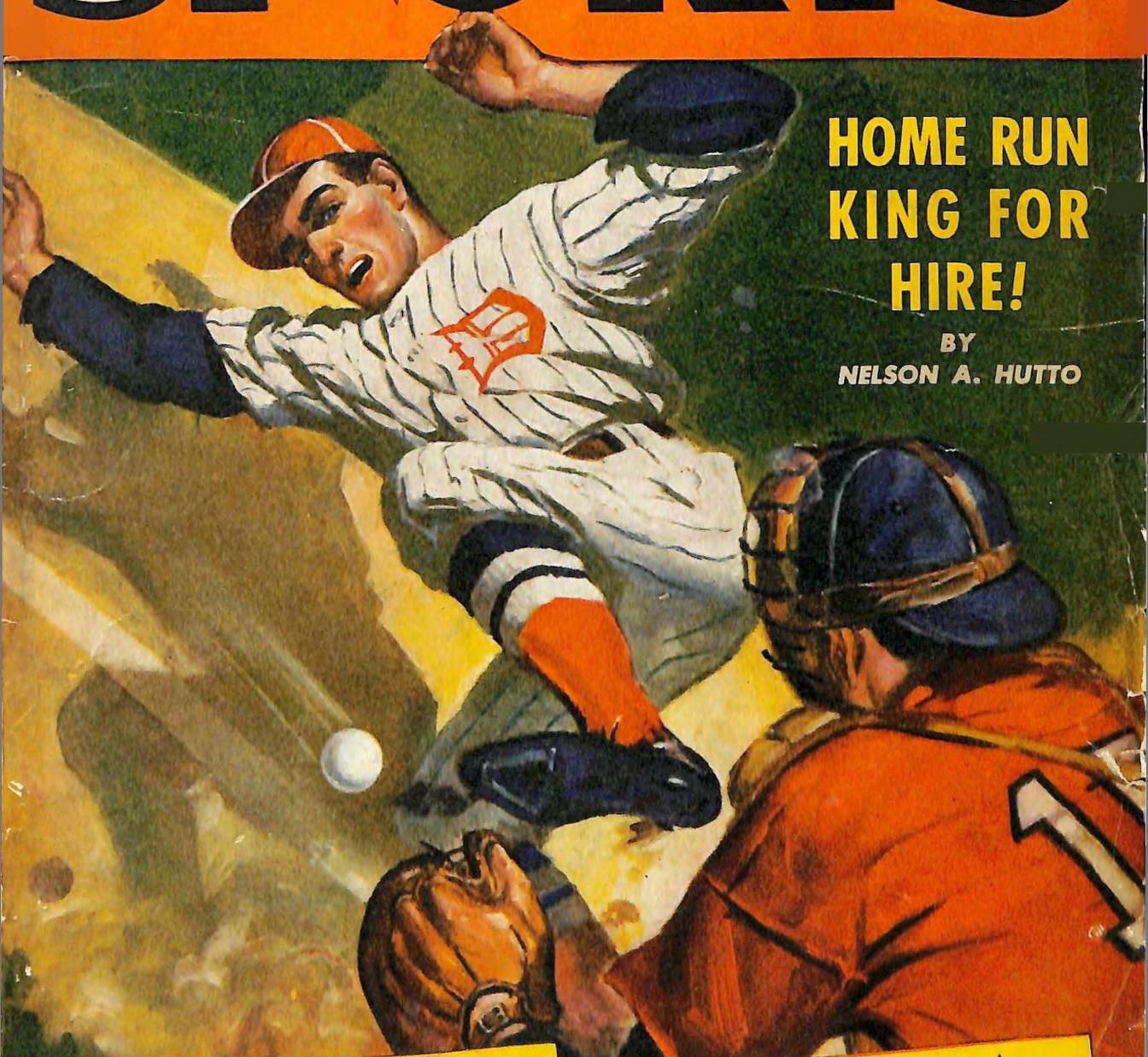


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SPORTS



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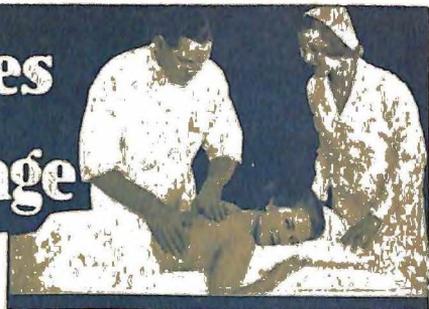
BY
NELSON A. HUTTO

**BLOOD-AND-
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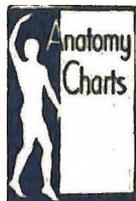
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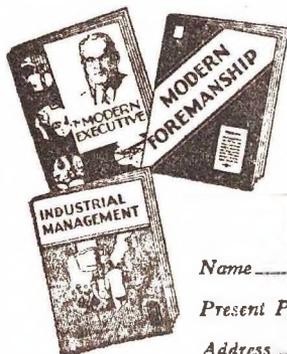
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COMPLETE ACTION STORIES **SPORTS**

Vol. 4, No. 2

★ ★ GREAT NOVEL ★ ★

September, 1942

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BASEBALL

BUSH-LEAGUE BOY-WONDER . . . by C. Paul Jackson 6

You can't catch big-league ball bucking every man on your team, and Muddy Lane could go back to the bushes or stick depending on how steady he kept the new Kid fogging in that fireball!

★ ★ 3 SMASHING NOVELETTES ★ ★

FIGHT

BLOOD-AND-LEATHER BUTCHER . . . by Giles A. Lutz 46

He was glad he had the sleep drops in his right hand, and could walk out there and end a scrap fast with a sock or two, but Canby was no ring killer!

BASEBALL

HOME RUN KING FOR HIRE! . . . by Nelson A. Hutto 59

This was for the pennant, the Series, the World's Championship—this was up there in the clutch, when it took a horsehide king and not a diamond has-been!

BASEBALL

BASEBALL PLUS by Norman L. Paul 96

He wanted to ride one, he wanted to really blast one over the center-field fence—but a guy had to be a ball-player to do that!

•
PLUS
•

★ ★ 3 EXCITING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

TENNIS

THE TENNIS TERROR by Richard Brister 38

The Kid was playing slam-bang, reckless tennis, he was really hot, and if Jerry Monroe still wanted to make a net champ out of him, he'd have to match him drive for drive and smash for smash!

GOLF

LAST HOLE HOODOO by W. H. Temple 78

His first major tournament would be in the bag if he shot a six or better on this final four-par hole—if!

FIGHT

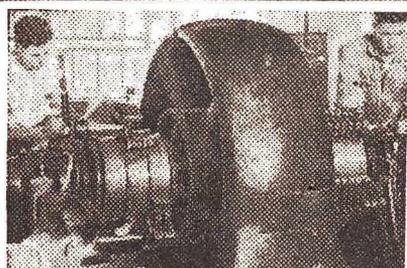
RING WAR by David Manners 87

He'd been fighting a ring war all his life, and one red-leather blitzkrieg more or less wouldn't make or break him!

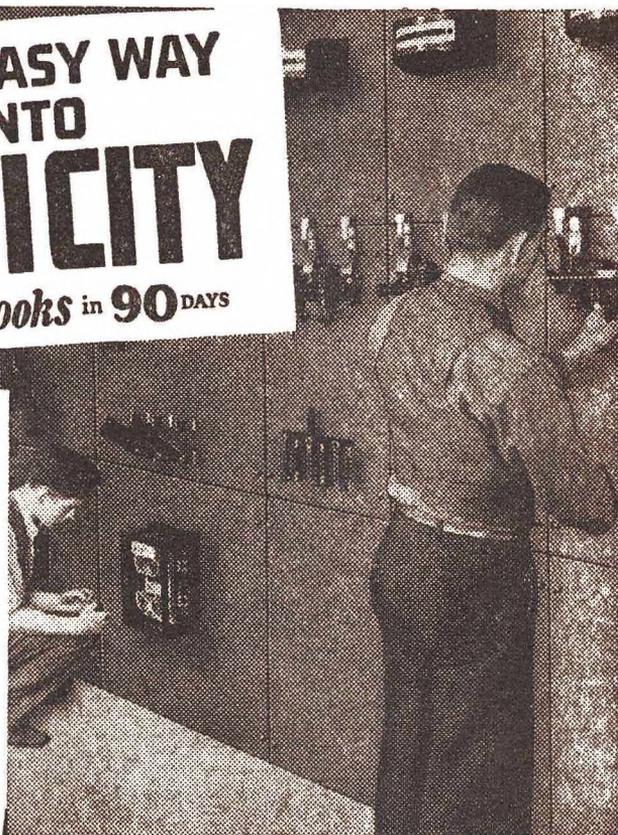
ROBERT O. ERISMAN—EDITOR

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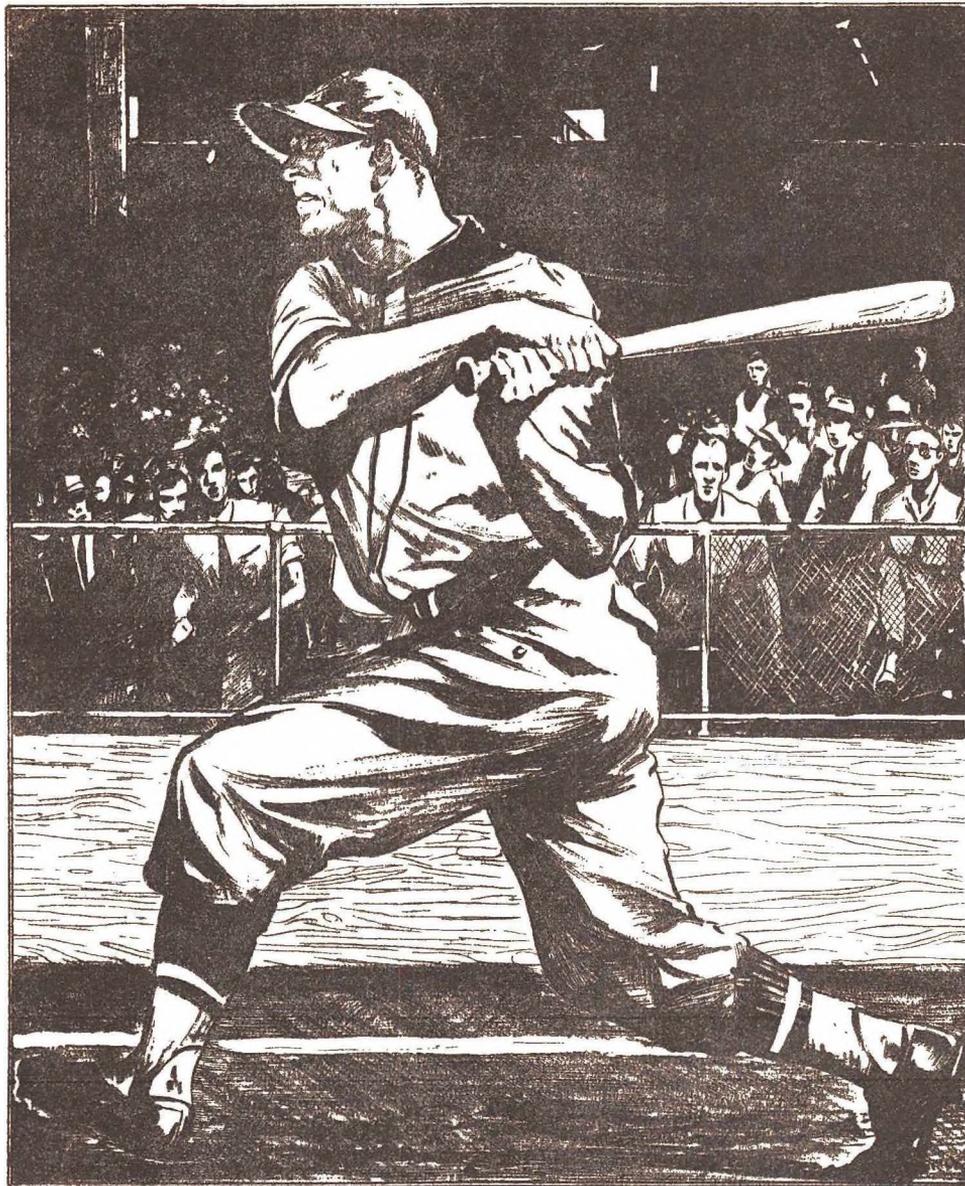
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BUSH-LEAGUE



He tried hurriedly to change his timing. He

HE CROUCHED behind the plate and passed a carefully masked sign to the rookie southpaw on the mound. He felt the strained tightness in his knee, but Muddy Lane pushed from his mind the gnawing uneasiness. It was nothing, it *had* to be nothing. The knee would be a little shaky until the ligaments toughened, that was all.

"Come on, Lefty, kid. Gun that agate at the old mitt!"

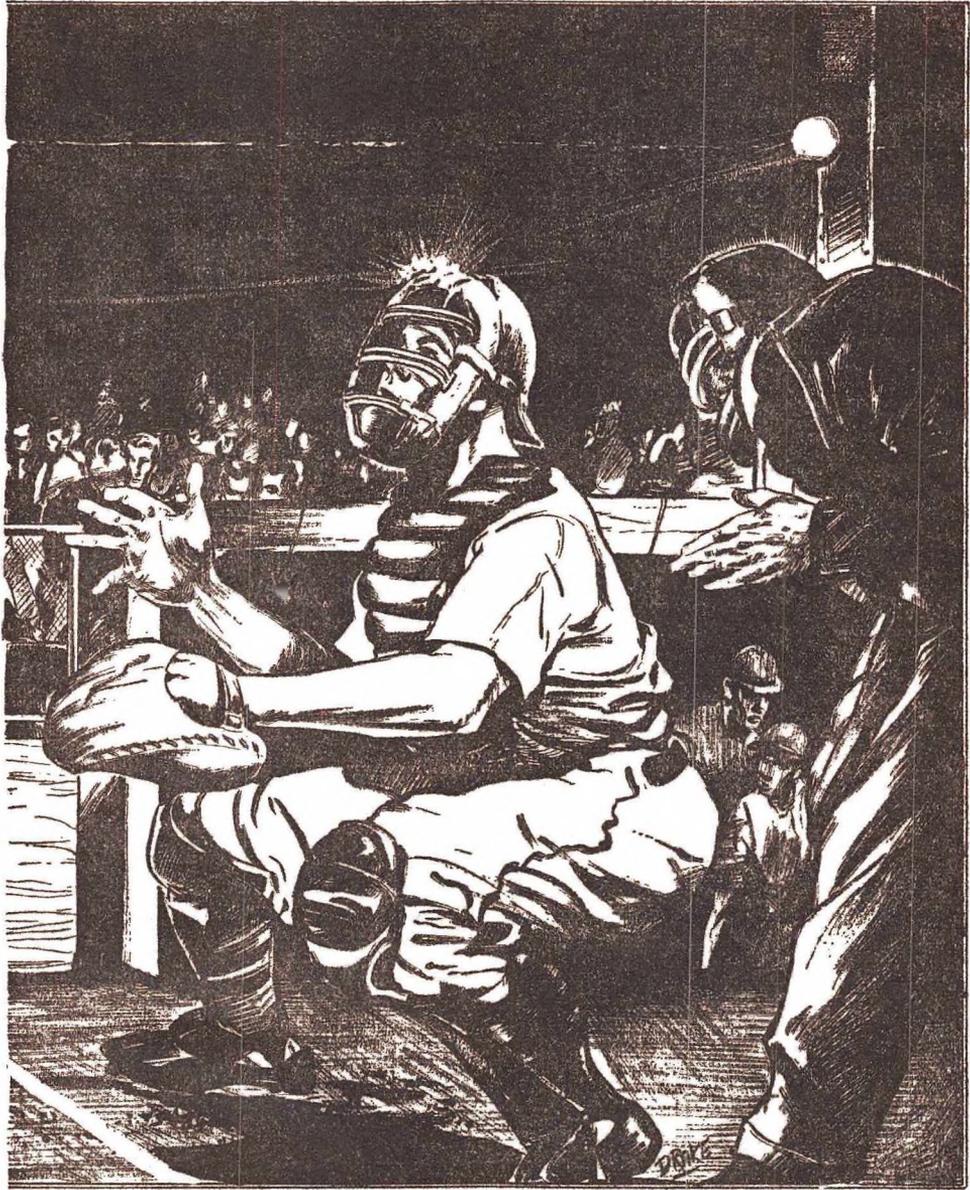
The old fight was in Muddy's shout of encouragement to the southpaw—a flaming competitive spirit that flowed down pitcher's lane to steady faltering hurlers, and one of the reasons Muddy Lane was a big league star when only three years removed from college ball.

"Nothing to worry about, Lefty.

SMASH DIAMOND NOVEL OF A ROOKIE BACKSTOP WHO

BOY-WONDER

by
C. PAUL JACKSON
Author of "Horsehide Hellion," etc.



couldn't. His weak lunge missed the teasing, slow curve!

Grove himself never grooved a sweeter payball than this rookie southpaw was giving him, but Muddy Lane knew the big-leagues took more than a crack battery!

Bust that rock down the slot!"

The husky southpaw chucker on the rubber reared back and cut loose his swift. The horsehide pellet smoked through the ozone, fast enough but off

the beam. The lanky, six-feet-one of Muddy Lane abruptly shot up and out in a stretching leap. The pitch was three feet outside and almost as much over Muddy's head. His big mitt

TRIED TO BUCK EVERY BIG-LEAGUER ON HIS TEAM!

smothered the near wild-pitch, but Muddy landed off balance and in a twisted stance.

White-hot pokers stabbed his right knee. The bars of his mask hid the grimace of pain that wrenched his lean face. Muddy straightened, tossed the ball to the pitcher.

"Don't mind it, Left, the next one'll be in there. Two-and-two is nice chuck-in', you're still ahead of 'im!"

Smudges of color from the big blue 3 on his back merged into the dampness of his shirt. Sweat-stain edged the cross lines of his chest protector straps across the gray flannel and dust and sweat plastered his pants a darker, muddy gray. Muddy Lane perspired a flood when he caught a ballgame—he'd come by the name "Muddy" because the grime and sweat he accumulated made his monkey suit look like he'd slid on his belly through a mudpuddle—but the sudden clammy trickle down his spine wasn't normal, healthy sweat.

Muddy crouched to give his sign and gritted his teeth to keep from crying out at the grinding fire when he bent his bad knee. A little voice inside his brain whispered, *Don't be a fool, you're through! You can't catch big league ball on one leg!*

He stifled the warning. He didn't dare listen. If he didn't hang in there, Hutch Hinkly would be in the back-stop spot and Muddy Lane *would* be through. That couldn't be. He hadn't battled his way to the hindsnatch job on the big league Blues to lay down and give in to Hinkly at the first sign of adversity. Why, a man wasn't through in the big show before he was an oldster of thirty-five or forty! He had at least ten years left. He was only twenty-three!

He eased his weight on his good leg. The bad one, the knee he'd twisted sliding in a game the final week of last season and that had taken another beating

six weeks ago in a pile-up at the plate in a training camp game, was heavy and throbbed numbly.

"The old pepper out there, gang!" Muddy yelled. "The old jinegar!"

The lanky catcher had been behind the plate in too many grueling battles not to recognize that this was a crucial spot. A hit here and another game was gone. Besides the two runs that would score, Lefty Gray would blow higher than the stratosphere and the jittery Blues would come apart at the seams like they had yesterday behind Smoky Joe Booker.

It was because he fought against this imminent collapse that Muddy was practically on one leg. Lefty Gray had walked three to fill the bases after one was out. Muddy's snap throw to Jake Hale had trapped an unwary baserunner off first, forced him to jockey between first and second until finally the man on third dashed for home. Hale's peg had the runner by six feet but he'd barged full-tilt into Muddy and that weak knee had taken a banging.

"Nothing to worry about. Lefty," the lanky hindsnatch shouted again. "The dark one, kid, right down Main Street! The old fireball!"

THE ball broke down and away from the lefthand batter. It was going to be close, the hitter didn't dare take it on a two-and-two count. He tried hurriedly to change his timing. He couldn't. His weak lunge missed the teasing, slow curve and he heaved his bat disgustedly toward the dugout.

"The way to chuck, Lefty!" Muddy chortled at Gray. "Grove himself never tossed a sweeter payball than that!"

The young pitcher grinned, swaggered a bit. Muddy was content. All Lefty Gray needed to be a great chucker was confidence. Muddy forced himself to walk to the dugout without limp-

ing. The stubborn, fighting flame inside him refused to give in.

A fat, red-faced man in street clothes got up from the dugout bench. J. K. Menner, business manager and general front-office man of the Blues, was out of place bench-managing a ballclub and looked it.

"Come on, men, get some runs," Menner pleaded in a harassed tone. "For heaven's sake, show a little life! You don't look like a Mike Walsh team. Mike is listening on the radio, you can bet!"

A voice muttered, "So what? Takes more'n a big-name manager listening in to make a ballclub!"

The *sotto voce* observation came from Hutch Hinkly. Muddy looked sharply at the husky catcher Mike Walsh had traded for last winter.

Hinkley met Muddy's gaze challengingly, as though he dared the lanky regular backstop to say anything. Muddy's steady gray eyes stared levelly and it was Hinkly who dropped his gaze. Muddy sank to the bench, stretched his throbbing leg out straight. The pulsing pain in his knee momentarily drove thought of Hutch Hinkly from his mind.

It'll be all right after a few minutes rest, Muddy told himself. It's got to be all right. Hinkly will tear down all the confidence we've built up in Lefty Gray, if he gets in there.

Muddy didn't get much rest. Three Blues went through the motions at the plate. Muddy got up, clapped the southpaw on the shoulder.

"Let's go get 'em, Left," Muddy said. "Fog that fireball through for another frame and—"

He broke off abruptly, stumbled back to the bench. Cold sweat stood on his forehead and a whiteness was under the tan of his lean face. He tried to bend the knee. It was stiff as a ramrod.

"Now what!" Menner stood before the white-lipped catcher. "What's the matter, Muddy?"

"My knee. I—I guess I can't go on. It—I—Hinkly will have to finish."

"And about time!" Hinkly's voice was loud. "Maybe with somebody with all his legs and arms in there this outfit'll look more like a ballclub!"

"Everything happens to me!" Menner fumed. "That does it! I've got enough! Miss Walsh, take a—" The fat front office man suddenly realized that he wasn't behind his desk and that Jerreen, old Mike's niece and Menner's right hand "man," wasn't there to take a letter. Menner sputtered some more. "Okay, okay, okay! Get out there, Hinkly!"

Menner's round face was redder than ever as he turned to Muddy.

"Have the club physician look at your knee," he said. "And when we get back to Blues Stadium tomorrow, stop in my office before you do anything else. This thing is going to be settled without further delay!"

Muddy drew a deep breath outside the door lettered BLUES SPORTS ENTERPRISES, INC.—J. K. Menner, Bus. Mgr. A nagging fear was in Muddy's mind that the thing that was "going to be settled without further delay" was the connection of Muddy Lane with the Blues.

H E'D put in a session with the club physician before coming to the ballpark. The doctor had gone over the bad knee thoroughly. At the end the medical man had said,

"The knee is a mighty complicated articulation, son. Essentially it consists of the broadened ends of the tibia and the femur with a sesamoid bone—the patella—in the exterior apparatus; two fibrocartilages, interposed between the ends of the tibia and femur; two

cruciate ligaments, anterior and posterior; and two lateral ligaments, the internal and external. Injury to any one of these may impair the activity of the joint.

"The trauma you suffered last September was corrected by surgery and doubtless further surgery would relieve the present distress. However, there is a danger in too much cutting and carving of such a delicate and complicated organ. I am inclined to believe that some minor maladjustment explains your trouble. Perhaps either the interior or exterior semilunar cartilage is failing in its function as a wedge between the tibia and femur, thus not keeping the cruciate ligaments tense."

Muddy said frankly, "You left me at the second ligament, doc. What does all that mean in ballplayer's language?"

The doc smiled, said, "Didn't mean to show off, son. What I mean is simply that the right twist, jar, or something might—mind you, I say *might*—correct your trouble. There is, of course, the possibility that you may have re-injured the joint by too great stress too soon, but I would not advise immediate surgery."

The doctor's verdict had alternately buoyed and depressed Muddy. As he came to Menner's office he was on the low swing.

Well, might as well get it over with. If the doc had seen Menner and told him Muddy was all through, he might as well know the worst.

A girl sat back of a typewriter at a table in the outer office. Her face was small and the delicate white softness of her features contrasted to a frame of hair so black that it seemed purple. She wore it in a long bob with just a smooth upswirl at the bottom.

Muddy's pulse beat a little faster as always at sight of Jerreen Walsh. She looked up and the red line of her mouth was broken in a smile, exposed even,

gleaming white teeth, and a light was in her deep blue eyes.

He hastily smoothed a hand through his brown hair that was always ruffled. His gray eyes rested briefly on the girl then jerked away. It seemed to him that the eager light in her eyes flicked out when she saw who he was, as though she was expecting someone else. Probably Hinkly, he thought.

"J.K. asked me to see him this morning."

Muddy's words were blurted out in a kind of explanation for his presence. The girl looked at him. Once the smile on her lips had been warm and vibrant for him. Now it seemed fixed and impersonal. They'd had their first quarrel when Jerreen had gone out with Hutch Hinkly. She glanced now at the appointment pad on the desk. Muddy followed her eyes, saw scribbled on the pad, "Hutch Hinkly to see J.K. at ten" and below, "Mr. Lane sometime this morning. Send him right in." So it was Hutch Hinkly but *mister* Lane!

"He's expecting you," she said. "In the inner office."

Muddy mumbled, "Thanks," walked past the girl. He didn't hear the little sigh that moved her slight shoulders nor see the hurt in her eyes.

Everything was all mixed up. Funny how a guy could be torn to pieces by a girl. No use kidding himself, Jerreen Walsh didn't know he was alive anymore. Not since Hinkly had come to the Blues.

Damn Hutch Hinkly! And what difference if Menner did hand Muddy Lane his release? Most of the reasons he wanted to hang on with the Blues were wrapped up in Jerreen Walsh and certain hazy dreams about a lanky catcher and her dark loveliness in a little cottage. Oh, nuts!

MENNER stood at a broad window. The business offices of the Blues

were in the tower of Blues Stadium and the window overlooked the huge empty stands. Groundskeepers working on the green smoothness of the playing field down below were toy figures from this window. Menner turned his short round body briefly when Muddy came in, grunted, then looked back out the window. It seemed a full minute before he spoke.

"I've just been in touch with Mike Walsh by phone, Muddy. It's bad with Mike, they wouldn't let me see him in person."

Menner looked across the stadium then, added slowly, "Mike probably never will stand here and admire this view again and plan for days when World Series crowds will again jam every seat. They're shipping Mike to Arizona in a kind of forlorn hope that the dry air down there may help him. But Mike hasn't much hope."

Menner moved away from the window, went on,

"Looks like the old gag that it never rains but it pours fits us. Mike is cut down just when we need him most; the fans suddenly decide they've laid their dough on the line long enough without a winner and stay away in droves; and your knee has to go hay-wire again."

Muddy tightened his lips and his eyes held a resigned bleakness. When J.K. Menner cried hard times, the axe was goin to fall one place or another.

"No need to go through the ritual," Muddy said. "Outside of maybe Joe Booker, I'm the highest salaried man on the payroll. I get it. I was the fairhaired boy last year, the guy who was going to spark the club back to winning ways." Muddy's tone was bitter. "Now I'm slowed down for maybe a little while and right away I'm—"

"Don't say anything you might want to eat later, Muddy!"

"——I'm marked for the discard." Muddy waded through the general manager's interruption. "I've seen it coming ever since Mike traded for Hinkly last winter."

"You talk like a green rookie, Muddy! Mike Walsh knew the same as everybody in the league that Hinkly is a clubhouse lawyer, a trouble-maker!"

"Then why did he trade for Hinkly? Because Mike figured I was on the way out after that crackup last September!"

"Hah!" Menner snorted. "And that's the reason Mike gave you the fattest salary hike I ever knew a second year man to get, I suppose!"

The rotund front office man waddled to his desk, yanked a cigar from a humidior and jammed it into the corner of his mouth.

"You're off a country mile," he said. "Mike traded off a couple of players that he figured wouldn't fit in with us and got Hinkly, a twenty grand player on the open market. Mike knew what he was doing. He intended to use Hinkly as bait in a three-cornered deal with two clubs in the other league. He was after another starting pitcher and we would have got him, had waivers from every club in our league. Then you smashed your knee again in Florida and Mike was forced to keep Hinkly for insurance."

"If Mike hadn't had to have his operation and been struck with pneumonia, Hinkly would have been disposed of. We counted on Mike's being back in a couple of weeks. That's why we didn't appoint a manager, why I took over."

Menner bit down viciously on the cigar, scowled.

"That hope is definitely out. And when I talked with him on the phone, Mike agreed that it's time somebody who knows baseball should take over."

The fat business manager took the cigar from his mouth and pointed it at the tall young catcher.

"Hinkly asked me for an appointment this morning—I don't know why—but he'll be here. It's going to be up to the new manager to dispose of Hinkly's case. And that's you, I hope. I'm offering you the job as manager of the club!"

Muddy stared unbelievably across the desk, ran his tongue over his lips, swallowed. His ears were playing tricks on him.

"It sounded like you said manager of the club," he mumbled. "I—I—did you—"

"I did. Here's the contract," Menner cut in. "Mike is definitely through, even if he gets his health back, and it is his wish that you take over."

A SCORE of things flashed through the mind of Muddy Lane. Big league boss at twenty-three! Bucky Harris and Joe Cronin had been older than that when Griffith made them managers at Washington. Even Lou Boudreau, who'd taken over the tough job at Cleveland this year, was twenty-four. Muddy Lane would be the youngest manager in the history of big league baseball!

It never entered his head not to grab the chance. Why, managers never got too old. Look at Connie Mack. He could stay in the game for ages!

He said a little huskily, "You've hired a manager!" And he scrawled his name at the bottom of the document.

Menner heaved a big sigh. "I wish you luck, Muddy. Lord! Phenagling money to keep the club operating will be a vacation after the last six weeks!"

Then the general manager was abruptly sober.

"About Hinkly, Muddy. He's probably outside by now. Shall I call him

in and let you deal with him, or—"

Muddy hesitated briefly. He would have preferred a little time to get organized, but—. He squared his shoulders and the long slope of his jaw tightened.

"I'll take it from here," he said. "Bring Hinkly in!"

Hinkly didn't see Muddy as he opened the door of the inner office. Hinkly stood a second in the doorway, called over his shoulder to Jerreen Walsh:

"Mark it down on your date book, Sugar. We'll do the town!"

A broad, cocky smile wreathed the big catcher's face as he closed the door. He caught sight of Muddy and the smile faded. He looked quickly at Menner and displeasure was in his scowl.

"What's the idea? What I have to say is between you and me, Menner. I'll come back later."

He reached for the doorhandle.

"Just a minute, Hinkly." Menner rolled his cigar across his lips. "I—that is—well, Lane has the sayso now, instead of me, Hinkly!"

"Lane has the sayso! What the hell you talking about!"

"Muddy has just signed as manager at Mike's request."

Silence held the office for a space. Hinkly's tone was ugly when he spoke.

"I don't go for bum jokes, Menner. Especially a joke that puts a punk everybody knows is washed up in the driver's seat!"

A flush crept up the neck of Muddy Lane.

"You don't go for me," he said slowly. "That's all right. All you need do is play ball for the club and your personal opinion of me doesn't matter. I—"

"The hell you say!" Hinkly's sneer cut through Muddy's words. The big

catcher jammed his hands in his pockets, took a step or two toward the window, whirled on Menner. "Lane hates my guts because I beat him out of his job—and beat his time with his girl! Do you think I'm going to be put in a position where a lousy college squirt can throw the hooks into me? Not by a damned sight!"

Menner said, "Muddy is manager of the Blues. Signed, sealed, and delivered. Personal enmities have no place on a ballclub. Somebody has to take Mike's place. Mike saw fit to choose Muddy and—"

"Choose him! You mean he whined around to cut out the man Walsh intended to succeed him! Part of the deal that brought me to the Blues was an understanding that I'd be groomed for the managership! Walsh promised me!"

"I don't believe that!"

"Why do you think I asked for this appointment?" Hinkly shouted. "Because I knew Walsh wasn't coming back and I figured to remind you of our understanding, that's why!"

MENNER eyed the scowling catcher for a moment. "We'll soon see," Menner said, took the phone and dialed a number. "Bronson Hospital? Connect me with Mike Walsh, please. His room number is—" Menner broke off, listened a space, mumbled, "Thank you." He cradled the phone.

"Mike's gone," he said. "They took him to the airport right after I talked with him before. His plane left for Tucson five minutes ago."

The chunky front office man faced Hinkly.

"I can't believe that Mike Walsh would double-cross anyone," Menner said. "And I'm very certain that Mike never intimated to me that you were in line for the managership. Fact is, he intended to—but let that go. In

any case, if you're smart, you'll swallow whatever gripe is eating you and play ball."

Hinkly glowered at Menner, swiveled a baleful gaze to Muddy. He snarled an oath and muttered something unintelligible beneath his breath. He stomped from the office.

Menner looked at Muddy. "He's been boasting that he'd get Mike's job," he said. "You should have trimmed him to size, Muddy."

"How could I? The first consideration is for the team. Hinkly *can* catch and that's what we need most right now."

Menner shrugged, said, "You have to play it the way you see it, but—" He rang for Jerreen Walsh, gave her the contract Muddy had signed.

"File this, Miss Walsh," Menner said. He made a great show of looking at his watch, ejaculated, "Great Snakes! I'm supposed to be downstairs to give the printer the lineups for the scorecard right now!"

Menner waddled his squat bulk hurriedly from the office.

Since time began man has owned an instinctive urge to impress his lady with his accomplishments. Muddy Lane was no different than a cave man who dragged his kill before his woman or the small boy doing handsprings outside *the* girl's window, when he stood there a little fussed, finally blurted,

"Maybe you'd like to know that Mike asked J.K. to offer me the managership of the club. I just signed the contract!"

The girl lifted her gaze. There was a hurt and a kind of disdain in the depths of her blue eyes.

"I know," she said lifelessly. "Mr. Hinkly told me." She looked away then and a frown marred the softness of her face. The morning sun glinted on the sheen of her black hair as she

lifted her head. "It doesn't seem to me that you have anything to brag about, the way you obtained the job," she said.

Muddy stared at her back as Jerreen Walsh walked from the room. His thoughts were confused. What did she mean?

The men wandered into the clubhouse by twos and threes. Little Larry Cross, five seasons with the club and as aggressive and cocky as the day they ridiculed him as a bow-legged rookie; Ron Barry, scholarly Columbia U product who turned ballhawk and was slightly more than terrific roaming the center garden; Dal Roe, hardhitting but fading rightfielder, coming in with Jim Evans—who might have been a top-flight catcher, but needed seasoning; Chip Ditlow, lazy, likeable chucker who should have been one of the game's greats, except for a too great fondness for elbow bending at bars.

Pete Socho, the tall, dark and uncommunicative thirdbaseman, came along with Dan McCarty. McCarty had come up with Muddy and was a fixture in leftfield.

Big Jake Hale and Biff Byrnes were scuffling as they came into the clubhouse but the big first baseman for all his six-feet-four and two-fifteen was careful with Biff. The chunky second-sacker had put in two years in the pro fight racket before deciding on baseball. Andy Folk, utility infielder strolled in with Smoky Joe Booker, Lefty Gray, and Hooks Alder. Booker was a workhorse, the club's only twenty game winner of last season. Lefty Gray would keep the veteran company once he got from under the pressure of his fifty thousand price tag. Hooks Alder was a puzzle. Built along the lines of Lefty Grove in his prime, the slim curveballer was either awfully good or just plain awful. Tempera-

ment trouble kept Hooks from being really a star.

THERE were others, rookies, outworn veterans still around as coaches. Pop Warner, bullpen faithful and batting practice catcher. Hutch Hinkly came in last. The big back-stop's face was set in lines of truculent defiance.

Muddy dressed in the little private cubbyhole in the corner of the clubhouse that Mike Walsh had used. He didn't exactly dread going out to face the gang, but he was a little nervous. He could hear snatches of desultory conversation as the men changed into their monkeysuits.

"Wonder who Menner figures to work today? You, Chip?"

"Dunno. Like as not. He's got us so scrambled a man can't tell when he's in line to work anymore."

"Menner may be a hot-shot in the front office, but he sure is a drip as bench boss. I wish to hell Mike would get back or something. This wondering what's going to happen gives me the jitters."

"You don't have to wonder what's gonna happen, it's happened." Hutch Hinkly's tone was a surly snarl. "We've got a manager now that'll make Menner's bungling stand out as genius!"

"What are you talking about, Hinkly?"

"The club's gone to hell on a bandwagon," Hinkly said. "I'm talking about Lane whining around a sick man and getting the job a better man than he'll ever be oughta had! The one-legged punk has been signed to manage this alleged ballclub!"

Muddy could almost feel the eyes of his teammates through the door of Mike's old quarters.

"In my book, that's one of the smartest moves Mike could have made." That was Biff Byrnes talking. "Muddy

can pull us together if anyone can."

"Nuts! A big league ballclub is nothing for a downy-faced kid to play around with! It takes a man with guts. Lane won't last a month!"

Into this walked Muddy Lane. He came into the clubhouse proper and his lean face gave no hint that he had overheard, but every man there knew he must have. They looked expectantly at the youthful manager. Muddy dragged his stiff leg to the center of the room.

"I didn't expect announcement of my taking over to be made quite this way," he said quietly. "It's true I've been made manager."

He let his gaze roam around the group, went on in a slow voice.

"I'm no football coach with a fight talk to deliver. Mike figured this to be our year and we can still make it so. We've had some tough breaks, but a champion can take the bad breaks. Harmony is all we need."

No one said a word for a space. They seemed expectant. When Muddy walked stiffly to the door of the dugout tunnel without further speech, there was a kind of concerted long breath expelled.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

The ejaculation from Biff Byrnes seemed to sum up the feeling of the men.

"There you are," Hinkly sneered. "Harmony is all we need! Nuts!"

"It might be a good thing if you'd shut that yap of yours," Byrnes said. "Muddy is right. We've got a ballclub—if we pull together. A sorehead like you can ruin us."

"I don't take orders from no punk," Hinkly snarled. "And if the rest of you have guts to tell him off, none of us will!"

"You ain't kidding anybody, Hinkly. You're sore because Mike Walsh was too smart to give you the job you boasted you had sewed up!"

HINKLY glared at the stocky secondsacker but he said nothing, made no move toward Byrnes. Hinkly was well aware that they hadn't hung the Biff moniker on Byrnes because of his hitting prowess with a bat. Hinkly mumbled something under his breath, stalked toward the tunnel door.

"Damned blowhard," Byrnes snorted disgustedly.

There was no comment from other players. It didn't look like an auspicious debut for Muddy Lane as boss of the Blues.

It was the mighty Clippers opening the Blues' long home stand. Riding the crest of a five-game winning streak, out in front of the pack with a six-game margin, the swashbuckling Easterners swaggered into Blues Stadium cocky and confident. The Clippers and the rest of the league knew that they were the team to beat, but the Clippers had ideas about anybody beating them. Especially since the collapse of the Blues, doped by pre-season experts as the one club with any sort of chance to nose them out.

"Regular hitting order," Muddy said in the dugout. "Alder will go for us. Let's show these guys the Blues are still a threat."

Hutch Hinkly scowled. "Hooks never has any luck against the Clippers," he said loudly. "They'll murder him. Why Alder?"

Muddy was aware of the quick glances several other players flicked at him. They well knew what would have happened if any man on the club had questioned a pitching selection of Mike Walsh. Muddy stifled an impulse to tell Hinkly off there and then.

"A fair question," he said. "We've all got to work this out together and it's right that we all know what's going on. I'm aiming to get the pitchers back on a regular-turn basis. Hooks today;

Chip tomorrow, followed by Booker and Gray. That's the plan. Hooks is leading the parade."

"Parade is right," Hinkly said. "Parade of firemen from the bullpen!"

Nobody laughed. Again there were expectant glances at Muddy.

"If Alder's curve is on, he'll beat 'em," Muddy said.

It looked like the young manager had called the turn that first inning. Alder's jughandle was sharp and his fast one hopped in there with hair on it. He broke off the curve on a two-and-two count on the leadoff man and got the ump's decision.

Muddy settled back on the bench, gingerly eased his bad leg straight. It would be a big lift if Alder came through with a well pitched game. Two more Clippers tried vainly to straighten out the slender pitcher's twister. They couldn't get hold of it solidly. The side was out on the strikeout and two infield rollers.

Muddy clapped Hooks Alder on the shoulder, held the pitcher's wind-breaker.

"You got your stuff today, Hooks," Muddy said. "You'll make 'em roll over and play dead!"

Muddy walked stiffly to the third-base coaching box. The sparse crowd in the stands gave him a hand. It made him warm inside.

Big Red Holt was on the hill for the Clippers. Red was always tough for the Blues, tough for any club for that matter, but the redhead could sometimes be outsmarted. Muddy faced the plate as Larry Cross took his bowlegged stance in the box.

"All right, Larry, kid," Muddy yelled through cupped hands. "No waiting today. Here we go!"

Holt fed Cross his high hard one, just off the outside edge. The little shortstop took it for a ball.

"The way to look up there," Muddy

yelled. "Make 'im pitch to you, Larry!"

A buzz of comment rippled through the stands. It had been a long time since a Blues coach talked it up like that. Not since Mike Walsh had been forced to the bench by failing health. Some of the fans took it up. There was suddenly more life in Blues Stadium than had been evident all season.

Cross started a cut at a wide pitch, stopped in time. The umps pointed his left hand at the ground. Two and nothing.

"He can't get it in there, kid," Muddy shouted. "Take a walk, a free ticket's as good as a hit!"

BIG Red Holt flicked a glance at Muddy. He must have thought the young manager had passed the hit sign. He wasted another one. Muddy hopped stiffly around in the little chalked space back of third. Big Red pitched, got a corner, he thought. The umps said no, waved Cross to first.

Ron Barry threw away two of the three bats he swung, came out of the on-deck spot. Big Red Holt watched Muddy from the corner of his vision. The young manager went through a lot of motions that might been signs to Barry. But Barry had the hit-away sign before he came to the plate.

Holt wasted one and Barry bluffed a bunt. The Clipper thirdsacker and firstbaseman tore in. The pitch was high and wide. Holt threw another high one. Too high. It was ball two.

"He can't get it in there! He can't get it in there!" Muddy yelled. "Make 'im chuck that agate in there, kid!"

"Chuck" used with "agate" was the day's sign for the hit-and-run, but the Clippers didn't know that. Barry dried his hands on his pants, the answering sign that he had the play. Larry Cross returned to first, kicked the bag to signify that he had the sign.

Red Holt cut one down the outside.

The bowlegs of Larry Cross twinkled down the basepath toward second. The Clipper keystone guardian broke to cover the bag and Ron Barry poked a clean hit through the spot vacated by the secondbaseman.

Cross slid into third without drawing a throw. Muddy Lane grinned at Red Holt.

"Looks like a bad day for the red-head," he chortled at Dan McCarty at the plate. "Wait 'im out, he's shaky."

Holt was sore at himself for throwing that perfect pitch for Barry's specialty. He reared back and poured his swift right down Main Street. It was his second mistake. Dan McCarty had the hit-away sign and the husky Irish kid laid the wood to that fast one.

The ball hit the facing of the left-field stands on the fly. Cross and Barry scored and the big Irisher raced to third while the Clipper outfielders chased the ball.

The fans yelled wildly. Red Holt kicked the dirt around the slab. Muddy grinned contentedly. He hadn't personally delivered either of those hits but he knew that he'd worsted the Clipper ace chucker in the battle of wits.

Suddenly a daring idea flashed in Muddy's mind. Why not? The Clippers wouldn't expect it. Big Jake Hale lumbered to the plate. Muddy flashed a sign, yelled:

"Everybody hits, Jake. Pickle it if he gets it in there!"

Hale stepped out of the box, pretended he had something in his eye. He managed a look toward third while rubbing his orb. Muddy got it. Hale couldn't believe he'd caught the right sign, wanted confirmation. Muddy flashed the signal again and the brawny firstbaseman acknowledged it.

He took the first pitch, a called strike on the inside edge. Big Jake gripped his bat at the end, swung savagely as though he was going for a long one on

the next pitch.

McCarty was under way with the first twitch of Holt's shoulder. Hale ran his right hand to the fat part of the bat, dumped a beautiful bunt down the first-base line.

A perfect "squeeze" play. The Clippers were caught flatfooted. They didn't even get Hale at first base. The Clipper thirdbaseman threw a look at Muddy.

"What the hell kind of baseball is that!" he said. "That stuff went out with John McGraw!"

But there was grodging respect in his tone.

That was all. Red Holt turned on the heat. Dal Roe skied to center, Biff Byrnes rolled to short, forced Hale at second, and lost a hairline decision at first. The twin killing ended the inning but Muddy was satisfied. Three big runs went up on the scoreboard. A grand start. The ballgame if Hooks Alder kept his stuff.

The slim curveballer kept his stuff— for seven innings. He slipped on one pitch in the sixth and Hank Harris, the league's homerun leader, bashed a drive into the stands. But even though Red Holt had settled after that first frame, throttled the attack of the Blues, a two-run lead looked big with Alder breaking off those jughandles like corkscrews and only six men to get.

Then in the Clipper eighth began the chain of events that all but ruined the managerial career of Muddy Lane before it was well started.

ALDER got two strikes on the first hitter then momentarily lost control. The Clipper batter worked the count to three-and-two, fouled off three successive pitches. Hooks Alder came in there with his Sunday curve but it broke too wide, missed the corner. Alder beefed mildly. The umps shut him up abruptly. It made the slender

hurler sore.

When he walked the second hitter, the Clipper bench suddenly came alive.

"All aboard for the stratosphere flight!"

"He's joined the parachute troops, boys!"

Salty jibes came from the enemy bench. The Clippers sensed one of their copyrighted rallies in the making. Muddy Lane took down the phone to the bullpen.

"Get Chip Ditlow warmed up," he ordered.

Alder fussed around on the rubber, socked the ball into his glove. He fought to close his ears to the Clipper razzberries, to gain control of himself. Muddy watched him closely. It would be a morale builder if Hooks could finish, but Muddy wanted this game. Alder threw two strikes to the hitter. He was working too fast.

"Easy does it, Hooks," Muddy yelled. "Take your time!"

The hitter caught hold of a fast ball and Muddy's pulse quickened. It was a terrific drive. Fleet Ron Barry got on his horse, raced for the flagpole in deep centerfield. The Columbia U ballhawk really covered ground. His leaping catch nabbed the speeding sphere inches before it would have cleared the barrier for a homer.

Both baserunners advanced. One out and the deadlocking markers in scoring position. Big Red Holt was up. There was no pinch hitter because the husky redhead could belt that rock about as good as he could chuck it.

Muddy debated whether to order Holt walked. It wasn't good baseball to put the winning run on base, but—Muddy called time, walked out to the baseline. Alder and Hutch Hinkly came over.

"How about it?" Muddy asked.

The slim pitcher chunked the ball in his glove.

"I'd like to finish," he said. "I feel strong. I can get Holt."

Hinkly said, "They're getting to Alder's stuff. It's time to send in a relief chucker!"

Muddy had no thought of ignoring or slighting Hinkly, but he figured that Alder knew his own condition. He clapped the slender hurler on the shoulder, said:

"Go get 'im, fella. He's your meat!"

Alder worked hard on the Clipper pitcher. He got a two-and-nothing count on Holt but the big redhead refused to fish for outside curves. Alder came in there with a hopping fast ball down the inside edge. There was the peculiar hollow *thwuck* of an undercut ball as Holt swung mightily.

The ball was a mile-high foul a little to the right of the Blues dugout.

"You can get it, nobody around!" Muddy yelled as Hinkly threw off his mask and ran under the ball. "Right above you, plenty of room!"

Hinkly was under the high popup, all set to smother it. Then just before the ball hit his glove, Hinkly glanced to see whether the plate was covered. The Clipper runner on third base was tagged up. He could score on a caught fly, foul or fair.

Alder was running belatedly toward the plate. Whether he would have got there in time was problematical. It didn't matter. The horsehide missed the pocket of Hinkly's mitt, plunked the padded heel and bounced to the ground.

Red Holt had another chance.

"Don't mind it, Hooks," Muddy called. "Not your fault. Hang in there."

What he said was just words. He had no thought of censuring Hinkly. But those words were just one more link in the chain of grief forming for Muddy.

Holt rapped a clean single to right on the next pitch. The tying run scored.

Hooks Alder blew completely. Another hit. A walk. Muddy signaled the curveballer off the mound, sent Ditlow to relieve him with the bases again choked.

The Clippers got two solid raps off the delivery of Chip Ditlow before Barry grabbed a blooper in short center and doubled a runner trying to score from third.

The Blues were licked, Holt turned them back in the bottom of the ninth without a threat.

MUDDY LANE had never felt good after a losing ballgame. He was lower than a Jap's honor after that heartbreaking loss of his first game as manager. He sat slumped behind the desk in the clubhouse office long after the players had left, playing over again mentally that fatal ninth inning.

J. K. Menner pushed open the door of the office, came in.

"Thought you'd be here," the front office man said. He handed Muddy a yellow paper, added, "I wired Mike this morning. This is his answer."

Muddy scanned the telegram.

AT TIME OF HINKLY DEAL HE REMARKED THAT HE WAS GLAD TO COME WITH THE BLUES BECAUSE I COULD MAYBE GIVE HIM SOME POINTERS FOR A POSSIBLE MANAGERSHIP WHEN HIS ACTIVE DAYS WERE OVER. NOT SPECIFIED WHERE. I TOLD HIM I WAS ALWAYS GLAD TO HELP MEN WHO GAVE OUT FOR ME. ABSOLUTELY NO PROMISE OR UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN HINKLY AND ME.

MIKE WALSH.

"I knew Hinkly had no grounds for his ridiculous claim," Menner said. "And something had better be done to scotch his little game, Muddy."

"What do you mean?"

Menner's reply was apparently irrelevant.

"That foul Hinkly messed up, Muddy. How about that?"

The young manager looked up quickly. Puzzlement was in his gray eyes.

"I must be hazy-headed, J.K. I don't get you at all."

"Hinkly has done a lot of popping off about succeeding Mike. He hates you and—well, big league catchers don't muff pop fouls in tight spots!"

Muddy stared at the fat man a moment.

"You're off the beam, J.K. It was just one of those things like Owen of the Dodgers bungling that third strike in the Series. Hinkly took his eye off the ball too soon, that's all."

"I'm not so sure. I happened to overhear Hinkly and a bunch of sports writers. He kinda ducked when he saw me. I figure he was blowing his guts about you."

"You can't jump at conclusions because a fellow talks to the sports writers, J.K."

Menner shrugged.

"I hope you're right, but I'm wondering if you aren't giving in too much to Hinkly. And I'd remember that Jerreen Walsh's head is screwed pretty solidly on her shoulders. I wouldn't operate too heavily on the theory that Hinkly has her sewed up, Muddy."

The plump general manager left Muddy on that note. Muddy sat there a long space. His pulse pounded strangely. Suppose Menner had the right slant? Why, things would have an entirely different light if—

Abruptly Muddy began jerking off his uniform. He showered and dressed feeling almost light hearted. He hurried to a pay phone and dialed the number of Jerreen Walsh. The girl's roommate answered.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lane," she said.

"Jerreen isn't in. She is having dinner and doing a show with Mr. Hinkly."

Muddy Lane dove deeper into the pit of grief that seemed to be engulfing him these days.

WHEN he read the sport sheets that night, Muddy knew that Menner's vague suspicions of Hinkly were substantiated in part. A column in the *News-Advertiser* was typical.

BLUES DROP LANE MANAGERIAL DEBUT

Today's defeat by the Clippers may well be an ill omen for the managerial career of Muddy Lane. It is no secret that other and older—perhaps more deserving—men on the club roster resent the elevation of Lane to head man.

Lane's big obstacle is his youth. Can a mere stripling of twenty-three possess the aplomb, the tact, the necessary something it takes to handle a group of highly diversified temperaments? We wonder. Witness one small detail of the loss today.

The turning point of the game came in the Clipper ninth. Alder pitched hot ball until then, but in the words of Hutch Hinkly, who certainly should know, "Alder's stuff was gone. I told Lane as much. It's a wonder that Holt didn't rap that fast one he fouled out of the park. Too anxious, I guess. Sure I dropped a pop foul. But if Lane had been on his toes, yelling for Alder to cover the plate instead of bellowing at me, I wouldn't have dropped it. Lane lost the ballgame by not jerking Alder!"

Yea, verily, fans, dissension has an ugly head. A man needs tact and diplomacy to manage a big league ballclub. And an understanding that only age and experi-

ence brings. . . .

Muddy entered the clubhouse before the second Clipper game intending to demand explanation from Hutch Hinkly anent that popoff to the sports writers. He didn't jump Hinkly. Other developments drove the sport sheet comment from his mind.

Chip Ditlow lurched across the room the instant he saw the young manager. The burly pitcher was a mess. His eyes were puffy and the whites were blood-shot. He was unshaven. His clothes looked as though he had slept in them. He clutched a newspaper in his hand.

"Wha's the big idea," Ditlow demanded belligerently, shoving the paper at Muddy. "This lousy sheet says you're workin' me again today. You think I'm a truck-horse or somethin'?"

"You're drunk, Ditlow! You smell like a brewery!"

"Ain't drunk. Had a beer or two maybe, sure. Ain't a man entitled to little relaxation after pitchin' his head off tryin' to—"

"Get your clothes off!" Muddy's lips were tight. "Get under a cold shower and drive some of the beer out of your system. You're going to sweat the rest out!"

"You can't do that to me!" Ditlow howled. "You can't make me work again today after I—"

"You're working today," Muddy interrupted shortly. "You knew yesterday that your turn came today. Get this through your head, Ditlow. There is no change from Mike's rules. Everytime you show up full of beer, you work! Regardless of whether you pitched a doubleheader the day before!"

Ditlow yowled, tearfully appealed to fellow players.

"Migawd, 'tain't right. A man can't be treated like—"

"Shut your bazoo and take your medicine." Joe Booker rarely said any-

thing mean but now disgust dripped from the veteran pitcher's words. "Maybe you'll learn something, but I doubt it!"

Chip Ditlow got the Clippers in that first frame on exactly five pitches, but nobody was fooled. All three Clippers massaged the ball vigorously, they were going to get hits before this ballgame was very far along.

The Clipper manager started a second string pitcher. His gamble didn't pay off.

"All right, boys," Muddy yelled from the third base coaching box. "They're insulting us. Show 'em up!"

Cross started the parade by singling sharply. Barry strolled on four wide ones. Big Jake Hale laid the ash to a fast one and exploded a four-master into the rightfield stands. Four runs in, no one out.

"Oh the merry-go-'round broke down!" Muddy yelled. "Start it again, Biff! Everybody hits!"

BIFF BYRNES biffed a rifled drive against the screen for two sacks. Pete Socho drilled the first pitch through the box to score Byrnes and the Clippers changed hurlers. Hutch Hinkly greeted the relief pitcher with a long triple to the centerfield corner. Chip Ditlow struck out. Cross drove a long fly to left that scored Hinkly and Barry ended the big inning by grounding sharply to first.

A juicy 7 went on the board for the Blues.

It turned out that they needed it. The Clippers kept rapping Ditlow hard. The burly righthander got by the second frame, gave up one marker in the third, two in the fourth and three more in the fifth. His shirt was soaked with sweat. The beer he'd quaffed the night before paid off with interest in sweat.

The Blues had run their total to ten in six innings. Ditlow groaned as he

lifted his bulk from the bench to go out for the seventh. He looked pleadingly at Muddy as the manager came in from the coaching spot.

"Migawd, Lane, have a heart," Ditlow wailed. "I'm all in! I've pitched you to a big lead, send someone else out there. I swear I'll never look at another glass of suds!"

Muddy hesitated. The big fellow *did* look bushed. Then Muddy remembered the last time this same situation came up. Mike Walsh had listened to Ditlow's plea, sent in a relief hurler. And the next day the brawny pitcher turned up an hour late for a doubleheader full of beer. That had been the last time until today. Mike had made Ditlow work the second game in a hot September sun. Muddy hardened his heart.

"You're going all the way, Chip," he said quietly. "It will maybe make you remember that you asked for this."

But when the Clippers loaded the bases with one out, Muddy took down the bullpen phone.

"I wouldn't do it," Smoky Joe Booker grunted. "If Ditlow sees somebody warming up, he'll dog it. Let 'im take it, the blasted fool!"

Muddy spoke into the phone. "A couple of you fellows slip under the stands and loosen up. Don't let Ditlow see you go."

The Clipper hitter clouted one a country mile—mostly up. Barry took the skyscraper in deep centerfield, but even the rifle arm of the Columbia U star couldn't keep the run from third from scoring.

Then it happened.

Ditlow got in the three-and-one hole on the next hitter. When he came in there with the fifth pitch, the batter swung viciously. He topped a slow, twisting roller between Big Jake Hale and Byrnes at second.

"I got it!" Hale yelled. "Cover the bag, Chip!"

Ordinarily it wouldn't have been even close. For all his bulk Chip Ditlow was a good fielding pitcher. But not today. The beer had sapped his strength. He staggered blindly toward the bag. He was too slow. Hale held his toss as long as possible but even then it was going to elude Ditlow's clutch. Desperately the big fellow lunged at the ball with his bare hand.

There was a thud of Ditlow's big body and the Clipper runner colliding, a sharp smack, and both men crashed to the turf in a tangled heap. The ball rolled past the Clipper coach to the stands.

Two runs scored but that wasn't the worst of it.

Chip Ditlow didn't get up. When Jake Hale profanely lifted the big pitcher, Ditlow swiped his left arm across his sweat-glistening brow, held up his pitching hand. It dangled at an odd angle.

"I—I guess I busted something," Ditlow muttered, slumped into Hale's arms.

To make everything just dandy, the Clippers got to two relief pitchers in the final inning for enough markers to win 12-11.

The sports writers cut loose further blasts at Muddy after that game.

"—and Lane is batting a thousand in the master-mind-failure league. Not only did his poor judgment in leaving Ditlow on the hill without having a single pitcher readying in the bullpen for relief cost the ballgame, but his inexplicable reticence to remove a man that was physically incapable of normal action dealt the club a far more serious blow.

"CHIP DITLOW has a wrist fracture. He will be lost to the club for at least six weeks, if he ever regains his effectiveness. . . ."

That was in the *Sun*. The *News-Advertiser* contained another barb.

"—Lane was a hardworking team man when he wore the pad and mitt behind the plate. We were inclined to take issue with some members of the club who bitterly resented such a young man being put over them. Today we are not so sure but they are right.

"Perhaps Muddy Lane *is* too young to shoulder managerial responsibility. In the words of one veteran—"Lane showed he doesn't have it. No big league manager worthy of the name would have left a man in the game in the condition Ditlow was in. It was a crime."

"Could be that the recalcitrant veteran has something there. . . ."

Muddy called at the hospital that night to see Ditlow. The sportsheets of several papers littered the pitcher's bed. His right arm was rigged in a cast.

"Feel like a big baby, bundled up in bed with nothing but a busted wrist," Ditlow grumbled. "The doc said I better stay tonight 'cause it might jump plenty when the shock to the nerves wore off."

"Sure," Muddy said. "I—I don't know what to say, Chip. I'm sorry as the devil. I—"

"Nothin' for you to be sorry for," Ditlow scowled. "Look, Muddy, I was a damned fool. But I'm wise to some things now. I read that tripe in the papers and—hell, fella, it was my own fault. If any of them scribblers had come to me, I'd have told them so."

The big pitcher moved restlessly.

"I swore off the beer for good last Fall after Mike handed me a lesson. But I had to let a damned rat I shoulda known means nobody no good but himself talk me into taking a couple of beers. I shoulda known I'd never stop with two!"

Muddy peered sharply at Ditlow.

"You mean somebody urged you to fall off the wagon, Chip? Who?"

"I ain't no squealer." Ditlow frowned. "But that junk in the papers was probably dished out by the same lousy lug. I'm having a word or two with him when I get up! Don't pay no 'tention to that newspaper blah, Muddy."

The big pitcher hesitated briefly, then added, "The boys are mostly for you, Muddy. Only they're kinda wonderin' why you let a certain blabber-mouth keep on shootin' off his bazoo. I'll tell them pressbox guys a thing or two about their source of info, too!"

Muddy got up to leave. His lean face was set in grim lines. Cold fury held him inside.

"You don't need to name names," he said. "I had some vague idea that maybe you were sore and had given the newspapers that yarn. You're not the only one wising up some, Chip. And I'm going to have a word or two with a certain blabber-mouth!"

Hutch Hinkly maintained bachelor apartments in the swanky Marlo Arms. It was around nine o'clock when Muddy rang the buzzer under Hinkly's nameplate. Hinkly's voice sounded through the speaking tube. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Lane. I want a few words with you, Hinkly."

There was a little pause then the electric lock of the door clicked and Hinkly purred, "Wait in the lobby. We'll be right down."

Muddy didn't have long to wait. The automatic elevator went up and came down. Hinkly held the door open and a trim, smallish girl came from the lift.

She tossed a smile over her shoulder as she came into the apartment hotel lobby and the light splintered on her soft black hair. She turned then and Jerreen Walsh caught sight of Muddy.

She stopped abruptly and a sharply indrawn breath raised her breasts. Something flickered in her blue eyes.

"We're in something of a hurry, Lane," Hinkly said carelessly. "We can give you a moment."

THE girl looked quickly from Muddy to Hinkly. Hinkly smiled, said in a kind of aside, "I didn't think you'd mind Lane getting off whatever he has on his chest, Sugar."

Muddy knew a momentary desire to bash that smirking, superior leer off Hinkly's face. So things had progressed between him and Jerreen to the point where she went to his apartment!

"Well, what is it Lane," Hinkly half-sneered.

Muddy glanced at Jerreen Walsh. The girl held her head high. Faint color tinged the ivory of her cheeks.

"It can wait until tomorrow," Muddy said.

"Suit yourself." Hinkly shrugged. "It seems odd that you'd come over here this time of night for something that can wait." His tone was mocking. "If you're hesitating because of Jerr—Miss Walsh, I assure you that we have no secrets!"

Muddy's fists clenched. He ached to plant one of them against Hinkly's mouth.

"All right," he gritted. "What I have to say concerns your griping to newspapermen. You gave out an interview yesterday that was a lie, intimated that I was trying to blame you for loss of the game. You deliberately egged Chip Ditlow to hit the beer again because you knew he wouldn't be able to stop. Then when Chip got a bad break, you told the sports writers another flock of lies.

"This is a showdown, Hinkly. There will be no more interviews dished out to the newspapers by you!"

Hinkly eyed the lanky manager con-

temptuously. "Or what?" he sneered.

Muddy flushed angrily. "Or there will be disciplinary measures taken!" he said.

"If this wasn't so silly, it would be amusing." Hinkly looked at Jerreen Walsh, shrugged expressively. "I told you, Sugar," he said to her. Then he turned on Muddy.

"You aren't kidding anyone but yourself, Lane. Everybody but you knows that you're in a spot too big for you. You're washed up. You'd better get a job somewhere managing a bunch of sandlot kids!

"But get this, Lane. You're not bluffing me. Disciplinary measures! Nuts! Please excuse us now!"

He took the girl's arm. Jerreen Walsh looked at the young manager and her blue eyes were very dark.

"Mr. Hinkly told me that you worked around J.K. and Uncle Mike to get the position my uncle promised him," she said bleakly. "I was mistaken to doubt him. I see now that you are small, and vindictive, and vengefully mean because—because of something that has nothing to do with the club!

"I—I didn't think you would stoop to using your position for personal revenge, Mr. Lane. Nor that you were so—so dumb as to mix personalities with your attempts to manage the team!"

She tossed her black hair. Hinkly grinned triumphantly at Muddy as he and the girl left the manager standing rooted to the lobby floor.

Smoky Joe Booker beat the Clippers in the series finale. It was a snug pitcher's battle all the way and the two run margin by which the Blues won was directly traceable to the long bat of Hutch Hinkly. The big catcher belted a four-base clout with none on in the fourth and almost duplicated the

blow in the eighth. His long triple to the centerfield stands wasn't three feet short of clearing the barrier, and he scored by alert baserunning when the Clipper backstop lost a downer for a short passed ball.

How you going to put a man like that out of the game? Muddy thought.

In the Clipper ninth, the enemy got a man on through an error. He moved to second on a fielder's choice and the Clipper clutch hitter was up. Muddy knew this man well, he was awful tough up there when the chips were down. Muddy signaled Booker to walk him.

It looked foolish with Hank Harris, Clipper climax slugger, coming to the dish, but Smoky Joe Booker had always wielded the old Indian sign on the home run king. Muddy's heart jumped into his throat when the Clipper mauler cracked Booker's second pitch. But Smoky Joe had pitched smart. The change-of-pace ball he dished up caught Harris' timing just a little off. Ron Barry was under a long fly in deep centerfield.

HINKLY was loud in his criticism in the clubhouse.

"You guys will maybe pretty soon see what I've been saying is the McCoy. Lane got away with another bull today through sheer luck. Whoever heard of walking the tying run with a long ball hitter coming up! That's the kind of baseball you can expect from a kid still damp behind the ears in a man's job!"

And Hinkly's theme song was the vein of accounts of the game in the *News-Advertiser*. Muddy was in a predicament. He was satisfied that Hinkly had flaunted his contempt of his manager by shooting off his mouth to the sports writers again. Yet it was Hinkly's hitting that had won the ballgame. What was a fellow going to do?

Lefty Gray started the first game of

the Panther series. The young left-hander didn't look right in his pre-game warmup. He was too tight. Muddy turned over the infield practice hitting to Andy Folk, talked with Gray.

"Your stuff looks great today, Lefty," Muddy said. "You'll stand these guys on their ears."

"I hope so." Gray moved jerkily on the dugout bench. "I—I wish you were in there back of the plate, Muddy."

"So do I." Muddy grinned. "But Hinkly knows the Panther hitters as well as I do. Listen to him, Lefty. Throw 'em where he calls for 'em. Don't press. Forget that Mike laid out a wad of dough for you. Pitch just like you were still in the Association."

Lefty Gray tried. He worked hard, but it was clear from the first pitch that he wasn't right. Maybe if a catcher had been in there who would have nursed him along, he might have settled.

Hinkly didn't nurse him. He growled and cursed, slammed the ball back down pitcher's lane a mile a minute when the kid southpaw didn't come in there with what he wanted.

"He hasn't got it," Hinkly growled when the team came in after the third inning. Gray had walked three men. Only a fast double play had saved him from a bad inning. "We better get a chucker in there before he hits the ceiling!"

Muddy looked quickly at the young southpaw. Gray's face was tight, strained. Damn Hinkly, couldn't he see that the kid needed his confidence built up instead of torn down?

"Gray is all right," Muddy said sharply. "He's going all the way. Let's get him a couple of runs to work on."

The Panthers drove the husky fork-hander off the hill in the fourth. Two walks, a rousing two-base smack, another walk, then a base-cleaning triple.

Muddy called time, went out to Gray.

"Don't mind it, Left," he said. "The best pitchers in the game have an off day now and then."

Hutch Hinkly snorted, stood hands on hips and glared at the kid pitcher and Muddy.

"Gray is all right, he's going all the way!" Hinkly sneered. "And that's the boy wonder system of managing! Nuts!"

Muddy Lane came to a decision right then.

Jim Evans, the young catcher that Mike Walsh had brought up at the tag end of last season, looked frankly at Muddy Lane.

"I get it," he said. "And don't think I don't appreciate the opportunity. I'll give you all I have anytime you see fit to use me."

"Good." Muddy said. "You'd naturally and gradually absorb what we're going to cram into you if you could spend a season watching from the bench. But the way things are breaking, you may be in there any day."

It was early in the morning. Muddy and the rookie catcher were alone in the spacious ballyard. They spent an hour of hard toil.

Muddy gave out all he had to Evans. Little tips on how to mask signs to the pitcher, a proper, comfortable stance behind the plate, the trick of keeping your fist balled until the pitch is in the mitt, all the technique a competent receiver must master.

That afternoon the youthful manager sat beside Evans and pointed out strong points and weaknesses of rival hitters as they came to bat.

"I've kept a little book," Muddy said. "Every time I noted something about hitters, I jotted it down. I'll give it to you."

"I'll memorize it," Evans promised faithfully.

THAT was the day that Muddy had it brought home to him that Hinkly's incessant grumbling and criticism was reacting on other players.

Hooks Alder was on the mound and the slim curveballer had his stuff. He held the Panthers in check until the seventh. In the top of the stretch inning they got a man on base with one away. As the hitter came into the batter's box, he dropped his bat, rolled the handle in the dust.

"When I was with that guy at Columbus that used to be his sign for the hit-and-run," Andy Folk said suddenly. "If he picked up the dirt and rubbed the bat, it was the first pitch; if he rolled the bat, it was the second."

Muddy flashed a signal to Alder. The pitcher nodded. He cut the first pitch just inside and the hitter took it. Alder shook off Hinkly's sign on the next one, finally got what he wanted, the sign for a waste ball.

The runner on first broke for second with Alder's motion. Hinkly grabbed the high outside pitch, cut loose a peg to second right on the sack.

There was no one covering!

The ball went through untouched into centerfield and the runner sailed on to third. Somebody had missed the cover sign.

His old temperament trouble hit Alder. He glared at Biff Byrnes, chunked the ball into his glove angrily. He got himself in the hole on the hitter, laid a fast one down the outside edge on the three-and-one pitch.

The horsehide whistled over Hale's head, skipped off the turf a foot inside the foul line, and skittered into the rightfield corner. Dal Roe played the ball poorly off the bleacher facing, juggled the ball when he finally picked it up. The run scored, of course, and the man who had smashed the hit stretched a legitimate double into a triple. He scored a minute later on an

outfield fly.

Alder came in at the end of the inning and flung his glove into the dugout.

"Two unearned runs!" he exploded. "How the hell can a man win with that kind of support!"

Biff Byrnes growled, "I missed a sign, so what? Keep your shirt on."

"And don't try to alibi your lousy pitchin' onto me, neither," Dal Roe flared. "Chuckin' an outside ball to a dead rightfield hitter!"

"I suppose I'm to blame for making the throw," Hutch Hinkly said. "That's the way things are around this outfit lately, I get blamed for everything."

"You guys make me sick!" Alder was hot under the collar. "Any sandlot gang gets together better than—"

"That'll be all I'll take, Alder!" Byrnes cut in. "By damn if you want an argument, I'll give you one!"

"Arguments don't win ballgames," Muddy said sharply. He eyed the bell-cose players. "That'll be all from any of you!"

Biff Byrnes' expression was sullen. He muttered something to Dal Roe and the outfielder nodded, glared at Muddy.

That inning the bull-necked second-sacker topped a downer straight at shortstop. He heaved his bat disgustedly, jogged half-heartedly toward first. The Panther shortfielder bobbled the easy grounder, kicked it five feet away. Byrnes suddenly accelerated his pace but the hurried throw nipped him by a step.

As Byrnes left the dugout at the end of the inning, started for his position at second, Muddy said:

"Folk will finish out, Biff." The utility man jerked a look at the manager. "I mean it, Andy," Muddy went on. "When a man can't even run out his hits, he needs a rest!"

Biff Byrnes planted himself in front of Muddy.

"Getting tough, huh," Byrnes said.

"Okay. I got it coming and I can take it. But lemme get a few things off my chest. This club was supposed to be hot this year and we've been about as warm as a burned-out match!

"We started going down hill ever since a certain clubhouse lawyer came with us and it's been worse since Mike's gone. Now you throw your weight around on a guy that's been for you instead of the mug who openly ridicules you. Okay! I'm saying that it makes a man wonder if the blowhard's got you pegged right!"

BIFF BYRNES turned abruptly and disappeared into the clubhouse tunnel at the end of the dugout.

That night the sportsheets had full details of the flareup. Muddy was blamed. They openly doubted that he had the stuff to manage a big league ballclub.

—open mutiny will break out any day (the *News-advertiser* columnist stated). We suggest that drastic changes be made before the Blues are completely wrecked. Lane has shown that he is too young for the responsibility—

Muddy threw the paper across the room. Too young, was he! His mistake had been that he was too blasted eager to give Hinkly all the breaks. Things were going to be different—starting tomorrow!

It was the turn of Smoky Joe Booker to go for the Blues. As the veteran righthander came in from the bullpen to take his final warmup in front of the stands, Muddy said quietly:

"Evans will handle you today, Joe."

The big pitcher looked sharply at the manager. His eyes lighted and he grinned tightly.

"Now you're getting smart, Muddy!"

Hinkly saw the rookie catcher going over back of the extra plate where the

starting pitchers put on the finishing touches. Hinkly jumped Muddy.

"What's the big idea? More boy-wonder stuff, I suppose, having the starting chucker warmed up by a guy who's not going to catch him!"

"Evans is going to catch," Muddy said.

Hinkly's face darkened.

"You'll never get away with this, Lane! What am I supposed to do?"

"Maybe you'd better hurry up to the press box and give out another interview on something that is strictly a team matter!"

Hinkly flushed guiltily, covered it up by blustering.

"More kid stuff! The newspaper boys can see what's wrong with this outfit without anyone telling them! If you figure you can shove me around for a damned rook, you're crazier than I thought. I catch today or—"

"Evans will be behind the plate today." Muddy spoke softly. "And every day 'til you convince me you're ready to play ball and personal grudges are out."

"It'll be freezing weather in July before I crawl to you, Lane!"

"Then the dugout fountain will be frozen solid before you're in the lineup again!"

Muddy turned away to hit grounders for infield practice.

The papers had full and colorful detail of Hinkly's benching. But the edge of their comments was blunted by the 6-1 win Booker turned in. Evans held up the veteran speedballer in workmanlike fashion and contributed a timely baseknock in the three-run fifth.

The *News-Advertiser* quoted Hinkly. All the other sheets were more or less decent.

"This is just more evidence of Lane's schoolboy complex," Hinkly's statement read. "He was lucky and got

away with it, but any sensible person knows it's no business showing off by benching a proved veteran for a shaky rookie. Lane will be forced to come to me before long and this whole Joe College business will be thoroughly aired."

Hinkly was wrong. Jim Evans made mistakes, had a lot to learn, but he was willing and in there trying. Lefty Gray won his start in the Explorer series. Muddy gambled on a second string hurler to give Alder his regular three-day rest, and the gamble came off. Alder trimmed the Explorers the third day for the first series sweep the Blues had made all season.

The Blues looked like a different club. Hinkly shot off his mouth in the clubhouse, but other players didn't seem to hear him. They took a two-game set from the Hoppers. Five straight!

SPORTS writers slowed down the cries of "too young." The same papers that first began giving Muddy a little credit carried the story of the enlistment of the Savages' regular catcher in the Army. His draft number was up and he enlisted to get some choice of service branch.

The night before the Savages opened a four-game series in Blues Stadium, the manager of that club conferred with Muddy.

"Your gang and mine are in a battle for the first division," the boss of the Savages said. "And I know that ordinarily you wouldn't be anxious to help us out. But the grapevine has it that you're through with Hinkly. I don't like the guy, but in the spot we're in, I'm willing to shell out fifteen grand for Hinkly's contract."

Muddy promised to think it over. He talked with Menner. The front office man was all for grabbing the offer.

"Fifteen thousand would solve most of my problems, Muddy!"

"I've got a hunch we can squeeze something better than money from them," Muddy said. "We need a starting pitcher in Ditlow's spot. I'd like to swap Hinkly for Whitey Trent."

"Even up!" Anguish was in Menner's tone. "My Godfrey! Trent must be nearly 35 and—"

"—and that's a pretty good guarantee he won't be called for army service," Muddy finished. "Trent's got a lot of pitching left, too."

Menner chewed on his cigar, finally said: "We're sailing pretty close to the edge financially, Muddy. The banks won't loan us any more dough. Of course, if we continue to play winning ball the fans will come back. I don't go for Hinkly, but—well, what if something happens to Evans?"

"Nothing is going to happen to Evans," Muddy said. "I'm going to make the deal if I can. We'll be a better ballclub with Hinkly where he can't do us any more damage."

Muddy couldn't know that Hutch Hinkly was going to hatch more disaster that very night.

It was crowding midnight when Muddy came to his hotel from the second meeting with the manager of the Savages. Muddy's thoughts were pleasant. Maybe the tough breaks were behind him. In his pocket was a copy of the agreement by which Hutch Hinkly and Whitey Trent would exchange uniforms. Things looked rosy. Jim Evans was improving every day, Trent would fill the need for another starting pitcher, and—

Chip Ditlow got out of a chair in the lobby, hurried toward Muddy to interrupt the manager's thoughts. The brawny pitcher was scowling.

"Been waitin' for you, Muddy," he said. "Wouldn't bother you except for this—" he indicated his pitching arm, the wrist in a cast and slung in a sling

—” and maybe a little doubt in my mind that I could get near a joint where the beer is flowing and stick on the wagon.”

“I don’t follow you,” Muddy said. “What’s cooking?”

“That damned Hinkly,” Ditlow swore. “He’s pulling the same stunt he did with me, I figure. On Jim Evans! Jim and me stay at the same hotel and about an hour ago I just happened to see Hinkly come in. I stuck around and pretty soon him and the kid come down together. They ain’t come back. My angle is that Hinkly is gettin’ Jim spiffy-eyed figurin’ you’ll yank Evans from the backstopping job if he turns in a sour game.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“Not for sure, but I know the joint Hinkly usually plays.”

Muddy said, “Some on, show me.”

THEY got out of the cab in front of Joe’s Place. A scared-eyed man with no hat pushed past Muddy and Ditlow, ran for the taxi they had vacated. He turned and called back.

“Was I you, brothers, I’d give that joint the go-by! Somebody is gonna get in bad trouble in there!”

Muddy and the burly pitcher looked at each other. Ditlow swore. “This damned joint is noted for brawls! If Hinkly brought the kid here no tellin’ what—”

He broke off, hurried after Muddy.

They shoved a path through a milling, shouting mob inside Joe’s Place. Fists were flying. And heavy beer mugs and bottles. Suddenly Ditlow yelled, pointed across the smoke-filled room.

“There goes Hinkly! He’s sneaking out the back door and the kid ain’t with him!” Ditlow headed for the back to cut off Hinkly.

Muddy knew before he saw the crumpled bulk on the floor that it would be Jim Evans. The manager pushed one

brawling drunk away, jerked another roughly aside as the louse aimed a kick at Evans.

Evans was out cold. His nose was canted to one side and blood smeared his face. A trickle of red wormed down his neck from a skinned welt behind one ear.

Muddy shielded the fallen youngster as best he could, dragged Evans free of the center of the battle. Chip Ditlow shoved his way to Muddy’s side.

“The dirty so-and-so got away,” Ditlow panted. “Imagine a skunk like that deserting a—”

“Never mind Hinkly, help me get Evans out of this.”

They carried Evans to the door. Muddy whistled down a cruising cab. They got Evans into the taxi just as the siren of a police car sounded down the street.

“The nearest hospital,” Muddy ordered. “And step on it!”

Muddy stared incredulously at Hinkly in the office of J. K. Menner. The lean face of the youthful manager was set in grim lines.

Jerreen Walsh stood beside Menner. The fat business manager yanked a cigar from a humidior on his desk, jammed it into his mouth.

“It just don’t make sense, Muddy,” Menner said. “I—I—dammit, I’m not calling you a liar, but you must be mistaken. We’re in a bad spot with Evans out and—”

“Hinkly will never catch another game for us as long as I manage,” Muddy cut in flatly. “I tell you Hinkly dragged Evans to that dump last night. He’s lying!”

“Evans is out of his head—if he told a wild story like that, which I don’t believe he did,” Hinkly said to Menner. “It’s just as I told you. Lane is out to get rid of me.”

“Jim Evans hasn’t regained con-

sciousness," Muddy said bitterly. "He's got a broken nose and a bad brain concussion, maybe a skull fracture. Evans told no one anything, I saw you there, Hinkly."

Hinkly turned to Jerreen Walsh, said, "Tell him how silly he is, Sugar."

The girl raised her head. Her blue eyes were dark and angry as she flicked a glance at Muddy.

"Mr. Hinkly and I were together last night. And we were *not* at Joe's Place!"

Hinkly shrugged expressively. "There you are, Menner."

Muddy stared at the girl. He hadn't thought she would lie for Hinkly. Why, she— Then the answer came to him.

"What time did Hinkly leave you?"

Jerreen Walsh flushed. Hinkly said quickly, "Not that it's any of your business, Lane, but I left Miss Walsh at her apartment about eleven. I went straight to my own place and went to bed."

"You went to Evans' hotel and persuaded him to go out," Muddy contradicted. "You inveigled Evans into a fight and sneaked away when—"

"That's enough, Lane!"

HINKLY took a step toward the lanky manager. Then he stopped abruptly, said to Menner, "Call the Marlo Arms. It just happens that the manager of the place can fix the time I came in."

Menner moved uncomfortably. Hinkly said, "I insist, Menner. Maybe if you pin down Lane's lying attempt to hang something on me, you'll wise up to the fact that the sooner he's ousted and a real manager put in charge of your ballclub, the better for everybody!"

Menner picked up the phone, dialed the number Hinkly gave him. He asked a question, listened a moment. A peculiar light was in his eyes as Menner cradled the phone.

"Well?" Hinkly prompted.

"He said that you had to rouse him to get in last night because you'd left your key in a suit you sent to the cleaners," Menner said slowly. "He remembers it was a few minutes after eleven—and he's positive you did not leave the place again!"

It was a doubleheader today and the players filtered into the clubhouse before noon. The room hummed with a buzz of comment anent Jim Evans. Nobody seemed to know the facts. Chip Ditlow wasn't there.

The talk stilled suddenly as a broad-shouldered, white-haired giant came into Blues' dressing room. The big man walked over to the bench where Smoky Joe Booker was dressing.

"Well," Whitey Trent boomed. "How about a little show of welcome to your new chucker from you overworked elbowers!"

Booker looked sharply at the white-haired husky.

"What's the gag, Whitey?"

"No gag. The boss told me this morning that I'd been traded to you guys. And here I am."

Players looked at each other. Somebody said, "What goes on? Whose head has been chopped off?" just as Muddy came from the little room in the corner. Hutch Hinkly pushed past Booker and Trent, moved in front of the manager.

"You damned nincompoop!" Hinkly raged. "You can't get away with this! Who's going to catch for you? Menner will—"

"The deal is closed," Muddy said flatly. "Pop Warner will catch for us 'til we can bring up a rookie. You're through with the Blues, Hinkly!"

Black fury twisted Hinkly's features. His murky eyes glittered balefully.

"I'll be glad to get away from this stinking, gutless outfit!" he yelled. He turned as though to yank his belongings from his locker, suddenly snarled, "But

before I go there's a little something I want to leave!"

Hinkly pivoted and swung his fist from his shoetop. The treacherous, unexpected blow caught Muddy below the ear, staggered him backward. He stumbled off balance, banged into a low bench in front of the row of lockers. His weight twisted momentarily on his bad leg. Tearing, wrenching pain stabbed the joint and there was a sudden give as though something long tight had loosened. He crashed to the floor, slammed his head against the steel lockers.

For a second or two Muddy slumped there dazed. A peculiar pain rolled up his leg from the knee but there was an odd relief in the pain. Like the throb of a jaw when an aching molar has been yanked. Biff Byrnes and big Jake Hale pulled Muddy to his feet.

"Hold him, Jake," Byrnes said, turned to Hinkly. "I always knew you was a rat," he spat. "But I didn't think you had Japanese blood! Put up your hands, you lousy this-and-that!"

Muddy shook the fog from his head, brushed Hale's grasp from his arm. He took a step and was aware that his knee was sore, yet it felt easy and freer than it had in weeks. The pain actually felt good. He pushed in front of Byrnes.

"Thanks, Biff," the lanky manager said. "But I figure this is my job." He eyed Hinkly and his gray eyes were bleak and grim. "I'm *looking*, now, Hinkly," he added.

A hoarse animal snarl tore from the lips of Hinkly. He mouthed curses, leaped at Muddy. He threw a round-house swing calculated to tear the manager's head off.

MUDDY sidestepped, evaded the wild swing. His own left flicked out and a hard fist jolted Hinkly's jaw. He followed the left jab with a beautiful right-cross that any pro pug might have

been proud of.

Hinkly's head snapped back. He cursed wildly, lunged at the smaller man. Again Muddy sidestepped. As he did so his weight was thrown on his bad leg and there was a wrench of throbbing pain. Muddy slowed and Hinkly's big fist caught him in the face.

Hinkly yelled coarsely, followed up his advantage, threw a flurry of flailing fists. Muddy abruptly realized that his knee wouldn't stand prolonged footwork. Grimly he stepped inside a looping right Hinkly threw.

A hard left sunk into the middle of Hinkly's torso. Breath rushed from his mouth in a great gasp and he involuntarily hunched forward from that solar-plexus wallop. Muddy put every ounce of his one hundred seventy-eight pounds behind a jolting straight right to the jaw.

Hinkly's head jerked back. His eyes filmed glassily. His knees were abruptly rubber. He fell forward, splatted on the cement floor like a sodden paper bag.

Muddy could feel a difference in the dugout. There was a new air of respect from his men. Smoky Joe Booker summed up the changed attitude.

"Some of us suspected from the first that Hinkly was a tramp," the speed-baller said. "And that rest kinda woke up since Hinkly's been out of the game. We're a better ballclub even if you have to use the batboy behind the plate. We're all with you, Muddy."

But that day Muddy Lane learned that having his players with him isn't all a manager needs to win ballgames.

Pop Warner was pitiful in the first game.

Warner had been the Blues pullpen and batting practice catcher for eight years. In all that span, he had donned mask and protector in less than a dozen games and those occasions were in late

season when nothing hinged on the result.

Pop knew his own limitations. In the seventh inning, after the Savages had swiped three bases, he'd let in a run on a passed-ball, and dropped a third strike, Pop ran a hand through his thinning hair and slumped wearily on the bench beside the young manager.

"Ten years ago," he said morosely, "I might have done you some good, Muddy. Now I ain't worth a damn!"

Muddy tried to hearten the veteran bullpen catcher.

"You're doing all right. Don't mind a couple of bad breaks."

"I quit kiddin' myself a long time ago, Muddy. I never was no great shakes as a hindsnatch or I wouldn't been a bullpen fixture. I ain't got it, son. You better get some kid up here in a hurry."

Even with Warner's sorry exhibition the Blues came down to the ninth frame holding a 9-8 edge. The team had battled from behind four times.

In the first of the ninth the Savages' leadoff man caught one of Booker's fast ones on the nose, slammed a triple to the centerfield corner. Smoky Joe bore down, poured his fireball through. He struck out the second hitter. One away. He got two strikes on the next man. Then it happened.

The hitter swung at a fast one, barely ticked it. Pop Warner dropped the ball. He picked it up slowly, tossed it underhand to Booker. Pop shook his hand. Muddy came from the dugout.

"I'm okay." Warner waved him back. "Just stings a little."

The hitter slapped a sharp grasscutter straight at Larry Cross. The bow-legged little shortstop was in on the grass to cut off the run and he gobbled the ball cleanly. The Savages' third-base coach had gambled on the Blues weak catcher. He'd sent the runner home.

CROSS threw a strike to the plate. The ball was ten feet ahead of the runner—and Pop Warner dropped that perfect peg!

A moment later Biff Byrnes snagged a drive over second, flipped to Cross and the shortstop's shot to Hale completed an inning-ending double play. But the score was tied.

In the dugout, Pop Warner said bleakly, "One play I had to make and I messed it up!" Sweat glistened on his face. He held out his right hand to the trainer. "See if you can fix this blasted mitt so I can make a stab at the second game."

There was a sudden silence as the trainer looked at Warner's hand.

"You get that on that foul tip?" he asked. Warner nodded. The trainer grunted. "No wonder you dropped Larry's peg! Your index finger is broken at the second joint!"

Everybody looked at Muddy. The same thought was in every man's mind. A man can't do a job of catching with a broken finger.

Big Jake Hale busted a homer into the stands for the winning run, but as the players trooped into the clubhouse they were a silent lot. They were asking themselves the same question. Who would catch the second game?

J.K. Menner and Chip Ditlow were in the clubhouse. The round red face of Menner was worried and the cigar in his mouth had been chewed to shreds.

"I owe you an apology, Muddy," Menner said. "I didn't tell Hinkly that he'd been traded. He had me up in the air and—well I guess there was a hazy idea in my mind that the deal could be canceled. Chip gave me the complete story and—oh, hell, I should have known! I've been burning up the wires trying to locate a catcher 'cause I was personally going to bounce Hinkly if you did give in and call off the deal

with the Savages."

"Did you find a catcher?"

Menner rolled the mangled cigar across his lips.

"There's not a prospect worthy of the name on any club we've got a tie-up with," he said. "The only possibility is a young lad by name of Whip Johnson in the Texas League. He's the property of the Yanks and they're working him in the outfield. He'd have been up long ago with any club but the Yanks—you know how Bill Dickey rolls along—but they've got a thirty thousand dollar tag on him."

"Get him."

"With what?" Menner scowled, chonked down viciously on the wet cigar. "Barrow isn't taking I.O.U.'s this season and we haven't got thirty thousand dimes, let alone dollars! Pop busting his finger puts us in one sweet spot. What are we going to do for a catcher? I mean right *now!*"

Muddy looked at the front office man and there was a glint in the young manager's eyes. He slowly flexed his bad knee. There was an uneasy strained ache, but it wasn't stiff.

"You get the money somehow for this Whip Johnson. Get him up here as fast as a plane will carry him. I'll take care of the catching today!"

Muddy crouched behind the leadoff hitter, grimly forced his thoughts away from the dull, tensed strainedness in his tightly bandaged knee. He recalled the club physician's words: "— the right twist, jar, or something *might* correct your trouble."

Had the wrench he'd taken when Hinkly knocked him over the locker room bench righted his trouble? The knee *had* to take it today, at least.

"All right, Hooks, kid," Muddy cried. "Start hot today. Let's see that old jughandle."

The old driving, competitive flame

was in Muddy's voice. Alder broke off a sharp curve on the outside corner. Muddy gripped the horsehide, shook it at the slender curveballer.

"The old stuff in there," he chortled. "They'll be lucky to get a foul!"

Alder set the enemy down one-two-three. The Savages chucker performed the same disservice for the Blues. The pattern for the whole game was set in that first inning.

Muddy kept up a running fire of chatter. It reacted on the whole team. Gradually the infield woke up, responded in kind.

The two clubs battled down to the top of the eighth with but three hits between them. Muddy's knee throbbed and ached beneath the bandage, but he was still in there. With one out in the eighth, the Savages manager sent Hutch Hinkly in to pinch hit for the catcher. Hinkly glared at Muddy.

"You've been shot with luck so far," he snarled. "We're gonna catch up with you this inning!"

Muddy made no reply. He signed for Alder's Sunday curve. Hinkly cut viciously at the down-breaking hook. A spinning, twisting, swing-bunt squirted off his bat ten feet out from the plate. Muddy leaped after the ball but the sudden strain was too much for his knee. He stumbled, half-fell. When he picked up the sphere, Hinkly was plunking a foot on the bag. Muddy carried the ball out to the mound, handed it to Alder.

"My fault, Hooks. Should have had it easy."

Alder took the horsehide, said, "Don't let it bother you. We'll get 'em. It don't mean a thing."

But Muddy's error did mean a thing. The next hitter caught an inside curve that broke a little too soon, lashed a line drive into the leftfield stands.

Those two runs were the ballgame.

The Blues couldn't score in their eighth or ninth. Muddy's thoughts were bitter as he dragged his throbbing leg through the tunnel. Were the breaks *always* going to be in favor of Hutch Hinkly?

His leg was stretched across two chairs, a pillow wadded under his knee. The joint was swollen almost twice normal size. Muddy stared morosely at the knee. His pulse throbbed in the tender member but it was nothing to the throb of isolated phrases from the *News-Advertiser* that pounded in his brain.

. . . Lane is all through, as player and manager. . . . His desperate effort today only indicates more vividly his incompetence . . . no one in his right mind would have traded Hinkly with Evans incapacitated. . . . Our information is that the Savages are willing to forget the Hinkly-Trent deal. . . . Lane should resign to clear the way. . . . For the good of the club. . . .

The phrase hammered in Muddy's brain. "For the good of the club." The *News-Advertiser* guy maybe had the right dope. Everything was sour. He couldn't expect the guys on the club to be for him after today, Jerreen Walsh was all out for Hinkly, and—what was the use? He was licked. He'd better take the advice of the sports writer and—

His thoughts were interrupted by J.K. Menner coming into the room. Menner's round face wore a puzzled look.

"I started up here to give you bad news," Menner said. "Now I don't know whether it's bad or not. The only banker in town where I figured there was a chance for a loan turned me down cold this afternoon. Then half an hour ago he phoned me to see him again tomorrow."

Menner scowled.

"I don't know what happened. I asked him and he was evasive, said he wanted to look the team over tomorrow and if things were as they've been represented to him, he'd reconsider the loan."

Menner looked gloomily at Muddy's knee.

"If he meant whether we win or not, I guess the loan is out. You'll never be able to play ball tomorrow on that—"

The business manager broke off as a rap sounded on the door. Muddy said, "Come in."

BIFF BYRNES, Lefty Gray, Jake Hale, and Whitey Trent crowded into the room. They stood there awkwardly, looking from Menner to Muddy. Hale dug his elbow into the ribs of Byrnes.

"Do your stuff," he said hoarsely.

Byrnes cleared his throat.

"This here's a delegation from all the gang," he said. "Chip Ditlow gave us the lowdown and—well, hell, after the things that happened, and you going out there on a bum gam an' all, we want to—to—Dammit, I ain't no speech-maker! What we want to say is that no matter what the papers say, we don't want no part of Hinkly! We're for you, Muddy. We aim to show you how much in the games-won column. 'Tain't too late to catch them Clippers!"

"Yeah," Hale said. "It boils down to this: "You've had tough going but *you're our manager* and the only one we want!"

"We'll play over our heads for you, Muddy!" That was from Gray.

"My old flipper's got a lot of stuff left to give out for a guy like you, Lane," Whitey Trent said. "Gimme a crack at Hinkly and my old gang tomorrow. All you'll need do is to stand back of that dish and get your mitt in front of 'em!"

For a moment Muddy couldn't speak.

Something choked in his throat. How could a guy think of leaving this gang? He swallowed, said huskily:

"You're our chucker tomorrow, Trent. I'll be in the backstopping spot if I have to use a crutch!"

Whitey Trent almost made his promise to Muddy good. The giant right-hander was right on the beam from the start. He disposed of two of his former mates by the strikeout route in the first frame and forced a third to roll weakly to Cross.

"Okay," Big Jake Hale said to Cross, Barry, and McCarty in the dugout. "We roll. One or all of you guys get on and I'll shove you around. No fooling today!"

But the man on the hill for the Savages had other ideas. And Hutch Hinkly, behind the plate, cannily made use of hitting weaknesses for the Blues that he'd garnered while with the club.

Both chuckers were hotter than machine gun muzzles. They were all out, using all their stuff. It was the last of the fifth before anybody got a hit.

Then Dan McCarty swung on a fast ball and banged it between short and third for a clean blow. He took second when the leftfielder bobbled the hopper. Jake Hale dropped two of three bats he swung, strode purposefully to the dish.

He looked tough up there. Hinkly signed for Hale's supposed weakness, a low curve on the inside. Big Jake golfed it high and far into the stands. The only difficulty was that it landed fifteen feet foul. They didn't take any more chances. They walked the big slugger to fill up the vacant base and play the percentage for a double play.

There was one out but Biff Byrnes gripped Muddy's arm in the dugout as Dal Roe went to bat.

"Cross 'em up, Muddy," Byrnes said. "Dal ain't been hittin', sign him to bunt Dan and Jake down. I'll score 'em both

if you do!"

Muddy didn't hesitate. This was a *team* today. He signalled Roe to sacrifice.

The unorthodox move caught the Savage's infield flatfooted. They barely managed to get Roe at first.

Hinkly turned toward the Blues dugout. "Boy-wonder school of baseball, huh!" he yelled. "Sacrificing with one away!"

Byrnes stepped into the batter's box. "Watch, mug," he said. "And learn about strategy!"

Hinkly worked his pitcher hard on Byrnes. It came down to the clutch pitch. Both runners were in motion as Byrnes came around with the ashwood. The bat collided sharply with the horsehide.

MUDDY sighted the white streak of that drive from the bench. It went on a rising arc. It went over the leftfield stands into the street.

Biff Byrnes trotted around the bases, plunked his spikes into the plate.

"That's boy-wonder managing, you slimy slug," he chortled. "It's two more than we need to take you guys!"

Byrnes was wrong. Two innings later those runs didn't look so big. And Muddy Lane was responsible for the reduction of the margin.

Whitey Trent weakened a little. Two men got hits in succession. Muddy went down pitcher's lane to talk to the big fellow. Trent said,

"I've been trying too hard to overpower 'em. Let me stick, Lane. I'll mix 'em up."

The next hitter slapped a long one to right. Dal Roe grabbed it, cut loose a heave toward third. Muddy clomped down to back up the throw. It was going to be close. Then the ball took a nasty hop, skittered past Pete Socho. Muddy tried to block the ball but his weak knee betrayed him. He sprawled

to the turf. His big mitt batted the sphere. The ball rolled to the bullpen.

Before McCarty could race in from left and field the horsehide, one run had scored and the second Savages runner had rounded third. He slid safely under McCarty's hurried throw to Whitey Trent covering home.

Muddy was almost in tears when he came to the dugout at the end of the inning.

"I'm worse than Pop Warner," he said morosely.

"Hell," Whitey Trent said. "Forget it."

"Yeah," Jake Hale contributed. "We'll get them runs back."

They didn't. And the Savages were hitting Trent hard. The big fellow had been bearing down too heavily in the early innings. Only a sparkling double play saved him in the eighth. The Blues couldn't do a thing in their half.

Whitey Trent worked hard that ninth inning. Muddy played on his nerve alone. That twisting fall back of third had done his knee no good.

Ron Barry ran into the next township to pull down a drive in deep center for the first out. Trent wiped the sweat from his brow. Muddy straightened painfully. He knew Trent was weakening fast. The white-haired giant came down pitcher's lane to meet him.

"I'm about bushed," Trent admitted. "But I'd like to stay in. I can get two more."

Muddy nodded tiredly.

The second hitter bashed one squarely on the button. It looked like a line homer into the lower leftfield deck. McCarty made a leaping, one-hand catch.

Two away! Only one more to get!

The thought hammered through Muddy's head. A sneering voice came from far off.

"You're all through, punk!"

Muddy looked up. Hutch Hinkly

was at the dish. Muddy signed for Hinkly's blind spot, inside and high.

He groaned when the ball left Trent's hand. The big fellow had slipped. The pitch wasn't high and it wasn't inside.

Crack!

The ball streaked over second, skipped once, skittered into the extra-base lane between center and left. Barry legged after it. The drive rolled to the stands, bounced off the facing.

Hinkly rounded second as Barry reached the ball. He was almost to third when the relay reached Cross who had run deep into left-center. Hinkly paid no attention to the coach's palm-up, hold-it sign. He yelled at Muddy, "Get out of my way, punk!" and thundered down the line.

A dozen thoughts kaleidoscoped through Muddy's mind as Cross drew back his arm, fired the ball. If Hinkly scored, it meant the ballgame.

HINKLY was five feet from the plate as the ball smacked into Muddy's mitt. Hinkly snarled, threw his big body through the air. Muddy didn't flinch. He met that driving, full-body block, went to the dust with Hinkly. He didn't even feel the pain in his knee. All he felt was the ball gripped tightly in his right hand and the solid plunk of the rock-hard horsehide against Hinkly's head.

Muddy staggered erect, held the tightly clutched baseball before the umpire above the dust cloud. The umps jerked his right thumb over his shoulder.

"He's out!"

It was later in the clubhouse. The doc had examined the knee, asked a lot of questions. After Muddy had showered and was dressed, the club physician came into the little office.

"Mind now, I'm not saying for sure,

but I believe your knee will be all right. Whatever was wrong has fixed itself."

Muddy nodded, said nothing. It was good to know that he'd won his battle. It was good to feel that the players were back of him a hundred percent.

"It'll be sore for awhile," the doc went on. "But the irritation will leave after a few day's rest and your knee will probably be as strong as ever."

"Sure it will," J.K. Menner boomed from the doorway. His round face beamed through a puff of cigar smoke. "And here's the article that guarantees he'll get the rest."

The front office man waved a blue slip of paper in front of Muddy.

"A check for thirty thousand smackers! From the banker who absolutely wouldn't make the loan. I'll wire Whip Johnson to take a plane tonight!

"Things are breaking for you, Muddy. The hospital tells me that Evans will be okay in a couple of days, no fracture. You'll have *two* catchers and when you get rested, you can turn one of them into a slugging outfielder!"

Then Menner sobered a little.

"That banker was here at the game, Muddy. He came up to my office afterward and made out the check. It seems that a certain young lady called on him yesterday and made such an eloquent plea that he had to see the man who could inspire such fervor. He was impressed thirty thousand dollars worth with your courage in playing on that bum knee, Muddy, but the person we really have to thank is Jerreen Walsh. She's in my office, Muddy. I think—"

What Menner thought didn't interest Muddy.

He barged into the office on the surge of a sudden hope that Menner's account of the banker's loan gave him. Jerreen couldn't be so all out for

Hinkly if she would go to bat for him like that.

The girl sat at the desk, her back to Muddy. She held a telephone to her ear.

"Yes, Mr. Hinkly, I heard you. I was just trying to decide how to phrase what I have to say to you."

A silence. Hinkly must have said something. The girl spoke softly into the instrument.

"I'm afraid I can't believe that, Mr. Hinkly. Muddy Lane will be manager of the Blues a long time. The plain fact is that I would never again believe anything you say. Chip Ditlow was with Muddy the night you deserted Jim Evans. Chip went with me to the manager of Marlo Arms, forced him to admit that you bribed him to lie about the time you came in. Did you bribe the sports writer on the *News-Advertiser* to play your game, too? I wouldn't doubt it!

"You've lied to me about Muddy from the start, caused me to lose faith in a man I should have known better than to believe was the same small calibre as you. I should have been on the side of Muddy Lane all the time and I definitely am now. Don't ever phone me again or try to talk to—"

SHE broke off in mid-sentence as the phone was taken gently from her grasp. She looked up, startled, met the steady gray gaze of Muddy. A warm light glowed in the depths of her blue eyes.

Muddy cradled the phone. A lot of pictures chased through his mind. Pictures of a lanky catcher-manager and a blue eyed lovely in a little cottage.

"There's no time to waste talking to him," Muddy said. "The battle is over—right now I have to show my best general how much I appreciate her help!"

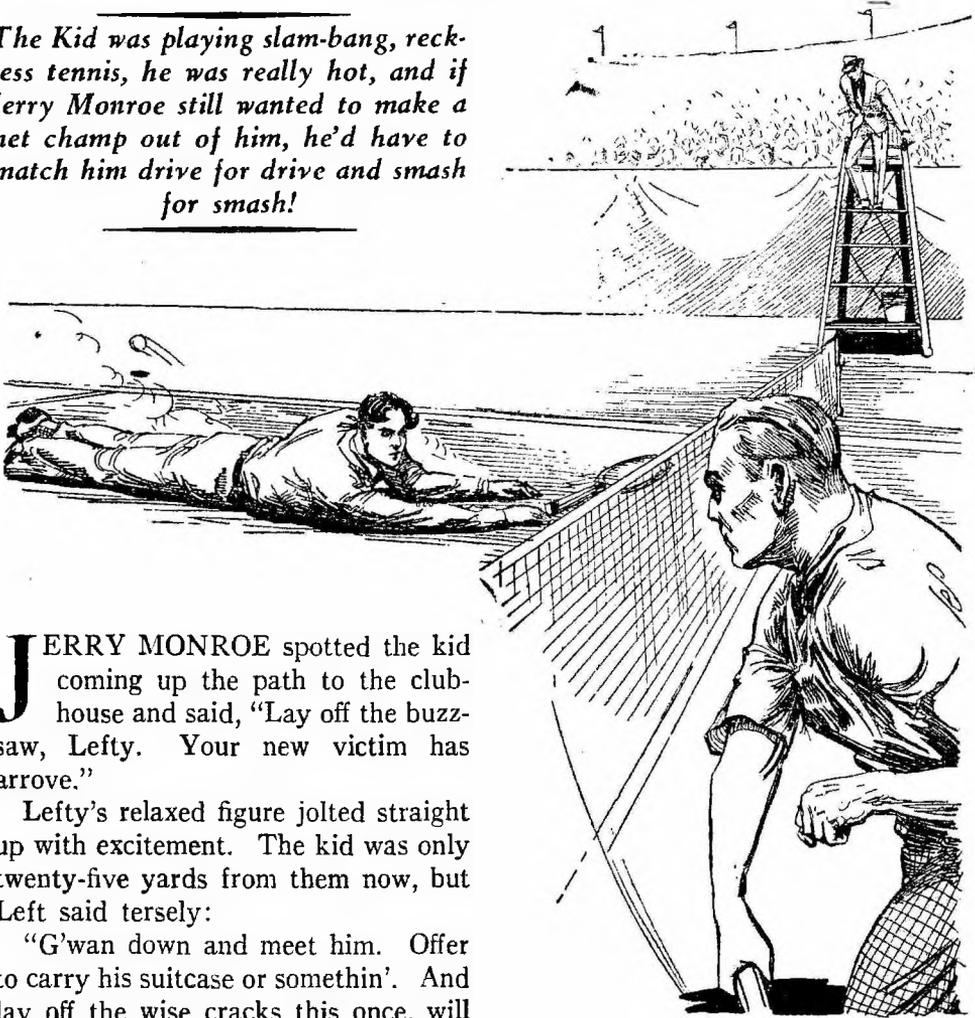
THE TENNIS TERROR

by

RICHARD BRISTER

Author of "Vengeance Volleys," etc.

The Kid was playing slam-bang, reckless tennis, he was really hot, and if Jerry Monroe still wanted to make a net champ out of him, he'd have to match him drive for drive and smash for smash!



He slashed viciously at the ball!

JERRY MONROE spotted the kid coming up the path to the clubhouse and said, "Lay off the buzz-saw, Lefty. Your new victim has arrove."

Lefty's relaxed figure jolted straight up with excitement. The kid was only twenty-five yards from them now, but Left said tersely:

"G'wan down and meet him. Offer to carry his suitcase or somethin'. And lay off the wise cracks this once, will ya? I don't want anything to undermine this kid's confidence."

Jerry's eyebrows took on a cynical slant. "Hail the conquering hero, eh? You go meet him. I'll try to scare up a garland of roses."

The kid stopped at the foot of the steps and dropped his suitcase. He had a boyish face, handsome in a pug-nosed way, and a pair of direct blue eyes. He looked like a typical American college product, and watching him, Jerry sighed inwardly, "Lord, I feel ancient!"

The kid looked at Lefty. He was turning on his best campus manners.

You could see the effort, almost feel it. "I'm Arthur Barry. You're Mr. Lefty Devine, I guess."

Jerry couldn't hold back a grin at the "Mr. Lefty." It even had Lefty fazed, but just for a moment. Then the shrewd little promoter went into his act.

"Glad to have you with us, Barry." He reached down and grasped the young ex-collegian's hand warmly. "You're gonna do us more good than you know. That was a nice job you turned in at Forest Hills. A damn' nice job, in case

you don't know it."

The kid's face was a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure. Jerry said caustically, "Don't even listen to him, youngster. Take the word of a tired old man, it's the kiss of death. Oh, and by the way, I'm glad to know you. I'm—"

"Jerry Monroe," the youngster provided. Jerry winced at the trace of awe in the youngster's tone. Why was it these kids coming up always hero-worshipped him? Might think he was a second Big Bill Tilden, or something.

Lefty broke in impatiently, "Come on inside, Barry, and meet the others."

The fat little man shot a furtive scowl in Jerry's direction, meanwhile herding the kid through the door like a mother hen with a wandering chick.

Jerry grinned back at him blandly. He stayed put where he was. He'd been the headline attraction in Lefty's stable of tennis players long enough to imagine what would go on inside.

Young Barry was being well taken care of. Leave that to Lefty. The little promoter had invested six thousand dollars for a year of Young Barry's services. This was cheap enough for an amateur champ of undoubted box-office power, but you could bet your best hat Lefty was keeping an eye on his new tennis property.

Jerry was still sitting there on the steps, taking it easy, ten minutes later, when Lefty came out, rubbing his fat hands with satisfaction.

"Well," Lefty said, "whaddaya think of 'im?"

Jerry couldn't help wondering why he'd been asked. There was a mile high wall of antagonism between him and Lefty. They didn't see anything quite the same way, but they did have for each other a grudging, mutual respect.

Jerry said, "Okay, I guess."

"Okay?" Lefty was hurt. "He's the

works. I'm gonna build this kid up to a real box office draw. This kid's got color, I tell you. I'm—"

Jerry said, "Lay off it, Lefty. It's a nice routine, but I seen it too often. Stop wavin' those arms and tell me who goes to the wall this time."

"The wall?"

"Sure. You know, the guy stands against the wall in the morning, smokes one last cigarette. Then the blindfold and 'Bang, bang!' Curtains."

Lefty scowled. "You ain't funny."

"You ain't either. Not even a little. Come on, quit stalling. I'm onto your system. You never built a new man up yet without giving some one the works. Who is it this time, Ferrelly?"

"I don't—"

"All right, skip it," said Jerry. He'd know tomorrow anyhow, when he saw who got stuck in against Young Barry at Maywood.

The ball zipped up over young Art Barry's head, hung motionless in the bright afternoon sunlight. His racquet swept up in a powerful arc, slashed at it viciously.

Jerry watched with a connoisseur's eye from the grandstand. He was not working today, taking a hard-earned rest.

The ball zoomed off Barry's swishing bat and moved in a long dipping arc across the net. It came down fast to stay in court, and Cowan stabbed at it.

COWAN was acting as fall guy, instead of Ferrelly, as Jerry had expected. Jerry scowled as he watched the lumbering veteran muff the youngster's serve into the net.

"Game for Mr. Barry," the umpire intoned from his wooden stand. "He leads, four-two, in the second set."

Cowan's big good-natured face displayed no emotion. He was taking a lacing in this three-set match, was in

fact only two short games from losing to Barry, but he didn't look ruffled as he moved back for service.

"The big ox is too dumb to be worried," Jerry thought with disgust.

Cowan unleashed himself at the ball in service. It was his famed cannonball delivery. It was the foundation of the giant's tennis reputation, and when he hit it right, it was well-nigh ungettable.

Young Barry lunged at it desperately. The high bounce almost fooled him. He managed to get his racquet in front of the ball, but all he could do was to block it. The pellet floated back in a soft, high lob to Cowan's baseline.

The big man had rushed to the net after service. For a moment he stood there, stupidly watching the high ball float past him. He started running at last but got back to his baseline too late. His last-minute stab at the ball sent it careening into the alley. As an actor, Cowan was very corny.

Jerry spat with disgust. Down on the bench beside the courts he could see Lefty Devine's face working with shrewd satisfaction. It was all working out as the little promoter had planned. Young Barry was handing Cowan a terrific flouncing. Whatever prestige Big Cowan held in the eyes of the crowd—and in his day he'd had plenty—was being swiftly transferred to young Art Barry.

You had to hand it to Lefty. He had his star system worked out even better than they did in the movies. The axe was ready to fall on Cowan any time now, but not until he'd contributed something to Barry's box-office power.

Jerry watched Cowan double fault after a series of deuce-ad exchanges, dropping the game. The bland expression on the big man's face was too much for him finally, and he jostled disgustedly toward an exit.

Lefty had given him Barry as a

roomy, just for a while, he said. Jerry was propped on the bed in their room before supper when the kid came in.

Jerry didn't look up from his paper. "Nice going," he grunted lackadaisically.

The kid picked him right up. "No kidding? You liked it?"

Some devil inside him tempted Jerry to tell him that Cowan had thrown the match to him—under Lefty's instructions. It would jerk the kid back onto terra firma. But what was the use? Let the kid have his pipe dreams.

The kid said, "Tomorrow they'll really see some tennis. You're taking Ferrelly on in singles, aren't you?"

The kid's eyes alone would have been enough flattery, Jerry thought, if he'd just kept his mouth shut. The kid had a lot to learn. He remembered when he'd been young and sincere like that. He forgot to wise crack.

"You take tennis straight, don't you, Barry? Without any chaser?"

The kid flushed. "Well, I more or less have to. I'm placing a lot of hopes in this year of pro tennis."

"Hopes? Hopes for what?"

"I'm taking this year off to finance myself through medical college. I've gotten my pre-med in already, and—well, the way things look, the six thousand I'll get for this year of playing will see me right through my interne-ship."

Jerry's quick glance at the youngster's face held new interest, and even a slight tinge of envy. Here was a kid who was going to go places. He wasn't being sucked into Lefty Devine's inviting blind alley. He had his route charted. It was plain his tennis playing ability hadn't gone to his head.

Jerry's voice lost its prepetual bantering tone. He said, "You got something there, Barry. You keep in there kicking."

It was time for dinner. He said, "See you down in the dining room, kid," and

walked out the door.

He bumped into Lefty Devine in the lobby. The promoter said, "Siddown a sec, Jerry. I wanta talk to you."

"Make it fast, Lefty."

"I'm gonna stick you in the singles t'morrow, with Barry. I want you to—well, just take it easy, a little." The fat little man was plainly flustered. It was the first time he'd ever braced Jerry Monroe on a set-up like this. "I mean—"

Jerry said flatly, "You're gettin' too big for your shoes, ain't you, Lefty? Go peddle it somewheres else. You hired me for a tennis player."

"Listen—"

"I been think' about those boys, Lefty. I even made up a poem about 'em. Wanta hear it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Cowan, Stapler, Johns and Ferrelly; those guys are dumber than my Aunt Nelly."

"It stinks."

"So does something else in here, Lefty." He turned away brusquely.

"You better get smart," Lefty called after him. "You better—" but Jerry was out of earshot by then.

L EFTY was getting a little too cute. Jerry decided he needed a lesson. He would have to demonstrate his independence, somehow.

One of the bell hops steered him to a stud game in a room upstairs. Jerry went up and asked in. A couple of the men in the game knew him by sight, and they'd all heard his name.

They wound up the game at ten the next morning. Jerry lost forty bucks, and consumed eight cups of coffee. It was a poor substitute for getting drunk, but he didn't drink. It was the only way he knew of going on a bat.

It was nice. He had a pair of bags under his eyes that were beauties, going out on the court, and the glims were nicely bloodshot. It played hell with

Lefty.

"I'm warnin' you, Jerry. You ain't so big you can't be cut down. I ain't—"

"Nuts, Lefty!"

He went out there and rallied with the kid for service. Young Barry was a littled awed by this first exchange of shots with Jerry Monroe. He flubbed one over the baseline, and Jerry had service.

He flipped the ball up, smashed into it squarely. He had a honey of a top-spin on it. The high twisting bounce to Barry's backhand tied the kid up in knots. The gallery applauded.

Barry lacked confidence. He didn't solve Jerry's service until the third point of that game. Jerry hit the kid's block back in a scorching drive to the youngster's baseline, to pull out a love game.

The kid looked flustered. He double faulted. Jerry kept him on the run. He turned on all the razzle-dazzle and brilliance of his perfected stroking and won that opening set at six-two.

Jerry had to grin when he looked at Lefty. The little promoter's face was scarlet with rage. It didn't do for the kid to take such a trouncing even if it *was* Jerry Monroe giving it to him. Jerry was knocking the props out from under a six thousand dollar investment. when he should, as Lefty saw it, be giving the kid's prestige a nice shot in the arm.

Jerry slammed into the second set of the three-set match with cold satisfaction. He was going to give this kid a real trimming. That would keep Lefty from getting cute ideas about him again.

A hard-hit service ball raced over at him. He slammed a terrific forcing fore-hand to the kid's far corner. The kid's desperate passing try was weak at the net. Jerry raced in and dropped it nicely for point.

"Game for Mr. Monroe," the umpire said. "He leads, three-love, in the sec-

ond set.”

They changed. As they passed at the net post, the kid said: “You sure are making me look like a chump, Jerry.” He grinned. There was no rancor in it.

He laced into service for all he was worth. It spat sand just inside the court. Barry didn’t block, as he’d been doing up until now, but drove with his backhand.

“Changing a losing game,” Jerry thought grimly, and raced over to get it. He got there too late, dropping the point.

He served again. The kid drove to the baseline. Jerry got to it, lifted a high lob over the youngster’s head. The kid was back in plenty of time, and angled it deeply.

Jerry saw the kid start to come in. He tried a passing shot along the right alley, but the kid was over there like a flash. He lit into it with an overhand smash. Jerry watched it fly hopelessly over the wire backstop.

He dropped that game. And the next. The kid was playing slan-bang reckless tennis, trying to kill everything he could lay his bat on. He was really hot.

Jerry played “getting” ball with him for a while. He was kept racing up to the net, back to the baseline, from one side of the court to the other. He found that he couldn’t stem the tide that way. And last night’s dissipation was beginning to tell on him.

It would be sweet irony now if he lost to the kid after all. That was exactly what Lefty wanted. Jerry’s legs ached now. His breathing grew fast and hard. He glanced over at Lefty, saw the satisfied smirk on the fat promoter’s face. Jerry decided to change his tactics.

He’d have to blast the kid off the court. It was the only chance. He started pouring soup into every shot. The topspin held them down nicely for him. He picked up two games.

“Five-three,” the umpire intoned.

“Mr. Monroe’s favor.”

Jerry blasted over three beautiful serves. Barry missed two entirely—aces for Jerry. The youngster got the third one back, but Jerry ran up on watery legs and killed it.

HE TOOK set point behind another beautiful service, and there it was. Six-two, six-three. The score made it look bad for young Barry.

It was killing Lefty just as it was. He followed Jerry into the clubhouse, storming. He said:

“It’s about time you an’ me come to an understanding.”

Lefty was raging. “You ruined Barry! Now he’s gotta be built up again, or he won’t draw peanuts! And you’re gonna do it. I’m putting you an’ him on in singles tomorrow, an’—”

Jerry said patiently, “You got the wrong number, Lefty. Sell it to Ferrelly, why don’t you? Or Cowan.”

“No.” There was a quiet note in Lefty’s voice that worried Jerry. The little guy was always popping off in the mouth, waving his arms and letting off steam, but now he was really in earnest. “You messed things up for me, Jerry. You hurt my business. And you’re gonna straighten things out tomorrow or else!”

“Or else what?”

“I’ll cancel your contract.”

There was no doubting the fact that he wasn’t fooling. Jerry felt a nagging fear that was a novel sensation after all his years in the professional game. Lefty had a real mad on this time. Maybe he’d better—

He smothered the thought with an angry toss of his head. The hell with Lefty! But by the time he’d dressed and taxied back to the hotel, he’d begun to wonder what he could do for a living except play tennis, and he was wavering again.

He found the kid on the bed in the

room they were sharing. The youngster had a letter in the afternoon's mail, and was reading it as Jerry came in.

"What's up, kid? Bad news?"

Barry's head shook from side to side. "No. It's just an offer—well—I could give up tennis, I guess, if I wanted to.

The kid looked straight at Jerry's eyes. He had lost his deferential manner. Jerry smiled to himself and reflected that after this afternoon's match, he was just a fallen idol to Barry. The kid probably felt a lot better than he let on, after extending the great Jerry Monroe like he had.

"It's nothing really," said Barry. "I have a feeling I'll do a lot better just sticking this year out in tennis."

Jerry was curious. He felt guilty. If the kid passed up something good on the strength of this afternoon's phony showing, it would be just too bad.

Jerry shrugged, letting it ride. He had his own problems, chiefly whether or not to tincan it tomorrow. Lefty was boiling over enough to pull something drastic. No matter how many ways you looked at the thing, the logical, common-sense answer was *yes!*

He was dog-tired. Barry's service ball swished over the ribbon and pounded sand at his feet. He hit it with a clean forehand, ran up to the net. The kid's hard return sent him lurching toward his left. He reached the pellet and nailed it, but the salt was draining out of him fast.

It was one-love in games. Barry's favor! The crowd looked surprised. For that matter, so did Jerry. He hadn't started to throw this match—yet!

He'd spent the whole first set making shots automatically, half his attention on the ball, the other half of his mind trying to reach a decision. That's one certain way to drop a point now and then, and Lefty Levine's sullen eyes burning at him had helped the cause.

He woke from a daze after fourteen

grueling games to realize that he'd dropped the set at 8-6. Barry needed just one more set to clinch it.

A smashing drive to his baseline forced him out of position. He got his bat on the ball, but flubbed it back weakly. Barry was waiting, pantherlike at the net to kill it.

"Game for Mr. Barry. He leads, two, love, in the second set!"

There was a whispering buzz, a rustling of programs, from the grandstand.

Passing the parapet of the stadium as they changed courts, Jerry caught knowing looks in several pairs of tennis-wise eyes. He'd better show them some tennis.

HE FLIPPED up the ball, smashed into his service. It was good. The kid blocked to Jerry's backhand. Jerry went over and drove it. It landed just inside the baseline. Barry didn't even get near it.

Jerry won that game from the youngster. And the next and the next. For the first time today he was really applying himself to tennis.

Barry was serving. The ball went up; he cracked into it hard. It struck the net. The second was good. Jerry really leaned on his forehead. It was too hot for the youngster to handle. Jerry went on to break through Barry's service, and it was 4-2, in his favor.

There was a burst of applause from the faithful for him. It would be pretty lousy of him to let them down, but after all, what choice did he have? Things had come to a pretty pass when Jerry Monroe lost a match on purpose, but it was just this once. Then he'd really lay down the law to Lefty.

He aced the kid. He picked up another pair of points after prolonged rallies, and then pulled out the game. Barry was worried. He faltered at service, and Jerry smashed through him

again.

"Set for Mr. Monroe," said the ump. "Sets are all even at one apiece."

They sat together during the brief intermission. Barry looked thoughtful, puzzled. He kept staring at Jerry.

"Not feeling quite up to scratch, are you, Jerry?"

Jerry could almost see his mind working. Barry still couldn't believe he was halving this match with the one and only Monroe.

Jerry said: "You're too modest, Barry. There's no good reason why you shouldn't take me."

Barry flushed. "The reason I asked—well, I'm still not decided. About going on in tennis, I mean."

Jerry glanced up at him sharply. "No?"

"No. I've been offered a scholarship, to go on with my medical course. A full one, too. 'Course I wouldn't have any spare money to throw around, but it's enough to see me through if I budget carefully."

Jerry said harshly: "Take it, you chump."

"Well, the thing is, I've been doing pretty well with the troupe so far. And six thousand dollars is nothing to sneeze at. It'll be years before I can hope to earn that much as a doctor. Maybe I'd be a chump not to stick to tennis. I'm young, and—"

"Foolish!" Jerry was getting sore. "Tennis is no career for you, youngster. Lefty'd hang onto you two or three years at the most, and then you'd be canned. But you can go on being a doctor forever."

The kid's lips tightened. "You're doing okay."

"I'm Jerry Monroe!" That sounded lousy, conceited, but he had to say it. "Lefty's wanted to can me plenty of times, but the crowd won't let him. I was playing tennis before you cut your eye-teeth, sonny."

Barry flared up. "You're not so *damn* hot, Jerry!"

Jerry sighed. It was funny how you'd tie yourself up in knots trying to reach a decision, and then circumstances would come up to decide things for you. He had a job to do, in this set that was coming. He wasn't, oddly, sore at Barry. The kid was just young, and had let himself get a little inflated.

Jerry said softly: "This is gonna hurt poppa more'n it will you. Come on out to the woodshed, sonny."

Barry's sceptical laugh floated after him. Jerry wrapped in a tight knot of concentration. If he had ever turned on the heat against an opponent, he was turning it on now.

He flipped the ball up, smote into it, his whole big frame unleashing itself at the pellet as if to kill it. The ball was a white blur racing over the net. It looked like a tracer bullet.

Barry pivoted, grim-jawed, lifting his racquet. The ball hit his taut strings with a thud, and bounced off weakly into the net.

Jerry smiled grimly, smashed at another. Barry chopped it back, short. Jerry went in with lazy grace, set himself. He suddenly exploded. His racquet sang as it smote the felt. The ball zipped up and down over the net. Top-spin literally jerked it away from young Barry's racquet.

THE kid's face was like granite as he flubbed again, making it forty-love now. The crowd had gone dead silent. They couldn't know what had gone on during intermission, but they sensed drama unfolding before their eyes.

Jerry took two love games from the youngster. Barry was storming, blasting away at everything that came near him. He was frustrated, blowing up badly. Jerry took advantage of his every mistake. The set rolled on. Three games for Jerry, four. Five, and

Barry had managed to garner only one or two occasional points from the tennis veteran.

The kid was serving. His ball had a high top to Jerry's forehand. Jerry rose with the ball. His racquet came up in an overhand chop shot. It struck solidly. The ball raced back over the net, sharply angled. Barry came running up. His face was read and gleaming with perspiration. He slashed at the ball. It slapped the top cord of the net and dropped back into the youngster's court.

"Love, forty," the umpire said. "Game, set and match point!"

Match point! Jerry risked a glance to where Lefty Devine was sitting. The little promoter's face was devoid of expression. It was only the gleaming close-set eyes that gave the tipoff to what he was thinking. Jerry shivered slightly, and went back to take Barry's last service. It came right at his middle. He swerved back and sideways. His racquet came sweeping around in a singing arc, smacked into it cleanly.

Barry ran over desperately to take it off his backhand. His return of the ball was a high floating lob. It was short, Jerry saw. It would land in mid-court. It would, if he let it.

He leaped upward, eyes straining to follow the flight of the pellet. His racquet came up from behind him. There was a solid clop as it met the ball in a perfect overhead smash. It struck ground just over the net, went flying up over Barry's racquet.

The crowd's ovation to Jerry was tinged with hysteria. Barry came to the net. Some of the anger seemed to have sifted out of him by now. He reached his hand over to Jerry.

"Blame it on my youth, Jerry. You were right. I'm really cut out for a doctor, but it took you to show me."

Jerry actually blushed. "Forget it." Lefty Devine came storming out on

the court. He had his small mouth half open, but Jerry spoke first.

"Save your breath, Lefty. You can't fire me. I'm quitting!"

Lefty just stared, his fat face working. Jerry said, "So's Barry. I got a feeling you're gonna have your troubles, Lefty. Of course, you still got the sheep."

"Now listen—" Lefty started. He had been hit right in the solar plexus, thought Jerry, and wanted a truce. "Now don't be hasty, Jerry. What do you want to quit for, anyhow. You just put on a wonderful display of tennis. The crowd's goin' nuts. I'm willin' to make a few concessions."

Jerry said, "I just don't like you, Lefty. I wouldn't come back on your lousy troupe if you gave me a half interest in it. Until a half hour ago I'd forgotten how much fun it is to play tennis. Real tennis!"

"All right," Lefty said suddenly. "I *will* give you a half interest in it."

Jerry stared at him, sensing a trick.

Lefty said, "You can have an even say about how we run it. Maybe you're right. Maybe it *is* better business to show them straight tennis. I'm willin' to learn, but you gotta show me."

Jerry knew he was Lefty's greatest asset, as a player, but still couldn't believe the little man was sincere.

He said, "And the first guy who fakes a match gets the can?"

"Listen—" Lefty started. Jerry waved him down brusquely.

"It's either that, or I'm through!"

Lefty stood motionless, eyes locked with Jerry's. The moment held for a while, then Lefty relaxed, nodding.

Jerry grinned. A new order had been born in that moment. The "sheep" were going to be very surprised. Jerry ad-libbed a couplet about it:

"Cowan, Stapler, Johns and Ferrelly; are due for a good swift kick in the—belly!"

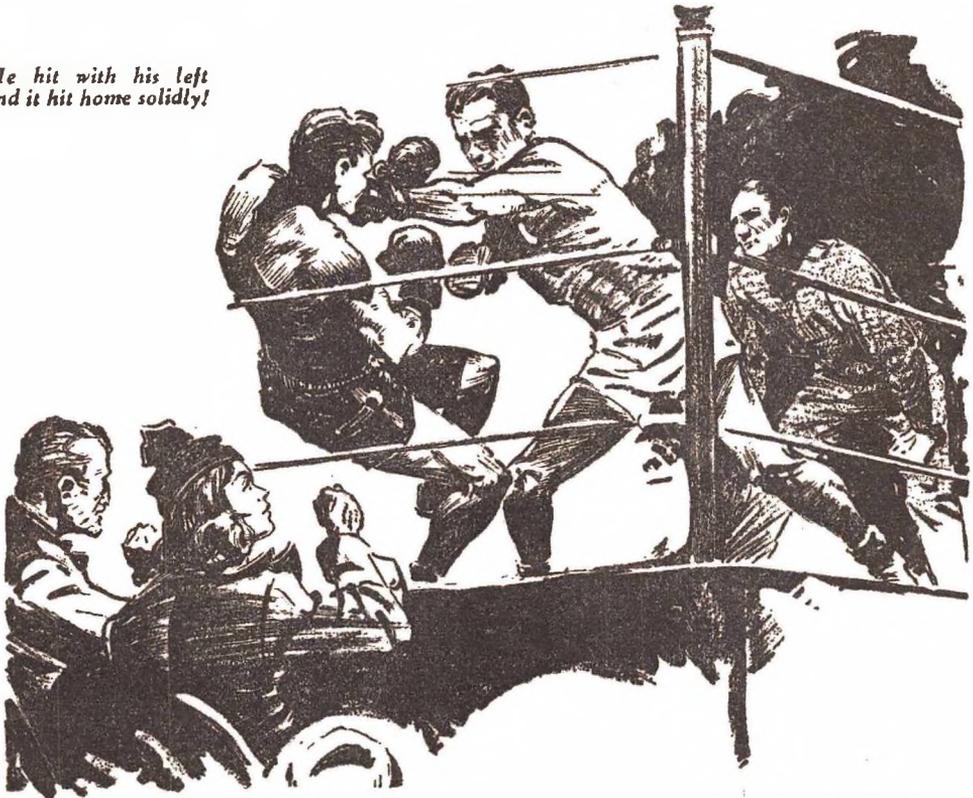
BLOOD-AND-LEATHER BUTCHER

by
GILES A. LUTZ

Author of "Fence-Buster Boomerang," etc.

He didn't look like a ring killer. He just looked like a big, pleasant young guy. He didn't look like the kind of a fighter who'd blast a man's brains out just to add another K.O. to his list!

*He hit with his left
and it hit home solidly!*



KILLER CANBY stuffed his left into the sparring partner's belly and grinned. He didn't look like a killer. He looked like one of the big, nice-looking, young guys you see in bathing trunks at the beaches. He flowed around the cumbersome sparring mate as sweetly as spring water, the grin constant and large on his face.

The meat slab flailed an awkward right at Canby's head. Canby picked it off with effortless ease, slipped inside and cuffed the hulk with open gloves.

"Hit 'im," Midge Halloran screamed from the training ring ropes. "You

ain't playin' pat-a-cake. Arrahhh," he broke off in helpless disgust. "That's enough."

Midge was a little man with a sharp, belligerent face. His voice was hard and incisive. When he spoke you forgot the smallness of his stature. Steve "Killer" Canby was going to make Midge the manager of the heavyweight champion next Friday night. The lethal potion Canby carried in his right glove would rock the Champ to sleep inside of six rounds.

"This is the last workout, Killer!" Midge's voice was plaintive as he adjusted the robe about Canby's shoulders. "And you horse around. Patsy

Charvez is no slob."

Canby said in good-humored protest. "Drop that Killer stuff. That's newspaper talk. I happen to stop a couple of guys, and they hang that name on me."

"A couple," Mush O'Rourke said in awe. "The last nine fights by KO's and he calls it a couple. Kid, if you ain't a killer I never seen one."

Canby rubbed the heel of his glove across Mush's chin. "There's a lot of things you haven't seen, Mush." He liked this broken-down handler. Mush had been a good fighter until too many punches had scrambled his brains. Sometimes his talk came out blurred like the poor guy was talking through a mouthful of mush.

Midge cleared reporters from Canby's path. He looked like a waspish fighter plane escorting a big bomber. "Later, you guys," he kept saying.

Canby stepped inside the farmhouse, dropped his robe, slipped out of his trunks and walked towards the shower. He moved like a stalking cat, all rippling rhythm. Canby liked the fight racket. But he was no killer. It was all a game, a test of strength and skill. He was glad he had the sleep drops in his right hand. He could walk out there and end it quickly with a punch or two, not havinig to beat some poor guy silly softening him up.

He came out of the shower, his skin glistening with the water, his hair slicked close to his skull. Midge was talking to a couple of reporters at the door.

He saw Canby, shut the door in the reporter's face and walked across the room.

Canby put an affectionate arm about Midge's shoulders. "You go for this, don't you?"

"I eat it up," Midge answered honestly. "Guys are asking what Midge

Halloran thinks. You think that don't feel good?"

Canby knew how Midge felt. Midge had been raised on the wrong side of the tracks. Everything he got came the hard way. Midge had seen possibilities in the young, husky dock-worker and spent time and what little money he had in developing him. Yes, Midge had his moment of glory coming.

"Worried about that dough we put up, Midge?"

"Me?" Midge scoffed. "We get it back. It took that twenty thousand forfeit to pin Charvez down. I thought maybe those guys would try something, but they ain't had a chance to get close to you."

A little guilty look crossed Canby's face. If Midge knew what he had been doing—

Midge said, "You let me worry about the money, kid. You been sleepin' well? You look kinda tired."

MUSH'S mouth dropped open, and Canby flashed him a poisonous glance. "I've been sleeping fine, Midge." After the fight he would tell Midge about it but not now. The little manager would literally explode.

Canby ate a slow, easy supper and sat on the front porch until blackness smothered the Jersey hills. Mush sidled up and said, "Gee, Killer, you think you ought to go tonight?"

Canby's hard hand clamped on his arm. "Shut up, Mush. When Midge is asleep rap on my door."

He walked to his room, across the hall from Midge's, and lay down on the bed. He stared up into the darkness, his mind piling up jumbled thoughts. He shouldn't be doing this, but he couldn't help himself.

A soft pecking on his door brought him to his feet. He opened it, and Mush said in a sibilant whisper, "He's

asleep, Killer." His voice went up in a little, moaning wail. "Midge would kill us if he knew."

Canby, Mush trailing after, slipped softly out of the house, not putting on his shoes until he was well outside. He hurried down the road, his eyes light and happy. He could see no harm in taking a few hours for himself—not as long as Midge wasn't directly hurt. It was like a hunger, this desire to see Judy, and Canby would be strangely empty if he were denied it.

She was there at the cross-roads, waiting in the battered, old roadster. Her face was pale, white oval in the moonlight, and the fragrance of her hair came keenly to Canby.

He climbed in beside her and heard Mush fall awkwardly into the rumble seat. He didn't want to bring Mush, but Judy insisted. "It wouldn't be right, Steve," she had said, and Canby could see what she meant.

He reached for her hand. "Honey, why don't you come up to the camp in the daytime? If Midge saw you—"

She leaned over and brushed his cheek with her lips. "Steve, I can't. You know how my folks feel about fighters. If they knew—" She fell silent as she started the car.

Canby frowned. Maybe after he was the Champ her folks would see him in a different light. He didn't know her people. In fact, he knew very little about Judy. He had seen her several times when he had gone into the village. The memory of her luxuriant hair, the flaming crown it made for her perfectly chiseled features wouldn't leave Canby. It prodded him until he spoke, and she answered him. It had moved fast after that until Canby was slipping out nights to meet her. He remembered when he told her, "I never had a girl before," and the pressure of her hand.

Midge would say she was after some-

thing, but Midge was wrong. Judy had never asked for a thing.

She headed the car towards the village, and Canby asked, "Where are we going?"

"Dancing," she replied gaily. "Do you know I've never danced with you. I've thought a lot about that, Steve."

A quick protest rose to his lips. "There'll be people. I can't—"

She turned her face towards him, and Canby knew there was reproach in her eyes. "I've never asked for anything before, Steve."

"I want to go, but if someone told Midge—" He shuddered, visualizing the little manager's wrath.

"I've fixed all that, Steve. My cousin owns a little place outside of town. He's closing it tonight. Only you and I and Mush will be there." She leaned towards him, and he could feel the warmth of her.

Canby's reluctance left him. Midge would never know. The trouble slipped from his eyes as he thought of holding her in his arms.

THE place was a shabby, little affair. Canby looked about the empty parking lot. "Just you and I, honey." His voice caught in his throat as he held out his arms to lift her from the car.

"Killer, if Midge finds out about this," Mush wailed.

"Midge is having sweet dreams. Shut up, Mush."

He walked inside, Judy on his arm, Mush at their heels.

The man behind the bar watched them intently. Canby's eyes widened, his head came up. Something about this place, something in the air—

He was shoved violently and as he fell heard the door slammed shut.

Mush's yell was high and broken. "Killer! Look out!"

Canby scrambled to his feet, catch-

ing a glimpse of Judy hurrying out of the door, behind the bar. He whirled to face the four men advancing toward him.

Canby read their faces and didn't wait. He moved in swiftly, his big fists swinging. Three of them swarmed him, the other one worked on Mush.

Canby fought silently and furiously, but he couldn't handle all three of them. He heard a dull ploshy thunk, saw Mush falling, saw the sap still swinging in the hand of the man who had hit him.

Canby had four of them now. They came at him from all sides. He concentrated on the man before him, found his opening, and snapped his weight behind the right hand. The man dropped like a poled ox. Canby spun and ducked, and the sap slid off his ear, lighting heavily on his shoulder.

The blow shocked and sickened him. His left arm went dead and useless. He threw his right hand as fast as he could, but it was like using a fencing rapier against broad slashing sabers. Blows rained on his face and chest. His sight grew fuzzy, and he could feel his senses leaving him. He smashed hard against the evil, grinning face before him, felt the solid impact as his fist rammed home against lips and teeth, and a blinding sheet of agony enveloped him. He knew what had happened. He had smashed the bones in his right hand with that terrible blow.

He stood there unable to protect himself. Even then it took them a long time to beat him from his feet. They pounded and smashed at him, and Canby fell slowly like a tree that has been deeply undercut. He lay on the floor, fighting off the swirling blackness and heard their panting swearing as they kicked at him. He felt no pain, only a dull numbness, a wish to get it over with. He jerked a little from a

final kick, and as the blackness reached for him, heard one of them snarl, "That oughta hold you, Sucker."

Canby opened his eyes and stared about him. His face and head were bulky with bandage, his body felt stiff and rigid under yards of tape. He lifted his right hand and felt a throb of pain as he moved it.

"Geez, Killer," Mush said, standing beside the bed. "Don't move the maulie. It's busted." Mush had a swollen, discolored spot on his forehead where the sap had hit, but otherwise he seemed all right.

"What happened?" Canby asked in a dry husk.

"That's what I wanta know." Midge spit the words forth in fury. "Mush called an ambulance after he came to and brought you here. You been out two days."

"There was a girl—" The words came out with painful effort.

"This her?" Midge thrust a picture before Canby's eyes. Canby could see ragged edges where Midge had torn it out. The girl's face was eager and smiling. Canby nodded.

"That's Judy."

"Judy, hell." Midge's swearing was terrible in its intensity. He pulled a newspaper sheet from his pocket and placed the picture over a hole. It fitted perfectly. Judy was only half of the picture. She was smiling at Potsy Charvez. Potsy had a smirk on his face and his Spanish blood showed in his dark features, in the slick, black hair fitted close to his skull.

MIDGE read the caption under the picture in an awful voice. "Mrs. Lola Charvez congratulates her husband on the successful retention of his crown without fighting." He threw the paper on the bed. "That was taken yesterday." He stomped up and down,

and his anger was a roaring sound, filling the room. "It was all set up, those beautiful nights, those long walks. Then she took you in that place, and they beat hell out of you."

Mush looked at Canby's bleak face. "I hadda tell him, Killer. He hadda know."

"A hell of a fine time to tell me," Midge raged. "After it's too late. After our dough is gone. We're clipped for twenty grand. Clipped, do you hear me?"

Mush said feebly, "We could tell the Law"

Midge whirled on him. "We're telling the Law nothing. You think I want us laughed out of the racket? We're took."

Canby's face took on a new hardness. His eyes were frozen, inhuman-looking. "So I'm a sucker — a prize sucker?"

Midge was compromising. "You are. Lay there and suck on the idea. Next time you'll tell me things."

Canby said slowly, "There'll be a next time. I'll get out of here, and—"

Mush's tone was awed. "I would not like to be Charvez."

Canby spent a long string of days in the hospital. His insides were messed about, and there were broken ribs to heal. The laughter and good humor went out of his face and his eyes never lost that bleakness.

Mush said aggrievedly, "Midge, it ain't the old kid."

"Good. Next time he gets Charvez he's got something to remember." Midge turned at the door and looked back. "He's a killer now."

Mush spent a great deal of time at Canby's bedside. He tried everything to break through Canby's wall of reserve. Canby met his remarks with the same blank silence. Mush knew in his own feeble way it wasn't good for the

kid to bottle up his thoughts. It would be better if he talked. He said jocularly, "The little black-haired nurse is sure gone on you. She comes in here a hundred times a day. Kid, you sure kill 'em."

Canby turned those dead eyes on him. "Yeah. That's why I'm here. Get out, Mush. You talk too much."

He lay there, thinking about the nurse. It was funny her going out of her way doing things for him. She was constantly fussing with his bed covers, bringing him special things to eat, or something to read. Now that Mush had mentioned it, Canby could see that she came into his room more than she had to. The cynical twist of his lips made the mouth line hard and bitter. She knew Canby was a fighter. The wren thought all fighters had dough. She was trying to cut herself a piece of it.

He was ready when she came in again. "I'm broke," he said harshly. "It'll be a long time before I make any dough. You're wasting your time, sister."

He could see the perplexity in her eyes. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

Canby's laugh was ugly. "The act won't do you any good. And all these little favors won't pay you anything, either. I told you I'm broke."

Color rushed into her face, and her eyes snapped. "So that's what you think." She sat down in the chair Mush had occupied, and the lines of her body were rigid. "I know what Lola Charvez did to you. I was trying in a small way to make it up to you." Her voice dropped so that Canby could scarcely hear it. "I'm Lola Charvez's sister."

Canby stared at her dumbfounded. Then he threw back his head and laughed, a harsh, tearing sound. "That's the pay-off. You gals are go-

ing to see that nothing is left. Your sister puts me here and you pick the bones." He reached over with his good hand and pulled her close. He held her tightly against him and kissed her savagely. "I oughta have something coming."

Her lips were cold and lifeless under his, and she stayed there, not resisting him. When he let go of her, she stood erect and adjusted her cap. He could see her eyes, big with the hurt behind them.

"Yes," her voice was empty, "You have something coming."

CANBY stared after her troubledly. Anything he did to her would be too good, but it left him feeling dissatisfied with himself. But that ought to keep her away.

It didn't, though. She came back as often as before, doing all the little things she could think of to ease his days. She talked as though nothing had happened, but Canby noticed the hurt confusion remained in her eyes.

He never touched her again and he tried hard to put her out of his mind. He found out a lot from a loquacious interne.

"Yeah, Ruth Trent," the interne said. "She's a swell girl. Supports her mother. Her sister's got a lot of dough, but she don't kick in a thing."

Canby never spoke to her unless she spoke first. His eyes followed her about the room, his mind busy with troubled thoughts. He thought of demanding she be taken off his case, but if she was on the square as the interne said, that might hurt her job. Maybe she was different than Lola. She was different-looking. She didn't have the class, the glamour her sister had. Canby looked at her again and saw things he hadn't noticed before. Lola's beauty was a dazzling thing, like the noon-day sun. This girl had a quiet-

ness like a shadowed pool—a cool comforting quietness.

She came into the room and said, "Doctor Funk says you will be leaving tomorrow. You'll have to take it easy for awhile with that hand."

"I'll take it easy until I meet Charvez. I'm going to knock him into that tramp sister's lap." He threw the words at her, watching to see her flinch.

"I hope you do," she said with passion.

She sounded like she meant it, and Canby stared at her curiously. It could be— He quit thinking and shook his head.

"I won't be here tomorrow." Her voice was low as she held out her hand. "Good-bye, Steve."

"So long," he growled and turned over on his side. He heard her go out of the room and didn't look up.

It was good to be released from the hospital. Canby stood on the steps, sucking in great lungfuls of air. "Where are we going, Midge?"

Midge helped him into the car. "To Jimmy's farm. We'll wait until the paw is entirely well, then we go after Charvez. You need a few fights first."

Canby was silent as the car sped down the highway. "Midge," he said finally, "That was Lola Charvez's sister. You know. The nurse."

"What?" Midge howled. The car swerved, and he put his eyes back on the road. "You don't have to tell me anything," he said bitterly. "I'm only your manager. She coulda poisoned you. I woulda fired her off—"

"That's why I didn't tell you before now." Canby's grin was crooked. "The gal's supporting her mother."

Midge's voice was a file. "You believe anything a dame tells you. You need a nurse—a wet nurse."

Canby was silent again. He supposed Midge was right. He took his

thoughts from the girl and put them on the months ahead.

The long stay in the hospital left Canby soft. He spent hours doing road work, skipping rope, and conditioning himself. He used the right mauler sparingly at first and daily it grew stronger. The thought of Charvez and his wife was like a spur, driving him on.

The nights went the slowest. There was nothing to do except to sit around and think. He thought of Ruth's unfailing high humor, despite his surliness, of the numerous things she had done for him. The least he could do was to thank her. He wrote her a stilted, awkward letter and ended it, "I want you to know I appreciated your help even if I didn't show it."

CANBY was surprised at the promptness of her reply. It was a friendly, impersonal letter, but he felt better after having received it. He waited a week and wrote again, and her reply was just as prompt. He fell into the habit of writing often, telling of his work, of little things that happened to him. He found himself looking forward to receiving her answers. He didn't try to understand it; he was just glad. He never told Midge about it. Midge would rave. Canby guessed Midge would have a right to rave.

Midge taped the right hand carefully. "It's all right, kid. See what it's got."

Canby waded into the sparring partner. His timing wasn't too far off, and he found his opening early. He poured the right through, felt no twinge of pain as it landed. The sparring mate's breath burst out in a loud whoosh and he toppled forward on his face.

Canby watched him, breathing easily. The man perked a little, then was still. Canby still had the old

power in his right paw. Midge could start getting Charvez.

Midge couldn't keep the exultation from his voice. "I thought you were ready. I signed for Sleepy Laughton in a couple of weeks at the Garden."

Canby went down the aisle, listening to the crowd roar for him. They were glad he was back. Canby put the thought from him irritably. The crowd wasn't glad because they liked him. They were glad because he would give them quick, brutal action.

He went out for the referee's instructions and glowered at Sleepy. He could look on Sleepy as part of Charvez, for Sleepy was the first step back.

Sleepy looked like a man in a trance, but he was good and tough. Canby had stopped him in three at Philly last year. He wondered if he could do it as quickly tonight.

He went back to his corner and looked about curiously. He had written Ruth about his fight and sent her a ticket. Afterwards, he was sorry, for he had not heard from her and he felt she was laughing at him. His heart jumped a little as he spotted her sitting near his corner. She lifted her hand in a little wave and smiled. Canby waved back.

"Who are you waving at?" Midge demanded suspiciously. His eyes traveled over the sea of faces, but he didn't spot the girl. "You keep your mind on this fight." He pushed Canby out at the sound of the bell.

Canby took it cautiously for two rounds, the left hand building a fence about him, blocking Sleepy's vicious hooking. The third round opened and it was time to go. He boomed in a left hook to the body, and Sleepy stopped like half of his side was taken away. Sleepy didn't get his gloves up, and Canby's right blasted him high on the head. Sleepy went backwards, his eyes taking on a glaze. Canby followed

and struck again with shocking speed and power.

Sleepy fell forward on his face, bounced a little, then lay there, his muscles quivering.

Canby looked on dispassionately as the referee counted Sleepy out. He had taken the first step.

He dressed and walked out of the dressing room, feeling strangely restless and dissatisfied. He had blasted Sleepy easily, after two or three more fights Midge would get him Charvez, but still he felt something lacking. He walked out of the Garden's exit and Ruth was there, waiting.

He couldn't keep the harshness from his voice. "Did my winning disappoint you?" He could talk to her in his letters, but now that she was here the old suspicions rose anew.

She took hold of his arm and said, "Buy me a cup of coffee." Her fingers were light and warm on his arm, and some of his brooding fell away from him.

THEY talked a long time over that cup of coffee. He told her a lot about himself and listened eagerly when she talked. "I thought fighters were ugly people," she said slowly. "Potsy doesn't give me a very good impression for the rest of you."

At the mention of Potsy's name Canby's eyes hardened.

She saw it and her face sobered. "I want you to beat Potsy, Steve. I want it as badly as you do."

He couldn't recapture his old, light feeling. Charvez's name had done that to him. He got up abruptly and said, "I'll take you home. I have to get some sleep."

He turned from her at the door, and she stopped him. "Do you remember the first time you kissed me, Steve? I always wanted to take the taste of it away." She rose on her toes and

kissed him quickly, and her lips were warm and light and sweet.

Canby stared after her as she ran into the house, his hand brushing awkwardly at his mouth. He walked down the street, his mind a turmoil of thoughts. He wouldn't let Midge say I told you so again. He wouldn't be a sucker for any dame that came along.

Midge got Jason Frizzel and they went down to Philly for the bout. Canby dropped Jason in the fourth round. It took a lot of leather slinging, for Jason was a rough, ready boy. The crowd howled for Canby when he finished his work. He wondered if Charvez would worry. It took Charvez seven to knock out Jason.

Canby put Mauler Mason away in Beantown in five, bloody rounds. It took a barrage of right hand punches before the Mauler dropped. It was a sweet showing, for Charvez had ducked the Mauler for the past six months. The public's clamor for Charvez to meet Canby grew. One or two more fights and Charvez couldn't duck him.

Canby didn't write Ruth. He was afraid to, and his fear left him surly and mean with his camp help. He beat sparring mates into insensibility and Midge gloated.

"He'll shred Charvez this time. He hates him so much he sees his face on every fighter before him."

"Maybe that ain't what's driving him," Mush said. He clammed up then, and Midge couldn't get anything more from him.

Midge signed to meet Pete Sachs at the Garden, and it was almost as big a fight as a championship go. This Sachs was a comer, a young guy with a rugged heart and mean hands. It would not be an easy night against him.

Canby went down the aisle, and his heart jumped at sight of the girl in the

aisle seat. He couldn't keep the shine from his eyes as she smiled, and Midge caught it.

"What the hell's that nurse doing here?"

"How would I know?" Canby snapped and climbed through the ropes. He didn't know. There were a lot of answers to that one, and Canby was afraid of them all.

Pete was good and strong, and he could hit like hell, but after a half a round, Canby knew he could handle him. His left kept flicking in there like a rapier and his bludgeoning right put Pete back on his heels.

He came back to his corner and Midge said, "You keep that up and it'll be over by the third."

Canby grew careless in the second round, and that was a mistake. Pete bounced out of his corner, going all out. He slid inside Canby's left and hammered away with busy hands. A right hand sent Pete away, but he came back, picking up his work. Canby bent to his task. This Pete guy was going to be tough to convince of anything.

He hooked with his left and it hit home solidly. They stood in the center of the ring, tossing the blows, the crowd's roar breaking about them. Canby got hit hard and often. The taste of blood was in his mouth, and he had a job keeping Pete from swarming all over him.

When the round was over Midge and Mush had work to do. Pete's gloves had opened a cut and a swollen eye had to be lanced.

Canby went to Pete. Pete met him with a murderous right, and Canby felt shock and pain. He thought he was beating Pete's punch until he found himself on the floor. He saw Midge's frantic, white face and Mush's open mouth. He pushed himself up at seven, and the fury burned along his

veins. This guy had almost knocked him out of his crack at Charvez.

HE BOBBED inside Pete's whistling left hand and dug his own deep into the body. He heard the painful gasp and felt Pete give. He used his left again, and Pete backed a step. He didn't back quickly enough for Canby's right was bombing for its target. Pete spun and fell on his face. Canby walked back to the corner and soberly watched the referee count Pete out. It was Charvez next time and nothing must take his mind from that.

It wasn't hard for Midge to get Charvez. The promoter cocked an attentive ear to the public's clamor and Charvez had to sign.

Midge took Canby high in the Jersey hills, and Canby's work was bad. "You're fighting Charvez in two months. You're lousy, kid. You gotta snap out of it. If these bums make you look like this what will Charvez do to you?"

Canby knew the answer, but he couldn't find his snap. His mind wasn't on it, and his heart wasn't in it.

Mush spoke to him about it. "The Champ will kill you, kid. You gotta do better. You gotta get your mind fixed up. Get that girl up here and tell Midge about it."

Canby snarled, "What the hell do you know about it?"

"I followed you that night. I seen the way you look at her. I seen you mail all those letters."

Canby stared at him wonderingly. "And some guys think you have nutty moments."

He went to the phone and called Ruth. "Can you come up here?"

"What is it, Steve?" He caught the alarm in her voice.

"I don't know," he said soberly.

"Maybe I will when I see you."

He was waiting at the village when she stepped off the bus. He stared a long time, letting the sight of her wash his troubles away.

She saw him and hurried across the platform. Canby held her at arm's length, and his fingers bit deeply. "Do you know what's happened to me?" He couldn't keep the gruffness from his tone.

She saw his eyes and said softly, "It happened to me a long time ago, Steve."

People stopped and stared, but that didn't make any difference to Canby. He held her close and kissed her. This was only the third time, and it was far more wonderful than the other two. He wondered if each succeeding one would grow as this had, and if they did he didn't know how he would stand it.

He finally released her and said, "We've got to tell Midge."

She saw the slight frown touch his features. "You dread that, don't you? Let me talk to him, Steve."

She did a swell job. Midge swore and raved at first, then he listened.

Ruth's eyes were a little flinty as she told Midge her story. "Lola and Potsy stayed with Mother and me after they were married. Potsy wasn't the Champion then. He wasn't anything. When he started climbing he moved away from us. That part wasn't so bad. Then I was sick for a long time and we needed money. Mother went to Potsy, and he laughed at her." Ruth's voice vibrated with her intensity. "Do you think I don't want to see him beaten?"

Midge said wearily, "All right. All right. I believe you. But I still say a dame around a training camp is bad business." His face was sour as he watched Canby's gleaming eyes. "Don't you know that all sick guys fall for their nurse? You're sick, all

right. In the head. You got your girl. If you don't get in there and work—"

CANBY worked. He worked like he never had before. His footwork was beautiful, his punching sharp and deadly. He had something to work for now, and it seemed a better thing than mere hatred of Charvez. The days were not too long or too hard, for in the evenings Midge allowed him a couple of hours with Ruth.

"Maybe it's better this way," Midge told Mush. "His pride in the girl will make him take Charvez."

"It's better." Mush bobbed his head. "I been watchin' this gal, Boss. She's the right one."

Midge's voice dripped sarcasm. "I'll bet the kid will be glad to know you approve."

Mush was unperturbed. "I done told him."

Midge broke camp two days before the fight. He told Canby, "You can go to dinner with Ruth. Then you come on back."

Ruth listened, then said, "I can't tonight, Steve. I have to spend some time with Mother. But tomorrow night after the fight—"

He swallowed his disappointment, noticing how pale and preoccupied she was. "You feeling bad, honey?"

"No, Steve." She seemed anxious to leave, and he let her go.

The evening seemed empty without her. Canby walked along Broadway beside a million people and still he was lonely. He would have taken her to Dempsey's for a steak. He wondered if she had ever eaten a choice chunk of cow there. The thought made him hungry, and he turned into a restaurant, just off Broadway.

The waiter was leading him to a rear table when Canby saw them. The shock hit harder than any punch he

had even taken. Cold fury spread along his body, and he could feel his jaw muscles bunch. Ruth here with Lola and Patsy Charvez. The three were absorbed in their conversation, heads bent close. Ruth said she hated them, that she wanted Charvez beaten. She wanted that so much she was dining with him. Canby had been neatly sucked in again. Something burst inside his brain, and he strode forward, pushing a table out of his way.

He heard Ruth say, "I'm telling you about tomorrow night—" and his hard hand clamped upon her shoulder.

"It runs in the family," he said, and his words smoked like fresh cinders. "You couldn't go out with me tonight. You had something really important to do. You were making a fresh sucker out of Steve Canby." She tried to get up, and he held her in her chair. She tried to say something, and he cut her short.

"Shut up. I've heard the last thing I want to from you." He strode out of the restaurant, Charvez's mocking laugh ringing in his ears.

He spent a bad night. When sleep finally came it was fitful, troubled snatches. When he came down for breakfast in the morning, Midge noticed his haggard appearance.

"What is it, kid?" Midge asked in alarm.

"You were right," Canby said dully. "Ruth was working with Charvez. I found it out last night."

Midge's tone was terrible with its wrath. "That two-timing, double-crossing, little—"

"I don't want to hear any more about it, Midge. I'm all right now."

Midge looked at Canby's bleak eyes and subsided. Canby said he was all right, but that didn't make it so. A great worry sprang from Midge's doubts, and it bothered him like a festered sore.

Canby never opened his head the rest of the day. He went through the weighing-in ceremony woodenly, even Charvez's remarks failing to draw any response.

"He really hates that Charvez now," Midge observed to Mush. "He'll tear him apart tonight."

Mush shook his head dolefully. "Maybe. If his heart ain't gone."

The long hours of waiting were somehow ended. Midge and Mush fretted in the traffic jam going to the Garden. Canby just sat there, his face showing nothing. He should be going out with fire in his eyes, but he didn't feel that way. He had felt sore and mean and tough when Lola had made a fool of him, but that was different. It was only fascination he felt for her, and what he had for Ruth was real. He could tell by the hollow feeling, the all-goneness. He was only an empty shell with no strength for resisting or hating.

HE WALKED down the long aisle, Midge and Mush at his heels. The Garden was a mass of packed, shouting humanity, and Canby scarcely heard them. A prelim boy passed him, his face bloody, and wished him luck. Canby never heard that either. He supposed dully Charvez would take off his head and that didn't matter. Midge would get his cut of a championship gate. Midge would be taken care of. And as for the crowd it didn't mean a damn thing to Canby.

Then he was in the ring and Midge adjusted his gloves. The crowd roared as Charvez walked towards the referee. There were a lot of boos in it, too. People knew this Charvez for what he was.

Canby met Charvez in the middle of the ring and received his instructions. Charvez's eyes had an ugly glint as he said, "Watch yourself, sucker. I'm

gonna pick out your eyes.”

Canby walked back to his corner. Midge slapped him on the shoulder as the bell rang. “Pickle him, kid.”

Charvez came to him, working low from his crouch, his chin hidden, his hands cocked low. Canby fed him a left that never landed.

Charvez slipped inside and stabbed a jab into Canby’s face. It had enough power to sting and slow him, and Charvez whipped in a half-dozen more before Canby could lay a glove on him.

For the two rounds Charvez kept that jab glued to Canby’s face. It didn’t stop Canby, but it wouldn’t let him get set. It kept his right hand tied up, and he knew he was looking bad.

His lips were split and there was a cut over his right eye. He kept moving after Charvez, absorbing more of the cruel punishment.

“For God’s sake,” Midge cried between rounds. “Wake up, kid. He’s makin’ a monkey outa you.”

Canby’s face was stony. Midge’s words weren’t registering.

Midge’s voice was blank despair. “Aahhhh, you’ve quit. You don’t give a damn. Mush.” He swivelled his head, looking for the handler. “He’s run out, too.”

Charvez stopped his hit and run tactics in the third. He moved in solidly, the weight behind crashing blows. He threw short, shocking punches, and Canby soaked them up like a sponge.

There was blood on Canby’s face, blood running from his mouth. His motions were automatic, slow. He didn’t look like Killer Canby. He looked like a helpless, bewildered, punch-crazy bum.

Charvez rocketed a shot into his mouth, and Canby went over backward. Midge beat on the canvas and screamed wildly, but Canby never heard or saw him. Something told him

it was time to get up. He put his wobbly legs under him and stumbled into a new hail of gloves. Charvez had him in a corner, punching the life out of him when the bell sounded.

Midge assisted Canby across the ring, and there was Mush, waiting.

“I knew the girl would be here,” Mush said. “I went out and found her. She’s in the fifth row behind the press. Crying her heart out. Does that sound like she wants Canby to lose? You better go talk to her.”

Midge stumbled down the steps, and Mush worked over Canby. “Stay away from him, kid,” he pleaded.

Canby didn’t stay away that round. Even if his heart had been in it, the strength wasn’t there. Charvez hit him with everything but the ring posts. Canby went down, he went down three times, but a stubborn instinct kept pulling him to his feet.

He had as much life as a battered rag doll when the round ended.

Mush steered him to his corner. Canby couldn’t see very well. The lights were blurred and hazy and his hearing played him funny tricks. He thought he could hear Ruth talking, and he tried to laugh. She wouldn’t be here in his corner; she was some place in the audience enjoying this fight, enjoying seeing Charvez beating him silly.

THEN he felt her arms about his neck and knew this was no dream. “Steve, you wouldn’t give me a chance last night. Then I was too hurt to try and explain.”

Midge grabbed him by the shoulders. “Wake up, you sap. She’s levelling. Look at her. Would I be talking like this if she wasn’t on the square?”

Canby could see better. He saw the pain in her eyes, the marks of tears on her cheeks. She wouldn’t

be crying unless she cared.

The warning buzzer sounded, and Midge said, "Stay away from that tramp. Come back here all together. She's got something else to say."

Canby couldn't stay entirely away, but he did a fair job of it. When his rubbery legs refused to carry him out of danger he tied Charvez in knots. Charvez wrestled and tugged at him, butted him with his head and heeled him, and still Canby hung on. The hope in his heart poured the strength back into his body and he was getting stronger with each passing minute.

He went back to his corner at the bell, and Ruth talked very rapidly. "When Potsy and Lola stayed with Mother, I learned about some of their crooked deals. I heard Potsy's manager fixing it up with other fighters so Potsy could win. When you walked in last night I was telling Potsy and Lola if anything happened to you I'd tell the boxing commission about those early fights. You didn't hear it all and you wouldn't wait. Even if those were some of Potsy's early fights I thought it would keep him from harming you."

Midge said sourly, "You are a very bright boy. You cause me nothing but worry. That bum has made a sucker of you twice. Go out there and beat his brains out. Watch him when he starts that left hand."

Midge got out of the ring at the buzzer.

Canby met Charvez half-way. He punched with cold precision, and the old fire was back in his gloves, fed by his white-hot rage. He stood there, ramming home the blows, and it was Charvez who broke. Canby followed.

Canby threw a punch and missed. Charvez connected with his left, and Canby felt his nose give under the blow. Charvez started the left again, and Canby shot his right. It hit high

on Charvez's head, and the Champ quivered. Canby hooked his left. It was beautiful. He could feel the shock clear along his arm and deep into the muscles of his back.

Charvez fell like a man who steps off a cliff in the dark. He fell slowly, pawing the air with his gloves.

Canby walked slowly to a corner. He rested on the ropes and wonderingly watched Charvez pull his legs under him. Charvez was a tough boy to have life left after that shot.

At eight Charvez was on his feet. His animal courage drove him forward, and Canby admired the man. He moved slowly forward to meet Charvez. Charvez hooked the left, a feeble blow. Canby ducked and the glove curled around his neck. He straightened, pinned Charvez with his left, then with all the power in his body threw his right. The life spilled out of Charvez like air from a split inner-tube. He fell flat on his face, and Canby knew he wouldn't get up this time.

It took a long while before the announcer and the crowd would let him out of the ring. Canby impatiently pushed through them and climbed down the steps. Ruth was there, waiting, and the glow in her eyes meant more to Canby than any crown.

He tried to keep her away for he was covered with sweat and streaked with blood. She pushed his gloves aside and gathered him in her arms.

MIDGE watched them a long moment, then said sourly, "Now I got two of you to worry about."

Mush's misshapen features split in a broad grin. "I know a guy who can cut your worries in half. This guy can make them one."

He scurried up the aisle, just ahead of Midge's flying kick. It had been a pretty good night.

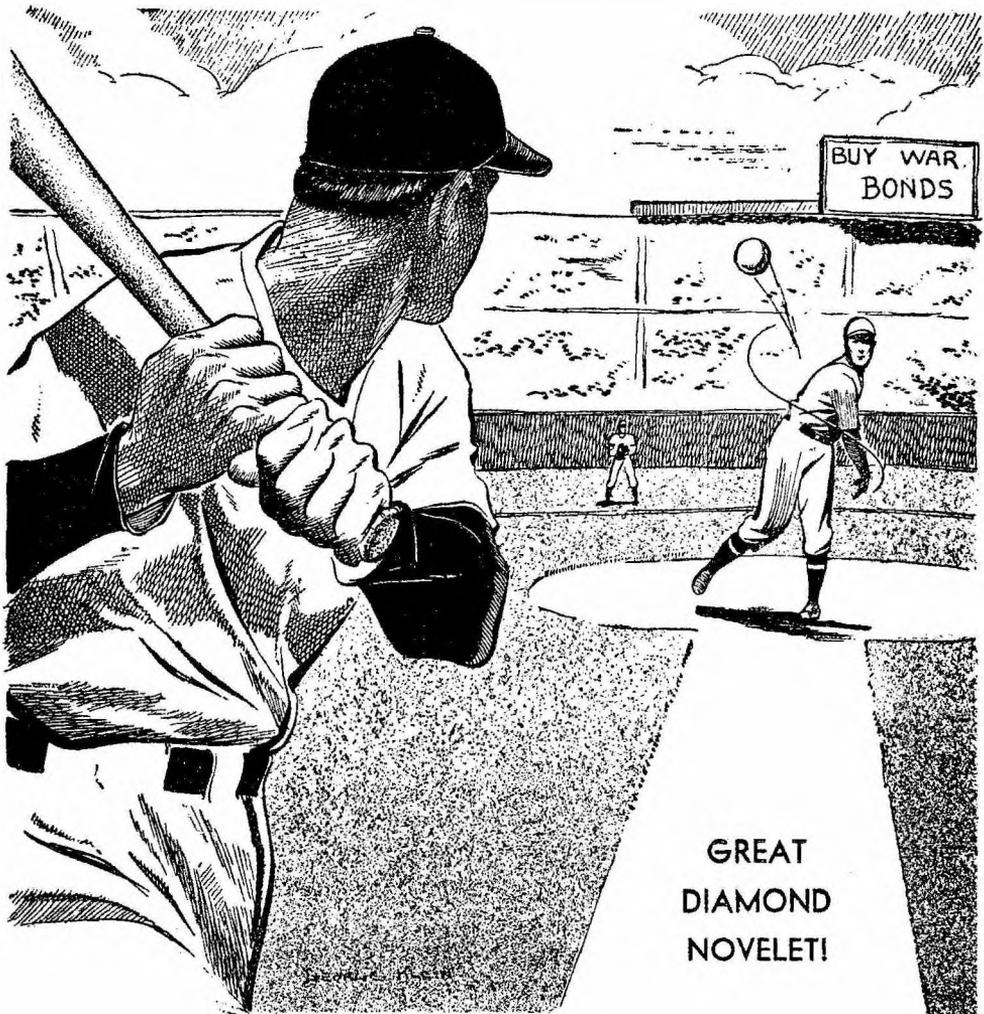
HOME RUN KING FOR HIRE!

by

NELSON A. HUTTO

Author of "Army-Bound Fireballer," etc.

It was old stuff, he kept telling himself: he'd been up there a thousand times in the clutch—but this was for the pennant, the Series, the World's Championship!



GREAT
DIAMOND
NOVELET!

Then one went down the alley, and Kidd didn't wait any longer!

CHAPTER I

PENNANT PRESSURE

TOMMY NEAL took his stance with the usual ritual. He tapped dirt from his spikes, hitched his pants, and waggled his bat two times. To the tense, hushed crowd, he was the same old Tommy—a calm, imperturb-

able little guy with quiet, brown eyes and a tinge of gray under his cap.

But Tommy Neal did not feel calm. His heart pounded, and the bat felt strange in his clammy fingers.

It was old stuff, he kept telling himself. He'd been up there a thousand times—in the clutch.

But this, he knew, was different. This was for a chance at the pennant,

and the Series! And Tommy Neal had never been even close to a Series.

It would be fine, he thought, to play for the world's championship. Fourteen years he'd dreamed of it, while his beloved Moguls wallowed in obscurity. Maybe that was why he was suddenly awed and a little uncertain. Fourteen years is a long time to wait . . .

Sutter leaned into the pitch. The ball came twisting for the outside corner. Tommy swung. A loud foul caromed into the first base stands.

Tommy frowned. He'd hit a lot of loud fouls lately. He'd got one hit in four days. Something had happened to his timing, his once-faultless coordination.

He saw the taut faces in the Mogul dugout. They were tense and edgy with strain. It was the final stretch, with the Moguls and the Hawks battling down to the wire. And this could be the payoff. It was the last of the ninth, two down, and the count tied at 2-all. Chug Roark stood waiting on third. Any kind of a hit would break up the ball game.

But old Benny Sutter, ace of the Hawks, was a crafty gent. He wasn't going to give anything decent to swing at.

The curve rode in slowly. Tommy controlled an impulse to blast. He stroked with deliberate care. The solid impact felt sweet, and he saw the ball streak for open ground in right field. He ran, treading on air. Chug would already be across the plate. All he had to do was touch the bag and—

He heard the moan of the stands, and somebody said,

"What's your hurry, pal? It's a foul ball."

Tommy turned. It was Duke Kellum, coaching at first. The Duke was a big, handsome guy, dwarfing Tommy's five feet eight. He smiled mockingly and said,

"Maybe it's your eyes, pop. Ever try glasses?"

Tommy didn't answer. He turned back thoughtfully. Kellum hadn't forgotten!

Two years ago the Moguls had brought Duke Kellum, a young sensation, up from the Coast. Potsy Proctor had looked him over and said, "The kid has color, and possibilities. But we don't need him yet. In my book, Tommy Neal's still the best second sacker in baseball."

And so back Kellum had gone for another stretch in the minors. Then this August, Tommy had sprained a back muscle, and they'd sent for the kid again. Tommy had recovered quickly, however, returning to the lineup in a week. And the kid, openly disappointed, began to sulk.

Tommy sought to console him. "It's baseball, kid. I'll wake up some morning with my gams gone stale, and it'll be your turn."

Kellum gave him a sour look. "Nuts to the song and dance, Neal. They'll have to hand you crutches before you'll admit you're through."

Tommy laughed it off. Just a restless, hot-headed kid. He'd get over it.

But that had been weeks ago. This Kellum guy seemed to nurse his grudges a long time.

SUTTER was very confident now. He wasted a couple, trying vainly to get Tommy to bite. Then he laid the fast one in close, and Tommy had to go after it. The bat cracked dully, and Tommy's heart sank. It was a weak skier to the shortstop.

Kellum said, "I got a hunch, there goes our ball game."

Waddy Stroud, picking up his pad, growled, "Who the hell asked you, busher! Run along." He turned to Tommy. "Forget it, pal. This ball game ain't over. We'll wrap these

punks in a package.”

But Tommy wasn't so sure. Kelum might be right. Jimmy Quist had already shown signs of weakening, and the whole staff was shot with sore arms and overwork. Anything could happen this inning.

They were playing a double header. If they lost this one and the nightcap too, they would be only one game ahead. And that could well be fatal, for the Hawks were moving on to a final series with the doormat Grays, while the Moguls must tackle the Sox, who were very tough. Any way you looked at it, these games today were for the money.

Quist tossed in a couple of wide ones. The left hander was obviously tiring. He uncoiled and threw the cripple. The batter pasted it for two bases.

The next man picked on the first pitch and lined it to deep left. Pinky Law did gymnastics against the fence and came up with the ball in his glove. But the lead man advanced to third, beating the long throw by a whisker.

Then Jimmy lost the plate. He walked a man on four pitches. Potsy Proctor, squat and grizzled and a little grim, came out. He talked to Quist and went back, leaving the lefthander in. Pitchers must be saved, Tommy knew, for the long series with the Sox.

Potsy's strategy was soon apparent. Quist gave Withrow, the slugging ace, an intentional pass. It meant the bases full and only one out. But it also set up a force-out on any base and a possible double play.

Hansen came up. He wasn't a heavy hitter, but he was nobody's bum. He ignored a pair of curves that missed by fractions. Then the fat one rode in there. And Hansen gave it the works.

The ball burned grass like a skidding bullet. Quist hopped to save a leg from getting knocked off. The crowd groaned.

Tommy seemed to glide across the turf. His motion was fluid, effortless, and unbelievably fast. He stretched, cupping the ball and lobbing it with one motion. Ace Talley took it ahead of the charging Withrow and snapped it to first. The umpire jerked his thumb.

There was a long hush. The Moguls were half way to the dugout before the stands got it. Then they went crazy.

“Atta boy, Jimmy!”

“That's pulling out of a hole, kid!”

Waddy Stroud snorted. “Hear 'em. Hollering for Quist. Tommy makes 'em look so easy, them nancies up there don't even notice it.”

Ace Talley murmured, “Between me and you, brother, that was a base-hit in anybody's league.”

“Sure,” Waddy grumbled. “You and me know it, and who else! Take Tommy out of this ball club, and you got a bunch of plugs going nowhere. But how many times do you see his picture in the paper.”

Pinky Law put in, “He ain't got color, pals. He don't talk big for the press or give the umpires hell. He don't go off on a toot and tear up any joints. He's a ball player, mates, and the newspaper guys wouldn't know a ball player if it bit 'em on the foot.”

Tommy, sitting at the other end of the bench, didn't hear. He was intent on the game.

Tobe Hervey flied out to center. Stroud went up and lined a blistering single to right. Hob Withers tried, but Sutter had his number. Hob fanned. Slender Ace Talley worked up a full count and then placed one between first and second. Stroud took third.

Chug Roark peeled off shin guards and went to the plate. He fouled off a dozen good ones and finally drew a walk. The bases were loaded and two gone.

Potsy made a gesture, and Quist sat

back down.

"Kellum!"

DUKE KELLUM came out of the dugout. He chose a bat and walked leisurely up there, radiating confidence. The stands were in an uproar. Once again, a hit meant the ball game.

Sutter fired one, and Kellum swung and missed. The fans howled encouragement. The Duke looked good even missing one.

A change of pace was high, and then the kid fouled off a fast one. Sutter tried a roundhouse, and Kellum grinned impudently. Then Sutter wound up. Instinctively, Tommy knew what was coming—the old swift, the Sunday pitch.

Kellum's bat was a flail, slicing the ball down first base line. The pellet kicked up chalk and rolled on toward the fence. Hervey crossed the platter. Stroud followed on his heels. The Moguls swarmed on the field. They wrestled Kellum toward the clubhouse.

They scattered then, and Tommy said to Kellum, "Nice doing, kid."

Kellum looked at him, not pleasantly. "Sure," he said, and walked on.

Waddy fell in with Tommy. "Lucky," he said. "Shut his eyes and swung."

Tommy said quietly, "He won a ball game."

And Tommy was content. He was first of all a team man.

They went in for a short respite. Potsy came up to Tommy and said, "It's been a long grind."

Tommy looked closely at the manager and saw new lines in his seamy face. Potsy had been here a long time too, working with infinite patience, waiting for the penurious owners to furnish him some ball players. This

year's team was the usual thing—a nondescript collection of oldsters, unseasoned kids, and cast offs. But somehow Potsy had found in them the winning combination. To everyone's amazement, they'd gone ahead of the league in July, and they'd stayed there.

But it had been an uphill fight. Potsy was a worker, but not a slave driver. In his even-tempered way he'd coaxed them along, weathering a wave of dissension in early season. And the last two weeks had been a nightmare. They'd lost nine of thirteen games and dropped six games in the standing. It had left its mark on Potsy. He looked tired.

"A long grind," he repeated. "Maybe you should lay off two-three days, Tommy." He smiled. "Sorta freshen up for the Series."

Tommy said, "Sure Potsy." But he felt a sudden qualm.

"Kellum can handle it," Potsy said. "You need a rest."

"Yeh," Tommy said. "Kellum will be okay."

But it bothered him. Potsy probably figured a layoff would cure his slump. But he couldn't help wondering how long the rest might turn out to be. The next few games would decide the pennant. It would be a strange feeling to sit on the bench while his team fought for the pennant.

He went out and watched the second game. The Moguls were doing all right without him. At the half way mark, Kellum had singled in a run and made two assists without a bobble.

It was a free hitting game. They went into the last of the fifth with the Hawks leading 5 to 4. Chug and Browder went down, and then Pinky started it. He beat out a roller. Tim Dillon lined into right, and Pinky went to third. Kellum came up, and the crowd gave him a lusty ovation. He had a way with the crowd all right.

He was quite an actor.

He took one and made a bowing motion to the ump. He let one go, and then he picked out one and laid wood to it. The ball went over the center fielder's head. Kellum slid into third with a flourish. He got up and knocked a cloud of dust from his pants, tipped his cap to the Hawk dugout, and the stands went into hysterics.

Hervey fled out, but it looked good enough for the ball game. Nobody got a smell in the sixth, and the final inning arrived with the Moguls in front, 6 to 5.

BROWDER got the first two men, and the fans started filing down the aisles. Then the Hawk leadoff man slapped out a single, and they paused. The next guy smacked one to deep left for a double, but Pinky's marvelous throw to the plate held the runner at third. The crowd sat down.

The Mogul pitcher, faltering, gave a base on balls. Then Withrow was up.

Chug Roark walked out toward the box, glancing toward the bench significantly. But Potsy did not move, and his sign was: "Pitch to Withrow."

Browder wasn't brilliant, but he had courage. He made the slugger go after two bad ones. Then he put the slider in there, and Withrow swung on it.

It was a hard grass cutter between first and second. Kellum went after it. He stabbed with his glove. The ball kept going, on into right. Two runners crossed the plate before Hervey's throw came in.

Hansen went down on an easy one to Talley. But now the Moguls were behind, and they had one more chance.

Waddy got a bat and paused in front of Tommy. "That busher!" he growled. "Let two runs right through his hands."

Tommy said, "It was a hot one."

"Don't be a mug," Waddy said. "You could of got it on one leg."

He went up and slammed the second pitch against the boards. Withers grounded, and Waddy went to third. Talley lifted a short fly to left. The ball hit the glove, and Waddy struck out for home. The throw-in was a beauty. The ball hopped, and Waddy hit the dirt. The umps stuck his nose into the play and hooked his arm.

"Why, the blind—" Chug started toward the umpire.

"Save your breath, Roark," Potsy rumbled. "The game's over."

Chug halted, making a face. "You ain't gonna protest!"

"Ask Stroud," Potsy suggested. "He'll tell you he was tagged."

They went inside, and Potsy told them: "Let's think about the Sox now. If we split the four games with them, the Hawks can't beat us. Just relax and play ball."

He walked out. There was a quiet moment, and then Hob Withers said,

"We lose ten games in two weeks, and he wants us to relax! What this ball club needs is some fight. Whaddaya expect, when the manager lets the ump get by with murder!"

Waddy bristled. "There's nothing wrong with this ball club, Withers. Except one or two bums like you."

Mel Statton, a pitcher, gloomed, "But we needed that last one. Potsy shoulda relieved Browder in the seventh."

"Potsy," Hervey said, "is getting old."

Tommy felt the hair rising on his neck. Withers and Hervey were big league tramps whom Potsy had rescued from the dump heap. He knew their angle. They were stooging for Chug Roark. It was the same thing that had come earlier, before they'd hit their winning stride.

Chug had ambitions to manage the Moguls, and some of the stockholders

leaned in his favor. Potsy was no politician. Tommy had helped squelch it in the locker room. The kids, Dillon and Talley and Law, respected Tommy, and they'd followed his lead. Waddy was an old faithful. Together they'd headed off Chug's game. And Tommy knew the catcher had not entirely forgiven him.

Waddy started to say something, but Tommy got ahead of him. He turned on them, his brown eyes hard as agates.

"This is a hell of a time for bickering. Potsy's made this ball club. Without him, we'd be crowding the Grays for eighth place. Lately he's nursed along a bunch of sore arm pitchers and clucks like me in a slump. We got a pennant to win. If we don't string along with Potsy we're worse than a bunch of heels—we're dumb."

They looked at him in surprise. It was a long speech for Tommy.

Dillon said, "You're right, Tommy."

"Right as a rabbit," Pinky said. "Potsy took me out of a Class D outfit and made me a big leaguer. He's done the same for some more of you. We'll stay in line, or we're crazy as bedbugs."

Withers and Hervey looked at each other, then at Chug. They all said nothing.

THEN Kellum stepped up. Chug tried to shoot him a warning glance, but he was too late. Kellum said, "It's easy to see why you're strong for Proctor. If he knew ball players, you'da been getting splinters in your pants for a month."

Tommy said coolly, "I'll make allowances for you, Kellum. Otherwise, I'd clout you."

Kellum laughed. "Getting tough don't become you, Neal. I could hang one on you, and you wouldn't wake up for hours."

"Who's holding you?" Tommy asked.

Kellum couldn't answer that one. He flushed, grinned foolishly and said, "Hell, I don't want to make trouble."

Waddy said, "You picked a damn funny way of staying out of it, pal." He swung around. "And there's something else, you guys. I came here eight years ago, and Tommy Neal was playing the best ball on this team. He's been doing it ever since."

"Stow it," Tommy said, reddening.

"Thirteen years he was the world's best ball player on the world's worst team," Waddy went on. "But he never squawked or tried to get changed to another club. I wanna see Tommy in a World Series."

Ace Talley said, "I'm with you, slugger."

"Me, too," Dillon and Law chorused.

Withers said sheepishly, "Hell, Waddy, I didn't mean to start somepin. We're all in this together. We'll line up."

Half an hour later, Tommy and Waddy walked out together, and Waddy said, "It's gonna be all right, kid. It looks like we play in the Series."

Tommy nodded silently. He was wondering if he'd be in there when it happened.

CHAPTER II

SLUMP MEDICINE

THE Sox came to town loaded for bear. They were battling for third place money, and they weren't giving up anything. Potsy threw Mel Statton in there, and the veteran pitched cagily and held the Sox to six hits while his mates were rapping out nine safeties to win 4-1.

The Moguls looked like a ball club, Tommy noted from the bench. And he had to be content with that, for it looked as if they could go on forever

without him.

Kellum, property chastened, stayed on his toes and played a smooth errorless game. He was even a bit less theatrical on his trips to the plate. But the crowd still liked him, and when he cracked one into the flagpole in the sixth, they raved for a full five minutes.

There was once when Tommy thought he let one by that maybe he should have got, but he didn't know. He wanted to be fair, and he had to admit Kellum looked all right. And thus far, his stick work was superior to Tommy's of recent date.

But Waddy wasn't convinced. "I don't like fresh rooks that play to the stands," he told Tommy. "He'll pull something first thing you know and lose us a ball game."

"You play ball with him," Tommy said sharply. "We want these games. That's what counts."

"Whaddaya think I am!" Waddy growled. "Just the same, he's a mugger, and he's not the ball player you are. He can't run them bases, and he's weak going to his left."

"I might help him on that," Tommy mused.

"Don't try it," Waddy said. "He ain't the kind to take good advice."

The second day the Sox weren't to be denied. They plastered base hits all over the lot. Ves Hinman lasted only four innings, and then Jimmy Quist went in and held them in check while the Moguls fought valiantly to catch up.

They finally got the range on the Sox fast baller in the seventh, and a barrage drove the guy from the box. The splurge sent them ahead 6 to 4, and it began to look like the game that meant the pennant.

The Sox came up in the eighth hungry for blood. They put men on second and third with two outs, and then the hitter laced one on the grass

toward right. It was almost a copy of the one that had come off Withrow's bat two days before. And it got by Kellum. Both men scored.

It seemed to rattle Jimmy. He grooved the next pitch, and the Sox hitter hoisted it into the right field bleachers.

That was the ball game. The Moguls tried for two innings, but the old side wheeler in there now kept them off balance, and it ended that way, 7 to 6.

Meanwhile the scoreboard showed that the Hawks were lambasting the Grays again. They would probably do the same tomorrow, which meant the Moguls had to win another one tomorrow to match the pennant.

Tommy noticed in the papers where "Kellum, the colorful young second baseman, continued today to make us wonder what the Moguls will do with Tommy Neal if they go into the series. The big youngster got his second triple in as many days and performed acceptably in the field."

It didn't say anything about the ground ball that went through and lost the game. Tommy supposed the experts weren't paid to notice those things.

He was lolling in the dressing room next day, feeling very useless, when Potsy came in. The manager said, "How you feeling, Tommy?"

Tommy felt his heart jump up in his throat. He managed to say, "I feel fine, Potsy. I could stand a few innings."

"They're yours," Potsy said. "You're back in there today, and remember, there's a pennant riding on it."

The sunshine was bright, and the sting of the ball in his glove felt good, and it was a very fine world after all, Tommy decided. He skipped through the infield workout, as full of pep and enthusiasm as a kid on his first tryout. Potsy was a wise old bird all right. He'd needed that stretch on the bench.

The first guy up for the Sox drove a sizzler straight at him, and he took it like practice ball and fired it across to catch the runner by a mile. Waddy took off his glove and rubbed his hand and grinned. The ball went around, and the Moguls yipped and chattered gaily. It was a very fine start.

Wade Struthers, in fine form, retired two more men on easy outfield flies, and the Moguls went in. Pinky opened things auspiciously with a double, and Dillon was out on a pop to third.

TOMMY went up and faced Biff Nance, the big right hander. This was the time, he knew. A base hit now would give the team a lift, and also blast that slump out of his mind forever. He looked over a fast one to get the feel again, and then he waited, relaxed and ready.

It was a hook, pulling away, and Tommy let it go and had a bad moment waiting for the ump to say, "Ball." Nance cocked his leg and fired one in close to the letter. Tommy planted his feet and swung through. It was a trolley-wire drive, going straight into the center fielder's glove. Tommy walked disconsolately to the bench.

"You was robbed," Withers said. "The guy was playing a mile out of position."

But it was no comfort. A slump is a slump as long as anybody catches 'em anywhere.

He still had that on his mind when the ground ball came at him next inning. It was an easy ball. He handled a million like it. But it bounced off his glove some way, and before he could chase it down, the runner was safe.

There were a few scattered boos in the stands, and one loud-mouth bawled, "We want Kellum!" Tommy tried to ignore it. There were always a few queers in a crowd that big. But it hurt

a little. They were pretty quick to get down on him, he thought.

As for the bobble, he would have to forget it. Errors, some wise gent had said, were in baseball to stay, although Tommy couldn't remember having ever made many except when he was trying to knock down a base hit. And this was not a propitious time to start.

When the next man walked, he was sure it was going to be costly. But Struthers bore down and struck out one man, and the next one flied to Talley, and then Withers came up with a circus catch in center, and the inning was over.

It settled into a pitchers' duel. Both sides had their chances. The Moguls got men on in the fourth, sixth, and seventh and couldn't bring them in. The Sox threatened in the fourth and sixth, but brilliant fielding by Talley and the outfield nipped the rallies.

In the sixth Tommy, still hitless after a pop-up in the third, had his second opportunity to push a run across. But his ground ball was an easy out for the shortstop.

Kellum, who had been pretty quiet today, greeted him with a thin smile. "Still having the old eye trouble?"

Tommy said, not unpleasantly, "Lay it on, Kid. I'm a little disgusted myself."

It was true. A few more trips like that, and Kellum would be back at second.

The Sox scored in the eighth. They bunched a single, a walk, and a double to tally two runs. Dillon singled in the Mogul half, but Tommy popped again, Hervey grounded, and Waddy flied to deep left. The Sox came back for the ninth still leading 2 to 0.

But they still weren't satisfied. The first man stabbed one to center. Waddy took a mean roller and tagged the next guy but couldn't make a play at second. Then a Sox lined another over second, but Withers' quick throw held the lead

man on third. Men on first and third, one out. It looked bad.

Struthers pitched one bravely, and a gray streak splatted off the bat. Waddy started after it, and Tommy yelled, "On your base!"

His short body was a blur of floating motion. Then he seemed to dive, though he was never off his feet. The ball struck in his glove. Waddy stood on first, waiting.

But Tommy didn't throw to first. He whirled like a dervish and fired to Ace Talley at second. Talley took it and threw in one beautiful motion. Waddy stretched. The ball hit his mitt, and the runner's foot hit the bag, and the ump yelled, "Yer out!"

THE MOGULS trotted in. The fans were yelling themselves hoarse.

Waddy grinned. "Even those clucks could see that one."

Hervey shook his head. "I've seen some baseball—but never anything like that before!"

Tommy sat down and took a breath. He wasn't entirely happy. There was still the matter of a batting slump. And unless the Moguls went on a rampage, he'd had his last chance.

The rally began to look possible when Withers and Talley singled in succession. Chug flied out, and it was the pitcher's turn. Kellum looked toward Potsy. But the manager was looking the other way.

"Mayer, hit for Struthers."

Dutch Mayer, whose legs were gone but whose eye was still keen, walked up, placidly chewing his cud. He slapped a base-hit over the shortstop's head. Withers scored.

Tommy's heart began to hammer. It was getting close to him again.

Pinky walked, Dillon fanned. And then Tommy, coming out of the on-deck box, suddenly realized here it was. The bases loaded and two out. Winning runs

on third and second.

Biff Nance scowled at him. The Sox pitcher had plenty of heart, and he wanted this game. All he needed was to get Tommy out of there, and he meant to do it.

He snaked out his long arm, and the ball looked like a dirty white marble. Tommy listened, and the ump's voice cracked his ear drums.

"Strike!"

Tommy kept his eye on Nance. The big guy stretched, and Tommy saw the wrist and knew it was going to be a hook. It started for the middle of the plate, then slid away. He let it go.

"Strike—two!"

Tommy brushed a sleeve across his face. He was almost sure the umpire had missed that one. But it was done, and nothing could undo it.

Nance threw quickly. And in a split instant, Tommy's eye read the pitch. A sinker, breaking over. Nance wasn't even wasting one. Tommy gathered the sinews of his body and shoulder. He didn't have time to marvel at his own cool, deadly concentration. He brought his bat around. He planted it against the leather.

The ball took off on a line. It dropped out between right and center. Tommy ran to first. Moguls streamed across the plate.

The field was suddenly a madhouse of howling fans. Tommy hurried to escape them. He made tracks for the clubhouse.

It was something in the dressing room. They wrestled each other like a bunch of pups. Everybody talked at once. Waddy bellowed, "How's your slump, Tommy?" And Tommy grinned and said, "What slump?" Then they mauled him some more, very affectionately.

A reporter emerged from the melee, hatless, his tie askew. He said to Potsy, "The boys seem happy."

"They're crazy," Potsy said. "But you can't blame 'em. After all, it's the first Mogul pennant in sixteen years."

Potsy said, "It'll be the Bombers, as usual, in the World Series. You think we can take 'em?"

He looked around. They were in the dressing room, before the final Sox game.

Chug Roark said, "There's only one way to beat those killers. Slug the ball and make more runs than they do."

Potsy smiled. "It can't be done."

Withers said, open mouthed, "You mean—you're giving up already!"

Potsy sobered. "What I mean is every club expects the Bombers to make a million runs, so they go out there all jittered up to outscore 'em. It's the wrong ticket. They got the most underrated pitching staff in baseball. There's only one way to stop the Bombers—stop their bats."

Chug looked amused. "How? I've often wondered."

"Pitching and defense," Potsy answered. "And by defense I mean every man on his toes mentally as well as physically. Every time you make one little slip, the Bombers crucify you. Well, we ain't gonna make those slips."

SOME of them nodded thoughtfully. Chug still smiled skeptically.

Potsy went on: "Air-tight defense gives our pitchers confidence. And the Bombers can be had—by good pitching. Right, Chug?"

"We hope," Chug said drily.

Potsy didn't press the point. He said, "Today we're saving our experienced pitchers. But Stringer is a good kid, and he'll work for you. I want you to give him support—the kind we'll need in the Series. No let-down now. Let's go!"

The game was an anti-climax, of course. But the Moguls were hustling right through, just as if it counted.

They were pulling them down all over the park, playing the right spot, giving the rookie pitcher marvelous support. And Tommy began to see the logic of Potsy's argument. The Moguls were basically a sound team. There should be no weak spots in their defensive armor. It would take base hits, of course. But you couldn't count on too many. You couldn't beat the Bombers at their own game.

There was one weak spot today, however. It was Kellum, who was in Talley's place while the shortstop rested a bruised hip he'd got sliding the day before. The Duke was having a bad day. In the third he booted one, and in the fifth he overthrew first. He wasn't even making it up at bat. Three times he'd gone hitless.

Kellum was strangely subdued, and it occurred to Tommy that the kid had really counted on getting into the Series. Tommy almost felt sorry for the guy. If he got straightened out, he'd make a great ball player.

The Sox nicked Stringer for three runs in six innings, and the Moguls were thus far scoreless. Tommy didn't hit until the seventh, but he knew it was no part of a slump. He could feel the difference today. Just to make it sure, he laced out a double in that seventh inning to shove across two runs and put the Moguls back in the ball game.

In the eighth inning Stringer walked the first man. An attempted steal wasn't likely, but Tommy looked at Chug for a sign, just in case. There was no sign. Then he remembered. Even if there was a throw, it wasn't his. The guy at bat, though a right handed hitter, nearly always hit to the right side of the field. It would be Kellum's job to cover second.

Then on the second pitch, it happened. The man on first did break, there was a pitch-out—though Chug

had never flashed the signal—and Chug whipped the ball. And Tommy saw Kellum wasn't covering.

Tommy reacted quickly. He sprinted for the bag, knowing he'd be late, but unwilling to give up. He looked for the ball. It was short. He leaped into the dirt for it just as the runner hit his slide. He got his hands on it, and there was a tangle of arms and legs, and the man was safe.

Tommy got up. He received several minor bruises in the collision, and he hardly noticed the pain that stabbed through his back. He played out the inning, in which the Sox scored another run.

Then, as he stepped into the dugout, it hit him again. A sharp, hot sensation in the small of his back. He winced slightly, and Potsy, looking up, said,

"The back again?"

"Just a crick," Tommy said. "Nothing serious."

He really didn't think it was bad. Just a minor strain that would be all right in a couple of days.

"Just the same," Potsy said, "you're not playing any more today." He turned toward Kellum. "What were you doing out there?"

Kellum sulked. "It was a right handed hitter, wasn't it?"

Chug said, "I gave the sign to Tommy. It was his play."

Tommy stared at Chug in surprise. But Chug wasn't looking at him. He was very busy taking off his pads.

Kellum won the game for them after all. In the ninth the Moguls got three men on, and the kid walked up and caught one right and golfed it over the left field barrier. He trotted around very slowly to give the crowd plenty of time to yell. They did yell, with enthusiasm.

Tommy got up off the rubbing table. Potsy said to the doctor, "Well?"

"Nothing torn," the doctor said. "If

he rests for two days he should be all right."

Tommy grinned. "Two days is all I can spare, doc. I got me some work to do, starting Friday."

Potsy said, "You'll be okay. Just don't take any chances."

His voice was oddly husky and his face a little pale, Tommy thought. It would be a fine thing when this was over and Potsy could go take a long rest.

The papers were quite enthused over Kellum's home run. One scribe wrote: "It wouldn't surprise us to see the kid in there during the Series."

Waddy read it to Tommy and sniffed. "They give me a laugh. As long as Potsy is of sane mind and sound body, there won't be but one guy on second base—Tommy Neal."

His words were unconsciously laden with prophetic irony. That night at seven o'clock, Potsy Proctor went to bed with a fever. At eight his wife called a doctor. At ten they had Potsy in a hospital—with a violent attack of the worst form of influenza.

CHAPTER III

BOMBER BOMBARDMENT

THEY wouldn't let Tommy in to see him, even next morning.

"Your friend will get well," an interne told Tommy. "But the man is sick. He'll need absolute quiet and rest for a number of days."

Tommy went away with a weak, empty feeling. He was thinking of the years he and Potsy had worked together. Long, lean years and little to show for them. And now they had won themselves something—and Potsy wasn't going to be out there to enjoy it.

There was one thing about it. They had to beat the Bombers now! They

had to hand that flag to Potsy when he got up from bed. It was the least they could do to square everything.

It hadn't occurred to him yet to wonder who would run the team. And so it was news an hour later when he read it in the paper.

ROARK TO MANAGE MOGULS THROUGH SERIES

Tommy stared at the big headline type with a vaguely troubled feeling. It was logical enough, he supposed. He and Waddy had been with the team longer, but neither of them had ever entertained managerial ambitions.

Chug called them to the clubhouse for a meeting. They were pretty quiet and glum.

"You guys would rather it was Potsy," Chug said, "and I don't blame you. But I got a job here now, and I'm going to do it the way I think it should be done. It's the only way. Potsy didn't even have a chance to talk over his plans with me. I'm asking one thing—stick with me and play ball."

They were impressed, Tommy noticed. It wasn't a bad speech at that. But he still had that worried feeling.

They were leaving when Chug called him into the office.

"I don't want you to think this is anything personal, Tommy," he said, "but I don't believe you should play with that injury. And—well, just to be frank, we're gonna need Kellum's power at the plate mighty bad."

And so there it was, a neat little package tied up and laid in his lap. Tommy could make a fuss and stir up factions on the team. Or he could say nothing and sit on the bench at his first World Series. Chug had figured the thing out nice. He'd left Tommy little choice.

Tommy got to his feet. He was mad. Madder than he'd ever been in his life,

and he could feel words coming that would be strangely bitter. But he had to say them.

"We are behind closed doors, Roark, and can talk freely. There's nothing whatever serious about my injury, and you know it. I know that for various reasons you don't like the way I part my hair. The thing is dirty and lousy, but I won't do anything about it. I think that much of Potsy and the team. Does that make everything clear between us?"

"You're putting me in a wrong light," Chug complained. "You'll admit Kellum is a hitter. If he don't come through, you go back in. Ain't that fair enough?"

"It's a phony promise, and it stinks," Tommy said with disdain, and walked out.

Waddy was incensed, as Tommy had known he would be.

"He can't get away with it!" the first baseman stormed. "I'll pin his ears back. I won't go on the field. I'll tell the team what a snake we got for manager."

Tommy was ready for it. He had his speech all made up.

"Look, Waddy. Get this through your thick skull. I want to play in the Series, but not bad enough to injure myself for life."

Waddy stared. "You mean—"

"This thing is worse than I thought. I couldn't throw a ball through a paper sack. I wouldn't be worth a thing out there."

Waddy shook his head sadly. "Sorry, kid. I wish it was me instead. It's not gonna be much fun—" He stopped, his jaw hardening. "But we'll give them Bombers hell, kid. They'll think they been in a riot when we get through with 'em!"

THE Bombers, perennial winners in the other league, were top-heavy

favorites. The Moguls, the papers said, had done well to win the pennant. Fans must not expect them to perform miracles.

Everybody agreed—except the Moguls. They wanted to win for Potsy, and for Tommy Neal who was out of the line up with an injury. They wanted to make the experts look silly.

Tommy could see the cold calm in their faces as they went out in the fall sunshine. They hadn't said much in the dressing room. They hadn't made any brags to bolster their courage. It was a good sign, Tommy knew. They were fighting men in a dangerous mood.

The Bombers came out then, and the crowd that had never seen a Series craned their necks in silent awe. They murmured magic names—Hogan, Walder, Moffat, Kidd, Foyle.

The Bombers scattered to their tasks in a business-like manner. They were not a noisy gang of holler guys. But they were very confident in a quiet, self-assured manner.

At last the endless preliminary was over. The Moguls trotted out in their clean uniforms, and lanky Mel Statton strode in his deliberate way to the mound, and Weinert of the Bombers started toward the plate—and the World Series was on!

Tommy Neal sat down to watch it.

Statton worked smoothly and unhurried. He threaded the control pitches in there, and Jack Weinert finally lifted a high fly to Pinky Law. Dynamic Joe Kidd, Bomber second baseman, came up and powdered one toward left. Ace Talley went up like a rocket, and the ball stuck in his glove. Mat Moffat drove one for the bleachers. But Hervey stood against the fence and leaped, and Moffat was out.

Jinx Foyle was on the hill for the Bombers. Foyle always worked the openers for the Bombers, and he hadn't lost one in the memory of modern man.

He was a big guy with power and a red head full of experience.

Pinky Law waved his bat truculently, as if the name Foyle meant nothing to him. He took a look at one, then tried to connect with one of Foyle's hooks, and he was lucky to get a piece of it. He went out on an easy throw from Walder at short.

Tim Dillon was also anxious to hit one. He swung three times. He missed all three swings and came back shaking his head.

Kellum tried a different approach. He decided to look them over. He looked at five, and three of them were very good strikes, all of which caught Kellum with his bat on his shoulder.

But they went back out with the old pepper. Tim Dillon came up with a scorcher from Hogan's bat on the first pitch, and the chatter of the infield could be heard above the crowd. They checked the Bombers the rest of the inning.

They kept checking them, through the third, fourth, fifth. Statton pitched with consummate skill and care, and the Moguls came up now and then with a miracle stop to stem the threatening tide. Meanwhile, Jinx Foyle was invincible. A single by Hervey and a scratch hit by Withers was all Mister Foyle gave away for five innings.

Then in the sixth the Bombers struck. In the usual Bomber manner. A double by Hogan, a pass to Fenton, and then suddenly a prodigious home run over the center field fence by Walder—and there it was, three runs. Like a bolt of lightning, then all over.

The Moguls refused to be panicked. Kellum, leading off in the sixth, found Mister Foyle's fast one and straightened it out into deep right center. Hervey slashed a bounder toward second, and Joe Kidd made one of his rare errors. Waddy cracked a curve ball into right. Kellum scored, and Hervey

moved to third. Withers fled to center, but Weinert's throw couldn't head off Hervey from the plate.

Then Foyle got tough. He fanned Talley and Roark in quick succession.

But the Moguls had two runs.

It went on to the ninth, and the crowd watched in disbelief. They were holding the Bombers! It was still 3-2, but the Bombers had not scored again.

It looked dark for a while in the ninth then. Walder's drive went between Waddy and Duke. Schumake eased a single over short, and Foyle bunted both men around a notch. But Statton made his bid for the hall of heroes. He struck out Weinert and made Kidd ground to Talley, and the disaster was averted.

The Moguls came in for their last chance. Nobody had any hope up in the stands, but not a person left his seat. Chug was first up. He grounded out. He sent Mayer in to bat for Statton. Old Dutch took a good cut, but his fly ball dropped in Moffat's glove.

PINKY, still hitless for the day, swung bravely on the first pitch. It was just out of the leaping Walder's reach, and Pinky was on first. Then Dillon pulled something. With two men down, he bunted, and even the canny Foyle was fooled. Tim's flying feet beat the throw. Two men safe.

Kellum missed a curve ball and looked bad doing it. Foyle threw one inside, and then he shot the hook again. Kellum reached out, almost off balance. He caught the horsehide on the end of the bat. It looked like a blooper behind first. But it was too deep for Hogan, and Fenton couldn't reach it. It dropped near the line and rolled dead. Law and Dillon did a war dance across the plate. The stands started pouring on the field.

Tommy Neal stood up and tried to smile. He must be very happy, he told

himself. The Moguls had won the Series opener 4-3!

They let him see Potsy next day for just a few minutes. Potsy's round face was full of gray pallor, but he smiled happily. He wanted to know, though, why Tommy hadn't been in there. Tommy told him the same nice little lie he'd been telling all of them. He certainly didn't want to disturb Potsy with his troubles.

Potsy said, "Chug's doing all right. I won't meddle. He knows what's going on out there. It's up to him to finish the job."

Tommy said, "Sure, Potsy. Don't you worry." And the nurse gave him the signal then, and he left.

The papers were full of it, and especially of Kellum. The *Record* columnist wrote:

"Tommy Neal's tough luck may turn out to be the Moguls' good fortune. We hate to see Tommy miss it. He has performed faithfully and well for a long time. But we must admit that the colorful young Kellum has added punch to the Mogul attack. He certainly had what it took in the clutch yesterday. He may be just what the home team needs to make this the biggest upset in series history."

It hurt of course, but Tommy swallowed down the bitter taste. Maybe they were right. As long as Kellum could deliver, maybe he belonged in there.

Even Waddy conceded that the kid looked good. But he was still a bit dubious. "I wish you was out there, Tommy. Kellum's still got a blind side. You see Walder's drive go by him yesterday?"

Tommy did not discuss the point.

Browder went in to stop the Bombers that afternoon, and for three innings it looked as if he might do it. Then the dam broke, and the deluge rolled in. The Bombers blasted two singles, a

double, and two homers in one inning, and Browder came in white faced and shaken. He'd pitched good ball, and it hadn't been enough. Five runs, just like that!

Tommy's face was bleak. The Bombers were killers, sure. But he remembered something. Kidd's grounder, if caught back there, would have ended the inning. But Kellum had missed it, and after that the Bombers had scored three of the runs. And Tommy was sure of one thing—he could have stopped the grounder!

This, he knew, was the thing Potsy had been talking about. You couldn't make a mistake against the Bombers.

The Moguls tried to outscore them, and it was pitiful. They couldn't bunch their eleven hits. And the Bombers, with only ten safeties, won the game 8 to 2!

They went east to continue play at the Bomber Stadium. The Moguls, still fighting but groggy, went out in front of the great three-decked stands, and tried to make it a contest and failed dismally. The Bombers spanked them 6 to 1.

It rained next day, but the down-pour stopped in mid-morning, and the teams slogged through a cold, wet game. Jimmy Quist's left handed slants somehow baffled the Bombers, and the Moguls pecked away at Jo-Jo Weir to win 4-2.

THE fifth game was a contest for four innings. And then the thing Tommy had been looking for happened. The Bombers began slashing ground balls to the right side. Two of them went by Kellum, and he booted another one to the sky. And then the other kids, Talley and Dillon, started hurrying their plays, and the whole infield fell apart. The Bombers pranced merrily around the bases on no more than two clean base hits, and when it was over

they had racked up six runs!

The rest was too terrible to watch. Pinky muffed a fly, and Hervey tossed a wild throw-in, and Mel Statton walked off in disgust, and Chug had to call young Les Winter in to finish it. The final score was 13-3, and the Bomber fans hooted and howled in derision.

They went back west, and Tommy could see the difference on their faces as they sat silent in the pullman. They had come east with the fighting light still there; now it was gone.

He went to see Potsy and tried to act cheerfully, but Potsy could not be fooled. They'd finally let him have a radio, and he'd listened to that last game.

"Browder and Struthers might stop 'em yet," Potsy mused, "if the defense would back 'em up. But it's Chug's series. A man can't lie on a hospital bed and run a ball club on the field." He paused and turned his head on the pillow. "I wish you were in there, Tommy."

Tommy said, "It's your series, too, Potsy. We'll take those guys for you yet."

He left then, not trusting himself to say more.

Waddy met him early in the dressing room next day. The first baseman was glum. "You seen it, Tommy. Them Bombers finally got on to Kellum. They know he can't cover to his left. They'll murder us from here out." He stopped and looked at Tommy appealingly. "We gotta have you back in there, kid. You suppose—"

Tommy said, "Look, Waddy. What would you say if I told you there's nothing wrong with my back—and never was."

Waddy's eyes narrowed, then opened wide. He was looking at Tommy's face, strangely hard and cold, and he saw it all—in one intuitive flash. He spoke

slowly, "I get it. You didn't want to split up the team." He shook his head. "Tommy, you're a good guy. But you're also a crazy damn fool."

"Not any more," Tommy said quietly.

Waddy grinned.

"And keep this under your cap," Tommy added. "Let me handle it."

He waited till they were nearly ready to go on the field. Then he said, loud enough for all to hear:

"The doc says it's all right, Chug. I'm ready for action. You want me to hit in the old slot?"

Chug's face flooded with startled surprise, then paled. Waddy Stroud hovered nearby. Chug looked at Waddy's eyes and didn't like what he saw.

He finally found his voice. "Yeh—that is—you feel okay, Tommy?"

"Never better in my life." Tommy said, with emphasis.

He saw the grins breaking out all around. He said to them, "Chug probably told you what Potsy said. We're not going to try to outslug those guys any more. We're going to play *our* game. And no slips!"

Browder said, "Now we're getting somewhere. You guys gimme some help, and I'll have them Bombers looking under the rug for base hits."

Outside Chug pulled Tommy aside. "Okay, Neal. You bought yourself something. It better work!"

"It will," Tommy said easily. But he had a small empty spot behind his belt. A guy feels that way sometimes, in his first World Series game.

CHAPTER IV

YOU GOTTA FIGHT

THE ball rode off the bat with "hit" written on every stitch. Tim Dillon pounced. He came

up with some dirt and the ball. He fired a strike at Waddy, and Weinert was out.

They passed it around the infield. Their raucous chatter filled the park with sound.

The Bombers looked up interestedly. The Moguls were supposed to be a bunch of whipped pups, thoroughly discouraged and beaten. Maybe those guys didn't know when they were licked!

Browder gave Dillon a look of gratitude, then went about his business, very seriously. He struck out the mighty Kidd. He retired Moffat on a puny pop fly.

It was a scoreless deadlock for three and a half innings. Then the Moguls opened up on Lefty Elder. Tommy hit safely to right, and Hervey moved him to third with the hit-and-run. Waddy, usually at his worst against southpaws, pickled one against the fence. Withers dumped a deep one into Fenton's glove, and Waddy scored from third. Talley went down on a circus stop by Kidd, and Chug grounded. But the Moguls had three runs.

In the fifth, Kidd led off with a double. Moffat lanced one through the infield, and the speedy Kid scored. Hogan flied to Talley, but Fenton came up behind him and doubled, and the second Bomber run was across.

Chug, coming out to talk to Browder, gave Tommy a sour look. He might as well have said it: Stop the Bombers, huh. Air tight defense! Like hell! You made three measly runs, and what did it get you. The Bombers would probably make a dozen.

Browder tried to get Speer on a hook. Speer let it go, and the umps waved him to first. Men on first and second, and still only one out.

Walder came up. He swung on the second pitch. He sent it screaming and twisting toward right. Tommy got on

his horse. He ran, head down. Then he turned and leaped. The ball stopped abruptly in its flight. Tommy threw before he hit the ground. Fenton scrambled back for second, but he was too late.

The Bombers were slow coming out. They couldn't believe it. They had their first tug of uncertainty.

It grew on them as the game progressed. They could do nothing with Browder, and when they did, the Moguls cut them off with miracle catches. It ended just that way—3 to 2 for the Moguls.

They were cheerful in the dressing room, but not demonstrative. Tommy took it as a good sign. Their minds were on the serious business of tomorrow.

It would be very tough tomorrow, he knew. The Bombers would throw Jinx Foyle back in there, and you couldn't count on many runs against Mister Foyle. And the Bombers would be fully recovered from their surprise of today. And quite aroused to do murder against the upstart Moguls.

The final game was played under a beautiful October sun. The limited Mogul stands were bursting with humanity. The press wires started humming early. The radio booth bustled with activity. This was a Series after all! Drama right down to the final payoff game!

The Moguls scampered out, still unafraid. Struthers walked up on the hill and took his warmup throws. Then Weinert stalked up there with his war club, and a hush settled over the scene, broken only by the staccato cries of the Mogul infield.

Struthers put one in there, and Weinert sent it right back at him. Struthers ducked to save his head, and the ball rolled into the outfield.

Joe Kidd watched a couple and didn't like them. Neither did the umpire.

Then one went down the alley, and Kidd did not wait any longer. His bat flashed in the sunlight. The ball zinged like a golf drive. It looked as if it would never stop rising. It cleared the fence in center by some feet.

THE crowd sat stunned. Moffat shook Kidd's hand casually as he trotted across the plate. The Bombers didn't seem greatly impressed. Evidently they expected more of the same during the afternoon.

Chug walked out, and the infield gathered.

Struthers mourned guiltily, "I musta slept too close to that window or something. I'm sorry as hell, Chug. I thought the wing would warm up."

Chug made a face. "I should have expected something like this from a Kansas hog-caller!" The catcher turned, hesitating. He didn't have a first-line pitcher in the bull pen. Finally he said, "It'll have to be Statton. Stay in till he can warm up a little. And keep 'em out of the groove!"

He motioned Statton, and the tall veteran got up a little wearily. He'd pitched three days ago, though he hadn't finished the game. Jinx Foyle had worked the same day, but Mister Foyle was a wheelhorse who could do those things.

Struthers fiddled and stalled and kept them away from the middle. Moffat walked down to first on the free ticket, and Mel Statton came across slowly.

Tommy danced around, chirping a confidence he didn't feel. Statton would give 'em all he had. And he was smart. But you didn't spot the Bombers two runs and win ball games. Not with Jinx Foyle in the box.

Statton looked calmly at the man on first and then laid the fast one over the corner. Then he pitched a low hook, and Hogan dumped a little roller into his hands. Statton whirled and

gave it to Talley and Ace quickly completed the double play.

Moments later Pinky made a running catch of Fenton's long drive, and the threatened Bomber blitz was halted.

Foyle was as fresh and strong as if he'd rested a month. He fogged 'em in with deadly accuracy, and three men went down in no time.

It went on, inning after inning. The Moguls couldn't touch Foyle. Struthers was working a deliberate, canny game, using his control and nimble brain on every pitch. But the Bombers could afford to wait. They had two runs.

It was Statton, strangely enough, who got the first Mogul hit, a single behind first. Then Pinky rolled out to Hogan, and Statton went to second.

Tommy picked up a bat, and Chug grumbled, "It's gonna take more than defense to win this. It'll take base hits, lots of 'em. Let's see you get one."

Tommy reddened and went out there. A little later, after Dillon's ground-out, he swung lustily on a third strike—and missed.

It was in the eighth that the Bombers scored again. Weinert led off with a blue darter over third base. Kidd caught one on the handle and it rolled slowly toward Tommy. He charged in, eager to get a pair. The ball took a tiny hop. He snatched it, not securely, and pivoted — and dropped it! He grabbed again and fired to first. Kidd beat it by a stride.

Tommy thought about what he'd said, about "slips." He wanted to die on the spot.

Moffat laid down a sizzler to short. Talley raced to his right and snapped it low, underhand. Tommy reached down for it and pivoted on oil bearings. Waddy gathered it in. It was there in time, by an eyelash. The Moguls cheered.

It gave Tommy a good feeling. His bobble hadn't dampened their spirit.

That was the thing he was glad to know.

But the Bombers got a run. Hogan singled and sent Weinert across. And that was all. Fenton flied out.

The Moguls finally scratched, in the last of that inning. Hervey connected with a fast one and rolled it against the fence for a triple. Waddy smashed one to deep short, and Hervey came in on it. But they had to be satisfied with that. Withers and Talley went down swinging.

Statton held the Bombers in the ninth, and the Moguls came back for the last stand. They were behind 3-1, and the sports writers were already fashioning their leads to tell the world that again the Bombers were too good to beat.

Chug stayed in there with Foyle a long time. The count went full, and Chug fouled off three. But Jinx finally got him, with a hook over the inside corner.

Statton held back, waiting for Chug's sign. He was a fair hitting pitcher, but he could not hope to hit Mister Foyle in the clutch. Chug looked toward Dutch Mayer. The Dutchman started up.

TOMMY said, "Why not give it to Kellum, Chug? Foyle don't know him so well. I got a hunch the kid might start us off."

Chug shrugged, as if it couldn't matter greatly. "Kellum it is. Get us a bingle, kid." But there was no lift in his voice.

Duke Kellum gave Tommy an unexpected look of gratitude. He grabbed his bat and walked over gamely. But he made no stage gestures for the crowd. Tommy got the feeling that the kid was in deadly earnest.

Jinx Foyle tried the kid out with a tentative hook to the outside. Kellum didn't move his bat. Then Mister

Foyle laid in the fogger. Kellum lashed out. He picked the ball up and set it down very neatly in short center.

Pinky took a cut and chased Walder far to his right, and then beat the throw. Tim Dillon went up and tried desperately. But he'd never been able to solve Mister Foyle. He didn't now either. He fanned.

Tommy threw away his extra bats. He tried to consider the situation coolly. It would take at least a double to score the men on first and second and tie up the ball game. And if you swung for the fences against Foyle—

He hesitated out of the box, pulled off his cap and tugged at it several times. He picked up some dirt, then repeated the performance. The umpire said, "We're waiting, Mister Neal. If you would be so kind—"

Tommy's eyes were on Chug. And Chug finally got it. He saw the signal, passed on to the coaches. Then he stepped in.

The slider came in, and Tommy fell all over himself striking at it. He could hear Schumake's intake of breath, vaguely saw the flash of the catcher's arm. He looked up in time to see a cloud of dirt at third. The cloud settled, and Kellum's foot was hugging the bag and the ump's hands were spread out flat. Pinky was getting up off second. Tommy smiled and got in his stance again. It had worked—the double steal.

Tommy didn't hear the screaming crowd. The world narrowed down to two people—him and the frowning Mister Foyle.

Mister Foyle pitched very cagily. But Tommy would not go for the bad ones. The count went to three-two. Then Tommy knew it would be good, but not too good. Mister Foyle pitched no cripples.

The long arm flashed over. Tommy's hitting eye sent the message to his

brain—a steaming hook on the outside corner. His muscles responded.

His swing was the essence of perfect rhythm. He saw the ball start its climb, and he ran. He turned the corner at first on two wheels. He heard the explosion from above and raised his head.

The ball was dropping behind the big sign in center field. Mister Foyle, hands on hips, was watching it sadly.

They ran over each other to get to him at the plate. But Duke Kellum knocked three of them aside and gripped Tommy's hand.

Tommy grinned at him. "I didn't figger on anything but a single, so I had to get you guys in scoring position. The laugh's on me. I mighta got you thrown out. . . ."

They lingered in the dressing room, long after the reporters and broadcasters had left.

Waddy kept saying, "It hadda be that way, kid. Your first Series—and you win it with a homer."

Tommy said, "Kellum started it. He deserves the glory."

"Quit arguing," Chug said. "There's plenty of glory to go around." He looked at them gravely. "There's something I want to tell you guys now—"

"Save it," Tommy interrupted. "You want to spoil our fun!"

They laughed, all but Waddy and Kellum.

And then Tommy was sure—the kid knew. And by the flush on his face, Tommy knew he was still ashamed of it. Kellum was all right, he reflected. Sometimes it took them young ones quite a while to get themselves straightened out.

Withers said, "I wish Potsy had been here. I wonder how he's feeling."

Tommy smiled broadly. "I have an idea that he's feeling mighty good right about now."

LAST HOLE HOODOO

by

W. H. TEMPLE

Author of "Power Hitter," etc.

His first major tournament would be in the bag if he shot a six or better on this final four-par hole—if!



He hit the ball cleanly!

JERRY FOWLER stood on the eighteenth tee and dried the sweat from his palms with a handkerchief. The crowd lining the fairways had become silent and even the breeze had stilled. Jerry reached for his driver and thought of Martha back on the clubhouse porch with the other wives of the pro players. He thought that she had it tougher than he did, sitting there, waiting. But this time she shouldn't have to worry. He and his partner were the last pair to finish and he had been hot through the seventy-two hole grind. A six would win, a seven would tie. Blindfolded, Jerry knew he could shoot a six on this four par hole.

He addressed his ball, and then hesitated, trying to loosen up, to shake off the memory of those other times when he had been winning until he reached the eighteenth tee. This time it was going to be different. He was going to win his first major tournament and he and Martha would be in the dough.

Jerry Fowler was small and slender, a quiet, soft spoken young man. He stood over the ball, then went into his swing. The club flashed through its arc and the crowd roared. Straight as a string the pellet flashed in the dying sunlight as it split the middle of the fairway. It was a long, low drive and it came down and rolled ahead.

Jerry's caddie said, "You're hot, Mistuh Fowler. You cain't miss." His ebony face shone with pleasure. He and the caddies everywhere were fond of Jerry Fowler. They walked on to their ball and the green was a hundred and sixty yards ahead of them. On in two and two putts for a four would mean a three stroke win.

Jerry took the iron, sighted and then

shot for the pin. Even as he did so he groaned. The ball was fading to the left. It landed on the edge of the green, bounced over the apron and slid down into a sand trap.

Sweat broke out on Fowler's face. The crowd came alive again suddenly. Jerry's caddie said, "It ain't nothin' to worry about, Mistuh Fowler. Even if you takes two to git out, you'll win."

Jerry said huskily, "Yeah, that's right."

They walked up toward the green and Fowler tried not to notice the crowd that pressed close, and the waiting photographers. He entered the trap with his sand wedge and studied the ball. Then digging his spikes into the soft sand he prepared to shoot. He was rigid and tense. The clubhead went down and cut across the ball. It skidded half way up the surface, then rolled back again.

His heart in his mouth, Jerry Fowler addressed it again. He got under the ball this time. He lifted it high and it came down on the green. It landed beyond the pin, rolled across the carpet and fell into the trap on the other side.

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Jerry Fowler plodded around to his ball. His teeth sank into his lower lip until blood showed. He thought that he could still win. The ball was deep in a footprint. Fate seemed to be grinning up at him. He blasted deep and the ball rose into the air. It landed on the green, fifteen feet from the hole and stuck.

One putt for a six and victory. Two putts to tie. Jerry bent over his putter, studied the line to the cup, then putted. The ball rolled straight as a die, then slowed. It came up to the rim, spun in a semicircle, then drifted on for two feet.

Jerry bent over it. His arms were wooden. He pushed the ball. It wob-

bled forward. It hesitated on the rim and then settled there, hanging on the lip.

The crowd suddenly roared. The photographers, waiting to take their pictures of the champion, folded their equipment and raced back to the clubhouse. Jerry Fowler stood there, turned to stone.

He heard a reporter's casual voice. "Fold-Up Fowler blows another one. Can you imagine that? He takes an eight."

Jerry Fowler plodded back toward the clubhouse. On the verandah he saw Martha waiting for him. She would know about it by now. She would sit there with the other wives and some would be sympathetic, and others would eye her slyly and smugly. She would go on knitting as though this meant nothing, as though it were not another catastrophe in a long line of them.

Jerry went into the locker room where the pros were changing their clothes. He sought out the winner, the veteran, white haired McAndrews and shook his hand.

"Congratulations, Mac," he said, "it couldn't happen to a better guy."

McAndrews said solemnly, "Jerry, ye should hae beaten me."

Jerry turned toward his locker. Next to him the burly, long driving Hatch Frame was drinking a high ball. Frame said, "Hello, Fold Up. You saving yourself for the Maypole Dance?"

He was used to being needled by the loud mouthed, unpopular Frame. He made no retort as he dressed, then started up the stairs. He went out to the porch, and Martha, pretty and blonde, looked up at him from a chair.

SHE smiled at him as though he had won the tournament and Jerry's heart tipped over. They went to the street and climbed into their car that had begun to look its age.

They drove toward the hotel and then Jerry said, "Well, I did it again. I'll quit. I'll get a job."

Martha said, "No, you won't. You wouldn't be happy except on a golf course, Jerry. It's in your blood."

"I'm thinking of you," Jerry said. "I don't mind living in cheap hotels, always wondering where the next dollar is coming from. But it's not right for you. I can't expect you to go on."

Martha said, "I'm not complaining. You'll come into your own one of these days, Jerry. And then we'll be on top. We'll get a tie up with a sporting goods concern and you'll get a good job as a pro at a country club that pays you a real salary."

"We're lucky that I'm holding down the pro job I have now," Jerry said. "I know the pay isn't much but I haven't won any tournaments. That salary is all that keeps us going. We just break even. If—well, let's not talk about it."

His thoughts had turned back to the past winter when he had first joined the circuit of professional golfers who made the trek through the south from Florida to California. His jinx had struck him in the first tournament. It had been a hard fought match and coming up to the last hole, Jerry Fowler had been out in front. There had been a big crowd watching and they had lined up along a narrow fairway.

Jerry had played a hook shot from the tee. It had been a beautiful ball, shooting straight toward the distant green and then some crazy spectator with a camera had dashed out from the sidelines. A hundred people yelled a warning but the camera fan had been struck on the back of the head. The ball had bounded into the rough and Jerry's tournament hopes died a sudden death but he had no thought of that at the moment. He was staring, horrified at the stretched out figure on the fairway.

Later that night, pacing a hospital corridor, young Jerry Fowler had learned to his great relief that the spectator had suffered a concussion, and would live. A load had been lifted from Jerry's heart, and then two weeks later, the man he had hit, sued him. The case was thrown out of court, but the plaintiff had no money and Jerry had to pay his court fees.

That had hurt but it was not until he played in the next tournament that the real disaster had struck. Jerry Fowler blew up with a loud bang on the last three holes of a match. He did it all through the winter circuit until it was a habit. He was a great golfer until the pressure tightened on him and then his game exploded. The only thing that kept him going was the hope that he could work out of it. Each new tournament was another chance, a new opportunity to come again into his own.

Jerry Fowler thought of that now as, back at the hotel, he and Martha packed their bags, and checked out. They were headed for another tournament, two hundred miles away and starting three days off. Jerry knew all the others would go there immediately to get in some practice rounds. It was a small tournament but it was a tune-up for the Tri-State open two weeks away, one of golfdom's richest prizes.

"I got an idea," Jerry said. "I'm going to forget golf until the day the tournament starts. We'll stay out in the country, then drive in on opening day. Maybe I'm stale. Maybe if I get away from it a couple days, it'll do me good."

Martha looked questioningly at him, then agreed quickly, and a few minutes later they were on their way. They stayed at a small hamlet where living was cheap and then finally three days later they drove in for the tournament. Jerry left Martha on the porch as usual and went down to the locker room. He

went inside and Hatch Frame was sounding off as usual. "I give you guys warning," Frame said. "I haven't been in the money the last couple months. But I'm getting hot. I figure on walking away with this one and then taking the Tri-State. I'm on my way."

He broke off as he saw Jerry Fowler enter. "Well," he said, "here's Fold-Up. I thought you quit. I figured you finally gave up."

Jerry said quietly, "Not yet."

Hatch Frame stared at him in amusement. He said, "When are you going to blow this one, Fowler? I'd like to know so I can watch it."

McAndrews put a heavy hand on Frame's shoulder. He said, "Lay off the kid, Frame. He's had a hard enough time."

Frame said, "Have it your way, grandpop," and turned away. Jerry looked gratefully at McAndrews, then got dressed and walked outside. There was a good crowd on hand but they were not following Jerry. He went to the tee and then saw that he was paired with McAndrews for the opening eighteen holes of the seventy-two hole match.

They started out and Jerry drove two hundred and thirty yards straight down the course. McAndrews' ball was a few yards short of his. The veteran said, "You got a lot of power for a small man, Jerry. You put every ounce you've got behind each shot. You'll be one of the best some day."

BOTH men were on the green in two. But Jerry Fowler took three putts and lost the hole. They went on and very soon Jerry knew it was one of those days. He was hitting them clean and straight but his putter was like a shovel. They went the eighteen rounds and Jerry had a seventy-four. He was six strokes off the pace set by Hatch Frame who turned in a glittering sixty-

eight, two under par for the opening round.

McAndrews said, "That happens to the best, Jerry. When your putter turns sour, you can only hope. There is no cure. And six strokes is not so bad. You'll improve your second round."

They went out again and Jerry Fowler fell apart. He came in with an eighty and that was that. He was out of the tournament. He didn't have a chance. Hatch Frame walked away with the prize money. He boasted but he seemed to be right and the gamblers made him a heavy favorite for the big Tri-State affair.

Jerry Fowler talked it over with Martha. He said, "There's only one thing to do. Keep on playing. Go after every tournament and play my head off every time. I'll probably blow a lot more of them. But I'll keep punching in there. I'll fight every minute and I'll never quit. And some day I'll get over it. I'll start winning and make it up to you, Martha. It's a good thing we have my pro salary. Without that we'd be licked."

They were preparing to leave for the Tri-State Open and as they checked out of the hotel, the clerk said, "Letter for you, Mr. Fowler."

Jerry took the long white envelope and noticed the address of his golf club on the face. He ripped it open, and quickly read the typewritten lines. Watching him, Martha saw his face go dead white. She said quickly, "Bad news, Jerry?"

He looked at her. He said, "No. Just a letter. How'm I doin', stuff like that. When we getting back?"

He stuffed the letter in his pocket and they went out to the car. They started off and Jerry said, "How much money we got left."

Martha said, "Oh, thirty or forty dollars, I think. We're pretty low. But

it doesn't matter, does it? You'll have your salary check waiting for you at the Tri-State Open."

"Yeah," Jerry said, "that's right. You mind if we don't stay at the hotel with the others. I'm kind of tired of these fancy joints, that high class food. Suppose we take a tourist court and you rustle up the groceries. You mind?"

Martha, studying him, said, "I'd love it."

They rented a tourist cabin on the outskirts of town where the Tri-State was being held. The next day Jerry Fowler went out for a tune-up round. He started late in the afternoon and the others were coming in.

Jerry Fowler drove his first ball and he knew that he was right today. There was something in the click of the ball, the rhythm of his swing that assured him he was in the groove. He parred the first three holes, then took a birdie on the long difficult par five fourth. At the turn his caddie added up his score and looked at him with awe.

He said, "Thirty-four, Mister Fowler. Sixty-seven is the record for this course."

Jerry said, "Yeah, I'm hot. There's no one watching me. There's no pressure."

He continued on the back nine and he couldn't miss. His wood shots were long and straight, his irons dead to the green, and the putts went to the cup as though drawn by a magnet.

The caddie said, "Sixty-eight, Mister Fowler. I'm sure glad to be your caddie in this open. I think I got the winner."

Jerry Fowler said, "I hope so."

He strode off toward the clubhouse and as he went inside Hatch Frame came in. He said, "Well, well, I just heard about your score. I'd be worried if we were going to play the tournament this way. But it will be different. There will be people around. There'll be pres-

sure. And you'll be good old reliable Fold-Up Johnny Fowler once again."

Jerry didn't have the heart to say a word. He started back toward the tourist court and on the porch he met the silver thatched Scot, McAndrews. The veteran kicked a chair toward him. He said, "Sit awhile."

Jerry sat down and McAndrews' keen eyes appraised him. He said, "You're a guy who doesn't say much, Jerry. A lone wolf, sort of. A guy who keeps all his troubles to himself. It ain't a good thing, Jerry."

Jerry said shortly, "My troubles are my own."

McANDREWS nodded. "And when you keep them to yourself, they pile up. They make you tighten up. You need to let off steam. Get things off your chest. You're out of work, aren't you, Jerry. You lost your job."

Jerry Fowler stared at him and McAndrews said, "You don't even tell your troubles to your wife. She told me you had a letter from your club. You didn't tell her what was in the letter but she's no dope. She asked me to talk to you."

Jerry Fowler looked off into the darkness. He said, "They've expanded, they're putting on a big membership drive. They want a pro with a reputation. I don't blame them."

McAndrews nodded. "And you're pinning all your faith on winning this tournament. You're carrying all your troubles around like a pack on your back—"

"If I win this one," Jerry said, "I'll get a good golf pro spot. I'll sign up with a sporting goods house. If I lose I get a job somewhere. Driving a truck, anything."

McAndrews said, "I been at this game a long time. And one of the first things I learned is to relax, to let every day take care of itself. In golf you have to think of the shot coming up,

not the one you just took. You can't ever call it back. What has all the past got to do with the Tri-State? Every match you play you're thinking of the ones before that you blew? You can't do it, Jerry. You feel sorry for yourself and you keep on getting worse."

The tension left Jerry Fowler. He said, "Thanks, Mac. I never looked at it quite that way. I've been a dope. I'd figured on going home and sitting in that two by four cabin thinking about tomorrow. I'd go to bed later on and lie there unable to sleep."

He got to his feet. He said, "I'm about broke, but I'm going to spend some dough. They got a night club in this town, I hope?"

He went back to the tourist cabin and said, "Martha, put on a party dress. We've got a date."

Martha said dubiously, "We don't have much money, Jerry. Maybe—"

"When I win this Open we'll have plenty," Jerry said. "Let's be on our way."

They toured the town together. They danced and Jerry didn't think of a golf ball. He didn't sit in a room wondering about the jinx facing him at every eighteenth tee. They came home at midnight and Jerry, dead tired, went right to bed and to sleep.

He was starting off at nine-thirty the following morning and as he walked toward the starting tee he saw Martha on the porch with the other wives. She waved and he waved gaily back. He stepped up on the tee and looked out over the fairway. He didn't see the crowd. This was a game of golf and he was fresh and rested, thanks to Martha and to Mac.

He addressed his ball, and leaned into it, his wrists breaking just before the impact, and the club following through the swing. When he finally raised his head the ball had landed two hundred and twenty yards down the

fairway and was bouncing on another twenty yards.

They went down to it and the green was two hundred yards away. Jerry asked for his brassie. The green was across a stream and he could play safe to the fairway bank or try for the green. He wasn't playing safe today. The crowd watched his ball soar high in the air, come down on the apron and roll across the green and stop ten feet beyond the cup.

Jerry Fowler lined up his ball and wasted no time. He tapped it and the pellet rolled straight ahead and dropped in for a birdie three on a very tough par four hole.

That was the beginning and it went on from there. By the time he had finished the ninth hole, the word had spread through the golfing gallery and they were leaving the other contestants to watch a possible record breaking round. Jerry Fowler didn't notice the increase. He took each shot as it came. And then finally he stood over a putt, pushed it across the carpet and watched it drop.

"Sixty-seven," his caddie said. "You tied the course record."

Jerry Fowler straightened up and grinned. "That's the first round," he said. "Three more like that and I'm in."

They went in toward the clubhouse and throughout the day the scores kept coming in. Hatch Frame had a sixty-nine. McAndrews was well in the running with a seventy and the pro from the coast, Willoughby, had a sixty-eight.

Martha said, that evening, "I wish I'd seen it."

"There'll be more of them," Jerry said. "I've forgotten that one already. It's tomorrow that counts. This is it, the last chance I've got, and I don't intend to flub it."

He went out the next day and slipped two strokes off his pace. But at the

end of the day with the qualifying rounds completed he headed the list of golfers who were left in the field for the final, gruelling thirty-six holes. He had a thirty-six hole score of one hundred and thirty-six. Willoughby was a stroke in back of him, and Hatch Frame was two strokes away. The concensus picked one of those three as the winner and Willoughby and Hatch Frame as the more likely. The reporters made references to the repeated blow-ups of Jerry Fowler.

FOR once, reading the papers did not bother him. He grinned at Martha. "They're making the same mistake I did," he said. "Thinking only of the past. They don't know what's coming."

He went out on Saturday for the next eighteen and up ahead of him Willoughby was blasting the course apart. The word drifted back but Jerry did not let himself think about it. He took each shot as it came and at the end of the round he had scored another sixty-nine. There was nothing wrong with that, it was great golf no matter what Willoughby had done. He went in the clubhouse and Willoughby, a sandy haired, pleasant man, grinned at him. "I couldn't shake you loose," he said ruefully. "I managed to tie you. It looks as though its between us tomorrow. Hatch Frame cracked and came in with a seventy-three. He's way out of it."

That night Jerry Fowler did not sleep so well. He thought that the next day carried all of his hopes. If he won there would be new contracts and a solid reputation. If he lost, he and his wife were broke. He'd have to put away the golf clubs and forget the game. He couldn't keep that thought out of his mind forever and he knew again that he was facing the jinx. The eighteenth hole, the last one, was coming up again.

He went out the next morning hoping

to build up a great lead so that he could breeze in with no pressure. But he was not reassured when he found that he was playing with Hatch Frame. Out of it unless a miracle occurred, Frame was in an ugly mood.

"Anyway," Frame said, "I will have the pleasure of beating you this round. This is your fold-up round."

Jerry tightened his lips, then tried to ignore him. There was a big crowd today and he stepped to the tee, waggled his club, then went into the backswing. As he started coming down, he knew the arc was wrong. He wasn't loose. The ball went out straight and then began to slice. It went into the crowd and Frame chuckled. "Starting early," he said.

Jerry Fowler trudged ahead, swearing at himself for letting Frame's remarks get his goat. He got to his ball and blasted it back onto the fairway. But just the same, the best he could do was a six. And if Willoughby who had started a half hour earlier had parred the hole, Jerry was starting off with a two stroke deficit.

He began to get into his game then. He played steadily, and at the end of nine holes he had a thirty-five. Willoughby was well into the second nine, he had also scored a thirty-five. They were still tied.

Hatch Frame who had scored a thirty-six, to destroy his last hope, grunted, "You're saving your act for the last, hey, Fowler? There's a lot of people to see you turn yellow on this one."

Jerry's eyes flashed, then he walked quietly to the tenth tee and drove a long straight ball down the fairway. He felt himself beginning to tighten up as the pressure increased. His iron shot toward the green was short and he went one over par on the hole.

His caddie, walking with him toward the eleventh said, "I got news that Willoughby went to hell on a couple holes.

You got a lead. All you got to do is play your game. Just par the rest of these and you're in."

The tension disappeared. Jerry Fowler got himself a birdie on the eleventh, and parred the next three. He went one over on the fifteenth, and made it up with another birdie on the next one. He came up to the seventeenth green and faced a twelve foot putt for another par. His putter moved like a pendulum. The ball went straight to the cup, and rattled down inside.

His caddie said, "You're in. You can't miss. Par the last one for a four and you're the Tri-State champ."

Jerry stared at him. A par four to win, a five to tie. It ought to be easy. This eighteenth was not an especially hard four hole. The championship was virtually in his hands.

And then suddenly he became conscious of the sea of people. There was a sound truck up by the green where the radio men broadcasted the news to the golfing fans of the nation. The other golfers who had finished were watching him. In the crowd was Martha, who had been unable to keep the usual golf wife post on the club porch.

The sweat suddenly streamed down Jerry Fowler's face. He walked toward the tee and his hands felt clammy and moist. He dried them off and he knew that it was the same old thing again. The last hole and he was tightened up like a drum with everything he wanted in life riding on the next few shots at a dinky white ball.

He addressed it, then hesitated, trying to relax and loosen up. He couldn't wait forever and finally he drew the driver slowly back, his eye on the ball. The club came down through its arc, his hips turning and the form was nice to look at because with Jerry it was instinctive. But it was form without concentration on the shot, and at the last moment, he jerked his head. The ball

was topped. It shot across the ground low and then it hooked. There were woods lining the left side of the fairway and the ball went into them and out of sight. Jerry heard it hit a tree.

THERE was a sudden hushed, incredulous silence. It was broken when Hatch Frame smothered a laugh.

Jerry Fowler stared in the direction that the ball had gone. He thought of Martha and McAndrews whom he was letting down. And then he remembered McAndrews's words about holding himself in, and never letting out.

He turned to Frame. He said, "Close that ugly mouth of yours."

He was a quiet little guy, Jerry Fowler, and Frame had never known the fires that burned deep inside of him. He started to say something and Jerry said, "One word and you get it right in that trap of yours. Just one word."

Hatch Frame stared at him and then he closed his mouth. He said nothing at all and his face was strangely pale. Jerry Fowler relaxed. It had felt very fine indeed to tell him off. He turned and said, "Let's find that ball," and he strode down the fairway.

In the woods his caddie was standing over the ball, trying not to look mournful. He said, "You can chip it out and probably get a five to tie."

Jerry nodded and sighted toward the green. There was a slim opening between the trees to the trap at the left and the green just beyond it.

"I'm not playing it safe," Jerry said. "I play to win every time. It's the only way. I'm shooting for the green."

Win or lose, he thought, he was not quitting on this one. He was gambling everything and he knew it was the way a real golfer would play it. He took his club, and set himself. He hit the ball cleanly, and for a second's fraction, his heart was in his mouth. Then he saw the ball shoot between the trees.

There was a wild yell from the crowds. In the rush toward the green to see the final drama, a man was running across the fairway. An official yelled at him, a hundred people shouted. The man saw the golf ball coming as he scrambled up the green. He tried to duck and fell into the ball. It bounded off his shoulder and into the trap below.

Jerry Fowler's caddie said grimly, "If this club were a gun. . . ."

"That's it," Jerry said. "Mac's treatment didn't work. I'm just a guy who's licked. There's no point in trying anymore."

He walked silently forward, defeat in his stride. He stepped into the trap and took the sand wedge, looking bleakly at his ball. Then he looked up bitterly at the crowd and saw Martha and McAndrews watching him. Their faces were tense and strained. He had never seen either of them look that way before.

And suddenly Jerry Fowler was filled with wonder. They took it harder than he did. Old Mac, veteran of countless tournaments, and Martha, who had to sit and wait and suffer in silence with never a word of complaint. He realized that a man could not keep his troubles to himself. It was not his battle alone, it was also Martha's, his wife, and Mac's, who had made him a sort of protege. They were the ones who took it hard because they couldn't do anything about it. But he could.

They were carrying his load and

Jerry Fowler's shoulders were lighter. He looked at his sad faced caddie. He said, "You bet on me?"

"My shirt," the caddie said gloomily.

"Kids like you should know better than to gamble," Jerry said. He turned, stepped up and smacked the ball. He dug down under it and the sand rose and obscured his vision, and came back in his face. He could see again finally and the ball was on the green. He was on in three. He had a ten foot putt for a four.

The caddie put the putter in his hands.

Jerry Fowler, no longer feeling sorry for himself, impersonally tapped the ball. With the same detachment he watched it roll straight into the cup for the title.

The photographers and the autograph hunters surrounded him and on the outskirts were the men with contracts and big fountain pens. Jerry made a date to see them later and pushed across to Martha and to Mac.

The veteran said, "You're a golfer, Jerry," and they shook hands, then Jerry turned to Martha. He said, "I'm a golfer. For life. It's not as soft as people think. It'll be tough, especially for you. Travelling the circuit every year. Sometimes we'll win, sometimes we'll lose. We'll have dark days. But I won't fold up again. You think you'll like it?"

Martha, grinning at him, said softly, "I'll love it, Mister Fowler."

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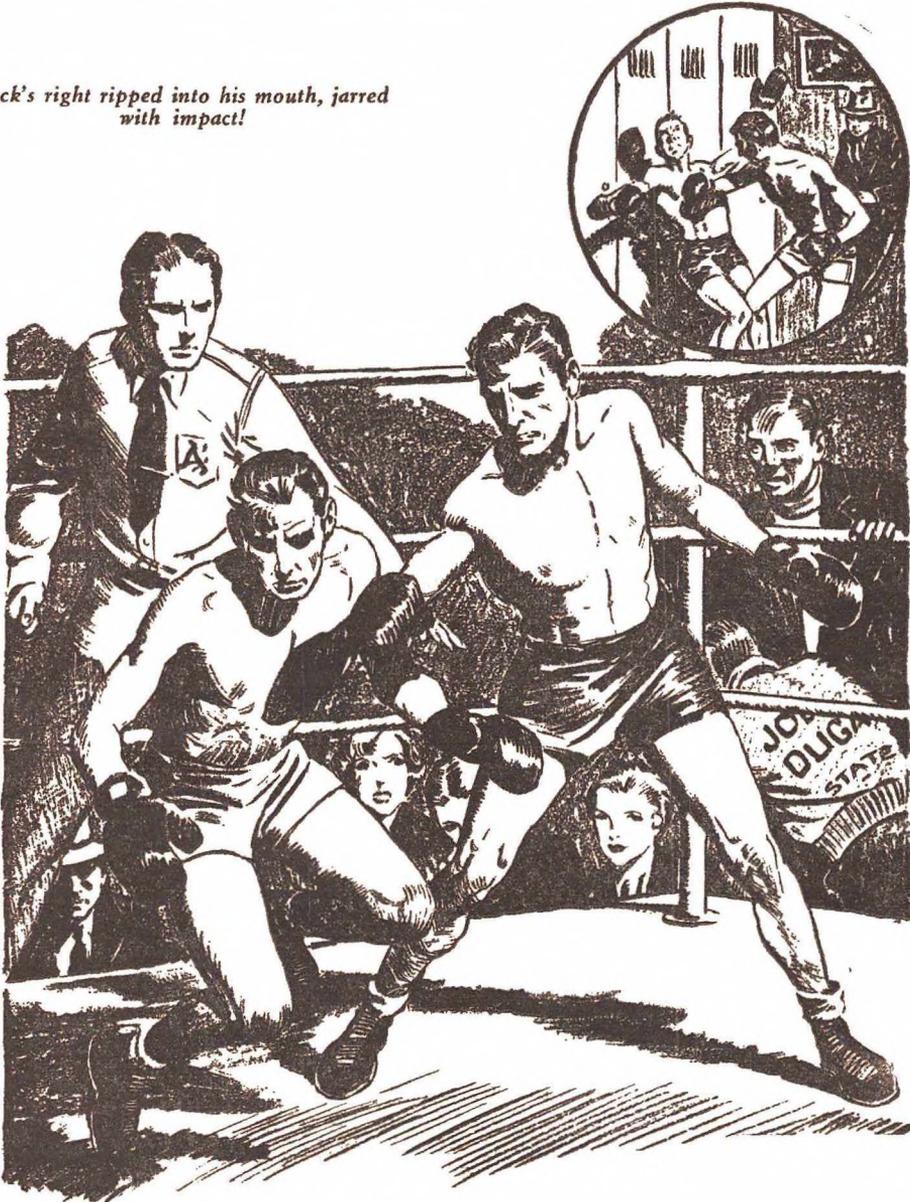
by

DAVID MANNERS

Author of "Hatchets in His Hands," etc.

He'd been fighting a ring war all his life, and one red-leather blitzkrieg more or less wouldn't make or break him!

Peck's right ripped into his mouth, jarred with impact!



THE bell clanged spiritlessly under the apron of the first ring, of a battery of three, in the Spring Street Gym. Young Peck Taylor about-

faced sharply from his sparring mate. As he did a weary, shuffling dance back to his corner, he felt the warmth of the applause, scattered only because the

spectators were scattered, and saw big Kid McTigue struggling through the ropes and into his corner.

"Pooped?" McTigue asked, wiping the perspiration off Peck's face and shoulders with all the rough force of a dog licking its pups. "How many rounds yuh do?"

"Six," Peck panted. His eyes passed eagerly from McTigue's familiar flat-bridged nose to the jumbled engravings of his left ear, seen now, for the first time, at such close range. Peck self-consciously checked the quickness of his breathing. Kid McTigue, former Middleweight Champion of the World, and right next to him.

McTigue said: "Six! Six's plenty," and held two ropes wide for him. On the floor he said: "Ain'tcha in the semi-final? What's the idea goin' six? Yuh wanta leave all yuh got in the gym?"

"But are you going to take care of me? Reynolds, he—"

"I seen Bo. He's leavin' with Mason for Frisco in the mornin'. Don't talk now. I wanta give yuh a rub. Go get your shower. Go ahead. Go on." McTigue wandered off.

A tingling shiver flitted over Peck's back, around his neck, and up through the strong buttress of his heavy cheek bones. Kid McTigue, the champ! He'd talked with Kid McTigue. Talked to him with an easy familiarity.

Peck shadow-boxed his way toward the low, rectangular opening in the back wall leading to the dressing room. Other boys were working in the two back rings. Two heavies were getting set in the first ring that Peck had just quitted. Fighters filled the aisles, punching bags that swung down from the sky-lighted ceiling, jumping ropes, feinting, snorting, conditioning before the lazy eyes of the spectators in the wooden tier of seats that crossed one end of the hundred-foot loft. Fighters—black, white, Mexican, Irish, Filipino.

Tough boys without profiles, with boneless noses and stitched lips. Blind Davey Downey on a folding chair on the side lines, listening understandingly to the sounds they made. His ears two hard buds on the side of his head. His white-tipped cane between his legs.

Peck breathed deeply, savoring the blend of leather and moldy sweat that makes gym air.

In the dressing room, he said to Pete Acosta, a lightweight like himself: "Kid McTigue's going to take care of me. He's going to rub me down now."

Acosta's eyes raised from a hand that he was massaging. "Yeah. Good stuff. McTigue won't steer you wrong."

In the shower, a spindly boy with a red-blue nude on his forearm said: "Pete collected twelve bucks last night. Now the doc'll cost him twenty. It ain't no percentage."

Peck soaped a rich lather over his smooth-muscled, rubbery body—hard and slick like a freshly manufactured article. "Pete Acosta?" Peck asked. "I just saw him outside. I just talked to him."

"Acosta's gonna ruin that mitt if he tries usin' it again. What a dope."

"Yeah," said Peck. He was trying to recall whom it was McTigue had fought for the middle-weight title. "Tough luck. It sure is."

Peck came out of the shower alcove, seeing a towel over his blond-red shoulders, his step light and gingery on the ribbed rubber floor mat. McTigue was just arriving at the little back room of black-cushioned rubbing tables and liniment bottles.

The fat of inactivity, following the extreme effort of a youth that was a ring war, padded his frame. He put one foot down in front of the other, like a rope walker. His blue eyes—tiny under punch-calloused eyelids—were set so intently it seemed that walking, as he did, was a problem difficult of solu-

tion, requiring utmost concentration.

His tiny eyes missed Peck. His crooked hands took one of the bottles off a wall two-by-four that was a shelf. He held it up to the light, smiling weakly at it, as if it were the expression of his thoughts and those thoughts were sparkling and glowing with whimsy.

Looking at Kid McTigue made Peck stand irresolute with his question.

"Why you want to take care of me?" he finally asked.

McTigue turned. "Say, get out from in front of that door. Yuh want to get all tightened up? Come on, get up here. On your belly—over, over on your belly . . . Where'd yuh get that moniker—Peck?"

"Joe's my right name. It's the way I use my left." His teeth sparkled white in a smile. "I like Joe better, but they gimme that name. So I figger maybe it can mean a peck of trouble too—for the other guys."

"Don't yuh be too busy watchin' that nice nose o' yours. An' that pretty baby face." McTigue's heavy fingers slapped yellow-green rubbing oil over the hard V of Peck's back. They lifted its fleshy parts and kneaded them like lumps of dough. "Yuh know yuh gotta get the duke Friday. Yuh know what that means?"

"I'm going to be right out there."

"Hollywood ain't Pasadena or none of these little clubs. Yuh win Friday—make a good showing, and the crowd likes yuh—and Charlie McDonald'll bring yuh back in a windup." He drummed up and over the back of Peck's legs with the sides of his two hands. "Yuh can take this boy, Friday. Yuh oughta put him away."

"I'm gonna be champ," Peck stated with matter-of-fact suddenness.

McTigue laughed, briefly, thoughtfully; his laughter lingered in a smile. "By God if yuh don't talk like a little

kid," he said. His lips grew tired of the smile that had turned sad. "But it don't make yuh a champ to beat that boy."

"You know Crowley?"

"Crowley—sure I know Crowley. A tough kid. But he don't keep his hands up—"

"He's from Chicago?"

"From Chicago. A bum. Wide open all the time. All yuh gotta do is keep the left in his puss—all the time." McTigue stepped back from the table, demonstrating, his mouth twisted crookedly. He jabbed quickly. "Bang . . . bang . . . bang. . . ." He jabbed again: "Bang."

"Say—"

"Call me Kid."

"Kid—how did I look today, Kid? Working with little Louis Miller, did I look tired?"

"Yuh was pooped," McTigue corrected with the emphasis of irritation. "So you're a comer. That don't give yuh no business workin' six. In this game, Kid, yuh gotta watch out for o' solo meo. Yuhself. Yuh can take that from me."

McTigue slapped Peck's oily seat, and Peck turned over on his back.

Peck smiled happily. "Bo Reynolds says he can get me in a movie. In the next fight picture, he says, when the studios call for a couple boys for background. He's always running somebody up to Culver City. For background. Hell, it might just be a flash, but the folks back East would see it. And then if I show good Friday night, he might get me on down in Mexico City. Imagine. All the way down there. Hot stuff, huh?"

McTigue's worn eyes were fixed inattentively. He massaged the toes of Peck's feet by rotating them first one way, then the other. His voice shrugged, went on musingly: "Lot of boys I know ain't got a dime. Take too many in

the kisser. What's it get 'em? Take Sammy Lazzetti. And let me tell yuh this, they don't think so good any more. And not so fast neither. . . ."

McTigue asked Peck about his weight, where he lived. Two more fighters and a rubber in a loose white shirt came in. McTigue wiped the flat of Peck's chest. Peck sat up. He shadow boxed his way to a mirror on the wood partition wall.

McTigue growled behind him: "Why'd yuh let that monkey nail yuh in there today? Keep the left mitt up high." He grabbed Peck's wrist and showed him, exaggeratedly, how high he meant. McTigue's figure was a wobbly distortion in the mirror. "And keep the left workin' right on his schnozzle. Get your pants on. I want to show yuh somethin'."

In the gym corner hung a big bag. McTigue got back of it and put his shoulder to it. What he wanted was a one-two—a zippy left with a right burner for a tail. Peck gave it to him—twice; each time the Kid shook his head.

"Put your right hand up, open your hand," he said, putting Peck's hand up where he wanted it. Then he stepped back, feinted, his scarred lips twisted into a wavy O for the delicate execution. His left smacked Peck's palm, and riding it pickaback was his right fist. "Yuh see? One-two, that's what it is. All right—all right, put your mitt down."

"I'll work better tomorrow," Peck said.

Peck finished dressing quickly after that, his street clothes cool and airy against the warm exhilaration of his arms and thighs. He hung his trunks and socks and supporter on the locker's hangers, to dry out. He opened the laces on his light kangaroo shoes and carefully stretched the tongues.

He waited his turn at a small mirror.

He ran his comb through his still sopped blond hair, whipped a spray of water from the comb down to the painted concrete. He looked carefully at himself. At the slight bruise and scaly dryness of his lips, at a triangular red splotch below one eye. Mechanically his fingers felt his left ear. Probed a spot in the center of it, between two cartilages, cushioned and sore. His thoughts turned from the tack they were following, slowed. His consciousness seeped through his fingers to his ear, and then the electric thought formed in his mind.

Peck twisted hurriedly between fighters crowding in through the locker room door, sweating and hot and smelling of acid. A Filipino fly bumped his arm. A big middle with a twisted cylinder of towel around his red neck wedged by.

There was a knot of handlers clumped near the entrance gate to the almost deserted gym. It was cool and the fading afternoon light was soft on their hunched shoulders.

"McTigue?" said one of them to Peck's question. "The Kid's gone, ain't he?"

"Left just a little while ago," put in another. Their fat, pouchy eyes were on Peck, appraising eyes, estimating eyes. "You looked all right in there today, fella. Nice goin'."

"Thanks," said Peck.

There was a smoky card game underway when Peck stepped into the living room. His face looked trained thin and washed as he closed the door behind him. It was nine o'clock. Four fellows, without coats around a square of table. McTigue, his feet up on a round, red-topped hassock. His shoulders deep in the divan's cushion, lying on most of his spine. There were a couple girls busy with cans of beer in the kitchen and their laughter and talk was an echoing wave on the cigarette air.

The players hardly saw him, but McTigue lumbered up and around a chair

with a big smile that almost threw him off balance.

"Women," he said. "Aaanh! Let's get outside."

A frog voice at the card table said: "Taylor, you sure put holes in that boy up at El Monte. What's the idea, Kid? Let Taylor pull up a chair."

McTigue pushed Peck through a door. The porch swing's chain had a two note creak. "The ear," McTigue said.

"The ear?"

"Yeah. I can see it's red. And you're touchin' it. Feelin' it. That little Louie musta clouted you one." He looked into the ear, felt it diagnostically with a forefinger.

"It's cauliflower?"

"No. Just a spot. Hell, you should have seen Sammy Lazzetti's. Blew up as big as your fist. An' right in a fight. But he didn't take care of it. He had a spot."

Peck said: "What'll I do?"

"Just keep rubbin' it till the swellin' goes down. Not that way. Down. Down. Yuh want to get the blood out of there so it don't harden. Yuh wear a headgear after this."

"I'll take care of it. It'll be all right."

"If yuh keep rubbin' it. Yuh wear a headgear. Don't be smart."

There was a slight breeze. The palms in the thick darkness of the court rustled woodenly.

"Where'd yuh say yuh lived?"

"I've got a room over on Vermont. 'Bout five blocks from here."

"Yeah, sure, yuh told me."

"Exposition Park's right there. It's swell for road work."

"You got a girl?"

"No. I told you—"

"None back home, neither?"

"Well—"

"Fightin's a funny racket. Yuh either make a helluva lot o' dough or yuh don't make nothin'." McTigue's

words flowed with the ease of words long repeated. "The trouble is, too many guys hang on when they ain't ever got a chance to get any place any more. Yuh'd think fightin' was the only thing a guy could do."

"I'm gonna be top. I'm gonna be champ."

"There are McTigues that are champs and McTigues that are stumblebums. Yuh gotta be careful which kind yuh are."

The swing's chain creaked to Peck's impatience. "I win Friday with Crowley an' I'll get a top spot. I'll be in there with all of 'em. Ambers. Armstrong—the best of 'em."

"Yeah? Well, when yuh get in there Friday with Crowley, yuh want to go. Keep goin' in there all the time. Yuh know that's what that Hollywood gang eats."

"They get a lot of movie stars there. They'll be watchin' me."

"Now yuh listen to me." Sudden irritation put a sharp lilt to McTigue's command. He stood up. "I'm tellin' yuh how to fight Crowley. Keep usin' the left. Keep usin' it. Tomorrow I'm goin' to put yuh in there with Moore."

"Joey Moore who's fighting Chuck Wolgast?" Moore was a *real* top-notch.

"Him and Crowley work the same. They're rugged and tough—see—but they ain't got no defense. Moore likes to plaster 'em to the ropes. Yuh know how to tie a guy up?"

"Sure I know how to tie a guy up."

McTigue bent down in a crouch in the semi-darkness, his arms parallel pistons, his elbows tight to his body. "Now tie me up?" he shouted. "Tie me up!"

Peck forked his thumb and open glove over the hinge of McTigue's elbows.

McTigue struggled to tear free his

arms and ram their fists into Peck's narrow, muscle-ridged waist. "That's it—sure. Yuh get one hand free, slough it over. Hold till the ref kicks. Watch when yuh break. Keep your mitts high. Just perfect yourself at all times. That's all yuh gotta do, see?"

"I gotta win."

"Sure yuh will. Yuh'll win. Just listen to me—an' exactly what I tell yuh. An' that Bo Reynolds. Yuh oughtn't tuh be mixed up with that guy. He's got money in his eyes."

"He's handling Bobby Mason."

"Yeah, Mason. A meal ticket that's all punched out. How long yuh think he'll last without eyes? Joe Louis don't have to worry about Mason no more. He's out there, and he's always fightin' two guys. Yuh can't do no punchin' if you're always seein' double."

"But he's fighting Tuesday up in Frisco," Peck protested in wobbly, uncertain triumph.

"Sure, he's fightin' in Frisco. That's exactly it. That's what I'm sayin'."

The weighing in Friday was at the stadium, an hour earlier than back East. It was sixty minutes of grace. It put movement to the day. And it advanced Peck's first and only meal: three soft boiled eggs, one piece of toast well done, and tea, because fistic wisdom said tea. A prescription more than a meal. Going to bed after that seemed natural enough. But the blinds pulled down made a dark, unreal, unconvincing night.

Instead of sleep, Peck lay flat on his back and fought with Mickey Crowley. He hadn't seen Crowley at the weighing in. Now his mind gave him a Mickey Crowley that was an amorphous black and white flicker. A patchwork of associations. The width of Joe Moore. An infighter sticking tightly to his body. The blue eyes, the bent, hammered nose of McTigue.

He jabbed the flickering black and white wraith with preternatural fre-

quency. Suddenly, he was in a bad way on the ropes. But he twanged off them. He knocked Crowley to the canvas with a one-two, a perfect one-two. He started over the bout again; this time he hit the shadow high on its head and broke his left, his wonderful left hand. He couldn't jab. . . .

The dressing rooms were tiny cells, off a long hall, in back of the stadium. Peck came into the one assigned him. It was a quarter of eight. He bent down and opened his bag and then pulled a wooden chair under him. He took out his shoes. Yellow-dust of resin, resin of other nights, powdery borders to the criss-cross print tightly pulled laces had made on their tongues. His socks. His trunks.

Cocky came in. He was flyweight size, a melted roundness to his shoulders. A lumpy tweed cap precariously far back on his head. He was one of those who followed in Bo Reynolds' wake.

"Did yuh hear about McTigue—the stinker!"

Peck looked up.

"Yeah," said Cocky. "McTigue. That robbin' thief. He rooked yuh. He's Crowley's old man! The guy you're fightin'. That crawlin' louse!"

Peck stared at Cocky. The lump moved painfully in his throat. "You're kidding," he said off-key.

"Kiddin'? Hell, no! Bo wondered why he was so anxious to train yuh. He figgered the lug needed the dough. I coulda rammed that stumblebum's face down his throat. He said he didn't know. The kid changed his name, and he didn't know it was him. The damn fool! The lie was all over his face. I'd like to've hit him—the poor, slobberin' lug."

"I—I can't figure it—"

"You don't know this racket. What a guy'll do. This is a great spot you're in. McTigue figgers the boy who takes

the nod in this bout'll step right up in there. If Crowley licks you, it'll be him. What'd that skunk McTigue feed yuh all week? Forget it! All of it!"

Peck stood up and turned so that Cocky wouldn't see his face. McTigue doing something like this to him? Hell, he'd been showing him things all week. Teaching him. Showing him how to jab, how to throw his right. Was all that wrong? And now he wouldn't be working the fight with him. Peck turned away more. He wanted a corner to hide his head in. McTigue. McTigue, the champ. An' they were calling him a stumblebum. . . .

Chuck Wolgast arrived with his easy, sleepy way that was his confidence. A menage that was loud and eager. They broke on the room, everyone talking, no one listening. Wolgast's clothes were noticeably new—a main-go outfit. There was a buff ascot tie that went with the coat and boisterous red stripes for its design.

Peck dressed numbly. He rubbed vaseline into his lips so they would be soft and pliable and not split open with a punch. Cocky took the jar from his hand. He hooked his finger into it, went to work on the bony ridges over Peck's eyes and the curved troughs of his ears.

"Don't be afraid to use the stuff," he said, and winked with the whole side of his face, as for an act covert and exceedingly clever. "Palooka McTigue tells me you got a sore ear."

Cocky bandaged Peck's hands. He finished up his right with a furtive pull on the spool of adhesive; a hasty turn of a foot of tape, that wasn't Queensberry, around Peck's knuckles.

Peck sat on the folding chair, gloved hands dropped between his legs, head bent at the neck, oblivious to Chuck Wolgast, slouchy and relaxed, the host that waited on him.

Cocky opened the door wide enough

to get his head through, shouted: "O'Rourke!" There was an answer, wordless, with only the airiness of an echo. Cocky's head came back. "O'Rourke's going to be on the bucket."

Voices called first one and then another of the preliminaries. From far off the crowd roar alternately heaved and died.

Finally: "All right! Crowley! Taylor! Crowley and Taylor for the semi-windup. Let's go!"

Peck, Cocky, O'Rourke moved in a tight formation down the hall. Hurried down the slanting aisle of the Arena of shouts, smoke, voices, faces, hawkers, ring, bell clanging its demand for silent attention.

Ahead was a green-silk bathrobe, with the white of a towel at its collar and spikes of bouncing reddish hair above that. Mike Crowley skipping, twisting his body and his shoulders with short, rudimentary warmup punches, climbing with a show of nerve and energy onto the ring and through the ropes.

Introductions, with the lilt and index-finger-flourish of the announcer's craft. Then Art Rafferty, his hands behind the necks of the two boys, his head taking his eyes from one to the other, his words coming through lips bumpy with cuts long healed. Peck heard the words. Crowley's blue eyes—McTigue's blue eyes—were ten inches from his. The formality was done.

Peck cut a diagonal across the white canvas to his corner. The bathrobe slipped off his shoulders and into an excited ball in Cocky's hands.

Peck came dancing out toward Crowley at the bell. Crowley's advance was a shuffle, soles and heels to the ring. Peck jabbed, was short. He remembered what Kid McTigue had said and his lips flattened tight to his mouthpiece. Another one and it landed. At last he was into the thick of it, away

from the waiting and the thinking. He jabbed lightly, tentatively, the muscles in his left arm relaxed. Five of these feathery ones landed on Crowley's nose.

This changed the even hum out in the darkness into the sharp points of laughter.

Peck saw Mickey Crowley's white body and the silken purple of his trunks against the black beyond. He carried his fists low and wide—like a trap that dared him to nibble. He was wide open. Peck checked the temptation to rejoice that this was Crowley and that Crowley was no more than this.

Crowley threw his right. The fist, followed by the whole arm, swung in a rigid loop. He looked like McTigue. Just a younger version of McTigue. Peck danced away, throwing Crowley off balance. He surged in, firing lefts, taking advantage of his confusion.

Crowley's body lunged and his heavy arms held Peck. Rafferty slapped Crowley's shoulder. "Break!" He pried them apart with his hands and stepped between them.

It cracked sharp yet solid. Peck was looking at the referee, then with languid surprise he was sitting on the canvas. His head tingled. He thought back. Recollected the punch, the incredible leadenness of its impact.

Rafferty's voice down near him, "Four!" His mouth twisted and wide with warning. The clarity necessary for the awareness of the count, brought shame to Peck. He'd been knocked down!

The anguish jerked Peck up. He shook his head. He jigged a little dance. His legs from his waist through his feet were empty with the vague solidity of numbness. The crowd beyond was a shrill, big-mouthed blackness just lifting the fringe of his consciousness.

Then he knew he was on the canvas again. He'd been knocked down again.

Noise pressed on him, crescendoed to a tenuous pitch. Under it, across the canvas, rolled what seemed the deep boom of McTigue's voice: "Down! Down! Down! Down! The boards of the ring shook to a pounding fist.

It broke through the cobwebs. On one knee, with Rafferty's arm striking . . . five . . . six . . . he waited. At eight he flexed upward. Nine . . . he was circling the approaching Crowley.

Crowley's fists dug into him; his body hot, clinging. Peck remembered McTigue's words. Peck tied him up. He broke free. Pivoted. Circled—the ropes searing his shoulder blades. "He's a sucker for a jab." Peck jabbed. He stepped with accuracy out of the way of over-anxious, floundering swings.

The bell broke into an icy, detached coldness that was of desperation. Peck felt it as strength, with reverent wonder.

Peck half-expected to see McTigue in his corner, but instead there was O'Rourke and an advice-screaming Cocky.

The second round was a blaze of left jabs landing suddenly into the surprise of Crowley's face. Sometimes, as though for variety, they chose to duck down and land as straight-arm pokes into Crowley's body. Again and again. Stiff jolting jabs. Staccato ones dusting his face—his nose, his mouth, his eyes, his chin.

The crowd's enjoyment took the form of superior taunts at Crowley's bewilderment. Give it to heem! Where'd they find that bum? Let's go home! Oh, you Mickey. . . !

Peck stayed clear of Crowley's right. Crowley's eye was swelling like a red-purple balloon. Peck let go his right along with a left. Crowley snarled at them. Both landed again. He came in doggedly.

Crowley took them in quick succession, his chin wide. The blood dripped down from his eye, smeared on his

cheek. Peck's right ripped into his mouth, jarred with impact. Crowley walked into another. Peck danced around him, burned in the right. Crowley wavered, straightened. Plunged forward scornfully, challengingly, as if his body were following the one pattern it knew, that blindly, reflexively it must follow it over and over again.

Peck gauged the range with his outstretched left arm, paved the way with accuracy for his right. Did it professionally. Without a layman's squeamishness. Rafferty saw the poised thrust, stepped in. Pushed Peck by the shoulder. Turned quickly to Crowley, shoved him to his corner.

The bell clanged as for a fire. Rafferty moved across the white canvas, grabbed Peck's right wrist. The soggy glove hoisted high.

Cocky met Peck with a wet towel as he came toward his corner. He rubbed away the perspiration and sponge water and the blood—the wide, blurred daubs of Crowley's blood—from his chest and shoulders.

"You done okay!" Cocky's little eyes swarmed over him. "Fine! You went over big! You wowed 'em!"

It was very quiet when McTigue came into the dressing room.

"Peck," McTigue said. He took Peck's hand in both of his and shook it, held on to it. His blue eyes were glassy. "I knew I ought to tell yuh. I wanted tuh. Crowley, the fellow you beat out there—"

"Yeah," Peck said. "I heard."

"Yuh see," McTigue's open hands pleaded for sympathetic understanding, "he wanted one more crack at it. Yuh get it? Yuh understand? I got him a good, steady garage job. It'd be better for him, his wife and his kids, I told him. But he said he wanted just one more crack at it. It—it ain't good when you hang on too long—and yuh ain't got the stuff. It's different when

yuh have. A hell of a lot different. You'll—you'll get along, Peck."

McTigue turned away. Peck stared after his shoulders, at the sway of them as he put one foot, almost accurately, in front of the other. Like a man walking a line. Cocky was watching it too.

"The stumblebum," Cocky said. "He knows. He's talking out of experience. He's been through it."

"Yeah," said Peck. "I figured that too. You know, for a while, I thought the Kid was the McTigue that used to be champ. But I began wonderin' about it the first time he told me fighting was a tough racket. I figgered a champ—"

"Who, *the Kid* a champ?" Cocky laughed a laugh designed to show incredulity. "The champ was a middle. McTigue here never tipped more'n thirty-eight. Just like his kid. Why, they even fight the same. He's carrying a lot of pork chops in his pants now. That pug caught more'n he threw. Hell, he can't walk straight."

When Peck put on his coat, he went with Cocky and stood in the back of the auditorium. He thought of the Kid. Ordinary. No longer luminous with enchantment. His prowess imagined, unreal. It was dark. There were other standees. Moore and Wolgast were down in the brilliant white ring, their heads locked together, the referee working to pull them apart. Crowley had fought his last fight. His future stretched void of horizons, a vast unbearable emptiness—without rings or the glorious tumult of rings. But he, he was on his way up. In another two weeks, a month maybe, he'd be fighting a final spot.

"Where'd yuh get that left hand, Taylor?" a voice asked.

Peck roused, rubbed his ear. People around about in the darkness were whispering and looking his way and craning and pointing him out.

FENCE-BUSTING FOOL ON A RAMPAGE!—THRILLING NOVELET!

BASEBALL PLUS

by NORMAN L. PAUL

*He wanted to ride one, he wanted to really blast one over the centerfield fence—
but a guy had to be a ball-player to do that!*



Remilli hit the dirt, spikes flashing!

THE tall red-haired rookie's eyes were popping with amazement. He had heard about it. He had read about it. But he had never believed it true. There were only thirty thousand of them. How could thirty thousand fans make so much noise? It was impossible. Thirty thousand air-raid sirens even couldn't make so much

noise.

Rod Blake turned to "Tiny" Higgins, the veteran relief hurler, who was sitting next to him in the dugout. He had to yell to make himself heard.

"How do they do it?" he asked.

"Brooklyn fans!" Tiny shouted. "They're born with calliopes instead of lungs, fog-horns instead of tonsils! You

ain't heard nothin' yet. Wait till they get started."

As if in answer, the world suddenly rocked. Noise split the stadium. The din was inhuman.

"What's that?" Rod's even white teeth flashed in a grin. "Roosevelt show up in a box seat?"

Tiny peered out from the dugout. "It's Cookie. He got a furlough from the army to attend the opener. The mob just spotted him sittin' back of third base."

From one of the box seats behind third base, Cookie Laval, looking fit and particularly handsome in his army uniform, stood up and acknowledged the cheers with a snappy salute.

The noise actually doubled. Even the tin roof over the dugout began to rattle in sympathetic vibration.

"Yep," Tiny chuckled, "they sorta like Cookie around here. He ran second in the popularity contest they held last year. Me, I got one vote. My wife voted for me. It was the day after payday."

Tiny put a friendly hand on Rod's knee. His tone became more serious. "I guess you know who took first place in that popularity contest, kid."

Rod nodded. "Sure. Cracker Wilson. So what?"

"You see how it is." Tiny looked troubled. "They kinda like Cracker an' now that you got his job, they're liable to— Well, you know what I mean, kid."

"You mean they're liable to give me the works." Rod laughed unbelievably. "But it doesn't make sense. I didn't steal Cracker Wilson's job. I won it from him. I outhit him, outfielded him in spring training."

"Sure, sure. I know. But that mob out there—" Tiny jerked his thumb toward the bleachers—"that's Cracker's own rooting section. They love the guy. They ain't gonna like seein' any-

body else patrollin' his beat."

Rod spoke with the easy confidence of youth. "I'll make them like it. And if they boo me at first, well, I've heard boos before."

"Yeh, but not the Brooklyn kind!" Tiny wanted to say, but then he realized it would be useless telling the kid about it. You couldn't possibly describe the way those bleacher bugs could ride a ball player they didn't like. You had to experience it. And if you lived through it, you were all right.

Tiny shook his head and lapsed into silence.

Rod was silent too. His eyes were open; he was watching the attendants finishing the process of smoothing the dirt over the base-paths—and yet he was dreaming at the same time.

His first big league game! The thing he and Pop had hoped for and planned for. Poor Pop with both legs crippled early in his youth; a promising baseball career snuffed out . . . Pop, hiding his bitterness and his hurt from his son, living for one thing and one thing only—to watch all the shattered dreams that he had had for himself come true for his boy.

"And they will," Rod said softly. "I'll make them come true, Pop!"

The voice over the loudspeaker was announcing the line-up. Rod thought of Pop back in Gainesville, listening to that voice on the radio. Pop would get a thrill when he heard his name.

"At first base, numbah five—Ralph Remilli. . . ."

Wild cheers. They liked Remilli in Brooklyn and they let him know it.

"In right field, numbah twenty-two—Rod Blake. . . ."

Just a little polite applause from the grandstand. Well, after a while, after they got to know him better . . . *But that!*—

At first his mind wouldn't believe what his ears heard. Why, it couldn't

be! But—it was. . . .

The booing was lusty. Wholehearted. It had a ripe Brooklyn accent and that meant it could be heard as far as the Bronx. It started in the bleachers and soon it swept through the entire crowd. With it was the constant undertone of, "*We want Cracker!* . . . *We want Cracker!* . . ."

Pop would be hearing this!

Rod felt his heart contract to a small ball of hate. Why were they doing this to him and—Pop? It wasn't fair.

Tiny Higgins glanced at Rod's twisted face and swore under his breath. The kid was taking it hard. Tiny said,

"They ain't a bad bunch out there. They're just loyal, maybe a little too loyal."

Rod spoke from between clenched teeth. "I'll make 'em eat those boos! Every one of them!"

A hand clapped Rod on the back. A friendly voice, speaking in soft southern accents, said, "Ah'll bet you will, kid. An' ah'll be rootin' for you!"

Rod turned, looked up into the smiling, sun-tanned face of Cracker Wilson. Cracker Wilson said, "Ah jus' came ovah t' tell you not t' min' my gang too much. They jus' like t' yell."

At any other time, Rod would have accepted this friendly overture from the Dodger veteran. But the sound of those boos was too fresh in his ears. They hurt—and what was worse, he knew how they must be hurting Pop.

"Your gang!" Rod laughed harshly. "What do you do?—Feed them peanuts after every game to keep 'em cheerin' you!"

Rod didn't hear Cracker Wilson's reply. The dugout buzzer sounded just then and Wilson's words were lost in the general confusion as the Dodgers surged out on the field for the opening game of the season.

Exultation should have been leaping

in Rod's heart as he jogged across the turf to his position. Only last year he had been playing with a class B team and now he was regular right fielder for those fabulous National League champs, the Brooklyn Dodgers. It would have been perfect if—

Apprehensively he glanced up at the right field bleacher section. The madmen were up to something again. He could see a lot of guys moving around in the early April sunlight.

Suddenly a huge banner unfurled in front of the bleachers. It read, "*Lippy, ya bum, we want Cracker!*"

He had to take up his station directly beneath the banner. There was a blur, an angry red film in front of his eyes. Why wouldn't they give him a chance?

Vaguely, through the blur, he saw Hy Hyatt, the portly right-hander, throw his three warm-up pitches to the plate. Ed Scythe, lead-off man for the Phils, walked to the biscuit. Rod crouched slightly, tense and waiting. He was hoping Ed Scythe would hit one out his way. He'd pull the ball down in a dazzling one-handed catch and then gleefully thumb his nose at the bleachers.

But Scythe didn't hit one. Hyatt had his stuff. He made the Phillie batter eat ozone. Then he got the next two men on dinky infield rollers. Rod trotted in and took his seat on the bench next to Tiny. Tiny said,

"They been usin' that banner for two years now. It's getting a little moth-eaten."

Rod didn't answer. The anger inside of him made him afraid to trust his voice. He watched Peewee Wright, the Dodger's lead-off man, stride to the plate. The bleacher bugs were screaming now, "Powder one, Peeweeeee!" The whole park was alive with sound.

Becker, the Phillies' moundman, threw one down the alley and Peewee

cut at it. A lazy fly lifted to short right. The Philly Gardener took two quick steps and waited. Back of him, the bleacher fans were roaring as if by sheer volume of sound they could make him drop the ball. But the outfielder was a veteran and crowds didn't worry him. He pocketed the looper easily.

Blackie Bonn, whom the Dodgers had obtained from the Corsairs to fill Cookie Laval's place at third, was up next. He received an enthusiastic reception from the throng and Rod thought bitterly that they would have been greeting him the same way if it weren't for Cracker Wilson's phenomenal popularity.

When Bonn laced a sharp single over short, the cheering actually lasted three minutes. A fan directly behind the dug-out yelled:

"That's it, Blackie Boy! With you in there we'll trim those Yanks in the Series!"

One hit and they were already counting the pennant as won. These were real bugs. Rod would have laughed if it wasn't so damn serious.

Ed Judwick strode to the plate and another fan stood up and proudly announced that here was the best outfielder in the world. Judwick struck out and the fan sat down. A minute later he was up and calling Petey Wise the best outfielder in the world. Wise had just singled.

Rod moved to the on-deck spot. He followed Remilli.

Becker was a bit too careful with the dangerous Remilli. He lost him on a free ticket. The bases were F.O.B. now. Rod wiped his sweating hands in the dirt and faced Becker. He heard yelling, lots of it, but he didn't know whether it was cheers or jeers. It didn't matter. He had enough steam up inside of him to fire a battleship. He wanted to ride one, to send it sailing into the bleachers. He hoped it would hit one of those loud-mouthed fans

squarely in the mouth.

Becker fiddled around on the rubber. He was foxy. He knew this waiting wouldn't be doing the rookie any good. Finally he threw one.

It came over, soft and easy. Rod reared back. He swung like he had never swung before in his life. If he had landed, the ball would probably have gone into the Gowanus Canal.

He didn't land. He hit the air. He went whirling completely around and ended up on the seat of his pants.

"Ah, a whirling dervish!" The Phil's catcher chanted. "A holy man. He punches holes in the air!"

Rod got up. He knew what was happening to him but he was powerless to stop this blind, unreasoning anger that was blunting his reflexes. Now he had looked silly. Now the crowd was laughing at him. It made it only worse.

He forgot everything he had ever learned about batting form. He missed the next two pitches by ludicrous margins. The mob really laid a carpet of boos for him to walk on back to the bench.

Maybe if he had fought this thing, said, "Damn the crowd. I'm a ball player and that's all that matters!" Rod would have been all right. He had the natural ability. But he had never learned to take it. His baseball career had been too short, too dazzling. He had been a sensation in the minor leagues, the darling of the crowds. This was his first experience with an unfriendly mob. And that, coupled with the fact that this first day meant so much to both him and Pop, had him down. He felt he was licked.

And because he felt that way, he was.

In the second, the Phil's first batter unleashed a terrific wallop to right field. Rod took one quick glance, judged, with the instinct of a born ball-hawk, that the horsehide would just about reach the far corner of the fence, and raced

for that spot.

At the last instant he turned and the ball should have been within easy reach of his mitt.

And it wasn't. One of those freak April winds had caught the pellet in its grasp, slowed it. Too late, Rod saw that it was going to drop in front of him.

He still might have gotten it with a desperate dive. But a voice in him was crying, "What's the use? . . . Everything's against you! . . . You'll never get it!" He didn't dive. Instead he took the ball on the first bound and threw it in to Willie Berman at second.

The batter had a double and the crowd had another chance to boo.

The Phils scored a run that inning, but the Dodgers came back in their half for the five big tallies, batting completely around. Rod's part in that rally was a dismal foul to the catcher.

Hyatt warmed to his task in the third. He struck out the side. For the rest of the game he kept the Phils completely subdued. They were whiffing and popping up to the infield. Rod had only one other chance, an easy fly which he managed to catch after bobbling it an instant.

The crowd applauded him then. Mock applause. A raucous voice from the bleachers cried, "Yer see that! I toldja he's a great player. He catches every ball five times!"

"Maybe the guy's rehoisin' a jugglin' act!" suggested another.

The back of Rod's neck grew red as fire. Instinctively, he moved in, trying to get as far away from those jeering voices as possible. On the bench, Lippy Durand, the Dodgers' manager, wound up and let burst with one of his finer flights of profanity.

His rookie sensation had rabbit ears!

The Dodgers won the game, 9 to 2. Every player had at least one hit except Rod. His best effort had been a pop-up to short.

In the press-box, they said as they banged their portables shut, "Another bust . . . The kid's through . . . The mob's got his number."

And in the locker room, Rod slowly pulled off his cleats and thought the same thing.

Lippy Durand walked over to him. Lippy said, "Damn 'em! I got thirty thousand managers but they ain't gonna tell me how to run my team. You play tomorrow."

Rod nodded dumbly. He knew about Lippy. The manager might let him stay in a few more days just to show the crowd it couldn't boss him. But then he'd take him out of there and put Wilson in his place. Lippy liked to run things his own way but mostly he liked to win ball games. He wasn't going to jeopardize the pennant chances of his team.

Rod opened his locker door. On the top shelf there was a letter, not yet completely written. It was to Pop. Rod had started it this morning in the hotel lobby. He had taken it with him because he had wanted to finish it with one little sentence:

"I'm really a big-leaguer now, Pop."

Slowly he tore the letter to bits.

Rod went hitless again the next day. In the field his work was sloppy, and though he didn't commit any errors there were one or two sharp line drives that he might have gotten but somehow just didn't. But the Dodgers won anyway, 7 to 4, and Rod had another day's reprieve.

It was a different story the following afternoon. The Brooks were entertaining their deadly interborough rivals, the Goliaths. The Goliaths had a new manager and fire in their eyes. They were nobody's pushovers.

They proved it by falling on Herbie Digbe and tallying four times before the bewildered hurler could even work up a sweat. Lippy yanked Digbe and

stuck in Tiny Higgins. Bases were full and only one out but Tiny came through nobly. He wheeled his twister through and the batter, swinging, caught just a piece of it. The result was a dinky roller to the right of the mound. Tiny, the best fielding pitcher in the league, pounced on it like a big agile bear and rifled the leather homeward for the force. Mickey Bowen got it back to Remilli in time to retire two and the side.

But the Dodgers were four runs behind.

And old Square-Pants Ravell was working for the Goliaths.

Ravell had lost most of his speed and his wrinkle wasn't as sharp as it used to be, but he was still as cunning as a fox with a college degree. He one-two-three'd the Dodgers in the first. Tiny returned the compliment in the Goliaths' half of the second and the two old timers settled down to a brilliant hurling duel.

For six innings neither team got a hit. Manning broke the spell in the top half of the seventh. He slammed a hot single over short. Then Del Scott, the boy-wonder-grown-up-to-be-manager, really tagged one. The ball screamed out toward deep center. It looked like Petey Wise couldn't even touch it, but the kid was incredibly fast. He racked back, leaped.

The ball hit his glove at the exact instant the brilliant young outfielder's body hurtled into the concrete barrier.

Petey crumpled and the white pellet rolled lazily away from his inert form.

By the time Rod had retrieved it and fired it back into the infield, Manning had scored and Scott was on third.

But that was not what caused the groan of dismay to rise from thirty thousand throats. Petey Wise hadn't gotten up! He lay sprawled on the turf, unconscious.

Ebbets Field was a strange bowl of

stillness as Doc Painter bent over Wise to examine him. Behind him a white-faced Lippy Durand was muttering, "Why does it have to happen? Why does it always have to happen?"

The Doc held a bottle in front of Petey's nose. The kid's eyes slowly flicked open. Doc Painter looked up, said, "He'll be all right. Just a nasty crack."

They helped Petey off the field to thunderous applause from the stands. And a moment later the crowd was cheering again. Cracker Wilson was coming out to take Wise's place.

Burgess walked to the plate for the Goliaths and Tiny Higgins resumed his place on the mound. One of Higgins' twisters failed to break. Burgess swung sharply into it. Another long fly, higher this time, but just as far.

Rod saw that the ball was going to hit the fence again. He raced back but Cracker Wilson was much closer to the horsehide.

The ball was dropping now, arcing down. Wilson was only about twenty feet away from the concrete barrier. He might be able to get it but he'd have to take a nasty bump.

Still he kept going. He was only about ten feet away now. Rod wanted to yell but his voice had dried up in his throat. The crowd was screaming, warning Cracker and begging him to catch the ball at the same time.

At the last instant, when it looked like he might have trapped it with a desperate leap, Cracker suddenly stopped and played the ball off the wall. He handled it neatly and his fast throw held Burgess to second but the gasp of disappointment that went up from the crowd brought a grim smile to Rod's lips.

Cracker Wilson was yellow! The crowd's great big hero was yellow!

Tiny Higgins turned on the steam and whiffed the next batter to retire the

side. The Dodgers came in for the last half of the seventh, six runs behind.

But Ravell was tiring. He fed Bowen a soft one. Bowen banged into it and made second with one of his patented headlong slides. Lippy inserted a pinch hitter for Higgins. Working carefully, Ravell managed to get him to pop up. But Peewee Wright dumped a safe bunt along the third base line. Then Bonn's infield hopper got away from Burgess and it was a full-house.

Cracker Wilson came up.

Somehow Rod knew what was going to happen. It had to be just that way. The set-up was too perfect. A tiring pitcher; bases loaded.

Ravell's arm went up, down. Smoothly, Cracker's bat came around. Rod didn't have to look. The noise of the crowd told him. Four Dodgers circled the bases. It was a home run.

Rod had a full meal of his heart. The hero was a hero again.

The Goliaths were holding a conference around the mound. Then chunky Del Scott jogged back to his post without waving toward the bullpen. Ravell was going to stay in.

Ralph Remilli walked to the biscuit and teed off on one of Ravell's south-paw slants. The ball blistered through the right side of the infield for a single.

Nobody booed as Rod set himself in the batter's box. There were even encouraging cries of, "Moider one, kid!" The Dodger fans were scenting blood, Goliath blood. They had forgotten all else.

Ravell's first pitch was wide. Rod almost bit, then pulled back.

Lippy, coaching behind first base, began yelling, "Wild! Wilder than a hawk! Everyyybody walks!"

Ravell rubbed his tiring arm and grinned across at Lippy. Lippy couldn't help grinning back.

Rod watched the next one zip across his letters. He didn't offer. The take

sign was on. Umps sang out, "Stu-rike wun!"

Another ball, then another. Lippy signalled, "If it's good, cut."

Rod thought the next one was just a mite outside. He held his swing. The ump shouted, "Stu-rike tuh!"

Lippy ran down from the first base box. He put his chin on the ump's chest and began jawing. He said that if that was a strike then his grandmother was Tarzan's mate. He suggested politely that if the ump didn't know the name of a good eye doctor, he'd be glad to give him one because any guy who could call 'em that way must be going blind.

The ump said, "An' deaf too, Lippy. 'S'funny thing but I can't hear a word you're sayin'."

Lippy walked back to his coaching spot, still spouting words.

Rod stepped back into the batter's box. Remilli edged a little farther off first. Lippy had just flashed the run-and-hit sign.

Ravell threw. Again it looked wide. Rod started to hold back, thought suddenly, "What if the ump calls this one a strike too?" and swung. Much too late. The ball thudded into Manning's mitt and then Manning was rifling it down to second. Remilli hit the dirt, spikes flashing, but the Goliath keystone shifted nimbly and put the horsehide on him. The ump's thumb came jerking up for the third out.

It was the Dodgers' last gasp. Ravell took a new lease of life in the eighth and ninth. He set them down in order.

Lippy was a madman in the locker room. He tore off his uniform without bothering to open the buttons.

Lippy's vocabulary was remarkable. He cursed them for ten minutes without repeating himself.

Mechanically, Rod stripped his uniform from his lean young frame and

took a towel out of the locker. He walked toward the showers.

Someone was walking alongside him. A voice said, "Don' mind ol' Lippy."

Rod turned slowly and stared into Cracker Wilson's smiling face. For a long moment he was silent. Then suddenly all the heartache, the bitter disappointment of the past few days came crowding up on him and he shouted,

"Get away from me, you smiling hypocrite! Get away before I beat your brains out!"

The locker room became deathly silent. All eyes fastened on the two men.

Cracker answered quietly, "Ah don' think you know what you're sayin', kid. You're jus' excited."

"I know what I'm saying, all right!" Rod's voice was lower now, pitched to a deep intensity of hatred. "Lippy didn't use all the right names. He forgot one. *Yellow!*"

The smile left Cracker's face. His eyes narrowed. "Say that again."

"You heard me. *Yellow!* You could have caught that ball Burgess hit. But you were afraid of running into the wall. *You're yellow!*"

Ralph Remilli flung himself between the two men. His dark face was blazing with anger. "You can't call Cracker that, you punk! He's got—"

"Jus' a minute, Ralph. Ah'll handle this!" Cracker pinned Remilli's two hairy arms down, firmly pushed him aside. He faced Rod again.

"All right, kid. You want it. Come an' get it!"

Rod threw the first punch, a wild haymaker. Cracker went under it and his left came up. Knuckles slashed across Rod's cheek. He lashed out again and then a right exploded into his mouth. He rocked back.

Cracker came in, weaving with the smooth form of a professional fighter. Rod smashed a right at the outfielder's bobbing head. Cracker picked it off

with his left and then his own right was driving home.

Rod went over backwards and clanged into an iron locker frame. For a minute there was blackness and then the blackness thinned enough to show Cracker Wilson's face. Cracker said, "Had enough, kid? Ah'm not enjoyin' this."

Rod shook his head. The guy was yellow. One punch and he could prove he was yellow.

Suddenly he drove in, both fists blazing. He took a smashing blow to the head but that didn't stop him. His left probed and his right came across. He timed Cracker's weave perfectly. He landed. Flush.

Cracker sagged, crumpled to the floor. Rod stood over him, exulting. Cracker wouldn't get up. The guy was yellow.

Cracker leaned back on an elbow and looked up at Rod. He put one hand to his jaw. He grinned. It was the kind of grin that said, "Well, what d'you know! The guy can really fight!" He seemed genuinely pleased.

Cracker got up. He held his hands ready. There was a glint of battle in his eyes. Rod's mouth popped open. He couldn't understand it. If Wilson was really yellow—

But he didn't have any time to figure it out. Cracker returned to the wars with a vengeance. He began blasting.

They whaled away at close quarters and Rod knew he was getting the worst of it. Cracker's fists were playing chopsticks on his ribs. A right came up out of nowhere, exploding against the point of his chin and suddenly the ceiling was full of stars.

Rod discovered he was on the floor. Somehow, he got to his feet. He plunged forward desperately, trying to clinch.

Cracker kept him away and battered. Again Rod rushed. This time

he got his arms around Cracker. Cracker tried to wrestle him off.

Rod didn't know quite how it happened. But then he was falling and Cracker was falling with him. His head just missed the point of the low wooden bench. He saw Cracker's shoulder drive heavily into the bench.

There was a snapping sound and he heard Cracker's breath escape in a sharp hiss of pain. Then Cracker was writhing on the floor and his lower lip was clenched between his teeth to keep from crying aloud.

Rod lifted himself up and sat down weakly on the bench. Nobody noticed him. The players were gathered around Cracker. One of them yelled, "Get Doc Painter! Quick!"

The Doc came running from the adjoining room. He pushed through the crowd of players, knelt over Cracker. He said, "Give me some room to work."

Tiny Higgins detached himself from the group and sat down next to Rod.

"I tried to help you once, Blake. I thought you had some decent stuff in you. I was all wrong."

He paused, went on:

"You don't know about Cracker, do you? Well, that guy was banged up more times than you got fingers on your hand. He was a sensation when he broke in with the Yanks. Then he ran into a wall. His shoulder went. The docs said he was through. But he wouldn't quit. He came back with Detroit. He looked great for a while. Then again — b a n g — the shoulder. Through once more. Waived out of the league.

"Cracker kept smiling. He said he'd be back. They strung his shoulders together with wires. He learned to throw all over again. McVail took a chance on him, a washed up American League cast-off. And once Cracker broke into the line-up, they couldn't keep him out.

"That's the kind a guy Cracker is. Why, he woulda run right through that wall if Lippy hadn't told him to be careful of his shoulder! And a punk like you's got the nerve to call him yellow!"

With those words, Tiny rose and walked away. Rod just sat there. Numbly he watched three of the huskier players, under Doc Painter's careful directions, lift Cracker Wilson and carry him into the tiny cubicle that served as the emergency medical office. Still Rod sat, not moving. Queer, dis-jointed thoughts were whirling maelstrom-like in his brain: . . . *Pop . . . Cracker Wilson . . . The fans screaming, "Ya bum, ya! . . . Louder and louder, "Ya bum, ya! . . .*

He put both hands to his head. The noise wouldn't stop. Then he realized someone was yelling at him. He looked up. Lippy Durand was standing over him, saying:

"Wilson'll be out at least a month. Wise won't be ready for a week. I got no one to put in the outfield, but I don't care if I even have t' use the Boswell Sisters! You're through here, Blake! Take your things out of the locker and — get!"

The conductor said, "Gainesville in five minutes."

Rod said, "Thanks," and lifted his valises from the overhead rack and set them in front of him. He was going home. Licked. Beaten.

It wasn't like Brooklyn, Gainesville. It was a quiet town, a sleepy town. Ten o'clock and no one was on the streets. Rod was glad of that.

He walked past Greenstein's general store and turned into one of the maple-lined side-streets. He paused at the familiar white picket gate. There was a light in the house.

He knocked on the door. Pop's voice yelled, "Come in. It's open."

Pop was sitting in his favorite chair,

the evening papers spread out on his lap. His crutches leaned against the arm of the chair.

Rod said softly, "Pop, I'm back."

Pop just sat there and looked at him.

Rod said, "Aren't you glad to see me, Pop?"

Pop pointed a finger to the paper on his lap. "It says here you were sent to Montreal. This ain't Montreal. You don't belong here."

Words rushed out of Rod. He told Pop about what had happened to him: His tough breaks, the howling mob, Cracker Wilson, the fight.

"So you see," he finished, "I can't ever come back. It's no use. I'm through."

"Through at the ripe old age of twenty!" Pop laughed a bitter, hard laugh. "You're not through. You're quitting!"

"But, Pop, you don't understand—"

"I understand all right." Pop's steely grey eyes gazed unwaveringly at his son. "You got booed a little and you blew right up. Well, what'd you expect the fans to do, anyway? You were taking the place of someone they liked, someone who had come through for them. They were loyal and so they booed you. They didn't mean anything personal by it.

"Baseball would be a hell of a game if it weren't for fans like that. They're not ready to grease the skids for a veteran once he's on the downward path. They stick by him. And if you had any brains you'd know that the loyalty of such fans is worth fighting for—worth taking a lot of booings for!"

Rod's eyes were fixed on a worn spot in the carpet.

Rod said slowly, "What do you want me to do?"

Pop carefully laid aside the crutch and picked up the evening paper. He said, "There's a train that leaves for Chicago in half an hour. From there

you can hop a plane. You can be in Montreal tomorrow morning in time to report. And now I'm going to finish reading the sporting page."

He didn't look up as his son left the house. He kept staring at a page he couldn't see because of the tears that were blurring his eyes.

Andy Andrews, manager of the Montreal Royals, was of the hard-bitten school. He said, "We got a tough one comin' up. I c'n use an outfielder. Yuh ready ter play, Blake?"

Rod hadn't slept. He had been traveling all night. "I'm ready," he said.

He got three for four that day and made one circus catch that had the handful of fans in the stands rubbing their eyes in amazement. The next day it was four for four. He went on a hitting spree; they couldn't get him out. In the field, he covered his territory the way a snowstorm covers an Alaskan village.

It was the spark the Royals needed. They started clicking. In three weeks' time they were knocking on the door to first place. Late July found them 'way out in front and Rod leading the league in everything but stolen umbrellas.

Meanwhile the Dodgers were having tough sledding. With Cracker Wilson and Petey Wise out, they had gone into a nose-dive, dropping five straight. Petey came back and the team perked up a little but not enough. There was a hole in right field. Durand experimented with half-a-dozen players; none was satisfactory.

Cracker Wilson returned to the lineup in early August and the National League champions reasserted their class. They began a long, steady pull to the top. By September, they were just a half a game behind those miraculously rejuvenated league-leaders, the Goliaths.

Brooklyn-town became a huge in-

sane asylum on the day before Labor Day. The Goliaths were coming across the river tomorrow for a double-header. Two wins for either team would give them undisputed possession of first place and a clear road to the pennant.

And that afternoon, Petey Wise received notice to report to Governor's Island for induction into the United States Army!

Rod was sitting with Andy Andrews in the lobby of a Syracuse hotel when he saw that headline in the evening paper. Rod said to the manager:

"Well, that's the straw that broke the camel's back. They got no one to put in Wise's place."

Andy Andrews chewed his tobacco cud, spat expertly into the brass cuspidor. "I don' know," he said. "They might get someone."

"Who? Durand's tried half-a-dozen guys."

"They could bring up some kid from the minors." Andrews squinted at Rod. "Some kid like you."

Rod laughed. "Durand wouldn't take me if I came wrapped up in hundred dollar bills."

The manager reflectively placed another well aimed shot in the cuspidor. "Yeh, but Lip's a funny guy. He likes ter win pennants."

A bellhop walked through the lobby. "Paging Mr. Bacon . . . Telegram for Mr. Bacon. . . ."

Andrews rose abruptly. "That reminds me. I got a telegram ter send. My sister's weddin' anniversary. Always send her a telegram on her anniversary."

After Andrews had left, Rod sat back in his chair and let himself do a little day-dreaming. If he could get another chance. . . .

An hour later, Andrews was back. He waved a telegram in his hands. "I got an answer!"

"From who?" Rod was mildly amused. "Your sister?"

"Sister, hell! I ain't even got a sister. It's from Lippy! Lissen!"

Andrews read, "Okay, you persistent old cuss, you win. Send him along."

Rod sat up. "What does it mean?"

"What does it mean, ya dope!" The manager's voice was loud enough to rustle the imitation palms in the lobby. "It means yer goin' back to the big leagues!"

Rod said weakly, "T-this isn't a gag, is it, Andy?"

"It's straight stuff, kid. I been sendin' that obstinate ox telegrams every day for th' last two weeks. It took a little help from the army but Lip fin'ly got wise. Or maybe I oughter say he lost Wise an' got you!"

Rod's eyes were brimming with gratitude. "You did that for me, Andy. Why?"

"Look, kid. When you came ter me, you were tagged as a stinker. If you had dogged it even a little bit, I woulda been the first ter step on ya. But ya didn't. Ya played yer heart out for th' team. Well, this is the least I could do!

"Come on! Get t' yer room an' start packin'! An' if ya don't make good, s'help me, I'll come to Brooklyn an' person'ly bat yer brains out!"

Rod got up. He had two to make good for now. Pop and Andy Andrews.

Lippy said, "No use wasting any time, Blake. I could stick you on the bench for a while but that won't do any good. Either you come through or you don't. Your uniform's in your locker. Get into it. You're playing today!"

Rod gulped and managed to mumble, "Yes, sir." He walked to his locker like one in a daze. He had stripped off his clothes and donned his uniform before he came out of the ether enough to notice that no one had bothered to speak to him.

Well, he couldn't blame them very much. Not after the way he had acted.

One of the groups broke up and Cracker Wilson strolled in his direction. Rod's jaw set. Whatever names Cracker chose to call him, he'd just have to sit and take it.

Rod said quickly, "Look, Wilson. I-I'm sorry about that other time. I didn't know—"

And then he saw that Cracker was smiling that same friendly smile!

"Fo'get it," the veteran outfielder said. "Ah jus' came over t' say hello."

He had his hand extended.

Rod stared at the hand for one amazed instant. Then he grabbed it the way a drowning man grabs a life-preserver.

"Hey," laughed Wilson, "if yo' pump any hahder, you're li'ble t' get wahter!"

The first game of the double-header was scheduled for one o'clock. By twelve, every inch of seating space was jammed with a typical Dodger crowd.

When the Goliath line-up was announced, nobody cheered. It would probably have meant instant death. Each name on the Brooklyn roster evoked thunderous applause. The announcer went down the line: "Short-stop . . . Wright, third base . . . Bonn, right field . . . Wilson, left field . . . Judwick, first base . . . Remilli . . ."

There was a moment's dead silence before the next name was called. Who was going to take Petey Wise's place?

"In centerfield . . . Blake. . ."

Rod braced himself for the boos. And it didn't come. There was even a generous sprinkling of applause.

On the bench, Cracker Wilson grinned at him and said, "Ah tol' you they're great fans."

Rod almost tripped over his own feet when he ran out to take his place in center field. His legs were wobbly. He had never been so scared in his life.

He looked around him. Judwick was playing a tight left field. It meant that he would have a lot of ground to cover—too damn much, in fact. And he wasn't used to playing center.

Crack!

Herbie Digbe had wheeled the first pitch in and Wicker, the Goliath lead-off man, had connected. It was a line shot over short, dropping fast and curving to the right at the same time. Rod raced in at a tangent, dove wildly. The ball curved past his outflung glove. He went rolling over and over and wound up in a heap near the foul line.

Now he would get it. The boo barrage. It took all his will power to force himself to stand up.

But nobody was booing him. Instead there was loud cheering. Amazed, he looked toward the infield. A cloud of dust around second base was just beginning to settle and Wicker was walking disconsolately back to the dug-out. Rod understood what had happened then. Cracker Wilson had been there to back him up and had fired the ball to second in time to nip the speedy Goliath lead-off man.

The next two Goliaths went down on infield raps and the Dodgers trotted in for their first at bat.

Hal Shoomaker, of the fighting heart, was on the mound for the Goliaths. He had his sinker working. The Brooks couldn't get a whisper of a hit.

Herbie Digbe had one of his usual slightly insane innings in the top of the second. He walked the first two batters and struck out the next two. Then to make it interesting, he gave a third walk. He ran to three and one on the next batter, grinned and coolly proceeded to fire two successive strikes.

Judwick touched Hal Shoomaker for a single to start the second. Remelli went out sacrificing. Rod tightened his belt around a lump of lead that used to be his stomach and walked up there.

The crowd begged him for a hit. He wanted to give it to them.

He struck out. He was too tight, too anxious. When he walked away from the plate, he would have felt better if they had booed him. But they were silent. They hadn't condemned him—yet.

Willie Berman's best was a long fly that Wicker collared and the Dodgers' first scoring threat fizzled.

The third and the fourth were also scoreless, Rod didn't have a chance in the field. Herbie Digbe was either walking them or fanning them.

Del Scott led off for the Goliaths in the fifth. He slammed a hot one between short and third. Pee-wee Wright made a diving stop but no throw was possible. Scott was safe on first.

Burgess faked a bunt and instead slammed on the hit-and-run. The ball went through the hole on the right side and Scott wheeled around to third, Burgess halting at the initial sack.

Mickey Bowen pocketed Riley's high, twisting foul in his big mitt for the first out and the crowd began to breathe a little easier.

Shoomaker walked to the plate. The Goliath hurler was a dangerous man at the biscuit. He lashed into the first pitch.

It was a terrific wallop hit almost exactly between left and center fields. Both Judwick and Rod tore after it but Rod was faster. He went back—back, and turned, leaping. The ball spat against the webbing of his glove, hung there—and dropped out!

By the time Rod picked it up and got it back to the infield, both runners had crossed the plate and Shoomaker was on second.

Then it came. The bleacher mob outdid itself. Rod got the kind of booing usually reserved only for Mr. Willie Berry, a popular character from across the river. It was tremendous.

And standing there, listening to it, Rod knew suddenly that he was going to be all right.

He had learned a lot since that other time. Pop had taught him and Andy Andrews and Cracker Wilson, too. He knew about these fans. They were great, loyal; and if they booed you, you deserved it. And he knew also that there was no grudge, no personal hatred behind their booing.

That knowledge was like warm wine inside him. He could make them cheer him too. He still had his chance.

Rod ran back to his post. He felt as if someone had just lifted a hundred pound weight from his shoulders.

The next batter hit a towering fly to dead center. Rod stood under it, waiting. He wasn't fidgety or nervous. He put up his hands at exactly the right moment and trapped the ball.

Rod trotted in. Cracker Wilson cut over and ran alongside him. He was going to tell the kid not to worry too much about the one he had missed. Instead Cracker said,

"Hey, what yo'all grinnin' about?"

"I was just thinking," Rod said, "that a guy has to know more than baseball to become a ball player."

He went to the bat rack and selected his bat. He said pleasantly to Lippy, "I'm getting on. And I'm going around."

Lippy said bleakly, "You owe me two runs. If you get one back, you'll still owe me one. That was a nice catch you didn't make."

At the plate Rod got another round of boos. He stepped out of the box and politely tipped his hat. Then he stepped in again. He held his bat loosely. He was relaxed.

Hal Shoomaker fired one in. Rod looked it over and decided he didn't like it. Umps called it a ball. Shoomaker threw his sinker. Rod wouldn't risk. The ump said it was a strike.

And the next one was sweet. Rod's grip tightened. He cut sharply, viciously. The Goliath shortstop had only a chance to wave at the white blur as it streaked by him. Rod rounded first and kept going. In left field, Lieb picked up the pill and rifled it to second. It was a good throw—but it couldn't beat lightning. Rod was safe with plenty to spare.

Willie Berman really laid wood to one of Shoemaker's slants but the mob's scream of joy died in its throat as Wicker went all the way back to the exit gate to make a gorgeous one-handed stab of the drive. Rod took third after the catch.

Shoemaker worked cagily on Mickey Bowen. He got him to bite on an inside pitch and a lazy foul fly back of first resulted. Myers gobbled it up.

It was crazy. The third base coach didn't give him the sign. And Myers was set, instantly in position after the catch.

Rod broke for home.

Myers took his time. He wouldn't be hurried into a wild throw. He had the kid dead-to-rights. He cocked his arm back, fired.

The throw was accurate. Manning had the plate blocked. Rod should have been out.

But you can't tag a projectile. You can't block it either. Manning tried gamely enough. But Rod, gathering speed with every instant, slammed into the big backstop like a torpedo avenging Pearl Harbor.

Manning went one way and the ball the other. Rod wound up sprawled over the home biscuit. The ump yelled, "Safe!" and added under his breath, "If you're still alive!"

Lippy, himself, was there to help Rod to his feet. Rod said shakily, "I only owe you one now, Lippy."

"Plus fifty bucks," the manager shot back, "for disobeying the coach's or-

ders." He winked at Rod. "I'll take that fifty out of the Saturday Afternoon Checker Fund."

Rod winked back. There was no Saturday Afternoon Checker Fund.

Herbie Digbie ended the inning a minute later by doing what every good pitcher has the right to do at the plate. He struck out.

He made up for it by fanning both Wicker and Webb. Lieb belted an outside pitch along the right field foul line. Cracker Wilson came hustling over and stowed it away in his big basket for the third out.

The Dodgers couldn't get a man aboard in their half of the sixth. Shoemaker was really working.

The seventh was also scoreless. Rod slammed a long one in that frame but Wicker was waiting for it when it came down.

Lippy used a pinch hitter for Digbie in the eighth. It didn't do any good. Twin zeros were racked up on the scoreboard.

They went into the last inning and the fans were no longer shouting. They were sitting silently, praying. That one run Goliath lead was beginning to loom as high as Mount Everest.

Tiny Higgins came out to do the mound chores for the Dodgers in the ninth. He got the first two men. But Manning found one to his liking and sliced a ringing double off the left field wall.

Del Scott stepped purposefully to the plate. His face looked very grim. Rod found himself edging back deeper in center field. He had the hunch that the Goliath manager was going to tag one.

Tiny Higgins began to work the corners. He figured it was better to walk Scott than feed him anything good.

It was sound strategy—but the Goliath manager had other ideas. Tiny laid one close inside and Scott's foot

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went up and that big bat of his whistled around.

The ball was ticketed for extra bases. It was hit to Scottie's favorite spot—the concrete barrier between right and center fields.

Cracker Wilson turned and raced back across the turf. He hadn't much time. The drive was solidly hit; it wasn't slowing.

Rod was running, too. Cutting across at an angle. He had been playing deeper than Cracker; he didn't have to go back as far—but the distance to his left was greater.

Cracker was close to the fence. He was still driving at top speed. Suddenly Rod knew that Cracker wasn't going to play it safe this time. A pennant was probably hanging on the outcome of this game and Cracker wouldn't take the easy way out. He'd crash full-tilt into the wall in a hopeless attempt to catch that ball. He was that kind of a guy.

In the space of an instant, Rod knew what he had to do. He couldn't let Cracker smash his baseball career against that wall.

And then Rod was yelling, "*I got it!*"

He didn't have it. He didn't even think he could get his hands near the ball. But Cracker couldn't make the catch either and it was better this way. They couldn't blame Cracker now for slowing up; they'd say it was a dumb rookie outfielder's fault.

Cracker's action was reflex—like an engineer's when he sees a red light flashed on. He came to an abrupt stop. Rod went driving past him. He saw the ball for a moment, white against the green of the fence. He leaped . . .

Cracker was pounding his fists into his face. It hurt—but Rod didn't want to hit back. He said, "Go ahead. Bang hell out of me! I deserve it."

Then he opened his eyes. There was a blue bowl of sky overhead, and

Cracker's face, leaning over, turned upside down in the bowl.

Rod said, "W-What happened?"

"Look in yo' glove, pal," Cracker answered.

Rod's right hand was cupped tightly over his glove. He lifted it. The ball was nestled in the pocket.

Cracker said, "You caught it. Ah don' know how you caught it—but you caught it!"

Rod got up with Cracker's help. He was still a little shaky. There was a noise like thunder in his ears. He heard Cracker say:

"It's fo' you, pal. Jus' lissen."

The cheers were welling out of thirty thousand throats.

"Tip yo' hat," Cracker said, "or they'll shake down the stands."

Rod's hand came up and touched the peak of his cap. Then he ran toward the dugout—fast. He was afraid if he stayed out there a minute longer, he'd bust out crying.

Tiny Higgins was waiting for him near the third base line. Tiny said:

"I once called you some names. Call 'em right back at me now, kid. I know what you just did for the Cracker."

Rod answered by putting his arm around Tiny's shoulder. Cracker caught up with them and the three went into the dugout together.

Blackie Bonn was up first in the ninth. Blackie said, "We got ourselves a right fielder. Now we go out and get ourselves a pennant!"

He laid wood to Shoemaker's first pitch. It was a sharp single over third.

Cracker Wilson winked at Rod and stepped to the plate. Rod felt a warm surge of pride well up in his throat at that gesture. Cracker Wilson was his friend. It was worth a lot to know that.

Shoemaker put his trickiest wares on display for the Cracker. But the Dodger right fielder was as choosy as a woman matching ribbons over a counter. He



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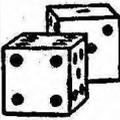
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waited until he got one he liked. Then—*wham!*

Rod was on his feet, yelling. In deep right field, Lieb was frantically chasing the bounding white pellet. Bonn and Wilson were racing around the base-paths.

Bonn beat Lieb's throw to the plate. Cracker pulled up at third while total strangers in the stands embraced each other gleefully.

The score was tied with none out. And a long fly would bring in the winning run.

The Goliath board of strategy gathered around Shoemaker. They confabbed earnestly for a minute then Shoemaker wiped the sweat from his brow and faced Judwick.

He had guts, this Shoemaker. His first pitch was a blazing, burning strike that Judwick hardly saw. A ball followed . . . then a strike . . . and then the ump was yelling, "*Stu-riike three. Yer out!*"

Remilli came up. Behind the plate, Manning stepped to his right and Shoemaker lobbed four wide ones to him. Remilli went to first.

It was Rod's turn. He walked up there and somehow he knew that Shoemaker was going to pitch to him. The Goliath outfielders moved in close until they were almost standing on the backs of the infielders. The third sacker edged forward ready to balk a possible squeeze play.

Rod looked to Lippy for his sign. It was the one he wanted. Hit away!

Shoemaker whipped his first pitch in. It was the sharpest breaking hook Rod had ever seen. It was a strike.

Again. Outside this time. Rod stepped out of the box and wiped his sweating hands in the dirt.

The next one looked good. Rod swung. The ball seemed actually to dip under his bat. Strike two.

The noise of the crowd had died now,

had become a low pleading murmur.

Rod felt tension starting to grip him again. He was in a bad spot.

And suddenly he grinned. Hell, what was there to be scared about? The crowd was with him. His teammates were with him.

Shoomaker hurled one close. Rod had to drop to get out of the way. But when he got up he was still grinning. From third base, Cracker yelled at him, "Ah want t' go home, pal!"

Rod yelled right back, "I'll take care of that little thing." He faced Shoomaker confidently. There wasn't a single nerve in his body that was out of tune.

Shoomaker reared back, fired. The ball came down, a white, darting blur. Rod's bat lashed around.

The crack of wood meeting horsehide and the explosive roar from the crowd was almost simultaneous. In center field, Wicker took three steps and threw up his hands despairingly. The ball smashed against the center field fence. Cracker Wilson ambled leisurely across the plate with the winning run.

It was in the dugout before the start of the second game. The Dodgers were celebrating a pennant that was already as good as won. Lippy Durand was saying, "From here in, we're a breeze. With that hole plugged in right field, we can't miss."

"A cinch," Tiny Higgins added. "We'll make those Goliaths look like Singer midgets."

"An' we'll lick the Yanks in the Series, too," Cracker Wilson put in. He turned to Rod, pointing to the bleachers. "What yo' say, kid? We goin' t' give ouah gang a world's championship this time."

Rod's eyes were shining. That was his gang out there too, now.

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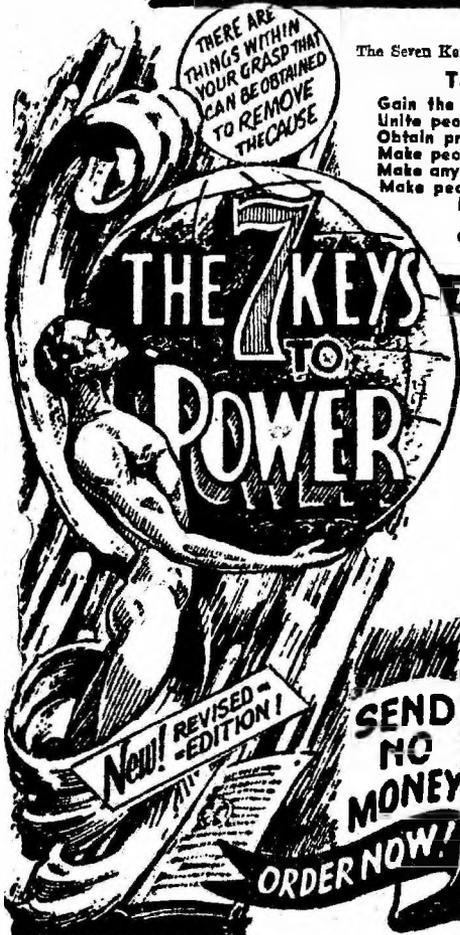
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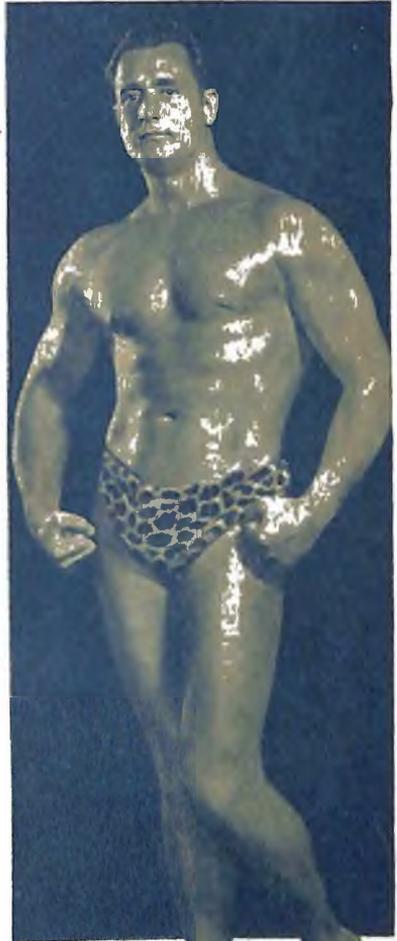
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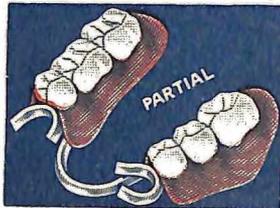
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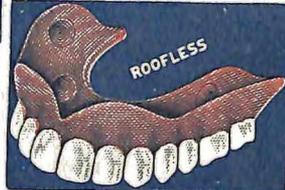
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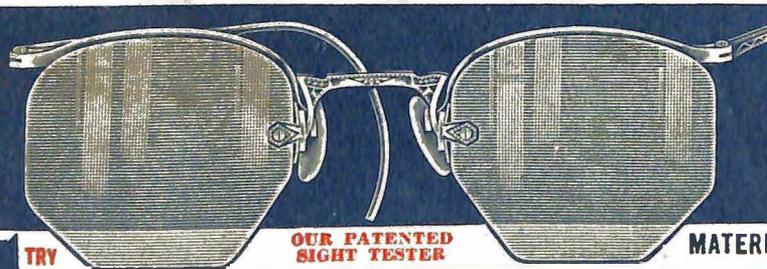
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