

ARGOSY

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Illustrating Till Doomsday

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The Battle of Dabbit Run

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "The Grass Grows Again", "Mudhole Pilot", etc.



Joe was mad. He slashed out and hit Dolf Burgen on the end of the nose

Ringside report of a remarkable benefit performance in which—for the first time in their lives—two gorillas got all the fighting they wanted. In attendance, the entire male population of Dabbit Run—with one exception

DABBIT RUN wasn't a peaceful community, but it was a tightly knit one. Its inhabitants fought each other frequently, but these were always intimate little battles with no regret for spilled gore and no grudges afterward. Fifteen minutes after they wiped the blood from their noses, any two Dabbit Runners would split a bottle of beer.

For the most part the Dabbit Run men were lean and wiry, adapted to mountains in which they lived. Such a

build made mostly for *blitzkrieg*, lightning war, with no heavy reserves to consolidate any advantages that might be won.

There were only two men in Dabbit Run who'd tip the scales at over two hundred. These were Pop Farr, who had lived in Dabbit Run so long he had finally become accepted as a Dabbit Runner, and old Andy Clark.

Thus when the Burgen boys crossed Dabbit Run they were not defeated in their first fight.

One quarter drunk, the Burgen boys came from a lumber camp in the Loft country with two months' pay in their pockets and in their minds a yen to raise as much cain as possible. They had a little scrimmage in the bunkhouse before they left, just enough to whet their appetites and leave a few battered heads behind them. Then they drank the rest of the hard cider in the camp keg, threw the keg through a horse stall, and started with two quarts of applejack to assist them over the rougher stages of the trip.

They crossed the Loft country at night, struck over Wing Gap, and into Patten County. Dawn was just breaking when they came out the last ridge to the head of the Dabbit Run road. Except for their continual roaring, which was a misdirected effort to sing, Dabbit Run might never have known that they had passed if Joe Nesbitt's collie hadn't been lying in the road.

Joe was a quiet kid who had finished his hitch in the navy and come home to work Grandma Nesbitt's little farm. He worked hard, poached game and fish only when necessary to help out on the grocery bills, and never bothered anybody. He adored Grandma Nesbitt, who had given him the farm to do with as he wanted, and liked second best to roam the hills with his collie, Chief.

Joe had bought the collie in a pet store in New York on his way home. But Chief, in spite of the handicap of a metropolitan birth, was shaping into a regular Dabbit Run dog. He'd herd cows, hunt squirrels, or do anything else Joe wanted him to.

Wayne McCloud had had some hopes of letting Chief hunt deer—because he trailed silent and so wouldn't attract the game warden's attention—but Joe had kicked and Wayne hadn't pressed the point.

CHIEF had come into the road to warm himself in the early morning sun. He saw the Burgen boys coming, but the hand of no human being had ever been raised violently against him. He wagged his tail amiably and settled deeper into the dust to let them pass.

But the Burgens four hundred and ninety-two pounds of brawn and muscle, were in no mood to turn aside for a dog. Dolf Burgen put his hands on his hips.

"Hit's a skyhoot," he announced. "A dawg. A hound."

"So 'tis," Bell Burgen agreed, his head cocked aside. "Hit's a woolly dawg, too."

He drew his foot back and let it fly forward. But the effect of the half gallon of hard cider had not worn off and the two quarts of liquor they had finished at the head of the Dabbit Run road did not help Bell's sense of equilibrium any. His hobnailed boot skidded over the resting collie, hitting Chief hard enough to injure his dignity but failing to break his back. Howling, Chief fled towards the house.

Joe Nesbitt happened to be standing on the porch with an arm full of kindling wood. Joe was twenty-five years old, and had never in his life been mad before. But nobody had ever kicked any of his dogs before either. Joe dropped the kindling wood and pursued the Burgen boys.

"You kicked my dog!" Joe's cheeks were as hot as his words.

Dolf Burgen turned around. "Hit's alive!" he ejaculated. "Hit moves!"

Joe got madder. Aside from Grandma, Chief was all he had in the world to care about and to care about him. Joe didn't care what they might do to him, but they couldn't kick Chief and get away with it. He slashed out with

his right hand and hit Dolf Burgen on the end of the nose.

Dolf roared, and launched his two hundred and forty-eight pounds at Joe's one hundred and thirty-five. Joe hit him again and danced aside. Joe hit him on the back of the neck and sent Dolf staggering. There wasn't too much size to Joe, but what there was was muscle.

But it was an unequal battle, a rifleman against tanks.

Joe hit Dolf again, and came back with a left to Bell's face. But both brothers were united now in an effort to brush from their path this rash mosquito that had challenged them. They used Loft country tactics, which begin where the Marquis of Queensbury said stop.

A haymaker Bell brought around put Joe cold into the ditch. Dolf kicked him a couple of times as he fell and they went on.

GRANDMA NESBITT, a little old lady who weighed ninety pounds with her winter coat on and who looked frail but wasn't, came down to get Wayne McCloud.

For the first time in his life Wayne saw Grandma without her habitual air of a great many things to be done and only a very short time to do them all. Joe was the only Nesbitt left out of what had been a big family.

"Joe's been hurt, Wayney," she said, trying to keep her voice from faltering and not being able to.

"Bad?" Wayne looked at her gravely.

"I don't know," Grandma said shakily. "He drug hisself to the house, an' he's sittin' there now sayin' he ain't hurt. But his face ain't right an' there's blood on his mouth. He won't leave me touch him. I do wish you'd come up."

That was proof of a grave situation. Grandma, with her "yarbs" and cures, presided over every sick bed in Dabbit Run. Only when she found a situation that she could not handle, once in a thousand times, did she ask outside aid.

Wayne walked back with her, and found Joe sitting shakily on a kitchen chair with his left hand probing the sympathetic Chief for injuries.

"How do you feel?" Wayne asked.

Joe Nesbitt glanced up. "I feel aw'right. I'd of licked both them possums, too, if I hadn't slipped."

Wayne laid Joe on a cot and stripped his clothes off. There was a bruise on his hip where Dolf's boot had landed, his four lower ribs sagged under pressure, and his right arm was broken. The blood in his mouth came from a cut tongue.

"What happened?" Wayne inquired.

"They kicked Chief!" Joe sputtered indignantly. "They was comin' down the road an' they kicked Chief!"

Wayne nodded. He knew what he himself would do if somebody kicked his dog. Wayne hadn't seen anybody go down the road, but the marks on Joe bespoke fighters from the Loft country where they put everything but sledges into their fighting.

"You're gonna be laid up for some little time, Joe," Wayne announced. "You got a couple of smashed ribs and such like."

"Don't be foolish," Joe Nesbitt protested. "There's plantin' to be done."

"You ain't goin' to do it," Wayne said firmly. "There's not much tellin' what might happen if you go shakin' them ribs around." He looked at Grandma. "See that he lays up, Granny. Don't worry about the rest and don't let him."

"I'll do that, Wayney," Grandma Nesbitt promised. Wayne looked at her

jaw, set the same way he had seen it a lot of times before, and he knew that Joe wouldn't do any planting or anything else until it was fitting that he should.

Wayne walked out on the porch. It was a serious situation, reaching beyond any injuries Joe might have. Injuries healed, but those who didn't plant in the spring in Dabbit Run didn't eat in the fall except such as the neighbors brought in; and that was robbing the neighbors.

Dabbit Run didn't give food to its children with such a lavish hand that anything could be wasted. It was a full-time job for any Dabbit Run man to support his family, and what they parted with must be at the expense of that family. Whatever those who were ill or injured needed was provided freely, but only at a sacrifice.

The law—not the legal statutes that never worried any Dabbit Runner but the unwritten law—said those responsible for the ill should pay for the cure. But how? The lumberjacks from the Loft didn't care two whirls of a buzz saw for anything that happened to any Dabbit Runner.

Head lowered, deep in thought, Wayne walked down the dusty road. The marks of the hobnail in the Burgen's boots were plain before his eyes. They were headed for Bradby. That, Wayne decided, was where they would be until their money was gone. Most of it would find its way into Al Drenk's money till.

Wayne pondered. There were plenty of men in Dabbit Run who would plant the Nesbitts' fields for nothing; but they would have to take time needed for their own planting to do it. The money the Burgens would waste in Bradby would beyond a doubt be enough to hire a man.

Persuading the Loft Boys to hire a man for the Nesbitt's would be about as easy as persuading a fighting bear not to play rough. The Loft was famous for its fighting men, and though the Loft boys never cared how fast they poured out their money after being cooped up in the Loft all winter long, they did expect value received for it in liquor, fighting, and general ruckus.

Wayne walked up the road to where Pop Farr lived with twenty-one assorted cats in a farmhouse whose owner had not been able to cope with Dabbit Run and had left it. He talked with Pop for half an hour.

"The fight will be at Sandy Dickson's barn, admission free," he said as he left. "Men only. You and Andy Clark be there by nine o'clock tonight."

SHORTLY before six o'clock that night Wayne walked into Bradby, a town of two thousand. It wasn't overrun with lumberjacks on their spring benders because it was located at some distance from the lumber woods. However, there were enough to liven things up nicely and keep the respectable residents indoors.

On the main street Wayne passed four lumberjacks walking together. Their rig told him that they were from an outfit over in the Buckhead Country, and discolored eyes on three of them told plainly that there were Loft boys in town.

Only two of the Loft boys were in town because only two had come down Dabbit Run. Wayne continued on up the main street, and ducked down a flight of stairs that led to Al Drenk's combined saloon and headquarters for whatever other business Al might see fit to transact.

Al's was the unofficial home for the

Loft boys in Bradby. They always wrecked the place before they left, and all except the uninitiated knew enough to steer wide of it when the Loft boys were there. But Al could still make a profit because the Loft boys always came with at least a couple of months' pay and always left broke.

Wayne opened the door and slipped into the dimly lit basement. Al Drenk, standing behind a wooden bar the front of which had been kicked in, read his paper and smoked a cigar. He glanced up and down again when Wayne came in. The only sure way to stay out of war when the Loft boys took his place over was to observe a strict neutrality.

The Burgen brothers, on the whole, had been having rather a spiritless time. So far there had been only the Buck Head crew to resist them, and the Buck Headers had fled after only a short skirmish.

Two rash Bradbyites, who had requested the Burgens to betake themselves and their cow-like voices to other parts of the town, had been chased inside and their homes besieged for an hour in the hope that they would come out. Bradby's lone policeman remained discreetly within his jail waiting for the state police to cruise through and give him a hand.

The Burgens had come back to Al's saloon to drown their sorrows in as much as possible of Al's rank-smelling, but high-powered liquor. They sat at the table staring sullenly through heavy-lidded eyes as Wayne approached.

"You been havin' a good time?" Wayne inquired amiably.

"What's it to ya?" Dolf Burgen growled.

"Plenty," Wayne continued calmly. "On your way through Dabbit Run this mornin', you two beat up a boy."

"Oh," Bell Burgen furrowed his brow as he strove to recollect. "That wasn't no fight."

"Hit's our business," Dolf sneered.

"Well, it's my business too," Wayne said. "He ain't in any shape to do his spring plantin'. You two are goin' back to see what you can do about it."

BELL BURGEN rose to his feet, the happy light of battle in his eyes. "You wanta fight?" he demanded. "Come on. I'll fight you alone."

Dolf Burgen tensed himself for a spring at Wayne's legs. Wayne sighed heavily. He could, he guessed, like Bell if given half a chance. Bell was merely full of excess energy and high spirits. But Wayne could never like Dolf. Dolf had a streak of cruelty in him, was a man who hurt things to see them squirm.

Wayne's hand went beneath his canvas jacket and when it came out it held a sawed off shotgun with a ten-inch barrel. The Burgen boys relaxed.

"I'm not goin' to fight you," Wayne said. "I ain't a total fool. But if either of you thinks I ain't the boss here, all you got to do is say so."

"Whada'ya gonna do about it?" Dolf growled.

"You left a crippled boy in Dabbit Run this mornin'," Wayne repeated. "That's got to be squared up."

"Whadda'ya think we are?" Dolf said. "The Red Cross?"

"I wouldn't say what I think you are," Wayne observed, "even in here. You come down from the Loft to fight, didn't you? All right. You think you're fighters. We think you're wind bags. Do you dare come back and fight?"

"Why didn't you say it was a fight?" Bell Burgen complained. "I was just sayin' to Dolf, I never did see this town so dead."

"Wait a minute." Dolf raised a hand. "What's the rest of it, mister?"

"You got any money left?" Wayne asked.

The Burgen's rummaged in their pockets and spewed a pile of crumpled bills out on the table. Bell counted it painfully.

"Ninety-two dollars," he summed up.

Wayne fingered the nickel and the three coppers in his own pocket. Ninety-two dollars was a lot of money in Dabbit Run, but he knew the boys would put it up if he asked them to.

He hesitated another moment. If they did put it up, and he lost it, he would be responsible for paying it back. Nobody in Dabbit Run could afford to lose anything. But he had done this much; he might as well make it whole hog or none.

"We'll match that in Dabbit Run," he said. "We'll bet ninety-two dollars you get all the fightin' you want. If after the fight you can stand up and howl for more, we'll pay up an' no hard feelin's. If you can't, you pay up an' no hard feelin's either. Old man Kinsley'll hold the money. Agreed?"

"Good enough," Dolf Burgen growled. "Come on. And you can put that scatter gun away, mister."

"I can, but I guess I won't," Wayne said. "It ain't as though I don't trust you boys, but I'll just walk behind you."

THERE were seventy-six men—except for Joe Nesbitt the total adult male population of Dabbit Run—in Sandy Dickson's barn when Wayne and the Burgen boys got there.

The barn was lit by lanterns hung on overhead beams. Fresh straw was spread four feet deep on the floor. The Dabbit Runners were perched in the

hay mow, on the beams, on top of the granary, and in any other place big enough to accommodate a man. They stared curiously down on the Burgens, but made no comment.

Wayne led the Burgens to the granary against which they stood smirking at as much of the crowd as they could see and making various uncouth noises in their throats.

Wayne walked to the center of the floor. "We got to raise ninety-two dollars," he announced. "Pat Rooney'll pass around with a hat and a hunk of paper. I'll be responsible for the money. If all of you give what you got, an' mark it down on the paper, I'll see that you get it back after the Burgen boys get licked."

"Haw!" Dolf sneered. "I'll take the hulk of you on down here now."

"Who'm I gonna fight?" Bell inquired eagerly. "I never in my hull life had enough fightin'."

"You will this time," Wayne assured him dryly.

Wayne crossed the barn floor, and from the shadows on the other side led Pop Farr and old Andy Clark. Pop was sixty and was beginning to add fat around the middle, though he was still strong. Andy was almost as old, bald, and with one eye blinded by bird shot twenty years before. Bell Burgen stared at them.

"*These* the ones?" he asked, disappointedly. "Shucks. I thought it was gonna be a real fight."

"Better lemme have 'em both at once," Dolf Burgen said.

"Shut up," Wayne commanded. "These are the only two we got of a size with you. If you think they can't fight, you're crazy. The rules are, you fight two at a time. The two who ain't fightin' stay in where they can't watch either. Each man fights buck naked,

with a sack over his head so's nobody'll know who it is an' there can't be no help from the side lines, such as chuckin' things under the feet of the man somebody might'nt favor. Fair enough?"

The four shrugged their agreement. Pat Rooney came back with the hat full of dollar bills and loose change. Wayne counted out ninety-two dollars in front of Dolf Burgen, and held the hat while Dolf matched it with a similar amount. Wayne gave the hat to old man Kinsley.

"All right," Wayne said. "Pop, you an' Bell Burgen come with me into the granary. Andy, you an' Dolf go with Pat Rooney into that box stall. Only Pat an' me knows who we'll bring back on the floor—who's fightin' who. The fight will be with no holds or punches barred."

With an audible intake of breath the gallery turned their heads from the granary door to the box stall. After five minutes Pat Rooney came out of the stall, his hand clasping the arm of a huge and hairy figure with a sack drawn over its head and tied at the neck.

Pat waited until Wayne, leading another figure, came out of the granary. Slowly Pat and Wayne advanced toward each other until the figures they led were able to touch hands. Then Pat and Wayne ducked.

IN THE straw on the barn floor a hurricane of major proportions instantly took form. The man Wayne had led leaped into the air and planted his heels in his opponent's abdomen. The other grunted, staggered two steps backwards, but reached his hands out in time to grasp the feet. He jerked as hard as he could and the kicker went prone in the straw.

Headlong the other hurled himself on his prostrate enemy, but the kicker wriggled aside and he landed in the straw. A howl of merriment arose from the audience as the first raised his foot to kick a second time and kicked so hard in the wrong direction that he upset himself again.

Both rose to their feet. A muffled roar arose from under one of the sacks and the other sack hurled himself at it.

Shoulder to shoulder they came together and made a dozen wild swings in the air. A continuous angry growling emanated from both sacks as the combatants began to get a sense of time and distance. They stopped swinging wildly and began to fence cautiously, their arms extended.

One backed until he was against the five-foot wall of the hay mow. He felt about with his foot, testing his position and making sure that there was a solid wall at his back. He bellowed a joyful battle challenge. The other, arms still extended, approached and cut loose with a terrific haymaker that landed squarely on top of the first man's head.

That one countered with a right that connected sharply with his opponent's chin, rocking his head and sending him to his knees. He came up again. Shoulder to shoulder they stood in a wild slugging orgy, hammering each other with sledge-like blows, pounding happily but mercilessly until blood stained both sacks, but not bringing their feet into play for fear of losing balance.

They kept up that steady, savage pounding, neither man giving way, for what seemed to be an endless time, and the only sounds in the barn were the thud of their fists and their rasping, muffled breathing.

Then, still fighting, the man against the hay mow sank to his knees.

The other cut the air where he had stood with a wild swing. Sensing that his opponent had gone down, he felt cautiously for him. His hand was seized in a grip from which strength was fast draining. There was a quick jerk. His head collided suddenly with the hay mow, and together the two wilted into the straw.

Wayne leaped down to cut the sack from one man's head and reveal the battered face of Dolf Burgen. He cut the other sack away to show the equally gory face of Bell Burgen.

CHARLEY GALE, in his battered pick-up truck, took the Burgen boys back to the Loft country and sent them on their way toward the camp where they worked. Wayne McCloud took the ninety-two dollars, to be used in

hiring a man until Joe was well, to Grandma Nesbitt.

He didn't mention any details, but simply told Grandma that the Burgens had heard about what they did to Joe and wanted to make amends. Grandma took the money and asked no questions—always the wisest procedure in Dabbit Run. And everybody seemed satisfied.

Everybody, Wayne thought, should be. The Burgens had wanted plenty of fighting and had got it. The Nesbitts wanted their crops planted and they would be. Dabbit Run wanted excitement and had found it. Yes: nobody had lost anything excepting maybe Al Drenk who had wanted all the Burgens' money and hadn't got it.

But Al Drenk didn't count in Dabbit Run.