

INTO THE RAINFOREST



If you recall, I began this book with the famous Tal quote that “you must take your opponent into a deep, dark forest where $2 + 2 = 5$, and the way out is only wide enough for one”. I offered to be your guide through the forest. But in this chapter, as you can see for yourself in the image above, I’ll take you one step further: into the *rainforest*.

You are standing in a rainforest. It is an alien world in so many ways with all sorts of bewildering noises and smells and sights, but it is as fascinating as it is frightening and you are ever more curious because there is so much to explore and to learn. I am your expert guide, and with me you are quite safe.

I know where to get water and how to catch dinner, which snakes to avoid and where the scorpions might be hiding at night. I explain many things, to your wonder and amazement, telling you that actually the rainforest is your friend if you try to understand it. There are dangers, but there are also opportunities.

We now venture further into this foreign, green world and you are past the point of no return. At this moment, I suddenly and quite unexpectedly inform you that I am leaving and you are on your own. How do you feel? I

am certain that most people would be thinking about survival, asking the question ‘What do I do next?’ and there would be a great deal of trepidation and confusion. Yes, that’s the word – confusion.

Why am I telling you this in a chess book? Well, I am delighted that you asked, dear reader. Let us draw a curious analogy with the chess opening. A strong player (the guide) shows this really clever opening line – which is equivalent to you venturing into the forest. He then proceeds to show you magic and trickery up to move ten and then declares, “I am leaving you now. You are on your own”. It’s all well and good getting you this far, but surely the guide cannot leave you now – you need to know what to do next, how to survive – you are dazed and confused. This opening is not necessarily your friend, and you don’t really understand it, or why we entered into it in the first place. Help!

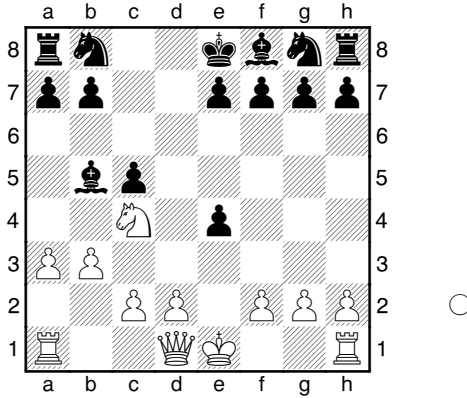
This is what happened to me. I was shown an opening by a happy, gleeful fellow, and after ten moves he said, “And there we are, White has the queen,” and he swiftly exited, rutilant and excited. I was not at all satisfied with this. I mean, isn’t the point of the opening to get you into a playable, indeed preferably superior, middlegame? Well, hold on, the journey had only just begun, and I was left wondering ‘What next? How do I survive?’

Well, it is time for you to enter this chess rainforest with me (please do not be afraid), and I will show you the route that I took. Fortunately, I set down bread crumbs (aka, chess notation), so that we can follow our way to the scene of the drama. Let’s go!

1.Nf3 d5 2.b3 c5 3.e4!? dxe4 4.Ne5 This is a Reti Opening, or you might know it as the Nimzowitsch-Larsen Attack.

4...Qd4 5.Bb2 Qxb2 6.Nc3 Qa3 7.Bb5+ Bd7 8.Nc4 Qb4 9.a5 Qxb5 10.Nxb5 Bxb5 *and there we are, White has the queen.*

So here we are. We can’t just leave things there: material imbalances in chess are strange things. Our old ideas of piece values: the rook being worth five pawns, for example, are all thrown into chaos. Piece values change based upon what is happening on the board, and it’s rare to have to evaluate queen versus two bishops, knight and pawn. This is the moment I want to focus upon. As the GMs say, who stands better and why?



Well, search me, I don't know. And I'm not going to ruin the fun by switching the engine on too early. I mean, White has a queen, that much is clear, but Black has three minor pieces in exchange, plus an extra pawn. What else? Well, Black has not only not castled, but not moved anything at all on the kingside. All this after ten moves. Wow. White doesn't seem to have much to attack with at the moment, but then he isn't getting mated either. The pawn structures for both sides look decent.

It is all well and good people showing sexy lines up to a point (this point), but then how should we proceed as White now that we have the black queen out of the way? I studied the position and decided upon 11.Qe2 as my move.

These positions are not always the easiest for engines to evaluate either. But when I did switch on the silicon, it said that Black was clearly better.

Fritz 18 wanted to play something else, but after five minutes, it changed its mind again (I use the term 'mind' loosely of course), and elected to play 11.a4. That's the trouble with engines, isn't it? You cannot just accept what they say after 30 seconds or so; you have to let the things run.

Stockfish 16 offered Black a huge plus, evaluating the position as -1.8, and - after initially favouring the odd 11.Na5 - eventually settled on 11.d3.

The supposedly more human-like **LeelaZero** was more forgiving with its -1.1 evaluation, but concurred with Stockfish about 11.d3.

Three different engines, three substantially different opinions on the same position. That's what these unusual positions - *rainforest positions*, perhaps, do. They divide not just flesh and blood but silicon and microchips.

Would a human really play 11.a4? I appreciate that the knight might disappear if Black elects to capture it and there is nothing left for White to attack with for some considerable time. Also, doesn't it compromise the pawn structure?

Could a human consider 11.Na5, even, really? I find that move difficult to imagine, as it seems counterintuitive to move the knight to the rim before completing development.

Or how about 11.Qg4, threatening mate-in-one? The rainforest is thick with branches.

Well, let's follow the engine (but which engine?), so indulge me please!

11.a4 Bxc4 Stockfish and LeelaZero prefer to capture the knight; Fritz18 prefers the retreat with 11...Ba6. If even the 3000-strength engines have sharp disagreements, I wonder what chance we have?

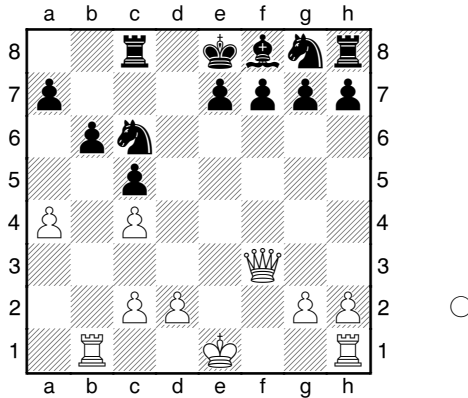
12. bxc4 Well, now where are we? There are only pawns developed on the board, and it is hardly setting the world on fire is it? It is more a slow burner than a conflagration, but still we must press on. Let us also remember that in chess one is compelled to move in turn, there is no sitting back in quiet repose. Decisions have to be made.

12...Nc6 If you are playing White, what is your plan? I mean, you do know how to form plans, don't you, dear reader? Big plans, small plans – how do we arrive at these? We cannot just move just for the sake of it. We cannot move pieces and pawns in isolation, there absolutely must be harmony amongst your army.

13.Rb1 b6 14.f3 exf3 When I initially looked at this position, I presumed that Black had to capture on f3. Looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight and Stockfish, this capture is in fact a blunder: Black would do better to lose the pawn than permit White's queen into the fray.

15.Qxf3 Rc8 This is my end point. I want to know if you would prefer to play White or Black in this position. Why not try it from both sides against a

friend or at the chess club in a group? It is actually quite fascinating. Can the queen and rooks enter the fray in time to cause mayhem or will the minor pieces and rooks hold sway for Black?



After the dust settles, all of the engines afford Black differing edges: Stockfish claims Black has -1.7 , whilst LeelaZero offers a more circumspect -0.8 . Opening aficionados have immense fun finding all of these delicious lines, just like the one above, but that only gets you so far. Perhaps we should all cultivate three chess friends – an opening expert, a middlegame expert and an endgame expert. Invite all three to tea, then study each phase of the game?

Fred Reinfeld wrote about the difference between memorisation and understanding. Openings are not only about assembling your army in a speedy fashion and keeping your king safe, although these are well-known general recommendations. No, what we often ignore is *what the opening leads to*. We have to know how to take the game from the initial skirmishes into the next phase, the middlegame (or mid-battle), and in that sense we have to be aiming to achieve something to our benefit. Coaches should make sure not only to teach the opening moves, but the *understanding* of the positions which arise. It is said that when you learn openings, you know openings - but when you learn endgames, you know chess.

Pawn structures will be key of course, as will the elements of open or closed positions which will determine whether or not you want to keep your archers (bishops) or cavalry (knights) for the endgame battle to come.

There is so much to think about and the point of this article is really to say don't just accept opening lines that people think are flashy and where they cannot explain 'the big idea.' Instead, you must look deeper into the position. Ask questions. Where does the opening take you?

Can you survive when you have ventured deep into the chess rainforest? If you don't know what to do when you are stranded in the middle of the greenery, your chances of survival are greatly reduced. Give yourself options.

Be curious – always. It will take you further than you thought possible and simultaneously enhance your enjoyment of this wonderful game.

CAISSA SMILES ON MONTPARNASSE



Alexander Alekhine lived for a long time in Paris and in 2022, I decided whilst visiting friends to pay my respects to him (pictured) and Lev Polugayevsky at the Montparnasse Cemetery. Alekhine's body may be found there for sure, but through Caissa the essence of his play lives on - still inspiring us today, a century after so many of his most famous games.

I still don't even know how to pronounce Alekhine's name. I have never been sure how to say it. Is it 'Al-yek-eeen' or is it 'Al Yekin' or even 'Alekiyne'? I shall plump for 'Al-yekin', but that is just a preference. I have no idea really, so ask me one on sport.

I do know that his name was Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine (1892-1946), and he was the only world chess champion to die whilst still 'in post' so to speak. It is not within the scope of this chapter to detail Alekhine's life, but he was one heck of a colourful character, as well as one of the all-time great chess players. He has been the subject of much political debate, he loved cats, and he allegedly died having choked on a piece of meat in Portugal. Some say he was murdered. I, for one, wonder how serene one would look sitting in a chair after choking on something, but there we are.

It was a poignant affair and I noted that his wife Grace is buried with him – which feels like a comfort. Many chess players covet their idols and Alekhine is the darling of many, including Garry Kasparov who provides a lovely anecdote in his book *My Great Predecessors, Volume I*, saying that Alekhine was so infatuated with chess that during school lessons, according to one of his fellow pupils, he “Used to switch off from his surroundings and was not always fully aware of where he was. Once, during an algebra test he suddenly leapt up and looked around the class with shining eyes, as usual twisting with his left hand his ginger forelock. ‘Well, Alekhine, have you solved it?’ asked the teacher. ‘Yes... I sacrifice the knight and White wins!’ The class burst out laughing.”

I can imagine someone like Vassily Ivanchuk doing just that when he was a kid. Imagine trying to teach him, with all of those chess pieces swirling around in his head. It would be like herding cats mentally.

But I digress. Today, I have selected a game where Alekhine has the White pieces and plays against the French Defence. Even Bobby Fischer had some difficulty playing against this opening – as Wolfgang Uhlmann proved. Yet a man like Alekhine, razor sharp tactically, and superb at both combinative and positional play, would cheerfully engage against any opening.

Let’s see how he set up against 1...e6, and I shall pick out some basic points which I hope might be of use to my fellow amateur players.

Alekhine - Nimzowitsch (San Reno, 1930)

1.e4 e6 Here it is then, the French Defence. It is solid and aims at counterplay, punching at White’s centre. Like any opening, it has its drawbacks, but let’s not dwell on those today. What variation will it be? (I am always excited to see what White plays.)

2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 The Winawer variation, a favourite of so many French Defence advocates and it is, in my view, a very interesting line. Black immediately wants to try to win a fight in the centre of the board. Of course,

White can play several things here, one move of which I have been analysing of late is 4.Bd3 just for fun, but of course, back then such a move was seldom essayed. To be clear, 4.Bd3 isn't really that good, it is just different.

4.e5 One would expect no less of Alekhine – grabbing as much space as possible.

4...c5 Indeed, continuing with the strategy behind this opening: attacking the centre. There are two main pawn breaks, which are ...c5 and ...f6. Therefore, it is all about timing and experience in the opening as to when both (or only one) are played. The ...c5 pawn break is the easy one; some might say the key to the entire French Defence is learning to time the ...f6 pawn break correctly!

5.Bd2 The move played nowadays is 5.a3. Alekhine prefers a move that at the time Bogoljubow used.

5...Ne7 After 5...cxd4 what happens? 6.Nb5 wants to go to d6 with check, and also both dark-squared bishops are 'live': 6...Bc5 (6...Bxd2+ 7.Qxd2 and now that knight can go to d6, which is a very annoying square) 7.b4 and game on – White is fine. I know 5...a6?! is far from the strongest move, but I have played it many times just to prevent the white knight from landing on b5, aiming for the d6-square.

6.Nb5 Bxd2+ 7.Qxd2 0-0

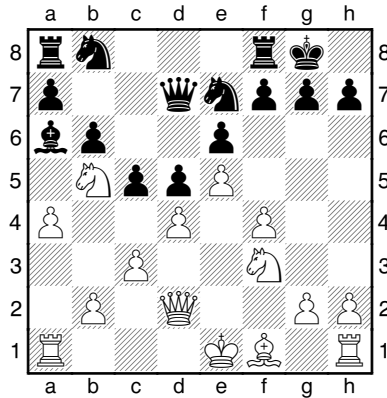
Good, old Nimzowitsch. He is following some general opening principles here. Play the centre pawns, castle early, that sort of thing. It is as applicable to masters as it is to beginners. Now White has options: he could take on c5, play 8.Nf3 or even go 8.f4.

8.c3 I flipped the board on my PC here to view things from Black's perspective. I really enjoy playing the French Defence myself, and I wondered what I would play here. I can tell you, it wouldn't be what the great Nimzowitsch played.

8...b6?! Even at my level I can say I don't like this, but, as I say, I don't let the knight go to b5 anyway.

9.f4 Why not? Instead, 9.Nd6 Ba6 is what Nimzowitsch would have wanted.

9...Ba6 10.Nf3 (10.Nd6 Bxf1 11.Kxf1 Nc8 is level) 10...Qd7 11.a4!

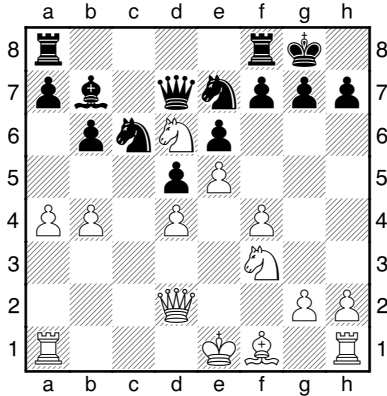


Ninety-two years on and the megastrong chess engine agrees with Alekhine that this is the optimum move. Bravo for humankind. Bravo for human intelligence, without which, computers and chess engines would never have existed. We rule – for now!

11...Nbc6 12.b4!? I find it interesting to note here that White has still not castled in accordance with sound chess principles. Why not? Well, it is a closed position and the king is in no danger. Plus, a chess player must never waste time, even by a single move. If something can be played, and you think it is good, then you should probably play it immediately. The king is one move away from castling (long) if he needs to. It might be a different story if he were two or three moves away.

12...cxb4 Instead, 12...c4 really closes the position. It has its pros and cons, unlike a prison library, which has its prose and cons (did you see what I did there?)

13.cxb4 Bb7 14.Nd6



What a beautiful square for a knight! This is why I cannot let my opponent play an early Nb5. Honestly, I would not fancy playing Black here. I was though pondering what I would play. Probably 14...Nc8, but that is not technically the best move.

14...f5 Alternatively, 14...Nf5 is certainly interesting: 15.Nxf5 exf5 16.Bd3 g6 and surely White is a little better. Probably best is 14...a5!. Why? Because it is all about space. White is just going to run riot if not challenged on the queenside. Try to make the pawns 'static', then focus on other areas of the battlefield.

15.a5 Alekhine wastes no time in throwing a punch first.

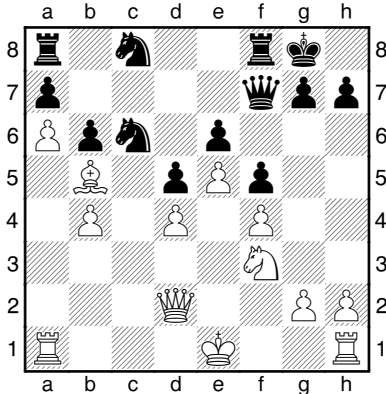
15...Nc8? The engine hates this and gives an advantage to White of around '+5'. Black could have tried the admittedly uncomfortable 15...bxa5 16. b5! (ouch!) 16...Nd8 17.Be2 - and just look at all the space that White has. As such, 15...a6 is Stockfish 15's preference: 16.axb6 Nc8 17.Nxb7 Qxb7 18.Qc3 Nxb6, when White is better, but there's still a good fight going on.

16.Nxb7 Qxb7 I consider this position at home as if some kind of sad violin lament is emanating from the radio in the background. It's how I feel about Black's position now. I mean, look again at the space that Nimzowitsch has in which to operate.

17.a6 If we are having Harry the h-pawn, then we must also give due deference to Andy the a-pawn.

17...Qf7 After 17...Qe7 18.Bb5 Nxb4 19.Rb1, the Black knight is trapped.

18. Bb5 How is Black to defend?



18...N8e7! Though really, what else? 18...Nd8? It's grim.

19.O-O Finally, on move nineteen, and at just the right moment, Alekhine castles.

19...h6 20.Rfc1 Rfc8 21.Rc2 It's all about the c-file, folks.

21...Qe8 Likewise, 21...Nd8 22.Rac1 Rxc2 23.Rxc2 Rc8 24.Rxc8 Nxc8 25.Qc3 Ne7 26.Qc7 is also winning nicely for White.

22.Rac1 Rab8 23.Qe3 Rc7 Even here, Alekhine and the 21st-century chess engine are as one. What should White play now, and why?

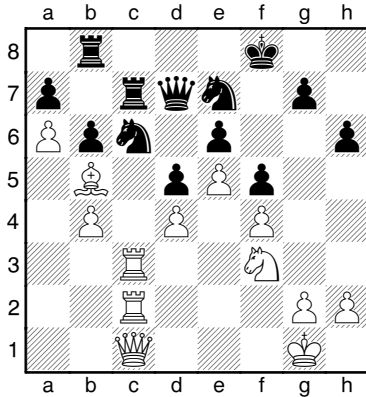
24.Rc3! Brilliant. I can reveal that Kasparov also gives an exclamation mark in his annotations, but fails to explain why and, of course, the engine won't tell you the why - only the what.

I suppose I might have to have a stab at it myself then. First, let us wait for a move or two and see how White's position progresses.

This is why I loved Karpov's games so much as a kid. I never understood why he played certain moves until about ten moves later.

24...Qd7 25.R1c2 Ah, so the point of White's 24th move was to make way on c2 for the other rook and leave c1 vacant.

25...Kf8 26.Qc1



The original 'Alekhine's Gun'! I am pretty sure that this was the actual game from which the term was coined. The tripling of two rooks and queen on a file, as played by Alekhine himself, is now afforded that moniker in perpetuity.

26...Rbc8 27. Ba4! Brilliant. It threatens b4-b5, so what is Black to do about it? Game over.

27...b5 28.Bxb5 Ke8 Gosh, this is miserable from Black's perspective.

29.Ba4 Kd8 30. h4! 1-0

Nimzowitsch resigned. There's nothing useful to play. Awesome. Let's just see what might have happened: 30...g6 31.Kh2 Qe8 (31...h5 32.Ng5 is just too much; the knight can go to f7 then d6 where it becomes a monster) 32.b5 and capitulation is inevitable.

Simply put, Nimzowitsch was crushed, probably mentally, as well as at the board. Alekhine had done to him what he (Nimzowitsch) used to do to others. He didn't lose to 'this idiot' for sure.

“

Why must I lose to this idiot? - Aron Nimzowitsch. He was clearly not referring to the genius that was Alexander Alekhine when he uttered these words.

Aspects of this game that I would pick out are that Black had no counterplay; he was very restricted and had little space to operate. Timing is key: for example, who could get a5 in first? Of course, rooks situated on open files are usually strong. With a queen supporting them, they can be super-strong.

French Defence players need to be aware of the lines where the white knight can hop to b5 and d6. Some players don't mind, others (like me) certainly do. In any event you must have an idea how to proceed if the steed does arrive on d6.

I am so grateful that we can still appreciate the games of the past thanks to them having been recorded. Surely such a form of communication is one of the greatest intellectual achievements of mankind!

But Alexander Alekhine is far from the only great to be interred at Montparnasse Cemetery. Lev Polugayevsky, a Russian émigré, was already living in Paris when he died in August 1995 at the age of sixty. He is buried some distance from Alekhine near Boulevard Raspail, section number twenty-eight.

I was determined to find him and say hello. It wasn't too difficult but 'Polu' is well tucked away, so it was with some relief and no little amount of emotion that I found him gently sleeping underneath an overcast springtime sky.

This was a different type of emotion: Alekhine was a hero of the game; Polugayevsky was not only a great player - but a personal friend. Lev had visited Shropshire and stayed at my house back in September 1992. I played against him in a simultaneous, obtaining an eventual draw. I'll only annotate the game briefly, because it doesn't contain any explosive excitement - just a tight game, with neither of us really gaining any huge winning chances at any point, but I will include it very briefly here in honour of my friend.