

Reminiscences by Capablanca

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We present an article by Capablanca entitled 'Championship Chess: Incidents and Reminiscences' from pages 86-89 of the *Windsor Magazine*, December 1922:

'Experience in chess, as in everything, is generally associated with elderly men, but in the case of a man who began to play chess almost from the time he was born, we have even at an early age the exceptional conjunction of comparative youth with old experience.

One's proclivities in any direction are often indicated in earliest childhood, and are as often

the result of some special event which has attracted the interest of the child beyond common boundaries. In my case it was one of the historical Steinitz-Chigorin encounters, extensively discussed in Havana at the time. I was then four years old. The second event was Pillsbury's visit to Havana when I was 11 years of age. I was then a very mediocre player, but the reader can well imagine the impression on a child full of imagination produced by a man who could play simultaneously 16 or more blindfold games of chess at the same time that he played a number of blindfold games of draughts and a hand of duplicate whist.

Though not in accord with the dictum of two or three stubborn old journalists who pose as chess critics, I have always had a very vivid imagination, which I have, after a long struggle, partly succeeded in controlling in order to use it to better purpose, according to the requirements of the occasion. The effect of Pillsbury's displays was immediate. They electrified me, and with the consent of my parents I began to visit the Havana Chess Club. By leaps and bounds I reached the top class in three months, and I was not over 12 when I defeated the champion of Cuba in a set match. The match was somewhat dramatic; the victor was to be the player who first scored four wins. I began by losing the first two games. On account of my age, I had the sympathy of the vast majority of the chessplayers and the public in general, and their disappointment after such a disastrous start can be readily conceived. With practically but one exception, that of my lamented friend A. Fiol, all the amateurs and experts gave me up for lost. The consensus of opinion was that I was outclassed by the champion. I must confess that I had very similar feelings, and that I was overawed by the vast technical knowledge of my adversary. I had nothing to oppose to his experience but my clear imagination and an ability, already evident, of playing the last part of the game with considerable accuracy. My friend Fiol encouraged me in my determination to do better. As matters turned out, I was able to win four games before my opponent could add one single point to his score.

At this time I was somewhat frail and small for my age. One day in a provincial town I was taken to one of the local clubs. In a corner of the room two elderly gentlemen were playing. There was no one about as I sat and watched them play. I have been accustomed from childhood to sit quietly while watching others play. Many times I have witnessed the most appalling mistakes without saying a word until I have been asked. On that occasion, when the game was over, one of the gentlemen had to leave, and the other, not seeing any of his customary opponents around, asked me if I knew the game. My silence had made him doubtful on the subject. When I answered in the affirmative, he promptly offered me the odds of a knight, as he said, in order to see how well I could do, and at the same time he volunteered the information that he was the strongest player in the town. I have always made it a practice to accept whatever odds have been offered to me.

I therefore accepted the proffered odds as we sat down to play. The old gentleman was somewhat astonished at the quick result, and, after trying one more game with lesser odds, decided that I was too strong, and condescended to play me even. After he lost the first game he stated that he was not fit. After the second game he decided that he must have been altogether ill and far below his usual form, and by the time he lost the third game there was not a single disease from which he was not suffering. Then I boldly offered to give him a knight, which he indignantly accepted to show me that I presumed too much. This time it was a real struggle, but finally the old gentleman, probably worn out, had to resign. He was so mortified that he put on his hat and hardly said goodbye. On second thoughts he turned back to inquire my name, a thing he had forgotten to do before playing. On finding out, his pride was evidently relieved, and he apologized for having given me odds, adding that he

had never thought it was possible for such a mite of a boy to play as I did. This was the first as well as one of the most interesting of many similar experiences.

In the summer of 1904 I went to the United States to learn English and prepare to enter Columbia University.

One evening in 1906 or 1907 – I have forgotten the exact date – while I was visiting the Manhattan Chess Club in New York, an acquaintance of mine came in and invited me to go down town to the East side to witness a simultaneous blindfold exhibition by one of the many second- or third-rate so-called “masters” residing in New York. The single player of the occasion was an excellent blindfold performer when pitted against only six or eight players. When we arrived, the affair was in its most interesting phase. We were taken to a corner of the room, where a short, middle-aged man, with a rather large head, sat in front of a board discussing one of the games in progress. I did not know anybody, and nobody knew me as we silently sat down to watch the proceedings. The short man was heard with evident respect by those around the table. Looking on with intense interest, I was surprised to see the others acquiesce in moves and explanations which were somewhat beyond me. My youthful conceit made me think that what I heard was absurd, and that the little man was not much of a player. On one or two instances I was on the point of interfering to contradict the much-respected personage. Luckily my old habit of watching, without saying a word, saved me from a most humiliating experience, as a few minutes later I was introduced to the little man, who was no less a person than the great Dr E. Lasker, the then world’s champion. Never in my life have I been so thankful for keeping my own counsel. The fact was that the great player looked upon the position from a different point of view to that of the common good ordinary player I was then, and a far higher one, and, with his profound knowledge and instinct, discarded as worthless many lines of play which I considered important.

A couple of years later I had the most extraordinary experience of my chess life. I was then at Columbia University, but visited frequently the Manhattan Chess Club. Dr Lasker lived then in New York. One night, when I was in the club, he came in. I was by this time recognized as the strongest player in the club. Dr Lasker paid me the compliment of asking me to look over with him a certain position which had puzzled him considerably, and about which he had not quite made up his mind. As we sat down some of the strong players of the club came over to watch, and incidentally to offer suggestions, but naturally with the respect due to the presence of the then world’s champion. We had been there for about half an hour without having arrived at any definite conclusion, when a well-dressed young man walked in, said “Good evening”, sat next to Dr Lasker, and inquired as to the nature of the matter under consideration. Immediately after he was told he proceeded to treat Dr Lasker’s suggestions in a rather cavalier manner, and undertook to show us that we did not know what we were after. I looked at him in amazement, but, seeing his unconcerned expression and the apparent familiarity with which he treated Dr Lasker, I concluded he was a close friend of the champion, and consequently I said nothing. It did not take long for Dr Lasker to show the young man how little he really did know about the matter under consideration. The young man soon got up, said “Good night”, and left. I could restrain myself no longer, and therefore asked Dr Lasker who his friend was. His answer was that he had never seen the young man before, and that he had thought all the time that the young man was a close friend of mine – a truly astonishing situation. We had both treated the young man with a great deal of consideration because we each thought that he was the other’s intimate friend, when, as a matter of fact, neither one of us had ever seen him before.

At the beginning of 1911 I crossed the Atlantic for the first time, in order to participate in the

great International Tournament at San Sebastián, Spain. Such qualifications were required to compete that only 16 players in the whole world had a right to participate. Of these, 15, all except Lasker, answered the call. Some doubts had been raised as to my own right to participate, and some of the players were very skeptical as to the reputation I had acquired on the other side of the water. I had the satisfaction and good fortune of silencing my critics by winning, not only the first prize, but also the special prize for the most brilliant game of the tournament. It was remarked by the chess critics that I played very quickly, and that I always got up and walked about while my opponent was thinking. In the United States, where the amateurs had watched my progress step by step, my habits were so familiar that they called forth no comments of any sort. It was taken for granted that I would play far quicker than any opponent, and that I would be walking about a great part of the time during the progress of the game. But in Europe, while they saw me for the first time, the contrast did not fail to be noticed. They were used to seeing the strongest players, when pitted against one another, take all, or nearly all, the time at their disposal and seldom get up and walk. On this point – which aroused at the time considerable comment, and has since been a subject of speculation – there are some considerations which I should like to submit.

Evidently a slow player cannot afford to get up often from the table and walk about while his opponent is thinking, since his time is limited, and he will generally need every minute of it, but a quick player may find it convenient to walk about in order to give his mind some rest. Often there is a great deal of mental work saved by it. Suppose that during the course of the game a very difficult position arises. By a process of elimination, which every master follows more or less, the conclusion is reached that there are three main lines of play which must be considered, each one of which will lead into complications requiring deep thought. Mere general knowledge will not suffice; on the contrary, it will be necessary to go through every possible variation that may clear the situation. If at that moment you remain seated while your opponent is thinking, you will perforce have to go through every part of those three different lines of play. If you are a very much quicker player than your opponent, you may be able to run rapidly through the three of them before your opponent moves, but as he can adopt only one of the three, the result is that two-thirds of the work is wasted. But this is the best case. Suppose, on the other hand, that you have had only time to examine two of the three possibilities before your opponent moves, and that when he moves he adopts the third line, the one you have not had time to analyze, then it is evident that you have wasted all your work, and that you are no better off than if you had been walking about, in so far as the saving of time is concerned, and that in any case you are much worse off in regard to the amount of wasted mental effort. Of course, as I said before, only a quick player who can come back as soon as his opponent has moved, take hold of the situation, and go through whatever analytical process may be required within the limited time at his disposal – only such a player should indulge in the practice of constantly leaving the board to walk about. Before leaving this subject, I should like to add that I have purposely exaggerated the case, so as to make clear the reasons to be considered.

Towards the end of 1911 I sent a challenge to Dr Lasker to play for the world's championship. The negotiations were hardly started when they came to an end, because Dr Lasker, on account of some fancied grievance, refused to meet me. Whatever his true reasons may have been, it was a costly blunder on his part. I was at the time merely a natural chessplayer with the same powers I have now, but without the knowledge which I have since acquired through experience and hard thinking. In the light of my present knowledge I believe that his chances of winning at the time would have been excellent.

Had he then played and won, the moral effect alone would have always been a powerful

weapon in his hands. His postponement of the encounter, hoping, possibly, that the event might never take place, was a blunder which was bound to prove fatal. Apart from other considerations, the moral to be derived is: Always accept a challenge, and play the challenger as soon as the conditions required are complied with. The mere fact that the champion is ready to play at once will make the challenger think that his own chances are none too good. The champion always has in his favor a moral force which can only be increased by showing that he has no fear whatsoever of his opponent.

In 1913 I entered the Cuban Foreign Office. I was sent to Petrograd, where I remained until 14 July 1914, scarcely two weeks before the outbreak of the Great War. In the spring of 1914 the Great International Tournament of Petrograd took place.

After looking like a certain winner, I finished second – half a point behind Dr Lasker. That was my last setback. Since then I have won every tournament in which I have participated, and won the two set matches I have played: one against Kostić, who resigned after losing five straight games, and the other against Dr Lasker, for the world's championship, which he resigned when the score stood four to nothing against him. How long I shall hold the championship no-one can tell. My predecessor held it until he was 53 years old. If I can hold it until I am 50, I shall be satisfied. One thing is certain: I shall always be ready to defend it at a moment's notice.'

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