

*It Looked as Though He'd Left His
Fire and His Hockey Back on
Guadalcanal—With His Arm!*



RINK FIRE

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IHAPPENED to be in Gus Sandvig's office when Jay Holt came back from the South Seas. I took a look at Jay, and wished I was somewhere else. I guess I haven't got the sort of stuff it takes to face a thing like that.

I'd been trying to shake Gus loose from a little inside dope, which was something like trying to open a time vault with a hair pin. Gus has an inbred distrust for all newspaper men in their official capacity of reporters. Outside of that, he likes me pretty well, I'm sure of it, and will tell me almost anything if I promise not to print it.

Gus is older than he looks, and he

doesn't look young. He has the long, sad face of a bloodhound, with the dewlap to go with it. At first glance you'd think he had the disposition of a pickle. You'd also get the same impression from a second glance—a sour-puss. The reason that Gus doesn't like reporters is, because he's scared they'll find and write about the way he spends the dough he makes off of his hockey team, the Penguins. Gus spends most of his potatoes on the boys themselves, and on their families when they get in trouble, which, if you know pro hockey players, isn't seldom. Gus goes about this with a furtive, criminal air. No one dares catch him at it—there'd be hell

to pay.

Jay Holt stood for a moment in the doorway. He was blocky, broad. His shoulders almost filled the opening. He was a square-faced, square-headed kid with sandy, wiry hair, but there was an alertness to him and a quick intelligence not usually associated with square-heads. His right hand was jammed into his pocket. He didn't have a left hand. He'd left it on Guadalcanal. His coat sleeve was looped upward from the elbow.

We'd heard, of course, that Jay had lost some of his arm. I was prepared for that part, too well prepared, in fact. Knowing he'd show up some of these days, I'd coached myself just how to act, just what to say—you know—the big hello, the hearty wallop on the back, the old hocus about pretending I didn't notice the empty sleeve. It was the sort of thing you'd naturally think up, but, after my first quick look at Jay, I knew I had hold of the wrong script. That's why I wished I was somewhere else.

It wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't known him when he was one of the greatest wings who ever ragged a puck. Those who had ever seen him on the ice could never forget the intangible quality he possessed. It was like a flame, not a lazy, quiet flame, but the blue flame of a blow torch. You were convinced he'd sizzle if someone threw water on him.

That same quality, to a lesser degree, was with him off the ice. You could feel the steady beat of his vitality. He had a frequent booming laugh, the contagious kind that gave a lift to those who heard it.

As he stood in the doorway now, I felt the solid shock of a great loss. He still possessed the rugged bulk of a volcano, but the fire was missing. I got the impression of dead ashes. It wasn't his missing arm that dried my mouth. That part was unimportant as compared to Jay

Holt's awful emptiness.

IT TURNED out, though, that I was taking myself and the problem of my own greeting too seriously. Jay didn't even know I was in the room, at first. His gray eyes, filled with a sardonic challenge, were fastened on Gus Sandvig. Jay's lips were twisted at the corners in what passed for a smile, a far cry from his former wide-mouthed grin. He said:

"Hi, Gus."

Gus had his old, armed swivel chair tilted all the way back. He said, "Well, Jay!" with more show of pleasure than I'd ever seen pried out of him. He gave a couple of hitches with his body, and leveled the chair to the point where he could reach his feet. He got up, a joint at a time, and walked over to meet Jay. They shook hands. Gus punched Jay lightly with his free hand, then dropping Jay's big mitt, he reached down, grabbed the slack of Jay's sleeve, and shook it curiously.

"How much did you lose?" he asked.

Jay stared at him sort of queerly, from which I doped it out that Jay's friends had shied away from that subject with such misguided delicacy that Jay himself had begun to believe it shouldn't be mentioned in polite society. Gus' naive acceptance of the thing nudged Jay off balance.

"Huh?" he said. Then stiffly, "Just below the elbow."

"Hum-m-m," mused Gus, still brightly curious, then asked, "Nice clean job?"

Slowly losing some of his reluctance, Jay admitted, "Yeah. We had good medicos down there."

"Hurt much?"

"Naw, not much. They kept me full of dope."

The tenseness was draining out of Jay. He turned toward me, and said, "Hi, Phil. How you been?"

I was feeling better, too. "Not bad for a

4-F,” I said. Then, following Gus’ cue, I gestured toward his sleeve and asked, “What did it?”

“Shell fragment. I was in a fox hole.” He told us about it. The Marine with him had been killed. The recounting of the story seemed to help him even further. He told it carefully, as if the facts, hard, sharp-edged things, kept thrusting at his skin, and had to be pushed back at intervals. When he had finished, Gus said:

“Our prospects aren’t so hot this year. Looks like the Penguins’ve got to learn to fly on one wing. Bitsy Binko’s as good as ever, but I’m going to have to use a raw kid, Ray Birch, on the right wing, and I don’t think he’s good enough to swing it.”

If this was Gus’ idea of keeping the conversation rolling, it looked to me like it was in pretty bad taste, and not like Gus at all. Jay Holt yanked back into his shell like a scared turtle. The set, hard look came back upon his face. And why not? Right wing was Jay’s old job. I figured Gus had gone a little nuts, after the fine start he’d made.

Gus himself, though, seemed blandly unaware of this, as he sat down again and let the chair tilt back with a bump. He eyed Jay a moment critically, then said:

“You look to be in good shape, Jay. How’d you like to help me out, and take over that right wing job?”

Now, I was certain Gus was nuts. A quick involuntary flame showed through the flat hardness of Jay’s eyes, then disappeared. His face turned a dull red. It wasn’t hard to guess what he was thinking. He said:

“Thanks, Gus. But there are other things I can do.”

Gus pulled a cigar from his vest pocket, and bit the end off. It was a good act. I’d seen it lots of times, and it was always good. His teeth met through the tobacco with a terrific self-restraint,

suggesting that he could have bitten through a nail as easily. I’ve seen strong men recoil before the gesture. His voice was strained with patience when he said:

“You got the wrong idea. Maybe you thought I was passing out some charity.”

The charge called for a reply. Jay looked uneasy, and said, “Well, hell, Gus. You know damn well I—”

“Do I know hockey players?” Gus shot at him. “Do I turn out teams that win? Do I give our fans what they want?”

“Yeah, sure, Gus, but—”

“Then shut up and let me talk. What do you keep your right hand in your pocket for? What’re you squeezing in there?”

Jay seemed glad to change the subject. He brought out his hand and showed us a small rubber handball. “I just sort of figured,” he explained, “that, so long as I only had one hand left, I might as well build it up all I could. Squeezin’ this thing helps.”

“I figured maybe that’s what was going on,” said Gus. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Jay showed us a forearm like a blacksmith’s, roped with muscle. With some pride, he clenched his big hand, so we could see the muscles bulge. Gus grunted his satisfaction, and said:

“There you are. A hockey club’ll feel like a toothpick to you. All you need is a little practice with the puck.”

“Do—do you think so, Gus?” Jay’s voice was strained.

“I’m sure of it,” said Gus. “Show up tonight for practice.”

WHEN Jay left a short time later, he took a little of his old assurance with him. Gus stared thoughtfully at the door for some moments after Jay had left.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Gus,” I said.

He turned his big head slowly toward

me. "Yeah, I hope so, Phil," he said.

"But, Gus—a hockey player with one hand—"

"Oh, that," he shrugged. "Jay's got the power, the speed and hockey instinct.

"Well, then," I said relieved.

Gus studied the tip of his cigar, then said, "It's not enough. He'll need much more than that."

No one disputes Gus Sandvig when he makes a statement about hockey, or his men. Just the same, I figured he'd slipped up this time, because I got an eyeful when I showed up at the arena that night to watch the Penguins practice.

I was there when Jay first took to the ice. I watched his first tentative strokes while he tried out his skating legs. The rest of the squad was watching too, a fact which tightened Jay up a little at the start. But once the feel of the ice got back into his bones, his old genius came back with a rush. His blades sang as he uncorked some skating that was skating.

He didn't start with the puck right away, and I got the feeling that he was a little scared to make the test. When Gus finally tossed a biscuit out to him, Jay worried it for a few seconds with his stick like a chicken sizing up a strange bug.

He finally took the rubber for a short run down the ice. It stuck to the face of his stick like glue. An expression of mild surprise came on Jay's face. He flipped the rubber off the dasher, and regained it handily. The stick seemed like a feather in his hand, and despite the strangeness of his one-handed manipulation, I spotted but a momentary awkwardness. His powerful instinct for the game of hockey seemed to provide a new technique for him as naturally as Nature provides new bark for a tree.

He was not, of course, terrific as I'd known him, but the resemblance, nevertheless, was there, and that was more

than I'd expected. He improved amazingly in each practice session. When he became accustomed to his team mates, and they gave no thought to his empty sleeve, some of Jay's grim restraint wore off. There were times when I even hoped he might return to normal.

I couldn't notice, though, that this optimism on my part was shared by old Gus Sandvig. He worked carefully with Jay as if he were handling a load of dynamite. He changed Jay's grip upon the stick, so that about six inches of the stick lay flat against his wrist. This gave Jay's stick all the support it needed on a face-off, and I'll bet he could have held his own with a gorilla. Gus made other small improvements in Jay's style, but, for the most part, Gus seemed worried.

I could understand this to some extent. Technically, Jay's skating and puck handling was as good as that of any man on the team. He would have looked impressive to those who hadn't seen him play before. The former bright, intangible flame was missing in him now, and Gus, I knew, would not be satisfied until he'd brought it back. Our first game, in a strict sense, was not our opening game. Our first game was looked on as a practice game against the Oakland Bobcats, who were not in our league.

Our real opening game, believe it or not, was the most important game of the whole series. It was always played against the Irontown Banshees, and the hockey rivalry between Redfield and Irontown was one of those crazy things you'd never believe until you saw the special police on hand to prevent rioting.

THERE was more than usual interest in the Bobcat game, however, because of Jay Holt's return to the club. There was a lot of excited speculation, pro and con, as to how he'd make out with only one arm.

The consensus of opinion seemed to be that Gus was making a mistake.

We all had that in the back of our minds, I guess. I'll admit it was gnawing on me like a mouse on a grain bin, and the feeling didn't improve when I wandered into the Penguin dressing room and got a look at Jay.

The guy was all tied up in nervous knots, and I guess I couldn't blame him. He knew well enough what the crowd was thinking, and he wasn't kidding himself as to the vital importance of his come-back. It was a whole lot more than his mere return to hockey, and Jay was smart enough to know it.

He seemed to be in a sort of a daze when he went on the ice to start his warmup. He got a fine hand, a swell hand, almost *too* big a hand. I saw him flick a swift, resentful glance, toward Penguin fans. They were spreading it on too thick. I had myself the job of penalty timekeeper, so I was down where I could see things.

When the game got under way, Jay was still tight as a fiddle string. He was moving about his right wing position with short, choppy strokes.

The Penguin center, Hack Clancy, put up a good battle on the face-off. Clancy came out with the puck, but was smothered before he could get under way. He zinged one at the dasher on Jay's side, but the angle was a little off and the puck came out behind Jay Holt. He whirled like a top, took a couple of driving strokes, and snared the rubber with a neat backhand. The Bobcat defense man, Tiller, closed in fast, but hesitated a fraction of a second too long, as if confused.

The reason for Tiller's confusion seemed clear enough to me. He'd been trained, probably, to play the puck, and nothing but the puck, but he must have been abruptly aware of Jay's one-handed grip upon the stick. I'm sure it hit Tiller

with a jolt he couldn't have analyzed himself. It was just that something was suddenly wrong with the picture, and he was a big, slow-thinking buffalo of a guy who couldn't arise to the occasion.

It was too bad for him. By the time he'd made a belated stab at the biscuit, Jay had floated it around him, and had followed it with his amazing burst of speed. Tiller, still ga-ga, whirled around so fast he sat down with a bump. Jay's blades melted a streak of ice as he whipped toward the Bobcat goal. The other defense man came barging across to break up the play, but he underestimated Jay's speed.

The goalie made a wild lunge when Jay fainted for the left side of the goal. That left the right side of the wicket wide open, and Jay whammed it in for the first counter. The buzzer sounded, and the red light showed.

The Penguin fans let out a surprised bellow. Being an official, I had to keep my trap shut, but it was hard. I figured that everything would be all right now, but that was before I took a good look at Jay.

His face was hard and set. He was trying to meet Tiller's eyes, but that big guy, still pretty much ashamed of himself, was taking a careful interest in his glove. Something was going on. Jay was sore. I tried to figure the thing out.

They faced off from the center of the ice again. Clancy didn't make out so well this time, and the puck got across the blue line into Penguin defense territory. There was a short scramble around the goal. Johnny Plack, our goalie, made an easy stop. Jim Cord, our right defense man, made a clean recovery, teamed up with Clancy, and the puck came swirling down the ice again.

Clancy angled a sweet one off the boards to Jay. Jay scooped it up in his stride. Tiller came slamming in, but got himself snarled up again with his own

conflicting thoughts. He made a bobbling effort to steal the puck, but scarcely slowed Jay down.

The other defense man tried to cover Tiller's blunder, thereby leaving our other wing, Bitsy Binko, as wide open as a barn door. Jay flipped the biscuit over to him, and Binko caged it.

I had my eye on Jay. I saw him snarl something at Tiller from the side of his mouth. Tiller turned an angry red, but moved away. When I got another look at Jay Holt's eyes, they were hot and definitely dangerous. I got a glance at Gus, and saw a drawn look in his face.

Jay had a small mix-up with Tiller on the next play. Tiller still seemed a bit bewildered, and Jay came out with the puck. The Bobcats got it back, and Tiller had his chance at it near the boards. Jay charged him, too obviously taking more than the two strides allowed. He slammed Tiller against the boards. Tiller started to come off fighting, but he caught himself and didn't follow through. The referee blew his whistle, and sent Jay to the hoosegow for a five-minute cool-off period.

It made me cold and a little weak, because I had it doped out by that time. Tiller may have been honestly befuddled in his efforts to cope with a player who used only one arm. On the other hand, Tiller, though some funny streak of sportsmanship, and because of his superior size, may have hesitated in using his full strength and skill against a man whom he believed to be seriously handicapped.

But, whatever Tiller's reasons were, Jay Holt's reactions were definitely clear. He had the notion Tiller was favoring him, letting down through pity, and it wasn't the sort of thing a man like Jay could swallow. It brought his missing hand too strongly to his mind, made him too conscious of it. It was only a step from

there for Jay, in his present abnormal frame of mind, to feel that the whole Bobcat squad was sorry for him.

That's why he had deliberately roughed Tiller. It was a desperate, blind attempt to prove himself as tough a man as ever, and to make the others believe it. I was scared.

I wondered why Gus didn't pull him out, then I knew the answer to that too. It wasn't the way Gus worked. He went whole hog or nothing. He wanted to find out the worst about his men before he tried to work a cure.

HE FOUND out plenty when Jay left the penalty box. Jay came out with an obsession. He was cagey at first, in his efforts to lure Tiller into returning his roughness, but Tiller had a stubborn streak. He took it all without a come-back, which was the worst thing he could have done to Jay.

The rest of Jay's game went to pieces. His timing was ragged. He handled the biscuit like a duffer. I felt the change come across the home-town fans. A lot of them now had the chance to say, "I told you so."

Jay didn't notice it. He was still concerned with the all-important job of proving to the world how tough he was with just one arm. His cageyness wore off. He became downright crude. His second foul brought him ten minutes in the clink. His third offense got him kicked out of the game. The Penguins won handily without him. There was only a week before our official opening game with the Banshees, and it was a bad, bad week. The local, rabid fans were staring at the spectre of defeat, because the Banshees were reported tough this year.

But it was more than the mere matter of losing a hockey game. It held true with both the Irontown crowd and ours. This first game between the Penguins and the

Banshees had a weird significance. Of course, it was just plain coincidence, but for the past ten years whichever club had won this game had gone on to win the championship. You can't laugh a thing like that off, not with as superstitious a bunch as pro hockey players and their fans.

And to make things even worse, the winner of our league championship this year, would be invited to join the hot-shot Eastern League. And did the Redfield fans want *that*? From the present outlook, it was certain that either the Penguins or the Banshees would get the nod. The rest of the teams were weak.

So that was the set-up. We wouldn't stand a prayer without a good right wing, and as matters stood we didn't have one. Gus Sandvig was on a spot, a bad one. He was well liked, highly thought of in the town, and because of this, it would break his heart to let the home folks down.

The sentiment against Jay Holt was adamant after his showing in the Bobcat game. The fans didn't want to give him another chance, and made no bones about it. They tried to put the pressure on Gus Sandvig, but Gus wouldn't tip his hand. I felt sorry for the old guy, because he'd always maintained that the fans actually owned the Penguins, because the fans supported them.

I began to get a funny feeling, though, as the week dragged on. Jay's play in practice was mechanical enough to be discouraging, and my feeling came from the fact that Gus didn't seem discouraged. I'd seen him act like that before when he had something up his sleeve. I wouldn't have been a good reporter if I hadn't asked him what it was, but all he did was shrug, and say:

"We'll see."

THE Banshees came to Redfield for the game, and their fans came with them. The fans had money in their jeans, a vulgar quantity. Its vulgarity increased when they couldn't get it covered without giving heavy odds. They rubbed it in, but plenty. Our fans were burning up, but not to the point where they would toss their good dough down the sink. They were in an ugly, gloomy mood as they crowded the arena for the game. The special police were on their toes.

I felt a prickle of satisfaction in the Penguin dressing room when I learned that Jay was going to start the game. I didn't get much encouragement from Jay himself, because he looked and acted like a zombie. I guess my satisfaction must have come from my blind, childlike faith in Gus. I must have figured that if Gus decided to put Jay in the game, everything would be all right—just like that.

Maybe I was looking for a miracle. Maybe I was expecting to find it skating around on the ice when I got up to the rink. I honestly believe I was a little disappointed to find everything as it always had been before a game. The main force of the lights was directed, as usual, toward the ice, and the crowd, sitting in a semi-gloom, was banked up solidly toward the roof. The usual two hundred block of at seats had been set aside for service men from the nearby camps, who were admitted without charge. The seats were already filled. They formed a big square of blurred khaki.

I didn't lose entire hope for Gus Sandvig's miracle until the teams actually took the ice. But the moment Jay skated on, I saw that Gus had whispered no magic words in the kid's ear. Jay's face was wooden, and he went through the warmup with the mechanical motions of a robot. This time, there were no yells of welcome for him from the crowd.

I tried to scrape a little consolation from a single fact which just might prove important. The Banshee defense man who would be Jay's particular play-fellow, was a big hairy-eared bruiser by the name of Boomer Klegg. He was a black-jowled, rough, tough guy to tangle with, and it was well known he had a nasty streak. He was rank poison for smaller men, because he liked to throw his weight around. So I doped it out that he wouldn't show Jay any mercy, which was just the sort of medicine Jay needed to yank him back into the groove.

The game finally got under way, with the Banshee fans making most of the noise. There was a bit of action on the face-off, the loud clatter of ash, and neither center got control. The puck squirted out into the neutral zone, and a Banshee wing swooped in on it like a chicken hawk and started ragging it toward the Penguin goal.

Our left defense man, Cal Webb, broke up the rush with a snappy body check, but the Banshee zinged the biscuit across to his other wing, who took it off the dasher. He tried to work in for a cage shot, but our other defense man, Jim Cord, had him well blocked, so the Banshee went whirling through the ten-foot space behind the goal line. Before he came out level with the crease he slapped a long bank shot which his center nabbed. The center tried a long scoring shot as Webb came at him.

It was a honey of a shot, and it traveled like a bullet about two feet off the ice. My heart jammed in my throat, but Johnny Plack was on the job. He made a clean, unhurried, one-handed stop, and flipped the rubber to his right where Jim Cord came through fast to pick it up. He started up along the boards. A Banshee bumped him hard, but Cord got the puck away in time. His pass angled the rubber across the blue line, but Clancy came flashing out of

the defense zone in time to snag it and keep it in control.

It was a familiar set-up now. Clancy and Jay had always teamed up well in practice. Jay met Clancy in the neutral zone, and as they started down ice they uncorked an exhibition of exchange shots which brought a few yelps of approval from the Penguin fans. It even looked, for a couple of seconds, as if they had caught the Banshees flat-footed, but they hadn't.

Boomer Klegg was a whole lot faster and smarter than he looked. He timed things to a gnat's whisker. He held his rush until the puck had left Clancy's stick in Jay's direction, then Klegg came in like a big thunderbolt with every indication that he would reach Jay just when the rubber did.

Jay saw what was going to happen, and he braced himself. I had my eyes glued on him, and I could almost swear that, for a fleeting instant, I saw a quick flash of his old fire, because I knew he liked to tangle with rough guys like Klegg.

The point is, they didn't tangle, and it was no fault of Jay's. Klegg put on the brakes a couple of yards away. Ice sprayed from his blades. He made a weak stab for the biscuit, and didn't snare it. His whole attitude was that of a man who suddenly didn't have the heart to take advantage of a weaker man. There was apology and uncertainty in his gesture. It was a good act. I'd never have believed the big ape had it in him.

It didn't register upon Jay at once, because he was still under the momentum of his instinct. He acted automatically as he flipped the puck against the dasher, then swerved around Klegg to take the rubber on the rebound.

He had a clear run for the cage, because Bitsy Binko was doing a neat, foxy job of screening him from the other defense man. Jay drove for the goal like a

small cyclone, and I spotted almost the exact instant when it dawned on him what Boomer Klegg had just pulled. It hit him like a blackjack just as he made his try for a goal.

The Banshee goalie had himself spread thin across the crease, knowing full well how slim his chances were to make the stop. It was the sort of shot Jay wouldn't have missed once in a hundred times, but I saw his body give an uncoordinated jerk, and saw the rubber miss the wicket by a good six feet.

EVEN the Banshees couldn't believe it, and the puck had almost come to a dead stop before anybody recovered enough to go after it. A Banshee reached it first, and they jockeyed it back to the middle of the ice, where it remained for some time in a flurry of hot action.

It gave me a chance to figure what had happened, and the answer wasn't hard to get. Baldy Faber, who managed the Banshees, was as crafty as they came. He had undoubtedly scouted our game with the Bobcats, and had been smart enough to figure what had happened to Jay Holt.

The rest was simple. All Faber had to do was to gamble on the chance that the same thing might happen twice. Boomer Klegg had undoubtedly gone into the game with definite instructions to act just the way he'd acted, and the bad part was, that it had worked. Jay was keyed to a nervous pitch where his normal intelligence wasn't working. Ordinarily he could have figured the thing out himself. Tonight he couldn't. I felt a little sick.

It was the old gag of, "This is where we came in." It was just like watching the first part of the Bobcat game all over again. The pattern was the same. Klegg and the rest of the Banshees did everything but get down on their knees and apologize to Jay every time they came in contact

with him, and the effect on Jay was the same as giving Gargantua a hot foot. Once more he had to prove how tough he was, and he only had the chance to prove it once. He poke-checked Klegg into the boards with a force to shake the building, and the next thing Jay knew he was in stir again.

Being penalty timekeeper I was on the same bench. Jay just sat there like a guy who had been doped. All the life was out of him. I tried to think of something to say, but hell, what *could* I say?

Gus Sandvig came over from the players' bench, but I was pretty disillusioned with Gus by that time. He moved to the back of our bench, leaned over, and said quietly to Jay:

"Take a look at those service men over there. Look carefully."

That was all he said. He went back to his own bench, and I wondered if Gus was getting too old for this sort of thing. I turned my eyes automatically toward the service men in their seats across the way. There wasn't much light in that section, and I had to stare for several seconds before certain facts began to jump out at me.

I felt my muscles begin to tighten. I stared harder, and saw I was right the first time. Those men were battle scarred. It was more noticeable in some, than in others. I could see crutches, empty sleeves, and bandaged faces. I guessed that Gus had invited them from the convalescing hospital at Meadville, about twenty miles away, and he'd kept his secret well, because the papers hadn't got a smell of it.

My thoughts, at the moment, I suppose, followed a logical sequence, with Jay Holt as the focal point. I merely thought what a tough problem these men would face in returning to civilian life, and how a man like Jay, who was in the same boat with lots of them, had the chance of a

lifetime, now, to prove to them beyond all doubt that they didn't have to regard themselves as cripples.

Those were my thoughts. Jay might have a different slant. I sneaked a glance at him, and saw him staring at them with a sort of frozen fascination. There were beads of sweat upon his forehead, fresh sweat, which was not caused by exercise. I pinned my hopes upon the fact that Jay was not a dope. He could think clearly when he wanted to.

I snapped my eyes back to the watch in front of me, waiting tensely for Jay's five-minute penalty time to end, but I might as well have saved my energy. Gus didn't send him back. He sent in young Ray Birch instead. Jay moved over to the players' bench.

I found out with some surprise and consternation that the Banshees had exploded their power against our five remaining men while Jay was in the penalty box. They had caged two counters, and those two points looked mighty big.

I didn't weigh much to start with, but I'll bet I lost ten pounds in the next hour. The Banshees didn't score again in the first period, but they jammed home another bull's-eye in the second, while Gus kept Jay Holt plastered to the players' bench. It seemed all wrong to me. I hoped Gus I knew what he was doing.

The Penguins had been playing a defensive game, because they had had no other choice. Young Birch was a game, hard fighting kid, but he wasn't strong or smart enough to give his team the help it needed. Our attacks just cracked wide open against the stone wall of the Banshee defense. Boomer Klegg kept Birch hog-tied, and had plenty of time left to help his other defense man.

Gus started Jay in the final period. Jay came quietly on the ice, but, nevertheless, my heart began to hammer. I tried to tell

myself that I was just seeing things, that I couldn't draw conclusions until I saw the guy in action. I was scared to believe that the fire was burning in him once again, even though it was only smoldering now. I sat there cramped and stiff, my throat dry.

I dragged my eyes away from Jay, and studied the other men. Bad news. They didn't want Jay back in the game. There was a dangerous listlessness about them. Jay didn't appear to notice.

The face-off. Clancy didn't seem to put his full power in it. The Banshee took the puck, and flipped it to his wing. The Banshees seemed over-confident and careless. Our defense smeared their attack. Webb got the puck and ragged it back to center ice. There was a mix-up there. The puck went wild, and a hurtling form came at it like a six-inch shell.

Jay Holt! He snared the rubber with a long, back-handed reach, and cuddled it to stick blade. He was in the Banshee defense zone before any of them had a chance at him. Then Klegg came in and staged his act.

It was no better than the first one, but as good. He sprayed ice on Jay, but didn't touch him. Jay went around him like a whirlwind, charged the crease and made his shot. I didn't even see the puck. Neither did the goalie. It went in the net so fast and hard the goalie merely stood there gaping.

The Penguin fans were slow on the pick-up. I guess they didn't believe the thing they saw. Their yell was jerky, tentative. The puck was back for the mid-ice face-off before they had much chance to accept the thing that had happened.

The effect on the Penguins themselves was more positive. I caught a new alertness in them. On the face-off Clancy cleared the puck. He got it off to Cord, and Cord didn't stand around picking daisies. He cut for the center of the rink, then

slammed a long one off the dasher.

The shot was figured nicely, either that, or Jay Holt did the figuring, because he was there to pick it up. He took it at top speed, and I've never seen prettier stick-handling in my life.

Klegg came in to cover him, and it was sort of funny in a way. Because Klegg couldn't make up his mind whether to really rush him, or to pull the old apologetic act. He compromised, and that was bad—for him. Jay struck him a glancing blow which didn't even spoil Jay's balance.

Binko had the other defense man screened again, but Jay had to make a tricky try for the cage from a bad angle. The goalie got in front of that one, but the best he could do was to let it hit his bolsters.

The puck bounced off about two feet in the air. I thought it was a certain save, until Jay pulled one of the fanciest shots I've ever seen. He used his war club like a tennis racket. It was a volley back-hand shot. I heard the smack of his club against the puck, saw the goalie make a frantic lunge, then saw the red light blossom like a boil.

This time the Penguin fans cut loose, because they had finally seen the thing that I'd seen. Jay's fire was back, and I'm sure I'd never seen it burn so savagely. It was a

forest fire, a roaring holocaust of which there was no quenching.

The Banshees saw the threat in time to call time out and talk things over. It didn't do them any good. They really went to work on Jay, but that only seemed to make him burn the brighter. I got the impression that the Banshees were spraying him with high-test gasoline.

The Banshees must have gathered that idea too, because they began to shrivel from the heat. The Penguins all caught fire from Jay Holt's flame. They merged their flame with his, and the red light behind the Banshees goal kept flashing like a stop light.

It didn't stop Jay Holt, however. No chance for that, not while an understanding thunder of approval rolled down from the service men.

So much for that. We won the game, 12-3. Afterwards, Gus said to me, impelled by his old phobia:

"Look, Phil, don't publish what went on tonight—I mean, the inside dope."

I finally stood up for my tights. I looked him in the eye and said, "This time you lose. I'll write it if I never get another yarn from you."

Gus looked sour, a little disillusioned, but he finally shrugged agreement. Then he heaved a noisy sigh, and made, for him, a great admission.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess you're right."