

THE KING OF GAMES.

Some Reminiscences of Great Chess Players, Living and Dead.

[With the beginning of this volume the *Argonaut* commences a weekly chess column. The first article, which is here appended, is a preliminary essay. The succeeding articles will contain chess problems and other matters of interest to chess players, and matters of purely local interest will be touched upon. The chess column will be conducted by Mr. J. Fennimore Welsh.]

Much has been written, still more remains unsung, relative to the origin and honor of the invention of *Caissa*. It is exceedingly difficult to discover who was the inventor of this imperishable game. Some say it was Philosopher Xerxes, others the Grecian Prince Palamedes, while others still ascribe the credit to the ancient Egyptians. Certain it is that the first mention of the game in literature is found in the first book of the *Odyssey* of Homer, who flourished about one thousand years before Christ; and it is claimed by certain writers that it is the only amusement indulged in and countenanced by the Messiah while on earth.

Some students claim that the game has existed in China from time immemorial. But if evidence be required to prove that chess was invented by the Hindus, we may be satisfied with the evidence of the Persians, who, though as much inclined as other nations to appropriate the ingenious inventions of a foreign people, unanimously agree that the game was imported from the west of India, together with the charming fables of Vishnusarman, in the fifth century of our era.

It seems to have been immemorially known in Hindustan by the name of "Chaturanga"—that is, the four angas, or members of an army, which are said in the "Amara-cosha" to be "hasty as warat in hapádátum," or elephants, horses, chariots, and foot-soldiers; and in this sense the word is often used by epic poets in their descriptions of real armies. By a natural corruption of the pure Sanscrit word, it was changed by the old Persians into "Chatrang," but the Arabs, who soon after took possession of their country, had neither the initial nor final letter of that word in their alphabet, and consequently altered it still further into "Shatrang," which found its way presently into the modern Persian, and at length into the dialects of India, where the true derivation of the word is known only to the learned. Thus has a very significant word in the sacred language of the Brahmins been transformed by successive changes into "scacchi," "echecs," "chess," and by a whimsical concurrence of circumstances given birth to the English word check, and even a name to the exchequer of Great Britain.

The beautiful simplicity and extreme perfection of the game, as it is commonly played in Europe, Asia, and America, prove that it was invented by one effort of some great genius, and not completed by gradual improvements, but formed, to use the phrase of Italian critics, "by the first intention."

The ancient Chinese game differed from modern chess in having two pieces whose moves were distinct from any which we use. The "mandarin," which answers to our "bishop" in his station and oblique movement, can not through age cross the river (which divides the contending forces); and a rocket-boy (still used in the Indian armies), who is stationed between the lines of each party, and acts literally with the motion of the "rocket" by vaulting over a man and taking his adversary at the other end of the board. Except that the "king" has two sons to support him, instead of a "queen," the game in other respects is like ours.

On the introduction of the game in Persia, the board changed with the dry and arid nature of the region, and the contest was decided on *terra firma*. In all probability the game was invented by an experienced soldier, based on the principles of war—not, as some claim, to dispel love-sick vapors, or instruct ladies in a science which would neither enrich them nor enhance their beauty, but to quiet the murmurs of a discontented soldiery, employ their vacant hours in lessons on the military art, and to cherish the spirit of conquest in the bosom of winter quarters. The Chinese themselves claim that the game was invented three hundred and seventy-nine years after the time of Confucius, or one thousand nine hundred and eighty-five years ago.

One thing is certain, chess has been played by the learned and accomplished members of society in all the nations of Europe and America for many hundreds of years. Distinguished students and masters of the game have flourished in all ages, whose fame has spread abroad throughout the world. Labourdinais, Phillidor, and Morphy are names revered by every lover of the noble science. Perfection at the game is almost an impossibility. A moderately thorough knowledge of the history, laws, and practice of the game is rare, and is all the modern student aspires to acquire.

Hundreds, if not thousands, in every large city amuse themselves by playing at the game, but very few attain to even a moderate degree of excellence. The noted players now living in Europe and America can almost be numbered upon the fingers of the hand. We mention them in the order which their rank and strength deserve:

First and foremost, incomparably greater than any who lived before his time, or who have flourished since, stands Paul Morphy, probably the only man who ever lived that played *perfect chess*. Poor fellow! Bereft partially of his reason, he roams around New Orleans arrayed like an exquisite of the time of Louis XIV., “a melancholy sight to look upon.” Spurred on by an utterly heartless but ambitious and beautiful woman to whom he was betrothed, he attempted to master the study of the law, and to memorize whole law libraries in order that he might shine preëminent in law as in chess. He was but human, and his mind collapsed under the gigantic strain.

Next in rank among living experts we mention Doctor Zukertort, the renowned savant who recently won first honors at the International Tournament held in London. Like Morphy, possessed of an almost clairvoyant mind, his memory is so wonderfully retentive that the writer remembers seeing him, a few years ago, at the close of an evening at whist—after three games had been played—take the cards and assort to each player, in regular rotation, the hands held during the entire evening. Then comes Steinitz, who,

in the opinion of many good judges and critics of the game, has no superior; Winawer, the great Russian expert; Baron Kolisch, who has retired from public contests; Mr. Blackburne, who is one of the greatest blindfold players; Louis Paulsen, who now lives in Germany, and the only man who was able to conduct successfully a game against Morphy in the tournament of 1857; Captain McKenzie, of New York, who is one of the most accomplished and versatile players in the world; James Mason, who bids fair to outrank all competitors; Mr. Hosmer, of Chicago, who, with the time limit barred, has no superior; Mr. Morgan, a wealthy citizen of Illinois, who is the only American with an equal score against McKenzie; Mr. Reichelm, of Philadelphia; Mr. Martinez, President of the Philadelphia Chess Club; and Max Judd, of St. Louis. Among the renowned European players we omitted mention of the celebrated experts De Re Vere and Rosenthal, of France, and Messrs. Englisch, Tschigorin, and Bird, all diamonds of the first water.

There are no strictly *first-class* experts who are residents of San Francisco, but quite a number of second and third-grade players. Among leading lights may be mentioned, in about their just rank, Messrs. Jefferson, Wise, Redding, Yerworth, Franklin, Kendrick, Marshall, Holstein, Chace, Pfeifer, Van Vliet, Peck, Scott, Shipman, Oakley, White, and a few others whose names we do not now recall, who are but little, if at all, inferior to those whose names we have already mentioned. It is highly desirable that there should be a much more strict observance of the rules and etiquette which obtain among first class players by our local lights; and to this end we suggest a universal observance of the law that a piece touched must be moved, and allowed to remain upon the square first touched with it after the intention of moving that piece has been manifested. In future articles we propose to publish the laws and rules of the game entire, as observed by the leading clubs in this country and Great Britain.