Chapter Two

Italian Game: Modern Variation (Part II)

In this chapter we consider early alternatives for both colours in the Modern Variation. The first, after 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗c4 ♗c5 4 c3 ♘f6 5 d3 a6 6 ♗b3 ♗a7, is 7 ♘bd2, a move with which I've enjoyed some success. 7 ♘bd2 could easily lead to a transposition to main lines considered in the previous chapter. However, there's an independent option for White in 7...0-0 8 ♘c4!? (see games 11-12); and also one for Black with 7...0-0 8 h3 d5 (see Oratovsky-Gozzoli, Game 13).

The rest of the chapter focuses on alternatives for Black on the 5th and 6th moves. In Bologan-Heberla (Game 14) Black plays the typical idea of 6...0-0 followed up by a quick ...d5, and White reacts by implementing Plan B. In Nun-Spesny (Game 15) Black castles a move earlier, again with the intention of advancing two squares with the d-pawn, but this time White prevents the advance with ♗g5.

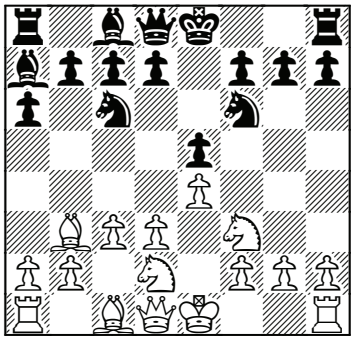
Black can also play 6...d6, leaving his bishop on c5. This move often transposes to main lines because ...♗a7 is usually played at some point, but not always. In Degraeve-Dorfman (Game 16) White invites complications by carrying out the ♘d2-f1 manoeuvre without first playing h2-h3, so ...♘g4 becomes an option for Black.

Finally, Erenburg-Kreizberg (Game 17) gives us the opportunity to consider a number of different possibilities for Black, good and bad, if he dispenses with the usual ...a6 move.

Game 11
J.Emms-G.Flear
Jack Speigel Memorial, Southend 2009

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗c4 ♗c5 4 c3 ♘f6

5 d3 a6 6 ♗b3 ♗a7 7 ♘bd2



So far we've only considered 7 h3. This knight move offers White some new possibilities.

7...0-0

The theoretically recommended response. Black keeps open the possibility of playing ...d5 in one jump.

If 7...d6, White can of course transpose to main lines with 8 h3, but there's also 8 ♘f1!? inviting Black to play 8...♘g4. Now:

a) 9 ♘e3 ♘xe3 10 ♗xe3 ♗xe3?! 11 fxe3 0-0 12 0-0 left White with a useful open f-file in S.Tiviakov-E.Van den Doel, Dutch Championship 2000. However, as Tiviakov notes, Black would be okay after any reasonable move instead of 10...♗xe3.

b) 9 d4!? looks more testing from a theoretical viewpoint. For example, 9...exd4 10 cxd4 ♘f6! (10...♕f6 11 h3! ♘xf2 12 ♔xf2 ♗xd4+ worked out well for White after 13 ♗e3 ♗xe3+ 14 ♘xe3 ♕xb2+ 15 ♕d2 ♕xd2+ 16 ♘xd2 in J.Degraeve-D.Marciano, Belfort 1997 – White's extra piece is worth more than the three pawns) 11 ♘g3 ♗g4 12 ♗e3 d5 13 e5 (13 exd5 ♘xd5 14 h3 ♗e6 is equal) 13...♘e4 14 ♗c2 (this might be too committal; perhaps simply 14 0-0 0-0 15 ♖c1! is stronger) 14...f5 15 exf6 (15 h3!?) 15...♘xf6 16 h3 ♗xf3 17 ♕xf3 ♗xd4 18 ♘f5 ♗xb2 19 ♖b1 ♗c3+ 20 ♔f1 and White didn't have enough for his material investment in J.Degraeve-V.Tkachiev, Corsica 1997. However, there is certainly some scope for improvement here.

8 ♘c4!?

This move is quite rare but after spending some time studying it, I began to appreciate that it was trickier than it initially looked.

White normally chooses either 8 h3 (see Oratovsky-Gozzoli, Game 13) or 8 0-0, reaching the Classical Main Line.

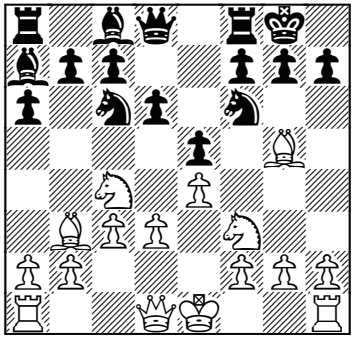
8...d6

Can this natural move really be classed as a mistake? I'm not totally sure, but what is clear is that Black has to deal with some problems which aren't easily solved.

It seems that Black experiences fewer difficulties after 8...d5 (see the next game).

9 ♗g5!

The point. Black is forced to endure the usual pin on the knight, again in awkward circumstances. Compare Tiviakov-El Taher (Game 5), and the problems Black faced there. This current situation might be even more unfavourable for Black because ...h6 followed by ...g5 is even riskier (see below).



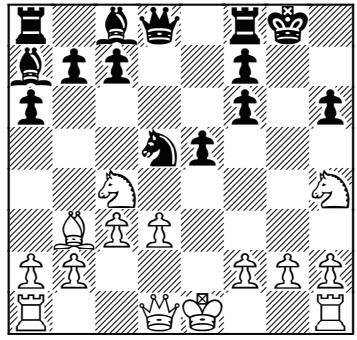
9...h6

Previously, Tony Miles had played 9...♘e7 against me (Mondariz, 2000), after which 10 0-0?! let Black off the hook following 10...♘g6 11 ♘h4 ♔h8!. Later on I realized that White would have more chance of an advantage by playing 10 ♘e3!?, which discourages 10...♘g6 in view of 11 ♘d5.

10 ♗h4 ♗e6

Against 10...g5 I would have been very tempted to play just like in the game, with 11 ♘xg5!? hxg5 12 ♗xg5. However, there's also nothing wrong with the simple 11 ♗g3. Let's see how this worked out well for White in the game V.Zhelnin-A.Kolev, Odessa 1989: 11...♗g4 (perhaps 11...♗e6 is wiser) 12 ♘e3 ♗xe3 13 fxe3 ♕e7 14 h3 ♗d7 15 ♘h2 ♔g7 16 ♕e2 a5 17 a4 ♖ab8 18 0-0 ♗e6 19 ♗c2 ♘g8 20 ♖f2 f6 21 ♘f1 ♕e8 22 ♗h2 ♗f7 23 ♘g3 ♘ce7 24 d4 and White had built up a significant advantage without having to do anything spectacular.

10...♘e7 is also possible a move later. 11 ♘e3 no longer makes sense because of 11...♘g6, but with the pawn on h6 rather than h7 weakening Black's structure, 11 ♗xf6! becomes more desirable: 11...gxf6 12 ♘h4 (I quite like 12 ♕d2!?) 12...d5 13 exd5 ♘xd5

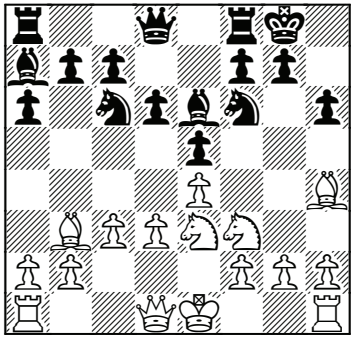


14 ♕f3 (White mustn't get too excited: 14 ♕h5?? ♘f4! 15 ♕xh6 ♕xd3! and it's White's king which is the terminally weak one) 14...♘f4 15 0-0-0 ♕d5 (White was threatening both 16 g3 and 16 d4) 16 ♕xd5 ♘xd5 17 ♘xe5 ♘xc3 18 bxc3 fxe5 19 ♖d2 ♔g7 (19...♖e8!? may be stronger) 20 ♖e1 f6 21 d4! (now White is definitely better) 21...h5 (the problem for Black is that 21...exd4 allows mate with 22 ♖e7+ ♔h8 23 ♘g6) 22 ♖d3! ♔h6 23 ♖g3 ♗g4 24 h3 exd4 (or 24...♗d7 25 ♖g6+ ♔h7 26 ♗c2 ♔h8 27 ♖e3! etc) 25 hxg4 dxc3 26 ♘f5+ ♔g5 27 gxh5+ and Black resigned, G.Sax-M.Brancaleoni, Bratto 2003. Black might have been doing okay somewhere in that game, but it's clear that he's under some pressure.

11 ♘e3!

Still not committing the king. However, if Black were to play 11...♗xe3 12

fxe3 then of course kingside castling and utilizing the newly-opened f-file suddenly becomes highly attractive.



11...g5?

The pin is very annoying and it's difficult to refrain from playing this move, but it's likely that Black is now in some trouble.

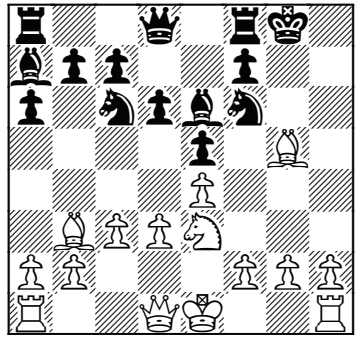
Glenn suggested 11...♔h7! intending ...♖g8 and only then ....g5 as a creative way for Black to solve some of his problems.

12 ♘xg5!

Again 12 ♗g3 was possible, but this sacrifice was simply too difficult to resist!

12...hxg5 13 ♗xg5

White has fabulous compensation for the piece: Black's king is unsafe; the pinned knight on f6 is a constant source of concern; and the bishop on a7 is more or less out of the game. If Black ever takes on e3, White recaptures with the f-pawn after which ♖f1 is going to be decisive. True, Black can defend initially, but White's initiative lasts for a very long time.



13...♔g7 14 ♕f3 ♘b8

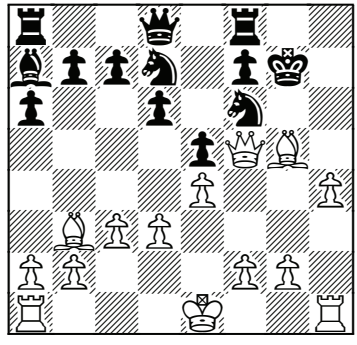
To support the f6-knight with ...♘bd7.

In general Black would welcome an exchange on e6, to provide cover for f5 and d5, but he must still be wary of some concrete lines. For example, 14...♖h8? 15 ♗xe6! fxe6 16 ♘g4 ♖f8 17 ♕h3! and White wins.

15 ♘f5+ ♗xf5

The knight must be taken: 15...♔g6? loses to 16 ♗h4 (threatening ♕g3+) 16...♖g8 17 ♕g3+ ♔h7 18 ♗xf6! ♕xf6 (or 18...♖xg3 19 hxg3+ ♔g6 20 ♖h6 mate!) 19 ♕h3+ ♔g6 20 ♕h6 mate.

16 ♕xf5 ♘bd7 17 h4!



With two ideas: h5-h6+ and ♖h3 followed by ♖f3 or ♖g3. White doesn't have to castle kingside to activate the rook.

17...♖g8! 18 ♖h3 ♕e7 19 ♖f3 ♔h8!

The best try.

20 ♔e2!

Planning to bring in the final piece with ♖h1-h3-g3.

There's no hurry to take on f6, and indeed 20 ♗xf6+?! ♘xf6 21 ♕xf6+ ♕xf6 22 ♖xf6 ♖xg2 23 ♔e2 ♖f8 would offer Black good chances for survival.

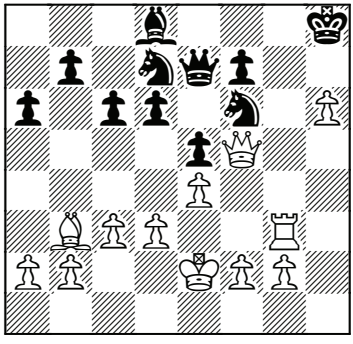
20...♖g6 21 h5 ♖xg5

What else can Black do?

22 ♕xg5 ♔h7 23 ♖g3 ♖g8 24 ♕f5+ ♔h8 25 ♖xg8+ ♔xg8 26 h6 ♔h8 27 ♖h1 c6

Or 27...♘f8 28 ♖h3 ♘g6 29 ♖f3 ♘f4+ 30 ♖xf4! exf4 31 ♕g5 and White wins.

28 ♖h3 ♗b6 29 ♖g3 ♗d8



Finally Black's dark-squared bishop is back in the action, but it's too late to save him.

30 ♖g7! d5 31 exd5 ♘c5

31...cxd5 can be met simply by 32 ♗xd5. Glenn's one remaining chance here was that both players were in some time trouble, but I managed to keep everything together.

32 dxc6 ♘xb3 33 axb3 bxc6 34 g4 e4 35 d4 e3 36 fxe3 ♕d6 37 g5 ♕h2+ 38 ♔d3 ♕h1 39 ♔c2 ♕e4+ 40 ♕xe4 ♘xe4 41 ♖xf7 ♗xg5 42 ♔d3 1-0

Game 12
J.Emms-A.Greet
British Championship, Douglas 2005

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗c4 ♗c5 4 c3 ♘f6 5 d3 a6 6 ♗b3 ♗a7 7 ♘bd2 0-0 8 ♘c4 d5

Black makes the thematic ...d5 break, ignoring the double attack on the e5-pawn. To me this looks like the best way of meeting 8 ♘c4.

9 exd5

I don't think Black has much to worry about after 9 ♘cxe5 ♘xe5 10 ♘xe5 dxe4. For example, 11 d4 (the only chance for an edge is to try to block out the a7-bishop, but Black immediately seeks to activate it) 11...c5! 12 ♗e3 (M.Klinova-Qin Kanying, New Delhi 2000) and now 12...♕e7 intending ...♗e6 is Black's simplest route to a decent position.

9...♘xd5 10 0-0

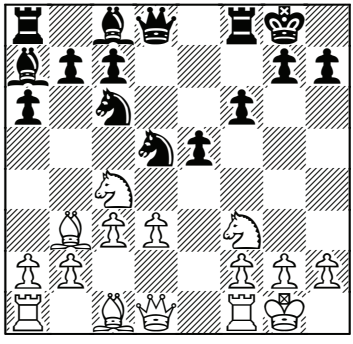
With White's king finally tucked away, the threat to e5 becomes real. How should Black deal with it?

10...f6!

This is a key move, which demon-

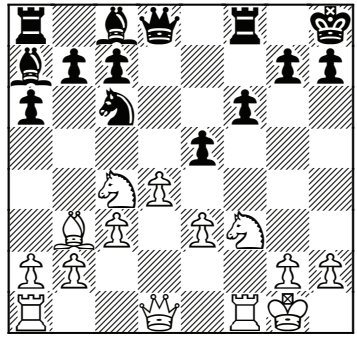
strates that Black is not afraid of the temporary weakness on the a2-g8 diagonal. For example, 11 ♘e3 can be met by 11...♗e6 followed by ...♔h8.

10...♖e8 looks seemingly more attractive and is certainly playable, but I feel White can cause Black more problems after this move: 11 ♖e1 ♗g4 (Black must avoid 11...♕f6 12 d4! e4 13 ♘cd2!, attacking d5 and e4, P.Svidler-H.Steingrimsson, Gausdal 1991) 12 h3 ♗xf3 (if 12...♗h5 White can safely grab the pawn with 13 g4 ♗g6 14 ♘cxe5 and follow up with d3-d4 to shut out the a7-bishop) 13 ♕xf3 ♕f6 14 ♘d2 ♕xf3 15 ♘xf3 ♘f6 16 ♗g5 ♖ad8 17 ♖ad1 h6 18 ♗h4 with a nagging edge for White, P.Van der Houwen-J.Masek, correspondence 2003. The pawns on d3 and e5 are both weaknesses, but White's two bishops might become a handful if the position opens up.



11 ♖e1

Given how effectively Black deals with this obvious move, there's an argument here for trying something else. If I were to reach this position again, I would be tempted to play 11 ♗e3!?. It might seem strange to offer Black the chance to grab the two bishops, but actually I think White should be happy to get rid of his dark-squared bishop. It's not easy to find a useful role for it; indeed, it's in danger of becoming White's worst minor piece. I won't go as far as to claim that this gives White an advantage, but it can lead to some interesting positions. If 11...♘xe3 (this is certainly not the only move) 12 fxe3! ♔h8 13 d4, the position looks genuinely unclear.



White's aim – not for the first time – is to keep the a7-bishop firmly out of play. The game Z.Hajnal-L.Vajda, Eger 2002, continued 13...e4 (this looks too committal) 14 ♘h4 ♘e7 15 g3 g5 (15...♗h3!?) 16 ♘g2 b5 17 ♘d2 f5 18 ♕h5! ♘g6 and I prefer White's position here. As well as the game's 19 ♗c2, White could consider the pawn break g4 (now or later), or even 19 h4 intending to meet 19...gxh4 with 20 ♘xe4! fxe4? 21 ♘xh4! with a winning attack: 21...♘xh4 22 ♖xf8+ ♕xf8 23 ♕e5+ ♕g7 24 ♕e8+ and it's mate next move.

11...♔h8!

Other moves are possible, but vacating the a2-g8 diagonal is the simplest solution. I think Black is fully equal here.

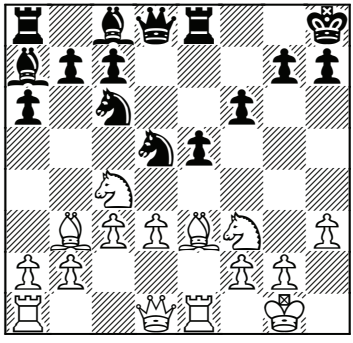
12 h3

White needs to prevent ...♗g4. I wanted to play 12 ♘h4 intending ♕h5, but I couldn't find a reason why Black should avoid the straightforward 12...g5! 13 ♘f3 b5 14 ♘e3 ♘f4 when White is in serious danger of being worse.

12...♖e8

12...b5 13 ♘e3 ♘f4 14 d4 exd4 15 cxd4 ♘e7 was equal in A.Tzermiadianos-H.Gretarsson, Rethymnon 2003, and even 15...♘xd4!? is possible: 16 ♘xd4 ♕xd4 17 ♕f3 ♗e6 18 ♘c2 ♕xf2+ 19 ♕xf2 ♗xf2+ 20 ♔xf2 ♘d3+ 21 ♔f3 ♘xe1+ 22 ♘xe1 is again equal.

13 ♗e3!

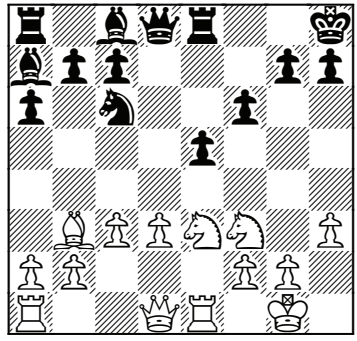


Better late than never (see the note to White's 11th move), even if the circumstances here are less favourable for White.

13 d4 looks like the only other logical continuation, but after 13...exd4 14 ♖xe8+ ♕xe8 15 cxd4 ♗e6, or 15 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 16 cxd4 ♗e6, Black is well coordinated and probably has an edge.

13...♘xe3 14 ♘xe3

14 fxe3?! makes much less sense with the rook on e1. Besides, after 14...b5! White's knight would have to retreat to the ugly a3-square to avoid dropping the d3-pawn.

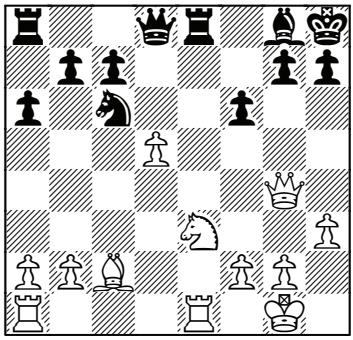


14...♘a5?!

It is desirable to kick the bishop off the a2-g8 diagonal, but now Black's knight is misplaced, he loses his grip on the centre and White can get in d3-d4.

14...♗e6 15 ♗xe6 ♖xe6 16 ♕b3 looks a bit awkward for Black, but 16...♕c8 should be okay for him. Alternatively, there's 14...♕d6 to prepare ...♗e6. White can try 15 ♘h4 here, and 15...♗e6 16 ♘ef5 ♕d7 17 ♕h5 ♗xb3 18 axb3 ♔g8 19 ♖a4! is the kind of thing White should be aiming for. Unfortunately, Black can spoil the fun with something like 15...♗xe3 first, and only then ...♗e6.

15 ♗c2 ♗e6 16 d4! exd4 17 ♘xd4 ♗g8 18 ♕g4 ♗xd4 19 cxd4 ♘c6 20 d5



Now White enjoys a small advantage. His pieces are the more active, and the isolated d-pawn, although requiring protection, does have a slight cramping effect on Black's position.

20...♘e5 21 ♕h4 ♕d6 22 ♖ed1 ♕f8 23 ♖ac1 ♖ad8 24 ♗b1 ♖e7 25 ♕b4 c6 26 dxc6 ♘xc6 27 ♕b6

The c- and d-pawns have been exchanged, leaving a symmetrical structure. White's more active pieces still promise an edge, something which is maintained through to the endgame.

27...♖ed7 28 ♖xd7 ♖xd7 29 ♗e4 ♕d8 30 ♕xd8 ♘xd8 31 a3 g6 32 ♖c8 ♔g7 33 ♔f1 ♗e6 34 ♔e1 ♔f7 35 ♗f3 ♔e7 36 ♘c4 ♖d1+ 37 ♔xd1 ♗xc8 38 ♔d2 ♗e6 39 ♔c3 ♔d7 40 ♔d4 ♗f7 41 ♔c5 ♔c7

During the game I was concerned about the defence 41...♘e6+ 42 ♔b6 ♘d4 43 ♘a5? ♘xf3 44 gxf3 ♗e6! 45 h4 ♗d5, but in fact 43 ♗g4+! f5 44 ♘e5+ ♔e7 45 ♘xf7 fxg4 46 ♘g5 is still very good for White.

42 ♗d5 ♘e6+

Now White is probably winning. Passive defence with 42...♗e8! offers Black better chances of survival.

43 ♗xe6! ♗xe6 44 ♘b6!

Intending ♘d5+. The pawn endings are winning for White because his king is so far advanced and Black runs out of waiting moves.

44...g5 45 ♘d5+ ♗xd5 46 ♔xd5 ♔d7 47 g4! ♔e7

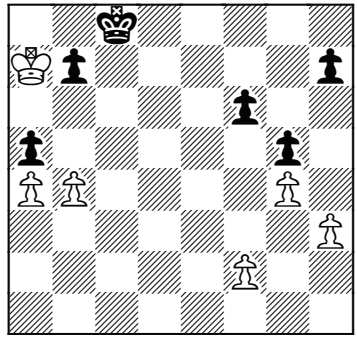
Or, for example, 47...a5 48 b3 b6 49 b4 axb4 50 axb4 h6 51 b5 etc.

48 ♔c5 ♔d7 49 ♔b6 ♔c8 50 a4 ♔b8 51 b4! ♔c8

If 51...♔a8, White wins by 52 ♔c7 ♔a7 53 b5 axb5 (or 53...a5 54 f3 h6 55 ♔c8 – but not 55 b6+?? ♔a6! – 55...♔b6 56 ♔b8, winning as in the game) 54 axb5 ♔a8 55 b6 h6 56 f3 and it's mate in four.

52 ♔a7 a5!

The last try. 53 bxa5? ♔c7! 54 a6 b6! 55 ♔a8 ♔c8! is only a draw, but...



53 b5! ♔c7 54 ♔a8 1-0

After 54...h6 55 f3 ♔b6 56 ♔b8 White wins the crucial b-pawn and with it the game.