

Party Line (Continued)

coated Pepper, grinning and proud as he turned at the gate to wave.

One morning Dave had left early for the county seat on farm business. The sky was overcast but windless, so Phyll let Skip take the horse, glad she didn't have to get out the car. For she was making two shirts as a surprise for Dave's birthday, and she needed every moment.

Busily stitching by the bright light on the machine, she didn't notice the ominously darkening sky. At lunch time she munched on a cold muffin as she worked. Then the cat yowled at the door and as he streaked in, she felt the lash of the rising wind and saw the snow.

She must go after Skip! Surely the school wouldn't let him start out—Stunned, she saw the clock. Skip should have been home by now.



Anxiously she rang the school number, over and over. At last a timid voice answered very faintly, "Hello?"

"Hello! This is Mrs. Reeder. Skip hasn't arrived home. Is he—" The voice said again, "Hello?" She recognized it as a child's. Then the receiver clicked. Further rings were useless.

Five minutes later the horse came limping in, saddle twisted, Skip's lunch box dangling from a saddle strap. As she hurried the animal into the barn and struggled back to the house through the stinging whiteness, Phyllis knew sick fear.

Then, hearing rattling chains on a laboring car, she rushed into the driveway to meet her husband, jerking open the car door. In the house they faced each other as she gasped out her story. "I didn't know a storm was coming."

The look on Dave's face frightened her. "You let him take the horse, after I told you—"

"Told me?"

"I put a note by the clock because I left so early." They stared at it, unseen, unread. He said desperately, "Didn't anybody call you?" Then he stopped short, knowing.

Even as he talked he was hurriedly getting into a heavy jacket. "Dave—What'll we do?"

"I'll ride Darby and go by the cut that Skip uses. Get me the flashlight." She held it out, too numb to speak.

It was a wordless leave-taking into the now-screaming storm. Her attempted prayer was an anguished whisper, "Oh, God, please—"

Then the phone rang—their ring.

She snatched it. "Hello?" "Miz Reeder?" It was Julia Jacob's slow heavy voice. "Yes, yes." "Guess my Susie's got bad manners,

listenin' in, but she says it's about your boy—" The phone crackled. "Pepper came home without him," Phyll cried. "Dave's gone out on the sorrel by the cut. He—" The crackling

grew more violent; the line hummed and went dead. There was only the wind outside. Phyll rang the bell despairingly. Her only chance to get help was gone.

It was already dark at mid-afternoon; a fearful night lay ahead of her.

Both Skip and Dave were in danger. The fault was hers. Had she made friends instead of enemies—all morn-

ing the phone had jangled, but not once had she heard her ring.

The hours dragged through the longest night she had ever known. At first she paced helplessly. At last she

sank down into a chair and held the cat because he was alive and warm.

Slowly, in the quietness, forgotten words came: *He shall give His angels charge over thee—to keep thee . . .*

She dozed at last, and awakened to an utter stillness. The cat jumped down as she moved and rose unsteadily to her feet. Beyond the window was the pale wash of daylight.

It was the creak of leather she heard first, then the strong breathing of a horse. Was it bad news? Such weakness overcame her that she clung to the chair and couldn't take a step.

So it was that Dave and Skip found her, eyes anguished, fearing to hope. Then, with their reassuring arms around her, the tears came, the half words, the clinging as if she would never let them go.

Later, with Dave across the table, and Skip by her chair, they told her. "Pepper dumped me, Mom; he went in some sort of a hole, and I couldn't catch him. I made it back to the Martins. I tried to phone you, but nobody answered."

"I must have been at the barn."

Dave took it up, then. "When you called the school, little Susie Jacobs listened in. It wasn't until later she told her mother that Skip wasn't home. Mrs. Jacobs called you, but the line went out."

He put down his cup slowly. "But you told her I'd gone out, Phyll. Everybody was—listening in. They all heard you."

"Tell her the rest, Daddy." Skip's eyes shone.

"Well, they knew I hadn't a chance, Phyll, taking that cut. The snow closes in; you can't see a light or anything. But they figured I might hear a noise. They blew car horns, shot off guns. I—I wasn't sure at first I heard anything, and then Darby's ears went up. I turned and the sound grew louder—"

"It was Gramma Bevins," Skip burst out, "beating on her washtub with a poker."

Then, beautiful its sound, the phone rang. Dave jumped up. "Saw the phone crew out working when I came by. It was a tree down."

He lifted the receiver. "You bet," he said, tired face smiling. "All okay."

Phyll rose. "Give it to me, Dave." He met her eyes and handed over the receiver without a word.

She said hesitantly, "I—I hope you're all listening." Her voice grew stronger. "Last night when I was so afraid, I clung to just one phrase: *He shall give His angels charge over thee.* That's what you were, angels—angels on the party line. I hope you'll forgive me and let me make it up somehow; let me be the kind of friend you have all been."

Voices were in her ears, reassuring voices, all talking at once. "I'll listen in, too, after this," she promised shakily, between laughter and tears. "I'll be just like the rest of you."

"Land's sake, Phyllis," Gramma Bevins' voice came crackling through, "that's all we've been waiting for—for you to join us snoopin' sinners."

They let her hang up at last. "I think," she told Dave unsteadily, but smiling, "that if I work at it I'm going to be a party-liner in good standing."

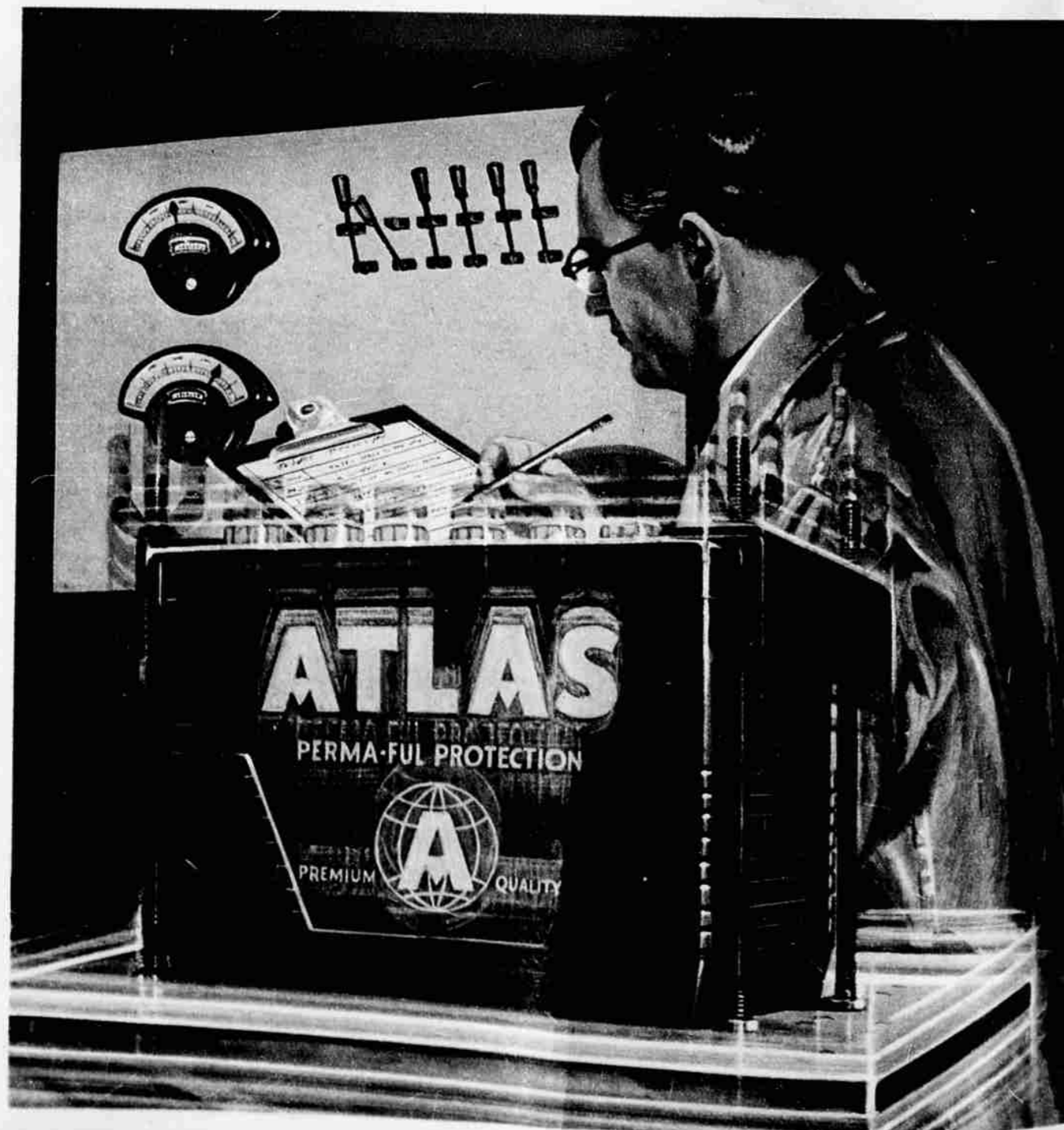
HE'S GIVING IT THE ROUGHEST "RIDE" OUTSIDE OF A RODEO!

TWO THOUSAND VIBRATIONS A MINUTE—FOR HOURS! COLD-START TESTS AT 0°! OVERCHARGE TESTS IN BROILING HEAT! THESE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE GRUELING TESTS AN ATLAS BATTERY UNDERGOES BEFORE IT REACHES YOU.

A battery really has to be rugged to withstand the "torture tests" of the unique group of Atlas Automotive Specialists who design and develop the Atlas products for your car.

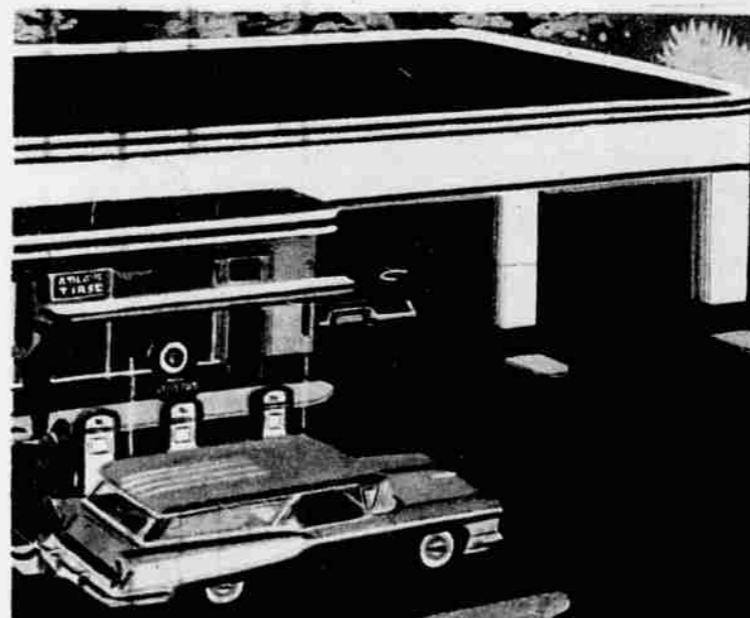
Atlas Automotive Specialists are often called "the toughest critics in the world"—and with good reason!

They insist every Atlas Battery, Tire and Accessory give you extra value and stamina. Only then will they pass it! For example, they actually design Atlas Tires and Batteries to standards higher than those on factory-new cars! So look for the name Atlas; you pay no more than for ordinary products.



TORN APART IN ATLAS LABORATORIES

Above is all that's left of a tire . . . tested down to the last cord! Every year Atlas Automotive Specialists analyze thousands of competitive products, too, to make sure Atlas stays ahead in performance, long life and all-around money's worth.



BE READY . . . WINTERIZE WITH ATLAS NOW!

Don't wait for a freeze! 38,000 leading service stations in 49 states and Canada are ready to service your car with Atlas Batteries, Atlas Perma-Guard Anti-Freeze and Atlas Weathergard Snow and Mud Tires. You just can't buy better!



TESTED ON THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST ROADS

Rigid field tests go on continuously . . . in bitter mountain cold and blasting desert heat. In tests in snow and mud, for example, Atlas Weathergard* Snow Tires have proved their superior traction and skid-resistance over and over again.



THEY'RE BEST—BY DESIGN!

It's no accident Atlas products give top performance. They're designed to meet highest specifications by Atlas Automotive Specialists. Atlas Perma-Guard* Anti-Freeze, for example, protects to 60° below; provides protection against rust and corrosion.



YOUR GUARANTEE OF PROVED TOP VALUE

*Reg. U. S. Pat. Off. Copyright 1958 Atlas Supply Company, Newark 2, N. J.