

White Musky

By SCOTT YOUNG

Once or twice before, Black Ab had caught a glimpse of her.
But somehow he had never believed he'd find her in his nets

ON THE last Tuesday in April, Black Ab Magee was sawing wood behind the house when he heard a car coming in low gear through the mud of his lane. The day was raw, with low fast clouds, but Black Ab had laid aside his sweater while he sawed. Now he put the sweater back on and walked around the house. He was pretty sure he knew who had come, and he was right. The truck from the government muskellunge hatchery was standing by the front gate, and John McManus was getting out of the driver's seat.

Black Ab's big boots squished in the waterlogged soil as he walked, and his overalls flapped against his thin legs. John McManus, long-nosed, smiling, taller than Black Ab and almost as thin, waited for him at the truck. The two men shook hands warmly.

"How've you wintered, Ab?" John asked.

"Not bad, John. How about you?"

"Gets worse every year. The more money I get, the more desk work I have to do. Sure glad it's spawning time."

Black Ab had worked with John for twenty-two years—ever since John had come here, a raw-boned, diffident young man, to organize the first milking of the great muskellunge in Irishman's Lake—yet they had little more than that to say to each other. Perhaps it was because they knew that when men are friends there's no use jawing about it.

It was different, though, when the company came. News of a strange car travels fast on those rolling back roads, and these farmers, whose forebears a hundred years ago had fled an Irish famine to the Kawartha country of hills and lakes in central Ontario, knew the hatchery truck from years past and liked to listen to the kind of talk it brought.

Red Ab Magee, Black Ab's cousin, skirted the new green of his winter-rye field, climbed a couple of cedar-rail fences, and got there in time for the after-dinner tea. Fat and thin, bearded and shaven, young men and old, O'Connells and Fees and Deyells and McQuades came, too. They all crowded into Black Ab's kitchen, sitting on the rocking chairs and the black-leather settee and the floor, and some stood against the wall. Black Ab's three boys, home from school for the noon meal, sat in the wood box by the kitchen range, and his littlest girl sat on Black Ab's knee.

Prompted by a question here, or a comment there, Black Ab and John told stories then of the forty- and fifty-pounders they'd milked of spawn in other years. They talked of the battle scars they'd found on these ferocious fish, of the musky that had been starving until they removed the sucker stuck in its throat, of net-smashing monsters they hadn't been able to milk because they couldn't subdue them without hurting them.

When Black Ab was telling of a five-foot fish, he rubbed his whiskery chin and chuckled and said, "Wonder where that old lady keeps herself in the

summertime. Some of those Yanks I guide would sure like to know, and for that matter so would I, so I could take 'em there and see the fun."

From his tone of voice, you knew he was really on the side of the fish like a fight manager who will send his boy against anybody in the world and never figure on his losing. Red Ab Magee, in a rare moment of perception, put his finger on that.

"You'd think them fish was personal friends of yours, Black Ab."

"All my friends is fish," said Black Ab, "and some of my cousins, too."

There was general laughter at that, a single soprano from Black Ab's large and comfortable wife, Minnie, a high giggle from the little girl on Black Ab's knee; and one of the Deyells said, "Wonder what you'll find down there this year, Black Ab?"

"Something interesting. We always do, eh, John?"

John smiled and nodded and there was a thoughtful silence, because everyone there understood the feeling that Black Ab Magee and John McManus had for these fish, from twenty-two years of guarding their birth and babyhood.

About two o'clock Black Ab and John got up, and the neighbor men got ready to go. Black Ab rolled up his oilskins and kissed Minnie and got in the truck beside John. They waved good-by and drove a couple of miles to pick up Lanny O'Connell. Young Lanny's wife didn't look too happy about it, but Lanny had known they'd be coming any day, and he was ready. From Lanny's they drove seven miles to the Duke of Bedford Tourist Camp on the north shore of Irishman's Lake.

John had the keys to one of the cabins and to the camp kitchen, and by midafternoon the men had unloaded the truck and were checking and mending nets in the sun on the grassy hillside. Lanny went back into the bush to cut some poles which would be pounded into the soft lake bottom to hold the nets. There was no one else around. The owner of this camp never came out from the city until the middle of May. The musky-milkers always had the place to themselves for the weeks they were here.

ON THE second morning, in a hard cold rain, they set out to stake nets. Black Ab, sitting in the stern of a skiff, handling the five-horse outboard which towed a punt full of nets, pointed at a huge snapping turtle climbing a gravel cliff on shore to lay her eggs. An early loon flew high overhead, cackling madly, and Lanny exclaimed, "Listen to that darn' loon laugh!"

"That loon ain't laughing," Black Ab said. "He's serious!" The three of them laughed hard at the old joke, and Black Ab had the feeling that always came with springtime and musky-milking and the awakening of the world again—the feeling that made him tell jokes, and laugh hard at others' jokes, and feel good. He felt good now, and the rain beat down on their oilskins and soaked the cotton gloves that would have been soaked soon anyway, and



finally Black Ab nosed in to where they'd stake out the first net.

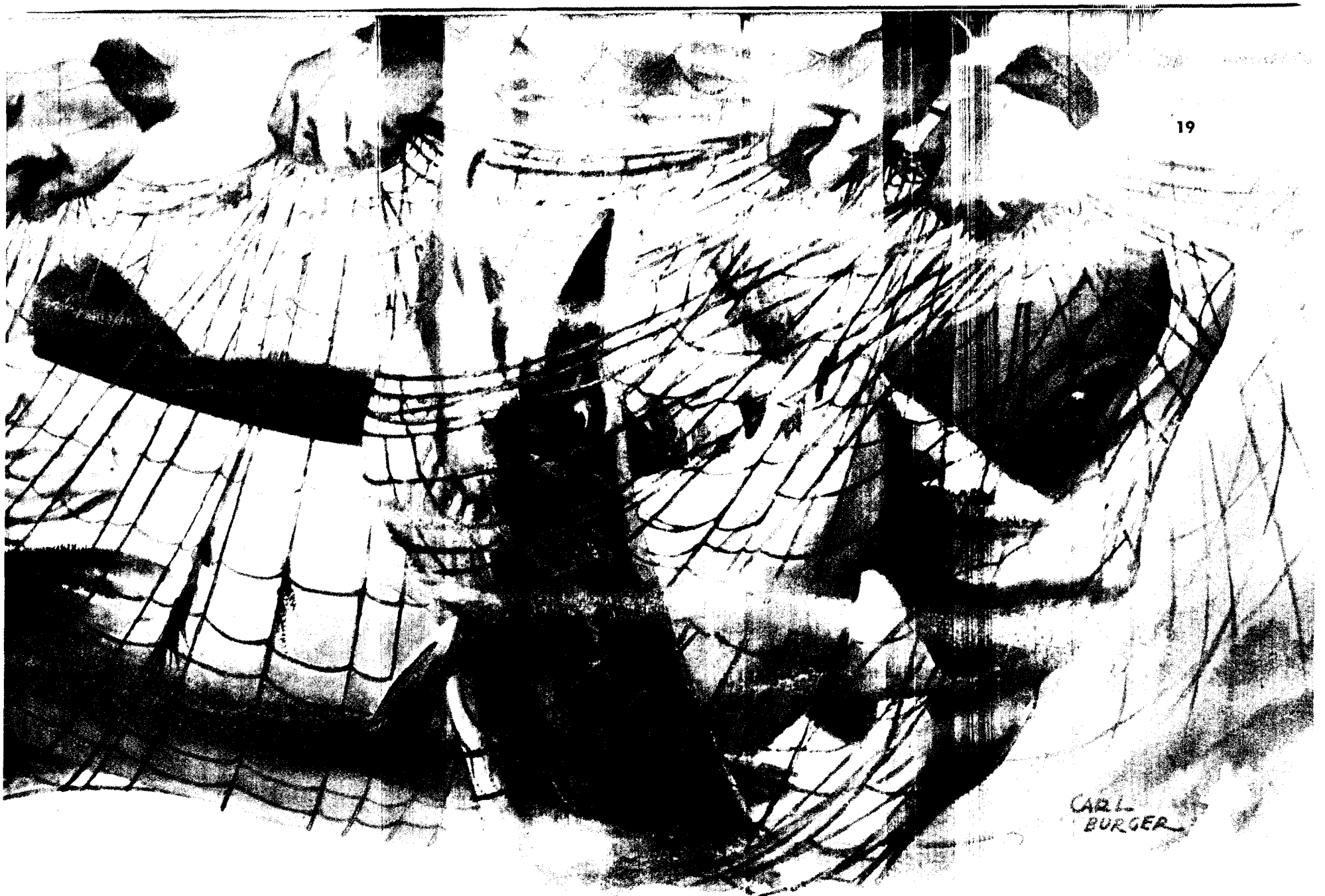
They worked with the precision of a gun crew. Black Ab and John placed the first stake and held it while Lanny pounded with the mallet; then they unrolled more net until they came to another stake to pound, and still another, until a single net like a fence stretched fifty feet out from the shore. That was the lead net. The heart net was easier. They set the stakes in a rough square with the nets strung between them. It was open at the entrance from the lead net and had a funnel-shaped passage leading to the final net, the pound net.

The big fish, nosing into the shallows to seek spawning places, would hit the lead net and turn out to go around it. They'd hit the heart net and circle it, looking for a way out, and the first outlet they'd come to would lead them along an underwater funnel and in through the bottom of the pound net. Fish being what they were, they circled there until the spawners came, seldom going back to the depths to find the small hole through which they had entered.

The three men staked out one net that morning, another that afternoon, the remaining two the following day. Lanny drove the truck to town for groceries and also brought back some beer, and they played three-handed cribbage that night in the cookhouse, stopping occasionally to throw more wood into the roaring kitchen range, uncapping beer as they needed it. They quit at ten and went to bed in cots right there in the kitchen because it was too cold to go to the cabins. The next morning at eight o'clock, after John had telephoned his hatchery to send a truck at noon for the first spawn, they set out to milk the muskies.

Black Ab, as usual, handled the skiff and Lanny bailed. The boats had been in water only these three days and were not yet watertight. John sat in the punt, towed behind the skiff over the choppy, gray water, which on this morning's reading was

Collier's for May 5, 1951



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nine degrees warmer than freezing. It was in the first net, that first day of milking, that they found the albino muskellunge.

Black Ab saw her first. Looking ahead to the string of nets stretching out from the shore, gauging his wind and drift, he saw the long, rolling flash of white, and immediately he thought it might be the albino. In the instant it takes a man's mind to call up the possibilities, he thought of the times he had seen her before, the crashing, bait-smashing fight of her, and how he had kept silent to protect her from men who would want to boat such a sensational freak. He said nothing to these others who had never seen her or heard of her, because maybe it had not been the albino at all, maybe just the white belly of another large fish.

He brought the skiff quickly alongside the pound net and grabbed one of the stakes and stood up to look down into the ten-foot-square enclosure. He saw her clearly.

"Look in there, John," he said. "See it?"

The white shape swirled near the surface again, and they all saw the murderous undershot jaw.

"By the Lord Harry!" Lanny burst out. "It's a white musky!"

Black Ab jerked on the punt's towrope and clambered into the punt beside John. He pulled the punt into the passageway between the heart net and the pound net and flipped off the lines that lashed one corner of the pound net to a stake. He and John hauled on the heavy black nets.

Their gloves were soaked immediately, and the punt heeled far over with the weight of the net. They pulled it in until the bottom of it was only about eighteen inches under water. The white musky, splashing and thrashing, was the largest fish in the net. Black Ab's expert eye estimated it at twenty-five pounds as it plunged furiously among the hundreds of other fish.

"It's the damndest queerest-looking fish!" Lanny burst out.

"I never saw one before," John said, turning. "Have you, Ab?"

Black Ab nodded his head in quick jerks, but he said nothing. He was angry that this fish should be caught in a simple net and he cursed himself for being angry because, after all, she wasn't hurt and she could be released when her purpose was served. And yet he felt apprehensive and tense.

He picked up a large landing net, and John did the same. With quick selective sweeps through the dashing fish, they scooped out the unwanted varieties, flipping bass and sunfish and perch back into the water. The egg-eating carp were tossed to the floor of the skiff and the mud cats to the floor of the punt. After two or three minutes of fast work, only muskellunge were left in the nets.

"Let's get a look at her first," John said. "You bring her, Ab." He reached for the pile of enameled dishpans in the punt, placing one to his left in the stern.

BLACK AB dipped his landing net into the water and moved it gently until it enclosed the head half of the albino; then he got his free hand under her belly and lifted her into the punt.

John took her flailing tail in his left hand, and clasped her to him with his right elbow, the way a man would hold a banjo. She struggled, and the men grunted and held hard, and her tail whacked the side of John's face.

"Steady, baby," said Black Ab gently.

The struggle ceased for a few seconds and John cupped his right hand under her belly and pressed slowly toward her tail, forcing the first thousands of eggs into the pan. They were the normal golden yellow. He pressed again and again, pausing occasionally to hold on hard when the albino rioted in his arms, while Black Ab struggled to keep her head in the enclosing net. The level of the eggs in the pan rose until the stream lessened and finally stopped.

The two men still held the big white fish in their

arms. Usually when a fish had been stripped it was released. The only ones put back in the trap were females not quite ready to spawn, or males not yet needed for their fertilizing sperm.

"I think we should put her back in the trap," John said.

"We've got her eggs," Black Ab said. "Don't need nothing more."

John said, "If we let her go, sure as hell somebody is going to say why didn't we keep her."

"You mean for a zoo, or something?"

"Something like that."

Black Ab's anger at the albino came back. Maybe John sensed the way he felt.

"I've got to remember I'm working for the department," John said. "I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't hold this one at least until someone told me to let her go."

John moved his end of the albino out over the side of the punt and, after a second's pause, Black Ab upended the landing net. The albino slid back into the water and lay sluggish with shock. Then she moved slowly against one side of the net, a few inches under water.

With the eggs waiting in the pan, there was no time for talk. Black Ab dipped the net again and came up with one of the males. He was almost as hard to hold as the albino. The forcing process was the same, and when this fish had contributed his fertility to the eggs of the albino he was released gently in the open lake. Black Ab had another male ready, and then another, until John said that should do it. Black Ab dipped water from the lake and poured it carefully against the sides of the dishpan, so as to cause a minimum of disturbance among the eggs as it settled around and over them, reproducing as closely as possible the conditions of a normal nesting place.

John moved the half-full dishpan up under the punt's short deck and said he'd take over the hoisting while Black Ab did the (Continued on page 62)

USSIA could hurt us badly in the opening minutes of a war. Guided missiles launched from submarines might destroy parts of some coastal cities, and bombs might cripple a number of our inland centers.

But we could immediately hit Russia hard, too. Her transport system is vulnerable to bombing, and so is her industry, which despite recent efforts to decentralize it, is still largely concentrated. Especially vulnerable is the great Baku oil center, lying within striking distance of Middle East bases—and Russia's petroleum problem is serious.

Unless deadlier weapons than any now in sight are developed, however, neither side would be likely to win quickly. After the first lightning blows, the war would almost certainly settle into a long, grim struggle dependent on the relative strength of the American and Soviet economies.

It is all-important, therefore, for us to know the real truth about Russia's economy—not the expansive claims put out by Soviet propagandists, but the plain, hard facts. Russia has been able successfully to hide all facts which might be used to compare the size of her armament output with that of other nations. But figures on arms production are far from the whole story, and there are other vital economic facts which the Soviet government either hasn't cared to conceal or hasn't been able to. These we must know if we are to size up Russia's potential.

The sum total of such facts shows that—war or no war—not until 1970 or after can Russia expect even to equal our *present* production of such basic materials as steel, electric power and petroleum. This would give us an enormous initial advantage in a long struggle, an advantage which would grow as the war continued if the Soviet could be kept from hitching Western Europe's industries to its own. And, of course, Russia this time would not have the large assist she had during the last war through American Lend-Lease aid.

Aside from these initial considerations, what are

the facts we need to know about Russia's economy?

When World War I began, Russia ranked only fifth as a world industrial power. Since then she has outstripped all other nations except the United States, and now stands as the second most powerful nation in the world. From 1913 to the end of 1950, for example, she increased her output of petroleum four times, of pig iron five times, of steel seven times, of coal nine times and of electric power more than 45 times. With the help of these vital commodities, she has developed vast chemical and machine-building industries.

Much of this impressive progress was spurred by Russian fears of the outside world, which caused her to look upon industrial capacity as a weapon. "To slacken the tempo would mean falling behind," Stalin told a group of Russian executives in 1931, "and those who fall behind get beaten. One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beatings she suffered for falling behind, for her backwardness."

As a result of this viewpoint, Russia, unlike the United States, has been far more concerned with using her economy to build up military strength than to make life more agreeable for her people. Last year the Soviet Union apportioned steel for only 400,000 motor vehicles; the U.S., with a population only three fourths as large, made more than 7,000,000 cars and trucks. Early in 1950, there were no more than 150,000 television sets in the U.S.S.R. as compared with considerably more than 3,000,000 here. Production of Russian radios is so low that the average Russian has never had a set of his own; he has to use a loud-speaker wired to a central listening station. Nor has he ever owned a refrigerator or washing machine.

Last year, Russia produced 197,000,000 pairs of leather shoes, or not quite enough to give every person just one pair; in 1948 the U.S. made 3.15 pairs a person. Likewise, the Russian production of hosiery averaged just over two pairs apiece; whereas in the U.S. it was 12.

Because Russian industry has been far more absorbed all along in developing the nation's military power, if war came, the U.S.S.R. would need less time than the U.S. to convert to full war production.

On the other hand, the U.S. would have the advantage of more slack to take up, since our work week is much shorter than Russia's. Also, there are relatively more American women who could be called from homes into factories. Proportionately, then, America could increase her output more if war came.

Of greater importance, if the two countries switched completely to military production, the armaments race should go to the U.S. in the long run because its industrial capacity is much larger. These figures tell the story:

In 1950, Russia's estimated total output was greater than ever before. Yet in 1949 America actually produced almost 75 per cent more coal than Russia did in 1950, 145 per cent more pig iron, 160 per cent more steel, almost 300 per cent more electric power and 570 per cent more oil. These are the commodities that provide the sinews of modern war.

Industrially, therefore, while Russia ranks second to the U.S., she ranks only a poor second. The over-all goal she has set herself to reach 10 or 15 years from now is no better than the one we reached a decade ago. The U.S.S.R. may meet her goal, if there is peace. Even if she does, though, her per capita production in 1960 or 1965 will be less than ours in 1929, since she has more people.

Lest all this bring smugness to Americans, however, we should consider one other fact. The industrial power of Western Europe, including that of Great Britain, is substantially more than that of Russia, Russia's satellites and China put together. If Russia could add Western Europe and Britain to what she now controls, most of our present economic advantage would be canceled. Furthermore, Russia, whose fleet is now weak except in subma-

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