

THE NIGHT THE STAKES WERE LIFE OR DEATH THE ROAD THE ROAD

by Jude Acers (US senior master)

THE ROAD...

The True Story of the World's Number One Lecture and Exhibition Chess Player Part 3: Beth

(She is 25, black, a waitress in an all-night restaurant. Her face has been cut to pieces by her father when she was nine years old. But she is not worried. She gets by with a little help from her friends...)

You are writing and 16-page letter to your U.S. tour manager Russell Miller and just sitting there minding your own business like a good little professional chess master should. The place is a York, Pennsylvania all-night restaurant, which looks terrible on the outside, but which serves nifty food on the inside. The place has wind-downs on all sides, an obscure fact that probably saved the lives of three people on that day. You chomp upon a huge salad.

This is your second visit to the restaurant at two in the morning. You do not notice anything strange, save the admitted novelty of a waitress who has almost no face. "My daddy, he was just crazy is all. He just got a knife and goes chop, chop, you know. I don't mind talking about it, because, y' know, everybody who comes in here gets around to it eventually," Beth told me the night before.

The newspapers are delivered to the all-night restaurant now and the photograph of one Jude Acers is on the front page. (I played 41 opponents simultaneously 12 hours ago at a local shopping center exhibition.) Beth sees my picture and lights up like a Christmas tree, laughing. "Well, I do swear--here you are, staring at me, sure enough!" She is fascinated and beams from far away as I continue writing in a poorly lit booth in the far corner of the place. I pause for a friendly smile, ask for more coffee for the world's heaviest coffee freak and give Beth my best "I-like-you" wink now and then.

Beth is the only waitress on the graveyard shift. She is reaching for the coffeepot as you notice that her all white uniform really looks quite nice on her. You reflect on how quiet, friendly and graceful she has been in just moving about. Helen Gurley Brown was right. It's not your equipment, it's your bearing, your poise that makes or breaks you. Very interesting.

Beth is about five feet two inches high and pencil thin. Her eyes widen expressively as she speaks and she folds her arms as if she wishes to protect herself from the cold. And her eyes are lovely, lovely brown.

Just like Paul Harvey, "page 3" of your letter is going down. Beth and you are alone in the place. You realize that Beth is glad you're there, that you're a hero, the class of the night. You consider writing about Beth in your letter. You could say that she is everybody's big sister, that she never misses the slightest detail of an order. "A lotta truck drivers started coming again and again to see me. I really like that. At Christmas I have to keep a big box in the kitchen for the presents they bring in here for me. Lord, once I didn't have anymore room and I had to use the top of the refrigerator, and then there wasn't any more room there. I guess people feel sorry for me, you know, but I don't let things get me down. Do people give you trouble because of your long hair?" Beth wanted to know.

You sit there incredulous at comparing super careful frisking at airline terminals and an occasional hostile look with the lifelong United States misery of an "unbeautiful" woman. You keep writing...

They come in quietly, three bigee teenagers. They are punks, losers, nothings. But Beth serves them. One calls her "scarface" in audible conversation, just loud enough so Beth and I can hear it. They are cruel men and there is nothing I can do about it unless I want to kill or be killed. I have to sit there in the far corner of the restaurant and watch Beth get plastered by idiots. Beth is handling it beautifully, like a champ. They order something. She brings it, trying to be cool, hoping that her courtesy will break through. They order six hamburgers, three salads, three malts and pie.

Beth brings it all. She avoids any provocation, hoping they will pay and leave.

I feel my throat run dry. I must have looked awfully

small, hunched back there at the booth table with my spectacles drooping down my nose. I do not know what to say or do. My eyes snake toward them.

The lead punk has a red leather jacket and caddy cap. He is enjoying the scene immensely and looks in my direction, and apparently considers me harmless, insignificant, maybe worth robbing. To my amazement, he does not appear drunk or stoned. He is just naturally crazy. He turns back to Beth and says, "Ma'am, we ordered one hamburger and one shake--right?" He put some money on the table and they were leaving.

Then Beth made what one might interpret in retrospect as a horrible mistake. She called out, "I want you to pay me for everything you had, please." This was exactly what they had not wanted to hear. Lead punk turned. "What'd you say?"

"Please pay me for your food," Beth repeated, looking like a matchstick in the presence of a 50-story hotel.

With one savage clawing gesture, lead punk grabbed Beth by the throat across the counter and hurled her against the ice-cream freezer. Then he pushed the cake and pie container over the counter on top of her as she fell to the floor. Cake and pie splattered all over Beth.

Beth could be heard saying, "Oh, God! Oh, God! I'll pay for everything. I'll pay for everything." She grabs toward her purse, fumbles for tip money instead and says, "I'll pay. I'll pay it. I'm sorry. I'll pay."

It is precisely at this moment that I became absolutely mad-dog insane. I would kill all of them, coldly, ruthlessly, and I would use sugar shakers from the tables to do it. Yes, I would, damn it! I stood up, all "chicken" in me totally vanished, and grabbed three sugar shakers. I would mash their heads to pieces with sugar shakers to save her.

I must have looked a hysterical sight, flying across the diner with a stop here and there for sugar-filled shakers. Yes, I picked up only sugar packed, completely filled, sugar shaker mothers. Yes, I would get them all with my shakers.

Never in a million years will I forget what happened next. There was a sharp pop as the kitchen door swung



to toss me his knife or get in another good knuckle hackeroo.

The cops walk in quietly. They are state troopers, and I have never seen such huge beefy people. They calmly walk toward Beth, and everybody freezes in place, just like in the movies.

"Hi, Beth! What's the problem?" the stout, short trooper (who must have been only six-foot-six in his socks) says nicely.

Instantly, the lead punk snarled at Beth, grabbed her arm and started to say "the filthy" something. I use the word "something" because no third word ever came forth. The trooper standing silently by took a nightstick and brought it sharply to lead punk's jaw, knocking him totally out of commission. I remember thinking, "Oh, those police sticks really are useful, after all. They're not just decoration. How delightful!"

The remaining two guys want to take me off the table and tear me in two. They decide that it is not wise in view of the new development. They do not move and answer a few politely addressed questions. The cops are still, cool, and control the situation beautifully.

Suddenly, truck drivers, six of them, are standing next to the troopers. Obviously, there are only a few strangers in this gathering and the remaining two hoods are fully aware of it.

Nobody is doing any screaming now. The drivers get the message that these are local boys, who have hassled Beth "Let me tell you something, young man," a squirely, blue-shirted driver says to one of them. "If we find any of you in here again, you won't be needing food or anything else."

Having climbed down from the table, I see the whole thing now. I walk up to a trooper and mumble, "Excuse me, sir. Could I file a statement against them or something? I'd get a haircut or whatever you think I ought to do to testify against them in court and make it stick."

The cop turns and smiles a half smile. "That's okay. We won't need it. The judge comes in here for coffee all the time. The Judge knows Beth and he's not going to let any crap like this go on, believe me."

Beth serves me coffee and pancakes, jokingly removing the sugar shaker from the table and clutching my hand as she talks to me.

A newspaper reporter arrives to see the place slowly emerge from shambles. The owner arrives, kisses Beth and thanks me. The cook is leaving as I am trying futilely to pay the bill. "On the house, anytime," the owner says. You walk outside and put your arm around the cook.

You whisper, "Mr. Lee, thank you for not giving it to me!" And you are gone.

It is over. Beth does not really know what could have happened. But you do, don't you?



open and an incredible old chinaman, the cook emerged with a huge knife, ready for business. The chinaman did not hesitate, was not warning anybody or doing anything about introducing himself, like, "Hi, I'm Chon Lee, the cook," which, after all, is only being courteous.

Instead, Chon Lee took his knife and hacked a vicious cut in the right hand of the huge punk. Blood was all over the wall, as the cut man pivoted slightly and stood face-to-face, staring into my eyes. He was like a truck above me. Also, without hesitation, I took a step back, like Joe Namath, and whistled a sugar shaker into his face with every ounce of power I could summon, which is to say, all that any human being could get on a sugar shaker. It was a tremendous shot, and the hood went to his knees immediately.

The punk was upset, and so were the other two musketeers, who were now advancing upon the cook and me and my shakers. Beth was hysterical, screaming at us to "run, run, run!"

I creamed one with my last shaker, and as he lost balance slightly, grabbed his feet and dumped him on the floor. Then I turned an entire dining table over on top of him, and threw a container of forks on him as well.

There was blood everywhere, as the guy's hand was spewing it. The three hoods finally got it together and hit me several times, forcing me to retreat to a table-top near my sixteen-page Russell W. Miller letter.

Now I was trapped, and it was goodbye, Jude Acers, but then...there was a red light, a tiny dot moving in my eyes. It was a warm glowy light, brighter, brighter. Stunned, I realized that I had a good chance to get out of this alive, if only--if only--I could get my hands on another sugar shaker or two.

A police car was quietly and quickly creeping to the doorway of the diner, and there were two cops inside it. They had seen many things in their lifetimes, I suppose, but can you imagine how this all-night diner looked to them: I was standing atop a table, hysterical with anger and fear, and two salt and pepper shakers. Three men were surrounding the tables, grabbing at my legs, while dodging and keeping their hands near their heads, because of the shaker shot danger and my practical fighting chances in the theoretically lost position.

Beth and the cook were about ten feet away from the men, screaming at them to stop. The cook was trying

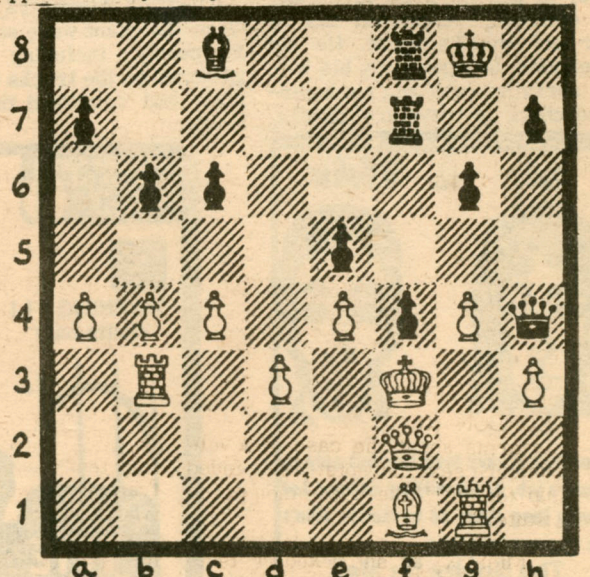


DIAGRAM: (White: Witt, Canada. Black: Geller, US-Sr. Siegen World Chess Olympiad.) Black to move and win (all variations!) Solution elsewhere in this issue.