

Capablanca Bested

Monday, Dec. 12, 1927

In Buenos Aires 32 small statues stood upon a polished piece of wood. Sixteen of them were white; behind these sat a middle-aged Cuban, Jose Raul Capablanca, chess champion of the world. Behind the other 16, which were black, sat Alexander Alekhine, a Russian nobleman, who, for a prize of \$10,000 offered by the Argentines, wished to beat the champion. A crowd surrounded the two men. The voices in the crowd became a whisper, then a silence.

As if to an inaudible and exciting music, the bright statues began a fantastically deliberate ballet through the squares of the chessboard. The pawns stepped forward with a delicate terror; the rooks swept furiously, in straight lines, across the spaces, and the bishops slanted with slow dexterity between the stiff irregular maneuvers of the knights. Soon there were fewer dancers in the ballet; two sinister queens pranced among them with precise cruelty. The music to which they moved grew faint and there were long periods in which the figurines stood still and the two men stared at the board with a contemplative fury. Finally, after 32 moves, Capablanca made a gesture of concession; the Russian nobleman, using a Queen's Defense, had won the first game in the series.

The next game was a draw and the third Capablanca won. The games that followed were all played with a Queen's Gambit and most of them were drawn; but Capablanca won the 7th and the 29th, Alekhine the 11th, 12th and 32nd. Last week the two men sat down to play the 34th game. Capablanca, with the score 5-3 against him, looked sulky. The Russian, with one game to win, looked meditative & nervous.

When play ended on the first night of the 34th game, Alekhine had an advantage of one pawn; a blocked pawn on the queen's rook file. Play began the next night with the 41st move. On the 47th, both queens fell, leaving Alekhine with a rook, four pawns and the king. Capablanca refused to take the odd pawn at the price of exchanging rooks; Alekhine sent his king to destroy the Cuban's pawns and on the 82nd move, play stopped for the evening. The next night Capablanca did not, in the face of sure defeat, resume it. After the longest match in chess history—74 nights—there was a new champion.

After his defeat, José Raul Capablanca wrote an article for the New York Times. In this, with the justified arrogance of a king who spends more thought on the government of 16 statues than any ruler has ever spent upon a million living subjects, Capablanca, using the royal idiom, explained his downfall. Said he: ". . . We are not as strong as we were a few years ago. . . . We are very anxious to try to prove that we are yet capable of at least holding our own against anybody in the world.... As to our adversary, he has evidently played better than we. . . ." The game of chess, Capablanca hinted, had become so formalized that it was perhaps possible for an expert to draw every game in case he wished to do so. To attempt victory demands a move which, if its implications are overlooked, will supply an advantage but which, if they are detected, will lead toward a checkmate.

Capablanca was born in Cuba 39 years ago. When he was eight he had beaten the best players in Havana. When he was 19 he went to New York to college, at Columbia where he was captain of the chess team.

By 1908, he decided to be a professional chess player. To him the game was less a tiny, quiet and concentrated war than an argument in which ideas could be expressed more precisely than the words. The vocabulary of 16 pieces was to him a language capable of the finest rhythms, the most terrible and subtle inflections. The sly digressions of a slanting bishop, the rapid cynicisms of a threatened queen, the stormy contradictions of the agile castles—these provided dialect in which the finest abstractions could be stated. By 1921, when he had not lost a game for seven years, Capablanca met German Dr. Lasker for the championship and won four games without losing any. Since then, until this autumn, he had lost only three games.

The new champion is four years younger than the old. He was born in Moscow and achieved the foundation of his present eminence when he won the Russian National tournament in 1909. To him, chess is less a philosophy than a war. He imagines the chessmen as weapons, not as words; his play is marked from the beginning with a sort of slow-burning and intricate belligerence.

Playing in Germany at the outbreak of the War, he was made a prisoner. He escaped and fought with the Allies, was recaptured when wounded, and kept in an Austrian hospital where he used to baffle his ward-mates by playing blindfold matches with all of them at the same time. This was mental vacuity for Alexander Alekhine; a few years later in Paris he played 28 experts in the same fashion, setting a World's record for such feats.

After the War, Alekhine left Russia where aristocratic sympathies made residence dangerous. Since then his eager face has made a shadow upon chess boards in many a country. Every game he plays Alexander Alekhine remembers. He can describe without scorebook, the moves in almost any game played in any important tournament in the last 30 years. He speaks six languages. In 1929, probably, he will defend his title against Capablanca.