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by JOHN WILSON

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SUPER SPORTS

Volume 6

December 1947

Number 4

3 Complete Novelets



KEEP HOLLERING, BUSER! (Baseball)
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A holler guy's a fireworker, but not a sorehead, remember that, son!



THE SWEDE (Football) By Roe Richmond 30

Johanssen was dynamite on the field—when he remembered to play rough!



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They had the big boy on the spot, and they wouldn't let him off until he was finished, a broken, punch-drunk shell of a man.

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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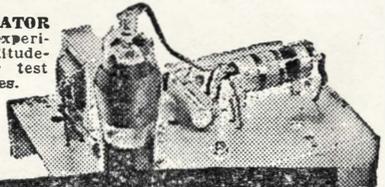


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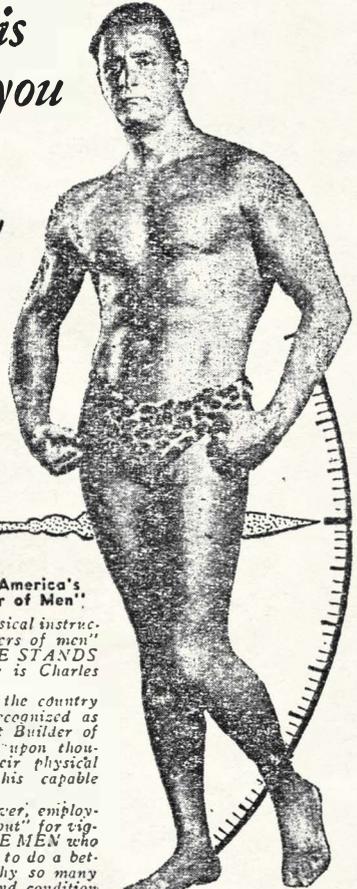
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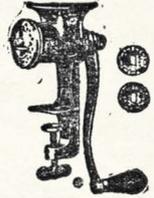
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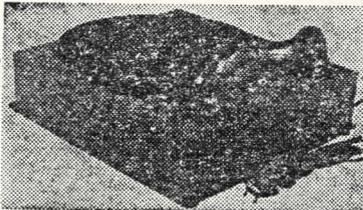
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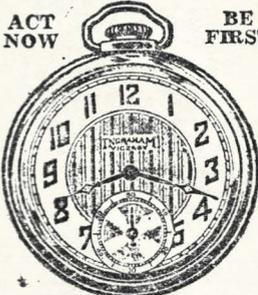
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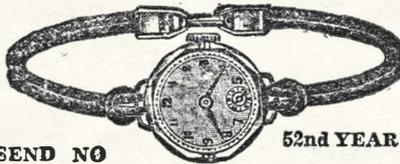
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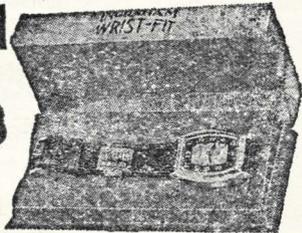


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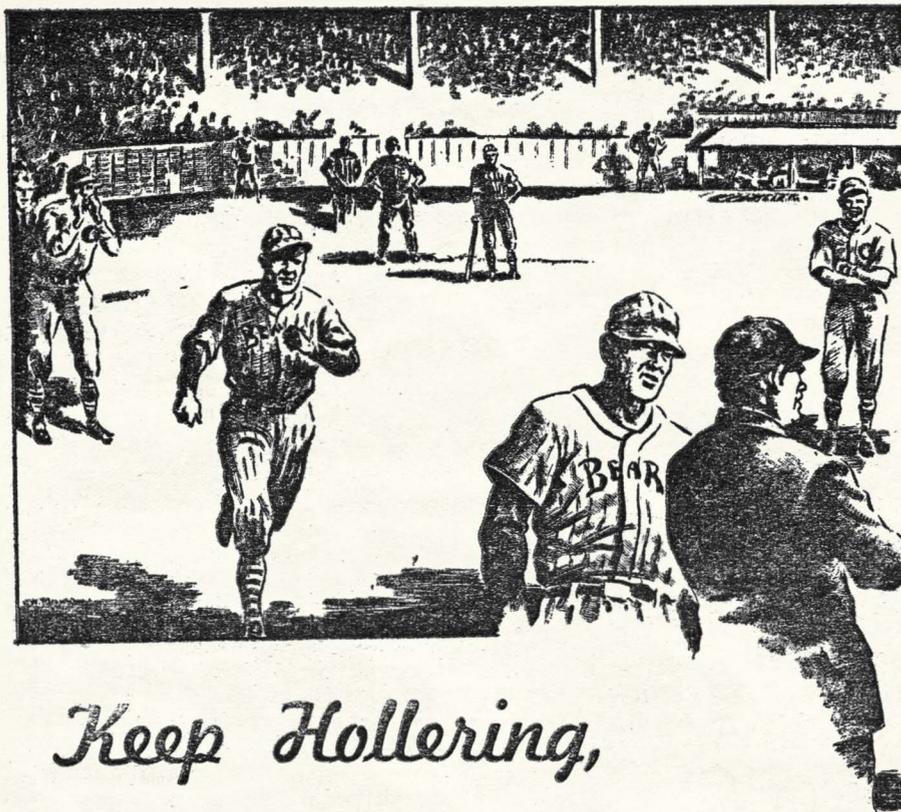
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Keep Hollering,

Busher!

A Powerhouse Baseball Novelet

By **JOHN WILSON**

(Author of "Hot Corner Hi-Jinks")

✓ 1 ✓

SKIP MERRILL, one hundred and fifty pounds of muscle and lungs, went dashing out there to his shortstop slot. The ceremonies were over. The season opener was getting under way, and for the little guy it was the beginning of everything. He was a runt with nothing on his shoulder but a chip. A stocky-framed kid built like a midget racer, geared for speed and endurance. His lean jaw jutted impudently; his blue

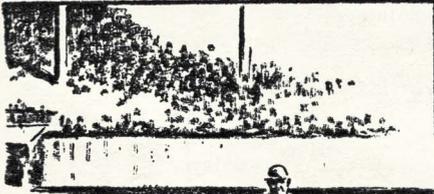
eyes were determined. He jerked at his cap and it fell naturally at a cocky angle.

Hunch Sanders, ballwether of the Central League Indian moundsmen, was on the hill. He looked very impressive on his first two pitches to the Bear batsman. Both were strikes. Out there behind Hunch, Skip poured out his chatter like milk from a bottle.

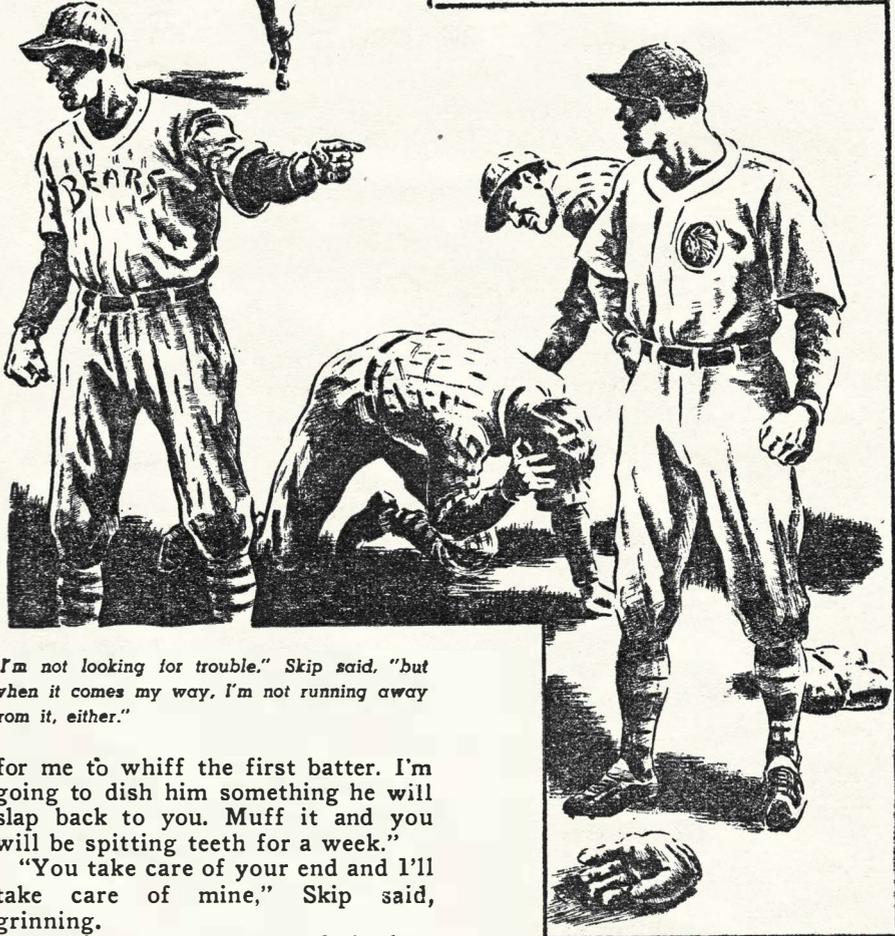
"He's a has-been, Hunch old boy. One more and you got him."

Hunch nonchalantly flipped the rosin bag aside, stepped off the mound and strolled over to Skip.

"Listen to me, small stuff," he said tersely. "It has always been bad luck



*Don't ever quit holler-
ing out there, son.
When you feel licked
and want to quit, hol-
ler all the louder. No
matter what they say
to you or do to you,
don't ever let them
shut you up!*



"I'm not looking for trouble," Skip said, "but when it comes my way, I'm not running away from it, either."

for me to whiff the first batter. I'm going to dish him something he will slap back to you. Muff it and you will be spitting teeth for a week."

"You take care of your end and I'll take care of mine," Skip said, grinning.

Hunch slammed it in and the batter slammed it right back, on a line into the slot between right and center. The batter went into second standing up.

"Maybe that's better luck, huh?" Skip shouted at the pitcher. "When you gonna start shucking, you old goat?"

The big, round-shouldered hurler dug his spikes angrily into the dirt and swore a blue streak. He served four straight balls to the next batter, punctuating each serve with a spate of purple language.

There were two on and none away, and the holler guy at short kept

talking it up, urging Hunch to pull the string. It was a blaring voice, incessant. A tireless spark reaching out and setting the others afire. The other infielders caught the contagion and poured out encouragement.

"Make him hit it, Hunch boy... Just look at him. Looks like a scarecrow up there... Couldn't hit a pillow with a paddle..."

The batsman glowered angrily in Skip's direction. He swung at Hunch's first offering and drilled it back through the box. It was a dynamite smash that might have torn Hunch's leg off if he hadn't instinctively hopped out of its path.

But moving with the crack of the bat, Skip streaked behind second base, his gloved hand gliding close to the grass. He speared the bulleting white ball on a flashy pickup, shovelled it to the second sacker, then piled flat on his face from the momentum of his dash. The second sacker made the pivot, the peg. It was a lightning double-play, and the fans were on their feet, thundering applause.

On the next play Skip, getting that split second jump on the ball, went back to the fringe of the infield almost behind third base to scoop up a dribbler. Then, while off balance, he whipped a beautifully accurate peg to the first sacker to nip the runner by a stride.

It wasn't till the third inning that Skip, batting seventh, came to the plate. He didn't do much; he fouled one off, took a ball, and then on a sharp-breaking curve, raised a high infield fly. In the fifth he did even less. He took three lusty cuts, and lugged the hickory back to the pile. Hunch Sanders, his bald head gleaming with sweat, got up from his seat at the far end of the dug-out, faced toward Skip and made a loud, insulting noise.

"A hitless wonder," Hunch derided. "You might as well have some fun while you're around. This is your first game in this league and it looks like it will be your last. You'll be back pouring steel at the mill before many days. That's where you belong."

Skip looked at the veteran and was puzzled. His play in the field had

pulled Hunch out of a couple of holes. But that seemed to cut no ice; because he had looked futile at the platter, the veteran flinger was giving him the business.

What kind of guy was this Hunch Sanders? Skip couldn't figure it. He shook his head a little in bafflement and said nothing.

DON FROST, grizzled, gray mountaineer of a man, had watched the by-play. The manager of the Indians, he was an old friend of Tom Merrill, Skip's father. He'd consented to give Skip a whirl at organized ball. Don Frost and old Tom had, in years gone by, played together in fast minor league company, and their friendship had lasted beyond their playing days. Tom Merrill had retired from the game, taken a job at the Peerless Steel Works, and been content to limit his connection with the game to teaching his sons all the baseball he knew, prepping them for the big time.

No one could question that he'd done a marvelous job. Lance had taken to the game like a duckling to a pond. He seemed to have been born with the game in his blood. He picked up everything, seemingly without effort. He'd made the jump from the Peerless Steel team to the majors, and made good there with a bang. Already an established star, Lance had tracked up twenty-three wins to spark the Titans in their pennant dash. He'd rode the crest with the Titans, winning two games as they copped the world series.

Skip was several years younger, and somehow that knack of learning without effort was missing from his make-up. He learned things the hard way, had them pounded into him by old Tom. There were times when old Tom almost gave up on him. But old Tom Merrill was a hard-boiled gent, stubborn and determined as they come. He'd made up his mind that Skip would follow in Lance's seven-league boots.

And Skip was as stubborn and determined as his father. He wanted a crack at the shiny brass ring that fate holds out to tempt young ball players. It was a hard call to resist, but he'd

fought it for a long time because there were some things even greater than personal ambition.

Old Tom looked hard as nails, but his ticker was wearing out. He'd had to give up his job at the mill when the doctor warned him that it might suddenly give out. He'd made some excuse to Lance, but Skip knew the truth. And the job of looking after old Tom fell on Skip; it was the least he could do. He'd held back on carving himself a baseball career because he could not bring himself to walk out on old Tom. Not with that bum ticker. Old Tom had made Skip promise not to reveal the truth to Lance.

Lance was a big timer, and he lived like one; he seldom got to the old home town to visit his father, and Skip didn't want to put anything in his way that would interfere with his enjoyment of the life stellar play had won for him.

Skip was proud of his famous brother. It didn't matter how much he had jibed him, derided his ambition to become a ball player. Lance never knew how deep his verbal snots cut, Skip had never given him the satisfaction of showing how deeply he was hurt.

The day had come when Skip, returning from the day's work at the mill, had found a train ticket on the table, and his bags packed.

Old Tom had said, "I wired Don Frost you'd be there. I want you to go out there and make good. I expect you to make good, so don't get any funny ideas about coming back in a couple of weeks with a sad and phony tale of how you flopped."

"Don't worry, pop," Skip had said. "I won't let you down. If I miff it it won't be because I didn't try."

That's the way it had been, and before he had left Tom Merrill had given him some final words of advice: "Don't ever quit hollering out there, son. When you feel licked and want to quit, holler all the louder. When you holler you keep fighting. No matter what they say to you or do to you, don't ever let them shut you up."

NOW, ON the Indian bench, Don Frost eased his massive bulk alongside Skip and said.

"Don't let Hunch get under your skin. He's got his own ways and I guess he's pretty much of a screwball, but underneath he's a pretty right guy. He was up in the big show, used to chuck for the Owls. He was a nine year man when they gave him the heave-ho. That was a rotten stunt, and Hunch wasn't himself for awhile. That's the reason why he's with us now. And don't let anyone run him down. For a three or four inning stretch he can chuck them in any league."

"I didn't know that," said Skip. "He got a rough deal. I'd like to see him get a break. He's got one coming to him."

Don Frost laughed a mirthless laugh. "Don't kid yourself, boy. For an old timer this is the last stop. They don't come back from here."

It was a hard-fought, scoreless contest. Skip continued to lash the opposition with his merciless tongue. He had more than one of the Bears hot under the collar.

By the time the seventh inning rolled around, feeling was running high between the two clubs, largely because of Skip's expert barbering.

The first batter for the Bears laced a single through the infield. On the hit and run the next batsman drove a bouncer down the right side of the infield. The Indian second sacker corralled it, made the toss to Skip. Skip pivoted, bulletted the ball to the first sacker. A second after he'd gotten off his throw the runner charging down from first slammed hard into Skip, knocked him sprawling.

"Maybe you wanna make something of it," the Bear demanded.

Skip got to his feet. He was shaken up, and he was sore inside, but he kept a firm check on himself. Old Tom Merrill had made it plain that being a hothead and throwing knuckles at every slightest provocation didn't come under the heading of holler guy.

"I don't think so," Skip said evenly. "I get my paycheck for playing ball."

He grinned at the Bear, then deliberately turned his back and started to walk away.

A look of mingled disbelief and disappointment flashed over the Bear's face. The nice little scheme he had hatched was suddenly falling to pieces. The fresh rookie was having none of it. Without warning the Bear struck out at Skip. Quick as a cat, as if he had eyes in the back of his head and saw what was coming, Skip whirled. At the same time he lashed out with his right. It connected, with all his beef behind it.

He followed up with another powerful swat, catching the Bear on the button. Down went the Bear, hitting the dust hard and staying there, stunned and pop-eyed.

Suddenly the Bear bench was empty. They were all out there, clustered about their fallen cohort. They looked at Skip with respect and anger.

"It can be that maybe I can't hit the size of my hat," Skip said quietly. "I'm not looking for trouble, but when it comes you can bet your boots I'm not running out on it. Mark that down in your book."

None of the Bears seemed disposed to dispute Skip any further. All of them, including the chagrined guy who'd brought the fracas on, returned to the bench.

Hunch Sanders, standing on the slab observing the festivities around the keystone sack, seemed to get quite a bang out of the affair. There was a strange smile on his chubby face. He went over to Skip and said:

"It's too bad you can't hit like that with a bat. You'd be a whiz."

Hunch settled down to the business at hand. He was bowling along in great style again, and he struck out the next batter on three pitches.

Trouble was just beginning for the Bears. The first batter for the Indians slashed a two-bagger down the left field line. The next man bunted, placing it deftly down the third base stripe, and beat out the throw to first.

There were Indian runners on first and third when Skip stepped into the batter's box. He waved the bat menacingly. This was the time he wanted

that hit, the first time he'd come up with men on base. Skip was no slugger and he knew it, but in all the games he'd played in the past he'd been strictly a clutch hitter, getting bingles when they counted most.

THE FIRST pitch was a twisting curve ball breaking sharply across the inside corner. Skip had been fooled twice on the same kind of pitch. And once again the hurler pitched to that inside spot. Skip stepped into it. He felt the bat meet the ball squarely. He tore down toward first, looking up and seeing the ball soaring high and far. He was well past first and sprinting like a deer when he saw the ball smacking against the distant left field fence. He rounded second without losing speed, and made third safely by dint of a head-first slide into the hassock.

On the bench Hunch Sanders scratched his shinny dome and muttered, "Wouldn't surprise me none if that little rascal is a clutch hitter."

"What was that you said?" questioned Don Frost, overhearing the veteran pitcher's soliloquy.

"I was remarking," said Hunch, "that that little pepperpot is pretty darn lucky."

"Oh," said the manager. "Let's give it a little time before we go calling a belt like that lucky. Seems to me he tagged it mighty nice."

They couldn't touch Hunch for the remaining innings, and the Indians came out on the heavy end of the 1-0 score.

Games added up, and for the Indians it was the holler guy all the way, the little guy with the oversized heart and the whippet speed and the slick dukes. He was the spark plug who had the opposition wild and who spurred on his teammates to outdo themselves. He was Skip Merrill of the magic name. All around the circuit the fans liked his style. Everywhere the opposition came to look on him with respect. His teammates came to realize that in his brash way he wanted to win every game. They accepted him for the dynamo he was. The Indians steam-rolled everything in sight, and

rolled up a commanding lead. Then they rolled triumphantly from their home bailiwick to meet the challengers on the road.

Hunch Sanders was Skip's roommate. That was an arrangement made by Don Frost. He made a practice of pairing off a newcomer with an old hand. He figured that the raw rookies would profit from the experience of the veterans, and the veterans might catch some of the fire and enthusiasm of the newcomers. In the case of Skip and Hunch, the pair hit it off like soap and water. They made a weird combination, the sour-pussed Hunch, wise in the ways of the diamond, and the flamboyant Skip, kicking up his heels, full of ginger and the determination to scale the baseball heights.

They argued endlessly about everything and nothing in particular. After a while it was almost as if they had a contract that made it obligatory for them to argue. Spite, hate, anger never figured in it. And underneath the veteran and the youngster were building the foundation for an increasingly firm friendship.

2

RETURNED from their road trip more solidly entrenched in first place than ever before, Skip was sitting in their hotel room reading the newspaper. He was, as usual, concentrating on the sport page. Hunch came in, and there was an odd smile flickering across his face. "What's this?" he said slowly. "Reading the sport page again, I see. No doubt reading up again on your brother's performance. How'd you ever get in the family? I guess you must be the black sheep. But you don't have to worry about getting up there with Lance. You'll never follow the same trail as him. The big time scouts got no use for a little punk like you. They'll stay away in bunches. Take a tip from an old guy who knows the score."

Skip raised his eyes from the newspaper and grinned a little sheep-

ishly. Hunch had an uncanny knack of guessing what was on his mind. He had been reading about his brother. Lance had already salted away half dozen games.

Then the grin melted from Skip's face and he murmured thoughtfully, "The Titans were rained out again yesterday. The third straight day. I'm afraid that's gonna hurt Lance. He needs steady work to be at his peak."

Hunch sat back in a soft chair, pulled a fat cigar from his pocket and got it going. He said in a voice edged with a rough contempt.

"Why do you worry about him? That guy could swing a deal to get you out of here if he wanted. At least he could get you planted with one of the Titan farm clubs."

"Look here, lamebrain," Skip flared. "I'm not asking anything from anybody in this game. I'm making it or breaking it strictly on my own. Get it?"

"I get you all right," Hunch nodded. "And pardon me for hinting around. Maybe you don't know it, but the Titans are coming to town tomorrow for an exhibition game. Frost put our league game for tomorrow in the freezer. He already sent the telegram to the Titans giving the okay."

"You're not pulling my leg?" Skip asked incredulously.

"It's on the level," said Hunch, puffing out a dense cloud of smoke from his cigar as he got up preparatory to leaving the room. "Their series in Cincy was rained out or something. Mostly rain, I guess. They got an open date on their way to Chicago. They need the workout. If the game the Indians can give them can be called a workout."

Skip didn't know what to make of this news. He got to his feet and paced up and back a couple of times, not knowing whether to feel glad or not over this turn of circumstances. A sharp knock on the door caused him to abandon his pacing.

There was a sharp-featured, eye-glassed man there when Skip opened the door. Skip recognized him as Shelby Gates, a local sportswriter. Gates was a hustler, a young guy

determined to go places in the newspaper game.

After they exchanged greetings the newshawk got down to the purpose of his visit. He had his pencil and pad ready when he began firing questions.

"Well, how do you feel about getting in there against your brother?" he began. "The inside dope is that Lance is gonna chuck at least four frames. Expect to get a hit off him?"

A laugh was Skip's answer. "He's the best pitcher in the game and I'm no Ted Williams. Last time I swung against Lance I got one little hit, and that was an accident. I was trying to get away from an inside pitch and the ball glanced off my bat. It blooped over third and I got a freak single." He laughed again. "To the best of my memory that was the first and only time I ever got on base against him."

"Could be some day you'll make the grade with the Titans and be out there on the same team with him," the scribe said.

"I'd like nothing better. But any team that wants me is good enough for me."

A lot of other questions were fired at Skip, some of which didn't seem to make much sense. Until Skip started to read the write-up in next morning's Tribune:

"The world champion Titans are in town today, ostensibly to play an exhibition game with the Indians. But Skip Merrill, rookie shortstop for the local team, has a somewhat different version of it. According to him:

'All this talk about rain and open dates is the malarkey. The Titans came here primarily to scout me. Any other reasons are purely incidental.'

It looks as if the Titans are the champs to everyone except Skip Merrill. To him they're all chumps, especially his older brother Lance, aoe hurler for the Titans. Skip said of his brother.

'Lance has always been duck soup for me. I don't expect to have any trouble knocking out

two or three hits off him tomorrow...'

Skip made it clear that the brothers are at dagger points, remarking, 'Of course the Titans are wasting their time coming here scouting me. I would never consent to play with the Titans while Lance is with them. I've had enough of that guy. But just say I have my own good reasons...'

There was more in the same vein, and as he read a tight knot gathered in Skip's throat. His face crimsoned.

"You were here all the time, Hunch," he said, more hurt and bewildered than angry. "Its all a rotten lie."

Hunch answered quietly. Sure it's a lie. Not a word of it is true. You know that and I know that, but that won't keep it from getting around and being believed by other people. The whole big lie will be picked up and plastered all over the big city papers. That's just what the young louse was gunning for. He comes up with a big scoop and he becomes famous and maybe he grabs himself off a better job with a big city sheet. A sweet scheme — for him."

"I'll deny the story. I'll tell them down at the Tribune what was really said. They'll print my version and no one will believe him. My brother will take my word over his. Everyone will. They'll have to..."

But Skip had a feeling that the damage was done, that denials would be futile and maybe wreak more damage being interpreted as a weasel attempt to squirm out of responsibility for his words. He was suddenly silent.

Hunch draped an arm around Skip's shoulder. "Being the loud guy is a helluva big job, lad," he said. "And being a runt doesn't make it any easier."

A BIG CROWD turned out for the exhibition. In batting practice the Titans boomed mighty drives off the distant fences, demonstrating the terrific power locked in their bats.

A group of Titans were clustered

around the box when Skip stepped in. They eyed him coldly. Skip found it very hard to grin. They were making remarks. It was plain they'd read the spurious yarn in the paper.

Skip felt a tenseness come over him. The box, the stands, the whole place seemed suddenly strange. His arms felt heavy, as if he had no control over them.

The chucker did his best, serving the pellet up big and soft and over the middle. But Skip got his willow around late and dribbled a meek foul past first. Another serve. A hard swing, but still off-time, resulting in a high hopper down the third base line. He lofted the next offering to short center.

As he walked from the box a familiar voice sounded in his ears. "So you're the guy who hits me like he owns me. My little brother, Skip, who wants to be a ball player. Still full of vinegar, huh? Well, take it easy on a poor mug like me. Don't make me look too bad before all these nice people."

Lance! Skip turned to face his brother. Tall, broad, tanned—a picture book athlete. Lance, oozing confidence, hard-boiled, without sympathy for the awkward, ugly-duckling younger brother.

"Give me a chance to explain," Skip pleaded, his voice hoarse. "I never said those things. Believe me. They misquoted—"

"Can it," Lance broke in. "Your nasty tongue always gave the whole family a black eye. You spoke your piece and now you're trying to talk your way out of it. Well, it's no dice."

There was a heavy silence then Lance went on, "You're just a two-bit busher, and you ain't got the stuff to get any higher. So get some sense. Enough to keep that trap of yours shut tight. Next time you open it like you did I'll beat you to a pulp."

Skip's heart was an anchor in him. He was hurt, and his hurt found outlet in a rising tide on anger.

"I'm a busher," he spat out. "So what. You were lucky. You were a one on a million guy. You made the big jump quick. Maybe I'm not as good as you, but I'm gonna get up there

too. I'm a holler guy. I talk up. That's the kind of guy I am. I'm sick of having you treat me like a kid. No more of being told what I can do and can't do for me. You're no one to be passing out free advice. Maybe I should have told you off long ago. But now that I've had my say, you can go your own sweet way and do what you damned well please about it."

Lance's eyes went hard. He smiled that odd cynical smile of his. "Okay," he said icily. "Here's what I'm gonna do about it." His open hand swung in a short flat arc and smacked Skip sharply in the mouth.

The blow caught Skip by surprise. He'd gone through the years all but worshipping Lance and for seconds he stood immobile, refusing to believe it. Then he spun on his heels and paced like an automaton back to the Indian bench. A murmur swept the stands. The fans had come half-expecting to see a blow-off like this.

The steam seemed to have departed from Skip. He was the last man onto the diamond as the Indians took their places. He tried to choke down the shame, the fury, the hurt boiling inside him.

Then Slim Merwin was on the hill, ready to get the game under way. Stuffy Gibson batted first for the Titans. He swung at the first pitch and belted a fly to deep center for the first out.

Len Arnold laced a grasscutter right at Skip. Skip knew the Titans would like nothing better than to see him mess it up. But mess it up he did. The ball was in his glove and out again and skittering to his right before he knew what was happening. He dove after it, lost it in the red blur before his eyes. He kicked the pellet, and he was furious at himself, and the Titans were howling their satisfaction.

THAT WAS only the beginning. On the next play the batter paddled a grounder through the middle. Scooting to his left, Skip reached for the pellet, felt a fierce triumph as he speared it.

The Indian second baseman hopped

to the bag, waiting for the toss that would launch the double-play. He waited. The ball might have been nailed to Skip's glove. He reached for it frantically, couldn't get it loose. He was all thumbs. Finally he pried it loose and hurried the peg. The toss went wide of the bag, rolling to left field. The upshot was that Titan runners exploded first and third.

The panic was on. Digger Herzog, Titan first sacker, blasted a titanic wallop over the left field fence. Extra base blows exploded all over the park. Slim Merwin went out of there, and two more Indian hurlers made the long trek from the bull pen to the mound and back again to the bull pen before they got the side out.

Lance Merrill set the Indians down nice as pie. His fireball smoked past the Indian sticks. Delivered with a flowing overhand sweep, it had a terrific hop on it. And obviously he was not cutting loose with everything he had.

Skip batted to start the third. Lance grinned mockingly at him and poured in three bolts of forked lightning. Skip swung three times in vain.

That was the way it went. At the end of seven the game was called to enable the Titans to catch a train. The Titans were ahead, 13-0, and only Hunch Sanders, coming on in the fifth, had been able to hold their bats in check. The Titans went out of their way to make Skip look bad. He struck out three times. He made three more errors. The Titans took pains to keep him busy, pouring sizzling grounders and smoking line drives at him.

After the game the reporters travelling with the Titans were on him like a plague of locusts. He tried to evade their questions, but they were determined. Finally, anxious to get rid of them, Skip said.

"Okay, boys. The guy beat you to the punch. If I didn't say it then, I say it now. Lance may have copped the preliminary, but we'd better all wait and see who takes the final."

Skip opened up then. They gobbled it up. Skip had no regrets. If Lance wanted it that way, that was how he'd give it to him.

A COUPLE of days later old Tom Merrill's weekly letter rolled in. Skip read it carefully, and suddenly was berating himself for having stopped hollering in the game against the Titans. What old Tom wrote made sense, and reading between the lines, Skip knew old Tom had a pretty good idea of what had happened. A holler guy, wrote old Tom, wasn't just a guy with a loud yap. A holler guy made his noise for a purpose. A holler guy had to have a balance wheel, and that balance wheel was common sense.

Old Tom went to great length to point out these things. Then he went on to say that Skip would have to use his own head to solve his own problems. There was no magic pass-key to the big leagues.

A postscript in big letters said: **KEEP HOLLERING.**

Time mended Skip's hurt. Old Tom came first in his book, and he heeded his father's advice. With the elasticity of youth he soon recovered his old drive, and he grew more and more determined to make Lance eat his harsh words. He was out there hollering and clutch hitting and sparking the Indians on a winning drive. Five weeks went by.

Then one morning he read in the papers that Dib Peters, star shortstop of the big league Comets, had suffered a broken arm in an automobile accident, and would be on the shelf for the remainder of the season.

The idea was in Skip's head before he'd put the paper down. It was, he knew, a wild scheme, but worth a try. He hotfooted it to the telegraph office and sent a message to Matty Endicott, pilot of the Comets:

DON'T. BOTHER. LOOKING FOR A SHORTSTOP. I'M THE GUY AND I'M ON THE WAY.

"You're off your rocker," Don Frost said when Skip told what he'd done. Whaddaya think the Comets got reserve infielders and farm clubs for?"

Skip grinned. "Sure, I know they can get themselves a new shortstop somewhere, but maybe they'll give me a try. That's all I want, a chance to

get in there. I'll make the grade."

"You got my blessings," said the manager. "You've been holding the club together, and I'll hate to see you go because of that. But I'll give you your release. Remember, kid, any time you wanna come back, the front door is wide open."

That night a return telegram arrived for Skip. Matty Endicott was willing to give it a whirl. Skip packed hurriedly and hopped the train. He arrived in the morning at the hotel where the Comets were staying, and immediately put a call through for Matty Endicott.

A SHORT TIME later a tall, spare man, square-jawed and owning steady steel-gray eyes came down into the lobby. His penetrating gaze seemed to bore right through Skip.

Skip walked over to him, said, "Skip Merrill's the name. It was a long trip here, and I didn't come just for the ride. I'm your new shortstop."

Matty Endicott smiled thinly and there was a doubtful expression around his eyes. "You don't tell me," he said. "I was under the impression that I had something to say about you who plays shortstop around here. You've got a lot of lip. Tell me more."

"Too bad I haven't got a batch of clippings to hand you," Skip said. "This is my first season in baseball. Central League. Class D. I hit .275, give or take a few points. I don't think I'll ever hit more. In the field I make all the plays in the book and maybe a few that aren't. I think I'm ready to fill that vacant slot."

He spoke very quietly, as if he were reeling off a string of indisputable facts. Matty Endicott's gimlet eyes were steady on him.

"It's a steep climb from the Central League to the big time. It doesn't happen often that a player makes it in one leap. What makes you think you can do it?"

"Dib Peters hit .265, but he didn't drive across many runs. I say I'm a guy who can hit in the clutch. I want

a chance to show I'm not just making a lot of noise in an empty barrel.

Momentarily there was a weary hopelessness in the Comet pilot's eyes. Then he said:

"If the situation wasn't so desperate I wouldn't waste time on a long shot gamble like this. I like your style. Guys with a spirit like yours are scarce around here. I'm willing to make the gamble. Check in at the desk."

"There's one more thing, Mr. Endicott."

"What?"

"If I click at short, the Indians should get something. Say, ten grand."

"You'll have to show plenty to rate ten grand, but if you do, we'll take care of the Indians."

/ 3 /

SKIP MADE himself right at home next day. He displayed plenty of pep in the pre-game drill, cutting loose with his usual assortment of vocal fireworks. He shouted, hollered, yelled it up all over the place. Hollering was a big part of his equipment, and whether the other guys liked it cut no ice with him. The Comets glanced at him the way they'd look at a worrisome gnat, and some of them seemed a little annoyed.

Breathing hard, his face sweaty and streaked with diamond dirt, Skip came into the dugout. His eyes swept over the stands, and he wondered why they were so empty. It was Sunday, and the Comets were meeting the third-place Buffaloes; there should have been more than ten or twelve thousand fans on hand. But the Comets were wired in fifth place, and the home town fans had grown a little weary of watching them lose. Especially when, with a hard-hitting, tight defensive club, they figured to be a contender.

Keeping his eyes peeled, Skip began to notice things from his spot on the bench. With a Buffalo on first, the next batter bunted along

the first base line. The first sacker charged in, scooped up the ball, spun, hesitated a split second, then chucked the apple to Biff Steffens, Buffalo second baseman, covering first on the play. Biff was the Comet field captain, and Skip got the impression Biff had been slow in coming over to cover first. The Buffalo batsman beat out the bunt.

The next hitter lashed a long double to center, sending two runs across. The Buffalos led, 2-0, and a new chucker came in for the Comets.

"There he goes again," someone on the bench grumbled. "No pitcher's gone nine innings for us for weeks. Endicott has them rushing in and out of there like it was a hotel. He's got that damned strategy of his working all the time and one of these days it's gonna work him out of a job."

"Excuse it," Skip said "I'm new around here, and I'd like some education. Tell me what's so wrong with that system? It's harder to hit a fresh chucker than a guy who doesn't have his stuff or is hanging on the ropes."

A frosty stare was the guy's answer. There was much discussion pro and con over Matty Endicott's manner of manipulating his pitchers. The Comet pilot had his own theory of the game, and he played it to the hilt. He never hesitated to yank a hurler at the first sign of faltering. When it paid off in the win column he looked very good; and on the other hand he looked very bad indeed when the Comets lost, as they were doing pretty consistently.

Skip sat tight, absorbing everything that went on out there. In the sixth inning a Buffalo lined a single to left with one down. A dribble to short followed. The shortfielder nabbed it, flipped to Biff Steffens. Instead of snapping the ball off to first Biff wound up before cutting his throw loose and the runner was safe.

Skip squirmed on the next play. The Buffalo hurler skied one just back of second. The Comet center fielder sprinted in. So did Huck Beasley in right. Biff Steffens floated back.

Then all three stopped short and

the ball plopped down between them for a cheap safety. One runner scored. A walk followed, and then a four-ply swat cleared the sacks, putting the Buffalos in front 6-0.

Biff Steffens stormed into the dug-out, laying the blame for everything that had happened on Matty Endicott's faulty judgment in changing hurlers. He was still grumbling as he sat down alongside Skip.

Skip said, "They catch those with their eyes closed. Double-plays aren't made that way, and where I come from they move like they were wearing spikes instead of chains."

Biff leaped to his feet, his face beet red, the muscles of his jaw drawn taut. He glared at Skip. For a tense moment it appeared as though he were going to sail into the rookie.

"I'll take care of you for that some other time, palsy," he said angrily. "And you'd better have a friend around to put the pieces together when I get through with you."

Matty Endicott intervened, stepping between them but in no way indicating he'd heard the beginning of the exchange.

"Get out there at short," he said quietly to Skip.

SKIP WENT into the game with a steady dynamic flow of chatter rattling off his tongue. A line drive single to right launched the Buffalo half. The next one came Skip's way. At the crack of the bat he rocketed into motion. A blazing white bombshell whizzed through the box. Gliding behind second, Skip snared the pellet. Two fast steps and he touched second and rifled the ball to first, for a snappy double-play.

"Forget that grandstand stuff," Biff growled at him. "Flip that ball to me on the double play grounders. We don't do things like that around here."

"Let me do it my own way," Skip countered. "Maybe my way will win a coupla ball games."

Skip came to bat with two men on base. The Buffalo hurler poured one in high and hard. Skip lashed into it, pulling a drive down the left field line. It went for a triple, and

two runs scampered across the platter. In the ninth he rammed another hit with a man aboard. But the Buffalo racked up the win, 7-3.

Skip couldn't understand the casual way in which the Comets accepted defeat. They seemed completely indifferent, and Skip burned. He slammed his spikes into the cement floor.

"That game was a gift," he boiled over. "I'm only a dumb busher, and maybe I don't understand how they do things in the big leagues. My idea of this game is you play to win and play as hard as you can and risk your neck to win. Your way is evidently different, and I'm telling you right here and now that I think your way smells."

The locker room was suddenly very quiet. Sullen, hostile faces turned on him. He was asking for trouble and he knew it. Biff Steffens strode over to him and grabbed his arm.

"Look here, Kid Lips," he said fiercely, "you're a little too wise. A coupla lucky hits and you think you own the team. Get ready for what's coming. I'm gonna massage that baby face of yours."

Biff was a burly guy and handy with his mitts. He tied Skip up with one hand and belted him with the other, bringing up a terrific uppercut. The jolting blow caught Skip flush on the mouth. Biff released his grip and Skip sank to the floor. Skip staggered to his feet, and his mouth was bloody and a crimson stream was trickling from his nose. He wiped blood away with his sleeve and went charging into the Comet second sacker.

Biff's fists beat a steady tattoo, hammering his ribs, bruising and pounding his face. The place whirled around Skip, but, dazed and bloody, he hung on, knowing he was finished with the Comets if he quit.

No one moved to break up the unequal struggle. He went down, struggled to his feet, absorbed more knuckles, and had just gone down for the third time when Matty Endicott burst upon the scene. He thrust between the embattled players and said

crisply, "This will cost you a hundred dollars apiece."

"Cheap at the price," Biff snarled. "But you better make it another hundred." And he sailed in again and belted Skip with a thudding right to the jaw.

It wasn't any picnic going out there, grinding and plugging and talking it up every day. And having the other half of the pivot combination purposely pulling the other way, made it all the tougher. There was no doubt in Skip's mind that that was what Biff was doing. Smoothly, slickly, in a way hard to detect. In a lot of little ways he made it tough for Skip, especially when the pressure was on. But Skip hung on grimly, taking it all, trying to get the ball rolling for the Comets.

IT DIDN'T take Skip long to catch onto the deal, and it had a familiar ring. A word here, a word there, and the parts of Biff's scheme fell into a neat pattern. Biff had come up to the big time as a teen-age genius, but now the years had flowed away and he was a veteran campaigner with not many seasons of active play before him. His sights were set on grabbing off a manager's berth while the grabbing was still good. And it was apparent he was gunning for Matty Endicott's job.

The season stretched on, and the Comets still languished in the fifth place spot, playing lack lustre ball. They dropped three straight to the last place Chiefs, and Skip knew then that there was scant hope of the Comets buckling down and flashing the kind of ball they were capable of. They were determined to get Biff in as manager, and they didn't care where they finished so long as they achieved that purpose.

The Ravens came to town, and it was a two-and-two tilt entering the eighth. The Ravens filled the sacks on two scratchy hits sandwiched around a walk. The Comet chucker showed signs of tiredness and Matty Endicott immediately jerked him from the box and sent Hobe Newton to the slab.

Fresh and strong, Hobe blazed two

strikes past the Raven hitter. Then an inside pitch was slapped down the second base slot. Biff Steffens snared it and Skip raced to cover the bag and engineered the twin killing.

The ball came at him hard and low and spinning, instead of in a soft, underhand flip. It took Skip unaware, and ricocheted off his glove and spilled into enter. A run scored, and the official scored Skip with an error.

Skip fixed a cool, level stare on Biff. There was a thin sneer on Biff's lips. Skip knew that unexpected, uncalled-for hard throw had been no accident.

The Comets came in for their half and Matty Endicott was standing on the dugout steps waiting, his face sombre. He said to Biff in cool, measured tones, "You may be the top second baseman in the game, Biff, but you're not running this team—yet. Don't think you're kidding anyone. As of now, you can sit it out on the bench, and you know why."

Stu Delaney, a tow-headed angular recruit from a double A loop took over Biff's post. That he was no finished performer became clear when he played tag with a hard hit ground-er in the ninth, getting off his peg, though, in time to nip the batsman at first.

There were two out in the Comets' half when Clint Gruber drilled a single through the middle. Stu Delaney came in there, swung viciously twice, caught hold of the third offering. It sailed on a line into right field for a two base knock, chasing Clint Gruber home with the tying run.

Skip set himself determinedly at the plate. The Raven flinger came in with the fast one. Skip stick whipped around, placed the horsehide through the slot between first and second. Stu Delaney raced home and that was the ball game, the Comets winning 4-3.

That started it. The Comets swept the four game series with the Ravens. Stu Delaney booted one once in a while, but he was a terror at the plate. They couldn't get him out. And Skip encouraged him, steadied him in the field, covered territory like a whip-pet, made plays that ordinarily should

have been made by the second sacker.

Slowly the Comets started rolling. They were a snarling, trigger-tempered outfit. Skip drove them, paced them with a flaming spirit, daring them to show their real stuff. They were bitter about it, especially seeing Stu Delaney responding to Skip's encouragement, breaking down fences all over the league.

The Comets played winning, consistent ball. They passed teams, moved into third place. They were moving into the thick of the pennant scramble.

And they were showing that Matty Endicott's system could work if given a chance. Playing for today's win, the Comet skipper never hesitated to throw two or even three of his first-line hurlers into a single battle.

They invaded the lair of the front-running Falcons, and it was a great chance to lop games off their lead. Just before game time a telegram came for Skip.

Skip read it, and all the blood drained from his face. For a second he stood immobile as a statue. Then he was sobbing and staring down at the bitter words of the telegram:

YOUR FATHER DIED TODAY.

The telegram fluttered from his hand to the floor.

OLD TOM WAS gone. Old Tom, who had told him to keep hollering no matter what pain and anguish was in his heart. It was like having a part of himself torn loose, an irreplaceable part. But Skip resolved to lock his own grief in his own heart and keep it there. There was no room for sentiment on the ball field. Out there, there was room only for hitting that ball and running those bases and making those plays. And nothing else counted or mattered, except hollering and hollering some more.

Skip strode into the sunshine of the afternoon and played shortstop. He hollered, and the words stuck in his throat. His face was moist, and all

the moistness was not sweat. Tears he couldn't hold back.

But he played shortstop. With two down and a runner on first the batter poled a wicked smash through the infield. Skip sprinted to his left, flung himself in the path of the speeding pellet. He stabbed at the ball, knocked it down, pounced on it and made the toss to Stu Delaney for the force. Even the hard-boiled Falcon fans applauded the amazing play.

Skip came to bat with the bases loaded in the fifth inning. The Falcon moundsman delivered a crazily breaking knuckler. It hopped and dipped and swerved wide of the plate. It would have been a ball, but Skip slid his hands down on the willow and swung with all the power in his wiry frame. All the pent up grief and fury in his soul went into that lash of the hickory. There was a crashing impact as wood met horsehide, and then the white pill was rising in the sky, soaring deep and far and sailing over the left field fence.

Skip trotted around the bases, dented home plate. Passing the bat rack he suddenly turned and kicked viciously at it, spilling the bats over the ground. The Comets stared at him and exchanged durious glances, baffled by this sudden display of temper.

Skip worked miracles that day, covered ground with lightning speed and getting three hits as the Comets took the tilt 5-1. The fans could hardly believe their eyes. They'd never seen anything like it. They didn't know it, but this was Skip's tribute to old Tom, written in the language he loved best: *Baseball*.



THERE WAS AN odd, unnatural silence in the clubhouse after the game. The players steered clear of Skip—except Biff Steffens. He strolled over to Skip.

"Let me in on the secret of how

you do it, palsy," he began sarcastically.

Skip didn't give him a chance to say any more. He hauled off, bounced a right off Biff's jaw. The same fury was behind it, and it dumped Biff. Biff climbed to his feet, his eyes murderous with rage. But other players grabbed Biff and held him back, and one of them whispered something in his ear. The furious rage instantly left Biff. Skip knew then that word of his father's passing had gotten around.

Skip was gone three days for his father's funeral. Lance was there, but even old Tom's death couldn't effect a reconciliation between the estranged brothers. Relations between the two were strained as ever. They were civil when they spoke to each other only because of respect for the grand old guy.

The Comets took two out of three from the Falcons. They drubbed the Buffalos twice, rode into second place. It was painful and trying, the bitter uphill climb. And Skip was carrying the weight of the whole club on his back. He was practically fielding two positions. The grind was bound to catch up with him some time. It did, in the third game with the Buffalos.

In the third inning, with two men down and runners on first and third, a grasscutter was whacked to short. Skip tore after the ball. He stooped to clutch it, and someone was drawing a thin black curtain across his vision. The ball went through him into center field. Both runners scored.

Later, going back for a pop-up, that same blurring cloud passed before his eyes, just as he was about to gather in the descending sphere. The ball skipped off his glove, and he was charged with an error.

Nothing went right. Three trips to the platter were fruitless. The bat felt too heavy for him to bring around and he couldn't seem to see the ball. After striking out for the third time he shook his head.

Matty Endicott noticed how

pinched and pallid his face looked and came over to him. He asked, "What's the matter, Skip?"

"Nothing," Skip insisted. "Nothing. . ."

It was then that something hit him between the eyes. The world went dim, and he felt himself swaying. The next thing he knew he was lying on the ground and the club physician was holding a stick of smelling salts under his nose.

"He's been making demands on himself beyond his strength," the doctor stated. "He's worn himself to a state of sheer collapse. He needs a rest. I'm afraid the club will have to get along without him for awhile. It'll be a week or more till he can play baseball again."

Slowly Matty Endicott's eyes swept the knot of players gathered about the prostrate shortstop. His eyes had a frosty glitter, and his voice had a sharp edge as he said;

"Guts. The guy is all guts. It was his guts that made this team tick and his guts that held it together. Sometimes I wondered which he was, my second baseman or my shortstop. It looks like he was both."

His eyes fell hard on Biff Steffens, and he said, "Maybe you think this will give you a chance to play again, Steffens, but you're wrong. You'll rot on the bench."

Biff flushed, and his fists clenched, but he said nothing.

The Buffalos trampled the Comets, 10-4, shoving the Comets back down to third. Without Skip the Comets backslided. Their bats went silent, and the infield fell to pieces defensively. The pitching went sour. The spark was gone, the inspiring force Skip had contributed to their play.

The wolves leaped at Matty Endicott's throat again, attributing the crack-up to his managerial system. They ripped into him for not sticking Biff Steffens back in the line-up, hinting that Endicott was holding a grudge against Biff because Biff was the logical successor to the manager berth.

Hal Green, veteran utility man, filled in at short. He stopped what

they hit right at him, but he was slow afield and an erratic man with the willow.

Things looked blackest for the Comets when they dropped both ends of a twin bill to the seventh place Chiefs, suffering the added indignity of a double whitewashing.

They kept Skip in the hospital for eight days. On the ninth day they had to let him out, because it would have taken a strait-jacket to hold him any longer. The first thing he did on leaving the hospital was to wire the Comets: KEEP SLUGGING, GUYS. THEY CAN'T BEAT US. SEE YOU IN CHICAGO.

He grinned to himself, knowing this message would get under their skin, if only because he was the sender. And maybe stir them out of their sloppy, losing ways. He didn't care if they hated him, so long as he could ignite the spark that would make them contenders again.

MATTY ENDICOTT was waiting for him at the airport, and a cab was waiting nearby. Skip noticed the worried frown on the manager's face as he sat next to him in the cab.

"It's the chuckers," the skipper explained. "Some of them have been worked too hard and need a rest. Lefty Craven will be out awhile. He got hit in the arm with a batted ball. Joe Lopata has a blister on his hand. What I really need is a good relief pitcher, somebody who can come through with three or four airtight innings when the chips are down."

Skip's eyes suddenly lit up. He was thinking about Hunch Sanders. Don Frost had once stated that Hunch was still good enough to go a few innings in any company. And there was that exhibition game. Hunch had done okay against the Titans.

Skip said thoughtfully, "I know a smart old hombre who's winging them for the Indians. He's as cool as you can find anywhere. A gent by the name of Hunch Sanders."

Endicott shook his head and snort-

ed, "A has-been! I don't need drift-wood."

"Okay, it's a gamble," Skip said quickly. "But I don't think you'll go wrong on this one. I've never steered you wrong before, Matty. Come on," he pleaded. "Give him a try at least."

"I suppose it will cost me another ten grand," the skipper grinned.

Skip grinned back, "Not this trip."

Hunch breezed in next morning, the same old pudgy, sour-faced guy, but wearing about him a look that told his joy and gratitude at being given this fresh crack at the big show.

The same afternoon Hunch made the long trek from the bull pen to the hill. The heat was on. The Comets led 9-8 in a wild and woolly game, but the Chiefs had already tallied three times in the ninth. None were out, and runner occupied first and second. Skip shaped his hands like a megaphone and hollered over to Hunch,

"Crank up that old soupbone, Hunch boy. Make him slap it on the ground and I'll do the rest."

Hunch turned around, glowered at Skip. He swore eloquently, then shouted back, "Don't get that big mouth of yours in the way. You might swallow the ball."

A grin split Skip's face. Just like old times, he and Hunch trading wisecracks. And now there was a real purpose to it, the exchange helping ease the pressure. It was a rough spot for Hunch to be getting into on his first real test.

The first batter got an intentional pass, loading the hassocks. Hunch went to work, slowly and carefully on the next batter and the count worked to 3 and 2. Then Hunch fired one down the middle. It looked big and fat as a house riding in there.

Confidently the batter set himself and took a lusty cut. But the ball suddenly dipped, almost into the dirt, and the batter hit, hurting nothing but his feelings with that swing. It was the sinker Hunch had come in with, and it took a lot of moxie to use that delivery in so tight a situation. One out.

Bull Morgan, feared as a tough hitter in the clutch, stepped in next. The second serve was just what he wanted. He swung and hit the apple hard.

The ball took off on a low arching ride toward center field. But it never got that far.

Bolting to his left, Skip lunged at the ball and speared it with a leaping catch. He caught his balance, spun around and stepped on the sack easily to double the runner who had streaked all the way to third. The catch was sheer larceny, and it meant the ball game.

THAT NIGHT Skip was summoned by Matty Endicott to his room. When he arrived there he noticed that Biff Steffens was sitting in the smoke-filled room, talking to Matty Endicott. Matty sat there, smoking a cigarette at almost as furious clip as Biff was talking. Biff clammed up when Skip entered. The Comet pilot looked up at Skip.

"Biff's going back at second, Skip," he said firmly. "He says he's ready to skip all the monkey business and play ball. I'm giving him a chance. We need him to plug that hole at second."

"That's it, kid," Steffens said. "That other stuff is all done and over with. Let's forget about that and give it another whirl."

Biff's change of heart came as a stunner, but it was good news and it could make the big difference. Biff Steffens playing for keeps out there was a first class operator, well able to take care of his own terrain unassisted. Skip would be able to stay in his own backyard at short.

Skip's face was wreathed in a smile. He stuck out his hand to Biff. Biff extended his own paw and they shook. Steffens was smiling, but when Skip looked into Biff's eyes he was shocked. They held a cold, gloating smirk, as if Steffens were secretly laughing while biding his time.

"Sure," Skip said, "We're writing a new chapter now. We're really going to town."

Skip proved an accurate prophet. The Comets reeled off eight straight wins, surging past the Buffalos and treading close on the heels of the pace setting Falcons. Biff Steffens was once again the superb ball player Skip had read about but never seen in action, playing with a marvelous cool efficiency. He was hitting consistently and for plenty of distance. He was every inch the star performer.

Skip, however, was certain Biff was stilling nursing along some underhand scheme in spite of the way it appeared on the surface.

Pressure piled heavily on the Falcons, and they started to blow, losing games to tail-enders. In the last two weeks of the chase the Comets whittled the Falcon lead to two games, then moved in and applied the coup-de-grace. They took three straight one run decisions from the Falcons, who proceeded to fall apart. When the season ended the rampaging Comets were three full games out front.

In the other league the Titans waltzed home for the third consecutive year, their potent maces and airtight pitching demoralizing the opposition. And the ace of aces on their staff was Lance Merrill, rising to new heights to rack up thirty-two wins.

When the Comets held the customary clubhouse meeting to decide on division of the series swag, Skip got hit with the Sunday punch Biff Steffens had been hoarding.

"Skip Merrill wasn't with the club the whole season," he said, "I don't think it'd be fair to the rest of us if we voted him a full share."

It was a carefully planned scheme, some of the players objected, those not in the tight clique centered around Biff. Hunch Sanders went to bat for Skip, lashing out with a biting tongue. "If anybody in this mean, miserable crew rates a full share it's Skip. It was his hollering that made this team, and it ain't right to kick him around like this."

But Biff Steffens and his cohorts held firm. This was Biff's moment of triumph, and he meant to have it.

Skip himself cut short the discussion. "Just forget the whole thing," he said quietly. "I'll take what you guys think I've got coming and be glad to get it."

He grinned, and walked out, followed by Hunch, Stu Delaney, and one or two others. Skip didn't want to break the team up with dissension just before the series. He was a team man and what happened to the team was more important than what happened to him. Squabbling could only lose the series before a ball was thrown.

THE TITAN'S ball park was jammed with fifty-thousand spectators for the initial game. The Titans were overwhelming favorites, it being almost taken for granted that they'd beat the Comets. The big question in the minds of the fans seemed to be if the Comets would fare better than the lambs led to the slaughter the last three years, and maybe win a game or two. But all the color and throbbing excitement of the great fall classic was there, and an incessant flood of sound rippled through the stands.

The dark men of baseball, the umpires, came out on the diamond. The crowd's roar reached its peak, breaking and rolling in a mighty cascade of sound. Close behind them trotted the Titans. Lance Merrill was out there wheeling in his warm-up tosses. He looked big and strong and confident.

Allie Stokes entered the box, wagging his stick. Lance went into his wind-up. Up lashed the arm, down kicked the leg, and a dazzling, blistering speed ball snapped over the outside corner. Two more bombshells exploded in the catcher's mitt, and the Comet lead-off man retreated to the dug-out, awed by Lance's tremendous speed. The next batter raised a feeble foul behind first base and Digger Herzog, Titan first sacker, grabbed it for the second out. Pep Griswold whiffed to retire the side. Lance looked more invincible then ever.

The pitching chore for the Comets fell to Sam Emory, veteran south-

paw curve ball artist. Skip's tireless tongue wagged on,

"Let's go there, Sammy boy. Get this one quick. This is the big one. . ."

Sam looked loose as ashes getting Stuffey Gibson to hit back to the mound. A long drive to the outfit was in the bucket. Then Harry Harms poled a drive inside first base for a double.

Digger Herzog, most feared slugger in the league, came in there, levelling his mace. Sam Emory tried to make him offer at a bad one, and finally walked the Titan first baseman.

Jackie Feathers followed. The game was barely under way and the Comets were in a tight spot. Two aboard and two away. The Titan powerhouse was threatening to explode the game in the faces of the Comets.

"This bum is as far as he's going right now," Skip screeched. "Make him watch the birdie, Sammy boy."

Feathers took two, then swung and connected with the third pitch. The horsehide leaped off the wood, a hard hopper that skittered through the box.

Skip streaked in behind the mound, left his feet and flung up his mitt. In mid-air, he twisted and rammed the pill to first. It was a sparkling play, and Feathers was out by a whisker.

Skip tossed his glove back of short and jogged past the mound. Lance, on his way to the hill, crossed his path.

"You're real fancy, aren't you?" said Lance. "But when you get up I'm going to cram that apple right down your throat."

Skip grinned and said, "The days when you could scare me an inch are over, brother. When I go up there I'll have a bat in my hands. Watch out you don't choke on the apple when I rap it back at you."

Hitting in the sixth spot, Skip got his chance in the second inning with two Comets down. Skip hugged the plate and waited for the pitch.

It was a zipping bullet, scorching the air as it came out of that white-

shirted background. Skip came all the way around, spinning to his knees desperately trying to get a piece of it.

Again it came hopping and twisting out of that tangle of arms and legs. Skip hit the dirt in the nick of time. He scrambled to his feet, his face flaming red, and went scurrying out to the mound with upraised fists. Lance met him half way, but the Titans ganged up on Skip and shouldered him roughly to the sidelines.

Skip gripped his bat again and took up his stance at the plate. The fans were booing him heaping abuse on him. Lance kept up a steady stream of taunting chatter at him. Then he poured that fireball in and Skip struck out.

The innings slid by. In the third Skip, skidding on all fours, stopped a torrid smash and managed to shovel the sphere to Biff Steffens. Second to first. Double play.

In the fourth the Titans got runners on first and third. This time Skip darted into short center. Running with his back to the infield, he pulled a circus catch on what looked like a sure hit. He was all over the field, making impossible saves, cutting off budding rallies and playing a general bang-up game.

He was the holler guy. An outcast on his own team. Kicked around by his own brother. Still hollering Taking everything Biff Steffens could offer and laughing it off and coming up with holler. Play to win and keep hollering. That was the system old Tom Merrill had taught him, and it was the only system he would ever use.

SAM EMORY hung in there grimly. He was in hot water almost every inning. And he was up to his neck in trouble in the fifth. Runners on first and second. Two out.

He worked slowly, carefully. But the batter got something he liked and slammed a smoking shot down the second base alley. Moving to his left, Biff Steffens was almost handcuffed by the drive. He picked it up, but

there was no chance for a play at first. He hurried his flip to second, trying for the force play, and the throw was almost in the dirt. Skip reached for the ball.

In the same instant the base runner slid hard into the bag. A sharp, piercing pain stabbed through Skip's foot. The ball plopped out of his glove, and the bases were loaded.

That sent Digger Herzog to bat, and this time Digger belted the first pitch far and deep into the right field stands. One brief lapse and the Titans had four runs. It was that kind of club, getting the breaks because they made the breaks.

The next man was an easy out, but the Comets trooped into the dug-out looking a beaten, discouraged outfit.

Lance threw like he had a cannon for an arm. Five complete frames and he hadn't yielded a hit. The ball roared in, breaking and dipping and swerving and baffling the Comets.

Skip's eyes glanced over the men on the bench, and he could almost tell what each one was thinking. They were blaming him. If he hadn't messed up Biff's throw Digger Herzog would never have come to bat and there wouldn't have been any home run. Finally it got too much for Skip to bear. He said.

"Sure, I muffed one when it hurt. So what? What do you guys use for guts? This game's not over. Don't hang around here with your chins sitting on your knees."

"You haven't knocked down any fences today," Biff Steffens said. "You make with a lot of big talk. Maybe you can make with a big base hit."

Lance bowled over the first two batsmen, preserving his perfect game. Skip selected his mace and strolled into the batter's box. Blood had gathered in his shoe from the spike wound. It annoyed him. He couldn't seem to dig in firmly.

Lance wasn't his brother. The guy out there with the arrogant smirk on his face was his enemy. Maybe his bitterest enemy. He'd try to power

the ball past him. Why waste the cute stuff on an automatic out?

It came down the middle, a streaking, blurring streak of white. Skip was waiting for it, timing it, swinging. He leaned into it. His wrists, shoulders, heart—everything went into that swing.

Hickory cracked dynamically on horsehide. A roar leaped from the throats of the fans, a dismal wail of apprehension, turning to a groan of dismay. Skip didn't need to look to know that the ball was in the stands. Lance's dream of no-hit fame went right there. And Skip knew an exultation that was a new thing to him. He crossed the plate, and walked up to Biff Steffens.

"There's a pretty good little hit, Biff," he ripped out. "Now let's see what a real leaguer can do."

Skip expected Biff to make his usual stinging reply, but this time Biff was silent. Steffens was staring down at Slip's shoe, gazing in astonishment at the blood staining it. The team trainer took over, ushering Skip into the dug-out and examining the wound. There was a long, nasty gash, not deep enough to require stitches. The trainer cleaned the blood away and put a patch over it. Amid a dead silence.

The next hitter drew walk. Then Bob Dressler dented the wall with a double, scoring the runner from first. Matty Endicott sent Stu Delaney in to bat for Sam Emory, and Stu delivered the goods. He lined a hit to right and another run scored, making the tally: Titans 4, Comets 3.

It remained that way till the eighth, when Biff Steffens poled one into the stands, knotting the count at 4-all. Skip was waiting when Biff dented the platter.

"That one is just to show you that I can still hit 'em once in a while, busher," he shot at Skip, but he was grinning.

Skip grinned right back, and the old tense feeling between them was gone. "Now we really got a ball team," he said.

THE TEAMS battled into the ninth inning. Skip, coming to bat, noticed that the Titan infield was playing shallow. He dragged a bunt expertly down the third base line, legged it like a whirlwind to first. He beat the hurried throw by a hair.

The next batter dumped a sacrifice between the slab and first. Skip rounded second and went digging for third. He caught the Titans flat-footed, slid safely into the hassock.

Lance was bearing down hard now, and that smile of assurance had faded to a thin, worried wisp of a grin. He whiffed Frank Dirks, and there were two men down. That brought Johnie Orlando to the plate. Lance whipped his arm around, and with the motion Skip went sprinting madly for home. The jam-packed stands unloosed an ear-splitting din. The holler guy was trying to steal home. He roared toward the plate. Lance's motion hung. He almost committed a balk. Then he fired the ball homeward.

The Titan catcher loomed in Skip's path, crouching and blocking the plate. Skip catapulted in there, head first, like a human battering ram. There was vicious thud as he collided with the burly Titan backstop. Then he groped for the plate and couldn't find it because he was stretched across it.

He looked through the swirling dust, and saw the backstop didn't have the ball. It was ten feet in back of the plate. Skip didn't know how it got there and he didn't care. What counted was that the umpire was flashing the 'safe' signal and the Comets led, 5-4.

In the last half of the ninth the Titans launched a desperate last ditch rally. The first batter walked. A single followed. Harry Harms cut into the second pitch, cracked a sizzling liner between short and third. Skip dashed over, knocked it down but couldn't make a play. All hands were safe.

Matty Endicott stepped out of the dug-out, waved toward the bull pen.

A roly-poly figure trudged the diamond. Hunch Sanders.

And what a spot. Digger Herzog straddled the pentagon with that dynamite-loaded stick of his waving menacingly. Hunch delivered. The swing, and Digger laced a screaming foul into the far right field stands. Hunch served up a swooping jug-handle curve. Digger swung mightily but futilely. No use depending on speed to fool this customer. Hunch relied on that dinky bender. It came in there, looking big and fat. Digger lunged at it, popped weakly back to Hunch. One gone.

Jackie Feathers, the next batsman, worked the count 3-2, and then was fooled completely, missing the fast dropping sinker by half a foot. Two gone.

It was all or nothing, with Buck Talbert swinging. He swept his stick around, crashed into the ball hard. Skip went deep behind second, dug it out of the dirt and flipped the pill to Biff Steffens.

THEN THEY were in the clubhouse and the Comets were hugging Skip and slapping him on the back. It was a scene of unrestrained joy. Flash bulbs were popping.

Skip was sitting on top of the world. And also on the brawny shoulders of Biff Steffens and other riotously happy Comets. They were parading him around the clubhouse.

A keen-eyed sports writer said,

"That's a funny way to be treating a guy who's only getting a half share of the series melon."

"That was yesterday," said Biff. "If he doesn't get the full cut he deserves I'll make up the difference out of my own pocket."

But that wouldn't be necessary, judging from the roar of approval that followed. The roar was cut short by a commotion in the shower room. Biff dropped to the floor and the entire Comet team followed him to the shower room. Hunch Sanders, still fully dressed in his baseball togs was

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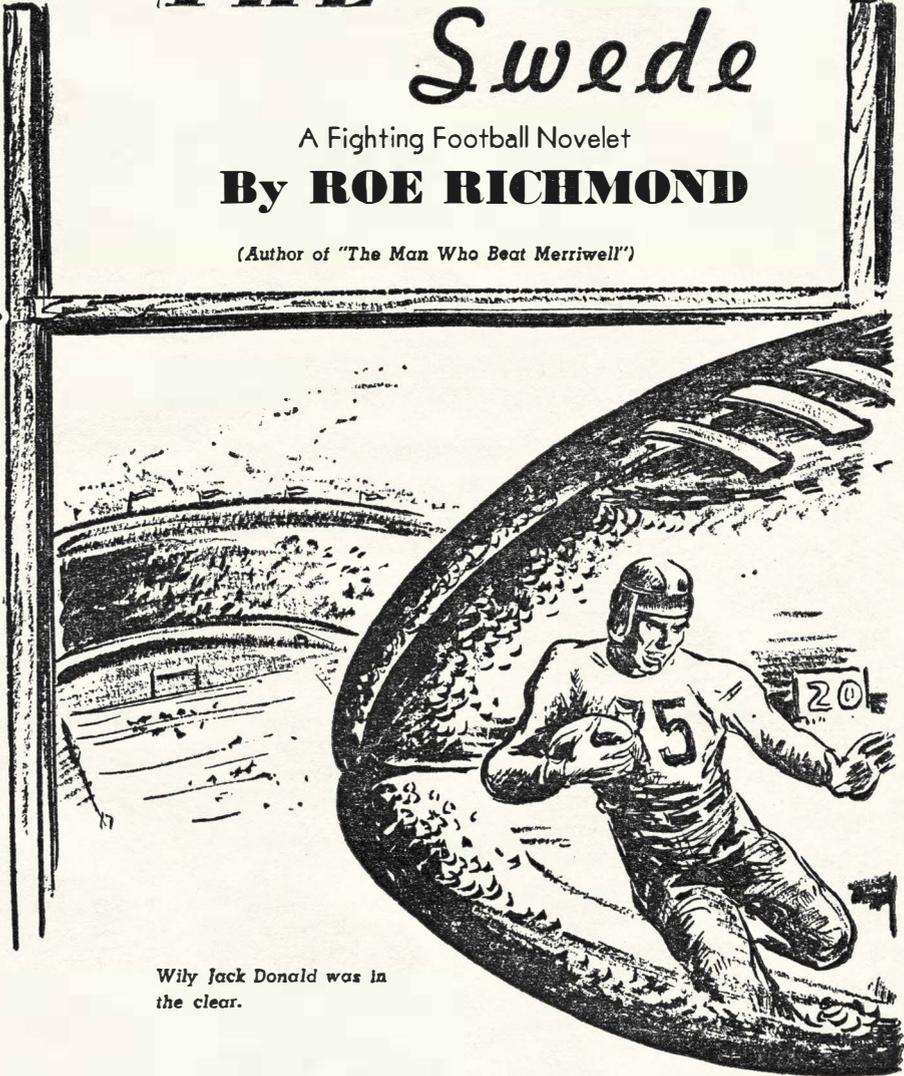
THE

Swede

A Fighting Football Novelet

By **ROE RICHMOND**

(Author of "The Man Who Beat Merriwell")



Wily Jack Donald was in the clear.

1

JOHANSSSEN knew the play was coming his way. They called it instinct on the part of the Swede but it was more than that. Out of his long experience he read the signs and reacted automatically. Now he could feel the goal at his back as he stamped in his cleats and waited

with hands on hips.

In the final quarter the Bisons were thundering toward the touchdown that would give them the lead and probably the game and the top of the league. The veteran Pirates had fought gamely, but the young blood of the Bisons was telling late in the afternoon. Young Jack Donald was a ball of fire that the Pirates couldn't put out. Johanssen was proud of him, even if Jack Donald were on the other side.

He was dynamite on the field, this Johanssen, this tender-hearted giant who knew he was getting old and wouldn't hit an up-and-coming younger man too hard. And everyone called him a dumbhead for letting heels like Torch Trego shove him around, for not seeing that he had enemies on his own team. Then came the day Johanssen's sense of fair-play fouled him up and left him out in the cold, beaten and broke!



The double reverse did not fool Johanssen; he moved up from his wing-back post to meet the thrust. Jack Donald was sweeping wide behind Brute Bellamy and Chetvich. Chetvich's hurtling bulk clipped Johanssen across the legs, but Johanssen used his hands to throw Chet-

vich by while his own body turned on the impact and broke clear. The spin brought Johanssen into a head-on collision with Bellamy, who was sitting high. An elbow mashed Johanssen's mouth numb, but he ducked and stumbled past to take his shot at the runner. Johanssen only got one

huge hand on Jack Donald's ankle, but it was enough to spill him as if tripped by wire. Bellamy's back-flung cleats raked Johanssen's side as he fell.

Getting up Johanssen said: "You're going to get me sore."

Bellamy laughed. "Don't scare me, Poppa. I'll have your false teeth yet."

The Bisons had only gained two yards. Third down and goal to go, eight yards away. Score even at 17-17. Two clubs battling for the leadership of the league in the fading minutes.

On the Pirate bench Torch Trego spat and said: "The Squarehead's slowing up. He's taken a lot from that Bellamy today."

"The Swede's always been too good-natured," said Morry Maynard, owner of the Pirates. "If he ever got mad he could lick the world."

Torch Trego, the only player-manager in professional football, let his handsome lips curl back on his white teeth. "Once maybe, but not any more. The Squarehead's about done,, Morry. You call him good-natured, and I call him dumb."

Maynard's loose-lipped mouth smiled. "Well, you went to school with him, Torch, you ought to know."

"I know more about him than he does," Torch Trego affirmed.

Time was out on the field. Torch Trego called a substitute over. "Get in there for Devitt. Tell the Squarehead to come alive and give Bellamy the business. Bellamy's been crucifying him all afternoon."

Morry Maynard suggested faintly: "Hadn't you ought to be in there, Torch?"

"If we take the ball I'll step in," Torch Trego told him. "There's still time to score."

* * *

PLAY WAS resumed. The Bisons gathered themselves for another charge. It came, a cutback over center, with Brute Bellamy heading the interference. Somehow Johanssen was in there back of the line and cracking down hard on Bellamy. The play piled up and stopped in a welter over their tangled forms. Johanssen got up but Bellamy stayed on the ground squirm-

ing. Bellamy went out protesting groggily.

Young Jack Donald faced Johanssen and snarled somethig.

"Listen, kid, the Brute used everything but an axe on me all afternoon."

"When the Torch puts the finger on 'em, you go get 'em for him, don't you?" Jack Donald sneered. "You thick-headed stooge."

Johanssen smiled gently at the boy. "It's a rough game, kid, people get hurt all the time."

"All except you, and you're too stupid to get hurt!" flared young Jack Donald.

The Bisons went into kick formation. Three points should be enough to win this one. Jack Donald was back to try the placement. Johanssen and Tex Varney, the end who played in front of him, looked at each other and nodded with grim meaning. It was a specialty they had rehearsed many times. Tex Varney threw himself forward and wiped out two men. Johanssen drove in after him and burst through. The ball boomed against Johanssen's broad chest and bounced off at an angle. Johanssen checked his momentum before hitting the kicker. They toppled together with the Swede trying to protect the boy.

"Don't baby me, Blockhead," Jack Donald said through his tight teeth, glaring up wildly.

"Tough luck, kid," Johanssen grinned down at him. "Had to do it."

The Pirates' ball, first and ten, the length of the field to travel and little time left. Another Pirate substitution. "Here comes the Torch," somebody muttered. The crowd gave Trego a good reception. He was still a sensational back, still a great money player. Like the Swede he was a veteran in pro ranks, thirty years old and past the peak but one of the best yet.

Torch Trego trod the earth like a world conqueror, pride in the set of his black curly head, scorn on his darkly handsome face, strength and assurance in his body and limbs. Johanssen wiped sweat and blood from his own grimed face and watched Trego, wondering as he always did at the light that seemed to emanate

from the Torch. There was magic in Trego's every movement. Small wonder that Molly Donald, young Jack's sister, was intrigued by him. Johanssen rubbed his thinning hair and replaced his helmet.

The Pirates faked a kick. Torch Trego broke through and ran to the thirty-five. Johanssen went down blocking ahead of him as he always had, taking the punishment of driven knees and trampling cleats. Some of the Pirates griped about Trego's coming in to grab the glory.

"He's the boy that can take us over the top," Johanssen told them. "Hit 'em for us and we'll go."

They looked at the Swede and shook their helmeted heads. After all these years the old Squarehead still had the college-try spirit.

THE PIRATES snapped into line up. The ball changed hands rapidly in the backfield. The Swede faked and spun and handed it to Hogan Hoge flipped a pass out onto the flat. Torch Trego caught it on the dead run and carried across the middle stripe. That hoarse roaring sound was for the Torch.

Another quick pass, this time from Brisky. The Bisons were laying for the Torch but he snared the leather. Johanssen cut past him and threw a flying block to blot out two tacklers. Trego powered a path to the Bison twenty. Only seconds left on the clock.

No time for the touchdown. One more play. Torch Trego threw off his headguard and paced backwards. Birsky knelt to hold the placement. Johanssen braced himself to bear the brunt of a heavy onslaught. The ball came back and Birsky put it down. Torch Trego stepped smartly forward and swung his leg. Johanssen hurled his aching frame in front of the on-rushing Bisons and went down under their smashing dive. Ground and hammered into the sod Johanssen felt the pain from the vicious knees and elbows and stabbing cleats.

The voice of thousands swelled in volume and burdened the air. The kick was good and they were cheering Trego, the Torch. Pirates 20—

Bisons 17, and it ended that way.

In the dressing room Torch Trego stood over Johanssen, who sat slumped back on a bench against the wall. The Swede's fair grave face was melted and bruised and cut under the dirt. His great shoulders and chest heaved with his breathing and glistened with sweat. Trego looked fresh and cool and clean.

"Squarehead, you're softening up," Trego said. "Bellamy did everything but kick your teeth out this afternoon. Another thing, you went pretty easy on Jack Donald. When a back is hot your job is to cool him off, Swede."

Johanssen was embarrassed, "Aw, Bellamy didn't hurt me, Torch. And I didn't want to hurt young Donald."

Torch Trego laughed shortly. "You're too dumb to get hurt anyway. I can stand dumbness if you stay tough enough, but there's no room on this club for softness. Remember that, Squarehead."

Trego moved away. Bo Birsky leaned toward the Swede. "Imagine that after the ball game you played, Johans. Why do you take that stuff from him? You ought to break his back for him; and you could do it."

The Swede shook his head. "He doesn't mean anything, Bo. Besides he and I are friends."

"Friends!" Birsky said. "You may be his friend, and he's sure *his* friend—but nobody else's."

"You've got him wrong, Bo," protested Johanssen. "The Torch is quite a guy."

"Yeah, he's a hot apple," Birsky said bitterly. "Hot and sour. I hear he's taking your girl, too."

"Molly Donald wasn't really my girl," said the Swede. "We were just friends, kind of. Besides you can't blame her for falling for the Torch. All the girls at college did."

Bo Birsky shook his crooked head. "Swede, you're wonderful."

JOHANSSSEN MET Molly Donald in the hotel lobby, and she scanned his marked-up face with her frank level gaze. He was a blond giant of a man with a grave stolid face, gentle gray eyes and the smile

of a bashful boy. Standing very straight Molly's head reached the Swede's breast pocket. She had the poise and assurance, the smart cool manner of a girl who made her own way in the world.

"Swede, you did a grand job this afternoon," Molly Donald said. Coming from her it was not idle praise, she knew football.

Johanssen grinned shyly and shook his head. "The Torch saved it for us, Molly. And your kid brother was hard to beat."

"Torch and Jack are just break-away runners," Molly Donald told him. "Work-horses like you, Swede, make them and their head-lines."

"I don't kid myself, Molly. I know I wouldn't have gotten there if the War hadn't taken so many of the boys."

"You're the only genuinely modest man I ever saw," Molly said. "I don't think you ever realized how good you are, Swede. Perhaps you never will."

"Cut it out, Molly," protested the Swede. "Are you coming out to the house for dinner? Mother and Gunnar have missed you lately."

"I'd like to, Swede. I've missed them, too. But I had sort of a tentative date with Torch."

"Well, some other time then," Johanssen murmured, and Molly Donald felt a vague annoyance and resentment. If only the Swede would rouse from his lethargy, grip her arm with the insistence of his great strength, lead her away and say, "To hell with Torch, you've got a date with me."

Torch Trego swaggered casually across the lobby to join them. Molly Donald tilted her brown head and turned her straight blue eyes to meet his challenging look. Trego ignored Johanssen.

"Hello, Lovely," said the Torch. "Are you ready to go out and take over the town with me?"

Molly Donald glanced at Johanssen, but the Swede had become absorbed in the pattern of the parquet floor. Then her smile flashed bright and warm upon Torch Trego.

"Whatever you say, Big Shot," she said lightly.

"Let's go, Gorgeous, time's a-wasting."

Molly hesitated. "Swede, won't you come along with us?"

"No, thanks, I've got to go home," Johanssen said. "Mother's expecting me, you know, and Gunnar'll want to talk about the game."

Torch Trego laughed. "Swede, the home boy. Say hello to your folks for me. Tell Gunnar I'll get out to see him someday, if I ever get the time. I should've been out before."

"He knows how busy you are. Torch, he understands. He'll be tickled over the way you pulled that one out for us today."

"Gunnar would've been a swell ball player if he hadn't got himself hurt," Torch Trego said. "Better than you, Squarehead. Maybe even better than me. . . Let's be on our way, Wonderful."

JOHANSSSEN watched them go with a sinking empty feeling. The loneliness stayed with him as he rode homeward, a hollow ache in his breast and a hurting catch in his throat. With an effort he finally put them out of his mind and thought about his mother and Gunnar, his younger brother.

Gunnar had been a sophomore, a classmate of Molly Donald's at the University, when Torch Trego and the Swede were seniors. The Torch made All America for the second time that fall, and Johanssen was mentioned for his blocking and defensive play. Gunnar got into action a few times and showed a lot of stuff. They said Gunnar blocked like his brother and ran like Trego. They said the Torch and the Swede wouldn't even be missed, as long as Gunnar was there.

It happened soon after the season closed. The Swede was in his room cramming for an exam when the hospital called. There had been an auto accident and Gunnar Johanssen was badly injured. At the hospital the Swede found Molly Donald and Torch Trego with other students, suffering

from minor cuts and shock. Gunnar was under ether for an emergency operation. Gunnar had been driving the car when it happened. . . For a time the doctors thought Gunnar was gone, but he finally pulled through. Gunnar lived but he was crippled for life, dead from the hips down.

Something in the Swede died, too. Gunnar took it better than he did. Gunnar brought back to life what had died in his big brother.

"It could be worse," Gunnar said quietly, "I can still see, Lars, I can still use my hands and arms, I can do lots of things."

Gunnar had inherited a talent for handicrafts from his father. He carved toys and sets for Christmas presents. He had always liked to draw and sketch for his own amusement, and now he took it up seriously. First he did decorations for greeting cards, and then he illustrated magazine stories. It brought in a little money and bolstered his self respect.

Gunnar painted pictures from his athletic experience and they were good. Strong stirring action scenes that carried the smell of torn turf on the gridiron, hot dust on the diamond, the feel of conflict and strife under the sun. Locker room and side-sharp realism. A row of football substitutes leaning forward on the bench, bare cropped heads intent and anxious, keen young faces set grimly. . . Occasionally he sold one of these for a small sum, and the critics praised them. Once a big national weekly bought one to use on its cover, and that check was a check.

MONEY TO the Swede meant one thing, something he had been saving towards all these years. There was one surgeon in the world who could perform the operation that might restore to Gunnar the use of his legs. This man Weimar had been in Vienna until the War. Now he was here in this country.

The Swede would have to clean up this season to secure enough to pay for the operation. He'd have to gamble on games, and he didn't like to do that, but he'd do anything for his brother. He'd have quit football be-

fore now if it wasn't for that goal. Pro football was too tough on a man of thirty.

Now his mother and Gunnar looked up as he entered the apartment that was their home, and he fancied he saw some slight disappointment trace their faces when they observed that he was alone. He recalled then how Molly Donald brightened the place, and he felt guilty for not bringing her.

"You were pretty hot today, Lars," smiled Gunnar. "Even on the radio I could tell how you were smacking 'em."

"I wasn't so much, kid, but the Torch burned 'em up."

"What's the matter, couldn't Molly come out, Lars?" asked his mother.

"No, I didn't see her in time. She had a date with Torch. But she'll be out one of these nights."

"That Torch Trego, he takes everything," Mrs. Johanssen muttered. "Takes everything he wants, does everything he wants. I don't like that fellow, son."

"He's all right, Ma, he's a good guy," the Swede said.

"Maybe, maybe he is, but I don't trust him."

Gunnar switched the subject. "Molly's brother is quite a ball player, huh, Lars?"

"Yeah, he's faster'n a streak and shifty, hard to hold. He got sore because he thought I was easing up on him."

"Were you, Lars?"

"Well, a little bit, maybe. But not enough to count."

"Sometime you may let up and he'll slip by for a touchdown."

"I don't slack up that much," protested the Swede. "But I do get tired now, I can't take it like I used to."

Gunnar laughed. "You still take it and you still hand it out, Swede. You're the best in the business, boy, even if you don't believe it."

The Swede grinned his boyish grin. "Don't build me up until we cop the championship, Gunnar."

"When you bring Molly Donald home—for good— I'll really give you credit, Lars."

The Swede was sombre. "Better not count on that, Gunnar."



THE PIRATES struck a losing streak. Everything went wrong all at once. Injuries riddled the black-and-scarlet ranks. Hogan, Calgary, Buratti, and Yednoch were on the shelf. Johanssen had a charley horse that made every stride agony, but he said nothing about it. Torch Trego went back to full-time duty, but even the Torch failed to lift the Pirates out of the rut.

Fortunately the brown-and-gold machine of the Bisons also encountered difficulty in winning. Young Jack Donald, who was considered rather fragile anyway, was out of the lineup. Without their climax runner the Bison offense faltered and foundered. Jack Donald's running and passing had kept them up there near the crest.

The Pirates lost at Detroit, dropped another in Chicago, and fell again at Green Bay. Every minute in there was torture to Johanssen, and the charley horse slowed him. The Packers got their winning touchdown because the Swede couldn't cover a pass into his zone. Torch Trego blistered the Swede's ears without mercy and benched him with ominous finality.

With Johanssen on the sideline the Pirates eked out a victory at last. Torch Trego's terrific running set up the score, and Bo Birsky pitched the touchdown pass to Tex Varney.

In the dressing room Torch Trego confronted Johanssen. "See?" he said. "With you out of there we win, Squarehead! You were quitting cold on us, letting us down."

"You ought to know me better'n that," Johanssen said. "I've got a charley horse, Torch, a bad one." "Don't crawl out under an alibi, Squarehead."

"Look at that leg, feel of it, Torch," pleaded Johanssen.

The Torch looked and the black

scorn faded from his face. He felt of the knotted muscles and shook his curly head. "Why the hell didn't you report it?"

"There were so many boys out I thought I ought to stay in there," Johanssen explained carefully. "I thought—"

"Don't ever try to think, Squarehead," Trego said caustically. "Leave that for people with brains. It's brawn we're paying you for, understand? Get that charley horse worked out of there, and you start against the Bisons. Young Donald is back and I want him stopped—for keeps. If we don't beat the Bisons they move out front."

Johanssen's leg was baked and boiled and rubbed almost raw. When the day of the Bison battle arrived the bunched muscles were loosened and smoothed, but there was still a catch in the leg. Torch Trego examined it.

"Looks all right, Swede. How's it feel?"

"Okay," lied Johanssen. "It feels good. I'm ready, Torch."

"You better be ready and right. A lot depends on this one. They'll be out to get you today, especially Brute Bellamy, but tougher teams than that have laid for you, Swede. Keep an eye on young Donald. Every time you hit him, hit him with a little extra, see? He can't stand the gaff much, but he's dangerous as long as he's unhurt. Your job is to hit him hard and keep hitting him, hurt him, slow him down, make him hate football."

"I don't like it," said Johanssen slowly. "I don't like that part of it, Torch."

Trego barked an unpleasant laugh. "I don't like, Squarehead. You'll take orders or you won't play ball for me. You're starting to slip anyway. It wouldn't take much to put you on the skids for fair. Just remember that."

"But Jack's Molly's brother, Torch."

"So what? He's just another player on the field. There's no place for sentiment in pro football, Squarehead. You follow instructions and keep

your mouth shut. Flop today and you're washed up."

JOHANSSSEN had planned to bet on this game, but when the time came he had nearly lost his nerve. Knowing his leg wasn't right he was afraid to bet on the Pirates, and he could not put his money on the opposing team. The Bisons were favored almost two-to-one. At the last moment the Swede placed five hundred on his club to win. Five would bring close to a thousand. The Swede had to make enough for Gunnar's operation this fall. It was his last season. It would have been the last even without the War.

There was a full house at game-time. The cocky young Bisons glittered in buff-and-gold uniforms. The Pirates were sinister in their black-and-scarlet. The Bisons won the toss and elected to receive. Johanssen's mind was clouded by uncertainty, and his leg muscles caught at every step.

The ball rose end-over-end against the murky sky. Gold and black figures sped at one another on the white-striped green of the field. Three laterals took the ball to young Jack Donald and he fled up the sideline. The Bisons were blocking. Johanssen crossed to take his shot, but Brute Bellamy knocked him down with a wicked block. Jack Donald skimmed down the sideline to the Bison forty-five.

The Bisons had the jump and they kept grinding out yardage, punching their way into Pirate territory. The Pirates finally held on the twenty, but they couldn't get a counter-attack started. When the Swede carried the Bisons belted him savagely and roughed him without mercy. Johanssen felt the knot tighten in his leg, and he tried not to limp. Trego wasn't playing but the Swede could feel his black eyes clear from the bench.

The Bisons started plowing again, pounding the Pirates back. Johanssen kept creeping up closer to the line, trying to fight his way through the interference to get at the runners. Once Jack Donald was almost

out in the open when the Swede struck him from the side with stunning force. Young Jack held onto the ball but he didn't get up right away. Time was out while they worked over him. Johanssen was sick with fear and horror. He had thought of nothing but stopping the play, he hadn't meant to knock the kid out... But the Bisons were eyeing him with hatred, snarling curses and shaking their fists at him.

When Jack Donald got up he grinned palely at the Swede. "So the finger's on me today, stooge?"

Johanssen shook his head. "Sorry, kid. Are you all right?"

"You'll find out, Squarehead," promised Jack Donald.

The Bisons drove deeper and deeper. Play was vicious. Men went out battered, broken, beaten, limping, and fresh ones came on to replace them. The Pirate defense tightened as they felt the goal at their backs. Johanssen was playing in closer than he should have been. Johanssen was splitting the interference with terrible hands, ripping through to smash the runners with deadly tackles.

Jack Donald came sweeping out of a reverse and headed toward Johanssen's side. The Swede moved up fast to meet him, saw too late that the kid was going to pass... The ball zipped past the Swede and a gold-shirted sprinter caught it behind him. The Swede swung back to take up the chase, but a crushing weight caught him across the thighs and rolled him on the sod. Heavy shoes thudded against his ribs and his helmet as they piled over him. He saw Bellamy's snarling face through a hot haze.

Wave on roaring wave surged down as the crowd applauded the first touchdown. The runner had carried Birsky over the line with him. The Bisons booted the extra point and led, 7-0.

JOHANSSSEN expected to be yanked. He almost hoped for it. His leg was clamped in a vise of agony. Football was becoming very hard work. The accumulated drub-

blings of all those autumn afternoons weighed heavily on him. He was tired and hurt, he was getting old. He had been in there too long, and playing the way he did a man took a severe mauling every minute. The Swede never had saved himself as Torch Trego did.

A black-and-red substitute came on. Johanssen hoped it was for him. But it wasn't. The replacement gave him the Torch's tomahawk signal, however, a chopping motion of one hand against the other wrist, and then the fingers to indicate the victim's number. Jack Donald, of course, he was supposed to give the axe to.

The Pirates received the kickoff and started a parade of their own. Bo Birsky sprang a series of new plays and shot his backs forward in short steady gains, Calgary, Yednoch and the Swede. There was a painful hitch in Johanssen's stride, but he ground his teeth and drove himself on into the wild welter of combat.

The quarter ended. The Pirates kept beating their way goalward. The Bisons made desperate stands, took the ball, punted out of danger, but the Pirates came hacking and hammering back. Swede Johanssen burst the line and blasted straight through the secondary to the Bison thirty.

Another Pirate substitution. The Torch himself ran jauntily out adjusting his scarlet-splashed helmet. Bo Birsky grumbled: "Here comes the king himself, after another touch-down." But this trip Torch Trego did not break away at once and dash to glory. The Bisons were rough, rugged and stubborn. Johanssen threw blocks with spine-cracking force, but the Bisons stopped Torch Trego.

So the Torch dropped back to kick, with Birsky holding. The Swede barred the way as the Bisons stamped through. Torch Trego split the uprights with a perfect placement. The Pirates trailed, 7-3.

For a time the struggle see-sawed back and forth evenly. Then the Bisons gathered themselves and launched another assault. Jack Donald ran and passed and faked the

Bisons well into Pirate terrain. The kid whizzed like a rocket and his passes were rifle-accurate. Bison blockers led by Brute Bellamy did a jot on the Swede and his mates. Johanssen could no longer hide his limp.

Before the half closed the Bisons unleashed everything in an all-out effort to score. The final thrust came Johanssen's way, as he expected. The Bisons trampled Tex Varney under on the flank. Johanssen summoned every ounce to go in for the kill, but Chetvich and Bellamy hit him simultaneously and slammed him back.

 **ON THE TURF** Johanssen fought free of the tangle, rolled clear and strained mightily to fling himself in front of the flying Jack Donald. The kid could have skirted round him on the outside, but he cut back in and ran straight over Johanssen with stamping cleats. The Swede felt a blinding numbing smash on his face and the sickening *thump* of his head against the solid ground. Then there was nothing but swirling blackness laced with fiery pain.

Johanssen came to in the dressing room. The half was over and the Bisons were up, 13-3. Tex Varney, raging mad, had spoiled the try for extra point and almost ruined young Jack Donald, the kicker... Johanssen's face felt enormous. He knew his nose was broken, it had happened before, and there were raw cleat gashes.

Torch Trego stood over him. "I sent you out to get Donald, and *look* at what he did to you!"

"Sure, because the Swede still tried to get him after being taken out by Bellamy and Chetvich!" flared Bo Birsky.

"Shut up, you!" warned Torch Trego. He bent back over the Swede. "What's your excuse this time, Squarehead?"

"Nothing," mumbled Johanssen. "No excuse, Torch. But my leg's tied-up again." The Swede's lips were lacerated and puffed, it was difficult to talk.

"Yaa-aah! You'll be riding that

charley horse the rest of your life, Squarehead." Torch Trego turned away in disgust and beckoned to the doctor. "Patch up that mangled map of Sweden, if you can. I may let the Bisons finish the job next half."

Bo Birsky and Tex Varney stood beside Johanssen's table. Birsky said: "If I were you I'd quit, Swede. I'd snap Trego's spine, and to hell with the Pirates."

Johanssen rolled his throbbing head. "Can't do it, Bo. Even if I wanted to. Got a bet on this one—for Gunnar."

Tex Varney swore and choked. "We'll win it for you, Swede. You're damn right we will."

"I'll be back in there, too," Johanssen told them. "We'll get 'em, boys."

Second half. The Swede sat on the bench holding his wrecked face in his hands. Torch Trego was in the Pirate backfield lashing his players into a frenzy, driving them back to the attack. There was no checking the Pirate crew this time. The Bisons fell back before their black fury. Young Jack Donald was hurt and left the game. Torch Trego tore off gain after gain to set up the score. Yednoch caught Bo Birsky's pass for the touchdown. The kick was good, and the Bison lead was cut to three points, 13-10.

Last period. Jack Donald returned to spark a brilliant Bison rally. Jack Donald passed and ran the ball deep into Pirate ground. The Pirates rose and staved off the touchdown, but Jack Donald drilled the uprights with a fancy field goal. Bisons 16—Pirates 10.

The Pirates received but couldn't get started. The Bisons sprang to the assault like a golden avalanche. Jack Donald flitted forward like a phantom that faded out of Pirate clutches and fled on. Torch Trego signalled the bench. Morry Maynard slapped the Swede's broad back.

"Get in there for Hogan, and stop that Donald kid."

Johanssen ran out onto the field trying not to limp. He took Hogan's position backing the line with Moose Gregg, the center. The Bisons surged forward. Johanssen and Gregg stood

like two giants and smashed them back.

Torch Trego snarled: "Get Donald this time, Squarehead. Get Donald or you're done."

Jack Donald came out of a spinner and sliced off tackle. Johanssen threw blockers right and left with his mighty hands and fought to reach the runner. Brute Bellamy came at him like a madman, elbows wide. The Swede struck straight at him, hurled Bellamy back on top of Donald, piled up the play in a thrashing tangle.

Jack Donald faked a run and slanted off to pass. Johanssen swung wide and leaped high to intercept the ball. Johanssen hit the turf running and ran right over an enemy tackler. More Bisons swarmed at him, but the Swede wrenched savagely, whirled wildly, and burst into the clear. It looked like he was loose for a touchdown as he angled toward the sideline. Only Jack Donald had a chance to catch him. Johanssen labored across the middle stripe.

The Swede saw the kid coming and tried to spurt, but his leg locked in sudden screaming pain and his stride broke. He swerved in to meet Donald, but the kid slipped under the straight-arm and smacked Johanssen square and solid. They rolled on the sod together. The ball was on the Bison thirty-five. Johanssen had brought it forty yards, but he should have done better, he should have gone all the way.

"You're slow, Squarehead," panted young Jack Donald. "Too old for this game. You ought to give up."

JOHANSSSEN said nothing. The cramp in his leg was making him sick. Torch Trego raged at him: "What the hell ails you, Square-head? A clear field and you fold up and quit! Are you playing for us or for them?" The Swede was silent, thinking of Gunnar and the five hundred dollars.

The Pirates punched their way to the twenty, but the Bisons refused to yield another inch on the ground. Torch Trego himself was stopped

dead twice in succession. It had to be a pass. Torch Trego fired the ball, and Calgary clawed it away from two Bisons in the end zone for the tying touchdown. The Bisons bulled through and spoiled Torch's try for extra point. It was all even, 16-16.

There wasn't much time left. The Bisons took the kickoff and started marching. Jack Donald was a golden ghost once the brutal Bison blocking got him past the scrimmage line. Backing the line Johanssen could feel Torch Trego's eyes burning into his neck. "*Get Donald, or you're done, get Donald...*" Cocky and tough and full of fire the Bisons blasted on into Pirate soil, deeper and deeper.

The blistering pace took its terrific toll. Men went out dazed and groggy and battered. Fresh players rushed in to take their places. There was always bad blood between the two teams. Young Jack Donald, supposed to be brittle and easily hurt, was still in there and still gaining. The Pirates couldn't connect with him today. The kid was too elusive.

Jack Donald running again. It started like a sweep and turned into a sharp cut-back. Most of the Pirates were fooled, but not Johanssen. He was plowing in there when Tex Varney knifed through and took his shot at the flying speedster. Young Jack Donald dodged away, but Tex Varney hit him glancingly, staggered him out of stride. Jack Donald went into and off-balance spin, helpless and unprotected as Johanssen closed in on him. Here it was, the perfect chance to crack down on the kid, bust him apart, make him fumble the ball... The Swede went in with a panther leap, but he could not carry it through. He was slowing his momentum to merely stop Donald and not slaughter him, when the boy recovered in some miraculous manner and faded swiftly out of reach.

Johanssen plunged futilely along the ground, his outflung arms empty, his mind frozen with horror. Jack Donald was gone. Jack Donald was streaking for the coffin corner. Black jerseys challenged him and fell away. Jack Donald was over the line and

circling in the end zone. There went the ball game and the Swede's five hundred. Bisons 22—Pirates 15, at the finish.

In the dressing room Torch Trego stalked across to where Johanssen sprawled on a bench. Trego's black eyes blazed, and his handsome face was contorted into the mask of a killer. Trego stood there staring down at Johanssen with contempt and hate, and for once the Torch was too full for words. Unable to speak he had to release him in action. His open hand made a whiplash sound on Johanssen's scarred cheek.

Silence followed that quick report. Not another sound was in the room. Johanssen sat stunned and incredulous, stroking his face and looking up at Trego. Johanssen shook his fair head and stood up slowly. Trego was a big man, but the Swede seemed to tower over him. The players waited, tense and stricken, but the Swede did not lift his great hands. He only looked steadily at Trego.

TREGO SWORE, laughed a barking laugh, and started another swing, this time with his hand clenched. Johanssen moved then, not to strike but to grasp Trego by the shoulders, moved with such speed and power that Trego was helpless and the onlookers were awed. With explosive force Johanssen slammed Trego back against the wall so hard it jarred the steel lockers, held him nailed there tight. Trego started to struggle, realized the uselessness of it, and subsided, fear showing on his face.

"If you weren't my friend, I'd kill you," said Johanssen, and not a man in the place doubted his words or his ability to do it. Like a child Torch Trego, terror of professional football, was pinned flat to the wall by Johanssen's mighty hands. Tremendous muscles stood out along the Swede's magnificent arms, shoulders and back, yet he didn't seem to be exerting himself. Men who had played beside him for years were never aware of the Swede's full strength until that moment.

"Don't do that again, Torch," Johanssen told him quietly. "Don't ever do that again."

Johanssen released him, and Torch Trego almost collapsed, shriveling and shrinking against the wall. Johanssen turned and walked back to his locker, his head bowed as if in sorrow.

Trego swallowed convulsively and got his words out: "There'll be more to this," he threatened. "You're all through in football, Squarehead."

The Swede didn't speak or look back at him. The Swede was tired and sick, thinking of his brother and his five hundred dollars.

"You're fired, Johanssen!" shouted Torch Trego. "You're all done with the Pirates. Get out of here and stay out, Squarehead."

"Wait a minute, Torch," interposed Morry Maynard. "I think I have something to say about that, as long as I pay the salaries."

Trego wheeled menacingly on the owner. "O k a y, Moneybags!" he sneered. "Either he goes or I go, get that? Either him or me, take your choice."

"We'll wait and talk it over when you cool off, Torch."

"I won't be changing my mind any," promised Torch Trego. "That Squarehead's lost his last game for the Pirates." Trego went out into the office and banged the door.

Morry Maynard approached the Swede. "I'm very sorry this had to happen, Johanssen. Please remember that nothing Trego said was official. I'm still owner of the Pirates."

"It doesn't matter," the Swede said dully. "Anyway Torch was right; I did lose the game, it was my fault."

Johanssen's teammates stared at him in wonder, and some of the respect dimmed in their eyes.



JOHANSSEN was out of a job and five hundred bucks. Morry Maynard paid him his full salary for the season and was very apologetic about the whole thing.

"I'm sorry, Swede," Maynard said. "I don't like it, the boys don't like it, but Trego won't have it any different."

"It's all right, and thanks," said Johanssen.

"If we got into the championship money you got your split, too."

"That's pretty nice of you, Morry."

"No, it's only fair, it's in the contract, Swede. And I'd like to see you get your brother fixed up, if it's possible. They say Weimar can do it, but of course he's expensive. What'll you do now, Swede?"

"I don't know. Maybe I can get a job. I'm through with football, I guess."

"Hell, you're still the best blocking and defensive back in the game," protested Maynard. "Any club would be glad to get you. I told Trego we were foolish to let you go."

"But I can't join another club now, can I?"

Morry Maynard smiled. "With my permission you can, Swede, and you have that. I released you as a free agent, it was the best I could do for you. And it may cost me the championship, I know."

The Swede shook his head. "I'm all done with football, Morry. Getting too old and tired, and the legs are going bad... But I can't figure what made the Torch treat me like he did."

"I don't understand it myself, Swede. Unless it's because of Molly Donald."

"It wouldn't be that. I was no competition to the Torch there, Morry. He had the field to himself."

"Perhaps, but I'm not so sure," mused Maynard. "I think you could have been plenty of opposition—if you'd tried. That girl thinks a lot of you, Swede."

"Sure, we're good enough friends," admitted Johanssen. "Well, thanks again, Morry. I'll be seeing you."

"Good luck, Swede. If I can ever do anything for you let me know."

JOHANSSEN didn't want to go home. He could not face his mother and Gunnar. He got himself a room in a downtown hotel. He

didn't want to see anybody, he wanted to be alone. He wasn't a drinking man but he felt like getting drunk now. He walked the streets for miles that evening. He went to a show but was unable to sit through it. Leaving the theater he stopped in the first tavern he came to and ordered a beer. He was standing at the bar when Tex Varney, Bo Birsky, Calgary and Yednoch came in and shouldered up alongside of him.

"Hi, Swede," they said casually, and ordered beers.

"Hello, boys," said the Swede, realizing all at once how lonesome he had been and how glad he was to see them. They didn't talk much at first. They sipped their beer slowly and twirled the glasses in their fingers.

After a time Tex Varney drawled: "I know a better place," and they drifted out together, five big men with strong tanned faces, clear eyes, short haircuts, and an easy graceful way of moving.

They made the rounds then in a leisurely fashion, growing mellow and more talkative. They replayed old games and relived old times, and their laughter rang out freely. They started their sentences: "Remember that day in Chicago..." "Remember when we played the Redskins..." "How about that afternoon in Philly?..." And they spoke of old teammates and opponents who had gone from football into business or the Armed Forces, a man who had died at Pearl Harbor, another who was lost on Bataan.

In some places they were recognized and pointed out and eyed with interest and curiosity. In one place a husky man jerked his thumb at them and said to his companions: "Them bums, breaking training like that, no wonder they can't play football. The old yellow shows in 'em when they play the Bissons."

Tex Varney turned back to that table. "You sure talk too much and too loud, friend."

The husky man roared upright. "You lousy tramp athletes, swaggering round like you own the town. Brave because you're five to one, huh?"

"You've got five or six friends there," drawled Tex Varney. "Come on outside and play."

They all went outside and formed a jostling group on the sidewalk. A crowd gathered about them. Tex Varney pointed to an alley and started walking toward it. The others trailed after him with watchful eyes and ready fists. The husky man bounded forward suddenly and started a swing at the back of Tex Varney's neck, but it never landed. Johanssen caught the man's thick arm, yanked him back and spun him round like a huge top. The fellow cursed and swung at the Swede, but the Swede beat him to it. The blow sounded like an axe striking meat and bone. The victim went down as if shot through the head, and Johanssen felt the jawbone give under his knuckles.

There were no further hostilities. The friends of the fallen husky crouched over him, tried to revive and lift him. "My Gawd, he's dead!" cried one of them, getting to his feet and dashing off into the night. Others fled after him. A loud voice demanded: "Get a doctor, call a doctor!" The five football players stood close together and waited. The companions of the unconscious man had disappeared now. The entreaty for a doctor was repeated.

"We ought to get out of here, gang," muttered Yednoch.

"You guys go," said the Swede. "I'll stay."

"Like hell!" Tex Varney said. "I started this mess."

"We'll all stick," said Bo Birsky. "We're all together."

"You're damn right," agreed Calgary.

A SMALL MAN came pushing his way through the crowd, speaking in a precise accented voice: "I am a doctor, make way, please. I am a doctor. Who is it wants a doctor? Is it just a drunk, or is somebody hurt? Please open up there, I am a doctor." The little man finally reached the center of the milling throng, ordered everybody to stand back, and knelt to make a swift ex-

amination.

"Was anyone with this man?" the doctor asked.

"I was," said Johanssen.

"We all were," put in Yednoch quickly.

"All right, you big fellows, help me get him into a taxi. You should come along, too, all of you. I cannot tell how badly he is injured. But my office is nearby, we shall take him there."

Under the lights they saw that the doctor was a queer looking man with thick glasses and a funny mustache, but he had an imposing manner of authority and command, supreme self-assurance. "In my country we break skulls for a cause," he said. "In this country they do it for fun. I cannot say which is worse. Neither one makes good sense in the end, it seems."

They carried the unconscious man into the building behind the little doctor. Riding up in the elevator the doctor surveyed the five solemn-faced young men.

"There's no cause to look so tragic," he told them. "I am sure your friend will be alright although he has a fractured jaw. From his appearance I should think he had been kicked by a horse, a horse of unusual strength."

Somebody snickered. The tension snapped and soon they were all laughing, even the Swede. The little doctor looked from one to another with mild amazement. "A very strange country," he decided. "Extraordinary people with the strangest sense of humor. I shall never understand them." He studied them again. "Are you, by any chance, players of football? That is a game I have become addicted to here. Ah, I thought as much. It is possible then that the victim was kicked by a football player instead of a horse."

They roared with laughter in the corridor, and the patient showed signs of regaining his senses. The doctor warned them that he might be violent, which occasioned more mirth.

"If he gets rough," drawled Tex Varney, "we'll let the horse kick him

again."

The little doctor shook his gray head and paused before a door with gilt letters on the frosted glass, Johanssen stood staring at the lettered glass as if he couldn't believe his eyes. The doctor unlocked the door and showed them where to deposit their burden.

"Yes, I am fascinated by your game of football. I never miss a game when I can help it. My favorite team is the Bisons. Perhaps you gentlemen are affiliated with them, no?"

"No, we're against them," Birsky said. "We're with the Pirates."

"Ah, ha," murmured the doctor. "So you represent the enemy then. I should not be doing this for you, in that case. But I have always wanted to become acquainted with real football players. He bent to examine the patient and nodded his head. "Yes, he will recover, he will be all right. If you gentlemen will wait I shall join you in a few minutes to talk football, if you wish."

Johanssen forced his words out with difficulty. "Are you—are you the Doctor Weimar from Vienna?"

"So, you have heard of me?" said the little doctor, frankly pleased. "Yes, I am Doctor Weimar, formerly of Vienna. Now if you will pardon me, please."

In the outer room the Swede paced the floor, gently scrubbing his right hand knuckles against the palm of his left hand. "He's the one, boys," said the Swede over and over again. "He's the one who could make Gunnar walk. He could give Gunnar his legs again."

THE NEWS of Johanssen's dismissal startled the football world. Molly Donald had been hunting for the Swede ever since the story broke, but nobody seemed to know where he was. He had not been home, and his mother and Gunnar were worried. There were rumors that he had enlisted in the Army, the Navy, the Ma-

rines, but they were not substantiated. Managers and agents of various pro teams joined in the search for him when it became known that Morry Maynard had given Johanssen an outright release.

Torch Trego, who had boasted that no other club would want the Swede, was berated and ridiculed by all the critics of the press. Johanssen, who had sweated and slaved unnoticed through most of his gridiron career, became all of a sudden the most publicized figure in football. Sports writers tried to outdo one another in the singing of his praises. Gunnar clipped all the notices and pasted them carefully into an already voluminous scrapbook.

The Bisons and the Pirates were still battling for the top of the league. The race was more even than ever in the circuit. The leaders had dropped more decisions than was customary. But the Pirates and the Bisons were still the class of the country.

It was Molly Donald who finally found the Swede working in a shipyard, and tried to talk him back into football.

"I'm doing all right here," Johanssen said.

"What about this Doctor Weimar?" asked Molly.

"He's all right, he's quite a guy," said the Swede. "But he's a funny one, Molly, kind of a screwball."

"Did you tell him about Gunnar?"

"Sure, I gave him the story, and he's interested. But he's a gambler, Molly, a betting man. He even wants to make a betting proposition out of a thing like that. He says he'll do the operation if the Bisons win the championship—for nothing. Otherwise he'll have to charge his regular fee. And that's out of the question."

"What's holding you here then?" demanded Molly Donald with heat. "Don't you know that the Bisons want you?"

"Don't kid me, Molly. I'm out of football for keeps."

"I'm not kidding, you dumb Squarehead!" cried the girl in exasperation. "The Bisons want you. They'll sign you as soon as they see

you. They've been hunting you from hell to Hoboken, the same as I have. You can step into a Bison uniform, smash the Pirates, and win that operation for Gunnar. With something like that to play for maybe you'll wake up and play the kind of football you're capable of playing, Swede."

"I didn't know," mumbled the Swede. "If that's true I'll have to try it, Molly."

"I didn't spend all this time looking for you to tell you fairy tales, Swede," Molly Donald said. "Sometimes I don't wonder that Trego got crazy mad at you, and my brother does, too. Come on, let's get started. The Bisons play the Pirates Sunday, and that's the game that tells the story."

"How is the Torch?" inquired Johanssen.

"I don't know," said Molly Donald. "I haven't talked with him since you disappeared. Nobody has to worry about the Torch, Swede. He made himself and he'll break himself—I hope. With a little help from you."

They went to the management of the Bisons and the Swede signed up. They went to Doctor Weimar and sealed the agreement there. And then they went to the Johanssen apartment. The Swede was rewarded by the lighting up of the faces of his mother and brother when they saw him, and Molly at his side.

The papers wrote it up big and made much of the drama involved in Sunday's championship game when Johanssen would go against his old teammates. They built up the personal issue between the Swede and the Torch. Interest in the battle ran nationwide at a fever pitch.

ON THE EVE of the great struggle Johanssen was strangely dull, lifeless, apathetic. He turned to Molly Donald with misery on his grave fine face.

"Molly, I don't know," he began brokenly. "I can't do it, I guess. I can't go against my old gang, against Torch Trego and the boys. Against Tex Varney and Bo Birsky, Calgary, Yednoch and all the rest. It isn't

right, Molly, the whole thing's wrong."

She looked at him in despair. "You can do it for Gunnar, can't you?"

He shook his head heavily. "My heart isn't in it, Molly. I've gone dead inside. I shouldn't have tried to come back."

Molly Donald flared wildly at him. "Then you're what Trego said you were—a quitter. Everything you've always wanted, to fight for, and you're quitting cold."

"If it could be the other way round. If I was with the Pirates I could do it. Hell and high water couldn't stop me. But this way, I don't know, Molly... I feel like a traitor."

"Swede, you're a fool!" Molly said bitterly. "You're just the Squarehead. and Trego was right after all."

"I guess so, Molly. I guess he was. The Torch's always right."

"Gunnar's going to be there with Weimar—Gunnar and your mother, Swede."

"I know, I know," mumbled Johanssen abjectly. "I know, Molly."

The girl's blue eyes flashed fire and her lips thinned against her white teeth. "Well, here it is, Swede. There's one thing you don't know—and maybe never would have known if it hadn't come to this. We all promised not to tell, never to tell—but I'm breaking my promise here and now. Torch Trego was driving that car the night your brother got hurt, Swede. Torch Trego was driving and he was drunk. Gunnar was unconscious so that Torch pinned it on him. Gunnar came to on the way to the hospital. We told him and he was glad to take the rap—Torch was his hero, next to you. And Gunnar made us swear never to tell anybody the truth. So I never told anyone, not to protect Trego, but because I promised Gunnar. I'm telling you now, Swede, because I think you should know."

Johanssen lowered his scarred face into his big hands and rocked slowly back and forth. Johanssen stood up and strode across to the black window and stared out over the lights of the city. Johanssen turned

back after a long time and took the girl's hands into his own, smiling a slow sad smile as he bent to brush her brown hair with his mouth.

"Thank you, Molly," the Swede said gently. "I'm all right now. Everything's all right, Molly, thanks to you."



NEITHER Johanssen nor Torch Trego were in there for the opening kickoff in the championship clash.

The Swede sat on the sideline in the brown-and-gold trappings of the Bisons. His new teammates weren't particularly glad to have him with them. They had a healthy respect for the Swede, but they had always known him as an enemy and they still regarded him in that light. The Swede had put in a busy week studying the Bison system and learning their plays, which he had some familiarity with from the other side of the scrimmage line. He knew he wasn't very welcome, but it didn't matter much.

It was only for one game. It didn't matter if young Jack Donald, Brute Bellamy, Chetvich and the others resented his presence. His mother and Gunnar were up in the stands with Weimar, the great and eccentric surgeon, and Molly Donald was watching, too. On the other side of the field was Trego, the Torch. It was only one game, but it was the most important game of the Swede's life.

The Pirates threatened in the early minutes. Bo Birsky's passes were clicking. Calgary, Yednoch and Hogan were gaining. Tex Varney was blocking like a demon. For a moment Johanssen forgot which side he was on, forgot that the black-and-scarlet colors were no longer his. The drive of the Pirates nearly lifted the Swede from the bench. He caught himself and relaxed just in time, painfully conscious of the curious side glances of the Bisons.

The big golden team made its stand

and took the ball from the black invaders. The Bisons unleashed an offense of their own, a dizzy display of razzle-dazzle with young Jack Donald, Brute Bellamy, Chetvich and Castonguay handling the ball like magicians and reeling off the yardage behind superb blocking.

The golden torrent surged into Pirate territory, but was thrown back from the goal. Birsky punted from the end zone across midfield. The ball shuttled back and forth near the halfway mark. Play was inspired and fierce, no quarter asked or given.

The Bisons went on another rampage. Young Jack Donald skittered like quicksilver through a broken field. Molly's kid brother was a ball player, all right. The Bisons shook him loose and Jack Donald went like wildfire. The Pirates fought with their backs to the wall now. The Pirates made it tough but the Bisons kept coming. Jack Donald went flashing over for the touchdown. Jack Donald converted the extra point. The Bisons were out front, 7-0.

THE PIRATES received the kickoff and started a campaign of relentless fury. They marched steadily down the field, hacking and biting their way into the terrain of the Bisons. The Bisons halted them several times, but only temporarily. The quarter ended and the teams switched goals. The Pirates took up the attack again. Torch Trego made his dramatic debut. Torch Trego promptly broke loose and ran to the Bison twenty.

"All right, Johanssen," said the Bison manager. "Your man is in there, let's see you stop him."

Johanssen went in feeling conspicuous and out-of-place in the golden uniform, feeling like a sophomore in his first varsity game. Johanssen took Castonguay's post as line-backer.

The Pirate thrust came. Mechanically the Swede moved to meet it, using his powerful hands on the interference. He got a glimpse of Trego's dark snarling face coming at him as he sheared through a wall of black

jerseys. Then his massive shoulder caught Trego fairly under the ribs, and Johanssen lifted him back and over on the momentum of driving legs. No gain. The Swede had stopped it flat. But there was no emotion in him, no exultance.

The Pirates ran one to the other side. Again the Swede was there, looming suddenly to fill the breach in the Bison barrier, heaving the interference back onto the Torch, burying the ball in a welter of bodies. Still there was no feeling in Johanssen. He acted automatically without thinking. He had never been more indifferent. It was as if his mind sat back and watched his body go through the motions. The game had no reality for him, no meaning.

He sensed the next play almost before it started. Bo Birsky slanted off to the right and whipped a short pass back over his left shoulder. Torch Trego took it in full flight out in the flat. Johanssen was there nearly as soon as the Torch. Johanssen lunged forward to make the routine tackle... But the Torch swiveled sharply back at the Swede, jolting out a straightarm, thrashing free of Johanssen's grasp with high-jabbing knees. Johanssen floundered on the stadium floor. Torch Trego went roaring on his way and knocked Jack Donald back into the end zone to score. The Torch toed the tying point in there, 7-7.

The rest of the half was a nightmare. Johanssen was vaguely aware of the distrust of his teammates and the scorn of Torch Trego. Johanssen played good sound football by instinct, but there was no fire in him. He blocked well for young Jack Donald, but he didn't belt them as if he meant to break them in two. He couldn't hit them that way. He couldn't do that to Birsky and Varney, to Calgary, Yednoch and Moose Gregg. They were his friends.

The Bisons kept rapping at the Pirate goal but could not cross it. Jack Donald kept tearing off yardage behind the Swede's consistent blocking, but the Pirates refused to yield inside their ten yard line. The Bisons could have scored a field goal,

but they chose to go on shooting for a touchdown or nothing. And they got nothing.

The last Bison attempt culminated with a surprise pass from the Swede to Jack Donald. Johanssen overthrew his target. Jack Donald made the catch high in the air, stretched wide open and defenseless. A black-shirted tackler hit him in mid-air and toppled him with stunning suddenness. Young Jack was rolling helpless on his back when Torch Trego came hurtling through and landed on him with both knees. The ball had bounced away on the ground, incomplete. Jack Donald was out cold, and had to be carried from the field.

Johanssen tried to reach Trego but a dozen men barred the way. Johanssen knew hatred for the first time.

The Pirates took the ball and started a scorching assault. Johanssen hit Trego with everything he had but couldn't seem to hurt him. Torch Trego laughed at him, mocked him. The Pirates stabbed deeper into Bison land, but there wasn't time for a touchdown. Torch Trego planted a placement between the uprights.

Pirates 10-Bisons 7, at the end of the half.

MOLLY DONALD was outside the dressing room when the Bisons herded for the last half. The Swede knew she would be there.

"How is he, Swede?" she breathed anxiously.

"The kid's all right," Johanssen told her. "He'll be fine, Molly—but he won't play any more football today."

"Trego gets them all, doesn't he?" she said bitterly. "He cripples them all, breaks them, ruins them. And nothing happens to him."

The Swede made a hoarse sound deep in his throat. "Something will happen to him this half, Molly."

"Something would, all right, if Gunnar had his legs under him."

"Gunnar will have his legs," promised Johanssen. "I've been a thick dumb Squarehead for a long time, Molly. But I'm not any more. You watch me go, Molly."

"I'll be watching, Swede," said Molly Donald. "I've always been watching you—and waiting for you."

"There won't be any more waiting either," the Swede told her, and jogged on toward the ramp after the others. Molly looked after his mighty figure, marveling and thankful for the change in him. Her slumbering giant had awakened at last. The sleeping Swede had come to life.

Johanssen felt the difference in himself. It was as if a film had lifted from his eyes and he saw clearly for the first time. Things were sharply in focus now, where they had been blurred and foggy. He knew what he had to do and nothing could keep him from it.

The Bisons spread out to receive the kickoff. The ball came in erratic flight against the gray sky. Johanssen swung across to the left and called for it. The Bisons let him have it, but they did not go down blocking for him. Somehow they blamed him for Jack Donald's injury... But the Swede did not need them, or anyone else. The Swede feinted to the left and reversed to the right. The Swede moved with a speed that nobody knew he possessed. He ran right by the first Pirate tacklers with a blinding burst of that speed. He smashed straight through a second wave of black-and-red jerseys, jockeyed into the clear, and swept down the right sideline.

Johanssen reversed his field once more and crossed the middle marker. He ran straight at Torch Trego, making no effort to evade him, running clean over him as if Trego wasn't there. He fell finally under three black shirts on the Pirate thirty-five. He had carried the kickoff back sixty yards, without any help at all.

THE NOVEMBER air shuddered with the sound of 70,000 people roaring for Johanssen, the Swede. It was his day, his game, his hour of glory. After all those years the Swede was a headliner at last.

He rammed the line like a gold thunderbolt to the twenty-five. He ripped off tackle like a golden rocket

to the fifteen. He ran like a man gone mad, exploding through tacklers like a huge projectile... But the other Bisons weren't with him yet. The Pirates braced and held, took the ball and punted out.

Johanssen started another one-man onslaught. He shattered the black line and two Pirates left the game. He threw a pass to Bellamy. He caught a pass from Yandel. But he was still fighting more or less alone.

"Come on, boys," he panted. "Not for me, but for Jack Donald. Don't quit on that kid now."

The Bisons caught fire from the flame that was in Johanssen. Bellamy and Chetvich began blocking for him. The Swede slashed through the black forwards, cleats chewing the turf, driving him faster and harder with every stride. Brute Bellamy and Chetvich erased two secondaries. Johanssen laid Trego flat on his back in a head-on collision. Johanssen burst free into the end zone, and the stadium rocked to the roaring of his name. The kick was missed, but the Bisons led, 13-10.

It was the Pirates turn to start something now, and they did. The fire went out in the Bisons as quickly as it had caught. The cheers were all for Johanssen, an outsider, and they didn't like that. The Bisons let down again, and the Pirates began cutting them to pieces. But they couldn't get by Johanssen. The Swede was in there on top of every play, mowing down the interference, smacking the runners. Torch Trego took an awful beating but he was still strong and tough, still spearheading the Pirate offensives. The third period closed with the Bisons clinging to their narrow lead, 13-10.

Fourth quarter. The Bisons were backed against their own goal now, with the Pirates pounding closer and closer... Johanssen watched Torch Trego, recognizing his enemy for the first time, going hot all over with shame as he recalled all the things he had taken from Trego through the years. After what Trego had done to Gunnar, his brother, and

now to Jack Donald, Molly's brother...

The Pirates came on with a rush, hell-bent on scoring and regaining the lead. Torch Trego ran wide on an end sweep behind heavy massed interference. Johanssen followed the play over, ripped the interference open, and went after Torch Trego like a tiger. Torch was cutting for the extreme corner, but the Swede reached him in time. The Swede's terrible hands caught Trego by the shoulders, whipped him completely off his feet, whirled him about and dashed him to earth with a shocking impact. Trego's body bounded and the ball sputtered from his grasp. A gold-shirted Bison covered it. Torch Trego sprawled loosely across the sideline like a big broken doll. Torch Trego had to be taken off the field on a stretcher.

Bison's ball on their own four yard mark. A fake kick with the Swede springing through the line and going to the twenty. Once again the Bisons took life from Johanssen. The Swede faked a pass and ran to another first down. The Pirates held for two downs, and then the Swede crashed into the clear once more and sloughed his way past midfield.

THERE WAS NO stopping Johanssen now. His leg was knotted in pain with that charley horse, but it did not slow him. Time after time the Swede took the ball and went driving forward behind Brute Bellamy and Chetvich, smashing men left and right out of his path, trampling men under his cleats, grinding out the yards... Four, three, six, eight, five, nine yards at a clip.

The stadium was one vast ocean of sound with 70,000 people on their feet cheering the Swede onward. Johanssen... Johanssen... *Johanssen again!*... First and ten for the Bisons on the Pirate fifteen yard line.

Johanssen was smeared and plastered with dirt from head to heels. Blood dripped slowly from his nose and mouth, tracing red on the sweaty grime of his face. His broad chest

and mighty shoulders heaved with his breathing. A wild glory seemed to radiate from the giant Swede.

Johanssen carried once more, fainted wide, cut back at a crazy angle, fought his way forward, lurched out into the open. Johanssen ran blindly into a group of Pirate tacklers near the goal, scattered them like an exploding bomb, and stumbled on to pitch headfirst into the end zone. The try for extra point was made. Bisons 20-Pirates 10.

The Swede went out of the game then, with the entire stadium up to pay him his tribute. The game ended a few minutes later with the Bisons on top, 20-10.

ONE OF MANY after-game parties was held in Doctor Weimar's Central Park West apartment, with Mrs. Johanssen and Molly Donald acting as hostesses for the little doctor and his guests: Gunnar and the Swede, Jack Donald, and four of the fallen Pirates, Bo Birsky, Tex Varney, Yednoch and Calgary.

Weimar said aside to Johanssen. "Of course you understand I would have done the operation for your brother anyhow, no matter who won the game. But, as I say, I am a betting man, and I wanted to make more sure my bet."

"Was that your idea altogether, Doctor?" asked the Swede.

"Well, it was partly mine, at least," smiled the little man. "The charming Miss Donald contributed somewhat to it, I confess. She said she had a big Swede who needed to

be awakened. She said this Swede was the greatest football player in the world—but he didn't know it."

Tex Varney idled by, drawling: "Just like a horse, Doc, he never knew his own strength—until today."

"If I had to be struck by either one, I should select the horse," chuckled Doctor Weimar.

"So would Torch Trego, after this," grinned Calgary.

The Swede smiled like a hulking bashful boy. "If you think I'm good," he said. "Wait until you see my kid brother Gunnar! He and Jack will be the best pair of backs in the country."

"You said it, Squarehead," chirped young Jack Donald, and for the first time there was fondness instead of contempt in the way he used the term.

"Don't I get any credit here?" laughed Molly Donald. "After all I dug Swede out of a shipyard to play this afternoon."

"You get me," said the Swede, with an assurance new and strange in him. "That's enough for any girl."

"That football is a funny business," said Mrs. Johanssen. "I don't understand it much. But I like it fine when Lars gives out good to that Torch Trego. That part I like—very much."

Gunnar said nothing but his gray eyes were shining ahead into the future, where perhaps he would run again as he had seen his brother run that afternoon.

THE END

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

BIG MURDER ON CLEATS

A Smashing Football Novelet

by **T. W. Ford**

Basement Backstop

Complete Novelet

By **GARDNER F. FOX**

✓ 1 ✓

THEY KNEW all about him here; he could sense it as he crossed the lobby, carrying his big grip. Their eyes met his and slid across without meeting his grim, sullen look. Their tanned faces turned away. Tip Rankin tightened his big hand on the handle of his valise until the skin showed white over the knuckles. No team wanted a guy who quit when the going got tough.

Jim French had called him a Philadelphia ballplayer two years ago, when the Bruins fell out of the pennant race and his batting average slid down to below two hundred. French had commented in his column, "*. . . the kind of guy who bats a thousand when the other team uses their fourth string pitchers, and who folds when he runs into a real hurler.*" That was what he was now. Philadelphia ball player!

He saw manager Chick Drewson of

the Herd waiting by a big potted fern. Drewson had cold black eyes that could see right through a man. Tip went over to him, nodded, and put down his bag.

"First off I want you to know you ain't stayin' here long," Drewson snapped. "The Herd's hopin' for the pennant, and we—the boys and me—don't want to take no chances."

The blood came up redly in his cheeks. Tip ground his teeth together, biting back the hot, angry words he wanted to blurt out. He felt the eyes of the players on his back.

"Yeah, I catch. Like that, is it? Only thing I can't figure out is why you made the deal for me. I was plenty happy with the Goons, down in the cellar. Nice and cool, cellars, on a hot summer day."

"We want a third baseman from the American Association. They need a catcher. You'll go big there, Tip. You might even hit four hundred against that pitchin'."

Drewson turned away, snapped over his shoulder, "We're keepin'



"There's no place in this team for a Philadelphia ballplayer—no place for a guy who won't give the best he has all the time!"



you for two, three days. Team needs a replacement until Ted Phelps' wrist gets over that sprain."

"Thanks a lot!" Tip muttered.

"Don't get your hopes up. Me and the boys only like guys who give out with the best *all* the time!"

IT WAS HOT IN the dugout, and dusty. Tip slid a couple of inches over so that he could watch Biggy Thomas, the Bird hurler. Biggy was having one of his better days, and his high hard one was mowing down the Herd batters, one after another. There was something about Biggy, though, that Tip had never noticed before. Every time he shot his curve across the platter, he barely flicked his gloved hand across his left knee.

Tip got up and walked to the bat rack where the next Herd batter was bending over, picking up his club. Tip said, "Watch Biggy on that curve. His left glove tips it off. He

brushes his knee—"

The batter straightened and grinned at him. It was a cold grin. "Thanks, Tip. I'll sure remember that. Didn't know the Goons were such wide-awake ballplayers!"

Tip flushed and shrugged and turned away. He saw Drewson eyeing him and huddled himself into a corner. The minor leagues for him. He knew it deep inside himself. It was there like a lump of lead, weighing him down.

"I'm twenty-eight years old," he muttered to himself. "I ought to be coming into my best years. I can catch; I got a hot arm. I can hit, too." Grudgingly he amended his words, "Against the second raters, anyhow. Three twenty one last year, three ten the year before."

"But with men on bases, you're a flop," somebody whispered.

It was Chick Drewson, looking at him coldly. The manager moved over, sat down beside him. "Tip, I ain't a naturally hard-hearted guy, although plenty folks seem to think so. You just ain't built for pennant-winning baseball, that's all. You can't change a guy. Look, you're smart and you're observant. Why don't you get into some other line? Maybe a sportin' goods salesman, somethin' like that—"

"Can it," Tip grunted, staring out over the green grass of the outfield, looking at the billboarded signs on the outfield walls.

Drewson sighed and got up. "Thought I'd give you some advice, that's all. Forget it."

"I will."

The score was two to nothing going into the bottom half of the eighth inning. Biggy Thomas was winning himself a carton of cigarettes with a two-hit shutout when the Herd number man rifled a single between his legs and out into center field.

The Herd second string catcher who was filling in for Phelps, swung at the first pitch and missed it by a foot. The second was a curve that failed to break. The catcher ducked down under it, but there was a solid thunk as the ball hit his wrist.

Drewson was off the bench like a

rocket and out beside his backstop, looking at his wrist, moving it and talking softly. Tip held his breath, looking on. He said to himself, *This is your break. If Drewson waves you in, you got a chance to make up for everything, maybe. You can give it the old college try, anyhow!*

Drewson waved a hand and a kid shortstop leaped from the bench and trotted down to first. The loudspeaker behind the scoreboard boomed, "Rawson now running for Klegley."

The manager ducked down into the dugout and snapped, "Get the tools on, Rankin. Got to use you after all."

IT FELT GOOD to snap on his leg-guards, pull the padded, iron-barred mask down over his face. He squatted down behind the plate, scooped his pitcher's tosses into the deep hollow of his mitt. He slammed a throw down to second to tune up his arm. The Herd batters hadn't been able to move Rawson beyond second, so Tip was starting the top of the ninth inning behind the plate.

He crouched and waggled his fingers, as the herd pitcher nodded. He held his big mitt up as a target. The ball swept in and down, curving across a corner nicely. Tip shook the ball at his pitcher with a grin and settled down to getting the man at the plate.

Tip wondered idly if Babs Cottom was in the grandstand. He'd been trying to marry Babs for a long time, ever since he first came up to the league. Babs was a dancer at the Fern Club, taffy-blonde and five feet two, with curves that would have made a pitcher jealous. Two weeks ago, when the Goons had come on to play their three game series at Herd Park, she had let him slip a diamond on her finger.

"Bet she won't like the idea of them sending me to the minors," he gloomed, swerving his mitt aside to pull in a low hook.

The sharp crack of the bat slamming into the ball snapped Tip to attention. His heart thumped as he watched the pellet curving foul, inches outside the right field screen. Better forget Babs and settle down,

he told himself, if I want to hang onto this uniform for a few days until I show what I can do!

He signalled for a fast ball. The pitcher threw him off, shaking his head. Tip knew the batter was a sucker for high hard ones, and repeated his signal. This time the hurler nodded. Tip grinned to himself. Smart stuff; the Goon pitchers had never shaken him off. They hadn't cared enough.

Tip took the high fast one right behind the swooshing bat that blurred in his eyes as it went around against the empty air. "That's only the first one," Tip yelled, and slammed the ball down to third and watched the infielder chuck it around.

The next man hoisted a foul behind first that the Herd initialsack man took. The last batter popped to short.

The Herd players came running in for the last half of the ninth, two runs behind. With the Goons, those two runs would have seemed like a dozen, but Tip heard big Rick Norman the center fielder chatter, "Only two, boys. Only two. Le's get them and jus' one more!"

The first Herd batter popped a single into right. The next man up hunted him to second. The Herd number three batter rifled a bullet above the upflung glove of the Bird hot corner man. The ball went so fast into left that the Herd runner on second had to hold up at third.

Rick Norman stepped to the plate. Tip found a couple of bats and went up on deck. He was hitting in the number five slot where Hammering Hank Phelps usually swung his black bat. Tip knelt and watched Rick, studying the big man's easy stance, his relaxed tenseness, his keen attention.

Rick let two close ones go by for balls. He caught the next pitch and banged it into the outfield, between center and right. The man on third came in, and the runner at first legged it to third.

"Only one out, Tip," somebody called from the Herd dugout. "A long fly an' she's tied up! Le's see you do it, boy!"

Tip tossed his extra bats aside and stepped into the rectangular batter's box. He swooshed his stick easily in his big brown hands.

The first pitch to him was plenty fast, with a hop. Tip took it. He discovered that there was a tenseness in his chest and arms, a tight feeling that he'd never had with the Goons. With the cellar champs, he'd been relaxed, easy. Maybe that was why his stickwork was so good. There wasn't the same tension with a basement dweller as when you were fighting tooth and nail to hang onto the roster of a pennant contender. With a flush, Tip realized that was why they called him a Philadelphia ballplayer.

Tip stepped out of the box, bent and rubbed dust on his hands. He told himself, You got to bring in this run. If you got any hope at all of sticking, you got to!

He saw the Bird pitcher flick his knee with a glove. Tip automatically set himself for the curve that was swooping in, and swung. His bat nicked the ball, sent it squibbling into the Bird hurler's glove. The pitcher whirled and rifled the ball to second to double up Rick Norman. The throw on to first caught Tip by three steps for a double play and the ball game.

Tip turned off the base paths and growled to the Herd coach, "It was a curve all right, but the one time his curve fails to break, I got to nub it!"

The coach shrugged and trotted ahead of him toward the dugout. The shrug said to Tip, "What can you expect of a basement backstop?"

As he came close to the grandstand behind the dugout, a voice called, "Chin up, Tip. You can do it! Don't let that get you down!"

Tip glanced up from under the peak of his cap. A girl with a thick mass of yellow hair that hung to her white-bloused shoulders was leaning across the rail. Her eyes were soft and brown. She smiled, "It'll be a little different, but you'll like it better here, Tip. The Herd is going places."

"Thanks," Tip muttered.

2

HE SHOWERED and dressed in a silent dressing room. He felt the cold looks and the indifferent stares. The Goons never took a loss like this. They talked about dates and food and taxes no matter what the score had been. But here Tip began to feel that hitting into a double play was something of a crime.

Drewson came to the door as Tip was slipping on his coat. The manager said, "See me in the office, Rankin."

Tip muttered, "Here it comes. The official news. Traded down the river."

Drewson was sitting in back of his big walnut desk, hands folded above his desk blotter. The black-eyed manager was smiling wryly. He lifted a square of paper from the blotter and handed it to Tip.

Tip read: *Third baseman Kessler sprained ankle today. Stop. Impossible for him to play for few weeks. Stop. Suggest hold off on trade until see how ankle responds. Stop. Manders.*

Drewson said, "That's that. The deal's off. Looks like we're stuck with you, Rankin."

Tip stuck his chin out, growled, "Any time you want, you can let me go!"

Drewson shrugged and turned aside. He muttered, "Maybe we will at that. But report back for work tomorrow anyhow."

The girl with the long blonde hair and the soft brown eyes was waiting for him at the exit door. She took her shoulder away from the concrete wall where she had been leaning and came across to him. She walked easily, with smooth movements of her long legs. She wore a light wool skirt and a blouse.

"I'm Christine Farrel," she said, holding out a white hand. "Most of the players call me Chris."

"Oh? Well, thanks for the kind

words out there today. I sure needed 'em. You know the other players?"

She laughed, "I ought to. Tommy Farrel's my dad. Yes, that's right. Flannel-mouth, you call him. The first-base coach."

Tip remembered Farrel's shrug and flushed. Chris eyed him teasingly, laughing softly, "Don't mind Daddy. He's pretty tight these days. The boys are all tight. Pennants have been few and far between here at Herd Park. The gang plays every pitch out, all the way."

Tip found that the soft brown eyes were deep and glowy. He said suddenly, "You're like a tonic. Would you like to—?"

"Ohh, Tippee. Tippee, come over here!"

That was Eabs Cottom. Tip knew her voice, without looking. He squirmed under the steady regard of Chris's brown eyes. She asked, "What were you going to say?"

"I—I was going to ask—"

"Tippee! I'm waiting!"

Tip said helplessly, "Got to run. See you maybe tomorrow?"

"I always come out to the games," Chris said.

"Tippee!"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. See you then, hah?"

Babs was radiant in a flowered print against the red leather upholstery of a yellow convertible sedan. The top was down, and the sunlight glinted in the red corona of hair that framed her red-lipped white face. She patted the seat beside her.

"Hop in, Tippee. We're going places."

"But, Babs—"

"I said, hop in!"

IT WAS hot in the bullpen, under the sizzling July sun. Tip crouched with the big Wilson on his left hand, mitting the shoots of Tubby Dangerfield, the Herd relief artist. Tubby was fast, and his curve broke a foot away. It was strenuous and the dancing of the last few nights was beginning to catch up to Tip.

Sweat gathered on the back of his neck and across his forehead. He

paused with the ball in his mitt to slip off his cap and rub a sleeve across his face.

Tubby growled, "You stay home nights, you wouldn't mind this so much!"

"My life's my own," snapped Tip bitterly. "Man's got a right to have some fun!"

"Sure, sure. But you pay for it, smart boy. Like two days ago when you struck out pinchhittin'! And yesterday, fillin' in for the last inning, you let two balls get away from you that cost us the game!"

Tip came forward a few steps, stiff-legged. "You don't like what I do, you meet me under the stands!"

Tubby was scornful. "The boys're pinnin' their pennant hopes on my ol' right arm. I ain't hurtin' their pocketbooks cloutin' you around!"

Tip flushed. The portly hurler was right. He was just an idiot; he'd been wanting to make it with the Herd, maybe even become their first-string backstop. Hank Phelps was getting on. The old timer would be hanging up his spikes pretty soon. And what was he doing about it? Bullpen catcher!

Tip bit his lip and squatted down, held up his mitt. "Okay, okay. Le's get on with it."

The game with the Gazelles was a scoreless tie. In the left field bullpen, Tip could see across the big park, the white-uniformed Herdsmen and the grey-spangled Gazelles like little dolls in the distance. Going into the last half of the seventh, the Herdsmen came up to bat. A roar from the stands made Tip and Tubby halt and turn to stare.

Rick Norman was perched on second base. The black scoreboard showed there were two outs. The Gazelles were putting in a right hander to toss against old Phelps. An arm waved from the dugout, close above the ground.

Tubby chuckled, "They want the low-down guy, the basement backstop. Hurry up there, night-owl. Take your cuts and come back."

Drewson met him as he trotted to the bat rack. The manager growled, "Hank can't work no more with his

bum hand. You swing for him against this rightie, put the tools on."

TIP WAS RELAXED for the first time since he'd put on the blue-and-white Herd uniform, but it was a relaxation induced by his not caring what happened. If the Herd players wanted to look on him as an outcast, let them! He'd tried, and you couldn't ask any more of a guy.

The Gazelle pitcher was fast. His smoke-ball poured across the plate for a strike. Tip watched it, gauged its speed. The next offering was low and outside. Tip figured that the Gazelle would come in with his speed again.

He dug in with his spikes and moved his big black bat easily. His fingers tightened on the handle as he brought it around in a vicious arc. There was a ringing crack and Tip knew he had caught hold of it.

The ball rebounded from the right field wall as Tip went wide around first. He made it into second standing. Rick Norman had scored with the only run of the game.

Tip felt good until he saw Flannel-mouth Farrel glaring at him from his coaching box at third that he took on alternate innings. "What's the matter now?" Tip wondered.

He found out after the next two batters skidded deep to the outfield. Farrel waited for him, lips a thin line. The coach snarled, "If you'd only keep your head up, you'd have seen me wavin' you to come on to third. You coulda made it crawlin'. But you was so swelled up with your lucky bingle, you forgot all about the team."

"I got a double! What more do you guys want?"

"We want everything you got, see? Everything! Each extra base you can make! If you'd come on to third, you coulda scored after Harrigan's fly ball, easy. The score would be two to nothin', instead of just one nothin'!"

Tip slipped on his shin-guards and chest-protector glumly. He had to admit that old Flannel-mouth was right. If he hadn't been dancing half the night, and lapping up those high-balls with Babs—

"Hell!" he snarled into his barred mask. "It's my own fault. Why should I go blamin' her? She likes a good time, that's all!"

He squatted down behind home plate and took Jim Reynolds' hopping fast one in his mitt. He sweated and he sickened, but he stuck it out through the sixth and seventh and eighth innings. His arm cut down Gazelle base-runners. He made Reynolds toss what he wanted him to toss. He helped his pitcher through three scoreless innings.

In the top of the ninth Reynolds passed the first man. Tip went out to the mound with the ball.

"Let's get this next baby, Jim. He likes speed. We'll slow stuff him to death."

Reynolds nodded and picked up the resin bag.

His first offering was a slowly twisting curve. The Gazelle batter eyed it sneeringly, and dug his spikes in. Reynolds backed him away with a fast inside shoot. He came in with a curve, but he had too much fast on it. The batter swung savagely and Tip came forward with a cry, staring as the ball went up and out, curving a little as it dipped down out of sight beyond the right field wall.

The next three batters popped to the infield, but the damage was done. Tip banged a single through the box to start the last half of the ninth, but he died on first.

Farrel was standing at his green metal locker when he went in to take off his uniform. The thin-lipped coach was smiling wryly. He said patiently, "You see what I mean now, Tip? We'd had a tie game instead of a loss 'f you'd come on to third. With maybe a chance of winnin' it in the sudden extra innin's."

Tip gloomed, "Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm just a bonehead dummy."

Flannel-mouth said quickly, "Ain't that, Tip. Ain't that at all. Just that you don't feel the same way we do about things. Maybe you aint used to it. You might pick up that feelin', though."

Tip paused with his shirt off, shoulders and chest naked to the warm air of the dressing rooms. He said slowly,

"You had a change of heart lately, huh?"

Farrel looked uneasy. He muttered, "Like to see any young ballplayer do good. You got the size and the strength to be a good swatter. You do a nice job with your pitchers, too. You know how to handle an infield from behind that platter. Only thing you got to do is—"

"Learn to run myself ragged, knock myself out, break a couple of legs and fall flat on my face exhausted at the end of each game!" Tip snapped. "Sure, I know what you guys want. Thanks. I do what I can and that's all!"

He lifted a foot to the bench and unlaced his shoes. Farrel watched him for a moment, shrugged and turned away.

♪ 3 ♪

THE MUSIC swelled up from the raised red dais of the Bubble Klub, sifted through the big plastic bubbles that dangled from the ceiling, and rebounded onto the dance floor. Tip's feet tapped in rhythm with the tune, watching Babs moving easily in Jim French's arms. Tip stared at the white cloth on their table, turning his cool highball glass in his fingers. He glanced at the red-head and the owner of the Bubble Klub again.

They broke from the floor, came toward him. Babs ruffled his thick brown hair with a red-nailed hand. She smiled, "Get our duds, honey. We're moving on to the Casa Noir."

"Not me," said Tip glumly. "I got to get some sleep. Hank Phelps' hand is still sore, and I'm liable to be sent in tomorrow's game again."

"Tippee! I said we were going to the Casa Noir!"

Tip flushed, "I don't have much money left, hon. After all, my salary isn't any too much already, and the way we've been stepping lately—"

Jim French laughed. Tip looked at him steadily. He clipped, "You're the guy that hung that 'Philadelphia ball-

player' tag on me, Jim, before you quit writing and took up nighting for a living."

"Tippee, don't you dare say anything mean to—"

French put a pudgy hand on the girl's bare shoulder. He pressed his fingers gently into her flesh. "Easy, Babs. Tip and I are good pals. Sorry about that tag, Tip. I see you haven't been able to live it down."

Tip half rose from his chair, then sank back. "I ought to kick your teeth down your throat, French, but it wouldn't mean anything. Nothing seems to mean anything to mean any more."

Babs pouted. "Me too, Tippee?"

Jim French took out his wallet and thumbed through a sheaf of bills. "Here's two hundred, Tip. Take Babs out and show her a good time. You worked hard today. You need some fun."

"Thanks, but—"

"Tippee! Thank Jim and get our things."

"I won't owe anybody any money."

Jim French laughed, "Come September, you'll be rolling in dough. The Herd's in second place now, but they got young players. They'll cop the pennant. Your share'll be about four, five grand . . . tell you what . . ."

Tip snarled, "I'll tell you what, French. I don't give a hang who wins the pennant, I don't take money from anybody! Babs you get your wrap and meet me in the foyer. We're going!"

Babs squirmed uneasily. Her blue eyes went from Jim to Tip and back again. She pouted, "I want to go to the Casa Noir, Tippee."

"Then go ahead!" Tip exploded, and stalked away.

As he slammed his way between tables, jaw muscles working in fury, her caught a glimpse of a girl with long blond hair and soft brown eyes staring at him from the dance floor. When he looked again, the girl was hidden by the other dancers.

TIP PEERED at his infielders between the parallel bars of his mask. They were alert, eager. His fingers signalled from under the big

Wilson mitt. Tip came from his squat, stood with the mitt held forward.

The ball swept from Tubby Dangerfield's right hand, curved in and across the plate and boomed into the hollow of the Wilson.

"Steeriiiike threeeee!" bellowed the umpire in Tip's ear.

The stands erupted with noise. A strikeout in the top of the sixth, bases loaded and only one out. The Goon batter turned away silently and stalked toward the visitor's dugout.

Fat Frankie Parks, the Goon clean-up man, tapped the end of his bat on the plate. He grinned at Tip, "Here's where I put a nick in that left field fence, an' break up this scoreless tie!"

"You couldn't put a dent in a piece of tin with the lumber," Tip chuckled.

Parks liked low fast ones. Tip signaled for a floater. When it came looping in, Tip could almost count the stitches. Fat Frankie took a toe-hold, swung under it and skied it above the plate.

Tip thumbed his mask up and away from his head, eyes glued to the faint white speck far up in the air. He took two steps, then another. The wind was blowing in from centerfield and the ball danced on its way down. At the last instant it swayed to the right, but Tip's mitt and hand went out and smothered it.

Tip chattered as he ran toward the dugout, "Le's get some runs. Can't let that Goon rookie shut us out. Le's go!"

He slid his eyes sideways into the stands, where Chris was crumpling her scorecard in nervous fingers. She smiled faintly when she caught his eyes on her. Tip wanted to ask her if she had been at the Bubble Klub last night, and with what man. He wondered a little at the faint unrest in his chest at the idea of Chris with somebody's arm around her, even in a dance.

Tip elbowed Rick Norman away from the wood pile. He lifted his long black bat and shook it. He told the big center-fielder, "You get on

an' I'll bring you home."

Norman grinned amusedly. "What's eatin' you, Rankin?"

"I want to get this game over fast. I got a date."

Norman walked on four pitches. Tip brought his black bat to the box and waggled it. The rookie moundsman of the Goons had been throwing easy stuff, but Tip had noticed that after he tried a sidearm slowball, he rocketted the ball down the middle so fast it smoked.

Tip waited for the sidearm slow. It came when the count was two and one. Tip let it go by, then set himself.

The ball was like a pea coming in to the plate, but Tip brought his stick around fast and hard. He got hold of the ball and drove it high into deep right center. It came up and up, on a line. As Tip was halfway between first and second, it bounced on the roof of a garage on the other side of Bemley Avenue for a home run.

Norman waited for him at the plate, hand extended. The big man grinned, "You keep that stickin' up an' you maybe you got a steady job, Tip."

THE GAME ended, two to nothing. Tip was the first man under showers, and the first one fully dressed. He headed for the door when Drewson got in his way.

"You been reading the Sporting News, Tip?"

Tip halted, surprised. "Er—no. Should I?"

"Keeps you up on the game. Tells you the battin' averages of the minor leaguers. Like Kessler, that third baseman the Herd wants. He's clubbin' three-five-0. Manders tells me his leg's okay, too."

Tip muttered, "I guess I forgot about him. When do I start packin'?"

Drewson eyed him speculatively. "Don't mean anything more to you than a train trip, does it?"

"What you guys want me to do, drop dead because I got Herd lettered across my shirtfront?"

"If that's the way you want it, I'll

have the front office make out your pink slip."

Tip thrust his way past his manager and opened the door.

Chris was waiting on the sidewalk for him. She wore a white sharkskin dress with a broad blue leather belt clasped tightly around her waist. Her legs were tanned and shapely above her high-heeled white shoes.

"It was swell of you to meet me today," Tip began.

"The usher gave me your note. What's on your mind, Tip?"

They walked along the sidewalk, through the milling crowd pouring from the green exit gates of the ball park. Tip murmured, "I've been seven kinds of a dope, Chris. Like last night at the Bubble Klub. You were there."

"Yes," the girl said quietly. "I was there."

"About Babs Cottom. I mean—well, we kind of busted up last night. She gave me back my ring, and—I wanted to tell you. That's why I—asked you to meet me. I'd like to see you, if you . . ." his words trailed off before the girl's quiet aloofness.

"I think you should know something, Tip. When you first came up to the Herd, I didn't believe all the things Daddy and the other players said about you. That you were good only when there wasn't anything depending on your play. That when the chips were down, when you had to face good hurling all the time, as a pennant contender does, that—that you curled up and died."

"Yeah, that's what they were saying," Tip said slowly.

"I didn't believe it then. I do believe it now. I—I wouldn't want to find myself—caring a lot about—a fellow who didn't care about his own team."

"For Pete's sake!" Tip burst out. "What does a guy have to do to convince people that he wants his team to win? I hit a homer today that won the game. So I've made bonehead plays. Everybody does, once in a while—"

Chris came to a stop and faced him. Her brown eyes were serious.

"Tip, if ever it does hit you, you'll know. You'll realize you've been a dummy up until it happens. It's like a fever inside you. It burns you up and it makes you go all-out all the time. It's the way a team or a man just won't be beaten."

Tip smiled grimly. "Drewson said he was handing me the pink slip. He'll be shipping me off for Kessler tomorrow or the next day. But I wish—I wish I could get to know what it is you're talking about before I go."

The girl cocked her head sideways. "Do you really want to find out, Tip?"

"You bet I do!"

.. Christ turned on her heel and beckoned him with a finger. "Come on with me. I have some friends I want you to meet."

THEY WALKED three blocks before they came to the row of brownstone front houses facing the big dust-covered parade grounds. A gang of boys, in patched pants and bare-headed, were throwing a taped baseball and hitting it with a broken, taped-up bat.

"Hi, boys!" Chris called, waving.

"Geest, fellas! It's Miss Farrel."

"Hiya, Miss Farrel."

"How'd da Herd do today?"

Chris smiled and turned to Tip.

"Boys, I'd like you to meet Tip Rankin. He's the catch—"

"Sure, we know Tip. Hiya, Tip. My old man says ya got it in ya to be twicet as good as Hank Phelps."

Tip smiled, "He said that, did he? Is your dad an old ballplayer?"

"Naw. He jest goes ot ta Herd Park an' watches. But it's like he owned da team. All da folks round town feels dat way. Ya see, da Herds ain't just a bunch o' guys ta us. Dey're part a us. Ain't they, Fellas?"

Heads nodded. Bright little eyes peered up at Tip. Smiles that were shy friendliness hovered on their lips. Tip began to wonder. He said, "What's your honest opinion of—of me, fellas?"

"My brother says you'll do all right—once you get some confidence."

"Confidence?"

"Awww, what Rata means is, oncet

ya faget what they used ta call ya and play da way ya really can play. Ya ain't no Philly ballplayer, but ya ain't wised up to it yet. Once ya do, ya'll go great."

A freckle-faced boy grinned. "The Herd needs you, Tip. Hank Phelps is gettin' old. My pop says that since you've come to the Herd, your battin' average has upped ten points. He says you're on your toes, that you study the other guy and use the knowledge."

"The Herd's a great team," said a towhead. "They saved my uncle's life once. The doc said my uncle was so interested in knowin' whether the Herd would wind up in the first division he just refused to die until after the season—an' while he kept on livin', he got well!"

Chris and the boys laughed, but Tip whispered, ". . .while he kept on livin', he got well!"

∩ 4 ∩

TIP RANKIN moved his black bat menacingly, up at the plate. It was late August, and the Herd was one game out of first place. The Bird pitcher took his time, walking around the mound, toying with the resin bag. Behind him, Tip could hear the fans' excited roaring as the tension of the scoreless tie tightened their nerves.

Mingled with the yells, Tip made out the shrillings of the parade ground gang seated in the box with Chris. He had paid for their tickets for all the home games. They looked on him as their special hero.

You can't let 'em down, Tip whispered to himself. *Those kids are part of what's behind the Herd spirit. You got to win, for them and for those other people in back of you. This isn't just a job anymore.*

The Bird pitcher came down with his right arm. The ball was a streak of whiteness blurring in the sunshine. Tip swung. His muscles bunched and writhed as he brought his bat about.

His hands tingled as the bat met

the ball and sent it deep to the outfield. Tip ran with both legs churning. He rounded first, saw the ball caroming off the right field wall. He kept going as the horsehide rebounded over the Bird outfielder's glove. He went around second.

The third sacker had his hands out for the ball as Tip went sliding into him. The ball shot through his hands when Tip legged him sideways into the dirt.

The coach yelled, "Get up! Get up!"

Tip streaked for the plate, left his feet ten feet away and cannoned in, sending the catcher flying as he side-swiped the plate with an outstretched foot.

The Bird backstop came for him with hamlike fists. Big Rick Norman was ahead of him, took a swing on his chest that would have landed on Tip's nose.

Tip bellowed, "I'll handle—" when the umpire thrust his big bulk between them, thumbing the Bird catcher out of the game.

Chris was standing with the kids as he came toward the dugout. The wide eyes of the youngsters made Tip grin to hide the warm, excited feeling inside of him. This was all-out baseball. This was wanting to win, needing to win to hold your head your head up. Fighting, clawing, battling for every last chance. Never giving up . . .

"Oh you Terrible Tip!" some fan bellowed.

Drewson nodded as Tip dropped down beside him. The manager whispered, "You've caught on!"

Those words were like an accolade to Tip. They brought back the day after he'd met the parade ground kids, when he'd begged Drewson for one more chance, when he said he'd go out and break a leg if it would help the Herd. Drewson had regarded him with those black eyes for a long time, then nodded curtly.

Tip roared, "This is jes' the beginnin'! Le's hammer that prayer-ball pitcher out there!"

The Herd batters caught fire. They drove in three more tallies on a walk, two singles and a base-clean-

ing double, to make it a four-run inning.

Tip held up his pitcher for the rest of the game, coaxing and bullying him until the hurler had a 4-0 shut-out in his hip pocket. Tip took the last pitch for a third strike, wheeled and ran for the dugout.

TIP NOTICED that Chick Drewson and Flannel-mouth Farrel were not on the bench as he ducked down under the dugout roof. He forgot about that as the grinning, confident Herdsmen trooped in beside him along the tunnel.

The team dressed with backslaps and catcalls interrupting each move. The showers vibrated with off-key songs. Bottles of ice-cold pop went the rounds. Tip smiled happily. He was one of the gang, now. He was Terrible Tip Rankin, the Herd Horror.

Funny, he thought, sliding his pads off his thighs. Nothing startling happened to change me. Except Chris. She opened my eyes to what I'd been, and to what I could be. Chris and the parade ground gang. When you know somebody's rooting hard for you, when you know somebody cares, then you care, too. You just don't let anybody like that down. It's not playing over your head. It's just—playing all-out to win!"

Chick Drewson came to the dressing room door. His face was white and pinched. He licked his lips with a tongue. He whispered to Tip, "When you're dressed, come to my office. I'll give you your release."

Big Rick Norman said quietly, "What gives, Chick?"

Drewson looked sick. "It isn't for publication, Rick. I think it'd be better just to say—we don't need Rankin any more."

"But we do need him!" the center-fielder cried. "You know he's been sparklin' the team durin' August. We lose him, we lose the pennant!"

"Maybe we'd lose it anyhow," said Drewson coldly. He turned and went out the door.

Tip shrugged big shoulders as the players crowded around him with explosive questions. "Don't know any

more about it than you do, but I sure am goin' to find out!"

In his shirt, without a tie, Tip flung himself into the manager's office. He came to a skidding halt when he saw Jim French and Babs Cottom in the brown leather easychairs. Drewson, behind his desk, eyed him glumly.

Babs said, "I was just telling your manager he'd better not put too much trust in you, Tippee."

"You, huh? I should've guessed. What cooks?"

Drewson snarled, "Did you tell French in Miss Cottom's presence, that you didn't care who won the pennant?"

"What? I never—"

"Remember, Tippee?" carolled the redhead. "When Jim told you how much money you'd make when the Herd did win the pennant?"

"But—that is—I didn't mean it like it sounds. I—"

Drewson got to his feet. He looked haggard. "Rankin, you've been trouble to me all during the season. I strung along with you at first because I had to. Then Farrel and I felt there might be some good stuff in you. Now comes this. Maybe it doesn't sound like much, but a ballplayer on a team in the thick of the pennant fight sayin' publicly he doesn't care who wins—! I don't know why you've been playin' your heart out lately. Maybe so you can set the Herd up for some sort of crooked killing. I—"

Tip went white. He whispered, "If you were a little younger, I'd ram those words down your throat, along with your front teeth!"

The door opened. Flannel-mouth Farrel stuck his head in, but a red-cheeked Christine pushed him aside and skirt-swirled into the room.

Drewson came to his feet. "This isn't any place for you, Christine."

"Indeed it is, if it concerns Tip Rankin! Daddy told me what that—that woman's been saying about Tip, and I want to know the facts. Tip said he didn't care who won the pennant, yes—but only because Jim French offered him money to hit the high spots, and Tip wouldn't take it. French said Tip could borrow money

from him because he'd make plenty when the Herd won the pennant. That's when Tip said what he did. I was there. I heard the whole thing!"

Chris drew a deep breath and went on, "Do you know she was engaged to Tip and that Tip broke the engagement? Remember the old saying about a woman scorned? Do you know Tip's been spending his spare time with the parade ground teams, coaching them? Do you know he's discovered two prospects there who've been sent to the Herd's Class D farms."

"I didn't know that." Drewson spoke through the silence in the room. He glanced at Babs Cottom. He said, "But I'll have to let Tip go, anyhow. I can't afford to take chances!"

Babs Cottom's face lit up with a sunny smile. She did not see the scowl gather on Drewson's face as he understood the triumph behind the smile. She turned to Tip and said, "Maybe that will teach you to break engagements with me, Tip Rankin!"

She bent and lifted her silver fox furs and tossed them about her shoulders. "Come along, Jimmee!"

Tip watched them leave with a leaden lump under his ribs. He smiled grimly at Chris, "Thanks for everything, Chris. I've been nothing but a nuisance. . . ."

Chris was not looking at him. She was looking straight ahead, at Chick Drewson who was coming around the edge of his desk and walking toward Tip. He came to a stop and scowled.

"Tip, I'm going to forget what that girl said. I got to! Hank's hand is still bothering him — Oh, hell! I guess what I'm tryin' to say is—the Herd needs you! If I let you go, the boys would go into a tailspin that—well, we stand or fall together, Tip. If you flop remember—the Herd will flop with you!"

TIP TOOK the pitchout in the hollow of his mitt and rifled the ball down to second. The Bird runner was five steps from the bag, but the throw was on a clothesline into the second baseman's glove, and the runner made the third out of the ninth inning.

"One run behind," Tip chirped, tossing his mask aside as he went for the dugout. "Le's get it and one more."

He grabbed Pinky Morton, the number three Herd batter as he was lifting three bats. "We got to get this one, Pinky! Only two more games—both with the Goons! This one puts us three out in front of the Birds. We got to make it! You get on. We'll get you in!"

Pinky tried. He drove a ball deep into center, but the Bird fielder took it in a running stride. The Bird player threw his hand up, knocking his sun-glasses up on his cap-peak before he threw in. Tip watched him, wondering. The Bird always made that gesture. It was habit with him. If Tip got the chance—

Rick Norman was at the plate, feet close together, moving his bat back and forth. He stepped into the first pitch and powdered it cleanly through the middle for a single.

Tip tossed his extra bats aside. He dimly heard the yelling of the stands, the shrill screaming of the parade ground gang. He eyed the Bird Hurler, brought his bat down and back.

He picked out a fast ball and hammered it high and far. Rick Norman had to hold up to be sure the drive would not be caught, but when the ball hit the concrete wall and rebounded into the field, Rick turned on steam and scored by a twisting slide around the Bird receiver. The score was tied.

Tip went into second on the hit. He was the winning run, if he could get it around. He stepped off the bag. If the Herd won this game, it would be the pennant, with a three game lead and only two games left to play. Tip led down off the bag. Barney Trent, a right-handed batter, was at the plate.

The Bird pitcher wound up. He threw, and Tip broke for third. He

went into the bag in a cloud of dust, and the spikes of his shoe bit the bag an instant before the ball dug into his ribs in the hand of the Bird third sacker. Tip grinned and got to his feet. Brushing dirt from his uniform, he stood on the bag. The Bird catcher had had to step around the right-hand hitting Trent to throw to third. That one extra step made the difference in the stolen bases.

Tip came up the baseline, crouched over. He heard Flannel-mouth yelp from the third base coaching box, "Easy there, Tip. You're the run that makes the difference."

The Bird pitcher came in with a fast ball. Trent swung and lifted to short center. It was a sure putout, too close to the infield to tag up and score.

"Hold the bag," chirped Farrel. "He'll cut you down if you try to go in!"

The ball thudded into the infielder's glove. The Bird player put a hand up to his sun-glasses—

Tip broke for home. He ran with his big body leaning forward. That move of the Bird fielder's hand to his glasses was the split-second that he needed.

The ball came in as Tip hit the dirt of the baseline. He went across the plate with all the fury of his hundred and eighty pounds.

"Saaaafe!" bellowed the umpire.

Tip got up out of the dust cloud and headed for the box behind the Herd dugout. Chris was waiting for him with her arms stretched out. Tip ignored the parade ground kids all around them and lifted her up and put his mouth on hers.

"Whew!" whistled one of the spectators. "That Tip Rankin ain't no Philly ballplayer in that league, either!"

THE END





Paine was fouling
Ted continually.

Mallet Mix-Up

By M. M. TINNEY

They were the laughing-stock of the campus, the secret-order Nighthawks, the place of scrub players. Then Ted Harlin shoved down to what was considered their level, found . . .

UP AND DOWN Burrows Field, to the music of thundering hooves, the willow ball was taking a beating from the mallet swingers. On the sidelines, looking on with casual interest, a handful of Weston College's wealthier undergraduates watched the progress of the scrimmage. They saw tall, wiry

Ted Harlin swing his pony clear of the pack, stretch high in the saddle, and with a long sweep of the mallet pour the ball through the uprights.

Most of Weston's students were scions of the country's richest families. And the majority of the remainder were crack athletes who had struck a bargain, exchanging athletic skill for a college education.

Ted belonged to this latter category, and he learned early what he was up against at Weston. For two years he had struggled unavailingly to grab a starting berth on the polo four. Often he thought bitterly that it wasn't lack of ability that made his endeavors futile. Polo was the big thing at Weston, and the upper-crusters under the dominance of Byron Paine, were banded together into a tight little clique that seemed determined to keep the polo team wrapped up for itself.

The practice tilt went on, the two squads getting set for the throw-in. The Blues were the varsity aggregation. They were getting a run for their money from the Whites, being pressed hard, largely through the dashing, daring efforts of Ted Harlin. Ted was riding in the number 2 slot.

The Weston captain and number 1, Byron Paine, sent a backhand skittering across the grass. Ted Harlin spun his pony around and rode fiercely after the ball. One of the Blues pounded after him, riding hard. Ted glimpsed Byron Paine slicing toward him, approaching at a dangerous angle.

Ted high in his stirrups, prepared to drive the ball to a White in the clear. Then suddenly, as Paine's chestnut pony veered into his mount, Ted let his mallet drop and he did not make the shot. To the spectators it might have appeared like a slick bit of horsemanship by Paine, but Ted knew he hadn't been ridden out cleanly but had been deliberately fouled.

Paine repeated the stunt twice in the same chukker, taking delight in riding Ted out of the play whenever the opportunity offered. But Ted, playing the number 2 post which gave him no chance to let up, stayed right

in there. He rode with a daring expertness, and seemed to relish being in the thick of the struggle.

Paine broke away and slammed his fourth goal of the session through the uprights. On the following throw-in, Ted got control of the pill and fired a neat pass to a teammate. Then he was off for the Blue goal, playing for a return pass. The goal yawned wide before him, but Ted never got a chance to drive the pellet home. Instead, Jeff Barker, the White number 1, elected to pass off to another man.

SITTING in the stands, shading his keen, shrewd eyes from the sun as he watched the game, was a spare, gray man. He was Sandy Emerson, and from time to time as he drank in the details of the action, he would purse his lips and nod his head knowingly.

Sandy Emerson, trainer of the Paine stable, took more than a passing interest in Ted Harlin. It was he who had sensed the inherent horsemanship in Ted when as a mere lad Ted had worked as a stable boy at the Paine stable, which included many famous racing thoroughbreds. Sandy, an eight goal player in his day, had taught the youngster the fundamentals of the game at the same time as he was teaching Byron Paine. And though the spoiled, over-indulged Byron Paine had done everything he could to make it tough for Ted, Ted had taken everything with a grin and gone right on learning his lesson well.

That was a thing Sandy liked about Ted, the resilient, bouncing, indestructible quality. Ted wasn't getting a break—Paine saw to that, aided and abetted by his wealthy teammates—but he stubbornly refused Sandy's every offer of assistance. Ted was determined to make it or break it strictly on his own.

Between chukkers Ted approached Byron Paine and said, "I'll bet your riding looks great from the stands, but you know you'll never get away with that stuff in a game. Those fouls were deliberate."

Byron Paine's eyes narrowed and his lips moved in cynical enjoyment. "Really," he said. Then, and there was an arrogant patronizing quality in his voice, "Perhaps it would be better for you if you found some other sport. Football, maybe. Something like that, where the fellows would be more your type."

Ted looked around at the circle of unsmiling, unfriendly faces. They were all thinking the same thing, and their hostility broke through. They were waiting for this opportunity.

Ted tightened a notch on his inner resolve. He would never allow them the satisfaction of revealing he was hurt. He would never show them that anything they said or did could hurt him.

There was that face-filling grin, and slow, easy words for answer. "Football? There's nothing wrong with football, but polo's always been my game. I like polo and I intend to keep right on playing it, no matter what."

"Suit yourself," said Paine. "But don't ever say we didn't give you some good advice."

In the ensuing practice chukkers it seemed to Ted that more than ever they were conspiring against him, Blues and Whites alike. Playing his heart out, following the ball like a bloodhound on the trail, he maneuvered his way into the clear repeatedly, and just as often his teammates snubbed him.

When a halt was called for the day, Ted walked over to the paddock on his way from the field. Sandy Emerson was there, checking over some ponies brought from the Paine stable for Byron.

"Good afternoon, Ted," Sandy greeted him. "How's it coming?"

"It is," said Ted glumly, "not coming. It is standing still."

"He's making progress," a voice said. It was Byron Paine speaking, and he seemed about to erupt into dirty, gloating laughter. "That is, he's doing great with the Nighthawk gang. They're after him for membership. Hasn't he told you?"

Ted flushed. There was no smile

on his face, only a stare that he turned on Byron Paine.

"Don't be bashful," Paine went on. "Tell him about it."

Ted's stomach dropped sickeningly. He'd been hearing reports. To be chosen by the Nighthawks would be the last straw in the way of insults. To be a Nighthawk was to be considered the lowest form of scrub, one who could never make a varsity squad, one who was hopelessly inept.

THERE WAS a definite aura of mystery about the Nighthawks. No one knew much about them. It was generally agreed that they were the oldest organized society on the campus. It was known that they were the only club that did not set up restrictions based on wealth, class, religion and ancestry. The richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor mingled on terms of strict equality. But though they were congenial, easy-going lot, they were tongue-tied about the club's activities, and authentic information on the club's real aims and purposes never got around the campus.

Like every mystery, there were those who could never rest for their attempts to pry loose the secret. The big fraternities had tried for years to unmask the Nighthawks but had been baffled, largely because there was no entering wedge. The Nighthawks gave no parties or dances, exacted no fees or dues. And the time of each meeting at their clubhouse was a secret known only to its members and well-guarded by them.

It didn't look like an appealing set-up, and it was easy to understand why not even the lowliest scrub wanted any part of it. That is, until for some reason or other he succumbed. Once elected, even though election invariably meant being made the target of rudeness and laughter, no one had been known to quit.

Sandy Emerson was acquainted with the facts. He understood Ted's distress immediately. He said:

"It's not news to me, Ted. Don't let it get you down."

Ted turned a look of thanks at the

trainer, but his fists were clenching and unclenching as he watched Byron Paine climb into his car and drive off, howling with laughter.

"I don't know why I didn't slug him one," said Tip.

"And get yourself bounced out of that summer job at the stable?"

"That's something I didn't think of. Jobs are hard to get, and if it weren't for working summers I'd never be able to afford to go to college."

"Let it ride, Ted," said Sandy. "Pretty soon you won't be having to work for old man Paine."

That evening things came to a head. Ted was bent over the long table he used for a desk, trying to master a complicated problem in chemistry. It was slow tedious going, and every time he thought he had it licked polo would spring into his mind and he would find his thoughts wandering off at a tangent.

He boarded at a rooming house owned by a pleasant old woman the boys called Little Helen. The fellows who roomed at her place, several blocks from the campus, looked upon her as more than just a landlady. She helped them in a lot of little ways. Among them, whenever she suspected a boarder might be having trouble making ends meet she was never in a hurry to collect her rent.

Ted was just about ready to give up on chemistry for the night when he heard voices drifting up from downstairs. Someone was talking softly to Little Helen.

Presently he heard Little Helen say, "He's upstairs in his room."

Then there were footsteps coming up the stairs. The Nighthawks, Ted thought, a sudden sinking sensation running through him. A knock on his door. A powerful desire to flee, to escape from this humiliation, possessed him. Then the knock was repeated. Ted moved on straw legs to the door, opened it slowly.

He stood facing Barry Marlow, head man of the Nighthawks.

Marlow was a stocky, red-faced chap, with a built-in smile. For three years he had taken a buffeting as a football squad scrub without once be-

ing heard to utter a word of complaint. When they taunted him his only answer was a smile. He was smiling now as he read the look of near consternation on Ted's face.

"Don't like to butt in, chum, but I'll make it short and sweet. The Nighthawks have nominated you for membership."

"That's short," Ted replied, "but not sweet enough. Thanks all the same, but the Nighthawks will have to get along without me."

Ted leaned forward in a semi-belligerent attitude, as if he expected a tongue-lashing to be socked at him. Nothing of the sort happened. Marlow just grinned that infectious grin of his. Ted could not help but like the fellow right off..

"We're in no hurry for your answer. Let it simmer for awhile. Till after Saturday's polo match."

SATURDAY AFTERNOON rolled around. It was a fine, sunshine-filled day, and the Weston stands were packed with the turn-out of polo fans. Long lines of parked cars outside the field were evidence of the fever pitch interest in the match.

This wasn't a regular championship clash, but was the eagerly awaited varsity-alumni clash. Every year the varsity used this contest as a final tune-up for the regular competition. But to the spectators it afforded an opportunity to gauge the varsity's chances, for against the alumni they found themselves opposing some of the game's greatest players. Weston had launched many an international mallet swinger on the road to glory. Harry Greathouse, rated at nine goals, and a veteran of many classic international struggles was on hand to lead the alumni. And there were others almost as famous.

The consensus of opinion was that Weston rated little chance of outscoring this array of stars, but would profit immeasurably from the experience. To add interest to the match, the varsity was conceded a generous handicap.

From his vantage point on the side-

lines Ted Harlin watched the famous visitors going through their warm-up paces, banging long drives up and down the field with that effortless ease that is the mark of the champ.

Harold Greathouse was acting as captain of the alumni. He rode over to Byron Paine, who had been given complete charge of the Weston team in the absence of Larry Doll, the elderly coach who was convalescing from a stubborn siege of illness.

The pair were so near Ted that Ted could overhear Harry Greathouse saying: "We're a man short. Our plans went haywire at the last moment. Ovenshine and Leeds are on the west coast, and now I just got a telegram from Pritchard. His car broke down and he won't be able to get here on time. Maybe you can use one of your substitutes to fill in."

"Certainly," said Byron Paine. Anxious to get the match started, he waved to Ted, who happened to be the nearest to him of the Weston players.

"Harlin," he barked, "the alumni need another man. Get out there and play with them—as well as you're able." There was heavy sarcasm in his voice, intended for and not wasted on Harry Greathouse.

"I'll be glad to," Ted said.

Paine's lips started to frame some reply but he was cut short by Greathouse saying, "Glad to know you, Harlin. Do your best and we're with you all the way." There was a warmth in his voice that put Ted at his ease.

But when Ted saw the ponies that Paine as captain had assigned to him he set his jaw grimly. Speed certainly wasn't their strong point. Ted knew his ponies, and he knew these were old-timers; steady enough but not owning the speed his Cossack, hard-driving brand of play demanded. As always, Paine was stacking the cards against him.

From the beginning play was fast and furious. The riders raced after the throw-in, and it was Greathouse who captured the willow. Greathouse stroked a perfect pass to Ted. Ted urged his plodding mount frantically, but there wasn't enough pony to

catch up with the pass and Ted lost control of the ball.

Byron Paine galloped in from the side, bullied Ted roughly out of contention. Paine's mallet swung, met the willow cleanly and sharply. The ball sped straight and true on the long drive, splitting the uprights.

A ripple of applause swept the stands. These spectators were polo enthusiasts and they appreciated that shot. But applause wasn't all that came from the spectators. Somebody yelled:

"Look at that Harlin go. Best man the varsity's got."

TED LOOKED glumly at his teammates. The remark had been shouted so loud that they couldn't have helped hearing. Ted expected them to instruct him on how to play that number 2 slot. Instead Greathouse came over to Ted and said:

"Don't let it worry you. The game's young. Stay with it and give it your best."

Greathouse was at his superb peak, and Ford and Wilson were playing brilliant polo. Nevertheless they were hampered in their team play by Ted Harlin because Ted's mount could not be prodded into flashing heyday speed. Soon, however, the alumni's sparkling play began to make itself felt, and at the completion of four chukkers they had knotted the count at seven goals each, allowing for the handicap.

The ball was tossed in to start the fifth chukker. Ted swung his horse around, worked the ball into position. Greathouse tore along the sideline stripe, playing for a fast, straight pass. Then Byron Paine, atop a swift black gelding, came sweeping across the turf, crowding Ted.

Side by side, like a team, they rode, Ted bending far over his mount's side, urging the pellet on with short, sharp strokes. It was a race, shoulder to shoulder, a contest of man against man and beast against beast. Then Paine piled his mount hard into Ted's.

A gasp escaped the crowd, followed by a sigh of relief as Ted yanked on

the reins of his horse. Only this action prevented him from taking a nasty spill. But he lost possession of the ball to Paine, and Paine, maneuvering skillfully, worked the ball into gay dirt. But Greathouse, anticipating the play's development, had whirled his pony around. In a dazzling burst of speed he snatched the ball away from Paine and while moving at top speed cracked a stinging pass to Ted. Ted drove it through for a tally.

Players rode to the barrier for fresh horses at the end of the chukker. Ted looked at the slow mount that was waiting for him. It was one even less speedy than the mount he had been riding.

"You're not doing bad at all—for a sub," Paine addressed him sarcastically. Paine looked significantly at Greathouse for appreciation of his witticism. Greathouse's face revealed nothing of what he was thinking.

"I could do a lot better," said Ted, "if I had a polo pony under me instead of a plowhorse."

Paine snickered. "So you think that would make a difference; I have my doubts."

Greathouse said, "Let's give it a chance. Pick out one of my spares, Ted."

Feeling grateful, Ted looked them over and selected a bay mare.

It turned out to be a wise choice. It was a great mount, and in the following chukkers, Ted fitted into the play of the alumni as if he'd been working with them for years. The final chukker especially was a spectacle, with Ted riding rings around Byron Paine. He made it plain that in the earlier chukkers it had been the leftover from the pony express that had been nailing him to the turf.

The Alumni bagged the match, 18-8. When it was over Byron Paine lost no time getting to Ted and making his outspoken remarks.

"You'd better start looking for a job for the summer," Paine bellowed. "You won't be working at my father's stable any more."

Tip fixed a cool, slow, steely gaze on Byron Paine.

"That suits me fine," he said. "If

you want it that way."

Paine stormed off. His laugh was a triumphant one, yet tinged with a note of sourness.

The shadows of dusk were falling over the campus. A mild, delightfully cool breeze was stirring. Ted, worn out by his strenuous exertions, moved slowly along the tree-lined walks and almost empty streets. Now and again he would stop to kick angrily at a stick that lay in his path.

THROUGH his mind ran a confusion of thoughts about the Nighthawks. Their offer to him was disturbing. Nighthawk was a label branding the wearer of it scrub. Yet in his mind he ran over some of the strange and in some ways attractive legends that circulated about the Nighthawks. Ted, in common with the great majority of Weston's students with empty pockets, did not belong to any fraternity for the simple reason that he had never received a bid.

He wondered what it would be like, and he remembered that he was supposed to give them his decision today. And before he knew it he found that his wandering steps were not taking him home to the boarding house but were carrying him in the direction of the building that housed the Nighthawks. Now's the time, he told himself. While I'm here I might as well turn them down and make it a clean break.

The Nighthawk's nest was a small, attractive, two-storey brick cottage tucked quietly away in a grove of trees in a corner of the campus. As Ted approached he could see the warm yellow light streaming through the open windows, and hear the sound of the jolly laughter that was ringing within. That made Ted's pounding heart beat a little faster.

The door was open and Ted walked right in. There was so much noise there that no one would have been able to hear a knock. The room was full. It looked as if all the athletic teams were gathered in the small, friendly room.

But Barry Marlow spotted Ted standing in the doorway and hurried

over to pat him on the back and shake his hand warmly. He was about to introduce Ted to some of the Nighthawks when Ted said:

"Don't jump to conclusions. I just came to give you my decision—"

"No hurry," broke in Marlow in a genial tone. "That can wait awhile. Right now, though, there's something I'd like you to look over. I'm sure you'll agree with me that it's quite a good deal out of the ordinary."

"No harm in it," Ted said. He followed Marlow through the room and up a flight of stairs. They entered a large room, passed through it into a smaller one. Running around the walls were showcases stacked with precious trophies. Tables took care of the overflow. The entire place was spotlessly clean. One wall was bare of showcases, and Ted's eyes finally came to rest on this.

Ted saw at a glance why this wall was not lined with showcases. There was a tremendous oil-painting of a figure in old-fashioned football togs. Ted recognized the figure instantly.

"Taffy Hamilton!" he exclaimed. Taffy Hamilton, titan among titans of Weston's legendary athletic heroes. They still told and retold stories of how Taffy Hamilton in his last year at Weston had shattered all records. He had won six major letters and had been prevented from winning more only because as one man he found it impossible to get around to all the sports in the same season. He had gained immortality by being picked on Walter Camp's All-American team.

"None other," said the Nighthawk president, his soft chuckle taking off into a big grin. "The best athlete who ever wore a Weston uniform."

"I don't get the set-up," said Ted, puzzled. "What's Taffy Hamilton got to do with the Nighthawks?"

"Without Taffy Hamilton there never would have been a Nighthawk society. He was a scrub for two years and just couldn't seem to get going. When he did, there was no stopping him."

"I didn't dream he founded the Nighthawks," said Ted.

"That's one of the things we don't go jabbering about. We haven't had an athlete like him since he founded the club. It's been a lot of years, and it's kinda been forgotten that Taffy Hamilton was a Nighthawk. Naturally, the frats wouldn't be keen on advertising that he was a lowly Nighthawk."

Marlow grinned, then went on, "And we have our own reasons for not advertising the fact just yet. We've been waiting all these years till we got something real to crow about. We've been holding out till one of our guys makes a varsity team. Maybe this year, maybe next year, maybe never."

SUDDENLY some of the mystery dropped away from the Nighthawks. It came to Ted that the Nighthawks were able to absorb the insults and laugh off the taunts thrown at them because they never forgot what their aim really was. And Ted knew it was a mighty fine target they had set their sights on.

Ted was suddenly smiling. "I think I've sorta changed my mind," he said. "Does that offer still hold?"

"It certainly does," said Marlow offering his hand. "As of now, you're a Nighthawk."

Weston struggled through the practice sessions on up to the launching of the regular season without their veteran coach, Marshall Doll. Then word was received that because illness had permanently impaired his health, Marshall Doll was retiring. No replacement was available. Byron Paine was left, temporarily at the helm.

The season began as if Weston would run through all opposition with ridiculous ease. A highly-touted Crestwood four came riding into Weston with hopes high and left smarting under a smashing 16-5 defeat. It was a team triumph, a victory earned by four men playing with finesse and silk smooth teamwork. They reeled off three more victories, but each was a little more hard won than the one before. Byron Paine was inaugurating new tactics, working up

special plays all revolving about him in the glory-grabbing, goals-coring spot.

Patton U. broke the winning streak. Two more defeats followed, and the rosy beginning faded to a dismal prospect. Soon the intercollegiate championships were coming up, and jit looked as if Weston's unbroken skein of triumphs was due to end.

Byron Paine refused to see the light, saying his system was best suited to the erpsonnel and would start clicking when the chips were down.

One day Paine said point blank, "Why don't you get wise to yourself, Nighthawk? Can't you see you're not wanted around here. Quit the team."

Ted's answer was a grin. "I don't mind, and we Nighthawks are kinda dense about some things. This is one of 'em. You'll just have to get used to having me around."

When Ted informed Barry Marlow of the incident Marlow laughed and said: "A Nighthawk can't quit and still stay a Nighthawk. Besides, we manage to get inside stuff once in a while, and there's a special reason for you to hang on. Paine is getting worried. The boys are getting fed up with him and his tactics and the way he keeps going out of his way to make it tough for you. The time may be coming close when he'll be forced to use you and he doesn't like the idea one bit."

A few days later a special meeting of the Nighthawks was called. Barry Marlow presided. And Ted noted that for once there was nothing carefree or jovial in the demeanous of the Nighthawk president.

"Every semester we are faced with a problem," Marlow stated. "We select the one of us whom we think has the stuff to make a varsity team. This man's task is to redouble his efforts, to fight just a little harder no matter how hard he has been trying to win that berth."

Ted felt himself go tense, and sensed that the others were reacting in the same way.

"Remember now," Marlow's clear voice boomed, "we have no cliques in the Nighthawks. The man we vote for is the man we honestly believe

has the best chance to make the varsity grade. Once we pick our man, we all get behind him with all the support we can muster."

BALLOTS were then distributed, and each man wrote in his choice. As the ballots were collected they were handed to Barry Marlow who tallied the results on the blackboard.

Ted thought it was some freak when his name was the first one chalked on the board. But the votes mounted up in machine gun fashion, and Ted was an almost unanimous selection.

He got to his feet and a thunder of applause roared around him. Then Ted shook hands with the Nighthawks. He felt proud to be so honored, and there was a lump rising in his throat.

"You know how things are with the polo team," Ted told Barry Marlow. "There's not a chance in a million for me to make the team unless..."

"Unless," Barry Marlow interrupted, "something new is added. Well, that something new has been added. Didn't you hear about Weston's new coach?"

"You don't mean Byron Paine?"

"Way off. Harold Greathouse," said Marlow. "The one and only Harold Greathouse. They finally wised up that Paine can't handle the job, for a lot of reasons. Greathouse has agreed to take over for the intercollegiates."

A little more than two weeks remained before the championships. Greathouse assumed charge with a vengeance, driving his charges hard, concentrating on mallet wielding, horsemanship, and above all on team play.

Greathouse called a meeting of the team a few days before the championships were scheduled to begin and said, "The way the team is going you couldn't beat Vassar. You've got to bounce out of it and forget personal glory and work as a team. Before we run through these plays on the blackboard, I've got some news to announce. Clint Meadows had been declared ineligible because of scholastic deficiencies. He's through for the season and his number 3 slot has to be

MALLET MIX-UP

filled. Tomorrow there'll be a practice game among the teams. The man who shows me the most stuff will play in the championship matches."

Ted, mounted on a fiery chestnut mare, saw all his Nighthawk cronies clustered in a bunch along the center of the field. As he rode by they bel- lowed cheers that echoed to the sky and shouted words of encouragement.

"Go get 'em, Ted. Show 'em how it's done."

"You're a cinch, boy. We're right behind you all the way."

The referee flipped the ball in. From th estart things whirled along at a frantic pace. Biff McKinley, var- sity number 1, emerged from a scram- ble and whacked a backhander to By- ron Paine down field.

Ted sliced down the field, letting his pony run like a bolt a hooved lightning. The pellet ricocheted off a horse's hoof, and Ted and Byron Paine were fighting for the ball. Then the new deal came in. Ted wasn't playing it alone. His teammate, Ed Mills, riding in the number 3 post, came charging in and rode Biff Mc- Kinley, who had come driving down to aid Paine, out of the play.

IT WAS MAN against man, Ted Harlin against Byron Paine. Paine crowded his mount close, trying to force Ted to give ground. Ted re- fused to budge. The ponies collided with a shuddering impact but Ted held firm. Paine's stick swung in a short arc; Ted raised high out of the saddle, swung his mallet down and foiled Paine's attempt. Instead of hurtling like a streak toward the up- rights the ball trickled feebly toward the sideline.

Ted's teammate, Hy Green at num- ber 4, got control and the play roared up the field. A minute later Ted slammed a steaming forhand through for the first goal.

At half time, with four chukkers completed, Ted had scored five goals.

He could feel the difference in spirit. The men were fed up with By- ron Paine. They'd followed his orders to the letter before, but now they were striking out on their own, leav- ing Paine to shift for himself.

It was a spectacular, bitterly-con-

(Continued On Page 95)

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Big John *Fights Again*

By **JOHN D. MACDONALD**

(Author of "That Old Grey Train")

They had him on the spot, this clean, big boy who knew his day in the ring had passed and wanted to hang up his gloves. But Big John had one friend who wouldn't hesitate to match a rotten deal with equally shady trickery to right a wrong!

IT ALL started on a crisp autumn Thursday while a biting wind was scudding the brown leaves around the corners of the houses, and doing odd things to the skirts of the gals crossing Main Street. I had turned in my column of football predictions and I was standing by the hall window with Bus Henry watching the Walgreen corner where a nice updraft was fluttering the females as they scuttled by, when the copy girl came out and said, "Cooley. Tear yourself away from your obscene amusements and answer the phone." That's the trouble with getting copy girls from college journalism courses; they're too flip.

I picked up the phone and a deep voice said, "Mister Cooley? This is Big John Washington. You remember me?"

He wondered if I remembered him! Tyler City's one claim to fame in fistic circles. A big solid Negro with dancer's legs, a happy grin, a jaw like iron and sudden death in either hand. Did I remember him!

Before the war I had followed on down to watch him fight in Philly, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St. Louis, Jersey City and points North, South, East and West. I saw him in there battering down a lot of good boys and I knew that all he was getting out of it was peanuts, because Dicky

Wing was dragging down eighty-five percent of Big John's share.

Big John was just edging into the big time when the draft got him, back in October of forty, six years ago. I hadn't heard of him since, even though I had thought of him a few times.

"I certainly do remember you, John boy," I said. "What can I do?"

"Mister Cooley, I always figured you were in my corner all the way and I remember some good advice you used to give me and I need some help. I need help bad. Could you come out and see me?"

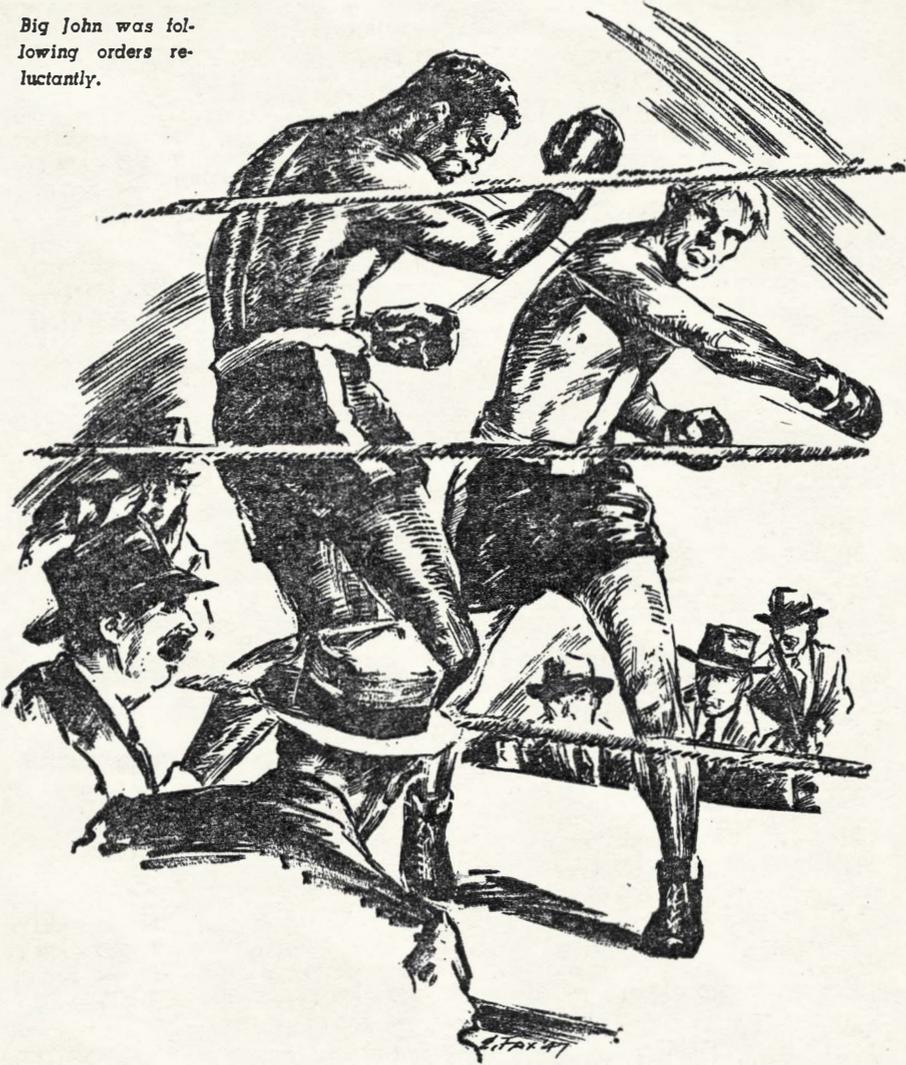
"Sure. Where?"

"Idle Vista Apartments. Out beyond the armory in the flats. Bunch of red brick buildings. I'm in number nine. I wouldn't ask you to come out except...."

"Hell, that's okay. Say half an hour."

I pulled my black coupe off the asphalt and went up the walk toward the long low red brick buildings. It was sort of a housing development. The wind was stiff and clothes stood out almost straight on the lines. A little brown kid in a blue snow suit riding a bright red three wheeler pedaled out to me and gave me a shy smile. I winked at him and walked along the front of the place until

Big John was following orders reluctantly.



I found nine. I stuck my thumb on the bell.

A very familiar looking gal with a green cotton dress and wide beautiful eyes opened the door and smiled. "Mister Cooley?"

Big John loomed up behind her and said, "Come on in. Come on in," before I could answer. The apartment was small, bright and cheerful. A blond cocker puppy threw himself against my leg, wriggling from the shoulders down in an ecstasy of puppy welcome.

"Down, Keep, down!" Big John said. "Mister Cooley, you maybe remember my wife, Jeanie. She used to sing at the KitKat before we got married."

I said, "I sure do." Her smile got bigger. "I remember her arrangement of 'Lazy Day.' You shouldn't have let her stop singing."

"She stopped singing and I stopped fighting, It's better this way."

We walked into the living room. I could see into the sparkling kitchen. Big John said to Jeanie, "Go

fix us up some coffee, Honey, and bring it in."

"Let's all go into the kitchen," I suggested. "I'm an old kitchen sitter from way back."

Jeanie put the coffee on and Big John and I sat at the white porcelain table. When the smile went off his face, he looked much older than I had remembered.

"What's new with you, John. How did the war go?"

"Old Uncle Sugar, he got me and he stuck me in the Engineers. And then my regiment went on over to Burma and we built that Ledo Road. More mud and dust than I ever see before. It was okay, I guess. Leastwise, I only got shot at once, when I was runnin' a cat."

"Do any fighting in the army?"

"Little bit. I roughed up a couple boys on the boat goin' over. That's all."

"Johnny got to be a Master Sergeant," Jeanie interrupted proudly.

"That don't buy no groceries nowadays," he said, firmly.

"What are you doing?"

He stuck out his big chest and the grin came back. "I got me three trucks. Got drivers for 'em. Got two big hauling contracts and I'm doing good. Saving money." The smile faded. "Anyway, I was."

Jeanie said, "We got a lot of trouble, Mr. Cooley."

I DIDN'T ask any questions. I wanted them to tell me in their own way and their own time. I watched the cloud drift over their faces, watched them look at each other helplessly. "You tell him, honey," Jeanie said.

"It's like this, Mister Cooley. I still got this contract with Dicky Wing which says he's my manager when I'm fighting. Mr. Wing, he wants me to start fighting again. I was twenty-five when they drafted me and I'm thirty-one now. I was quick so they didn't mark me up much but even twenty-five is pretty old for a fighter. My legs were about

to give out, and you know what that means. Now I know my legs are bad. I'm about thirty pounds heavier and I can't move around. I go in there and the kids are going to punch my head off for me. I can't do no good any more, and anyway, if I do fight, I don't get hardly anything out of it. Wing takes eighty-five percent of my share of the gate and he nicks me for a bunch of phoney expenses besides."

"He can make more with this trucking and we can be happy besides," Jeanie said, as she put the coffee in front of me.

"Yeah, we got this place here and Jimmy is three years old now. Damn it, Mr. Cooley, I fight again and she has to go back to singing so we can keep living here, and I have to sell the trucks and they punch me around until I'm talking to myself."

"But why fight, John, if you don't want to?"

He gave me a very wry grin. "I tell Dicky Wing that I don't fight for him. Then maybe some loads in the trucks get smashed. Maybe somebody talks to the people I got contracts with and they don't want contracts with me any more. Maybe they find some way to get me out of here. Suppose I get stubborn. Maybe somebody catches Jeanie on a dark street and tosses a little acid in her face. Just a little bit."

"That's nonsense, John. People don't do that."

"Maybe they don't do that to white folks, Mister Cooley. You're about the only white man in this town never treated me like I was some kind of big animal that fights for a living. I swear to you, Mister Cooley, they'll ruin everything if I don't fight."

"Why are they so anxious?"

"Folks remember Big John Washington," Jeanie said. "He always gave a good show. They remember that he was practically in the big time. That's where they'll start him again after a few setups. Wing won't give a damn if Johnny gets killed. He'll get one or

two big gates that'll make fifty thousand for him. Then John'll be through."

"Why can't you string along with him for a year and then pick up your trucking business again?"

"You ever talk to a doc about how fighters get punchy? One more year on top of the fifty bouts I had and I walk on my heels, talking to myself. I can't take it. When it was over, I'd be too slow to get into a rough business like this here trucking."

"Are you sure the contract with Wing is still good?"

"Lawyer says so."

They both looked at me helplessly as I drank the coffee. They were two very damn nice people and the world had suddenly backed them into a corner. Somehow I couldn't tell them that I didn't see any way out. They had come to me in trouble and it was up to me to do something. Anything. Big John sat with shoulders like a brewery horse, a neck like the trunk of an oak tree, and the eyes of a frightened child. Jeanie stood by him, her hand on his massive shoulder—her eyes mirroring the look in his. They could feel their world slipping and I happened to be the straw they clutched at. It made me feel inadequate and insufficient.

"You kids got to give old Steve Cooley time to think this out," I said. "Suppose I run along and see what I can do. I ought to be able to think of something."

I patted the head of the kid on the bike as I walked back to my car. As I started to drive away, I looked back. Big John and Jeanie were still standing in the doorway. All the way back to the center of town, I cursed softly and yanked the coupe around corners.

The thing that was needed was time. Wing was pushing Big John. If Big John could leave the trucking alone for a few months....

AT FOUR o'clock in the afternoon I walked into the Harder

Truck Terminal and opened the door of Harder's office. Red was on the phone, yelling at some poor driver that had broken down eleven miles from nowhere, I stood and waited until he finished and slammed the phone back onto the cradle. The office seemed too small for Red. His grey-sandy hair fell over his forehead, and his white freckled skin was trying to burst out of his clothes. He had the energy and drive to turn a small wildcat outfit into big business and dozens of trucks.

He wiped his forehead and said, "Damn it, Steve, how do all the feeble minded drivers get onto my payroll? What can I do for you?"

I sat on the edge of his desk. "Red," I said, "we've always gotten along, haven't we?"

"Is this a touch?" he demanded.

"Yeah. But not for money. For a favor for a friend of mine."

"What kind of favor?" he asked, growling at me.

"I got a friend, as I said, who's got troubles. It'll take him three or four months to clean up. He owns a small trucking business. He has two good contracts. I want you to take over his business, for a fee, of course, until he can come back and handle it himself."

Red exploded out of the chair and shook a freckled fist in my face. "Are you nuts?" he shouted, "I can't even take care of maintenance on my own wagons! Take care of a competitor! I got troubles enough and I got three big answers for you. No! No! And no!"

I let him rave and mumble for a few more minutes while I took a cigarette off his desk and lit it. When he had run down, I said quietly, "You know, Red, the newspaper business is damn slow these days. Not much local news. I've been thinking of an idea to hand the city editor. A review of old crimes that happened in Tyler City. Just to refresh peoples' minds a little. Pictures and all."

His fists uncurled and he seemed to sag. It was cruel, but I had to do it. He sat heavily behind the desk and all the fight had gone out of

SUPER SPORTS

him. "Gawd, Steve! You wouldn't do that. She's happy now. People have forgotten, almost. You wouldn't do that to a pal's wife?"

"Is your definition of a pal a guy who refuses to do a friend a little favor?"

"It's blackmail, Steve."

"Don't be silly. You'll get paid for your trouble, but the fee has to be reasonable."

I gave him a chance to think it over. We sat in the small office. Finally he grinned up at me and said, "I'm sorry, Steve. Send the guy in. Who is he?"

"Big John Washington."

He rose halfway out of the chair and said, incredulously, "Take care of business for a . . ."

I stopped him with my hand out. "What difference does it make, Red? Turn me down and I'll stick Sally's picture all over the magazine section of the Sunday edition. That's a promise."

He held his head in his hands for a few moments. He said, "Send him in with his records, Steve."

I COULDN'T get Big John on the phone, but I got hold of Jeanie and told her the story. She listened and said, "I'll tell him to take the papers over there, Mr. Cooley. But . . . this don't mean he's going to fight, does it?"

"I don't know yet, Jeanie. Give me a chance to figure on it for awhile."

You asked me to help you. Let me do it in my own way."

She agreed and said she was sorry that she had questioned me.

I found Dicky Wing standing like a customer at his own bar in the basement of the Craylor Hotel. He has the concession on the bar and grill. He is a smallish man with a thin narrow head and faded blond hair. He has weak eyes, a little blond mustache to march his hair and a very deceiving air of vagueness and helplessness.

Dicky is about as vague as a French postcard and as helpless as the Russian infantry. He owns three horse rooms, a wire service, the foot-

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BIG JOHN FIGHTS AGAIN

ball pool, the hotel bar and grill, a greyhound track, half a dozen stumblebum fighters, seven or eight crummy tenements, a cut-throat taxi company, a ten year old Duesenberg, several blondes and half the crooked politicians in town. He knows everybody, speaks to everybody and grabs every check in sight.

"Hello, Steve," he said. "What are you drinking?"

"Scotch and water, Dicky. Thanks. How goes it with you?"

"Pretty good, I guess. Yes. . . . maybe I could say pretty good. Yes indeed."

"Heard a rumor, Dicky. Heard you were going to hoist Big John Washington back into the big time. Can you give me a line on it for the sports page?"

"My goodness, Steve. Things certainly do get around in this town. They certainly do. You can. . . . ah, quote me. Yes, quote me. I believe that Big John will make a. . . . a startling comeback. Yes. . . . uh. . . . startling."

"Pretty old, isn't he?"

"Big John! Why, Steve, he's a young man. A young man. Lots of good fights left in him. Lots of good fights."

"Go on, Dicky. Some kid'll tear his head off. He's been out of the game for six years."

"They won't hurt Big John, Steve No sir. Not Big John; he's got a head like a rock. Yes sir. Like a rock."

"What have you got lined up for him?"

"Nothing very definite. Not definite at all. Maybe two fights with some unknown boys that are on their way up. Good boys, you know. Just to get Big John back into the swing. Then I have spoken to my good friend in New York, Boots Hungerfort, and he is willing to have his boy Sailor Henderson meet Big John in Philly during Christman week."

"Henderson'll kiss him! That boy's good. Really good. Big John never was and never would have been in his class!"

"Look. . . . uh. . . . Steve. You know, as a favor to me, you ought to keep

(Continued On Page 78)

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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 77)

your personal views...ah...toned down a little in the paper. Big John will train out at my place on the lake. If I...ah.. keep the big sportswriters out entirely, it would be worth... say fifty a week to you to drive up once or twice a week and give him a good writeup. You...uh...know what I mean."

The bartender was down at the far end of the bar. I said to Dicky, "I get the picture. You make him look real good with your two bums and his past rep. Then I write him up as a killer. Then, you match him with Henderson and get a wad of dough down on Henderson. No thanks."

He smiled at me softly. "Don't say no so quick. If you don't somebody else will. You know how it is. I like you, Steve. I'd like to see you making the extra dough."

It gave me something to think about. I went back to my apartment and shut myself in the kitchen with a bottle of rye, hoping for inspiration to come. I am a solitary drinker only when I have a problem. It doesn't help much, but I like to think that it does. Dicky was right. And Big John was right. It was the old merry-go-round. They'd build him up and match him with Henderson. Then they'd build him up again and match him with some other good boy. At the end of a year or so, Big John would be through—physically and mentally. It was a dirty business, but from Dicky's point of view, it was good business. Big John could make him a lot of money—quickly. It would be much easier with Big John than it would be with some new boy. The crowd loves the idea of a comeback.

I sat and drank rye and beat on my head with my fist. When there was an inch of rye left in the bottom of the bottle, I had one stinking little inspiration. I fumbled my way into the bedroom and fell across the bed into dreamland, giving the old subconscious a chance to work out on the problem.

In the morning I called Dicky and told him that I'd take on the job he

BIG JOHN FIGHTS AGAIN

had mentioned to me. He was delighted.

THEN I WENT to work. Being on a local sheet as long as I have, you make a lot of friends and a lot of enemies. Good and bad of both kinds. I went to work on them. I begged and pleaded and threatened and swore. I ignored them when they said they'd have me thrown out of their offices. I signed my name until my hand was sore—signing away my life, signing away my future. Whenever I stopped to think of what I was doing, it scared me to death. A dozen times I wanted to quit, and each time I remembered the two of them standing in the doorway of the little apartment. I remembered that I hadn't been born with two strikes against me, and the third pitch, a hard-breaking curve halfway to the plate. I remembered a lot of things, and I kept signing my name.

When I had enough I went to see Rocky LaPorte. He is Dicky Wing's only competition in Tyler City, but they get along pretty well. Sometimes I handle the police beat, and on one of those times I was able to do Rocky a very large and juicy favor. He is inclined to remember it.

He is a stocky man with a white-toothed grin a yard wide. He is the lavender shirt and dollar cigar type, but at heart a nice guy—so they keep telling me. He owns a construction company that knocks off all city contracts, a brewery that uses emphatic sales methods, several meat markets, two gas stations, a roller skating rink, a third rate football team, several redheads and the rest of the crooked politicians that Dicky doesn't own.

I found him late at night in a poker game in a suite at the Craylor. The other monkeys in the game seem disturbed to see me, but Rocky gives me the big hello and we lock ourselves in the bathroom while the game goes on without him.

I outlined the deal and what I wanted him to do. When I was through he flicked cigar ashes into

(Continued On Page 80)

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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 79)

the tub and said, "Stevey boy, I got to protect you from yourself. You've gone nuts. This newspaper work is killing you. Suppose you come to work for me, hey? I'll make you an offer. I can use a little fat guy like you with big ideas. But not the kind of ideas you just give me."

I reminded him of all I had done for him and told him of the chances I might get in the future. At last he sighed and agreed to help me.

"That's great, Rocky," I said, "I certainly appreciate it. Now I like to do things in business like way, and even though I trust you further than I would my own grey haired mother, I want you should let me pick you up tomorrow and go and see my legal eagle, at which time some money will change hands. Then you can sit tight and I'll tell you when to move in."

It all went as planned, with Tom Hennessey, my lawyer, looking at me strangely during the little conference. The paper was drawn up and Rocky and I signed it, with Hennessey and his girl for witnesses. It was as tight as a drum . . .

We sat in the kitchen again and Big John had a sad droopy look on his face like a lonesome bloodhound. "I'll do anything you say, Mister Cooley, but it sure looks like I'm going to be fighting a long, long time."

"John, you got to trust me. I'll tell you more later. Look, your business is being taken care of, isn't it?"

"Sure is, but that man didn't act like he wanted to do it too bad."

"Don't worry about him. He's a friend of mine. You just remember what I told you to do. Tomorrow you're going up to Wing's camp to start training. When it gets too cold he'll bring you down to the gym in town. All you got to do is remember not to use that right. You can't punch with it any more. You can paw with it a little, but no punch."

"I get that okay."

"And if I don't get a chance to talk to you or relay a message to you through Jeanie before this first tank job fight that Dicky has lined up, remember that you got to look very

(Continued On Page 82)

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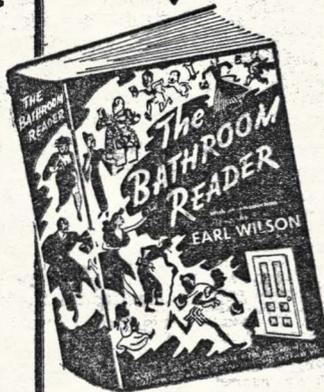
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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 80)

bad in there. Very bad. The two or three guys he lines up will dive for you as soon as you land a good punch. You drag it out. Move around as slow as you can."

Big John grinned whitely. "I'll sure be slow in there, Mister Cooley."

I convinced them both that it was going to work out okay, even though my fingers ached from keeping them crossed. I knew that if it didn't work out, the three of us were hitting the skids together. Big John seemed to cheer up. As I was leaving he instinctively put his hand on my arm, and then yanked it off as though I was red hot. There wasn't anything I could say to him. You can't tear out five generations of fear with a few words. I liked the big homely lug and he knew it. So there wasn't much need for words.

I GOT UP TO the lake three times before the first fight. Dicky had Benny Baum and Kid Williams working on Big John. They melted twenty pounds off him, bringing him down to two fifteen, but they didn't take any more off for fear of weakening him.

I hung around and I could see that they were discouraged. Big John moved slowly around the ring with the leather face guard hiding his expression. Baum could hit him at will. Big John would paw with the right. The second time I was up there, he knocked Baum through the ropes with a left hook to the gut. That made Baum and Williams very happy.

I filled the local sheet with all kinds of guff about Big John. I built up the incident of his knocking Baum through the ropes with one punch. I hauled a pal of mine, Doc Wescott, up with me and had him look Big John over. He let me print his opinion that Big John had the reaction time, the reflexes and the speed of a kid of eighteen. That went over well, and Tyler City began to wake up and take notice.

Wing's idea of keeping out other sportswriters worked pretty well. They were all sore, especially a couple that came up from New York.

(Continued On Page 84)



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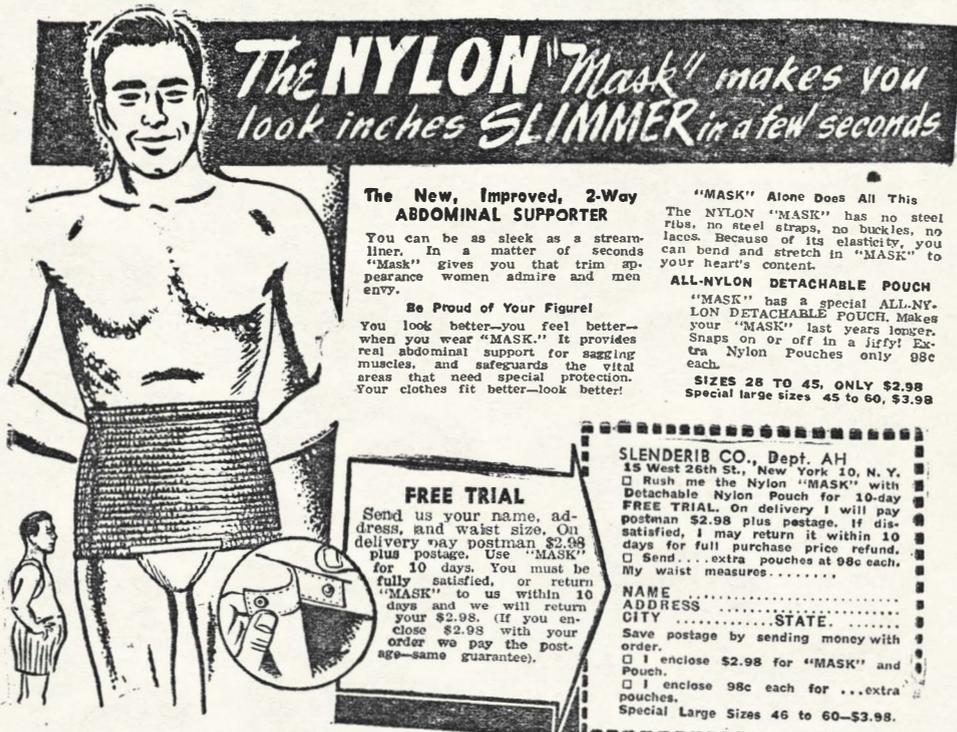
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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 82)

They made cracks about secret training, but it only increased the interest in Big John. Wing walked around looking like a little kid who had found a nickel in his pocket that he didn't know he had.

I got down to the first fight in Youngstown, Ohio. Wing had Big John matched with a Polish boy they called Mick Doyle. Big John almost overdid it. I was at ringside and I could see that Doyle was worried that he wouldn't get a good chance to fold up and collect his diving money. Big John, chocolate and impassive, plodded around the ring, pawing at Doyle. Doyle peppered him at will but pulled his punches while the crowd jeered and sneered. It was terrible.

Finally in the seventh, Big John pawed Doyle with a slow right. Doyle wavered and dropped his arms. John pawed him again and Doyle fell heavily onto his face, turning his head just in time to keep from flattening his nose. It was a classic and beautiful dive.

The papers tried to give Big John a ride, but after all he had knocked out his man, and who could prove it was fixed? I did a long piece about deceptive punches, about slow punches having terrific battering power and so on.

I missed the second bout in Scranton, because I didn't want Wing to think I was being too eager. Every Saturday I went to the bar at the Craylor and the bartender would slip me a plain envelope with five beautiful tens in it. That part I liked.

The second bout was the same as the first, only the diving champ was named Young Weeks instead of Doyle. He finally located his chance to dive in the sixth. The crowd boomed and the ref lifted Big John's hand in disgust. But it was another knock-out and it gave me a chance to blow off steam in my column and in the story of the fight. Wing was as happy as a turtle in a goldfish bowl. I fed them some more about those deceptive punches.

There were still three weeks to go before the Henderson fight. Big

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BIG JOHN FIGHTS AGAIN

John was training in town and staying in a room over the gym. As I had figured, they wouldn't let him come home. All I could do was wait. I had horrible visions of Cooley with a tin cup on the corner, Cooley in a line of guys in grey behind bars, Cooley with the soles off his shoes, bumping dimes for coffee. It was too damn late to turn back and I couldn't keep myself from thinking how awful it was going to be if things didn't work out.

A week before the fight I got the phone call from Rocky. He said, "It's all set, Stevey, and I hope you know what the hell you're doing."

I was in no mood to discuss it. I thanked him and hung up.

I got word to Jeanie to tip off Big John somehow that I wanted to see him at his apartment at eleven o'clock. It would depend on John to get out of his room and get to his home. If he wasn't able to make it, I'd have to depend on Jeanie to give him his instructions, and that wouldn't be so good.

I WAS IN Jeanie's kitchen drinking coffee at eleven o'clock when Big John arrived. He came stomping out into the kitchen, worried and looking almost haggard from the weight he had lost.

"I'm sure glad to see you, Mister Cooley. They give me hell about the way I handled those two fights. They sure did. Boy!"

"Are you scared of Sailor Henderson?" I asked him.

"Mister Cooley," he said, with dignity, as he sat in the other chair, "I'm not scared of no man in this wide world in the ring. But I know this boy Henderson, he can lick me. He's a better man in the ring. That's all."

I didn't give him any part of the story except what he had to do in the Henderson fight. I didn't want to give him any more of it, because I didn't want to worry him too much. Feeling like a damn fool, I got up in the middle of the kitchen and showed him just about how he had to do it. He caught the idea and went through the motions.

(Continued On Page 88)

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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 85)

"Now do you think you can lick Henderson?" I asked him.

"If he does what you say he's going to do, I can clip him so he won't get up right quick, but how do you know he's going to act that way?"

"I'm going to go see him and make sure he does."

"I don't follow that, Mister Cooley."

"Never mind about it. You just do like I tell you."

"But how is this going to make me stop fighting? I should think if it works I'll be fighting more than ever."

"Let him worry about that, honey," Jeanie said. Big John shrugged and went silent on me. After a time he promised to do it just like I told him to do it. He began to cheer up, even finding the light-heartedness to chuckle at Henderson's probable surprise.

I drove him back down and dropped him off a block or so from the gym. He hurried off down the street and I U-turned out of there.

THE BIG arena at Philadelphia was packed. Everybody was loaded with dough and Christmas spirits. I was in the third row from ringside, bathed in cold sweat. I realized that I had gone sentimental and staked everything on a great big clown that would probably get slammed out of the ring before he could put my plan in motion.

I had talked with Henderson in his room in the Trevor in the middle of the afternoon. He had scared me. The man moved like a big cat, and his fists looked like boulders. His eyes were the color of fractured steel. He had listened to me and thanked me. He had been sitting on the bed, thinking hard, when I left.

I didn't notice the preliminaries. They were just bobbing, weaving figures that my eyes were looking at, while my mind was busy in other places. I glanced down at the palms of my hands and saw the curved grooves that my fingernails had cut into them.

Finally the stools were hauled

BIG JOHN FIGHTS AGAIN

around to what had been the neutral corners, the referee sprinkled some fresh rosin and some kind of master mechanic checked and tightened the ropes. Big John came striding down the aisle, his gay yellow robe trailing out behind him, the big muscles of his thighs bunching as he walked.

Henderson made him wait about ten minutes. John slumped in the stool while Baum and Williams puttered around him, patting his shoulders and whispering to him. Suddenly the crowd roared and I knew Henderson was coming down to his corner.

He vaulted the ropes and stood up and down on his toes, high strung, nervous and tough as old leather. The crowd quieted down for the announcement, and yelled again as each man was introduced. The seconds checked the bindings and the gloves were put on. Baum took Big John's robe off, and he stood in the middle of the ring with a towel around his shoulders as the referee gave the standard instructions to the two of them. Henderson didn't look at Big John.

They turned and went back to their corners. Baum grabbed the towel and the stool. At the bell, both men whirled and touched gloves in the middle of the ring.

Henderson danced lightly, stooping into a low crouch and then bobbing up, looking for an opening. Big John shuffled around. The hot white lights burned down on them. The crowd was so quiet that I could hear Big John's shoes scraping the canvas.

Henderson opened up with three fast, hard, left jabs, slamming Big John's head back. The crowd murmured and Big John circled away. Henderson found him again with some more left jabs. Big John covered, and pawed out of the cover with that blundering right. Henderson moved out of range and grinned. There were some loud boos from the crowd.

As soon as Big John came out of cover, Henderson stepped in with

(Continued On Page 88)

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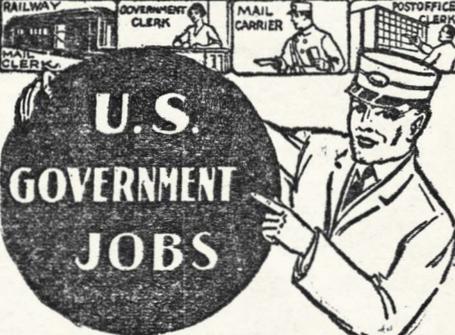
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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 87)

two quick jabs. When Big John's guard lifted, Henderson slammed a right to John's middle that boomed like a drum. People at ringside gasped along with Big John. That wasn't according to the book. I think it was at that moment, I stopped breathing.

Big John lowered his guard a little, and Henderson hooked the heavy right to John's jaw. I went up onto the edge of the seat. Keeping his hands fairly high, John started to fall forward. Henderson hovered, looking for another spot to slug in the right hand and make it look better. Big John fell forward until it seemed he couldn't possibly recover. At the last moment, as I had showed him in the kitchen, the big left leg came out, bracing him, and the right arm shot out like a mortar shell. It had all of Big John's shoulders and back in it. It hit a Henderson standing almost wide open.

Henderson flew clear off the floor, into the ropes. He rebounded off the ropes and rolled limply back almost to the center of the ring. He was on his face and motionless. At the count of ten, he hadn't begun to stir.

Baum and Williams climbed up onto the edge of the ring, white and shaken. Big John hauled Henderson over to his corner. I remembered to start breathing again.

I FOUND Rocky and two of his boys in the club car. I was surprised to see him. He was a hired man in the picture. It was no skin off his nose either way. We went out between cars and he handed me the stuff. I looked it over and stashed it away. Then he said, "Stick out your hand, Stevey."

I did so. He licked a fat thumb and counted off some bills into my hand. "One hunnert, two, three, four and five. How's 'at look?"

"Wonderful, Rocky. What's it for?"

"Commission. I rode along with you and got some good odds."

"But I didn't broker it for you."

"If I'd lost, maybe I'd have the

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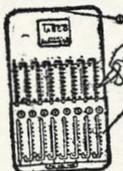
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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 88)

boys work you over some dark night. You know how it is." I shoved the money into my pocket. Later I even bought him a couple of drinks out of it.

The next morning Jeanie gave me a nice smile when she opened the door for me. Big John was drinking coffee in the kitchen. One eye was a little puffed from the fight, and that was all. He didn't seem very cheery. I waved him down when he started to stand up. I sat opposite him.

"How does it look now, John?" I asked him.

"I can't truly say. I found out last night that Dicky Wing, he lost my contract to Mr. Rocky LaPorte. He bet it on the fight, betting against me. Looks like I'm going to have to start fighting for Rocky now. He's worse than Wing I hear."

"Maybe," I said, and grinned at him.

He scratched his head and said, "How come that Henderson fella, he acted like you said he would?"

"Easy. I went up and told him that you were coached to take a dive in the first round, that your manager was betting against you. He had his boys check and I guess they found out where the Wing money was riding. He never figured for you to hit him. He was trying to make the knockout look so good so it wouldn't queer his record. He's a straight boy, as straight as they come."

Jeanie asked, "What will Rocky want Johnny to do?"

"Nothing," I said, "I bought John's contract from Rocky last night."

They both gave me a very vacant stare and Big John said, "What was that you said? Have you got that kind of money, Mister Cooley?"

"It cost me a buck."

His mouth dropped open. I handed him a copy of my agreement with Rocky. He went through it twice, his lips moving as he read. He looked up and said, "This here thing is dated before the fight. It says that if Rocky ever gets hold of my contract, he agrees to sell it to you for one dollar."

"That's right. I made him live up

BIG JOHN FIGHTS AGAIN

to it. Here's the original of the contract." I threw it on the table.

"But this Rocky, he had to put up a lot of money to get hold of that."

"He put up my money, John. I mean, money that I borrowed on notes from every chump in town without telling them what I was going to use it for."

He got very still and I heard Jeanie gasp. "But . . . but, if I knew that . . . Mister Cooley, suppose I lost that right?" John said.

"You didn't, did you? Henderson was sucked in by the fact that you apparently didn't have any right hand, and your manager was setting you up for a dive."

I picked the contract off the table and stuck it into my inside pocket. I slapped the pocket. Jeanie had fallen against him and had her face buried in his neck. Her shoulders were shaking with silent sobs. "Now I'm the manager, John, and when I need the dough, I'm going to have you get in there and take some beatings. But in the meantime you better get back into the trucking business."

They both went with me to the door. Big John said, "Mister Cooley, you got yourself a fighter. Any time."

Jeanie was mopping her eyes. I stood on the porch and stuck my hand out to Big John. He took a furtive look up and down the street and took my hand timidly. In a moment I left. All the way back into town I cursed and yanked the little coupe around all the corners. I was wondering what sucker trap I'd fall into next.

THE END



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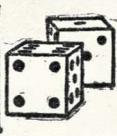
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Dope From The Dugout

By Wilcey Earle

AND IT WASN'T HALF WRONG EITHER

Some of the boys along Bashed Beezer Boulevard were discussing a former member of the fight brigade who had forsaken the ring to become an emcee in a night club. He specialized in bad singing and bum jokes.

One chap asked another what he thought of this fighter turned entertainer. "Well," fanged the object of the query—"I'd say he's half song—and half wit!"

HEY, FRANKENSTEIN, LOOK OUT

Vincent Price, the bearded star of the smash dramatic hit, "Angel Street," which was the best murder play to hit the Gay White Way in eons and eons of time, is a first cousin of Cliff Frank, the former All-American football star from Yale.

Vincent is quite an athlete in his own right. Played a lot of football, basketball and baseball on the intramural squads when he attended Old Eli.

Says if you think he's sadistic because of the sinister role he played in "Angel Street," you'd think he was a lamb if you ever saw the part a schoolmate of his portrayed in a school drama.

Playing the executioner in the Death House, this chappie, just before pulling the switch—gave the condemned man a hot foot!

(Continued On Page 94)



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to give you many secret formulas for securing power and success in life, love and financial affairs—he claims that the formulas in the "7 Keys to Power" are similar to those supposedly used with such unflinching effect by the Chaldeans, Cuthic Priests, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Sumarians. The author claims that the book allegedly reveals "the power to get what you want." He claims that the formula is revealed for the first time since the dawn of creation; that it has been used by many to overcome all enemies, obstacles and hidden fears.

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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 92)

HE WAS EXCITED ALL RIGHT

Last year, Honey Russell, coach of the Manhattan College Basketball Team, had a very inexperienced outfit. Honey recalls with glee an incident that took place in one of the squad's early games.

Manhattan had been playing a man-to-man defense and was taking a licking. Honey sent a rookie player in with instructions to order the players to switch to the zone defense.

The kid was so flustered that when he ran in and reported to the referee, instead of giving his name, he fairly shouted to the official—"Switch TO THE ZONE DEFENSE AT ONCE—THAT'S AN ORDER."

TEEING OFF

The Duke of Paducah, a great comedian, was discussing golf with your reporter the other day. He passed along some interesting information about this wonderful sport:

Golf is a game where a little white ball gets chased by a bunch of old men who are too old to chase anything else!

The Duke also said that he knew a fellow who, when he played golf, wore two pairs of pants, just in case he ever made a hole in one.

IT'S A NATURAL QUESTION

Max Baer's favorite query upon being introduced to someone is "Do I look like a half-breed?"

When the startled object of his question replies "Why, no, of course not. Why do you ask?", the Livermore playboy slays 'em with "Well, some bum I fought said I was because I breathed through one side of my nose!"

THE END

MALLET MIX-UP

(Continued From Page 71)

tested duel. In the seventh chukker Ted broke away for another counter, driving a bullet shot cleanly through the uprights from way out.

Ted's team pulled away to a 14-11 lead. The ball was thrown in. There was a hectic mix-up in the middle of the field. Ted, riding hard, bulled his way clear, raised his mallet for the sweep that would urge the willow goalward. But he saw Byron Paine's pony careening toward him and he checked his swing in mid-air. He jerked the reins, narrowly averting a head-on collision. Paine's mount plunged into the flank of Ted's pony and Ted was thrown from the saddle.

The last thing Ted saw before he hit the turf was the grin Paine was trying to hide.

The nasty spill silenced the onlookers. Harold Greathouse hurried onto the field. His face was flushed, and he turned a long, hard stare on Byron Paine but he said nothing to Paine. Instead he trotted over to where Ted lay huddled motionless on the grass.

Ted was in the club house when he regained consciousness. He looked around through foggy eyes, saw the doctor standing over him.

"Nothing to worry about, my boy," the doctor assured him. "You got shaken up some and you'll be sore for a day or two. The coach was here, but he left when I told him you weren't seriously hurt. He's still looking for a man for the team."

A bitter pang of disappointment shot through and was mirrored in the hurt look in his eyes.

"Looks like I'm a complete wash-out," he said. "Just when I was thinking I might be making the grade."

The doctor laughed heartily. "Come off of that, boy. You're in solid. They want that replacement for Byron Paine. Now, there's a bunch of guys outside who'll be breaking down the doors if I don't let them in. There's no holding that wild bunch of Night-hawks."

THE END

To People who want to write but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance. Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

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KEEP HOLLERING BUSHER

(Continued From Page 29)

forcibly holding a sharp-featured, eye-glassed man under an ice cold needle spray.

Skip recognized the guy. He was the young reporter who had framed the interview when he was playing with the Indians. The guy who had brought on so much misery and misunderstanding.

Hunch looked up, smiling like a cat full of salmon.

"Thought this guy might need a little scrubbing," he drawled. "Guess I was right. Will someone fetch a good stiff bristle brush. We'll scrub him down real proper."

The guy tried to protest, but Hunch jammed a fistful of soapsuds into his mouth. "This is only the beginning, bud," he said. "When we're through here you're gonna take a trip into the Titan clubhouse and do some explaining. You're gonna tell everyone about that phony interview you planted."

In another corner of the clubhouse the reporters were swarming about Matty Endicott. He was saying,

"I guess the parade of pitchers to the post is about over. I'm going back to the old way of letting a guy stay in there until he really had to be yanked. At least for the duration of the series."

"What's your prediction on the rest of the series?" a reporter asked. "We'll win," said Matty. "This is a team now."

A little later a messenger handed Skip a note from Lance. It read:

"Nice going, kid. Learned all about that interview. Wait for me at your hotel."

Matty Endicott proved to be an excellent guesser. The Comets copped the series four games to three.

THE END



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