

In Moscow

Monday, Dec. 07, 1925

Evenings in Russia are long— how better to pass them than by a game of chess in front of the fire? A Paris restaurant, chequered with the light and shade of tablecloths and parquetry, is a background that fittingly salutes a pair of men in dinner-clothes seated on each side of a black and white board; in California patios, in drawing-rooms overlooking the Grand Canal of Venice, in the smoking-car of the Florida Sunbeam, and on the glass verandas of the hotels that front the long sea-promenade at Ostend, the game is played.

It is never the rage; when professionals perform in public, the occasion involves little or no ticket speculation; even devotees speak of "a quiet corner for chess." But when, three weeks ago, 21 experts from Austria, Germany, Cuba, Mexico, the U. S., England, Poland, Russia and Czechoslovakia gathered in the Metropolis Hotel in Moscow for a formal dinner before their tournament, the Soviet Government took official notice, and great daily newspapers of the U. S. published editorials pontifying upon their activities in general and focusing the reader's gaze upon one man in particular.

Chess champions are rarely swashbucklers. They call their ties "cravats" and tie them neatly but docilely; they wear their hats on the middle of their hard round heads. Among the gentlemen at Moscow is the imperturbable veteran, Dr. Emanuel Lasker, who slightly resembles his late fellow-countryman, Dr. Immanuel Kant. The years have failed to shake his prestige; he looks on tempests and is never shaken. The shrewd American, Marshall, did well in the first rounds of the tournament; the great Russian, Bogoljubow, lived up to expectations; a young man named Torre rose like a red ascending star out of Mexico; but these the press passed over with a glance to direct its attention at José R. Capablanca, Champion of the World.

Señor Capablanca was born in Cuba in 1888 with the strategies of knights and pawns apparently engraved by dry point upon his infant brain. He lisped in gambits; at a period when most children are teething, he was teaching his father the Ruy Lopez, and while still a child he became primus of the Havana Chess Club. Only the insistence of a medical man induced him, at the age of eight, to take a holiday and go to school. He went through college, where he interested himself in science, history, art, music, sport. Then he began to play chess again, and the story of his life is the graph of a series of brilliant moves from the little square of one country to the little square of another. After winning 99 tournament games, he wrote a book, *My Chess Career*, which contains many remarkable statements, such as the following:

"I was not yet five years old when . . . my father took me to the Havana Chess Club, where the strongest players found it impossible to give me a queen. About that time the Russian Master, Taubenhau, visited Havana, and he declared it beyond him to give me such odds. Later, in Paris, in 1911, Mr. Taubenhau would often say, 'I am the only living master who has given Mr. Capablanca a queen.' . . .

"Before going any further I will narrate an incident which proves that my good sense was not impaired by my surprising victory over Marshall. Soon after the match some of my new admirers talked to me about arranging a match with Dr. Lasker for the championship of the

world, and I told them that I would not consider it for the simple reason that he was a much better player and I had to improve a great deal before I contemplated such a thing. ... "As one by one I mowed them down without the loss of a single game, my superiority became apparent. . . ."

Such blithe vainglory as this might be fatuous if it were not the utterance of a man who is, in his field, an indisputable genius. But recently he made one statement as pompous as Louis XIV's "L'etat? C'est moi"; as foolish as Theodore Roosevelt's "A third term? I will not take a third term." Capablanca said: "The game of chess? It is too simple."

Last week the game took its revenge. The champion had suggested making it more difficult by enlarging the board, adding new pieces, but the hackneyed pastime in the form that it has kept unchanged for centuries, proved at last too much for his mighty brain. He was beaten by two "unknown" Russians, Genewsky and Werlinsky, and he played to a draw with Dr. Lasker, with Romanowsky, with Gruenfeld. In fact, he seemed impotent to beat anyone. To be sure, his championship was not at stake; no one can supplant him until he is challenged and beaten in a series of games, even as he beat Dr. Lasker. "But," said critics, "a champion who cannot even win from second-raters ought to be very moderate in his conversation."

Still, in Riga, Buenos Aires, Lodz, Berlin and Manhattan, the ancient game goes on; kings make their stands, their swart or pallid queens beside them, and with minds that fence like searchlights on a night sky, chess-players wage their wars.