

SPORTS FICTION

JUNE

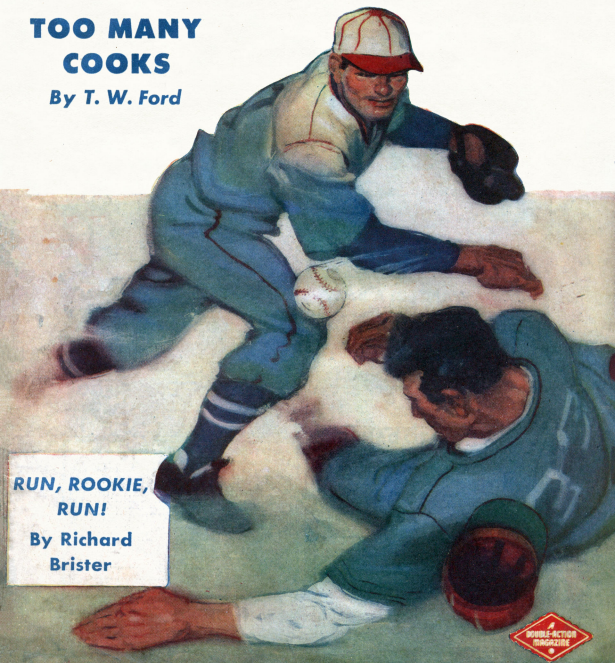
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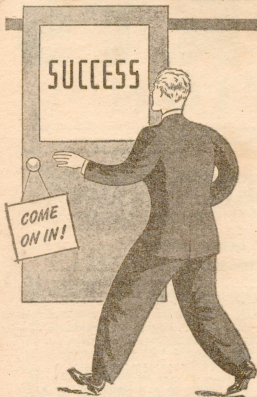
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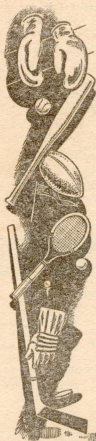
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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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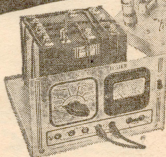
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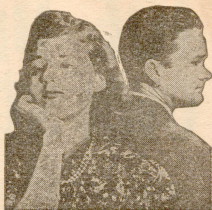
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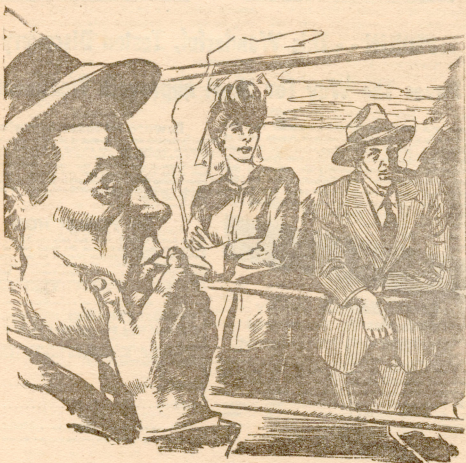
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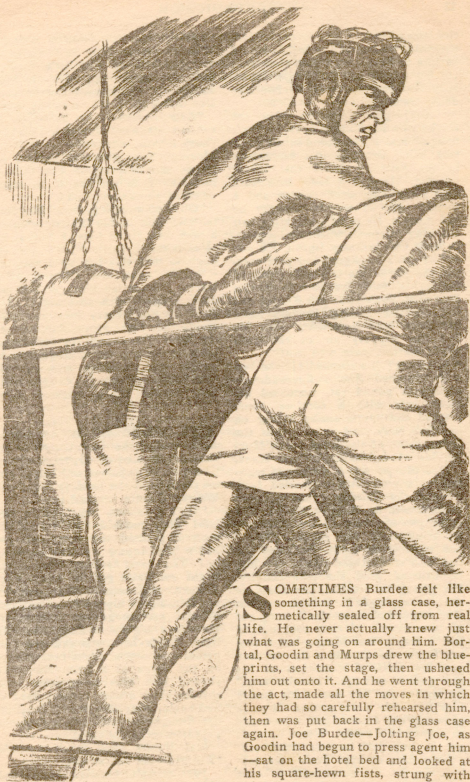
Too Many Cooks

He was Jolting Joe Burdee, the wonder boy who never lost a bout. But behind him were a trio of tricksters who wouldn't let him use his own ring-savvy, and went for the publicity build-up that reeked of phoney. Then came that little stunt that backfired and something happened that took the heart out of Joe's fighting. And the same night, he learned the answer to all the questions he'd been asking. . .

COMPLETE NOVELET

By T. W. FORD





SOMETIMES Burdee felt like something in a glass case, hermetically sealed off from real life. He never actually knew just what was going on around him. Bortal, Goodin and Murps drew the blueprints, set the stage, then ushered him out onto it. And he went through the act, made all the moves in which they had so carefully rehearsed him, then was put back in the glass case again. Joe Burdee—Jolting Joe, as Goodin had begun to press agent him—sat on the hotel bed and looked at his square-hewn fists, strung with

the heavy tendons of his profession, and wondered what the hell it would be like to bust out of that glass case.... To go out and do things, especially fighting, the way he felt like doing them.... To—

"Okay, Joe. Time to give the clucks who buy tickets a run for their dough." Mal Bortal stood in the doorway, slim, swarthy, half his mouth in the knowing smile that meant nothing. He had a long face with eyes ringed by dark circles and a certain type of women thought he had menace. He toted a vibrating belt reducing machine, wherever he went, to keep that willowy figure. He was one of Joe's managers and part owners, the one of the trio who arranged the fights, told Joe how to handle each man. Sometimes Joe Burdee had the peculiar feeling Bortal's name had once been something else. He had the slippery air of the kind who'd do that.

"Uh-huh." Joe climbed off the bed and stretched like a hundred-and-eighty-six pound cat, smoothed his black hair with a careless hand, hitched the sports slacks higher on his flat body, and moved into the living room of the hotel suite. Murpo, his second manager, was there.

Doc Murpo was a sawed-off monkey of a man with a gnarled face. Around the training gyms, he used to be known as Muggsy Murpo. The other two members of the managerial triumvirate had decided "Doc" had more class to it. Doc was the one who trained and taught the kid, conditioned him, the real handler. His glassy bald skull came about to the heavyweight's shoulder when Doc stepped close to size him up out of blue moons of eyes that bulged like a frog's. Doc Murpo had a theory there was more to a fighter than just his physical condition or his raw animal courage. "Interior tone" he termed it. "It's something inside him like this here morale. It sorta glows. When a man's got it, he wants to fight; he's ready. When he ain't got it, he's just another workman."

Now, Doc scoured Joe's face, jabbed him on the chest with a blunt forefinger audibly, snapped with his

traplike mouth, "You're ready. What're we waiting for?" He went over, picked up his little medical case, the larger bag with the kid's equipment, and headed for the door. Doc didn't go in for ceremony much.

"And remember," he barked as he twisted his head over his shoulder, "keep moving every second you're *Moving!* You give this Batta a set target and he'll tag it. See? Crowd him like I shown you if he starts punchin' you heavy. And—"

"Oh, stop sweating, Doc," Mal Bortal told him in his languid manner, a pose that fitted him as well as his sleek-tailored suits. "Joe's got enough to take this boy by a margin."

"And," continued Doc, ignoring Bortal, "never let him get set and draw a bead with that right! See, Joe? He don't carry no cream puff inside that right glove. Say, where's my hat?" He started to jack-rabbit back across the room, forgetting he had it jammed down atop his big ears. Murpo always got excited when they headed for a dressing room. "Oh! Here it is!"

HE WHEELED in his tracks, reached the door, turned to jab another piece of oft-repeated advice. The door swung open and belted him on the side of the head as big florid Whitey Goodin breezed in.

"She's a sellout, boys! Not a seat left! They mobbed that box office after I planted the story that Joe had a hand injury we were covering up! The local yokels think they might see Batta get the win. Yah! We got our guarantee plus a percentage if the gate topped five thousand. Whatta percentage we take now!" He was a big-shouldered man with light blonde hair who radiated perpetual confidence, plum face always on the verge of a grin. His little shrewd blue eyes were never still, shifting from a man, around, back to him again, away. Sometimes Joe Burdee thought he acted like a guy who expected to be followed.

Mal Bortal gave the half smile. "Not bad—not bad at all!

Joe himself scowled, perplexed. "My hands are all right! Say, I want

to fight Batta, not trick him. If he thinks—

"Soft pedal it, kid," Whitey Goodin broke it up. He had one of those warm confidential this-is-the-inside-dope voices. "You just do the fighting; we handle the business end." Goodin was the advance man for the fistie troupe, handling the publicity, picking the spots to be hit, setting the stage on this build-up that was to carry Joe East with a reputation that would land him in Madison Square Garden in a bout with a leading contender.

"But how about the betting?" Joe tried to be forceful. "If they think one of my hands is bad, maybe they'll—"

"Sucker bait, that's all that stuff is, Joe," Whitey assured him. "Pay no attention to it; Batta won't. And those fans ain't got rocks in the head. They'll come and yell like hell for the local chump. But they aren't laying much cabbage he'll whip Jolting Joe Burdee; hell, no! They know what you did to Kid Lebolt out on the Coast; And what happened to Eddie Danolawitz; and how you cooled that tough Red Pancho Brown in New Orleans, that slugging fool. These fans'll just *hope* Chuck Batta catches you when you aren't right."

Joe shook his dark head thoughtfully. "That Brown was a puncher all right. But I sure was surprised when he went down for the count from that short right of mine. Can't get over it yet. I just figured to shake him up when he was off balance and—"

"Okay. Let's go shake up this Batta," said Bortal, propelling Joe toward the door.

"Remember! Keep moving. Don't let that Batta draw a bead with his right," Doc Murpo started the refrain anew as they boarded the elevator.

THEY emerged in the lobby of the small city hotel. Joe turned toward the side door, but Bortal was marching straight ahead. And Whitey Goodin hooked Joe's arm and steered him down the main lobby.

Joe, mind intent on the coming fight, oblivious to all else, didn't question. Then Whitey was pointing at a petite blonde number stepping through the line of great potted tropical ferns that flanked one side of the local Peacock Alley.

"Joe! Look! Donna Taslo, the film starlet from Hollywood. You remember her, kid; you were introduced to her out on the Coast." Whitey told him.

Joe studied the fur-jacketed glamorous little number rushing toward him. He didn't remember her. But, after all, he had met a lot of folks out there on the West Coast. Whitey was always bringing celebrities, at least alleged celebrities, into the dressing room. And they'd gone to the famed Coconut Grove a couple of times. Been to one studio party. Joe framed a smile and said, "Hello, Miss Taslo. I—"

And then he was engulfed in a pair of arms, chunky fur jacket, musk-heavy perfume. He was warmly kissed on the cheek next to his mouth. "Put your arms around her, dopey," growled Bortal. "Joie—darleeng, darleeng!" cried Donna Taslo in a husky sensuous voice. "I could not get here sooner, Dahleeng. I know—all your telephone calls and—" She bussed him again.

Joe didn't mind; he was just in a fog about it all. The photographers flashbulbs were flickering. Then a reporter stepped forward.

"I'll be giving the best I get in there. They tell me Batta is a tough baby and—" Joe started.

Miss Taslo took over the controls, leaving Joe stammering at the post. "They are crazy out on the Coast; I am engaged to no one. Joe and I are just very very good friends. After all, he has his career, and I have mine. And the stage is so demanding, you know." She was hoping she'd have a career. Donna Taslo had been born Elka Wiscke, puttered around in stock on the road, had a job currently singing in a local nightclub, was trying to get a bid to the Coast. She clutched ravenously at any bit of publicity she could cor-

ral. She chattered away; Joe Burdee felt like the forgotten man.

Then the little act was over. Miss Taslo draped herself on the arm of a lobby chair, revealing plenty of cheesecake for the final shot by the Graphlex boys. Then she grasped Joe's arm intimately, wished him luck, promising to be at the ring-side. "After all, dahleeng, when I'm in a town where you're fighting, I'm always there, am I not, dahleeng?"

They got outside, into a taxi, and headed for the arena. Joe back-handed lipstick from his mouth, grinning. "I feel no pain. But, shucks, I never knew her that well on the Coast."

"Forget it, kid," Whitey said around his cigar. "Publicity! It's what makes the wheels go round. Fans like their sports stars to have colorful lives outside the arena exciting lives. That photo will make newspapers all around the country—ten to twenty, at least. Guys love pics of dames, especially ones showing plenty of gams. Folks'll hear of you. Joe—jolting Joe Burdee, the fighter, he's got a movie dame crazy about him. Color, see?"

Joe guessed he did. But Doc Murpo hunched on a bucket seat made a faint Bronx cheer. Bortal asked what was eating him. Doc scowled around.

"It's bad luck for an atha-lete to get his picture took just before a contest," he snapped.

"There won't be any bad luck against Batta," Bortal said smugly.

Joe rubbed his thighs nervously. Sometimes fighting seemed the least important part of his whole career, at least to Mal Bortal and Whitey Goodin....

CHAPTER II

THE DRESSING room had a smell of liniment, ~~antiseptic~~ and dried sweat—and dankness from the leaky plumbing in the shower cubicle. One of Chuck Batta's handlers came in to watch while Doc Murpo bandaged up Burdee's hands. Two minutes of fast shadow-boxing while Doc watched with a stop-watch in his hand—then Joe stretched out on the rubbing table

and tried not to think. At least of the coming fight, anyway.

He thought of his older brother's chicken farm back in Hope Valley Rhode Island. Rod wanted him to come in with him. In twenty years, if things went all right, they'd have a nice tidy fortune. But twenty years was too long to wait, Joe had decided. He wanted to get a chunk fast and have some fun when he was still young. He wanted excitement, glory. He aimed to have himself a neat trailer and the financial independence to knock around in it wherever he might get a craving to go.

Nancy fitted into those plans too. Nancy with that pert face that nobody would ever suspect fronted such a level-headed mind, and her long legs. And that gleaming brown hair in the shoulder-length bob that she had a trick of flipping when she thrust her chin out in argument. Like when they got discussing fighting. Nancy said she didn't want a husband with a mass of scar tissue for a face and a brain deadened by too many punches. But he'd show her when he established himself in the East as a leading contender with real money. Of course, he had competition back there in the home town. Bob Hummell the young lawyer, for one. But Joe was confident of himself; he was coming along in steady sure strides, accumulating a record that would smash the Eastern boxing experts right in the eye, with this trio that was handling him. Soon—

There was the quick double rap on the door. The voice saying, "All right, Burdee, you're on next!" The semi-final event had ended in a mid-bout kayo.

Doc wrapped the Turkish towel around the kid's neck, swung on his sombre black robe with the silver lettering across the back. Joe would have preferred a green robe, or a big furry red one with white piping like that Red Pancho Brown had had down in New Orleans. But Whitey and Mal Bortal said the black one had more class, made him stand out. Joe always felt as if he were going to a funeral in it. They went out and up, Doc leading the way with the bucket

and sponges and his medical kit. Bortal swung along beside Joe.

"You'll take this guy," Bortal said from the corner of his mouth. "Don't worry about that. But you wanta look good doing it; you wanta look like the class. Once it starts, listen to everything I say real careful. *Do* just what I say, too!"

They were going down the aisle, almost unnoticed at first. Chuck Batta the local boy had already climbed through the ropes and was getting a big ovation from the crowd. Joe could see he was a compactly-built, barrel-chested hundred and ninety-five pounder, a veteran ring horse. Little nerves like violin strings were jerking at the back of Joe Burdee's neck. His legs felt unsteady as if he were walking on eggs and had to be careful how he put his feet down. Every movement seemed unnatural, jerky, tensed-up. He knew the signs. It was the way he always got wound up till the first leather mitten smacked against his flesh.

WHITEY GOODIN detached himself from a couple of reporters in the press section and joined them. Then Joe was mounting the steps, swinging through the ropes, Doc Murpo's guiding hand on his arm. There were a few cheers, some clapping. The announcer took over, introducing other locally prominent figures of fisticuffs. Finally it came the turn of the principals. There was a fair amount of applause when Joe rose, swathed to the ears. But he barely touched his gloves over his head perfunctorily, let the scornful half-smile that Whitey and Mal Bortal had taught him drift over them. "Give 'em the patronizing attitude," was their slogan. They'd jeer, but the crowd would remember you far longer than they would the usual grinning monkey who capered and pranced for their favor.

There were some jeers now. Joe actually felt like grinning. He felt good, confident, eager to go. But he held his mouth curled scornfully. Then he was out getting instructions. Batta watched him with light-hued

eyes from beneath heavy brows. Back in the corner, Doc whisked off the robe and towel. He had a chief second's license and really handled Joe inside the ropes.

"Keep moving, now. Don't give him no target, Joe."

Joe nodded, flexing himself on the ropes, dancing his feet into the rosin a little. He stood with his back to ring center, a tall kid with more the build of a light-heavy than a heavy-weight. He had long, almost pipe-stem legs, very flat hips, supporting the smooth-muscled torso with over-large shoulder bones. There was a certain easy grace about him. At the bell, he pivoted, glided out.

Batta came across the ring with short steps, feinted, bobbed into a crouch and threw a left hook. Blocking it, Joe circled to his right, varying his speed as Doc had warned him. Batta came in. Joe snapped his head twice with left jabs. Batta took it to thump a right and left to the body. But Joe had both blows blocked with his arms. The glancing leather drummed against him harmlessly and he was at once cool and poised, all the jerky nervousness gone at the touch of leather. He backed, caught Batta sharply with a straight inside right as he bulled in. Batta pumped with both heavy arms, but Joe was gliding away, rattling that long left into his broad face. Hesitating, Batta dropped onto his heels. Quick as a flash Joe was in a step and nailed him with a straight left that packed power.

Batta absorbed it and kept right on coming. He moved like a big bear but his hands were fast. He got Joe on the ropes and pounded. Joe tied him up, unhurt. Chuck Batta kept carrying the fight, throwing leather, a rough burly pushing customer, especially inside. He punished Joe around the ribs when he got under a left. He exploded the right and Joe pulled away from it so it missed by inches. Joe rocked him back on his heels with a solid straight right. Batta was bulling him around at the bell. It was Batta's round, but Joe was satisfied. He was studying his man

timing him, learning the pattern by which he fought. And there were nine more cantos to go.

THE SECOND began with Batta apparently dominant. A left hook slapped Joe Burdee against the cords again. A left and a right to the body made him crowd and tie up. But his shooting stiff left was finding Batta's head like a tireless triphammer. When Batta leaped in again, Joe nailed him flush with another straight right, then spun him with a surprise left hook. The crowd yelled for the local favorite as he bored in; but Joe was steadily outboxing him now, blocking his hooks, making him miss. A ribbon of blood, produced by these jabs, curled from Batta's mouth. His right eye began to swell. Checking the clock, seeing there was a half minute to go, Joe stopped the backtracking abruptly, stiffened him with a straight right, then loosed a brief attack. It was Batta who was trapped in a corner, a little woozy in the head, at the gong.

"Nice, nice, boy," Doc assured him as he worked with the towel, held out the elastic waistband of the trunks so Joe could suck deep breaths more easily. "You got him timed now. But don't slow down or he—"

Bortal had swung up on the ring apron. "All right, Joe. The razzle dazzle this round! Box him dizzy! All the speed you got!" Bortal ordered in a staccato whisper.

Though he was disappointed, Joe nodded; he would obey. But he hated to quit the pattern he'd built up. He was a natural counter puncher anyway. Had he been fighting his own kind of fight, he would have kept catching this Batta coming in, wear him down with that constant left, soften him up. And somewhere about the eighth or ninth he'd have figured to have him dressed up for the kill. But now—

At the bell he was two-thirds of the way across the ring, springing on his toes. Darting whistling gloves threw a swarm of leather at Chuck Batta. Joe danced all around him, firing constantly, the red mittens buzzing like a mosquito swarm before

Batta's eyes. There was no real power in those punches; Batta was taking no genuine punishment. True, Joe was piling up points. But when the round was over, Batta would be as strong as ever, even recovered from those jolting jars of the first two. Joe looked flashy, brilliant as again and again he sped away from Batta's ponderous, bulling attack. He simply boxed the local boy dizzy; but the fans were hooting and yelling for a first knockdown when it ended.

BORTAL GAVE no instructions for the fourth. Doc Murpo looked into Joe's eyes as he reinserted the fighter's mouthpiece at the ten-second buzzer. They needed no words, those two. Both knew Joe would go back to his own natural style, chopping his man down stealthily, scientifically. As Batta charged, Joe rocked him with another of those straight rights. And then there was a surprise straight left. The claret began to seep from Batta's right eye. Joe jumped in and tied him up before he could get a retaliatory charge launched.

Joe backed, jabbing, jabbing. An inside right half spun Batta. Outside the apron, Doc Murpo beat his hands together, snorting. "Sweet, Joe, sweet! Boss him, Joe, boss him!" And some of the fans had now switched to jolting Joe Burdee. He had begun to dominate the battle as decisively as if he had put Chuck Batta on the deck a couple of times. It began to be evident that Batta could only win by a kayo, by landing a lucky one.

With a minute to go, they were tied up. The ref shoulder-slapped them to break. Joe moved away, frowning a little. In the clinch, Batta had mumbled, "Don't be so damn ambitious, huh?" Joe couldn't understand. His concentration wavered a moment. And even as Doc bawled from the ringside for Joe to step around, Batta's right exploded.

The blow caught Joe on the left cheekbone, dumping him. He glanced off the ropes, went down to his knees. The impact from the side of the head sent his mouthpiece flying. It looked sensational; but, actually, he was in

no real trouble. His head rattled but was clear. He saw the referee's gray-sleeved arm flag down, heard the "two" of the count. He knew he'd been careless. But what surprised him was Batta's touted right hand. It hadn't packed anything near the bombing power Joe had been led to suppose.

Up easily at "six", he expected Batta to rush him. Batta did come in but was wild with one, then waited. Going sideward, Joe slipped on a wet patch in Batta's corner, was off balance and catching at the ropes with one glove to right himself. Still Batta didn't close; then Joe was back in control, boxing him off, nailing him with that straight right counter. Batta acted sort of sheepsh, like a guy who'd made a mistake. The round ended.

Bortal was up on the apron with new instructions for the fifth. Joe was surprised. It was his fight now, going his way, time running out against the slowed-down battered Chuck Batta. But Mal Bortal ordered:

"Tear into him this round, Joe! Go out for the kill!"

JOE STARTED to protest. He had this fight under control, was moving inexorably toward his objective, a knockout in the late rounds. Joe tried to speak. But Doc began to towel his face, at the same moment putting the cold sponge at the back of his neck. And Joe knew he'd obey. It was part of that campaign Goodin and Bortal was selling of him being an unpredictable fighter, the man with a dozen styles.

He went out at the bell, tap-tapped with his left, fainted with the right, and moved away. Batta came in on tracks. Joe still circled. Then he drilled a right, and began to go after the tired Batta with the killer stuff. Batta stood in and slugged it—hurt Joe a couple of times. But Joe had slowed him to a walk and was throwing the leather a lot faster. Batta went to the ropes, fell along them. Joe nailed him with an overhand looping right. Batta went down for a close-up look at the deck on all

fours. When he rose, he used his strength and weight advantage and tied up Joe. Joe threw him away, missed a left uppercut, then rocked Batta with the straight right. Batta fell inside again. He seemed sore about something.

What the hell! Can't you count?" he snorted on Joe's shoulder.

That didn't make any sense whatever to Joe Burdee. He kept carrying the fight, beating the weary Batta to the punch. The round ended. There were no instructions for the sixth. Joe and Doc knew he would go back to his own campaign of softening up Batta for the kill. And Joe made him miss two whistling swings to open that sixth. The fickle gallery was bawling for him to go for a knock-out now. But he knew the tough Batta wasn't quite ripe yet. Joe jabbed him sharply three times without a return, then tricked him by following up with a straight left lunge. Batta bounced off the ropes, knees slightly wobbly. He tied up.

They broke. Joe hooked him with a left, fired the short inside right. Another round or two, he was figuring, and Batta would be ready to be taken to the cleaners. And then he blinked; Batta was falling, buckling at the knees. Then he smacked onto the deck, rolled onto his belly, and lay there with gloves outspread helplessly. Automatically Joe moved into a neutral corner, watched the referee count Batta out with plenty to spare.

DOWN IN THE dressing room, Joe could still hardly believe it. "I'd hit him with dozens of those before. It wasn't supposed to be a knockout punch; I'd planned to work on that cut eye the rest of the round. He was slowed down but still strong. Why—"

Doc said nothing as he rubbed him down. But Bortal put in loudly, "Accumulative effect, Joe! You had him eating leather round after round. You fought just as I told you; he was due to go. A full right would have half killed him. Sure. Accumulative effect, kid."

And then Whitey Goodin was

barging in with some local celebrities. "Meet the kid who's going to be next champion, folks."

Joe was shaking hands with a local political bigwig, a major league ball player who made his home in this town in the off season, and a couple of society women. The mayor, a pot-bellied little guy who didn't seem to know what the score was. They glad-handed him, obviously awed at meeting a prize fighter. The sports writers were there too, telling him how good he looked. Batta's manager came in and told him he was a comer.

"The boy doesn't know how good he is himself," Bortal proclaimed. "He really wasn't working hard tonight. When he went out for the sixth, he told me he'd put him to sleep that round. And—well—he did...."

CHAPTER III

JOE BURDEE didn't like the bull-throwing, the half-lies, and some of the acts his managers demanded he go through. But aside from details like that, he felt pretty good in the sleeper that night as they rolled eastward. Detroit was the next stop. Before turning in, he had wired Nancy in Rhode Island as usual when he won. Which, in the last three months, meant practically always. There had been one draw. But a couple of weeks later he had kayoed the man who'd held him to that even break. Yeah, things were moving along very smoothly, Joe told himself as he stretched his frame and looked at the night-shrouded landscape slipping by the window of his berth.

He wasn't putting away much money. This kind of a tour, apparently, took plenty of onionskins to put over properly with the publicity build-up and everything—so Whitey and Mal Bortal had explained to him. But he was going somewhere. He was piling up wins, amassing a record. By the time they got to New York he would be known, touted, with a list of victims behind him as long as his forearm. Then would

come the big bouts with the real dough. And he wasn't worried about the brand of competition he'd meet there, about taking on some of the tough challengers for Joe Louis' title. He knew how easily he was winning against these first-class club fighters like Batta. How he'd taken good men, a notch above club fighters, like Lebolt on the Coast—Lebolt who'd boxed with Conn. And Pancho Brown, who, before the war had fought a blood-streaming draw with Galento, the Jersey beer barrel. Yes, he had plenty behind his red mittens. Only he wished he were allowed to fight his own way. Sometimes there was a phoney touch to the way his managers did things. But, perhaps, that was the way things had to be handled. After all, all he knew was the punching end.

And he couldn't complain about the way they handled the rest of the business. He was being touted on all sides as one of the leading challengers. Sports experts were beginning to point the finger at him. The sports pages throughout the Midwest carried colorful highly laudatory write-ups on him. On the radio, analysts of the ring game commented repeatedly on his impressive record, spoke of his varied hard-to-solve fighting style. And all this time, Bus Graham, the Pittsburgh slugger and one of the top contenders for a title shot, was barnstorming through the Middle West too. Hardly anybody knew it; even the New York sports writers were beginning to mention the smart kid from the Coast with the puzzling ring tactics, Jolting Joe Burdee.

Yeah, he was moving toward the top of the ladder, all right. And if publicity was part of the business, he guessed he could stand it. He roled over and went to sleep.

In the Motor City, he outpointed the flashy Jimmy Morelli in twelve heats. Around about the ninth, worried about the outcome, he wanted to go in and try for a knockout, but Bortal ordered it otherwise. And in the last two heats, the dancing speedy Morelli, who had a reputation for being tireless, seemed to slow down. Joe shook him up plenty, jabbing him

all around the ring, to clinch the decision.

The saturnine Bortal shook a long finger at him afterward. Back in the ring, Joe had put up an argument when Bortal had commanded him to keep boxing through the final three. "See? Things worked out perfect, didn't they?" Bortal told him in the dressing room. "We know what we're doing. All you got to do inside that ring is push the leather and obey orders." He sneered a little. "You got managers like me and Whitey to do the brain-work."

Joe had flushed. Then Doc was shoving him flat on the table. "Your jab was almost as good as his, kid," Doc picked it up fast. "He's faster. But he can't punch for nothing. So what if Bus Graham did get a t.k.o. over him? It was one of the dirtiest fights this town's seen. Morelli's camp claimed three fouls... Relax, will ya, relax! I gotta keep your interior tone good, don't I?"

THEY remained in Detroit for a fight a week later, Joe meeting one Al Green at the same club. He was glad to stay in the town. It gave him a chance for some real workouts at a first-class training gym under Doc Murpo's expert tutelage, gave him a break from the sleeper jumps. But he couldn't help thinking that if they'd left him alone he could have gone on to knock out that Morelli. Doc worked on sharpening his left jab and a left hook to the body. Green was a rough customer, a smart bird at long range and poison once he got inside and started pitching his whip-like arms to the body.

Everything seemed the same as usual when they got down to the dressing room. Whitey was out seeing "somebody important." Bortal was primarily interested in the house; a sleety night had held down the gate. And Doc, pattering around fretfully, was warning Joe repetitiously as usual.

"Be ready to drop that left and shoot it to his body, boy. He's got a trick of riding in behind an overhand right. He don't care too much whether it lands—just so long as

you're covering and goin' back against it. Then he's inside. Be ready to drop that left and smash him in the side. You understand?" His bluish moons of eyes switched to Joe as if he hadn't been saying exactly the same thing half the evening.

Joe nodded. "Uh-huh. His ribs'll be wide open." He watched the front half of Doc's glittering bald head wrinkle when he grinned at how Joe had learned the lesson. It always amazed Joe Burdee how much little Doc knew about so many other fighters. Doc had little to say outside the gym or the dressing room or the ring. Whitey Goodin and Bortal were the big shots then. But once they got in the action zone, without seeming to do so, Doc asserted himself. And when he personally hadn't seen a scheduled opponent of Joe's before, he always seemed to know somebody connected with the fight racket in the town who could give him the dope.

"When he pitches that high right, you duck inside, and slam the left to his ribs, kid. And if—"

IT WAS THEN the dressing room door was flung open. A big tall man with the cauliflower ears of a wrestler filled the doorway, came through it, slammed the door with a careless slap of his hand behind him. His dull eyes were only for Joe sitting on the rubbing table.

"So you're the Don John of the prize ring, huh?" he said hoarsely.

"Hey, what the hell gives?" demanded Bortal, climbing off a stool where he'd been studying a newspaper race result chart.

The tall man armed him aside, throwing him half over the stool, as if he'd been a child. The man's eyes never switched from Joe. They gave Joe a creepy feeling. Then he realized this guy was a psychopathic case, a man brooding over a fancied wrong but still a little short of actual madness.

"So you're the guy who's been playing around with my wife, huh, Burdee?" said the tall one, advancing slowly. "I'm Donna Taslo's husband. See? I knock the ears off to pay

that dame alimony. So what? So she plays around with you, a big timer! I saw them pictures in the papers, bub. I ain't so dumb."

Joe had slid off the edge of the rubbing table, taped hands rubbing together. He had to think who Donna Taslo was. Then he remembered the incident in the hotel lobby in that last town. He watched awareness fade from the man's eyes, then come back with an obvious effort. Joe heard himself say:

"Look, pal, we were just good friends." It sounded inane the instant it got out.

"I support that woman," Donna Taslo's husband said heavily. "And you run around with her!" He came forward another step past the stool on which Bortal had been sitting. "Yeah. Maybe that's good."

Joe was measuring him, getting ready to drop him with a punch. He knew trouble was coming. From the corner of his eye he saw Mal Bortal shift around behind the man. Then, the next instant, the big fellow whipped a short ugly knife from his side coat pocket. There was a little diving figure. And Doc Murpo threw himself on the man, swinging wildly with a damp towel.

Joe wished he hadn't. He'd had the man measured for a kayo punch. The crazed fool hacked at Doc. Joe leaped into the struggling thrashing bodies and grabbed the wrist of the knife hand. He heard the door slam and Mal Bortal was gone from the scene. Joe twisted the wrist till the man released the knife. It bounced on the floor. But the estranged husband of Donna Taslo had an insane strength. He threw Doc from him and bent and scooped up the knife. Joe let him have a terrific right to the head. The man rocked but came up with a glassy wild look.

He slashed with the blade as the battling Doc again got in Joe Burdee's way. The knife passed over the hunched puffing Doc Murpo. Joe leaned away from it. But the tip of the knife caught him across the forehead a half inch over the left eye. Then Joe wheeled in and nailed him flush with another smashing right-

hand. The poor devil bounced off the wall and folded up with Doc grappling him around the knees. And then the cops, with Bortal a cautious distance in the rear, busted in.

DONNA TASLO's husband was hauled off, a shambling muttering thing by then, not too certain why he'd even come there. Doc started to swab at the blood running from Joe's forehead, applied colloidion. Then he shook his head. It was deeper than he had thought.

"You ain't going in there tonight, kid," he said.

"Holy hell, we got a sellout up there! Think of our percentage!" Bortal started. "Why—" Then he realized the cut was no nick.

Joe stood leaning against the table, a little bit dazed by the near tragedy that had occurred. Whitey Goodin arrived on the scene. A club doctor was brought in. Then it was decided that Joe couldn't enter the ring with that slice in his forehead. Even one punch would reopen it. The kid tasted anger in his throat for the first time then. He glared at Bortal, who'd been far from heroic, and at Whitey.

"Looks like some of your publicity stuff backfired this time!" Joe spat out.

Bortal was telling one of the club officials the alternate would have to go on in Joe's place. He turned to beam and shake his head with Whitey. Whitey said, clapping on his hat.

"Don't be crazy, kid. Wait'll the reporters get down here. This'll be real front page stuff. 'Leading heavyweight contender stabbed over romance!' Brother-r, that's real news. Some of the damfools will probably suspect me of staging the thing. Why, Joe, this is better than a one-round knockout!"

Later that night, as he stretched out in his hotel bed, Joe remembered that Bortal and Whitey Goodin had overlooked one little thing. He might have been stabbed to death. He grinned a little as he recalled how Doc had tied into the crazy guy. Then the phone on the bedside table

at his elbow tinkled. A sharp reedy voice asked him if he were Joe Burdee. Joe said he was.

The man at the other end said slowly, as if talking from behind clenched teeth, "All right, Joe. I'll catch up with you yet!" Then the wire went dead.....

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a lucky thing there was a twelve-day break till the next bout down in Center City. It gave that slice on Joe Burdee's forehead a chance to heal. He indulged in sparring workouts, using a headgear. And he was sharp when they swung into Center City for the bout with Frankie Goritano, a smart veteran who'd boxed Tami Mauriello and Lesnevitch when they were coming up a few years ago. It would be a real test, they told Joe.

"Goritano's no chicken," Bortal said. "But he's rough—and a cutie. He's spoiled a lot of kids who thought they were going somewhere."

"You take him into camp," Whitey put in, "and those New York sports writers will have to admit you're good, Joe. Then—"

"You gotta watch this Goritano every minute, boy," Doc said again. He'd been saying it, it seemed, every half hour for the last two days.

"Aw, quit worrying the boy, Doc," Bortal snapped. "He'll take Goritano. It'll be a fight, of course. But—"

Joe looked up from the newspaper. "Has Bus Graham met Goritano yet?"

Whitey Goodin shook his head. "No; and he won't. Graham wants no part of a guy who pitches leather as wildy as Goritano."

Joe nodded thoughtfully. "All right. Now—let me fight Gori in my own way, huh?"

Sucking hard on his cigaret, Mal Bortal scowled. "You fight the way we tell you to fight, understand? Who's brought you along this far, anyhow?"

Joe nodded. "Sure. But I know what I can do in there And—and—" He almost halted. Then he got a surreptitious poke in the side from

Doc and went on, not quite understanding the gesture himself. "And, well—well, I was thinking that if I handled this guy in my natural way, why—"

"We do the thinking," Whitey Goodin said sternly. He was studying some papers from the pocket of his sports jacket. "As a matter of fact, Graham shows here two weeks from this Friday, Joe. But not against Goritano. He meets Al Green, the guy you were supposed to take on in the second bout in Detroit..... And remember, we do the thinking." He smiled blandly.

Something about the very blandness of it angered Joe Burdee. He swung out of the chair. "Look, Whitey, I'm not exactly one generation removed from some baboon who swung from limb to limb. I know what I got inside those ropes." His voice was quick, harsh. "And if you guys'd let me show what—"

THE CRISIS was averted by the arrival of the bellhop with the mail they'd ordered sent up. Joe grabbed his two letters. One was from a friend out on the Coast. But the other had a Westerly, Rhode Island, postmark. That meant Nancy. He went into the other room to read it. When he slit it open, a newspaper clipping dropped out of the letter itself. He reread the heading of it, started a third time before it finally percolated. It was like the delayed shock of a punch. It said: "Mr. and Mrs. Donald Laporte Announce Engagement of Daughter, Nancy, to Robert Hummell, Prominent Local Attorney."

Joe sat down on the window sill and swallowed hard. Finally he fumbled open Nancy's letter. It was kind but to the point. She said she realized that they both must have changed, that it was inevitable he would meet other girls in his travels. But she resented the fact, she said, that he hadn't been honest enough to admit it to her. It wasn't pleasant to learn it from the newspaper story of an estranged husband assaulting him in his dressing room before a fight. She closed wishing him the

best of luck and saying she expected to be married in a month.

Joe bit off a hoarse oath. He took the snapshot of her from his wallet, eyed it a long time, slowly tore it up and dropped it in the wastebasket. Then he was afraid he would bust out bawling. That was the morning of the day of the Goritano fight.....

It was the middle of the afternoon when Joe heard Mal Bortal answer the phone in the other room. Then there was an explosive oath.

"What the hell do you mean, Goritano can't fight tonight? Listen, our contract calls for— Oh, I see. Goritano's strained his back. Well, what the hell, he can climb through the ropes, can't he? All he has to do is put on a good show for a few heats, then...." Bortal broke off as he listened to the promotor at the other end. "You got Al Green to go in Goritano's stead. Mister, you can go to hell and shoot pool with a broom straw! Go stick it in your eyeball.."

WHEN Joe walked in from the bedroom, Bortal was still ranting away at the promotor on the other end of the line. He finally said he'd call back, then made another call and told Whitey Goodin to hustle up.

Joe said, "What's the matter with Al Green? I was going to meet him in Detroit."

Pacing the room, Bortal said Joe wouldn't understand Joe tried to argue. Bortal shushed him. "It's a matter of box office, kid. We don't fight for peanuts. We want a big gate, a packed house."

"Well, if you thought Al Green was good enough to draw in Detroit, I don't see why—"

Bortal waved him silent. "Go read a comic book, will you, kid? Write your girl a letter. Anything. Just let me think."

Goodin arrived in a few minutes, got the story from the other pilot. They both acted as if a great blow had fallen. Whitey Goodin called Goritano some ugly thing for being such an undependable guy to do business with. "Green in town?" he asked Bortal.

Bortal's sharkish face froze as he

cut his eyes at Joe. Bortal phoned the promotor back and asked about that. He got the information he wanted, said he'd call back again. Then he picked up his hat and coat and went out hurriedly with Goodin without so much as a word of explanation or a goodbye for Joe. The latter stared at the closed door behind them, a little riled. Who the hell did they think did the actual fighting, he wondered. He felt like throwing a scare into them, telling them he wouldn't go into the ring that night, then see what happened.

Doc came in. Joe told him about it. Doc lighted up a five cent cigar and made no comment. "Well," Joe half shouted at him, "don't they think I can take this Green? Are they scared—or something?"

"Cool down, Joe. It's just a matter of business. Mal and Whitey are trying to protect your interests. See? Don't worry about it. And now if it is this Green you go against, remember about how he rushes behind an overhand right. Drop your left to his body. See? Then...."

Doc went on and on. Joe hardly heard him. There was that other thing on his mind, Nancy, and their broken engagement. He tried to keep it tucked away in the back recesses of his consciousness. But the thing preyed on him. By the time Bortal returned, Joe was apathetic about any details of the bout. They seemed unimportant. But Bortal was cheerful and smiling.

"She's all set. We take Green," he announced. "I ironed out things with that dirty crook of a promotor. If it isn't a big house, we get ours anyway. So don't worry, Joe. We always look out for your interests."

Before Joe knew it, it was time to leave for the arena. He'd almost forgotten the bout, his mind was on Nancy so much. Doc went through the usual routine of sizing him up.

"You ain't got so much interior tone tonight," he pronounced his verdict. Joe just scowled.

HE WAS ONLY vaguely aware of the dressing room, of having his hands taped. Then there was the usual procession to the ring.

Green already on deck, a blonde-headed fellow with sloping shoulders and overly long arms, powerful if a little thick around the mid-section. When they met in ring center for instructions, Joe noted he had some scar tissue over his right eye. Then he almost recoiled at the baleful glimmer in Al Green's eyes when he lifted them suddenly to meet Joe's full. There was a cold rage there, an animal hate that didn't make sense.

But Joe almost forgot it back in his corner. All he could think of was Nancy and how he'd lost her forever. This fight seemed an unimportant thing, something to be gotten through. That was all. Mechanically he moved out at the bell, jabbed with the left. And Green, after only feinting with his looping right, was inside at once, taking two, and tying him up.

"All right, Joe. I caught up with you like I said I would," Al Green muttered close to Joe's ear. And it was that same sharp reedy voice Joe had heard on the phone back in Detroit. They broke, Green calmly snapping in an illegal short punch instead of making it clean.

Joe was baffled and showed it in his boxing. From ringside Doc yelped as Green cocked his right, telegraphed it, then caught Joe flush in the mouth as he backed, the last thing he should have done. And Green was on him, mauling inside, as he was trapped on the ropes. Again Green grappled and talked, a vicious note in his voice.

"I was going to throw the deal over an' belt your ears off in Detroit for what you done to Chuck—Chuck Batta," he grunted. "Didn't know he was my brother-in-law, did ya? Ya cheap punk!" He slipped a looper to Joe's kidney.

Joe showed a short one to the head himself. "I licked Batta! So what?" he demanded.

Green called him a dirty name. "So what?" he mocked, diving into another clinch a second after the ref had broken them. "Innereent, huh? You slugged hell outa him in the fifth when he never expected it, ya bum! Ya slugged hell outa him and

put him in the hospital with an injured eye when ya knew you was going to win in the next round, ya bum! When ya knew!"

THEY BROKE again. Joe flashed in his jab twice, slipped a hook, then crossed his right over Al Green's left as the taller man started to close in. But Joe Burdee was working automatically, dully, trying to make sense of things even as he fought. And it was he who clinched the next time, clamped to get more information. He asked Green if he was crazy.

"Crazy—sure, crazy mad! Why the hell do ya think I followed you here and paid Goritano to take a powder, ya bum? I'm getting ya tonight—for Chuck Batta!" And he rocked Joe with a wicked backhand punch.

The round ended. Joe stood like a dazed hurt man a long moment before he started for his corner. He didn't know he was bleeding from a cut inside the mouth till Doc removed his protector. "Wake up, kid. Get in the fight," Doc kept saying as he worked over him fast.

Bortal was up on the apron edge. "What the hell's the matter with you? Get in there and make it look like a fight. What's wrong?"

Joe muttered he'd be all right. He tried to spur himself as the ten-second buzzer sounded. Tried to see through things. In a vague way he sensed he should ignore Green's talk and concentrate on fighting him. That was his business and he should stick to it, he knew. But his mind was still shocked by the news from Nancy. He wasn't sharp; he lacked rebound. At the bell he went back out there. For a few seconds he did lock his mind on the fight, boxing slickly, jabbing Green's squarish head several times. And then the doubts reared in his brain. He missed a jab, was short with a right. Green's looping righthand caught him on the forehead and he was on the ropes. Green threshed in and tied up.

"All right, ya bum! Now you're going to get it! See? This is going to be for Chuck! I'm double-crossing your managers!"

Joe larruped him inside, slid along the ropes, then grabbed and tied up Green as he came in again. "What do you mean?" Joe snorted. "My managers? You're crazy. I'm fighting on the level and—"

Green pounded in a couple of short low ones the official missed. "Ya lying dog! Your bunch fixed me this afternoon. But now—"

"Break up this waltz and fight," the ref warned.

Joe remembered that afternoon. There had been something peculiar about Mal Bortal's reaction when informed Goritano was out of the picture and it would be this Green. The paralyzing doubts bloomed bigger in Joe's mind. His movements were hesitant, unsure, reflecting the confusion inside him. He saw Green start that right, covered. It was a feint. Green's left hook rocked him, then the right did whizz in. And Joe Burdee found himself sitting on his pants on the canvas.

For the rest of the round he absorbed a merciless beating. He couldn't seem to get started. He fought like a man whose mind was elsewhere. The only thing that saved him was his speed in back-tracking on those deceptive-looking thin legs. At the gong, Doc had to dash out and steer him to his corner. Al Green had caught Joe with an unexpected psychological blow, then followed it up with a physical one. Joe had never gotten started. A mouse building fast on his left eye, battered, blood leaking from mashed lips, half out on his feet, Joe flopped onto the stool, almost slid off it. Bortal was leaning through the ropes, swearing at him.

"Kid, are you hurt bad?" Doc only wanted to know.

Joe was too shot to try to answer for a moment. They thought he couldn't hear. And Mal Bortal snarled:

"Gees, has that Green gone mad? What the hell does he think we paid him for?"

And then Joe Burdee knew beyond any shred of a doubt...

CHAPTER V

HE GOT LICKED. In the fourth, he managed to come out of his lethargy briefly to box off Green and take that canto. In the fifth, he even sent Green backward a couple of times with sharp righthand counters. But he was spasmodic, slowed down by the beating he'd taken. Green bullded inside and let Joe have another low one. Joe went back on the ropes and Green flailed him. Joe Burdee didn't care too much any more. All the quiet deep-rooted confidence that had once been his had dissipated like a filmy mist before the sharp wind of realism. In the sixth, Green battered him to the canvas for a knockout as Joe tried to rise instinctively at eight but failed to make it in time.

There were no celebrities, no bandwagon riders in the dressing room that night. Bortal paced around like a caged animal, started to curse and rant at the kid. Whitey Goodin slouched on a chair, then began to figure aloud.

"To begin with, we'll put the blast on the ref with the State Boxing Commission. Then—let's see now.... Sure, the old Pagliacchi gag. Joe's old man died tonight. He got the news just before we entered the ring. Or—maybe his best girl ran off with some jerk. That's a good one. I'll see the reporters and—"

Doc Murpo broke in uglily, "Shut up, both you dopes! Can't you see the kid's interior tone ain't no good now? Shuddup!"

"Why you little sweat-monkey, who the hell do you think you're—"

"Shuddup or I'll throw you both out," Doc said. They looked at him. And they shut up. There was something about Doc in that moment.

Doc got Joe patched up. He had no serious gashes though his left eye was completely closed and his lips were badly battered. His whole face was swollen out of proportion. Forgotten, ignored, they took a cab back to the hotel. Bortal actually was in a black rage but Doc silenced him again when he began to blow off. As

they climbed out, Whitey said he'd go look up the press.

"Come up to the room—all of you." It was about the first thing Joe had said since the fight.

THEY ALL went upstairs. Joe put his back against the main door when they got inside. And then he let go with the surprise bombshell. "What I want to know is what're we going to do to that damn Green for crossing us up?" he demanded.

Bortal, taken by surprise, spoke before he thought. "Why that dirty double crosser can't take our dough and then welsh on the deal! I'll have him put in a hospital before—" Then he choked, realizing what he'd admitted.

"That's what I thought," Joe Burdee grated hoarsely. And the storm broke. He raged and raved as he let them have it, calling them crooks, dirty racketeers, bums.

Whitey Goodin tried to get in a word. "Joe, Joe, listen! That was just one fight. It was the first one we ever—"

"Liar!" Joe barked, white with his fury. "You had Green fixed to take a dive—or at least, go easy—up in Detroit! I suppose they were all fixed! Batta softened up his right hand against me! I guess Morelli slowed down in those final heats so I'd get the decision! Oh, God-d! And Pancho Brown down in New Orleans—no wonder I never could figure how I dropped him with an inside right! And—" The words gagged in his throat as he strode around, kicking a chair savagely that got in his path. "Why, hell, you'd think I couldn't fight a lick, that—" And again he broke off, aghast at his own accusation. Maybe he couldn't; after all, this night, Green had half massacred him and....

Whitey and Mal Bortal began to talk. They tried to explain. They pleaded, cajoled, told Joe he didn't understand the inside business of the fight game, that this sort of stuff was pulled every day in a build-up campaign. Joe stood staring out of his one flickering eye at them. And then he could stand no more. Grab-

bing the sleek Bortal by the front of his coat, he flung him across the divan. He started to swing on Whitey Goodin when the latter tried to hold him off Bortal. And then Doc, who'd remained silent, who as one of the managers had denied nothing, barged in with a shoulder block that thrust Joe back against the wall. He managed to pinion his threshing arms for a moment. The other two managers stampeded out the door and down the hall for the stairs, not even waiting for the elevator.

JOE SUDDENLY deflated, all the hating rage and sense of violation and even the strength running from him. He dropped down on the arm of a chair, head slumped on his chest. Doc fired up one of his five-cent Specials and went over to the window. After a long while, Joe asked:

"Doc, how many of 'em were tank jobs? How many guys were paid to take a dry dive? For God's sake, tell me!"

Doc told. He said there were quite a few. He admitted Al Green had been paid to lose. And Merelli. And Pancho Brown, of course. Joe asked if the list included Lebolt out on the Coast. Doc shook his head.

"We knew Lebolt's style was made to order for you, Joe."

"I see! When it was safe, when you knew I could knock some bum over, those were on the level." The impotent rage was lashing up inside him again. He came off the chair. "Holy hell! Why—"

"No, Joe. You don't understand," Doc said sternly, no apology in his tone. He wasn't weaseling as had Bortal and Whitey Goodin. "I didn't like the fix stuff so much. But it was two of them against me and, we—Look, Joe. It's a matter of plain business. We knew you could whip any of those men you met. We're almost dead sure. We wouldn't uh signed you to fight 'em if we hadn't thought so. It was just—well, sorta like insurance and—"

"I'll blow the whistle on those two. Whitey and Mal!" Joe roared. "I'll report 'em to the commission! I'll

give my story to the papers and—"

"What, exactly, can you prove?" Doc asked quietly.

Joe gargled, torn with the terrible bafflement and disillusionment. Then fresh madness leaped into his eye. He strode over and grabbed Doc by the front of his plaid sports shirt, wrenching him up onto tiptoe. "By God, you were in on this too! You strung right along with those two vultures! You—" He drew back a bruised fist.

Doc looked him squarely in the eye. "I never tried to do anything but make a first-class fighter outa you, Joe."

Joe Burdee's fist started forward. Then he suddenly released Doc. Grabbing up his coat he rushed from the room and caught a descending elevator before Doc could overtake him. Down at the hotel desk, he cashed a check for several hundred dollars, the full balance he had in his checking account. Outside a dank wind-flung rain hit his hot face. Barely aware of it, he walked, blindly, furiously, turning and angling around corners without purpose. The ruddy lights of a cheap backstreet bar and grille caught his eye. He marched, dumped down one whisky in a gulp, stared for a while at a second shot before dispatching it, then threw another bill on the counter and told the barman to leave the bottle in front of him.

After that, nothing of his movements was very clear to Joe Burdee. He vaguely was aware of going to another place. Of getting something to eat once. There was another place where there was music and he was dancing with a red-haired girl who kept giggling. He left her. He awoke to find himself sleeping in a chair, fully dressed, in a dingy little room. He got out of these and screwed up his eyes against the sunshine, realizing another day had come. He kept drinking. He didn't get drunk so much as dulled. And he had to have something to deaden the terrible knowledge. The knowledge he wasn't the fighter, the winner, he'd believed he was. That men had been bribed to lose to him. It was a shock like a club

blow over the head. He was just another palooka, a bum.

IT WAS SOME time that afternoon when he learned he was no longer in Center City but out in a suburb. In a dim way he recalled taking a ride in a car last night with somebody he'd met. He supposed he should go back to the hotel and pick up his clothes. What he'd do after that, he had no idea. A girl laughed over at a table and he thought of Nancy, then clamped his mind shut against the picture of her. It seemed the next time he glanced out the front window of the place it was dark. A kid came in selling chances on something. Joe gave him a bill and then went out and began to walk.

He dozed again and was awakened by the metallic voice of a public address system. He was in a railroad station. He heard something blurred about a train to Detroit. It seemed as good as any place. He bought a ticket and boarded the train. Once in Detroit, he took up the aimless wandering, catching a drink when memories got too sharp, when consciousness of the events of the other night became too fierce. Day after day went like that. And then, he woke one morning to find his pockets empty save for some silver.

There was but one business he knew, fighting. His feet took him to that training gym where he'd worked when he was in Detroit before, when he was the touted rising contender, the kid with the wonderful record. He swore and forked up enough silver to pay his admission. Nobody recognized this beard-stubbed, grimy guy in the rumpled clothes, apparently some young bum, as the promising kid who'd worked out there before. There was little resemblance between this listless shuffling dull-eyed guy and the neat vibrant young Joe Burdee with his entourage of managers and the fight writers eagerly closing about him. But he got some work as a sparring partner, a punch catcher.

When they asked him his name, he said "Bird." He got three dollars for five rounds with a green strong kid

out of the amateur ranks. Joe gave him a workout but was smart enough to make him look good and not to show too much himself. He didn't want to be recognized; he was ashamed of the fraud he had been. The next day he went back there and went another five rounds with the big raw kid. In the last one, the kid, cocky, slammed Joe as they broke from a clinch. There was a flash of the old pride in Joe. And then he was going after the bigger raw guy, boxing him dizzy, rattling the jab into his face, then rocking him with a series of right hands. Another moment and he caught himself.

But it was too late. The boy's manager cut the round short, steaming at Joe for showing up his kid so badly. He gave Joe a stiff tongue-lashing, then threw a dollar at him in the dressing room and told him to get out. Joe lost his head and the brawl started. Joe never had a chance. The manager was well-known there, a regular patron who trained his whole stable at that gym. Some of the bouncers grabbed Joe and hustled him out. At the top of the stairs to the second-floor place he ran smack into Doc Murpo....

"I've been looking all over for you, Joe. But I never really expected to find you here," Doc said simply and took Joe's arm.

CHAGRINED at being ejected from a joint that had once welcomed his patronage. Joe let himself be led along. He felt somewhat sick, anyway. What he'd been doing to his physique for days, plus the way he'd been eating—a cup of coffee and a sandwich at odd intervals, had knocked him out more than he'd guessed.

Doc led the way to the restaurant on the corner and ordered a couple of steaks. He didn't say anything till they'd finished eating. Then he fired up one of his cheap cigars and said mildly:

"To think of how I worked to make a real fighter outa you—and then you go an' blow it all like a screwball. Humph! Why right now you

got the interior tone of a sick cockroach."

Joe said, "Will you shut up about me as a fighter, Doc? I never was one, and I don't want any part of that dirty racket again. I'll pull up my socks and get me an honest job—where I don't have to be a faker."

Doc smiled a little crookedly, bluish moons of eyes rolling back into his head. "You was a real scrapper. I don't waste time on fakers."

"Sure, I was good. Every jerk who could wear mittens had to be fixed to make me look good. Bah! That's how good I was." He slammed the table so the silverware rattled. "By God—"

"You're dumber than I ever thought," Doc said. And it brought Joe up short. And Doc went on. "Now listen, kid. Not all the fights was fixed. That Danolawitz go was on the level, for one; and you took him by a big margin. It was that one that started Mal and Whitey really worryin'. They knew you had big possibilities then. You was a valuable piece of property to them. They knew they could take you places, and they wanted to keep buildin' your confidence. So—"

"My confidence is just swell now." Joe said bitterly. "Just like a stale pie crumb—only not so big. Hell, if they'd only had let me fight my own way—even if I got licked! Those damn crooks!"

Doc shook his head. "Joe, try an' see. I ain't on their side; I was against the fix stuff. But I couldn't stop it. But they didn't crook you. They was protecting their own interests and—thus—you. You see? We figured you to take them boys like Pancho Brown and Batta and Green—an' some others. But Whitey and Mal—they didn't want no accidents, no setbacks. They—well, they wanted to insure things. Ya see? Morelli, well, he might uh outspedded you once, but you'd uh wrapped him up in a return match. But Mal and Whitey, they wanted the impressive record—no setbacks. An' wanted to build your confidence—sorta build up your interior tone."

"I suppose I oughta crawl back and

kiss their feet, huh, maybe?" But some of the rancorous bitterness was gone from Joe's voice.

"No, Joe. They figure you're a bum now, anyway, because you lost to Green. They couldn't realize what learnin' what you did did to you. An' that there was something wrong before you went into the ring, too.... There was. I could tell.... Joe, was it your girl?"

Joe nodded slowly. He might have known. You couldn't fool Doc with those probing deep-seeing eyes of his. "What should I do, Doc?"

"Fight," Doc said succinctly around his cigar. "You are a fighter—and a damn good one though you got a ways to go yet."

Joe put his head in his fisted hands and shook it slowly.

"Joe." Doc's hand stretched across the table and clamped on one of Joe Burdee's shoulders. "I believe you're good, I'm on your side. That's why I brought your clothes an' everything along from the hotel. Joe, a week from this Friday, Bus Graham is fightin' in Center City. Meets Al Green. Remember?"

"Well, what?"

"I believe in you enough Joe so I think you could take Graham. An' maybe I could—uh—well, wangle things so Green wouldn't be able to fight. If I could do that—and get you named to replace him—I'd put you in there, Joe. I believe in you, kid. Do ya believe in yourself, Joe?"

CHAPTER VI

THE CHILL paralyzing tentacles of dread were winding around Joe Burdee's heart as once again he waited in a dressing room of the Center City fight club—waited to go up and mix it with Bus Graham, the Pittsburgh slugger and contender from the East. Waited, too, to find out how much of a fighter he was or wasn't.

He'd quickly whipped himself back into shape in a smaller training gym in uptown Detroit. Doc had arranged things at this end. He had hinted that he'd bluffed Green, threatening to report the fixed fight episode to

the Commission and claiming that he had proof that would put Joe and himself in the clear as being ignorant of the pre-bout arrangements. Green had conveniently developed a hand injury. It wasn't strictly on the up and up, but Joe had little sympathy for Al Green who'd accepted money for a fixed fight. And then the wily Doc had sold Joe to the club promotor as a substitute for Green. They weren't going to get much of a purse, small change really. After Joe's last showing, he couldn't command much in Center City. And the switch had been acceptable to Graham's camp; they figured there was nothing to fear from the guy who'd been drubbed so thoroughly by Green. Now, Joe Burdee was on the verge of finding out about himself.

"Remember now," Doc warned him for the umpty-umth time as was his wont. "Keep that right glove up. This Graham shoves a tricky jab. And he can hook you crazy with his left too if you give him the openin'. And—"

THEN THERE was the call to come up. They went upstairs and down the aisle with a hired club second toting the bucket that night. Joe climbed in to a chorus of cat-calls and Bronx cheers. And he had to wait in a cold sweat for Graham to come up. There was time for a lot of thinking. Then Bus Graham finally came down the aisle, a big swaggering guy with a wide grin and unruly rusty-hued hair. He had two inches in height plus a twelve pound weight advantage on Joe. He entered the ring and pranced in his crimson robe without seeming to see his opponent, drawing a big ovation.

Joe moved in a daze. He went out for instructions. The referee was saying something about being boss in that ring and aiming to stay so and for them to break clean. Joe thought of Nancy Laporte. Maybe he was going to end up in the fight game the way she'd warned. Then he cut off all thoughts of her. He'd lost her; that was that. Now he had the most important piece of business of his life on hand.

He came out of his corner fast at the bell, every nerve in his body twitching, and fired two jabs—was short on both from over anxiousness. Poised, confident, big Graham moved around, jaw tucked into his shoulder, feeling out Joe. Joe, unsure of himself, wondering, having to prove himself to himself, moved in sharply, carrying the attack. Lip curling over his mouthpiece, Graham blocked his stuff. Joe missed with a right. Joe advanced, fired again. That time Graham slipped the punch and countered with a whistling hook; then he was in, punching away, both hands windmilling. He was a slugger who knew when to turn loose the bombardment, who struck with the heavy artillery in spurts.

Joe caught plenty, was hurt in the midsection, reddening up. They clinched. Broke. Joe began to box, but he was jittery, uncertain. When he ducked frantically from a right Graham only fainted with the crowd guffawed. Graham nailed him flush with a couple of stiff jabs, then faked a charge and stood back, mocking. And Joe went to him because he felt he had to to show himself. They stood toe to toe and punched it out, Graham's game. Joe was staggered into the ropes, mouth bleeding already. He had to hang on hard. It was all Graham's round.

Doc said nothing till the ten-second buzzer for the second. Then: "Fight your own fight—not his! You're the smart boy, Joe!"

JOE WENT OUT and was dropped to one knee right off as Graham streaked from his corner and tagged him with a surprise hook. Up at four, mentally foundering, Joe caught two hard rights. The crowd began to yell for the finish, the kill. It was training, Doc's drilling, that took over then as he fought the fog in his head. He jabbed slashingly, was away, then whipped inside to tie his man up. He rolled from one of those hooks and drove in a sharp inside right. Graham got him in a corner but Joe boxed his way out. He began to feel a little better.

Graham punished him, but Joe's

head was clear at the close of the round and he was stinging the rusty-haired fighter with that snaky jab. Graham got him on the ropes to start the third, but Joe covered well, cut loose with a surprise rally, then was away before the big Pittsburg mauler could retaliate. Boxing smoothly now, Joe found himself beginning to time his man, to watch for the pattern of his style, his fight. The knack came back to him like an instinct. In that round he discovered when Graham threw the left hook, he himself could beat Graham to the punch with a straight left of his own. The crowd booed him as he kept on his bicycle in the final seconds as the Pittsburgher sought to catch and punish him.

Graham crowded to start the fourth. There was considerable infighting. Joe gambled, after holding, and connected with a savage uppercut. Circling, just as Graham fired the heavy right, Joe Burdee slipped on a wet spot on Graham's corner. Off balance, he was caught hard by the punch, went down. Again the crowd roared, smelling a kayo on the way. Joe felt his eye mushrooming; the blow had tagged him just under the left one. But he took six on one knee, then came up and wheeling fast. He wasn't worried; that had been an accident. And he was studying his man all the time.

He speared with his left, started it again. It led Bus Graham into the move he wanted. Graham drove a left to the head. Joe blocked. And it was the punch series he'd expected. Graham had a little trick of tilting his head to the left when about to fire the lefthand punch combination. Joe thrust with his own left harder, started back. Then he was in, hooking with the left and snapping in a short right. Graham, snorting angrily, started his own left hook. Dropping flat on his heels an instant, Joe whammed over his own straight jolting left, beating Graham to the punch.

"Stand still and fight, palooka," Graham muttered in the clinch. When he followed the retreating Joe again, he wasn't quite so fast, so shift.

That round ended. "How's it going, kid?" Doc said as he applied the collodion to a cut that had opened under that left eye.

Joe sucked in air. "I'm working now," was all he said. But the eyes of the pair met a moment, and Doc understood.

THE FIFTH was fast. Joe made it so, speeding up, flashing in to launch a brief attack at times. He was fighting with a flair, a gusto now—and a gusto he had never demonstrated before, when he thought he was good. Now, in this grim test under fire, he had found he was good. He had taken plenty of Graham's best. He was outboxing him, fighting his own fight. More than that, he was fighting his natural way, the way he'd always wanted to fight, studying his man, wearing him down with stiff counters, moving to the point, calculatingly, smoothly, where he would take over and dominate.

There were no more of those show-off rounds such as Mal Bostal used to order. No box him dizzy this canto, go in and try for the kill this one, kid. Stuff ordered to impress the experts and the press section and finally, the fans. Stuff, safe because Bortal had pre-arranged the outcome, that was all part of the artificial build-up. Joe was going on his pattern.

He took that round by a clean margin, outspeeding his man, making him miss more frequently, beating him to the punch. After a few seconds of the sixth, Graham landed with his heavy right twice. And as Joe slid along the ropes, he laughed at Graham. The venom was fading from that right hand. He was slowly but surely cutting Graham down. Moving even faster, Joe started Graham's eye swelling with that repetitious jab, cut his mouth with a sudden hook. Graham wanted to coast; then Joe was beginning to move in more and more instead of backward. Graham was covering, retreating at times.

Some of the mob was yelling for Joe when the seventh opened. Both went inside and punched. Joe heard Graham grunted as the leather thud-

ded into him. Graham's own punches were slower. Joe rocked Graham with a lightning like short inside right. Then brought the fans out of their chairs as he stayed in close and dynamited a terrific straight right to Graham's jaw. The big man hit the ropes. Joe was boss of the fight now.

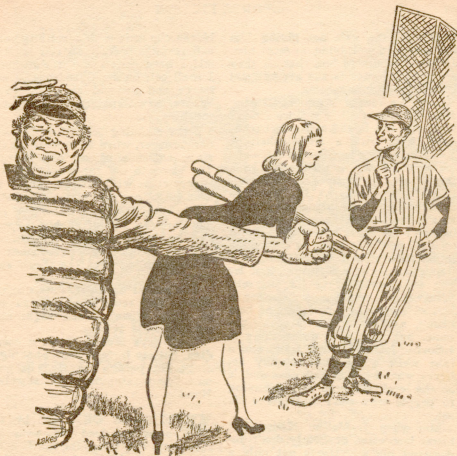
They were bawling from behind Bus Graham's corner. He obeyed, bulling in, trying to twist his chin from the jabs to get within slugging range and try for a blaster. Joe saw the man's head tilt. Saw the left start for the body. Joe blocked, ignored the feint with the right. And Joe, before Graham could bring in the left high, bulleted three short inside rights to the jaw. The ropes bellied outward as Graham was flung into them and then sank. He was on all fours, glassy-eyed but not cold as the count reached "five" and the bell ended that seventh round.

"You're coming in ahead now, Joe boy," Doc told him as he applied more collodion to the reopened eye cut. "Smack him fast to open this next one...Then—then keep your hands high and make him come to you. He's going to be pitching for the head and a kayo. Remember now. Hands high—and make him come in. He'll leave himself wide open. But don't go crazy for a knockout; you got him now, Joe."

MOST OF Doc Murpo's advice was unnecessary. Graham rushed and was wide with two swings as Joe rolled neatly. The crowd was roaring now, aware Graham might still land the crusher, excited by the way Joe had taken over. They tied up, were broken. And then Joe, striking with a slung lance, was on the battered-down slowed-down Graham. His left, with three sharp raps, reopened Graham's eye and the blood spurted. His right knocked Graham's mouthpiece loose; another right sent him sort of stumbling backward like a drunken man out of control.

Graham was a gamester. He tried to come out of the corner, tried to come into bombardment range. But

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The Moore The Merrier

One of Those Outrageous Tales

By TOM THURSDAY

IN CASE THERE is some one in the grandstand or bleachers who don't know what a four-flusher is, I would like to make a statement, viz., and even i. e.,—A double-F is a guy who claims he can kayo Joe Louis but the reason he didn't take up boxing is because his Aunt Swivelhips claims it ain't nice. Let some anemic barfly make a slight pass toward this lad's beakus, and he will

laugh and remark that the other boy has no sense of humor.

A double-F is a yamneck that will confess, minus any third degree, that if he had taken up baseball, instead of now working behind a hamburger counter, he would have made Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio look like gents with toothpick bats. A double-F or four-flusher is a yoop who thinks, when he walks down the

street, all the gals are giving him the wolf-eye and dying to meet him. It never occurs to him that all they are giving junior is the hee-hee and the largest of haw-haws.

Now the reason I am mentioning four-flushers at all is because I don't want any one in the audience to confuse them with a *five-flusher*. A five-F is a home run from a different ball ground and is as much like a four-flusher as Boris Karloff resembles Hedy Lamarr. In brief, a 5-flusher is not in the same league as a 4-flusher because one is a foul ball and the other is a home run. In case all this is as plain as chop suey in an Irish stew I better bring in a living sample of a 5-flusher, and let you see the difference for yourself. Whereas and to wit a four-flusher is full of wind and large gobs of ham acting, a fifth-flusher is really the same, but with this distinction: A 4-flusher *knows* he is a fraud and a fake while a 5-flusher actually *believes* what he says and does and is on the level, although very annoying to people who can't understand his act.

Me, when J. Malibu Moore first looms into view, positively don't understand his act. He is not only a pain in the place right below the chin but he likewise hurts me mentally. For one thing he is extra-fresh out of college and he can use words that go over my head like a buzz-bomb. For a few weeks I think he is a delegate to the United Nations and I begin to understand why there isn't no peace.

He reports for Spring training in Miami and the Champs—haw-haw—are not only in need of Spring training but Spring cleaning. We get the name of Champs because, back in 1902, we won the pennant. This accident was due to the fact the other seven teams had raised the age limits to 56 and allowed players to carry their crutches and pills around the field with them.

Well, I get my first view of J. Malibu Moore when he alights from the train at the Florida East Coast depot, just a day before our training regime is about to start. Although the train is crowded with tourists, he

blocks the exit with a smiling pose, and remarks, "Well, so *this* is Miami! I have been sadly misinformed. I shall call on the Chamber of Commerce and demand an explanation. Where, may I enquire, is the famous sunshine?"

I am standing with Joe Crunkle, our manager, when we tune-in on the stage entrance of the new recruit. Joe turns to me and says, "Does a keeper come with this guy or do we have to get our own straight-jacket?"

Just then some guy in back of our new wonder boy gives him a push and he lands on the platform. "I see," he grins, "some gentleman is used to riding the New York subways."

The pusher hops off, stands before Moore, and remarks, "Are you one of them Miami Beach night club comedians?"

"Sir," says Moore, "I am a comedian, but my forte is radio, not night clubs. Er, pardon me, sir," he goes on, "your stupidity is showing. Haw!"

WE GRAB OUR brat by the arms and lead him away before some one kills him. He is a little wump, weighing no more than 135, and has coal black hair and very good and white teeth. I can tell that no one has smacked him in the puss, otherwise his front molars would be some place besides his mouth. All the way to the hotel he is wondering about the much-advertised Miami sunshine and finally Joe Crunkle stops, dead, and snorts, "Listen, chump, since Miami is also on this earth, and since it has to revolve when the earth turns, the sun goes down and since it is now 10 P.M., and not A.M., we ain't got no sun in stock. What the devil do you want—a 24-hour sun?"

"Why, Mr. Crunkle," says J. Malibu Moore, "out in Los Angeles, they tell me that they have constant sunshine."

"Out in Los Angeles," snipps the boss, "they will tell a guy like you anything."

We get him to the Hotel Gold Haven and bed him down. He says

he has about sixteen books on comedy and humor that he must study before going to sleep.

"You understand, Mr. Crunkle," he says as we are about to leave, "that this baseball racket is just a means to an end, the end being the world's most famous and greatest radio comedian. My ambition is to succeed Jack Benny, Fred Allen and even Bob Hope. When your talent scout was fortunate enough to find me at Jerkly University I was majoring in dramatics, with special attention to comedy. The world lacks laughter and I shall go down in history as the greatest of comedians. I have no doubt about it. Have you?"

"Yep," says the boss. "Good night, and don't get lost in Allen's Alley."

We go down to the hotel bar and sniff a few beakers of root beer, as hard likker is strictly against training rules, and Crunkle adds a few knits to his brow.

"Know what I think?" asks the boss. "I think Snooper Snodgrass is playing a joke on us." The Snooper is our talent scout. So far, he has discovered everyone but Robert E. Lee and General Grant. The boss thinks he's working for the other league.

"Well," I say, "unless they add another team to the league, we can't get shoved out of eighth place. If this new guy can play like he talks, we should win the pennant."

WE START practice next morning and J. Malibu Moore gets into the hair of all the other players. When they ain't got no hair, he gets into the bald spots. He has a large, constant grin and kids the underpants off every guy that comes near him. Foul Ball Fogarty, who has a sense of humor like a mosquito trying to get blood out of a cue ball, threatens to kill him before the day is over.

But—he can play ball!

He scoops scorching liners an inch from the ground; he catches flies headed toward Mars and Orion; he throws to first like a rocket-plane; and he can run like a landlord after a delinquent tenant. The few sports

writers who came out to look us over, and planned on taking a quiet nap, kept awake and thought they were witnessing a mirage.

A week later we play an exhibition game at Miami Field with the Tigers, who finished third in last year's pennant race. J. Malibu Moore is playing right field at the request of Clunkle.

"Do you mind?" asks the boss.

"Certainly not," says Moore. "I am willing to play anything, from short stop to a flute. Haw!"

"You slay me," says Clunkle."

We win, 6-2. The Tigers were positively robbed of at least four homers. They were terrific clouts high up on the fence. Moore snatched them all with either his right or left hand. He could jump like a guy with a hot foot.

At bat, he just knocks two homers, one triple and a double. He thinks nothing of this and seems very bored, indeed. He keeps telling all the boys that he can't see any sense to baseball.

"It reminds me of golf," he grins. "A guy has a little ball; see? He has it in his hand; see? The sun is very bright and hot; see? He puts the ball on the ground and then knocks it two hundreds yards away; see? Well, then the poor dope chases it in the hot sun; see? Personally, since he already has it in his hand, why don't he hold it? Haw!"

WE GO OVER to Tampa where the Yellow Sox are Spring kidding and play another exhibition game. Moore does some show-off stunts in the field and the crowd thinks he's full of citrus juice. They boo him. This time he's playing left field and one of the cash clients in the bleachers calls him a boob. He grins, steps over in front of the bleachers, and says, "Did I hear some gentleman refer to me as a boob?"

"Yeah," whinnies some flathead, "what else did you think you was; hey?"

"Friend," grins Moore, "let's get this thing straight. You claim I'm a boob. Well, let's look at it this way. I'm out here in the field, playing a

game called baseball, and I'm getting paid for it. You are sitting up there, getting no exercise whatever, and *not* getting paid for it. In fact, *you're* paying to see *me*. Well, friend, all I want to know is, *who's* the boob?"

Which settled that.

We annoy the Yellow Sox to the melody of 9-3. Again J. Malibu Moore is the star of the game. However, he thinks nothing of it; he prefers to talk about anything but baseball. When the other players congratulate him on his playing he says, "Oh, fiddle-sticks. Wait till you hear me on the radio. Some day I will be on a national hook-up and I will make the whole world laugh. You know something, fellows? I don't care for baseball at all. I am just using it as a stepping stone. I figure if I make a name for myself I will attract the attention of some of those big radio tycoons and they will give me my chance."

The boys thought he was nuts and told him so. He just grinned more broadly. "Wait and see, brothers," he said. "Just wait and see."

One night we make the rounds of the swank Miami Beach night clubs. Moore goes just to hear the high-priced comedians. He gets us in bad with the head waiter by ordering one glass of buttermilk after another. Joe Clunkle blushes each time he orders the sour milk and winks at the waiter. The waiter raises a set of indelicate eyebrows and shrugs his shoulders.

"Okay," says Moore. "So I'm a sis-y because I don't drink a lot of booze. Any dope can get drunk. There's no trick to it. If all the smart guys, be they baseball players, boxers or even football stars, who thought they could be champs of both booze and their professions, were placed end to end, the line would be longer than the Lincoln Highway. Waiter—another glass of buttermilk!"

The star of the show, a \$1,000-a-week comedian, came on the floor. He got a big hand. He sang a few risqué songs, did a few cute steps, told some jokes and bowed off. Big applause.

I looked at Moore and his face was

very sad, indeed. "That fellow," he says, "isn't funny. He is not a comedian. I bet I could go out there and do much better. Er, Mr. Clunkle, will you please call the manager and ask him if I can go out there and show him how a real comedian acts?"

"Look, my prize ape," says Clunkle, "I have no pull with the local police. If you went out there they would have to call the riot squad. Get your hat, junior, we are about to depart."

WELL, BEFORE we leave Miami, J. Malibu Moore has cornered the publicity market. Both the *News* and *Herald* sports writers break down and admit that Brother Moore is a very remarkable baseball professor but think he smells when it comes to giving interviews to the press. The usual baloney is not cut in the usual way; Moore tells one and all that he is against commercial baseball. "If you want to see real ball games," he states, "watch school kids playing in sand lots. Those kids are real and they play for the sake of the game, and not the money. And say, fellows, don't forget to mention in your stories that I hope to be on the radio some time next year. When I do, Jack Benny and Fred Allen can take a vacation. Haw!"

This kind of talk just kills the club's official press agent, one Fairytale Finnegan, who claims that Moore is murdering all his fine build-ups for the reading chumps.

"Can you imagine a flatfoot like that?" moans Finnegan. "He would be a natural for pages of free puffs, but the monkey kills it all with his big trap. And the funny part is that he don't give a damn about being a great ball player. He'd rather you smiled at one of his corny jokes than break your hands applauding his home runs. I've seen many screwballs, but that yoop is a twin-screwball!"

A day before we play our first league game, in Birmingham, Moore trips into the club house with a hick-chick on his arm.

"This," grins Moore, "is the brand mer Roberta Lee Jackson, of Dothan,

Alabama. She is studying to be an actress and will no doubt be a great tragedian. Meet the boys, Sugar Plum."

"Hello, you-all," says Roberta. "Don't you think Jasper is wunnerful?" So now we all know what the 'J' stands for. "Any time you-all wanna eat some grits and real gravy, jus' lemme know. I used to be a short-order cook at Claghorne's Elite Fried Fish Stand. That's where I met and fell in love with Jasper. Ain't that right, Honey Boy?"

We all said we were very happy to meet Lady Birdbrain but failed to make a date for trying out her conception of grits and gravy before finding out how the hospital service was with stomach-pumps.

"You fellows never knew I was married; did you?" laughed Jasper. "I'm full of surprises!"

"That," snorts Clunkle, "ain't all you're full of."

I LEARN later that if it hadn't been that Roberta worked in Claghorne's Elite Fried Fish Stand Brother Moore would have got very skinny, due to a lack of nourishment. He told her that he was studying dramatics at Jerkly University and she broke down and spilled that she had always wanted to succeed Duse and Ethel Barrymore as great dramatic actresses. He gave her encouragement and she gave him food. When he learned that she had nearly \$500 in tips saved up he fell in love promptly and at once.

We play Birmingham a four-game series and win three out of four. The one we lose is the day that Moore decides to spend the day around the local radio stations. He just phones in and says, "Mr. Clunkle, I'm afraid you'll have to do without my services this afternoon. I've been invited to be the guest of the radio stations and that is more important to me than baseball. Tell all the boys to tune in at 3 P.M. and they will hear me being interviewed."

"Look, lunkhead," sizzles Clunkle, "3 P.M. will be right in the middle of the game. Do you want us to stop playing ball, ask the customers to wait, while we listen to you?"

"What," says Moore, "is the matter with that?" The boss slams up the receiver. It must have busted Jasper's ear-drum. Then we lost 12-1. That evening I get a copy of the *Age-Herald* and read what Bob Crossland says about Brother Moore. He kides the step-ins off him but Moore thinks it's real.

Our next series is at Montgomery. Roberta kept coming on the field and trying to take the place of the bat boy. She was very dramatic about it but the bat brat failed to applaud her histrionic ability. "Listen, sister," he says, "if they rationed ham you'd be out of circulation!"

She pouts and rushes to Jasper with the sad story. Jasper rushes up to Clunkle and says, "My wife has been grossly insulted by that stunted moron. Either he is discharged or I quit. Take your choice!"

Well, since Jasper is the whole team, the boss tells the kid to lay low for a while, at full salary. "Okay," agrees the kid. "But is they any law again makin' faces at that dumb dame?"

For the rest of the game Roberta is the bat boy. She struts around like Queen Mummy of Ancient Egypt. Everything she does is an act. Jasper thinks she's great. When he comes to the plate, she hands him three bats with a bow to the ground. The bleachers give her a laugh that would have made a horse envious. This makes both of them very mad. They take their art seriously.

We go to Hattiesburg and Jasper decides that he would like to pitch the first game. He has played everything else on the team and made good, so Clunkle says, "Go ahead." he does. Up to the eighth inning no man has reached first. Then the first guy up in the first half of the ninth knocks a home run. It seems that this lad is no less than the brother of Roberta and she asks Jasper to let him hit one. He throws one underhanded and he bams it over the fence. Clunkle demands an explanation.

"He is my brother-in-law," explains Moore. "One should always favor one's family, don't you think?"

Clunkle walks away before the homicide squad arrives and charges him with murder.

NEXT AFTERNOON, after the second game—which we win 4-2—a scout for the N.Y. Giants calls at the hotel. "That Moore fellow is a very remarkable player," he says to Clunkle. "Would you be interested in selling him for, say, \$50,000?"

"Personally," says Clunkle, "I would be interested in selling him for fifty cents, and his wife you can have for a dime. But," says Clunkle, "I am just the manager and not the owner."

"Can you get the owner long distance?"

Clunkle puts in a call for Roscoe Biergarden, Sr., who owns the Champs. Twenty minutes later he gets the connection and says to Biergarden, "There's a guy down here who says he would be happy to pay \$50,000 for Moore. Wanna talk to him?"

The scout gets on the wire, and says, "I have the check right here with me and will give it to Mr. Clunkle, if you are interested, Mr. Biergarden. Is it a deal?"

Nothing comes over the phone for a moment, indicating that Mr. Biergarden has collapsed on his puss. Then the scout goes on, "Okay, Mr. Biergarden; okay. I'll talk to Moore right away. Goodbye, Mr. Biergarden."

Clunkle sends for Jasper. "Look," says Clunkle, "you are worth \$50,000 to the N.Y. Giants. I hate to see you go, although you are a severe pain in the rear-housing. Mr. Biergarden says he will not stand in your way, if you can make the big time. Besides, he will get \$50,000 for you."

Jasper furrows his brow and begins to scowl, something unusual for him. Then he strikes what they call an attitude, whatever that is.

"As I understand it," says Jasper, "another club is offering to buy me for \$50,000. In other words, I am being sold as if I was a hunk of beef or a slice of real estate. I give you my answer: If the offer was \$1,000,000 I'd still tell 'em to go to hell!" Jas-

per snorts a few seething snorts and walks out.

"What," asks the scout, "d'yer think of that?"

"I don't know," says Clunkle. "He don't care for baseball, he don't care for money; all he cares for is to be a radio comedian."

"I think the guy is plain nuts," says the scout.

"Not plain," says Clunkle, "fancy."

WELL, WITHIN THE next month J. Malibu Moore is sitting on top of the baseball world. He gets reams of newspaper and magazine publicity and even the movie news-reels take shots of him. This great fanfare makes him madder than a rooster with a sore throat.

"P'toccy!" he says, and aims some cut plug at the ground. "You can have all that publicity goo. I don't want fame as a baseball player; I want fame as a radio comedian. Some day the big broadcasting companies will get wise to themselves and make me an offer. And they will also recognize that Roberta is a great dramatic actress. Wait and see; just you wait and see!"

Meantime, hearing of his ambition to be a great radio comedian, a flock of amateur radio script writers are flooding him with offers to write his act. He turns them all down, but very Arctic.

"I will write my own act," he says. "I am not going to make the same mistake as the other radio comics. They hire a lot of high-priced writers and what happens? They cramp the poor guy's natural style. I shall write and even direct my own act. Roberta will be in the act with me. She will play the part of feeding me the lines. She can do that very good. She is a natural tragedian. Then she will have a radio program of her own, same as I will."

"What will you do with all the money you earn?" asks Clunkle.

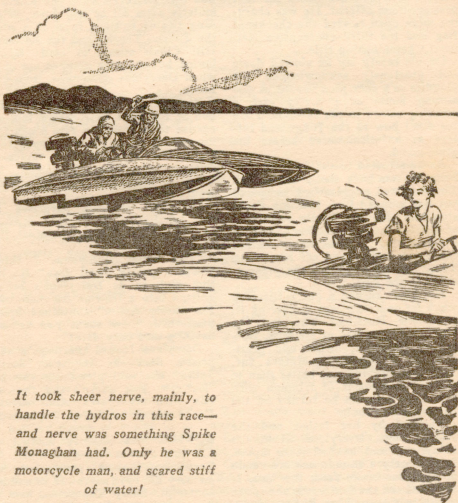
"I will set some aside for indigent ball players, like you," he says. "Haw!"

We are in the dressing-room after the game with Mobile and in pops a

(Continued on Page 90)

Mad Marathon

By JOHN LOCKHART



It took sheer nerve, mainly, to handle the hydros in this race—and nerve was something Spike Monaghan had. Only he was a motorcycle man, and scared stiff of water!

SPIKE Monaghan was tough, and he was demonstrating his toughness at the Freeport track on Long Island. It was the last lap of the National Championship Motorcycle finals.

Head down and lithe stomach flattened against his tiny tank, Spike twisted the throttle grip to its full capacity. His twin cylinder steed

bucked and slithered precariously as he dragged his left leg to take the oncoming turn. Straightening up, Spike darted through an opening so small he simultaneously brushed the guard-rail and a competitor's exhaust pipe with both straddling legs.

A lap before, a rock thrown up from a competitor's skidding wheels had smashed his goggles. With a deft

movement he had torn them off. But not before a challenger, waiting for such an exigency, had darted into the lead! Half blind and maddened with pain, Spike bent low to give battle!

Spike had now accounted for that presumptuous affront. He was charging wide open toward the checkered flag and his third consecutive National Championship title.

On his safety lap he slowed down and graciously acknowledged the plaudits as a champion should. A disarming smile at a pretty girl, a mocking salute to the rowdies. Then the final bow to the Judge and referee as he dismounted before the grandstand.

As he strutted to the Judge's platform he was both cocky and proud. Those busted goggles had hampered but not stopped him. Nothing could stop him! He was firmly convinced of that—now or here-after. Striking a conquering pose he halted before the booth and ripped off his helmet. Then patiently awaited the presentation of the cup.

His heart turned a quick flip-flop when he saw who was delivering it. Darrylene Rossiter! The striking, blue eyed daughter or his boss, Darryl W. Rossiter, owner and president of Lightweight Motors Inc. To Spike, nothing was better than to share this moment of triumph with her. Like a faucet he turned on the personality—plus!

Flanked by her father and the AMA judge, Darrylene lifted the shiny cup and handed it to Spike. Immediately a thunderous crescendo of applause broke from the fans. It drowned out the few words she spoke befitting the occasion. But her smile, gleaming like a row of pearls against the tanned background of her skin, completely overwhelmed Spike.

He was still in a daze when Darryl W. Rossiter leaned over and pumped his hand. "Congratulations, my boy," he said hurriedly. "You really put over Rossiter motorcycle engines—and thanks a lot!"

He suddenly dropped Spike's grimy paw, turned quickly and disappeared behind the booth. Left standing with his hand in the air, Spike was completely flabbergasted.

This abrupt dismissal surprised and maddened him. The least he expected was a renewal of his contract; but the guy walked out on him.

It was unlike Rossiter to treat him like this, he reflected moodily. Particularly after all he had done. Winning twelve straight races in a row, the Tourist Trophy and the National Hill Climb award to boot! Spike boiled, but abruptly snapped out of it when Darrylene descended from the booth.

Perhaps she would put him wise, and at the same time afford him an excuse to negotiate a few plugs for himself. Undeterred, he stepped forward. His approach was typical—swaggering. "Miss Rossiter," he drawled. "Darrylene, as your friends would say."

Darrylene stopped, surprised at this familiarity. Spike took a hitch in his belt and leaned against the booth.

"You know, Darrylene. I think you're a pretty swell dish." He let that sink in as Darrylene's brows knitted into a frown. "An' now that I'm champ again," continued Spike unabashed, "how about you an' me havin' a nice cozy date?"

Darrylene looked thoroughly surprised, then she laughed. "Sorry, Spike," she said pleasantly enough. "But you just haven't the class to mix with my crowd. And besides, I'm engaged to Larry Tepoorten."

SPIKE was slightly ruffled at this answer. No class huh? As Tepoorten's name penetrated his memory his eyes narrowed in sudden contempt. Larry Tepoorten, heir to the Tepoorten Boat business! He grimaced appropriately.

"And anyway," resumed Darrylene blithely. "Daddy's abandoning motorcycle competition next season to concentrate on outboard motors. Larry is going to use one for the first time in his hydro for the Hudson River marathon, and I'm using another in the *Miss-Quote*. As a team we should really get somewhere. Tepoorten Boats and Rossiter Outboards!" Her eyes glowed with pride at the thought.

So that's it, thought Spike quickly.

His release! Outboards? He knew Darrylene was tops as a hydro racer, and so was Larry Tepoorten. They'd both won races all over the country. But being dropped in favor of some silly putt-putts got under his skin. It hurt his pride.

"Just the same I think it's a lousy deal," he muttered.

Darrylene eyed him coldly behind flashing eyes. "What's a lousy deal?" she demanded.

"I risked my neck makin' a rep for Rossiter motors; Now I'm dropped like a dirty shirt so's you can concentrate on outboards. That's gratitude for you!"

Darrylene's oval face turned crimson. "Just who are you to suggest running my father's business?" she propounded haughtily.

Spike started to make a scathing retort, but Darryl W., his face carrying the worried look of a homeless pup, hurried up. Beside him was Larry Tepoorten.

Larry took in the scene with a hasty glance. Immaculately attired in faultless whites and sport haberdashery and shoes, he had all the attributes of the deg eared social register.

"This roughneck annoying you, Darrylene?" he asked casually.

Darrylene shook her head.

Tepoorten turned his tanned, handsome face to Spike. "Beat it, fellow," he said.

Spike stood his ground. So this was the guy she was going to marry. Unconsciously he clenched his ham-like fists. "If a lady wasn't present, I'd dust off the track with you," he gritted.

For a moment he matched Tepoorten's stony stare with the fiery intensity of his own. Then he suddenly thought better of making mush of that movie profile and abruptly turned on his heel. That gesture took will power. Spike Monaghan had never walked out on a fight in his life. He had taken but a single step when a crashing blow exploded in his ear.

Caught flat-footed and stunned, Spike turned groggily as Tepoorten rushed in and flailed rights and lefts

on his unprotected face. Shaking his head like a punch-drunk fighter, Spike suddenly came to. He lashed out with a short left jab as his right zipped through the air and landed on Larry's chin.

The impact resounded like a three car crash, and the human foundation of the Tepoorten genealogy crumbled earthward. Larry's knees slowly buckled and he folded like a deflated accordion at Spike's feet.

FOR a moment there was complete silence. Then Darrylene was on her knees. With a handkerchief she wiped away a trickle of blood presumptuous enough to spatter the Bond Street eclat of Tepoorten's spotless attire. Then with soothing words she brought him around. He blinked uncertainly and sat up.

Suddenly Rossiter was beside him, proffering apologies. "I'm sorry this happened, Larry," he mumbled.

Tepoorten struggled to his feet and gave Spike a look of concentrated loathing. "It's nothing," he lied. "Nothing important. But it does settle conclusively the fact I'm severing business relations with you right now. If this thug—" He indicated Spike with a contemptuous forefinger, "ranks with the type of individual you usually employ to promote your interests—then I'm well rid of the association!"

Rossiter turned white. "But, Larry," he protested. "The Hudson marathon is coming up in two weeks! Where'll I get another driver?"

Tepoorten shrugged and glanced mockingly at Spike. "Perhaps this dust eating impresario might help you out," he scoffed.

Spike unconsciously shuddered at the thought.

Tepoorten now turned to Darrylene. "I've decided to use the same boat and motor with which I won the race prior to the war," he said tonelessly. "And remember this," he carefully chose his word for effect. "If I *don't* win, our engagement is off!"

"But, Larry!" cried Darrylene aghast. "Naturally I'll try to beat you because of my reputation, but I'm

also advertising Daddy's new motors!"

Tepoorten shrugged elegantly. "My statement still stands," he replied coldly. He abruptly turned on his heel and strode away.

Darrylene's modeled features twitched defiantly. It was not pleasant to see a fine girl turned down by her fiance and Spike sympathised with her in her embarrassment.

"What a heel!" he offered philosophically. "Walks out on you two weeks before the race an' leaves you up a creek without a paddle."

Suddenly Darrylene found her voice. "Why—why you contemptible beast!" she stormed. "It's all your fault! With your guttersnipe tactics you beat him up within an inch of his life! Naturally he walked out on us! Oh! Oh! I could kill you!"

In sudden fury she flung herself at Spike. With pint sized fists she hammered his chest and kicked his shins until he backed up in pure self defence. "Now, now, what'll we do?" she cried hotly.

Alarmed at this tantrum, Rossiter rushed in and dragged her away, screaming and kicking defiantly.

Spike was so astounded at Darrylene's passionate outburst he was tongue-tied. His fault? What the hell! All he did was defend himself. But wasn't that just like a woman?

His first reaction was to smooth things over. "I'm sorry, Darrylene," he said contritely. "If there's anything I can do to fix it I'll—"

"Do!" she screamed. "You've done enough already. Larry and the Atlas Outboard people'll beat the shingles off us!"

"Now, now. It's not as bad as that," soothed Rossiter from the rear.

DARRYLENE shook herself loose. Faced with this fury in female form, Spike did something he never did before. He lost his head. Words flowed from his mouth before he had an adequate conception of what he was saying. "If it'll help you any," he mumbled. "I'll drive that other boat of yours."

Darrylene stopped her tirade.

"What do you know about outboard racing?" she demanded.

Rossiter jumped to his rescue with sudden alacrity. "What he doesn't know can be taught," he thundered. "That's one kind of race where experience doesn't count as heavily as nerve. And he's got that!"

With a haughty shake of her head, Darrylene stormed away.

Rossiter put his arm about Spike's shoulders. "Thanks a lot, guy," he said pleasantly. "You've sure taken a load off my mind. Just before you received the cup, Tepoorten was trying to crawl out of our verbal contract. When I asked him why—he couldn't answer. Like a jellyfish."

"He was looking for trouble when you socked him, and it gave him the excuse to quit cold. So don't worry about it, boy. Darrylene'll forget it as soon as you start handling a hydro like you do a motorbike."

Then under his breath he muttered. "I wish she could forget Tepoorten as quickly!"

Spike shrugged uneasily. "Mebbe I won't be so good in a hydro?"

Rossiter laughed. "Sure you will. There's nothing to it!"

Spike shook his head and summoned all the will power at his command. "I don't think so, Mr. Rossiter. You see, I'm afraid of water!"

"Afraid of water?" Rossiter's tone was tinged with unbelief. "Can't swim, eh?"

Spike nodded.

"No matter. You always wear a life jacket."

Spike shuddered involuntarily. "You don't understand, sir. I'll race anybody or anything as long as I have one foot on the ground. Through dust, mud, splinters or fire. *But I'm afraid of water!*"

Disbelief showed on Rossiter's plump face. "D'ya ever ride in a hydroplane?"

Spike shook his head.

Rossiter beamed. "Okay. I've got a stock model at my summer place at Tuxedo Lake. You come up there and in two weeks I'll teach you everything there is to know."

Spike's face paled. "But the water?" he protested.

"Once you get the feel of it there's nothing to it," assured Rossiter benevolently. "Just like riding a motorcycle. I'll be seeing you."

As Spike gathered his equipment, he was overwhelmed by a sensation totally unfamiliar to him. Fear! Cold beads of perspiration broke out on his shaggy brow. He felt clammy and hot—nauseated.

Brought up on a farm in the Arkansas dust belt, water was at a premium. It was something to drink and administer sparingly to the stock. Moving westward because of its lack, he had the misfortune to see his father and older brother drowned before his eyes. Since then he had never been near it.

"I sure put my foot in it that time," he told himself darkly. "An' all because of a dizzy dame!"

ROSSITER began Spike's training upon his arrival at the lake. Hydroplanes were a plaything of the motor manufacturer and his boat-house was stocked with every conceivable kind.

Spike's eyes opened wonderingly as he glanced at a sleek Class D Inboard. Then at a streamlined racing runabout and two flimsy looking shingles with powerful four cylinder outboard motors attached to their transoms—Class F. In a corner was Darrylene's famous *Miss-Quote*, resting on a specially constructed portable cradle.

Darrylene was not in evidence and Spike heaved a sigh of relief. He wished to see her least of all in this first venture on the water. Rossiter picked one of the Class F outboards, and Spike's apprenticeship began.

There were few things Rossiter didn't know about hydroplane outboards. He showed Spike how to take the 'wash of another boat without upsetting. How to stay on the edge of a fast skid without going over. These and many others, Rossiter taught Spike.

Within a week Spike was riding alone. Skimming over the placid surface of Tuxedo Lake with the closest thing to assurance he had so far achieved. He lacked the confidence,

fearlessness and grit he possessed on a motorcycle. He missed the bite of the tires. The dusty, acrid smell of scorched rubber and burned castor oil. And most of all, the hoarse, thrumming crescendo of the fans.

And deep down inside, was his ever present fear of the water. He hated it. Recoiled instinctively as a cloying wind showered him with spray from the upturned prow.

A thousand times a day he asked himself why he was doing it. Beating himself to death with this self-inflicted torture? He owed Rossiter nothing—not a single thing. In fact it was the reverse. He had nothing to gain. Then why?

It wasn't until the middle of the second week he knew what it was.

Skimming along at close to fifty, he heard the staccato whine of another boat close behind. With a swirl of spray, the *Miss-Quote* drew up beside him. Behind the wheel was Darrylene.

Poised, confident, the wind whipping her chestnut hair in wispy streamers behind her, she nonchalantly waved a beckoning challenge. Spike's fingers tightened instinctively on the throttle. His heart accelerated in tune with his quickening motor. So this was it. He knew it at that very moment. The silhouette of that lovely girl against the sun was the reason for all this.

Pique, envy, a defense mechanism, an inferiority complex or what have you, Spike didn't know. All he knew was that he intended to show the world Spike Monaghan was as good as anybody in any kind of race. He felt the stock model lift its prow to the sky. Shoot up on its single step as white water broke in diamond spray to windward. He surged into the quickening wake of the *Miss-Quote*—wide open!

So he didn't have the class to mix with her crowd? Huh! Tepoorten did—but guys who rode motorcycles didn't. It was a little involved for he knew he was riding this silly piece of board and fabric to show her he had class. Yes, that was it! And by golly, he had it!

WITH a grin he cut to starboard to avoid the choppy water of her wake. Skimmed into the clear and gave the stock job its head. Inch by inch he crept up on the *Miss-Quote*. He knew Darrylene was playing with him. Her racing hydro had speed to spare, but the thrill of competition pulsed through his veins like heady wine.

Suddenly the machine-gun crackle of another motor caused him to turn. Looking back he saw a silver hydro bearing down. White water exploded from its guard-rails in crescent arcs as it sliced over the surface at annihilating speed.

Spike's eyes bulged in sudden, uncontrollable fear at the sight. Water! Acres and gallons of it, stretching indistinctly into the distance. In choking panic he clutched his wheel with icy hands. His blood congealed and froze in leaden streaks, leaving him cold and stiff. Water!

Behind him the thundering crescento increased. It hammered into his skull like a thousand pneumatic hammers. Ahead he saw the buoy denoting shallow water further on. Heard Darrylene throttle back to take it. Automatically he slowed down as a glistening hull loomed to port. He dared to glance over—peered into the poised, disdainful face of Larry Tepoorten!

Spike was too concerned with his own inborn phobia to realize Tepoorten's lacing hydro was crowding him. With skilled recklessness, Larry maneuvered his thin shelled hull beside the stock model. He saw Spike's tight lipped, white countenance. His staring, unseeing eyes. With a harsh laugh, Tepoorten leaned down in his cock-pit and extracted the paddle Hydro racers use when stalled. With a sudden knife-like slash he brought it down on Spike's unprotected head!

The result was devastating! It broke Spike's death grip on the wheel. The hydro swerved sickeningly. Arrowed with unprecedented velocity at the high priced, hand made mahogany hull of Tepoorten's famous *Little Barracuda III*!

The impact was shattering. It flung Spike into the water and tore a

gaping hole in Tepoorten's shell as it swerved abruptly off course. It's motor whining like ten thousand banshees, the silver racer shot from the water and plummeted head-on into the shallow water buoy!

There was a splintering crash, a hoarse shriek from Tepoorten and a churning, foamy upheaval as its thousand dollar engine threshed itself to pieces in the muddy bottom of Tuxedo Lake.

Spike's kapok life jacket kept him afloat, but he was glassy eyed when Darrylene pulled him into her boat. He lay sprawled across the turtle-deck, panting and heaving until she transferred him to the Tepoorten work boat to rush him ashore.

A mechanic took over the *Miss-Quote* as Darrylene propped Spike in the stern. She gently administered to him as Larry stood sullenly by. He was trembling with rage.

"Did you see what he did?" he cried. "Deliberately wrecked my boat and tried to kill me! Five thousand dollars worth of the best hydro in America—a mass of junk!" He wiped the water from his eyes with an impatient gesture. "I'll never be able to replace it," he whined.

Darrylene's laugh was brittle. "I saw it all, Larry," she replied coldly. "You purposely crowded him in the hope he'd smack the buoy! But your plans misfired and you're lucky to be alive. You deserve everything you got!"

Larry glared at her, then tried to laugh it off. "He's as yellow as a Chinese flag!" he sneered.

Darrylene's answer was so surprising it momentarily brought Spike out of his coma. "If you were as much afraid of water as he is," she said. "They couldn't get you aboard the *America* with a derrick!"

ONCE ASHORE, Tepoorten hurriedly disappeared. Darrylene dispatched a mechanic for a doctor. In a few minutes he arrived and immediately attended to Spike's needs.

"Just a bad case of shock," he said with professional assurance. "He'll be all right in a few days."

Shortly afterwards, Spike scram-

bled shakily to his feet. "Thanks a lot, Darrylene," he said huskily. "I'll be all right."

Darrylene patted him gently on the back. "Okay, Spike," she answered kindly. "Mr. Tepoorten's mechanic will ferry you back to the house in the work boat. It's too crowded in the *Miss-Quote*."

Spike watched her twirl the motor and shoot from the tiny dock in a swirl of spray. He turned to the waiting mechanic. "I'm ready any time," he said.

In the ride across the lake Spike felt anything but good. The mere sight of the water sent spasms of fear snaking through him. To relieve his mind he spoke to the mechanic. "Mr. Tepoorten's boat badly wrecked?" he ventured.

"Finished!" was the laconic reply.

Spike shrugged. "Oh, well, he can get plenty of new ones."

The mechanics laugh was harsh. "Oh, sure. What's five thousand bucks more to a guy what owes a quarter million!"

"What d'ya mean?" asked Spike uncomprehendingly.

"I work for the Atlas people, see. Tepoorten's in so deep with us our outfits' practically taken over th' whole Tepoorten Boat Works. We've advanced him money for expansion, for advertisin', for promotin' stock an' th' Lord knows what. Now he's borrowed money on his rep to win this Hudson river race. If he don't cop it, our old man collects his notes an' th' Tepoorten Boat Works is no more. It's Atlas!"

"Jeez," muttered Spike, slowly understanding. So that was why Larry couldn't go through with his verbal contract with Rossiter. He had to win with an Atlas engine or lose the whole Tepoorten Boat Works. A fine state of affairs! And the heel was trying to blame it on him for socking him in the puss.

No wonder his engagement to Darrylene would be off. He couldn't afford to lose! By losing he forfeited the boat business and his income. He'd no longer be the heir of the Tuxedo Park Tepoorten's; he'd be just another guy looking for a job!

OVER A hundred boats were drawn up at the starting line in Albany for the 133-mile dash to New York. Boats of every eligible description. Two man racing Runabouts, 225 cubic inch Inboards, four classes of Hydroplanes, ranging from the flimsy shingles and single cylinder outboard motors of Class A, to the rugged four cylinder power plants of Class F.

The contestants were tense. To make the race fair, the boats with the greatest horsepower were handicapped in time. Spike's entry, the *Un-Quote*, sistership of Darrylene's famous *Miss-Quote*, was the largest type of hydroplane. They were not due to start till 9 A.M. Then came the Runabouts and Inboards.

Spike's face was strained and his hand on the automatic throttle cold. He glanced at Darrylene in the boat beside him. She was outwardly calm, her face pale. But he knew she was determined to win despite Tepoorten's ungentelemanly assertion he had to win or else! She didn't know why he had to win. But it was apparent from the set of her resolute chin she didn't particularly care whether he married her or not. *She would win or else!*

Down the line lay Larry Tepoorten's silver hulled *Little Barracuda IV*. It was aptly named like its master—the knifing, slashing demon of the seas. Tepoorten was calm. His lean face wearing the confident smirk of a mechanical rabbit in a greyhound race.

At 8:55 motors began to pop deafeningly. Spike primed his engine and jerked the starting cord. With a roar the *Un-Quote* moved into mid-stream. He circled warily until the hand on the big clock crossed sixty.

Bang!

They were off! Twenty Class F hydroplanes surged down river. At first it was a mad scramble for the narrow channel between the oil refinery and the west bank. Tepoorten shot through first. Then Darrylene, two white boats and Spike. In the widening channel he began to get the feel of his hydro. He had tried it out on the river and found it wasn't the

same as Tuxedo Lake. Choppier. And a much faster boat than the stock model.

As the field thinned, he let out his motor until the *Un-Quote* bucked and shimmied. A familiar feel to Spike. Crouched forward over the wheel, knees resting in a squatting position, he surged past one of the white boats.

An icy blast of fear consumed Spike as he dared to glance at the blurring water. He gritted his teeth and tried to imagine it was the track of a speedway. Anything but water!

Slowly he overhauled the other white boat. Spray flew back from its threshing prop into Spike's tense face. Doggedly he crept up as the old fear of water laid icy tentacles on his throat. It paralyzed his muscles and froze his hands in a death grip on the wheel. Suddenly he saw his father and brother drowning again, and his eyes went glassy.

Wide open, the *Un-Quote* blasted forward. Faster, faster! He passed Darrylene at so furious a clip his hydro was almost out of control. She tried to match his speed, but realizing the danger point, let him slip past. Ahead, in an ever lessening gap, was Tepoorten's silver streak, the *Little Barracuda IV*!

Tepoorten heard him coming. He zig-zagged erratically off course as the *Un-Quote* ploughed relentlessly onward. Nausea gripped Spike's stomach as he tried to swerve past. For a fleeting instant it looked as if the two hurtling shingles would crash! But Tepoorten gave way. He watched Spike swirl past, a look of surprise constricting his features.

LEADING the field Spike was only conscious of it. His mind was in the grip of horrible memory. The fear of overturning and being immersed in water. Water! He stared at it in fascinated fixation as more and more of it stretched between his boat and Larry's.

It was inevitable that Spike couldn't hold that mad pace without upsetting! Fate intervened against him. Hurling past two small islands before the bend at Catskill Creek, a

ferry boat hove into view. Spike tugged at the wheel to avoid it. The *Un-Quote* skidded precariously, hit a wave broadside, teetered uncertainly and stalled as Spike crashed back the throttle.

The impact split open the narrow seams on the *Un-Quote's* thin skinned hull and water oozed into the cockpit. With a curse Spike realized he'd have to keep going to prevent sinking altogether. Before his rocking craft had regained its equilibrium, he spun the starting cord.

Simultaneously, Darrylene and Tepoorten barrelled past. Then came a white boat and a fan-like wave of miscellaneous craft. Spike paid scant attention as his motor again broke into a defiant roar and the *Un-Quote* lifted its prow to the sky. Losing but minutes—he was on his way!

Instead of leading, he was now an also-ran. An unfamiliar position for Spike. Eyes narrowed and mouth a grim straight line, he crouched tensely over his wheel and crashed headlong into the breakers caused by a dozen other boats. He passed one after another in a blaze of heedless, harrowing speed.

Gone now was his fear of the water. It was but a numbing memory in the background of his mind. Taking its place in his foremost consciousness was this crazy, bone-rattling, ear-splitting, body stiffening mad marathon!

Rossiter had told him he was staking all on this race. Either Darrylene or he had to win it! If they didn't, Rossiter outboards would fade into oblivion, which meant motorcycle engines as well—the fastest in the world. Spike was vitally concerned about that, his chosen profession. Rossiter motors had to survive or else!

Mile after mile he charged down river, clapping turbulently over the rough water as the lusty Rossiter outboard snarled defiance in its wake. Boat after boat he passed. Some gunning all out, others chugging along with a burned out piston or leaking seams caused by the interminable pounding.

IT WAS AN HOUR before he again saw the leaders. With an oath he recognized the *Little Barracuda*. Tepoorten was still leading! A hundred yards in his wake, Darrylene dynamited along like the thoroughbred she was. With renewed vigor, Spike bent low to offer less wind resistance. He unleashed the *Un-Quote* to the last notch on the throttle. Drove hard, his body cramped and legs numbed from the battering.

As Poughkeepsie loomed on the east bank, Spike turned in to refuel. Within three minutes he was in mid-stream again and wide open when his motor suddenly spluttered and died.

Believing he had failed to re-open his shut-off valve, Spike found it surprisingly on. Hurriedly he checked his plugs and wiring, then the carburetor. Here the fluid failed to evaporate—water! With a curse Spike jerked off the tank top and verified his discovery. The gas attendant had filled his tank with water!

Mumbling incoherently, Spike stared about him. So Tepoorten got to the gas attendant first and paid him off to fill his tank with water. The lousey skunk! With a sudden panicky sensation he wondered if Darrylene had also been a victim of the same gag? And if so, how far had she been able to drive?

Hastily draining his carburetor and gas line, Spike paddled off in the direction of a stalled hydro hovering close by. He saw its motor torn and twisted and obviously out of the race. He hailed the pilot. "Can you spare some gas?"

"Sure," was the weary response, "I won't need any more today. Immediately Spike drained his tank of water. Refilling it quickly, he jerked the starting cord. "Thanks, kid," he sang out. "I'll do as much for you someday."

With a blast he gave the *Un-Quote* its head. Last place again! Glancing about he saw the *Inboards* and *Runabouts* barely ahead in mid-stream. They'd made almost an hour on him in time. Spike bent low—changed his position. He had to keep day-

light between his hull and the water to prevent it seeping in and cutting down his speed.

Wide open he hurdled the crests and dynamited past a mis-firing red speedster. A black boat gave him a race, but was soon lost behind in the streaking, knifing fury of his onslaught. He slipped past one pilot after another, daringly, inexorably, then finally surged into a wide stretch of river where a tiny speck in the distance denoted a stalled hydro.

Nearing it his throat constricted—Darrylene! He shut off and idled up beside her. Her face was flushed and streaked with oil. With an impatient gesture she pointed to her engine. "I think there's water in the gas," she gasped.

"I know there is," replied Spike grimly.

So Tepoorten had double-crossed her too! He might have known. Without hesitating Spike grabbed a wrench and began unloosening the bolts that held his motor to the transom. Darrylene stared at him bewilderedly.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Changing engines with you."

At her cry of protest, he pointed to the water in the cock-pit of his boat. "I'm sinking, sec. Seams split! You have a much better chance than I with a good motor."

Darrylene saw the logic in his act and hurriedly began to help. As the last nut was tightened on the *Miss-Quote*, a breeze blew in from the west. With it came a fleecy mist which obscured the sun. Spike lifted her water-logged engine into his boat and shoved off.

"I don't know how to thank you," said Darrylene solemnly.

Spike impatiently waved her on. "Get goin'! Get goin'!" he cried excitedly. "An' cop this grind from Tepoorten—or else!"

WITH A snarl of unleashed power, the *Miss-Quote* surged away. Spike watched it go. So that was that. Presently the mists thickened, laying a deep grey blanket of fog over the river. Spike watched it

settle with a sense akin to fear. Suddenly he grabbed the paddle as the crackling exhausts of surging outboards whammed closer.

He paddled and alternately bailed. Paddled frantically as the water reached his thighs. Inch by inch it increased as Spike's spirits sank lower. All about him, hydros whizzed in every direction as the fog closed about in a gigantic sheet of impenetrable gloom. They could only guess at their direction.

Spike's veins stood out in leaden ridges as he waited for the inevitable collision! Desperately paddling and bailing, he fought his water-logged shingle all the way to shore. With a sigh of relief he discerned the lights of cars travelling the Albany Post Road. With renewed energy he dug in, finally grounded his boat with a rasping swish on a sandy beach.

He jumped ashore. Then lifted Darrylene's motor from the cockpit and drained the carburetor and tank. Next he overturned the *Un-Quote* and emptied it of water. Lastly he bolted the outboard back on the transom and climbed the steep bank to the road in search of gas.

At the top of the hill he found a filling station. Within five minutes Spike had returned to the hydro and was scudding off shore. Hugging the riverbank, he kept his eyes glued on the intermittent flashes of automobile headlights on Highway 9. As they receded, he came inshore to pick them up. Then retreated if they came too close and the possibility of his hitting the beach.

It was a nerve wracking business. But he had the advantage over the other racers who had either slowed down or were circling blindly in mid-stream. As mile after mile flashed by he could hear their motors in the gloom, groping their way at half throttle through the murk.

Eyes two frosty slits glinting through the haze, lips compressed and muscles taut, Spike forced the *Un-Quote* to the limit. He had but one comforting thought. If he hit anything at this speed, he'd knock himself unconscious before he struck the water. Was his old dread of it re-

turning? He shook the thought from his mind.

Suddenly, like the lifting of a curtain, he zoomed out of the fog. In a wide, sunlit panorama stretched the Hudson. On his left was Yonkers, and directly ahead two speedboats fighting it out neck and neck. Darrylene and Tepoorten, leading the race!

Recklessly Spike forged ahead. Suddenly a wild oath escaped his windburned lips. He saw Tepoorten's silver hydro abruptly swerve! Darrylene tried to avoid him, but her maneuver was too late. With deliberate, vicious impetuosity, Tepoorten aimed the *Little Barracuda* straight at the *Miss-Quote*!

There was a shattering, seam-splitting impact! Like a sheaf of wheat thrown pell-mell from a binder, Darrylene crashed headlong into the water! Her boat upended, catapulted bow first and sank with barely a ripple. Like a hit-run driver, Tepoorten limped away, his prow caved in and seams gushing water.

BLIND WITH helpless rage, Spike throttled down and circled to pick up Darrylene. He saw her come to the surface, and his heart glowed with admiration as she struck out toward his boat. Leaning over, he yanked her into the cock-pit. For a moment he stared at her. Then seeing she was unhurt, he gently pushed her behind the wheel.

"You deserve to win this race, Darrylene," he said. "Now get goin'!"

"But, Spike," she protested. "We can't—"

"I know," he interrupted. "Rules forbid two occupants in Class F hydroplanes. So I'm takin' a powder!"

He stood up. With a single, deliberate step he put one foot on the coaming and plopped into the water! That took courage. And it was the bravest thing Spike Monaghan ever did. For a brief, awe-struck moment Darrylene stared at him as his kapok life jacket buoyantly kept him afloat, then she yanked savagely on the throttle!

From his vantage point, Spike saw the *Un-Quote* rapidly gain on the

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Sabers Are for Saps

By LUKE TORLEY

"You should have known, kid, that if a man insists on a particular weapon against your preference, it must mean that he's not so hot on the one you prefer."

UNDERNEATH the applause for Carroll, the crowd was making a murmur of comment, half disappointed, half mocking. The undertone swirled around Benicke's feet like quicksand even after the locker-room door was closed.

He glanced briefly at his manager with smarting eyes and sat down on the bench to pick miserably at the lacings of his sandals. As he bent the plastron rode up and seemed to shut off his breath.

"What happened, kid?" Bart demanded around his eternal dead cigar. "Cheest! I never had no blow-up like this before."

"It was the lights," Benicke said dully.

"The lights? Wasn't nothin' wrong with the lights. They was right overhead—regulation stuff. No shadows on the mat except right under you and Carroll."

Benicke didn't try to explain it further. He opened his locker, set his foil in the clip and hung up the plastron and mask. There was a dirty smudge, like the mark of an old eraser, across the rough quilted canvas of the target—the mark of Carroll's button. The little man's foil had seemed to bend nearly double; on the recovery he had snapped the button across Benicke's chest and off the foil into the darkness beyond the mat.

In an amateur match such a disengagement would have been more than a defeat—it would have been an insult. It was fencer's etiquette to feel your opponent's blade and make your points without unnecessary violence. Carroll's ruthless attack had told the excited watchers in the stands plainly what he thought of Benicke's ability—

But maybe among the pros things were different; Benicke didn't know.

It was his first professional match. He'd come billed boxer-style as "the Minnesota Flash," straight from high school and a startling amateur career. There'd been a good deal of criticism of Bart when the manager had signed him to meet Carroll, a foilsman with his eye on the championship, without any preliminaries. It looked as if the critics hadn't been just beating their gums.

He pulled his shirt off over his close-cropped yellow hair and stepped into the shower. Bart leaned against the door, chewing the black butt.

"Cheer up," he said, "maybe it ain't so bad. Everybody has bad days. I seen you fence before when you was terrific—we'll shoot a little lower next time and play it close."

"It'll be just the same next time," Benicke said, and turned on the faucets. Bart shouted a question against the steaming water, but Benicke couldn't hear what it was. After a moment the manager spat disgustedly at the drain and went out.

Benicke was glad to see him go. He didn't feel up to talking to anybody. He dressed rapidly, closed his locker and shrugged into his coat. What he wanted most was to get back to his room and pack.

But he didn't get the chance. A slim, gley-clad figure leaning against the building straightened as he came out and pitched a cigarette away.

"Benicke?"

"That's me."

"My name's McLaughlin—maybe you've heard of me. Like to talk to you."

The name clicked at once. McLaughlin had been the undisputed champion of the previous generation for many years, and until recently had been putting down younger men with monotonous regularity, just for the hell of it. He was retired now, but served on the PFLA board.

"Sure. Let's go over to the diner there."

McLAUGHLIN said little until the coffee came. Then he looked directly at Benicke and began, "I caught your match tonight."

"You didn't catch much, that's a cinch," Benicke said, beginning to flush. "I guess I was pretty much of a laugh with that 'Minnesota Flash' stuff."

"Sure you were," McLaughlin returned evenly. "Bart's your manager, isn't he? He's full of promotion ideas like that, and can't seem to learn from experience. But you will, so that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Whatever made you fence foils with Carroll? Don't you know saber?"

"Well, sure. But Carroll insisted that it was no fit weapon for tournament; he talked Bart into argeeing that foils were there only real test of a fencer. 'Sabers are for saps,' he said."

"He would; but by that line of reasoning he should have insisted on epee. You should have known that if a man insists on a particular weapon against your preference, it must mean he's not so hot on the one you prefer. As for you—you're never going to be more than fair at foils; you haven't the build. Foils are weapons for quick, little, nervous men like me. Carroll will beat you every time with 'em."

"I guess I am a nice target," Benicke said ruefully.

"Another thing. Carroll fights Italian style. You should have known the minute he took guard how to beat him from the French positions."

"I never learned anything about the Italian ones."

"Well, it was a two-handed one originally—the other hand for stil-etto. That means it's designed for infighting. The reason why the French system is the favorite one is because half the movements you make in the Italian are wasted giving a balance advantage to an empty hand. If you know that you can beat it every time—especially *with the edge*, because Italian is a *poignard* style, and a man who uses it is all wound

up in a technique that never used the edge at all."

Benicke clattered his cup into the saucer excitedly. "I get it," he said. "No wonder I kept fanning the air. Every time I started a coup d'arret I wound up with nothing in sight but the lights on the mat. He kept recovering in the wrong direction."

McLaughlin nodded. "Favoring that empty hand, you see. Two centuries ago you would have stabbed the first time that happened; but nowadays the opportunity goes to waste." He leveled his spoon at the blond boy. "But none of this explains quite why you fell all over yourself like that on the mat. Hell, man, nobody can be *that* lousy, let alone somebody the Board passes for a pro match. Just what was the matter?"

Benicke had never before talked to anybody about the lights, and it was hard getting started; but the slender old-timer before him inspired confidence.

"It's a funny business," he said hesitantly. "Maybe you'll think I'm nuts, but.... Well, when I was a little kid, maybe about three, my family lived in Pennsylvania—because I'm blond and blue-eyed and live in Minnesota people think I'm a Swede, but I'm not; I'm from a German family. Anyhow, we went to the Jersey shore for the summer, and something happened. I'm not sure what. All I know is that I got left alone on the beach, asleep, for nearly a whole afternoon. I got a bad case of sun all over me, and when I woke up I couldn't walk. I just crawled; for I don't know how long, with the sun glaring and the waves roaring in my ears. When somebody finally came and got me I was damn near dead. I was sick for a long time after."

He stopped and pulled at his coffee.

"Go on."

"That's nearly all there is to it. It's just that whenever I get into a big open space, with bright lights, I get scared. I feel like the lights are blinding me; my knees go all watery, and I'm just generally no good for anything. That's what happened to me tonight—I'd never fenced in such a

big hall before, and I just plain turned green when I got out there on the mat."

He looked at McLaughlin belligerently. "Or maybe I should've said yellow."

"Don't you go putting words in my mouth," the past champion retorted. "I don't think you're yellow, or nuts either—though I'll tell you straight that you'd be a terrible temptation to a belfry sawbones. Do you think you can lick it?"

Benicke bit his lower lip doubtfully. "I'm willing to give it another try, I suppose. I'm not trying to alibi out of what I did—I blew up, and that's that. But it's a lot harder thing to live with than it sounds when I tell it."

"All the more reason to get rid of it. Ever talk about it before? No? I thought not." McLaughlin eyed him shrewdly. "Feel better, maybe?"

Benicke grinned. "Maybe I do."

"That's the ticket! All right. I'd like to see you beat Carroll. I don't like his type. Fencing's a funny sport, half skill and half the rigidest code of manners there is. Carroll's got the skill but his manners could use some smoothing; he's not the kind of guy I like to see on a mat."

He got up and held out his hand. "Sign up with him again, kid. I don't know what you can do about your trouble, but if you can beat that, you can beat Carroll. Remember—use the blade, not the point."

BENICKE spent most of his spare time, as well as his regular practice hours, matching himself with the singlestick against any partner he could find, and gradually felt his confidence coming back. It was a long process, and tougher than it might have been back home. Among others he crossed laths with several of the men who'd been on the same bill the night of his stumblebum performance against Carroll. He didn't much want to tangle with them, but several of them challenged him out of curiosity; there was surprise all around when he succeeded in giving an excellent account of himself. After

that the atmosphere of the gym became perceptibly friendlier—apparently the blond kid was all right, he'd just been off his feed or something.

In the locker room on The Night, however, Benicke felt like a man in the process of learning that his inherited fortune contained an unknown number of plugged nickels. The sword looked odd slung in the clip, clumsy and huge; and every time the door opened for the contestants of another match, he could see through it part of the arena, seemingly dim and hazy with distance.

"How d'ya feel, kid?" Bart asked nervously.

"I feel all right. Do you ever swallow that cigar?"

"Nah. I sure hope you're okay. I got my reputation to think of, too—your next blowup send y'back to the bush. I shouldna letcha match Carroll again. Why didnya take it slow, and work y'way up?"

"Oh, stop griping," Benicke growled. "If I don't make it this time, I'm not going to be worrying about you."

The other door squeaked back and Carroll came in, scuffing his sandals cheerfully. He ran a sardonic eye over Benicke's huge frame.

"So I got the Swedish Terror on my docket again," he said. "You got more guts than brains, handsome."

"Save your wind," Benicke said. "You might need it."

"To whack a man with a blade? That's no effort." He jumped lightly over a bench and went to his own locker. "Take it from me in a friendly way—if a man's faster'n you are with a tough weapon, you aren't likely to lick him with an easy one."

"Sabers, four minutes," the locker-room annunciator droned.

"That's your cue, kid," a familiar voice said. Benicke looked around quickly. It was McLaughlin.

"Hi, champ," Carroll said.

McLaughlin ignored him. "You look all right," he said to Benicke. "I've been hearing good reports about you at practice. How about the other business?"

"I can't tell till I get out there. I've been practicing on it, though."

"How?"

"Over by the lake."

McLaughlin looked at him respectfully. "I can about imagine what that took."

"So that's the story," Carroll sneered. "You been training with the Grand Old Man, eh? Well, he ain't so grand as he used to be. I can take you both on at once if I have to and not raise a sweat over it."

"Two minutes," said the announcer. Carroll jammed his mask over his face and went out, slapping his canvas trouser-leg cockily with the flat of his blade.

"Fencing," McLaughlin said ruminatively, looking after him, "is supposed to be the aristocrat of sports. Sometimes I wish we could debar a man for having a runny mouth."

Benicke shrugged and put on his own mask and gauntlet. He hefted the saber; once in his hand it felt all right. It was a good PFLA blade, not much like the loose-socketed old sticker he'd had in high school. The cup made a smooth metal fist over his knuckles.

"Sabers, first event," said the announcer.

"Go to it, kid," McLaughlin said softly.

Bart said, "Ya sure ya feel all right?"

The saber split the air and the dead cigar butt splatted against the ceiling.

THE PLACE was vast, even vaster than he'd remembered it. From the floor entrance the mat was a white postage stamp a mile away. Above, in a black sky, two suns funnelled glare down upon it. Benicke swallowed and maintained a steady walk.

At the mat the crowd noise went up a little. The story of the first blowup and the return match had gotten around. There was some tendency to look on the saber duel as a grudge fight, almost like wrestling. Over the steady wash of sound the arena's p. a. system boomed unrecognizable words.

"Salute," said the ref.

Benicke planted his sandals on the

mat, touched his point and raised his hilt to his mouth. His eyes locked with Carroll's; the other's mouth twisted mockingly.

"Guard."

The blades ticked gently together. Benicke watched the smooth, tense motion with which his opponent took position, the way the left hand dropped to linger over an imaginary scabbard. To his own sword hand came the faint, indescribable sense of a lunge in leash—he could not tell exactly where it was directed—

"Engage!"

Carroll's blade exploded toward tierce. It was a short, choppy swing, as if he were relying on his point for a toe cut. Benicke parried at the forte, the parry became a smooth riposte in octave, and Carroll stepped back lightly, yanking his own toe out of danger. Benicke recovered, catching the counter-thrust with a clang against his hilt.

For a moment the two feinted like sparring cats. The crowd had become noisier. The big blond boy was not being quite the comic relief he'd been expected to be.

Certainly Carroll didn't look a bit amused. He broke blade contact and managed to hold the break just long enough to let Benicke lose the feel, fainted toward sixte, disengaged again and lunged at Benicke's throat, his body twisting strangely. Benicke's saber whistled up. The two weapons locked. Benicke shifted his weight; Carroll's off-center stance became a sort of agonized totter, and Benicke's blade cracked viciously against the crown of his mask.

A bellow of excited surprise went up from the dark stands. Benicke began to feel a little queasy. The lights seemed unbearably hot, bright, distant. His skin crawled under the heavy duck shirt, and sweat made the mask templates feel slick. The surging roar of the crowd was a single smooth sound, like—like surf.

He gritted his teeth and engaged again, hardly hearing the referee's calls. Carroll's face was dark and murderous. Outside the double circle of light the dimness stretched away forever, and the surf beat ceaselessly.

Carroll moved in with swift, chop-

py slashes, one after the other in relentless succession. Confused, Benicke retreated; the blades went clack clack, clack clack, clack clack to the mechanical parries.

HIS HEEL FELT a familiar sensation; he was on the edge of the mat. The crowd noise became dizzily louder. Sweat ran down into his eyes. He made a desperate riposte. Carroll's counter-riposte caught him squarely across the chest.

Carroll walked away, his swagger markedly returning. They took guard again. This was the one; Benicke blinked and his eyes cleared a little. They were just lamps.

Carroll attacked immediately, with brash confidence. Benicke parried cautiously and disengaged, watching his opponent's stance. Still favoring that useless left hand. Carroll broke contact again, feinted toward prime. Benicke knew that one now; when it came, Carroll's blade slid over his head harmlessly.

Benicke crossed quickly, but he was still no match for the slim, dark duelist on speed. Carroll's recovery was spring-swift. His face showed that he had lost his temper again, but he was playing it for caution.

The blades went clack clack, clack clack; the sandals danced forward and back on the mat. Benicke began to press a little, then fell back again, drawing Carroll forward. *All right*, he thought; *if he's faster than I am, let him make the most of it.*

Carroll did. His blade flew. They were all standard cuts, almost practice routines, but they flew faster and faster. In a moment he would reach Benicke's fastest speed. Then, just a fraction faster, a compound attack—

Benicke moved as little as possible, flexing his wrist and arm delicately;

but at each parry he thrust Carroll's blade back more stiffly than was necessary. The small wiry arm attacking him was tiring more rapidly than its owner knew—and each new cut was a fraction further to the right. In a moment Carroll would be in a swell spot to use that invisible stiletto. Benicke drew it on.

Suddenly Carroll lashed forward. It was even faster than Benicke had anticipated. His prepared coupe de temps tangled in a whirlwind of metal. Sweating, he gave ground—again to the right.

Carroll grunted triumphantly. His wrist turned over, and the edge of his blade slashed skyward—

Benicke took one step to the left, and his saber thumped Carroll's plastron heavily. Carroll tripped and fell completely off the mat. The crowd screamed its delight.

McLAUGHLIN was still laughing weakly when Benicke came into the locker room.

"I never expected anything like *that*," he gasped, wiping his eyes. "Son, when you learn a lesson, you learn it whole hog! Did you plan it that way?"

"No," Benicke grinned. "At least, not to knock him over. I just didn't realize he weighed so much less than I do—he was way off balance and I hit him harder than I figured."

McLaughlin shook his head wonderingly. "Damndest thing I ever saw," he said. "I guess you must feel pretty good."

"Yeah. Especially about licking my trouble. You know—I can do something now I never could before."

"What's that?"

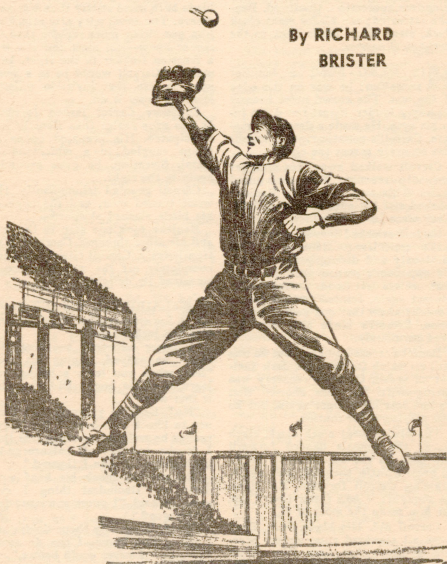
The blond boy turned slightly pink. "Take my girl swimming!"

THE END



Run, Rookie Run!

By RICHARD
BRISTER



Vic Edwards was up against as tough a situation as a rookie ever had to handle, with 10-1 odds that he'd lose his opportunity through failure to come through on a deal the best of them might well botch!

VIC EDWARDS jiggled on the balls of his feet and watched O'Dowd send a sinker ball down there. It cut the rubber in half, belt high. The Lion hitter blinked in mild amazement, not offering at it. Vic's barrel chest deflated in a sigh of relief, and some of the fine lines of tension sifted away from his round Welsh face.

He cupped his small hands toward O'Dowd and yelled nervously, "Fan him, Lefty."

This was Vic's first day with the league-leading Titans. He'd handled his shortstop post with ridiculous ease, back at Scranton. But this was the top, the big time. He'd always been high-strung, too serious-minded for his own good, he supposed, but making good in the world was not entirely a selfish concern, the way Vic looked at it.

There were a lot of mouths to be fed, back home, now Pop had passed on; and this was his big league try-out, the one big chance of a lifetime. And if that wasn't enough to get his nerves jumpy, he could always think of the screwy welcome he'd received this morning, when he'd reported to Buck Daly.

"Don't wanta worry you, Edwards, but I better warn you. You've got a job on your hands, out there at shortstop. Be prepared to cover a good deal of territory."

Vic frowned, puzzled. "That's a shortstop's job, Mr. Daly."

The tall, painfully thin pilot had looked almost too pleased at Vic's reaction. "That's the spirit we like on the Titans. Hope you make good out there, Edwards." Buck Daly sifted long, battered fingers through his wispy red hair. "I've had trouble plugging that hole at shortstop all season. If you can turn the trick, we'll romp through the rest of this season."

"Trouble?" Vic's eyes narrowed. "What sort of trouble?"

"You'll know," said the stoop-shouldered pilot, "soon enough."

That was as much as Vic could get out of Buck Daly. It was the man's attitude that had made Vic uneasy, as if the pilot knew Vic was

doomed to failure before he started.

The rest of the team hadn't done anything to weaken his conviction that there was something wrong out there at shortstop. "You the knew shortstop?" Lefty had asked, and when Vic had admitted he was, the long portsider had smiled thinly. "Good luck, pal."

"Sounds like I need it," Vic said, fishing. "What's the deal?"

But the tall, sober-eyed pitcher ignored Vic's question, and instead, proceeded to introduce the rookie to some of the others.

Al Hovendon, the chunky backstop had been friendly. "Be ready to move fast, right or left, rookie."

Pete Day, the first sacker, had a grip like steel. "You stay in there punching, kid. Like to have a permanent shortstop, up here with the Titans."

"Listen," Vic said, exasperated, "what gives? You guys are acting like a bunch of Irishmen at my wake. How about waiting till you see me in action, before making your minds up how I'm gonna do out there?"

McGinnis, the wiry center garden-er, chuckled shortly. "You ain't the first shortstop Buck's tried this year, Edwards."

How could he help wondering, Vic thought now, after such a greeting: He smacked his glove pocket with a balled-up fist, and set himself as Lefty went into his painfully slow windup.

THIS WAS the eighth, the game still scoreless. O'Dowd had pitched air-tight ball, and the Lion at the platter was gimlet-eyed, hungry for a piece of that horsehide. He swung smartly on the grooved fast one. There was a clean click, and a hot grounder clipped grass on its way past the mound.

Lefty made an abortive stab at it, but was too late to block it. The ball was sizzling toward the outfield, almost on a line for second base. By rights, Vic figured, it was Sam Calfin's private property. But the stocky second sacker was late getting started over toward it. Vic dug in for all he was worth and went down in a

lunging dive, desperately trying to get his glove in the path of the screaming pellet.

He got the tips of his fingers on it, but that wasn't enough to stop that hot baby. It bounced off the end of his glove and rolled twenty yards out toward center, before McGinnis raced in to cover on it. He fired it on a line to Sam Caflin, effectively holding the runner on first.

There was a groan from the home crowd in the grandstand, and a few whistles and catcalls for Vic's benefit. It was his error, sure, but he still figured Sam Caflin should have taken that ball. He went back to position, wearing a disgruntled expression. He had to make good in a hurry. That had been his first chance all day. Lefty wasn't giving the Lions even scratch hits. So his one chance to show as a fielding shortstop had made him look simple. He blamed Sam Caflin's laziness for that, and remembered Buck Daly's injunction: "Be ready to cover a lot of territory."

The lanky redhead hadn't been kidding, apparently.

But Vic fought back any resentful feeling against Caflin. We're all entitled to a certain number of mistakes, he figured, and so reserved judgment.

Stoop Donlan was at the plate, a rangy, aggressive swingaway hitter. Lefty worked carefully on him. But Donlan finally got one he liked, and poured all the immense power of his back and shoulders into his vicious swipe at it.

Vic's heart flopped miserably the minute he heard the sound of that poke. It listened like a homer. He hardly had to turn around to realize it was earmarked for some fan's pocket, out in the center field bleachers.

2-0, favor the Lions. And the fans would blame him, for starting the Lion rally off with that error, on a ball that should have been handled by Sam Caflin.

Lefty held them during the remaining minutes, and the score ended that way.

HHE FELT LIKE saying something to Caflin, on the way in. Just a slight hint, to make sure the stocky second baseman would pull his own share of the load in the future. He was thinking of his family, back home in Scranton, Mom and the girls, hugging the radio, praying for him. His resentment toward Caflin was still inside him, still in the controlled, hard-look stage, but ready to pop in hot words any minute, when Bucky Daly threw a bombshell at him.

"By the way, Edwards, you'll be roomin' with Caflin."

"But—hunh?"

"You got any objections?"

Vic sighed. From what he'd seen of the guy, Sam Caflin was a type who'd be hard to live with, loud and chesty, constantly talking, and hardly the tonic for edgy nerves that Vic would have preferred to live with. He shrugged his square shoulders limply. "Guess you're the doctor, Mr. Daly."

"Anything wrong?" The tall, red-headed pilot was staring at him.

"Look, Mr. Daly, if it was just for myself, I'd keep quiet about this. But—I've got a Mom and four little sisters at home who're counting on me. Pop's dead, and when I stepped out of the mines to try my luck at full-time baseball up here with the Titans, I made a tough decision. I've got to make good. I'm willing to cover my side of the sack out there, but—"

"But not Caflin's?"

Vic frowned. "Why should I have to—"

Buck Daly's freckled face looked suddenly tired. "I suppose I should've told you the story on Sam before the game, Edwards. But it was your first game up here; I didn't wanta worry you too much. We feel like we've gotta carry Sam, sort of. He's a wounded veteran, and—"

"Huh? Wounded how, Mr. Daly?"

Buck Daly's stooped shoulders dropped even lower. "Don't feel right, now I've told you that much. Sam's a bit touchy. It's only natural, I guess. You had to know, sooner or later. I'd hoped you'd get it from

him. That's one reason I'm sticking you in with him."

Vic felt a wave of shame sliding through him. He'd missed out on the war himself, tied to the mines as an essential worker, and his wages had been needed desperately at home, after Pop had died. But he'd always felt sort of uncomfortable about not having gone with the others. The feeling of uncompleteness came back in him now, stronger than ever. A lot of right he had to gripe about Caflin, a wounded veteran.

He couldn't pump any more out of Daly. But in their room that night, he got the whole thing direct from Caflin.

"Yeah, I shouldn't've let you try for that grounder, by rights, kid. Only, I don't move very fast to my right. Here—" he kicked of his left shoe and removed the stocking with a somewhat proud manner "—I'll show you the reason."

"Gee," Vic said. He was staring at Sam Caflin's left foot, from which the two smallest toes were missing. He suppressed a small shudder, hoping Sam wouldn't see it, and said, "No drive off the left foot, huh? I feel like a louse, Sam. No one told me. I—I thought you were loafing."

"I never loafed in my life on the ball field," Sam had a wide mouth, a flat blond nose, and wide black eyes. He looked like a prize fighter, and words came readily to him. "I didn't loaf over there on the other side, either. I was with General Smith, the old Bulldog Division. He waved at the missing toes. 'Kraut sniper did that. I stalked that guy like a deer, spent two solid hours sneaking up on him. Finally knocked him out of a tree with a spurt from a Tommy.'"

"Gosh," Vic said, and again a feeling of inadequacy gripped him. Here was a man who had risked his life, for such as himself. It seemed to Vic at that moment that stay-at-homes like himself could never possibly pay the debt they owed to those who'd been overseas, doing their fighting for them. The awareness of

duty toward Sam Caflin depressed him. What could anyone do to pay a man back for the sort of a loss Sam had suffered? Sam's injury wasn't much, but it was tragic to him, as a professional athlete.

SAM SEEMED to enjoy Vic's response to his account of the fighting. His stocky frame straightened, and he said, "That wasn't nothin', kid. I been through worse'n that, plenty times. Don't like to talk about it. Memory's still too sharp. But there was one time..."

There were a lot of times, a lot of stories to go with them. Maybe Sam didn't, as he had said, like to talk about them, but Vic heard them all. At the end of an hour, he was pumped brimful of blood and gore, and Sam was still talking. It was the first time Vic had ever heard the real inside stuff at first hand, from someone who'd been in the foxholes. He kept pumping Sam, wanting to know all about it, to know just what he had missed.

But it all left him brooding. He should have gone too. It wasn't right, for a guy like Sam to be forced to go through such terrible experiences, while Vic stayed home working the mines, not even suspecting how awful life was for those in the foxholes.

"I dunno, Sam," he said shamefacedly. "It seems rotten, somehow. I never saw any of it. Every one of us who stayed home owes you guys plenty. Sure wish I could do something, anything, to—"

"You might," Sam said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin, "play over a little closer to second."

Vic didn't hesitate for a fraction. He leaped at the chance. A strong sense of duty was ingrained deeply in him. That was what had kept him at work in the mines, supporting Mom and the girls, while other young men of his generation were off fighting. Maybe he was soft, too sentimental, but right now it seemed that what Sam Caflin asked was nothing.

"Sure," he said. "Sure thing, pal. Don't know why I shouldn't be able to cover a bit more ground out there."

THIS WAS the second of their five-game series with the Lions. Bucky had Art Thouless working the hill, and the big fellow was alternately cold and hot out there.

In the third, he wavered badly, and allowed a single. The next man up pounded a hard grass hopper out toward the second bag, and that was Vic's first fielding chance.

He leaped over fast, knowing he had to, if he hoped to stop it. It was a sizzling ball, and Vic couldn't get his body in front of it. He blocked it with his glove, pounced viciously on it, and rifled a snap throw toward Pete Day for the put-out.

But he was too hurried; his flip to the big first baseman went wide of the mark. The ball ended up under the grandstand, and the Lion hitter wound up on second.

There was a concerted groan from the crowd. Vic's heart flopped over with dismay. He punched his glove pocket, and told himself that he'd just have to learn to get started faster.

It would be his rotten luck, when his big chance had come, when he had finally found a possible way to take care of Mom and the girls without breaking his body and soul in the mines, that he'd have to find the cards stacked against him.

Back on the sandlots in Scranton, he could take on a little extra territory and not strain a muscle. But this was the big time; this was the league-leading Titans. You had to be on the ball every second, to stick in this kind of fast competition.

He found himself momentarily regretting his promise to help out Sam Caflin. Then a vision of the man's crippled foot floated before him. A realization of his, and everyone else's debt to the guy assailed him. He swore at the weakness that had made him waver.

Both pitchers were turning the heat on. There was no score till the eighth; there shouldn't have been any score then. One of the Lion batsmen sent a whistling line drive between second and third. It was Vic's ball. There were two down, so the

crowd yelled lustily, eager to see him pull that smash in and cut the Lions off for the end of the inning.

Vic was no less eager than they. He slammed his chunky frame over that way, his cleats driving hard in the choppy dirt. But he had been playing slightly out of position, ever mindful of his promise to Caflin. That was the trouble. He had too far to go, and too little time to get there. He flung himself bodily forward in a stretching leap for the pill.

It sailed swiftly past the tip of his outstretched glove, and came down fast for a neat little single.

The crowd booed lustily, and groaned a little. And well they might have. The safety was just the shot in the arm the Lions needed. The next man up walked. That worried Art Thouless. The kid pulled the string on a would-be fast ball, and the batter poked it against the center wall for a crashing three bagger.

Thouless stopped them by whiffing the next man. But the damage was done. 2-0 now, favor the Lions.

It ended that way, and once again it was the rookie, Vic Edwards, who had contributed the one all-important blunder that had cost them the full game.

THEY WERE a moody bunch in the showers. Especially after Pete Day came in with a morale-shattering pronouncement. "Just heard the tail end of the Bucks' game with the Tigers. They copped. There goes our lead. That puts 'em a half game up on us."

Buck Daly wasn't there; he'd already repaired morosely to his stadium office. There were a lot of cold glances tossed in Vic's direction. He stood it as long as he could and then faced them.

"All right, somebody say it. I flubbed the one that cost us the ball game." He didn't see Caflin, so he knew there was no danger of hurting the veteran's feelings. "I'm a short-stop. There's a limit to how much ground one guy can cover."

Al Hovendon, the stub-fingered catcher, said tartly, "Lay off Caflin. He's doin' the best he knows how.

The war's slowed him some, fieldin'. He makes up for it with his hittin'."

"I never said it was his fault," Vic flared. "I—"

Pete Day growled, "Look, kid, take the chip down off your shoulder. Caflin's a fixture, see? We all agreed on that at the start o' the season. We took a vote. We figured if winnin' the flag meant chuckin' a crip—a veteran outa the line-up, we didn't care that much about it. There's things more important. Thing is: it all falls on the shortstop. That means you. You either can handle the extra load or you can't. If that seems hardboiled to you, it's just tough. It's either stick up here, or back to Scranton."

Vic said thickly, "I'm for Sam just as strong as anybody in this room. It just seems unfair, sort of. This means a lot to me. I've got a mom and four kid sisters to take care of. This was my big chance and—" He stared bleakly at Day. "Hell, Pete, couldn't you play wider off first, and let Sam slide over? It'd close that gap up some."

"I'm doin' that already, rookie. You think Buck didn't think of that?"

A messenger stuck his head in the room. "Mr. Daly wants to talk to you, Edwards."

"Okay," Vic said bleakly. On the way up, he struggled with his problem. He was caught neatly, in a perfect pocket, he realized. It was either let down Mom and the girls back home, or let down Sam Caflin. On the surface of it, that ought to be a cinch of a decision. The average guy would just say the devil with Caflin and refuse to cover up any more for him.

It was different with Vic. The way he felt about not being a soldier was all mixed up in it. He'd always had too much conscience for his own good, he realized, too strong a sense of his obligations to others. One side of his mind kept saying, "Don't be a chump. Charity begins in the home, don't forget. Let Caflin worry about his own troubles."

Then his conscience chimed in. "Well, but there must be *some* way to see this thing through without let-

ting anyone down." If only he had a jackrabbit's legs, to cover more territory!

He walked into the tiny cubicle that served lean, red-thatched Buck Daly for an office, wondering what the pilot wanted of him. He didn't wonder very long.

"I hate to be blunt, Edwards," the old man said grimly, "but a manager has to. Frankly, I don't think you're going to be able to see this thing through. It's tough, having to cover so much territory. I may never find a man who can do it. But Caflin stays—that's for certain. And I'm bound to keep trying new shortstops, long as we have any chance for that pennant."

Vic gulped, fighting the ball of cotton that was wedged in his throat. "It's not fair, Mr. Daly." He was wondering what sort of a welcome home he would get, if he flopped tomorrow. "I—"

"I agree with you," Buck Daly said, and his thin shoulders drooped. He looked years older, in this moment. "It's the rottenest kind of a break for a rookie to get, on his first big league tryout. But my hands are tied, son. I simply don't have any choice in the matter. Let's hope you can turn the trick against those Lions tomorrow."

VIC DIDN'T completely understand the manager's frankly sympathetic attitude toward him until the next day, at game time. There was a strange face on the Titan bench, a towheaded rookie fresh up from Richmond. His name was Ren Foster. He played, Vic learned finally, shortstop.

Buck Daly looked sheepish when Vic shot a questioning glance at him. "Charlie Day sent him up here, Edwards. He's got a standing order to scout for hot shortstops. You'll still get your fair chance out there today. Prove you can take care of that territory, and Foster goes back; that's a promise. But there's no harm in having a man on tap to replace you, this late in the season."

To replace you. Vic hated the sound of that. He had visions of go-

ing back to the mines, grubbing a sorry existence out of the black bowels of the earth, and he didn't like it. It bothered him, out there.

In the first, he was slow getting started on a grounder that cut between second and third. He muffed it, the runner was safe, and the crowd started yapping at Bucky to "Take that punk rookie outta there, Daly. He runs like molasses."

It burned Vic up. They didn't know, of course, that Sam Caflin couldn't go fast to his right, and that Vic had to cover both his own spot and part of Sam's also. All they knew was that he was bobbling balls, and after the time-honored fashion of ball fans everywhere, they were after his scalp.

He began finally to perceive the utter hopelessness of his situation.

He went to the plate, in the Titan half, and whiffed miserably, compounding the grandstand's thirst for vengeance against him. They hated him now, knowing so little of what he was up against, and he could understand it. He had always fancied himself at the plate, but a dark mood gripped him. He could not fight his way through it.

In the third, he whiffed at the plate again. There were no runners on; it was not a clutch, but the cat-calls made a deafening thunder in his eardrums.

He had experienced some of the toughest crowds in the game, back at Scranton, but never had he heard himself cussed out with such awesome volume, with so many thousands of voices blending in a chorus of vituperation. His sensitive soul shrivelled before the avalanche of hatred.

He went out for the fourth and muffed two easy ground balls in succession, allowing the batters to win a brace of scratch singles. By that time, he had just about reached rock bottom.

Then Purdy, the Lion's home run king, stepped up to the plate and blasted a beauty into the bleachers at center, for a three-run clean-up of the bases. Vic hung his head, and wondered if it wasn't about time to

start looking for a convenient exit. That mob in the grandstand was in a dangerous mood. They seemed to think he was a Judas or something, that he'd muffed those two grounders on purpose.

In the dugout, Buck Daly's face was stormy, but his voice was impassive. "Don't let it get you, Edwards. Stay with it. You're going to finish this ball game."

Vic just looked at him and didn't answer. Buck Daly had promised him a last chance today, and meant him to have it. That much was plain.

He went to the bench and sat down alongside of the kid from Richmond, the new shortstop, Ren Foster.

Foster said slowly, "Looks like I picked a helluva job to understudy, hey, Edwards."

Vic didn't have the heart to tell the kid what was in prospect for him. "I dunno. You may turn out to be the guy Bucky's been lookin' for, Foster."

The kid looked wistful. "Wish I had a whole season of playin' behind me. I only had two months, down there with Richmond, and I'm still kind of rusty."

Vic said idly, "How come?"

"I was away," the kid said. "Three years in the Army."

Hovendon was out there at the platter. He poked one down toward third and ran like a rabbit. The Lion third sacker made his toss, and Hovey was out by a foot.

Vic sighed, relaxing. "Army, hey? You and Sam Caflin oughta get your head's together. He put in some years with the Bulldog divis—whup, there goes Day! Look at that apple!"

PETE DAY had nailed one. It was rising in a low, screaming arc over the first baseman's head. It kept on rising, coming down comfortably at last in the right field bleachers. The crowd let loose a torrent of applause, though it was only one run. The score was 3-1 now, still favor the Lions.

Vic was in the slot. He hefted three bats, watching McGinnis face the Lion hurler, who looked plenty worried. But Mac whiffed, and that

was the end of the Titan rally, such as it was.

It was 3-1 still when the Titans came up for the opening half of the ninth. Vic sat miserably on the bench, lower than a snake's belly in his morale by now. He hadn't hit one good ball, and he had continued to field like a high school player. He might as well be thinking of his speech when he got back to Scranton, he realized glumly.

Caflin was up. He watched two strikes and three balls float past, then swung hard on the money offering. It went through the pocket between first and second, a clean single.

The crowd found its voice, taking hope. Hovendon went out in an expectant silence. He whiffed, but his stay at the plate sent Caf down to second.

Pete Day popped out to center field. Two away now. McGinnis was up, Pete on deck, and Caflin had swung over to third on the popout.

McGinnis looked nervous. He failed to offer at a couple of wide ones. Vic watched weakly, hoping Mac would poke one, so Vic would at least get another crack at the apple. Vic heard a slight sound behind him. It was the kid from Richmond, Len Foster. He had moved to the rim of the dugout, away from the others.

"Say, Edwards—" he seemed sort of excited "—did you say Caflin was with the Bulldog Division?"

Vic frowned. He was thinking that if McGinnis got on, he'd be up there. He'd have a chance to make up for some boners. He was in no mood to talk about Caflin. "That's right, Foster. What about it?"

Foster slapped his pantsleg. "Caflin—I knew that name was familiar. Yeah, I—" He hesitated, his face going suddenly scarlet, as if he suddenly had realized he had spoken out of turn in bringing up such a subject at such a time.

Vic was curious. "What's up, kid? What about him?"

"Aw—it's nothing. Nothing important," said Foster. He moved to sit down, but Vic caught his sleeve and drew him close, where they could

talk without being overheard, in tense low whispers. "Spill it, pal. Anything to do with Sam is important to me. Damn' important!"

Foster fidgeted. Vic stared at him hard, and the kid finally spluttered, "It's not the kind of thing I like to pass on. Just one of those fool rumors, I guess. My cousin was with the Bulldog Division, and he told me about a guy named Caflin, an ex-ball player, who—uh—"

"Go on!" Vic snapped. "Who what?"

"Well, the guy got his foot mashed under a truck, at the point of embarkation, and never got overseas. There was some talk that he did it on purpose, but shucks—that couldn't be this guy."

Vic's head was spinning. He watched dazedly as McGinnis laid into one smartly and drove a Texas Leaguer neatly over the second baseman's head. So that was Sam Caflin's stupendous war record! The cheap phony had traded on his purely fictitious war exploits to win a free ride with the Titans. And Lord, how they'd all fallen for it. Of all the cheap, lousy stunts.

He'd been right about Sam Caflin the first time, Vic knew now. He'd sized Sam up for a braggart, a blowhard. But he'd never thought Sam was this much of a liar!

He stood at the plate, storming, waving the bat in angry half circles. He watched one sail past, high and outside, still raging. The next one looked grooved for him.

He poured all of his pent-up disgust and anger into a fierce swing at the pellet. He knew from the smooth solid feel of the impact in his hands that he'd caught the ball fairly.

Halfway down the line toward first, he quit running so hard. The crowd was swiftly going nuts, and the ball was settling neatly into the left field bleachers.

Hovey and Mac and about half the team were waiting to thump his back as he crossed the plate. 4-3 now, favor of the Titans.

Buck Daly said, "It's a gift from the gods. Now let's get out there an' hold 'em!"

But Thouless was tired. He walked a man, steadied, and fanned a couple. Then the Lions pulled an ace card, and sent Kirby, a tough pinch hitter up there.

THERE wasn't a sound in the whole great park as Art pitched to Kirby. Vic stood on wide legs, ready to dart to either side as the need evolved, still fuming with his hatred and infinite disgust for Sam Caflin.

He was all out for number one now, he decided. The devil with Caflin! He had to cinch his own job with these Titans!

Crack!

Kirby had found one. It was coming on a line, straight toward Vic. He put his hands up, pivoted, ready to

Caflin was slow getting over, Vic's gauging eye told him in an instant. He put his head down, running madly toward second. He tagged up a fraction ahead of the runner from first. As he ran he was cranking his whip for the toss to Pete Day.

He had to twist his whole upper body to make that toss. He almost wrenched his fin loose from his shoulder, but he made that snap, and then stopped cold, watching prayerfully.

It was not on a line. But Pete Day could stretch, when it was necessary. He went down in the dust and picked the pill up just as the runner slammed over the sack. The base umpire jerked his thumb, and you never heard such a roar from the crowd as greeted the gesture. There was the game, 4-3, Titan's favor!

* * *

"This," Buck Daly was saying coldly, "is about the rottenest thing

thing I've heard in a month of Sundays. You're through, Caflin. If I had my way, you'd be thrown out of baseball. You can pack your things. Foster can hold down your spot, till we get somebody."

"Aw—" Sam Caflin started.

"Save it!" stormed Daly. "You came up here with your lies, and your whining complaints, and because we felt we owed you something more than just anybody, we carried your dead weight through a tough pennant battle. You—a battle-scarred veteran! And now it comes out you had a foot run over, just before you were slated to go overseas—which seems pretty queer, in my personal opinion—and you never even got out of this country."

"Can I help it if—"

"It's the lies I'm not forgetting," the manager said with disgust. "That—and the cold-blooded way you decided to let the kid here carry you. Yes, and the others before him. Only this chance meant more to Edwards. He proved up today, when he pulled off that double, with no help from you. I'm glad we found out the truth when we did, before—"

Vic said huskily, "Then—does that mean—I'm sticking, Mr. Daly?"

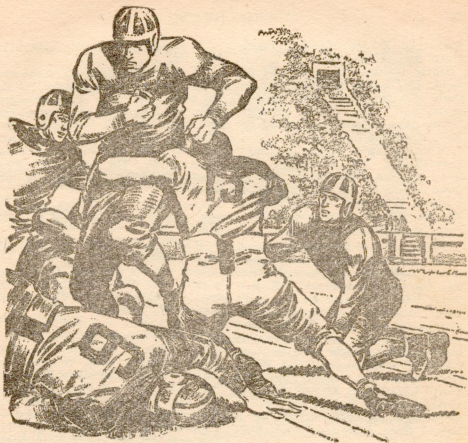
"Darn tootin'!" the manager grinned. "And you can call me Buck, kid, like the others. Hey, where you goin'?"

Vic paused in the doorway. His heart was pounding with fierce excitement and pride, and he couldn't control the gyrations of his Adam's Apple.

"Gonna phone the folks," he said happily, "back in Scranton. Gonna tell 'em from now on our troubles are over!"

THE END

* * *



There's A Place for Razzle-Dazzle

By LEE FLOREN

"It's formula, lad; nothing new. Just the old stuff, cut and dried as two-and-two makes four. But it wins."

THE END AND tackle stripped the interference, and big Ed Shell blocked the ball-carrier out, spilling the husky Western halfback hard across the grass. The ref's whistle blew and beyond that sharp sound Ed heard the roar in the stands. The ref placed the hoghide on State's five and the State red and black huddled, with Ed rap-

ping out instructions. State had finally held for downs, after Western had driven sixty-five yards.

The red and black snapped into position, with Ed holding down the T spot, behind huge Tiny Smith, the center. First and ten on their own five yard line. Ten minutes to go, with Western leading, 6-0. A sensible quarter-back would have called

a punt, but Ed sent Halfback Jimmy Hurtz around left end.

Hurtz traversed the width of the field, the stands howling, but he made only two yards. They huddled again and Tiny Smith growled, "Punt, damn it, punt," and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"You can't win a game punting," growled Ed. "On our seven yard line," growled Tiny Smith. "Second down coming up. He saw a pro game, I guess. Wide-open, with plenty of laterals. What'll it be now, Ed?"

"A lateral," said Ed. "74."

Tiny looked at him and muttered, "Lord, I'll bet coach's blood pressure is up!" and went over the ball, toad-like in the brilliant fall sunshine. Ed looked over the big man's rump. Western was spreading out, playing its ends wide. The ball was in his hands, then, with State's line moving ahead. Hurtz came in, took the faked play, hit right end. Western's end came in, running hard, and Hurtz lateraled to Martin. The big Western center, backing up the line on defense, dumped Martin for a loss of three. State came back, huddled.

"Now what do you say, Ed?" asked Tiny.

"A pass," said Ed. "64."

"Our own four," said Willy Martin. "Damn it, Ed, we oughta kick."

"I'm running this team," said Ed.

He was down again, his hands between Tiny's legs. The ball came, the lines clashed, and Ed was running backwards, running into his own defense zone. Hurtz had snakehipped off the tackle, and the spot was open. Western's safety-man had expected a punt and he came in, covering Hurtz. But the Western man was too slow, and Ed laid the hoghide out there, rifling it into Hurtz' grip.

Hurtz was up high, stretched and colorful. He had the ball, and Ed thought, *Well, we made forty yards on that*, and then he saw Hurtz lose his stride, and the ball rolled on the green grass. Hurtz trotted back, slapping his helmet against his thigh.

Ed said, "Tough luck, fellow."

Tiny Smith said, "We kick now, huh, Ed."

Ed glanced at the clock at the end of the stadium and murmured, "Nothing else to do, Tiny." Tiny was down then, his legs wide, the legs of the two guards hooked behind his. The Western safety-man was back, and Ed lifted the ball high in a long, clean spiral. The State ends were down, dumping the man in his tracks.

Tiny Smith said, "You can't do any wildcat stuff and win football, Ed."

"This game needs no thinking, then?" snapped Ed.

Tiny was a senior, and he spoke to a soph with tired knowledge. "You run this by plays. It's like mathematics. It's formula."

"I don't think so," retorted Ed. "I think there's room for brains in it."

Tiny lifted his massive head. "Coach doesn't seem to think so, Ed." Ed looked and saw sub quarterback Jack Darnell running toward the ref, adjusting his helmet. Ed trotted out and settled himself on the bench, the water-boy hanging his coat over him and giving him a drink.

Ed spat the water out, settled down.

COACH BLANTON was quiet, pulled into a small, dark ball. With three years behind him at State, he had only lost one game. That had been during his first season, and State had fallen before Mountain Empire. Now, with four wins this season, it looked as though his red and black would lose again.

"Western has a tough line," said Ed.

Coach Blanton shifted, grunted, "Not too tough. There are holes in it a quarterback should see."

Ed was silent.

Western ran a flanker, butted over left tackle, using its power. Two and four to go, and State dug in. Tiny Smith, backing up the line, knocked out two Western interference men, and Hurtz blocked the ball-carrier, spilling him hard. Western kicked to Jack Darnell, who cat-walked to the fifty yard line.

Ed saw there was six minutes to go. Darnell called for time and the red and black squatted, talking it over. From then on, State used straight, orthodox football. They ran over guard, sending Hurtz ahead. Martin flanked left end, with good interference. They made their down in three plays with two yards to spare.

Coach Blanton said, "Good football." He glanced at Ed.

Darnell was down again, shadowed by Tiny Smith. Hurtz took three over right guard, Martin gained two over center.

"We need more than that," said a sub.

Quarterback Darnell stood and looked the Western line over, then settled down behind Tiny. Now he was traveling backwards, right arm cocked. Hurtz cut back, moved into the spot. The short pass rifled over center. Hurtz was downed immediately.

Ed said, "They made it."

Coach Blanton grunted.

Western called time. The stands were silent as players and spectators alike took a rest for tired nerves. The first half had been scoreless. Early in the third, Western had shoved across. Now it was State's chance, or never. Play was called again, and State settled down.

Regimentized football, thought Ed Shell. Not an ounce of brains in it. Stereotyped plays, old as the hills. But he had to admit they were working. Darnell sent Hurtz over right tackle, mixed the next play and sent Hurtz over center. Hurtz was a work-horse and Darnell was using him.

Yet Ed, seated on the bench, saw many mistakes in Darnell's work. But they were mistakes in judgment, in determining—or seeing—the weak spots in Western's line. Darnell played close, air-tight football. Nothing spectacular. Darnell took no chances; he played by the book.

Hurtz spun, broke loose. Martin took out the safety-man, and State scored. Ed listened to the groan of Western rooters and the wild riot of State supporters. Now Darnell held the ball and Tiny Smith was kick-

ing. The hoghide split the uprights and State led, 7 to 6.

The game ended with that score, with Western in the middle of the field, and State playing an air-tight defense. Tiny Smith trotted into the dressing-room with Ed. Tiny said, "Formula, my boy. Nothing new; old stuff. But it wins."

"No brains?" asked Ed, almost cynically.

Tiny never got to answer. An alumnus slapped him so hard on the back the big center gulped.

"That guy should be on this squad," the center finally said.

THEY HAD almost finished dressing when Coach Blanton came in. Ed was tying his shoes, the smell of towels and hot water in his nostrils. Blanton settled down, a small man with importance, and said, "All right, boys, find benches."

They did.

Blanton said, crisply, "We almost lost that; you took too many chances. Never pass inside your own twenty yard line. You knew that, didn't you, Ed?"

Ed nodded slowly. "We had a little tough luck, coach. If Hurtz would have hung onto that, we'd both been heroes, not damn fools."

But he didn't hold it."

The coach went on, picking out weak spots.

Ed said, finally, "Don't bawl out the rest of the boys for my mistakes."

Coach Blanton's head came up. "Ed, there's a place for brains in football, all right. But here is where it is: It is used in picking out the opponent's defects, his weak-spots. It's used in directing plays—an assortment of plays—over those defects. It isn't used in trying new, unorthodox plays."

"Rote?" murmured Ed.

Blanton pounded his fist into his palm. "You're majoring in philosophy, Ed. There, you can use imagination, let your mind soar away. But football follows mathematics. Two and two make four, nothing else; that's all, men."

Ed and Tiny Smith walked to their

room together. Ed said, suddenly, "I don't think he's right, Tiny. I'm damned if I do! The unexpected is what counts."

"Why didn't it work against Western?"

"Blanton never gave me a chance. I ran a few plays; they fizzled. The law of the averages holds that there'll be some bum plays. But if I could have run thirty unexpected plays—"

"We'd have lost the game," finished Tiny.

Ed said, "I think I'll turn in my suit."

Tiny's small eyes were lazy. "Ed, don't talk like a damn fool. Blanton's tough, but he's unbiased. Play straight football, fellow, and we'll win."

THEY PLAYED Santa Ynez State the next Saturday. Sport writers, basing their predictions on the State-Western game, picked Santa Ynez. Ed hunkered behind big Tiny Smith, calling his signals. Santa Ynez outweighed them on the line, but State outcharged them. And therein lay the margin of victory.

Yet Ed's heart wasn't in his work. This was straight football, rote football. Huddle, call your play. Over tackle, over guard, around end. Maybe a spot pass or two. Nothing spectacular, nothing out of the ordinary. No long, clean passes, hanging across the blue afternoon, with a receiver going high, flanked by two opposing backs. None of that.

Even the stands sensed it. The spectators settled down, wrapped in wool and fur, for the wind was chilly. Early in the first, State ran Hurtz over from the thirty-four, the half-back cat-walking the white line to score. Ed packed it over from the two in the second, and Tiny Smith picked up a fumble, awkwardly traversing the fifteen yards to pay dirt. The half ended with State leading, 21 to 0.

Santa Ynez showed a spark of life in the third, pushing fifty-four yards to collect six. Tiny Smith blocked the punt and the fourth stanza started with State still leading, 21 to 6. Ed took the punt on his own twenty-

seven and returned it some twenty yards, when a Santa Ynez man dumped him.

They trotted back to the huddle.

"You should've gotten him, Tiny," grumbled Ed.

Tiny snorted.

Ed called his play and the red and black rolled into position. Ed was down, calling his signals, and Hurtz came in, taking the ball. He made seven over tackle and they huddled again.

"We got their number," said Hurtz. "Their line has lost its power."

They went down again, with Martin cuddling the sphere. They were playing without inspiration, they were playing with ennui. Ed made good use of his philosophy and psychology. They were against a weaker opponent than Western had been, true. That kept them from reaching a high, fighting edge. But the main reason they were so listless was that the game was so unexciting.

"Over and over again," muttered Tiny Smith.

Ed was glad when the entire second team trotted out. Coach Blanton lifted his eyes and said, "Good handling, Ed," and Ed knew that Blanton wanted the rest of the team to hear his praise.

"Formula football," said Ed, spitting water.

Blanton nodded. "But it pays off."

Ed watched Jack Darnell send his plays. Blanton had coached Darnell from the bench, and Ed saw that Darnell used the same set of plays that he had used. He had played the game right, according to Blanton. But Ed wondered what the score would have been had they met a fast, scrappy team instead of a squad of slow bemoths.

The gun sounded. State, 27; Santa Ynez, 6.

Tiny said, tying his shoe, "Well, that one's behind us," and his eyes were quick on Ed. Ed murmured, "Now there's only Willowbrook and then Mountain Empire."

"Willowbrook took Western," said Coach Blanton. "Two touchdowns, this afternoon." He was spreading words of praise with words of criti-

cism. He squatted, looked at Ed and Tiny.

"Save mine," said Ed.

Blanton's lips hardened.

Ed said huskily, "Sure power football is all right...when you're against a slow, heavy team. But wait until we meet something fast like Mountain Empire. They have speed and weight.

"You still think along razzle-dazzle lines?" demanded Blanton.

Ed nodded. "Razzle-dazzle, with some brains."

Blanton got to his feet. "Sometimes it works. Most of the time it doesn't. Don't try it, Ed."

Ed had no answer.

They went out into the raw, cold wind. Tiny said, "Ed, you ask for trouble. Blanton didn't like that. You're a good quarterback. Look, you're only a soph. How many soph regular quarterbacks had State had?"

"I don't know, and don't care. Blanton's a traditionalist. He believes in the only things he knows, the old things. Ritual. That old stuff has its place, sure. But football changes, even though some coaches don't. Watch the pros play it."

"But the pros aren't college."

"College needs their stuff." Ed looked at his room-mate. "All right, we meet Willowbrook next Saturday. They're tough—they clipped Western, and Western almost tagged us for a loss. We'll be two power teams and we should have the most power, therefore we should win. But what about Mountain Empire?"

"Empire has speed," Tiny admitted.

"It'll be speed against power. Power *should* win, but speed is unorthodox. And how can our squad build a defense against any thing but rote plays? We're like the German privates. We can't think for ourselves. The German officers did the thinking; therefore, the privates couldn't think; they didn't know how. Well, our team is almost that bad. Blanton thinks for us!"

Tiny's huge face was serious.

POWER clashed with power on the next Saturday. High after

toppling Western, Willowbrook unleashed raw, crushing power. Power through the tackles, around ends, through center. A powerful line that played rote football and a heavy backfield that played by formula. And State met them, pound for pound, with power.

The stands sat, for the post part, almost silent.

Again, Hurtz and Martin carried the pigskin. They smashed over tackles, they beat their way over guards and the center, they ran the ends. For two tough quarters, the play see-sawed back and forth, with cleats grinding out the fifty yard marker. And when the gun ended the first half, State trotted into its dressing-rooms, with the score knotted at two big zeros. Nothing to nothing.

They draped themselves on the floor, with Coach Blanton in the center. He talked forcefully, convincingly, pointing out weak holes, both in Willowbrook and themselves. This was old to Ed Shell, for he had seen them, out there on the field. But he listened carefully, gaining some new pointers.

"What do you say, Ed?" asked Blanton.

Ed spoke carefully. "We ought to loosen up, Coach. Put some razzle-dazzle into it. Spring some unorthodox stuff, not the same old power plays and spot passes. They're heavy, but they're slow."

"Play straight ball," growled Blanton.

Ed shrugged.

Willowbrook pushed to their two yard marker early in the third, and Ed kicked out of danger. The State end dumped the Willowbrook safety man and the ball squirted out of his grip. Tiny Smith was on it, the teams piling up. When the ref unsorted the mess, it was State's ball, first and ten, on Willowbrook's thirty-five.

"Our break," said Hurtz, slapping Tiny's wide back.

They put Hurtz twice into the line, and he lost two yards. They huddled and Ed said, "A pass, and a prayer. Hurtz and Martin down; you

two ends, too. Tiny, block for me on this."

"Coach," said Tiny. "He won't like this."

Ed had the ball, fading. Martin was down on the ten, cutting in. He rifled the hoghide, and it planked into Martin's guts. He held it and then stumbled, dropping it. Ed looked at Blanton.

Blanton was looking at the ground, and Ed saw his disgust.

The ref brought the ball back. Fourth down and twelve to go. Jack Darnell came out running out, tying helmet cord, and Ed trotted out, listening to the dull sound of the stands.

He said, "What's wrong, Blanton?"

"Fourth down," said Blanton coldly. "I didn't know what you'd do, Ed. You might not kick."

"We're on their thirty-three," growled Ed.

Blanton was silent.

Darnell kicked out on the six. Willowbrook followed the old pattern, kicking on first. Darnell took the punt on Willowbrook's forty, running it to the twenty-nine. He was dumped hard.

The ball was on the south side of the field. Darnell ran two plays to the right—wide, hard plays that netted a yard a piece. With third coming up, Darnell had the ball in front of the uprights on Willowbrook's twenty-seven.

Blanton said, "He'll kick now."

Hurtz was on one knee, and Darnell stepped back. Tiny Smith sent the sphere back, Hurtz placed it, and Darnell's toe found it solidly. Ed watched the ball lift and split the uprights. Back of him, Willowbrook partisans groaned, their sorrow being drowned in State's roar of approval.

Blanton said, "That should be it, Ed."

And that was it. The powder hung in the air, and State left the green grass, victor by virtue of a place-kick, three to nothing. They dressed and were rather silent, for the narrowness of their victory left them a little stunned. What would they do

against mighty Mountain Empire next Saturday?

Tiny said, "We won that on straight football, Ed."

Ed spoke quickly. "We'd have had a touchdown, if I'd had my way. Blanton's even getting afraid of a pass."

"Back on the same subject," muttered Tiny.

ED BLANTON drove them hard during the next week. But still, they were listless, with little if any lift. Blanton drilled them on fundamentals, going over the Willowbrook game to show them their weaknesses.

They had a long, hard scrimmage Thursday night. The first squad bogged down, and Ed called a razzle-dazzle play. Martin lateralled to Hurtz, who shot the skin to Wee Willie Jones, the left end. Jones fumbled and the second squad recovered. Blanton blew the whistle.

"Ed Shell, play second-string quarter. Darnell, come over and quarterback the first team."

Darnell smiled. "With pleasure."

Tiny Smith looked long at Ed and said, "Don't you know any better... by now?" and winked. Blanton didn't see the center's crass, humorous eye-closing.

Ed settled behind Johnson, second-string pivot man. He felt angry, a little disgusted. They see-sawed back and forth, with neither team having much spunk. It was dark when they turned in, and Blanton was scowling deeply.

"Let him scowl," growled Ed.

They had calisthenics the next evening, and Ed turned in early. Tiny Smith snored across in his bunk, his massive body covered by blankets. The student-body was having a rally, but Ed didn't care to attend. As he told Tiny, Jack Darnell would probably start the game; let him make a speech.

The rain started toward morning.

It rained all forenoon. By noon, the sky was gray, with intermittent showers. The weather forecasts predicted more rain. By starting time, the grass was wet, limp, and they had mud-cleats screwed on their shoes.

Blanton was nervous, alert. He paced the room, talking to this man, now this. He read the starting lineups and Jack Darnell took the quarter-back post.

The rain was pelting down, sweeping across the grass. Umbrellas sprouted out in the stands. Mountain Empire came out, white and orange, and ran through its plays.

After the first play, Empire's uniforms were dark with mud. Darnell took the kick, spearing it out of the rain, and went twenty yards, landing on State's thirty eight. Ed watched, rain dripping from his hood.

Darnell called a power play over right tackle. Empire pulled out the interference and when the ref untangled them Hurtz had lost one. Darnell sent Martin around right end, and Martin gained it back. Hurtz hit the left guard and was stopped cold. Empire had a fast, tough line.

Darnell booted. Empire got it on their forty and went to State's forty-six. Hurtz dumped the ball-carrier savagely. Tiny Smith called defense signals. Darnell fell to the safety spot. Empire slashed through tackle for four. Empire made three more on an end run. State picked up a fumble.

Ed saw that the mud curtailed Empire's speed. Tiny Smith glanced at Ed on the bench, rain on his beefy jowls. When the quarter ended State had the ball on the midway marker, nothing to nothing.

Empire's line was out-charging State's. The backfields, though, were about even in power and speed. But Empire was playing formula football. The spectators had settled down, waiting for Empire to turn loose some razzle-dazzle. Ed knew that if Empire did that, State was doomed. State clung to straight, power football.

Empire passed twice in the second stanza, both incomplete. When the teams slopped off the gridiron at the end of the half two big goose-eggs stood on the rain-washed scoreboard. Ed walked to the dressing-room with the other subs.

State's team was tired, dead. No

pickup, no joking. Ed knew that was a bad sign. He knew, too, that if Mountain Empire opened up—if the team went to razzle-dazzle, to laterals,, to cross-bucks—the next half would see State defeated. The mud, and Empire's reluctance to open up, had saved State so far.

Blanton gave his talk.

Darnell sat, looking at the floor. Tiny Smith shifted as he lay on a bench, grunting a little. They were going out, then, cleats grinding on concrete. Ed glanced up at the crowd, took his seat on the bench.

DARNELL took the kick, ran it back a short ways, then was dumped.

Hurtz hit the line. Ed saw the savage block, saw Hurtz fumble. Mountain Empire's guard was on it, and it was Mountain Empire's ball on State's twenty-four. In four plays—gruelling, terrible power-plays—Mountain Empire scored. Tiny Smith rushed the kicker, and sent the placement wide.

Mountain Empire led, six to nothing. And the guests still led by that score at the end of the third.

Blanton walked back and forth, oblivious of the rain. In the fourth, Darnell fumbled again, and Blanton grabbed Ed's shoulder. "Go out there, son."

Ed got to his feet.

Blanton whispered. "Straight football, nothing fancy."

Ed ran out then. Darnell came trotting by, said, "Good luck, Eddie," and Ed nodded. Tiny Smith wiped his huge jaw. "Hello, honor student."

Hurtz said, "Let's go, Ed!" and he was brittle.

They huddled, and Ed sent Hurtz into the line. The big half smacked hard, made one. Martin went around end, lost two. Blocking was good and the line was tough, but Mountain Empire was too fast, too deadly.

Ed said, "Lateral the damn thing."

He settled behind Tiny Smith. The ball came, and he flipped it to Hurtz, who took it behind right end. The Mountain Empire tackle came in, and Hurtz lateralled to Martin, who fumbled. A Mountain Empire man

recovered, started to run, and State's right tackle dumped him.

"Didn't work," said Tiny.

Mountain Empire's ball on State's thirty. Darnell came out, adjusting his helmet. Ed said, "Get to hell out of here."

"Blanton says—"

"Get out," said Ed.

The ref said, "One of you have to leave."

Darnell turned, trotted off.

Still, Mountain Empire stuck to power ball. State held on its own fifteen. They took possession at that point, muddy, tired, battered. With Ed smiling, a little too crooked.

"What now, glamorous puss?" asked Tiny.

"Pass, over center." Ed added, "Or to any eligible man."

"The old man," moaned Tiny. "He'll go nuts!"

Hurtz spoke. "We gotta flip it, Ed."

They faked the play, with Martin hitting the line empty-handed. Ed rifled it out to Hurtz, who held. The play ended with State's ball on their own forty.

Tiny said, "Twenty five yards, if I can add."

"Did you see the old man?" Martin was smiling. "He jumped higher than Hurtz."

They were chuckling, laughing, as they huddled. Ed was down on one knee, talking quickly. Mountain Empire's line was down, and Ed saw some of the linemen were rather perplexed, judging from their looks.

"We got them," said Myers, the left guard.

THEY RAN up to the line of scrimmage, with Ed whipping himself behind Tiny's huge thigh. The crowd was quiet, and Ed looked up at the thousands of faces, obscured by the rain. They shifted, Tiny moving over, and Mountain Empire's line moved with them. They had used this shift play before, but always they sent a man into Mountain Empire's line.

Now Ed had the ball. He moved back, handed it to Martin. Martin reserved, and a tackle hit him. Hurtz

was across the field, moving like a bullet through the rain. Martin flipped, the ball hung, and Hurtz had it. The safety-man came in, knocked him down on Mountain Empire's twenty.

They were roaring up there now, the sound beating on Ed's ear-drums. A peaceful, sleepy housecat had come to sudden, terrible life. He was clawing, snarling, and fighting. The crowd was stunned, and so was Mountain Empire.

"That clock," said Hurtz. "It's going fast, Ed."

Mountain Empire called time out.

Ed and his men squatted, talking and chatting. Two minutes to go, and twenty yards. Mountain Empire sat and watched them, their quarterback pouring it on. The ref whistled, they went up.

Again Ed was behind big Tiny Smith. This time, Mountain Empire had its ends wide, expecting an end run, another razzle-dazzle play. But Ed sent big Hurtz into the line, and the battering, running-back smashed through to the fifteen. He was brought down there, grinning, the hoghide in his guts.

Ed rapped signals.

Hurtz took the ball, lateraled to Martin, who fumbled. Mountain Empire came in and recovered. Ed looked at the clock, his heart sinking. Ninety seconds to go, and Empire had the sphere.

Mountain Empire broke out of its huddle, moved into position. Ed shifted with them, looking over the muddy, broad backs of the linemen. Straight power again, right over Tiny Smith, who stopped it for no gain. Ed blocked a runner out, dumping him angrily. The man got up, snarling.

"Take it and smile," growled Ed.

Mountain Empire came up slowly, plainly stalling. Another power play, and Hurtz played the ball. There was a fumble and Tiny Smith had his carcass over it. Ed saw forty seconds left.

They were cheering then, slapping each other, and Tiny Smith was grinning. Martin said, "Good work,

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Candidate For The Boneyard

By **CLIFF
CAMPBELL**

It was bad enough being sold to another team the moment he started to show signs of age, Val Lachner thought; but what was worse was being thrown in with his oldtime rival now!



“YOU’RE NOT so young any more.”

The words ran like an echoing refrain, through Val Lachner’s mind as he threw himself to the right and behind the first base sack, stretched for the inaccurate throw. He was trying to keep a toe hooked into the bag and thinking of that weak right knee as he did a split to reach for the ball. *You’re not so young any more...* The words ran through his head again. His family physician had used those words this last Winter when he’d gone to him for a checkup. And Tuck Chalmers, his old enemy, second baseman of the

Bulls, had said exactly the same thing the last time the two clubs had clashed. He’d said it as he put the ball on Val after the latter had punched out what seemed like a certain double, then been cut down at second by a great throw-in.

Now, Lachner stretched, strained, gathered in the almost wild throw a split second before the hitter came into the sack. It was the third out in the top of the ninth, making the Maroons the winners, 6-5. Big rangy Val trotted into the dugout.

“Nice catch there, Val,” said Manager Chuck Fenstall.

Val nodded; but he knew it was

the kind of a catch a first-class first sacker would make automatically, with no doubts in his own mind. The right knee felt a little shaky under him as he headed out past the stands for the clubhouse with the rest of the team, and his throat was slightly sore. He wondered if he were going to have that tonsil trouble again. Then some of the fans were booing him as he passed the bleachers. It was for failing to put the game on ice in the eighth when he came up with two down and the sacks populated. He had driven a rival outfielder against the wall for his drive. But he knew that in the old days, when he was a well man, he'd have put that ball into the stands or else slashed it so hard no outfielder would have had a chance to race under it.

Showering in the clubhouse, he thought about that. It was strange to be old at twenty seven. He was six one with long flat muscles and a hard narrow-hipped body stemmed on long legs. But he had come up into the majors as a substitute first sacker at eighteen. Then there had been the war, a three-year hiatus when he had played practically no ball. And added to that, an automobile accident last year when he'd injured his right kneecap. This season, it seemed he'd lost some of his old speed. That right leg seemed to feel any undue strain; he was always worrying about it. And finally—recurring tonsil trouble. Twice after those attacks, his throwing shoulder, his left one, had stiffened up on him. Birdsall, the eager though inexperienced rookie, had taken over at first on those two occasions; and the kid had done a job, Val had had to admit to himself. He couldn't bust the fences or power out the long ball Val himself did when he got hold of one. But Birdsall had speed to spare, had a trick of stretching a hit for an extra base. He was a comer; Val himself was going, was on the down trail.

"Nice game today, Val," said Ermont the pitcher as he came into the steamy atmosphere of the shower room. "That last catch was sweet."

Val's broad-jawed flattish face creased in a smile. "I was all right, I

guess," he admitted. But he knew he should have been better, that he had to try to hard to come up with plays like that last catch.

HHE LATHERED HIS Florida-tanned body again, then began to increase the cold water in the shower. When he'd watched young Birdsall around first, he got that cold feeling inside. It was like watching the man who was going to shove you out, to give you that last push that started you on the trail down. He towelled himself, half slipped on a loose bar of soap, then moved gingerly toward the door. If that knee went out of kilter again, it might be the end. Some of the sports writers had begun to hint about his apparent brittleness. The club might hand him his unconditional release. After all, baseball was a business from the standpoint of the magnates; and his salary was far in excess of the rookie Birdsall's.

He got dressed quickly, made a weak excuse when a couple of his teammates suggested stopping off for a few beers, got in the convertible, and drove across town to the apartment on the river. Eileen met him at the door. She'd heard the broadcast of the contest.

"The big boy played a nice game today," she said and kissed him. Then gave him another. There were always two when the Maroons won. It was a compact they had. "You look tired though," Eileen added. She was a tall, willowy ash blonde with long slim limbs and a pair of fine honest gray-green eyes.

"I'm all right," Val said, forcing a grin. "But I should have come through with a hit there in the eighth. What've we got for dinner tonight?"

Afterward, when he heard her busy out in the kitchen, he slipped into the bathroom and gargled some of that special stuff the doctor had given him. He didn't want to worry Eileen. She was a good sport and took his problems on her own shoulders as if they were virtually her own. Besides, in about six more months there was going to be an addition to the Lachner family. After dinner, when

they had finished the dishes together, he tried to be easy and jovial. Told her a story one of the sports reporters had told him before the game that day.

Eileen asked him if he'd like to see a movie. He shook his head. Maybe he ought to cut out movies altogether. Some of the oldtimers claimed the flicker of the screen didn't do a man's batting eye any good. Then conversation lapsed in the living room of the apartment. Eileen went into the kitchen. When she came back she had a couple of tall icy lemonades. He was inordinately fond of them.

"Thanks, kid," he said, staring out the window into the thickening twilight.

"Val..." Her voice was gentle yet knowing. "Stop worrying, please! Everything'll be all right. You're playing good ball."

IT POPPED out of him before he could stop himself. "Yeah, but for how much longer? When the Old Man, Nichols," he said, naming the club owner, "once gets the idea a player is getting brittle, he unloads him fast. He figures to get something for him before his condition becomes too well known."

Eileen leaned over to hold the table light to his cigaret. "You're a major leaguer, Val. What if you do go to another club?"

His mouth worked. "It might be the minors, baby. The Old Man's been dickering for the Indianapolis outfielder. And they want players on the deal, according to the talk."

She sat down on the edge of his chair and took his big black-haired hand in both of hers. "You're a major leaguer, Val. Don't you ever forget it. And don't let them! You can always refuse to report in a deal sending you to the minors."

"A guy likes to earn a salary somehow," he said drily.

"Don't forget we've got the house out on the Island; and there's the sporting goods store out there too. We'll always be all right, dear. And if things got tough temporarily, I can always go back to work." She'd been a private secretary before they were married.

He squeezed her hands in gratitude, but he had to freeze his face. He didn't want to give her the low-down on the sporting goods store. No sense worrying her more now that a baby was on the way. But a new owner had come into possession of the building that housed his store as well as three others; he had served notice there would be no renewal of the leases that were due to run out this fall. The new owner had a son-in-law with an automobile agency. He intended to move him into the place. And with the building shortage what it was, in that bustling Long Island town, there was no other decent location for the store.

"Everything will be all right, honey. Don't worry so much," Eileen reassured him. "You've just had some tough breaks physically."

"Sure, sure," he said. But he knew better. The three other store owners had gotten in contact with Val. But he lacked the cash, and he didn't want to borrow from a bank when he was unsure of his means of livelihood. When he was not certain this wouldn't be his final season in big league baseball. But he didn't want to tell Eileen that; she thought everything was all right about the store.

THEY PLAYED some cut-throat two-handed bridge with two dummies for a while. Then the phone rang. That was about ten o'clock. It was Chuck Fenstall, the midget manager. He asked Val to drop down to his room at the hotel. Val figured this was it. Going downtown, Val thought about Tuck Chalmers. How Tuck would laugh when he heard the news.

Once they had been friends. That was when they'd both been in the minors, back in the Three-I League. And then a girl had entered the picture. Her name had been Helen or Hazel; Val wasn't even sure which now. But they'd both been crazy about her. They had turned into enemies, started to feud over the matter. Things had become so bad the club had felt it necessary to trade one of them after a clubhouse outbreak, and Tuck Chalmers had been sent to an-

other club in the circuit. That was a blow to his pride for which he'd never forgiven Val. In the very first game in which the two clubs had met after the trade, they had come to blows when Val had slid into second.

The following year, both men had moved up to the International League. The feud had been continued every time their two clubs met. Tuck had gone on to the majors, to the Bulls. And Val had come up with the Crimson. The feud had not become public; but when the two clubs met, Val knew Tuck was waiting for him, was waiting for a chance to give him the works if possible. And he himself, at first cool about the thing, had come to hate Tuck. If the opportunity came, he knew he'd give him the works, but now—

HE GOT DOWN to the hotel and went up to the manager's suite. Fenstall was a little birdlike guy, bald, with a nice manner. He was an inveterate coffee drinker. He had a fresh pot from room service in front of him and poured Val a cup. Then he began to talk about the way the club was going.

Val Lachner said, "Let's have it with the bark off, Chuck. And I'm telling you now, I won't go down to the minors."

"It isn't the minors, Val. But you have been sold." Fenstall looked sad about it. "Val, we had to have an outfielder. We had to get one. You understand that. We got Finlay from the Bulls."

"The Bulls?"

"Yeah, Val. The Bulls. We got Finlay and three thousand for you." Fenstall took a sip of his coffee. "I didn't want to make the deal, Val. You've always been my kind of ball player. But we had to have a hard-hitting outfielder. And they need a first sacker; Emery is getting old."

"All right, all right," Val said impatiently.

"Look, Val, I still wouldn't have made the deal if I hadn't realized New York is a good spot for you. I got a promise from them you'll be the regular first baseman. And, after all, you got that home out on Long

Island. So it should be a good set-up, Val."

Val stood up. "Stop crying, Chuck. You were always a good guy to work under. I'm sorry to go. But I've been in baseball long enough to know it's a business." He put out his hand.

Fenstall shook. "Good luck, Val. I wanted to tell it to you personally first. The story will be released in the morning papers; they expect you to report in forty eight hours."

Going down the elevator, big Val Lachner faced it. The Old Man, the owner, was unloading him because he figured he was getting brittle, that he was about washed up....

HE AND EILEEN drove to New York. Val had little to say during the trip. He was doing too much thinking. It wasn't nice to realize that people figured you were washed up. And it was going to be an odd feeling to be on the same club with Tuck Chalmers, the second baseman of the Bulls.

He recalled some of the hints he'd seen in newspapers stories out of New York about how Tuck was slowing up. They implied he couldn't cover the ground he used to. Val wondered. He'd been honest enough to admit to himself that Tuck had always been one slick second sacker.

"Don't worry, please, Val," Eileen said again as they drew into New York the following morning. "Perhaps the change will do you good."

He turned the car over to her to drive out to the Island and open up the house, took the subway up to the Bulls' stadium. When he walked into the clubhouse with his bag and his special bats strapped to the side of it, Mulroy, the thickset husky Bull manager, was in the doorway of his office. He came forward, hand outstretched, a big grin on his beefy red face.

"Glad to have you with us, Lachner," he said cordially. "We can use those bats of yours. You're my first baseman, if you haven't guessed it."

Val thanked him. They talked a few minutes. Then the locker room

man showed him his locker. Val had a few words with Harmon, veteran backstop of the club, and a couple of other regulars. They all seemed glad to see him. But he was thinking of that newspaper story he had stuck in the pocket of his sports jacket, the story that talked about the trade and called him a stopgap. It asserted that the Bulls had bought him as a box office name to placate their fan following, predicted he'd be kept in there as long as he could hit, then be supplanted by a rookie the club had when they finally decided to build for next year.

He was given a monkey suit with the number 21. He began to strip down. Then a man walked in from the other end of the locker tier, stopped at a locker four down from his, gave him a crooked grin.

"Hello, you has-been! This club sure is going to hell now, pal!" It was Tuck Chalmers. He was almost as tall as Val but gangling and loose-limbed, a long-jawed freckle-faced guy with bleak gray eyes. Chalmers was also an expert boxer from his college days, a man who could take care of himself with anybody on the field.

Val fed it right back to him. "Hello, busher," he fired back. "Didn't expect to see you here. When I was traded, they told me they were going to get a real second sacker!"

Chalmers' gray eyes became icy. "You bum, when this club took you on, they as good as conceded the flag!"

And Val knew the old feud was still on. He went out for the pregame drill. They were meeting the Nationals that afternoon. Val felt a little strange in the white red-striped uniform with the red bull insignia on the shirt below the lettering. In batting practise, he rode one into the right field stands and they were none too close in that park.

"You must've had your eyes shut when you swung on that one," a voice said. It was Chalmers over beside the batting cage.

said everything was all right out at the house and that the store looked fine. She said she'd drive back to town for his first game with the Bulls but that she probably wouldn't get there till around the third inning. Val felt better after talking with her. She was a great kid. She gave him confidence. Then, almost before he knew it, he was out there at first for his new club. The umpire in chief behind the plate was calling, "Play ball!", and big Fulsom, on the hill for the Bulls, was throwing the first one in.

It was a ball. Then the leadoff hitter slashed one up to first, a high twisting foul. Val back-tracked and cut over toward the stands as he followed it. He got over against the railing of a first-base box and stretched and thought he had it. But somehow the ball celed out of his mitt, giving the hitter another life. Fulsom lost him, putting him on via a walk. The next man flied to Rubbler at short. But the Number Three hitter pushed a single into center, putting the runner on third. And he scored with the first run as the clean-up man pumped out a long fly.

"Nice work, Lachner," gibed Tuck Chalmers from second as the run crossed. "Who did you bribe to keep out of the minors, huh?"

Val glared up the baseline and swore silently at him. He was going to have trouble with Chalmers, he could see. He felt the flush of anger stain his face. Then, on the hit and run, the next man smashed a grass cutter to deep short. Rubbler came up with it on a nice play. The only play was to first, and his hurried throw was low. But Val stretched and made a nice scooping play for the second out. He surprised himself at the way he made it. Then he realized he'd been out to show Chalmers.

The following hitter lined a low line drive foul up outside the first baseline. Val cut over and half dived and gloved it on the fly for the third out. But there was practically no applause as he came off the field. The fans were still remembering that error of his that had let in the run.

WHEN HE came back into the clubhouse, Eileen called. She

"Nice catch, Lachner," Bus Mulroy said as he stepped down into the dug-out.

VAL WAS GRATEFUL to the manager for the words, but he was doubly nervous now. He was batting in the Number Three spot behind Tuck Chalmers, and the Bulls had bought him for his power with the stick. Rubbler, at leadoff, failed to beat out an infield roller. Chalmers slapped one over second for a single.

"Try to move me around some, fella," he called down from first as the rangy Val stepped in there. The mockery behind his words was obvious to the first sacker.

Val took one for a strike, took a ball, then fouled one into the back screen. This particular National hurler had always been tough on him. But he was grimly determined to get a hit. There was another ball, a foul into the stands behind first. Then he measured a let-up curve, timed himself, and slammed it deep into the right field, being a left-handed hitter. The speed boy in right for the Nationals went over toward the foul line and then back and back. Val tore into first, made the turn, and headed for second, confident he'd bashed out an extra base hit. And halfway down to second he had to pull up to avoid a collision with Chalmers who waited as he watched the outfielder. Val cursed him and yapped at him to run.

But Chalmers took a couple of more steps and waited. Out in right, the fielder backed up against the wall, leaped, made a stab. He got his glove on it, seemed to have it, but couldn't hold it. Chalmers ran then as the outfielder scooped up the ball at his feet. And big Val tore after him. Chalmers rounded second. Then he looked over his shoulder and saw that throw coming into the infield, coming in like a bullet, low and true. He scampered back for second. And Val had to get off it, retreat toward first.

The National second baseman took the peg and whipped it back to first. And Val Lachner was caught in a rundown. He headed back for second.

Chalmers moved off a few feet. But they concentrated on Val and finally pinched him in and the rival first baseman tagged him off. The fans hooted and he walked off the field with a flaming face. He had banged a legitimate double and ended up an out. He wondered if Chalmers had done it purposely to make him look bad. The cleanup man whiffed to end the inning. Chalmers came into the dugout and Bus Mulroy gave them both hard-eyed glassy stares. You couldn't tell who he was blaming it on.

IN THE THIRD, Val made a slick play on a hard ground ball that was almost in Tuck Chalmers' territory. But he failed at bat in that same frame, and failed to get a hit in the rest of the game though he did nail one on the nose in the seventh. But the National keystone man went up and made one of those lucky stabs of the drive, robbing him. And in the ninth, there was a hit through Chalmers to put one man on with the scored knotted up at 3-3. To Val, he looked slow on the play. Once, he knew, Tuck Chalmers would have scooped that ball.

"You bushier!" he yelled down at him, paying him back for his remark of the first inning. "Can't you get out of your own tracks?" He had the satisfaction of seeing his old enemy pale with anger.

The Nationals moved the man to second on a sacrifice. There was a popup to Rubbler at short for the second out. Rubbler was talking it up. But Fulsom on the hill was shaky. He missed the plate twice, then came in with a fat one. It was a low slash right through the center that caromed off one of the pitcher's shinguards, twisting between first and second. Chalmers came over for it, but it almost got away from him. The runner on second was tearing up the pea patch, going all out with two down. Chalmers nabbed the ball but was badly off balance; the throw was wide, in the dirt. Big Val stretched and tried to come up with it for the third out, thought he had it; then he dropped the bad throw. The runner

from second score with the tie-breaking run.

"Throwing with your eyes shut?" he yelled down at Chalmers.

"What's the matter, is your girdle cramping your style?" the belligerent second baseman came back. It was going to be war between them, a renewal of the old feud.

The Bulls were unable to do anything in their half of the ninth, including Val who only managed to drive out a long fly against the relief man on the hill. They lost the game. And a few minutes after he got into the clubhouse, Val learned the official scorer had credited him with an error on that low throw in the top of the ninth.

"Keep your shirt on, Val," Harmon the veteran catcher advised him. "That could have been ruled either way. It was on those plays a guy can make nine out of ten times. The tenth time—well, the only thing to do is forget it, chum."

Val tried to. But when he ran into Tuck Chalmers in the shower room, he almost blew up. He called Chalmers a has-been who was taking money under false pretenses of being a major league ball player. Said he'd lost his arm as well. Chalmers gave him that taunting crooked grin.

"A guy on his way down the ladder always blames it on somebody else, doesn't he?" he said, pushing away Rubbler who tried to get in between them. "A guy's got to have an alibi, I guess, huh?"

Val stuck out his jaw. "Yeah. And what's yours for clogging up the traffic on the baselines in the first inning, pal?"

Chalmers laughed nastily. "That right fielder of the Nationals, they just brought him up from the International. I happened to know he was fast as an antelope and had an arm like a cannon. Hell, I thought he was going to make the catch! He's capable of it. When he was with Scranton, he was known as a second Terry Moore."

"But he didn't make it, did he?" Val threw at him. Then Harmon and Fulson the pitcher and one of the coaches got between them. But afterwards, Val admitted to himself,

Chalmers could have been right on the play....

A LITTLE LATER, he met Eileen in the parking lot with the car and they drove out to the Island. Eileen said he'd played a good game. That he should have had at least two more hits if the breaks hadn't gone against him.

"Val, I have a strong hunch the change of scene is going to be just what you needed," she told him.

He nodded and forced a smile. That right knee felt wobbly again, but he had to admit he hadn't thought about it during the game.

It was good to get out to the South Shore town where the cottage was. After dinner, he dropped in at the sporting goods store he had a manager running for him. The real business would develop in the off season when he would be there in person, when folks would drop in to meet him as a baseball celebrity. But unless he was able to do something, he wouldn't be at that spot to do business. He talked to two of the other merchants in the building who wanted to buy the place as a group to protect their investment in their businesses. But he had to stall them off when they asked if he meant to go in with them on the purchase of the building. As a fading ball player, a so-called brittle guy, his credit wouldn't be any too good. And, anyway, he didn't want to get himself in debt till he knew what his own future was. He'd talked to one of the local banks earlier, back in the Spring. They'd been hesitant, a little evasive.

That was the story. He didn't feel he could put himself in debt with a child coming along and his own ball career a big question mark. But he still said nothing about it to Eileen when he drove home. The next forenoon he reported to the Bull clubhouse. But that afternoon's game, the last of the series with the Nationals, was rained out. Going home, Val felt a sense of disappointment he couldn't understand. Normally he should have been glad of the rest. When he was with the Maroons, he would have

welcomed it as a chance to take the strain off his ailing body. Now he didn't like it. And a few miles from the Long Island town where he lived, it came to him. He realized he had been looking forward to the opportunity to show that Tuck Chalmers he could still cover the first base sack.

THE NEXT DAY was an open date. And then the Wolverines came in, a tough swaggering club that invited trouble. The sports writers said that the Bulls would show their real mettle then, would get rolling and take the series or else go nowhere for the rest of the season. But in the second inning, with a runner on second, another on third, and two down, Chalmers went to his left on a hard-hopping ground ball. He was slow getting over, got his glove on it, but failed to hold it. Two runs sped across the plate.

And Val, without any mercy, let his old rival know what he thought about it. "You bum, why don't you give yourself up to the Bloomer Girls?" he rode Chalmers. "You're playing your position on a dime, mister!"

"Ah, it's contagious!" Chalmers yapped back. "I'm playing next to a bushier and it gets in my blood!"

Val showed him by coming up with a honey of a play on a left-handed batter for the third. In the third he blasted a long double with two on to tie up the score. And when he saw that Wolverine outfielder juggle the ball a moment out there, he tore on for third and made it, never thinking once of his bad knee. He died there as they failed to bring him in. But in the very next frame, Sammy Vannis on third uncorked a wild high throw. Val went high off the bag and just snagged it in the webbing of his glove. And he came down to toe the bag a split second before the runner hit it. There was applause from the fans.

But Chalmers trotted down the baseline, batted a pebble around in his glove, an old trick of his. "Bow and smile for the cash customers,

busher! And tell me where you buy your four-leaf clovers, will ya? You never knew you had it!"

The old feud was renewed for fair between the two. Neither meant to concede a thing, to give the other an inch. In the fifth, with the score still knotted up thanks to Val's hit, the Bull hurler got wobbly. The first man to face him got a walk. Then the usually dependable Harmon dropped a third strike and let it roll behind him to put two men on. Two hurlers went to work hurriedly in the bullpen. There was a smash between first and second. Playing close to the bag against a left-handed swinger, Val never had a chance for it. Then Tuck Chalmers, travelling like mad and cutting deep, snagged the liner off his shoe laces on the fly. He flipped to Rubbler covering at second for the second out. Rubbler's throw to Val was true. He had the runner caught off with no trouble to complete a great triple play. Val was still amazed at Chalmers' burst of speed as they trotted off the field.

IN THE SEVENTH, Val got hold of one. But the rival center fielder, after a great run, pulled it down. In the ninth, with the score still knotted up, the crisis came. With two down, the Wolverine first baseman punched a Baltimore chop over the box. Tuck Chalmers went in for it. His peg to Val Lachner was high. Val went up, knowing he would get it. He did, came down on the bag in time for the out. But the Wolverine first baseman tore in and crashed him. Val was knocked rolling and dropped the ball to make the man safe; and he felt that twinge of pain in his right knee.

Then the next Wolverine hitter connected for a double to score the runner. It was the run that turned out to be the ball game.

"Brother, haven't you turned out to be a great dummy on first?" Chalmers needled him as they moved toward the clubhouse. "What's the matter? You afraid of a little personal contact, Lachner?"

"Your throw was high or it'd never have happened!" Val threw back hot-

ly. "And speaking of personal contact, do you want some, pal?"

"Break it up, you guys!" barked Bus Mulroy moving up between them.

But as he showered, still raging, Val felt those tonsils swelling up. Tomorrow it would probably effect his throwing arm as it had done in the past. Everything seemed to be going against him. The fans would doubtlessly blame him for that second loss in a row since he'd joined the club. He remembered a thing he'd heard a veteran say once in the minors. When you started to slip, always all the breaks went against you. It sure looked that way now. And he could read the handwriting on the wall. He was as good as ticketed for the minors. That knee that had been cracked in the collision at first base would probably put him out of play tomorrow. He swore under his breath.

He was a candidate for baseball's boneyard, he guessed, and he might as well recognize the fact....

WHEN HE walked into the stadium the next day, he was thoroughly discouraged. If he only had a couple of more good big league seasons in front of him, he wouldn't have to worry about his financial set-up and that sporting goods store. Normally, if he could have held onto his location, it would have provided a nice means of income. His bad knee felt shaky, and his throat was sore despite all his gargling. Then he entered the clubhouse and heard Tuck Chalmers talking.

"What I say is the Bulls are too damn greedy for this season's gate instead of rebuilding for the future, for next year, or the year after," the second baseman was sounding off to some others of the club. "We ought to be using our rookies, bringing up the kids from the farm system and breaking them in."

"Maybe you got something there, Tuck," another player agreed.

"Box office names, has-beens on their way down—shucks, we can't win ball games with them," Chalmers went on. "Looka that last trade we made. A hot young outfielder for a

first baseman who saw his best days—if he ever had them—a long while ago. Outside of the mechanical errors, a club like that has no drive. It hurts its morale. I'm no youngster myself, I know. But the day I become a liability to the club, I want them to let me know it!"

Hands bunched, Val rounded the end of a locker tier and turned down the aisle where Tuck Chalmers was holding forth. "Gosh, if talk could only make a guy play second base! I heard those digs at me, fella. Now get up on your hind legs!"

Chalmers jumped up, grinning meanly, long jaw shooting out. Irvine, a spare outfielder, tried to jump in between them. Val threw him aside with a long arm, then he and Tuck Chalmers were pitching punches at each other. Val was bigger, but he knew what a trained boxer Chalmers was. And he found out fast after landing a right swing. Chalmers bounced out a locker front, then ducked two in a row and came into him. He bunched a set of knuckles off Val's mouth, cutting a lip. Val clipped him twice in the body.

Chalmers blocked two more and rocked Val with a sizzling uppercut. Val was staggered but hooked a left at his man. He took a terrific punch to the belly.

"You damned fools!" Harmon the veteran catcher was rushing in with a couple of other older men. They pried the pair apart and Harmon read them the riot act. "Do you want Mulroy to walk in and see this, you nuts? He always says he does all the fighting for the club! It'll be a hundred fine for you both if you're caught! Now cool off and show some sense!"

Val snapped, "This big-headed busher can't make cracks about me!"

Chalmers yipped, "This has-been oughta get fired off the team! He's no good! And—"

"Shut up, both of you!" the catcher cut them off. "We happen to be a ball club that's trying to win some games! And we won't do it by fighting each other."

CHALMERS was led away. And after a few more words, Val

went down to his own locker, but he was burning up. In the pre-game infield drill, he forgot about his knee and the throat condition. He was simply out to field that first-base position in such a manner he would give the lie to Tuck Chalmers' assertions about has-been players weakening the club.

The game got under way with Wortley, the southpaw curve ball artist on the hill for the Bulls. And with the swaggering Wolverines, cocky after the first game victory swinging for the heels. But Wortley stopped them in the first with three flies to the outfield.

"I'm going to get on," Chalmers told Val Lachner as the home half started. "See if you can move me along, bum!"

And Chalmers did get on as he deliberately didn't pull quite far enough away from an inside pitch, got nicked and got waved into first. But Val's drive was straight into the right fielder's hands though a long one.

"Do these major league pitchers scare you?" Chalmers asked as they took the field.

Val was too damn mad to answer. Wortley got the first man to swing against him in the second. But the next man walked, stole second. Wortley made the third hitter foul out to Harmon behind the plate. And then there was what looked like a clean hit to the right of second. But Tuck Chalmers, cutting loose a terrific burst of speed, dived for it, knocked it down, then flung to first from a sitting position. It was a poor throw, but big Val made a beautiful scoop for the third out.

"You didn't look so lousy that time," Chalmers told him with a sneer as they moved into the dugout.

And Val fed it right back to him again. "I suppose you were grandstanding on that one yourself, pal, eh?" The right knee felt as if he had pulled it when he stretched for the ball. But he ignored it; Tuck Chalmers wasn't going to see him withdrawing himself for any ball game now.

In the top of the third, Val made

a terrific runback into right field for a circus catch of a foul the right fielder could get nowhere near. And in the home half of the frame, stepping up with nobody on, he picked on the 2-2 pitch and slashed it right through the rival first sacker. He headed for second. But the throw-in was faster than he'd expected. The second sacker had the ball and pivoted to put it on him. And Val went in with a belly-whopper headfirst slide. He cut down the Wolverine second baseman who let the ball go through him. And Val was up and tearing for third.

He made it. A moment later, Harmon, batting in the cleanup spot, sent him in with a long single. And the panic was on. Before the Wolverines could put out the fire with a relief pitch, three more runs had crossed. Val galloped out to his position when the inning ended, then suddenly recalled he hadn't taken the field so enthusiastically all year. His throat felt all right. And his attitude about that right knee was "the hell with it." He was going to show Tuck Chalmers he was still a first-class first baseman.

IT WAS CHALMERS who stole the honors that inning in the fielding department though. He came up with two brilliant plays, turning on more speed than Val had ever suspected he possessed. In the fifth, Val blasted out a triple to let Chalmers practically walk in from first after beating out a surprise bunt. In the sixth, Val went far to his right to scoop up a ground ball that was labelled a sure hit, and start the difficult 3 to 6 to 3 double play with a man on, one of the most difficult plays in the game. He got back to the bag to dig up Rubbler's low return throw for the two-ply killing and got a great hand from the fans.

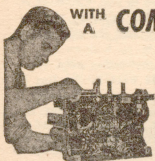
In the seventh, he was deliberately walked as a testimony to his batting prowess but failed to get around. And then, in the ninth, Wortley began to weaken fast. With one down, he walked two men. Harmon signed for a pitchout to nab the runner who

(Continued on Page 80)

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SPORTS FICTION

(Continued From Page 78)

was taking a long lead off first. But his throw was wide, to the inside. Val flung himself out on the grass and knocked it down as the runners, seeing the wide throw, tore. Val scooped up the ball, lying on his side. And there was Tuck Chalmers, just a few feet away, having raced over, yelling, Val flipped to him. Chalmers relayed to Rubbler covering the key-stone and they had the big second out.

It was the game-saving play. Wortley walked the next hitter. But he got the following man to line out to center for the last out of the ball game. Val felt great as he jogged into the clubhouse, not quite understanding why. His luck seemed to have turned.

The next afternoon, in the final game with the Wolverines, he and Chalmers, rivalled each other with sensational plays. And Val came up with three for four, two of them blasting doubles that sent in three runs. He brought in a fourth himself when, on third, the Wolverine catcher let a sinker get away from him. It didn't go far. But Val tore into the plate and made it with a great slide. He didn't even think of that knee.

THAT NIGHT, the club left for a road trip. He was sitting in the club car after having bid Eileen goodbye, reading the morning tabloids. All the writers touted his terrific play plus that of an apparently rejuvenated Tuck Chalmers. Val felt great. He didn't feel ready for the boneyard any more. And he knew he was going to be hot for a long while. The tonsils hadn't blown up. His right knee—well, he didn't pay much attention to it any more. He felt he had at least a couple of top seasons in front of him. There'd be no trouble now getting a loan so he could buy into that store building and protect his interest in the sporting goods store. Actually, he felt young.

And then it came to him how it had happened. Convinced he was aging and broken down when he joined the Bulls, he'd forgotten to think so much of his physical condition in his

Candidate For The Boneyard

feud with Tuck Chalmers. He had gotten to the point where he didn't give a hang so long as he played a hot first base in Tuck Chalmers' eyes. He had forgotten anything was wrong with him. He looked down the club car to where four of the club were playing a game of hearts. Chalmers was one of them. Val was just figuring maybe he really owed something to Tuck for his antagonism.

Then he saw Chalmers looking his way, right at him in fact. And Chalmers had a little grin on his face. The second barrel hit big Val then. Chalmers had speeded up, had become a brilliant second sacker again. And Val realized it was his effect on Tuck that had done that. Then Tuck's grin turned to a scowl, and Val Lachner glared right back at him. But inside, he knew; and he knew Tuck knew. He figured it was a great break for him that he'd been swapped to the Bulls after all....

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Dope from the Dugout

By WILCEY EARLE

THE WAY WE SEE IT

Now that the 1947 baseball season is here, this reporter would like to make his annual prognostications on the way the big league teams will finish.

After considerable crystal-ball gazing, we are of the belief that the teams will endup the 1947 pennant race in this order:

NATIONAL LEAGUE:

- 1—Boston
- 2—St. Louis
- 3—Brooklyn
- 4—Chicago
- 5—Pittsburgh
- 6—Philadelphia
- 7—New York
- 8—Cincinnati

AMERICAN LEAGUE:

- 1—Cleveland
- 2—Boston

(Continued on Page 84)

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SPORTS FICTION

(Continued From Page 82)

- 3—New York
- 4—Detroit
- 5—Washington
- 6—St. Louis
- 7—Chicago
- 8—Philadelphia

HOW INDEED

Joe McCarthy was reminiscing the other day about Bugs Bennett, a pitcher he managed at Louisville.

"One day," related McCarthy, "I passed a group in which Spencer Abbott was telling how one of his Coast League teams had lost 12 straight.

"One afternoon," said Spencer, "we found ourselves in the ninth inning, one run ahead. The other guys had the tying run on third and two out. If we got this baby out, we would finally snap our losing streak.

The batter hit a one-hop grounder to the pitcher. When he came up with it, I said: "Thank God, our losing streak is over. But believe it or not, the pitcher took the ball in his right hand, let it run up his arm, across his shoulder and down into his glove, before he threw out the runner at first—by a half inch."

McCarthy cut in: "Don't tell me the pitcher's name, I'll tell you. It was Bugs Bennett."

"Gosh, how did you know?" gasped Abbott.

"How," snapped McCarthy, "could it be anyone else?"

IT'S HARD TO TELL

One of the interesting angles brought up by "The Basket-Ball Bribery Case," to use the jargon of Philo Vance, is this: "Does a coach know when his players are throwing a game?"

No one can say whether a coach actually knows. A star player can have an off-night and look like the worst dub in the world, yet he may be trying with all his heart.

On the other hand, another star player who has larceny in his heart can just manage to miss the basket by a few inches with his shots and make it look like tough luck.

DOPE FROM THE DUGOUT

A coach would have to have an x-ray mind and be able to look into the minds of his players to see if they were "levelling."

A great many fans won't agree with this opinion. They feel a coach can tell in a moment if a man is cheating. However, when they are asked for evidence to back up their opinion, there is none forthcoming.

In an effort to find a scapegoat in the current messy state of affairs in the hoop world, the finger can't be pointed at the coaches. The only stop-gap to a thrown game must be the player's own conscience.

SAFETY FIRST

Casey Stengel was discussing manners and customs in the up-and-at-'em leagues, where the teams travel by bus and are therefore "up all night and at 'em all day."

"In the Eastern League when I was managing Worcester, we didn't have a bus. Used cars, touring cars and sedans. If a fellow was a good driver, it meant a little extra for him on his contract.

Used to be a tough trip if the driver was a fellow who had gone 'four for Oh' that day. He'd jam that foot on the floor and bark at cops and try to pass everybody. Didn't care what happened.

Being manager, I always saw to it that I was in a car where the driver had made a couple of hits that day and was feeling friendly to the world."

SHOWDOWN AT SHORTSTOP

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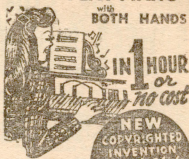
By T. W. Ford

Is In The June

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SPORTS FICTION

There's A Place For Razzle-Dazzle

(Continued From Page 48)

Hurtz," and Hurtz smiled his tired, muddy smile.

Ed said, "A fast spinner, into left tackle. Martin, you pack it."

Tiny Smith swung into the line, and Ed went down. His signals were clear, his backfield shifted. Suddenly Hurtz was running out straight, sucking in the Mountain Empire left half.

Ed had the ball, then. He moved back, and stuck it into Martin's guts. Martin made his hole, it closed up. The other back was battering, running clean interference. Ed saw that Martin was doomed. He put a block on a man, and then he saw Martin lateral.

Hurtz had it, clean, beautifully. He tucked it under his arm and Tiny Smith bowled over two Mountain Empire men. Hurtz had the field, then, and he had the speed. Ed blocked another man, landed on his side, glanced at the bench.

Blanton was up, hollering, jumping.

Hurtz stepped over, standing up. Ed watched the scoreboard change: 6 to 6. They lined up, and Hurtz held the ball. Ed kicked, tight across his chest.

The ball seemed to hang, then go between the uprights. There were five seconds of playing time left. Mountain Empire received, then the gun boomed. And State trotted off on the long end of a six to seven score.

They locked the dressing room to keep out the audience. Blanton was shaking hands with his men, pounding them on the back. Finally he came to where Ed was rubbing himself with a hard towel after his shower. The coach stuck out his hand.

"Good work, Ed."

Ed said, "There's a place for razzle-dazzle, Coach."

"You found the right place," said Blanton. His eyes were sharp, keen. "By the time you're a senior, Ed, you'll be one of the best. Unless, of course, that philosophy course doesn't harm you."

Ed smiled warmly. "It won't, sir,"

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SPORTS FICTION MAD MARATHON

(Continued From Page 46)

chugging *Little Barracuda*. With a swirl of diamond spray it surged past and beyond as a thousand boat whistles acknowledged the winner!

Spike grinned as happily as his voluntary immersion would permit. So Rossiter outboards were set—and so were his bike engines. Tepooten had lost his boat works—and any self respect he may have possessed. "But it was his own fault," reflected Spike grimly. "An' nobody to blame but himself!"

A few minutes later, Darrylene chugged back. She circled Spike's immobile form and drifted beside him. "You big lug!" she smiled happily. "You could have won that race!"

Spike returned the smile. "I'm a motorbike racer," he returned vehemently. "I still prefer it to this puddle-jumpin', wet nursin' nightmare! An' anyways, you said I didn't have th' class—"

Darrylene's gay laughter cut him short. Then suddenly her lovely face softened. "Anyone who did what you did, Spike—has class! I only hope I have half as much!"

The look in her eyes made Spike feel warm all over. He grabbed her diminutive hand and hauled himself awkwardly into the boat. His added weight gave fresh impetus to the fast sinking *Un-Quote*. With a resounding groan, it settled permanently under the waters of the Hudson—crew and colors flying.

THE END

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SPORTS FICTION THE MOORE THE MERRIER

(Continued From Page 36)

breezy little bird with a writes-under-Lake-Erie pen in one hand and a check for \$500 in the other. He slaps Jasper on the back and says, "You look very healthy, young man. Very healthy, indeed. And do you know why you look so very healthy, my friend? I will tell you in a very few words. You owe your great health and playing ability to taking *Dr. Greenliver's Lively Liver Pills.*"

"Never heard of 'em," snaps Moore.

The little weazel steps closer and places his right hand on Jasper's shoulder. "My boy," he coos, "the whole wide world has heard of *Dr. Greenliver's Lively Liver Pills.* Look!" He holds the check for \$500 under Moore's quivering beak. "This very easy money is all yours, pal, for simply signing this little piece of paper."

"If it ain't the Declaration of Independence," says Jasper, "I'm not signing it."

"Very funny," says the little guy. "Now, all you have to do is sign here and, to bind the bargain, I will also throw in this brand new Yam-head Ball-Point Pen. It is guaranteed to write under water."

"I don't care if it writes under China," says Jasper. "I never heard of your pills, and I never took any, and if I signed that testimonial I would be lying. What do you take me for, one of those hams out in Hollywood?" Jasper tears up the contract and walks to the showers.

"I will be glad to sign that for \$50," says Clunkle. The little lad gives him a scornful look. "Brother," he says, "my company only pays live people for signing testimonials. Good afternoon!"

WELL, BY THE end of the season, we are so far ahead of the other teams that the pennant is cinched. This is due entirely to the master-playing of J. Malibu Moore. He has played every position on the team and played it better than any

(Continued on Page 92)

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SPORTS FICTION

(Continued From Page 90)

one in the whole league. More, he is nationally famous and is Mr. Baseball of 1946. When Mr. Biergarden offers him a contract, with triple the salary, Jasper shoots fire out of his nostrils.

"That's the whole trouble with this world," he sniffs. "Money, money, money! To hell with it. I am through with baseball, if my deal with a big broadcasting company goes through. They want me to go on right away on a national hook-up, but I insist that Roberta plays with me. They claim that she won't fit in and I claim she will. She can feed me my lines and I will get the laughs."

"How much will they pay you?" asks Clunkle.

"I don't give a damn," says Jasper. "I will put on my program for a dime, just to prove that I am a great radio comedian. Wait and see; just wait and see."

Two weeks later we read in the papers that a new radio program, *Laugh and Live*, will be aired at 8 P.M., Tuesday. This program, it says here, will co-feature J. Malibu Moore and Roberta Lee Jackson. It also states that all the material was written by Mr. Moore, himself, and any resemblance to Shakespeare is strictly coincidental, if not downright baloney.

Me, along with Clunkle and several other Champ players are glued to the radio that night and await the debut of Brother Moore. With a few strains from *Dixie* and a short announcement, Moore and Jackson hit the airwaves. After listening three minutes me and Clunkle decide that, as a radio comedian, Jasper is as wet as the Gulf of Mexico.

"He will be back in baseball, where he belongs," says Clunkle. "Did you ever hear such craperino?"

Next morning we get all the papers and see what it says about Brother Moore and his playmate, Roberta Lee Jackson. They say plenty. One reviewer remarks—quote—"Although Moore tried hard he positively has neither voice nor talent for a radio comedian. But his wife, Rober-

(Continued on Page 94)

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SPORTS FICTION

(Continued From Page 92)

ta, was a real comedy treat. However, we think Moore has a fine future as a tragedian. His sense of stark drama is excellent."

"H'mmm," says Clunkle. "Boy, will this burn him up. Let's go around to his hotel and see him."

We hop a taxi and find Moore and wife on the third floor. We expected to find him all broken-hearted and practically weeping.

"Greetings, pals!" he exclaims. "Did you hear our program? Swell; hey? I told you I could do it!"

"Hey, look!" says Clunkle. "Stop making with the kidding. For months you bragged what a great radio comedian you are. If you're funny, so is *King Lear* and *Frankenstein*!"

"Why, fellows," he grins. "Where's your sense of humor? I was just fooling when I said I was a comedian. I thought you knew all the time that I really was a great tragedian. Roberta is the great comedian. Haw!"

"I ain't not no comedian!" snaps Roberta. "Them dopes what write for the papers must be screwy."

"Isn't she a scream?" demands J. Malibu Moore. "I bet Gracie Allen and Joan Davis will be off the air by next month!"

Well, tune in again sometime. Same magazine, same salami!

THE END

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SAVINGS BONDS

AND STAMPS

SPORTS FICTION TOO MANY COOKS

(Continued From Page 30)

his legs betrayed him as he stumbled and almost fell. Jumping between them, the alert referee waved Joe away. Then the official turned and spoke to the fumbling Graham, inspected the gashed eye. And the next moment he was waving that it was all over, that Joe had won by a technical kayo, and steering Graham to his own corner. Graham didn't protest too much.

Joe stood, feeling as if he would cry a little, hardly able to believe it. He had proved himself. And how! Then Doc was through the ropes and hugging him, almost spitting out his false teeth in his excitement.

"Gee, Joe, your interior tone was wonderful!"

DOWN IN THE dressing room, the sports writers were still kept waiting outside. Joe Burdee sat on the rubbing table, trying to think straight, trying to digest it. He knew he had a silly smirk. Once his face darkened a moment as he recalled Nancy. No, there would be no telegram to Rhode Island tonight. That was a thing of the past. He felt older, knew he had come into his maturity. And he really knew, for the first time how good he was. Knew he was even better than he himself had believed when he was living in that dream world and going through those pre-arranged fights. Tonight, for the first time, he had fought his own style, and he had cut down one of the top-drawer boys. The slick Bortal and publicity-smart Whitey Goodin had made a mistake. Like too many cooks doctoring up the broth. They had used so many tricks they had blinded themselves to how much Joe had.

Doc was going on, "And the way you got that left hook of his timed, Joe. Oh, it was sweet, sweet. He was in trouble whenever he pitched it. You was smart, Joe."

Joe dropped one of his hands, from which Doc had just sheared the ban-

(Continued on Page 96)

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SPORTS FICTION

(Continued From Page 95)

daging, on Doc's shoulder. "Doc, it's you and me now, huh?"

"Always was, wasn't it?"

Joe grinned, then grew solemn. "It looks like we're ready for the East now, New York, maybe, huh, Doc?" And Doc bobbed his head excitedly. "Doc, now that I'm going places again, those two, Bortal and Goodin, they got a contract. Maybe they'll try to cut back in."

Doc winked knowingly and shook his head. "Bortal—well, Joe, I know things. Bortal's got an old bum check rap against him in a Southern state. And Goodin deserted a wife and child in Maryland a while back. So they try to crash back in, Doc, he's going to talk so loud every newspaper in the country'll hear him. Besides," he looked sheepishly modest, "them two came back to the room that night after you left. And—well, I gave Bortal a nice mouse on his eye. Whitey ran too fast for me. If they came back, they might get some more mice, huh, Joe?"

Joe hugged the stumpy little manager then. And he said they better let the press in. "But no phony lines this time, huh, Doc?"

Doc gripped his hand hard. "No phony lines. They ain't needed with a fighter like you!"

THE END

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