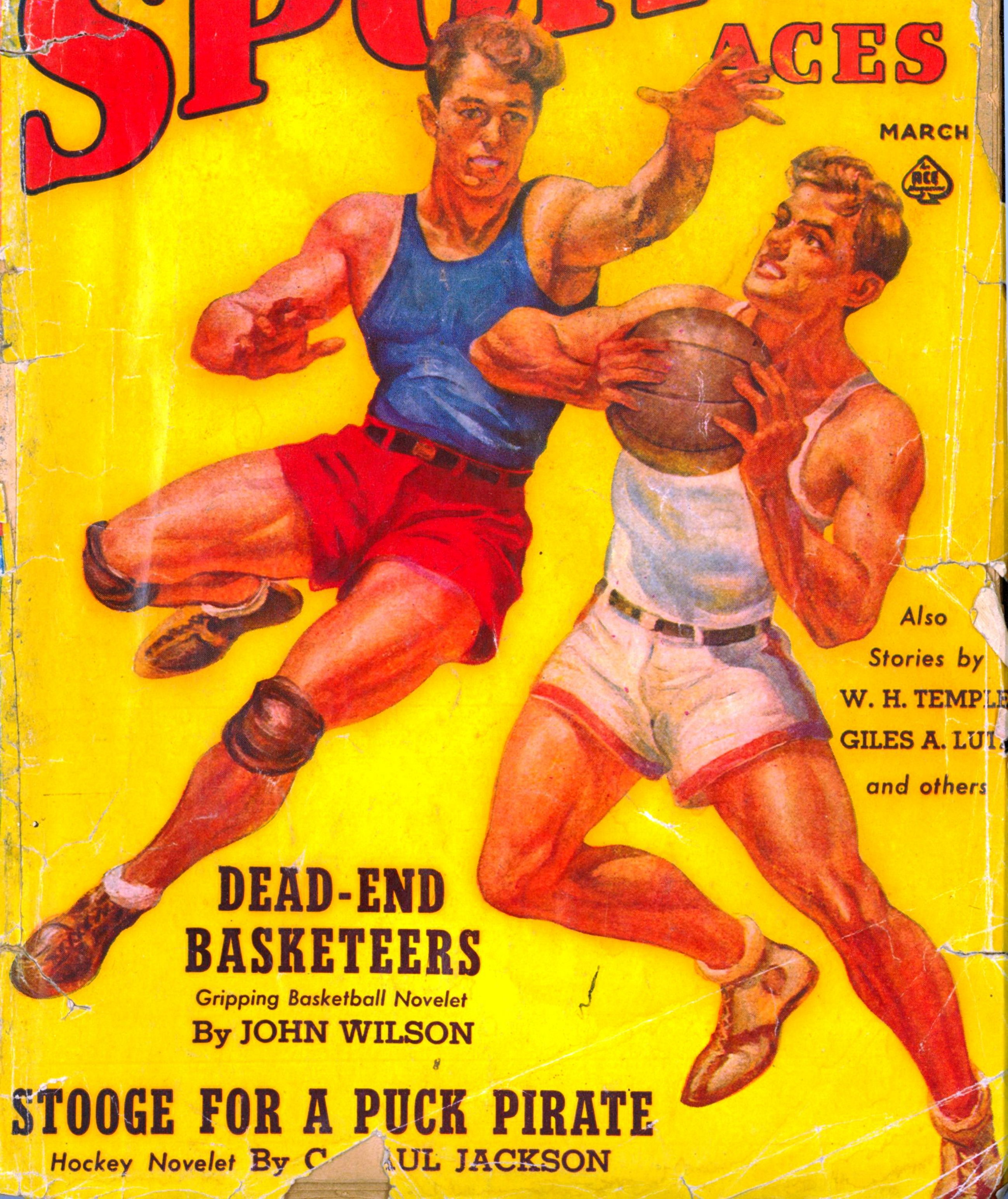


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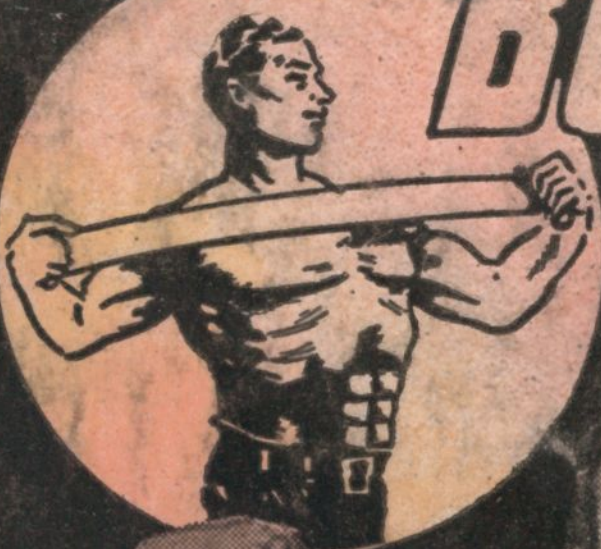
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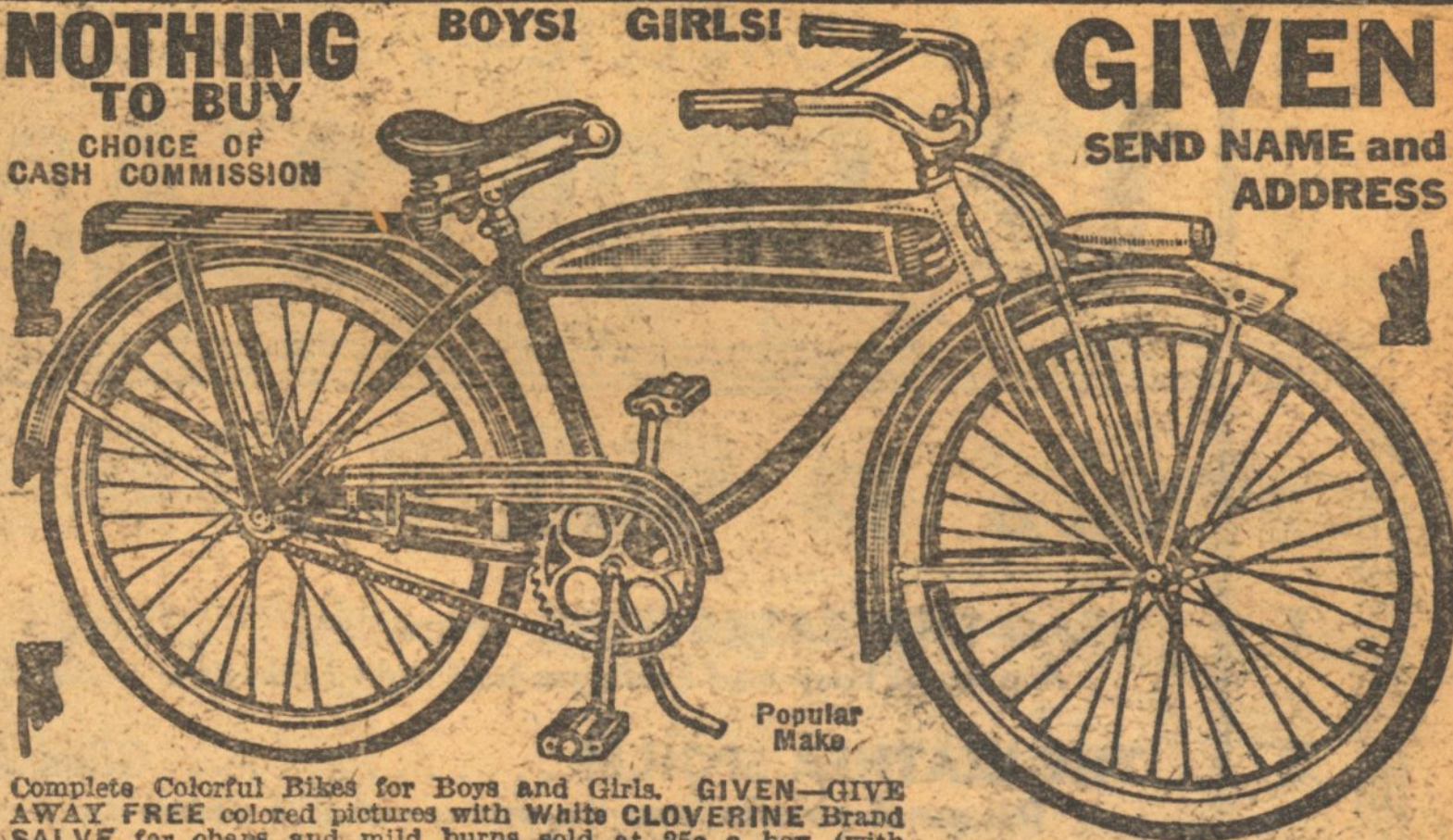
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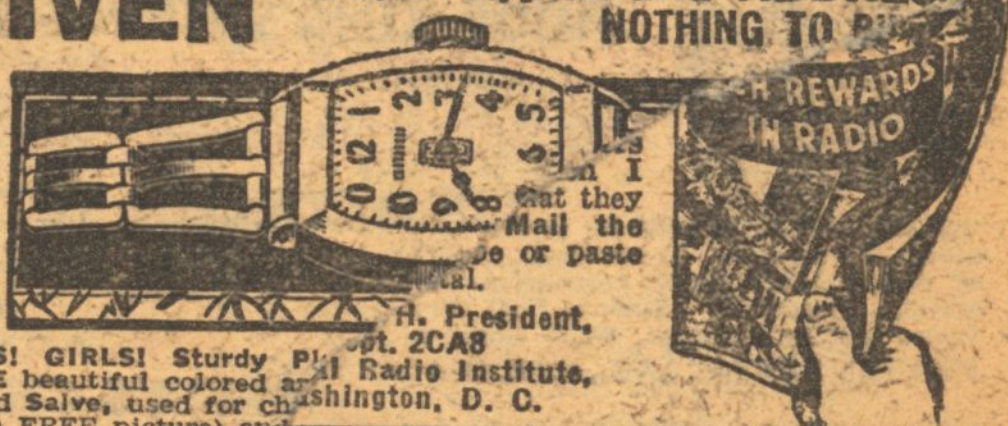
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Vol. 6

March, 1942

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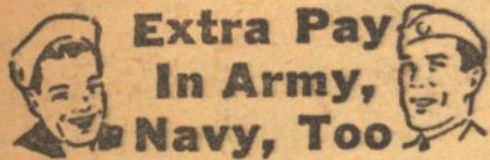
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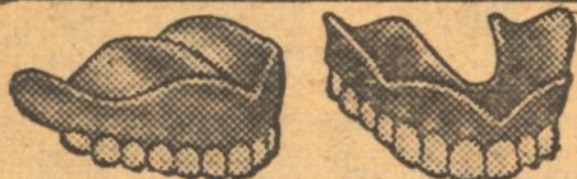
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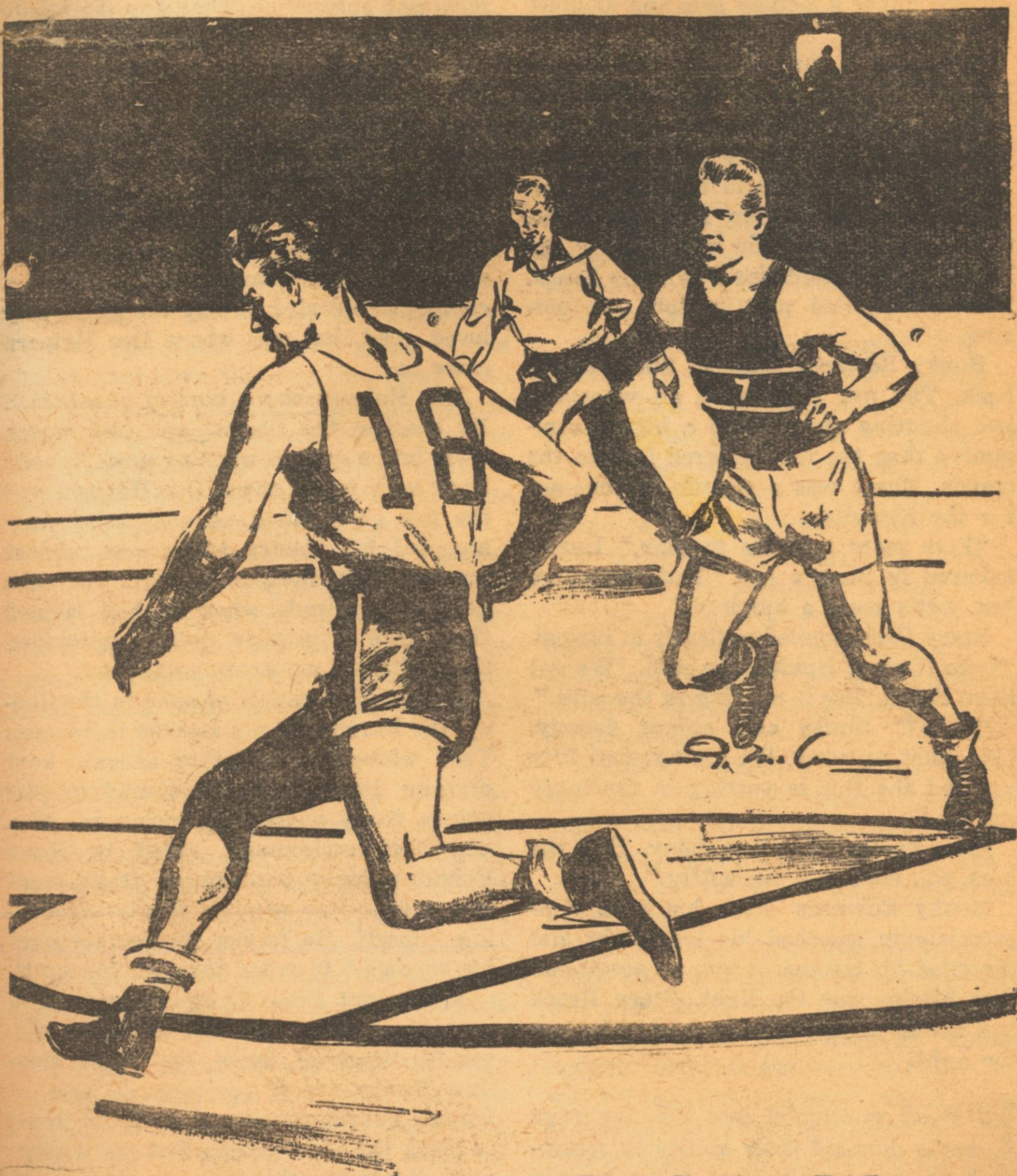
CHAPTER I

THE five guys in the faded blue jerseys were rollicking over the boards, beating the daylights out of the local biscuit company and having fun. They were riding the crest of a 34-19 score. Still they continued to pour it on, hot and heavy.

The five guys called themselves the Barons. They liked that name because it was funny, them being barons. Everybody knew the five guys were a bunch of rebels hailing from the "Hill" section of the town.

The Barons played a man-to-man de-

Stacy Brock, leader of a gang of exiled hoop-mad hooligans, didn't know that he was destined to become a double outcast. For when he handed a couple of hardwood knocks to a score-crazy hellion, he placed himself right behind the basket eight-ball.



By John Wilson

fense. That was the system Doc Halpern had taught them. That was the way the five guys wanted to wage their battles, man squaring off against man. The tall, pale-faced youth, bushy-haired and badly in need of a haircut, closed in on the enemy forward. The Biscuit player tried to

trick him, to bounce-pass the leather to a teammate knifing across the boards. The bushy-haired youth, his jaw firm and square and set, was Stacy Brock.

He expertly stuck out his foot, blocked the ball, scooped it up with a sweep of his hand. He flipped a pass cross-court to

stocky, grim-jawed Bunky Edwards. A husky Biscuit player rushed the Baron forward. But Bunky Edwards was too smart for that kind of stuff. He feinted, ducked under a lashing arm and dribbled into the clear.

A teammate cut for the basket. Bunky let him have the ball. The melon engorged off the backboard, rolled crazily around the rim, finally spinning loose. Milling figures drove in to grab the rebound. Then slicing in from an angle, springing into the air and flicking the leather off his fingertips was Stacy Brock. The ball nestled prettily into the netting.

Bunky Edwards pounded Stacy on the back. The five guys were all whooping and shouting and raising a bigger commotion than the few hundred fans in the stands. There was a whistle, a time-out for the Biscuits.

"Five more minutes to play," Bunky hollered in Stacy's ear. "Let's massacre 'em. Let's score a hundred."

Stacy Brock smiled patiently at his pal. "Take it easy, Bunky," he said. "We got them licked. Doc is sending in the subs."

"Subs?" Bunky said almost fiercely. "He must be crazy. We ain't scored fifty yet and the Doc is putting in the lousy scrubs."

"Doc knows what he's doing. He's the boss, pal. We'll still make fifty."

Bunky Edwards shook his head compromisingly, pinched his lips tight and throttled his tongue. It was an admission that Bunky saw the light. Stacy Brock had a way of making his teammates see the light.

IT WAS wonderful how the five guys never doubted their ability to accomplish the impossible. Used to having the odds high-stacked against them, they were not an outfit to be content with shallow, one-point victories. Always the Barons were out to rout the opposition, pile up a huge score.

You couldn't blame them exactly for playing that way. Hardly a day passed that one of them wasn't chased by a copper, bullied by some supertoughie from the Hill. It was a daily battle for exist-

ence that the five guys waged. It was fate, a cold, ironic fate that handicapped them at the start, trade-marked them the Hill Gang. The five guys were tough and hardened and suspicious. That was their only defense. You get that way when you're kicked around, scorned and made to feel like so much riff-raff.

It was little wonder that the Barons sought to reap vengeance for their hurts on the hardwood. An independent outfit, they went out of their class to trounce the better amateurs of the town. They had nothing to prod them on. Only a flaming, competitive desire to play the game they loved. And that was where Doc Halpern came in.

Doc Halpern was a kind of benefactor. He coached the Barons and had woven them into a smooth-working unit. Nobody knew very much about Doc Halpern and the five guys asked no questions. They accepted his sundry kindnesses, almost grudgingly at first, to be sure. But with genuine gratitude when he had molded them into a regular quintet, provided them with the necessary equipment.

Even with a couple of subs in the lineup, the Barons did not slacken their pace. They whipped the leather around, kept digging for the goal and clicking for points. Stacy snared the melon out of a mid-court scrimmage, rifled to Hank Eldridge, lanky centerman. Hank went into a four-star windup, finally unraveling himself. He looped the leather over his shoulder. It sailed through the cords.

A moment later Stacy intercepted a pass. He swished the ball to Bunky Edwards, breaking down the right sideline. Bunky fed it to Hank. A pair of Biscuit guards converged on Hank, tried to block the pivot-heave. But the centerman didn't fire this time. A clear, even voice stopped him. It was Stacy Brock's voice.

"Back to Dinny. Let Dinny stick it up."

That's the way it always was. Stacy Brock, calm, deliberate in the white heat of battle, directing the Barons' attack. The ace in a deck of deuces, Stacy Brock was a thinker on his feet. Gifted with an intuitive sense, he was a regular Mister Chips in the clutch.

Of the five guys, Stacy was the lone one not born in the poverty of the Hill district. Stacy Brock had once lived on the other side of the tracks. But that stretched back to a time when his dad had been alive. Before everything including "home" had been swept away. All because Stacy's dad had trusted one man as sole executor of his small estate. It did not seem a coincidence that among the real estate owned by R. J. Conklin was the house Stacy had once lived in.

It had taken courage and guts, crossing the tracks, trying to fit in with the Hill gang. That had meant everlasting brawls and blood and hard going. It had taken character, the kind that flows from the heart of a man and defies the fates to destroy it. Stacy Brock had stood the test, come through with flying colors. A guy from the other side of the tracks, he was the chosen leader of the five guys.

The ball flew back to Dinny Sherdel. Dinny poised himself, potted the shot. It went on that way. The Barons didn't get their fifty points, but they managed to come close enough. They were on the long count of a 43-23 score when the game ended.

THE Barons went piling into the cramped, damp confines of the recreation hall dressing room. They roared in, their faces split in wide grins. It didn't matter to these hard-bitten kids that there was only one shower faucet and no assurance that the water would be hot. Nor that the radiators rattled, gave little steam.

All that mattered was that they had socked away another ball game. That was enough to warm their blood, make their game hearts beat in a wild song of ecstasy.

A florid-faced, heavy-set man, his black hair peppered with gray, came into the room. Doc Halpern had a cigar in the corner of his mouth. He stood there a moment, a thin smile on his lips. His eyes did not have the softness of a good Samaritan. They seemed too hard and cold and appraising.

Stacy Brock looked up at Doc Halpern and grinned.

"Who do we play next, Doc?" he asked. "We can't play too often. The gang is rolling now, getting better every game."

"Get us somebody good," Bunky Edwards put in cockily. "Maybe you can get us a game with the cops or firemen. That would be fun. We would love that."

Doc Halpern took a long drag on his cigar. In a soft-spoken voice, he said: "You're playing the high school team—next."

The Barons stared in amazement at one another. Then they were all trying to talk at once. The excited clamor of their voices filled the air.

"The school team," Bunky Edwards shouted above the din. "We'll swamp the bums. This is our chance to make them sorry for not giving us a fair tryout. We weren't good enough for them, huh? Boy, that game's gonna be something. It's gonna be a nice party—for us."

A trace of a smile played around the corners of Doc Halpern's mouth.

"I've agreed to a proposition with the school authorities," he said slowly. "If their team beats us we are to disband. You'll all become members of the regular school squad."

Shouts of jubilation froze on the Barons' lips. The very thought of joining hands with the Kingston team rankled deep inside them. Previously, they had all gone out for the school team, their hopes buoyed high.

But they had been quick to learn that there was no welcome mat out for guys who came from their side of the tracks. They had been trade-marked "trouble-makers" and that was very bad. Just who was behind that movement was a matter of conjecture. However, there had been rumors that old R. J. Conklin, the school board prexy, had the final say-so.

"They didn't want us before," Stacy said soberly. "Well, we don't want any part of them now. How come they're so willing to let us play on their team, Doc? Maybe they think they can bribe us into losing. But we're not falling for that kind of gag. We're gonna hand them one sweet pasting."

Doc Halpern's eyes rested keenly on Stacy.

"The school team has been practically forced into playing you," he explained. "The townspeople have been kicking up a lot of dust. The school team hasn't been showing up well. The fans want to know the reason when they've got material like you guys on the loose. They could even stand having you guys on their team. Provided you show 'em how to win ball games."

Stacy Brock turned, glanced probingly into the grimly determined faces of his pals. He was conscious of the Doc's stare upon him. Stacy knew the Doc realized that a word from him could cancel the whole affair. He was the leader of the pack and they stood behind him even more solidly than behind Doc Halpern.

"Okay, Doc," Stacy murmured. "It's a deal. We'll be out there to take those guys."

A grin twisted across Doc Halpern's lips.

"You've got nothing to lose," he said quietly. "It ought to be a cinch winning that one. All you'll have to do is stop their top man—Merle Conklin. That's going to be your job, Stacy."

The lines tightened a little around Stacy Brock's mouth. The familiarity of that name was like a cattle brand in his memory. It was Merle Conklin's old man who had double-crossed Stacy's dad. And Conklin Junior seemed like a chip off the old block.

"Just so his old man isn't the ref," Stacy said levelly, "I'll give him a good fight."

Doc Halpern put them through hard, arduous scrimmages during the week preceding the game. But that was all right with the Barons. They couldn't get enough of the game. Two days before the scheduled encounter with Kingston, Doc Halpern ordered another stiff workout.

Doc himself seemed on edge, being unusually severe in his discipline. Once when Stacy asked for a time out, the Doc refused to grant the request.

"What's the matter with you guys?" Doc demanded irritably. "Your tails are dragging. Get in there and show some scrap."

"We ain't complaining, Doc," Stacy

said thoughtfully. "But maybe we ought to save something for Kingston. We've been practicing pretty hard all week. Some of us are a little fagged out, I guess."

"I know what's best for you," Doc said rebukingly. "I've done all right by you so far. Let me do the worrying about Kingston."

In that instance the Doc's word was law. Nobody could dispute the fact that he had steered them along in victorious style. The Barons shuffled back to their positions. The scrimmage went on and there were no more calls for time out.

CHAPTER II

ON THE night of the game, the five guys piled out of the truck that Doc Halpern had hired to take them to the Kingston gym. At the entrance, milling fans, unable to get tickets, spotted the Barons, serenaded them with a nice salvo of jeers.

A policeman pushed his bulk in front of Stacy, splitting a path through the crowd. The five guys strutted on through, paying no heed to the caustic comments. Barons they were, kings for the nonce.

"Coppers," Hunky Edwards yapped disgustedly. "Always there's got to be coppers around. We don't want to raid the joint. We only want to play the bums."

Stacy grinned. "You're a bum and the coppers chase. A hero, and they escort you. You can't get away from the coppers, pal."

The husky, square-shouldered youth in the costly plaid topcoat looked up at the two guys, snickered as he handed the fur wrap of the blonde girl at his side to be checked. His name was Merle Conklin. He had a habit of looking down his nose at guys, especially the Hill Gang.

On more than one occasion they had knocked him loose from more than his pride. There had been the time when one of them had pulled a boyish prank on him. And Merle Conklin had picked on the guy nearest him, knocked him down with a "sneak" punch. That guy had been Stacy. He had gotten off the ground to slug it out with Merle Conklin in a give-and-take affair.

That was not the sole reason for Merle Conklin's attitude toward the Hill Gang. He could not understand their run-ins with the cops, their hell-for-leather way of doing things. To Merle Conklin the Hill Gang were riff-raff. And his actions clearly revealed his attitude.

"They fumigated the gym yesterday," Conklin said derisively, fixing his glance on Stacy. "They'll fumigate it again after the game. It isn't often they allow scum to contaminate the place."

Stacy stopped abruptly, started toward Merle Conklin, fists balled. A tiny knot of anger began to swell and burn inside of Stacy. His fists itched to wipe the smirk off Conklin's lips, exact vengeance for the nasty remark.

Then he saw the blonde, blue-eyed girl with the shoulder-length tresses, the clean, firm features. She looked directly at Stacy in a way that took all the storm out of his sails. Instead of the fighting retort that was on his lips, Stacy said:

"Maybe you're right about them having to fumigate the place after the game, Conklin. But maybe it will be because of the smell your team makes."

Merle Conklin laughed haughtily. He took a step toward Stacy. But the girl, a faint smile on her lips, put her hand on his arm.

"I think you'd better go to your dressing room, Merle," she said complacently. "We'll talk about it at the dance after the game."

Stacy stood there a moment. The girl looked at him, her glance lingering on him briefly. A flush crept into Stacy's cheeks. He turned, strode toward his own locker room. Behind him Bunky Edwards was muttering into his ear.

"You shoulda taken a poke at the guy. You let him get away with murder." Bunky stopped short, suddenly blurted, "That was Doc Halpern's daughter the big shot was trying to impress. Now ain't that a hot one! I oughta tell Doc on her, the traitor."

"Clam up, Bunky," Stacy snapped. "I guess she can talk to who she wants to."

Bunky ran his stubby fingers through his hair, gave Stacy a level stare. Then a wide grin broke over his lips. That grin

was more significant than words. Stacy had taken a shine to Doc Halpern's kid.

They went down into the spacious Kingston locker room, the five guys did. They got into their faded uniforms that seemed out of place with the atmosphere. But the Barons didn't mind that at all. They knew that the payoff is on the stuff inside a man, not the fancy embellishments. Doc Halpern called Stacy aside before sending them out there.

"You'll be in there the full game, Stacy," he said slowly. "It's going to be tough because these guys are going to shoot the works. They don't like the things the fans have been saying about them." The Doc paused. Then: "You feelin' okay, Stacy?"

"Yeah," Stacy said. "Don't worry about me. I'll do okay."

Doc Halpern's eyes held a strange, peculiar glint. He took a small envelope from his vest pocket.

"I don't want to take any chances on losing this game," he said firmly. "Maybe I was a little tougher on the gang in the practices than I thought. I've got a vitamin pill for you, Stacy, that will fix everything up. Give you that something extra when the pressure is on."

Stacy laughed, shook his head. "Hell, I don't need any vitamin stuff, Doc," he said, grinning. "Go pedal your vitamins to Merle Conklin. He might be needing them more than me."

But Doc Halpern was persistent. He went so far as to pour Stacy a cup of water, place the pellet in his hand. And Stacy laughingly gulped it down.

A MOMENT later, the Barons were racing onto the smooth Kingston court. It swept their breath away, the great crowd, the color and buzzing voices. The five guys were out of their element. It was funny, the way some of them stood out there gaping and staring and not knowing what to do. Then from the bleachers under the basket a throaty roar burst like a giant balloon.

"C'mon, Barons, rip into them! Tear the bums to pieces!"

"Show 'em how we do it on our side of the tracks! The old fight, guys!"

It was a humorous wrinkle, yes. The

sustained shout rolling out there like a single cloud in the sky. That and the comments drew plenty of laughter from the Kingston adherents.

But it wasn't funny to Stacy and his pals. Stacy knew at what price some of the "Hill" fans had gone to scrape up the necessary admission. It meant that a lot of them would be passing up their lunch the following day. Stacy clapped his hands briskly.

"Shake it up, gang," he yelled. "We got friends here."

The five guys were quick to get their bearings. They flipped the leather around in a lively warm-up session. Stacy was taking his practice foul heaves when he experienced a sudden, sagging feeling. He missed three straight tosses.

He stepped back from the free-throw mark, toed the line again and sank the next two. The feeling was gone as quickly as it had come. Stacy didn't give it a second thought. The ref's whistle was a call to clear the decks.

The Kingston players peeled off their bright green sweat togs. They were a tall, rangy crew of sharpshooters. Even though they were something of a doormat in the North League, they certainly were a threat. Their low standing could partially be attributed to the fact that they competed in one of the fastest scholastic loops in the state.

There were no feeling-out tactics by either team. Hank Eldridge, leaping into the air like a kangaroo, practically batted the ball to Stacy. No waste motion to the sizzling attack the Barons uncorked. They swept down the floor, their passing swift and sure. Almost before Kingston could throw up their territory zone defense, Stacy had whipped a pass to Bunky, scooting down the middle lane. Bunky took it in stride, laid it away cleanly.

The rapidity and precision of the counter caused the Kingston partisans to sit back stunned and nursing a premonition of terrible things to come.

"A bunch of flatfoot floogies," Bunky Edwards chirped. "They ain't rubbed the sand out of their eyes yet. Turn on the heat, guys."

The five guys did. Kingston tried to

storm the ball up the hardwood. Their attacks broke fast, revolving around their star forward, Merle Conklin. His teammates blanketed, Conklin poised himself for a mid-court heave. The melon flew from his hands.

It didn't go far. Out of nowhere came Stacy Brock to slap it down. Both players lunged for the skittering spheroid. Stacy got there first, scooping it to Dinny Sherdel and beating Merle Conklin to the punch. But Conklin got in a different kind of punch. A digging knee that smacked against Stacy's midriff.

Kingston men scurried back into position. Dinny Sherdel stood in his tracks, a grin on his lips, and fired a long one. The ball snapped the strings, registering again for the Barons. Seconds later, Hank Eldridge pulled one of his spectacular shots out of the bag. It dropped through, a one-handed pivot beauty.

The score mounted heavily in favor of the Barons. Their whirlwind attack was paying dividends, sweeping the school team off their feet. Reb Ruffin cuffed in a rebound. Then Bunky Edwards split the mesh, dumping in a snowbird. Under this terrific rain of points, Kingston wilted. At the end of the first period, the Barons held an amazing 15-1 advantage.

THE second quarter started out with the Barons threatening to make a farce out of the contest. Stacy grabbed a loose ball in the foul circle. Directly in front of him loomed Merle Conklin, his face twisted in a challenging sneer. Stacy accepted the challenge. He feinted a pass, drawing Conklin with him. Stacy wheeled in the opposite direction, twisting loose and dribbling in on the unprotected goal.

It hung up there like a big, red apple ready to be plucked. Stacy laid the leather against the backboard. He heard the sardonic chuckle that rolled off Merle Conklin's lips and knew he had blown the bunny shot. Practically the same thing happened a couple minutes later. Five times in all, Stacy flubbed a variety of shots. Once he even missed the backboard.

There was no accounting for Stacy's berserk shooting exhibition. Stacy went

back to concentrating on his passing, figuring that he was having an off-night. But even in this department, the fire seemed to have gone out of his game. A listlessness that he couldn't shake off settled in his bones. With less than the game half played, he felt tired and fagged out.

Merle Conklin was quick to take advantage of Stacy's lapse. Snatching a pass, he cut around Stacy, caged a two-pointer. He came right back with another bucket when Stacy was slow covering on a thrust down the right wing.

Stacy felt greatly relieved when the gun sounded, closing out the first half. He was tired and exhausted and at a loss to explain the reason.

The Barons didn't seem downcast over Stacy's poor showing. They had confidence in Stacy. He had always come through for them in the past. Besides, the Barons were out in front, 21-7. The outlook seemed very bright. They started back to the court to finish their business in happy spirits.

Instinctively looking up, Stacy noticed Doc Halpern giving him a raking stare. Stacy thought he detected a flinty flicker in Doc's eyes. Doubt began to swirl and cloud Stacy's mind. The vitamin pill! The Doc had insisted that he swallow it. But its effects were the opposite of what Doc Halpern claimed they would be.

Then Stacy laughed at himself. It was incredible, the thought of Doc trying to pull a fast one on him. It didn't make sense.

Stacy knew something was definitely wrong when play got under way again. Kingston started out with a rush. They swung past mid-court, snapping short, fast passes. Pass they could. But when it came to shaking a man loose, that was another matter. The Barons, guarding close, battling every minute, had the Kingston attack bottled up.

The ball flew to Merle Conklin. He snared it, stopped short and made a lightning maneuver to the left. He broke one step ahead of Stacy for the basket. That was enough. He dribbled in, scored.

That was only the beginning. Merle Conklin dropped in three more buckets in

startling succession. Paced by Conklin, Kingston got hot. Long throws, short ones and one-handers began to pour through the hoop. The Barons' defense was being punched full of holes.

Stacy, the backbone of that defense, was cracking wide open. The whole house was coming down with him. With Merle Conklin running wild, Kingston gradually crept within striking distance. In the waning minutes of the final period, Stacy walked over to the ref, called a time-out.

The Barons clustered around him, the severe strain of the game etched on their grim, taut faces.

"I ain't doing you guys any good," Stacy said, his voice a little shrill. "You'll do better with somebody else in there. I'm going to have Doc take me out."

"Heck, we're only foolin' with 'em," Bunky Edwards piped. "You'll get going, pal. That Conklin guy must have been picking four leaf clovers all day."

Stacy shook his head. "He's not lucky a-tall. He's been playing me into the next county."

That was Stacy. No alibis. Just a plain statement that he didn't have the stuff. But not a word about the suspicion in his mind that something was drastically wrong. Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Hank Eldridge said:

"We want you to stay in, pal. If we gotta take a licking, we know how. We've taken plenty of the other kind. But it wouldn't be any fun without you in here."

A loyal gang they were. Regular musketeers. They would rather take it on the chin than admit he had let them down.

"I'll stick," Stacy decided finally. "You couldn't get me out of here for anything now."

The five guys went back to their positions to wage a last-ditch fight. Merle Conklin jutted his jaw in front of Stacy. The gloating, satisfied light in Conklin's eyes dug deep into Stacy.

"All noise and no guts," Conklin said tightly. "This is one time when the rats get driven back into the gutter."

STACY swallowed hard. It was tough, standing there and having to take that kind of stuff. But Stacy knew there

are times when even the toughest guys can't fight back. That's what makes tough guys.

No matter how hard Stacy tried to collar Merle Conklin in those final minutes, he found himself helpless. He could not get off a dime and his feet felt rooted to the floor. Stacy was the "motorman" of the five guys. And now the motor had stalled.

Kingston came down the floor. Conklin slid around Stacy, looped in another two-pointer. That was the marker that put his team out in front. It didn't matter much after that. Kingston swept to a shining 37-33 triumph.

The five guys trooped off the court, beaten and battered and wondering how it had all happened. There was no consoling them in the locker room, either. Doc Halpern came in, closed the door behind him.

"Tough luck, guys," he said. "You can't win 'em all. But it won't be too bad playing on the school squad. A couple of you guys and Conklin, and Kingston will have a ball club."

Nobody said anything. The sudden thought of the Doc's agreement with the school authorities dawned realistically on them. That meant they would have to disband, join forces with the school team. They were shocked into deeper silence.

Doc Halpern shrugged, started toward the door. Then Stacy spoke up, his voice halting the Doc in his tracks.

"That vitamin pill, Doc," he said hesitantly. "Maybe it don't work right on me. I felt lousy out there. Maybe it wasn't the kind you thought it was, Doc."

Doc Halpern's eyes flashed angrily for a moment. Then a slow, thin smile etched over his lips.

"If you're looking for an alibi, Stacy," he said pointedly, "you'll have to cook up a better one than that. A better one would be Merle Conklin. He ran all over you, made you look like two cents. Maybe you can't take it, Stacy."

The red crept up the back of Stacy's neck. He was sorry he had mentioned the capsule Doc Halpern had given him before the game. It was against the code of a "Hill" guy to alibi. And even though he hadn't meant it as an alibi, Stacy could

see the skepticism in the faces of his pals.

It was nice, the school dance after the game. The soft strains of the orchestra making a couple of hundred young hearts beat a little faster. The five guys, not knowing what to do with themselves and feeling very much out of their element, stood around in a group.

Stacy, looking out on the floor, saw Merle Conklin whirling on the floor with Doc Halpern's daughter. They danced toward Stacy, and Patty Halpern, glancing over the Kingston star's broad shoulders, smiled faintly at Stacy. The music stopped and she looked directly at Stacy on the sidelines.

"You're not dancing, Stacy," she said, frowning a little. "It's good for you."

Stacy tried to grin, but it was like stirring hard concrete. "I'm not much on that stuff," he managed. "Besides, I don't have a girl."

"He's not much of anything," Merle Conklin put in bluntly. "He isn't even much of a basketball player."

Conklin put his hand on Patty's arm, tried to steer her to another part of the floor. But Patty politely ignored his attentions. She smiled at Stacy.

"I'd like you to dance with me, Stacy," she said directly. "I'm sure it would be all right with Merle."

Stacy's knees turned to rubber. He heard the muffled snorts of his teammates. He looked at Merle Conklin and it wasn't encouraging. Behind him drifted Bunky Edwards' prodding voice.

"You ought to see Stacy dance. He's really wonderful. I'll bet there isn't another dancer like Stacy anywhere."

The twinkles were swimming in Patty's eyes. The orchestra started playing and Stacy took his courage in his hands and sallied out on the floor. It was amazing how Patty kept from being bowled over. But she did, and pretty soon Stacy was doing a bit okay.

"Not as good as advertised," Patty said lightly. "But good. I think your pal had to dare you into making you dance with me."

"They're a great gang," Stacy said. "This was the ball game they wanted to win. I messed it up on them. We'll have

to break up the Barons now and play on the school team. I guess we kinda let Doc down, too."

Patty looked up, shook her pretty blond head. "It won't be giving away a secret, but Kingston has hired dad as assistant coach. So he hasn't given up on you, at all."

Stacy's brows went up. "That's fine. The gang will like that news. He's done okay by us."

She nodded, looked at Stacy strangely. "I've seen you play before, Stacy. Was there something the matter tonight? It isn't like you to—well—blow up."

Patty's eyes were probing, searching his face.

"Just plain lousy," Stacy remarked. "That's what the matter was."

Patty seemed to relax, the tension went out of her face. Striding toward them was Merle Conklin and Stacy had a pretty good idea his dance with Patty was over. Patty must have had the same thought. She smiled, said. "Keep your chin up."

CHAPTER III

THERE wasn't a quitter among the five guys. They kept their bargain to join the school squad, showing up at the regular Monday practice session. Stacy led them on the floor, not knowing quite what to expect. In jig-time they discovered the trend of the current. Stacy strolled over to Merle Conklin, put out his hand and grinned.

"Let's start over, pal," Stacy said. "I guess you and me sorta got off on the wrong foot. But we're all one gang now. The season is still young. We can still cop the pennant. Whattaya say, Merle?"

Merle looked down at the proffered hand, the corners of his mouth dipping in an arrogant grin.

"Yeah," he scoffed, ignoring the hand. "We're all one gang. That's what you'd like to think, Brock."

He picked up the leather at his feet, turned and walked to the opposite end of the court. The other members of the Kingston team followed. Stacy stood in his tracks, tried to grin. He bit into his lip, stared at his gaping teammates.

"This isn't a museum, guys," he said. "Let's snap into it."

All during the warm-up drill, the five guys stayed on their own end of the court. That's the way it always had been. A line being drawn and the five guys not being able to cross it. They went through the motions, shooting and cutting and loosening up. But the five guys moved with dampened spirits. They had their place and it apparently wasn't on the Kingston squad.

On the sidelines stood a tall, dark figure. Coach Heffner, a poker-faced individual in his initial season at the helm of the Kingston team, was watching and saying nothing. Then sidling alongside him was Doc Halpern. The Doc looked down the court, clasped his hands and mitted the five guys. The gesture brought a rumbling cheer out of the throats of the Barons.

"Yea, Doc," Bunky shouted. "So there really is a doctor in the house. Hah!"

Bunky thought that remark was very funny. But not Stacy. The whole business was beginning to have a fishy smell. The deal Doc Halpern had made with the school authorities and his popping up as assistant coach. Then too, Doc's practically forcing that vitamin capsule down his throat. Even more important was that Stacy had since learned that somebody had made a nice killing on the game.

The Hill followers had pooled their hard-earned dollars, backed the Barons. It had been a case of put up or shut up. A Hill guy seldom backed down from that kind of proposition. The slicker putting his dough on Kingston had named his own odds, the Barons being overwhelming favorites to notch that one.

There were a lot of loose links. Stacy had nothing authentic to substantiate his suspicions that Doc Halpern had been the guy holding the sugar-bait. Nevertheless, the suspicion lurked in his mind. He couldn't shake it off.

Coach Heffner shrilled his whistle, calling the squad together. The coach didn't mince any words. They came right out of his square jaw and rang the bell.

"We've got one team, one squad, one

school," he said bluntly. "Get that straight and forget the funny stuff. There are things I can be very dumb about. I can't understand what difference the social standing of my players makes. I'm interested in a winning team and I'll get one—without friction."

Coach Heffner paused, scanned the squad. He added: "Every position on the team is wide open. We start scrimmaging right now. The best men get the varsity jobs."

He said no more. That was dynamite enough. Bunky winked at Stacy, nudged him in the ribs.

"I guess ole Doc wised him up," Bunky murmured. "The Doc is lookin' out for us. They're not gonna get away with stuff while Doc is around."

"Maybe," Stacy conceded. "And maybe the coach has a mind of his own."

The five guys scrimmaged the varsity. It was a vastly different story from the previous encounter. Hank Eldridge gave the tap to Bunky and Stacy went down on a guard play. He streaked in, dropped in a snowbird, leaving Merle Conklin flat-footed.

Stacy came right back to stop Conklin's attempt at a goal. Leaping into the air with him, Stacy knocked the leather from his hands. Bingo. Stacy passed for another counter. Then he fell back and split the strings from mid-court. It wasn't even a good scrimmage. It was a slaughter, the five guys winning going away when Coach Heffner called a halt.

Bunky Edwards shook his head, puzzled. "How'd these bums ever beat us?" he asked Stacy. "I don't believe it ever happened."

The lines around Stacy's mouth tightened a little. "Yeah, it was funny, huh?"

IN THE scrimmages that followed, the result was the same each time. The varsity was no match for the five guys. On that basis, the five guys became the Kingston varsity with one exception. Merle Conklin retained a forward post. He was good. There was no denying that. With Merle Conklin in the lineup, Kingston became a harder, more deadly striking aggregation.

Stacy's mind could not be at peace with itself while clogged with doubts concerning Doc Halpern. He cooked up a little experiment and on the final practice session before the Exeter tilt, he sprang it. Stacy waited till Coach Heffner was within earshot. Then he turned to Doc Halpern.

"Doc, you got any more of those vitamin pills?" he queried. "The kind you gave me before we played Kingston. I'd like to try 'em out again. Maybe I was all wrong thinking they had something to do with me playing so lousy."

Doc Halpern got very red around the gills. "Still trying to alibi," he snapped. "You better smarten up and keep your trap shut about that nonsense."

The coloring in Doc Halpern's face went blood-red when Coach Heffner wheeled around. Heffner stared at Stacy, then at Doc Halpern, and his eyes narrowed.

"I'm surprised, Stacy. A husky guy like you going in for vitamin pills. Don't tell me Doc had you take one before you played us."

"I was trying to help him," Doc said coldly.

"The way Stacy played that night he must have had a carton of lead in his feet," Heffner said, looking directly at Doc Halpern. "I don't suppose that pill could have gone to his feet."

Doc Halpern mumbled something incoherent and that was the first sign of a rift between the two men. Stacy needed no microscope to see that the Doc and Coach Heffner weren't as close as two fingers. There was a definite coolness between them. Not something that had just started, either. But something on which the fuse had previously been lighted. Of one thing, Stacy felt certain. Coach Heffner was a two-fisted guy not in the habit of backwatering to anybody.

Kingston humbled Exeter. The team operated with a nice, smooth precision. Merle Conklin flipped in ten points. But the real star of the fray was Stacy. He was all over the court, brilliant as a shining star. The next four games definitely established Stacy as the team's top man.

Whatever Merle Conklin's reaction was

to Stacy's ascendancy, he gave no clue. The fact, however, was that he went out of his way to be cordial to the other players, notably Bunky Edwards. The inconsistency puzzled Stacy.

Stacy sensed that the iron Merle Conklin had in the fire was getting hotter, that it would strike soon. The eruption came at the "skull" session Kingston held each week. When the players entered the room, Doc and Coach Heffner were in a heated confab. Suddenly Doc Halpern's voice flared loud and distinct.

"You're out to get me, Heffner," he bristled. "You think that by making Stacy the star you can turn those kids against me. Well, they'll walk out on you before you can get away with that kind of stuff. Go ahead and ask them and find out for yourself. It's you or me, Heffner."

Coach Heffner smiled grimly. "All right, we'll ask them since you want it that way. But maybe I better let them know that I don't think you're the right kind of a man to handle them. I'm more convinced now than ever. My reasons are my own."

Bunky Edwards turned to Stacy, his eyes hot and excited.

"He's trying to put the screws on Doc. He can't do that. Get up and tell him we won't let him, Stacy. Tell him for all of us."

Stacy got to his feet, scanned the faces of the players. Doc Halpern was a Messiah to them. He could do no wrong. Yet Stacy was certain Coach Heffner had not tried to frame Doc, to jerk him out of his job because of any personal feelings. He liked the coach's straight-from-the-shoulder way of doing things. How on that initial day of practice, Coach Heffner had gone to bat for his pals.

Stacy did not say what was expected of him. He said, "I'm not walking out on anybody. I'm going to keep taking my orders from Coach Heffner. He's done okay by all of us."

"Sure, he's willing to string along with Heffner," Merle Conklin interpolated. "Stacy likes being the star. That's all he cares about. But he's a traitor to the Doc and the rest of us and he knows it."

MERLE CONKLIN said a lot more. He said it with eloquence and great persuasion. That was Merle Conklin's ace card and he played it for a grand slam. You'd think he had been one of the five guys all his life. But he did not fool Stacy.

No one knew better than Stacy how much Conklin resented his being in the catbird seat. He'd much rather Coach Heffner had built the team around him. But the coach had not succumbed to the pressure, not even to the heavy hand of Conklin's old man hanging over him.

Coach Heffner said, "This thing will be settled later. Right now we have a blackboard drill coming up."

The whole thing came out in the wash that night in the game against Jenkins High. The passing was slovenly and the Kingston attack floundered hopelessly.

Stacy found himself practically ignored. The only time he got his hands on the leather was when he dug it out of a scramble himself. Jenkins High wasted no time making the best of a bad situation. As early as the second period they had run up a commanding lead.

Coach Heffner countered by yanking the varsity, leaving only Stacy in the game to direct the reserves. As the four players started toward the sidelines, Bunky Edwards looked back over his shoulder.

"Ain't you the nice guy — coach's pet!" he said bitterly. "You quit cold on Doc and us. But not even you can get away with that kind of stuff. You'll find that out, Stacy."

That hurt, coming from Bunky. He was now an outcast among outcasts. His pals winced and dined, and tricked by Merle Conklin, had grown fat around the ears. Conklin had manipulated things nicely to gain their friendship.

Stacy held no malice for Bunky and the others. They never had much to start with and Conklin had put a glitter in front of their eyes. The glitter had blinded them. He had chauffeured them around the town in his convertible, let them have fun while he paid the fiddler. It all meant that the gashouse gang had been broken up.

Kingston lost that game and the defeat practically blew them out of the league pennant race. Even the scrubs conspired to grease the slide for Stacy. He looked pitiful in there, trying to get the team clicking and having every move he made jeered. The fans howled for Coach Heffner to take him out, put back the regulars. It wasn't till the last couple of minutes that the coach did that.

Coach Heffner had a sweater ready to wrap around Stacy's shoulders when he got to the bench. A volley of boos were ringing in Stacy's ears from all sides.

"Grin, Stacy, grin," Heffner said, his voice warm and understanding. "Never let them think they can hurt you with words."

And Stacy grinned. He grinned and brushed his hand over his eyes to hide the wetness. Amid the boos and hisses, he heard the lonely clap of hands behind the Kingston bench. Patty Halpern smiled at him and that was his sunshine. And somehow, Stacy didn't mind the snickers, the derogatory comments that ran up and down the bench.

That same night, Merle Conklin's convertible drove up in front of the one-story dump on the corner where Stacy lived. Conklin and Bunky and the others piled out and trooped into the house. There were nine names on the petition Conklin handed Stacy.

"This is your last chance, Stacy," Conklin announced. "You either sign this petition to get rid of Heffner or else—"

Stacy looked at Conklin, Bunky and the others. Well, here it was. It had come down to a choice between Doc and Coach Heffner. They were trying to put across the final coup that would give the reins to Doc Halpern. It wasn't justice. It wasn't even being fair to themselves.

"Nobody is going to listen to your sour grapes," Stacy commented. "You want to put the skids under Heff because he hasn't put whipped cream in your coffee. He's given you a fair shake but that isn't good enough. It's gotta be everything or nothing with you guys. Okay, go ahead and get it. But you'll have to get it without my name on the lousy paper."

"We'll get Heffner out of there or quit," Bunky Edwards blurted. "Heffner won't have a team to coach then."

"I'm sure there won't be any difficulty along that line," Merle Conklin cut in. "My father, you know, is president of the school board."

THE school board met and it was all a very cut-and-dried proposition. R. J. Conklin announced that action would be taken on the petition. It was. Kingston got a new head coach. His name was Doc Halpern.

Several days later, Heffner called Stacy into his office. The deposed coach looked tired.

"I saw the petition, Stacy," he started. "Your name wasn't on it. That was a pretty big thing to do. But they'll bear down on you now. Stick in there, boy. You've got a good chin. It's not made of glass."

Stacy shook his head a little. "I guess Conklin got his way again."

"It was a mistake coming here," Heffner said thoughtfully. "I thought I could do something useful. But it's a one-man school here. I couldn't be a yes-man to old R. J. Conklin when I know I'm right. He wanted a one-man team and you guys were to be the trimmings. I don't do things that way."

"That means you'll have to look for another job," Stacy said, concerned. "It was a bum ride they gave you."

Heffner grinned wryly, shook his head. "There's no worry on that score, Stacy. My old job is waiting for me. Just make sure you don't let Doc feed you any more of those vitamin pills."

There was something in the way Heffner said that, that caused Stacy's head to jerk up.

"Then you don't think that was a vitamin pill?"

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't," Heffner said evenly. "One vitamin pill can't work a miracle. But even if Doc slipped over a fast one, you couldn't prove anything."

Stacy's brows clouded. "How come Doc picked on me," he asked. "I figured he wanted to win that game."

Heffner smiled skeptically. "You were the key man on the Barons," he explained.

"And it was up to you to stop Conklin. Besides, I know definitely that there was a lot of wise dough on Kingston to win. I guess if you came right down to it, Doc and old R. J. Conklin know all the answers. But you won't find any finger prints around."

Stacy thought of Patty. He wondered how Patty could be so fine and fair and unlike Doc. His hurts were trivial to what hers would be should the finger ever be pointed at Doc.

"I guess there's nothing to do but forget it," Stacy said. "I'd rather have it that way, because of—"

Heffner looked at Stacy searchingly. "A girl, Stacy? The one who cheered you when the fans were booing?"

Stacy hesitated, but the look on Coach Heffner's face showed he understood.

"Yeah, Patty Halpern," Stacy admitted.

CHAPTER IV

KINGSTON began to surge upward under Doc Halpern's direction. Doc cannily maneuvered Merle Conklin into the glory-seat, building his bridges around him. It was nice stuff and Doc could get away with it. Conklin had "bought" his way in with the gang. They didn't seem to mind pulling the chains.

Stacy wasn't a part of the victory parade. He sat on the bench game after game. But he could see things. Each triumph was getting tougher to notch than the previous. The opposing teams were getting wise to the system that starred Merle Conklin and were beginning to clamp down on him. Games that would have been routs for Kingston under Heffner's five-man system became close, hard struggles.

The Luzerne game bore out Stacy's thoughts. Leaders of the loop, Luzerne had a fast, aggressive outfit. They played Merle Conklin to a standstill and Kingston trailed badly at the half. It was a rough, hard game. In the third period, Hank Eldridge went out of the game with four personal fouls marked against him. At the beginning of the final quarter, Dinny Sherdel got thumbed out for

the same reason. Luzerne roared out in front, 27-21.

It was then that Doc Halpern, desperate to stop the Luzerne charge, stood up, poked a finger at Stacy.

"Get in there, Stacy," he clipped. "Feed that ball to Conklin. He's our only chance."

It was the pressure and nothing else that had forced Doc to play Stacy. He hadn't the reserves to dip into to come up with a winner. Stacy went out on the floor and his reception was frost-bitten. They stared and frowned, accepting him as something borrowed in an emergency.

Kingston had the ball on a throw-in. Stacy lined it to Bunky whipping down the right alley. The Luzerne zone defense squeezed tight around Bunky. He flipped to Merle Conklin. There was an opening between Bunky and the Luzerne guard. Stacy knifed through, dug for the hoop, the green light looming ahead. But there was no pass forthcoming. Merle Conklin, instead, tried to angle one from the side pocket. He missed.

Something flared inside Stacy. He was tired of the cold-water treatment, tired of Doc Halpern's system that featured Conklin over the team. It was time he came out of the doghouse. If they wanted a show, he was going to be in on it. Not the chorus, either.

A Luzerne sortie carried to mid-floor. There it was stopped abruptly. Checking his man close, Stacy snagged a bounce-pass. He straightened, pushed the leather in a high arc. It was a daisy, hitting the target like a soft bomb, causing an eruption of noise from the Kingston stands.

Luzerne put the leather in play again. Stacy engaged a forward in a regular dogfight under the basket. He came out on top of that one. He scooped up the loose melon, pivoted all the way around. In the same motion, Stacy lifted the ball with one hand over his shoulder. The shot clicked for another basket.

Stacy couldn't miss. He was a one-man tornado roaring up and down the boards. He was shelling away at the hoop with deadly aim. He was hot.

Single-handedly, Stacy was blasting the Luzerne attack to pieces. He stalled

their offensive, whittled down their lead. He pulled the trigger on another long heave. It pumped through the twine. The roar grew, became a deafening din.

"Kill that ball," Stacy heard Bunky shouting. "Lay off the shooting, Stacy."

In the fury that pounded at Stacy's temples, the words had no meaning. He didn't know how the scoreboard tally read. All Stacy knew was that Luzerne was attacking with a savage abandon. He wanted to tear the ball loose and keep rattling home the points.

BUNKY EDWARDS grabbed a rebound and let loose a pass to Conklin. Stacy wheeling, cut directly in front of Merle Conklin, hooking the ball with one hand. He spun on a dime, slashed between two Luzerne men and dribbled into the clear. Stacy whirled down the floor in a solo flight, dribbling furiously. He flashed in on the basket. A hand hacked down over his shoulder, knocking him to the hardwood as he let the ball fly. The ref's whistle shrieked. Two fouls.

Stacy toed the free-throw mark. It was only then that the fury in his soul began to deaden. He glanced at the scoreboard. It read: Kingston 38, Luzerne 35. Stacy sank both shots. With the sound of the gun, an earful of syllables blasted in Stacy's ears.

"You dirty, chiseling glory hound," Merle Conklin snarled. "So you think you got away with something bright, huh. Okay, fella, this fixes your wagon for good."

Stacy laughed shakily. "I had myself a time and I'm not beefing. That one was on the house. I won't mind sitting the rest of 'em out on the bench."

There was no laughter in Stacy's heart that night as he started his trek home. The moon shone bright and Stacy walked along the silent, lonely streets enmeshed in his thoughts. It didn't matter that he was washed up with the team. He could stand that. But somehow, his heart ached for the companionship of Bunky and the old gang.

It ached, too, because Coach Heffner had already left his post at the school and Stacy missed that hand on his shoul-

der. He might have stayed for the dance after the game and found out Patty's reaction to the whole affair. But there, too, Stacy was stymied. He was only making things more difficult for Patty. It went without saying that Doc Halpern resented his seeing Patty. Doc had as much as told Stacy so.

It was beginning to rain when Stacy arrived within a block of his house. It dawned on him that the house would be empty. On week-ends, his mother toiled in the kitchen for a family on the other side of the tracks. Stacy pulled the brim of his hat down, pulled up his collar and turned down a side street. He wanted to walk and be alone.

Back at the school, the music was swinging and light-hearted couples were swaying. Patty Halpern gazed steadily at Merle Conklin, her blue eyes stormy.

"It just doesn't seem fair," she said quietly, "the way you have been gang-ing up on Stacy. He stole the show on you tonight and you're sore. He was the best man on the floor—in spite of you."

"Go ahead and defend him," Conklin said angrily. "He's just plain gutter-tripe. He even deserted your father for Heffner."

Patty's face whitened, and her lips curved in a defiant line. "Stacy stood up for his convictions," she said tensely. "He wasn't afraid and he didn't run away. I don't care what you think of him. I like him."

"You actually like Stacy," Conklin said incredulously. "Well, I think you better have nothing more to do with him."

The music stopped and Patty, lips tight and eyes blazing, said, "I'll decide that. And right now I'm deciding that I don't want to be here with you."

She whirled on her heel and made her way toward an exit. Merle Conklin stood there, anger coloring his cheeks. A short time later, he stomped out onto the street to where his car was parked a block from the school.

He climbed in, slammed the door shut and stepped on the starter. The car lurched forward, its motor roaring. Conk-

lin pressed his foot against the pedal and sped ahead on the highway. The rain spattered against his windshield. The light ahead flashed red. But Conklin kept his foot on the pedal without slackening his speed.

Another red light loomed. He was barely past this one when another car seemed to leap from a side street. There was a sudden grinding of gears and Merle Conklin's car swerved crazily on the slippery concrete. Instinctively, he jerked at the wheel. Too late. He heard the smashing of fenders, felt the jolt of his convertible sideswiping the other car and bouncing it off the road.

A panicky chill ran up his spine. His only thought was to get away from the scene as quickly as possible. Merle Conklin jammed down hard on the pedal, sped away in flight. A hundred desperate measures pinwheeled through his mind. Then suddenly something clicked. He leaned back on the seat, a smirk of satisfaction on his lips.

IT WAS late the next day when a detective picked up Stacy Brock. He was taken to police headquarters and booked on robbery and leaving the scene of an accident.

"But I didn't steal any car," Stacy protested. "I don't know what it's all about."

The detective smiled unbelievably. "That's what they all say. Conklin's car was found in a vacant lot near where you live. Not only that, but your coach, Doc Halpern, saw you drive away in the car. The ignition keys were found in your locker. You had an argument with Merle Conklin after the game. You decided to get even by stealing his car. It's an airtight case. Lucky for you, the guy in the other car wasn't hurt much. He got the license number."

Stacy stood stricken in his tracks, dumbfounded by the accusation. It all seemed like some terrible nightmare. It was obvious that Merle Conklin and Doc Halpern had framed him. But Stacy couldn't think of any way to prove his innocence.

"I haven't got an alibi," he said. "I

didn't think you needed one when you've done nothing wrong."

The judge went "easy" on Stacy. He gave him a severe lecture and sentenced him to the reform school.

CHAPTER V

SO IT was that Stacy Brock, hard guy with a soft heart, walked through the entrance of the Maxwell Institute, the gates closing behind him. A guard led him past several drab-colored structures and into the main building. Stacy was taken into a plainly furnished office. There a bushy-browed man, the headmaster of the school, looked up from his desk at Stacy. He explained the rules in a stern but not unkind voice.

"We believe here, Stacy," he concluded "that every boy has an interest of some kind, that there is some good stuff in all the boys. Our job is to bring out the good and bury the bad. I've studied your case and I'm placing you under the direct supervision of our athletic director."

He spoke briefly to the guard and a few minutes later the guard returned, a tall, dark man following him. Stacy stared wide-eyed. It was Coach Heffner.

Heffner said, "Those things happen, Stacy. You don't have to explain to me. The main thing is to keep that chin up."

"They framed me," Stacy said, finding voice. "Honest, I didn't steal Conklin's car."

"We won't worry about that now, Stacy," Heffner said quietly. "Things aren't too bad here. We're quite sports-minded. We've got a pretty good basketball team. Our schedule calls for games with prep and college frosh teams. You'll take to our system, Stacy."

Maxwell Institute had a nationwide reputation for its modern, social reform methods. One of its latest experiments was booking games with high school and prep teams. It was something novel, but the reform school board left no stone unturned when it came to rehabilitating the boys. But it was not a case of all fun and no work.

Stacy discovered that soon enough. Locked from the outside world by gray

walls and ever watchful guards, he toiled in the shops, fell into the routine. They were grim, hard days that seemed to stretch endlessly. Stacy Brock had started paying the price for a crime he had not committed.

It was toward the fag-end of the season when Stacy joined Coach Heffner's court team. Heffner did not start Stacy against Middleberry Prep.

"Sit this one out awhile, Stacy," he told him. "It's a good ball club but that little something is missing. I got an idea you can get them in the groove."

Stacy couldn't see anything amiss in the first few minutes. Middleberry was employing a zone defense. That didn't seem to bother the Institute much. Matt Wasco, the big, blond pivot man, snared the leather out of a *mêlée* and sunk a dazzler. Middleberry moved the ball down the floor.

Out of nowhere sprang Ziggy Peters, a human flash of chain lightning. He stuck out a hand, intercepted the leather and stopped dead. He flicked his wrists, dropped a long one through as pretty as could be. The Institute set a blistering pace, scoring seven points before Middleberry caught its breath.

Then just as swiftly the tide began to change. Middleberry shifted to a man-to-man defense. Matt Wasco tried to turn loose a long-range toss. The leather was blocked as it slid off his fingertips. Middleberry rushed it down the floor, scored. The Institute came swirling back, Ziggy Peters breaking fast under the basket. The pass drifted in. He hesitated, broke his stride and flubbed a lay-up shot. Again, Middleberry roared for another counter.

That's the way it went. The Institute did okay as long as their mid-court blasts connected. But when it came down to a close-knitted defense and smooth ball-handling, the touch was missing.

STACY saw the daylight. It all boiled down to one thing. Their passing attack lacked the necessary split-second timing. It put a crimp in their whole game and was costing them double. Middleberry was scoring when they should

have been scored upon. At the half, Institute trailed, 24-14.

Between halves, Coach Heffner took Stacy aside. "They're all good shooters and bad passers," he said. "Go in and pull them together."

Matt Wasco slapped the tap-off to a forward. It was hurry-hurry stuff, the ball flying here, there and everywhere. Stacy didn't even get a smell of the spheroid. It ended up in possession of Middleberry.

They shook a man loose and in the clear. From a side angle, Stacy closed in on him. Stacy cleanly spanked the ball from his grasp, scooped it up.

Stacy worked the ball up the court with the curly-headed guard named Barney Hoban. They got past the center line and Hoban drew back his arm for a long pitch ahead of him.

"Pass that biscuit here, pappy," Stacy cautioned. "We've got no train to catch."

Back and forth the leather shuttled, Stacy calling each pass. His teammates were hollering and cutting for the basket, beseeching Stacy to get rid of it. Stacy let them cool off, giving them a chance to steady themselves. He kept feeling out the defense with feints, short flips, each time motioning for a return pass.

Again the melon flew back to Stacy. His forwards criss-crossed. And this time, Stacy made a lightning maneuver, faking to Barney Hoban and looping an overhand pass to Ziggy Peters. Peters cradled it in his hands, dunked it into the net for a two-pointer. He looked at Stacy, turned on a big grin.

"We got a passer," he said jubilantly. "This is gonna work out fine. Shoot me some more, palsy."

Middleberry found themselves in a predicament. Stacy was a one-man scourge, stepping high and fancy. Middleberry began rushing him, using two players to pin him down. That suited Stacy fine. He stayed in the backcourt, fed the ball through the defense to the loose man. When Middleberry caught wise to these tactics, Stacy stood on a dime and split the mesh with two flips in succession from his department.

In the final minutes, the opposition

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clinging desperately to their lead, Stacy whirled around his man. He dribbled in all by his lonesome to put the Institute out in the van. The Institute won that game. They copped their next three games and the season ran to a close.

"Next season we will be undefeated," Ziggy boasted. "We ain't got a graduate in the bunch. Now if we could only get a couple good reserves...."

Coach Heffner grinned wryly. Then he looked directly at Stacy. "I've got a lot of plans for next season. Might even come up with a few surprises."

IT WAS a long year between seasons. The recreation periods relieved some of the monotony. But the routine and drudgery made a heavy blow to withstand.

Stacy worked hard in the shops, the fields. He plunged into his chores trying to forget the agony in his heart. He tried to down the vagrant thoughts of Patty Halpern. Of the fact that he had been framed. These things time would heal. But his blasted hopes, shattered ideals would always be a scar upon his heart.

The Institute started right where they left off the previous season. They belted Baisley Prep, 53-21. Next it was Keystone to take a drubbing. They put the whammy on a couple of college frosh teams and began to attract a lot of outside notoriety. Partly because they were a human interest story, but mostly because of being a sweet bunch of ball-players.

Then one day, Coach Heffner called Stacy into his office.

"We've scheduled a game with Colston College Frosh," he said. "That will interest you more than you think, Stacy. There are two pals of yours who hold basketball scholarships at Colston. Bunky Edwards and Merle Conklin."

Stacy stared blankly at the coach. "I didn't know Bunky and Conklin were in college. It's a great break for Bunky, that scholarship."

"Both of them are going great guns," Heffner murmured. "I saw one of their games. Bunky sets them up and Conklin

cashies in the chips. I guess that's the only system Conklin knows."

Stacy felt something tighten inside him. "Conklin can get away with most anything. I found that out."

Coach Heffner understood. He looked intently at Stacy.

"I've been working on your case, Stacy," he said softly. "Turning over rocks and hoping to find something that will clear you. I've never doubted your innocence. I know the situation back there—it smells. But keep your fingers crossed. There's something in the wind."

Hundreds of fans squeezed the Recreation Hall for the battle with Colston. Some came out of sheer curiosity aroused by the stories the papers had been running about the reform school team. But most of them were drawn there by an admiration for these kids who were making a kind of comeback on the hardwood.

The Colston quintet was already out there in their silky violet togs when Stacy led his mates on the floor. He tried to calm the medley of emotions that ran riot through him. Stacy thought how strange it should be, Bunky and Conklin teamed up. All the things he had sought to blot out glowed again in his mind. It was like an old toothache returning. Yet Stacy felt no desire for revenge. Just a dull, throbbing hurt.

The ref's whistle shrieked through Stacy's thoughts. The teams lined up. Stacy fell in beside Merle Conklin. His old rival shifted his gaze on Stacy, his lips moving raspingly.

"You're doing all right, jailbird. You've come all the way up from the gutter to the coop. I don't know why we have to mix with tramps like you."

Stacy's lips twitched. "The gutter runs right next to the street," he said, holding his voice down. "Be careful you don't slip off the curb, Conklin."

The whistle. The ball flashed between the leaping centers. Matt Wasco outstretched his rival, sent the tap-off spinning toward Stacy. But Conklin jounced him out of the path of the leather. He hooked out a hand, flipped it cross-court to a guard and whirled into motion.

The Colston outfit, a fast, rangy crew,

handled the bobbing spheroid in a deft, swift chain of passes. The attack unfolded with Bunky Edwards stabbing in, cutting inside of Stacy, screening him out of the play. Merle Conklin picked a heave out of the air and disdainfully flipped it through the cords.

COLSTON strung their zone defense across the confined quarters of the court. Directly in front of Stacy was Merle Conklin. A cynical expression on his face, he kept digging verbal shots at Stacy.

Out of the corner of his eye, Stacy saw Ziggy Peters suddenly burst in on the goal. He fired the ball down the slot. It wasn't the same sure, sharp pass that Stacy had been pitching in other games. He knew it the moment he let it fly. The pass led Ziggy too far. It bounced off his fingertips and Colston snapped it up.

They launched a fast-breaking down-court drive. It culminated with Conklin popping a one-hander, racing along the sidelines. Then Bunky Edwards, intercepting Stacy's trap-dribble, whizzed in and laid away another deuce.

The smooth rhythm was missing from the Institute attack. They slipped back into the old jerky motion. Conklin's steady flow of flaunting remarks kept rankling in Stacy's mind. He found himself pressing, unable to settle down to a steady, cool brand of ball. In no time, Colston ran up eight points. Barney Hoban finally broke the ice, firing a long one that looped through the pay basket.

Colston wasted no time resuming their winning ways. They were constantly breaking a man loose, piling up a hefty lead. Not only that, but they had the Institute scoring power completely bottled up. Colston's zone defense was a barbed wire stretching across the floor. At the end of the half the score was Colston, 19, Institute, 8.

Colston started the second half with a furious rush, determined to sweep the Institute team off its feet. They swirled in on the wings of a blinding passing attack. Stacy poised himself, waiting for it to break in a thrust at the goal. It did with

two men coming down, fanning out and clashing in from opposite directions.

Another violet-shirted player tried to block Stacy out of the play. But not this time. Stacy was right on the spot when Conklin snagged the leather, dribbled in straight at him. Conklin didn't swerve from his course an inch. Stacy stood his ground. There was a jolting thud of bodies. Stacy's feet flew from under him. He hit the hardwood with a terrific thump.

He felt something hot trickling down his cheek. Blood. Then Merle Conklin was bending over him. He was being smart, making it look like an accident. But what he said was something different.

"Keep out of my way, sucker."

Stacy scrambled to his feet, burning with anger and a desire to punch it out with Conklin. But over Conklin's shoulder, Stacy glimpsed Coach Heffner. There was something in the coach's face that stayed Stacy's intent. It made him realize that he would be getting his teammates, himself in hot water if he sailed into Conklin. That was exactly what Merle Conklin wanted him to do.

Stacy's gaze traveled to the sidelines once more as though drawn by a magnet. He saw her standing near the bench. Patty Halpern was looking directly at him. The smile on her face was a proud one.

There was a time-out. The players gathered around Stacy.

"That guy's been asking for trouble," Ziggy Peters said hotly, poking a finger toward Conklin. "He wants to get tough. Okay, I'm gonna bump him into the stands."

Stacy shook his head. "Skip it, Ziggy," he said quietly. "Let's do it another way—with baskets."

The ref planked the ball on the free-throw mark. Stepping up to the line, Stacy saw Bunky Edwards staring at him. Then Bunky swiveled his head toward Merle Conklin.

"Lay off the dirty stuff, Conklin, I'm tellin' you. There's nothing to stop me from taking a poke at you. I know Stacy can't."

STACY grinned at Bunky. Bunky grinned right back. The free throw was good. Then the spirit, the fight in the School began to show. Barney Hoban jammed the Colston attack, getting a held ball. Stacy grabbed the tap. In the same motion, he jump-passed to Hoban circling behind the defense. Hoban made it count, scoring.

Institute swarmed in on the Colston receivers, covered them. Stacy leaped, pulled down a stray pass. The thunder and the lightning began to strike. Ziggy Peters flicked in a rebound. Then Matt Wasco hit the mark with a crazy one-hander from an incredible angle.

The spark flared to a flame. The tide was swinging in the School's favor. They were riding it. Stacy plopped one in from mid-court.

Colston threw reserves into the fray to stem the double-barreled assault. But the Institute could not be held. They climbed within two points of Colston. Score: Colston 33, Institute 31.

The game turned into a regular dog fight. On the out-of-bounds play, Stacy rifled to Matt Wasco, tore in behind the pass. Wasco fed it back and Stacy neatly bucketed the melon, deadlocking the score.

There was a fierce scramble under the Institute basket. With time running out, Colston swirled into formation. The pass was to Merle Conklin at mid-court. He veered to his right, stopped short and pushed the ball forward.

Stacy was waiting for that maneuver. He slapped the ball from Conklin's hands, scooped it up. He twisted and dribbled. He stopped, looked for a receiver, but they were all covered.

There was only one thing to do. Stacy did it. He let the ball sail. It was a lazy blob swooping down on the basket, brushing the strings. It meant the game, 35-33.

It was an hour later that Stacy stood in the headmaster's office, puzzled and wondering what it was all about. Then Coach Heffner came in the room. The headmaster nodded, leaned forward in his chair, a document in his hand.

"Stacy," he said slowly, "you've been exonerated of the crime that brought you

here. You can thank Coach Heffner. He's done an excellent job on your case."

Stacy's heart leaped. "You mean that I've been cleared of everything," he said, an incredulous light in his eyes.

"That's right, Stacy," Heffner put in. "Doc Halpern was just another small-time crook. He had to have a lot of rackets to pay his way. If it wasn't cards, it was phony corporations or stocks. In this case, old R. J. Conklin bankrolled his rackets and Doc did the slick work. That's the way Doc worked the small-time circuit. He always got himself a sugar guy and used him for a stooge.

"But there was one thing Doc couldn't hide. That was his past. I had him investigated. His coaching job at Kingston was only a front. As long as R. J. Conklin got his cut and his son was made the star, Doc's job was safe. That was the agreement. Well, the whole mess has been uncovered. Naturally, Doc squealed on Conklin. Doc admitted that Conklin bribed him to testify that he saw you drive off in Merle's car. He wanted to cover up his son."

Stacy sucked in his breath, looked at Heffner with gratitude that was deeper than words.

"I guess I can't begin to thank—"

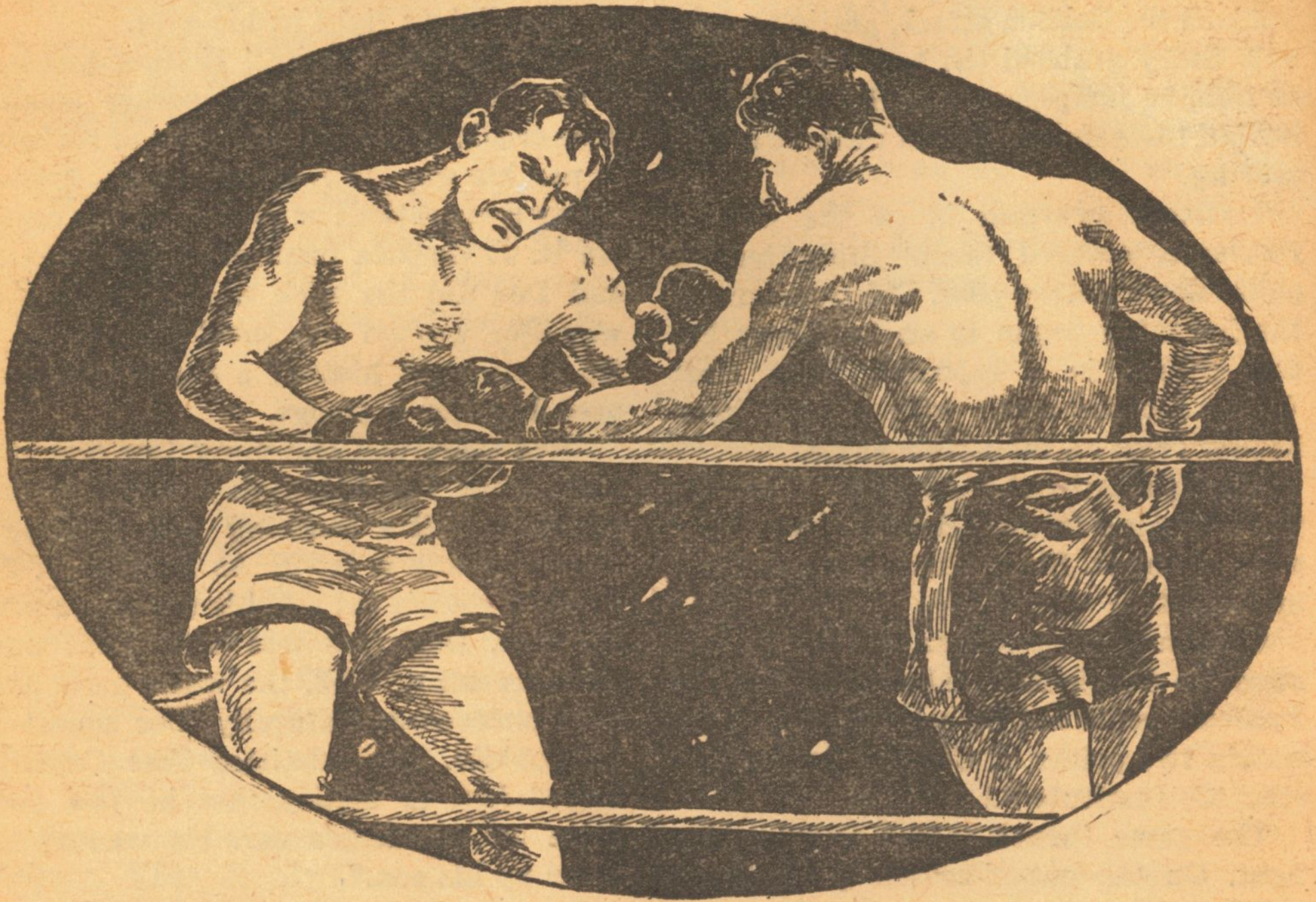
"Patty had as much to do with clearing you as I did," Heffner said. "She gave the authorities valuable information concerning Doc. You see, Patty's dad was an M. D. But he lost his license when he made out the wrong kind of drug prescription. That broke her mother's heart, sent her to an early grave. Doc never did keep his feet on the straight and narrow. Patty didn't have a very happy life."

Heffner hesitated. He added, "I had to pull a few strings to let Merle Conklin play tonight. It was worth it."

There was a knock on the door and Bunky Edwards stuck his head in. "Hey, pal," he said, grinning, "Patty's waiting for you. How long they gonna keep you?"

Stacy started toward the door. Coach Heffner said, "I'll be losing my best player. Colston is going to be needing a replacement for Conklin. And you're going to be it, Stacy. You get his scholarship. Maybe he'll get yours."

The Leather Spoiler



By Giles A. Lutz

Rocky Tyler was just another leather pusher in the fight parade. But when he found himself on the wrong end of a double-cross right, rage made him mount his fistic bicycle to overtake a ring drum major.

ROCKY TYLER was a great, shaggy bear of a man with high good humor. Even with gloves on his fists he didn't look like a fighter. Rocky was just a big guy who figured punching other guys got him better pay than punching time clocks. Rocky would never get a championship go, but it didn't bother him.

He and Kink Bohan, his manager, had been together five years. They made money even though they hadn't been in on the big gates. Rocky was satisfied with the way their bank account was mounting. Kink wasn't. Rocky wondered if the blonde was digging Kink for dough.

The brassy clang of the bell interrupted his thoughts. Kink slapped him on the back and said, "Thirteenth round. Get in there and punch this bum's head off. There isn't anything wrong with that right hand."

Rocky grinned as he moved out to meet Joe Simons. Joe was not a bum. He was a tough boy with a wicked right.

Kink was always screaming for Rocky to use that right. Rocky didn't need it to put this kind away. Besides, he remembered how it felt when he broke it two years ago. And the doctor had told him breaking the right again might cripple it permanently.

Kink was a great little guy though. He had a pushed-in face and prematurely curly white hair. He knew box fighters inside out. Rocky would cheerfully give Kink his right arm and think nothing of it. He knew Kink would do the same for him.

Joe put a left in Rocky's face. Rocky bent to his work. He slipped a left to Joe's teeth, then belted him with a right in the stomach. Joe grunted and flailed away.

No, Joe was not a bum. He was a young comer with a heart full of hatred and fists full of murder for the guy in front of him.

Rocky played Joe at the end of the left, like a fish on a taut line. He opened up a cut again, and the blood poured over Joe's eye. Joe shook away the blood and kept boring in. He was a very hard boy to convince of anything.

Rocky threw a right hand and missed. A left smashed against the side of his head, bouncing him into the ropes. Joe pinned him there. Rocky had to fight his way clear.

THEY stood toe to toe, slugging. The roar of the crowd beat about them. Rocky bled at the nose. Joe's face was a mess. It was a very beautiful fight from a blood-hungry fan's standpoint. It wasn't so nice for Rocky. He felt his years and all of the old fights in his legs. His chest pumped laboriously and the lights spun dizzily.

Joe, in his eagerness, left an opening. Rocky poured the right through. It was a sweet punch, a beautiful thing, but it didn't drop Joe Simon. His mouth flew open, the glaze set in his eyes. But he stayed up, and he had instinct enough to fall forward and tie up Rocky's hands.

Rocky's mouth flew open from a different reason. Rocky's right hand was a ball of leaping, stabbing fire. That last punch had shattered a bone.

At the bell Rocky walked to his corner and sat down carefully. Baldy Nelson, the colored boy, worked on a cut. Kink saw Rocky's face and said, "What is it, Rocky?"

"The mitt. I busted it all to hell. I can stand two more rounds. But this is my last fight. The doc told me not to break this hand again." Rocky was more concerned with his hand than with winning or losing the fight.

He went out calmly and for two minutes he kept Joe away. But he couldn't keep him away forever. Just before the bell rang, Joe floored him. The searing smell of salts jarred Rocky's senses awake.

"The bell saved you," Kink said harshly. "You ain't going back."

Rocky managed a twisted grin. "I can stand three minutes"

"You ain't gotta chance, Rocky. He'll kill you."

Rocky knew all that. But he went out just the same. He kept his right hand tight against his chest, kept the left stabbing out faster than a snake's tongue. The left alone wasn't sufficient protection. Rocky caught three hard ones, and dropped.

The referee's count came to Rocky through a fog. He heard, "Eight," and painfully pulled himself erect. His legs were like flabby inner tubes. He wobbled and fell into Joe Simons. He hung on desperately with his good hand. Joe gave him hell, wrestled and tugged him all over the ring.

Three times Joe put him on the canvas before the bell rang. But the round ended with Rocky still on his feet. Joe was the winner, but the crowd gave its acclaim to Rocky. He had shown them a raw, bleeding courage he himself didn't know he possessed. Rocky didn't feel too badly. The wild cheers took some of the sting from the beating.

Kink hurried Rocky to the dressing-room. He closed the door and leaned against it. Baldy gently cut the glove from Rocky's hand.

"Now what?" Kink asked harshly.

ROCKY glanced at Kink curiously. The little manager took the loss hard. His face was gray and contorted, his breathing anguished. Rocky suddenly remembered Kink had looked like this for several months. He wondered if some-

thing besides tonight's loss was causing Kink distress.

Rocky said in a calm voice, "We hang up the old gloves. With tonight's purse, we got a nice bank account. Maybe we buy a nice quiet little farm. Sounds good, huh, Kink?"

Kink cried out wildly, "You can't quit now, Rocky. You got a long ways to go. You can make a lot of dough yet."

"If I keep on, I'll make it in the puzzle works—with scissors and paper. What do you want money for, pal? Is that blonde digging you again?"

Kink didn't match Rocky's grin. "Joy and I broke," he said flatly. "She pitched me this week." He broke into wild swearing. "The dirty little two-timing—"

"You oughta be glad, Kink. The blonde ones always cost the most."

Rocky sighed. He was suddenly very tired and very glad he and the fight racket were through. He would rest a few days, then look around for a place to settle down. That would appeal to Kink, too.

Baldy said sagely, bobbing his dark shaven head, "When Kink gets as old as me, he learns all of dem cost." He chortled and slapped his thigh. "Ah bet dat Joy gal think Mistuh Kink is bettah dan a gold mine."

Kink swung wildly at Baldy. Rocky pushed Kink away. "Forget it," he counseled. "Grab some sleep. I gotta see a doctor. See you in the morning, Kink."

The doctor probed and pushed. He took some pictures. Rocky waited patiently. The doctor came back and gave Rocky a lot of medical terms. In plain language Rocky had broken a bone. It wasn't as bad as he thought, but it was bad enough.

The doctor bandaged his hand and said, "You keep on and you'll ruin this hand. It can't stand much more of this sort of thing."

Rocky nodded. He was way ahead of the doc. The hand wasn't going to stand any more at all.

Rocky didn't see Kink in the morning, or for several days. Baldy asked questions that Rocky couldn't answer.

"How do I know where he is? I heard some of the guys at the Beach laughing about Kink and the blonde. Kink is lick-

ing his sore spots. He'll be around in a few days."

He paused reflectively. "It's a good thing it happened. She wasn't doing Kink any good."

Rocky fretted away the long days. Kink didn't come around, and Rocky couldn't locate him. The doctor worked over Rocky's hand, took some more pictures, and said cheerfully, "It's coming around nicely. But you can't use it as a club any more."

That was okay with Rocky. He wasn't going to use it any more at all, except maybe to shave with. He made the rounds of the gymnasiums and the Beach, but no one had seen Kink. A few of the wise boys said Kink had run out on Rocky. It took a lot of control not to hit them. Rocky let their remarks pass. They didn't know Kink like he did.

He ran out of money and went down to the bank where Kink kept their joint account. The teller took Rocky's withdrawal slip, frowned and left his cage. He came back and said, "I'm sorry, but this account has been closed out."

Rocky stared at him. There was forty grand in that account, half of it Rocky's. The teller was crazy. There was money in that account. There had to be.

"Mr. Bohan drew all of it some weeks ago," the teller said emotionlessly.

Rocky muttered thanks and left. His brow suddenly lightened. Kink had transferred the account to some other bank. That was it. Kink had forgotten to tell Rocky. It was all right with Rocky. Kink always handled the money. When Rocky found Kink everything would be straightened out.

But Rocky needed some money now. He had a doctor bill, and the hotel clerk was eyeing him a little oddly. He thought of his last fight's purse and quickened his step. The promotor was still holding that dough. Rocky and Kink had four thousand coming to them.

Jake Gearing shifted his fat cigar, and said, "Sorry, kid. Kink picked it up the night of the fight." He squinted shrewdly at Rocky. "Whatsa matter? Kink run out on you?"

"Hell, no," Rocky said savagely. Just

the same it was funny, Kink taking all that money and not telling Rocky. Rocky worried with it all the way back to his hotel room.

HE LAY on the bed, carefully rubbing his right hand, thinking about it. The knocking on the door finally penetrated Rocky's thoughts. He swung his feet to the floor, crossed the room and opened the door. A young guy stood there. He had a cheerful face and an infectious grin.

"You Rocky Tyler?"

"Yeah." Rocky brightened. This was probably news of Kink.

"I'm Sid Frish. I'm your new manager."

Rocky's heart jumped a little. "It sounded like you said you were my new manager."

"It ought to. That's what I said."

Rocky recoiled. His face had an incredulous look.

"I'm not kidding. I bought your contract from Kink."

The young guy wasn't kidding. The cheerfulness was still on his face, but underneath it there was a seriousness, too. He handed Rocky a letter. "Maybe you better read this."

The letter was short and to the point. Rocky read rapidly. *Rocky, you're all washed up. Joe Simons' manager needed dough, and I bought Joe cheap. Joe is the coming champ. A guy has to think of himself.* It was signed Kink.

Rocky handed the letter back and said in a strangled voice, "What did I cost you?"

Sid grinned. "Four thousand. That wasn't much for Rocky Tyler." He saw Rocky's face, and the grin went away.

Rocky asked hoarsely, "Did Kink say where he got the money to buy Joe?"

Sid answered uncertainly, "He told me he saved it. With what he had, and the last purse, he had enough. Why?"

"Nothing." Rocky's voice was dead. He had been a damn fool. He had believed in Kink like a brother, and Kink had neatly clipped him. All those years together meant nothing to Kink—nothing

but a chance to milk some poor sucker for an additional four thousand.

He said flatly, "You made a bad buy. I'm through."

Sid's voice was weak. "Can I sit down? That was all the dough I had."

Rocky laughed harshly. "Kink is very good at getting that last dollar."

Sid leaned forward eagerly. "He got you, too, huh? Look! You could get another go with Joe Simons. You could shellac the bum and show Kink just how smart he isn't." He added hopefully, "It's an idea."

Rocky's eyes blazed. He would like another shot at Joe Simons—a chance to blast him and his manager out of the heavyweight picture. Kink had sunk a lot of dough in Joe Simons. That would hurt that damned Kink. The fire went out of Rocky's eyes, and he shook his head.

"I got a bum paw." He held up the bandaged hand. "The doc says not to take any more chances."

Sid argued earnestly, "You don't need a right to whip a bum like Joe Simons. You had him last time. I know a place where we can stay for almost nothing. We wait until the hand heals, then start after Joe—and Kink," he added shrewdly.

"I'd do anything for a crack at Kink."

Sid jumped to his feet. "What are we waiting for?"

ROCKY fretted, waiting for that fist to heal. If it would only gain strength as fast as Rocky's growing hatred, Rocky would be fighting Joe Simons tomorrow. Joe and Kink became closely tied up in Rocky's mind. When he whipped one, he whipped the other.

Rocky heard a lot of conjecture as to what had really happened between himself and Kink. Some of the wise boys said Kink won Joe's contract in a poker game. Rocky's jaw set when he heard that one. Rocky had seen Kink's letter. Kink paid good money—Rocky's money—for Joe.

Kink must have seen Rocky slipping and laid careful plans. Rocky walked over and slammed his left fist into the bag. The bag beat an angry tattoo against the board. Rocky would do a little leather spoiling on Kink's beautiful plans.

Joe Simons was doing a lot of fighting—successful fighting. He knocked out Stinger Barnes in Philly. He kayoed Joe Rosher in New York. He put together five knockouts, while Rocky fretted over his healing hand.

Sid Frisch surprised Rocky. The young guy knew a lot about the fighting game. He fitted in as naturally as if he had managed fighters all his life. "My old man taught me a little," Sid explained lightly. "He knew something."

Sid came in excitedly one day and said, "I just signed for Honey Boy Wiles."

Rocky nodded approval. Honey Boy was a big slab of meat, but he was rough and willing.

As Rocky walked down the aisle for the Honey Boy fight, he felt a gray emptiness in his stomach. It was a new feeling for him. Always before, he had had two good hands and a careless, sure belief in himself. Rocky broke into a cold sweat at the thought of Honey Boy sidetracking him from reaching Kink and Joe Simons.

The referee gave them the old story. Honey Boy leered at Rocky and said, "Boy, I hear you ain't worth much."

The anger came up chokingly in Rocky's throat. So everyone was laughing at him because of what Kink had done.

At the opening gong, Rocky went out fast, faster than he usually did. He caught Honey Boy in his corner. The left went to work, stabbing out Honey Boy's eyes. Rocky kept Honey Boy off balance, drumming a steady left-handed barrage to the head. He ducked Honey Boy's wild swings, and walked away easily at the sound of the gong. It had been a nice round—Rocky's round.

Sid said, "Nice going, guy. Just keep it up."

Rocky kept it up. His right-hand punches were light and harmless. The old instinctive fear rode the hand and slowed it down. The left did the work. By the third round, Honey Boy's face was a mess. His eyes were almost shut, his swings wild and ineffectual.

Rocky hadn't lost a round when the tenth came up. He was a little tired and a little arm-weary from punching Honey Boy so often, but otherwise he felt fine.

The referee held Rocky's arm aloft. The crowd cheered and booed. Rocky didn't like the boos, but he knew how the crowd felt. The big boys shouldn't win on points.

HE FOUGHT Harmony Meyers in Pittsburgh and eked out a shaky decision. In the dressing room, Rocky swore at his impotent right hand. Harmony had been in distress in the seventh, but Rocky didn't have the right-handed power to put him away. Three months ago, Joe Simons kayoed Harmony in three.

"So what?" Sid asked lightly. "In the record books it's a win, the same as Joe's. You keep your mind on Kink."

Rocky put together a long string of wins. He fought some mediocre boys and more than a sprinkling of good ones. Slowly, he pounded his way back up the fistic ladder. He read about Joe and Kink, and it twisted his heart. Joe had dynamite in his gloves. His recent string showed twelve straight knockouts. He was headed for a title go.

Sid's eyes gleamed. "Joe will put away the champ. Then comes your chance." He eyed Rocky speculatively. "Two years ago you were just an ordinary glove swinger. You never rated a crack at the top. You do now. You got the spark."

Rocky knew where the spark came from. Making a few dollars wasn't important any more. He had to beat one man and humble another to find satisfaction. His face grew hard and ugly at the thought of Kink.

The bout between Joe Simons and Hymie Bergman made national headlines. The champ had trouble with Hymie last year. If Joe handled Hymie, he rated a go with the champ.

Joe did more than handle Hymie. Rocky and Sid hung over a radio listening to the bout. Sid's eyes grew awed as he listened to the announcer's first round description. Joe beat Hymie all over the ring. Hymie went down twice in the first canto.

Sid murmured, "You had Joe until you broke your paw."

Rocky said flatly, "Joe's gotten some fights under his belt. I'm a lot older." He

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didn't say it, but he thought it. Kink was a hell of a good manager, too. Kink had polished Joe. It showed tonight.

Joe dropped Hymie in the second. Hymie's senses were gone for he got up without a count. The referee moved in, but he wasn't quick enough. Joe had a seventy-five shell in his glove. He hit Hymie with it, and there was no more Hymie.

Rocky reached out and snapped off the radio. "Joe is good," he said simply. "He's the next champion."

Sid didn't say anything as Rocky left the room. Sid was worried. What the hell? Rocky was a little worried himself.

The papers were full of Joe Simons' latest knockout. Sporting pages picked up the ballyhoo and threw it far and wide. Public opinion forced the champion to reluctantly sign papers.

Rocky read the news without emotion. He looked up at Sid and said, "Get me Hymie."

Rocky fought Hymie three months later in Chicago. He fought calmly and methodically, his left hand flashing. He used it like a rock chisel against a granite face. He kept pecking away, wearing through the steel in Hymie's system.

By the seventh, Hymie was cut to pieces. When the round ended, the referee peered at Hymie's swollen lacerated face. He walked over to Rocky's corner and lifted Rocky's hand. Rocky was the winner by a technical kayo in the seventh.

Sid said joyously, "That was very smart work."

Rocky kept still. It was smart work all right, but it didn't stack so well against Joe's win over Hymie. Against Joe's win, it didn't look like much at all.

Rocky didn't get much notice. The publicity guns were trained on Joe Simons and the champ. Joe was training well. The champ didn't look so hot. Fight experts said Joe in five. Rocky silently agreed with them.

He said suddenly, "I wanta see that fight. I wanta see this Joe Simons again."

ROCKY and Sid walked down the aisle to their seats. Maybe in a few months it would be Rocky Tyler march-

ing to the slaughter instead of the champ.

The crowd roared and Rocky looked up. Joe Simons and his retinue were coming down the aisle. Rocky looked squarely at Kink. Kink's face went white with startled recognition. Then he set it in a loose, flabby grin. "Rocky, it's good to see you."

Rocky said harshly, "Don't give me that stuff."

Rocky's face was hard and twisted. He wouldn't have believed it would hurt to see Kink. Rocky knew now why he wanted to see this fight. It was Kink he wanted to see, not Joe. A man doesn't take five years of close friendship out of his life and throw it away without losing something. The bitterness came flooding back on Rocky.

Sid said, "You'll get your chance, guy."

Rocky nodded silently. The announcer spied him, and called him into the ring. He introduced Rocky to the crowd. Rocky got a few sporadic cheers. He walked over to shake hands with Joe Simons. Joe kept his hands on his knees and stared insolently at Rocky.

Something came up in Rocky's throat. "I'll see you again soon," he rasped.

"I can't wait—bum," Joe mocked.

Rocky went back to his seat, his face a wooden mask. "You gotta get me Joe," he said savagely.

"You'll get him," Sid promised grimly.

For three rounds the champ stayed away from Joe. Then the life left his legs and the champ was helpless. Joe stalked him like a hungry panther. He had a hammer for a left hand and a battering ram for a right. He beat the champ to his knees in the fourth and dumped him twice in the fifth. The champ came out for the sixth, but he didn't stay long.

Joe pinned him with a left, then took him apart with a right. The champ fell slowly, pawing the air with stupid motions. He quivered a little, then lay quite still.

Sid said too quickly, "Joe will be cold meat for you."

Rocky looked at him fiercely. Let Sid think what he wanted. Rocky was going to hurt Kink. Breaking up his fighter was the way to do it.

Rocky took a little place up in the hills and went to work.

Sid was worried. "Don't go at this thing too hard. Kink is ducking. Maybe next year. . . ."

Rocky grabbed him savagely by the shirt front. "Now," he yelled. "I want him now." He released Sid and said, "Sorry, guy. But I gotta have this fight." Rocky knew what Sid thought. Sid wasn't sure Rocky was entirely smart.

Sid said gently, "I'll get the guy." He came back in a couple of days and said, "It's all set."

Rocky was surprised it went so easy. But, then, knowing Kink, he wasn't so surprised either. Kink was money mad. Kink thought Rocky was just another bum to be ground up by Joe's fists.

They went into town and signed papers. It was hard for Rocky to look at Kink and keep his hands open.

Kink wanted the fight three months away. Rocky said harshly, "Two." Rocky's feelings wouldn't let him agree with Kink.

Joe said irritatingly, "Make it tomorrow, sucker."

Rocky put cold eyes on him. Joe colored and said, "Why, you—"

Kink pushed him away. Joe snarled at Kink and Kink gave it back.

Rocky enjoyed it. From the looks of things Kink and Joe hated each other's guts.

Kink snapped, "That's okay with us." He didn't look at Rocky again.

Rocky and Sid went up into the hills and worked. Two months was time enough. Rocky's legs were there, and the left grew more accurate. He didn't knock out the spar-bums, but even with the big pillows he did plenty to their features.

Rocky came through the training grind fit—maybe a little nervous, a little too much on edge. That was a natural thing. He was fighting Joe Simons.

Rocky and Sid went into New York for the weighing-in. Joe Simons was there, big and arrogant. He and Rocky shook hands for the photographers. Joe told the reporters, "Boys, meet the new—" He paused, and added mockingly, "sucker."

It got a snicker, but Rocky's face didn't change.

Rocky walked out into the hall and almost bumped into Kink. Kink was talking to Grant Price, the noted sports columnist. "It won't go two," Kink said. "Don't I know Rocky Tyler? He's a smooth-water fighter. Put him where the going gets tough—" He laughed loudly. "You know Joe."

Rocky clamped a hard hand on Kink's arm. "Always the big-mouth," he said levelly. He brushed by, not trusting himself to look at Kink again.

HE WENT back to the hotel room. Sid said, "Kink is betting like a crazy man. The Beach says he is down for plenty."

Rocky felt a savage exultation. He hoped Kink was down for everything he had. . . .

Rocky and Kink and Baldy went down to meet Joe Simons in the deepening darkness. Rocky undressed slowly. All he could think of was Kink. This was his chance to smash Kink; this was the payoff night for the hurt Kink had done him.

He got his call and walked out among the mob and towards the lighted ring. The roaring of the crowd had a hungry, pulsating sound. Someone recognized him and screamed his name. It was good to hear his name shouted again. Good, because this was his last fight.

Joe Simons came in right behind him. The babel of sound was greater, more sustained. The crowd liked Joe. Joe gave them what they wanted.

Baldy broke the new gloves across the knuckles and laced them on securely. Then Rocky was in the center of the ring, facing Joe, listening to the referee's talk.

Joe's beady eyes were cruel and glinting. He always looked like that with fresh meat before him. Rocky went back to his corner, adjusted his mouthpiece, and turned at the sound of the bell.

He went out fast, light and graceful. He set the left against Joe's chops. The shock felt good. He stuck the left in there again, and crossed a light right to Joe's head. He got away quick, and Joe followed him steadily.

The left kept the sullen-faced killer away, the legs took Rocky out of danger. The round went nice and fast.

Sid said, "He looks like a bum, pal. You keep that left fastened on his nose and he will go crazy."

Rocky knew he could keep Joe looking like a bum for five, maybe six rounds. But after that— He stared steadily across the ring, nothing showing in his face.

The second was more of the same. Rocky stuck the left in Joe's face. Joe kept missing. He went a little crazy under the barrage. He came in wildly, and Rocky stopped him with a right. It wasn't a hard right. Rocky tried to throw the right, but all the months of protecting it acted like a chain, holding it back.

The third passed and the fourth before Joe tagged him. The blow caught Rocky high, shaking him. Joe came flailing in. Rocky tied him in a pretty knot.

Joe hit him with a hook. Rocky bounced along the ropes. Joe didn't smell any more. His gloves came in a steady flow, and Rocky's legs couldn't carry him out of the flood. He saw a right hand coming, but he was powerless to move out of its road. He remembered sitting down sharply upon his pants, then someone half carried him to his corner.

The sharp sting of the salts dug deeply into Rocky's mind. He looked bemusedly at blood on his gloves, at the crimson smears splashed across his chest and forearms. Joe must have cut hell out of him with that last blow.

Baldy worked on a cut over his eye. Rocky said, "He pinned me with that one. I thought I could go past the fifth."

Sid said in awe, "The guy's talking about the fifth. The ninth just ended. It is one damn awful fight, Rocky. Joe has been beating hell out of you. You have been giving it back in spades. You been right-handing him silly."

Rocky went out still trying to figure Sid's words. He couldn't right-hand Joe. Rocky didn't have a right hand. There was blood splashed all over Joe. His features were battered and swollen.

Rocky threw a sizzling left hook and connected solidly. Joe retreated before

Rocky's cocked right. Rocky's right felt sore, as if he had punched a lot of concrete. Rocky found his answers then.

Joe had punched the sense out of Rocky's head. Rocky's mind was too numbed to think of protecting his right hand. He had gone out and thrown it like he used to. The right had kept Rocky in the ring with the terrible Joe Simons—it had punched fear and respect into Joe.

Rocky looked at Joe's corner. Kink stood there open-mouthed. Rocky laughed and moved after Joe.

JOE caught him with a full right, and Rocky's knees buckled. He straightened and poured a left into Joe's bleeding mouth. Joe stopped his backward march and crashed hard fists off Rocky's head. Those blows would have stopped Rocky in earlier rounds, but not now. Rocky was too close to everything he wanted.

He thought of Kink standing open-mouthed, and it put power in his gloves. He punched away, and felt Joe break under his hands. The strength drained from Joe like wheat from a ripped sack. Rocky hooked a terrible left to Joe's jaw.

Joe was literally lifted off his feet and blasted backwards. He landed in a crumpled heap. Rocky didn't look back as he walked away. . . .

Sid got the last congratulating fan out of the dressing room. Baldy tenderly removed the gloves. He saw Rocky's swollen right hand, and said mournfully, "Yo done bust it again."

Rocky grinned cheerfully. "I busted Kink. I'd bust both hands to do that."

A little guy came through the door in a rush, and heard Rocky's words. "You have like hell," he yelled. He waved both hands filled with green paper. "What do you think this is? Spinach?"

Rocky stared at Kink open-mouthed. "Get out of here," he yelled hoarsely.

Kink grinned at Sid. "You better tell him."

Sid said, "Kink and my old man used to be in the fight business together. We all come from the same town. I didn't buy your contract, Rocky. Kink just turned it over to me."

Rocky didn't get this at all.

Kink couldn't wait for Sid's explanation. "I blew your dough, Rocky. I was so damned ashamed I couldn't tell you. I blew it on that little blonde. She dug me for every cent we had. I 'bout lost my mind trying to figure how to get it back. You said you were through fighting, and that made it worse.

"I took our last purse and got in a poker game. Sure, it was crazy, but that's how I was thinking then. I got Joe there. You heard it that way, but you didn't believe it."

Rocky said bewilderedly, "Then tonight—"

"Sure," Kink grinned. "When you got sore at me, you caught fire. All I wanted was for you to be mad enough to fight again. It carried you all the way. Then Joe got better than I thought he would. He worried me plenty. I was afraid he was too good. That's why I stalled, and kept trying to give you time. Sid told me you still burned, and I saw some of it. I knew then Rocky Tyler could handle that bum."

Rocky asked in a strangled voice, "Where did you get all that dough?"

Kink waved a careless hand. "I went out and collected. I bet on you tonight, kid. I knew Rocky and I knew Joe." His face twisted sourly. "I oughtn't to cut you in. There ain't enough money to pay me for staying around Joe."

The bitterness and loneliness fell away from Rocky. He knew now what it was he missed so much. He missed Kink. "Then you owned both fighters tonight?"

Kink said airily, "So what? The fight was on the level. Nobody got bit." He grinned craftily. "For once I collect on both ends."

"The commissioners would like to hear this," Rocky said.

Kink said in alarm, "Rocky, you wouldn't tell them?"

"I will if you ever pick up any more blondes."

"Rocky, I swear—"

"I got a better idea." Rocky reached over and took the bills from Kink's hands. "I'll handle the dough from now on."

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Homestretch Magic



By Dean Parker

Tricky Willie, who knows all the horses by their first names, pulls a deep plan out of his feedbag of gee-gee magic.

THE old jockey jumped to his feet and hurried across the track, calling back over his shoulder, "My gosh, Tricky Willie is here."

Curley Callahan leaned glumly against the rail, and watched the old jock and the newcomer shake hands. Tricky Willie didn't sound like an important name, yet the old jock seemed steamed up.

Curley scuffed the dust with the toe of a battered boot. A green boy around

a racetrack got a terrific pushing around. No one would tell him anything.

Curley said, "Nuts to them all," his face creasing pugnaciously. He had the flaming blue eyes of the true Celt, and his hair lay in tight black curls. Curley was always defending that hair.

The old jock came back bringing the newcomer with him. "Curley, this is Willie Shad."

Curley brightened. "The old jock

called you Tricky Willie," he said boldly.

Willie laughed. He was tall, with a thin, sharp face and hard bright eyes. "I wouldn't know why." He winked solemnly at the old jock, and the old jock laughed.

Curley liked this Willie guy. He had a sure poise that Curley envied. Willie reminded Curley of a long carving knife he had once seen in the window of a restaurant. Sharp and shining and deadly, able to cut through anything.

Willie indicated the old jock. "Jim, here, tells me you want to be a hack-man."

"I sure do," Curley said eagerly. "I been loping horses in the morning." His face fell a little. "So far no one thinks I'm good enough to ride. You got horses here, Mr. Shad?"

Willie was amused. "Not even a horse-shoe. Maybe I'll run across something for you. So long, Jim."

The old jock called to Willie, "You dig up anything and I'm in."

Willie said carelessly, "Sure, why not?"

Curley was bitter. "A lot of good he can do me. He doesn't even own a horse."

The old jock said impressively, "Tricky Willie can do anything around a man's racetrack. If he wants to make a rider out of you, you will be a rider. He is a great guy."

Curiosity wiped away Curley's pique. "Why the name?"

"He knows more ways to win a bet than any six guys. Tricky Willie is a smart boy with a betting dollar. And it's always an honest one." The old jock spat reflectively into the dust. "Soap Edwards must be here."

"Who?" Curley wished he had been around like the old jock. The old jock knew everybody.

The old jock said patiently, "The big bookie. Soap has a finger in everything. Wherever you find Soap Edwards, you find Tricky Willie. They do not like each other and then some."

The old jock was in a talkative mood. Curley settled himself and waited.

"Soap has a slick front. A long time

ago he fast-talked Willie out of his girl and a string of horses. It's said when she found out things she died of a broken heart." The old jock shrugged.

"Anyway, Tricky Willie set out to take Soap. It's a big job. Soap has a pocketful of the green stuff. Willie has clipped him several times." The old jock's face creased with disgust. "Then he gives most of it away. Any sorrowful story can get money from Willie."

Curley was wide-eyed. "Is he going to bet something here?"

The old jock was pained. "You think Tricky Willie advertises. He probably does not know himself. This is a new track. He will look the horses over and come up with something."

CREST VIEW was a half-mile jerry-ko, painfully new and glaring. The grandstand was crude and hastily done, and there were scars in the infield. But the purses were average, and some pretty fair horses were in the stables. Curley thought that Willie could find a pretty fair betting tool here.

Curley saw Willie a lot. Everyone seemed to like Willie. Curley thought wistfully that it must be swell to have a lot of friends. Curley didn't have anyone except his uncle, old Ed Loring. Ed had three broken-down skins at Crest View. Occasionally, they staggered in the money and Ed kept going.

Curley fed those horses and groomed them. He mucked out their stalls and loped them in the mornings. He did everything but ride them in races. Ed Loring belonged to the old school of horsemen. It took so long to make a race-rider, and no one could rush it. Curley simply wasn't ready. Curley had fought and rebelled, but he hadn't changed Ed's decision.

Curley sat Shamble Off and listened to Ed's instructions about the morning's workout. He brightened as he saw Willie standing at the infield rail. If Willie was interested in Shamble Off it might hurry Curley's riding chances. Curley shook his head. This old hide wasn't worth a dollar bet.

The old jock came over and said, "You

are setting in the middle of a horse looking like you know what it is about. Tricky Willie said someday you might make a pilot."

Curley said sourly, "All Willie knows is 'someday' and 'maybe'."

The old jock paid no attention. "The big, beefy guy standing over by the rail, with those other three men, is Soap. Those are his clockers and musclemen."

Curley said impatiently, "If Tricky Willie gets in his hair, why doesn't Soap take care of him?"

The old jock said darkly, "It has been tried. Now Willie has some information filed with a friend. If anything happens, that friend will give the information to the right people. Soap does not want that information to come out." He chuckled dryly. "Soap worries about Willie. One of Soap's guys practically sleeps with Willie to see what he is doing."

Curley said dourly, "You talk like this Tricky Willie is something very special."

The old jock said earnestly, "He is like a ten-length lead in the stretch on Derby Day. He is going to give me a headache over my next income tax."

Curley turned away, and plodded back to the tack room. Maybe Tricky Willie would make the old jock some fresh money, but that wouldn't help Curley.

Ed Loring came around the corner, leading Shamble Off. As he passed, he said, "You will work out Twinkle Toes in the morning." He shifted his cud of tobacco. "I'll take you over."

Curley yelped with indignation, "That crazy old mare. She hasn't won a race since the first World War. Every jock on the tracks ducks old man Chelsey and his horse. She is a nutty animal. She will break—"

Ed walked on, leading his horse. He came around again, and asked, "You afraid? A jock can straddle anything with four legs. All right, I will tell old man Chelsey—"

Curley snarled, "I'll ride her. When she throws me off, I hope I land in your teeth." He walked into the tack room, very mad and hurt. His future as a jockey didn't look good—not if they

picked hides like Twinkle Toes for him to ride.

IT WAS as black as the inside of a Halloween cat when Ed pulled Curley out of bed in the morning. Curley set his teeth hard. He wasn't shaking because he was afraid. He was cold, and his stomach was empty. He pulled on his breeches and boots, and followed the old man. He said complainingly, "Next time I will stay up all night and gallop the horses you pick."

Twinkle Toes was saddled when Curley and Ed reached old man Chelsey's stalls. Another horse was there, looming big and ghostly in the darkness. Curley got close and recognized the old jock sitting the big horse.

Old man Chelsey gave Curley his leg-up, and snapped the long end of a rope into the ring of Twinkle Toes' bridle bit. Chelsey led the mare, another man led the big horse, and they went down to the tow-ring behind the stables.

Chelsey and the other man stood in the center of the ring. The horses went round and round at the end of the long ropes.

The mare got hot and impatient. Chelsey told Curley to pull up, and led the mare out of the ring. The old jock kept on galloping the big horse.

It was still dark when Chelsey led Twinkle Toes out onto the track. The mare fretted and danced. Curley thought bitterly of what might might happen if Twinkle Toes ran into a quarter pole. Curley thought he saw a couple of men standing near the barrier. He looked again, and they weren't there. He thought he was seeing things like a man with the second bottle.

Chelsey said, "When I yell, 'Come on!' turn it loose. When she settles in stride, take hold of her, but don't swing her head. And sit still."

Curley gulped a weak, "Okay." He secured his cross-rein and settled himself.

Chelsey yelled, "Come on!" and slapped the mare on the rump.

The mare almost jumped from under Curley. She left like the 8:45 with time to make up. Curley got a full cross-

rein at the sixteenth pole and sat against her, like Chelsey said.

The mare wasn't running; she was flying. The rail was a boiling, white torrent at Curley's left boot, and the wind whipped his eyes full of tears.

Curley didn't think she could get around the first elbow. She would fly off the track like a bug on a pin wheel. He tried to take her up, and she really went. She felt the bit pulling at her mouth, and flattened her belly to the track.

He got her around the turn, and there were other turns to take. Somehow he got her straight through the stretch and she went steaming past the finish line.

Curley's arms ached and his legs ached, but he had sense enough not to pull her up right away. He took it slow and easy, and finally she stopped. When she stopped, breathing hard, Chelsey stepped up and took hold of her. He led her back to the tow-ring, and Curley slumped weakly on her withers.

They got back to the tow-ring, and the old jock was leading the big horse around. Curley jumped to the ground, and Chelsey slipped a cooler on the mare. Curley led her around after the big horse.

A sharp voice made Curley jump. "Are you guys crazy?" the voice demanded. "Get that big horse out of here." The voice swore, and said, "You want to tip this off?"

The old jock hurried out of the ring leading the big horse. The man who had galloped the horse around at the end of the rope went with him.

Willie shook his head, and muttered, "If somebody saw the big horse in here, it's in the fire." He looked sharply around, and seemed satisfied.

Willie turned to Curley. "A sweet workout. Keep the mare moving. Remember, if anyone asks, she's the horse that worked."

Curley stared, open-mouthed. Willie was crazy. The mare was the one that had worked.

WILLIE looked at him and laughed. "I'll let you in on something, kid. Minted Dollar turned in a good work-

out. If any clocker is nosing around, I want him to think it was Twinkle Toes. I have connections who will spread the news all over the country. They will give the word that the mare is ready.

"The chumps will bet her in a hundred books. The bets will trickle back to the track and beat down her price. Minted Dollar will go up, and my money will be on him. If Soap hears of the betting on Twinkle Toes, he will think it is my money and let Minted Dollar alone. Smart, huh, kid?"

Curley started to say something. Willie waved him quiet.

A big man, with a knowing grin on his face, came out of the gloom. "That horse just work?" He nodded at the mare.

Willie asked harshly, "You been here long?"

The man said innocently, "Just got here. Is that Twinkle Toes?" His face was full of humor as if he had something he couldn't hold.

"Yeah," Willie said reluctantly.

When the big man left, Willie said, "I hope he didn't hear anything. If they should get wise it was Minted Dollar—"

He grabbed hold of Curley before Curley could open his mouth and walked him away. He walked him clear back to the tack room and turned him over to the old jock.

Curley waited until Willie left, then said desperately, "But it was Twinkle Toes I rode. Willie is crazy. He kept telling me the horse was Minted Dollar."

The old jock lowered his voice cautiously. "It was Twinkle Toes," he agreed. "But Minted Dollar is the horse Willie is interested in. The Dollar is sharper than a chorus girl after a sugar daddy. Minted Dollar can give Twinkle Toes half of the track, then choke her to death with dust."

He continued impatiently, "Don't you get it? The clocker will report to Soap that Willie is betting Twinkle Toes. The chumps will believe the reports that Willie spreads about the mare, and bet her. Soap will think it is Willie's money, and let Minted Dollar alone. I will ride Minted Dollar Saturday and make myself a piece of change. Willie is bet-

ting two grand. Tricky Willie is a very smart boy."

Curley said bitterly, "I am a come-on guy. I work the mare, and a thousand guys all over the country lose their dough. It is a very pretty racket."

The old jock said disparagingly, "You cannot think of the other guy in this game. If they believe what they hear, that is their lookout."

He left the tack room, then turned and came back. "You keep your mouth shut about this," he warned Curley. "Your uncle is in this, too. He needs some money for a change."

Curley didn't go back to sleep. He kept thinking bitterly of how things are done. He didn't like it; didn't like Tricky Willie, or the old jock, or his uncle.

Curley read the clocker's report in the racing form. The clocker had reported Twinkle Toes in a fast work. Curley thought of how the Chumps would read that workout, listen to Willie's smart boys, and be waiting to bet Twinkle Toes. And Minted Dollar will kick dust in her face all the way.

Old man Chelsey came to him Friday night and hossed him a badge. "You are a race-rider," he said. "See you tomorrow."

Curley felt no elation. He was riding, but it didn't mean a thing. He was riding without a chance.

SATURDAY morning dragged slowly away. The old jock came to Curley and said, "Watch yourself today. Soap thinks Willie's money is on Twinkle Toes. He will be out to stop the mare." He swelled with visible delight. "Then I step down with the Dollar."

Curley was lonely and nervous in the jock's room. The old jock tried to talk to him, but Curley wouldn't open up. The saddling bell rang, and the valets left with the tack. Curley fretted some more until the bell rang again.

Chelsey was waiting at the stalls. He said, "Pay attention, Curley. Break the mare, then reach up and take hold of her. Keep her second or third until you hit the stretch. She'll fold then." He had a wise grin on his face as he finished.

The paddock judge called, "Mount your jockeys," and Chelsey threw Curley into the saddle.

Curley was number one, right behind the lead pony. Minted Dollar was five. The old jock threw Curley a grin, and Curley looked away. As he passed the odds-board, Curley saw Twinkle Toes was fifteen. Some of the chump money was showing up at the track. Minted Dollar stayed fours. Tricky Willie would win himself a nice bet.

The mare was fretful and impatient. The assistant starter had a handful of trouble with her. Another assistant helped, and they finally got her in the stall. The starter yelled, "Come on!" and Curley whacked sharply with his bat.

The mare bounded out of the gate like a scared rocket. Curley got a confused glimpse of a wild tangle down the line. He had a blurred impression of a horse going down, and heard a loud groan from the crowd. Somebody's bet was on the ground.

Curley secured his cross-rein. In two jumps he was a length in front and widening the lead. He remembered old man Chelsey's instructions and tried to pull the mare down. The old man said to keep her second or third, and here she was heading the field.

Twinkle Toes felt the bit pulling at her mouth and really started running. In the middle of the back stretch, Twinkle Toes was five lengths on top, and the rest of the field was stretched out behind her like the tail of a comet.

Curley tried again to take a hold, but the mare wasn't having any. She ran like a crazy horse, and all Curley could do was to sit there and go for the ride. He was in the stretch-turn before he knew it, and nothing was close to him. He crossed the finish line, and the field was still eating his dust.

He pulled the mare in slowly, trying to think of something to tell the old jock and Tricky Willie. Old man Chelsey and his uncle would be sore, too.

Chelsey was waiting to take the mare when Curley got back. Curley looked at him miserably, untied his knot, and slipped to the ground.

"Who fell?" he asked.

"Minted Dollar," Chelsey grunted. "The old jock wasn't hurt." He stood there, looking hard at Curley.

Curley carried his saddle and weighed out, and nothing to tell Willie or the old jock came into his mind.

CURLEY straightened his shoulders. He would tell them and get it over with. He hadn't meant to win the race, but he couldn't hold back the mare. A smart play had backfired, and they could blame him or not. Curley didn't care.

He walked over to the stable after he dressed. Chelsey was cooling out the mare. Ed, the old jock, and Willie were sitting on the ground.

Curley blurted, "I couldn't help it. I couldn't hold her."

"That's what I figured," Willie said, and laughed. "That's why you got a chance to ride her. She closed at twelve, and I had five thousand on her. All of it bet in Soap's books around the country."

Curley said feebly, "But you bet Minted Dollar."

Willie nodded. "Yes, two thousand Soap knew I made that bet. So he went after Minted Dollar. Minted Dollar was knocked down right after the start. But Twinkle Toes was let alone. Soap thought sucker money was riding on her."

Curley groped his way, like a man in the dark. "Then it was Twinkle Toes all the time."

"Sure. That damned clocker heard me that morning. I knew he would. He stuck to my tail like a burr in wool. He heard me and saw Minted Dollar in the ring. He figured it was really Minted Dollar making that work. He reported to Soap, and to fool me they let the work go through as Twinkle Toes. It was all there for Soap to see, but he wouldn't believe it. He is sheared like a sheep."

He looked around at the listening faces. "I will have some coarse bills to distribute when I collect some bets."

The old jock got up with a limp. "The beating I take for money," he sighed. "Those guys almost put me in the hospital." He grinned at Curley. "Winning your first race was not so bad."

Curley expanded a little. "I was not so bad," he corrected.

"You were very bad," Tricky Willie said dryly. "I knew the old mare from a long time back. She has a soft mouth, and goes crazy when she feels the bit. A good rider would not be dumb enough to sit in her mouth all the way. But you were green enough to follow instructions."

He looked at Curley's crestfallen face. "I think I will take you with me," Willie said thoughtfully. "Someday, maybe, you will be a race-rider."

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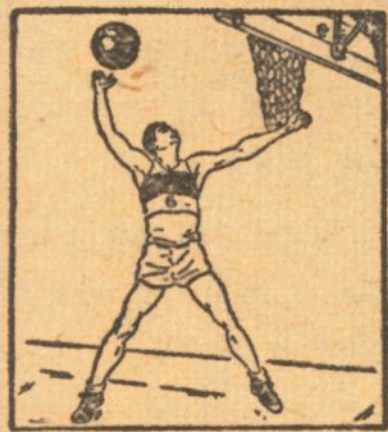
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Hardwood Missionary

By Jay Thorburn

The coach promised bench-warmer Blubber Bronson that he'd soon see hoop action. But the coach made good his promise with a boomerang basket mission.



BLUBBER BRONSON was idling the minutes away on the Westley bench. Blubber was not a man to be ignored. You could not help noticing him any more

than you'd miss seeing the trees in the woods. Blubber was the biggest of all the Westley cagers. He had occupied two seats on the bench over the span of three seasons. Yes, Blubber was a big man, round and roly-poly, and everybody loved him.

He sat there twiddling his thumbs, staring out onto the hardwood and seeming very pleased with things in general. Blubber lifted his glance to the scoreboard. It showed three minutes to play. The invading Tech quintet could consider themselves scalped. Westley had piled up a 46-22 advantage.

Blubber rubbed his pudgy hands together as though he were trying to light a fire. In his eyes was a gleam of anticipation of big things to come. It certainly would be a big thing in more ways than one if Blubber got into the game.

A howl from the stands switched Blubber's attention back to the court. A fierce mêlée was ensuing under the enemy basket. Out of it emerged Shep Emory, Westley's hot shot and captain. He whirled inside the foul circle, looped a one-hander over his shoulder, pivoting away from the hoop. There was no doubt in Blubber's mind that the melon would tickle the strings. It did, and Blubber emitted a sigh of satisfaction.

He shuffled his feet, looked down the bench at Coach Raynor. The great moment was at hand. The game was in the bag for Westley. And Coach Raynor had promised that under those conditions he would let Blubber play. That was all Blubber wanted. Just a chance to get in the game. That would be glory enough, even though it amounted to only a few seconds of action.

Another minute passed. Coach Raynor signalled four of his green-shirted scrubs. They got off the bench, went into the fray. Still Blubber sat there stranded and eagerly awaiting the call to action. Time was running out.

Blubber began to wax impatient. He kept swiveling his head, jerking his glance hopefully at the coach. Blubber did everything but hit the coach over the head with a club to remind him of his promise. But it all went to naught. Finally Blubber flung out his barrel-chest, took his courage in his hands, and strode up to Coach Raynor.

"Coach," Blubber said sturdily, "there's only a minute left to play."

Coach Raynor did not take the hint. He did not even so much as grunt at Blubber. He ignored him and that was even worse. However, Blubber was not to be denied in his hour of distress.

"The clock says only a min—"

"What's so unusual about that?" Coach Raynor interrupted. "Sixty seconds make a minute. Minutes come and minutes go. Get out of my way, Blubber. Looking at you makes me feel like I'm shipwrecked on a floating island."

Blubber stood his ground, body and soul.

"We're a million points ahead," he murmured. "Maybe I could make a basket if you'd put me in the game. That would be something."

"I should say it would, Blubber," the coach agreed. "It was yesterday that I told you I'd use you in the game. Today is not tomorrow. Tomorrow you can play. Besides you couldn't throw a pinball in the ocean. Go sit down, Blubber. I can't even see the alumni."

The coach's double-talk confused Blubber. But nothing could make him yield his point.

"You got nothing to lose, coach," he said stubbornly. "I would do all right if you put me in."

Coach Raynor threw up his hands, shook his head sadly.

"Okay, Blubber. Go in for Shep Emory. So I'll be gettin' my head examined in the morning."

THE kind of grin that broke over Blubber's features made it hard to see his face. But the grin froze there. The sudden sound of the gun ending the game was an awful let-down. A rollicking laugh swept up and down the bench. Blubber turned to his teammates.

"You see," he explained, grinning. "The coach is saving me for the big game with Central. I'm his ace in the hole. You tell 'em, coach."

That was Blubber, always the funny guy whether it hurt or not. He was a character. He didn't mind how often the last laugh was on him. It was commonly known that Coach Raynor kept Blubber on the squad if for no other reason than that he was a good-humor guy. He kept the team in high spirits.

In his own secret heart, there was nothing Blubber wanted more than a chance to contribute something more than laughs to the team. The hope beat eternally in his breast and that was not the least bit funny.

It was the next day that Coach Raynor ushered Blubber into his office. "Blubber, your big chance is at hand. I've decided to use you."

Blubber's eyes bugged. "I'm going to play in the next game," he said, fascinated by the thought.

"No, stupid," Raynor retorted. "You're going to scout the Aggies for us. We have a game scheduled that night. That lets me out. And our regular scout will be getting the dope on Central."

Even if Blubber wasn't a star member of the varsity, he did know basketball inside and out. He was always first with the court-puzzlers at the "skull" sessions.

It was during the half time of the Aggie game that Blubber, strolling out in the corridor for a drink, hit upon a real feedbox special. There, only a few paces away, a tall, craggy-faced man said:

"Westley will be expecting us to play man-to-man defense. That's where we're going to fool them and use a zone."

It wasn't till the fourth quarter of the game that the craggy-faced man's words really registered in Blubber's mind. The Aggies suddenly switched to a zone defense. That was all Blubber needed to see to convince him that what he had heard was not idle gossip.

"Good work," Coach Raynor told Blubber when he handed in his report on the Aggie game. "I'll see that you get your varsity letter for that."

WHATEVER exultation Blubber experienced faded with the Aggie-Westley game. The Aggies, playing a man-to-man defense, held a 19-10 lead at the half. All during the previous week, Coach Raynor had prepared his team for a zone defense, built his pet plays and hopes on that assumption.

It was all Blubber's fault that Westley was taking a drubbing. He had given them a phony tip. The players lost no time making their feelings known, either. They eyed Blubber scornfully, let loose with plenty of cracks.

"If ever I see you again, Blubber," Coach Raynor raged during the half, "it will be too soon." Then he paused, a peculiar light coming into his eyes. He added: "You've been squawking for a chance to play, Blubber. Okay, you're getting that chance, even if it costs us the

game. I'm going to give the fans a good laugh. Let them see how lousy you are. You'll never want to show your face around the campus again. That'll be good punishment for your phony scouting job."

Blubber started the second half at a guard position. The Aggies captured the tap-off. They rushed the melon down the boards, attacking with swift precision. A forward knifed in, swept across Blubber's slot.

But there on the spot was Blubber. He hooked out a hand, intercepted the ball. There was a clearing down the sidelines and Blubber began moving with a deceptive, shambling gait. He dribbled past the center line. Hemmed in, he faked, bounce-passed to Shep Emory. Then Blubber rode in on the goal from the opposite side. The Westley captain fired to Blubber. Blubber heaved a one-hander. It sailed into the webbing.

The Aggies surged back, bent on swift retaliation. Their attack bogged down because Blubber was there to stop it. The big guy was all over the court. He was

playing an inspired, determined brand of ball. The Aggies clamped down on the Westley attack. Blubber lofted the melon from mid-court. It swished through the mesh.

Blubber didn't make many more like that. Nor, as the game wore on, was Blubber quite so sensational. But he gave his teammates the required lift and drive. They had the Aggies licked, 38-29 when Coach Raynor took Blubber out of the game.

"You may not be the best man on the squad, Blubber," the coach said seriously, "but for my money you've got what it takes. Even if you just stood still, the enemy would get so winded trying to get around you, it makes up for your weaknesses. All by yourself you're a panzer division. I'm going to save you for the Central game."

Blubber, the fat guy with a grin and a thousand wisecracks, could neither grin nor wise crack. It was a great feeling, being saved for something besides the dance.



"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do if there is poverty unrest,

unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 442, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1939, Frank B. Robinson.

Stooge for a Puck Pirate



*Sticks swung fiercely
and bodies clashed
as he neared the
cage.*

By C. Paul Jackson

CHAPTER I

PUCK CONSPIRACY

THE husky, wide-shouldered lad in the left wing spot poised there on the ice of the Olympia Arena for the start of the workout. Surreptitiously he rubbed his fingers over the red woolen jersey of the Detroit Red Arrows. An

eager light filled his deep blue eyes.

"The big time!" he whispered. "Me! Up here with the big leaguers!"

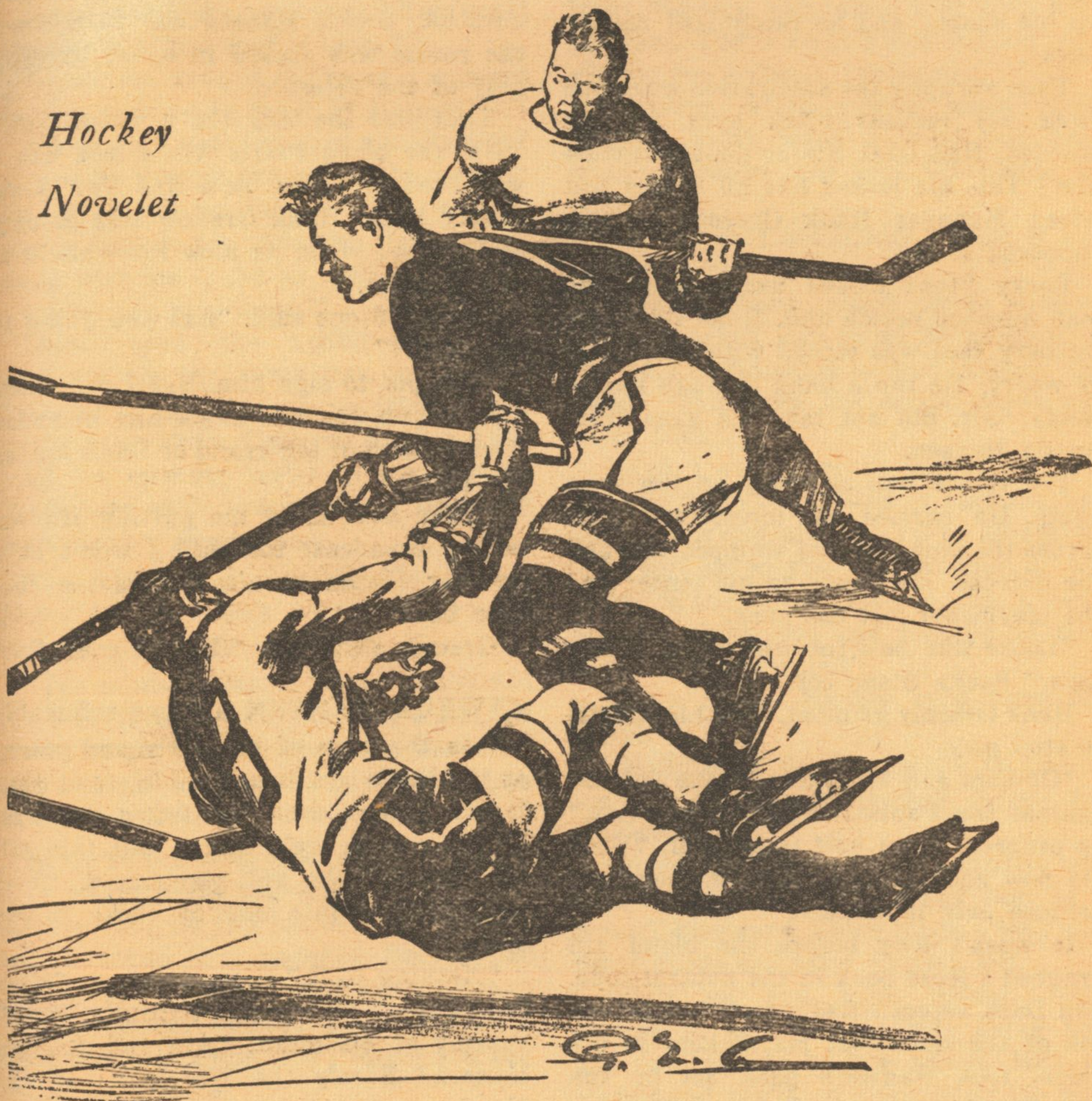
Swede Hansen didn't know that he was getting a trial in fast company because of mistaken identity—and the mistake had been deliberately arranged!

The puck bounced free from a flurry of sticks at the face-off. A blond streak

Swede Hansen, unknown puck-ragger, came down from the hockey hinterlands to take a wing spot with big-time stick-wielders. But Hansen didn't know he had been sent for mainly to play stooge to an ice pirate's conspiracy.

Hockey

Novelet



shot cross-ice, and Swede Hansen pounced on the loose disc, pivoted in a cloud of ice spray and skimmed down the boards.

He cradled the rubber in the crook of his stick, poured into his skates all the exuberance he felt at being up here with the big leaguers. His yellow head swayed and bobbed rhythmically with the flashing blades as he eased past a poke check at the blue line.

Like a streamlined Diesel, the big Swede thundered in on the lone defense-

man between him and the goalie. He feinted, swerved around the lunging check that the defenseman threw.

Fifteen feet from the crease Swede Hansen flexed powerful wrists and a black streak whistled six inches off the ice, burned toward the corner of the cage.

That blistering puck numbed the goalie's foot. The blond rookie leaped on the rebound, lofted a sweeping backhand into the opposite corner before the padman could lunge back.

"BOY!" Instinctive appreciation for the speed of the rookie was in the exclamation that came from a tall, black-haired man in the players' box. Rocky Stone had been a star puckster before an auto crash forced him to hang up his skates, and he recognized hockey talent.

Then abruptly the admiration was gone from his restless black eyes and he scowled. Had Dink Stofer double-crossed him? This kid *looked* like all Stofer had wired Manager Hank Greenly he was supposed to be!

Rocky Stone looked narrowly at the man hunched beside him. Hank Greenly's leathery face was etched with deep lines of worry. He ran a hand through sparse sandy hair, did not take his gaze from Swede Hansen.

The rookie was suddenly on the loose again. He carried an intercepted pass across the blue line and whipped through the defense. He passed to his center and the playmaker lost the puck.

"Looks like he's the whirlwind Stofer says," Rocky Stone commented.

Hank Greenly grunted, blew his whistle to stop play.

"Oldham and MacAllister take defense against the Paulaski-Dahl-Hansen line," he ordered. Then half to himself, "We'll see how good he is against the toughest defense pair in hockey."

It wasn't long before the blond kid grabbed a loose puck in the neutral zone. Ben Dahl, veteran Red Arrow center and one of the smoothest playmakers in the game, took Hansen's pass, set up the play. The frontliners rolled in on Oldham and MacAllister.

Swede Hansen had the puck as they swung across the blueline. Big Buck Oldham faked him into an attempt to slip inside, nailed the rookie with a tooth-rattling body check. The kid crashed against the boards and lost the disc.

Hank Greenly groaned. "He's too green! He might be the Whirlwind of the North, like Stofer says, but that's in the bushes!"

Rocky Stone let out a soft breath. Stofer hadn't crossed him.

"Be reasonable, Hank," he said. "Old-

ham can make any forward look terrible when he hits 'em."

They watched Hansen slicker the second front line, maneuver a second-stringer into making a pass and then intercepted the puck by sheer speed. No question, Swede Hansen was fast. Then the rookie was sucked in again by cagy play of the veterans.

That was the way the workout went. First the blond rookie would look like a world-beater, then he'd fall for some sucker trick. Hank Greenly was gloomy and morose when he blew his whistle to end practice.

"Well," Stone said. "Are you going to sign him?"

"I've got to sign him. But I sure wish Dan Brunn was able to see him in action 'fore I pass out ten grand of Dan's money for him."

"Then how about me putting Hansen on my broadcast tonight? I won't have another chance at him before the club gets back."

Greenly shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

SWEDE HANSEN sat uncomfortably on the edge of his chair and stared at the black box on a flexible stand near Rocky Stone's desk. He licked dry lips.

"M—maybe we'd better call this off, Mr. Stone," the kid stammered. "I—I never talked into one of those things and—"

"Nothing to it," Stone laughed. "Mike fright is—" He stopped abruptly, looked sharply at his guest. "Are you goofing, Hansen? Surely the Whirlwind of the North must have been on some local sports review!"

The blond youngster stared in puzzled bewilderment. Suddenly his face cleared. He grinned, said apologetically, "You're thinking of Swede Swanson. He's the guy they call the Whirlwind of the North. Sure, Swanson was interviewed over the air on some small station. But I'm just plain Olaf Hansen. The boys call me Swede, but that's as near as I come to being Swanson."

"Are you saying you're not the Swede who's been burning up the Border League!"

"I played in the Northern League, Mr. Stone. I—I explained to Mr. Stofer that he had the wrong fellow, but he said he was the judge of what sort of player Manager Greenly wanted."

"Holy slithering busted sticks!" Stone sounded genuinely perturbed. "How could Dink have pulled such a patsy?"

He walked around the room a moment or two, stopped in front of Hansen.

"How much guts have you got, Hansen? You're in a spot and after the buildup I've given you on the air, you've got me over a barrel, too. Are you game to go along with me to get us both out?"

"What do you mean?"

Stone eyed the rookie narrowly. "Greenly has lost three men in the last four games and there is no talent ready on the farm clubs. The club won't get beyond the opening series in the play-off if Greenly can't round out at least one more decent front line."

The kid looked puzzled. "Isn't that better for me? He's bound to give me every chance to make good."

"The minute Greenly learns you're not the Whirlwind of the North he's laid ten grand on the line for, you'll be handed a ticket back to Ironwood so fast you wouldn't believe it!"

Stone fiddled with a pen set on his desk.

"I played eight years in the big show, Hansen. Maybe you know that the same auto crackup that wrecked Dan Brunn put me on the shelf—but let that pass. I know hockey ability. You're maybe a little rough in spots, but I figure you can make the grade."

"I—I—all I want is a chance, Mr. Stone. I'll do anything to—"

"Good," Stone cut in. He scowled to hide the decent impulse that ate at him. Only the worst sort of heel would do what he was doing to this kid and for a moment he wavered. Then the resentment he bore Greenly and Dan Brunn won. He went on. "Here's what you've got to do."

As Stone outlined the procedure, the broad face of Hansen grew more and more doubtful.

"I'm only a rookie, Mr. Stone. I can't blow off like that!"

"Don't be a sap, it's your only chance," Stone argued. "Be smart. Who gets the headlines and the big dough? The quiet, colorless lads? Not by a jugful! The Eddie Shores, the Orlandos, the— hell there are dozens of examples in every sport. Glamor, nicknames that stick with the fans. That's what I'm doing for you, giving you color, a trademark."

"Besides, after you've made good, Greenly won't want to send you back whether you're the real Whirlwind or not!"

The kid said doubtfully, "Well, if you think it's best!"

That broadcast ruined Swede Hansen.

Stone asked him what he thought of the class of National League Hockey. The rookie read from the script Stone had given him.

"Well, I haven't really seen it yet, but judging from the caliber of play the Red Arrow workout showed, I'll do all right."

"They called you the Wonder of the North in the Border League, didn't they? Do you think you can live up to that moniker down here?"

Again Swede Hansen read from the script.

"Nothing to it! The fans'll be calling me the Wonder of Hockey before the play-offs!"

No wonder the rookie's teammates who heard that broadcast pegged him as a pop-off blowhard. Stone made a long distance phone call after Hansen left.

"He's all you said, Stofer. Good enough to egg Greenly into using him and raw enough to lose games. He's all signed and you'll get your cut of the purchase price. Besides that, the day Greenly is fired and I have the job of manager that's rightly mine, I'll bring you back as coach. I'm not forgetting, Stofer."

Rocky Stone listened a moment, thoughtfully. "No," he answered at length. "I'm sure we don't have to worry about that angle. In his neck of the woods the Whirlwind of the North may be a big shot. But who's seen him around here, or even his picture? There are a hundred local ice heroes up in the hinterlands—but who's ever heard of them? Don't give that angle a thought."

CHAPTER II

BIG LEAGUE DEBUT

THE Blackhawks were in the midst of a hot streak and Hank Greenly wanted this game for the lift in morale the crippled Arrows would derive if they cooled the Hawks. He teamed Hansen with lanky Ben Dahl at center and steady Paulaski at right wing for the first line. Grimly the manager doped the setup to Dahl before they skated onto the ice.

"Hansen's fast, a good stick-handler, and it's hard to blink away the eighteen goals he scored in the Border League."

Dahl shrugged, "I don't go for a big I-am guy, Hank, but you can depend on me an' Alex givin' all the help we can."

For two periods of slashing, slam-bang hockey, neither club scored. The Blackhawk line of Carse-Cunningham-Chad gave Mannie Levin a workout in the Arrow nets, but the round little man staved off the red light. Dahl and Paulaski were unsure of the rookie, and the Detroit attack was erratic. Goodman had only two tough saves in the Blackhawk cage all the ten minutes the Arrow first line was on the first period.

Again in the second stanza, Levin fought a continual flurry of pucks. Greenly grew more and more morose in the box. It wasn't the Arrow defense line that was at fault.

The backliners were battling extra burdens because the blond rookie at wing was outlickered too often and the enemy attack poured through his area.

"That damned braggin' rook ain't got it" Buck Oldham growled when Hank pulled him off the ice for a rest. "The front line's a sieve. He's muffed every chance!"

"Maybe he just hasn't found himself," Greenly sighed. "Maybe he'll wise up."

"Not him!" Oldham snorted. "I can't stomach a mug that tosses out a line like that rook pulled on Stone's program—and then puts up a game an amateur would be ashamed of!"

Swede Hansen sat on a bench apart from his mates. He was hurt and bewildered and plenty low. He'd been

terrible, he knew, but at least they didn't have to ignore him.

They want me to flop, he thought gloomily. He wondered if he ought to turn in his uniform and beat it back to the bushes. He was surprised when Greenly said gruffly:

"You're starting with Dahl and Paulaski again, Hansen. The way this game is going, one goal may decide it. I'm counting on your line to get it."

A wave of renewed confidence swept the rookie. He couldn't have been *too* rotten: Greenly was sending him back. A guy had to make good for a manager like that!

Dahl slashed his stick to the ice a fraction of a second before the enemy center at the face-off, hooked the puck aside and sped for the blue line. Paulaski dragged just short of the attacking zone so as not to be offside, took Dahl's rifle pass near the boards the instant the center's skates cut the blue.

Dahl ragged the puck out front, sized up the defense. He didn't see a Blackhawk forward in time, lost the disc. The puck caromed off the boards into possession of the opposing center.

The Hawk frontliners roared down on Detroit's right side. Once more Swede Hansen was fainted out of position. He lunged for the man with the puck along the lumber, caught a flash of a black and white sweater shoot past him, realized he was caught again.

Frantically he bit his blades into the gleaming surface, whipped around in a spray of ice, and tore for the spot where Oldham battled a three-man attack. He was too late.

OLDHAM crashed one man to the ice but another wing darted in and snatched the puck. He blistered a scorcher toward the corner of the cage that Mannie Levin saved only by a sensational dive. The rubber disc slithered crazily off the goalie's big stick, twisted straight at Hansen.

Instinctively the rookie gathered in the puck, whirled in back of the nets to pick up speed, and dashed down ice.

Chicago was caught flatfooted with

four men down-ice in their drive for a goal. Swede Hansen sizzled down the right boards like a supercharged racer. Paulaski cut diagonally for the opposite lane and when a burly Hawk bore down on the rookie, Paulaski pounded his club on the ice, yelled:

"Here, kid, here! Pass it!"

The rookie flicked his thick wrists. The puck hummed across to Paulaski a second's fraction before the defenseman crashed Swede Hansen.

Paulaski burned the black disc at the cage from fifteen feet out and Goodman came out to save. Instead of being smothered in the big gloves, the cannonaded puck rebounded, spun away from the frantic clutch of the goalie.

Hansen scrambled to his feet. He dived at the spinning puck, slapped it with his stick a split second before a Blackhawk's descending club crashed down on his own.

The red light in the goal judge's cage glowed and the public address system blared tinnily, "Goal for Detroit by Hansen, Number 16. Time, 1:19."

A warm feeling thrilled the rookie. A goal! Lucky, yes, but still a goal in his first big-league game!

The Blackhawks then really turned on the heat. For eight minutes the Red Arrow defense was given a terrific ride. Little Mannie Levin bobbed around in the nets under the storm of pucks like a rowboat in a gale.

Time and again mistakes of the inexperienced rookie put his team in the hole. But more than once the sheer speed the kid owned enabled him to get back in time to nullify his errors.

"By dang!" Hank Greenly ejaculated. "The kid's in there swingin' with all he's got!"

He pulled off his first line, replaced the defensemen. "Defensive hockey," he snapped. "Hold that goal edge!"

The Blackhawks retaliated by sending in a spare forward for a defenseman. Six minutes to play. A Red Arrow man was caught holding, sent to the penalty box for a two-minute penance. The Blackhawks stormed the shorthanded Arrows with renewed savagery. The veteran March-Dahlstrom-Gottselig line over-

powered Levin for the deadlocking marker.

"On the ice," Greenly barked at the five starters. "Get that goal back!"

It was a wild and woolly dogfight for a hectic three minutes. The scoreboard clock rolled to show only two minutes left. A Blackhawk was caught high-sticking and was sent off the ice, leaving only five teammates to finish the game.

Greenly yanked MacAllister, sent in a spare wing.

"Give 'em the power!"

The teams battled furiously for ninety seconds. Then it happened.

Dahl beat his man at a face-off, drilled the puck to Paulaski. The right winger shot it to Hansen and the rookie fell victim to a sandwich check. One Blackhawk hit him on the left, another from the right. He was neatly boxed, lost the puck, and the Hawks carried the fight unexpectedly to the Arrows.

Two men bore down on Oldham and when the husky defenseman finally had to commit himself—lunging for the man with the disc and shifting fast to the free man—he was lost. The Blackhawks knew all the tricks as well as Oldham.

The Chicago wing faked a pass, pivoted sharply, whirled and ripped the disc toward the nets. Mannie Levin got a piece of it with a desperate, plunging dive, but it ricocheted off his glove, slithered across the thin red line.

The winning goal for the Blackhawks!

IN TORONTO against the Maple Leafs, Hansen was hotter than a little red wagon. A couple of times men got past him that a more experienced wing might have stopped, but the rookie was a ball of fire when the Arrows had the puck.

He scored twice himself. He had two assists on light-blinkers that Paulaski registered. It was the blond recruit's solo dash into enemy ice that drew the defense over to his side so that when he flipped the disc to Paulaski and the chunky Polish star passed to Dahl, the Red Arrow center had an unhampered blast that beat the Toronto goalie for the fifth counter.

Hank Greenly had hopes that his gamble on the rookie would pay off as the team hit Boston. He changed his mind after the game.

The Arrows battled the always tough Bruins even for nearly three periods. Late in the final session, a Boston forward slipped past Hansen, took a carom-pass off the boards, and beat Mannie Levin for the winning goal.

Two mornings later, in a New York hotel lobby, Buck Oldham bought a copy of the *Detroit Gazette*. He browsed through the sheet, finally turned to the sport section. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, leaned forward and re-read two paragraphs in a column headed THE DOPE BUCKET.

Oldham's jaw tightened and he stared unseeingly across the lobby for a space. Finally he muttered, "It don't make sense, but it could be. I'm having a heart to heart confab with that rook!"

Swede Hansen was surprised when Oldham came into his room; he looked at big Buck questioningly. The face of the defenseman was grim. Hansen pushed a chair at Oldham, said:

"Sit down. What can I do for you?"

"I want to give you a little Red Arrow history that you maybe don't know," Oldham said.

"Sure." The rookie looked more puzzled.

"Last year," Oldham continued, "we were good enough to get quite a ways in the play-off for the Stanley Cup. We looked set for a big year this season. Then Dan Brunn, the man who developed the club, and Rocky Stone, our star wing and big scorer, went up into Canada to contact some promising amateurs. They cracked up in a car wreck that retired Stone from hockey and nearly killed Dan Brunn.

"Brunn came back at the start of this season against the advice of his doctors. He fell again and injured his back the day before Christmas. He's been in a wheel chair ever since."

Oldham stopped momentarily, glanced at the rookie. Swede Hansen said nothing. He didn't get this at all.

"Brunn brought Hank Greenly back

from a farm club to run the club," Oldham continued. "Hank earned it. He was the backbone of the team when I broke in and they don't come any finer or squarer than Hank. More than anything else, Hank wants to justify Dan Brunn's faith. He got bad breaks, had to have a capable man to fill out our front lines, so he bought you on recommendation of Dink Stofer."

Oldham stopped. The rookie said bewilderedly, "What am I supposed to say? What's all that to do with me?"

"I don't know exactly. I do know that Stofer is a louse and couldn't be trusted around the block. You shot off your gab on Stone's program about being a wonder. I'm wondering just what this means."

He shoved the Detroit paper at Hansen. The rookie read:

Your correspondent is increasingly intrigued by a rumor current that the Arrows were sold a bill of goods when they bought the contract of Swede Hansen. Can it be that they bought the wrong man? We hear that the hockey player wearing that salubrious handle—Wonder of the North—is named Swede Swanson. And he is the property of the New York Warriors!

We wonder if there can be any connection between the undoubted effort being made for the scalp of Hank Greenly as Arrow manager and this mixup involving the Wonder of the North!

Swede Hansen lifted his gaze. Two spots of red showed high on his cheeks.

"I never claimed to be Swanson! Do you think I would be party to a plot to—"

Oldham cut him off. "I think it's funny that you pop off what a world beater you are—and then turn in the kind of hockey you did in Chicago and Boston!"

He stared steadily into the rookie's eyes, added quietly, "We'll never stand for anybody jobbing Greenly or Brunn, Hansen!"

SIXTEEN thousand hockey-mad fans jammed the Olympia Arena when the Red Arrows came on the ice. A roar of welcome greeted the players. The fans recognized the game fight the team had put up on the road trip, knew that if they

could take the Warriors tonight, Greenly's club would gain the coveted play-off spot.

Swede Hansen had an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wanted so hard to please the home fans in his first appearance.

Both teams started out playing a wary game. There was no stalling, but they were feeling each other out. It was midway of the first period that the Warriors abruptly surged across the Detroit blue line, a four-man attack concentrated on the right side of the Arrow defense.

Swede Hansen raced for the man with the puck, crowded him to the boards, poke-checked at the disc. The New York wing feinted, tried to draw the rookie out of position. Grimly Hansen watched his eyes, refused to fall for the ruse. It gave him a lot of satisfaction to bang the enemy puckster, tie him up on the boards until the referee shrilled a face-off.

Oldham skated past, slapped Hansen on the back. "That's the way to go in there, kid! Show 'em there ain't no free passages to the nets tonight!"

A warm glow suffused Hansen. It was heartening to be treated like a human by a teammate.

The teams battled furiously. Greenly sent in new lines five minutes before the end of the period, gave Oldham three minutes' rest, then sent the burly defenseman back with instructions to try one of his powerful, bull-like sashays for a goal.

The Warriors ganged him, spoiled big Oldham's try. The gong clanged with no goal for either club.

In the dressing room Hank Greenly said, "No fight talk. You men know what this game means to us. We'll start the same lines that began the game."

As the teams were preparing to face off for the second period, the P.A. System metallicly droning out the lineup, there was a little silence as though the man at the microphone was stunned. His voice was excited when it came.

"Ladies and gentlemen. For days we have been reading and hearing about the Wonder of the North. Apparently we have *two* such phenoms!

"Number thirty-six, Swede Swanson, in at left wing for the Warriors, is—according to the information supplied by the New York management, the one and only original Wonder of the North! He is making his National Hockey League debut here tonight!"

Oldham skated near the rookie.

"Forget all that Wonder of the North bunk, kid," he muttered. "The gang will be with you if you're on the level. It's in your lap now."

Swede Hansen felt himself tightening inside. He was so full of determination that it ruined him. He was too inexperienced to be able to keep himself from tightening up in such a crisis.

CHAPTER III

PUCK-RAGGER EXILE

DETROIT lost that game in the second twenty minutes and it just about wrote finis to the hockey career of Swede Hansen. Everything he did was wrong.

The period wasn't four minutes old when he made his first mistake. Over-eager to show his mates and the fans that he could play hockey whether or not he was the Wonder of the North, the rookie charged a New Yorker at the wrong time.

The referee thumbed him to the penalty box and while he was serving the penance, the Warriors jammed a score through Mannie Levin.

A minute after he was back on the ice, Hansen took a pass from Oldham in the neutral zone. He thought Ben Dahl was over the blue line and instead of passing to the center, he essayed a solo dash down the boards. He was dumped hard, lost the disc and Dahl and Paulaski were out of position because they had expected him to pass. Mannie Levin made an all-out split to save or the enemy would have had another counter.

Dahl skated in front of the rookie when Mannie froze the puck and the ref blew a face-off. Dahl was hard-eyed and suspicion rode his features.

"Why the hell didn't you pass?" he

demanded. "By damn, Hansen, if you're deliberately letting us down, I'll—"

"Shake it up, shake it up!" the referee barked. "Get going, Dahl."

Dahl scowled, said grimly to the rookie, "I'm watching you, Hansen!"

Less than sixty seconds later, Hansen was permanently in the doghouse.

Paulaski and Oldham shot the puck between them, waited in the neutral zone for Dahl and Hansen to swing into the play. Suddenly a Warrior materialized from nowhere, intercepted a pass and sped across the blue line into Detroit ice. Oldham was caught. A New York wing drew MacAllister to the boards and the man with the puck cut sharply into the center lane before Oldham could get back. He thundered in on Mannie Levin all alone.

Hansen bit his skates into the ice with all the power he owned. Just as the Warrior shot, the rookie whizzed in front of him in a vain effort to block.

He leaned so far forward that he sprawled on his face. The Warrior banged into him and both men slid in a tangled mass of red jersey and blue toward the goal cage.

The puck bounded crazily from the skate of Mannie Levin, skittered just outside the goalkeeper's crease. Hansen snaked out his stick while still flat on his face, tried to hook the rubber disc out of danger.

Everybody, including the referee, missed the sweep of the New York player's gloved hand. It looked as if Hansen had batted the puck into his own goal.

The red light went on in the judge's cage.

Then the big crowd was treated to a strange sight—a near fist fight between players of the same team. Ben Dahl rushed at the blond rookie, pulling off his gloves.

"Damn your yellow soul!" the center gritted. "Oldham was right, you're throwing Hank Greenly down!"

He swung a roundhouse right calculated to knock the rookie loose from his moorings. The referee grabbed the irate center, deflected the blow. Players of both teams separated the two.

"Let him go!" Hansen begged. His face was drained of color. "Let him go! He thinks I'm throwing the game, I'll—"

Buck Oldham shoved him toward the sideline. Oldham's face was hard and uncompromising. "Get off the ice," he said in a tight voice. "I warned you that we wouldn't stand for Hank being jobbed!"

Fans in the seats near enough to have heard, told others. The ugly thing spread through the crowd like wildfire, gained ugliness as it spread. By the time Hank Greenly waved the rookie to the dressing room, programs and popcorn boxes were being showered at him.

One rabid fan leaned over the railing and took a poke at him as Hansen clumped down the ramp. Tears of rage and humiliation streamed down the cheeks of the rookie.

Heartsick, bewildered and hurt, he dressed, slipped out by a side door. He walked the streets for hours, tried to figure out what had happened to him. He knew but one desire—to get away from this heartless city. He was beaten.

He took a train for Ironwood that night. He heard the newsies crying their wares, but he bought no paper. He knew nothing of the lies that Rocky Stone had put out over the air that night. . . .

SWEDE HANSEN came into the cabin quite late in the afternoon. A scuffed pair of shoeskates dangled from his neck and he was flushed from hours of skimming over the ice in the sharp air. It was the first of April but there was still ice in the lakes of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Hansen had found that he didn't care to go home to face questions of old friends. He had got off at a junction, bought food, and hired a farmer to take him to the cabin he and his father had built years ago for a hunting and fishing base. For days he roamed the wildness of the north country.

Today he had been restless, had longed for the feel of steel blades biting smooth ice. He'd dug up the old skates. It was while he rummaged for the skates that he found the portable radio. His dad must have blown himself, or maybe the gang

.....
had chipped in when they were deer hunting. Now, as he threw down his skates, Hansen thought of the radio. He brought it out, fiddled with the dials. Music came in for a space then a voice said:

"We bring you flashes of the news from our Toronto studios through the courtesy of—" The inevitable commercial plug, then a rasping, staccato voice barked latest developments in Europe. Hansen was about to turn to another station when the voice said:

"And now for the world of sports. Toronto's entry in the Stanley Cup finals embarked tonight for Detroit where they meet the Red Arrows in the opening game between second place teams of the two divisions of the National Hockey League.

"Toronto is confident of victory but not overconfident. They are not misled by stories from Detroit that the Arrows are torn asunder by recent developments."

Hansen reached for the dials. He didn't care to hear about the fortunes of the team that had broken his heart. Then his name came over the air.

"As yet no trace has been found of the missing Swede Hansen, Detroit rookie left wing, about whose head the tempest rages. Latest reports from Detroit indicate that the resignation of Manager Hank Greenly will be tendered before the game. Detroit fans are demanding it after revelations contained in a statement made by Hansen to a Detroit radio announcer."

There was a brief pause then the radio continued: "This broadcast is a presentation of our press-radio bureau. For further details, see your local newspapers."

THE queenly brunette behind the desk in the reception room of radio station WZL looked up startled when the door banged open. She looked into the bleak visage of Swede Hansen.

"Rocky Stone," he said grimly. "Ring whatever gadget you have to warn him that I'm coming!"

"Mr. Stone isn't in." The girl peered closely at the big blond. "Aren't—aren't you the missing hockey player? They've been hunting you for days."

The Swede grunted. "I just learned that. Caught a flash on the radio and hiked into town and read some back copies of the papers. That's why I'm here. Rocky Stone is going to eat every one of the lies he spread about me! Where is he?"

"He—he left about half an hour ago." The brunette quailed before the fierceness in Hansen's expression. "He—he writes the scripts for his sports review at his apartment. He may be—"

She was suddenly talking to thin air. Hansen slammed from the place. He knew where Stone's quarters were.

Rocky Stone looked up from the desk in his bachelor apartment as the buzzer sounded. Rocky felt good. He'd just put the finishing touches on his script for the sports review. A script that would provide the final impetus to blast Hank Greenly loose from the job Rocky Stone coveted.

Stone went to the speaking tube, answered the buzzer, "Yes? Who's there?"

"It's me, Stone—Swede Hansen! I want a word with you!"

Rocky Stone smothered a startled curse. For an instant panic gripped him. He'd had it all figured out how he would handle Hansen; then when the rookie disappeared, he had felt secure, had given no further thought to Hansen. Now the big rookie had to be contended with.

Stone pushed the button that released the lock downstairs. While he waited for Hansen, the sportcaster gave himself a fight talk.

"Hell, I can handle that big dumb Hick! What's the matter with me?"

He left the door unlatched, went back to the desk. Apparently he was busy writing when Hansen knocked.

"Come in," he called. Then as the husky rookie poked his head in the doorway, "Grab a seat, Hansen. I've got to finish this. Be with you in a second."

Hansen stared in amazement. He'd expected anything from Stone except this reception. The gorge rose in his throat. He strode purposefully to the desk.

"You'll talk right now," he said grimly. "Stalling won't get you anywhere. You know why I'm here!"

Stone reached for a cigarette from a

box on the desk, frowned. "Why, no," he said. "I don't. I thought you were smart in getting out from under. I didn't expect you to—"

"That statement you released that I pretended I was Swede Swanson under Greenly's orders, to cover up his error in buying my contract, is a lie and you know it! You're going to retract it over the air. Tonight!"

"Get this, Hansen," Stone said coolly. "I'm retracting nothing!"

The door buzzer rasped again. Neither man paid any attention. Stone's gaze was locked with the blue fire of Hansen's eyes.

"You lied from the start, Stone! You're pulling a rotten trick to get Hank Greenly fired!"

"So what?" Stone shrugged. "Neither you nor nobody else can—"

Swede Hansen shot a long arm across the desk, jerked the sportcaster erect. Stone's head rocked from the whistling right the blond youngster cracked to his mouth. Stone shook his head, wiped a hand across split lips.

"I'll tear you apart for that!" he snarled. "You'll wish to hell you'd stayed hidden!"

"Judging from that sock, you've got a job of tearing to do," a voice drawled. Hank Greenly stood in the doorway. He hadn't heard any of the conversation, but he had a hunch what it was all about. "Go right ahead, boys. I figure the air can stand some clearing around here!"

Stone peeled off his coat, came snarling around the desk. Hansen said nothing, just watched. Stone suddenly charged like a mad bull.

Hansen calmly sidestepped, took a short step forward, and planted a vicious left to Stone's head. The sportcaster's ear reddened under the impact.

FOR two minutes the battle was even. Stone pumped rights and lefts to Hansen's face, drove him against the desk. The husky youngster coolly jabbed himself out of tight spots, began to cut Stone to pieces. Stone was panting like an engine going upgrade.

Condition and youth asserted itself. Hansen slipped inside a looping hay-

maker, cracked Stone on the jaw with a staggering left hook. Stone crashed over the desk, sprawled to the floor.

"Is that enough, Stone? Are you ready to admit you lied all the way?"

Stone muttered a curse, staggered erect. Hank Greenly thought, *Rocky never did know when he was licked*. But the manager made no move to interfere. He sensed that the boil had come to a head and the only way was to let the corruption come out.

Rocky Stone swayed on his feet, squinted at Hansen through puffed eyes. He wiped the blood from his mouth and plunged at the youngster.

Hansen let him have it. A stiff left to the face slowed Stone's rush and as beautiful a right cross to the button as Hank Greenly had ever seen exploded against Stone's jaw. His black eyes glazed, his knees buckled, and Rocky Stone pitched forward to the floor. He was out cold.

Hansen told Greenly everything as they cleaned up Stone in the bathroom. Stone finally came out of his stupor. His eyes were sullen and he muttered thickly through bruised lips.

"You're a better man than I figured, Hansen."

"That isn't what I licked you for!"

For an instant Stone sustained the steady gaze of the youngster, then his eyes dropped. He frowned and you could almost see the wheels go round in his head.

"You licked me, all right," he mumbled at length. "And in a way I guess I've got it coming to me. I guess I'm no good as a puck-mentor pirate . . ."

"I've been a skunk, Hank, sore because Dan gave you the job I figured should have been mine. Well, I always was a damned fool and now I'm finished. Hansen never told me any of the stuff I passed out!"

He hesitated. "I guess I must have blown my top to have even gone so far with it."

Strangely, Hank Greenly felt little rancor toward Stone. He couldn't forget that they had been teammates, had gone through scores of tough hockey battles shoulder to shoulder.

"Dan and me had it figured about the way it is," he said slowly. "After you threw the barbs into me on your broadcasts, Dan said it was because you was after my hide. He sent me to bring you for a little talk, but—I guess it don't matter, now."

Greenly turned to Hansen.

"We'll have to get Stone to a doctor. That's a bad gash in his cheek where he hit the desk and he needs a stitch or two where you split his ear. After that we're going to see Dan Brunn. Things are going to be different, kid!"

IT WAS almost six-thirty when Hank Greenly and Hansen entered the apartment of Dan Brunn. The veteran boss of the Red Arrows, wan and pale from weeks of convalescing, lay on a day-berth with his ear cocked to the radio. He looked questioningly at Greenly.

"Who is this guy? Where's Stone? Didn't you get to him before he left for the studio? I wanted to—"

The radio interrupted Dan Brunn.

"You are listening to WZL. Due to an accident, Rocky Stone will not be heard in his sports review tonight. We expect Rocky to be able to bring you the play-by-play report of the Detroit-Toronto game, but we repeat that the sports review for this evening has been cancelled. You will—"

Hank Greenly snapped off the radio. He said dryly, "Dan, meet the accident that happened to Rocky Stone—Swede Hansen. I got there just in time to watch the kid beat the ears off Rocky. I wish you could have seen it!"

"Listen to Hansen, Dan. You were right. Stone didn't spill the whole layout, but it's easy to see that he and Stofer engineered this thing. Hansen is an innocent victim."

Dan Brunn listened to Hansen's story. All the while the kid talked, the older man studied him. At the finish, Dan said:

"You've been used pretty badly, son. And you're not out of the woods yet."

He drummed gnarled fingers on the edge of the couch. "How hard do you want to play hockey for us, Hansen? Hard enough to go out there tonight and take

the beating the fans are sure to hand you?"

"I can take anything they give me, Mr. Brunn—if you will only give me a chance. If the fellows on the team will believe that I—I never would have shot off my mouth except for Stone's phony advice, why—"

"That will be taken care of," Hank Greenly interrupted. Then he looked at Dan Brunn doubtfully. "Do we dare expose him to the crowd? The bugs in this man's town take their hockey pretty serious. There's liable to be a riot."

Dan Brunn drew his shaggy brows together. "We'll fix that, too. Give me a hand, Hank, I'm going to Olympia!"

"You can't do that, you're a sick man! The doctor said—"

"Doctors don't know everything. When I get there, send word to Rocky Stone that I want to see him in the clubhouse before the game time!"

CHAPTER IV

STICK-WIELDER'S PAYOFF

ROCKY STONE, a bandage taped on his cheek and over one ear and his nose looking like a ripe tomato, came into the clubhouse. He cast one glance at Dan Brunn, then dropped his gaze. He didn't look at Swede Hansen sitting on a bench in back of the gray-haired manager.

"Greenly said you wanted to see me," he mumbled. "Get it over with, Dan. I've been expecting orders from the studio not to go on the air tonight ever since—Get it over, Dan. Whatever you're going to do with me!"

Dan Brunn's voice was very soft when he spoke.

"Rocky, you never were a very good judge of men. That's why I made Hank manager instead of you. But I don't forget my boys, Rocky. I see that you understand now that I got you your connection with WZL and I can hold it for you."

"If you were the judge of men you'd have to be to manage a team, you'd know that I'm not gonna do anything to you. Instead, you're gonna do something for me—and for Hansen."

Wild hope flickered in the eyes of Rocky Stone. Then he shrugged dejectedly.

"Don't play with me, Dan. After what I tried to do to you, you can't mean it!"

Abruptly then he was the old Rocky Stone of the days when he, along with other members of the Red Arrows, took their problems to Dan Brunn.

"What got into me, Dan? I must be just plain rotten clear through!"

"All of us have a bad spot or two, Rocky," the old manager said quietly. "Yours is resentment—you let it get away from you. You got mixed up with Dink Stofer and—" Dan Brunn lied a little then— "Stofer got scared when we caught up with him, Rocky. He spilled the whole setup."

"It was Stofer who suggested the rotten thing," Stone said. "But, hell, Dan, I'm not a baby. I knew what I was doing. There's no out for me!"

"There is an out," Dan Brunn said. "And you're going to take it. In a minute you're going back upstairs. You're going to the public address mike and tell the crowd—then later you're going to tell the folks listening to the game over the air—that you've been mistaken. You're going to tell them that Hansen never tried to palm himself off as anyone but himself."

"You're going to tell them that it wasn't Hank Greenly's mistake, but the deliberate attempt of a disgruntled scout to discredit Hank. You're going to maybe look bad, lose some of the omnipotence you've been kind of high-hatting the fans with, but you're going to do it."

Dan Brunn stopped for a moment, then added gently, "You're going to do that Rocky, and Hank and me are going to forget the Rocky Stone of the past two or three months and remember the Rocky Stone who was always a team man. Hansen, here, will forgive you, Rocky. But you owe him a break. If you could kinda boost him a little, it'd be good for your conscience."

Rocky Stone looked at his old manager with the expression of a condemned man who has been handed a last minute reprieve.

"I'll do it," he choked. "By God, Dan,

I don't deserve such treatment!" His words were thick. "I'll take my beating and like it!"

ROCKY STONE made a thorough job of the crow he had to eat. And he got to the microphone of the P.A. System just in time. Someone in the crowd had recognized Swede Hansen as the rookie skated onto the ice. Word passed through the crowd quickly and an ominous muttering rose and swelled. A few scattered programs sailed onto the ice, aimed at Hansen.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The muttering of the fans stilled as the metallic voice of the public address system blared. "Perhaps you do not recognize my voice. It is a bit thick because I'm talking through split lips. I got them in the process of learning how wrong a man can be. This is Rocky Stone speaking, and I ask your whole-hearted attention for a few minutes."

The great crowd stilled. Rocky Stone went on.

"First, let me apologize to those of you who have listened to recent broadcasts I made over the air disparaging the managerial ability of Hank Greenly. In no way was Hank responsible for the acquisition of a man whom I have led fans to believe came to the Red Arrows under false pretenses. The errors, the mistakes, have been mine."

"Let me tell you, fans, that Swede Hansen is not the conniving crook that I painted him. Even a radio sportcaster must depend somewhat on others for information and—but let that pass. I take full responsibility, and I want to say that I had the wrong steer on Hansen from the start."

"Swede Hansen is naturally a quiet, unassuming youngster. It was my questioning of him under mistaken advice, and his answers, given also under mistaken advice, that gave you and his teammates the idea that Hansen was a braggart and showoff."

"He distinctly is not. But I predict that someday in the not too distant future Detroit fans will hail this youngster. Perhaps not as a Wonder of the North,

but as a brilliant star in his own right."

Rocky Stone didn't spare the horses.

"Fans, I'm eating all sorts of humble pie. Believe me when I say that this is no hokum. Swede Hansen and Hank Greenly deserve all the support you can give them. And I am sure you fans are fair-minded enough to reverse the opinion that has been foisted upon you by a man who should have known better!"

A stunned silence held the great arena for a moment. Then an excited buzz filled the arena. Someone yelled, "'Ray for Swede Hansen. We're with you, kid!"

The shout drew thunderous applause. Rocky Stone breathed a sigh of relief as he limped upstairs to make substantially the same speech into his own mike. He hadn't been too sure that the fans would believe him. Mob psychology sometimes is a funny thing.

"Well, at least you've made a start to redeem a heel!" he told himself. "Now if Hansen can only come through!"

When the fans cheered him following Stone's speech, Hansen experienced a surge of emotion he hadn't felt since he was a kid in short pants. These fans were swell people. And Dan Brunn! A fellow just *couldn't* fail with men like Dan Brunn and Hank Greenly backing him up!

Oldham skated beside the rookie. The burly defenseman carried an entirely different manner.

"Kid," he said. "I was a dumb jackass, and I'm asking you to forget what I did to you. This is your night. Take it easy, kid, don't tighten up and try too hard. Everybody's for you."

The rookie gripped Oldham's outstretched hand, said nothing. But Oldham liked the glint in the rookie's blue eyes and the set of his jaw.

Toronto learned from the opening face-off that they were in for a tough night. Greenly started the Paulaski-Dahl-Hansen line and Dahl beat his man for possession of the puck. He zipped a pass to Paulaski, and the manner in which the frontliners zinged over the ice was evidence that the Arrows were keyed to a fighting pitch and that there was no question of their morale.

BUT Toronto was nobody's setup. They'd lost the top spot in their division only because they had one more tie game than the winners. It was action-filled, thrill-packed hockey from the opening whistle.

Time and again the Arrow frontline swept in on the Toronto defense. Time and again, alert, sometimes spectacular defensive play turned them back.

Oldham and MacAllister were rocks on defense. Mannie Levin shuttled back and forth in the cage, picked high shots from the air, kicked out ice-skimmers, turned them aside to mates near the boards.

Twenty minutes of fast, hard hockey kept the fans on their feet the whole period. At the gong the scoreboard registered 0-0.

"We'll get 'em this period," Greenly said in the dressing room. "Keep swinging, their goalie can't stop all of 'em!"

But he did. The two clubs battled at the same furious pace for eighteen minutes of the second stanza without a goal. Then a Toronto defenseman was caught high-sticking and sent to the penalty box for a two-minute minor.

Greenly looked down on the row of spares. He met the eager gaze of Swede Hansen and played a hunch.

"Out there for Lowe," he ordered the Swede. "Turn on the speed. We oughta score while they're shorthanded."

Toronto staved off the first rush, attempted to kill time. And it's no easy task to take the puck away from four clever men. Toronto held possession for better than a minute, ragged the puck, passed in the neutral zone, showed the fans dazzling stickwork.

Suddenly a Detroit forward crowded a Toronto man into the boards and the puck skittered free. Hansen dashed cross-ice into the *mélée*.

It was a fatal move.

The Toronto man fought free of his check, saw Hansen bearing down on him. He flipped the puck to a mate on the right boards at the Detroit blue line. The Toronto wing roared in on Mannie Levin with no one to slow him. Twenty feet out he faked a shot, stopped in a cloud of

shaved ice, whipped the black disc diagonally toward the goal.

It was a wide shot and Levin relaxed. Hansen, tearing at breakneck speed to get into the play, cut sharply and momentarily blocked the goalie's view. In that instant a second Toronto forward lunged from the side, banged the puck a scorching backhand wallop, and Mannie Levin never saw it.

Goal for Toronto!

SWEDE HANSEN sat in the dressing room with downcast head. Tears of impotent rage at Lady Luck for the tough break stung his eyes. Buck Oldham clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hang in there, kid, nobody's blamin' you. We'll get that one back!"

For more than half the final period it looked as if they wouldn't get it back. The scoreboard clock ticked away the seconds. That lone goal assumed huge proportions. There were barely five minutes to go. Paulaski took a pass from Dahl, started a drive on the Toronto goal.

He saw an opening and blazed a sizzling shot at the cage. The Toronto goalie flung himself across the goal mouth, stopped the whizzing puck, but it bounced off his club, spun dizzily just outside his crease as the goalie sprawled on the ice.

Dahl stretched his long legs, beat a Toronto man's effort to hook the rubber from danger. Dahl slapped the puck over the prostrate goalie into the left lobe of the nets.

The fans went crazy. Tie score! Four and a half minutes to play!

The Arrows poured everything they had at Toronto. It seemed inevitable to the hysterical thousands that their favorites must score. The frenzied bugs all but tore the seats out of the concrete.

Dahl overskated a pass in the furious mêlée and Toronto suddenly unleashed a savage drive of their own. They swept down on Oldham four strong.

Big Buck barged into the man with the puck, jarred him loose from the disc with a body check that the Toronto man's ancestors must have felt. Another Toronto

player hooked the puck, stick-handled past MacAllister, and rolled in on the nets.

Mannie Levin had to come out to save a high-shot blast. He turned to scramble back, turned too short, and sprawled to the ice. The Detroit goal yawned wide, unprotected as three Toronto men dashed for the black disc. Swede Hansen, skating like mad, saw that he was going to be too late.

A Toronto club smacked the rubber, sent it unerringly toward the wide-open Arrow cage. Swede Hansen shot his lithe body through the air.

It was a desperate, impossible try. But the groan of the crowd suddenly turned to a wild yell. Unbelievably, the outstretched club of the rookie deflected the flying rubber disc. The puck hit the steel goal post, bounced weirdly up over the nets, slapped against the end boards and skittered along the ice.

The momentum of Hansen's dive slid him over the smooth surface. He crashed into the boards five feet from the twisting puck.

He was up in nothing flat, hooked the puck in the crook of his club. Swiftly he scanned the rink. Dahl and Paulaski were tearing back around the goal after the disc. Two Toronto men were tangled on the ice and two more were too far away to reach him. A lone defenseman edged across to the right side as the blond rookie shot down the boards.

His speed fooled the defenseman. Too late he tried to force Hansen into the boards. The kid slapped the rubber against the lumber, cut past the belated check, picked up the carom rebound.

The Toronto goalie never saw the big rookie shoot. Hansen blasted that puck while skating full speed straight at the nets. It seemed to drill right through the goalie.

The arena exploded with pandemonium. The fans were even taking each other apart as the red light glowed back of the Toronto goal!

Scores of backslaps and hundreds of handshakes later, Swede Hansen sunk gratefully into the chair in the little office next to the dressing room. Dan

Brunn, his pale face alight with satisfaction at being back at the old stand, sat behind a battered desk.

"I asked Hank to send you in, son, so we could kinda get acquainted. We haven't had much opportunity so far."

"I hope we'll have plenty of time in the future, sir?" Hansen said.

Hank said, "Now that—that—"

"That I was retiring?" Dan Brunn nodded slowly. "Yep, Hank Greenly is manager from now on. I'll just kinda look after things in the front office. Maybe take a little jaunt now and then with Rocky Stone to look over promising

youngsters. But you needn't worry, son. That's why I wanted to talk with you. You're gonna be with the Red Arrows a long time."

"I'm glad, sir. It's the thing I want most. I like this town."

"And we like you. After tonight you could be elected mayor. Next year, after we've brought the Stanley Cup back here, you'll be a veteran. Tonight was the payoff, son."

He held out a gnarled hand, grinned.

"Rink Rookie's Payoff, Hansen," Dan Brunn said. "And may there be many more of them!"



STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of 12 Sports Aces, published bimonthly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1941

State of New York) ss.
County of New York

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the 12 Sports Aces and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form to wit:

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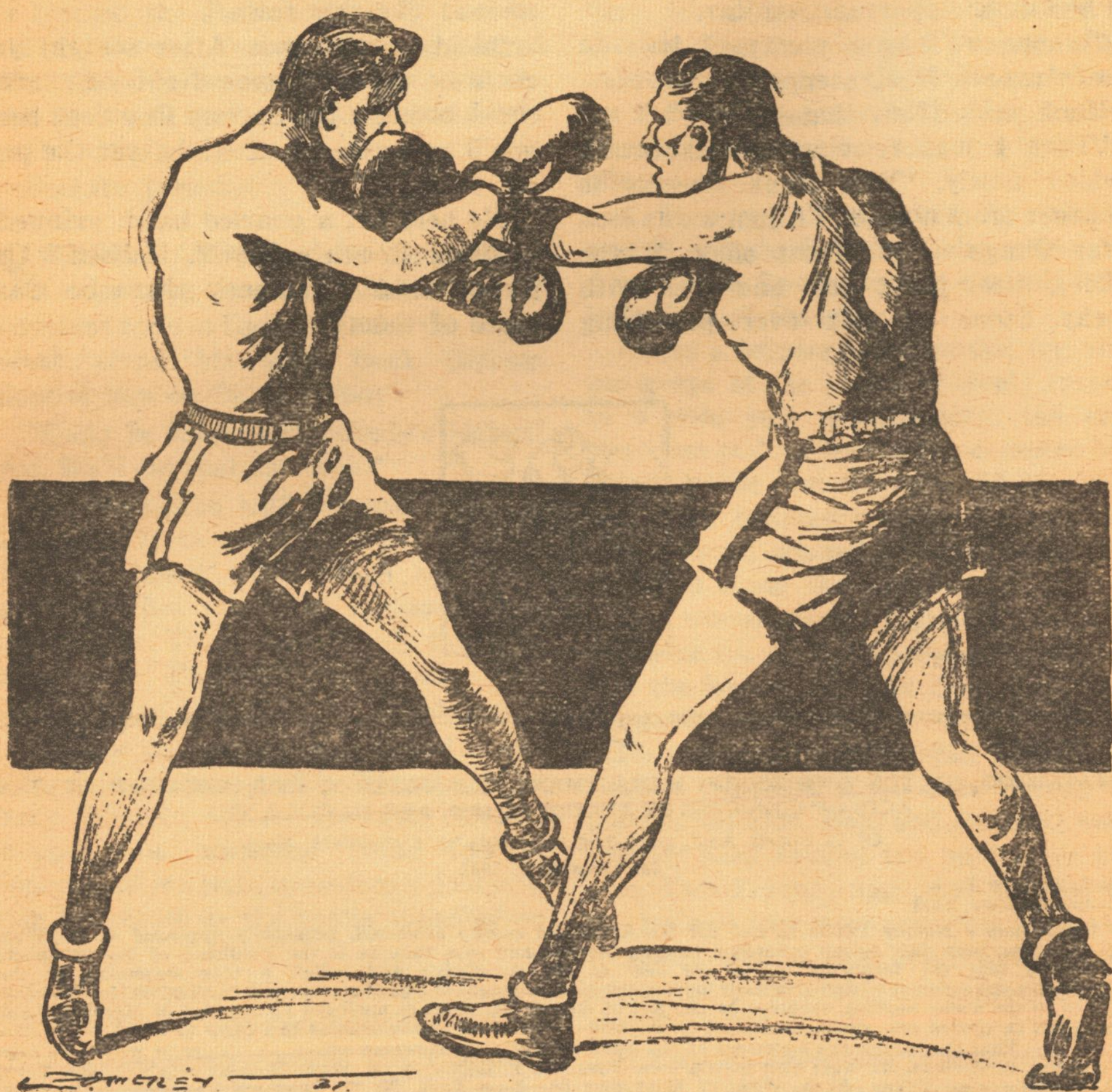
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A. A. Wyn, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 10th day of September, 1941.

SHIRLEY L. BERICK, Notary Public
Bronx Co. Clerk No. 220
Certificate Filed in N. Y. Co. No. 1085
Commission Expires March 30, 1943

Punch Shy



By M. M. Tinney

Ring artist Burt Langley would not let fighting fists mar Nature's handiwork on his handsome features. But his Fancy Dan tactics were wiped out on a blood-splotted canvas when a slugger's assault fixed both his career and his face.

THE bell clanged. And the roar of eighteen thousand fight fans jammed into the Garden swelled louder. They sensed the downfall of Burt Langley. They hated Burt Langley. He had flaunted them long enough with his clowning tactics and slippery footwork.

He had never really given them their money's worth. So why should they feel sorry?

"This is the end of the rainbow for Pretty Boy Langley," dryly commented a scribe to a brother writer.

"Yeah. It's a break for the fight game.

The champ will put him away this round for keeps. Can't say I'll be sorry, either."

The handsome playboy, Burt Langley, stalked slowly out of his corner. The fans had long monikered him "Pretty Boy" because of his unblemished good looks. His knees were wobbly, and his eyes possessed a blurry glint. The champ had caught up with him in the seventh round, and had floored him twice.

The champ lunged halfway across the ring. He drove a wicked right to Langley's midriff. Then he shifted his attack and rained short, terrific rights and lefts to Langley's head. Burt Langley threw back his head, as if laughing the blows off. His even white teeth sparkled under the glare of the giant flood lights.

It was evident that Langley was attempting to clown his way out of a serious situation. He called on his weary legs for the old bicycle act but got no response.

The champ was crowding again, slashing, driving, punching with a deadly accuracy. Feebly, Langley back-pedaled and sought to box at long range. The champ sneeringly took the weak returns and bored in relentlessly. He snapped Burt Langley's head back with a left upper-cut brought up from the floor. For a moment Langley wobbled on his heels. Then, with a thud, he crumpled on the canvas.

At the count of seven he was haunched on his knees.

"I can make it," the thought flashed through his mind. "But damned if I'll take a beating for the benefit of those blood-thirsty gallery wolves."

He clearly heard the referee wave eight, nine, over him. A faint smile spread over his handsome countenance. He listened to the yells of the fight mob, beseeching him to get up and take his medicine.

Then the ring suddenly became cluttered with photographers, seconds and spectators. Pretty Boy Langley had been counted out while comfortably resting on his knees!

MONTY BREWSTER, his faithful manager, draped a flashy robe over his broad shoulders.irate fans vocifer-

ously booed and hissed. They had been denied the pleasure of seeing Pretty Boy whacked into unconsciousness. And it was only in this last round that the champ had been able to break through Langley's upper guard. Langley's features were still hardly marred.

"Pretty Boy always finds the easy way out," snapped a fan. "He sure takes good care of that handsome mug of his."

Even in so humble a defeat, Burt Langley emerged from his shower wisecracking and jesting. After the last newshawk had filed out of the dressing room, Langley's manager, Monty Brewster, spoke:

"Why didn't you get up, son? It's no disgrace to lose—if you lose like a man."

Pretty Boy ignored the question. He ruefully gazed into a mirror and contemplated what could be done about a mouse under his eye.

Nonchalantly, he said, "Monty, I got my good looks to think of. I don't intend to play catcher for any fist-slinging fool. To hell with the fickle cheers." Then Pretty Boy threw out his chest and bellowed, "Just think, Monty, forty middleweight bouts and not a scar on me. You gotta be smart in this racket!"

"Maybe we were better off when you weren't so smart," uttered Monty under his breath.

The months flew by. Fight promoters adopted a hands-off policy in so far as Pretty Boy Langley was concerned. The middleweight division was packed with sluggers who were the real thing. Pretty Boy was too much of a risk for them to handle.

Both fighter and manager drifted from city to city with only an occasional fight to take care of the most dire necessities.

Even in the small clubs the answer was always the same.

"We want sluggers, not Fancy Dan boxers, on our cards. We got our trade to think of."

Still Monty Brewster clung to his protégé. He was just that way about the boy. Having pawned everything but the clothes on their backs, the pugilist and manager wandered into a tank coal mining town in eastern Pennsylvania.

Burt Langley changed his name for obvious reasons, and shuffled into the squalid office of the local fight promoter.

The matchmaker was a heavy-set individual, with his nose squashed suspiciously over his face. He eyed the bedraggled pair suspiciously.

"Whaddaya punks want? A handout?"

"I want a fight. I must fight," responded Langley.

The matchmaker scrutinized the clean-cut features of Burt Langley. His sharp eyes told him that the youthful appearing fighter begging him for a bout was no ordinary pug. He was gifted with an Apollo physique, but he seemed too handsome to be a fighter. Then the cagy matchmaker's eyes glinted brightly for a second.

"Cutie, you ought to be in pictures instead of wanting to fight," he grinned. "Where did you fight before coming here?"

"Lay off the wise stuff, mister. I've been on the Garden card more than once." Langley was angry.

"I'll take your word for it," said the promoter. "Slugger Morgan is the champ middleweight in this section. The fans are getting tired of seeing him lick the same bums every other week. At least your face will be a novelty, if not your fighting. It will be the main go—ten rounds."

"But," he added cautiously, "you will take a dive in the sixth canto. I can't afford to take a chance on a stranger. Of course, if the slugger stings you before that, well— Anyhow, I'll give you fifty bucks if you carry out instructions."

Monty Brewster reddened around the gills. "We ain't going in the tank for nobody!"

"Then," said the promoter, "suppose both of you get the hell out of here."

Burt Langley looked appealingly at his friend. It had been a long time between meals for them.

"Never mind, Monty, I'll go through with it."

With only a week of training, Burt Langley stepped into the Main Street arena to battle Slugger Morgan. His condition was far below par, and the meals he had missed did not help him any.

The arena was thickly clouded with smoke. Apparently the matchmaker had himself a neat racket. Three thousand fans had somehow jimmied themselves into the fight club.

A sudden gasp went up when the mob got a glimpse of Pretty Boy Langley. Compared to the gorilla he was going to fight, he looked the part of a choir boy.

Deriding remarks filtered towards Langley. "Isn't he cute?" And "Sonny, be careful."

Burt Langley gritted his teeth and cursed his luck. How he would like to go out and box the gorilla dizzy. But that was a hopeless thought. He would take a dive for this bum for a lousy fifty bucks.

SLAGGER MORGAN looked like a cross between a tree trunk and a rock pile. He was a massively structured person. But he moved with a grace surprisingly swift.

Burt Langley peered out over the crowd as he was introduced as Lou Keefer, a New York middleweight of note.

The bell! Burt Langley danced cagily out of his corner. Quickly he let fly a couple of left hooks to the slugger's jaw. He had to make it look good, he told himself. Besides, he'd command a little respect from Slugger Morgan.

Morgan barged in close and landed solidly with both hands to the body. Langley noted Slugger Morgan was open for a counter smash. Instead he jabbed a light left to the Slugger's head. In return for this nice gesture, the Slugger pelted Langley with a whistling right on the chin.

Langley knew his timing was out of gear. Months of enforced idleness and poor food had robbed him of his lightning precision and masterful footwork.

He maneuvered nimbly about, causing Morgan to miss his target badly. Langley felt the old urge to clown and laugh openly at the frustrated thrusts of his burly opponent. But instead he plowed ahead, deciding to make the dive look good.

The crowd lustily clamored for action. At the bell, Slugger Morgan was winging stiff blows to Langley's body. Appar-

PAGES 63-64 MISSING

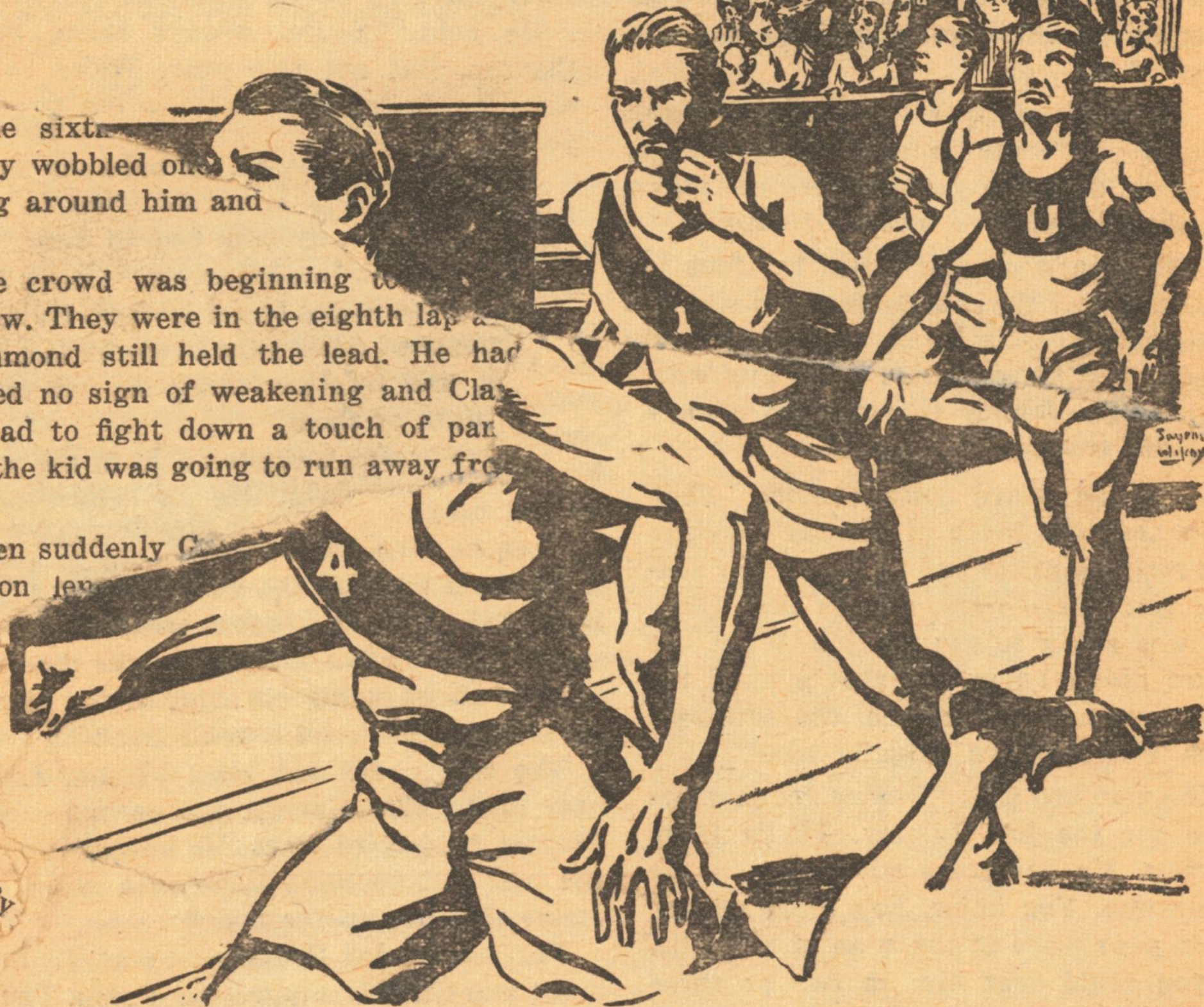
Running Fool's Payoff

By
W. H. Temple

of the sixth.
Javery wobbled on
swung around him and
suit.

The crowd was beginning to
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them.

Then suddenly C
Clayton le-
went



This was the big race of Johnny Clayton's career, the contest that was to determine his future. But Johnny sprinted into new trackster turmoil when he opened the door to spike glory for another running fool.

JOHNNY CLAYTON was stretched out on the rubbing table when the red-headed kid came into the locker room. The kid's eyes flickered over Clayton and an amused grin twisted his lips. "Hello has-been," he said casually.

Clayton sat up slowly, trying not to hear the chuckle across the room from

Duke Garrett. He thought for a moment of taking a poke at the fresh redhead and then decided against it. Johnny Clayton had to save all his strength for the mile race coming up in half an hour. Already Clayton felt kind of tired. His legs had carried him through too many campaigns and now they protested.

But this race wasn't just another mile. It carried with it the matter of a job, the importance of the money necessary to buy groceries and pay rent.

Clayton slid down to the floor, a long-legged guy with a thin face and a retreating hair line that made him look older than his twenty-seven years. He walked slowly out to the arena and glanced up at the banked spectators watching the track meet. Slowly Clayton jogged up and down, stretching the muscles of his legs.

Three more miles to run, he thought. And I got to win at least two of 'em. If I don't, then I'm just another ex-athlete, broke and with no means of support.

He jogged up and down, his face impassive, and the crowds that had watched him run the mile for seven years thought again that he was a power-faced guy with no feelings. Johnny Clayton had always kept his troubles to himself.

They had heard some rumors. They knew that the coach of Johnny's college was retiring at the end of the winter season. And there were reports that Clayton was going to get the job. What the crowd didn't know was that a week before Clayton had gotten the lowdown from the Ashburn athletic head.

The man had said, "You've got just one rival for the job, Johnny. That's Duke Garrett. He has some adherents on the committee. You know, he's more or less taken your place at the head of the mile. If you could beat him in two or three of the big open meets this winter, you'd get the job. If he beats you, I'm not so sure."

Johnny Clayton nodded, grinned, and went back to training. He did not waste time in thinking bitterly of the speed with which an athlete is forgotten. That is the way of the world and Clayton accepted life as it was.

Now they were meeting again. Garrett had never beaten Johnny Clayton. A senior at Ashburn, Garrett was coming into his own this year, and Clayton, as he walked toward the starting line, knew that this winter campaign was going to be the toughest of them all.

THERE were five men in the mile. Clayton, Garrett, Brant of Wisconsin, Javery from the Coast, and this red-headed kid whose name was Drummond. He was unattached, a nineteen-year-old independent who had turned in some good times.

Johnny Clayton had drawn the third lane. Drummond was on one side of him, Garrett on the other. Lean, dark and cocksure, Garrett glanced briefly at Clayton.

He said, "You've always taken me, Clayton. But not this year. We're running for dough now and I'm out to get you."

Johnny Clayton didn't would take a headed kid crowd busy fifty bucks.

other side and ORGAN looked like a kid."

He was a massively structured person and he moved with a grace surprising to a wift.

Langley peered out over the crowd his first introduced as Lou Keefer, a he had been. right of note.

Then he forgot them both and lined them up, and the gun was pointed toward the rafters. Clayton crouched forward. With the crack of the gun he threw himself ahead, using his arms to pull him up straight and send him off smoothly.

The red-headed kid piled by and cut over to the pole. Garrett was second and Clayton held third place. He swung in to the pole and pounded along in a smooth stride that ate up the boards.

The red-headed Drummond was out in front and Clayton suppressed a grin. The kid ran like an elephant. He was all over the track, arms and legs thrashing like mad. He wouldn't be up in front long, but maybe by setting the pace he would make it a fast mile.

It was a twelve-lap track and they came around the turn and into the second lap with the order unchanged. Clayton hung on Garrett's stride, matching it, and he knew it was going to be fast.

They hit the third lap. Drummond still held a five-yard lead. He hadn't slowed up at all. Clayton heard thundering steps at his side and Javery flashed by him on the outside and slid in behind Garrett. Clayton was in fourth place.

He pounded along, stretching out his legs in that long and effortless stride, his eyes fixed on Garrett, the man he had to beat. The Wisconsin runner flashed ahead and Johnny Clayton was running last.

He wasn't worried. The pace was deceptively fast and it was only a question of time before someone faltered. They swept into the fifth lap and Clayton pounded around the turn and into the backstretch. He felt good. His muscles were oiled and his legs were obeying him implicitly.

They hit the halfway mark at the end of the sixth lap. Up in second place, Javery wobbled once. Brant and Garrett swung around him and Clayton followed suit.

The crowd was beginning to tighten up now. They were in the eighth lap and Drummond still held the lead. He had showed no sign of weakening and Clayton had to fight down a touch of panic that the kid was going to run away from them.

Then suddenly Garrett upped the pace. Clayton lengthened out his stride and went after him, matching his speed. Brant was beginning to fade. Garrett cut around him and a moment later Clayton passed him and went into third place, behind Drummond and Garrett.

They went into the tenth lap that way. Every lap now was a little faster. And suddenly the pace of the race caught at Johnny Clayton. His legs began to feel heavy as lead and there was a twisting knife in his stomach.

UP FRONT, Drummond slipped, caught himself and lurched on. But his stride had broken. He thrashed ahead wildly and Garrett went wide to pass him on the back curve. He swept into the lead and Clayton cut around and got a look at the anguished Drummond's face. Then he was looking at Garrett's back again and there were just two laps to go to pay dirt.

The crowd was beginning to roar in anticipation. They were waiting for the famous Clayton kick that had broken every runner's back for years. Garrett had

never come within five yards of beating Clayton.

The sweat suddenly stood out on Johnny Clayton's forehead. He wondered if he had a kick. Garrett had run a clever race. He had kept slowly increasing the pace with Clayton hanging on his heels as Garrett had known he would.

Clayton stayed on his rival's heels as they came down the backstretch of the eleventh lap. In a moment now he would find out what he had left. They came around the curve and started the twelfth and final lap.

Johnny Clayton shifted to the outside. The crowd's roar filled the big arena and then he was pouring it on. He fought up to Garrett's shoulder and then they were side by side in the straightaway.

Johnny Clayton bit his lips against the pain in his belly and the dead numbness in his legs. He got an inch ahead and then Garrett made it up. They were into the back curve and Garrett was hugging the pole, hanging on grimly.

They went around that curve side by side, and the final straightaway was under their feet with the tape shimmering up ahead of them. Johnny Clayton thought that he had given his kick and for the first time it hadn't shoved him into the lead.

He felt that he was falling forward. He saw the tape coming to meet him, and he was almost close enough to Garrett to touch him as they ran. There wasn't an inch of lead between them.

Johnny Clayton's nails bit deeply into the palms of his hands. He fixed his eyes on that tape and from deep down in his body he pulled forth some reserve strength that he didn't know he possessed. He threw himself at the shining cord and then fell flat on his face on the hard boards.

He lay there a moment. Then he was being helped to his feet and he didn't know whether he had won or lost. He walked off the track and then the announcer's voice came to him.

"The winner—Clayton!"

He took a long breath, then walked slowly toward the lockers, wobbly on his pins but gradually getting his strength

back. He got inside the door and Duke Garrett was heading for the shower. The Duke glanced at him and he looked triumphant.

He said, "Well, you beat me again, Clayton. But it's the last time. Last year it was five yards. It was about an inch tonight. And look at you. You're through. You'll never take me again."

Johnny Clayton found a seat, and he was there when Drummond came in. The red-headed kid was sore. Johnny said, "Tough luck. Did you finish?"

"Damn right I finished," Drummond snapped. "I was last but I finished."

"You set a fast pace," Clayton said. "Too fast. If you—"

"Next time I'll run you old-timers into the ground," Drummond snapped and stalked off.

Johnny Clayton was still sitting there when a heavy-set man strode in and shook his hand. He was Atkinson, head of the Ashburn Athletic Committee.

"A beautiful race," he said. "I was the only man on the committee able to come East to see it, but the others will watch you in the Middle West in the next couple of meets."

Clayton stared at him. He said, "I may not be able to beat the guy again, Mr. Atkinson. A guy can only run so long before the new men knock him over. Garrett's coming into his own this year. I got him tonight by an eyelash, but he'll be better every time out."

Atkinson said, "There's something you ought to know. Garrett has an uncle on the committee. Naturally he's pulling for Duke."

"That means I've got to beat Garrett again," Clayton said.

"Once, anyway," Atkinson said. "The whole committee will be on hand to see you in the next two. If you split them, I think you'd be safe. We've got to choose the new coach before long. Pop Laird wants to quit right now. His health is pretty bad, and he wants to get away this winter."

Johnny Clayton stood up. He said, "Ever since I went to college I've wanted to be a track coach. There aren't many opportunities. Track coaches hold their jobs until they die or retire, it seems.

This is the first chance I've had and it's come when my running days are about over. I've just got to beat Garrett."

A WEEK later Johnny Clayton was getting ready to run again. It was almost the same field. He and Garrett and Drummond again, and a couple of other guys who might have been named Joe for all the chance they had of winning.

The redhead's popping off got him in trouble. The morning of the meet he showed up with a black eye, and Duke Garrett looked pleased with himself and wore a piece of adhesive tape on his right hand. He said, "The guy talks too much."

"Yeah," Clayton agreed, "but he could run if somebody took him in hand."

"Like hell," said Garrett. "I don't know how he managed to get invited. He scored a couple of fluke wins outdoors last summer, and he's travelling around on the strength of them."

Drummond swaggered in to the locker room that night. He sat down beside Johnny Clayton and said, "When I get to the point where I'm slipping, nobody will have to tell me to quit."

Johnny Clayton said easily, "Maybe some day you'll beat somebody who can really run, and maybe then you'll be a pretty good guy."

Garrett came walking by. Drummond's shoe was in the way, and Garrett booted it across the room. Drummond pumped up from the bench, his head coming to Garrett's shoulder. Garrett started a right-hand swing and suddenly Clayton was in between them.

He said, "Leave the kid alone, Duke."

They stared at each other and Garrett grinned. "I won't take a poke at you," he said, "because the Ashburn Athletic Committee might hear of it. And I don't want you to have any alibis after getting beaten tonight."

He went on outside, and the little red-head said, "I can fight my own battles, Clayton. I don't need your help."

He stalked after his shoe and Clayton went slowly outside and down toward the start of the mile race. He jogged up and down, and after a while he was taking his place at the start.

He had it figured out. He was going to pace himself. He was going to have that kick tonight, a real one. This was the race that counted. If he could beat Garrett tonight he could forget about the next mile race. He'd have two wins in two attempts and that would be all the edge he'd need. This was going to be maybe the last mile he would ever run. And it had to be the best.

He knelt in the second lane, his ears alert for the pistol. Then suddenly it came and he was up and slicing in behind Garrett to the pole. The red-headed Drummond was out in front again, setting the pace, but it seemed to Clayton that the kid was not quite so fast tonight.

Garrett was running the same kind of race as he had the last time except that perhaps he was a little faster. Clayton didn't hang on his heels; he ran carefully, letting the gap open up between them.

They covered the first two laps, and as Clayton came down from the back straightaway he caught a glimpse of the Ashburn Athletic Committee seated together in the stands, intent on the race.

Garrett had opened up a little more, and Clayton forced himself to hold back. He was running fourth, and Drummond still headed the parade. He was running as wildly as ever, his arms and legs flailing the boards.

Johnny Clayton felt like a fire horse with the reins pulled tight across him. He wanted to cut loose. But he couldn't take any chances with this one, and after tonight Garrett could win every mile race for the rest of the season. This was the one race Johnny Clayton couldn't afford to lose.

The pace had been stepped up, and Clayton increased his speed a trifle, his feet sliding smoothly over the boards. The race had shaped up again and once more it was Drummond the pacemaker, with Garrett and Clayton behind him.

Garrett suddenly began to sprint. He came around into the ninth lap and caught Drummond. He went out in front. And Johnny Clayton, hitting the start of the tenth lap, decided to let himself go.

The crowd saw the start of that kick and they came alive with a full-throated

roar. The boards suddenly began to disappear under Clayton's flying feet. He let it out all the way, and as he did so he knew he had paced it right. He had plenty left and this was going to be his race.

Drummond was up ahead of him, but Drummond did not count. He was already as good as out of the race, stumbling, lurching, going ahead on nerve. Clayton thought that the kid had guts if nothing else, and then his gaze shifted to Garrett.

They came into the eleventh lap, and Johnny Clayton began to cut to the outside. Red-headed Drummond was three strides ahead of him, and as he ran he lurched out from the pole. Johnny Clayton drifted wide, then started to shoot ahead. And as he did so, Drummond's tottering body slanted across in front of him.

CLAYTON tried to cut back, to knife inside, but he was going at top speed and he crashed headlong into Drummond with a crash that shook him from head to toe. For a moment he stopped, staggered, and then he cut around him.

His eyes glazed, out on his feet, Drummond looked blankly at him and then he was fading in the distance as Johnny Clayton took out after Garrett. They were in the last lap and Garrett had a ten-yard lead. Slowly Clayton started to cut it down. They hit the back curve and he was five yards behind.

Johnny Clayton sought some extra reserve, and then found he didn't have anything left. The gap stayed at five yards as they went down toward the tape, and then suddenly Garrett widened it another yard. He breezed across the tape an easy victor, and Johnny Clayton staggered across behind him.

When Clayton got his breath back, Garrett was waiting for him. He grinned. He said, "Tough break, Clayton, but it didn't mean a damn thing, you know. You couldn't have caught me anyway."

Johnny Clayton said, "Maybe," and shrugged his shoulders. He started toward the lockers, and at the entrance he was stopped by a man whose face seemed vaguely familiar.

The man said, "My name's Garrett. I'm Duke Garrett's uncle, on the athletic committee. I wanted to let you know that while I'd like to see my nephew get the Ashburn coaching job I want the best man to have it. I intend to be fair. This winter you've beaten Duke once, and tonight he beat you. I've persuaded the committee to agree to let the decision rest on the results of the Cameron Mile at Ashburn next Saturday night. By picking the winner of the Cameron Mile we'll get a lot of good publicity when we announce our new coach. The publicity will draw some track athletes to Ashburn. I think that's fair isn't it?"

Johnny Clayton thought briefly that there was something else, the fact that he had passed his peak a year before and that Garrett was on the way up, but he merely nodded and went on inside.

Drummond was there, his red hair sticking up, his jaw defiant. Johnny glanced at him and murmured, "Those things happen. Forget it."

Drummond stared at him. He said, "I'm sorry. I heard that conversation out there. I guess I lost you a job. I don't think you can beat Garrett again. You might have got him tonight, but he was better tonight than he was last week. He gets better every race and you get a little worse. But I'm sorry I knocked you out of the running. I'll be a miler yet."

Johnny Clayton looked at him, defiant, determined, and he remembered again the days when he had finished in the ruck. He said, "Stop acting tough, youngster, and maybe you will make a miler. Maybe I could show you a little something."

Drummond looked suspicious. He said, "I'm not a college guy. I learned my running on a city pavement. Maybe I'll go to college next fall if I can get a scholarship somewhere. But I won't get a scholarship unless I win a race sometime, or anyhow finish better than last."

"You running in the Cameron Mile?" Clayton asked, and Drummond nodded.

Clayton said, "You can stay with me. I'm heading for Ashburn tonight and you can bunk with me at my fraternity there. Maybe I can teach you something."

The belligerence faded out of Drum-

mond's eyes. He looked at Johnny Clayton with vast respect. With a little choke in his voice, he said, "That'd be swell. I've about run out of dough. I was gonna have to hitchhike to Ashburn for the Cameron Mile."

He hesitated and Clayton could see his mind working. Drummond said, "Look. You gotta beat that Garrett. My bumping you tonight was accidental. I never meant to do it. Maybe in the Cameron I could sort of bump up against the Duke."

Johnny Clayton chuckled at his earnestness. He said, "That's one of the things you got to learn, Drummond. That isn't done. I don't want to beat him that way."

"It was just an idea," Drummond said. "I come from a tough neighborhood. But if you don't play it that way, then I never will either. What's good enough for you is good enough for me."

They piled into Clayton's car that night and reached Ashburn in the early hours of the morning. Drummond was much in awe of the fraternity and by mid-morning he said to Johnny Clayton, "This is the college I want to come to. You think I might be able to get a scholarship?"

Johnny Clayton grinned mirthlessly. He said, "I suspect you better see the Duke about that."

He took Drummond down to the gym that afternoon. He taught him how to run. He was throwing energy away with every step he took. Clayton stood off at the edge of the boards and had Drummond lope around the Ashburn track. Gradually the kid caught on. He controlled his arms and kept them at his sides. He lifted his knees straight and high and brought his feet down like pounding pistons the way a runner should.

THEY were out there every day after that, and Johnny Clayton thought it was good for him. Working on Drummond took his mind off Duke Garrett and off the Cameron Mile. He knew it was the last race he would ever run, the last mile, and with it rode all his hopes.

Then, finally, he was ready to go. He and Drummond left the locker rooms and climbed up the stairs to go out on the in-

door track floor. Johnny Clayton stepped out in sight of the spectators, and a wave of handclapping went through the crowd. He thought that they hadn't forgotten him here at the scene of most of his triumphs. He went over and shook hands with the retiring Ashburn coach, the man who had trained Ashburn teams for thirty years.

The coach said, "You're the man I'd like to have follow me, Johnny. But they got some damn fools on that committee. You better beat Garrett."

Johnny Clayton looked down at his legs. "I'll run until they fall off," he said.

He began jogging up and down, limbering up, and Drummond trotted at his side. Johnny Clayton felt as nervous as at the first race he had run as a sophomore on this same track.

To try and loosen up, he said, "Remember what I taught you, Drummond. You have what it takes. You still have track savvy to learn, but you have a pair of legs and a heart and that's what counts. Some day you'll be a great miler. You'll be running in the Garden some day. You might even be the guy who runs a four-minute mile."

"If I ever do," Drummond said huskily, "they can give the cup to you."

Johnny Clayton walked toward the starting line, and a smiling Duke Garrett crossed his path. The Duke said, "Maybe you can bump into that redheaded monkey again tonight. It'd be nice if you got yourself an alibi."

Clayton said, "Still a heel, aren't you, Garrett?" and went on past him.

They lined up. Clayton had the pole and he crouched there, leaning forward. He looked down the line, caught Drummond's eye, winked and then cocked his ears for the sound of the pistol.

C-r-a-c-k! Johnny Clayton hurtled forward, taking the lead. Then, a moment later, Duke Garrett cut in front of him. He cut the pace down slowly, and Clayton fell back to match it. They went around the first lap that way, and Johnny Clayton knew that the Duke had figured it out his way again.

It was going to be a slow mile. Duke Garrett knew that Clayton's kick had lost

some of its punch. It didn't kill them off any longer. And Garrett was going to loaf around the track because he knew in the sprint finish he could match Clayton. He was ahead now and he was going to take his own sweet time and then finish ahead.

Clayton heard a snort of disapproval behind him, and then Drummond was beside him. "Hell," the redhead said, "I gotta run."

"Remember what I told you," Clayton said. "Good luck."

Drummond cut out in front of Garrett and took the lead. He was running better. There were still some kinks in his stride that would have to be ironed out, and he wasn't a great miler by any means. But he had it in him.

Drummond lengthened out his lead, and two other men went out to try and overtake him. Johnny Clayton trotted along in back of Garrett. He was wondering if he would have the kick to beat him, and suddenly he knew that it wouldn't work out that way. He was slipping and Garrett knew it, and the Duke figured beating him was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Clayton thought, *I'm damned if I'm going to be beaten in lousy time. I haven't got much chance to win. But the guy has got to beat me the hard way.*

It was all going down the drain now, everything he wanted out of life. But he was going to go down fighting, not trotting around the track while the spectators yawned. He'd make 'em yell once more.

HE CUT outside and stretched his long legs. It felt good to really run. He got up even with the Duke and saw the surprised look on his face. Clayton grinned derisively at him and shot forward. He dropped back to the pole and set out after Drummond.

The redhead had built up a long lead. He had killed off the two men who had tried to catch him and now he had slowed down, but he was a long way out front. Johnny Clayton started cutting down that lead. They went around the turn, and, glancing back over his shoulder, he saw Garrett frown and then start to move

up. His strategy was upset and Garrett wasn't sure of his next move.

Clayton grinned to himself. This wasn't going to be a strategic race. It was going to depend on legs and heart.

They were in the eighth lap when Johnny Clayton came up even with Drummond. He knifed around in front and the kid flashed a smile and pounded along in back of him.

Clayton went around the curve into the next lap, and the pace hit him like a blow to the pit of the stomach. A moment before he had felt fine, but now weights were dragging him down. Hammers pounded in his head and a thousand needles punctured his insides.

He felt giddy and nauseated, and shaking his head he drove on. He didn't have any kick for the final three laps, he could only keep going until he dropped.

He heard pounding footsteps behind him, and he couldn't tell if it was Garrett or Drummond. Then a figure appeared at his side. Duke Garrett was there, his face strained and contorted. Duke was paying the price for setting that loafing pace—he was really running now.

Clayton hauled air into his lungs. He pushed ahead and Garrett fell back.

I've got him, Clayton thought. It gave him a little more strength. He hit the last lap, wobbled and then caught himself as they started down the straightaway.

He heard the footsteps behind him again, and once more Garrett was at his side. They were neck and neck as they went down the straightaway and then in the back curve Garrett made his bid. He got ahead by an inch and Clayton moved up to close the gap.

Then Garrett went ahead again. Clayton was looking at his shoulder. They came out on the back straightaway, and suddenly Johnny Clayton was looking at Garrett's back.

He knew then that he was beaten. His body seemed to collapse. He struggled on and foggily he saw a red thatch of hair go by. He staggered down the boards and across the finish line. A couple of men caught him and walked him slowly up and down.

When he got to talking again he mut-

tered, "Well, it was a race. I didn't give it to him."

He could see the announcer lifting the megaphone. The man roared, "The winner, Drummond; second, Garrett; third, Clayton."

Johnny Clayton felt just a little better. Anyway, the kid would feel good. He had accomplished something. He started slowly toward the lockers, wondering what kind of a business job he could get after devoting his life to a pair of spiked shoes. It was in his blood, but he would have to get it out now.

He entered the locker and the figure of the Duke's uncle was there. The man looked solemnly at Johnny Clayton. He said, "I told you I intended to be fair, Clayton. I think we have been and I think we've made a wise decision. How soon can you take over the Ashburn coaching job?"

Johnny Clayton stammered, "Garrett beat me."

"I happened to come in the gym a couple times this week," Garrett's uncle said. "I saw you working on that kid. He was a bum last week. Tonight he won the Cameron Mile. You taught him that much in a week. A coach's job is to turn out champions. That seems to be your line, Clayton. Up in the stands tonight when Drummond won, we decided unanimously for you."

Johnny Clayton had his hand shaken, and then he stood there in a slightly dazed condition. He was still groggy when Drummond came in. The redhead said, "I won, Johnny. The time was lousy. I only won because Garrett loafed. I ain't that good yet and I know it." He sobered down when he saw Johnny's face. He said, "Gee, that was tough."

Johnny Clayton shook his head clear. "Drummond," he said sternly, "you got a wobble in your stride. You got to get rid of it before you report to me next fall." He grinned at Drummond's bewildered look. "I'm the coach," he said, "and you're getting a scholarship. You're going to have to work like bloody hell. O.K.?"

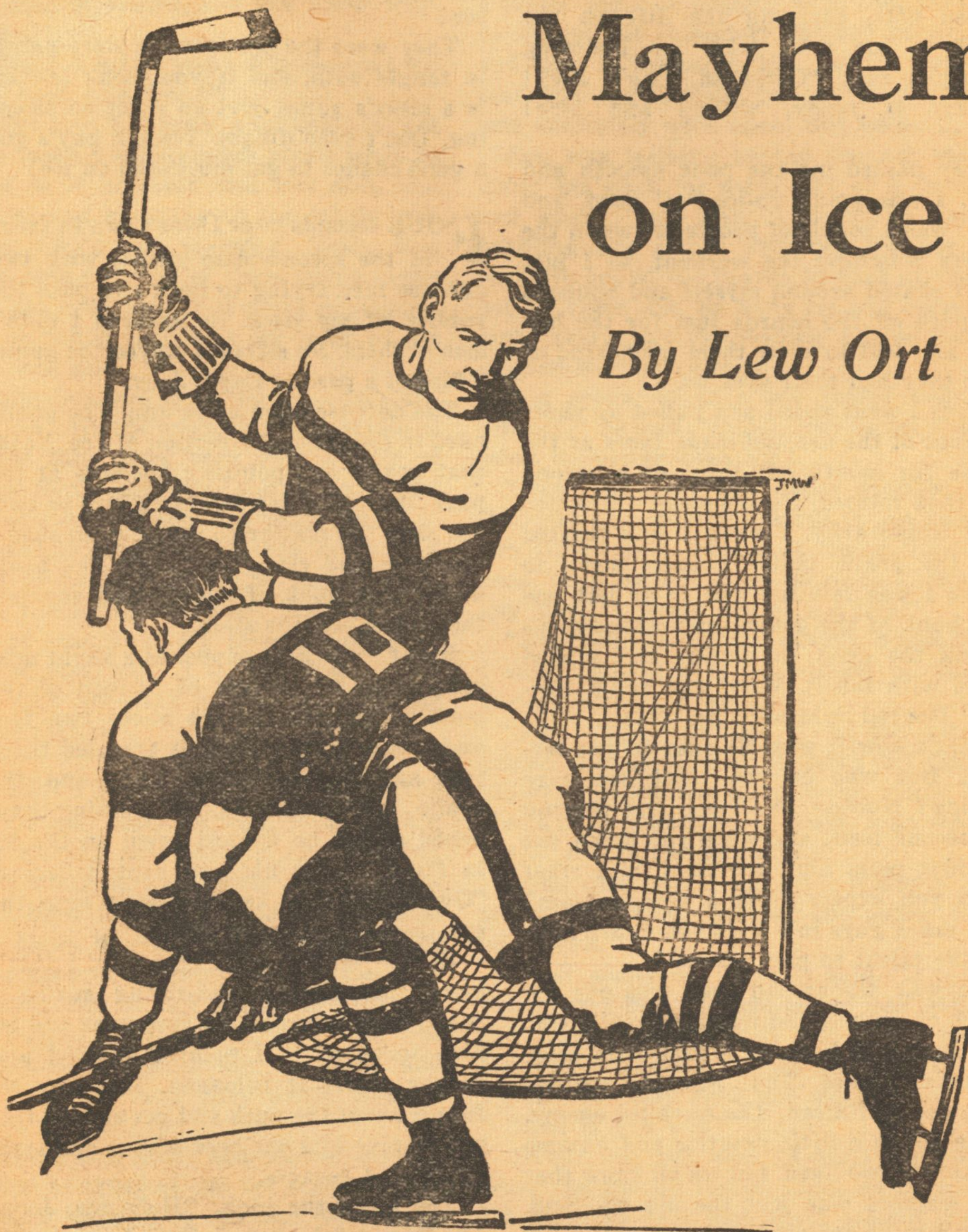
Drummond straightened. He said, "O.K., Coach Clayton."

It sounded swell to Johnny.

Little Sammy, puck pride of Brooklyn, initiates his hefty pal Ben in the gentle ways of

Mayhem on Ice

By Lew Ort



WELL, just as my big hefty pal Ben had a talent for using his heft and power when he got into trouble, or wanted to get somebody else in trouble, in the same way and manner I had a talent for other things. Hockey, for instance. Right now I was at the Ice Palace in Brooklyn, flying around and playing right wing for the good old Y

and for my pal Joey, who was captain of our Y team.

Right wing I was. Me, Sammy, the right flipper of our attacking wall. For once in his life my hefty buddy Ben was on the sidelines making believe skating didn't cut no ice in his young life. And he was right, believe me. Ben couldn't skate.

So there I was sailing down ice like a flying flash with Cap'n Joe, our center, shoving the hunk of rubber toward the golden gate, carrying the disc on the crook of his stick with me hollering alongside him, "Come on, Cap'n Joey! Sammy is ready, willing and able! Give!"

Joey passed me the puck smooth and easy. I was going up-ice real good, and there was a couple of people or two in the gallery watching the workout, so I just about skated around myself and bounced the puck off the boards just for the hell of it and just to show them what kind of class they had their eyes on.

Then I went ahead and pulled up short in front of the net and made faces at the goalie for one-twenty-third of a second and then fainted. I don't mean I dropped dead temporarily. I mean I just fainted and the goalie pulled himself down to where I was fainting and so he left one tiny hunk of the golden gate exposed. So I took the good old wrists and flipped them, with talent. What else could happen? The red light went on. Yessir.

That's how it was. So easy it was terrible. But who do you think we were playing? Nobody. We were just playing our second team, and when you figure out our first team ain't too good, well what could you expect from a second team? How many guys in a Y do you figure have got the talent to play hockey?

Anyway the second team was one big bunch of lemons, and we had a goalie who was as full of holes as a first-class piece of Swiss cheese. That was the second-team goalie, I mean. The so-called enemy.

We got in a little practice and became as fancy as we liked. but we all knew that this workout was just the old oil. Still, we had to do something to get ready for our trial by fire and sword. The Octopuses were coming our way. And when these Octos came our way, a head or two was liable to be busted and it didn't especially have to be hockey. But right now it was hockey, and the Octos were going to try to take over.

When I tell you a skunk is a gentleman, you don't have to believe me. But when I tell you that the Octos would kick the

teeth out of your mouth and take the gold fillings out and then wouldn't even give you your teeth back, you just believe me, see?

They were the children we were going to tangle with, and if you think hockey is a sissy's game, just go right on sleeping. Don't even dream. Yeah, a guy's got a good chance to get murdered on ice!

FOUR seconds later I was down in front of the second-team goalie, with two defense men trying to hook and poke the rubber off my stick. Be assured I didn't look at them. No sirree. I played the game. I flipped a pass to Cap'n Joey.

The defense piled after him. The goalie piled in the general direction of Joe. Yeah, that goalie was pointing his nose at the puck like a bird dog sniffing a bird or two. Joe shot the platter to me now because I was free and clear, and I got the blade under that hunk of rubber and snapped the wrists into the stick.

Right here there happened a slight miscalculation on account of instead of the puck going into the net about two feet and eleven inches high, it traveled three feet and eleven inches high—and the goalie was crouching. So nothing happened except he flopped down on the ice in front of the net and kept hollering, "Ow! Ow!" and kept hanging onto the eye the puck bounced off of.

If this was a regular game and I didn't know this here second-string goalie, I would have snagged the free puck and let him holler while I planted it good and proper where it belonged. But now we forgot about the puck and got around this guy to give him our best wishes and sympathy and regrets.

You know the junk: "Holy gee, Johnny. I'm awful sorry." But down inside you're saying, "Boy, that guy is going to have the best-looking shiner this side of town, and he gets it free. For nothing!"

Now we needed a goalie. We couldn't play without a goalie, without a substitute goalie, I mean.

"Ben," I said to myself, "he is the man for the job."

Ben was sitting there taking everything in and admiring the quality of the

goalie's shiner when I propositioned him for the job.

"Me?" Ben said. "I can't even stand up on a pair of skates, and you know why, Sammy."

"Yeah," I said, "you got to support too much beef, huh, Ben?"

Right here Ben made a mistake. He got up to make a little speech about what he would do if he could and was able, and here he was speaking to the whole mob of us, Cap'n Joe included. Yeah, Ben would stop a couple of them flying pucks with his eyes also if it were necessary. And he would positively try to do or die if he was able.

While Ben was sounding off, Cap'n Joe gave the boys the wink, and in a couple of seconds they came back with a pair of skates Ben's big size, and a good fast protest didn't do him any good now.

I said to him, "Ben, there won't be a thing to do out there. You just have to stand there and look wise. We'll all take care of you, Ben. I'll take special good care of you, pal." I tapped him on the head with my stick just to give him the feel of things.

THEN I give him a shove out on the ice and away he went with his big arms waving and his big feet flapping and bending at the ankles like a punch-drunk baby trying to walk for the first time. Down he went with a crash! There was a general laughing around the rink and that was all Ben needed to give him inspiration. He got up to do or die, but his ankles still paid him no mind and they bent any way they damn pleased, Ben or no Ben.

I then had a heart and planted my big pal Ben in front of the net and told him to stand there. The general idea about the puck, well, I guessed he knew that anyway, so I just told him to stand there.

Well, there was a guy in the gallery who was cutting up and laughing and sure giving Ben the heckle plus a lot of no good advice on what he should do to straighten out the ankles. Ben didn't like that.

We were just fooling around on the ice and I could see Ben didn't like this here

heckler. Who likes a heckler, anyway?

Cap't Joe, Shorty, our left wing, and me were cruising down the ice and doing a pretty hunk of passing with that puck so we got the secondary defense groggy and dizzy at the same time, and we came tearing down to shoot for the net which was absolutely wide open. But wide.

Ben was walking behind the net and using his stick for some sort of a cane, and when I said walk, I meant he was hobbling like a guy with two big lame feet. He got to the boards in back of the net all right and he hung on and there, right there, sat the heckler behind the chicken-wire screening.

Ben spoke up in a too gentle voice. "Buddy," he said, "maybe you figure you could do better than me?"

"Now that's a pretty dopey question," this guy said, taking his life in his own two hands and waving it under Ben's nose. "Tell me who could do worse?" this guy said. "I would like to see him."

"And you, buddy, are exactly whom?" I said, getting very high-toned to this medium-sized big mouth.

"I'm a spy," he said. "I'm the fifth colyum. I'm an Octo scout, ketch on? And anyway I'm the left wing. Baby, would I give a little something to tangle with *this* goalie. Boy, a dream goalie!"

"And what would you give, Windy?" I asked, my loyalty getting the better of my senses.

"Well, sociable," this guy said, "if the Octos don't beat the hell out of you with this goalie, I personally will go to the museum of ancient history and bark like a pekinese every time you say."

"And if you win?" I said.

"Well," the guy said, "I want this big feller for the ice follies. I got an in and I'll fix it so he'll just skate around the rink once. Boy, what a prize package!"

"Done!" I said, the word slipping past my brain and teeth, and Ben took this moment to cave in on the ice.

CAME the day of the battle with the Octos and we were down at the Palace. By we, I mean us and our no-account subs, including Ben, and the powerhouse from the West Side, the Octos. We were

going to play to a packed gallery and the gallery was on our side except a couple of hecklers that trailed the Octos up from the West Side. Yeah, any neutral in the gallery was on our side because, compared to the Octos, we were what they called good guys, honest and true.

But we didn't need my pal Ben on account of we still had our first-string goalie in shape, and even though it was an affair of honor and Ben was willing to go out and make a dope of himself on ice, I said no.

I was the one who got him into this bet and I'd get him out one way or another, I told him. So I stepped over to the Octo locker room and told this guy, Jerry was his name, that the bet was off.

Jerry didn't like this business of me reneging and he told me so right up and down. But I stuck to my guns and that was that. So he went off on another tack.

"All you got is that first-string goalie of yours," he said. "Your second-stringer is still out with the eye, no? So what do you say you put the big dope in if your regular goalie gets knocked out of the game. What do you say?" this Jerry said to me.

"Okay," I said, "and all bets are on if the big guy plays."

That was that. The ref dropped the puck between Cap'n Joe and Mike, the Octo center, and the play was on.

Joe flipped me the puckeroo and I spread my wings and sailed past the center line, going deep into Octo territory like a flying Dutchman. Of course I carried the platter right along the stick but didn't pay it no mind. I knew where it was. All I had to do was watch the defense men getting ready to gang up on me. And if I hung around and tried to do a serious bit of figuring, them Octo icers would come along and spill me like a sack of potatoes busting wide open.

Joe was handy. Cap'n Joe was always handy, but the Octo center had him covered right now, so I slipped the rubber across the rink to our left wing Shorty, and now the Octos were hopping around because Shorty was clear for a shot at the golden gate.

Shorty came in close to the goalie, feint-

ed and shot. But the Octo goalie took it on the heel of his stick and passed it to one of their defense and now it was a scramble getting back into our own territory. The Octo, Jerry, was carrying the mail and I rubbed it off his blade so pretty he never knew what hit him.

Back into Octo territory we scrambled, five of us now, a real deep attacking wall. We were shooting the platter around and trying to make it look fancy and trying to get the Octo goalie dizzy at the same time, but it was no go. He glued his eyes to the puck and we couldn't get him out of the net nohow.

I had the puck and was going to give it to Cap'n Joe to try an angle shot, a quick one, when an Octo wing caught up with me and gave me the whammy, and not gentle.

And there I was sailing into the boards alongside the net and the ref slipped this Octo, my pal Jerry it was, three minutes in the box, and me, I got the same. For nothing. We had just piled into the boards, the two of us, and when we got up he had shoved the handle of his stick into my belly and dug.

"In the puss next time, bozo," he told me.

"No kidding!" I said, and took a poke at him which never even landed, and then the ref took over and planted us.

Of course I didn't start anything, but the Octo team figured I did and they started cutting loose with a lot of plain and fancy mayhem and roughing up the details. Our goalie got cracked on the head by two Octos at the same time and the goalie didn't stagger out. He was carried out!

The two Octos went to jail for five minutes apiece and in came my big hefty pal Ben, looking twice as big and hefty because of the padding. Yeah, Ben came in with an escort, Cap'n Joe and me on each side of him dragging him over the ice like a Trojan horse.

BEN had his instructions down pat and he just stood there in front of our net and looked bigger than an elephant, with a big inviting smile on his moon pan of a puss. He was smiling at

all the females in the gallery and he sure got plenty of smiles in return; laughs, as a matter of fact.

Time was in now and we took off. We were five to three in the field now, goalies excepted, so we hopped on the Octos with a five-man attack and drove four counters into the golden gate to make it 4-0 before the reserves came out of jail.

The strategy was all worked out in advance. I personally was to be Ben's body-guard, and we'd be strictly on the defensive when the Octos threatened.

Right here I started getting my head handed to me on a plate. We were playing a three-man defense and just Cap'n Joe and Shorty carrying our attack, so naturally what could two guys do? The rubber was in Y territory almost all the time. The Octos were out for blood now, and they didn't care whose blood it was as long as it was ours.

They bulled down the field with a smashing five-man attack, and one guy trying to slip a body check into that mob was like a traffic cop standing in front of a stampede and holding up his hand for a couple of wild-eyed beef to come to a dead halt pronto.

They went through and around our defense wall like it was the Maginot Line, and if you think my pal Ben gave them any trouble at the net, you better try thinking again.

Ben stood there and smiled and waved his bat toward the disc, but that was all. If the Octos had a chance to shoot, it was in there for a marker, and no ifs or buts.

Of course, we rested up between the periods, but here it was in the last period and the score was 4-3 in our favor. We had one more marker to play around with and that wasn't a hell of a margin. Not the way the Octos were playing. This game made a difference, not so much to the Y as to Ben and me. We had a personal stake, and I don't mean with French fries, either.

Ben began sweating now. He'd been working up a sweat every time the Octos counted, but now, with the chips down, he began pouring perspiration in earnest. The captain of the Octos at center was

charging down the ice, flanked by his two flashing wings, with the two Octo defense men bringing up the rear and not dragging along either.

This time our Y boys slammed into them, body-checking here, swiping the puck there. We were in there trying so damn hard we almost busted wide open right on the spot, all of us. But the puck kept sliding in one general direction and that was toward our main and final line of defense—my pal Ben.

This time Ben wasn't a picture of nonchalance. He was excited. This possible point meant something to him. And after this possible point, if another one went for a red light by the Octos, then he, Ben, was practically a dead chicken, a big dead chicken.

The puck was no respecter of worriers, especially when the Octos were hounding it for the net. Their rush slammed me into the boards hard and headfirst, and when I got steel under me again they had punched another one through to tie it all up, 4-4.

Ben's round puss was lengthening and getting more mournful by the second.

"Ben, the time has come," I told him. "From now on it's up to you and your ability. Just do what I told you. That's all, pal."

"Okay, Sammy," he said.

And even while our boys were still winging in the camp of the enemy, my pal Ben began to make himself comfortable in front of the net like a horse bedding down for the night, sort of buckling his hind feet first and then stretching out like a regular Cleopatra.

The Octo team was so surprised when they finally got down to our goal to see Ben bedded down so sweet that I sneaked the puck from under their noses and gave it a free ride to Cap'n Joe again. Our whole mob went up-ice with us this time in a five-man attack.

TIME was very short now. The Octo, Jerry, bulled the platter away from me and flipped it to his buddy and the race was on to get back to Ben again. They were bearing down on him now, the whole Octo crew, with our mob in hot pursuit.

But me, I didn't pursue. I got over the line into Y territory and hung around biding my time. It was now or never. The score now was in the laps of the gods, with a lot of help from Ben.

Ben was on his feet now, waving his stick around as the wings of the Octo forward wall closed in on him. He jumped from one side of the net to the other in the direction of the puck. The ice was not used to such heavy jumpings, and Ben went down just as the Octo, Jerry, began poking one.

On account of it takes a big guy like Ben no time at all to fall, Ben hit the ice right on top of the puck and stopped it dead.

A cheer went up from the gallery. It was Ben's first save and it sure came when the Y needed it. He grabbed the puck in his hand and looked surprised for a split second that he hadn't flattened it out with his heft.

Then while he was still on one knee, while the Octos were pecking away at the hand that held the puck, Ben, very casual-like but with a quick snap of the wrist, spun the puck over their heads toward me like he was sliding a penny toward a crack in the pavement.

I was in the clear and folded the platter right onto my stick. I streaked over the line into Octo territory with nobody between me and the golden gate but the Octo goalie.

Well, even though the goalie was no Ben, he was no cockeyed wonder either, and by the time his pals came around to help out I had him fainted out and the red light lit up like a very nice-looking traffic signal. They all knew what happened to the puck all right.

We faced off immediately. It was just

seconds to go now, and the Octos took charge and started a rush. The bell rang, ending the match, but they bore down *en masse* on the crouching Ben. They knocked the legs from under him and whacked him into the net along with the puck, and they weren't too gentle about it either. No, sir, they sure weren't gentle, not by the way they were cracking their sticks on any part of Ben that was handy, especially the unpadded seat of his hefty pants.

Our Y team came around the net swinging, and the Octos departed and then out came Ben looking like an angry bulldog.

The gallery let out a big cheer for Ben, for our goalie who had set up the winning marker with his flip to me after his beautiful fall-down save.

Ben forgot his mad for an instant and gave the gallery a big smile and a little skating exhibition. He very gingerly slid across the ice on his double-runner ice skates, with not a wobble of either ankle on account of each one of them was planted solidly on a small-sized sled. Just so long as Ben didn't get too fancy, he was sure to keep his feet

He skated right over to the Octo dressing room and disappeared. In a few moments the announcing system blared out, "Now don't get frightened, ladies and gentlemen . . ." and suddenly over the loudspeakers came barking, plenty of barking.

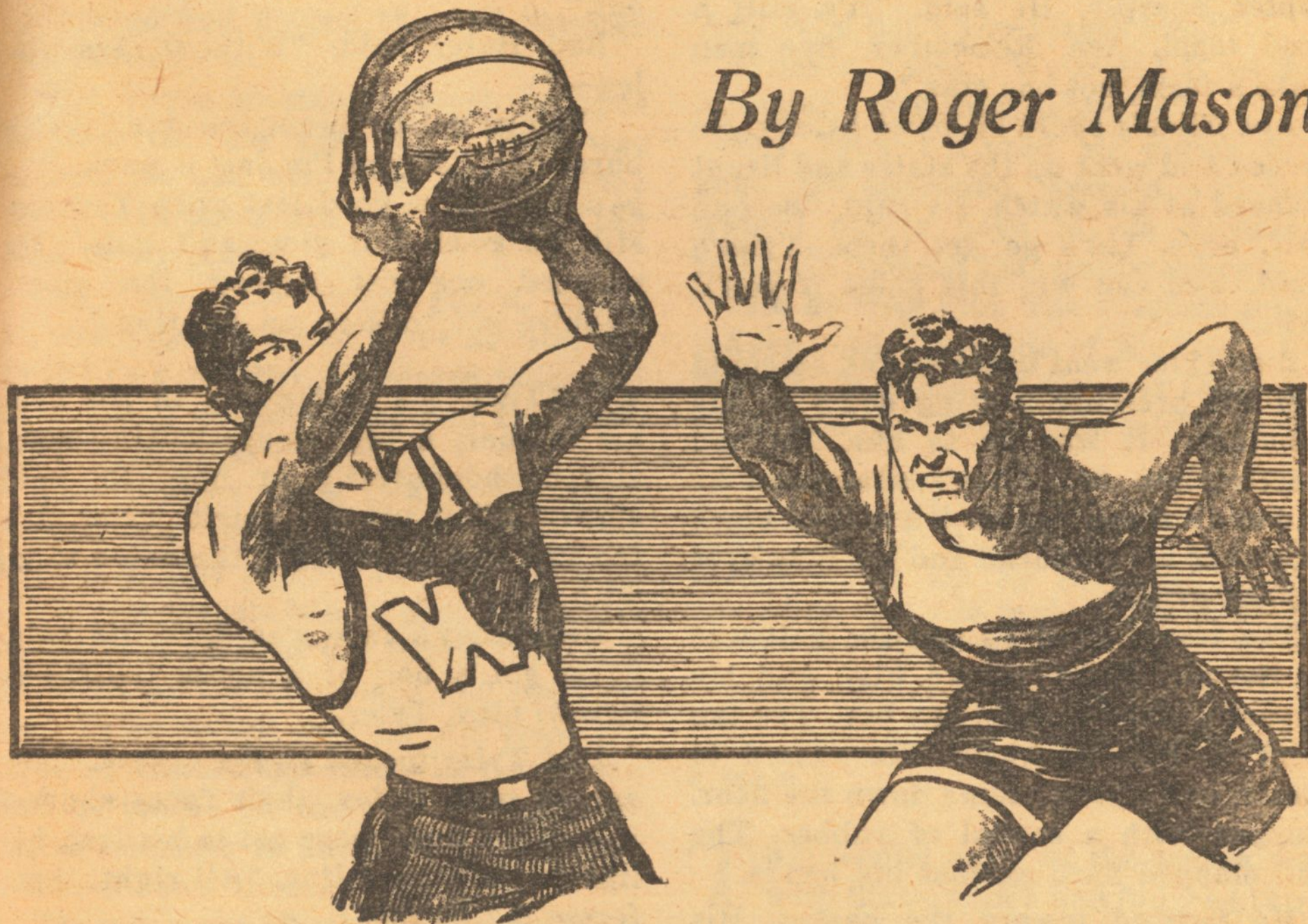
Then I heard Ben's voice over the loudspeakers, "Put a yip or two into it, you mutt. Then you can go ahead and yarf!"

Yeah, it didn't have to be a museum with Ben. He was collecting, and the Octo Jerry was paying off pronto, and in spades!



Hoop King's Nemesis

By Roger Mason



When Bud Tyler tried to fill a hoop king's throne, he found that instead of a court coronet, he had inherited a basketeer's royal headache.

THERE was a hard lump in Bud Tyler's throat. He was a small, black-haired young man, and a basketball uniform hung loosely on his slender frame. He raised his head and his jaw-line hardened.

He said, "We're only ten points behind. We'll take these guys yet."

Across the room center Red Haley muttered, "We were a great team when we had Ace Allen. Without him we're a bunch of bums."

Bud Tyler's shoulders sagged and the red crept up to his ears. Ace Allen had been a super-star. He had graduated the preceding June and this season sophomore Bud Tyler was taking his place. Tonight the Vayle team was opening its season against Tech. Vayle was losing and Bud Tyler knew that his team mates blamed him. He hadn't been

able to step into Ace Allen's shoes.

The locker-room door opened suddenly and a tall, husky young man in civilian clothes entered the room. Ace Allen, who after his graduation had taken a job in town, greeted the basketball team with a grin.

"I guess you could use me, boys," he said complacently.

Bud Tyler reddened, but tried to force a grin. "We sure could, Ace," he said. "But we can still win this game."

He had a feeling that he didn't dare put into words. Without their great star the Vayle team was giving up. They didn't expect to have a good season and in the first half of the game against Tech their play had been listless. He thought maybe the Ace would pep them up.

"You're doing O.K.," Ace said. "No-

body expects the team to win the conference this year. In fact—"

Across the room Coach Brant interrupted sharply. He said, "It's still a good team, Ace. Remember, five men make a team, not one star."

Ace Allen's smile flickered briefly. He turned and went up the stairs and Brant glanced at his watch. He said, "Second half, boys. Let's go get them. Tyler's right. You can win this game if you'll fight."

Bud Tyler went upstairs and he could feel the pressure beating down on his shoulders. It was up to him. He had stepped into Ace Allen's shoes and he had to fill them. He shook a lock of black hair over his forehead and his blue eyes flashed grimly.

The teams lined up and the ball was in the air. Haley leaped high and his fingers pushed against the ball. The tap went to Pike at guard. He passed to Slater, and Tyler, racing down the floor, stopped with a squeal of rubber. The ball slapped hard against his hands.

He twisted toward the basket. His hands arched high and his guard jumped to intercept the shot. But Tyler didn't shoot. He shifted away and lined a pass to the corner to Red Haley.

The center took the ball and sent it for the hoop. The ball bounced on the rim and fell down into the hands of a Tech player. Bud Tyler got a little mad. The past year, when he was a freshman, he had seen Red Haley make that shot dozens of times. And practically never had he seen Haley miss.

Bud Tyler thought, *They think I'm a bum and because of that they're not even trying to win. They haven't got any fight.* He looked toward the bench and saw Ace Allen sprawled there with a grin on his face. The ex-Vayle star seemed to be enjoying his team's defeat.

Tech came down to score and their lead was twelve points. Bud Tyler snapped to Haley, "Call a time out."

The captain glanced curiously at him and then did so. The Vayle five got in a huddle and Bud Tyler squatted down and stared at them. He said, "I'm new on this ball club. Maybe I got a lot of gall

to shoot off my mouth. But if you don't mind my saying so I think we can do better. You guys just aren't putting out."

Red Haley said, "Without Ace Allen—"

"You've got to forget the Ace," Tyler burst out. "Maybe I'm just a punk. But you guys were good last year. You can still be good. But you can't quit." He pounded one fist against the other. "You've got to keep on fighting."

SLATER, the best guard in the conference, a big, sleepy-looking man, stared thoughtfully at him. He said slowly, "You got the spirit, Tyler. It's too bad you haven't got the game to go with it."

Red Haley's face was dark. He said, "You got a hell of a nerve telling us how to play, Tyler."

Bud Tyler looked at the others. They agreed with Haley, their faces showed it, and the sophomore got to his feet, his lips set in a hard line. "All right, then, forget it," he said.

He went back into the lineup. It was outside Vayle and Birch had the ball. He passed in to Haley and an alert Tech man intercepted the pass. He set himself for a shot at the Vayle hoop and Bud Tyler left his feet. He dived across the floor, came down hard and his hands were clamped around the ball for a jump.

His opponent was taller than he by six inches. Tyler crouched low and when the referee threw up the ball Tyler went up as if he were made of steel springs. His fingers curled around the ball and he pushed it just beyond his opponent's head.

Tyler hit the floor again. His hand snaked out to get the ball before it hit the floor. He started dribbling down the court. He got to the center of the floor and a guard lunged up in front of him.

Haley was across the court. Tyler feinted in his direction and the guard moved that way. Instantly Bud Tyler let fly for the basket. He stood there and watched the ball sink down through the hoop.

Tech took the ball out. They came in leisurely and Bud Tyler, running like a deer, batted down a pass. Instantly he recovered and flipped the ball through the netting.

The Vayle spectators began to come to life. On the next play Tyler was fouled. He had two shots and he made them both good. He had cut the Tech lead to six points.

Big Slater, the sleepy guard, began to wake up. He could move around the floor like a panther. He scored twice and then Birch added a goal and the score was deadlocked.

The minutes were ticking off. Tech rallied and began to fight. With less than a minute to go Slater got the ball. He fired a desperate long shot. Bud Tyler started running for the basket. The ball hit high on the backboard and bounced out. Tyler leaped into the air from his running start. Desperately he batted the ball. It landed on the rim. For an agonizing moment it hung there and then swished down through the cords.

The gun went off while a frantic Tech team tried vainly to score.

Bud Tyler walked slowly off the court. He felt warm and comfortable. He wasn't kidding himself. He wasn't a court genius like Ace Allen and he never would be. But he had proved himself. The game was won and now the team would have confidence in him. He had proved himself on the field of battle.

He entered the locker room and surveyed the tired, sweating varsity. Softly, triumphantly, Bud Tyler said, "We got a ball club."

Red Haley's eyebrows shot up. He said, "Take it easy, Tyler. Tech will finish at the bottom of the conference. We just managed to beat them by two points in the last thirty seconds of play. That doesn't make us good."

Slater scowled. "The kid looked good, Red," he said. "You got to give him credit."

Haley said, "I got nothin' against him. He's all right. But how do you think we'll look against some of the strong teams like Radburn and Wallace. Why, Ace Allen—"

Bud Tyler, taking off one shoe, fired it into his locker. He said, "I'm getting a little fed up with hearing about the Ace. Why don't you forget him?"

Haley snapped, "We might if we had a forward who could make us."

Bud Tyler buttoned his mouth tight shut. He showered, dressed and then walked slowly back to his dormitory room. He thought that maybe the campus would be with him. The students might influence the thoughts of the team. But the next morning the *Campus Daily* disillusioned him. The article said in part—

Despite their story-book victory over Tech, the Vayle basketball team made a sorry showing. Bud Tyler is a capable enough player but by no means another Ace Allen. The Ace made Vayle great and his loss is irreparable.

Bud Tyler clenched his fist. He muttered angrily, "No one man ever made a team."

THE second game of the season was with State, which had finished third the preceding year. In their opening game of the season they had bowed to the conference favorite, Wallace.

Bud Tyler went out to play that second game, thinking that a win over State would be the inspiration that would make the Vayle team. He came off the floor with his shoulders sagging. State had beaten them by eleven points.

In the locker room, Ace Allen joined the team. He said, "You did pretty well to hold them that close. They have a good outfit."

"So have we," Tyler flared. "Our timing was off. We could have beaten them but we just didn't click."

Ace Allen chuckled. "Kid," he said, "they say you're a long way from being the player I was, but one thing you sure can do is outtalk me. It's too bad you don't play as well as you talk."

Slater said mildly, "The kid is playing his heart out, Ace. Give him credit."

"Sure," Ace said smiling. "I'm all for you, Bud."

But Tyler began suddenly to wonder about Ace Allen. Along with the rest of the team he had looked upon him as a

sort of god. The Ace was without question a basketball genius. But Tyler began to wonder if a guy could be a great athlete and still be a heel.

"Get that idea out of your head," Tyler told himself. "The Ace is an all-around great guy."

But he had an idea. The Vayle team was tackling Radburn the next Friday night and the afternoon of the game Bud Tyler went downtown to the office where Ace Allen had been employed since his graduation. He was shown into Allen's office and the Ace extended a hand, grinned, and said, "What can I do for you?"

Bud Tyler was a little nervous. Finally he said, "Ace, I think you can help the team. You were a great star. You were so good that you gave the rest of the team an inferiority complex. Every time they play they're thinking about you instead of fighting to win. They need a shot in the arm, they need some pep. Coach Brant hasn't been able to give it to them because he's in the same frame of mind. After all, Ace, you know as well as I do that it takes five men to make a team. Slater's the best guard in the conference and Haley comes close to being the best center."

Ace Allen had stopped smiling. He said, "What do you want me to do?"

Tyler, sitting forward, said excitedly, "I want you to come to the locker room tonight like you always do. But I want you to sing a different tune. Instead of sympathizing with the team, give 'em hell. Give 'em a fight talk. Tell them they can win without you. You see, they been quitting. Not intentionally maybe but they're letting down because they have no self-confidence."

Ace Allen toyed with a fountain pen, his eyes narrowed. Then he said softly, "Aren't you taking on a lot for a green sophomore?"

"I'm trying to help the team," Tyler answered.

Ace Allen said, "I'll be in the locker room at eight."

"Thanks," Tyler said. "Thanks a lot, Ace."

He felt better as he walked back to

his dormitory. And that night in the Vayle locker room his heart leaped as he saw the Ace walk in.

The ex-Vayle star sat down and looked seriously around the room. He said, "This is rather painful. I'm not a member of Vayle University any longer and it's none of my business but there's something you ought to know. One of the men on this team came to me this afternoon. He complained that the other four regulars were quitting, that they were lying down on the job."

Bud Tyler stared apprehensively at Ace Allen. It didn't sound like the kind of pep talk he expected.

Ace Allen went on, "It seems to me that an unfortunate situation is created when one player talks behind the backs of the others. That player is Bud Tyler."

Haley took a step toward Tyler. He said, "Why, you little rat, you—"

"Now, wait a minute," Ace interrupted smoothly. "After all, the kid is probably envious. He's had to step into my shoes and he's a little jealous—"

Bud Tyler bounced to his feet. He said, "My hunch was right. You're a great basketball player, Allen, and you're a first-class tramp as well. The trouble with you is that you don't want the team to win. You want to see them lose because you've always been a guy who loves to pocket all the glory and the headlines."

Ace Allen, his face flushed, got up and then Slater said, "Don't hit him, Ace."

Allen relaxed. He said, "I just thought you ought to know. I'm sorry it happened."

He walked out of the locker room and Coach Brant came down the stairs. He said, "Game time. Go up there and give them all you've got. Do the best you can."

The team started slowly up the stairs. Haley walked behind Bud Tyler. He said, "You're asking for it. Nobody has said so but I'm telling you now what we know. The trouble with this team is that you haven't got the stuff to replace Allen. Think that one over the next time you want to shoot off your mouth."

Tyler made no answer. He knew they wouldn't believe that he had just been thinking of the team. Ace Allen had too strong a hold on all of them except Slater. But the big guard was too easy-going to make any move.

BUD TYLER thought bitterly that at any other college he might be a sophomore basketball star. But here at Vayle he was the weak man on the team. No matter how well he played he would always be compared with Ace Allen. He was beaten before he started.

He went out on the court. He set that jaw in a stubborn line and told himself that tonight he was going to show them. He was small but he was just as fast as the Ace had ever been. He had a good eye, maybe a better eye than Allen, and just as much fight. He didn't have the basketball savvy of the Ace but he had everything else. He would prove to them tonight how good he was.

The ball went up between the centers. Haley leaped and won the tap. The ball went to Pike. The forward dribbled three steps and passed to Bud Tyler. He took it on the run, swung across the court, and lined the ball to Birch. The guard sent it to Haley and Tyler was cutting in for the basket.

Haley fired the ball at him. It was a wild throw and Tyler went up in the air. The ball bounced off his fingers and outside. Radburn came smoothly down the court to score first blood.

That was the start of it. It grew worse as it went along. Bud Tyler threw himself into every play but the team had fallen apart. Their passes were wild and a once great team crumpled into failure in that first half. The score at half time was Radburn, 27; Vayle, 14.

Twenty minutes later at the end of the game a weary Vayle squad, smarting under the worst beating ever administered a Vayle quintet, came down into the locker room.

Haley stripped off his jersey and fired it into his locker. He muttered, "A game like that makes you want to quit!"

Tyler snapped, "You did quit. You

quit before you ever went up there tonight."

Haley stared at him, his eyes flashing. Then suddenly the back of his hand slapped hard across Tyler's mouth. Tyler went backward over a bench, hit the floor with a crash, then bounced to his feet. He charged Haley and ran right into the arms of Slater.

The guard held him at arms' length. "Cool off, firebrand," he said. "We played lousy up there, all of us. You're new on the team, you're full of fight. But the reason we're not playing our best is because we've played a certain kind of ball for the last two years. We did nothing but feed Ace Allen the ball. We haven't got a guy like that this year, and we're bound to be in a slump."

Bud Tyler said, "I'm not so bad. You might give me a chance."

Haley said, "Do you ever read the papers? What do they think of you? Why, Ace Allen—"

Bud Tyler said, "Suppose I proved I was as good or better than the Ace. What then?"

Haley laughed scornfully. "If you were three-quarters the ball player Allen was, we'd win the title again."

Tyler, his face white, said, "What's the best first half the Ace ever had in scoring?"

Haley thought a moment, then replied, "Last year in the State game, Ace scored thirteen points the first half. That's the best."

"I've got a proposition," Tyler said. "Promise that in the Wallace game next week you'll feed me like you fed the Ace. If I can score thirteen points or more, that will prove I'm as good as the Ace. You'll have to eat your words and start playing basketball."

Haley said, "It's a deal. And if you flop, so help me, you'd better turn in your uniform."

Early next week Bud Tyler met Coach Brant after practise. The coach said, "I know what happened, Tyler. I'm afraid you're not good enough, kid. The Ace was really a genius out there."

Bud Tyler said, "It's not just for me. It's for the team, too. We're having a

lousy season. If I can make good on this, it'll snap them out of it."

Brant studied him a moment. He said finally, "I'll let you in on something. Ace Allen has been dropping a word here and there that I'm not much of a coach. He'd like the job himself. Some people think that our great teams of the past three years were due to Ace Allen and not to me. If we have a bum season this winter, the Ace will be coaching Vayle next year. If we do all right, I'll keep the job. People will think I'm due a little credit."

Bud Tyler gaped, then said, "I knew that guy was a heel. Why don't you tell the team?"

Brant shook his head. "I'm not going to plead for my job," he said. "I'll keep it the hard way or not at all."

Bud Tyler said, "That leaves it up to me. I've got to score thirteen points this Saturday."

Beaten by Vayle two successive years Wallace was hot for revenge when they came out on the court that Saturday evening. At his forward post Bud Tyler, tense and drawn, watched the ball spin high between the centers. Haley won the tap. He sent the ball to Pike and Bud Tyler sprinted toward the goal.

Pike dribbled and passed back to Haley. The center wheeled and fired the ball toward the basket. Bud Tyler reversed his stride and cut straight across under the hoop. His guard was a step behind him and Tyler took the pass on the dead run and leaped high in the air. He twisted his body, turned and arched a shot for the hoop. The ball dropped through for a score.

Two points, Tyler thought. Eleven to go. It was a lot to get in twenty minutes of basketball and his future depended on it.

He went back into the lineup and Wallace roared down. They were a big, fast team and they maneuvered under the basket and knotted the score.

Birch took the ball out and passed to Slater. The guard threw to Haley and Tyler was on the run again. He took a pass over his head and threw to Pike. The forward feinted a shot and passed

back to Tyler. He stopped dead with a squeal of rubber. His guard lunged on past him and in that second while he was in the clear Tyler shot. He held his breath until the ball came down through the loop.

WALLACE went outside and Bud Tyler grinned. He saw a surprised look on the faces of his teammates. They hadn't believed he was any good. They had refused to believe it. But now the chips were down and he was showing them. He had four points in less than four minutes of play. It was going to be duck soup the rest of the way. Just nine points to get.

Wallace tied it up a moment later. But in the seventh minute of play Tyler broke loose again. He got a pass at the corner of the court and he looped the ball high and watched it drop straight through.

Six points! Seven to go to tie the Ace and eight to beat him. It was in the bag.

And then suddenly a Wallace substitution came running out on the court. He became Bud Tyler's guard. He was tall and rangy with long arms and big hands.

Wallace came down the court again. They tied the score and once more Vayle went on the offense. Tyler started running. He took a pass, stopped, whirled and the guard was with him like a shadow. Tyler tried to pivot away and those long arms reached around him and the big hands of the guard clamped down on the ball.

Bud Tyler felt the first hint of panic shoot through him. His guard easily out-jumped him and Wallace scored to take a two-point lead.

The play moved up and down the floor and Bud Tyler stole a glance at the clock. He saw that ten minutes had gone by. He had ten minutes to make at least seven points.

He got the ball and his guard was there. He seemed to have as many arms as an octopus has tentacles. Bud Tyler spun around, pivoting, and he was fouled as the guard lunged into him.

He had one shot. He took his time and

the ball went through. Seven points and eight minutes to make them in. Almost a point a minute. It was getting tougher all the time.

The stands were in a bedlam. They weren't thinking of Bud Tyler, but they had expected a runaway victory and Vayle was almost holding Wallace. They were one point behind their rivals and then the Wallace class asserted itself. They came down the court three times. They scored each time and had a seven point advantage.

Haley wore a dour grin. He took a ball and flung it at Bud Tyler. Tyler had to reach for it. He stuck out his right hand and the ball cracked against the thumb and forced it back. There was a moment's tearing pain and then Tyler forgot it as he got his other hand on the ball.

His guard was directly in front of him. Tyler rolled the ball between his legs. He knifed around him and picked it up. As he straightened he fired the ball for the backboard. It hit with a thump and bounced through the hoop.

Nine points, Tyler thought. Just four to go. Only two more baskets and four minutes to make them in. He had a chance. Just two shots at that basket.

Wallace scored again. Pike went outside and passed to Birch. The guard threw to Haley and at center court Haley fired to Tyler. He took the hard pass and bit his lips against the pain in his right thumb. He shot quickly and he hurried it. He favored his right hand a little and the ball sailed out of court.

He went racing down as Wallace took the ball outside. A pass came in and he threw himself at it. He came down on the floor on his hands and he had the ball. He twisted, turned and lobbed the ball for the basket. It went through and he had eleven points.

He got up and his thumb was on fire. He broke into the defense again and a pass glanced off his hand. As he stood there the gun ended the half. He had eleven points. He had gone all out and he had missed by one goal!

Wallace held a seven-point lead. It hadn't been enough, what he had done

up there. He had thought that if he could score thirteen points he would pace his team to an early lead. He had scored eleven points and it hadn't been enough. He was through.

He walked slowly down the locker stairs. He went into the room and stood there silently a moment, his throat choked up. Then he turned to the silent team. He said, "You win. I'm not as good as I thought I was."

He turned toward the locker and began to climb out of his uniform. He was standing there when Ace Allen strolled in, a smile on his thin lips. "Well, well," he said, "so the flash didn't come through. I thought you were going to top me, Tyler. What happened?"

Big Slater had been sitting on the bench. He nodded to himself as though he had finally made up his mind. He got up off the bench and moved calmly over to Ace Allen.

He said quietly, "Get out, Ace."

Ace Allen scowled. He said, "What's the idea?"

Slater said, "I never did like you. I kept it to myself because I thought maybe I was jealous. But this kid was right. He had you pegged from the start. You were a great player, Ace, but you haven't done this year's team anything but harm."

Allen began saying, "You're taking a lot on yourself—" and then he stopped talking.

SLATER had one hand around Allen's neck and his other hand in the seat of Allen's pants. He kicked open the door leading upstairs. He gave a heave and threw the Ace halfway up the flight. Then he closed the door. He said:

"Tyler, will you shake hands? You didn't score thirteen points. But you came awful close. You came close enough so that I'm for you."

Haley, and Birch and Pike were hesitant. They stood off by themselves. Slater shook hands with Tyler. He saw the sophomore wince and then he looked down at Tyler's thumb. The digit was almost twice its normal size.

Slater stared. He said, "When did that happen?"

"Around the middle of the half."

Slater looked at the hand. Birch, Pike and Haley stared at it, and then Slater turned and faced them. His fists were doubled up in craggy knobs. He said harshly, "Are you lugs going to play ball this half or aren't you?"

Haley's eyes were popping. He said, "But we can't feed you this half, Tyler. You can't shoot with that hand."

Tyler said, "I'll tape it. But don't feed me. I was wrong. I'm not the genius Ace Allen was. But all together, the five of us can play a hell of a game of ball."

They went up the stairs. They were seven points behind and Wallace didn't expect much trouble. They romped out on the court and came down expecting to break through easily.

They ran slam-bang into a stone wall. Slater stretched across one half of the court and Birch took the other half. Wallace lost the ball and Haley got it.

Haley showed what he could do. He spun around like a dervish and the ball suddenly sailed past a guard into Birch's hands. Birch dropped a long shot dead. He grinned. He said, "I haven't made one of those since last winter."

They were five points behind. Tyler barged into the play. His thumb was taped but he didn't take a chance on shooting. He got the ball and passed to Haley or to Pike. The center made one good and then Pike put the team one point behind.

Wallace got a little panicky. Slater was fouled and he stood lazily at the foul line and flipped in two shots. He put them ahead by one slim point and up in the balcony they were going crazy. Wallace took a time out then. When they

came back they were in stride again. They scored twice and went ahead by three points. The teams moved up and down the floor and finally Haley took a pass from Tyler and made it good.

The game was in the final two minutes. Haley called a quick time out. He said, "Tyler, you haven't made a shot this half. How's the hand?"

"It hurts but it's all right."

"They're not expecting you to shoot," Haley said. "They'll be covering us but maybe you can break loose. You got to make just one shot with that bum mitt, Tyler."

They went back into the play. Wallace had the ball and Slater finally got it under the Vayle basket. He threw to Haley and Haley flipped to Pike. The forward set himself for a shot. His guard was in front of him and Pike suddenly angled the ball out to the side.

Tyler lurched in front of his guard. He caught the ball and looked for Haley. He moved in that direction and his guard moved with him. As he did so Bud Tyler leaped high and arched the ball for the basket. He forgot all about his thumb as he watched that ball come down. It dropped straight through and the gun ended the game as a frantic Wallace team started shooting from all over the court.

Vayle, 39—Wallace, 38.

Bud Tyler, walking happily toward the stairs, said, "I knew I was right. There's no such thing as a one-man team."

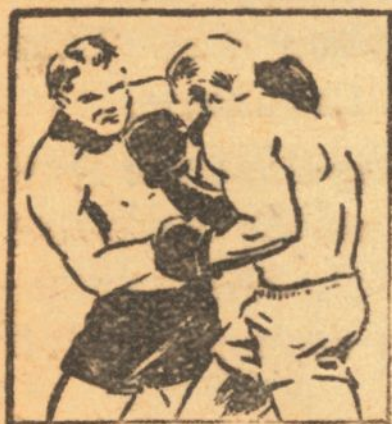
Slater grinned. "You fought hard enough for five," he said. "You've been doing it all season. The hell there's no such thing as a one-man team. Bud—you're it!"



If you want to hit the top as a pro athlete, you've got to give it . . .

The Old College Try

By Ned Cady



IN THIS kawnuh, that gallant and hard - fighting admiruh of Mickey Walker — Freddie Cochrane," the announcer yelled, pointing his finger across

the ring. "And in this kawnuh, that challenger for the title now held by Henry Armstrong—Kid Whoozis!"

I do not remember Whoozis' real name. No one else will remember it either.

The warning buzzer sounded. The handlers and seconds scowled and looked as tough as they could—in the way of handlers the world over—then squirmed through the ropes and out of the ring.

The bell! Round one! Cochrane advances and leads with a whistling left hook. Whoozis ducks inside and swings left and right to the waistline.

Cochrane pushes him away, raising a left uppercut on the way back. Cochrane leads with another left hook. Whoozis grabs the top rope and pulls himself back and forth, slipping and ducking the punches. Cochrane comes in and hooks again. Whoozis leans his head on Cochrane's shoulder where his jaw will be safe, swings a couple of punches downstairs where they will not hurt his hands, and lets himself be tied up in a clinch. And there is the bell.

"What is Cochrane doing in that ring?" A stranger asks. "He will never be any good!"

"He always is in there trying," a fan from Elizabeth answered. "The boys like to see him go."

Round ten. Whoozis has speeded it up, even taking a shot or so at Cochrane's jaw. Cochrane is still leading and forc-

ing. But here comes the final bell. The referee holds up a gloved hand. The announcer points a finger toward the other corner.

"The winnah!" He yells. "Kid Whoozis!"

We all went home. We forgot Cochrane and we forgot Whoozis. We are still forgetting Whoozis, a guy who liked to coast through a fight and drag down his dough with as little effort and risk as he could get away with.

A few fight seasons passed. Then the word flew around the main stem in New York. A town clown named Cochrane from Elizabeth, N. J., is getting a bout with the champ, Fritzie Zivic. And a lot of the wise money is riding on Cochrane.

Why bet on Cochrane? How does he rate a bout with the champ, anyway? The questions bounced back and forth, wherever the fight fans gathered. Has not this Cochrane a pretty poor record?

COCHRANE gives it the old college try in every round of every bout. The fans like him for that, so he gets a crack at the title. And some good boy who tries like that is likely to upset Zivic. For Fritzie takes it a bit too easy. So ran the answers to all of those questions.

The result is history. Cochrane became the first man to lose twenty-seven bouts on the way up and still cop a title. The old college try got him his shot, and the old college try put it over for him.

Once Cochrane was in, some of the boys began to look over his situation. And they found out something.

Losing twenty-seven bouts should have kept Cochrane in the hamburger and onion class as a money maker. But

he had really been making good dough all along. For the fans will pay for the man who tries, and the promoters will pay him too.

Who was the biggest money-making boxer ever to step into the ring?

Jack Dempsey, of course. And Jack was in there giving it the old try for a knockout every minute of every round.

Baseball fans used to say they would rather see Babe Ruth strike out than watch any other man hit the ball. For when the Bambino took a slap at that apple, if he missed it you could hear the whistle of the bat clear up in the stands. And when he hit one there was no doubt as to why the ball was going for a ride. And the Babe made \$60,000 per year in salary, not including the additional thousands for autographing and endorsing articles.

Professionals know these records. And the ones who want the big dough are going after it with that old college try on every play.

A few years ago there were two men trying out for the job of shortstop. One was a lean, sure, clean-handed boy named Lyn Lary. The other was a smaller, faster, always fighting bozo named Leo Durocher.

The battle these two put up became the talk of the spring training camps. Lary was the better baseball mechanic. But you could not ignore that Durocher fight. You could not overlook the way Leo would spark a whole team, even though he was just a rookie.

Years went by. Lary remained a wonderful player, swift, sure-handed and game, a man sure to stay up there as long as his legs lasted.

Durocher was a fireball at fielding. But he could not bat well. He became known as "Three-out Durocher" for his failures to deliver the hits in the clutch.

Any other man would have been sold down the river for getting a name like that. But the managers could not forget the way he fought. He battled every ball and every pitcher, also every umpire. Everybody could accuse him of failing, but no one of not trying.

Owners noticed that fight too. And

in a few years Leo Durocher was leading an aggregation of cast-offs, misfits and "Bums" to the championship of the National League.

The way one man can spark a pro outfit to victory is shown by the feat of Ace Parker in 1941.

The football Dodgers have been a hapless pack this season. Eleven of their best men—including the great Ralph Kercheval—are in military service. Game after game has been lost. They even lost to the Chicago Cardinals.

Then came that game against the New York Giants. The game which Brooklyn wanted most to win. And the Giants coming up with a very good season, and all the odds on them.

But Ace Parker is back in there for Jock Sutherland's Dodgers. Ace, who always gives every play the old college try.

Have the Dodgers a chance? Can the old Ace put it over? Probably not, the dope seems to say. For Ace has had both of his ankles broken. And his specialty is passing, while the Giants have been winning by intercepting passes.

You know the story. The Giants did not intercept a single Dodger pass. The old Ace put just a little extra on every try, that little extra which made old Pop Warner claim: "A team that won't be beaten can't be beaten." And the game ended, Dodgers 16, Giants 14.

THE rules are being changed in team games to favor the "college try" player. In football, for example, the danger to the man who tries too hard is exhaustion followed by injuries. But in the Giants-All Stars game this year, Ward Cuff was in and out of the game seventeen times.

Ward is a hard fighter and all-out trier from way back. Taking him out and putting him in under the unlimited substitutions rule kept him right to put the old whammo into the situations where he was needed most. And it is doing the same for many another man.

Old timers—real old timers—will remember when hockey was a form of

fancy figure skating with a puck and a few goal tenders put in there to give the sweet swoopers an objective. The puck was passed back and forth, often with such cleverness that neither fan nor official knew who had it for a second or so. And the best player was a stick magician, a Harry Houdini on skates.

Then along came a guy named Hobey Baker.

Hobey had been a hip-swinging half-back at Princeton, and a good enough hockey player too. But once he was signed for pro hockey, he started tearing the game apart.

Getting the puck behind his own net, Hobey would make a solo dash down the ice. Weaving, ducking, charging, he would come blazing into the opponents' territory. Football mixed with hockey. The comet! No, the meteor! The sports writers could not find names for him—although the opponents often could.

Yawning areas of empty space in the grandstands began to fill up with red hot fans. Everywhere Hobey Baker played, the game made money.

Then the managers found that every team had a fireball, all ready to burn up the ice. The Canadian players especially took one swift look at Baker, then tossed their pit-a-pat into the ashcan and started whizzing all over the rink. The old sweetness game never had appealed to Canadian temperament, anyway.

Hobey Baker died in action during World War I. But the rules have been changed again and again—letting in the forward pass was the biggest change—to make hockey exactly the game that Hobey Baker would have wanted. And now there is no sport which pays bigger rewards to the Bill Cooks, the Red Duttons and the other boys who give every play the real old college try.

About once per week someone rises to remark: "Pro sports are all ballyhoo. If you want to see the real fight, go

watch a bunch of sandlot kids some time."

And then I think of Dixie Walker. Dixie Walker, and a blazing hot day late in the season.

The Dodgers were two full games behind the league-leading St. Louis bunch, and slipping. Joe Medwick was out during one game, and old Dixie had to shift from right to left field.

Strike one! Ball one! Then the batter walloped a liner straight at the coffin corner in left field.

Was it fair? Was it foul? Every Brooklyn fan was hoping it was foul, but was ready to settle for a two bagger.

Over that way came Dixie, his long loping stride which seems to go so slow but really goes so fast, skimming him over the grass.

He looked at the ball, then at the stands, then broke his stride to stop from crashing into the concrete. Dixie, it seemed, was letting it go. And nobody blamed him.

But Dixie Walker was not letting it go. Grasping the wall with his bare hand, he leaned over and shoved his gloved hand under the guard railing. His head and shoulders followed it. And Dixie Walker picked a line drive off the seats of the second row, when he had to turn his back to the ball to reach it.

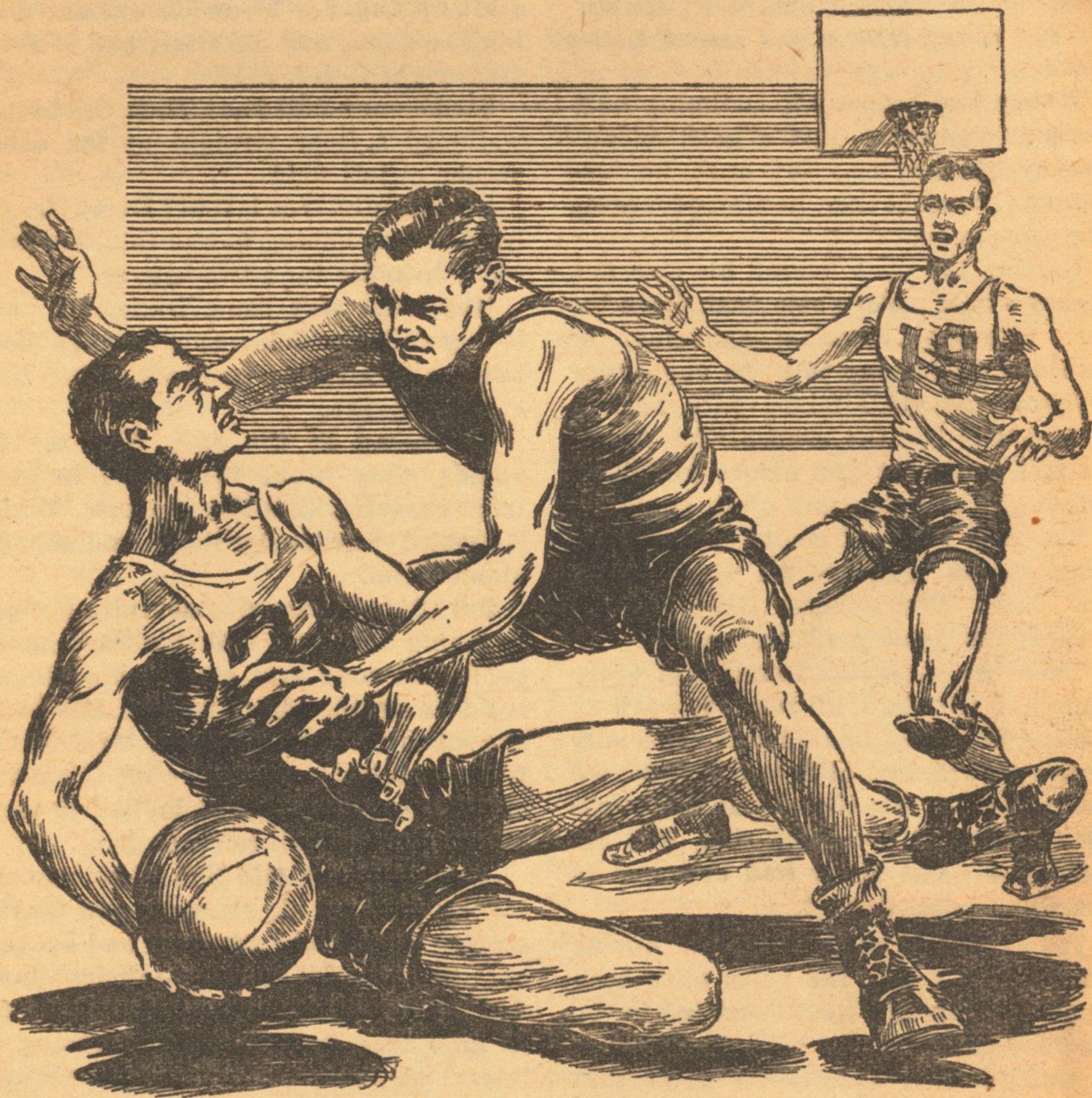
And I think of Old Bob Fitzsimmons, hitting with all his strength and nearly scoring a knockout after he had broken both his hands on Jim Jeffries' jaw. And Tuffy Leemans, scissoring his legs to kick free from a tackle, tossing a lateral to Ward Cuff, and then throwing a block for Ward while the tackler still held him about the waist, taking the tackler along on the block like the tail on a kite.

Do not let them tell you that the college boys try harder. For the element which makes pro sports great is the good old college try.



Swampy Marsh was a champ hoopster—on the bench. And he figured that his best friend kept him from reaping real hardwood laurels. But Swampy had to shower punches instead of baskets before he got his . . .

Bench-Warmer's Chance



By Roe Richmond

SWAMPY MARSH sat on the University bench watching the ball fly back and forth on the bright-lighted hardwood court. It was not an unusual position for Swampy Marsh. Familiar was the cut of the board under his thighs, the warmth of the crimson sweatsuit, the nervous pressure of shoulders and knees on either side.

It was a position Swampy Marsh had known intimately for three years. Three

years he had sat there watching his roommate, Hiker Holt, flash his stuff on the floor. Hiker Holt, whom he loved and hated.

Swampy Marsh was a joke at University, a short, chubby, curly-haired boy with a yen for basketball and a deadly eye for the basket. It was said that Swampy Marsh was the best shot in the Conference, yet Swampy Marsh had never started or played a full game for University.

This was because Swampy Marsh was useless in all other departments of the game. He could sink his long shots if he got time to get set and take aim. But outside of that he was useless.

Now Swampy Marsh was sitting there watching the last game of his last season, the championship struggle between University and Yukon. Last year Swampy Marsh had known briefly the heights of glory in another championship battle between the two teams. With three minutes to go the score was deadlocked and the University offense had stalled. Hiker Holt asked for time out and demanded that Swampy Marsh be called in. Against his will Coach Crawley yielded and sent in the small sharpshooter.

"Listen, Swamp," said Hiker Holt. "They got us stopped. You shoot every time you get hold of the ball. I'll take care of the rebounds if you miss. Let's cop this one, kid!"

So Swampy Marsh had fired for the bucket every time he could while Coach Crawley squirmed and swore on the sidelines. And Swampy Marsh had dropped three long beauties through the net to jump University into the lead. Hiker Holt had slashed through like a madman to pump in two rebounds as Swampy missed. And University had won by those points.

But Crawley hadn't been happy about it. The tactics employed had been contrary to his own strategy. Swampy Marsh had saved the game and the championship, but he had also assured himself of a permanent seat on the bench for another season.

TONIGHT the game was even and tight and bitter. The defenses were so strong that neither team could launch a telling drive. Even Hiker Holt was being stopped dead time and again. It was an extraordinary thing when Hiker Holt was stopped. Hiker was a natural.

When his long shots weren't registering, Hiker Holt would tear through to toss in one-handers from close range. When they stopped him in close, Hiker Holt would drop back and send long loops whipping into the meshes. And he did

everything with seeming ease and nonchalance.

Swampy Marsh watched him, as he had watched for three winters, trying to choke down the resentment that welled up like acid into his throat. After all, Hiker Holt had befriended him. Hiker Holt had come to his rescue that freshman year when frosh players were giving Swampy Marsh a merciless riding.

Hiker Holt had smacked Pip Walker and knocked Hymie Schwartz cold, because they'd been picking on Swampy. Hiker Holt had taken Swampy into his fraternity and roomed with him ever since. But Swampy knew why. It was because Hiker Holt wanted a stooge, an amusing stooge like Swampy, a foil for the tall, straight, handsome Holt.

Out on the floor University was attacking. The ball zipped from Holt to Pip Walker to Hymie Schwartz to Swede Yensen, pass, pivot, fake, and pass. Then Hiker Holt cut through and took his pass, but he was swarmed under by the Yukon blue before he could make his shot.

Jump ball. Yukon took it and reversed the direction of play. A blue jersey filtered through into the corner and swung his arm. The ball described an arc and fell neatly into the cords. Yukon led 15-10, in the second quarter.

University started another offensive, the crimson shirts crossing and crisscrossing as the ball shuttled to and fro. Another play set up Hiker Holt in the scoring slot, but once more Yukon smothered his attempt and took the ball.

This time University stopped the Blue, with Slug Smith breaking it up. The Crimson stormed forward again, but the Yukon defense was rockbound. Hiker Holt faded back, feinted a couple of passes, and sent a long one flying through the strings. Three points under now, 15-12.

Swampy Marsh found himself on his feet screaming: "That's more like it, Hiker! Keep 'em rolling!"

He stopped shortly and sank back onto the bench. He thought: *What the hell am I cheering for? I could win this ball game if the dopes'd give me a chance. That swell-headed Holt . . .*

But Swampy was up again a minute later when Hiker Holt faked and swiveled into the clear on the right wing and hooked another through the hemp.

Hiker Holt was a beautiful ball player, that no one could deny. He was fast and smooth and graceful, he was a fearless fighter. He had everything, Swampy Marsh admitted. He had too much for any one guy to have. And he was a good fellow, too, that was the worst of it. He was good, he knew he was good, he had a personality that both men and women admired, and he knew that, too. And still he was a regular guy.

"Nuts," muttered Swampy Marsh. "He's the worst thing that ever happened to me. He's given me an inferiority complex. He's messed up my whole life at University. I would've been a big shot if it wasn't for him. And now I'm just Hiker Holt's roommate . . ."

University smeared another Yukon threat as Swede Yensen grappled the ball. The Crimson started a quick break as Pip Walker snatched the tap. Hiker Holt darted through, took a pass from Schwartz, and leaped to shoot.

But Yukon hit him and hit him hard. Holt skidded on his back on the floor. The referee gave him two free tries and Holt missed them both. He was badly shaken up. Swampy Marsh started to chuckle and stopped when he felt the quick side-glances of his teammates. Yukon pounded down the court and hooped another to grab the lead, 17-14.

University advanced again, faked a break-through and passed back out. Hiker Holt took it, pivoted away from one man, faked, sidestepped, and flipped a long clean one into the netting.

"Got to hand it to him," mumbled Swampy Marsh to himself. "If he can't get 'em one way he gets 'em another."

Slug Smith converted a free throw and tied it up, 17-17.

The combat went on, surging back and forth. Swampy Marsh shifted on the bench and scrubbed his rubber soles on the floor. His last game, his last chance, and he was forced to sit there on the sideline.

All because of Hiker Holt, Hiker was

to blame. Coach Crawley would use him more if he wasn't Hiker's roommate and friend . . . Well, kind of a friend anyway. Crawley didn't want anybody to think Hiker was running the club. Crawley would rather lose his own way than win somebody else's way.

The Blue of Yukon took the lead on a field goal and two foul points, 21-17. The half was nearly over now. University drove into another offensive, but Hiker Holt was crowded roughly and missed his shot. Swede Yensen vaulted high to shove in the rebound, however, and cut the difference to two points. Yukon failed in their attempt, and University charged back with the ball. Hiker Holt was covered completely, but he slipped the ball out to Pip Walker, and Pip caught an overhead heave to knot the count at 21.

"He can't score in close tonight," murmured Swampy Marsh. "They got him bottled in close."

An elbow prodded his ribs. "Which side you on, runt?" growled Mahoney from beside him.

"Aw, shut up, you lug," said Swampy Marsh.

"Sure, you're brave, you are!" jeered Mahoney. "You can run and tell Hiker if anybody hurts you."

FIRE flamed up Swampy Marsh's neck to flood his cheeks and rim his ears. That's what they all thought. He was nothing but Hiker Holt's stooge. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair. He wanted University to win as much as anyone did. But he wanted to have a hand in the winning. And he deserved one. If he didn't deserve it he wouldn't kick. But even Hiker Holt had said:

"You can shoot baskets, Swamp. You can shoot better'n me or anybody else in the Conference. Too bad you didn't grow man-sized."

Yukon spurted and scored three times from the floor. They kept Hiker Holt covered up tight. The half ended Yukon, 27—University, 21.

In the dressing room Swampy Marsh saw how tired the varsity was. Their bodies and limbs were red and gleaming

with sweat, their hair curled damply, their faces hot and flushed. Hiker Holt was the most weary of all. He strayed occasionally from training rules and he always played harder than anybody else. It looked easy to watch him, but it took it out of him just the same.

"Coach," said Hiker Holt, "you ought to shoot Swampy at 'em. They're stopping us. Swamp could sink a couple, pull their defense out, open 'em up."

"I'm running this club, Holt," said Crawley. "I don't need your advice."

Hiker Holt spread his big hands in a gesture of disgust and despair.

Mahoney said: "Swampy Marsh, hell! He's even rooting for Yukon to win!"

Swampy Marsh stood up quickly and slapped Mahoney's face. Mahoney reared up, towering over Swampy, and was starting a swing when Hiker Holt caught his arms.

"Let him come, Hike," said Swampy Marsh. "I'll take the big blubber-mouth!"

Mahoney struggled to free himself, raving about little shrimps hiding behind somebody's skirts. Hiker Holt forced Mahoney back and set him down forcibly on the bench.

"Stay there," advised Hiker Holt, "or you'll get hurt."

"Cut out the cheap dramatics!" roared Coach Crawley. "What do you think this is anyway?"

Mahoney was still muttering vaguely. Swampy Marsh threw himself forward, yanked Hiker Holt's shoulders and pulled him around.

"You keep the hell out of this!" sobbed Swampy Marsh, and lunged at Mahoney.

Hiker Holt grabbed him and hauled him back. Swampy Marsh whirled and swung his fist blindly. It caught Hiker Holt squarely in the eye, and Hiker stumbled back in surprise, holding his hands to his face. Swampy Marsh infuriated with white-hot rage, spun again and let go a terrific left that nailed Mahoney under the jawbone. Mahoney's head banged back against the steel locker and he slumped to the floor. Then the others moved in to prevent further hostilities.

SWAMPY MARSH fell back on a bench and hid his face in his hands. Hiker Holt tenderly felt of an eye that was swelling and purpling fast. Mahoney stood up groggily and rubbed the back of his head. Coach Crawley stared wildly around the room and then stalked out.

The other players looked at one another and shook their heads, then paced the floor and avoided seeing anything. There was a sense of unreality about the whole thing. It was the weirdest locker room scene any of them had ever imagined. Only Jekyll the trainer, was calm and collected.

"Lemme see that eye, Hike," Jekyll said. He examined it and swore softly. The eye was puffed almost shut. Jekyll said, "I'll do what I can to get that open. It won't be fun though, Hiker."

"Get it open, is all," said Hiker Holt.

Swampy Marsh sprang up and caught Hiker's shoulders. "Hike, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Hiker Holt laughed. "Forget it, Swamp. I don't blame you, boy. You've taken a lot from us—especially from me."

"You haven't taken anything compared to what you'll take when I get a crack at you, punk!" put in Mahoney.

"Over my dead body," said Hiker Holt. "You asked for it, Mahoney. Now shut up about it."

Swampy Marsh stood by while Jekyll fixed Hiker's eye. "You aren't sore at me then, Hike?" asked Swampy.

"Hell, no!" grinned Hiker Holt. "I'm proud of you. You should've done this before. And you're starting this half. Swampy."

"He is *not*!" denied Coach Crawley, re-entering the room. "He's not starting at all. The same lineup starts."

University started the same lineup, and Swampy Marsh was still on the bench. Yukon took quick notice of Hiker Holt's blackened eye and razzed him without let-up. Hiker showed them how little it bothered him by racing through their defenses and splitting the strings with a lightning one-hander. Hiker rubbed it in by breaking loose and bagging another brilliant shot from the sideline. And

Hiker Holt tied the score when he burst into a clump of blue shirts and slapped a rebound back into the rim, making it 27-27.

Then Yukon took a bracer and Hiker Holt couldn't break loose for any more close-in shots. They were all over him like starved wolves, and they got away without fouling him. Hiker Holt was stopped cold. And Yukon staged a rally that gave them two field baskets and two foul points. Yukon was leading, 33-27.

They were roughing Hiker Holt now, giving him the business at every opportunity. They knew that Hiker Holt was the main menace to their chances, and they piled into him with elbows, shoulders and knees. They didn't mind the fouls that were called, they had plenty of reserve strength, and one point was better than two.

Hiker Holt popped three in from the black stripe. A Yukon guard left the game and a fresh one came in, promising to do a job on Hiker Holt. Yukon was ahead by three, 33-30. Then Yukon loosed an onslaught that ran their lead up to ten points, 40-30.

They were stopping Hiker Holt in close, so he switched to long range and swished the drapes with three perfect loops from a distance. Yukon, 40-36. Then Hiker Holt changed tactics again and dashed in close for a crack at the basket.

He was in mid-air when they smashed him from either side, and as he sprawled down they landed on top of him and used their elbows and knees. A jabbed elbow landed in Hiker's good eye with stunning force, and when he got up he was almost blind. Hiker Holt got up unsteadily and saw through a curtain of shimmering fire. He called time and walked to the University bench.

"I can't see, coach," said Hiker Holt. "Put Marsh in while Doc Jekyll works on my eye."

Crawley started to say no, took another look at Holt's face, and changed his mind. "All right, Marsh, get in there."

Swampy Marsh trotted onto the bright hardwood, and he was thinking of himself no longer. He was thinking of what

those big guys in Yukon blue had done to Hiker Holt. It had been deliberate, they had been out to get Hiker, and they got him. Swampy knew that he himself had started it with that crazy punch in the dressing room. He had to make that up to Hiker Holt. And he had to get even with these big cocky players of Yukon.

They greeted him sarcastically. "Little Lord Fauntleroy," they gibed. "Does your mother know you're out?" And, "Isn't he cute, fellows? I thought he was the mascot." And, "Aw, they want to give him his letter, he's been getting bench-boils three years now."

Swampy Marsh laughed at them. "Remember last year?" he said. "Well, that was nothing compared to what this's going to be!"

The Yukon machine rolled onward and drilled out five more points to lead, 45-36. Swampy Marsh began to taste failure,

THEN Swampy Marsh took a pass in mid-floor, dodged aside, set his feet, and pushed the ball up from his chest. It flew in a long precise trajectory and zipped through the twines. The University crowd gave a thankful roar.

Yukon launched an assault that Slug Smith and Pip Walker disrupted, and the ball went the other way. Swampy Marsh ducked and swiveled away from two blue shirts and arched another long clean one into the net. Five points behind now, 45-40.

Swampy Marsh was not playing for himself. Forgotten were the many long night on the sidelines. He was playing for University, and for Hiker Holt, his friend. Up to now Swampy Marsh had been a little guy, small in more than just physical size. Hiker Holt had shown him how small he was tonight. But he wasn't small any more. Swampy Marsh had a great and terrible strength burning inside him. He was a giant now, and unbeatable.

Swampy Marsh faked a shot from long range, feinted a pass and a dribble, and gunned a long accurate pass in to Hymie Schwartz, who dumped it into the bucket. Three points to go.

The Blue swept the court like a hurri-

cane, but Swede Yensen and Slug Smith ganged up on them and stopped the play. Jump ball, taken by Pip Walker, passed to Hymie Schwartz. Then Swampy Marsh had the ball out in front of the Yukon defense.

Faking and feinting, he lured them out, snapped the ball to Walker, cut through and took the return pass. They converged on him viciously, but Swampy Marsh swerved away and hooked a right-hand shot over his head. The ball glanced from the board and sliced through the meshes. One point more now.

A Yukon shot missed and Swede Yensen captured the rebound and started the Crimson return. University worked the ball through but little Swampy Marsh was brutally trapped between two hurtling bodies in the corner. He got up, dazed and sick, and with a great effort planted the tying point in the twines, 45-all.

There wasn't much time left. Swampy Marsh looked at the scoreboard but the clock blurred before his eyes. His lungs were on fire and there were raw ashes in his stomach. He hardly realized when Yukon scored—his man it was—putting the Blue out in front by two points.

A whistle cut the din. A University substitute came on, and the crowd stood up, cheering. It was Hiker Holt, with two black eyes and a grin on his face. Swampy Marsh started toward the bench but Hiker waved him back. It was Schwartz who went out. There was a brief flurry of action and then a welcome time out.

"Just like last year, Swamp, only better," said Hiker Holt, grinning with those two bruised eyes. "You and me, kid, the way we belong."

And Swampy Marsh knew he was no more a stooge, a joke, a shadow of Hiker Holt. He was himself, an individual, a ball player with a championship to help win. But he wasn't playing for himself as he had before. He wasn't playing to show them how he could play. He was fighting for something bigger and more important than that. And he knew Hiker Holt was fighting for the same thing, and always had been, and all the jealousy he had felt for Holt was silly and trivial and misplaced.

Play again. Two points behind. Hiker Holt tore the ball away from a blue jersey and fed it to Swampy Marsh, and Swamp lifted a long arching shot toward the goal. It bounced from the rim. Hiker Holt was in there with a panther-leap to snare the rebound and push the ball back into the net. Tied at 47.

YUKON surged forward. This time it was Swampy Marsh who knifed in, intercepted a pass, and started the return drive. Hiker Holt missed from the side, with two blue jerseys hanging onto him, and Pip Walker batted the ball out to Swamp Marsh. Swampy pivoted clear, faked and fired. The cords swayed sharply as the ball whipped through. University in the lead now, 49-47.

That sweet exultant flame was singing in Swampy Marsh's blood and he tasted victory—too soon. For Yukon unleashed an offense that sheared through for the tying basket, 49-all, and added a free try to go one up.

Seconds only were left as University broke fast down the floor. Swampy Marsh had the wild feeling that this was his ball game, it was up to him now, and he forgot all else. Taking his pass he whirled and threw the ball goalward, instead of passing, sure that he could score. And the ball glanced aside from the rim onto a sea of upflung hands. He had failed, he had lost.

Up and down, to and fro bounced the ball, until with a superhuman effort Hiker Holt reached it and slapped it outside, and by some miracle it came to Swampy Marsh's hands again. Another chance, another shot to win his ball game.

He was all ready to shoot when he saw Hiker Holt cut into the open, and he knew then what to do. Like a bullet he rifled the ball to Hiker, and went sick all over as the blue jerseys hemmed Hiker in. But Hiker burst free for a precious second, just long enough to gun a pass to Slug Smith in under the board. And Slug Smith quickly flipped the leather into the cords.

University, 51—Yukon, 50. And the flat sound of a gun ended it that way, while

the thunder came pouring and crashing down from the stands.

In the University dressing room there was riotous celebrating. Hiker Holt, with his two black eyes, and little Swampy Marsh were the heroes, each disclaiming the honor and pointing to the other. Swampy Marsh felt that he was really one of them, on the inside for the first time, and it was worth all that waiting on the bench. He was ashamed of feeling as he had felt about Hiker Holt. But it was a fine way to have it end.

But there was one more lesson that

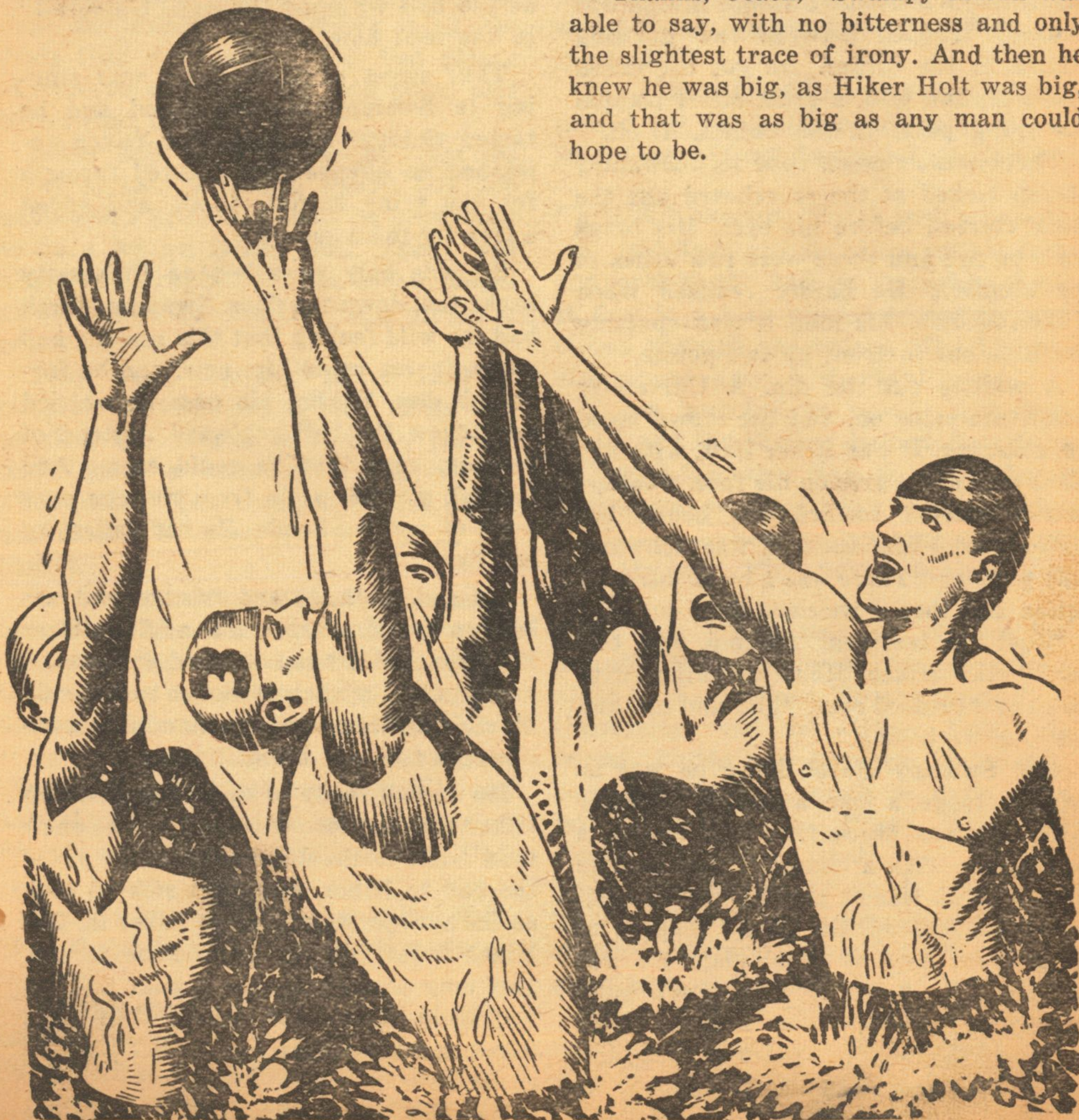
helped, that made it, in fact, perfect. Mahoney came toward Swampy in the dressing room and Swampy Marsh tightened a little, then grinned.

"If you want to sock me, go right ahead," said Swampy Marsh. "I deserve it, I got it coming."

Mahoney laughed and threw his arms around his small teammate. "Hell, no, I don't want to sock you, I want to shake your hand," said Mahoney. "You're a great big little guy!"

Coach Crawley crossed the room and said: "Marsh, I've been saving you for just such an occasion. And you came through in grand style."

"Thanks, Coach," Swampy Marsh was able to say, with no bitterness and only the slightest trace of irony. And then he knew he was big, as Hiker Holt was big, and that was as big as any man could hope to be.



Blue Line Blazers



By Theodore J. Roemer

There were no gay blades for Bo Wilson. For instead of playing the game for puck pleasure, he had to skate on thin ice to keep the rink in hockey harmony.

BO WILSON had seen the kid between the second and third periods, but Bo had been having his hands full of Duke Morg the preceding semester, and he wasn't in any frame of mind to get curious about a bony, half grown kid, even though it was the first time the youngster had been in a Ram jersey.

Bo was seeing a lot of things right now,

lights going in circles, the ice tilting: he'd just stopped Duke Morg of the Tigers.

Bo righted himself on his runners again, and his head jerked down into his broad shoulders, suddenly, as a man would taken by surprise. Duke Morg was cruising down once more in that gentle-freight-train way he had.

Dutifully Bo blinked, gritted his teeth, and went in.

For two full periods and seventeen battle-soaked minutes he'd carried the Rams on his rugged, veteran shoulders, fighting Duke Morg and his league-leading Tigers to a 3-3 deadlock. There were three more minutes of regular playing time. Duke had young Watson and a third-string spare to relieve him; Bo had no one.

Bo was playing his heart out for this game. He didn't particularly care for crotchety old Adams, who piloted the Rams, but when the guy is going to be your father-in-law and he was going to lose his job if the club dropped into the second division by the thirteenth, and this was the thirteenth, well—

So Bo Wilson gritted his teeth and went into the big Tiger center.

The crash made a hair-tingling sound. The big Tiger center spun. The stocky, red-haired Ram player shook his head, then went charging after the loose puck. He got it. He dropped his shoulders low, his squatty legs drove for speed. Three minutes. He had a lot riding on this shot.

He streaked down the right dasher, cut inside an orange stick, ragged across the goal at the blue line. Then, like a jagged line of fire, he spun and hurled himself straight between the set defense. *Bang!* His stick spoke, then both defensemen got him. He knew he'd missed.

The clash of hot blades was the first thing that came to him. Amazed, he struggled to his feet. Was old French pulling the plug? Then Bo stared.

THAT bony kid he'd seen in the locker room was in there for Higgins at right wing. He was battling Duke Morg back of the net. Another Tiger jumped in. The kid took him on, too. Morg got

the puck and started out, but the kid threw off the other Tiger and was on his back like a vengeful hornet.

Bo got up and skated back, watching in astonishment.

The kid was an ice-riding fool. He could handle that stick like a wand. Morg tried to bully loose. The kid threw his club around, knocked the puck out and gave big Morg the shoulder. Morg hit the boards and the kid gobbled up the rubber, wheeling on a dime.

The Tiger defense set hurriedly. Bo swung around the blue line. Frenchy scrambled to position. They flanked the kid in.

They were as helpful as a one-armed paperhanger. The kid did something with the rubber, something more with his stick. He split the two defensemen and the goalie sat down suddenly with the disc behind him.

Before they could face off, the gun sounded.

Bo pulled cold air into his scorched lungs. "Close, Frenchy boy," he gasped. "Where'n hell this—"

A cry spun him around. He and the Ram right winger turned in time to see the kid slam off his gloves and with bare fists wade into big Duke Morg.

They flew over and rode the swinging kid down.

"What the hell?" Bo growled, jerking him to his feet.

Morg picked up his stick and wiped blood from one heavy brow. "Damned if I know, Wilson," he growled, "what's wrong with the crazy coot. At the bell I just shoved him off my stick an' said it was a good thing he wasn't in earlier—lucky thing for him I meant, the way he was pushin' me around."

Then Bo really looked at the kid for the first time. The rookie was young, not more than twenty, with a bony hard face, deeply tanned. His eyes were a peculiar milky-blue. His features were tight and twisted. Bo had never seen hate transfixed on a man's face so strongly as on this kid's. Bo was puzzled.

He said: "Ease up, kid. Morg's all right. Any dirt he did you on ice was purely unintentional. I know. I been play-

in' against him for three years. C'mon."

But the kid just stood there glaring at the big Tiger center, and Bo and Frenchy had to drag him off. Duke Morg scratched his big, dark head, dumb-founded.

Bo was curious about the kid, curious about how he got there, popped right into the game raw. Then Bo saw Rosy Joe, scout for Dolph Jones, who owned the Rams, and Bo understood a lot of things. Rosy Joe brought in a lot of punk ivory during the season.

Bo said, "This your property, Rosy?" and let go of the kid, who stood there on his blades, sullen, glaring around.

"Won us a game, didn't he?" Rosy piped.

"Yeah," Bo said. "But you'd better wet his fuse or he'll explode. What's your name, bub?" The other Rams had ringed their captain now.

"Smith." The milkiness was leaving the lad's eyes.

"That tells me a lot," Bo said dryly. "Where you from?"

"He's from Gabriel, Ontario," Rosy cut in. "Never played pro hockey in his life. I got a tip on him, scouted the kid an' brought him down pronto. He's what Crab needs."

"Yeah," Bo said. "In second division by the thirteenth and Crab is out. And today is the thirteenth. He sure is Crab's neck-saver."

Frenchy poked him in the back and Bo heard the door open behind him. He knew it was Crab Adams.

"What's this, brainy fellow?" Crab Adams rasped.

Bo turned. Crab Adams was a gouty old veteran of the heydays of hockey, wide as a barn, craggy-jawed, with bristling grey fuzz around his shiny dome. He was Mary Adams' father, which was one of the reasons for Bo's now-or-never try during those closing minutes.

CRAB ADAMS had a farm up-state where he raised some fancy breed of dogs. The thing was mortgaged to the ears. If Crab lost his job as Ram manager he couldn't lift the farm plaster, and the farm was the only home Mary

had. This Ram hockey standing thus was a father and son-in-law affair.

Bo grimaced. There was little love lost between him and Crab Adams.

"Skip it," he said, and turned to his locker. The kid was Crab's headache; Bo was only the captain.

But Bo was fooled. He came out of the shower and was toweling himself when Frenchy said: "The old boy wants to see you in the office."

Bo scowled. When he was dressed he went leisurely to the front office.

"'Bout time," his future father-in-law grunted, looking sourly at his star center. "I been talking to Rosy and Smith here. Smith says it's the first time he's been out of his country an' Rosy suggested somebody take him under his wing. I've chosen you, Wilson."

"Why pick on me?" Bo growled.

"You're captain. Tame him down. Polish his game."

"An' see that he washes behind his ears?" Bo ended sarcastically.

Rosy cut in. "You don't have to worry about that cussed fighting any more, Crab. When I signed the kid, he asked if Duke Morg played in the same league, and when I said yes he signed without askin' about salary. What you got against Morg, Smith?"

Bo saw the milkiness rolling in the kid's eyes. Bo growled: "Lay off. C'mon, kid. Let's scram. Frenchy's waitin'."

He didn't know why he did it, but instinctively he sensed it hurt the kid to talk about it. When they got outside the door he knew he was right, for Smith stopped.

"Thanks, Wilson." Then he hesitated. "If—if you'd rather not have me around, I c'n—"

"C'mon," Bo growled. "There's Frenchy." Damned nursemaid now.

For a fleeting moment Frenchy looked askance at the kid with Bo, then the three front-line hockey men of the Rams went out and up the street shoulder to shoulder. He'd accepted the kid at Bo's say-so.

French moved out and Smith roomed with Bo. The Rams went to Chicago, where they had a two-game party with the second-placers. The first morning they

hit the Windy City, Crab ordered them out for a ten o'clock workout.

"Think he'll make the grade?" Frenchy asked of Bo as they donned harnesses.

Bo shrugged. "Showed plenty against the Tigers."

He lapsed into silence as Smith came near. Bo wondered if that flash-in-the-pan performance maybe wasn't due to the strange grudge Smith had against Duke Morg. Somehow Bo hoped it wasn't; he'd sort of grown to like the kid's surly ways.

Smith was no flash-in-the-pan. True, he lacked polish and the finesse on close-in work around the cages. But he had speed to burn, as Rosy Joe said, and there was none could say that he wasn't a fight-in' fool. And he took his bumps without a yap.

Crab put him on the front line with Frenchy and Bo, and they copped the first game with the Hawks quite handily, 5-2. They dropped the second one, however, when their second line went to pieces and Frenchy kinked his elbow wrong again, putting an opponent out of play. At that Bo and the kid battled it into an overtime before losing 4-3.

It was strange what a raw punk from the farthest hinterlands could do to a major-league hockey club. Slowly, inexplicably, the Rams began to climb. They took the New York Eagles two straight, split with the Titans, and came back against the tail-end Orioles for three straight wins, two of them shutouts.

Bo was happy. He wrote some pretty nice letters to Mary, up-state, telling how things were going and saying her old man wouldn't lose his cabbage-patch farm and his ten-dog kennels. And the gout had evidently left her dad's port kieber. And Bo and the old man had buried the war club, for a time at least, because they were a cinch to end at least in third place, and that would give Bo enough to pay for the preacher. Everything looked mighty fine.

Then Frenchy, in a moment of youthful exuberance, tried to ride the rubber through Paunch Dayton of Toledo on his ear. Paunch promptly fell on the little icer, making Frenchy's arm turn into a pretzel.

Bo swore heartily when he picked his little pard up.

"Hurt, Frenchy?" He had a time keeping his voice even.

"What's that word mean?" Frenchy said, but he was white to the ears.

THEY carried him off and Higgins of the seconds took over left wing and the battle went against Bo and his fighting Rams. Toledo won the fracas in a free-for-all, with Smith the center of attraction of four blue Toledo club-swingers.

"I'm sorry I lost my head, Wilson," Smith said that night in their room.

"Forget it, kid," Bo said. "We'd have lost anyway. With Frenchy out."

He dropped his head to his hands. He and Frenchy had been roomies ever since Frenchy had come up from the bushes. There wasn't another guy in the league who could handle the rubber off the boards the way he could—that is, no one except Duke Morg. Morg was a natural.

And that thought gave rise to another one. So that night Bo went to see Crab Adams.

"Just try Jones," Bo insisted, after explaining his errand. "He's Scotch enough to invest a buck where ten will grow. And the Tigers will sell Morg. They've got this young Watson coming up fine, burning the league in scoring and assists. Tell Jones if he buys Morg we got a chance at the title."

"Yeah. An' put my neck on the block if we don't."

"Hell's bells! You're a manager! You got to take chances! You've got to use your brain!"

"Brains!" Crab Adams came half erect to shout at his future son-in-law who'd turned down nice, well-paying professional jobs to enter the lean, fighting ways of a pro hockey man. Suddenly Crab's face twisted with pain and he fell back gasping. "That damn leg. I'll saw it off. I swear I will." He cussed through tight lips.

Bo looked at the old veteran, and for a minute his heart softened toward the pirate. "Better lay off after this year or they'll be digging a hole for you." He

turned for the door, then tossed back: "But get Morg for a whirl at that cup first. It means dough for both of us."

They were in third place breathing on the Hawks' necks when Frenchy got hurt. Two weeks later they were fourth. Another week and they slipped to fifth.

And then the rumor went around that Dolph Jones had bought Duke Morg!

It swept the Rams' dressing room like wildfire before the Titan game which was to determine fifth place or sixth for the Rams. When Bo heard the news he happened to be looking at Smith's face.

Then he remembered Rosy Joe's words: The kid wanted to play *against* Morg! Now— Bo saw the milkiness come into the youthful blue eyes; he saw the bone-deep brown grow ashy and the lean jaw began to twist. He went over.

"Go easy, kid. Morg's a good guy. He wouldn't hurt anyone, 'cept accidentally or fightin' for a goal hot-headed. What you got against him?"

Smith shook his head and jerked away. Bo wasn't sure, but he thought he saw tears in the kid's eyes.

Morg showed up for the game. He shook hands all around; he knew most of the Rams. He was a big, broad-shouldered chap with thick brows and a slow smile. But there was nothing slow about his skating or stick work, and Bo felt warmth inside him for the first time since Frenchy went out. His team looked good out there.

Only Smith was off. He didn't smile. He didn't spurt in warm-up. He avoided Duke Morg, he avoided Bo. He skated and shot with set, hard face and eyes on the ice.

A chill spread over Bo's warmth. The crowded Titan Auditorium shouted when their green-clad warriors swept out. The chill spread. Bo had a definite hunch that from then on things weren't going to go so smoothly.

Crab put Bo at left wing, Frenchy's old spot; the kid took right, and big, smooth Morg went at center. The puck shot in and with a roar the game was on.

MORG outsticked the green center handily, passed to Bo and sizzled down. Bo came around, passed to Smith

and tried to slam through to get a scoring pass. The green defense hit him and he went down.

Smith skated around. He had a clear shot at Morg's powerful stick idly waiting. Instead, Smith essayed a quickie himself. It went wide by three feet.

Bo cursed and raced back to bolster the defense. The Rams swept the green attack to the wall, and once more Bo took the disc and shuttled back up-ice. But the kid wasn't with them. He was loafing at the sideline.

But when Morg missed the shot, the kid was on it like a flash, trying to drill it through. It was an amateurish thing, his lone-eagle attempt, and the goalie cleared his shot with ease. Once more Bo raced back to help the Ram defense, but now he was hot with anger.

And at each fizzle by the kid his anger mounted. They were replaced by the seconds.

"What about a little teamwork?" he growled at Smith.

The kid didn't answer. Bo's wrath wasn't cooled any by that.

The first period went scoreless. During the second, the Titans glutted the twine twice. By dint of hard skating and some beautiful stickwork, Bo and Morg evened the count in the third. But the green-shirts came back to light the red bulb with a last-minute counter and Bo's binge went over the top. He was mad.

He ran off the ice after the whistle to get at Smith. He burst into the locker room just in time to see Smith taking a poke at Morg. He saw Crab Adams grab Smith, then all three went down into a tangle.

"Of all the damn—" He dived. He got Smith by the jersey. Morg crawled to his feet, big hands white-knuckled. Crab sat up, a funny look in his eyes.

Bo shouted: "You damn, traitorous—"

Smith took a punch at him. Bo gave him a hard right to the face and dropped him. Morg stopped at that.

"You shouldn't have hurt him, Bo," he said slowly. "I don't know what the punk's got against me, never saw him before in my life, but— What's the matter with you, Adams?"

"My leg," the manager said, sweat beading his craggy forehead. "Help me up."

There was silence in the room. Every man there knew Crab Adams was done for. Bo looked about the wrecked team and wet his dry lips. Old Crab had a farm that had a mortgage on it; it was the only home Mary ever had. Bo had hopes of doing something to that mortgage with his bonus money. He had had hopes of living up there with the old boy some day, with old Crab playing around with his dogs. But now. . . .

They helped Crab to a bench and called a doc. Morg and Bo hung around while the other men left. Smith went out the door, not giving them a glance.

Dolph Jones, the Rams' manager, came after a while. When he left, Bo looked at the big center.

"Well, that's that, Morg. I'm manager, Frenchy's out, so you're our big gun. I got you and a crazy kid to win a pennant with. What do you suppose is the matter with him?"

But Morg could only shake his shaggy head. "Smith. Smith. Never heard of or saw the punk before." And he felt pretty bad about it.

Bo threw himself into the job of player-manager. He had a chance to win out; it was all a man could ask. Old Crab said he had no brains, but he'd show the old boy.

Bo put the kid on the second line and brought Higgins up with him and Morg. Higgins was slow but steady. They began to click once more, while on the seconds Smith was picking up stride. The Rams began to climb again.

But the weeks had slid past. The time was short. And when they got into third place there was a scant twenty days left. And a week hence they were playing the leading Tigers in a three-game series that would decide their chances. They had to take all three.

Bo entered his hotel room after a heavy practice before opening with the Eagles in a three-game home stand. He saw Smith in the center of the room carefully unpacking a box. Bo had continued room-

ing with the kid, hoping to find a clue to Smith's hatred of Morg.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A gun," Smith said, and pulled out a battered twelve-gauge pump and fondly put it together.

IT WAS on the tip of Bo's tongue to ask caustically if it were to shoot Morg with, but he decided otherwise. He watched Smith take the gun apart again and begin cleaning it carefully, then he growled: "Better come down for dinner." Some guys were nuts about dogs, as old Crab; others were nuts about other things. Maybe guns were Smith's weakness. Bo forgot the incident.

They took a close one from the Eagles the following night, and Bo was gratefully draping his battered body on his bed when Morg came in. Morg had punched the twine with the winning score with one minute left, and they made small talk about the game, both dead-tired, when the big center's eyes lighted on the gun in the corner.

"Yours?" he said, pumping it open with easy familiarity.

Bo shook his head. "No. Smith's."

"Smith's?" Morg was surprised. He worked the action several times, looked it over closely with the air of a man who knows guns, then put it aside.

After a while he left, but Bo was frowning. Was this a clue? The clue he was looking for? Both these fellows knew guns. Maybe it was worth looking into.

They dropped the second game to the Eagles, and Bo knew they not only had to win the three Tiger games but the third Eagle one also. They'd confounded the sports writers with their comeback. Now they had to do the impossible. And they needed Smith.

That night Bo went to Morg's room. He'd thought out some things.

"You know guns, Morg. Do you do any hunting?"

"Sure. Crazy about it. Every fall I get up into Canada."

Bo's heart leaped. "Canada? Where?" He held his breath.

"Well, last year it was Gabriel. Two years ago—"

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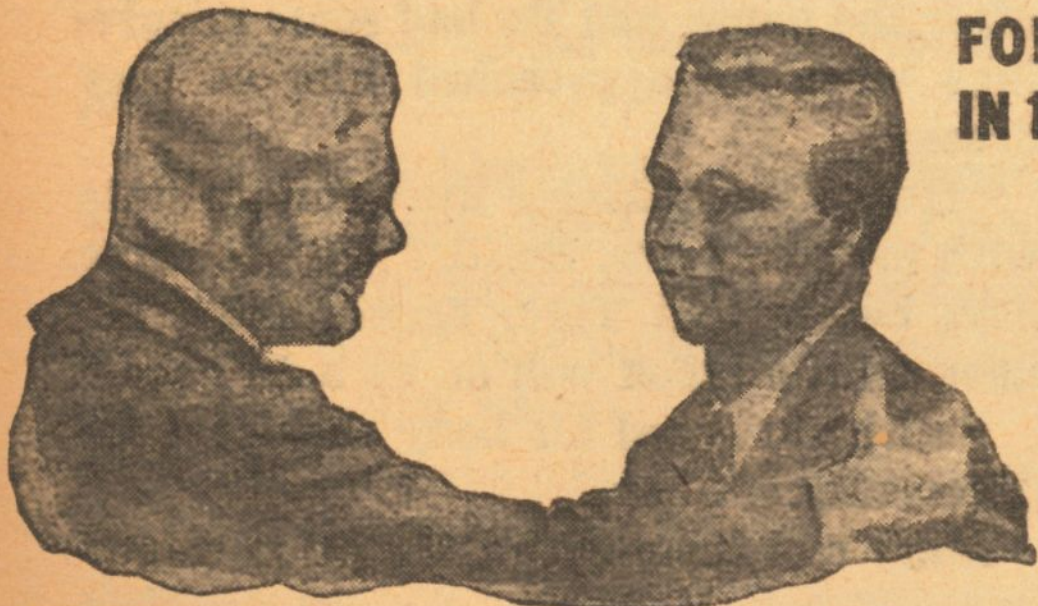
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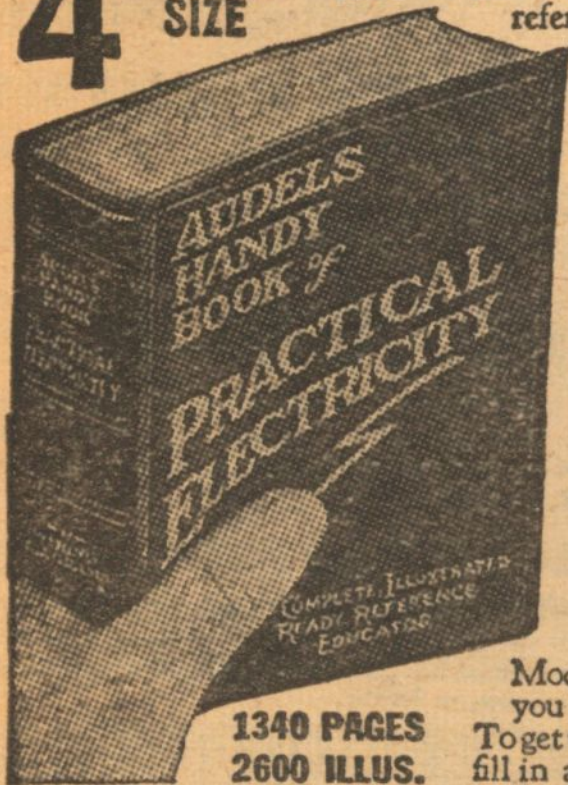
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"Gabriel! Listen, Morg." Bo had a hard time keeping his voice from trembling. "That's where this kid, Smith, is from. Think! Think, Morg! Did anything happen up there? Between you and any of the natives? *Anything?*"

Morg's great brow furrowed. "Why, no. I—ah!" Bo saw a tremendous light growing in Morg's eyes. "I shot a dog, accidentally. It was our last night up there. I didn't have time to look up the owner and we pulled out—" Morg gulped. "Say! You don't suppose—"

Bo nodded. "Yeah, I suppose just that thing. It was Smith's dog. He's a nut about them—just like Crab Adams. You shot his dog and it cut the heart out of him. What kind was it?"

"A big Gordon setter. He came bounding out just when I was drawing a bead on—"

"Gordon setter!" Bo almost jumped out of his chair. "Morg. Look. We win this game tomorrow night and we win the championship. I've got an idea!"

"Championship? You crazy? What's dogs and hunting got to do with hockey?"

"Win that game tomorrow night," was all Bo said.

Bo was alive with fire the next night. He was unstoppable. And Morg cruised after him and swept up what he left behind. Between the two they made five goals, and Smith came along with the seconds and counted twice himself. He was the same surly-eyed youth before and after the game, and Bo had some misgivings when he approached him as they dressed.

"How about taking a little run up-state with me tomorrow, Smith? We got three days before that Tiger series, and I believe a little layoff will do us both good."

Smith shrugged his bony shoulders indifferently. "Okay."

Mary met them with the station wagon at the depot. Mary was a sight for Bo's hungry eyes. She had her old man's gray eyes, but there was warmth and laughter in them. When she took Bo's craggy paw in her warm hand and led him to the car, Bo knew he'd take all the body-jolting checks the entire league could dish out for one dimpled smile from this girl.

Smith was polite but disinterested. He rode in the second seat and Bo drove up to the farm. It was spring and Bo had a time keeping the wagon on the wet, rutty road. But he managed to watch his star rookie through the rear-vision mirror when they rounded the cottonwoods and swung into the lane and the setters from old Crab's kennels let loose.

It was a joyous thing to behold. At first there was disbelief in Smith's bony face. Then when his ears told him the truth, the blue eyes became wide and alert and he sat upright and peered ahead, a little smile tugging at his young mouth. And Bo knew he was on the right trail.

Purposely he stopped the wagon opposite the dogs. Their clamor sent the crows away, cawing. At a word from the girl they quieted and they moved down the cages watching the men.

S MITH dropped to his knees before Peter III and put his great hands between the wires and caressed the dog. "Jumbo," he murmured. "Jumbo, it's you, sure as hell."

There was a funny catch in his voice, and Bo turned away quickly. It got a guy to see a fellow who could play hockey like Smith acting in this way.

They stayed at the farm all that day. Most of the time Smith was down with the dogs. When they were ready to depart Bo took Moss, the trainer, aside and whispered something.

"But—but—" Moss began to expostulate.

Bo stabbed him with a hard finger. "You do as I say. The hell with old Crab. It's one dog or the bunch. The whole farm for all of that." And he wheeled and got into the station wagon.

It was the night of the first game with the Tigers. The Rams' great brick-and-stone arena was ablaze with lights and long streams of cars, cabs and people lined up in the falling snow before the busy ticket windows. There was a tenseness even out there in the street.

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nuts. Youthful Bo Wilson had done something to their team.

Bo Wilson didn't look youthful now. He stood in the center of the locker room and looked at his men, dressed and waiting, and there was a scowl a mile deep between his brown eyes. He'd expected something and it hadn't showed up.

He looked at Morg placidly hitting a skate with his club. He saw Smith across there, stiff and sullen-faced, as usual, and Bo wanted to scream at them both. If he could get those two guys to click in there, and with him on the front line—

A roar came from above and he knew the Tigers had skated out. He gave the clock one last, despairing glance. Moss had fallen down on him. Crestfallen, he said: "Awright, fellows. Let's get out."

The orange-and-black-striped Tigers were wheeling on the gray oval like a bunch of hungry gulls. They were a great team all right. Bo could count the bumps on his muscular body to attest to that. But he knew they were beatable; they were beatable three times straight if the right combination came along.

"I see your gal is over there," Frenchy said at his elbow. Frenchy was in civvies, his arm in a cast.

Bo grunted, peered to see if Moss was with Mary. He wasn't.

"Yeah," Bo said. "An' old Jones is in his box ready to wield the axe, too. If anything shows up in the locker room, Frenchy, let me know." He skated out. He wished he were with old Crab in that hospital room.

The game started fast. Morg beat young Watson, his former understudy, to the puck, and Bo had it all the way in—until one of those two-hundred-pound Tigers decided maybe he'd better step in.

Bo took the hard check gracefully and bolstered his defense, taking Watson on the shoulder into the planking.

Higgins took his pass-out and raced down with Morg, but Higgins' race had long since degenerated into a choppy scramble and he was well out of the battle when Morg went into that Tiger wall.

Bo sleeved a bloody nose and swore. Now if that had been Smith. . . .

The game developed fast into a hard-

skating, hard-checking battle with sticks carried high and shoulders used relentlessly.

The ref began clamping down on them. An orange wing went to the cooler. Morg got two minutes for setting a guy down with his stick-butt. Bo kept his elbows in and skated his heart out.

When the punch began to drain from his legs Bo thumbed Smith and his seconds out on the ice. "Go it hard, Smith," he snapped. He had to help the puffing little Higgins through the gate.

Tiger replacements also barged onto the ice. Smith, the old set look on his map, went into them and the fight waxed sweetly. But neither team could score.

Bo reeled off with his first line, which had finished out the period, and he closed his mind to the thought of what would happen around the third period when the Tigers' superior reserves would begin to tell.

He saw Frenchy and hope fanned for an instant. If Morg and Smith got together they could still do things. But Frenchy shook his head and Bo led the panting team down.

THOSE ten minutes of rest were torture to Bo. He tried not to think about it, but he couldn't help it. Just because one hockey-playing fool was a saperoona about dogs. It'd almost serve old Crab Adams right: losing a championship on account of a dog. Maybe Bo's plan wouldn't work, but it sure as hell wouldn't hurt to try. What the devil had happened to Moss and that dog?

The timer shouted and they went out again. The Tigers unloosed an attack upon them that even Bo, in his lone-handed fight, couldn't stand up before. They counted twice.

"C'mon in with me, Morg," Bo gasped from the bench after a bare minute's rest. "We gotta do something." The Tigers were pushing the seconds all over the ice.

He thumbed the two spares off the rink and said to Smith, hard: "Buckle down, guy. We three gotta get those counters back." The kid's face didn't change.

And Bo, in the next five minutes, found out there's nothing so great as a hate a



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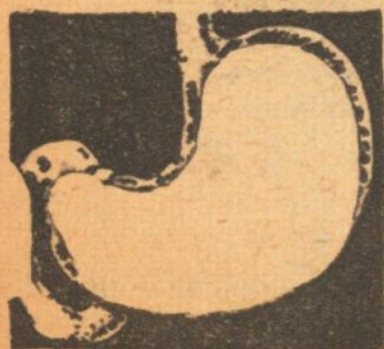
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dogman has for a fellow who's killed his dog. Smith wouldn't unbend as much as a pass to Morg. He wouldn't cover Morg's man when the latter got loose. And when Morg tried to help him, he fought like a fury—the opposite way. Bo felt sick.

His great shoulders were battered from useless charges into those hulking orange-clad men. His legs were leaden. But he kept on battling, and the period slowly wore away and he thought he was going to last it when he saw Frenchy motioning frantically from the pen.

He thumbed Higgins into his place and reeled off, bitter anger choking up in his throat against Moss. It was too late now.

He saw the dog in the crate, he saw the markings just as he'd ordered Moss to put them on. He saw Moss himself, and then he saw Crab Adams. And he stood stock still.

"You," he said, and he saw a million things in old Crab Adams' battered, stubborn, squinty face. All the answers were there. "You," he repeated, "are the cause of Moss not bringing the dog?" On skates he clumped forward slowly.

Crab looked once into Bo's blazing eyes and backed away. "What damn foolishness is this?" he blustered. "Taking my prize dog an' giving it to a guy in another fellow's name. Is that how to run a hockey club?"

Bo had the old boy by the coat lapels. He shook him. "You tight-fisted, near-sighted old fogey! Can't you see? The kid's dog-nutty, just as you are! His was killed by Morg. This trick might—"

The door burst open behind him, and the Rams came in—blowing, dead-tired, practically out on their skates. The Tiger reserves were telling.

But there was one exception. At the sight of the dog in the crate the kid let out a choked cry and ran forward and fell to his knees. "Jumbo. It's you. How in—"

The dog wagged his tail and licked Smith's sweaty hand, but the hand was frozen at the latch on the crate. Smith saw the writing.

Bo watched and thought his heart would pound out of his chest. Would it stick? Would Morg give it away? He glued his

eyes to Smith's bony face, as the kid read the inscription:

To Smith From a Guy Who's Sorry as Hell.

It sounded tough, as Bo wanted it to. It sounded as he thought Smith would like it. Bo held his breath and watched.

Slowly Smith came around. His bony hand absently stroked the black setter in the crate. He looked at Morg sitting there on a bench, watching with stoic face, and Bo was glad Morg was a guy who could keep surprises out of his eyes. And then Smith went over to the big, tired center in the sweat-blackened red jersey.

"Morg, I—uh—" He stuck out his mitt.

There was an agonizing second. Bo's fingernails bit into his hands. Would Morg give it away? Maybe Bo should have told him?

Then Bo saw Morg lift his shaggy, wet head. "Shore, kid, I get how you feel." He grabbed the hand and pulled Smith down beside him. "Sit down and rest some juice into your pins. We might have to do some skatin' out there yet."

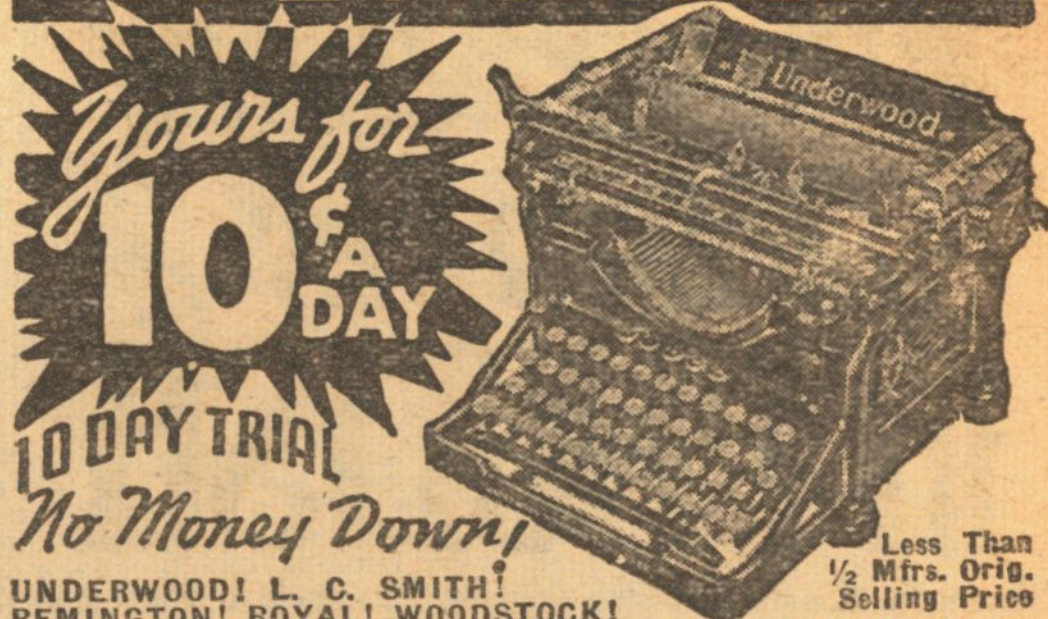
Bo sat down. He felt pretty weak himself right then.

The third period started out tame enough with Morg, the kid and Bo on the front line at the face-off. The Tigers had their big first-stringers on the ice for the big push. Bo never noticed it before, but they were big enough to make the kid look a mill-ponder. But the kid had got hold of a piece of gum, and the brown jowls were jumping out of the sides of his face in quick, little knots and Bo saw a funny gleam in his blue eyes.

They had a little of that milkiness back, but it wasn't the same milkiness as that first time he'd tied into Morg. It was different, and Morg's face, Bo noticed, had taken on a sort of pallor. Bo gripped his club hard. Something shook inside him. It told him he'd have some skating to do if he weren't going to be third man these next twenty minutes.

The Tigers got the rubber at the face-off, but lost it on the blue line. Bo started for mid-ice, but they nicked him and the big Tigers went in again. Smith grabbed the goalie's toss-back and went around

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the cage for orange ice, but he was draped over the penalty box and the orange skaters whizzed back once more.

Bo knew the pot was brewing. He watched Morg.

IT HAPPENED quickly. A big wing I tried to give Morg the old once-over. Morg's shoulder did something and the other man found himself spinning into the boards. A second Tiger found the puck suddenly gone from his club, and Duke Morg was starting that gentle, freight-train glide he had.

Bo whipped in from the left, Smith took the right. The black rubber shuttled between their sticks with uncanny magic, and the home crowd, who hadn't had a thing to cheer for all evening, came to their feet with a sudden, ear-splitting roar.

They got over the blue line. Morg went into that short, choppy stride he had that looked funny and yet managed to take him through any two-hundred-pounder, and shouted:

"The outside, kid!"

Smith understood. He whipped to the outside and with speed dripping from his blades went into the cage. He took the lightning pass with a flip. He let go, and the frantic goalie never had a chance.

The Ram fans went mad. It was first blood for their team. It had been quick and easy. They screamed with confidence.

Bo wished he could have felt their confidence. He looked at the front line of Tigers. Each one of those big boys spat on the ice and hiked up his orange pants. Bo clamped his jaw and watched for the face-off.

The big Tigers pulled the plug and Bo never had spent a busier five minutes. And he spent a good share of them on the ice being walked on by big Tigers trying to ram Frosty Lane's throat with an innocent piece of round rubber.

Bo checked and clubbed and fought Tiger men all up and down the boards. He didn't know when Tiger replacements came in. He battled the rubber away from a lanky orange jersey, saw Smith crying for it on the blue line, and passed.

Smith and Morg did it again. And it

was sweet to watch them. Bo looked at the big "2" going up opposite the Rams' name and could have kissed both of them.

Somebody banged on the boards on the Tiger side and three fresh men jumped out. The place was a madhouse by now. Bo looked around. They'd have to stick it out.

There was a face-off near the Tiger goal. Bo banged the puck into the planking. Morg took it off neat. A big orange guy hit him. Both piled into the dasher. Bo jumped for the spinning puck, but Smith burned the ice between and unloosed a quickie at the goalie's bearpads. The guy made a lightning save that was a miracle.

Morg and the Tiger came around the net together, battling for the disc. Then the bell shrilled again.

Bo was gasping for breath. He'd never heard such a racket. The whole arena was up screaming. Then the puck flashed in again and Morg and Smith were at it side by side.

The fight carried to the Rams' side. *Wham!* A big Tiger let Frosty have it. Frosty cleared with ice in his veins. *Wham!* Another Tiger sneaked it out and let him have it again. Frosty shed the hard-driven puck like water.

"Smith!" he called.

The kid was there with waiting stick. Morg was there. Bo came searing in and the trio was off.

The riot carried to Tiger ice.

It was like that, ten minutes of the fastest hockey Bo had ever lived in his life. Three goals in twenty minutes. Against an outfit like the Tigers with three front lines. It was a big order. But Morg and Smith and the boys were trying to deliver. Bo went back into the battle, his eyes gleaming fiercely.

There was a tie-up in front of the Tiger penalty box. Bo hit it with the throttle tied back. He bounced, hit the boards, bounced to his runners and found the puck under his club. He was a wild maniac. He glued the thing to his stick, screamed at Morg and Smith coming out of the pack, and away they went.

A burly Tiger defenseman hit Smith, who then had the puck. The kid rolled like a shot jackrabbit. Morg tore from the



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other side, spilling the other defenseman. He reached his long stick out, sucked up the rubber. Bo got set for the pass, but the kid landed on his runners just then and let out a yelp.

Bo could have sworn he saw a grin on Morg's face. He just floated a beauty over to the kid, and the kid took it in stride. It went in as if it would burn the strings.

Bo didn't check his speed. He just swung his club harmlessly over the cage and sailed around, his stocky body leaning, his stocky heart pumping pretty happily. Let the kid make 'em! Bo had two skating fools now. What more could a manager want?

In another minute the game ended.

They were down in the locker room and everything was pretty noisy. Bo had his skates off and the sting was easing off. He lay back on the bench. It'd be a cinch from now on in. He heard voices at the far end of the bench. Smith and Morg were there. He heard Smith say:

"That was a game all right, Duke. Can't spot 'em that many goals tomorrow night."

"Hell," Morg sniffed. "We could spot 'em a dozen. But about that dog—I'll swear the guy said the only Gordon he had was a black an' tan."

Bo jerked erect. He stared at Morg a long second, then he leaned over to Frenchy and whispered hoarsely: "For Pete's sake, get out there an' stop any guy trying to deliver another dog."

But he felt pretty tickled with big Morg, pretty tickled to have him on his team. Guys like Morg didn't come very often.



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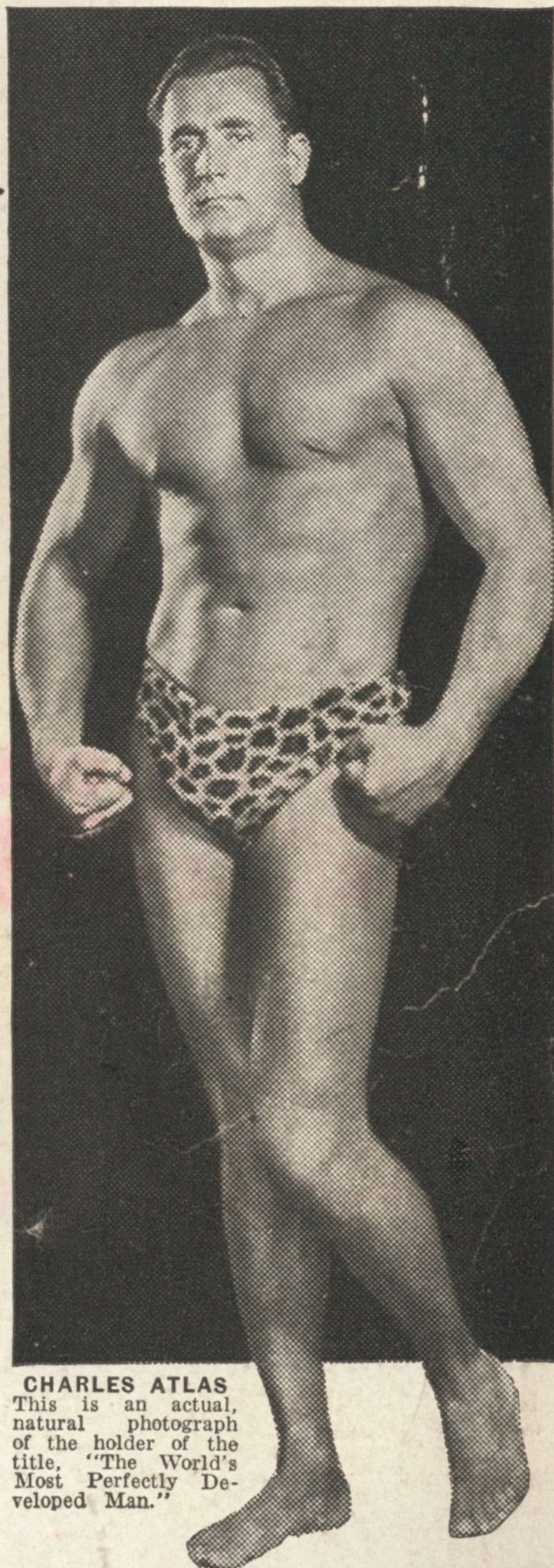
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