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ALL SPORTS

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MAGAZINE

3 FEATURE NOVELS

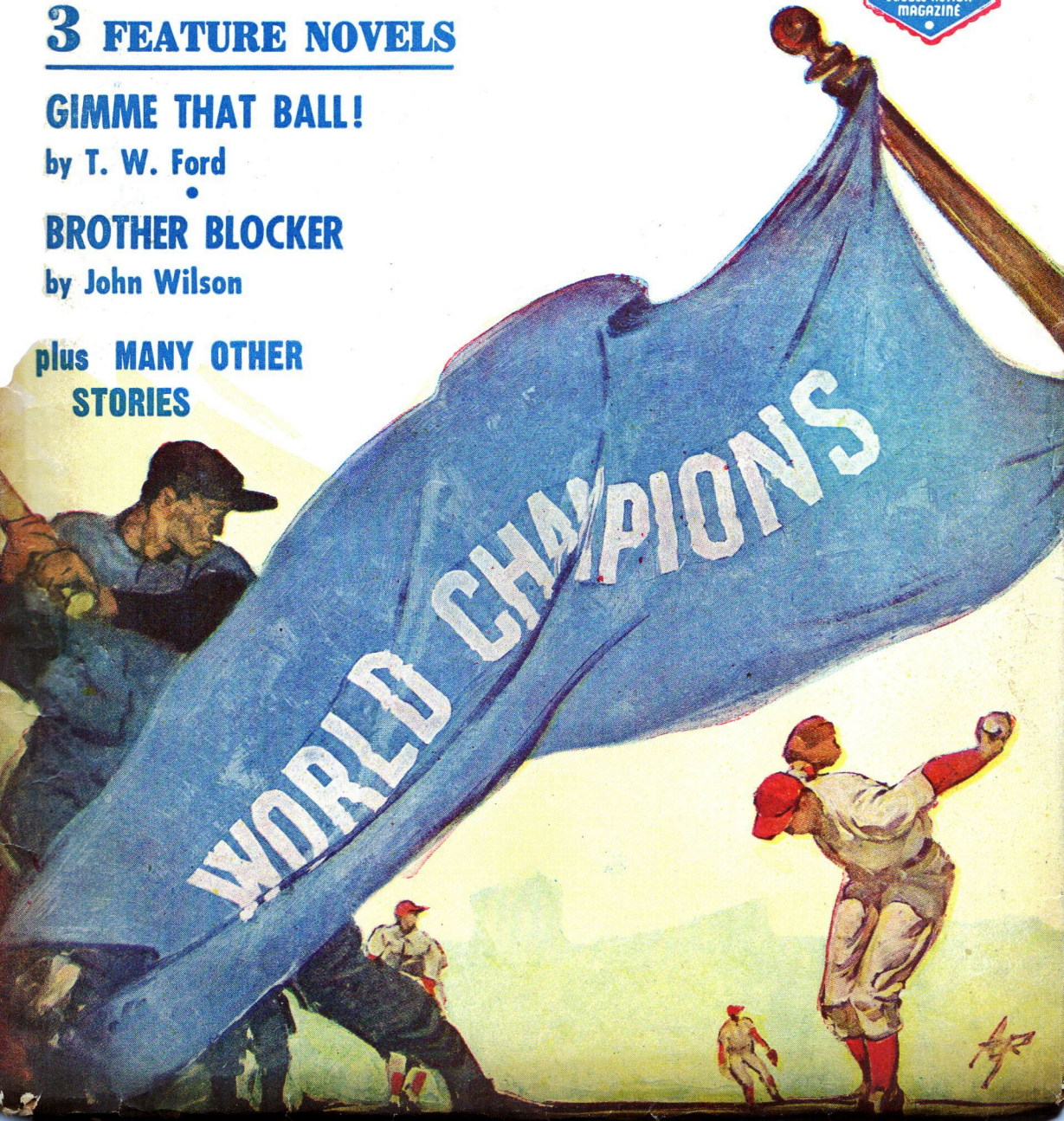
GIMME THAT BALL!

by T. W. Ford

BROTHER BLOCKER

by John Wilson

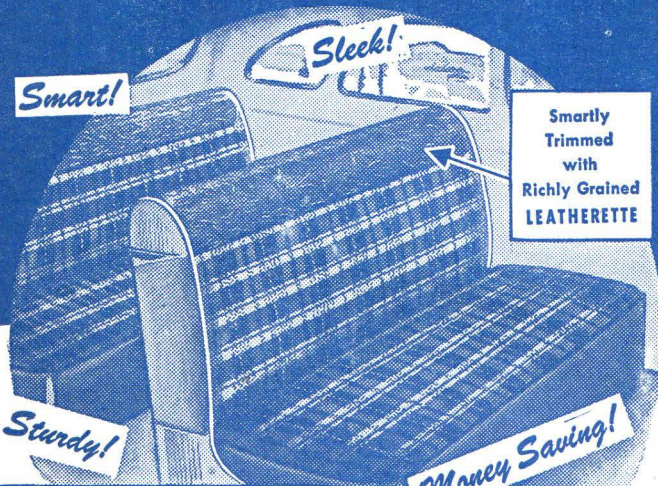
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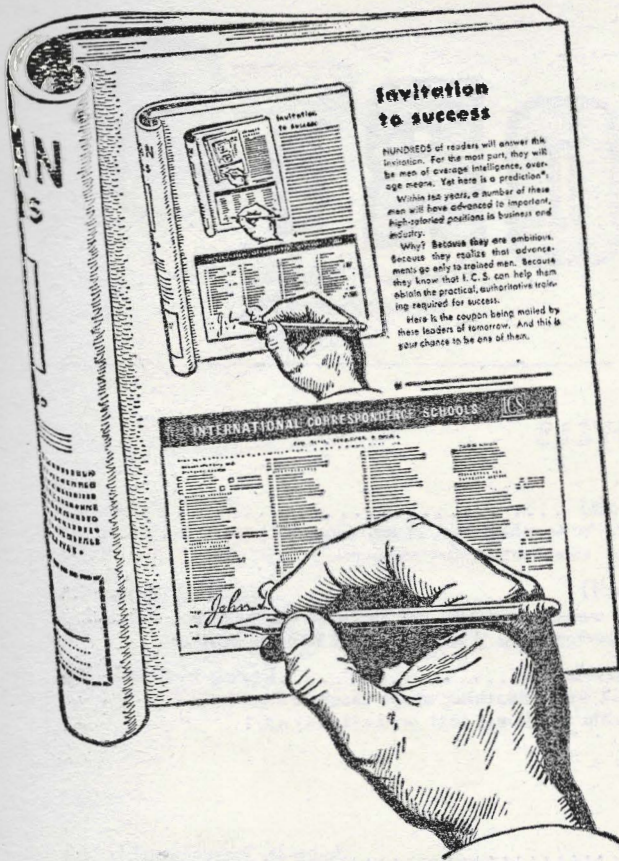
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ALL SPORTS

Volume 4, Number 3
November, 1948

THREE FEATURE NOVELS

- GIMME THAT BALL (Baseball)** T. W. Ford 8
Socks Preston found himself in the toughest spot of all, when he tried to make his pitching comeback—relief pitcher!
- BROTHER BLOCKER (Football)** John Wilson 76
Flash Wells was just what his name suggested, out there on the gridiron; but it wasn't fair when they expected Mike Wells to be just like his brother!
- SPIKE THE MAN DOWN! (Baseball)** Larry Holden 42
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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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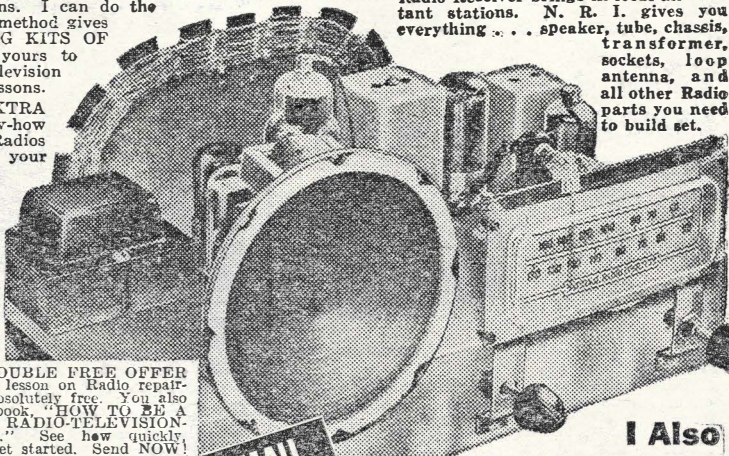
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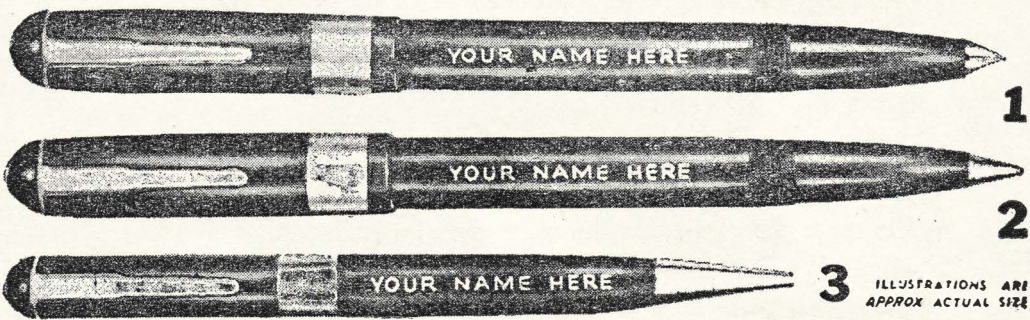
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"GIMME THAT

by J.W. Ford



A Gripping, Unusual Novel of The Diamond

Hitting the come-back trail, pitcher Socks Preston finds himself in the toughest post of all—the relief pitcher, the man who has to put out the fire at moment's notice. And the guy who he had to help out of the clutch was walking off with Socks' girl.

I'LL ADMIT I never liked Big Bud Lawlor from the first, practically sight unseen. After all, me and his older brother, Pinkie Lawlor had been feudists back when I was in the minors. Bitter ones, too. This kid, Bud, has to come up here with the Rockets in the majors, hailed as the "Big Hook" right from the start of the season; and it means me, who's

BALL!



not so young any more and fighting to get a starter's berth, is relegated to the bullpen. And now I'm walking across the outfield once again to try to save a game for this damned kid. I was charred up to a cinder all right. I didn't give a hang if I didn't save it; maybe I would even let it slip away, I told myself. After all, this kid, Bud, the "Big Hook", is stealing my girl right out from under my pug nose. I wished they'd summoned somebody else from that bullpen.

Then little Whitey Masine, the Rocket skipper, met me just outside the infield and I forgot about letting any ball game slip. You just can't do things like that to Whitey. Skinny and white-haired, in his fifties, he could peel you to the bone with his caustic tongue when he felt you were not giving everything. Yet let a player get in a jam and Whitey would stick his hand into his own pocket for a fast fifty. A skull play on the field, a mental boner, and Whitey would remind a player of it for days. But let anybody try to pull anything on one

of his boys, let an ump hand them a raw deal, and the white-thatched bantam cock was out there, cap in the dust, pawing and ranting for justice as if one of his own sons had been robbed. A great little guy, Whitey.

He reached up to put a hand on my shoulder, said; "Socks, Bud's arm is still a little sore from that cold. He's stiffening up. I know you've been working a hell of a lot of late. But if we could save this one. . . ." He left it there as we walked on into the mound.

I said, "Sure, Whitey." The Rockets had a one-run lead in this, the seventh. That's what Whitey meant by saving it. I said to myself, "His arm sore from a cold—hell! The big publicity-crazy lug don't keep in training." I'd seen things of nights.

We went over to the hill and Whitey took the ball from him. The Big Hook looked down at me—I came to little above one of those loose rangy shoulders of his—and said: "I thought I could go all the way. But you can hold 'em, Socks! You're the guy."

I said to myself, as I nodded: "Nuts! The old oil! If I hold 'em, the kid wonder gets the win and everything'll be all right. If I don't, the loss might even be checked against me. The old shell game." It was a 4-3 ball game, the top of the seven. He'd just been reached for a walk and two ensuing hits, the first a double. That had sent in the third Wolf tally and left men on first and third. One down. And a 2-0 count on the dangerous Menzinger up there waving his wood at the plate. A lovely, lovely spot.

THE BIG HOOK walked off the mound, getting a great hand despite the fact he had to leave. They weren't forgetting that two of the three tallies scored against him were unearned, set up by boots behind him—or that he had driven in two of the Rocket runs himself with a prodigious double in the second. The rock was a rough-tough boy with the stick—so much so they had experimented, in spring training, with converting him into an outfielder to get his bat up there every day. It hadn't worked;

he'd almost been brained by fly balls.

I picked up the rosin bag and Whitey said: "I don't have to tell you how to pitch, Socks....She's all yours." The public address system was announcing me, blaring, "Now pitching for the Rockets, Socks Preston, Number 21....Socks Preston."

Then I saw Bud Lawlor looking at me over his shoulder. He had halted an instant in leaving the field. He was a big rangy guy with no belly and long thin arms. Blond hair that was somehow always sleek, not like my curly black mop with a lock or so always managing to drop over my forehead. He was good-looking in a way with china-blue eyes in a flat-jawed Sphinxlike face. But there was something new in the china-blue eyes at this moment that killed off the usual poker-faced expression.

Off the field those eyes were usually pretty hard and distant when they rested on me. We'd had a few jaw battles when he'd first joined the club with his cocky I-know-I'll-click attitude. I'd made a few cracks about his brother, Pinkie, my old enemy. On the field, I'll hand it to him, he was strictly business, any personal enmity sidetracked for the time being. But now, as they met mine, those eyes had a certain desperate and also half-pleading light in them. I didn't understand.

Then he called back low, "Hold 'em, Socks," and went on off. I started to throw my warm-ups down to Lucky Charris, our little tough monkey of a catcher. My shoulder felt a little stiff and that easy natural flow of healthy sweat wouldn't start. I'd only had about two minutes of warmup out in the bullpen when Whitey had put in the fire alarm call.

"Okay, Socks," Lucky called, coming out before the plate after the fifth toss. "Just work easy. This big baboon ain't got his hitting clothes on today." The infield jabbered behind me.

With the count 2 and 0, I couldn't play around. I came in there, sidearm, with my sinker pitch close on the hands. My sinker doesn't sink too much but I fire it at three different speeds, contriving to keep the hitters off balance. Menzinger had to go for

it at the last moment and fouled a ground ball off the handle up the third baseline. I missed the outside corner low with my swift ball. Ball three. Whitey stepped out of the dugout and waved the infield several steps deeper. The Wolf runner on third cracked. "Here's where I walk home, pickin' flowers on the way!"

Then I came in to Lucky with a gamble, the swift in the same spot. But this time I tagged the corner of the plate with it. Menzinger was so surprised he was caught flat footed and swung too late completely. Strike two. Then I gave him the dink sinker, in low, at a teasing half speed. He topped a chopped ball to short with the runner breaking for the plate.

I HAD TO hand it to Mack Simmons at short. He was no star, not a great player. When the big guy clipped the ball at better than .250 he was practically on a batting rampage. But he was a solid man; had a knack for doing the right thing at the right time. He charged the ball, scooped it, and sidearmed a bulls-eye to the plate. Charris tagged out the runner. Two down.

I turned around on the hill and called to Mack, "Thanks, pal."

He just looked at me stonily. Mack had never liked me since that time in my first year up with the club I'd accidentally beamed him in a Yannigan practise game in training camp, never forgiven me for it after being out a full month of the season. And, I must confess, I had never cared for big Mr. Simmons. To me it seemed as if he was always fawning around the stars. Maybe he thought it would secure him in his job. This season it was the Big Hook, Bud Lawlor, he was boot-licking around.

Anyway, I went to work on the next Wolf, got him to top my middle-speed sinker up to third. The play to second for the forceout and the third out on the slow-footed Menzinger coming down from first. I walked to the dugout and the sweat was coming easy for the first time. But my flipper felt a little heavy. Whitey had been working me a lot lately. We were in third place, only four and a half games out of first. Two of our ace

players were on the shelf with injuries, including Loder, our slugging center fielder. It was a case of hanging in there and not losing ground till our stars got back in action. Then we'd be set to catch the leaders, an aging ball club, in the September drive.

The Rockets could do nothing in the home half, and I was back there on the hill for the top of the eighth before I knew it. The fans gave me another nice hand when I reappeared. Then it all had to be spoiled when some goon in a box behind first bawled: "Keep going, Socks! Save it for the Big Hook!"

I spat cotton. Then, I realized, I really hated that guy's guts. Me saving ball games for a guy I disliked, for a guy whose brother had made a jackass out of me and delayed my making the majors for a whole season. And for a bird who was cutting in on Jean, my girl. I was so burnt up I whiffed the first Wolf to face me.

The next hitter promptly doubled off the right field wall. But then I got my head back. I got an infield out by mixing up the fast ball with the three-speed sinker, walked a pinch hitter, then got the third out on a foul that Lucky Charris made a nice catch on back by the screen.

"Nice going, Socks," Whitey said. "I knew I could depend on you."

BUT WHEN I went out for the ninth, after our gang went hitless in the last of the eighth, my soup-bone felt very heavy. I had to snap the elbow, but hard, to make the side-arm stuff break. I got one man, gave up a single, had the next Wolf wallop—a swift one into the left field bleachers—foul by only a couple of feet. I could hear them throwing fast from out in the bullpen. Then Charris let a sinker, that was a little wild, roll through him and the runner scooted down to second, killing the double-play setup. That was one to start your heart bleeding.

Lucky came out and spoke about an intentional walk, but I shook my head; I didn't want to put the potential winning run on base. A long single could send both men over the plate.

"I'll use the overhand motion," I said, swearing some too.

I did, bringing that arm straight over as I rolled my shoulder, wheeling through behind it with a powerful follow-through. It was the swift, boiling through there. It was by the hitter before he knew it, knee high. And then that bat-blind umpire ruled it a ball. I went in there and yapped at him—but you know how those things are. I kicked some dirt and the dog-robber turned his back on me and said he'd give me ten seconds to get back to that hill.

"Let's play ball, chucker!" snapped Mark Simmons who'd come halfway in from short. He fancied himself as an infield boss though it was really the veteran Kellen at second who ran that infield.

That really put me to boiling—Chowderhead Simmons trying to tell me. I was wild with the sinker, and that made it a 3 and 1 count. One down, and that runner bouncing around like a monkey on a stick off of second. The crowd was beginning to hoot me and call me a red neck and demand a new guy from the bullpen. Then Whitey was out there. Not to jump on me.

He just said, "Socks, remember, you are a big leaguer!" That's the kind of a guy Whitey was.

I REMEMBERED. I hammered the swift through inside with that overhand motion. By the time that cluck got his bat around, Lucky was counting the stitches on the ball. And then I came through with the middle-speed sinker and he was caught off balance, slapped at it. A soft popper to the hill. I gloved it, faked the man on second back, threw out the hitter at first for the big second out. Somebody barked, "Now, we got 'em!" Yeah, sure and maybe; but my arm felt like a piece of old seaweed, something water-logged.

Del Powers, Wolf third sacker, a .318 hitter, one of the best men at spiking a sinking line drive for an outfield single in the circuit, stepped up. I fed him a couple of low outside sinkers, but he refused to go fishing. Ball 2 and no strikes. I snapped the

single in over the plate with all the smoke I could apply to it though it felt as if my arm had left the socket. A low smash right back at the box. It caught me on that left knee, the one I'd had operated on last winter. I went down, but I clawed for the ball over to my left toward the first baseline, got it. It was too late for any play at third. I twisted around toward first—and there was nobody there to cover.

For Hesling, our first sacker, had dashed in to field the ball after it caromed off me lest the runner try for the plate. Another heart-breaker. I went back to the hill and waved Whitey back to the dugout, nodding that I was okay—but I wasn't. That kneecap hurt. But I was mad in a cold peculiar way now; damned if I was going to let Bud Lawlor give me the sneer for letting the game slip away.

How I threw to that pitch hitter, I don't know. I missed once on a fast sinker, tricked him into biting at a sweeping curve. He fouled a half-speed sinker into the stands. And then I had him swinging fruitlessly at an overhand speedball that smoked for the third strike of the game.

They slapped my back and said nice things; then I was in the clubhouse; and there was the Big Hook just coming out of the locker room phone booth, all showered and togged out in one of those slick sports jackets of his. With that frame of his, he made quite a picture as far as female appeal went, I had to admit.

"Nice work, Preston," he said, giving me a little salute.

A nasty suspicion struck me as I stripped. It was connected with that phone booth. Winding a towel around me I hustled into it and called Jean. She worked as a secretary in the business office of the club downtown. When she came on the wire, I squeezed the fatigue out of my voice.

"Hi, baby. Socks has just had quite an afternoon. How about celebrating it with a nice dinner?"

Jean came back regretfully, "Oh, darling, I'd love to. But I just—well, I've got a dinner date. If you'd only called me ten minutes earlier—"

The suspicion was correct. While I'd been out there saving the big cluck's ball game, he'd been dating up my girl....



Chapter Two

AFTER dinner I had three-four drinks after leaving the team hotel. I was supposed to be off the stuff, getting a thousand dollar bonus at the end of the season if I kept in training. And that had been explicitly defined as nothing stronger than beer. But I was pretty needled up.

I knew I was a fool to endanger that bonus clause. It was more than just extra money. A clause like that in a player's contract is practically like telling him this is his last chance. Two years ago I started out going great guns, overpowering batters with a mix-up of the sidearm and the overhand power throwing. Knocking the bats out of their hands. The experts said Socks Preston had gotten control and come into his own at last. Those had been my salad days all right after a long apprenticeship in the minors. And I'd done some nimble and fancy terpisichore work on the primrose path; the wine, the music and the girls had been made for a sports celebrity like me.

Then, suddenly, I wasn't winning any more—was being edged out by clubs against whom, earlier, all I'd had to do was throw my glove on the hill. I finished up badly with a trick of folding in the closing frames. The following year I still laughed at the twinkle in a girl's eyes and the bubbles in the wine, kept telling myself I'd get to winning soon, that I had the stuff and plenty of the old vinegar left. That was last season.

Before it was over, I found out how wrong I was. They fined me a couple of times, suspended me without pay for two weeks on another occasion, then relegated me to the bullpen. I'd gotten my old wildness again in my desperate effort to throw the ball

through the batters. It was then that I met Jean and we began going around together. And I got my eyes open and took a look at myself, the wise guy.

Jean helped. This last spring I'd walked into training camp in the pink, ready to throw hard the first day, ready to fight my way back, out to get myself a starter's berth again. I kept in strict training. It was tough. I was no hot kid any more, not with my crowding thirty now. The wing didn't have the old elasticity. I could not throw the swift stuff too often or over too long a route. The sinker did not sneak in there nearly as sharply. But still, I was going good in the exhibitions. I had savvy, and there was no more handing out free tickets to first in bunches.

Then the new phenom, the Big Hook, Bud Lawlor, had to walk into the picture, purchased from Richmond. A big confident kid with a hook that took off like a homing boomerang, and one Mr. Socks Preston was smack back as a mainstay of the bullpen staff. Now the guy was stealing my girl, even as I'm burning off my arm to pull out his ball game.

I had a couple more shots and it kept eating on me. I got out of the place and ran smack into Mark Simmons. He said he was going down to shoot some pool with Ding Fesling and Kellen the second sacker. Asked me to come along. I said no.

He nodded at the bar and grille and said, "I bet they have just dandy gingerale in there."

I said, "Sure. But you're too cheap to spend a dime to find out." He was a cheap guy too. But as I went on I was a little worried; that frog-eyed Joe had a big mouth and a nasty habit of turning up places at the wrong times. Some people are born with the trick; they don't have to try. He should have been a private eye.

I TURNED up the Main Stem and walked for a while, thinking of that guy out with my girl. And that wing of mine had me worried. It was not that it pained. It just throbbed dully at intervals and felt heavy. I had another pair of drinks, then headed across town to a little side street res-

taurant with a bar I'd frequented ever since coming to this burg as a member of the Rockets. Several nights a week a quiet stud game went on in the back room after the restaurant part had closed for the evening. Once a week, I sat in. Sometimes 'he stakes got a little stiff, but it was the one vice I still allowed myself. And this night I had to do something to take my mind off Jean and the Big Hook; it made me feel like such a sucker and a has-been.

There was a game on this night: the day bartender, the owner of the modest little place; a retired cop who'd once played in the International League; a musician who never worked. They were sitting in. I bought chips.

At ten-thirty, I was some forty odd bucks in the hole, so I decided to keep going. I knew two of Whitey Mason's pet hates were ball players who gambled for anything more than penny ante stakes, and players who bet on games. Bixbie, business manager of the club, a coffin-faced guy who looked like a parson and used ice-water in his veins for blood, was poison on that stuff too. But I wasn't worried; this wasn't any regular gambling joint that anybody would suspect. And as far as getting back into the hotel after the ten-thirty curfew, I knew the night operator of the service elevator. All I had to do was slip in the employee's entrance of the place and be whisked up. Whitey wasn't one of those kind of manager's who went in for bed checks.

Midnight came; Twelve-thirty; and my luck still hadn't turned. Still I stayed. What the hell, I'd done my stint for the day. It wasn't as though I was a starter or would be called upon to come in on the morrow. Along about one, I pulled out, some sixty odd dollars to the bad.

Outside, I caught a cab. But I rode a couple of blocks past the hotel to one of the town's cheaper avenues, got out there, walked down to a low-class little ginmill in the middle of the block. Went in and maneuvered to just the right spot at the dingy bar and ordered a shot. Sure enough, he was there, back in a booth, brooding over a

highball. The Big Hook, Lawlor.

He didn't figure to be seen from up front. But at just the right spot at the bar, those rear booths were caught in the bar mirror. I'd seen him there before repeatedly when I'd stopped in for a quick beer before turning in. I watched for a while during which he had a couple more highballs, dumping them down fast. Then he'd sit brooding over them, mouth strained and jerking at times. There was no danger of being spotted by him; he never looked up. Finally I left.

Yeah, cold in his arm so he couldn't finish games. Before that, games in which his control wavered near the finish. And good old workhorse Socks Preston would be brought in to save his laurels for the Big Hook. Bah! His sore arm and his control and his weak finishes all came from right here where he loaded up on highballs in the late hours.

I thought of Rocks Pelucci, too. . . .



Chapter Three

BEFORE I went to sleep that night, an idea hit me that gave me some satisfaction. If he kept going on that way, sore-arm alibing and failing to finish, the patient Whitey would ultimately give up on him. Might shove him down to the bullpen and give me a chance as a starter again. But out at the ball park the next forenoon, I realized that Dame Fortune, the old hag, had a spot marked "X" and that I was her favorite occupant of it.

For, shagging fungoes in the outfield to keep his legs in shape, Pop Fazio slipped and twisted a knee. The trainer said he'd be out a couple of weeks at least. Pop was the only other veteran in the bullpen beside myself. With him out, it meant that I was condemned to the relief chores, come hell or highwater, for an extended period. And I'd be carrying the lion's share of the firemen's burden.

That afternoon, though, Little Joe Case soft-balled the Wolves into submission and went the full nine. I could've kissed him when we went into the clubhouse; I felt so good I ceased to be mad at Jean and made a date for the next night.

But the next day was a rough one for me with the Bears in for a series. Everything was all right till the sixth with Lefty Schoonmaker subduing the visitors effectively, then the game was held up by a shower. When play was continued, Lefty's arm had stiffened up and he couldn't get his curve in there. Two walks. A hit. One run over. A scratch off Lefty's glove. The runner was held on third but it loaded up the sacks. Then Lefty took a full windup and the runner on third scooted across to make it a 2-1 game against us.

Whitey took him out of there then. When Lefty pulled a skull like that—which he had a habit of doing when in trouble—it meant he was really finished. Whitey pulled Sutter, a big kid just up from Minneapolis, from the bullpen, and I said a little prayer. Then I saw Lawlor come loping down to the pen to warm up with me. Whitey wanted to pull out this one if he could. Every victory we could scrouge out was all-important till our hitting stars returned to action.

As for that prayer, the little gods of chance must've been deaf that afternoon. Sutter simply pitched nine balls, found the plate on one of them, walked two men, and forced another run over. An umpire came trotting toward the bullpen, yelling, "Twenty one! Twenty one!" That was me. I looked at Lawlor and sneered and went in—in to clean up somebody else's trouble again.

SACKS POPULATED. One down. Kellen on second took me out of it with a fancy double play. And in the home half, our gang tied it up with a couple of tallies. Now it was my ball game to win or lose. But after I'd retired the first man in the top of the seventh, that leadenlike heaviness caught up with my wing again. I was forcing the apple up there to the plate. It was a case of too much work. And

then the hitter crossed us all up with a surprise bunt to the left of the mound.

I whipped to my right, then bogged down a moment. I was too late; the runner beat out the throw. It was that left knee of mine where the line drive smash had hit me the other day. I did not say anything, just went on pitching. A fly out to left. The runner going to second when Charris and I got mixed up on the sign and a swift on the inside got by him. Then there was a smash to short.

Simmons went up for it, had it in his glove, then dropped it. Twisting, he picked it up and winged it to first. The throw was in the dirt, making the hitter safe. And with two down, the runner had been going all the way. He slid into the plate with the tie-breaking tally.

That was the game. Whitey pulled me for a pinch-hitter in the home half when it looked as if we had a rally going, and it ended up that way, a 4-3 defeat, the loss charged against me. I was plenty steaming when we went into the clubhouse and started to chew on Simmons. Always I'd been very effective against the Bears; always could silence their bats.

"Well, chowderhead, what were you doing out there on that line drive?" I let him have it. "Picking buttercups? You big dumb—"

Stripped to the waist, revealing the smooth flowing muscles of his torso, Bud Lawlor chimed in coldly from nearby, "When a pitcher fails to field his position and puts the run on base, he's got to expect trouble. That's baseball, mister, in case you don't know it."

This from the guy who was giving me my grief. From the cluck whose games I was saving. And another thing out of the past poured oil on the fire. Down in the minors, Pinkie Lawlor, Bud's brother, had a knack of bunting me crazy at times. I went for the Big Hook, hands doubled.

"Why you crumb-bum with your phoney sore arm!" I snorted. "I could blow the whistle on you! Put up your hands—not your press clippings, ya lousy—"

Simmons jumped in, brandishing a

bat that he held clutched short, brandishing it at me. "Come on—if you want your hair parted a new way, Socks!" he taunted, sort of half laughing.

But he meant it. For a big burly man, he had a trick of grabbing something when trouble started. Down in Florida, during spring training once, I'd seen him conk a guy with a coke bottle in a night club.

Then one of the coaches came over and broke it up. But I was madder than ever. Nothing puts the kinks in the muscles a guy wears between his ears as much as constant frustration. It would probably have cost me a fat fine, but one good belt at the Big Hook's jaw might have cleared the atmosphere and everything would have been all right. I was in an extra-fancy black mood when I met Jean.

SHE WASN'T a beautiful doll, but she was cute as a new penny. A natural blonde, small like one of those little trigger-sharp shortstops you see sometimes. And just as smart. She was the kind of a girl who could steer a guy's life for him. No kid, but poised and balanced. She could cook swell too. I gave her a quick peck on the tip of her snub nose in the crowd and we went to a murder movie and I felt better. We wanted something to eat when we came out and I was ready to take a cab to that place we used to go to up by the bridge.

"Let's save the cab fare, honey," she said. "I know a new place a couple of blocks over."

It was one of those little night spots off the Main Stem; one of those innocent-looking not-too-well-known places. But I knew it and not from frequenting it though. It was owned by Rocky Pelluci, the bookmaker and gambler. It gave him a nice front plus an office from which to operate. Rocky wasn't a bad character, not known to be a fixer—just one of the smart boys who had a reputation for getting the inside dope, for plunging heavy on sure-thing bets. A good character for a professional athlete to stay away from. We went in. The sandwiches really were something extra, too.

"Mr. Buddie Lawlor introduce you to this place, kid?" I asked Jean. That was no blind shot in the dark. She'd just had a date with him; and, more than that, in knocking around the Main Stem, I'd seen the Big Hook in Pelucci's company two or three times.

She nodded, frowning thoughtfully. "Allen, you're a veteran; you've been around. What's Bud doing that's wrong out on that hill? Why is it he weakens in the late innings and fails to finish? He hasn't said anything to me about it. You know how he always acts so confident—but I know it's preying on his mind."

Oh, brother, could I have told her what was wrong! Instead, I just looked bored and mentioned that I had some pitching problems of my own. And that Mr. Lawlor's belonged to him.

She slapped my hand, sort of half playfully. "Don't be stuffy. Has he developed a hitch in his delivery? Or isn't he pacing himself?" I just clammed up. She jabbed out a cigaret angrily. "Haven't you got any team spirit? He's on your side. You want him to win, don't you?"

That one really sizzled me. Me, no team spirit? All I'm doing is toiling out of the bullpen, being overworked, fighting a tired arm, while that big cluck is still garnering the glory. I told her so and not in a pretty way. She got angry too and said we'd go home after she went to the powder room.

IT WAS while she was there. I'd just checked with my wrist watch and noted we'd been in the place a little over half an hour. Then the door of Rocks' office in the rear of the place opened and the Big Hook himself hurried out with those long strides of his. He cut into the corridor at the side of the joint so as to be seen as little as possible.

I didn't say anything about it when Jean came back. But when she repulsed me as I tried to kiss her in the cab going home, I really blew. "Couldn't you close your eyes and pretend I'm Buddie boy?" I threw a nasty curve at her, then told her who

operated the place we'd been in and how I'd seen Buddie boy leaving the private office. "Of course, maybe he wanted to be alone and had his sandwich served in there, honey. Or maybe he had some little business to chat over with Rocks—a gambler. Maybe Rocks was telling him how to pitch next time out, eh?"

She stared at me a long moment. "You mean—you mean you think Bud would throw a ball game? Oh, Allen, that was rotten! Vile!... He admitted to me he'd been playing the horses and I got him to promise to give it up. This Rocks, he is a bookmaker. Bud was probably there to settle things up. But you—that was a rotten thing to say!"

I could have kicked myself all the way home. I couldn't seem to do anything right, and the Big Hook could not seem to do anything wrong. I looked into that ginmill over on the avenue behind the club hotel before checking in. He was there all right, lapping them up, looking like a guy wondering how long before the Law caught up with him....



Chapter Four

THE next day, rain washed out the second Bear game. It had been undecided whether Whitey would pitch the Big Hook or send Little Joe Case in there. The sports writers had picked the Hook because the Bears were always rough on Case's soft ball stuff. But it rained all day till six. Which was all right with me because it meant I wouldn't have to drag that weary arm out to the hill. Whitey announced he'd use Lawlor on the morrow in the final contest of the series.

That evening, I dropped over to the "club", that little restaurant where they played cards. I usually only went once a week, but I wanted to get some of that seventy back. And I felt mean anyway. I felt still meaner when I came out about eleven, another thirty

odd in the hole. I walked home, stopped for drinks twice. I knew I ought to stay on the wagon, but when Jean had refused to talk to me on the phone when I called the office that afternoon, it had hurt pretty badly.

I don't know how my feet happened to take me along that side street past Rocks Pelluci's place. But I found myself across the street from it. I fired up a cigaret and wondered about going in and having a drink there just for the fun of it. Then a cab swooped into the curb before it; and the Big Hook got out and hot-footed it in as if he had itchy heels. I stood there maybe a couple of minutes more than the idea came to me, a dirty idea. I guess my brain was pretty twisted up with that old frustration stuff and jealousy—and too many shots of whisky.

Down at a corner drugstore, I called the hotel where Bixbie, the blue-nosed business manager, had a suite. He was a bachelor in the bargain. They said when he entertained friends he served straight gingerale, the uncut stuff. I didn't have to disguise my voice when I got him on the wire because he did not know me save as a name in the lineup. I said:

"Bixbie, I got a tip for you. If—shut up and listen! Never mind who this is. Or maybe you prefer a scandal on your ball club. All right. Listen. If you want to know why your rook pitching ace isn't clicking so hot now, drop around to *The Old Venice*, a night spot." I gave him the address and waited while he wrote it down.

"Why?" he asked in that colorless voice. "I never credit idle rumors or scandal mongers."

"You got that address? Good. Here's why! Because the joint is run by Rocks Pelluci, the bookie and well-known gambler. When you get there, go into his private office in the back—or just wait and see who comes out. That's all. Roger."

"Who will—" he started. But I clicked the receiver into the cradle and went out and swaggered some as I moved down Mazda Lane.

That would fix his little red wagon all right, all right. But good. He'd be

caught with his bloomers drooping. He'd been there at least half an hour the night I was with Jean, and knowing Bixbie with his cold-blooded efficiency, the business manager would hop out promptly and grab a cab. He mightn't believe my story, but he was the kind of a cautious guy who always double-checked anything.

Maybe the Big Hook wasn't working any fixed game stuff with Rocks; maybe it was just making bets on the bangtails. But Bixbie would consider that just one step less worse than throwing a ball game. Oh, this was going to be great. I wasn't going to be a fall guy, El Chumpo, any longer. That Jean hinting I didn't have the best interest of the club at heart! I turned into a place and ordered a drink. Brother, would I have one big laugh! Would—

I put the drink down without touching it; it hit me like a beanball pitch. Well, did I have the best interest of the team at heart? I wouldn't only be hurting the swell-headed cluck. There were a flock of other men on that club. Nuts, I told myself. I picked up the drink again. A beard-stubbed grime-greasy bum rolled in to do some panhandling and suddenly I felt as dirty inside as that poor derelict on the outside. I never did have any of that drink.

THE NEXT moment, I was going up the line the two blocks to that side street where Rocks' place was like a broken field runner in a grid game. I made the turn and dug in like I was coming from third on the squeeze bunt. Wheeled into the joint and almost knocked down a guy and a doll coming out of the bar. I didn't waste any time in preliminaries, just bee-lined for the little maroon door of Rocks' office. One of those quietly tough characters who wore a dinner jacket and somehow make it resemble a suit of armour slid out of a side corridor and in front of me.

"Mr. Pelluci is in conference now, sir."

"Look, brother, there's trouble," I panted. "I want to warn a friend in there. It's Bud Lawlor the—"

"Never heard of him," said the big

slab-bodied Joe wearily, a hand on my shoulder. "Mr. Pelluci is engaged. Now be a good fella, pally, and drop around later. Next month, maybe. Now—"

There was no more time for diplomacy. I'd probably get my ears beaten off later. But I brought up a left hook. It didn't conk him, but it did dump him off balance a couple of yards down that side corridor. Then I jerked open the door, and brushed by a crimson side drape and was in. Rocks, a plump little dandified man, was lolling behind a desk as big as a plateau. And on a corner of it, tensed, a hand half extended as if in the midst of a plea, was the Big Hook.

I grabbed him by a shoulder. "Bud, start running the bases! Somebody tipped Bixbie's mitt. He's en route here now! Now!"

I saw Rocks turn green from his usual night-club pallor. He was out of that chair and pushing the Hook doorward. We got outside and cut over for the archway leading to that hallway that ran up the side past the dining room and foyer bar. It was just in time. And damned lucky it was dim back there; for H. R. Bixbie and that crab-faced male secretary of his were just stepping in at the front. Bixbie had the general aspect of a thunder-cloud coming over the horizon, a thunder-cloud late for a date to lay down a deluge.

They turned into the foyer bar. We gave them a few seconds, then ducked out the front door and went down that block like a couple of fugitives from the Law. At the corner we hailed a cab. I let the Big Hook get in, then said I had to see somebody about a horse.

He leaned out and grabbed my arm. "Socks, that was real swell of you. I won't forget it... But how did you know?"

I thought fast, said something about knowing a phone operator at the hotel. I said, "Forget it, cluck! I still don't like the way your ears are fitted onto your fat head. See?"

Then I walked off down the avenue. I felt a lot cleaner, but I still didn't like the guy...



Chapter
Five

THE next day, Whitey started him. He retired the first two men all right. But watching from the bullpen, through that pair of binoculars we had out there, I saw something. Maybe I was thinking of how Jean had asked me if he was doing something wrong on the mound. And I could see he was forcing that ball through there, that he wasn't throwing with the old fluid motion.

The third man caromed a drive off the side of his head, dropping him for a moment or so. He wanted to continue. Whitey let him throw a few wobbly ones, then yanked him. Whitey was a great guy that way. He'd never risk a man's health by leaving him in there if he was seriously hurt. And I suppose he figured the rook was too valuable anyway. He would not let him pitch any more till x-rays had been taken.

Me, I was throwing fast and hard out in the bullpen. But Whitey sent in Joe Case; it was too early to gamble with a relief hurler.

Little Joe went the route. But we lost another one, a tough 5-3 contest when a Bear homered in the top of the ninth with one on. Before we left the clubhouse, the hospital report on the Big Hook had come in. No injury outside of a lump on the side of the head. No fracture. Not even a concussion. He could pitch tomorrow as far as anything like that was concerned.

That night we caught the train out for a two-games series with the Cougars. It wasn't a regular road trip. Just two games and we'd come back to the home park, an overnight hop. Lefty Schoonmaker looked slick in the opener till the eighth inning when all the breaks went against us. Three in a row we'd dropped. We were slipping fast.

After dinner, I was in the hotel lobby when the Big Hook braced

Whitey Mason. I overheard the talk. The kid was begging for the chance to pitch tomorrow's game. Said he felt good. After all, he'd only pitched two-thirds of an inning the other day. He felt great. Whitey finally gave him the nod. I watched the Hook. After Whitey went away, he headed for the pay phone booths.

I hovered just close enough. There was a wait, too long a wait for a local call. Then I saw him feeding silver and still more silver into the coin box. Long distance. Nobody has to draw pictures for me. He was undoubtedly calling Rocks Pelluci to tell him he was chucking tomorrow. To get the bets down.

This thing began to smell like a skunk's boudoir. I was suddenly sorry I'd changed my mind and hadn't let Bixbie catch him red-handed in Rocks' place. This stunk.

HE STARTED the next afternoon, under a leaden sky, a sultry day that had a guy bleeding sweat before he'd poured three in there. But for six innings he looked good, exploding that famed hook past the hitters and coming up with two fancy gems of fielding plays. In the seventh, they reached him, and hard. He seemed to lose all his stuff and smoke was something he just didn't have. But we still had a 5-2 lead over the Cougars when Whitey brought me in.

It was boom-boom-boom. Maybe it was because I was sour on things. Or that tired arm. I seem to be busting my stuff in there the same as always. But those Cougars were butting the wood to it, and hard. Base-hits bounced off the fences. I got two men down finally, after the score was knotted up. Whitey sure must have faith in me, I told myself, to leave me in here this long. Then I missed the plate on two pitches to the next hitter. The third one he put into the stands, foul by but a couple of feet. I knew then I simply didn't have it. My soupbone had no snap left; my stuff wasn't taking off.

Calling time, I walked off the

mound and motioned Whitey from the dugout. I said, "Look, Whitey, if I had it, I'd give it all for you. I'd throw my arm at them hitters. But —I just haven't got it today. My arm ...or something Better bring in somebody else."

Whitey didn't jump on me or even cock an eyebrow. He knew I was a veteran and had never jaked it. He just nodded and slapped me on the shoulder and told the umpire whom he wanted from the bullpen. And I left.

I sat in the visitors dressing room of the Cougar clubhouse doing a lot of thinking. A nasty little thought began to worm its way into my mind. Sure, the cluck, Bud Lawlor, was alibiing himself with that cold in-the-arm gag. But I was no angel myself; I'd been breaking training plenty lately. Maybe that was why my stuff didn't fool the batters today, tired arm or no.

WE DROPPED that one, for four straight losses. It went fourteen innings though before the Cougars finally tagged the bird who'd replaced me for the clinching tally. Our bats had kept right up with theirs.

The bunch looked like a bunch of pall-bearers when they came in. This was being on the skids with a capital "S." But there was no time for grieving or bellyaching or post mortems. That extra-inning contest left us barely more than a matter of minutes to catch our train back to the hometown. Everybody was scrambling and swearing and hustling out with suitcases, neckties and coats over their arms, to grab cabs. I was about to go when I saw the Big Hook drop down on a bench before a locker tier. He didn't seem to be in a hurry to go anywhere; he looked like a man condemned to death. Then the china-blue eyes switched around to me.

"Gawd, if you only could've held 'em, Socks," he said. It wasn't savage or vindictive. It was sad. I couldn't understand.

And then Mark Simmons honked

up from across the aisle. "Well, that is an easy way to get outa work, I'd say. Tell the boss man you just don't have your stuff today. So-o—you get a reprieve."

I spun around fast. That one was beamed at me, I knew. I didn't like myself too much for getting banged around like that, regardless of whose game it was that had been thrown away. I said, "You punk!" And I called him something else that they don't allow in print.

He said, "I kill men for that!"

Which was what I wanted. I went for him. And that guy, who always had a trick of gabbing up a weapon, slipped one of his brown-stained bottle bats from the straps of his bag and started a swing.

The Big Hook was fast. He got over there, jumped in. Simmons choked and pulled up on the bat at the last instant when he saw Bud Lawlor in there. But the club caught him over the side of the left thigh on his gray flannel sports slacks.

I piled past Bud and wrested that bat from Simmons's hands. Most of the rest of the club had already pulled out. And the few left, up at the other end of the room, were cut off from view by the locker tier. Then I prepared to settle down for a competent job of working over the short-stop's features. But the Big Hook grabbed me from behind, locking my arms. Then Lucky Charris came down and said:

"Break it up, you goons!"

Lucky and the Big Hook and I were somehow in the same cab going down to the station. Nobody said much of anything, but I noticed that Bud snapped his jaws on his gum nervously.

WE JUST made it. Charris swung aboard and the train started to roll. The Big Hook, bag in left hand, put a foot on the vestibule steps, gripped the rail handle with his right, his throwing hand, and tried to haul himself abroad. For some reason, he couldn't do it. He kept tugging and tugging but could

not get his carcass up there as he half skipped along with the train.

I cursed and gave him a push from behind. And he was aboard, stumbling up the steps to the platform as I hopped on behind him. He stood there swaying, sort of pale. And like a sort of delayed reaction—things had happened very fast in the last few minutes—I got mad. I put a fist against his big chest and massaged. Called him some names. He had his eyes closed like a man hiding pain. I said:

"Damn you, Bud, why did you have to interfere when I was going to work Simmons over? Because he's your adoring pal?" For the moment I'd forgotten how he'd taken that bat blow on his thigh.

He shook his head. "It'd been bad stuff. You pulled me out of a jam—for the good of the club. I know you hate me. If you made a hospital case of that phoney—Simmons—then everything'd been bad."

That sort of stopped me. That brought me up short. The rook was correct, all right. I brought out cigarettes and we both lighted up. "Let's go inside." He shook his head; he said he wanted to stay out there where it was cooler. He walked over to the other side of the Pullman vestibule and stared out the window. Then I remembered something else.

How he'd had trouble trying to swing himself aboard the train with that right arm, his pitching wing. And a sudden suspicion shot through my mind. I stepped over beside him, blowing out smoke, and began to talk to him like the well-known Dutch uncle.

"You damned idiot," I told him as a starter. "Why don't you get wise? You're in bad shape—specially that soupbone. Why don't you wise up, punk?"

"Shut up, Socks," he ground out.

I suddenly knew I liked this kid even though he'd side-tracked me with my girl and also into the bullpen. I didn't know why I did, but I did. I went on.

"Look. I'm one step away from a

has-been! I've wasted my future before I had it. Sure, I'll go along for a coupla years more maybe. But you—you're young. Hot. Full of the old sap. And so what? You run around with guys like Rocks Felluci. I don't wanta think you're throwing games. I don't think you are!... Then you sit around in the small hours lapping up balls at a back-street bar. And then you come around alibiing with that cold-in-the-arm gag. Are you clean nuts?"

He started to say "Shut up" again. His wide mouth was working hard. Then he looked down at me. "That sore arm is no gag stuff, Socks. I guess they'll find out sooner or later. Maybe it's only fair you should know. You keep coming in there to try to save them for me."

IN A SMALL tight voice, staring hard out at the rural landscape sliding by in the twilight, he gave me the story. At the close of last season with the Richmond club, he'd injured the arm in a headfirst slide to the plate when the opposing catcher stepped on it up near the shoulder. He figured it would mend during the winter; it had seemed to. Then, down in our spring training camp, when Whitey had been experimenting with breaking him in as an outfielder, on making a long hurried throw, the old injury had returned.

He been scared. He'd gone up north to see a specialist without telling the club there was anything wrong. I recalled that, his alibi *had* been sickness at home.

"The specialist told me it was a nerve injury." His voice was all choked up. "There was a lot of medical terms. I got 'em written down. But there's nothing they can do for it. It'll never be right again. He said I might be able to work my way by—with a lot of pain—for most of one more season. And that'd be the last."

I heeled out my smoke. "The decent thing to do would have been to tell the club about it," I snapped brusquely.

He nodded. "It would have been..."

But I had to have this one more season—for the money it meant. My brother, Pinkie, he's in trouble." And he told me about Pinkie whom I'd tangled with in the minors. And who was now out of baseball in business. It seemed he had embezzled a chunk of money from his employers. The poor devil had gone gaga about some silly gold-digging dame. And now the employers were giving him a limited time to pay it off before prosecuting.

"That's why I had to keep pitching with the Rockets—and get that dough. To help Pinkie, Socks... I know you hate his guts. But he is really a great guy. We're orphans. He brought me up, supported me, gave me that college education I got—I gotta back him now."

I just nodded to that. There was nothing I could say.

Bud went on. "That's why I gotta keep pitching as long as I can this year. When they find out, I'll be released, finished. That's why I've been playing around with Rocks Pelluci. My salary isn't enough to cover what Pinkie took. So I bet on us when I pitch. Rocks isn't a bad guy. He admits he'd try to angle a fight, but he's crazy about baseball. And he's been bankrolling me, carrying me some, on the bets."

IT WAS A good thing the porter closed the vestibule doors of the train or else I'd have fallen off. This was some story. The Big Hook said:

"That was why I felt so bad when you couldn't hold that lead today. I had plenty riding through Rocks."

I said, "I see," in a meek small voice. Then I bridled a little. "Sure, sure. The old hearts and flowers stuff. But that drink-lapping you do late at night, you jackass, that—"

He touched my arm gently. "It's the pain in the throwing shoulder, Socks. Sometimes I just can't stand it at night. And if I called a doc, the club would get wise. That's all."

It was all. There wasn't the hell of a lot to say. This kid was pretty grand. Packed guts. I punched him in the ribs. "Stop sweating, pally."

You and me—we'll keep pulling 'em out somehow, Bud."

We went into the car and found our berths and stowed our bags. Then I headed for the club car, figuring to catch a couple of quick ones. Halfway to it, I pulled myself up and turned back. No more of that stuff. I had to be in shape to back the Big Hook. Both of us were about washed up; we had to stand together...



Chapter
Six

WE hadn't needed to hurry back. With the league-leading powerful Trojans in town, it rained the next day. The day after that, Red Finnucane started, hit one of his usual wild streaks in the third, was replaced by Little Joe Case. Little Joe's soft stuff was batted around in the seventh. But Whitey didn't bring me in; he pulled about everything else out of the bull-pen but the bench. I was surprised.

There was no question of using the Big Hook. He was limping around from the bat bruise he'd taken on the hip to save me. He passed it off as an injury he must have sustained in one of those fielding plays up against the Cougars. We dropped another one and that ball club was really in the doldrums.

That evening, I got a ring to drop up to Whitey's room. Whitey had beer and good cigars and we just talked along at first. Then he asked me how my arm felt.

"I know I've been working you too much, Socks. But..."

I lied. You would, for Whitey's sake, though I didn't know what was coming. I said it was okay. He studied his cigar tip reflectively.

"This is off the record, between you and me, Sock... But we've bought Anglers from Indiannapolis."

I gasped. He was one of the hottest moundsmen in the minors, a guy with three speeds, fast, faster, and fastest.

Plus a grand curve. The Red Sox and Cincy had been bidding like mad for him, I knew.

"Cash and players. Plenty of cash," Whitey went on. "One of the players is Simmons... But the deal won't be consummated till next week. By that time, it may be too late. This club drops a few more and it'll be sunk for the season. A man's morale can take just so much."

"Yeah," I said brilliantly. But I knew he was right; the Rockets were about ready to toss in the sponge.

"We got to pull one out, break this losing streak. Then we get Anglers and we got a real shot in the arm."

"Yeah," I echoed myself, just as scintillatingly.

"That's why I'm starting you tomorrow, Socks. You're all I got left that I can depend on with Lawlor's leg out of kilter... I know you always wanted to be a starter again anyway..."

I was still in dreamland, a sort of drab woozy kind of dreamland, when I stepped onto the hill the next afternoon for the opening pitch. There I was, back with a chance to become a starter again. And I knew too damn well how much I hadn't got left. I got through that first inning somehow, with Charris making a sensational catch of a foul back by the wire for the third out with a potential run cocked off third. The top of the second was rough when Simmons couldn't find the handle on an easy one with a double-play setup in the making. But the sweat was running easy on me under that clear hot sun. And I kept overhanding that big swift stuff in there against the Trojan bats and somehow getting away with it. No score.

They yipped it up in the dugout when we worked a tally around with a single, a sacrifice, and then the runner coming all the way in on a smash by Kellen. I didn't make much noise myself. That arm was getting that terrible leaden feeling. It inched down it like creeping paralysis.

I took the mound for the third and

prayed. And they hit me. Hard. They got that run back. Then Kellen made a great stop and threw out a runner at the plate. Ding Hesling on first made a terrific stab of a rising liner tagged for extra bases into right. And Charris made another of his miracle catches of a long twisting foul, almost climbing onto the roof of the enemy dugout."

IN THE fourth, I kept mixing up the swift and that sinker with its three speeds and managed to trick them into infield rollers. Set the side down in order. Coming into the dugout, I told Whitey: "Let's have insurance, boss man. Have somebody warmed up out there in the pen." He gave me a queer look, then nodded and stepped out to flash the signal.

The Big Hook walked past me to the water cooler. "You sure are chucking it down their throats, Sock," he murmured sort of sheepishly.

Maybe. But I didn't know for how long. Something new was happening in that leaden arm. Pain. I knew what it was; I used to get it last season when I was hitting the bottle. And I'd been jousting with Old John Barleycorn quite a bit of late. I was paying for it now. Paying for it when it was my payoff chance.

It was still a 1-1 ball game when I went out for the fifth. It was a 3-1 game, against us, when I came in. The first man was an easy out. And then the cannons began to speak. A hot single right through the box. My control slipping as I tried to bear down and a walk. A sensational catch against the wall in left by Suski to save me that time. But DiMaggio himself couldn't have done anything but tip his cap to that double into left center that sent in two runs. Firing with everything I had, I got a swinging third strike on the next man to end the slaughter, temporarily.

It seemed I'd hardly planted my pants on the bench when it was the sixth. And the first man was a different story that time. We got him

but it cost. Plenty. A roller up the first baseline. Hesling went in for it and I raced for the bag. Took his peg a split second before the runner came ripping in. An out. But he flung against me in passing. And I was spun around—on that weak left knee; my guts climbed right up into my throat with the nausea the pain caused.

It was time to quit, but Whitey had nobody else. I walked slowly back to the rubber and stalled around with the resin bag, the sweat of pain oozing from my head. And I was facing Ossie Younger, one of the long ball hitters of the Trojan club. I plunked him in the ribs with one to put him on as my control wobbled when I threw off that injured knee. Then it was Skip Rice, their booming-bat centerfielder. This looked like curtains. I had no right to be around there.

But I went to work on him. One ball, the sinker in second gear. I put it in low gear in under the chin and he fouled it back. How I was getting that arm around for the throw, I'll never know. I wanted this one. I wanted to show Whitey I could start. If I'd kept my self in shape, I'd have been able to do a real job, maybe. The wages of sin is failure, brother. I came through with the swift, outside. Rice refused to fish. Ball two. I unloaded the swift, even faster, at the knees. Rice sent a sharp hopper to short.

NEVER BEEN kicked in the belly? Simmons did it then. He played that one up his left arm, around his shoulder, off his chest, then dropped it and kicked it a few yards. When this feat of acrobatics was completed, runners were camped on third and first, one down. And Mush Rober, Trojan fence buster, a left-hander, up there at the plate. My heart was broken and my arm was dead. I was into the dirt with a feeble sinker that Charris barely blocked.

And then I heard that mocking voice, "Watch out for the hidden ball trick, boys! Socks loves it!"

I figured it was one of the Trojan coaches. But a red tide ran up my neck. It took me back to the minor league days in the Mountain States League, when I'd been battling it out time and again with Pinkie Lawlor, the Hook's brother, a shortstop on a rival club. And that crucial series when I knew there was a Giant scout in the stands looking me over. The eighth with the game deadlocked. And me preening myself on second with a double and representing the winning run. Pinkie Lawlor had pulled the hidden ball trick on me, sneaking around behind me to trap me off. It had meant that ball game, and my chance at cracking into the majors that year. The Giants have no yen for dumb ball players. The hidden ball trick.

I fired a swift past Rober so fast he was an hour late with his swing. It set that left knee on fire. I looked at the dugout, wondering if I ought to call in Whitey and tell him. And then that voice came again.

"Watch out for the hidden ball trick, fellas. Socks, he just *loves* it!"

I saw who it was that called it that time. The Big Hook, Bud Lawlor, Pinkie's brother, crouched up on the dugout step. I got fighting mad. The dirty so-and-so, after the games I'd saved for him. After I thought we'd become friends. With all the pain and fatigue and sweat, I don't remember quite how I did it, but I whiffed Rober. And I made the next man look like a monkey as he tapped a half-speed sinker to me at the mound for the third out. I stumbled into the dugout.

In a vague way I was aware that the ball park was getting noisier and noisier. With one down, suddenly, we had two on. I was due to take the stick up there. Then I heard Whitey say: "Lawlor, bat for Socks."

The Big Hook turned away from the bat rack, pointed his piece of lumber at me like a gun, grinning in a grim way. "This one is going to be for you, Socks, and it's going to be good." It was then I realized that taunting reference to the old minor

league days and the hidden ball had been deliberate, in a kind way, to get my fighting dander up.

THAT ONE was for me. That trook hurler who was a natural batsman, pickled that second pitch, and it never stopped until it sliced into the upper tier of the left field stands for a round-tripper. A 4-3 ball game, a lead for me. I don't know how I could keep going though. When I started to take off the wind-breaker, Whitey stopped me.

"You've gone far enough today. Sock," he said. "You were slick—and I know it wasn't easy."

I started to buck. "But who—"

"Lawlor, Socks... The Kid was out in the bullpen the inning before this last, part of this. He begged me to let him relieve you."

That was the way it was. I sagged back down on the bench and watched it. After all, he'd gone in as a pinch hitter for me; he could stay in the game. I saw him locking his face against the arm pain on every delivery, throwing with a limited body motion because of that injured thigh. And I saw him stop the Trojans for three innings, though in trouble at times, to lock up the ball game. The club danced out of the dugout, wild at breaking the losing streak. Especially against the champs. Then the Big Hook was walking into the clubhouse, his arm linked over my shoulders.

"That's us, Socks," he said. "Don't matter who starts. One or the other of us two cripples. The other'll always be ready to come in and save him."

"That's a deal," I said. . .

When I got downtown in my hotel room, I just dropped on the bed, bled out. The phone tinkled and it was Jean.

I said, "Look, honey. He's a swell kid, the Hook. Go ahead, and no hard feelings; the music was nice while it lasted."

"Allen, that sounds like you... But couldn't we have a goodbye drink? I'm downstairs in the lobby."

To meet the Hook for dinner, I

figured. But I pulled on a coat and went down. She looked especially divine somehow, then. In the cocktail lounge, she stretched her hand over the table and took my throwing hand.

"Just one thing I want you to know about Hook and me, Allen," she said. "During spring training in the South, I met his fiancée when she visited camp."

"His fiancée? Why what the—he—the two-timing—"

"Will you keep your big mouth shut, darling? I met her, discovered we'd gone to school together. She asked me to sort of look after Bud

in the big town up here; that's all I did. I was sort of his fairy god-mother. It was purely friendship. The big jerk spent half the time with me talking about Linda... As for you, you wooden-headed baboon. I got a hunch you're going to be a starting pitcher again. Whitey, you know, knew you were working on that bad knee, but he was desperate."

I didn't say anything. I just hung onto that hand. I wasn't even in a hurry to get at the tall glass—I'd ordered—of ginereale....

THE END

Mormon Missionary Matman

THAT much maligned sport, professional wrestling, often dubbed "the grunt-and-groan racket," has a staunch defender and loyal disciple in Brother Jonathan DeLaun Heaton of Kanab, Utah, Mormon missionary matman, writer and physical culturist, who cites the Bible in defense of the grapple game.

"You want to know how wrestling can be considered missionary work?" asks Brother Jonathan. "It really isn't hard to explain. *First Corinthians*, Chapter 6, Verse 19, says: 'What! Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?'

"And, *First Corinthians*, Chapter 3, Verse 17, says: 'If any man defile the temple of god, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.' The Scripture, therefore, tells us to take care of our bodies."

With Brother Jonathan wrestling is mainly but a means to an end. "The money three of us (Mormons) make is sent back to the Brotherhood of Physical Educators," he explains. "We hope to establish a health farm in Cash Valley, near Logan, Utah,

where anyone can come to learn and appreciate physical fitness. I am partial to wrestling because it built me up from a 92-pound boy at 17 to my present state of good health—240 pounds and six feet tall."

Wearing a Lincoln-like beard ("out of respect to my ancestors—I'm the eldest son"), the top-hatted, frock-coated, cane-carrying Brother Jonathan is far, far more than merely an internationally-renowned top-flight professional wrestler.

Father of four sons and a daughter, who live at his home in Kanab, Utah, Brother Jonathan, between wrestling shows throughout the nation, takes the pulpit in Mormon churches, writes, and lectures on physical culture. As he lectures, his wife, Mildred (she's "Mickey" to him), demonstrates the exercises.

In 1923-1927 Brother Jonathan carried Mormonism from door-to-door in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. In Hawaii in 1908-1909, his father, Israel H. Heaton, preached the doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, as the Mormon sect today is officially known.

. . John Winters Fleming

Brother Blocker

by John Wilson

A
POWERFUL
GRIDIRON
NOVEL

Everyone expected that Mike Wells would be the same kind of football player as his colorful brother, Flash! And color just wasn't Mike's strength, at all.



OVER AT the Beta Gamma fraternity the boys were having a swell party. There was plenty of food and solid music; everything was moving along fine, except for one thing; the guest of honor at the party, Mike Wells, still hadn't shown up. It was after eleven and the group of frat brothers gathered near the door were anxiously wondering.

Mike Wells had two strikes on him before he ever joined the Marlowe varsity. Mike was "Flash" Wells' kid brother and that automatically made him a "great" football player. There were a few doubters at first, but Flash Wells said his kid brother

was going to be great and that's all there was to it. That Mike would become a star was something that was taken for granted. But a lot of people thought it was a tough rap to pin on a kid that still had to make good where it counted—on the grid-iron.

Al Parker, frat leader, moaned, "I don't like to be a wet blanket, guys, but it could be that we've been stood up. Maybe Mike wouldn't listen to Flash and decided to hook up with the Alphas. I hear they've been working on him."

"That doesn't sound right," one of the boys commented. "Flash knows that if Mike doesn't join us, most of the pledges'll take off. The Alphas'll start saying that our frat isn't as hot as it's supposed to be, and the kids will believe it. Then where'll we be? What's the matter with Flash?"

"He says he doesn't want to put any pressure on Mike, that Mike



Ace
Marion
was out . . .

should decide for himself," Al Parker sighed.

A lean fellow with fiery eyes and a shifty walk strolled over to the group. He was Roy Bently, probably the most disliked guy in the frat. "Take it easy," he said in a bored voice. "The Whiz Kids will be here soon. Flash must have stopped to feed the kid a bottle. When are you guys going to wise up that lug?"

Of the four brothers in the group, all except Parker played in the Marlowe backfield. The tallest of the three held his nose. He was Speed Handley, a stringbean of a guy who looked like he could be broken in two with one good tackle. A few guys had tried breaking him in two, much to their sorrow. Speed Handley was the light heavyweight champ of the school, besides being a varsity football player.

"Something smells." Speed said, looking at Bently.

Bently shrugged. "Well, wise guys, which one of you boobs is going to donate your job to the great Mike Wells? The rule says that only four guys can play at a time and Flash wants Mike in there. Not you, Pete." he sneered.

Pete Burnett, a more squat version of Speed Handley, smiled casually. "You don't have a monopoly on that end job, Bently. I played some pretty good end myself in high school, and so did Handley. It would straighten things out very nicely if one of us went back to the flank. And where would that put you? Or is that a silly question?"

Crash Majeski, who was known as "Crash" for some very good and evident reasons, nodded. It was said that Crash could knock down a brick wall if it got in his way. He had led the way for Flash and the other Marlowe men for two seasons.

"Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to have Bently on the bench," he said. "He could probably give the coach some real valuable tips."

AT THAT instant, Mike Wells and a tall, well-dressed grin-

ning man walked in and stopped the show. It was Flash Wells, the grinning guy with the boyish, handsome face. Flash was the greatest backfield man that Marlowe had ever produced. Coach Ed Fowley was a T man and Flash Wells was the best T formation quarterback in the county. Not only that, but he was an all-around triple threat guy. He could pass with anybody, was a sensational break-away runner and a terrific punter. All-American two years in a row—it was no wonder that everyone listened when Flash Wells spoke.

He waved his arm congenially. "I brought you what you wanted fellas. The Alphas gave Mike the rush act but the kid knows a good thing when he sees it."

Al Parker nodded to the band and they swung into the stirring Marlowe fight song. The brothers gathered around Flash and Mike, wringing Mike's hand and whacking him on the back. When things quieted down some, Al Parker made a ringing speech, aimed at the scores of pledges in the hall. When he finally finished singing Betta Gamma's praises, he turned to Mike. "Come on, Mike, tell us why you chose Betta Gamma. Come on, boy, let's hear the good word."

Mike looked at his brother. He felt insignificant next to Flash, but he was proud. Anything that Flash ever accomplished gave him pleasure.

Flash whispered, "Give it to them, kid. Make them love you." He moved aside to let Mike get the full spotlight.

There was only one reason Mike had joined up with the Betta Gammas. That was Flash. If Flash belonged, that was good enough for him. He said: "It was an easy decision for me to make. Flash is a Betta Gamma, so I'm a Betta Gamma."

Flash frowned and Mike realized that he had said the wrong thing again. It was an old story. Flash pulled his arm and led him around the room. Near the food table they met Flash's three backfield mates.

Flash grinned. "You've met these

bums before, but this was special. They are swell guys and I couldn't gain a yard without them. They'd take you to hell and back if you wanted."

Roy Bently put his two cents in. "Yeah, I hear we're going to have a nurse maid on the bench to take care of the new-born babies."

"Don't mind him," Speed Handley said. "He's going to be the coach's special assistant this year."

Mike saw the looks that passed between Flash and Bently. There was deep anger in their glares.

"Leave Mike out of it, Bently," Flash snapped. "He's got nothing to do with what's between you and me. Lay off."

They started to talk football and it was quite a while later when Flash and Mike left. It was dark as they walked along the path away from the frat hall. Suddenly three men stepped in front of them. One of them, heavy-set and menacing, put his hand on Flash's shoulder. "Take it easy, Flash," he said. "I got something to talk to you about."

Mike didn't like the look of things. He started to go for the man, but Flash held him back. "It's all right, kid; just a little thing to settle between me and this gent. You wait here, I'll be right back."

Flash and the heavy man walked a few paces away. Mike heard muffled voices and then they became louder and he could tell one of them was angry. He felt that Flash was in some kind of trouble. When Flash returned, a few minutes later, Mike could tell by his face that something was bothering him.

"What is it?" Mike asked.

"Nothing, nothing."

Mike didn't sleep well that night. He was worried about Flash but if the big guy didn't want to let him in on it, the only thing he could do was hope that things worked out.

IT WAS a cold clear Autumn day that Mike reported to the varsity squad. Flash and the others were waiting for him.

"Welcome, kid," Flash told him. "Long may you reign."

Mike looked at his teammates and they were all smiling encouragingly at him. The only frown in the room was on Roy Bently's face; Mike knew that Bently hated him for the same reason that the others were so eager to welcome him.

Mike went out on the field and saw the coach, Ed Fowley, putting the squad through the back breaking workout. Fowley was a taskmaster and his motto was work, work and more work.

Mike's first practice was no bed of roses. It just hadn't been a case of kissing Mom goodbye and going off to school. He'd worked in a steel mill all summer to earn the dough to pay his way. But Flash didn't know that, didn't know either that Mom's business was going on the rocks and that she was in bad financial shape. She had made Mike promise not to tell his brother; she wanted her oldest son to finish school in the same grand style that he'd gone through.

Mike worked like a demon for twenty minutes, then Fowley blew his whistle and called him over. It was hard for Mike to realize that this ugly, middle-aged man ran the great machine the Marlowe was. There was something about Fowley that irritated Mike, though he couldn't figure out exactly what it was.

"Glad to see that you could finally make it," Fowley said sarcastically.

Mike didn't answer. He didn't want to tell the coach that he had held his job as long as possible so he could pick up all the dough he could.

"Listen, coach," Flash interrupted, "Mike's in shape right now. He's your answer to a dream—just give him a chance."

Mike was embarrassed. "I'm not that good," he said. "I can pass some and I'm a good blocker, but when it comes to running, that's Flash's job. I ran with the frosh, but I'm a blocker by trade."

"I'll decide what you'll do," Fowley snapped. He looked hard at both of them. "You'll run the ball on this squad." He started to walk away, but

stopped. "And Flash, remember that I run the team."

"What did he mean by that?" Mike asked.

"Nothing, kid," Flash told him. "Sometimes he just likes to talk."

Mike nodded, but he wondered if Coach Fowley liked his star quarterback as much as the newspapers seemed to think he did.

Fowley called the men together and shouted orders at them for ten minutes. Then he set the scrubs and the varsity against each other in a scrimmage. Mike stood on the side and it was like watching giants against midgets.



Chapter Two

THE regulars were sensational. The line was big and fast and charged like they were shot out of catapults. The backs were strong and quick; Majeski opened up holes that you could drive a Sherman tank through. In short order the varsity smashed from midfield, where play had begun, to the scrubs' ten-yard line. Then Flash took the pass from center, faked off to Pete Burnett and cut to the left. Speed Hanley came zooming out of nowhere and Flash delivered the pigskin package to him and led him over the last goal line stripe.

The sheer beauty and deception of the play dazzled Mike. And it filled him with admiration for Flash, too. What a player he was.

A moment later Mike heard Coach Fowley's voice ring out. "Get in for Handley, Mike, and let's see a little pep out there."

Speed Handley passed him as he went out on the field. "Well, pal, I guess it's between you and me. Good luck to you; you'll need it to take my job away." Speed patted him on the back in a friendly manner. A good guy, Mike thought.

The varsity huddled on the scrubs' forty. Mike slapped him on his seat. "Let's go, Kid. Number sixty-two. You take it all the way."

They lined up with Pete Burnett wide on the left flank. Flash took the ball and started to fade as though to pass. Suddenly he stopped short and handed off the ball to Mike who had come up behind him. Flash led the way and they ploughed through a big hole that had opened up in the center of the line. Scrubs were falling like ten pins. At the fifteen Crash Majeski took two out at a clip and Flash flattened another at the ten. Mike went over without a hand having touched him.

The varsity was wild with joy. On his first try, Mike had gone all the way. Only Roy Bently failed to join in the jubilation; he walked alongside Mike, drawing, "Nice going—against the scrubs. But it won't be that easy all the time. Not when you go against real football players."

Flash jerked Bently to the side and growled something to him. The lean end shoved Flash aside. "Don't give me that bunk," he snarled. "I can ruin you if I want to, and you know it. Welsher."

Mike clenched his fists. He thought Flash would let Bently have it right then and there, but the quarterback dropped his hands and walked away, his face pale. Mike was surprised, but he knew one thing for sure: Bently had been right about his long run. Orphan Annie could have scored with the blocking he'd gotten. It would be different later.

Mike found that out soon enough. Fowley switched backfields and had the varsity run from in back of the scrub's liner and vice versa. Mike handled the ball on the first play. It was a double reverse, aimed off guard. Mike saw the hole, made for it and then it wasn't there. Roy Bently smashed over and crashed him to earth. An elbow cracked into Mike's ribs and he felt all the breath go out of him. He thought his rib has been broken. Bently's voice grated in his ear.

"This is nothing. I hope it hurts your brother more than you."

Mike got up and walked around for a minute until he regained his breath. Then he went over to Bently. "Any more of that rough stuff and they'll pick you up in pieces. I'm warning you, lay off."

Bently laughed. Mike swung at him but Pete Burnett held him back.

They went into a huddle. "I'll take it," Mike snapped. He flung himself over left end, but Bently was waiting and knocked him down. He tried twice more and it was the same story.

Most of the varsity line hated Bently's guts but they played together as a unit. It did something to their morale to show their backfield brothers, who got all the newspaper write-ups, that if it weren't for the line they would not be worth anything. They smashed down one ball carrier after another.

IF THE regular backs, only Flash was making occasional gains. It was rough, tough football and Mike was being stopped cold. The entire varsity line was giving him a real battering, but Bently was the only one who laid it on dirty. And the way Bently kept making nasty remarks about Flash made Mike's blood boil.

They lined up and Flash faked to Mike and cut for the sidelines. It was Crash Majeski's job to knock out the wing, but Crash somehow missed Bently. Mike rammed into Bently himself, smacking him down. Flash zoomed into the clear. Seconds later Mike felt a heavy boot shoved into his teeth.

"That's for Flash," Bently barked. Mike jumped up. Bently anticipated this and swung first, but Mike ducked. The months in the steel mill had done Mike plenty of good and when his fist crashed against Bently's jaw, the end sprawled out.

Flash leaped in front of him. "Are you crazy?" he yelled.

"I don't care what he does to me but I won't let him keep insulting you," Mike answered.

"I can take care of myself, espe-

cially where Bently is concerned." Flash strode off angrily.

Practice finally ended a few moments later and the team slowly walked off the field. Coach Fowley called Mike to his side. "Okay, you've got it," he said. "You've got the job as Flash's running mate."

Mike was amazed. After one practice session the coach had handed him Speed Handley's job. It didn't seem right.

"I'd like a shot at the blocking spot," he protested.

"Listen, I still give the orders around here," Fowley spat out.

When Mike got to the locker room he saw something he didn't like. Roy Bently had Speed Handley's ear and he was telling him a few things. Bently pointed at Mike. "Ask him. Ask him how much chance you have to keep him out of the line-up. Flash has fixed everything."

Handley grimly went to the shower room.

IT WAS three o'clock in the morning when the hall telephone jangled. Mike was awake and jumped up to answer it. When Flash left early in the evening he'd had a worried look on his face.

A rasping voice came over the telephone. "Better tell Mike Wells to come and get his brother. He's down at the 42 Club and he ain't in such hot shape."

"What's the matter with him, what's the..." Mike shouted into the phone, but it had gone dead. He got dressed as quickly as he could and rushed outside. He was lucky to find a cab right away. The 42 Club at the end of town was one of the worst joints in town.

Mike kicked open the door when he got there. He saw Flash right away. His face was dirty and cut and the side of his head was bloody. Mike looked around and found a bottle of whiskey and made Flash take a drink. Flash stirred and Mike helped him up and started to drag him out. As he was leaving, he saw the same heavy-set man he had noticed that first

night at the frat. The guy was sitting in a corner with two other characters. Mike knew that he must have had something to do with what had happened to Flash, and he'd have liked to bounce him around a little, but his first thought was to get Flash away.

In the cab Flash seemed to come around. "Thanks, kid," he smiled weakly.

"We'll have to get you to a doctor," Mike said. "Our first game is coming up in a week and it sure looks like you're going to miss it."

"No doctor," Flash answered quickly. "We can tell them that I got into a drunken brawl. I'll be okay for the game, don't worry. There's an old friend of mine, Ace Marion, playing with Brandon U. and I wouldn't want to disappoint him for anything." Flash was quiet for a moment.

"I guess I'd better give you the story. That fat guy you saw back there is Slick Rogers, and that name of his is quite appropriate. Besides taking part in all the other lousy rackets you can think of, he's a loan shark. He lends dough to dumb college guys—dumb guys like me—when they need it for a small interest rate. So small that you never get finished paying him back."

"I don't understand," Mike interrupted. "Mom always sent you enough money."

"Yeah, but when you get to be a big shot it seems you never have enough. That's where Slick came in. And if you won't or can't pay it back, he takes good care of you. Like what happened to me tonight."

"But you can go to the cops," Mike protested. "Wouldn't they help you?"

Flash laughed. "Not in this burg. The cops are in back of Slick and Sam Marion is in back of the cops. You wouldn't have a chance."

Mike had heard the name Sam Marion many times before. One of the biggest politicians in the State, Marion was mixed up in anything unsavory you could think of and he was filthy with money. Ma-

rión had no sons but he did have two nephews whom he treated like sons; one of them was Ace Marion, star of the Brandon football team, the other Jeff Marion, who played for Simpson.

"Incidentally," Flash continued, "Bently is Slick's contact man on the campus. He was the tramp who got me tangled up with Rogers in the first place. He's a good football player, but he's always envied the headlines I've made."

"Maybe they'll leave you alone after tonight," Mike offered.

"Like hell they will. Slick is trying to make a deal with me. His district attorney is coming up for reelection and it's touch and go if he'll win. He's offered to cancel the thousand I owe him if I'll make a few speeches for the crook. There's a lot of people in this town who might listen to what I have to say, but I don't want any part of the dirty business. I'll get the dough from Mom and throw it in his face."

A thousand bucks. Mike groaned to himself. He wanted to tell Flash that Mom was almost broke, but he remembered his promise. "Yeah," he breathed.

MARLOWE was facing Brandon U. in the season opener. Marlowe opened against the toughest club on their schedule. They were all good and there were no soft spots, but Brandon and Marlowe were the two gridiron greats of the nation. A victory for either might mean an undefeated season for the winning team. The big question around Marlowe was how Mike Wells would go in his first big test.

Coach Fowley drove them almost to exhaustion right up until the day of the game, and Mike improved steadily, although he still felt that he would be better off in the blocking spot. This way the pressure was on him from all sides.

Mike noticed that Speed Handley was sulking and irritable. He knew that Speed thought he hadn't received a fair shake in his fight with

Mike for a backfield position. It was the beginning of dissension.

An enormous crowd of eighty thousand screaming fans filled the stone stadium to capacity.

As they raced onto the field, a thin amiable looking fellow called out to Flash. The two brothers went over to him. "Can you do me a favor, Flash?" he asked. "A friend of mine is up from National Photo Service to take some good shots of the game. Where would you say the best place was to set up?"

Flash thought for a moment. "It gets pretty dark in the late afternoon around the twenty-yard line on the north end of the field. That would be a good spot for some hocus-pocus," he grinned.

They continued onto the field. "That's Frank Sims, best newspaper guy in town," Flash explained. "Nice guy."

Marlowe won the toss and elected to receive. Mike and Flash were back in double safety. The kick was high and booming; Mike danced underneath it. Suddenly he felt as if his legs were made of butter. He lost the ball in the air for an instant and then it whacked down against his chest, bouncing away. Mike dove frantically for it, but to no avail. The Brandon Tigers recovered the fumble on the Marlowe twenty-three.

"It's okay," Flash consoled him. "We'll get it back."

Mike was miserable about the start he had made; fumbling on the first play...

The Marlowe line dug in as Brandon came to the attack. The Tigers were a T formation team, too, and in Ace Marion they had a quarterback second only to Flash. It was common knowledge that only Flash kept Marion from being All-American.

Ace made five yards through center on the first play, then he handed off to the left half who pounded out two more. Ace smashed to the ten-yard line, but the Marlowe line stiffened and stopped Brandon on the next two plays. Then Ace took the pass from center, fell back a few

steps, hesitated as if he might run, and lofted a beautiful pass to the goal line. Luckily Crash Majeski was on his toes and dashed over to knock it down. Roy Bently had been completely fooled on the play and had let his man get away from him.

IN THE next play Marion faded again and this time Bently went out with his man. But Marion suddenly streaked for the left side-lines. Bently was the only Marlowe man in his way, but the Tiger end he was tailing turned and smashed him out of the play. Ace Marion waltzed over for the six pointer. As he walked back to the line, Marion stopped near Bently.

"You sure looked good on that one," he sneered.

Mike saw the look of hatred that passed over Bently's face. He thought nothing of it but the look was to come back to haunt him later. The kick was good and Brandon lead, 7-0.

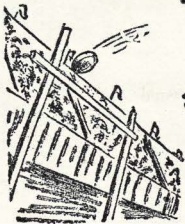
Brandon kicked off and Flash returned twenty-five yards. Flash ripped through to a first down, then five. It was Mike's turn, and he made seven. With Flash and Crash Majeski blasting gaping holes he rolled for eleven and eight. Marlowe was going and it looked like they couldn't be stopped.

It was only a tough break that did stop them. Third and five on the Brandon thirty-two. Flash decided to try his first aerial of the game, but the pass from center was bad and sailed over his head. He was after it like a shot, but just as he caught up to the bouncing ball, three Tigers smashed him to the ground. When they finally unplied, Flash still had the ball, but he was holding his head. Marlowe took time out and the trainer raced onto the field. After a few minutes Flash said he was all right, but Mike saw his eyes were glassy and tried to persuade him to take a breather on the bench. Flash refused and insisted on remaining in the game.

The two teams continued to bang themselves mercilessly at each other.

Flash seemed to be all right but Marlowe couldn't keep a sustained attack going. Then late in the half, Marlowe recovered. Mike went off tackle for three; Pete Burnett made six around end; Flash picked up eight, then five to the Brandon eight. There were now forty-five seconds to play in the half. Flash tried a pass and it was knocked down. Another was no good. Fourth and five and Flash called Mike's signal. Mike protested, but Flash called it again; Mike took the ball and started through center. And suddenly Crash Majeski and Flash and Pete Burnett were like pneumatic drills hammering at a stone wall. Mike stumbled at the two, almost slipped at the one, and fell over for a touchdown with a second left. The crowd went crazy.

Seconds later the extra point was made good and the game was all tied up. Now Mike knew how it felt to hear the plaudits of the fans ringing in his ears.



Chapter Three

THE second half started slowly. Both teams were afraid to risk too much, but midway through the third period Marlowe began to march again. Flash and Mike, and Flash and Flash. Sixty yards and a touchdown. Marlowe led for the first time; the kick was blocked, but the score was now 13-7.

A determined Brandon eleven took the kick-off and returned to the attack. Ace Marion was almost an All-American, and he began to show his stuff. Twenty yards off tackle, an eighteen yard pass, a six yard pass, a ten yard plunge. Then Ace broke loose and it looked like he might go all the way, but Flash caught him on the Marlowe seventeen yard line with a terrific diving tackle. When Flash got up Mike saw that the glassy look had returned to his eyes. Seconds lat-

er Ace faded to pass and couldn't find a receiver. He drifted all the way back to the thirty yard line but he suddenly shook himself into the clear and started to run with the ball. Only Flash, Roy Bently, and Mike stood between him and the goal. Flash was in the lead and he made his try at the fifteen. It was good; Marion went down in a heap with Flash and a split second later Roy Bently and then Mike piled on. And Mike saw something that made him wince. As Bently went down, he delivered a vicious kick to the back of Marion's neck.

The referee unpile the players, but Marion didn't get up; he was stretched out on the ground. The Brandon trainer came out and then a doctor, and then a stretcher was brought and they carried Ace off. Mike saw a funny look on Bently's face. "You did it, Flash," the end shouted. "You had it in for Marion and you fixed him good."

"You're crazy," Flash said. "I wouldn't foul a guy like that deliberately."

Mike went over to Bently. "Shut up. You can't pin your dirty work on Flash. I saw you give Ace the boot."

"You can't prove it," Bently said excitedly. "You can't prove it."

Marlowe held for downs and took the ball away. The Brandon team seemed to have lost their drive with Ace Marion out, but they hadn't lost their desire for revenge. They blamed Flash for what had happened and they tried to take it out of his hide. He got up from one pile with blood running from his nose and from another holding his side, and from another from a cleat mark on his cheek.

Mike pleaded with his brother to let him do most of the ball carving and finally Flash had to give in. Now Mike took the battering. He got almost senseless after each play, but he felt better that he was taking the pounding rather than Flash. Finally it was over: Marlowe 13, Brandon 7.

A FEW NIGHTS later Flash and Mike were sitting in the frat

house chatting.

"I got a letter from Mom today," Flash said. "Had a thousand bucks in it."

Mike gasped. He wondered where the money had come from. "That's fine," he said.

"No, it isn't. I finally got wised up about Mom. She needs the dough more than I; I sent it back to her as soon as I could."

"What about Slick?"

"He can take it out of my hide like he tried once before," Flash smiled.

"Except for one thing," Mike pointed out grimly. "Ace Marion is seriously injured and his uncle might get the bright idea of cracking down on you though Slick to get even. Roy Bently has everyone convinced that you gave Ace the works."

"Maybe I did. I don't know," Flash said. "I got that bad bang in the second period and I don't think I ever got over it. After that tackle by Marion just before the accident I got another shot on the head. I hardly remember anything after that."

It was nothing new to Mike. He remembered how glassy Flash's eyes had been. Flash, great player that he was, had played most of the game out on his feet.

Suddenly Al Parker raced into the room. He held a newspaper in his hand and began to read excitedly.

"Ace Marion, All-American quarterback of the Brand on U. Tigers, and nephew of Sam Marion, leading political figure, died tonight of injuries sustained in the Marlowe contest. The District Attorney's office announced that in view of the circumstances surrounding Marion's death, a full inquiry will be conducted."

Mike and Flash stared at each other, white-faced.

Mike tried to recall every detail of the play in which Marion had been hurt. He remembered clearly seeing Roy Bentley's foot lash into Marion's neck, and he remembered the look of rage that had swept over Bentley's face early in the game when Marion had fooled him to score a touchdown.

"I couldn't have done it," Flash insisted, "But honestly, I don't remember a thing, and you're the only one who saw Bently. I'm afraid I'll really be in for it." And Flash was right. Shortly afterwards, newspapermen were surrounding them, pleading for a statement.

"Bently says you did it, Flash," one of them said. "You've got to give us the lowdown."

They kept firing questions at him. He had many reasons to want Ace out of the way; Bently had none. It was obvious that they all thought he had done it. Bently hadn't meant to kill Marion, but now that it had happened, he would do his best to wriggle off the hook. It tortured Mike to see what Flash was going through as the reporters hammered away at him. Suddenly he couldn't take it any longer.

"Listen, you dopes," he shouted. "It's a cinch, isn't it? All American kills rival. Only you're forgetting one thing; I was in on that pile-up, too. Maybe I hit him harder than I intended. Maybe it was an accident."

The scribes dashed out of the room. This was a bigger story yet. Star's brother practically admits killing.

After they had gone, Flash looked at Mike sadly. "You're crazy, kid. What'd you get yourself into this for?"

Mike stuck out his chin, "We'll stick together, like always. I'm blocking for you."

The papers were full of the story next day, and in the afternoon two detectives came and escorted Mike and Flash to the D.A.'s office.

THE D.A. was a hard-looking, gruff man named Andrews. He was in office because Sam Marion had put him there. The boys knew there was no chance of getting a square deal from him.

"Let's have it," he barked. "I want a confession. One of you is going to sit for this."

"The truth is that neither of us did it," Flash quietly said.

"What're you trying to give me? A teammate of yours has sworn he saw Flash hit Marion. Then you tell a bunch of crazy stories to the papers. Who did it?"

"Roy Bently," Mike yelled.

"That's a laugh," the D. A. snarled. "You've got it in for him because he's testified against you, so you try to pin the rap on him."

Mike told Andrews the whole story. How Bently had been sore at Marion, how Flash had played most of the game on his instinct, how he had clearly seen Bently kick Marion in the pile-up. The D.A. said: "Baloney, I'm convinced Bently is completely innocent; we're going to set bail on you two."

Flash jumped up. "So that's the way things are. Sam Marion calls the tune and you guys dance. Oke. I've got a story for the papers I think they'd like. About Bently and Slick Rogers and loan-sharking on the campus, and about what happens when a guy can't pay up. And maybe they'd also be interested in learning that Slick offered to cancel the thousand I owe him in return for a little favor—all he wanted me to do was make a few speeches to make sure a certain D.A. gets re-elected."

Andrews shifted uneasily in his seat, began to toy with a paper weight on his desk. "Perhaps I have been a little hasty. The—the investigation has not been altogether finished. I think we'll let bail ride for the time being. You can go now."

Outside Flash and Mike were still a little gloomy. Suddenly Mike shouted, "Flash, I've got it. Why didn't I think of it before? That photographer—remember those pictures that Frank Sims' friend took?"

Flash slapped him on the back. "Of course, Kid. They should have been taken right near where the accident happened. If only they have a shot of that play. Let's hunt up Sims."

They found the newspaperman in his office. He listened to their idea and hopped into action. "We'll check all the papers that might have used the pictures," he told them, as they followed him into the Globe's library.

Half an hour later they emerged, unsmiling. There was a picture of the play all right, but all it showed was Ace Marion on the ground and Flash on top of him; it was no use.

IF THE Wolverines, who followed Brandon on the schedule, thought that Coach Fowley's club would roll over and play dead for them, they had another guess coming, but it was a close game. The team had gone through too much to be up to par. And they had two regulars under threat of indictment for murder and one with a guilty conscience.

Things went wong—they couldn't seem to get going. But they held their own and five minutes from the end it looked like the game would wind up a scoreless tie. Then Flash Wells showed the stuff he was made of. He stood back on his own forty and pitched twenty yards to Pete Burnett, threw ten yards to Mike—but the Wolverines broke through and spilled him for a thirteen-yard loss. Flash was not to be denied; on third down he floated back and coolly as could be tossed a fifty-yard scoring pass to... Roy Bently. Marlowe was the victor, 6-0.

The game was written up all over the country. How Flash Wells had proved what a great player he really was by coming through with the shadow of prison over him. And how he had passed for the winning touchdown to the man whose confession might ruin him for good. It was almost unbelievable.



Chapter
Four

DAY followed day and things remained quiet. The following Saturday, the team won its third game in a row, 14-7. But Mike and Flash knew that it was the calm before the storm.

Sam Marion came to town. He wanted to know what was being done about the case. He called the D.A. on the carpet and told him he wanted action, or else.

Mike and Flash were taken to the District Attorney's office once more;

this time they knew the pressure would really be on.

"I guess Sam Marion's putting the squeeze on, eh?" Mike asked Andrews. "Or is it that he's getting his dough down on Simpson early and he wants to insure the bets."

"You boys don't think much of yourselves, do you?" the D.A. sneered. "Without the Wells brothers, poor old Marlowe is up the creek. I'll remember that."

"You could trump up some phony charge and arrest the whole team," Flash said. "Then you'd be absolutely sure of winning your bets."

"You can't talk to me like that," Andrews roared.

"Flash'll talk to you any way he pleases." Mike shot back. "We're fed up with you and the whole rotten mess in this town. Don't forget that Flash pulls a lot of weight in this town, and a few speeches might not do you much good."

"And the Globe might be pretty interested in getting the lowdown on the racket in this burr," Flash added coldly. "Andrews and Slick Rogers go to jail for fleecing college students. Inquiry to be made into affairs of one Sam Marion. It'll make nice reading."

"Shut up—" Andrews bellowed. "So that's your game, blackmail." Then a thought occurred to the D.A. "Let's have it again—your proposition," he said smoothly.

"We're no dopes," Flash told him. "We're not offering you any proposition. We're going to tell the truth, and the whole town is going to know it if I can do anything about it."

"I'm going to hold you on bail," Andrews said quickly.

"If it's war you want you'll get plenty of it," Flash declared angrily.

The Marlowe team played its fourth game without the services of the Wells', but Speed Handley, warming the bench all season long, got his big chance and made the most of it. He played like a combination of Red Grange, Sammy Baugh, and Bronko Nagurski. The wiry young speedster ran twice for more than

fifty yards to touchdowns. He bucked across for one more and passed for three as an aroused Marlowe eleven smashed to a triumphant victory to the tune of 47-6. It was like a gesture of defiance to Sam Marion and his whole rotten gang.

Two days later the Globe came to the rescue and posted bail for the brothers. Frank Sims had convinced the chief editor that with the help of Flash and Mike he could break a story that would set the state on fire.

Flash and Mike were in uniform the following Saturday and they made up for lost time. For the second week in a row Marlowe humbled an opponent by a top-heavy score. With Flash and Mike and Speed Handley roaring on all fours, the squad sireiked to a 48-0 win.

The Sunday before the election the Globe broke the story of the racketeering in town. There were full page stories signed by Flash Wells and other innocent students who had been trapped by the vicious Slick Rogers. The expose threatened to blow the top off state politics.

And Frank Sims, the great reporter, had an even better idea. Monday night Flash Wells was scheduled to make a speech on the Marlowe campus. Everyone knew the whole town would turn out to hear him. Marion and his thugs would have liked to stop the speech, but they knew they couldn't do it directly, so Andrews got the brilliant idea of importing some fifty hoodlums from out of town to heckle the speaker and break up the meeting.

IT WASN'T without reason that Frank Sims had suggested that Flash speak on the campus. Surrounding the speaker's platform were thirty rough and ready youths, members of the football squad, and dispersed throughout the crowd were some of the biggest and strongest newspaper loaders and machine feeders that Frank Sims could round up.

Flash made a stirring speech. He didn't shout or try to rouse them to a fever pitch. He spoke slowly and

calmly and sincerely. He told them he was sorry that he had gotten mixed up with Rogers and he was more sorry that it had all come out the way it did. But it was more important to him that the racketeers be cleaned out of town than any personal considerations. They cheered him madly for this.

As Flash neared the end of his talk some of Andrew's imported rough-necks started to heckle him and then a bunch of them tried to rush the platform. There were cops around, but they were Andrew's men and stood idly by. No help was needed; the college boys and the newspaper guys had been waiting for just such an opportunity. There was a battle royal and when it was over the boys carried Flash away on their shoulders to head a torchlight parade. The next day the people voted by the narrow margin of four to one, to give Mr. Andrews and his gang their walking papers.

Two Saturdays later the retiring D.A. had his last measure of revenge. The loaded county jury voted to return an indictment for manslaughter against Flash and Mike Wells. The blow hit the still unbeaten Marlowe eleven like a bomb.

The day before the big Simpson game, Coach Fowley visited the brothers. There was a hint of tears in his eyes. "Flash," he said, "you may have thought that I was jealous of your publicity, or that I didn't like you or something of that sort. I want you to get it straight that my only consideration has always been to try and see that you played your best game possible. I've seen too many fine players ruined through swelled heads. Every star needs someone to keep pushing him or he gets soft and lazy and believes all the stuff they write about him in the papers. But I'm with you a hundred percent, remember that."

Flash nodded. It made him feel good to hear that.

"Where's Frank?" Fowley asked.

The reporter wasn't around and

couldn't be located. Mike Wells smiled inwardly, but he wasn't sure and he said nothing.

A DISPIRITED Marlowe club took the field the next day, played as if they were only going through the motions. Simpson, with Jeff Marion, brother of the late Ace Marion, leading the way, jumped out in front. A quick touchdown in the opening moments of play, another midway through the first period, and a third early in the second quarter, put them in front, 21-0. As Marlowe walked disconsolately to their lockers between halves, it looked like a hopeless cause.

And then the door to the dressing room suddenly swung open and the boys went crazy. It was Frank Sims with Mike and Flash Wells...

While the boys were pounding the brothers on the back in welcome, Frank Sims called Fowley to the side, and breathlessly told him the story. "It was Mike's idea at the beginning, to check the pictures National Photo took to see if we could find one of that play. We couldn't find a thing and it looked bad, but Mike kept thinking about it and he brought it up again the other day. Suddenly I realized that there might have been other pictures taken that weren't used for one reason or another. So I hot-footed it to New York."

"And..." Fowley was so excited he couldn't keep still.

"I dug one up all right. The one we needed; the picture shows Bently piling on Marion and giving the boot to the back of Marion's head."

Fowley was a shrewd man and he didn't want to disrupt the team, so he wrote a short note and handed it to Bently. It told Bently that Fowley was aware of what had happened and that Bently was through. He was to pretend he had suffered an injury and leave the squad immediately.

The team wasn't disappointed when Fowley announced that Bently would not play in the second half. They had the Wells brothers back and that was

all that mattered. Fowley switched Pete Burnett to end and Speed Handley was able to remain in the game.

Marlowe raced onto the field for the second half, a new club. The boys acted like they'd just discovered a gold mine, and they had, a gold mine named Flash and Mike Wells. Simpson knew the Wells brothers were back and their coach ordered them to play a strictly defensive game.

Simpson punted and Speed Handley returned twenty yards to his own thirty-two. Crash Majeski and Mike cleared the way beautifully for him. Then Flash made three and Mike two. Simpson was concentrating on the brothers, trying to shake them up as much as they could, but Flash Wells had an idea. Simpson found out what it was soon enough when Crash Maieski carried all the way to midfield on third down. Big Crash wasn't the fastest guy on the field but it took a gang of men to bring him down. Crash carried twice more for ten yards and then twelve to the Simpson twenty-eight.

Simpson called time out, but it was no use. On the first play after that Flash faked to Majeski and then spun and floated the sweetest twenty yard pass to Speed Handley. Speed went over standing up and a moment later the point was good, and the score was now 21-7.

Marlowe started to go again from their own twenty after taking a punt. It was Speed Handley and Mike and Maieski, with Flash acting as decoy time after time. Eighty yards they rolled and to another touchdown—21-14.

But Simpson still had plenty on the ball; they decided the best defense would be a good offense, and Jeff Marion, a fine player, began spraying passes all over the lot. Mike knocked two down and Flash and Handley were all over the field, but the Simpson aerial artist was lucky. Stymied on the Marlowe forty, Marion faded past midfield and let go a sixty-yarder. Crash Majeski was covering the receiver all the way and

leaped to bat the ball down, but it bounced off his chest and into the arms of Simpson man. Simpson kicked the extra point, and led, 28-14.

THE ROAD uphill tough, but they kept pushing. Majeski battered the forward wall and Mike and Speed cut the tackle and guards. Eight minutes from the end Speed Handley raced over with the third touchdown. Flash made the kick good, and the score became 28-21.

Simpson took the kick-off and tried to hold the ball as long as they possibly could. The Marlowe line had tried, but they made one last great effort and broke through to trap the ball carrier behind the line of scrimmage. He was hit so hard that he fumbled. A minute and a half and four plays later Mike Wells pounded over for the fourth touchdown. A hush fell over the stadium as Flash went back to try for the point. A mighty roar blasted forth as the kick sailed straight and true over the crossbar, tying up the contest at 28-all.

Now it was a battle against the clock. Simpson held on to the ball as though it were a diamond, but finally they had to kick and Marlowe gained possession on their own nineteen, with two minutes left to play. The crowd began a rhythmic chant calling for Flash to carry the ball. And the great star finally obliged.

With Crash Majeski and Mike leading the way, Flash spun off tackle ended up and turning, flipped a back-for twelve. On a pretty fake double reverse, Flash zoomed to the forty-five. The clock was ticking away as Flash hammered into Simpson territory. With twenty-five seconds left, Flash raced to a first down on the thirty-eight yard line. Marlowe took time out. The team gathered around Flash. They had time for one, maybe two more pass plays, or one running play, or a field goal attempt. But it was a long kick and the angle was poor. Suddenly Flash grinned and whispered to the rest of the team.

They snapped into line with Mike kneeling on the forty-six and Crash Majeski and Speed back for protection. The team was well spread out. The ball was passed back to Mike, but he didn't set it down. He straightened up and turning, flipped a back-and-Speed as Flash's convoy. ward pass to Flash who was cutting for the sideline. Mike joined Crash and Speed as Fash's convoy.

All over the field Simpson men were going down like ducks in a shooting gallery. Crash took two men out at the thirty and went down himself. Speed hit the Simpson left half so hard that they both sailed off the field and out of bounds. Then only Mike was left and Jeff Marion was between him and the goal; Mike hit him hard enough to stretch him out flat, and Flash pranced over with the winning touchdown. Seconds later the goal posts were gone and the field was a bedlam of shouting students and fans and players. The whole squad was carried off on the shoulders of their admirers.

his equally great brother, Mike, had sparked the team to come from behind a three-touchdown deficit to win out, 34-28...of how Flash Wells had hardly carried the ball until the dying moments of the game, but had acted as a decoy to strengthen his team's chances...how the mighty Flash had finally come through with his great runs and brilliant last play when the chips were down and victory hung in the balance.

And there was another story in the Globe by Frank Sims. It told of an interview with Coach Fowley. Fowley said that he wasn't worried about the team's chances for the coming year, not as long as a fellow named Flash Wells was on the squad. He also said that he was getting old, and that one of these days he was going to retire. He'd been looking for a smart young guy to take his place for a long time. He thought he'd found him, and the guy could start in as backfield coach next season if he did not want to play pro ball...a guy named Flash Wells.

NEWSPAPERS all over the country were filled with stories of how the sensational Flash Wells and

THE END

*A Suspenseful Novel
of Midnight Mystery*

STRANGE MAN, STRANGE MURDER

by Bruno Fischer

leads off the big
November issue of

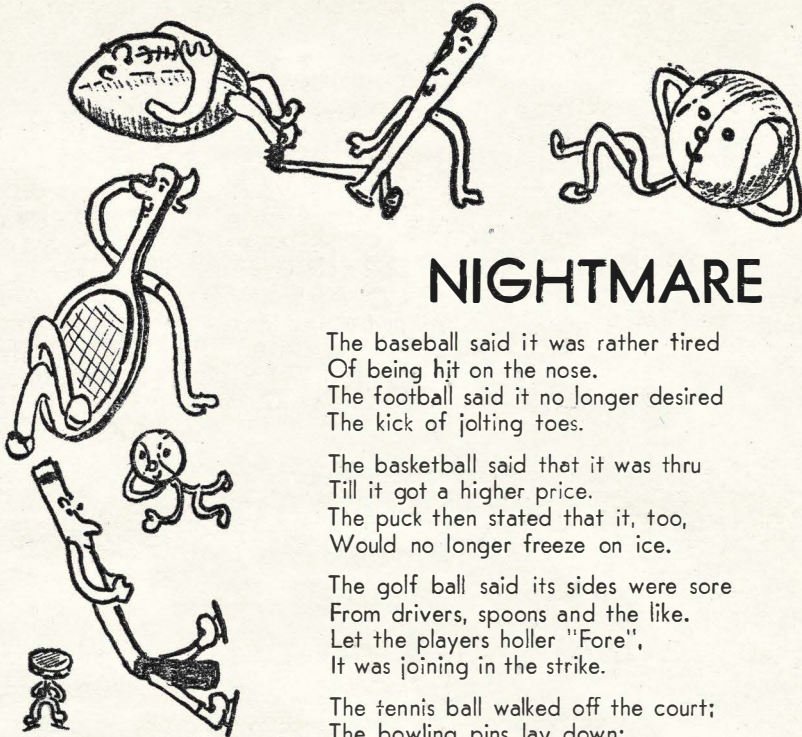
CRACK

DETECTIVE

STORIES

On Sale Sept. 15th





Bernie

NIGHTMARE

The baseball said it was rather tired
Of being hit on the nose.
The football said it no longer desired
The kick of jolting toes.

The basketball said that it was thru
Till it got a higher price.
The puck then stated that it, too,
Would no longer freeze on ice.

The golf ball said its sides were sore
From drivers, spoons and the like.
Let the players holler "Fore",
It was joining in the strike.

The tennis ball walked off the court;
The bowling pins lay down;
And one by one each game and sport
Closed up all over town.

Fans were playing mumble-peg
Or learning to make fudge.
The promoters started to plead and beg
But the strikers wouldn't budge.

There was no longer any news
Upon the sporting pages.
Even billiard balls and cues
Went out for higher wages.

Negotiations were begun
But the strikers wouldn't yield,
Until at last control they won
Of each stadium and field.

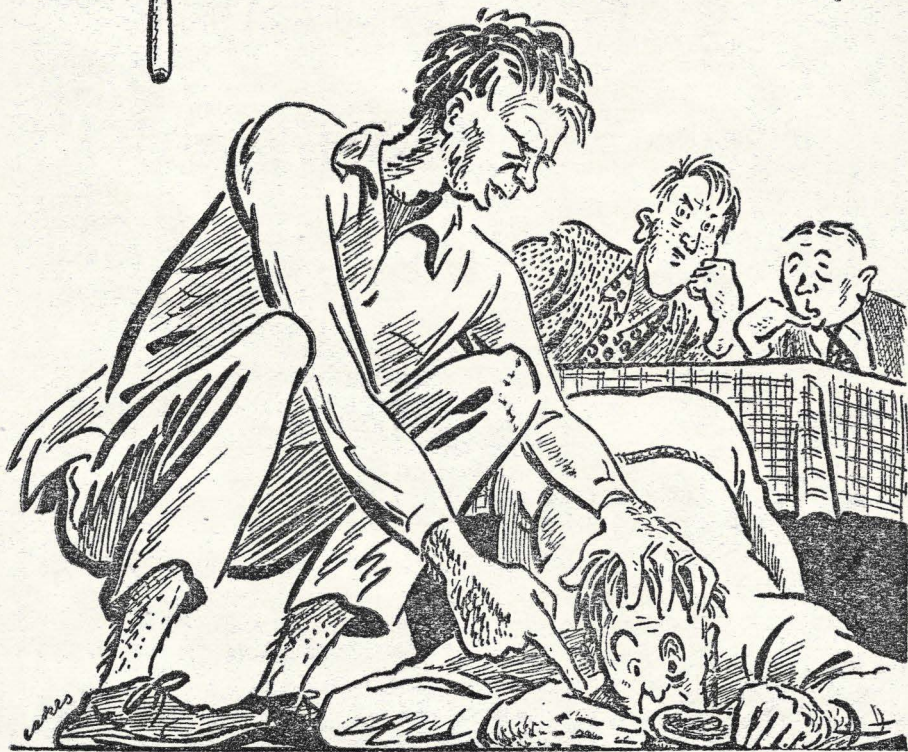
The equipment, now bosses if you please,
Were taking the receipts.
The promoters were on salaries
And paying for their seats.

I woke with a start as dreamers do.
I was lying on my bed.
I looked at the newspaper, then I knew
It must have been something I read.



SID PRESS

Spike the Man Down



A Rip-Roaring Baseball Novel

By Larry Holden

The rube had hair everywhere except his teeth, didn't know a blessed thing about any position on the field — but he could hit like a dream, and he sure was seriously concerned with getting the pennant. Yeah. Only the question was — would Slaughter slaughter his team-mates trying to get them to give out their best?

BY THE middle of March I was swearing that if anything else happened I'd put on a Hitler suit and walk through the Bronx waving a swastika. That was my first season as manager of the Chiefs. Yeah, the hitless wonders. The only baseball team in the world with mass astigmatism.

That wasn't all.

My outfielders couldn't have been

slower if we'd been playing with bowling balls; my pitchers had no more control than an exploding gas tank; Bucky Moore, my catcher, was beginning to duck every time somebody threw a ball at him; and Sloan was covering first as if he'd stepped in something and was trying to scrape it off on the bag.

That still wasn't all.

The team wasn't speaking to me



“Now eat it,” Slaughter grated,
 “and remember that I’m doing
 it for your own good and for the
 good of the team. Eat it!”

and I wasn’t speaking to them; I was yelling. It seems Bucky Moore had the idea he should have been the Chief’s new shepherd, on account of he was smartern anybody, and eight of the others kind of felt the same way. It was my first job of managing and, like I said, by the middle of March it was beginning to look like my last. From the locker-room feuds that were going on, you’d have thought half of us was named Martin and the other half Coy.

Then, on top of all this, just when I thought nothing else could happen, Link Slaughter happened.

I’d gotten a telegram from Hap McAuliffe, our talent scout. Everybody in the business has a lot of respect for Hap McAuliffe; he really can pick them. You could start out in April with two bat boys and an outfielder, and by May Day he’d have you a pennant team on the field. That’s how good he was. So I got this telegram from him.

*Walter Bone
 Pall Mall Hotel
 Wistful, Fla.*

Sending in best damn little shortstop in the world. Bats .250. Should be your lead-off man ha ha. Tempermental but kind treatment should pay dividends. Has anyone called you Wishbone since you started sacheming the Chiefs?

Hap McAuliffe

That’s where I got my nickname—Wish Bone.

Anyway, that telegram came in February. By the middle of March I’d forgotten all about this best little shortstop in the world, and on March the twenty ninth he walked into the lobby of the hotel.

ONLY JUMPING Jeepus knows where he had spent the intervening month, but from the look of

him it was a wonder the hogs hadn't chewed off his ears while he was lying there. He had on a pair of dirty white sneakers, torn dungarees and a shirt that had come down the chimney with the first Santa Claus.

He walked over to the desk in the hotel, took the clerk by the tie, pulled him half way across the counter and growled; "This where the baseball team spreads it on the springs?"

The clerk said, "Wha-wha-wha-wha..."

"This where they sleep, you clunk?"

The clerk nodded violently and Slaughter dropped him behind the barrier like you'd drop a nickel in a slot machine you had no faith in. He turned, surveyed the lobby malevolently and roared; "Paging Mr. Walter dammit Bone! Come on. I ain't got all day!"

Luckily I was just coming out of the dining room at that moment or Jeepus only knows what would have happened. Whatever he was mad about, I don't know, but he sure was mad. He looked like a lion that'd got his head in the trainer's mouth by mistake. He had a shock of tawny, uncombed hair; he had hair all the way down his arms and up his fingers. It crawled up out of his shirt and all over his face. He hadn't shaved since they invented the razor. In the middle of his face were two tawny eyes and both of them were spitting fire. If he was a sixteenth under six-foot-three, I'm a Singer midget. He weighed about two-twenty and made Charles Atlas look like the *Before* in one of his own ads.

I snapped; "I'm Walter Bone. What do you want?" By this date, as you can imagine, I would of snarled at Hedy Lamarr.

He snarled right back. "What d'y'think I want? Hap McAuliffe sent me in. He said you got a baseball team."

I remembered Hap's telegram and stared at him. He was the biggest darn shortstop I've ever seen. "What position do you play?" I asked suspiciously.

"What d'y'need?"

I laughed bitterly. What did I

need! Everything but a water boy. All the same, I couldn't believe Hap had sent this monument in to play shortstop. "What position did Hap see you play?" I asked.

His scowl got blacker and he growled; "Shortstop."

"What do you bat?"

".250."

So far so good, but I still had to see it. I have fanatical faith in Hap McAuliffe, but when a 220-pounder stands up there and tells you he plays shortstop and on top of that he is left-handed, it made you wonder maybe if Hap was beginning to pick them out of a filbert factory.

"Okay," I said reluctantly, "we'll take you out to the park tomorrow morning."

I told the clerk to room him with Sloan, our first baseman.

THE NEXT morning I walked out to the park with Sloan. He didn't say a word for six blocks, but finally he blurted, "Say, what have you got against me, Wishbone? What did I ever do to you?"

"I ain't got nothing against you, Sloan," I said. "What's the beef?"

"Who's that missing link you stuck in my room with me last night?"

"Missing link?" I had forgotten about Slaughter.

"Yeah, missing link. The only place he ain't got hair is his teeth. And who's he mad at, anyways? He asked me what my average was and I told him .231. He grabbed me by the pajamas and spanged me against the bed. 'Laying down on the job?' he says, ominous, 'You're batting .300 starting as of now.'"

I didn't look at Sloan; I didn't dare to. He would of smacked me right in the middle of my grin. I said cautiously: "That was a funny thing to do now, wasn't it?"

"What's so funny about it?"

"Nothing, nothing," I said quickly. Sloan was just about the only friend I had on the club. "I meant screwy."

"Screwy is right," he said, mollified. "You know me, Wishbone; I'm a peaceable guy, but I don't take no guff like that from no busher, so I told him to go to hell, and the next

thing I know he drags me to the bathroom and starts to dunk me. 'Now what're you batting from now on?' he snarls, 'What're you batting from now on?' I'm no milk toast but I ain't no gorilla neither. I'm telling you, that guy's the missing link. He dunks me like a doughnut till I say, 'I'm batting .300, I'm batting .300'. Then he dries me off and puts me to bed and gives me what's maybe a grin. You should die from rigor mortis with a grin like that. I don't open my trap. Now tell me man to man, Wishbone, what're you got against me?"

"It was a mistake," I said quickly. "I'll room him with Bucky Moore from now on."

"And have a death in the family?"

We grinned at one another. He did not like Bucky Moore, too.

There must be something in this telegraphy, because neither Sloan or me said a word about Slaughter being the missing link. It was actually Bucky Moore that gave him the nickname.

Baseball players ain't no hairier than anybody else, but this Slaughter was twice as hairy, and on top of that he didn't believe in underclothes. Bucky Moore gave him one look in the locker room and said; "I'll be a geetus if it ain't the missing link."

Everybody looked, but Bucky was the only one who dared say it right out loud. Luckily, Slaughter was too busy cramming his number thirteens into a pair of size twelve shoes. When he got up to walk, you could see the spikes bothered him. He lifted his legs very high and took long steps as if he was walking on broken gin bottles.

ON THE WAY out to the field I heard him say to a promising rookie, "What's your average, Cap?"

I held my breath.

But the rook hadn't been with us long enough to have a real average. He said seriously; ".350." Thank Gawd, he didn't add that everybody in the south Jersey Strawberry League, where he'd come from, batted .350 or better.

Slaughter looked satisfied, then collared Burns, our left fielder.

"What's your average, Cap?" he growled.

Burns gave him a look, spotted him for a busher and—praise be to Jee-pus!—said; ".500. What's yours?"

Slaughter just patted him on the back, gave him the benevolent sort of look a lion gives a rabbit he isn't going to eat right away, and passed on to the next player.

"What's your average, Cap?" he asked.

It couldn't go on forever. It didn't.

This time he'd gotten Shotton, our third baseman—a worrier. Third basemen get that way; maybe it's the heat in that corner. Shotton had it. ".249," he said, "I can't understand it. I think my spikes are too long. I'm going to have them filed and...."

Slaughter just put his hand on Shotton's shoulder and Shotton seemed to wilt under it. He squirmed and turned white. Slaughter said grimly: "From now on you're batting .300, Cap. Understand?"

Shotton just nodded, and when Slaughter took his hand away, he scuttled into the crowd and hid behind Bucky Moore, looking fearfully over his shoulder.

I took the situation in hand before it went too far. I didn't get it. Here the guy wasn't even on the club, and already he was acting like a stockholder. I hooked my arm through his and said curiously;

"You're showing a lot of interest in the boys, Slaughter."

"That soldiering bunch of bums," he said heavily, "I'll show them."

"But *I'm* managing the club, Slaughter."

"Okay. You manage them—but I'll show them."

There was something in back of his voice that I couldn't argue with—a kind of implacability, a remorseless drive, a grim determination that nothing was going to stop. I was glad to have a friend, mind you—but it was like making friends with a hungry boa constrictor. When he was finished constricting everybody else, he might start on you.

I felt very uneasy.



Chapter
Two

WHEN we got out to the field, I put him in the gap as shortstop, which earned me an eyeful of jeering glances from Bucky Moore, who knew better. I knew better, too, but I had Hap McAuliffe's word that Slaughter was a shortstop, so I had to try it.

It was criminal. A Boy Scout could have lighted a fire under him with a bow and arrow before he got started. Shotton hit an easy grounder ten feet to his left and all he did was lift one foot and look around for a place to put it down again. Another one came straight at him and he jumped out of the way.

"What's the matter?" I called out to him.

"I don't like this position," he said, looking mad.

I moved him over to second. Bucky Moore pegged one down to him on a line from the plate and he took it six feet behind the base, and even then acted as if his hands hurt. He still looked mad.

I moved him over to first. Sloan gave me a look and said stiffly, "Benedict Arnold!"

He should complain! So far he'd been acting as if his foot was glued to the bag.

But Sloan was a regular Lou Gehrig compared to Link Slaughter. He didn't have to field no batted balls, but he'd take the thrown ones off the bag, then try to stab it with his foot. Even Sloan knew better than that. The worst base runner in the world could stretch a scratch hit into a two bagger by the time Slaughter got his big foot on that bag, because he was never no closer than six feet, and he never did move very fast. Even now.

Just for the laughs—and there were few enough of those on the Chiefs—I was thinking of trying him out in the field, but the plate was

closer, so I called him in for batting practice.

He grabbed up a bat as if he wanted to wring its neck and strode to the plate, scowling. He was madder than ever. Hogan was on the mound, and Hogan was pretty good. For the Chiefs, he was wonderful, but, generally speaking, he was pretty good. He had a ball that could break like glass, and a teaser that took forever to reach the plate. Hogan tossed him in a teaser.

Slaughter braided his legs missing it. Hogan's grin was so wide, I thought the top of his head would come unhinged. He tossed in another teaser. Link wrapped his fingers around the bat, pulled it back over his shoulder, gathered himself and whammed it over third so hard that if Shotton had ever gotten a glove on it, his fingers would have fallen off.

He had solved the teaser, so I signalled Hogan to put something on the next one. It dove in close with a fast break. Slaughter choked his bat and whammed it over first. The next one cost us a ball over the centerfield flagpole.

"Give him a fast one." I yelled at Hogan.

Hogan took the full spread on this, and when he unwound I could practically hear the smack as it burned into Moore's big mitten. Only it was not a smack that I heard—it was a *crack!* of wood meeting horsehide. The right fielder went back and back until his shoulders were against the barrier, then he looked up and waved a sad farewell as the ball went bouncing and clattering into the bleachers.

I didn't say anything, but I sent Beamis in to toss him a few—then Ross, then Underwood. You have thought he was batting fungoes from the way he spread them all over the park—and not a one of them but wouldn't be good for two bases or better in any league.

He couldn't play baseball, but, brother, he sure could bust the stitches. I walked over to him grinning. If there was anything the Chiefs needed right at that minute, it was somebody who could hit the ball. He could of needed a tank trap to stop a rolling

bunt, but as long as he could paste them, he was my white-haired baby. The closer I came to him, the slower I got and the more my grin melted.

NOW YOU take the ordinary busher. If he manages to get a hit off a big league pitcher first time up, even in practice, you'd think he was wearing an inner tube the way his chest comes out. But not Slaughter. He stood there glowering at Underwood—who isn't bad—and from the way his eyes thinned out at the ends, you could see he was madder than ever.

"You call them pitchers?" he snapped at me.

"Maybe you can do better," I snapped right back.

"I never pitched in my life, but I can do better than that."

"Okay," I said, "Go ahead."

For a minute I thought I had him—but he was just reshaping his mouth for another scowl. He threw his bat into the dugout and strode out to the mound. Underwood tried to give him the lend of a glove but he snarled, "Who needs a glove to throw the ball anyways?"

Underwood's a good-natured kid; he just shrugged and walked to the sidelines, grinning. By this time, half the club was lined up between the plate and third to watch the fun.

I hadn't told Bucky Moore to take up a mace, but he had thrown off his armor and was standing there waving a bat, waiting for the first one to come in. There wasn't anybody behind the plate. Bucky was our heaviest hitter, and on top of that, he considered himself king of the team. If anybody was going to show up Link Slaughter, he was the boy.

I don't know why, but from the minute he'd called him the missing link in the locker room, Bucky considered Link his personal victim, his personal property, so to speak.

I could see right away that Slaughter had never thrown from the mound before in his life. He was three feet behind the rubber, looking at the ball as if he wanted to tear it apart with his teeth. I sent Underwood in to show him where to stand.

There was a brief altercation and Underwood came back with his face as red as a sliced tomato.

"Let him break his arm," he said angrily; "nobody talks to me like that." He squatted down on his hunkers and I didn't bother him. It just wouldn't have been smart at that minute.

Slaughter wrapped his big hand around the ball then, all of a sudden, threw it in without even a hint of a windup. If Bucky hadn't dived for the dust, his brains would have been from here to Hoboken. The ball slapped into the netting and stuck there. Sloan tried to pull it out and broke a fingernail; he needed that like he needed leprosy.

Bucky jumped up, maddern a hatful of hornets. "One more of them," he yelled at Slaughter, "and I'll biff you so hard with this bat your uncle 'll be picking splinters out of his butt for the next ten years."

Slaughter just picked up a new ball and growled, "What's your average, Cap?"

Just to be on the safe side, I told Bucky to stand back and send in a rookie named Hanson to catch while Slaughter warmed up. I had all the casualties the Chiefs could stand.

After about twenty or thirty throws, Slaughter got the idea that the ball was supposed to go over the plate in such a way that the catcher could put a glove on it—though for the first ten or fifteen poor Hanson really stretched out like a rubber band trying to get at them.

Underwood whispered to me "That guy can't pitch, Wishbone. What're you trying to do—show him up?"

To tell the truth, I didn't know what I was trying to do. Slaughter had just gotten me sore, and I had sent him in; that was all.

And he wasn't really pitching. He was just throwing them over the plate so Hanson could catch them. A pair of Girl Scouts could have done the same.

Without my telling him, Bucky Moore stepped up to the plate, tapped it with his bat and grinned at Slaughter.

"Okay, Walter Johnson," he said, "Let's go."

LINK RUBBED some dust on his hands, then hid the ball in them. Bucky was watching this time. Slaughter whipped over his arm. I saw Bucky swing—but that was all I saw. I heard a *clunk* then a *whang*—and there were two balls stuck in the netting. Hanson was dancing on one foot, holding his glove against his belly.

Underwood gasped beside me; "What was *that!*"

I couldn't blame Hanson for dancing. It wasn't his glove, and every catcher likes to break in his own so the pocket fits just right. But I could not see how Bucky had whiffed.

But Slaughter instead of grinning the way he should have, just stood there, wide-legged and glaring at Bucky. "Has he got an average?" he demanded.

Bucky's face boiled to the ears and he rapped the plate and said noisily; "Come on, come on, throw it in here, throw it in here!"

Slaughter composed his face to a mere grimace of disgust and picked up another ball. Hanson didn't even try to catch this one, though it was right over the middle—as far as I could see. He just stuck up his glove, pulled it down and ducked.

The bat slipped out of Bucky's hands and went sailing clear out to center field from the force of his swing.

There were now three balls stuck in the netting.

Underwood said, "Whew! Maybe he can't pitch, but he's sure going to tear that netting down before he gets finished!" And Underwood's fast ball wasn't anything to sneeze at, either.

I let Slaughter throw a few more, then called him in before he crippled Hanson or Bucky pulled a ligament trying to hit him—or before Slaughter killed himself throwing without a windup.

I tried him in the field before we went for lunch, but the only thing you could do with him out there was hitch a horse to him. He seemed to admire the long, high flies that came

out, but he got more satisfaction out of watching them bounce against the barrier than catching them.

Every time a long one came out, I heard him call to the left fielder, "What's *his* average? What's *he* bat?"

Honest, you'd of thought he'd bought the Chiefs from the way he was so anxious about the averages. And he practically broke off his teeth every time somebody whiffed.

By that time I knew Hap McAuliffe was crazy. Slaughter had the makings of a pitcher—though who could teach him without getting his neck broke, I didn't know; and he could hit. But he certainly was no shortstop. Above all, he was no shortstop.

I was going to keep him, there was no doubt about that. I needed a pinch hitter—but other than that he was a total loss.

On the way back to the hotel he said to me, "Say, you, why does everybody keep calling me Link? My name's John Slaughter. I was named after a sheriff of Cochise County, Arizona. John, not Link. Why do they keep calling me Link?"

I'd of had no club at all if I'd told him.

"It's like this," I said, thinking fast, "A chain's as weak as it's strongest link. That's why they call you Link."

You'd of thought he'd of been flattered. But not him. He just grunted sourly. "If they spent more time on baseball," he said, "and less on thinking up names for people that ain't named nothing like it, maybe they wouldn't be known as the hitless wonders."

That hit so close to the truth that I couldn't think of an answer for it—and all I could do was cross my fingers and hope nobody, even Bucky Moore, called him the Missing Link to his face.

THAT NIGHT I sent a telegram to Hap McAuliffe. I said,

"What's the name of this best damn little shortstop in the world you just sent me? And who said he was a shortstop?"

Wishbone

The next morning I got back the answer.

"John Slaughter. And who says he isn't?"

Hap McAuliffe

I was too new in the managing business to argue with a deity like Hap McAuliffe, so the only thing I could think of was that there was something I had missed. Or that Slaughter was just being, like Hap had warned me, tempermental.

He was tempermental, all right. And not only that. He was taking charge like a field marshall.

On the club we had a center fielder named O'Grady. All he'd eat for dinner was fish and chips, sprinkled with salt and drowned in vinegar. His nickname was Ulcers. Up till June the five. After that we called him MacFadden.



Chapter
Three

JUNE the five was the date Link Slaughter discovered what he was eating every night. I'd been bothered about O'Grady's indigestible diet before, but not nearly so bothered as Slaughter got.

He kept watching O'Grady's plate and watching it and watching it, and finally he nudged Sloan, who was sitting beside him. "Say," he said, "what is that bog-hopper over there stoking himself with?"

By this time Sloan was wearing a rubber pad down his right side, and he merely looked up and followed Slaughter's pointing fork

"O'Grady," he said mildly. "Fish and chips."

"And what's that gunk he keeps dousing it with?"

"Vinegar."

Slaughter made a noise like "Arrrrrragh!" and stood up. He jabbed at O'Grady with his fork and

said angrily, "Hey, you over there, lame-brains, you with the fish. Yeah, you!" as O'Grady looked up, astonished, "What're you trying to do, sell us out with your belly? We want the pennant, not halitosis. Throw that gunk out the window and eat something that'll do you some good. Who ever told you you were an athalete?"

O'Grady was one of the boys that even Bucky Moore didn't talk to that way. For a minute I admired his restraint. He laid his knife crosswise across his plate and looked around the table. "Teeth are for chewing with," he observed. "Am I right?"

Bucky Moore, always eager for a voter, said quickly, "Right."

"In that case," said O'Grady, who weighed 215, "Guys that swaller them instead of their steak," looking meaningly at Slaughter's plate, "are nuts. Am I right?"

"Right," grinned Bucky Moore.

"In that case," said O'Grady, looking straight at Slaughter, "Why the hell down't you sit down and eat your steak?"

I can't say that Slaughter got mad. He hadn't been anything else since he got on the club. He just looked madder; he grabbed up his plate, steak and all, and rounded the table.

I yelled, "Cut it out!" but I might as well of been talking to a pair of locomotives.

O'Grady jumped up and the first thing I knew, Slaughter's plate went flying across the room. That was too bad. O'Grady gave it a back-hand that sent it flying right out to the bay window that fronted Main Street. It was too bad. If O'Grady hadn't been so impetuous, he wouldn't of been dragged the length of the room and his face shoved in the steak that lay in a corner together with a tortoiseshell cat with four kittens and a well masticated cigar butt.

"Now, eat it," Slaughter grated, "and remember that I'm doing it for your own good and the good of the team. Eat it!"

O'Grady ate it.

For the record, let me say that it was the last steak O'Grady ever ate. After that he ate spinach, potatoes, snap beans, peas, squash, corn (rare-

ly), carrots and brussels sprouts. The nearest he ever came to fish and chips again was the day we went through Ocean City without a stop and saw the Atlantic in the distance. That's why we called him MacFadden.

Yeah, O'Grady. Vince O'Grady, the boy that batted .379 and covered his field like dandelions. Maybe it was the change of diet that done it, but he lost twenty pounds and, next to Link Slaughter's, his voice was the loudest when it came to the; "Come on, snap it up! Get on your toes! Come on! Come on!"

See what I mean?

And not only that, it cut down the Bucky Moore faction. I now had Slaughter, Sloan, Underwood, the pitcher, and O'Grady on my side.

I didn't know what Link Slaughter's angle was, but he charged into the Chiefs like a bull into a regiment of treading. Believe me, I was grateful for his strength. I wanted to keep that managership, and Bucky was doing his damndest to butt me out of it.

But . . .

The way Link Slaughter was going at it meant only one thing . . . trouble

I WAS THERE the morning Link came down to breakfast and found a coconut on his plate. I knew what it meant and who was behind it—Bucky Moore. And it meant—here's the food for you, you big ape.

Slaughter stared at it, mad as usual, and demanded; "What creep gimme this?"

Nobody said a word. He glowered at me.

"What's it suppose to be, Wish-bone?"

"It's a coconut," I said, "and if you ask me . . ."

I didn't bother finishing, because right there the joke backfired.

"A coconut!" he said, his eyes lighting up for the first time, "And all wrapped up in the original package. Cap, do I love coconuts!"

He chopped a "V" with his knife, wedged in his fingers, put it against his chest and pulled it open with a rending sound like a wolf chewing a

sheep. He took out the nut, opened the eyes and drank off the milk, smacking his lips.

"Cap!" he said.

He put the nut in his lap and crushed it with one blow of his fist. Generously, he passed the pieces around.

"But chew it good," he said seriously, "or you'll get a bellyache. We gotta think of that old pennant. The Chiefs are taking it this year."

From anyone else that would have been the old rah-rah maiarkey, but Slaughter meant it; he meant it with every grim bend of his eyebrows, with the black depth of his frown, with the bond-hard gleam of his snarl. He wanted that pennant. It was beginning to look like a personal fight between him and the rest of the Coastal League. He meant to have that pennant, and he was going to have it if he had to fight to the last Chief.

THERE WERE few of us who could talk to him. I couldn't, and I admit it. The only snarling response I could get out of him was, "You manage 'em—but I'll show 'em!"

It was not a boast, it was a threat.

But Sloan, for some odd reason, could talk to him. Sloan was young, but he had a spray of gray over his ears. Maybe that's what did it. Anyway, Sloan could talk to him. So could O'Grady—after the steak episode. But all they talked about was vegetables. And Underwood could talk to him. Underwood was older than Sloan, but he still looked as if he had yet to buy his first razor. Link Slaughter took a paternal interest in Underwood, and slyly Underwood began to show him how to pitch

And Underwood was really cutting his own throat. He was the worst of our string of pitchers; he just didn't have the steam. He only weighed a hundred and sixty, and if there was anybody's place Slaughter would take, it was Underwood's. But, in an off-hand way—there wasn't any other way with a madman like Slaughter—Underwood was out there every day, showing him the finer and finer points of the pitcher's trade.

But what a pupil he had!

I'm not claiming any credit that's not due me. I didn't discover Link Slaughter as a pitcher; Underwood did. I just thought of Slaughter as a slugger. But that's what goes to make up a team—it's individual parts working together.

Underwood is now the best coach the Chiefs—or anybody else—have, and I claim that discovery.

ALL THIS emphasis I've been putting on Link Slaughter might lead you to think I wasn't having any other trouble. I was. We still weren't a team—and Bucky Moore was right in there, bucking me every step of the way.

We took the long swing up from the South, playing our exhibition games from city to city, getting ready for the opener in Newark. When we hit Charlestown I was ready to take the boat and row back to Florida. Except for Link Slaughter, we were the Hitless Wonders; one man—a raging lion though he might be—cannot win a baseball game. And he was only a pinch hitter at that time.

The Florida Seminoles took us 5-0.

The Georgia Peaches took us 7-3.

The South Carolina Confederates—not in uniform—took us more modestly 2-1.

We took the Virginia Signers-Of-The-Declaration-Of-Independence at 25-0—only to discover later that the team we'd actually been playing had been drafted from the Richmond Reform School because they had no other...and that the only reason they'd thrown the game was on account of they were protesting against having okra in their coffee.

None of this did my egg-o any good, or whatever you want to call it. As a manager I was beginning to flop like an unbuttressed bosom, and you don't get many chances in this business. Either I came good this time, or I never came good.

It was Bucky Moore I had to fight.

Without telling him why, I cautiously wired Hap McAuliffe to look around for another catcher for me. Not that I was going to can Bucky Moore; that was the last thing in my

mind. He was a darned good catcher and smart, and he led the team in batting, but consciously or not, he was sabotaging the team.

Take, for instance, our game with the Fredericksburg Foxes. That was a nice game, the first one in which it looked as if the Chiefs were finally beginning to shape up as a team. Beams was working the mound for the Chiefs, and working it good. His curveball came in like a dog leg and had those Foxes biting the air with their clubs, and his fast one threw off sparks. He had those Foxes right at his sensitive fingertips.

Sloan had pulled his foot out of the mudhole and was playing first as if he had invented it; O'Grady ranged center field like an eagle after a duck and you couldn't have gotten through him with a court order; and in the hot corner, Shotton was picking them out of the air, out of the grass roots and just generally picking them off in mid-season form. In fact, it would have been easier for a safe cracker to go through Fort Knox than it would have been for a ball to get through our infield.

Bucky Moore got four for four, Sloan got three for four, and O'Grady would have had four for four only it had been his tough luck that I had to call on him twice for sacrifices.

What a ball team—for six innings.

IN THE sixth we had a man on first and second, one out and Beams at bat. Beams was at the tail end of the batting order, so I signalled him to lay down a bunt on the first baseline. Bucky Moore would be the next man up, and even if they tossed Beams out, we'd still have a man on second and third and a good chance of scoring. Beams had scratched out a meager one for four, and I couldn't trust him; I signalled him to bunt.

He stood in close with his bat choked and watched two teasers wobbled wide for called balls, then the third came in belt-high—the kind of ball you can do practically anything with. He could have laid that ball on a dime—but instead of that, he took a cut at it, ducked his head and sprinted for first. He could have saved him-

self the exercise. Never a strong hitter, he sent out a particularly feeble grounder that ran straight to the shortstop as if he'd called it by name. Short flipped it to third, who snapped it back to second for the double play that retired the side—our side.

The game didn't mean anything and we weren't in any danger of losing it at that point, but I was boiling mad. I had signalled for a bunt and he had deliberately ignored it.

Before he could start for the mound, I walked out to him and said very quietly, "Why didn't you bunt like I signalled?"

"That wasn't no bunt you signalled, Wishbone. You signalled me to lay into it." But his eyes flickered and I knew he was lying.

Just to spread it on a little thicker, Burns, our left fielder, chimed in, "Sure, you told him to lay into it. You must of got your signals mixed, Wishbone." He was another of the Bucky Moore faction.

"See?" said Beamis, grinning.

That grin touched it off. I was boiling mad anyway. "I don't get my signals mixed, Beamis," I snapped, "so that little mistake'll cost you fifty."

His face got ugly. "Now you wait a minute, big shot," he started.

He didn't get no further than that. Slaughter had been right behind me, taking it all in. He brushed me aside and took Beamis' uniform in his big fist and jerked him close.

"What does it mean," he said dangerously, "when Wishbone pulls his right ear?"

Beamis saw the red in his eye and stammered, "B-bunt."

"Spell it," snarled Slaughter.

Beamis got red, then white—but he spelled it. B-u-n-t.

"Now gimme the definition of a bunt. I wanna make sure it wasn't just ignorance before I bust you in the snoot. I was sitting right beside Wishbone and I saw him pull his right ear and you were looking straight at him."

"Is—is that what he done?" Beamis faltered, "I thought he brushed off his left knee."

I thought Slaughter was going to

take a poke at him right then and there, and I grabbed his arm.

"That's enough," I said sternly. "Behave yourself or I'll fine you fifty, too."

Slaughter gave Beamis a shove that sent him staggering half way to the mound, then he turned on me. "And I got my eye on you, too, Wishbone," he growled; "I'm gonna change that name of your's from Wishbone to Backbone. You're gonna *manage* this team before I get finished with you. We're taking the pennant this year, see? We're taking the pennant if I have to work on these longhorns with a meat axe."

"You're fifty in the red," I snapped, "Keep it up and I'll make it a hundred."

He told me what to do with my hundred and stalked for the dugout. "That's a hundred," I called after him.

AS I TURNED, I saw Bucky Moore grinning just as he slipped on his mask. I stopped myself short just as I was going to throw a fifty at him, too. That would be playing right into his hands, and give him just one more boost in his little game of locker room politics. The more dissension he could spread, the worse it would be for me, and I wasn't going to make him a martyr for fifty bucks.

Well—that was the ball game.

Beamis blew up and gave away four runs before I pulled him and sent Underwood to pick up the pieces. They took us 4-3. I was heart-sick.

There are managers who make the grade by being tough—but I'm just an ordinary guy with good baseball sense, and the rest of them were ordinary guys, too. Instead of being top-notch plumbers or carpenters, they played top-notch ball—or had the ability to, or they wouldn't have been on the Chiefs. It was my job to get them to pull together—and I didn't want to do it by throwing fines around. I could have done it that way, and I would have gotten results; but I wanted them to work with me because they wanted to—not because they were scared of me.

All I had to do, I know, was get rid

of Bucky Moore—but I didn't want to do that. He was a helluva good catcher and once he got over his grouch, he'd be the spark plug of the team.

I was playing a little politics myself. My politics was Link Slaughter. Sooner or later he and Bucky Moore were going to tangle—but they were not going to tangle until I picked the time. That was my politics.



Chapter
Four

THAT night I got an answer to the telegram I had sent to Hap McAuliffe, asking him to dig out a spare catcher for me, but the answer wasn't from Hap. It came from the head nurse of a hospital in Ohio. Hap had been in a plane crash and among a miscellany like busted ribs, he had a fractured skull. The crisis was past, but he was on a diet of peace and quiet and the doctor had forbidden any communication with him.

I felt very subdued when I walked into dinner that night. I liked Hap McAuliffe, and all I could do was wire him a roomful of fruit and flowers. I had to stay with the team, but I knew he'd understand. It still didn't help.

We had a little excitement going into the dining room that night. I swear Link Slaughter had ears in the back of his head. Burns, the left fielder was grumbling to Lingg, our shortstop, about the fine I had slapped on Beamis that afternoon. Slaughter was at the head of the procession, but before you could say "Strike one", he was in front of Burns with Burns' shirt gathered in his big mitt.

"I take those remarks personal, friend," he said angrily; "I saw Wishbone call that play and Beamis was wrong. I like to get things settled right. What's your beef?"

Burns said; "Take your hands off me, busher."

Slaughter let go of his shirtfront,

but stood in front of Burns with his hands on his hips and a hungry grin on his face. "You're one of the boys I've had my eye on, Burns," he said softly; "you're one of the boys that don't care if we take the pennant this year or not. Suppose we go outside and talk this over. This is a pennant year for the Chiefs and I'd sure like for you to see it my way."

They went outside. I pretended not to see. Fifteen minutes later Slaughter returned with a mouse under his right eye, but otherwise hale and hungry. Burns never did show up for dinner.

Beamis was there. He ate three bowls of soup. Anything else with those doughnut lips of his would have been impossible. He looked like a Ubangi. He had some adhesive tape stuck on various portions of his face and he used his left hand very gingerly. I didn't see any of that, either. But I did notice that he sat with Sloan and Underwood and very pointedly avoided any conversation with Bucky Moore.

Score another one for our side. Politics, politics.

THE FOLLOWING week we played the Baltimore Hawks and took them 5-0. Beamis pitched that game, and a beautiful job it was. The Hawks were tops in the Boll Weevil League and, though not in the Chiefs' class, they were nothing to sneeze off either. Beamis didn't give a thing away.

For some reason, Shotton at third base and Lingg at shortstop had seen the light and settled down to the brand of ball that would have been tops in any league. Burns played left field as if he were defending his hearth and home. He climbed half way up the fence to snare what should have been an easy double with one hand.

Going into the ninth, we had one precarious run, too slim a margin for my peace of mind. Bucky Moore singled; Sloan scratched out another single. O'Grady whiffed and Burns nearly broke his legs trying, but he went down for our second out. They walked Lingg, who was an incalcula-

ble batter, and Shotten, always weak at the plate, was the next in line.

Up till this time I had never really used Slaughter in the clutch, so nobody knew what he could do. I sent him in in Shotton's place. He had an awkward stance at the plate—his left foot advance, his right crosswise behind it, his bat immobile on his shoulder. I could see that Lee, working the mound for the Hawks, was puzzled. Slaughter was standing up straight, so Lee sizzled in a low one. Link took the very first pitch. He leaped into it and out in center the fielder shaded his eyes with his hand so he could get a better view of it going over the flagpole. Slaughter trotted, scowling, around the bases.

This habitual scowl of his was getting on my nerves, and when he came back to the dugout, I snapped at him; "Don't you smile, even when you hit a homer?"

"Why should I have to get up there and hit a homer?" he growled. "What's the matter with Shotton? And why did Burns and O'Grady whiff? If they had their minds on how the ball was going to cross the plate instead of how that blonde in the stands was going to cross her legs, maybe they'd of hit that old apple. I'm gonna have a little talk with them birds."

"Whoa, whoa," I soothed him, "even the best of them whiff sometimes."

"Sure, but who ever took the pennant with a whiff?"

I'm telling you, that pennant was an obsession with him.

AFTER THE game, Sloan very mysteriously invited me down the street for a chocolate malted. "Wishbone," he said, looking worried, "there's something very funny about that guy Link Slaughter."

"Outside of everything?" I said.

"More than that," he dropped his voice. "I found something."

Sloan was rooming with Slaughter now. Sloan was now good hit, good field, and Slaughter had given him his dour approval.

We took a booth at the back of the milk bar and, glancing back over his

shoulder, Sloan reached into his wallet and carefully took out a letter. He shook his head once and passed it across the table to me. "I don't know what to make of it," he confessed. "See what you think."

It was written in a very shaky hand.

Dear Jerry:

I am very much suprised to hear you are playing basboll with those Chiffs. You jump around so I can't keep tract of you. What is a penant? But whatever it is, I hop you get it, becus you seem to want it so. I didn't no you play basboll. Thank you very much for the flours as I no Johnny would appreciate it too. Be a good boy and rite to your second mother as offen as you can. All my love.

Mom No. 2

"I found that," Sloan said tightly, "on the floor after Link went down for lunch. What does it mean, Wishbone?"

I grimaced to hide my bewilderment. Jerry? Who was Jerry? Slaughter's name wasn't Jerry, yet this letter was obviously addressed to him. That talk about the pennant proved that. He was Jerry, all right. But if he was Jerry, he certainly was not John Slaughter. Who the hell was he?

"The envelope," I said; "did you find the envelope, Sloan?"

He shook his head. "That's all I found. I don't get it, Wishbone. But this guy ain't Slaughter. Slaughter was supposed to be a shortstop, and this guy never played shortstop in his life. In fact, Wishbone," he looked suddenly surprised, as if the thought had just struck him, "I don't think this guy ever even played baseball."

I went back over Slaughter's antics since he had come to the club—the way he had handled the ball, the way he stood at the plate, the way he had not even seemed to know where the rubber was that first day when he pitched to Bucky Moore. Of course he had never played baseball before.

He just didn't know his way around. It was as clear as a crystal ball.

Of course he'd never played baseball before. He was a natural hitter, but that was all. There wasn't a position he really knew anything about.

I stared at Sloan and he stared back at me.

Who the hell was this guy who called himself John Slaughter.

DOCTOR'S orders or no doctor's orders, I sent a telegram to Hap McAuliffe the minute we got out of that milk bar. I marked it high priority, urgent and everything else, and paid extra to have Western Union put it in a red envelope when they delivered it. I wanted to know.

Dear Hap:

Describe Slaughter shortstop. Think we have imposter. Did you eat the bananas? Sending pomegranates and mangoes. Urgent. Love and kisses.

Wishbone

That head doctor in that hospital must have been a baseball fan, for I got an answer in six hours, signed by the doctor.

Mr. Wishbone:

Mr. McAuliffe says this Slaughter is five feet eight, weighs 172, red hair, blue eyes. He also says what the (censored by Western Union) are pomegranates and mangoes? Luck to the Chiefs.

Dr. William S. McKinley

So there I was. I had confirmation, but I wasn't any better off than I was before. Now we knew Slaughter was not Slaughter—but it didn't solve anything. I pledged Sloan to secrecy and set out to do a little digging.

I found Link in the writing room with a little notebook in his hand. He had his lower lip between his teeth and he was jotting down figures with the stub of a worn out pencil. He hid it quickly when I walked up and sat down on the leprous sofa beside him.

"Figuring something, Link?" I said pleasantly.

"Beat it," he growled. "Go man-

age your team."

"What were you figuring?"

"Drop dead."

"Batting averages?" I asked shrewdly.

"Beat it. Go throw rocks at your mother's grave."

"What was it, Link?" I looked straight into his glowering eyes. "Did it have something to do with Johnny?" I asked.

His face drained as white as a broken thermometer. For a minute I thought I was going to get a faceful of fist, but he just sat there, holding himself in. "Beat it," he said thickly; "beat it while you can still breathe through your nose."

"Why are you so hot after the pennant for the Chiefs, Link?"

His fists, on his thighs, turned veal-white from the muscle he poured into clenching them. He started to swear. I've heard hard-bitten catchers, like Bucky Moore, swear when they dropped a third strike and their man got to first before they could scoop it up. But it was never anything like this. Every word that came out was charred and burnt as if it had been doused in acid. And the funny part of it was, I had the feeling he wasn't swearing at me. He wasn't swearing at me at all!

His high, savage, leonine face looked like a death's head when he finished. He lunged out of the sofa and strode across the room, blindly, furiously, like a man going to meet his deadliest enemy. But he was all alone. There was no one he was going to meet.

Except himself.



Chapter Five

THE week before we opened in Trenton for our first circuit game, we played the Jersey City Owls. After my little conversation with Slaughter in the writing room of that hotel, he'd become so savage that nobody dared cross him or even talk to

him, even Underwood, that he seemed to have kind of adopted on account of Underwood looked so young.

Ross, a nice left-handed twirler, had fallen down in the bathtub and sprained his wrist, so he wasn't any good to us in that game. Underwood had gotten worse and worse; his arm just couldn't stand the big league pace. Hogan had snuck off and gotten himself a bellyache on hot dogs and pop at Coney Island, and as far as he was concerned we could of handed the Owls a fungo bat and a ball and told them to hit it where they wanted. All we had left was Beamis—which should have been enough.

With only a few exceptions—like Bucky Moore behind the plate, Haroldson at second and Barger in right field—the Chiefs clicked along like a well-oiled machine. You couldn't ignore those strategic weak spots, but on the whole there was a lot of good ball played.

A fire engine couldn't have gotten through Sloan at first, Lingg at short and Shotton at third. Burns and O'Grady had their fields covered like a cemetery lawn, and Beamis was throwing the horsehide like he'd stitched it with his own loving fingers.

Then it had to go and happen.

We had a nice, comfortable 3-0 lead until the seventh. Mitchell the Owls' lead-off man, was first to bat. He took a lucky cut at a wide one and sent it straight at Beamis. Beamis stuck out the bare skin of his right hand and stopped it. It trickled toward the plate, but he still had plenty of time. He scooped it up—and flang it clear over Sloan's head into the stand!

He walked the next man, and the third boy up dug into his first pitched ball for a double, scoring twice for the Owls. The fourth batter calmly put one over Sloan's head on a line and went into second standing up while another run crossed the plate.

Underwood, beside me on the bench, whispered, "Wishbone, he hurt his hand on Mitchell's drive."

"Warm up," I said, "Quick!"

"Who're you kidding?" he said, "I can't pitch to the Epworth League

and you know it. Put Link Slaughter in."

"And be booked for murder?" I snapped. "Warm up."

"Listen to me, Wishbone," he said urgently. "I've been coaching him. He can pitch, honest he can. Fine me fifty if he bobbles, but put him in."

I bit my lip. I didn't believe it. I'd seen Slaughter throw them, and all he had was a fast ball. It was fast, but nothing you couldn't solve after three throws. You had to mix them up.

"Okay," I said reluctantly. I gestured to Slaughter down the bench. "Warm up," I said.

"I don't have to warm up," he said disagreeably. "Why waste time? That poor guy out there is busting his heart. Do you want it served on a platter? Take him out."

SLAUGHTER went in for Beamis. I saw Beamis' hand when he came in. It was swollen as big as an elephant's kidney. How he managed to hold the ball at all was a mystery to me.

Slaughter had two men on base, no outs and a ball game to save. You'd of thought a guy in that spot would of been nervous. It would of made him human if he was—but not Slaughter. He just glared at the next batter as if he wanted to take him apart, bone by bone. He was just somebody who stood in Slaughter's way in his drive for the pennant—though the pennant wasn't really involved in this game.

He must have looked like a stupe standing there, because suddenly he turned and snapped the ball to Sloan on first, catching his boy three feet off the bag for the first out. I've never seen a prettier throw. It flowed like water. After that the man on second stayed on the bag as if he'd sprouted out of it.

Bucky Moore signalled for a slow ball. I saw him do it. The boy at the plate was the patient type and that was just the kind of ball he'd rip to pieces. Slaughter shook his head, scowling. Bucky gave him another signal and his scowl deepened. He started toward the plate. The ump

yelled at him and Bucky gave another signal; this time he liked it.

He went back to the mound, took a full wind-up—the man on second did not wriggle a finger—and smoked one over chest-high for a called strike. He burned in two more, and that surprised Owl went down swinging at balls that were half way back to Slaughter before he finished his swing. The next batter went down on four pitched balls.

I began to see now a little of what had been going on. Bucky, shrewd veteran that he was, had been calling them on the knife edge. Not exactly wrong, but not exactly right—but he had been giving the batter a chance all along. He'd never called before for a ball that could be murdered—but for a ball that had a chance of being hit. That's a hard thing to see from the bench, believe it or not. If a batter likes them knee-high, Bucky would call for one waist-high with maybe a break. On the border. Understand? Nothing you could put your finger on.

But he had never really shown his hand until he called for that slow ball. He tipped his hand to me, and to Slaughter.

I was too elated over my new pitcher to think much about it. New zip went into the team and we piled up three more runs in the eighth, two in the ninth, and that was the ball game, as the saying goes.

It wasn't the kind of baseball that wins pennants, but I still had hopes of ending up in the first division.

Then...

Hogan's bellyache turned into appendicitis; the Doc found three busted bones in Beamis' hand and Ross's sprained wrist turned out not to be a sprained wrist at all but a pulled tendon.

Shotton, our crackerjack hot corner guardian, got himself in an altercation with person or persons unknown. He was still able to play, but three busted ribs didn't help his speed any. Bucky Moore turned up with skinned knuckles, which may or may not have had anything to do with it. And O'Grady had to pick this minute to

fall from grace. He snuck off and filled himself with fish and chips, and one of the fishes had been a little deader than usual. Is to remain the right spelling? O'Grady didn't have to spell it—he had it.

And were the papers having a good time with us. You know how reporters are, especially with a made-to-order goat like the Chiefs. Bill Tatum, columnist on the News, started his Bundles-For-The-Chiefs campaign and personally contributed two bits to buy us blankets to keep us warm in that subcellar we were going to spend the season in. Harry Gregg, of the Herald, contributed a hot water bottle, and Sammy See, who wrote the sport column "Seeing Stars" contributed a slightly used package of K-ration.

NO TEAM in the world can take the casualties that were dumped in our laps in less than a week and still have any morale worth speaking of.

The night before our opening game in Trenton, Sloan came to my room in the hotel. He came in without knocking. His face was white and his big hands were visibly shaking.

I said; "For the love of Pete, what is the matter with *you*?" He looked like walking pneumonia.

He shook his head, moistened his lips and after a kind struggle with himself, handed me a telegram.

Regarding request for information John Slaughter. Slaughter dead. Suggest you contact Fayetteville police.

*M. Harris, police chief
Kearny, Arizona*

Sloan sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his hands down his face and shuddered, looking thoroughly miserable. "I got that the day before yesterday, Wishbone," he said dully. "I found another of those letters of Slaughters. It was addressed to Jerry Bassett and it came from Kearny, Arizona. I didn't want to pile any more worry on you, so I wrote to the police. That was the answer. What does it mean, Wishbone?"

The telegram had struck a chill right into the middle of me, particularly that line "suggest you contact Fayetteville police". What the hell *did* it mean? Sloan and I looked bleakly at one another.

"Did...he kill Slaughter?" Sloan whispered. "He's a nut, Wishbone. They ain't never been no ball player so hot after a pennant before. We're all after it, but not the way that guy is. He acts like he'd cut throats to get it. He's a nut. This is right off the elbow, Wishbone—I'm scared of the guy. There's something wrong with a guy who can stay as mad as him as long as him. And who the hell is Jerry Bassett and what did he do with John Slaughter?"

I didn't have time to answer, because the door busted open and Lingg, our shortstop, rushed in wild-eyed. "Wishbone, for the love of Jeepus, come downstairs before they kill one another!"

I jumped as if he'd pointed a gun at me. I was on edge anyway. I said, "What? Who? Where?"

"Downstairs. Bucky Moore and Link Slaughter. Bucky called him a murderer or something, I didn't get it all, and they went for one another in the lobby. We got them apart but it's going to bust loose any minute again. You know Bucky in a fight; he'll kill him if he can."

I looked at Sloan, but he quickly shook his head.

"I didn't show that telegram to *nobody*," he said with emphasis. "I carried it around on me for two days. But...he could've gone through my clothes in the locker room. Bucky seen me get it and seen the way I looked. Maybe he got curious."

We didn't waste any time arguing about it. The lobby was boiling with excited ball players when we got down there—and they all turned to me the minute I stepped out of the elevator. They turned to me the way a bunch of school kids would turn to their teacher in an emergency. It was very gratifying—but I wasn't thinking about that then. I gave the lobby a quick brush with my eyes—and neither Link Slaughter or Bucky Moore were to be seen.

"Where'd they go?" I demanded.

Barger, our right fielder, giggled from pure nerves. He pointed at the door. "Th-they said we could go with them if we wanted to c-commit suicide," he stuttered.

I charged out into the street with Sloan at my heels. Sloan went up the street and I went down. We circled the block; we looked into every empty lot and we even prowled the riverfront. We never did find them. I spent the rest of the night sitting up in the lobby, and when dawn came I had chewed my fingernails to the elbow.

WE WERE still minus a pitcher and a catcher when we went out to the field that peeyem to meet the Trenton Indians in mortal combat for the opening game of the season—and me with half a team and only the flagging Underwood left to pitch. I didn't even have a relief for him.

Maybe you read about that game. From my point of view, it was our most important game of the series. Sports writers picked the later games, but to me that opening game with the Indians was the crisis.

For three innings Underwood pitched his heart out. He didn't have speed; all he had was brains and a every pitch—but you can only drive yourself just so hard and go just so slow ball. I could see him sweat on far. At the end of the third, the Indians had us 3-0. The boys were playing desperately, but the heart was out of them and they were on the raw edge.

We were a pretty glum bunch as we started into the fourth. Sloan was at bat, leading off in place of Bucky Moore. He looked back over his shoulder at me, then I saw his jaw drop. He turned excitedly and gabbled at the plate ump, gestured toward the dugout.

I heard the ump bark; "Get in there and play ball."

Sloan waved violently at me, then pointed toward the locker room. I turned. I swear my heart stopped in mid-beat. Coming toward the dugout, arm-in-arm, were Link Slaughter and

Bucky Moore. Bucky was grinning and Link Slaughter—I keep calling him Link Slaughter—was walking soberly at his side.

I showed them my teeth and snapped; "This is costing you a hundred apiece."

Bucky said quietly, "Okay, Wishbone. I'd of made it sooner...."

Slaughter blurted; "It was my fault. I was on my way back to Arizona, but he made me stay. Put the two hundred on me. He don't deserve no fine."

They each had a mouse under his left eye.

Something had gone on that I did not know about. "We'll talk about the fine later," I said grimly; "but take a look at the scoreboard."

They did—and it was Bucky Moore's eye that fired up. He faced the dugout and, brother, did he give it the rough of his tongue! He left behind him some of the reddest ears I've ever seen. It was Haroldson, the second baseman, who threw it back in his teeth.

"You're a one to talk, Bucky," he said truculently.

Bucky nodded. He looked at me. "Yeah," he said, "I'm a one to talk, but from now on I'm with you, Wishbone. After the season's over, we can talk about who'd be the better manager—after we have the pennant."

Slaughter scowled and said, "Shud-dup!" but there wasn't the old savagery in it. He glowered at Lingg in the batter's box. "Come on, come on," he shouted, "lean into it!"

LINGG WENT down swinging. We went down one, two, three—but it was a different team that took the field in the end of the fourth. Underwood grinned at me and shook his head.

"Me, Wishbone," he said, "I'm finished. I couldn't pitch another inning if you gave me a thousand bucks a ball. Link's your boy."

The rest of it, as they say, is history. With Bucky behind the plate and Link on the mound, the Indians went the remaining six innings without a hit. We didn't start our rally until the seventh—but you probably

read about that. Bucky poled out a long double, Sloan followed him with a single and Link clouted them in. They came up again in the ninth, when we were standing 3-3. Bucky tripled. Sloan went to first on what was to be a sacrifice, but Bucky was held at third. Link slammed out a double—the book will tell you the rest, how we took them 5-3 and went on from there.

Link disappeared right after the game, but Bucky Moore met me outside the park. "I'll buy you a dinner, Wishbone," he said gruffly, "I owe you one, I guess."

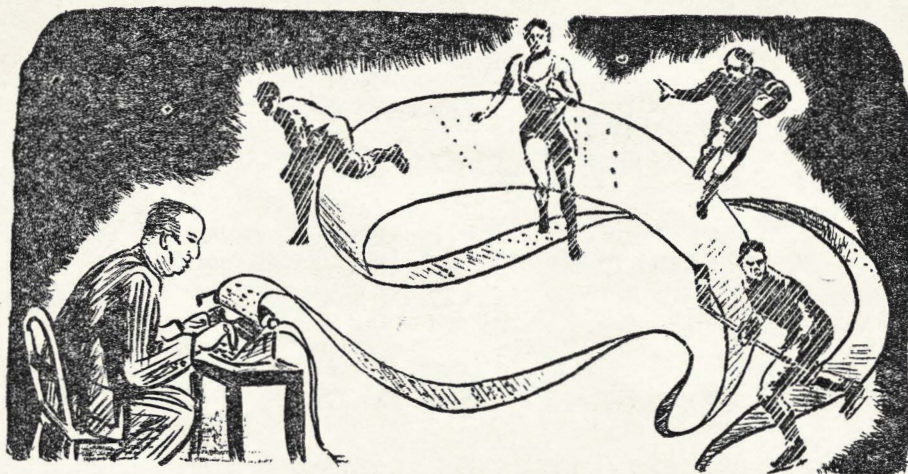
I said, "Boy Scout," but I was grinning.

"No," he said seriously, "not Boy Scout. I'm going to tell you a little story. I went out with Link last night and I was going to beat out his brains if I could. I won't kid you; I was after your hide and I admit it. But this guy Link..." he stopped. "I said I wouldn't tell you," he mumbled, "but I wanna show you what kind of guy he is. He could of beat my brains out, but he didn't want that. All he wanted was for me to play ball in there. Get me? I made him tell me why."

I said slowly, "He killed Johnny Slaughter, didn't he?"

"Like hell he did!" Bucky said hotly. Then apologetically, "Sorry, Wishbone. I didn't mean to bust out like that. But I was all night talking *him* out of that idea and I'm a little ragged. Link was an orphan and he was raised by Mrs. Slaughter, Johnny's maw. Hap McAuliffe picked Johnny out of the Cactus League and Link was driving him to the station to catch the train. They were a little late and Link gave the car the old hypo. A front tire blew and they wrapped around a telegraph pole. Johnny was killed. Link blamed it on himself. Don't ask me why, but he was all busted up and feeling guilty. The only way the big lug could think of to make it up to Johnny was to do the thing he knew Johnny would of wanted, because Johnny was a ball player from his spikes up—and that was to get the pennant for

(Continued On Page 62)



Dope From The Dugout

Facts & Fun From The Sports World

By Wilcey Earle

IT WILL BE QUITE A JOB

Bing Crosby is probably the most sports-minded actor in Hollywood today. Owns several stables of horses right now and at one time actually owned his own race-track. He very often takes time out from his pictures to see the Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and San Francisco baseball teams in action.

When the football and basketball seasons are with us, invariably you will find Bing in a front-row seat cheering the gladiators on in their efforts. At the American Legion fights in Hollywood, Bing and his pal, Bob Hope, are inveterate ring-siders.

But what we really started out to talk about was Bing Crosby and his race horse. He takes an awful twitting about the way his gee-gees run, but accepts the kidding like the regular fellow he is. He even kids about his glue-factory prospects himself.

One day, a chum asked how his fugitive from a merry-go-round made out in a certain event. "Well, I'll tell you," laughed Bing "just as soon as the Bureau of Missing Persons locates the horse and jockey!"

HE WANTED THE TRUTH

It happened in Mike Jacobs' office recently. A fighter with a bit of conceit in his make-up (who shall remain nameless for obvious reasons) approached us and said "Wilcey, you get around the fight clubs quite a bit. What do the fans think of my ability?"

"Well," we replied, "one fan we asked thought you were good. Another thought you were lousy."

"Is that so?" he pressed. "What do you think of me?"

Getting a running start to the elevator, we shouted back over our shoulder, "We agreed with them both, you're good and lousy!"

PAGING THE EXPERT

One of the most interesting phases of sport is the puzzler that is concocted by someone and then passed along to the expert to see if he can unravel it. For instance, here's a baseball puzzler that stumped us. Perhaps you can answer it. Take a fling and see, vis. How can a side be retired on two pitched balls? (If you can't figure it out, the answer is on page 62.)

IT'S NOT SURPRISING

Then there is the tale of the two gamblers who died and went to heaven and hell, respectively.

The fellow in heaven called up the fellow in hell and the following conversation ensued: "How you doin' down there?"

"Mighty fine, havin' a great time down here. All day long, we play roulette, backgammon, fan-tan, pin-ochle, poker, and we shoot crap. *ALL THIS and SEVEN TOO*. How you doin' up there?"

"Not so good, not so good. We're kept busy up here all day. We gotta shine the moon, brighten the stars and sweep the clouds.

"Well, how come you're kept so busy up there?"

"We ain't got enough help up here!"

IT WON'T BE LONG NOW

Visited a chum of ours in the lighthweight class the other day who has recently scored a string of sensational knockouts. In so doing, however, he absorbed a lot of knocks on the noodle which addled his gray matter a bit.

When we saw him, he had three letters in his hand which he kept putting on and off the scale continuously.

"What are you doing?" we asked.

"Oh, he replied, "I'm weighing off-fers from fight promoters!"

JUST LIKE A KID

Frank Leahy, former Notre Dame mentor, tells this joke on himself: One day, while talking to his father-in-law, his five-year-old son walked into the room.

"Hey, Granpa," said the kid. "You must be a pretty good football player because Pop said we could buy a new house when you kick off!"

WELL SAID

The other night, in Toots Shor's, a group of prominent horsehide devotees were discussing "Lippy" Leo Durocher, widely known for his sartorial splendor as "Baseball's Well-Dressed Man."

A member of the group then told of an argument Leo had had with Umpire Ziggy Sears a couple of years ago at Ebbets Field, in which Durocher, in no uncertain terms, told off the arbiter and punctuated his remarks with a series of forceful gestures.

Sears kept his dignity and refused to answer.

"Yes, indeed," the chap was talking, said, "that afternoon, Durocher was not only Baseball's Well-Dressed Man, he was Baseball's Well-Stressed Man!"

SO HE DID

Recently, a couple of prize-fighters who thought they were great chucks as runners, ran a mile race in Central Park, New York City. It was agreed that the loser would pay for the winner's lunch.

Right after the race, we approached the winner and asked him if he had a statement for the press. "Sure," he huffed and puffed, "just tell your readers (if you have any) that I beat him to the lunch."

NO DOUBT

Rollie Hemsley, the reformed baseball catcher, whose bouts with John

Barleycorn rated headline space on many of the country's sports pages, now lectures on the evils of whiskey every opportunity he gets. Probably the result of walking into barrooms on many occasions optimistically and walked out misty-optically.

LUNCHEON IS SERVED

Saw a piece in the paper the other day about Ernie Vigh, the terrific New York belter, which set us to reminiscing about him.

It seemed that right after Ernie lost a close duke to Billy Soose in a scrap which your reporter and most fans thought he won decisively, a friend soothed Vigh's justly ruffled feelings with the admonition. "Don't eat your heart out over that bum decision, Ernie."

"It's too late," lamented Vigh. "I have already eaten my heart out and I have started on my liver!"

Answer To Baseball Problem

The first two men pop up the first balls pitched. The third batter, who is right-handed, suddenly switches to the other side of the plate while the pitcher is warming up to throw. The pitcher sees this and holds his pitch. The batter is automatically out for switching his stance.

There you have it, two pitched balls and the side is retired. The answers are always so simple!

THE END



SPIKE THE MAN DOWN

(Continued From Page 56)

the team Johnny was to have played on. Know what I mean?"

All the time he was talking he did not look at me once. He just stared straight ahead as we went striding along.

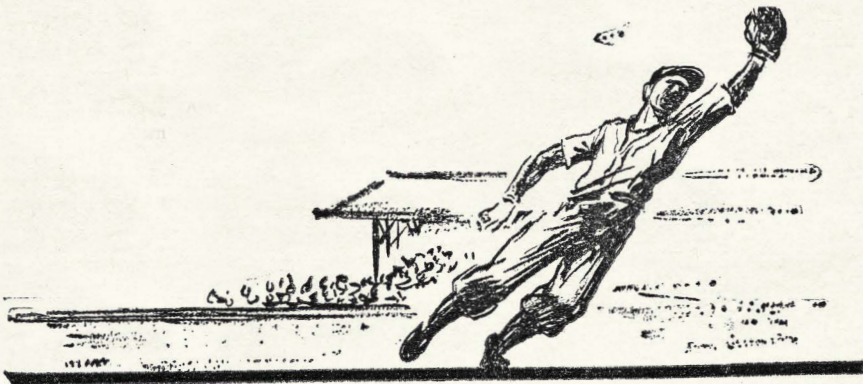
But I knew what he meant. Link Slaughter—I still call him that—was

building a monument to Johnny Slaughter, the pennant for the Chiefs.

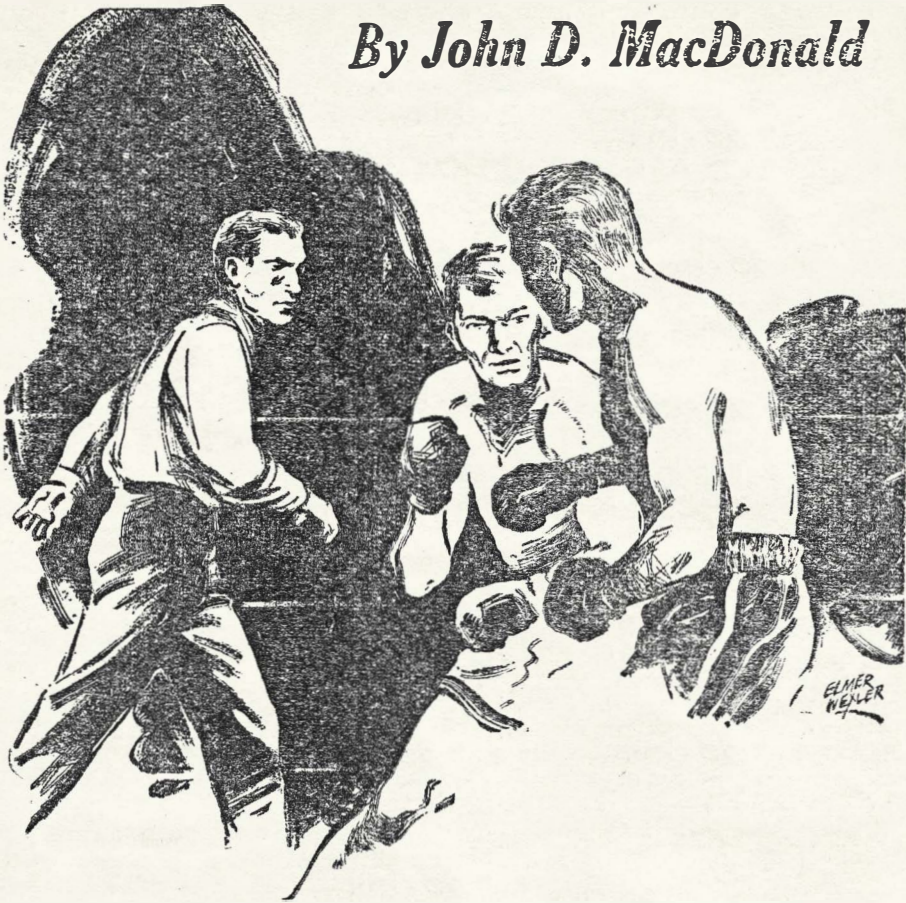
I said fiercely, "We're getting that pennant!"

Bucky Moore clamped his hard jaw. "You're telling me?" he demanded.

THE END



By John D. MacDonald



The Gentle Killer

Danny Watson should have known that there was something wrong with this fighter, Leslie, considering how he had obtained him . . .

WE HAD hacked up the Cleveland purse, the short end of it, and a week later, after bailing out the convertible and paying the back alimony to Myrna, the leech, and catching up on my rent and adding a few necessary numbers to the wardrobe, I was down to a slim fifty bucks; the next bout for the Tailor was set up for three weeks ahead, and there was my other bum, Joe Zamatchi, eating off me while his busted hand knitted.

As a direct consequence, I was giving the Beach the jaunty 'hello' and making like I had an in on the sweepstakes which is standard procedure when you feel the wolf fangs, but usually fools nobody at all, at all. Every time I thought of the fifty bucks it seemed smaller and it seemed like every time I turned around there was fat Barney Gowdy clinging to my lapels and breathing in my face, indirectly advising me of what he had had for lunch. Even though the salami

was in top shape, I was chewing it like sawdust and smiling in pain and wondering when I'd have to listen to Barney Gowdy when, like rubbing the lamp, he slid into the opposite side of the booth and said: "Danny boy, I'm weary of your evasive tactics and it is high time we consulted each other on a proposition which I want to make you out of the goodness of my heart."

I gave him the wealthy smile. "Barney, I've got no time for propositions. Everything is like silk with me, and I don't want to change the dice."

He sighed patiently. Barney Gowdy has been pitching pennies at the cracks in the boxing profession ever since the days of John L. He is somewhat like an obese penguin with extra chins, and it is said that if you come up behind him on the street and say, "Eight to five," he'll say, "Seven to five," and make you take it because he is persuasive in his hedge betting on both sides of any sporting picture.

"Danny," he said, "it is difficult to do you a favor. I like you, Danny; I've always liked you. It is people like you, with an education and all, who elevate the profession. I want to give something away to you and for the last week you have been putting a shoulder in my face and walking off. My feelings are hurt and this is maybe the last time I will show you the attention."

"You're a pest," I said, "and the only way I'll find peace is to let you give me your chiseling proposition so that I can say no. Go ahead."

I THOUGHT his eyes were going to fill with tears. He gulped. "Danny, you have doubtless heard of Spencer Leslie, who, as the coming light-heavy has amassed a string of twenty-one knockouts, three decisions and a draw?"

"Yes. Whitey Burd owns him and Whitey is stupid to change the name. I understand that this Leslie is a good boy."

"You are right, except on one point, Danny. Ten days ago Whitey indulged in a game of chance and felt so happy about his full house that he put his contract with this Leslie in the pot and my four little threes made him very sad indeed. I am now the

owner and manager of said Spencer Leslie and though no one enjoys box-fighting like I do, I have no desire to handle one of the bums. You see my point?"

It baffled me and I nibbled at the last bit of salami while I thought. "Barney, couldn't you sell the contract? Somebody would pay good dough."

"That is the trouble. They would pay good dough and the contract would be recorded and the Department of Internal Revenue would take all the joy out of it. It is not good business. I have had offers, going as high as forty."

"You want to give him to me? I'll take him."

"Not so quick, Danny. There is a bit more detail. I won forty percent of this Spencer Leslie and it is my understanding that you own thirty percent of the Tailor. Now Tailor Rowe has been around many years and he is less valuable than Spencer Leslie."

"That's open to question, Barney. The Tailor is a good boy."

"Let me make my point, Danny Watson. I have a friend who owns a small but profitable business property. This friend is very conservative. He can see a good deal of merit in proven property like Tailor Rowe, but he has little interest in an up and coming young man like Spencer Leslie. You and I know that this Spencer Leslie will be clubbing his way around the circuits long after the Tailor is selling neckties in Dubuque."

"Again you raise a debatable point."

"Be that as it may. I wish to trade my forty cut of Leslie for your thirty cut of Rowe. Then I can trade my cut of Rowe for a forty-nine percent cut of this small and profitable business in which I will be a silent partner, providing O'Dwyer permits it to remain open and in business."

"When does Spencer Leslie fight again?"

"Next week in Toledo. A match with Hymie Bruin who is popular out there and the gate should be around ten with fifty-five for the winner."

I did some mental arithmetic. Conservatively figuring the gate to be

seventy-five hundred rather than ten, and figuring on a loss by Leslie, his end would be thirty-three seventy-five, and my forty cut would be thirteen hundred and fifty.

I looked hard at Barney Gowdy and there was nothing but loving-kindness in his big damp eyes. "Has Leslie broken his leg or something?" I asked.

His underlip quivered. "Danny boy, you wound me. You really do. I wouldn't make this offer to anybody else."

"Nobody else has a hunk of the Tailor."

"You have a small point there. What is the answer?"

"Hold it open for twenty-four hours and give me a chance to talk to this Spencer Leslie and then I will give an answer."

He beamed at me. "You will never regret it, friend. You will always thank Barnard Gowdy for presenting you with this opportunity. Spencer has a room at the Brainard Hotel—515, and I would suggest that you call at about ten tomorrow morning. He gets up early. I will see you here at noon tomorrow in this same booth."

AS USUAL the Tailor took in two double features in the afternoon and I didn't see him until after six. He has a standard schedule. He works out slow and easy all morning, sees movies all afternoon and practises his magic tricks until he goes to bed. He doesn't drink, smoke or stare at women. He is a lean, knobby guy, about thirty-three and we both worry about his legs. He got the name of the Tailor because of his left. It is always out there like a needle. Stitch, stitch, clip, clip. His specialty is turning faces to hamburg and winning on technical kayos. He has no color, no right hand, no bad habits. Just that left like a needle.

I sat on the bed and he stood in front of me and said, "Now look at this, Danny. Here is a handkerchief. See? I take it like this and stuff it down into my other hand, a little bit at a time. Then I wave the other hand over it and... Poof! Gone!"

"Tailor, when you say it is gone I see something run up your sleeve, like

a small flesh-colored mouse. Could it be that it was carrying the handkerchief?"

"Damn it all, Danny. The man said nobody would see it. I must have stood wrong or something. Or maybe the elastic isn't tight enough."

"Tailor, I got a proposition to unload you on Barney Gowdy in return for a forty percent slice of a kid named Spencer Leslie."

Tailor looked mildly interested. "Okay by me, Danny. But I want the same clause in the contract. You know: the handling expenses charged against my end will never in any one year run over eight percent of my gross take."

"Sure. I'll see it goes in. But look, Tailor, aren't you sore at me or anything?"

He looked blank. "Should I be? All I care is I got somebody who gets me fights. I figure I got maybe two more years, maybe three, before I get out. I'll see you around, won't I. Hey, watch this one. See here? I got a coin. A quarter. I hold it tight in my fist and I pass the other hand over it like this..."

I ARRIVED at 515 a few minutes after ten. All the world has a funny look that early in the morning. It smells different, too.

He opened the door when I knocked and I liked the looks of him. He shook hands and that gave me a chance to see that he had thick, square hands with strong bones. Good wrists. He was one of those boys with a small head set close against his shoulders, a big chest, no hips at all and a springy way of walking. Outside of a vague suggestion of a shelf over the left eye and a little knob on one ear, he wasn't marked. He had a snub nose, a nice grin, and cold grey eyes.

"I'm happy to know you, Mr. Watson," he said quietly.

There was a big table in the room and it had books opened on the top of it, a pencil next to an open notebook, a slide rule. He saw where I was looking and said: "When I got out of the army, I got into school and they took six months to toss me out. I couldn't concentrate. I'm learning the hard way."

I sat on the bed. "Very interesting. What sort of stuff are you doing?"

"Mechanical engineering."

"What is it, a hobby?"

"Sort of. With the way the schools are jammed, and with my record of busting out, I haven't got a prayer of getting back in."

We stared at each other. He laughed nervously and said: "Barney told me about this deal of his. I feel like a chorus girl applying for a job."

"You like fighting?"

He frowned. "That's a toughie, Mr. Watson. I hate it until I get into the ring and get a glove in my face. Then the only thing I want to do is drop the other guy; I hate him until I hear that ten count and then he's just another guy."

"That's a good way to be, Spencer. If you haven't got that, you never make much of a fighter. The press boys call it the killer instinct."

He grinned. "That's a harsh word."

"You want to make a career of fighting?"

"No. A man hits his optimum mental efficiency at age forty-five. You can't keep fighting much beyond thirty-two or three; your reactions go bad."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-four."

I added it up in my head. Nine years with a good boy. Maybe champ in another year or two. He seemed as open and honest as the day is long, but there was something about him, some coldness in those grey eyes of his that told me to be on guard.

"You can get fights for me?" he asked.

"Sure. I can get fights. I've spent a few years doing favors for the right people and I can get fights. How many of those knockouts of yours were setups?"

He frowned again. "The first five. Then Whitey found out that in two cases I had put the boys away before they were ready to drop. He tried three level ones and I got a decision in one and knockouts in the other two. From then on I was on my own. It cut expenses and gave me better training. I didn't like the setups; it made me feel ashamed. But Whitey said they were necessary."

"I don't like 'em myself. Once in a while it's okay with a fading bum that you want to ease into a big bout so he can grubstake himself for the future. But it hurts the business in the long run."

"You make sense," he said. "I hope the deal goes through."

THE DEAL did go through. I went out to Toldeo and sat in his corner. In the fifth round Bruin dropped his left shoulder a fraction of an inch too far. Spencer Leslie put a right down the slot and followed it up with a left hook that bounced Bruin off the ropes. As Bruin bounced, his arms limp, Leslie put two meaty rights and a left on the button. Bruin landed face down and they could have counted up to seventeen hundred.

Whitey had made some tentative arrangements for the future and I followed them up. In the swing we got a decision over Bannock in Detroit, Stankiewitz in Chicago, a knockout off Dormer in Memphis and a technical over Hailey in Atlanta. I nearly needed a suitcase to carry the dough in. We came back to New York and the press boys were screaming about my boy. No wonder. Perfect timing, a perfect build and good endurance. I saw my legal eagle and he got Myrna to accept a cash settlement instead of alimony. I bought eight or nine complete outfits, paid my income tax, and put a few hundred in a checking account. All was well with the world.

The next go-round was with Angel Adams in the Garden and it was two weeks away. The only bad habit I had found in my boy was the bug on engineering.

On the second day I ran into Whitey and said "Sure was tough about you losing that boy."

He grinned at me in a nasty way and said, "You think so? Brother you have been lucky, you don't know how lucky. Maybe you haven't heard, but I've got the Tailor. There's a boy I like."

I angled him over against the wall of a building. "What are you driving at, Whitey?"

"Nothing, kid. I just said you'd been lucky as hell. My timing was

off. I should have held him another two months before the switch."

"I thought you lost him."

"Did you? Gowdy made an easy five bills pulling the switch."

"Damn it, Whitey, what's wrong with Leslie?"

"Why don't you ask him, sucker? Or maybe you could try to fix him up to train at Stayman's Gym."

He wouldn't tell me any more. I went to see Ike Stayman and said that I wanted to make arrangements for Spencer Leslie to train there. Ike snickered. "You keep that crazy man the hell away from here." He would not tell me any more.

I went to Leslie and asked him what was up. He said, "I thought you'd heard, Danny. I didn't want to bring it up; I just get a little excited when I get sore."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I sort of lose control of myself."

"Tell me about it."

"I can't Danny. It isn't very clear in my mind. I got sore a couple of times when I was training at Stayman's, and Ike said I couldn't use the gym any more. I guess I hit a couple of the wrong people or something."

THEY CALL him Angel Adams because he is the dirtiest fighter known to man. He makes the referee earn his money. There was a good crowd at the Garden, not packed, but a nice house to add up in your head. In order to get a shot at the champ, we'd have to lick Angel, and then Stick Mobray and then Kid Willows.

We were the final, and Leslie was nice and loose in the dressing room. He got a good hand when we came down the aisle and he bounded in, scuffing his feet in the resin, grinning at the public.

After the words of wisdom in the middle of the ring, where my boy looked like beauty and the beast along beside the swarthy scowling Angel Adams, Leslie came bounding back. The stool had been yanked and the second took the robe. He grabbed the top ropes and it made me feel good to see those long, loose muscles in his shoulder. At the bell, he whirled, ran out and touched gloves with

Angel and started to feel with his left.

Angel stamped on his foot and swung a booming right into the breadbasket. Les managed to get in a high hard left to the head before the clinch. In the clinch, Angel rubbed the laces up across Leslie's nose and gave him a good butt on the cheekbone.

Artie Mosher, the ref, pulled them apart and told Angel to cut it. I saw that Les had turned a little pale.

In the next mixup, they got over near the ropes. Angel grabbed the top rope with his right hand and used the leverage to drive a heavy left into Leslie's throat. In the next clinch Angel spun fast, jamming a hip into Leslie's cup. When Les bent over, Angel chopped him behind the ear and Les went down hard on his face.

The bell sounded just as Les came up to his feet. Angel walked away. Les looked after him for a few seconds, then turned and came back to his corner like a sleepwalker.

I jumped up and, while Joe was working on him, I said; "Don't let him rile you, boy."

"Shut up!" Les snarled. I noticed that the cords of his neck were taut and strained. His face was still white.

Joe jumped down at the whistle and Les went out at the bell. Angel clinched clean the first time, but on the break he looped a high right across that staggered Les.

It happened.

Les roared like a bull and went after Angel with both fists swinging, his legs planted like oak stumps. Angel blocked a few and slipped a few but he couldn't keep out of the way of all of them. The crowd was screaming. A right dropped Angel to his hands and knees. While he was down there, Les leaned over and hooked a left under his chin, lifting him two feet off the canvas. Artie Mosher came running over and tried to pull Les away. Les spun on him and slammed a hard right into his mouth. Artie spun across the ring and dropped. Angel was trying to get up. As he came off the canvas, Les jammed a knee into his face, knocking him back so that he hung half in and half out of the ring. By that time

I was in the ring and so was Angel's second.

Les kicked Angel in the side, toppling him out of the ring and then slammed Angel's second through the ropes. The crowd was screaming. As I got to Les he turned and I got a quick glimpse of eyes as cold and grey as broken iron before the boom was lowered and the lights went out.

I SAT ON the bed holding a cold towel against my throbbing face. Jenks, my legal eagle was pacing up and down the room. Spencer Leslie sat in the corner by the windows, silent and moody. He didn't have a mark on him except for the cut on his cheek where Angel had butted him.

Jenks said, "I've got the whole picture now. Not only does he knock out three of Arthur Mosher's teeth, but he smashes Angel's nose with his knee, fractures the jaw on Angel's second, busts the nose on a salesman from St. Louis who had a ringside seat, closes both eyes on a bookie named Morali—and it takes seven guys holding him hand and foot to get him back to the dressing room. He doesn't stop roaring and struggling until they hold him in a cold shower for ten minutes. And now he can't remember a thing."

I looked at Leslie. "Is that right?"

"I remember knocking Angel down but that's all. The next thing I know some people are holding me in the shower and I still got the gloves, trunks and shoes on," he said sullenly.

Jenks said wildly, "Judgements! Everybody's got judgements they want. The Garden gets sued by the salesman and the bookie and Artie, Angel's second and even Angel for that knee in the face business. And the Garden turns around and gets a judgement against you for the whole mess plus a fat fee for hurting their business. Brother!"

"The judgements'll stick?" I asked him.

"Hell, yes. And the total will probably be around a hundred thousand."

Without a word, Spencer Leslie got up, opened the door and walked out. He slammed it behind him. Jenks and I looked at each other. "What a mess!" he moaned.

ON THE Beach at four P.M. I got the sympathy usually reserved for a case of ulcers at a clambake. Dear old friends gave me the clammy paw, the sad shake of the head and the maybe-things-could-be-worse philosophy.

I had the Word inside of an hour. No more bouts for my boy. Nobody wanted to take the gamble. All of a sudden everybody seemed to know that he had blown up twice in training and that the second time the boys in white coats had to come and throw a net over him and give him a wet sheet treatment.

It didn't help any to find that Whitey had matched Tailor Rowe with Stick Mobray and stood to clear maybe six, maybe seven.

I stood on the Beach and jingled the change in my pockets and made the habitual, unthinking appraisal of the ankles that waltzed by. Jenks had said a hundred thousand. I wondered how I'd like working on a banana boat, and if there was a fight arena in Rio. Back at the suite were my assets. Forty or so suits and a couple dozen pair of shoes. Two hundred and eighty in the checking account. Of course the leech had been paid off and that helped. But I would have traded back for the chance of climbing out from under the hundred thousand. I had even asked Jenks if I could tear up the contract with Leslie and climb out from under that way. He had given me some legal double talk about the responsibility of an agent and said no. A big no. A hundred thousand dollar no.

The shades of night were bringing out the neon when, heavy in heart, I started for the suite. I had gotten Les a single down the hall and hoped he'd be in. I wanted to get some one syllable words off my chest.

Ahead of me I saw Barney Gowdy duck into a doorway. In three seconds I had a big wad of his shirt in my left hand and I had the right drawn way back. He looked at me with his big sad, damp eyes and said, "Why slug a guy for making a buck, Danny boy? You just had your guard down. That's all."

He was right. I pocketed the right fist and contented myself with help-

ing him trace his ancestry back through three or four generations. I also made a few terse comments regarding his state of personal cleanliness, his philosophy in life and his habits.

When I walked in, Les was on his back on the bed in the darkened room, staring up at the ceiling, his hands linked behind his head.

"Hello, Danny," he said softly.

I didn't turn the lights on. I went over and sat by the windows and looked out at the fine fancy night of Manhattan.

After a bit he said, as though talking to himself, "It's always been that way. Since the war I mean. I was with the First Raiders and after a year I finally got it. I wasn't wounded, really. Just blown about eight feet in the air. Shock, they called it. Six months in the hospital and a medical discharge. I think the shock had something to do with not being able to stick in school when I got in.

"Hell, the only other kind of a job I could get would be with my hands—washing dishes or swinging a pick. I know I can fight good. I could even be champ if it wasn't for...this other thing. When I get sore something goes click in my head and I black out. I guess maybe I ought to find something to do where I won't get sore."

HE STOPPED talking. All of a sudden I wasn't sore any more. All I had for a problem was a stack of judgements coming up. I suddenly realized that Les really had a problem, that there was something in his head that frightened him and made him lonely. He was a good kid; I liked him.

"You've got it figured right, kid," I said. "The fight game's not for you. You might kill somebody in one of those blackouts. Do you ever get riled at anything else?"

"No. Just in the ring or sparring with some wise guy in a gym."

"Look kid, I got a brother that's head of a place where they do a lot of mechanical drawing. Drafting work. You done any of that?"

"Some. Not a lot."

"Suppose I give him the word and there ought to be a spot for you. You could mark time there until you can get into a college. And you'd be learning, too. Just forget the fight game. Hell, nobody'd give you a bout anyway."

He sat up suddenly, and I heard the eagerness in his voice. "Danny, that'd be swell!"

"Okay, kid. I'll call him in the morning." I stood up. "Get yourself some sleep and don't worry about it. If you saved any dough from the fights I booked for you, you might use it to help me pay off some of the hundred grand they're going to stick me with."

His voice sounded puzzled. "Stick you? Didn't that guy find you?"

"What guy?"

"The guy from the insurance company."

"Kid, you're driving me nuts. What insurance company?"

"Oh, I guess I didn't tell you. After the first time I went off the handle and started socking everybody in sight, I went out and paid a hundred bucks for an unlimited, comprehensive personal liability policy. Three years worth. The adjuster was here late in the afternoon looking for you. So was Mr. Jenks. The insurance company will defend the case and pay off if we lose."

* * *

They told me that I had a good time that night. I don't know where I went or what I did. All I know for sure is that when I woke up at noon there were three strange guys sleeping on the floor of the suite. They told me later that I had bought drinks for them all night long. They also told me they were insurance agents.

THE END



He Who Swims Alone

By Cliff Campbell

(Author of "Candidate for the Boneyard")

Ab Carson couldn't even approach the gracefulness of such socialite swimmers as Ted Westbrook or Tupper Moreland—but he had the essential thing they lacked!

THEY WERE like timed and silent automatons, the three of them, with only the faintest ripple and never a sounding splash of water as their fast hands cut the surface of the practice tidal pool. The swift beat of their overhand crawl stroke was as smooth, as noiseless as if their driving arms were attached to a single, perfect machine.

Ab Carson tried to pretend he was not noticing them. Three heads cut the water as slickly as gliding seals. Only two heads were dark and the third one was of shining platinum, the last giving Sylvia Coburn her natural nickname of "Silver." Beat for beat, forging through the green-blue water, Silver displayed as much speed as either Ted Westbrook or Tupper Moreland.

Ab Carson was doing his damndest to make his heavy, calloused hands cut the water soundlessly and knife-like. But when he turned on the power his work-toughened palms made a slapping, and his long, knobby-kneed legs thrashed up a foam that made him feel that he was about as graceful as, say, a walrus plunging after a salmon.

The thought didn't come to Ab that a Walrus nearly always got the salmon, or that his own apparently lunging crawl stroke could outspeed the three perfect swimmers over there any time he wanted to turn on the juice. Tubby Macklin, puffing alongside Ab Carson, grunted at him.

"Why'n't you quit watchin' them and put a pair of rings around their fancy stuff? You could do it, Ab, and still be kicking water in their eyes before they hit the upper end of

the pool. Wait'll them two show-offs, Westbrook and Moreland, maybe hit an unexpected undertow tide rip in the Narrows next week."

Even when he grinned, Ab's hard-boned face was too long to rate him being tagged for good looks. But there was that mocking hellishness in his deep-set brown eyes to make you look twice to be sure if he was laughing with you or at you.

"Nuh-uh, Tubby," he said, spewing salt water from between his even white teeth. "Silver's bound to stick to her own class, an' right now it wouldn't be smart to wise Ted Westbrook up to the speed he loses in that shortened overhand crawl."

Tubby Macklin snorted water like a young whale blowing. "I know you got too much brains to think it would pay off for you to be sellin' Silver Coburn as any part of your future, Ab! Sure she's stickin' to class, putting on the fancy stuff with Westbrook and Moreland; but if you're going all out for that engineering scholarship in the big Narrows, don't forget for one damn' minute that Silver's class comes of a full page of Coburns in the latest Social Register, and you're still Ab Carson, son of old man Carson who's been gardening the Westbrook place for all the years you've been out of diapers."

Ab's laugh wasn't as pleasant as he meant it to be. Needled by Tubby's jabbing, he rolled his shoulders, smacked the water with his big hands and went the rest of the way up the pool without either timing or regard for gracefulness. He was crawling out on a rock when the three, perfect, clocklike swimmers were still twenty yards out. Westbrook and Moreland

As the canoe tilted, the girl managed to do everything wrong



were evidently slowed by their bellows failing them and Ab could see that the sleek and slender Silver was deliberately holding back.

TUBBY MACKLIN floundered up, climbed out. "You might as well

have played ring-around-the-rosy with 'em as done that, you thick-headed Irisher," he sputtered. "Maybe this ain't them cross-rippin', tricky Narrows, but Westbrook and Moreland are cravin' to take the trophies back to dazzle their fellow frats in their

senior year, even if they ain't any use for an engineering or any other scholarship that man's workin' at any kind of job than throwin' their family dough around the Hollywood night spots or maybe back on that hot dog and juice-joint main stem known as Broadway."

It was a long speech for the breathless Tubby, who had started out to coach Ab Carson two months before, only to discover that Ab was one of those natural fish that might leave a noisy white wake, but could come close to out-swimming a penguin.

Ab packed a load of good nature, too much of it. "Westbrook and Moreland aren't as you're making out, Tubby," he said with a grin that made you forget his face was too long and his nose too short. "Hell! Westbrook was good sport enough to have his old man talk the officials into cutting down my entrance fee in the Narrows show, only Pop didn't like it much. You know how my dad gets his back up."

Tubby's eyes went almost blank. "Yeah. I know how your own old man is; and there's something smells about that entry fee cut. It could be—say! Had Ted Westbrook seen you tear a hole in the pool like you did just now?"

Ab shook his head and Tubby added quickly, "Well, here comes the Casanova of Puget Sound legging it over here. Which spells me making myself suddenly represented in absentia."

AB CARSON pulled up his long, gangling legs and hooked his arms around his bony knees. He neither liked nor disliked Ted Westbrook. As the son of his father's boss for twenty-odd years, Westbrook had been seen in the newspapers more often than in person.

Young Westbrook was tall and dark. He had a habit of smiling with his mouth while his eyes were half-lidded. That was supposed to and did make him the ladies' choice over other lads who showed too much frankness.

Ab Carson gave Westbrook's smile an answering grin. "Was watching you and the others putting on that

timed stroke, Westbrook," he said. "I'm gonna try and learn it some day if I can make these hams I call hands some down easy in the water."

"Nothing to it, Ab," stated Westbrook, and his eyes were narrowed more than usual. "But it cuts your speed; that's the reason you wallowed away from us so easily."

The way Ted Westbrook was pulling hard to bring his lungs back to normal Ab had his doubts, about that last. He never had cared much for Westbrook, but then he hadn't known him either, seeing the son of his father's boss had private schooling, then two years of college, while Ab's old man had only managed to see Ab through High school.

Since then Ab had picked up jobs here and there, gardening for the most part, that being his old man's life. Glancing past Westbrook Ab could see the shiny-haired, blonde Silver Coburn had some sort of an argument with Tupper Moreland.

"I came over, Ab, because something come up only this morning that my father thinks might be something worth while for you," stated Westbrook crisply. "Dad has a new survey starting on the upper Fraser river in British Columbia. It may mean the cutting of a tunnel under Mount Robson. He thought it would be a great chance for you to break in with some real engineers."

Ab didn't know why snowflakes seemed to be falling on the back of his neck. There wasn't any argument against that idea. Probably, up in that early winter region a survey would be wound up before college opened.

"Why, that's fine, Westbrook," said Ab heartily. "I'd sure like the chance for some field work. I'm all for it, and thanks."

It was then that Ted Westbrook's eyes really slitted. "Seeing the party's ready to start, and taking a plane for Prince George day after tomorrow, it'll mean you'll have to drop out of the Narrows swim. And if you need some dough to get ready, I'll be glad to stake you."

Ab could feel a sizzling as the impact of Ted Westbrook's words hit his brain. It wasn't often his eyes

temper went ragged. He had the sudden impulse to rear up and smash that confident smile off Westbrook's mouth.

Instead, he said, "No, thanks, Westbrook. I hadn't any idea but your getting into it was only a whim, and you didn't care much whether you won or lost. How would it hurt you if I could win the scholarship?"

"You'll damn well find out—" Westbrook checked his words.

Silver Coburn was beside him and Tupper Moreland was following.

"I never knew any animal but a seal that could cut water that fast, Ab," said Silver, a tight smile on her usually impudent face. "I saw you start trimming our hedge this morning. I'd lay off everything but swimming until after the Narrows meet."

"Ab isn't so sure he's going into the Narrows swim," said Westbrook, his voice edged. "He's thinking of a sudvey job up north."

Silver's greenish blue eyes harmonized with her platinum hair. Her nose tilted slightly above her rounded chin. She had an air of snootiness that went with the Coburns of Tacoma Point and that page in the Social Register.

Ab had been brought up to work as the gardener's son. Seeing the Westbrooks, Morelands and Coburns owned adjoining estates on the Point, Ab had worked much of his time in old Jason Coburn's garden after leaving High School. Since she had come home from her final year in finishing school the year before, Silver had often kidded with Ab at times when his big, soil-stained hands and sweaty overalls made him keenly conscious of the way she seemed to have of talking down to him.

Tubby Macklin had made a wrong way guess in hinting that Ab might be getting so far out of his class as to think of Silver Coburn as other than what she was, a pampered and too popular rich girl who knew exactly the tone to employ toward a servant. Ab now could almost feel Silver's greenish eyes upon his bare, angular knees and big, work-flattened hands.

Ted Westbrook had just put him in a state of mind where Silver's sud-

den little speech was patronizing and sweetly poisonous.

"That's showing good sense, Ab," she said with a slight lift of her chin. "A boy like you gets ahead faster when he knows he has to work his way up instead of wasting his time trying to win a future some easy way."

SILVER'S HUSKY voice had never been more friendly than now. But if she had slapped her knuckles suddenly across his mouth, Ab would have preferred it.

He thought, *she might as well have said, "You're the gardener's son and you'd be a fool not to keep your place."*

Tupper Moreland had a broad face, with popping eyes and constant fatuous smile. He bobbed agreement with Silver.

"Silver's right, Ab, and that job up at Mount Robson is the biggest chance that'll ever come your way," babbled the smiling Tupper, dumbly tipping off that whole idea had been mulled over.

Ab felt as if something had exploded inside the swelling muscles of his chest. He didn't know the suddenly hard voice that cracked out as he reared to his feet.

"To hell with alla you, and that goes for your smart frame, Westbrook! Sorry, Miss Coburn, but there's only one way for a boy like me to go up! Outta the way, Westbrook!"

Ab jumped from his toes, one long arm slapping across the taller Westbrook's middle and sweeping him backward into the green water pool. Ab's big hands and long legs thrashed with the fury of a steamboat paddle wheel fighting a river flood.

He was at the other end of the pool, leaving a record white wake, and climbing out before he was entirely conscious of what he had either said or done. Tubby Macklin poked a grinning face up from some rocks nearby.

"When you come out of it, Ab, do you still think you'll rate getting into the Narrows swim?" said Tubby. "Wouldn't it be right smart to drift down to the committee's office and

make up the full amount of that entry fee? Your old man's got a lot of good Scotch-Irish sense, Ab. Generosity is not one of Ted Westbrook's traits."

Tubby's shorter legs had to double-time to keep pace with Ab's long stride. Ab's thinking was as long as his steps as he rounded the tip of Tacoma Point and halted a moment before starting down with Tubby to grab a bus for downtown.

Stretching away like a blue, shimmering mirror, deep Puget Sound rimmed under the snowcapped peaks of the hundred miles of Olympics that lay between Tacoma, Seattle and the Pacific. Directly below the point the first of the full flood tide was sweeping into the gut canyon called The Narrows, that cut notches as deep as 400 feet and would end up by spreading into the inner and vast Olympic Bay.

At this stage of the sweeping tide the swimming of the Narrows would be impossible for anything less amphibian than a seal. But the three miles of the Point canyon Narrows was to be attempted at the low ebb in another week, giving the swimmers a chance to clear before the treacherous flood could catch them.

Ab Carson had the instinct of a born engineer. That was one reason he believed he could best the greatest swimmers who would compete. He had studied the swing of the undertowing tide rip at different stages of the tide. For a prospective future builder of bridges and piers that was paramount.

"Tell you, Tubby, I made a damn fool of myself, breaking out like that, with Silver Coburn," said Ab. "But if there's a real job of chain toting up in British Columbia, this is the first I've heard of a Fraser river survey. What in hell's the come-on with Westbrook and Moreland, practically offering me a bribe to stay out of the Narrows swim?"

"Silver Coburn, of course," announced Tubby promptly. "Besides hankering to razzle-dazzle other frat boys with their cups. Neither one gives a damn about that engineering scholarship."

"It wasn't enough to make my entry fee questionable; they had to try a likely phony job-bribery on the side. But why should Silver Coburn horn into it?"

"As long as you've been around, haven't you heard of the way of a maid with a man? I listened in, Ab. You took fire because you thought you were being snooted. It could be you was only being needled by a gal who had a lot more to her head than platinum blonde hair on the outside."

AB MADE no reply. He was looking down a clean two hundred feet to the swirling tide rips of the Narrows at the foot of the sheer cliff at Tacoma Point. In the month since the Narrows swim had been announced, Ab had studied every vagary of the treacherous currents.

"Straight below us, Tubby, the short beach is only a ledge of a mountain wall jutting out into the inland sea of Puget Sound," said Ab. "Except at the highest tide, that beach extends all the way for the three miles into Olympic Bay. There are from three to five hundred feet of water under that ledge."

Tubby Macklin shivered. He had heard of fishing boats being crushed and disappearing forever along that near shore.

"That's the route the swim committee thinks is the safest," he said. "On the time given by the ebb tide, the tide rips die and then change direction."

"Not all of them, Tubby," argued Ab. "Some always move toward the bay and the guy knowing them will be warned to avoid."

"Sure, Dead Man's Chute, I know," agreed Tubby. "At the last of the ebb it's like the whole sound is sucked up and shot through that hole for more than a mile. But the other side, past both islands, is the safest."

"And the slowest," stated Ab. "Some freak of the tide makes part of it dead water, usually clogged with sawmill drift."

"And how much good will Westbrook's and Moreland's fancy, clock-work strokes do them in any of the rips, Ab? I suppose you've figured out

where you'll have to turn on the power and to hell with style?"

Ab's long face showed a slow, serious grin. He nodded. But just now he had come to the conclusion of another long thought that had been steaming though his brain since his, to himself, inexcusable burst of bad temper.

"It might be I won't stay for the Narrows swim, Tubby," he announced abruptly.

Tubby expressed surprised disgust.

"I've got to thinking," elaborated Ab. "It could be that Silver Coburn is making a choice between Westbrook and Moreland hang upon which one wins the swim. If either one does. You voiced it when you mentioned that reversed version of 'the way of a maid with a man,' and Silver's talked enough with me at one time and another for her to show she's been so badly spoiled she'll have the hell and all of a time deciding the lucky or maybe unlucky devil she'll marry."

They were making a bus that ran around the rock-hewn road high above Tacoma's docks where ships were known to have sunk and gone so deep no diving apparatus ever could reach them.

"I don't get why that might pull you out of the swim, Ab," said Tubby, his round face screwed up with thinking.

"If it's that way," stated Ab, "then Ted Westbrook would have one card up his sleeve I wouldn't try to counter. My old man made the Westbrook garden the most of his life's work after I was born. I'm hitting twenty-three now. The Narrows swim and the engineering scholarship as the big prize isn't enough for me to see dad lose that garden. It's been mom's home, too, since before I kicked into this old world."

"Hell! Ted Westbrook wouldn't be low enough to pull that, Ab."

"I hope not, but I can't take a chance with Ted's mother thinking he's the tops of anything that ever wore a man's pants," declared Ab, his long face set in hard lines. "Old Man Westbrook may have hit his millions the hard way, but it's Missus Westbrook who is queen of the home roost.

Suppose I win the Narrows swim, and my own mulebrained old man has to shove off and start over again."

"You're crazy, Ab. That wouldn't happen."

JAMES J. FENNING, chairman of the Narrows swim committee, twisted his normally unsmiling mouth into a grin.

"Nope, Abner, you can't pay up the full entry fee for the swim now," he announced solemnly. "It's too late."

"That damn well saves me the trouble of pulling out, Mr. Fenning," started Ab. "That's what I had decided to do for my own good reasons."

Mr. Fenning's grin didn't change. "No one can stop you from doing that, Abner," he said gravely. "But seeing that Bob Carson was in and paid the full fee, he'll like as not leather the hide off you if you quit."

"My dad? He paid all of the fee?"

"Yeah," declared Fenning. "Guess that ties you up."

"Nope, it doesn't," asserted Ab. "When was the entry paid?"

"Day before yesterday, Abner. Your dad's quit the Westbrooks, or did you know? Said he's tucked away enough to buy an olive grove above San Diego, not far from Mexico, and he's figuring on your mother and him taking it easy while you're turning yourself into an engineer."

Tubby Macklin chuckled sardonically. "Now you'll swim, damn you—swim, Abner."

"My dad can't do that!" exploded Ab.

"I've never known anyone yet who could tell old Bob what he could do," said Mr. Fenning with a hard grin. "Not even his oversized sprout of a son."

IN THE last of the ebbtide the entrance to the dangerous Narrows appeared as smooth as a millpond. But as he glanced along the half-mile line of launches and cruisers from which the contestants would be started, Ab Carson wondered how many of the twenty-odd swimmers knew all of the deadly secret of the green water gut between the high cliffs that formed its deep channel?

Tubby Macklin touched Ab's shoulder. "Got it all figured, pal?" he said. "In another few minutes the last flow of the ebb tide toward the sea will be ended. That gives a clear half hour of nothing but sluggish tide rips."

Ab handed one to Tubby then in a low tone. "The outgoing tide stopped a good ten minutes ago. The flood has started in strong."

"You nuts, Ab?" Tubby glanced at the slowly moving surface of the deep water. "Them bits of drift are still coming out into the sound."

"Sure enough, they are," stated Ab without looking. "And there are half a dozen pretty well filled rivers rolling into Olympic bay above the Narrows, Tubby. That top water is lighter and will keep on moving in that direction for another ten to fifteen minutes. But the heavier flood of salt water is on its way into the Narrows underneath the top flow."

"You mean, Ab—hell! That's what causes unexpected rips before the full flood!" Tubby had it. "How many of the swimmers know that, Ab?"

"Only the trolling fishermen who play the Narrows understand it and they don't talk much," said Ab. "If the land crabs running the show knew it, the starting gun would have cracked twenty minutes ago. That deep-down flood rolls damn' fast when the fresh top water turns with it."

"Then why didn't you beat—"

Tubby's intended remark was stopped by the echoing crack of a pistol. Lean, seasoned bodies in thigh trunks shot into the water off the long row of boats.

"I wouldn't want to beat the gun, Tubby," said Ab with a tight grin and went splashing over with all the smooth grace of a hippo.

Ab Carson's initial jump was followed by what seemed slow motion strokes compared to the showy overhand crawl being exhibited by nearly all the other entries. He started swimming steadily with long-armed underwater sweeps at first, but edging toward the south cliff where the narrow, rocky beach slanted steeply into the depths.

He repeated a few names as he kept his face up and eyed the line of his competitors.

"Waton and Randall from California will make the finish tough, if they have taken time to study the side rips," he grunted. "Both of 'em have tried that grind from the lower coast to Catalina Island, but they didn't make it. That Jim Parish from Portland has plenty of power, but he wouldn't be holding to the center channel if he knew how the flood swings. Dammit! They're fast company and they could go away from me any day in a pool battle or a fight over a smooth sea, but they'll find the big push of the first flood behind them makes a funny twist before it hits the trick reefs and Dead Man's Chute."

Ab ceased wasting his breath then. He had spotted Ted Westbrook and Tupper Moreland nearest to him. Both were putting on a fancy side crawl that carried them away from the starting boats faster than the others. The pair of rivals for the favor of Silver Coburn were gaining their first speed with the kind of clockwork strokes that only a college trainer could have taught them.

But Ab could see that show-off stuff wasn't timed to last over a long route. Their seemingly effortless strokes were too perfect and too short.

AB FELT the first side rip swirl around his long figure and it was within yards of the Point spot he had figured. He held back his power while it must have seemed to those in the few following boats that he had hit a current that was carrying him back instead of into the Narrows.

He had felt out the strength of such swirling rips too often to fight it, knowing how Tubby Macklin must be cussing to himself as he watched through glasses in the boat from which he had jumped. And Ab had Tubby pegged. He was cussing between set teeth.

"That damn' bullhead!" gritted Tubby. "Whyinell don't he turn on the steam? That's one he wasn't set for and damned if he ain't being

checked up an' pushed back! Westbrook and Moreland are sure hitting out for a lead there in the lucky turn of that top fresh water Ab was spillin' about! What the hell now?"

Ab didn't hear it, but he could guess it. Tubby would be having fits over the clean, long start Ab's hottest rivals were gaining.

Then the tide rip that had been riding him backward seemed to stand still, and the current was swinging in the other direction with a far faster rush. Ab threw overboard all the rules of supposed water cutting form and went into that all-over thrashing of long legs and work-hardened arms.

The first crazily twisting tide rip that had brought trouble to many greenhorn fishing trollers appeared to have become a whirlpool that hurled Ab ahead and straight toward the rocky rim of the short beach under the high cliff. There the rip was sucked under the overhang, but Ab's apparently clumsy legs and arms carried him along the surface at a speed which made Westbrook and Moreland, farther out now in suddenly dead water, appear to have stopped altogether.

The green water was like a living beast, tugging at Ab's body, its liquid tentacles pulling downward. No neatly timed strokes could have kept any swimmer afloat here, prevented his being drawn into one of the numerous tunnels that cut deeply under the Point cliff.

Ab's body scraped along the outer rocks of the slanting beach for more than a hundred yards, tearing skin from his shoulder. Then he was clear and riding the calmer turn of the fresh top water where the rip had spent its force.

It was a Chinaman's guess what Westbrook and Moreland were shouting to each other as they found themselves outdistanced. Ab settled to long strokes of power now, turning on his side and lifting his eyes enough to see the straggling outer line of swimmers.

A second tidal rip rolled apparently from under the beach and Ab was

being carried at an angle toward the center of the channel. One glance showed his nearest contenders, Westbrook and Moreland, forgetting all stroking style as they fought to clear the first space of slowly turning dead water in the middle course they had chosen.

Then Ab was around a turn in the cliff and giving all he had to a stretch of slow, opposing water of the long eddy he knew he had to cross. He was beyond the view of the slowly following boats now and it was impossible to see what some of the better swimmers were doing as the ragged line swung on the flood pickup toward the head of the first island reef.

Ab had gained more distance in another dangerous rip that came up with a push from the bottom. Here, Ab knew, there was a comparative shoal far below that sent the heavy salt water booming toward the surface. At that, a landsman would scarcely have called a ridge of rocks 200 feet under a shoal. But when millions of tons of heavy salt water are driven up abruptly from a depths of more than 400 feet, it has to find passing space.

That lift from the deep shoal broke the surface into turbulent swells, but Ab rode this with long, slow strokes that rested him. He had estimated time and distance and knew that he was a mile and a half on the way to Olympic bay. At the moment he could see no other swimmer and no following boat.

The best boatmen were wary of risking their craft in some of the treacherous rips. Ab could see the high point of the middle reef like the prow of a ship. The heat of his effort was chilled as he pictured the white water flood that would soon be rushing through the narrow confines of Dead Man's Chute, creating a rip current that was broken in many spots by thrusting side rocks.

THINKING of the treacherous chute, Ab unconsciously swung nearer to the short strip of slanting beach. He had the warm glow of pride now in having "engineered" this swim in advance, having the advantage of

years of swimming and fishing about the dangerous Narrows.

Ab didn't see the girl in the canoe until it was directly in front of him. She was wearing a slick, green silk sunrobe and hood. The canoe was but a few yards from the beach, but the cross-tide was carrying it out and it went into a swirling spin where the eddy of the shore and the increasing flood tide came together.

"Hiya!" yelled Ab. "Get back, you fool, or you'll be swung into Dead Man's Chute!"

If she heard, the girl's paddling was amateurish. Perhaps she sensed her danger and, did the wrong thing. She got to her feet. That did it; the canoe capsized in the maelstrom of rolling tidal conflict.

Swearing savagely, Ab spotted the green sunrobe going under and he lunged ahead. By the barest chance he got a grip with one big hand on the robe between the girl's shoulders and a stranded porpoise couldn't have outdone him in flailing with his legs and free hand.

The green sunrobe held together and Ab landed awkwardly upon the slanting rocks of the rapidly narrowing beach. The canoe drifted away. Ab's quick eye saw the sweep of the tide rip take the upset craft past the prow of the middle reef and into the rushing flood of Dead Man's Chute.

The green sunrobe came apart as Ab pulled the light figure of the girl to safety on the higher rocks. He had one quick look at an uptilted nose above a rounded chin, at silvery blonde hair and his oath was as grimly unpleasant as he could make it.

"So that's it, you spoiled, double-crossing brat!" exploded Ab as greenish-blue eyes opened and the girl apparently pretended to stare at him as if dozed. "so, there being no other way to get a boy like me out of your friends' way, you played their game to stop me. Being the swimmer you are, I'd oughtta throw you back and let that tide rip take you into Dead Man's Chute. You hear me, Silver Coburn?"

The girl's green eyes half closed and she appeared to go limp. "You want to play it that way, huh?" rasped the infuriated Ab, for at that moment

he saw bobbing heads and shoulders passing down the Narrows, "You may be top stuff in the society column, but right now you're just another cheating dame. Your act's over, sister. Come out of it!"

Ab slapped Silver Coburn then, hard, with his big hand. Her head jerked up and she fully awake. Ab was looking at his own toil-calloused hand as if he had never seen it before. Silver was talking, low, and there was no anger in her voice.

"I took the chance to—to try and stop you from winning—because—that can wait, Ab—get back in there and win your engineer scholarship—don't ask me anything now—get in and you can still beat all the others—"

ALTHOUGH her voice had faltered, there was a command in it that Ab had to obey. It was all crazy. But Silver Coburn meant all she was saying. He glanced about, made sure she was at a point on the narrow beach safe from the flood tide. Then he turned and slammed back into the running flood with the plunging splash of an oversized polar bear.

The tide swept him out. He could barely discern the vanishing heads of Westbrook and Moreland and a few other swimmers. He knew there was no passing them now straight the Narrows.

"Dead Man's Chute," he muttered and flailed with all his power into the deadly flood that would swing him past the point of the middle reef rock.

It seemed to Ab that he heard a scream behind him, "No! No! Ab, don't do that!"

It could be nothing less than pure imagination with the roaring of the flood tide in his ears. Then he was rolling into rushing, tumbling white water that narrowed into Dead Man's Chute with its menacing, terrible rocks.

Perhaps it was five, ten, fifteen minutes, more or less. Ab never would be able to estimate that time. He didn't swim. All he could do was take the pounding of the rocks that bruised and cut his arms and

shoulders. He didn't know how he kept his skull from being crushed.

At times he closed his eyes and he kept repeating, "Damme to hell! I slapped her! I slapped little Silver."

Feeling as if he had been run over by a bulldozer, Ab suddenly shot out into a tide rip that was calm compared to the chute. Ahead he could see a line of boats across the inner end of the Narrows.

He heard the tripple crack of a gun. Then there was more shooting. Ab felt himself lifted from the water into a small boat from one of the finish line cruisers.

The whole world seemed to be yelling crazily at him. And all the time he kept saying, "Damme to hell! I slapped her! I slapped little Silver."

The thought that he might have won the swimming race was lost in trying to remember what Silver had said, and the sincerity in her voice as she had said, "I took a chance—to try and stop you from winning—because—that can wait, Ab—get back in there and win your engineer scholarship—"

"YOU damn' tootin' he'll do, doc," spoke the voice of Tubby Macklin. "What's a bump or two on that hard head of his?"

"Okay," said a tall man with the air of a medic. "He can talk to Miss Coburn now. But he'll have to make it short.

Ab could tell he was in the cabin of a cruiser by the slow swell and the slap of water outside.

"You'll stay off that sprained knee a couple of weeks, Miss Coburn," ordered the medic. "No swimming for a month, and then don't start in the Narrows."

"Yes, doctor," and Silver's voice was small and meek. "Whatever you say. Now will you be kind enough to leave us alone."

Ab closed his eyes. When he opened them again the platinum hair and the shining green eyes were still there. Preliminary to speaking, Silver leaned over and kissed him squarely on the mouth.

There was a snort behind her and she said, "Go on out, Tubby."

"I hadn't oughtta slapped you, Silver," said Ab suddenly.

"Yes, you had," she contradicted. "It was the first time in my life. I've been waiting, I guess, for the man who could do that."

"You? Waiting?"

"Take it easy, Ab," she said softly. "I wasn't trying to stop you because of Ted Westbrook or Tupper Moreland. I'd heard Ted make his mother promise to fire your dad from their gardener's cottage. I knew you wouldn't want to win and have that happen, but —"

Ab shook his head and Silver smiled.

"I found out after they picked me up that your old man'd beaten them to it, and he was already packing to leave for his olive ranch in California," said Silver. "I wanted to talk to you before he gets out here. You'll be in college four years or more."

"Then I did win the swim?"

"The hardest damn' way you could find, of course," she said with unexpected vigor. "But when you get that engineer's degree, Dad Coburn has a mine or a bridge or something down in Mexico that you'll start on."

Ab guessed he was awfully dumb. "I don't get it Silver. I thought — I guessed — Tubby said Ted Westbrook or Tupper—"

Silver stopped his mouth with one small hand.

"Please, Ab, don't think as awkwardly as you swim," she whispered. "While you're getting that engineer degree, I'm planning to stay with Bob Carson and your mom so they'll get used to me. Your mom seems to think I want to play all my life, but I'm not playing this time, Ab. I'm gonna have a place to start and a cottage of our own when you're not tearing down mountains or building bridges."

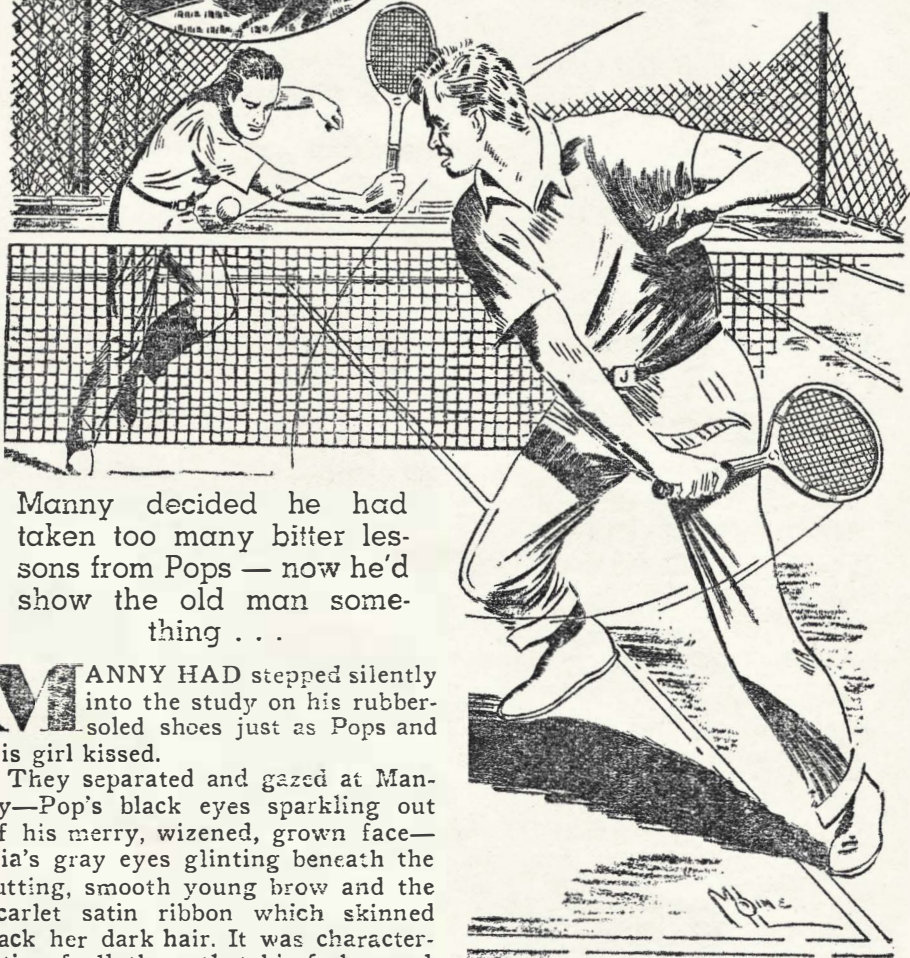
Ab's long arms were around her.

"So I did get myself killed back there in Dead Man's Chute," he muttered. "And this is heaven."

"If you want to think it's that way, it is, Ab darling. Only don't you go around slapping any other girls, ever. It's dangerous."

THE LAST LESSON

By
Valma Clark



Manny decided he had taken too many bitter lessons from Pops — now he'd show the old man something . . .

MANNY HAD stepped silently into the study on his rubber-soled shoes just as Pops and his girl kissed.

They separated and gazed at Manny—Pop's black eyes sparkling out of his merry, wizened, grown face—Tia's gray eyes glinting beneath the jutting, smooth young brow and the scarlet satin ribbon which skinned back her dark hair. It was characteristic of all three that his father and Tia were not the embarrassed ones—only Manny standing there stiff and tall and handsome in his locked fury.

He turned and walked stilt-legged from the room.

In his own room, Manny instinctively seized a tennis racket. He gripped the handle, as a murderer grips the hilt of his gun, anticipating the kill. Manny thanked his lucky

stars for so arranging it that he could blast his father from the courts this very afternoon. Too bad the setting would not be Forest Hills, only their own little old country club. But the tennis moguls would be there, those fogies who were trying to persuade Pops to try once more for the national title in September. All their friends would be there. And Tia.

Manny frowned out the open window upon the pleasant ways in which his life had been cast: the flagstone terrace, where his old Irish setter sprawled in the June sunshine; the rose-garden with its open-hearted profusion of pink and red blooms; the cropped lawn sloping to shaggy meadowlands. For all this he had to thank his father, who practiced what he preached—i.e., that tennis was just a game and that architecture was a living. He felt all plowed up. Hating your own Pops so violently was a little like hating yourself. But when your father was after the girl you'd picked out, too...

WHEN he followed Pops out onto the main court, Manny was cold and correct and supremely confident. The crowd boiled up, as one man, to welcome Pops: "Hi, Ray! Ray Pierrot!" Pop flipped his racquet at them.

"Well, Manny, remember all the things I've taught you," grinned his father, "and use them all against me."

"Let's go, Pops,"—impatiently.

Manny took Pops' serve and lost it, meaning to lose.

He had a plan, and the plan included dropping the first set. He let his eyes stretch over the scene, marshalling this setting of his victory. Glendale's courts were bowled in green hills. The pour of sunshine over this backdrop and over the restless, color-stippled crowd was like a huge spill of wet yellow paint. It was so strong that old Mrs. Graham Carruthers had her purple sunshade up, shutting out the view of those behind, but that was Mrs. Carruthers' privilege. She occupied a garden chair on the side line. Mrs. Carruthers' was Glendale's social arbiter, and any

occasion to which she lent her presence was definitely on the social calendar. There in the front row of the grandstand were two Panama-hatted U. S. L. T. A. officials—middle-aged stuffed shirts, Manny knew them well. Behind them, in the dizzying welter of faces, was the scarlet stroke of a ribbon, marking Tia.

For one instant, Manny, waiting again on Pops' serve (Pops was agile as a monkey off his stick in action, but was deliberate between points: an old man's trick of saving himself,) reflected how the little game of tennis, played in narrow, white-taped limits with its formal rules of in bounds and out of bounds, of scores and faults, was like life itself. The same struggle, on a larger scale, conditioned by commandments of right and wrong, leading to the same failure—or success! Manny was not particularly imaginative. Pops had somehow suggested to him the comparison; but never in words.

Pops took the first set easily, 6-2, just as Manny had planned. Inevitably some wit in the crowd sang out: "Yah, *Manhood*—yah can't trade strokes with your old man!"

The old jealous fury knifed the boy. Imagine being called "Manhood!" Somebody should have saved him from that, if it was his mother's maiden name. His father should have saved him.

In the second set, Manny unleashed his powerful service. Part of the time Pops didn't catch up with it, though he never stopped trying. The rest of the time he pulled his old trick of playing to Manny's non-existent backhand—and Manny let him get away with that. But the set was service-governed, and Manny took it, 6-4.

Now in the third set, Pops was really going all out, leaping over the court as in his brilliant young days. The "Miracle Man" they had called him during those years when he had flashed over all the courts of this country and of Europe and had consistently brought off inconceivable shots from impossible angles.

So different were father and son as they faced each other, trading shots; and Manny had been made to know it.

The comparison was always invidious. "Manny Pierrot plays an old man's game even young," one sports writer had said. "Ray Pierrot plays a young man's game even old."

What did Tia see in Pops? A little man, who looked, in his peaked eyeshade, more like a jockey than a tennis champion. Even his nimble, bare legs, below his shorts, were slightly bowed, as though from hugging a horse—or sitting cross-legged on a mushroom, as Tia had once said.

Manny, reaching for the ball at his baseline, had the height and beauty of a golden young god. But he had a ramrod in his back and a chill smile on his lips.

Pops cracked out "Good shot, Son!" and Manny glowed. For a moment the old companionship between them held—the companionship they'd had when he was a boy and Pops was his coach, and the common language they so eloquently spoke was with their beloved racquets. For an instant, he found himself wondering—were things the way they seemed?

Now Manny held set point, when suddenly Pops bored into the net and, in a streak of inspired volleying, took that set, 6-4. The gallery went wild. Tia surged up with the others—Manny's eyes found the red ribbon—to cheer Ray Pierrot.

As they changed places, Pops was mopping his face—he never did. And his smile at Manny was a grimace from a stiff mask of a curious sunburned pallor—also new.

ANGRY NOW, Manny put on the pressure. This low, flat, wicked serve was for that kiss. And Pops fell over his racquet, missing it!

Take that—and that. The tennis ball was a bullet and the victim was that little crickety-legged old man scrambling about the court. Manny was almost sorry for the old boy. His agile flounderings were just the antics of a dying champion. The gallery was rooting for Pops hard; but now these were just pitying cheers for the underdog.

Manny took the set, 6-2, and the sets stood level, two all with victory

in the bag for young Pierrot.

In the fifth set, Manny kept on hitting so hard and so deep that Pops had no chance to get in to the net. While running swiftly to a lead of 4-0, he seemed to be playing all the matches he had ever played with his father over again—only *not* losing, always losing. The past mingled queerly with this present.

He lost the thread of his control, and Pops took a love game! The crowd made a sound like the leaves of trees tossed by the wind before a thunderstorm—excitement.

All the resentment of all the years came flooding up in Manny and in formed his racquet arm. He smashed Pops a diabolical serve—but Pops, scabbling over the court like a dying crab, all angled legs and arms, somehow picked it up! "Love-fifteen," sang the umpire. And Manny was mad.

Pops returned the next serve to Manny's missing backhand—and Manny gave him back his own coin: a vicious backhand volley!

"Where did you get that?" gasped Pops.

"Bud Tyson," grinned Manny. (Tyson was the club pro, and Pops did not cotton to him)

"Good boy! Come again!"

Pops kept shooting to his backhand, and Manny kept saucing him back. But the play began to see-saw now. Manny began increasing his drives, shot after shot, laying a creeping barrage to force Pops deeper behind his own baseline. But it didn't work. The old boy had come to life and was storming the net. He was putting away the balls that no human being could touch. Manny tried a high lob and Pops caught it with a leap like a cat's.

There was some kind of an upset in the gallery, and Manny, angrily holding his serve, saw that it was their old family doctor, complete with little black satchel, who was stamping right down to the umpire's seat, looking thunderous beneath his bashed down fedora. He spoke to the umpire, who shrugged. Pops took a salt tablet, and did a ta-ta wave at old

Doc. The tense gallery hooted hysterically with Pops.

Then a cathedral-like hush settled over the scene. There was no sound at all but the slup-slup of the balls and the monotone of the umpire's voice: "Deuce—add-in—deuce—add-out—deuce...."

EVERYTHING dropped away—even Tia—and Manny was alone in the world with his father. The cheering was from another planet. Everything was soft and slow. The balls no longer whizzed like bullets—they flew like white birds.

Manny knew in advance that it was hopeless. He knew, but he kept on fighting against this paralysis, because Pops had instilled that into him. *What did the old boy have that Manny hadn't? Just genius!*

With Pops leading, 5-4, and holding match point, Manny made a desperate get and angled the ball down the side-line. But Pops did a backward flip and caught it and the umpire called game, set and match.

The gallery went off like fireworks. One of the tennis moguls shied his Panama hat into the air. The purple parasol of Mrs. Carruthers shed all its dignity and bobbed about over its owner. The red ribbon that was Tia rose over the crowd, as she stood on her seat to scream exultance.

Manny gripped Pops' hand, while the cameras clicked at them. "Good try, Son."

Many moved sharply to cut it short, but Pops was clutching his hand, not letting go. The expression of his face was puzzled, faintly smiling.

Then Pops' hand slithered out of

his with a lax, brushing feel and he folded at Manny's feet.

In the pregnant hush of many people, old Doc's voice lashed out: "You fool! Why did you let him play like that? He swore to me he'd just walk through the match."

"Walk—Pops?" groped Manny.

"The man's mortal, ain't he? He's not a kid. He's middle-aged, with a middle-aged heart that's got some kinks in it. Here, you, give me a hand!"....

Lying there, in the locker room, with Doc working over him, Pops came back.

"Hi," he said to Manny.

"Hi."

"You...needed that threshing, Son. You needed it from *me*."

"Yeh," gulped Manny.

"But you...graduated today. You are...on your own."

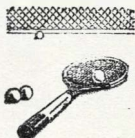
That flurry was Tia, who, with a total disregard for the privacies of the men's locker room, broke through to Pops. Her green eyes were agate-bright with tears. Her black hair fanned out over Pops' wizened, taut, little face, as she flung herself down to kiss him.

Tia's kiss, Manny saw clearly, was all compassionate and daughterly; and Pops was still addressing Manny past the curtain of her dark hair.

"You've got the stuff, Son. *And I'm not just talking about tennis.*"

Manny muttered: "I get it, Pops." And couldn't say more; the terrible familiarities you take with your own flesh and blood, like his hating Pops, when really he loved him till it hurt in his chest and closed his throat.

THE END



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FAMOUS WESTERN

October

NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS



A Bird in the Bush League

By W. T. Ballard

When Lawyer Culliman started to run the team, and make baseball a gentleman's game, Larry Shane decided that this was where he got off. Only he didn't want to run out on the Eagles — or on the Princess, either . . .

THE PITCH came up to the plate, big and fat and in the groove. Larry Shane hit it, putting all his anger into the swing. It gave him satisfaction to watch the screaming arc the ball made as it headed for the sign on the middle of the center field fence that read:

GET A MUG OF MUGGER-

*IAN'S BREW A BEER HIT IN
ANY LEAGUE*

Shane had nothing against Muggierian's Brew. He wasn't trying to hit the sign, nor did he, for the ball cleared the fence by a good ten feet and disappeared into the weed-grown lots beyond.

He wished Culliman could see it,

but then, Culliman wouldn't understand. Culliman was a lawyer, not a baseball man. Culliman said that Larry was getting old and unreliable but he could still hit.

Turning, Shane headed for the dug-out beneath the empty stands. Fred Gibbeny's voice was bitter with the acid of disillusionment. "Always the showoff. I'd hoped that Culliman was wrong, that you'd finally learned some sense. Are you trying to give my rookies an inferiority complex, knocking all our practice balls outside the park?"

Shane settled on the bench at the small manager's side. "Rutledge built an empire with the Eagles and his chain of farm club teams. He never worried about petty things like lost balls in those days."

"The Colonel's dead," said Gibbeny heavily. "A lot died with him. We're on a budget now."

"Jamie's idea?" Shane asked.

"No, Culliman thought it up."

Shane's mouth twisted. "Jamie isn't the man his father was. He's president, but he lets Culliman run things; a lawyer with as much idea and feeling for baseball as an eel."

"The Colonel picked Culliman before he died," Gibbeny reminded him. "It's rumored that he picked him as a son-in-law."

Larry Shane was suddenly tired. The words hit him hard, and he did not want Gibbeny to see. He rose and turned away, but the manager's voice came again, embarrassed now a trifle hesitant.

"Look, Larry. I'm manager here. You've played on Rutledge teams for years, but I'm managing this club. I don't give a damn about lost balls, but I do worry about the kids. It's my job to bring them up, to make them sharp and smart and ready for the big major leagues."

"So Culliman can sell them and show a profit for the estate?" Bitterness was in Shane's tone. "It was different with the Colonel. He developed players to make the Eagles solid fighting team." He fell silent, remembering. He'd been a fighter

himself, an umpire baiter, a crowd pleaser, a man who clowned and held out and argued with the front office.

Then everything was strife, a strife the team loved and the fans understood. They were one, the crowd and the team, with a single purpose.

All that was gone. The Colonel was gone, and Culliman was in command. Culliman didn't like players who fought and clowned. He'd offered Shane the choice, utility outfielder with a farm club, or out of the game entirely.

LARRY SHANE picked up his glove and moved along the third base line. With jaundiced eye he watched the pitcher. The kid was young and had a lot to learn. He needed control for his blinding speed. It would take work to shape this team, and Shane's interest was stirred. It might be fun to help Fred Gibbeny.

Then he turned and saw a patch of color in the empty stands behind the third base coaching box. He knew it was the Princess although he could not see her face. The way she sat reminded him of the Colonel. Too bad Jamie had to be the son. The Princess was more like the Colonel than her brother was.

Shane opened the wire gate and climbed the steps to where she sat, a circle of peanut hulls about her feet, a striped sack in her lap. He had not seen her since her father's death, and there was a new maturity about her which startled him.

"You don't belong here," he said, settling at her side. "This isn't a woman's world. It's a place of toil and sweat and tears." His grin took the cynicism from his words. "You should be leaping through daisy chains and listening to Sinatra."

She made him a face. It remained a cute face, even screwed out of shape. Then she held up a peanut which he accepted as one connoisseur from another.

"No daisy chains," she said. "I've graduated. I'm here to look at the Speakers and Ruths of tomorrow. I'm an ivory scout."

A BIRD IN THE BUSH LEAGUE

He leaned back to admire her. The hair was still red, but no longer stringy as it had been when he first showed her the proper way to hold a bat. The tiny freckles were gone, buried beneath a careful powder base.

He had the impulse to reach out and touch her. He thought, *I've loved her a long time and she's never known. I'm just Larry Shane, the clown who played on her father's teams.*

He kept the feeling from his voice, substituting a bantering vote. "A girl scout. I suppose you can make fire by rubbing two Cherokees together. But scouting the bushes for baseball talent needs more than that."

"You take the words out of Tom Culliman's mouth," she said.

Shane pictured the lawyer's displeasure. "He'd prefer you as a housewife, wouldn't he? His house: his wife."

"Tom's nice," she said, and the tone did not commit her. "He doesn't seem to realize that baseball is something you were born to feel. He thinks you learn it, like you learn accounting. He even dared to question my ability."

SHANE SHOOK his head. Culliman had a genius for making errors. This girl had cut her teeth on a catcher's mask, had slept between innings on a chest protector, had played in the dugout before she was three. She'd been the Colonel's confidant and pal. She knew baseball as few people knew the game.

But for her own good he couldn't tell her that. Instead he said, "For once Culliman is right. Traveling in busses and jerk-line trains sitting in leaky grandstands and sleeping in swayback beds. . . no Princess, no, that's not for you."

Disappointment put shadows in her eyes. "I never thought you'd turn into a hidebound conservative. Is this the Larry Shane who clowned his way through life, thumbing his nose at umpires and authority, or was your reputation only a figment of our press agent's fertile mind?"

"Here's the man to answer that," he

(Continued On Page 88)

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ALL SPORTS

(Continued From Page 87)

said, for he had seen Culliman moving toward them along the stands.

The girl turned her head quickly and her eyes changed and grew a little hard. "I told him not to follow me," she said. "I warned him not to come down here at all."

He thought, *she's angry, and anger is close to love.* He turned his head because he did not care to watch her face, and so, he watched Culliman instead.

The man was big and handsome and you felt his success. *He's proud, thought Shane. He's never been tamed. It will be a job for the Princess to undertake.*

He saw Culliman climb toward them, saw the look in the man's eyes and he was suddenly startled. *Culliman's jealous, he thought, the fool is jealous of me.*

He masked a smile. This was another Culliman error. The lawyer couldn't understand that to the girl Shane was a friend and nothing more.

Culliman nodded, and his voice was curt. "I hope you remember what I told you, Shane. I hope you'll have no trouble here."

Shane's eyes were wicked but his smile lent his words a certain friendliness. "Culliman and I don't see eye to eye. I resent seeing the old fighting spirit go. I liked to hear the crowds, even when they booed. At least boos showed interest.

"But there's no interest left in a Rutledge team, no fire, no color. Do you know how long it's been since an umpire got his head cracked by an Eagle bat?"

The Princess laughed but Culliman failed to smile. "I don't like violence," the lawyer said in his dry voice.

"Neither does Arthur." Larry Shane kept his voice carefully light. "He's your perfect mirror, Tom. I couldn't play on an Arthur managed team. To me there's nothing left of the old game."

"You might be wrong." The Princess' tone was questioning.

He was suddenly bitter because she seemed not to understand. He had told Jamie these same things and Jamie had thought he was merely fighting to keep his job. Maybe the

A BIRD IN THE BUSH LEAGUE

Princess thought that too.

He rose, tall as Culliman and quicker, a man who failed to show his thirty years. "Goodby," he said, "and good luck." He moved away, driving his spikes deep into the weathered steps, as if by splintering the wood he could hurt something he had once loved—something that had betrayed him.

THE SEASON opened dismally. They dropped the first four games by sorry scores. Larry Shane had almost forgotten how good Three-A ball could be. Only the pitching fell far short. He could have battered Muggerian's sign from the center field fence, but the old urge was gone.

He took no pride in a safe hit, no joy in a race to make an impossible catch. Few errors were chalked up to him, but line drives he might once have saved fell well beyond his grasp, and often, in the pinches, he lied out.

He didn't clown, he never questioned an umpire's decision. He played mechanical ball, and he gave the team its money's worth—no more. It was the second month when Gibbeny buttonholed him. "You sick, Larry?"

"No," said Shane. "Just old."

Gibbeny snorted. "Old, hell! I'm forty, and I can still last a few innings."

"I'm playing," said Shane. "Nine innings every day."

"But not the whirlwind you used to be."

"I'm growing up." Shane was curt. "I found out this is a business, not a game. It's only in a game you add that extra bit of steam. In a business you merely work to earn your pay."

He didn't like the look in Gibbeny's eyes, but then he was doing what Tom Culliman had asked and maybe Tom Culliman was right. It didn't pay to clown and fight. It didn't pay to make the fans feel you were their personal friend.

He continued to do his job, and it was only a job. He had no interest in his batting average, nor in the percentage standing of the farm club.

But there was one thing which he

(Continued On Page 90)



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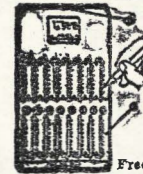
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ALL SPORTS

(Continued From Page 89)

could not put aside. The habit of ten years was much too strong. He followed the Eagles in the newspapers, watching the box scores, judging the mistakes. He knew as much about his old team as Arthur the manager did.

He watched them falter, slip into the second division, slide down hill. He watched the attendance figures drop. The team was listless, without interest.

The first of August came and passed, and the Eagles hit the bottom of the league. In all the years the Colonel owned them they had never found that spot. There was bitter grumbling in the press and the sport pages filled with rumors that Arthur was slated to go.

ARTHUR WAS being blamed for something which was not his fault. Shane knew the man had carried out front office orders to the letter, and he would go down because of Culliman's mistakes. A bleak anger touched Shane, although Arthur was no friend of his. The anger held when the call came, unexpected and without warning.

The wire was to Gibbeny, not Shane. "They're bringing you back upstairs," Fred said with envy in his voice. "Though why I wouldn't know, after the brand of ball you've played for us."

"I'm not going," said Larry Shane. "I wouldn't be caught dead in the Eagles' park. And judging by the papers, neither would the fans, Culliman might as well have hung out a smallpox sign."

"Tell him that," Gibbeny's smile was sour. "Go there and tell him exactly how you feel. It might help your soul if it does no other good. Lord knows it's been eating you all season."

The thought gave Shane an unexpected pleasure. Suddenly he grinned. "I'll do that. I'll explain exactly what his careful blundering has done. Then I'll throw the whole works in his face. And maybe next year I'll jump to Mexico." He turned and walked away, and that night caught the plane.

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A BIRD IN THE BUSH LEAGUE

It moved no faster than the high speed elevator which lifted him to the twentieth floor of the Rutledge Tower, the building which had been the Colonel's pride, erected as a monument to his expanding empire.

It was good to be at home, and walking along the marble corridor he rehearsed the words he would use to Culliman. Then, coming in through the big double doors he stopped, for the Princess stood in the reception room.

Surprise held him very still as he watched the smile come up to warm her grey green eyes. "Didn't you expect to see me, Larry?"

He recovered then, and caught the ball. "No, but I'm glad you're here. It gives me a chance to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" she gave him a puzzled look. "But this isn't goodbye. It's hello, and welcome back."

He shook his head. "I just came to bow out, to tell Culliman what a damn fool I think he is."

"Tom isn't here," she said. "He bowed out. We had an argument I told him the management was wrong, and Jamie backed him up. There was only one thing to do. I traded my share of the estate. Jamie got my other interests. I took the Eagles and the farm club teams."

"You made a sour deal," Shane said. "The Eagles aren't what they were. Their drawing power is gone. There's nothing more fickle than a disappointed fan. The club must be losing money right and left."

"It is." Her chin came up, and her resemblance to the Colonel grew. "I've got to prove I'm right. You've got to prove it for me. Together we'll show Tom Culliman."

He saw it then, the whole story in the way she spoke. This was the fight between her and Culliman, and effort on her part to tame the man and bend him before they married. The irony came in her choice of Shane to help her bring Culliman to heel. But it wasn't in him to refuse. A Rutledge asked help, and Shane had never failed the family in the pinches.

"We'll try," he said, "We'll wake up the Eagles if it takes an atom

(Continued On Page 92)

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bomb, and Arthur too."

"Arthur's gone," she said. "He went out with Culliman. You're manager, Larry." She offered her hand which he took gravely. That had been the Colonel's way. Contracts were for the legal department only.

SHANE KNEW what he had to do. It was too late to help their standing in the league. If they won all the remaining games they would still finish in the second division.

But standings did not worry him. The thing was to rouse the team, to play each individual game to win, to thus restore the failing confidence of the fans.

It looked impossible, but for the Princess it was worth a try, and for the team. He had to prove her right, to help her show Tom Culliman.

Dressing under the stands Shane felt like a clown making a final appearance under the big top, dabbing his face with grease paint for the last time.

He thought, *I'm getting maudlin, and to hell with it.* He grinned then as he went out to meet the newspaper guys.

"We'll play ball," he said when the greetings were passed. "I've got one interest, to give the crowd its money's worth."

"Sure," said Tobey Reynolds of the News. "You always did do that, but it's different now. The front office will ham-string you like they did Arthur."

"The front office will leave me alone," said Shane. He picked up a bat and swung it loosely. "The first auditor or clerk who interferes gets this across the rump."

The press boys laughed because they liked him. But he sensed that they were cynical. They doubted that the Eagles could be made to fight. It was a team whipped before it took the field.

There were times during the next few days when Shane began to doubt himself. He couldn't seem to break the lethargy which bound the club and made the players mechanical atoms rather than men.

A BIRD IN THE BUSH LEAGUE

Ben Warren was one of the worst, a stringy youth with the legs of an antelope. Warren had his share of chances and he made them good as long as the soaring ball fell into the bounds he had set for himself.

But Texas leaguers which he might have saved feil as safe hits while he loped lazily up toward second to retrieve them. And after each such miss he turned to stare at Shane as if daring the new manager to comment on his failure.

Shane held his tongue. He didn't ride Warren and he made no college-coach speeches. The time for words had passed. It was a new role for him, holding his tongue in the face of careless play, but he realized that only action could save the team, action and a miracle.

He got what he wanted in the sixth inning of the fourth game, and it turned out better than he had dared to dream, better than anything he could have manufactured. There were two out, two men on base and Gilbert coming up. A hit would mean a run.

Gilbert led the league, a slugger whose home run record made headlines, even in this day of lively balls. The first pitch was a strike, called; the second wild, high, on the outside. The third a little low, but Gilbert crouched and caught it square, starting it for the fence in a sizzling drive.

Larry Shane moved with the crack of the bat. It was Warren's chance, really, though a little left of center field, but Warren wasn't running fast enough.

Shane wasn't certain he was running fast enough himself. The ball was a streak of grey, still climbing in its flat trajectory, and it looked as if it might just clear the fence.

SHANE PUT on his last ounce of steam and went into the air, lacking the time to get his glove in place. He made the impossible catch with his bare hand, high against the fence, and pain sickened him as he dropped back to the ground.

He saw Warren watching and the kid's face had a guilty unbelieving

(Continued On Page 94)

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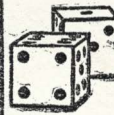
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ALL SPORTS

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look. "Nice catch," he muttered as they trotted in.

"Just luck," said Shane, knowing this was the truth. He got a nice hand from the half-filled stands. He turned a cartwheel for them down the third base line. He was the Larry Shane of other years. He mugged and pantomimed, and gave the crowd its return for their cheers. It was a hero's return and all in fun—and the crowd was his friend again, and therefore friendly to the team.

The Eagles, jolted out of their apathy, went on and drove the pitcher from the box. They won the game, the second in three long weeks.

The sports writers gave the credit to Larry Shane, and what they said about him was nice to read. But the praise would not last. You couldn't build up spirit on one play. "We need a fight," he told the Princess. "A good, old fashioned bottle-slinging scrap. There's nothing like a scrap to solidify a team."

There was a question in her eyes. "You'll be fined, and thrown out of the game?"

"So what?" He was light hearted and feeling very young. "Warren and the rest will love me that much more. A club will battle for a fighting manager, and in so doing will battle for themselves. The crowd will love it. They'll come back to see the feud carried on. It's things like that that bring in customers."

"You're a fraud," she said, a smile touching her lips. "I guess maybe you've always been a fraud."

He shook his head, trying to make her understand. "Not a fraud, Princess. We all play a part, of course. Even the fans aren't fooled by that. But they love it when you care enough to play the part. If you don't care they lose interest."

She thought that over soberly. "I understand," she said. "I think I understand my father better at the moment than I ever did before."

Shane staged his fight the following day, and no director ever planned a show more carefully. McNulty was behind the plate, and Shane well remembered his short temper. It had been a hazard, batting

A BIRD IN THE BUSH LEAGUE

in front of him in other years.

He let the first pitch go for a called strike. The second was a ball, high, inside. Shane ducked away, more than he needed to. "If that jerk beans me I'll blast his ears." He said it very loud and McNulty laughed.

"Nowhere near you, soldier. Because you catch them bare handed is no sign you aren't blind. Go back to the bench and give a younger man a chance."

SHANE TURNED and cursed the crouching catcher. He pushed him back into the umpire's legs. McNulty came up ripping off his mask. He slammed his mitt into Shane's face, and Shane waded in gleefully. It felt good for his knuckles to jar on bone again. It was even better when McNulty's teammates came streaming off the field and the Eagles boiled from the dugout to meet them. Not until then had he felt certain he had won. Now he knew he had a team, a group of men with one thought in mind.

The crowd was on its feet, yelling encouragement. The park police had their hands full and everything was fine. He grinned and ducked a singing bottle as it passed. The Princess could stop worrying. The Eagles would play ball now, not for her, or him, but for their own self respect.

Banished from the playing field, he was still happy. The aroused Eagles drove the pitcher from the box, and Warren made a headlong dive for a ball which simply could not be caught.

The spirit held on through the closing weeks. They knocked off the league leaders three straight games. They had no pennant hopes themselves but they played each individual game as if life and death hung in the balance.

Shane found himself playing impossible ball, urged on by the example of the men he had set out to inspire. The team quarreled happily among themselves, they baited umpires and threatened rival clubs. The public loved it and came back for more. The stands filled up and in the final

(Continued On Page 96)

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ALL SPORTS

(Continued From Page 95)

week they out drew the league leaders in attendance.

When the last out was called there was no room for regret. The boys made boistrous plans for their fall hunting trips, and noisy prophecies for the coming year. Shane did not have the heart to tell them he was not coming back, that he had already accomplished what he had set out to do.

He went downtown instead and called Culliman on the phone. He asked the lawyer to a quiet dinner in a side-street restaurant, and was almost surprised that Culliman did not refuse.

He meant to talk straight with the man, to show Culliman where he'd been wrong, and then to tell the lawyer that his chance was now, that he should go to the Princess and admit his errors. That, thought Shane, would fix everything. She and Culliman could take the teams, could run them as the Colonel planned. He got a satisfaction from the thought. Again he'd helped to carry out a Rutledge wish. And if the Princess was now happy, what more could he ask?

He rose as Culliman came in, and their hands locked. It was a solid handshake that the lawyer had ever given him, and there was a respect in Culliman's eyes which Shane had not seen there before.

"I've got to give it to you," the lawyer said. "I see now you were right. I see the Princess understood."

In front of praise Shane found that he lacked words. He said, slowly. "It's nice of you to take it this way."

"It's the only way you can take it," said Culliman.

SHANE SMILED at his own fears. He'd been afraid that Culliman might be too hard headed to admit his mistake, that the Princess would have further trouble with the man. "Not everyone is big enough to admit it when he's wrong."

Culliman smiled. "A man can't argue with figures. All anyone would have to do is to look at the attendance records. The team started to pull them in the week after you came back.

If you can keep the increase coming the Eagles will need a larger park next year."

Shane started to say, "I won't be here. Your turn has come. It's time for you to admit your mistake and patch up your quarrel with the Princess," but he never uttered the words for Culliman continued to speak.

"It's funny, Shane," he sounded puzzled. "I gave the crowd an honest game, good careful work with no horseplay, no mugging, no clowning, and they stopped coming. You handed them your corny arguments, your faked fights, your silly grandstand catches, your small boy tricks. They flocked in. They believed it, and all the time you were merely fooling them. They're suckers who didn't know that behind your clown's mask you were laughing at their stupidity."

Shane's face was suddenly stiff. He tried to smile and his lips would not respond. He tried to speak, but his tongue wouldn't form the words.

He wanted to explain that he hadn't laughed at the crowd, that they had laughed with him and that the fan in the cheapest seat understood perfectly what he did, and wasn't fooled. He wanted to say that sheer love of the game bound them all together.

But he couldn't speak because he saw that Culliman would never understand. The words to Culliman would merely sound cheap and melodramatic as most emotion does when put in words.

And this was the man who the Princess was to marry. She couldn't be happy in such a marriage. To hell with what she or the Colonel had thought. For once he would not be bound by a Rutledge wish.

He heaved himself from the chair, forgetful of his guest, of his unfinished meal. He found a taxi and barked her address, and the trip uptown was very slow.

HE CAME barging in through the little entry as if sliding up to second on a close hit. She was standing there, regarding him with widened eyes.

"Why Larry, what's happened? What's the matter? The clerk called up to say you went across the lobby like a tornado in a Kansas town."

"Plenty," he said, and paused for necessary breath. "I've had a talk with Culliman. I meant to explain that he'd been wrong, that he should come to you and admit the mistake.

"He crossed me by saying it himself and for an instant I judged him a swell guy, and bright, that your pick of a husband was strictly in the groove. But he doesn't understand, Princess, he sees only surface things. He thinks I brought the fans back into the park by faking. He can't realize that they came because the Eagles were playing ball, that all any fan asks is for a team to play with its heart."

She tried to speak, but he waved her down. "To hell with him," he said. "I don't know much about girls, or love, or things. I only know that Culliman is not the man for you. It was the one mistake the Colonel made. I think you're nuts to want to marry the man."

"Who said I did?"

He stared at her and his face went slack with surprise. "But Princess, I thought..."

"You thought," she said. "You're as stupid as Tom Culliman. Why do you think I scouted the bush-league? What is every girl on the scout for? Why did I take over the clubs and bring you back? I decided to marry you when I was ten years old, and I've never changed my mind.

"But I don't know. Love's a game too. You have to play it with your heart although you only have a single fan to please. I guess everyone has his blind spot, and yours must be love. I'm not certain you can ever learn..."

He stopped her words. He stopped them with a kiss. And when he could speak it was to laugh. "I can try," he said. "I can try like hell, and what have I to lose? At least the lessons will be interesting."

THE END

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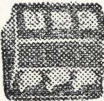
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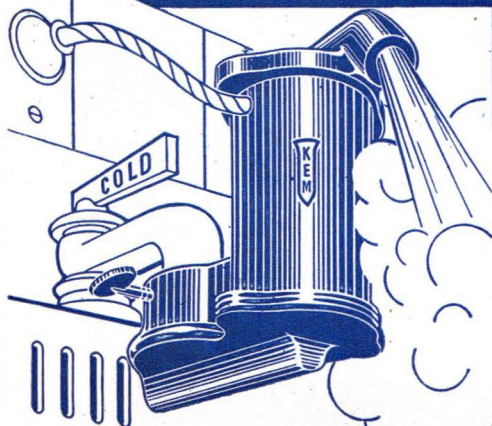
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