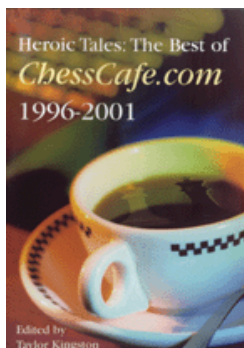




SKITTLES ROOM

## From the Archives

Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



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## From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](#) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe.com](#) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives...*

## The Old Chess Master

by John Healy

**A short story by the author of the acclaimed “The Grass Arena.”**

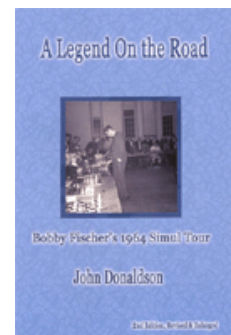
The young warder rattled the bolt for the third time. Still no movement from the prisoner. He opened the cell. ‘You alright, 119?’ No answer. He shook the old man. The body was limp. He felt the pulse, which confirmed his suspicions, and walked out of the cell towards the hospital wing. So the old man was dying, he mused. Some said he had been a chess grandmaster. What past fantasy lives these prisoners dreamed up. In cell 119 a faint smile had appeared on the old prisoner’s face as his mind recalled that evening so long ago in the Hall of Pioneers, where he was giving a simultaneous display on 40 boards...

The Master was honoured, as ten of the boards were taken by high government officials. There was Markov, Minister of Education, Balashov, Deputy Head of State, and Vogar, of Soviet Intelligence (reputed to be one of the cruellest interrogators of the KGB).

Though merely an average player, Vogar considered himself strong, a fault common to chess-players from humblest tyro to grand master. Vogar made no attempt to control his vanity. The other statesmen were unpretentious players of various strengths and consequently much less of a danger to him than Vogar. The Master’s mind was young and sharp as a lance on this evening, but even so he had a formidable task ahead of him if he was to beat all 40 opponents. It was two hours since play had begun and 20 of them had been disposed of. Turning over in his mind whom he should allow to draw, the Master realized that he had to let Vogar beat him or the pompous fool would make things awkward, and he wanted that visa to the West...

Only three left now, all the other boards having been won by the Master. The three survivors are all dignatories. He has carefully arranged it so that Vogar has a win (that was especially hard!) and both Markov and Balashov have safe draws. He checks with the rook for the third time and

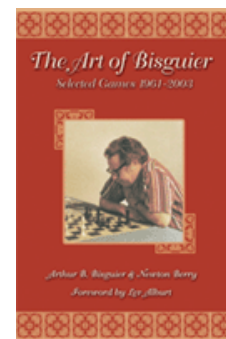
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Balashov has his draw. The spectators applaud, Balashov is a wonderful player, how clever of him to hold the Master to a draw. If he had not entered politics, surely he would have been a Master – So runs the talk. The Master smiles inwardly at the folly of ordinary mortals and makes the move that gives Markov a draw.

Now to swallow pride and allow Vogar to win. But this is not easy for two reasons. Firstly it is crushing to the Master's ego; and secondly, Vogar has started an action on the queen's wing that is doomed to failure. Did he not see that he could have won in three moves on the kingside? Furthermore, he is now strutting round chatting to the spectators as if it were he giving the display. His brain pounding at this insult which he must ignore, the Master's mind works through the variations and finds a line that will steer Vogar back to a winning position.

Once again he makes his move. He looks round for Vogar, who is now talking to a pretty girl and making no show of returning to the board. The minutes tick by. The Master's embarrassment is becoming obvious. The girl's laugh seems strange in this tense atmosphere. Vogar gives her a final playful pat on the bottom and heads over to the board. He stands looking silently at the position. He captures the knight with the bishop and looks round with disdain as if the Master has been easy meat for him all the time. How could anyone be so pompous and so stupid? Vogar has made the only move which could lose; as there is insufficient play in the position for the Master to be able to steer Vogar's game back to a win, the Master asks 'Will you accept a draw, comrade?'

'I will think about it', replies Vogar. Unable to restrain himself any longer, the Master bangs down his queen, threatening mate. For several minutes a spark of hope lights up Vogar's eyes. He sees that he can capture the queen with his knight, he does so, gasping with the sudden release of tension. He wonders how his picture will look in tomorrow's papers after his win against the Master. The Master calmly, confidently moves a pawn one square forward to give check. The KGB chief is jerked back to stark reality. His own knight, which captured the Master's queen, is now blocking the King's only flight square. It takes a while for his brain to register what his eyes convey to it. He looks up suddenly, eyes filled with hatred, and walks briskly to the door, flanked by his security lieutenants. Two nights later the police called at the Master's house. The trial that followed was a formality. He was sentenced to five years for attempting to obtain a visa by false pretences. Teaching his cell mate the higher knowledge of chess had helped pass the first few years in jail...

Five years had passed and the Master had still not been released. He rebelled but the warder's truncheon and months of solitary confinement had had their effect and his sense of injustice had turned to apathy. At intervals the prison administrator had the Master brought before him for chess games, and although the Master had ceased to practise his art, it was a pleasure to watch how he disposed of the administrator with ease. After one such visit, on being escorted back to his cell, the riot bell sounded. The warder immediately put his charge into the nearest cell. As the Master's eyes adjusted to the poorer light, he made out the form of another. 'Good evening Tamianovich,' said the inmate. 'You know me?' asked the Master. 'Yes, I have witnessed your tournament successes. It is fortunate that we should meet this way as I have something of interest to tell you.' 'O what is that?' asked the Master warily. 'I was cleaning the administrator's office and overheard him talking to a visitor about you. The visitor was saying that the authorities were to make themselves aware of your playing strength after the course of rehabilitation you have been receiving, and it would appear that you will not be released while you continue to play at Master level.'

The Master suddenly notices the bareness of the cell: no pictures – not even the usual pin-ups, no magazines or books, just the wooden bed. Suddenly he feels the intense gaze of the other's eyes; a sort of piercing friendliness shines from them. 'All your life, anyone judging by your

games can see your ego is the cause of your troubles, especially your present one.' The Master is annoyed, but something compels him to listen. 'Many are here through their greed. Others because of laziness or malice. Each of your compatriots will be free men in time when they can effect their release by curbing the fault that brought them here. You have the power to bring about your own release.' 'How is that?' 'Curb your ego!'

He is about to reply when the warder reappears and returns him to his cell. He is unusually disturbed and passes that night thinking on what was said, and in the morning has admitted to himself that perhaps he is a little egocentric, and if curbing this failing is the only way out, then to that end he will divert all his energy and will. The talents that had lifted him above other humans in chess he has now utilized towards negating the ego, but the moment it was put down on one front it would arise all the stronger in another guise. Yet he was determined to succeed, to achieve his freedom...

After many years the Master cut himself free of the illusion called ego, which once in his ignorance he had mistaken for himself. He now began to experience wonderful freedom of mind and body. Alone in solitary (his cell mate had been moved years before, when the Master's newly acquired passivity had been mistaken for insanity), his eyes fell upon the metal water jug which reflected the light with such marvellous splendour that he fell into an inward ecstasy and it seemed to him as if he could now look into the principles and deepest foundations of things. Momentarily, he believed it was only a fancy and yet when he paced up and down his cell, the walls and floor harmonized with what he had inwardly seen. Gradually he acquired the capacity to see with eyes of the soul into the heart of all things. This faculty remained with him even in his normal state of being.

His mind had been released! ...

The warder returned with the doctor. Taking the old man's pulse he shook his head. 'No more to be done here,' said the doctor, leaving the cell. 'He has long been mad'. 'Why do you think that?', asked the young warder. 'Because the old fool was always asking about the prisoner in the cell near the governor's office and you know that no prisoners have ever been kept in that cell!'

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