, in preparation for ♗e3.

**14... f5?**



**Warning:** Be careful about playing ...f5, since then Black renounces all ...f6-based kingside play, the repercussions of which prove catastrophic.

Black should play 14...d4! 15 ♖f2 0-0 16 ♗e4 ♕b7, not worrying if his d4-pawn falls later on.

**15 ♖c1 ♕b7**

When we feed an incorrect plan, we subsidize a fiction. Black is still oblivious to the importance of the d4-square. 15...d4 is met with 16 ♗f2 winning d4 without compensation, which I think is still better for Black than what happened in the game.

**16 ♕e3**

White takes ownership of d4. White's idea finally reaches the point of articulation, and there is no way for Black to extricate himself from strategic poverty.

**16...♗d8 17 ♗d4**

Just look at the difference between White's knight and Black's awful light-squared bishop.

**17...♗f8**

The knight is forced into indenture in service of e6.

**18 0-0 h5?!**

**Warning:** To have a deviation, one must first begin with a norm, which many players in this era lacked.

Black's plan has a future, the way a mass murderer with ten consecutive life sentences has one as well. Black's move is in violation of Steinitz' principle: avoid unnecessary or weakening pawn moves. Black's idea is to prevent g4. What he failed to grasp was that Steinitz had no intention of

attacking on the kingside.

**19** ♖c3 ♕f7 **20** ♖b1!

Intending ♖d2 and ♖b3, when White increases his grip on the queenside dark squares.

**20...g6 21** ♖d2 ♖d7 **22** ♖2b3 ♜c8

Notice that Black doesn't have ...♖b6 and ...♖c4, due to Steinitz' farsighted move 12 cxd3.

**23** ♖a5 ♖a8 **24** ♜xc8 ♞xc8 **25** ♜c1 ♞b8 **26** ♞c2

White seizes control over the only open file.

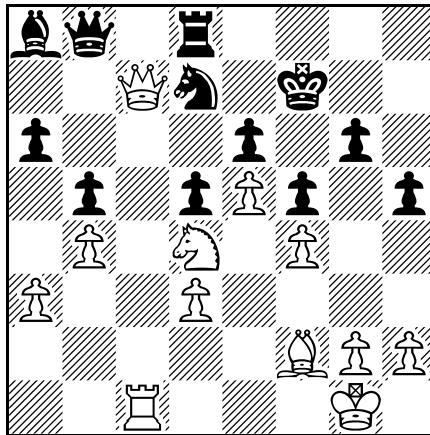
**26...♙d8 27** ♖ac6! ♞b7

Black can't rid himself of his bad bishop with 27...♙xc6?, since doing so enables decisive infiltration after 28 ♞xc6 ♖f8 29 ♞xa6 and b5 falls as well.

**28** ♖xd8+

Clearing the path to c7.

**28...♜xd8 29** ♞c7 ♞b8 **30** ♙f2!



*Tip: Use all your pieces.*

Steinitz methodically brings into play his only ineffective piece, threatening ♙h4.

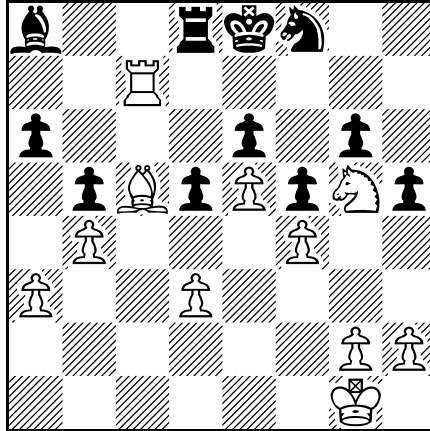
**30...♞b6 31** ♖f3

Order and obedience are the driving principles of the totalitarian state. White can actually play the paradoxical 31 ♙h4! ♞xd4+ (the white knight's Jimmy Hoffa-like disappearance baffles the authorities, but not White's king) 32 ♕h1 ♞b6 33 ♙xd8, winning.

**31...♞xc7 32** ♜xc7 ♕e8

Come all ye faithful. One by one, Black's pieces have been ceremoniously ushered to the first rank.

**33** ♖g5 ♖f8 **34** ♙c5



Threatening mate on the move. “Don’t hate me. I am merely obeying the law of natural selection,” the bishop tells Black’s king. White threatens mate and Black’s position bursts asunder.

**34...♘d7 35 ♙d6 1-0**

### Summary

Remember to fight for the crucial d4-square, while fighting too for the dark squares in the Steinitz Variation.

### Game 15

**F. Caruana-H. Nakamura**

Saint Louis (rapid) 2015

***Did You Know?** American super-GMs Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura are both considered potential challengers for Magnus Carlsen’s world championship crown.*

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♗f6 4 e5 ♘fd7 5 f4 c5 6 ♗f3**

Caruana improves upon Steinitz’ lame capture on c5.

**6...♘c6 7 ♙e3**