

Finished Game

By HARRY BUTMAN

What weird compulsion led the player to make the moves he did in that archaic chess game?

MR. CABOT reluctantly pushed a black pawn forward. His position was nearly hopeless, and familiar symptoms of frustration and annoyance began to simmer in him. This was the worst of being club champion. You had to play every touring master who came to Boston.

The thin-faced youngster across the table brought his cleverly masked bishop out of hiding.

"Check," he said.

Mr. Cabot made a pretense of studying the board. You had to look as though you were trying, if only for the sake of the century-old tradition of the Sommers Club. There seemed to be something familiar about the position of the pieces. Suddenly his attention sharpened. The pieces were approaching Morrison's Game.

"The first time I've ever seen it come up in play," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon," said his opponent.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Cabot. "I just remembered something."

On a shelf in a closet of that very room stood an unfinished game, with bone chessmen, stuck to the board with varnish a century had set, arranged as the pieces in today's game, with only the positions of black's king and white's knight altered. There was a tale told of that carefully preserved game.

The first and greatest of the Sommers Club champions was Talbot Morrison, who, during his *Wanderjahr* on the Con-

tinent had amazed the chess masters of the Old World with the genius of his play.

When Mr. Cabot was a boy he had heard the story from one who had been present that morning when Talbot Morrison's carelessness had brought him to the verge of checkmate while playing a novice from Salem. Perhaps it was not wholly carelessness, for as Morrison sat drumming the table with his fingers, Henry Crandall, his closest friend, pushed his bulky watch into a pocket of his flowered waistcoat, and touched Morrison on the arm.

"We'll be late, Talbot," he said.

Talbot Morrison stood up reluctantly.

"By the laws of chess," he said, "I forfeit this game by leaving the room. But will you do me the honor, sir, to permit me to finish the game later? Had I more time I think I could study out a solution."

His opponent beamed, well pleased at the play that had placed the great Morrison in an impossible position.

"We'll put the board aside, Mr. Morrison," he agreed, "till you come back."

"Thank you," said Talbot Morrison. "I will certainly return to finish this game."

But when Talbot Morrison came back from his trip from a lonely West Roxbury farm he played no chess, for there was an ounce ball in his brain. His adversary fled to Canada, for affairs of honor were no longer legal.

Out of memory to their champion the directors caused the pieces to be varnished

in place and set aside. Through the years, now and then, men toyed with the problem, and while some could stave off black's defeat longer than could others, it was at last conceded by all that white was unbeatable. Mr. Cabot had tried it himself alone in the club, afternoons, but the odd unease that assailed him, the curious sense of pressure on him whenever the game was set up, led him to cease seeking a solution.

MR. CABOT, back in the present, moved his king out of check. He was certain his opponent would move the white knight. A dream-quality, a sense of having been there before, was creeping over Mr. Cabot. The young man moved his knight.

There it was. After a hundred years, out of all the infinite combinations possible to chess, Morrison's Game had at last reappeared.

Mr. Cabot definitely did not like the way his mind was behaving. You're getting as silly as Old Bangs, he told himself.

Old Bangs was the club custodian, a fey old fellow who put outlandish interpretations on the noises he heard about the venerable chambers at night, surmises which so annoyed Mr. Cabot that only yesterday he had baited a trap with his own hands and a bit of his own Stilton to prove to Old Bangs that nothing more eery than a solitary rat was responsible. Mr. Cabot wouldn't have liked it if anyone had said that he had sacrificed genuine imported Stilton because he too wanted proof.

Mr. Cabot watched his right hand irrelevantly move a pawn. He wasn't sure why he made that particular move. His opponent puckered his lips, breathed

through his teeth in an abstracted fashion, and countered. Again Mr. Cabot's hand made an apparently aimless move. This time the young man looked keenly at him and studied the board for several minutes before responding.

The habitudes of the club watching the game, began to buzz softly behind the backs of their hands. Swiftly, as though he had rehearsed this game many times, Mr. Cabot maneuvered his pieces. The young man buried his head in his hands and thought long over each reply. But, incredibly, black had seized the offensive and the white pieces were in retreat.

Somewhat over an hour later Mr. Cabot made his final move.

"Checkmate," he said.

Mr. Cabot was aware of his friends jovially pummeling his shoulders. He was also aware of the amazement on his opponent's face.

"Why," he cried, looking at Mr. Cabot wildly, "you played like nothing human. How did you do it?"

"I don't know," began Mr. Cabot confusedly, rubbing his hand hard across his eyes. "I—"

A muffled crash from the closet stopped him.

Old Bangs was the first to open the door. The board with Morrison's Game had fallen from the shelf, and the pieces were scattered.

"You were right, Mr. Cabot," admitted Old Bangs. "It was a rat, after all. And he's finished that game, all right."

Mr. Cabot's mind was still confused from his strange victory.

Should I tell him, he wondered, that I caught the rat this morning?

