THE CHAMPIONSHIP OF TENNIS.

THE following remarks have nothing to do with lawn-tennis, and lovers of lawn-tennis may therefore pass them by. To those who know and love the old game, the game of kings and king of games, as it has been called, no apology is necessary, I hope, for putting forth a few observations on the recent match for the professional championship of tennis, which has excited very strong interest among the devotees of the game in England, in America, and in many Continental cities. The occasion was exceptional. The championship was held by a young player, Thomas Pettitt by name, a native of Kent, but domiciled in America, though not yet, as I am told, an American citizen. He is just thirty years of age. Five years ago he came over to England, and, after a struggle which was spread over three days, defeated our best English professional, George Lambert, who had occupied the position of champion for about fifteen years. His recent challenger was Charles Saunders, our best living player on this side the ocean, and a year younger than Pettitt. Considerable difficulties were encountered before the arrangements for the match could be completed. Pettitt wanted the match to be played in Boston, in his own familiar court, though he had won the championship here in a neutral court; then he wanted it to be played with American balls, which are different from English balls, lighter, smaller, and inferior in other respects. Saunders agreed to play in Boston, but stood out for English balls, as being the best, as well as being similar to those with which Pettitt had achieved his former victory; but this did not satisfy the champion. At last it was settled that the match should be played in Sir Edward Guinness's court, in Dublin, but with French balls. The court selected was unquestionably neutral, and the balls equally unfamiliar to both players, but not as good or durable as those of English make. By another condition both players were forbidden to strike a single ball, either in practice or in the usual preliminary "tossing," before the commencement of play, a senseless limitation, the only effect of which was that both players were at first unable to judge the bound of the ball, and the deviser of the condition was incapacitated in that respect for even a longer time than his opponent.

The court, like the castle of "The Young King of the Black Isles," was "of black polished marble," and very nearly "as smooth as glass." It was entirely built of Irish marble, I believe, from quarries in Connemara. One effect of this construction was that the players and the ball were mirrored, as "in a glass, darkly," on floor and walls—a rather distressing feature, both to the players and to the marker. Another effect was that Saunders slipped at one point, and fell on his face and knees. Fortunately the fall caused nothing more than temporary shock and discomposure to the unlucky player.

Pettitt has a rather violent and eccentric style, developed out of his inner consciousness, but somewhat displeasing to lovers of the recognised, orthodox method, which has been approved by many generations of European players and critics. It is successful, and that is its justification. Among his eccentricities was one in which he frequently "forced" the ball for the dedans (that is, drove it straight for the spectators' gallery, always a winning stroke), even when he was too near the net for such a "force" to be free from danger to the life or limb of his opponent. This is forbidden by the etiquette, or unwritten law, of English courts, in which we play to win, but not at the risk of slaying our adversaries. In France it is forbidden, as it should be also in this country, by the printed laws. He was warned against this practice, both publicly and privately, and his backers, as I am informed, inquired and learned the usage of the Paris courts before the match took place.

"But they say," said a *Herald* representative to the American champion, "that you appear to forget that there is a floor in the court, and that your ferocious style is likely to abolish fine tennis?" "Don't you believe it," he replied. "They call it slogging. Fossil players expect one to do per rule, according to their reading only—to lob the ball in the spot they expect it. To send it in strong or in unexpected places is rank heresy. Indeed, some old ducks, sixty years of age, as Barre when he tackled Tompkins, can play this antiquated tennis lively, as the ancients danced a minuet." "Did you ever kill or maim an adversary?" "No accident ever happened in my experience. To talk about danger from my style is all babble." His style in prose is as delightful as in tennis. Mr. Fiske-Warren, the American amateur champion, says that when Pettitt begins slogging, his opponent usually lies down on the floor of the court at Boston, Mass.

The argument on Pettitt's side is that the "antiquated" European is like M. Jourdain, who, when hard pressed with the foils by Nicole, cried, "Oui; mais tu me pousses en tierce, avant que de pousser en quarte, et tu n'as pas la patience que je pare!" To this our reply is, that his attack resembles rather the famous "coup de Jarnac," and is unexpected because it is a "coup déloyal," opposed to all the written or unwritten laws of the game, and one by which the striker risks causing the slaughter, rather than the defeat, of his opponent.

I gladly avow that, in deference, perhaps, to the public and private advice which he received, Pettitt refrained in this match from any infraction of the general law, or custom, in this matter. His play was perfectly fair throughout. Nor was there any need for such extreme measures, had he been minded to employ them. Much as he showed his versatility and capacity for learning and adopting his adversary's style in the match which he played against Lambert in 1885, he showed even more power of adaptation on the present occasion. Whether he chose the Dublin court because it was neutral, or because he thought it would suit his game better than

any English court—for both reasons have been suggested—he discovered on the first day of the match that it did not suit the slogging style, for it is more restricted in height (by a wire netting) than other courts, and his hard hits, when not perfectly accurate, flew up to the net, and were scored against him. No sooner had he recognised this little fact than he immediately changed his tactics and remodelled his style for the occasion. The floor now occupied his attention, and he played upon it persistently, except in special cases, in which he now and again developed his startling and lightning-like "force."

It was curious to observe, as a study of character, how he thus modified his usual play, while his adversary, unconsciously imitating the vices of Pettitt's former style, began, in the stress of the contest, to play wildly and in the air, not often with commensurate success. Here, I think, lay the difference between the two men. Pettitt adapted himself at once, and instinctively, to the circumstances which controlled the combat; but Saunders was slower to recognise these conditions, attempted a slashing style, which was unsuccessful, and was constantly urged towards this course by the "service" of his antagonist, who never varied from the underhand delivery, which almost prevents the recipient from "cutting" his return.

On the first day, Saunders won three sets out of four. On the second, he lost as many out of the same total. On the third, with four sets to the credit of each player, and an exactly even number of strokes (209) won by each, confidence in our English player had abated, and the champion was expected to win. His task, however, was not easy. Saunders "played up," as they say, in most manly and courageous fashion, took his punishment "like a gentleman," and made the best fight he could in the circumstances. But the champion "carried too many guns" for him. The "rests"—as we call the protracted struggles for the decision of single strokes, or points—were frequently very long and stubbornly contested on both sides, the returns of the ball were fast, and often marvellous; but the American steadily wore down his antagonist's powers of resistance, and ended by winning three out of the four sets played that day. He thus secured the seven sets necessary to decide the match, and so won the stakes and retained the championship.

I am aware that I have been taxed with being prejudiced against Pettitt's style, and have been accused of criticising it elsewhere with undue severity. This is an accusation which I wish to repel with the strongest possible denial. But I have seen all the best exponents of the game, of the present and the last generations, and I find their style diametrically opposed to the principles on which he plays. His powers of eye and hand I recognise with as much admiration as anyone. But I think that he would now be even a greater player than he is if he could adopt some of their qualities and excellencies.

I cannot, perhaps, better corroborate my opinion than by quoting the words of two of the best living amateur players and judges of the game, Mr. J. M. Heathcote, who was the amateur champion of England for more than a quarter of a century, and the Hon. Alfred Lyttelton, his successor in that position. In the recent volume of the Badminton Library ("Tennis, Lawn-Tennis," &c.), the first of these gentlemen writes:—"I now come to Pettitt. . . . He came to England in 1883. . . . At that time his style could hardly have been more faulty than it was. He knew little about cutting the ball, he had never seen any good play, and a boasted force was a revelation to him. . . . At present (1890) his style can scarcely be looked on as a model for imitation. . . . He is not a master of the subtle refinements of that ideal feature of the game, the 'cut'; and, although his activity and admirable physique preclude any imputation of awkwardness, his stroke partakes more of the character of a 'hit' than the easy grace of a finished player." This cannot be called an unkindly appreciation. Mr. Lyttelton, in criticising the play of a great cricketer, writes thus:—"There is a certain uncouthness and stiffness noticeable in the performance. Thus, he who measures skilfulness by success will be abundantly satisfied; but he who, while giving full weight to supreme success, demands also consummate 'form,' will find something lacking even in the greatest cricketer the world has ever seen. The scorer will be filled with good things, but he whose heart is set upon beauty of style will be sent empty away. These observations apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to some others among the foremost players of games—conspicuously, for instance, to Pettitt, the champion tennis-player."

Well, style or no style, Pettitt has won his match, as he deserved to do, by indomitable energy and perseverance, allied with extraordinary natural gifts; and we do not grudge him his victory. We must hope that Saunders will reverse the result on a future day; or, failing his success, that we may raise another aspirant worthy of the champion's place and honours. In the meanwhile, I must express the earnest wish that the amateurs of England, in conjunction, if possible, with those of the United States, would lay their heads together to formulate a set of regulations for the management of matches for this championship in the future, so that we may have no more unseemly disputations when the next occasion arises for the playing of such a match.

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