

A WHITLER

Come. Listen to the soft rapping. Listen, Jude. Once, twice, three times. Now, Jude, come closer. Hear the sound of death. Four days -from now you will hear it twice more. The sound of death.

THE ROAD (Part VI)

Click . . . click . . . click
The Sound of Death

by Jude Acers (US Sr. Master)

I do not expect you to believe my experience. I will tell you how it happened as I write these words where it all began so many years ago in Specs Adler's drinking establishment. I do not believe in unidentified flying objects, little green men, voodoo, witchcraft. I claim no psychic power or extra-sensory perception or unexplainable foresight in my lifetime. I will leave the problem to you, the reader.

It is just a matter of getting a cup of coffee now, before I begin telling the story for the second time, since that week of long ago. So I motion to Liam to make a cup as always, three sugars. You see, I could not have been mistaken about the beginning. I think clearly and remember clearly such places and the curious, delightful people who haunt them, because I do not imbibe. This has proven disastrous for me, as there is no alibi, nowhere to run. I saw what I saw, I heard what I heard. Liam stirs the coffee.

Ritchie Valens is singing "Oh, Donna" on the radio. Dwell on the fact that Otis Redding, the big bopper, Buddy Holly, Rocky Marciano and Jim Croce have all died in private plane crashes. No such small death traps for me, I make a mental note. No, sir, if I have to go, I want to go in style in one of those huge Boeing hotel planes and a big K-boom.

And let me tell you that if my plane hits the only tree within a mile of takeoff (as Jim Croce's did), well, Suh, that tree isn't going to be around to do any talking to reporters, the National Tattler or the Berkeley BARB, about "How I nailed Jude Acers' plane." No, siree. That tree is going to be smashed, pulceefied, whisked into zeroness. The tree and Jude are going together, so any tree that has such ambitions had just better think about the matter most carefully.

Such thoughts are madness, this tree, rock-and-roll ballad songs and hotel plane delusions. But I do not want you to feel real. Just suppose, just suppose. . . .

In 1969, on Wednesday, you are all slone near the ivory sailor pieces in Specs. You look at a chess problem in George Koltanowski's column in the Chronicle. There is rain outside to keep you inside. And that's when I heard them, the three clicks I mean. They came K-thug, k-thug, k-thug. I sat paralyzed with fear and surprise. No person was within ten yards of me, and the sounds had been an inch away from my ears. I simply could not believe what was happening. I never dream. I sleep like any innocent and good professional chessmaster and chess teacher should, soundlessly, unworried by Richard Nixon, San Francisco

falling into the sea or what the wonderful ladies of the City think of me this Wednesday at eleven o'clock.

Let me assure you, dear reader, that when you hear three clicks in a quiet table corner of Specs Adler's, you don't go talking about it to the other people in the place. You're on your own. It's between you and the clicks. And you're really scared, because that's it. There will be no more repeats. You heard them once and that's enough.

The sound was muffled but loud. I knew it had meaning, but that was my fate: to be shocked and blown completely out of my tree and then to witness a murder and listen, listen to the sound of death.

Several days passed. Nothing happened. But I had heard them and knew that something would tell me what I had heard. I was reaching for a leather address book at dawn when a piece of paper fell onto the floor in a hotel lobby. It read, "Prison exhibition and lecture, Sun., 11:30 a.m., Tracy, Calif." I had forgotten entirely! I was supposed to be there in a matter of hours. It was a freebee chess exhibition, true, but I knew that the technique, enthusiasm and determination required to pull off a series of prison exhibitions would be invaluable experience to a chessmaster, even if he had to endure poverty and ridicule of the Fischer-worshipping chess public to do it.

And now I was about to disappoint hundreds of prisoners by missing this exhibition, which I had agreed to give months ago. How very stupid and unprofessional that would be. No! I will get there by bus, I will rush like a mad whizzer down to the Greyhound station on Market Street. And with all the powe I could summon I ran for blocks to the bus station to keep my date with death.

Nothing was destined by a god or thing to stop me. It was no matter that when I arrived at the bus depoe I discovered that I had no money in my blue jeans for the bus ticket. I stood like the utter fool that I am in the doorway and begged for coins from passersby. I was a dollar short, five minutes left before the last possible bus takes off. But I was not to be so fortunate as to be left behind. As I was about to give up, fighting depression and kicking myself, who sould appear but a small, grey-haired lady with darting darling green eyes, much like Helen Hayes, with white bag and black umbrella.

"May I help you, young man," she exclaimed with a flashy smile, sealing my fate.

"My'am, I know you're not going to buy this program, but here is what's happening. I am a professional chessmaster and I'm supposed to give a chess program at a prison in Tracy. I'm dynamite, really. I'm doing it for free. The last bus is pulling out soon and I need two dollars to get there. Can you help?"

"Why, certainly, young man." She gave me the money. Gone. And that was that. I was on the bus just ten seconds before it pulled out.

I remember that "Whiter Shade of Pale" was playing on a radio in the front of the bus. And, too, I remember a strange feeling as we entered a patch of fog on the road, then another, then another. It is horrible day-long, all-night fog that I am told comes often to Tracy. The fog is the real blinder. You cannot see your hands, your feet, if you are forced to step out of your wheels.

The bus rolled on at a creeping eleven miles an hour. But I would make it and was quite proud of myself, my gutsy stick-to-it-ness and never-say-die mentality. What could go wrong, Jude?

The answer is simple and horrible. You're out of money, and the bus takes you only to Tracy, California, while the prison is miles outside of town. Consider the possibility, dear reader, for one moment: at 8:30 a.m., in a horrid, pitch white fog, you are freezing, unable to see a few feet ahead, not knowing where you are going along the superhighway. And it's loney, baby blue.

Start walking out of town. You hear the Greyhound slide past you slowly. It is impossible to see it at all. And then mile after mile you make your way without the faintest idea which turn to take on the road which never ends. But you listen carefully as cars come

ed, officially rated U.S. Chess Federation games with the prison champion, a USCF chess "Expert." (A "master" is 2,200; an "expert", 2,000.) This means that each of you will have to play 45 moves in one hour and a half of thinking time on the clock. You may take all the time you need on one move, but you have to hurry and make the other 44 moves within your allotted time or lose the game.

For this occasion the entire chess club population has jammed into a small concrete room. The game begins and you remember seeing bars everywhere as you answer 1 d4 with 1...d5 and defend the Queen's Gambit Declined with the Black pieces.

All eyes are on your face as, suddenly, the prison champion hits you with a T.N. (Theoretical Novelty), which you instantly realize wins the game by force. You think to yourself, "Oh, boy Ed Edmondson of the U.S. Chess Federation will love this! I am going to lose a game to this good, but low rated player, drop 20 national rating points and goodbye national and international tournament invitations. I can see Edmondson laughing at me now."

So there you sit with a lost position, dug out of Al Horowitz's "Chess Openings: Theory and Practice" especially for this oc-

g4 and prepared to die. He was about to become a WITNESS! What murderers do not need is a WITNESS.

In times that try men's souls there is a helpful hint for beginners to help them avoid becoming witnesses, and Jude Acers learned the rule like a drowning man learns to swim. Hit the floor, Daddy! Stick your face in the floor. Kiss it. Put your hands over the sides of your face. Isn't this a nice floor. Kiss! Kiss! Kiss! Oooh! Look at that nice tile. See the curly red design. Ohh! Ohh! How nice. Beautiful floor! Good floor. Yummeel! They come in a second later. Blood is everywhere. They hover around me for a second. There are five of them, the other prisoners tell me later. All have knives with tapes across the handles. They look at Jude kissing the floor lovingly.

One makes a gesture. The USCF expert screams out, "Hey, man. No! No! He ain't seeing. He's on the floor. He doesn't see anything. Let him go. Let him go."

Knives clatter to the floor. Blood spatters on my shirt. One of the knives actually strikes my shoe, which sends nervous twitches up my leg for at least two hours.

There is a rustle of feet and a lock is being picked. "Tell him to

lyze the situation coldly. Tick, tick... Guards know I saw nothing or I would not be alive. Guards know I had nothing to do with it. There is a dead body in the next room. Knight takes g4 had to be played. Oh, God, I want to get out of here. Still, knight takes g4 was best. Wonder what happens now. You are mad, but this is precisely why you survive.

Two hours have passed. The fog is there, everywhere. Jude is there, with no money to get home, and this is no time to borrow a dime for an emergency phone call from a guard. Jude has been awake now for more than 24 solid hours.

There must have been some debate as to whether to let Jude out of prison. At 5 p.m. they come to take him away, yes, out of the gates. And there he stands in the worst fog possible, with no jacket, 90 miles from San Francisco, without resource. No normal human experience would suffice to deal with the situation. So start walking. Don't think. Don't worry. Start walking. Don't wonder why they wouldn't let you use the phone for a collect phone call. Just walk.

It is very quiet on the road. A man has died, but you are all right. Be thankful you're alive and keep moving or you will never get out of this. See the headlines: "San Francisco Chess Ace Found Dead in Roadside Ditch!" Keep moving.

It happened just as I approached the highway. The three clicks, I mean. Just like that: k-thug, k-thug, k-thug. The feeling of terror and agony which I had found in that moment was the very threshold that I could endure. I heard these sounds. They were real. But I could see nothing at all.

The clicks grew louder, came again, again, again, again. I walked slowly toward the sound, prepared quite simply to die on the road. This was it. I had heard the exact sound days before. Now I was getting it up front, straight ahead. Just a little way up the road. Here it is. Now....I reached out. I could feel something icy cold. It was glass. There was a handle above. I pulled. A door opened. It was a telephone booth.

I could not believe my senses. The phone was jammed and was making one "k-thug, k-thug" click after another. But what does this have to do with your destiny, Jude Acers? I hit the telephone savagely, and the clicking stopped, and a dime rolled out, which was exactly what I needed to make my phone call (!!!!).

I stood in the booth, not believing the chain of events and good fortune of this day. Now, who would I call?

Again, I cannot even faintly guess why I phoned a man I had met only once in my lifetime, Ernest Shields, in Bakersfield, California. He was a millionaire cement contractor who sponsored two chess tournaments in his city. But we had not even spoken to each other, and here I was phoning long distance collect with the incredible luck to catch him as he

was about to leave his home. And — are you ready for this? — it so happened that he had his own private plane, was a licensed pilot, and had a map right by the phone, so as to be able to locate me instantly. He lit up like a Christmas tree the moment he heard who was calling.

"Jude Acers! Well, how are ya, boy! Where are ya, boy!" Naturally, he was in a telephone booth outside a prison, where a man had just been murdered while a chess game was in progress.

"Did you WIN?" Ernest Shields wanted to know, getting down to essentials FIRST.

Here, clearly, was a fellow madman, just what was needed at this time. Shields had spirit, hollowiness. He could keep up!

"Jude, I know right where you are. Stay put. There's an air strip right there. If you can't see me, I'll give beeps on my horn. Be there in an hour. Leaving right now!"

I stood out there, alone. It came out of the sky, a monoplane. I was riding toward Bakersfield with the wonder of Lindbergh swaying with the tide. I had never been in such a plane before. I wondered what happens if the gasoline runs out or the engine conks out. "If something goes wrong, how does it glide to safety?" Jude Acers asks Ernest Shields.

"Like a rock," said Shields. And Jude thought about that carefully, prayerfully all the way to the Bakersfield airport. Remember Croce's plane. He reminded Shields to watch out for trees. "Don't worry, I've only hit one, and that just broke part of the wing. Ha, ha," laughs Ernest Shields.

That was when Jude Acers, who was always a picture of health, began to become ill. His stomach was sending emergency telegrams. His eyes were bulging. His whole system vibrated with danger and fear. "Brave Jude will survive," keep saying that, thinking that, believing that. "Brave Jude will survive."

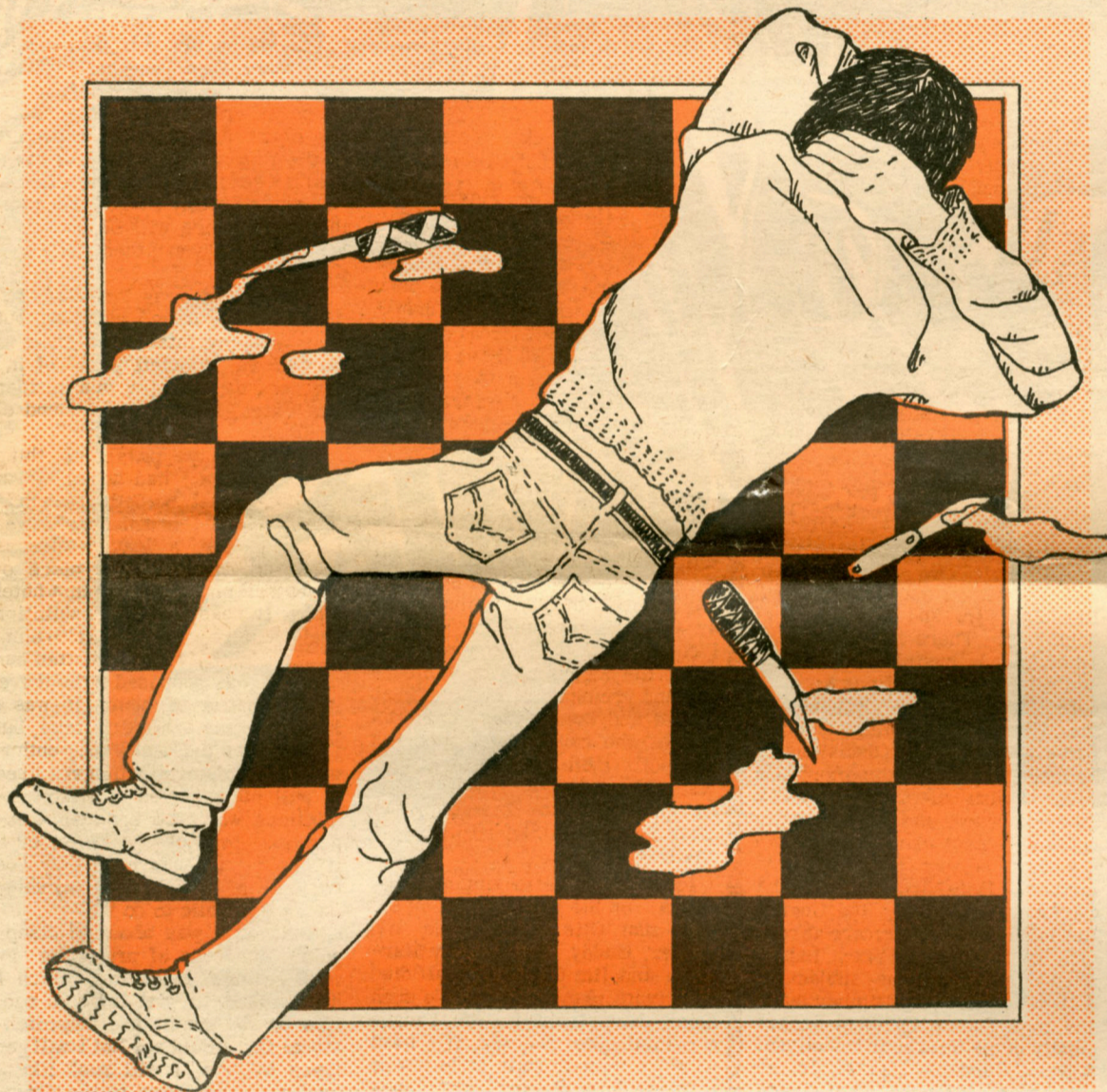
Mercifully, we were landing. Slowly, yes, we were down, parking. Don't worry. Don't tell Shields anything about the clicks. Just climb down slowly and start toward Shield's truck.

Half way across the field Shields is parking the plane, while you watch him. Then you turn to walk to his truck all by yourself. The hangar is empty. The parking lot is deserted. You reach for the door handle and suddenly hear something.

You turn slowly around and gaze across the parking lot at a telephone booth. It is jammed. It is making the same "k-thug" clicks that I had heard this afternoon, hundreds of miles away by the prison. I had heard that sound before. A man had died. Would another man die? Yes, but I am not going to tell you about it.

Shields came around the hangar, glanced at the jammed telephone and said, "Crazy machine!" And he climbed inside the truck.

Thank you for listening to my story. "Liam, more coffee?"



and go. This tells you where forks in the highway and curves are popping up. To tell where you are, you reach up on road signs and feel the letters. Letters like "D.V.I. —", for instance. And you turn down the final road to the prison, cold and walking like a robot.

It is silence all the way. They know you are coming, though, because they can hear you through the little Nixon-like buggers along the road as your shoes go poppity-pop along the road. The guards are listening all along the watchtowers. Oh, god, is it cold.

The bars begin to creak open. "Link Ray and the Raymen" are playing "Rumble" on the radio in the admission building. You haven't heard it in 12 years since East Jefferson High School days in New Orleans. Or was it Gentilly Terrace Elementary School, where you won the spelling bee championship ahead of 26, all girl, rivals? Don't remember, I remember.

The guards know you from two previous visits and are respectful. "We talk about you all the time, Judy!" one says with a wink. Another barred door opens. Then the third tier and you are standing at the apex of three hallways with streams of inmates going every which way, many smiling, many recognize you.

Today you will play two clock-

casian. You begin to analyze, looking for cunning, tactical resources. This position is tough. You'll have to Jude Acers-Korch-Torch-Marshallize it! The clock ticks. You look frantically for ideas. None come. Think, Jude, think, for Christ's sake. No move comes to mind. You'll have to avoid taking the pawn. No, wait, you must take it at g4, because the advance g5 is murderous. You lift your hand to play knight takes g4, when

Someone screams, "Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!" and there is a terrific pounding on a door against your back. A man is being stabbed to death in the next room and you can hear his last sounds. YOU ARE GOING TO BE A WITNESS TO A MURDER, JUDE ACERS. Where is the guard? Guard!!! There is no one nearby. The occasion has been planned undoubtedly for this reason. When Jude Acers plays chess, there is no need for supervision. Nothing ever happens, and it's a good time to kill a man. Boy, will everybody be surprised. Boy are YOU surprised.

What happened next was Kafka's crime, the mistake of being there. The door behind Jude Acers is being unlocked! Paralyzed with fear, thinking that knight takes g4 must absolutely be played or Black must be prepared to die, Jude Acers played knight takes

keep his head down."

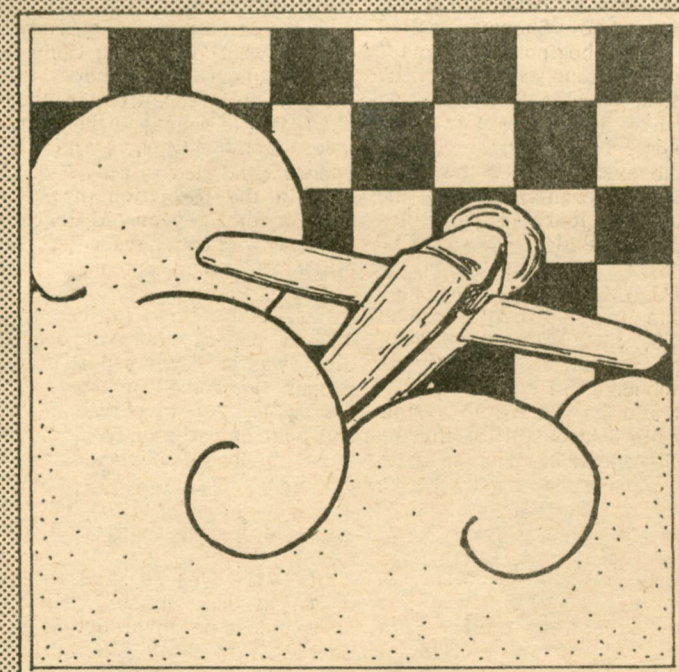
Jude Acers was telling himself again and again to keep his head down. Glad you mentioned that, he thought. More rustling and bustling. The First Commandment. In fact, all ten commandments. Keep your head down. Then the prisoners picked me off the floor. I was paralyzed, reddened like a beet with terror. I could not speak.

They dropped me into my chair and all I remember is staring at my knight at g4 and the sound of horns. Prison horns were blasting out insanely. The whole prison was going crazy. Guards were everywhere. Prisoners were being locked up, one by one, throughout the prison. The whole chess club is being locked up downstairs.

And you? What happens to you, Jude Acers? A guard comes up with a clothes basket and carefully places each knife in the basket. There is no time to wipe blood everywhere from the floor. Then the guard stands up and says, "Sorry, we'll have to lock you in here for your own protection until this is over." You are actually locked up in prison. Boy, would the U.S. Chess Federation people love this! Wow! Their dreams come true!

You sit there, absolutely mute, paralyzed, save for a twitching left leg. Your mind begins to ana-

SHADE OF PALE



shelby 74