

THE BIG SPORTS MAGAZINE—32 MORE PAGES

MAR.



25¢

SPORTS NOVELS

MAGAZINE

**W. H.
TEMPLE**

**ROE
RICHMOND**
MANY
OTHERS!

LUCKY LEATHER

A GREAT NOVEL
OF FIGHTING MEN

by **WILLIAM
HEUMAN**

**POUR-'EM-IN
GUY**

by **DANIEL
WINTERS**



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FERNCLIFF.
OKAY, WILL
HANDLE!



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SUPPLY CONTAMINATED BY FLOODS, RIVERDALE'S
CITIZENS ARE UNDERGOING MASS INOCULATION,
BUT YOUNG DOCTOR EVERTS' SERUM SUPPLY IS
RUNNING LOW AND...



RIVERDALE AIRPORT TO PIPER
237: RUNWAYS FLOODED. LAND
ON HIGH GROUND BETWEEN
FLARES. OVER



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SERUM, DOC.
THIS YOUNG
LADY...

GOOD! WE CAN USE HER!
HELP THE SERGEANT
LINE 'EM UP, MISS!

B-B-BUT...



ONLY FIFTEEN
MORE, DOCTOR

THANK HEAVENS THAT
PILOT BROUGHT FIFTY
EXTRA AMPULES

Eight Hours Later



ME ON YOUR
NEWSCAST? GOSH,
I WAS JUST GOING
HOME AND CLEAN
UP

DO IT AT THE
STUDIO. NOW
TO FIND THAT
SERUM PILOT

WAIT
TILL THE
DOCTOR
FINDS OUT
IT'S ME!



HERE'S A
RAZOR,
DOCTOR

THANKS



REMARKABLE
BLADE! I'VE NEVER
HAD A MORE
REFRESHING
SHAVE!

IT'S A THIN
GILLETTE...
PLENTY KEEN
AND EASY
SHAVING



YOU FLEW
THE SERUM!
WHY...

BUT YOU
NEEDED
HELP...

QUIET! TEN
SECONDS TO GO

M-M-M-M
HANDSOME

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SPORTS 25c NOVELS



This seal protects you!

MAGAZINE

VOL. 17

CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1949

No. 3

THREE BIG NOVELS



BLUE LINE BELTER *John Prescott* 10

Over the years Rocky's skates had spent their blue-line lightning . . . but he had one thing set aside to blast another guy's puck to glory—a stick of dynamite!

BACKCOURT BADMAN *Roe Richmond* 46

A battered backboard bomber, he could go to glory as a big-time coach—or into a castoff's limbo with a five—to whom victory meant more than scoring the most baskets!

LUCKY LEATHER *William Heuman* 66

The kid was a book-fighter—until that bloody round when the champ taught him one last lesson—the best man never wins—unless he fights!



ALL-SPORTS HEADLINE FICTION

SUDDEN DEATH DUKES *John Wells* 24

The champ could feed it—the punch-hungry kid could eat leather all night. It promised to be ten rounds of murder—for a crown neither could wear!

LAST CHANCE CLEATS *John D. MacDonald* 34

Ten guys put their chips on a backfield clown who won with a grin, lost with a laugh—and fought for eleven men's dream!



RUNAWAY SPIKES *W. H. Temple* 59

"You've got a clock in your head, kid, and wings on your spikes—everything you need to win—except what it takes for that last second cut of hell—the second when a champ is born!"

THE PLUNDERER'S LAST RIDE *Bob Reed* 86

When too much horse meets too much jock down that last long thundering stretch, it's win—or oblivion—for two!



POUR-EM-IN GUY *Daniel Winters* 98

"You're wearin' your old man's spikes, kid—have you got his kind of steel in your heart?"

ROOKIE, COME BACK TO ME *Duane Yarnell* 106

Six blue-line badmen gave rookie Doug Britton one last grim chance to swap his glory for the one thing he'd never owned—high stick courage!



PLAY BAWL! *Jimmie Jamieson* 115

"Umpires are born blind—and there's a law against their being human. But I heard tell they hafta die, just like other people—and one of them's liable to after this game!"

SPECIAL FEATURES

THE HOME PLATE diamond chips *A Department* 6

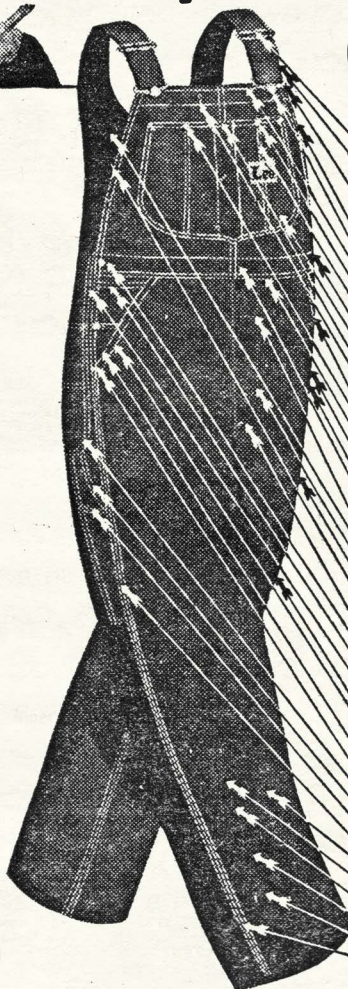
ABOVE THE CROWD oarsmen extraordinary *Nelson and Allen* 44

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc. 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 8, 1948, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1949, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under the International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries 23c additional. Send subscriptions to 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois, or to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.



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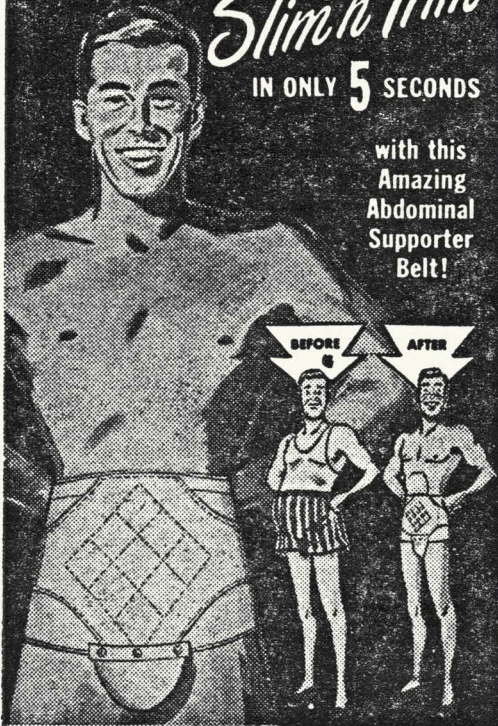
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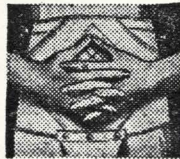
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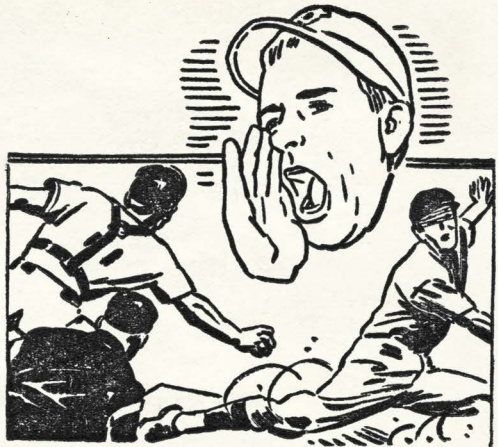
My waist is..... My height is.....

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Check here if you enclose \$2.98 with coupon and we'll pay postage. Same refund offer holds.



THE HOME PLATE

WHEN Rogers Hornsby was the greatest right-hand hitter in baseball, and played second base for the Giants, a young pitcher who'd reported to the Braves was almost immediately sent into action against the New Yorkers.

While the youngster was warming up, Jack Fournier, the first baseman, came over to him. "Don't worry, kid," he said. "These guys aren't much different from those you've been pitching against in the minors. I know the weakness of all the Giants. As each one comes up, I'll tell you what to pitch."

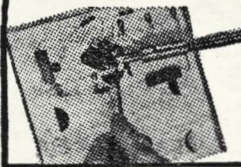
For the first batter, Fournier suggested a curve on the outside, and number one rolled out to the shortstop. The next batter was given a high, fast one, and he popped out. The third fanned.

Hornsby opened the next inning. The young pitcher looked inquiringly toward Fournier. Jack came over, said, "Give Rog a curve on the inside."

The youngster did as he was told. Hornsby pulled the pitch down the left-field foul line like a shot out of a Bren gun, nearly ripping a leg off the third baseman. The young pitcher looked reproachfully at his mentor, but still followed

(Continued on page 8)

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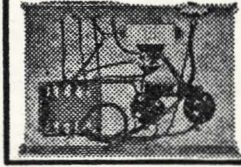
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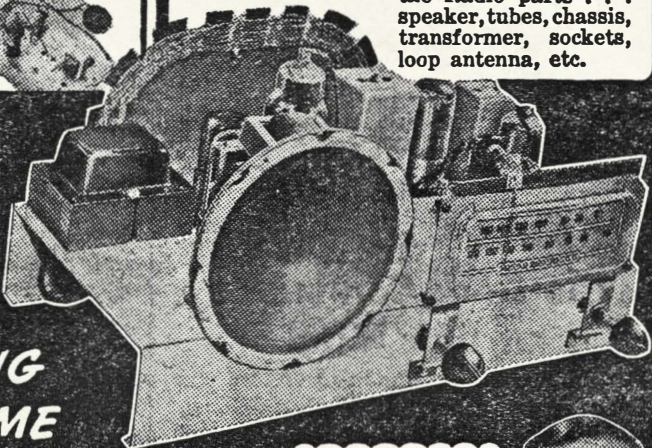


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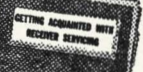
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City.....Zone.....State.....
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VETERANS

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APPROVED FOR TRAINING UNDER GI BILL

(Continued from page 6)

Fournier's advice and kept the other Giants under control.

When Hornsby came up again the kid asked Fournier what he should now dish up to the champion hitter.

"The same thing," said Fournier. "A curve on the inside."

"After the way he hit the last one?"

"Well, I'll be honest about it," Jack declared. "I'm a married man with two kids. Give the Rajah one outside, and he's likely to paste it at me. That third baseman of ours isn't married, and if he's killed there's no family to suffer. So, for my sake, keep pitching them on the inside to Hornsby!"

THE headaches of baseball managers are endless. Most managers never know how long they'll be around. The anguished wail of the fans may influence the front office into firing a man who has been doing an intelligent job in the face of odds.

Clark Griffith is old and white-haired, and has been president of the Washington club for many a season. But, if he lives to be a hundred, he'll never forget 1905, when he managed and pitched for the New York Highlanders.

The year before, the Highlanders had made a great bid for the pennant, being nosed out by a whisker at the end of the race. Griff figured he had a fine chance to win the championship. He had a fast, able infield, a hard-hitting outfield, a couple of smart catchers, and a pitching staff made up of Chesbro, Orth, Powell, Hogg, Puttman and himself. They were going places—only Griffith didn't realize in what direction.

A couple of weeks after the season started, the club looked like a dressing station at the front. A player couldn't run to first, or drink a glass of water, without being hurt. Charlie horses,

(Continued on page 129)

The Dark Continents of Your Mind

DO YOU struggle for balance? Are you forever trying to maintain *energy, enthusiasm, and the will to do*? Do your personality and power of accomplishment ebb and flow—like a stream controlled by some unseen valve? Deep within you are minute organisms. From their function spring your emotions. They govern your *creative ideas and moods*—yes, even your enjoyment of life. Once they were thought to be the mysterious seat of the soul—and to be left unexplored. Now cast aside superstition and learn to direct intelligently these *powers of self*.

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BLUE LINE BELTER

ROCKY raised his head from his hands and watched the Comet fresh forward wall take the rubber across the Leaf blue line. Expendng no more effort than was required to raise his eyes above the top of the boards, he watched Doc Franco take the puck on a pass from Sain and stab his stick at the cage. The Leaf's goalie made the save and smashed it out, but the effort cost him his balance and propelled him clumsily along his belly on the ice. It was a surprise, a mistake and a break.

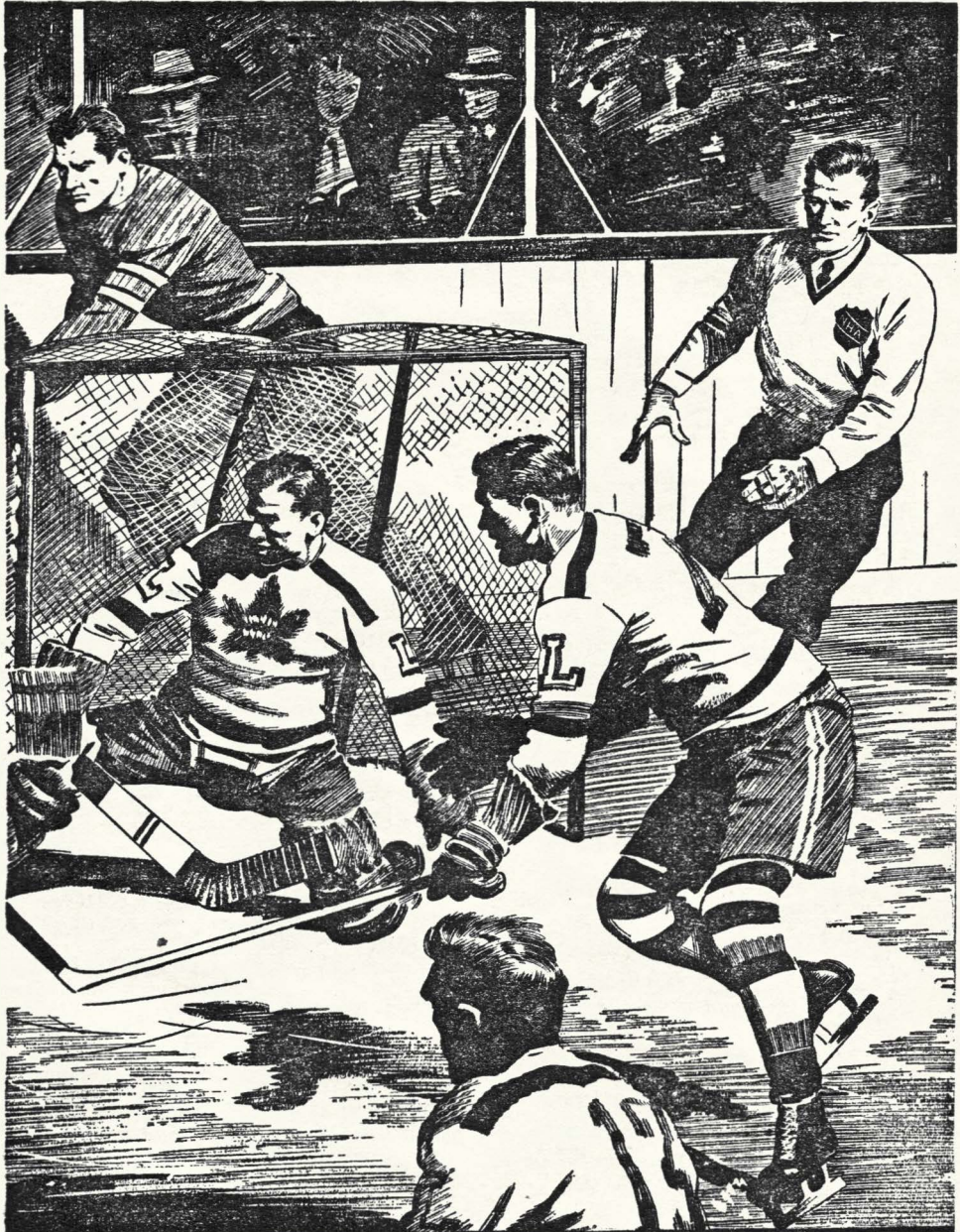
The swelling thunder of the crowd rose high to the curving roof of the stadium as Franco and Sain, and then Butcher, met in silent fury with the Leaf defense in front of the fallen goalie. Sain fought the rubber back to Franco, who made the shot and the red light glared. The board showed four

By
JOHN PRESCOTT



The cage was wide and high and the goalie

Over the years Rocky's skates had spent their blue-line lightning . . . but he had one thing set aside to blast another guy's puck to glory — a stick of dynamite!



was squat and poised as Rocky put his last ounce of effort into the shot. . . .

up. The time was deep in the third period. "Listen to 'em," young Johnny Dawson said to Rocky. "I guess we owed 'em that one. We got to get more, though. We got to get one more."

Johnny Dawson bounced impatiently on the bench and looked down toward fat Benny Garret. Rocky didn't move. Rocky thought they owed them that one too, but he didn't say anything to Johnny Dawson. He was too tired to talk, and with all that yelling and movement on the ice he was too slowed down to match the young forward's spontaneity. It was just nice to sit there and be passive about everything, until Garret sent them in again.

He just nodded at Johnny Dawson's face, still clean and fresh, after more than two periods, and put his head back in his hands. It was comfortable that way, and presently the sound died to quiet expectancy as the Comets and the Leafs met on the red line for the face-off.

Rocky Davis was tired—tired and beat, and he was old, and so it was easier and more restful to sit there that way until the call came. He relaxed and let his limbs become fluid and his mind blank. He needed that above all other things. And nobody would mind—least of all, Benny Garret. So it was all right what he did.

Rocky had been playing hockey for a long time. Many people regarded his retention on the revamped Comets as something of an incongruity. He was a good ten years beyond the rest of them. But then, a lot of people were not familiar with the odd terms of Rocky's contract. In truth, he was an heirloom, an inheritance.

Fifteen years before, Jock Harmon had thrashed the Canadian brush and had brought Rocky Davis down from Calgary. The Comets had their ups and downs, their hours of desolation and defeat, and their share of brief moments of shining immortality. Players came and went—new ones, old ones, good ones and bad ones. But Rocky Davis had stayed.

He'd stayed on through all the time that Jock Harmon had owned the club. When Jock Harmon's warmth was replaced by the more gate-conscious syndicate, Rocky's dismissal in the shake-up was forestalled only by virtue of the fact that Jock made the honoring of Rocky's contract one of the terms of sale. But with the season swinging toward the close, and with the Comets slugging through the play-offs with the Leafs, Rocky knew the end was not far off. He knew, too, that Benny Garret would not let him forget it. Benny Garret would not let him forget a lot of things.

But Rocky didn't mind, and he thought a good deal less of Garret than Garret so self-importantly imagined. Rocky knew he was through, and so anything that Garret had to say made a very small impression.

Somewhere there was noise again and he knew he was being yelled at.

"Okay! Okay! Let's go! Dawson, Ballot, Davis!" The loud voice slurred and Rocky came back to the stadium and was aware of Johnny Dawson moving off the bench. Garret was still yelling.

"Let's go, Davis! Let's sleep after the game. Move it, Punchy!"

Rocky raised his head and moved slowly, not looking at Garret, but at Johnny Dawson's thick, young back and at Sain and Butcher and Franco coming off the ice. They were tired, but they were young, and happy and they wore their fatigue lightly. Franco had his first long gash along the cheek and forehead and his grin was bloody and fierce with pride.

"Give it to 'em," Franco said as Rocky went past him, and Rocky smiled and slapped clumsily at Franco's shoulder. "We tied her up, but the big one's up to you," Franco breathed.

"Okay, kid," Rocky said, and it was somehow startling to consider that they were within one point of tying up the play-offs—if they could slap one in and keep the

Leaf from doing likewise. It was the kids, he knew, who had done it with their guts and never say die spirit. It had nothing to do with Benny Garret. If anything, it was in spite of him.

ON THE ice, play resumed and Rocky put his back into the face-off and forked the rubber to Arnie Ballot. Ballot took it on the boards, evaded a hard body check, passed the puck in a teasing sweep before the Leaf defense. They were up high on their own blue line, but scatted back when Rocky sticked the puck in mid-rink and fired across to Johnny Dawson. The yellow-haired kid took it behind the cage, and Rocky made the shot on Dawson's pass. The right defense swung low with a clubbed stick and the puck went wide. Rocky hit the ice and the referee stayed blind.

Through the turmoil of the up-rink sweep of the Leaf offensive, he heard Garret's jeer, but it was distant, and he was aware of it only remotely in the roaring that was around him in the stands.

The Leaf wave was at the red line and ramming toward the Comet blue line before he was up and on the move again. The puck was center ice, but a pass brought it to the boards on the right. Johnny Dawson went into the boards with the forward who had the puck.

For a second the puck was free, sliding wildly beyond the Comet blue line and then the Leaf center and left forward were on it and crashing into the Comet defensive wall. Sticks swung like claymores and once again the rubber flung wild. Johnny Dawson broke free from the boards and fled with bloody face across the ice. He stumbled, staggered, fell and slid along atop the rubber, but his glassy eyes found Rocky and his arm had the strength and accuracy to stick it to him.

In center ice, behind his own blue line, Rocky took the puck and slammed around the cage. Sticks and skates exploded out-

ward at him from the mess before the cage, but he swung wide to the right, took it up between Johnny Dawson and the boards.

Beyond his own blue line, he felt his legs go spongy. He noticed, for the first time, the red syrup running down his face. He looked through the crimson haze for a taker, gave it to Arnie Ballot on a long sweep. Ballot was moving like a sprinter along the boards on the left. He ran like a dash man across the red line and the Leaf blue line. He was bottled on the boards by the Leaf center and right forward. He could not pass, and so he slugged through and came around the nets.

Rocky was alone with the two Leaf defensemen when Ballot's wavering thrust pushed the rubber from behind the cage. He saw Ballot go down on a long slide along the boards, his face turned toward him blankly. The rubber came with agonizing slowness, and when Rocky got his blade on it the defense was ramming in.

One hit him low and drove the wind in sharp gusts from his lungs with a poke check beneath the ribs. The other's stick arced out and slashed at the rubber. Rocky sagged and dug in and drove with head down and shoulders forward. One gave way on his left and fell backward into the cage. The other came in with a flying block, but the puck was firm on Rocky's blade and he lifted with his shoulders and it sailed over the fallen Leaf. The goalie stabbed, but tripped on his own man and Rocky saw the bulb light up.

There was noise, then, in aching volume, and it hurt his head. He turned away from the Leaf cage and went with Ballot, who was white and not talking, down the boards to Johnny Dawson. Johnny Dawson's head was split and the blood ran in his yellow hair as he leaned on the boards. He grinned whitely at Rocky and Rocky took his arm and led him across the ice to the Comet bench. Benny Garret's face was black.

"Take him out," Rocky said. "Take him out and put Sain in."

"Get back to the red line and face-off, PUNCHY," Garret said. "I'm running this team. I'll call the players' numbers. Dawson stays."

Rocky shifted his stick and brought it up level with the top of the boards. Ballot opened the gate and eased Dawson through and set him on the bench. "Give me Sain," Rocky said again. "Give me Sain or I'll slit your damned fat head. I know you're not human, but think of the play-offs. If Johnny gets slugged again it's a concussion and there goes your title."

Garret sat fat and calculating before he jerked his thumb at Sain. Sain went through the gate and out with Ballot to the circle. Johnny Dawson's smile was vague as Doc Seabright dabbed at his head with cotton.

"You've had it, Davis," Benny Garret breathed. "You've really had it now. After that contract of yours expires tomorrow night I'm going to can you and then queer you with every club from here to Hudson Bay."

"I know you'll try," Rocky said, and he spat deliberately on the ice and went out to the red line.

After that it was bad. The Comets had the margin, but they were beat up and the incident had rattled the kids. Rocky got the face-off, but Ballot, still shaky from the plunge at the boards, muffed the take and the Leaf forward scooped the puck and the heat was on.

It was going to be defensive from then on, Rocky knew. It was going to be rough and tough and they would have to fight like hell to keep the Leafs up-rink while the time bled out. He looked around and what he saw he didn't like. The kids had taken a licking. The defensemen, Cain and Black, were close in and leaning on their sticks. Ball was on his knees in the cage, one arm supporting him against the steel. He was breathing heavily and his

hair was drifting down over his eyes.

On the line, Sain was still tired from his last shot in the forward wall, and Ballot looked worse than he had before. Rocky himself felt the seconds stretch to hours. It was bad and the whole damn business lay at Benny Garret's feet. He could forget Garret's attitude toward himself, but the guy was a sadist when it came to handling the rest of the boys. He didn't give a damn if they lived or died. Only their guts kept them on their feet and going.

The Leaf forward took the rubber back and the line hopped into stride and came across the red line. Ballot made a gallant, losing fight to get his stick back on it, but the Leaf center came across and slammed him into wood. At the same time he took the pass and rammed along the side lying unprotected by Ballot's crack-up. Rocky's stab missed, and the puck went center ice to the other Leaf wing.

Rocky came out of it and sprinted on his rockers to the blue line. Sain was on the boards and coming in toward center ice. The Leafs were idling, trying to draw the Comet defensemen out. Black wavered and made the plunge, and Rocky yelled, but Black was too far out and the rubber slipped behind him to the Leaf center. The Leaf forward stalled and checked Sain as he came in. They tangled wildly and Black went down beneath them.

On the other side, the Leaf center took the rubber around the nets. Cain fainted but drew back to cover Ball, and Rocky crossed in front of them to block the center coming out. He met him head-on and hard. The puck came on in a bullet pass, but Rocky stepped in front of it and came in plunging.

He doubled over when the rubber hit him in the belly. He went to his knees when the center cross-checked him to the head. It was all dim and black when he fell forward with the puck beneath him. And when the horn sounded it was a

faraway sound in fading consciousness.



Red Line Thunder

2

SOMETIMES Rocky thought he'd like to spend the rest of his life in a hot shower. Sometimes, too, after a really rough session, he was sure he would. It was like that now. He couldn't remember when he'd been so completely whipped.

Under the hot spines of steaming water he would stand and wonder why he was still at it. Sometimes it would not come right away, and then it would soak in, gradually, like the delicious water. The money. It was the money. Funny about the money. It had always come easily and it had always gone easily. A soft touch here, a hand-out there. They always said that Rocky Davis had it.

He stood loggily under the needles, watching his skin boil red around the thin, white lips of old scars, and thought about money and time and Benny Garret. He had known all season that he was through, that it was his last, that teams like the Comets were no longer for him. But he had always imagined, when he looked forward into that dim never-never land, that he would somehow wind up as a coach on a farm club and a nice berth in the minors. But that was all gone, too. When a team like the Comets put the Indian sign on a man, it stayed put. The man was just out and nobody would touch him with a ten foot pole.

It was hot in the shower, but Rocky suddenly shivered. He turned the spray off and went through the mist to his locker. While he slowly toweled himself, the kids gathered around him.

"You did it right tonight," Butcher said. "I think you pulled that one out for us."

"No," Rocky said. "I just fell down at the right times."

"You can't sell that around here," Sain put in. "I sure liked the way you faced up to Garret. We're really going to miss you around here next year."

"You'll do all right," Rocky told him. It felt good to hear that from Sain, and it was hard to be casual. He realized that he'd miss them, too. The kids, all brand new, all scrappers. He grinned and tossed the wet towel at Sain. "You'll probably move a hell of a lot faster when you don't have me dragging at your heels."

"I can see it now," Franco said. He'd come up from behind and he stood grinning over Butcher's shoulder. He had iodine and tape all over his face, and the tape pulled his mouth to one side. "Maybe we can take care of the opposition, but who's going to take care of Garret?"

"He'll take care of himself," Rocky said. "He can't keep riding you guys that way for long. The owners will pull him out."

"They like the gate count too well for that, and they know we'll fight till we drop," Franco said. "They know we like being Comets."

"Maybe, but they'll wise up. It may take a while, but when they see you losing your snap and bounce because you're staying in too long, because you aren't getting a rest, they'll change. They'll have to, if they want a team."

"Yeah," Ballot said. "Maybe so. I like being a Comet, but I don't know if I want to put my life on it. How in hell did you stand it as long as you did, Rocky?"

"Things were different in the old days," Rocky said. "Jock Harmon used to spend a lot of time with us. We didn't have any Benny Garret, either. Things aren't like that any more."

Rocky slipped into his shirt and pulled the tie knot up around his neck. He had his coat on when Doc Seabright came by.

"Garret wants to see you in the office, Rocky," he said.

"Okay. How's Johnny Dawson? Haven't seen him since the game."

"He'll be okay. I've had him in my place, and now Garret's got him. Garret's sore as hell."

Rocky swore, slammed the locker and went off down the long aisle to the office at the end. The door was glass and he could see Johnny Dawson sitting nervously on the edge of a wooden bench. He walked in and Garret shifted the scowl to him.

"What do you want?" Rocky asked. He was still sore at Garret and he didn't care whether the coach knew it or not. Dawson looked like Garret had been giving it to him. His face eased when Rocky came in.

"You two are wanted up in the front office," Garret said. "Suite ten-twenty in the Plaza. The boss'll be waiting for you. I'd get going if I were you."

"Something happen you couldn't handle?" Rocky asked. "You go running to the big boys?"

Garret made a move to shift his weight out of the chair and then he sat back and smiled. He drummed on the desk and looked from Dawson to Rocky. "I think I handled it all right," he said. "You'll find out when you get up there. You've stepped over the line for the last time, Davis."

"If I don't like what's up there I'm going to bust your head," Rocky said. "I'm through after tomorrow night, fat boy. I'm free to break you in half after that."

Garret licked his lips, but the smile stayed. Rocky motioned to Johnny Dawson and they went out of the office and up the ramp to the street. In the turbulent traffic and bright ribbons of hard light they found a cab and gave the Plaza address.

ROCKY sank deep in the cushions, but the ten minutes went fast and presently they were going in swift silence up to the Plaza's tenth floor. At the end of a wide, softly lit corridor Rocky knocked on a shining, solid door. It swung inward

quickly, and a tall man in evening clothes and rimless glasses led them to a wide mahogany table. His pale eyes frowned slightly at Dawson's bandaged head, but without amenities he sat in a deep chair and motioned them into stiff chairs in front of the table.

"My name's Alden—George Alden. I represent the Comets' stockholders." He looked at Rocky, and then more closely at Johnny Dawson, before he continued. "I have here a recommendation from Mister Garret that you both be suspended."

"For what?" Rocky asked blankly.

"For insubordination," Alden replied. "I take it you're Davis," he said to Rocky. "Mister Garret reports that you usurped his position as coach and that you, Dawson, refused to play when so ordered. That's insubordination."

Rocky leaned forward in the stiff chair and rattled his thick fingers on the polished wood. "That's murder," he said. "I make no excuses for myself, but if Johnny'd stayed in there he'd be dead now. Garret would have killed him. He was blanked out, didn't know what he was doing."

Alden shook his head briskly and fiddled with his glasses.

"Frankly, I question that, Davis. We consider Mister Garret to be a very competent man. In his capacity he's brought a raw team into the play-offs with the Leafs. He's won two out of four games, and we have every confidence in his ability to win the last one tomorrow night. And in the matter regarding you two, I can only say that we have faith in his judgment."

"You take Johnny Dawson out and you lose that game," Rocky said. "If he thinks he can win without him, he's nuts. He's nuts anyway."

"It isn't me," Johnny Dawson said quietly. "It's Rocky. He's been sparking the squad all season. There'll be no doubts about dropping that last one if you take him out."

"Mister Garret does not appear to think there's any danger of that," Alden said. "He assures me the team will do very well."

"He's got nothing to do with making that team what it is," Rocky said. "Those kids have won because they're scrappers, and because they're proud of being Comets. Garret's killing that spirit. He's been doing it all season, slowly. And when the guys hear that Dawson's out of it for tomorrow night, that'll wind things up just sweet."

"That's something I meant to mention, Davis. They're not to hear—at least, not from either of you. Mister Garret believes there is a time for that, and he will select it. It's a matter of morale."

Rocky snorted. "That's the first time I ever heard the word spoken in connection with him."

Alden leaned forward on the table and spoke quietly.

"You're not here to argue team policies, Davis. Under the terms of this strange contract you had with Jock Harmon, and which we are obliged to honor, you're to be retained until the end of the season. You'll be paid for tomorrow night's game, but you won't play. That is, you'll be paid if you follow my directions in this matter."

"I don't want your damned money," Rocky said, and he got to his feet and stood awkwardly in front of the table. "You don't have to buy me off. I'm not such a big-head that I consider my playing a deciding factor, but I'll shut up and let Garret spill it. The kids ought to have every break they can get, and if this is one of them that's okay with me. But he ain't thinking of morale, that's for sure."

Alden rose and waited with pained patience until Rocky had finished.

"I think we've covered everything, Davis," he said. "You're to remain silent, both of you. It seems we can't very well take measures against you, Davis, but if

word leaks out, Dawson may have trouble when his contract comes up for next year. Remember that."

Dawson remained silent and Rocky took his arm and pulled him toward the door. When he opened it he looked back at Alden.

"You ever see the Comets play? Ever see the boys coin your money?"

"Why, no," Alden replied, and he looked surprised. "Why should I? It's a business enterprise, and it's in good hands. We're satisfied."

"You ought to come down and see that last game," Rocky said. "You ought to come down and see your boys spill their blood. If I don't miss my guess there's going to be a lot of it."

"Thank you for your invitation," Alden said, but he was not looking at Rocky. He was looking at Johnny Dawson's head again. "Perhaps I shall."

In his time in the big town Rocky had acquired a host of friends, and one of these was unexpectedly waiting in the room he shared with Johnny Dawson in a small hotel a block or two away from the lights. For a moment he had a hard time remembering, because the last time he'd seen Tony Absalon that worthy had been but a pace or two from Skid Row. Tony's worsted and patent-leathered splendor was a far cry from the day he'd hit Rocky for a ten.

"Hiya, kid," Tony Absalon said, removing a pearl-gray Homburg and revolving it slowly for Rocky's benefit. "How you like it?"

Rocky sat on the bed and smiled. "You look good, Tony," he said. "You look some different than when I saw you last. You must be in the blue ones."

Tony Absalon was round and short and he stood in the center of the room and replaced the Homburg. He put his hands in his coat pockets and pushed his chest out. "I'm in 'em," he said. "I come to pay you back—with interest!"

Rocky thought for a moment and then smiled again. "The ten," he said. "I'd forgotten."

"Yeah, that's like ya, Rocky, but not me. That one put me back on the road again. I've been making it ever since." Tony grinned, but when he looked at Johnny Dawson, he stopped grinning. "Geez, you really got it, kid."

"Yeah, he got it all right," Rocky said. "Shake hands with Johnny Dawson. He got it good tonight."

"Glad to," Tony said slowly. He took Johnny's big hand. "I see you play tonight. You and Rocky did it fine. I made some money on the Comets, but it don't seem right when you guys get beat up that way."

"It's all right," Johnny Dawson said. "It's in the game."

"It's a living," Rocky agreed.

"It still ain't right that I make a killin' when you're gettin' killed," Tony Absalon said. He opened a fat wallet and passed a bill to Rocky. "Here's the ten. It was a long time comin'. Thanks."

Rocky unfolded the bill slowly. It was a century note.

"Nix, Tony, you got the wrong guy," he said. "I don't charge interest. Here—keep it."

"Nix, yourself," Tony said, and he lost his aplomb and twiddled the hat between his fingers. "I was out and flat when you set me up, kid. The ten was like a million. I know it ain't like that with you, but I know you're leaving the game after tomorrow night, and that you won't be doin' business at the same old stand." He flipped the hat carelessly and smiled weakly. "It's for old times, Rocky. I got a bushel of it."

"Thanks," Rocky said, "but it's still nix." He caught the flap of Tony's coat and stuffed the bill in the pocket. "I mean it. Forget the ten. It's worth it to see you in good shape again."

"You mean that, don't ya?"

"I mean it."

"Okay, but I got more, anytime. I got lots. Just say the word. And I got more comin'. I been doin' good with the ponies, and I hit Crafty Venirri for a grand on your game tonight."

"You ought to be careful of guys like Crafty," Rocky said slowly.

"Ah, he's nuts," Tony said. "He's givin' it away. He must of lost ten grand tonight. And after the Comets win tonight, what do you think he tells me? He tells me he'll give me odds on the last game—and the papers all sayin' it's a toss-up! Imagine it—he'll take the Leafs and give odds! He's nuts, Rocky. I can't lose. I put up five with him. Must'a been ten others did the same."

Rocky's mouth went suddenly dry and he stared at Tony Absalon. Tony put the hat back on and opened the door.

"I got to go now, kid. Take care of yourself, and good luck tomorrow night. I'll be there to watch Crafty squirm and cheer you in."

"You got this money all laid out on us?" Rocky asked.

"Sure. The works. You think it ain't enough?"

"It's enough," Rocky said. "You ought to get it back."

Tony Absalon laughed and swung the door wider. "Ain't you the modest guy. Is he like this all the time, Dawson?"

"Most of it," Johnny Dawson said, and Absalon laughed again and closed the door. Rocky got up from the bed and began to peel off his clothes.

"I got to think about this one," he said quietly. "This one looks goofy."

"On the face of it that Crafty does sound a little weird, doesn't he?"

"On the face of it, and if he didn't know that you and I were out of it, yeah. But I think Tony's wrong about Crafty. That guy is crazy like a fox. But we won't know for sure until the game is well along."

*High Stick Glory***3**

THE time was deep in the second period and Rocky and Johnny Dawson were sitting far back in the general admission section. Johnny fidgeted and beat one hand into the palm of the other. Rocky listened to the wide silence of the crowd, the slapping of the sticks and the punctuating harshness of the blades. He studied his watch and swore.

"We're two down," Johnny Dawson said. "They can't get going. Do you think they can swing it?"

Rocky looked down at the rink and didn't answer. Under the lights the ice was broad and white. He thought of Johnny Dawson's question and watched Butcher, Sain and Franco puddle around behind their own cage, tired, wobbly. The Leaf forward wall swept in and bottled them up against the lumber. The fight surged around the cage, drawing Cain and Black into it briefly, then fell back against the boards again. The puck was pinned and the whistle blew for a face-off.

Rocky looked at the Comet bench. There was no continued movement. He saw Ballot stand up and swing his arm at the face-off circle. He saw Benny Garret shake his head and wave Ballot to his seat. Rocky snapped his teeth and swore again.

"That line's been in nearly ten minutes," he said to Johnny. "They should have been pulled five minutes back, at least. He's killin' 'em."

"They can just about stand up," Johnny Dawson agreed. "I guess you figured it right. That Crafty is crazy like a fox."

Rocky began to say something and then changed his mind. The centers were in the face-off circle and when the rubber dropped, Franco slashed with his stick and got it over to Sain. In a quick burst, Sain rapped it off the boards and picked it up

again on the other side of the Leaf forward. Butcher went up on the left and took the long pass as he crossed the blue line. The Leaf defense checked him hard and he passed to Franco, who took it around the nets.

In the wild melee the Comet attack was killed. Reeling and unsteady, Franco was met as he came out and laid flat along the boards. The puck dribbled away from his stick and Sain and Butcher were checked out and tied up tight by the Leaf defense. The forwards took the quick pass and went unmolested into Comet territory. Cain and Black made desperate stabs, but the sweep went around behind them and presently the red light flashed.

Rocky got up from his seat suddenly, and Johnny Dawson followed him into the aisle.

"I'm going to find Tony," Rocky said. "We've got to put this fire out. Locate Alden. He'll probably have a box somewhere down along the wood. I'll join you as soon as I can. Don't let Barret see you."

Johnny Dawson nodded and he went down the aisle toward the boards. Rocky circled high around the rink looking for the pearl-gray Homburg. The first one he found was a dud. The second had Tony beneath it. Tony was biting his polished nails. When Rocky dropped down beside his aisle seat he turned white.

"Geez, Rocky, you should have told me this. I've had it."

"I couldn't tell you last night. I could only try and warn you." He told Tony Absalon what had happened with Alden and Garret. "Crafty had an angle," he finished.

"He got the tip-off, then," Tony said. "I should'a known. Geez, he'll make a mint."

"He got it from Garret. It fits now," Rocky said. "He's probably splitting with Garret on the take. Garret's making sure the guys don't have any chance whatso-

ever. He's keeping them in until they can just about stand up. This line's been in ten minutes."

"Ugh. Can you do anything?"

"I think so," Rocky said. "But we got to hurry. Come on."

Rocky got up, and without looking to see if Tony was there or not, he went down the sloping aisle toward the boxes. Near the boards, he saw Johnny Dawson's bandaged head bent over George Alden's shoulder. Alden was listening carefully, and when Rocky came into the box he didn't say anything until Johnny was finished.

"Did you tell him everything?" he asked then.

"I gave him the works," Johnny Dawson said.

Rocky sat in an empty chair and introduced Tony Absalon. Alden nodded with critical eyes and Tony took off the Hom-burg.

"You see how it is?" Rocky asked. "This Crafty Venirri got the advance tip from Barret that the team would be short and took all the bets he could get on tonight's game. By making you think it was a morale factor, he got you to swear us to silence and thus keep the dope from getting around. Now you're losing your game, and he's not only making a killing in money, but he's making sure it stays lost by grinding the kids into the ice. This wouldn't have happened if you'd paid more attention to your team and hadn't looked at it as just a self-running business. You put everything in Garret's hands, and now he's running away with it."

"Yes, Davis, I see," George Alden said. He took off his hat and mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief. "I haven't been very smart about this thing. A good executive is supposed to be able to select able men, but I see that I haven't done very well."

"There might still be a chance," Rocky said quickly. "If you'll take that suspen-

sion off Dawson and myself, you'll have a couple of fresh men out there, anyway. And if you'll let me run your squad for what's left of the game, I can see that some of the other guys get a rest."

"Yes," Alden agreed quickly. "Yes, do it. But what about Garret?"

"Tony'll round up a couple of house dicks and you can all sit around and keep an eye on him. You might tell him I'm running things. I think he'll get the idea when he sees Johnny and me on the ice."

"Yes, I daresay he will," George Alden said. He had a Comet pennant in his hand and he looked at it, now. "It's all yours, Davis, and if you'll pardon a breach of speech—give 'em hell!"

THE period ended as Rocky and Johnny Dawson left the box. They waited in the tunnel near the locker room until the teams had rested and had gone out on the ice again. By the time they were dressed and going on up the ramp the third stanza was five minutes old.

The cheers came in scattered flurries as those who saw them coming from the dimness of the corridor began to yell. And then the cheers swelled and cascaded from the high seats far back beneath the vaulted roof. On the rink the playing paused as the whistle blew and Rocky saw the battered Comet faces light up. Franco's, streaming with blood again, and Sain's, swollen and bruised from a high stick. In the cage, Ball raised his shovel wearily. And on the bench, Benny Garret's face was going white. Tony Absalon was leaning over his shoulder.

Rocky and Johnny Dawson went through the gate to the red line. Rocky's finger waved Arnie Ballot from the bench and the tall young wing came through the gate and joined them with the referee. Cain and Black came up across the blue line.

"I been hoping for this," Franco said. "Big Belly didn't tell us how he'd fixed

you guys up until ten minutes before game time. What a hit that made."

"Big Belly doesn't have much to say just now," Rocky said. "Alden, the boss, okayed our playing, said I was to run things the rest of the game."

"And how we need it," Sain said. "That guy is trying to murder us. Won't take us out. Says it's the only chance we got."

"It ain't quite that way," Rocky said. "Garret's been playing you to lose, and betting that way, too."

"We're going to play hockey now," the referee broke in. "We'll have a long talk about this whole thing later. Franco, Sain and Butcher out."

It was the first time the Leafs had had really fresh opposition since the first five minutes of the game. And they showed it. The Comet line moved with vengeance. Rocky's flip to Dawson carried the rubber to the Leaf blue line. He fainted past a drawn-out defenseman, then rammed it to center ice. Rocky picked it up and stalled. He gave it to Dawson again and the boy with the bandages ran it around the cage.

The Leafs moved in to trap him there, but his pass was good and Rocky held it with the defense moving in to mow him down. He heeled the puck to shoot between them, then slipped it quickly to

Arnie Ballot on the left. The defense hit Rocky and bore him down, but he heard Ballot's open shot whisper into the nets.

At the red line, Johnny Dawson's grin was wide. Arnie Ballot beat the ice with his stick. A deep murmur filled the stands on every side. Beyond the boards, Rocky saw Benny Garret slouch deeper on the bench. When the rubber fell Rocky speared it again.

He fainted to Dawson and gave it to Ballot and took it back on a snap shot to center ice. He rammed it across the blue line, then hooked it to Dawson, who scatted across the Leaf defense and flipped the puck to Ballot. Ballot took it around.

It was not easy that time. The surprise was wearing off and the Leafs had tightened up. Ballot's shot to Rocky deflected on a surprise stab by the goalie and caromed wide behind Johnny Dawson. Dawson swerved crazily and ran head-on into the Leaf center. The puck went wild again and Rocky scrapped with the two forwards and finally wrenched a wobbler to Arnie.

The tall wing charged the nets, went down on the defenseman's thrust, and all three piled up in the cage. It was doubtful, but the ref ruled it good. The crowd yelled and stamped and booed.

After that it got rough—rough and

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dirty. Rocky almost wished he'd never learned to skate.

The fight milled up and down the ice, scarred the blue lines and chipped shell-ice from around the nets. The brief flurries behind the cages became wilder and rougher. Rocky went to the box for two minutes, and when he came out a Leaf went in for three. A while later Rocky was back for one. When he came out, Johnny Dawson's head had opened up and Ballot was leaning on the boards, doubled over. Rocky sent for Butcher and pushed Ballot through the gate. When he looked at Garret, the coach's face was yellow.

IT MADE him feel good enough to spark another drive for the nets. Butcher took it around the cage and fired it out to Rocky. Rocky spread his spongy legs and powered the rubber in. After the face-off a Leaf defenseman took a raised puck across the bridge of his nose. They called time to take him out and Rocky lay flat on the ice. Johnny Dawson's face was bloody as he came down on his knees beside him. Rocky grinned and punched him on the leg.

"You're gettin' out of here, Dawson," he said. "You're dripping blood all over the rink. Makin' a hell of a mess."

"You can't even see me," Johnny Dawson said. "You're blind. I go when you go. About a minute left."

"And we're tied up. A minute and we're tied up," Rocky said in a singsong voice. "We got to get one more. Did you see our boy Benny after that last one?"

"Yeah," Johnny Dawson said. "He was yellow before it, now he's green. They got him ringed with house dicks. Alden looks like he's ready to stab him."

The Leafs took it deep around their own blue line and came up-ice a thousand miles an hour. They came up the right flank. They hit Butcher and rammed him into lumber. They hit Johnny Dawson and sent him spinning on his face. The

blood was a thin streak on the ice. They hit Rocky and carried him into the defense. Rocky went to his knees and clubbed his stick. The Leaf center hit the ice and Black took the rubber. He scatted back behind the cage and holed up till Rocky was on his feet. Rocky took the pass and went up-ice to the left.

It was a very long time before he reached the blue line. And it was even longer before he found Butcher over on his right. Butcher seemed to be skating very lazily, and when he made the pass the rubber went slowly across the ice. The intercepting Leaf forward missed his stab and kept on coming. He hit Rocky like a runaway truck. Rocky skidded on his back.

When Rocky pulled himself up on the boards, Johnny Dawson had the rubber. He was deep in behind the nets. He was trapped and Butcher was flailing to slug his way through. As Rocky moved in, Butcher went down. Butcher fought to his knees and went down again. Johnny Dawson found Rocky and tried a pass. It went wide along the boards.

When he came back across the blue line, there were three men waiting and none of them were Comets. The defensemen were deep set around the cage, the two forwards were still tangled with Butcher and Johnny Dawson and the center was coming at him like a locomotive.

Rocky Davis saw him only as a shadow. He could only see the cage and the dim images moving around it and in back of it. His eyes were very bad and when the center hit him he rolled loosely and un-surely and swung to the side. The puck slipped to his left, in the direction of his travel, and he picked it up again when the center's momentum carried him past.

The defensemen were there suddenly, and there was no way now to get around them or to pass so he put this head down tiredly and drove.

His wide shoulders lunged, caught and

lunged again. Sticks and blades cut at his hands, his arms and legs. He felt himself going, sliding, slipping. The cage was wide and high and the goalie was squat and poised as Rocky put his last ounce of effort into the shot.

After that he was down and sliding on the cold ice. There was wild movement above him and he waited with his face against the ice—which he suddenly could not feel. He waited until the noise filled the stadium and until he heard the buzzer sounding through it. Then he smiled with his eyes closed and slapped his thick glove softly on the ice.

ROCKY DAVIS, Johnny Dawson and Butcher leaned on each other in their smeared and bloody uniforms, and went through the deep corridor to the locker rooms. The sound from the stands was rolling and reverberating like thunder. But in the shower it was not noisy. It was hot and the hissing was quiet as Rocky sat on the marble floor with his back against the side of the stall. He soaked long and languidly and came out presently and began to dress.

Doc Seabright came by and looked at him closely and clinically.

"You took a few tonight, Rocky. You're about ready now, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Rocky said slowly. "I guess I'm ready now—that one wound me up." He bundled the towel and dropped it. "How's Johnny and Franco?"

"They're okay. It's a good thing the season's over, though."

"Yeah, it is. They got guts, those kids. Never say die."

"It ain't just the kids, Rocky," Doc Seabright said, and he put his hand on Rocky's shoulder and walked quietly away. Rocky finished dressing, closed the locker for the last time and walked quickly, frowning, with his head down, out into the corridor. George Alden was standing in the half-darkness.

"I've been waiting for you," he said. "Garret went away with the police. He seemed almost anxious to. Your friend, Mister Absalon, said that he was probably scared stiff that this Crafty person might think he had been crossed up."

Rocky chuckled softly. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I never thought of that. It could have looked that way when Dawson and I came on." He chuckled again. "Garret was a rat but I don't know if I'd wish Crafty Venirri on him or not. He's going to lose a lot of weight, running."

Alden cleared his throat. The conversation took a business turn. "That leaves us without a coach," he said presently.

"You won't have any trouble getting a good one," Rocky cut in. "The Comets are on top. They're the cream. Just make sure you know what you're getting this time. Those kids are worth the best."

"Yes, I want to make sure of that this time. I know what you meant now. They're more than a business. That's why I've been thinking it ought to be you."

"Who?" Rocky asked. They had been walking up the long ramp to the rink which was now white and empty beneath the high roof. They stopped and it was quiet; their voices carried hollowly.

"You, Davis, if you'll take it. It will have to be voted on, but since I'm secretary, I think they'll listen."

"It's the kids," Rocky muttered. "The kids did it. I just helped out a little here and there, and poked 'em in the breeches."

"Well, if that's what you did, then that's what we need from now on. What do you think? Will you take it?"

"Yeah," he breathed after a moment. "Yeah, I'd like that. We'll get along fine."

They walked quietly on up the long aisle to the street. Behind them the great floodlights above the ice died slowly, one by one. As they passed through the door into the restless street the stadium lay quiet in blackness, waiting there for next year . . . and Rocky Davis.

SUDDEN DEATH DUKES

The champ could feed it—the punch-hungry kid could eat leather all night. It promised to be ten rounds of murder—for a crown neither man could wear!

He was on his knees and elbow at the count of eight. . . .



TOMMY CRANE went to his corner at the end of the eighth, and Milty Berg had the stool in place, slipped the mouthpiece free. He gave Tommy a drink and said, "It looks good, Tommy. You take him this round?"

Tommy breathed deeply and nodded.

By
**JOHN
WELLS**



He said, "Maybe. The guy is tough. Very tough."

Milty washed the mouthpiece while Rocco Para sponged Tommy's face and dried it. Milty, small, thin and bald, said, "Certainly he's tough. He's been around for a long time, and Stone is the only guy who ever put him down. You don't take no chances, you hear me?"

Tommy nodded and stared across the ring at the other corner. Sancho Nevada was hurt, he knew. He'd felt it in the last round. He was easier to tag now, and you could drive the punches in and feel them really hit.

The buzzer sounded. Milty slipped the mouthpiece into place and said, "You be careful." The bell rang and Tommy went out.

The heavy-shouldered brown man came to him, shuffling in, the chin hidden behind the shoulder. Tommy stabbed him with the left hand and it hit high, glancing off Nevada's head. The man hooked to the body and Tommy took it on the arm. The left hand hooked again for the head, and Tommy beat him to the punch with a short right. It was a solid shot and Nevada was hurt. The big Garden crowd sensed blood and they started to roar.

Tommy hooked the left heavily, and he could feel Nevada shake. He threw the right hand down the line and the man walked into the punch.

Nevada was on the ropes. Tommy timed his shots, measured them carefully. He hit Nevada six fast punches to the head, and the man started to crumble. Tommy hooked another left to the head before he fell.

He walked to a corner and waited, listening to the count, barely audible over the noise of the crowd. Nevada was on one knee at six, on his feet at nine. Tommy walked to him, threw a right hand.

It never landed. Nevada's left hook exploded against Tommy's head, and all the lights in the Garden went out for one

terrific moment. He steadied himself, feet gripping the canvas, and another bomb landed before he could shake off the effects of the first. It was higher, less damaging.

He looked, and Nevada came out of the fog that had surrounded him for a moment. He hooked his own left to the head and felt it hit, followed it with the right.

Nevada, weakened, was going away. Tommy stalked him, carefully this time. He stabbed with the left. The range was perfect, and he threw the right hand down the line. He could feel the impact in his heels. Nevada's face went blank for a moment, and Tommy hooked the left. It hit with all the authority a left hand could possess. Nevada fell forward on his face.

Tommy followed the count from a neutral corner. Nevada stirred at three, started to climb. There was no chicken in the guy at all. He moved like a ghost, fumbling on his hands and knees, and nine found him somehow on his feet. Tommy walked to him, disliking the job. He got a look at Nevada's eyes. They were as lifeless as marbles. The guy was out on his feet.

Tommy shook his head, dropped his hands to his sides. The referee was facing Nevada, his back to Tommy. He grabbed the brown man, led him gently to his corner. The fight was over.

Milty was busy with towel and sponge, his face wreathed in a smile. He kept repeating one word. "Terrific!" he said. "Terrific!" He said it twenty times.

Rocco Para said, "Okay, okay. We heard ya. You know another word?"

Tommy Crane did. He'd been thinking of the word for a long time, for over a year. He said, "Stone. Now we get Stone."

The smile vanished from Milty's face. He said, "Now, kid! I told you—"

It was then that the little fat man jumped into the ring. He threw his arms

around Tommy and said, "Tommy boy, it was wonderful! Wonderful! Stone it'll be, now! And this time it'll be a different story."

Tommy grinned at him and said, "Pop, how did you get up here? You're not supposed to be in the ring."

"The father of the future middleweight champion, and I'm not allowed in the ring? Nonsense, my boy! Nonsense."

There was the formal announcement, then, and the time, and Tommy waved to the crowd and went over to Nevada's corner. The brown man was out of his fog, and he grinned at Tommy and said, "Very fine fight, boy. Very hard hit."

Tommy rubbed him gently on the head and said, "It was like punching a mail box. It was a nice fight."

He went back to the corner, and in a little while they were able to get to the dressing room. There was a crowd in there for a half-hour, and then most of it cleared away. Tommy lay on the rubbing table and Rocco worked on him, kneading out the soreness.

MILTY BERG'S happiness seemed to be diluted. His smile was a hesitant thing, and he said, "Now look, Tommy. It was a fine fight and you did mighty good and I'm proud of you. But forget about this Stone business, you hear? Maybe in a year or so. Not until then. Just forget about it and don't talk about it."

Tommy looked at the ceiling and said, "I want him, Milty. Get him for me."

"I'll get him when you're ready for him, not before. You know what happened last time."

Tommy said, "I wasn't right."

"You won't be right for him for a year, a year and a half. You know that, Tommy."

"I'm right for him now. I want him as soon as you can get him."

Milty said, "Listen to me, kid. I'm tellin' you—"

Tommy's father said, "Berg, the boy is right. As sure as my name is Paddy Crane, he'd take Mickey Stone tomorrow." The small fat man assumed a stance, threw a left hook at an imaginary opponent. He said, "The left hand. It'll be the left that'll get him."

Milty said, "Yeah, like it got him a year ago."

Tommy lay on the table and thought of that night a year ago, in Pittsburgh. He didn't remember all of it, just the first five rounds. But that was enough. Stone had taken his time. He'd cut him, set him up, and then he'd really teed off. Tommy had finally gone down in the eighth, but he had no recollection of that. He didn't need it. The first five were enough. He wanted Stone again, right now. He wanted to make up for those five rounds.

Milty said, "A year ago I'm flat on my back with the grippe, and I let you go to Pittsburgh with Rocco. The thing is a deal, over the weight, and you're supposed to go ten rounds and not get hurt."

Tommy sat up on the rubbing table. He looked at Milty. "A deal! You didn't say anything about that to me."

"So I got a secret," Milty said. "Is it dishonest? He figures to pick your brains apart if he wants to, and we need the dough. I figure you learn something and we make a few bucks. But I shoulda known better than to do business with that Bemis. I tell him, 'I don't want my boy to get hurt', and he says, 'Okay, the kid won't get hurt.' And look what happened."

Tommy said, "If I'd known—"

Milty shrugged. "If you'd known, it wouldn't have been any different. I figure I'm doin' you a big favor, gettin' you in there with the champ, makin' money, and you don't get hurt. I was wrong."

Paddy Crane said, "This time'll be different. This time Tommy'll beat the bedaylights out of him."

Milty turned to him. There was a

patient expression on his face. He said, "Look, pop. Do I bother you? Do I come into your butcher shop and say, 'Mr. Crane, you're cuttin' the salami the wrong way. The pork chops are too big, the lamb chops are too little. Take the sawdust off the floor and put down grass.' Do I bother you? You kill kindly stay in the butcher business and leave us alone. In a year we will fight Mickey Stone. Not now. It's like with a steak. Tommy's got to hang for a while before he's ready."

There was a knock on the door and Rocco opened it. The man who came in was of medium height, slim and well-dressed. His eyes were cold, his face wore a smile that was patently an artificial thing. He said, "Hello, Berg. Hello, Crane."

Milty grunted, but Tommy said, "Hello, Bemis."

Bemis said, "It was a pretty good fight. The crowd liked it."

Paddy Crane said, "Liked it? Now, that's a mild word to use! Why, man, they—"

Bemis looked at him and said, "Who the hell is this?"

"My father," Tommy said. "Be quiet a minute, pop." He turned to Bemis. "What's on your mind?"

Bemis shrugged his tailored shoulders. "Not much. I was just thinkin' how the crowd liked it. It gave me an idea. They'd go for you and Stone."

Milty said, "Nothing doing. Not a chance."

Tommy Crane said, "When?" He was thinking of the last time.

Bemis looked at him. "In a month. It'll be good weather. In the ball park. A nice gate."

"Absolutely no," Milty said. "Come back in a year. We got other plans, other ideas."

Tommy hadn't taken his eyes off Bemis. He said, "Okay. It's a deal. In a month, Bemis."

Milty waved his arms. "It's no deal! It's foolishness! Who's the manager around here, anyway? I tell you, Bemis, that we won't, not for a moment, consider—"

Tommy said, "Suppose we sign tomorrow. We'll be down getting a check and it'll be convenient." He ignored Milty.

Bemis said, "We'll be there, Crane." He walked to the door. He said, "Milty, the kid's got more brains than you. He knows something good when he sees it." He had turned the smile off by the time the door closed.

Milty ran around the room like a frightened bird. "For four years I bring him along nice and careful. I make one mistake, because we're broke and I'm sick. And now you talk yourself into something like this. Stone'll beat your brains out. You're a year away from him, Tommy. A full year. The guy is sudden death."

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"I'm a month away from him," Tommy said. "Just a month."

They signed for the fight the following day. Milty was a most unhappy man and gave no joy to the occasion. Mickey Stone grinned wolfishly, showing his uneven teeth. Bemis was contained. When the papers had been signed, the pictures taken, Bemis said, in a voice meant only for Milty and Tommy, "I'll see you in an hour at Lennon's."

Tommy went out into the street, Milty a sad and silent figure at his heels. Tommy said, "What does he want with us? Why Lennon's?"

Milty shook his head. "I dunno. Probably nothin' good. But at this point I'll listen to anything. We have been very stupid. Right now Stone will murder you, but in a year you would take him. Bemis knows all this. He wants to get rid of you before it becomes too much trouble. We'll hear what the guy has to say."

Lennon's was a steak house in midtown, and Bemis was there, in a corner booth, when they arrived. He was alone, and they went and sat with him.

Bemis eyed them. He said, "Look. I won't waste any of your time. Milty, you can add two and two. We can make a deal. This thing can be a nice little affair. A good fight, you understand, but a Barney. Stone wins in fifteen rounds and nobody gets their brains knocked out. It can look very good. Then what happens? In the fall we do it again, but on the level. You get two shots at the dough, one shot at the title. We can all clean up. They won't be able to print enough tickets for the slobs who'll want to see it. How does it sound?"

Tommy was on his feet, but Milty pulled him down again. The little man said, "How's it sound? Lousy. It sounds like it stinks. I did business with you once before, Bemis. Remember? Once is enough."

Bemis shrugged. "That was Stone's fault. The kid tried to belt him, and Mickey thought he'd have some fun. This one will be an on-the-level phoney."

Tommy got to his feet. He said, "Come on, Milty. We have things to do." He felt a little sick. He wanted to get out of the place.

Bemis said, "Don't be in too much of a hurry. I told you how I want this thing to work, and that's the way it's gonna work."

Milty shook his head. "You're wrong. It works on the level, Bemis. Once for the money."

Bemis' face was a harsh mask, now. He said, "You're walkin' into a lot of trouble, Berg, if you don't play this my way."

"Trouble, schmouble," Milty snapped. "Once burned is twice learned, or something like that. Go catch yourself another sucker, Bemis."

Tommy turned to Bemis. "And don't forget to tell that slob of yours that this is on the up and up. I don't want him to have any excuses."

"Okay," Bemis said. "Okay. A couple of smart guys."

And Tommy looked at him once and was a little frightened by what he saw in the man's eyes.

THE training camp was up in the country, and Tommy worked hard. He knew the size of the job ahead of him, and he was determined not to fail. It was never difficult for him to recall the last fight. He was anxious to get in there with Stone again.

Milty had brought up three good boys from the city, and the workouts were stiff. The little manager was on Tommy's neck all the time, coaching, shouting, criticizing. He said, "You talked yourself into this thing, now I gotta see you don't get killed."

Ten days before the fight, Tommy and Milty walked to the small neighboring

town to see a movie. It was dark when they started back.

Milty was in a more cheerful mood than he had been. He said, "I don't say you'll beat him, understand? But he ain't gonna cut you into stew meat, like last time. It won't be like that at all. Now, the way we work it'll be like this. For the first couple of rounds—"

The car came up in back of them and stopped beside them, the headlights whitening the road. A man said, "We're tryin' to find Tommy Crane's camp."

Milty said, "He works out in the daytime, not at night. Who are—"

The two men came piling out of the back of the car. One of them brushed Milty aside, and Tommy saw that their attention was focused on himself. By the car lights, he suddenly saw the blackjacks in their hands. He didn't wait to be told what was going on.

He hit the first man to reach him, but it was a glancing blow that did not stop the man. An arm was raised and the sap fell wickedly, and Tommy turned, took it upon his shoulder. He punched to the body and the man grunted, and then the second was on him.

He didn't stop to think. He just punched, tried to keep his head away from the flailing saps. He went to his knees once, avoided a swinging foot. He got up, threw a right hand that hit someone's head. He felt as if he had punched a steel door.

And then Milty was into it, screaming, shouting, kicking, punching. Tommy tried to shove the little man out of harm's way, but it was useless. Milty came in, valiant as a lion.

Tommy saw the blackjack hit him. It was deliberate and timed, and there were two blows. Milty fought without skill, armed with only his courage. His head was down, his arms swinging wildly. The first blow knocked him to his knees, the second stretched him out on the ground.

Both men now gave their attention to Tommy.

And it was at that moment the pair of headlights, coming from the opposite direction, fell on the small group. Someone from the stopped car yelled, "Come on, we can't stay here!"

The attack ceased as quickly as it had started. The two men piled into the car and it roared away.

Tommy knelt over Milty, turned him over on his back. The little man was barely conscious. He muttered, "Bemis, that louse. He's used to gettin' his way. Some day I'll—" His voice faded out.

Tommy got to his feet and flagged down the approaching car.

At the hospital, Tommy waited for almost two hours before he could speak to the doctor. The man's face was grave. "We won't know for a day or two exactly the seriousness of the injury. There seems to be a fracture, but just how severe it is we can't tell as yet. We'll keep you informed."

The camp was a sick place, and Tommy tried to keep things moving. He knew Milty had been right about the men who had tried to beat them up. Bemis had sent up a couple of his thugs to lump Tommy and Milty.

They'd done a job on Milty, all right, and whether they knew it or not, they'd done Tommy no good. His right hand was swollen, just back of the knuckles, from the punch he'd landed on someone's head. It felt like a break, but he wasn't sure. He decided to say nothing until he had to.

In three days he learned about Milty. The little man was in a bad way. The fracture was severe, and of such a nature that an eminent brain specialist was recommended. The doctor who told Tommy said, "Of course, you realize, Mr. Crane, that the expense will be considerable. We will—"

"Anything," Tommy said. "The sky is the limit."

And then he figured quickly how much they had left from the Nevada fight, and it wasn't very much. He'd been idle for three months after Stone had beaten him, and they'd borrowed money during that time and were still paying it off. But the coming fight would take care of any doctor bills, no matter how high they might run. Bemis had robbed them, but Tommy had been so anxious for the fight, money hadn't been a consideration. A flat fifteen thousand.

It would take care of things.

The day following the beating on the road, Rocco had looked at the hand and said, "That's lovely. That thing is busted, kid."

Tommy shook his head. "It's just swollen. Tape it up. It'll be all right." He refused to let himself believe the hand was broken. Not now. It meant too much. He'd wait a while, use it sparingly, see how it stood up.

Rocco bandaged it with reluctance "Maybe you know what you're doin'. I don't. You go foolin' around with a mitt like that and the first thing you know you'll be out of work for a year."

FOR the rest of the training period, Tommy didn't use it. He fainted with it, threw it to the head occasionally with great care, used it just enough so that no one would become unduly suspicious. The swelling gradually subsided, but it was stiff and sore, and he knew he didn't dare exert pressure on it until he had to.

The brain specialist arrived, did what he had to do with Milty, and informed the local man that another operation would be necessary as soon as Milty recovered sufficiently from the first. Tommy was not allowed to see the little man. The second operation would take place two days before the fight.

Tommy tried to stay, to sweat it out, but his nerves were beginning to buckle under the strain. He went back to the city

the morning of the day of the second operation.

He had dinner with his father that evening. He said, "Where will we eat, pop?"

Paddy Crane looked at him. "Where? Why, at The Champ's, of course. Where else should another champion eat, the night before he wins the title?"

Tommy humored him. They went up to The Champ's, and the Big Guy welcomed them, wished Tommy good luck in his fight, seated them at a prominent table. Paddy Crane was in his glory. He nodded at celebrities, signed with a flourish the autograph book someone brought over to Tommy. He looked around the big restaurant and shook his head in approval. "A proper place to eat, lad, and all the proper people. In the future—"

He elaborated on that, and Tommy listened with half an ear. He was thinking of Milty, wondering about him. The operation would be taking place about now. He hadn't mentioned the incident to his father, had invented an excuse for Milty's absence.

Someone in back of him said, "I hear you had a little trouble up the camp, Crane?"

He didn't want to turn. He was afraid of what he might do. It was Bemis. The man walked into his field of vision, tight-smiling, cold-eyed. Tommy looked at him, restrained himself with an effort.

"Too bad about Milty," Bemis said, and Paddy Crane asked, "What happened to Milty?"

Tommy shook his head. "We had a little accident on the road. Milty stayed up there in the hospital, just to play it safe. I didn't want to worry you about it."

Bemis said, "Sure. Why worry? Why worry about a little thing like that? You got plenty to worry about, tomorrow night."

Paddy Crane had had a few drinks. He said, "Now, that's a foolish way to talk. Everyone with an ounce of brains in his

head knows that Tommy will have no trouble with your boy. No trouble at all."

Bemis looked at him, then at Tommy. He said, "Your old man's got a lot more confidence than you have."

"I'll do all right," Tommy said.

Bemis said, "Sure. Like you did on that road. You'll do fine."

"It'll be a little different," Tommy said.

Bemis jingled some change in his pocket. "You wouldn't like to put a few bucks on it, would you?"

"I don't bet on fights," Tommy said.

"Not on this one, anyway," Bemis told him. "You know what's going to happen to this one."

Paddy Crane said, "I seem to remember seeing you before some place, and not liking you then. Now, as to betting—you name the sum, and if Tommy doesn't take you, he's no son of mine. There's never been a Crane afraid to back himself, and Tommy's no exception."

The surroundings had gone to his head, Tommy could see. Nothing would stop him now.

Bemis said, "That's talk."

Tommy nodded. "Just talk."

Paddy Crane took a modest roll of bills from his pocket with a grand air. "Now, if you'll be so kind as to name the amount, Mr. I-Don't-Know-Your-Name. I've got it right here, and—"

Bemis looked at him and sneered. "Put your two bucks away." He looked at

Tommy. "If your kid wants to bet, I've got fifteen thousand says he'll get his ears knocked off."

Paddy Crane said, "Fifteen—" He looked at Tommy then, and said, "Well, my boy? You'll take this braggart, of course?"

Bemis shook his head. "He won't take a dime of it."

There was a moment of heavy silence, and Tommy could feel his father's eyes on him. Paddy Crane snorted. He said, "Well, in such a case, I have a butcher shop down on Thirty-Fifth that's worth all of that. Now, if you'll take my note—"

And suddenly it was a little too much for Tommy. Bemis baiting him. Bemis making a fool of him a year ago. Bemis putting Milty in a hospital. He knew the man was mean enough, tough enough, to take his father's shop. He said, "Okay, pop. Put it away." He looked at Bemis. "You've got your bet."

There were people at the next table who were interested in the talk. One of them was Pete Sears, the fight writer from the *Record*. Bemis looked at him and said, "You hear that, Sears?"

Sears said, "I heard it."

Bemis nodded. He said, "I'll be seeing you, chump," and walked away.

Paddy Crane leaned back and stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. He said, "Well, Tommy me boy, I guess we called that peddler's bluff in fine fashion."



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Tommy looked at him. He said, "Yeah, pop. We sure did."

Fifteen thousand! And Milty having specialists! And with his hand in the shape it was! It was like throwing money into the sewer. He should have his head examined. His or his father's. . . .

AT THE end of the third round he went to the corner and Rocco said, "Kid, I got news for you—you're in for a rugged evening." He set to work immediately, patching the cut over Tommy's left eye. Joe Gold, the other corner man, busied himself with a sponge and with the mouth-piece.

It was no news to Tommy. Mickey Stone, clever as Satan and as tough as six cops, was giving him a fine working over. The guy was the smartest boxer in the world, and when he wanted to fight, he could fight like hell and hit with brutal force. Tommy had tried for three rounds to set the rhythm of the fight, but with a master craftsman like Stone, and a right hand you couldn't depend on, it was an almost impossible task.

He went out for the fourth, and Stone waited for him. The champion was built loosely of muscle that was ropey and unbunched. His shoulders sloped deeply in a hitter's build, and he was as fancy as any man had a right to be.

Tommy abandoned his original campaign. He went in there, his only purpose to get close enough to Stone to hit him. He'd have to put the hand to work, damaged or not.

Stone let him come within a certain distance, then the fine left hand got busy with Tommy's face, and it was like fighting a man with a rake. Tommy got under it once and hooked the left hand to the body with solid force, followed it with the right. He heard Stone curse. Then the champion tied him up inside, and suddenly there was the agonizing scrape of laces across his injured eye.

The ref broke them and Tommy went in again. He hooked with the left hand and was short.

Stone came to him, wary but anxious, and stabbed with a left. Tommy took it high on the head, ripped his left hook to the belly. Stone pushed him away, punched to the head with both hands, and Tommy punched with him.

It was Stone who broke away. He went off with a twisted grin on his face, stabbing Tommy with that beautiful left hand. But now there was blood on the grin. Tommy followed him doggedly. He spent his shots sparingly, driving them in when he was sure there would be no miss. He was putting all his power into them, concentrating on the body. He didn't know how many head punches his right hand would stand.

In the seventh, Rocco said, "Kid, you shoulda brought a tailor in here with you. That eye! I can't do much more with it. Another two, three rounds, and they're gonna stop this thing. They got a rule about guys bleedin' to death in the ring."

He went out at the bell, slowly, now, pulling at his trunks. Stone was in no hurry. They met in the center of the ring, and Stone stuck out the left hand. Tommy took it high on the head, whipped his own left to Stone's middle. The champion clubbed a right hand to his head, and Tommy lifted the left hook and felt it hit solidly. He drove the right to the body, the left to the head.

And suddenly Stone was against the ropes, and Tommy knew this was his chance. He drove both hands to the head, punching fast, taking the shots. Stone threw at him. He hit the champion five solid belts, driving everything he had behind each punch. Stone punched with him, and Tommy shook with the thunder of the storm. He dug in and walloped.

The punch that dropped Stone was the punch that broke the hand. He could feel the thing go, and a ripping pain shot up

his arm. He had hammered it home, flush to the jaw, and Stone went down.

Tommy went to a corner, wading through the terrible voice of the crowd. He leaned in the angle of the ropes, trying to suck air into his burning lungs, aware only of the immense pain that wrung his hand. He watched Stone.

The champion was tired and hurt, but he wasn't through. He was on a knee at five, on his feet at nine. Tommy went to him. He was met by a whistling right hand that Stone threw on a line. It shocked him, rocked him. He sponged it up, set himself and hooked the left to the head and it went home. He clubbed the left again, and he saw Stone haul back a bit with his own left.

Tommy drove his dead right hand over the hook. He threw it deliberately, classically, with very bit of his power behind it. He hit the target and almost shouted with the pain. Stone stood in the angle of the ropes for a moment, then plunged forward on his face.

IN THE dressing room, Rocco cut the gloves away and whistled. He was profane, then looked at Tommy and said, "How long you been cartin' that thing?"

Tommy managed a grin. "Not long. It didn't go until the last few minutes." He said, "Rocco, get on the phone." He gave him the number of the hospital. He'd been calling all day, but they hadn't been able to give him any information. "Get all the dope you can."

Rocco made his way through the herd of newspaper men and photographers. Tommy answered all the questions, and he was not surprised when his father climbed through the crowd. The newsmen loved it. Paddy posed with his son and by himself. He had a wonderful time.

Tommy got a rub and most of the crowd cleared out. He showered and dressed awkwardly, and wondered what had happened to Rocco. He was headed for the

hospital himself, but his mind wasn't on his hand.

Rocco came in, his fat face one big smile. He was shaking his head. He said, "That Milty. That's a character."

Tommy said, "Come on, come on! Don't stall. How is he?"

Rocco threw his hands open. "How is he? He's got that joint in an uproar. Six o'clock tonight he comes off the table after havin' his head scraped. At seven o'clock he's conscious. By nine o'clock they've got six guys holding him in the bed. And what happens by ten o'clock? Ask me. Go ahead."

"What the hell happened?"

"He's got 'em bulldozed to where they gotta get him to the television set. They fix up mirrors so he can see the thing layin' down. The doctor says it is better than the way he is carryin' on. And when the thing is all over, he goes to sleep like a baby. He's fine. The brain guy does a wonderful job on him and he will be just as stupid as ever."

Tommy relaxed then, for the first time in ten days. He sat on the rubbing table and felt weak, and it wasn't from the pain in his hand. Milty was all right.

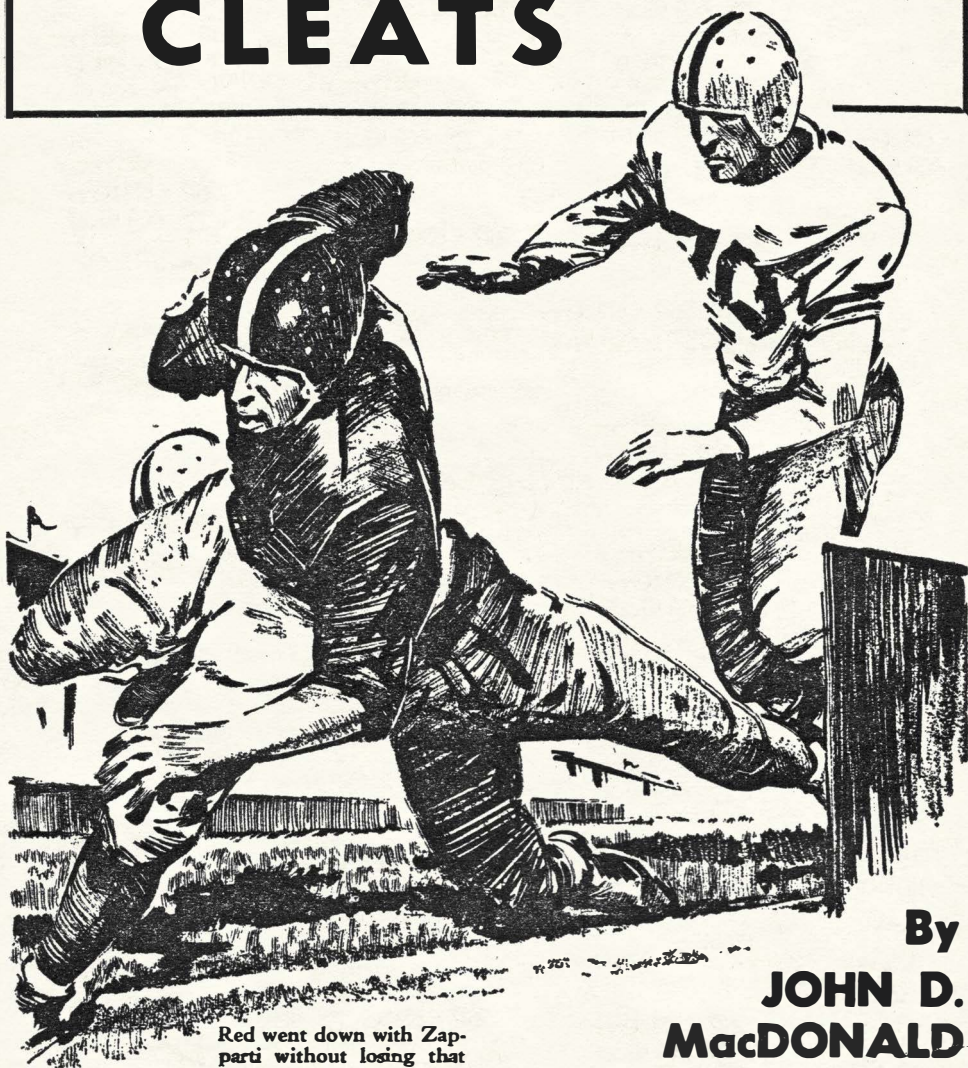
His father came up to him. Paddy was chewing on a huge, fat cigar. He said, "My boy, I hope this will teach you one thing, if nothing else."

Tommy said, "What's that, pop?"

Paddy said, "That you can gain a lot from listenin' to your father. Now, take for instance that Slemis, or whatever his name is. I mean the loud-mouthed glom we met in the restaurant. Now if it hadn't been for the advice I gave you, you'd be poorer by fifteen thousand dollars. You didn't have the vision to see the opportunity. I had to go to some lengths to point it out to you, and I hope you've gained from the experience."

Tommy looked at him and grinned. He said, "Sure, pop." There was nothing else to say.

LAST CHANCE CLEATS



Red went down with Zaparti without losing that hold on the back of his pants. . . .

When the season died out to just one more down—one more play—ten guys put their chips on a backfield clown who won with a grin, lost with a laugh—and fought for eleven men's dreams!

34

By
**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

I KNELT on the sidelines. I had given the boys a little talk. The man in motion came in, slow and easy. He cut fast when the ball was snapped. The timing was just right. The fake came off well, and the hand-off was clean. It made nine yards right through the middle, with the safety coming in fast to help smear the play.

I was proud of the boys. Weston Walker, the new head coach, was standing just behind me. I half-turned and grinned up at him. "How about that, Wes?" He had insisted that with each other we should be "Wes" and "Mike."

I had met him eight years before, and hadn't seen him since. The occasion of our first meeting was the annual fracas between my Philadelphia alma mater and his outfit, the national champs that year. Wes was a senior and I was a sophomore. I was line backer-up behind the shaky side of our line. He was the hardest charging back I have ever seen, before or since. I stopped him almost all afternoon. Each time I got up slower. It was like stopping a runaway milk horse.

After the game they came up to me in the shower and politely informed me that it was customary to take off the uniform before taking the shower.

Weston Walker hadn't changed much in the intervening years. He was still horse-size with a cold, still face and colder eyes.

It was his first look at the teams—offensive and defensive. As backfield coach it would be nice if I could say that I had built that team. All I could say was that I had helped. Rooney Mulligan, the grand old man that Wes replaced, had fitted the Harbour College team together, bit by bit.

Naturally, we were sorry about Rooney leaving. But the pro offer was so large that in three years Rooney could retire in the style he deserved. He had stuck around for spring practice, and Wes had showed up for the fall session.

Harbour isn't a big place. But we get our share of the bowl bids, and the alumni groups keep the hopefuls drifting in—high school captains, and All-State kids.

I was trying hard to be nice to Wes. When Rooney left, he recommended to the Athletic Board that I be made head coach. But Rooney made one small mis-

take. He didn't suggest it soon enough. Negotiations with Weston Walker had already gotten under way. I got a bump in pay, kind words and I agreed to stick around and help.

Wes told them that he didn't contemplate bringing in anyone except a couple of spotters and he could think of no one he would rather have as backfield coach than Mike Burk. Probably he didn't want to change the dice. We had eighteen wins in a row.

I grinned up at him and asked him how he liked it. He was frowning. He said, "Offensively, Mike, it was swell. I can't say as much for it defensively."

I remembered one of Rooney's theories and decided that it wouldn't be smart to quote one of Rooney's theories to Wes Walker. Rooney always said, "Mike, lad, you've got to remember that offensive football is intellectual. It can function anywhere. It is cold, hard, smart timing that counts. Practice and precision. Defense is another animal, lad. It's emotional. The defensive team has to have the spark to get in there and dump them on their tails. The smack-em-down spirit. Defense won't ever function right in practice unless there's a grudge operating. And you don't want any grudges on the squad. They're poison."

I knew that old Rooney Mulligan had the proper analysis. The whole business is like two different games. In a game you have the crowd noises, the will to win. In practice all you can hear is the bite of cleats on the turf, the thud of running feet, the smack and grunt as a man is stopped. It's hard and dirty business, and there's no will to win.

While I was thinking of Rooney, Wes interrupted my line of thought to give me a short lecture on football.

He said, "Mike, offensive football has the edge these days. Any T team with timing can score. The balance of power is in defense."

Scotty Shannon was calling the defensive shifts. On the next play, Scotty moved Tug Ober, the full, over a few feet, along with "Slipper" Angeline, the right half who was backing up the line. Dusty Lane, right guard, backed up the right half. Red Rollins, left half, was a few feet behind Dusty and toward the outside.

THIS time the 6-2-2-1 clicked nicely and Dusty and Slipper converged to help Bill Krozak, defensive center, drop the ball carrier for no gain.

I looked up. Wes was smiling. "That's what I like to see, Mike," he said. "A sharp defense."

But a moment later, on the next play, Red Rollins was sucked out of position and the ball carrier smacked through for eleven yards. Rollins had pulled a bone-head play.

Wes was frowning again. "Mike, who's that kid? Number thirty-five?"

"Red Rollins. Nice boy."

"I don't care if he wins personality contests. How well does he work in there?"

I concealed the groan. "Red does okay," I said calmly.

"That gives me enough to go on," Wes said. "Break 'em up. You take the offensive backfield boys over across the field and polish them for a while on that faking." He turned to Tiny Lauderdale, the line coach. "Tiny, take all the linemen down to the far end and get those fannies down a little further. They're going in too high. I'll work the defensive backfield for a while. In an hour we'll give them three times around the field and call it a day."

That was exactly what I was afraid was going to happen. And though Wes was acting as though he had an open mind, I knew no reason why he should feel duty bound to listen to any of my theories—second-hand theories from Roo-

ney—when Wes had already piled up a nice record at a good eastern school.

We had three weeks before the first game. It was our usual curtain raiser with Malloy Tech. The following Saturday we would be traveling to do battle with the Michigan Raiders, and on the third Saturday the Gray Wave from Ohio was coming in to pummel us a little. We could walk all over Malloy, and we had a good chance of smacking down a weakened Raider team, but the Gray Wave meant trouble. We had given them their only loss of the season before, and they were stronger, if anything.

The original division of labor that Wes Walker had set up remained in force for ten days. Our squad was big enough to put three offensive teams and two defensive teams on the field.

The kids were eager and they took pride in the win record that had been hung up. I could see that they were keeping the beady eye on Walker, wondering how he'd react when the going got rugged. Walker had none of the warmth that Rooney Mulligan had had. But he was straight and fair. He didn't play favorites and he knew his football. It was equally obvious that he was as hot to keep that record untarnished as was the squad.

Also, Walker had an eagle eye on the gold-brickers, and a few of them left us rather suddenly. Another kid left, too. He was a fair, third-string end, but he ran to Walker with some sort of snitch on another guy on the squad.

I was feeling pretty good myself. I was afraid that Walker was going to be one of those characters who can't delegate responsibility. But he gave me my head and showed no signs of tightening up on the reins.

He said, "Mike, the offensive backfield is yours. I've watched you. If I step in, I'll just foul it up. We'll cook up the plays together, with you having final word, because you know what the kids can do

and what they'll fluff. Is that okay?"

I couldn't have asked for a better deal.

And at the end of ten days, Wes leaned over my shoulder and snatched away my second-string left half, a smart, rugged junior named Rick Denatti.

He explained by saying that Denatti had the speed, the build and the disposition to become a fine defensive back. He had a bad hole to fill on the first squad.

"Bad hole?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I can't understand how Mulligan left that red-headed clown, Rollins, in a first-team slot. The harder he tries, the more he turns into a tangle-foot. I'm bustin' him down to a third-string sub and I may toss him off the squad entirely."

"He's a nice boy," I said.

"Burk, we can't give free rides to nice boys. We've got a record to protect."

It was the first time he had called me by my last name. I knew he was annoyed. Maybe I had picked the wrong word for Rollins.

Walker made a wise choice in Rick Denatti. Rick was a chunky boy, but as quick as a cat, with a mind that clicked every minute. He had that indefinable sense of smelling out a play and getting to the trouble spot just as it exploded.

With the defensive backfield of Ober, Shannon, Denatti and Angeline, running a play through their back yard became as easy as carrying a bass fiddle through a subway turnstile.

Every day Rollins was at the swampy end of the practice field, working out with the other misfits who wore the old-style uniforms.

Scotty Shannon was Red Rollins' roommate. Scotty, just like every other man on the defensive team, was a workman. A hard, solid, fast workman with a fine warm feeling toward physical contact. Scotty's eyebrows and eyelashes were so pale as to be almost invisible.

I waylaid Scotty after the final practice

before the Malloy game, just as he came out of the showers to walk over to the training table. I fell into step beside him.

He gave me a quick glance and said, "Hi, Mike."

"How's the kid taking it?" I asked.

He knew who I meant. "It's kind of a jolt from being the fair-haired boy with Rooney to getting the dirty end of the stick from Walker. He's pretty moody."

"Tell him to keep his tail up, Scotty."

Scotty stopped and stared at me. "What can you do for him? Pardon me for putting it that way."

"You don't have to step gently with me, Scotty. I'll think of something—maybe."

Scotty was looking behind me and his face changed. Red shambled up to us. Red is the only player I ever met who could manage to knock himself out on a locker bench. He was out cold for fifteen minutes one time, with a lump on his head as big as a lemon.

Physically he was strictly for laughs. A big, shambling guy with oversize hands and feet, a shock of red unruly hair, a lean neck with a huge Adam's apple, and a pair of bright blue eyes.

They call that particular type, *accident prone*. I would like a dollar for every broken bone he had in his lifetime.

He came up to us and his usually bright eyes had a dull and woebegone look. "It could have happened to anybody," he said helplessly.

"What was it, Red?" Scotty asked.

"Oh, that last scrimmage. Mr. Walker was watching us. Gilly calls those shifts and he mumbles, I think. Anyway, I shift right and Joey shifts left and we knock each other down and the play comes right through where we should have been."

"No harm done," Scotty said.

"Mr. Walker told me that I was through. Just a minute ago," Red said bleakly.

"He can't do that!" Scotty flared.

Red shambled away into the night, his

head down. We heard him say, "Brother, he went and did it."

"Now what?" Scotty demanded of me.

"I got to think," I said.

But I tried talking instead of thinking. I tried talking that same night. I said to Wes, "I understand Rollins is through."

Wes lifted a careful eyebrow. "Oh, did he come whining to you?"

"No, he didn't."

"I got rid of him first because he was awkward, an impossible clown, with no more football sense than a fish peddler. Second, getting rid of him is a hell of a good warning to the others with any tendency to clown up the game."

"But Wes, I really think that maybe you should have waited and—"

"Subject closed, Burk. Closed tight. Apparently Rollins was some sort of mascot for the squad when Mulligan was in charge. We don't need mascots and luck pieces, Mike. We will win with a better brand of ball, played by guys in top condition."

I shrugged. "You're the boss."

He turned on the charm, clapping me on the shoulder. "Don't sulk, Mike. I'm not the boss. We're partners in this deal, doing the best we know how."

Even though part of the act was phoney, there was enough sincerity behind it so that you couldn't help liking the guy.

And on the next day we walked all over Malloy, 42-6. They got the single touchdown on a fluke. The score could have been run up to an astronomical figure, but Wes was anxious to get everybody in there, to see how they'd react in the press of an actual game.

We had two minor injuries that could be well baked out and taped for the next game with no risk of further damage to the boys.

It was a thrill to see Harbour, in pale green and gold, take to the field. There was a professional snap and precision about the boys. Tiny Lauderhouse had

worked with the big linemen until they charged low, hard, and deep.

I had worked on every ball carrier's style until I had him doing what he did best on each play that used him. The aerial attack clicked, even when we tried stuff that Wes and I had been leary of as being too complicated for the college level.

STATISTICALLY, Michigan was weak. The Raiders had lost seven of their top men, and the blanks were filled with green sophomores. Yet, they came out with fire and spirit, and made up, in pepper, what they lacked in statistics.

In the first ten minutes of play they punched over two touchdowns and made two conversions to leave us trailing by fourteen points. The crowd thought they were seeing a 19-game win streak chopped off. They were pulling for the Raiders.

Wes sat, lean, hard and composed, on the bench and directed replacements with a cool and masterly hand.

Harbour played uninspired ball, and very competent ball. Our boys didn't make any mistakes. The plays clicked. Nobody extended themselves to make that extra half-yard, but competence began to pile up the yardage. The steady hammering culminated in a seventy yard march for a touchdown in the closing moments of the first half.

Between halves, Wes was cold and matter of fact. He said, "They blew all their stuff early in the game, men. You're playing the kind of ball I want you to play. Watch for the breaks, and don't hand them any favors. I expect three more touchdowns in the second half. The first one might be tough to get. The other two should be easy."

It was a good guess. The first one was tough. We slammed down to their seven and, in four more plays got it no further than the three.

They kicked out and on the first play Messna, our big fullback, took it down to

their five. We gained two yards to the three on first down, lost one back to the four on second, gained down to the one on third, and on fourth down they stopped the surge on the six-inch line.

They kicked out. But the sawdust had run out of Raggedy Andy. We punched it over, converted, kicked off, stopped them dead, took the ball and marched it over again.

For a time I thought Wes was going to be wrong about the third touchdown, but with two minutes to go, the Raiders tried a long pass. Our offensive right end gathered it in, reversed the field to give interference a chance to form, and galloped the whole distance. The conversion was bad, but the final score was Harbour, 27, Raiders, 14.

Twenty-one wins in a row!

But on the following Saturday the Gray Wave from Ohio was coming to town. Rough boys, coached by an expert. And loaded with a big urge for revenge for the upset of last year. I watched during the week while Wes tried to inject a little spirit into our lethargic squad.

On Thursday night I went to Scotty's room. He was wearing a green eyeshade, cracking the books. Red was on his bed, his big fingers locked behind his head, staring without expression at the ceiling.

Scotty was cordial. Red just glanced at me and went back to his inspection of the ceiling.

"We're pretty sad out there, aren't we, Mike?" Scotty asked.

"Sad, lazy, and dull as dirt."

Red came up on one elbow. His eyes were suddenly bright. "Saturday we win, Mike?"

"Saturday, Red, we win just like the Maginot Line held off the Germans."

The look faded. He sank back. "Oh," he said. If anybody had told him he had three days to live, he would have said, "Oh," with about the same tone.

Scotty frowned at me as I cut the string. "What's in the box, Mike."

I showed them what I had in the box and I made each of them swear three times that he'd keep his mouth shut.

"Suppose it doesn't work, Mike?" Scotty asked.

"Then I find myself a nice bread truck to drive around some nice quiet city."

Weston Walker's analysis of what might happen when the Gray Wave hit us was pretty close to being right on the button.

It was one of those days. Clear and cool, with no wind. The field was springy and right. Forty thousand people jammed the stadium.

Our locker room was tense and sour. Wes threw a few half-humorous remarks into the air. They floated over like marble airplanes.

When we ran out, the Gray Wave was already on the field. At first glance it



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looked as if they had twenty teams around, running through the plays. I made a count, was faintly surprised to find they only had nine teams warming up on the field.

It was our first top-flight opponent of the season, and they looked better than top-flight. They looked better than any squad has a right to look.

I thought I detected a bit of pallor among our boys, a bit of licking of dry lips. I went around spreading words of confidence and cheer.

Jerry Bascoe, Harbour captain and offensive right-half won the toss, elected to receive. I checked the wires from the spotters, saw that they were placed, relayed Walker's last minute instructions and picked a soft spot on the bench right next to Wes.

The ball came down, high enough to give the Wave ample time to get down the field. Messna, Harbour offensive fullback, spun out of the arms of one of the big gray men on our nine, bulled his way up to the fourteen before he lost his legs.

The big Gray Wave offensive backfield of Grunnert, Halliday, Raygo and Zaparti went out taking a hunk of the line with them and eight defensive men came in.

Lined up against the Wave, our boys didn't look so feeble. They had snap and precision. Smart little Dandy Thomas called our signals.

On a half-spin and fake to Jerry Bascoe, he fed the ball to Messna who crashed off right tackle for three yards. The next play was a double fake, opening the same way, but faking the hand-off to Messna, making another half-spin and handing it to Kriefeldt, the left half who swept wide around end, Messna cutting sharply back to chop the legs from under the defensive right end.

Kriefeldt cut in very nicely, fooling the secondary, making it all the way up to the twenty-six for a first down.

Ohio was off balance and, as we had taught the boys, they lined up fast, cracked the center for two yards. There was a whistle on the play and Jerry elected to take the offside penalty, making it first and five on our own thirty-one.

The next play was one of those things that sometimes happens in football. Notre Dame has done it oftener than any other team in the business. Every play in a game is a touchdown play. Particularly off the T, where timing takes the place of double blocking and releases men to play almost a man to man offense.

The play was one of my pets. Kriefeldt was the man in motion. He came jogging in. The ball was snapped to Dandy Thomas. As it was snapped, Jerry Bascoe came across fast. Bascoe and Kriefeldt were passing each other just behind Dandy. We had practiced it a hundred times, with Dandy flipping the ball across Kriefeldt's bows into Jerry's hands.

Kriefeldt ran back as though to pass. Jerry went wide in what looked to be a naked reverse. But he picked up men as he got to the line. Kriefeldt had sucked the secondary off in the wrong direction. As they reversed rapidly, they were chopped down. Our end got down and took care of the safety man. Jerry went across standing up. We were all on our feet, yelling.

It reminded me of the shock when, in 1947, the Army fullback carried the mail right through Navy on what had started as a routine thrust through the line.

One of the big Grays came through fast and tipped the ball off line for a conversion miss.

Ober, Shannon, Denatti and Angeline went into our backfield to stop the Gray Wave. Ohio brought the kick back to the thirty. They made a first down on their forty-two, another on our forty-five, and missed the third by inches.

Their kick rolled out on our fifteen. When we had possession of the ball, I

realized that I had been gnawing on my underlip. The Gray Wave had pulled a surprise on us. We had them figured for purely a T outfit. But they had shifted to both a single and double wing to shove their punishing power plays across. It was disheartening to note that in addition to Halliday, their All-American fullback, the two halves, Zapparti and Raygo, ran just as hard as Halliday.

It was the day for line play. Probably to the uneducated spectators, it was a dull game. But there was drama in the way Tiny's men plugged the holes, smelled the plays, fought and struggled. But they couldn't help letting those big men into the Harbour backfield.

When they lined up unbalanced to the right in a single wing, Scotty couldn't gamble on defensive power where the threat was aimed. He tried it once and only a beautiful tackle saved the play when a naked reverse seemed headed for paydirt.

They lined up in the T, and made the sad mistake of trying to mousetrap Dusty Lane. He merely outran the man who was supposed to block him out of the play, cut back and blundered into some fancy hand-offs. The ball skittered out to the side and when the pile was untangled, Jamie Lee, our left end, had it cradled under his chin.

We took our time on three running plays, and then got off a nice kick. The ends were down to smother Raygo and the half ended after they tried two passes, one good for eleven yards and the second one batted down by Rick Denatti.

THE locker room between halves was like a hospital ward. The defensive boys were stifling groans with every breath they took. They lay where they dropped. Scotty had a purplish bruise that covered half his face. Tug Ober had two sprained fingers.

Wes came in and stood with his hands deep in the slash pockets of his topcoat.

Except for his size, he looked like a prosperous young broker.

He walked through the room, talking quietly with man after man.

Then he stopped in the middle of the room and raised his voice. "You know the score as well as I do. We'll plan on not pushing another one over. If they push one over, they'll convert. It looks rugged out there. We've had a break on injuries. Lane saved our goose once. Play heads-up ball and see if you can do as Lane did."

There was no emotion there. I wasn't asking for corn, but I did feel that something a little more personal than a profit and loss statement was in order.

In the second half, the Gray Wave started their march from their own five. Grunnert, Halliday, Raygo and Zapparti seemed to be running faster and harder than before. Maybe it was the contrast.

Our defense was grim, workmanlike, sober—and ineffectual!

In my position on the bench, I could feel a certain pair of eyes boring into the back of my neck.

Where they had made four yards before, they made six this half. Their march was faster and rougher, and the downs were piled up one after the other.

At the midfield marker, Lane had to come out with a leg injury. On the next play, Stan Frayle, right tackle, was knocked out. When he came around during the time out, he didn't know what team we were playing. He had to come out. Tiny, analyzing the line play, recommended the replacements.

On our fifteen, on an end sweep, Raygo, almost in the clear, stumbled and fell hard. Little Scotty Shannon recovered the fumble. Out of their self-disgust, the Gray Wave drew fifteen yards for unnecessary roughness on the very next play.

Dandy, after two gains of two yards each, surprised them with a quick kick

that lofted over the safety man's head, rolled and bounded on down to the six yard line before it went dead.

We were back in business. But not for long. They made first down twice and then it was the last quarter of the game.

I could see that the boys had taken all they could take. Denatti missed an easy shot at the runner, handing them fifteen yards as a gift before Tug Ober brought the runner down. Our line and our backfield, on defense, were men of lead.

When they got down to our thirty, I couldn't avoid taking the chance any longer. The very next play might be it. The Gray Wave smelled the score coming up and lined up with all the snap of a fresh team.

I turned on the bench and gave Red the signal. He came down out of the second row, cramming the felt hat in the pocket of the topcoat, unbuttoning the topcoat.

Wes didn't see him. I grabbed Wes Walker's shoulder and said, "Take a chance with me. Let me send a man into the backfield. They're going to score."

The quick opening play of the Gray Wave took them down to our twenty-two. Ober and Angeline were a long time getting up.

"Send in anybody you think will do us some good," he said thickly. His knuckles were white and his nostrils had a pinched look.

"Rollins for Denatti!" I yelled.

Wes turned and glared at me. "Have you gone crazy, Mike? Rollins isn't around to go in—"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the crazy redhead galloping out onto the field hand raised.

"Come back here!" Wes yelled.

Red stopped, confused. When Wes tried to yell again, I clamped a hand over his mouth and yelled, "Get in there, Rollins!"

Wes slapped my arm down and doubled up a mean-looking fist.

"You said I could send in anybody."

"I didn't know you'd cross me like this, Mike. He comes out after one play. How the hell did he get a uniform?"

"I took one to him. He was up in the stands with a coat on over the uniform."

Walker's eyes were blazing and knots of muscle stood out on the corner of his jaw.

The play was delayed as Red Rollins reported. The stands, seeing that familiar shock of scarlet hair, roared the welcome.

Above the roar, I could hear Red's familiar crazy yelp, his battle cry. Denatti came out, looking back over his shoulder. As usual, Rollins refused to wear a helmet.

He pranced up and down behind the line, slapping the taut seats of the linemen, crowing and dancing like some crude marionette animated by an amateur.

The Gray Wave opened up their play. It was a thrust at the right side of the line, between guard and tackle. The hole didn't open right for them. Zapparti came through what hole there was and Tug Ober, traveling at terminal velocity, hit him so hard that he bounced him back onto his pants in his own backfield. The ball went down for a half-yard loss.

Wes had called Denatti over to him, but he was ignoring Denatti who squatted in front of him. He was looking over Denatti's shoulder, an odd frown on his face. Red was making a burlesque of spitting on his hands and rolling up his sleeves.

Our defensive backfield lined up with a lot of snap, and the line suddenly looked tight and hard. The play was another of those brutal end sweeps by four bunched men, the ball carrier, and three smart boys running interference.

Red came loping in from out of nowhere in particular and threw an absurd rolling block into the bunched men. He spilled two of them. The other man running interference tried to block Slipper Angeline out of the play, but Slipper was

moving so fast that the blocker bounced back into the runner, tilting him off balance, setting him up for a crushing tackle by Bill Krozak, the center, who had somehow managed to get into the play. The Gray Wave took a two yard loss.

Red galloped over and helped the ball carrier up, pantomining brushing the dirt off the ball carrier's pants. Once again that crazy yelp split the air and the stands roared their approval.

Weston Walker waved Denatti away. He was leaning forward and the odd frown had changed to the beginning of what promised to be a wide grin.

The next play wiped out that grin. The Gray Wave end got around in back of Rollins. The pass caught Red flat-footed, but Scotty came over fast to drop the receiver on the five.

I groaned inwardly. "Let him stay in."

Our boys lined up and Red charged up and down in our backfield. Something he said gave our boys wide grins.

Halliday tried a straight line plunge. The center of our line rose up and smacked him down for no gain.

They ran the next one off the T, with some pretty faking, which turned into a delayed line buck after the left half had gone out to the right. Red had been confused by the faking. But when the delayed buck came, Red turned into a lean projectile and buried his shoulder in Raygo's middle.

They called time so that Raygo could pull himself together.

The ball still rested on the five. Third and goal to go.

On the next play, Grunnert faded back and dropped a line-of-scrimmage pass right over Zapparti's shoulder into his hands as he hit a big hole in the right side of our line.

With Zapparti's speed, he should have carried it all the way over. But little Scotty hit him from the side just as Red, coming from the other direction, somehow managed to grab a handful of Zapparti's pants. Red went down with Zapparti without losing that hold on the back of his pants. For a split second Zapparti was running hard in one spot. The ball came to rest on the two.

They depended on Halliday. They ran it off the T, with Halliday coming through to take the hand-off on a hard run.

Rollins, Ober and Angeline hit him as he came through. The smack set my back teeth to aching and I could imagine that I felt the shock wave.

We took the ball on the one-foot line.

The Gray Wave got the ball again before the game ended, but the heart was out of them. They had come too far, too many times. When the spirit faded, the legs in the offensive backfield turned to so much putty.

When the game ended, we were on their

(Continued on page 130)



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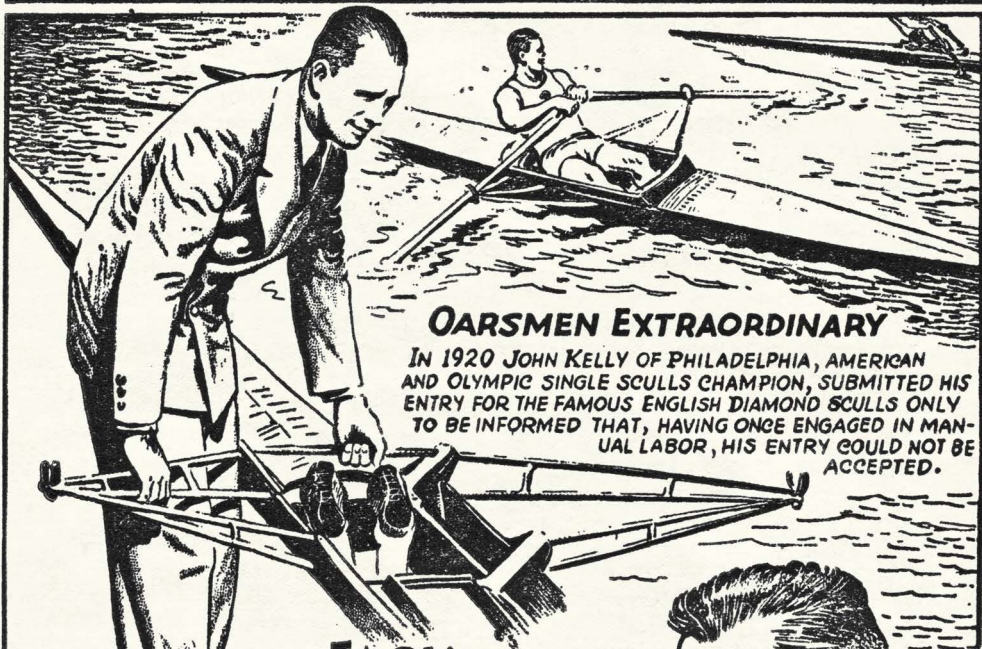
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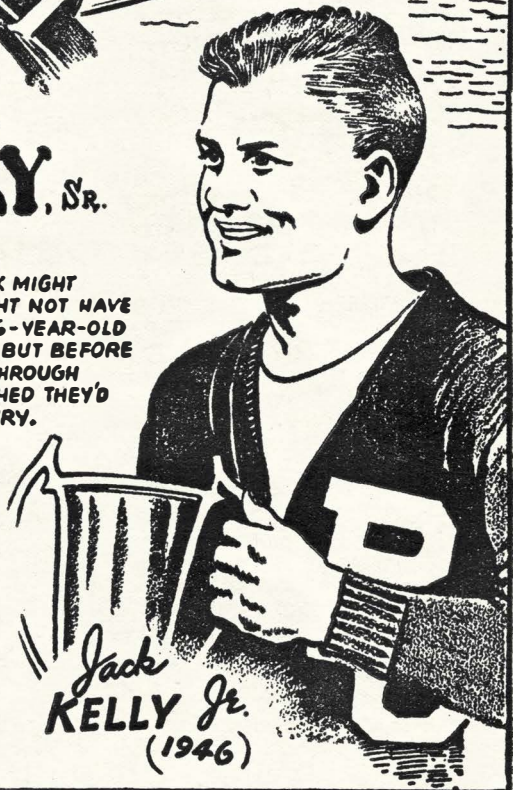
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HITTING A KILLING 39-STROKE PACE, HE SWEEPED TO A 2-LENGTH LEAD. FRONSDAL HUNG ON GRIMLY BUT KELLY WON AS HE PLEASED. OLD JACK LIFTED HIM FROM THE BOAT, HIS 27-YEAR FIGHT OVER.



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DEFINITELY ABOVE THE CROWD, THE KELLYS!

BACKCOURT BADMAN



By ROE RICHMOND

"SLASH" SOMERS took the ball on the outer rim of the foul circle, faked a quick break-through, faded back to clear his man, feinted a right-hand pass into the corner, swiveled with smooth grace and lofted a shot with his left hand. The ball looped in a clean arc and swished through the net. Fifteen thousand people gave the old Slasher a roar of acclaim and we went ahead late in the last half, 55-53.

Somers was winning the one that would

give us the division title and put us into the championship play-off, and I was sitting on the bench, hating him.

"Look at him," I said. "Old enough to die. No legs left. Can't drive in any more, but everytime he fakes it they fall for it. Not big or strong or fast. He ought to quit and take up coaching. He'd make the big time, sure."

Dutch Emlar grinned beside me. "And still the highest-scoring highest-salaried player in the league, winning the cham-

He'd reached the hardwood cross-roads, the battered backboard bomber who could go on to glory as a big-time coach—or into a castoff's limbo with a man—and a five—to whom victory meant more than scoring the most baskets!



Rushing in from the side I clamped down onto the ball. . . .

pionship for the Bombers if one guy ever did. What you got against him, Joe? He's putting money in our pockets, boy."

"I got plenty," I said. "That Somers has haunted my whole life."

"A nice guy," Dutch said. "No big

head, no temperament—a real regular."

"You can have him," I muttered. "I've had him ever since high school."

"Well, we wouldn't be up here without him," said Dutch Emlar.

The Warriors were attacking now, a

little desperate under the pressure, but our gang was checking tight and covering close. Their forwards couldn't get away from Chuck Crater and Tex Dallas, and Renwick had their six-foot-eight center bottled up. When the guards tried to carry through, Rusty Fennell and Slash Somers were all over them. Finally the Warriors tried a hasty heave at the basket. Crater captured the rebound and the Bombers broke fast.

This time they worked the ball in to Fennell in the corner, Somers faking and feeding him, but Rusty's shot bounced high off the rim. With uncanny instinct and perfect timing, Slash Somers was there, snaring the leather from men younger, stronger, with more spring in their legs, flipping it goalward with his wrists. The ball bobbed around the rim and sank into the net. We were up four points, 57-53.

"Can't stop him," Dutch Emlar said. "Can't beat him."

"You're telling me," I said with some disgust.

I was twenty-two, just out of college and right in the prime, and I was second-string to Slash Somers, thirty-two years old, an ancient in pro basketball. That would have been enough, especially since I had been an All-American for two years at Piedmont University, but there was more to it than that. A whole lot more.

Tex Dallas fouled his man as he was shooting, and the Warrior converted both free tries. Two points again. Then their towering center tucked a rebound in and it was tied up, 57-57.

Crater and Dallas brought the ball up but couldn't get it in to Renwick in the pivot slot. The Warriors were on top of every Bomber. Fennell dropped back to take a pass, feint, and flash it across to Somers. Slash floated to throw another from outside, but they had him tied in knots this trip. Slash faked them with sleight-of-hand artistry and cut forward.

His man stayed with him, but Slash had a slight jump on him. Driving straight in under the backboard, he laid it in there, just as the Warrior clipped him hard from behind.

Slash pitched forward in a headlong slide into the screen. He got up, shaken and limping and walked back to the foul line to take his free toss. He planted it nicely in the hemp and we had a three-point margin, 60-57.

"He comes through in the clutches," Dutch Emlar said.

"Sure," I said bitterly. "He always comes through."

Dutch looked at me and shook his square-cropped head.

The Warriors struck back with all they had, but our boys fought them off. Crater hurried their shooter, and Slim Renwick snared the ball off the backboard. The Bombers weaved a slow stalling pattern to let the clock run out. The Warriors fouled and Slash Somers took the ball outside instead of trying for the point.

The Warriors roughed it up again in a frenzied effort to get hold of the ball. Once more Slash took it outside. This time he feinted and fired a bullet pass to Fennell, who was cutting for the basket. Rusty was covered but he slipped the ball to Renwick, and Slim twisted away from that giant enemy center and sliced the strings with a one-hander.

That clinched it for us, 62-57. All we had to do now was beat the Eagles for the championship.

In our dressing room they got Somers on a rubbing table to unwind the special bandages he wore on his knees. Most of the squad gathered around to see if his legs had been hurt bad, but I stayed away. I wouldn't cry any if he had a broken leg or two.

"He's all right," Dutch said, coming back to his locker.

"Sure," I said. "He's held together with adhesive tape and he'll be going

strong when us young fellows are washed up."

"You got an awful case of sour grapes there, Joe," said Dutch.

"I got reason to have," I told him. "Plenty of reason."

THE trouble was, I couldn't see Slash Somers as a human being. He was a legendary figure to me.

When I entered Carnegie High, Slash had been gone about six years, but they still talked about him there. He was a three-sport man, good in all of them, but basketball was really his dish. Most athletes, even the big shots, are more or less forgotten after a couple of years, but not Slash Somers. Six years later he was still talked about at Carnegie, even more than last year's stars.

I started with the freshman team, was promoted to the junior varsity, and in that first year I began to resent Somers. It seemed to me he was stealing the glory that belonged to today's players, and it didn't make sense. Who cared what happened six or eight years ago?

I got my growth early and made the varsity in my sophomore year. I had a good season, too, leading our scoring and getting honorable mention in All-State selections, although we only made a fair record. A few writers ventured the opinion that I was the best basketball player to show at Carnegie since Slash Somers.

I decided then I would make them forget all about Somers before I got through. But I never did.

We were runners-up for the state championship in my junior year, and I was practically a unanimous choice for All-State honors. But whenever anybody compared me with Slash Somers it was all to his advantage. He was breaking records in pro basketball then, and that helped keep his name prominent. But even if he'd dropped out of sight after high school he would have been a god at Carnegie.


There were plenty of offers to play professional basketball after I graduated, and more money in that than in anything else I could do. The best offer came from the Bombers and I signed with them. Slash Somers was with the Maroons in the same division and still burning up the league. At last, after all these years, I was going to get a chance to play against him, a chance to show these so-called experts that I was as good as Slash Somers or better.

Then, the week after I signed, the Bombers acquired Somers in exchange for two players and an unstipulated piece of cash. I just couldn't get out from under the guy. It looked as if I was doomed to trail along in his shadow all my life. I tried to tell myself I could show him up as well on the same team as I could on an opposing club, but I didn't have much

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faith in the theory. And the Bombers couldn't have had much faith in me, or they wouldn't have gone after Somers. So all the joy went out of my first season in the pro game before it ever got started.

It turned out worse than I expected. They drilled me as Slash's understudy—a replacement for a thirty-two-year-old who should have been pensioned off long ago. But the guy was good. I had to admit that. He had the extra something that makes a real champion.

Slash wasn't a bad looking guy either, although his blond hair was thinning a little and he looked kind of tired. He had sharp, angular features, a lean jaw and real high cheekbones. His eyes could change from mild gray to bitter green. His smile was pleasant, friendly, his manner easy and natural. He was sure of himself, confident without conceit.

He was nice enough to me. When we first met he'd said, "From what I hear about you, Joe, I'm glad we're on the same side. How's things at Piedmont, anyway? And have you been back to Carnegie lately?"

It was a shock to me. In spite of all I'd heard and read about him, I had built him up in my mind as pompous, egotistical, arrogant, swaggering. Even after I saw how wrong I'd been I couldn't shake that preconceived picture. I had lived with it too long.

Slash always tried to help me. He had learned a lot of tricks in ten years of pro ball, things that you get only from experience. He was willing to pass them along to me, but I wasn't having any. I would learn from watching Slash, but I couldn't take any outright teaching from him. Puzzled and a bit hurt, Slash gave up after a while. I knew I was acting like a stupid, stubborn, swell-headed kid, but I couldn't help it. You can't cast off eight years resentment overnight. It takes time to stop hating.

Fran Whipple was in my class at Car-

negie High, a slim, poised girl with curly brown hair and large brown eyes, old and wise beyond her years, the belle of the school before she was a sophomore. She was glamorous, sophisticated, the best dressed and the best dancer, a superior creature with a scornful look and a barbed tongue. I was a bashful kid, scared to death of her, blushing every time she looked at me, all awkward elbows and knees and oversized hands every time I met her.

"She goes for yuh, you dope," the other boys said. "Get hep, Joe. That's the fanciest stuff in this town. If she ever gave me a come-on like that, boy!"

I didn't want to get mixed up with any girl, but I couldn't get away from Fran Whipple. I don't know why she kept after me that way. Perhaps she enjoyed tormenting me because I was so shy. Maybe she was interested because I acted indifferent, while all the other boys were ardent and devoted to her. Finally I started going out with her, in self-defense, you might say. It was the only way I could protect myself against that mocking tongue of hers.

But it got serious very soon, and the first thing we knew we were in love, not like kids, but really meaning it all the way. By the time we got to be seniors we were talking about getting married. We were sure there was nobody else anywhere for either of us.

It happened that last spring at Carnegie. I was away with the baseball team, and we won that game at Bolton for the sectional championship. I had a big day, I remember, hitting two doubles and a triple, driving in four or five runs and scoring twice myself. I was feeling fine and happy that June evening when we got back home and I walked over to Fran's house.

But she wasn't at home that night, and I thought her mother and sister acted sort of strange and guilty when they said

she'd gone out to the lake with some of the girls. I went downtown and found Dopey Carroll and we rode out to the dance pavilion on the shore of Mettawee Lake, bouncing along the moonlit gravel road in Dopey's old jalopy. I knew something had gone wrong, awful wrong, and I felt dazed and hollow and sick to my stomach.

We looked into the dance hall and I saw her right away, dancing with a tall blond guy who looked old for our crowd, a slim, graceful guy in an expensive, tailored sport jacket and slacks. Dopey saw them too and jabbed his elbow into my ribs. "Holy smokes!" he said. "That's Slash Somers!"

Fran Whipple explained to me later. Slash wanted to marry her, and that's what she wanted too, more than anything else in the world. She'd always remember me, always be fond of me, but Slash was the real thing.

They were married that next fall, when I was getting ready to leave for Piedmont. By then the tragedy of it had worn off. I wasn't broken-hearted any more. In a way I was relieved to be footloose, fancy free, unattached and on my own. I was too young to think of marriage, anyway. I had too much to do, too many places to go and things to see, a world to conquer. I dated a lot of nice girls at Piedmont, but I never let it get too serious. I liked some of them quite a lot, but never as much as I had liked Fran Whipple.



Backboard Bust

2

WE MOVED East into New York for the championship game in Madison Square Garden.

The Eagles were favored to win, loaded with high-powered operators like Sea-holm, Prairie, Conowit, Hockaday, Bres-

lin, and Vollmer. A tremendous array of talent for one team to possess, called by many critics the greatest collection of stars ever assembled.

Rumors had preceded us into town that Slash Somers was all through. His legs at last were gone. Manager Mallory denied this to the press, but when we worked out in the Garden he had me in Slash's position with the Bomber's first unit.

"If Somers is okay, why isn't he in there?" demanded the reporters.

"He needs a rest," Mallory said.

I wondered if something was wrong with Somers. He didn't move around much in practice. Basketball is rough on the legs, and Slash Somers had been at it a long time now. Ankles and knees take a beating with all the sudden starting, stopping and pivoting, the constant pounding on the hardwood floors. And Slash was looking tired and worn, with new lines around his mouth, fretting the corners of his gray eyes, crinkling his forehead.

After practice Slash went off somewhere with manager Mallory, and I began wondering again in spite of myself. They didn't come back to the hotel in time for dinner, either.

"When Slash isn't here it seems like a lot of people are missing," Dutch Emlar remarked at the table.

"Why don't you write a sonnet about him?" I said. I had noticed the same thing myself, but I wasn't telling anybody about it.

That evening I was lobby-sitting with some of the boys when I was paged to take a phone call. I almost dropped the receiver when I heard the well-remembered voice of Fran Whipple Somers! She was in the cocktail lounge and wanted to see me, and I discovered that I wanted to see her, too.

We talked the way old friends do—of classmates, parties and games at Carnegie High, of her family and mine at home, of

her children and my four years at Piedmont, of the Bombers and basketball.

"Slash says you're not very friendly, Joe," she said then.

"I guess I'm not," I admitted. "I can't help it, Fran. He's been nice, too."

"He is nice," Fran nice. "But I'm awfully worried, Joe."

"Worried?" I said in surprise. "About him?"

She nodded gravely. "Is that so unusual?"

"No, I guess all wives worry about their husbands. But I thought he—"

Fran gestured with impatience. "Everyone thinks that nothing can bother Slash." She laughed a little bitterly. "He hides it so well, you see. Why, he shouldn't even be playing basketball, Joe! He should have quit last year."

"Why didn't he?" I asked.

"He wouldn't. And besides, we needed the money." She looked at her slender fingers as they twirled the stemmed glass.

I stared at her. "Money? But he's been making big money for ten years now."

"You'd be surprised, Joe," she murmured. "He lost two years in the Army, you know, and he's had to help his folks all the time. It goes, Joe, it goes incredibly fast. Slash isn't very practical, I'm afraid. Perhaps I'm extravagant, too." Fran shook her rich brown head.

"Why shouldn't he be playing?" I inquired.

"His legs are bad, Joe," she said. "He suffers all the time. Lots of times after a game they hurt so much he can't sleep. He has a sacroiliac condition, too, from an old back injury. He never gets any rest in a pullman berth."

I shook my head. It didn't seem possible she was talking about Slash Somers. Legendary heroes don't suffer the aches and pains of ordinary humans. The gods are not afflicted with the commonplace hardships and minor discomforts of mor-

tal beings. This injury-ridden husband she spoke of could not be Slash Somers of the Bombers! But I knew he was, of course, and Fran was not exaggerating.

After a while I said, "He could have taken it easier. He didn't have to play so much and so hard, Fran."

"I know it, Joe. I told him so. He might have done that, if— Well, if you had been more cooperative."

"I don't see that it's my fault," I said rather stiffly.

"I don't mean that it is. And Slash would be the last one to blame you or anybody else. I'm just telling you what I think, Joe."

"All right, Fran, I'm sorry. There's only one more game, anyway."

"Yes," she said. "The big one. The one I'm afraid of, Joe."

"Why this one?"

"I don't know. Unless it's because the Eagles hate him. There's always been bad feeling there, you know. More feeling than there should be in basketball."

I remembered then reading about those savage battles between the Eagles and the Maroons, the flaring of tempers, vicious fouling, injuries inflicted by either club, fists flying and players banished. Suddenly I wondered if Slash Somers wanted to get out of this final game. Perhaps it was unfair. He certainly had never lacked courage, but I couldn't help thinking that way. Slash had slowed up enough now so the Eagles could catch him, cover him, and really pour it on. With his legs already gone beyond normal limits, you couldn't blame the guy for being worried some.

As if she'd read my thoughts, Fran said, "Slash wouldn't like my telling you this, Joe. He wouldn't like it a bit."

"He'll never know about it, Fran," I promised.

"I hope not. I don't really know why I wanted to tell you, anyway."

"I'd like to get in there," I said. "I

haven't enjoyed riding the bench this winter."

"You've played quite a lot. You've been in every game, Joe."

"Not enough, though. I can't get used to being a substitute."

"Do you hate Slash?" she asked abruptly.

"More or less," I said. "Since I was a freshman in high school. Remember how they always raved about him at Carnegie?"

"Yes, I remember. But as a man you can't hate him, Joe."

"I guess I never thought of him as a man. I'll try to, hereafter. It ought to make a difference."

"It will," Fran said with conviction. "I know what you mean, Joe. But it hasn't been fair to Slash."

"No, it hasn't," I agreed. "Maybe I can make up for it, Fran."

Back in the lobby I met Mallory in front of the newsstand chewing a cigar and studying the magazines. There was still some doubt in my mind and I wanted to straighten it out before that championship game tomorrow night.

"Mal," I said. "Is Somers really in bad shape?"

His chin jutted and the cigar angled up toward one slitted eye. "Whatever gave you that idea, kid?"

"Rumors, I suppose."

"You ought to know better than listen to that stuff, Joe," said Mallory.

"Then Slash is all right, on the level?"

"Of course, he's all right." The cigar resumed a horizontal position and Mallory went back to scanning the magazine racks.

SOME twenty thousand fans jammed the Garden. The teams lined up, our Bombers shining in scarlet, the Eagles gleaming in gold uniforms. Mallory started our regular five, Slash and Rusty Fennell up front, Slim Renwick at center,

Crater and Tex Dallas in the backcourt.

The Eagles had Skip Seaholm and Dick Drexel in the forward line, mighty Hod Vollmer at the pivot, slick Les Prairie and brawny Ed Hockaday as guards. The Eagles were a bit bigger, stronger and younger, with an easy jaunty arrogance about them. They had the reputation of being rough, tough and ruthless, and they certainly looked it. They were colorful, cocky, swaggering, great favorites in the Garden, and we were clearly the outsiders.

It started slowly, as championship contests are apt to. From the opening whistle it was obvious that the Eagles were going to bear down hard on Slash Somers. When they put Ed Hockaday on a man it was to slow and hurt him, beat him down and stop him, for Hackaday was a hard-bitten killer on the defense, master of every trick in the trade. Les Prairie was a skilled operator back there too, a rapier to Hockaday's bludgeon, and those two had our front line throttled tight.

In the duel between centers it looked as if Hod Vollmer might be too rugged for our Slim Renwick. In our rear court Crater and Dallas were covering their forwards well, but it was a full-time job to keep track of Seaholm and Drexel. Chuck Crater fouled Seaholm and Skipper sank both free tries to break the ice. A few seconds later Drexel drove through and rang in a lay-up, and the Eagles led, 4-0.

Slash Somers had always been our play-maker, but he wasn't setting them up this night. He wasn't doing any of the things he usually did for the Bombers. It looked to me as if he was dogging it in there. When Hockaday hit with a long one the Eagles were up, 6-0, and Slash called time out.

"What the hell's the matter with 'em?" muttered Dutch Emlar.

"What's the matter with Somers, you mean," I said.

"Aw, Slash'll get going," said Dutch. "But the other guys, they act lost in there."

Play was resumed. The Eagles' shots barely missed. With Slash not clicking in his key spot our offense failed to function. Hockaday was still giving Slash just space enough to breathe, giving him a rough time all around, and Slash seemed to have lost all his old magic.

Rusty Fennell at last found the hoop for us from deep in the corner, but hulking Hod Vollmer immediately countered with a whirling pivot shot. When Somers tried to cut through, Hockaday chopped him down with a brutal block, and Slash missed both free throws, an almost unheard of thing! But Tex Dallas intercepted an Eagle pass and drove downcourt to score, and Chuck Crater converted a foul try.

We trailed by three points, 8-5.

The Eagles launched another drive led by Skip Seaholm and Dick Drexel, with Les Prairie contributing a foul point. Slim Renwick slapped in a rebound for the Scarlet, and Rusty Fennell added two from the black line. But Vollmer hit again from the pivot and the Eagles were up, 15-9.

As they neared the quarter mark, Slash Somers was the only player on the floor who had not scored. Rusty Fennell went through in a headlong rush and fired at top speed, but the ball caromed out of the bucket and Rusty skidded on his knees, got up limping as Hod Vollmer grabbed the rebound.

The sensational Seaholm counted once more and the Eagles held an eight-point advantage at the quarter, 17-9.

There was substitutions on both sides. Mallory sent Flit Vermillion in for Fennell, Stretch Slocum for Renwick, Dutch Emlar in place of Crater. I glared at the manager and sank back on the bench, swearing. Somers was the man who should have come out of there. Somers

was useless tonight. From where I sat it looked as if Slash was licked even before he'd started.

The Eagles had a whole new team in there, with Bull Breslin riding close herd on Slash. Our boys staged a second-period drive paced by Flit Vermillion and Tex Dallas, narrowing the gap to two points before the enemy got started. Slash Sommers was no more help than he had been in the opening quarter.

Then the Eagles got warmed up and winged on out ahead once more, with Pop Phelps, Harty Schaffner and Hans Reininger breaking away for baskets, while Bull Breslin cashed in on two free tosses. They led by ten points, 25-15, and it looked like a runaway.

Slash Somers was neither scoring himself, nor setting up the others. Once Slash nearly got loose on the sideline, but Breslin belted him out of bounds with stunning force. Slash got up slowly, his face showing nothing, and walked to the foul circle. He was jarred groggy but he wisted home his first point of the evening.

We kept closing up as Dutch Emlar drilled in a long one. Tex Dallas tore through to lay one up, and Vermillion made a foul try good. But we never quite caught up to them. Bull Breslin ran away from Somers to score in close, and Conch Conowit looped a beauty through the laces. Phelps and Schaffner kept the ball rolling for them.

With Slash off form we couldn't keep that pace up. The best we could do was drag along about ten points behind them. It was a fast, furious battle now, both clubs hitting with all they had, but the Eagles maintained their lead.

Slash Somers did hook in a right-hander before the half ended, but three points in an entire half were nothing at all for him. Riley Flint went in for Dallas and rammed home a couple of field goals. The other boys fought hard

but the Eagles were flying too high to overtake. At half-time it was Eagles 43, Bombers 32.

If Slash had scored his usual twelve points or so it would have been even.



One Man—Or Five!

3

THE third quarter started about the same way. Slash was still in there with Ed Hockaday back on his neck again, crowding him at every turn. Flit Vermillion was at the other forward, because Fennell's knee had been wrenched in the first period. The other starters were back on both sides. I was still on the sideline with bitterness rising inside me.

Skip Seaholm and Les Prairie were hot for the Eagles, hitting often enough to hold that lead. Fortunately for us, Flit Vermillion was having a great night so we didn't lose any more ground, but we couldn't gain any either. Long range gunning by Chuck Crater and Tex Dallas kept us in the ball game, and Slim Renwick fought Hod Vollmer on even terms.

Suddenly Slash Somers shook Hockaday off briefly and flipped in two quick ones, a left-hander from the left wing, a right hook from the other corner. This closed the breach in the score as the third quarter came to an end with the Bombers six points behind.

But Vermillion had sprained his hand in a scrimmage under the board, and Mallory finally had to give me the nod. I was in for the last period, at least, but the chance came so late it left me cold and dull. I took off the scarlet warm-up suit and stepped onto the court.

On the floor I saw what I hadn't seen from the bench. Slash Somers was really suffering. He held his face straight and smooth as a mask, but the agony burned in his gray-green eyes. What Fran told me must be true, no matter how Mallory denied it. But why should I care how much he suffered? He had put me through enough of it throughout the last nine years.

It was our ball outside as play started again. Tex Dallas pitched in to Chuck Crater, and we moved forward weaving intricate patterns, with Les Prairie closer to me than any shadow. I hung back as the Eagles finally went into a shifting zone defense, skirting the front of it instead of driving through as I should have. *Let Slash go in and take it. He's the big shot!*

Slash went in as fast as he could on those bandaged legs, but two golden jerseys clipped and ground him between them. Hockaday hurtled into him after the whistle. There were three or four men down in that tangle and the crowd was booing the Eagles. As Slash got up the mask that had hidden his pain for three

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quarters was broken into harsh twisted lines, and he could no longer conceal his limp.

I watched him take his stance at the foul line on legs that ached and quivered, quiet and uncomplaining, tortured eyes fixed on the basket, agonized features writhing and shining with sweat. A slow fire began to smoulder deep inside me. Slash's arms swung an easy arc, the ball rose in the lights and rippled down through the netting. Five points now. The fire grew stronger in me, blazed higher, flared all through my body and brain.

I had a lot to make up for and little time to do it. I had thought Slash was quitting, lying down, when every move must have sent pain shrieking through his overworked legs.

The Eagles advanced and concentrated on Slash's flank. Ripping in from the side, I clamped onto the ball in huge Ed Hockaday's arms, and saw the flicker of surprise cross Slash's squinted eyes. Jump ball. I timed it right and tapped it wide to Slim Renwick. The Scarlet broke fast, Slim, Slash and Chuck Crater in the first wave.

I raced Hockaday down the floor and screened him off as he lunged toward Slash Somers. The pass came zipping from Crater. Slash spun smoothly away from the gold shirts and his left arm lashed high overhead. The ball described an arc and caught cleanly in the meshes. Three points to go.

The enemy attacked again and got a shot off this trip, but Tex Dallas clawed

the rebound away from them and started our return. We were passing now. Slash Somers was in there as he hadn't been all night, faking and feinting, handling the ball like a living part of him, feeding to me as I leaped ahead of Les Prairie for a split second. Les was on top of me but I kept driving and twisted free to whip my shot. The net swayed with the spinning leather and we were only one point down.

The Eagles were anxious now, beginning to fret and strain. Seaholm's attempt was short and Slim Renwick snared it in the air above Vollmer's groping fingers. Hockaday fouled Slash once more, so flagrantly that booing filled the Garden and Bull Breslin came in to replace Ed. Slash limped into the foul lane and laid both tosses neatly in the hemp. We led for the first time that night, 55-54.

But the boys in gold came hammering back in swift retaliation, Skip Seaholm and Dick Drexel scoring in short order from the field, Vollmer counting twice from the foul strip. Striking like lightning, they were back in front again by five points, 60-55, and we asked for time.

"How you standing it, Slash?" asked Chuck Crater.

Slash Somers forced a faint grin. "All right." He looked like a man tormented beyond human endurance, but there was nothing wrong with his brain. Quickly, tersely, he outlined an offensive campaign for us. I watched him in wonder. I had been a damn fool for years, but perhaps I could make up for some of it in this final quarter.

— TO OUR READERS —

We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!

The Eagles scored again with the superb Seaholm splitting the strings, and they were seven points up.

Our assault started under their basket and wound up with Slash faking and swiveling in the keyhole, feinting until he could fire a pass to me. I took it in full flight, jumped to clear Prairie, threw for the bucket. Prairie flattened me hard and I was on the floor when the ball slid into the meshes. I had a foul try coming. It danced around the rim a bit but fell inside, putting us to within four points of the Eagles.

CHUCK CARTER and Tex Dallas tore the Eagle thrust apart and Slim Renwick snagged the rebound. We went downcourt like a scarlet scourge. Once more Slash Somers faked them cross-eyed, fed to me, and I flicked it back overhead into the net. The Eagles asked for time out.

"You're going to save this one for us, Joe," panted Slash.

I shook my head. "You're the boy that's doing it, Slash."

The Eagles were making some changes. Conch Conowit came in to guard me, and Harty Schaffner replaced Drexel at forward. For us Mallory sent Riley Flint in to take the exhausted Dallas's guard post.

With time in, the Eagles soared ahead. Conch Conowit got away from me to score in under the board, and Harty Schaffner popped in a pretty one from the corner. Every time we got within reach they spurted ahead. It was 60-60 now.

We couldn't get inside for a close crack at the hoop. Conowit clung to me like a leech, Breslin was all over Slash, and Hod Vollmer had Renwick bottled up. Slash signaled me and dropped back toward midcourt. I drifted after him, passed to him, and sliced between him and Breslin to let Slash get set. Slash lifted a long one from his chest. The ball arced high and whistled cleanly through the cords.

The crowd, shifting its allegiance to the underdogs, rocked the Garden with roaring sound.

The Eagles came on in a golden onslaught, but missed both the shot and the rebound. Riley Flint then wrenched the leather out of enemy hands and we swept down the hardwood. I could have shot from the sideline, but I faked it and fired a bullet pass to the cutting Somers. Slash exploded through yellow shirts, leaped high and laid the ball in the net. Two points now!

But the Eagles fought back with Skip Seaholm and Harty Schaffner punching home points, Hod Vollmer batting in a rebound, Bull Breslin hitting at long range. This magnificent burst lifted them into a ten-point lead, 74-64, and it looked like curtains for us. The Eagles were just too good. They packed too much power, bounced back too hard.

I thought we were licked. We all thought so except Slash Somers. In the time out he grinned sweatily at us through his agony. "We can do it," he panted. "There's still time." We looked at him, caught fire from him, smiled and nodded grimly. Somehow he made us believe him.

Old and beat up as he was, Slash Somers was the man to have on your side when the going was toughest. After all those years of hating him and wanting to show him up, I suddenly loved the guy, would have done anything for him. Three minutes to go! Ten points to pick up!

The whistle. We hit them like a scarlet hurricane, sweeping them right off their feet. Slash and I went through together, the pay-off pass smacked my palms, and I flung it overhead as Conch Conowit climbed my back. Down on my hands and knees I looked around in time to see the ball topple through the meshes. A lovely sight. And I planted both foul tosses dead center, too.

The Eagles stormed the floor but I stole the leather from Conowit and

whipped a long pass to Slash Somers going down the left sideline. Slash threw left-handed just as Bull Breslin smashed into him. They went down together and the ball lodged momentarily in the swinging net. Slash dragged himself to the foul stripe and dropped the point in. Four points in back, 74-70.

The Eagles panicked a little under the increasing pressure. Chuck Crater intercepted a poor pass and we carried back fast. My shot missed, but Slim Renwick beat Vollmer to the rebound and cuffed the ball into the basket. Two points now.

The Eagle attack, frenzied and furious, was halted by the whistle when Skip Seaholm charged headlong into Chuck Crater. Chuck coolly made the free try count and we were but a single point behind, 74-73.

They tried to stall now, but it was a fatal mistake. Riley Flint blasted in between two gold jerseys and broke loose with the ball. We went down shuttling it from man to man, weaving and criss-crossing, until Slim Renwick had it in the pivot slot.

I went in from the right wing and sprang high to take Slim's pass, but Conch Conowit was right up there with me as the ball sped my way. I might have scored, but it was doubtful. I saw Slash Somers racing in from the left side, half a step ahead of Bull Breslin, and I batted that pass like a volley ball toward Slash. I wanted him to have it. There was lots of time left for me.

Slash took it in full stride and with a sharp burst of speed left the Bull behind. I was tumbling on the hardwood with Conch as Slash Somers soared high and graceful to clear another yellow shirt. I saw Slash's flawless form and wrist action as he flipped the leather up. I saw the ball ripple beautifully down through the meshes, and I laughed with what breath I had left at the snarling, cursing Conowit sprawled beside me.

The final buzzer was drowned in a tremendous surging of sound. We'd done it, 75-74!

OUR dressing room was a mighty happy place, and it was a long time before we got out of our sweat-soaked scarlet uniforms.

"What'd I tell you about old Slash?" said Dutch Emlar, mauling me joyously.

"You were right, Dutch," I said. "They don't come any better, boy."

"You didn't do so bad yourself, Joe," grinned Dutch. "You were hot, kid."

I shook my head modestly, although I was pretty well satisfied with myself and my nine points in that one period. But Slash Somers was the boy. In spite of three bad quarters Slash was high scorer of the game with a grand total of 20 points, 13 of them in that last period. He was tops all right.

Slash came limping over now and threw an arm around my wet shoulders. "You came through, Joe," he said. "You pulled that one out for us."

I shook my head again. "No, Slash. You're the guy that did it."

"I reckon you both had a little something to do with it all," drawled Tex Dallas.

Slash bent close to my ear. "I feel better about giving up the game now, Joe. You'll carry on. You're the one."

"Thanks, Slash," I said. It meant more than all the press notices in the world. "I only hope I can be half the player you are. You'll go on to be a big-time coach."

Slash Somers laughed. "Hell, you'll make 'em forget all about me next year, Joe. I'm going to stick around to help you do it."

But I knew better. I hadn't made them forget him at Carnegie or Piedmont, and I wouldn't make them forget him in pro basketball, either. Nobody could do that. And I didn't even want to—not any more.

RUNAWAY SPIKES

"You've got a clock in your head, kid, and wings on your spikes—everything you need to win—except what it takes for that second out of hell—the second when a champ is born!"



The taut tape snapped across Dan's chest. . . .

By
W. H. TEMPLE

HANOVER had a big squad that spring. Dan Castle, star miler and captain of the track team, came out of the fieldhouse to see the infield and cinder track crowded with men in sweat pants and jerseys, all in the black-and-red Hanover colors.

This was Castle's last year and he had

his plans. He wanted this to be a big year. He had done all right as a sophomore and junior, but now that he was captain he wanted this to be the best. Hanover had no indoor season but Castle had behind him a grueling fall of cross-country, and all through the winter months he had kept himself in condition in the gym. He'd put on six pounds, and while that might take a second or two off his time, it

would give him a little more stamina for the grueling mile run.

He went out on the track and worked easily. Most of the men were veterans, but there was one new man he hadn't seen before, a stocky fellow with a clumsy but powerful stride. He was doing a quarter-mile at full speed. Castle watched him finish and then walked over and held out his hand.

"Don't believe I know you," Dan said. "My name's Castle."

"Fenley," the other answered. "Duke Fenley."

"Just a tip," Castle said. "You'd better take it easy for a while. The ground is still soft. You don't want to tie yourself up with a Charley horse."

There was a satiric grin on Fenley's face and his manner became mockingly respectful. "Yes sir, coach," he said.

"I'm just the captain," Castle said.

"I know." Fenley's grin broadened. "That's very funny."

Castle stared at him a moment, then walked away. He didn't get the gag if one had been intended, but he wasn't concerned about it. He had other things on his mind.

Hanover was the smallest school in the Border Conference. They had a good track record but they had never been able to send a team to the Border Relays, the big event of the year. This year they had plans to send a picked squad of from ten to fourteen men. They even had hopes of scoring an upset team victory over some of the Conference mighty monarchs.

Dan Castle was thinking of that and of the Border Conference mile. It would be his last race before he'd hang up his spikes and go out and get a job. He jogged around the track, wanting to take off and run, but deliberately holding back. There was plenty of time.

For two weeks the squad had worked out under the watchful eye of coach Chuck Wiley, and then the veteran mentor

had announced that time trials would be held. The sprints and field events were finally completed and now came the call for the mile.

Dan Castle walked slowly toward the starting line. He would be running against Morrell and Hanley, two men who had been on the squad the previous year and who would not give him much competition. The time today would not be good, but this was just a formality with the mile.

He walked over to the line and Morrell and Hanley were there. There was also a third man, Duke Fenley, and he gave Castle that one-sided grin as though he had a private joke all his own.

"Didn't know you were out for the mile," Dan said. "The more the merrier. Let's make it a real race."

"It'll be real all right," Fenley said.

Wiley lined them up and then sent them off. Castle liked a quick start. He took the lead, coming up like a sprinter and taking the pole position. He slowed down then and began a steady pace around the track with the other men strung out behind him. Years of experience had given Castle a clock inside his head, and now, as he completed the initial lap, he knew that the pace was slow.

He wished they had a man on the squad who liked to go out there and be a pace-maker. He had hoped this new kid, Fenley, would pour it on and make him work. At the turn he took a quick look backwards, saw Fenley running in that clumsy stride and well in the ruck.

Dan stepped out a little, feeding that power to his legs, and behind him he heard Morrell and Hanley picking up the new pace. But they were just guys who liked to run and who weren't quite good enough. The pace would take it out of them.

Dan pounded around the track and saw the coach nodding approval. Dan went on into the third lap. He felt good but he would have liked to have had someone

pushing him. He was still all alone out there.

He rounded the back curve for the fourth lap and turned his head for another look. Morrell and Hanley were already fading, as he watched them. Fenley cut out and passed them both. But he was apparently content with that, for he cut into the pole again and plodded along.

Dan went into the far turn with the straightaway ahead of him and he had no complaints. He was in good shape.

Suddenly he heard a yell from some of the track candidates clustered in the infield watching the race. He wondered what it was about and then suddenly he knew. Duke Fenley had swung into view at his right shoulder. He'd come out of nowhere like a bullet.

Fenley knifed in abruptly toward the pole, and Castle almost broke his stride. In that instant Fenley widened his lead. Dan Castle swung wide to overtake him, but there was a big two-stride gap between them. That gap was still there when Fenley hit the tape.

Dan slowed down and walked over toward the coach.

"Four twenty-eight," Wiley said. "Good going this early in the season."

Fenley had come up to them. "I'd have done better," he said, "but I was waiting for Castle to start running. He's been at this a long time. I thought he'd be aiming for better than that kind of time. If I'd

known he was going to loaf, I'd have cut loose sooner."

Wiley scowled at him. "You're a good publicity man for yourself, son, aren't you?"

"He ran a good race," Dan said. "We can use him."

"You aren't kidding," Fenley said. "You wondered what I thought was funny the other day, didn't you, Castle? Well, now you know. You're captain and you can't make the team."

He turned and swaggered off. "Nice guy," said the coach. "He'll get cooled off. Only he did look pretty good out there, didn't he?"

Dan Castle told himself he had no need to worry. The men he worried about were from other universities, men he had come up against before. He didn't relish being licked by one of his own teammates. But it had been only a time trial. It was probably nothing but a fluke. Their first meet of the new season was two weeks away. It would be a different story then.

TWO WEEKS later Dan Castle walked out toward the track from the field-house. The meet with Margate was already under way. The sprints were over with and the half was just now being run off. He went down to the straightaway, jogged up and down, lifting his knees high.

He saw Tyler over on the field. Tyler was the man he had to beat, Margate's

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mile ace. They had met three times before and twice Dan Castle had taken him. But Tyler was reputed to be fast this year. If Dan hoped to win the Border mile championship he had to take Tyler. Today would show him what chance he had.

There were six men going in the mile. They lined up finally, three from each school. Dan Castle had drawn the pole and the gun went off, and he cut straight down the track, hugging the inside position, timing himself carefully. Tyler was a runner who had quite a finishing kick, and he had an idea what Tyler would do. A bad clocker, Tyler would probably hang on his heels, and then try to overtake him with that kick.

Dan pounded along on the cinders. He'd have to anticipate Tyler's sprint, keep him back there in second place. A runner swerved out then and passed him, a Margate pacemaker. But Dan didn't bite. He slogged along at the same pace, went into the curve and saw the runners lined up behind him. Duke Fenley was running fourth, two strides behind Tyler.

Dan hit the end of the first lap and he was still holding down second position. The pacemaker was far in front, but he was beginning to weaken now. Dan stepped up the pace a notch, pouring it on and hoping to wear down Tyler behind him. He heard Tyler matching his stride behind him. The runners were spreading out now, the weak sisters dropping far back as the second lap ended.

Dan Castle cut his stride. He had his race figured. A slow third quarter and then a final sprint for the tape, heading off Tyler when the Margate star made his bid.

Dan went past the pacemaker and was out front all by himself. It was a nice place to be, but it wouldn't be easy to stay there all the way. And Tyler wasn't biting and trying to take the lead now. He was smart enough to sit back there and wait.

The fourth lap Dan sensed that Tyler

was starting his bid. He notched up his own pace, still holding to the pole, racing down the straightaway. For just a moment he saw Tyler at his side and then he was gone again. But he didn't have him beaten yet. He knew Tyler would try again, probably break wide on the back curve.

He swung into it, heard the pounding footsteps and again he saw Tyler. This time the Margate man wasn't fooling. Dan could see the taut neck muscles, the grim set of his mouth.

He fought off the challenge. He pulled out all the stops and they were even going around the curve. They hit the straightaway and Dan fought for more speed. Tyler faded a stride behind and he was alone again.

Relief flooded through him as he went down the straightaway. The race was in the bag now. Tyler was hotter than a pistol, but he had beaten him off.

Then, suddenly, he was no longer alone. Tyler again, he thought incredulously, but this time it wasn't Tyler. It was Duke Fenley! No one else ran with that shambling stride that could eat up the ground.

Dan tried to put on more speed, but he had given it all to fight off Tyler. He watched Fenley inch ahead. He fought him all the way, right down to the tape, but there were two strides between them when Duke Fenley snapped the tape to win.

They announced the time—four minutes, twenty seconds. Castle of Hanover second, Tyler and another Margate man third and fourth.

Dan Castle recovered his breath. He went back to the fieldhouse and saw Fenley there. "Nice race," Dan said.

Fenley chuckled. "Kind of forgot about me, didn't you? When you licked Tyler you thought it was all over."

"I'll remember next time," Dan said.

"Not that it will do you any good," Fenley said. "I got the angle on this thing."

And I have the kick. That's what wins the mile. Be kind of funny, won't it, if you don't win a race this spring? I guess that would set some kind of a record—the team captain who couldn't win a race.”

Dan went on to the showers. He came out and dressed and the coach was there waiting for him. “Tough one to lose,” he said. “I have to hand it to Fenley, though. He can run. He won't take any coaching. I've tried to improve his form and he says he's good enough to win and he doesn't want me to mess with his form. But you'll take him. You'll go to the Border Relays all right.”

Dan stared at him. “Is there any reason why I shouldn't go?”

“We've never been able to get the money, and believe me, it does take money. This year we're going, but we're not taking the team. We're taking potential first-place men, an all-star squad. The top man in each event whom we think has a good chance to win. It means that I can probably take only one miler. But don't worry, you'll be the guy. There's no question about it.”

But Dan knew there was a question. Coach Wiley had to take the best man. He had to beat Duke Fenley or stay home. He had to beat that kick and he thought he knew how he could do it. It would be worth trying in the next meet.

TEN days later the Tech meet was under way. He had no one else to worry about except his own teammate, Fenley. The Tech miler had never been under four-twenty-five. It was going to be a team race today.

Dan Castle had drawn the outside lane. He had always come out fast, but today he held back. He drifted over to the pole, a stride behind a Tech runner. Duke Fenley was up in first place and he seemed a little uncomfortable up there, twisting his head once to look back for Dan Castle.

Dan grinned. He was going to enjoy

this race. He had always been up front and today he would stay back. When the last lap came he'd turn on everything he had left.

They went around the first turn and it was slow. Duke Fenley was loafing and Dan knew why. He didn't like it up front. He was deliberately slowing down in hopes that Dan would move up and take the lead.

That was not going to happen today. Dan trotted around and the first lap was over and the time, he knew, was bad. The two Tech milers in the race had passed Fenley, were running out front all by themselves.

They went into the second lap, and again Fenley turned his head. Dan plugged along behind him. It stayed that way into the third lap, and Dan knew that he would have to make his bid before long. Fenley would be trying to figure him, wondering when he would start coming.

Dan picked his spot. They came down the far straightaway and into the turn ending the third lap and Dan cut wide and went all out. But Duke Fenley had been ready for it. He went into his kick at the same moment. Dan caught up with him, but he could not go ahead. They went out of the curve and down the straightaway side by side.

They caught the leading Tech runners in the far turn, drove past them and on around the curve into the final straightaway, Fenley hugging the pole, Dan running at his side.

Then the tape was looming ahead of them. One last kick, Dan thought, and he had this guy. He flung himself through the air. The tape was right there in front of him, and then he saw it snap—across Fenley's chest!

Coach Wiley said, “Four-thirty-two. A heck of a race that was.”

“It was an idea,” Dan said. “A lousy idea.”

“You almost got him,” Wiley said.

“Almost isn't good enough,” said Fen-

ley, drifting up and overhearing them. "Dan Castle, the second place captain."

It had been a mistake, Dan thought. All he could hope to do was to run his own race, do the best he could and hope that before the season ran out he would have built up enough stamina and speed to hold off Fenley's terrific kick finish.

They had four meets before the Relays. Dan Castle ran well in every one and once he was clocked at four minutes and twelve seconds. But in that same race Duke Fenley came from out of nowhere and was timed in four-eleven. Four times Dan Castle came in second.

Crossing the campus one day, he met Duke Fenley. He spoke to him and Fenley snarled back, "Good politician, aren't you? Guess you feel pretty good. But to me you're still a chump."

"What are you talking about?"

"Going to the Border Relays, aren't you? I'm staying home."

Dan didn't get it. He sought out coach Wiley after class.

"Why sure," Wiley said. "After all, Dan, there isn't much to choose between you. The guy has never beaten you by more than two strides. You're entitled to go. You're captain. You've been on the team for three years. Fenley is a sophomore, and a wise guy to boot."

"And a better miler," Dan Castle said. "This deal is no good, coach."

"The team wants you," Wiley said. "This wasn't just my idea. They don't like Fenley."

"They want to win the Border Relays, don't they?" Castle said. "Fenley's the best man. And you're taking the best men. You're taking Duke Fenley."

Fenley dropped in to see Dan Castle that night. The sophomore seemed a trifle embarrassed and grateful. He mumbled his gratitude and quickly departed. The guy might be all right, Dan reflected. All he needed was a licking or two. Only he couldn't seem to give it to him.

The picked squad of track men left for the Border Relays ten days later, at one o'clock in the afternoon, a seven-hour train journey ahead of them.

Dan Castle saw them off. And then he went back to his room and pulled a suitcase out of his closet. He put a change of clothing in it and his track clothes. He left the dormitory and walked to the edge of town and stood there on the highway jerking his thumb at passing cars.

He got a ride in a battered jalopy for ten miles. He waited half an hour and a truck picked him up and carried him a hundred miles. He had three more rides with long waits between and at nine the next morning he was in the hotel where the Hanover track team was staying.

They were just coming downstairs and they stared at him.

"Any law against a guy coming on his own?" Dan grinned. "I'm not costing Hanover anything. Not a nickel. Only I'm missing some classes. You'll have to square the profs for me when we get back. I'm going to find a cheap rooming house somewhere in town."

"Like fish," said Duke Fenley. "They can put another cot in the room I'm in. And the room clerk better not give me any argument."

DAN CASTLE slept most of the day. He worked out on the track the next day and the following afternoon his event was on as the Relays wound up its two-day program. The stands were jammed for the mile. This was the crowd puller, for only top milers filled out the event.

Fenley was his cocky self again. "Glad to see you here, pal," he said to Dan. "I'm sorry it isn't going to do you any good."

Dan ignored the remark. There wouldn't be any pacemaker in this race, he knew. These boys were all smart runners. He was probably considered the smartest, the guy with the clock in his head.

The starter lined them up. Fenley was in the first lane, Dan Castle in the fourth.

Dan Castle came up swinging his arms, pulling himself up like a sprinter, knifing over to the pole. He had taken the lead.

He had counted on that. He raced along over the cinders. The others were spread out behind him in single file. He went into the back curve, his legs pumping steadily.

He tore down the straightaway, saw the coach standing down near the turn, staring at a stop watch in his hand. Dan looked at him and the coach shouted figures Dan couldn't hear and shook his head.

But he knew what the coach meant. Wiley was checking the time for the first quarter and he thought it had been too fast.

He went into the turn and twisted his head to get a look behind him. He saw indecision on some of the men's faces. He had them puzzled. They knew he had speeded it up, and they had to make up their minds. They had to decide whether to keep up with him, or hang back and hope he would run himself into the ground.

Tyler of Margate and Carpenter had decided on the latter course. They had slowed down and were now running last. The others had accepted the challenge. Fenley had taken second place.

The second quarter had to be slower, Dan knew. This was his last collegiate race. He had to finish even if he came in last. He cut the pace and went around and into the straightaway and on down toward the curve. And when he went into it he speeded up again, opened a gap between himself and Fenley.

Dan moved into the third lap. He had to save himself on this one, but he kept it as fast as he dared. And still he hadn't been able to lose Fenley! The big sophomore was plowing along right behind him.

The pace hit him suddenly. The only consolation he had now was that the others must be feeling it about as much. No one tried to pass him. They stayed in position as he swung around the far turn and

came down the straightaway and into the curve for the grueling pay-off lap.

Dan Castle was thinking of that Fenley kick. It would come whenever Fenley decided he could make the break. Early in the lap, or in the middle of it.

Dan came out of the turn and tried to forget how far there was yet to go. He stretched his stride and roared down the straightaway. He could hear the crowd roaring. He was still out there alone.

He hit the turn, and now every breath was laced with tongues of flame. His legs felt numb, like sticks of lead that stubbornly fought his will. The noise of the crowd increased in volume and his heart sank. There at his side was Fenley. It hadn't worked. The big guy was super-human.

He saw the tape ahead of him and he fixed his eyes on it and lurched forward with Fenley at his side. He was waiting for Fenley to break in front. He kept wondering why Fenley wasn't ahead. And then, suddenly, he couldn't see Fenley at all. The tape snapped across Dan's chest—and then cinders came up and hit him, tore at his face, chest and arms like a hellish rasp. He lay sprawled, motionless except for the fierce heaving of his chest.

Coach Wiley helped him to his feet, walked him across the grass. As though from far away he heard the announcement come over the public address system.

"The winner of the Border Mile—Dan Castle of Hanover. The time—four minutes, seven seconds. A new Conference record. Second, Stein; third, Fenley—"

The words were lost in the roaring of the crowd. Dan Castle finally got his breath back, but his legs were still rubbery. Duke Fenley came up.

"It took you a while to figure out a system," Fenley said. "And what a system! You just ran me into the ground. Brother, what a race!"

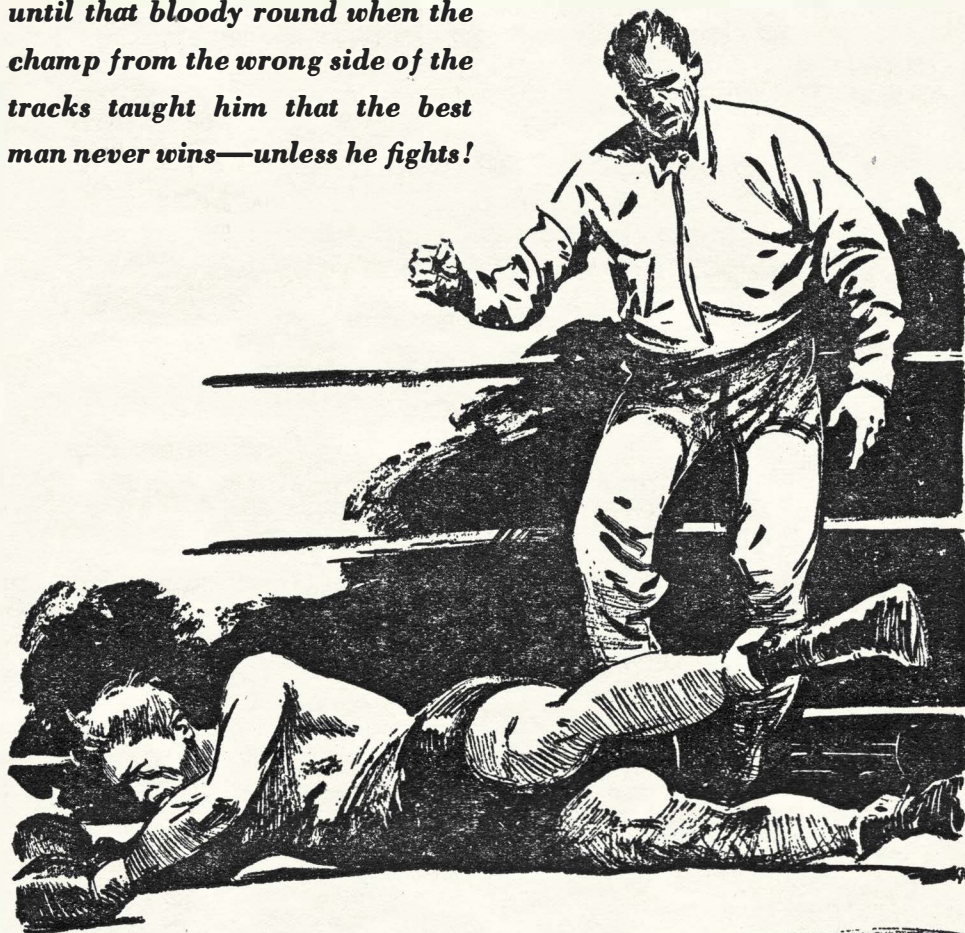
Dan Castle grinned. That last seemed to say it all.



LUCKY LEATHER



*The kid was a book-fighter—
until that bloody round when the
champ from the wrong side of the
tracks taught him that the best
man never wins—unless he fights!*

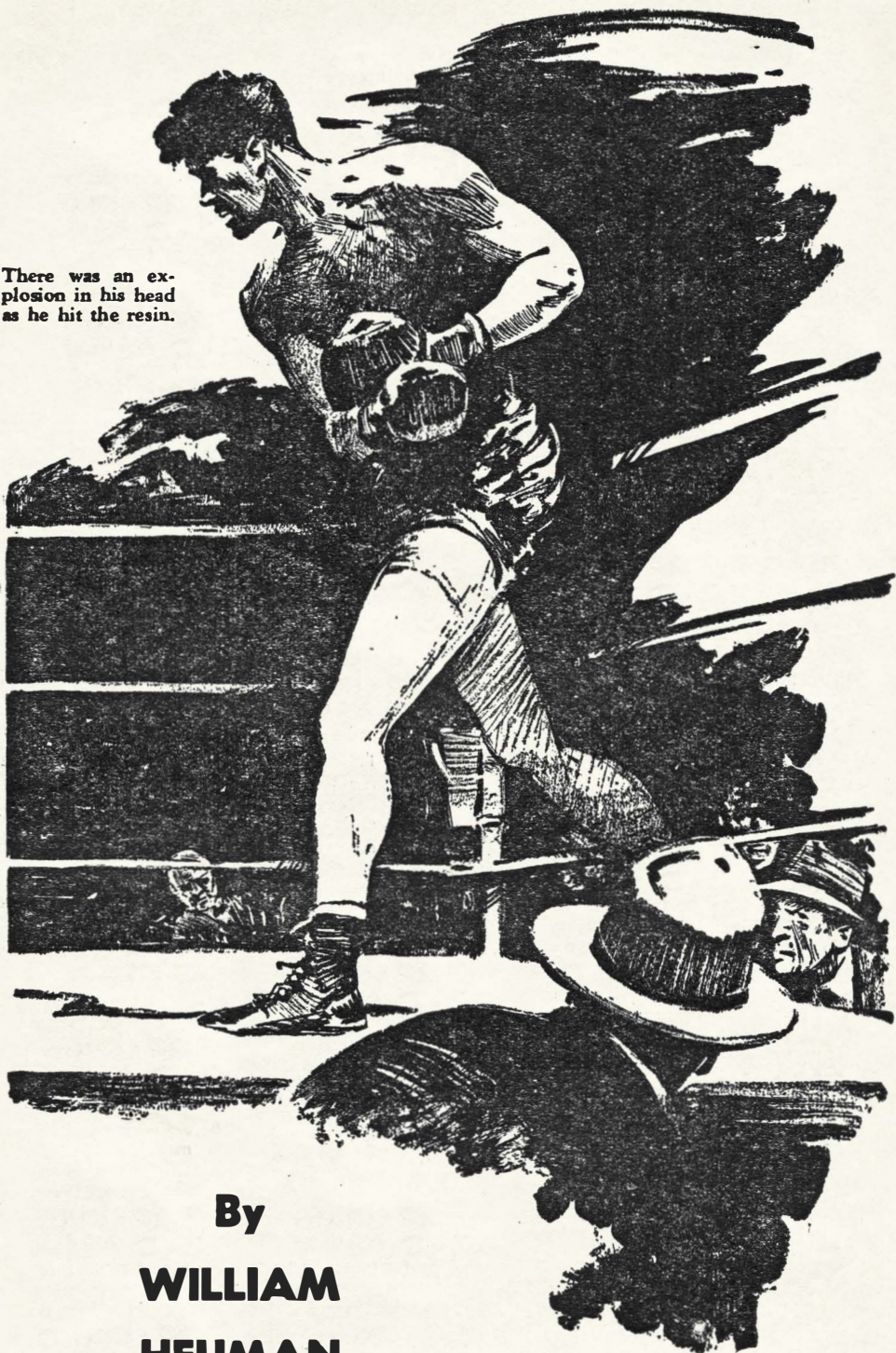


JOHNNY "HOOKS" McCOY came out of swank Bromwick Hall at five o'clock in the evening, books under his arm, horn-rimmed spectacles planted firmly on his nose. He came down the steps slowly, the way a man walks who is slightly groggy. He'd been at it for three solid hours, boning for the English mid-term exams.

Pausing at the bottom step, he took off

the glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief, and he was thinking ironically that it was a hell of a way to train for a welterweight match with Frenchy LeBlieu, champion of all Europe, and one of the leading contenders for the welterweight title. He wondered what the boys along Forty-Ninth Street and Eighth Avenue would say if they knew he was attending staid, ivy-walled Harwood U. while he

There was an explosion in his head as he hit the resin.



By
**WILLIAM
HEUMAN**

was in training for LeBlieu on the side.

Manager Joe Snell had protested long and volubly. Little Joe had tried to point out to him that education was good for a kid who wasn't goin' no place an' who had the time for it, but for a guy with the welterweight title almost in his lap, and big money beginning to pour in, it didn't particularly matter.

On the campus of Harwood U. he was known as John Barrett, a quiet sophomore who didn't bother anybody, didn't go in for sports, and who did a lot of studying. They didn't try to use him as the butt of their jokes because there was something in the steel-gray eyes behind those spectacles which warned them off.

He'd an awful time getting into Harwood in the first place. He'd had to study up in order to get his high school diploma. He'd had to hire a private tutor to work with him for six months in order to pass the entrance exams, but he was in, and it still seemed like a dream. He was still only twenty-two, but he'd been fighting professionally for four years, and he'd beaten the best in the welterweight ranks. He was in line for a shot at the title, and Joe Snell thought he'd take the champ without too much trouble if he got past LeBlieu, sensational French boxer.

He'd only been at the school for three months and the LeBlieu fight was his first one as a student. He'd been training in the town of Milton, eight miles away, where Snell had set up the camp. He drove back and forth, doing his training after school hours, getting in his road work early in the mornings, sometimes while it was still dark. Thus far no one had caught on, and he was hoping that they wouldn't. He wanted to lose himself in this school. He wanted to live the life of a normal undergraduate, and not as the public freak he'd become if it got out that he was a professional pugilist and a top-ranking one at that.

He glimpsed Eva Cranston swinging

across the campus, coming from the direction of one of the girls' dormitories. She was wearing a bright yellow sweater and she lifted a hand to him, turning in his direction when she saw him on the steps.

Johnny grinned. He'd met the girl the third day at Harwood, and quite by accident because he wasn't on the make. He'd bumped into her in the library as he was walking around one of the big book stands, and he'd discovered later that she was in his English class. They'd had a good time discussing the eccentricities of old Professor Boswell, English Two.

Eva said, "Still boning?"

She was the outdoor type, always brown, wore low-heeled shoes, a good-looking girl, and not the dance-floor type. Johnny always had the feeling that she looked and felt better with a tennis racket or a golf club in her hands. Unlike some of the other students at the university she made him feel at home.

"I'm all set for the big one on Friday," Johnny said. Friday was the English mid-term exam, and Friday was the day after the LeBlieu fight. He hoped that he'd still be looking presentable on Friday when he appeared for the test.

"I've been thinking," Eva said casually. "We have a few days off next week. I don't have any exams, and I thought I'd take a run home and see mother and dad. Will you be busy next week, Johnny?"

"Me?" Johnny gulped.

"I won't bite you," the girl chuckled. "My mother will be around all the time."

Johnny reddened. "You know I'd like to go," he said, "if you have room for me."

"We can always find room," Eva said carelessly. "Think nothing of it. Shall I ask Dad to come down with the car, or can I persuade you to drive me up?"

"I'm persuaded," Johnny smiled. "And—and thanks a lot."

"You won't have to dress up," Eva was saying. "We're not putting on the dog."

"Okay," Johnny grinned. "I'll wear my overalls. Maybe I can help your dad around the house."

"He'd love that," Eva grinned back at him. She waved a brown hand and then she was off.

Johnny went up to his room, deposited his books, and finished packing the valise he was taking with him. He drove to the airport immediately after supper.

JOE SNELL and the others were waiting for him. Snell, a small, black-haired man with a dead cigar always in his mouth, came bustling up, impatient as usual, fretting, worried. Snell had handled Johnny in his first fight as a pro. He'd led him along carefully, picking his spots. He'd hired one of the smartest trainers in the game, Manny Bates, to handle him.

The whole stable was here—Snell, Bates, a sparring mate, the likeable Sam Washburn, and Doc Wilson, good-natured, good-humored Doc, who worked in Johnny's corner every fight, and who could patch up a cut or open an eye faster than any medico living.

"Everyone is here?"

Snell said, "Where the hell did you think we was, Johnny? We been sittin' here damn near an hour waitin' for you."

"The plane doesn't leave for fifteen minutes," Johnny smiled at him. "What's the rush, Joe?"

"All right," Snell scowled. "So you could have got a flat, or somethin' could have happened to you. What the hell goes if you miss this plane tonight? You got to weigh in tomorrow mornin', kid. We should be in Chicago this afternoon already, restin' up."

"I was studying for an English exam," Johnny explained.

Snell sniffed. "That'll help a lot," he said, "when Frenchy LeBlieu starts throwin' left hooks at you. This is one hell of a way to train for a fight."

"Let him alone," Doc Wilson grinned. "He's in good physical shape. I've never seen him better."

"Take off them damned glasses," Snell scowled. "I always think I'm talkin' to somebody else."

Johnny took off the spectacles and put them in a case in his pocket. He looked at Sam Washburn and he said, "How's it going, Sam?"

"One boy an' one girl. Mr. McCoy. Twins!"

Johnny gulped. "You can go home if you want to, Sam," he said.

"Go home after we lick LeBlieu," Washburn grinned. "Plenty time, Mr. McCoy."

Manny Bates said, "You rest up like I told you today, kid? Just a little light exercise?"

"Plenty of sitting," Johnny smiled. He liked these men—every one of them. They were not like the Harwood undergraduates or the professors, but they had something. They'd all been brought up on the other side of the railroad tracks like himself, but unlike himself they were satisfied where they were.

Walking out to the plane a few minutes later, Joe Snell said apologetically, "You know how it is with me, kid. I'm on your side, an' it's not only for the money. I want to see you win. I want to see you get up there because you deserve it. Anything that's goin' to hurt your chances or hold you back I'm against. Maybe that's why I'm worried about this school business, but if it's what you want to do, it's okay with me."

Johnny threw an arm around the older man's shoulders. He said, "Joe, you're all right. I'd like to win a title for you."

Joe Snell had never managed a titleholder, but he'd come close several times. It was his high ambition. Johnny McCoy was thinking that he owed much to Snell—more than he could ever repay, even by winning the title for him. The little man-

ager had handled him the way a father handles his son. He was sometimes rough with his words, but he never meant them. When Johnny had been nineteen and the money started to roll in, it was Snell who steered him through the pitfalls until he was old enough to take care of himself.

Johnny wasn't forgetting those things.

Frenchy LeBlieu was the mauling, rushing type of fighter who'd bulled his way through a dozen victories on this side of the water. He was incredibly strong, and despite the fact that he was in his early thirties, he could keep up the pace from first round to last.

Johnny circled his man carefully the first round, feeling him out, working an experimental left. He was the better boxer by far, and strangely enough the more experienced fighter of the two. He was twenty-two, but he'd been boxing professionally for four years, and in the amateurs for several years before that, where LeBlieu had only entered the ring a few years ago.

LeBlieu worked a rapid feint with his left hand and then tried to swarm in, both hands working for the face or the body. He'd done this since the opening bell, and it was his only strategy. He hit very hard with either hand. He had to be watched every moment.

Johnny jabbed the left and drifted away. He went under LeBlieu's right swing, and came in with a hard left hook to the body which made the Frenchman wince a little.

That was the best blow of the round, and when he came in and sat down on the stool, Doc Wilson said, "You shouldn't have too much trouble, kid. You know too much for him, but watch his right hand. He brings it up pretty fast when you least expect it."

Johnny nodded. That was the way with unorthodox fighters. They could be very dangerous just at the moment when you thought you had them. They did the unexpected. They led with right hands, or

they threw punches from off-balance positions when an experienced boxer wouldn't be looking for them.

The second round was a repetition of the first, except that Johnny had more sting in his lefts, and he was increasing the pace. Tonight it was for twelve rounds, and he could go twelve without any trouble.

LeBlieu stepped on the gas also, and the crowd started to yell as the squat, game Frenchman tore in, shooting punches from all angles. Johnny met him in the center of the ring and swapped punches with him, giving as good as he took, and he saw the respect come into LeBlieu's eyes. Very few welterweights had been willing to stand up against the Frenchman since he'd come to this country.

Johnny caught LeBlieu with a right cross to the chin halfway through the round, and for a split second LeBlieu's knees started to sag. He recovered immediately, but the crowd had come up out of their seats and were cheering Johnny wildly.

WHEN he walked to his corner at the end of the round, they gave him an ovation. He wasn't too well known in Chicago, having fought there only once before, but already he was a sensation. He hit hard and he boxed, and he had the courage to stand up against a man.

Joe Snell said from behind the ropes, "Now don't get gay, kid. That frog is still plenty tough. You didn't soften him up with that right."

"I'll watch him," Johnny promised.

That was Snell—always careful, always worrying about his man, not wanting him to get hurt.

Johnny had the better of the fight during the next three rounds, taking each round by a fair margin. He was able to avoid LeBlieu's heavy punches, and he was able to counter himself. Again in the fifth round he caught the Frenchman with

a hard right which nearly floored him, but LeBlieu came back with a wild rally, showing that he still had plenty of fight left in him.

He caught Johnny with an unorthodox left to the eye in the sixth round, and the eye started to close. The punch was almost accidental, coming out of a half-clinch.

Doc Wilson examined the eye after the bell and he said, "I'm afraid you'll have a shiner tomorrow, Johnny."

Johnny McCoy frowned. "We'll have to work on it tonight, Doc," he said. "You're the man to take a swelling down."

"Look," Snell interposed, "to hell with that eye and with tomorrow. We still got LeBlieu up here and he's aimin' to win this fight."

LeBlieu never stopped trying. Up to the ninth Johnny had won seven of the nine, and the other two rounds were fairly even, but it hadn't been easy and the margins never were wide. LeBlieu's aggressive tactics meant much to the judges. A late rally by the Frenchman could still avert defeat.

In the tenth Johnny started to think about a knockout. LeBlieu had never been knocked off his feet since he'd gone into boxing. He was supposed to have a granite jaw. But several times Johnny had tagged him cleanly and he'd seen the effect. He had the feeling that if he followed up one of those solid rights he could drop LeBlieu for good.

Joe Snell kept warning him, "Be careful, be careful, kid. This guy's still dynamite."

Johnny saw his chance halfway through the eleventh round, with only one to go. He was still plenty strong.

LeBlieu was getting wilder all the time with those right-hand punches. Knowing that the fight was going against him, he wanted to turn the tide with one punch. He kept boring in, shoulders hunched, dark eyes blazing. He had long arms, and

the length of the arms, backed by those broad shoulders, gave him hitting power. He kept throwing the rights, and Johnny McCoy ducked them, rolled with them, stepped away from them, countering all the time with short, effective punches to the body and head.

He was watching LeBlieu carefully now, waiting for the good one. He wanted to get the Frenchman coming in, thus adding power to the force of his own blow. He had his right hand cocked and he used the left more and more to distract LeBlieu's attention from the right, and then he saw the opening—the big one!

LeBlieu leaped in with a left for the body, and Johnny pulled back very quickly. The Frenchman was off balance, his weight leaning forward, jaw exposed.

Johnny's right whipped out. He caught the Frenchman flush on the chin and those black eyes seemed to lose their luster. This was the moment. Moving in fast to follow up that first punch, Johnny launched another right, and then something struck him on the side of the face. He never saw the punch. It was hard, like the snap of a whip.

LeBlieu unleashed a right from the floor. Johnny saw this one coming, but was powerless to do anything about it. The first punch had dazed him and he couldn't get away from the second.

There was an explosion inside his head, and then he felt the sharp bite of resin dust on his back as he rolled on the canvas. The left side of his face felt paralyzed. He had no strength in his body.

He could hear the noise from outside the ring. A man in gray was moving in front of him and his hand was going up and down as he started to count. He couldn't make out the numbers until the referee reached five.

He could see the faces of Joe Snell, Doc Wilson and Bates, looking at him through the ropes. Snell was too dazed to say anything, but Wilson was motioning for him

to stay down. Bates was analyzing him critically as if to ascertain how much he had left after that knockdown.

LeBlieu had gone over to a neutral corner and was standing there, his long arms draped over the ropes, no particular expression on his face. It was as if he'd expected this all along and it was no surprise to him. He'd waited all night for Johnny to become careless, and Johnny had finally obliged him.

His head ringing, Johnny managed to get up on one knee. He rested there, looking at the referee, knowing what was in store for him when he got up. LeBlieu was known as a wicked finisher. When he had a man going, he piled it on and he never stopped until it was over. He had fully a minute and a half to work on his man in this round, and all of the next round.

Johnny got up at nine. He hadn't been tired all evening, but he was tired now. All of the strength seemed to have been taken from his body by those two terrific shots to the head. He wanted to lie down somewhere and stay there, and he wondered if he was yellow!

The referee brushed his gloves off, and then the Frenchman was on top of him. He had to remember all the things Bates and Joe Snell had told him during those years of training, the things he knew but had never had to use. He had to stay away from his man until his head cleared. He had to finish this fight on his feet, or his chances at the title were nil.

LeBlieu whirled in, swinging lefts and rights for the head. He hit Johnny three times before he could get inside, and those three punches hurt. They hurt because his body was weakened. He got his head against LeBlieu's chest and he held on with the Frenchman trying to throw him off, to line him up for another shot at the jaw.

Joe Snell was yelling now, screaming instructions, but Johnny could scarcely

hear him. LeBlieu's sudden rally had electrified the crowd. They were howling for a knockout—his knockout!

Johnny held on desperately until the referee broke them. He kept his head low, the way Bates had taught him, and he tried to duck in low and hold again until his head was cleared entirely.

LeBlieu hooked him with a left and then a right, drawing blood both times. Johnny went down on one knee, but this time he got right up again. It was as if those two punches had cleared his head instead of rendering him more stupefied. It was a strange thing, but Manny Bates said it happened occasionally, and there was no way of explaining it.

Johnny came up after that second brief knockdown, and he came up throwing punches. LeBlieu met him in the center of the ring and they hauled off at each other.

Johnny held his ground doggedly, stubbornly, knowing that it was the wrong thing to do at this time. He could feel those gloves ripping at his flesh, cutting him, and he had the horrible thought that he would look like something the cat dragged in when he had to take that English-Two exam on the morrow.

Johnny took the Frenchman's blows, and he didn't break ground, and then the bell rang and he was still on his feet. He walked back to the corner like a farmer coming in from the field after a hard day's work. He sat down on the stool and Doc Wilson went to work on him rapidly, efficiently.

Sam Washburn worked on Johnny's legs and body, massaging, dousing him with the cold sponge. They had about forty full seconds to work and it wasn't much, but Wilson could do in forty seconds what a physician took thirty minutes or more to accomplish. He'd been trained for this.

When Johnny straightened himself on the stool as the warning horn sounded for

the last round, he was feeling pretty good. Those precious seconds relaxing on the stool had done wonders for his tired body. He was young and he had marvelous recuperative powers.

Joe Snell started to talk then, while Wilson and Washburn worked on his body. Snell said quietly, "You got nothin' to worry about, kid. You're in better shape than he is for this round. He's over thirty. He shot his bolt tryin' to put you away last round."

Johnny stared across the ring. The Frenchman was breathing heavily in his corner, and there were fatigue lines around the corners of his mouth. LeBlieu was very tough, but he'd worked hard tonight; he'd done the forcing and that took a lot out of a man, and in the previous round he'd murdered his body in order to finish the fight.

"Go get him," Snell said. "Keep on top of him every moment till that bell rings. You can take it and he can't, and he'll be lookin' for you to be bicycling this round."

Johnny McCoy said, "We'll sew it up now, Joe."

THE bell rang and LeBlieu bolted out of his corner. Johnny met him halfway and he didn't jab. He started to shoot the punches into LeBlieu's surprised face. He kept throwing his gloves and he pushed forward, something very few men ever did against the Frenchman.

LeBlieu's thirty-year-old legs were tired. He fought doggedly to hold his ground, but Johnny was the stronger man now. He kept moving in, backing LeBlieu up for the first time since the fight started. He hooked LeBlieu with the left and he shot the right. He threw more hooks. He kept on top of the Frenchman every moment, never giving him time to get set and swing.

His face hurt; his right eye was swelling badly and would be closed before long, but he kept going in. He nearly floored

LeBlieu with a short left to the point of the chin. He hit his man twice with heavy shots to the body and the Frenchman grunted and looked sick.

LeBlieu was still up at the bell. He was still standing there, legs braced, his record of finishing every fight on his feet still untarnished. He smiled when the bell rang and then he came forward to embrace Johnny. He said something in French which Johnny could not understand. He did understand that smile of respect. LeBlieu was a gallant fighter and a good loser.

Johnny walked back to his own corner with the cheers of the crowd ringing in his ears.

Doc Wilson slapped his shoulder and said, "You don't look too pretty, but you won."

"Work on me," Johnny murmured. "I can't afford to have a mark on me when I go back to school tomorrow."

Wilson snorted. "What am I—a magician?"

He did work though. He worked in the dressing room after the fight with cold packs and hot compresses. He opened the eye and cleaned it out. He had methods of his own for reducing swellings on the face, and they were good.

Doc Wilson continued to work on him on the plane flying east. They arrived in Milton, and Joe Snell and the others went back to New York, Snell telling the usual story when he got there, that his fighter had gone out to his Nevada ranch for a rest. He was always very vague about the location of that ranch.

At eight o'clock in the morning Johnny was riding in his own car back to Harwood. He was at his desk in the examination room at nine sharp, and by eleven-thirty he was through. He went immediately to his room and slept till eight o'clock that night.

He read the papers when he got up. They spoke of his brilliant win over

Frenchy LeBlieu. They'd given him a big write-up because the fight had been on the sensational side, and he was now the leading contender for the crown, with a title bout looming for the fall or late summer.

He looked at himself in the mirror, studying his reflection there, comparing it with the pictures on the sports pages of the paper. There were a few tiny cuts on his face, and his right eye was slightly swollen. These were the only marks of the fight, and with the spectacles on the swollen eye scarcely showed at all. In another day or so no one would dream that he'd just emerged from a bruising battle with the toughest welterweight in the business.

He went out later in the evening, after giving Eva Cranston a ring at her dormitory. He met her on the campus and they walked into town together.

She said casually, "I didn't see you around yesterday, Johnny."

"I was out of town most of yesterday," Johnny told her. "How'd you make out in English-Two?"

"I'll know when the marks come through," Eva laughed. She was looking at him closely as they sat down at one of the tables in the Hop House. She said, "Don't tell me you have a black eye, Johnny."

Johnny McCoy laughed ruefully. "Wish I could say that it was," he chuckled. "Bumped my face in the dark the other night. I walked into the door when it was open. Next time I'll switch on the light first."

Eva shook her head. "I was hoping you'd say you were in a brawling fight with some roughnecks."

"A roughneck would kill me," Johnny said. "I steer clear of them."

Eva Cranston glanced down at his hands, folded on the table. They were not the hands of a bookworm, or a man who had never done any kind of hard labor. They were strong hands with good solid

wrists. There had never been any bones broken in the hands, because Doc Wilson knew how to bandage them, and Manny Bates had taught him how to hit so that they wouldn't be damaged.

"Sometimes," Eva said slowly, "you intrigue me, Mr. Barrett. I don't quite get you."

"Don't let it worry you," Johnny grinned. "Are we still going out to your place next week? Did your mother say she could put me up?"

"I told them we were coming," the girl said, "but don't expect too much in the way of entertainmet. Mother is usually pretty well tied up, and dad probably has some new hobby to ride now."

Johnny thought he understood. The father was a retired man, probably living on a little pension. He'd have his hobbies to occupy his time. The mother would be busy taking care of the house. That was all right.



Ten Count Tutor

2

THEY drove to Eva's home on Monday morning. Johnny McCoy rolled up the driveway and stopped in front of the cottage. It was about what he expected—not too big, but homey. They were out in the country. There seemed to be quite a bit of land around the house.

A big man with stooped shoulders and gray hair came through the door, his brown face lighting up with a big smile when he sighted the girl in the car. He called, "Eva! I wasn't expecting you."

Eva Cranston made no motion to get out of the car. There was a broad grin on her face. She said, "Johnny, meet Ernest, the gardener."

Johnny blinked, and then his face turned red. He said, "The—the gardener?"

Ernest came up, big hand extended. He

said warmly, "Glad to meet you, sir. Hope you enjoy your stay at Folly Farm."

Johnny cleared his throat. He looked accusingly at the girl beside him. "Folly Farm?" he repeated.

"A pet name father gave to the place," Eva explained. "Are the folks home, Ernest?"

"Your mother went up to the station to pick up the other guests. I believe you'll find your father out on the golf course."

"The other guests?" Eva murmured. "I didn't know we were having an affair."

"Nothing special. I don't believe any more than fifteen or twenty persons."

Johnny McCoy sat back against the seat. His throat was dry. He looked straight ahead of him and he said nothing. He saw the towers then, up above the trees, red and gray brick towers, six of them that made him think of a huge sanitarium or a summer resort. This was the house. And he'd asked if her mother had enough room for him!

The girl touched Johnny's arm. "I didn't expect a crowd," she apologized. "Mother is always doing something like this. She means well. When I phoned that I was coming home for a few days, I suppose she thought it would be nice to have a little house party—old friends and all that sort of thing."

Johnny recovered himself. He said, "That's all right. Don't worry about it."

It wasn't all right. It was all wrong. He didn't belong in this place with these society people. He didn't belong with Eva Cranston. She'd fooled him at the school.

They were getting out of the car when a baggy-looking man sauntered across the grass, swinging a single golf club, cutting at the grass with it. He wore decrepit knickers of the old style, and a sweater which was too loose for him. He had a pretty hard face, a solid jaw, and blue eyes beneath the spectacles. The eyes were very sharp.

Eva Cranston called, "Pop!"

Johnny got out of the car. He watched the girl run to her father and hug him for a moment, and then they both came back to the car. Johnny McCoy discovered that he was not much surprised. He was past surprises.

Eva said, "Johnny Barrett, meet my father."

"Glad to know you," Johnny said. He didn't think that the feeling was reciprocal.

Mr. Cranston nodded to him, took his hand, and said gruffly, "Glad to have you with us, Barrett."

He was looking at the spectacles, at Johnny's comparatively small size. He was not impressed.

"I understand," Eva said quietly, "that mother has arranged a little house party."

Mr. Cranston nodded grimly. "Another one," he growled, "and I suppose that ass, Eggleston, will be here, sounding off

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loudly on the manly art of self-defense."

Johnny McCoy pricked up his ears, but he didn't say anything. Eva explained.

"Tracy Eggleston is the son of a British earl. He's been in this country for about six months, and he's usually invited to all the affairs given by our set."

"And wherever he goes," Mr. Cranston scowled, "he brings along his sparring partner, and he has to give a demonstration of the ancient English art of boxing. He gives it whether he's asked to or not." The father glanced at Johnny quickly, then said to his daughter, "The crowd will be here within a half-hour or so. Why don't you and Mr. Barrett play a round of golf? You could duck them for a couple of hours."

"It's an idea," Eva said. She looked at Johnny.

"I don't play golf," Johnny had to say.

Mr. Cranston looked at him approvingly. He said, "A tennis player?"

"No tennis," Johnny said.

Mr. Cranston started to grin a little. "What do you do at Harwood?" he asked.

"I study," Johnny said.

Mr. Cranston gulped and he looked at his daughter. He said, "I think I'll dress." He left them then.

Johnny said quietly, "I'm afraid your father doesn't approve of me, Eva."

Eva laughed. "Father likes what he considers big he-men, the football player type. He'll get used to you, Johnny."

Johnny was standing in the doorway of the stables with Eva when the English-made car came up, two men in it. The man at the wheel was hatless. He had reddish hair and classic features. He sported a small wisp of reddish mustache, and his age Johnny guessed to be about twenty-eight, or possibly thirty.

The man with him was short, chunky, had a battered face, broken nose, scar tissue over his eyes. When he got out of the car and began to haul out the bags he

walked with the heavy tread of the man who'd taken a lot of beatings around the head, a man who had to think before each step. Johnny had seen his type in a dozen different fight gyms. He was the spar mate, the guy who was never good enough to make money in the ring, but who picked up a meager living going a couple of rounds in the gyms with better fighters.

Eva Cranston said, "There's Tracy Eggleston."

"Which one?" Johnny asked.

Eva laughed. "Gus," she said, "always accompanies Tracy. He's a kind of valet and sparring partner. They'll undoubtedly give an exhibition before the day is over."

"That's nice," Johnny said.

Eggleston was coming toward them, puffing on a cigarette which was held in a silver holder. Johnny judged him to be a middleweight. He was fairly tall for his weight. He spoke with a pronounced English accent, and he looked down at Johnny as he said, "How do you do," blurring the words together.

Johnny could see that he rather liked the girl, and that he'd been here before. It was very evident, too, that Mrs. Cranston favored him. She gushed when she spoke to him. He had royal blood in him, and he was undoubtedly considered a fine catch by society mothers.

AFTER that brief introduction, Eggleston studiously ignored Johnny. He directed his remarks directly toward Eva, thus including Johnny out. Grimly, Johnny took off the spectacles and wiped them. He was putting them on again when Gus came toward the car for more bags.

The spar mate glanced at Johnny suddenly, mouth open, and then his mouth closed again when Johnny put the glasses on. Gus went about his business, and Johnny knew what had stopped him. For a moment Gus thought he'd been looking at Johnny "Hooks" McCoy, the welterweight contender. He went about his

business, hauling out the bags, carrying them into the house. It looked as if Eggleston was staying for the summer.

Eva said to him as they were eating on the patio later in the afternoon, "I'm afraid you're not having too good a time, Johnny. I'm sorry."

Johnny looked at her. He was sorry, too, because he liked this girl, and he had the feeling that she liked him, but that was bad because they were from different worlds. When they returned to Harwood he knew that he'd have to avoid her from now on. He wondered what her society mother, who was angling for the son of an English earl, would think when she learned that her daughter had come home with a professional pug, a guy a little higher than Gus!

"Don't worry about it," Johnny assured her. "You know I'm a quiet fellow to begin with. It's just that I'm not used to all this."

"Mother is," Eva said slowly. "I'm not, Johnny, and neither is father."

"I didn't mean it that way," Johnny said hastily, "and I'm not condemning your mother, either. She's been very fine to me. It's just that—that I don't belong here."

Mrs. Cranston had an announcement to make, and everyone seemed to know what it was going to be. Tracy Eggleston was looking down at his plate modestly as the society woman spoke.

"I have persuaded Mr. Eggleston to give us a demonstration of the art of boxing," Mrs. Cranston said. "I'm sure those of you who have witnessed Mr. Eggleston before will be delighted to see him again, and those of you who have never seen him box are in for a delightful treat."

The patio was cleared of chairs and tables, and the guests were arranged in a big circle on the edges of what would have been the ring. Mr. Cranston was out on the edge of the crowd, looking for an excuse to get away. Johnny saw Mrs.

Cranston give him a look and he sat down.

"They're pretty close to the ring," Johnny observed to Eva. "They're liable to get blood spilled on those dresses."

Eva laughed, and then Eggleston came out so quickly that Johnny suspected the guy had had his ring togs on underneath his pants. He wore a pure white bathrobe, edged with crimson, and there was a picture of a British bulldog sewed on the back.

Gus followed him, somewhat shorter, walking like a dog behind his master, grinning a little. He had his gloves on already and he was set to go, only he wasn't quite sure where he was going. That was Gus.

When Eggleston took the robe off, Mrs. Cranston let out an audible gasp. It was the body beautiful. Johnny studied the man. He had a nice build. He undoubtedly kept in good physical condition because he lived for these exhibitions.

One of the guests was persuaded to act as referee, and he stepped to the center of the space, laughing, clapping his hands to start them off.

Johnny found himself leaning forward a little, wondering. A guy with a build like that could conceivably have something. Eggleston had good legs. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him. He was well-muscled, and he was not muscle-bound. He could have been good, but he was a bum.

Johnny watched Gus walk into the Englishman's left jabs, sticking his face directly into the path of the punches. He watched Eggleston flash around the ring, moving his arms and legs very rapidly, jabbing, feinting, shooting rights and lefts, avoiding Gus's crude counters.

It was all flash, all color, and no substance. The guy was a powderpuff hitter. Like many other fighters Johnny had seen, he looked good zipping around the ring. He didn't look so good when the other guy walked into him, knocked his guard

down in a corner, and went to work on him. He was convinced that even Gus, obviously paid to absorb punishment, could have done that.

The audience applauded politely, and Johnny yawned. He wasn't sure, but he thought Eggleston saw that yawn as he was in a clinch with Gus. The Englishman's blue eyes snapped.

They boxed for three rounds, and then Eggleston put on his robe, draping it across his shoulders so that his beautiful physique was not concealed. He stood that way, chatting with the guests, and every once in a while glancing in Johnny's direction. Then he came over.

"Do you box, my dear fellow?"

Johnny had been expecting trouble and he regretted that yawn now, but he'd been so incensed by the tremendous vanity of the man that he couldn't help it.

"A little."

Mr. Cranston was edging up closer, having noticed the expression on Eggleston's face. He was looking at Johnny and then at the Englishman.

Tracy Eggleston said gently, "Would it be too difficult to persuade you to box a few rounds with me, chappie?"

Johnny McCoy took a deep breath, knowing what he was in for eventually. Sooner or later the Cranstons would have to know who he was, and if it were revealed today the worry would be over.

"It shouldn't be too difficult."

EVA CRANSTON was staring at him in amazement. She whispered, "Johnny!" in a startled voice.

Eggleston was smiling coldly, triumphantly. He said, "My man has an extra pair of trunks in his bag." He turned and signaled to Gus, who shuffled over, still shaking his head, sniffing through his battered nose.

Johnny stepped off the patio and started toward the garages, Eva following him. The girl said quietly, "You know he just

intends to make a fool out of you, Johnny."

"He can try," Johnny said. "Don't worry about it."

He walked on with Gus, and he heard Gus call back over his shoulder, "Sucker."

In the garage dressing room Gus took out a pair of trunks and fight shoes. He looked at the size of Johnny's shoes and he said, "These ought to fit you, kid."

"Thanks," Johnny said.

"Know how to put 'em on?" Gus grinned, tossing the trunks in Johnny's direction.

"I'll figure it out," Johnny said. He started to undress while Gus was taking his shower in the stall nearby. He took off the spectacles and put them in the case in his pocket. He was in the fight trunks and he'd just finished tightening the shoelaces of the shoes and was straightening up when Gus came out of the shower stall. He was wiping his face with a towel and he was humming a little tune. He stopped, looked at Johnny, started to hum again, and then stopped on a sour note. He came forward, mouth open, eyes popping. He said weakly, "Hooks! Hooks McCoy!"

Johnny smiled grimly. He started to move around the room, shadow boxing, working up a little sweat even though he knew he didn't have to for a guy like Eggleston.

Gus watched him, eyes still wide, too dazed even to speak now. His eyes dropped down to the feet, to the beautifully clever footwork for which Johnny had always been noted. Gus said softly, "I seen you put away Leo Fink, Hooks. I seen you in that Kid Boyle fight."

"That's nice," Johnny said. He walked over to the table and he picked up the gloves Gus had discarded.

"Holy Smokes!" Gus whispered. "This guy's gonna git moidered!"

"Lace them on," Johnny said, holding out his hands.

"I don't get it," Gus muttered. He came over to tie on the gloves.

"I don't get it, myself," Johnny McCoy said half-bitterly. "Why the hell does it have to be this way?"

Gus didn't get that either. He started to dress hurriedly in order to be out for the fight. He was beginning to grin now. He said, "For six months I wanted to see this dog get it. Today's the day."

Johnny slipped into Gus's old robe and started across the lawn. Eva was waiting for him, standing with her father on the edge of the patio. She looked at him in the robe, and he didn't look like much. The robe was very loose, much too big for him.

Mr. Cranston said nervously, "He looks better than he is. You go in and hit him on the chin and—"

"Father!" Eva gasped.

Tracy Eggleston was coming toward them. He said condescendingly, "Shall we make it two minute rounds, my dear fellow? The gloves get rather heavy after the first two minutes."

"Three minutes will be all right," Johnny told him.

"Shall we go?" Eggleston smiled grimly.

They went out into the square and Johnny took off the robe. He heard the murmur go up from the audience. Eva Cranston was staring at him. Mr. Cranston's eyes were bulging. Johnny looked like a fighting man now. He was somewhat heavier in the shoulders than Eggleston, and about two inches shorter. His stomach was flat, hard. There were long, rippling muscles in his back and under the armpits, running down to the trunk line. There was speed in his legs.

Eggleston was studying him, too, not liking what he saw. Eggleston thought he had challenged a bookworm.

The referee clapped his hands and stepped back. Johnny started to move in at his man. He ducked under Eggleston's long left. He slipped by another left, and then his own left snaked out, hard, catch-

ing the Englishman on the tip of the nose. His legs went all out of kilter and he looked like a doll on a string. He was blinking as he recovered, and his nose was red.

He tried to box, very fast, working his gloves the way he'd worked them against Gus. He jabbed and feinted and danced away with lightning rapidity, but he didn't land. Johnny ducked some of the punches cleanly, rolled with others, pulled away from short jabs, and then jabbed the taller man without any effort. He was almost afraid to throw his right hand for fear of breaking Eggleston in half.

After about a minute and a half of this Eggleston slowed down, having accomplished exactly nothing, and when he stopped, Johnny suddenly stepped in, feinted with the left, nearly dropping the Englishman, feinted again, and then jabbed him on that sore nose. That left jab was a hard, stiff thrust, and again Eggleston had to dance to stay on his feet.

Eggleston forgot himself and led with a wild right. Johnny went under the glove and popped him on the nose. Then he stood still and made Eggleston miss half a dozens blows in a row.

The Englishman was desperate, knowing that he was being shown up. He threw punches from all angles, and then once, when Johnny feinted with his left shoulder, he nearly fell in his excitement to get away from the expected punch. Somebody laughed and Eggleston's face went red.

He couldn't hit Johnny, and he couldn't avoid that tantalizing left jab, and still Johnny hadn't used his right. He let it go once just before the round was about to end, and he didn't throw it too hard. The man in front of him had a glass jaw, and it did not require much to upset him.

The right followed a left hook to the body. Eggleston's eyes went glassy. He sat down with a thump and he continued to sit there, staring straight ahead of him. The fight was over!

Gus, who'd been watching from the rear, couldn't contain himself. He yelled, "Nice goin', Hooks!"

Johnny put on his robe. They were helping Eggleston up off the patio floor, but he was still groggy from that short right. He was not cut up or hurt in any way, but his dignity was destroyed.

Johnny turned to walk back to the garage. He saw Eva and Mr. Cranston staring at him. Mrs. Cranston was standing with them now, and Mrs. Cranston was looking at him disapprovingly.

Eva said slowly, "Hooks?"

"Hooks McCoy," Johnny told her quietly. "Welterweight contender for the championship."

"A pugilist!" Mrs. Cranston gasped.

"That's it," Johnny said. "Pleased to meet you," He lifted his hands in mock salute and he walked on. He didn't look at Eva any more, knowing then that that was finished. He was thinking bitterly as he walked to the garage, *Why the hell couldn't Ernest have been her father?*



Hungry Mitts

3

AFTER dressing he went right up to his room and packed his bag. Mr. Cranston was standing near the stairs when he came down, puffing on a cigar. He looked at the bag and then at Johnny.

Johnny said to him, "I made a mistake, Mr. Cranston. I didn't know your daughter was heir to billions."

"Millions," Mr. Cranston grinned. "You make me out a rich man."

Eva came into the room and she started to bite her lips when she saw the bag. She said slowly, "You don't have to leave, Johnny. You're very welcome here."

"Leave!" Mr. Cranston scowled. "Hell, you're the first man she ever brought into this house."

"Let's stop being polite," Johnny said tersely. "I made a mistake. Eva made a mistake. And now it's all over. I'm going back to my side of the track." He said to Eva, "How is Mr. Eggleston?"

"He's all right," Eva murmured.

"I didn't try to hurt him," Johnny said. "I pulled the punches all the way."

"I—I'm sure you did," Eva said.

Johnny licked his lips. "I'll see you around," he said. "I had a nice time today—the first part of it." He walked down to the garage, rolled his car out, and drove away. He watched the highway ahead of him, steering mechanically, a kind of sickness running through him. He'd been so sure everything was going to turn out all right, and now the whole thing had blown up in his face. He wondered how long it would take for the reporters and the photographers to get down and ruin the rest of it.

It took them less than twenty-four hours. He came out of the library the next afternoon at two o'clock and he saw the two photographers waiting for him on the steps. One man he recognized as Dip McNeil, a well-known leg man for a big city paper.

McNeil said, "Will you stand for a few, Hooks?"

"What kept you?" Johnny asked him half-ironically.

"Hell of a time getting a plane to this place," McNeil chuckled. "You mind lifting the hat a little, I want to get those cheaters in. They look becoming."

"Make it snappy," Johnny said. He pushed his hat back so that they could see his face clearly. He held the books under his arm the way McNeil wanted him to. Then he posed, sitting on the steps, looking at a book, and the flashlights popped.

Curious students started to gather around, and there was nothing he could do about it. The story was out. The press had always been good to him. They'd played him up in all of his matches. They'd

played fair with him, and McNeil and his partner were the first men on the scene. They rated the break. If he didn't pose, they'd get him anyway and there would be hard feelings.

Dip McNeil said, "That's enough, Hooks. Thanks a lot."

Johnny spotted Eva Cranston in the scattered crowd below the library steps. She was looking up at him. She'd come back to school instead of staying for the house party. Johnny nodded to her, but he didn't go over.

He was walking across the campus toward the dormitory when Sam Fisher, sports writer for the Globe, fell in beside him. Fisher had evidently just come from the little airport at Milton.

"Hooks, what's the gag?"

"Is it a gag," Johnny asked him quietly, "for a guy to try to get an education?"

"It's a gag," Fisher observed, "when the guy uses a phoney name."

Johnny McCoy said tersely, "Sam, how would you like to attend school here and have every damned freshman on the campus pointing you out to his parents when they came to the visit? How would you like to live in a goldfish bowl?"

Fisher grimaced. He was looking at the ground as he walked. He said quietly, "I get it, Hooks, and I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to use this story."

"If you don't use it," Johnny told him, "somebody else will. You got a job, Sam. I have a job, too. I'm not ashamed of mine."

He left school that night. For an hour he deliberated whether he should give Eva a ring, or drop in and see her for a few minutes before driving away. He decided against it. There was nothing to be gained. She would try to be very nice because she could not be any other way, but she'd be a fool not to recognize the gap between them now.

Johnny drove back to New York, and he went straight to Joe Snell's hotel apart-

ment, and the little manager was excited.

"So you got my wire, kid?"

"Wire?" Johnny asked, mystified.

"Yeah," Snell grinned broadly. "I sent you a wire this afternoon, askin' you to get up here if you could to sign the papers."

"What papers?"

"The champ," Snell chuckled. "He wants it now, within a month. He don't want to wait till the fall like we figured he would. He thinks if he gets you now he'll be better off. He might slip more by the fall."

"Okay," Johnny said.

Snell stared at him. "Look, kid. I said this is the champ. We're fightin' the champ maybe in a month!"

"I know," Johnny said. "I'm ready to start training whenever you say, Joe."

Joe Snell rubbed his jaw. He said, "You didn't get my wire, kid. What brought you back here?"

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"I quit school," Johnny told him. "I'm through. I'm back where I belong."

Snell stared at his face. "Sure," he said, but he wasn't enthusiastic, and he should have been. He repeated, "Sure, kid. That's all right." He didn't ask why. There was something in Johnny's eyes which prevented him.

Johnny signed the papers with the champ the next day, meeting him for the first time. The champ was in his early thirties, but he'd been fighting a long time. He had a long, lantern jaw and he was a pretty nice guy. He'd had the title for three and a half years and it was a long time. He said, "If I lose, kid, I'd like to lose it to you, but I sure don't figure on losing."

"Good luck," Johnny said.

He couldn't wait then until Snell opened the camp. He mooned around the hotel for two days, and then he told Snell he was driving up the next morning even though Doc Wilson, Bates and Washburn weren't due there for two days.

Snell said dubiously, "Okay, Johnny, if you want to get at it right away. That's a good sign."

Johnny thought it would help when he got under way, when the genial Doc Wilson and Manny Bates arrived, and they started to move, but it was still bad. He was listless. He had no pep even though he tried. He discovered that spirit was not something you turned off and on the spur of the moment. You either had it or you didn't. He didn't. He had his mind on too many other things.

After the first week, Bates said, "Maybe we'll take a few days off, kid. Maybe you're run down and need a little rest. Forget about boxing."

Johnny turned down the suggestion. He didn't need physical rest and he knew it. There were other things working on him, and he couldn't do anything about those matters.

Joe Snell had a talk with him after

the second week. He was sluggish in the ring and it wasn't because he didn't try. He worked as hard or harder than he'd ever worked for a match. He was in good physical shape, but that wasn't enough.

Snell said, "Look, kid, we're fightin' the champ. We got to start movin' here. The champ is no washed-up bum. He figures he can lick you. That's why he wanted the match now. Manny says you don't look right in there."

"I got plenty of time," Johnny said. "The fight's still two weeks off."

"Time ain't what we need in this camp," Snell said quietly. "Now, kid, is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so," Johnny smiled. "Thanks for asking, Joe." He was down now, at the bottom of the heap, and he didn't want to get up. He didn't care any more. The title meant nothing.

"We're all on your side, kid," Snell told him. "Remember that."

Johnny McCoy remembered it, but it didn't help. Reporters came down to get a line on him, and they went away shaking their heads. They'd never seen him so slow or so sluggish.

A SUMMER moon hung high in the sky when Johnny McCoy walked down between the rows of seats in the packed stadium, wearing the usual gray-and-maroon bathrobe Joe Snell had given to him as a Christmas present many years before, with *Hooks McCoy* inscribed on the back in maroon letters.

Bates, Snell, Doc Wilson and Washburn followed him, and they walked like four pallbearers, Washburn sadly humming a little tune.

The champ was already in the ring, dancing around in his corner, working his shoes into the resin, testing the ropes. He smiled at Johnny when the challenger climbed through the ropes and came over to shake his hand. He said, "How's it Hooks? Bring your smelling salts?"

"In my pocket," Johnny said, "and I have an extra bottle for you, champ."

Johnny went back to his corner and he was standing there, rubbing his shoes in the resin box, looking over the crowd. He looked down and straight into the eyes of Eva Cranston. He felt suddenly weak.

She was smiling up at him, sitting with her father. Mr. Cranston was grinning, waving a hand to him. Eva looked older, more mature. It had been quite a while since he'd seen her.

They were calling them to the center of the ring, and all Johnny could do was nod briefly to her. He didn't hear a word that the referee said. The champ was standing in front of him, looking down at his gloves, and the champ wasn't smiling now. This was the champ's bread and butter. He was a business man and the time for business was at hand.

The bell rang. Johnny turned around and he saw the champ coming out of the far corner, unhurried, left shoulder up high, right hand cocked, the craftiest ring-man in the game, and the cleanest.

Johnny watched his left hand, moving out, and he started to remember the things Bates and Snell had drilled into him during those weeks at the camp. They'd watched pictures of the champ in action. He had a hard, accurate left, and it had won many a fight.

Johnny watched that left. But the champ swung his right for the jaw. He'd led with a right, a long, swinging right which he brought up with terrific force. Johnny saw it coming, but he was too dumb-founded to do anything about it.

There was the explosion inside his head and he was down. He was rolling over toward the ropes. He could think, but not clearly, and the one thought was going around and around. He'd led with a right! The champ had led with a right! It was unorthodox. But he'd done it and caught Johnny flat-footed!

Bud Chandler was counting as Johnny

lay on his back, blinking up into the bright lights. His head felt heavy and he could scarcely lift it from the floor. He could hear the chant, "Three, four, five. . . ."

He managed to sit up and his head pounded all the more. He looked over into his corner and he saw Snell watching him, little Joe Snell who'd wanted a champion, and who'd nearly had one.

Snell wasn't bitter. He wasn't disillusioned. He was concerned because his boy had been hurt. Snell wasn't worrying about the money he'd lose if Johnny failed to win the title for him.

It was the same way with Bates, Doc Wilson and Washburn. They were his gang. They'd stuck with him all the way. They'd been worried about him, but he hadn't worried about them. Obsessed with his own troubles, he'd selfishly forgotten all about them and their dreams. They'd wanted a champion because a champion meant something to them. Something more than the money, more than basking in reflected glory.

Bud Chandler was up to seven when Johnny got one knee up off the floor. At nine he got up and Chandler wiped off his gloves.

The champ came out of the far corner, unexcited, still the polished craftsman. He had to set his man up for the finish shot now, and he had plenty of time to do it. He maneuvered around the ring, feinting with his left, and Johnny stood his ground, watching him, his senses still dulled. He was weak in the body from that right-hand punch and he would go down again if the champ landed cleanly. He knew it and the champ knew it.

The champ started a left jab, changed it to a left hook, and the glove thudded into Johnny's body. It hurt, but the right which followed like chain lightning was worse. It exploded high on the face, a little too high.

Johnny rolled again when he hit the floor, and he could feel his face begin to

swell up. He wondered if he had a broken jawbone.

The crowd was going wild. Bud Chandler started to count. He was up to six when Johnny got up, holding his gloves up to be wiped. He was in for it now and he knew it, but he wasn't flinching. He had the strange feeling that this was a kind of scourging which he deserved, and that after he'd had it he'd be a better man.

His mind still befuddled, he fought automatically, digging deep down to remember all the things he'd learned through the years, the defensive tactics which would enable him to weather this storm till his head cleared.

He held and he rolled and he ducked and he dodged. The champ hit him plenty, but he stayed on his feet, and as the round drew toward a close the champ redoubled his efforts to finish it, knowing that in his corner Johnny McCoy had the finest conditioner of men in the world.

Crowding Johnny into a neutral corner, the champ opened with a flurry of hard rights and lefts which nearly settled the matter then and there. Johnny could feel those punches. The champ was pouring on everything he had.

Johnny was still on his feet, swaying, rocking, rolling with the punches. He walked to his corner and he sat down. He looked through the ropes at Eva Cranston. Mr. Cranston was standing up, cheering, and they were cheering him for his gallant stand. He'd taken it the way a real fighter takes it, and he was ready for more.

Joe Snell said calmly, "Okay, so he threw more punches than he's thrown in his last three fights. How long can he do that—a guy thirty-three?"

Doc Wilson looked into his face and said, "Who am I, Johnny?"

"Quit kidding," Johnny said. "How is that left eye?"

Wilson laughed. "What's an eye to a kid who's going to win the title tonight."

"You work under his left," Snell said.

The warning buzzer sounded. Doc Wilson stuffed the rubber protector into Johnny's mouth. "Give him hell, kid."

JOHNNY McCOY moved out of his corner with a kind of mist before his eyes. He didn't feel bad at all, physically, and he realized then that Wilson had done a wonderful job on him in those brief seconds.

The champ slid in front of him, stabbing with the left, the right hand cocked. Johnny McCoy moved around that left. He fainted with his own left and he tore in suddenly with a left and a right to the body.

The champ smiled faintly. It was as if he saw the handwriting on the wall, and he knew what it meant, but he was going to stand by his guns to the bitter end. The champ was like that.

Johnny started to crowd him. He was the younger and the stronger man. He hit harder than the champ, too, and he started to work on the body. He took punches because the champ never missed an opening. He took even more than he handed out, but when he hit the champ in the body the man felt it. A left hook to the pit of the stomach made him lift his left foot off the floor.

It went on that way through the third, fourth, fifth and sixth, Johnny forcing the fighting, gradually taking the play away from the champ. With each succeeding round the champ became slower and slower. In the ninth he appeared to be played out. He came from his corner at the bell, moving like a man who wanted a place to sit down and rest.

Johnny McCoy tried to find him that place, and then, suddenly, the champ galvanized into life. He drove in, shooting rights and lefts to the head, a wild flurry of punches which drew the crowd to its feet, howling. A right to the head upset Johnny. He sat down on his haunches in his own corner, surprised more than hurt,

his respect growing for this man who would not be beaten.

He got up at the count of six, and he was very cool. The champ was smiling at him when they met in the center of the ring. The crowd was urging the champ to move in, to finish it, but the champ had shot his bolt this time. His arms were like lead. Those body punches had slowed him down and he had nothing left.

Johnny circled him, looking for an opening, and it looked as if he had just floored his man and was trying to finish it, instead of the opposite. He hit the champ with a left hook to the body, and then he came in fast with a right to the jaw. He landed twice more to the head and the champ started to totter.

He had less than a minute of the round to go when he saw the opening. The champ dropped his guard when Johnny feinted with his left. The jaw was exposed for one brief moment, and Johnny let go with the right.

When he walked to the far corner he knew that he'd not have to fight any more tonight. The announcer proclaimed, "Winner, and new champion, Johnny 'Hooks' McCoy!"

Joe Snell said, "That's my boy."

Johnny McCoy was in the dressing room when Manny Bates came from the door and said, "There's a guy out there looks and talks like J. P. Morgan. He's got a girl with him. Wants to see you."

Johnny gulped. "Mr. Cranston?"

"That's the name," Bates nodded.

"I—I'll see them," Johnny murmured.

He was sitting on the rubbing table when they came in. He had the robe draped over his shoulders. His face was battered and Doc had been working on the bruises.

Eva came in first. She came over and she held out her hand. She said, "I'm glad to see you, Johnny."

Doc Wilson and Washburn moved away, the Doc suddenly getting busy with his bag at the other side of the room.

Mr. Cranston waved a hand to Johnny and then started to talk to Joe Snell.

Johnny said, "I've missed you, Eva."

"Yet you've stayed away," Eva accused.

"Because I know where I belong,"

Johnny told her. "I—"

"You're a fool," Eva interrupted.

"What has money got to do with it? You have money, too. You're making it. You're the champion now."

"I come from a different level of society," Johnny tried to tell her. "I don't have the education."

"You were getting it," Eva told him, "and you ran away."

Johnny reddened. "I didn't want that kind of publicity," he said.

"You wouldn't have it for long," Eva informed him. "You would have been a novelty for a few weeks, and then you'd be just another student. We have an Indian prince and a Zulu studying at Harwood."

"Do you think so?"

"Try it next fall," Eva urged.

"I can try it," he said.

"Father and I stopped in mainly to invite you to a house party next week at our place," Eva said coolly.

"But—" Johnny muttered.

"Either you come," Eva smiled, "or I invite Tracy Eggleston, and I'll ask him to box for us, too."

"Not that," Johnny grinned.

"Mother will be delighted to have the world's champion come to her house," Eva chuckled. "She didn't know you were famous, Johnny."

Joe Snell was coming over with Mr. Cranston now, and Snell was saying, "He'll be a great champion, Mr. Cranston. I know this boy." He grinned at Johnny and he said, "How's it, champ?"

Johnny McCoy looked at Eva Cranston. He said, "You'll never know, Joe."

Joe Snell was a married man. He thought he knew. He grinned, saying, "Okay, champ. I'm on your side."

THE PLUNDERER'S LAST RIDE



*When too much horse meets too much jock
down that last long thundering stretch, it's
win—or oblivion—for two!*



JOHNNY CLEMENS looked at his face-up cards—a pair of aces, a six and a king. He glanced around the board. Maronna had a pair of tens, a jack and a five. Georgie Silvers had eights, a deuce and a four. Johnny pushed five hundred dollars worth of chips into the pot. He said, "It'll cost you, gents."

Maronna, big and fleshy, his hat on the back of his head, shoved in five hundred and said, "It's gettin' late. Let's make it interestin'." He put forward another thousand dollars.

It was Silvers' turn, and he had trouble making up his mind. He looked at Johnny's cards, then Maronna's, and shook his head in doubt. Finally he said, "I'm flat, except for the horse. What'll you give me on Timetable?"

Maronna said, "What was his last claimin' price?"

"Three thousand."

"Three thousand for a skate that ain't won a race in two years. Okay. You got three grand worth of credit."

Silvers made out an IOU for fifteen hundred, dropped it in the pot. Johnny was content. He was sitting there loaded, and they were walking into him. He counted his remaining chips and said, "All of it, gents. We'll see that and up it fifteen hundred."

Maronna looked at him through the fat-

lidded eyes for a long moment. He started to turn up his card, then stopped. He pushed fifteen hundred dollars into the pot and leaned back in his chair.

Silvers spread his hands. He said, "I'm in a swindle but I'm a hopeful man. I think you two are kidders." He pulled fifteen hundred dollars worth of chips from the pot and piled them on his IOU. "I will teach you not to cheat an honest man. What the hell have you got?"

Johnny's three aces were, as he had known they would be, high. Maronna had tens and jacks. Silvers had three eights. They looked at him in disgust.

Johnny said to Silvers, "Send me a bill of sale for that oat-destroyer." He looked at Maronna. "You want some more?"

Morning was heavy in the windows. Maronna shook his head. "Not tonight, Clemens. Plenty of time. I'll get to you yet. In the last week you've taken me for thirty gees. I never lose that much to one man. Never."

Johnny stacked his chips and grinned. He had won almost twenty thousand dollars and a horse. It had been quite an evening. He said to Silvers, "Georgie, you can have back that nag, if you want him."

Maronna's face turned ugly. He said, "What the hell is this? You two playin' footsie? Win a horse, then give it back!

By
BOB REED



Timetable had a neck
at first, and then a bit
more. . . .

What kind of a game you runnin' here?"

And at the sound of his voice, there was movement in the back of the room. A huge man loomed up behind him, blunted features contracted in a scowl. A voice growled, "You got trouble, boss?"

Maronna shook his head. "Not yet, Sully. Maybe later."

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, I'll keep the horse. With beef the price it is today—"

He cashed in his chips. Silvers looked relieved. Johnny asked, "On the level, just how old is that Timetable, Georgie?"

"A little over four years," Silvers said flatly.

"That's not very definite. I've seen him run. Ten years is a little over four years."

"He ain't that old," Silvers protested. "He's a fine horse."

"He'll be pullin' a milk wagon before the meet ends," Maronna snarled. "That's

the only stickin' you got tonight, Clemens." He heaved his big bulk up from the table. He said to the giant in back of him, "Let's get some sleep, Sully." He turned to Johnny. "I'll see you here tomorrow night. I want another whack at you."

Johnny grinned at him. "The way you treat me, it's a pleasure. I can win from you and afford to lose at the track. A very nice arrangement." He pocketed his money and got to his feet, yawning. He was a tall young man and broad in the shoulders, and his black hair was disheveled at this hour. He put on his coat, waved to Conelli and Reagan, who had gone out of the game earlier. "See you out at the track."

"With what you left me," Conelli said, "if I go out to the track I'll have to enter myself in the fourth race."

Johnny went out into the freshness of the morning, walked down the wide, tree-lined street. He thought of the game with great satisfaction. His luck at the track had been terrible for the last week, but Maronna was making up for that. The cards were running in a most satisfactory fashion.

He had a cup of coffee at an early stand, then went down to the boarding house. Old Len Jordan was sitting on the porch. He eyed Johnny, saw the wide grin.

He said, "You took 'em again?"

Johnny winked. "For plenty." He took out his wallet, counted off a thousand dollars, handed it to the old man. Len shook his head.

Johnny said, "Look, Len. Ten days ago I was broke. You staked me to a thousand and I started getting lucky cards."

Len said, "Boy, you've given me back the thousand and another besides. I'll take no more of your money."

Johnny looked at him, then grinned. "How about a partnership in a horse? I

won something called Timetable from Georgie Silvers."

The old man sat up straight in his rocker. "That's a lot of horse, son. A great deal of horse."

"By poundage, yes. He also has not won a race in more than a year."

Len said, "Johnny, I've got theories about that horse. He's a whole lot of fine horse."

"He might have been a fine horse about six or eight years ago. He's gettin' a little tired about now."

Len shook his head. "Horse ain't no more than five or six years old. You ever close up to him?"

"I've never danced with him, if that's what you mean."

"'Bout the biggest horse I ever saw. Power—power like a tractor!"

"Just about as much speed, too."

Len looked at him carefully. "You sure you own that horse?"

"You and I," Johnny said. "Sole possessors."

"Then I'll tell you a little secret. Silvers has been usin' that horse all wrong. Been runnin' him in sprints. Six furlong stuff."

"He has trouble running that far. Always seems to finish last."

"Too big for sprints," Len said. "Can't untrack himself. Room to run is what he needs. Mile and a half, two miles. Let him loosen up and get all that muscle workin'."

Johnny raised his eyebrows. "Maybe you have something."

Len nodded. "We'll enter him in the Rider's Cup next week. Horse'll make a fortune for us."

Johnny held up a restraining hand. "How do you know the horse'll run two miles?"

"We'll try him," Len said. "Good way to find out. Try him tomorrow mornin'."

Johnny nodded.

THEY were out at the track at dawn a day later, an exercise boy with them. They went up to Timetable's stall, and Johnny looked in, then backed away. He was pale. He said, "Len, that damn thing isn't a horse! No wonder they named him Timetable. He must have been sired by a locomotive!"

Len chuckled and went into the stall. "A lot of animal," he said. And a moment later he came out, leading a horse that was a monster among horses. The great beast was nibbling gently at Len's ear.

"Put a trunk on him," Johnny said, "and you could sell him to a circus." He had never seen such a horse. The huge frame was a study in silkily moving cords of muscle.

The boy spat. "You want me to ride that thing? Hell, I wouldn't go near him with a gun."

"Gentle as a lamb," Lem said. He saddled and bridled the huge horse, gave the boy a boost aboard. He said, "You take him out, warm him, then work him two miles easy. I just want to see how he runs."

The boy was reluctant but took the horse out to the track. He trotted him slowly, broke him into a canter. At Len's signal, he let him fall into a gallop.

The great beast was immediately out of control. He went down the track like a locomotive, the boy clinging to him helplessly. He went six furlongs at a thunderous pace, then slowed down. At the eight furlong mark he was walking.

Len knew what the trouble was. "Boy couldn't hold him. Horse is used to going six furlongs. Just runs his brains out. Have to get someone to hold him in."

Johnny said, "Maybe if you put two or three boys up—"

Len snapped his fingers. "If Happy Hicks is in town, Johnny boy, we've got no problem."

"What is he, an elephant trainer?"

"Smartest jockey in the business. Just

a mite too smart for his own good. I'll look around for him." Len turned to Johnny. "How did the card game go last night?"

Johnny shook his head. "No good. I dropped ten. That Maronna had some very pretty cards. He doesn't like me, and he had me over a board." Then he brightened. "You really think this out-sized moose has a chance in the Rider's Cup?"

Len nodded. "If we can get Hicks, a man who can hold him, we're just as good as in."

"You find him," Johnny said. "I'd like to take a little of Maronna's money on that race."

Len said, "You be careful of that Maronna, Johnny. He's bad medicine."

Johnny thought of the fat, evil face. "I'll be very careful."

Len found Happy Hicks and brought him to the boarding house that evening. Hicks was a gnome of a man, just a touch over four feet high, with shoulders and arms like a stevedore. His face was a cynical mask. The world held no secrets from Hicks. Johnny wondered what wit had nicknamed him, Happy.

Len said, "Talk to Happy, Johnny boy."

Johnny said, "Len tells me you can haul a horse."

"I can haul a ten-ton truck if you give me a strong enough bride."

Johnny said, "Suppose you come out to the track with us tonight. There's a full moon, and we don't want to give away our plans."

"It'll cost you," Hicks said. "Five yards."

They went out to the track in the full dark, and when Hicks saw the horse he said, "I'd hate to get a look at that thing when I had half a load on. How am I gonna get on him? You gonna shoot me out of a cannon?"

Len saddled the horse and Hicks was

instructed. "He'll try to run away from you, but we want him to do two miles at a good pace. Think you can hold him?"

"I've had a lot of practice," Hicks said. He went out on the track. The horse was walked and trotted warm, and then Johnny gave him the go sign.

For a full furlong it was a struggle. The giant horse wanted to break away. Hicks worked on him with skill and strength, and suddenly Johnny saw that the horse understood. He galloped evenly, easily, not expending himself in a sudden burst of speed. Len had snapped a watch on the start, and they followed the horse with glasses.

Hicks rode him prettily, and the big beast seemed to enjoy the run. At the end of two miles, he was coming along beautifully. Len snapped the watch, and Johnny looked at the figures. He shook his head. "It can't be right. Three minutes and nineteen seconds. That's only four seconds off the world's record."

Len winked at him. "And the first time he went the distance. Boy, we have something."

Hicks came back with the horse. He said, "Damned locomotive. Run all night if you pace him right."

Johnny said, "Will you take him for the Rider's Cup?"

Hicks counted off on his fingers. "The twenty-third. Okay. My suspension is up that day."

THE day before the Cup race, Johnny went to Len Jordan. He handed him five thousand dollars. "On the horse," he said. "You lay it. I'll be playin' cards tonight and I don't trust myself."

Len nodded. "I'll do that." Then he grinned. "Know who's got a horse in this race, son?"

Johnny shook his head, and Len said, "Your pal, Maronna. He bought Escalon, the favorite, today. Paid a fancy price for him, I hear."

Johnny wanted to know one thing. "Can Timetable beat him?"

Len said, "It'll be close, but Timetable can beat him."

"That's all I want to know."

He played cards happily that night. He had only five thousand left of his previous winnings, but it didn't matter. He won slowly but steadily for a couple of hours, then Maronna started to get the cards. The money left Johnny's side of the table very rapidly.

Dawn was hitting the sky, and they were playing draw poker. Silvers had found a stake some place, and Conelli and Reagan were in the game. Johnny dealt himself a pat flush, and the pot grew as Maronna, across the table, opened big. Silvers dropped, but Conelli stayed in.

Maronna drew two cards, Conelli one. Maronna bet into Johnny's pat hand, and Johnny thought the man figured him for a bluff. Conelli stayed right in. Johnny's chips disappeared and he threw his IOUs in recklessly until Conelli suddenly dropped and he began to see the light. He called Maronna. The man had a lovely full house.

The IOUs added up to twenty-five thousand dollars, and Johnny's stomach was suddenly somewhere up around his ears. Maronna looked at him and said, "Well, when do you get it up, Clemens. That's just my dough I'm gettin' back."

"I'll have to stop at the bank," Johnny said, and he wondered what he would do there, except ask a teller the time.

Then he had a brain wave. "I hear you have a horse in the Rider's Cup—Escalon."

Maronna nodded. "That's right. He'll take it."

"A slight difference of opinion," Johnny said. "Timetable will walk away with it."

There were guffaws around the table. Maronna looked at him out of those

shrewd eyes. Johnny said, "How's about a little bet?"

"For how much?"

Johnny regarded the IOUs. "Say twenty-five thousand."

"You got it?"

Johnny tried to grin. It was a weak effort. "In the bank. Your dough. I'll see you out at the track."

Maronna said, "Okay. But Clemens, you better have it." He jerked his head, and the huge man in back of him moved to the table. Maronna said, pointing to Johnny. "You see him, Sully? Keep an eye on him. If he tries anything silly—" He made a twisting motion with his hands.

Sully said, "Now, boss?"

Maronna shook his head. "When I tell you."

Johnny went back to the boarding house. He told Len Jordan his troubles. He said, "That damned houseboat better run."

Len looked at him. "He'll run. You just hope he runs fast enough. We'll have money on him."

At the stables that afternoon, Johnny and Len were standing at the barn, waiting for the race. They saw Hicks coming down the line of stalls, and suddenly a big car pulled up beside him. In it were Maronna and his mountainous bodyguard. They talked to Hicks, and the conversation was short. The car pulled away and Hicks walked toward them. When he reached the stall, Johnny noticed that his face was white.

"What's the matter?" He asked. "That baboon trying to scare you?"

Hicks said, "Maronna? Hell, no. We're old friends. Just something I et, I guess." His hands were shaking.

Len eyed him carefully. He said, "Well, while you boys are saddlin' up, I guess I'll mosey down and lay my bets. Be back in a while."

Johnny saddled the giant horse, which

seemed in excellent spirits. Hicks was nervous, kept looking over his shoulder. Johnny said to him, "Hicks, if you so much as—"

Hicks said, "Knock it off. This is the first time I've had a mount in a while. I just got the shakes. I'll be all right."

They went out to the paddock, and Len met them there. Hicks had weighed in, and Len gave him a hand up. He also shoved a wad of mutuel tickets at him, and Hicks looked at them, suddenly grinned in a happy fashion, then jammed them in his boot. He said, "You'll get a ride." He went out on the track with a groom at the halter.

Johnny said, "You make it worth his while?"

"A thousand dollars worth of tickets on this horse, at the price he'll be, ought to be worth-while. We'll get a ride."

Johnny went to the grandstand with a smile on his face. If Timetable won the race, it would square him with Maronna. And Timetable would win.

The start was perfect. Escalon was on the rail with Timetable beside him, Greenbough next, Jersey Lad and Omnibus on the outside. They traveled in that order to the half, then Omnibus went out in front and set the pace for a full half-mile. Johnny watched carefully through his glasses.

Timetable was running handily on the pace, and Hicks had him well under control. Escalon was just behind him, on the rail, running easily.

In the third half-mile, Jersey Lad made his bid. He went out in front for a few yards, then quit cold and dropped back rapidly. On the last turn but one, Omnibus ran wide and Timetable and Escalon were inside of him, Escalon on the rail.

The crowd started to roar then, for they were really running. They came almost neck and neck around the last turn and headed for the wire.

Johnny was conscious of someone

shouting very close by. The voice roared, "Timetable! Timetable!" He turned to see who it was and discovered he'd been looking for himself.

They were in the stretch now, and to Johnny's horrified eyes it was apparent that Escalon was forging slowly ahead. Timetable was fighting hard and Hicks was giving him a beautiful ride, but he was losing ground. He started to make it up in the last furlong, but it was too late. He closed with a rush, eating up the yards, but it was too late. Escalon was the winner by a full half-length.

IT WAS a bitter trip, back through the stands and down to the stables. He didn't want to make it. What he desired at the moment was a fast plane to a distant part of the Argentine. Maronna would be waiting, he knew. Maronna and that big gorilla of his, Sullivan.

He used up half an hour in the trip, but it had to be done. Short of rejoining the Army, there was no getting away from Maronna.

But the thing that surprised him slightly was the way he felt about the race. The money was important, of course. He'd have a hell of a time getting out of the jam he'd put himself in. Maronna would want fifty thousand dollars, and he'd want it bad.

Perversely, Johnny wasn't thinking of Maronna. He was thinking about the big, gentle horse, Timetable. He'd been around horses for the better part of his adult life, and he knew when a horse liked to run. Timetable loved it. He'd been out there trying, every inch of the way, and his gallant spirit touched a cord in Johnny's heart. That was one hell of a lot of horse. The money to one side, it had been a shame he couldn't have won.

He went back to the stalls, and there was the little group. Timetable was being walked cool by a groom. Maronna and Len Jordan stood to one side. And there

was the giant, Sully. Johnny examined the man with a new and personal interest.

He approached them, and Maronna's face was flat and expressionless. The man said, "Well?"

Johnny didn't have much of an answer. He sought to find an out, but there wasn't any. Fifty thousand dollars was an awful lot of money when you didn't have it. There was no sense in trying to stall Maronna any further, for the man wouldn't be interested in promises. He wanted money.

And Len Jordan said, "Johnny, I was waiting to give you this." He handed Johnny a packet of money.

Johnny stared at it in amazement, then counted it. There were fifty one thousand dollar bills in the bundle. He extended them to Maronna and the man took them with a scowl, thumbing through them. He looked up at Johnny and seemed disappointed. "Where did you get these?"

It was something Johnny himself would have liked to know. He said, "What difference does it make? You've got 'em."

The gigantic Sully moved up behind Maronna. He said, "Don't get snotty. When the boss asks you somethin', you answer nice."

"Breathe mud," Johnny told him. He looked at Maronna. He didn't like this man to beat him at anything. He did not like Maronna's horse to beat his own.

Maronna said, "You got that plug entered in the Weston Stakes next week?"

Len Jordan answered. "He's entered."

Maronna grinned. He said, "Maybe you'd like a little more of the same." He waved the money in his hand.

It was a moment Johnny would have liked to have been able to handle. It was a time when a man should step up and declare, with a fitting amount of cash, his faith in his horse and in his own judgment. He put his hands in his pockets and said nothing.

But Len Jordan was not silent. The old man looked at Maronna, and a tight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He said, "Just the fifty thousand, Maronna?"

The man looked shocked as Jordan dug into the side pocket of his jacket and came out with a handful of new bills.

Maronna, Johnny thought, was a little too surprised to up the bidding. He just nodded and said, "Okay."

Teddy Brown, the racing writer for the *Record*, was just passing. He was a very surprised young man when a hundred thousand dollars was placed in his hand and the terms of the bet explained to him. He said, "I don't carry this kind of dough around with me. This goes into the track safe." He went off in a hurry.

Maronna and his gorilla left soon after. The fat man said, "See you next week, sucker."

Johnny stood there thinking about it for a moment. He said, "Where did you get the dough?"

"You gave me five thousand dollars the other day," Len said. "I had five of my own. You know what that horse paid to place?"

Johnny shook his head. He hadn't bothered to consult the tote board.

"Twenty-four dollars. To *place*. There was a terrific play on the race, but it was all Escalon and Omnibus money."

"You bet him to place?" Johnny stared at the little man.

Len grunted. "What do you think Maronna was talkin' to Hicks about, before the race? Wishin' him luck?"

Johnny stared at him.

"Maronna was scarin' him off. Didn't cost him a dime, either. Imagine what that Sully would do to a man Hicks' size."

"And you played Timetable to place." Johnny couldn't get over it.

"You keep sayin' that. Sure. He figured to have a fine chance to win, but he couldn't miss the place. And when I gave

Hicks a handful of place tickets, I thought he was goin' to kiss me. Without tellin' me, he knew I figured what had happened. He wasn't breakin' anyone's heart, this way."

Johnny said, "But next week it won't be like that. Timetable will have to win." Len frowned. "I been thinkin' about that."

"And you put up all that dough, knowing what you did?"

Len looked at him. "Shucks, son, I can't let a man like Maronna throw his weight around with me. Get's me a little riled."

Hicks came down to the stall after the last race. He wore a big smile until he saw Johnny's face, then he sobered. Johnny said, "You hauled him, didn't you?"

Hicks shrugged. "Jordan knew it. Why did he buy the place tickets?"

"He was playing it safe. He didn't tell you to pull the horse."

"Maronna did," Hicks said. "That's enough for me."

Johnny took him by the lapels. He said, "I wouldn't hit you, but I know a guy just about your size who'll beat your brains out anytime I tell him to. And that's just what I'll do if you ever haul that horse again."

Hicks looked at him and saw that he wasn't kidding. Hicks said, "But how about Maronna? That Sully! If he ever got his hands on me, he'd—" He did not finish, but there was terror in his voice and in his eyes.

Johnny said, "If you ride this horse again next week, you're riding for me and Len. Not Maronna. We'll take care of you. Maronna won't get near you. And you can bet your arm on that." He felt less forceful, less sure, than he sounded. "But when you ride for us, you *ride*."

Hicks looked from him to Len Jordan. The old man said nothing. Hicks finally

said, "Okay. I'll take a chance. You did mighty fine by me today, so the least I can do is run along with you for a while. Besides, you got a hell of a lot of horse, there. I like the way he runs. I'd like to win with him."

A LONG week followed, a tough one to get through. Johnny knew just what Len Jordan had done. The man was no longer young, and his luck of late had not been good. Through affection, through pique, through love for and regard for this gentle, monstrous horse, he had bet away his future. Fifty thousand was all he needed to see him comfortably through the rest of his years. He had repeatedly told Johnny that once he had a decent stake, he'd quit the track, buy a small house he knew of, and live out the rest of his years peacefully and quietly.

But his nature, the fire that still burned in him, had betrayed him.

And Johnny felt it was his fault. If he had not played cards with Maronna, plagued him into betting, this wouldn't have happened to Len Jordan. Through befriending Johnny, originally, Jordan had walked into trouble.

It was a hell of a week. Hicks had mounts at the track every day, but the moment the last race was over, Johnny latched onto him and didn't let the man out of his sight. He took Hicks to live in the boarding house he and Len Jordan used, and he bought himself a gun, just in case. Hicks slept in Johnny's room, and when he went out to the track in the morning to work the huge Timetable, Johnny was with him all the way.

Maronna called the boarding house frequently, asking to speak to Hicks. Johnny intercepted the calls, and said Hicks wasn't around. Twice, a big heavy car stopped at the house and one of its several occupants came up and asked for Hicks. Strangely, he was never present.

The day of the race, Johnny woke with

the dawn, roused by nervousness. In the other bed in the room, Hicks slept peacefully. Johnny wondered just what the day would bring. The strain was beginning to tell on him, as well as on Len Jordan. The old man had been pale and quiet all week. Fifty thousand was a big thing to worry about, when you were as old and as constantly broke as Len.

For himself; Johnny was no longer thinking of the fast dollar, nor did he regret the sum he had lost to Maronna. The horse had become the important thing, now. The horse and the future. He could see Timetable as the start of a new era, the first horse in a small but growing stable of good horses. He'd been around them for most of his life, and he had theories concerning training and breeding which, he knew now, he was going to put into practice. He just didn't want Maronna to tough him into any bad deal, to be a factor in his future or in his fate. He was determined about that.

They went out to the track early. Hicks had a mount in the first race, another in the third. The Weston was the fifth on the card.

He had come to know Timetable, and to love him. The big horse was curious, gentle, knowing. He tossed his head at Johnny's entrance, nuzzled him with gentle strength, nosed his pockets for the carrots Johnny usually carried for him.

Johnny patted the soft nose and said, "Baby, today you have to do some running. Some running for Len Jordan."

He was worried about Hicks. He knew the man would scare if Maronna got to him, and in a way, he couldn't blame him. He was working for money, and there wasn't enough money in the world to compensate for the terrible beating Hicks would receive if he crossed Maronna after an arrangement had been made.

And the thing he had been fearing happened. He was at the paddock after the third race. Hicks had brought home a

winner, and just as he left the circle, Maronna approached him. Johnny saw them speaking, and noticed that the giant Sully was a party to the conversation. He hurried over.

He heard Maronna say, "That's all the talking I'm going to do. If you're smart, if you got the brains of a rabbit, you'll do what I tell you."

Hicks was looking at him, and he had lost color, but in his face was a hint of defiance. He said, "And if I don't, Maronna?"

Johnny was grouped with them now, and he answered Hick's question himself. "Nothing's going to happen, Hicks. Not a thing. This fat punk won't lay a hand on you. And neither will that big slob with him."

Maronna turned, and his face was suddenly creased by hatred. Sully started to move to Johnny, and Johnny put his hand in his jacket pocket. The gun, to his surprise, wasn't there. He bunched his hand together, pointed his forefinger, thrust it against the cloth. It looked like a gun, anyhow. Enough like one to stop Sully, who stared at it.

Johnny said, "Maronna, this is one that's going to be run on the level. You'll do no monkeying with Hicks. Run your horse and we'll run ours."

Maronna said, "You're gettin' pretty tough all of a sudden, Clemens."

"All of a sudden," Johnny agreed. He was thinking of Len Jordan. He knew he wouldn't be taking an attitude like this if only his own money were involved. It was a little strange.

"You're bein' stupid," Maronna said. "You get yourself in trouble, shootin' off your mouth like that."

"Okay, so I'm in trouble. But you keep your mouth off Hicks, and tell that meat-head to keep his hands off him."

The giant said, "You keep talkin', Clemens, and you're gonna get it, gun or no gun."

Johnny pushed the moment. He said, "All right, get going. I want to talk to Hicks. He's through with you."

They went. They went slowly and with reluctance, but they went. Johnny turned to Hicks. He said, "All right. What sort of a race is this going to be?"

Hicks said, "That big guy. He gives me the willies." Then he turned to Johnny. "Whatever you say is okay. But keep him off me."

Johnny went back, and Len was with the horse. Timetable was readied soon, walked warm. Johnny patted the old man's arm. He said, "Think of it, Len. A hundred grand all to yourself, and a half-interest in what's going to be a good farm. Feel good?"

"Whole thing'd feel a lot better if I figured that Hicks was more frightened of you than he is of Maronna." He shook his head. "I sure shot my mouth off fast for fifty grand, Johnny. That was faith in the horse. I just wasn't thinkin' of the jock, then."

Johnny nodded. And there had been no one else they could get. Hicks was the tops, the best, and it would be foolish to put someone else up on the horse.

They took Timetable out, and he seemed to sense that he was going to run. He was alert, eager, though no less gentle and considerate. Johnny had his bridle, and the beast towered above him.

Hicks came along with his tack, and they saddled the horse, gave him a leg up. Len looked at the jockey and said nothing. Johnny told him, "We want a good race, Hicks."

The little man was pale, but he nodded, said, "I've got one in me somewhere."

JOHNNY and Len hung on the rail, watched the horses parade up past the stands and come back. Johnny said, "How much hauling do you think Hicks did on Timetable, last time out? You think he can beat Escalon?"

Len turned to him, and the old man's face was wreathed in a grin. "Johnny, I don't rightly know, and that's a fact. It's what makes horse racin'. Maybe he can't. Most people don't think so."

And Johnny looked at him and felt a new warmth toward him.

Greenbough was on the rail with Escalon in the No. 2 position. Omnibus was third, and Timetable, in fourth position, towered above the field. Showboat was outside of him and Sleeveless was in No. 6. There was a little trouble with Omnibus in the gate, and then they were off with the roar of the crowd.

The field ran bunched for the first half-mile, and Johnny had his glasses on Timetable. The horse was running easily, evidently under wraps. The great legs were reaching and stretching in a smooth and beautiful rhythm.

Just behind him, in fourth place and on the rail, Escalon strode with the grace of a beautifully conformed horse that packed a lot of running. Triple Crown winner a year before, Escalon was truly a great horse and had proven it time and again. He loved to run, was as game as any animal on four feet.

At the mile, Showboat went slowly up on the outside and took the lead and held it for a couple of furlongs before he faded. He was replaced by Greenbough, and the English horse stepped up the pace. The field started to string out. Timetable and Escalon, keeping right behind the leader, went through as Greenbough swung a bit wide on the turn. With a half-mile before them, the race was theirs.

Johnny did no shouting today, for his heart was in his throat. He watched Hicks let the great horse out to match stride for stride with Escalon. The crowd was in a frantic uproar, but Johnny could hear the beating of his own heart.

They came into the stretch with Escalon on the rail, Hicks keeping Timetable right at the other boy's iron. Both horses

were really working now, the great muscles of Timetable straining, stretching, putting the ground under him. Escalon, running with a shorter stride and more beautiful form, was making the pace.

They stayed under a blanket until they hit the mile and three-quarter pole, and Johnny was not worried about the horse. Timetable would run as long as his heart beat in his great chest. Hicks was the uncertain factor. Any slight hauling on the jockey's part would make the difference, because the horses were as evenly matched as possible, up to that point. He searched Hicks' actions for a sign.

But there was none. The man had used the bat just once, in a perfunctory gesture, but he must have felt, from the effort under him, that the horse was giving all it had.

And Timetable started to go out, with a hundred yards remaining. He had a neck, at first, then a bit more. When he had half a length, he was really rolling away. The stride did not slacken, the rhythm did not falter. He put daylight between himself and the other great horse before he went under the wire. The race was all his.

Johnny put his hand on Len Jordan's shoulder. The old man was trembling gently, and when he turned, his eyes were moist. He said, "Johnny, I been around a long time. I never saw a horse like that."

Johnny grinned at him. "And he's half yours. Half the horse and all of a hundred thousand dollars, besides that lovely fat purse. A hundred grand, right in your pocket."

Len blinked his eyes and shook his head. He said, "Hell, I plumb forgot about that money. It'll come in handy."

They went to the winner's circle, and Len held the sweating horse and grinned for the cameras. Timetable nibbled at his ear, and the picture people loved it.

They went back to the stall, and a boy

walked the horse dry, and Hicks was there, bundled in a coat, through for the day. The cynical face was wrinkled in a grin. He shook his head and said, "I've been up on a lot of them, but he's the tops. Man, he'd run to China if I asked him."

Johnny smiled. "Didn't haul him today, eh?"

Hicks shook his head. "Rather kick my mother. Maronna or no Maronna."

And at the words, Maronna hove into view around the edge of the barns. His face was black and sullen, and at his side was the giant, Sully.

Len Jordan said, "Looks like we might have a little trouble, gents."

Maronna walked up to them. He said, "All very pretty. But there will be something done about this later." He turned to the giant behind him. He said, "Sully, take a good look. First, the little man." He indicated Hicks with a manicured forefinger, then pointed at Johnny. "Both for being too smart, for talking too much. Later. When it is convenient."

Johnny took his hand out of his pocket, and Sully grinned at him evilly. Len Jordan was watching Johnny. And Johnny had a sudden idea.

He said, "You. Oxhead. Come here."

Sully walked to him, the grin showing stained and yellow teeth. Johnny hauled a right hand from down around his ankles. It whistled in its flight. It landed squarely on the giant's chin.

Sully stood there for a moment, emptiness filling his eyes. Then he fell forward on his face and lay motionless.

Len Jordan said, "Figured you might try that, Johnny. Big young feller like you. Surprisin', ain't it?"

Johnny stood there and shook his head. "Very surprising, Len." He felt an inclination to grin and gave way to it. He looked at the older man. He said, "I guess it doesn't pay to worry until you have to. No use running from nothing."

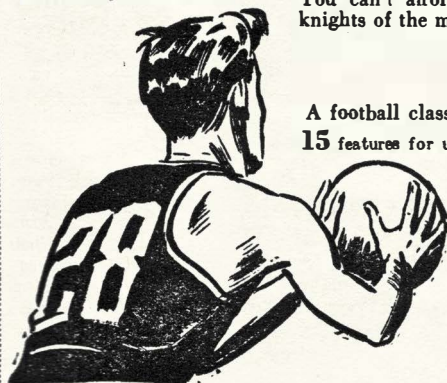
Len said, "Somebody's havin' almost that sort of trouble right now." He pointed, and Johnny looked up.

Maronna was running down the line of stalls, his fat figure jouncing and jiggling.

Len heaved a sigh. He said, "Well, there's been big doin's. Might as well call it a day."

Johnny looked down at the prostrate Sully. He said, "Len, you might have something. Let's call it a wonderful day."

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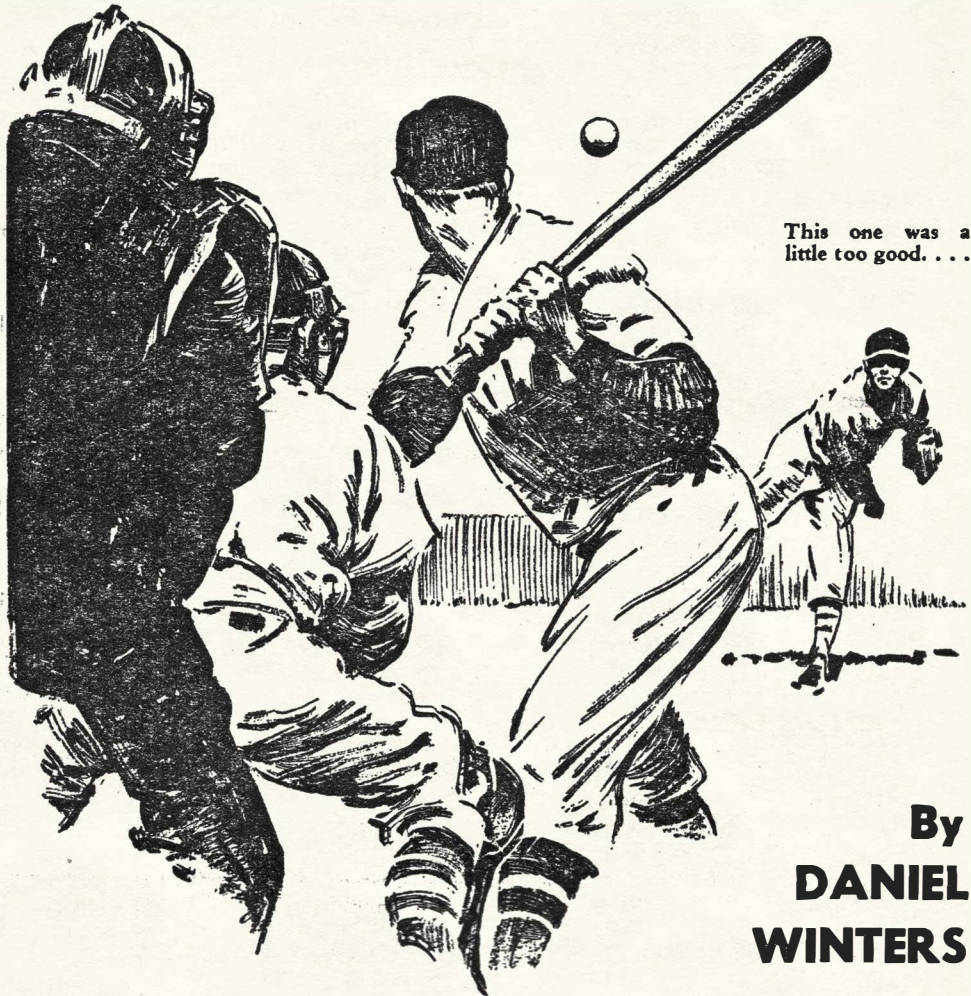
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POUR-'EM-IN GUY



This one was a little too good. . . .

By
**DANIEL
WINTERS**

JOHNNY BURK left the dressing room, paused in the corridor as he heard his name spoken. He glanced to the left. The door of Andy Linn's office was open. The voice hadn't been Linn's, though. Jenkins, who owned the Sox, was talking.

"I don't want Burk in there today. Hell,

this is the big one. He doesn't belong in there. He hasn't won a game in three weeks."

"He's lost some tough ones," Andy Linn said. "By one and two runs. We didn't hit behind him. He lost a two-hitter to the Blues a week ago. Things like that aren't a pitcher's fault."



When you're up for your last big inning, an' the stands are out for your blood, remember: You're wearin' your old man's spikes, kid—have you got his kind of steel in your heart?



"This is too big a deal for him," Jenkins said. "How do you know he won't pull the same stunt his old man pulled? There's an awful lot of people interested in this one. What's wrong with Bolton or Fontaine?"

Linn's voice was patient. "Bolton is a cousin of the Gray's. They murder him. And I don't want to give this to Fontaine. It's too big for him."

"You know what the Grays will do to this guy! You know what will happen when Eagan and Hanning get working on him! It happened before."

"That was the first time he got it. It won't be like that again. I'm going to pitch Burk." Linn's voice was changed now, the patience gone from it.

Jenkins said, "Okay, Linn. But I'll tell you one thing—you better be right. You'd damned well better be right."

Johnny Burk stepped back into the dressing room quickly. He heard Jenkins leave the office, walk down the corridor. Then he left the dressing room for the second time and headed out onto the field.

The day was bright and warm. His eyes took in the packed stands, the overflowing bleachers. Seventy thousand out for this one. Not more than a game and a half had separated the Sox and Grays during the last month of the season, and yesterday the season had ended in the tie that made this play-off game necessary. And Linn was giving this one to him.

He didn't want it. It was too big for Fontaine, Linn had said. Well, it was too big for him. It was too damned big for anyone.

In the dugout, Eddie Riley came back from the water fountain, wiping his mouth on his forearm. "A hell of a crowd. You gonna work it?"

Burk shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know." Linn would give out the news. Maybe he'd changed his mind. It would be fine if he had.

But he hadn't. He came into the dugout

a moment later and looked at Burk. "How you feel, Johnny? You want to go?"

"I feel fine," Burk said, and a chill went through him. "It's up to you."

"Well, warm up," Linn said. "See how it feels." That was all he ever said. It meant that you were working.

Burk got up and Benny Jackson saw him and came over with a glove. They went to the warm-up plate and rubber, back near the screen, and Burk started to throw easily, just lobbing them up, waiting for the arm to loosen. A murmur ran through the stands like a wind, starting slowly and quietly, gaining momentum. They'd seen him and they liked it.

He felt the engulfing presence of that crowd of seventy thousand people, was acutely aware of their hostility, their twenty-year-old prejudice. Some guy with a voice like a foghorn boomed down, "Ya better be good today, ya bum!" and that was the prevailing sentiment, he knew. They were just sitting there watching, regarding him with suspicion. They remembered too well. They'd remember forever.

He wondered if his father was up there in the stands somewhere, and then he stopped kidding himself. Sure he was there. He wasn't supposed to be allowed inside a ball park, but he'd be here today. A crowd like this, a ticket from a spec, and in twenty years you change enough so that some guy at the gate isn't going to pick you out of the mob and say, "That's Lew Burk. Throw him out." He was here all right.

The voice came from the Grays' dugout then, harsh and pitched only for his ears. "How much you want for this one, Burk?"

He closed his mind to the voice and pitched easily, but the voice and the thought of his dad brought memories.

HE'D been only five when it happened, and at the time he knew nothing definite, but could only sense the sorrow

that pervaded his grandmother's house, the air of shame and confusion. The sorrow had been there when his mother had died, the year before, but the other qualities were new. They were strong, and they came through to him and frightened him. No one told him anything. They shushed him and lied gently to him, and it was only years later, when his father told him the story and he had looked it up in the old files of newspapers, that he actually knew what had occurred.

His father had gone away, after that strange and frightening day, and Johnny Burk had not seen him for another six years, until his grandmother had died.

Other children were the first to tell him what had happened. They did not know the details. Their shrill voices taunted him with shouts and singsong jibes that his father was a crook.

*Burky's father is to blame
He took the money, lost the game.*

That they were inaccurate made no difference. His father had taken the money but had not been allowed to pitch. He had told Johnny about it years later, when Johnny was old enough to understand. And old enough to condemn or forgive, as he pleased.

He wondered just how much it had cost his father to tell him the story; how much it took out of a man to drag a corpse from its hiding place in the past and tear off the moulded wrappings.

Benny Jackson said, "Easy, kid. Take it easy."

He'd been throwing too hard. The automatic motion had released his mind from his work. He slowed the pace, felt the warmth coming into his arm. He threw six easy pitches before he went back into the past, examining the full story as he knew it now, as his father had told it to him, as he himself had rebuilt it on the foundation of truth.

Lew Burk had been with the Eagles. One of the big wheels of the league. A burning fast ball and plenty of speed and a smart head on his shoulders. He was on top, where he should have been, after five years. And then his wife had died, his son had gone to live with his doting grandmother.

After that, Lew hadn't cared for a long time. The world was empty for him, and sometimes liquor seemed to fill the vacant spaces. Money went through his hands like sand, and one morning when he was rottenly hung over and flat broke, he'd had the phone call.

The middle of the season, and he was slated to pitch an unimportant game. Somebody wanted him to let it go, for five thousand dollars. Just the one, meaningless game. He had agreed out of the misery, the despair of the moment. The money was sent to him by messenger, but someone had been listening in on the hotel switchboard, and the whole ugly business was immediately brought out into the open.

Lew Burk was out of organized baseball, through for life. And baseball was the only thing he'd ever known. He found work, all right. With semi-pro teams that paid him a hundred dollars a game for the use of his wonderful arm. He played in whistle towns, in Cuba, in Mexico. Always beyond the pale, never friendly even with the men who played beside him.

Johnny had known him during those years. In the summer, between school sessions, he'd traveled with his father. A silent man, Lew Burk. Grave and kind and considerate to everyone. Making a lot of money, saving some, giving Johnny the best he could. Good schools, a good home with an aunt, and then, in the magic summertimes, taking him on the long, irregular tours that showed Johnny so much of the country and its people.

Teaching him, too. All the tricks, all

the know-how, all the things a man spent a lifetime learning. And telling Johnny, coldly and starkly, the one thing he'd never altogether forget.

When he was seventeen, on one of those summertime trips, he'd started to pitch. His father would begin a game and let him finish, and gradually he got to work them alone. His father worked at it until he was past forty.

And when it became evident that Johnny was good, good enough to go up, his father had warned him against it. "They won't be looking at you," he'd said. "They'll just be remembering the name. And they'll never forget. You're going up there with two big strikes on you, son. They won't forget and they won't let you forget."

Well, he'd been right about that. No one let him forget.

He looked at Benny Jackson and started to bear down a bit. He threw a couple of hooks, then cut loose with a few fast balls. He was all right. The arm was strong and limber and he was ready to go. The clubs were through with fielding practice, and Andy Linn came over and grinned at him. "It looks good, Johnny."

He looked at Linn. The finest short-stop in the league, by far the youngest manager. His contract was up for renewal. His future was swinging on this one game. And Linn was giving it to him. He said, "It feels fine. I guess it'll go all right."

Linn nodded. "Sure it will." He walked away. Johnny noticed that Linn was pale under the tan, that his face was strained. It was a hell of a day for him, too.

He went in to the bench. This was the Grays' field, and the Sox would hit first. He put on a jacket, took a short drink of water, and the Grays went out on the field.

Joe Thomas was pitching for them. A lean left-hander, he'd won twenty-two

games through the season and had the lowest earned run average in the league. He'd had five days rest and he figured to be good.

He was good. He got Riley, Meldin and Linn in order.

JOHNNY shucked the jacket and went out. As soon as he left the dugout steps, he was the loneliest man in the world. Seventy thousand pairs of eyes were on him, examining him, looking through him and down the line of years. He was a mirror held up to time and there was a stain on the glass.

Eagan's voice came out of the dugout. "It won't be long today, Burk! You can go back to those parkin' lot games with your old man."

Eagan was the Grays' first-base coach. He had a voice like a file and a heart made of flint. No one else had gone into the well, when Burk had come up. The other clubs had not confronted him with the past and another man's mistakes. They'd ridden him as they'd ride any other pitcher, but they didn't put the knife in and twist it.

But Eagan did. Eagan and Hanning, the third baseman. They were the really hard guys. They used all the weapons. And they'd beaten him the first time he'd gone against the Grays. They'd routed him with the uncontrollable anger they'd bred in him. He'd gone hog wild, hadn't been able to find the plate, and when he was yanked, in the third, he'd drawn a three-day suspension and a fine for the brawl he'd had with Eagan and Hanning.

Well, that wouldn't happen today. They wouldn't beat him that way. He had that angle licked. Or he hoped he had.

He took his pitches, and Summers stepped into the box. Summers was a waiting guy, and Burk didn't waste anything on him. He burned a couple of strikes in there, then blew a hook at the inside corner. Summers got it with a lot

of wood and it rode out into center. Reardon made the catch.

Fulton hit the first pitch, a ball inside and high. It rode on a line out into left, and Marty Mason didn't have to move for it.

Collins hit one on the ground. Linn went to his right and made a lovely stop and threw him out. That was all.

He went in to the bench, and the stands were silent. He was worried. He'd had no trouble at all, but he knew he was in for some. All three men had put good wood on the ball. His stuff was soft going up there. They'd be hitting him today. It was not a comforting thought.

Hawkins got a hit off Thomas to start the Sox second, but he didn't move off the sack. Reardon fouled two bunt attempts, then went down swinging. Mason and Venturo flied out. Burk went out to the hill, wondering when it would happen.

They got to him in the fourth. Fulton led off, and he smashed a curve ball solidly to left. It came off the wall and fooled Mason for a moment, and Fulton took second.

The crowd started it, then. The crowd, and Eagan in the first-base box, and Hanning on the bench. The crowd was normally vicious. Eagan and Hanning got busy with their spades and dug up the ghost. They were in fine form today. Burk listened for the first ten seconds, then shut his ears to them.

He pitched to Collins, and the curve didn't break. Collins swung from his heels and it was a flat drive down the right-field line. Hawkins made a stab for it and the ball hit his glove and bounced over into foul territory. Burk ran to cover first and Hawkins retrieved the ball. Fulton was held to third.

In the coach's box, Eagan said, "No kiddin' Burk. Your old man show you how to chuck those fat ones? What did he ever do with that five grand? And listen. I hear that your wife—"

Burk walked away on stiff legs, not thinking, not permitting himself to think. Andy Linn was waiting for him on the hill.

Linn grinned. He said, "Simmer down, Burky. Don't let these lice get to you. Pitch me a ball game."

Burk said, "Sure, Andy." But when he looked around to see that everyone was set, his eyes hit the bullpen. Brennan was warming up, and he was working fast.

He gave his attention to the plate. Donald stood there, all chest and shoulders and heavy arms. Burk got the signal from Jackson and nodded, took his short motion and pitched.

He knew it was bad the moment he let it go. It was too fat. Donald uncoiled all that massive power, exploded against the pitch. The ball traveled on a line into the upper stands in right field.

The park was a madhouse. Eagan had a tongue fashioned in hell, and Hanning's shrill voice came to him from the Gray bench. Burk took a deep breath and tried to steady himself as the runs came in across the plate.

Linn came over to the hill. He wasn't grinning, now. "It didn't behave?"

"That's right," Burk said. "It went up there fat." There wasn't anything else to say. It was up to Linn, now.

Linn's voice was tired. He said, "Well, we'll call it a day. They've been hitting solid, and maybe this just isn't it. We'll stand here and give Brennan a few more pitches before he comes in."

Burk said, "Sure, Andy." He was empty, now, the bone gone out of him. In back of him, he heard Eagan say, "Hell, Burk, your old man couldn't have done better than that for ten grand."

He was talking, then, almost surprised at the sound of his own voice. "Look, Linn. One more won't make any difference. Let me pitch to one and give Brennan a chance to warm. You got a lot of empty bases. I might get it."

Linn looked at him without frowning or smiling. "It's a bad deal, Johnny. You haven't got it."

"I've started without it before and worked into it," Burk said. "Sometimes it happens like that."

"You're so sore at Eagan he's got you wishing."

"The hell with Eagan. He's got nothing to do with it. They figure to get a couple of runs off Brennan, anyway, in five innings." He was talking desperately, now.

Linn didn't waste time thinking about it. He looked at Burk and said, "All right." That was all. He turned and trotted back to his position at short.

And the crowd roared out in disbelief and derision, the gigantic, multiple voice thundering down and filling the park. And through the mass of sound rasped Eagan's voice, Hanning's shrill tones cutting through it.

Burk tried to forget about everything but the pitch. He was in this thing deep, as deep as he could get. He and Linn. He knew that if he didn't get this one, there'd be no more. He couldn't go through it again. Either he beat the Grays and the crowd today or they had him licked, and for good. He knew that.

He pitched to Kellaher through the unceasing din. He got two balls and a strike in there, then Kellaher hit down to third. Ventura made a difficult stop and threw out the runner.

HANNING was up, his mouth full of bile. He fouled two and looked at two, then he drove the next ball screaming back at the box. Burk threw up his hands in an instinctive, protective gesture and the ball smashed into his glove and stayed there. Hanning cursed him for a lucky slob.

He pitched to Bell, the right-fielder. He was shaky, now. His first two pitches were wide, then Bell fouled two. He

thought the next pitch was in there, but the umpire called it a ball. Jackson called for the fast curve, and Burk thought to shake him off but didn't.

He threw it. He came down with it hard, let it go snapping, and he knew it was the best pitch he'd thrown all day. Something had happened to it. It had felt right all the way, and he watched it break and saw Bell take his cut and miss. Burk walked to the bench and he was excited, now. He put on his jacket, and when Linn came down the steps the manager looked at him.

Burk said, "Get some runs. Get me a couple." He was anxious to get out there again. He wanted to see if he was wrong about the thing.

They got him a run on a walk, a sacrifice, and a single, and he went out to the hill.

He hadn't been wrong. He had it. He'd been throwing stiff, a little uncomfortably, but now that was gone. He was as loose as a piece of rubber hose and he wasn't trying to steer them in there. It was going where he wanted it to go.

It was good, pitching now. The crowd was on him, and the Grays were on him, but he wasn't fighting himself. He had his stuff, and he threw it up there and the Grays couldn't do much with it.

In the sixth Riley flied out, Meldin singled through the box, and Linn poled a long double out to left-center. Meldin came all the way and beat the throw to the plate. They needed another, but Linn died on second as Hawkins rolled to short. Reardon beat out an infield hit, Linn couldn't move on, and Mason flied out to left.

In the Grays' sixth, Burk struck out Fulton, got Collins to pop up behind second, then fanned Donald.

Venturo walked to start the inning, then took second on a passed ball. Jackson hit a ground ball deep in the hole between first and second, and Summers made a

miraculous play on it and threw him out at first, but Venturo went to third.

Burk went up there. He looked at Linn, and for a moment there was a wedge of indecision in the manager's eyes. But he turned his head away and Burk went out to the plate.

He looked at a pitch-out on the first ball. They were expecting the squeeze, waiting for it. He eyed Benson, coaching down at first, and got his sign. The next pitch was high, and he let it go. The third was in there for a called strike.

The pitch came in, high and a little outside, but he got the bat up there and dumped the bunt down the first-base line. Venturo was almost down to the plate before Burk got away. They threw him out, but Venturo scored standing up.

Riley lined out to short, and Burk went to the hill again. He had a game going, now. He had *the* game going. Because he knew that if he took this one, it would cover an awful lot of ground. It would take away a lot of bad taste. A man would be able to mention baseball and Burk in the same breath without spitting.

He pitched loosely, almost without effort. Kellaher hit a weak foul that Jackson took near the screen. Burk concentrated on Hanning. He grounded weakly to short. Bell flied out to short right.

During the eighth inning the crowd was standing, roaring on every pitch. Thomas was cagey, throwing nothing good, nothing that they could hammer. Meldin grounded out. Linn got his third hit of the day, a single to left, but Hawkins and Reardon went down on fly balls.

Burk pitched two strikes and a ball to Nevers, then the catcher grounded out to Hawkins at first. He struck out Dean, batting for Thomas. Summers flied out.

Halpin had come in to replace Thomas. He got a ball and a strike on Mason, then struck him out on the next two pitches. Venturo went up there and cut at the first

pitch. It was a high foul that Collins took in back of first.

Benny Jackson watched two go by that were wide, then fouled the next two back to the screen. The next pitch was low and inside, and Halpin kicked like a steer when it was called a ball. Halpin came in with the next one, as he had to. It seemed to be inside, and Benny pulled on it. The ball rode on a line into the lower right-field stands.

The mob roared out its dismay. Benny trotted around the bases calmly, and Burk shook his hand as he crossed the plate.

Burk hit a lazy fly to left that was taken for the out.

There were only three, now. Three more and it would be over. He'd be in the clear, and Linn would be in the clear, and maybe somebody up in the stands would feel a hell of a lot better.

He pitched to Collins. He got a called strike and a foul, then he threw for the inside corner. This one was a little too good. The ball came back to him on a line. He was off balance and flagged it down with his bare hand, and he knew that was a mistake. He recovered, chased it on the grass, turned and threw Collins out.

THE hand was numb immediately, the fingers dead. He shook it, trying to get the feeling back into it, trying to loosen the fingers. He took off his glove, rubbed it with the other hand.

Linn came in from short, and his eyes were worried. Burk shook his head and said, "It's all right, Andy. I got it on the heel of the hand. Just stung some."

He knew he ought to wait, to call time and have Doc Roberts come out and rub the hand, but he didn't want to delay, didn't want to lose the rhythm of the thing.

He took Jackson's signal, went into his motion and pitched. He didn't even feel the ball leave his hand. It went sailing six feet over Jackson's head.

He managed a grin and shook his head in an attempt at comic dismay. Jackson started out to him but he waved him back.

He tried a curve and it was a nothing ball. Collins swung into it with a level drive and Burk felt his heart leap into his throat. The ball rode on a line into left-center, and Collins ran like a thief. The relay came in to hold him at third.

Burk rubbed his thumb across his forefinger and middle finger, and they were like two pieces of wood. He held his gloved hand over his waist, took the tension off his belt buckle with two fingers, then jammed the buckle tongue under the nail of his right forefinger. Pain flooded through his hand in a white-hot wave. He held his breath and did the same thing with his middle finger.

He rubbed his thumb across the fingers again. They were alive and outraged. He turned to pitch to Donald.

The first one was outside, and so was the second. He could feel the ball in his hand, now, but he knew he had no business in there. Except that Brennan would be stone cold, and Brennan hadn't put that run on third base. He went into his motion, let it go, and it looked good, but it was called a ball. The crowd was tearing down the ball park.

He remembered, then, something his father had told him. "Someday it'll be tough, son. You won't have it but you'll have to throw it. The big guy will be up there and you'll have to give him a look at it." Well, this was the time.

He gave Donald a look at it. A fast ball, low and good. Donald let it go by and then squawked. Jackson wanted another, but Burk shook him off, nodded at the next sign. He threw the hook, low and fast, hoping it would behave for him. It broke in nice, just above the knees, and Donald fouled it on the ground, down behind first base.

Burk forgot about the hand. The pain was gnawing and intense, but he knew he

had fingers. The hand was serving him and that was all he wanted. He took the sign, made his short motion and heaved it in there. It was good and Donald took his cut, but it broke off cleanly and sharply and Donald went to his knees with the momentum of his swing. The crowd roared.

He thumbed the fingers, kneading them, rubbing them. He got a strike on Kellaher, then missed a corner. The Gray shortstop fouled one, then took a chance and let an inside pitch go for ball two.

Burk leaned on the next pitch. It was a touch high and Kellaher cut at it as it broke. It was a little lazy pop out in back of the mound. He heard Linn yell for it.

He stood there on the hill, the sweat running down his sides, his legs suddenly a little weak. Linn ran in to him, grinning, then his expression changed suddenly, and his gaze went down to the ball in his hand. When he reached the hill his face was sober and he said, "What the hell!" He held the ball in his open hand and there was a heavy smear of blood on it. He took Burk's right hand in his own and looked at it and swore softly.

The crowd had been silent, stunned in its disappointment, but now a ripple of sound started in back of the plate and started to spread. There was hand-clapping and shouting, first, probably from up in the pressbox, but it wandered and grew in intensity and fervor until it was a storm that rocked the ball park.

Burk looked up at them, seventy thousand of them. He had them licked, now. They were his and they wouldn't forget it. They'd ride him in the future, but it would be different.

Linn said, "It's all for you, kid. Tip your cap."

Burk touched the peak of his cap and started for the runway to the dressing rooms. He waved his battered hand once, but not to seventy thousand people. Just to one. To a guy who wasn't supposed to be there.

ROOKIE, COME BACK TO ME

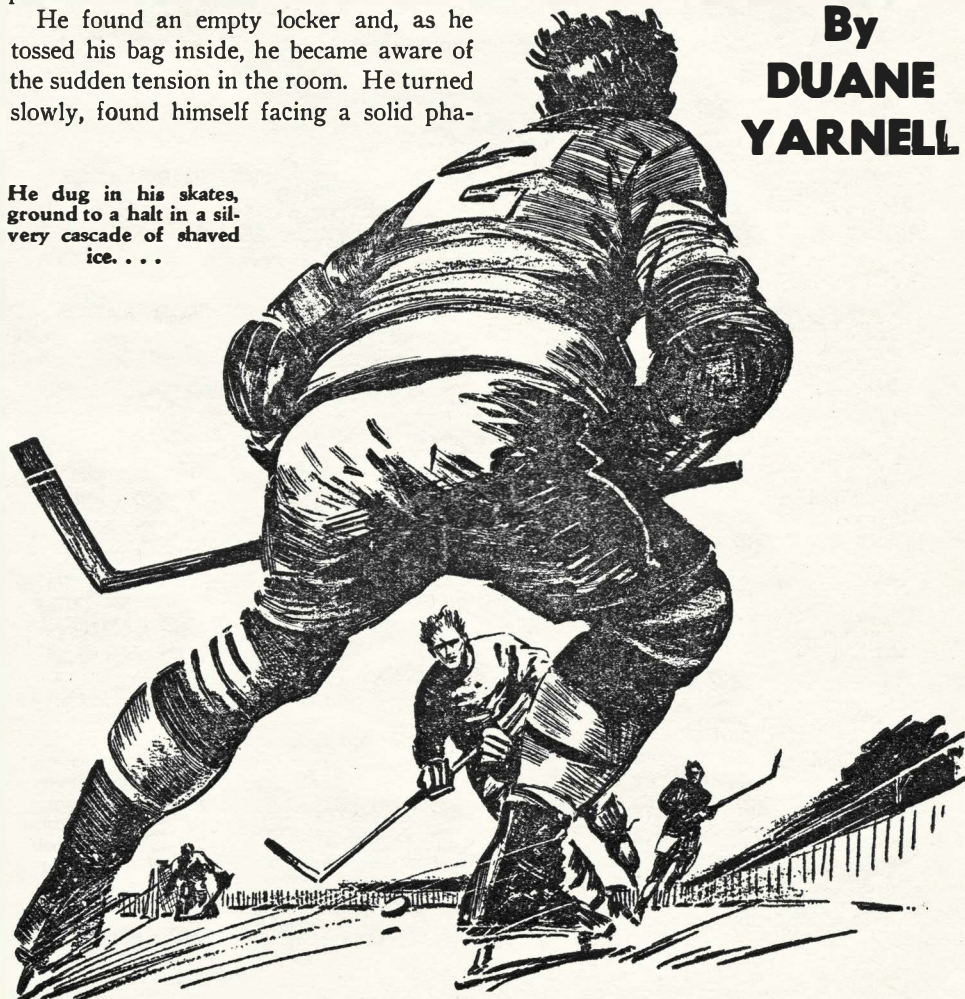
D OUG BRITTON'S plane was late. By the time he finally reached the dressing room, the Hawks were almost ready for the ice. Doug's small suitcase contained a toothbrush, a razor and a pair of hockey skates. The rush phone call from Gil Ingleman, boss of the Hawks, hadn't given him much time to pack.

He found an empty locker and, as he tossed his bag inside, he became aware of the sudden tension in the room. He turned slowly, found himself facing a solid pha-

Six blue-line badmen who hated his hide paid high for rookie Doug Britton—to give him one last grim chance to swap his glory for the one thing he'd never owned—high stick courage!

**By
DUANE
YARNELL**

He dug in his skates, ground to a halt in a silvery cascade of shaved ice. . . .



lanx of tight, sullen, grimly set faces.

Doug Britton shed his coat, dropped it onto the bench beside him. He stood there, feet planted wide, a tall, slope-shouldered kid with a dark, somewhat angular face and a crazy, reckless grin in his eyes. He thought he knew what was eating them. He'd had four hours on the plane to get his speech ready.

"You're sore," he told them slowly, "because Nap LaRue is out for the rest of the season. And you're all set to hate the guts of any busher who thinks he can take Nap's place."

Hank Draper, the Hawk's veteran center, came up slowly, jaw muscles bunching. "Nap LaRue, even with a busted leg, would be better out there than a busher with dollar signs in his eyes."

"So it's the bonus I'm getting for signing a contract," Doug muttered.

"It's not the bonus, exactly," Hank Draper flared. "It's the way you got it. The way you put Gil Ingleman over a barrel."

Doug Britton couldn't see how he'd put the Hawk owner over a barrel, exactly. Doug had just finished a season with a fast semi-pro club. His high-scoring performance had brought plenty of offers from the big time. One had come from Sam Fetner, owner of the gold-plated Owls. He'd offered a bonus of ninety-five hundred for Doug's signature on an Owl contract, with Doug to join the Owls next season.

It had been a big offer and Doug had been tempted to sign, until he'd remembered some of the things he'd heard about Fetner—none of them good. Still, he'd agreed to think it over and he'd gone so far as to promise that he wouldn't sign with anyone else unless the Owl bonus offer was topped. "Hell," Fetner had laughed, "you're as good as signed right now. No other club will go so high on an untested busher."

But a quick call from Hawk-owner Gil

Ingleman had taken Doug off the hook. He'd explained about the Owl's bonus offer. And Gil Ingleman, desperately needing a replacement for the injured Nap LaRue, had immediately wired Doug ten thousand dollars. Doug hadn't felt guilty about taking the money, since there were plenty of years ahead for him to earn it. So why, he wondered now, could they accuse him of putting Gil Ingleman over a barrel?

Before he could ask the question, the door opened and Gil Ingleman came in. The Hawk boss was tall and rail-thin, a nervous, harried-looking man. He recognized Doug Britton and his silver-gray eyes took on the chill of a Newfoundland fog.

"Don't look so damned happy to be here," Ingleman said bitterly. "I just found out about the fast shuffle you gave me!"

A slow flush spread up from beneath Doug Britton's tight collar. "That's the second time I've heard that crack. Maybe you could explain—"

"Don't play innocent," Ingleman snarled. "With three games left and with my Hawks pushin' the Owls for the title, I felt pretty cocky after I'd topped Fetner's so-called bonus offer. And since we're playin' Fetner's Owls tonight, I called Fetner to do a little crowin'." Gil Ingleman paused and the bleakness came back into his eyes. "Fetner laughed at the idea that he'd ever approached you. Which means only one thing to me. You concocted that bonus story and you shook us down at a time when we really can't afford it. So don't stand there with that innocent look on your face, expectin' us to love you!"

Doug was stunned. But gradually it began to dawn on him that Sam Fetner was sharper than he'd imagined. Fetner, naturally upset because Doug hadn't signed with the Owls, had denied the story to make it appear that Doug Britton had

swindled the Hawks. With both teams fighting it out for the title, Fetner's lie had been planted with careful purpose. Doug had only to look around to see the effect that the lie had had upon the Hawks.

HE SAID, desperately, "Listen, Ingleman. Fetner lied. He knows I can't prove it because the offer was a verbal one. But—"

"I feel lousy enough," Ingleman complained, "without you makin' me feel lousier." Ingleman's eyes hardened. "If I could afford it, I'd tell you to get the hell out and bonus be damned. But I can't. I've got to salvage what I can!" Ingleman paused, began to pace nervously. Then he swung around again, pointed a finger at Doug's chest.

"Right now," he muttered, "we need a win over the Owls or we're about out of it. So I'm gonna forget a few things. I'm gonna forget that Fetner let the story leak to the afternoon papers and that the whole league is laughin' at me because I let a busher swindle me out of ten grand. I'm gonna forget that you clipped me when I couldn't afford it. All I know is that you played good hockey in the bushes. Do the same these last three games and maybe we'll be willing to forget a few things."

Doug Britton looked around him. He saw the grimly set faces, the hostility in a dozen pairs of eyes. He wondered, bitterly, what good a chance would do him so long as the Hawks felt as they did. Gil Ingleman could partially forgive him, due to the urgency of the situation. But not the Hawks. They'd had too many lean years, too many seasons of mediocre pay, not to resent a busher who had signed for more money than many of them made in an entire season.

For a split second, Doug was ready to offer the bonus money back. But then he realized that this would look like a confession of guilt.

He swung slowly, faced them, his eyes

hard. "Fetner lied," he said quietly. "And there was a reason for his lie. I don't ask you to believe me. But this much I do ask—keep an open mind about my ability to deliver. If you give me half a chance, I'll help you win your first title in six years."

One by one, they turned and started out onto the ice. Without a backward glance, Gil Ingleman fell in behind them.

When Don reached the ice, the packed rink grew ominously quiet. Then someone broke the tension. "What're you gonna do with the ten grand, you chiseler?"

The afternoon papers had apparently covered the story well. The Hawk fans were blazing mad. They hurled cushions down onto the ice and their cries of denunciation swelled into a symphonic roar. It took ten minutes to clear the ice, and a crop of hastily recruited assistants to prevent a riot.

Doug warmed up slowly, mechanically. He was on a spot and he owed it all to Sam Fetner. Near the end of the warm-up period, he chased a loose puck across the ice, came face to face with a tall, granite-jawed gent sitting in the Owl box—big Sam Fetner, the angle-shooting boss of the Owls.

Fetner was still sore, although the frozen smile on his heavy lips was one of triumph. Doug Britton had to fight the urge to leap over the rail and start swinging.

"You shot off your face once too often," Doug warned. "You won't get away with it, Fetner!"

"I'm scared to death!" Fetner taunted.

Some of the fans watching them. Angri-ly, Doug turned away. But the memory of Fetner's arrogance followed him.

A moment later, the referee skated out, puck in hand. Doug moved into Nap LaRue's old spot, just to the left of the Hawk center, Hank Draper. The puck dropped. Draper caught the puck on the shank of his stick, twisted and rifled a pass to Doug who was already moving toward the enemy blue line.

Doug Britton wanted to make a fast start, wanted to convince them that his bush-league days were behind him. He caught the puck near the barrier. An Owl defenseman lunged at him, but Doug bounced the puck off the boards and streaked past. He hooked the disc just beyond the blue line and his lightning move had the Owls with their skates down. Frenchy St. Johns, the only remaining defenseman, skated over fast. But Doug saw that he had Frenchy safely outdistanced.

He slammed in toward the cage, knowing that he had it made. Then it happened. Frenchy came in from the flank. For a split second, the referee was behind the play and Frenchy had his opportunity. A stick snaked out. And as Doug Britton's skates came together under the drive of fast-scissoring legs, Frenchy's stick sneaked between them. Doug Britton went hurtling through the air. His shoulder hit the iron upright of the cage and for a moment he lay there, unable to breathe, the puck smothered beneath his body.

Then he looked up, saw Frenchy St. Johns grinning down at him. Doug was a rookie. He knew that if he let the Owls get away with one foul, they'd keep trying it all night. Leaping up, Doug Britton clawed at his gloves, jerked them off. He went in swinging. Frenchy tried to fend off the blow by raising his stick across his body. But Doug was in over the stick with a smashing right hand that found its home on Frenchy's solid jaw. Frenchy stumbled backward. The referee came gliding in. But the damage was already done. Frenchy St. Johns was sitting on the back of his pants, skidding slowly to a halt, ten feet across the ice.

"That'll be a major," the referee snarled. "One more like that and you can pack up and go back home!"

The whole thing had been fast. Too fast, really, for more than a handful of **Hawk fans to see.** They'd missed

Frenchy's foul, but they hadn't missed Doug Britton's retaliation.

They began to boo as he left the ice for the penalty box. The booing increased, an instant later, when the short-handed Hawks were unable to stem an Owl five-man rush. The Owls overpowered the cage and when goalie Porky Janosik leaped for the skittering puck, he got a skate in the face for his pains. But before he could turn around, the puck had been drilled into the netting and the red light was blinking.

WITH Doug Britton in the cooler for a five-minute major penalty, and the player strength at a six to five ratio, the Owls went right back to work. Once again they stormed down the ice, a solid wall, five men abreast. They swept through the defense-minded Hawks and after a feint at the right side of the cage, the play loomed to the left. It caught Porky Janosik on the blind side. Frenchy St. Johns rammed the disc into the left corner and once again the red light blinked.

That was all. But it seemed to be enough. The Hawks were trailing by a brace of goals when Doug Britton skated from the penalty box. He joined the play on the Owl blue line. But an offside brought a halt to the play and when Doug turned, he saw a new line coming out.

The boos followed him as he skated off. In the player box, Gil Ingleman had made a place for him. He slumped down, the line of his mouth harsh and bitter.

Ingleman said, coldly, "I saw the foul. Frenchy had something coming. But that was a dumb way to settle it. You could have held off until you got a chance at a good stiff body check."

Doug didn't say anything. He had to admit, ruefully, that he'd handled the situation in typical busher fashion. Ingleman continued to study him. Then, finally, the Hawk boss said, "The Owls play for the big break. You gave 'em their break when you got yourself hoosegowed

for five minutes. It cost us a pair of goals. If you'd—"

"If I'd been out there," Doug finished for him, "you don't think it would have happened."

"They wouldn't have sent five men down in a wave," Ingleman muttered. "Figure it out for yourself."

"I'll get the goals back," Dave promised. "And another to go with them."

But he didn't. It would have been tough enough had the Hawks been willing to accept him. The fact that they resented him made it all but impossible. They weren't consciously refusing to work with him. It was simply a case of the attack bogging down whenever Doug Britton was out there.

The 2-0 score held into the final period. Gil Ingleman's attitude of desperation became one of resignation. Watching, Doug Britton could understand. For years, the Hawks had been trying to put together a winner and now they were almost at the end of their rope. A loss tonight would put the Hawks two games behind, with only two games left, the final one against the Owls again. Only a miracle could bring about a deadlock. The minutes ebbed and with only seven left to go, the fans began to move toward the exits.

Then the Hawks got their first good break of the evening. Hank Draper, trapped out near the blue line, sent a desperate back-hand flip toward the cage. The puck lifted lazily, turning over and over like a fruit-jar lid. It dropped a couple of feet in front of the goalie, took a crazy bounce that carried it over the extended stick and against the corner upright. As Kaplan reached for the puck, it took a final carom, then skittered into the cage.

It was pure horseshoes. And it so unnerved the Owls that instead of falling back to defend, they tried to get the goal back. But Corey Fremont intercepted an Owl pass and went the full length of the rink to score again and tie it up. The

fans stopped moving toward the exits. It had become a game again.

Doug Britton, who hadn't figured in either play, skated off with the first line as a new wave of Hawks came in. Ingleman didn't even look at him as he sat down. A few minutes later, the game ground to a halt with Doug still riding the bench. The weary Hawks went slowly toward the dressing room for a brief rest before the sudden-death overtime period.

In the dressing room, Gil Ingleman looked at Doug with deeply brooding eyes. "Turn in your suit," he ordered. "You're not doin' us any good out there."

Doug reddened. "If these guys would give me a chance, I—"

"You had three periods," Ingleman said wearily. "You cost us two goals by gettin' yourself juggled. The boys got 'em back without any help from you. You don't fit, busher. So take your ten grand and blow!"

Doug started to say something, but Hank Draper made a menacing motion in his direction. "Open your trap once more, busher," Draper snarled, "and I'll part your hair with a hockey stick!"

Doug sat there for a long time after the team had gone back on the rink. There was more involved than just his ability as a hockey player. Doug Britton was young and his hockey career was still before him. Sam Fetner's bold lie had gotten him off to a bad start with the Hawks. But there seemed little point in trying to clear up the situation tonight. Not with the Hawks in such a sour mood. The thing to do was to get out, give the Hawks a chance to cool down. There were still two games left after tonight. Still time for him to prove himself.

As he walked out, he could hear the sudden shrill scream of the fans and when the scream continued to build, he knew that the Hawks had somehow managed to pull this one out. They were tied, now. Tied with but two games yet to play. And

the final one would be against Sam Fetner's Owls. Maybe, just maybe—

But Doug Britton's hopes died the following morning when he picked up the local paper. His picture was on the sports page and beneath it was the story:

Last night, Gil Ingleman announced the outright release of busher Doug Britton, perpetrator of the ten-grand shakedown against the near bankrupt and desperate Hawks. It's almost a cinch that Britton will have a hard time landing with another big-time club.

Gil Ingleman has decided to play out the final two games without trying to add to his crippled line-up. While Ingleman won't admit it, it is believed that his failure to go after additional talents stems from the fact that he simply can't afford it. The busher who pulled down ten-grand for one night's play is no longer for these parts. But it's doubtful if the Hawk rooters will soon forget him.

Doug Britton didn't read any more. He crumpled the paper, tossed it into a basket. He tried to blame Ingleman, tried to blame the team. But it was no good. He always came back to the same starting point. Sam Fetner had lied. Fetner's lie had created dissension that had almost cost the Hawks an important game. Now, the lie was preventing Doug Britton from taking part in the final two games.

Doug called Gil Ingleman's hotel, but Ingleman refused to talk to him. He chafed a while, then called again, only to be told that the team had already pulled out for the night game away from home against the lowly Frogs.

That night, from his hotel room, Doug listened to a play by play account of the game. The Hawks, clearly off their game, had a miserable night. They dropped the decision, 6-3, and it looked like curtains—until a late sports flash gave the result of the Owl-Terrier game. The Owls had dropped their second close one in as many nights. They had lost 1-0 after going into an overtime period to settle a scoreless tie.

Doug Britton sat there for a long time

after he had switched off the radio. Finally he decided what must be done. It was a long shot chance and it would bring him his share of bumps if it failed. But it was the only way. He got up, began to pack his bag. In two nights, the Hawks would visit the Owls for the championship finale. There was plenty of time. But Doug Britton wanted to be there early.

THE first part was easier than Doug Britton had anticipated. A few minutes before the teams were ready to take the rink, Doug, with a pair of skates dangling over his arm, walked past the gatekeeper at the players' entrance. He hurried inside and down the long, poorly lighted hallway. The two dressing rooms were across from each other. Both doors were open. He glanced in at the Hawks, caught the looks of surprise. Then, swiftly, he stepped into the room of the Owls, dropping his skates at the door.

Sam Fetner was saying something to Frenchy St. Johns. Sam Fetner was a big man, a former hockey great himself, taller than Doug and heavier by twenty pounds. Fetner's back was turned and that was the way Doug wanted it.

His whole plan was predicated on surprise. He moved up behind Fetner before anyone could stop him. Swiftly, he reached for Fetner's arm, then shoved it up behind Fetner's body.

Fetner snarled an oath, but when he tried to move away, Doug shoved the arm higher. "We're goin' across the hall," Doug warned angrily. "You're gonna tell Gil Ingleman that you lied about that bonus business—"

Before he could say any more, he saw Frenchy St. Johns get set to leap at him. Doug swung Fetner around in front of him. "Make one move," he shouted, "and I'll break it!"

For an instant, the dressing room was ominously silent, except for Sam Fetner's softly muted curses. Fetner had been taken

by surprise and he seemed to realize that any attempt to get away would, emphatically, cost him a broken arm.

Doug began to move toward the door, shoving Fetner along in front of him. He almost made it. He was halfway through the doorway, when Fetner suddenly shoved backward. At the same instant, Frenchy St. Johns leaped in, clouted Doug over the temple.

Doug's grip relaxed and he dropped to his knees. When he came up, Fetner was facing him, face livid. Doug lunged, but Fetner met him as he came in, met him with a smashing right hand blow that dropped him to his knees again.

"Throw the bum out!" Fetner snarled. "He's askin' for it!"

Doug was still down when half a dozen pairs of hands lifted him unceremoniously, tossed him outside, almost at the feet of a tight-faced Gil Ingleman. Ingleman made a tentative grab for him, but Doug tore away and leaped back inside before Sam Fetner could slam the door. He bumped against Fetner and the big man fell back. Before Fetner could bring his hands up, Doug drilled a hard right hand in under the short ribs. Fetner's breath exploded out, refused to come back. He doubled forward, face purpled, gasping. Doug was winding up to finish it when someone broke a hockey stick across his head and shoulders. He was unconscious before his body hit the deck.

When he came out of it, a grim-looking Gil Ingleman was staring down at him. The rest of the Hawks were looking over Ingleman's shoulder. He realized that they'd brought him into the Hawk's dressing room and that he hadn't been out very long.

Gil Ingleman said, "It was a nice try, kid."

Then Doug remembered. "But it didn't work," he said, bitterly. "If I could have gotten him out of there, he'd have talked before he let me break his arm."

A strange light was blazing in Gil Ingleman's eyes. "You had your ten grand," he said slowly. "You could have gone back home if something hadn't been eatin' in your craw. Maybe I'll never get the real truth from Fetner. But I saw enough. No guy in his right mind would have pulled what you did unless he had a damned strong reason." Gil hesitated, then "We could still use a good man—"

Hope flared in Doug Britton's eyes. He got up slowly, flexed his arms and legs. "It'll take me five minutes to get dressed," he said, hopefully. "I've got a couple of things to settle out there on the ice."

Hank Draper was frowning. He said, "Ingleman—maybe we were wrong about the busher. But can we afford to take a chance on him? He didn't help us much before."

Ingleman said, "They'll be ridin' him hard. But we've almost got to chance it." The Hawk boss turned to Doug. "Hank's got a point, kid. They'll concentrate on you. They'll try to make you break down. You're askin' for a big order."

Doug Britton nodded grimly. "Just put me in there. That's all I ask."

Ingleman said, "Okay, kid. You're in."

The rest of them went outside, leaving him to dress. The Fetner lie had been taken care of, but the Hawks were still unconvinced that he could help them. It was a normal reaction, particularly with a long-sought title at stake. Convincing them would be strictly up to him.

Suddenly, he thought of something else. And when he finally started out of there, he was limping. Out on the ice, he warmed up with the Hawks and when the game was ready to begin the limp was still as pronounced as it had been when he'd first come from the dressing room.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Sam Fetner watching. Fetner hadn't missed a trick. But as the teams started to square away, Gil Ingleman called out to him.

"You'd better let the trainer look at that leg, kid."

Doug said, urgently, "Promise me one thing, Ingleman. Don't pull me out until you send in a new line. No matter what happens."

"They gave you a hell of a pounding, kid. Maybe—"

Doug Britton turned away. He half-expected Ingleman to call him off the ice. But Ingleman didn't. The referee was waiting as the two centers squared away. A capacity crowd sat in hushed silence as the puck was dropped.

HANK DRAPER snared it, flipped it against the boards. Doug caught the puck as it bounded off. But his limp slowed him to a halting pace and before he could cross the blue line, an Owl wingman poked the puck away from him.

The Owls swept down fast, the puck darting rapidly between them. Doug tried to follow, but he was limping worse than ever. At the blue line, Corey Fremont made a lucky stab and got the puck. Doug slapped the ice and the puck came darting. He had been trailing the play, and as he caught the puck on the crook of his stick, he was a full twenty feet out in front.

He skated across the blue line, his face a picture of agony. He watched Frenchy St. Johns move over to cover him. Frenchy grinned as the limping Hawk winger tried to ease around him. Carelessly, Frenchy stabbed for the puck with his stick.

When it happened, it was with the speed of summer lightning. Doug Britton dug hard with his skates. He exploded past the startled Frenchy and the limp was magically gone. The other defenseman swept over fast, but Doug's rush carried him into the very mouth of the cage.

The Owl goalie, Mickey Kaplan, made a futile lunge to cover. But Doug feinted him out of position, then lashed the puck into the left-hand corner. The red light blinked and the Hawks were out in front.

Doug Britton turned in time to catch Sam Fetner in the act of biting a cigar in two. Then he looked at the Hawks. The Hawks were just as startled by the transformation as the Owls had been.

Hank Draper said, "I don't get it, kid."

Doug grinned. "Fetner's gag almost loused us up. So I pulled one of my own. The Owls knew I'd been slapped around and they were ready to believe that my leg really was hurt. All I wanted was an edge. And they gave it to us."

"For a busher," Hank Draper chuckled, "you ain't so dumb." Then Hank's expression sobered. "But don't let it give you ideas. They fell for a gag and they don't like it much. From now on, you'll be on your own."

The warning was prophetic.

The play raged madly from one end to the other. Twice, Doug Britton was bumped into the boards by bruising body checks. But each time he leaped back fast to join the action. He was completely

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bushed when both clubs sent in new front lines.

On the bench, Gil Ingleman said, "Grab a fast rest, kid. You'll be goin' right back in there. You three guys are gonna see a lot of service tonight."

But Ingleman didn't send the front line in fast enough. The Owls took the play away from the Hawk replacements and before the Hawks recovered, a five-man attack punctured the defense zone—and the Owls rammed in one to knot it at one-all!

It was still tied when the first period came to an end. As Doug Britton left the ice, he felt as if the roof had caved in on him. But the sight of Sam Fetner's worried expression gave him more relief than an extra half-hour of rest.

The second period was sheer murder. They slammed into each other as the play raged up and down the ice. They hit hard and they got up more slowly after each encounter. The penalties were frequent, but even with fewer men on the ice, neither club could break the deadlock. Porky Janosik was all over the mouth of the cage, making sensational stops. But at the other end of the rink, Mickey Kaplan was performing sterling service for the Owls.

The second period ended, 1-1. And as the third period began, the partisan Owl crowd seemed to sense that this one would go to the team that took advantage of the first break.

But the break didn't happen. Not in the first ten minutes of the period. Not in the next five. With only five left, the Hawk first line got up off the bench where they had been resting. Hank Draper looked at Doug and said, "I've seen enough. You can take it, kid. Frenchy St. Johns is still burning because you made a sucker out of him. Maybe, if you encouraged him a little—"

Doug understood. "Yeah," he muttered.

They swept back onto the ice. Both teams were now at full strength, ready to **battle it down to the wire. The teams**

squared away on the blue line near the Owl goal. The puck was dropped. Sticks slashed, then the puck went sliding toward the boards. Doug Britton gobbled it and his reckless grin was back.

He made a pass at the cage, but Kaplan blocked the shot, cleared it to one side. Again, Doug leaped for the puck, but Frenchy ragged him all the way. They locked bodies at the retaining wall and it was Doug who got his stick into position first. Doug's pass went out to Hank Draper, who was immediately bottled. But as Doug moved away, he grinned at Frenchy.

"You've been up here too long, mister. You're too slow for big-time hockey."

HE HEARD Frenchy's snarl, then the pealing of the referee's bell as the play halted. Again, there was a face-off at the blue line. And as the puck dropped, Doug leaped in ahead of Frenchy St. Johns to take the play away from him. His quick pass out to the side was intercepted by an Owl wingman and the surge for the other end got quickly under way. But over his shoulder, Doug could see that Frenchy St. Johns was not exactly happy. He grinned tightly as he caught the attack crossing the far blue line. He knew that Frenchy was about ready to blow.

Doug's poke check caught the puck. He whirled, and he was out in front again. He had a three-stride jump on the pack. In front of him was one more blue line, then two Owl defensemen, their hips butted together. And back of them, the Owl goalie, Mickey Kaplan.

Doug's skates sent up little slivers of ice as he moved past center ice, then into enemy territory. He saw the anger in Frenchy's eyes and as he swept in close, he swerved in Frenchy's direction.

And this time, Frenchy St. Johns played the man instead of the puck. Frenchy lunged hard, his stick held high, intent on dropping Doug Britton if he had to club

(Continued on page 127)

Play Bawl!



"Keep talking, rookie," the catcher said, "and you'll talk yourself right into the showers."

"STR-RIKE!"
The batter stepped from the box and in the same motion swung around, his eyes scowling. "What the hell. That was a foot inside."

I ignored him.

"Right down the slot," the catch said. "Musta closed your eyes, rookie."

The ball went back to the pitcher. The

batter, with another glare, drooped both shoulders helplessly. He stepped into the box, thumped the plate, then pumped back and forth while the catcher went through his signal ritual and held up his glove for the target. The pitcher wound up.

"Ball!"

The catcher, on bent knees, made a half-

By
**JIMMIE
JAMIESON**

"Umpires are born blind—and there's a law against their being human. But I heard tell they hafta die, just like people—and one of them's liable to after this game!"

motion to return the ball, checked his arm in mid-air and stood up. He turned his head.

"You said that was a—ball?" he asked very softly.

"Ball one, strike one," I said quietly.

The catcher shook his head.

"Tough when a feller gets old and begins to lose his sight," he said.

"Yeah," the batter said. "That's how he missed the first one. Or mebbe he was squaring up for that."

"Keep talkin', rookie," the catcher said, "and you'll talk yourself right into the showers." He gave his signal.

"Ball two!"

"His eyesight's gettin' better all the time," the batter murmured.

The catcher thumped the ball into his glove a couple of times then burned it back to the mound. It came back whistling.

"Ball three. Three and one!"

The catcher sat down, holding the ball squarely back of the plate.

"Have another look, a good look," he said.

The pitcher came running three-quarters of the way in.

"What you tryin' to do to me?" he yelled. "Mebbe I should toss 'em in so you can see 'em."

The home-club manager started from the dugout, snarling something, then told the pitcher to go back. The fans were whooping it up, booing, stamping their feet in unison.

There were men on bases and the pitcher was worried; he also showed that he was angry. He sent in a let-up ball and the batter, hitting left-handed, swung too soon, pulled a high, screaming one down the right-field line. Two men came in. The ball, still curving, struck in the upper stands.

"Foul ball!"

The pandemonium of yelling didn't lessen, but it took on a different, a savage

sound. There was a crush around the plate; the two runners who had just come in; the third baseman, the pitcher. A loud, penetrating voice, told of Steve "Big Mouth" Larkin, the visitors' manager, running in from the third base coaching box. Out on first base, the visitors' coach and another man were both pointing, arguing their heads off with Bob Kaestner, umpiring that bag.

I took the whisk brush from my pocket, shoved someone aside and began dusting off the plate. Someone pushed against me. I got up from one knee, stuck the brush away and shifted the mask from my left to my right hand.

Larkin was close against me, shoving his face into mine, yelling so I could have heard him outside the park. Larkin had been chasing me all season, fighting over every adverse call. I'd sent him to the house more than once, and out in Cincy I put him out of the game. In his own home park he'd start the fans and it got so I could expect anything from insults to pop bottles and was always glad to have a base job there rather than at the plate.

SURE, I was getting mad. And that's something an ump can't afford. At the same time I didn't mind it too much. Like concentrating on the pitching, it helped to keep me from thinking of the real thing that was riding me day and night—the worry I had at home.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not asking for sympathy, knowing damned well I wouldn't get it anyway. Who the hell ever gives a thought to an umpire—that is, after the last man is out? His whole life is right there, so far as anyone cares, from the time play is called until the game is over. He is not even a human being. He is only an ump.

But I've mentioned it. So I'll just tell you what it was. Margaret, my wife, was at the hospital, and the doctors were trying to determine if the tumor was malign-

nant or not. Then our girl was engaged to a young fellow who'd come up to the majors for his tryout. If he made it, they'd get married. If not, they'd have to wait some more. I couldn't help them, not with what I was carrying. And to make it worse, he was a pitcher. Get it?

All right; let it slide.

I didn't like Larkin, as far as I would let my likes and dislikes go. But I didn't like his breath in my face, and that's for sure. Neither did I care for what he was saying. I didn't say anything. I looked him steady in the eyes, and perhaps he saw something I wasn't putting into words. Also I was swinging that mask in my right hand, wanting nothing more right then than to smash his face with it; and perhaps he read that, too.

Just then Jock Fones, umping third, pushed his bulk in, showing Larkin back.

"That was a good call, Red," he said. "I ran over to the line. All of three feet out when it hit the stands."

I stepped around him to Larkin.

"I'll forget the push this time, Larkin," I told him, speaking low. "You can go back to the box, though it isn't for the good of the game. Another play like that and you're out and—and out five C's. Go on," I snapped at him when he opened his big mouth. I turned my back to him. "Play ball!"

The two runners made a tandem and trotted back to their bases. The catcher was grinning as he adjusted his mask, and the pitcher seemed to have lost his gripe, but the young batter glared his hatred at me before stepping into the box.

The next was a ball and although I hadn't paid any particular thought to it I was aware that it filled the bases. That may seem odd to you, but you have to remember that the score is the last thing we're supposed to be interested in.

As I said, an ump can't distinguish between likes and dislikes; that is, officially he can't. Still, believe it or not,

he is human, and there is a great difference between a good sport and a mucker. No matter how hard the guy plays the game, he shows that difference in the way he takes the breaks against him. And let me tell you, the toughest chore of an ump is not to favor the lad who takes them like a gentleman.

This "Big Mouth" Larkin, for an example, was a playing manager, and when he was in the game you had to watch yourself against the temptation to close your eyes on the bad ones and the pinch put-outs. As a consequence, you made no rule between good sport or bad; mucker or regular guy.

I'M TELLING you this because the next batter up was one of those quiet, smiling fellows. Yeah, but he was also the most eager beaver on Larkin's club, the Blue Sox. He knew his right of way and when his fast two hundred pounds was coming into a base or the plate, a fellow wouldn't get in his way. And he would question you if he thought you were wrong. And when he did, you knew he thought you were wrong, and you'd give him a straight answer. His name was Jerry Caffrey and you can find his averages in the record books.

Larkin, the catcher, and the shortstop, were in a huddle with the pitcher. It was a tight spot all right. One out; bases filled; top of the ninth with the Rebels, the home team, leading by two markers and the two clubs fighting for second place. Jerry Caffrey, hard-hitting number three in the order, was up.

Jerry was smiling as he tossed away the two extras and strode briskly to the plate. Not at me—not at anyone in particular. But you could see that he enjoyed the clutch and was eager to get at it.

The huddle broke up, the catcher hustling back, slipping on his mask as he came. I waited for Larkin to get off the field, and he just strolled over to the

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third base box, staring at me all the way. Caffrey hit right-handed and mostly straight away, so while the outfield was pulled a little to the left, the sackers and short didn't shift much.

As the pitcher got his signal, there was such a noise from the stands that I couldn't have heard the catcher if he spoke. The moundman nodded, then stepped quickly off the rubber and deliberately looked the bases and the fields over. Strategy—to work on Jerry's nerves. But from his confident grin you'd think he didn't have any. And then came the hollow sound of the rhythmic stamping, the visiting fans' way of evening up on the pitcher. He stepped to the rubber. The catcher squatted and I leaned close.

The first was a hook, low and outside, and Caffrey let it go. He set himself for the next, a dipper, squarely over the plate, and topped it enough to send it skimming through the box to centerfield.

I saw the shortstop run over, tore off my mask and stepped around the catcher to get set for the throw-in, if it came. I didn't pay much attention to the ball but did see the short make a phenomenal gloved-hand scoop, take one step forward and peg it home.

The man off third was almost in. The catcher was a little on the field side of the line. I stooper over, close. The runner hurled himself into his slide. The ball thumped the glove; the catcher wheeled and slammed. My hand shot up and back.

Then there was hell all over the place. I glanced automatically to my left, saw Larkin running in, mouth open, arms waving. But the home lads emptied the dugout and swarmed around the catcher, which meant the double had been completed and the game was over. Larkin, apparently thinking of mayhem and murder, managed to slip around the jam and catch up with me as I hurried to the clubhouse and a phone.

PLAY BAWL!

"We ain't in the game now," he yammered at me, his mouth twisted and ugly, "and I'm going to tell you what that last call was. And if you don't like it you can do anything you damned please about it."

I'd been hustling right along and he'd kept right up with me, leaning his head around in front, careful not to touch me, for if something came of this, which looked likely and as if he meant it should, he would want to tell it was my move that started it.

I could see that he had completely lost his head, and while I wasn't worried over the immediate outcome, the aftermath could be nasty and cost me my job. And I couldn't afford that now. And that reminded me of the errand I was on, with Larkin holding me up. God, how I wanted to take a poke at his big mouth.

"Save it, Larkin, and get the hell away away from me," I snapped at him. "I have something more important on my mind now than your beefing."

"The hell with that," he said, and I almost swung at him. "I'm saying—"

With his head twisted around at me, he bumped solidly into someone and brought up short. And there was Jerry Caffrey, come from somewhere, standing in Larkin's way and smiling that quiet smile of his.

"How's Margaret?" he asked, paying not the slightest attention to his manager and boss.

"What I've been waiting all afternoon to find out. How did you know about her, Jerry?"

"Tom told me. Go ahead, Red. I know how you feel. And wish Tom luck when you see him."

I hurried away then, but not too fast to miss hearing Larkin ask, "Who the hell is Tom?", and Jerry's answer, "Oh, an old buddy of mine."

I got the hospital and all they would

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tell me was that they'd given Margaret some injections and she was sleeping.

IT WASN'T very happy at the apartment that evening. I couldn't get any further word about Margaret and it dumped me plenty. However, I tried to keep up for Nancy's sake, and it helped a little when young Tom Hartley came in.

Yeah, Tom was the pitcher I told you about, engaged to Nancy and the fellow Jerry Caffrey had called his pal. I sure hoped Jerry wouldn't give Larkin the rest of it, for while Tom wasn't yet a relative, if he knew it, it would give Big Mouth something to yell about and maybe get into the papers, if I had to call Tom's slants and curves.

Tom was a fine youngster, a husky six-footer, and I could see why he and Jerry should pal up. Tom's club, the Redmen, was coming to town for the season's wind-up—a wind-up that would decide the pennant, for the Redmen, Rebels or the Blue Sox could take it. The race was that close.

Tom was full of pep and ginger with a confidence that had no brag about it. He told us how he had been coming along and felt sure he would be throwing them in the World Series. He told Nancy they could be married right after that and go south to his home in Georgia for the honeymoon.

He did his best to cheer me up, but away down inside it was all hollow. I don't want to keep speaking of that, but maybe it will get you to understand how hard it is sometimes for a man behind the plate to keep his mind on one thing and one thing alone—the balls and the strikes and the plays at the plate.

A scientist said that what they call persistency of vision is one-fifteenth of a second. That's why they run sixteen film exposures a second, making it seem like one continued, smooth motion. A lot can

PLAY BAWL!

happen in a blink of the eyelid. The touch of the ball before the heel hits the bag. A hook or a curve, cutting the plate before it gets past. And we are right down there where we can see them, even better than the batter.

I drew the bases for the first two games in the Blue Sox pasture, where Big Mouth Larkin was king boss, for which I was thankful, although I got plenty riding at that. Thanks to Larkin the fans over there weren't likely to forget me ever, and on one or two close ones that went the other way, there were some bottles to be picked up, and the lads in blue-and-brass buttons had to be posted in the stands. And that was only the mild prelude to what was to come.

The Sox took both of theirs from the western team. The Redmen split their two with the Rebels and on that last day the Redmen and Blue Sox stood at the top in their league with the play-off game to be played in the Sox ball park. And it was my turn to be behind the plate.

I phoned once more before leaving for the park. Margaret was going to the operating room in about an hour, and it would tell the story. That was that.

In the covered stands the fans were mashed into the corridors and the aisles and hanging from the rafters. In the bleachers there was scarcely room for a long breath. The umpires were announced, and as my name was called they let out a razz that must've been heard across the river.

And when it finally let up, a leather-lunged guy, who didn't need a bellows nor a megaphone, yelled, "There goes our flag!" That is what a manager can do who doesn't like a particular umpire. Later I learned that he even got word to the Commissioner to watch me close.

It was a pitcher's battle most all the way with everyone in the stands and on the field all keyed up, waiting for the

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break when they could throw away the safety valve and blow off all the steam that built up inning after inning.

It went even to the first of the fourth—three up; three down. And I tell you, brother, that game was the toughest chore I ever did.

It's going to be a ball—it's going to be a strike, I kept telling myself. Keep your eye and your mind right there. Don't think of anything else.

It was the stretches of waiting that were the most trying. I'd seen Tom warming up, and all the time I was calling them, and the teams were changing, the chance that he might be brought in was a dread in the back of my mind.

There had been some beefs, of course. You couldn't go three innings in Big Mouth's park without them. But I didn't let anyone monkey with it, and I guess Larkin got the correct idea that I wasn't taking much from him that day.

IT CAME down to the fourth, and with two down and none on, the Redmen's big first baseman hoisted a slant clean out of the place. There was quite a yelp on that belt—not that the Redmen had much of a following this far in the East, but some Rebels fans must have come over and there could be a few home folks not too keen over Big Mouth's methods.

The next man up was the victim of that home run's effect on the lanky pitcher. He went down on three fast ones; one missed, two called.

Both clubs blanked in the next three, that one-run lead of the Redmen loomed bigger and bigger. The tension built up until the fans could contain themselves no longer. They were yelling all the time and at anything.

I jammed the mask on my head as the Sox came up for the last of the eighth. The Redmen's catcher said something

PLAY BAWL!

when I bent over his shoulder, but whether to me or to the batter I didn't know. I didn't answer.

A ball, a strike, three balls in succession, and a runner was on.

The Red's pitcher was tiring. I could see it when he heaved another ball, then let one come over that was a cinch to bunt toward first. He fielded it that way, and I saw Bob Kaestner wave the lad out, but the sacrifice worked. Four more balls on top of a couple of strikes put another man on first.

A conference out at the mound let him catch his breath and call up his reserve, and he got himself out of the jam with the help of some stellar fielding.

Last of the ninth; one to nothing. Last chance, and the pennant around the corner for somebody.

He let a man get on. On the bunt that followed, the only play was at first and the runner went to second. Another pass put the winning run on first. He tightened then, putting into it everything he had left, using his head, hooks and curves and change of pace when he had little of that fireball speed to count on for a clincher. He coaxed the next man to pop to short left, for the second out. But that seemed to finish him. He walked the next man, and the bases were filled.

They took him out.

Then the loudspeaker blared, "Number fourteen—Tom Hartley—going in to pitch for the Redmen!"

I hadn't thought it possible they would put the kid in on the toughest gamble any pitcher could face. But they had.

I didn't look at Tom. I saw Larkin stare at me for a moment, then run over toward the Commissioner's box. I continued to gaze vaguely toward third and soon Larkin came slowly back, and his face was twisted and ugly.

I didn't think anything about it at the time. I was waiting only for them to get

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SPORTS NOVELS MAGAZINE

settled again, to get this thing over. Then, I saw Jerry Caffrey stepping up, and the fans turned from razzing Tom to give Jerry a mighty hand.

Jerry was smiling, and I think a part of it was meant for me, but I looked past him, putting on the mask, holding the chest protector close with my arms. Then I got it. Tom and Jerry Caffrey had been pals, which probably meant they had played together somewhere, sometime. And both being keen players, it was dollars to doughnuts that Jerry knew how Tom pitched, and Tom knew how Jerry hit.

And that, brother, was drama, piled up on as tight a clutch as you could pick. A drama that the fans missed, although the situation right before them was driving them wild.

Then I got to thinking how each one would act. I knew Tom only fairly well, but if he was good enough for my daughter, he stood all right with me. You might say I didn't know Jerry at all, but that isn't so. I had watched him the way an ump will watch players, and what I had seen of him on the field was good.

I DREW a long breath and tried to forget that I knew the batter or the pitcher. A ball is a ball, and a strike a strike. That had to be my whole thought for the next few minutes, with all hell apt to break any moment.

Umps have to size up the height of a batter, get in mind an image of the rectangle, from knee to shoulder, and the width of the plate, then watch the pitcher's hand, pick up the ball as it starts plateward, follow it in and see if it pierces that rectangle or goes outside.

Tom finished his warm-up, but instead of stepping to the rubber, he beckoned the catcher to come out to him. And you can imagine how that crowd took the delay. It seemed an age, but finally the catcher

PLAY BAWL!

clumped back, fixed his mask and settled down to his job.

It was a sight to see Tom on the mound. He fixed the runners with a sweeping glance, then stood, calm as a post, the edge of a smile on his lips, and shook off two signals as a storm of yells beat at him, then nodded. He went into action without hesitation, in one smooth motion.

In came the first one. Gad, I didn't imagine the boy had that speed! But my left hand went up, for it was in close, under Jerry's hands. My mouth was closed. I couldn't have heard myself yell. The catcher looked around and I showed him the left. He scowled and settled back.

Tom was slow, taking his time. The next was just as fast and it had a jump hook. And it cut the rectangle waist high. I hoisted the right.

The next one was high—two strikes; one ball.

Twice then, I had to jerk the left, both inside and under the hands.

Jerry stepped out of the box, and I couldn't help thinking it was an odd thing to do, with Tom apparently gone wild. He tapped the bat against the edge of his shoes, cool as ice. Then slowly he stepped back in.

And suddenly there was silence all over the field. It was just too much for everyone. The ninth inning; two down; bases filled; three balls and two strikes. One more pitch and the pennant would belong to the Sox or Reds. One more pitch!

Jerry braced himself in his stance. The catcher squatted and I stooped. I could just catch the movement of the three runners, edging away from the bases, all set to go the instant the ball started on its way.


It started all right, and it was there almost the same moment it left Tom's hand—the swiftest thing I'd seen all day. It came just like the two preceding ones and Jerry didn't move his bat. But in-



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stead of shooting in, it cut fair across the plate. My right hand went aloft.

I turned, but before I could get my mask off something crashed down on it with splintering sound and I felt something warm trickling down my cheek and neck. Other things were thudding around me on the ground. Players were rushing from both dugouts; fans were jumping over the rails. From the noise you would think all hell had broken loose, and a moment later I was sure it had.

I was in the midst of a pushing, yelling, fighting crowd. Then the boys in blue were in among us, and they got around me and fought a way through the mob to the corridor leading to a dressing room, and I left them without saying good-by.

Sure, Tom made the club. Won his game, too, in the Series. And Margaret was well enough to be at the wedding right after it. She's all right now. And Jerry Caffrey was best man. He and Tom were joshing each other at the wedding luncheon.

"You always were a sucker for those inside close ones, Jerry."

"That's where you're wrong, Tom. I can hit them but you can't place 'em for sure, and I figured a base on balls was better than a scratch hit. I could have been a hero but you made a monkey out of me." He turned to Nancy. "Don't you ever forget your husband is a baseball man, so watch out for his curves. And I'll tell you a secret. I did my damndest to win that game, which B. M. Larkin would never believe. But I'm glad Tom came out the hero just the same."

As for me, I got a whole new lease on life when I learned that the Commissioner had told Larkin that he trusted me to call them right no matter who was hitting or pitching. And brother, that's one thing that makes an ump's life worth while—to know that he's believed in all the way by the man who counts.

ROOKIE, COME BACK TO ME

(Continued from page 114)

him to do it. Doug Britton could hear them pounding up from behind him.

He dug his skates in at an angle, ground to a halt in a silvery cascade of shaved ice. Meanwhile, Frenchy's lunge had pulled him off balance, and when Doug wasn't where his rush should have taken him, Frenchy simply tumbled to the ice.

The other defenseman whirled, but Doug was away again. He hurled the prostrate Frenchy, slammed the puck hard, about ten feet wide of the cage. The puck bounced off the wall, came out in front again. The Owl goalie hesitated, then decided to smother the skidding puck.

Kaplan lunged from the mouth of his cage, reached for the puck with a pair of heavy gloves. But an instant before the gloves could smother, Doug Britton had snaked the puck away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hank Draper sneaking in. Then the Owls were boiling around him, trying to hold the fort until Mickey Kaplan could get back. Deftly, Doug flicked his wrists. The puck rocketed out to the side, miraculously eluding a flurry of stabbing sticks. Hank Draper snagged it right in the mouth of the cage. As he poked it in, an infuriated Frenchy St. Johns crashed into him from behind.

The red light blinked. The referee waved his arm toward the penalty box.

But that was the edge the Hawks wanted. With less than two minutes left, and with six Hawks against five Owls, they played it smart. They fell back and let the Owls hammer vainly at their tight defense. The clock ticked away while Frenchy St. Johns sat chafing in the box.

Then, with only seconds left, Doug Britton gobbled a loose puck and was off for the other end, the Owls in fast pursuit.

For the first time that night, he had the full length of the rink in which to operate. He crossed his own blue line, body bent forward at an angle, the puck riding loose-

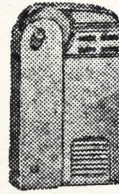
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SPORTS NOVELS MAGAZINE

ly at the heel of his stick. The Owl fans were screaming for someone to stop it, but not a man in Owl uniform was fast enough. The second blue line sped under his skates.

Mickey Kaplan was hunched now, his big body all but covering the mouth of the cage. Doug kept driving, holding his fire, waiting for Kaplan to make his move. When he was three feet out, Kaplan had to commit himself. Kaplan dived, his stick down flat against the ice. Doug feinted to the left and as Kaplan thrust out a skate to cover, he flicked the puck in between Kaplan's legs. The net bulged as the puck found a home and the Hawks were leading 3-1. It was the clincher. . . .

LATER, Doug sat on the bench in the Hawks' dressing room, his back still stinging from the pounding his mates had given him. He watched them go about their undressing, a team of veterans who had waited six years for a title.

An instant later, Gil Ingleman came inside. For the first time since Doug had known the man, Ingleman was grinning. "They're havin' quite a battle across the hall," Ingleman said. "Fetner was givin' Frenchy hell for being such a sucker. Then Frenchy made a crack about the lie that Fetner told. The door was wide open and plenty of guys heard Fetner's reply, including one guy who happens to be a reporter. So if you're worryin', forget it."

Doug said softly, "But I still feel a little funny about the bonus. I didn't know—"

"You can forget that part, too," the Hawk owner said. "We've got a championship club, now. And when you've got a champion, even the bankers are willing to get into the act. We've got the play-offs. And then, next year—"

Doug Britton looked down at the white lettering across his uniform. He was a Hawk. And now, for the first time, he was really beginning to feel like one. He was grinning again.

THE HOME PLATE

(Continued from page 8)

sprained ankles and broken fingers bloomed like hibiscus in Florida. Substitutes were brought in from the minors. Most of them either failed, or were hurt.

Both Griffith's catchers were incapacitated, and the manager didn't have a man to go behind the bat. For probably the first time in history, a manager's appeal to a rival club was answered. Kindly old Connie Mack loaned Clark Mike Powers to fill in until the other maskmen recovered sufficiently to get into action.

Griffith was nearly through as a pitcher, but with his cripple-armed, spavin-legged collection of moundsmen, he had to play a relief role every couple of days. It takes nerve to do that. If a manager is batted out of the box, it's pretty tough to bawl out a pitcher who turns in a bad game.

For a while, in spite of all these handicaps, Clark kept his team in the race, but it was an impossible situation. The Highlanders began to slip. Griff shifted his meager reserves, played hunches, did everything he could think of, but it was no dice. They finished sixth.

The fans panned him, of course, but ball players, who knew what a great pitcher Griffith had been, and how shrewd he was in handling a team, swore that under almost anybody else the club would have finished last. Griffith was strong enough to overcome criticism, but other men have not been so fortunate.

One afternoon after Tom Burns had taken over the Chicago National League club some years ago, he was trying to correct an error in the batting form of a husky young rookie. After manager Burns made a few suggestions, the rookie turned on him with, "Ah, dry up, you old bum. You never hit over .210 in your life!"

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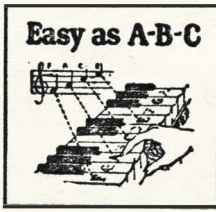
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SPORTS NOVELS MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 43)

twenty-two, and knocking hard on the door.

THE dressing room was a shambles. When Wes and I walked in, Red was on a chair giving a speech. He was saying, ". . . and I want all you men to know that next Saturday we got that tough game with Vassar coming up and—"

He saw us come in. He stopped, swallowed hard and got down from the chair. The grins faded and the men got busy stripping off uniforms.

Weston Walker didn't say a word. He walked through the room for a few moments, a faraway expression on his face.

Then he spoke.

"Okay, okay, so I can make a mistake! What an outfit! Brains and guts and muscles aren't enough. Mike said something just before I came in here. Something about defensive football being emotional. What did you do out there, Rollins?"

Red gulped again, "Coach, I just— Well, I— You see—"

Scotty spoke for him. "Red came out and said that we were doing it the hard way, trying to get the ball carrier. He said that maybe we ought to knock everybody down who was wearing gray. It just made us— Well, it made me feel better and I wasn't so tired."

Walker, his face like a stone mask, stood over Rollins. In a low tone he said, "Rollins, I want you out of here in five minutes."

"Yes sir," Red said sadly.

"I want you out of here in five minutes. I want you to go back to your room and get some sleep. I've got to have you in shape for the Vassar game."

The roar of laughter didn't catch us until the door had almost shut behind us.

Wes grinned at me. "What are you going to teach me next, coach?" he asked.

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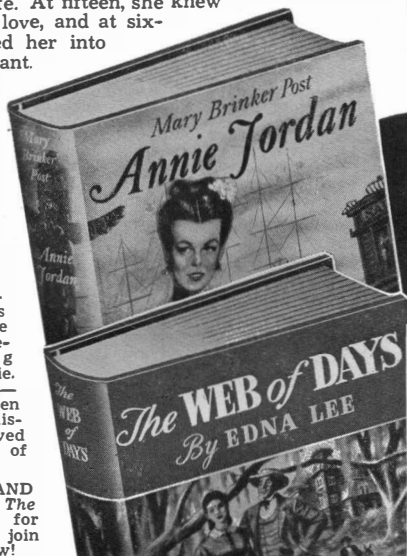
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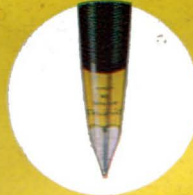


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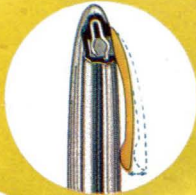
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