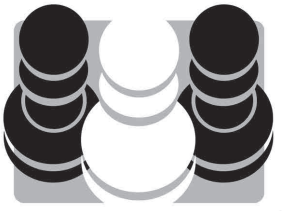
The Exhilarating Elephant Gambit

By

Michael Agermose Jensen
& Jakob Aabling-Thomsen



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Preface

Of all the possible responses to 1.e4, the classical 1...e5 is known as one of the most respectable. You may, as Michael did for years, play this move in the hope of entering the Marshall Attack in the Ruy Lopez. But once you start winning, people take notice and you are doomed to meet the anti-Marshall, the Exchange Variation and that "exciting" d2-d3 stuff until the end of time. Even if you deal with those lines, White still has the choice of the Italian Game, Scotch and Bishop's Opening, as well as an assortment of gambits and sidelines. Occasionally, it is nice to be the one determining the course of the game, even with the black pieces.

Sticking with 1...e5, the Elephant Gambit begins with the moves 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 when, instead of the usual 2...♘c6, we play the provocative 2...d5!?, which takes the game in a unique direction and will probably come as a complete surprise to the opponent. The Elephant Gambit has never been at the pinnacle of opening theory, and is often classed as a fourth-tier opening alongside such "gems" as the Grob. While there is no way for White to force a clear advantage and some of the refutations are fallacious, a few lines do promise White a slight but tangible advantage. Nevertheless, theory is one thing, practice is another and we will show how to handle all of White's tries and get a playable position, even if White is objectively a bit better at times.

2...d5 may not yet be a pawn sacrifice but it is our intention to play a real gambit, and we present a repertoire for Black based mainly on 3.exd5 ♗d6. For the price of just one pawn, we lure White into a maze of unexplored complications.

Gambits have lost a lot of their popularity since the glorious days of Morphy, Chigorin and Anderssen in the 19th century, as computers have advanced our understanding of defensive resources and databases have removed some of the surprise element. We believe the Elephant Gambit is a dynamic weapon which will appeal to the enterprising Black player looking to fight for a win. You may choose the Elephant Gambit as your main weapon against 1.e4 at your own peril, but we recommend not wearing your best clothes every day and saving it for special occasions for maximum impact. The Elephant can be a great surprise weapon against well-chosen opponents; and at shorter time controls in particular, many opponents will be clueless.

The move 2...d5 was first mentioned in *Traitté du jeu royal des echets* by B. Asperling, published in Lausanne around 1690. The book was a collection of opening theory and only examined the reply 3.d4. For centuries, 2...d5 was almost ignored, save for the occasional appearance on the board and a brief mention in opening tomes. In the 1980s and 90s some small monographs and leaflets appeared, promoting the gambit, but it has never really gained a wider audience. Even today, information on the gambit is scarce, with most contemporary opening manuals allocating only one or two short lines to its "refutation". As will become clear, this bad reputation is undeserved. Earlier books were written before the advent of strong engines, and we have used these modern tools to weed out mistakes in earlier analysis and refine our own ideas.

The authors are grateful to Jonathan Tait, for helping with some material; to Stefan Bücker, for pointing out where to get hold of Jonathan Rogers' 1994 monograph; to Raymond Kim, for supplying us with a lot of material; to Jacob Carstensen, for agreeing to play the White side of the gambit in some blitz games against Jakob; to Allan Stig Rasmussen, who supplied us with a number of game scores of engine games; and finally, we are very much indebted to FM Dr. Philip Corbin, who went out of his way to help us with rare material and unpublished game scores.

This book introduces the magical world of the Elephant Gambit, analyses key games and provides numerous novelties that we believe will lead to a revival of the gambit for the club player. But please do not tell anyone! We want to keep the opening's bad reputation, while we rack up the points.

If you, dear reader, are the kind of player who thrives in complicated positions and is not afraid to take risks, then look no further than the book you're holding in your hands. Read it, and you are ready to play the Elephant Gambit.

Michael Agermose Jensen & IM Jakob Aabling-Thomsen
Denmark, September 2020

My Elephant Experiences

by IM Andrew Greet

So far, I have scored 6½/9 (+5 =3 –1) with the Elephant in classical and rapid games. As an IM who plays in the Glasgow League and other Scottish events, I do out-rate most of my opponents by some margin, so I won't make too big a deal of the positive score. Still, the opponents have included an IM, an FM and several of the tougher club players on the circuit – none of them have been pushovers.

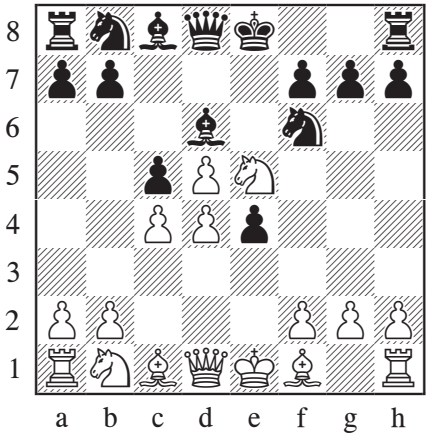
I have also played the Elephant in a bunch of over-the-board blitz events (as well as many online blitz games), but I haven't kept track of the results or game scores. I can, however, share an amusing titbit: my quickest ever winning position with the Elephant came against a well-known grandmaster:

Igor Glek – Andrew Greet

Dublin (blitz) 2019

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d5 3.exd5 ♗d6 4.d4 e4 5.♘e5 ♘f6 6.c4 c5!

I remembered this as an important detail from Michael and Jakob's draft files. Black challenges his opponent's pawn phalanx and invites 7.dxc6 ♘xc6 8.♘xc6 bxc6, when White's active knight has been swapped off and Black's lead in development offers realistic compensation for the pawn. Perhaps not liking the look of this, Glek instinctively replied:



7.♗e3??

I couldn't remember seeing this move in the draft book files. It's obvious that the knight on e5 is unstable – but being in 'blitz mode' and perhaps having had one Guinness too many, I decided to avoid any checks on a4 before taking direct action.

7...0–0?

7...♕e7!–+ would have left White without a satisfactory way of defending the knight. 8.♕a4† ♔f8 is nothing, and although there are a few other possible attempts to resist, the bottom line is that White will lose material for nowhere near enough compensation.

8.h3!

Giving the knight a retreat square. Black still has more than enough compensation, but I misplayed my hand and my opponent eventually got the better of me.

...1–0

I have often used the Glasgow League as sparring practice when testing out new opening repertoire ideas, usually stemming from Quality Chess books which I have been editing or otherwise involved in. My first Elephant game came in unusual circumstances...

Iain Swan – Andrew Greet

Glasgow 2017

1.e4

Usually Glasgow's train network is pretty reliable, but on this December's evening, one service after another got cancelled or delayed. I finally arrived at the game slightly after the official default time – but fortunately, the league rules allow for some leniency when a player is delayed for reasons beyond his control and informs the team captain as such. Still, to start the game with less than 28 of the original 60 minutes on the clock (with another 15 minutes added at move 30 – no increment) makes for a tough challenge against an experienced FIDE Master.

1...e5 2.♘f3 d5

All I really knew about the Elephant was what I had taken in while glancing through the initial sample files for this book. Had I started the game with the full time allotment, I probably would have considered it too risky – but the adverse clock conditions were strangely liberating.

3.♘xe5

Clearly surprised by the gambit, Iain opted for safety.

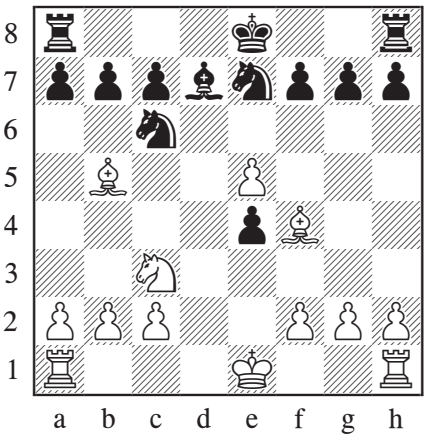
3...♗d6 4.d4 dxe4 5.♘c3 ♗xe5 6.dxe5 ♕xd1† 7.♘xd1 ♘c6

I remembered this much from the draft files. I couldn't recall any specific details beyond here, but the position is not too difficult to handle with mostly natural moves.

8.♗b5

About a year later, IM Steve Mannion played 8.♗f4 against me in a league game. Again I equalized without much effort (as referenced on page 78) and attempted to press, although on that occasion I had to settle for a draw.

8...♗d7 9.♗f4 ♘ge7 10.♘c3

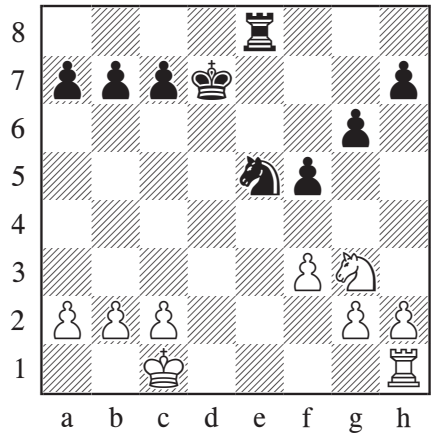


10...0–0–0!

After the game I discovered that 10...♘g6 was the only move on the database, but I correctly rejected it because 11.e6!N is annoying. The early draft had mentioned the concept of *the tusk* so I was on guard against it.

Although I was still behind on the clock, I had only used 16 minutes getting to this point, compared to 36 for my opponent.

11.0–0–0 ♘g6 12.♗g3 ♘cxe5 13.♗xe5 ♘xe5 14.♗xd7† ♖xd7 15.♖xd7 ♔xd7 16.♘xe4 ♖e8 17.f3 f5 18.♘g3 g6



The position is equal, with just a tiny edge in piece activity for Black. The remaining moves are not so important – the main thing is that the Elephant enabled me to equalize effortlessly while managing my limited time effectively, whereas my opponent burned a lot of time and had completely caught up with me on the clock by move 30. Eventually, I was able to eke out a win.

...0–1

Of course, you will also encounter opponents who try to punish you by keeping the gambit pawn.

Ketevan Arakhamia-Grant – Andrew Greet

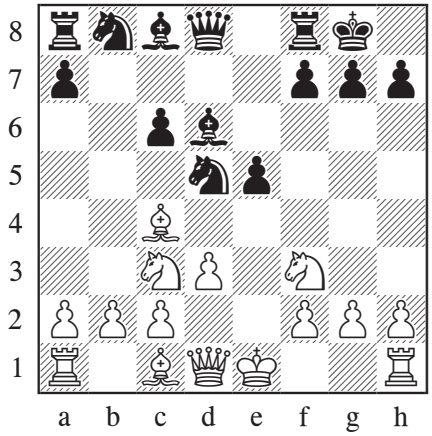
Edinburgh (blitz) 2019

The event was a 15-round FIDE-rated blitz and a qualifying tournament for the British Blitz Championship final. As such, it was among the more serious blitz events I have played in – so I made sure to stick to top-notch openings such as the King's Gambit, Morra Gambit and of course the Elephant throughout the tournament.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d5 3.exd5 ♗d6 4.♘c3 ♘f6 5.♗b5† c6

Once you have learned the basics of the Elephant, you will want to pay more attention to finer details such as when to meet this check with a block on d7 and when to go all-in with a ...c6 sacrifice – and in the latter case, is it best to recapture with the knight or the pawn? Full guidance can be found in Chapters 11 and 13; but the good news is that even when you get it slightly wrong as I did here, there is always enough complexity in the position to get an interesting battle with practical compensation.

6.dxc6 bxc6 7.♗c4 0–0 8.d3 ♘d5!?



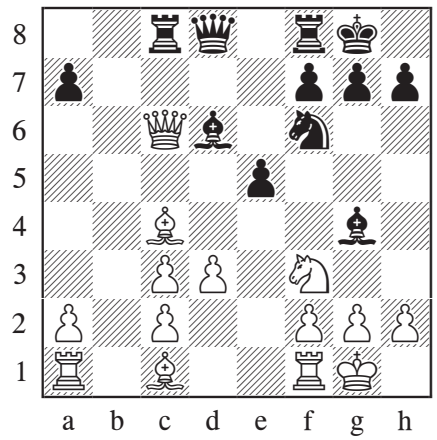
This isn't recommended in the book but was just a quirky idea which I made up at the board. Black avoids a ♗g5 pin and dares

White to capture a second pawn by giving up the bishop pair. Keti sensibly declines the offer.

9.0–0 ♘xc3 10.bxc3 ♗g4 11.♕e2 ♘d7 12.♕e4

But around here she gets a bit too greedy. White should aim to consolidate slowly rather than indulge in further pawn-grabbing.

12...♘f6 13.♕xc6 ♖c8



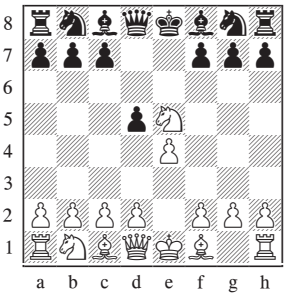
I wish I could reconstruct the rest of the game. Alas, all I can remember for sure is that White's queen had to lose contact with the knight on f3 (either immediately or after 14.♕b7 ♖c7), which enabled me to exchange on f3 and shatter her kingside structure, followed by ...♘h5 with a serious attack. Keti then showed great resourcefulness and the game became wildly unclear, perhaps even winning for her at some point, but I eventually prevailed.

...0–1

Having played the Elephant in a bunch of games at different time controls over the past three years, I offer a brief summary of my experiences and the main lessons I have learned:

- 3.exd5 has been the most common reply I have faced, with 3.♘xe5 (or 3.d4 dxe4 4.♘xe5) not far behind – roughly in line with database statistics.
- The endgame lines from Chapters 1 and 2 are pretty easy for Black to handle. The general pattern in my games has been that I equalize with ease and the main question has been if my opponent would escape with a draw.
- To date, I have yet to face the 5.♗c4 ♗xe5 6.♕h5 variation (covered in variation B of Chapter 1) – it doesn't seem to be a natural choice for someone who has been surprised by the Elephant. Of course you should still look at it – but in my experience, the 5.♘c3 endgame lines have been much more common so far.
- Some players seem to be terrified of accepting the gambit. One strong FM repeatedly plays the 5.♘c4 line (see Chapter 3) against me in blitz; another slightly lower-rated but still decent player started by going for the 5.♘c3 endgame variation, but since then has always preferred 3.d3.
- Most players react with a certain amount of caution when confronted by the Elephant, so it was a long time before I encountered the Hebden Gambit Accepted. But then out of nowhere, I faced this variation in a couple of online blitz games, and lost badly because I couldn't remember what to do. So don't neglect this critical variation, even if you don't face it for a while.
- After 3.exd5 ♗d6, quite a few opponents have opted for a quick ♗b5†, either immediately or after 4.♘c3 ♘f6 – so I suggest paying especially close attention to Chapters 11 and 13.

Andrew Greet
Glasgow, September 2020



Part I

3.♘xe5

Introduction

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘xe5

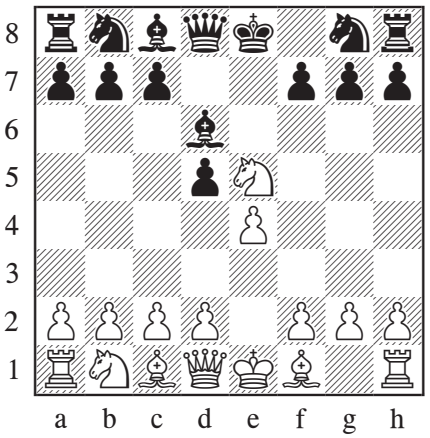
With this move, White captures a central pawn and plans to answer 3...dxe4? with 4.♗c4 attacking f7, as in the Bronstein game on page 16. Gufeld considered this move more logical than 3.exd5.

Before we proceed to Black's main move, we will take a brief look at another dubious alternative. 3...♕e7? was once recommended by Staunton, who played it, and lost, against Cochrane in London 1842. A game from almost a century later shows why it has fallen into disrepute: 4.d4 f6 5.♘d3 dxe4 6.♘f4 ♕f7? 7.♘d2 ♗f5 8.g4 ♗g6 9.♗c4 and White was already winning in Boleslavsky – Lilienthal, Moscow 1941. Lilienthal wrote of this disaster: "I was very naïve, Veresov had told me that 2...d5 was perfectly playable."

Well, we agree with Veresov and we offer the Elephant move:

3...♗d6!

Hitting the advanced knight.



Question: What happens if White takes on f7 and follows up with a big queen check on h5?

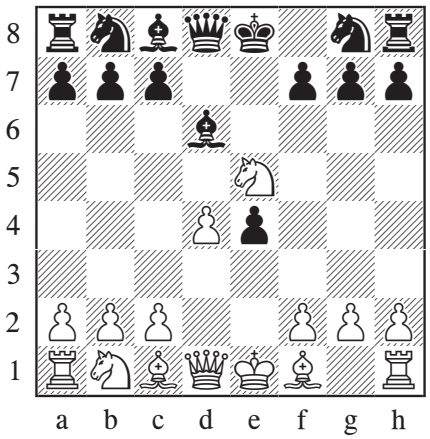
Answer: 4.♘xf7 ♔xf7 5.♕h5† looks scary and White does get three pawns for the piece, but a few accurate moves secure Black the better game: 5...g6 6.♕xd5† ♔g7! and 7.b3 is met by 7...♕f6, while 7.♗c4 is parried by 7...♕e7.

4.♘f3, 4.♕h5, 4.♘g4, and 4.f4 are also easily dealt with, so the main move is:

4.d4

And only now do we take back the pawn:

4...dxe4

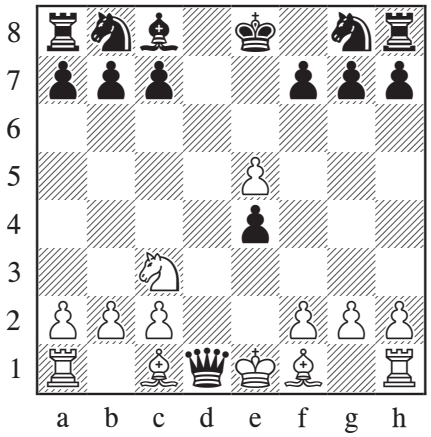


White has a number of possibilities, the most important being 5.♗c4, 5.♘c3 and 5.♘c4.

Question: Doesn't 5.♕h5 force Black to relinquish the bishop pair?

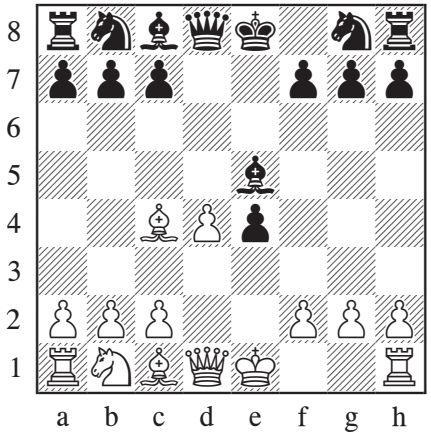
Answer: No. Black can defend with 5...♗e6.

However, we do like the idea of playing ...♗xe5 – but only on our own terms. For instance, after **5.♘c3** Black will play: **5...♗xe5!** (another argument for this move is that standard development with 5...♘f6?! 6.♗g5 ♗f5 can be met by the strong 7.g4!, as was discovered by Rogers) **6.dxe5 ♕xd1†**



White must either forfeit castling privileges or relegate his knight to an inferior square.

After **5.♗c4** we also play **5...♗xe5!**,



but here White has the sneaky **6.♕h5!** to mix things up. Chapter 1 covers this line, as well as the less challenging 6.dxe5.

5.♘c4 avoids the exchange on e5 but loses time. Chapter 3 examines this line, where **5...♘f6** sees Black develop quickly without fretting over the bishop pair.

White has an assortment of 5th-move alternatives that pre-empt the ...♗xe5 threat, such as: **5.♕e2** (avoiding the queen exchange); **5.♗e2** (planning 5...♗xe5 6.dxe5 ♕xd1† 7.♗xd1); and **5.♗f4** or **5.f4** (reinforcing the knight on e5). These tries are the subject of Chapter 4.

The infamous Tacoma Narrows Bridge gained the nickname *Galloping Gertie*, because of its wildly moving deck. This is the feeling we would like to imbue on our opponents, where facing the Elephant is like crossing the bridge. You may reach safety on the opposite shore – but even if you do, it is going to be a rocky ride.

GAME 5

Fawler – Ernst Rasmussen

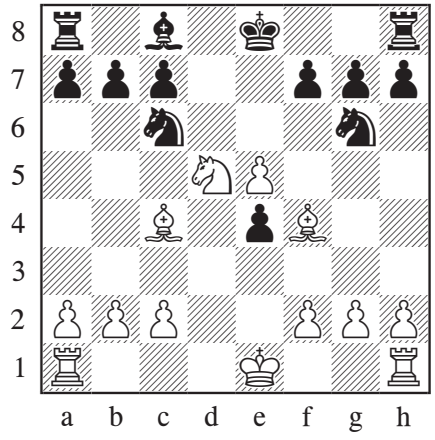
Tacoma 1991

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d5

The player of the black pieces is better known for a line in the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit, 1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.♘c3 e5 4.♘ge2, the Rasmussen Attack. In 1988, after the publication of *Elephant Gambit*, the authors Jensen, Purser and Pape organized the correspondence *Elephant Gambit World Tournament* (EGWT), which Rasmussen won.

3.♘xe5 ♗d6 4.d4 dxe4 5.♗c4 ♗xe5 6.♕h5 ♕e7 7.♕xe5 ♕xe5 8.dxe5 ♘c6 9.♗f4 ♘ge7 10.♘c3 ♘g6 11.♘d5?!

A dubious adventure. White figures he will win material, but this whole plan blows up in his face.



11...♘xf4 12.♘xc7†?

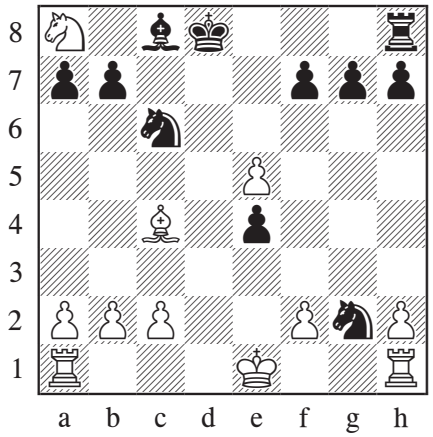
Taking the bait – hook, line and sinker.

12.♘xf4 was the lesser evil. Still, after 12...♘xe5 13.♗d5 f5 14.♗b3 c6 15.0–0–0∓ White had no compensation for the lost pawn, and was unable to hold in Rost – Leisebein, corr. 1999.

12...♔d8

12...♔e7! is even better, since White does not have a dark-squared bishop to harass the king. 13.♘xa8 ♘xe5 14.♗b3 ♘xg2†–+ leaves Black with a winning position; the knight on a8 is doomed, no matter where White's king goes.

13.♘xa8 ♘xg2†



14.♔f1?

A howler.

14.♔d2 would have made a game of it, although 14...♗f5∓ still favours Black.

14...♗h3

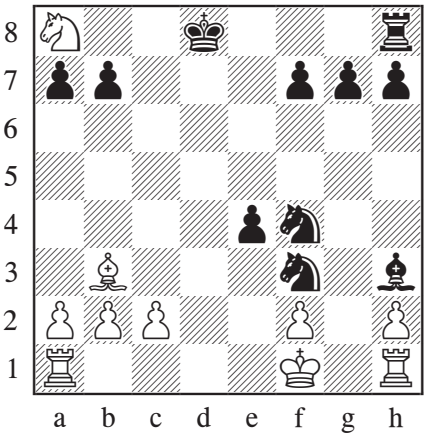
Anyone who has ever played bughouse knows the value of this X-ray attack.

15.♔g1 ♘xe5 16.♗b3

16.♗e2 ♘f4 17.♗d1 ♘f3† 18.♗xf3 exf3 19.♖e1 ♘e2† 20.♖xe2 fxe2 is analysis in *Elephant Gambit 2* (1997), with an evaluation of "∓" – but it is mate next move.

16...♘f3† 17.♔f1 ♘f4#

A nice finish!



Game recap: A real coffeehouse game. White went straight for material and won the rook in the corner. Meanwhile, Black launched an attack straight out of a bughouse game. The queen exchange did not inoculate White against mate in 17 moves.

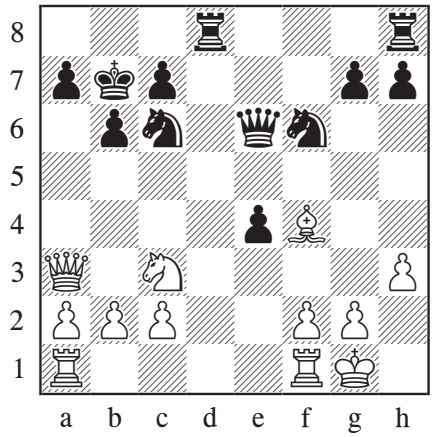
GAME 6

Sigurd Perlström – Walter Gabriel Muir

Correspondence 1989

Walter Muir was the grand old man of American correspondence chess and a Correspondence International Master. Muir played many correspondence games with the Elephant for four decades, before the advent of chess databases and strong engines. Still, his games are interesting and instructive.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d5 3.♘xe5 ♗d6 4.d4 dxe4 5.♗c4 ♗xe5 6.♕h5 ♕e7 7.dxe5 ♗e6 8.♗xe6 ♕xe6 9.♘c3 ♘c6 10.♗f4 0–0–0! 11.0–0 f5 12.exf6 ♘xf6 13.♕c5! b6 14.♕a3 ♔b7 15.h3?!

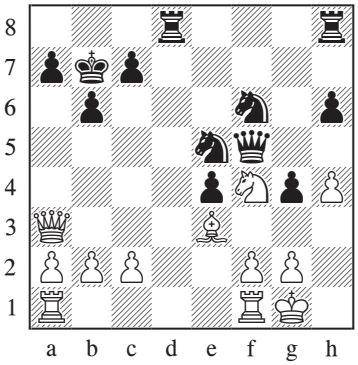


15...h6

On page 60 it was noted that 15...g5! could have been played without further preparation.

16.♘e2 g5 17.♗e3 ♖d7

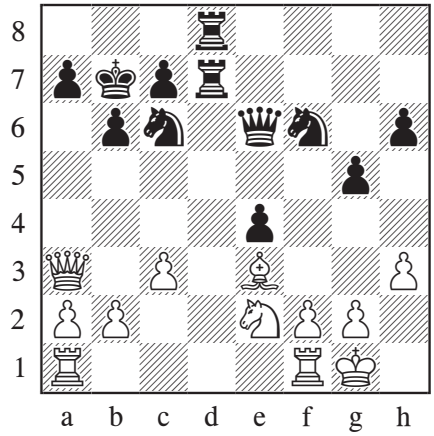
Black rejected 17...g4, although we think that after 18.♘f4 ♕f5 19.h4 ♘e5∓:



Black's attack looks dangerous.

18.c3 ♖hd8∓

Black has opted for control over the d-file rather than a direct kingside attack.



19.♘d4 ♘xd4 20.cxd4

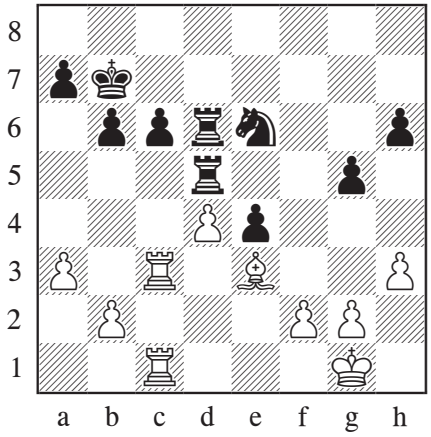
The alternative is 20.♗xd4, when Muir mentions that 20...c5 21.♗xf6 ♕xf6 is equal; but we prefer 20...♘d5!∓ when the knight dominates the bishop.

20...♘d5 21.♖ac1

Black should put a rook on the g-file, play ...♘f4 and go for a kingside attack. However, Muir remains true to his positional squeeze and wins a long game.

21...♕f6 22.♖fe1 ♘f4 23.♖c3 ♖f7 24.♕a4 ♘d3 25.♖e2 ♖d5 26.♕c4 ♕d6 27.a3 ♘c5 28.♖e1 ♘e6 29.♖ec1 ♖d7 30.♕c6† ♕xc6 31.♖xc6 ♖7d6 32.♖6c3 c6!∓

"Black wins the isolated pawn on d4, and the game." – Muir



33.♔f1 ♘xd4 34.♗xd4 ♖xd4 35.♔e1 c5 36.♖3c2 ♔a6 37.♔e2 ♔b5 38.♔e3 a5 39.♖c3 ♖d2 40.♖1c2 ♖xc2 41.♖xc2 ♖d4 42.♖c3 a4! 43.♖c2 ♔c6 44.f3 exf3 45.♔xf3 ♔d5 46.♖e2 ♖f4† 47.♔g3 h5 48.♖d2† ♖d4 49.♖e2 h4† 50.♔f2 ♔c4 51.♔e3 ♔b3 52.♖f2 ♖d1!

0–1

Game recap: Black castles queenside when the opposite-castling favoured the second player. Muir eschewed a direct kingside attack and won in positional style. However, should the reader reach such a position, we strongly recommend throwing those kingside pawns down the board.