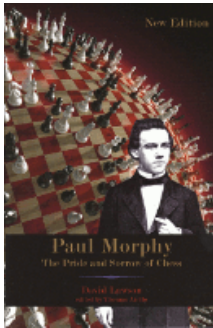




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Chess in Hades

From *Chess Monthly*, February 1858

On the third Thursday of last November I dined in company with some chess friends. The viands were choice and abundant; the wines were light and delicious; the coffee was redolent of the perfumes of Araby, and the cigars had the true West-Indian flavor. Nor was a more refined enjoyment wanting. Brilliant conversation furnished food for the mind; every dish was served up with a joke; every glass was washed down with a pleasantry; every puff of smoke preluded a flash of wit. We passed in review the whole history of our game, from its first appearance among the mountains and valleys of India down to the late American Congress; we wondered at the curious incidents, of varied character and multiform interest, that set off its long career; we surveyed the wide and ever green field of chess literature, and we talked in admiring accents and reverent tones of the great dead, who, by their attachment to the royal sport, have honored both themselves and chess. Exhausted by so much physical and intellectual pleasure, I went home and threw myself upon the sofa for a refreshing sleep. But just as my eyelids were growing heavy and my mind was beginning to welcome the longed-for Somnus, there came a loud knock at my door. I roused myself as speedily as I could, and bade the untimely visitant enter. A little man, with a queer but not disagreeable countenance and clad in a plain suit of somber gray, made his appearance as I spoke. While I was rubbing my eyes in a desperate attempt to recognize the intruder, he nodded once or twice good-naturedly and said: "Put on your coat and come on; I am all ready, you see."

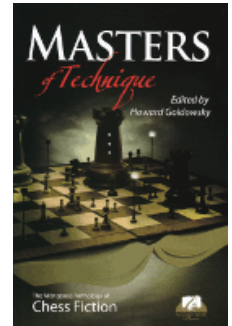


Chess Monthly Editor Willard Fiske

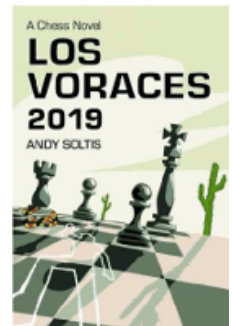
Whether it was the sublimity of the stranger's impudence or some impulsive whim of my own that induced me without dissent to obey the command, I cannot now say. I threw on my coat, and hat, and taking the man's proffered arm, we stepped out upon the pavement under the clear sky and into the crisp air of a wintry night. We walked in silence a long while until the houses became less and less frequent and the gas and glare of the city had been left behind. Meanwhile, musing upon the strangeness of the adventure, I never heeded the direction we took, and only noticed at length that the bright stars looked down upon us in the midst of the broad fields of the country. Finally, turning the base of a hill, we found ourselves upon the banks of a river totally unlike any stream that I remembered to have seen in the vicinity of the town. A small boat, half antique and half modern in its construction, was moored to the shore, and in it reclined a quaint-looking, bearded old boatman.

"On with your oars, Charon," said my companion; "on with your oars, and set

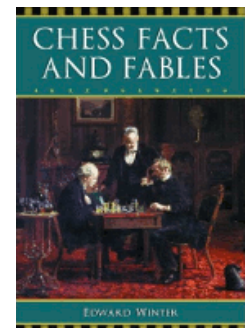
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us over."

I knew it all now. This was the black Styx and yon aged ferryman was Charon. Opposite lay the bleak and dreaded coasts of Hades, and the beaten path beneath our feet was worn by the last terrestrial tread of all past humanity. Instantly the fascinating stories of my school-days rushed, with the vividness of yesterday, to my mind. I began to compare the scene around with the account given by the Mantuan bard. But everything how changed! Where was that awful vestibule in the first jaws of Hell where Grief and Care, pale Diseases, disconsolate Old Age, and Fear and Famine and Indigence, with Death and Toil, War and the Furies, were wont to show their forms ghastly to the sight? Leucaspis, Orontes, and Palinurus had vanished. Even Charon's grim features had been lamentably softened down. The frightful slovenliness, the flaming eyes, had disappeared. The fierce ferryman of souls was now a simple, green old boatman, sufficiently clean, and the occhi di fiamme, which Dante had seen, were transformed into a jolly, twinkling pair of grayish eyes. He seemed to manifest no unwillingness to carry us across, and without hesitation I stepped, a new Æneas, into the boat.

Upon the other side of the Stygian Lake the changes had not been less marked. The stirring, civilizing influences of our revolutionary century had penetrated even to the infernal regions and a city was actually going up on the borders of the dread river. To be sure, many of the former landmarks still remained. Down under the shore near the landing-place stood old Tantalus. Having been denied fruit and water by the severity of the incensed gods, he had taken to meat and wine and appeared to suffer his punishment in the most jolly manner. The threatening rock above his head had been carefully propped up by some ingenious mechanical contrivance and he seemed to have recovered from his fear of its falling. On yonder hill Sisyphus still pursued his hopeless and unending task, but, with the true spirit of modern improvement, he had obtained a small stationary steam engine which rolled the famous boulder up the steep ascent as often as it fell to the bottom. He himself reclined upon a grassy spot hard by, puffing away at the largest of meerschaums in the most comfortable of moods. We saw, too, the enormous Tityus in a garden to the left. He had hit upon the cunning idea of assuaging his pains by the use of an anesthetic, and now the giant stretched his bulky form along the ground in lazy indolence, occasionally rousing himself to pour the ease-giving chloroform out of an immense flask upon a huge napkin which he held continually to his mouth — what time the persecuting vulture by his side pursued his gnawing propensities unfelt and uncared for. Ixion's terrible wheel had been cleverly enlarged until it resembled one of those miniature railways which are seen in our public pleasure grounds and, seated in an easy armchair fastened to its outer edge, the too ardent admirer of Juno enjoyed its perpetual revolutions with placid resignation.

Passing by all these sights, my guide, who had not the most distant resemblance to the Cumæan Sybil (although he assumed to be a descendant of that female), was about to enter the Elysian Fields when I noticed by the roadside a large building of peculiar construction. At each corner rose a lofty tower. In niches next these castellated towers stood huge statues of Knights and Bishops; while supporting either side of the grand entrance were great marble Caryatides representing a stately monarch and his queen. Ranged in front of this ornamented facade, as a sort of fence or protection, was a curious row of bronze foot-soldiers, eight in number. The exquisite beauty and massive strength of this structure enchained my attention, and after gazing a while at the wonderful architecture, I turned with a glance of inquiry towards my conductor.

"This," said the descendant of the Sybil, "this is the last home of those unhappy souls who have been madly devoted, during their lives on earth, to the game of chess. Here, through the never-ending lapses of eternity, they are compelled to pass their time in the pursuit of that idle amusement which possessed such charms for them during the days of their terrestrial existence. The just gods command them to play chess forever."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed with a shudder. "What a horrible punishment! What are all the pains and terrors of Sisyphus, Ixion, and the rest compared to a penalty so terrible, a sentence so shocking. Let us go in and look at the poor

wretches."

"There is not much to be seen," remarked the little man; "these men of chess are the most stupid of beings."

Nevertheless we entered. Over the inner vestibule glistened in gilt letters, neatly carved, the simple inscription:

Hades Chess Club.

My guide stopped here, giving me strict injunctions to return soon, and I passed into the first of a long suite of rooms. It was evidently appropriated to newcomers. In one corner sat a Frenchman, with the fire of a poet in his eyes, playing chess, drinking absinthe, and smoking cigars. Near him stood a pleasant Hungarian explaining to a crowd of listeners an interesting position where a White King and three Pawns were opposed to a Black King and three Pawns. At the remotest end of the apartment, on a sort of raised dais of honor, sat two players — a laughing, round-faced Frenchman and a silent Irishman — surrounded by a great throng of spectators. By the Irishman's side was an elderly, spectacled gentleman recording the game. I recognized the group at once, and eagerly hastened to witness a renewal of the contest between the chief of British chess men and the renowned champion of Gaul. The former had just accepted the Queen's Gambit, and knowing pretty well how such games usually terminated, I did not await the final result. In the next room I found the monarch Philidor, around whose brows were twined a wreath of ivy, playing with the Syrian Stamma. Sir Abraham Janssen and a host of the great master's contemporaries were viewing the contest. A group nearly as numerous encircled another table at a little distance, where a game was in progress between two great proficients from Modena.

As I was about to leave this apartment an agreeable sort of a fellow stepped up and politely asked me to play a game. Nothing loath to enjoy the honor of an encounter with one of the shadows of the past, I sat down. We drew for the move; it was mine. A brilliant idea struck me. These old fellows, thought I, having left earth so long ago, cannot be remarkably well posted up in the new openings, and I played an Evans. My opponent smiled as I offered the Queen's Knight's Pawn and unhesitatingly accepted it. (Athwart my memory gleamed at this instant all the dazzling Evans games that I had witnessed during the just finished Congress, and I mentally resolved to be worthy of my membership in that Convention.) His smile, however, gave place, as the combat proceeded, to a look of surprise, which was soon followed by a sullen cast of countenance, not unlike that which I have seen darkening the visage of living — and losing — players. I won gallantly, and the shade eagerly demanded his revenge; but remembering my guide's behest, I excused myself. "That opening," murmured my late adversary, "ought to have been in my book; it would have immortalized me." Upon hearing this I demanded his name, and learned that I had been contending against the great Greco. I assured him that his fame, among players still in the flesh, needed no such additional excellence to keep it fresh or render it enduring. This compliment served to heal, in a measure, his wounded vanity, and no longer urging me to play, he obligingly offered to bear me company in my visit to the remaining rooms.

Neither pen of poet nor pencil of painter could portray, in all their glorious light and shade, the scenes I witnessed as I pursued my walk. I was journeying backwards through the long history of chess. Each step disclosed new objects of interest and wonder. All the famous characters, all the heroic personages, whose names glow upon the pages of the annals of the game, met my gaze as I passed along. The shades of kings and peasants, nobles and priests, scholars and soldiers mingled in strangely varied groups. Men from the lands of the morning placidly played with the sons of the unromantic West. Devotees of Buddha, followers of Mohammed, disciples of Confucius, and pupils of Zoroaster leaned in friendly converse over the same board with stern believers in the laws of Moses, devout children of Rome, and zealous supporters of the doctrines of Luther. Surely, said I to myself, there is no creed so broad as the orthodoxy of chess. Neither race nor religion, neither age nor caste, neither color nor climate can shut out from its all-embracing platform the true worshiper in the temple of Caïssa. Nor was it the players

alone that attracted my notice. Each room was furnished with the boards and men that were in fashion during the earthly days of its occupants. Antique implements of chess warfare such as ornament the printed volumes of Caxton and Cessolis or stand out among the glittering, unfading illuminations of medieval manuscripts — pieces of wood, of bone, of ivory, of walrus teeth, and occasionally carved from rarer and costlier substances, were scattered upon tables equally diverse in their patterns, materials, and construction. The uncouth figures of the earlier ages and the graceful boards and men of modern times were alike represented. These persons and things Greco kindly pointed out, now and then accompanying his explanations with humorous comments or witty bits of satire.

At last we emerged into an extensive court, around which the numberless rooms we had traversed appeared to be built. In the center of this great enclosure stood four vast cages or ovens of solid iron. Under each were blazing piles of wood and coal, and grim, swarthy-visaged firemen stood about ready to heap on new fuel. This, I thought, at the first glance, must be the culinary department of the club. Here, doubtless, the most delicate luxuries, the most exquisite dishes are prepared to tickle the palates and gratify the stomachs of this multitude of chess enthusiasts. But drawing nearer I was struck dumb at hearing the terrible groans which issued from one of the ovens, and upon looking closely towards it I saw half a dozen beings inside undergoing the torments caused by the intensity of the heat. I turned to my companion for an explanation of this hideous spectacle.

"You will observe," said Greco mildly, "that these ovens are numbered respectively One, Two, Three, and Four. They are merely reformatory places of confinement for such of our members as manifest too great a fondness for certain little chess peccadilloes. The regulations of the club require that those individuals who are in the habit of moving hastily and without consideration should be punished by twenty-four hours' imprisonment in Number One. Those who are influenced by the opposite vice, and who habitually consume more than fifteen minutes on every move, are placed for the same length of time in Number Two. Number Three is given up to those demented wretches who exhibit a morbid fondness for alternation games, five-second games, and similar outlandish kinds of chess. By means of Number Four we correct a glaring and outrageous fault which clouds the characters of many problem-makers, and sometimes of other lovers of chess; whoever ventures to ask the club to examine more than one problem a day is brought to repentance by four and twenty hours in Number Four. For a repetition of any of these offenses the penalty is doubled. You see that Number Three is in use; I myself once experienced the inconvenience of a prolonged stay in Number One."

"A capital idea!" I exclaimed, as the Calabrian finished. "I wonder that some clever, clearheaded fellow in the other world has not hit upon a similar plan. It is exceedingly simple and, I should judge, must be very effective. What a beneficial change would take place in our terrestrial clubs if such an arrangement formed part of their furniture."

"You mortals," responded Greco placidly, "would assuredly find it to be an excellent and salutary contrivance."

We thereupon returned to the hall where I had first met Greco. Philidor and Stamma had by that time finished their game, and thinking to amuse them with a novelty from our side of the Styx, I called their attention to the Indian problem. Instantly the Syrian and his illustrious competitor, together with Ponziani, Brühl, Atwood, Verdoni, Bernard, and others, crowded round the board. While they were employed in attempting to discover the solution of this elaborate and beautiful enigma, I caught sight of a vacant table and quietly arranged Loyd's fine three-move position.

"Here," said I, with an air of pride, "is another beautiful chess stratagem lately concocted among us mortals."

Scarcely were the words out of my mouth when a great clamor arose. Cries of Roast him! Off with him to Number Four! resounded on all sides. I was instantly seized and hurried away towards the dreadful courtyard. All the horrors of my fate burst upon me at once. I cried aloud to my guide, who,

hearing my voice heavy with fear, arrived just in time to snatch me from the jaws of the terrific red-hot furnace. So overcome was I with terror that to this day I cannot recall a single incident of our return to the upper regions. My consciousness only came back when I found myself once more in peace and safety on my sofa.

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