

Let's begin by a sort of fan-fiction,

CHESS IN THE EVENING

by Harald Kressler

Say to yourself: what else can be done than play chess? Do you know how long and lonely and terrible dark winter evenings are when sitting in front of the fireplace, with your pipe pouring forth grey smoke, and a cold glitter from the stars shines through your window?

Perhaps it is my fault that I am alone and forgotten; I remember the time when there were many friends, thinking of it I grow melancholy. They were different, these times, with people I danced, laughed, and feasted. Then I discovered my love for chess. I cannot remember if my friends left me because they could no longer bear my "chess-fanaticism" as they called it, or if I began to play myself after they stopped visiting me. Anyway, there is no one to speak to, only the fire - it cannot run away. This conversation is a bit one-sided and even the best reading cannot drive away the tedium of this evening.

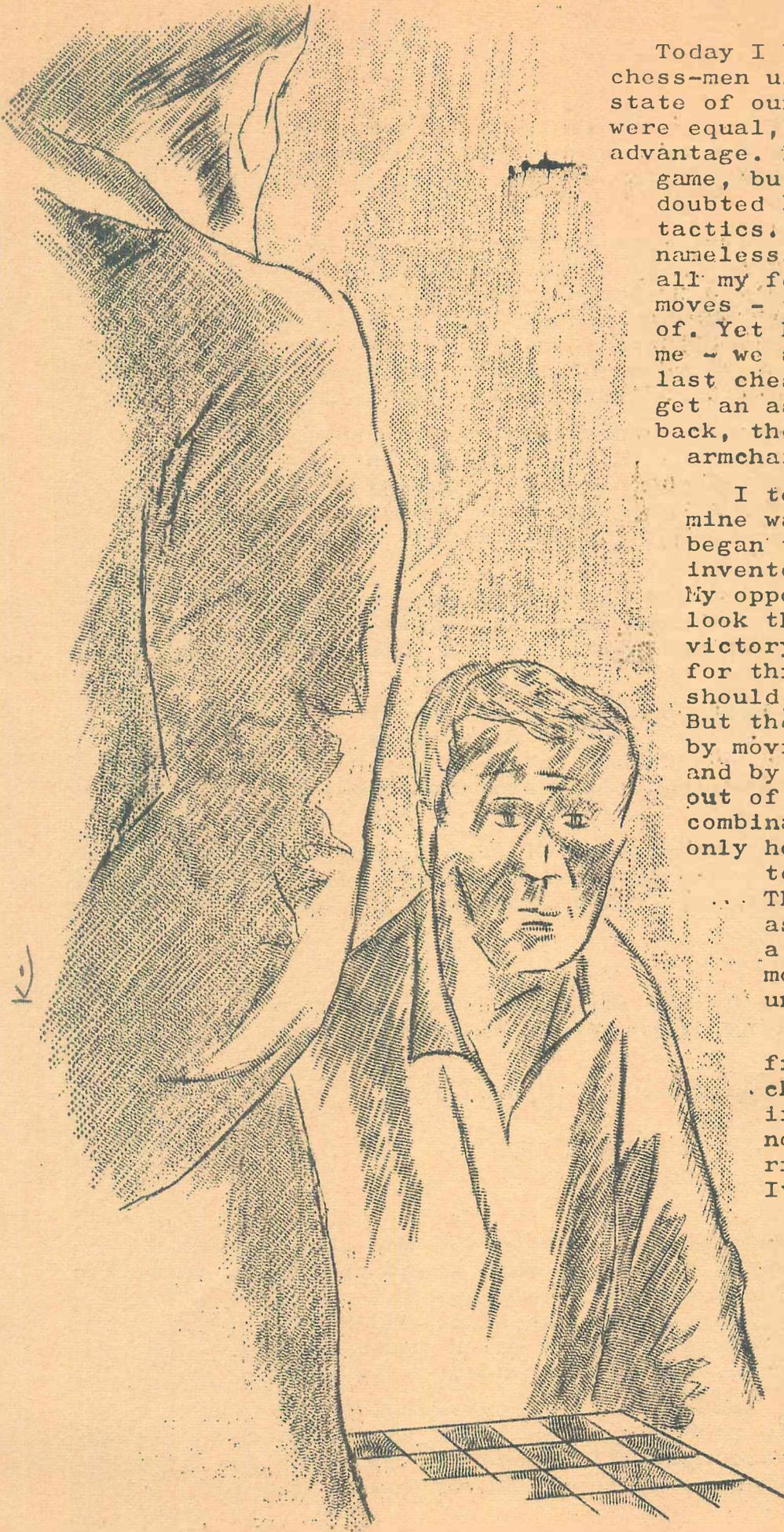
For half a week I had a dog, a small cur and a stray; then it ran away and did not return. And I was alone again. Alone with the fire, the cold outside and the scornful glittering of the stars. It is not surprising my love of chess grew; another might have turned to drink, but I played chess. I played it with perseverance and doggedness not only for hours - for days, and once a game that lasted for several weeks. Against myself of course! I have no friends anymore.

This did not make the game dull: I played fair, never preferring one side against the other - then the game would be useless. Sometimes I laid traps for myself, which I would blindly overlook. Afterwards I realised what had happened, but most times the game was decided then. This often happens after the game has gone on for a long time, you get tired after four or five hours, and it happens easily. I really know all the rules and the only possible answer to each move. I'd certainly be an outstanding player if I -- ah yes, you already know -- if I only had a partner!

One day I had a partner; I don't know who he is, and I don't dare ask for he might be angry and run away. I'm so pleased to have found such an excellent player, for his playing is outstanding, he seems to be my equal.

When I set up the chess-men, he suddenly appeared in front of me and began to play. He did not ask permission, he did not speak, he only played. It was strange: I was neither astonished or joyous at his presence. Only after a long time, when he was gone, did I feel an almost insane delight.

Now it is customary among good chess players to speak rarely during a game, but I learnt he was a clerk; so we were colleagues! Any other questions were silently ignored by him, so that I finally gave up the effort.



Today I began to set up the chess-men using my notes of the state of our unfinished game. We were equal, neither had an advantage. I would try to win the game, but an inner voice doubted I could meet his tactics. It is strange, but my nameless opponent is aware of all my feints and misleading moves - the ones I am so proud of. Yet his are also known to me - we are equal. I put the last chess-man up and turned to get an ashtray, when I turned back, there he was... in the armchair grinning at me.

I took my place silently; mine was the first move, I began to play a system I invented only one night ago. My opponent seemed to overlook the trap; sure of the victory I advanced the runner for three squares, now I should win after three moves. But then he evaded the trap by moving his horse elegantly and by hitting a pawn he was out of the trap. This combination of moves was his only hope, I invented that too but a night ago. ... The game went on, the ashtray filled, sometimes a move took an hour or more. The game was still undecided.

In the past my friends called me choleric, I don't know if that was right, but now I felt something rise which dimmed my eyes. It was hatred and grudge, envy without reason, for he played no better than I. When he finally evaded a carefully built-up trap I nearly lost my self control! Only the thought of losing my only opponent kept me from using my fists.

"Well done," I said appreciatively but dishonestly, actually I was furious. My partner remained silent, the game was undecided and I knew this would be so forever unless one of us forgot the rules. Or if he died!

If he died! Can you imagine the feeling when you play for years and years and think there could be no one superior...and then find a partner you cannot beat! A partner whose name even you do not know... The last I had thought aloud! "Dave," said he shrugging, "perhaps my name is Dave." Saying this he smiled challengingly and so scornfully I knew he laughed at me, for my name was Dave, and he to have the same name...? Ridiculous, wasn't it?

As I write this I cannot understand myself, why was I so excited? I don't regret the end, but it does not satisfy me. Smiling in comradeship I shook his hand, congratulating his ability and went to the kitchen to get some wine. When he raised his glass I shot him dead. He dropped the glass, looked at me and tried to smile - then died.

At this moment my fury and hatred disappeared, and with it my love for chess. I did not care that his corpse disappeared - the magazine of the revolver was still filled; this convinced me that I had not shot at all.

But my opponent remains dead and gone. The revolver has been the symbol of my wish to kill. I do not play chess anymore and only sit in front of the fire. Uninterested in any hobby, or my lost friends; the cold glittering of the stars remains, but I do not look. I have changed.

Of course, I had only played myself even during his presence, that was the reason I could never win, and you will understand why I have no feelings anymore...for it was my soul against which I played...

I've killed my soul - - -

So now I am sitting by the fire and do not think and do not love, and the glittering of the stars and the cold, it does not touch me.

My partner was my soul ...and I killed it.

(SOL 20)

+++ Harald Kressler is a young Austrian fan who seems to have gaffiated by now. I do not know very much about him, but for 1960 he was elected best fan-writer of the year. This piece may have lost much of its atmosphere by translation. CHESS IN THE EVENING was part of a sort of competition in which three authors wrote about the same theme; Harald's story undoubtedly was the best.

Next you'll find some lines about Meyrink's THE GOLEM. The author of this piece wants to remain unknown (even to the readers of SOL), so he made up this pseudonyme. I choose his article, for a fair amount of you will already have heard about Gustav Meyrink.