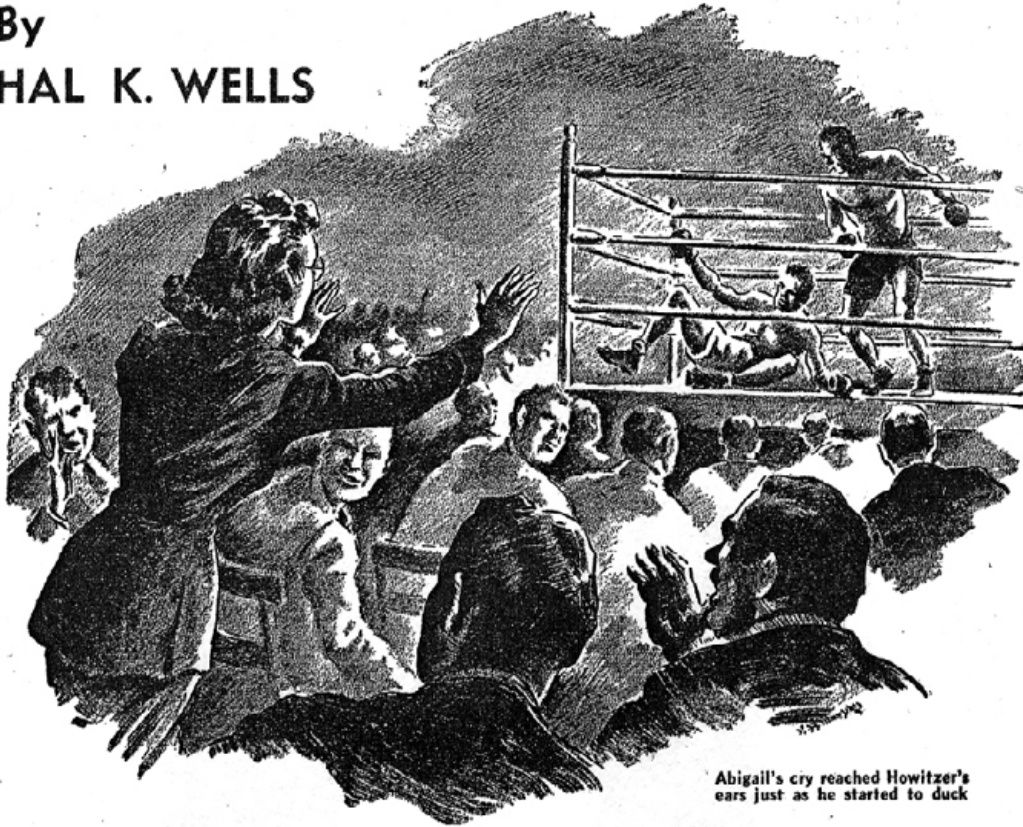


By
HAL K. WELLS



Abigail's cry reached Howitzer's ears just as he started to duck

Ants in His Planets

When the pretty astrologer named Abigail came along waving her horoscopes, what happened to Howitzer Hogan was unpredictable!

LITTLE Gus Arnovic, manager of that up and coming young heavyweight, George "Howitzer" Hogan, was distinctly unhappy as he crouched on the floor outside the ring apron and stared up at his boy's endeavors in the eighth round of the main event at the Valley Fight Arena.

The derby hat that crowned Gus' thinning locks was dented and askew. His heliotrope and orange hand-painted tie was a limp, bedraggled mess. The long-dead cigar clamped in one corner of his mouth looked like it had been used for a teething ring by a particularly industrious beaver.

"What's the matter with the big lug,

anyway?" Gus wailed to Willie Lavery, Howitzer's trainer and chief second. "For seven rounds I have tried everything except plant a battery in the seat of his pants. Don't he even want to fight tonight?"

"If he wants to, he'd better start," Willie answered. "Just two more rounds comin' up after this one."

The bell clanged for the end of the eighth. Gus and Willie scrambled up into the ring to work over a thoroughly dispirited Howitzer Hogan.

"Don't look now, Junior," Gus said, "but there are some sports writers down front there. I do not think they will be

calling you 'Howitzer' in tomorrow morning's papers. You will be lucky if they even call you 'Pea-Shooter.' ”

“I can't help it, Gus,” Howitzer mumbled. “Tonight just ain't my night. Saturn is in the wrong house.”

“If the guy is sitting out front, he is certainly in the wrong house,” Gus conceded. “He is probably figuring by now that he should much better of gone to a nice hot checkers match.”

THE crowd gave voice as the gladiators came out for the ninth. Gus flinched. There were no wreaths of laurel in that ovation. It was without doubt the largest bowl of raspberries ever collected in the previously flourishing ring career of Howitzer Hogan.

Howitzer's opponent was Dapper Danny Dixon. Danny was a powder-puff puncher, but he could box with a clever grace that would almost feint his own shadow out of position, and his footwork was nimbler than that of a barefooted jack rabbit on a red-hot stove. Gus had figured that all Howitzer had to do was stalk the fancy-dancing Danny for a few rounds until he got a chance to throw the lethal right that had given Howitzer his name. Then another KO would be added to the imposing Hogan record. Things had worked out a little differently, however.

So far in the bout, Howitzer had stayed so far away from Danny that the only way he could have landed his famed right would have been by parcel post. That sort of long range battle had been Danny's pet dish. For eight solid rounds, his flicking, jabbing gloves had piled up points faster than a porcupine in moulting season.

The ninth round started out the same way. Midway of the round, it suddenly became more so. Danny feinted Howitzer as wide open as a barn door, then came through with a lightning one-two-three. The “one” was a hook to the left ear. The “two”

was a right cross to the button. The “three” was a resounding smack on the rear portion of Howitzer's trunks as he landed on the canvas.

The only thing hurt was Howitzer's dignity. He was back on his feet at the count of three. He promptly used those feet to stage a retreat rivaled only in the annals of history by Napoleon's departure from Moscow. Danny was still vainly trying to catch him at the bell.

Gus talked frantically during the one-minute rest period. Howitzer listened to the pep talk with no interest whatever. He went out running to start the tenth, and he continued running. Danny tried valiantly for the full three minutes, but the only way he could have cornered the fast flying Howitzer would have been with the assistance of a pack of hunting dogs.

The decision of the referee and the judges was prompt and unanimous: “The winnah—Dapper Danny Dixon!”

When they arrived in their dressing room, Gus surveyed Howitzer with the jaundiced expression of a man who has just found a large bug doing the Australian crawl in a bowl of his favorite soup.

“Talk about gettin' on a bicycle!” he commented acidly. “Them last two rounds all you needed was a headlight and a tire pump!”

Howitzer sat disconsolately on the rubbing table while Willie removed the tape from his hands.

“Tonight wasn't my fault, Gus,” he protested plaintively. “My zodiac is especially inauspicious all day today.”

“Yeah?” Gus said skeptically: “The commission doctor didn't find anything wrong with it when he examined you this afternoon.”

“He didn't say sacroiliac, Gus,” Willie put in. “He said zodiac. You know, the thing that comes with astrology.”

“Astrology?”

Gus scowled. He had heard of astrology, and that was about all. He had a hazy idea that it had something to do with stars and planets and a picture of a man who had apparently posed while in the midst of a particularly extensive abdominal operation.

"Sure," Willie said. "Astrology. The science based upon what planets were in what places when you were born. If your birthday comes during a certain period, for instance, you would be a Capricorn. Or if it comes another time, you are a Sagattarius."

"If you are referring to our boy," Gus said, "I would say he looks more like a Hereford, with maybe a slight touch of Holstein."

HOWITZER scowled. "I am an Aries," he protested indignantly. "Which is what makes today a very inasupicious day in my horrorscope."

"He means horoscope," said Willie.

"Leave him alone," Gus said. "In his case, he could be right. Whatever you call it, it's a sort of timetable for a guy's personal Lady Luck, huh?"

"Sort of," Willie answered. "Only it is not luck. It is a very exact science. I use it in playing the races."

"I do not recall seeing you driving any Cadillacs," Gus commented.

Willie shook his head. "I don't seem to be able to pick me a horse with the right birthday," he admitted sadly.

"Maybe you don't buy your tip sheet from the right star-gazer," Gus said. "Who are you getting yours from, Howitzer?"

"From my new girl friend, Abigail Wadley," Howitzer answered. "She and I are very congenial in a planetary way. Our zodiacs vibrate together."

"That I would love to see some time," Gus commented. "As for now, go take your shower. I think that Abigail and I will have a cozy little chat tomorrow."

Abigail resided in a small cottage in the

suburbs. Gus' mind was full of carefully laid plans as he started up the walk next morning, and his wallet was filled with enough folding money to carry those plans out.

The young woman who answered the door was slender to the point of thinness, with a pair of shell-rimmed glasses framing a large pair of serious dark eyes in an equally serious face. She wasn't bad looking, Gus conceded grudgingly, if your ideas of feminine beauty ran along angular lines.

She surveyed Gus briefly, but completely. "Oh," she said. "You must be Georgie-Porgie's manager."

Gus blinked his eyes. "Huh? Oh, you mean Howitzer. Sure, I'm his manager. But how'd you guess it?"

"My horoscope warned me that this was a day that I might have strange experiences and meet weird people. Won't you come in?"

Gus followed his austere hostess into the living room and parked himself in one of the stiffly uncomfortable chairs.

"You probably know by now, Miss Wadley," he began tentatively, "that the boy friend was not what you might call a ball of fire last night."

"How could he be at his best?" Abigail demanded indignantly. "Nearly every astral influence in his chart was against him yesterday. He will fail every time that you foolishly insist upon forcing him to fight when the aspects of his planets are so obviously inauspicious."

Gus' eyes narrowed. It sounded like the preliminary pitch for a shake-down.

"But if the planets say okay when he fights, he'll do good, huh?" he queried.

"Indubitably," she assured him. "If he fights when his planetary aspects are auspicious, he will do the very best of which he is humanly capable. He could even rise to pugilistic heights of which

neither you nor he have ever dreamed.”

“I see.” Gus’ smile was wily. “You know, Miss Wadley, I would be glad to pay good money—very good money, in fact—if Howitzer was to get a favorable horoscope for his next fight. It is with Dynamite Davis, three weeks from Friday night.”

“Are you by any chance trying to bribe me to give him a false horoscope, Mr. Arnovic?” Abigail asked.

Gus gulped. There was a sudden cold glitter in the lady’s eyes. There was also a large vase on a table within easy reach of Abigail’s hand.

“No, no!” Gus spluttered hastily. “I wouldn’t want any false horoscope. I just meant I’d be glad to pay the usual fee for any horoscope. If it happens to be a good one, fine. If it ain’t, that’s just our tough luck.”

The frigidity slowly melted from Abigail’s eyes. “There is no fee, Mr. Arnovic,” she said. “It is purely a labor of love. I will be glad to cast a horoscope for the date and see if it is favorable for Georgie-Porgie.”

SHE WENT over to a desk and began consulting books and transcribing various items on paper. Gus frowned. It could be an act, but he would almost swear that this dame was strictly on the up-and-up. It was disconcerting. As far as his carefully planned attack was concerned, it left him as far out on a limb as a scared raccoon up a 90-foot pine.

Abigail finished her work. “This is wonderful, Mr. Arnovic!” she said delightedly. “Three weeks from Friday is a marvelous day in Georgie-Porgie’s planetary aspects. Why, he should win practically any pugilistic engagement on that night. I can hardly wait to tell him!”

“Huh?” Gus stared at her blankly for a moment. Then the full import of the idea soaked in.

For the first time, he realized that there could be a highly profitable silver lining in this astrology cloud. If Howitzer was a dismal bust when he believed the celestial omens were against him, he could as easily become a raging bearcat when he believed those omens were favorable.

“Fine, fine!” said Gus, enthused. “When Howitzer comes over, you pass the good news along to him. After that, we’ll take this Dynamite Davis character like the Marines took Iwo Jima!”

Gus was feeling fine as he went out the front door.

“G’bye now, Miss Wadley,” he chirped cheerily. “Don’t take any wooden comets. Heh, heh.”

The look he got in return would have produced icicles in a Turkish bath, but Gus was too happy to care. He thanked his own lucky stars now that he had not been able to buy Abigail off. This new set-up could work out much better.

Howitzer came back from his date with Abigail filled with the whole-hearted enthusiasm of a college halfback for the big game of the season. He carried that enthusiasm into his training regime in a way that brought havoc to sparring partners and unalloyed joy to Gus’ heart.

The coming bout with Dynamite Davis could be really important. If Howitzer showed well in it, he might get the shot with Ironclad Innis, for which Gus had been angling for months, and tangling with the Ironclad would be about seven steps upward in class as far as Howitzer was concerned.

As Howitzer’s training progressed, there were occasional times when everything was not milk and honey. In addition to her long-range forecast, Abigail gave Howitzer brief daily horoscopes, and the instructions therein did not always jibe with Gus’ training schedule.

When the celestial instructions came up with: “A favorable day for travel and social

engagements,” Howitzer thought it meant that he should take the afternoon off and have a beach picnic with Abigail. It took all of Gus’ persuasive powers to convince him that the travel edict was better served by a five-mile jog, while Willie Laverty went along to supply the social element.

There were other minor difficulties, but the over-all picture was more than good. Gus had never seen his boy so full of belligerent confidence. He went through his training chores with the single-minded vim of a hungry mountain lion heading for a rabbit convention.

It was the next Tuesday afternoon when Gus received an unexpected summons to the office of Babe McClurg, matchmaker of the big Boulevard Arena. Gus found a worried frown on Babe’s broad pink face when he got there.

“I’m in a hole, Gus,” Babe said. “I had Slammer Siegel matched with Ironclad Innis for my main event this Friday night. Now Slammer comes down with a cracked rib. What’s the chance of using Howitzer?”

“Okay by me,” answered Gus. “But how would the match set with that chiselin’ monkey of a manager of Ironclad’s?”

“It’s all right with Slick,” Babe assured him.

“He must’ve got reports on that last bout of Howitzer’s,” Gus commented sardonically, “so he finally figures it’s safe to let Ironclad in the same ring with Howitzer.”

“So what?” Babe asked. “Here’s the chance you’ve been looking for. What do you care what Slick is figuring?”

“I don’t,” Gus answered promptly. “Gimme the contract. Howitzer’s already in training and rarin’ to go.”

HOWITZER was working on the bag when Gus returned with the glad news.

“Think you can take the Ironclad, boy?” Gus asked.

“Sure, I can take him,” Howitzer grunted confidently. “And six more like him. I’ll—but, hey, wait a minute!” Sudden worry corrugated Howitzer’s battle-scarred brow. “I wonder if my horrors cope is auspicious for this Friday night, too. Gosh! I’d better see Abbie right away, and ask her.”

“You keep on with your work-out,” Gus ordered. “I’ll drive over and ask her. Don’t worry, there ain’t no reason why this Friday wouldn’t be as auspicious as the other one.”

Unfortunately, however, it seemed that there were plenty of reasons why one Friday was as bad as the other one was good. Abigail tried to explain the details to Gus, but all he got out of it was a vague idea that at least three planets were in the wrong houses, and several more weren’t even on the right street.

“It’s too bad, Mr. Arnovic,” Abigail said tearfully. “If George-Porgie had only been born two weeks earlier, this would be one of his best astrological periods. But for anyone born on April fifteenth of the year Georgie-Porgie was born, the signs for this Friday are so catastrophic they actually frighten me!”

Gus’ mind moved with the speed of pure desperation. “Maybe he’s mistaken about being born April fifteenth,” he suggested. “There was a big fire in the courthouse back in his home county in Ohio several years ago, and all the birth records was burned up. Maybe he’s just guessing about it being the fifteenth.”

“George-Porgie ought to know his own birthday, Mr. Arnovic,” Abigail said. “He did act a little peculiar when I asked him what it was, but he was very positive about it being April fifteenth. And, with that particular birth date, it would be nothing short of criminal for you to send him into a pugilistic ring this Friday night.”

Gus was not feeling good as he departed from the Wadley cottage this time. Neither

was Howitzer when he heard the news. Gus kept him from going to see Abigail that evening, but he couldn't keep him off the telephone. When Howitzer hung up, his face was longer than a rubber yardstick.

"It's awful!" he moaned. "Abigail says that this Friday is not only bad, but it is the worst day in my zodiac for the whole year! It is a day, she says, in which I should stay completely at home and avoid all possible contact with anyone."

Gus shuddered. He had a vivid picture of what that "avoid all possible contacts" admonition could do to Howitzer's fighting style in the ring against Ironclad.

"Listen, Junior," Gus said through clenched teeth. "I don't care if your zodiac is sourer than seven dozen lemons in a barrel of vinegar—you are going to fight Ironclad this Friday night! You try to back out now and the boxing commission will bar both of us for life."

Howitzer reluctantly went on with his training next day. For all the practical results he achieved, he might as well have stood in bed. His best showing of the afternoon was during two rounds of shadow boxing, and even then Gus had to admit that the shadow won both rounds on points.

Thursday was still worse. When they went into town for the weigh-in Friday afternoon, Howitzer was so obviously melancholy that the commission doctor called him back for a second physical check-up before finally giving him an okay.

"Willie, I'm worried!" Gus moaned. "The mental state that big lub is in, what Ironclad will do to him tonight could easily make me an accessory to manslaughter!"

"Nothin' you can do," Willie said glumly. "It's Howitzer's fault. He shouldn't ought to have been born that particular day."

"He shouldn't ought to have been born any day!" Gus said bitterly. "But if he had to be born, why, with three hundred and

sixty-four other days in the year, couldn't he have picked a better one?"

Gus' eyes suddenly narrowed. "Why couldn't he, at that, huh?" he muttered to himself, and thought the idea over.

"Listen Willie," he said, "I've got some errands to do. Take Howitzer over to my apartment and keep him there. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

THE first object of Gus' search was a character known as Inky Barnes. Ink was more than a mere writing fluid to Inky—it was a career. In pursuing that career, Inky had at various times landed in most of the penal institutions in that part of the country. Gus hoped fervently that this might be one of the relatively scarce periods when the gifted little penman was temporarily at liberty.

He covered half the bars in town before he finally found the object of his quest in Tony's Cafe. Inky was huddled forlornly on a bar stool, staring at an empty glass.

"I don't suppose," Inky said to the bartender, "that you would care to cash a check for me for, say, five dollars?"

"You don't suppose correctly," the bartender answered. "The only way I would cash one of your checks for five bucks would be if you handed it to me neatly wrapped in a five-dollar bill."

"Hi, Inky," Gus said. "Come on over to a booth, and have a couple on me. I got a job for you."

Inky listened to Gus' outline of what he wanted, then nodded.

"Sure, that's easy," he said. "I'll bat it off for you right away. Cost you fifty bucks, payable in advance."

"Forty," said Gus, "and no part of it paid till I get the finished work."

"Shylock!" Inky sighed. "All right. Meet me here in a couple of hours. I'll have it for you."

Gus was back in Tony's at the appointed

time. It was a good deal past the two-hour mark when Inky finally came in. One look at him told Gus that Inky had promoted some more corn juice somewhere.

"Pilot to control tower," Inky hailed him jauntily. "Request permission to land."

"Let your wheels down, sky boy," Gus grunted impatiently. "Got it finished?"

"Why, sure." Inky hiccupped gently, and fished a paper from his pocket.

It was a beautifully executed document, typed on heavy bond paper and topped by an imposing looking State seal. The seal was hand-drawn in India ink, but only a printer could have detected it. Beneath it was a brief letter addressed to Mr. Augustus Arnovic, and signed with a flourishing official signature.

"In answer to your query, I am happy to inform of newly discovered vital statistics to supplement birth data lost in fire in Buckeye County. Re George Hogan birth date—year you mention is correct. Birth date, however, not April 15th but April 1. Trusting this clears up your understandable doubt in the matter."

"Nice going, Inky," Gus commended. "Here's your forty."

Time was Gus' greatest enemy now as he headed for Abigail Wadley's. He started talking the minute she opened the door.

"Great news, Abbie!" he said jubilantly. "I thought maybe Howitzer could be wrong on that birth date, so I sent a query to the secretary of state back in Ohio. I just got this answer, air mail, special delivery."

He handed Abigail the paper. A stricken expression came over her face as she read it.

"Why, Mr. Arnovic, this is terrible!" she exclaimed. "I've done poor Georgie-Porgie a frightful wrong in that erroneous horoscope I gave him!"

"You can still undo it," Gus said. "But you'll have to work fast."

"I'll go talk to Georgie-Porgie right away," said Abigail.

Gus shook his head. "Nope. Might upset him too much with the fight only a couple of hours off. You better phone him. He's at my place and the phone number is Oromond two-five-four-three."

"I'll call him at once," Abigail agreed.

"And, Abbie," Gus cautioned, "don't say nothin' about him having the wrong birthday all these years. It might upset him. A fighter's pretty nervous just before a big bout. Just tell him you discovered an error in looking up his horoscope, and that instead of this being a hoodoo day for him it's really one of the hottest dates in his zodiac."

ABIGAIL pursed her lips thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded. "All right, I'll tell him that. And I'll give him all my love. I'll tell him—I'll tell him that I will be vibrating right with him!"

"Against Ironclad Innis, he can use all the vibrations he can get," Gus said. He retrieved the paper and put it in his pocket. "Gotta show it to the commissioner," he explained. "So long, Abbie. Don't waste no time getting that phone call in."

Halfway home, Gus stopped and phoned his apartment.

"Yeah, Abbie called him," Willie answered. "And, oh brother, what she must of told him! We got ourselves a ragin' tiger on our hands now. Me, I wouldn't be in Ironclad's shoes tonight, not if they let me go in the ring with a atom bomb in each hand!"

"Fine!" chortled Gus. "We're due at the Arena in forty minutes. Start over there with him now. I'll pick up a quick snack and meet you there."

When he got to their dressing room in the basement of the big Arena building, Gus found Howitzer pacing the floor with a smoldering fury that needed only a set of whiskers and a striped fur coat to make him look at home in any jungle.

“Boy, oh boy, oh boy!” Howitzer growled exultantly. “My planets is right, my zodiac is perfect, and Abbie loves me! You know what, Gus? She’s even coming to see me fight tonight. I had ‘em lay away a ticket for her, third row, ringside. With her out there vibratin’ with me, I’ll peel that Ironclad bum like he was a banana!”

In Howitzer’s present frame of mind, any effort to give him the usual prefight inspirational spiel would have been as superfluous as giving a pep talk to a Kansas cyclone. Gus’ principal problem was to keep his boy’s rampaging energies sufficiently bottled up that he would have some left when fight time came.

Ironclad’s manager arrived to watch the taping of Howitzer’s maulies. Gus went to Ironclad’s dressing room in an adjoining corridor to do a similar chore. He was on his way back when a feminine voice hailed him.

“Mr. Arnovic!”

Gus turned. It was Abigail. The expression upon her angular features sent a cold chill down Gus spine.

“Mr. Arnovic, let me see that Ohio letter again.”

“Huh? Oh, the letter,” Gus faltered. “Why, I—I had to file it with the commissioner.”

Abigail’s eyes bored into him like a sharp needle impaling a bug. “Don’t lie to me, Mr. Arnovic. Give me that letter—now!”

Gus reluctantly handed it over: Abigail studied it, then nodded her head.

“I thought so!” she snapped. “You hurried me so at the house that I didn’t have a chance to really take a good look at it, but after you left I kept thinking there was something wrong about it somewhere. And there it is. Official letter from the secretary of state of Ohio, indeed! And since when, Mr. Arnovic, has an active volcano existed in Ohio?”

Gus followed the direction of Abigail’s pointing finger. He saw now what he had not had time to see before. Gus ground his teeth. He remembered too late that when sufficiently inebriated, Inky Barnes had a sense of humor that verged upon the pixie-ish.

The state seal of Ohio at the top of the letter was a beautiful job of drawing, but it had one slight error. Instead of the gently rounded summit of Mt. Logan in its center, there was an unmistakable depiction of Mt. Vesuvius in full eruption!

Gus’ brain moved with the panic speed of stark desperation.

“There’s something awfully wrong here somewhere!” he exclaimed. “We’ll take it up with the commissioner right now. Come on. We’d better both go.”

GRASPING the suspicious Abigail’s arm he hurried her around a corner, and started down one of the maze of passages that gave the basement of the big building its popular title of “The Catacombs.” He stopped in front of a door in a deserted side corridor.

“The commissioner has a working office in here,” he said.

He opened the door with his right hand. With his left hand he gave Abigail a push that catapulted her inside a capacious broom closet. He slammed the door shut and turned the key.

Indignant screams came from inside the closet, accompanied by fists beating upon the door, but it was a nice thick door. With luck, it could be some little time before anyone heard the disturbance. What would happen after Abigail got out was a bridge that Gus refused to cross until it came along.

He got back to his own corridor just as an attendant came hurrying along it.

“You’re on now, Gus,” the attendant said. “The semi just ended with a KO in the

first.”

Gus collected Howitzer and Willie and went upstairs. Ironclad Innis was already in the ring. Ironclad was a rugged veteran who had never actually been a championship contender himself, but he had put up some good fights against boys who were.

He was cagy and durable, filled with ring savvy to his well-flowered ears, and packing a potent sock in either mitt. His defense was nothing to brag about, but it didn't have to be. The jutting chin that had given Ironclad his name looked like something that would come in very handy to crack coconuts upon, and it was just as impregnable as it looked.

Howitzer paid little attention to the referee's instructions as they huddled in the center of the ring.

“Where's Abigail? Her seat's still empty.”

“Oh, she'll be along,” Gus said impatiently. “Never mind her. You got work to do.”

When the bell clanged for the first round, Howitzer came charging out of his corner like a rampant hurricane. Ironclad gave way momentarily, but he was no green preliminary boy to be rushed off his feet in the first round. He merely went into his shell and waited for the tempest to subside.

Howitzer gave it the old college try for the full three minutes. The crowd roared an ovation as he went to his corner. Gus was not unduly impressed. Howitzer had scored nothing but a few points. The expression upon Ironclad's face as he sat in his corner was merely one of mild annoyance. The fury of Howitzer's attack slackened slightly in the second. Ironclad began coming out of his shell. A couple of jolting rights to the jaw slowed Howitzer further. For the rest of the round, Ironclad was comfortably in control.

“Get goin'!” Gus urged in the respite between rounds. “Take him early before he

wears you down.”

“Sure,” Howitzer said vaguely. “But where's Abbie, Gus? I'm gettin' worried.”

“She'll be here,” Gus assured him. “Forget her. Get in there and fight!”

Howitzer tried. He put up a good fight, but it wasn't quite good enough. Ironclad piled up points relentlessly for round after round. Howitzer was cut over both eyes and blowing like a winded whale when he came in to his corner at the end of the eighth round.

“What're you tryin' to do—make a bum out of your zodiac?” Gus demanded, as he went to work expertly on the cut brows. “You got every planet in the sky with you, and still you're losin' this fight by twice the distance from here to Honolulu!”

“It ain't no use, Gus!” Howitzer said forlornly. “I'm worried about Abbie. She said she'd be here sure. Something must have happened to her!”

The ninth round started. Gus pounded a despairing fist on the ring apron as he watched Ironclad continue cutting Howitzer down to size.

“Fine going!” he moaned. “It ain't enough that I got a fighter with ants in his zodiac. Now he has also come down with a fatal case of disappointed love!”

ROUND NINE was two minutes and seconds gone when a commotion behind him attracted Gus' attention. Abbie was coming down the aisle in full cry, with a couple of harried ushers in pursuit.

“Georgie! Georgie-Porgie!”

Abigail's cry reached Howitzer's ears just as he started to duck one of Ironclad's left hooks. He turned his head. The left hook crashed into his right ear and blasted him off his feet.

He barely managed to lurch erect at the count of nine. Ironclad rushed in for the kill. Howitzer lunged desperately forward into a clinch, and succeeded in hanging on like a

love-sick python until the bell rang.

Back in his own corner, a whiff of smelling salts cleared the last of the cobwebs from Howitzer's brain. He clutched Gus' arm.

"Abbie finally got here, Gus!" he burbled happily. "See her over there? But what's she sayin'?"

Gus looked over his shoulder. Abigail had both hands clamped on the ring apron opposite them with a grip that for the moment defied the efforts of the ushers to pry her loose.

The noise of the crowd kept Gus from making out the words she was screaming, but he could guess their context. He hurriedly crammed an ice-pack over Howitzer's right ear and started talking into his left one to bar any of Abigail's remarks from getting home.

"She says she's sorry she's late," he extemporized swiftly. "But now that she's here she says she'll be out there vibratin' with you for all she's worth—so go in there, she says, and take the big bum in this next round!"

The ten-second buzzer sounded as the ushers finally pried Abigail loose. The houselights went off before Howitzer could see that she was being hustled on up the aisle to the exit. He left his corner at the bell with the firm belief that Abigail was in her seat, busily vibrating.

Ironclad came out fast, with the idea of finishing it while his opponent was supposedly still groggy. He met 210 pounds of startlingly rejuvenated Howitzer. For a solid minute they stood toe to toe and poured leather while the house went mad.

It was Ironclad who finally stepped back and tried to cover. Howitzer's right brushed his guard aside. His left caromed off the side of Ironclad's face, knocking him momentarily off balance.

For a fractional second, Ironclad's jaw was as exposed as an abalone at low tide.

Howitzer swung a right with everything he had behind it. It landed dead on the button.

When an irresistible force meets an immovable object, it is inevitable that one of the two shall be proved a liar. The false pretender proved to be Ironclad's jaw. His knees buckled. Howitzer socked home a smashing left and another right to the jaw. Ironclad crumpled forward on his face.

He was up at nine, groggy and rubber-legged. Howitzer set him up with a left, cocked his right and pulled the trigger. Fifteen seconds later, Ironclad awoke to find that his ring record had acquired its first KO.

Ten minutes later, down in their dressing room, Gus shooed the last of the back-slappers out and locked the door.

"I wonder what happened to Abbie," Howitzer said.

"Aw, she'll probably meet you outside," Gus answered carelessly.

He was no longer worried about Abigail. When Howitzer learned that his resounding victory had been scored in spite of the worst omens in the zodiac, it should forever banish astrology from the pugilistic picture as far as he was concerned.

"I'll meet Georgie-Porgie right here! And you too, Mr. Arnovic!"

The voice came from the opening door of a small clothes closet in one corner of the dressing room. So did Abigail.

MR. GUS ARNOVIC'S jaw dropped. "Good thing you haven't got claustrophobia, Abbie," he said dazedly. "You seem to be spending most of your time in closets."

"This closet was my own idea," Abigail said grimly. "When they ejected me upstairs, I came down here and hid until I could see you and Georgie-Porgie by yourselves. I can see by poor Georgie's face the price he paid for your brutal treachery in tricking me into sending him into the ring

tonight.”

“But I win, Abbie,” Howitzer protested. “I knocked him cold!”

“You couldn’t have won,” Abigail protested. “Everyone of your planets was against it. He tricked me into believing your birthday is really April first instead of the fifteenth.”

“April first?” Howitzer’s face was a study for a moment. He stared sheepishly down at the floor, then blushed as he looked up again. “But my birthday really is April first, Abbie,” he confessed. “I don’t know how Gus found it out. I ain’t never told anybody since I was a kid.”

“I—I don’t understand,” Abigail, faltered.

“Well, you see, the kids all used to ride me about bein’ an April fool,” Howitzer said shamefacedly. “I fought ‘em till I got tired of fighting. So when we moved to a new neighborhood I just moved my birthday ahead a couple of weeks so’s people couldn’t kid me about the April fool business any more. And—well, I don’t know, I just never got around to moving it back again.”

“But didn’t you realize,” Abigail asked, “that giving me a wrong birth date made it impossible for me to give you a true horoscope?”

Howitzer wriggled in embarrassment. “Aw gee, Abbie, I didn’t think just a couple of weeks would make any difference. And anyway, I was afraid that a guy born on April first might have a sort of an April fool horrorscope.”

Abigail drew a long breath. Her eyes softened as she gazed at the blushing Howitzer.

“All right, George-Porgie,” she said forgivingly. “You’re no April fool, and don’t let anyone tell you that you are. You come over tomorrow and I’ll work you out a brand-new horoscope for your real birthday. And if this person tries to stop you,” she went on, shooting a venomous glance at Gus, “just let me know. I’ll take care of him!”

Gus smiled placatingly. “Why, I wouldn’t try to stop him, Abb—that is, Miss Wadley. I think it’s a fine idea.”

Gus was not kidding. The knowledge that he had unwittingly hit upon Howitzer’s actual birth date had put a brand-new and startling light upon the evening’s victory. It had also left Gus’ thoughts as scrambled as an omelet in an earthquake.

It could have been mere coincidence that he had picked that certain day, or it could be that there were things about this astrology business that he didn’t savvy. The thought of spending the rest of his life with a swarm of insulted and hostile planets putting a hex upon him sent an eerie chill down his spinal column. It could do no harm to at least try to play it safe.

“I will not only be tickled to death to send Howitzer over to your place tomorrow, Miss Wadley,” he said, “but I will also come with him, if you will permit me. I think it’s about time I got me a horoscope, too!”