

Chapter III

LINCOLN PLACE AND SIR HORACE PLUNKETT

SIR HORACE PLUNKETT, the founder of the co-operative movement in Ireland, was a name to conjure with fifty years ago, and we were fortunate in having him as our President for nearly twenty years, from 1904 to 1923. His Presidency thus covers the difficult years of the first world war, and forms a bridge from Molesworth Street to Lincoln Place. A distinguished economist, a benefactor of Irish farming and a moderating influence in politics, Sir Horace added to his many qualities a lasting love of chess and a more than average competence in the game. He had a family connection with the club; for the Hon. H. Curzon Plunkett of Dunsany was a member in 1878, and played for us against Zukertort in 1879. His ideas for Irish chess may yet bear fruit, and he had a real affection for the club, and showed it by his sound advice, by his peace-making, and by his personal generosity. He continued to interest himself in our affairs after his retirement to England in 1923, and he kept in touch with us through his nephew, Lord Dunsany, who also was a benefactor of the club. Sir Horace died in 1932, and in the Report for that year a fine and well-deserved tribute was paid to his many services to the club.

The address "20 Lincoln Place" is so well known to most Dublin chess-players that they would find it hard to associate the Dublin Chess club with any other address. We

moved in there late in 1912, losing the Georgian grandeur of St. Stephen's Green, but gaining solid Victorian comfort and an outlook on the College Park. The report for 1913 gives as reasons for the move, the more convenient neighbourhood and the comfort and convenience of the rooms, adding with a touch of pardonable pride, "Our rooms should be worthy of our standing, the only Chess Club rooms in Ireland." At that time the house was rented from Trinity College by Lady Mayo, who there ran an Irish School of Needlework—a charitable enterprise of considerable importance. From her we rented front and back rooms on the first floor at £31-10-0 *per annum*. The expense of moving in was considerable, and we had to draw on our reserves; but there were compensations, amongst them, facilities for tea, "small, 3d.; large, 5d.; with toast, 6d."

A letter from the present "father of the club," covering the transition period, is before me as I write; and I am fortunate in being able to quote from it. It is from Mr. Norman Wallace, who as a boy used to come to the club with his father, Mr. Hugh Wallace (1906), and who himself became a member in 1908. Mr. Norman Wallace was a distinguished player, who drew his game with Capablanca in 1919. He won a second class medal in 1910, a first class medal in 1912, and the Leinster Championship in 1920, and for many years he played No. 1 board on the Armstrong Cup team. He has a clear recollection of the club as it was at Molesworth Street, at St. Stephen's Green, and of course at Lincoln Place.*

Mr. Wallace writes:

"When the club was at the Friends' Institute it was a very self-centred affair, consisting of elderly business men, retired Civil Servants, retired school Inspectors, members of the Bar and a sprinkling of Trinity men, like the late Mr. Dunscombe. The majority of the play was in the afternoons from 4 o'clock onwards, and we could get afternoon tea consisting of a pot of tea and a plate of buttered

* Mr. Wallace writes from memory, and he asks me to check up with the records. He is not quite right about some dates and about the competitions but the general picture he draws is so vivid and true, that I have refrained from editing the detail. Mr. Wallace tells me that he has a clear recollection of Mr. H. V. White, the founder-member, who at the A.G.M. of 1930 gave a talk on the early days of the club.

toast for 6d. The Club did not play in any competitions until the Club moved to St. Stephen's Green W. Nearing the end of our period there the Club started to play in competitions and in 1913 entered and won the Armstrong Cup.

"About 1913 the Club moved to 20 Lincoln Place in the floor below where the club now plays, and the Club took on a very much more liberal outlook although the majority of the play was still in the afternoons, and we had arrangements with the caretaker by which we could get afternoon tea, but the price had gone up to 10d.

"Amongst the prominent men in the Club were Sir Horace Plunkett and John Howard Parnell (brother of Charles Stewart Parnell). Howard Parnell * used to arrive at 4 o'clock accompanied by his wife, and as ladies were not admitted into the club at that time, Mrs. Parnell was accommodated with the chair in the passage where she patiently sat for two to three hours until Parnell had finished his chess when he took her home. There was also another well-known member named Frank Hobson who always dressed in a frock-coat and silk hat, and his great delight was to look out for strangers coming into the Club when Hobson would politely ask him to 'play a game,' and when they got settled down, Hobson would remove his queen and benignly say, 'I will give you a queen's odds and see how you get on.' Hobson was a very tricky player, and it worked all right with beginners, but an odd time quite a good chess player would be treated in the same way, and to the Club's delight and amusement would wipe the board with Hobson." †

In 1913 in conjunction with the Irish Chess Association the club took the lead in arranging a match for the Championship of Ireland. The result was that the Championship "was wrested from a gentleman who had held it for many years by Mr. J. O'Hanlon of Portadown." This is the first

* In 1923 he was thanked by the club for the part he took in running the competitions.—Ed.

† F. Hobson, joined 1886, Vice-President, 1924-36. In 1934 he and Mr. Falkiner were formally thanked by the club for coming in the afternoons to keep up old traditions, and being there to welcome visitors. He died in 1937 at the age of 90, when the club recorded a tribute to his memory.—Ed.

mention in our records of Mr. O'Hanlon, who was to dominate Irish Chess for the next forty years.

And now the shadow of World War I descended on the club's activities; the rooms were open as usual, but competitions were cut down. Prices rose. Income fell off. A deficit was incurred. The future looked black, and the dissolution of the club was forecast. However, as always, members rallied to its support, made a collection and balanced the accounts.

Eviction, too, stared us in the face. That was no time for fine art needlework. Lady Mayo had to close her school, and we received notice to quit. However, the Board of Trinity College intervened, allowed us to stay on as monthly tenants, and helped us to secure from the new lessees, the Mission to Lepers, a lease of the two rooms on the second floor which since then we have continuously occupied. The lease was dated 18th July, 1917; the rent, £31-10-0 was raised to £40 in 1920.

The Secretary of the club, Mr. W. Nicholls (1917-18) had a flair for a telling phrase. In his Report for 1917 he stressed the need for more members, and wrote, "Chess is the game of the few, not of the many; it is therefore urgent that any players suitable for membership should be attracted to our little College." "Little College" is a bold phrase, but it well describes the educative value of this game that is more than a game; and it is particularly happy, said of such a friendly and sociable institution as the Dublin Chess Club.

In the Report for the following year, too, Nicholls was fine and witty. Deploring the lack of interest in chess, due to the war, he said that a few members had been very loyal to the club, but "the bulk may be said to occupy the position of buttresses, rather than pillars, as they remain outside."

The Report for 1916 notes with deep regret that two members of the club, Messrs. Wallace and Wilson, had been killed on active service in France. Mr. Wallace was a brother of Mr. Norman Wallace whose letter I quoted above.

Now I come to the first of three calls for action made by our President, Sir Horace Plunkett. The first was answered at the time. The second is being answered now. The third still awaits an answer.

By the end of the war our membership had fallen below the safety level. Then came a dramatic turn in our fortunes, largely due to the foresight, energy and influence of Sir Horace. He was a busy public man, and was not often present at our ordinary meetings ; but he was devoted to the interests of the game and the club, and he came regularly to our general meetings, and took the chair. In 1919 the club was still suffering from post-war depression, and at the general meeting ways and means of carrying on were under discussion. Mr. McIlwaine, Treasurer of the club for nearly 30 years, who rendered invaluable service, suggested Capablanca. Sir Horace's quick mind saw the possibilities at once. He jumped at the suggestion. He said he was going to London, and would see Capa., and ascertain his terms. Meantime, he summoned a meeting of representatives of other Dublin clubs, viz., Sackville, Cairo, Trinity and Rathmines. They all promised to support the venture. Sir Horace went to London and arranged matters. Capa. agreed to come to Dublin and give displays on December 4 and 5 at a fee of 12 guineas a display, plus travelling expenses. The displays, given at the Mansion House, were a great success. Capa. played 40 simultaneous games each night ; ten of our members took boards, scoring 5 draws and 5 losses on the first night, and 1 draw and 9 losses on the second night. Sir Horace took charge of the Master, and put him up at his own house ; he contributed £10 to the guarantee fund of £33-10-0 raised by our club. A deficit of £8-1-10 was incurred — which was more than offset by the general interest aroused. The effect on our membership was immediate. Fourteen new names were up for ballot at the two next committee meetings. At the general meeting of 1920 the accession of 25 new members was reported, making a total of 60 full members, besides honorary, country and affiliated members, and associates. The ship was now on an even keel.

In the same year the club subscription was raised from £1 to £1-5-0 ; and those who have never known the gold standard may be surprised to learn that the subscription had remained unchanged at £1 for 53 years from our founding in 1867. Those were the days !

Another change, long overdue, occurred at this time. Miss F. Meade set the ball a-rolling. In 1919 she wrote to ask if ladies were eligible for admission. She received

the answer, "under the present constitution of the club ladies were not eligible for membership." In the following autumn the question was referred to a special general meeting. It was decided to alter the rules so as to admit ladies as associate members at a fee of 10/- on Tuesdays and Thursdays, or such other two days a week, as the Committee should decide. There were seven Lady Associates on the roll in the following year, and the Report stated that their admission was a great success, rather inconsistently adding that "they did not often come." On 6th February, 1922, a special social evening, with tea, was arranged for the Lady Associates. In 1924 the club purchased a mirror.

The world war was over, but the struggle for independence continued, and while "the troubles" lasted chess clubs carried on under difficulties. Here, to illustrate, is an extract from the Report for 1923, telling of the final match in the Leinster Championship for 1922.

The present holder of the title, Mr. P. Baker (Sackville C.C.) succeeded in winning the title for the year 1922 after a close contest. Those who were present will not soon forget the memorable evening when the final game was played at our club between Mr. Baker (Sackville) and Mr. Wallace of our club. Just when the game had reached its most critical stage a terrific earsplitting explosion of a land-mine near by took place, shaking the whole building and scattering players and spectators alike to right and left, seeking cover under tables and behind chairs. It speaks volumes for the courage and nerve of the players that as soon as quiet was somewhat restored they calmly and without ostentation resumed and finished the game, which decided the Leinster Championship for 1922.

In spite of such difficulties the organisation of Irish chess went ahead at this time. Provincial competitions were encouraged; the Leinster Championship was started, and the formation of the Leinster Chess Union followed. In 1920 the "Leinster" was won by Norman Wallace, who defeated C. J. Barry, the holder; in the following year it was won from Wallace by Mr. Cranston, who at this period was at the top of his form, and who in 1922 won the Irish Championship, defeating "Mr. O'Hanlon of Portadown."

In 1921 it was decided to open the club rooms every day ; it was argued that this was the former practice, but that recently members had come to regard Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays as the only club days. In 1922 we lent our rooms to the Cairo C.C., for inter-club matches, when the Café Cairo closed down.

When the celebration of the Tailteann Games was announced, we sent the following letter to the Government:

20 Lincoln Place,
Dublin.
6th February, 1922.

The Committee of the Dublin Chess Club suggests to the Irish Government that, concurrently with the holding of the Tailteann Games, a chess tournament be held for players of Irish birth or extraction, for the promotion of an intellectual pastime which was high in favour in ancient Eireann, and to which the Irish people are returning in ever increasing numbers, the most brilliant and famous exponent of which the world has known, Paul Morphy of Louisiana, is claimed to have been of Irish extraction.

A courteous reply was received from Mr. O'Hegarty. The Chairman of the Games Chess Committee requested our co-operation, which was readily granted. The Report for 1924 states that the Chess section of the Games was well supported by our members, that Professor W. E. Thrift put up a splendid fight, and only lost by half a point to Mr. P. Baker, the Irish Champion (1924, 1927-1929), who joined the club in 1924.

In 1923 the club won the Armstrong Cup by eight matches to nil, and at the general meeting of that year (November 19th) Sir Horace made two more suggestions of importance. He suggested a history of the club, and Geo. Peyton, M.D., LL.D., who was a member from 1905 to 1932, undertook to write it, and the Secretary was instructed to give him access to our archives. Dr. Peyton was Librarian from 1923 to 1931, and he gave talks on the Library at the general meetings of 1924 and 1929, and a talk on the history of chess in 1930 ; he also revised the club rules in 1924 ; but there is no further mention in our

records of his history of the club, and if he wrote it, it has not come to us. The present work is an attempt to fill the gap, and thus give effect to Sir Horace's suggestion.

Sir Horace's third suggestion looked forward, not back; it was broadly conceived, and a characteristic product of the new sense of independence and national spirit. He proposed the establishment of a representative organisation for Irish chess. Let us call a conference, he said, of all chess-playing bodies in the city, and persuade them to join in setting up in the Capital "a chess club worthy of the country." The meeting received the President's suggestion with some hesitation. He was obviously thinking of something more than a paper organisation with annual, voluntary officers. He must have thought of some central body with a local habitation, able to speak for all the main chess clubs, to guide, control and foster the game, and place Ireland on the chess map of the world.

The proposal of the President was referred to the Committee, who after considering it reported that it was not feasible at present, "owing to the difficult conditions prevailing throughout the country, and also the apparent numerical weakness and inactivity of the other Dublin Clubs from whom little support could be expected." That was the only possible verdict in 1923; but that was nearly half a century ago. Has not the time come to take another look at Sir Horace's proposal? All Dublin players appreciate the work of existing organisations, who manage the inter-club competitions, and the provincial and national championships. Scores of officers sacrifice their own playing time in order to raise the standards, and supply good chess to others, and keep up Ireland's reputation. But are we satisfied with the results? I raise the question, and leave it to others to answer. But if there is to be another look at Sir Horace's suggestion, could there be a better time for doing so than the centenary of that Dublin club where the suggestion was made, and which in its own small way has done its best for representative chess, and has never been content to provide play for its members only.

In 1924 Sir Horace resigned the Presidency, as he was leaving the country. As a recognition of his many services he was elected an Honorary Member of the club. Acknowledging the honour he said that though absent he would be as keen as ever on the welfare of the club. He was as

good as his word. One of his first actions was to send a cheque for £10 in lieu of the subscription which was no longer payable. For many years he kept in touch, sending telegrams of greetings to our general meetings, and other messages through his nephew, Lord Dunsany. When he died in 1932 sincere regret was felt in the club, which was voiced in the fine tribute paid to his memory in the Annual Report of that year.

It is pleasing to record that the family connection which began with the election of the Hon. Curzon Plunkett of Dunsany in 1878 was continued in the person of Sir Horace's nephew, Lord Dunsany. Lord Dunsany joined the club in 1924 and was elected an Honorary member in 1955. Besides being a good friend of the club he was a distinguished chess player of an original turn of mind. He was modest about his over-the-board play, but, as will appear in the next chapter, he made a special study of chess problems, their construction and solution. He was President of the Irish Chess Union.

To continue reading further chapters of Luce's history, return to the history page of the club's website and click on the chapter of your choice. The next chapter is Chapter 4.