



**THE
ONLY WAY
TO WIN**

by Charles Mercer

**The tackle looked
good, and no one
was blaming Hal
for what had happened.
It was just one of
the risks of football,
wasn't it?**

He got up late that Saturday. Ruby, the cook, served him breakfast in the dining room. He was reading the sports section of the morning paper at the table when he heard his mother come into the house.

But he pretended not to hear her. Sometimes, particularly in the morning, she annoyed him. Sometimes, when the old man wasn't around, she treated him like a baby. It was annoying to be treated that way when you were eighteen years old.

"Hal," she said cheerfully as she came toward him. "Sleep well, dear?" She ran a hand across his blond hair, which was short and bristled hard as a brush when rubbed the wrong way.

"Oh, sure."

His mother gazed at him fondly. He was a big kid, tall and wide shouldered, with even features.

"The last game of the season today." She sounded glad. But before she could tell him how glad she was, the telephone rang and she left the room.

He stared out a window. The sky was blue and the sun shafted down brightly, laying the precise shadows of bare maples on the big yard. It was a perfect day for football.

"Carol for you," his mother called. He took his time going to the telephone. Carol would wait, he knew. She was the best-looking girl in Highland High, but she'd wait indefinitely for him.

He was, after all, the captain of Highland's football team and the class president and on the honor roll. He was going to college next year, and his old man was J. D. Caldwell, who really was

somebody around the suburb of Highland and in the city, too.

Those were some of the reasons why Carol Kirsh went steady with him.

He picked up the phone and said, "Yeah." His tone did not ape toughness; it simply was flat, sure. It was the tone he used with practically everyone he knew. It was the old man's tone. It got results.

"Hi," Carol said. She always sounded relaxed.

"What d'you know?"

"Think I'll have a little party tonight," she said. "The usuals. Okay?"

"Sure."

"Okay." She paused as if waiting for him to say more, and when he didn't she said, "Give it to Glenfield today."

"Natch."

"So old Grummick isn't letting Buzz play. What a graut!"

"Yeah." He took a deep breath.

"We'll do okay without him. See you later, kid." And he hung up.

He wished then that he'd prolonged the conversation awhile. He often felt there was something he should say to Carol or she to him, but it seemed they never could.

Grummick the graut, he thought as he wandered into the den and sprawled on the sofa. He wasn't sure what the word "graut" meant. It was a word the gang used to describe a certain—well, it described a guy like Grummick, the high-school principal, who didn't care about having a winning football team, a vague character who would rather generalize than be specific.

Just last Monday when Hal had gone

into his office to try to argue him into letting Buzz Strathmeyer play in the Glenfield game despite his low grades, Grummick had done it again. He'd gone off on a tangent.

"Tell me, Hal," he'd said suddenly, "what's happened to you and all that gang you run around with? You've always got to win! Did it ever occur to you that it might be good for you to lose a little? Someday you'll wake up and feel you missed something. You know what you'll miss? Your youth."

Grummick had smiled and pushed his hair off his forehead. "No, Hal, I won't let Buzz play on Saturday. I'll be out there cheering for you. But I won't feel too bad if we lose."

A graut, Hal thought disgustedly. He picked up a magazine as the old man clumped in, his face flushed from playing golf.

"What d'ya say, J. D.?"

"Oke." His father grinned. He liked Hal to call him J. D. It showed, he'd boasted, that this, his only child, was a mature man at eighteen.

But it just went to show you, Hal thought, that you never could satisfy the older generation. Grummick wanted you young. The old man wanted you mature. You never could please everybody.

Mother appeared in the door behind the old man, gazing at him worriedly.

The old man winked. "Take it easy, kid, and then," he drove a fist through the air, "give Glenfield the works!"

Hal suddenly wanted to follow them to the dining room. For an incredible moment he wanted to be a little boy

again. But he didn't follow them. He sat still, wondering what was wrong with him.

Maybe the trouble was that this was his last high-school game today. And, most important, it was the Glenfield game, which really was supposed to be something this year because each team had dropped only one.

Besides, there was a tradition around Highland that the team could lose every game up to the Glenfield contest, but if they won that one it was a successful season. There was a tradition that Glenfield, the suburb on the plain, was jealous of Highland, the suburb on the hill, where the people were supposed to be richer and the houses bigger.

So it was essential to beat Glenfield, to uphold the tradition, to keep the bums in their place.

The bums? He was thinking suddenly of Jean Kenyon. She'd be a senior at Glenfield High School this year. She was—well, she was so easy to remember. He'd met her last summer at the lake. He'd met her on the far raft.

He was surprised to learn that she came from Glenfield, for he hadn't supposed that anyone so lovely would live in that town. But he was more surprised to learn she was working as a waitress that summer at a hotel where her aunt was a housekeeper.

She never stopped surprising him from the first day to the last. She disagreed with him amusedly on so much of his—well, his attitude. And she showed such amazing contradictions.

She was so ambitious that she worked as a waitress in the hope of going to col-

lege; yet she told him that she thought too much ambition was a bad thing. She was extraordinarily shy about coming home with him one evening to meet Mother and the old man; yet, once there, she wasn't a bit afraid to disagree with the old man or to tell Mother she was a waitress.

But her biggest surprise she saved for one day late in the summer. They were lying on the raft talking that afternoon.

That is, he was being positive about something—about the rightness of a mighty man who was much in the news. That was the sort of thing they often found themselves talking about. And she, as usual, was good-humoredly disagreeing, not so much with his opinion as with his positiveness.

"How can you be so sure, Hal?" she was always laughingly asking him.

Suddenly there was a great splashing, and Bolo Godwaite pulled himself onto the raft, yakkling loudly. Bolo was a skinny kid who worked for the boat club that summer. He was all right at times, but Hal didn't want him around just then and told him to scram.

Bolo asked plaintively if Hal thought he owned the darned raft, and Hal got up leisurely and threw Bolo into the lake. Bolo climbed back angrily and Hal pushed him off again.

"Hall!" Jean rose, her eyes smoldering. "Don't do that!"

"I told that two-bit boatman to leave us alone," he said.

"But it's not your raft," Jean said.

Bolo clambered onto the raft again, gasping for breath, and again Hal flung him off. Then Jean pulled on her bath-

ing cap, dived off the raft, and swam toward shore. He watched her go with bewilderment, before diving and swimming fast after her. Behind him he heard Bolo, who had struggled onto the raft again, yah-yah-yahing derisively.

He caught up with Jean in the shallow water and tried to talk to her. She didn't answer until they reached the beach. Then she turned and said, "So long, Hal. It's been fun." She walked away fast.

He was hurt and then he was angry and eventually he was terribly lonely. He went around to the hotel where she worked and finally cornered her.

When he started to speak she said, "It just won't work, Hal." She extended a hand and he took it automatically. And then she hurried away, but not before he saw the tears in her eyes.

Well, it was lucky that Carol came back from Europe with her family just then, and they picked up where they'd left off in June. Of course it was lucky. It had to be or none of this would make sense.

Sense. That was the important thing. He hadn't showed much sense after he returned from the lake and phoned Jean. He'd just wanted to give her the chance to change her mind if she saw things differently then. He'd just wanted—well, doggone it, to see her.

But not any more. Not after she was so polite on the telephone but firmly refused to date him. After that the green and blue summer days, the silver and velvet nights on the lake—all that was past.

Now in the cold season he was going

out to the last game—and win. He'd show her he was a winner. He'd show her what she'd missed. For she undoubtedly would be there. Yes, he'd show her today.

He felt fine when he trotted onto the field at the head of the squad and the Highland stands cheered and the band played "On to Victory."

There was a welcoming yell from the Glenfield stands as the enemy came on to the field. He always thought of the opposition as the enemy. He had to hate the opposing team; he had to work himself into a cold, calculated hatred in order to do his best.

Once last season, in the Red Oak game, he'd played against Minty Balch, an old friend from days at the lake. In that game Minty had helped him up when he was down and he'd helped Minty up. He just couldn't work up any hatred against Red Oak and so Highland had lost.

But he'd learned his lesson. He must not stop hating.

He saw the old man and Mother on the fifty-yard line. Then he glimpsed Carol. She sat in the midst of the gang. She wasn't so corny as to wave to him, of course, though he rather wished she would. And while he saw her face, he felt she really wasn't there at all.

Warming up, he slowly worked his way across the cold November field. He looked over the Glenfield stands frequently, wondering if he'd see Jean, telling himself he didn't care but wondering anyway.

He thought that the people from that town certainly had no tone. A lot of

them looked pretty seedy. Of course, Jean had tone, but——

The warm-up ended then and the first string clustered around Coach Ford at the bench. Ford played him at fullback—that lonely position where you had to make like the all-American boy most of the time.

It began in all-American-boy style all right. He won the toss and Highland spread into receiving position. Here was the perfect football day. There were his parents and his girl watching him as was always the way in football stories. A drum rolled as Glenfield swept forward following a beautiful kick.

The ball came in a flat trajectory straight toward him. He tucked it in an arm easily, almost tenderly, and swept after his grouping defense. But Drew Taylor was moving too slowly in front of him, and suddenly it seemed that there was no defense. Then the truck hit him.

He was lying on the ground, dreaming about the all-American boy. He heard the whistle. And he didn't have the ball. His fingers clawed at the turf as if to dig a place to hide. But he knew he couldn't hide, and he squirmed over to find and kill the man who had the ball.

The guy lay beside him. He was a little guy and under his big helmet he looked like a baby in a bonnet. He was hugging the ball and grinning.

"Hi," he said to Hal.

"You'd better get out of the game," Hal said slowly. "You'd better quit right now or your own mother won't recognize you."

The little guy stared at him in amazement and then he started to laugh. The referee took the ball and the little guy got up, laughing. It was Glenfield's ball on Highland's twenty-six-yard line. The Glenfield stands were wild; the Highland stands stunned.

Hal called for time. He knelt on the ground with the team around him and used tough language. Then he said, "Who is he? Who is that runt?"

"That's Cronk," somebody said. "You know."

Now he knew. He'd only heard before. The papers had touted Dave Cronk in their high-school sports columns, and Coach Ford had yakked about watching Cronk, a junior, a new kid who'd just come to Glenfield.

I'll kill that runt, he thought. I'll get him. It's the only sure way to win. He told the team they had to hold.

And they did. Hal yearned to get at Cronk but he didn't have a chance.

When it was Highland's ball on its own eighteen-yard line, Hal downed the impulse to try to run it out. He did the conservative thing and kicked out.

Cronk gathered in the ball away up near his own twenty-five-yard line and came down the field, not terribly fast but balanced, like a ballet dancer. He seemed to move in a rhythm all his own, offbeat from the rhythm of anyone on that field, sprinting and slowing and weaving unpredictably.

It was a difficult rhythm to follow, like a strange and beautiful dance. But Hal sensed it and moved in slowly, stalking him. Cronk came through Brown and Stansyck and Harrison, and then he

sprinted, angling away from Hal. They streaked toward an inevitable point on the Glenfield side of Highland's thirty-yard line. But as the point of impact seemed impossible to avoid, as Hal's arms swung forward to seize and fling down and crush the small body, Cronk seemed to stop dead. It was an almost impossible halt in his sprint, a kind of blurred optical illusion. Yet Hal, in his quick study of Cronk's rhythm, had expected it. His cleats dug at the ground, but the momentum of his heavier body carried him past the angle of Cronk's break. His right hand flailed at Cronk but Cronk twisted from his grasp.

Somehow Hal managed to pivot. His legs churned, his heart seemed to coil and spring him forward. There was the goal line, there was Cronk, there was he. The distances between took an eternity to narrow.

And suddenly the three were bunched in one. That was how it must look to all the world. Only the runners knew differently. Dave Cronk knew he was across the line, for he began to turn his head. Certainly Hal Caldwell knew. He could not stop this score now, but maybe he could stop Cronk. The sure way to win was to forget this score and stop Cronk.

He tackled him at the waist. His arms went around the slight, hard body under the loose jersey, and he tipped off on his right toe in a shallow dive. And in that instant he saw Cronk's face, surprised, wondering why he was tackled now that he was across the goal. Hal flattened his weight along Cronk's back, driving his thick padded shoulder into

the loose helmet as they went down, driving his weight hard as Cronk flattened under him.

He rolled on over Cronk and got to his feet slowly, hearing the ecstatic screaming from the Glenfield stands.

But Cronk didn't get up. He lay there on the grass. He certainly was a little guy.

Hal kept wiping his hands on his pants, trying vainly to get the sweat off his palms. He looked down at Cronk. His eyes were closed, his mouth open and curled at the corners in a kind of smile, like a kid playing dead. Hal kept wiping his hands on his pants.

The Glenfield doctor appeared and Hal went back to his team. Somewhere an airplane droned in the fall sky, but down here the people were silent, staring at the motionless body of Dave Cronk.

After a while some students trotted out from the Glenfield bench with a stretcher. They moved Dave Cronk onto it and carried him off the field.

As they reached the edge of the field somebody cried, "Dave!" A small dark girl darted from the stands. Behind her came Jean.

Hal started forward and stopped, gaping at Jean. Why, out of all the thousands in the stands, must it be Jean who ran to Cronk's stretcher?

Then he saw her hold the smaller girl back from the stretcher. Maybe the small dark one was Dave Cronk's girl. That was the way it had to be.

Please, he thought as he turned away, don't let Jean be Cronk's girl. But if she is, he thought, Cronk has made a good

choice. You had to give him credit. You had to give Dave Cronk credit for a lot of things.

Brown said, "Well, we got rid of our competition."

Nobody spoke. Nobody even looked at Brown except Hal, who said, "He'll be all right. He'll be back next quarter and running right through you—and through me too."

They looked at him in surprise and he realized he'd never said anything like that before. He was being a lousy captain. But he wanted Cronk back.

"Yes, sir," he said to them, "Cronk'll be back."

But Cronk didn't come back and without him it wasn't much of a game. Glenfield kicked the ball wide of the posts in the try for the extra point. Highland should have romped for a touchdown after that, but Highland seemed as weakened as Glenfield.

Hal wondered if anyone except himself knew why. For it was his fault. He was playing sloppily. He didn't care who won. He was just waiting for Dave Cronk to come back into the game. When Cronk did come back he would go up to him and shake his hand. Not for the grandstands. Just for himself. He wanted to shake the hand of the best player he'd ever seen.

He was still anxiously waiting for Cronk to come back early in the second quarter when Ford sent in Harris to replace him. As he trotted toward the bench, the Highland stands gave him a hand. It wasn't an ovation, just a polite hand. But even that was better than he felt he deserved.

Ford and Grummick and a stranger stood at the end of the bench, staring at him.

"Look, kid——" Ford placed an arm around his shoulders. "There's been an accident. Cronk, he—he——"

"Hal," Grummick looked at him gravely, "Dave Cronk's neck was broken. He has only a slim chance."

The world grew blurred. He heard their voices but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

Finally he heard his own voice. "Call the game. Glenfield won. Dave Cronk won the game."

At dinner that evening his throat constricted at the first taste of food, and he left the table. His father followed him into the den.

"Look, Son," he said at last, "I used to play football myself."

"Did you ever kill anybody?" asked Hal.

His father grimaced. "Now look here." He made his voice loud. "You cut that out. An accident is an accident."

"It wasn't an accident." He raised his gaze to his father's. "Don't you see? I was so mad at Cronk I wanted to kill him. So maybe I have."

"Don't talk foolish." His father repeated the words measuredly, almost shouting. "Everybody gets mad sometimes when they're playing football. It just happened. It's one of those things. Reminds me of the plant. You remember when I absorbed Faber's outfit. Well, I—he—I thought he could take care of himself on a deal, but he was overtrusting. I mean ——"

"You mean," Hal said, "you tricked

him. And now you're trying to justify what happened as something like the natural risks of business. Just like you're trying to justify this as the natural risks of football. All because we were doing our best to win. Well, it doesn't seem right."

Then, knowing he'd hurt him, he muttered, "I'm sorry, Dad," and he realized it was the first time he'd called him dad in a long while.

"That's okay, Hal." The voice was low, persuasive. "When you come into the plant with me——"

He didn't listen. In the past whenever he'd thought about the future he'd assumed he'd go into the plant with his father after college. But now he knew he wouldn't. He was going his own way. He hadn't the vaguest idea yet where it would lead him, but at least it would be his own way.

He stood up. "I'm going down to the Cronks' house."

His father gaped at him. Then he made his tone judicious. "All right, Hal, all right. Pick up some of the fellows and——"

"No," Hal said, "I'm going alone."
As he went through the hall his mother came up, her face taut. "Carol called you, Hal. She said some of the gang were at her house and you hadn't showed up yet."

"Does the dizzy dame think I'm going there *tonight*?" he shouted. "I'm going down to the Cronks'."

Her eyes widened. She might be going to cry. Suddenly she pulled his face down to hers and kissed his forehead. "I'm glad," she said. "I'm awfully glad."

The Cronks lived on a side street lined with old small houses crowded in tiny yards. As he drove along he remembered that Jean had told him she lived on this street. But he tried not to think about her.

He stopped his car in front of the Cronks' house and hunched behind the wheel for awhile, thinking that he couldn't go in. But he did.

A girl opened the door. In the sudden light he blinked at her in surprise. Jean!

"Come in," she said in a low voice. She stepped ahead of him into the small living room. "Mr. Cronk, this is Hal Caldwell."

A slight man wearing a dark suit sat in a chair, dragging on a dead pipe and staring straight before him. His eyes met Hal's. They were faded eyes, expressing nothing. Slowly he got to his feet and came to Hal and shook hands limply. "You were very decent to come," he

said. "I'm sorry, my wife, she—she's upstairs resting." He turned. "This is my other son—this is my son Jack."

Jack Cronk was about fourteen years old, big for his age. He sat, hands stuffed in his pockets, and glowered at Hal.

"Glad to meet you, Jack," Hal mumbled and started toward him. But Jack simply stared at Hal with hatred.

"And this," said Mr. Cronk, turning to the dining-room archway, "Dave's sister—my daughter, Marilyn."

She was the small dark girl who had rushed from the stands when Dave was carried from the field. She looked at him through a film of tears, and suddenly she whirled and fled through the darkened dining room.

"Hal," Jean said quickly, "my brother, Dick." He had come from the hall behind them, a big kid possibly a year or two older than Jack, fifteen or so. He



lounged against an old upright piano and stared hard at Hal.

"Jean's told me a lot about you, Dick," Hal said.

"Yeah?" He was a not-so-tough kid trying to act tough. "That's a hot one. I never heard about you."

"Mr. Cronk," Jean said, "won't you let me get you some coffee now?"

"No. No, thank you, Jean." He looked at Hal. "Take a chair. Jean's been—well, she's sort of been helping us here. We're neighbors, I guess you know. Friends. Jean and Marilyn. Jack and Dick. They've made it nice for us coming into this new town. The other fellows—the Glenfield fellows, the ones on Dave's team—they just left."

Hal sank into the sofa, trying to ignore the stares of Jack Cronk and Dick Kenyon. They hated him and he did not blame them. He hated himself. How could he start again and be different?

He cleared his throat. "I came to say, Mr. Cronk, that I——" His hands clenched in the futility of saying anything, "that Dave is the best football player I ever played against. He—he is a great little guy. I—I'm sorry."

Mr. Cronk dragged hard at his dead pipe. Finally he said, "He sure liked football. He is pretty light, only a junior, but he sure liked the game."

Then, the terrible silence. Dave would be sitting here now if it hadn't been for this afternoon.

Mr. Cronk lowered his pipe. "It was an accident," he said dully. "It was—one of those things that happens when you—go hard at something."

Supposing he told them it wasn't an accident? But it would only make things worse for them instead of better.

Dimly he felt that it might make things better for him if he told them. But it no longer mattered how he felt. Now



it only mattered how they felt. He wanted to do something. Words, even the sincere words that were ready to tumble from his lips, were too weak.

"Mr. Cronk. Mr. Cronk, at a time like this—I mean, because of what's happened, you—you suddenly find yourself loaded with expenses you didn't expect. And I wondered if—I'd like to do something toward——"

"No!" Mr. Cronk got up and scowled down at him. "Thank you for calling, young man."

Jean rose too. Jack and Dick sneered at him.

He got to his feet and backed into the hall, mumbling incoherently. Jean opened the front door for him and suddenly stepped out after him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You're a fool," she answered. "Just because—— You needn't think—— Coming here trying to buy something with your father's money!"

"I'm not trying to buy anything." His voice rose unhappily. "And it's not my father's money. I've got five hundred dollars in savings bonds in my own name, and I just wanted to do something——" The words trailed off as he saw her expression of misery.

Impulsively, she reached out and touched his arm. "I know," she said. "I feel as sorry for you as for——them. Hal, you didn't have to hit Dave so hard, did you?"

He shook his head. "That's the awful thing," he said slowly. "At the time I hated him so much that I wanted to kill him."

She stared at him for a moment. Then

she swung around and went inside and slammed the door shut behind her.

Monday was the most difficult day of his life. He didn't want to go to school. But he went, of course. He knew he had to go. It was like being thrown from a horse; you were always supposed to get up and ride again. Yet once he was in school he found that everyone was as friendly as always and that no one blamed him for what had happened.

The city's Sunday newspaper had set the mood with its front-page story about Dave Cronk's accident. It had reported that his neck was broken "in a goal-line tackle," making it sound as if the whole Highland team had piled on him. There were even a few lines about Captain Hal Caldwell's insisting that the game be called. He sounded good in the newspaper. Dave Cronk might not live, but he, Hal Caldwell, sounded good.

Carol walked from chemistry to history class with him, chattering about the Christmas dance. She didn't mention Dave Cronk or Hal's failure to attend the party Saturday night. Nothing had really changed. He could go right on as he had been.

He went home dazedly. His mother came in a few minutes later. They sat in the living room as the dark afternoon waned, and finally he told her about the Dave Cronk incident in detail.

"Perhaps he'll pull through," she said. And then after a long time, "I won't tell you to try to forget it, Hal. You'll forget the worst of it eventually. But I hope you can remember the best of it. Because there could be just a little good in it for you.

"It may——" She hesitated and looked around the large, expensively furnished living room. "It may make you see that there's a penalty in trying too hard for some things that don't count at all. In a sense, you know, your father and I are more to blame than you for what happened. We must have taught you that the important thing is to win, no matter how. That's what's wrong, Hal. If you could learn that, some good could come out of this for you."

In the following days he thought about what his mother had said. Dave Cronk's condition improved, but Hal lived in a kind of solitary confinement of his own construction. He went around school with Carol and the rest of the gang, but after school he didn't go to the drugstore with them or date Carol in the evenings. He went home alone and read or merely sat. And he seldom stopped thinking about Jean.

Finally, on a gray afternoon in December, Carol stopped him as he hurried toward his car in the school parking lot.

"Listen, Hal." She looked at him coldly. "It doesn't take a house to fall on me. Everybody gets the idea that you want to be left alone. There's just one question. Are you taking me to the Christmas dance next week?"

He looked at her for several seconds. "You'd better get another date," he said and walked to his car.

Then he did what he'd wanted to do for a long time. He drove down to Glenfield and looked for Jean among the crowds of homeward-bound students.

At last he saw her. But she was walk-

ing with Marilyn Cronk, and he didn't have the nerve to stop and speak to them. It was the one thing in the world he wanted to do, but he didn't have the nerve.

The next day he left his car at home, not wanting to ride up to Jean in the sleek convertible. After school he walked to Glenfield, but he didn't see her.

On the third day, when the first light snow of the season covered the ground, he walked to Glenfield again. And then at last he saw her, walking alone in the gathering darkness of late afternoon. Again he was afraid to speak to her, but he had to know what she truly thought. He caught up with her and said quietly, "Hi, Jean."

It seemed to take her forever to say "Hi."

"May I carry your books?" It didn't seem a corny question, not now, not with her.

"All right," she said after another pause and gave him the stack of school-books.

He had imagined himself saying many fine things to her, but now he could only say, "You want a soda or something?"

"No, thanks."

His heart seemed to hesitate in its heavy hammering. "Everything going okay?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Just fine. And you?"

"Fine." His tone was unconvincing. He did not speak for some time, for he was content just to be walking along her street with her, the light snow

scrunching underfoot, the bare branches of the elms tossing overhead in the northern wind. Lights from the windows of the old houses cast faint yellow paths on the new snow. A man's voice rang across the street. Somewhere a shovel scraped a path.

He breathed deeply. "Jean, I've been wanting to ask you, could—would you go to our Christmas dance with me?"

Her lips parted. For an instant he was sure she'd agree. But she shook her head slowly. "Thanks, Hal, I'd like to. But I can't."

He looked at her closely. "Just tell me one thing, Jean. Are you Dave's girl? Because if you are, I understand. I know it wouldn't be, well, right for me to try to see you any more. I mean—see, I've got to be punished for what I did. I know that. And it would sort of be just what I deserve if you were his girl and that's why you didn't want to see me."

She looked at him gravely. "No, Hal, I'm not Dave's girl."

"Then why——" He paused. "I guess I don't need to ask you why you don't want to see me. It's because of the way I am. That day on the raft, the day I kept pushing Bolo off, it was just like the way I set out to fix Dave's wagon, wasn't it? You saw then just what I'm like. I've got to be the big shot. I've got to have my way. I've got to win."

He shook his head. "I don't trust a guy who tells you he's going to turn over a new leaf. I know I'd like to change, but, well, words don't mean anything. It's how you are inside and how the inside makes you act outside——"

She halted suddenly at the path to her house and looked up at him as his voice trailed off. Her face was troubled.

"Maybe I'm the one who's being superior," she said. "Maybe I'm being the smug one now instead of you. But I want time to think over things, Hal."

Suddenly, instinctively, he knew that you couldn't force the most important things. And this was the most important thing of his life.

He interrupted her quickly. "Let's not talk about it right now, Jean. Let's see what happens. Maybe someday I'll walk down here again."

Her mitted hand squeezed his as she took her books from him. "I'll see you, Hal." Then she was running up the path to her house.

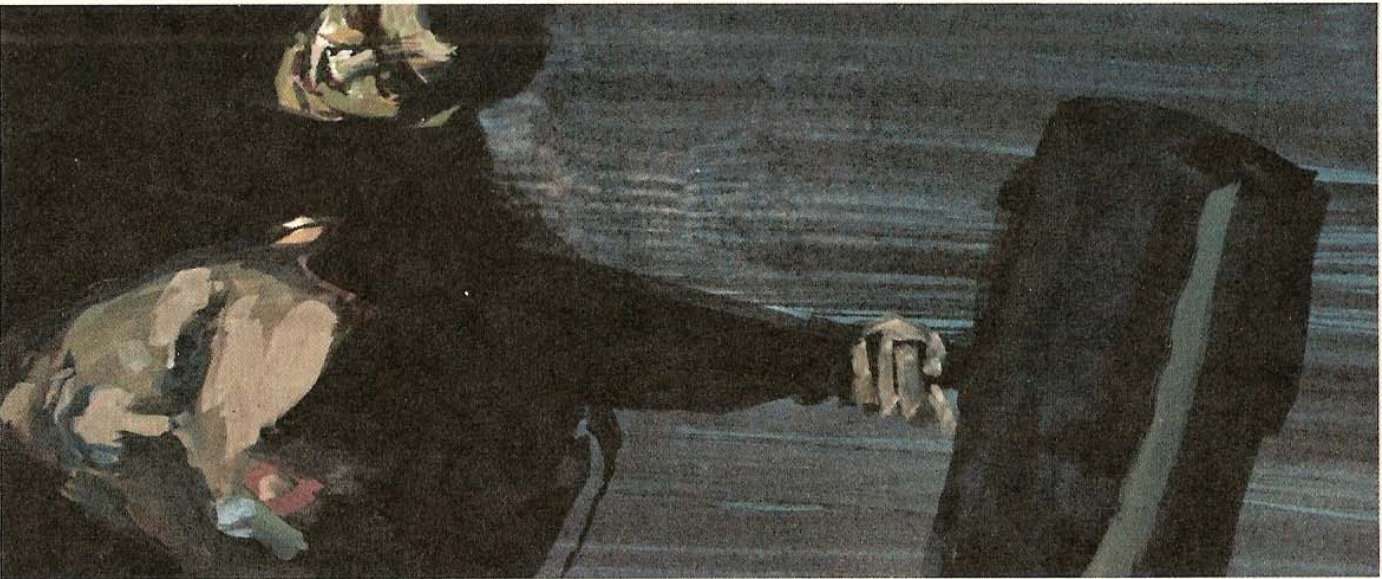
He walked on slowly. For a moment he was tempted to look back, but he was certain she wouldn't be watching him. He was sure that she wanted to forget the attraction of last summer.

On the Cronk steps he noticed Jack holding a shovel and Dick Kenyon balancing a broom. Talking with Jean, he had not seen them come out to clean the walks. They stood motionless as cats and stared at him across the snow.

"Hi." His despondent voice was so indistinct that it probably didn't carry to them. He didn't care now. He never could change the fact they were his enemies. He walked on, head lowered.

The sharp blow on his back staggered him. He stumbled and wheeled. Jack Cronk faced him, shovel raised to hit him again. Beside him stood Dick Kenyon, his face pale and determined.

"That's for you, hot stuff." Jack's face



That was what Dave must have thought about him: The crazy guy!

"Jack," he said, "Dick, look——"

Hal swung the broom at him. Hal ducked and snatched it from him and flung it aside. He could beat these kids to a pulp. But he wouldn't, no matter what they did to him.

Together they drove in at him, butting and swinging fiercely. He slipped and fell backward. He fended instinctively, but he didn't try to hit them as they fell on him. He saw the shovel swinging at him and he tried to duck.

In the deep darkness and numbing pain he heard Jean crying, "Dick! Jack!" And in the darkness he knew she *had* stood and watched him.

He was lying on the sidewalk and she was crouched beside him. "You crazy kids! He didn't even try to defend himself," she said. "Suppose you've killed him!"

"I didn't mean to kill him!" Jack cried.

He could see her beside him, he could hear her. His head throbbed painfully.

"I'm okay," he said. "You hear me, Jack, Dick? I really am okay. Things are going to be all right."

Talking it over

1. *a.* In what ways has Mr. Caldwell influenced his son?
b. How has Hal's mother influenced him?
2. *a.* What is Mr. Grummick's attitude toward winning a game?
b. What is Hal's attitude toward Grummick?

was contorted savagely. "You stay away from here!"

"And stay away from my sister," Dick cried shrilly.

The crazy guys! And then he thought that the expressions on their faces must be what his own had been when he had looked at Dave Cronk that Saturday.