

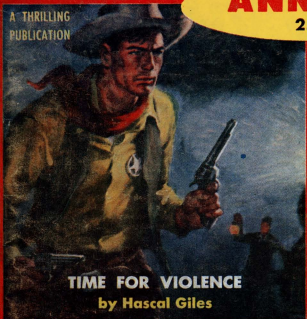
12 TOP-FLIGHT ACTION STORIES! ALL NEW!

# STORIES

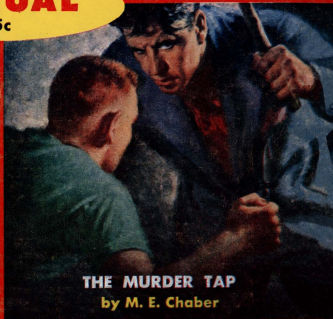
**ANNUAL**

25c

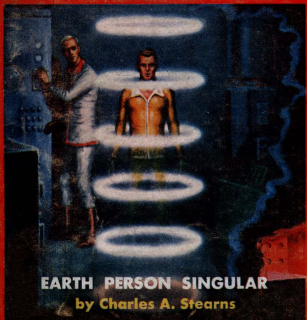
A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION



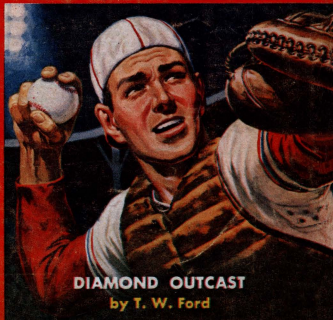
**TIME FOR VIOLENCE**  
by Hascal Giles



**THE MURDER TAP**  
by M. E. Chaber



**EARTH PERSON SINGULAR**  
by Charles A. Stearns



**DIAMOND OUTCAST**  
by T. W. Ford

# STORIES

**ANNUAL**

Vol. 1, No. 1

1955 Edition

## Three Detective Stories

- PARTNER'S PAYOFF** . . . . . Roger Dee 6  
The guy had the gun—but Al had the guts! A short short story
- THE MURDER TAP (A Novelet)** . . . . . M. E. Chaber 26  
Private Eye Hamil had only one client—but that one was plenty
- VENGEANCE IS NOT ENOUGH** . . . . . Bruce Elliott 67  
Henry cradled his dead son in his arms, and his mind went blank!

## Three Western Stories

- TIME FOR VIOLENCE** . . . . . Hascal Giles 51  
They were waiting for one thing, a chance to kill the squatter!
- HAWK IN THE SUNLIGHT** . . . . . Robert Stephens 84  
He was about to lose his best friend, and find— SELF RESPECT
- BRANDY ON THEIR MINDS** . . . . . Paul Randell Morrison 102  
Cruelty meant one thing to C. C. Sisters, another to the burro!

## Three Sports Stories

- CHEESE CHAMP (A Novelet)** . . . . . Bill Erin 10  
The fight fans called Welter yellow, so he took on a man-killer
- DIAMOND OUTCAST** . . . . . T. W. Ford 55  
Was it any wonder the hapless Bulls made an outcast of Carlson?
- THEY'RE DEAD AT COOPERSTOWN** . . . . . Fletcher Flora 98  
It certainly looked like a no-hitter for good old Southside Drum

## Three Science-Fiction Stories

- EARTH PERSON SINGULAR** . . . . . Charles A. Stearns 43  
Sometimes, a space alien's bark can be worse than his aardvark!
- KING LODGE REVISITED** . . . . . Herbert D. Kastle 76  
The kid from the future insisted that Tim King was his ancestor
- BANNION'S CAVE** . . . . . Margaret St. Clair 90  
Lycias paid a heavy price for his daring in tinkering with time

See "A Word to Our Readers" on Page 83

ALEXANDER SAMALMAN, Editor



The crashing slide cut Wiley down, and he dropped the ball

# DIAMOND OUTCAST

By T. W. FORD

**T**HEY weren't a boisterous bunch, the Bulls, as they sat in the club car of the train that carried them westward for a two-game series with the Spiders. But they radiated confidence with the talk quick and sharp, a laugh once in a while and sometimes a hopeful boast.

"The Spiders are tough, all right. Gas-house stuff. But they can be taken. And we got the pitching now!" That was Nick Cassino, the third-sacker, talking.

"Yeah, and I hear Wiley is suffering from that old back trouble again. Without him at short, it's a different infield."

Kid Jarron was the Bull shortstop, a towheaded, baby-faced kid a year out of college. He was raw but a flash out there in the short spot.

Down the car a little way, taking no part in the barbering session, the tall, flat-bodied man sat sprawled, long legs thrust out. He watched them, his narrow, leather-hued face dead-panned behind the cigarette smoke curling before it. The cheeks were slightly hollow, the face of a man who'd come up the hard way. But the long, light blue eyes held a slight smile at the enthusiasm in the Kid's voice. Then one of the group happened

*Was it any wonder the hapless Bulls made Tuck an outcast for feeding them jeers—when they were hungry for cheers?*

to glance his way and the eyes went cold, impersonal.

"The way I see it," Moose Kenly's thin, squeaky voice rose above the rumble of the train through the night, "there are four guys in their lineup we gotta stop. Early is one." He started to check them off on his long fingers. Moose, with shoulders like barn doors, was a pitcher. "And I'll stop 'em if I have to throw my arm in after the ball, by damn!"

**T**HEY were on their last leg of a road trip, a highly successful road trip with seven wins out of nine games. There was the Spider series yet to play, and then back to the home park for a long stand. They were swinging in home after climbing to third place, right hard on the heels of the Spiders. And the Spiders were breathing on the necks of the leaders. The Bulls felt good about it, felt they were coming along.

"Trick is when you tangle with them Spiders," said Shorty Scott, "you mustn't let 'em shake you off your game." Scott was one of the veterans, a former major leaguer. "They get you sore and you try to get back at them and forget baseball—and they got you. The point is, though, we can take 'em."

"Sure we can!" chimed in the Kid. "Who the heck are they to take us, anyway?"

"Why don't you guys stop smoking that kind of joy juice?" The tall man with the poker face drawled. He rose slowly, the long blue eyes sneering at them while the mouth grinned mockingly. He stretched long arms lazily sideways.

It wasn't till he stood up that a man realized how big-boned Tuck Carlson, the Bull centerfielder, actually was. "The Spiders are poison, a hot, tough ball club. You guys—we—we've been loaded with luck on this trip. Caught the Little Bears when they were in a slump. The Maroons should have both those games we stole on flukes." He paused to shake his sleek black head.

"Wake up and cut out the rah-rah stuff!" he went on, jeering. "Grow up,

little boys! We'll be lucky to get a split with those toughies. Lucky as the devil." He turned to ease down the swaying car with a natural grace, then turned half back when his name was called.

It was the swarthy Stretch Berry, another of the veterans down from the majors, who'd swung up out of a booth. "Carlson, why don't you crawl off to a nice quiet place and drop dead? I'm fed up with your kill-joy talk! And all because you just can't understand guys fighting for a ball game!" Berry was truculent wagging his head with his words, a danger signal.

Carlson laughed harshly. "Pollyannas, you mean, don't you?" Then he swung on down the car. In the entrance was Big Bill Kirk, the skipper. Carlson gave him a curt nod and passed on. Kirk said nothing to him. Arms akimbo, Berry stood down the car, wondering at that.

"I'd give my store teeth to knock off them Spiders in both games just to show that jerk," he growled.

Nick Cassino raked his wavy black hair with an angry gesture. "Even if it was for marbles, that guy makes you sore enough to want to win, the crepe hanger!"

The next forenoon in Spidertown, the special bus to take them out to the park pulled up before the hotel. There was a tautness in the air about them. Mouths were a little grim. The few attempts at badinage had fallen pretty flat. They started to climb in. But Tuck Carlson's wide lips cracked in a sharklike grin.

"Hi ho, here we go," he half sang, "to get our brains knocked out!"

Cassino whipped around on him. "For cripes sake, why in hell didn't you stay with them doggone Spiders, anyway?" Carlson had come from the Spiders several weeks ago in a trade in which Big Bill Kirk had given up a young speedballer and a bundle of cash.

Tuck Carlson's eyes flickered coldly once. He could have told Cassino why the Spiders, aside from the fact they had plenty of picket line replacement, had been willing to part with him.

First, there was his feud with Jess

Raines, the mound star. In a pre-season practice game, he'd come in from third on a passed ball with Raines covering the plate. There had been a crash, the giant hurler coming out of it with an injured leg. It hadn't been serious. But when Raines got knocked around in the early weeks of the season, he'd blamed it on the leg and Tuck Carlson. And there was a Raines clique on the Spider club. So plenty of guys were against him. The management had been glad to unload a player causing dissension on the team.

Second, Tuck had had a weakness for breaking training, a fondness for the glass that cheers. He had been fined several times, warned. But the calibre of his play had remained high so it had been difficult to do too much to him. But it had been an angle in the deal with the Bulls and Big Bill Kirk. Kirk had protected himself on that point, though. He and Tuck were friends from class-D days. The Bull pilot, before okaying the deal, had talked to Tuck on long distance and gotten his solemn pledge to stick to the straight and narrow if he came to the Bulls. And Tuck Carlson, an outcast amongst his teammates, had kept his word.

Sitting alone amidst the buzzing chatter of the other players as the bus rolled along the parkway, Carlson's saturnine face relaxed in a little smile. He was proud of the fact that he'd kept his word and stayed on the wagon. But then, Big Bill had always been able to handle him.

**I**N THE locker room, he dressed for the field off alone. The others, in knots and pairs shunned him, chattering amongst themselves. Just once the wide mouth twisted sadly. He walked onto the field the same way, alone, chin out-thrust belligerently, black head tilted cockily. Some of the bleacher fans cheered him. But as he got nearer the visitors' dugout, he was booed and hooted. The Spiders, after his departure, hadn't minded letting out the story he was a trouble maker. He just smiled coldly at them, then rattled a couple of long drives into

the stands in batting practice.

The game got underway with his old enemy, big Raines, pouring them in for the Spiders. The left-hander was in great form, smoking the ball through there to retire the first three Bulls in order. On the bench, Tuck wondered what would happen when he, batting fifth, came up. He had a pretty good idea as he trotted to center when Moose Kenly took the hill for the Bulls.

And Moose was shaky. The Spiders had become his problem child, knocking him out in his last three starts against them. He put the first man on with a free ticket. A cool wind blew. But he kept taking off his cap and sleeving his forehead. Out in center, Tuck felt sorry for the poor devil. He knew the feeling. He had been a chucker, back in class-D days, himself. The Moose missed with two, then grooved the next. Carlson was off with the crack of the bat, going back and over toward right. In right, Tip Olsen was racing, too, but had started a split second late. He couldn't get it. Then Tuck leaped and made a one-handed snatch, wheeled and whipped the ball to Kid Jarron to hold the runner on first. He did it all with that effortless grace that made things look easier than they actually were.

Moose settled down and got the next two. But when Tuck came in, none of his teammates had anything to say. Sphinx-faced, he waited in the on-deck circle as Stretch Berry batted. Tuck knew it wasn't going to be easy to stand up to that Raines' fireball under the circumstances. He had a pretty good idea of what was coming.

But it never came. On the 1-1 count, Berry uncorked a line drive. Raines tried to duck, but the hit caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head. After the trainer had worked on him, the giant Spider tried a few heaves, then shook his head and walked off. He'd always been one of those "me-first" guys who didn't believe in punishing himself.

It was little break for the Bulls because the Spiders then brought in Michaels, the sinker ball specialist who was only

a whit less effective than Raines. He got Tuck to hit into a double play on his fourth trip to the plate.

It went along like that till the fourth when Tuck came up again with one aboard. He reached for an outside pitch with the hit-and-run on, pushed a blooper over the first-sacker's head. Tuck rounded first, saw that Wiley, the Spider shortstop, was asleep at the switch as he watched little Jarron dancing like a monkey off third, and had only started toward the keystone bag. So Tuck took off.

He and the ball and Hooks Wiley arrived at the sack about the same instant. Wiley swiped at him with the ball, but Tuck's crashing slide cut him down. And Wiley lost the horsehide. The ump reversed his decision, ruling Tuck safe, as Kid Jarron flew across the plate. It had been heads-up baseball.

"Okay, Tuck, so you want it rough," Wiley said as he rose.

Tuck raced to third on a sinker in the dirt that got by the Spider second-string backstop. He came in with the second run on Shorty Scott's long fly. But as he walked toward the dugout, he knew he could expect trouble. Wiley hadn't said much. But he was one of these soft-spoken guys who never even cursed and yet would cut your head off when roused. More, he was one of the Raines clique on the Spiders.

Moose got in trouble in the fifth when a boot by Kid Jarron, a two-base error, put a man on. He got the next hitter, but Early waited him out for a pass. A single scored one man and sent Early to third.

Then there was a sharp liner over second, a clothesline hit due to fall in there. Tuck raced in swiftly, experienced head working twice as fast as his long legs. There was a chance for a diving shoestring catch. But if he made it diving and hitting the ground, Early would waltz in from third. That runner on first would be holding up, though. Tuck knew the answer.

"Second!" he yelled as he charged. He was at the ball as it sank, a foot or so from the turf. Then he dug in his spikes

and held up to trap the ball on the first hop. He fired to Kid Jarron at the keystone for the force, Jarron whipped to first and it was an inning-closing double play, slamming the door on the Spider threat.

Shorty Scott said to Moose as they walked in, "For a danged Calamity Jim who's always jeering, he sure plays a hell of a lot of ball."

**T**UCK himself came walking in with a typical dead-pan expression. When he came up in the top of the eighth with it still a 2-1 ball game, the Spiders let loose such a flow of abuse from the bench the chief arbiter had to warn them. They knew he was responsible for these two Bull tallies. And there was that take-out at second.

"Hit him in the eye and win a big cigar, Mike!" Wiley yipped to the hurler.

"Let the busher get on base and try to come down!" sang out the second-sacker.

Michaels did blaze in a duster that made Tuck hit the dirt. The backstop guffawed. "Whatsa matter—afraid when it gets rough, bum?"

Tuck's lean jaws worked slowly but hard on his gum. He'd make them pay. He bit at a jug handle in too tight. Then Wiley, at short, stopped his nervous hopping around and called time. He was bent sideward, and a few moments later he was leaving the field, walking lopsidedly. It was his back again. And Tuck knew that would be blamed on him for the play at second. Sure enough, somebody barked from the dugout.

"All right, Carlson! You asked for it, busher!"

The pitch came in, a sinker that he timed. But the third-sacker made a great play and he was out. The Bulls could do nothing that frame. Moose went back to the mound. And the trouble started. He simply came apart at the seams, blew to pieces. By the time Kirk could get a bullpener in there, the Spiders had slammed over two tallies. They drove home another to make it a 4-2 game before the new man could get the third

out, simply reversing the tide. The Bulls came into the dugout with a dazed look.

All save Tuck Carlson. He stepped down into the dugout with a smirk. "Well, I guess that means curtains, huh? It's the ten-count. You guys can't be expected to get up off the deck after that blast."

"For gawd's sake, shut up, Carlson!" Scott said sullenly.

"Don't say I didn't tell you," Tuck went on cheerily. "The Spiders are just too tough for you guys. Might as well admit this game is as good as over, I guess, or are you still kidding yourselves that you're better than they are?"

They started to snarl along that bench. "You devil, Carlson!" Stretch Berry barked. "Shut up! You can't call us yellow and get away with it!"

The smiling Tuck looked blandly innocent. "Nobody said that. I'm just being a realist. See what I mean?" The first Bull up had already gone down swinging.

Cassino had come back to change bats. "Let's show this big-mouthed wise guy!" he bit off. And he started the fireworks by rapping out a double, then streaking to third when the sub shortstop kicked around the throw-in.

And the Bulls, embittered and riled by Tuck's needling, went to work on Michaels and got him out of there. When the smoke had cleared, it was knotted up at 4-4. Moose's reliever proceeded to handcuff the amazed Spiders in the home half, and the game went into the tenth inning. Then the Bulls, still boiling, collected two more, Tuck himself driving in one of them with a long fly to right center. And that proved to be the ball game.

There was just one sour note in the victory. The Spiders, bitter about losing Hooks Wiley, had begun to turn on the rough stuff. And during their big three-run rally in the eighth, a runner from first had gone into second with his steel high to spike Kid Jarron badly, forcing him out of the game.

"Who the heck said these guys were

tough?" asked Scott.

"You guys were lucky, loaded with horseshoes," drawled Tuck as he shed his sliding pads. "Shucks, Raines got hurt right off. Then they lost Wiley. That sub in his place whiffed with a runner on twice. Why you practically had the game handed to you on a platter. And still you almost dropped it, right?"

They were all looking at him. There was an ugly pulsing in the silence, broken only by the splash of water from the shower room. Big Berry dropped the towel with which he had been rubbing his hair-matted body. He advanced, elbowing aside Nick Cassino who had already started toward Tuck. Berry came on, bare feet slapping on the concrete floor. And the others closed on him in a semi-circle, like a wolf pack. Berry's hands folded into big, malletlike fists.

"Look, Carlson, I've had just a little too much of your grousing, kill-joy stuff," the first-sacker said, low in his throat. "You're getting paid by this ball club, but you're always running it down. I've had all I can take of it, you—" Anger choked his throat and he leaped forward, his thick right arm cocked.

"Cut that stuff!" Big Bill stepped into the picture. "Berry, you want to get plastered with a fifty-smacker fine? Carlson, pipe down and get showered. I run a ball club, not a fight stable."

**R**EAL TENSION built in the dressing room before the next afternoon's game. They were confident. But they were tight, too. If they could cop two from the Spiders—that was the thought in every man's mind. Except one, maybe. Then, walking past Tuck Carlson, Nick Cassino broke the silence.

"Well, wise-guy crepe-hanger, what's going to happen today, huh?"

Tuck looked up, slate-blue eyes mocking. "Thompson will be back in there for 'em today. Look out!" Ching Thompson was the Spider's big first-string backstop, rated tops in the circuit, who'd been laid up with a strep throat condition for more than a week.

That was all Tuck said. But the reper-

ussion was fierce. The Spiders started Wild Will Sands, a smoke-balling kid, on the hill. And that day he had his control. The fighting Bulls had him in trouble several times, but in the clutch he had the big strikeout ball at his command. For the Bulls, it was little Knobby Rock. And the diminutive veteran with his flutterball stuff had spun a two-hitter going into the eighth, not letting a Spider get past first.

"We'll get 'em! They gotta crack. Just keep plugging away," Stretch Berry said as they went out for that frame.

With one down, Ching Thompson stepped in. Knobby worked him to a 2 and 2 count. Then he served up an outside pitch, and Thompson, a noted bad-ball hitter, reached. There was a crack like a pistol shot. When last seen, the ball was passing over the left-field fence. It was the only run of the game. As they dragged themselves into the clubhouse, Stretch Berry was cursing away. But it sounded almost like sobbing. It was a cruel one to drop. A two-hitter plus one bad pitch—and a guy didn't win it. The club felt bad about little Knobby as well as about the loss.

They were a bunch of sad sacks on the train, homeward bound that night, when Tuck Carlson strode into the club car. He surveyed them with that Pollyannaish smile. "Well, this is the first time I ever saw a morgue on wheels," he cracked.

"Aw, dry up," somebody said wearily.

"Come on, fellas," Tuck said, with a mocking chuckle. "Why, it was just another ball game."

It happened that time. Nick Cassino slung his cigarette away and came out of his chair fast. Tuck was watching him, his own hands down, prepared to duck. And it was little Kid Jarron, stepping in from the other side, who tagged him with a long haymaker. Tuck was stretched on the car floor. Not out, he lay there propped on an elbow until some of the wiser heads got things quieted down. Then he climbed up.

"How to win friends and a punch in the kisser," paraphrased Jack Manson, one of the sports writers traveling with

the team.

"I might be influencing people, too," Tuck said calmly, as he turned and walked out of the club car.

When they detrained at home in the morning, Tuck Carlson found he was the black sheep of the team. There was a good crowd of Colver City fans down there to greet this club that had caught on fire and was climbing fast. They roared enough to threaten the station roof when big, amiable Stretch Perry appeared. Kid Jarron, hobbling on his bad leg with the aid of a cane—he had been out of the lineup yesterday—had them splitting their tonsils. But when Tuck came through the gate, there was a striking silence.

When he got off alone at breakfast with the local morning papers, he found the answer. He scanned Manson's column, filed the night before from the train. first. The heading was, "Fight Follows Bull Loss to Spiders." That alone wouldn't have bothered Tuck Carlson. He knew what he was doing. But the story covered a lot more than the little outbreak on the train:

Not so many weeks ago, the Bulls consisted of a few ex-major league veterans content to go through the motions of playing ball, plus a bunch of youngsters, many of them swollen-headed enough to think they were already stars and didn't have to bear down. Now, thanks to the managerial genius of Big Bill Kirk, they have become a fighting, die-hard ball club with the once lethargic veterans showing the way and the youngsters playing their heads off. Their recent record, their rise toward the top, is ample evidence of that. But there is one exception, Tuck Carlson, the ex-Spider and centerfielder.

Carlson is no team man. He doesn't believe in the club and tells them so. He is constantly running down the team, jeering other players for going all out, and conceding defeat in advance. It was his roughneck tactics that brought on the retaliation by the Spiders that cut down Kid Jarron. Things came to a head last night on the homecoming train when Carlson taunted the team for its loss and . . .

There followed a description of the fight, greatly exaggerated. Tuck spat out an expletive, unconsciously jerking an arm to half spill his cup of coffee. The strawberry-blond waitress hurried down behind the counter, smiling. Then she took a good look at Tuck and the



smile froze on her face.

"Oh, you're Tuck Carlson, aren't you?" She pranced away, nose in air.

"The man they love to hate, that's me," Tuck muttered. He finished his coffee and hopped a cab to the hotel.

**U**P IN HIS room, Tuck called Marion at the office where she worked. He'd met the pert little brunette before being traded to the Bulls, the season before, and had dated her whenever his former club, the Spiders, had come to town. That was one of the things that had delighted him about the deal. Playing under Big Bill Kirk suited him fine. And now he could see Marion regularly. It had become a mighty serious matter with him, with dreams of matrimony and all.

She was slightly cold when he got through to her but consented to have dinner with him that evening. When he picked her up at her apartment, he attempted to kiss her as usual. She gave him her cheek.

"I just don't—well, feel so well, Tuck," she said evasively when he asked what the trouble was.

But over dinner, he caught her big gray eyes studying him thoughtfully several times when he looked up. She pleaded a headache when he suggested a movie and asked to be taken home. In front of the apartment house, he pulled up and caught her wrist as she started to get out.

"All right, baby, come clean with papa," he said a little sharply. "Me. I don't go for mystery stories. What's wrong?"

She drew hard on her cigarette, then turned the gray eyes directly on him. "Tuck, I know you're a real ball player who gives all he's got out there all the time. But—"

"That's what they pay me a salary for, kid," he said drily. "And, incidentally, I'm sort of crazy about the game. Go ahead."

"Tuck, do you have to keep running down the team, telling the players they haven't got a chance? Do you have to

say the things they claim you do? Do you have to take that cynical attitude? Even if you don't think the Bulls can take the pennant, do you—oh, well, you know what I mean!"

He sat staring straight ahead, mouth hard and eyes narrowed as his face was caught in the headlights of a car coming down the hill. "Did you hear me say or do any of these things? Has anybody accused me of not trying to win when I'm on that field?"

"No-o," she admitted hesitatingly. "But—well, there are the newspapers."

"Don't believe everything you read, ladv," he snapped.

She flushed slightly. "But it's hard not to believe what the players say. And some of them have been talking, Tuck. Ellen, in my office, is engaged to Nisk Casino, you know. She had lunch with him today. I don't know what to think, Tuck. I don't know why you take the attitude you do."

"That's all I can tell you now, Marion." His voice was cold, stiff. When she dropped a hand over his on the wheel, he repeated it. "I said that's all I can tell you now."

"That's no answer, Tuck." She swung open the door. "And I can take myself in alone, thank you."

He felt as if he had a mouthful of dirty ashes as he drove back to the hotel garage. The next forenoon, before he left for the ball park, he called Marion's office twice. Each time, after he gave his name, he was told Miss Collins was taking dictation and could not come to the phone. When he walked into the clubhouse to dress for the opening game of the series with the Arrows, his dour face reflected his depressed state of mind.

"What's the matter, Calamity?" Shorty Scott sang out. "Grieving already about the licking the Arrows are going to give us?"

Tuck half turned to snarl back, "You oughta be able to lick them if you had to play it on crutches! A last-place club with half their pitching staff on the shelf with injuries! But you never can tell."

The Arrows were a pushover, going

down 9-1 as the Bulls had a field day with the stick. But Tuck Carlson himself went hitless, getting on only once, thanks to a walk.

The next day, though, it was a different story. The desperate Arrows threw in a kid hurler they had just picked out of a semi-pro industrial league. The kid had a mean knuckler with a sweeping curve to fall back on. As Bull after Bull went to the plate and went down, beating the air at the knuckler or slapping the ball to the infield, the dugout grew more and more silent. The scoreboard showed the second-place Spiders just a notch ahead of them, winning after a two-game slump.

**I**T WAS in the last of the fifth when Tuck made his wisecrack in the dugout with the game still scoreless. With Cassino on first via a free ticket, Kid Jarron had swung late on an outside pitch, lashing it up the right-field line, just fair. And Cassino had taken off like a jack rabbit, going around second at full tilt without taking so much as a glance into right. The third-base coach had bawled frantically at him to get back. Too late, the flying Cassino wised up. The Arrow right-fielder had made a great, lunging catch. They doubled Cassino off first easily.

Tuck spat cotton over the dugout step. "Boy, that's kicking it away, all right! Why bother to try with a cluck club like this?"

The remark caught up with him in the very next inning. With two down, there were Arrow runners on first and second. Out there in center, he vaguely was aware of the crack of the bat. Then he blinked and saw it was a long drive into left center, rising. It should have been an easy catch for him, but he'd been thinking about Marion's strange attitude and was caught flat-footed mentally, so he was that all-important stride late in starting back.

He raced back and to his right, was sure he could glove it as he kicked on an extra spurt of speed. But just as he reached for it, his right foot hit a soft

spot in the turf. He lurched off balance. The ball just grazed his glove and went on through. Two runs dashed over, enough to mean the game as the handcuffed Bulls could only get one before it was over. It was very quiet in the locker room afterward.

Tuck had little appetite for his early dinner. Up in his room, he turned on the radio and had a bottle of beer. A ball player to the core, he felt bad about that skull. Still, the best of them made one occasionally. He knew it was the strain of the whole situation, not Marion alone, that was getting him. But his spirits lifted somewhat as he left to pick up Marion at eight for their movie date. When she opened the door to him, though, she was in lounging pyjamas instead of being dressed for the street.

"Hey, baby, I thought we were stepping out to a show?"

"Come in, Tuck," she said gravely. She led the way into the living room but remained standing when he dropped onto the couch. "Tuck, did you hear Jack Manson's broadcast half an hour ago?"

He shook his sleek black head. "Never listen to that pill." He knew the program, "Post Mortems with Manson." "He gives me a very large pain."

"Tuck, did you make that remark in the dugout?"

He frowned. "What remark?"

"Monson quoted you as saying in the inning before you dropped that ball, 'Why bother to try with a cluck team like this?' Did you say that, Tuck? Tell me!"

He rose slowly, realizing at once that one of his teammates must have carried the remark to the sports writer with the radio program. "Yes," he said low-voiced. "I—" Then he shook his head. He couldn't tell even Marion, yet, why he made remarks like that.

A couple of minutes later, he was seething as he walked out of the apartment house—alone. He slammed the car back downtown like a madman. At the hotel, he went immediately to Big Bill Kirk's room.

"Look, Bill," he exploded, as he burst into the room past the big pilot in a dressing gown, "I can't keep this up! It's too much!"

"What's happened now, Tuck? Sit down and let's have it."

But Tuck Carlson was in no mood to sit. "Look, Bill, it's bad enough having every man on the club hate me like poison, but it's beginning to go further. Take things like Manson popping off on the radio tonight, quoting that remark of mine. After that error of mine in center, you know what this whole city is going to think!"

Big Bill nodded slowly. "That was a rough break, Tuck."

"And now this business has cost me my girl! Gosh, Bill, how much do I have to take of that, anyway? How much can a man take?"

"Tuck," Bill Kirk said harshly, "back there in the class-D days, who was it straightened you up when you began to stray from the straight and narrow? Who was it who saw you'd never be a chucker and converted you into an up-and-coming kid outfielder?"

Tuck back-handed sweat from his forehead. "Okay, Bill. I'll carry it on, but it's rough, believe me. It's awful dog-gone rough." He went out shaking his head.

When he walked onto the field the next afternoon for the opener of the all-important Spider series, a booming wave of catcalls and Bronx cheers, interspersed with other forms of verbal abuse, rolled over him. He'd never known anything like it. "Yellow" and "You dirty quitter" were only a few of the things he was called. When he reached the infield, all the Spiders were out in front of their dugout, eyes bent on him. They neither taunted him nor bawled insults.

But one loud, clear voice blared: "All right, Carlson! Today we even the score with you. Get ready for it!"

As he sat in the dugout just before the game began, he realized he probably didn't have a friend in the park. He was definitely a pariah.

Big Bill Kirk walked slowly down the

bench. "Boys, this is the big one. I know it's a three-game series, but knock 'em in this one and you'll have 'em on the run. I have the inside dope from their own baliwick that this bunch has the jitters—that they're ready to crack. *This is the one we want! Go get it!*"

As they started out of the dugout, Berry called to Tuck. "Well, Mr. Calamity, what've you got to say today?" he inquired bitingly.

"Pray that you come out of it alive!" Tuck flung back.

It was Moose Kenly hurling for the Bulls, Big Bill playing the hunch that a strong show of confidence in him might do the trick. And Jess Raines, swaggering and sneering, was working for the Spiders. The first inning was over quickly, both men retiring three hitters in order. The second got under way.

There wasn't much jockeying yet. But it was plain both teams were ready to break their necks to cop, ready to tear into the other guy at the first break. A Spider got as far as second on Moose with one down. But that was all.

Raines, pouring his stuff in there, got Stretch Berry on a swinging third strike. Then Tuck stepped in there. And the stands poured it on him. He tried to close his ears to it. But one voice reached him.

"Why try, huh, Carlson? Why try? Go ahead and whiff, you bum, and then you can drop one out there in the field! Why try, Carlson?"

Raines smirked down the alley at him. Tuck was ready for trouble. The first pitch was inside, but on the hands, for a ball. Not at the head.

"Let the bum get on, Jess!" a Spider infielder yelled. "We wanta get a close-up look at him!"

"Roll him over, Jess, and let's see the color of his underside!" yipped Hooks Wiley, who was back at the shortstop berth for the first time since the collision.

**T**HEN there was one of Raines' smokeballs through there at the knees. Tuck went around on it, but way

late. The stands cheered sarcastically. The count went to 2-2, and still no bean-ball. And then it came in, blurring fast, aimed at the head. Tuck pulled away, dropping his bat as he twisted.

"Strike three!" boomed the umpire. It had been a hook that snapped over. And Raines's laugh rattled out through the jeers for Tuck. He had been beautifully fooled by his old foe.

But he got back some of it in the top of the third when the Spiders clawed at Moose briefly. With a man on, after Cassino had booted around a soft roller, there was a sizzling liner over second that Jarron just failed to stab. The alert Tuck had the fans pop-eyed as he was already headed in on the rush, seemingly before the bat even met the ball. Closing with that ground-eating lope toward second, he reached out, nailed it, and in almost the same motion cut loose a bulleting throw that nailed the Spider runner off first by a foot. There actually were a few cheers then. It had been a terrific gambling play.

In the home half, the lower part of the Bull batting order came alive. A wild heave by the usually hot Wiley put a runner on second. The next man drove a smash deep on the right side of second. The Spider there knocked it down and automatically fired to third after seeing the runner break. Instead, Olsen doubled back to second and both runners were safe.

A long fly advanced both runners. And then the squeeze went on and the first Bull run tore across the platter on a close play. The Spiders rushed out for a terrific rhubarb. And then the game broke wide open, the fight on. A run in this game was like three in an ordinary one.

Big Wiley pushed little Jarron around as men poured from both dugouts. Tuck Carlson pulled the Kid back and stepped in there, the slate-colored eyes like rocks under icy water.

"Put a hand on another Bull, Hooks, and I'll stretch you out in that dirt with a busted jaw!" he said in a low, tight voice.

The arbiters broke it up. But the Spiders were exchanging looks, then eying Tuck as they walked away.

With that one run, Moose was superb in the top of the fourth. In the home half, Tuck stepped in there. The Spiders were boiling now, still claiming the runner had been out on the squeeze. Raines spat angrily as he chucked away the resin bag. And that first pitch was right at Tuck's noggin, sending him into the dust. The booing from the crowd that had greeted his second appearance at bat choked off suddenly.

Poker-faced but cold angry inside, Tuck bulletted the next delivery over third. But it curved foul by inches. It would, if fair, have been a double. The count went to 2 and 2 after Raines drove Tuck into the dirt again. Baring teeth in a fighting grin, Tuck gave him the needle as Raines fussed around out there.

"Come on, you big ape! Chuck one at my head again. You couldn't hit me at two feet, you beanbag champ!"

Raines wheeled and powered in a hook. It was wide and streaking into the dirt. Knowing Ching Thompson couldn't reach it, Tuck took an automatic swing for the third strike, then leaped out for first as the wild pitch went on through. He made it without even a throw.

"Don't look now, but I'm on first," he taunted Raines. "How about complaining about that sore leg now, cry baby. After all, you're in trouble."

He got what he wanted, a throw. It was high and the first-sacker just pulled it down. Tuck guffawed. "Careful now, Jess. Careful. Watch your tempah, my dear fella. Watch—out!" And he ran down a few yards.

Raines wheeled, cocked his arm, then saw that his tormentor was already sliding back to the bag. Kirk was out of the dugout like a shot, yelling. And Raines' move was ruled a balk. Tuck strolled down to second.

"'Oh, merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along,'" he sang.

Raines went to work on Scott, obviously going for a strikeout. But at 1 and 2, he made it too fat. And Scott lashed out

a single. Tuck scooted around third and over the plate. Then he turned and bowed to Raines, sweeping off his cap.

"Thanks so much, pal!"

And Raines, burning, gave Olsen a fat one, too. That was a double, scoring Scott, to make it a 3-0 ball game. On the bench, Stretch Berry spoke to little Jarron.

"That Tuck is stealing this game right out from under their noses almost single-handed," he said, amazement plain in his voice. "I can't figure that guy at all."

Raines got a grip on himself and retired the side. The fifth was uneventful. But in the top of the sixth, the Spiders came slamming back. A single and a walk with an out between put two aboard. And then the one man wrecking gang, Ching Thompson, caught hold of one for a round-tripper to tie it up. It was a new ball game when Tuck came to the plate again in the home half.

"Hello, cousin," he greeted Raines. Raines missed with his fast ball. "Don't tell anybody, kid, but I own you," he said to the glaring pitcher then.

**A** WHITE streak came at his head. Tuck waited till the last moment, figuring it might be the hook. It wasn't, and he headed for China, but too late. The ball caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head. He came up slowly, swaying as they rushed from the dugout. He slung his bat away and headed for first. But then he dropped to one knee a moment as Kirk came up.

"Better come into the dugout, boy," the pilot said, starting to lift him.

"It barely nicked me, Bill," Tuck whispered. "I'm all right. Just—watch." He was exaggerating some, for his head still rang from that beanball. But he wasn't going to let those Spiders drive him out of the game.

On the next pitch, he lit out for second on a steal they never expected. He came in there head first, beating the throw by yards, the Bull fans roaring with delight. But Wiley, covering, took the late throw and dropped to put it on Tuck anyway. He brought his right knee down savage-

ly; all his weight on it, atop Tuck's head. Rocket-shot blackness like a great cloud of smoke swirled over Tuck.

He heard the shouting around him; as he was lifted, as another brannigan threatened. He was aware of catching his spikes on the dugout step. He knew the trainer was working on him, and all he could think of was that he had to get back into that ball game. The Bulls needed him.

"We can lick 'em, we can lick 'em," he muttered, half out, forgetting his former role, knowing only that they had to win. "This club can fight any of 'em down—a real fighting ball club. They'll get 'em yet."

The players, who'd been cleared from the field and were gathered around, stared at each other. "Did you guys hear what I did?" asked Stretch Berry.

"He—he called us a fighting ball club, that guy who's been sneering all these weeks!" burst out Kid Jarron.

Big Bill turned and faced them. "I might as well tell you men now, that was an act. I cooked it up with Tuck when I got him from the Spiders," he told them. Then he explained the reason—they'd had no fire, the veterans just going through the motions, the youngsters conceited. "I couldn't rouse you myself, but I figured an outsider who rode you and sneered at you might pull the trick. Tuck Carlson sacrificed himself and did it."

"Wh-what, Bill?" Nick Cassino stammered incredulously.

"Why you meatheads!" Big Bill snorted. "Why the devil do you think you're driving for first place now? Because you were so mad at Tuck you played like wild men to show him up! And now he's whipping these Spiders almost single-handedly—for you guys!"

An umpire was there, warning Kirk to get a sub runner on the field. But as Big Bill looked around, Tuck, coming out of the fog, got off the bench and pushed the trainer aside.

"I'm all right now, Bill," he said quietly. "Don't try to take me out of this ball game, dang your hide!"

And Big Bill Kirk knew better than to

try that. As teammates watched, silent with awe, Tuck Carlson walked back onto the field and out to second base.

"Hello, Raines, my pal," he even managed to chirp. "Don't forget to say good-bye to me when you leave for the showers."

And Tuck had called the shot. An enraged gang of Bulls, their eyes finally opened to the true setup, realizing they had badly misjudged the calamity guy with the kill-joy tongue, put on their hitting clothes and combed Raines' hair for him. They came near making a shambles of it. When the smoke cleared with a reliefer on the mound, it was a 7-3 ball game, and the Bull players were yelling for more as they took the field.

That was it. The Bulls even picked up another in the eighth. And Tuck, despite

his weakened condition, made a great over-the-shoulder catch in center to kill off the one desperate Spider rally. Then it was over.

Still unaware of what he had said when he'd been half out, Tuck Carlson suddenly found himself hoisted on the shoulders of his teammates and being carried from the field with the cops trying to hold off a swarming horde of delirious fans.

Over their heads, up behind the boxes, he spotted the pert brunette in a turkey-red jacket, smiling at him and clasping her hands prize-fighter fashion over her head. Marion! Tuck waved. Then his eyes blurred a bit with moisture. He looked down at his teammates, and he thought how very good it was to be accepted as one of them at last.

---