



Sherlock Holmes and the chess

(Brief summary of my article in Italian)

Did Sherlock Holmes know the chess?
We introduce some examples that reveal the knowledge of the chess from the famous detective.

The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier, (1)

His great eyebrows came down over his eyes, and he tapped his fingers impatiently on the table. He looked up at last with the expression of one who has seen his adversary make a dangerous move at chess, and has decided how to meet it.

The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone (2)

Holmes looked at him thoughtfully like a master chess-player who meditates his crowning move.

Therefore, Sherlock Holmes knew the chess.

But would the genial investigator also have been a genial chess player?

You imagine the study in red, Holmes and Watson that study the position of the pieces on a chessboard. Watson observes:

- Nobody would have believed in your victory after that sacrifice of knight that to so many, to the club, is seemed risky and out of every logic.
- It was the only move by to do for achieving a bright victory. All had been calculated. In the chess the signs are clear but not all know how to decipher them. This is the difference that exists between a master and a good amateur.
- You want to say that you have been able to calculate all the possible consequences before effecting that sacrifice?
- Certainly, Watson.
- But it dealt with twelve moves and of all the possible variations.
- The variations would have brought to a more rapid mate, as it are easy to verify. I have treated the game, since the principle, as a mystery to be resolved. The iron logic of the movement of the pieces of the chess cannot lie. The movements of the chess are not unpredictable as those of an assassin or of a thief. The strength of the deductive method is applicable in many fields: in the criminology, in the science, in the medicine.
- And in the chess.
- Is evident, Watson.

But Conan Doyle didn't write only stories on Conan Doyle but also stories on the mystery and of adventures. Also in these books it is possible to find references to the chess.

Here are some examples:

1) **Sir Nigel** (3)

one small table littered with chessmen.

carrying over the small table and the chessmen, he proposed that they should play their usual game before they sought their rooms for the night. But a sudden and

*rude interruption broke in upon their gentle contest ...
The old dame and Nigel had both sprung to their feet,
their table overturned and their men scattered among
the rushes.*

2) **J. Habakuk Jephson's Stetement (4)**

November 8, 9

Played chess with Harton in the evening.

3) **Uncle Bernac A Memory of the Empire (5)**

Lesage stood by the table, with his fat brown book in his hand, looking at me with a composed face, but with that humorous questioning twinkle in his eyes which a master chess-player might assume when he had left his opponent without a move.

4) **The White Company. (6)**

Is a novel of adventures, tournaments, battles in England, France and Spain of the XIV century.

Sir Nigel Loring, rider English, commands the White Company composed by the squire Alleyne, the archer Samkin, the John of Hordle and from Simon the Black.

In the chapter XI (entitled *How a Young Shepherd had a Perilous Flock*) we find a double interesting reference to the chess.

The White Company reaches the castle of Twynham. Alleyne, the squire, waiting for the arrival of Sir Nigel, it observes the room of the castle:

All this Alleyne examined with curious eyes; but most interesting of all to him was a small ebony table at his very side, on which, by the side of a chess-board and the scattered chessmen, there lay an open manuscript written in a right clerkly hand, and set forth with brave

flourishes and devices along the margins. In vain Alleyne bethought him of where he was, and of those laws of good breeding and decorum which should restrain him: those colored capitals and black even lines drew his hand down to them, as the loadstone draws the needle, until, almost before he knew it, he was standing with the romance of Garin de Montglane before his eyes, so absorbed in its contents as to be completely oblivious both of where he was and why he had come there.

He was brought back to himself, however, by a sudden little ripple of quick feminine laughter. Aghast, he dropped the manuscript among the chessmen and stared in bewilderment round the room. It was as empty and as still as ever. Again he stretched his hand out to the romance, and again came that roguish burst of merriment.

The reference to the book **Garin de Montglane** (open nearby to a chessboard!) it is the sign that we looked for and that it concludes our investigation: Conan Doyle not only knew the chess but it knew (at least in this case) the correlation between the medieval literature and the chess.

As I have put in evidence in the volume **Scacchi, Dame e Cavalieri - Re, Regine, Nobili e scudieri** the **Garin de Montglane** (XIII century, Carolingian cycle) it narrates the dramatic challenge to chess between Garin and the emperor Charlemagne:

Garin is a French rider, famous chessplayer. Charlemagne, bothered by the gallantries of Garin toward the Queen, challenge Garin to a chess. The game is tall for both. If Charlemagne will be defeated he will lose his wife and the kingdom of France. If,

instead it will be Garin to lose, to him the head will be cut.

*"Si je perds", lui dit Charlemagne,
"vous recevrez tel don qu'il vous plaira,
même celui de ma couronne et de ma femme;
si je gagne, je vous fais aussitôt trancher la tête".*

Garin accepts and wins the game. Wisely and magnanimously, however, it doesn't accept the two prizes and he asks, as it compensates, the feud of Montglane (or Monglane, today Lion).

It is evident that the chessboard and the book are tightly connected, that the book of Montglane is not casually found open next to the chessboard.

This is a well precise sign on the knowledges literary connected to the chess of Conan Doyle.

Notes:

- 1) The story is contained in **The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes**, 1927.
- 2) The story is contained in **The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes**, 1927.
- 3) **Sir Nigel** published by Smith, Elder & Co., London - 1906.
- 4) **The Captain of the Polestar And Other Tales** published by Longmans & Co., London - 1890.
- 5) **Uncle Bernac - A Memory of the Empire**, published by Smith, Elder & Co., London - 1897.
- 6) **The White Company** published by Smith, Elder & Co., London - 1891.

[From the book **Le citazioni scacchistiche dei libri di Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** - Citazioni vol. 5]

Reviewed article on **Sherlock magazine** [Sherlock magazine](#)

(San Gregorio, 07/01/2008)

Copyright: Carmelo Coco.

[Ritorna alla Home Page](#)

[Back to Index "English version"](#)