

"The Game Of Kings."

CHESS IN LITERATURE AND HISTORY.

No game has gained a more prominent place in literature and in history than chess—"the game of kings." In drama, in fiction, and in biography references to the game abound; and there are numerous stories of the performances of distinguished persons at the chess-board from the earliest times.

One of the first instances in drama that comes to mind is the scene in "The Tempest" where Ferdinand and Miranda are found playing at chess, and Ferdinand denies the gentle impeachment, "Sweet lord, you play me false."

"The Sublime Combinations." Tennyson pictures Henry II. and Becket engaged in a friendly chess contest in his play of "Becket," and

he goes so with history accuracy. The king, preoccupied with weightier matters, falls a victim to the churchman's wiles. He is a bad loser, and kicking over the board, exclaims: "Why, there then—down go bishop and king together; I loathe being beaten."

The Duc de Beaufort, imprisoned at Vincennes, in "Twenty Years After," was "immersed in the sublime combinations of chess." Like King Henry, he makes blunder upon blunder through inattention, and is easy game. In the same book, Dumas appears to give credence to the tradition that Henry IV., the evening before he was assassinated, was playing at chess and saw clots of blood upon the board.

Chess-board of Matrimony.
Oliver Wendell Holmes had a keen insight into the game, and his allusions to it are many. In "The Professor at the Breakfast Table" there is a striking metaphor where the mother of Iris, "seated with her companion at the chess-board of matrimony, had but just pushed forward her one little white pawn upon an empty square, when the black knight, that cares nothing for castles or kings or queens, swooped down upon her and swept her from the larger board of life." Holmes invokes the aid of another chess comparison in the same book when he remarks upon "the nice shades that separate the skillful players."

The Life of Catherine Gladstone, by her daughter, Mary Drew, records that Mrs. Gladstone showed no little skill at chess: "The tradition survives that Mrs. Gladstone beat Mr. Gladstone, that Mrs. Gladstone beat Lord Lyttelton, and that Lord Lyttelton beat Mr. Gladstone."

Probably the earliest reference in literature to chess was that by the Persian poet Firdusi, who, in his historical poem, "Shahnama," mentions the introduction of the game into Persia.

In "The young Tamlane" we read that

Four-and-twenty ladies fair
Were playing at the chess.

It is worth recalling that the first book Caxton printed in England was a translation of a treatise on the game written about 1300 by Jacobus de Cessolis, a preaching friar.

Scott is said to have objected to learning chess because the time it would occupy would be sufficient to learn two languages. On the other hand, Henry Thomas Buckle was one of the finest players of his day. John Huss, when in prison, deplored having played at chess "whereby he had lost time and run the risk of being subject to violent passions."

Napoleon's Curious Set.

It is a curious circumstance that most great generals were poor chess-players. Marshal Saxe was an exception; and Napoleon relieved the tedium of life on St. Helena by playing with a quaintly-carved set. One king was fashioned in his own image and the other represented Frederick the Great, the other pieces showing the respective uniforms of the two leaders.

In regard to the part chess has played in history, one must dismiss as a myth the romance that Charlemagne lost his kingdom over a game of chess to Guerin de Montiel; and equally doubtful is the story that a certain Prince Otkar of Bavaria was killed by a blow on the temple by Pippin, who, so the story runs, had been ignominiously checkmated.

William and Canute.

It is easy to believe, however, that the fiery William the Conqueror, when beaten by the Prince of France, "knocked the chess-board about his (the prince's) head," and that the incident "was the cause afterwards of much enmity between them."

There are many evidences that Canute was an enthusiast. Carlyle, in his "Early Kings of Norway," relates that a dispute arose between Canute and Earl Ulf when at chess, that the earl upset the board, and was murdered shortly afterwards by Canute's orders. The "Ramsay Chronicle" records that Canute, visited on State matters by Bishop Utheric, was found at chess and dice with his courtiers. Henry I., John, and Edward I. are likewise stated to have been fond of pastime.

In mediaeval days chess came under the ban of puritanical prelates. In France fines were imposed for indulgence in the game; and in Spain the edict went forth that "Clerks playing at dice or chess shall be excommunicated." A bishop ordered to do penance for being a chess-lover in 1061 was reproved by Cardinal St. Peter Damian in these words: "Was it right, I say, and consistent with thy duty to sport away thy evenings amidst the vanity of chess, and defile the hand which offers up the body of the Lord and the tongue that mediates between God and man with the pollution of a sacrilegious game?" Brian Chapman, in John O'London's Weekly.

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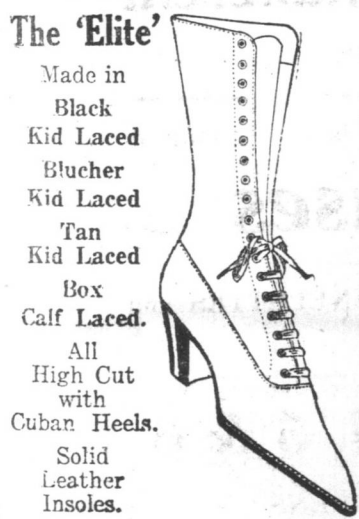
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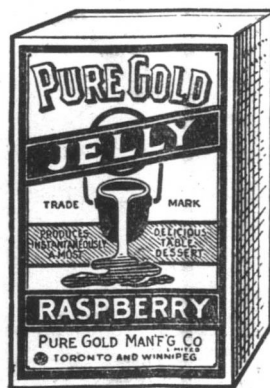
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