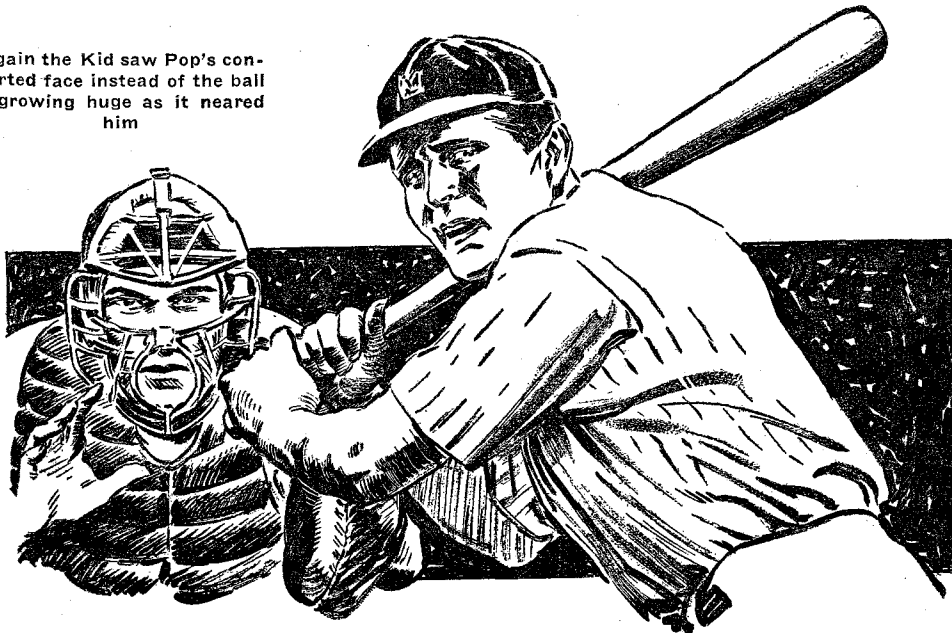


Again the Kid saw Pop's con-
torted face instead of the ball
—growing huge as it neared
him



Ghost Ball

The story of a big-league heavy hitter who struck out because he saw
the face of a dead man on each slow pitch—until he learned to swing
at specters

By JAMES A. KIRCH

IT WAS the Kid's spot, all right. First and third loaded, two gone, and the Corsairs a pair of runs down to the Macons, closing the ninth. This was the one that would break the triple tie for first—the Corsairs, the Macons, and the Bengals. There'd be only two of them up there tomorrow. And it was up to Kid Weyman to decide which. He was in the hot seat, on this one.

And he loved it.

He grinned at Ace Hudman, hugging third. You didn't pull off the bag with Slacker out there heaving; not if you were smart, you didn't. You stayed on first, the way Teller was doing, or glued yourself to third, like Hudman. You just stood out there and waited for Kid Weyman to sock you home.

And the Kid shuffled his feet in the dirt,

finding his stance. He heard, dimly, the roar of twenty thousand voices. Without thinking of it, without realizing what it meant, or was going to mean, he heard twenty thousand people shout, their hearts in their mouths.

He saw the motion of Slacker's arm on the first one; that was all. Just the swift, easy motion, with the follow through at the end that meant this one had hair on it. The old boy was fogging them through. Even now, in the ninth inning, he could sock them over the plate too fast to see.

The Kid let it go by, heard it crack into Willard's mitt, heard the umpire's "Strike one!" and grinned again. Hell, he'd known it was coming across the plate. He just couldn't find the damn thing.

He shrugged his shoulders, letting the muscles ripple down his broad back, watched Willard float the ball back to Slacker.

The next one missed the plate by inches, curving out. It was a "bite" ball, but Weyman didn't bite at it. One all.

He saw the curve on the next just a second too late to check the swing, and he hooked savagely, driving it foul into the stands. A white-haired figure pushed forward from his seat, his right snaking up like a flash to snare the ball, holding it. The crowd cheered again, and Weyman tipped his cap to the old man, grinning broadly.

Pop Davis could still snare them. Pop could still get a roar from the crowd, too. They hadn't forgotten the old boy who'd managed the Corsairs for twelve years, through seven pennants, before he'd retired. And the Kid hadn't forgotten the nervous little manager who'd given him his start and taught him half of what he knew about playing third.

He tipped his hat again, smiling to the old man, and then swung back to the batter's box. He whispered it to himself, so that even Willard, crouched behind the plate, missed it.

"Here's one for *you*, Pop." He was to remember that, later on.

Slacker played it wrong. Right at that spot, the old boy who'd been outsmarting the Corsairs all afternoon, outsmarted himself. One-and-two, he figured. The Kid'll be looking for a ball. He slipped the next one in, shoulder high, clipping the outside corner.

That is, he tried to slip it in.

The Kid saw it coming. The money ball. Right where he liked 'em. He loosened the dynamite in his shoulders, rolled it forward, slammed it against the whirling pill. He took it that way, hard, and felt the shock up to his forearms.

It was the ball game.

It cracked off his bat like a cannonball and zoomed over third. It cleared the left field stands before the outfielder had taken two steps. Not only that, it cleared them by a good six feet.

And the crowd went nuts.

The Kid said, aloud, jogging toward first, "How'd you like that one, Pop?"

and high in the stands a white-haired old man suddenly stopped dancing, jerked his hands to his mouth, gasping in agony. His body twisted with the gasps, and then fell out flat across the stone flagging. A young man in a dark suit pushed through the crowd, forcing them back. He leaned over the old manager, then shook his head.

Just as the Kid crossed third, heading for home, Pop Davis stopped choking and lay very still.

THEY didn't tell him about it, right off. They let him grin his way through the crowd, toward his locker. They gave him a cheer in a clubhouse, and the Kid was too excited to notice there was anything tense about them. He got a glimpse of Fat Jim Teller standing alone in a corner of the locker room, his eyes dull and lifeless, but it didn't register, at first. None of it registered with the Kid until later. At first, he just laughed his way around the locker room, not knowing.

He never guessed he'd just killed Pop Davis.

Dick Manton told him, finally. Dick Manton, with the wise old eyes and the young face, who Pop himself had picked to handle the team, took him aside and let him have it. He tried to break it gently, but that was out of his line.

He said: "Pop Davis died this afternoon, Kid."

The Kid stood there staring at him, not getting it.

"His pumper was weak, you know, Kid. He was supposed to take it easy. He got sort of excited out there. And his heart blew apart on him."

The Kid felt the chill shoot up the middle of his back, burning like ice through the heat. He tried to speak and his lips froze up on him, not moving. He stood there, his lips tight, not saying anything. He got a mental picture of the old man snaring his foul in the stands, and then he knew it was a gag.

His voice was ugly. "A nice joke, Manton," he told the little manager. "A nice joke, that. Only it happens I saw Pop

Davis snake a foul of mine out of the air today." Even as he said it, he realized Manton wasn't kidding. Manton wouldn't rag about a thing like that.

The manager said, quietly, "He'd probably been working himself up to it all day, Kid. Straining his heart, out there on the field making every play himself, mentally. And then . . ." The Kid got it, this time.

He said it very softly. "You mean when I pounded that last one out, you mean that's when he—" and Manton nodded. "You'd have seen the papers, anyhow, Kid," he said. "I figured I'd better tell you. We all feel badly about the old man, but it—"

The Kid wasn't listening to him. The fingers of his right hand were clenching and unclenching, the palms wet with sweat. His face was a dead mask. He looked at Manton as he said it, but he wasn't seeing Manton. He said:

"That means I killed him!"

He turned on his heel and walked out of the clubhouse, and they let him go. They knew how he felt; or thought they did. Nobody could have known, actually. Even Kid Weyman didn't realize it, then. He found out, later.

THE Corsairs had a two-day rest before their three-game final with the Bengals. Manton had arranged that early in the spring, and kept holding the dates open even when it meant playing double-headers in July and August. He'd figured the Bengals would be the team to beat, and that if he could bring his boys up to that series with the tenseness eased off, they'd be in. He'd figured right.

The Macons collapsed, losing two in a row, their morale shot by the loss to the Corsairs. That left Manton where he'd hoped to be, in a clean tie for first with the Bengals, and a three-game series to decide it in. He'd figured the boys would spend the two days resting, easing up, relaxing.

He'd never figured they'd spend it waiting for a funeral.

Fat Jim Teller was usually a life-of-the-party boy—a guy who could be counted on to shake the team out of the worst case of doldrums. But Fat Jim had been Pop's first-string catcher for five seasons. He sat in a chair in the hotel lobby, staring into space. Boyle, the first sacker, had come up in Pop's last year; but he looked as if he'd lost his best friend. Kane and Witter, two of the outfielders, were newcomers. They felt the tense shock of their teammates and did the only thing they could—kept away from them. But the rest of the team, right down the line, was shot.

Manton let them stay that way. He let them go through the funeral without trying to jab them out of it. Right up to the opening game of the Bengal series, he laid off. Then he gave them the works.

He aimed most of it at the Kid. He told them how he felt about Pop, and what his death meant to him. He told them how he'd feel if his brother were to drop dead tomorrow. He laid it on heavy, building it up. Then he paused, watching them.

"If it had been my brother, or anyone else, I'd be out there running this team today. And I'd be running it right, the way Pop would've expected me to. There was no sloppy baseball on Pop's teams. Let's not have any on this one."

They knew what he was doing, then. He was giving his team to Pop, giving the old man credit for it. And they came through.

Fat Jim pushed his heavy bulk from the locker bench and started talking, normally. He led off on the pre-game discussion of the Bengals' lineup. Barrows, the leadoff man for the Bengals, pulled them toward left. That meant Kane would have to be on his toes out there every time the little guy swung. If Witter pulled over a bit from center, that would give Kane a chance to play his man almost on the spot.

The young outfielders nodded. They'd remember it.

The discussion went on. Mel Dillard,

the Corsairs' twenty-game winner, was going to be in there heaving them across for number twenty-one. A long beanpole of a pitcher, whose fast ball had less smoke on it than Gomez at his peak, but could still ring the gong. And he had a change-of-pace ball that left the best of them standing at the plate, waiting for it. They didn't have to worry about Mel's pitching. Or Teller's catching.

With Boyle at first, Sandy Decker at second, Ace Hudman peppering up the short-stop spot, and Kid Weyman at third, they had the best defensive infield in the league.

And with Kane, Witter, and the big Southerner, Cal Trimmer, filling the outfield, the lineup had enough dynamite at the plate. Teller and the Kid for the heavy hitters, and the outfield averaging .284. The team had what it takes.

Manton was praying that they'd use it.

IT was cloudy for the opening game. A break for the Corsairs. With Dillard's fireball whizzing through against a dull background, they gave themselves the edge.

They'd forgotten, though, that the Bengals were hot; really hot. They'd pushed themselves into a tie for first with a nine-game winning streak, and they weren't cracking now. They played a sweet defensive game when they were hot.

They were pitching Steve Hansen, the big Swede with the fast ball and a tricky curve. And Steve was really smoking them over. He took four pitches to fan Ace Hudman, leadoff man for the Corsairs, in the last half of the first. The little shortstop trotted back to the dugout, his eyes wide.

"They've been feeding the guy heroin," he insisted. "They've been doping the guy, or something. You can't see the damn ball."

Trimmer saw it, though. He caught a slow one, with the count two and one, and belted it high into the air. Hansen came in himself and made the catch. That put Teller up.

The big catcher took his time getting into the batter's box. He took his time getting out of it, too. He argued for three minutes with Umpire Feltman about the third strike.

Three men up, three away. That was the first inning. It was the same dose Dillard had handed out in the top half. And Mel kept it up in the second.

In the Corsairs' half of the second frame, the Kid started off with a walk, without taking his bat from his shoulder. And the crowd began shifting restlessly, looking for excitement.

Kane gave it to them. He put one in the left field stands, not more than three inches past the foul line, on the wrong side. He sent another after it, in a straight line, a terrific wallop that had "hit" labeled all over it. And little Dink Alconi, the Bengals' center fielder, started running the minute it left the bat. He virtually pulled it out of the bleachers for the out.

That put the Kid on second. And he stayed there. Witter looked at two fast ones and ground the next to short. Boyle, the big first baseman, went down swinging. And slender Mel Dillard shook his head, grinning, and set the Bengals back on their heels without a good look at the ball in the third.

They went through the last half the same way, with Steve Hansen matching Mel ball for ball. But in the last of the fourth, the Corsairs snapped out of it.

Cal Trimmer, the lanky Southerner, grinned as he picked up his heavy club. "Ah think ah'll belt one out theah," he told them. He moved toward the plate, still grinning, walking with that swinging stride of his. And he parked the second pitch over second for a screaming single.

The infield drew in close, hoping for a double play, and Fat Jim Teller lumbered into the box.

He let the first pitch burn across, fast. He let the second one follow, cutting the corner at terrific speed. And he parked the third one over second, in the spot Trimmer had hit.

They were off.

The crowd knew they were off. This was the big inning, the traditional Corsairs' inning. None out, first and third filled. This was the spot. This was where the ball game started.

KID WEYMAN came up swinging two bats, tossing the light one aside, tipping his hat to the crowd.

Hansen caught him on the first one, an inside curve that got him just under the fingers. He was afraid of the Kid, but not too scared. Not enough to walk him, with Kane coming up next, followed by Witter. He wanted to get him, if possible.

The Kid didn't figure he would.

The second pitch was low, under the knees, almost biting into the dirt. The third clipped the inside corner, close. The Kid didn't like the umpire's "Strike!"

Then Miller, the Bengals' catcher, got smart. He figured the Kid would be waiting for a ball. And he tried to cross him. That had been tried before. The Kid saw it coming before it left Hansen's glove. The old money ball. Shoulder high, on the outside corner. He set himself for it, letting his muscles relax.

It came in that way, shoulder high, on the outside. The one the Kid had hammered over the fence three days before. The same one he'd belted when Pop Davis keeled over in the stands.

The Kid saw that, then. The same spot, the same ball—the ball that had killed Pop. He saw it even as he started to swing, ready to push it out.

And his nerves fell apart on him.

The ball seemed to come in like a balloon, swelling. And then the Kid didn't see a ball any more; he saw Pop's head coming toward him, growing so huge that he could see nothing else, the face contorted the way it must have looked the moment that Pop had died. That twisted face came on for an instant that lasted forever.

The Kid just stood there and let the ball go by. The palms of his hands were wet, cold, and the back of his knees felt as if

someone had clipped them, hard.

He didn't hear Umpire Feltman's "Strike Three—ee!" All he could think of was the look of Pop Davis' face, with the gasping mouth and the wide staring eyes.

The Kid was through.

He didn't realize it, right at first. He stood there at the plate, not moving, trying to wash that picture of Pop's face out of his mind, until Kane shoved him aside lightly, digging in at the plate. "I'll make up for it, Kid," the young outfielder told him.

And he did, in a way. He lifted one into deep center, a sacrifice fly, sending Trimmer across with the run, Teller holding first on the play. So the Corsairs were on the right end of a one-nothing score, going into the fifth inning.

They were still that way coming up for the seventh. With the Kid as leadoff man. The Kid trotted in from third, walking a little stiffly, a little tense. Manton caught him on the way to the plate. He was one wise lad, Manton was.

"It's like buck fever, Kid," he said, slowly. "You got to shake it, now. You got to shake it now, or you'll never shake it. Get in there and knock hell out of the damn thing."

The Kid said: "I guess you couldn't understand, even if I could explain it. It was like Pop was—" and Manton nodded. "Sure, Kid," he agreed, "Sure. Only you got to shake it, son."

The Kid stood there at the plate, feeling the tenseness in his muscles, trying to throw them loose. He heard Miller say, ribbing, "We got your number, Kid," and he stepped away from the plate, picked up a little dirt, rubbed his hands on his uniform, moved back in. His throat was dry, parched.

Hansen pumped his arm a few times, came right down with his fast one. Strike. The Kid was worried about that. He dug in at the plate, crouching a little. He took the next, an inside slant that drove him back from the box. The third one came in low, just above the knees, and he lashed

at it savagely, fouling it into the upper deck, behind the Bengal's dugout. One-and-two.

He heard Miller say, coldly, "This is it, Kid," and the ball floated in on him. It was a change of pace this time, a slow one that dragged its way through the air. Shoulder high, on the outside.

And he got the picture again. Pop Davis, floating in with the ball, gasping for breath. It floated past him, finishing him.

MANTON took him out in the eighth. When Miller, the Bengals' catcher, lashed a hard liner toward third and the Kid dove for it but didn't come up with it, the little manager knew it was no go. He slapped Pitlow, the utility infielder, in at third, and said his prayers.

And they took the game. It was Mel Dillard who took the game, wearing his arm out doing it. He fanned five in a row in the last two innings, and caught the third on a low rolling bunt toward first. He won the game, one-to-nothing, throwing his arm out.

The Kid said, once, to Manton on the bench, "Mel's killing himself out there, bearing down on every pitch. We can't use him for the final. He's working too hard." And Manton, without thinking, agreed. "He's afraid to let them hit it," he said slowly, as if to himself. "Mel's a smart boy. And the team's shot to hell. You can't have one of the key men in the infield blow apart without the other boys feeling it."

Manton hadn't meant to say it to the Kid, that way. But he went on with it, then. "You've got to shake it, Kid. Or you'll be licked in baseball."

The Kid nodded, not saying anything. "You didn't kill the old man, Kid. You're not dumb enough to believe that. He had a heart attack when you smacked that homer. Okay, so Pop had a bad heart. The fact that he got excited when you delivered in the clutch doesn't mean that you killed him."

Weyman shook his head, scowling. "I

know, Manton. But I can't forget it. Seems like everytime I get in that spot, every time they shoot a ball like that over to me, I see the old man again. I can't even swing at the damn thing. Maybe you're right—maybe I'm through in baseball."

He sat there, staring at the little manager, his face death-white. He said again, torturing himself with the thought, "Maybe I'm through in baseball." But it meant more to him than that. If Weyman was through in baseball, he was through in everything. You can make insurance men out of some of them, auto salesmen out of others—but you can't keep Tony Lazzeri from looking for a playing berth as long as he can stand on two feet and field on a dime. And you couldn't take Kid Weyman out of baseball and expect him to live. Some of them are built that way.

Connie Mack, Tony Lazzeri, Pop Davis. And the Kid.

Manton said, slowly, "When this game's over, Kid, you do me a favor. You're on wires now, high-tension wires. You go out and get plastered. Not just high—plastered. You won't play tomorrow. But, maybe, in the final game—" He stopped, not believing it himself.

They sat there watching Dillard tear his arm off the hinges, winning a three-hitter, one-to-nothing, not letting a man connect solidly with the apple.

And then the Kid went out and got plastered.

It wasn't any use. He'd known it wasn't going to work when he started. But Manton had suggested it, Manton had felt it might loosen the tension, snap him out of it. It didn't. It raised hell.

He met three sportswriters in the lobby of the hotel, weaving his way between the chairs. Little Joey Spellman, crack man on the Blade, took one look at him and dove for a phone.

THE papers headlined it the next day. Kid Weyman drunk in the middle of the crucial series. Kid Weyman, letting his team down in the clutch. The ugly stories

started. There were a dozen publicity hunters who swore it had happened before; that it was a regular habit with the Corsairs' third baseman. That explained his lousy showing in the game the day before, his being yanked in the eighth.

It went over big.

Manton might've killed it, if the sportswriters had trusted his motives. He did his best, but it wasn't enough. They knew Kid Weyman was big trade material, even if he was drinking himself out of the league, so long as the manager could keep it quiet. Nobody paid much attention to Manton.

And the Kid didn't say anything. He sat on the bench, next to Manton, through that second day, and watched the manager send out four pitchers to wind up on the short end of a twelve-eight scramble. Four pitchers. That was fine. That left nobody for the next day, unless Big Carl Hutter could pace himself over the last few innings. Carl took a slashing ground on his elbow in the top half of the ninth, and that was that. That was the pennant.

The boys knew it when they trooped back into the clubhouse, hot and discouraged. Witter, the young outfielder, stared at Weyman, his black eyes dark with anger. He was the one who said it, but they were all thinking it:

"A hell of a time you picked," he said, evenly. "A hell of a time to throw us down." He moved toward the Kid, his fingers curling in. And the Kid stood there taking it, not answering.

Manton moved into the doorway, getting the picture. He walked down the aisle slowly, his bright little eyes darting from one to another of the sullen figures. His voice was flat, cold:

"You read too many papers," he told them. "I'm running this team. Me. Dick Manton. And Weyman was following my orders. Get it? Following my orders."

They didn't believe him, of course. They weren't suckers. And they knew Manton had to keep the Kid's value up, to trade him off. It was a song-and-dance act, the old "his arm ain't sore" gag.

Witter said: "How about giving *me* some orders, Chief?" Manton glared.

"One more crack," the manager said softly, "and I'll bench you. I'll bench you tomorrow if I have to play the whole damn outfield myself." The funny part was, he meant it. And they shut up.

The Kid went up to his room and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall. He heard a knock on the door, and Manton's low voice calling to him, but he didn't answer. He sat there on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall, not moving, not saying anything. At four a. m. he lay down on the bed, his clothes still on, and went to sleep. He dreamed of getting up there in the clutch with the bases loaded and his muscles freezing up on him, leaving him cold at the plate. "Strike three!" He heard that thirty times during the night. "Strike three!" Each time his bat rested on his shoulder, his muscles refusing to kick through on the pay ball. And Pop Davis' face sailed past him.

The picture stayed with him the next day. Right up to game time. Up to the locker room conference, when Mel Dillard, slim Mel Dillard who'd pitched his arm out two days before, asked Manton for the assignment.

"Hutter is out," the fireballer argued. "And the rest of the boys can't stop this crowd. They fattened 'em too much yesterday. When a tough bunch like the Bengals lick you all over the place one day, they don't have much respect for you the next. But I'll sit 'em back on their heels."

It was talk, and everybody knew it was talk. Dillard wouldn't sit anybody back on their heels. Maybe five or six innings of the game, sure. By pitching his heart out. But the rest of the time, they'd be getting to him. Still, it was the only gamble.

Manton nodded, forcing a grin. "You'll sit 'em back, all right, Mel." He ran through the lineup, stopping at third base, letting his sharp eyes jump toward Weyman.

The Kid sat on the edge of the bench, his eyes turned away.

Pitlow went in at third, batting in the eighth slot, the rest of the team moving up one, like the day before.

THE Kid stayed on the edge of the bench, away from Manton, and sweltered through the early innings. He saw the Corsairs pick up a one-run lead in the second, getting to a couple of Dugan's sinkers, and blow it in the fourth when Pitlow muffed a double-play ball. They scored again in the last of the fourth on a double by Fat Jim Teller and a clean single by Witter, but it wasn't enough.

Mel was tiring. His fireball was still coming in there about every sixth pitch, but the rest of them were change of pace balls and a wide curve. The fast one had lost its zip. And the Bengals were getting to him. They tied the game up in the first half of the fifth and pushed over two more runs in the sixth. Four to two.

The Kid saw how the infield was pulled over, favoring Pitlow, trying to cover his territory. That was the hole he'd left. He sat there, hating the game, knowing how it would go, but not able to walk out on it. He had to watch it. And he watched so closely he didn't see the girl until she moved in next to him on the bench.

He heard her say, "How does it feel to be out of baseball?" and he turned around and saw her dark eyes and soft black hair.

This was one time he could've done without Pop Davis' grand-daughter. He stared at her a minute, remembering. She'd been the team mascot, under Pop. The girl who knew more baseball than some of the players. But, more important, she knew people. He wouldn't have expected a riding like this—not from her.

He drew his eyes away from her, looking out over the diamond, and he heard her say, again, "How does it feel to be out of baseball?" Nice, that.

He said, savagely, "Like hell!" and hoped she'd get sore and move on. He could see the shadow as she nodded her head. He wasn't watching her, but the shadow fell out on the ground before him

and he could see her head bob up and down. Her voice was quiet.

"That's how Pop felt," she said.

He swiveled in the seat, turning toward her, his eyes hard. She was half-smiling at him, but her smile wasn't the kidding sort.

He sat there, watching her.

Her cool voice cut through the dry air. "He should have been in bed, in the hospital. His heart was too bad for him to walk around with, much less see baseball games. They told him that. And he said they could take him away from baseball, all right—when they buried him. That's how Pop felt about it." She hesitated, waiting, but he didn't say anything.

"You've been blaming yourself for Pop's death," she told him, flatly, and when he shook his head she went on, insisting. "Every time you get in a tough spot, you remember that it was your homer that over-strained him. You keep worrying about that. You're a jackass." She said the last part very calmly.

The Kid was beginning to get it. He was still tense, keyed up, but he was getting it, now. He said, "It's just that I keep seeing him that way, when the ball comes over the plate. I can't forget that."

The girl nodded. "That's right," she told him. "You can't forget that. You can't forget that Pop went out watching the game he loved best, when his team had come through in the clutch. And one of his own boys had done it." Her voice grew almost bitter. "I suppose," she suggested, "you'd rather he'd spent weeks in the hospital, dying slowly, wondering whether they were still playing ball, with nobody to give him the scores because the doctors would be afraid of the excitement. I suppose that's what you'd rather have happen to *you*."

"No," the Kid said softly. "No. I wouldn't want that." He was watching the girl, his eyes on her, away from the game. He didn't even realize that Mel had held them, or that it was the top half of the ninth. But the game was going on, without him.

FATS TELLER was leading off, digging in at the plate. And Dugan was slipping. Not much, not enough to throw the game, but a little. He came down with his fast one across the inside corner, for a strike. He came down again with one, tight inside, and Fats danced away from it. One-and-one. The next one started nicely, right over the center of the plate with a short curve. It landed in short right field, Teller pulling up at first.

And the crowd started shifting around in their seats. This was the game. The chips were down. And Dugan knew it.

Teller was leading off first, the first baseman holding the inside corner. And Kane came up slowly, moving into the batter's box. He stepped out again, stood there whaling that bat around, waiting for Dugan to rub up the ball a bit. Then he stepped back in.

Dugan pumped once, twice, shot the ball in there. Strike.

He was working harder, now. This was his game, and he wanted it. A two-run lead and only three men to go. He cut the inside corner with a curve ball, just under the fingers, for strike two. And Kane parked the next one over first for a clean single, Teller puffing his way to third.

That put it up to Boyle, the big first sacker.

The crowd roared as the big fellow moved toward the plate, hunching his shoulders forward, ready for his crouch. And then they stopped roaring.

Dugan was leaving the game, waved to the showers. And Steve Hansen, the speedballer, was coming in from the bullpen.

Hansen threw a few pitches, getting the feel of the mound, and then nodded. And Boyle didn't even see the first two. They smoked past him like bullets. He caught the third, a change-of-pace ball, and fouled it high into the net. And he took the third strike standing there, not swinging.

The crowd was shouting now, giving Steve a hand one minute and begging Decker to "Murder one" the next. And the little second baseman did his best.

He sent a bounding ball down to third, the crowd holding its breath. The third sacker went to his left, came up with it, snapped it to second for the force. Teller held third.

It was the ball game. Teller on third, Decker on first with the tying run. And Pitlow, a .212 hitter, coming up. Manton waved him away, called down the bench, throwing Bob Lurcot in to pinch hit. Only Lurcot was a rookie.

The girl said, "Pop would've wanted to win this one. I'm glad he didn't live to see it," and the Kid tore his eyes from her, looking out over the field.

The tying runs on, two gone, the last half of the ninth. This was his spot. And Bob Lurcot was going out to try his luck.

The Kid said, "Pop wouldn't have liked it, would he?" and pushed himself to his feet, forcing himself down toward Manton. He cut forward, in front of Lurcot, reached out to take the bat.

The Kid didn't say anything. He just stood there, holding the bat in his hands, his eyes on the manager. He had to have this one.

Manton stared at him, looked down toward the girl, then back at the Kid. His eyes were suddenly bright. He nodded.

"Knock the holy hell out of it, Kid."

THE crowd didn't like it. They didn't like anything about a man who got plastered the night before a deciding game and threw his team to the dogs. And they let the Kid know it. They gave him the works, everything they had. And that baseball mob had plenty.

Miller, straightening his mask, grinned through it at Weyman. "You'll hear more of that, Kid. Plenty more. What you need is a drink." He settled down, into his stance, keeping up the ribbing. "We've got your number, Kid," he told him.

The Kid moved into the batter's box, not answering. He heard the crowd's razzing dimly, as though from a distance. He wasn't worried about the crowd. He was worried about himself.

The first one came in with hair on it,

snapping across the plate. The crowd booed the Kid for not swinging. A called strike.

Hansen was working easily, taking his time. He drove the Kid back, fast, with an inside slant, and the crowd laughed as Weyman danced away from it. He heard a husky voice shout from behind third, "Give him a shot of rye," and then the third one was coming over, barely cutting the inside corner.

One-and-two. The Kid's spot. And Miller knowing it.

The catcher said, loudly, tossing the ball back to Hansen, "We've been waiting all day for you, buddy," and the Kid could feel the confidence in his voice.

He saw the next one coming. He knew it by this time. The only money ball. Shoulder high, on the outside, burning across the corner of the plate. This was it.

It came in that way, smoking toward the plate, shoulder high, with "Strike three" labeled all over it.

It went out, fast.

With his bat swinging out from his shoulder, the Kid got a flash of Pop Davis' face, jabbing at his nerves. And he followed the swing through and around, giving it everything he had.

It was enough. Little Dink Alconi took five steps backward, and then froze. There was no sense chasing that ball. It landed deep in the center field bleachers, bounded once, high in the air, and then came down near the outside fence.

It was the pennant.

A husky voice shouted from behind third, "Give him a *bottle* of rye," and the Kid was off, shooting around the bases. Not trotting, not taking his time with a bow at each base for the wildly cheering crowd. Running. And he came in that way with the winning run, not stopping at the plate, heading for the dugout.

He saw her standing on the steps near Manton, her eyes bright. She said, "Well, Kid?" and the Kid moved toward her.

"The funny thing," he said, seriously, "the funny thing is, he was out there again, this time. Just like before. Only when I smacked that ball, I could have sworn I heard the old man laugh out loud."

"We all did," the girl told him. "Even here in the dugout, we could hear him laughing the way he used to when the boys put one over." She turned to the manager, her eyes begging, "Isn't that right, Manton?"

The little manager opened his mouth, closed it again, staring at her. He started to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. He nodded his head quickly, up and down, then turned away, whispered to himself.

"Somebody," he said seriously, "is just plain nuts. But we just won the pennant. So maybe I'm the one. I'd rather be nuts than have lost that pennant. Maybe the Kid won it, or maybe it was the tenth man. I wouldn't know."


He left it at that.

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JOHN R.
HUGHES**
TEXAS RANGER

Tough on Bandits

CAPTAIN JOHN R. HUGHES — ONE OF THE OLDEST AND MOST FAMOUS OF ALL THAT GALLANT BODY OF MEN, THE TEXAS RANGERS. HIS DISTRICT, THE BADLANDS ALONG THE RIO GRANDE, WAS AT ONE TIME THE MOST LAWLESS IN THE U.S. CAPTAIN HUGHES HAS GONE AFTER MORE BAD MEN THAN ANY OTHER RANGER AND HE HAS NEVER LOST A GUN BATTLE!

AS A YOUNGSTER HE CAUGHT THE WILD HORSES OF THE PLAINS FOR A LIVING AND SOON AMASSED QUITE A HERD. ONCE, THIEVES STOLE HIS STOCK. HUGHES TRAILED THEM ACROSS 2 STATES AND IN A BLAZING BATTLE KILLED 4 OF THE BAND AND RECOVERED ALL HIS HORSES. FOR THIS FEAT HE WAS INVITED TO JOIN THE RANGERS.

DESPERADOES ESTABLISHED A STRONGHOLD ON AN ISLAND IN THE RIO GRANDE. THIS CAME TO BE KNOWN AS "PIRATE ISLAND" AND WAS A REFUGE FOR ALL WANTED MEN. PEACE OFFICERS SENT INTO IT NEVER CAME OUT. HUGHES, WITH A HANDFUL OF PICKED RANGERS, RODE INTO THE PLACE AND CLEANED IT OUT, KILLING MANY BAD MEN WHO HAD SWORN TO GET HIM.

ENOUGH LEAD HAS BEEN FIRED AT HUGHES IN 45 YEARS TO "SINK A BATTLESHIP" — YET TODAY HE'S HALE AND HEARTY AND TEACHES SUNDAY SCHOOL IN EL PASO!

STOOKIE
ALLEN

A True Story in Pictures Every Week