

to make the first move. They'd play the game all the way.

She found her black cloth coat and purse and walked down the flight of steps to the ground floor. Everything was quiet and sterile-looking in the evening gloom. Ben, the janitor, leaned on his mop and tipped his cap at her.

"G'night, Miss Merritt, see ya tomorrow."

She smiled at him and walked out the door.

Tomorrow would be a beautiful day.



The Runner

by *Robert Caldwell*

Chemistry, Jr.

THE GARDENER'S late afternoon nonchalance had let that single strand of grass escape the whirling, slashing fate of its neighbors. The runner's hand, which now caressed the solitary blade of grass, did so with indifference, until, with a vicious jerk, the hand thrust it in his mouth.

In response to the shrill note of a whistle, the runner sat up and spat the mangled remains on the ground. The whistle, which might have called children indoors from recess, caused the runner's heart to surge in awful harmony with his twisting stomach. The runner's entrails knew, perhaps even better than he did, that in fifteen minutes they were to be tortured over the surrounding terrain.

The runner would have preferred to do his calisthenics first, but the field was filled with stretching and bending runners. He stood, paused two seconds, and then began to jog. His feet beat out a rhythmic pattern interrupted by the occasional crack of his loosening joints. At irregular intervals, he would swing out his elbows, kick high his legs, and fight his way through an imaginary pack of runners.

After he had passed a safe distance away from the other athletes, he began to walk. He walked up to the two sprawled arrows that were etched in the grass, and with a kick of disgust, rather than of curiosity, he caused a cloud of white chalk to rise. He glanced at the one arrow pointing into the woods and then followed the flight of the second one coming out. At the end of the path leading from the woods, a dull white ribbon would leap to life as the victor plunged across the finish line.

The runner had finished warming up as the second whistle split the silent and tense atmosphere. As he neared the starting line, the runner's eyes fixed on the blue steel revolver gripped in the chubby, pink hand of the man who was to start the race. The man was perspiring a little more than necessary while he informed the runners of the elementary procedure involved in starting the race. The runner laughed to himself as he thought of the immense tension the starter must be under compared to his.

The starter backed a safe distance away. The runner leaned forward and gazed at the ground before him; he visualized the fat, sweaty arm raising the gun. The explosion rang out across the field, the runner strained forward, jostling and being jostled.

This race had begun better than most, for the runner had been able to break through the pack quickly. He almost smiled as he stretched out his stride and lost the thundering herd behind him. The starter was sitting and wiping his brow as the first droplets of sweat were appearing on the runner's forehead.

Although the runner had managed to out-distance the pack, he was not alone. Out in front by twenty yards was another, an opponent who ran with the same ease, but be-

cause of his longer stride the gap between the two was increasing. The runner forced his legs out longer, enabling him to answer the increasing distance. The pursuit began.

The runner no longer breathed through his nostrils. Instead, he relieved his body's plea by gulping down air. Each new supply of air would satisfy only for an instant and was painfully discarded in a wheeze. His legs stopped beating out a muffled pattern and became air hammers, pounding his body into a more convenient position to receive pain. The runner dropped his arms to his side, remembering how this was to help relieve a side ache. The more conscious he became of his misery, the more it plagued him.

His teeth punctured his lip. The metallic bite of blood stirred his sense of taste. His eyes squinted, forcing out a tear, which only attracted the moisture from his sweating face causing his eyes to be flooded with a burning mixture of sweat and tears.

The pain in his side would not loosen its grip. In an almost "mad-man" response he struck himself viciously in the side. "Anything," he pled, "anything, to stop the pain." His mind was no longer a mind. It was functioning only as a receptor for pain impulses.

Suddenly it awoke. His senses, which had become numb, sprang with new energy, as they interpreted signs of the opponent's faltering. As he closed within ten yards, he became alive with anticipation of overcoming the opponent. They broke away from the woods and just stirred the chalk arrow pointing towards victory.

Nothing mattered now— this last hundred yards would win the race. The runner swung his arms as long as he could to lengthen his stride. His head bobbed on his neck—he passed the exhausted opponent and pounced upon the lifeless ribbon which flowed around his chest. The runner's momentum carried him on, but his feet stopped abruptly as if they had been severed.

As he fell forward, the cool grass splashed around his face; he lay there, motionless.