



Alva ROGERS

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THE DREAMS OF ALBERT MORELAND

Fritz Leiber, Jr.

I think of the autumn of 1939, not as the beginning of the Second World War, but as the period in which Albert Moreland dreamed the dream. The two events--the war and the dream--are not, however, divorced in my mind. Indeed, I sometimes fear that there is a definite connection between them, but it is not a connection which any sane person ought to consider seriously, and in any case it is not a clear one.

Albert Moreland was, and perhaps still is, a professional chessplayer. That fact has an important bearing on the dream, or dreams. He made most of his scant income at a games arcade in lower Manhattan, taking on all comers---the enthusiast who got a kick out of trying to beat an expert, the lonely man who turned to chess as to a drug, or the down-and-outer tempted into purchasing a half hour of intellectual dignity for a quarter. After I got to know him, I often wandered into the arcade and watched him playing as many as three or four games simultaneously, oblivious to the clicking and mechanical whirring of the pinball games and the intermittent whip-cracks from the shooting gallery. He got fifteen cents for every win; the house took the extra dime. When he lost, neither got anything.

Eventually I found out that he was a much better player than he needed to be to whitewash arcade competition. He had won casual games from internationally famous masters. A couple of Manhattan clubs had wanted to groom him for the big tournaments, but lack of ambition kept him drifting along in obscurity. I got the impression that he actually thought chess too trivial a business to warrant serious consideration, although he was perfectly willing to dribble his life away at the arcade, waiting for something really important to come along, if it ever did. Once in a while, he eked out his income by playing on a club team, getting as much as five dollars.

I met him at the old brownstone house, where we happened to have rooms on the same floor. And it was there that he first told me about the dream.

We had just finished a game of chess, and I was idly watching the battle-scarred pieces slide off the board and pile up in a fold of the blanket on his cot. Outside a fretful wind eddied the dry grit; coming home earlier in the evening I had had to keep my eyes three-quarters closed. There was the surge of traffic noises, and from somewhere the buzz of a defective neon sign. I had just lost, but I was glad that Moreland never let me win, as he occasionally did to encourage the players at the arcade. Indeed, I thought myself fortunate in being able to play with Moreland at all, not knowing then that I was probably the best friend he had.

I was saying something obvious about the game.

"You think it a complicated game?" he inquired, peering at me with quizzical interest, his brown eyes dark like round windows pushed up under heavy eaves. "Well perhaps it is. But I play a game a thousand times more complex every night in my dreams. And the queer thing is that the game goes on night after night. The same game. I never really sleep. Only dream, about the game."

Then he told me, speaking with the mixture of facetious jest and uncomfortable seriousness that was to characterize many of our subsequent conversations.

The images of his dream, as he described them, were impressively simple, without any of the usual musing and incongruity. A board so vast he sometimes had to walk out on it to move his pieces. A great many more squares than in chess and arranged in patches of different colors, the power of the pieces varying according to the color of the square on which they stood. Above and to each side of the board only blackness, but a blackness that suggested starless infinity, as if, as he put it, the scene were laid on the very top of the universe.

When he was awake he couldn't quite remember all the rules of the game, although he recalled a great many isolate points; such as the appearance and powers of certain pieces, the situations in which two or more might be moved at the same time, and the interesting fact that--quite unlike chess--his pieces and those of his adversary did not duplicate each other. Yet he was convinced that he not only understood the game perfectly while dreaming, but also was able to play it in the highly strategic manner that characterizes the master chess player. It was, he said, as though his waking mind had many more dimensions of thought than his waking-mind, and were able to grasp intuitively complex series of moves that would ordinarily have to be reasoned out painfully, step by step.

"A feeling of increased mental power is a very ordinary dream-delusion, isn't it?" he added, peering at me sharply. "And so I suppose you might say it's a very ordinary dream."

I didn't know quite how to take that last remark, with its trace of sarcasm and ambiguity, so I prodded him with a question, for I wanted him to go on.

"What do the pieces look like?" I asked.

It turned out that they were similar to those of chess in that they were considerably stylized and yet suggested the original forms--architectural, animal, ornamental--which had served as their inspiration. But there the similarity ended. The inspiring forms, so far as he could guess at them, were grotesque in the extreme. There were terraced towers subtly distorted out of the perpendicular, strangely asymmetric polygons that nevertheless made him think of temples and tombs, vegetable-animal shapes which defied classification and whose formalized limbs and external organs suggested a variety of unknown functions. The more powerful pieces seemed to be modelled after life forms, for they carried stylized weapons and other implements, and wore things similar to crowns and tiaras---a little like the king, queen, and bishop in chess---while the carving indicated voluminous robes and hoods. But they were in no other sense anthropomorphic. Morland sought in vain for earthly analogies, mentioning Hindu idols, prehistoric reptiles, futurist sculpture, squids bearing daggers in their tentacles, and huge ants and mantises and other insects with fantastically adapted end organs.

"I think you would have to search the whole universe--every planet and every dead sun--before you could find the original models," he said, frowning. "Remember, there is nothing cloudy or vague about the pieces themselves in my dream. They are as tangible as this rook." He picked up the piece, clenched his fist around it for a moment, and then held it out toward me on his open palm. "It is only in what they suggest that the vagueness lies."

It was strange, but his words seemed to open some dream-eye in my own mind, so that I could almost see the things he described. I asked him if he experienced fear during his dream.

He replied that the pieces one and all filled him with repugnance---those based on higher life forms usually to a greater degree than the architectural ones. He hated to have to touch or handle them. There was one piece in particular which had an intensely morbid fascination for his dream-self. He identified it as "the archer" because the stylized weapon it bore gave the impression of being able to hurt at a distance; but like the rest it was quite inhuman. He described it as representing a kind of intermediate, warped life form which had achieved more than human intellectual power without losing--but rather gaining--in brute cruelty and malignity. It was one of the opposing pieces for which there was no duplicate among his own. The mingled fear and loathing it inspired in him sometimes became so great that they interfered with his strategic grasp of the whole dream-game, and he was afraid his feeling toward it would sometime rise to such a pitch that he would be forced to capture it just to get it off the board, even though such a capture might compromise his whole position.

"God knows how my mind ever cooked up such a hideous entity," he finished, with a quick grin. "Five hundred years ago I'd have said the Devil put it there."

"Speaking of the Devil," I asked, immediately feeling my flippancy was silly, "whom do you play against in your dream?"

Again he frowned. "I don't know. The opposing pieces move by themselves. I will have made a move, and then, after waiting for what seems like an eon, all on edge as in chess, everything still as death, one of the opposing pieces will begin to shake a little and then to wobble back and forth. Gradually the movement increases in extent until the piece gets off balance and begins to rock and career across the board, like a water tumbler on a pitching ship, until it reaches the proper square. Then, slowly as it began, the movement subsides. I don't know, but it always makes me think of some huge, invisible, senile creature---crafty, selfish, cruel. You've watched that trembly old man at the arcade? The one who always drags the pieces across the board without lifting them, his hand constantly shaking? It's a little like that."

I nodded that I got the idea. For that matter, his description made it very vivid. For the first time I began to think of how unpleasant such a dream might be.

"And it goes on night after night?" I asked.

"Night after night!" he affirmed with sudden fierceness. "And always the same game. It has been more than a month now, and my forces are just beginning to grapple with the enemy. It's draining off my mental energy. I wish it would stop. I'm

getting so I hate to go to sleep." He paused and turned away. "It seems queer," he said after a moment in a softer voice, smiling apologetically, "it seems queer to get so worked up over a dream. But if you've had bad ones, you know how they can cloud your thoughts all day. And I haven't really managed to get over to you the sort of feeling that grips me while I'm dreaming, and while my brain is working at the game, and plotting move-sequence after move-sequence and weighing a thousand complex possibilities. There's repugnance, yes, and fear. I've told you that. But the dominant feeling is one of responsibility. I must not lose the game. More than my own personal welfare depends upon it. There are some terrible stakes involved, though I am never quite sure what they are.

"When you were a little child, did you ever worry tremendously about something, with that complete lack of proportion characteristic of childhood? Did you ever feel that everything, literally everything, depended upon your performing some trivial act--some unimportant duty, in just exactly the right way? Well, while I dream, I have the feeling that I am playing for some stake as big as the fate of mankind. One wrong move may plunge the universe into unending night. Sometimes, in my dream, I feel sure of it."

His voice trailed off and he stared at the chessmen. I made some remarks and started to tell about an air-raid nightmare I'd just had, but it didn't seem very important. And I gave him some vague advice about changing his sleeping habits, which didn't seem very important either, although he accepted it with good grace. As I started back to my room he said, "Amusing to think, isn't it, that I'll be playing the game again as soon as my head hits the pillow?" He grinned, and added lightly, "Dreams it will be over sooner than we expect. Lately I've had the feeling that my adversary is about to unleash a surprise attack, although he pretends to be on the defensive." He grinned again, and shut the door.

As I waited for sleep, staring at the way churning darkness that is more in the eyes than outside them, I began to wonder whether Moreland did not stand in greater need of psychiatric treatment than most chessplayers. Certainly a person without family, friends or proper occupation is more liable to mental aberrations. Still, he seemed sane enough. Perhaps the dream was compensation for his failure to use anything like the full potentialities of his highly talented mind, even at chessplaying. Certainly it was a satisfyingly grandiose vision, with its unearthly background and its implications of stupendous mental skill.

There floated into my mind the lines from the Rubaiyat about the cosmic chess-player who, "Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays, And one by one back in the closet lays."

Then I thought of the emotional atmosphere of his dream, and the feelings of terror and boundless responsibility, of tremendous duties and catalytic consequences--feelings I recognised from my own dreams--and I compared them with the mad, dismal state of the world (for it was October 1939, and the sense of utter catastrophe had not yet been dulled), and I thought of the million drifting Morelands suddenly snatched into a realisation of the desperate plight of things and of priceless chances lost forever in the past and of their own ill-defined but certain complicity in the disaster. I began to see Moreland's dream as the symbol of a last-ditch, too-late struggle against the implacable forces of fate and chance. And my night thoughts began to revolve around the fancy that some cosmic beings, neither gods nor men, had created human life long ago as a just or experiment or artistic form, and now decided to base the fate of their creation on the result of a game of skill played against one of their creatures.

Suddenly I realized that I was wide awake and that the darkness was no longer restful. I snapped on the light and impulsively decided to see if Moreland were still up.

The hall was as shadowy and funereal as that of most boarding houses late at night, and I tried to minimize the inevitable dry creakings. I waited for a few moments in front of Moreland's door, but I heard nothing, so instead of knocking, I presumed upon our slight familiarity and quietly edged open the door, in order not to disturb him if he were abed.

It was then I heard his voice, and so certain was my impression that the sound came from a considerable distance that I immediately walked back to the stair-well and called, "Moreland, are you down there?"

Only then did I realize what he said. Perhaps it was the peculiarity of the words that caused them first to register on my mind as merely a series of sounds.

The words were, "My spider-thing seizes your armor-bearer. I threaten."

It instantly occurred to me that the words were similar in general form to any one of a number of conventional expressions in chess, such as, "My rook captures your bishop. I give check." But there were no such things as "spider-things" or "armor-bearers" in chess or any other game I knew of.

I automatically walked back toward his room, though I still doubted he was there. The voice had sounded much too far away--definitely outside of the building or at least in a remote section of it.

But he was lying in the cot, his upturned face revealed by the light of a distant electric advertisement, which blinked on and off at regular intervals. The traffic sounds, which had been almost inaudible in the hall, made the half-darkness restless and irritably alive. The defective neon sign still buzzed and droned insectlike as it had earlier in the evening.

I tiptoed over and looked down at him. His face, more pale than it should have been because of some quality of the intermittent light, was set in an expression of painfully intense concentration---forehead vertically furrowed, muscles around the eyes contracted, lips pursed to a line. I wondered if I ought to awaken him. I was acutely aware of the impersonally murmuring city all around us---block on block of shuttling, routined, aloof existence---and the contrast made his sleeping face seem all the more sensitive and vividly individual and unguarded, like some soft though purposefully tense organism which has lost its protective shell.

As I waited uncertainly, the tight lips opened a little, though without losing any of their tautness. He spoke, and for the second time the impression of distance was so compelling that I involuntarily looked over my shoulder, and out the dustily glowing window. Then I began to tremble.

"My coiled-thing advances to the thirteenth square of the green ruler's domain," was what he said, but I can only suggest the quality of the voice. Some inconceivable sort of distance had drained it of all richness and throatiness and overtones, so that it was hollow and flat and faint and disturbingly mournful, as voices sometimes sound in open country, or from up on a high roof, or when there is a bad telephone connection. I felt I was the victim of some gruesome deception, and yet I knew that ventriloquism is a matter of motionless lips and clever suggestion rather than any really convincing change in the quality of the voice itself. Without volition there rose in my mind visions of infinite space, unending darkness. I felt as if I were being wrenched up and away from the world, so that Manhattan lay below me like a black asymmetric spearhead outlined by leaden waters, and then still further outward at increasing speed until earth and sun and stars and galaxies were all lost and I was beyond the universe. To such a degree did the quality of Moreland's voice affect me.

I do not know how long I stood there waiting for him to speak again, with the noise of Manhattan flowing around yet not quite touching me, and the electric sign which showed Moreland's face blinking on and off unalterably like the ticking of a clock. I could only think about the game that was being played, and wonder whether Moreland's adversary had yet made an answering move, and whether things were going for or against Moreland. There was no telling from his face; its intensity of concentration did not change. During those months or minutes I stood there, I believed implicitly in the reality of the game. As if I myself were somehow dreaming, I could not question the rationality of my belief or break the spell which bound me.

When finally his lips parted a little and I experienced again that impression of impossible, eerie ventriloquism---the words this time being "My horned-creature vaults over the twisted tower, challenging the archer"---my fear broke loose from whatever controlled it and I stumbled toward the door.

Then came what was, in an oblique way, the strangest part of the whole episode. In the time it took me to walk the length of the corridor back to my room, most of my fear and most of the feeling of complete alienage and other worldliness which had dominated me while I was watching Moreland's face, receded so swiftly that I even forgot, for the time being, how great they had been. Perhaps it was because the unwholesome realm of Moreland's dream was so grotesquely dissimilar to anything in the real world. Whatever the cause, by the time I opened the door to my room I was thinking, "Such nightmares can't be wholesome. Perhaps he should see a psychiatrist. Yet it's only a dream," and so on. I felt tired and stupid. Very soon I was asleep.

But some wraith of the original emotions must have lingered, for I awoke the next morning with the fear that something night have happened to Moreland. Dressing hurriedly, I knocked at his door, but found the room empty, the bedclothes still rumpled. I enquired of the landlady, and she said he had gone out at eight-fifteen as

usual. The bald statement did not quite satisfy my anxiety. But since my job-hunting that day happened to lie in the direction of the arcade, I had an excuse to wander in. Moreland was stolidly pushing pieces around with an abstracted, double-haired fellow of Slavic features, and casually conducting two rapid-fire checker games on the side. Reassured, I went on my way without bothering him.

That evening we had a long talk about dreams in general, and I found him surprisingly well read on the subject, and scientifically cautious in his attitudes. Rather to my chagrin, it was I who introduced such dubious topics as clairvoyance, mental telepathy, and the possibility of strange telescopic and other distortions of time and space during dream states. Some foolish reticence about admitting I had rushed the way into his room the preceding night kept me from telling him what I had seen and seen, but he freely told me he had had another installment of the usual stuff. He seemed to take a more philosophic view now that he had shared his experiences with someone. Together we speculated as to the possible daytime sources of his dreams. It was after twelve when we said goodnight.

I went away with the curious feeling of having been let down--vaguely unsatisfied. I think the fear I had experienced the previous night and then almost forgotten must have been gnawing at me obscurely.

And the following evening, that fear found an avenue of return. Thinking Moreland must be tired of talking about dreams, I coaxed him into a game of chess. But in the middle of the game, he put back a piece he was about to move, and said, "You know, that damned dream of mine is getting very bothersome."

It turned out that his dream adversary had finally loosed the long-threatened attack, and that the dream itself had turned into a kind of nightmare. "It's very much like what happens to you in a game of chess," he explained. "You go along confident that you have a strong position and that the game is taking the right direction. Every move your opponent makes is one you have foreseen. You get to feeling almost omniscient. Suddenly he makes a totally unexpected attacking move. For a moment you think it must be a stupid blunder on his part. Then you look a little more closely and realize that you have totally overlooked something and that his attack is a sound one. Then you begin to sweat."

"Of course, I've always experienced fear and anxiety and a sense of overpowering responsibility during the dream. But my pieces were like a wall, protecting me. Now I can see only the cracks in that wall. At any one of a hundred weak points it might conceivably be broken through. Now, whenever one of the opposing pieces begins to wobble and shake, I wonder whether, when its move is completed, there will flash into my mind the unalterable and unavoidable combinations of subsequent moves leading to my defeat. Last night I thought I saw such a move, and the terror was so great that everything swirled and I seemed to drop through millions of miles of emptiness in an instant. Yet just in the instant of waking I realized I had miscalculated, and that my position, though perilous, was still secure. It was so vivid that I almost carried with me into my waking thoughts the reason why, but then some of the steps in the train of dream-reasoning dropped out, as if my waking mind were not big enough to hold them all."

He also told me that his fixation on "the archer" was becoming increasingly troublesome. It filled him with a special kind of terror, different in quality but perhaps higher in pitch than that engendered in him by the dream as a whole: a crazy, morbid terror, characterized by intense repugnance, nerve-twisting exasperation, and reckless suicidal impulses.

"I can't get rid of the feeling," he said, "that the beastly thing will in some unfair and underhanded manner be the means of my defeat."

He looked very tired to me, although his face was of the compact, tough-skinned sort that does not readily show fatigue, and I felt concerned for his physical and nervous welfare. I suggested that he consult a doctor (I did not like to say psychiatrist) and pointed out that sleeping tablets might be of some help.

"But in a deeper sleep the dream might be even more vivid and real," he answered grimacing sardonically. "No, I'd rather play out the game under the present conditions."

I was glad to find that he still viewed the dream as an interesting and temporary psychological phenomenon (what else he could have viewed it as, I did not stop to analyze). Even while admitting to me the exceptional intensity of his emotions, he maintained something of a jostling air. Once he compared his dream to a paranoid's delusions of persecution, and asked whether I didn't think it was good enough to get him admitted into an asylum.

"Then I could forget the arcade and earning a living, and devote all my time to dream-chess," he said, laughing sharply as soon as he saw I was beginning to wonder whether he hadn't meant the remark half seriously.

But some part of my mind was not convinced by his protestations, and when later I tossed in the dark, my imagination perversely kept picturing the universe as a great arena in which each creature is doomed to engage in a losing game of skill against demonic mentalities which, however long they may play cat and mouse, are always assured of final mastery--or almost assured, so that it would be a miracle if they were beaten. I found myself comparing them to certain chess players who, if they cannot beat an opponent by superior skill, will capitalize on unpleasant personal mannerisms in order to exasperate him and break down the lucidity of his thinking.

This mood colored my nebulous dreams and persisted into the next day. As I walked the streets I felt myself inundated by an omnipresent anxiety, and I sensed taut, nervous mystery in each passing face. For once I seemed able to look behind the mask which every person wears and which is so characteristically pronounced in a congested city, and see what lay behind--the egotistical sensitivity, the smouldering irritation, the thwarted longing, the defeat...and, above all, the anxiety, too ill-defined and lacking in definite object to be called fear, but nonetheless infecting every thought and action, and making trivial things terrible. And it seemed to me that social, economic, and physiological factors, even Death and the War, were insufficient to explain such anxiety, and that it was in reality an upwelling from something dubious and horrible in the very constitution of the universe.

That evening I found myself at the arcade. Here too I sensed a difference in things, for Moreland's abstraction was not the calculating boredom with which I was familiar, and his tiredness was shockingly apparent. One of his three opponents called his attention to a move, after shifting around restlessly, and Moreland jerked his head as if he had been dozing. He immediately made an answering move, and quickly lost his queen and the game by a trap that was very obvious even to me. A little later he lost another game by an equally elementary oversight. The boss of the arcade, a big beefy man, ambled over and stood behind Moreland, his heavy-jowled face impassive, seeming to study the position of the pieces in the last game. Moreland lost that too.

"Who won?" asked the boss.

Moreland indicated his opponent. The boss granted noncommittally and walked off. No one else sat down to play. It was near closing time. I was not sure whether Moreland had noticed me, but after a while he stood up and nodded at me, and got his hat and coat. We walked the long stretch back to the rooming house. He hardly spoke a word, and my sensation of morbid insight into the world around persisted and kept me silent. He walked as usual with long, slightly stiff-kneed strides, hands in his pockets, hat pulled low, frowning at the pavement a dozen feet ahead.

When we reached the room he sat down without taking off his coat, and said, "Of course it was the dream that made me lose those games. When I woke this morning it was terribly vivid, and I almost remembered the exact position and all the rules. I started to make a diagram..."

He indicated a piece of wrapping paper on the table. Hasty criss-cross lines, incomplete, represented what seemed to be the corner of an indefinitely larger pattern. There were about five hundred squares. On various squares were marks and names standing for pieces, and there were dotted lines or arrows radiating out from the pieces to show their power of movement.

"I got that far. Then I began to forget," he said tiredly, staring at the floor. But I'm still very close to it. Like a mathematical puzzle you've not quite solved. Parts of the board kept flashing into my mind all day, so that I felt with a little more effort I would be able to grasp the whole thing. Yet I can't."

His voice changed. "I'm going to lose, you know. It's that piece I call 'the archer'. Last night I couldn't concentrate on the board; it was always drawing my eyes. The worst thing is that it's the spearhead of my adversary's attack. I ache to capture it. But I must not, for it's a kind of catspaw too, the bait of the strategy ~~trap~~ my adversary is laying. If I capture it, I will expose myself to defeat. So I must watch it coming closer and closer--it has an ugly, double-angled sort of hopping move--knowing that my only chance is to sit tight until my adversary overreaches himself and I can counterattack. But I won't be able to. Soon, perhaps tonight, my nerve will crack, and I will capture it."

I was studying the diagram with great interest, and only half heard the rest--a description of the actual appearance of "the archer". I heard him say something

about "a five-lobed head...the head almost hidden by a hood...appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe...an eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison...posture suggesting it is lifting the weapon to aim it...all intricately carved in some lustrous red stone, speckled with violet...an expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence..."

Just then all my attention focussed suddenly on the diagram, and I felt a tightening shiver of excitement, for I recognized two familiar names which I had never heard Moreland mention while awake: "Spider-thing" and "green ruler".

Without pausing to think, I told him of how I had listened to his sleep-talking three nights before, and about the peculiar phrases he had spoken which tallied so well with the entries on the diagram. I poured out my account with melodramatic haste. My discovery of the entries on the diagram, nothing exceptionally amazing in itself, probably made such a great impression on me because I had hitherto strangely forgotten or repressed the intense fear I had experienced when I watched Moreland sleeping.

Before I was finished, however, I noticed the growing anxiety of his expression, and abruptly realized that what I was saying might not have the best effect on him. So I minimized my recollection of the unwholesome quality of his voice---the overpowering impression of distance---and the fear it had engendered in me.

Even so, it was obvious that he had received a severe shock. For a little while he seemed to be on the verge of a serious nervous derangement, walking up and down with fierce, jerky movements, throwing out crazy statements, coming back again and again to the diabolical convincings of the dream---which my revelation seemed to have intensified for him---and finally breaking down into vague appeals for help.

Those appeals had an immediate effect on me, making me forget any wild thoughts of my own, and putting everything on a personal level. All my instincts were now to aid Moreland, and I once again saw the whole matter as something for a psychiatrist to handle. Our roles had changed. I was no longer the half-awed listener, but the steady friend to whom he turned for advice. That, more than anything, gave me a feeling of confidence and made my previous speculations seem childish and unhealthy. I felt contemptuous of myself for having encouraged his delusive trains of speculation, and I did as much as I could to make up for it.

After a while my repeated reassurances seemed to take effect. He grew calm and our talk became reasonable once more, though every now and then he would appeal to me about some particular point that worried him. I discovered for the first time the extent to which he had taken the dream seriously. During his lonely broodings, he told me, he had sometimes become convinced that his mind left his body while he slept, and travelled immeasurable distances to some transcosmic realm where the game was played. He had the illusion, he said, of getting perilously close to the innermost secrets of the universe and finding they were rotten and evil and sardonic. At times he had been terribly afraid that the pathway between his mind and the realm of the game would "open up" to such a degree that he would be "sucked up bodily from the world", as he put it. His belief that the loss of the game would doom the world itself had been much stronger than he had ever admitted to me previously. He had traced a "fringing relationship between the progress of the game and of the War, and had begun to believe that the ultimate issue of the War---though not necessarily the victory of either side---hung on the outcome of the game.

At times it had gotten so bad, he revealed, that his only relief had been in the thought that, no matter what happened, he could never convince others of the reality of his dream. They would always be able to view it as a manifestation of insanity or overwrought imagination. No matter how vivid it became to him he would never have concrete, objective proof.

"It's this way," he said. "You saw me sleeping, didn't you? Right here on this cot. You heard me talk in my sleep, didn't you? About the game. Well, that absolutely proves to you that it's all just a dream, doesn't it? You couldn't rightly believe anything else, could you?"

I do not know why those last ambiguous questions of his should have had such a reassuring effect on me of all people, who had only three nights ago troubled at the indescribable quality of his voice as he talked from his dream. But they did. They seemed like the final seal on an agreement between us that the dream was only a dream and meant nothing. I began to feel rather buoyant and self-satisfied, like a doctor who has just pulled his patient through a dangerous crisis. I talked to Moreland in what I now realize was almost a pompously sympathetic way, without noticing how dis-

pirited were his obedient nods of agreement. He said little after those last questions.

I oven persuaded him to go out to a nearby lunchroom for a midnight snack, as if --God help me!--I were celebrating my victory over the dream. As we sat at the not too dirty counter, smoking our cigarettes and sipping burningly hot coffee, I noticed that he had begun to smile again, which added to my satisfaction. I was blind to the ultimate dejection and submissive hopelessness that lay behind those smiles.

As I left him at the door of his room, he suddenly caught hold of my hand and said, "I want to tell you how grateful I am for the way you've worked to pull me out of this mess." I made a deprecating gesture. "No, wait," he continued. "It does mean a lot. Well, anyway, thanks."

I went away with a contented, almost virtuous feeling. I had no apprehensions whatever. I only mused, in a heavily philosophic way, over the strange forms fear and anxiety can assume in our pitifully tangled civilization.

As soon as I was dressed next morning, I rapped briskly at his door and impulsively pushed in without waiting for an answer. For once, sunlight was pouring through the dusty window.

Then I saw it, and everything else receded.

It was lying in the crumpled bedclothes, half hidden by a fold of blanket, a thing perhaps ten inches high, as solid as any statuette, and as undeniably real. But from the first glance I knew that its form bore no relation to any earthly creature. This fact would have been as apparent to someone who knew nothing of art as to an expert. I also knew that the red, violet-flecked substance from which it had been carved or cast had no classification among earthly gems or minerals. Every detail was there. The five-lobed head, almost hidden by a hood. The appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe. The eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and the little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison. Posture suggesting it was lifting the weapon to aim it. An expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence.

Beyond doubting, it was the thing Moreland had dreamed of. The thing which had horrified and fascinated him, as it now did me; which had rasped unondurably on his nerves, as it now began to rasp on mine. The thing which had been the spearhead and cat paw of his adversary's attack, and whose capture---and it now seemed evident that it had been captured---meant the probable loss of the game itself. The thing which had somehow been sucked back along an ever-opening path across unimaginable distances from a realm of madness ruling the universe.

Beyond doubting it was "the archer".

Hardly knowing what moved me, save fear, or what my purpose was, I fled from the room. Then I realized that I must find Moreland. No one had seen him leaving the house. All day I searched for him. The arcade. Chess clubs. Libraries.

Never, and it is almost two years now, have I seen him or heard any word of him.

It was evening when I went back and forced myself to re-enter his room. The figure was no longer there. No one professed to know anything about it when I questioned them, but some of the denials were too angry, and I know that "the archer", being obviously a thing of value and having no overly great terrors for those who do not know its history, has most probably found its way into the hands of some wealthy and eccentric collector. Other things have vanished by a similar route in the past.

But I am certain that it was not made on earth.

And although there are reasons to fear the contrary, I feel that somewhere---in some cheap boarding house or lodging place, or in some madhouse---Albert Moreland, if the game is not already lost and the forfeiture begun, is still playing that unbelievable game for stakes it is bad to contemplate.

EDITORIALLY SPEAKING. (cont. from page 2)
torial, Laney's family obligations preclude his participation in the always expensive folderol of court proceedings. To put it bluntly, Laney does not feel it worthwhile to jeopardize the possible future of his two infant daughters by taking any chances whatever on making big donations to lawyers and their works. If this be cowardice, make the most of it.

Upon careful dissection and analysis of The Dog In The Man-
ger, we have discovered five points which, we believe, may require

(turn to page 27)

NIGHT'S BLACK AGENTS



Fritz Leiber, Jr.

The Dreams of Albert Moreland

Fritz Leiber

I THINK OF the autumn of 1939, not as the beginning of the Second World War, but as the period in which Albert Moreland dreamed the dream. The two events—the war and the dream—are not, however, divorced in my mind. Indeed, I sometimes fear that there is a connection between them, but it is a connection which no sane person will consider seriously, if he is wise.

Albert Moreland was, and perhaps still is, a professional chessplayer. That fact has an important bearing on the dream, or dreams. He made most of his scant income at a games arcade in Lower Manhattan, taking on all comers—the enthusiast who gets a kick out of trying to beat an expert, the lonely man who turns to chess as to a drug, or the down-and-outer tempted into purchasing a half hour of intellectual dignity for a quarter.

After I got to know Moreland, I often wandered into the arcade and watched him playing as many as three or four games simultaneously, oblivious to the clicking and whirring of the pinball games and the intermittent reports from the shooting gallery. He got fifteen cents for every win; the house took the extra dime. When he lost, neither got anything.

Eventually I found out that he was a much better player than he needed to be for his arcade job. He had won casual games from internationally famous masters. A couple of Manhattan clubs had wanted to groom him for the big tournaments, but lack of ambition kept him drifting along in obscurity. I got the impression that he thought chess too trivial a business to warrant serious consideration, although he was perfectly willing to dribble his life away at the arcade, waiting for something really important to come along, if it ever did. Once in a while he eked out his income by playing on a club team, getting as much as five dollars.

I met him at the old brownstone house where we both had rooms on the same floor, and it was there that he first told me about the dream.

We had just finished a game of chess, and I was idly watching the battle-scarred pieces slide off the board and pile up in a fold of the blanket on his cot. Outside a fretful wind eddied the dry grit. There was a surge of traffic noises, and the buzz of a defective neon sign. I had just lost, but I was glad that Moreland never let me win, as he occasionally did with the players at the arcade, to encourage them. Indeed, I thought myself fortunate in being able to play with Moreland at all, not knowing then that I was probably the best friend he had.

I was saying something obvious about chess.

“You think it a complicated game?” he inquired, peering at me with quizzical intentness, his dark eyes like round windows pushed up under heavy eaves. “Well, perhaps it is. But I play a game a thousand times more complex every night in my dreams. And the queer thing is that the game goes on night after night. The same game. I never really sleep. Only dream about the game.”

Then he told me, speaking with a mixture of facetious jest and uncomfortable seriousness that was to characterize many of our conversations.

The images of his dream, as he described them, were impressively simple, without any of the usual merging and incongruity. A board so vast he sometimes had to walk out on it to move his pieces. A great many more squares than in chess and arranged in patches of different colors, the power of the pieces varying according to the color of the square on which they stood. Above and to each side of the board only blackness, but a blackness that suggested starless infinity, as if, as he put it, the scene were laid on the very top of the universe.

When he was awake he could not quite remember all the rules of the game, although he recalled a great many isolated points, including the interesting fact that—quite unlike chess—his pieces and those of his adversary did not duplicate each other. Yet he was convinced that he not only understood the game perfectly while dreaming, but also was able to play it in the highly strategic manner of the master chess player. It was, he said, as though his night mind had many more dimensions of thought than his waking mind, and were able to grasp intuitively complex series of moves that would ordinarily have to be reasoned out step by step.

“A feeling of increased mental power is a very ordinary dream-delusion, isn’t it?” he added, peering at me sharply. “And so I suppose you might say it’s a very ordinary dream.”

I did not know quite how to take that last remark, so I prodded him with a question.

“What do the pieces look like?”

It turned out that they were similar to those of chess in that they were considerably stylized and yet suggested the original forms—architectural, animal, ornamental—which had served as their inspiration. But there the similarity ended. The inspiring forms, so far as he could guess at them, were grotesque in the extreme. There were terraced towers subtly distorted out of the perpendicular, strangely asymmetric polygons that made him think of temples and tombs, vegetable-animal shapes which defied classification and whose formalized limbs and external organs suggested a variety of unknown functions. The more powerful pieces seemed to be modeled after life forms, for they carried stylized weapons and other implements, and wore things similar to crowns and tiaras—a little like the king, queen and bishop in chess—while the carving indicated voluminous robes and hoods. But they were in no other sense anthropomorphic. Moreland sought in vain for earthly analogies, mentioning Hindu idols, prehistoric reptiles, futurist sculpture, squids bearing daggers in their tentacles, and huge ants and mantes and other insects with fantastically adapted end-organs.

“I think you would have to search the whole universe—every planet and every dead sun—before you could find the original models,” he said, frowning. “Remember, there is nothing cloudy or vague about the pieces themselves in my dream. They are as tangible as this rook.” He picked up the piece, clenched his fist around it for a moment, and then held it out toward me on his open palm. “It is only in what they suggest that the vagueness lies.”

It was strange, but his words seemed to open some dream-eye in my own mind, so that I could almost see the things he described. I asked him if he experienced fear during his dream.

He replied that the pieces one and all filled him with repugnance—those based on higher life forms usually to a greater degree than the

architectural ones. He hated to have to touch or handle them. There was one piece in particular which had an intensely morbid fascination for his dream-self. He identified it as “the archer” because the stylized weapon it bore gave the impression of being able to hurt at a distance; but like the rest it was quite inhuman. He described it as representing a kind of intermediate, warped life form which had achieved more than human intellectual power without losing—but rather gaining—in brute cruelty and malignity. It was one of the opposing pieces for which there was no duplicate among his own. The mingled fear and loathing it inspired in him sometimes became so great that they interfered with his strategic grasp of the whole dream-game, and he was afraid his feeling toward it would sometime rise to such a pitch that he would be forced to capture it just to get it off the board, even though such a capture might compromise his whole position.

“God knows how my mind ever cooked up such a hideous entity,” he finished, with a quick grin. “Five hundred years ago I’d have said the Devil put it there.”

“Speaking of the Devil,” I asked, immediately feeling my flippancy was silly, “whom do you play against in your dream?”

Again he frowned. “I don’t know. The opposing pieces move by themselves. I will have made a move, and then, after waiting for what seems like an eon, all on edge as in chess, one of the opposing pieces will begin to shake a little and then to wobble back and forth. Gradually the movement increases in extent until the piece gets off balance and begins to rock and careen across the board, like a water tumbler on a pitching ship, until it reaches the proper square. Then, slowly as it began, the movement subsides. I don’t know, but it always makes me think of some huge, invisible, senile creature—crafty, selfish, cruel. You’ve watched that trembly old man at the arcade? The one who always drags the pieces across the board without lifting them, his hand constantly shaking? It’s a little like that.”

I nodded. His description made it very vivid. For the first time I began to think of how unpleasant such a dream might be.

“And it goes on night after night?” I asked.

“Night after night!” he affirmed with sudden fierceness. “And always the same game. It has been more than a month now, and my forces are just beginning to grapple with the enemy. It’s draining off my mental energy. I wish it would stop. I’m getting so that I hate to go to sleep.” He paused and turned away. “It seems queer,” he said after a moment in a softer voice, smiling apologetically, “It seems queer to get so worked up over a dream. But if you’ve had bad ones, you know how they can cloud your thoughts all day. And I haven’t really managed to get over to you the sort of feeling that trips me while I’m dreaming, and while my brain is working at the game and plotting move-sequence after move-sequence and weighing a thousand complex possibilities. There’s repugnance, yes, and fear. I’ve told you that. But the dominant feeling is one of responsibility. I must not lose the game. More than my own personal welfare depends upon it. There are some terrible stakes involved, though I am never quite sure what they are.

“When you were a little child, did you ever worry tremendously about something, with that complete lack of proportion characteristic of childhood? Did you ever feel that everything, literally everything, depended upon your performing some trivial action, some unimportant duty, in just the right way? Well, while I dream, I have the feeling that I’m playing for some stake as big as the fate of mankind. One wrong move may plunge the universe into unending night. Sometimes, in my dream, I feel sure of it.”

His voice trailed off and he stared at the chessmen. I made some remarks and started to tell about an air-raid nightmare I had just had, but it didn’t seem very important. And I gave him some vague advice about changing his sleeping habits, which did not seem very important either, although he accepted it with good grace. As I started back to my room he said, “Amusing to think, isn’t it, that I’ll be playing the game again as soon as my head hits the pillow?” He grinned and added lightly, “Perhaps it will be over sooner than I expect. Lately I’ve had the feeling that my adversary is about to unleash a surprise attack, although he pretends to be on the defensive.” He grinned again and shut the door.

As I waited for sleep, staring at the wavy churning darkness that is more in the eyes than outside them, I began to wonder whether Moreland did not stand in greater need of psychiatric treatment than most chessplayers. Certainly a person without family, friends, or proper occupation is liable to mental aberrations. Yet he seemed sane enough. Perhaps the dream was a compensation for his failure to use anything like the full potentialities of his highly talented mind, even at chess-playing. Certainly it was a satisfyingly grandiose vision, with its unearthly background and its implications of stupendous mental skill.

There floated into my mind the lines from the *Rubaiyat* about the cosmic chess-player who, “Hither and thither moves and checks, and slays, And one by one back in the Closet lays.”

Then I thought of the emotional atmosphere of his dreams, and the feelings of terror and boundless responsibility, of tremendous duties and cataclysmic consequences—feelings I recognized from my own dreams—and I compared them with the mad, dismal state of the world (for it was October, and sense of utter catastrophe had not yet been dulled) and I thought of the million drifting Morelands suddenly shocked into a realization of the desperate plight of things and of priceless chances lost forever in the past and of their own ill-defined but certain complicity in the disaster. I began to see Moreland’s dream as the symbol of a last-ditch, too-late struggle against the implacable forces of fate and chance. And my night thoughts began to revolve around the fancy that some cosmic beings, neither gods nor men, had created human life long ago as a jest or experiment or artistic form, and had now decided to base the fate of their creation on the result of a game of skill played against one of their creatures.

Suddenly I realized that I was wide awake and that the darkness was no longer restful. I snapped on the light and impulsively decided to see if Moreland was still up.

The hall was as shadowy and funereal as that of most boarding houses late at night, and I tried to minimize the inevitable dry creakings. I waited for a few moments in front of Moreland’s door, but heard nothing, so instead of knocking, I presumed upon our

familiarity and edged open the door, quietly, in order not to disturb him if he were abed.

It was then that I heard his voice, and so certain was my impression that the sound came from a considerable distance that I immediately walked back to the stairwell and called, "Moreland, are you down there?"

Only then did I realize what he had said. Perhaps it was the peculiarity of the words that caused them first to register on my mind as merely a series of sounds.

The words were, "My spider-thing seizes your armor-bearer. I threaten."

It instantly occurred to me that the words were similar in general form to any one of a number of conventional expressions in chess, such as, "My rook captures your bishop. I give check." But there are no such pieces as "spider-things" or "armor-bearers" in chess or any other game I know of.

I automatically walked back towards his room, though I still doubted he was there. The voice had sounded much too far away—outside the building or at least in a remote section of it.

But he was lying on the cot, his upturned face revealed by the light of a distant electric advertisement, which blinked on and off at regular intervals. The traffic sounds, which had been almost inaudible in the hall, made the half-darkness restless and irritably alive. The defective neon sign still buzzed and droned insectlike as it had earlier in the evening.

I tiptoed over and looked down at him. His face, more pale than it should have been because of some quality of the intermittent light, was set in an expression of painfully intense concentration—forehead vertically furrowed, muscles around the eye contracted, lips pursed to a line. I wondered if I ought to awaken him. I was acutely aware of the impersonally murmuring city all around us—block on block of shuttling, routined, aloof existence—and the contrast made his sleeping face seem all the more sensitive and vividly individual and unguarded, like some soft though purposefully tense organism which has lost its protective shell.

As I waited uncertainly, the tight lips opened a little without losing any of their tautness. He spoke, and for a second time the impression of distance was so compelling that I involuntarily looked over my shoulder and out the dustily glowing window. Then I began to tremble.

“My coiled-thing writhes to the thirteenth square of the green ruler’s domain,” was what he said, but I can only suggest the quality of the voice. Some inconceivable sort of distance had drained it of all richness and throatiness and overtones so that it was hollow and flat and faint and disturbingly mournful, as voices sometimes sound in open country, or from up on a high roof, or when there is a bad telephone connection. I felt I was the victim of some gruesome deception, and yet I knew that ventriloquism is a matter of motionless lips and clever suggestion rather than any really convincing change in the quality of the voice itself. Without volition there rose in my mind visions of infinite space, unending darkness. I felt as if I were being wrenched up and away from the world, so that Manhattan lay below me like a black asymmetric spearhead outlined by leaden waters, and then still farther outward at increasing speed until earth and sun and stars and galaxies were all lost and I was beyond the universe. To such a degree did the quality of Moreland’s voice affect me.

I do not know how long I stood there waiting for him to speak again, with the noises of Manhattan flowing around yet not quite touching me, and the electric sign blinking on and off unalterably like the ticking of a clock. I could only think about the game that was being played, and wonder whether Moreland’s adversary had yet made an answering move, and whether things were going for or against Moreland. There was no telling from his face; its intensity of concentration did not change. During those moments or minutes I stood there, I believed implicitly in the reality of the game. As if I myself were somehow dreaming, I could not question the rationality of my belief or break the spell which bound me.

When finally his lips parted a little and I experienced again that impression of impossible, eerie ventriloquism—the words this time being, “My horned-creature vaults over the twisted tower, challenging

the archer”—my fear broke loose from whatever controlled it and I stumbled toward the door.

Then came what was, in an oblique way, the strangest part of the whole episode. In the time it took me to walk the length of the corridor back to my room, most of my fear and most of the feeling of complete alienage and other-wordliness which had dominated me while I was watching Moreland's face, receded so swiftly that I even forgot, for the time being, how great they had been. I do not know why that happened. Perhaps it was because the unwholesome realm of Moreland's dream was so grotesquely dissimilar to anything in the real world. Whatever the cause, by the time I opened the door to my room I was thinking, "Such nightmares can't be wholesome. Perhaps he should see a psychiatrist. Yet it's only a dream," and so on. I felt tired and stupid. Very soon I was asleep.

But some wraith of the original emotions must have lingered, for I awoke next morning with the fear that something had happened to Moreland. Dressing hurriedly, I knocked at his door, but found the room empty, the bedclothes still rumpled. I inquired of the landlady, and she said he had gone out at eight-fifteen as usual. The bald statement did not quite satisfy my vague anxiety. But since my job-hunting that day happened to lie in the direction of the arcade, I had an excuse to wander in. Moreland was stolidly pushing pieces around with an abstracted, tousle-haired fellow of Slavic features, and casually conducting two rapid-fire checker games on the side. Reassured, I went on without bothering him.

That evening we had a long talk about dreams in general, and I found him surprisingly well-read on the subject and scientifically cautious in his attitudes. Rather to my chagrin, it was I who introduced such dubious topics as clairvoyance, mental telepathy, and the possibility of strange telescopings and other distortions of time and space during dream states. Some foolish reticence about admitting I had pushed my way into his room last night kept me from telling him what I had heard and seen, but he freely told me he had had another installment of the usual dream. He seemed to take a more philosophical attitude now that he had shared his experiences with

someone. Together we speculated as to the possible daytime sources of his dream. It was after twelve when we said goodnight.

I went away with the feeling of having been let down—vaguely unsatisfied. I think the fear I had experienced the previous night and then almost forgotten must have been gnawing at me obscurely.

And the following evening it found an avenue of return. Thinking Moreland must be tired of talking about dreams, I coaxed him into a game of chess. But in the middle of the game he put back a piece he was about to move, and said, “You know, that damned dream of mine is getting very bothersome.”

It turned out that his dream adversary had finally loosed the long-threatened attack, and that the dream itself had turned into a kind of nightmare. “It’s very much like what happens to you in a game of chess,” he explained. “You go along confident that you have a strong position and that the game is taking the right direction. Every move your opponent makes is one you have foreseen. You get to feeling almost omniscient. Suddenly he makes a totally unexpected attacking move. For a moment you think it must be a stupid blunder on his part. Then you look a little more closely and realize that you have totally overlooked something and that his attack is a sound one. Then you begin to sweat.

“Of course, I’ve always experienced fear and anxiety and a sense of overpowering responsibility during the dream. But my pieces were like a wall, protecting me. Now I can see only the cracks in that wall. At any one of a hundred weak points it might conceivably be broken. Whenever one of the opposing pieces begins to wobble and shake, I wonder whether, when its move is completed, there will flash into my mind the unalterable and unavoidable combination of moves leading to my defeat. Last night I thought I saw such a move, and the terror was so great that everything swirled and I seemed to drop through millions of miles of emptiness in an instant. Yet just in that instant of waking I realized I had miscalculated, and that my position, though perilous, was still secure. It was so vivid that I almost carried with me into my waking thoughts the reason why, but then some of the steps in the train of dream-reasoning dropped out, as if my waking mind were not big enough to hold them all.”

He also told me that his fixation on “the archer” was becoming increasingly troublesome. It filled him with a special kind of terror, different in quality, but perhaps higher in pitch than that engendered in him by the dream as a whole: a crazy morbid terror, characterized by intense repugnance, nerve twisting exasperation, and reckless suicidal impulses.

“I can’t get rid of the feeling,” he said, “that the beastly thing will in some unfair and underhanded manner be the means of my defeat.”

He looked very tired to me, although his face was of the compact, tough-skinned sort that does not readily show fatigue, and I felt concern for his physical and nervous welfare. I suggested that he consult a doctor (I did not like to say psychiatrist) and pointed out that sleeping tablets might be of some help.

“But in a deeper sleep the dream might be even more vivid and real,” he answered, grimacing sardonically. “No, I’d rather play out the game under the present conditions.”

I was glad to find that he still viewed the dream as an interesting and temporary psychological phenomenon (what else he could have viewed it as, I did not stop to analyze). Even while admitting to me the exceptional intensity of his emotions, he maintained something of a jesting air. Once he compared his dream to a paranoid’s delusions of persecution, and asked whether I didn’t think it was good enough to get him admitted to an asylum.

“Then I could forget the arcade and devote all my time to dream-chess,” he said, laughing sharply as soon as he saw T was beginning to wonder whether he had not meant the remark half-seriously.

But some part of my mind was not convinced by his protestations, and when later I tossed in the dark, my imagination perversely kept picturing the universe as a great arena in which each creature is doomed to engage in a losing game of skill against demoniac mentalities which, however long they may play cat and mouse, are always assured of final mastery—or almost assured, so that it would be a miracle if they were beaten. I found myself comparing them to certain chessplayers, who if they cannot beat an opponent by superior skill, will capitalize on unpleasant personal mannerisms in order to exasperate him and break down the lucidity of his thinking.

This mood colored my own nebulous dreams and persisted into the next day. As I walked the streets I felt myself inundated by an omnipresent anxiety, and I sensed taut, nervous misery in each passing face. For once I seemed able to look behind the mask which every person wears and which is so characteristically pronounced in a congested city, and see what lay behind—the egotistical sensitivity, the smouldering irritation, the thwarted longing, the defeat...and, above all, the anxiety, too ill-defined and lacking in definite object to be called fear, but nonetheless infecting every thought and action, and making trivial things terrible. And it seemed to me that social, economic, and physiological factors, even Death and the War, were insufficient to explain such anxiety, and that it was in reality an upwelling from something dubious and horrible in the very constitution of the universe.

That evening I found myself at the arcade. Here too I sensed a difference in things, for Moreland's abstraction was not the calculating boredom with which I was familiar, and his tiredness was shockingly apparent. One of his three opponents, after shifting around restlessly, called his attention to a move, and Moreland jerked his head as if he had been dozing. He immediately made an answering move, and quickly lost his queen and the game by a trap that was very obvious even to me. A little later he lost another game by an equally elementary oversight. The boss of the arcade, a big beefy man, ambled over and stood behind Moreland, his heavy-jowled face impassive, seeming to study the position of the pieces in the last game. Moreland lost that too.

“Who won?” asked the boss.

Moreland indicated his opponent. The boss grunted noncommittally and walked off.

No one else sat down to play. It was near closing time. I was not sure whether Moreland had noticed me, but after a while he stood up and nodded at me, and got his hat and coat. We walked the long stretch back to the rooming house. He hardly spoke a word, and my sensation of morbid insight into the world around persisted and kept me silent. He walked as usual with long, slightly stiff-kneed strides,

hands in his pockets, hat pulled low, frowning at the pavement a dozen feet ahead.

When we reached the room he sat down without taking off his coat and said, "Of course, it was the dream made me lose those games. When I woke this morning it was terribly vivid, and I almost remembered the exact position and all the rules. I started to make a diagram—"

He indicated a piece of wrapping paper on the table. Hasty crisscrossed lines, incomplete, represented what seemed to be the corner of an indefinitely larger pattern. There were about five hundred squares. On various squares were marks and names standing for pieces, and there were arrows radiating out from the pieces to show their power of movement.

"I got that far. Then I began to forget," he said tiredly, staring at the floor. "But I'm still very close to it. Like a mathematical puzzle you've not quite solved. Parts of the board kept flashing into my mind all day, so that I felt with a little more effort I would be able to grasp the whole. Yet I can't."

His voice changed. "I'm going to lose, you know. It's that piece I call 'the archer.' Last night I couldn't concentrate on the board; it kept drawing my eyes. The worst thing is that it's the spearhead of my adversary's attack. I ache to capture it. But I must not, for it's a kind of catspaw too, the bait of the strategic trap my adversary is laying. If I capture it, I will expose myself to defeat. So I must watch it coming closer and closer—it has an ugly, double-angled sort of hopping move—knowing that my only chance is to sit tight until my adversary overreaches himself and I can counterattack. But I won't be able to. Soon, perhaps tonight, my nerve will crack and I will capture it."

I was studying the diagram with great interest, and only half heard the rest—a description of the actual appearance of "the archer." I heard him say something about "a five-lobed head...the head almost hidden by a hood...appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe...an eight pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and little bagshaped receptacles, as though for poison...posture suggesting it is lifting the weapon to aim it...all intricately

carved in some lustrous red stone, speckled with violet...an expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence..."

Just then all my attention focussed suddenly on the diagram, and I felt a tightening shiver of excitement, for I recognized two familiar names, which I had never heard Moreland mention while awake. "Spider-thing" and "green ruler."

Without pausing to think, I told him of how I had listened to his sleep-talking three nights before, and about the peculiar phrases he had spoken which tallied so well with the entries on the diagram. I poured out my account with melodramatic haste. My discovery of the entries on the diagram, nothing exceptionally amazing in itself, probably made such a great impression on me because I had hitherto strangely forgotten or repressed the intense fear I had experienced when I had watched Moreland sleeping.

Before I was finished, however, I noticed the growing anxiety of his expression, and abruptly realized that what I was saying might not have the best effect on him. So I minimized my recollection of the unwholesome quality of his voice—the overpowering impression of distance—and the fear it engendered in me.

Even so, it was obvious that he had received a severe shock. For a little while he seemed to be on the verge of some serious nervous derangement, walking up and down with fierce, jerky movements, throwing out crazy statements, coming back again and again to the diabolical convincingness of the dream—which my revelation seemed to have intensified for him—and finally breaking down into vague appeals for help.

Those appeals had an immediate effect on me, making me forget any wild thoughts of my own and putting everything on a personal level. All my instincts were now to aid Moreland, and I once again saw the whole matter as something for a psychiatrist to handle. Our roles had changed. I was no longer the half-awed listener, but the steady friend to whom he turned for advice.

That, more than anything, gave me a feeling of confidence and made my previous speculations seem childish and unhealthy. I felt contemptuous of myself for having encouraged his delusive trains of imagination, and I did as much as I could to make up for it.

After a while my repeated reassurances seemed to take effect. He grew calm and our talk became reasonable once more, though every now and then he would appeal to me about some particular point that worried him. I discovered for the first time the extent to which he had taken the dream seriously. During his lonely broodings, he told me, he had sometimes become convinced that his mind left his body while he slept and traveled immeasurable distances to some transcosmic realm where the game was played. He had the illusion, he said, of getting perilously close to the innermost secrets of the universe and finding they were rotten and evil and sardonic. At times he had been terribly afraid that the pathway between his mind and the realm of the game would “open up” to such a degree that he would be “sucked up bodily from the world,” as he put it. His belief that loss of the game would doom the world itself had been much stronger than he had ever admitted to me previously. He had traced a frightening relationship between the progress of the game and of the War, and had begun to believe that the ultimate issue of the War—though not necessarily the victory of either side—hung on the outcome of the game.

At times it had got so bad, he revealed, that his only relief had been in the thought that, no matter what happened, he could never convince others of the reality of his dream. They would always be able to view it as a manifestation of insanity or overwrought imagination. No matter how vivid it became to him he would never have concrete, objective proof.

“It’s this way,” he said. “You saw me sleeping, didn’t you? Right here on this cot. You heard me talk in my sleep, didn’t you? About the game. Well, that absolutely proves to you that it’s all just a dream, doesn’t it? You couldn’t rightly believe anything else, could you?”

I do not know why those last ambiguous questions of his should have had such a reassuring effect on me of all people, who had only three nights ago trembled at the indescribable quality of his voice as he talked from his dream. But they did. They seemed like the final seal on an agreement between us to the effect that the dream was only a dream and meant nothing. I began to feel rather buoyant and self-satisfied, like a doctor who has just pulled his patient through a

dangerous crisis. I talked to Moreland in what I now realize was almost a pompously sympathetic way, without noticing how dispirited were his obedient nods of agreement. He said little after those last questions.

I even persuaded him to go out to a nearby lunchroom for a midnight snack, as if—God help me!—I were celebrating my victory over the dream. As we sat at the not-too-dirty counter, smoking our cigarettes and sipping burningly hot coffee, I noticed that he had begun to smile again, which added to my satisfaction. I was blind to the ultimate dejection and submissive hopelessness that lay behind those smiles. As I left him at the door of his room, he suddenly caught hold of my hand and said, “I want to tell you how grateful I am for the way you’ve worked to pull me out of this mess.” I made a deprecating gesture. “No, wait.” he continued. “It does mean a lot. Well, anyway, thanks.”

I went away with a contented, almost virtuous feeling. I had no apprehensions whatever. I only mused, in a heavily philosophic way, over the strange forms fear and anxiety can assume in our pitifully tangled civilization.

As soon as I was dressed next morning, I rapped briskly at his door and impulsively pushed in without waiting for an answer. For once sunlight was pouring through the dusty window.

Then I saw it, and everything else receded.

It was lying on the crumpled bedclothes, half hidden by a fold of blanket, a thing perhaps ten inches high, as solid as any statuette, and as undeniably real. But from the first glance I knew that its form bore no relation to any earthly creature. This fact would have been as apparent to someone who knew nothing of art as to an expert. I also knew that the red, violet-flecked substance from which it had been carved or cast had no classification among the earthly gems and minerals. Every detail was there. The five-lobed head, almost hidden by a hood. The appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe. The eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it. and the little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison. Posture suggesting it was lifting the weapon to aim it. An expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence.

Beyond doubting, it was the thing of which Moreland had dreamed. The thing which had horrified and fascinated him, as it now did me, which had rasped unendurably on his nerves, as it now began to rasp on mine. The thing which had been the spearhead and catspaw of his adversary's attack, and whose capture—and it now seemed evident that it had been captured— meant the probable loss of the game. The thing which had somehow been sucked back along an ever-opening path across unimaginable distances from a realm of madness ruling the universe.

Beyond doubting, it was “the archer.”

Hardly knowing what moved me, save fear, or what my purpose was, I fled from the room. Then I realized that I must find Moreland. No one had seen him leaving the house. I searched for him all day. The arcade. Chess clubs. Libraries.

It was evening when I went back and forced myself to enter his room. The figure was no longer there. No one at the house professed to know anything about it when I questioned them, but some of the denials were too angry, and I know that “the archer,” being obviously a thing of value and having no overly great terrors for those who do not know its history, has most probably found its way into the hands of some wealthy and eccentric collector. Other things have vanished by a similar route in the past.

Or it may be that Moreland returned secretly and took it away with him.

But I am certain that it was not made on earth.

And although there are reasons to fear the contrary, I feel that somewhere—in some cheap boarding house or lodging place, or in some madhouse—Albert Moreland, if the game is not already lost and the forfeiture begun, is still playing that unbelievable game for stakes it is unwholesome to contemplate.