

CONCERNING CHESS

The passion for playing chess is one of the most unaccountable in the world. It slaps the theory of natural selection in the face. It is the most absorbing of occupations, the least satisfying of desires, an aimless excrescence upon life. It annihilates a man. You have, let us say, a promising politician, a rising artist, that you wish to destroy. Dagger or bomb are archaic, clumsy, and unreliable--but teach him, inoculate him with chess! It is well, perhaps, that the right way of teaching chess is so little known, that consequently in most cases the plot fails in the performance, the dagger turns aside. Else we should all be chess-players--there would be none left to do the business of the world. Our statesmen would sit with pocket boards while the country went to the devil, our army would bury itself in chequered contemplation, our bread-winners would forget their wives in seeking after impossible mates. The whole world would be disorganised. I can fancy this abominable hypnotism so wrought into the constitution of men that the cabmen would go trying to drive their horses in Knights' moves up and down Charing Cross Road. And now and again a suicide would come to hand with the pathetic inscription pinned to his chest: "I checked with my Queen too soon. I cannot bear the thought of it." There is no remorse like the remorse of chess.

Only, happily, as we say, chess is taught the wrong way round. People put out the board before the learner with all the men in battle array, sixteen a side, with six different kinds of moves, and the poor wretch is simply crushed and appalled. A lot of things happen, mostly disagreeable, and then a mate comes looming up through the haze of pieces. So he goes away awestricken but unharmed, secretly believing that all chess-players are humbugs, and that intelligent chess, which is neither chancy nor rote-learned, is beyond the wit of man. But clearly this is an unreasonable method of instruction. Before the beginner can understand the beginning of the game he must surely understand the end; how can he commence playing until he knows what he is playing for? It is like starting athletes on a race, and leaving them to find out where the winning-post is hidden.

Your true teacher of chess, your subtle chess-poisoner, your cunning Comus who changes men to chess-players, begins quite the other way round. He will, let us say, give you King, Queen, and Pawn placed out in careless possible positions. So you master the militant possibilities of Queen and Pawn without perplexing complications. Then King, Queen, and Bishop perhaps; King, Queen, and Knight; and so on. It ensures that you always play a winning game in these happy days of your chess childhood, and taste the one sweet of chess-playing, the delight of having the upper hand of a better player. Then to more complicated positions, and at last back to the formal beginning. You begin to see now to what end the array is made, and understand why one Gambit differeth from another

in glory and virtue. And the chess mania of your teacher cleaveth to you thenceforth and for evermore.

It is a curse upon a man. There is no happiness in chess--Mr. St. George Mivart, who can find happiness in the strangest places, would be at a loss to demonstrate it upon the chess-board. The mild delight of a pretty mate is the least unhappy phase of it. But, generally, you find afterwards that you ought to have mated two moves before, or at the time that an unforeseen reply takes your Queen. No chess-player sleeps well. After the painful strategy of the day one fights one's battles over again. You see with more than daylight clearness that it was the Rook you should have moved, and not the Knight. No! it is impossible! no common sinner innocent of chess knows these lower deeps of remorse. Vast desert boards lie for the chess-player beyond the gates of horn. Stalwart Rooks ram headlong at one, Knights hop sidelong, one's Pawns are all tied, and a mate hangs threatening and never descends. And once chess has been begun in the proper way, it is flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone; you are sold, and the bargain is sealed, and the evil spirit hath entered in.

The proper outlet for the craving is the playing of games, and there is a class of men--shadowy, unhappy, unreal-looking men--who gather in coffee-houses, and play with a desire that dieth not, and a fire that is not quenched. These gather in clubs and play Tournaments, such tournaments as he of the Table Round could never have imagined. But there are others who have the vice who live in country places, in remote

situations--curates, schoolmasters, rate collectors--who go consumed from day to day and meet no fit companion, and who must needs find some artificial vent for their mental energy. No one has ever calculated how many sound Problems are possible, and no doubt the Psychical Research people would be glad if Professor Karl Pearson would give his mind to the matter. All the possible dispositions of the pieces come to such a vast number, however, that, according to the theory of probability, and allowing a few thousand arrangements each day, the same problem ought never to turn up more than twice in a century or so. As a matter of fact--it is probably due to some flaw in the theory of probability--the same problem has a way of turning up in different publications several times in a month or so. It may be, of course, that, after all, quite "sound" problems are limited in number, and that we keep on inventing and reinventing them; that, if a record were kept, the whole system, up to four or five moves, might be classified, and placed on record in the course of a few score years. Indeed, if we were to eliminate those with conspicuously bad moves, it may be we should find the number of reasonable games was limited enough, and that even our brilliant Lasker is but repeating the inspirations of some long-buried Persian, some mute inglorious Hindoo, dead and forgotten ages since. It may be over every game there watches the forgotten forerunners of the players, and that chess is indeed a dead game, a haunted game, played out centuries ago, even, as beyond all cavil, is the game of draughts.

The artistic temperament, the gay irresponsible cast of mind, does what it can to lighten the gravity of this too intellectual game. To a mortal

there is something indescribably horrible in these champions with their four moves an hour--the bare thought of the mental operations of the fifteen minutes gives one a touch of headache. Compulsory quick moving is the thing for gaiety, and that is why, though we revere Steinitz and Lasker, it is Bird we love. His victories glitter, his errors are magnificent. The true sweetness of chess, if it ever can be sweet, is to see a victory snatched, by some happy impertinence, out of the shadow of apparently irrevocable disaster. And talking of cheerfulness reminds me of Lawson's historical game of chess. Lawson said he had been cheerful sometimes--but, drunk! Perish the thought! Challenged, he would have proved it by some petty tests of pronunciation, some Good Templar's shibboleths. He offered to walk along the kerb, to work any problem in mathematics we could devise, finally to play MacBryde at chess. The other gentleman was appointed judge, and after putting the antimacassar over his head ("jush wigsh") immediately went to sleep in a disorderly heap on the sofa. The game was begun very solemnly, so I am told. MacBryde, in describing it to me afterwards, swayed his hands about with the fingers twiddling in a weird kind of way, and said the board went like that. The game was fierce but brief. It was presently discovered that both kings had been taken. Lawson was hard to convince, but this came home to him. "Man," he is reported to have said to MacBryde, "I'm just drunk. There's no doubt in the matter. I'm feeling very ashamed of myself." It was accordingly decided to declare the game drawn. The position, as I found it next morning, is an interesting one. Lawson's Queen was at K Kt 6, his Bishop at Q B 3, he had several Pawns, and his Knight occupied a commanding position at the intersection of four

squares. MacBryde had four Pawns, two Rooks, a Queen, a draught, and a small mantel ornament arranged in a rough semicircle athwart the board. I have no doubt chess exquisites will sneer at this position, but in my opinion it is one of the cheerfulest I have ever seen. I remember I admired it very much at the time, in spite of a slight headache, and it is still the only game of chess that I recall with undiluted pleasure. And yet I have played many games.