

THE BIG SPORTS MAGAZINE—32 MORE PAGES

SPORTS NOVELS

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SEPT.

MAGAZINE

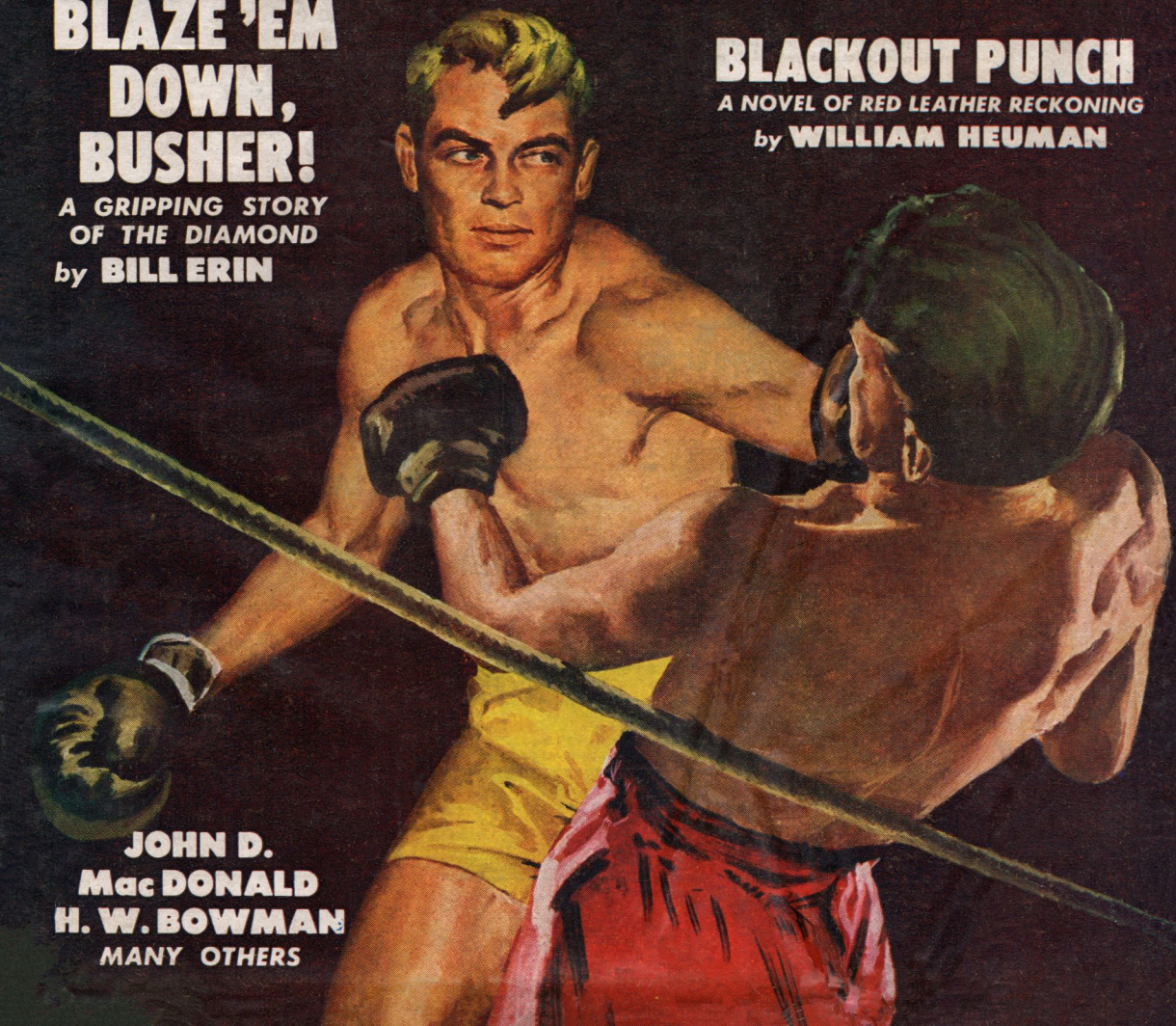
BLAZE 'EM DOWN, BUSER!

A GRIPPING STORY
OF THE DIAMOND
by **BILL ERIN**

BLACKOUT PUNCH

A NOVEL OF RED LEATHER RECKONING
by **WILLIAM HEUMAN**

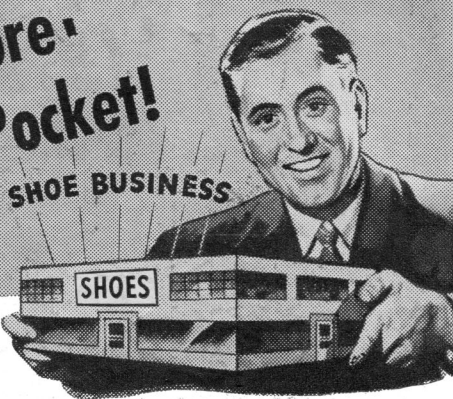
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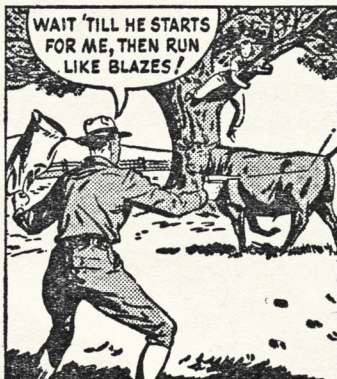


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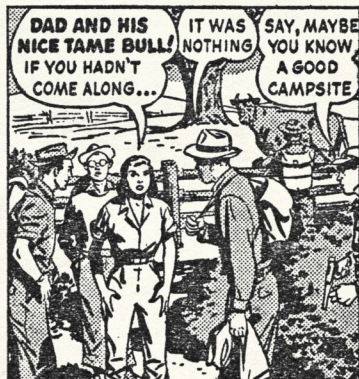


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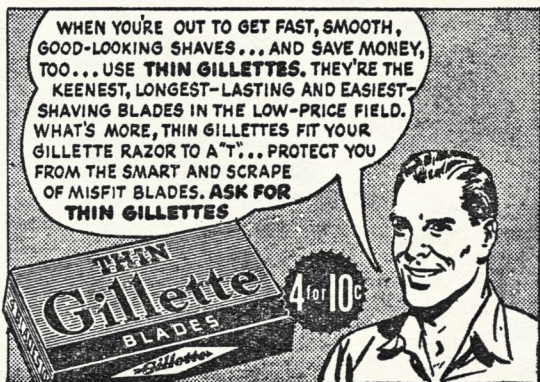
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MAGAZINE

VOL. 16

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When you're down to your last big windup, remember that eight stars may shade your glory—but the mighty win alone!

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Johnny was no killer, and Gentleman Jack was no gentleman. This fight would end up in Queer Street—or the morgue—for one of them.

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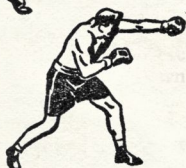
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A
NOVEL

THE BIG WOOD

There was not much left in Blow's arm, but he had a dozen seasons of fooling batters behind him. . . .

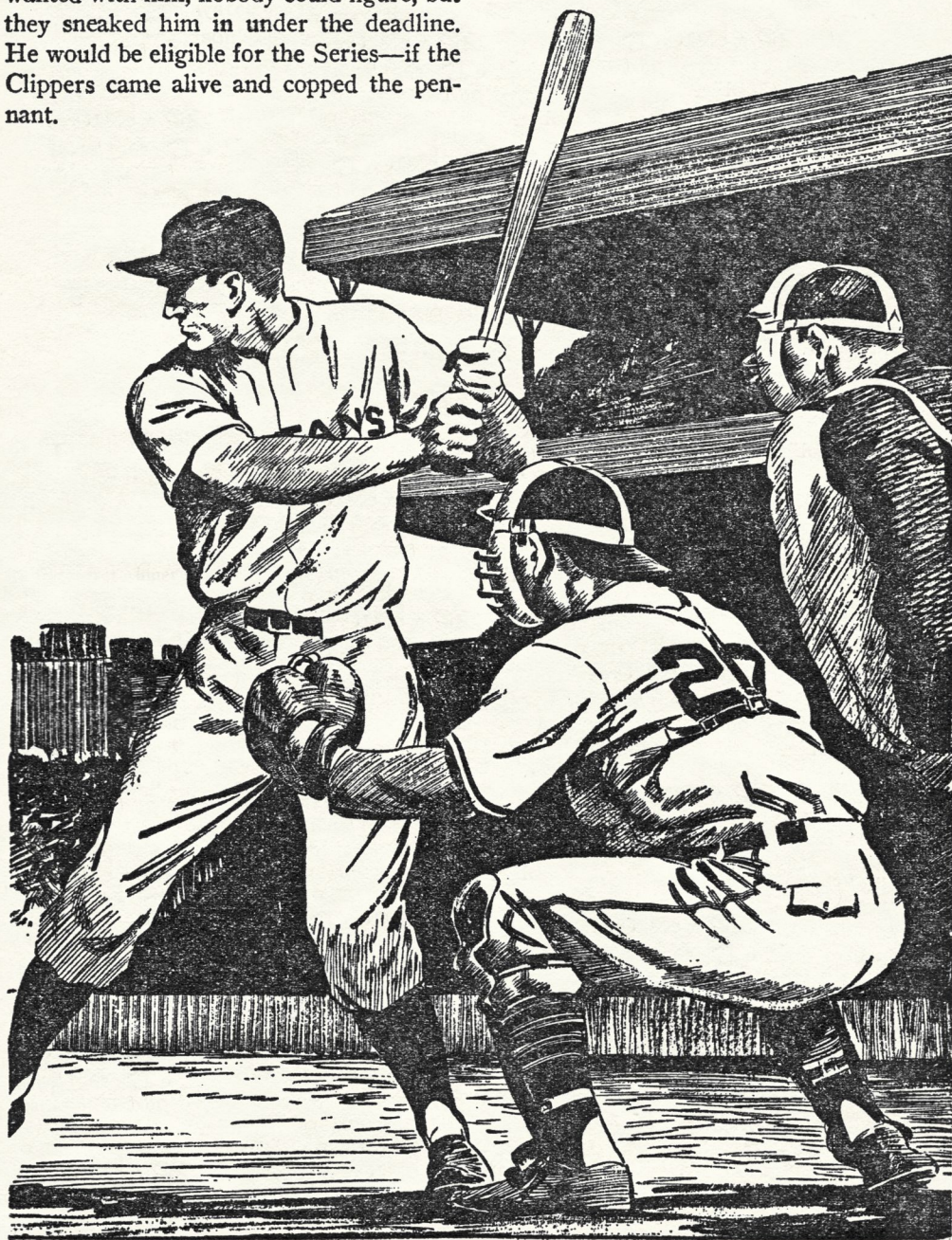


*When they've blasted the smoke from your fire-
ball, when you're down to that last big windup,
remember, eight all-stars may shade your glory
—but the mighty win alone!*

By BURGESS LEONARD

BLOW BARNES came to the Clippers in the twilight of his pitching career. He came with waivers out of the senior league. What the Clippers wanted with him, nobody could figure, but they sneaked him in under the deadline. He would be eligible for the Series—if the Clippers came alive and copped the pennant.

Blow Barnes went into the Clipper dressing room under the Wolf stands. He went in like a rookie—he who had been a rookie a decade ago. The big mouth that



had blown him into more jams than any one right arm could pitch him out of, was doing no business today.

He looked around him at the greatest legend in baseball. He could see Spike Johannsen, the lanky shortstop who could make that pivot with the slightest of the no-hit wonders, and bang out his thirty homers with the sluggers. Mule Wehry, the man mountain at first base. Lefty Moore, the fireballing southpaw with the face and dark suits of a mortician. The priceless outfield trio: Cates, the best thief, Grogan, the rifle-arm, and the towering, peerless Elhannon. They were the legend. The mystery was how they had let the pennant slip away from them these past two years.

Blow had pitched against these men on many a torrid afternoon. Good days, he had beaten them with arm and tongue; bad days, they had simply exploded against him with a power no pitcher could survive. But even when he had beaten them, it meant nothing to them. Their indifference had tarnished his bright triumph. Now Blow Barnes was a Clipper.

They did not pay him much attention. A few of them looked at him carelessly, and then went on talking. Husky, square-rigged Mutt Grogan belted monkey suit pants around a hard middle and grumbled, "This used to be a nice, quiet place to do a day's work."

Ban Shocker, the bright kid, the blond and peach-faced second baseman with the stocky frame for every-day durability and tapered big legs for sparkle, chided, "Didn't you hear, Mutt? The Clippers are seven games off the Titans' pace. We are falling apart. We need another pitcher."

Elhannon, the dour, taper-built giant, snapped, "We don't need a pitcher that bad."

Blow's mouth jolted open before he remembered. He just took it. After that they ignored him.

The locker room boy brought him a monkey suit, and said disdainfully, "It won't fit, but it's the biggest we've got."

Blow put on the suit. He put it on slowly, knowing it would have to make a new man of him. But the pants were too tight. He saw his reflection in a small mirror in an open locker: a beefy old pitcher who ran to fat, with pouches under round blue eyes, and a very wide mouth—closed.

He walked out and sat in the dugout. He would not be working his first day with the Clippers. It happened on other teams sometimes, but not with the Clippers.

They were playing the Wolves, a hungry team that should have been anchored to the bottom of the league, and was hanging somehow to fourth place. Blow had pitched for the Wolves years back; he had pitched for every second division team in both leagues.

The Wolves pitched little Sammy Sack, and the disgust was thick in the Clipper dugout. Fat little Sammy had nothing, and he dispensed it with utter caution at long intervals. It took him almost ten minutes to pitch to three Clippers. Shock-er went out with a line drive. Marrs topped a bounder to short. Johannsen smashed one that brought the crowd up; but the Wolf centerfielder showed a fine disregard for the wall, tearing the ball almost from the grasp of souvenir seekers.

Farmer Flynn strode to the mound for the Clippers. The Farmer was big in the pattern of the Clippers, solidly big, almost lean. He was rawboned. His hands were as big as spades. Speed had won him some games in this, his second season; wildness had cost him others.

Farmer Flynn had his control today; he always had speed. He simply blew three Wolves away from the plate.

Elhannon came up in the top of the second. The Wolf fans gave him a riding; but there was brittle unease in their taunt-

ing. Elhannon was deep in a slump; but he always led the league in homers and the RBI totals.

Elhannon stood up there, a nerveless giant who never looked his real size, and waited while Sack picked at corners. He ran the count to two and two, and straightened out an inside curve. The Wolf right-field wall had been pulled in for lesser southpaw sluggers than Elhannon. The ball cleared the fence by twenty feet. Elhannon trotted methodically around the bases, his dark face less grim.

On the mound, Sammy Sack seemed undisturbed. Mule Wehry was up. An inch shorter than Elhannon at six-two, twenty pounds heavier, Mule had the lumpy, ponderous look that Elhannon escaped. Mule swung on the first ball. He bounced it from the centerfield wall and wound up on third.

Still there was no activity in the Wolf bullpen. Sammy threw his nothing balls to Cates. Cates smashed a vicious bouncer over second. The Wolf shortstop knocked it down, picked it up, and Mule retreated to third. There was no play on Cates.

Cates made a cheap steal of second on the third pitch to Grogan. The Wolf catcher did not try for him.

Sammy Sack walked around the mound nonchalantly. He pitched with sublime confidence. Grogan lifted a pop fly for the catcher. On the bench, quiet little Joe Hahn gave an unobtrusive signal for the squeeze.

Clipper catcher Will Harms's bunt was perfection, a dragging roller toward first. But if Sammy Sack was not the league's top twirler, he was its best fielding pitcher. He materialized over at the base line suddenly, rifling the ball into his catcher's mitt. Mule came in, a landslide of meat and muscle, spikes high. He knocked the slighter Wolf receiver ten feet. But the scrappy Wolf held the ball, and the ump's thumb jerked.

MULE got up silently, brushed off the dust, and headed for the dugout. That was the Clippers; they took the breaks as they came.

But when Mule flopped on the bench in the shadows of the dugout, he snorted, "Huh! We go for one run when we could of had a inning."

Joe Hahn said only, "Most times it would have worked, Mule."

Sack struck out Flynn, and the Clippers went back to the field. Farmer Flynn blew hot. His fast one had a wicked take-off. The Wolves could not touch him.

The innings moved uneventfully. In the fourth Flynn hit a batter, walked another, and gave up a scratch single that scored a run. It was 1-1 when Mule Wehry went up in the first of the fifth. He lofted a blooper pitch out of the park, and paraded around the sacks.

The Clippers held their 2-1 margin through the eighth. With one down, Johannsen doubled off the right field wall. But Elhannon lined to the first baseman. Wehry, hitting behind him, swung for the bleachers and topped a chest-high bounce to the second baseman for an easy out.

The Wolves came in for their last try. Farmer Flynn could not find the plate, and walked the first hitter. The second man, Ladoy, laid down a swinging bunt. It was too deep for Farmer. Mule Wehry came in on it with lax stride. Shocker was covering the bag, but Mule made an overconfident, backhand stab at Ladoy—and missed.

Mule grinned in unbelief, and Shocker waved a reproving finger gaily as he trotted back to position. Farmer was the only Clipper who showed concern. He put extra zip into his next pitches, and got two strikes out of attempted bunts. The batter got a piece of the next pitch and set up a pop foul.

Catcher Harms pursued the ball, yelling for it. He was settled under it when

the Farmer barged into him, reaching. Both men went down, and the ball rolled away.

Harms got up, shrugging. Blow heard him say, "It's your ball game, yokel. Kick it away if you want."

Scowling, the Farmer went back to the mound. He tried to fog one through, and the batter lifted a Texas leaguer over third. A run came home, and the winning run perched on third.

Manager Hahn, waving for activity in the bull pen, walked out to talk with Farmer. The pitcher's heavy back hunched like a fighting cat's. Hahn patted his shoulder and came off the diamond.

Gregson was hitting, the Wolves' only power threat. As Farmer began to pitch outside, the Wolf fans squalled bitterly. Flynn did not like it, either. He threw three wide ones, and then got careless. He threw the fourth ball too close to the plate. Gregson reached out with a long bat and pulled the ball almost from the catcher's mitt. He angled it safely into right field, and the winning run came home.

The Clippers went into the dressing room, hardly more concerned than if they had had a fatiguing day at the office. Flynn was sore, but he kept his anger to himself.

Manager Hahn said, "A tough one to lose, gang."

Mutt Grogan grunted, "The tough ones don't count any more'n the easy ones, pop. It's just one more ball game. That feather-dusting clown is done. We murder a real pitcher tomorrow."

Hahn smiled vaguely and said nothing. He started for the office next to the dressing room. He turned, looked for a moment at Blow, and said, "See me when you dress, Barnes."

Joe Hahn was slumped in a chair when Blow entered the small room. Hahn was a little man. His brows were darker than his thin hair. His face was round, almost

cherubic in spite of his leathery skin. His famous smile was thin now.

Hahn took a good pull on his cigar. He asked abruptly, "What did you think of the game?"

Blow blinked. He said cautiously, "We blew it."

Joe Hahn stood up. His head reached to Blow's shoulders. Hahn jabbed a forefinger into Blow's chest. His ragged voice surprised Blow, "Look, Barnes. We ain't in no dressing room. There's just the two of us. And there ain't no Santa Claus, and there ain't no goody-goody managers who are fathers to their ball club."

Blow stared. Hahn growled, "I just hope I can finish the season without wrapping a bat around somebody's neck."

Hahn looked up and laughed suddenly at Blow's face. He asked in a mincing voice, "What's wrong with the Clippers? They've been asking that for three years. They're still young. The three rookies are every bit as good as the men they replaced. So the front office started changing managers. Will Flake, the guy who made them, was too cold, they said; he wasn't an inspiration to the boys. They got Boss Clump, a slave driver. He rode the boys sullen, the front office decided when they lost again last year. They decided they needed a good humor act. That's me. And I'm stuck with it. I wish to gravy I was back coaching with the Cards."

Hahn's cigar was out. He went back to the desk for a match. He slumped in the chair. He said more slowly, "The greatest team I ever saw, and they just don't ever care about any one game. They've been on top too much, too easy. They need a jolt. Blow, do you have any idea why I got you?"

Blow said slowly, "You needed a pitcher."

Hahn snorted. He said, "I took you because you've been the number one Clip-

per hater of all time. Because you're a blowoff guy. Because if anybody can wake up these sleeping beauties, you're the man. So today you watched them kick away a good game, and you impersonated a busted vocal cord."

Blow felt his cheeks getting red. He kept his voice low. "Hahn, I'll tell you something. Yeah, I always hated the Clippers. I rode 'em harder because they wouldn't yap back. They didn't have to. They beat me three out of every five games. A man grows up, Hahn. Sometimes it takes a pitcher a long time to find out he hates a club because they've got a class he ain't; that, deep down, he'd like to be that way himself. I never figured I'd get to wear no Clipper monkey suit. Now I've got it, I'm trying to rate it. I've thrown my last rhubarb. You've hired yourself just a pretty fair old pitching arm."

Hahn laughed in harsh disgust. Then his face settled into his cherubic pattern. Blow felt the irony of it as Hahn said gently, "Have it your way, Barnes."

Blow caught a taxi outside the park. The cabbie knew him. All cabbies everywhere seemed to know him. This one said, "D'ja read Hi Halters' column, Blow? He don't give you no chance to stick with them Clips. He says you ain't their type."

Blow asked plaintively, "Ain't you heard, Joe? I am a reformed character. I don't squawk no more on the close ones."

"Yah!" the cabbie derided. "I must hasten me home and delight me grand-mudder with the news."

BLOW let himself into the hotel room, and he stood in the doorway for just a moment. His round blue eyes were pleasantly dazed, and his chubby face wore the prideful amazement of a man who looks at a wife too good for him. He had been married to Marge for over a

year, but in her presence he was still conscious of the size of his hands and feet, and the redness of his thick neck.

She came to him quickly, but with a finger to her lips and a smiling gesture at the tiny bundle of humanity sleeping on the bed, and stood on her toes to kiss him. Gentleness turned his big arms awkward. He just whispered, "Marge." Then: "How's his Nibs?"

She told him, laughing, "He's as lazy as his father. How did you make out with the Clippers, Blow?"

She was a small girl. Her heart-shaped face was fresh and lovely. Her motions were quick and buoyant, but the large violet eyes were grave and understanding under dark, level brows. She dropped to the arm of the big chair and pulled him to a seat. She smiled, but her eyes wanted to share the uncertainty that pulled the big pitcher's brows together.

She said softly, "Give."

Blow said slowly, "There's their side of it. I always rode those guys hard. They don't like me. And it's their ball club. I've got to remember that."

She urged, "Honey, don't let them get you down. This is just another ball club."

He shook his big head. "No, Marge. They're the Clippers. They're the best baseball has. They're not hungry no more, and they've dreamed away a couple of pennants. But they're still tops, and if they got mad enough, they'd tear up the league the same way they did before. Joe Hahn didn't want my pitching. He figured I'd put spurs to the guys and snap them out of it."

She protested, "If they're so good, why don't they win?"

He tried to explain, knowing that no woman could understand. "They've had everything baseball can give. Best they can do is repeat, and it's not the same. Mostly they're playing good ball, but they used to give more'n that. It used to be,

every play was a clutch, every chance at bat a try for a pennant. Now they just play pretty ball and expect the pennant to drop into their laps, and they figure they've been cheated somehow when kids like the Titans nose them out in the fall. I dunno. Maybe I could get 'em riled enough to get more baseball out of 'em. But I could kiss that job with Wreese goodbye."

Her small hand stroked a heavy, rounded shoulder. She asked quietly, "It means so much, that personnel position you've been begging Mr. Wreese for? Enough for you to give up baseball?"

There was misery in his smile. "Baby, I've made and tossed away enough dough to keep you and the kid in style the rest of your lives. I ain't the pitcher I was. You saw what I put on the marriage license—and I might have miscounted just a little. Maybe if I'd met you sooner I'd—but I didn't. Instead of having a nest-egg, I'm broke and likely to be washed up any year. I owe it to you and his Nibs to grab a job with a future to it. This is the best chance I'll ever have. I've just got to show Wreese I'm his man."

"What kind of man is this Wreese?" she asked, perplexed. She quoted, "'Show me you can play the Clipper brand of baseball, and you are my personnel manager.' Wasn't that what he told you?"

"And what he meant," Blow told her. "Andy Wreese is big time. He left his factories for a colonel's wings in the army. He was C. O. of a camp where I played ball. He must have liked me, or he wouldn't consider me at all, now he's making tractors again. He's a Clipper fan. He found out I was slated for the Clippers before I knew it. He wired me that if I could get along with the Clippers and keep my nose clean, he had a job for me. And that's just what I'm going to do."

She put small hands on his cheeks and

turned his face until he looked squarely into the grave, violet eyes. She said steadily, "Blow, you're scared. Because of Junior and me. If it weren't for us, you wouldn't be worried about Wreese's job. I didn't marry a mealticket. I happen to love you, and I'd go on loving you if you were digging ditches or pitching once a week for a Class-D team. If you want this job, then try for it. But don't you see, I don't want you doing anything because you are scared? You're a big man, Blow. People will talk about Blow Barnes long after they have forgotten these namby-pamby Clippers."

He said slowly, "I want that job more than I ever wanted anything, except you."

Her head dropped to his shoulder, and her arm slid around his neck. She murmured, "Whatever you say, Blow."

Blow toiled methodically in the bullpen the next afternoon. Young Lefty Clydeson and Pop Powatan kept him company. Manager Hahn gave them a busy afternoon, waving them into activity each time pitcher Ed Merkel waded into hot water. Merkel was wild, but the fault was not entirely his. The Clippers had won that game three times, and kicked it back into the Wolves' laps each time.

The Clippers were leading 8-7 in the the last of the eighth. Merkel lost control to walk the lead-off Wolf. The next hitter tried to sacrifice the runner down, and the hard-working Merkel smoked in two downers that hopped foul off of the batsman's jabbing war-club. Then he fooled the Wolf hitter with a change of pace curve, and a slow roller went dribbling out toward Shocker. The kid came in too fast, intent on the double play, and booted the easy chance. Merkel gave what was left in his weary arm to strike out the next Wolf; and he walked the succeeding hitter on four balls.

Blow Barnes came ambling out of the dugout in answer to Hahn's signal. The

Wolf fans caught sight of him, and they fired both barrels. But there was a certain fondness in the abuse, a pride of past ownership. Blow had pitched for the Wolves.

Ordinarily he would have shouted back at them. Today he walked straight out to the hill. He looked over the man in the batter's box and motioned the infield in to him. They sauntered over lazily, and Hahn came out.

Blow said, "I know this Gregory from when. I can make him hit on the ground. I'll put you into position, Johannsen. We can forget the plate and make the double play."

Mule Wehry growled, "Yeah. We forget the plate and they squeeze home the tying run."

Blow said carefully, "Gregory won't bunt on me. I can make him hit to short. That's my idea. I'll listen to a better one."

"You'll listen to Hahn," Shocker snapped.

Hahn looked troubled. He said finally, "We'll give it a try. Blow has been around. Go where he wants you, Spike."

Blow waved Johannsen into position with his big right hand. His arm felt loose and good. He knew Gregory. He could think a step ahead of the methodical Wolf gardener. Gregory would not be expecting the curve; Blow used it sparingly.

The ball flashed at Gregory's jaw, twinkling out suddenly from behind the cover of a big, high-flung foot. Gregory was jerking his head back angrily when the curve broke and chipped a corner of the plate. Strike one. Blow took his time, stretched laboriously and came across with a swift cross-fire that nipped the outside corner. Strike two. Gregory had not offered at it.

Blow checked the runners on the loaded bags. They had itching feet. Gregory was tense at the plate, hunching the mus-

cles along his jaw. Gregory did not like speed low and outside, and that sizzling cross-fire had reminded him that Blow remembered. Gregory crowded the plate a little.

The pitch was a change of pace just above Gregory's knees. When he was not tied in mental knots, trying to outguess a pitcher, Gregory could murder that delivery. He was not set for this one, but it was good and he had to swing. He got a piece of horsehide with a hurried snap. The ball bounced twice and burrowed into Johannsen's glove, and the lanky shortfielder was lining it to second. Young Shocker was pivoting in a blaze of finesse, slamming the ball to Wehry, and the side was retired.

Disappointment was a wet blanket on the stands. The bitter cry came down, "Yah, ya lucky old fat bum!" Blow's hand started to his cap. In the moment of starting his flourishing bow, he remembered. He walked to the dugout in precise silence.

Hahn sweated in relief, though nobody else seemed greatly concerned. As it developed, there was no need for alarm. Shocker singled, and Cates worked a free trip. Spike Johannsen scored Shocker with a long single. Elhannon flied out, but Wehry sent both Cates and Johannsen home with a siege-gun double.

It was 11-7 when Blow went out to the mound to give the Wolves their last licks. He gave them nothing good. He struck out a man, and turned desperate swings into two cheap fly balls, and the game was over.

THEY went into the dressing room, and they were as unconcerned as the day before, when they had lost. Grogan theorized "That's baseball. Why get hot and bothered? Just keep scoring, and after a while the other team will get tired and quit."

Little Hahn admittedly mildly, "That's

one way of looking at it, Mutt." But he kept his eyes on the floor, and moved out quickly.

They won the finale against the Wolves; but the league leaders, the brash young Titans, were fattening themselves at the expense of the hapless Sox. The Clippers were still six games off the pace.

Blow sent Marge and the baby back to her mother's home in Newark, and the Clippers moved on around the circuit to meet the Jays. Shocker, the lead-off hitter, greeted the Jay pitcher with a home run. They made three double plays that day, and hit three homers. They made two errors, and Shocker and Wehry let a ball drop between them in an apathetic Alphonse-Gaston act, and Farmer Flynn heaved two wild pitches against the grandstand wire. And they lost, 6-5.

Blow pitched the second game. It was very simple. The Clippers went out in the first inning and scored five runs. Blow went to the hill with a relaxing lead and a head full of savvy. He saved his fast one for another day. He pitched to spots and let the Jays wear themselves out. But he never let them get him in a hole. He turned it on when he needed it.

He had a shutout until the eighth. He gave up a scratch single then. Grogan missed the signal Johannsen was relaying to the outfield, and was unforgivably out of position when the Jay first sacker, Knotts, lined a lime-hugger into right field. The man on first came all the way home as Grogan had to chase the ball to the fence. Grogan almost—but not quite—redeemed himself with a superb throw.

Blow's meaty face flushed. On another club on another day, he would have been roaring his wrath. But he was thinking beyond today. He pitched out the game and won it, 12-1.

In the dressing room, the sprightly Shocker begged Hahn humorously, "Next

time we start with five runs, let me pitch. My aunt could have won for us today."

Hahn smiled. He said quietly, "Takes a pitcher to know when to bear down, Urb. Grogan, you want to watch for those signals. A curve into his knees, that Knotts pulls down the line just about nine times out of ten. Keep your eye on Spike. He can't get too elaborate, or they'll catch on. You were way out of position on that one."

Grogan flipped his heavy shoulders. "I was gabbing with a blonde in the third row. I think I got a date."

The laugh went around the room. Hahn said gently, "Have your fun. But when a pitcher tosses a shutout game, I like to see him get it. If I were Blow Barnes, I think I'd really kick out a few of your teeth, Mutt, instead of just muttering about it."

Hahn's face never changed, and he was gone from the room and the Clippers were blinking at each other before they realized what he had said. Everyone took a deep, quick breath. Mutt Grogan shoved his square, darkened face toward Blow. He growled, "What's this about kicking out my teeth, big wind?"

Astonished, Blow stepped back. He objected, "It wasn't my idea, Mutt."

Grogan snarled, "Old Man Hahn didn't think up those fighting words without help. I seen that look you gimme."

Mule Wehry rumbled, "How come it's so important this fat bum gets a shut-out or don't? He's lucky we let him live around here. I should bust guts for Blow Barnes."

Grogan snapped, "More like, I'll bust his nose. Barnes, you keep that man-hole mouth of yours lidded up, and maybe we can stand the smell of you for a few more days. Open it, and you get a fist right in the middle of it."

Storm-tossed from the tide of red fury that was pounding into his brain, Blow clung desperately to one idea, and he

voiced it in a strained tone, "I ain't looking for no trouble."

The towering Elhannon sneered over Grogan's shoulder. He accused, "Not with anybody your size. You talk a great fight, Barnes, when you're out on the field and there's people handy to pull a guy off of you. In a corner, you make like a rat."

Somehow, Blow got out of there without hitting anyone. When he got outside, he leaned against a telephone pole, and his whole big body shook. It was the first time in his life he had run from a fight. He felt like a tail-tucked cur, and he was so mad that his vision was blurred. He stood there until a measure of calm returned, but the humiliation was branded into him.

He told himself desperately, "You've got to take it. Whatever they hand out, you got to take. You can't blow up now."

He waited until he was master of himself again before he walked into Joe Hahn's hotel room. The manager was alone. He had blued the air with cigar smoke, and he was sipping his beer with no apparent enjoyment. Hahn wore no shirt, and he was smaller and scrawnier than Blow had realized. He looked at Blow with his inky, moody eyes, and said, "You've changed to beat all get-out. Who'd have thought Blow Barnes had a yellow streak?"

Blow said coldly, "That won't do you no good, Hahn. No more than the lousy stunt you pulled this afternoon. The quicker you get it through your head that I'm not going to do your dirty work, the better it'll be for both of us."

Hahn sighed, "Yeah. And it's too bad, Barnes. A player with a top sergeant's mouth can do more than a manager to keep a team on its toes, even if the front office ain't got said manager's hands tied. I've watched you around the league. I never saw you ride no rookie nor fry the hide of a guy that was trying. But a

man that made an error behind you never forgot it, and I saw you kick the pants of Dib Dooley in Cleveland one day when he didn't cover second on a pitch-out. You wasn't ever an easy man to play with, Blow, but it's in the records, them teams played better ball as long as they kept you."

Blow said sourly, "And what did I get out of it? A trip somewhere else."

Hahn considered the tip of his cigar. He admitted tonelessly, "Frankly, I wasn't considering your welfare. I had the Clippers in mind."

Blow only glowered, his long lower lip protruding, and Hahn went on, "That's not a team. It's a bunch of All-Stars. Give them something to make them pull together, even if it was just a guy that they all hated, and you'd see some baseball! Okay, Barnes, have it your way. You didn't look bad out there today. I seem to remember, a change of scenery always made you tough to beat. All season I've had three pitchers I could depend on. With four, maybe we could pull it out."

Blow said eagerly, "Mister, I'm your man."

Hahn's "Maybe" did not drip enthusiasm. He reached down and pulled a fresh bottle of beer from a bucket of ice beside his chair. He put the bottle on the table beside an empty one and watched the dripping stain the cloth. He spoke moodily, "Manager of the Clippers. The best job in baseball. And this is what it adds up to: a bottle of beer by yourself in a hotel room, because you're ashamed to show your face outside. When you sell your soul, Blow, try to get a better bargain than I made."

Blow left the little guy with his beer. He felt more pity than anger for Hahn. The little manager was just a figurehead. If he dared raise his voice in anger, the Clippers would hit the well-beaten path to the front office. No longer champions,

the Clippers insisted on being treated as champions. The front office pampered them, blaming the managers for their failures. Joe Hahn, as experienced and knowing a leader as there was in baseball, was on the way out; he had never had a chance.

It was nothing to Blow, except that he hated sloppy baseball. He had been thrilled, coming at last to the Clippers. It was still baseball's biggest name. Dozens of afternoons Blow had watched the methodical young men who did not have to strain and squabble like other teams, calmly go about their business of playing ball a little better than anyone else; and they had seemed very grand. Now the uniform meant nothing to him. He just wanted a chance to pitch out the season without trouble. It seemed that Hahn would give him his wish.

THE Jays evened the series the next afternoon. The Clippers splattered eleven hits around the field, but they could not put them together, and big Elhannon failed dismally in the ninth-inning clutch with two aboard; so they dropped the contest to the aged knuckle-ball artist, Rube Horn, 4-3.

Lefty Moore pitched the finale against the Jays. He won it 2-0. It was a grim sight to watch Lefty pitch. There was no more waste motion about Lefty than there was fat on his frame. He always knew where that ball should be placed, and he put it there. Lefty had had his big season three years back. He was thirty-two, and his fast one was not quite so glittering, but he would win his twenty games.

Manager Hahn had his Big Four now, steady Jim Rockney, Grisset, the knuckle-ball artist, Lefty, and Blow. Farmer Flynn took over relief duties. Hahn threw them with relentless regularity into the fray as they moved around the circuit. Later, perhaps, the hot-shot rookies could

be called in from the minors to rest them. But Hahn was intent on closing the gap on the warring Titans, and he kept his big guns firing.

Rockney stuck out a late-inning pasting from the Cubs and racked up a 7-5 win. Blow pitched the second game and got off to a bad start as the first Cub batsman singled through the box. Blow struck out a man, but the next hitter pulled a single between Wehry and the initial sack, and the runner on first went into third with a safe slide. The batsman took second on the peg. Catcher Harms stood away from the plate, and Blow lobbed four balls wide to fill the bases.

Larry Conti was coming to the plate, a stocky man with long, bulging arms. Conti was the Cub clean-up man, a power hitter. Blow checked the runners, stretched and fogged his fast one through at shoulder height. Conti did not offer at it, and the umpire called it a ball. Blow frowned, but made no protest. He stretched and cut the heart of the plate with his change of pace. It was Blow's mastery of pace that had kept him in the big show beyond his time. Blow did not let up perceptibly on this pitch, but Conti's bat came around too soon. Bat met ball in a chopping contact. An orderly hopper bounced out toward Johannsen, perfect double-play bait. The great shortstop swooped in after it.

There was a pebble the size of a man's thumbnail on the carefully worked base paths at the edge of the grass, where no pebble should have been. The ball struck the pebble and hopped crazily. Because he was a great shortstop, Johannsen slowed the ball with a lightning stab, but it rolled behind him. Johannsen whirled and trapped the ball with a cat-pounce, and lined a perfect strike to the plate—an instant too late. The runner from third was sliding across the rubber. The Cubs were leading, 1-0; and the bases were still loaded.

Johannsen slouched back into position, unmoved. Shocker called automatically, "Bad hop, Spike."

Nifong came to the plate, tall, stoop-shouldered and bespectacled. He was a long ball hitter, and Blow sensed from the way Nifong dug in at the platter that the Cubs were not playing for one run. Blow worked on the batter with slow curves on the outside, and mixed three balls with two vicious fouls from Nifong's big bat. Blow was deep in the hole, and Nifong waited greedily for Blow to come across with the big one. Blow fooled him. He broke a jughandle hook, so fast that it screeched, to the outside corner. Nifong moved, but held back his swing.

Blow stared. The umpire was thumbing Nifong down to first. The runners were advancing, yelling gleefully; and the crowd was howling as a run came home. Blow's lower lip pushed out. That ball had been good—perhaps by only a fraction of an inch—but he had clipped a corner. Catcher Will Harms turned to stare disapproval for a moment at the umpire before tossing the ball back to Blow.

The home stands, sensing a debacle, were riding Blow with sharp spurs. He did not say a word. In cold wrath he fanned Solomon on three pitched balls, and made Crenshaw pop up to the catcher. He stalked to the dugout, and the Clippers trotted in, complaining about their luck.

Grogan grumbled, "Same kind of lousy break we been getting for three seasons. You'd think a major league team could hire guys to keep rocks off their diamond."

Cates declared, "Same old story, Mutt. We get our share of the breaks—all bad. And now we've got a pitcher that would rather force in a run than pitch to a punk like Nifong."

Blow zippered up his windbreaker and sat stonily on the bench. He watched little Petty, the Cub shortstop, search the

ground until he found the pebble Johannsen had not bothered to remove, and toss it from the field. Blow heard a grunt beside him. Lefty Moore's hawk face was in hard profile, but the dark eyes were fixed on Petty. Lefty said nothing. There was only that sour grunt, but it was enough to make Blow realize that Lefty knew. It was gospel truth that the Clippers got more than their share of the bad breaks. They made their own bad breaks.

The Clipper infielders never bothered to search for pebbles, or smooth spike-torn dirt. Menials were hired to perform such tasks; the Clippers couldn't be bothered. They kept their dignity, and in the course of a season they lost just a few bad bounces that less talented, more watchful infielders would have turned into putouts by keeping their little plots of ground in perfect condition.

Clipper batteries never squawked over bad decisions. Big league umpires are invariably honest; they are likewise human. There are borderline decisions sometimes; plays that could be called either way. When one decision will be accepted in graceful, if disapproving, silence, and the reverse is sure to surround the official with outraged, howling men, it is human to take the peaceful way. Blow hunched on the bench with his fist supporting his chin, glum in his conviction that if he had squawked on that first close decision, he would not have been victim of the second.

The Clippers went down in order before the puzzling slants of the Cubs' sophomore sensation, Lank Abbott. Blow went out there again, got into immediate trouble as the first Cub laced a double into deep left field, and pitched himself out of it. It was not one of his better days. The Cubs were hitting him hard, threatening in every inning. They pushed over another run in the fourth, leaving three men on the sacks.

Perspiring vastly, the fat pitcher worked hard. The crowd sat back and crowed at him; there was no pitcher in baseball the crowds would rather see scramble. In grim silence Blow used all his craft to spread the Cub hits. By the sixth inning the Cubs had racked up eight hits, but they had only three runs.

In the seventh the Clipper bats came to Blow's rescue. Shocker opened the inning with a scratch single through second, and suddenly everyone was hitting Abbott. When the inning was over the Clippers had five runs and Abbott was headed for the showers.

BLOW went back to the mound with a 5-3 lead, but he could not stay out of trouble. He had two strikes on Nance, and tried to fool the hitter with a bad ball. Nance, jittery, golfed a swing at a slow ball and the end of his bat connected with the horsehide not six inches above the dirt. A freakish Texas leaguer rode the breeze over Johanssen's head, and Nance roosted on first.

Kinsey, the Cub second baseman, went after a tough outside hook with the hit-and-run pending, and got just enough of the leather to dribble a slow roller down the line toward first. Blow charged the initial sack as the ponderous Wehry went in after the ball. There was no hope of a play at second. Wehry fumbled the ball for an instant, then whirled and scorched the peg low and wide. Blow had to stretch across the base to dig it up, and Kinsey plowed into him with a thunderous smash. Blow never had a chance. Kinsey's shoulder was in his ribs, and Kinsey's knee was smashing sickness into his stomach, and spikes ripped at Blow's ankle. Blow turned over in the air and his head landed first, and he lay in smothering darkness, with tracer bullets and fiery flares drawing weird patterns across the screen of his stupor.

Blow came out of it quickly. He was sick and shaken as he climbed to his feet. Only Joe Hahn had come out to help him. Nance was on third and Kinsey grinned mockingly from second base. Shocker had recovered the ball, and he was pounding it lazily into his mitt. Shocker asked mildly of Mule Wehry, "You ever see a balloon punctured before?"

Wehry's grin was broader. He declared, "Funniest thing ever I saw. Wouldn't have missed it for two homers."

Blow stiffened. All the Clippers were smiling. The bleachers were rocking with laughter. There was something very funny about a fat man's downfall. Only Hahn was concerned. He asked anxiously, "Can you make it, Blow?"

Blow said, "I'll make it."

He walked slowly back to the mound. His ribs were numb and there was a hinge in his middle. He threw three straight balls before he could find the plate, and then he threw three successive strikes. He got the second out with a pop-up he took himself, but the next hitter singled over Wehry's head. Grogan came through with a superb throw that drove the ambitious Kinsey back to third, but Nance was across the rubber, and the score was now only 5-4 for the Clippers. The next hitter blasted the first pitch on a line to Johanssen, and the shortstop pulled it down to end the inning.

The Clippers went hitless in the first of the ninth, and Blow climbed the hill with only that slim one-run lead to bolster him. The Cubs had his number today. They had hit him hard all the way, and now he was weary and sick. He steeled himself for the ordeal, and wildness came to plague him. He walked pitcher Wilkey, All-American out, though the stubborn, clumsy relief pitcher tried to help by swinging at two patently bad balls. The Cub manager substituted a runner for Wilkey, and Petty sacrificed him down to second. Blow could not find the plate

again. Herrick walked on four balls.

Blow's arm hung like a dead weight from his beefy, rounded shoulder. He wiped sweat from his eyes and pulled himself together. He drove southpaw-hitting Tombs back from the plate with a fast ball at the jaw. Then he gambled with a slow curve low on the outside corner, and Tombs smashed a grounder at Fred Marrs. It was a hard ball, but it bounced cleanly. The Clipper's chesty, blond third sacker went to his knees, blocking it, then raced the runner to the bag for the forceout. One down. Blow felt a little better. But Larry Conti was up there now, swinging for the bleachers. The clean-up slugger fouled two out of the park, then backed Elhannon to the wall with a towering fly. The runners tagged up and advanced, Herrick high-spiking into third under Elhannon's strong-armed throw, upsetting Marrs.

One more out. But lanky, whipcord-muscled Nifong was digging in at the plate. Nifong was not the steadiest hitter among the Cubs, but when he connected he was capable of tearing a leg off of an infielder; and he had been hot today. Blow wiped his face with his sleeve, fingered the resin bag, and frowned at Nifong, his long lower lip creeping out. He was dismally conscious of an overpowering hunch that Nifong was going to hit. And he knew that he had to end this game now, or he was finished.

He called for a new ball and roughed it up with horny hands, remembering somehow the first time he had pitched to the rookie Nifong, five or six seasons back. And he knew what he had to do. He worked his cross-fire delivery at the outside corner, and both pitches were a shade outside. He spun a teasing curve across the tall man's knee, and Nifong sneered and let it go for a called strike.

Then Blow grooved the ball. He put everything he had left into the pitch, and

it bulleted down the slot, and Nifong's lanky body whipped into action like an uncoiling spring. Dead center, the flailing hickory smashed horsehide. A white projectile screamed warning as it drove for Blow's head.

But his glove was out there. He had to move it perhaps an inch to blend the smack of new contact with the echoes of the bat-crash. Blow's right hand removed the ball from a gloved mitt that had no feeling at all for the moment. He slipped the ball into his pocket and walked slowly off the field. He had never in his life worked harder to win a game.

In the dressing room the Clippers were languid. It had been a long game. Cates said, "The big inning. We looked like the old-time Clippers today."

Mule Wehry grumbled, "Why can't we get a flock of runs when we've got a good pitcher working? We're making that bum of a Barnes look good."

Blow stripped away his sweaty jersey and lumbered over to the rubbing table. He said, "Better gimme a dab of that iodine on this, George." The injustice of their regard made his voice unconsciously a little loud. The trainer swore as Blow held out a dripping hand. There was an inch-long gash that ran from between the second and third fingers across the palm of the pitcher's left hand.

Lefty Moore was standing close. His dull, dark eyes fixed on the slow drip of blood. Then he turned away. Chunky Jim Rockney laughed shortly, recalling, "I grooved one for Nifong—once. I can still feel the wind of that thing going past my ear. Either that last pitch slipped, or you're the biggest fool in baseball, Barnes."

Lefty said softly, almost muttering, "It didn't slip." Shocker added brightly, "That leaves just one choice." But Lefty did not laugh with the rest.

Manager Hahn came in, and the ghost of a smile pried at the ends of his grim

mouth. He said, "We gained a full game. The Tiges took the Titans. We're just three games behind."

Grogan laughed impatiently, "So what? The punks have been playing over their fat heads. They'll fold in the stretch."

Hahn's mouth went straight as a ruler. He pointed out, "They didn't fold last year. This thing isn't going to fall into your laps. We'll have to beat the Titans for it."

Spike Johannsen snorted, "Nuh, you read the papers too much, Joe. There ain't nothing wrong with us a crack at them Titans—won't cure."

Confident, unconcerned, they drifted into the showers. They were the Clippers. They had a little more class than any other dressing room could hold. They could whip any other team without really trying—their memories told them. And Blow Barnes, who had a split hand, ugly bruises and an aching arm from giving everything he had on an afternoon when he was not right, to hand a game to a team that figured they didn't really need the win, watched them with bleak eyes and began to hate them.

Blow was the last to leave, and he rode alone in a taxi to the hotel. He went into the lobby, and a tall, lean man with a grey Moustache of Distinction stood up from a lounge and walked toward Blow briskly. Blow blinked in surprise, then grinned as he shook the lean, hard hand. He asked, "What are you doing out here, Mr. Wreese?"

"The name is 'Andy' to you just now. We're out of the army long since, and you're not working for me—yet," Wreese corrected with a quick, cordial smile. "I think you will be. I saw the game. The Clippers have done you good, Blow."

Blow said, "I was lousy today."

Wreese told him, "You did your job. No fuss, no feathers, no—exhibitions. You took the bad breaks without protest. You played like a Clipper. When I made

the bargain with you, I never thought you would come through, frankly. You have come a long way. The pitcher I saw on the mound this afternoon is the kind of man I'd be proud to put in charge of my factory teams."

Blow stammered, "Thanks."

Andy Wreese reflected, "I imagine that these few weeks with the Clippers will mean more to you in the future than all the years you pitched around the leagues. You'll be able to say to that son of yours, 'I was a Clipper.' It's the same as saying that you belonged to the greatest, cleanest, most gentlemanly bunch of champions who ever walked a diamond."

Blow admitted, "I ain't likely to forget it."

He had dinner with Wreese, and the industrialist shook hands warmly as he left to catch a plane. Wreese reminded him, "Keep pitching, big fellow. I'll be watching all those last home games. I hope you get a chance at the Titans."

Blow went up to the hotel room he shared in a sort of a neutral civility with Doby Dobbs, the utility infielder. He spread his aches and pains on the bed. He said to himself, "What I hope, Barnes, is that you can keep your big mouth shut and watch these conceited clucks toss a pennant away. What's it to you? You'd be lucky if they voted you a half-share of that dough. Wreese is sold. Keep him that way."



Hungry Bats

2

THE Clippers hit a winning streak, and they picked up momentum down the stretch. Elhannon came out of his slump to terrorize enemy moundsmen, and Hahn's Big Four throttled the opposition. The Clippers were sure of steady hurling every afternoon, after a season of Hahn's frantic juggling around the three depend-

able pitching arms the Clippers had owned. Blow had won five straight without a setback. It was a newspaper sensation. Writers who had roasted Hahn for the deal were now busy explaining how logical it had been to assume that a pitcher who could win twelve or so games a season for mediocre clubs could win regularly for the Clippers.

The Titans were faltering a little. Injuries plagued them, and they had a tougher schedule than the Clippers. When Blow walked out on the hill one hot September afternoon in St. Louis, the Titans were a single game ahead of the Clippers. Blow was very good that afternoon. He gave up seven hits, but no runs, and he was not tired at the end of the 2-0 victory. The Corsairs bumped off the Titans again that afternoon, and the Clippers were in a tie for first place!

They played through that series with the Birds with one eye on the alternate scoreboard. They swept the series. They were magnificent, confident to the point of smugness. They bombarded Bird pitchers mercilessly while the Titans were losing games by one run. They came out of the series two full games ahead of the

Titans, and they picked up an additional game and a half against the Lions while the Titans were locked in desperate combat with the third-place Robins.

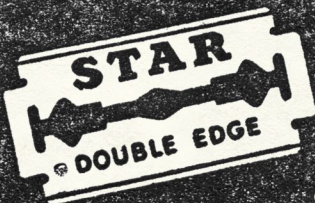
So the Clippers went home with the pennant hanging like ripe fruit before their eyes, three-and-a-half games in the lead, six games to play, all on their home grounds. If they could sweep the series with the mediocre Wolves, the last games with the Titans would be no more than a formality.

It was a big day, that first game with the Wolves. The fans jammed every available inch of the stands, loud and colorful, boosting their champions to glory. Lefty Moore was pitching. It was a memorable chance for Lefty. He was gunning for his twentieth win of the season, the two hundredth of his career. If the mortician-faced southpaw felt the pressure, no one could detect it. Grim and methodical, Lefty went out to the mound and struck out the first three batters to face him.

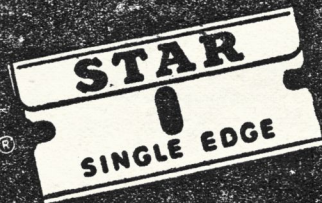
But the Wolves pitched Sammy Sack, and the exasperating, tedious little man strutted and grinned and taunted, and served up rags and rotten apples for the

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Clippers to hit. It was a queer duel. Lefty was setting the Wolves down in order, hardly giving them time to get settled on the bench. Sack was always in trouble, and he was never worried; and somehow he always got that third out before the Clippers could force a run across. By the fifth inning Sack had allowed six hits, Lefty none. But the score remained 0-0.

Farr, the Wolf second baseman, opened the sixth inning with a crafty bunt that hugged third base line, and Freddy Marrs's throw pulled Wehry off the initial sack. The fast little Farr was safe. He took a cocky lead, and Lefty drove him sliding back twice. But Farr kept his lead, and he went down with the first pitch, safe on second as the batter plunked down a perfect sacrifice bunt. One down. But Gregson, powerhouse of that unimpressive batting order, was at that plate, and Farr was hopping alertly away from second, yelling taunts at Lefty. The pitcher almost got him with a lightning throw as Shocker sneaked a dash for the base; but the imperturbable Farr made it back with a headlong dive. And then the thing happened.

Shocker flipped his arm back carelessly to make the toss to the pitcher. Somehow the ball squirted free from his lax fingers, and the momentum of the flip sent it rolling out on the grass behind him. One instant Farr was slapping dust from his shirt; in the next eye-blink he was halfway to third base, gathering steel into his hunched shoulders as Marrs blocked the bag. Farr got there a moment before Shocker's magnificent peg. He cut the legs from under the Clipper third baseman, and the ball rolled out of the dust-cloud as the Wolf coach screamed to Farr in a shrill exhortation, and the little guy was up and running again, swirling around catcher Harm's block with a flowing fall-away, hooking a toe across the plate for the first run of the game.

And it was the only run of the game. Lefty gave the Wolves a hit in the eighth and another in the ninth. The Clippers loaded the sacks with two out in the last of the ninth. Shocker came to the plate with the double-decked stands screaming pleas and prayers. He swung at the first pitch, and the ball was labeled "homer" as it bulleted off the bat. The wolf centerfielder raced back and leaped, his right hand protecting him from the wall. He seemed to hang in the air for a moment, and the ball dove into his reaching glove and stuck there. And so the Wolves took that game, 1-0.

They clumped into the dressing room, more sober than usual. Lefty sat down on a stool in front of his locker and stared at the floor like a man in a dark trance. One or two of them said, "Rotten shame, Lefty." But they spoke automatically; most of the Clippers remembered that Lefty would not hear them. Lefty had no complaint, now or ever. He pitched like an automan, and he accepted his wins like a good machine; it was only in the black and lonely depths of defeat that Lefty showed his human frailty. He just sat there, shoulders slumped, sweat and bitterness dripping from him, while other Clippers voiced annoyance.

Shocker groaned, "One time a year that Yates makes a catch like that. And it's got to be me he climbs up into the stands and robs of a grand-slam homer."

Wehry growled, "That Sack. He can't throw hard enough to hit. A lousy team murders him, and we pop up."

Johannsen said, "Yeah, you guys got troubles. Look at Lefty. He goes for twenty and two hundred the same day, and we let him down with no runs. Tomorrow we'll probably make twelve for Blow Barnes, a character his own mother couldn't love."

Nobody mentioned that they had lost half a game to the idle Titans. They were

mortified that they had succumbed to the jinx a second rate pitcher held over them. They were annoyed that they had failed their quiet, gentlemanly friend and ace hurler. But that half-game did not bother them at all.

Lefty was still sitting there when the other Clippers were dressed and moving out. Blow made a phone call from a booth in a drug store across the street to tell Marge he would meet her train. Remembering that he had left his wallet in the locker, he went back to the dressing room. He heard the hard, flat voice before he pushed open the door.

Only Lefty and the trainer were inside. Lefty was standing in the middle of the room, swearing in a low, furious monotone, and his lean fingers were ripping his glove to shreds that he was hurling to the floor and stamping. He stopped abruptly, jerking around with his mouth hanging open when he heard the door open. He recognized Blow, and he grinned suddenly, and his thin face made a weird pattern of shame and bitterness more terrible than his wrathful anguish had moulded.

Lefty's laugh was close to hysteria, "Ain't we the nuts, Barnes, we Clippers? I had a no-hitter there. I could feel it. And a punk kid pulls a sandlot boner and gives away my game. But we must not complain, Barnes. We are the Clippers."

Then Lefty closed his mouth with a snap that clicked teeth. He straightened. He gave Blow one confused, angry glare, then walked steadily to the rubbing table. Blow recovered his wallet and got out of there fast, stirred by a wondering pity.

THE Clippers were methodically murderous in their hitting practice. Ball after ball soared into the packed, noisy stands. By comparison, the Wolves looked puny at the plate. Blow warmed up well. The kid catcher had trouble holding him. The Clippers were ready to take this one.

It was a championship team against a run-of-the-mill nine that had never climbed higher than fourth place all season.

They started the game impressively. Alexander drove a liner into Johannsen's glove. Blow struck out Farr. Applewhite lifted a miserable fly ball that Shocker moved three steps to take. The Clippers trotted to the dugout, and an incredibly tall, thin boy ambled out to the mound for the Wolves.

The pitcher's name was Ambrose. He had the shambling gait of a farmer, and the sweep of his right arm was the swing of a scythe, and he probably could not pitch at all without that bulge of tobacco in one cheek. The Clippers had never heard of him. He was a rookie up from a Class-D league for a trial at the tag end of the season. And he was never going back.

Blow had his back turned when he heard the first pitch smack into the Wolf catcher's mitt. He turned around slowly, his eyes narrow, fixed intently on the tall rookie's next windup. He thought defiantly, "So he's got speed. So did a thousand other kids who never made the grade." But he watched the way the tall boy hid the ball in a huge hand; he saw the whip-lash snap that whisked the ball in a white blur toward the catcher's mitt. And he knew that destiny had a place for this kid.

Shocker scooped a trio of bats from the rack and wagged them gently. He noted complacently, "Just fast enough to hit. We murder this rook."

Three pitches later he was walking back toward the dugout. He had not removed his yellow bat from his shoulder. He said, "About three innings of that, and he'll have no arm." Marrs popped out to the catcher, and Johannsen dribbled a weak grounder the Wolf first sacker handled without assist.

Blow went back to the mound. He felt good. He had always been a strong Sep-

tember pitcher. And now, when younger men like Rockney and Grisset had to have relief in the late innings, Blow was finishing his own games. He had never had a sore arm in his life. He had learned early that he would never achieve the jug-handle curve other pitchers broke with freakish, arm-taxing deliveries; so he was content with the curve that came naturally to him. And he was still pitching long after the brighter stars had burned out, banished from the game by bone-chips and dead arms.

Pitching deliberately, Blow set the Wolves down with two ground balls and an outfield fly. The lanky Ambrose climbed the hill, spat largely, hoisted his chewing tobacco to fill out one hollow cheek, and fired bullets at the plate. Elhannon and Wehry went down swinging. Cates lifted a weak fly. Farr moved over deliberately, shaded his eyes, and took it just over second.

Until the fourth, Ambrose had not permitted a man to reach first. Shocker, batting first, dumped a bunt Ambrose was slow to handle, and the speedster flashed across the first sack ahead of the throw. Shocker took a long lead. He went down on the second pitch. His hook slide was a thing of beauty. The umpire backed out of the dust storm with his palms down. The stands trembled as the Clipper fans began to stamp. This was it.

Shocker took a dangerous lead. Ambrose whirled and threw for the bag. The mercurial Shocker made it back to second with ease, scorning a slide. It had been a clumsy effort on the part of Ambrose. The lanky hurler looked unsettled as Shocker stretched his lead. The Wolf shortstop gave it up as a bad job. Nobody was in position to cover the bag.

There was something wrong with the picture. Blow stiffened on the bench. He was up, yelling, before the shriek of warning started in the stands. Ambrose was whirling, his arm moving like a snake's

head, and there was nothing awkward about this throw. It splatted venomously into the glove of Yates, the Wolf center-fielder, as the outfielder came in with a crazy sprint, trapping Shocker off the sack. The runner pulled up short and broke for third. The Wolves ran him down methodically. He came back to the bench with incredulous anger brightening his blue eyes. Shocker fumed, "Of all the sandlot tricks. Why, those lousy bushers."

Manager Hahn said in a small, dry voice, "Yeah. It pains me, the things some teams will stoop to—just to win a lousy ball game."

Grogan looked at him suspiciously. He said coldly, "There's a place for bushers stunts—the bushes."

Hahn replied softly, "Then why don't we show these bushers how the big leaguers do it?"

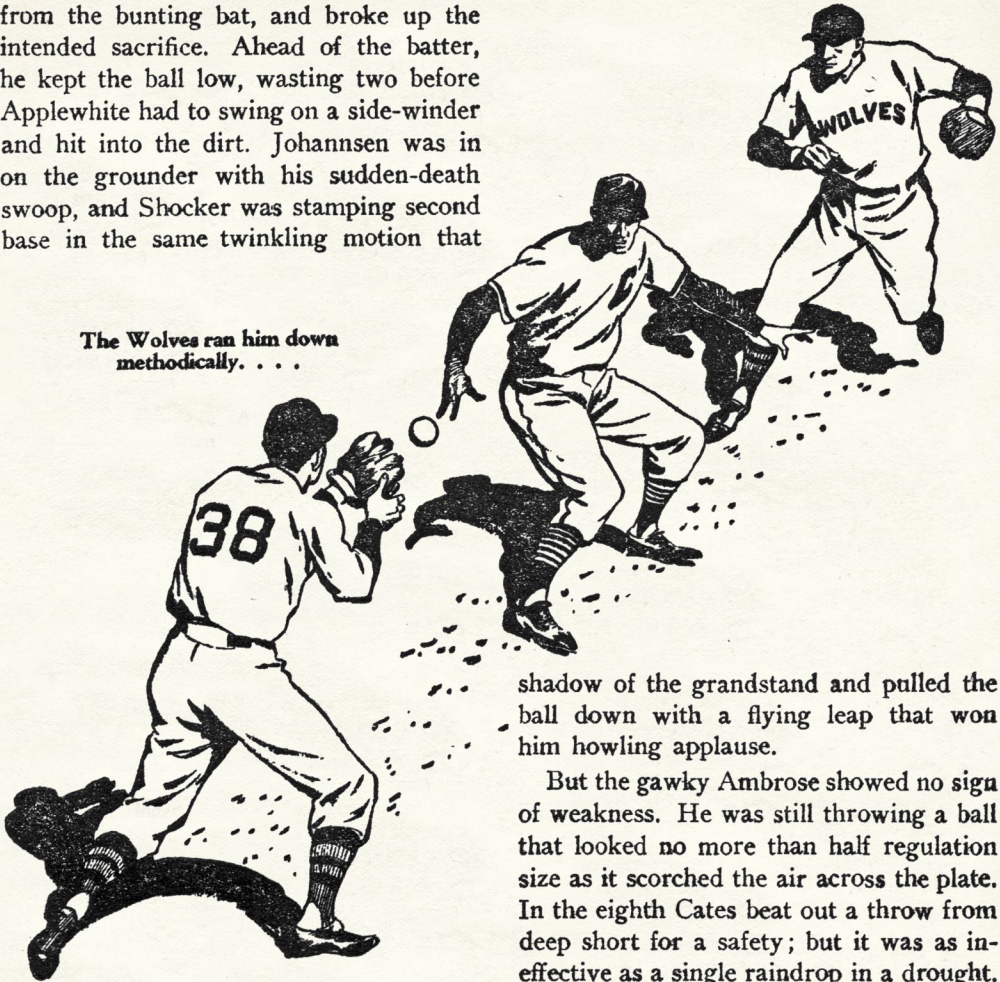
Marrs was called out on a corner-nipping third strike. Elhannon came up with the first solid blow off Ambrose, a ringing double that put an undeniable price ticket on Shocker's folly. Then Ambrose struck out Wehry to strand Elhannon.

The Clippers took the field again, still grumbling scornfully at the gray-bearded stunt the Wolves had pulled. Blow's lower lip was beginning to pucker; he had the feeling that the big chance was gone. He was pitching one of his good games, and the Wolves were hardly stout stickmen; but they were pesky little men who lingered long at the plate, fouling off pitches they did not like, waiting for fat ones to push toward the holes they picked out. Like Farr. The cocky Wolf, with two strikes on him, deliberately poked four corner-cutters foul. When Blow tried to catch him napping with the fast one, Farr stroked it very gently over Wehry's head and ran down to first base.

Blow bore down on Applewhite. He forked in two downers that slithered foul

from the bunting bat, and broke up the intended sacrifice. Ahead of the batter, he kept the ball low, wasting two before Applewhite had to swing on a side-winder and hit into the dirt. Johannsen was in on the grounder with his sudden-death swoop, and Shocker was stamping second base in the same twinkling motion that

The Wolves ran him down methodically. . . .



shadow of the grandstand and pulled the ball down with a flying leap that won him howling applause.

But the gawky Ambrose showed no sign of weakness. He was still throwing a ball that looked no more than half regulation size as it scorched the air across the plate. In the eighth Cates beat out a throw from deep short for a safety; but it was as ineffective as a single raindrop in a drought. He died on first.

flung him high and safe from Farr's spikes and whipped the ball to Wehry to nip Applewhite by three steps.

Gregson was up, the Wolves only .300 hitter, a big and formidable man. But Gregson had never worried Blow. The big fellow was just a trifle stiff in the shoulders. Blow's cross-fire just off the knees and a properly deployed rightfielder made a nightmare combination for Gregson. Blow checked Grogan's position over near the foul line and cut loose the cross-fire. Gregson took a prodigious chop and drove a foul ball, more liner than fly, toward the curve of the stands. Mutt Grogan, stocky legs flying, raced into the

BLOW'S legs dragged a little as he walked out to open the ninth. He was a strong old pitcher, a workhorse all his days; but he was no superman, and the Wolves had made it a long game with their waiting, baiting, fouling tactics. His arm was beginning to ache, and perspiration was stinging his eyes. He thought he had one more inning left. He was not sure.

Ambrose, the pitcher, was up first. He was no hitter, but the Wolf manager wanted him to stay in the game. Blow fanned him with a minimum of effort. But Alexander timed Blow's change of pace, ripping into the ball with a snap of his wrists,

riding the horsehide in rabbitly hops over second. Shocker went deep and knocked it down with a diving lunge, but there was no play at first.

The troublesome little Farr came up, crowding the plate. Blow tried to drive him back. Farr straightened suddenly, swayed back, and swung viciously. Blow saved his head by stabbing the ball a foot in front of his nose. Farr flung his bat in disgust, howling, "Lucky, fat bum!" Blow grinned. He had been lucky. But he mopped his face, knowing that the pace was off his fast one when a duster could be blasted back at him.

The first ball he threw at Applewhite came back, a brief streak of white lighting that sizzled past Johannsen's snatching glove. Elhannon played it on a big hop. His smoking peg nailed Alexander to second.

And suddenly Blow was very tired. All his years climbed heavily on his back. His arm sagged from his shoulder. Manager Hahn was walking out to talk to him. Hahn was worried, strung tight, his eyes shadowy and his lips a pale gash.

Blow admitted, "I'm about cooked. If it was anybody but Gregson, I'd say let the Farmer take him. But Farmer don't have no luck with Gregson. I can make him fly out."

The point of Hahn's tongue ran like a drop of blood around the pale gash. He scratched his jaw, the stubble rasping against his palm. Finally he said, "You make it good."

Catcher Harms, out for the conference, asked, "You working on this chump with the cross-fire thing?"

Blow nodded. Harms went back and gave the signal for the benefit of Johannsen, who relayed the pitch to the outfield. Blow checked the outfield, and his face bronzed. Grogan had not moved. He was playing the pull hitter straightaway. In an angry quandary, Blow considered. If he made a commotion about moving Gro-

gan, it would be a sure tip-off to the batter. Gregson was no fool; forewarned, he might be able to time the pitch and push it into a hole. Blow shook off the signal.

He accepted the indignant Harms's choice of the high, hard one. It was not so hard, but it surprised Gregson, and he missed it. Blow wasted one outside. From the dugout a white scorecard was waving imperatively at the right fielder; Hahn was aware of the trouble. But Grogan hunched out there with his hands on his knees, his upper face in the shadow of his cap. His anger boiling, Blow waved Grogan over with a sweeping gesture. But Grogan did not move, and Blow knew that it was not a mental lapse. The outfielder was playing a hunch of his own.

Blow saw the batter's eyes gleam intelligence. So he crossed up Gregson again, whipping a slow curve across the shoulders. Gregson got a piece of it, lashing a foul ball into the screen. The batter's face was gray now, his eyes angry.

Blow wasted a deliberate bad ball. Gregson itched, but held back as the pitch bounced in the dirt. And Blow knew that he would have to use the cross-fire. He threw it, praying for a tall fly ball.

But it was a liner. He knew it from the crack of the big bat against horsehide. The ball screamed two feet above Mule Wehry's instinctive mitt-stab. It hugged the foul line. Mutt Grogan, running like a mad pony, left his feet in a desperate dive. He missed by inches. The ball bounced to the fence. Two runs came home. Gregson slid safely into third base.

Farmer Flynn came out of the bullpen. His face was dark with wrath. He snarled, "I coulda saved this thing." Blow handed him the ball in silence. He walked off of the diamond, shoulders bowed. The stands gave him a gallant hand. He did not hear it.

He had not had time to remove his uniform when they came into the dressing room, spikes scraping and voices raw.

Farmer Flynn grumbled, "We ought to be playing yet. I was hot today. We'd have played until dark—or till that rook cracked."

Grogan exploded, "What can you expect? We got a soft-headed manager and a glory-hog that would rather lose a game than get off the mound."

Blow got up very slowly, a kind of dread nagging him; but his temper was out of his hands, plunging downhill toward a smash-up. He spoke, and the words flowed evenly, almost joyfully in their release, "Mutt, you may be no worse than the rest of these lice. But you are closest, and you just lost me a ball game, and I want no misunderstanding about how I feel. You are the cheapest, most conceited, bull-headedest—"

Mutt Grogan moved for him then, a wide, powerful man, driving in quickly with his fists cocked for Blow's big stomach. He never got inside. A huge right fist whipped overhand and smashed on the side of Grogan's jaw. Grogan performed a weird, slack-legged dance and pitched to the floor. He rolled over, pushed with fumbling hands at the tile, and flopped limply.

There was a blended roar from a dozen throats. Mule Wehry got to Blow first, huge body behind a lunging shoulder that slammed Blow back into a locker. Wehry recovered balance first. His right hand smashed over the heart, and his left hook thudded high on Blow's temple, and then he had Blow in his giant's grip, slamming him against the lockers. His head reeling from contact with the lockers, Blow fought at the grip that imprisoned his arms. He could not break it. He sidled along the row of lockers, the handles gouging his flesh, knowing in the sickness that flooded from the numb hurt at the back of his head, that he could not endure much more. Wehry's feet tangled with a stool. He lurched, throwing his weight on Blow, and the pitcher whirled them around.

Wehry cursed and kicked a bombshell of pain against Blow's shin, and then Blow's round head hammered against the towering man's jaw. Wehry's head rang echoes from the locker as he tried to jerk back. The arms around Blow relaxed and slid down his body as Wehry folded to the floor.

Blow stepped back, panting, and a blow he never saw hurled him a dozen feet and left him huddled in a daze at the base of the wall. Blow raised his face, the numbed jaw dragging, and the bleary outlines of the tall and mighty Elhannon loomed like a dark shadow over him. Blow got up painfully, swinging a futile haymaker before his feet were ready. Elhannon, terrible satisfaction twisting his dark face, drove Blow into the wall and held him there with deliberate, sickening blows that seemed to be tearing his body apart.

BLLOW never had a chance. He tried to swing back, and the wall at his back ruined his aim. But he never gave up. Even when he lost his balance in the pinwheel whirl of crazy lights Elhannon's last punch drove into his brain, Blow tried to stand up. He grabbed for support, and his clawing fingers hooked into Elhannon's shirt. Blow's weight carried them down. Instinctively he doubled up as the floor jarred him. Elhannon stretched his hard middle across Blow's knees, and the breath went out of the great outfielder in a convulsive groan.

Blow got to his knees, steadied himself with a hand against the wall, and pushed himself up. He fell back against the wall, but his spread feet braced him. He croaked, "Next?"

But they were stunned, staring at Elhannon's flailing feet and gasping mouth. Manager Hahn rushed through them and knelt by the star outfielder. He looked up at Blow, and there was consuming anger in his eyes as he snarled, "Barnes, if you've hurt him—"

Blow leaned against the wall, his breath coming in ragged gasps, and there was a new sickness inside him. There was more in Hahn's potent glare than his words expressed. Even to Hahn, Blow was a rank outsider here. He was a bum. And even if he handed them a pennant, he would still be a bum to them.

Elhannon's breath came back in a howl. He did not protest as two of them lifted him and moved him to a padded table. The Clippers turned venomous eyes on Blow. Shocker spun Hahn with a hand on the little man's shoulder.

Shocker ordered coldly, "Get rid of that tramp. If you pitch him again, get yourself a new second baseman."

Johannsen corrected, "A new keystone combination."

It went for all of them, they declared angrily. Hahn shook his white head. He said, "The day I don't need him any longer, he goes. I need him for the series."

Shocker's voice turned nasty. "We'll see what the front office says, little man."

Hahn seemed to grow an inch taller. His smile turned grim. He admitted, "Maybe you could swing it. But I wouldn't. You go to the front office, there's a guy around here that's just louse enough to blab to the reporters that the whole Clipper team jumped poor old Blow Barnes, and he laid out three of you, including the two biggest men on the team. I'm that guy. Better just forget it."

He had washed away some of the evidence of battle, but his bruises were still fresh and the flush of combat lingered on his face as Marge let him into the hotel room. The violet eyes widened more with pity than surprise.

She said softly, "It happened."

He nodded. He kissed her with odd restraint and walked past her to sit heavily on the bed. She followed him and put a hand lightly on his shoulder. She asked quietly, "So you don't get that job with Wreese?"

He shook his head. "I dunno. We had a row in the dressing room. I think they'll keep mum about it. I finished it on my feet. It would kill them for anybody to know."

She reassured, "Then everything is all right. Why the long face?" Her voice quickened anxiously, "Have they hurt you? If they have—"

Blow shrugged. "Naw, just bruises. Everything is all right—I guess."

But he knew better.

Everything was not all right. A man has his pride. He could not get over the expression in Hahn's outraged eyes. It had been the way a man looks at a stray dog that has bitten him. Blow Barnes was no bum. The hundred and fifty major league games he had won for so-so and tail-end clubs could have been the two hundred Lefty Moore was shooting for, with decent support and a little more help from mediocre batters. He had won the Clippers seven games against today's loss, and they resented having him in their uniform, because the legend of the Clippers did not fit him.

Blow swore softly.

The legend was their casual perfection, and they worshipped it. They were better than anyone else; and they never had to squabble and scramble, because in the end the percentages would reward them. For them to need the help of Blow Barnes was an admission of weakness forced upon them, and they despised him.

Blow sat there on the bed, his face in his hands. He wished he could tell Marge about it, but he could not get the thing into words. The issue was no longer clear-cut. It was not just a question of pitching and keeping his mouth shut. It was whether he could bow down like a slave, as even the great Lefty Moore had to do, before the vast and complacent conceit of a team that glorified more in possession of pennants than in the winning of them.

BLOW saw the last Wolf game from the stands. Hahn had called him early that morning with instructions to stay away from the dressing room. So Blow sat high in the stands with his wife and watched the Clippers crush the Wolves 12-2 behind Rockney's steady pitching. But the Titans drubbed the Pirates 5-2, and the Clippers' two-game margin left the Titans a slim chance.

Then the Titans came to town. They were big and brash and tough. They were young. They had gotten their fingers into one Series pie, and they liked the taste. They were world champions, and they meant to stay that way. They were two games behind—a single loss would pull the curtain on their hopes, but there was no fear in them. Blow Barnes, back on the bench with plenty of room on either side of him, watched the grim, explosive energy of the Titans and decided, "These are the guys the Clippers think they are."

The thunder of the fans made a roof low over the playing field as Grisset toed the slab and Doug Tankersley dug his spikes carefully into the batter's box, a barrelish little man with half-moon legs, a lead-off with camera eyes for weaknesses and walks, and a heavy, stubby stick for the tougher going. Grisset pitched five times, and Tankersley's bat seemed a part of his shoulder. But he swung on the pay-off pitch, and the ball blazed like a white meteorite through the hole to Wehry's

right, and Tankersley pulled up on first as Elhannon made a magnificent stop.

Then Hawk Domingo was at the plate, the Cuban boy, his eyes slits in the dark death's-head of his peasant face, a man who had known near-slavery in the cane fields, and was not there now because he could hit a baseball. And he hit now, a savage grounder Johannsen could not handle. Domingo loped to second under cover of the unsuccessful try to catch Tankersley at third.

Sut Innes came up, the oldest of the Titans, eagle-beaked and leather-skinned, but with the spare and supple body of a growing boy. Grisset worked on Innes too carefully, and lost him.

Ed Alsoforth paused a moment outside the batter's circle, stroking with great hands a black mace that gleamed like a darkened mirror. He loved that bat, and it showed in the tenderness of his handling as he plodded to the plate, immense in the brevity of his frame, cube set on cube, square head, square neck, granite face, with the space of a big man's fist between cold green eyes. This was the man who was taking Elhannon's crowns from him.

Grisset drove the wide man to his knees twice with dusters, but Alsoforth got up calmly and dug in again, and there was something terrible in his inexorable patience. With the bases loaded, Grisset had to pitch to him. He whipped the knuckler across the knees. The black bat

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swung, a whiplashing arc of destruction.

For a moment there was almost complete silence in the stands, dominated by the awesome crash of contact; for the sound of it was so thunderously louder than the noise of other bats against balls, that it was instantly clear that no stadium could hold a ball hit like that. Alsoforth just started trotting, and it was 4-0 for the Titans with nobody out. Grisset pitched one more ball, and Red Hale bounced it from the rightfield wall and reached second base in a dog-trot.

Ed Merkel, warming up frantically, answered Hahn's summons. Merkel walked into trouble hotter than his luke-warm arm. He could not find the plate, and Crouch walked. Then Ripper Nast strode into a low curve and smacked it to the deepest angle of the centerfield wall for a triple; and poke-hitting Warwick singled to drive in Nast. So there were seven runs across the platter before pitcher Poole lifted an infield fly for the first out; and the score was 8-0 when Elhannon pulled down Innes's scorching liner for the third.

The Clippers might just as well have stuffed their gloves in their hip pockets and followed Grisset to the showers. It was shocking. The Titans blasted four pitchers. They fought as though they had a single run between them and defeat. The only way the Clippers could score was to knock the ball out of the park—Elhannon did that just once. So they lost, 12 to 1.

They were very quiet, going into the dressing room. They were stunned. They had not played badly; they had just been buried by better baseball.

Spike Johannsen said finally, "Forget it. We just got to win one game to bag it."

Shocker exclaimed with a touch of unconscious desperation, "It don't stand to reason, we can't win one out of three from any team."

BLOW looked around him, and his lip curled. Fear had caught up with them; and they did not know it. They had been slapped down, but they had not come up swinging. They were on their knees yet, trusting blindly that the law of averages would gallop up and rescue them in time. They had booted away pennants before, but they had never had to face their arch-rivals in a last, chips-down series. And the great Clippers were folding.

And Mutt Grogan, oldest and toughest of them, knew it. He barked, "Nuts to that. We wind up this thing tomorrow. We got Lefty."

They had Lefty. The southpaw walked out there under the next day's sun, spare motioned as a robot, and whisked three strikes past Tankersley's flailing bat; and the crowd's roar was a heart-sent bellow of relief. Hawk Domingo went out on a smoking liner to Cates. But old Sut Innes singled cleanly to rightfield, and though Lefty fanned the great Alsoforth to end the inning, that clean, hard bingle stood like a warning blight on Lefty's magnificent inning.

Tutterow pitched for the Titans, and it was a surprise. The Clippers had expected to face Clint Mauff, the Titans' twenty-five game winner. Tutterow, a husky with a blacksmith's hands and forearms was only the Titans' second best; and he had his bad days. There was calculated confidence in the choice. The Titans expected to win today. Behind Mauff tomorrow, they would be unstoppable.

Shocker stepped to the plate. Burly Buck Tutterow glowered at him, lowered his head like a bull preparing to charge, wound up elaborately, and hurled a handful of white murder at Shocker's head. The kid hit the dirt, falling away barely in time. His face was gray as he backed out of the box, and he was easy prey for Tutterow's curve, hitting a dinky dribbler to

the veteran first sacker, Innes. Marrs struck out, and Johannsen set up a pop foul for catcher Warwick.

The tension started early. The Titans crowded the plate. They were going to hit that ball or be hit by it, and Lefty's fast one could not drive them back. Nast hit a double in the second. Lefty fanned two men to kill the threat. Lefty nicked Innes' ribs with a fast curve in the third after Domingo had singled through the box. Again Lefty pulled out of it, pulling pop-ups from the bats of Alsoforth and Hale, and whiffing Nast. The strain was building up, piling high and heavy on the Clippers' shoulders. Lefty was having to work too hard to isolate those clean bingles.

Buck Tutterow had the Clippers squelched. The big boy boasted a very fast ball, and his wildness was an uncomfortable thing to face. He matched scoreless innings with Lefty.

Going into the sixth, it was a scoreless tie. Tankersley came up first, hugging the platter. Lefty's curve did not break, and the ball thwacked lustily on the short man's meaty shoulder. He got up and trotted down to first, alternately swearing and taunting. Lefty broke his famous dipper across Domingo's knees as Tankersley charged down the path, and Domingo got a piece of the horsehide. The ball trickled out to Johannsen. The short-stop could have done better with his eyes closed. He booted the try miserably, batting it around in the grass, and both runners were safe.

Lefty hitched his pants. Innes hit sharply back to the box. Lefty knocked the ball down, recovered and threw to third for the forceout. One down. Alsoforth came up, fouling off curves. Lefty got the slugger in a hole, and showed his sheer courage by grooving a change of pace that Alsoforth popped up ludicrously. Two down. Lefty rammed two strikes past Hale. The payoff was a hook that clawed

at the air and broke a foot. Hale missed it. Catcher Harms missed it. Hale ran down to first while the catcher gyrated wildly, searching for the ball that had bounced through his legs. The bases were loaded.

Lefty got in a hole with Crouch, and the Titan picked on the cripple. Crouch hit it hard, but on the ground. Shocker rushed the ball, and it popped out of his glove. He fumbled for it in numb desperation. His throw pulled Wehry from the sack. A run came home. The bases were still loaded.

Then Nast hit the ball. It made jack-rabbit leaps against the green of the outfield, bouncing high as it struck the wall, and it was 4-0 as Nast slid into third. Lefty struck out Warwick to end the dismal session.

It was the ball game. The Clippers loaded the bases with one out in their half of the inning, but a brisk double killing ruined their chances. The Titans picked up two more runs in the ninth, and it ended like that, 6-0.

Silent as zombies, the Clippers filed into the dressing room. They kept their eyes on the floor, each man afraid of what he might discover in his neighbor's stare. They were licked.



Clipped Clipper

3

BLOW slept late the next morning. He was shaving when the phone rang. He came out of the bathroom dripping lather and took the phone Marge was holding out to him. The caller was Andy Wreese.

Wreese told him, "I just got it straight from Hahn. It's going to be you today, definitely. I want to wish you all the luck in the world today, big boy. And by the way, I'll be in my usual spot this after-

noon. If you'll stop by the box before the game I'll have a little something to say that might interest you, win, lose or draw today."

Blow said, "Why, thanks. I'll be trying in there."

He put the phone down and stood for a moment, fingering his lathered jaw. He knew from the tone of Wreese's voice that the industrialist was going to give him the job he wanted. He wondered why Wreese hadn't come out with it?

And then the truth struck him suddenly. It meant a great deal to Wreese to be able to call up the Clipper starting pitcher before the game of the year. It set Wreese above the crowd. Blow realized with surprise that the man was a climber in a peculiar, grasping way. Wreese had money and prestige, and he wanted these things to count in the sports scene. He liked to be seen in public with prominent athletes, to hear his name linked with theirs. He wanted to sit like an archduke in his private box and watch the envy in the eyes of his business associates when the famous Blow Barnes stopped by for a word before the game.

Blow said softly, "Why, the little snob. I've been shaking in my shoes about what Andy Wreese thinks. And all the time the star-struck punk would pay any kind of money just to brag, 'I've got Blow Barnes working for me.'"

Marge smiled brilliantly. She chided, "I was wondering how long it would take you to remember you are still the best pitcher in baseball?"

Blow shook his head. "Nope. But still pretty darned good. And not so old, come to think about it. You help me keep from getting larded up hog-fat winters, and I can pitch three-four more seasons."

He was a little late. The slight noise he made, closing the dressing room door, jerked a dozen heads around. They were strung that tight. They were mean and silent, and there were dark hollows under

many eyes that was not soot to cut down the sun glare.

Elhannon grated, "Decent of him to show up at all."

Blow beamed at him. "Show up! On the day I pitch my greatest game?" He walked to his locker, whistling loudly. Spike Johannsen snarled, "Will you cut that out?"

Blow sympathized, "Nerves, Spike? What you excited about? You're licked before you go out there. All you got to do is walk out and go through the motions. Oh, maybe the fans will be disappointed. Maybe some of them will call you a yellow bunch of quitters—"

Cates exploded, "Listen who's talking! You punk, we picked you off of a tail-end club that was too good for you—"

Blow declared, "There ain't no club that's too good for me. Including this bunch of puffed-up brats." He bent for his baseball shoes and rapped the sharp spikes together suggestively. He said, "I got a few things to say to you bums—"

He had more than a few things to say, and they were shocked into immobility, jaws hanging. The colors came and went in their faces like a neon sign as his strong voice filled the locker room. He concluded, "You think you're too good for me. Huh! You just listen to that crowd when they call my name. Them fans ain't color-blind—they can pick out the yellow backbones. You quit on Lefty yesterday, and he didn't have the guts to complain. I know you're going to quit on me, and I'm telling you in advance. I'd rather have the lousiest team in the league out there behind me in place of you gold-plated punks. I don't give a faint hang for the Clippers, or the Series. I'm pitching this one for Blow Barnes, the best chucker this club ever had. I'm gonna put on a show out there, and unless one of you yokels falls down and breaks a neck, the fans ain't gonna remember you was out there at all."

They moved in on him, a semi-circle of outraged wrath. Manager Hahn broke it up with a sharp bark, "Outside, you guys." Blow thought he detected astonishment in those squinted eyes.

He warmed up in the sun in front of the dugout. He knew with his first hard pitch that he was ready; down the years he had always been ready for the big ones. The crowd sighted him and the roar went up. He took off his cap and bowed deeply, showing the small bald spot at the back of his head. It laid them in the aisles. He'd never been able to figure it. He was fat and he had a bald spot; so he was funnier than four comedians.

The batteries were announced. The cheers put a ceiling on the stadium. He smirked at the lowering Clippers. He walked toward the mound, circling past the box Wreese had filled with prosperous, paunchy, cigar smoking men. Wreese was leaning forward, his thin face eagerly expectant. Grinning, Blow raised thumb to nose in the immemorial gesture, and saw Wreese stiffen as though he had been struck.

HE WALKED out to the mound and uncovered for the Anthem. Then Tankersley was digging in at the plate, shouting his direful prediction of the things in store for Blow. Blow shouted right back. He wound up, thrust his masking foot high, and nipped the inside corner with a slithering fast ball. Tankersley let it go for a called strike. Blow wafted a slow curve a trifle outside. Fogarty, the umpire, called it a ball. Blow looked astonished. Elbows swinging wide, he marched with dignity and purpose to the plate. Hulking Brick Fogarty fixed him with a boring blue glare. Fogarty sighed, "I knew it couldn't last. Get back there and pitch, you fat blow-hard. That was a ball and you know it."

Blow declared, "I ain't kicking on that one. I come in to satisfy myself you're

awake. You watch them corners today, you old thief. Today I am hot, and them corners are my meat and bread."

A purple-faced Fogarty chased him back to the mound. The crowd cheered Blow. He tipped his cap. He threw his cross-fire, and Tankersley swung and missed, flailing mightily. Blow pitched a slow one inside at the knees, and the batter wouldn't go for it. Blow came around with a long-armed whip and at the last instant unlocked his wrist to break the speed of the pitch, and Tankersley could not hold back the swing he started too soon. He went down swinging as the crowd hooted at him.

Domingo was up there, dark and grim. The Cuban stood like a dead man; the life showed only in his black, intent eyes. He fouled off two slants, then lifted a little pop-up. Blow moved leisurely off the mound to take. Two down.

Sut Innes came up. Blow heaved his fast one over the middle in borderline territory across the shoulder. Innes hunched down a little and took it. Fogarty called it a ball. Blow heaved down his glove. He stormed the plate, shouting, "He ducked! It was right in there. Fogarty, are you related to this monkey!"

He made quite a row. Catcher Harms stood away from the squabble, frowning distastefully. Half a dozen of the Titans leaped to the support of the umpire. Fogarty moved them back. He pulled his watch on Blow.

The big pitcher stared at the watch. He moved closer, bellowing, "Lemme see that. I had me a watch like that. Some louse stole it out of my locker last year in Cleveland. Where'd you get that time-piece, Fogarty?"

Grinning, Blow retreated to the mound. He whipped two strikes across where Sut Innes had no liking for them, just off the knees. Then he turned and dramatically waved his outfielders to come in. They did not move, of course; they only glared

at him. He waved more insistently. Then he shrugged and appealed to the crowd with a gesture. He turned to the plate, and he saw that Innes was mad, too; mad enough to swing much too soon at the change of pace Blow used to strike him out.

The cheers followed Blow to the dug-out. The Clippers were chafing. Grogan demanded viciously, "What is this, a clutch game or a three-ring circus?"

Blow replied mildly, "I can't go on whipping these guys single-handed. After a while you bums will blow up and give away my game. So let's all relax and have fun."

He was surprised at the hatred in their faces. Even though it was exactly what he wanted, the fury he had stirred up shocked him a little.

Clint Mauff was on the mound for the Titans, a young giant with the best record in the majors, if you considered only wins and losses. In three seasons Mauff had sent four men to hospitals with head injuries; and it had not sobered him. He still drove hitters into the dirt with the fastest ball in the big show; and they could duck or take it. He was loud and ignorant and utterly callous. He printed his name on his contracts, but he could almost write his signature in the air with a baseball.

He pitched to three Clippers, and the pattern was always the same, the first pitch the high hard one inside to upset the batter. They were not quite the same after that white bombshell drove them back and burst in the catcher's mitt. Shocker and Marrs were strikeout victims. Johannsen grounded out submissively.

Blow went back out there. Instinctively he knew he could handle the Titans in the early innings by shading off the pace. Fighters, they were out to ruin him quick. Alsoforth fouled two over the wall, and struck out on a slow curve. Hale swung mightily, and the ball curved into his

wrists. A miserable handle hit trickled out toward first. Hale, trying to fall away from the curve, was off to a slow start. Blow charged over, picked up the ball, and tagged Hale out. Working carefully, Blow picked on the corners and got two strikes on Crouch. He turned and belted to his outfielders, "Gwan in and rest. I don't need you guys."

And then he polished off Crouch with a dipper that broke sweetly under the flashing bat. The Clippers came in faster than their usual trot. There was brittle anger in their movements. They were stung deeply. This was hallowed ground, the shrine of perfect baseball; and a fat old clown was turning it into a circus.

ELHANNON struck out, and the crowd booed him. Mule Wehry fouled off an outside curve. Then Clint Mauff hurled that blinding fast ball at his head. Wehry hit the dirt instinctively. But the ball struck the bat he was abandoning and rolled out to the pitcher's mound. Laughing hugely, Mauff picked it up and threw Wehry out.

Wehry held in his wrath until he reached the dugout. He pointed a huge, trembling finger at Joe Hahn and sputtered, "Call yourself a manager? That big ape is trying to kill us, and you're letting him get away with it."

Hahn's gray, tense face cracked into a bitter grin. He asked wearily, "So I protest; where does it get us? He swears it is unintentional. He says the high hard one is his best pitch and he's got to use it. He claims he's got a right to try for that inside corner. And he has."

Blow said scornfully, "There's ways of taking care of a bean-baller. Mauff don't throw no dusters at the Wolves. They cured him. They bunted down first base line and beat his brains out when he covered the sack."

Wehry choked, "I'm talking to Hahn."

Blow amended, "You're crying to

Hahn. That Mauff won't throw no duster at me—more'n once."

Marrs spat, "He throws at your belly, he can't miss."

Cates dropped a weak grounder that Sut Innes handled unassisted. Blow went back to the mound. Ripper Nast swung at the first ball and lifted a foul that Marrs caught near the Clipper dugout. Warwick fouled off four before lifting a pop for the catcher. Blow struck out Mauff.

Mauff went back to the hill and unleashed more high hard ones. Cates went down swinging, and Grogan was called out. Mauff was heading for a strikeout record today. But he nicked Harms with a rib-duster that doubled the catcher in pain. Harms shook it off and trotted slowly to first.

Blow walked to the plate, swinging a heavy stick. The crowd gave him an ovation. He took his stance awkwardly, the club poised high. On the rare occasions when he hit, Blow could drive out a long ball, but he was helpless against a fast ball below the bulge of his stomach, and his batting average was a joke.

He swung at the first ball Mauff rifled across the knees and spun all the way around. Mauff performed the short stretch and the ball leaped from his hand, flashing at Blow's head. The wild leap that saved Blow's head stretched him on his back in the dirt. He got up slowly, knocking the dust from him in little clouds. He saw sardonic satisfaction in Shocker's face as the kid swung bats in the on-deck circle. He looked once to the mound. Mauff's coarse face was blank, the loose mouth primly closed, but harsh laughter in the green eyes. Blow said not a word.

He took his stance again. The ball bulleted across his knees. He missed it a foot. The bat slipped from his moist hands—that was the way he explained it to Fogarty—and hurtled out toward the pitcher's mound, shin-bone high, whirling de-

struction. Mauff saved his legs with a leap that spilled him. He scrambled up and raced plateward, howling. Blow spat on his fists and waited. Fogarty headed off the raging Mauff. But the Titans were racing in from the field, massacre minded. And suddenly little Joe Hahn was out there with a big black bat poised high in his hands, holding off the Titans.

The umps finally gained control. Fogarty said, "I am a gullible man. I believe that Blow's bat slipped, just as I am convinced that Mauff's curve did not break. Both were accidents. But there will be no more accidents, unless somebody wants to find himself accidentally out of the ball game. Hear me, Mauff?"

Mauff went back to the mound. He was mad. Blow made him wait, and Mauff stamped around the mound, kicking up dust. Blow waved to the crowd and pointed dramatically out to the leftfield bleachers. Mauff's towering frame stiffened; he seemed to choke.

As Mauff's arm lashed, Blow began his swing. Mauff did just what Blow hoped he would do; that ball was grooved, and there was nothing on it but sheer wrath. At that, Blow almost swung too late. The ball did not go near the left field stands. It was less than three feet inside first base as it boomed standward in a mighty arc. It was Blow's first homer in three years.

He trotted around the sacks. Mauff was a wildman, shredding his cap, howling like a dog at the moon. In the stands stranger was embracing stranger. The din was terrific. Blow puffed across the plate behind Harms. A doughfaced Shocker dangled out a limp hand for him. He paraded back to the dugout.

There was some confusion in the dugout. Joe Hahn still held the bat he had drawn on the Titans, and he was jabbing the butt of it against Wehry's stomach. His face was very red, and he was shouting, "Thirty years I've been in baseball, and it's the first time I ever saw a team

sit in the dugout and let a mate get mobbed. You're a bunch of yellow dogs, and tell the front office I told you that. I'm through with you. There's better jobs than playing nursemaid to a bunch of percentages. I'd swap five .300 hitters now for two common, ordinary guys who can hit in the clutch."

Blow said benignly, "Don't be too tough on the boys, Joe. They think a clutch is just part of an automobile."

Fuming, Mauff struck out Shocker. The Clippers went back afield. Blow watched them rifle the ball around the infield, sullen fury riding the throws. Spur-ridden by Blow, withered suddenly by a meek little manager who had turned into a lion, they were so mad they almost forgot the importance of the game.

When Tankersley topped Blow's dipper pitch, Johannsen came in and threw out the speedster by fifteen feet. But Hawk Domingo hit that ball. Elhannon played it on the first bounce, and the very speed of the hit held Domingo on first. Sut Innes swung for the hole to Shocker's left, and hit into the second baseman's glove. Two down. But Alsoforth pulled for that hole too, and slashed a savage grounder through it, behind the runner. Grogan knocked the ball down, grabbed it up, and made a sensational throw to hold Hawk on third, Alsoforth on second.

Hale came up, and the Titans were out of the dugout, jockeying Blow. Blow took his time. In this clutch he let Hale see nothing but curves as the batter ran the count to three-two. Blow blazed the last one right down the middle with nothing on it, and the startled Hale missed it.

Blow was sweating as he walked to the dugout. The Titans were getting to him now. He'd need more stuff from now on. And he was feeling the pace already.

THE Clippers did nothing to lengthen that 2-0 lead. Mauff was untouchable. The Titans were hitting in every inning

now. Blow was putting out fires with his hook, each curve wringing a little of the strength out of his arm. He could not pace himself. There were no soft spots. Any of these boys was capable of knocking the ball out of the park.

Nobody did that until the seventh. Blow had two down and two strikes on Alsoforth. He threw a good curve in there, and the Titan slugger knocked it four hundred feet over the centerfield wall. Blow did not rattle. It had been overdue; he was thankful that nobody had been on base. Calmly he struck out Hale on a called third strike, and the Clippers still led 2 to 1.

He felt his arm tighten inside his wind-breaker as he sat on the bench; the limb grew heavier, as though turning to stone. He massaged it furtively. Hahn caught the movement. He said nothing, but his eyes were eloquent in their plea. Mauff pitched to Marrs, and the third baseman startled everyone with the second hit off the ace pitcher, a Texas leaguer behind third. But Johannsen hit into a swift double play, and Elhannon lined a deep one that Domingo plucked out of the air against the wall.

The warm-up tosses did not loosen Blow's arm enough. But Crouch went out like a gift, a streaking liner that would have rattled the fence if it had not been hit straight into Shocker's glove. Ripper Nast stroked a looping single over Wehry's head. Warwick came up, touching his cap to acknowledge a signal from the dugout, the lightest stickman of the Titans, but a crafty place hitter, a deadly man with a bunt.

He took his stance.

Blow knew what was coming. He did not try to stop Warwick from bunting. He made that ball big and fat, and he stamped after the ball in an amazing charge. He grabbed the bunt with his meat hand and threw out of the dirt, an instinct guided fling that bisected the padded sack

that was second base while Nast was a full two strides away. It was sensational. Except that nobody covered the bag.

The ball bounced across the outfield grass. Nast rounded the bag at a sprint. Elhannon caught the ball on the bounce and uncorked a terrible peg for the plate. It came in on the fly, too high for catcher Harms. He leaped and missed, and Nast started home. But there was a fat old pitcher backing up Harms, red faced and bitter; but doing his job. Blow pulled down that wild heave in the webbing of his glove, and Nast retreated to third, Warwick pulling up on second.

Blow walked back to the mound. He stood there and delivered a short, pointed lecture to baseball's most brilliant short-stop on how to play his position, and Johannsen cursed him in a choking voice. Manager Hahn came out for a conference. The little guy's blue eyes flamed like puddles of hot steel. Johannsen dragged himself into it snarling defensively, "We never make that play at second."

Hahn turned an anguished face to the skies, begging for patience. He turned his back on Johannsen and asked Blow, "What do you think? They're letting Mauff bat."

Blow told him savagely, "I'll fan him."

Hahn was in a torture of indecision. He said slowly, "If he hits an outfield fly, they tie it up. Maybe we better walk him and go for the double."

Blow raged, "With people like this behind me?"

Marrs flared, "Take the fat bum out. He's done."

That decided Hahn. His face flamed. He said, "It's your ball game, Blow. You won it and they kicked it away for you. Pull it out if you can."

Anger gave Blow strength. Mauff was waving his stick, shouting arrogantly. He never saw the three pitches Blow fired across the plate. But mean little Tankersley was up there, and a hit meant two runs. A hit meant the pennant.

Blow pitched to Tankersley for an eternity. He used everything he had, and the strength drained out of his arm with every pitch. The barrel bodied little man kept fouling them back against the wire, swinging late, trying to pull the ball into rightfield. Blow put a whole season into one pitch finally; he came around with a full-armed whip and dropped a blooper over the plate. The surprised Tankersley topped it. Blow jabbed out his glove, and the ball stuck in it, and he threw Tankersley out.

There was a difference somehow, as the Clippers came toward the dugout. There was glory enough for twenty men in the shrieking from the stands, but all of it was for the fat, strutting pitcher, and they knew it. It was just as he had promised in the dressing room. It was a one-man show. The great Clippers had been



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crowded out of the act. And they were dying to get back in the spotlight.

They didn't make it, this inning.

BLOW went out for the first of the ninth, and he knew it was the last time today. He would finish it now or be finished. His arm hung like a wooden paddle. The ball felt soft and fuzzy in his numb fingers. He did not have a decent pitch left in that arm.

Blow placed his fast one across Domingo's knees, and it was a cripple. The Cuban strode into it, flailing the stick. Fred Marrs left the ground as though a derrick had jerked him upward and sideways. With a long-armed stab, he stopped a liner that was ticketed for two bases. Yelling, the Clippers rifled the ball around the infield.

When Sut Innes banged out a long single, the infield began to yelp, "Taking two!" They were eager, even with the big man, Alsoforth, at the plate.

There was not much left in Blow's arm, but he had a dozen seasons of fooling batters behind him. The crowd saw only a weary, sweat dripping old pitcher, deep in a hole, preparing to gentle that ball down the middle toward the target his catcher was standing to frame. Few saw the curve break out and down as Alsoforth's bat flashed with terrible power. It was not much of a curve. Just enough to make the slugger hit into the dirt instead of the stands.

That ball never seemed to stop moving; it just changed direction. First it was Spike Johannsen, a twinkle of legs, a stab of glove across his body. Then Shocker, a pinwheel of blurred motion around the keystone sack, slamming the ball into Wehry's mitt to catch Alsoforth ten feet short of the bag.

It was all over. It took Blow several seconds to realize it, and many minutes to follow the jubilant Clippers through the dugout entrance. Well-intentioned

maniacs almost beat him to earth with their back-slap.

He went up through the tunnel. He could hear the commotion in the dressing room. It was a delirious confusion of yells and songs. Joe Hahn was standing in front of the closed door. The tension had aged the manager. His smile was small and unbelieving, and it slid off of his mouth when he saw Blow.

Hahn straightened his shoulders. There was pain in his eyes as he said, "Blow, don't go in there for a minute."

Blow grinned bitterly. He said, "It's okay, Joe. I know. I'm ticketed for a half-share of Series money."

Hahn nodded faintly. He choked, "Half a share, and you wrapped up that rag and handed it to 'em! We're going to win this Series—the Bruins ain't half as tough as the Titans—and then I'm through with these bums."

Blow smiled whimsically. "Before you go, Joe, get me a decent trade."

Hahn nodded. "That's what I wanted to tell you. I think I'll be managing the Wolves next year. I been offered the job. I'll be offered others. I'll bust a gut to get you on my ball club. If I can't, I promise you, you won't ever be waived out of this league. When your arm goes, I've got a coaching job for you."

Blow said, "Thanks," sincerely but a little indifferently. He had found himself again today. Responsibilities had scared him; the future had loomed before him like an awesome monster, and he had been ready to flee from the game that was his life to take shelter behind a measly paycheck. He was no longer scared. The future was just a bunch of seasons strung together; he'd meet them as he'd met the Titans, one by one. He was the Big Guy again in his own mind, and he knew that baseball would always have a place for him. There is always a spot for a big guy who can make the men behind him play a little better baseball.



RUNAWAY CLEATS



He'd been a big shot yesterday—he'd make tomorrow's headlines. But this was today . . . the day he had to prove himself to ten gents—who were hell on heroes!

The next time they smashed through the other side of the line, and I called it in time to swing out. . . .

GAVIS took it on the eight and got just over the twenty before he was dumped. On the first play, running from the T, Shelavat went wide on a naked reverse. I had plowed deep and come up in their backfield, but I was too far off the play for anybody to bother with a block.

It looked good for at least five. Maybe more. But a wide little chunk of meat traveling at terminal velocity hit Skimmer Shelevat across the thighs and in the proc-

— By **JOHN D. MacDONALD** —

ess of nearly tearing him apart, drove him back inside the twenty.

The wide little chunk of meat, Ferris Gallahan—Sir Gallahan—bounced up and yelled to Big Hunk, "You like that?"

Big Hunk, the assistant line coach, was carrying the whistle on the scrimmage. He had a sour, amused look on his wide face.

"You're wonderful, kid!" he said.

Shelevat bounced a few times to make sure he still had legs. He towered over Sir Gallahan. He spat, looked down at Gallahan, and said, "What was that school again, kid?"

"Yohannus College."

As always, it got a laugh. And, as always Sir Gallahan looked bothered by the laugh.

Mike Kaydee, the head coach, was sitting across the field on top of the sound truck, the hand-mike in his hand. "Get rolling out there!" the metallic voice bawled.

The next play looked like the same thing. When you play two seasons of big time football, you begin to smell out the plays. Once again I found my way under the line and popped up out of the play. I saw right away that it was an old game called suckalong.

Sir Gallahan came in fast as before. Maybe faster. And when Skimmer went up for the jump-pass into the flat, Sir Gallahan didn't horse around with tackling him. He went right up too, a beefy elbow tickling Shimmer under the chin as the outstretched fingers of his hand tipped the pass straight up into the air.

Gallahan came down on his feet and moved under the pass, and the jarring tackle that Nick Toroki handed him didn't loosen the ball a bit. Sir Gallahan had it. He jumped up and yelled, "We did it that way at Yohannus."

It didn't get much of a laugh.

Too many guys were hot after their positions on that fourth day of September. As you well know, Karr Tech always puts

a team on the field. A very loyal alumni group keeps the talent rolling in. Mike Kaydee turns out tough, smart teams, and each year there are always a dozen ex-high school team captains on the freshman squad.

It was my senior year, and no different from the others. First comes spring practice, and then the pre-season warm-up. Each year the forty top boys go to the estate of Homer Winkledine. He played guard for Karr back in the days of the flying wedge. His estate is set in beautiful country, and there is a special wing big enough to handle the whole forty and the coaching staff—all except Mike Kaydee, who stays over in the main part of the house.

The remaining eighty or so hopefuls turn out for the first practice sessions back at the school after registration. Sometimes before scheduled toughies, Kaydee will set up a secret practice session at Winkledine's place.

We all knew how come Sir Gallahan was with us. He was a transfer from Yohannus College somewhere out in the wilds where, during his sophomore year, he had captained the stalwart Yohannus eleven. One of the biggest contributors to the alumni fund had talked him into the transfer and had let Mike Kaydee know that it was give Gallahan a king-size break, or else. . . .

And thirty-nine of us were wishing Mike had taken the "or else."

I Had arrived, drawn my room, gone up and found him sitting on the bed. He was a kid with a face like one of those brown rocks you find in New England fields, with a pair of perpetually surprised-looking blue eyes stuck into it.

"Jeez!" he said when I walked in. "Why, you're Ed Stumpke! All-American! Jeez!"

"You've been reading my scrapbooks," I said, tossing my bag onto a bench.

"Yeah, I keep one too. But of course, you never heard of me. I'm Ferris Gallahan from Yohannus."

"You're what from what?"

"They call me Sir Gallahan," he said hopefully.

"Oh, sure. Sir Gallahan from Yohannus," I said. I can go along with a gag. I looked him over. "Back?"

"Oh, I play any position. I played 'em all with Yohannus."

It was hard to keep from laughing at the kid. And yet there was something almost pitiful about him. I hadn't seen a wide-eyed look like that in years. I noticed he had a funny build. Wide as a barn door and about the height of a hydrant. And no waist. Just meat. Beefed to the heels is a good expression.

"Gosh," he said. "I never thought I'd be rooming with the great Ed Stumpke."

I straightened up from the bag I was unpacking and looked at him. It if turned out that it was a gag, I was going to learn him some manners. But it wasn't. Those sappy words were dished right out of his little soul.

I grinned at him. "Kid, it's awful hot and old Mike Kaydee is going to melt some of that baby fat right off you."

His face fell. "Oh, I'm in good shape. I'm in better shape than you are. You puffed a little after coming up the stairs." He jumped up, spread his arms out and said, "Go ahead, Ed. Hit me in the gut. Hard as you can."

I shouldn't have done it. He had made me sore and even so, I pulled the punch a little. But I know how to pivot and get my back into it. It was exactly like hitting the shoulder of a side of beef. Smack! It didn't even put a trace of a crimp in his smile.

"See?" he said. "I bet you wouldn't let me do that to you."

I held my arms out and shut my teeth hard. He had to look up at me a little. My heels lifted off the floor and came

down again. Little yellow pinwheels were bouncing off the backs of my eyeballs. I walked over calmly and stretched out on the bed. Then I tried to breathe. It sounded like the last bit of water running down a drain.

"See?" he said. "Condition is everything. The coach was very firm about that at Yohannus."

During the first couple of days of push-ups and trotting around, Mike Kaydee had the look of a cat after a canary sandwich. He knew he had something. With his backfield of Blair, Toroki, Gavis and Shelevat on offense—and with Jak, Silberson, Gestrey and Raegen on defence, a very rough schedule began to look soft indeed.

I could tell that he was itching to throw us at each other. Mike Kaydee is a firm believer that there is no way to get in shape for football like playing football. He was willing to risk pre-season injuries in order to find out for sure that the stuff was good, and nobody had faded too badly.

Raegan, the defensive left wing, had sprained an ankle during the summer. He said it was okay, but Johnny Jerome, the trainer, didn't like the look of it. And that was why, during the first scrimmage of the practice session, Sir Gallahan was in there.

But after the first couple of days, he was far from unknown. The boys were fed to the teeth with his big talk about Yohannus. He wasn't a bad little guy, but he talked too much. And he let it be known at meals, in the showers, and everywhere else that he was one hell of a fine football player. At any position.

But every squad needs a fall guy. Sir Gallahan elected himself to the position.

However, I couldn't help but feel there was something just a little phoney about him. It didn't seem possible that he could have lived so long and stayed so green.

It was noted, however, that he worked hard.

Now we were all beginning to wonder if maybe Sir Gallahan had some stuff after all.

When we grabbed the ball—or Gallahan grabbed it—old Mike raised hell with the offensive backfield, and sent us trotting down the field to kick off again.

Gavis took it, flipped it back to Toroki, and they formed fast. I was angling over and didn't quite step clear of a good block. As I scrambled up, I saw Gallahan go in hard, and get bounced on his can while Toroki stepped around him. Silberson finally knifed through and nailed Toroki on the forty.

When the P.A. system said, "Single wing for a while," I wondered if maybe old Mike Kaydee had the same ideas that I knew Shelevat had.

Blair was calling them—no instructions from Mike. Old Mike likes to develop smart quarters. You never can tell when you might need one. Look what quarter-backing did for Columbia in the '47 season.

They swept around left end, and the play piled up after six yards, with Sir Gallahan on the bottom. The next time they smashed through the other side of the line from me, and I called it in time to swing out and come down on it from the side. Both Gallahan and I dumped the ball carrier.

Gallahan bounced up like a rubber ball. He had a wide grin on his face. "This is the way we did it at Yohannus!" he said. "This is football!"

"Don't take it so serious, kid," Big Hunk said mildly. "This is practice. Remember?"

Sir Gallahan gave him that blue-eyed look, but he wasn't smiling. "I like to take it serious," he said flatly. "To me it's important. I'm going to earn myself a berth in the top backfield you got at Karr."

It's the sort of a thing you might think, but you don't say it. Not in front of a

lot of guys who get some of the bread and butter from the top-team slots.

Then it began to get really rugged. For Gallahan.

Shelevat mumbled to Blair and the next powerhouse play bounced off the left side of our line. Then Toroki ran wide and flipped a lateral outside to Shelevat, and Gallahan rolled onto his feet after a vicious block and yelled as he cracked into Shelevat.

Sir Gallahan got up, and Shelevat didn't.

Johnny Jerome came out and the P.A. system told us to take it twice around the field and into the showers.

Gallahan was dressing ten feet down the bench from me when Sid Raegen strolled in. Raegen is the black and bitter type.

"Nice going, kid," he said to Gallahan, his voice loaded with contempt.

Sir Gallahan looked up quickly, his pleased smile slowly fading as he saw the expression on Raegen's face.

Raegen said, "We keep a fast, smart club here, kid. We save the old school try for the schedule. Maybe Shelevat will be okay for the first game. Maybe not. So you've helped us a hell of a lot. Skimmer is worth nine of you."

Gallahan stood up. The blue eyes suddenly were narrow, dangerous. "If the coach wanted us to play patty cake, Mr. Raegen, he would have said so. I didn't hit Shelevat any harder than I was hit."

"You're a smart little backwoods punk, Gallahan. I don't like your face."

Gallahan moved toward Raegen like a cat. He flowed along. It was a sort of movement that didn't go with his build, and with that wide-open face. But as he got close, his balled fists slowly dropped and the fury left his face. It was then that Raegen hit him.

I remembered catching a sledge hammer in my middle and waited for the counterpunch. It didn't come. Gallahan

stood there, the blood trickling down his chin, looking almost sleepy. "I might have known it," Raegan said, almost to himself. He turned on his heel and walked away.

Gallahan smeared the blood with the back of his hand, gave me a broken grin and said, "He might have been right about Shelevat. If I'd hit him, Ed, I might have broken his jaw."

"That excuse is as good as any, kid," I said. I finished lacing my shoes and left him there.

AFTER that, Gallahan was no longer the butt of the rough gags. They left him alone. Even Big Hunk treated him with mild contempt. The boys had him cased. A showoff, an ambitious guy, and saffron in the clutch.

I guess I was the only one in the group that was a little uncertain about the correctness of that analysis. In some subtle way, the kid bothered me. I didn't have much to say to him, and he stopped trying to make conversation when we were in the room.

He didn't read or anything. Just stretched out on the bed with his hands locked behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

Old Mike didn't run many more scrimmages, and had us work hard on fundamentals. We were weak in the downfield blocking assignments, and the defensive backfield was slow in covering potential receivers.

But Gallahan did get in on one more session. He got in at Raegan's spot, as before. Twice he ran Toroki out of bounds when he could have saved four or five yards with a clean tackle. That just gave the boys more evidence.

I noticed a few funny little things about Sir Gallahan. Whenever he was alone in the room, the door stood open. Once I shut it with him in there. I stopped in the hall and waited. In a matter of seconds

the door swung open and I heard the springs creak as he got back on the bed.

By the consent of all, he was brushed off, left out of the horseplay.

Once, out of a clear sky, he said to me, "Ed, I just started wrong, I guess."

"Started what wrong?"

"They've got me wrong, Ed."

I didn't answer him. We were beginning to shape up, and I knew that the sessions back at the school would put us in top shape. The skull sessions began to get rough with the plays that old Mike had dreamed up during the summer. We spent the last day walking through them, with old Mike correcting the positions over the P.A.

I wondered how much old Mike knew about the Gallahan situation. I guessed that he knew all there was to know—somehow Mike Kaydee even learns what you're thinking.

Mike was putting everybody in there on the walking plays, and late in the afternoon, Gallahan came in. It was one of Mike's inventions. We call signals on defence, of course, and the defensive team was trying to outguess the offensive team, with the rules that no man could move faster than a walk. A slow motion form of touch football, but damn good for familiarizing yourself with the fast-breaking plays.

Toroki was over by the truck, chatting with Mike. Then he came in. A power sweep around the left end was called, and Jak had called a defensive shift to the left. Toroki had a blocking assignment. As they walked it around, and as Gallahan came to meet the play, Toroki put his big hand in the middle of Gallahan's face and shoved. Gallahan went down onto his back and got up, looking surprised.

Nick Toroki is six-two, two hundred and five, fast, hard and smart. With a lazy grin on his face, he pushed Gallahan down again. We all looked toward the truck. By all rights, Mike should have

been yelling our ears off, and should have ripped Nick apart at the seams. Mike doesn't allow that sort of stuff.

The P.A. speaker bawled, "What's the matter, Yohannus? Yellow?"

Gallahan looked toward the truck in a stupefied manner. He began to grin. It wasn't a pretty grin. And he suddenly looked a foot taller.

He was giving away over thirty pounds, plus a hell of a lot of height and reach. It was hopeless from the beginning, because a good big man can always lick the good little man. We had drifted into a loose circle around them. Gallahan went in like a man chopping wood with a hatchet in both hands. The fury of it drove Toroki back. We weren't padded because we were just walking through the plays.

Toroki, after he got over the initial surprise, acted like it was a joke. He tried to clown it a little, and Gallahan caught him with a right and a left that dropped him. Toroki came up, fast and mad, and Gallahan ran into a jolting right that knocked him back.

There was no sound except the splat of fists on flesh, the sobbing grunts of Gallahan. There was something incredibly persistent about the little guy. Toroki knocked him down a half dozen times, and each time Gallahan came back like a rubber ball. His face was beginning to lose shape, but his eyes were like blue fire. Every once in a while he scored on Nick, and I could see that Nick was beginning to worry. Gallahan wouldn't stay down. It was like hitting a rubber ball with a hammer.

Then Gallahan began to get up a little slower each time, but each time he came in as though he were going to kill Nick with his fists. I glanced around at the wide eyes and open mouths.

Suddenly, as though some signal had been passed, three of us grabbed Gallahan. Nick stood to one side, breathing hard, fingering a lump on his jaw. He grinned

in a shamefaced fashion and said, "You can't lick the guy!"

Gallahan sobbed as he tried to twist away from us and get back at Nick. Finally he relaxed. His chest heaving, he looked around and said in a low tone, almost a whisper, "Now give me a shot at Raegen!"

Raegen was ten feet away. He wore a startled expression. Suddenly Gallahan ripped loose from us, stumbled and fell. He wavered when he got up and blinked to focus his eyes. Then he began to move toward Raegen. Sid licked his lips, and began to back away.

Gallahan stopped, swayed, and fell heavily onto his face. We let out a long, pent-up sigh.

Mike's amplified voice said, "Carry him in. Twice around the field, the rest of you."

But they only carried Gallahan about fifteen feet. He sat up, rolled off the stretcher and, in a blundering run, caught up with the rest of us, took his two circuits of the field and came in with us.

He was standing in the shower when I heard Blair yell across to Gestrey, "Say, Al, where the hell is Yohannus?"

There was a roar of laughter and I knew that Sir Gallahan was part of the group more than he had ever been before. But I still didn't have all the answers. I did notice that the boys were being very polite and formal with Sid Raegen.

I knew Raegen wouldn't let that pass.

There was about an hour between showers and the evening meal. By the time I got to the room, Sir Gallahan was already there. He gave me a crooked grin. One eye was nearly closed and his face was as lumpy as a bag of apples.

"I had you wrong, kid," I said.

"Thanks, Ed."

At that moment Nick Toroki came in. He walked over to Gallahan and stuck out his hand. "You licked me, kid. If they hadn't grabbed you, I wouldn't have been

able to lift a hand when you came in again."

They shook hands and Galahan said, "Don't make me laugh. It hurts my face."

Shelevat came in a few moments later and said, "Glad Yohannus isn't on our schedule kid. Sounds like a rough league."

We sat on the beds and talked about the team chances, and I could see that Sir Gallahan was practically bursting with pride at being considered one of the group.

When a break came in the talk, he said, "You know, I had the wrong angle. I guess I—maybe I was too anxious to get a good slot on the squad."

"Hell, everybody's anxious," Nick said.

"I can't figure why Mike let you two scrap like that," I said. Nick gave me an odd look.

JUST then Raegen came in. I took one look at his face and knew that there was trouble in the air.

He had a mean and gloating look about him.

"Hi, guys. Say, I've just been over in the main house looking up some information."

Nobody answered him. He flushed a little and said, "Yeah, I was looking up schools and colleges in the almanac. Funny thing, there's no such a place as Yohannus College. How about that, Gallahan?"

I looked at the kid. His face was crim-

son, and he was staring down at his clasped hands.

Shelevat looked puzzled. "What's the pitch, kid?" he asked.

"Shut up!" Toroki snapped.

Sir Gallahan looked quickly at Toroki. "You know?" he asked quietly, turning to Raegen.


"Know what?" Raegen asked. He continued, "You know what I think, guys? I think Gallahan is a phoney. He's too young to have come out of an industrial league. And he didn't transfer from a college. There's only one other place where they play ball like he plays. A prison team."

When Gallahan looked up, his face was changed. It was a bitter face. And somehow he looked shrunken.

"Okay," he said wearily. "There's always a smart guy. I got my school credits on the inside. I got drunk when I was fifteen and woke up in the middle of a gas station hoist that didn't come off and I drew five. Served four, and got first year college credits on the inside. I wanted to come here, and the guy backing me rigged up the story. So it didn't work. I was to be Brighteyes from Yohannus. So the hell with it."

He stood up. "The dean knows about it. Kaydee knows about it. Now you guys know about it. So I guess it won't

(Continued on page 125)



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Above the Crowd

by Nelson & Allen



Torger Tøkle

HIS BROTHERS PUT SKIS ON TORGER FOR THE FIRST TIME WHEN HE WAS 6 IN HIS NATIVE NORWAY, SO THE STORY GOES, AND SENT HIM DOWN THE BIG SLIDE. HE FELL ON THAT FIRST JUMP BUT CAME BACK FOR A SECOND TRY--- AND MADE IT!

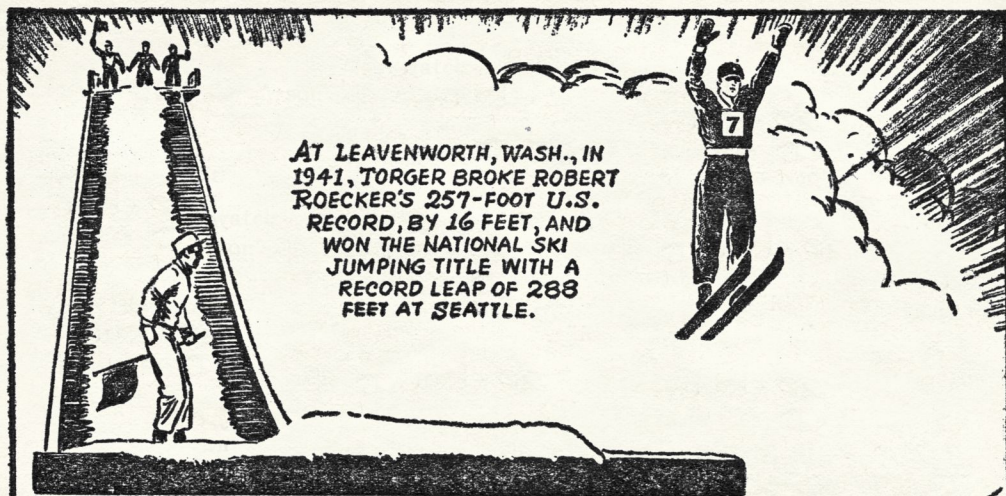
AT 9 HE WON HIS FIRST MEET AND AT 17 OUTJUMPED THE NORWEGIAN CHAMPION BY 25 FEET! HE TRAINED THE HARD WAY-- BY RUNNING, NOT WALKING, UP THE HILL AFTER A LEAP.

NOT YET 20, TORGER LANDED IN NEW YORK IN 1939, AND THE NEXT DAY ON BORROWED SKIS WON THE JUMP AT BEAR MOUNTAIN. IN THE NEXT 3 YEARS HE WON 38 OF THE 43 MEETS HE ENTERED, COLLECTING 54 CUPS AND 13 MEDALS!



THOUGH HE WAS ONE OF THE GREATEST JUMPERS OF ALL TIME, TORGER'S FORM WAS NOT PERFECT, BUT HE SURE GOT DISTANCE. NO HILL WAS TOO DANGEROUS FOR THE RUGGED YOUNGSTER WHO OFTEN IGNORED A HILL'S SAFETY LIMIT AND BROKE RECORDS ON 19 OF THEM FROM COAST TO COAST.

IN NEW HAMPSHIRE HE JUMPED INTO A BLIZZARD, UNABLE TO SEE THE GROUND BELOW, AND LANDED SAFELY!



AT LEAVENWORTH, WASH., IN 1941, TORGER BROKE ROBERT ROECKER'S 257-FOOT U.S. RECORD, BY 16 FEET, AND WON THE NATIONAL SKI JUMPING TITLE WITH A RECORD LEAP OF 288 FEET AT SEATTLE.

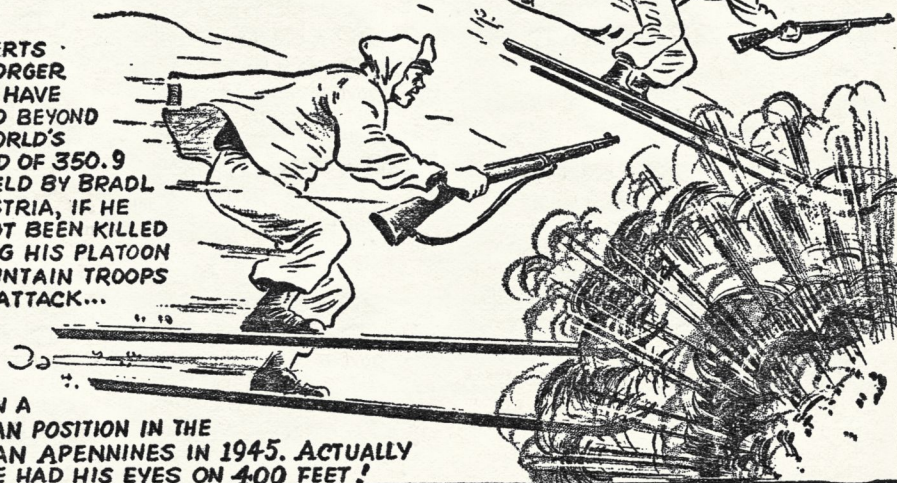


THE NEXT YEAR AT IRON MOUNTAIN, MICH., HE LANDED ON ONE FOOT AND BROKE A SKI ON HIS FIRST JUMP. UNABLE TO SECURE ANOTHER HE ZOOMED DOWN THE SLIDE AT 90 MILES AN HOUR ON THE BROKEN SKI AND SOARED TO HIS FINAL AMERICAN RECORD-- 289 FEET!



EXPERTS SAY TORGER WOULD HAVE JUMPED BEYOND THE WORLD'S RECORD OF 350.9 FEET HELD BY BRADL OF AUSTRIA, IF HE HAD NOT BEEN KILLED LEADING HIS PLATOON OF MOUNTAIN TROOPS IN AN ATTACK...

.... ON A GERMAN POSITION IN THE ITALIAN APENNINES IN 1945. ACTUALLY HE HAD HIS EYES ON 400 FEET!



By

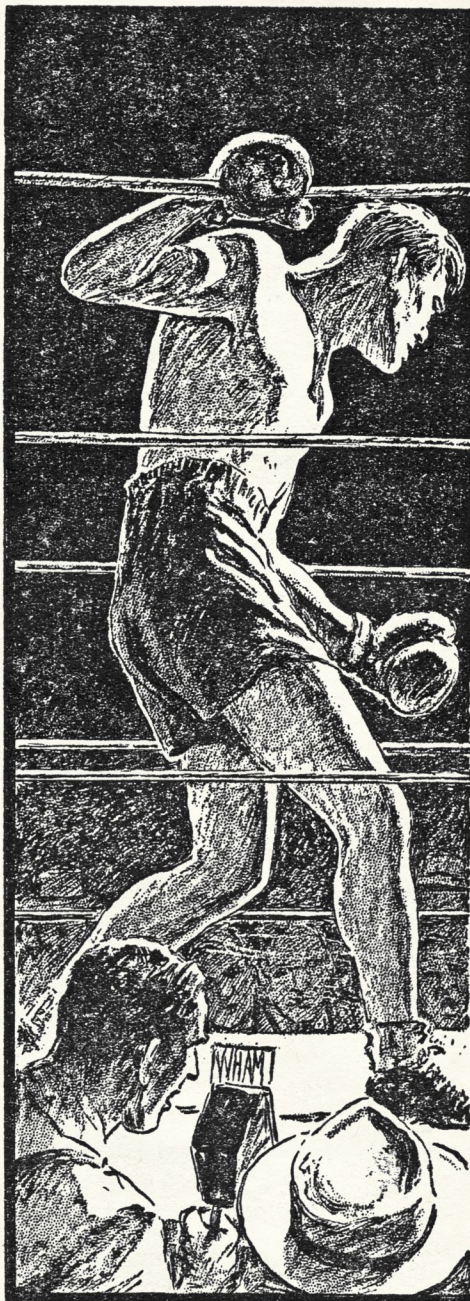
WILLIAM HEUMAN

IN THE OLD days when they came down the aisle together, they used to sing *Frankie And Johnny Were Sweethearts*, but now it would have been more appropriate to sing about the Kilkenny cats who'd been thrown across a washline with their tails tied together, and who'd eaten each other up.

Middleweight contender Johnny Craig was thinking ruefully that they were even coming down separate aisles now. Half of the arena separated them, but the breach was even wider than that. It was a breach which had been caused by small things—not a woman, not money. The little foxes had eaten up the wild grapes of friendship, and that amazing Damon and Pythias combination of Johnny Craig and Frank Dunham which had come out of the sticks to run riot through the host of middleweights, was no more.

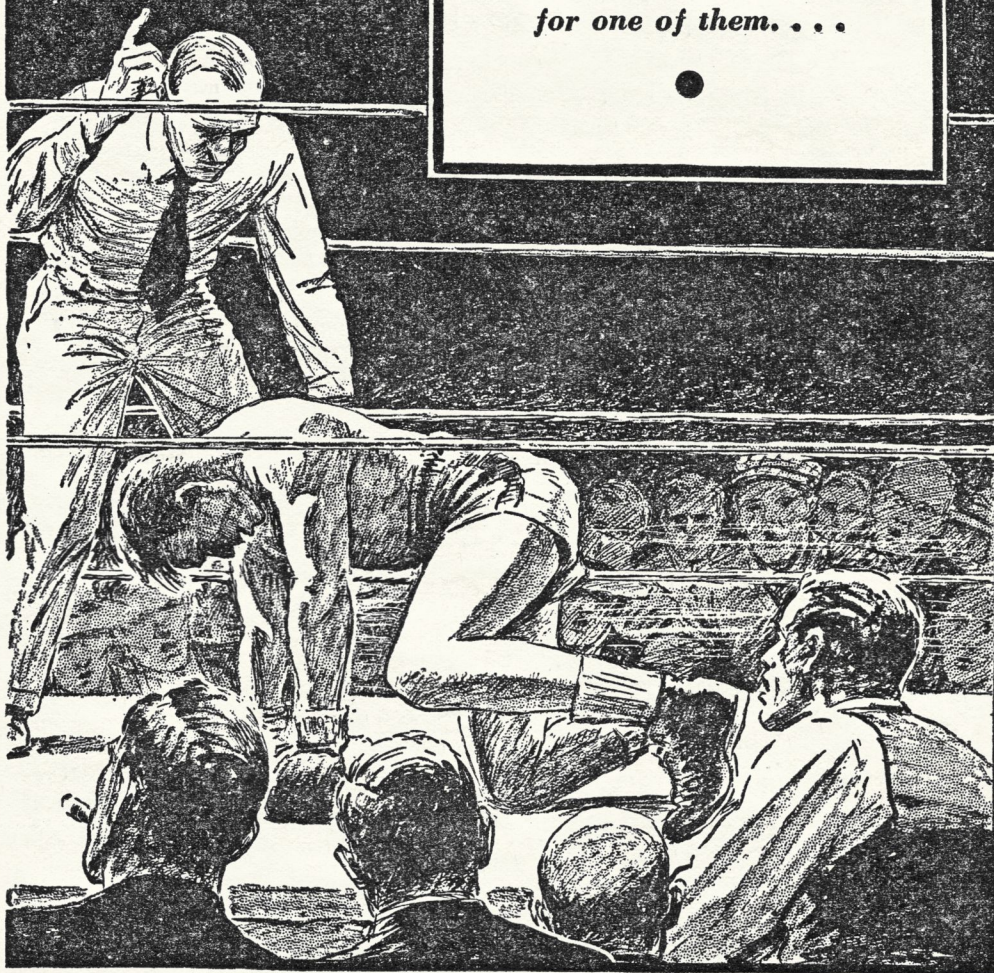
The lights were on now all over the arena, and Johnny Craig could see Dunham, his former manager, walking beside Tiger Blaine, the man he was supposed to fight tonight, the only man standing between himself and the match for the championship with Gentleman Jack Malloy.

Frank Dunham hadn't changed much in the six months since they'd split up. He was the same lean, thin-faced, youthful smalltownner, who in a year and a half had established himself in the big city as one of the smartest fight operators in the business. Dunham was thirty-one now; he'd been twenty-nine and Johnny had been twenty-three when they came out of the amateur ranks to earn twenty-five



BLACKOUT

Johnny was no killer, and Gentleman Jack was no gentleman. This was a fight that would end up in Queer Street — or the morgue — for one of them. . . .



PUNCH



Johnny took a punch on the side of the jaw and went down on one knee, a little dazed. . . .

bucks for a four-rounder, their first pro bout.

Two seconds walked behind Johnny, but no manager. Since he'd split with Dunham he hadn't signed on with anyone else. The Tiger Blaine match had already been signed for. He'd done his own training, making his own schedule, handling all the details by himself.

Going up the ring steps, a reporter at the press table called to him, "Lay him out, Johnny."

Johnny Craig winked at the man and ducked through the ropes. He was well liked by the fight crowd, just as Frank Dunham was well liked. Hardened fight reporters had greeted the two with open arms when they appeared on the fistic scene. They were honest, they were unassuming; they were like a tonic to men who had become accustomed to cheap chiselers and tank fighters. The sports writer said they were a credit to the game.

"Let him come to you tonight, kid. Let him do all the work," said Sammy Kramer, the trainer, who was in Johnny's corner tonight.

Johnny nodded. He saw Frank Dunham ducking through the ropes after Tiger Blaine. He noticed that Dunham avoided looking in his direction.

The Tiger was bouncing around in his corner, always active, a nervous type of fighter. The Tiger had been up a long time. His record was good, and he was gunning for the title now, putting it all on the line tonight. The Tiger was blond, three years older than Johnny and a few pounds heavier, a squat, barrel-chested man with bow legs, long arms, plenty of hitting power in the slope of his shoulders.

Watching him, Johnny Craig wondered how much he'd lost in that siege of sickness he'd had right after he'd parted company with Frank Dunham. He hadn't had the usual pep in training, and he had the feeling that his punches lacked the old power.

That had been one of the things which had caused the trouble—one of the small things. They'd been going at it hot and heavy for over a year, fighting regularly, and then Dunham had suggested a lay-off before his man went stale from overwork.

Johnny had disagreed because he was one man away from a shot at the title, and he'd had that title dangling in front of his eyes since they'd come to New York. He was keyed up; he'd been keyed up for months. There had been too much tension, the kind of atmosphere where the smallest remark caused trouble. And they'd been living too close together; they'd gotten on each others nerves. There had been words, and then Dunham had stalked out.

Referee Larry Kelton was calling them to the center of the ring after the introductions. Frank Dunham stood behind his fighter, still looking down.

Kelton said, "Make it nice, boys. Watch your low punches. Break when I tell you. I don't have to tell you guys to make it a fight. Good luck."

Johnny walked back to his corner and slipped out of the robe.

Kramer said again, "Let him come, Johnny."

JOHNNY CRAIG gripped the ropes, shuffled his feet a few times, and then was ready to go. He didn't feel too much like it. He'd had a kind of tired feeling the past week or so, a hangover from that attack of the grippe. He'd even thought once or twice of asking for a postponement of the fight; he was positive Frank Dunham would have done that had he been running things, but Dunham was on the other side now.

The bell rang and Johnny turned around. It was for twelve rounds tonight, but even that was too long against a man like the Tiger. The blond tore out of his corner, bobbing and weaving, right hand cocked against his chest.

Johnny speared him on the nose with a left hand and drifted away, but not far. When the Tiger rushed him again, Johnny was waiting with a left and right, snapping his punches, short, jolting blows. He fought from a stand-up position the way he and Frank Dunham had decided he would fight way back when they were small town boys boxing in an empty garage.

They'd read all the books on the trade, and several times Frank had gone down to big city gyms to watch the professionals go through their paces; he'd picked up things, little tips here and there. He'd kept his ears and eyes open, and he'd passed everything on to Johnny—the kid with the strong body Frank Dunham lacked.

The Tiger kept coming, ducking under a left lead, banging a right to Johnny's ribs, forcing the fight. Johnny moved away, fainted a few times, jabbed the left and then came in fast with the right. He caught the Tiger flush on the jaw and the blond man's left foot came off the ring floor.

The crowd whopped, and Johnny poured it on fast for a few moments until the Tiger got hold of his arms and held on, clearing his head. Larry Kelton broke them. The Tiger was grinning foolishly as he came out of the clinch, but he'd been hurt by that short right to the jaw.

Johnny took his time. He wasn't moving away now he wasn't the Fancy-Dan boxer type, and never had been. He boxed and he hit, and he could force a fight when he had to. He wanted to force this one now, and end it quickly, if possible.

Shifting around in the Tiger's corner, trying to line up his man for another hard right, he saw Frank Dunham looking up at him, and he remembered then that he was trying to set Frank's man up for a knockout. He remembered the hundreds of hours he'd sat with the youthful man-

ager, discussing fights and fighters, making plans for coming battles. They had been pleasant hours.

It was hard to tag the Tiger cleanly again after that first shot. The Tiger bobbed under the punches, rolled cleverly with them, taking the sting away, and the round was over with Johnny still trying to pin him down for a haymaker. It was Johnny's round by a wide margin, but the early rounds usually meant nothing to Blaine. He always lost them.

Sam Kramer said, "You damn near had him, kid, but don't get careless."

"Okay," Johnny said. He sat in the corner completely relaxed, the way Frank Dunham had taught him.

"He'll be smarter from now on," Kramer said. "He didn't think you hit that hard, Johnny."

Across the ring Frank Dunham was talking to the Tiger, and Johnny knew what he was saying. It was Frank Dunham who had developed that right-hand punch which nearly floored the Tiger. Dunham would know how to set up a defence for it.

It was tougher in the second round. The Tiger went into his shell, and kept his head tucked in between his broad shoulders. He bobbed even lower than before; and he kept moving every moment, making himself an elusive target.

Johnny boxed him carefully, giving no openings himself, working a nice left hand to the head, crossing the right to the body occasionally. He won the round handily, but he had to fight to do it. He didn't like to think of ten more rounds at this pace.

Sam Kramer said, "The guy's hard as a coconut, Johnny. Concentrate on his belly."

Johnny Craig smiled. He'd noticed that washboard stomach of the Tiger's and he'd come to the conclusion that the middleweight contender could take it down below just as well as he could upstairs.

Blaine had never been knocked from his feet in six years of fighting, and he'd stood up against them all.

Johnny moved out against him at the start of the third, convinced that he'd have to outpoint the Tiger in order to win. It meant that he'd have to finish strong because the Tiger usually had a spurt in the last rounds, and if his opponent didn't have staying power it was just too bad.

The Tiger seemed in no hurry to start anything, undoubtedly following Frank Dunham's instructions. Johnny kept after him with a long left hand, crossing the right whenever he saw the opening, but never landing it cleanly. He won the third and the fourth, but after that it wasn't so easy.

The Tiger began to hit up the pace. Where he'd been content to duck and dodge the first few rounds, he was now bullying in every moment, throwing right-handers from all angles, and throwing them hard.

Johnny began to feel it first in the legs. He hadn't been able to do as much roadwork as he'd wanted to since the illness, and the legs which had carried him to thirty-seven straight victories, and up among the topnotch middleweights, no longer functioned as well as before.

His body felt tired, too, and he wasn't finding openings the way he had in the beginning of the fight. He could spot the opening, but he couldn't get his glove in there before it closed up.

The Tiger started to reach him with right-handers to the body, and they hurt. Johnny managed to block some of them off with his left elbow, but one hard shot to the elbow nearly paralyzed it for a moment, and then the Tiger, sensing this, swarmed all over his man, bringing the crowd to its feet.

Sam Kramer said at the end of the round, "How do you feel, kid?"

"You should be in there," Johnny murmured. He was thinking that now was

the time when he needed his speed to get away from the Tiger, and at the same time pepper him with counterpunches. But the energy wasn't there to keep him going.

The Tiger won the fifth and the sixth, nearly flooring Johnny near the end of the sixth with a right-hand punch which he brought up from the floor. Those right-hand punches to the body were hurting now, also, and Johnny winced every time the Tiger leaped in, swishing that right for the ribs.

He didn't want to lose this one because it would be a big set-back, and he'd have to wait until after the Tiger had his shot at the title before he got his. He didn't wait that long. The sports writers were predicting that Gentleman Jack Malloy, middleweight champion for four years, and one of the craftiest fighters in the ring, was ripe for the plucking.

Johnny sat in his corner at the end of the sixth, feeling a little nauseous. The Tiger had started to switch that right to the ribs with a left hook into the stomach, and it was a wicked punch.

"Watch him," Sam Kramer said, "when he starts to work upstairs. He's tryin' to get you to drop your guard, Johnny."

"I'll open up a little next round," Johnny promised. He wasn't sure what with, but he knew he had to put on a little rally here and there to protect that early lead and to pile up enough points to win.

The warning horn sounded, and then the bell. Johnny came out of the corner faster than he had been doing the past few rounds. He fainted rapidly with the left, jabbed with the same glove, and then crossed the right to the Tiger's heart.

The Tiger had been getting ready to drive in again at the start of this round—he hesitated now, and there was respect in his eyes. That right had hurt.

Johnny forced the fighting the remainder of the round, but every moment he was conscious of the fact that he was get-

ting down near the bottom of the barrel, and there was still plenty of fighting to do before the final bell.

He could see Frank Dunham watching him closely several times when he got into Tiger Blaine's corner, and he wondered what Dunham was thinking. He didn't think the lean man felt any malice toward him, because Dunham wasn't the type to bear any man ill will; but they'd had their quarrels during the last weeks of their relationship, and everybody had known about it.

At the end of the round Johnny sat down on the stool wearily. He'd had the better of that round, but it had taken a lot out of him. He knew that he'd have to rest up a round or two, or come out for the final rounds in very bad shape.

He was wondering what Frank Dunham would have told him to do now. Up to this fight he'd never had to do any thinking in the ring. Dunham watched the other guy, studied his condition, and decided upon a plan of action. Dunham knew, too, how much his own fighter could take and give.

Johnny Craig looked down at the splotted ring floor, and wished Dunham were still on his side. He wondered how Frank felt about it.

THE warning horn came all too quickly, and he had to get up again. This was to be the "rest" round, but the Tiger

didn't give him any rest. The Tiger was getting tougher than ever. He came in hard, pumping those gloves to the body, reddening Johnny's ribs, backing his man around the ring.

Desperately, Johnny tried to hold him off, but the Tiger was the stronger man, and he was in vastly better physical shape for this fight. The Tiger came in under Johnny's long left. He broke out of the clinches, wrestling his man around, leaning his weight on Johnny, doing all the things an experienced battler would do to wear down his opponent.

Near the end of the round the Tiger looped a long right for the head, switching his attack very suddenly. Johnny saw the punch coming, and he tried to pull away, but his reflexes were slow. He took the punch on the side of the jaw and he went down on one knee, a little dazed.

Sam Kramer was howling for him to stay down, and the crowd was going wild. Johnny had been a five-to-three favorite in this fight, and the boys playing the odds thought they were in.

In his first professional fight Johnny had been knocked to the ring floor, but never since then, and it was an experience. He kept his head, and stayed down for a seven count. He got up then, extending his gloves for Larry Kelton to clean off.

The crowd was up, waiting for the kill when the Tiger tore out of the far corner. They had less than a minute to go, and



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the Tiger evidently wanted to finish it then and there. He came in wide open, and Johnny shot a right to his mouth, stopping him in his tracks. The punch was a lifesaver, because his legs were still wobbly; he was positive that another clean punch would upset him again.

He stood in the center of the ring, waiting for the Tiger to come at him, grinning a little, and the crowd gave him a big hand.

When he went to his corner at the end of the round, Sam Kramer said to him, "If you can hold him the next few rounds you'll have the fight, kid."

One of the seconds was holding the wet sponge to the base of Johnny's skull, letting the water roll down his back into his ring pants. It felt good. He looked across the ring and he saw Frank Dunham watching him again as he was talking to the Tiger. He thought he saw a faint shadow of regret slide across the lean man's face, and then it was gone.

Dunham was talking rapidly to the Tiger, telling him how to win this fight, and telling him honestly. Johnny Craig knew that if Frank Dunham's own brother were sitting on the stool on the other side of the ring, the fight manager would still be telling his man how to fight to win, because he was like that. Tonight Tiger Blaine was relying on his judgement, and he wasn't letting him down.

The next two rounds were very tough. The Tiger almost floored him again with a short left to the jaw, but Johnny weathered the storm, trying to conserve enough energy to give himself a good finish and clinch the fight.

"These last two will decide the fight," Sam Kramer said during the intermission between the tenth and eleventh.

"I'll work on him," Johnny muttered. He was beginning to feel a little sick from his exertions. He realized now that it had been foolish to go through with this fight so soon after his illness. He should have asked for a postponement.

Tiger Blaine floored him with the first solid punch in the eleventh round. It was a short right which Johnny never saw. They were in close, and the Tiger was hacking at his body with lefts and rights when he suddenly brought the right up to the head.

Johnny rolled over on his side, and as he rolled in the Tiger's corner, he came up on one elbow, looking straight into Frank Dunham's face. Very clearly he saw Dunham's lips form the words, "Down—stay down".

Johnny Craig grinned. Blood trickled down from the corner of his mouth. He got up on one knee, his head clear. He had time to think while Larry Kelton was tolling off the numbers. He had to win this fight or go way back and start over again. He didn't want to do that. His early lead had made it a fairly close match, but this knockdown had undoubtedly given the tough Tiger the lead. Only a very strong finish would give him any chance of winning the fight.

He got up at eight and he made no effort to clinch with his man. He stood flat-footed, waiting for the Tiger to come in at him, both fists balled. The Tiger didn't waste any time. With the crowd again whooping it up, Blaine piled in on top of his man, shooting punches from every angle.

Johnny ducked, bobbed and weaved. He ripped a right into the Tiger's body; he shot a left to the pit of the stomach, and then brought rights and lefts up to the head, staggering his man. He walked forward slowly, making the Tiger retreat for the first time in the fight, and the crowd went hysterical.

Frank Dunham was up on his feet, face tense, as his former fighter pushed forward, opening up with everything he had, still taking his time the way Dunham had taught him.

He nearly floored the Tiger with a short left to the head. He did knock his

man into the ropes, shaking him up considerably with a right to the chin, but the Tiger recovered. It was Johnny's round when the bell rang.

"That wasn't bad," Kramer grinned, "for a guy who was nearly flattened the first thirty seconds of the round."

In the last the Tiger was a little cautious, starting his main attack late in the round. Pegging his punches from that same flat-footed position, Johnny landed the heavier blows. He didn't take a backward step in the twelfth, and it was this more than anything else which gave him the round, and the winning of the final two rounds of the match gave him the fight.

He stood in his corner, very weary, a towel around his head, when the announcer pointed a finger in his direction and pronounced him the winner. The crowd gave him a terrific hand as he went over to shake with the Tiger.

The Tiger said, "Good luck with Malloy, Johnny. Watch him when you get him in there. He's as crooked as a snake, and twice as low."

Johnny smiled. "Sorry I had to beat a decent guy like you, Tiger. Better luck next time."



Up-Hell Battler

2

HE WAS so tired in the dressing room he could scarcely stand up to take his shower. Kramer rubbed him down after cutting off the gloves. His right eye was nearly closed, and his ribs felt as raw as a piece of steak.

Several reporters came in, and, after they'd gone, Gentleman Jack Malloy, who had been at ringside, and his manager Hymie Greensban. Malloy was a tall man for a middleweight; he had black hair, smooth, white skin, with not a mark of his profession on his face. He looked more

like a matinee idol than a prizefighter, but the expression around his mouth was not pleasant. Moreover, Gentleman Jack wasn't pleasant in the ring. Johnny had watched him work on a man years before.

A master boxer, Malloy was not a knockout artist, but he hit viciously—cutting blows which left their mark on the opponent. He hurt a man's soul when he whipped him, and that was not good.

Greensban, small and debonair with a light blond mustache, said "So you win, Johnny, and you want a title shot."

"That's what the papers say," Johnny observed, "and also the Boxing Commission." It had been understood prior to the signing of the match that the winner was to take on Malloy for the title. Gentleman Jack hadn't defended his title in almost a year, and the commission was taking steps to make him fight or vacate.

"So you got it," Greensban chuckled. "Nobody's trying to sidestep you, kid."

Gentleman Jack straddled a chair, studied Johnny coolly with the green eyes, and said, "You look done in, Johnny. You pulled that one out of the fire."

Johnny nodded coldly. He didn't try to alibi. Greensban and Malloy knew his condition before the fight because there had been some comments on it. The champion was trying to gall him now.

"When do you want this title shot?" Greensban asked. He took out a silver cigarette case and slipped a turkish cigarette between his lips.

"I figured," Johnny said, "in a couple of months."

"You got five weeks," Greensban grinned. "Take it or leave it."

Johnny stared at him, and then at the smiling Malloy. He said dumbly, "Five weeks?"

"It's all yours," Greensban said, "before we leave for Europe. We got to fight someone before we go. Either we get you, or we arrange to get somebody else."

"So that's your way of crawling out of a match," he said tersely. "You know damned well I can't get in shape in five weeks."

"How old are you?" Gentleman Jack sneered. "Sixty-eight?"

Johnny didn't answer him. He was watching Greensban puffing on a cigarette, flicking off the ashes, a very dainty, very delicate, very dirty man.

"Take it or leave it," Greensban said softly.

A man said quietly from the doorway, "I'd leave it, and to hell with them."

Johnny Craig spun around. Frank Dunham was standing there, thin lips very tight, red spots showing in his cheeks. Dunham was a man who seldom grew angry. He was mad clean through now.

Hymie Greensban inclined his head slightly. He said, "I thought this beautiful partnership had broken up, Dunham, or were you pulling a fast one on the fans by managing Tiger Blaine and working for Johnny Craig at one and the same time?"

"They're trying to pull a crooked deal on you, Johnny," Frank Dunham snapped. "Malloy's afraid to stack up against you when you're in good physical shape. He wants to get you now."

"You signing papers for Johnny?" Greensban asked.

"No," Dunham said.

"Then get the hell out," the little manager said.

"I can give him advice," Dunham scowled, "if he'll take it." It was the way he said it which got Johnny, the implication that his former fighter was too pig-headed to take advice—and that had been one of the big stumbling blocks between them.

"I can take advice," Johnny said grimly, "if it's good, but it has to be damned good." He glared at Dunham and Dunham glared back.

"Okay," the manager murmured. "Par-

don me for coming in. Go ahead and get kicked around." He went out.

Hymie Greensban grinned. "Now that papa's gone," he chuckled, "maybe we can get down to business, Johnny. Blimm wants it for the ball park on the fifth of next month. All the arrangements have been made. You sign on the dotted line in the morning and you have your shot at the title. The champ will be glad to oblige."

"My pleasure," Gentleman Jack added.

Sam Kramer said, "I wouldn't do it, Johnny. Take Dunham's advice."

"If he does," Greensban observed, "it'll be three years before he gets another shot at the title. Think about it, Johnny."

Johnny Craig thought about it. The matchmaker, Tom Blimm, was Greensban's brother-in-law, and they worked hand in glove. Blimm arranged all of the champion's fights, and he'd arranged this one. If Johnny Craig didn't sign up, Malloy would defend his title against another picked middleweight, a guy Malloy would have no trouble with. He would go to Europe after that, spending a year or so there, giving exhibitions, making every contender wait for him.

"In three years," Greensban was grinning, "a guy can be over the hill, Johnny. You're smart."

"You want to make a deal?" Johnny asked him suddenly. "I'll take five per cent less of my cut if you'll give me a month extra."

Greensban shook his head. "We made our deal, Johnny," he smiled. "Do I look like a sucker?"

"Okay, Hymie, you have your fight. I'll be in Blimm's office in the morning."

Gentleman Jack Malloy caressed his knuckles gently. He said softly, "Johnny, we'll have a nice little party, won't we?"

"It'd be the other way around," Sam Kramer grated, "if you gave this boy time to get his health back. You're a dirty—"

Gentleman Jack hit the little man across

the mouth with the palm of his hand before Kramer could finish the sentence. The little trainer staggered, tears of impotent rage coming into his eyes. Kramer weighed about one hundred and twenty pounds to Malloy's one-sixty, and Kramer was nearly fifty.

Gray eyes flashing, Johnny Craig slid off the rubbing table. He was tired to the point of exhaustion; his arms and legs felt like lead, and he'd hardly been able to make the dressing room without sitting down. He threw a left-hand punch for Jack Malloy's chin, and missed.

Malloy had been ready for him. The champion pulled his head back and shot two punches—short, cutting slashes, being very careful not to hit bone cleanly with his bare knuckles.

Johnny sank to the dressing room floor, blood streaming from his cheek. He started to get up, but couldn't make it this time.

Malloy looked down at him contemptuously. He said, "That's a little preview of the real thing for next month, kid. We'll have a pleasant night together."

Hymie Greensban was laughing as they went out. Sam Kramer, cursing under his breath, helped Johnny to his feet and back on the rubbing table. He worked on the cut cheek, stopping the flow of blood with adrenalin.

"The louse, Johnny, the dirty louse," he said softly.

Johnny Craig said slowly, "I'll pay that back, Sam."

"You're a fool, signing up for that fight in a month," Kramer told him. "You've been damned sick, kid, and this fight tonight took a hell of a lot out of you. You ought to get a full month's rest before even starting training, and now you have to meet him in four weeks."

"I wish," Johnny said tersely, "that it was two weeks. I wish I could start on him tomorrow night."

"A guy in your condition ought to have

two weeks sleep before he even thought of fighting again," Kramer growled. "It's a hell of a business."

JOHNNY slept around the clock, but when he awoke the tiredness was still with him. His body ached all over from the pounding the Tiger had given him. The very thought of starting training for the Malloy fight made him sick. He needed plenty of rest now.

Sam Kramer came around and said, "My advice is to lay off for two or three weeks. Don't do anything. Just lay in the sun. After that we'll see how you are."

Johnny smiled wryly. After that he had a week or so to prepare for the Malloy fight, to get himself in fighting trim for the smoothest fighter in the ring. Gentleman Jack was always in superb condition; he could be depended upon to come into the ring ready to go the full fifteen rounds if necessary—at top speed. It was not a pleasant prospect.

The two weeks' rest was very good. Sam Kramer was not a fight manager, but he knew how to train men. Johnny lay in the sun out at Ben Aronson's fight camp, a quiet place in the country. He felt some of the strength come back to his body, but it wasn't enough. In his condition he should have taken several months to recuperate from the illness and from the grueling fight with Tiger Blaine.

Sam Kramer said gloomily, "I don't know how the hell you'll get into shape in a week or two. You're not fighting some amateur, Johnny. This guy's pretty tough."

Johnny Craig didn't say anything. He took Kramer's advice and laid off for another few days, and then he had ten days until fight time. He'd taken on some weight and that had to come off if he wanted to come in under the middleweight limit. He'd become soft around the middle, and had to harden up.

Before starting training he had to go

back to New York to attend a sports writers' dinner and be presented with the annual award as the "fighter of the year." He'd have a good year, capping it with the win over Blaine.

George Brand, the veteran *Lantern* writer, came over and said quietly, knowing he was on a touchy subject, "I understand Frank Dunham split with Tiger Blaine, Johnny. You hear about it?"

"No," Johnny said shortly. Dunham was at the dinner. He'd caught a glimpse of him at the far end of the dining room, but he hadn't gone over.

Brand said, "It would be a good thing for the fight game if you two boys made up, Johnny. We have too few honest combinations around."

"Tell that to Dunham," Johnny said stiffly.

Brand shook his head, and Johnny Craig could see that he had already done that with no success.

"You're a pair of stubborn mules," Brand chuckled, "but I love you both. I hope to hell you knock Malloy out of the ring, Johnny."

"We'll see," Johnny said. The way he felt he wasn't knocking his grandmother out of the ring.

He had to make a short speech after the presentation of the trophy, and all the while that he was speaking he noticed that Frank Dunham looked down at the table. Dunham was there because every fight manager and fight notable in the city was there. But his face was expressionless as he listened to the talk in which Johnny thanked the writers for their kindness to him.

When it was over George Brand cornered Johnny. He said, "You mind stopping up in my room for a few minutes after this shindig is over, Johnny? I want you to meet an old friend."

Brand had a suite upstairs. Johnny went up after saying good-night to his friends. It was past twelve o'clock when

Johnny entered the vet reporter's room.

"Step this way, kid," Brand said. "I was just mixing a drink."

Johnny walked into the sitting room and saw Frank Dunham just lighting a cigarette as he sat in one of the big leather chairs. Dunham got up slowly, his face flushed. He looked at Brand accusingly, and Johnny knew that his former manager had not been in on this little party that Brand had arranged for them.

The reporter said quietly, "Boys, everybody has little differences. Let's get together now and settle ours."

Frank Dunham said tersely, "There wouldn't be any differences between a fighter and his manager if the fighter had sense enough to know it pays to do what he was told."

"You can't make any mistakes, is that it?" Johnny snapped. "You—"

"Wait—" George Brand began.

"Why did you sign up for Malloy?" Dunham said grimly. "You want to be killed? You want to walk around on Queer Street?"

"I'm not being killed," Johnny snorted. "You think I'm a dope?"

"Anybody in your condition signing up with a fighter like Malloy," Dunham grated, "is worse than a dope."

Red-faced, Johnny Craig scooped up his hat and started for the door, Brand hurrying after him, waving his hands.

"Okay, wise guy, get some more pigeons like Tiger Blaine. I'll knock 'em off one at a time," Johnny said.

"For how long?" Dunham rasped.

Johnny went out into the hall, George Brand still with him.

Brand was saying, "Why not listen to reason, kid? We can fix—"

"Forget it," Johnny said wearily, "and no hard feelings, George." He wondered, though, why it had to be that way. He was very tired when he went back to his own hotel.

*Bell for Blood*

3

GENTLEMAN Jack Malloy had a left jab which was the talk of the pugilistic world. Johnny had run up against left jabs before, and he had a good one of his own, but he'd never seen anything like this before. It was stiff and hard and it cut like the point of a spear. In two rounds his face was red and puffed, and there were a half dozen small cuts around his eyes and mouth.

Malloy moved around coolly, easily, taking his time, content to work that left only, never giving Johnny a chance to counterpunch. He was slightly taller than Johnny, with long arms. His body was white, chiseled out of ivory.

For two rounds Johnny chased him around the ring.

Sam Kramer said desperately, "You got to get him early, kid. You can't stand up fifteen rounds tonight."

That was Malloy's strategy—to stay away and let his man chase him until he was ready to drop, to work a left jab and keep his distance. In the latter rounds he could really open up.

Johnny Craig had expected this, and he'd gone after Malloy with a rush from the opening bell, trying to tag his man with a clean right-hand shot before his ill-conditioned body gave out. But Malloy wasn't easy to tag. The champion was a wraith, constantly moving, shuffling, dodging the punches, rolling his head and his body, the most elusive target Johnny had every pursued.

It was outdoors, with a big crowd looking on, and a full golden moon hanging up over the rim of the grandstand. Johnny came back to his corner after the second, his face feeling as if he'd been attacked by a swarm of bees. There was not too much blood because the cuts were

very small. The blood would come later when Malloy started to work his right, and to chop with that left instead of jabbing as he was doing now.

Kramer said, "I don't know, kid. This guy's too smart for me. I'm a trainer, not a fight manager. You should have somebody here who would know what to tell you."

"Just keep me in shape," Johnny said tersely. "He's bound to slip sooner or later. Then we'll catch up with him."

Sam Kramer nodded, but it was obvious he was not too much impressed with this logic. Fighters like Gentleman Jack Malloy didn't leave any openings. He wasn't leaving any tonight because he knew that the man in front of him was waiting for just that.

The start of the third Johnny bounded out of his corner again and tried to pin Malloy against the ropes. The champion feinted, jabbed, ducked, and was gone. Johnny took a half dozen stiff jabs in the face. He threw a right for Malloy's chin, missed, and Malloy hooked him with the left on the side of the mouth. He could taste the blood then.

He was slow on his feet tonight; he was slow with the reflexes. When he spotted a slight opening he couldn't bring his glove up fast enough to connect—that made a difference. He'd been much better against Tiger Blaine, but the Tiger wasn't Jack Malloy.

His legs and his arms got heavier as the rounds went by. He'd planned this fight to stop Malloy in less than five because he'd figured that for five rounds he could move pretty fast. After that the thing might become too much for him.

He could see the gleam of triumph in Malloy's green eyes as the fifth, sixth and seventh rounds went by, with Johnny still hopefully boring in, trying to nail his man with a clean right or left-hand shot, to start him off toward dreamland.

He was being cut up badly now. He

could feel it around his eyes in particular. His right eye was nearly closed; his mouth felt twice as big as it was. He was knocked to his knees near the end of the seventh with a cutting right-hand smash to the mouth. He got up at the count of six, and he didn't look pretty.

Sam Kramer said, "Why let this dog work on you like that? A reasonable man will stay down when he's had enough. This guy wants to cut you to pieces, Johnny."

"I want to knock him out," Johnny said slowly.

Kramer looked at him. "Sure," he said. "Okay, Johnny."

It got worse in the eighth and the ninth. There were two more knockdowns. Johnny took a nine count on one of them, and when he got up he felt sick. He walked in to Malloy's punches and he heard the crowd yelling for the referee to stop it.

The referee didn't stop it because Malloy eased up a little—Malloy didn't want this fight to stop just when he was beginning to have a good time.

At the start of the tenth Johnny's right eye was completely closed. Kramer had worked on it desperately between rounds, but it was still in bad shape. Johnny peered out of the left eye, looking for his man, moving after him. It was becoming a nightmare now, but he wasn't quitting. He watched Malloy's chin and he threw punches for it, missing badly because he couldn't see well.

Malloy jabbed him with a left, avoided Johnny's wild right, and then stepped in fast with a hard right of his own under the heart. Johnny winced, staggered a little, and then came in again, swinging with both hands. He took more jabs, more cutting slashes to the face, none of them hard enough to knock him off his feet, but all bad.

He came back to his corner at the end of the round and his two seconds started to work on him, massaging his legs and

arms, holding a cold sponge against the base of his skull. Somebody was working on his face, trying to stop the flow of blood from those cuts.

Sam Kramer said, "We have him now, Johnny, because he's careless. He thinks you're through, but you're not."

Kramer didn't talk like that; it wasn't even Kramer's voice. Johnny opened his one good eye and he looked into Frank Dunham's face.

"You're never through, Johnny Craig. That's why I like you. We'll get him now," Dunham said.

"Sure," Johnny muttered, and he wondered if he was really punch-drunk, and dreaming this.

"He never liked it downstairs," Dunham was saying. "He always tries to keep that belly well-protected. We'll work on it now, Johnny."

"I can't get near him," Johnny panted. "He's as fast as hell." It was a funny thing now. This was the way it always had been. He'd depended upon Dunham, and Dunham had given him the confidence. He didn't even think it strange now that Dunham was in his corner; he didn't try to figure out how or why it had happened. Dunham was here.

"He's careless now," Frank Dunham said. "You work in close, give it to him in the clinches. He'll fold up like an accordion. Then you work on his chin and watch him drop."

It was that easy, and Johnny Craig had to smile. It was the thing he'd been trying to find out since the fight had started, and Frank Dunham had spotted it. Malloy could be hit in the stomach in the clinch, and he didn't like to be hit in the stomach to begin with.

"How do you feel?" Dunham asked.

"Okay," Johnny said. "Now."

The manager ran a hand through his hair. "Give it to him, kid," he murmured. "It's made me sick to my stomach watching it."

JOHNNY went out at the bell. He moved more slowly now, taking his time. He bobbed and weaved several times, and then gently fell into a clinch. He hadn't been doing any real punching in the clinch before because he'd always felt that the mauling and wrestling around took too much out of him. He'd been content to wait until the referee broke them.

He felt Gentleman Jack Malloy relax in this clinch, too, because Malloy had become accustomed to that. Johnny freed his arms and let go with two hard shots to the stomach. He heard Malloy gasp, and he sent in two more hard digs. They were short punches, neither one traveling more than six inches, and most of the crowd didn't even see them.

The referee didn't break the fighters because Johnny's arms were still free, with Malloy trying to tie him up now. Johnny managed to throw in another one-two just before Malloy succeeded in tying him up. He knew the champion had felt those punches, partly because they carried quite a lot of steam behind them, and because he wasn't expecting to be hit in the stomach.

Malloy backed away and Johnny moved after him, gloves balled, ready to hit. Malloy tagged him with a left and then a right, and Johnny took the punches, finally lunging into another clinch.

Frank Dunham was yelling, "Give it to him, Johnny! Give it to him!"

Johnny Craig did. Wrenching his arms loose before the referee could intervene, he slammed Malloy twice more in the bread basket, and this time the champion's head started to come down as he backed his stomach out of range.

Johnny caught him with a short left to the head, close, and then he followed up with another right to the stomach when Malloy's guard went up. The right hurt because it was a swinging punch, with all Johnny's weight behind it.

The champion stayed away the re-

mainder of the round, with the crowd pulling hard for Johnny now, howling for a turn in the tide of battle. Johnny tried desperately to corner his man or get in close, but Malloy kept moving every moment, and it was difficult.

At the end of the round Dunham said, "You see what I mean, kid?"

"He can be hit," Johnny murmured, "and I'll hit him." He looked at Dunham queerly and said, "What brought you up, Frank?"

"Would you want to sit down there and see your brother get it?" Dunham asked slowly.

Johnny Craig smiled. "It should be a cinch now, Frank," he said.

Gentleman Jack Malloy was still cautious, still a little afraid of the clinches. Johnny caught him once halfway through the round, rocking him with four hard shots to the midsection before Malloy could hold him, and the champion didn't like the way the fight was going now. He became even more cautious, and the crowd started to boo him as he covered up.

Fighting flat-footed, Johnny trailed him around the ring, saving his strength for punching, taking his time about it. He caught Malloy with a left hook thirty seconds before the bell rang, staggering his man, but Malloy recovered.

Dunham said, "You have him, kid. He's worried now, and I never saw a worried fighter win a fight."

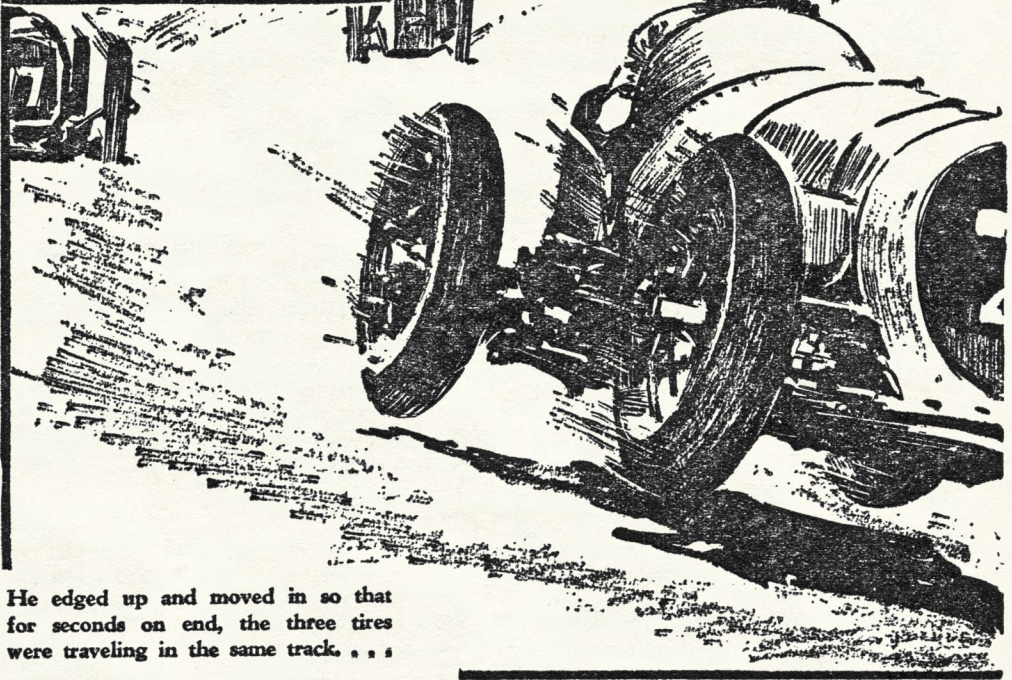
"This thirteenth round," Johnny said, "is going to be unlucky for somebody."

It got unlucky for Gentleman Jack Malloy after fifteen seconds of the round. Johnny bulled in close and whacked his right into Malloy's midsection. Before the champ could skip away he threw another right and a left to the same place, and then shifted his attack to the jaw.

He could hear Dunham shouting frantically from below, and he knew that this was the time. He had to get Malloy now

(Continued on page 127)

THUNDER



He edged up and moved in so that for seconds on end, the three tires were traveling in the same track. . . .

Bad blood and gas don't mix on the thunder stretch—the stretch where the hellions of the deadly oval meet to drive their bargain for glory—or death!

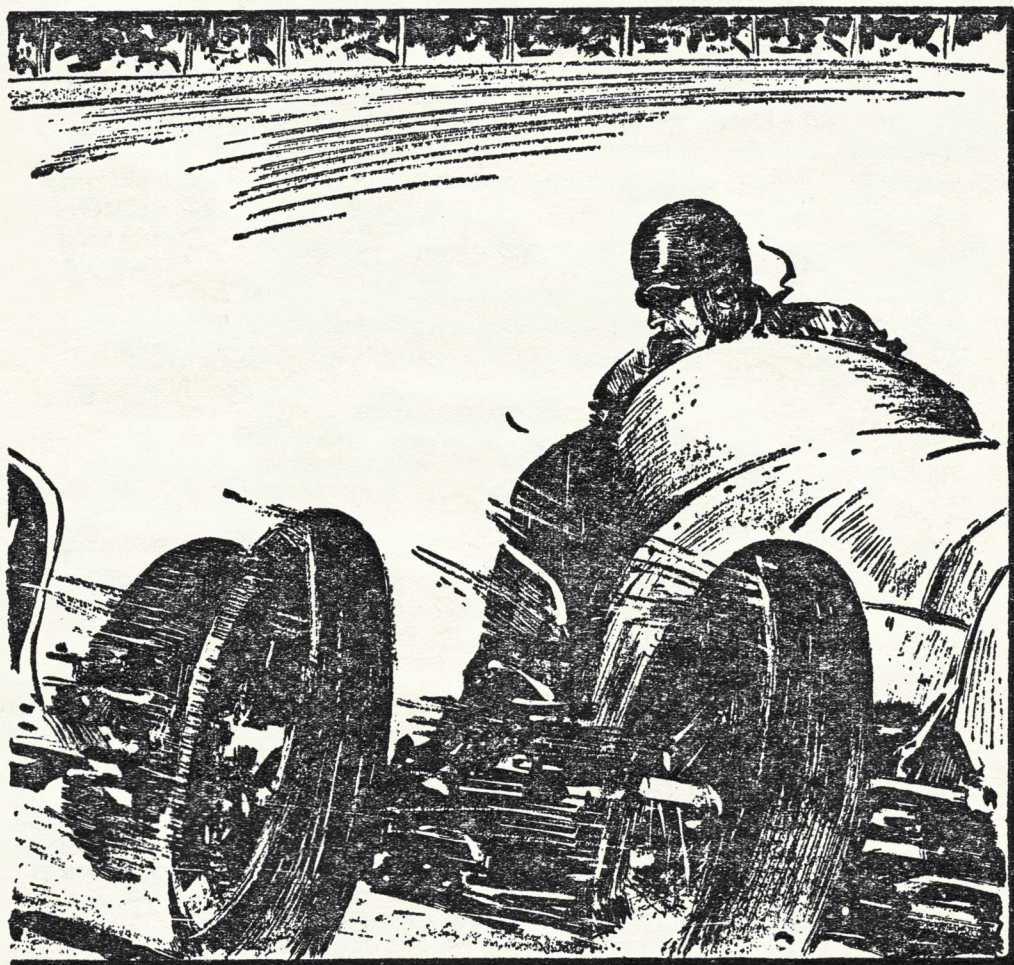
A NOVEL

HOOP, the pit boss, and me—we decided that it wouldn't do our morale any good to watch the amateur events, watch the hot rod kids smash themselves to death on macadamized sucker trap that passes for a track at Darido, California, so we spent our time putting the last touches on the Jeyett Special.

Big Arch Jeyett had gotten more than a little rough when Brick Arlen didn't even place the iron at Indianapolis, and

KING

By SCOTT
O'HARA



you can't blame him. It isn't exactly a hobby with him.

After numerous words too harsh to mention, the four of us found ourselves with the sedan, the tool truck, the Special on the trailer, and all the tools, heading for a circuit of the hard-track meets.

There is Bud Hoop who is the pit boss, a guy who thinks motors live and breath. For him, they do. Gil Forrester, who never says more than two words a month, is the mech, and Brick Arlen and me, we

are the drivers, doubling in the pit for switching rubber and such. My name is Joe Gartner and if I knew what was good for me, I would be back on the dirt hacking at track records that don't go higher than eighty.

This four-day meet at Darido is like a consolation when you miss the big one. And we shuddered to think of what Big Arch would say and do if we missed the pipsqueak main go at Darido.

Anyway, we are in a garage off the

track, Hoop and me, hearing the high whine of the amateur irons, when Brick Arlen comes in, a funny look on his face.

"Hey," he says, "there is a guy out there who is nuts. He drives like he's got eight hands and like he's playing tag."

"So what?" Hoop says. "We won't have to worry about him. You can't push one of those irons into the big one."

Brick is like he doesn't hear him. Brick is, of course, a redhead, with a bunch of features too close together in the middle of his face. He has a sneer and a cocky way with him, but on bricks, macadam or dust, he could place on a kiddycar.

"His name is Johnny Wall," Brick says.

At that I straighten up slow, dropping the wrench so that it bounces nicely off my toe. But I hardly feel it. "Johnny Wall? Skinny guy with black hair and one helluva big scar on his face?"

"Same one."

I had seen Johnny Wall before. I had seen him edge me at the turn on the dirt at Worcester, and slant down. I had seen him spinning like a doll against the sky when Ed Murph, now dead, broke Johnny's back. And Johnny was driving again!

"Yeah," Brick says. "A guy tells me Wall figures to take that merry-go-round out there to get the dough to lift an attachment on a big wagon that he wants to wheel in the main. Joe, you and I better hope he misses out, the way the guy drives. He's nuts."

And that was more than something for Brick Arlen to say.

By the time we got back out, Johnny Wall had gotten the winner's flag and I watched where he drifted in. The tow boys were pulling two hulks out of the infield.

I went on down just as Johnny climbed out of the stripped stock, his goggles in his hand. He wiped his face and looked at me.

"Hell!" he said. "You're Joe Gartner."

I shook hands. "Guilty," I said. "Brother, I never thought I'd see you on a track again."

His eyes seemed to cloud. A girl came out of the back of the pit. She wore a stained bandanna to cover her hair and there were smudges of grease on her face. Her hands were square and capable.

"Johnny shouldn't be on a track," she said.

He grinned at her. "Janey, meet Joe Gartner. Joe, this is my sister. Best pit man in the country."

Jane's handshake was firm, but her eyes were worried. Her voice was low, a very nice sound.

"Are you with it, Joe?" Johnny asked.

"Right. I joined up with the Jeyett outfit about eight months ago. We got a Special here—Brick Arlen and me wheeling it, Bud Hoop in the pit and a mech named Gil Forrester. On the big day at Indianapolis, we lost eight laps with brake lock and throwing oil, and didn't place. The boss'll have our scalps unless we bring in first iron here at Darido."

Janey's dark eyes suddenly flamed as she turned on Johnny. "You see? You won't stand a chance. Please give it up, Johnny!"

Johnny gave me an embarrassed grin. He said, "The gal wants me to take a Detroit job that I was offered. I keep telling her that I've got to wind up a big one first. We've got every dime in this Darido meet." He turned to Jane and said, "Look, honey. One hundred times around the two-mile oval. Suppose I put it in front and ride it there all the way. Fifty bucks for the lead car in each lap. There's five grand. Another seventy-five hundred for first money. Say another seven or eight for endorsements. There's twenty thousand."

"And maybe you die, Johnny," she

said, and her lips were thin and tight.

He shrugged. "So does everybody."

She turned to me with a helpless gesture. "We shouldn't let you in on the family argument, Joe. But I wish he—" The tears came suddenly and she turned and walked away, her back straight and proud.

I HAD a beer with Johnny. It all came out. After the big smash at Worcester, he spent nine months in a cast. And all the time he was wondering if he had lost his nerve. He didn't tell me that, but I knew. You don't fly through the air with the greatest of ease without getting some marks on the inside where they don't show.

A month after he got out, when he was trying to hire himself out as a driver, their father died, and with the insurance he had decided to get his own wagon for the hard tracks and see what he could do.

After the beer we wandered down to the rented garage and he showed me the wagon. It was an evil-looking iron. Green black in color, with a bronze sheen on it, low snout and hood vents that made you think of some kind of animal with its lips lifted in a snarl.

Then he unbuttoned the bonnet and showed me the power plant. It was clean enough to scramble eggs on.

"What the hell is it?" I asked.

"Special job. Franzetta-Gorf. Two hundred and fifty cubic inch displacement. Double overhead cams. A hell of a lot of stuff."

I frowned. Memory awakened. "But a plant like this should cost at least thirty thousand bucks and—"

"It didn't. Remember Whitey Devlon?"

Suddenly I remembered. When it had rolled a year ago, Whitey had tried to go downstairs, but the centrifugal force got him and the car tore him in half.

Johnny's grin was strained. "So in the

trade they figure it's a bad luck plant and I got it for peanuts. The chassis is different, but three guys died behind that plant without ever damaging it much. Three times and out. This time it's in. I would have been in the big one last month, but we were in hock."

"Your sister doesn't like the idea," I said softly.

He gave me a sharp look. "Joe, I got to ride out in front once more. I've been aiming at this for a long time. Nobody stops me. Understand?"

And I understood. Sometimes it works out that way. It's a stubbornness that is born out of fear. The worst sort of fear.

In the morning of the following day, Brick and I helped Hoop and Gil set up our pit, and the devil's brew of high test, alcohol, benzol and acetone was in the pressure drums ready to be squirted into the Special. After we were through, I wandered over to Johnny Wall's pit. They had picked up a local mech who seemed to know his business. The Franzetta-Gorf twinkled in the sun, and even standing still it looked as though it were ready to surge ahead.

By noon there was a sprinkling of white shirts in the stands and it was time for the speed trials. The track record at Darido was 115.6, not too far behind the record for the big time.

We had decided that it was my shot at the speed and qualification trials, so at two o'clock I shoved the rubber plugs in my ears, pulled on the crash helmet and snapped it under my chin, slipped on the goggles with the massive sponge rubber rims and edged my way down into the seat of the Special. She is a dark, dull-finish red, with the cowl shaped to the size of the steering wheel.

After a short push the big power plant caught, coughed, sputtered, and settled down to a rising drone of power. I took it slow twice around to feel out the track. The macadam was like black velvet. but

I found an uneven patch in the backstretch a third of the way in from the north corner, and marked it for future reference.

I don't like speed trials. In a race you've got a reference point, the deck of the iron ahead, but in a speed trial you're out there alone. The first lap and a half was like driving the family car on a country road. I gave the arm signal, and dug in as I whined down toward the starter. The flag was a flash out of the corner of my eye and the Special started doing what it was built for. It took over. I was the guy in there steering it. It snugged down nice on the perfectly banked end of the oval, and as it started to straighten, I fed it all it would take. At that speed you don't just go by something. No, it grows and leaps at you and the air, plus the motor noise, makes it go *paahhh!* at you as you whistle by. The vibration turns you to leather and the drone makes you feel like your head would fall apart like a tangerine without the skin.

I took my fast lap, caught the flag, and floated around with decreasing speed, turning into the pit.

I had my disguise off when the time was announced over the P.A. "Joe Gartner, driving the Jeyett Special, qualifies at one eighteen point eight, just three tenths under the one-lap record established by Jig Devine in nineteen forty-six."

There was a spatter of applause and I waved at the stands. Five minutes later Brick, Hoop and I leaned on the rail and watched Johnny Wall in the Franzetta-Gorf take two slow laps, and catch the flag.

Concrete, bricks and macadam are a hell of a lot different from the dirt. In the dirt you have to skid it into the turns and whip your deck. If you just don't give a damn, you can do the same thing on a hard track, but it rips your rubber to bits and in a long race what you may gain is wiped out by the times you got to pit yourself to switch rubber, to say noth-

ing of the possibilities of a bad blow and upsy-daisy over the wall.

When he hit the first turn I felt Brick stiffen, because there wasn't any decreasing tempo of that big power plant. To skid on the hard tracks, you have to watch it, because if your deck swings a shade too far, you lose more than you gain; a shade further than that, and you spin like a ballerina on the snow.

Rubber screamed and he took the turn high, nothing but the beautiful banking keeping him on. He kept it high, then slammed down in toward the rail, going inside the rough spot, gunning it like a madman, hitting the south corner, screaming the rubber again, digging in and driving hard for the finish.

I had held the watch on him and I didn't believe it. I thought the watch was wrong until the P.A. boy, with an edge in his voice said, "John Wall, driving the Franzetta-Gorf, qualifies in one twenty-two point four for a new one-lap record!"

He got more than a spattering of applause. Brick said, "I told you! The guy's nuts! What the hell is he trying to do?"

"Could he need the dough?" Hoop said. "The new record-holder gets himself two hundred fifty bucks. It cost him maybe a hundred fifty in rubber to do it, so he's a hundred ahead."

"There's an easier way to make money," Brick said.

The other irons were around, so I took myself a little walk to say hello to old friends and look over the competish. The ones to worry about, I found, were Gidge Putner, driving one of the old Walker Supers; Sam Waybo in a Dillon-French that was five years old, but still a warm iron; Skid Wilkinson in one of his usual bailing-wire jobs out of which I was sure he could coax some miles; and Robby Harkness in an experimental Sternevaunt.

After shooting the breeze and kidding around, and looking over some unknown

kids in make-shift irons, I came back and told Hoop that our biggest trouble would be Johnny Wall, and that Harkness might turn out to be bad if the Sternevaunt held together.

If the three of us happened to go sour in the power, or if one of the wild kids creamed us out, the big event would go to Waybo, Wilkinson, or Putner.

Hoop agreed.



Hell's Curves

2

BY THE end of the long afternoon there were sixteen cars qualified for the big event, and for the minor races leading up to it. The way they work it at Darido, they race the big jobs on three afternoons. Twenty-five laps, fifty miles, the first day. Fifty laps, one hundred miles, the second day. One hundred laps, two hundred miles, the third day.

Because we wanted to make a showing, we were entered for all three. Some of them were saving their stuff for the big prize. I was checking the board when I saw that Johnny was entered for all three. I hadn't figured it that way.

Since Brick, in a pinch, probably has the edge on me, and since his national rating is three points higher than mine, he was to drive in the big job. I drew the middle-sized one, and he wanted the short one to get the feel of the competition.

Nine cars were set for the first one. It was slated for two o'clock. I was to handle the board for Brick. Due to the qualifying speeds, when they lined up, three sets of three, Brick Arlen, Johnny Wall and Sam Waybo were the three last cars.

The pacemaker car led the parade, pushing it up over fifty as they finished a complete circuit. They hit the starting line perfectly, got the go-ahead flag, and all

nine cars roared and jumped ahead as the pacemaker darted off the track like a scared rabbit.

They hit the turn in a pack, went around almost in formation, and then began to string out and jockey for position as they hit the backstretch. The roar of the motors was like a squadron of fighters going over.

It looked to me as though Johnny Wall was bottled and then I saw him jump through a hole. By then Brick had gone high around the outside and they came into the turn neck and neck. An orange crate in the lead kicked out some big puffs of blue smoke and lost speed fast. The kid driving it knew he had to get out of the way, and he cut down too sharply toward the inside rail. Another kid behind him swerved badly, went into a dry skid and, pretty as a picture, Brick went high and Johnny went low as they tooled around him.

They came down past the stands neck and neck, with Brick on the outside. He hung there and it kept Johnny from climbing a little to take the turn the way he wanted to. Brick held his advantage, went high, and then cut back to knife in ahead of Wall with more than the legal clearance.

They were fighting as though it was the last lap. Brick had talked as though Johnny was a crazy kid. I knew he was a little crazy, but after you hit a few score state fair dirt ovals, you're no longer a kid.

I knew that Johnny was smart, and I suspected that as far as speed was concerned, the two irons were as close as they could be. I gave the Franzetta-Gorf a little edge on stability, and gave us a little edge in getaway.

Twenty-five tough, fighting laps. Johnny tucked his iron right in behind Brick and let Brick suck him along in the slipstream, riding close and careful.

At the end of eight laps, Brick began to edge up on the tail of the parade. There

were only seven cars left in the race. It worried me to see the way the kid acted just on the verge of getting lapped. He was in a pale blue job, a home-grown outfit, and when Brick began to move up on his deck, the kid edged out away from the rail. Not much, just a little. It happened just before they hit the north end. Brick over-compensated for the little swerve the light blue job made, and as a consequence he went too high on the curve. He had to cut the speed to make sure he would cling.

Johnny had figured it nicely. He was riding high on the curve and he merely cut it in to the left and zoomed right between the pale blue job and Brick. It was pretty driving, but not the kind that lets you grow old gracefully. You could hear the yell of the crowd over the drone of the motors.

By the time Brick got under control, Johnny had three hundred feet on him and was still moving away. He was all alone on the south end, so he pulled that skid trick of his which gave him a little more distance.

While Brick was trying to catch him, Gidge Putner made his bid in the old Walker Super. Gidge is one of the old men of the game. Hell, he drove a wagon in the big day when they still had two men in them.

And he kept Brick busy. They fought on turn and backstretch for fifteen laps before Brick made it so stiff for Gidge that he dropped back and held his place. By then Johnny was a full half lap in the lead.

With Gidge off his tail, Brick started to close the distance. But there was only three laps to do it in. It couldn't be done.

Johnny breezed home without trouble, with Brick streaming in five hundred feet behind him. Putner was fourth.

Brick tore off his helmet and his face was white with anger. "You saw what that Wall character did, didn't you, Joe?"

I grinned. "He passed you."

"Not that, damn it! I could have been in trouble. How the hell did he know? I might have needed the room to cut back from that fence."

"Take it easy, Brick," I said. "I've seen you do the same thing."

"He didn't give that number twenty-three official clearance."

"Then it's up to that guy to shout about it, not you, Brick."

"Are you pulling for Wall, Joe?"

There was a sneer behind his words. "I'm pulling for the Jeyett Special, son," I said.

"Tomorrow we'll see how good you do with him."

"I'll do okay, Brick. Don't worry about me. Don't worry about me at all."

He spat into the dust and turned away. "Wall seems to rile him," Hoop said quietly.

"Guys who get riled don't live long," I said. And then I was sorry I said it. When you follow the iron from track to track you never know how long you're going to be around. So you don't talk that way. Any more than you try to buy insurance. If Brick should get it, I'd wonder if I'd hexed him by saying that.

IT WAS a hot evening and the town was full of little kids lapping ice cream cones, girls in light dresses, the sound of laughter and loud music. A carnival atmosphere. I didn't get hungry until after dark, and then I took a cab into town. Brick was out in the sedan and Hoop and Gil were overhauling our spare power plant just in case it would have to be set in before the big race.

There was a place where the pale green neon yelled about steaks and air conditioning and all legal beverages. I decided I'd blow myself to a good meal and then go back to the hotel near the track and fold up.

The interior was dim and paneled and

nice. As I went by a booth a girl's voice said, "Joe! Hello!"

I turned. It was Wall and his sister. Johnny said, "Eating alone? Move in here with us. We're celebrating."

Johnny looked gay enough, but the sister didn't look too happy.

I sat beside her. Johnny grinned across at me and said, "I've been trying to convince Janey that I don't take chances."

"After you convince her, you might try Brick Arlen. He needs convincing."

Johnny raised his eyebrows. "Arlen? Didn't he like the way I slipped by him today? Hell, there was a lot of room. Two or three inches on either side."

Janey looked as if she were about to cry. "Arlen didn't like it," I said. "He's sore and he's a redhead and he's driving the Special on the big day. I'm wheeling it tomorrow."

"I'd rather race against Arlen," he said. "I like a man who gets sore. Then he makes mistakes. You're as cold as a snowman out there, Joe."

"Maybe I look that way. In the middle I'm made of mush."

"Johnny," Jane said, "I don't want Arlen mad at you on the last day. Why don't you find him and apologize?"

Johnny got sore. "Apologize! For what? For winning a pipsqueak race? Arlen's got pebbles in his head."

"He's a rough little man," I said. "Garry Larue tried to run him off the track in a dirt job in Atlantic City three years ago. Neither one of them would give up. Brick held it steady as she went, and when he saw the wheels about to lock, he went downstairs. Brick walked away from it. Garry won't ever do any more walking."

Jane gasped. She put the back of her hand to her mouth. I was sorry I said it. I got a good look at her out of her work clothes. She was something very special, I decided. Very special indeed.

When Johnny left the table to get some

change, she put her hand on my arm and said, "Please, Joe. He'd promised not to race any more if he wins the main event the day after tomorrow. See if you can keep Brick from getting too angry. I—I don't want anything to happen. You see, Joe, he's all I've got, now."

I looked into her eyes and we sat there like a couple of fools, feeling something happen to the two of us, and then I felt myself blushing and I looked away. When I looked back she was as red as I thought I was. "I'll see what I can do," I said.

"Thanks, Joe," she whispered.

There were eleven cars in the hundred miler. We lined up, four, four and three. I was in the back row, in the middle, with Johnny on my right. I grinned at him, and saw his lips move, but I couldn't hear what he said over the roar of the motors.

The start was ragged, and they flagged it down and we went around again. This time it was okay.

As in the beginning of every race, I glanced around at the other cars, wondered who would be dead when it was over.

Some neck-and-neck kids bottled us until the second turn, and then the kid on the outside didn't seem to turn at all. He went through the fence, tossing timbers high in the air. I gulped, but before I could move outside to ease by where he had been, Johnny had moved up with me, driving straight ahead for the hole.

The second time around I caught a fleeting glimpse of the gap in the fence, oily smoke rising in a plume beyond it.

I fell in behind Johnny and rode his tail. It seemed that I'd better let him make the race. He was my reference point, and it was no trick keeping right on his tail.

But I went to sleep doing it. I was out too far when we were lapping the end of the string, and Harkness boiled by me on the inside, slamming it into a tight turn that swung his deck dangerously near me, his experimental job whining like the

Cleveland Air Races. It had a lot of stuff.

He screamed out in front of Johnny, too. And Johnny tried to sneak high and cut in on the next curve, but he couldn't get enough clearance. The Sternevaunt moved out and Johnny tucked his nose behind it, with me behind him, and in that way, in that order, by the time we had finished the twentieth, we were a lap and a half on the nearest competition. It was fast company to be in, even as third man. I knew that Bobby Harkness was riding with a funny feeling in the back of his neck, two cars so close behind him that any pileup would ride him down.

It was a lucky thing that Johnny made his bid to pass Harkness exactly when he did. And lucky that I swung out too, to follow Johnny.

Because something blew up and shredded the bonnet of the Sternevaunt, and the oil puffed out in a black spray and he dropped behind so fast it was as though a big hand had grabbed him and yanked him backwards.

When we hit the same spot the next time around, I saw the oil slick on the black macadam and decided it would be a good thing to keep away from. Johnny started acting funny. His car seemed uncertain, and suddenly I realized that he was slower.

At just about that time, he hit the oil slick. His deck swung out, and I screamed around him on the outside and his nose swung around, missing me by a hair and I was all alone and in the lead. I looked back and saw him stalled, high on the curve, almost against the outside rail. I had it in the bag, and there was no point in taking chance. Now I wish I had. Because when I came around the second time I looked for Johnny but he wasn't there. The next time I looked in the pit, but he wasn't there. I risked a glance back and saw him, a half lap behind, and coming on faster than I had believed possible.

Brick held up the chalk board that said

45. Only five more to go. I began to pour it on, and then eased off as I detected a faint wobble. A front end wobble. It was no time to hit the pit. I pushed hard, and the punishing vibration made my arms numb, but I was able to hold it. On the 47th and 48th lap, I could see Johnny out of the corner of my left eye as I made the turns. Then I couldn't see him any more.

But I could feel him. I could feel him riding up on me.

On the 49th lap the green-black snout of the Franzetta-Gorf crept up to where I could have reached out and patted it.

Last lap. On the straightaway the menacing snout dropped back, but on the north turn there was a thin scream in my ears and suddenly he was riding even with me—on the inside!

On the south turn I tried to push it to where I could slide back down at him, slide by him, but once again the scream and he was a half length ahead. On the way down to the finish line, I cut that half length to a quarter length. And that was all.

I pulled into the pit after a slow circuit. The Special popped and died. Brick looked at me with utter disgust. I ignored him and took a look at the left front. As I had suspected, two of the bolts had pulled just enough to give the front left a tiny shimmy. Not enough to use as an excuse.

Hoop clucked sadly as he saw it. I drank all I could hold of cold water, then ambled down to congratulate Johnny. He didn't look so good. A first-aid citizen was dabbing his face with goo.

"What happened?" I asked.

"When Harkness conked out," he said, "I got a batch of oil in the face. Hot oil. It smeared the goggles. That's why I hit the oil patch—couldn't see it. I stalled by the rail, and it gave me a chance to rub the oil off the goggles. The plant was hot enough to catch when I jumped out and gave it a little shove down that slope. I was afraid you were going to lap me, Joe."

The hot oil had pitted his face.

Jane pulled me over to one side. "Did you talk to Brick?" she asked.

"I tried to, Janey. He doesn't listen so good."

WE TALKED a little while and made a date. After dinner I took the sedan, picked her up and went to call on the kid who had gone through the fence. But when we got to the hospital we found that they had doped him because the traction splints were bothering him. We walked out to the car and I lit her cigarette as we sat in the darkness.

"What's the point in it, Joe?" she asked, her voice calm.

"In what?"

"In these nice kids getting killed and banged up. Just to see which car can go the fastest? Just to see who can drive better?"

"There's—well, there's more to it than that. I can't explain it. I don't know the words. You've just got to believe me. There is more to it. Something that gets in your blood."

She sniffed audibly. "Take me home, Joe."

"Sure."

They were in a two-bedroom tourist cabin a half mile from the track. When we got there Johnny was sitting on the floor just inside the door, his face white, holding onto his wrist. His wrist had a funny bend in it.

"Johnny!" she gasped, and dropped on her knees beside him. "What happened?"

His lips were pale. He tried to smile up at me. "Your friend, Arlen," he said. "He came around and shot off his mouth. I popped him and he broke my wrist. Better get hold of a doctor."

Hoop, Gil and Brick were playing three-handed showdown for quarters when I flung the door open and stomped in.

"What the hell kind of a trick did you

pull?" I asked Brick, walking over to him.

"Relax, Joe. Relax! The punk got wise and popped me. See the lump here on my chin? We wrassled around a little and I left."

"You broke his wrist!"

"Tch, tch, tch. Whadda ya know!" he said.

Hoop laid down his hand and pushed his chair back. "You didn't tell me that, Arlen," he said softly.

Brick tilted his chair back. "Do you guys need pictures? You know I talked to Big Arch Jeyett. He wanted to know what the hell has happened to us. I gave him the pitch and told him how this Wall guy cut me out in the first race. He sort of hinted around that maybe I ought to convince him he didn't have me buffaloed, and then he talked about how much all this meant to the firm. And he said that we'll be looking for jobs if I don't come through tomorrow in first place. He said it would be a shame if Wall couldn't drive tomorrow, and when I talked to him to be sure that I didn't mess him up bad. Hell, I can take a hint."

Bud Hoop had a look on his weather-beaten face as though he tasted something bad. I said to him, "Is Arch that sort of a guy?"

"Could be," Hoop said.

I leaned over and slapped Brick across the mouth, hard enough to split his lip and tip him over backward in the chair.

He came up, fast, ugly and silent. He was tougher and smarter than I, but not half as mad. He hit me high in the temple with a left and crossed a right to my throat. I gagged and rushed him until I had him over in a corner by the bureau. His face was something hanging in a mist. My arms slowly turned to lead and there was a thick, wet, hammering noise, jolts that ran up my arms.

Then my fist cracked into the bare wall, and I was sobbing for breath. Hoop

pulled me back and I looked around for Brick. He was on the floor, his cheek against the wall, his eyes closed.

"When he comes to," I said, "Tell him to call his good pal, Jeyett, and tell him that Joe Gartner resigned."

I threw the stuff into my suitcase and walked out into the night.

By the time I got to the tourist cabin, the doctor had gone. Some color was back in Johnny's face. He looked at me dully. "This tears it, Joe," he said. "We're all through."

I glanced at Jane. "What are you going to do now, Johnny?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sell the big wagon, get a stake together and try again. I'll have to start at the bottom. Midgets or dirt. Something like that."

Jane looked as though he had slapped her. "You promised!" she said.

Before he could make angry answer, I stepped in and said, "And what happens if I drive the iron and bring her in for you? Will you go back to that promise?"

Finally I explained to them. Johnny agreed not to race again, and then Jane was in my arms, laughing and crying. She looked up at me and said, "Be careful, Joe. Please be careful!"

The officials put up an argument. The Franzetta-Gorf had to be wheeled by John Wall. Then I told them what had happened. They saw the light. I glanced up mechanic's row and saw Brick standing in the pit, glaring at me. I waved at him.

A pair of trim legs concealed by blue jeans stuck out from under the Franzetta-Gorf. I got down and crawled under. She was checking a lock-nut on the differential. I took the wrench out of her hands, pulled her toward me and kissed her.

She struggled for one-tenth of the first second. Then she got into the spirit of it. She whispered, "If I could break your arm to keep you from driving, Joe, I'd do it."

"We'll have a talk about that after-

wards, Janey. It's the only trade I know." We crawled out from under. I looked at the Franzetta-Gorf and didn't let her see how much I hated the ugly, shining snout of it. I had one of those hunches. Hunches are bad. I had a hunch with fire in it. Fire and blood and the bitter jagged ends of broken bones. It put a chill in the sunshine.

I knew what I had to do. I strolled down to the big red Jeyett Special, spat into the dust and said, "Arlen, I've got some advice for you. Just stay the hell out of my way."

I was banking on that red hair. I walked back. When I turned around, both Hoop and Gil had hold of his arms. He was bucking and plunging, trying to get loose to come after me.



Thunder Bargain

3

THERE were fourteen cars in the big deal. Five, five and four. I was on the outside in the row of four. Brick was on my left. With the helmet and goggles covering his face, I could still tell what he was thinking. He glanced at me and sneered.

The stands were packed. A hundred thousand people anxious to see somebody kill themselves. Ice cream, soft drinks, peanuts, spun-sugar and death.

The two slow circuits gave me the feel of the wagon. It was sweet iron. It had that tingling in it that you associate with a thoroughbred. The wheel had a light touch, lighter than I cared for.

Brick edged over and put his hubs against mine. I felt the shock. It was a damn-fool thing for him to do, even at forty. I leaned against him, knew he would bounce back, so I watched his hands on the wheel. I moved away just as he did.

When he swerved back I met him, saw his startled jump. And there were two passengers in the Franzetta-Gorf. Me and my hunch. Me and fear. Me and the old guy with the grass-cutter.

I have always been a careful guy, avoiding personal feuds on the track, taking chances only when I could figure the odds.

But this was going to be different. A lot different. I knew that Brick was angry enough to kill. If he was good, he'd kill me. If he was clumsy, he'd kill both of us. If I was lucky, he'd kill himself.

When we got the flag, the surge of motors was like a rising roar of rage, and the fourteen cars jumped ahead. Five was too many to go into the first turn abreast; even four was too tight.

As I was on the right, I took the first curve as high as I could, hoping to see a slot ahead as I came out of it, a slot into which I could cut, and flatten out against the rail for a straight drive that would get me out of the ruck.

Everything in the world was blurred but the steady shapes of the cars around me. It is a funny feeling. As though all the cars stood still and the track was unreeled under them. The constant roar and scream and whine dies away, somehow; you forget the noise and it is like a nightmare where you are wheeling the iron in dead silence, with the wind plucking at your face. Not much wind. The design of the cowl whips a lot of it over your head.

Right out ahead of you is your front rubber, the tread a gray-black blur, and if the rubber is running true, the edges are as sharp as though cut with a knife. A little wobble and the rubber blurs along the edges and then it is time to cross your fingers.

The vibration turns you into lead and leather, and numbs you, and when it is over, a physical beating would have been easier. One hundred laps of roaring hell.

I rode the first turn high, and no slot

opened up, and Brick's nose crept up my deck. Too close. Much too close. I had a few inches left, and I took them, but still he angled in at me. I wondered if I had made him too mad—if he would try to ride me off the track on the first curve.

Still he came in and I knew that soon his front right wheel would be inside my left wheels, and nothing could save us from locking.

Nothing behind me. I cut power suddenly, got a flat hit on my left front from his right rear; there was a thud, and a white splinter flashed up from the fence and he was by me. I cut back into safety, watched the rubber for side blur, found none, and shaking with relief and anger, I gave it all it would take.

By then he had a hundred feet on me, and he was bulling his way through the kids. They moved for him, but Putner, Waybo and Wilkinson were in the pack. They wouldn't budge.

I took the hole he made and clung to it.

Skid Wilkinson and Sam Waybe bottled him in what I guessed was the third lap. Wilkinson was low and by the inside rail. Waybo was high, and a half length back. Brick had his nose right in the pocket. I saw what was happening, and went very high to get above Waybo.

As we came out of the south turn I gave it everything and jumped ahead, forging by Waybo. My hope was to get far enough ahead in the stretch so that I could angle down and reduce speed to something sane for the north curve. Waybo, an old hand, gave his iron more stuff, with the idea of caution making me drop back. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Brick come around his tail to creep up on me, no longer bottled, and it was no time for Joe Gartner to be cautious.

I went into the north end of the track so fast that I leaned hard to the left, hoping that the extra pound or two would keep the inside wheels from lifting. Even so, the deck swung, the rubber screamed,

and I thought I saw the left front lift an inch or so clear.

I shot out of the turn, using the incline down toward the inside rail, and boiled by one of the kids who had managed to stay out in front in his home-made job up until that point. But a dull, dark red nose appeared on my right, and I knew that as I had passed the kid on the inside Brick had gone by him on the outside.

It wasn't racing any more. It had gone beyond that—it was controlled suicide. The track wasn't built for the speeds we were hitting. The cars were, but the track wasn't and neither were Brick and I.

He went high and cut down toward me, and I gunned it as I started to come out of the turn. He slid back, still cutting in, and I felt a jolt, a tiny squeal. It was a sound I have heard only three or four times. His front left, at high speed, snubbing against my right rear. It is a sound you don't want to hear often. The guy was crazy. Crazy with rage. And I had told him to stay out of my way.

There were two distinct fears. One was the fear of not being able to squeak around the ends of the track at the speed I was making. The second was the fear of what the madman behind me, the red-head with his pinched, bitter face, his thin, sneering lips, might do.

Crazy laps. Cars pushed beyond the outermost limits of their iron endurance. The haze came, the haze of the long grind, and I squinted at the pit. The next time around they told me it was lap fifty.

MY TROUBLE was that I wasn't as crazy as Brick was. Eight years of competition gave me respect for the black track, the high, dizzy curves.

His nose came up on my right and I rode the curve high, too high for him to cut down in front of me. The nose dropped back, and just as I was breathing again, he crept up on me on the left, and once again he was edging me toward the out-

side, as he had back on the first turn.

But this time I wouldn't drop back. This time he wouldn't bluff me. I thought of the dark eyes of Jane Wall and the funny angle that I had seen on Johnny's wrist. Not this time, Brick.

So I held it as steady as a rock and watched his front right. He edged up and moved in so that for seconds on end the three tires were traveling in the same track. My two left tires, and his front right in between them. Death was riding with us then.

Death was sitting on the hood of the green-black job, chattering at us and rubbing dry hands together in anticipation.

He swung away and I thought I had won, but when he swung back he came so far in that his front right was inside my two left tires. Maybe I screamed. Maybe I did nothing. I don't know. We wheeled high around the curve in that position. I pulled my left leg back as we hit the straight stretch and shoved my knee up against the bottom edge of the steering wheel, to hold it rigid.

Then, spreading my lips in a horrible grin, I lifted both arms, shook hands with myself, glancing back at Brick.

I dropped my hands back onto the wheel. There was a thud, a wrenching jolt, and the whole skyline of Darido was whirling around me to the tune of screaming, burning rubber. Cars loomed up from nowhere and, as the wheel was useless, I folded my arms around my head and slouched in the seat, waiting for death.

There was the grinding crash of tortured metal, a hot flare of flame that scorched my face, and my car jolted to a stop, stern first, against the outside fence just beyond the turn, and then began to roll straight across the track toward the inside fence. Care were whining down at me. I wrenched the wheel hard to the right, and the motor gasped, popped, coughed, jerked my head back as it caught, as an orange car went by me with a full

inch to spare. I lined it along the fence, trying to think.

Was this death?

Then I saw the paint blisters along the side of the cowl. Those weren't imaginary. I saw the scorch mark on my left glove. That wasn't imaginary. I was driving like a man in a dream. I waited for the red nose of the Jeyett Special to creep up.

But it didn't. When I flashed by the pit I gave the signal to tell me where I stood. The board went up and it said "2." There were cars ahead. I had no way of knowing who was leading. I passed them all. I bit down on the nausea and passed them all. And when I leveled out, after passing them, a checkered flag came down and I heard the tempo of the other motors change and a voice inside me said, "Look, Gartner, when they flag you with a checkered flag, it means you've won. Now stop at the pit after you go around again, and they'll tell you if you're dead. If they don't look at you, you're dead, son."

At first, with the noise of the crowd and all, and with the presentation and confusion, they didn't know that I didn't know what had happened.

I understood a little bit when I saw the angry scar, the torn mouth of metal just above my right rear.

Johnny told me, with Jane looking on, grave and quiet.

"We could see that he was trying to ride you out. He didn't care if he killed himself, too. Jane couldn't watch any more. Then I saw your arms lift and saw you turn. For my money, that's what scared him off. Gidge Putner was right behind you.

"I guess Brick, suddenly scared, tried to slew out and drift back. But it was too late. Your wheels locked and his front right bounced up over your left rear. It tipped him and he took one roll before Putner hit him. You disappeared in the flame burst when the tanks on both the Special and the Walker Super went up,

and then you came out of it in a spin that took you up to the fence.

Gidge—he came out of it. Running But he was a ball of fire. They hooked the two cars and dragged them through the inside fence.

"Brick never knew what hit him."

Later, we ate solemnly, without much joy. The news cameramen were around to take flash shots of the three of us. Over coffee, the spell seemed to lift a little, and we began to look at each other with that hey-ma-we-won look.

Johnny rubbed his thumb and first two fingers together and said, "We're rich!"

"And just because of that crate of yours," I said. "To tell you the truth, kids, I was afraid of that iron. It had a mean look. It hasn't got that look any more. Now it looks as friendly as a pup."

"It's got enough stuff for another couple of years," Johnny said.

I looked quickly at Jane, expecting the flare-up. But she had a remote look in her dark eyes and a little smile playing around the corners of her mouth. Softly she said, "We could take it down to Houston for the Christmas races and—"

Johnny and I exchanged quick and knowing looks. Johnny started to laugh.

"Remember, Janey?" he said. "Those things are dangerous. What's the point in wheeling around and around and around?"

"There's something more to it than that," she said, confused.

"It's too dangerous for us," I said, severely.

"It is not!" she snapped. "My goodness! Anything is dangerous. Why, even if I were married to somebody who washed high windows and—"

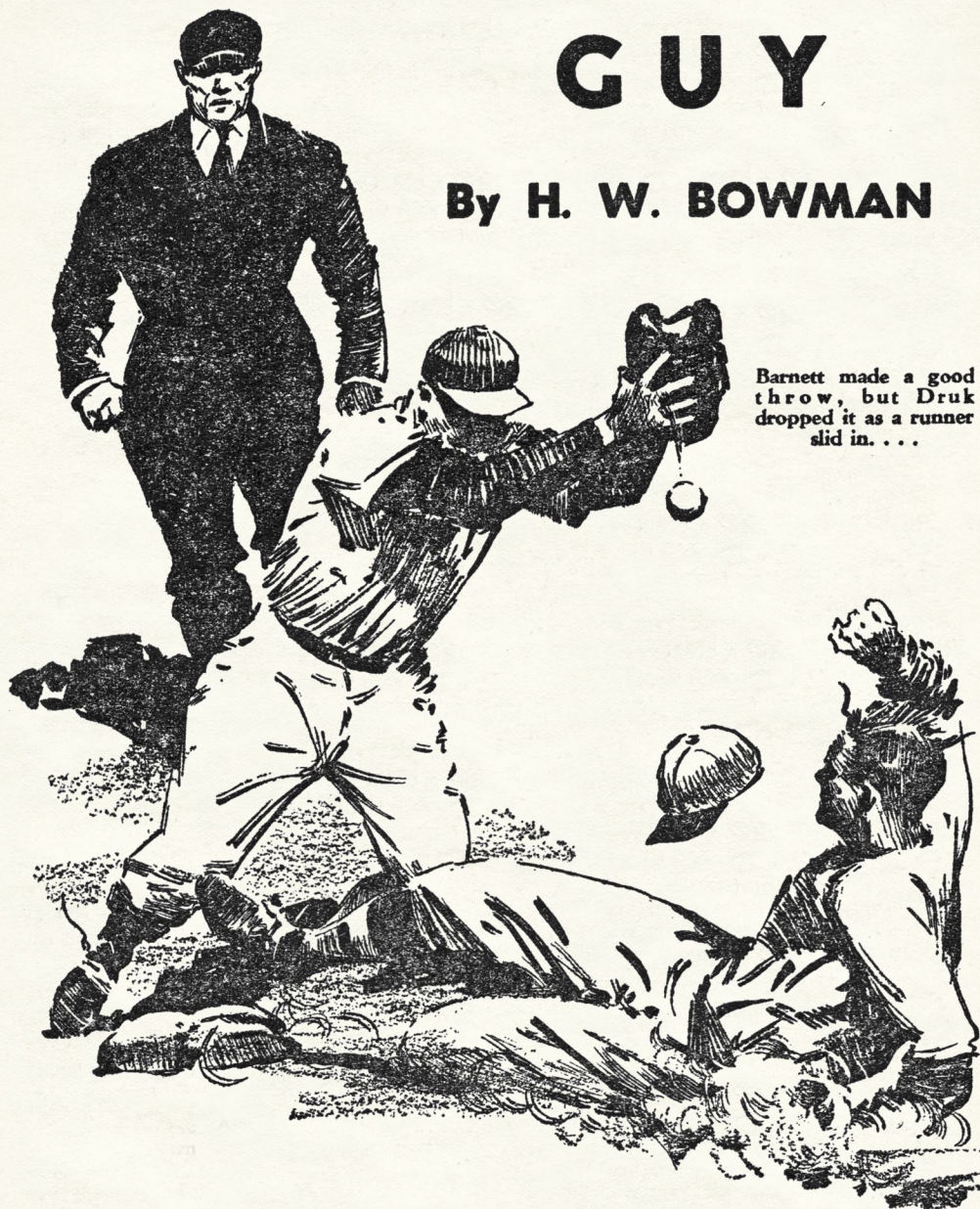
Johnny laughed delightedly and said, "Joe, that's a proposal if I ever heard one. With a witness, too!"

"No gentlemen would say no," I said.

She looked down at the tablecloth, but under the table my hand found hers.

HIGH SPIKE GUY

By H. W. BOWMAN



Barnett made a good throw, but Druk dropped it as a runner slid in. . . .

"You'll catch hell on this club, kid — hell an' high spikes — till you learn to throw your own!"

I'VE seen a lot of new hopefuls walk into the Bisons' locker room for the first time. Some of them shuffled in self-consciously, with awe bugging their eyes like kids on their first visit to the circus. Others were scared and acted

cocky to try to hide their nervousness. But regardless of their approach, almost to a man they arrived willing to do anything to fit in as members of the Herd.

The one exception was Hunter Barnett.

All I knew about Barnett before he arrived was what I could dig out of the records. It wasn't much. He'd batted about .280 and fielded .986 or better for the four years he'd caught for Centerville in the Eastern Shore League. Centerville's a good Class D ball club, but we're triple-A. Why Bing Hanley, our scout, singled out Barnett when he could have had his pick of half a dozen Class B catchers was something I didn't figure out until later. But Hanley had been scouting for the Bisons for the twelve years I'd been manager, and he knew his business. Aside from a couple of switch-hitting outfielders who never did pole out better than .200 the short time they lasted with the Bisons, Hanley's finds had been better than average. He was a sucker for switch-hitters, but a look at the record of the Bisons' catchers shows that Hanley's got a sharp eye for backstops.

Well, the afternoon I first saw this new guy, I decided Hanley had gone completely nuts. Judging by the sour looks passed around the locker room, the rest of our gang thought the same thing.

He was small, not more than five-foot six at most, and discounting the padding in the shoulders of his wrinkled, cheaply-cut suit, he'd be lucky to scale more than one-fifty. There was no mistaking, though, who he was. Even without the battered black catcher's mitt he dangled from one hand, the initials M.B. on his shabby Gladstone bag proved he was our new catcher.

When he came in the door he had a friendly, timid sort of grin on his face, like the look on the face of a stray pup at a dog pound hoping to win himself a new home. He tossed the bag on the floor inside and waited for someone to speak.

For a minute or so no one said a word; they just looked at this sawed-off excuse for a ball player and jumped to the same conclusion, namely that he didn't look like the guy to take the place of Flip Grumbach or Digger Hatton, our two good catchers.

I sat with one sweat sock half pulled on, groaned inwardly, and cursed the luck that had put Hatton out of business with a split thumb and Grumbach on the hospital list with a broken ankle. Here we were in second spot, two games behind the Jays and slipping fast. I got ready to tell the kid not to bother to unpack and waste our time. I'd already decided I'd have to fill in behind the plate until Hanley could send us a man, not a boy, to take over while Grumbach and Hatton were being patched up.

Wally Druk, our second baseman, spoke up before I had a chance. I'll grant you Wally shouldn't have said what he did, but Wally was disappointed like the rest of us, and just a bit more outspoken.

"Peddle your smokes somewhere else, Johnny. This is a locker room, not a hotel lobby," Druk said in an insulting tone.

I found out later that Barnett was twenty-seven, but he had the appearance of a fifteen-year-old-boy. But behind the boyishness you could see that his mouth was kind of tight-drawn and his eyes were steady and cold, like a man who'd been around and doesn't go for wisecracks at his expense.

The friendly look was gone. You could sense that he'd been suspicious from the start and now that his suspicions had been confirmed he became defensive. "I can smell it," he said in a tense voice. "Tell your manager his new catcher, Hunt Barnett, is here." It was obvious that he was touchy about his size and Druk's crack hadn't set well.

Druk should've let it drop, but he was in a sour mood because of his batting aver-

age slumping twenty points in two weeks. "So you're Hunt Barnett." Druk straightened to his full six-foot two and stared down sneeringly at Barnett. "Shoulda named you Runt."

What happened next was a surprise, especially to Druk. This Barnett kicked out with his right foot and caught Druk on one shin. Druk folded over automatically to grab his ankle and the kid let him have it with a short left jab to the chin. He threw another right and left that jerked Druk upright, then jabbed again with a left. Druk's arms waved like wings as he tripped backwards over a bench and banged his head into one of the locker handles as he fell.

He lay there cold as a cucumber with Barnett standing over him with his fists still doubled up.

This time I didn't wait for anyone to beat me to it. I jumped up, grabbed Barnett's arm and led him back toward the other corner of the room. That no one took a pass at the guy as I led him down between the row of lockers was typical of what had happened to the Bisons since we'd dropped out of first spot. The Bisons were no longer a team, they were a collection of individual players. A month before, if some outsider had taken a poke at one of them they'd have ganged up on the guy. Instead, they just sat and glared at the kid as he and I threaded our way through the mess of loose uniform gear that cluttered the aisle.

"Druk would kill you when he comes to, if I'd let him, smart guy. And it's only because the Bisons need a catcher that I don't let him work you over. If you hadn't taken him off guard, you'd never have laid a finger on him, runt."

Barnett twisted slightly and I thought he was going to make a try at slugging me. No question about it, he was a hot-headed article, and the thing that seemed to stir him up quickest was any mention of his size.

"And don't think you'll take a pass at me, busher, because I'll slap a fine on you so big you won't draw salary as long as you're with the Bisons, which probably won't be very long." I didn't figure the guy would last, but he'd showed more spirit than I could ever hope to whip up again, and in spite of his size I'd decided to give him a try.

I SAT in the dugout stewing over how I would shuffle up our batting order to fit in some guy I didn't know a thing about. That .280 wasn't too impressive, but if he could tag 'em when the pressure was on, it would be better than a couple of my .300 batters who folded up in the clutches. At the same time I was guessing what to do about the batting list, I was watching Barnett during our ten-minute fielding session. The kid had style, and a peg to second that was all but tearing the glove off Druk's hand. Druk kept scowling every time the kid sizzled one down as though he was trying to toss out a runner like George Case. A nod from me would have been all Druk needed to come in to the plate and ram a fist down the kid's throat.

A couple of minutes before game time I called Barnett over and started to run over the entire Shamrock line-up. About halfway through the list I noticed he wasn't listening; instead, he was looking out at the ground crew floating the infield and touching up the lines.

"Pay attention, dream boy," I snapped at him. "It might help you to know some of the things I'm telling you. Now, Len Kramer, the Shamrock's first sacker is a sucker for—"

"Sure, Temple, I know Kramer's a sucker for a high inside ball, he eats up slow curves, and he'll murder anything down around the belt line."

"How'd you know?" I asked. It burned me because actually everything he'd said was exactly what I'd planned to tell him.

"Mister Temple," he said slowly, "maybe I'm new up here in the three-A's, but I'm not stupid. We played mostly night ball in the Eastern Shore League. Day-times I used to go see what you three-A players had that we didn't have in Class D. I've watched the Shamrocks plenty. Also the Bisons. Maybe sometime I might even give you a tip or two about the Bisons. You haven't slipped without good reason."

At first I thought the guy was kidding; then when I realized he was serious, I blew my top.

"Squirt," I said, "twenty years I been with the Bisons as a player and a manager. No swell-headed, runt-sized rookie can give me any pointers. Just remember this, son. Some of our boys, including myself, were playing baseball before you were born."

"Maybe that's part of the Bisons' trouble. Some of you Bisons are so old you're almost extinct."

I had trouble not taking a swing at him. "Take a tip, kid," I said in a controlled voice. I'd promised myself not to let him get my goat. "You're new here. You got off to a bad start in the clubhouse, but even Druk may forgive you if you don't step out of line again. Frankly, you don't look like a catcher to me. I like a plenty big man behind the plate, a guy with reach and enough beef to hold pitchers like Ott Schindler."

You know what? This Barnett looked at me for a minute, spit out of one corner of his mouth, and said. "Nuts."

I debated whether or not to slap him down right there, and then I decided he could take it the hard way. I'd let the fans boo him till the guy begged to be sent off the field. I also decided to let Ott Schindler work the game, even though I'd planned to save him for the Jays the next day and hadn't given Ott a chance to warm up. I secretly hoped Schindler, who heaves the fastest ball in the league, would

knock the little jerk right through the ump's legs.

"Don't let 'em step on you, Runt," Wally Druk called as he walked out to second base.

Barnett pretended not to hear Druk, and kept on fumbling with the snaps on his chest protector.

I'd been out at the plate warming up Ott Schindler while Barnett crawled into his rigging.

"Okay, Temple. I'll take over." He said it as though I was the bat boy. I can't remember ever having rooted against one of my own players, but as I walked back to the dugout, I hoped everything in the book happened to Barnett. And it damned near did, but not the way I'd figured it.

THE Shamrocks' lead-off man took a walk on Schindler's first five throws. That wasn't surprising, as Schindler hadn't expected to work until the next day and was having trouble settling down.

I wouldn't have been surprised, though, to have heard Barnett yell at him to settle down—loud-mouthed character that I figured he was—but he just grinned encouragingly at Ott and didn't try to rush him.

A pop-up to right retired the second batter.

You didn't have to be a mind reader to guess that the Shamrocks were going to try to steal Barnett silly. They knew he was a Class D replacement and they were set to put the pressure on him right off.

Barnett knew it, too, and signaled for a throw-out so he could get a quick peg off to Druk at second. Schindler shook him off. He wanted to go right to work on the batter. They finally agreed on a signal, and Ott shot one up high and inside. Higgins cut at it and missed.

The man on first had started down with the pitch. I sat there gloating because Barnett had been pulled off balance to make the catch. Druk went through the motions of covering the bag, never ex-

pecting Barnett to be able to get the peg off in time to nip the Shamrock runner. The kid's throw was a honey. It rifled down to second right in the cut-off crease about a foot off the ground, and just a shade to the right of the sack. Druk was caught napping, and barely touched it with his glove as the runner tore into second with a chest slide that Druk had stepped away from. The runner wound up on third and I could tell from the way Druk jerked at the peak of his cap, spit two or three times, and kicked at the dust, that he was mad clean through.

"Want a bed out there?" Barnett yelled.

Naturally, Druk didn't answer, but some of the fans took up Barnett's lead and yelled at Druk to wake up.

Higgins missed a hook that cut the outside corner, waited out one that was high and outside and went down on the next one swinging. Dale flied out and the Bisons walked in for their turn at bat.

What happened next was my fault, but Druk didn't blame me. It was another black mark against Barnett in Druk's book.

Druk had been batting fifth, but with his twelve-point slump, Barnett's .280 topped him, so I'd switched Druk to sixth spot and shoved Barnett's name into fifth.

Gleason, our shortstop, bumped a Texas Leaguer over second. Timmons struck out on four throws. Willets poled a long fly to right that the Shamrock fielder lost in the sun. Gleason wound up on third and Willets on second before the Shamrock fielder got his throw in to home. I forgot all about Barnett, and moved up on the edge of the bench with that taut expectancy you feel when a big inning is coming on.

Degnan, our leftfielder, moved out to the plate. He was batting about .335 and I expected O'Neill, the Shamrock pitcher, to pass him, but the first pitch was right in the groove. Degnan took a terrific cut

at it and lined one down to third base. Our coacher on third had been expecting O'Neill to hand Degnan a walk, and fortunately hadn't given Gleason a big lead or the Shamrocks might have nabbed Gleason off the bag. Gleason held up at third, and Degnan was thrown out at first.

With a man on second and third and two out, no one on the Bisons' bench said a word, but I still hoped for a couple of runs. We were all pulling for Druk to break through his batting slump and hit us into a nice first inning lead. Barnett came charging over to me swinging a couple of bats and yammering something I couldn't hear above the roar of the crowd. By that time I was plenty fed up with the guy. I reached out, grabbed a fist full of his shirt front, jerked him back onto the bench and yelled, "Shut up."

He started to object, then a big grin spread over his face and he clammed up without saying another word. I watched Barnett squat down on the bats and then shifted my attention back to Druk out at the plate, and prayed he'd tag onto one.

O'Neill stepped back from the rubber, picked up the rosin bag and dried his fingers, ran the back of his left sleeve across his forehead, and faced the plate. He looked tense, and I knew he must be sweating out there on the mound because Druk was leading the league in home runs. Even though his eye had been off for a couple of weeks, you could tell O'Neill was afraid Druk was about due.

O'Neill took the sign from the Shamrock catcher, stretched, eyed Gleason on third, then threw to the plate. It whipped in high and close inside for a called strike. I crossed my fingers—if Druk could break his bad luck and we could take the Shamrocks, I figured we might hit our stride again.

O'Neill took his time and finally served up another. This one was outside for a ball. Something about the way Druk stood

poised up there in the box made me sure he was going to tie into the next one.

The crowd missed the tenseness I felt. To them it was just the last half of the first inning, and the fans don't often get steamed up until halfway through a game unless it's during the play-offs. But I held my breath when O'Neill took his stretch and threw.

This time Druk swung and the clear, sharp crack of the bat against the leather was sweet to hear. The Shamrock third baseman leaped high and made a stab at the horse-hide as it rifled off Druk's bat. It topped his glove by five feet lifting in a line for the the top of the left field bleachers.

It was one of the cleanest and longest homers Druk had slammed all season. Gleason was across home plate even before the fans started to scramble for the ball. Willetts jogged in and Druk trotted around the bags with a grin on his ugly pan for the first time in weeks.

YOU could feel the change in spirit on the bench as half the Bisons rushed out to clap Druk on the back and all but carried him on their shoulders back into the dugout. It reminded me of the way the Dodgers acted towards Lavegetto during the 1947 Series.

"Okay, Barnett. Get up there and get a hit," I called to the new catcher, and I was so happy I sounded civil for the first time since he'd reported.

He just shook his head in a kind of I-told-you-so manner, started to buckle himself into his catcher's gear, and nodded toward the plate.

I looked over and there was Moore, the Shamrocks' first baseman captain, talking to the umpire. Rind, the Leaf manager, was walking across to the plate with a copy of the line-up. Suddenly I felt sick. The umpire checked over the batting order I'd provided him before the start of the game and nodded in agree-

ment with Moore. He stepped back of the plate, turned and faced the crowd in the stands, and announced, "The batter is out."

Druk and the rest of the Bisons looked in amazement at the umpire. I would have crawled into a hole if there had been one handy. There was no question about it, the Bisons were retired without scoring because Barnett rather than Druk should have been the batter. Druk charged over to the umpire waving his arms, and using language strong enough to cause him to be thrown out of the game.

I rushed over and rescued Druk before he got himself fined, and led him back to the bench. "I forgot to tell you, Wally, I shifted you to sixth on the batting order. You batted fifth in your old spot. You know the rules, fellow. It's tough break." I felt small enough to curl up in my own hip pocket.

But Druk didn't blame me. He glared at Barnett. "Why didn't you tell me, shrink? You knew."

"I tried to tell both you and Temple, our smart manager, but Temple told me to shut up. And I don't see what your beef is. The rules say the proper batsman shall be declared out. That's me, not you. I get chalked up with a time at bat and an out, not you. If Temple had been on his toes he would have told you." Barnett walked off toward the catcher's plate with a grin like a kid who's caught his arithmetic teacher in a mistake in simple addition.

The rest of that game with the Shamrocks was one I'd rather forget. The final score was 8-0 with the Bisons on the zero end. Barnett's playing was flawless. He handled anything Ott threw; he chopped off two attempted steals and got two hits to give him two out of four—actually two out of three times at the plate although technically he was chalked up with a time at bat when Druk took his place. On the books, he didn't have a bad day, but somehow everyone blamed

him instead of either Druk or me for that mix-up in the first inning that cost us three runs and the spark we needed to break our losing streak.

The next day we tangled with the first-place Jays.

As we came up for our turn at bat at the end of the fourth, the score was 0-0. Barnett led off with a clean single to center, his second hit of the day. Druk went down swinging on three pitches and slung his bat halfway to third base in disgust. Connors lay down a nice bunt along the first base line, and beat the ball to the bag by a whisker. Wallace lined out to right field and the Jay rightfielder grabbed it off his shoelaces on the run, but wasn't able to get his throw off in time to keep Barnett from getting to third. Dekes poked a clean single to short left field, and Barnett scored. Gleason popped up a foul fly that the Jay first sacker took five feet from the bag and the inning was over, but Barnett's lone run looked nice up on the scoreboard.

The first Jay up in the fifth tagged a slow roller down between first and second. Druk and Connors got their signals mixed and both of them went after the ball, leaving first base as lonely as a war bride. It couldn't have happened with a fast runner, but Savage, the Jay batter, is also their second-string catcher—a big man, but not too swift on his feet. He started lumbering down toward first and would have been a cinch to be safe considering the way Druk and Connors were bumping each other around like a couple of high school players during early season practice. Barnett had sized up the play even before Connors and Druk got into trouble and started on a sprint down the first base line after Savage.

"Play the bag," Barnett yelled to Connors who'd finally scooped up the ball and was looking sadly at the empty sack.

Connors appeared confused until he saw Barnett nearly to first and sprinting past

Savage, his shin guards clanking and his chest protector bobbing back and forth.

Connors lined it to the bag about three feet off the ground as Barnett took off in a dive with his toes barely scraping the dirt. Barnett snagged that ball and hooked one toe over the sack as he fell right in front of the plodding Jay catcher.

Neither Connors nor Druk said a thing, but the big Jay catcher stuck out his hand and helped Barnett to his feet. From the way his mouth worked, with a friendly grin playing around the corners, he must have congratulated Barnett on the play.

The crowd gave Barnett a big hand as he trotted back up the first base line to take his place behind the plate.

By the beginning of the eighth, the score was still 1-0 and the pressure was really on.

Dekes walked the first man on the Jay hitting list, and the second batter singled to left. Degnan made a nice peg in from deep left and held the runners on first and second. Dekes's next pitch was wild and nearly got away from Barnett, who left his feet to go after it and knocked it down with his mitt, but before he could get the ball, the Jay runner had moved to third. The runner on first went down with the next pitch and Dekes was in a hole, with none out and men on second and third.

Carmen, the Jay second sacker, moved into the batter's box, and I groaned. Carmen was riding a hitting streak and Dekes had never been able to bother him too much. Degnan moved back until he was almost in the front row of the left field stands. Carmen was a righthander who pulled his hits and usually poled a long ball.

I waited, almost afraid to look. There was Carmen with his bat poised motionless, just itching for Dekes to serve up that first pitch. Barnett was crouched behind the plate like a small beetle, with that battered black mitt held up for a close

inside pitch. Dekes studied the plate carefully, finally made his stretch, and grooved it right for Barnett's glove. But it never got there.

The Jay runner on third took one look at the fly ball Carmen had tagged, decided it would drop between left and short-stop, and set out for the plate. Gleason and Timmons, the Bison third baseman, started off on a run toward left. Dekes stood limply on the mound, shaking his head disgustedly.

Timmons was running with his head twisted around so he could follow the ball over his right shoulder, and just as the ball seemed about to drop beyond him, he lunged up and made one of the sweetest one-handed circus catches I've ever seen. He landed on his back, but as he fell, he tossed the ball to Gleason.

I'D BEEN too busy watching Timmons to realize the possibilities of the play, and groaned as I saw the Jay runner head back for third. Dekes finally came to life and started across to cover the bag, but Barnett was already there. Gleason made the throw in and Barnett touched third for a double play. The crowd went wild.

Even some of the Jay rooters clapped a bit because they'd seen a piece of real heads-up baseball, and a catcher with put-outs on first and third bases to his credit in one game.

Dekes looked at Barnett as though he were a Ming vase or something even more valuable. To show his appreciation, Dekes practically tore his arm off scorching in five throws that set the Jay batter down without even swinging. It looked as though at least one Bison player had changed his mind about Barnett. Dekes came off the field with an arm draped around the little guy's shoulders. Right then I should have walked up to Barnett and told him I had been wrong about figuring only a big man is any good behind the plate. In fact, I'd worked out a little speech of apology and would have given it if he hadn't spoken first.

"Why don't you tell your slow-moving herd to get off their fat duffs and play ball like Timmons out there," he said before I had a chance to make my little spiel. "You get more action out of a buffalo on a nickel than out of most of your Bison team, Temple. Maybe twelve years is too long in one spot?"



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"Two games with us and a couple of fluke put-outs and now you're going to tell me how to run my ball club. Little man," I said trying hard not to swear at him, "for my money you're still just half a catcher. As soon as Grumbach or Hatton are ready for business you can spend your time in the bull pen."

That was the end of the eighth and my last chance to make peace with the guy. Degnan flied out and what does Barnett do but rap out a two-sacker to make me feel like the biggest schmo in baseball. Druk went down swinging as though he were beating a rug, Connors got a little bat in front of a slow ball and punched out a puny roller down third base line for an easy out and we're ready to move into the ninth.

Fiore laced a long line drive to deep center that a beautiful peg by Wallace saved from being a double. Savage bumped a short fly into right for the first out. Our one run lead didn't look too secure and I practically wept when Klever lofted Dekes's first pitch out between right and center. Druk started back for it, but Wallace shouted for him to let it go and jockeyed into position to take it. Fiore already had rounded second and was starting for third when his coacher waved him back. Fiore turned and sprinted back to first barely beating out Wallace's throw to the bag.

Two out, I thought, and began to feel a bit more comfortable. After the game, I decided, I'd ask Barnett out to dinner and try to straighten things out. Well, just as I was thinking about that, Barnett charged out past the mound and headed for second base.

"Let me have it, Connors! Shoot it over here," Barnett shouted. Druk by that time had moved back toward his bag and looked at Barnett as though he were crazy. However, Connors, evidently figuring he had nothing else to do with the ball, and by this time a bit more im-

pressed by the diminutive backstop, threw to second. Barnett scooped the ball into the depths of that black mitt, stomped on the bag and looked over at the field ump. The umpire jerked his thumb and screamed, "Yer out."

Fiore, standing on the bag at first base, didn't even put up an argument. He knew he had missed that second sack by inches as he rushed back to first from third, but he had hoped no one else had noticed. Evidently no one had other than Barnett and the field ump.

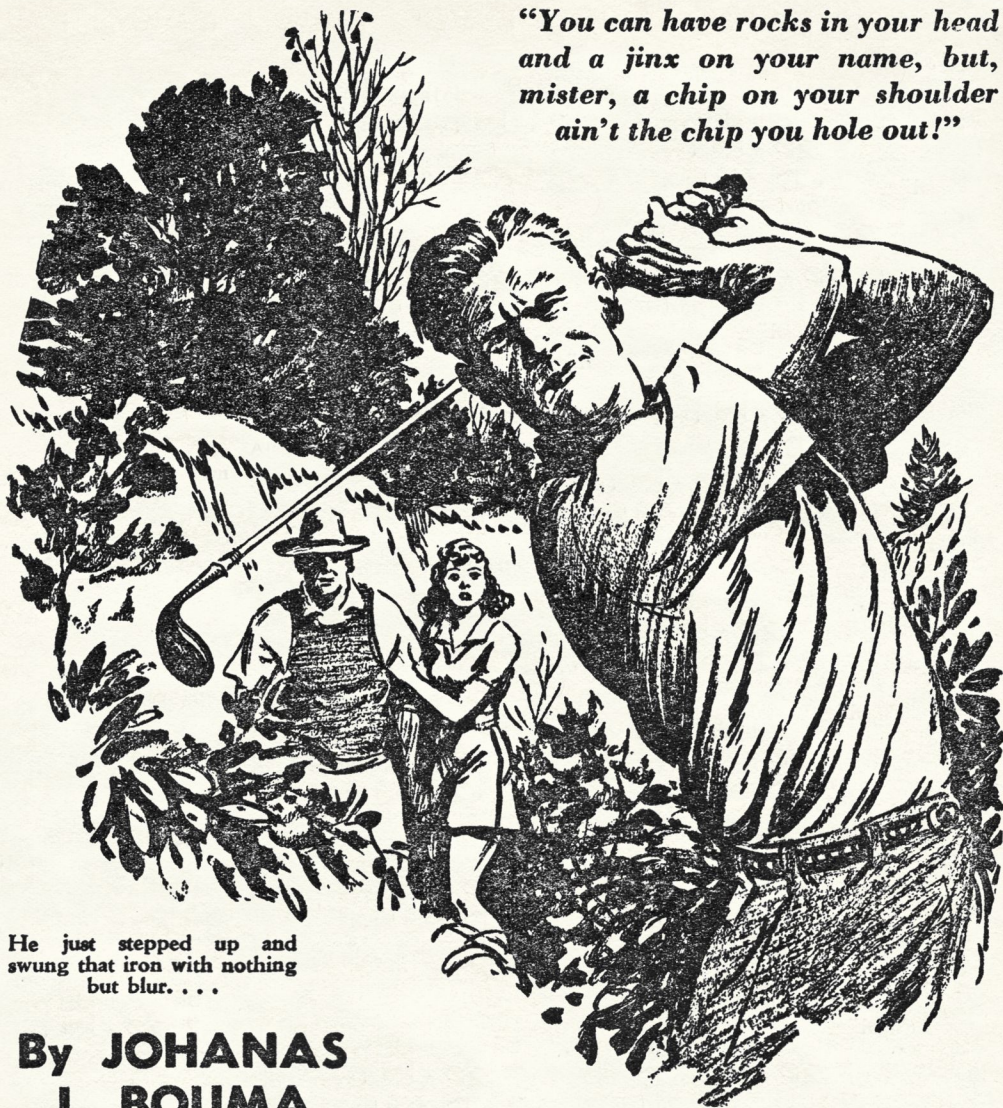
That put-out by Barnett at second was just one thing too much for Druk. Even while the stands were going mad cheering this little catcher who in one game had made put-outs at every base as well as scoring the winning run, Druk blew his top. Once in a while a shortstop, even the pitcher or first baseman might take a play at second, but to have the catcher come down and grab a putout right from under his nose was too much for the Bison second baseman.

That's about all there was to it. The Jays made a good offer for Barnett and the kid asked for his release.

We finished up that season in fourth spot and would have slipped even farther if the season had been any longer. I caught most of the balance of that season and it was tough going for a guy my age. We had to get a new man at second too, because as soon as Druk got out of the hospital he asked to be transferred out to the West Coast where the fans wouldn't know him as the guy who'd swung on a man sixty pounds lighter than he is—especially when that guy is the Jay catcher who has won the year's-most-valuable-rookie award and batted .412 in the Jays' play-off series with the Grays.

Incidentally, Barnett was a switch-hitter. Guess I'll never break Bing Hanley of being a sucker for switch-hitters, but like I said, they never last long with the Bisons.

*"You can have rocks in your head
and a jinx on your name, but,
mister, a chip on your shoulder
ain't the chip you hole out!"*



He just stepped up and
swung that iron with nothing
but blur. . . .

**By JOHANAS
L. BOUMA**

● LINKS JINX ●

HE CAME toward the clubhouse, a yellow-haired youngster with a loose, ground-eating stride and a moth-eaten golf bag. Mary made a half turn on the putting green as he passed without glancing at us. She frowned, missing a five-footer, and looked across to the graveled parking lot. Outside of the

new coupe I'd bought for her twenty-first birthday, there was only this battered, Model-A roadster.

"I didn't know they allowed them on the highway," Mary sniffed.

"Don't belittle a man's car," I said. "Didn't they learn you anything at college? It cost me enough."

"Teach," she said, "not 'learn'."

"Quit correcting me," I said. "Ready to take your old man to the cleaners?"

Yellow-hair strode out of the clubhouse. A big one, this youngster. Six-one or two, sun-baked to mahogany, good-looking in a rugged sort of way, and with a familiar set to his wide shoulders. Brown fingers pushed a green-fee ticket inside his shirt pocket. He still didn't look at us. Mary stared after him as far as the first tee.

"Now we'll have to wait," I said.

"He would have gone through us anyhow," Mary said slowly. "That young man has a purpose." Then she grinned. "An old duffer like you holds up the game."

"Hah," I said. "Old duffer, is it? It's a spanking you'll get."

She said sharply, "The brogue doesn't become you, Mike. Not even in a joke."

"Mike," this daughter of mine calls me. But she wasn't fooling about the brogue. That college did it to her. Put a lot of high-society ideas into her head. Took her away from me a laughing, freckled-faced kid who played tag with the rest of the steel workers' kids, and brought her back with a tilt to her nose and a snub for her old friends. Maybe my working up to superintendent had something to do with it. Anyway, it made me sore at times the way she acted.

Walking toward the first tee, I said, "It looks good for me this year, chicken. Walker is out of the running, and there's a fine chance I get past Taber."

Our golf club—*Rancho La Mesa*—holds a yearly tournament for its members, and somehow I had never been good enough at the right time to win the cup. Golf has been a big part of my life, especially since Ann died, and I wanted that cup more than anything else in the world. Mary knew it too, but right then she was more interested in this boy's teeing off than in answering me.

No fooling around for this one. No wiggle of the hips or fancy acrobatics. He just stepped in there and swung. There was power behind his drive, and I liked the way his wrists snapped the club head into the groove. The contact was like the report of a shot, but he was pressing. There was anger in him, and he looked up before he should have.

Number one is a par-four, 460 yards of straight-away that runs parallel to number nine coming back. The boy's drive was long—well past the 200 yard marker—but it developed a slice and ended up on the ninth fairway.

"If that young man had control he could play golf," Mary said.

"He's doing all right," I said.

Some girl, my Mary. She goes with the cool, clean freshness of morning. She has chestnut-red hair that catches the sun and makes it dance. Her eyes are green—her mother's eyes. Her mouth is full, and I've never known her chin to tremble.

"You might as well hit one," I said.

She was wearing a bright yellow blouse and white shorts, and she looked cool as a drink of iced tea. What's more important, she plays a good game, and there's nothing feminine in the way she handles a club. She hit one straight down the center as the boy up ahead took his second shot.

"I'll bet you don't beat him for distance," she said.

"What makes you think so?" I was feeling good.

"He's bigger than you. He hits harder."

"I'll give him an inch," I said, "and I'll take twenty pounds. That makes us even. Watch this one."

I could feel it was a good one before the club head met the ball.

"Short by ten yards," Mary said. She looked disappointed.

I grinned. "But in better position."

"Hah," she said. We picked up our

bags and trudged down the fairway. I chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"You're burned up because he didn't give you a quick once-over."

Her chin lifted. Quick color found her cheeks. "You're a silly old man."

"I'm forty-five and have known you for twenty-one years. I can read everything that runs through that pretty head of yours."

She looked at me over the tip of her nose. She laughed. It held the clear tinkle of a bell. "I love you, Mike," she said.

"Take your shot," I said.

The green was clear. Mary came up with a clean six iron that just missed the apron, giving her a bogey five. I was lucky with a putt and collected a par. As we tramped across to the second tee, Mary said, "I'll take you on Hogan's jinx."

HOGAN'S jinx is number two, a dog leg with a deep ravine slashing it just before the turn. It's only about a 120-yard drive to the other side, and most duffers cover it with ease. But for a few it develops a mental hazard. One Jim Hogan, who had played the course fifteen or twenty years ago, had always had trouble with this particular hole. Any other hole, his drive was good for 250 yards, but not number two. It got so it became a joke, and somebody tagged the hole Hogan's jinx.

Mary cleared it with a nice high drive. The ball plopped, bounced once and rolled up to the turn. I figured the boy was way up ahead, so I played my drive to cut the dogleg and land past the turn.

"Nice shot," Mary said. She walked quickly ahead of me to the narrow bridge. When I reached there I saw the boy. He was in the ravine poking the deep, tangled grass with an iron. I leaned over the railing. "Lose a ball?"

He looked up with a quick lift of his head. His eyes were deep blue under

heavy brows. They told me he wouldn't have been down there if he hadn't made a bad shot. He said, "Yes, sir," and continued his search.

Mary had gone across and into the ravine on the other side. I saw her toe at something, and then her heel went down hard. All innocence, she asked, "Would this be it?"

He ducked under the bridge and I stepped around for a better look. It was in the short grass of the creek bed that had dried but was still soggy. Only the tip of the ball showed. The boy looked at it. He looked at Mary. No ball could have dug in like that from a natural shot, and he knew it.

"Thanks," he said.

He reached an iron out of his bag. It looked like a six, and had an ancient wooden shaft. He would have to dig to even lob it onto the bank, and it was another 150 yards to the green. He didn't bother to study his lay. He just stepped up and swung that iron with nothing but blur. Grass and mud followed the club head, and the ball was a streak of white parting its center. It hit short of the green, but bounce took it past the pin.

"Say," I grinned, "that was a dandy. Should earn you a birdie."

He gave me a short nod, then looked at Mary without smiling. "Thanks again," he said.

For a second her eyes blazed, then steadied on his. "I'm sorry," she said.

He shrugged, picked up his bag and climbed to the bank. I said, "As long as we're together—how about making it a threesome?"

He hesitated for a moment, then, abruptly, he held out his hand. "Glad to," he said. "I'm Pete Hogan."

"Mike Donegan. This is my daughter Mary."

He had a firm grip, big-fingered, hard-palmed. He looked me straight in the eye. Then with slow deliberateness, he

said quietly, "I'm Jim Hogan's son."

There was pride in the way he said it, and something of reckless challenge that I felt very strongly.

"I should have known at the clubhouse," I said. "Jim's there in the set of your shoulders. I used to pour steel with your dad."

His eyes softened a little. "He often mentioned you." Then he looked at Mary. "I remember you from grade school. You were in the first. I was two years ahead of you."

"Nice of you to remember," Mary said.

From then on it was a fast game. Pete wasn't a boy to dally around with meaningless conversation. He was there to play golf, and I like it that way. A fast, firm game is good for my scorecard, and at the end of the ninth it showed me a thirty-eight, two strokes up on Pete. Mary followed with a forty-six and, considering she refuses to use the ladies' tees, that's nothing to be ashamed of.

I said, "How about something tall and cool before we finish the last nine? The fountain is open by now."

Pete shook his head. "Thanks just the same, sir. You and your daughter go on ahead. I'll finish alone."

Mary said quickly, "I don't care for anything, Mike."

Now that wasn't like Mary. She'd always insisted on breaking eighteen holes with a malt. "Okay," I said. "Your honors, Pete."

He teed off, a long, screaming drive that sliced in the brush bordering the eighteenth. Mary snorted. "Relax," she said. "What are you trying to do—kill the ball?"

He snapped around. "It's my ball, and they're my clubs."

"I noticed your clubs," she shot back. Then she bit her lip, and I knew she was sorry for saying it. That boy had the poorest set of clubs I've ever seen. A driver, a wrapped spoon, an eight, six and

two iron and a putter. Before he could say anything, I said, "If you can't keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady, Pete and I'll finish alone."

I meant it and she knew it. She flushed, and for a moment I thought she would walk away. Then, awkwardly, Pete said, "It's all right, sir. I shouldn't have popped off." He grinned for the first time. "And she was right about me relaxing."

He didn't apologize for his clubs, and I liked that. And some of that inner tightness worked out of him. He relaxed. When we finished the eighteenth, I was only one stroke ahead.

"Nice game," I said. "Play often? I haven't seen you around."

"I've only been back a week," he said. "I took an afternoon job at a service station in town. That leaves me free for golf in the mornings." He hesitated. "I plan to join the club."

"Glad to have you," I said.

It hit me then what was bothering this boy. We shook hands again, he said goodbye to Mary and strode across to his roadster. We watched it rattle onto the highway.

"I wonder why he came back here?" Mary said abruptly. "It wouldn't surprise me if he came to work in the steel mill, but a service station. Ugh!"

"Watch your manners," I said. "It's an honest job."

"But the club?" he said. "I wonder if he realizes what it costs to join?"

"That's his affair," I said. "Let's go. I have to be at the office this afternoon."

BUT all the way back to the house I couldn't get it out of my head about Pete wanting to join. A hundred dollars is a stiff fee, and remembering his old jalopy and the clubs, I wondered how he would ever swing it.

"Why do you suppose he wants to join?" Mary said.

"Do you really want to know?" I said, "or is it a woman's curiosity?"

"Both," she said.

"Then find out for yourself."

She sniffed and turned up the drive. Our house is two miles from the club, and Steel City is five miles beyond. The mill is on the edge of town and, driving out there an hour later, I found my thoughts returning to Pete Hogan.

I hadn't mentioned his dad after that first time. Jim had been dead for over fourteen years, and I hadn't thought it my right to bring up his memory. We'd worked together in the old days, living in the shabby frame houses provided by the mill for their employees. Neither one of us belonged to the club because we couldn't afford it. Ann was still living then, and Mary was learning to walk. Jim had his family of romping youngsters, and they stretched his budget to the limit. But we managed an occasional eighteen holes of a Sunday, and that's where I really learned to know Jim.

He had a lot of clown in him and didn't mind a joke at his own expense. He was bluff, hearty, a two-fisted drinker if he could get it. Everyone liked him and everyone took advantage of his good nature. Sometimes they went too far, but Jim didn't seem to mind. And thinking about it, I saw that even if the kid was like Jim in a lot of ways, he wasn't a clown. He must have been about nine when Jim died, and I could imagine him loving his dad and hating the fact that everyone thought him a joke. Remembering his eyes, I knew it had stayed with the boy, and that it was something he wanted to erase.

The next morning at breakfast, Mary said, "A good day for golf, Mike."

I looked up from the paper. "And don't tell me you're playing two days in a row."

"I can if I feel like it."

"Fine," I said. "We'll play a fast round—just the two of us."

She took a long time dressing, but when she came down she looked cute as a ladybug. She had on cream-colored shorts that matched the tan of her slim legs, a green-checkered blouse, and her hair was done in pigtails. She looked seventeen.

"Why all the fuss?" I said.

Her green eyes widened. "My goodness—what fuss?"

"Hah," I said. "I doubt if he shows up."

"Who?" she said, moving ahead of me through the door.

I unlocked the garage doors. "He works in a service station," I said. "Ugh!"

"Shut up," she said.

It was a grand morning, the kind that tingles the blood and makes you impatient for the first shot. The greens sparkled under a soft blanket of dew, the fairways stretched clean and tempting. We batted a few around the putting green, but I was impatient to get going. Mary's was still the only car on the parking lot, and it didn't look as if Pete was coming. I told her.

"Here he comes now," she said, smiling a little.

I hadn't heard his car. He was coming from the shoulder of the highway, cutting across the parking lot with that loose, easy stride. He waved.

"Where's your car," Mary yelled.

He didn't answer until he'd approached us. Then he said, "In town."

"You walked clear out here?" I asked.

He grinned. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. "Caught a ride part of the way. Ready for a game, sir?"

"Don't you want to rest a bit?"

"I feel swell," he said.

When he swung into that first drive, a spot of worry gnawed at my insides. I was going to have to play golf to beat him. He plucked his tee from the grass, grinning, and said "Two-fifty if an inch."

I grunted, teed up my own ball and let

go. It was twenty yards short of his drive. We waited for Mary.

"I'll just go along for the walk," she said.

"I thought you said—"

"Just for the walk," she said sweetly.

I used a spoon for my second shot. It was a good one, but still short of the apron. Pete picked out his two iron. It looked small in his big hands, but when he swung it became part of him. There was a sharp clack, and for a hundred yards that ball didn't rise three feet. Then it lifted in a slight bulge and plopped on the green. And it stuck there.

"Wow!" Mary said.

He sank his for a birdie, while I scored my usual par.

Mary skipped along beside Pete to the second hole. She said, "Mike'll take you on Hogan's jinx."

I was right behind them, and I saw his back go stiff. He didn't answer, and when he put his bag down to tee up, the dark anger was back in his eyes. For the first time he took a couple of practice swings. They were stiff, savage swings, and when he stepped up to drive, he topped the ball so that it hopped and bounced into the ravine. He didn't say a word, and it wasn't until we'd finished half the round that he snapped out of it.

He excused himself, saying he had some business in the clubhouse, and I sat with Mary on the bench and lit a cigarette.

"If Pete enters the tournament next month," she said, "you can kiss the cup goodbye."

"Maybe," I said.

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "You know what, Mike? I'll bet he sold his car in order to join the club."

"Now you're getting smart," I said.

She didn't say anything further, and after he came back we finished the eighteen. We tied with seventy-sixes.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" he asked.

"Sure thing. Bright and early."

He adjusted his bag strap across his shoulder. "Swell, sir. 'Bye, Mary."

"Ride with us," Mary said. "We're going toward town." She climbed behind the wheel. He didn't move.

"Go on," I said. "Rest your feet."

"Okay," he grinned. "I'll ride as far as your place."

Mary gave me a dirty look when I sat next to her. Pete put his clubs in the back of the seat and we started off. Suddenly he said, "I joined the club."

"Entering the tournament?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes, sir."

There was something grim and final in the way he said it, and I knew then that it had been on his mind for a long time. I felt a hollow pain inside me to think he was taking it upon himself to prove something that didn't matter. It didn't take imagination to figure it out. He'd loved his dad, and you felt the things he must have felt about Jim being a joke. You knew that as a youngster he hadn't understood that it meant nothing, but you also knew that not understanding he had been deeply hurt. He'd believed in his dad. He still believed in him, and now he wanted to fix it so Jim's memory wouldn't bring laughter. For a second I felt a little envious. It was a fine thing for a man's son to do, even if it was wrong. I didn't know whether this was, or not.

Mary pointed out a rambling stucco bungalow. "There's our place, Pete."

"Nice," he said. "I'll get out here."

"Don't be silly," Mary said. "We'll drive you in."

"Thanks anyway," he said, "but I'll hike it the rest of the way."

Mary jammed on the brakes, and Pete climbed out, grinning. He shouldered his clubs. "Thanks for the ride," he said, waved and strode down the road.

Mary spun the wheels she backed up so fast. Then she turned up the drive. Her chin was out, her eyes frosty.

"Nice fellow," I said.

"He's a jerk," she said. Then she added, "I'm not playing tomorrow."

"Nobody asked you to," I said. "Besides, you usually play with Bill Taber on Wednesdays."

"He's a pain," she said. Then that thoughtful look came back to her eyes. "Maybe I will play tomorrow," she said slowly.

"Cat," I said.

SO WE had a foursome the next day. Mary stayed close to Taber. He's a big fellow, as tall as Pete and a bit heavier, dark-haired, handsome. He plays a darn good game of golf. Pete, after a bad start on Hogan's jinx, burned the fairways to a crisp. He carded a seventy for the course, two below par. I followed with a seventy-three, and Tabor nudged me with an extra stroke.

I guess Taber was a little confused about our knowing Pete. He's an insurance man, makes big money, and had been chasing after Mary for over a year. He's a nice enough fellow even if he is a bit of an extrovert, drinks too much and would like nothing better than to beat me out of the tournament. Luckily, he didn't associate Pete with Hogan's jinx. He'd only been around town since the war, and the old-timers who might have remembered Pete played golf during the afternoons. Anyway, after learning that Pete was a service station attendant, Taber's interest dropped to zero, although once or twice he made as if to speak to me about him.

Mary paid no attention to Pete that morning. It didn't seem to bother him, but it bothered Mary. She was plenty burned up, and during the last nine she would hardly speak to any of us.

I don't know how many times during the next week she threatened not to play. But every morning she was out there pounding the fairways with us. Then one morning they laughed together over nothing.

It was good, honest laughter, and for no reason at all I found myself joining in. During the following weeks, watching them walk hand in hand, this tall, yellow-haired Pete and my Mary, you could tell that love had found them. It was a good thing, and I was happy about it. I couldn't have asked for a better son-in-law than Pete Hogan. He'd gotten over that inward turmoil, too. He was playing like a pro. Hogan's jinx no longer bothered him. He'd play it with never a show of worry about clearing the ravine. And neither Mary or I ever mentioned it again.

The night before the tournament our club held a dance. I hadn't wanted to go, but one look at Mary coming downstairs changed my mind. She was wearing a white, off-the-shoulder gown, and there was fire in her hair. For a second I thought it was Ann coming back, and I guess it showed in my eyes. She kissed me.

"Will you be for disappointing me?" she asked.

I chuckled. "So it's the brogue, is it? And would it be a Peter Hogan taking you dancing tonight?"

"A Peter Hogan and a Mike Donegan."

I shook my head. "Tsk, ts, and Peter a man what greases cars for a living."

She cupped my face in her hands. "That part doesn't matter, Mike," she said softly. "I had to find that out."

"Aye," I said, and my voice was husky. "It's a good thing to know."

Pete drove out in a cab. He was neat in a dark suit, hair slicked back, face shining and eyes sparkling. A good-looking, capable young man.

We drove to the club in Mary's car. It was a soft night with autumn just around the corner. We mixed and mingled with the crowd. Taber was there, resplendent in a tuxedo. After the usual punch and a dance with Mary, I managed a breather in an easy chair on the end of

the veranda. I had smoked a cigarette and was ready to go back in when I heard voices from the doorway.

"... Pete Hogan," someone was saying, and I recognized Taber. "I was talking to some of the fellows this morning. You're not by any chance related—"

"Bill Taber," a voice said sharply. That was Mary.

"What's wrong?" Taber asked. "All I was asking—"

"You don't have to ask," Pete's angry voice said. "I'll tell you. Jim Hogan was my father. What about it?"

"Nothing at all," Taber said easily. "It's just that I've heard so many jokes about the old man. That Hogan's jinx thing, for instance. He seems to have gained quite a reputation with—"

I started to get up when Pete hit him. I sank down again. I've heard a lot of punches land in my time—threw a few myself—and from the sound of this one I knew that Taber wasn't getting up for at least five minutes.

The next thing there were feet pounding down the walk, and then Mary's voice saying, "Why did you have to hit him? We were having such a lovely time, and—"

"Forget it," Pete said harshly. "Forget everything and go back to your friends. I'm leaving."

"So you're leaving, are you?" Mary said. Her voice was pitched low and it trembled. "Let me tell you something, Pete Hogan. You can leave and good riddance. You've carried a chip on your shoulder ever since you came here, and just because you imagine an insult to your father's memory you try to kill somebody. Your father wasn't a joke. You're the joke, you stubborn fool. If he was here now he'd be in there having a roaring time, but his son—"

"Get out of my way."

"I'll be glad to get out of your way for good, and—and—"

She was crying as she ran out to the car. . . .

Thirty-two members entered the tournament, and the only thing rough about it was that we ran it in one day. That meant eighteen holes in the morning and eighteen during the afternoon. When the morning scores were posted, the field was down to eight men. Kane, a young doctor, was leading with par for the course. Taber was second with a seventy-three and I was tied for third with a fellow named Briggs. Pete held down fourth position with a seventy-five.

I hadn't seen him since the night before, but I drew Taber for the first round. He surprised me. There was a lump the size of a grapefruit alongside of his jaw, but none of the kidding he took fazed him. And all he said to me about it was, "That kid should have been a prizefighter, Mike. He can hit."

It was Mary I was worried about. She was making out to have a big time, but she wasn't fooling me.

WE DREW lots for the afternoon round. Kane, the doctor, Taber, Pete and myself had last choice. That meant we played the last nine holes first, the other foursome starting from the first tee.

Kane was up first, and he hit a beauty. He has Hogan's slender build, and plenty of his control. That tenth hole is a short, 320-yard, three-par affair with a deep sand trap below the apron. Kane's drive was high of the trap, leaving him a good approach. I wasn't worried about him too much, though, because he'd been plenty short on practice and the strain was beginning to show.

Taber hit a careful drive, depending on his iron shots to carry him through. Mine was a sizzler, a good twenty yards ahead of Kane's. Then Pete stepped up.

He hadn't spoken to me—just a nod of his head—so when he passed me, I said, "Hit one, Pete."

He didn't make a sign of having heard, and I could see from the way he bent to tee his ball that he'd gone all taut inside. His swing was hard, jerky, and it had enough slice to carry his ball to the rough. He picked up that old bag of his and walked off without looking around. I saw Mary then. She was looking after him, and for a moment there was agony in her eyes. Then she caught me looking and she smiled gayly, and winked.

I kept mental track of the scores, and by the time we stepped to the eighteenth tee there'd been quite a change. Kane'd had some bad luck on the lake hole, taking an eight. That was enough to put him out of the running, and he knew it. I'd caught up to Taber, and when we finished that hole I was one stroke up on him. Pete was third with a two-stroke lag. He was playing good golf, but not his best by a long shot. He was strung tight, and he still had Hogan's jinx to contend with. I didn't like it. I wanted to win the tournament in the worst way, and I had a good chance; but I didn't want to win it against a man who wasn't playing his best. When we reached the clubhouse for a breather, I motioned him into the locker room. Inside, I locked the door and pocketed the key. He just stood there and looked at me, and his eyes were dark and angry.

"What do you want, Mr. Donegan?"

I said, "I want to win this tournament, but I want to win it against competition."

He flushed. "It isn't over yet."

"It's over as far as you're concerned unless you snap out of it."

He didn't say anything.

I said, "I like you, Pete, and I understand why you came back. You're all wrong, kid. I'll tell you something now, and you'll listen to me. Sure, people made jokes about your old man, but it didn't mean anything. And the people didn't mean anything by it, either. Let me tell you this: the ones who remember him

around here liked him a lot more than they like you now. You understand that?"

He crowded past me for the door. "Anything else?"

"You damn right there's something else. You go out there and play a game or—"

"Or what?" he snapped.

I measured him. "Or I'll give you the worst licking you've ever had."

For a second I thought he would hit me. His shoulders shifted a little. He breathed deep, and then amazement showed in his eyes. "Mike," he said softly, "I believe you would."

He was grinning as we shook hands.

Well, there's no use telling you about the last nine holes. Check on one of the professional tournaments some day, and the best golf you'll see there won't touch the way Pete played that afternoon. On Hogan's jinx he hit a drive that was nothing but distance. None of us had a show against him, but somehow I didn't mind losing my chance at the cup.

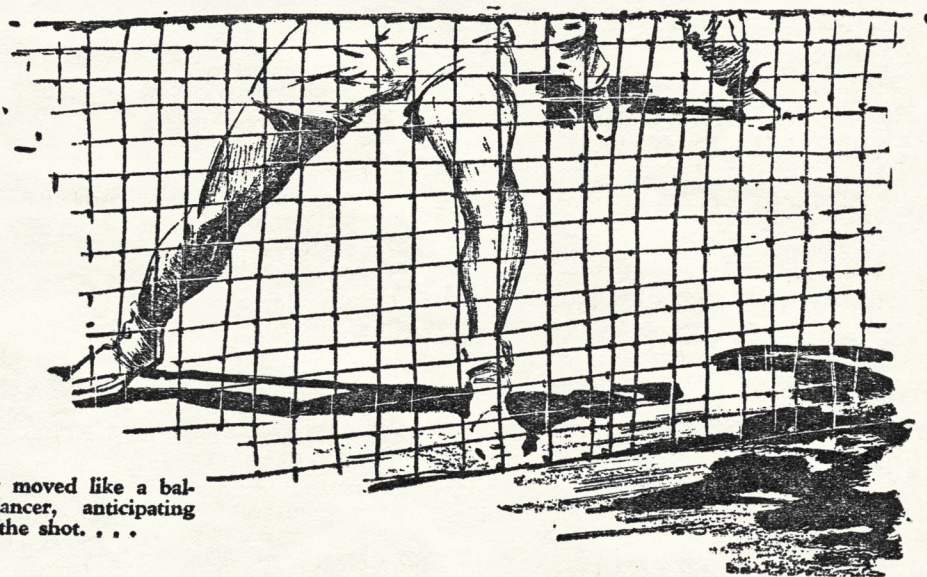
They handed it to him inside the clubhouse. The place was packed, but there was a silence you could slice. He looked at it for a minute, and then he looked up and kind of chuckled. "You know," he said, "I joined this club with the idea of winning this cup. I had a chip on my shoulder and rocks in my head, but it's different now—the chip is gone." There was a short laugh, and then he looked straight at Taber. "The joke is on me, and right now I want to christen this cup Hogan's Jinx Cup. It was my jinx, but it isn't any longer. And I hope—"

He was looking at Mary when he stopped. You should have seen her—smiling and tears big as silver dollars in her eyes. He never did finish his speech. The crowd took it from there. After the back slapping was over I had my shower and headed for the parking lot. Would you believe it? They had beat it in Mary's car and I had to hitch a ride home.

DOUBLES

By WILLIAM R.
COX

TROUBLES



Rocky moved like a ballet dancer, anticipating the shot. . . .

He was a hot champ with a hotter racket . . . until he met a brash kid whose fighting volleys bore out a simple motto: The harder they come —the faster they go!

DAN MILSAP met the South American in the clubhouse. He had never known the wiry, dark-haired man before. He said shyly, "I'm Milsap. I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

They shook hands. Rocky Janiro said, "Stuck?" He had only a slight accent, and it was his intonation which was foreign and somehow warm and amusing.

They said he wasn't any good, but he was a riot. They said he couldn't play tennis, but on the court he kept people in stitches with his gyrations. He looked like a young prizefighter with his magnificent shoulders and slightly bowed legs and twisted nose. He said, "It will be a pleasure." He had exquisite manners, which also amused the tennis crowd.

Dan Milsap was taller, lighter in weight, very fair of complexion. He wore his hair short, crew fashion. He had gray eyes and a square, determined chin. He was only twenty-one, and he was ranked eleventh in the nation. The tennis crowd said he would never rise higher. They said he did not have the ground game, that he was erratic on his deep game, that he lacked something which is needed to make a champion.

Dan said, "Maybe we'll have fun. Doubles is more fun than singles, sometimes."

White teeth flashed in the swarthy face, warming up the Latin's personality like a flame. "Yes. You are right. Doubles, that is fun. If both partners like!"

They walked toward the courts. They were tanned and fit, for it was June and the tournament merry-go-round was on. Everyone was heading for Forest Hills in September, rating himself along in his own fashion, striving for the grail of tennis, the National Men's Championships.

Dan said, "You like backhand or forehand court?"

"For me the backhand," said Janiro. "And you?"

"Forehand," nodded Dan. "That's nice, huh?"

"Very nice," beamed Janiro. "Who we play first?"

"Curry Taylor and Max Fairchild," shrugged Dan. "Seeded number one. Defending national champions. Well, we will have one match, anyway. Your entry was rather late getting in, or they would've given you a better partner."

"Better?" Janiro's bushy brows went up. "You are modest?"

"Nope. Honest," grinned Dan. "I'm a guy who dreams of championships but never wins them."

Janiro shook his head with vigor. "Me. I am a good doubles player. Maybe not in singles the best. But doubles—I am quick!"

Dan said, "I know. I've seen you." Janiro was the fastest man getting around a court on the circuit. But he was wild. He was not an exceptional doubles player, Dan thought—no better than himself, really. Foreign entries, however, are gently treated in the early tourneys and Janiro should have had a name player for partner. As it happened the draw was small, and being un-seeded, they had to meet the top-ranking team in the first round.

Not that it mattered. Dan swung a racket viciously. He had not gained the finals of a tournament in singles that year. He was far from rich and he could really ill afford to give up this summer to tennis. He should be establishing himself in the business world. His college career had been cut short—somehow nothing seemed to work very well for Dan Milsap.

They came to the court assigned to them and the two tall champions were working out against each other. It was early, but Curry Taylor wore his customary scowl. He was the aggressive type. Sometimes Dan thought he overdid it. He had won the national singles on aggressiveness, they said. A fighter, that was Curry. He was big, strong, and a hitter.

Max Fairchild was also tall, heavy, and a carbon copy of Curry. Max was runner-up the previous year in the singles. He was Curry's shadow. Max had money, a rare thing among present day top-ranking tennis stars. He was petulant where Curry was vigorous. He was, in every way, a step behind his friend and doubles partner.

Curry said, "Come on, come on. Let's

get this over. I've got singles matches to worry about."

Rocky Janiro said politely, "How do you do, gentlemen? A very pleasant afternoon, is it not?"

Max said, "So what? Let's play this match."

Rocky Janiro said, "You are in a hurry? I am not in a hurry." His smile was as wide as ever, but his voice suddenly held an edge.

Dan Milsap heard himself say, "Yeah, take it easy. There's no fire, you know."

Curry and Max stared. They had never heard Dan Milsap talk back before. They had been shoving the tall kid around for years. They had beaten him to submission on the courts and shrugged him out of their minds when it was over.

Curry said, "Well, warm up. Get going. What do you think this is?"

"A tennis tournament," said Rocky Janiro. "A game which gentlemen sometimes play." He removed his sweater, made a small courteous bow to Dan and went onto the court. His muscles rippled under the T-shirt. He was half a head shorter than the two tall star players, but he moved proudly, with grace.

They took the court. On forehand side, Dan rallied against Curry. The big champ was beating the ball deep on every shot, scowling and impatient. Curry had the strokes, all right. Dan knocked them back, but he did not have the zip in his long ones. He felt inferior. There was a small crowd following the champs, rather bored, but desirous of seeing top doubles play by Curry and Max.

Curry was saying, "Come on—come on, you're warm enough." Dan would have given up, he supposed. But Janiro kept hitting back to Max. They went to the net to hit a few volleys. Curry deliberately drove one as hard as he could. It started for Dan's head. A tennis ball will not kill, but it hurts like the devil when it strikes bare skin.

DAN slid his racket into defensive position. The volley zoomed off it, deep to backhand. In a frenzy of impatience, Curry slammed it again, as hard as he could hit it. Dan blocked. He put the ball clean away in the alley. Slow resentment was burning deep inside him. Curry snapped, "Can't you hit them back to me?"

Rocky turned, signifying he had had enough practice. He stared hard at Dan. His eyes were black as coals. He said in a very low voice, "These are pigs! Can we not punish them?"

Dan said, "Maybe. We can try like hell!"

He saw Joe Potter in the crowd. Joe shook his head and made a wry face. Dan nodded and waved his racket. Joe was another outcast. Joe was an old teaching pro who had somehow lost his grip, and followed the tournaments when he could, making a few dollars now and then. Dan had felt a kinship with Joe this year. People said Joe was no good, he was a bum, he would never amount to anything. Yet Joe had been a great player in his day and had held good professional jobs. Joe lifted a fist. He did not like Curry, or Max.

They won the service in the spin, and Dan took the balls and went to position. He knew Curry and Max, knew better than to hit aces at them. Joe Potter had showed him how to hit a doubles service. He glanced at Rocky. Janiro was at the net, properly near the middle of the court, and he was loose and relaxed. His muscular back was reassuring, Dan thought, in its strength. Dan hit a service with plenty of slide and bounce, medium slow. He ran, starting fast, slowing as he came in, watching Max Fairchild.

Max tried the center, driving hard. Dan flung himself over, then wondered if Rocky, with his swiftness, would conflict. The ball spat off his racket and went into play. Rocky had held.

Curry drove for the middle also. It had speed and barely cleared the net, but Rocky pounced and volleyed. Max lifted one. Dan wheeled, got under it and slugged. He put it away.

Dan walked back. It had been sharp, it had been orthodox. He pondered, throwing up the ball. He hit the same easy spin to Curry. The champion impatiently slugged at his feet with top-spin. Dan picked it up, sending it down center.

Curry tried to bull in, driving. Rocky volleyed deep. Max missed and Curry said something to him in a low voice.

Dan won off Max with one volley. Then Curry missed and the pick-up team of Janiro and Milsap had won the first game at love!

They changed courts. Rocky was smiling, not derisively, but with smooth satisfaction. Rocky could be a regular goat-getter, Dan thought, chuckling to himself. The South American could be a big help in a doubles match.

Curry had a booming, deceptive service. But Dan knew how to block in the short one, topping the net and dropping at the feet of the charging server. That shot was instinctive to Dan; he wished his deep drives were so certain. Curry plopped it into the net.

The champion drew himself up to full height. He stared at his racket. He took deep breaths. He went over to serve to Rocky.

Rocky also had the short shot. He topped his back-spin, not hitting too hard. His style was a little awkward, but he got the ball down at Curry's feet. Curry had to hit up.

Dan found himself rushing. He got down under the shot and hit it with all he had. Curry, close to the net, still crouching, could not avoid it. The ball struck him on the head and bounced.

Someone laughed. It was Joe Potter and the laugh was harsh and derisive. Others joined in.

Curry was a veteran. He steadied himself as Dan apologized. He smiled. It was frosty, it was phoney, but it passed for sportsmanship. Curry's eyes were red.

Curry lost his service, an unheard-of thing. The ill-assorted upstarts had broken through the champions.

Dan fed them the soft stuff. He kept going up and putting away volleys, he kept slugging overheads. He was playing well over his head.

Alongside him Rocky was a court-coverer de luxe. They never collided. They never were at cross-purposes. Dan thought how strange it was, the way they worked together like a machine, and they had never even spoken before this afternoon.

They won the first set against Taylor-Fairchild, 6-3.

Rocky took a deep suck of air as they changed courts. He said, "Ah! How sweet! To punish such arrogance, such big balloons!"

"Careful," Dan warned. He was warmed up, eager, but he knew the play of the champions. He had never been so excited in a match, but he was cautious, too.

"We will fly at them," said Rocky. He was carefree and cheerful.

Then the champs went to work. They were superb. They charged the net at every opportunity. They flung themselves at apparent aces and defended. They could both volley deep, and against deep volleying there is little anyone can do. Dan felt himself go on the defensive.

He fought, running, driving, trying to keep the ball short and sharp, to reach the alleys with cross-court volleys. Rocky was valiant. They both were like marionettes on strings, but the champs were pulling the strings.

Taylor and Fairchild won the next two sets and the match, 6-4, 6-4.

At the net they shook hands in perfunctory fashion. Curry glowered at Dan.

There was still a red spot on his temple where the ball had struck. He said, "If you ever hit me with a ball again—"

Dan said stiffly, "It was an accident."

Rocky interposed, smiling sleekly, "You forgot to duck, isn't it? You played good, after we made you angry, eh? But until then you were human. I think you are human."

"Nobody asked you," flared Max.

"Ah! But I ask myself!" said Rocky triumphantly. "Are these men human? Or are they pigs!" He never lost his beaming smile.

Again Joe Potter laughed. Curry and Max began to swell like toads. Dan and Rocky made a leisurely exit.

They went into the locker room, and Joe Potter was lounging against the steel cabinets. They were alone in a corner, the three of them, and Dan said, "What did we do wrong, Joe?"

Potter was a lean man. He was seamy-faced and tanned, and there was an undercurrent of gayety about him. That was part of the reason he did not fit the tennis scene. He was too happy. For a man who had never amounted to anything he seemed to have much fun.

Potter said, "Let 'em take the play away. That's doubles. Huh? Team at the net always wins. They're good, though."

Rocky said, "Potter, you are right. Do you think we are good together? Dan and me?"

Potter said, "I dunno. Look good. Act good out there. But I dunno. Funny thing about doubles teams. Even jerks can get together. Like the champs."

Rocky said, "I would like to take back a championship, some small thing. It would be fine for tennis in my country, you see?"

Potter looked at Dan. He said, "I see, all right."

Dan felt the question in Joe's mind. It irked him a little. He said nothing, however.

Rocky said, "You will coach us, Potter?"

"For a price, I'll coach a dog to play tennis," grunted Potter.

THAT was a strange summer for Dan Milsap. He kept losing singles matches to Max and to Curry and to Loney Campbell and Ed Barret. They were the first four ranking players in America, and Dan simply could not get his deep game going. He lost close ones—he even won two sets in early August from Curry Taylor—but he could not win the fifth and deciding set.

Yet he was happy. Loney and Ed were the second best doubles team, and they met, Rocky and Dan getting to the finals. Rocky and Dan won. Curry and Max were not in that tournament, but it was the first cup that Dan could own with pride.

Joe Potter followed them around the circuit, lounging, drinking tall ones at the bars, grinning, making critical jokes. He called Rocky "The Fearless Fabulous." He said Rocky was always out of proper position, but generally right. He said Dan was such a lousy singles player that his game was perfect for doubles—short. He said a short game was the doubles game, and Lott never won the National Singles, either. He jeered when he said it, but all the time his wise eyes were calculating.

The National Doubles were held at Longwood in mid-August that year. Dan Milsap had a long struggle with himself before then. Listening to the cynical, forthright Joe Potter did something to him. He began to think more clearly about himself.

He would never be a great singles player. He would never be able, dream of all poor-in-pocket amateurs, to turn pro and garner the big money. He could be a teacher, like Joe, or he could be a tennis bum for a few years and then disappear into some limbo where the mediocre of the game linger in their memories of dim glory. For there is only twelve points dif-

ference per set between victory and defeat, and that is mathematics, Dan realized.

He liked Joe Potter. But he did not want to live as Joe lived, from day to day, from hand to mouth. He was rooming with Rocky all the time now.

Rocky said, "But you are right! Life is important. This tennis, it is a grand and glorious game. To match against the others your speed and skill, that is good. But life is again something."

Dan said, "I'm young enough to get a good start in some business. If I quit now, I can go to work for a friend of my family down South. In citrus."

Rocky said, "Now? This moment?" His black eyes regarded Dan thoughtfully.

Dan said, "Oh, not before the national doubles."

"Ah," said Rocky. "We shall practise some more, charging the net, eh?"

"Sure," said Dan. "Joe will be looking for us. I talk too much, I reckon."

Rocky said, "I do not think you have talked enough. I think maybe it is good for you to talk."

Rocky was great. He was no better a singles player than Dan, but his big grin and his colorful antics, his steely-springed leaps and bounds captured the eyes of all beholders. Rocky was always a favorite on the court.

Joe hacked at them about the philosophy of doubles. He said, "The net. Get to it. Can't win back-court. Shoot it low, at their feet; force 'em back, come in and volley—don't volley for aces, volley deep. Stab 'em back. Always more misses than aces. Let them miss. But volley sharp, serve down center, shoot for spots. No tricks, just solid."

They won two more tournaments when Curry and Max did not compete. They were like a team of ponies working in harness. Once when they were playing Curry was in the crowd and Dan saw his florid,

sullen face and the tightness around the jaws as Rocky made play after play in perfect complement to Dan's own efforts.

One national title, Dan thought. The doubles. Half a championship is better than none, he thought. Just one big moment, and then I can quit and go to work and be somebody.

And then something happened. Dan was rallying with Rocky and they decided to play a set. Dan served hard. Rocky put the ball on backhand. Dan stroked it. There was something in the stroke.

The ball almost clipped the net cord, went deep and to the baseline. Rocky's defense was weak. Dan put it away.

Joe Potter was lounging on a chair, drinking a cold one. Dan said to him, "How did you like those apples. Deep, huh?"

"Can't do it again," said Joe.

But Dan did it again. He beat Rocky 6-0. They were betting a friendly dollar and Rocky clamored for revenge.

Dan beat him 6-0 again.

Joe was sitting up straight. That afternoon Dan played Loney Campbell, a nice guy, in the singles event. He beat Loney 6-2, 6-3.

Rocky and Dan won the doubles match. They went into the locker room and Loney was talking to Joe Potter. After a moment Joe came over. His eyes were squinted almost shut. He said, "It happens sometimes. Loney said you got it."

"Just a good day," shrugged Dan.

But he kept going. He beat Ed Barret. He made the semi-finals. He had to knock himself out, but he beat Max Fairchild, 6-4, 7-5, 8-6. His ground shots were superb. He knocked deep ones in until the sullen Max almost collapsed chasing them, then went to the net and picked off winners.

IN THE finals there was Curry Taylor. The night before the singles finals Rocky and Dan got into a long, late tilt

against Loney and Ed. Dan, exhausted by his singles effort of the day, was not sharp. Rocky was all over the place and they finally pulled it out, thanks to Rocky's struggles.

Dan felt listless against Curry. But he stroked the ball in his new-found way. He kept Curry on the defensive for two sets. He won them both. He could not manage to maintain it, and finally lost the match, 4-6, 4-6, 7-5, 7-5, 6-4.

The next day he was waiting for Rocky on the courts when Joe Potter came. Joe was moving faster than Dan had ever seen him move. He came directly to Dan and said, "Kid, you've found it. Watched every stroke yesterday. You got it."

Dan said, "I never saw you so excited. I'm just hot for awhile, that's all—I just want to win this doubles match." The doubles had been postponed because of the long match between Dan and Curry.

Joe said, "Doubles? You can beat Curry. I can show you. You can be champ. No doubt about it. I know!"

"Singles champ?" The image grew in his mind. Forest Hills, the flags blowing in the breeze, the crowds, Dan Milsap in the limelight, receiving the big cup.

Joe said, "Quit knocking yourself out in doubles. An hour a day to sharpen tactics. The strokes you got, I'm tellin' you—Curry can be had. You got him—just work at it. Rocky will help. Good guy, Rocky."

The smiling Latin was coming toward them now, waving his racket. Rocky, who also wanted a championship.

Dan said slowly, "I can't agree with you, Joe. I'll think it over. Rocky and I were planning on winning that doubles title."

"Doubles? What about the dough? What about the pros?" Joe snorted. "Are you goin' to chuck it away? Doubles!"

"I'll think about it," Dan repeated. "Here come Curry and Max."

Curry and Max were hot and vengeful.

Twice Curry tried to nail Dan with the ball at the net. He had never forgotten the sock on the head he had received. It kept Dan on his toes, ready to defend against this tactic.

Curry and Max won in five sets. When they walked off the court Rocky said cheerfully, "In two weeks maybe we will get them, eh?"

Dan said, "Maybe."

"You almost beat him. You were weary," said Rocky. "If you did not play doubles, you would have beaten Curry. You are not rugged, like me, Dan. You need rest."

"That's true," said Dan. "But I couldn't beat him."

Rocky said, "You will play, however? In the national singles?"

"That job—I couldn't take it if I stayed North," said Dan. His pulse was pounding. The pros, the jaunt around the country, with the gates they drew nowadays. What was a job in Florida?

Rocky said, "I think you could beat Curry."

Both Rocky and Joe believed it. But Rocky had put his finger on it. Dan couldn't play his best singles and play doubles, too. Dan said, "Let's win this doubles title first. There are no doubles at Forest Hills." But it went deeper than that. He had to practice with Joe, every day. He had to re-arrange his game. If he started now, if he threw off that delicate balance . . . there would be no chance to whip Curry and Max at Longwood.

It was a clear choice. Rocky said no more, and Dan let it rest. Joe was at him the next time they were together alone. Joe was insistent, excited. Joe said he had already talked to Jack Harris, that the pro impresario would have his eye on Dan. There was gold in the hills, if Dan would practice his singles and forget doubles.

Dan tried to keep his mind clear. He tried to keep the sun from reflecting off the gold which glittered. He had been

thinking clearly enough about tennis before his deep game got going—he fought to keep it that way.

AT LONGWOOD it was hot and muggy weather. When they came down to the finals of the USLTA Doubles Championships, the blue ribbon two-man event of the year, Dan Milsap was sucked dry. His face was thin, his cheeks sunken. But they were in the pay-off round, Rocky and Dan.

Joe Potter lounged about, drinking with the older crowd, disinterested, it seemed. He had quit coaching them; after Newport he just didn't show up. Not that Dan and Rocky needed him—they were working for themselves, now.

There had been one moment when Joe had stirred. As the event drew close an official had come to Dan Milsap and asked him if he wouldn't play with Loney Campbell, Barret having decided to lay off. Dan said only, "I'm all set, sir. I have the partner I want." Joe had stared hard at Dan, then walked away, his head wagging. Loney was a terrific doubles player.

They came down to the finals. It was Curry Taylor and Max Fairchild, of course. Curry was swaggering and blustering at the edge of officialdom, the old bowl was full of people, the fanfare and excitement of a championship final was at its height. Rocky and Dan were dressed and waiting to go on the court.

Rocky said, "The pigs, eh? Now we get another chance to punish them."

"Sure, Rock," said Dan. "You feel all right?"

"Never better," declared Rocky cheerfully.

"This humidity," said Dan. "It's rough."

"You will be all right," said Rocky confidently. "You have played sensationally. You have carried me."

Curry was demanding haste, as usual. The officials got into place. The sticks for

the net were not right, Curry said. They were measured. Curry set himself and scowled at Dan. He said, "All right. I've been waitin' for this. The chips are down now. I'll get you now and I'll get you in the singles. You'll never slug me with another ball."

Dan said, "I'm sick of your tactics. Play, or pick up your doll things and go home."

He turned his back on Curry and went to position for rallying. He felt better, stronger inside. Curry no longer meant anything to him. Curry was just a jerk, trying to bully his way into a position of advantage. Fairchild was a minor irritant.

Dan warmed up well. He was sweating when they started to play. They had won service and Rocky was happy. It was good to get that odd game. Holding service was the trick in doubles, of course.

Dan served. He kept it down center, with a kick he had acquired through practice. He did not pound it, but kept the first service in. Curry swept at it. Dan was sliding in on the grass, volleying. Curry hammered it back at him, on backhand. Covering the net, Dan block-volleyed like a fighter throwing a punch. The ball skidded to Fairchild, who drove out.

Rocky said, "That is beautiful, Dan!"

Dan went to the odd court. He served again. Fairchild tried to get down the lane as Rocky moved, a foolish trick, as the agile and acrobatic Latin reversed himself and drop-volleyed where Curry could not reach the ball.

Dan won service and they changed courts. Curry was growling, but Dan could ignore him now.

Curry's service was terrific. He held it. Rocky soft-spun and held. Then they broke Fairchild. They won the first set, 6-4.

Dan was not tired, now. He felt good. He was ready for the blasting of the champions. They came hard and they came fast. Rocky, working like a cog in a ma-

chine, was everywhere at once, but never in Dan's way. They doggedly fought every inch of the next two sets.

But Curry and Fairchild were also a team, more experienced, bigger, stronger. They poured it on. Their volleys and overheads were crisp, they were swift to gain the net at every opportunity. They won the next two sets, 6-4, 6-4.

They went in for the rest period. Dan needed it. He was dehydrated, and his legs were beginning to hurt a little. It had been a long, hard summer and he was not so rugged as Rocky.

He had little to say. Joe Potter was not there to counsel them. In fact, Dan saw Joe, grinning as usual, talking to Curry and Fairchild for a moment during the intermission. It didn't irk Dan—Joe was in it for what he could get. Joe was just a practicing tennis pro.

Rocky was bright with optimism. He said, "They feel the heat too. They are not so fresh now. We have fought them well. Always we fight well, eh, Dan?"

Dan said, "We'll be in there. You're covering me nice, pal."

THEY went out again. Starting fast after the rest, Dan and Rocky won the fourth set, 6-4.

Curry was still swaggering. He censured the ball boys, made terrible squawks over close decisions. He meant to dominate the court, and he did. He also played hard, fast doubles.

Still, Dan went along holding service in the deciding set. He had not been broken yet. Rocky had been broken, because his service did not have that extra kick. And also, Dan added, because Dan did not cover service as well as Rocky, who could be two places at once.

Curry and Max held. The sun began to slant in the western sky, and a slight breeze came up. Dan and Rocky hung on. They went past deuce without losing service, either team. They went to eight-all.

It was a tiring job. Hit down center, get to the net. Guard your alley and volley deep. Keep the ball short and crisp and at their feet. Over and over again, with variations as the multifold complications of fast doubles came up.

They went to ten-all—to fifteen-all. People were getting stiff-necked from following the swift exchanges. Dan's legs seemed to have turned to stone.

Yet Dan held it up. He kept coming in and the ball was there and he stroked short, or he snapped his volleys. He scarcely knew how he did it, always hearing the low-voiced, pleased approval of Rocky as he pulled shot after shot. He was dimly aware that Curry was cursing him. Fairchild snarled as they changed courts. But Dan kept playing the best doubles he could.

For himself, he knew, he would have quit. But he had learned something. This was for Rocky. Rocky had never gained a singles semi-final all season, yet he had been cheerful, he had been always out there. He had always played doubles the same, however he felt he had been solid and good. They were a team and this was what Dan had decided upon; he would stick with the team.

Now it was the pay-off. They were even with the champs. He took the balls. It had gone to eighteen games apiece. Curry, big and powerful, was waiting for service. Curry's face was redder than the afternoon sun. Fairchild looked as though he had taken a shower with his clothing on.

He served, and managed to get up there. Curry tried to pass him on the outside, but he flung over with what strength he could muster and knocked the volley back. Curry tried to get between them.

Rocky moved like a ballet dancer, anticipating the shot. It went over to Fairchild. He slugged, a good one down center. Curry shouted and the champions boldly moved in. But Rocky didn't get

deep enough and Curry scooped a half-volley. Dan got it and punched. The four men were at the net at once. The champs were trying to force it, to take the net away from service and crash through. The ball flew back and forth without touching the ground, as if juggled by a quartet of masters.

A bell rang deep inside Dan. He refused to lob or to retreat. He took his chances and punched back, holding the racket in a semi-western grip, stabbing like a lightweight boxer.

Beside him Rocky did not give an inch. Curry hit a ferocious shot at him. Rocky pounced and rammed the ball down the middle. Fairchild and Curry both went for it. They collided and the ball went into the net.

Dan made himself go to position swiftly. Curry was jawing at Max. Dan threw up a ball. He hit it as hard as he could, the first acing service he had essayed in the match. Max, unsettled, leaped, and knocked it out.

Dan went over. He tossed a floating spin-service down the center on Curry's backhand. Curry tried for a low one and Dan, coming in, caught it neatly and sent it to Max, who blew again.

Curry said loudly, "You stink!"

Max cowered. Dan threw him another big service. Max blocked it, but Rocky came from nowhere, picked it off and banged it back to Max. The return was to Dan. He blasted a volley at Max's feet, and Max missed.

Dan faced Curry. The feeling of the big break was on him. He tossed up the ball. Curry, like a cat, started in to take the spin-shot on the rise. Dan hit him a deep, perfectly-placed flat one. It struck at Curry's feet. The champion netted. It was game to Dan and Rocky.

It was nineteen-eighteen. They changed. Dan said into Curry's angry red face, "The chips are down, big shot. Now you serve."

"I'll murder you," Curry snarled.

"With that pat-ball?" Dan laughed.

Rocky grinned over at him. They had no need to talk, to make plans on the court. They knew what they had to do.

Curry was snorting, playing with the balls. He threw one up suddenly, without the courtesy of a motion toward Rocky. He hit it as hard as he could.

"Fault!"

Curry blew through his nose. He stomped. He glared at the official who had called the service out. Then he had to hit another one. It was a twister toward Rocky's backhand. Rocky came in. He had a trick of turning on an easy backhand shot and the serve was not deep. He hit over the ball, with terrific speed.

DAN started with Rocky's ballet tactic.

Curry, coming in, had to dig up the ball. It came a little high to Dan.

Dan laid into it on the volley. He blasted at Curry. The big man, still partially off-balance, batted it out.

Curry was beside himself with rage. He went to the baseline. He aimed his racket at Dan and again attempted an acing service.

It struck lime. Dan had to throw himself sideways to block. Curry, coming in, hit off overhead and put the ball away. It became fifteen-all.

Fairchild barked encouragement. Curry faced Rocky. He changed tactics, throwing the spin-serve. Rocky, again on backhand, slashed it so the ball cleared the net and dipped. Curry, coming in, had to bend to reach the shot.

Dan put it away. He said between his teeth, "You're killin' him, Rocky. If I could only do as well."

"Steady, chum," Rocky grinned. He was relaxed and confident.

Dan accepted another fast one. This time he shot for the wide angle, and got it. He saw Curry go off-court and start a snooper, a terrific shot along the net-

cord at a practically impossible angle.

Dan's legs were about gone, but he knew where that ball would end. He trucked over there, running parallel to the net. He reached as Curry's amazing shot dribbled in, got the racket under the ball and shoved.

Curry was walking away, sure of the point. The ball slid in behind him. He turned and lashed out, and knocked it back over the net.

Rocky covered the spot vacated by Dan. His bat flashed in the sun. The ball went deep off his volley. It struck the line.

Curry had to serve again. His face violently red, he essayed an ace, and missed. Rocky took the second service and played it down the middle. Rocky wasn't laughing now. This was match point.

Fairchild rapped it back. They were all playing their heads off on this one. Dan had to stay back and try the spinner to Curry's feet. The champs had the net.

Curry volleyed. Rocky took it off backhand, rolling. He nailed it down center. Fairchild again hit back.

Dan saw the chance. He got to the ball and applied the smooch. He tossed it just barely beyond the reach of Curry's racket as the big man leaped.

Fairchild gamely ran for it. Dan said sharply, "Now."

Rocky had already started. They went to the net like a team of race horses, nose and nose. Fairchild made a terrific try for a save.

It came to Dan on overhead, and he smashed with all the strength in his lean frame. It was not until he hit the ball that he realized how little strength there was left.

Curry was too close. Somehow he had missed; it was game, set and match for Dan Milsap and Rocky Janiro!

Curry came to the net. He said nothing at all. They shook hands, but with little pretension of sincerity, and the photographers closed in.

A reporter said, "Milsap, you'll be a hot favorite in the singles at Forest Hills."

Dan said, "I might as well tell you now, I won't be playing in the singles. I'm quitting this year to take a job."

There was a swirl of excitement. Tennis officials exclaimed protest. But Dan got away. Rocky could handle them, good old Rocky with his big grin. Dan went to the clubhouse and stretched out on a bench. He was half dead.

A chuckle aroused him. Joe Potter was lounging on the end of the bench, glass in hand. Dan said, "Well, we fooled you."

"Nope. Didn't fool me. Knew you could do it."

Dan said, "But you quit us—"

Joe shrugged. "Rocky's idea. Paid me to quit. Said I was right about you. But better to leave it alone. Let you sweat it out."

Dan said, "I couldn't let him down. And I had promised to take that job in Florida."

Rocky said, "Your job, that is still waiting even next November. You play in the singles, against that Curry."

Dan said, "But the boss said I had to report—"

"Ho," said Rocky, laughing very heartily. "What you do not know—my uncle, he has bought that company. He has many interests in Florida, my uncle. You see? He thinks it very important that his employee play in the National Singles."

Dan said, "Bought the company?"

"Me, I am also staying in this country, I am working for my uncle," said Rocky. "You must introduce me to nice girls in Florida, sponsor me, eh? That will be fun!"

Joe said, "Fun, he says! What about me?"

"You can go to work too, only you are too lazy," said Rocky.

Dan could not laugh.

It paid to think straight, then. He sighed. He said, "Thanks, Rocky."

BLAZE 'EM DOWN, BUSER!

By **BILL ERIN**

The sweat was rolling off him
and he was afraid the numbness
would spread to his hand. . . .



*It was the biggest inning in the
biggest Series — and one thing
stood between eight guys and the
Hall of Shame—a dead-arm bush-
er with one pitch—a pitch that
had to match his heart!*

JIM heard Kelly stirring around the room. It was nice and comfortable in the bed, and he didn't open his eyes immediately. He snuggled down and tried to get back to sleep. He was tired. The minute he woke, he could feel the tiredness in his body. He hadn't gone to sleep until late the night before, although he had been in bed early.

Now that he was awake, he couldn't go back to sleep. He turned on his back and stretched, and the twinge ran through his left arm. He cuddled it down by his side where it was warm, and where the arm felt relaxed.

"Good morning," Kelly said. "How you feelin'?"

How was he feeling? There was more interest in how he felt today than in how the President felt. "Sleepy," he answered truthfully.

"You better get some sleep while you can," Kelly said. "We gota go down and get us a meal before it's too late."

"What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

"Nuts," Jim said, "we've got plenty of time. If I eat by eleven, that's plenty of time."

"Well," Kelly said, since he was already dressed, "I'm goin' down and grab me a cup of coffee and a roll to hold me until we eat." Kelly stopped at the door. "Get a load of that paper," he said. "Rocker Jones came out with a statement that if you pitched the game today, they'd beat us. He says you're not durable." Kelly laughed as if that was a great joke, then he went out.

Jim was wide awake now. It was like an ice cold bucket of water right in his face. Rocker Jones said he wasn't durable! Rocker Jones was putting him on the spot in front of the baseball world. Rocker was really trying to prove he hadn't made a mistake when he traded Jim out of the New York system four years ago.

Nuts, Jim thought, no use lying here in bed. He climbed slowly out of the bed, and he was very careful not to put any weight on the left wing. He stood in front of the mirror and regarded himself in his rumpled pajamas. He explored his beard with his right hand and decided he might as well shave. Still, he could go down and relax in a barber chair and maybe fall

asleep under the hot towels while he was shaved—if nobody recognized him.

He decided to get a shave. He stood in front of the mirror and took his stance. Carefully, as though the arm were made of glass, he brought it around in a throwing motion. It was stiff and there was a pain under the muscles. It would be a sharp, burning pain when he pitched.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Jim said.

The door opened to admit Colly Barber, manager of the Leafs, and wizened little Fred Burke, the trainer. "How you feeling?" was Colly's first question. "How's the arm?"

Jim turned away from them and dug out a fresh pair of socks. "All right, he said.

"You sure it's all right?" Colly asked.

"Yeah," Jim lied, "it's all right."

"You want I should give it a good rub?" Fred asked.

Jim turned and looked speculatively at the little trainer. "All right," he said, "you could give it a rub."

"What's the matter with it?" Colly asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Jim said. "It just feels a little heavy. Rub'll do it good."

"You better take a good warm-up today, then," Colly said. "You better take a long one."

"Okay," Jim said. But he wasn't sure. He didn't know whether to take a long one or a short one. He didn't think the stiffness could be worked out. He thought maybe a long warm-up would make it worse. The pain had set in at New York during the fifth game. It had slowly set in until by the ninth it had felt like someone was tearing his arm off every time he threw.

"Come on," Fred said, "lay out here on the bed and I'll work it a little bit."

Jim stripped off his pajama top and stretched out on the bed.

"I'm going to make the rounds of the

other boys," Colly said, like a worried mother hen. "I'll see you later."

Fred started to rub and it only awoke the throbbing. He worked his fingers into the muscles and brought out a sharp pain. Jim pulled his arm away and sat up. There was no use taking that torture. The arm was just sore, that's all.

"Did that hurt?" Fred asked.

"No," Jim said scornfully, "I'm ticklish."

"I thought so," Fred said. "You got a sore wing."

Jim looked sharply at the little trainer. "Did you say anything to Colly?" he asked.

Fred shook his head negatively. "Maybe we should, though," he said.

"I think I can pitch with it," Jim said evenly. "I think I should try. And if I'm gonna try, there's no use pulling the props out from under the team by telling anybody."

He and the little trainer measured each other. They both knew, without mentioning it, that they had dynamite in this information. If the news that Bobcat Jim Monroe had a sore arm got outside the room, it would change millions of dollars in betting, switch the odds within an hour, completely change the picture of the crucial seventh game of the World Series.

Fred nodded in agreement finally. "I guess if you're gonna go, that's best. Colly's gonna have McCoy warming up from the first inning anyway."

"Who's Colly got besides me?" Jim asked, in defense of his decision. "He used everybody trying to save the game yesterday. Once around and they'll have McCoy's fast ball timed out again. They eat up fast balls, those guys; they'll murder him. And old Casey Michaels can't go a full game, like this one is gonna be."

"Okay," Fred said, "You're rowin' the boat."

Jim knew he could trust the little guy. The salty old character would say what he

thought, and if he said he'd keep quiet, he'd do it.

"What about the arm?" Jim asked Fred. "You think I might ruin it permanently?"

Fred shrugged his shoulders. "If I could tell you that," he said, "I'd be worth a million bucks. Arms are funny. Sometimes they get sore and shake it off like colds, sometimes they go blooey. As long as you got the whip and the snap left, you're all right. But when she goes dead, so do you."

Jim nodded. That was about the way he had summed it up. Jim would pitch today. He was on a threshold that he might never reach again. He had won thirty and lost five during the season, the best that anyone had done since Dizzy Dean. He had won two in the World Series and could win his third, which alone would put him with the immortals of baseball. There was the additional several thousand for each member of the team if they could win today. And then there was the leering triumph of Rocker Jones if Jim let the team down—because he wasn't durable.

"I'll pitch," he said.

JIM entered the elevator, and the operator knew him. "Good morning, Mr. Monroe," he said, and his eyes sparkled. "How's the arm today?"

"Fine," Jim said.

"We gonna beat New York?" He asked.

"Shouldn't have any trouble," Jim said.

"You gonna pitch?" The boy asked.

"I don't know," Jim said. "That's up to Colly Barber."

"Do you think you'll pitch?"

"I don't know a thing about it," Jim said with practiced ease.

"Imagine that Rocker Jones sayin' you ain't durable," the kid said with great scorn.

"Yeah," Jim said, "imagine that."

"Say," said a dignified looking business man, "are you Bobcat Jim Monroe?"

"That's right," Jim said.

"By golly," said the man, "would you sign an autograph for me? My boys will go crazy about it if I bring one home."

"Sure," Jim said, as the man dug into his brief case. "How many boys?"

"Two," the man said.

"I'll sign it twice," Jim said, "one for each boy."

A little old lady, with a flowered hat and gray hair, rummaged through her purse. "Would you do that for me?" She asked. "I have a nephew that would rather have your autograph than a hundred dollar bill."

"Maybe I ought to start selling these," Jim said good-naturedly. By the time the elevator reached the ground floor he had signed autographs all around.

"Hi, Bobcat," someone yelled when he got out of the elevator, "how's the arm?"

"Fine," Jim said. That's what everyone wanted to know—how the arm was. It was lousy, but only two people in the world knew it.

Bobcat, they had nicknamed him, because he prowled on the mound and fought for every game like a wildcat. A little lefty who fought for every run as though the World Series depended on it. Now the World Series did depend on it, and he was in bad shape, with all his fight gone.

What was it Rocker Jones, now manager of New York, had told him? "Forget it, kid," Rocker had said four years ago when Jim was trying to break into the Texas League and Rocker was managing down there. "You're too little to ever be a major league pitcher."

"I can pitch as good as anyone you've got there," Jim had said.

"Maybe so," Rocker said, "but you're not durable."

"I'll take my turn," Jim had said.

"Forget it," Rocker said. "You couldn't win twenty games in the majors if you had Feller's fast ball. Just about the time a manager's depending on you, you'll come up with a sore arm. Forget it. Take up plumbing."

So Rocker had put him back a year, and finally had traded him out of the farm system. Now he had a chance to show Rocker he was durable, and instead it looked as though Rocker was going to be right. It was ironic.

"How's the arm?" someone yelled, and everybody in the lobby stopped what they were doing to hear the answer.

"Fine," Jim said. He had to pitch the game today. It seemed as though everybody in America except Rocker Jones would be disappointed if he didn't pitch, even though Colly hadn't yet announced officially who his starting pitcher was going to be.

No, the question was not whether he would pitch, but if he'd win if he did pitch.

Jim arrived at the ball park early, but he didn't do anything except sit around in the sun and let the heat soak in. He was glad it was going to be a warm day.

Finally Colly started to worry about his warm-up, so Jim strolled down the line with big John Cain. John would catch him during the game. He took it easy and worked himself up slowly. He gave his arm plenty of time to warm before he started to bear down, but the pain was still there. It was a wrenching, searing pain, and Jim quit early. It wasn't going to work out; he'd just have to pitch with it the way it was. He told John not to call for anything fancy until he said so.

Colly didn't think he'd warmed up enough. "Something wrong with your arm?" He asked Jim.

There was no one near them. "Better keep McCoy warmed up from the beginning," Jim said cautiously. "It feels a little heavy."

He could see Colly's face bleach under the heavy, weathered tan. "Listen, kid," he said, "if it doesn't feel right, you don't have to—"

Jim shrugged his shoulders. He knew Colly's conscience was bothering him about the way he'd worked Jim. Jim had been in fifty games that year for the Leafs. That was almost one out of every three. And Rocker had said he wasn't durable.

"It'll be all right," Jim said, and he strolled away from Colly and back into the sun. He had his jacket on and he was very warm, and that was good.

They announced the line-ups on the public address system and there was a big roar after Jim's name. They played *The Star Spangled Banner*, and then Jim was out on the mound for the top of the first.

Rocker was going to the third base coaching box, and passed Jim. "You'll never make nine innings today," Rocker said, his heavy face wearing the sneer Jim knew so well.

"I remember once you said I'd never make twenty games," Jim retorted.

"I'll bet that arm of yours gives you trouble," Rocker said. "You're all arm, kid, you ain't got the body for an iron man."

Jim didn't answer. But the fighting fire came burning up from within. He wanted to wipe that sneer off Rocker's face if he never pitched again.

JIM took it easy the first inning. He knew the New York batters well, and he used his control to pitch to their weaknesses without putting much on the ball. It hurt his arm, but not as much as if he was putting all his stuff on it. He let the fielders work. He put the side away with only a single registered against him.

Big Sam Rockford was working against Jim for New York, and Sam did all right, too. The Leafs didn't even hit a solid ball in the first inning.

New York banged out three long flies against Jim in the second inning, and things were looking pretty good for him. With a little luck, he might be able to do it, yet.

In the third he put the New York catcher in the well, and then laid three easy ones across to Sam Rockford. Sam hit the third one, and popped up to the second baseman. That brought up the lead-off man.

Jim laid the first one in carefully, and the man slashed it into right for a hit. The next man banged one into left field, and it put men on first and second with two gone.

Rocker Jones started to yell from third. "Now we go," he shouted, and he clapped his big hands together. "Let's knock this little kid outa there. He'll never last, men, let's get him outa there."

Jim called Cain out, and the catcher lumbered to the mound. "I wondered how long you were going to get by with that cripple pitching," Cain said. "You better start showing them something or they'll tee off."

"Okay," Jim said. "Call them the way you want them." Cain lumbered back.

Cain called for the slow curve, and Jim broke it in close to the batter. The New Yorker was looking for an easy thing, and nearly broke his back when the ball hooked. It was strike one.

Jim wasted two fast balls outside, both of them just about taking his arm with them, and then broke in the slow curve again. Again it fooled the batter, and Jim had the two and two count. He caught the inside, high corner with the fast ball for a called strike three. But when he left the mound his arm was throbbing with pain and threatened to drop off at the shoulder. Rocker might have the last laugh yet.

Jim had to bat in the bottom of the third. He had an inclination to just take his swings and get out of there. But he realized that any hit might start something

here, so he took his cuts. He caught one solidly, but drove it right into the center-fielder's hands.

The fourth inning opened with this big seventh game still scoreless, and the tension was mounting until something was due to let go with a bang.

Jim eased up again, trying to save his arm as much as he could, but the New Yorkers were looking over every pitch. They went boom-boom, and there were two men on with nobody out. Colly came out of the dugout and Cain came in from behind the plate, while Rocker taunted from the third base coaching box. They converged on Jim.

"How they looking?" Colly asked Cain.

"Lousy," Cain said, "but he can throw them if he wants to. He's protecting a sore arm."

Colly turned to Jim. "How about it?" he asked.

"It's a little sore," Jim admitted, "but I haven't started to bear down yet."

"Better start," Colly said, "we can't play around with even one run today." He went back to the dugout.

Jim was over the hump with the tough part of the batting order. He had one more good man facing him, but his runners were on first and second, so he decided to pitch to the batter. He broke off a sharp curve, and the man faced up for a bunt. He bunted, but the pitch fooled him enough so that it was a poor bunt. It came almost straight off his bat, and toward Jim on the mound. Jim moved like a cat and pounced on the ball. He cut it to third base with everything he had, and went to one knee to weather the pain.

It was a force at third and one out. Jim took a long time on the mound getting ready for the next batter. He finally wheeled a fast ball with a big hop. It was strike one.

He broke a curve on the inside corner for strike two, zinged in a fast ball that was wide, and then pulled the string on

one that was due to nip the corner. The batter had to go for it, and topped it out to Wally West at short. It was a symphony to Jim to see the ball moved from short to second to first for a double play. His crowd, the hometown fans, let loose with a real cheer as he trotted to the dugout. Rocker was scowling as he passed Jim.

"When do I blow?" Jim asked gently.

"You won't last," Rocker growled back.

In the fifth he struck out the first batter, eased up on Sam to let the big pitcher pop one up, and then fed one that was too good to the lead-off man. He swung from the heels. Jim saw the ball take off and he didn't even look back. He went to the rosin bag until he heard the crowd yell and saw the runner pull up. Kelly had pulled it down in centerfield right up against the wall.

When Jim came out for the top of the sixth his arm was so numb he wasn't even sure that it was there. But as soon as he wheeled the first warm-up throw, he knew it was there, all right.

The sweat was rolling off him and he was afraid of the numbness that seemed to set in until he wheeled the ball. He was afraid of the numbness spreading to his hand so he couldn't feel the ball. He had to feel the ball to keep his control and keep the ball breaking.

Jim was bearing down on every batter now. The Leafs hadn't done a thing with Sam Rockford, and Sam's support had been excellent. Jim was afraid of throwing that home run ball, or getting a man in scoring position. It could happen so fast when it happened. The Leafs couldn't afford to give away any runs.

Jim worked a three and two count on the first batter in the top of the sixth. He tugged at his cap, picked up the rosin, and kicked around on the mound to give his arm time to settle down between pitches. He took his stretch and wheeled

the ball in. It was a fast curve with a big break, and the batter missed it for strike three.

The next batter tried to tee off on the first pitch, but fouled it up behind home plate. Cain maneuvered under the whirling pellet, and grabbed it for the out.

He had to grit his teeth and pitch—grit his teeth and pitch. It was like sticking his arm into a red-hot furnace every time he threw. At last he had the third batter out of there, and he trudged back to the dugout. Three more innings. Nine more men if none got on base—more than that if they put men on, and chances were good that they would.

HE WAS shrugging into his jacket when they reminded him that he was leading off in the bottom of the sixth. He shrugged out of the jacket and selected a bat.

Jim couldn't gold-brick here. If he could get on, with the top of the batting order behind him, it might do the trick. He crouched and looked over Sam's assortment. Sam caught a corner with the first one. Then he missed for a ball, high. He threw a big, sweeping curve, and that's the one Jim wanted. He timed it out carefully and swung into it. But his left arm wouldn't come around and hitched his bat. He caught the ball on the end of the bat and blooped it up into the air.

Jim dug in for first as the ball looped out over the first baseman's head. It was just beyond the man's reach, but he made a quick recovery to drive Jim hurriedly back to first after Jim made the turn.

Jim was on first. The crowd was screaming, clapping and yelling. They brought the jacket out to Jim, and he was thankful for the warmth. He took his lead and caught the bunt sign for the second pitch. Sam wheeled, and Jim lit out for second. He could tell by the yell, and Colly shouting from third, that the bunt was down. It was a good bunt, so

New York made the play at first, which saved Jim a slide.

Then Wally West, the great Leaf short-stop, struck out as Sam Rockford bore down. That was two gone, and Jim still on second. It brought up Kelly.

The crowd was begging, imploring Kelly to get a hit. A hit of any consequence meant a run. Rockford got a two and two count on Kelly, then tried to sneak over a fast ball. Kelly caught it right on the seam and blasted it over short into left field. It was a sure hit, but it was out there fast and didn't give Jim much time to go home.

Colly was swinging his arm wildly when Jim bore down on third, so Jim rounded third for home. While the thousands in the ball park screamed madly, and millions sat on the edges of their seats listening to the radio account, Jim belted down the third base line. The ball came wheeling in behind him. It dug into the turf and bounded to the catcher's glove about the same time that Jim, plunging head-first, hit the catcher.

The home town crowd went insane as the umpire came out of the cloud of dust with his hands spread flat. Jim was in with the run. It was 1-0 in favor of the Leafs. But Jim was limping and dragging deep for air when he went to the dugout. He didn't even bother to brush the dirt off. He wanted to sit down, before he fell down.

The next batter was out, and that was it. Jim was still pumping for air when he went to the mound. He stayed in the dugout until the umpire yelled at him, then he strolled slowly to the mound.

"What's the matter?" Rocker asked loudly. "Getting tired, kid?"

Jim didn't answer.

"Okay, men," Rocker shouted, beating his big hands, "the man's tired. Let's turn the Bobcat into a pussy cat."

Jim took one warm-up throw, and signalled to Cain that it was all he wanted,

in spite of Rocker's chortle. He was tired and beat, and he felt he couldn't hold that one run lead. He had counted on a higher scoring game than this, something that would let him ease up until he had men on. He almost went to Colly to ask him to put someone else in. But he knew that they'd get to McCoy before three innings were gone—Casey might have it, and he might not. Jim at least had the psychological advantage. They were afraid of him, and he could keep them off balance. Then, too, there was Rocker.

Jim had the lower end of the batting order again in the seventh, and he staggered through. He wasn't issuing any walks. If they got on, they'd hit. When he got three balls on them, from then on he wheeled it over the plate. He couldn't afford to lose any batters today. His arm didn't have any extra pitches in it.

It was the top of the eighth, and if he could get by this time, he might make the ninth. These were the big guns, here in the eighth.

It was three and two on the first batter, with the whole diamond a sort of shimmering haze to Jim now, and Jim zinged home the fast ball. But the batter caught it and bounced it off the center field wall to put him on second.

Jim tried to shake off the haze. The pain went up through his shoulder into his head, now, but there were a million kids listening that thought Bobcat Jim Monroe was the greatest pitcher that ever lived, and Jim wasn't going to let them down.

Rocker's voice was still big and loud from third, but Jim thought he detected a little note of desperation in it as Rocker urged his team to drive that tying run in.

Jim concentrated on big John Cain and the area around his glove. It was step and throw, step and throw. This batter didn't like them at the wrists. Jim got a third called strike at the wrists as the batter tried to bluff it out.

The next batter could be fooled by a

good change of pace. Jim mixed them up until the batter was swinging at his own shadow. Jim struck him out, too.

THEN Jim was looking at a pinch hitter. He had never seen this batter before, and he didn't catch the name on the P. A. He called to Cain, and Cain came lumbering out from behind the plate. The big catcher's face was dirty and streaked with little channels where the sweat ran off. He was tired, too.

"Man, that's terrific stuff you're throwing," Cain said.

Jim looked surprised. It didn't feel good. "What about this guy?" Jim asked.

"He doesn't like it up around his shoulders," Cain said. "He'll murder anything from the waist down. And if I were you I'd throw him lots of curves. If he could hit a good curve consistently he'd probably be in the starting line-up."

Jim nodded and Cain ambled back. "All right," Cain yelled when he was back of the plate, "he's our cousin, boy." The rest of the team began to talk it up again as Jim toed the rubber. He looked back at second, and then cut the ball at the plate. The curve broke in right at the shoulders for a called strike.

The batter got out of the box and beefed to the umpire. Go ahead, Jim thought, take a lot of time. His arm was losing its strength now, and that was bad. If it didn't have the snap, the whip, all the grit in the world wouldn't put the ball in there. He decided to throw nothing but strikes. He put a good twist on the next ball, and broke it into the batter. He knew, as he threw it, that it was going too low. It broke in just above the waist, and the batter met it—his second bad pitch.

Merchant, in right field, stood with his back against the wall to grab the sailing white sphere. Well, Jim thought as he trotted in to the roar of the crowd, at least they're giving me support. If I lose this game, at least I've had support.

Rocker came down the line and, as tired as he was, Jim couldn't resist putting the hook into Rocker. Maybe after this next inning he wouldn't have the opportunity.

"One more inning, Rocker," he said. "Is that durable enough for you?"

"We'll get you," Rocker snarled.

Colly pleaded for another run, but big Sam Rockford wasn't giving anything. Jim was the second man at bat, and this time he didn't try. He scowled at Sam and crouched, but he didn't offer at a pitch, and Sam struck him out. The lead-off man got a hit, but Sam choked off the rally right there to retire the side.

Jim was pitching the ninth inning on guts alone, and he wasn't sure it was enough to hold this wild New York team in check. He didn't have easy men to pitch to, and Rocker was goading them furiously. Jim faced a parade of pinch hitters. He wasn't even sure when the batters changed.

If Rocker had shut up at third he might have won the game. But every time Rocker yelled, Jim pulled himself back into the game. Every time he threw it was labor.

He came out of the haze and he didn't know how long he had been pitching or what was going on. He called Cain out.

"How many out?" he asked.

Cain looked at his drawn face curiously. "There's one away and there's a man over there on first."

Jim looked over. "How in hell did he get on?" He asked. He didn't hear Cain's answer. He was already worrying about the man at the plate. The pain seemed to have diminished, but it was hard bringing his arm around. He was floating on the mound, and he had to get his foot on the rubber before he could pitch. It

was hard pitching. He didn't even know what Cain had called for. He cut a fast ball at the plate. He burned it in with everything he had. "Let's see you hit that," he gritted as he threw.

As if in answer to his challenge, the batter swung. The ball was coming at him, looming big. He put up his glove and felt the ball crack into it. The sting of the ball against his palm brought him back again. First! There was a man on first! He turned and whipped the ball without striding. He threw it with all arm, and then he felt the pain again. It brought him to his knees and he knew he couldn't pitch another ball in this game.

Pete, on first, stretched and grabbed the ball, then lifted his foot quickly out of the way of the sliding runner. That was all, it was all over!

Jim climbed wearily to his feet, and then the team closed in on him. They carried him on their shoulders while the fans gave him an ovation and the sports writers beat out the dramatic story on their typewriters. For one more year, all the kids would want to be Bobcat Jim Monroe.

There'll be more years, too, Jim vowed. The arm was sore, but it wasn't dead. No dead arm could have pitched that game today. A long rest, lots of heat, good care, and the old soup bone would be like new next year.

From up on his teammate's shoulders, Jim looked down and saw Rocker pushing his way across the field. The lassitude seeped away and a big grin came over Jim's face. Rocker looked up at Jim, and Jim waved mockingly. Rocker put his head down and walked moodily away.

Jim laughed. Nobody could say he wasn't durable now.

LAST DOWN DYNAMITE

A Novel by Les Etter

OCT. SPORTS NOVELS

OUT SEPT. 10th

LUCKY

THE stone entrance to the campus of Lee College was narrow, the approaches were hidden by lilacs, but Joe Carson later decided it was fate that threw him against Dick Rudd the first day he arrived.

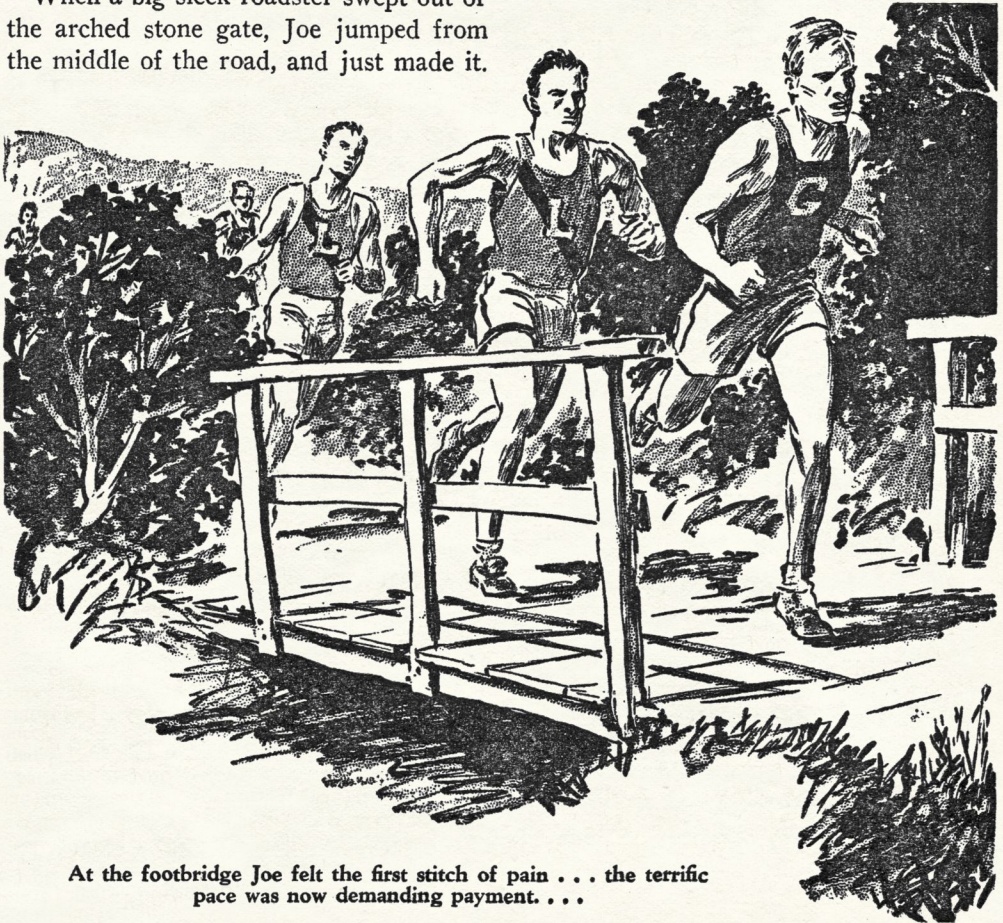
He had known Rudd before. In fact he'd even been thinking of the great miler whom he had defeated at the Garden last winter, and he was wondering how long he himself would be on the Lee campus before somebody recognized him.

When a big sleek roadster swept out of the arched stone gate, Joe jumped from the middle of the road, and just made it.

The blue roadster lurched as brakes set, but the left front wheel ran smack-dab over his weathered alligator suitcase. There was a fine, crunching sound.

Joe looked at the suitcase, then at the driver whom he recognized as Rudd, and said, "Hello."

Rudd let out a soft explosive curse and leaped out of the car. "I almost run the guy down, I mash his grip, and all the guy says is hello." He was a tall, handsome



At the footbridge Joe felt the first stitch of pain . . . the terrific pace was now demanding payment. . . .

LEGS

*A champ's spikes will fit
anybody — anybody with
the right size heart!*



By THEODORE J. ROEMER

kid, with blue-black hair and fine, high-strung features.

Joe was not very tall and not very good-looking. Rusty hair, a sprinkle of freckles on a map as squat as the shape of Ireland, and a hard, knotty body, were not conducive to good looks. His track coach at Western College in Kansas said he was made for running the mile and when you do it in the time Joe Carson did, that was enough reason for being on this earth. Joe accepted all these facts with a grin, as he accepted everything.

He grinned now. "Shucks, pop won't care about the bag. I'll kick it back into shape. An' the clothes will re-press. The nicknacks in there I c'n get along without. How are you, Rudd?" He shoved out his hand.

Dick Rudd stared. He looked back toward the car seat. "The guy knows me."

Joe looked toward the car and now for the first time noticed another man in there, and a girl. The man was tall and brown-haired; the girl was brown-haired too, but that was as far as Joe got in describing her—his breath was suddenly gone.

"... and I'll pay you for the damages, sonny."

Joe came back to life.

"What's that, Rudd?"

The young aristocrat stiffened at the tone of Joe's voice. "I say, send the bill to my room in Stanley Hall and I'll pay for it. And after this, freshman, have a little respect for upper classmen."

"Upper classmen?" He grinned. "But I'm no freshman, big boy. I'm a junior the same as you are. I'm transferring from Western College in Kansas. Taking up electrical engineering here at Lee. On a scholarship, you know, for that race I won last winter."

The two men blinked. The brown-haired girl suddenly sat up very straight and stared at Joe. Joe colored a little. He picked up the crushed bag and thumped it back into shape.

"Shucks, fellows, I came here to help you do some running. That's why I picked Lee—I wanted competition." He poked the droopy bag again with his fists. It promptly sagged on the other side. Joe shrugged, touched a red forelock in parting, and strode up the driveway.

"Harvey! Dick!" he heard the girl say in hushed excitement behind him. "That must be Joe Carson from Kansas."

There was silence then behind Joe. . . .

There was a notice on the bulletin board that noon.

ALL TRACK MEN REPORT TO COACH ASP IN THE DRESSING ROOMS AT FOUR.

Joe was a little surprised. It was fall, a little unusual for track. But, then, Limpy Asp was one of the greatest coaches in the game. Joe reported.

He stood in the pack of men as Asp addressed the assorted gathering. "To be a great runner you have to run . . . a winning track team isn't made in the spring, it is made in the fall . . . you're going to run and run and run. . . ."

Joe smiled. That's what he liked—running. And this was going to be cross-country running, in teams, against other colleges. He'd never done that. He'd just run out on the Kansas prairie by himself.

HE JOGGED out with the huge gathering of Lee men to the athletic field behind the gym. The valley stretched southward, and there were hills all around, with winding roads, pine trees on the slopes and rocky, grassy patches glinting in the sunlight.

Next to him was Dick Rudd, and with Rudd was the brown-haired man Joe had seen in the car. A gold star was above the "Lee" indicated he was captain of the team.

Rudd whirled, dancing on one foot. "You clumsy oaf. You spiked my toe—"

And then he saw who it was. His lips thinned expressively.

"So you're Carson, the guy who beat me at the Belmont mile last winter."

"Sure," Joe said. Once again he thrust out his hand.

Dick Rudd didn't seem to see it. "So you came here for competition, is that it?"

"Sure," Joe said. "If there's any around." He grinned at the gathering circle.

"Ever do any cross-country before?"

"I chased jackrabbits out of Kansas." He grinned. He expected a laugh, but none came. These guys acted as if he were walking on sacred ground, coming to Lee and challenging the mighty Dick Rudd.

He tried to pass it off. "Want me to run down a few for you here, Rudd?"

The silence had deepened now, but Rudd finally smiled. He said, "Why, yes, Carson. I wouldn't mind. We'll do it this afternoon. Follow me—if you can."

Coach Asp arrived then and lined them up. His gray eyes lighted speculatively as he saw Joe and recognized him, but he spoke to the squad.

"Take it easy today, men. Newcomers follow the older men until you learn the course. It's a tough five-mile grind, but we'll do only half today, so turn back at the brickyards. All right. Get set. Go!"

Rudd grabbed the lead, and Joe went up with him. Joe ran with smooth, hungry strides. The pack of blue and gold-shirted men swept across the grassy field, turned through the gate of a wooden fence and strung along a creek lined with yellowing maple trees.

The harriers left the creek and cut up a dusty road that began to climb. Rudd was stepping up the pace. Joe grinned and clung to him. The others, idling, fell behind.

In three minutes the two ace milers were alone. The course swung off the road up an old logging trail. The slant grew steep. Rudd began to puff, and Joe, with a grin,

thought of passing him but he didn't know the way, so he kept behind.

They crossed the hill and took the other slope, moving fast. It was cool under the trees, and Rudd stepped up the pace again. Paths branched off, but they stuck to the main one. They came to a fork and Rudd shot down the left one, Joe hanging grimly to his heels.

The pace began getting Joe then. Rudd had his second wind, and Joe had to admit the guy had stamina. It seemed they'd been running for a long time—he wondered where that brickyard was, but decided not to ask Rudd. The guy would think he was showing the white feather. Not a word had been spoken since they'd left the others, at least twenty minutes ago.

Suddenly Rudd sprinted. He raced down the dark shadowy aisles disregarding brush and logs and treacherous vines, running like a deer.

Startled, Joe plunged after him. But he didn't have the knack of dodging. A branch whipped him across the eyes, some thorns took his bare thigh, and, blinded, he tried to dash down the steep pathway but a vine grabbed his ankle and Joe went head-on into a soggy, moist log.

He lay there gasping, the earth in his ears, his nose, and his smarting eyes. He started to shout down through the dim woods to Dick Rudd, who was no longer in sight, and then Joe closed his mouth slowly. He saw it now. He had swallowed the bait—hook, line and sinker.

Rudd had teased him off the course, run the legs off him and then deliberately lost him.

Joe slowly got to his feet. He walked down the path trying to trail Rudd's steps, but there was little Indian blood in him. In five minutes he was hopelessly lost.

The evening lights were just going on when a farmer's wheezy truck drove into the Lee College driveway. A stocky little figure in a blue and gold running suit—much the worse for rips and tears—

climbed stiffly off the seat and made his way toward Junior Dorm in the soft September dusk.

Large groups of students were lolling on the steps of the college buildings. They watched the bramble-torn figure and at Junior Dorm someone chuckled. "Anyone hear of any Kansas cyclones around?"

"No, but I hear the Western Express is about to come in."

"I saw a passel o' jackrabbits come out of Newton's woods about an hour ago," a third said with an affected drawl. "D'yuh suppose—"

"I suppose," another said.

Joe just kept on marching.

LEE COLLEGE thought it was quite a joke. Dick Rudd had showed up Joe Carson, the miler from Western College. It was quite a neat trick. One of the boys had met Rudd at the brickyards with Rudd's car and Rudd had ridden home while Carson had wandered ten miles up the valley. Some of the boys were betting even money the redheaded Westerner wouldn't go out for the cross-country team anymore; some went so far as to bet he'd withdraw from Lee.

The next afternoon Joe Carson was down in the locker room drawing a fresh blue and gold running suit.

He kept with the pack that afternoon. He didn't say anything to Dick Rudd, nor much to anyone else.

For three days he ran the course, learning the turns, the slopes, where to use his speed, where to conserve it on the rocky slopes, how to take the creek at the sand bar, and his dogged running showed results. He seldom came in less than fifth.

He beat two wiry-muscled kids; he pressed a swift blond giant the next day; the third he was on the heels of Harvey Shummer, the captain. Invariably Dick Rudd led the pack home. Joe Carson's eyes were always fixed on Rudd's fine, athletic shoulders.

Shummer paused in the locker room door. "Nice running, Carson. We'll maybe need you this year to beat Grant."

"Thanks," Joe said, and walked past.

Things might have ended there, and in time Joe might have become a member of the Lee cross-country team, but Alice Shummer came into the picture. Joe met her one evening crossing the campus. In fact, Joe couldn't see anything. But he saw her eyes that were a lovely violet, her lashes long as the ferns he'd fallen over in the woods that first day, and her smile something out of this world.

And suddenly, he didn't know why, but he confided, "Your brother can be number one man on the cross-country team, but I'm going to be number two. I'm going to beat Dick Rudd if I have to run all winter."

Her eyes shadowed. Joe was puzzled for a second, and then the voice of Dick Rudd sounded behind Joe and Rudd was there with some of his gang. They'd heard Joe's words.

Joe shoved out his jaw, but it wasn't the threat that hardened Rudd's dark eyes; it was the fact that Alice Shummer was out with Joe. "I'll be around, Carson," he said, and moved on.

Gus Town, the blond giant, met Joe at the dressing room door the next day. "I heard you flung down a challenge to Rudd last night." Town grinned.

Joe didn't say anything.

Town said soberly, "You'll find Lee a bit different from your western schools, Carson. They like to give a joke here, and they can take a joke too, but when you're tampering with traditions and such things, you're treading on dangerous ground."

"Traditions? That what you call what Rudd pulled on me?"

"No. See that building over there? That's Shummer Hall. Harvey Shummer's uncle donated that to Lee. That building is Chantilion Hall. He was a track captain here years ago."

"I suppose you're going to show me a Rudd Hall now."

"No. But Dick Rudd is of that class. And he's gunning for the Lee captaincy next year. You see, since he's a famous miler, you're sort of attacking a tradition here."

"I'm something of a miler myself," Joe said curtly.

Town shrugged hopelessly and started to turn away, then faced Joe again. "We run out first meet against Grant College next week. Grant has about as much moss on its belfry tower as Lee has. And they've got tradition so thick over there freshmen have to wade through it. The two men who finish first for their schools in that meet win the captaincy for next year. Now do things make much more sense?"

Joe said, "I wouldn't mind being captain next year." He passed Town and yanked open his locker, reaching for his silks.

When Joe came out onto the athletic field there was an air of expectancy over the squad. They all looked toward him and grinned, and Joe remembered his boast last night. It had made the rounds already.

Rudd came over to him. Joe had seen him arguing with Shummer, and the captain had finally fallen into silence.

Rudd now said, "Hello, Carson."

Joe nodded.

Rudd said, "Feel like running today?"

Joe said, "What's the gag now?"

Rudd shrugged. "Nothing. Just wondered if this is the day you're going to run the pants off of me." He laughed and started away. "Just let me know when," he said over his shoulder. "I want to be prepared."

Joe felt quick heat. "Today's as good as any day," he retorted.

"What?"

"I think I know the course by this time, Rudd." Rudd laughed and moved on.

In a few minutes Coach Asp came out

and sent them jogging down the course. Shummer might beat him; Town might lead him in, but there was one man who wouldn't, and that was Dick Rudd.

Joe ran easily among the pack. Shummer paced the group. Only Rudd was ahead. Joe knew the course and how to pace himself. He knew where to let out—let Rudd run himself into the ground.

And it looked as if Rudd were going to do just that thing. He was among the maples before the squad hit the wooden gate. He was up off the creek bank before the harriers entered it. Joe saw his blue and gold shirt twinkling among the pines as Rudd raced up the dusty road. The guy really was cutting for a five-mile grind.

At the logging trail, the better runners forged ahead. Joe went with Shummer and Town into the lead. It was murderous going and Joe gasped for breath, but he was leading Shummer and Town when he hit the footbridge across the gorge where the course doubled back.

He got his second wind, and felt strong. Any turn now and he'd find Rudd collapsed, exhausted, arms clutching cramped sides. No man can run as Rudd had and last five cross-country miles.

But he ran on and on and he didn't see Rudd, and Joe's stocky legs began feeling the ago-old drag, his powerful lungs began to heat, his arms to pull down. *Run, run,* his mind said. *You're leading the pack. Rudd is somewhere behind you. He fell to one side, to rest.*

He splashed across the creek. The water felt cool, and he wanted to stop, but he knew he couldn't. He staggered up the bank, down the creek's sandy shore. He headed for the athletic field and the finish line. He was in the lead!

And then he saw a peculiar thing. He saw a blue and gold jersey flitting among the maples ahead of him. He blinked. He couldn't believe his eyes. No one had passed him. He had set too terrific a pace,

even for Shummer and Town to keep.

His eyes then grew wide with uncomprehension. The harrier was Dick Rudd. What was more unbelievable, Rudd was jogging lightly along.

Joe put down his head and pulled the plug. He caught up to Rudd.

Rudd turned. "Oh, it's you."

Joe didn't have any breath to answer. His lungs were crying for oxygen, his feet screaming with agony. They were on the edge of the athletic field. Joe saw the finish line four hundred yards distant. He fastened his eyes to the marks by the gym and he tried to run hard and in a straight line. But he staggered drunkenly. He clasped his sides. He finally fell, and he didn't get up.

Coach Asp ran out. "What's up here? Why did this man run himself into the ground like this? Who paced him like this? You, Rudd?"

Joe staggered erect. He was limp as a rag. He saw Shummer there now, and Town also had finished. And the two stringy-muscle kids. "What happened—"

Shummer said shortly, "Nothing much. You just ran too hard." He gave Rudd a curt look. The captain and Town helped Joe into the dressing room.

IN A FEW minutes Joe had recovered. He showered, dressed slowly, and went out.

A step fell in beside him. It was Gus Town. "Shummer didn't like it," the blond giant said.

"What?" Joe asked.

"The trick Rudd pulled on you."

Joe stopped. He looked at Town steadily, then said, "All right. Let's have it."

The big runner said, "Now don't go flying off your kite. They pull it on some cocky kid every year, only this year it really fit in, according to Rudd. But Shummer didn't want it; he doesn't want you ruined for that meet with Grant next week."

"What was the trick?" Joe asked steadily.

"There's a log fallen across the gorge half a mile this side of the foot bridge. It's in the brush and out of sight but everybody knows it so there's an official there the day of the meet. Rudd simply crossed on that log, ambled down to the creek and waited for you."

"Waited to make a fool of me," Joe said tightly. "Just one more score for me to settle."

"Hold on, Carson," Town cried. "We don't want any more trouble this year! We want to win that Grant meet—" But Joe had turned toward the Dormitory where Dick Rudd lived. He had broken into an angry trot.

Rudd was alone in his room when Joe burst in. The ace Lee miler started to his feet at the sight of Joe, then rose more slowly. Rudd had been thinking. It was in his eyes.

He said, quietly, "Come in, Carson. I was just going over to see you."

"Save yourself the bother—always, Rudd." Joe took two steps forward, fists clenched, and then stopped. For Rudd didn't lift his arms to defend himself.

"Well?" Joe asked, suddenly at a loss because of Rudd's strange quietness.

"Would it help matters any, Carson, if I said I think I'm a heel. Every year we pull it on somebody; we did it on Town last year, but it was all in clean fun. This year—Shummer was against it because—well, it was done in spite."

Joe bit his lips. "The hell with you, Rudd. The hell with the whole bunch of you!" He wheeled to the door.

"Wait!" Rudd's voice suddenly was urgent. "Listen, Carson, your cockiness doesn't fit in here at Lee. Maybe by now you realize that. On top of that you've got the ability to steal my thunder, maybe even be captain next year, and I—"

Joe saw the guy wanted to say something. "Go on," he said.

"Well, this captaincy means a lot to me, Carson. I want it—and I don't want you in that Grant race. With Shummer, Town, myself and the two Rigon brothers we can win that Grant College meet without you. I've got a proposition for you."

"Another trick?"

"Upon my honor. Tomorrow is Sunday. There will be no racing. In the evening there will be no one around the gym or the course. My proposition is that we'll race, and the one who loses will not run in the Grant race."

"Why don't you want to take a chance against me in the meet?"

Rudd colored. "I don't want to get beat by you in that race."

Joe watched him closely, and he knew Rudd meant it. "What about Shummer and Town?"

"I can beat both of them. Besides, they're seniors. I can beat the two Rigon brothers." He shrugged, then grinned wryly. "Doesn't make sense to you, does it? Such pride?"

Joe said slowly. "You fellows do things differently here at Lee. You're a different sort. But, as for the bet, okay. I'll take you on at seven. Just the two of us."

Rudd shoved out his hand. Joe hesitated, then took it briefly. He walked out of the room, and there was a hard smile on his face.

Rudd was waiting behind the gym and out of the wind when Joe showed up in running togs at seven. Joe had eaten very sparingly that evening, and had rested most of the afternoon.

"Ready?" Rudd asked. His lean, handsome face was pale. He had everything to lose and not much to gain. It was just the opposite with Joe.

A gust of wind tore around the gym. Joe looked at the low scudding clouds coming down from the head of the valley. There was rain in them, and wind. Night would fall quickly this evening. He thought of calling it off, then discarded

the idea. He wasn't going to be called yellow for backing out. He said, "I'm ready," and stripped off his sweat shirt.

Rudd did the same. Silently they toed the mark, both upright, leaning forward as if it were to be almost a sprint instead of a five-mile grind, then Rudd said, "Go," and both were paddling off, swinging for the wooden gate at the far side.

Rudd forced the pace through the maple grove, along the creek and onto the road, but there Joe took it up. They patted up the dusty road, each running strongly, each a splendid running machine in his own right, each matching strides, silently, grimly, knowing the real grind was yet to come.

The mountain paths were traversed in silence. They swung alongside the gorge, Joe in the lead by three paces. Each took rocks and logs and brambles in stride. They rattled over the footbridge, and Rudd forged ahead, running harder now. Joe began to feel the drag, but Rudd was feeling it too, he saw. The man's mouth was pulled down, his lips were parted, but the rhythm was still in his arms.

It was almost black now. Wind swept down in savage gusts, and Joe felt a sprinkle of rain on his hot face. Yet they ran on. They came out from under the shelter of the great trees, and Joe had never thought he'd endured such agony before. Rudd was two steps before him. The instant they came from under the maples great sheets of rain hit them; then lightning spat and crackled on the very grass-tops about them, and the creek was a roaring deluge right behind them and lapped at the heels.

Joe wasn't conscious of any of these things for there was a roaring and crackling all of his own between his ears and behind his eyes, and reaching wild fingers of fire deep into his chest. He was tortured and yet he ran, for Dick Rudd was two steps ahead of him, and they were crossing the quagmire of an athletic field

and they had two hundred yards to go . . . then one hundred yards . . . fifty . . . And suddenly Joe stopped.

He was alone. An instant ago Rudd had been there and now he was gone.

Joe stood on stocky, trembling legs and stared into the darkness. Then a glimmer of blue fire came from a hilltop and in the distant lightning flare Joe saw Dick Rudd stretched out on the wet mud half a dozen paces before him. He was lying face down, across a broken tangle of wires.

Joe shot a glance toward the power plant, and saw that the wires had been struck down, and that Rudd was on them. His hands felt as if a hot branding iron had been jammed against his palms.

He did not attempt to touch the wires again. He needed rubber gloves to get Rudd off those death-dealing wires. Rudd was unconscious, maybe already horribly burned. Joe raced toward the gym door. He remembered the heavy rubber mats before the doors—there was no metal in them.

Fear brought back his strength. He gathered the two big mats and ran back around the gym. He approached the spot cautiously. Everything was in inky darkness. Then he saw Rudd's still figure. He threw a mat over the closest wires and with the other rubber mat grasped Rudd by the feet while stepping on the wire with his right foot.

He felt no shock; there was no blue fire; and once free, Joe dropped the rubber pads and hoisted the unconscious Rudd onto his shoulders and he staggered toward the gym. He doubted that he'd make it.

The sun came brightly into the college infirmary. Joe opened his eyes.

"It's about time you're waking up, Carson," a voice said beside him, and turning his head Joe saw Dick Rudd in the next bed. Rudd had the sheet thrown back from his wide chest; Joe saw his chest and biceps were encased in bandages. But

there was a grin on Rudd's handsome face. "Wake up and get the news."

Joe looked to his own hands. They burned and felt numb and queer. They also were encased in bandages.

Joe scowled. "What news?"

"Look!" Rudd pointed down the small row of neat white beds. Joe started. Gus Town and Harvey Shummer were there sleeping.

"They ran into a washed-out bridge coming from a show last night," Rudd explained.

Joe looked at the two ace runners of Lee's cross-country team, then he said slowly, "What's wrong with them?"

"Shummer's right knee is twice the size of your head. Tom's ankle is either sprained or broken, the doc doesn't know which yet."

Joe digested this news slowly. And the cross-country race with Grant College was Wednesday. Shummer and Town were definitely out of it. Once Rudd had said Lee College would win easily with Shummer, Town, the two Rigon brothers and either Joe or Rudd in there. Now Shummer and Town were out.

He recalled what he'd heard of the Grant College runner—Lancel, Deevers and Morgan. The only ones Lee College now had to face the red and black harriers were the Rigon brothers—and Dick Rudd and himself, if they could run.

Rudd seemed to read his thoughts. "It doesn't look so rosy, does it, Carson?"

Joe shrugged. "It's your college." He lay back and closed his eyes, pretending sleep.

Rudd looked at him a long time, then lay back on his pillow. He stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

COACH ASP'S bony face was worried. He looked around at his men in the locker room. "A first is not enough today, men, even if that miracle should happen. We've got to get three men in the

first five, and one of them has to be one of the leaders. You've got a big job ahead of you. You know Lancel, Deevers, and Captain Morgan, from last year. Push them hard the first two miles. When they sag, you keep right on going. Run your legs off. That's all."

Joe went out onto the field between the great red and black buses from Grant, and the place seemed filled with great, hungry-looking men in red shirts and black running pants. He wondered which three were Lancel, Deevers and Morgan.

Then he wondered why he was going through this for a school he had grown to dislike. He had made up his mind that if Rudd defeated him Sunday evening, he'd transfer to Tech or Millard, but since the epidemic of accidents he would delay his action until after this meet. Then Town would be back on his feet; maybe even Shummer would be back running. He would defeat Dick Rudd, then be rid of this school. That meeting Sunday night hadn't proved a thing. He could beat Rudd. He'd show the guy.

There was a huge crowd around the athletic field. Expensive cars banked the course all the way to the line of maples. The autumn afternoon was bright and cold, and suddenly Joe felt a shiver. He told himself it was the cold. It wasn't the Lee band striking up *March On, Lee*.

Rudd passed him, jogging with high, bouncing steps. The junior's lean, handsome face was tense. Joe remembered then that the man who came in first of the Lee harriers—outside of a senior—was the captain for next year. Dick Rudd wanted that captaincy. He was out there running in spite of the horrible red bars that were burn scars across chest and arms.

Rudd now forced a grin. "Good luck, Carson."

A whistle sounded. The well-trained red and black harriers from Grant lined up swiftly. Every one looked lean and racy. A gold and blue runner from the

home school stepped in between the red-shirted men. Twenty young men tensed on the white chalk line, then a gun cracked.

Joe had a flashing picture of Alice Shummer standing with her brother before Rudd's blue roadster, and then he had passed.

The dried-grass slope invited his flying strides, and he lengthened them, his body coordinated with swinging arms driving legs. He was abreast of three men. One was Rudd; the other two were powerful but medium-sized men wearing the red of Grant. They must be Lancel and Deevers, he thought. He'd heard Morgan was tall and sandy-haired.

Joe remembered Coach Asp's words to set a hard pace and keep on running. He lengthened his stride a bit more. Both Lancel and Deevers shot quick looks at him.

They ran through the wooden gate, and the roar of the crowd faded behind them. They jockeyed for position as they ripped down through the yellow maples. Dry leaves swirled under their running feet.

Joe was in the lead, but Lancel and Deevers pressed. Joe smiled. They were wondering at this pace. They knew the course, probably better than he did.

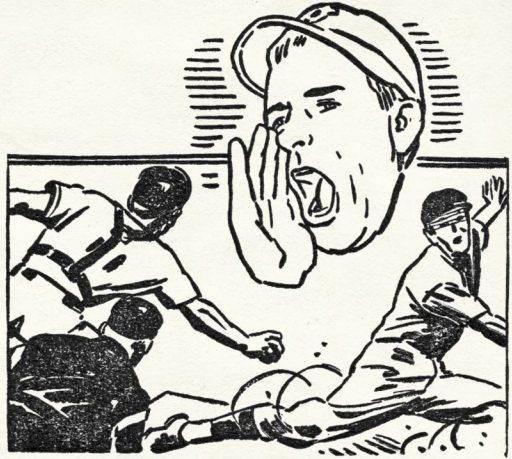
The four streaked up the dusty road leading the colorful pack and their pace looked more like a two-mile run than a gruelling hill and dale go. Both teams followed the leaders and the sun and shadows dappled their red and gold shirts. And every man knew a championship lay in the balance in this meet between the two leading colleges.

Joe ended the country road sprint with plenty of strength left. His spikes took the rising, pine-covered logging road. He whipped into the wood's path and Lancel, the black-thatched runner, was breathing on his neck. Joe's short spikes dug harder. The familiar roll of rock and sticks began

(Continued on page 128)

THE HOME PLATE

By
JOHN DREBINGER



IT WAS an exceptionally fantastic unloading that actually started the Yankees on their road to unprecedented triumphs and for this reason alone it seems more than passingly strange that they should have had something caustic to say when somebody else indulged in it.

Back through the years of 1915 to 1918, or directly after Mack's second great team had been sold down the river, the power club in the American League was the Red Sox. On their roster they had such luminaries as a southpaw pitcher named Babe Ruth, an outfielder named Tris Speaker and a host of other headliners, including pitchers Herb Pennock, Joe Bush, and Samuel Pond Jones.

The owner of the club was Harry Frazee; his interests seemed to be equally divided between baseball and the stage until his theatrical ventures on Broadway took a rather bad turn. It then developed, to Boston's misfortune, that Frazee liked the theatre more and in order to protect his Broadway interests he decided to unload his choicest baseball chattels.

Down in New York he found a couple of eager buyers. For the Yankees were now owned by the two millionaire sportsmen, Jacob Ruppert and T. L. Huston, and they were ready to go all out to produce a winner.

Their first notable purchase was this lefthanded pitcher named Ruth who presently was to become an outfielder, greatest home run slugger of all time and perhaps the most glamorous figure that any sport has ever known.

Frazee got exactly \$125,000 for the Bambino, a paltry sum, indeed, in comparison with the figures that Mack and others got for goods of considerably less value. However, Frazee had other pieces of baseball ivory to sell and he seemed quite happy. Mays, the pitcher with the "submarine delivery," came down from Boston to New York. Also his batterymate Catcher Wally Schang, whom Mack had earlier sold to the Red Sox in his hour of distress. On and on they came. Pennock, Waite Hoyt, then the "boy wonder" of the pitching industry; Samuel Pond Jones, and Everett Scott, a shortstop who set an endurance record that stood until Lou Gehrig came along to break it.

And then, in a final closing gesture, the Yankee colonels made off even with the Red Sox manager, Edward G. Barrow, who was to become the general manager and guiding genius of the Yanks for the next quarter of a century. That was really buying out a store, lock, stock and barrel.

RUNAWAY CLEATS

(Continued from page 45)

work. I might steal your pants while you take showers." He pushed by Raegen, went to the door. He turned and said, "I've got a pro offer. Read about me in the papers."

The door slammed. Raegen turned toward the door, but Toroki was quicker. Nick spun Raegen around and shoved him back against the wall.

"Have you shot off your mouth about this, Sid?"

Raegen grinned. "Not yet. Good thing I dug it out of him, hey? I don't want any jailbirds on the squad."

"What you want, Sid, and what we want, may be a couple of entirely different things."

"What the hell do you mean?" Sid blustered.

"Just this!" Nick shoved a big fist in his face. "If you ever pop off, Sid, I'll break you in half. And I'm not kidding about that."

Nick turned and looked at me and at Shelevat. "That goes for you two guys too."

"Hell," Skimmer said. "I'll help you work out on Sid."

"And when you two guys are tired of beating on him," I said, "I'll work him over a little."

Raegen licked his lips and looked at each one of us in turn. "You guys are nuts!" he said hoarsely.

"Crazy as bedbugs," Nick said. "What's your decision, Mr. Raegen?"

"I—I'll keep still."

Nick let him go. The three of us raced down and piled into Skimmer's car and roared out the main gate and headed toward town.

Gallahan was trudging along just beyond the crest of the first hill. He heard the car, turned and thumbed a ride.

But when he saw who it was, he picked up his bag again and walked on. Shelevat

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drove ahead, and then he stopped and we got out.

Gallahan's face was a stubborn mask. His mouth was set in a tight line. "What the hell do you want?"

Nick Toroki grinned. "A little exercise, kid. You want to leave. We don't want you to leave. So here's your chance to lick me."

Sir Gallahan stood and looked at us. Slowly the hard, bitter look dissolved and once more it was the face I had seen when I had first checked in at my assigned room. He looked like an uncertain, but enthusiastic, kid.

"You guys are kidding," he said, and his voice was uncertain.

Skimmer grinned. "Sure we are. We are smart boys and we take care of ourselves. We've got rugged teams on the schedule. Nick and I are in the offensive backfield. If you walk out on us, we lose a good chance to soften up the opposition. So come on, Gallahan, get in and we'll go back."

He had a wide grin on his face as we drove back through the big gates and up to the house.

They went inside and I stood by the car for a few moments. Mike Kaydee was strolling around the grounds. He came over. He grinned at me.

"Ed," he said, "it looks like some of the boys might have managed to learn something."

I looked him in the eye. "Learned something? I don't know what you're talking about. All I learned today was that Nick Toroki messed with a buzz saw."

He sighed. "Nick's a good boy. I had a hell of a job talking him into it."

"The squad looks good," I said.

"Could be, Ed. Could be." His eyes were keen. "Maybe we'll play the brand of ball they do at Yohannus."

He walked off. I laughed to myself and went in to dinner.

BLACKOUT PUNCH

(Continued from page 61)

because the champ was set up. Dunham could see it.

Johnny kept walking in after his man, knocking down Malloy's guard, pegging the punches home. He could hear the noise now, filling the big stadium, the cry for blood.

Gentleman Jack tried every trick in the book to break up the attack, but Johnny wouldn't be kept off. He staggered the champ with a left, in close, and then crossing the right to the chin floored him for the first time.

Hymie Greensban was tearing at his hair when Malloy went down.

Malloy, who had never been floored in his life, didn't know how to act. He came up at five, very groggy, and Johnny nailed him with a short left to the jaw. The champ went down again, rolling over on his back. He grabbed at one of the strands, pulling himself to a sitting position, and he looked across at Johnny in the far corner, his eyes glassy.

The yellow streak showed in the man then, and he stayed where he was while the referee counted off the fatal ten.

Grinning, Johnny went back to his own corner. He was standing there with Frank Dunham's arm around his shoulder, when the announcer blared:

"The winner, and new champion—Johnny Craig."

Dunham said, "How's it feel, kid?"

Johnny looked at him. He said quietly, "It would feel just as good now even if I'd lost. Thanks for coming up, Frank."

"I was a damned fool for staying away from the greatest fighter in the world," Dunham chuckled.

They went up the aisle together and the writer, George Brand, was following them, whistling *Frankie And Johnny Were Sweethearts*.

Johnny Craig thought it was a nice song.



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(Continued from page 123)

under his feet. Brush stung his bare thighs and the pungent scent of the woods came deep into his laboring lungs.

They came to the gorge path, and Joe flung a quick look behind. Harriers were strung out for four hundred yards. Lancel was still at his shoulder, rusty-haired Deevers six paces behind him, and Dick Rudd was fourth, six paces behind Deevers. The slope had been good for powerful, short-legged men. The others would make it up on the level stretches, and once more Joe wondered where Captain Morgan of Grant was.

At the footbridge Joe felt the first stitch of pain. The terrific pace was now demanding payment. Joe grabbed his right side. He was surprised to see the bandages torn and dragging from his hands. The thorns of the slope had done that. But he knew he'd have to ease the pace.

He shortened his stride, and Lancel shot past him. Joe grimaced, then heard other flying steps, and Deevers whipped ahead. He heard a third coming on swiftly, and Joe fought the pain and stepped up his pace once more. He wasn't going to let Dick Rudd do any passing.

When they came to the break in the woods a breeze fanned his wet forehead. It felt good, and tasted sweet. He was almost up to Deevers now, but the pain was coming back again, as he scrambled down the slope to the creek bank.

He caught Deevers at the bottom, and the man's face was ghastly. Joe drove past him. He straightened up the bed of the valley, then heard feet pounding behind. Rudd? He looked back and saw a giant, sandy-haired runner tearing down the slope toward him. Morgan!

Joe let out, running as if he had wings, and he wondered why Morgan didn't pass him. Lancel, the Grant harrier in the lead, strangely came back toward him. He crossed the creek, passing Lancel.

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LUCKY LEGS

Down along the creek sand other footsteps drummed up behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw it was Morgan. Rudd was just coming across the creek, fighting it out with Lancel and Deever. So Morgan was to be his fight. And Morgan wasn't any too fresh or strong either.

They jogged abreast for a hundred yards, and swung up into a screen of willows. Morgan forged ahead, but at the bank, Joe's stocky legs made it up. The Lee man and the Grant harrier fought it out, back and forth. They were coming in sight of the college now. They drove for the slope of the maple grove. Joe's solid legs gained him a scant one-yard lead.

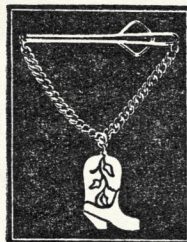
He hit the slope top and shot into the clear, the first harrier, and a distant roar came from the crowd. The blue and gold of Lee was in the lead.

Joe fought the tearing agony in his chest, and the numbing jar each time his feet hit sod. He ran on on unfeeling legs. He knew he was weaving crazily, but those footsteps were closing in.

Desperately, against all rules of running, he flung a tortured glance backward. He almost stumbled in astonishment. Morgan was not behind him. It was Dick Rudd!

DICK RUDD'S great chest was heaving. The deep red bars burned on his chest had broken open, and blood spattered his gold shirt. His head was back, his mouth open. The man was running with an incredible effort.

Joe had pretty much lost all sense of time and distance but somehow a sense of values remained in his own tortured brain. A Lee captaincy meant nothing to him. Besides, he wouldn't be here next year, nor next week for that matter. If he won now, and then left, it would be an empty honor for the man behind him, and the guy had pride as thick as the moss on Lee's belfry tower.



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SPORTS NOVELS MAGAZINE

In a few seconds a blood-spattered gold shirt was abreast of him. The crowd-roar was like surf. Joe ran on and the blood-tinged shirt drew ahead and finally Joe was running alone. Ahead of him Dick Rudd had broken the tape, and everybody was screaming.

Joe staggered in second.

Somebody slipped an arm around him and flung a blue and gold blanket around Joe's shaking shoulders. It was Gus Town. His blue eyes were sharp. He whispered, "You say fellows are different here? You mean men who come from the West, don't you? I saw you look back. I saw you shorten your stride."

Joe said gruffly, "Okay. I'm going down to the dressing room."

They came, in a few minutes—Rudd, Shummer, and Gus Town. Shummer did the talking. "All of us track men saw it, Carson. It was the biggest thing I ever saw in sport. Lee is proud of you. We want you to move over into Junior Dormitory, and Dick here—"

Joe looked at Dick Rudd then, and saw the guy's eyes. For Dick Rudd's eyes were wet, and Gus Town's lips were working. And Harvey Shummer was looking up at him steadily from the bench onto which he'd sank.

These aristocrats of Lee were asking him in. They wanted to be friends of his. These fellows who had poked fun at him, pulled their tricks on him. A queer little thrill moved through him.

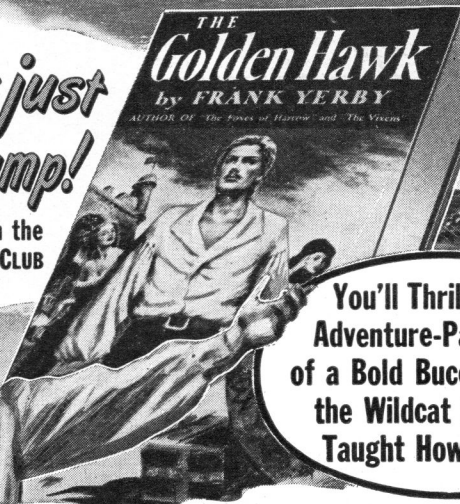
Then he thought of Alice Shummer, and for an instant he stiffened once more, but the rigidity left his stocky, hard-muscled body. He knew the answer to that one, and a guy can't have everything.

He said, "Okay, we won a race with Grant, and we got some more coming up. And next spring we'll be running those miles against each other. Okay, I guess I'll stick around."

He felt very good.

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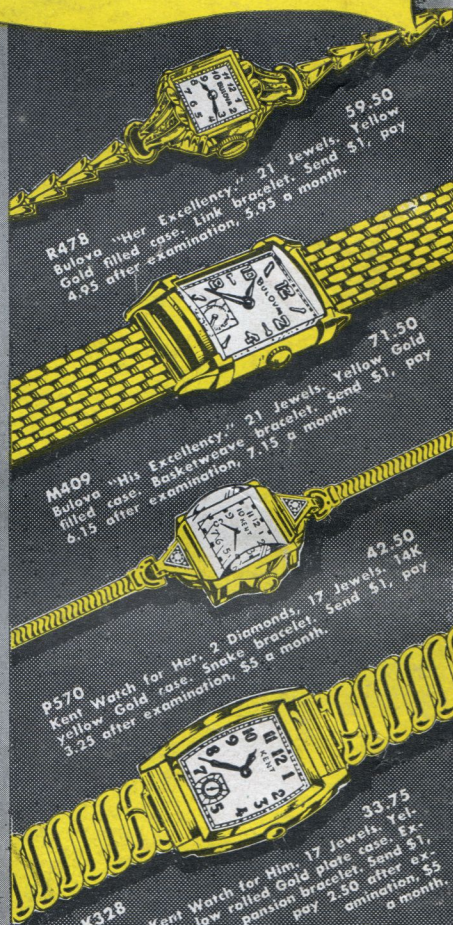


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