

## THE FATAL MATE.

"Quelque découverte que l'on ait faite dans le pays de l'amour propre, il y reste bien les terres inconnues."—*La Rochefoucauld*.

MUCH as may be said in favor of the game of chess, of its noble and scientific character as an intellectual enjoyment of the highest order, and the almost irresistible attraction it acquires for its votaries, still many are deterred from its practice by an ill-judged sensitiveness and morbid fear of defeat. Let those who have commenced the study of chess, and who really wish to improve, bear in mind that the player who learns not how to lose, will never learn how to win, and dismiss at once all impatience and rising irritability.

It must be confessed, however, that no game affects so directly the vanity of the individual as chess. That the winning of the game is due solely to the skill of the player, and that not a leaven of chance has mingled with and assisted his good play, becomes, in weak minds, a fixed idea, productive sometimes of the strangest aberrations.

Illustrative of this weakness, I recollect an anecdote of a somewhat singular nature.

In the autumn of 18—, while spending a week at the seat of General D——, a few leagues from Paris, I was introduced to an English gentleman, with whom I usually played a rubber at chess in the evening, after a long ride or a day's sport with dog and gun.

At the time I speak of, I was far from being an adept in the game, and my adversary, though not a very strong player, was still my superior, and an opponent against whom I could not allow my attention to flag a single moment without paying that direful penalty, "check-mate."

Among the persons who usually seemed to take most interest in our games was the charming Countess V . . . On the evening of our last match, the next day being fixed upon for a return to Paris, seated near the chess-table, it appeared to me that she had followed, with unusual attention, a preceding game won by my adversary. I had never, however, heard the Countess express the least wish to

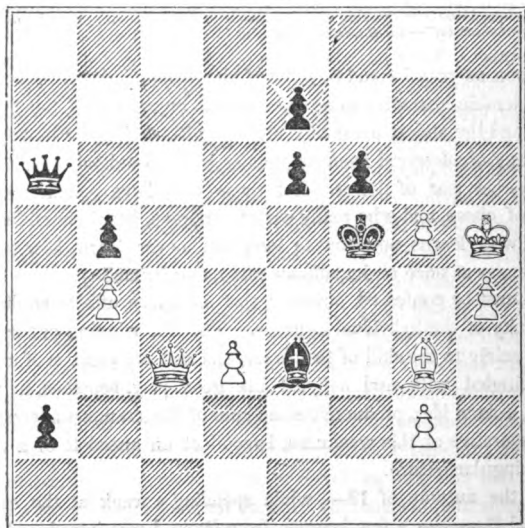


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play, nor intimate in conversation that she possessed any knowledge of the science.

Our game had verged into the following position. I was the player of the White pieces, and it was my turn to move.

BLACK.



WHITE.

Over this situation I had already paused some time, and was not a little embarrassed. To my inexperienced eye, the proximity of one of my adversary's Pawns to the royal line foreboded danger, and filled me with secret terror. I also feared his playing his Queen to her Rook's square, threatening Knight's Pawn, and worse, a mate. On the other hand, although the position of his King seemed to be one of some constraint, yet it struck me that on any move of mine, the advance of his King's Pawn would free him from embarrassment.

Thus perplexed and irresolute, I was hesitating between removing Bishop or playing Queen to her Rook's square, when instinctively I looked around in the direction of the Countess, as towards the person

who had taken most interest in the contest. There probably was much of appeal in my expression, and her compassion must have been great indeed, for as my hand was nearing the Bishop, I heard her make a remark on the position to Madame D . . . in a tone that seemed to banter my inexperience. The words indeed had been pronounced in a subdued voice ; nevertheless they had been overheard by some of the bystanders, who looked towards the Countess with some surprise. They had also fallen on the quick ear of my antagonist, who suppressed a rising frown. Whether I blushed outwardly I know not, inwardly I certainly did. The Countess's hint, however, had been a ray of light for me, and the truth gradually unfolding itself, I announced checkmate in four moves.

Proud of having carried out so well the conception of my fairy ally, I approached to thank her for her timely assistance.

"I confess my inferiority," said I, "but I have yet full time to improve, and, under the direction of a mistress so well skilled in the game, I feel I should make rapid progress." The Countess smiled, saying I flattered her, and that assuredly she would not undertake to teach an art she never practised. "It is even so," added she ; "we often show most enthusiasm for those things with which we have an imperfect acquaintance, and happy those who are not tormented by a thirst after profound knowledge. Since you consult me, sir, my advice is, that you take no master to perfect your chess education."

"I understand, madam ; my capacity for the game does not strike you as" . . .

"It strikes me as excellent—quite excellent enough to insure success, and enable you to play in a short time a very scientific game. But are you aware of the probable result of all the science you may acquire ? Believe me, sir, it will only serve to aggravate the disappointment at losing, in a proportion a thousand times greater than the pleasure of winning. Reflect on this, I pray."

The Countess pronounced these words with so grave and solemn an air, that I could not dissemble my astonishment. "You may not believe me, sir," continued she, "nevertheless, if you will grant me your attention, I hope to convince you there is some truth in my remarks." I seated myself near her, and she commenced the following recital :

"The Count de St. Genest, who died a few years before the restoration, had long been known in the world, as one of the most accomplished gentlemen of his time. His equanimity of temper and perfect disinterestedness were proverbial. Ever ready to admit the superiority of others, even in those things in which he excelled himself, he was prompt to proclaim the success of a rival, and quarrelled with none for not honoring sufficiently his own well-founded claims.

"It had been the lot of the Count de St. Genest to have spent two-thirds of his life in a state of well-deserved happiness, when he was compelled to share the uncertain fortunes of the emigration. During this period of trial he led a secluded and unostentatious life; one of devotedness to his family and friends.

"While residing at Frankfort he learnt the game of chess, at first looking upon it merely as an amusement well adapted to soothe and divert the weary hours of exile. The Count, however, soon became a devotee to the game and a first-rate player. At his advanced period of life, he acquired at chess the same superiority he had attained in his youth in every manly exercise. Age had merely changed his tastes and matured his faculties rather than impaired them.

"The Count had frequent opportunities of measuring his strength with some of the best players of Europe, and on more than one occasion were they compelled to acknowledge his superiority. In one respect, however, he was most unfortunate. No triumph compensated, in his eyes, for the bitter feelings of disappointment he experienced whenever a star more propitious than his own favored a competitor in the checkered strife.

"In the usual walks of life, the distinctive traits of the Count's character were modesty of demeanor, and an unpretending but noble manner, save at the Game of Chess, when a sudden transformation seemed to come over him, and he was no longer the same man. He could here brook no inferiority, and an attempt to obtain a concession on this point, was instantly construed by him into an outrage or a personal insult. A game lost would prey upon his mind for several days, rendering him gloomy and morose, even depriving him of appetite, and, as it were, of consciousness.

"In 18— the Count returned to France, retaining in all its fervor a fondness for his favorite game. But soon there came a change

over the aged nobleman. His faculties became suddenly impaired, and increasing infirmity finally debarred him from all society. In this painful state, chess was his sole alleviation. He had taught the game to his daughter, who had been married eight years to a colonel in the Royal Guards. Occupying the same "Hôtel," his daughter devoted her evenings to her aged father's amusement, humoring the old gentleman's fondness for the game, and seldom having any spectators except the Count's granddaughter, a child little more than seven years of age, somewhat precocious for her years, but withal a mischievous and giddy little thing. You would never, however, have taken her for such, when a game of chess was in progress, for then, seated near her grandfather, who was dotingly fond of her, she would seldom utter a word, paying all the time the greatest attention to the complicated moves of what she called her little black and white soldiers.

"The Count de St. Genest, in whose chess faculties there had been, alas! an immense falling off, had preserved, nevertheless, the same sensitiveness with respect to defeat, and strict play was still what he most prided himself upon. His daughter, now much his superior, through motives you will readily imagine, while prolonging and keeping alive the interest of the game by the most generous of impostures, invariably allowed herself to be beaten, to the great satisfaction of the old Count, who never slept better than after these illusory triumphs.

"One evening, however, towards the end of a game, which the Count had conducted with more skill than it had been his wont to display, his patient opponent, either through forgetfulness of her usual part, or led on perhaps by an inviting position, gave several successive checks, the replies to which were all forced; then without examining farther into the situation, and while looking up at the clock to ascertain the lateness of the hour, she unconsciously touched a piece and was of course compelled to move it; the old nobleman, as I have already said, never allowing the slightest deviation from strict play in the most rigorous sense of the word.

"Scarcely had his daughter committed the move, when she became conscious of the existence of a forced mate, and was devising the square to avoid giving it, inwardly congratulating herself that it

was in her power to do so : she still held the piece, when, to her utter dismay, the Count's youthful granddaughter, clapping her little hands, suddenly exclaimed—' Oh ! grandpapa, you have lost . . . checkmate ! checkmate ! ' The child, by following out the play, evening after evening, had not only become familiar with the moves, but had also acquired an acquaintance with the game, suspected by none and far above her years.

" Roused by this fatal revelation, the Count soon became fully alive to its truth. ' The child is right,' said he ; then drooping his head, he remained gloomily silent.

" A few moments after his little granddaughter approached. ' Good night, dear grandpapa,' said she, in a timid tone, as if conscious of having been the cause of her grandfather's dejection. ' Good night, Miss,' was the dry and somewhat rancorous answer the child received, and she was allowed to leave the room without obtaining the accustomed kiss which the Count, while patting her auburn ringlets, never failed to bestow.

" The next morning the poor child, half afraid, hesitated long before entering her grandfather's bed-room, with the newspaper she was in the habit of carrying to him. At length, overcoming her irresolution, she was about to knock, when her mother opened the door. ' My child,' said she, amid sobs and tears, ' my poor child, what have you done ! Your grandfather is no more ! '

" The Count had expired during the night. His impaired faculties had not been proof against the violent perturbation, caused most probably by the feverish and lethiferous visions conjured up by this fatal checkmate, foreseen and announced by a child of seven."

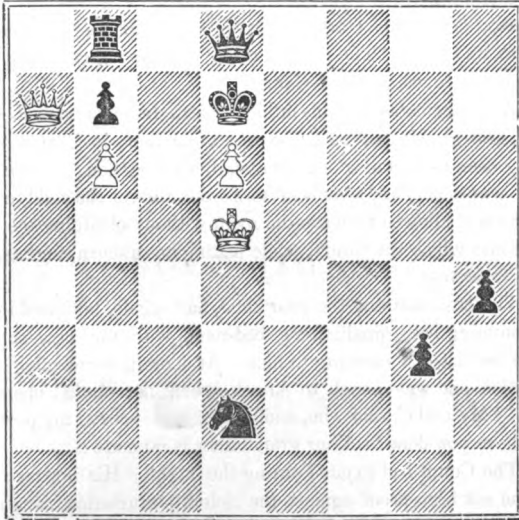
" Undoubtedly," said I, after a pause, during which I perceived the Countess was much moved, " most undoubtedly a talent for the game has been perpetuated in his family, and the Count's granddaughter, notwithstanding the melancholy circumstance attached to her precocious abilities" . . . .

" I have perhaps been wrong," suddenly interrupted the Countess, " in having placed under your eyes so fatal an example. . . Excuse some minuteness. . . My emotion you will readily forgive when you learn that in the narrator you behold the granddaughter of the Count de St. Genest." . . . . .

After some moments' silence, prompted by curiosity, I ventured to ask the Countess, whether she recollected the position that had led to this melancholy circumstance.

"I can never forget it," she replied, while arranging the pieces as follows :—

BLACK.



WHITE.

White to move and force the game.