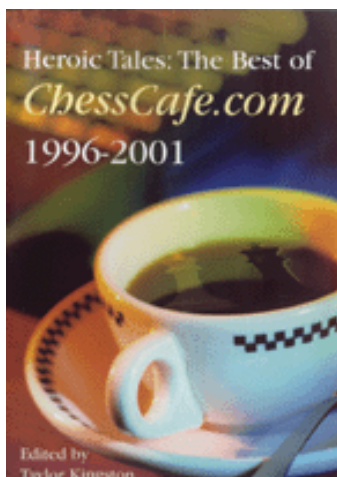


**BOOK
REVIEWS**

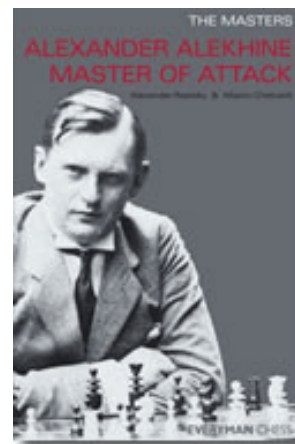
Onions Make the Milk Tase Bad

Derek Grimmell

Alexander Alekhine: Master of Attack by Alexander Raetsky & Maxim Chetverik, 2004 Everyman Chess, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 176pp., \$18.95

Long ago, milk came in waxed cardboard cartons rather than plastic jugs. One bit of household lore from those days was that you couldn't put onions in the refrigerator with the milk. Anyone who forgot would find that the milk tasted funny the next day. The milk "picked up" the taste of the onions, as the stuff that makes you cry when you slice onions slowly oozed through the waxed cardboard and infiltrated the milk, leaving a nasty flavor behind.

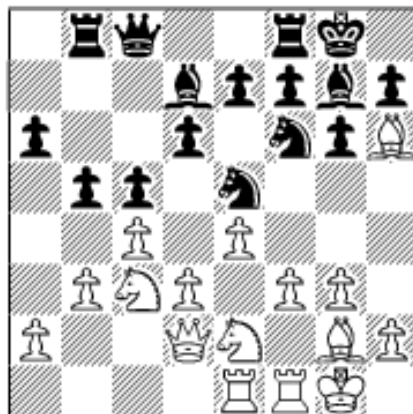
The development of plastic may have saved us many gallons of spoiled milk, but it's cost us a great metaphor. Because what happens with onions and milk, happens with people as well. Soldiers and sailors pick up combat skills and bad language from their drill instructors; graduate students acquire research methods and cynicism from their professors. Whoever you hang around with, you come to resemble in the end.



With that in mind, let's look at a first-round game played when I was rated around 1500 and my opponent was rated above 2000. The 500-point rating gap was much on my mind, to be sure, as was my lifelong tendency to commit shameful blunders. So I stuck to my preferred (at the time) English Opening, in the hope that I would thereby avoid any tactics whatsoever.

Grimmell – Much Better Player

1.c4 Nf6 2.g3 g6 3.Bg2 Bg7 4.Nc3 0-0 5.e4 d6 6.Nge2 c5 7.0-0 Nc6 8.d3 a6 9.Be3 Rb8 10.f3 b5 11.Qd2 Ne5 12.b3 Bd7 13.Rae1 Qc8 14.Bh6

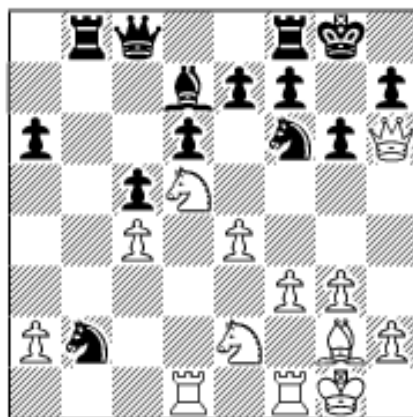


Right on schedule, I blunder a vital central pawn.

14...Bxh6 15.Qxh6 Nxd3

Bada-bing. I briefly considered resigning, just to save myself the inevitable agony and humiliation of being drubbed by someone who was simply better than me. Then I took a deep breath, quashed the self-pity, and focused. Okay, so I've blundered a pawn. What is there about my position that's good? After a bit of a think, I decided that I might try to use the newly-opened d-file to get more forces over to the enviable locale of my Queen.

**16.Rd1 bxc4 17.bxc4 Nb2 (suspecting nothing, and smiling a bit as I recall)
18.Nd5**



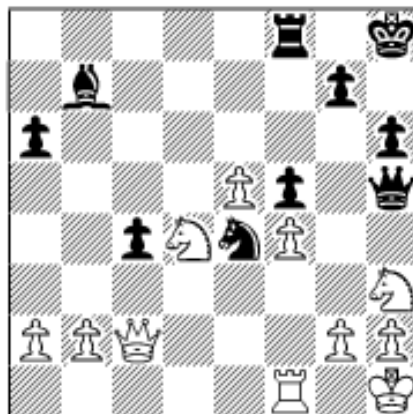
Suddenly e7 is a serious problem for Black, and will remain so to the end of the game. Black can probably still win here, but White is having a lot more fun than he had any reason to expect just four moves ago.

18...Nxd5 19.Rxd5 Be6 20.Rg5 Nd3 21.f4

Alekhine lost brilliantly and the seventh is devoted to endgame tactics. There is a short section of “Alekhine tips” where the reader can get a hint before looking at the solution to one of the problems. Finally come the answers, taking up more than half the total number of pages. As in the first volume the authors almost always include the complete game rather than just the winning moves.

There are several ways to judge this book. As a tactics manual it is short, with only 153 test positions. But it does pass the major test for tactics books, in that the positions are grouped by level of difficulty, but not by type of tactic that is used. This is the best way to do tactical puzzles, as it forces the reader to think independently and remain alert to all possibilities, including those of the opponent. In addition, the authors have done a good job of selecting a wide variety of tactical themes and sorting them by degree of difficulty. Sometimes strong players have lost touch with what the rest of us regard as difficult, but this book does a pretty good job of separating easy, moderate, difficult, and mind-numbing tactical exercises into their respective chapters.

Let’s look at a couple of examples so. The first position, number 9, comes from the easiest chapter. I give it here partly because it is the only position I have found that is *ruined by a misprint*, so I might as well give it away here, in its corrected form:



Black to move and win

Simply knowing that this is a winning position leads most of us to guess that ...Qxh3 is the correct move. It is. The combination runs **28. ...Qxh3! 29. gxh3 Nf2++ 30. Kg1 Nh3#**. As the commentary says, this is a mating pattern well worth remembering, as it occurs with surprising frequency in actual games. Many of the positions in the first two chapters include such meat-and-potatoes ideas, and together they make a fair survey of elementary tactics. (Please note: In the book, the position is given *after* 28. ...Qxh3 has been played, but the caption still says “Black to move and win.” This makes the killing move rather harder to find, as Black has no mate unless White cooperates by taking the Queen. Indeed, if White responds with 29. e6, for example, there is no mate at all, though being a piece to the good, Black will have few problems converting. But bear this in mind. If you buy the book, skip #9.)

Later chapters become more difficult, which means either that they demand calculation of more side-variations, longer variations, or include subtle, unusual, or non-forcing continuations. The final two chapters are genuinely challenging. This next position comes from the fourth set of problems, and it is presented here partly because of the interesting picture the Black forces present in the initial position:



White to move and win

Black's forces stacked up on the a-file are almost comically distant from their nervous monarch. But as the caption in the book points out, there is a dangerous pin of the Rook on c4, which limits White's options. I suspect most players quickly notice the undefended status of Black's Queen. But how to exploit it?

The key move is not so hard to find: **23. Bf6!!** wins by force. But it is a non-forcing continuation with several side variations and many tricks. White threatens Rg4 with a mate threat and an attack on the Black Queen, and 23...gxf6 24. Rg4+ is hardly better. But note that the otherwise tempting 23. b4? meets with 23...Nc3! continuing to exploit the pin on the Rook.

In the game, Black played **23...Rfc8**, after which you have to see the sequence **24. Qe5! Rc5! 25. Qg3!** again threatening mate while the unpinned Rook attacks the undefended Knight on a4. After **25...g6 26. Rxa4** White has an extra piece and the attack to boot. Black resigned a few moves later.

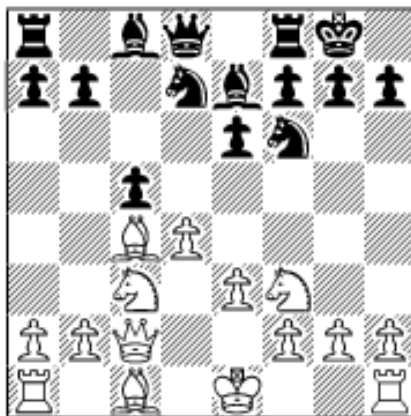
If you look up the solution to this problem in the second half of the book, you will find the complete game, and almost every position that does not arise from an "odds game" likewise has the complete score. This unusual feature creates an attractive training possibility. The ambitious student can approach each position as a tactical training puzzle first, then turn to the game score to get a glimpse of how a World Champion goes about *creating* such winning chances. The example above is particularly instructive in this regard, as Alekhine in fact mishandles the opening and is forced somewhat on the defensive before turning the tables with his spectacular 23rd move. This is actually a training tip worth trying: look at a position from deep in the middlegame, analyze it carefully, then go back to the start of the game and try to understand the twists and turns that led up to the position you studied.

This method of study is an excellent introduction to middlegame planning, and (as far as I know) is the best exercise for building insight into transitions between phases of the game.

To illustrate these possibilities, let's go through the game that leads to the above position, stopping at some interesting points along the way.

Alekhine – Sterk, Budapest, 1921

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 e6 3.c4 Nf6 4.Nc3 Nbd7 5.e3 Bd6 6.Nb5 A loss of time in the end. Better is 6. c5 when it is Black who loses time; 6. Bd3 is a good alternative. **6...Be7 7.Qc2 c6 8.Nc3 0–0 9.Bd3 dxc4 10.Bxc4 c5**



Black is able to play this freeing move with ease, thanks to White's loss of time on move 6. Here's the first question for the attacking player. Is White better off accepting the isolated pawn by playing 11. 0–0 Nb6 12. Bd3 cxd4 13. exd4? Conversely, is Black better off responding to 11. 0–0 with an immediate pawn trade, keeping open the possibility of advancing the Queenside pawns as in some variations of the Nimzo-Indian? Is it worth the time for Black to prevent White's Bishop from coming to g5 by playing ...h6? Alekhine thought White had too little to show for the isolated pawn, so he captured at once on c5. But our understanding of the pros and cons of such positions has advanced since his time. What do you think?

11.dxc5 Bxc5 12.0–0 b6 A second question for the attacking player: is Black better off playing ...a6 and ...b5? or ...h6, keeping the Bishop out of g5? More food for analysis. **13.e4 Bb7 14.Bg5 Qc8**

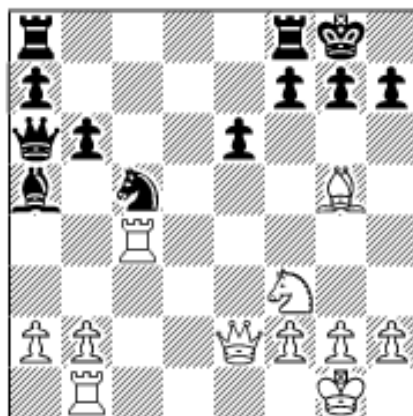


Black is clearly equal, if not a bit better. Notice this: Alekhine will play a killing blow in just eight more moves, but at present, he's the one on the defense. How does he turn this situation around? **15.Qe2** Let's call this a "mysterious Queen move." Alekhine was exceptional at his handling of the heavy pieces. The reasons for putting the Queen here are not subtle: the Queen can easily reach any part of the board from here; it cannot be harassed by a Rook; it starts clearing the c-file for harassment of the Black Queen. But would you have played it? **15. ...Bb4** Black stands ready to inflict a pawn weakness, at the cost of surrendering the Bishop pair. What is the *best* way to respond? There are several possibilities, but only one is best. **16.Bd3** [16.Rfc1 Bxc3 17.Rxc3 Nxe4 and Black is doing well] **16...Bxc3 17.Rfc1**



Another question for the ambitious player. What if Black now plays 17. ...Nc5? My impression is that Black ends up at least equal, if not better, because he can post his Knights actively while retaining the extra pawn. If you come to agree, then this goes along with Fischer's impression of Alekhine's play: his opponents allowed him to be brilliant. To a super-GM, that might be a reason to downgrade Alekhine a bit. To you and me, it means that Alekhine is one of the best teachers around if you want to know how to punish subtle errors.

17. ...Nxe4? [17...Nc5 18.Rxc3 Bxe4 19.Bxe4 Nfxe4=+] **18.Bxe4 Bxe4 19.Qxe4 Nc5 20.Qe2** In hindsight, 20. Qb1! was considerably stronger here. **20. ...Ba5 21.Rab1 Qa6 22.Rc4**



For our final lesson in attacking chess, how does White respond to 22. ...h6?

22...Na4? (The position in the book) **23.Bf6 Rfc8 24.Qe5 Rc5 25.Qg3 g6 26.Rxa4 Qd3 27.Rf1 Rac8 28.Rd4 Qf5 29.Qf4 Qc2 30.Qh6 1-0**

So there are many good features of this book: the one-two punch of the format, the selection and sorting of the sample positions, and (of course) the sparkling play of Alekhine at his best. It is too bad, then, that there are some equally glaring weaknesses that will probably limit the book's audience. Summed up simply, the games have very sparse annotations and almost no guidance for the lower-ranked player.

As I mentioned, almost every key position comes with the complete game attached. However, in only a few cases are there any notes at all attached to the moves that lead up to the key position. Most are simply unannotated game scores. Even at the start of each chapter, where the authors present several "appetizer" games, the first 20 or 30 moves are usually given with no comment. Only the tactical shot is diagrammed and receives annotations. On the other end of the game, Position #82 involves a combination that leads to a winning double-Rook versus Queen ending. In the back of the book you will find the complete game, but the last 40 (!) moves are given without a single note. Too bad, as this is a great ending with a lot of interesting points to it, including a fantastic King expedition to grab pawns in the teeth of the Queen's checks. But you will have to analyze it for yourself, as Raetsky and Chetverik give no assistance at all.

Furthermore, the comments themselves are usually not deep and sometimes simply repeat what is available from other sources. A small number of games are found both here and in John Nunn's algebraic edition of Alekhine's own games collection, *Alexander Alekhine's Best Games*. Where this is the case, many of the annotations in Raetsky and Chetverik's book simply repeat those originally written by Alekhine. They sometimes come up with a different line or explain something Alekhine left unstated, but equally often the same moves appear in both books. They deserve credit for including many games that are not found in Alekhine's own games collections, but even a player of my caliber can find places where they could have ventured farther with their annotations.

These meager annotations allow the authors to include 153 games, which gives a decent selection of tactical positions for study. If the games were fully annotated, they would be lucky to include 100 in a book this size. But the reader will have to do all the work when playing through the games. Indeed, the winning combination given above justifies much more analysis than the authors devote to it. Many of the other tactical positions similarly deserve more commentary than they get, and the games certainly do.

It would be easy to attribute this defect to Everyman's penchant for 165-page books. Given more space, the authors could have delved more deeply into the games they selected, while retaining 150+ games. But we have what we have, and the result is somewhat of an oddball blend of puzzle book and game collection, reminiscent of the car-boats that were briefly manufactured in the 1960's. They ran on land, and if you suddenly needed to ford a river or catch a trout, hey presto! just drive into the water.

These hybrid vehicles never did catch on, because they weren't very good cars, and weren't very good boats, either. Some things were meant to be kept separate. Perhaps tactics manuals and game collections are among them.

Alexander Alekhine: Master of Attack is a well-done but short tactics manual, grafted onto a well-chosen but sparsely-annotated games collection. If you want to explore and understand Alekhine's play at its best, you will find the games here, but you will have very little guidance in understanding everything that leads up to the winning blow. If you want to improve your grasp of tactics, you will get some excellent practice here, but the number of positions is low compared to the price of the book.

No collection of Alekhine's games could be a waste of time or money; he makes everyone's short list of players who truly deserve study. If you can study complete games without annotations and still understand what's going on, and if you are already fairly tactically sharp, you may find this book helps you develop your attacking skills in several different ways at once. But it will demand initiative and work from the student. Many players, especially those below club strength, will do better either to get a fully-annotated collection of games, or a larger collection of puzzles. Perhaps both.

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