

A Set of Chessmen

By Richard Marsh

I

“But, Monsieur, perceive how magnificent they are! There is not in Finistère, there is not in Brittany, nay, it is certain there is not in France so superb a set of chessmen. And ivory! And the carving—observe, for example, the variety of detail.”

They certainly were a curious set of chessmen, magnificent in a way, but curious first of all. As M. Bobineau remarked, holding a rook in one hand and a knight in the other, the care paid to details by the carver really was surprising. But two hundred and fifty francs! For a set of chessmen!

“So, so, my friend. I am willing to admit that the work is good—in a kind of way. But two hundred and fifty francs! Wit were fifty, now?”

“Fifty!” Up went M. Bobineau’s shoulders, and down went M. Bobineau’s head between them, in the fashion of those toys which are pulled by a string. “Ah, mon Dieu! Monsieur laughs at me!”

And there came another voluble declaration of their merits. They certainly were a curious set. I really think they were the most curious set I ever saw. I would have preferred them, for instance, to anything they have at South Kensington, and they have some remarkable examples there. And, of course, the price was small—I even admit it was ridiculously small. But when one has only five thousand francs a year for everything, two hundred and fifty being taken away—and for a set of chessmen—do leave a vacancy behind. I asked Bobineau where he got them. Business was slack that sunny afternoon—it seemed to me that I was the only customer he ever had, but that must have been a delusion on my part. Report said he was a warm man, one of Morlaix’s warmest men, and his queer old shop in the queer old Grande Rue—Grande Rue! what a name for an alley!—contained many things which were valuable as well as queer. But there, at least, was no other customer in sight just then, so Bobineau told me all the tale.

It seemed there had been a M. Funichon—Auguste Funichon—no, not a Breton, a Parisian, a true Parisian, who had come and settled down in the commune of Plouigneau, over by the *gare*. This M. Funichon was, for example, a little—well, a little—a little *exalted*, let us say. It is true that the country people said he was stark mad, but Bobineau, for his part, said non, no, no! It is not necessary, because one is a little eccentric, that one is mad. Here Bobineau looked at me out of the corner of his eye. Are not the English, of all people, the most eccentric, and yet is it not known to all the world that they are not, necessarily, stark mad? This M. Funichon was not rich, quite the contrary. It was a little place he lived in—the merest cottage, in fact. And in it he lived alone, and, according to report, there was only one thing he did all day and all night long, and that was, play chess. It appears that he was that rarest and most amiable of imbeciles, a chess-maniac. Is there such a word?

“What a life!” said M. Bobineau. “Figure it to yourself! To do nothing—nothing!—but play chess! They say”—M. Bobineau looked round him with an air of mystery—“they say he starved himself to death. He was so besotted by his miserable chess that he forgot—absolutely forgot, this imbecile—to eat.”

That was what M. Bobineau said they said. It required a vigorous effort of the imagination to quite take it in. To what a state of forgetfulness must a man arrive before he forgets to eat! But whether M. Funichon forgot to eat, or whether he didn't, at least he died, and being dead they sold his goods—why they sold them was not quite clear, but at the sale M. Bobineau was the chief purchaser. One of the chief lots was the set of ivory chessmen which had caught my eye. They were the dead man's favourite set, and no wonder! Bobineau was of the opinion that if he had had his way he would have had them buried with him in his grave.

"It is said," he whispered, again with the glance of mystery around, "that they found him dead, seated at the table, the chessmen on the board, his hand on the white rook, which was giving mate to the adversary's king."

Either what a vivid imagination had Bobineau or what odd things the people said! One pictures the old man, seated all alone, with his last breath finishing his game.

Well, I bought the set of ivory chessmen. At this time of day I freely admit that they were cheap at two hundred and fifty francs—dirt cheap, indeed; but a hundred was all I paid. I knew Bobineau so well—I daresay he bought them for twenty-five. As I bore them triumphantly away my mind was occupied by thoughts of their original possessor. I was filled by quite a sentimental tenderness as I meditated on the part they had played, according to Bobineau, in that last scene. But St Servan drove all those things away. Philippe Henri de St Servan was rather a difficult person to get on with. It was with him I shared at that time my apartment on the *place*.

"Let us see!" I remarked when I got in, "what have I here?"

He was seated, his country pipe in his mouth, at the open window, looking down upon the river. The Havre boat was making ready to start—at Morlaix the nautical event of the week. There was quite a bustle on the quay. St Servan just looked round, and then looked back again. I sat down and untied my purchase.

"I think there have been criticisms—derogatory criticisms—passed by a certain person upon a certain set of chessmen. Perhaps that person will explain what he has to say to these."

St Servan marched up to the table. He looked at them through his half-closed eyelids.

"Toys!" was all he said.

"Perhaps! Yet toys which made a tragedy. Have you ever heard of the name of Funichon?" By a slight movement of his grisly grey eyebrows he intimated that it was possible he had. "These chessmen belonged to him. He had just finished a game with them when they found him dead—the winning piece, a white rook, was in his hand. Suggest an epitaph to be placed over his grave. There's a picture for a painter—eh?"

"Bah! He was a Communist!"

That was all St Servan said. And so saying, St Servan turned away to look out of the window at the Havre boat again. There was an end of M. Funichon for him. Not that he meant exactly what he said. He simply meant that M. Funichon was not Legitimist—out of sympathy with the gentlemen who met, and decayed, visibly, before the naked eye, at the club on the other side of the *place*. With St Servan not to be Legitimist meant to be nothing at all—out of his range of vision absolutely. Seeing that was so, it is strange he should have borne with me as he did. But he was a wonderful old man.

II

We played our first game with the ivory chessmen when St Servan returned from the club. I am free to confess that it was an occasion for me. I had dusted all the pieces, and had the board all

laid when St Servan entered, and when we drew for choice of moves the dominant feeling in my mind was the thought of the dead man sitting all alone, with the white rook in his hand. There was an odour of sanctity about the affair—a whiff of air from the land of the ghosts.

Nevertheless, my loins were girded up, and I was prepared to bear myself as a man in the strife. We were curiously well matched, St Servan and I. We had played two hundred and twenty games, and, putting draws aside, each had scored the same number of wins. He had his days, and so had I. At one time I was eleven games ahead, but since that thrice blessed hour I had not scored a single game. He had tracked me steadily, and eventually had made the scores exactly tie. In these latter days it had grown with him to be an article of faith that as a chess-player I was quite played out—and there was a time when I had thought the same of him!

He won the move, and then, as usual, there came an interval for reflection. The worst thing about St Servan—regarded from a chess-playing point of view—was, that he took such a time to begin. When a man has opened his game it is excusable—laudable, indeed—if he pauses to reflect, a reasonable length of time. But I never knew a man who was so fond of reflection before a move was made. As a rule, that absurd habit of his had quite an irritating effect upon my nerves, but that evening I felt quite cool and prepared to sit him out.

There we sat, both smoking our great pipes, he staring at the board, and I at him. He put out his hand, almost touched a piece, and then, with a start, he drew it back again. An interval—the same pantomime again. Another interval—and a repetition of the pantomime. I puffed a cloud of smoke into the air, and softly sighed. I knew he had been ten minutes by my watch. Possibly the sign had a stimulating effect, for he suddenly stretched out his hand and moved queen's knight's pawn a single square.

I was startled. He was great at book openings, that was the absurdest part of it. He would lead you to suppose that he was meditating something quite original, and then would perhaps begin with fool's mate after all. He, at least, had never tried queen's knight's pawn a single square before.

I considered a reply. Pray let it be understood—though I would not have confessed it to St Servan for the world—that I am no player. I am wedded to the same for an hour or two at night, or, peradventure, of an afternoon at times; but I shall never be admitted to its inner mysteries—never! Not if I outspan Methuselah. I am not built that way. St Servan and I were two children who, loving the sea, dabble their feet in the shallows left by the tide. I have no doubt that there are a dozen replies to that opening of his, but I did not know one then. I had some hazy idea of developing a game of my own, while keeping an eye on his, and for that purpose put out my hand to move the queen's pawn two, when I felt my wrist grasped by—well, by what felt uncommonly like an invisible hand. I was so startled that I almost dropped my pipe. I drew my hand back again, and was conscious of the slight detaining pressure of unseen fingers. Of course it was hallucination, but it seemed so real, and was so expected, that—well, I settled my pipe more firmly between my lips—it had all but fallen from my mouth, and took a whiff or two to calm my nerves. I glanced up, cautiously, to see if St Servan noticed my unusual behaviour, but his eyes were fixed stonily upon the board.

After a moment's hesitation—it was absurd!—I stretched out my hand again. The hallucination was repeated, and in a very tangible form. I was distinctly conscious of my wrist being wrenched aside and guided to a piece I had never meant to touch, and almost before I was aware of it, instead of the move I had meant to make, I had made a servile copy of St Servan's opening—I had moved queen's knight's pawn a single square!

To adopt the language of the late Dick Swiveller, that was a staggerer. I own that for an instant I was staggered. I could do nothing else but stare. For at least ten seconds I forgot to smoke. I was conscious that when St Servan saw my move he knit his brows. Then the usual interval for reflection came again. Half unconsciously I watched him. When, as I supposed, he had decided on his move, he stretched out his hand, as I had done, and also, as I had done, he drew it back again. I was a little startled—he seemed a little startled too. There was a momentary pause; back went his hand again, and, by way of varying the monotony, he moved—king’s knight’s pawn a single square.

I wondered, and held my peace. There might be a gambit based upon these lines, or there might not; but since I was quite clear that I knew no reply to such an opening I thought I would try a little experiment, and put out my hand, not with the slightest conception of any particular move in my head, but simply to see what happened. Instantly a grasp fastened on my wrist; my hand was guided to—king’s knight’s pawn a single square.

This was getting, from every point of view, to be distinctly interesting. The chessmen appeared to be possessed of a property of which Bobineau had been unaware. I caught myself wondering if he would have insisted on a higher price if he had known of it. Curiosities nowadays do fetch such fancy sums—and what price for a ghost? They appeared to be automatic chessmen, automatic in a sense entirely their own.

Having made my move, or having had somebody else’s move made for me, which is perhaps the more exact way of putting it, I contemplated my antagonist. When he saw what I had done, or what somebody else had done—the things are equal—St Servan frowned. He belongs to the bony variety, the people who would not loll in a chair to save their lives—his aspect struck me as being even more poker-like than usual. He meditated his reply an unconscionable length of time, the more unconscionable since I strongly doubted if it would be his reply after all. But at last he showed signs of action. He kept his eyes fixed steadily upon the board, his frown became pronounced, and he began to raise his hand. I write “began,” because it was a process which took some time. Cautiously he brought it up, inch by inch. But no sooner had he brought it over the board than his behaviour became quite singular. He positively glared, and to my eyes seemed to be having a struggle with his own right hand. A struggle in which he was worsted, for he leant back in his seat with a curiously discomfited air.

He had moved queen’s rook’s pawn two squares—the automatic principle which impelled these chessmen seemed to have a partiality for pawns.

It was my turn for reflection. I pressed the tobacco down in my pipe, and thought—or tried to think—it out. Was it an hallucination, and was St Servan the victim of hallucination too? Had I moved those pawns spontaneously, actuated by the impulse of my own free will, or hadn’t I? And what was the meaning of the little scene I had just observed? I am a tolerably strong man. It would require no slight exercise of force to compel me to move one piece when I had made up my mind that I would move another piece instead. I have been told, and I believe not altogether untruly told, that the rigidity of my right wrist resembles iron. I have not spent so much time in the tennis-court and fencing-room for nothing. I had tried one experiment. I thought I would try another. I made up my mind that I would move queen’s pawn two—stop me who stop can.

I felt that St Servan in his turn was watching me. Preposterously easy though the feat appeared to be as I resolved on its performance, I was conscious of an unusual degree of cerebral excitement—a sort of feeling of do or die. But as, in spite of the feeling, I didn’t do, it was perhaps as well I didn’t die. Intending to keep complete control over my own muscles, I raised my right hand, probably to the full as cautiously as St Servan had done. I approached the queen’s

pawn. I was just about to seize the piece when that unseen grasp fastened on my wrist. I paused, with something of the feeling which induces the wrestler to pause before entering on the veritable tug of war. For one thing, I was desirous to satisfy myself as to the nature of the grasp—what it was that seemed to grasp me.

It seemed to be a hand. The fingers went over the back of my wrist, and the thumb beneath. The fingers were long and thin—it was altogether a slender hand. But it seemed to be a man's hand, and an old man's hand at that. The skin was tough and wrinkled, clammy and cold.

On the little finger there was a ring, and on the first, about the region of the first joint, appeared to be something of the nature of a wart. I should say that it was anything but a beautiful hand, it was altogether too attenuated and clawlike, and I would have betted that it was yellow with age.

At first the pressure was slight, almost as slight as the touch of a baby's hand, with a gentle inclination to one side. But as I kept my own hand firm, stiff, resolved upon my own particular move, with, as it were, a sudden snap, the pressure tightened and, not a little to my discomfiture, I felt my wrist held as in an iron vice. Then, as it must have seemed to St Servan, who, I was aware, was still keenly watching me, I began to struggle with my own hand. The spectacle might have been fun to him, but the reality was, at that moment, anything but fun to me. I was dragged to one side. Another hand was fastened upon mine. My fingers were forced open—I had tightly clenched my fist to enable me better to resist—my wrist was forced down, my fingers were closed upon a piece, I was compelled to move it forward, my fingers were unfastened to replace the piece upon the board. The move completed, the unseen grasp instantly relaxed, and I was free, or appeared to be free, again to call my hand my own.

I had moved queen's rook's pawn two squares. This may seem comical enough to read about, but it was anything but comical to feel. When the thing was done I stared at St Servan, and St Servan stared at me. We stared at each other, I suppose a good long minute, then I broke the pause.

"Anything the matter?" I inquired. He put up his hand and curled his moustache, and, if I may say so, he curled his lip as well. "Do you notice anything odd about—about the game?" As I spoke about the game I motioned my hand towards my brand-new set of chessmen. He looked at me with hard suspicious eyes.

"Is it a trick of yours?" he asked.

"Is what a trick of mine?"

"If you do not know, then how should I?"

I drew a whiff or two from my pipe, looking at him keenly all the time, then signed towards the board with my hand.

"It's your move," I said.

He merely inclined his head. There was a momentary pause. When he stretched out his hand he suddenly snatched it back again, and half started from his seat with a stifled execration.

"Did you feel anything upon your wrist?" I asked.

"Mon Dieu! It is not what I feel—see that!"

He was eyeing his wrist as he spoke. He held it out under the glare of the lamp. I bent across and looked at it. For so old a man he had a phenomenally white and delicate skin—under the glare of the lamp the impressions of finger-marks were plainly visible upon his wrist. I whistled as I saw them.

"Is it a trick of yours?" he asked again.

"It is certainly no trick of mine."

"Is there anyone in the room besides us two?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked round. He too looked round, with something I thought not quite easy in his glance.

“Certainly no one of my acquaintance, and certainly no one who is visible to me!”

With his fair white hand—the left, not the one which had the finger-marks upon the wrist—St Servan smoothed his huge moustache.

“Someone, or something, has compelled me—yes, from the first—to move, not as I would, but—bah! I know not how.”

“Exactly the same thing has occurred to me.”

I laughed. St Servan glared. Evidently the humour of the thing did not occur to him, he being the sort of man who would require a surgical operation to make him see a joke. But the humorous side of the situation struck me forcibly.

“Perhaps we are favoured by the presence of a ghost—perhaps even by the ghost of M. Funichon. Perhaps, after all, he has not yet played his last game with his favourite set. He may have returned—shall we say from—where?—to try just one more set-to with us! If, my dear sir”—I waved my pipe affably, as though addressing an unseen personage—“it is really you, I beg you will reveal yourself—materialize is, I believe, the expression now in vogue—and show us the sort of ghost you are!”

Somewhat to my surprise, and considerably to my amusement, St Servan rose from his seat and stood by the table, stiff and straight as a scaffold-pole.

“These, Monsieur, are subjects on which one does not jest.”

“Do you, then, believe in ghosts?” I knew he was a superstitious man—witness his fidelity to the superstition of right divine—but this was the first inkling I had had of how far his superstition carried him.

“Believe!—In ghosts! In what, then, do you believe? I, Monsieur, am a religious man.

“Do you believe, then, that a ghost is present with us now—the ghost, for instance, of M. Funichon?”

St Servan paused. Then he crossed himself—actually crossed himself before my eyes. When he spoke there was a peculiar dryness in his tone.

“With your permission, Monsieur, I will retire to bed.”

There was an exasperating thing to say! There must be a large number of men in the world who would give—well, a good round sum, to light even on the trail of a ghost. And here were we in the actual presence of something—let us say apparently curious, at any rate, and here was St Servan calmly talking about retiring to bed, without making the slightest attempt to examine the thing! It was enough to make the members of the Psychical Research Society turn in their graves. The mere suggestion fired my blood.

“I do beg, St Servan, that you at least will finish the game.” I saw he hesitated, so I drove the nail well home. “Is it possible that you, a brave man, having given proofs of courage upon countless fields, can turn tail at what is doubtless an hallucination after all?”

“Is it that Monsieur doubts my courage?”

I knew the tone—if I was not careful I should have an affair upon my hands.

“Come, St Servan, sit down and finish the game.”

Another momentary pause. He sat down, and—it would not be correct to write that we finished the game, but we made another effort to go on. My pipe had gone out. I refilled and lighted it.

“You know, St Servan, it is really nonsense to talk about ghosts.”

“It is a subject on which I never talk.”

“If something does compel us to make moves which we do not intend, it is something which is capable of a natural explanation.”

“Perhaps Monsieur will explain it, then?”

“I will! Before I’ve finished! If you only won’t turn tail and go to bed! I think it very possible, too, that the influence, whatever it is, has gone—it is quite on the cards that our imagination has played us some subtle trick. It is your move, but before you do anything just tell me what move you mean to make.”

“I will move”—he hesitated—“I will move queen’s pawn.”

He put out his hand, and, with what seemed to me hysterical suddenness, he moved king’s rook’s pawn two squares.

“So! our friend is still here then! I suppose you did not change your mind?”

There was a very peculiar look about St Servan’s eyes.

“I did not change my mind.”

I noticed, too, that his lips were uncommonly compressed.

“It is my move now. *I* will move queen’s pawn. We are not done yet. When I put out my hand you grasp my wrist—and we shall see what we shall see.”

“Shall I come round to you?”

“No, stretch out across the table—now!”

I stretched out my hand; that instant he stretched out his, but spontaneous though the action seemed to be, another, an unseen hand, had fastened on my wrist. He observed it too.

“There appears to be another hand between yours and mine.”

“I know there is.”

Before I had the words well out my hand had been wrenched aside, my fingers unclosed, and then dosed, then unclosed again, and I had moved king’s rook’s pawn two squares. St Servan and I sat staring at each other—for my part I felt a little bewildered.

“This is very curious! Very curious indeed! But before we say anything about it we will try another little experiment, if you don’t mind. I will come over to you.” I went over to him. “Let me grasp your wrist with both my hands.” I grasped it, as firmly as I could, as it lay upon his knee. “Now try to move queen’s pawn.”

He began to raise his hand, I holding on to his wrist with all my strength. Hardly had he raised it to the level of the table when two unseen hands, grasping mine, tore them away as though my strength were of no account. I saw him give a sort of shudder—he had moved queen’s bishop’s pawn two squares.

“This is a devil of a ghost!” I said.

St Servan said nothing. But he crossed himself, not once, but half a dozen times.

“There is still one little experiment that I would wish to make.”

St Servan shook his head.

“Not I!” he said.

“Ah but, my friend, this is an experiment which I can make without your aid. I simply want to know if there is nothing tangible about our unseen visitor except his hands. It is my move.” I returned to my side of the table. I again addressed myself as it were, to an unseen auditor. “My good ghost, my good M. Funichon—if it is you—you are at liberty to do as you desire with my hand.”

I held it out. It instantly was grasped. With my left hand I made several passes in the air up and down, behind and before, in every direction so far as I could. It met with no resistance. There

seemed to be nothing tangible but those invisible fingers which grasped my wrist—and I had moved queen's bishop's pawn two squares.

St Servan rose from his seat.

"It is enough. Indeed it is too much. This ribaldry must cease. It had been better had Monsieur permitted me to retire to bed."

"Then you are sure it is a ghost—the ghost of M. Funichon, we'll say?"

"This time Monsieur must permit me to wish him a good night's rest."

He bestowed on me, as his manner was, a stiff inclination of the head, which would have led a stranger to suppose that we had met each other for the first time ten minutes ago, instead of being the acquaintances of twelve good years. He moved across the room.

"St Servan, one moment before you go! You are surely not going to leave a man alone at the post of peril?"

"It were better that Monsieur should come too."

"Haifa second, and I will. I have only one remark to make, and that is to the ghost."

I rose from my seat. St Servan made a half movement towards the door, then changed his mind and remained quite still.

"If there is any other person with us in the room, may I ask that person to let us hear his voice, or hers? Just to speak one word."

Not a sound.

"It is possible—I am not acquainted with the laws which govern—eh—ghosts that the faculty of speech is denied to them. If that be so, might I ask for the favour of a sign—for instance, move a piece while my friend and I are standing where we are?"

Not a sign; not a chessman moved.

"Then M. Funichon, if it indeed be you, and you are incapable of speech, or even of moving a piece of your own accord, and are only able to spoil our game, I beg to inform you that you are an exceedingly ill-mannered and foolish person, and had far better have stayed away."

As I said this I was conscious of a current of cold air before my face, as though a swiftly moving hand had shaved my cheek.

"By jove, St Servan, something has happened at last. I believe our friend the ghost has tried to box my ears!"

St Servan's reply came quietly stern.

"I think it were better that Monsieur came with me."

For some reason St Servan's almost contemptuous coldness fired my blood. I became suddenly enraged.

"I shall do nothing of the kind! Do you think I am going to be fooled by a trumpery conjuring trick which would disgrace a shilling séance?"

Driven to bed at this time of day by a ghost! And such a ghost! If it were something like a ghost one wouldn't mind; but a fool of a ghost like this!"

Even as the words passed my lips I felt the touch of fingers against my throat. The touch increased my rage. I snatched at them, only to find that there was nothing there.

"Damn you!" I cried. "Funichon, you old fool, do you think that you can frighten me? You see those chessmen; they are mine, bought and paid for with my money—you dare to try and prevent me doing with them exactly as I please."

Again the touch against my throat. It made my rage the more. "As I live, I will smash them all to pieces, and grind them to powder beneath my heel."

My passion was ridiculous—childish even. But then the circumstances were exasperating—unusually so, one might plead. I was standing three or four feet from the table. I dashed forward. As I did so a hand was fastened on my throat. Instantly it was joined by another. They gripped me tightly. They maddened me. With a madman's fury I still pressed forward. I might as well have fought with fate. They clutched me as with bands of steel, and flung me to the ground.

III

When I recovered consciousness I found St Servan bending over me.

“What is the matter?” I inquired, when I found that I was lying on the floor.

“I think you must have fainted.”

“Fainted! I never did such a thing in my life. It must have been a curious kind of faint, I think.”

“It was a curious kind of faint.”

With his assistance I staggered to my feet. I felt bewildered. I glanced round. There were the chessmen still upon the board, the hanging lamp above. I tried to speak I seemed to have lost the use of my tongue. In silence he helped me to the door. He half led, half carried me—for I seemed to have lost the use of my feet as well as that of my tongue—to my bedroom. He even assisted me to undress, never leaving me till I was between the sheets. All the time not a word was spoken. When he went I believe he took the key outside and locked the door.

That was a night of dreams. I know not if I was awake or sleeping, but all sorts of strange things presented themselves to my mental eye. I could not shut them from my sight. One figure was prominent in all I saw—the figure of a man. I knew, or thought I knew, that it was M. Funichon. He was a lean old man, and what I noticed chiefly were his hands. Such ugly hands! In some fantastical way I seemed to be contending with them all through the night.

And yet in the morning when I woke—for I did wake up, and that from as sweet refreshing sleep as one might wish to have—it was all gone. It was bright day. The sun was shining into the great, ill-furnished room. As I got out of bed and began to dress, the humorous side of the thing had returned to me again. The idea of there being anything supernatural about a set of ivory chessmen appeared to me to be extremely funny.

I found St Servan had gone out. It was actually half-past ten! His *table d'hôte* at the Hotel de Bretagne was at eleven, and before he breakfasted he always took a *petit verre* at the club. If he had locked the door overnight he had not forgotten to unlock it before he started. I went into the rambling, barnlike room which served us for a salon. The chessmen had disappeared. Probably St Servan had put them away—I wondered if the ghost had interfered with him. I laughed to myself as I went out—fancy St Servan contending with a ghost.

The proprietor of the Hotel de Bretagne is Legitimist, so all the aristocrats go there—of course, St Servan with the rest. Presumably the landlord's politics is the point, to his cooking they are apparently indifferent—I never knew a worse table in my life! The landlord of the Hotel de l'Europe may be a Communist for all I care—*his* cooking is first-rate, so I go there. I went there that morning. After I had breakfasted I strolled off towards the Grande Rue, to M. Bobineau.

When he saw me M. Bobineau was all smirks and smiles—he must have got those chessmen for *less* than five-and-twenty francs! I asked him if he had any more of the belongings of M. Funichon.

“But certainly! Three other sets of chessmen.”

I didn't want to look at those, apparently one set was quite enough for me. Was that all he had?

“But no! There was an ancient bureau, very magnificent, carved”—I thanked him—nor did I want to look at that. In the Grande Rue at Morlaix old bureaux carved about the beginning of the fifteenth century—if you listen to the vendors—are as plentiful as cobblestones.

“But I have all sorts of things of M. Funichon. It was I who bought them nearly all. Books, papers, and—”

M. Bobineau waved his hands towards a multitude of books and papers which crowded the shelves at the side of his shop. I took a volume down. When I opened it I found it was in manuscript.

“That work is unique!” explained Bobineau. “It was the intention of M. Funichon to give it to the world, but he died before his purpose was complete. It is the record of all the games of chess he ever played—in fifty volumes. Monsieur will perceive it is unique.”

I should think it was unique! In fifty volumes! The one I held was a large quarto, bound in leather, containing some six or seven hundred pages, and was filled from cover to cover with matter in a fine, clear handwriting, written on both sides of the page. I pictured the face of the publisher to whom it was suggested that *he* should give to the world such a work as that.

I opened the volume at the first page. It was, as Bobineau said, apparently the record, with comments, of an interminable series of games of chess. I glanced at the initial game. Here are the opening moves, just as they were given there.

<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
Queen’s Knight’s Pawn, one square.	Queen’s Knight’s Pawn, one square.
King’s Knight’s Pawn, one square.	King’s Knight’s Pawn, one square.
Queen’s Rook’s Pawn, two squares.	Queen’s Rook’s Pawn, one square.
King’s Rook’s Pawn, two squares.	King’s Rook’s Pawn, two squares.

They were exactly the moves of the night before. They were such peculiar moves, and made under such peculiar circumstances, that I was scarcely likely to mistake them. So far as we had gone, St Servan and I, assisted by the unseen hand, had reproduced M. Funichon’s initial game in the first volume of his fifty—and a very peculiar game it seemed to be.

I asked Bobineau what he would take for the volume which I held.

“Monsieur perceives that to part them would spoil the set, which is unique. Monsieur shall have the whole fifty”—I shuddered. I imagine Bobineau saw I did, he spoke so very quickly—“for a five-franc piece, which is less than the value of the paper and the binding.”

I knew then that he had probably been paid for carting the rubbish away. However, I paid him his five-franc piece, and marched off with the volume under my arm, giving him to understand, to his evident disappointment, that at my leisure I would give him instructions as to the other forty-nine.

As I went along I thought the matter over. M. Funichon seemed to have been a singular kind of man—he appeared to have carried his singularity even beyond the grave. Could it have been the cold-blooded intention of his ghost to make us play the whole contents of the fifty volumes through? What a fiend of a ghost his ghost must be!

I opened the volume and studied the initial game. The people were right who had said that the man was mad. None but an imbecile would have played such a game—his right hand against his left!—and none but a raving madman would have recorded his imbecility in black and white, as though it were a thing to be proud of! Certainly none but a criminal lunatic would have endeavoured to foist his puerile travesty of the game and study of chess upon two innocent men.

Still the thing was curious. I flattered myself that St Servan would be startled when he saw the contents of the book I was carrying home. I resolved that I would instantly get out the chessmen and begin another game—perhaps the ghost of M. Funichon would favour us with a further exposition of his ideas of things. I even made up my mind that I would communicate with the Psychical Research Society. Not at all improbably they might think the case sufficiently remarkable to send down a member of their body to inquire into the thing upon the spot. I almost began to hug myself on the possession of a ghost, a ghost, too, which might be induced to perform at will—almost on the principle of “drop a coin into the slot and the figures move”! It was cheap at a hundred francs. What a stir those chessmen still might make! What vexed problems they might solve! Unless I was much mistaken, the expenditure of those hundred francs had placed me on the royal road to immortality.

Filled with such thoughts I reached our rooms. I found that St Servan had returned. With him, if I may say so, he had brought his friends. Such friends! Ye Goths! When I opened the door the first thing which greeted me was a strong, not to say suffocating, smell of incense. The room was filled with smoke. A fire was blazing on the hearth. Before it was St Servan, on his knees, his hands clasped in front of him, in an attitude of prayer. By him stood a priest, in his robes of office. He held what seemed a pestle and mortar, whose contents he was throwing by handfuls on to the flames, muttering some doggerel to himself the while. Behind him were two acolytes,

With nice clean faces, and nice white stoles,

who were swinging censers—hence the odour which filled the room. I was surprised when I beheld all this. They appeared to be holding some sort of religious service—and I had not bargained for that sort of thing when I had arranged with St Servan to share the rooms with him. In my surprise I unconsciously interrupted the proceedings.

“St Servan! Whatever is the meaning of this?”

St Servan looked up, and the priest looked round—that was all the attention they paid to me. The acolytes eyed me with what I conceived to be a grin upon their faces. But I was not to be putdown like that.

“I must ask you, St Servan, for an explanation.”

The priest turned the mortar upside down, and emptied the remainder of its contents into the fire.

“It is finished,” he said.

St Servan rose from his knees and crossed himself.

“We have exorcised the demon,” he observed.

“You have what?” I asked.

“We have driven out the evil spirit which possessed the chessmen.”

I gasped. A dreadful thought struck me.

“You don’t mean to say that you have dared to play tricks with my property?”

“Monsieur,” said the priest, “I have ground it into dust.”

He had. That fool of a St Servan had actually fetched his parish priest and his acolytes and their censers, and between them they had performed a comminatory service made and provided for the driving out of demons. They had ground my ivory chessmen in the pestle and mortar, and then burned them in the fire. And this in the days of the Psychical Research Society! And they had cost me a hundred francs! And that idiot of a ghost had never stretched out a hand or said a word!