TEMPLE BAR

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED "BENTLEY'S MISCELLANY."

A London Magazine

FOR TOWN AND COUNTRY READERS.

THE SEVENTY-FIFTH VOLUME.

SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 1885.

The Chess-Player

by Unknown

Temple Bar
Vol. 75, September 1885

Design:
Formatting: Katherine Nabity
Ornamentation: Via Freepik

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Chapter I.

THOSE WHOSE INTEREST in records of the supernatural is based chiefly, or entirely, upon what is monstrous or horrible, will find little pleasure in the perusal of the following narrative;—a narrative of events most wild, truly, and most strange, yet in themselves most simple. Regarding the *facts* of which I speak, to their truth I can bear witness. That they have filled me with amazement, with perplexity, even with dread, I freely own; but their reality I cannot deny, unless I refuse the evidence of my own senses. As to explanation, that is another matter. On that point I prefer to remain silent, and to content myself with a plain narration, since I confess I am not able to advance any conjecture which a sound judgment could approve, or which would not lay me open to a charge of superstition.

It was towards the close of a dark, heavy, and sombre autumn day that I, together with the messenger who had summoned me, arrived in sight of the house in which my services as a physician were required. It stood on the further shore of a black and silent lake, round which the solitary glades and mountain passes extended for many miles without other sign of human habitation. The spot was, indeed, in the last degree wild and lonely; nor did the aspect of the ancient mansion, black with age against the edge of the black water, do much to relieve the melancholy impressiveness of the scene.

The only way of approach to the mansion lay across the lake. My guide unfastened the chain of a small boat which slept among the sedges at our feet, and having taken my seat in the prow, we pushed off into the dark water. The shore receded, and the two great hills from which we had descended. Before us lay the mansion, backed by still loftier mountains, the peaks of which rose far into the sky. As we approached the building I regarded its details with growing curiosity; the strangeness of its situation, locked, as it were, in a

recess of rock—the moss-grown castellated walls—the ancient tower—the narrow slit-like windows—the flight of steps descending to the water. What strange inhabitant was this, I wondered, who preferred this aged tenement, in its solitude, its wildness, and its glamour, to the luxuriant surroundings of a modern dwelling? Who could support, day after day, and season after season, the lifeless lustre of that inky lake, the unchangeable oppression of those overwatching hills? Certainly, no common person.

"Certainly, no common person." As I repeated these words to myself the boat touched the fungus-tinted granite of the steps ascending to the archway of the door. Another servant appeared at the entrance, who, taking my bag and wrapper, preceded me into a dusky hall, where the light which entered through the deep-set pointed windows was barely sufficient to reveal the rich oaken carving of the walls and ceiling, the ancient and faded tapestries which veiled the doorways, and the spectral gleaming of suspended arms. Nothing here seemed to have been disturbed for ages. Not a sign of modern life was visible. The dust of centuries blackened the rafters. The scent of antiquity was in the air.

Thence I was conducted through many narrow, shadowy, and winding corridors to a small chamber at the other end of the building. This room was furnished in a more recent style, and indeed, except for the scarcity of light occasioned by the same pointed and narrow windows which I had before observed, might have been called a comfortable apartment. The floor and ceiling were, indeed, of the same black oak as before; an antique lamp hung from the roof by a long chain; the door was screened by a curtain of tarnished tapestry: so much was ancient, mediæval. But the walls were surrounded with shelves and stored with books, papers and writing materials lay on the table, and an easy-chair stood invitingly beside a cheerful fire. The room was empty.

"My master will be with you immediately, sir," said the servant. With this announcement he retired, and I was left alone.

As I now stood before the fire, it struck me for the first time as a little remarkable that I did not even know my patient's name. I had been summoned on this errand by mere chance, my door-plate having happened to have been the first to catch the eye of the messenger. I was a new arrival in the neighbourhood and knew little of the residents. Of this remote and singular dwelling I had never so much as heard. I looked round the room. Immediately my attention became arrested and my interest awakened.

Whatever sort of person might turn out to be the owner of this strange place, it was evident that he had one passion in common with myself. On the table stood *a chess-board*, with a game half played. Beside the board lay a note-book, in which seemed to be pencilled remarks on the position. I approached the bookshelves. One whole shelf—some dozens of volumes—contained solely works referring to the game, from the largest German *Handbuch* to the thinnest pamphlet; transactions of chess societies in all parts of the world; bulky scrap-books filled with, cuttings of problems, games, and annotations. Several of the volumes were of the rarest kind, such as I had never hoped to set my eyes on. And I too was a *virtuoso*, and a poor one! Is it any wonder that for some minutes at least I envied the fortunate possessor of these treasures, with all my heart?

I had, however, little time to moralise upon this villainy of fortune. My reflections were cut short by the opening of the door. I turned, and found myself face to face with the object of my envy.

For a moment we looked at each other in silence, and with mutual surprise. I saw before me a man somewhat past the prime of life, with a face which could not but be called beautiful even in its extreme fragility and pallor. I have said that he appeared to be somewhat past the prime of life; but his true age would have been difficult to determine. One who had looked only at his face, and at his strangely bright, yet tintless eyes, would have pronounced him young; yet his hair was the hair of a very old man, being as white as snow or ashes.

The surprise with which I regarded him, however, arose not from his appearance, but from a strange discovery which I made as my eyes fell on his person. Long though it was since I had seen them last, these peculiarities of face and figure were perfectly familiar to me. It was impossible that I could be mistaken.

"Philip—Philip Froissart!" I ejaculated at last, recovering a little from my astonishment.

"What," he answered on his side, "Paul Seldon!" And thereupon we clasped hands with all the cordiality of an old regard.

Strange and unexpected meeting! Five-and-twenty years—the quarter of a century—had passed since I and Philip Froissart had met. As undergraduates of the same college, we had once been close and intimate friends; and I had known as much of Froissart as it was possible to know of a person of his peculiar nature. But from the time of our leaving the University,

our ways of life had drawn us far apart; me to walk a London hospital, Froissart to wander in luxurious idleness to all parts of the civilized world. The circumstances of our life had been wholly different. Each had been carried away by separate billows of the Great Ocean; and thus it happened, as it often does happen in such cases, that though our friendship had never been broken, nor weakened, nor forgotten, we had passed out of each other's sight "like ships upon the sea." And now our paths had crossed again—how strangely! Yet my surprise was not so great as it might have been had I not been well acquainted with the character of my friend. I knew that neither his tastes nor his actions nor his motives were those of other men. I knew the *mysteriousness* (I can find no better term) which shadowed his character from the common eye. I knew well his passion for the singular, the strange, and the fantastic. I remembered his reserve, his love of solitude. The strangely interesting place in which I found him, seemed, indeed, the fitting habitation of such a man. An ancient saying, picked up I know not where, preserved in I know not what "untrodden region of my mind," passed through my brain, "As the eagle inherits the mountain summits, the owl the hollow yew-tree, the eremite the hill-cave, and the corpse the tomb,"—so seemed this old, this time-dimmed mansion, so remote, so strange, so melancholy, so forgotten, the fitting and congenial home of Philip Froissart.

We sat down; and for some moments regarded each other in silence. Although I had not failed to recognise him at first sight, on thus observing him with attention I found that years had not passed without leaving their mark on Froissart. The alteration was not so perceptible in his face or figure as in his voice and manner, which from having formerly been remarkable for their weighty calmness and self-possession now seemed nervous, restless, and agitated.

The appearance of illness—perhaps I should rather say, of disquietude and agitation—in his face recalled to me the purpose for which I had been summoned. I inquired whether it was on his own account that he had sent for medical advice. He replied in the affirmative. What then were his symptoms? What did he suspect?

Froissart answered me with clearness and precision. I gathered from his replies that he was suffering from disorder of the nervous system, accompanied by prolonged insomnia. He had, moreover, lately had suspicion, from certain sensations in that organ, that his heart was affected. "I am not naturally a nervous subject," he added with a melancholy smile, "but at

present I am no better than an old woman, Paul. I fear you will find me quite a ruin, perhaps beyond the capacity of your art to restore."

I sent without delay for my bag, produced a stethoscope, and examined him carefully. I could find nothing wrong; on the contrary, all the important organs of the body were in sound condition. The nervousness, together with the resulting insomnia, of which he spoke, proceeded therefore from some outer cause, which it now became my business to discover. The supposed affection of the heart was merely imaginary.

"Froissart," I said, when I had finished, "I can only account for your state by supposing you to be subject to some secret cause of agitation of which you have not spoken. If such be the case you must not hide it, or I can do nothing for you."

As I said these words Froissart started and regarded me with agitation—but he was silent. The action was not lost on me. I did not think fit to increase his disturbance by pressing the question further; but I paused a moment, so as to give him space to answer, if he pleased. He understood my silence.

"It is just," he said at length, "it is very just. I will not hide it. I have—I *have* a most strange story to tell you, Paul. And it is because it is so strange, so unaccountable, so incredible, that I hesitate to tell it, lest you think me mad or dreaming."

He paused; the tone was peculiar; I waited with much curiosity for him to continue. But my curiosity was doomed, for the time, to disappointment.

"But not now," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "not now. This is neither the time nor the place; and I am ashamed to have kept you here talking about my ailments when you must be dying of hunger. It is true that if I lived like a hermit in a rock I could hardly be more solitary than I am; but my fare is somewhat better than an anchorite's, as I hope to show you. Come."

Curbing the curiosity which his words, and no less his manner, had excited in me—(perhaps the more easily owing to the fact that I was really beginning to feel a little hungry)—I followed Froissart into a neighbouring apartment, where a table was already spread for two persons. This room, like the hall into which I had first been ushered, was of dark and ancient aspect. The silver on the table bore the same impression of antiquity—it was massive, richly wrought, and stamped with a device of armorial arms. Froissart had not exaggerated when he likened himself in solitude to a hermit. His establishment, it appeared, consisted of himself alone, together with the

few domestics necessary for his requirements. Notwithstanding this, the dinner to which we sat down was excellent; the wine was choice; and I secretly applauded Froissart's good sense and taste. I am no *bon vivant*; yet I confess I have much sympathy with the dictum of the great humourist, "I shrink instinctively from one who professes to like minced veal." I noticed, however, that Froissart himself ate little, though he drank with less moderation;—a sign from which I boded ill. I need not say that I observed him with attention—at least I need not say so to one of my own profession. No lynx, no eagle, has, nor needs to have, such eyes as a physician. And I was a physician watching a friend.

As we dined, our conversation, as might have been expected, turned upon the events which had filled the lives of each of us daring the twenty years and more which had elapsed since we had parted. Froissart's life, as he related it, had however been a singularly uneventful one, while, at the same time, it had been essentially characteristic of the man. Many years before, he told me, he had fallen in with the owner of that house, and had accepted an invitation to pass a few days in his company. A strong community of tastes drew together host and guest; days flew by, and still Froissart lingered; days passed into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, and still he and old Martin Sombras—a bachelor like himself—lived together in the solitary mansion. The life suited them both, and, what is more singular, they suited each other. Their days were occupied in scientific investigations, in which both took much interest. Their evenings passed—*in playing chess*, which game was in Sombras an engrossing passion.

I could not conceive why Froissart, as he mentioned this very simple and natural fact (for I well knew his old skill and love of the game), should exhibit a return of that same nervous agitation which I had observed in him before. It was but for a moment, it is true; and yet I was sure that I was not mistaken. It was strange.

In this way, Froissart continued, they had lived together uninterruptedly till three months ago, when old Martin Sombras suddenly died, leaving the house and the whole of his property, which was considerable, to his companion of so many years. Since that time Froissart had lived absolutely alone, nor had he even crossed the lake since the day on which he had seen his old friend carried to the grave—"That lake," he so expressed himself, "over which all worldly rumour flies as slowly, and perishes as surely, as birds that wandered of old over the waters of Aornis."

As Froissart spoke, a picture arose in my mind's eye. I saw again the gloomy water, as it was when I had crossed it in the afternoon—black, impenetrable, stilled as night and death. The fancy struck me at the moment to ask Froissart the cause of the remarkable appearance of the water—so lustrous, yet so sombre.

"I suppose," I said, "the lake is unusually deep?"

"Deep?" he repeated. "You are right; it is so. *How* deep I am unable to tell you. There is an old saying in the neighbourhood that it reaches to the centre of the earth; and the legend, however absurd, shows that the extreme depth of the water has been long known. It is, I believe, an undoubted fact that the lake has never been fathomed."

Froissart rose from the table as he spoke, and led the way back to the library, where our coffee was brought to us by a man servant. Evening had now closed in, and the burning fire and the lighted lamp made the room look warm and comfortable. And yet I felt, without precisely knowing why, a curious uneasiness. Perhaps, scarcely recognised by myself, the recollection of the mystery of which Froissart had obscurely spoken, continued to haunt the inmost recesses of my mind. Froissart, however, made no further allusion to the subject, and I forbore to press him for an explanation, which might not perhaps be agreeable to his humour. He should choose his own time. We had arranged that I should stay with him for a day or two at least—perhaps longer; so that there was no occasion for haste.

It so happened, however, that this very evening was not to pass by without a beginning of those strange events which it has so singularly fallen to my lot to chronicle.

For something unusual, even startling, I was of course to some extent forewarned by the sentences which Froissart had let fall. For what actually occurred, however, it is impossible that any mortal could have been prepared.

I have said that, in spite of the warmth and comfort of the surroundings, I was conscious of a sensation of uneasiness. It was perhaps—or certainly—the steady growth of this sensation over me which at length prompted me to speak of it aloud.

"Froissart," I said suddenly, after a long interval of silence, during which we had both become engrossed in our own thoughts, "there is something about this old house of yours which makes me shiver. What is it? Have you not felt it? It is something ghostly, I am sure."

I said these words of course merely in jest; but Froissart started, as if my

voice had roused him from a reverie. His strange agitation returned; he grew paler than before, gazed at me with a most singular expression, and seemed about to speak—but, as before, after a moment's hesitation, he remained silent. At the same time he glanced at the ancient timepiece which stood over the fireplace, as if suddenly reminded of something he had forgotten.

"Paul," he said, hurriedly, "I must leave you for a short time. I shall probably be back in a few minutes; but if I am detained you will not mind amusing yourself with a book, I know. I am exceedingly sorry to leave you even for a minute, but you will excuse me, I am sure." And murmuring apologies for leaving me alone, he hurried out of the room.

I was so much surprised at the strangeness and excitement of his manner that for a moment I did nothing. Then I sprang from my seat, and followed him. A sudden impulse resolved me to urge him to grant at once the confidence he had promised me, and not to endanger his health further with agitations which he was evidently in no condition to bear. My intervention of course might not be necessary; so much the better if it were not. But I chose to be on the safe side.

When I gained the door, Froissart was already at the end of the corridor; in a moment more I lost sight of him. When I reached the spot where he had been, he was no longer to be seen. There were, however, two ways only which he could have taken. On the right was another gallery which opened out of the one in which I stood; on the left was a dark and narrow flight of stairs which appeared to lead upwards into the tower. Had he taken the gallery he would, I thought, still have been visible—for he would hardly have been able to reach the end of it in so short a time. He must then have taken the stairs.

I stopped, and listened. The flight, as I have said, was dark, and I could *see* nothing; but listening, I thought I heard a sound above as of the unlocking of a door. This decided me. I turned towards the stairs.

I ascended slowly and with caution, for the steps were cramped and winding. Once or twice I stopped and listened; but I could now hear nothing. After what seemed to me an interminable ascent, the stairs came out upon a broad landing on which two or three doors opened. From one of these, at the opposite end of the landing to which I stood, a light shone; and now I could see that Froissart was there, and in the act of striking a light and kindling a lamp. I was about to advance, when the lamp flamed up, and the interior of the room became visible. It was of small dimensions, and seemed to be fitted

up as a workshop. I saw a lathe, a bench, a small forge, a confusion of wood and iron materials, and a quantity of tools. But I did not see these only.

To my extreme surprise, Froissart was not alone. The room was already tenanted.

In the middle of the chamber was a small, low, square table, the top of which was fitted with a chess-board. The pieces, of red and white ivory, were drawn up as at the commencement of a game. At this table a man was already sitting, with his side face turned towards me, and his eyes apparently fixed upon the board. His aspect was singular, not to say startling,—it was that of a foreigner—of an Oriental. His dress consisted of a coiled turban, a long, loose flowing robe, hanging sleeves, a crimson scarf, and a jewelled collar. His complexion appeared to be swarthy; he wore a long grey beard; and he sat before the table in a thoughtful attitude, his elbow resting on the arm of his chair.

I have said that I was surprised—startled; so much it was natural that I should be. The unusual dress and nationality of the figure, especially strange in that place, was sufficient to account for such sensations. Yet neither word describes with exactness the nature of my feelings. My heart trembled in its seat; my blood was troubled in its current. It was as if the uneasy feeling I had previously experienced had suddenly become intensified a hundredfold as my eyes rested on the chequered table, and the figure which sat before it. Are there mysterious influences, not human, which make their presence felt like witch craft, unintelligible to men? What was near me?

Froissart, having lighted the lamp, took his seat at the table opposite the Oriental. His behaviour surprised me much. Even from the distance at which I stood, I could see that he was labouring under strong excitement. On taking his seat, he looked tremulously towards the turbaned figure, and hastily moved a pawn. Then he remained gazing at his opponent without moving or speaking, as if in a sort of fascination.

The feeling of breathless expectancy, which seemed to possess him, extended itself to me. I waited silently, even in trepidation, for what would happen next.

Five minutes wasted—ten minutes—still Froissart sat thus, his eyes fixed intently, eagerly, upon the face before him. My surprise increased; I could not conceive why the other did not move his pawn in answer. The first moves in a game of chess are stereotyped, and require no consideration. Yet the player continued to gaze fixedly at the board, apparently absorbed in

thought, and gave no sign of motion.

A hundred thoughts, surmises, perplexities, speculations, flitted through my brain, each more bewildering than the rest. How came this strange personage to be sitting here alone in the dark tower before Froissart came? What was the cause of Froissart's curious agitation? For what reason had he left me to play chess with this mysterious stranger? Wherefore did the stranger thus refuse to play? And wherefore—above all!—did *I* feel myself so chill, so shaken, as if I had beheld a resurrection from the dead?

As I was vainly endeavouring to conjecture what could be the explanation of these things, or rather, not so much conjecturing as lost in a bewildering sense of their existence, Froissart changed his attitude. He rose, drew a deep breath, and prepared to extinguish the lamp. Had I been capable of feeling further surprise, I think I should have felt it. Nothing had happened —nothing which explained the presence of the stranger, nothing which even suggested a motive for Froissart's visit to the tower—yet he was evidently coming away. As he stretched out his hand to take the lamp, I advanced towards the door. He heard my step, and, turning round and seeing who it was, he came forward at once with the lamp in his hand, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"How did you find your way up here?" he said, in a voice which he strove, not altogether successfully, to render easy and unconcerned. "Have I been long gone?"

I told him—I explained without reserve the reasons which had induced me to follow him. He understood me; he pressed my hand in silence. We descended the stairs together.

"To-morrow," he said—"to-morrow I purpose to tell you all. To-night it is late, and my story is a long one; nor do I feel at this moment either the courage or the humour. Did you see"—dropping his voice to its lowest key —" did you see——"

"I did," I answered, replying to his look; "and I will ask you but one question, Froissart—perhaps a very strange one. Is that figure yonder—is it, or is it not—*alive*?"

We had, as I have said, been descending the stairs as we spoke thus; and we had by this time reached the door of the chamber in which I was to pass the night. Froissart regarded me with a singular expression.

"I know not whether you will decide that I am mad," he said, "if I answer truthfully that question. Perhaps you would be justified in so thinking,

though you would be wrong. Yet I will answer it. You asked me whether or not yonder figure is a living being; and I now tell you—*that I do not know!*"

As he returned this strange reply, his voice, his manner, thrilled me. I looked attentively at Froissart. His face was now composed, his voice steady, his eye clear and calm. I could perceive in him no trace of aberration or illusion. And yet his words were surely "wild and whirling" as those of nightmare, of frenzy, of delirium!

Chapter II.

WE SEPARATED FOR the night; but it was long before I retired to rest; and when at last I did so, I lay awake for hours, my brain busy with conjectural explanations of what I had seen and heard. No explanation, however, presented itself to my mind which I could accept as being in the least degree satisfactory. The only solution which seemed at all possible was that which had been present to my thoughts when I put to Froissart the question which he had so strangely answered—that the figure I had seen was a machine, skilfully constructed in human shape—in other words, an automaton. And yet how to reconcile his answer with this theory?—a theory which moreover, after all, explained nothing, neither Froissart's agitation, nor the motive of his visit to the tower, nor his behaviour in the presence of the figure, nor his inexplicable answer, nor my own sensations. No; this solution would not serve. Yet I could think of no other which did not seem still wilder and more fantastic. At length I gave up in despair the attempt to find an explanation of the mystery, and, weary of vain conjectures, I fell asleep.

But now the events of the day, pursuing my vexed spirit through the veil of slumber, again rose up before it, clad in wild disguises, arrayed in changed and bewildering and phantasmagorial forms. I thought I was again in the small boat in which I had that after noon been ferried across the lake, and was crossing, as then, the unfathomable waters towards the mansion. But now, though as before I sat in the vessel's prow, I was not alone—Froissart was by my side; and in place of the old man who had been my guide another figure occupied the stern—a figure veiled, shadowy, heart-shaking. As I gazed stupefied at this presence, suddenly it rose up, enlarged itself, towered up gigantic, and grew distinct and brilliant: and now I knew again the turbaned figure of the dark tower! For some moments it held itself motionless; then its

hands were outstretched, its eyes glittered, its mouth parted, and it advanced upon us. Froissart shrank before it, cowering behind me. Still it came on, nearer, nearer; till in the terror of the moment, and unable to endure further the agitation its presence caused me, I sprang up suddenly before it. The figure recoiled, tottered, lost its balance, and fell heavily over the side of the boat into the gloomy flood, in which it instantly disappeared. At the same instant I awoke and saw Froissart himself, who had come to call me, standing beside my pillow.

It was on my lips to tell him the strange imaginations which had possessed me; but I refrained. I rose, and we descended to the room in which we had dined the night before, and where the morning meal awaited us. Somewhat to my surprise, and much to my disappointment, Froissart made no reference to the events of the preceding night, nor to his promise of revelation. We passed the hours of the morning in conversation on many subjects; and I found that my curiosity was doomed to be prolonged. It was not until the afternoon, when the brief November day was already dying, that on a sudden, and with considerable abruptness, Froissart rose from the chair where he had been sitting for some time in reflection, and desired me to follow him.

I had no need to ask him whither. His voice, his face, his manner, answered me at once more clearly than words. At last the hour was come!

Froissart led the way in silence to the dark tower.

We reached the stairs—we mounted—we stood before the door. Froissart inserted the key, the door opened, and we entered.

The figure I had seen the night before was sitting before his chequered table, with the turban, beard, and flowing robe, exactly as I had seen them. On one point, however, I found that I had been mistaken; the eyes of the figure were not fixed, as I had supposed, upon the pieces, but were gazing straight before him.

I regarded him with strangely mingled sensations of curiosity and awe. The latter feeling I could not entirely account for; I reflected that it was probably a survival of that which I had experienced the previous evening, strengthened by a memory of that strange dream which had disturbed my sleep. Otherwise, I saw no cause for agitation. On viewing the figure thus closely and by daylight, I discovered at once that my supposition had been correct. The figure was an artificial construction, a machine in the shape of a man. There was no room for doubt; the beard was stiff and lifeless, the

features mask-like, the eyes of glass. It had been merely the effect of distance and uncertain light which had deceived me. I spoke my thoughts aloud.

"It *is*, then, really an automaton."

"It *was* so," returned Froissart, with a curious emphasis. I looked at him inquiringly, not comprehending.

"It *was* so!" I repeated. "And what then is it now?"

"As I have said," he answered, "an automaton it *was*. What it now is, God knows. Let us be seated, Seldon; and listen to a most strange story. If you find it not altogether incredible I shall be amazed. And yet of its truth I cannot be less firmly assured than I am of the reality of my own existence."

He paused for a moment; then resumed:

"This figure—this automaton, since I must call it so—was the, invention of my old friend, Martin Sombras. It was devised, as no doubt you have divined, to play a game of chess with an opponent. Many such figures have been constructed, differing: more or less in detail, but all depending for their mode of action upon the presence of some human player carefully concealed either within the figure itself, or in a chest upon which the board was placed. Sombras's idea, however, was radically different from these. He conceived the possibility of constructing an automaton which should be really such—that is, such that any move made by its opponent should set in motion a part of its machinery, which would thereupon cause the figure to make the answering move required by the particular combination of the game. Impossible as this may seem at first sight, the method by which it was accomplished was in reality wonderfully simple. Indeed, if you are acquainted with certain devices of somewhat similar nature—Babbage's calculating machine for example—you will be aware that this is not the only instance in which machinery has been made to accomplish, by most simple combinations, results apparently impossible."

I admitted that this was so.

"I need not then go into details," continued Froissart, "which are, moreover, unnecessary to my story. I may just mention, however, that the squares of the board are movable, and the men are variously weighted. The fact is, the design was never completed. Three months ago, just as it was finished, requiring only a screw or so to be put in, Sombras died, as I have told you.

"I must now relate to you more particularly the manner of his death. It was one evening when we were engaged as usual in playing chess. The game

was an absorbing one. It was the last of a series which we had been playing in order to test the merits of an opening which Sombras had discovered, and which, with the fondness of a discoverer, he held to be invincible. For some time I had maintained the contrary; yet, as Sombras beat me game after game, I began to feel shaken in my opinion. At last, however, I believed I had discovered a weakness in his method. That game was to decide it. If I failed this time, there could be little doubt that Sombras had hit upon a discovery which might revolutionise the game.

"We began to play; and it seemed that I had been right. The move I had devised appeared to have broken up the attack; so at least I thought as I sat waiting for Sombras to reply to it. He was already putting out his hand to do so when to my horror he paused, uttered a deep groan, and sank back in his chair—insensible. Perhaps the excitement, the strain of thought, had brought on the attack; which is the more probable as his health was at that time perilously feeble. But whatever was the cause, the result was terribly sure. He was carried to his room, doctors were sent for, and arrived—too late! Long before they came, my old friend was dead."

Froissart paused, and his voice trembled. I said nothing; and presently he resumed:

"I have hurried over this part of my story as briefly as possible, for the deep pain of it is with me still. It was by far the saddest moment of my life when I returned from the melancholy duty of following his coffin to the vault, to this old house where he and I had lived together so long. The evening of that day was gloomy and depressing; a low cloud brooded over the country like a pall; a fine and steady rain fell dolefully. Melancholy and sick at heart I roamed aimlessly and in silence through the empty house, regarding in every room the well-remembered tokens of my dead friend. At last my restless wanderings brought me to the tower—to this apartment. It was already dark when I entered it, and I carried in my hand no lamp.

"The room, I say, was dark when I entered it, and I struck a light and kindled the swinging lamp. As it began to glimmer fitfully, and to throw a doubtful light about the interior, my heart all of a sudden gave a great bound, and then seemed to stop beating. I was not alone! Someone was sitting there in the middle of the room. For some minutes, as the lamp glimmered and spluttered and would not blaze up into a clear flame, I stood there with a shivering feeling, only able to make out that a dark and silent figure, a mysterious presence, was before me. In another moment the lamp flamed up

brightly and gave forth a clear light. What a delicious sensation of relief I felt! The startling object, on becoming visible, turned out to be nothing more terrible than the automaton, which I had quite forgotten, seated as usual before his little table.

"I broke into a laugh at my own folly, not without a reflection that my nervous system must certainly be out of order. To think of my being frightened by that familiar figure, which I had seen a hundred times, sitting there so tranquilly before his chequered board! The sight of it touched me with a strange sense of the pathetic. I remembered how it had been for years the occupation and the delight of my old friend, to work at it, to calculate for it, to invent for it new movements and improved details. I knew how it had come to form at last—this creature of his brain—the interest of his life. He had loved it, as it grew into perfection, as a parent loves an only child. And now he would never watch it play a game, as he had planned; never see the moment on which his heart had been set. And he had died moreover, leaving unaccomplished the one other ambition of his life, to have linked his name immortally to the game he loved, as the inventor of a new and grand and revolutionary opening.

"My thoughts, however, were suddenly diverted into another channel. I was struck with a discovery which puzzled me greatly. The chessmen on the table at which the figure sat were not ranged in order as at the commencement of play, but were stationed irregularly about the board, as in the position of an unfinished game. Several pieces on both sides had been taken, and lay on the table beside the board. But what amazed me was the fact, that the position of the men on the squares was perfectly familiar to me. I recognised it in an instant; I could not be mistaken. It was the game which I and Sombras had last played together, and which had been broken off on account of his attack.

"I say I was amazed, and with good reason—my poor friend had never, I knew well, entered that room after his seizure. Who then had placed the men in the position they now occupied? The more I thought of this matter the more unaccountable it seemed. Yet there could be no doubt of the fact. In order to be sure that the positions were indeed identical I examined the board closely, in case I should have been deceived by a partial similarity. But no; the pieces stood man for man as I remembered them. I even recollected to what the move I had made seemed to lead up, and what I had intended to play afterwards—a move which opened out an exceedingly interesting and novel

combination. The move was possibly unsound; and yet I believed that I had analysed it correctly. As I now looked at the board the whole returned to my mind as clearly as when I first conceived it. I found myself repeating in my mind that the only plausible retort on the part of my opponent would be such-and-such a move—P. to Q. B. 3, as a matter of fact. Half unconsciously I took a seat before the board opposite the automaton, and became gradually quite lost in speculation. At length, in order to consider what the effect of my purposed move would be, I placed my hand on the Queen and played the move I contemplated—Q. to K. 5.

"Instantly the figure on the other side of the table stretched out its hand deliberately over the board, and made the answering move—P. to Q. B. 3.

"I will not attempt to describe my amazement. I fell back in my seat and gazed for many minutes in stupefaction at the figure of the automaton; nor could I, during that time, had my very life depended on the action, have risen from my seat or uttered a sound. The figure sat there motionless, with its eyes apparently fixed upon the board. Presently, however, finding that I did not move again, it raised its head and fastened its glassy orbs on mine. There it sat, looking at me with large mild eyes, which now (I am ready to swear it) seemed to be *alive*. Great Heavens! Oh, ancient earth and sky! It *must* have been my fancy! I thought the face of the figure *now* bore a strange and dim, yet frightfully distinct, resemblance to the features of old Martin Sombras, its dead creator.

"At that sight my blood ran chill and my hair rose up. Had I beheld before me the ghostly presence of Sombras in his own likeness, I believe I should have still preserved some degree of self-possession. But there was something in this manner of his appearance which shook my very heart. I do not know how long it was before I could collect my faculties sufficiently to become conscious of the unreasonableness of my fears, and the shame of superstitious terrors in an intellectual being. Was not this spirit—if spirit it were—that of my old friend? What harm would it do me, even if it had the power? Reflecting thus, and summoning up what courage I had left, I made an effort to speak, and this time my voice, though strangely altered, returned.

"'Sombras,' I said earnestly, though my voice quavered, 'if you are here indeed, though by what mysterious means I know not, speak to me! What would you have me do?'

"The figure was silent; only its eyes rested intently on the board.

"'I understand,' I said; 'I am ready. Yet if you have the power of speech,

I charge you, by our ancient friendship, speak to me, Sombras!'

"The eyes of the figure burned with a strange fire; but it answered not a word.

"'This game, so strangely set,' I said—'do you desire to play it?'

"I thought the figure bowed its head. Its eyes were still fixed upon the board as if impatient to proceed. I *dared* make no delay. I trembled, but I no longer hesitated. I knew my move before hand, and I made it. The right hand of the figure immediately extended itself over the board, and made the answering move.

"It was not a move which I had expected; I was surprised. Strange as it may seem, impossible as it may seem to any but a true disciple of the game (and to such it will appear natural, and indeed inevitable), in spite of the sensation with which my veins were chill, I became interested, then absorbed. I thought I saw the object of the move; but I was not certain. I did not move without deliberation; but again, as soon as I had played, my opponent, without the hesitation of an instant, stretched forth his hand and moved in his turn. This extreme promptitude surprised me at the time; I did not reflect that I was not playing against flesh and blood.

"Moreover, the move itself perplexed me. I saw that the advantage I had gained was vanishing. I began to tremble with excitement, as I had lately trembled with dread. And yet I know I played my very best; my senses seemed to myself extraordinarily acute. The combination which I had devised again appeared irresistible—a stratagem certain of success. I had the game within my grasp; I thought myself on the point of victory. Suddenly, as my opponent moved a piece, a low sound caused me to look up. The automaton was regarding me with a full gaze; and *now*, it was unmistakable, the resemblance in its features to those of Martin Sombras was no figment of my brain. The look was exactly that unmalignant glance of triumph with which my old friend had been accustomed to announce a victory. In voluntarily I cast my eyes down to the board. I could hardly believe what I saw; I was checkmated!

"For the first time I saw it all. I saw before me the most subtle combination which ever proceeded from a human brain. I believe it to be impossible for any ingenuity to have seen through such a movement. Many times since have I played over the game in solitude, and proved to demonstration that the mate, from the moment we began to play, was inevitable against that evolution, so veiled, so overwhelming. Sombras's

theory had, after all, been sound.

"So deeply was I absorbed in wonder and admiration, that I half forgot the strange antagonist to whom I owed my defeat. When shall I forget—I never shall forget—the circumstance which recalled me to myself? A slight noise, I know not what, caused me to look up. I raised my eyes and looked again at the figure. As I did so, the resemblance which had existed to the face of my old friend, suddenly vanished. The eyes again became glassy, empty, and devoid of speculation; the life, the movement, which had animated the figure died out of it; and there was nothing left before me but mere wood and painted cloth. It was as if I had seen my old friend die twice.

"Up to that moment I had preserved my faculties, if not from amazement and trepidation, yet from the full sense of an unearthly presence, which now rushed across my spirit in a flood. The excitement which had buoyed me up, deserted me. The lifeless eyes of the figure, vacantly staring, seemed now a thousand times more awful than their previous supernatural life. I could bear no more. Hardly knowing what I did, nor whither I was going, I staggered from the room, and from the house."

Again Froissart paused; I thought he had finished his story; but presently he resumed:

"Many days passed before the terrors of that night gave way to a calmer, if not less solemn feeling. Then a most strange idea took possession of me, and left me not a moment's rest or peace of mind. *What if the spirit should return?* Something persuaded me that it would return; that at some time, which I could not foretell, the mysterious fire would once more kindle in the glassy eyes, the living likeness waken in the vacant features, the startling hand extend itself over the table, and I should play yet another game of chess with my old friend. Reasonable or unreasonable, the persuasion took firm hold of me, and possessed, as it still possesses, my whole being. Not a night has passed since then but, under an uncontrollable impulsion, I have taken my seat, never without a thrill of awed expectation, before the table, and making the first move, waited for the figure to reply. Hitherto, I have waited in vain. Last night, as the nights before, it did not stir. To-night—*it may!*"

Chapter III.

AS FROISSART UTTERED the last words of his most strange story, I will not deny that I shivered, as if with cold. Evening was beginning to fall, and the light of the room was shadowy, haunted, and uncertain. On the other side of the table sat the mysterious figure, motionless, spectral in the twilight, and looked at us silently with its glassy eyes.

We sat in silence. I knew not what to think. Had I not heard the story from Froissart himself, I should doubtless have judged him, as he had said, to be mad or dreaming; it was necessary to have heard him, and to have watched him to be sure that he was not. And yet there was an alternative; the whole might have been a hallucination. What was there to show that it was not so, that it was not the illusion of a disturbed and excited brain? As if I had put the question aloud, Froissart answered my unspoken thought.

"Hallucination?" he said. "You think so, naturally—and certainly I thought so also the next morning. I was then as cool and collected as ever I was in my life, I mean as far as my *intellect* was concerned; and I was disposed to laugh at my own wildness of imagination, which had played me such a prank. I easily persuaded myself that I had been, as you suppose, merely the victim of a singular delusion. I told myself that it *must* be so—and I added that at least I could not *prove* it otherwise."

"Very true," I interposed.

"But as I was thus thinking, a sudden thought came into my head. I *could* prove it. I had but to go to the tower and examine the position of the chessmen on the hoard. If they stood as usual, I had been deceived. If not ——"

"Well?" I said hastily. "Well, you went?"

"I went," said Froissart, "I opened the door, laughing at my agitation,

repeating to myself that I should find the pieces drawn up in rank, and there would be an end of the mystery—a proved, delusion. I had played, as it happened, with the black men——"

"Well?" I said again.

"The pieces were stationed irregularly about the board. Tho Black King was checkmated."

Again, as Froissart spoke, my mind fell back upon itself, foiled and disconcerted. I could not deny the cogency of his argument; nor could I forget, what he himself knew nothing of, the strangeness of my own sensations in the presence of that mysterious figure. I said nothing.

"Seldon," said Froissart, after a time, "I have told you my story. I see that you are shaken. Do you now believe as I am forced to believe, or do you not?"

"I do," I said; "I must,"—at the same time I started from my seat. "I must, Froissart. But another thing is clear to me—that this figure is likely to kill you before long. If the apparition comes again, you will die of shock; if it does not, you will die of tension. Neither shall happen if I can help it—of that I am determined. To you, Martin Sombras, whether in the flesh or in the spirit, is rightly sacred. To me, a living friend is more than a dead stranger or a wandering spectre. Come!"

With these words I advanced upon the turbaned figure, and before Froissart could prevent me, or indeed become aware of my intention, I seized it in my arms, and bore it towards the open window.

It was the only window in the castle which was of modern size, a fact which arose from its having been enlarged for the purpose of giving sufficient light for the working of delicate mechanism. Sheer below it, at an immense depth, lay the lake, gloomy with the coming night. Exerting all my strength I raised the figure to the lintel, and launched it forth into the empty space.

It fell like a plummet. I watched it falling.

Heavy internally with brass and iron, it struck the water with amazing force. A cloud of spray flashed upwards and the space around it whitened and seethed with violence. Nothing was to be seen except the agitated water. The figure had vanished like a stone.

It was gone—eternally gone! Evil or harmless, earthly or supernal, it was gone, and its mystery with it. Even as I looked the lake resumed its sombre and undisturbed and fathomless lustre. Its waters slept again their

sleep of death and night. The automaton was buried in their depths—for ever.

* * * * *

A few words only need be added. A month has passed since that night, and Froissart is himself again; though assuredly both to him and to me the recollection of the automaton will remain lastingly connected with the most inexplicable experience of our lives. The "perturbed spirit" of old Martin Sombras may also rest in peace, his life's ambition being attained. His great gambit, so nearly lost, so amazingly revealed, will shortly appear before the world, edited with notes and analysis by Philip Froissart; and will assuredly create, among chess circles, a paroxysm of excitement, the result of which I will not attempt to prophesy.

END.